‘YOU DON’T HAVE to do this,’ said Dreagher, breaking the long silence, and the relaxing of tension from the other War Hounds was audible even without Astartes senses. Kharn looked around the loose square of warriors and saw sneaking relief in their expressions.

Someone had finally come out and said it.

‘You need not do it.’ Dreagher could not quite bring himself to step between Kharn and the doors, but his voice was steady. ‘You should not do it.’

But other signs gave the lie to the composure in Dreagher’s voice. Kharn watched his fellow captain’s respiration move at just below combat-preparation speed, watched the veins in his face and shorn scalp tick at an elevated rate, took in the motions of his eyes, the subtle shifts of his shoulders as his body went through the muscle-loosening routines that had been part of their deep conditioning.

Dreagher’s skin carried the scent of scouring-gel but underneath it, coming off his skin, was the scent of adrenaline and the inhuman essences that the Astartes body made for itself when the danger instincts rang.

They were all keyed up; Kharn’s own metabolism was escalated too. He could hardly have helped it. The air cyclers had not yet been able to carry away the tang of blood that had washed through the anteroom the last time the double doors had opened.

As Kharn worked his palate and tongue, processing and tasting the air, he realised something else: the rest of the ship had fallen as silent as the anteroom they stood in. The anteroom’s semicircular outer wall opened through to the barrack-decks, and normally the broad colonnade was alive with sounds. Voices, the clank of boots and the softer tread of the menials and technomats, the distant sound of shots from the ranges, the almost subsonic buzz of the new power weapons, all gone now. The decks were as silent as the great chamber beyond the steel-grey double doors at Dreagher’s back. The strangeness of that silence tautened his nerves and muscles further still.

Kharn ignored his body, letting it do what it will. He kept his eyes cold.

‘Eighth Company makes me the ranking captain aboard, now,’ he told them. ‘My rank, my oath and my Emperor. Together they close the matter. In case anyone is insolent enough to think there’s even a matter to close.’

‘No,’ came a voice from beside him. Jareg, the Master Shellsmith from the artillery echelon. ‘The matter to close is that we must find a way to, to…’ Jareg motioned wordlessly towards the doors, face twisted in distress.

‘We… don’t know how this will end,’ said Horzt, commander of the Ninth Company’s Stormbird squadron. Kharn watched the man’s hands form fists, shaking to match the shake in his voice. ‘And so we have to plan for the worst. One of us here, now, may need to command the Legion yet, and—’

He broke off. In the space beyond the doors a voice, deeper than a tank-rumble, mightier than a cannon-blast, was roaring in anger. If there were words to it, they were blurred and muffled by the slabs of metal in the way, but still the War Hounds fell silent. They had shouted oaths and orders and obscenities over the clamour of gun, grenade and chainaxe, over the scream of Stormbird jets, over the keen and bellow of a dozen different xenos, but Kharn was the only one who dared to speak now over that distant, muted voice.

‘Enough,’ he said, and his voice was flat. ‘I’m not stupid enough to deny what we all think and know. You all owe Horzt a salute for being the only one to find enough Astartes guts in his belly to say it. The Emperor has brought us our lord and commander. The heartspring of our own bloodline. That is who is with us now. Our general. The one of whom we are echoes. Do you remember that? Do you?’ Kharn looked from one to the next, and the War Hounds stared back at him. Good. He would have struck any of them who hadn’t met his eyes. On the other side of the scarred grey plate of the doors, the distant voice roared again.

‘Now, this,’ he went on, ‘this thing we are doing here, this is right. It is not for any Lord Commander, it is not for any high-helmed, gilt-edged custodian, it is not for anyone—’ his shout stiffened their backs, widened their eyes ‘—to come between the War Hounds and their primarch and live. Only for the Emperor himself will we stand aside, and the Emperor has shown his wisdom. He has taken this duty and he has laid it on our shoulders.’

He looked at Dreagher again. Like Kharn, the man was dressed in white, bands of blue glittering across the high-collared tunic, boots and gauntlets a dark ceremonial blue rather than functional shipboard grey. The Emperor’s lightning-bolt emblem gleamed at his collar and shoulder. His dress matched Kharn’s own: the formal garments with which the War Hounds symbolised they were about their most solemn business. It was obvious why. Dreagher wanted to go in Kharn’s place. Wanted to go in and die.

‘We have our primarch now,’ Kharn told them, and even now he felt a little shiver at the words. All these years since they had launched outwards from Terra, watching as one mighty creation after another emerged from unreclaimed space to take their

places in the ranks. Kharn had heard how the Salamanders had waited in orbit around the burning moon, waited for the Emperor's word that the one he had found there was indeed their sire. He remembered the first sight of chilly-eyed Perturabo walking at the Emperor's shoulder the day they took ship for Nove Shendak, and the change in the Iron Warriors when they knew who was to command them. Every Legion still with that empty place at its head felt the same longing, sharper with every voyage, every campaign. Would this next star be the one where their blood-sire lived? Would this ship, this communiqué, bring the news that their father-commander had been found, out there in the dark? And then that electric day when the word had come to the mustering docks at Vueron, the news that their own primarch had been found, their lord, their alpha, their… And it had come to this.

'We have our primarch now,' he repeated, 'and he will lead his Legion in whatever manner he chooses. We are his just as we are the Emperor's. What we wish or plan no longer matters. The commander of the War Hounds will meet the primarch of the War Hounds, and what happens will be as the primarch wills it. So be it. No more talk.'

Besides, he thought as Dreagher saluted and silently walked to the doors, I don't suppose it will be long before he works his way down to you. He was surprised at the thought, but surprised also at the lack of emotion that came with it. For all that the War Hounds were a hot-blooded Legion, Kharn found his thoughts flat and colourless. He took a moment to wonder if this were how others felt, the enemies who had advanced to their doom under War Hound chainaxes, or the condemned men of the auxilia in the days before the Emperor had banned the Legion from decimating allies who disgraced them on the field.

Dreagher worked the key controls and the doors swung silently outwards. Beyond them, oddly prosaic, a plain set of broad steps went down into shadows. Another roar, wordless and deep-throated, came echoing up from the gloom.

