



THE WAR AT CALTH



PART I: THE SHADOW OF WAR

"If you must strike against a dangerous foe, your blow must be so severe that you need never fear of his vengeance."

*Remark 223.XVII,
from the Codicils of Roboute Guilliman*

The bloody years which began the 31st Millennium all but ended the Imperium of Mankind. On the black sands of Isstvan V, Warmaster Horus had shattered the Legiones Astartes, casting the galaxy into blood and fire as he sought to overthrow his grandfather and claim His empire for himself. There, in the darkness at the very edge of the galaxy, Horus bound half of the serving Space Marine Legions to his cause with the blood of their slain brothers. Those who had remained loyal were either broken or scattered to the far corners of the Imperium by the Traitor Warmaster's schemes.

Yet despite all that the arch-Traitor had achieved, all the military might Horus had gathered to himself, he held no decisive advantage. The final heroism of those loyal warriors who had sold their lives so dearly on the barren planets of the Isstvan system had robbed Horus of the chance to strike suddenly at Terra and the Emperor. The Warmaster was left unable to end the rebellion in a quick victory, for without surprise on his side, only overwhelming numbers would suffice to breach the defences of the Imperial Palace.

Once woken to the threat of Horus' treachery, the innumerable worlds of the Imperium could raise a host of billions against him and though Horus might sway many of these worlds by bloody violence or honeyed words, such a conquest would last a lifetime. Worse yet, those of his brother Primarchs, the post-human creations of the Emperor, who led the Legions that had not pledged themselves to his cause or whose sons had been slain at Isstvan would soon rally against him, and their wrath would tip the balance of any galactic conquest.

Though Terra stood beyond the immediate reach of Horus, confusion and misdirection remained the Traitors' greatest weapon. These were weapons that Horus knew well how to wield, as a master of war whose talents had been honed to perfection in the utter destruction of innumerable xenos civilisations over the long years of the Great Crusade and the subtle preparations that had led to his grand rebellion. Out of the fleets of those not allied to his cause, some few warp-capable craft had escaped the Isstvan system, bearing warnings to Terra and other Loyalist strongholds. Yet most such vessels had been reduced to shattered hulks, drifting in the orbit of Isstvan V, or had already been harried and pursued across the bleak systems of the northern rim until brought to bay and scoured clean by the blood-hungry minions of the Warmaster. So the vast majority of the Imperium remained uncertain of events on the edge of the Emperor's domain, and when the agents and emissaries of the Warmaster arrived, they proved a fertile ground for the whispered promises and veiled threats they carried. Many vital strongholds were kept unaware of the rebellion too and took no measures to guard themselves against the storm that was to fall upon them or, worse still, took up arms in Horus' name fearing the dire consequences of making a stand against him. Within the galaxy therefore, Horus still retained the strategic initiative and the next move in the war would be his to make.

Though it may seem inconceivable that treachery on such a scale might remain hidden from the galaxy at large, the sheer size and complexity of the Imperium worked to Horus' favour. In those days the Imperium was formed of millions of individual worlds, semi-autonomous thrall realms and treaty-bound tributaries. All were separated by the immense gulf of interstellar space and a nigh-incomprehensible mix of divergent languages and cultures, some of which bore only the most tenuous resemblance to their ancestral home in the Sol System.

It is perhaps then more impressive that word of even such a monumental event as the treachery at Isstvan ever reached the Emperor and his councils at all.

This fledgling Imperium was bound together by a fragile web of astropathic relay stations, relying on the services of those arduously trained psykers within them to pass information across the byzantine networks of the Emperor's growing realm. Astropathic communication has ever been an imprecise science, with messages encoded in febrile psyk-dreams and complex allegory-code exchanged by the minds of psykers, all groping blindly in the dark of the Warp to contact their fellows light years distant. Worse still, in the aftermath of the Isstvan massacres, a disturbance began to grow within the Warp. This disturbance would spread out from the galactic north, twisting and distorting the substance of astropathic communications across the galaxy, leaving many worlds isolated and vulnerable. News of Horus' rebellion was quickly reduced to half-truths, rumour and vague nightmares, from which little fact could be distilled. Even on worlds where believable news of the rebellion was received, often brought by broken Legion craft limping back from the conflict at Isstvan, without the chance to confer with the impossibly distant masters of the Imperium on Terra, there could be no quick response, and the panic that the news spread worked only to aid Horus.

Not only did the increasingly tumultuous nature of aetheric space stymie attempts at communication and garble news of what had taken place at Isstvan, it also caused the disappearance or misdirection of a still unknown number of interstellar craft. Though travel through warp space had always been hazardous, the number of critical supply and munitions convoys and fast courier craft that went astray or simply never arrived at their destination far exceeded that of any other time either before or in the years that followed. Many otherwise stout Loyalist redoubts were fatally weakened by the sudden severance of supply lines, later to fall to traitorous forces seemingly unaffected by warp turbulence. Few of those in positions of power across the Imperium at that time could have anticipated that these were but the first stirrings of a far greater catastrophe that had yet to be unleashed.

So it was that when the hosts of the arch-Traitor Horus spread from the blackened corpse of the Isstvan System in the middling days of 006.M31, stretching forth his hand

to begin his conquest of the galaxy, they did so initially unopposed by the Imperium's massed fleets.

The Eye of the Storm

Of immediate importance to Horus was the need to establish a suitable domain from which to supply his growing army and to ensure that those of his brothers he could not sway to his cause were removed as threats to his eventual conquest of the Imperium. To these ends he set those Primarchs now sworn to him, turning a large proportion of the Legiones Astartes against the empire they had fought to build for two long centuries.

History has shown how the Death Guard and Sons of Horus Legions were unleashed upon the sectors of the Imperium that bordered Isstvan and the horrors that were visited upon those worlds. The slaughter of the defenders of Manachea in 007.M31 and the subsequent creation of a dark empire amongst the shattered border territories of the Imperium is well documented in other chronicles and such grim times need not be recalled here. Of the other Legions pledged to serve Horus, less is known, though few doubt that they were directed by their dark master to assault those loyal Legions who had yet to feel the Warmaster's wrath.

Fragmentary records place the Traitor Night Lords in the Thramas Sector locked in battle with the unsuspecting Dark Angels, as evidenced by the broken and rad-scoured worlds to be found in that region in these latter days. As has ever been the case, it is near impossible to accurately chart the movements of the Alpha Legion, even with the benefit of hindsight. Apocryphal tales and the fragmentary records of the few known survivors of their attacks would place the XXth Legion in disparate locations across the galaxy, in conflict primarily with both the Space Wolves and the White Scars. The veracity of such reports cannot be confirmed, but were they to be proven accurate, it would indicate that the Alpha Legion was capable of deploying a previously unthinkable number of Legionaries and combat-ready void craft.

More is known of the actions of the Word Bearers and the World Eaters, whose bloody trail across the eastern Segmentum of the Imperium was punctuated by dead, burned worlds and a tide of slaughter which served no purpose save sheer wanton bloodlust. To these Legions Horus assigned a critical duty: the destruction of one of the most powerful Loyalist strongholds outside of the Sol System—Ultramar.

The Price of the Imperial Truth

In the years before the return of Lorgar and the discovery of Colchis by the expanding fleets of the Imperium in 857.M30, the XVIIth Legion was known amongst the vast hosts of the Great Crusade by designations other than the 'Word Bearers'. The Emperor named them the Imperial Heralds at their inception, an elegant title that spoke of the grand purpose for which they had been created, whilst their fellow warriors named them the Iconoclasts, a more brutal appellation coined in appreciation of the zeal with which they cast down the idolatrous temples and cultic strongholds of Old Night.

Through the earliest years of the Great Crusade, the Iconoclasts were the foremost champions of the Imperial Truth, the vanguard of any assault against those of human descent who would deny the Emperor's dream of unity. They burned clean the fane-cities of psychic cults, overthrew grotesque xenos overlords who claimed for themselves the mantle of gods and delivered their human thralls into the expanding Imperium. Those who strayed from the strictures of the Imperial Truth, whether they be alien tyrants or misguided human survivors of the Age of Strife, were subject to their uncompromising judgement. None could fault the fearsome devotion of these warriors, for the fleets of the Imperial Heralds were the cutting edge of the Great Crusade, cleansing the taint of Old Night with the terrible power of their unflinching resolve and blind belief in the teachings of their Emperor. The tally of their victories could not easily be counted, though some amongst the highest circles of the Officio Militaris whispered that if the Iconoclasts remained unchecked, they would be left with an empire of ashes and corpses, for it was not the way of the XVIIth Legion to spare their wrath from those who failed to meet their exacting standards of purity. Then came the discovery of Colchis, and everything changed.

