

CHAPTER WAR

BEN COUNTER

THROWN DOWN FROM the Emperor's grace long ago, the Soul Drinkers Chapter, at the behest of their leader Sarpedon, is in search of redemption. Their quest takes them to Vanqualis, an Imperial planet that has been invaded by orks. Desperate to prove their loyalty, the Soul Drinkers go to the aid of the beleaguered citizens, but soon find they are surrounded by foes within and without as the Howling Griffons Chapter arrives to destroy them. Meanwhile, a breakaway faction of Soul Drinkers instigates a rebellion that engulfs the Chapter in a deadly civil war!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Counter is fast becoming one of the Black Library's most popular authors. An Ancient History graduate and avid miniature painter, he lives near Portsmouth, England.

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The following is an excerpt from *Chapter War* by Ben Counter.

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‘What is the greatest failure against which we must guard?’

‘The failure to die when death would serve the Emperor’s purpose.’

– Daenyathos, *Catechisms Martial*

‘PRESENT ARMS!’ YELLED Lord Globus Falken, and thousands of troops drew up their autoguns to salute the Aristarchical Pavilion. Magnificent in white bearskins and jackets of midnight blue and silver brocade, the Warders of the Vanqualian Republic trooped in perfect formation across the grand Processional Quarter with the banners of their ancient regiments flying alongside the topmost spires of Palatium. They were by far the mightiest fighting force in the Scaephan sector, the primary defenders of the Obsidian system and the proud sons of Vanqualis, and they looked the part. Their officers were resplendent in the heraldry of the Falken family from which they all hailed, and even the casings of their artillery and the hulls of their tanks shone in brass and blue.

‘Sloppy this year,’ said Count Luchosin Falken, whose uniform was so ornate it looked like his ample frame was swathed in hundreds of clashing flags. In a way it was, for he had to symbolise all the regiments of the Warders. The sun beat down hard on Palatium. The Aristarchical Pavilion, tented in silks and with several valet-servitors trundling around serving drinks, was one of the few places in the Processional Quarter that was not sweltering. Even so, Count Luchosin sweated gently where he sat.

‘Globus has got them digging trenches and mucking out the horses,’ said Lady Akania Falken-Kaal, standing idly beside

Count Luchosin. Lady Akania looked rather more rakish than most of the men, sporting an athlete's frame under her cavalrywoman's uniform and an eye patch thanks to a hunting accident in her youth. 'No damn respect.'

Lord Sovelin Falken, sweating under his bearskin and the heavy crimson sash of the Vanqualian Artillery, looked out across the sea of marching men and their forest of raised autoguns. To him it was still astonishing, a wondrous and powerful statement of Vanqualis's stability and traditions. Far away from the jungles that surrounded Palatium and covered the continent of Nevermourn, there were towering hives with billions of citizens who lived and died beneath their churning factories. Were it not for the rule of the Falken family, and the traditions such as the Trooping of the Warding Standard, the whole of Vanqualis would be like that. Nevermourn, a continent of magnificent natural beauty, was a miracle. It was far more fashionable to denounce it as dull and crude, but it filled Lord Sovelin's heart with pride.

'Globus wants them ready to fight,' said Lord Sovelin. 'I don't think there's anything wrong with that.'

Lady Akania cocked her one visible eyebrow. 'Fight? This is not an army for fighting, Sovelin! This is an army for reminding those vermin in the cities who is in charge. If it weren't for that the citizens might realise there are more of them than there are of us. The Falkens rule Vanqualis by magnificence, Sovelin, not by the gun! Killing them in the streets is fine for the rest of the Imperium but we do things differently. Do you not agree it is better this way?'

'Of course, Lady Akania,' said Sovelin. Lady Akania was an aunt of his a couple of times removed, though he was not much younger, and he was fairly sure she had seniority over him. Most of the family members on the Pavilion were higher up the ladder than Sovelin, which was probably why he had been palmed off on the artillery.

'Fight!' snorted Lord Luchosin with derision. 'What's there to fight?'

A sharp volley of gunshots rippled across the assembled troops, tens of thousands of autoguns loosed off to salute the sons and daughters of the Falken family. With perfect timing the regimental bands opened up and blared the ancient songs of war and rulership, the rhythm punctuated by volleys of disciplined gunfire. It echoed around the white stone spires of Palatium and the immense jungle trees that crowded up around the city walls, around the regimental banners and the gilded eagles atop the minarets of the Temple of Emperor Ascendant.