Kharn shook the thoughts away, walked forwards, and let the darkness fold over him as Dreagher swung the doors closed at his back.

KHARN CAME DOWN the broad, shallow steps into the great space that had been built into the ship as Angron's triumphal hall. He had been in it many times but it was a different space now, even with most of it lost in the dark. It felt different. Kharn registered that sensation, of walking into a strange space unfamiliar to him, and wondered if any room that held a primarch could feel the same again.

He walked three slow, measured paces onto the smooth stone chamber floor, and pushed his enhanced vision through its darkness adjustments – the primarch had shattered most of the lights, or torn them from their mountings. Here and there the survivors cast glow-pools that did little more than texture the darkness around them. Some of the glows showed dark spatters and puddles across the floor, but Kharn did

not bother to look closely. Even if the smell of it were not drowning his senses, he had seen the aftermath of death too many times not to know it.

He felt the urge to look around him for his brothers. Gheer, the Legion Master, who had come in here first when the Emperor had told the War Hounds they must take this duty upon themselves and then taken ship to meet the Thirty-seventh Fleet at Aldebaran. Kunnar, the First Company Champion, who had donned his formal cape, taken up his axe-staff and walked down the steps after the noises coming through the doors had convinced them that Gheer was long dead. Anchez, who had captained the assault echelon, had walked down next. He had joked with Kharn and Hyazn as the doors had been opened for him, despite the blood they could already smell on the air. The man had never known what fear was. Hyazn had been next, and two of the banner-bearers from his personal command coterie had insisted on marching down the steps into the dark with him. They had meant to block the primarch's fury for long enough that Hyazn could speak with him. It hadn't worked. Vanche, the master-at-arms to old Gheer, had insisted on being next, even though the next to inherit the Legion's command, and so the duty of taking up embassy to their lord, should have been Shinnargen of the Second Company. The point was moot now. Shinnargen had met his end in here an hour after Vanche.

I am, primarch, the servant of your will, thought Kharn, and I would never dare to pronounce you the servant of mine. But still, my newfound lord, if you would make your peace with your Legion while there are still any in your Legion to draw breath…

He exhaled, and took another step into the room. For a moment he thought he could hear movement, the padding of feet, a rush of air that felt like breath before everything splintered and whirled and he crashed into a pillared wall to land hard on his back, gasping in pain.

By the time the gasp had entered his lungs, reflex had taken over and he was up on one knee, turning to put his broken right arm and shoulder to the wall and holding and tensing his left arm ready to ward as he scanned for motion, eyes sifting the gloom, pushing into infrared to see the hulking shape hurtling forwards to fill his vision—

Will overrode reflex, and with an iron effort Kharn forced his hand towards his side. Then he was skittering on his back across the floor, breath hammered out of his lungs and cracked clavicle flaring. Unthinkingly he drew his knees to his chest, turned the skidding tumble into a backwards roll. Training, determination and Astartes neural wiring let him shunt the pain to the back of his mind as he came up into a combat crouch.

Then will took over again, and Kharn made himself stand upright and placed his hands by his sides. He looked back and found the spot where he had rested a moment ago, but the floor was empty, no shape or heat-trace.

Was this how it was for the others? He caught himself wondering, and stopped thinking about it when the lapse in concentration started him swaying on the spot. He focused, half-heard movement closing in behind him and opened his mouth to speak, and a moment later was jerked up from the floor, the back of his head and neck in the grip of a hand that felt bigger and harder than a Dreadnaught's rubble-claw. Will, will over instinct: Kharn stopped himself from kicking backwards, trying to wrench free.

'Another one? Another one like the rest?' The voice in his ear was a rasp, a rumble, words like handfuls of hot gravel. 'Warrior made, warrior garbed, uhh…' For a moment the grip on the back of Kharn's neck juddered and his body shook like a Stormbird hitting atmosphere, then the animal growl from behind him became a roar.

'Fight!'

He was being carried forwards one-handed in long blurring strides across the width of the hall.

'Fight me!' With the words, a slam into the wall hard enough to leave Kharn's wits red-tinged and reeling.

'Fight me!' Another slam and the red was shot through with black. His limbs felt sluggish and only half there. The voice was bellowing drowning his hearing, pouring into his head and trampling his jangled thoughts.

'Fiiight!' Another steel-hard grip closed about his broken arm and for a brief moment Kharn whirled through the air. Another impact and his back was to the wall, his feet dangling, broken shoulder incandescent with pain as one of the great hands pinned him against the dark marble.

It took a moment for things to clear. Astartes biochemistry stabilised his pain and his cognition, glanded stress-hormones slammed into his system and Kharn looked at his primarch's face with clear eyes.

Wiry, copper-red hair curled away from a high brow, pale eyes sat deep behind cheekbones that angled down like axe-strokes to an aquiline nose and a broad, thin-lipped mouth.

It was the face of a general to follow unto death, the face of a teacher at whose feet the wise would fight to sit, the face of a king made for the adoration of worlds: the face of a primarch.

And rage made it the face of a beast. Rage pushed and distorted the features like a tumour breaking out from the skull beneath. It made the eyes into yellow, empty pits,

debased the proud lines of brow and jaw, peeled the lips back from the teeth.

And yet it was a face so maddeningly familiar, the face of the sire whose template had made the War Hounds themselves. Kharn could see his brethren in the bronze skin, the set of the eyes, the lines of jaw and skull. Pinned there and staring, the thought that flicked into his mind was of the Legion's battles against the capering xenos whose masks wove faces out of light, taunting them with distorted mockeries of themselves.

The primarch's grip tensed, and Kharn wondered if he had heard the thought – didn't they say some of their sires had that trick? Slowly Angron's other hand rose up before Kharn's face. Even in this light he could see the crackling shell of quick-clotting blood coating the fingers. The hand made a trembling fist before his face that seemed to hang there for an age before it slowly opened to make a stiff-fingered claw. Kharn could tell how the claw would strike: a finger in each eye, powerful enough to punch through the back of the socket and into his brain, the thumb under his jaw to crush his throat, the whole hand then ready to clench and rip away the front of his skull or pull his head from his neck. Astartes bone was powerfully made – did the primarch have the power for that in just one of his hands? Kharn thought he did.

