



THE HORUS HERESY®
PRIMARCHS

THE ANCIENT
AWAITS

GRAHAM MCNEILL



Names had power.

Any novice of the Thousand Sons could tell you that.

To know something's name was to *understand* it, to have a window into the very heart of its being and see the workings of the machinery that underpinned it.

To pick the lock on a soul, you needed its name.

A name told you *everything*. The conventions of a name told you of the people who coined it. Etymological roots spoke to the historical circumstances of its origin, and each linguistic change that mutated it along the way told a unique story.

Names were *everything*.

Which was why Vistario's ignorance of this world's name so vexed him. The star chart Murshid had empathically drawn from the stagnant waters of the orrery retained no record of it, and the caustic winds blowing over the planet's irradiated plains only muttered the same imprecation that had drawn them to this barren rock in the first place.

'I can still hear it,' said Akhtar, a dusty gauntlet pressed to the faded Raptora icon at the side of his helmet.

'We all hear it,' snapped Murshid. Murshid was Athanaean; he heard the planet's lament most keenly.

He'd once likened walking the surface of dead worlds to stepping into a stream of liqnite and feeling the aching cold slowly seeping up through his flesh until his entire body was rigid. The gifts of the Great Ocean were manifold, but so too were their burdens.

Vistario's fellowship had been Corvidae, back when the idea of fellowship had meant something. He'd learned his craft under the tutelage of Magistus Amon in

his clockwork pyramid of brass, honing his ability to unweave the myriad threads of potential futures. His instincts for the truth of what might be were strong, but in the centuries since the retreat from Terra, the Corvidae had waned, now a shadow of its former glory.

The Great Ocean - always a treacherous mistress - had become a raging virago of psychic fury, the last breath of the Warmaster still echoing, centuries after his fall.

Yet even the mightiest oceans know ebbs and flows, and sometimes the veil obscuring the future would part, allowing brief glimpses into the endless, branching possibilities of the future.

One such glance had lodged in Vistario's mind like a knapped shard of flint. A gleaming, reflective blade in which he saw this dead and nameless world, a hollow city and a plaintive message from a time already layered with mythic allegory, like a sunken wreck overtaken by the encrustation of deep-water denizens.

Vistario had dismissed the vision as meaningless, casting it from his mind to fly on the aether-winds of the Planet of the Sorcerers.

Just another fragment of unknown prophecy.

Useless.

Or so he had thought until the Crimson King appeared within his crystalline tower, ablaze with psychic might: a terrifying monster of ego and fury.

'Go,' Magnus commanded. 'Heed this message. Find the messenger.'

Heed this message.

Find the messenger.

Two simple orders, yet to obey the primarch's command was almost impossible. Following a fragmentary vision without context was like chasing a whisper of thought in an angry mob, a hundred echoes spreading from the source, each amplifying exponentially and mutating until all trace of the original was obscured.

The three of them had left the Planet of the Sorcerers aboard the *Clavis Aurea*, a vessel so transformed by that world's chaotic nature as to be unrecognisable even to its original shipwrights.

Guided by Murshid's psychic map, Akhtar steered them through the roiling vastness of the Great Ocean with a seer stone torn from the ruins of the Reflecting Caves.

High in the Navigator's compartment, Vistario journeyed in the third

enumeration, clinging to the gossamer-thin memory of his discarded vision. He replayed it over and over in his mind in search of some hitherto unseen clue as to its source, some echo that might point him towards greater understanding.

Vistario had lost track of how long they had searched.

Years, most likely, but who could know in a realm where time was the first of the universal 'constants' to be brushed aside?

He had despaired of ever seeing the vision again. Their quest was as futile as reading a message in a bottle washed upon the shores, writing a reply and casting it back into the waters in hope the original sender would read it.

But Magnus the Red had issued his command, and to fail in any task, even an impossible task, was to invite terrible retribution.

Better to stay away than return empty-handed.

Then, with hope all but lost... a miracle. The mob parted, the whisper became a shout and its source was revealed. A simple phrase: ambiguous, yet portentous.

The Ancient awaits.

Little remained of the city's soaring majesty, though Vistario imagined it had once been beautiful.

