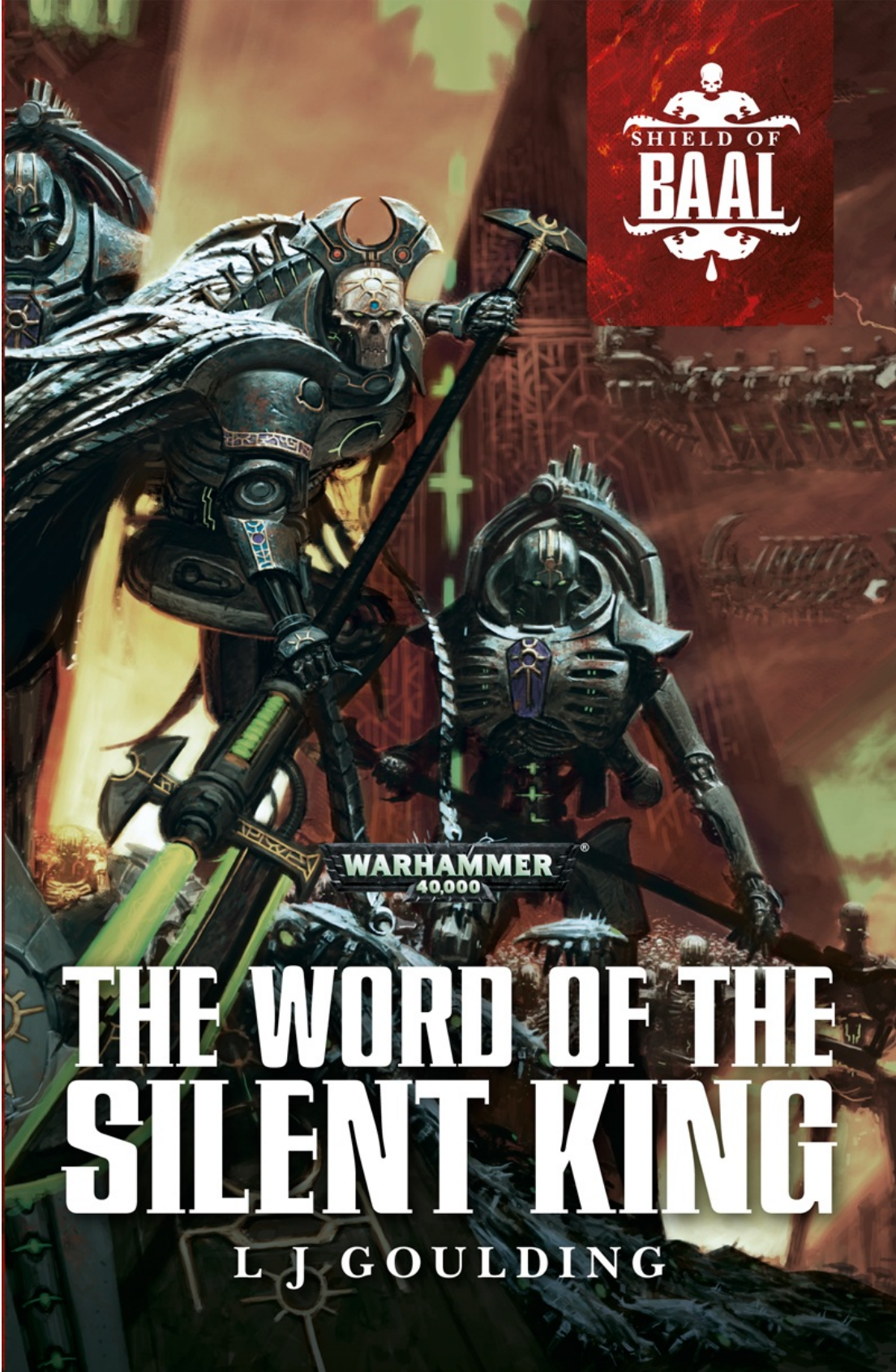




WARHAMMER
40,000

THE WORD OF THE SILENT KING

L J GOULDING



SHIELD OF
BAAL

WARHAMMER
40,000

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THE WORD OF THE SILENT KING

L J Goulding

More, my Lord Anrakyk? You would know more?

Better than this, we will tell you *everything*. Perhaps then you will understand. After all, you will need allies.

Long have we known of the Devourer. While the majority of the necron race slept away the aeons, his great majesty Szarekh, the Silent King, journeyed far and wide beyond the borders of this galaxy. Such unspeakable things did he witness as cannot be adequately articulated in our noble language, nor any other.

The most dire of all these extragalactic enemies were the tyranids.

For countless cycles he has sought to repel this threat. In his wisdom he has observed them, studied them and committed them to oblivion in all but the final, decisive deed. He has brought them to battle on a hundred worlds, ravaged their slumbering fleets out in the cold, measureless void, and even united the more fractious, warring dynasties so that our mutual interests might be protected.

What, you ask, has this to do with an alliance between the living and the dead?

We will tell you everything, my lord. Perhaps then you will understand.

The world's name is not important. Not to us. To the humans, though, it seemed to be paramount. For a species that would see themselves as the undisputed masters of this galaxy, they place so much emphasis on names, and the paradises and damnations that they imagine for themselves.

This, then, becomes a tale of angels and of devils, to use the crude, ancient terms.

The bloodiest of angels, fighting upon the Devil's Crag.

And we were there. The three of us – Khatlan, Dovetlan and Ammeg, if you will – and so many more. So many, many more.