But the hand did not strike. Instead Angron leaned forwards, the snarling gargoyle-mask of his face closing, closing, until his mouth was by Kharn's ear.

'Why?' And his whisper was like the grate of tank-treads on stone. 'I can see what you're made for. You're made to spill blood, just as I am. You're not born normal men, any more than I was.' A long, savage growl. 'So why? Why no triumph rope? Why no weapon in your hand? Why do you all walk down here so meek? Don't you know whose blood I really— eh?'

They were close enough that he had felt Kharn's smile against his cheek, and now he pulled back to see it. Angron's eyes squeezed shut for a moment, then flashed open again as he twitched Kharn away from the wall and slammed him back again. It seemed to Kharn that he could feel the fingers of the hand that held him thrumming with checked violence.

'What's this? Showing your teeth?' Another slam against the wall. 'Why are you smiling?' By the end of the question the voice was once again at that shattering roar, and even Kharn's hearing, more resilient than human, rang for whole seconds before it cleared. And in those few seconds, he realised that the question had not been rhetorical. Angron was waiting for an nswer.

'I am…' His voice, when he found it, was hoarse and brittle. 'I am proud of my Legion brothers.' He swallowed to try and soothe his dry throat so that he could speak again, but before he could take another breath he was pulled from the wall and dropped. Angron's kick lofted him into the air in a long curve that fetched him up against a cold,

torn corpse. When Kharn dragged in a breath it was full of the reek of blood and offal. There was no way to tell whose the body had been.

Bare feet thumped along the stone floor, counter-pointing growling heaves of breath as Angron closed the distance. He leapt and landed in a crouch beside Kharn as he tried to make his body move. The grip damped around him again, around his jaw and face this time, and he was dragged half-upright to stare into the primarch's eyes again.

'Proud.' Angron's lips worked as though he were chewing on the word. 'Your brothers. No warriors. None of you will fight. Why… are… you…' He was shaping his words with difficulty, and one hand had risen to clutch at his head. 'How, uh, how can, nnn…' And then he lifted Kharn by the front of his tunic and slammed him back down. The ragged remains on the floor gave a bloody squelch as Kharn's back came down across them.

'No pride!' roared Angron, in a voice that Kharn thought dizzily could finish the job of bone-breaking that his fists had started. 'No pride in brothers who stand there with their wits slack! Dull-eyed as a steer on a slaughter-chute! None of you fight! My brothers, my brothers and sisters, oh…' The grip on Kharn's tunic lifted, and he blinked his vision clear and looked up. Angron was not looking at him any more. The primarch had sunk back onto his haunches, one great hand over his eyes. His voice was still a powerful rumble, but barely formed and harsh with accent. Kharn had to concentrate to make out the words. 'My poor warriors,' Angron was murmuring, 'my lost ones.'

And then he dropped his hand and looked into Kharn's eyes. The fury was still in his stare, but it had been banked like a furnace, glowing a dull vermilion rather than roaring crimson.

'Your brothers,' he said in a drained voice, 'are not like my brothers, whoever you are.'

Whoever you are. It took a moment for the words to sink in, and the next thought was, He doesn't know. How can he not know? Still flat on the floor, Kharn took a shuddering breath.

'My name is Kharn. I am a warrior—'

'No!' Angron's fist shattered the floor beside Kharn's head. Stone chips stung his skin. 'No warrior! No!'

'—of the Legiones Astartes, the great league of battle-brothers in service to our—'

'No! Dead!' screamed Angron, his head back, muscles corded in his neck. 'Uhhh, my warriors are dead, my brothers, my sisters—'

‘—beloved Emperor,’ said Kharn, fighting to keep his voice cool and level, facing down the urge to gabble and plead, ‘humanity’s master, our commander and general, by whose—’

At the mention of the Emperor Angron had begun to shudder and now he threw his head back again, baying like a beast up into the dark, shocking Kharn into silence. Then, snake-fast, his hand closed around Kharn’s ankle and with a single wrench of his body he threw him spinning through the air.

There was no time to twist in the air or curl. Kharn managed to get his arms around his head before he crashed into a chamber wall and dropped limp to the floor. Through the red-grey mist in his head he could hear Angron’s voice, still filling the chamber with deafening, wordless howls. Within his own body he could feel twitching and roiling as his implanted organs worked on his system: somewhere in there Angron had damaged something badly. Something for the Apothecarion to study, he thought. If they’re up to the challenge of identifying which scraps are mine after all this, he found himself adding, and the grim little mental chuckle from that thought was what gave him the strength to push himself, groaning, up onto his elbows and knees.

Angron’s foot landed like a forge-hammer between his shoulder blades and flattened him back to the floor, cracked sternum sending out ripping bursts of pain, feeling the fused shell of his ribcage creaking as he fought for breath.

‘You don’t injure easily, do you, you meek little paperskins?’ came Angron’s voice from above him, the words bitten out in curt growls.

‘Who makes warriors who won’t make war? Your murdering bastard commander, that’s who.’

More shifts in him as Kharn’s metabolism noted the dwindling breath in his lungs and changed its pace to use its oxygen more efficiently. He felt the tickle of pressure as his third lung shifted to higher functioning to take up the shortfall, and a warm sensation in his abdomen as his oolitic kidney worked on the heightened toxins in his blood.

‘Sends his cowardly little paperskins to die for him, oh yes, I know his sort.’ Angron’s words were running together into an almost continuous growl. ‘Hands that’ve never felt the heat of blood. Skin that’s never parted. Brain-pan that’s never been kissed by the Butcher’s Nails. Tongue that’s never… huh.’

The weight had shifted on Kharn’s back. Angron didn’t have the leverage to keep the crushing pressure with his foot, and his other foot had started to come up off the floor. Then suddenly the pressure was gone, and Kharn whooped for air with all three lungs as Angron kicked him over onto his back.