Its destroyers had been thorough. The ground still bore the scars of an orbital bombardment so ferocious it had pounded an entire substrate of the surface to ash and vitrified rock. Walking at ground level was like traversing a plateau of volcanic glass, and its outline had only been possible to discern from the air.

Vistario mag-locked his bolter to his thigh and bent to lift a delicate shard of wafer-thin glass shaped like the head of a spear. He turned it over in his hands, the lens of his helmet staring back at him from its reflective depths.

In the space of a breath the image changed.

Vistario dropped the shard and it shattered, breaking into an unnatural arrangement of pieces. He saw significance in the pattern, but a sudden wind scattered the pieces before he could divine its meaning.

'What did you see?' asked Murshid, bringing his bolter to his shoulder as he read the sudden change in Vistario's aura.

'I do not know,' he replied. 'It was a fleeting glimpse only.'

'Of what?' said Akhtar, traversing his weapon over the ruins.

'A host of accusing eyes, as if reflected in a broken mirror.'

'A vision of the future or an echo of the past?' asked Murshid.

'You know better than to ask that,' said Vistario.

They pressed on, moving towards what he knew with a certainty he could not

explain was the heart of the city. The rubble here was thicker, more deeply stacked - perhaps a king's palace or some other grand civic structure.

'Here,' said Murshid, pausing by a heap of fallen granite blocks of polished pink, each with the suggestion of swirling carvings upon its outward face. 'These were once part of a greater whole.'

'Weren't we all?' muttered Akhtar.

'Have a caution,' said Vistario. 'All whispers eventually return to the Planet of the Sorcerers. Did Ulthar's fate teach you nothing?'

That silenced them all, the fate of the Athanaean splinter cult all too keen in their recollections.

'Can you rebuild it?' asked Murshid, turning his attention back to the blocks.

'Easily,' said Akhtar, eager to employ his powers. He rose into the seventh enumeration to lift the blocks, turning them over with brute psychic force and twisting them upon their axes until they slotted together like a three-dimensional puzzle.

The remnant of an archway was formed, seven metres tall and three wide, with knotwork carvings etched upon each cyclopean stone.

Vistario approached the towering arch and paused to examine the carvings. 'They resemble musical notes.'

'That is *exactly* what they are,' said Murshid, his head tilted to the side as he followed their course with a finger in the air, like an orchestral conductor. 'Every block is a song within a greater work, a choral symphony rendered in stone and sung by those who trod its byways.'

A series of jumbled impressions passed through Vistario's mind at Murshid's words. Of singers and war, of fire from the heavens: the final cacophony, the closing curtain of a drama...

'No, not the closing curtain,' he whispered. 'The *opening* act...'

His eyes were drawn by some strange volition to the cracked terrazzo of a once tiled thoroughfare, now revealed by the building of the archway. The tiles glistened with spots of gold in the wan sunlight of the dead world, and Vistario knelt to lift something.

'What do you have there?' said Akhtar.

Vistario turned the object over like a stage performer flipping a coin between his fingers.

It had once been a tapered cylinder, but had been pressed flat by the weight of the blocks. He saw now that it was not gold, but brass, its surfaces striated with heat and a faded mark that told of its origin.

Vistario stood and held out what he had found.

'That's a bolter shell,' said Murshid, reaching out to touch it, but thinking better of it at the last second as he saw the armourer's mark upon it.

Akhtar had no such reservations, and plucked the shell from Vistario's palm. He turned the round over and Vistario read the confusion in his aura as he too recognised the mark.

'World Eaters,' he said, uncomprehending.

The wind surged at his words, and once again they all heard it, a discordant, screeching psychic call. Stronger now, closer. They felt its grief, heard its fury, and most of all, they sensed its infinite patience.

The Ancient awaits.

Following the psychic scream to its source was not difficult.

The surface of the planet seemed now to open up before them and previously obscured pathways ran arrow-straight through the blasted landscape like the great Romanii roads of old. Patterns that had been invisible before were now undeniable, and the city's original plan became clearer with every step they took towards its heart.

Akhtar led the way like an eager bloodhound closing on its prey.

Murshid walked alongside Vistario.

'Akhtar's mind is blunt, but surely you must feel that we are not alone on this world?' he said.

'I have felt... something,' agreed Vistario. 'Can you identify it?'