Long a world mired in religious strife, it was on Colchis that Lorgar, 17th Primarch and soon-to-be lord of the Imperial Heralds, was re-united with the Emperor. As with all the Legions, the return of the XVIIth's Primarch had a profound impact on the Imperial Heralds, one that at first seemed beneficial to their character. Where once the Imperial Heralds had been cold and aloof to all, obsessed with their own bitter crusade, they became common sights within the established worlds of the Imperium and amongst the many Great Crusade fleets, eager to engage with their brothers and to praise their newfound lord. Where once destruction and death had been their only purpose, Lorgar taught them to build and to believe in the Emperor's grand vision for the future of Mankind. That he also spread his misguided belief in the deified Emperor, the religion he had founded at the moment of the Emperor's arrival on Colchis, is now well known, and its spread throughout the Imperial Heralds was to culminate in their re-consecration as the Word Bearers. The annals of the Great Crusade and other contemporary historical documents record no comment by the Emperor on the open secret of Lorgar's indiscretions, whether to rebuke or to encourage them. It is assumed that while no open censure was recorded against the Word Bearers in their earliest years, the Emperor remonstrated with Lorgar in private; indeed many of the writings of Lorgar's brother Primarchs infer such occurrences, yet these attempts came to naught. While the Emperor had apparently been willing to tolerate this while it did not interfere with the progress of the Great Crusade, as the newly dubbed Word Bearers began to delay longer and longer at their conquests, building temples and fanes in His honour, many among the Officio Militaris and the Emperor's inner council began to question their priorities. In 963.M30 the Emperor sent Malcador the Sigillite, first among his councillors, and Roboute Guilliman of the Ultramarines to correct Lorgar's ways. At His order, the Word Bearers were publicly censured and the city of Monarchia on the distant world of Khur, along with its false temples, was destroyed by the warriors of Ultramar as an object lesson in the folly of false religion. The entirety of the XVIIth Legion was then forced to kneel in the ashes of their devotion while the Ultramarines stood over them in judgement, that which they had seen as worthy devotion now labelled treasonous.

After a period of seclusion, Lorgar returned to the forefront of the Great Crusade, redoubling the efforts of the Word Bearers and bringing dozens of worlds into swift Compliance, thus avoiding further scrutiny from the Emperor. Few at that time imagined that his new zeal could have been anything other than that of an errant son who sought to atone for his mistakes. Yet in the years to come, many would look back at these actions and see the earliest hidden signs of the coming treachery.

THE REALM OF ULTRAMAR

Forged by the brilliant strategic mind of the Primarch Roboute Guilliman and the martial prowess of his XIIIth Legion, the Ultramarines, Ultramar was the jewel of the Imperium's border realms, over five hundred worlds torn from the grip of unspeakable xenos empires and the despots of Old Night. Two centuries of disciplined and masterfully planned campaigning since the rediscovery of Roboute Guilliman had won the Ultramarines Legion an industrial base which rivalled any of the ancient strongholds at the Imperium's core, and this vast industrial complex supported one of the largest armies in the Imperial war machine, providing men and resources for the hundreds of regiments of the Excertus Imperialis raised across Ultramar, as well as the XIIIth Legion itself, one of the largest of all the Space Marine Legions.

Ultramar was a blade at the throat of Horus' rebellion. Left unopposed and given time to gather in strength, for the warriors of the XIIIth Legion and their oath-bound Imperial Army auxilia, Ultramar would form a bastion that could resist even the full might of Horus' dark hosts. Worse, with Ultramar intact and alerted to Horus' plans, any attempt by the Traitors to move against the core systems of the Imperium would see the forces of Guilliman sally forth to trap him between their defenders and their own vast numbers. Yet, if Horus could bring Ultramar to ruin and leave the warriors of the XIIIth Legion scattered or slain, there would have been no other Loyalist force capable of stopping the advance of his growing armies.

That Lorgar found the breaking of his brother's realm to his liking is undoubted; the XVIIth Legion had suffered a humiliating rebuke at the hands of the Ultramarines

years before at Monarchia, an insult that had apparently festered within the Legion and driven them willingly into heresy. Indeed, it is commonly believed that the plan adopted by the Traitors for the destruction of Ultramar originated in the twisted mind of the Word Bearers Primarch.

It is unlikely that the true architect of the Calth atrocities will ever be known however, and weighed against the innumerable sins committed by both Lorgar and Horus, the attribution of this one offence is inconsequential. What is known is that the earliest stages of the assault on Ultramar were laid down long before Horus arrived at the fateful worlds of Isstvan, in the year 005.M31, with a series of orders issued under the seal of the Warmaster dispatching a number of Legions to campaigns in the furthest reaches of the Imperium. Of these, the Blood Angels were sent forth in their entirety to

Signus, the Dark Angels to Tsagualsa and the Ultramarines received orders to muster alongside the Word Bearers at Calth, both Legions to be deployed against the Ork hold of Ghaslakh.

Gathering at Saturn those of his Legion who had been embarked on crusades in distant parts of the galaxy, Roboute Guilliman would depart the Sol System mere months before news of Horus' rebellion reached the Emperor's ears. The turbulent state of the Empyrean in those years would see the Ultramarines' main strength journey to Calth by a winding and obtuse trail which would also cloak them from all attempts by Terra to recall them or forewarn them of Horus' actions. The Word Bearers, delayed by the slaughter at Isstvan, would not arrive at Calth until the majority of the XIIIth Legion had already gathered, travelling a path of blood and ashes of their creation.



The Bloody Road to Ruin

Much of our knowledge of the journey undertaken by the Word Bearers and the World Eaters comes to us from the ruins of those planets which fell in their wake, from buried and forgotten cogitator cores and ancient pictographical arrays. Of the beginnings of this fell undertaking, as the newly blooded Traitors gathered amid the corpses of their brothers, we can only guess. Yet we can infer from later events that they cannot have tarried long in the corpse-filled sands of Isstvan V, waiting only until Angron and his bloodthirsty sons had slaked their thirst for war on the remnants of the Raven Guard Legion and other scattered Loyalists that had taken to the wilderness of Isstvan V.

Even in the aftermath of the titanic void battles that had taken place at Isstvan, the combined fleets of the two Legions were still a force of system-shattering potency. The Word Bearers fleet numbered over a hundred capitol class ships, including nine Gloriana class battleships, several of which had once borne the colours of other Legions, and the three Abyss class kingships, still as yet unknown to the Imperium at large. These ships were the *Furious Abyss* herself, which departed for Jupiter ahead of the main fleet before heading directly for Calth, as well as the *Blessed Lady* and the *Trisagion*.

The World Eaters operated many times that number of smaller craft, fleet pursuit barques and gunships bristling with short range firepower. Led by Lorgar's flagship, the *Fidelitas Lex*, and the squat *Conqueror* where Angron had placed his flag, the combined armada included almost three hundred thousand Legionaries as well as uncounted mortal soldiers and men-under-arms, a force Horus considered more than sufficient to reduce Ultramar to ruins.

THE GHASLAKH XENOHOLD

Presented to the adepts of the Officio Militaris as a grave threat to the security of the Imperium's eastern domains, the Ghaslakh Xenohold, an Ork infestation long ignored, was the pretext under which Horus, his treachery then undreamed of, marshalled the combined might of the Ultramarines and Word Bearers Legions at Calth.

In the aftermath of Horus' rebellion, many within the Imperium have doubted whether the xenohold ever existed, that perhaps it was a fiction to justify the removal of the XIIIth Legion from the Imperium's core. Yet there are some surviving accounts of Ultramarines-sponsored explorer sweeps of that region of space, including evidence of Ork attacks on the fortress world of Golsoria. If Ghaslakh did exist as a credible threat to Mankind, any devastation its inhabitants wreaked on the defenceless worlds around it has long since been forgotten amid the destruction wrought by Horus and his allies.

