

WARHAMMER
40,000

AHRIMAN: KING OF ASHES

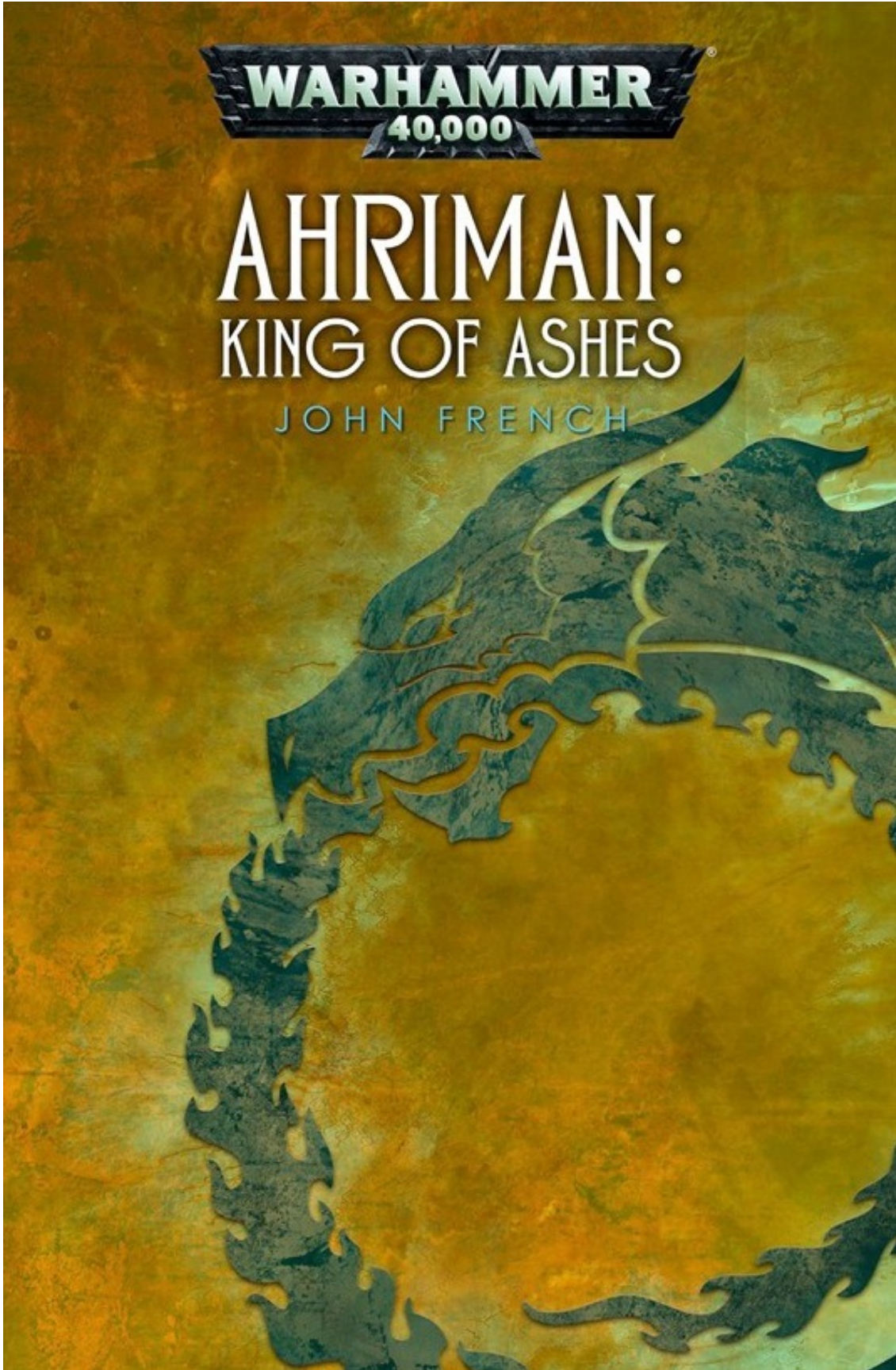
JOHN FRENCH



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KING OF ASHES

John French

Someone is calling me. I feel his voice pull me to wakefulness. How long has it been? Cold darkness surrounds me, unbroken by the beat of a heart, or the hiss of breath. How long have I slept? Why can't I see? I try to look around, but there is nothing to turn through, no light to break the blackness. I could be falling. I could be tumbling over and over without realising.

