



WARP CULTS OF THE AGE OF DARKNESS

"There are no lies in the Abyss, for all that Man calls lies are its truths and all that is neither true nor untrue rejoices therein."

The Empyrean Truth (suppressed 193.M31)

When the Age of Darkness descended upon the Imperium of Man, the galaxy reeled in shock that the Emperor's greatest champions—the Primarchs and their sons—would seek to tear down all they had built during the Great Crusade. The Legiones Astartes were created to be the very best of Mankind, the champions and protectors of an entire species, the stalwart defenders against the unnameable horrors that had brought humanity to the brink of destruction during the bleak millennia of Old Night. If such as Horus, Fulgrim or Lorgar could be corrupted under the baleful influence of the powers of the Warp, then what hope remained that the teeming masses of mortal humanity would do otherwise?

As the Horus Heresy entered its second year and the fires of war swept across the Imperium, the true and horrific extent of the Traitors' sins was exposed. The earliest battles had revealed the Warmaster to have turned numerous august bodies to his cause, including those within the Mechanicum Taghmata and the Legio Titanicus, as well as uncounted Excertus Imperialis Auxilia units. At Calth however, a new element of the Traitors' blasphemy was employed—vast hosts sworn to serve the Traitor Legiones Astartes, devoted to them not only in body but in soul; these deluded '*warp cultists*' so-named because of their mindless veneration of the creatures that dwell in the Empyrean and of their fallen Legiones Astartes masters.

Warp cults had of course been encountered, albeit infrequently, during the progress of the Great Crusade. Such debased examples of humanity were usually found on worlds within proximity of existing warp storm activity or with a prevalence of psyker birth within the general population. Such cults were oft times tainted with interaction with xenos lore or contamination by alien species, or promulgated by some alpha-level rogue psyker with messianic or apocalyptic pretensions. Direct confrontations with such threats were however rare as they were either a relatively minor factor in a larger Compliance campaign or encountered in highly unusual circumstances, such as the lengthy persecution of the void-born Gethora Warp-Witches by the Night Lords Legion across the Vaomir Reaches in the late 970s.M30. The principal reason for this was that since the very beginning of the Great Crusade, any world encountered with substantial warp breaches in evidence of the kind that such cults either promulgated or were often spawned from were simply destroyed via Exterminatus from orbit without direct confrontation. This order had been a direct and unwavering dictate issued directly by the Emperor and one that had been upheld almost without exception until the Word Bearers themselves began to covertly subvert and ignore it for their own ends. As to the 'truth' of such veneration, it was considered no more than just another false religion, meaningless in the context of the Imperial Truth, and consigned to the darkness from which the Great Crusade was delivering the galaxy, or so it was believed.

The truth, however, was that on many fringe and backwater worlds declared Compliant by Horus' supporters, entire populations had not just been allowed to shed the mask of civilisation and reason and surrender themselves to the Warp, but actively encouraged to do so by the work of the Word Bearers and other, far more hidden, forces. As the insanity of galactic civil war gripped the Imperium, previously law-abiding peoples rose up against their masters, slaughtering those in authority in bloody displays of long-repressed hatred. Once-productive workers smashed the machines they had tended for generations and set manufactoria to the torch, whilst amongst the madness educated men and women cast off the secular reason they had been born into and resurrected the heathen idolatries of their ancestors.

THE ROOTS OF INSANITY

Of the seeds of this galaxy-wide chaos, much has been surmised but very little proven.

Indeed, it is likely the warp cults that aligned themselves to the Warmaster's cause did so for a wide range of different reasons, although the end result was essentially the same—anarchy, bloodshed and treachery on a galactic scale. Regardless of the underlying source of the taint, it was the dark genius of the Warmaster's numerous envoys, in particular the Word Bearers Dark Apostles and their disciples, that harnessed it to the Traitors' cause. No doubt most would have receded over the generations were it not for the far-reaching and horrific scheme of Erebus and his kin, while others would likely have burned themselves out in brief, if bloody, rebellions.