'A powerful mind,' said Murshid. 'More than that I cannot say. Every time I try to focus on its thoughts it slithers from my perceptions.'

'We are seeking something desired by the Crimson King,' said Vistario. 'We should have expected we would not be the only ones in search of it.'

'True, but anything that seeks to thwart the designs of Magnus the Red is not to be taken lightly.'

'Do what you can,' ordered Vistario.

'I will, but whatever else has come to this world is not what concerns me most. It is that I believe who or whatever is sending out this howling missive is aware of us.'

'Then it is not just me that feels we are being reeled in like a fish on a hook,' said Vistario.

'No,' agreed Murshid. 'It is not just you.'

The path led the three warriors of the Thousand Sons to a canyon-like gouge

torn by something massive falling from the sky. It led to a blackened abyss, like the gate to some mythic underworld.

'Not the best omen,' said Murshid.

'Did we expect anything else?' replied Vistario. 'But a trap is not a trap if the prey is aware of the hunter.'

Once again, Akhtar led the way.

The darkness within was absolute, but easily penetrated by the senses of their baroque war-plate. The rock of this world was glossy and molten, rippled by unimaginable heat. It plunged downwards at a steep angle until it emerged into a deep, vaulted space of soaring arches, high, fluted pillars and shattered chambers.

'Catacombs?' wondered Akhtar.

Vistario's gaze followed the curve of a domed roof to where its structure had been ruptured. Dust drifted from above and thin spars of light speared into the darkness.

'No,' he said. 'Parts were once open to the sky. This entire area was built both above and below ground.'

'This was a city of secrets and lies,' said Murshid, taking a knee and placing his hand on the ground. 'One face presented, but it was a compliant mask. Its serpent face was hidden beneath.'

Whispers drifted on the wind, a thousand muttering voices just beyond the threshold of hearing. Vistario sensed their anger, watching with a wary eye as dust devils swirled in his peripheral vision. His footsteps stirred the abrasive sands, and Vistario heard a scratching sound, as if he walked upon the ashen ghosts of this world's people.

Who knows, perhaps I do, he thought.

An angled roadway curved away into the darkness, and Vistario set off along it, picking a path through fallen rocks and skewed girders twisted by ferocious heat and pressure.

'The fury of the bombardment was absolute,' said Akhtar. 'That this place has survived is nothing short of a miracle.'

'No miracle,' said Vistario, pointing to where the stonework of the underground city revealed reinforced steel embedded within. 'This region of the city was designed to withstand attack.'

'The world above was built by human hands,' said Murshid. 'A pre-Crusade culture, if I read the echoes of Old Night correctly. Why would they build their world to withstand the fury of a Legion?'

'*That* is a mystery indeed,' said Vistario. 'Perhaps the one who has drawn us here can answer.'

The roadway passed through a set of armoured blast doors, and from that point onwards, the rough and damaged stone of the city above took on the utilitarian character of an industrial facility. Its walls were layered plascrete and flakboard, its ceilings reinforced vaults of latticed steel.

The walls were black, as though a firestorm had flash-burned through, and Vistario saw negative impressions on the wall where warriors had burned to death. The outlines were blurred by time, but disturbingly familiar.

'You see them too?' said Murshid, his voice wavering.

Vistario read the pain the Athanaean warrior was feeling.

'I do,' he said, the muscles in his jaw taut.

Deeper into the planet they travelled, along metal-decked passageways, down twisting screw-stairs and descending dormant embarkation elevator shafts. The presence they had felt on the surface lingered in Vistario's mind, like a distant pressure. Whatever it was, it remained beyond all their perceptions.

'This was some form of military launch facility,' said Akhtar.

'No,' said Vistario. 'It is too small for squadrons of attack craft.'

'I know,' snapped Akhtar. 'More like a hidden, private facility such as a planetary governor might construct.'

'Perhaps we are following the lost words of a long dead Imperial commander,' said Vistario. 'Ironic that it would be warriors he would consider traitors who finally heed his call.'

'Traitor?' spat Akhtar. 'We betrayed no one. *We* were the ones betrayed.'

Vistario raised a hand, as much to forestall any careless outburst from the Raptora adept as to call a halt to their long march.

'We are here,' he said.

