



AHRIMAN:
HAND OF DUST

A short story by John French

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John French

The dust blows from my hand towards a far horizon. I watch it turn on the wind. My mind can feel every particle of it, can taste the bone, metal and flesh that it once was. I can hear the dead in the dust's soft touch. For a second I think I recognise a voice, but then it becomes just the soft rattle of dust against my armour. The sun is setting. The sky is a pyre of molten colour. The wind shivers close to my skin. It has a voice of thirst and whispers. I look down to where the dust has heaped against the charred remnants of a building. This is the place where everything began, and everything ended. I thought I would never return here, but here I stand and wait and watch the dust dancing on the wind and I remember. I am Ahzek Ahriman, exiled son of Magnus the Red, destroyer of my Legion, and I remember.

I remember red. The red was the blood gloss of armour under the high sun. A warrior crouched before me on the polished, white stone. Ivory edged his armour and symbols curled in silver on the polished plates. He was trembling as though from a chill.

'Helekphon?' I said slowly. He did not move.

I shifted half a pace forward. Deep, laboured breaths buzzed from the vox-link.

'Brother?' I tried again. Nothing. Just the trembling and the hiss-sigh of breath and static.

+Helekphon?+ I sent.

His head snapped up. Blank eye pieces met mine. The trembling stopped. He had gone very still.

I shifted my grip on my boltgun. I could feel his eyes follow the movement.

+Ahriman?+ he sent, his voice a crushed whisper of thought.

+I am here.+

+Please...+ The thought was a moan. It tasted of desperation, of the last breath of life. +You have never... seen this before... have you? You were not on Bezant... or Clorphor.+

He paused and I felt the dull echo of his panic as his will slipped. +You have heard... but have not seen. This is our curse, boy. This is our fate. You should have killed me when it began. Do it now, before...+

His thought drained away, and the hiss of his breath rose in my ears again.

+Brother I cann—+ I began, but never finished the thought.

Helekphon's head wrenched back and he screamed to the noon sky. His shape distorted. Armour shrieked as it tore apart. Wet flesh expanded out of the cracks. Blind eyes rolled in the branching mass of blood-slicked flesh. Claws and hands reached down, slapping on the stone floor as the flesh that had been Helekphon pulled itself from the cracked shell of his armour.

I fired. I fired again and again, until the firing pin clacked on an empty chamber. Then I stood for a long time, looking at the blood and pulped flesh glinting red under the sun.

The memory slides away with the dust, becoming small and distant as I watch. I breathe. I can still smell the blood. The wind and the dust rise from my hand.

I remember water. The water was black and still, like a mirror waiting for light. The still surface shattered as my hand scooped up a palm of water to my mouth. It tasted of pollution and chemicals, and life allowed to rot out of the sight of the sun. I took another mouthful and gulped it down. My mouth was still dry.

Where am I? I thought, as though the question alone would bring an answer. I looked up. There were stars in the sky, but their light did not reflect from the water's mirror. A swirl of colour lay across the blackness like a stain of rot blossoming on a bandaged wound.

'The Eye of Terror still holds me then,' I said to myself as I looked down from the bruised night. A world of leaping flames and broken stone extended away from me on all sides. Somewhere in the distance gunfire chattered and rippling detonations smudged the horizon. My armour hung from me, blackened as though by fire. My shattered staff lay beside me, still smoking. I closed my eyes and saw again the face of Magnus, and felt the roar of the warp as I tumbled away from that face.

Banishment: the last word spoken by my father, the word which followed me as I had fallen through the warp. Seconds had become years and years seconds. I had passed through fire, light and ice so bright it was blinding. All the while the last word spoken to me by my father had followed me, and with it the fact that the Rubric had failed – that I had failed.

Pride – last of sins – it finds us in the end. Always.

I reached for more water and saw the figures watching me. I should have sensed them approaching, should have heard their thoughts and read the paths of their next moments before they reached me. But I did not. My mind was a dull stone in my skull.

There were five of them. Their armour was the ochre of dried bone. Their weapons glinted in the light of the Eye above. I stared at them, my hand halfway to my mouth, the water draining between my fingers. They looked at me for a long moment, and then one spoke in a voice like gristle cracking between teeth.

'Who are you, who comes to our realm?'

Who am I? I thought.

I am Ahriman, came a thought that sounded like a distant shout fading into the distance.

Banishment. The word rang clear and fresh through my mind. I looked down at my hand. The water had drained away.

I am failure, I thought. I am the sinner chained to life for his hubris while all he valued became dust.

I looked up.

'I am Horkos,' I said.

The memory fades. The sun is setting in a final glimmer of red fire.

I am still banished, I am still an exile, but I am no longer broken by the burden of the past.

I see fading light. The last rays of the red sun catch the motes of dust as they spread through the air. I see the future in their dust dance. Possibilities and unborn fates spin before my eyes, each one a universe that shall live, or shall remain unborn. I see worlds burn, and ashes become the beds of the children of humanity. I see all that was, and I see how it may end. I see hope. We will rise again. Salvation will come, even if it takes ten thousand years.

The sun has set, and this dead land of ashes and dust is an ocean of black velvet beneath my feet. I let my hand fall, and watch with my mind as the last of the scattered dust settles with the night. I turn. Behind me a sea of eyes glow bright in armoured faces. They wait, silent, watching.

‘Come, my brothers,’ I say. ‘It is time’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHN FRENCH is a writer and freelance games designer from Nottingham. His work for Black Library includes a number of short stories, the novellas *Fateweaver* and *The Crimson Fist* and the novel *Ahriman: Exile*. He also works on the Warhammer 40,000 role playing games. When he is not thinking of ways that dark and corrupting beings can destroy reality and space, John enjoys making it so with his own Traitor Legions on the gaming table.



All is dust...

Cast out of his Legion, the sorcerer Ahzek Ahriman, who condemned the Thousand Sons to an eternity of damnation, plots his return to power and the destruction of his foes.

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**Published in 2013 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd., Willow Road, Nottingham,
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ISBN 978-1-78251-347-6

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