One source of the corruption which led to the formation of many warp cults was the religiosity of many ancestor populations, suggesting woeful failure in the Iterators whose task it was to dispel these beliefs and replace them with the Imperial Truth. Indeed, no world should have been declared fully Compliant until this had occurred, hinting at either conspiracy on a monumental scale or gross systemic incompetence. The latter might seem the more plausible theory, but the events of the Horus Heresy indicate the former is all too possible. Regardless, in the aftermath of the Istvan V betrayal, countless thousands of formerly denounced religions reawakened in subtly altered form. Benevolent deities were supplanted by vengeful gods and offerings of crops replaced with demands for blood sacrifice. All led inexorably to the worship of those powers which came so close to laying the Imperium low.

Another source lay in Mankind's own dark nature. Despite the trappings of civilisation and the appointment of Imperial Commanders to rule over them, the populations of a great many worlds still existed in barbarous conditions little improved since the Age of Strife. A campaign to bring a primitive feral world such as Oran or Forman C2 to Compliance might be won in weeks, but it might take decades or centuries before such a world could support a functioning society able to take its place within the Imperium. The populations of these worlds were notoriously warlike and primitive, and it took many generations to educate them in the Imperial Truth, for native ancestral superstitions were never far from the surface of those recently illuminated by the Emperor's Light.

Similarly, large parts of the populations of many hive worlds were violently lawless and

resentful of any form of authority. Even the most productive of hive worlds were host to countless thousands of wretches who existed in the lightless underhive depths without ever learning of the Imperial Truth. On worlds such as Gamma-Horgan, Kado and Avellorn, hyper-violent underhive gangers were quick to join with the forces of disorder when the Horus Heresy came to their world, hailing the Warmaster as a leader truly deserving of their loyalty.

At the other end of the spectrum were highly-ranked individuals whose positions within the upper echelons of the Expeditionary fleets granted them access to knowledge others were denied. Though many aberrant cultures were entirely obliterated, conservators attached to the Great Crusade fleets strove to record tales of the defeated foes of Mankind, from ravening alien horrors to recalcitrant human societies. Much of this knowledge was locked securely away and remained accessible only to the most senior of human and trans-human leaders, for many accounts contradicted the Imperial Truth and could not be allowed to fall into the hands of the weak or the ignorant. Inevitably however, some did, and many senior conservators were compromised by the events they recounted or the accounts in their custody. Men and women who had dedicated their entire lives to proving primitive superstitions false discovered that their own beliefs were in fact founded upon lies. When the Age of Darkness fell, the knowledge watched over by many conservators escaped into the hands of madmen and traitors who preached it to the warp-slaved multitudes.

The events that unfolded at the Battle of Calth would reveal a far more concerted effort to cultivate false religiosity in direct contradiction of the Imperial Truth in preparation for the galaxy-wide uprising that erupted in the aftermath of Istvan. It would be many years until the horrifying extent was realised but it is now evident that the XVIIth Legiones Astartes—the Word Bearers—deliberately seeded countless hidden warp cults across the worlds they had brought to Compliance in the five decades prior to the outbreak of the Horus Heresy. These were referred to by the sons of Lorgar and by many of the cults themselves as the '*Holy Worlds*' and beneath the mask of Compliance, they hid a myriad of aberrant doctrines. Worlds that on the surface appeared ordered and civilised in fact seethed with heresy just below the surface. Furthermore, they attracted the outcast and the dispossessed,

those unable or unwilling to accept the Imperial Truth. Individually or in small groups, hidden pilgrims travelled from all over the Imperium to join these bodies, swelling their numbers to such an extent that when word was given, countless billions rose up as one and declared the Warmaster as their lord, and in some cases, their god.

IGNORANT ARMIES

The Traitor Legiones Astartes made increasingly extensive use of allied human warp cults as the wars of the Horus Heresy progressed. In many cases the cultists were found easier to raise and frankly more disposable than conventional military units, for while they were nowhere near as well trained or equipped, they were often so utterly devoted to their trans-human masters they would obey any order and perform any deed, no matter how callous, inhumane or suicidal it was.