For all that the infrastructure around the launch facility had survived the bombardment, the hangar itself had not endured as well as its builders had expected. A small, orbit-capable starship sat at the far end of the hangar, its hull smashed open by falling debris and one swept-forward wing sheared from the fuselage by a fallen beam. A portion of the cave at the rear of the ship gleamed like glass, vitrified by the craft's jetwash.

'It was taking off when the roof collapsed,' said Vistario. 'Moments earlier and it might have escaped disaster.'

'Whoever he was, he was abandoning his world to its doom,' replied Akhtar. 'He

deserved to die with his world.'

'We abandoned our world,' pointed out Murshid.

Anger flared in Akhtar's aura. 'No, we were wrenched from it at the moment of its greatest need,' he said. 'The Crimson King denied us the chance to fight the Wolves and make them pay for their cowardly attack.'

'We would have died,' said Vistario.

'Better that than this pitiful existence, brother,' said Akhtar. 'Sent scurrying through the shadows like errand boys for a master who broods only on his failures.'

Vistario rose into a more combative enumeration and fixed Akhtar with the steely gaze of one who has stared into the future.

'Choose your next words carefully, *brother*,' he said. 'The fellowships may be broken, but what has been sundered may yet be renewed. You and I both read the prophecy of Temelucha.'

Akhtar snorted derisively. 'The words of a madwoman.'

'Since when have prophets *not* been driven mad by the things they have seen?' pointed out Murshid, slapping a gauntleted palm on Vistario's shoulder guards. 'Our Corvidae brother hasn't been sane since the retreat from Terra. We have dwelled so long in the Great Ocean that maybe we are all a little mad.'

The tension between Akhtar and Vistario drained.

'Forgive me, brother,' said Akhtar. 'The fires of the great war may have cooled, but mine still burn.'

Vistario nodded. 'The *great* war may be spent, but the long war goes on. We are yet part of it and I believe the Crimson King has a plan for how it can be won.'

'You really believe that?' said Akhtar.

'I have to,' replied Vistario. 'It is all I have left.'

Further discussion was ended by a clatter of stone from the front of the starship and a screech of twisting metal. All three of the Thousand Sons swung their bolters to their shoulders and rose into the war enumerations. Vistario stretched out his consciousness, searching for hostile minds.

And cried out as the force of an ancient mind skewered his brain with a lance of white hot power. He staggered as he felt patient hatred stab into him, its force so potent and singular that his secondary heart kicked in as the main organ ruptured.

'Vistario!' shouted Akhtar as his chest hiked with a sharp intake of breath.

Vistario raised a hand, switching from enumerations of war to ones of defence. Piece by piece he built his mental fortress, a citadel from which his mind could

operate while protected from psychic attack. The cacophonous roar diminished, and he blinked the dazzling lights away from the insides of his eyes.

'I am fine,' he said, pushing himself to his feet.

'What was that?' said Murshid, getting up off his knees, a viscous fluid leaking from his gorget. As much as Vistario had staggered under the psychic force of the assault on their senses, Murshid would have felt it far worse.

Akhtar too, blunt as he was, had suffered. 'That was no psyker.'

'No,' agreed Vistario. 'Fourth enumeration. Advance.'

Dust and rubble fell from the roof of the cavern, dislodged by the force of the assault. An assault Vistario now realised had not just been psychic in nature, but sonic. Hideous aural trauma and dissonant harmonics combined to form a screeching howl that would have obliterated their hearing but for the cut-outs in their armour.

'Careful, Vistario,' said Murshid. 'There is great hate here.'

Vistario nodded as he rounded a promontory of fallen rock and steel, his bolter tracking to the source of the psycho-sonic assault.

The prow of the craft had been split open in its abortive take-off, a six metre gash torn through to the pilot's compartment.

At first he could not understand what he was seeing.

A host of cables trailed from the starship like a writhing colony of snakes. They were coupled with an outlandish device, the function of which Vistario could not even begin to guess.

But that was not the most surprising discovery.

Lying on its side, partially crushed by a giant spar of steel fallen from above was the shattered outline of a Dreadnought. Dust and ash lay thick on its adamantium sarcophagus, the colour of its armour all but obscured. One leg had been sheared from its body, and its left side was buckled inwards so deeply that the flesh within was surely dead. Its weapon arms, a Kheres-pattern assault cannon and a splay-clawed power fist were aimed skywards, as if this ancient hero of the Legions had sought to vent his fury towards the heavens with the last of his existence.