Of Ghaslakh itself, no trace now remains to satisfy the curiosity of scholars.

The initial stages of the voyage of the combined fleet of Angron and Lorgar are the easiest to trace, marked as they were by a trail of butchered worlds and broken void craft left to drift as charnel way-markers. Few worlds of strategic significance existed among the simple colony worlds initially targeted by the Traitor Primarchs. Indeed, many of the worlds that the fleets paused to butcher appear to have been selected at random and fell beneath the blades of the rebels for no better reason than wild slaughter, no desperate pleas for surrender were heeded and no attempt at conquest was made; the corpses of those worlds that were sacked were simply left to rot.

While in most cases this senseless reaving has been revealed as the handiwork of the World Eaters, with pict records of Legionaries in the distinctive white and blue heraldry of the XIIth Legion, Angron always at the fore, are common, they cannot all be dismissed as simple butchery. Tales told by the few survivors of the Aglaean Colonies describe the wholesale abduction of hundreds of thousands of souls by Legionaries in armour the colour of dried blood, and the blasted ruins of Gareva conceal numerous ritual pyres and profane inscriptions of unknown significance. In light of later events, these atrocities would seem precursors to Erebus' great ritual at Calth, or possibly measures taken to smooth the fleets' passage through the turbulent tides of the Warp. For even as the Traitor fleets made their bloody way, the storms that were encompassing the Imperium rose to a new crescendo, almost as if in anticipation of events yet to pass.

It was not only isolated colonies which fell under the onslaught of the Traitor armada. Honourum was at that time the furthest

military outpost of the XIIIth Legion from Ultramar, seized in battle during the Imperium's expansion into the galaxy and fortified by the Ultramarines as a way-station for forces prosecuting the wars of the Great Crusade. Honourum was no unprotected colony world, but was garrisoned by a full company of the XIIIth Legion under the command of one Captain-Praetor Arcaes Odenathus as well as several regiments of Solar Auxilia raised from amongst the teeming industrial cities of that world. Yet when the blood-mad Primarch of the World Eaters came howling against the walls of Honourum's cities, the warriors of two full Legions at his back, there was little the defenders could do except delay the inevitable slaughter. The battle for Honourum lasted barely a day, but the killing continued for weeks as the berserk World Eaters and Gal Vorbak hunted the few auxilia survivors and holdout bands of Ultramarines through the gutted carcasses of its cities.

Leaving Honourum in such ruin that even in these latter years it has yet to fully recover, the Traitor Primarchs disappear from attempts to trace their course. It is assumed that they travelled through the desolate area of space along the Imperium's eastern border, its common name on astronavigation charts of that age the '*Dominion of Storms*', for other, surer paths would have taken them far from their objective. This region of the void was renowned for the ferocity and frequency of the ethereal gales that beset vessels that dared sail the Empyrean there, yet the Traitor armada passed through its embrace seemingly unscathed, their vessels continuing to leave a trail of destruction in their wake, emerging erratically from the Warp to destroy worlds and lay waste to those ships unlucky enough to encounter them.

During the crossing of the Dominion of Storms, as Angron and his warriors devoted more time to searching for ever-decreasing numbers of victims on which the Primarch could satisfy his lust for war, the progress of the armada slowed to but a crawl. Even with the unnatural ease with which the Traitors passed through the churning Warp, such excesses threatened to foil the Word Bearers' attempts to reach the overdue rendezvous at Calth and destroy the advantage of surprise they still held. The *Chronicle of Ashes* records that as they neared the edge of the Dominion of Storms, in the aftermath of Angron's destruction of Garalon Prime, the two Primarchs were on the verge of a violent confrontation. Had this not been averted by the untimely arrival and assault of a wayward

THE DOMINION OF STORMS

great affliction and so was set in motion a chain of events that would come to fruition at Nuceria, by the will of the true gods...

The Ruin of Honourum

One of the first worlds attested to have felt the wrath of the combined forces of the World Eaters and Word Bearers Legions after they were sent forth from Isstvan, Honourum was an Imperial outpost and colony founded as a beacon of Imperial civilisation by the Ultramarines to mark the furthest extent of their ranges into the Dominion of Storms. Its isolation meant that its demise went unnoticed as it was swiftly razed to ashes by the combined fleets of Lorgar and Angron as a bloody prologue to their assault on Ultramar itself. Subsequently, Honourum lay as a blasted ruin for much of the Horus Heresy. The scarred remains of its once proud cities had seen the worst of horrors, and even before the end of the war, it had gained an ill-favoured reputation among scavengers and Loyalists alike as a haunted ruin, echoing to the clash of chainblades, the distant calls of the dying and the battle cries of warriors long since passed beyond the mortal veil.

In 013.M31, during the early years of the Age of Darkness, an Ultramarines captain by the name of Arcaes Odenathus rallied the scattered Imperial garrisons across the Dominion of Storms and Honourum was finally recaptured. A fortified outpost was rebuilt and garrisoned by the Ultramarines and their successors, but even after this victory, its cities were left as forgotten ruins. Those surviving inhabitants of Honourum's colony, forever plagued by the horrors and trauma unleashed by the servants of Horus, have since swiftly regressed into a feral state.

The Ariggata Culling

The world of Ariggata had long been used as a brutal training facility and storehouse of dire and forbidden weaponry by the World Eaters Legion. Dating back to before Angron had taken control, the XIIth Legion had prosecuted a successful series of Xenocide Exterminatus objectives in the region. In 017.M31, the vengeful fleets of the Loyalist Legions arrived at Ariggata, expecting to find a world held by the remnants of Angron's transfigured sons as they fled the Emperor's justice. Instead they found a dead world, a world that had been scoured clean of all life many years earlier. Hundreds of the long

decayed corpses that laid there wore the white and blue livery of the XIIth Legion, and from the manner in which they were found had been locked in a fratricidal struggle before death claimed them. The bunker-storehouses hidden deep beneath the planet's surface were empty, their caches of phosphex and viral weaponry long since claimed, and it is believed by many that these stores of apocalyptic weaponry and perhaps an intake of fresh Legionaries were claimed by Angron before the start of the Shadow Crusade into Ultramar to replenish his forces after Isstvan, though it is likely that the fate of the Legionaries who perished there will forever remain a mystery.

The Fate of the Catechism of Revelation

The Word Bearers Armiger class cruiser *Catechism of Revelation* is recorded as playing a key role in the orbital battle over Isstvan V which claimed the lives of so many Loyalist warriors, yet she was never to arrive at Ultramar alongside her brethren. Recovered data-chronicles of the Word Bearers note that the vessel was one of several lost in the Empyrean during the long journey through the Dominion of Storms in 007.M31, evidence perhaps that even the forbidden arts of Lorgar could not completely hold the Warp's quixotic hunger at bay.

Yet this was not the end of the *Catechism of Revelation*. Throughout the latter years of the Horus Heresy and unto the present day, further reports of sightings of the vessel have been made. In 009.M31, images depicting the craft were recovered from the wreck of the Ultramarines Cobra class destroyer *Konor's Retribution* on the edge of the Dominion of Storms, though an exhaustive search of the sector by several squadrons of Armada Imperialis craft were unable to find any other trace of her. Since then there have been seventeen confirmed sightings, four of which have come in the wake of an attack on Imperial shipping or on a remote colony in the far reaches of the Ultima Segmentum. In 049.M31, the *Catechism of Revelation* was engaged, crippled and boarded by the grand cruiser *Pride of Petrabus*. When naval armymen boarded the craft, they found her a lifeless derelict, and the *Pride of Petrabus* withdrew after scuttling the ship. Four years later, an apparently undamaged and active *Catechism of Revelation* was once again sighted by the warp runner *Harra* fleeing a corsair convoy raid off Espandor.

xenos fleet from the heart of the Xersinia Prohibited Zone on Ultramar's border, the history of the Imperium may well have taken a much different course.

THE AXE FALLS

By mid 007.M31, the combined Traitor fleet is believed to have taken anchor at the edge of the prohibited zone to the galactic north of Calth that had languished under an edict of quarantine since the earliest days of the Great Crusade. The barren worlds contained within the Xersinia Prohibited Zone were shunned by Imperial craft, who dared not risk either the wrath of interdiction squadrons from the Five Hundred Worlds or the xenos plague that had once ravaged the long dead colonies within. Thus the Traitor fleet remained undetected, lurking within this forgotten and ignored area of space, despite its proximity to more well-travelled regions of the Imperium.