‘You’re not dying the way I’ve seen men and women die.’ Angron stood over Kharn for a moment, head high like a ceremonial statue, then began to circle where he lay, back bent and head thrust forward, a great hunting cat scenting prey. ‘You take wounds the way… hnnn…’ He dug the fingers of one hand into scalp for a moment, and Kharn could see his fingers tracing the lines of deep, runnelled scars, ‘…the way I do. Your blood crisps itself like mine, it… smells…’ His hands balled into fists, and Kharn saw the tension roll up the forearms, into the shoulders, into the neck and finally once again pulling the primarch’s features into the rage-mask. Slowly, clumsily, Kharn managed to sit up and onto one knee, braced for a new strike, but Angron kept circling him.

‘You carry yourselves like men used to iron in their hands, not air. If I were killing you on the hot dust, I’d know your names, because you’d have paid me the proper salute and we’d have turned the rope together.’ Around and around him the padding footsteps. Kharn could feel the primarch’s gaze on him like heavy chain draped over his shoulders. ‘Does it bother you, dying to one who will never know your names?’

Did it bother him, Kharn wondered? But of course that wasn’t the question. He was an emissary, here to deliver a message, not to debate.

‘We are your Legion, Primarch Angron. We are your instrument and yours to command. The deaths of our enemies are yours to command, and so are our own.’

Not a punch or a kick or a grip, this time, but a ringing, open-handed clout to the side of his head that pitched him sideways. ‘Mock me again and I’ll crumble your skull in my fingers before your mouth has finished the words.’ Angron’s voice was shaking with a precarious restraint that was more frightening than a bellow. ‘My warriors. My brothers and sisters. Oh my braye ones, my brothers, my…’ For several seconds Angron simply paced, his jaw opening and working soundlessly, his head twisting from side to side. ‘Gone they are, gone without me, I…’

Angron’s fists began to move. He beat them against his thighs and chest, brought one fist and then the other around in long looping motions to smash into his mouth and cheeks. In the new quiet of the chamber the sounds of his flesh splitting and his grunting breaths seemed magnified, textured. Kharn watched, unable to speak, as Angron dropped to his knees, fists doubled in front of his face, muscles locked taut and body shaking.

There was a silence. Finally, Kharn broke it.

‘We are your Legion. Made from your blood and genes, crafted in your image. We have fought our way from the world where you, my lord, were conceived. We have spilt blood and burned worlds, we have shattered empires and hounded species into

oblivion. Searching for you.'

Just let me speak, lord, he thought as he felt the strength coming back into his voice. Just let me bring our petition to you and then my mission is fulfilled and I am content. Do as you will.

'We do not fight you because you are our primarch. Not just our commander, but our blood-sire, our fountainhead. No matter what, I will not raise a hand to you. Nor will any of my battle-brothers. We are ambassadors to you now. We are here for our Legion and our… our Emperor,' Kharn tensed, but this time Angron did not respond to the word. 'We are coming before you to plead with you to take up the rightful place that was set for you at your creation.'

He began moving, wanting to shuffle closer to where Angron knelt and hunched and shook, but even now the violence that the primarch exuded like heat made him pause. Kharn took an unsteady breath. Pain from his wounds kept sawing at the bottom of his consciousness, nagging at him. He squeezed shut his eyes for a moment, pushed himself through the battlefield exercises that had been hypnoconditioned into him on the mountainsides of Bodt, smothered the pain with will.

That gave him a moment to think, and with the respite he brought his mind to bear on this task the way he would a battlefield, a fortification, an enemy's swordwork. He thought about his own mission, about the reports he had heard from the Emperor's own flagship before and after the disastrous visit to the planet's surface, about the primarch's own words. There had been battle down there, they all knew that. Kharn felt a flicker of envy. The rebels now lying as corpses down there had already had the glory of their primarch, their primarch, leading them in—

Understanding came in a flash, given a weird focus by the pain.

'I envy them,' he said quietly. 'Those ones who fought with you. I wish I had known them. They followed you to battle. That is all any of my brothers and I ask of you, sire. The chance to fight with you as they did.'

Slowly the primarch's hands lowered from his face. He was kneeling with his back to the nearest unbroken light, looming over Kharn in silhouette, but Kharn's vision took in enough infrared to let him see the bitter little smile on the giant face.

'You? No nails, no rope. Hope you've got a good head for mockery, Kharn of the so-called Legion. We'd have had sport with you in the camps. Jochura would have been merciless. Sharp-tongued, that boy was.' The smile lost a trace of its bitterness. 'I'd watch him bait the others. In the cells at first and then after, when we were roaming. He'd mock, they'd laugh, and he and the one he mocked would laugh harder than all the rest of them. It… was… good. Good to watch. Jochura always swore he would die

laughing at his killer.’ The smile vanished and Angron’s mouth took a brutal downwards twist. ‘I told him… told him… uuh,’ and Kharn felt the impact up into his body as the great fists smashed into the floor again. He made to speak but the words were cut off as Angron’s arm shot out, quicker than sight, and then his hand was locked around Kharn’s neck and jaw, dragging him in.

‘I don’t know how they died!’ Angron’s shout was so loud that the words seemed to fuzz into white noise in Kharn’s ears. The hand shook him like a sack. ‘We swore! Swore!’ Kharn was being yanked backwards and forwards, and Angron’s other hand beat the floor in rime. Amid all the clamour a sharp new scent imprinted itself on his senses, and Kharn realised it was the primarch’s blood, freshly shed. Angron had battered his hands bloody against the stone.

‘We swore an oath,’ Angron went on, his voice dropping to a groan like wrenching steel. ‘On the road to Desh’ea I had each of them cut a new scar for my rope, and I cut theirs. And we swore an oath that by the end of all of our lives we’d cut the high-riders a scar that would bleed for a hundred years!’ Despite himself, Kharn’s hands came up as Angron’s grip tightened around his neck and he fought the urge to try and grapple free. ‘A wound their great-grandwhelps would still cry from! A wound to haunt any of them who dared look on the hot dust again!’ Angron’s grip shifted, and air flooded back into Kharn’s lungs. He hung half-kneeling with one of the primarch’s hands pressed into each side of his head. ‘All this,’ Angron said softly, ‘and even my sworn oath wasn’t enough.’ He parted his hands and let Kharn crumple to the floor. ‘Because I don’t even know how they died.’