The Sons of Horus Legion, for example, used warp cults as occupation units during the Warmaster's later phases of the so-called Dark Compliance, for they brought such oppression to captured worlds that few would dare rise up against them. Cultists made effective hunter-killer squads, adept at tracking down every last vestige of Loyalist activity on Traitor-held worlds and making grisly examples of those they captured. Cult forces also served as brutal overseers of enslaved populations, driving the output of industrialised worlds to many times previous levels to meet ever more strident demands for arms and equipment to fuel the Traitors' advance on Terra.

Where the Sons of Horus used cult forces to control dominated worlds, the IIIrd Legion, as it slid into its own moral abyss, used such allied forces as disposable sycophants and slavish worshippers, debased beings who viewed the Emperor's Children as the very apex of creation and for whom no indignity, crime or sacrifice was too great to perform in the hope of favour. Mortal servants of the IIIrd Legion abased themselves before their masters and would offer their lives in return for the briefest acknowledgement of their very existence. With a single word, any Emperor's Children Legionary could order a hundred allied cultists to attempt the most lethal of tasks or suicidal of battlefield missions, orders the cultists would obey unquestioningly with rapturous fervour. The Legionaries themselves regarded the cultists with contempt, barely noting their presence except where dictated by necessity.

In several Traitor Legions, the ranks of humanity that constituted their support echelons—Legion serfs, void crews, menials and auxiliary troops—were slowly transformed into cult-like bodies. As the Horus Heresy ground on and the Traitor Legions began to cast off the trappings of their founding, their servants too were transformed into something else entirely. Many of the warp cultists came to idolise their trans-human masters as demi-gods, entire sects springing into being aboard the Traitor fleets. Many were a continuation of the warrior lodges seeded in the Traitor Legions before the Horus Heresy even began, while others were spontaneous expressions of recidivistic superstition entirely beneath the notice of the Traitor Legiones Astartes themselves. Soon enough, all had called upon and were enthralled to warp-born entities that cared only to feed upon their bodies and their souls.

Not all Traitor Legions, it must be said, had much use or regard for allied warp cults, seeing them as debased, dangerous and beneath them, at least before the Age of the Scouring when many were forced to turn at last to dark forces themselves to survive. One noted example of this disregard was in the Iron Warriors Legion who, in a manner entirely in keeping with the nature of their Primarch and temperament, used hordes of cultists under their control as expendable levies, utterly scorning their 'faith' and viewing them of less use than even enslaved local defence militia, which could at least be counted upon to hold a weapon correctly. Notably, if such cult forces came under Perturabo's control, his standing orders provided for the culling of any potent psyker or warp-crafter able to raise such entities as might interfere with the Iron Warriors' authority, while thousands of the cult's members were driven across mine fields or on to the enemies' guns; those who reached the walls forming a ramp of casualties over which the Iron Warriors would launch the final escalade assault. Sometimes, cult forces tens of thousands strong were herded towards an enemy city or fortress simply so that Iron Warriors warsmiths could survey the foe's fortifications and map their fire plans without expending their own forces, both Legion and military auxilia they deemed of greater value.

To the Night Lords, it seems that such warp cults were often no more than trivialities—pawns in the Warmaster's game and the distrusted lickspittles of the Word Bearers, with whom they were nominally allied but

scorned and distrusted. The Night Lords auxilia and servants had no master but them, even the whispers of the Warp failing to entice them, and no rule but for the fear the Night Lords engendered. This paranoia and obsessive control was even more evident in the machinations of the Alpha Legion, whose own web of agents and armies were labyrinthine and unknowable, and what use they made of warp cults in this era, and at what remove, cannot now be determined.

Of all the Traitor Legions however, it was the Word Bearers that made the greatest use of allied warp cult groups, and it was at Calth where they were first openly employed.