While at anchor, they most likely engaged in a necessary period of consolidation as the vast armada had been separated and scattered across a parsec in their travels through the tumultuous currents of the aetheric medium. During this time, as the various squadrons of the great armada reassembled and made ready for the attack on Ultramar, both Legions engaged in a campaign of reaving and piracy, the sleek Legion strike craft running down heavily laden chartist barques or crippling unsuspecting patrols before disgorging merciless parties of Legionaries to root out the cowering crews with fire and sword. Some rumours claim that the Word Bearers went so far as to employ some then unknown form of psychic manipulation to ensnare passing craft, leading astray their Navigators with false beacons before tearing apart the fabric of reality itself to allow the impossible creatures of the Warp to spill forth inside the doomed craft. Whatever the manner of their capture, word of the loss of these craft did not reach the ears of Guilliman until long after the Horus Heresy had ended.

With information torn from mind-broken chartist captains as well as from the data locked in the cogitator banks of their ships, it was then that the final stages of Calth's doom were formulated. The intelligence allowed the renegade commanders to build an accurate picture of Ultramar's defences and, more specifically, those of the Veridia System, where the unsuspecting world of Calth waited. While the disposition of the Veridia System, its worlds and orbital stations was far from a secret, accurate knowledge was far superior to hearsay and rumour, and allowed

THE CHRONICLE OF ASHES

In 017.M31, a task force of the Ultramarines Legion, composed of the survivors of the 19th, 48th and 207th Destroyer Cadres, encountered several renegade Word Bearers cruisers defending a lone Gloriana class battleship identified as the *Chronicle of Ashes* in the wild and uncharted space of the Dominion of Storms. Overwhelming the Traitor escort craft with the brutal efficiency that marked the Destroyers of that Legion, the Ultramarines captured the *Chronicle of Ashes* in a furious boarding action involving nearly three hundred Space Marines and two full days of bloody close quarters fighting as they swept the ship's innumerable decks clear of Traitor Space Marines.

In the aftermath of their victory, the Ultramarines discovered something unexpected in the vaulted halls of the *Chronicle of Ashes*' upper decks; stretching across every wall and onto ceilings was etched a history of the Word Bearers' actions and undertakings in the twisting and fey language of now dead Colchis. Later investigation of this prize by members of the nascent Inquisition was to reveal a wealth of information regarding events that had previously been hidden to Imperial scholars, and the details were transcribed into a series of tomes now kept in the sealed archives of the Imperial Palace, before the *Chronicle of Ashes* was finally cleansed, tech-exorcised and re-dedicated as the *Lex Talonis*, before being presented to the Ultramarines in 022.M31 and incorporated into the newly founded Nemesis Chapter. Many of the events noted in this history are based on the writings found within the *Chronicle of Ashes*, whose proscribed contents were made available to the author.

those charged with the assault on Calth to refine and perfect the schemes they had long hidden beneath a veneer of loyalty. It was common knowledge that the Veridia System was heavily fortified against outside attack, a legacy of the Ork raids that had long plagued the outlying systems within Ultramar—any frontal assault by a known enemy would sustain massive losses. However, as the warp storms that afflicted much of the Imperium continued to worsen and cripple the effective spread of vital news across the disjointed empire of Mankind, Ultramar remained unaware of the Warmaster's treachery. This did not mean that the Traitor armada could ignore the defences of the Veridia System though, for if left intact they could inflict heavy damage to the Traitor fleets once roused to the unexpected threat. The vast star fortress and its massed batteries of macro cannon set in high orbit over the cold orb of Ischara, in the furthest orbit from the system's primary, and the neutron-pulsar cannon buried in the icy wastes of the fourth moon of the gas giant Ravishol were therefore both marked for destruction.

Through their bloody interrogations, the Traitors also learned that the majority of the Ultramarines fleet and Legion assets had mustered both on Calth's surface and amongst the innumerable slipways and shipyards which hung in its orbit awaiting the expected and overdue arrival of the Word Bearers. The number and disposition of those craft in orbit was no doubt among the information dredged from the broken minds

of the Traitors' captives, and vital to the final stages of the armada's preparations. While the XIIIth Legion was widely known to field by far the largest number of Legionaries, a notional 250,000 warriors according to the *Officio Militarum* at the outbreak of the Horus Heresy, their fleet assets were less overwhelming. The strength of Ultramar's naval squadrons lay not in their heavy battleships, most of which were relics of the Terran naval reserve that had been operated by the XIIIth Legion before the return of their Primarch, but in the large number of steadfast cruisers and multi-role strike craft. These lighter, more tactically flexible vessels were manufactured in excess by the pre-Compliance shipyards of Konor and Calth, and had protected the Five Hundred Worlds since long before the Emperor's arrival. The knowledge that the pride of Guilliman's fleet, the ancient battleships built in the shipyards of distant Mars, were laying quiescent at anchor and at their most vulnerable, and the need to maintain the fiction that the entire Word Bearers Legion was arriving in the Veridia System, dictated the inclusion of the greatest portion of the Word Bearers fleet strength at Calth.

Yet in order to fully cripple Ultramar and the XIIIth Legion, it would not have been enough for the Word Bearers and their allies to destroy Calth and those Legionaries and other military assets gathered there. They would also need to strike at the other strongholds scattered throughout the Five Hundred Worlds, to shatter both the

capability of the remaining warriors of the Ultramarines to rebuild as well as their will to fight. To this end the great Traitor armada was split apart, dividing into at least half a dozen fleets.

The largest, comprising the fewest ships of the line, but including the world-killing firepower of the *Trisagion* and the *Blessed Lady*, as well as both the *Fidelitas Lex* and the *Conqueror* and the Primarchs who commanded them, set course for the war-world of Armatura to burn the beating heart from the perfect empire. The Word Bearers captain, Zadkiel, finally arriving at Ultramar with the *Furious Abyss*, began a futile assault on Macragge, while Erebus and Kor Phaeron took the main force of the Word Bearers fleet to Calth. The remainder of the armada, the few fleet strike craft amongst the Word Bearers and the vast array

of knife-fast cutters, grappling barques and interdiction cruisers of the World Eaters fleet, were dispatched across Ultramar to bleed the Ultramarines fleet away, forcing them to respond to a series of small-scale raids and lightning-fast assaults. These latter squadrons were tasked with causing the most bloodshed and destruction possible, making no attempt to capture or hold territory, and were unrestricted to those strategic targets an opponent might have expected them to strike at. Instead, it would be lightly defended agri-colonies and the industrial spires of worlds such as Espandor and Latona that would feel their wrath in the bleak days to come.

This would be a crusade whose first and foremost aim was to spread terror and blood across the Five Hundred Worlds, to wring every last iota of suffering from the people of

Ultramar, all to fuel the sorcerous schemes set in place by Lorgar himself and, where before he had restrained his blood-maddened brother, Angron was now to be unleashed.

With their plans laid and commanders briefed, Lorgar began the Shadow Crusade into Ultramar with the dispatch of Erebus and Kor Phaeron to Calth at the head of nearly seventy capital ships and numerous squadrons of escort craft, led by Erebus' *Destiny's Hand* and the squat battle barge of Kor Phaeron, still broadcasting her old identity as the *Raptorous Rex* instead of her newer designation, the *Infidus Imperator*. The attack on Calth was to be the opening volley in Lorgar's campaign, a symbolic bloodying of the knife and cruel retort to the shame Guilliman and his warriors had wrought years before on Monarchia.

War had come to Ultramar.



Kor Phaeron,
Architect of Betrayal

THE HORRORS OF THE PROHIBITED ZONE

Coreward of the Realm of Ultramar is a volume of space comprising many millions of square light years which, from the very earliest days of the Great Crusade, has been declared strictly forbidden to all subjects of the Imperium under pain of death. The cause of this prohibition is known only to the most highly-ranked peers of the Imperium, for with such knowledge comes temptation and the perpetuation of a doom that has already afflicted countless worlds within the region.

It was during the so-called Long March to Ultramar, when the 12th Expeditionary Fleet first encountered the region during its great rimward voyage, that the fleet's Navigators and Astropaths sensed a vast, looming darkness in the void and a concomitant vortex within the depths of the Warp. None could identify the source of the phenomenon, but many were convinced it was some artefact or lingering echo of an event on the scale of the Fall of the Eldar, yet far more ancient.