When Kharn opened his eyes Angron was sitting cross-legged a little way from his feet, elbows on knees, head thrust out in front of his shoulders, watching him. He could no longer smell the primarch’s blood as fresh as he had – had he lost consciousness for a time? Or had he just lain disorientated in the gloom? Or did Angron’s blood clot and seal even faster than his own? He thought it probably did. He took a breath, torso flickering with pain, and pushed himself up on his elbows.

‘And so how do you meet death, paperskin?’ The coolness in Angron’s voice was startling after the raving daemon that had battered and flung him like a puppet. ‘Do you make your salutes when you’re on the dust? Declaim your lineage like the high-riders? Declaim your kills like us? Tell me what you do while you’re waiting for the iron in your hand to warm up to blood-heat.’

‘We—’ Kharn began, but the unbecoming sprawl was cramping his chest. He pushed himself the rest of the way up and knelt, sitting back on his heels, keeping his breathing steady and composing himself through the pain. Even slumped over as he was, Angron was taller than Kharn by half a head.

‘The oath of moment,’ he said. ‘Our last act before we embark for combat. Each of us

prepares our vow to our brothers in the Legion.

‘What we will do for our, our Emperor,’ Angron snarled at the word, ‘our Legion and ourselves. We witness the oaths. Some Legions write them and then decorate themselves with the written oaths.’

‘Did you take one of these oaths before you came in to see me?’ Angron asked.

‘No, primarch,’ replied Kharn, slightly wrong-footed by the question. ‘I did not come in here to fight you. I say again, not one in the Legion will raise a hand to you. Oaths of moment are for battle.’

‘No challenge,’ rumbled the looming shape. ‘You do not ask their names when you walk the dust, and you don’t give yours. No salutes and no showing of ropes. This is how they fight who say they are my blood-cousins?’

‘This is how we fight, sire. We exist to make the Emperor’s enemies extinct. We’ve no need of anything that does not serve that end. And we rarely fight enemies who have names worth knowing, let alone saluting. What the rope is, forgive me, primarch, I do not know.’

‘How do you show your warriorship, then?’ The puzzlement in the primarch’s voice seemed genuine, but when Kharn hesitated over his answer, Angron lunged forwards and punched him over onto his back.

‘Answer me! You little grave-grubber, you sit there and smirk at me again like some high-rid… uhhh…’ The primarch had sprung to his feet and now he picked Kharn up by the throat, yanked him into the air and dropped him flat on his back again. By the time Kharn had shakily pushed himself back up, Angron had walked away to stand under one of the lights. He turned to make sure Kharn was watching, then turned and spread his arms.

The primarch’s torso was bare, packed with inhuman musculature on the Emperor’s design, broad, heavy and angular to accommodate the thickened bones and the strange organs and tissues that Astartes legend said the Emperor had grown from his own flesh and blood, modified twenty different ways for his children. Kharn found himself wondering for a moment if Angron had grown up with the slightest idea of what he truly was, before he realised what the primarch was showing him.

A ridge of scar tissue began at the base of Angron’s spine. It travelled up his backbone, then veered to the left and around his body, riding over his hip and curving around to his front. Angron began to turn in place underneath the light and Kharn saw how the scar seemed to expand and thin again, ploughing and gouging the skin, in some places vanishing entirely where the primarch’s healing powers had overcome it.

The scar looped around and around Angron's body, spiralling up over his belly, around his ribs, towards his chest. A little past the right of his sternum, it abruptly stopped.

'The Triumph Rope,' Angron said. His hand moved to indicate the upper lengths of the scar, where it was smoother, more continuous, less ugly. There were no healed patches in its upper reaches. Kharn jumped as Angron thumped a fist against his chest with a report like a gun.

'Red twists! Nothing but red on my rope, Kharn! Of all of us, I was the only one. No black twists.' Angron was shaking with rage again, and Kharn bowed his head. His thoughts were bleak: I've started this now, and I wish to finish it, but primarch, I don't know how many more of your rages I can withstand. Then Angron's hands had gripped his shoulders, cruelly grating the bones in the broken one, and the muscles in Kharn's neck and jaw locked rigid as he worked to stop himself crying out.

'I can't go back!' came Angron's voice through the pain, and the note in his voice was not fury now but an anguish far greater than the pain of Kharn's injuries. 'I can't go back to Desh'ea. I can't pick up the soil to make a black twist.' Angron flung Kharn away and dropped to his knees. 'I can't… uhh… I need to wear my failure and I can't. Your Emperor! Your Emperor! I couldn't fight with them and now I can't commemorate them!'

'Sire, I, we…' Kharn could feel hide stings and blooms of heat inside his abdomen as his healing systems worked on wounds inside him. 'Your Legion wants to learn your ways. You are our primarch. But we haven't learned them yet. I don't know…'

'No. Grave-grub Kharn doesn't know. No Triumph Rope on Kharn.' Kharn kept his eyes on the floor but the sneer was all too audible in Angron's voice. 'For every battle you live through, a cut to lengthen the rope. For a triumph, let it scar clean. A red twist. For a defeat you survive, work some dust from where you fought into the cut to scar it dark. A black twist. Nothing but red on me, Kharn,' said Angron, spreading his arms again, 'but I don't deserve it.'

'I understand you, sire,' Kharn answered, and he found that he did. 'Your brothers, your brothers and sisters,' he corrected himself, 'they were defeated.'

'They died, Kharn,' said Angron. 'They all died. We swore to each other that we'd stand together against the high-riders' armies. The cliffs of Desh'ea would see the end of it. No more twists in the rope. For any of us.' His voice had softened to a whisper, heavy with grief. 'I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be drawing breath. But I am. And I can't even pick up the dust from Desh'ea to make a black twist to remember them by. Why did your Emperor do this to me, Kharn?'

