



THE HOUR OF THE WARMASTER

“The slave cares not whose hand wields the whip or why, knowing only the authority of its touch, the discipline of its voice and the certainty of its pain.”

A Chthonian Proverb

THE IMPERIUM BETRAYED

In the year 006.M31, the Imperium of Man reeled bloodily from the greatest blow it had ever suffered; the betrayal of the Warmaster Horus and what will come to be seen as fully half of the fighting strength of humanity's greatest warriors—the Space Marines of the Legiones Astartes. Eight of the eighteen Legions were now pledged to the Warmaster's cause, with the disposition of a ninth, that would later join him, as then

unknown. As for the rest, three of those Legions known to have remained loyal had been wrecked upon the black sands of Isstvan V, victims of the Dropsite Massacre, a most grievous ambush wrought by the hand of Horus himself, while a greater part of a fourth had been ravaged in bloody void battle in the Phall system.

The five loyal Legions that remained yet accounted for were scattered, divided by vast distances both from each other and from Terra, and in the cases of two of them, they already were falling victim to fresh perfidy and murderous death-traps that would see them neutralised for a time and their strength bled, for such had been the plotting that had long foreshadowed the reach of the Warmaster's dark will.

Despite this monumental blow to the might and stability of the Imperium, not all however had fallen the Warmaster's way, and the fickle hand of fate and the bloody courage of the Loyalists who had already fallen had robbed Horus of the chance for a surprise strike against Terra to win the war before it had truly begun. Furthermore, each battle won had cost him a portion of his force's strength, as the realities of Legiones Astartes against Legiones Astartes, Mechanicum against Mechanicum and Imperial against Imperial in open warfare became clear, and the butcher's bill for both sides—even when one caught the other in seemingly overwhelming ambush—had proved time and again frighteningly high. In terms of the overall armed forces of the Imperium other than the Legiones Astartes, who like the Space Marines were now divided against themselves, the death toll was already mounting into the millions, and would only multiply arithmetically as the war spread and progressed.

There would now be no sudden death blow to end it cleanly; it would perforce become a war of conquest and counter-conquest, of merciless destruction and bloody defence. A domain as large as the known galaxy itself would now be the battleground on which merciless attrition, as much as bold strategy, would be the means to achieve victory. It would be a war fought across thousands of worlds and would doom untold billions to their deaths, a war on a scale so incomprehensible that not even the mind of a Primarch such as Horus, who had been named by his creator as first among his kind, could perhaps encompass it.

The unparalleled savagery already apparent in a war still young should not in retrospect have surprised anybody who had witnessed the fury and destruction unleashed at the hands of those self-same forces during the years of the Great Crusade; the Legions had torn world after world asunder, put uncounted alien races to the sword and cast empires that had lasted millennia into oblivion.

Now those Legions turned on each other, and on the worlds they had once sworn to defend with their lives. The Imperium itself would become the battleground over which this war would be mercilessly fought, and the destruction that had once been visited on the alien, would now be visited on humanity in their stead.

The galaxy would burn.



THE DISPOSITIONS OF THE TRAITOR LEGIONS

Much remains uncertain in regards to the strategic position, deployments and configuration of the forces loyal to Warmaster Horus in the early phases of the war, and even their full scope and extent cannot be ascertained with any genuine certainty by the historian. Perhaps a full half of the Titan Legions and the numberless hosts of the Excertus Imperialis—hundreds of millions of soldiers, vessels and war

machines—had either through corruption, misguided loyalty to Horus or simple blind ignorance in compliance with their orders, sided with the Warmaster. But this alone would never be enough. A thousand battleships might be wrecked against the defences of Terra, ten million Auxilia might spend their lives in besieging the Eternity Gate, and ten million follow them, and again and again, but Horus knew this alone would never avail him. Not against the superhuman

warriors who held it; not against the Legio Custodes and defences designed by the Emperor's own hand and garrisoned now by Rogal Dorn and his sons.