Who am I? The question echoes, and is lost in silence.

What am I?

Then I remember. I remember what I was, and the first time I glimpsed what I would become.

I remember gold. A golden web of glowing threads, spreading through the black, stretching into infinity. The threads split and divided, met and joined, over and over, slicing the emptiness into sharp slivers. I spun through the web. My body blinked between shapes: a silver hawk, a circle of fire, a sickle of moonlight. Rainbow sparks danced in my wake, and the golden web sang at my passing. I felt joy. I had made that journey many times in dreams before that moment, but that was the first time I had dived into the Great Ocean at my own will. It felt like breaking into air after drowning. It felt like returning home. I flew, my thoughts stretching across time and space, my will snapping realities and remaking them. It was so easy, it was like nothing, but it was everything.

They came for me then.

I felt them before I saw them. They cackled with voices of cracking ice. The golden web became fractures running through a plain of obsidian. I fell and hit the black glass. My shape became that of a human, hard-muscled and black-haired. I stood, and turned my single eye to the shadows which crawled above the ground. Cold poured over me. I tasted blood, hot and spiced. Laughter breathed across the idea of my skin...

None of what I saw or felt was physically real – it was all metaphor, a shadow play projected onto the curtain of the aether. But unkind dreams can burn deeper than true fire.

A wolf stepped from behind the darkness. Blood matted its pelt and hung in droplets from its teeth. Scars marked its muzzle and twisted between eyes the colour of molten brass. Those eyes did not leave mine as it paced forwards. Breath panted from its open mouth, and I felt rage and hunger in each exhalation. It began to circle. I thought I heard laughter in the click of its claws.

+What are you?+ I asked. The wolf growled, jaws snapping out and back, faster than a blink of lightning. I felt the tips of its teeth brush the skin of my face. Pain detonated inside me at the touch. The obsidian beneath my feet shattered and I plunged down, through into the oblivion below.

The wolf was all around me, circling like a hurricane-force wind. I pushed against its presence with all my strength, but the storm swallowed my power. Its hate surrounded me, hot and red, but even as its teeth ripped me I could feel that it was sparing me, that it was holding itself back. I was not afraid. I had always known that there were creatures in the Great Ocean, things that call it home just as I do. Old things, formed from mislaid thoughts and stranded dreams, dangerous, cruel. They had always seemed to ignore me. Until that moment.

I hit another glass plain, and pulled myself to my feet. Aetheric blood was sheeting down the idea of my skin. The wolf was circling again, but it was not alone. Three other shapes stood beyond the wolf. A serpent glided and coiled across the black glass, its scales changing colour with each stretch and squeeze of its body. There was something soft and obscene about its every movement, like the taste of vomit made solid. It reared up and looked at me with a human face. Its features were perfect in every way. I knew as I looked back that it saw everything I had ever hidden from anyone or anything. It licked its lips, the hood of scales flaring behind its smiling face. Behind it hovered a thing like a rotten moth with the cataract-white eyes of a dead fish. Its thorax shuddered as it expanded and contracted, phlegm popping and rattling with each breath. There was another shape further away, indistinct, yet I was sure that it had had its back

turned to me. The wolf circled nearer, and the snake glided in its wake.

+I know what this is, + I said, and there was laughter in my thought-voice. Even now, with all that has happened and all that I am, the foolishness of those words makes me shiver. +I know what you are. +

The wolf paused. I could see the blood-clotted fur on its back rise into serrated spikes. The snake laughed, and the moth buzzed its wings. I did not respond. I was sure, so sure that I understood.

+The bloody wolf, which represents destruction from within. The serpent, which is the temptation to turn aside. The spectre of the grave, which is the fear of failure. You are my weaknesses come to pull me back to the dark. The seeker of truth must face you all if he is to ascend, but you are nothing more than reflections, and I do not fear you. +

'Is that what you seek?' said a voice. It was quiet, but it shook with different sounds, as though stitched together from many voices. The wolf went still, and the serpent hissed but did not move. The rotting moth buzzed backwards. The hunched creature at the edge of the circle turned and looked at me. It had the head of an eagle, a crow and a vulture stacked one above the other. Its eyes burned gas-flame blue. 'Is the truth why you are here?' It paused, savouring its next word. 'Magnus.' The words chilled me. The creature should not know my name. It should not know me. 'Oh, but how could I not know you, my son?' it said.