There was silence after the question. Angron, still standing, had let his head fall

forwards and was digging his knuckles into his forehead and face. The lights made strange shadows across his skull, lumpy with metal and scars.

Kharn got to his feet. He swayed, but his balance held.

‘It isn’t my place to know, sire, what the Emperor said to you. But we—’ Angron wheeled, and Kharn flinched. The primarch’s eyes were alight, and his teeth were bare, but it wasn’t a snarl now, it was a broad, vicious grin.

‘Didn’t say much to me, no he did not. Think I let him? Think I did?’ Angron was in motion again, prowling to and fro under the light, his head snaking from side to side. ‘I knew what was happening. I’d stood there and seen the high-riders’ killers coming up for my brothers and sisters at Desh’ea, I knew, I knew. Ahhh!’ His hands shot out and blurred as they clawed the air in front of him. ‘Had his own brothers, didn’t he, his kin-guard. All gold-plated, fancying themselves high-riders even though their feet were in the dirt like mine. Pointing their little blades at me!’ Angron spun, leapt, hurtled at Kharn and slammed him backwards with an open palm. ‘They drew weapons on me! Me! They… they…’ Angron threw his head back, palms pressed to the sides of his skull as though sheer physical pressure could keep his boiling thoughts on track. For a moment he was frozen like that, and then he wrenched his body forwards and drove his fist into the stone by Kharn’s head. Stinging grains of rock flew out from the impact.

‘Killed one, though,’ spat Angron, rearing up and starting to prowl again. ‘Couldn’t put my hands on that Emperor of yours. Ahh, his voice in my ears, worse than the Butcher’s Nails…’ Angron’s fingers swiped and rubbed across the metal in his skull. His gaze was transfixing Kharn again. ‘Took one apart though. One of those gold-wrapped bastards. No stomach for it, your Emperor, paper-skinned like you. Pushed me back, into that… place… the place he took me from Desh’ea…’ The shadows over Angron’s face seemed to deepen at the recollection and his body hunched and folded inwards.

‘Teleport,’ said Kharn, understanding. ‘He teleported you. First to his own ship, and then to here.’

‘Something you understand, maybe.’ Angron was still moving, further away now, harder for Kharn to pick out except as a smoke-warm shape in infrared. He had his head back and his arms out, as though he were addressing an audience in a high gallery. ‘My sisters and brothers and I, owned by the high-riders, floating over us with their crow-cloaks. Their maggot-eyes buzzing around us while we drew each others’ blood instead of theirs.’ He growled, punching and clawing the air above his head. ‘And you, Kharn, owned by the Emperor who draws your blood and puts his gold-shiny puppets into the fights he won’t…’

Kharn was shaking his head, and Angron had seen him.

‘Well now,’ his voice rumbled out of the shadow, and all the menace was back in it. The sound reminded Kharn how weak he was, how wounded, how unarmed. ‘Kharn calls me liar. Kharn thinks he will question his primarch for the sake of his Emperor.’ Once again Angron came out of the darkness in a leap, landing in front of Kharn with one hand cocked back for a pulverising punch.

‘Admit it, Kharn,’ he snarled. ‘Why won’t you say it?’ The cocked fist shook but did not swing. Angron pushed his face forwards as though he were about to bite Kharn’s flesh. ‘Say it! Say it!’

‘I saw him once,’ was what Kharn said instead. ‘I saw him on Nove Shendak. World Eight-Two-Seventeen. A world of worms. Giant creatures, intelligent. Hateful. Their weapons were filaments, metal feathers that they embedded in themselves to conduct energies out of their bodies. I remember we saw the surface roil with the filaments before the worms broke out of it almost at our feet. Thick as a man, longer than you, sire, are tall. Three mouths in their faces, a dozen teeth in their mouths. They spoke through the mud in sonic screams and witch-whispers. We had found three systems under their thrall, burned them out of their colony nests and chased them home. But on their cradle-world we found humans. Humans lost to humanity for who knows how long, crawling on the land while the worms slithered in the marsh seas. Hunting the humans, farming them. Killing them.’

Angron’s eyes were still narrowed and his fist still raised, but he no longer shook. Kharn’s eyes had half-closed. He remembered how the War Hounds’ blue and white armour glimmered in the worm-world’s twilight, remembered the endless, nerve-sapping sucking sounds as the lunar tides dragged the mud oceans to and fro across the jagged stone continents.

‘The Iron Warriors were with us too, and Perturabo landed with the assault pioneers after our lances scoured our drop-zone bare and dry. He worked out how to dredge and shape the ground. The earth there, well, there barely was earth. Just muddy slops, full of trace toxins, the bedrock deep enough that a man’d drown if he planted his feet on it.’

‘How did you stop them?’ demanded Angron. ‘If you couldn’t stand on the ground?’

‘Sentries with high-powered lasguns, sire, devices to read the movements of the mud to hear them moving through it towards us, explosives we seeded around the earthworks and allowed to sink to where the worms burrowed. Perturabo’s earthworks were a miracle. He built trenches and dykes, penned in the mud seas and drained them, drove the worms back, reclaimed land these wretched humans could build on. And when the worms came out to fight us, they met the Emperor and his War Hounds.’

‘You’re speaking of yourself,’ said Angron.

‘Yourselves.’ Kharn nodded. ‘The War Hounds. XII Legion Astartes. Made in your image, as your warriors, primarch. He saw us fight in the Cephic hive-sprawls and named us for the white hounds the Yeshk warriors in the north used. He did us an honour with the name, primarch. We are proud of it, and we hope you will be too.’

Angron gave a growl, but he did not speak. The hand that had been a fist had opened again.

‘The southern anchor of Perturabo’s earthworks was a rock, the closest thing that place had to a mountain, the only one the sludge tides hadn’t been able to wear down. When the worms saw the Mechanicum begin to change the world’s face they mustered to break us under the peak. They buried themselves in the sludge beyond our range and came forwards under it to meet us.’ Kharn’s voice was speeding up as his memory filled with the sharp reek of the poisoned ground and the warning cries from the Imperial Army artillerists as the mud ocean heaved. Angron had backed away, his head pushed forwards and his eyes were full of concentration.