'No respect,' spat Lady Akania. She turned and walked off briskly, waving away a regimental underling who tried to get her attention. He was carrying a field vox-unit.

'Not now,' said Lord Globus. 'It's not the time.'

'My lord,' said the officer. 'It is a communication from Fleet Admiral Thalak.'

'Thalak has no idea what we are doing here!' growled Lord Globus. 'The man's a peasant. He can wait.'

Sovelin waved over the officer. The man was sweating and it wasn't just from the heat. He wore the uniform of the Mechanised Cavalry.

'It's the emergency channel, my lord,' said the officer.

'Give it to me,' said Sovelin. He took the vox handset and put it to his ear, wincing at the harsh screech of feedback.

'...the love of the Throne!' shouted a voice, barely distinguishable from the howl of static. 'The *Starstrider* is down! They've hit the docks! They're killing us up here! They're killing us!'

'KILLING US, YOU HEAR?'

Fleet Admiral Thalak was thrown off his feet as the *Sanctis Chirosian* rocked again, as if it were afloat in an endless sea and great waves were battering against it. Thalak's head cracked against the deck and the vox handset kicked out of his hand and clattered away.

Hot blood sprayed over him. He coughed, covering his face, trying to wipe it out of his eyes with the sleeve of his black Naval

greatcoat. The sound was tremendous, metal screaming – and men screaming, too, screams cut short as steel pounded against steel.

Thalak rolled onto his front and got to his knees. The blood was from Petty Officer van Staelem, who had been impaled through the abdomen by a great shard of metal. Her body was split open and she shuddered as she died, blood running down her chin.

Thalak had to fight to remember where he was. This place, with its dark wood panelling and friezes of silver cherubim, was the Cartographers' Hall where the navigation officers pored over huge map tables or immense orreries suspended from the ceiling alongside the chandeliers. Now half the hall was caved in, huge jagged blades of twisted metal pushing through from the industrial guts of the ship. Lights flared as a display of planets and stars fell free of its mountings and crashed to the floor, enormous metal globes crushing fleeing crewmen as they ran, sections of the silver hoops cutting ratings in half. Greyish liquid sprayed in from a torn fuel line and caught light, flame flowing around the wrecked metal and devouring the injured crewmen crawling away from the destruction.

Thalak spat out a mouthful of van Staelem's blood and ran, stumbling as the deck tilted again. It felt as if some huge hand had grabbed the *Sanctis Chiroasian* and was dismembering it, crushing it here and tearing it apart there.

He ran towards the communications helm that budded off from one end of the Cartographers' Hall. A ringed planet rolled by, its thin silver rings slicing through the floor like a blade as it rolled, cutting Senior Navigation Officer Rorkren in two. Fragments of burning star charts fell in flurries. The ship tilted alarmingly again and the mass of twisted metal forced its way in further, crewmen scabbling away from it and screaming as it crushed them against the far wall.

'Admiral!' yelled someone from the communications helm. Thalak looked up and saw an arm reaching down to drag him into the helm. The helm was set into a large spherical room

with its walls covered in monitors, its officers slumped in grav-couches with their faces covered by the heavy interface units through which they communicated with the other ships of Battlefleet Scaephan. Several of the monitors had blown out, like blinded eyes, and the others showed images from throughout the battlefleet's moorings around the orbital station Ollanuis XIV.

The young woman officer's face was streaked with blood and oil. She was a junior officer, probably from the communications support crew whose duties involved making sure the officers were tended to during the months they were wired into the *Sanctis Chiroasian*. 'Admiral, what is happening? Who is attacking us?'

'I don't know,' said Thalak, breaking his own rule of never revealing any ignorance or weakness to his crew. 'Someone who was waiting for us. It's not just us, they're going for the whole system.'

'You've heard from Vanqualis?'

'I don't need to,' replied Thalak bleakly. 'It's the Trooping of the Warding Standard. The whole damn army's in Palatium. That's what the attackers were waiting for.'

The officer pushed a strand of bloody hair back from her face and looked up at one of the monitors. It was showing a great chunk of burning wreckage drifting above the pitted metal surface of Ollanuis XIV, venting streams of burning fuel and air. 'The *Skystrider* is down,' she said.

'I know,' replied Thalak. The *Skystrider* was a grand cruiser, the largest and most powerful ship in Battlefleet Scaephan. Without it, the battlefleet's power to oppose an invasion was cut in half. 'The *Defence of Phantis*, too. They've hurt us. But we're not down yet.'