The Dreadnought lay upon something half buried in the rock of the cavern floor, its surface heat-burned and unrecognisable. More cables snaked from the wrecked starship and were hooked into the object's underside as well as to the war machine

'A Dreadnought?' said Akhtar, lowering his weapon.

'Keep it covered,' snapped Vistario, edging forwards to better examine the

strange device. It appeared to be a monstrous hybrid of musical instrument and an apparatus of excruciation designed by a sadistic lunatic. Its colours were faded now, but once it had been vividly painted and elaborately ornamented. It thrummed with energy, ripe with potential, and Vistario looked for a way to disconnect it.

An angry buzzing built as he reached to unhook the nearest cable, as if the machinery were alive and aware of his intent.

'Do. Not.'

Vistario flinched at the sound, a grating, wheezing vox-exhalation. He spun and brought his bolter up to aim at the not-so-dead-after-all Dreadnought. His finger tightened on the trigger, then eased off as he found himself staring down the multiple barrels of the Kheres assault cannon.

'You. Are. Not Him,' said the Dreadnought.

Vistario slowly lowered his weapon, lifting his free hand away.

Murshid was held in the Dreadnought's fist, struggling in vain against strength that could tear open the hull of a Land Raider. Akhtar stood apart, his bolter trained unerringly on the Dreadnought's sarcophagus.

A gesture of defiance only. Even if the mass-reactive penetrated a weak spot in the Dreadnought's body, Vistario and Murshid would be dead before Akhtar fired the first round.

'So. Long. I. Have...waited,' said the Dreadnought. 'Forgot. Name. Forgot brothers. Only hate endured. Only vengeance sustained me.'

The towering bio-machine's voice was redolent with power, its words halting at first, then growing in coherence, as if the very act of addressing the warriors before it was rekindling a memory of speech.

Soft light built within the cracked augmetic orb that was all that remained of the war machine's sensorium. Could it see him, and what would it make of his war-plate's colour...?

'What Legion are you?'

'Fifteenth,' said Vistario.

'The sons of Magnus the Red. The Cyclops. The Crimson King. Sorcerer Supreme, Master of Prospero. How fare the Fifteenth after so long? Tell me you did not fall into the same trap as my brothers. Tell me you endure and yet stand at our father's side.'

He doesn't know, thought Vistario. All these years trapped below, and he doesn't know. How could he?

'The Thousand Sons endure,' he said.

'I may be smashed and clinging to life, but I know evasion when I hear it.'

Vistario shrugged. 'You would not like the truth.'

'My like or dislike for the truth is immaterial,' said the Dreadnought. 'Truth is all we have. It is our shield against falsehoods. When facts can be twisted to become weapons, nothing good can endure. The Emperor taught me that, but too few of us took the lesson to heart or understood how vital it was.'

Vistario briefly considered pointing out the lie that lay at the heart of the Emperor's crusade, its corrosive effect like a poison pill slowly dissolving under the tongue. But he needed no Corvidae foresight to know the Dreadnought would kill him instantly for such an utterance.

'What is your name?' asked the Dreadnought.

'Malin Vistario, of the Corvidae Fellowship. What is yours?'

'I am... *he who remembers*,' said the Dreadnought. 'Or I used to be. An ancient mystic once said that it is the doom of men that they forget but my memory is as broken now as my body. My purpose... I had one. It was to *know*. To remember. Examples of the past shape the present. Events of the future compel the past.'

Vistario was acutely aware of how precarious was his position. The Dreadnought was clearly insane, after the long centuries spent in isolation without Techmarines to minister the complex bio-mechanical cycles of his existence and maintain his fugue state of slumber.

'What were you to know?' he asked.

'To know what, you ask?' growled the Dreadnought in irritation. Shells clattered as rusted auto-loaders slammed them into the assault cannon. 'Does not the Fifteenth retain one whose task it is to *know*? *To see* everything! I once knew all the things that mattered - names, dates, places. Things of moment. The oaths taken. The oaths broken. The litanies of the faithless. I am he who remembers. I am the *Ancient of Rites*.'