SLAVES TO THE WORD

Although the Word Bearers often employed the many warp cult forces aligned to them as auxiliary soldiery, their greater worth was as a mass offering to the warp entities to which they were dedicated. In the aftermath of the Isttvan V betrayal, the Warmaster had tasked Lorgar and his brother Primarch Angron with engaging the Ultramarines on the Eastern Fringe and ensuring that the XIIIth Legion was not able to interfere with the Traitors' march on Terra. Lorgar intended to achieve this by two means: one military, the other far more esoteric. The military objective was to unfold during and after the Battle for Calth, once the Ultramarines' strength had been shattered by the surprise assault of the Word Bearers forces. In this, the warp cultists aligned to Lorgar played a support role, for the task of killing Legiones Astartes could only be performed with any true efficacy by other Legiones Astartes. The warp cultists' role in the Battle of Calth was to engage the mortal forces mustered on and about Calth—the native defence units, Imperial Army line regiments and the elite of the Solar Auxilia. They were used as cannon fodder by the Word Bearers, hurled against a thousand defensive positions in order to foul the defenders' guns while the Traitor Astartes closed to assault range to deliver the killing blow. They were then used to hunt down survivors of the initial betrayal and to harry any force that attempted to consolidate with other remnants and were given responsibility for scouring the cities of Calth of their populations, driving the populace from the shelter of the dense cities and into the killing fields directly under the guns of the Word Bearers planetary bombardment fleet.

As much as these tasks represented a military objective, they each served a still greater end which not even the genius of Roboute

Guilliman could foresee. The deaths inflicted by and upon the numerous warp cults aligned to the Word Bearers were all enacted as part of Lorgar's great ritual to bring about the Ruinstorm—a vast warp storm that was to reave its way across the stars and slice the Imperium apart. Every drop of blood shed by the warp cults, whether that blood was their own or their enemies', served to attract the attentions of the Ruinous Powers. Each scream resounded in the Empyrean and added yet another note in the great symphony of Chaos which only Lorgar could perceive and direct. That symphony was building to a crescendo that was to break many months later at Nuceria, a tale yet to be told in accounts other than this one.

Though it might appear that the Word Bearers' allied warp cults were brutally exploited in the pursuit of Lorgar's grand scheme, the truth must be that they were entirely willing participants in their own demise. The cultists had been promised all manner of esoteric and visceral rewards in return for their lives. They willingly threw themselves onto the enemy's guns, in the process achieving the multiple goals of soaking enemy fire, blocking shots aimed at their Legiones Astartes masters and of proving themselves worthy of the rewards promised to them. They did so with evident fervour, shrieks of blasphemous ecstasy on their bloody lips even as they fell.

A further, still more awful, use which the Word Bearers' cultic allies were put to was only suspected at the time and was uncovered in more detail during the long

THE PRIMORDIAL ANNIHILATOR

At the time of the Battle of Calth, few amongst the Imperium's rulers were conscious of what the numerous warp cults actually believed. Later, they would become all too aware, and later still, all such knowledge would be suppressed and declared anathema. At that early stage, it was guessed that the cults worshipped what they imagined to be deities within the otherworldly dimension of the Warp. Certainly, Navigators and Astropaths, and perhaps the Primarchs, were aware that the Empyrean was host to an order of life that had no analogue in the material universe, but which was able to interact in a limited fashion with it, in particular through those who had been born with psychic abilities, ranging from enslavers to psychneuein.