As if in reply, the *Sanctis Chiroasian* was wrenched over savagely. The ship's gravity suddenly shifted and snapped into reverse, the floor becoming the ceiling. Thalak grabbed onto the doorframe as he fell, stomach lurching as the din grew. Massive map tables heavy as boulders crashed into the chandeliers of the Cartographers' Hall, and bodies broke against

the decorative bosses of the ceiling.

The communications officer fell past him and smashed into the monitors on the ceiling of the communications helm, her body spasming as electric current ran through her and spat sparks from her fingers. The smell of cooking blood turned Thalak's stomach one final time and he vomited, heaving up his guts as he clung grimly to the doorway. He heard a grisly snap above him and a pair of booted feet hung beside him. The comms officers, hard-wired into the ship's systems, had fallen down but they were still attached by the interface units clamped around their heads and their necks had snapped. Like a scene from a mass execution, they all hung silent and dead in a ring above Thalak.

A new sound, louder and even more appalling, battered against Thalak's ears. It was a rhythmic scream of metal through metal. Something was biting through the ship, crunching through decks and bulkheads.

Thalak looked through at the Cartographers' Hall and somewhere in his battered mind it all made perfect sense. He was in hell. The Imperial creed had many hells, although some priests argued they were all one and the same, but one of them definitely looked like this. Bodies impaled on shards of metal. Corpses guttering in the flames, some of them still alive and writhing. Great wet streaks of blood sprayed up the walls. Lights flickering, screams cut off, the boom of escaping air shuddering through the ship. Thalak had served his Emperor, but it had not been enough, and now he was in hell.

As if to prove him right, the ruined side of the Cartographers' Hall was forced open like a great metal mouth with teeth of jagged steel. Bodies slid into it as it howled, metal against metal screeching. Guttural voices yelled from inside and dark shapes clambered out, misshapen, hulking forms.

Thalak snarled and clambered back into the burning ruin of the Cartographers' Hall. He took his laspistol from its holster – it was a good gun, and it had been his uncle's before Thalak had followed him into the Imperial Navy.

There were more of them. Dozens. A hundred. Dark and monstrous, swarming into his ship.

'For the Emperor!' yelled Thalak, and fired. The crimson lasblasts streaked past gnarled dark green skin and flickered in tiny, furious red eyes. Gunfire opened up in response, heavy-calibre fire sprayed at random, splintering the panelling behind Thalak. Thalak dived to the floor, rolled and came up firing, forcing himself to ignore the pain.

He was terrified. The fear inside him was like a chunk of ice where his heart should be, freezing his mind. But the rest of him kept fighting, because some part of him told him that was what an officer did.

A fist slammed into him and he was driven into the floor. The shattered remains of a chandelier cut into him. A brutal face with tiny violent eyes above a huge mouth filled with filthy tusks roared down at him and a kick crunched into his ribs. One of the creatures stamped down on his hand and the laspistol was gone.

Greenskins. Orks. Animals, killers, the oldest enemy that mankind had among the stars. They were on Thalak's ship, and they were killing him.

An ork bellowed and the creatures bearing down on Thalak parted for one of their number, easily twice the height of a man and hugely muscled. Its face was so deeply scarred it was barely a face at all but in the midst of the ugliness, there was a glimmer of intelligence and malice in its eyes far more terrifying than a hundred ignorant killers.

There was no part of Thalak now that felt anything other than terror. The greenskin leader reached down and gripped Thalak by his shoulder. Its other arm was artificial, a bionic so crude it looked like it could have been powered by steam. Metal claws fixed around Thalak's elbow and tore his arm off at the shoulder; white horror flooded through him and his body reeled with the shock.

The greenskin held Thalak up into the air. For a moment he could see the ocean of orks flooding into the *Sanctis Chiroisian*, butchering injured crewmen where they lay, blazing away

with crude deafening guns at those few still on their feet. The orks seemed completely at home amid the destruction and death. They were a natural part of this hell.

Thalak was held high and shaken like a standard to rally the orks. The leader roared and the orks roared with him, cheering the death of the ship and the mutilation of the fleet's commander. Then Thalak was thrown back down and a dozen feet stamped down on him, shattering his bones and battering against his head. Finally the *Sanctis Chirosian* was gone, and there was only blackness.

IT WAS JUST after the Warding Standard was unfurled that the attack came.