While you travelled the stars, seeking tithes and tribute, we answered the call of our true master. The Praetorians can move in great numbers, quickly and

quietly, when the attentions of the dynasties fall elsewhere for a time. So it is that we return to the court of the Silent King whenever he would wish it, to bring him new word of the Great Awakening. To the rest of the galaxy, we are his eyes and ears, as we are his right hand, and his only voice.

He does not speak. He will not speak. Not to you.

Not yet.

But he may, in time, if you prove worthy.

They had us, brothers. We were done for.

We had fought them hard. On Gehenna, those clanking mechanical xenos seemed to be without number. For three weeks, Dante had led the Third Company against their Legions – we in the Assault squads would strike and fall back with the commander, over and over, while Captain Tycho directed the long range engagement. It was a dry, dusty grind. The only blood that fell upon the barren wastes was ours.

That felt wrong. There was nothing to slake our thirst, no glorious crimson to bathe the armour of the damned.

Tycho was the Master of Sacrifice. That title seemed appropriate. We felt sacrificed.

Gehenna is nothing if not an altar upon which such offerings can be made, though the myriad alien races seem forever drawn to test the Imperium's right to preside over it. A million souls more hallowed than ours had passed on the hive world's plains, over the millennia. What more noble endeavour, what more glorious calling can there be than to defend such a place from the hordes of the restless xenos dead?

And so defend it we did, with every last ounce of our company's strength.

We fell from the grey-streaked skies, the crimson of the Ironhelms Assault squads like a bloodstain upon the pristine gold of the Sanguinary Guard. Commander Dante was ever at the front, the tip of the blade thrust into the necrons' flanks. The Axe Mortalis hewed left and right, cleaving through metal bodies as easily as it might through living flesh on any other battlefield, and in Dante's divine shadow we were inspired. I led my squad in a freefall drop, the weight of our charge like the hammer of Sanguinius's own wrath against the enemy, their dully glowing eyes turned upwards in those last heartbeats before we were in their very midst.

No towering necron lords swathed in fuliginous silks, no insectoid sentinels lashing us with electrum whips. These were the poorest stock of the Legions that

we now faced, the meagre revenants that seemed almost without number and whose only tactical use seemed to be that they *absolutely would not die*.

Exhorting my battle-brothers onwards, I drove into the necron warriors with my blade held before me. Speed, we had found, was the key – they simply could not track us quickly enough as targets if we kept moving, and they seemed incapable of firing their gauss weaponry without first taking careful aim. And so we struck them down by the dozen, taking heads and limbs and blowing out armoured torsos with point-blank pistol fire, and stamping their remains into the dust beneath our boots.

Yet for every necron we tore apart, three more would trudge forwards to take its place; or else the supposedly dead warrior would simply rise up again once we had passed by, wounds reknitting under whatever baleful technomancy powered them.

Green flashes cast the seemingly endless horde in silhouette, and I looked up to see more of the great, gravitic monolith structures gliding ponderously down the slopes from the crags beyond. Their energy matrices cast thumping charges into the melee, scattering golden-armoured Blood Angels like leaves in the wind. Maddening, squealing static cut through the inter-squad vox-channels, and suddenly we were cut off from Dante's command entirely.

And more necrons came. And yet more.

The press of cold, lifeless bodies around us become entangling, and the warriors began to jab at us with their hooked bayonet blades. Brother Jophael tried to free himself from the horde's grasp by launching back into the air, but metal claws pulled him down, jump pack and all, beneath the ambling tide. His agonised screams were mercifully brief.

I planted a boot into the chest of the closest necron warrior and sent it sprawling backwards with a pair of frag grenades for its trouble. The blasts hurled a score more of them aside, but all that bought me was the space to truly see the inevitability and futility of our assault. We were outnumbered by hundreds to one, and hovering ark-transports would gather the xenos dead right out from beneath our feet to send against us once more. And on, and on, until we were buried.

We *had* been sacrificed. I did not know if Commander Dante had planned it that way, but I could no longer even see his Sanguinary Guard amidst the throng.

There would be no resurrection for us. Once fallen, the Angels of Death do not rise from the dead. There is purity in that – something that the necrons have failed to grasp in their eternal pursuit of... eternity.

Two more of my brothers fell. Then a third.

I don't remember what it was that I screamed in that moment – likely it was something ignoble and suitably defiant. I struck a necron down with every swing of my blade, until it seemed that I could no longer even find room to draw it back between blows.

My pauldrons began to catch on the press of metal limbs. Unfeeling fingers clamped around my wrists, and my neck. My sword was pulled from my grip, and my plasma pistol too. I realised that I was being dragged over backwards, and I was no longer even screaming real words.

That's when it happened.

The pause. The *stutter*.

As one, the necrons faltered. Just for a fraction of a second, their eyes dimmed.

Then, again as one, they put up their weapons and turned to withdraw. I crashed to the ground on my back, before scrambling free of my jump pack harness to see ten thousand immortal xenos warriors striding away from us as implacably as they had been advancing only moments earlier.

I snapped my pistol up and put down nine of them without thinking. I shot them through their retreating backs, hot plasma dashing their mechanical innards onto the ground. Others did the same, in futile impotent rage. Our blood was still up, and the wounded remnants of the front line squads harried the enemy with frustrated battle cries still upon our lips. Necrons fell, and still the Legions did not pay us any more regard that day.

It was as though we had simply ceased to exist.