Proceeding with caution, the fleet's pathfinder squadrons discovered a string of systems that were host to dozens of resource —rich paradise worlds teeming with limitless varieties of flora and fauna. The Great Crusade had already learned of the Eldar and their so-called maiden worlds— planets seeded with verdant life in preparation for eventual settlement, and found to its cost that the Eldar defended such worlds with the utmost vigour. Claiming them would prove costly, leading to heated debate amongst the fleet's leaders as to whether it was best to destroy the worlds to deny them to the aliens or attempt to occupy them in the name of the Imperium. The matter was decided by Indias Cavalerio, Grand Master of the Legio Tempestus Titan Legion, who swore to take the maiden worlds in the name of the Emperor as a matter of honour.

And so the lead elements of the 12th advanced cautiously through the cluster, augurs on high alert for attack from the impossibly agile and notoriously stealthy Eldar. Yet no such attack came. Legio Tempestus maniples made planetfall across a dozen worlds, the Solar Auxilia and Imperial Army line regiments accompanying them reporting the verdant glades and teeming oceans were the Imperium's for the taking.

On one such world however, the vanguard of the 322nd Nexxas Solar Auxilia came upon a vine-choked structure which towered dozens of metres over the forest canopy. Decadent ossific curves marked the object out as xenos in origin and so the ground forces assumed the highest possible alert state in expectation of imminent attack. When that attack came though, it did not take the form of an army of alien warriors. What occurred next is only known through the grainy pict-captures transmitted to the fleet by orbital uplink and after-action accounts submitted by the crews of the Tempestus engines. The air beneath the towering alien archway shimmered, revealing the black of the void shot through with seething nebulae. From that void emerged a bleeding and ragged figure. Before the Solar Auxilia could react, the figure held up a chalice of actinic liquid and then cast it to the ground. Immediately, a cold wind as if born of the grave gusted forth.

Upon that wind was seeded death. The Imperial Army troops fell first. Their eyes bulged and then burst and flesh ballooned and distended hideously, heralding what must have been an agonisingly prolonged death. The better-equipped Solar Auxilia troops survived longer, the myriad systems wrought into their void-warded armour keeping them alive long enough to fill the vox channels with desperate requests for extraction. Such pleas were short-lived however, for whatever alien viral strain was assailing them was so potent, that it ate through their armour seals before any could reach the landing zones.

Within hours, the only human presence on the surface of any of the worlds in the cluster were the Titans of Legio Tempestus, their systems strong enough to keep the virus at bay. Word of the disaster filtered up the chain of command to the 12th Expeditionary Fleet's flagship via Astropathic relay and specialist strategio-savants learned in the ways of the alien were immediately set to theorising what was occurring and formulating a response. It was clear that across the entire deployment of the 12th Expeditionary Fleet, every single one of the paradise worlds on which Imperial forces had set foot was being seeded with a viral plague strain keyed specifically to the human genetic signature. Worse, the strain rapidly spread to the crews of numerous war ships through no agency that has ever been discovered since, as if carried on the unseen winds of the void.

The fleet's response was commendably decisive and was later credited with saving the lives of upwards of three million human troops as well as numerous paradise worlds, which might still one day be claimed intact. As it retreated, the Legio Tempestus was set to destroying any and all of the alien gate structures its engines could locate. Evacuating its engines was a major undertaking, as the inexplicable plague struck down thousands of crew on the heavy landers and Titan transport vessels, yet the entire Legio was successfully withdrawn.

In the aftermath of this event, the Council of Terra ordered that the entire region be interdicted out to a distance of thirty astronomical units in order to forestall the alien plague from spreading from world to world or infecting passing ships. When at last the 12th Expeditionary Fleet reached Ultramar and the Primarch Guilliman took his rightful place amongst the Emperor's sons, it fell to him to enforce the cordon. Guilliman set himself to this duty with his customary efficiency, ensuring that void beacons were placed on the outskirts of the affected systems and along stable warp routes skirting it. All vessels were forbidden to enter that region and anything coming from it was engaged and destroyed without hesitation.

Though many hope that one day the paradise worlds of the prohibited region might be settled, until the plague that haunts the stars thereabout is eradicated, it remains forbidden for any servant of the Imperium to trespass there.



Auxiliary of the 12th Infantry Tercio, Mainward Sub-Cohort, 255th Calth Solar Auxilia Cohort (the 'Calth High Guard'):
The 255th Calth Solar Auxilia were raised in late 001.M31 primarily from the Erud Provincial Militia of the Imperialis Auxilia, the best of the province's yeomanry being converted to the 'Solar' template, and trained and equipped for void and exploratory warfare. The 255th was deployed across several key orbital defence platforms protecting Calth Near-Space, the Mainward Sub-Cohort being assigned to the defence of Platform Elipsia-Veridia 09/Q.



PART II: THE BATTLE FOR CALTH NEAR-SPACE

"Then the angel took up the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar and cast it down to the land; and there followed earthquake, thunder, lightning and death."

The Apocrypha Terra

The act which heralded the Battle of Calth went unseen and undetected at the time, by human eyes at least, for it was performed in the silent outer reaches of the Veridia System. That act was the taking of an aged fleet auxiliary tender by the name of the *Campanile*, and no report was made of this event and none survived it. Whether she was captured by some warp-tainted psyker fated to die as an act of ritual sacrifice, or some warp entity breached her hull, slaughtered the entire crew and took total control of the vessel's systems matters not. The use to which she was employed betrays the genius of a Primarch allied in unspeakable compact with powers then only just stirring and known to few others than he.

Soon after the *Campanile* fell silent, an event barely noted by the massively over-taxed Veridian System Control, the first of the Word Bearers fleet broke Warp to complete the conjunction of the two Legions.

Before it, hundreds of Ultramarines vessels of all classes were docked across Calth Near-Space, with dozens tethered to Calth Veridian Anchor loading bulk cargo. Scores more were arriving in orbit or awaiting docking orders, while many others were locked in station-keeping orbits, their mighty plasma reactors quiescent as maintenance crews hurried to enact final work orders in preparation for war.

The bulk of the Word Bearers war ships weighed void anchor some distance out from Calth's ring of hundreds of orbital platforms, while their heavy troop transport barques set down at prearranged muster camps across the planet's surface. With hindsight, the Word Bearers' efforts to remain apart from the Ultramarines and their allies were clearly evident. Aside from an honour party of Word Bearers boarding the Ultramarines cruiser *Samothrace* and a brief hololith contact between the Primarchs, the two Legions remained apart until the moment the Word Bearers' true intent was revealed.

THE BELL TOLLS

That moment came when the *Campanile* accelerated without warning to almost half maximal realspace velocity, her approach towards Calth masked by unknown forces. It was a suicidal manoeuvre beyond the capability of human void masters, and the fleet tender was transformed into a relativistic missile aimed squarely at the densest concentration of the anchored Ultramarines fleet. A dozen Legion warships were slain in the blink of an eye, the impact destroying each in sequence as the *Campanile's* mass was transformed to pure energy. By the time what remained of the tender struck her true target — Calth Veridian Anchor — nothing of her form remained but her super-dense reactor core. The orbital platform and every warship tethered to it were slain in an instant.

The shock of the platform's demise came as lightning from a clear sky. The wave front sent dozens of vessels spiralling out of control and the flash-pulse blinded thousands of deck staff before armoured vista panels could react and lower. Worse still — though as history would eventually reveal, far from a coincidence — the impact destroyed the anchor's cogitation engines, which at that stage in the Calth Conjunction were in direct control of the planet's mighty defence grid.

THE BOW WAVE OF FATE

As the seas drain at the approach of a tsunami, so an event of such import as the betrayal of the Calth Conjunction was foreshadowed by numerous portents, few of which were noted at the time but which in retrospect are telling of its cataclysmic scale. Vox operators, for example, reported abnormal interference on a wide spectrum of channels, including distant chanting, eerie whispering and intermittent screams. Tragically, the Ultramarines had followed the Edict of Nikaea and relegated their Librarians to the line, and many of these individuals reported later that they had experienced a range of inexplicable effects, including auditory and visual aberrations, and profound feelings of impending horror. Only in the aftermath of the Battle of Calth would the Ultramarines rescind the edict, in recognition of the manifest necessity of maintaining a cadre of warriors who could warn of the approach of such dire events.