The first blast hit the Processional Quarter square on, throwing broken bodies and severed limbs into the air, a hundred men blown to bits in a split second and dozens more sliced apart by shards of shrapnel. The Warding Standard itself, stitched together from a dozen regimental banners and festooned with battle honours and campaign ribbons, fell tattered and bloody to the ground, draping itself over the chunks of uniformed meat that remained of the honour guard regiment escorting it.

The second blast hit the Aristarchical Pavilion. Lord Globus was vaporised. Lady Akania was beheaded by a shard of missile casing and tumbled down onto the square. Counts and barons were shredded. Lords and ladies were thrown broken against the front of the Herald's Chapel and the Lord Magister's Basilica.

It was an orbital artillery strike. Guns high up in orbit above Vanqualis threw explosive shells down at Palatium. It came utterly without warning, because with Battlefleet Scaephan stationed in the system nothing could possibly have got through to threaten Vanqualis. And yet it had, because now enemy spaceships were spitting fire and death down at the jewel of Nevermourn.

In the moments that followed, the Warders of the Vanqualian Republic reacted to the shock. Guns were hurried-

ly loaded, officers yelled for battle order, and cavalry tried to control their starting horses. The gates leading from the vast parade grounds of the Processional Quarter were jammed as thousands of troops tried to get out and take cover among the lofty civic buildings of Palatium. In the panic, few of them took heed of the shadow now cast over the parade ground, or of the dark spot that appeared in the air and got larger and larger.

The third blast was not a missile or bomb. It was the impact of a huge dark slab of rock, pitted like an asteroid, that slammed into the centre of the parade ground so hard it drove a deep crater into the ground. The front of the Herald's Chapel collapsed and the roof of the Lawkeeper's Chamber fell in. Spires fell with the impact, buildings spilling their floors out into the parade ground.

Through the choking dust, the survivors could see hundreds of bodies and scores of groaning wounded. They helped their brother soldiers, dragging them towards the scrum at the processional gates. Cries went up for regimental medics, only a few of whom had been permitted to carry their bulky, inelegant medi-packs on procession. Men screamed, shorn of limbs or with their abdomens split open by shrapnel. Some tried to claw their way out from beneath the dead. Others bit back the pain and waited to die, knowing no one would come to save them. Many looked to the scions of House Falken to deliver them, but House Falken's proud sons and daughters were mostly dead in the burning wreckage of the pavilion.

The dust began to settle. The outline of the rock itself could be seen. It wasn't just a rock – its underside had been heavily plated with slabs of metal to help it survive the impact and it was studded with crude engines that had directed its fall. A gunshot rang out, and a screaming man fell silent.

Shapes emerged from the deep pits in the rock. At first they were just more bodies, the inhabitants who had died in the impact being kicked out to make way. Then a terrible cry went up from inside, a deep animalistic war-bellow echoed by hundreds of bestial voices.

As one, the attackers charged out of the rock. They surged forward with their guns blazing, raking through the bodies, great rusted blades dispatching the wounded as their hulking shapes lurched through the near-darkness.

Some of the soldiers turned and readied their autoguns, bayonets fixed. The attackers crashed into them and the Wardens of the Vanqualian Republic saw their enemy for the first time – huge, brutal, green-skinned with murderous red eyes, maddened with battle. Orks, someone yelled – aliens, foul xenos come to defile Nevermourn and the world of Vanqualis.

The battle at the gates was short and bloody. Blades fell on uniformed flesh. Autoguns chattered in response but the orks had the numbers and the momentum, and hundreds of troopers fell. More were crushed as the retreat forced its way through the gates and out into the civic districts of Vanqualis, the orks hacking into the backs of the troopers as they turned to run.

The resistance in the Processional Quarter collapsed, but the orks did not stop. As more rocks slammed into Palatium and disgorged their alien passengers, the orks surged forwards into the streets of the city.

SOVELIN COULD HEAR Palatium dying. From his position by the Malcadorean Gate he could see huge columns of dust and flame spewing from all across the city as more asteroids smashed into it, and more bombs streaked down from above. The sky was almost dark, only a blood-red tinge across the horizon remaining of the daylight, and Sovelin could see silver specks hanging high above in orbit. Spaceships, he realised – and it wasn't Battlefleet Scaephan. The battlefleet was gone. Vanqualis was alone.

'You!' he yelled at an artillery crew trying to manhandle their bulky mortar carriage towards the gate. 'Unlimber the damn thing and carry it!'