So it is that rightly in this matter, the greatest attention should be placed on the location and strengths of the Traitor Legions at this hour. The Legions at the Warmaster's side during this time comprised the following: the Sons of Horus, the Emperor's Children, the Death Guard, the Iron Warriors, the Night Lords, the World Eaters, the Alpha Legion and the Word Bearers. The shattered remnants of the Thousand Sons, who would later join the Traitor's cause in earnest, were not yet at this time fully active in the war, and were still largely of unknown disposition and even allegiance following the apocalyptic Battle of Prospero. Although the Dropsite Massacre had inflicted terrible wounds on the Loyalist forces involved, the Traitor Legions had not themselves come away from

the cataclysm unscathed which, combined with losses suffered during the recent purging of the Traitors' ranks at Isstvan III and elsewhere, had weakened Horus' position from its notional strength when the die for war was cast.

Hard facts regarding operational Legiones Astartes numbers are impossible to ascertain, but credible estimates place Traitor losses during the battles of the Isstvan, Phall and Paramar systems in the region of 100,000 Legiones Astartes fatalities, compared to an unknown number, perhaps three to four times as high, as a death toll for those who remained loyal to the Emperor. This, by many estimates, left something in the region of 900,000 Legiones Astartes under arms in the Warmaster's cause, with perhaps two thirds or more of that figure in the Loyalist camp. This estimate, however, is still far from certain, one which is itself further distorted by the events that were to shortly unfold on Calth and Signus Prime. From this calculation—as equivocal as it is—it is possible to determine that even after the Dropsite Massacre, the military advantage Horus had yet gained was simply not large enough in scale to make an immediate and direct assault on Terra and the Imperial heartlands of the Segmentum Solar, roused as they were now against attack, a strategically viable option, let alone one that would guarantee victory. This was the reality that Horus now faced in determining his next move.

The Hounds of Horus Unleashed

In retrospect, his strategy seems to have been based upon the ancient maxim that when faced with a numerous foe spread over a wide geographical (or in this case celestial) area, the surest route to victory is to divide and conquer. As befitted one of the Warmaster's undoubted military genius, the interpretation and execution of this strategy was however a subtle and complex one, which simultaneously served a number of different, but interlinked, short term tactical priorities as well as longer term strategic goals. The first and perhaps foremost of these goals was to blind, bleed and confuse his enemy, an enemy which in this case comprised the entire sphere of the vast Imperium of Mankind.

Under Horus' orders, the war was to be taken to every corner of the Imperium, and on every battlefield imaginable; from small scale strikes by elite forces, to sponsored terrorist campaigns and civil uprisings, commerce raids by warship squadrons, and targeted

strikes to disrupt vital supply chains, smash strategic keystones of Segmentum defence and shred astrotelepathic communications. Alongside these came wholesale campaigns of conquest and devastation, spearheaded by mighty Legion-led combined-arms battlegroups which operated like a dark mirror of the Expeditionary fleets of the Great Crusade, now turned inwards to ravage and subjugate what once they had built. To this end, taskforces comprising the core elements of entire Traitor Legions, such as the Night Lords and Iron Warriors, were dispatched, seemingly at random, to strike at locations all across the Imperium, to conquer, neutralise and destroy, but perhaps most of all to weaken and provoke resistance—Loyalist resistance that could then be isolated, overwhelmed and exterminated.

In this Horus, it can be gleaned, hoped to maintain control of the war's initiative, to force battles where he chose and not his enemies, relying upon the Imperium's monolithic strength being both slow to respond and hampered by the need to defend as much of its territory as it could lest entire sectors slip from its grasp, which they did, and as many and more to their own parochial concerns, petty revolts and secessions as

went over to the Traitors' cause. Horus, once the Imperium's defender, had exposed its greatest weakness; that below the cohesion of a domain maintained by war and bound by a web of communication, authority and the ultimate threat of punishment directly to Terra, lay potential disunity, insurrection and rebellion were the threads of those sustaining webs cut. Once this was done, the isolation of the vast and empty void between the lights of human civilisation, and the omnipresent fear of a terrible predator stalking the night skies, would be enough to drive whole worlds into anarchy alone.