+No, + I said. +You are not my father. +

The four creatures laughed with a crackle of bones and a rustle of feathers. Their shadows grew, crawling towards me. Their hunger was all around me, pressing close, churning like waves against my mind. Then, suddenly – so suddenly that I felt their absence as a cold shock – they were gone. I was alone, surround by nothing but silence.

Where had they gone? Why had they gone? The answer came, clear out of the silence. They had fled. And that meant that the silence was a lie.

I was not alone.

I felt it then: the presence in the emptiness, vast and so bright that I could not see it.

+Why are you here?+ I asked. When the answer came it echoed through my being.

+I have been searching for you, + it said, +my son. +

I open the idea of my mouth to answer, but the memory is gone and I am falling

again, trying to remember if I answered, or if in that moment I was, for the first time, afraid.

The memory has gone but it has given me part of myself.

I am a son.

A son...

I remember earth. The earth was red, it rose in dry ribbons on the wind. He stood before me, his armour powdered by dust and marked by fire. His brothers stood beside him: Amon with his head bowed, Tolbek, his face blanked by shock, and the others. My sons. My defiant sons. My murderous children. So clever, so gifted and so blind.

Ahriman stared back at me. He knew what he had done; I could see the truth haloing him like black smoke around a flame. He had defied me, he had wielded the fire of the gods to remake the present, and he had failed.

I turned and looked at what my son had left of my Legion. Thousands of blank eyes stared back at me from the helms of motionless suits of armour. I could see the soul caught in each one, held like smoke in a bottle, drowning in oblivion, dead yet not gone.

Rage. Even now the memory shakes me. Our anger is not the anger of mortals. It is the lightning bolt which breaks the high tower – the hammer blow which shakes the heavens.

I looked back to Ahriman, to my son, the best of my sons. We spoke, but the words held no meaning. There could be only one answer for what he had done.

+Banishment.+ I spoke the word, and the word remade the world.

Ahriman was gone.

My son is gone. I remain. Falling. It is he that is calling me, back to the world of mud and flesh. I see his face as I fall from the cradle of gods. Was it a memory of what has been, or is it yet to come? Is there a difference?

I am not what I was. I am not even a fraction of what I was.

I am the broken son of a false god.

I am dust.

I am time scattering from the hand to be blown on the wind of fate.

I am the whisperings of the dead, forever cascading into the grave.

I am the king of all I see.

I open my eye. Reality screams around me as it rushes and tumbles past. Time surrounds me, scattering and gathering me. Once I would have thought this power, but it is not; it is a prison.

There are shapes in the tempest: faces, towers and plains of dust, possibilities waiting to be seen, to be made real. I can decide to make them real, or to make them fade. I can slip back into the dark silt of dreams that might not be dreams. I choose to let them become real. My throne builds itself from shadow. The boiling sky and dry red plain congeal and harden above and below me. I still have no form besides a jagged line of golden light which hangs above the throne like frozen lightning. Then the tower splits the ground beneath me, and thrusts me up into the air. Other towers shimmer into sight as I rise, a great forest of obsidian, silver and brass. I look, and see through the veils of matter, see the weave and flow of the aether beneath. It has been a long time since I have taken my throne, an age in which empires could die and be forgotten. For the half mortal creatures which dwell in the towers, though, I have been absent for no more than a turning of one of this planet's nine suns.

My remaining sons are waiting for me. They kneel, high-crested helms dipping, silk robes rustling in the wind. Each of them sees me differently. I know this, though I cannot know what it is that they see – that insight is denied me. Perhaps they see me as I was when I was half mortal: copper-skinned, red-maned, and crowned by horns. Perhaps they see only a shadow cast across my throne as though by a flickering fire. Perhaps they see something else.

Knekku raises his head first, and the questions begin to form in his thoughts. What is my bidding?

+The exiles are returning,+ I send. I feel their shock, their anger, and their hope.
+*He* is returning, and war is coming with him.+

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John French has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novellas *Tallarn: Executioner* and *The Crimson Fist*, the novel *Tallarn: Ironclad*, and the audio dramas *Templar* and *Warmaster*. He is the author of the Ahriman series, which includes the novels *Ahriman: Exile*, *Ahriman: Sorcerer* and *Ahriman: Unchanged*, plus a number of related short stories collected in *Ahriman: Exodus*, including 'The Dead Oracle' and 'Hand of Dust'. Additionally for the Warhammer 40,000 universe he has written the Space Marine Battles novella *Fateweaver*, plus many short stories. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

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