Investigations, interrogations and signals intercepts revealed myriad occult terms in use amongst the cults, much of it beyond classification, but there remained certain terms and precepts that appeared over and again. The 'Primordial Annihilator' was one such term, a title determined to refer to the Warp itself, as if the Empyrean were some vast gestalt consciousness which the warp cults appeared to venerate. Others referred to the 'Octed' and the 'Eightfold Path', ascribing an unfathomable formulae and a dark purpose to those entities they believed guided their actions.

years of the Calth Underworld War. The cultists were used as offerings to the Ruinous Powers, willingly setting their necks upon sacrificial blocks or shedding their guts upon stone altars as part of the most hideous and debased rituals imaginable. The objectives of these rituals varied, and while some were component parts of the larger ritual to bring the Ruinstorm into being, others were intended to summon warp entities—only later named 'Daemons' in common parlance—from the other-dimension of the

Warp. The more ritual form the deaths took, the more powerful or more numerous the entities summoned, so that for a time at least, the raw stuff of reality became stretched and worn at Calth as the things brought forth by the Word Bearers fell upon their mortal prey in an orgy of blood. Oftentimes, those cultists not slain during the summoning of the warp entities were butchered by them soon afterwards, serving as the sustenance the creatures required to fuel the planet-wide slaughter to come.

WARP CULTS AT THE BATTLE OF CALTH

“At Calth, black stars shall rise in the night, and strange moons cross the skies...”

Uncoded vox traffic detected in the days before the Calth atrocity

History has yet to relate the names of all of the cultic forces the Word Bearers committed at Calth, and it is likely that as the Underworld War ground on, those factions brought to Calth as part of the Conjunction altered greatly. Some were obliterated when the Ultramarines began their fight-back on the surface, while others merged, split or changed in other ways. On the day of the Calth Conjunction, however, there were four chief cultic groups represented amongst the ranks of the Traitors, and it is likely there were numerous smaller factions present in addition to these, the names of most of which history does not record and only substantive evidence for cult forces in the northern hemisphere remains. The four primary warp cults present at the Battle of Calth were the Ushmetar Kaul – ‘*the Brotherhood of the Knife*’, the Tzenvar Kaul – ‘*the Recursive Kin*’, the Jeharwanate – ‘*the Ring*’, and the Mandari – ‘*the Gene-kin*’.

The heavily mechanised forces of the Calaq War Hosts that took part in the Battle of Ithrac in the southern continent were

notable in themselves as their trappings of technology and record of Imperial military service masked the truth of their savage culture and devotion to the influence of the Warp, and therefore do not conform to the pattern illustrated here. As such they were not a cultic force in this accepted sense.

The Unclean Horde

Of the Recursive Kin and the Ring, very little is known save they were represented on the muster-tally as feral world levies dragged along in the wake of the World Bearers Legion. While both factions fought in the opening phases of the war and inflicted heavy losses on the defenders of Calth, both were largely wiped out by counter-attacks when the Ultramarines regained control of Calth’s defence grid and initiated a heavy bombardment of Traitor units from orbit. According to after-action reports, both forces were observed engaging in the most outlandish of rituals and employed warp craft via rogue and aberrant psyker mutants concealed within their ranks. The Tzenvar Kaul, in particular, numbered many thousands of abhumans and mutants in their ranks, ranking them as third-line troops suitable only for hazardous environment labour, forlorn hope operations and Zone

Mortalis ‘clearance’ duties. The conspiracy of the Traitors had concealed the full extent of their physiological deviance, however, which proved to be far in excess of that which would have warranted extermination on the grounds of biological contamination to the Imperium. These forces, when unveiled in battle, were revealed to be so debased in body and mind, they were little more than caricatured mockeries of humanity whose limbs were twisted far beyond all human norms, sporting chitin horns, thrashing tentacle limbs and far more eyes than any living thing should have. These aberrant creatures were simply driven at the Loyalists in massed wave assaults, seeking to overwhelm by sheer numbers, and died in their thousands either to Loyalist guns or the indiscriminate bombardments launched by their ‘allies’.

The Crimson Brotherhoods

The Brotherhood of the Knife was the largest and most effective of the warp cults deployed by the Word Bearers to Calth. As with others of its kind, it was brought to the muster under the guise of second-line Excertus Imperialis Levy Auxilia, with an entry given to the muster as classification ‘*Light Infantry/Terrestrial Sub-type/Feral-Feudal Regressive*’. The cult force was, it appears, organised into between 10-20 sub-sects, each at least 10,000 strong. The members of the Ushmetar Kaul had already gained something of a reputation as a most bloodthirsty and brutal fighting force alongside the Word Bearers during their later Compliance actions, and they were recorded as engaging in the most violent rites before, after and even during battle.