These terrible campaigns of fear and destruction make up the early years of what has since become known to historians as the Horus Heresy's 'Age of Darkness', not least because so great was the chaos and damage of this time, and so widespread, that no true light may be shed on the full facts and progress of the myriad catastrophes and genocidal strife of the period. They were themselves but a means to an end for Horus. This end was not simply that the Imperium beyond Terra be fatally weakened and dismembered piecemeal, but that the Warmaster and his armies would wax stronger than ever before.

The Dark Compliance

On many worlds, the seeds of corruption had been sown long before the hand of betrayal struck at Isstvan. When the Warmaster led his forces in civil war, hundreds of worlds not directly connected to his power base declared for his cause. On these planets and dominions, many scattered around the dangerous periphery of the Imperium's frontiers, it was because his agents and those of his allies within the Mechanicum, the Alpha Legion and the Word Bearers had already poisoned their hearts against the Emperor. There would be many hundreds more, from isolated and otherwise unimportant colonies to keystones of the Imperium's economy and military strength, that would fall under his sway as the war progressed in a process that became known as the 'Dark Compliance'.

To each world over which the Warmaster's shadow fell, a simple choice was given; total submission and surrender or total destruction and brutal subjugation—slavery or death, there were no other options and no second chances. It was a perverse parody of the progress and glorious goals of the Great Crusade, but served as more than mere scorn for the Emperor's dream or even the vainglory of a tyrant, for there was underlying method and intelligence beneath the apparently wanton savagery. When one militant world or stubbornly Loyalist star system was punished by apocalyptic destruction for their brave defiance, such fear was created in others nearby that their surrender came as a rapid and forgone conclusion, often without a shot fired in their defence. Each world added not simply territory but manpower, production capacity and supply, feeding a war machine that was growing exponentially in power. Further, those worlds marked for death—where possible—can be seen with hindsight to have been more strategically expendable compared to those spared to fall through fear, or the more measured if no less brutal decapitation strikes for which Horus' own Legion had long been famed. It can also be observed that the devastation visited during the Dark Compliances was never so thorough that survivors were not left to spread the word of what terrors they had beheld, and of the price this new shadow emperor exacted for defiance.

Horus the Warmaster, the Arch-Traitor

THE SCIONS OF WAR

With the task of waging war against the Imperium in order to slay its master at hand, it was of vital importance to Horus and his forces that their martial strength not only be maintained, but expanded as rapidly as possible. It is a common mistake among the uninitiated to assume that the strengths of the various Legions at the outset of the Horus Heresy represented their greatest force, which simply diminished by attrition until the end, like the dwindling playing pieces of a parlour game as it winds out to its conclusion. This could not be further from the truth.

From the outset, all sides strove to increase their recruitment of new Legiones Astartes, accelerating and expediting the process of gene-seed implantation and mimetic programming to unheard-of speeds, often with disastrous consequences. Even before the calamity, it had been widely reported that it had become possible for the most callous Legions, such as the World Eaters, to cut down the creation time of a Space Marine to as little as two years, perhaps less, although the rate of failure was frighteningly high. This had been a matter for controversy and censure in the past, but with the onset of galaxy-wide civil war, dire expediency overrode such concerns, for Loyalists just as much as Traitors. No full account of the actions of individual Legions in the particulars of this regard can be given, but it can be said that recruitment was not only vastly accelerated across the board, but also the nets were cast far wider with, it is believed, a tithe of manhood demanded from scores of suitable worlds where it had not done so before. Tens of millions were inducted into the massing forces on both

sides of the warring divide, and from these the finest were culled as potential Legiones Astartes, with perhaps as few as one in a hundred in several cases surviving the brutally accelerated techniques.

Not in all cases was this to be a success, however, as the terrible price the Raven Guard was to bear was later to prove, but it was the case that a number of Legions saw very swift and marked increase in the order of tens of thousands during the early years of the Horus Heresy, particularly amongst those whose gene-seed was known to be stable, or who had access to extensive apothecarions and the resources for mass-implantation techniques to be viable. The fate of these new recruits was to be a bloody trial by fire, and it is believed some did not even know for who they fought or under what colours when first they were unleashed to be hammered on the anvil of war.