Hundreds of troopers swarmed around Sovelin, all from his regiment, the Vanqualian Rearguard Artillery. He had got them off the parade ground as soon as their part in the

Trooping of the Warding Standard had been done with. He had known that something was wrong, and he had known that no one would listen to him. They would not put the army on alert; certainly not break up the Trooping, on the word of someone like Sovelin who was barely senior enough to be spared the marching. So he had got his artillery out of the Processional Quarter and had been taking them to man the walls, just in case, when the first bombs had hit.

The sound was horrible. From far across the city he could hear more explosions mixed with screams. People were in the streets now – the Terran Avenue was lined with the homes of functionaries and house servants, and they knew that something terrible was happening to their city. Another rock streaked down from above and slammed home, the closest yet to the Malcadorean Gate, kicking up a plume of wreckage. Chunks of stone and red roof tiles scattered across the street. More and more civilians filled the streets, emerging from their homes or running from the areas of the city already under attack.

‘Get up on the wall!’ shouted Sovelin to his men. ‘Protect these people!’ The soldiers began to turn their artillery pieces to face the street and ready their guns, sheltering behind the monuments that flanked the Malcadorean Gate – a great stone serpent, the heraldic symbol of the Falken family, and an eagle representing the Imperium to which Vanqualis paid fealty.

Sovelin heard the orks and knew then what the forces of Vanqualis were facing. There was nothing else that could explain the war cries and the shrieks of raw terror that moved in front of them like a bow wave. Panic filled every face Sovelin could see as gunfire stuttered from the alleyways and windows smashed.

Closer. Sovelin could hear their grunting alien tongue and the screams of people who fell beneath their blades. Closer still and a building along the avenue collapsed, its front spewing rubble and shattered furniture into the street. Dark green forms scabbled over it, blazing gunfire. More of them, thick like a green tide, flooded down the street.

People were pouring from their homes, running and

screaming. They were heading for the Malcadorean Gate, beyond which was the jungle and the hope of safety. Perhaps they could make it to the coast, and from there reach the cities of Herograde.

But they would not make it. Not unless the guns of Sovelin's artillery made a stand, and bought them time with their lives.

'What do we do, sir?' said Captain Laesc, who had his laspistol and sword drawn as he crouched down by the closest autocannon mount.

Sovelin couldn't answer for a moment. Thousands of people were now crowding the street and the orks were surging forwards. Sovelin could see the crude totems, festooned with severed hands and heads that the orks carried ahead of them, the gleaming bone of their tusks, the savage glee in their eyes as they cut down the civilians who straggled behind.

'We run,' said Sovelin. 'Run! All of you! Now! Go!'

The Vanqualian Rearguard Artillery broke cover and ran, Sovelin at the heart of them, hauling their autocannon and mortars with them as they headed between the monuments of the Malcadorean Gate and out into the deep green mass of Nevermourn's jungles.

As Sovelin's troops broke and ran a great cry went up from the fleeing civilians of Palatium. They were the men and women who served the Falken family, for Palatium was not a city like the towering hives elsewhere on the planet but a place that had been built as the seat of the Falken family's reign. Its civilians had given their lives to House Falken and now the army, led by scions of that same family, was fleeing before them.

Many gave up and died beneath orkish blades, trampled by the booted feet of the xenos. Others scrambled over one another and trampled fellow citizens, even friends and loved ones, in the scrum to escape. Those who made it to the Malcadorean Gate were crushed against the huge stone pillars of the gate itself or the podiums on which the statues were mounted. The serpent and the eagle looked down sternly on the carnage and panic.

Then the orks overran the gate and the butchery began in earnest. Thousands died in a few moments and the orks plunged into the crowds and emerged again covered in gore, exhausting the magazines of their crude guns and laying into their prey with swords and cleavers.

Survivors streamed from the Malcadorean Gate, a fraction of those who had fled the orks. The screams followed them and many of them, like Admiral Thalak, were sure that they had indeed already died to an orkish bullet and were now simply fleeing further into hell.

THE HUGEST AND greatest ork to ever emerge from the war-worlds of the Garon Nebula strode towards the pulpit of the Temple of Emperor Ascendant. The temple was a riot of howling orks, ripping down the tapestries that depicted the founders of House Falken taking their first steps on the shores of Herograve or forging through the jungles of Nevermourn. The greenskins blew the faces off statues with their guns and smashed the bronze plaques that showed scenes from the lives of Imperial saints. They smeared blood on the pale stone walls, blood from the temple's clergy now being dismembered by the small slave-creatures who followed the orks everywhere. Dung and gore were heaped on the temple's altar and the image of the Emperor now lacked a face, the intricate altarpiece scarred with gunfire.