The excesses attributed to these forces during the Battle of Calth —particularly by the harrowing accounts of civilian survivors— speak of the Brotherhood of the Knife fighting clad in rags soaked with the freshly-spilled blood of sacrificial victims, which were as likely to be drawn from their own ranks as from captured enemy combatants. Others had daubed arcane symbols on their skin with blood or had hair matted with clotted viscera; the by-products of mutilations and acts of furious cannibalism beyond the countenance of any sane mind. Many bore ceremonial blades and other melee weapons, and the more senior wielded ritual weapons since classified under the general term ‘*athame*’, fashioned of jagged stone or strangely alloyed iron. Such weapons were by unknown means specifically attuned to the realm of the Warp, so that every death they inflicted was an offering to feed the empyreal entities with which the cult was in communion, and by the act of killing, they sought to breach the barriers which separated the material realm from the Immaterium.

It is believed that the Ushmetar Kaul proved itself a key component in the vast ritual of which the death of Calth was but the opening phase, its thousands-strong cohorts being deployed into the many cities and provinces across the surface of Calth, from Numinus to Talanko. The brotherhoods fought in close coordination with their Word Bearers masters, either serving as an expendable first wave or to clear entrenched foes by weight of numbers, butcher the wounded and round up prisoners for sacrifice. They were also fearsome and skilled fighters, and while individual cultists were no match for a Space Marine, they had the advantage of numbers and were driven by their twisted creed to perform deeds beyond the endurance of mortal soldiers. With each death inflicted by the Ushmetar Kaul, Lorgar’s grand ritual was progressed an increment more, making the Brotherhood of the Knife as useful in an occult sense as it was in a military one.

The Gene-bound

Perhaps the most unusual of the cultic sects engaged at the Battle of Calth were the Mandari, about which very little is known, for the manner of its members’ devotions left little behind in the way of evidence that might be studied. What is known from examining captured fragments of their ‘sacred texts’ from the bodies of the dead is that the rank and file of the Mandari —the so-called ‘Gene-kin’— were bound by some aberrant combination of technology and

genetics to the service of the Warp in such a way that they believed utterly they would be re-born immediately after their deaths into a new and glorious form. The Word Bearers, it appears, promised the Mandari Gene-kin that they were in essence immortal. While a great many of the warp cults committed to the Battle of Calth and elsewhere likely held similar beliefs, those of the Mandari were far more than dogma or esoteric metaphor.

Accounts submitted by Ultramarines units following the Battle of Calth and the subsequent Underworld War describe incidents of spontaneous mutation of a singular character far beyond the most extreme cases of bio-aberration previously recorded by Imperial savants, up to and including the bodily re-vivification of the dead. Forensic examination of recovered corpses by the Legion’s apothecaries obtained during the Underworld War also record numerous medical anomalies, such as unnecessary surgical interventions and seemingly non-functioning implantations of extraneous foreign matter. The process by which these individuals underwent change was far from certain, yet in time the defenders of Calth came to recognise the hideous effect. Within a period of a few minutes to several hours after death, the body of the slain might begin to convulse and then thrash, bones snapping and flesh distending to the extent of acquiring additional mass by unknown means. Ruined flesh would re-knit, the fallen Mandari becoming a bent, split and twisted thing which bore little resemblance to the human form and that moved across

the ground in an entirely unnatural rapid gait and was impervious to pain and trauma. Killing the returned Mandari took bravery, discipline and concentrated fire, and the defenders of Calth soon learned that only severe trauma inflicted to a Mandari cultist’s central mass would ensure the horrific process did not occur. By their very nature and the fact that they could only be killed by the most destructive of means, the re-animated Kaul Mandari proved impossible to study.