It made no sense at the time. Why would they suddenly give up, with certain victory within their unfeeling, iron grasp?

The answer was the result of cold, mathematical logic. It would come to stun us all, and most especially Commander Dante.

We had misjudged them. We misjudged them so badly.

You understand, lord, that the angel-humans were never our real foe in this. Mere happenstance it was that placed them in opposition to the Silent King's plan. That, and their characteristic unwillingness to admit that they know nothing of the true nature of the universe.

For as much as the human empire considers itself the height of evolution and the antithesis of the tyranid race – if you can believe such a thing! – they are perhaps more alike than either of them can know. Dovetlan once likened the humans to insects. They swarm. They cannibalise. They live without real

thought for the future or the past, beyond the propagation of their own brood.

And they build hives. Literally.

Teeming with human vermin and other, even more degenerate life forms, their settlements agglomerate around the points of industry and resource, openly abusing their worlds to feed the wasteful cycle of war and procreation. Even their ruling classes may live out their entire organic lifespan within a ten-kilometre area, such is the self-contained and parochial nature of the hive cities.

In all our time, we have rarely witnessed such edifices constructed by a sentient race. They are stockpiles of humankind, in all its stripes. Concentrated cells of organic filth.

Bio-mass.

Bait.

It was a fortuitous coincidence that placed a world such as this in the path of the Silent King's quarry. After his great victory over the tyrannid beasts in the dimensional anomaly at Anjac, he had pursued a splinter fleet through the void entirely undetected for almost three cycles. He observed their movements. He studied their reactions to external astral stimuli.

And then he began to calculate ahead.

None but he, in his majestic wisdom, could have accomplished such a feat – but even the magnificent Szarekh could not deny the providence that brought them hence afterwards.

Our cold bodies hold little interest for the Devourer. At best, they might be drawn to the more physical power sources utilised by our technologies, or defend themselves when we strike them. But fodder for their living ships, we are not.

The hive worlds of the humans shine like beacons in comparison. The tyrannids are drawn to such banquets with a singular, predatory hunger.

The Silent King knows this.

The beginnings of a plan began to form in his mind, as he later told us.

He would lay a trap for them, and he would bait it with the humans.

The seven of us stood around the hololith table – the five surviving squad sergeants, battered and bloodied, shielded from the worst of the commander's wrath by our noble captain Erasmus Tycho. Though he was similarly armoured in golden plate, the two of them could not have appeared more different in that moment.

'Answer me this,' Dante growled. 'How did they know? How can the necrons

scan the interstellar void more accurately than the long-range sensors of the *Bloodcaller*?’

The Chapter Master had set his death mask upon the surface of the table, and I could scarcely take my eyes from it. The play of light over the angelic, sculpted features of our Lord Sanguinius lent the helm an even more numinous aspect, beyond even the polished golden halo that encircled the crown.

From behind his own half-mask, Tycho spoke carefully.

‘I’m not sure they can, commander. It is possible that they already knew the tyranids were approaching before the hive ships crossed the system’s heliopause. Our sensorium officers’ report did cite multiple objects “of unknown origin” in their initial tactical sweeps, but you and I both bid them turn their full attention towards the necrons. We simply perceived a greater threat on the ground.’ The corner of his mouth flickered with an involuntary tic. ‘We were watching the pageant when we should have been scouting the hall.’

Dante glowered up at his protégé, gauntleted palms resting on the table’s edge, and a grim smile creased his dour features. ‘Aye, perhaps.’

Between the two of them, the lambent silhouette of Gehenna Prime turned slowly in the tactical hololith projection. The planet was bracketed by the battle-barge *Bloodcaller* and the twin strike cruisers *Melech* and *Fratrem Pugno* at station in high orbit. Of the necron cairn-ships that had apparently retreated from the system more than a month earlier, there was still no sign.

Instead, from the galactic southeast had come the tyranids.

Xenological identifiers marked them as a splinter of the defeated Behemoth fleet, or possibly cousins of little-known Dagon. Regardless of their origin, the four great hive ships had already spawned a veritable multitude of lesser craft and begun to move into a splayed formation that bypassed the outer worlds entirely. Tiny numerals rolled down the hololith next to each sensor contact as the telemeters updated their distance and relative speeds.

There was no mistaking it – this was a standard xenos attack vector. The tyranids had set their ravenous gaze upon Gehenna Prime.

‘What would you command of us, my lord?’ asked Phaniel, turning away from the dire tableau. The Devastator squads had been furthest from the necrons’ front wave, and so were the least mauled by the weeks of attrition that the rest of us had suffered.

Dante gestured to the approaching hive ships. ‘We are about to be caught between our chosen foe on the ground and a new one in the heavens, brother-sergeant. Our victory over the necrons was already far from assured. Now we

face an even more overwhelming force – one that could take an entire world on its own.’

The weight of that truth hung in the silence for a moment. Tycho nodded slowly, presumably at the prospect of a swift and glorious end for his battle company. ‘The presence of the tyranid fleet does at least go some way towards explaining why our astropathic calls for reinforcement seem to have fallen upon deaf ears, Chapter Master,’ he offered with a shrug. ‘Nonetheless, the Ironhelms are with you to the very last.’

Before the commander could reply, the hololith flickered and a shriek of white noise cut through the embedded audio feed. We all recoiled, startled but ready to react.

Then the display blinked out, along with every visual feed, lumen and powered system in the strategium chamber, plunging us into darkness.