The death of Calth Veridian Anchor set in motion a chain of further disasters, each more cataclysmic than the last. The venerable Ultramarines war ship, the *Antrodamicus*, slipped her graving dock moorings and began an inexorable, sternway descent through the atmosphere. With her former dock locked in geostationary orbit above the world's capital of Numinus City, the result was horrifyingly inevitable. The *Antrodamicus* fell with calamitous majesty through the skies above Numinus, parting the clouds before impacting the surface with the power of an atomic detonation and in the process obliterating the Kalkas Fortalice Watchtower — the very heart of the Mechanicum's command and control network.

From the moment the *Campanile* struck her first victim to the incendiary death of the Calth Veridian Anchor, mere seconds had passed, but tens of thousands of lives had been extinguished in that instant. At a stroke, the most potent gathering of naval power in the Segmentum had been dealt a mortal blow. Across nine hundred and more orbital platforms, thousands of ground installations and dozens of war

ships, vox stations were blasted, augurs were blown and hard-lines fused, while many of the officers attending these systems were consumed in the back-blast, alongside the many thousands of specialists slain in the process. Veteran shipmasters fortunate enough to avoid being blinded were shorn of any facility to command their own vessels and were unable to raise their fellow captains or their superiors. Those few vox channels that remained open were overwhelmed as a thousand voices spoke out at once, signals officers demanding to know what had happened, requesting orders or simply begging for aid.

++Ultima Dominatus++

++Tributis: Macragge++

++Astropathic Conduit:
Calth Platform
Azimuth Omega-122>
Veridia Maxima Relay>
Macragge
Lamda Kz88++

++Cartographica Stellar:
Refer to Attached
Logis Appendix++

++Compliance:
Non Responsio++

Status:
Further Authorisation
Required...

"No world shall be
beyond my rule;
no enemy shall be
beyond my wrath."



++Calth:
2 Moons
[Barren, Calth
Near-Space Monitoring Stations] ++

++Ischara:
Barren [Evidence of Failed
Pre-Compliance Geo-enginearium Detected]
Veridia Maximus Star Fortress in Far Orbit
Proximal to Apex [8.00Kz+ Stability]
System Jump Point
Secondary System Astropathic Relay++

++ Veridian Asteroid Range:
Multiple Mining Operations.
Extensive Evidence of Extinct
Pre-Compliance Survivor Colonies++

++Veridia Forge:
Semi-autonomous
Mechanicum-oathed Sub-domain
Largest Body in
Veridian Asteroid Range
Aptus Non Tithe Pact++

++Lamane:
18 Moons
[Multiple Sub-Aestimare
Mineral Extraction Operations]++

++Ravishol:
Anomalous Di-polar
Emissions Detected
[Mechanicum Expedition
Scheduled 320.M31]
9 Uninhabited Satellites++

+The Veridia System+

++679007.M31++

+++Revolutionibis Orbium Coelestium Ultima+++

WOLVES AMONG THE FLOCK

Few imagined that the disaster which had descended upon Calth Near-Space was any kind of accident. With the Mechanicum's manifold—the planet-wide command and control network used to coordinate machines of all types by thought alone—collapsed with the death of Calth Veridian Anchor, an immediate coordinated response was impossible. With the Kalkas Fortalice Watchtower consumed by the fall of the *Antrodamicus*, the multiple redundancies engineered into the network should have restored control with seamless efficiency. This could not occur for, as was later ascertained, the Word Bearers' Traitor Mechanicum allies had insinuated some manner of tainted machine code into the manifold, blinding and deafening Calth at its most vulnerable moment.

Anarchy ensued. Many commanders assumed that the Orks had launched a pre-emptive and overwhelming attack, and soon enough what appeared to be return fire was flashing across the burning orbital field. Bereft of functional scanning capability, ships were reduced to visual observation alone and, as their captains looked out upon the void with stunned disbelief, the contrails of fire streaking across space only served to confirm their very worst fears.

But the weapons fire was not that of any Ork war ship, it was coming from Word Bearers vessels which, even as the disbelieving Guilliman and his senior officers watched from the bridge of the *Macragge's Honour*, were closing in on the scattered mass of Ultramarines ships as they floundered amidst the chaos of burning debris.

Undetected by any of the few auguries still operational, the Word Bearers battle barge *Act of Convocation* surfaced with terrible grace through a cloud of pulsing micro debris left by the destruction of an Ultramarines frigate, the dust slowly parting by the bow wave of her void shields. The Ultramarines heavy cruiser *Star of Paramenio* never saw her slayer, the battle barge's forward weapons batteries breaking her spine before she had the chance to raise shields or react in any way. As the *Act of Convocation* emerged fully from the roiling cloud, corosant arcing from her otherwise invisible shields, another three crimson-hulled killers hovered into view in her wake.

The void erupted in flame and shellfire as Word Bearers vessels fell upon the wounded Ultramarines ships. The battle barge *Judicious Truth* had barely fought clear of her burning

moorings when a broadside from the Word Bearers Legion *Sanctifying Grace* caused her to shed her guts as her keel was split wide open. The Ultramarines vessel's drive section separated and tumbled through the void along with a thousand engineerium plasma-stokers, its eventual impact gouging an irradiated crater hundreds of metres deep into the surface of the planet below. Next to die was the newly commissioned *Trials of Anteias*, her entire prow burned to superheated gas in hungry fusion waves as the *Rapture of the Void* unleashed weapons of unknown class and terrifying effect. The consequences of the discharge of these and many other weapons would scar the void about Calth for years, indicative that the devices had been wrought before Old Night and were of a type long proscribed by order of Terra herself.

Still the Word Bearers bore down on their targets, a phalanx of heavy cruisers led by the battleship *Abyssal Communion* powering along a shattered line of orbital slips as the squadron of Ultramarines frigates tethered to it struggled in vain to disengage docking clamps and boarding umbilicals. The *Communion* unleashed volley after volley from her fearsome broadside batteries, pounding the *Defence of Romus* and the *Scion of Latium* to twisted, burning metal and crippling three other vessels for her cohorts to murder.

Within minutes, scores of Word Bearers war ships were pounding every Ultramarines vessel within range, their own systems powered to full yield while those of their victims remained cold and sluggish. Shields, engines and weapons were all outputting at optimal levels, while the reactors of a great many Ultramarines ships had yet to be fully awakened.

Upon witnessing the Word Bearers' attack, Roboute Guilliman and his officers concluded that the sons of Lorgar had made some tragic mistake. Some reached the conclusion that the Word Bearers had misconstrued the death of Calth Veridian Anchor as an enemy assault and were firing blindly, their systems or their wits so blasted by the calamity that they were unable to tell friend from foe. Others concluded that the Word Bearers feared that the Ultramarines had taken it upon themselves to censure them again in a repetition of Monarchia, that if the Word Bearers' worst unspoken fears had been confirmed, they saw no alternative but to fight for their very lives.

The tortured vox channels were choked with attempts to contact the Word Bearers and restore sanity, but even those few vessels whose hailing systems were functioning were unsuccessful—the Word Bearers would not, or could not, answer.

Rubicon

From the first moment of disaster, the bridge crew of the Ultramarines flagship, *Macragge's Honour*, had fought valiantly to restore vox capability and establish contact with the Word Bearers. Now, contact was made, albeit limited to a grainy, flickering holo projection and sibilant audio transmission laced with static and feedback. Guilliman demanded his brother stand his fleet down, swearing to Lorgar that the Ultramarines had played no part in whatever disaster had visited Calth. Lorgar had no interest in conversing with his brother and instead spat a bitter curse before terminating the link. In that moment Guilliman saw that what was unfolding could be no accident. With his fleet burning and the Word Bearers crippling or destroying ever more of his vessels with each passing minute, the Primarch of the Ultramarines gave an order he had never imagined he would have cause to speak. With bitter resolve, Roboute Guilliman ordered his sons to defend themselves, authorising measures up to and including return of weapons fire.