CULT ORGANISATION

Throughout the wars of the Age of Darkness, cultic factions organised themselves in many different ways which remain still largely incomprehensible to Imperium observers. It was only much later that the numerological and esoteric significance of certain patterns and formulae were apprehended and categorised in the broadest terms by the agents of the Imperium’s own more esoteric agencies. Countless variation was observed and any concerted effort to quantify or categorise cult formations was invariably doomed to failure. Despite this, certain common factors were observed across a wide range of cults, and while there were always examples of bodies with unique structures or no structure at all, some degree of commonality was recognised. The task of studying these groups was entrusted to a small number of savants and logistae on the staff of Malcador the Sigillite—the Regent of Terra. While most of the work was carried out in secure isolation deep within the labyrinthine bowels of the Imperial Palace

THE DAVINITE LODGE PRIESTS

Such histories that exist describing the roots of the Horus Heresy reserve a special place for the warrior lodges of the feral world of Davin. Such descriptions are beyond the scope of this account and much remains unknown to us, but any examination of the warp cults of the galactic civil war must also include some mention of the Davinite lodge priests who were often to be found serving alongside them. These twisted abhuman magos and demagogues each followed one of the animist and totemic warrior and mystic cults of Davin. Of these, one of the most commonly encountered were initiates of the so-called Serpent Lodge, into whose clutches the Warmaster fell when wounded on Davin’s moon and who would go on to act as his emissaries, but numerous other lodges were also recorded to a lesser extent.

The warrior lodge priests appeared to serve a higher interest than the individual cults and may have been acting in concert with certain conspirators at the highest levels of the Traitors’ leadership, in particular the Dark Apostles of the Word Bearers, who it is apparent had a hand in countless atrocities across thousands of worlds. While some lodge priests served as advisors in matters of prophecy and the Warp, others acted as high priests under whom multiple cult bodies could be gathered together. All were schooled in the darkest arts of warp craft and were able to call upon and wield the most terrible of warp-born powers and aberrant psyker abilities, making them one of the most dangerous classes of the Warmaster’s allies outside of the Traitor Legiones Astartes.

on Terra by adepts sifting through countless thousands of reports and accounts, some came about through first-hand observation by field adepts operating at great danger to themselves. It is from a combination of these two sources that the information presented here is collated.

The majority of cultic groups were organised in a broadly pyramidal form, with a single individual at the apex and other members occupying subsidiary interstitial nodes with varying degrees of power and responsibility below them. Invariably, this person was either highly charismatic or otherwise able to exert an inordinate degree of control

over the cult's members. In some cases the leader was possessed of psychic ability, either recently developed or else repressed for many years before being revealed. Others were possessed of such darkly portentous and forbidden knowledge, they were able to bend the multitudes to their will with words and phrases that struck horror into the souls of all who heard them.

Prior to the revelation of the Warmaster's betrayal, the cult leader or 'magister' was the only member of the group who was aware of the existence of other cults and invariably this individual kept such knowledge to themselves, apportioning small amounts

out to underlings as rewards for service. In most cases, and in particular during the early days of the Horus Heresy, the leader was the only member of the warp cult with any contact with outside powers, namely the Traitor Legions or their agents, or indeed other cults. The magister was master of the cult's numerous ciphers and secret tongues, without which both internal and external communications were all but impossible. This perspective invested cult leaders with enormous power, and made it less likely they would be challenged or usurped, for in doing so any challenger would win only incomplete control of the group.

Below the magister there often existed an inner circle, sometimes referred to as a 'coven', of especially trusted lieutenants, co-conspirators, seers, enforcers, advisors, consorts, bodyguards and even family members, forming a malignant dynasty at the warp cult's heart. Such acolytes shared some of the leaders' burden of command and assisted in the occult rituals and murderous pursuits around which the warp cult's activities were focused. When the call to rise up and fight for the Warmaster came, the individual members of the coven might serve as sub-officers, leading the greater masses of the cult into battle against the hated Loyalists. The realities of war very quickly

weeded out those not suited to battlefield service and those who survived were often potent warrior-leaders indeed.