‘Generatorium!’ Dante roared. ‘Restore the—’

Static seeped through the dead channel, bleeding in and somehow multiplying in the air before us. Motes of greenish light ran upwards from the table’s surface, though this time it cast no reflection in the Death Mask of Sanguinius.

The rasping un-sound built upon itself, pulsing in strange, eddying waves.

‘Listen to that,’ whispered Gaius, reaching for his bolt pistol but finding the holster empty. ‘It’s a voice.’

I spat, my hands bunching into fists as I scanned the room for any threat. ‘That’s no voice. It’s artefacting from an incompatible signal source. Nothing more.’

The motes of light began to swirl and gather above the centre of the table, blocking out some new shape in the space where Gehenna had previously hung. The emerald glare grew in intensity, rising with the crackling, maddening howl of the—

‘HUMANS. PROSTRATE YOURSELVES BEFORE OUR MAGNIFICENCE.’

Turning slowly in the shimmering field, a gaunt necron visage with a high crest stared out at us, its eyes blazing almost white and casting tiny arcs of energy before them. Tycho and two of the others moved quickly to place themselves between Dante and the xenos avatar, but the commander barged them aside, a look of disbelief upon his face.

‘I AM THE JUDICATOR-PRIME. I AM CHARGED WITH SECURING YOUR COOPERATION. YOU WILL NOT RESIST.’

With a snarl, Phanuel drew his combat blade and slashed at the thing’s face, but the weapon passed cleanly through and left him only with a tracery of

greenish sparks dancing over his gauntlet and vambrace. The necron either did not notice, or did not care.

'WHOM AMONG YOU HOLDS AUTHORITY?'

Dante scowled, and stepped forwards. 'I am Dante,' he said from between clenched teeth, 'Master of the Adeptus Astartes Chapter the Blood Angels. Who are you to address me and my officers in such a manner?'

The avatar regarded him with its blazing white eyes. *'I AM THE JUDICATOR-PRIME. I AM CHARGED WITH SECURING YOUR COOPERATION. YOU WILL NOT RESIST, DANTE OF THE BLOOD ANGELS.'*

Reaching out to the table controls, Gaius warily mashed the keypad with his palm, hoping to sever the connection. It did not have any effect. Commander Dante looked back to the Judicator.

'Cooperation in what, xenos? Until mere hours ago, our forces were locked in mortal combat. Now you are fled to the empty plains, awaiting our inevitable vengeance. There is no matter in which we or you will ever cooperate.'

'YOU ARE INCORRECT. OUR SUCCESS HAS ALREADY BEEN CALCULATED. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN US WAS AN ERROR.'

Rage boiled up inside me at the thing's brazen insolence. I bared my teeth and bellowed back at the projection. 'Silence! Let us end this on the field of battle. You will not strike at the worlds of the Imperium and then run for cover when a greater enemy rears its foul head!'

The Judicator's gaze swept over me. *'THE CONFLICT BETWEEN US WAS AN ERROR,'* it repeated.

Tycho raised his voice, then. 'Who decides that? You?'

'NO. IT IS THE DECISION OF MIGHTY SZAREKH, LAST AND GREATEST OF THE SILENT KINGS. PROSTRATE YOURSELVES BEFORE HIS MAGNIFICENCE.'

An uneasy silence fell over the seven of us. I turned to my brothers, unsure how to react.

Dante narrowed his eyes. 'The Silent King... *The Silent King?*'

'MIGHTY SZAREKH, LAST AND GREATEST OF THE SILENT KINGS.'

'The Silent King is... here, on Gehenna?'

The Judicator's head twitched. *'I DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF "GEHENNA". BUT THE SILENT KING IS HERE, NOW. HE WOULD TREAT WITH YOU, DANTE OF THE BLOOD ANGELS, IN THE FACE OF OUR COMMON ENEMY.'*

More motes of light spun out to create a topographical map in the projection,

with a specific ridgeline highlighted in a brighter green from the rest.

‘SEND YOUR EMISSARIES TO THIS LOCATION AND MIGHTY SZAREKH, LAST AND GREATEST OF THE SILENT KINGS, WILL RECEIVE THEM.’

With a sudden flash that left blooms of colour on our retinas, the necron avatar vanished. After a single heartbeat of silent darkness, the lumens and hololith stuttered back into life and left us blinking in the pale light of the strategium once again.

I spun to face Tycho. ‘My lord, I know where they want us to go.’

Though Commander Dante still stared at the now empty space above the table, the captain’s expression was stern. ‘Speak, Brother-Sergeant Machiavi. Where is it?’

‘It’s where my squad landed in the last assault – the Devil’s Crag.’

Szarekh would have it known by every phaeron of every dynasty, that he is a just and noble ruler. Before the Great Sleep, he realised his failings and vowed to atone for them. He is humble enough to learn from his own mistakes. The necrons will rise once more, and he will lead us into a new and glorious age as the preeminent masters of creation. Not because it is his right, but a privilege that he would first re-earn.

Yet, his benevolence has its limits.

It is not to say that he harbours the humans any particular malice. Simply, their supposed destiny is incompatible with our own. Perhaps if they had ascended more powerfully in an earlier epoch, then they might have claimed this galaxy out from beneath the slumbering dynasties while the Silent King still dwelt in self-imposed exile.

And perhaps not. Their propensity for self-destruction is... troubling.

The tyrannids are anathema to all life, and life is what the necrons require for supreme domination. So too, then, is the primal destiny of the Devourer incompatible with our own.