A sudden flash of prescience swept through Vistario, and he craned his neck to look around the chamber, his mind's eye racing back the way they had come to the surface. He saw the war-wracked world above as the bombs fell from orbit, shattering the city and laying waste to those who defended it.

'I know this world's name,' he said, as its terrible legacy poured into him.

'Yes,' said the Dreadnought. 'Of course you do. Horus cut it into the heart of every legionary, whether they were there or not.'

'This is Isstvan III.'

'Yes.'

'And you...' said Vistario. 'You are—'

'I am Ancient Rylanor,' said the Dreadnought.

Ancient Rylanor.

Vistario knew the name. How could he not?

The tales spun around the betrayal at Isstvan III filled entire wings of the Gallery of Pergamum. This was where the canker at the heart of the Legions was first revealed, where the Legions had first spilled the blood of their brothers in open warfare. Magnus had despatched cabal after cabal seeking truths from those who had fought in that battle, desiring to unravel its root causes. It seemed to Vistario to be a thankless task, for every adept of the Corvidae knew that nothing ever *really* began. There could be no single moment from which this or any other event sprang; the threads could always be followed to some earlier moment and the actions that preceded them.

To attempt to pin any event's origin to a single moment in time would drive a mind to insanity.

Perhaps it already has, thought Vistario, thinking of the desperate need he pretended not to see in his primarch's gaze.

Those who had fought through the virus-scoured hell-scapes of Isstvan III described loyalist warriors of the World Eaters, Death Guard, Sons of Horus and Emperor's Children fighting for months against their brothers, enduring unimaginable horrors in the face of inevitable extinction.

The only mention of the Dreadnought's fate came from that most unreliable of narrators, Lucius the Swordsman, who claimed Saul Tarvitz spoke of an underground hangar the Dreadnought was rumoured to have found.

'Why did you not escape?' asked Vistario.

'I would have, but the seismic shockwaves of Isstvan's death went deeper and lasted longer than any could have foreseen. The roof of the cavern collapsed, trapping me here as you see.'

Vistario glanced at the strange device hooked to the interior of the wrecked starship.

'And what is that?'

'A sonic weapon of some kind. A handful of my former brothers found this place and sought to kill me. They failed, but the power of their weapons crippled me and left me as you see me now.'

'And you wrought it into, what? A distress beacon of some kind?'

The Dreadnought's vox-caster grated with what Vistario took to be a rueful chuckle.

'A distress beacon?' said Rylanor. 'No, a lure.'

'A lure for what?'

The sound of dead skin slipping over rock sent a chill down Vistario's spine.

A silken voice answered the Dreadnought's question.

'For me,' it said. ***'Isn't that right, Rylanor?'***

Vistario's mouth fell open as a towering, serpentine shape emerged from the shadows of the cavern. Multi-limbed, sinuous and beautiful, ivory white hair spilled across the shocking purple of his sculpted war-plate.

'At last,' said Rylanor. 'Fulgrim.'

The primarch was an abomination, even by the standards of warriors who had seen their own father hideously changed by the transformative energies of the Great Ocean. Vistario felt aether-fire pulsing within Fulgrim's body, his ability to manipulate its energies massively powerful yet unobtrusive.

Swords glittered at his midsection, and his eyes roved the chamber, taking the measure of the presented tableau. How long had he been watching and listening? In the centuries since the Battle of Terra, the Phoenician's behaviour defied rational understanding or a sense of predictability. Magnus himself had given up any form of prognostication concerning his brother's actions, so how could Vistario even begin to predict what Fulgrim might do next?

'Ancient,' said Fulgrim, sliding over the floor with grotesque, peristaltic motions. ***'You look terrible. A disgrace, even.'***

'What has become of you, my primarch...?' said Rylanor, his horrified disgust clear even through the degraded quality of his vox-caster. 'You are a monster.'

'Says the scrap of ruined flesh maintained by grotesque machinery,' said Fulgrim, circling the four of them. His pale eyes were pearlescent orbs without pupils, soulless and devoid of anything that had once made him great. They regarded the warriors before him with only passing interest.

'Why does Magnus send his broken sons to Isstvan III? Did you learn nothing from the Wolves' destruction of Prospero? My hermit brother should know by now that his meddling curiosity only leads to disaster.'