‘They first came in a wave,’ Kharn said. ‘They had skulked around the fringes of the earthworks, carried off some of the crews working the pumps and dredgers. We had not fought a decisive action against them for months. But now Gheer and Perturabo had read the patterns of their attacks and placed us for the counter-assault. We formed up among Perturabo’s aqueduct walls, only half-built they were and still blocked half the sky. We took our oaths of moment and primed our bolters.’

‘Bolters?’

‘A firearm. A powerful one. The weapon of the Astartes.’

‘Ehh. Get on with it. The worms came for the earthworks.’ Angron was staring over Kharn’s head, yanking his hands back and forth, shuffling his feet. It was a moment before Kharn realised the Primarch was playing the defence out in his mind, ordering the lines, mapping out the ground. ‘So they came up like chaer-dogs at a spike-line? Stupid to rush a shield wall. Tell me what you did.’

Kharn closed his eyes, focusing past his injured body to run the conditioned routines that ordered his memories.

‘The first line of them broke the mud with their jaws and filaments,’ he said, ‘and they came at us behind a wall of their power-arcs. The mud steamed in front of them and where the arcs converged they shattered rock. They sent a rolling bombardment ahead of them. We worked to break it with thudd guns, dropping shells behind their

blast-front, and we broke up the rock in front of them with grenades. We thought we had their measure when the counter-bombardment made their front lines shiver, but they were simply filling up our attention, measuring where our own line was wavering. When their blasts dropped away they came in force to the weak points. Drove wedges into our front. To flank and envelop we'd have had to go out onto the mud where we could barely walk, and where the mud was shallow enough for us to try it, they had second and third lines ready to drag the flankers under or cook them in their armour. To break the assaults we had to get them onto rock, where we could manoeuvre better than they. Perturabo had built traps into his earthworks. False outer walls, double emplacements, killing zones along the drainage canals.'

Angron nodded approvingly, looking up and down the dark chamber as though he could see the great rough walls, lit by orange bolter-flare and the blue-white power-arcs of the worms.

'But still we had to bring them inside our lines to break them. Hold them back and then fall to second positions, one formation at a time, through the Army lines to where we were waiting to drop the axe. There were a lot of worms, primarch.' Kharn grinned. His wounds throbbed as the vividness of the memory prompted his metabolism to begin glanding combat stimms. 'Our axes weren't dry for a month.' In answer Angron growled again, making a quick double motion of his arm as though swinging a blade forwards and backwards at something below his own height. Barely thinking about it, Kharn's warrior brain filed away the Primarch's footing and balance, his arm and shoulder motions, noted where a riposte might land home. Then, still in his combat stance, Angron pinned Kharn with his gaze again.

'The Emperor. You talk about fighting down there in the mud but you don't talk about the Emperor. High-rode, did he? Hung above you, did he?' Angron's voice was rising, turning ugly and ragged. 'Laughed at you, did he? Called your blood-spills, did he? Admit it, Kharn!' In a blur he crossed the distance and knocked Kharn to one knee with a looping, glancing arm-sweep.

'The Emperor,' Kharn said, and couldn't stop himself from smiling at the memory. 'The Emperor was a golden storm descending onto Nove Shendak's filth. When the worms were in amongst us he came down from the peak and it was as if he had brought a fragment of the sun down for us in amends for the sun we couldn't see through those filthy fogs. He shone out over the battle lines like a beacon. His custodians were like living banners, the troopers rallied to them, but he…' Kharn closed his eyes, looking for the words.

'Imagine, sire, did they fight in your home with grenades? Explosive weapons, small enough to hold in the hand and throw?'

'High-rider weapons,' snarled Angron. 'Not fit for a warrior on the hot dust.'

‘But imagine, primarch, some,’ he searched for the word Angron had used, ‘some paperskin who takes a grenade and simply grips it in his fist until it explodes. Imagine how it would destroy the hand, shatter the arm, ruin the body! Wherever the Emperor met one of their columns head on it shattered like that. He didn’t repel them, sire. Didn’t defeat them. He ruined them. Assault after assault, not even Perturabo when he came down to the lines for the final—’

‘You’ve said that name already,’ boomed Angron from behind him. ‘Who is he?’

‘Forgive me, sire. Another primarch. One of the first we found. I was new to the War Hounds when the message went through the fleets, and I almost didn’t understand what it meant. Not until I saw the Iron Warriors and how they reacted. The very air seemed to change around them. They and we and the Ultramarines, we were travelling together. We envied them. They had found their blood-sire and their general. Now we have found ours.’

‘Another. Another one.’ Kharn risked a look around and up. Angron was standing still, hands pressed to his face again, teeth grinding as he concentrated. ‘Another one of me?’

‘Not like you, primarch. A brother to you. Made for conquest and kingship as you are. The Iron Warriors, they’re his Legion now.’

‘Brave fighters?’

‘Brave enough,’ Kharn answered, ‘with a wall to sit on or a trench to stand in.’

‘Walls.’ Angron growled the word. ‘Walls can be broken.’

‘So we tell them, sire. Perhaps you can—’

‘Walls,’ Angron cut him off. ‘When we first broke out of the caves and walked on stone, not dust, we were nearly trapped within walls. We had the weapons we’d drawn one another’s blood with and they were ready for a change of flavour. The high-riders laughed, the way they always laughed as they looked down on us on the dust, and they called out taunts the way they goaded us when we fought.’

Angron whipped his fists through the air as though he were batting at insects. ‘Sent their voices through the maggot-eyes they watched us with. Voices, voices. “Oh, do oblige, wonderful Angron!”‘ Angron’s voice was suddenly, eerily imitating a higher, softly accented, singsong voice. ‘“We wagered you’d take a wound from a dozen enemies, surely a single wound, won’t you oblige and bleed for us?”‘

His tone shifted and he imitated another. '"My son is watching with me, Angron, what's wrong with you? Fight harder, give him something to cheer!" The eyes, the voices. The Butcher's Nails in my head… hot… smoke… in my thoughts…'A wolfish look stole over Angron's face. 'It was good to fight without the eyes and the voices. They tried to trap us but we wouldn't stop for them. Every line they formed we rushed before they were in formation. They were everywhere but we were fast.'