The humans create.

The necrons maintain.

The tyrannids consume.

There can be no lasting symmetry in that triumvirate. One must fall. The great Szarekh has decreed that it shall be the tyrannids, and none can refute the word of the Silent King.

It is unlikely that the humans see things as clearly as we do, Lord Anrakyr. Ironic, is it not, that they gnash their teeth and cry out at the injustice of a new

alien race polluting ‘their’ empire with brash, unwitting conquests? We have seen this before, and doubtless we will see it again. When all of this is but a footnote in the annals of our great triumph, who will even remember the name of a dead human Emperor, or the ignorant miseries doled out in his name?

The court awaited the humans openly. There could be no suggestion of deception. We had returned to the ridge where last the Dante-Angel had resisted us.

Beyond the unnumbered ranks of common warriors and the Immortal Legions, a full *nine hundred* of the Triarch Praetorians stood sentinel before the Silent King’s throne. Not in the living memory of the Imperium would such a gathering of our order have been witnessed by any human, and likely it never will be again. Our Judicator-Prime attended noble Szarekh at his right hand, and the High Chronomancer, whose techno-magicks had so confounded the humans, stood at his left. Beyond were arrayed the seven phaerons who had sworn themselves to the Silent King’s purpose in secret – each of them wearing a bronzed mask to hide their identity from all but their own household guardians.

The first we saw of the humans was a haze of chemical fumes and plains dust kicked up by their primitive transport. It trundled over the terrain on wheeled treads, its bulky armour caked in red paint and crude, winged glyphs. As it drew nearer, the Judicator-Prime descended the polished steps of the courtly dais to bar the humans’ path.

At Dante’s command, the hastily installed servitor driver brought the Rhino as close as possible to the necron herald. The engine idled for a moment, then cut out. Cooling metal on the exhaust stacks ticked and clicked in the dismal morning sun, but aside from that the silence felt absolute. Though we could see the necrons standing in their uncounted thousands, not a sound did any one of them make, nor was there any hint of movement.

I peered out through the forward viewing block, scanning the grand dais for sign of our host.

It was absurd – a monolithic ziggurat, easily forty metres at the peak, dropped onto the surface of Gehenna Prime as a monument to xenos vanity. Cast from some achingly black, polished metal, it was edged with glinting golden runes and glyphs that ran in interconnecting patterns up the long flight of steps to the summit. Upon its tiers stood the more elite warriors of the necron horde, elevated above their kin and presumably enjoying the prestige of greater proximity to their monarch. Gleaming statues of alien deities towered at the

cardinal points of the structure, and the two greatest of them held their arms out to form an arch over the peak of the dais, heads bowed in symbolic supplication.

This was a king, their posture said, that had once held even the gods in his thrall.

And this was his court that travelled wherever he went.

I glanced back into the darkened interior of the troop compartment. Captain Tycho reluctantly put up his combi-melta in the overhead stowage, and edged around the tarpaulin-covered bulk in the middle of the floor. He had pleaded for the honour to undertake this endeavour alone. Nay, he had almost *begged* for it. It was his right, and he had insisted. His privilege. His duty. But Dante would not hear of it.

The commander's face was set, almost as serene as the golden mask that he held so carefully in his gauntlets. It was the face of a man who knew that destiny had smiled upon him, no matter what the cost of that fortune might ultimately prove to be. How like our father Sanguinius he seemed in that moment.

'Brothers,' he said calmly, 'let us go to him.'

I eyed the open palm of my gauntlet warily – it felt so heavy – and tried to keep my voice low.

'My lord, is this necessary? We are here. We could–'

Tycho silenced me with a hand on my pauldron. 'This isn't about tactical positioning, Machiavi,' he muttered, squinting at me sidelong through the eye of his half-mask. 'This is about respect. No matter how much we may despise the xenos, the Chapter Master would at least meet this Szarekh face to face. No one else will ever get this chance again. We have to at least see him with our own eyes.'

Dante nodded. Tycho managed a wry grin, and reached for the rear hatch controls.

'Besides, I think noble Dante wants to hear the supreme ruler of the necron race beg for our help, first.'

The ramp opened on powered hydraulics, and the three of us stepped out onto the dusty ground at the foot of the ziggurat, defiant in the face of the ten thousand enemy warriors who watched from all sides.

The Judicator-Prime stood before us, a tall ceremonial glaive held rigidly in both hands. As well as the high crest of his office that had been visible in the hololith projection, he wore a mantle of smooth metal links that hung from his shoulders like a cloak. He regarded us coldly for a moment before inclining his head in a condescending gesture that we should follow him.

My hearts began to hammer in my chest. I could taste the acrid tang of xenos energy weapons in the air, feeling the dead gaze of the machines upon us as we ascended the steps. I walked to the commander's left, Tycho to the right. The captain glared, but said nothing.

Dante simply followed the herald, the mask of Sanguinius held in the crook of his arm.

We reached the summit and passed beneath the archway of the god-statues. Beyond, shimmering silk drapes fluttered in the breeze between ornate electro-flambeaux that cast the various necron lords of the court in an even more eerie light against the Gehenna sun. I looked to each in turn, wondering which of them was *him*...

Without warning, the Judicator-Prime halted, and whirled around. Reflexively, the fingers of my gauntlet closed, but I managed to catch myself before it was too late.

'Kneel, humans,' he commanded. 'Kneel before mighty Szarekh, last and greatest of the Silent Kings.'