Vistario fought to find his voice, always a problem in the face of a primarch. Doubly so in the presence of one so altered. Yet even though Fulgrim's appearance had changed so terribly, pangs of longing stirred in Vistario's breast.

'We heard his message,' he managed.

'Too bad for you,' said Fulgrim with a grin, taking in their predicament. Murshid still hung like a limp fish in Rylanor's grip, Vistario was covered by the

assault cannon, and Akhtar stood immobile, his weapon trained unerringly upon the Dreadnought's sarcophagus.

The Phoenician approached Rylanor.

'So, old friend,' said Fulgrim. **'You have my attention. What is it you want me to hear? And do try to make it diverting - after all, you've had millennia to perfect it.'**

Rylanor dropped Murshid and used the wheezing, grating limb to push its carapace upright. Vistario saw the muzzle of the assault cannon track away from him, following the primarch's movements.

He eased his mind into the warlike enumerations, letting the power of the Great Ocean into his flesh.

+Be ready,+ he sent to his brothers. A flash of thought only.

He felt their understanding, and flexed his psyche in readiness for wielding his powers. Conflicting visions pressed upon the meniscus of his mind: shredding bullets and mass-reactives, fire and an unstoppable tide of virulent destruction.

The omens are not good.

Dust and rubble fell from Rylanor's armour like sand in an hourglass. Fresh portions of the smashed object beneath the Dreadnought's body were revealed, and humming power cables ran from Rylanor's sarcophagus to an opened control panel.

Vistario felt his blood chill as he finally understood what it was.

'Has it truly been millennia?' asked Rylanor, his voice stronger now, coming from a time long ago and filled with infinite sadness and patient regret.

'It has,' said Fulgrim, moving closer. **'Think of all that time wasted. All the glory unearned, all the victories denied.'**

Rylanor gave another grating bark of laughter.

'Glory? You think I sought glory? How little you understood of your own Legion. Yes, I have indeed perfected what I wish you to hear,' said Rylanor as Fulgrim reached out to touch him. 'And though I am sure you will find it diverting, it will not be me that says it.'

Fulgrim's grin faltered as he too saw what the Dreadnought's body had obscured.

'No,' he said, as if he thought he could stop what was about to happen with a word.

'Yes,' said Rylanor, sending an activating pulse of energy to the armed warhead of an unexploded virus bomb.

Vistario saw the moment of detonation a fraction of a second before it happened. Instantaneously, he beheld a vision of the explosive spread of the Life Eater virus as it consumed them, dissolving like frost before the sun. He saw their doomed bodies transformed into replicating flesh refineries in which the hyper-evolving viral strands mutated and found ever more inventive ways of destroying organic material.

All of this he witnessed in the space between life and death, the most fleeting glimpse into an inevitable future.

But a fleeting glimpse was all an adept of the Corvidae needed.

+Akhtar!+

Already in the blunt, pugnacious enumerations, Akhtar was unleashing his power even as the detonation circuits of the virus bomb triggered. The casing shattered as the explosive heart of the bomb cracked open and the isolated viral compounds mixed in the precise amounts to catalyse the unstoppable reaction. Fire bloomed from the warhead in tortuous slow motion, lapping around Rylanor's sarcophagus like low-grade viscous promethium.

+*I cannot hold it for long!*+ cried Akhtar, his Raptora powers stretched to their limits in holding back the explosion. Vistario reached out with his mind and poured his power into the warrior, feeling Murshid do the same.

Fulgrim laughed as the creeping death slid slowly over the Dreadnought's body.

'Is this it?' he said. 'You sought to draw me here to kill me?'

Rylanor triggered his assault cannon, but - fast as quicksilver - Fulgrim caught it and crushed it before it could fire.

'No, I don't think so,' said the primarch, effortlessly ripping the arm from the Dreadnought's body. Sparks flew from the ruptured limb and Fulgrim gave the weapon a dismissive glance before tossing it aside.

'You betrayed us,' bellowed Rylanor. 'Your sons! You led us here to die. There is no forgiveness for that. None! You must die by my hand! The Emperor's justice will fall upon you. Not even Fulgrim the Illuminator can escape the Life Eater.'

Fulgrim leaned in close to Rylanor and shook his head.