One cleric was still alive and the slave-creatures were toying with him, kicking a gun away from his outstretched hand as he reached for it to take his own life. Again and again he reached haplessly for the skittering gun, and each time the lean, scurrying creatures howled with laughter. They looked up as the great ork's shadow fell over them and their faces fell, cruel red eyes widening in fear above their sharp wicked little faces, and they scrambled out of his way to hide between the dark wood of the temple's pews.

The other orks bellowed their triumph as their warlord walked among them. The warlord was bigger than any of them, twice as tall as most, its great gnarled head thrust bru-

tally from between his shoulders and its huge jaw scowling around the forest of broken tusks. Its skin was as dark and gnarled as the bark on an ancient tree, and its eyes, even sunk deep into its bestial skull, burned with an intelligence and drive the other orks lacked.

The warlord only had one normal arm, with which he batted the closest slave-creature out of the way. His other arm was a contraption of metal and steam that spurted hot goutts of vapour as he moved, and ended in a great three-fingered claw large enough to rip the turret off a tank. The machinery encasing his ribcage and his spine was a rusted ladder of metal chunks that hissed black lubricant as he moved. Thick green cords of muscle had grown around his mechanical parts, loosening and contracting as he moved. To have survived the replacement of half his torso with such crude replacements suggested a level of toughness abnormal even for an ork.

The warlord roared, but not with the triumph and gloating bravado of the other orks. The orks fell silent, even the burliest of them shuddering at the warlord's displeasure. The warlord glowered at the greenskins and his eyes fell on one of them, who was slashing up one of the temple's tapestries with the rusted, bloody blade of his cleaver.

The warlord darted forward with speed far too great for something of his size, and seized the vandalising ork with his natural hand. His fingers closed around the ork's muscular throat and lifted the creature off the ground. The warlord shifted the ork to his mechanical hand and threw it across the temple. Its body slammed into the far wall leaving a crumbling dent in the stone, and slumped to the floor unconscious.

The warlord turned back to the slashed tapestry, pulling it off the wall closer to his face as he examined it. It showed the earliest Warders, the troops of Vanqualis who first protected the shores of Herograde as the planet's cities were settled under the banners of House Falken. The soldiers were capturing a ridge, their stylised uniforms bright and their autoguns held high. The bodies of orks, cut up into pieces, were piled beneath their feet. The artist had shown them as

weak and skinny, pathetic creatures barely worthy of Vanqualian bayonets.

The warlord yanked the tapestry off the wall and held it high, so the assembled orks could see the slain orks trampled by human feet. He yelled at them, spitting the hateful syllables of the orkish tongue.

The Vanqualians had won this planet from the orks. This planet belonged to the orks. This world, like so many of the worlds across which the warlord had strode, was green – and it would be green again. But these humans, the same humans now being slaughtered in the streets of Palatium, had once crushed the orks just as surely as the orks were crushing them. They were resilient and resourceful. They were driven. They believed in things that made them perform extraordinary tasks. To underestimate them, to treat them as blade-fodder and play-things, was a way to ensure the same defeat that had befallen the first orks to claim Vanqualis as their own.

If the orks in the temple understood this, any sign of it was hidden under the fear the warlord's smouldering anger instilled in them. The warlord threw down the tapestry and spat on it. He noticed the only surviving cleric hiding behind the pew beside him. The man was elderly, his creased, terrified face smeared with blood and dirt, his fingers bloody and his dove-grey priestly robes tattered. Near him lay the gun he had been trying to grab off the slave-creatures.

The warlord bent down and picked up the gun. He crushed it in the fingers of his mechanical arm, and threw it back down at the cleric's feet. The cleric looked down at it, then stared up at the warlord, terrified tears filling his eyes.

As the warlord stomped towards the pulpit the slave-creatures fell upon the cleric and the temple filled with noise again, the cleric screaming, his robes and his flesh tearing, the slave-creatures cackling as they slicked themselves with his blood. The orks took the racket as a signal to continue destroying the icons of the human enemy and gunfire roared again, blasting censer globes from the ceiling and blowing holes in the pews.