The visible half of Tycho's face appeared unimpressed. He rested his thumbs at his belt, and tilted his head. 'We will not. He is not *our* king.'

The Judicator-Prime bristled, but did not repeat himself. Instead he turned solemnly and sank to one knee. The move was echoed first by the masked nobles, then by their retainers, and then by every other necron warrior upon the dais and beyond. Again as one, they knelt.

Except for one figure.

He was taller than the rest, yet not as tall as I had imagined he might be. His mechanical body was a work of unspeakable xenos artifice, more finely wrought than any I had ever seen upon the field of battle. Where they might be skeletal, he was lithe. Where they were animated with grim, unyielding purpose, his every movement possessed an undeniable vitality. His form spoke of musculature and clean-limbed strength, perhaps touched by the divine, and his finery was simple and yet impossibly elegant.

His face, though...

Brothers, I can scarcely put into words what I felt in that moment. What all three of us must have felt. It was not reverence or awe, I can tell you that much.

It was closer to hatred.

Framed by a cowl of shimmering light and the trceries of his intricate collar, Szarekh – heralded as the last and greatest of the Silent Kings, and undisputed overlord of the necron race – wore a golden mask fashioned into the likeness of

our Lord Sanguinius.

A rank blasphemy, indeed.

The humans were surprised. Their flesh-forms took time to process what they were seeing, though it clearly stirred their indoctrinated racial hatreds at a fundamental and subconscious level. The Judicator-Prime was the first to rise, transmitting a sub-ethyric signal to the Praetorians to be ready. No matter that they had sent the Dante-Angel and the Tycho-Angel, their most respected battle leaders, as a gesture of good faith. The human warrior castes can be unpredictable and nihilistic when pressed, and may act illogically in the face of insult or overwhelming adversity.

We may speak more of this later, Lord Anrakyr. After all, you will need allies. Learn their strengths as well as their weaknesses, and turn all to your advantage.

Wise Szarekh knew this. He saw the truth of it when first he encountered the humans squatting upon the tombs of the dynasties and the ruins of the eldar empire. They believed that their stars were in the ascendant, and that they would soon conquer the galaxy. Of course, this was not to be. It will never be. It cannot be.

It is curious what the humans choose to know of their past, and what remains unremembered. They do not heed the lessons that they have already learned, because they often elect to forget them. Perhaps, had he not fallen to illogical and prideful infighting, their Sanguinius-Angel might have steered them towards a more enlightened destiny.

Certainly, he would have made a more amenable emperor than a preserved witch-corpse.

If ever there were a human to be mourned, noble Szarekh would say that it was him. That alliance – the *first* alliance, perhaps? – might have ended the threat of the Devourer before it ever surfaced. At least, the tyranids might never have been drawn to this galaxy in the first instance.

Like the humans, the Silent King was blind to this possibility at the time.

But unlike the humans, he is humble enough to learn from his own mistakes. The High Chronomancer's temporal mastery merely afforded him the insight that he required, and the opportunity to prepare a new truth for them.

The Chapter Master's grip tightened around the golden helm in his hands, and he quaked with a barely suppressed fury. This time I saw Captain Tycho's fist clenching, although he too managed to restrain himself. We had to see how this

would play out before doing anything premature.

Dante looked from his own mask – the Death Mask of Sanguinius, holiest relic of the Chapter – to the benign, alien representation of the primarch worn by the Silent King. The similarities were astonishing, brothers. Though elongated and curiously more androgynous, the features were mournful and angelic in the way that every Blood Angel knew and recognised even from the first day of their Adeptus Astartes induction. The proud and noble brow. The suggestion of tumbling hair swept back from the face. Even the stylised halo crowned Szarekh just as it did the commander.

But where Dante’s mask was crafted into a defiant, righteous battle snarl, this was Sanguinius at his most benevolent and peaceful.

The face of a king. A ruler supreme.

More beautiful, perhaps, than any sculpture or cast had any right to be that was not the work of human hands, though it pricked at my soul to admit it.

Dante’s blood was up. Finally, he found his voice.

‘How... *dare...*’

Ignoring the commander’s outrage, the Judicator-Prime spoke again in his strident and uncaring tone. ‘Dante of the Blood Angels, the Silent King bids you welcome. None among us shall harm you while you respect the sanctity of this court.’

Captain Tycho’s eyes widened, and he looked to me in disbelief. The Silent King remained still, regarding us all with the eyes of our primarch.

Through gritted teeth, Dante cursed.

‘Your Silent King had best learn to speak, and explain to me why he insults us with this... this... *mockery* of our Lord Sanguinius. It is a travesty, and I shall not suffer it! If he thinks to make his demands more pleasant by skinning them in the face of our holy founder—’

‘This is not so, Dante of the Blood Angels,’ said the herald. ‘Mighty Szarekh, last and greatest of the Silent Kings, honours your angel-father and the accord that we wished to strike with him in ages past.’

Numbness spread through my chest at these words. Even Dante twitched.

‘That is a lie,’ he murmured. ‘Our gene-sire would never have treated with xenos filth.’

‘The Silent King cannot lie, Dante of the Blood Angels, for he does not speak. He will not speak. Not to you. But your angel-father would have seen the wisdom in this alliance, and we hope that you will also. The tyranids are coming, whether you or we choose to remain, or not. The conflict between us was an

error. Our success has already been calculated.'

I was very keenly aware that the Chapter Master held his gauntlet loosely at his side, with the palm wide open. Both Captain Tycho and I followed suit, trying to keep the movement as surreptitious as possible and hiding it from the passing gaze of the necrons.