With the Primarch's order given, battle was truly joined. The Word Bearers redoubled their attack, their initial actions now revealed as no less than a preparatory atrocity. In the span of scant minutes, the Ultramarines vessels *Gladius*, *Hope of Narmenia*, *Valediction*, *Vesperus* and *Antropheles* were engaged and destroyed as they mounted a courageous yet doomed rearguard action in an attempt to buy precious time for their beleaguered compatriots to regroup.

Signals analysis undertaken many years later would reveal that it was around this point in the betrayal that the Word Bearers honour company that had come aboard the Ultramarines cruiser *Samothrace* at the beginning of the Calth Conjunction gained control of that vessel's bridge. In the wake of the Word Bearers assault parties came a cadre of the Mechanicum whose mission was to turn the vessel fully to the Traitors' control. Ten minutes later, the *Samothrace* was making full speed for one of the still-intact orbital platforms, a facility codified as Zetsun Verid Yard. The Dark Apostle Kor Phaeron would lead this crucial stage of the Word Bearers' attack in person, the outcome of which would damn an entire star system.



PLANETARY ASSAULT

With the Battle of Calth fully underway, the Word Bearers enacted the next stage in their orbital operation. A formation of seventeen Word Bearers planetary bombard monitors, led by the *Destiny's Hand*, forced its way through the burning debris field and edged into a low orbit. From there, the formation broke into smaller squadrons in order to unleash an overwhelming coordinated bombardment on key surface targets. Had Calth's defence grid been operational, not one of the vessels could have approached within ten thousand kilometres, yet the bombard force went unchallenged as its vessels loomed so close that their dark forms were dimly visible from the ground, silent harbingers of an entire planet's doom.

As one, the ships of the Traitor bombard fleet opened fire. Munitions the size of tanks rained from the skies by the hundreds, detonations blossoming from horizon to horizon. Plasma bolts burned through the clouds and burst across the land, scouring all life at their touch. Blinding columns of heavy laser beams speared down through the heavens, boring through dozens of metres of crust and setting in motion a cascade of tectonic destabilisation, whilst kinetic munitions smashed into mountains, shattering the lands asunder as if they were the hammer of some ancient god enacting their terrible judgement.

With the Word Bearers in control of Calth's defence grid, the bombard squadrons had no need to seek out and destroy its hundreds of thousands of weapons silos, bunkers and towers. Instead, they moved in on the dozens of defenceless cities, ports and other centres of infrastructure and population. The skies darkened with falling bombs and entire districts were cast to burning rubble. No region was immune to the bombard fleet's attentions, but several were singled out for particularly thorough devastation.

The southern island cities simply vanished beneath a conflagration so intense that no trace of their existence remained but deep crater pits marking their graves. The oceans about this dense island chain were targeted by a concentrated fusillade of energy weaponry of numerous types. The initial effect was the flash-vaporisation of hundreds of millions of cubic metres of sea water, creating a dense, super-heated fog that thundered outwards in an ever-expanding wave front, boiling alive anyone unfortunate enough to be caught out in the open. Within hours, Calth was wreathed in a thick blanket

of vapour which little more than an actinic glimmer of the doomed Veridian star's light could penetrate.

In subjecting the southern island cities and surrounding oceans to this level of punishment, the Word Bearers were able to concentrate their subsequent ground attacks, focusing on the regions about the world's capital of Numinus City, as well as Ithra and a handful of other locations. Subsequent analysis suggests that this strategy was dictated by cultic alignments of ritual significance, fate and symbolism, as if Calth's demise had been preordained to proceed according to a specific and intricate pattern no sane mind could perceive. Those concentrations of population and infrastructure that were not part of this formula were condemned to destruction out of hand, allowing the Word Bearers to focus on those whose death, by their own hands, held the most esoteric pattern.

Orbital Defence

As the southern island cities were being pounded to dust and vapour, the battle in the void was spilling ever further across Calth Near-Space. The world was ringed by over nine hundred orbital defence platforms, each bristling with lance turrets, weapons batteries and torpedo launch tubes, but each had been rendered as defenceless and impotent as an unarmed freighter by the usurpation of the defence grid's command systems. Many of these platforms, even the smallest of which were served by crews of hundreds, were engaged and crippled in scornfully opportunistic strikes by passing Word Bearers war ships, while others were simply ignored. A number however were singled out for destruction or boarding, again suggesting the existence of some underlying and esoteric pattern to the entire attack. In a phenomenon that would be repeated countless times, the Word Bearers sought out specific enemies to slay in specific ways, as if in doing so they would honour their Primarch, or some other still higher power.

Across Calth Near-Space, boarding torpedoes and assault claws exploded from the launch bays of Word Bearers vessels to smash into the armoured flanks of scores of defence platforms. Even as the assault claws fusion-burned through metres-thick armour and torpedoes bored deep into their guts, the platforms' defenders mustered. All available hands were scrambled to oppose the Word Bearers boarding parties, but it was the Solar Auxilia stationed on each platform who would bear the brunt of the fighting.

While not as strong or as heavily armed and armoured as the trans-human Legiones Astartes they would be fighting, these defenders were nonetheless the elite of Calth's human forces. Configured according to the long approved and highly efficacious 'Solar' pattern, these units were equipped with vacuum-warded void armour and so could fight even in areas depressurised by the breaching of the platform's outer skin. While not so potent as Legiones Astartes bolters, their weapons were still capable of inflicting significant damage when massed against targets they could scarcely miss in the platform's cramped interiors.

The greatest advantage the Solar Auxilia defence units had over lesser troops and pressed station hands was their chain of command. Well organised and relentlessly drilled in every facet of 'Zone Mortalis' warfare, they could be relied upon to stand resolute against any foe and, if necessary, to die in pursuit of their sacred duty. On a hundred orbital defence stations and more, Word Bearers boarding parties forced their way along passageways swept with torrential blizzards of laser, plasma and flame. The defenders were on home ground and had trained countless times to undertake such duties, and so made the boarders pay dearly for the first few gains they made. The Word Bearers weathered the storm, striding inexorably into the very jaws of death. Ceramite armour cracked and degraded layer by layer as round after round impacted, but few were the truly telling killing blows the defenders could land, and so with lethal inevitability, the Legiones Astartes closed on the defenders' positions. Even then the Solar Auxilia enacted tactical protocols born of generations of void warfare mastered by their Saturnine forebears before the Unification Wars. Lasrifle sections fell back along pre-ordained routes while Veletaris Storm Sections held the attackers at bay with fearsome volleys of volkite fire and searing blasts of flame. Others simply held their position, maintaining a steady rate of fire as death came for them, determined to the last to buy their comrades time to fall back to the next defensible position. But the Word Bearers had gained a foothold and, ultimately, the bold defenders were doomed.

As the battles spilled ever deeper into the guts of the defence platforms, the passageways and chambers were transformed into charnel houses. In places, the defenders' resolve was sorely tested when confronted with the unfamiliar combat doctrines certain Word Bearers Legionaries employed.

Some chanted mournful plainsong as they advanced, an atonal dirge filling the hearts of all who heard it with dread. Others halted after every kill, pausing to enact grisly mutilation upon the recently fallen. In still more cases, the Word Bearers refrained from slaying cornered or overrun foe, instead handing them off to following mortal units to clap in irons and drag off as prisoners. The fate of these unfortunates can only be guessed at, for the last that was seen of most does not bear recounting.

On a scant handful of orbital defence platforms, the Solar Auxilia defenders were successful in repelling Word Bearers assaults, but not without paying a heavy price indeed. On Platform Principia-Veridia 27/K, a sub-cohort of the 222nd Calth Solar Auxilia rad-purged an entire marshalling deck just as a Word Bearers void-breaching party forced its way onboard. The resulting flood of neutron radiation was so intense that even the trans-human physiologies of the attacking Legiones Astartes could not fully protect them. The first of the attackers wavered and the auxiliaries of the 222nd fixed bayonets and charged, their Solar pattern void armour able to fend off the radiation only so long as it took the charge to strike home. Dozens of the stricken Legiones Astartes were overrun before they could react, and seconds later the auxiliaries fell victim themselves to the radiation. Not a single warrior of either side survived, the rad-flooded chamber forming a tomb for enemies locked in a mutual death-struggle for all time.