The maelstrom of the Horus Heresy was, however, to prove a brutally effective crucible of training, and units comprising such new blood were always formed around a core of hardened veterans of the Great Crusade and cast into the first and bloodiest throes of the civil war. Alongside these waves of newly forged Legiones Astartes was an unceasing need to arm and equip them, and the loyalty and control of key Forge Worlds became of paramount importance to both sides of the war, particularly after the Blockade of Mars—a Traitor domain at the heart of the Sol System—came into effect. Supplies of advanced arms and armour, interstellar vessels and even basic munitions were commodities for which entire campaigns were fought, and more than one industrial world or indefensible fortress was rendered a lifeless cinder by its own side, simply to prevent it from falling into an enemy's hands. The military expediencies they encountered, and forced evolution-in-arms and tactics

the internecine conflict created, all had their own undeniable influences to bear on those who fought, and the armies on both sides began to rapidly change, some under the influence of dark and then largely unguessed at forces from beyond, and others simply by the brutal, mutilating hand of war. Swiftly gone were the lock-step Legions and serried ranks—diverse though they had been—of the Great Crusade. In their place were savage angels of death and bitter armies clashing in ignorance without respite or relent, all but unrecognisable from what had gone before.

THE TALON CLOSES AROUND MANACHEA

What came to be known as the Conquest of Manachea was a campaign carried out by those under the direct command of Warmaster Horus during the latter part of 007.M31. It was both an early example of the Warmaster turning his forces to seize entire sectors of the Imperium he deemed valuable, and a demonstration of the speed and brutality with which such campaigns were accomplished. It can be seen in retrospect to have provided a template for scores of such campaigns which came after it, both in terms of strategy and the savage consequences involved for those worlds which fell into the Traitors' grasp throughout the time of the Age of Darkness.

The Conquest of Manachea, led personally by Horus and his inner cadre of commanders, was itself the centrepiece of an interlinked series of campaigns, fleet actions and local wars which swept like storms through the celestial region sometimes referred to as the Coronid Thule, or the Coronid Deeps, between 006.M31 and 008.M31. This region, which encompasses the frontier border areas of the Segmentum Obscurus and Ultima Segmentum, and constituted some of the most industrialised regions of the northern Imperium at the time, had been effectively cut away from regular direct contact with the Segmentum Solar owing to the rising tide of warp turbulence which would culminate in the so-called 'Ruinstorm', which followed on from the dark events at Calth in 007.M31.

Manachea itself was the jewel of the region; a highly populated, highly advanced hive world of the first rank which sat at the centre of its own well-developed sub-domain of attendant star systems. As such it offered the Warmaster much that would be of value in the ongoing war, not least of all strategic control of the region, and vast human resources to exploit as well as industrial capacity that could be readily turned towards the war effort. Nearby sectors also included the mineral-rich Cyclops Cluster—home to two fully fledged Mechanicum Forge Worlds, the vital Armada Imperialis fleet anchorage of Port Maw, several independent Knight Worlds, and a score of agri-worlds and other colonies that could be used to feed and supply the Warmaster's armies on the long march to Terra.

These prizes were not, however, unguarded. Although the Traitor's agents had already been at work in the region, the bulk of its worlds and military strength was already set against him, the region's Imperial Commanders alerted by the wildfire warning that had spread after the news of the Isstvan III Atrocity had reached Terra. That such a warning had been issued in the region (whereas many other sectors and domains had been kept ignorant at first of the betrayal) was a result of the frontier's own proximity, in relative terms, to the Isstvan system itself; Port Maw being used as a layover and resupply base for a number of the fleets despatched so disastrously to punish the Traitors.

With only a few notable exceptions, the garrisoning of the Imperial worlds of the Coronid Deeps was provided for by the Imperialis Armada and regiments of Solar Auxilia pattern Excertus Imperial Army formations. The Solar Auxilia pattern was particularly suited to the defence of the region as it was equipped and formed to fight in hostile environments and participate in void battles, both of which were common in this far-flung domain of the Imperium, while the high technological base of worlds such as Manachea and Agathon made the requirements of Solar Auxilia pattern regiments possible to maintain in a manner that was simply untenable on the majority of Imperial colony worlds. These defenders had shown themselves repeatedly able to withstand the assaults of xenos raiders, rebel uprisings and, on occasion, wholesale invasion—at least until reinforcements arrived. They were well provided with arms, armour and warships, and numbered in their hundreds of thousands in terms of

active troops. They had never though been measured against the unthinkable opponent; the Imperium's own Space Marines.