All three of the human emissaries kept their right hands open. It was a curious gesture, likely some measure of deference offered to the majestic Szarekh as their natural superior.

Ammeg later postulated that it signified they were unarmed. I am not so certain.

Regardless, the alliance was soon agreed.

The ignorance of the humans is easily turned to our advantage.

Unable to take his eyes from the Silent King's mask, I watched Dante consider the herald's words.

'Why, then? Why seize this world, and defend it from us when we came to reclaim it?'

'The conflict between us was an error. Mighty Szarekh, last and greatest of the Silent Kings, did not seize this world. He meant to defend it from the Devourer.'

Another long moment passed. I regarded the various necron nobles of the court – where living beings might betray their true intentions with subconscious body language or barely perceptible movements, these machines were unreadable. Instead, I wonder if I projected something of my own thoughts onto my perception of them, in their perfect ambiguity. The Silent King continued to gaze plaintively at us. I shuffled uneasily.

For the first time ever, in all my days, I felt a tremor of *pity* for the necrons. Had we, in fact, misjudged them?

The Judicator-Prime raised a hand. 'The error was yours, Dante of the Blood Angels. But you were not to know, and we did not take the time to make it known.'

'Oh, blood of Baal...' Tycho whispered, realising the full extent of what was being implied.

Dante let out a long, measured breath. 'And in fighting us, you have lost significant forces that might have assured your victory over the tyrannids.'

The Silent King nodded slowly, but it was his herald that spoke.

'Correct. There is no more time. We must form the alliance that mighty

Szarekh would have pursued with your angel-father. Join us, and we will save this world for your Imperium.'

The Chapter Master's brow furrowed, just slightly. 'What do you care of the Imperium and its people?' he asked in a low voice.

The Judicator-Prime swept his arm out to encompass all of the assembled necron Legions. 'Regardless of what you might believe, Dante of the Blood Angels, we are most concerned with the survival of the human race. There are greater matters at stake here. Perhaps one day these lesser differences can be reconciled.'

With great solemnity, Commander Dante handed his helm off to me, and I took it carefully in my free gauntlet. Then he stepped forwards, holding out his left hand to the Silent King.

'I cannot speak for the Imperium, and I cannot speak for what my blood-father Sanguinius would or would not have done in my place. But my warriors will lend their numbers to yours, if you truly mean to save this world from the Great Devourer.' He paused, and his expression became more fierce. 'And then you and I will speak of the future, King Szarekh. We will speak of what may be, if this alliance is honoured to its end.'

The Silent King reached out and grasped Dante's wrist in a remarkably Imperial manner.

Then he leaned in with an alien grace that should have been impossible for a machine, and whispered something into the Chapter Master's ear.

I speak the truth. The Silent King spoke to him. Tycho and I both strained to hear, but the words were lost to the breeze. Dante recoiled slightly, his face a picture of shock and confusion. Then he composed himself, and nodded to Szarekh.

And so the alliance was accepted.

Calm yourself, my Lord Anrakyr. The great Szarekh did not need the humans in order to defeat the tyranids.

Consider the facts. Our fleet had transitioned out of range of their primitive sensors, but were at full battle readiness throughout our engagement with the Dante-Angel's forces as well as afterwards. Similarly, we outnumbered them by many hundreds to one on the ground. A thousand or more, by the end, since it was they who made the greater sacrifice in battle against the tyranids.

Consider the wisdom of noble Szarekh. He allowed the humans to believe that they alone held void-superiority over the hive fleet, and so they alone took

damage in engaging the alien vessels as part of the allied offensive. Our ships remained safely out of the conflict. He also allowed the humans to mount what they considered a valiant and righteous defence of the larger city-structures – a manoeuvre that held little tactical merit or advantage, and a much higher likelihood of attrition. He maximised the effectiveness of the alliance entirely in favour of the necron forces, by giving the humans just enough hope for a brighter future, and just enough of the truth to commit them to our cause.

Doubtless, they would have turned on us if the opportunity had presented itself, later. Most especially if they had learned the whole truth. That was a risk that wise Szarekh could not take.

Even so, it was hard not to admire the conviction with which the humans fought. They may come to recognise in time the threat of the tyranids like we do. For that, we wear these trinkets and adornments to commemorate their sacrifice. We honour their dead, even if we do not mourn their loss.

If you would review the specifics of the battle that the magnificent Szarekh fought that day, then I will bring you the accounts from the Praetorian archives. They are exhaustive.

Do not be like the humans, my lord. Learn from the past.

You will need allies if you are to prevail. Maximise the effectiveness of your alliances, and turn them entirely to your advantage.

Prove yourself worthy in this, and the Silent King may speak to you as well. In time.

It was only after the Gehenna Campaign was concluded that we realised how completely we had been deceived by those thrice-accursed xenos. But it was difficult to be truly bitter when we had intended to betray them from the start.

When Commander Dante, Captain Tycho and I had returned to the Rhino to leave, we had carefully removed the remote triggers from our gauntlets, and disarmed the detonators under the tarpaulin. As I said, this had all been Tycho's idea, and he had wanted to carry it out alone. He would have become the Master of Sacrifice, indeed.

When Dante had realised that the Silent King – *the* Silent King – was present on Gehenna Prime, our duty to the Imperium was clear. This was the supreme ruler of the necron race, a being so legendarily elusive that even the most informed members of the Ordo Xenos doubted whether or not he even existed in a literal sense.