The greater mass of a warp cult was made up of seemingly normal people, subjects of the Emperor and citizens of the Imperium who, despite appearances, nurtured a deep and twisted hatred for all the Great Crusade had achieved. When called upon to turn their hand against their masters, the masses did so with cruel relish. The majority of the cult's members had only the most rudimentary knowledge of tactics and weapons, but made up for this deficiency in wanton savagery, suicidal fervour and deluded courage. Under the fell influence of the magister and the cult's inner circle, the rank and file cultists would obey any order and perform any deed, utterly certain that even should they die, they would be resurrected into a new and supremely powerful sphere of existence as just reward for their sacrifice. As with other tiers, those cultists not suited to warfare were cut down in the opening salvos, leaving behind a core of warriors that in sufficient numbers could overwhelm almost any foe.

STRENGTH IN DARKNESS

Warp cults had two primary weapons to bring to bear against the Loyalists. The first was simple numerical advantage, for the tendrils of heresy had spread far and wide in the years preceding Istvan and by the time of the Battle of Calth, the Traitors were able to call upon unnumbered hordes of devoted cultist foot soldiers.

Numbering among the subservient foot soldiers loyal to the Word Bearers and Sons of Horus in particular, Traitor war fleets were often accompanied by carrier vessels whose dark, stifling cargo holds were crammed full of cultists devoted to their cause. While many warp cults rose up as discreet bodies, each holding their own idiosyncratic beliefs and practises, once swept up in the massive sector-wide advances of the Horus Heresy, they were soon subsumed into a gestalt mass of frenzied devotees bearing all manner of equipment and clothing.

The second is that numbers alone are unlikely to have granted these forces a decisive advantage, and it was in the sphere of the esoteric and the occult that their true strength was to be found. At Calth and in many other conflicts, the warp cults served as part of a grand conspiracy, one in which stratagems beyond the grasp of the Loyalists were frequently employed. By way of warpcraft and forbidden psionics, warp-

magos could cause the Empyrean to bleed into reality; they could assail the foe with the sanity-shattering wails of damned souls; they could make the stars go out and cause horrifying visions to burn across the night skies. Most terrible and potent of all were those magi who, by way of pacts with the unnameable denizens of the beyond, could call forth legions of fiends, things dubbed 'Daemon' by those few who witnessed them and survived to recount the nightmare. Time after time, the warp cults showed themselves willing to sacrifice their own lives in abominable mass rituals to bring these creatures into being, and the Loyalists learned at a high price indeed that in slaying the massed hordes of warp cultists, they might simply be hastening the arrival of a second wave of warp-born Daemons, a foe which few mortals and only the most stoic of the Legiones Astartes could hope to defeat.

In the panoply of war however, the majority of warp cults were almost entirely deficient. Unlike the Imperialis Auxilia regiments that declared for the Warmaster, the countless warp cults rarely had any access to military stockpiles before they rose up against the Imperium. Even once counted amongst the ranks of the Traitors, most cult bodies were afforded only the most limited access to Traitor supply chains. In reality, most cultists armed and equipped themselves by looting the bodies of the fallen, both Traitor and Loyalist, giving them a motley and ramshackle appearance made all the more outlandish by the occult formulae and warp runes scratched into weapons and daubed across flesh and armour.

For all their undoubted value to the Traitor Legiones Astartes, the fate of the majority of allied warp cults was the same on many battlefields. Their lot was to be expended as ammunition in the service of the Warmaster. They were frequently deployed but rarely re-deployed unless they could extract themselves from a war zone by their own efforts. Traitor Legiones Astartes commanders gave little or no heed to their well being and regarded them as entirely expendable. Until Terra, this fact was never made more starkly clear than at Calth, where hundreds of thousands of deluded warp cultists were committed, only to be abandoned, their deaths but one element in Lorgar's far-reaching and unfathomable ritual to bring about the Ruinstorm.