So it was that in the closing days of 006.M31, terrifying reports, quickly suppressed, reached the governing courts and councils of the Coronid Deeps that the unthinkable had occurred; that the Traitors had crushed those sent to bring them to heel at Isstvan V. These reports were at first scoffed at and wilfully disbelieved, until the first few battered ships,

Loyalist survivors of the void battle at Isstvan, began to limp brokenly in, seeking sanctuary from the hounds of Horus at their heels.

Fear came then to Manachea, to Agathon, to Mezoa and a hundred other worlds greater and lesser along the frontier. Requests for aid and instruction from Terra were lost on blinding squalls of warp static, and with the warp storms behind them and the black void of the frontier before them, the worlds of the Coronid Deeps could do little but wait for the devil to come for them from the dark.

The Sundered and the Black

It is said by ancient proverb that truth is the first casualty of war and, if this is the case, then rumour is its first child. Almost from the outset, the war of the Horus Heresy was a vast cataclysm and one whose events moved with such quicksilver pace that mystery, supposition, lies and simple ignorance cloaked much of the bloodshed even as it occurred, casting a veil over much that will never be lifted. Though the roll call of Space Marine Legions, Titan Legio, Auxilia regiments and Mechanicum Taghmata that sided with the Arch-Traitor and those who remained loyal is largely known and accepted, the full truth is far more complex and far more mysterious than commonly believed.

Of those who fell at Isstvan, there were survivors, remnants and fleeing fragments shorn of command and driven half mad by treachery; from that point onwards they were isolated, alone. These were the shattered Legions and, while some swiftly returned to the Imperial fold, some did not or would not. Some would go on to wage a bitter war of vengeance alone, some would simply disappear, their fates unknown, their stories untold. But there were others of a darker hue. It has long been refuted since, but is indelibly the case, that in the Legions that remained loyal there were elements, sometimes whole companies and commands, that did not. In some cases the infection of the Warmaster's 'warrior lodges' has been blamed, while in others perhaps grievances long smouldering were the cause, just as infiltration by outside forces, or simply a darker truth applies that, given the option, some Legiones Astartes believed Horus had the superior cause and the superior right to command their allegiance, not the Emperor, while some retained a loyalty to their Emperor and the Great Crusade over that of their own Primarch's will. It is true that particularly in the early years of the war, detachments of Legiones Astartes and sometimes entire squadrons of warships simply vanished without apparent trace, and while many may have fallen foul of warp storms and enemy action, it is likely just as true that some quietly slipped anchor and turned their coats to serve another master, and that this happened on both sides of the divide.

Thus can perhaps be explained, at least in part, persistent stories and evidence long since suppressed of midnight clad warriors in defaced Night Lords heraldry savagely attacking Traitor forces at the liberation of Estaban III, or of recurring reports of multiple Space Marine strike forces seemingly in the resurrected livery of the Dusk Raiders thwarting the Iron Warriors at Kibron and Malinche's Fall. Likewise also should be considered the long-denied evidence of a Great Company of the Space Wolves Legion bearing the symbol of the Serpent's Eye slaughtering millions at Neo Cadiz in 008.M31, or of a company of Legiones Astartes present at the Siege of Mezoa bearing the hybrid arms and panoply of the Iron Hands and Sons of Horus Legions both. These are merely a handful of still infamous cases, but there are many more unsubstantiated or simply now forgotten which paint a more complex and uncertain picture of this great civil war than is normally accounted. Further to this, and perhaps an even more sinister enigma, are the persistent reports of Space Marine forces appearing bearing no sign or seal of heraldry or origin at all, or stranger yet, heraldry which bears no mark known during the Great Crusade, although whether the 'black' Legionaries were merely turncoats or, as some have whispered, perhaps raised by the Traitors from the chimeric gene-seed of the Isstvan dead for their own terrible purposes, none can now say for certain.