'You wish me dead?' he said, scathing pity dripping from every syllable. 'Why? Because you think I betrayed you? The Legion? Oh, Rylanor, your thoughts are so narrow. If you could only see us now, how beautiful we have become. We shine so brightly, each of us a brilliant sun.'

Fulgrim reached down, sliding his bare hand inside a rent torn in the Dreadnought's armour. He smiled, closing his eyes and letting his tongue slip across his lips as he pushed deeper inside.

'Ah, there you are!' said Fulgrim, as Rylanor's vox-caster grated in fury. *'Wet and wriggling. I can feel your panic. It's delicious!'*

Rylanor's power fist swung around, bathed in fire. It struck Fulgrim on the shoulder, but Akhtar's psychic force was not simply confined to the Life Eater's detonation. Fulgrim laughed off the sluggish attack and one of his lower arms drew a glittering sword of alien origin. The blade sliced in a cruelly precise arc, cutting through the fibre-bundle motivators and servos.

Rylanor's arm fell limp at his side.

Vistario watched the viral fire spread over the Dreadnought's carapace, slipping inside his buckled plates of armour. Rylanor did not care whether he lived or died, only that Fulgrim went with him.

'Do. Not. Do. This!' barked the Dreadnought.

'Why not? I am your master - I can do whatever I like. I can crush you or I can raise you up. Return to the Legion. Accept the gifts of the Dark Prince and you will walk at my side, clad once again in flesh. You can be anything, old friend! I will sculpt you into something beautiful - a god to these mortals!'

'Never! All we have left between us is that we will die together!' roared the Dreadnought, the upper portion of his carapace burning with blue flames. 'I am Rylanor of the Emperor's Children. Ancient of Rites, Venerable of the Palatine Host, and proud servant of the Emperor of Mankind, Beloved by all. I reject you now and always!'

Fulgrim laughed and said, *'I'm sorry, did it sound like I was offering you a choice?'*

The primarch wrenched his hand from Rylanor's sarcophagus, dragging a sopping mass of fluid and matter with him. Glutinous ropes dripped from his fingers; he was like a midwife holding a mewling newborn. Ruptured cables spilled amniotic fluid so stagnant it must surely have been poisoning Rylanor with every passing second.

'I will remake you, brother,' said Fulgrim. **'You will be my crowning achievement.'**

Though his body was little more than rags of wet meat, Vistario sensed Rylanor's horror at this last violation. An inescapable destiny where he would become that which he hated most.

+*What do we do?*+

The question was Murshid's, and the connection between the Thousand Sons was so strong that the Athanaean's perception for emotion spread to all three of them.

Vistario felt Fulgrim's infinite malice, his cruel enjoyment of Rylanor's anguish and the helplessness of the Thousand Sons. The primarch of the Emperor's Children revelled in his overweening pride, a trait Magnus had more than once told Vistario had been present long before his fall.

But more than anything, stronger even than Fulgrim's spite, Vistario felt Rylanor's pride and honour, the unbending core of greatness that had set him against his brothers and seen him descend into obsessive madness beneath the surface of a dead world.

Vistario took the measure of Fulgrim, seeing nothing worthy in him.

His warriors felt the moment his decision was made.

+Primarch Fulgrim!+ sent Vistario. +Rylanor deserves better than you.+

The primarch looked up, his once bright eyes now black and filled with the darkest poison.

+He deserves better than all of us.+

He raised his bolter and fired a mass-reactive into the back of Akhtar's skull. The Raptora's head exploded and with his death, the psychic force holding back the warhead's detonation ended.

Vistario saw fire.

And once more, all life burned.

It took much less time for the Life Eater to burn out on Isstvan III's second death. Its first ending had claimed eight billion lives, snuffed out in a matter of hours when Horus launched his bombardment from the *Vengeful Spirit*. With such plentiful mortal flesh to fuel the bio-killer's fury, the psychic scream was said to have eclipsed the Astronomican itself.

A shadow emerged from the undercity, a serpentine outline of cinders, held together by a web of neverborn energy. Not even the viral toxins wrought by ancient science could unmake that which the darkest powers of the warp had raised up.

The Phoenician's form was already weaving itself anew, but his soul was broken. For no pain, no hurt and no injury could wound such a being as much as denial of its magnificence.

That was Ancient Rylanor's final victory.