The warlord ignored them. Perhaps once, he had been the same, a simple and brutal creature with nothing but the love of war burning inside him. But the warlord was not like that now. Even the cleric, in the last horror-filled moments of his life, had realised that. He was not an ork, for an ork was a simple thing. An ork was not driven by convictions that equalled those of his most zealous human opponent. An ork did not live by cunning as well as strength, the lust for supremacy as well as the desire for violence and carnage. The warlord did.

He stomped to the top of the pulpit, which overlooked the main nave of the temple. Instead of facing the rows of pews as the temple's preachers had done, the warlord looked the other way, past the ruined altarpiece and through the smashed window that still had fragments of stained glass clinging to its frame.

Palatium stretched out before him. It was a small city, built as a place for the planet's human leaders to rule from instead of a centre of population and industry. Even so, the speed with which the orks had overrun it was impressive. Tiny green figures cavorted on distant rooftops, tearing down the banners of House Falken, hurling masonry and roof tiles into the streets below. Buildings burned, and through the palls of black smoke descended huge ponderous craft, daubed with the crude glyphs of the many ork clans united under the warlord.

Many such craft were already disgorging thousands more orks to fuel the invasion of Vanqualis. Some of the orks were specialists in the warlord's army, sought out and won from their own warlords in fighting pit duels or all-out battles. There were orkish veterans in massive suits of powered armour, heavy and brutal as walking tanks. A squad of expert infiltrators, faces smeared black with camouflage, moved with silence and economy unbecoming of the more raucous ork warriors – these were the scouts and assassins whose natural habitat was a jungle war zone. Masked slavers with barbed whips lashed forwards squabbling crowds of slave creatures, who would be herded in front of the warlord's main force to absorb bullets and set off mines. Other ships were lowering

down rickety, temperamental war machines and tanks, with slaves scabbling all over them to tighten screws and oil joints.

The humans who had slain the first orks to inhabit Vanqualis doubtless had no idea that orks could muster such soldiers. They assumed that the greenskins were nothing more than a horde of animals, all alike in their crudeness and brutality. For the most part they were right, but then for the most part the orks did not have leaders like the warlord to marshal them into a fighting force as deadly as anything the humans could field.

The warlord looked beyond the city, to the jungles. Beyond those jungles was the sea, and beyond that the coast of Herograde, the polluted rocky wasteland with its teeming cities and billions of humans. Weak, cowardly, doomed humans, for whom the cleaver or the bullet was too honest an end. Nevertheless, that was how they would die, because Vanqualis belonged to the orks and no greater desire burned behind the warlord's eyes than to see it in the hands of the greenskins again.

FOR A LONG time, the countess was silent. The only sound was the hiss of the air recyclers pumping stale, cold, dry air into the pinnacle chamber. Her small, frail frame swamped by the sweeping pearl-studded gown, her hollow-cheeked face framed by the tiara of diamond spines, the countess seemed to sink deeper into the juvenat throne.

The chamberlain waited politely. He was a small and officious man who had lived a lifetime of service and delivered his share of bad news to the sons and daughters of the Falken family, but never had the news been this bad. He kept his composure and cast his eyes to the floor, awaiting the countess's reply.

Countess Ismenissa Falken took a deep breath that rattled through her aged body. 'When did this happen?'

'But less than an hour, my lady.'

'And of my husband?'

The chamberlain had evidently expected this question.

'Nothing is known of him. With the grace of the Emperor it may be that he still lives...'

'Spare me not, chamberlain,' said the countess, cutting him off. 'Is my husband dead?'

The chamberlain swallowed. 'Lord Globus was on the Aristarchical Pavilion, my lady, and it was thought destroyed in the first attack.'

'Then he is dead.'

'Very probably, my lady.'

'I see. Are there any of the family left?'

'We do not know. Many citizens have escaped Palatium but with little order. Perhaps there are some scions among them. I fear I have little to tell you that is certain.'

'It is certain that the greenskins have returned,' said Countess Ismenissa. 'And it is certain that our world is invaded. It is also certain that we cannot stand alone.'

The countess stood up. From the black slabs of metal that made up the juvenat throne snaked several thick cables that fitted into the rear of the jewel-studded bodice of her dress. Several children, dressed in the same crimson coattails as the chamberlain, stepped out from the shadows behind the juvenat throne, some holding the hem of her long skirts off the floor, others gathering the cables as they slid from the throne so they did not become tangled as the countess walked regally towards one of the tall arched windows that ringed the chamber.