Angron was suiting actions to words, loping back and forth, smashing and lunging and ripping at imaginary enemies.

'Jochura with his laugh and his chains. Cromach, he fought with a brazier-glaive. Hah! I gave him the first black twist in his rope, and he and I burned the watchtowers at Hozzean together. Klester riding her shriekspear through the air, you should have seen her, Kharn, so fast, and ohh…' Angron was clutching at the metal tracery poking out through his mane. 'Fast we moved, fast, not hanging between walls, entrapment is death, fast, trust and discipline… Never rest, always forwards, hunger for the enemy, that's what they taught us… Uhh, my brothers and sisters, oh, if we had known how it would end, we didn't know!' Angron fell to his knees and howled. 'All that valour! The eaters of cities, they called us! All the mountain fastnesses, burning like beacons! All the Great Coast painted in blood! We devoured Hozzean with flames! Meahor! Ull-Chaim!' Weeping and roaring, he leapt to his feet, oblivious to Kharn looking on.

'We broke them at the river before Ull-Chaim! Hung half a thousand high-riders and kin-guard from the vine bridges! The princelings' heads floating on the river, down to the lowlands as our heralds! The silver lace from their skulls, ahh, ripped from their skulls, wrapped on my fists!'

The furnace rage was back. Kharn thought to shuffle away, and dismissed the idea. He would not hide from Angron any more than he would fight him. And Angron would find him anywhere in this room anyway. And no sooner had he finished that thought than he had been wrenched from the ground by each arm and swung over the primarch's head to be slammed into the floor. Stone cracked under him.

'They paid! They paid! We made them pay!' Angron kicked Kharn across the floor, bellowing. 'Paid for my brothers and sisters! Who will pay?'

Dizzy, fainting, Kharn felt himself picked up and slammed down again, kicked again, grabbed by the neck.

'Pay, War Hound! Pay! Fight me!' Something – fist? Foot? – crashed into his chest and Kharn sprawled on the floor, choking. 'Get up and fight!'

The end of it, then, Kharn thought. Well, I carried my embassy as well as a War Hound could. He tried to rise and couldn't, so he lay full-length on his back and spoke weakly

into the air.

‘You are my primarch and my general, Lord Angron. I swore that I would seek you out and follow you, and I will not fight you. And if I must die, then yours is the hand I will die by. I am Kharn and I am loyal to your will.’

While he waited, he faded from consciousness then jerked back as his system shifted itself to rouse him and the pain of his injuries sharpened. He could not see or hear Angron, but he could feel the stone floor underneath him and the cool air in his lungs. When it came, Angron’s voice was frighteningly close, almost by his ear.

‘You are warriors, Kharn,’ the primarch said. ‘I know warriors when I see them.’ Kharn tried to answer but pain rippled through his neck and chest when he tried to speak.

‘This… Emperor,’ Angron said, palpably struggling to keep his voice level. ‘He is the one you swore to?’

‘We swore to each other,’ Kharn managed to get out, ‘in his name and on his banner.’ His breath took a long time to come. ‘That we would not… raise a hand against you.’

Angron said nothing for a time. Kharn’s consciousness had begun to flicker again by the time he spoke.

‘Such devotion… from such warriors…’ His voice tailed off, faded and returned. His hands were pressed to his head again. ‘A man who can… a man… to whom… your oaths… for him you would…’

Minutes passed. Angron’s voice came again.

‘This room. I can leave it?’ It took Kharn a moment to work out how to answer.

‘This is the flagship of the War Hounds. Our greatest vessel. It is the instrument of your will and yours to command, primarch, as are we.’

For a long time there was no answer, just quiet and dark, and just as Kharn was starting to feel his consciousness go again he felt himself lifted, slowly and gently now, and carried through the dark.

THEY HAD LOOKED at one another when the booming knock came on the doors, unsure of what to do, but only for a moment. Then Dreagher worked the openers, and when the locks clanked and the portals groaned open he was there. The War Hounds gasped and moved back as the giant shadow on the steps grew, advanced, came into the light. With his right hand the primarch supported Kharn, battered and hanging barely conscious.

Angron stood, wary, wound tight as a bowstring, his free hand opening and closing. His breath rumbled in his throat. For long minutes each War Hound in turn blanched under the primarch's gaze, until Kharn managed to lift his head and speak.

'Salute your primarch, War Hounds. Salute he who shed blood on the hot dust and made the high-riders pay for their arrogance. Salute your blood-sire and the general of the XII. Salute the one whose soldiers were named the Eaters of Cities. Salute him, Astartes!'

And the War Hounds answered him. Hands and voices lifted in salute and axe-heads were crashed against the floor. Gathering around Angron, he towering silently at their centre, they shouted and saluted again, and again, and Kharn found the strength and voice to stagger to join the circle and add his shouts to theirs.

'Primarch,' said Angron. His voice was a murmur, but it cut the War Hounds' voices straight to silence. 'I am a general again.'

'Primarch!' shouted Dreagher in response, 'General! Your warriors were the eaters of cities, lord, but with you to command us the War Hounds will be the eaters of worlds!'

For a moment Angron swayed, his eyes and fists closed. But then he looked at Dreagher, from there to Kharn. And he smiled.

'World Eaters,' he said, slowly, tasting the sounds. 'World Eaters. So you shall be, then, little brothers. You'll learn to cut the rope. We shall bleed, and be brothers.' This time they all met his eyes. Slowly, one of Angron's great fists came up to return their salutes.

'Come with me, then, World Eaters. Come down into my chamber and we will speak.' Angron turned on his heel and walked back into his chamber.

Silently, supporting Kharn in their midst, the World Eaters followed their primarch down into that darkness that stank of blood.