We had to kill Szarekh, no matter what. He could not be allowed to leave this

world.

Concealed beneath the tarp inside the troop compartment was the warhead from a cyclonic torpedo. It had been carefully and painstakingly removed from the magazine on board the *Bloodcaller* by our company Techmarines, shuttled down to our encampment and hidden within the Rhino at Dante's command.

It was a planet-killer. An Exterminatus-grade weapon, the use of which could only be sanctioned by the Chapter Master himself.

Each of us held a trigger in our open, gauntleted palm, and any one of us could have fired it in an instant. At ground zero, the nucleonic blast would have annihilated everything on the planet's surface within a five hundred kilometre radius. The Silent King, the three of us, every single necron construct stationed at the Devil's Crag, every last member of Third Company who remained in our own encampment, and the common citizenry of at least two major hive cities – all would have been evaporated in the space of a few heartbeats.

It was a sacrifice worthy of Erasmus Tycho's title, and his ambition.

Dante, however, had refused to let him go alone. He schooled us in his reasoning around the strategium table.

It would arouse the suspicions of the necron lords if the Blood Angels suddenly withdrew from the surface, leaving only a single, nihilistic warrior to approach their master. We could not risk ordering an orbital strike without first making visual confirmation of Szarekh's presence, lest the necrons realise our duplicity with the bare, vital moments that they needed to pre-empt us.

It had always been a desperate scheme, with only a slim chance of success.

But for that slim chance, Dante was willing to sacrifice himself.

I claimed the honour of the third position within the emissary group. My familiarity with the local terrain made me the obvious choice.

It was only Szarekh's mask, and the insinuation that Lord Sanguinius himself might have once been on the verge of an alliance with the necrons, that stayed Dante's hand. Was it even true? Had Szarekh ever looked upon the face of our primarch? It did not appear to matter.

As the Rhino had bumped and rolled over the plains back to the encampment, Tycho had voiced the question that was at the forefront of my mind, too.

'So we are taking his... *word*... for it, my lord? We will knowingly and willingly enter an alliance with our hated xenos enemies, with the view to some possible future reconciliation?' He rubbed at his good eye. 'No one will believe this. Chapters have been excommunicated for less.'

Dante narrowed his eyes. 'We serve the Imperium. We protect its people when

they cannot protect themselves. If we do this, then we will save at least a portion of Gehenna Prime. If we do not, then the world will fall to the tyranid advance, and the nucleonic fire of Szarekh's murder.'

Before Tycho could reply, Dante had raised up the Death Mask of Sanguinius and gazed into its lifeless eyes. Appraising. Reconsidering.

'And when the war against the tyranids is won, I will slay Szarekh myself.'

It had seemed like the perfect solution: we would use the necrons to ensure an Imperial victory first and then strike down their king once we had secured his confidence. But we had misjudged them. We misjudged them so badly.

They had deceived us.

As the campaign against the foul hive-spawn drew to a close, we began to notice strange things – the bodies of our fallen brothers were being looted, our supplies raided. Was it the tyranids, you ask? Unlikely.

We realised that fewer and fewer of the necron lords and elite guard were making each successive rendezvous with us as planned. We had not heard from the Judicator-Prime or his Praetorians in days.

We were being frozen out of the final stages of our combined victory.

By the time we stood upon the killing fields in the shadow of Hive Sendeep, our rent armour and notched blades caked with more xenos blood than we could ever ask, we were reduced to a handful of survivors from the Ironhelms and the Sanguinary Guard. The *Fratrem Pugno* had been gutted by plasma fire, and it would be many more months before she was warp-capable again.

Wounded, Captain Tycho had instead been evacuated up to the *Melech* to coordinate the last stages of the void-war. It was I alone who stood at Dante's side, and the grim realisation came upon us both as our battle-brothers led teams of ragged local militia in heaping up the bodies of slain tyranids for the cleansing pyres.

He leaned heavily upon the Axe Mortalis, his breath coming like a gasp through the gaping mouth of the Death Mask.

'We haven't seen any necrons in over twelve hours, my lord,' I muttered. 'Szarekh isn't coming back, is he?'

Dante did not answer, but stared hard at the setting sun over the distant mountains. His rage was spent. It was the same for all of us.

I wiped xenos foulness from my combat blade, and sheathed it at my hip. 'Do not concern yourself with this, Lord Dante. I will have the official records amended to state that you allowed the xenos to depart as a gesture of respect for their unexpected assistance in the campaign. We will catch him eventually, and

you will have vengeance.’

At this, the Chapter Master shook his head, and pulled his helm free.

‘No, Sergeant Machiavi. We will never have this chance again. I doubt whether any warrior of the Imperium will ever again lay eyes upon the Silent King.’ He sighed. ‘If that is even who he was...’

We remained there for another hour or so, watching in quiet contemplation as the pyre flames began to spring up in the dusky twilight.

I thought back to the moment that we decided to spare Szarekh from the fire, and I am ashamed to say that the most impertinent question sprang unbidden from my lips. In fact, brothers, I am still amazed that this moment of indiscretion did not cost me my eventual succession to command of Third Company.

‘What did the Silent King say to you?’

Dante’s weary gaze rolled to me, and he stiffened slightly.

‘He said... something that I no longer think I understand.’

The commander paused. I waited expectantly, almost now dreading to hear the answer.

‘He said, “They are the rising storm, and you must become the shield”.’

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