The shadows behind the throne could not hide their blue-grey skin and hollow black eyes, nor the way they walked hunched or on all fours like animals. The wives of House Falken dutifully produced many children, not all of whom survived their childhood, and it was from those lost sons and daughters that the countess's hem-bearers were created. The servitor technology leased to House Falken by the Adeptus Mechanicus was complex and flawed, so the half-living children fell well short of the cherubic ideal.

The chamber was at the pinnacle of one of Herograve's hives and from it could be seen the vast slope of the city, studded

with lights against the night's darkness, sweeping down towards the polluted plains that surrounded the city. In the far distance could be seen another mountain of scattered lights, smudged through the polluted air – a neighbouring city, one of the several that studded the continent of Herograve. Billions of Vanqualians lived within those cities, and in a few hours they would start to learn that their ruling class was all but destroyed and aliens had invaded Nevermourn.

In the sky above, just visible through the layers of smoke from the hive factories, were the tiny specks of light reflected from the undersides of the orbital defence network. Thousands of turbolasers and missiles speckled the sky above Herograve's cities, protecting them from bombardment. Vanqualis did not have the resources to protect its entire orbit in such a way, and so had chosen to spare its cities from enemy bombardment. That was the reason that orks were not raining down on the hive cities, but that would be little comfort to the survivors of Palatium who had seen their loved ones butchered in the streets on distant Nevermourn.

'We must ask for help,' said Countess Ismenissa. 'With the Warders broken and House Falken decimated, we are alone. We are isolated here, far from the worlds of Imperial dominion, but it is only the Imperium that can help us. Now is not the time to be proud. We will beg if we must.' The countess looked away from the window at the chamberlain. 'Summon the astropath and bring him here. He must be ready to transmit immediately.'

'Of course, my lady,' said the chamberlain. 'Should I take steps to inform the populace?'

'Of the invasion?' The countess waved a hand. 'Yes. Give it to the Lay Parliament. Have them debate it. It will give them something to do.'

The chamberlain did not scurry off to his duties, as the countess expected.

'Yes?' she said.

'There remains one further matter. With Lord Globus... gone, you are the only representative of House Falken in a

position to assume leadership. You are the ruler of Vanqualis, my lady.'

The countess sighed. She had never looked older than she did in that moment, framed against the blackness of her city, swamped by her finery. 'Very well. I am sure there is a ceremony for it somewhere. Have the archivists dig it out.'

'It shall be done.' The chamberlain bowed briskly and hurried out to his duties.

The countess was well over two hundred years old, thanks to the efforts of the house physicians and the constant attentions of the juvenat throne. In all that time it had never been this bad. She had lived through the Hive Scorcid revolt, the scandals of her uncle Baron Malifiss Falken, and the schism forced by the emergence of the now-defunct Cult of the Terran Resurgence. She had seen upheavals and unexpected deaths, conflicts with the governors of the Scaephan sector and crises where the hive cities were starved of food or water. But never anything as bad as this. She was an old woman, and she felt every year.

And now, for the first time in its history, Vanqualis would have to beg for help from the Imperium, that distant power to whom House Falken had paid the tithes of its cities' riches in return for sovereignty over their world. The orks had their foothold on Nevermourn now, and there was no doubt where they would head next. With Nevermourn infested Herograve would follow, with its cities and its teeming billions.

The countess walked to an ornate bookshelf, which held several large volumes. Her dear Globus had always been more concerned with military than planetary matters and the countess had felt it prudent to become familiar with the history and geography of her world, in case she had to take a more active part in the governing of Vanqualis. Now, the entire responsibility for that government fell on her.

Countess Ismenissa took a heavy book from an upper shelf, the children crawling like obedient pets to carry her skirts around her. The book was an atlas, presented to her by one of the hive universities in return for some state function she had performed half a century ago. One of the children turned a han-

dle that reeled her cables back in as she returned to the throne. She sat down, feeling the juvenat liquids flowing through her veins again, holding back the effects of ageing on her bones and organs. She laid the book open on her lap as the children took their positions behind the throne again, and began to read.

Maps of Nevermourn flickered past her eyes. At that very moment, refugees and greenskin filth alike were streaming through those valleys and hills, fighting, killing, making for the shore and then Herogrove beyond them. There would be a war, long or short depending on how the countess led her people in the following days, and perhaps at the end of it all Vanqualis would still stand and House Falken would still rule. But the centuries had taught Countess Ismenissa to be pragmatic, and she knew in her heart that Vanqualis and all those billions of citizens would probably not survive.

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