The defence of Platform Elipsia-Veridia 09/Q was equally successful and equally lethal for both sides. In this instance, it is thought that a substantial force of Terminator armour-equipped Word Bearers utilised a rare teleportarium array to board the station and launch a brutal *coups de main* attack on the station's primary strategium. The station master had scant moments to react and so mounted a noble, if futile, defence of his bridge. The attack had bypassed the large sub-cohort of the 255th Calth Solar Auxilia stationed on Elipsia-Veridia 09/Q, the Word Bearers judging that the defence would collapse with the strategium captured. This did not occur however, for the 255th was commanded by the veteran Lord Marshall Turnus, a beloved leader of advanced years and with countless victories to his name. Determined to strike back at the Traitors even if they could not possibly be repulsed, Turnus ordered the station's Mechanicum magos prime to overload the platform's plasma reactor. The magos refused the Lord

Marshall's instruction and so died at Turnus' hand, a bolt round detonating within his platinum-chased skull. His deputy however acceded when the Lord Marshall repeated the order, and within minutes the entire platform was consumed in atomic fire, briefly forming a new, deathly star in the tortured skies above Calth.

Elsewhere however, even the elite of the Solar Auxilia could not stem the inexorable tide of assault nor blunt the zealous fury of the Legiones Astartes Word Bearers. Valiant troopers died by the thousand, and at last the Word Bearers' intent in boarding specific orbital defence platforms was revealed as the same scene was enacted upon the bridges of scores of defence platforms. Those commanders taken alive were forced to bear witness to the destruction heaped upon the world whose defence they were sworn to. Compelled to watch by the vice-like grip of a Word Bearers Dark Apostle or other senior officer, the last sight these men and women saw served as a vital component in the vast and terrible ritual unfolding on Calth. Much later, it was determined that the intent of this cruelty was to sear the sight of the dying world into each victim's consciousness as an act of witnessing, a scene the Word Bearers believed the dead would take with them to the afterlife as evidence to the powers that hold sway there of the Traitor Legion's deeds.

THE HONOUR OF MACRAGGE

Two hours into the orbital battle, the Master of Vox of the Ultramarines flagship reported to Roboute Guilliman that the Word Bearers flagship, the *Fidelitas Lex*, had opened a lithocast hailing channel. The Primarch of the Ultramarines stepped onto the holocaster platform at the centre of his bridge as the hooded figure of his brother Primarch Lorgar manifested before him in grainy hard-light. For perhaps the first time in his life, the famously measured Guilliman was lost to fury. He raged at his brother for his betrayal and swore to exact merciless vengeance. Guilliman denounced Lorgar's very sanity and swore that he and all his sons would be punished. But the Lorgar that listened to all of this with a smirk upon his lips and the remainder of his face hidden in shadow was not the being Guilliman had once known. No longer was Lorgar the cerebral seeker after truth who had debated the nature of the universe with his brother Magnus for days on end, nor was he the over-zealous son who had brought upon himself the censure of the father-Emperor he had declared a god. Neither was Lorgar the chastened warrior who alone of all the Primarchs sought not

conquest, but enlightenment. Here instead was a transcended being radiating a new-found self-assurance, as if he and he alone was party to knowledge still hidden from others, but which they would soon learn whether they willed it or not. No longer cowed or eclipsed before a more overtly purposeful or assured Primarch, Lorgar was the very essence of phlegmatic defiance.

More shocking than Lorgar's manner, however, were the words he now spoke to Guilliman. With scornful derision, he informed the Lord of Ultramar that, contrary to Guilliman's assumptions, Lorgar's treachery was not vengeance for Monarchia and neither was it an isolated event. Rather, it was part of a long-planned scheme of impossible scope and ambition, and that no less than half of their brother Primarchs were complicit in it, including the greatest of their number, Horus. Three of their brother Primarchs, Lorgar claimed, were in fact already dead, a claim that history would reveal as erroneous, yet which he himself had every cause to make at that time.

Guilliman was rendered speechless by the staggering hubris evident in Lorgar's words, yet he knew his brother spoke the truth, unpalatable as it may be. In that moment, he swore anew to end his brother's betrayal, even if it was the final act in his long and loyal service. Even if it was revealed as utterly contrary to sound tactics and sane strategy, Guilliman's sole intent at that moment was to hunt Lorgar down and slay his brother by his own hand.

But it was not to be. Lorgar's hard-light avatar suddenly twisted, mutating into a monster torn from nightmare or the imagination of a madman. Guilliman ordered the hololith link terminated in disgust at what he dismissed as grotesque theatricality. Only then did it become evident that the hololith signal lock had already been cut. The thing of eyes, teeth, tentacles, scales and unreal flesh standing in the centre of the bridge of the *Macragge's Honour* had transubstantiated from hololith hard-light to corporeal flesh and the abomination was revealed to the horrified bridge crew and the enraged Primarch as all too real.

An instant later, the entire bridge erupted in an explosion of phantasmagoric viscera, blowing out its armoured viewing dome and blasting its occupants into the void. At a stroke, the Ultramarines were bereft of their beloved Primarch and their beleaguered fleet had lost its flagship.



PART III: BETRAYAL ON CALTH

"Victory is a fickle mistress, failure a haphazard executioner; for those with the courage to persevere will not abide their dictates."

Attr. Tetrarch Eikos Lamiad, from the dedication of the 'Defence of Bathor' monument, Calth Holophusikon

Just as in orbit, the surface of Calth was witness to a carefully planned and deliberate campaign of slaughter and betrayal, one whose opening moves were played out in the brief calm before the storm heralded by the *Campanile's* final moments struck Calth. This was no violent outpouring of hate and bitter vengeance, no sudden cathartic release of long-held hatred, but a cold and calculated genocide, long-planned and anticipated, whose purpose served only to further nurture the canker festering at the heart of the Word Bearers Legion.

Its genesis lay two years in the past, in orbit of Saturn amongst the gathered void craft of Roboute Guilliman's Crusade fleet, returned to safe harbours in the Sol System from the remnants of yet another petty empire broken and brought to Compliance by the tactical acumen and discipline of the 13th Primarch

and his sons. What awaited him though was not an extended period of refit and resupply at the great Jovian shipyards and the gene-forges of the Emperor, where the presence of much of the XIIIth Legion, the Ultramarines, might have led history along a much less twisted path, but instead he received a set of ciphered orders directing him to bring the bulk of his Legion to the Veridia System, to Calth, for a punitive crusade against the Orks of Ghaslakh.

A Prelude to Disaster

The assemblage of a full Legion was no simple matter, with hundreds of thousands of Space Marines and armoured fighting vehicles scattered across a thousand far flung fleets and crusades. Those most distant contingents of the Ultramarines would take some time to properly withdraw from their current combat operations and redeploy, and

in most cases would travel directly to Calth. Some detachments, most notably elements of the 10th Chapter engaged in the ongoing Compliance of the insular colonies of the galactic north-east and those companies of the 7th and 22nd Chapters assigned to the reduction of the Fraal crucible worlds along the edge of the galactic void past the Imperial fortress of Incalpeta Terminus, were not able to join the muster, either due to the distances involved or the ferocity of the fighting they were engaged in at that time.

For Guilliman and the main body of his Legion travelling along once-stable warp conduits, now rife with storms, directly to Macragge, the journey was arduous and time consuming. It would be almost eighteen months sidereal before he would arrive, and during the voyage his fleet was becalmed twice by aberrant warp confluences and the heavy cruiser the *Tiger's Heart* was lost with all hands to the Empyrean's fury. Other detachments of the XIIIth Legion voyaging along paths little travelled, such as the ever-turbulent routes through the Eastern Fringe, suffered even more. Four companies of the 14th Chapter, en-route from the border fortress of Lachesis, were ravaged by a series of geller field collapses during transit, and contingents of troops from Accatran and Tigrus were so delayed that they did not arrive at Calth until after the tragedy was over. Few at the time marked the sudden and almost vindictive rise in warp disturbances as anything other than misfortune and unhappy coincidence, though later scholars point to these incidents as the first stirrings of the Ruinstorm, or perhaps a dark future-echo of the carnage to come resonating in the Warp around Calth.

Calth itself was thrown into turmoil, its governor instituting a series of gargantuan engineering projects to accommodate the coming muster. Encampments would be needed to harbour over 100,000 of the Legiones Astartes along with their attendant war machines and chattels, requiring specialised facilities built to the most exacting specifications and the re-assignment of nearly a million labourers from the world's verdant fields. The vast majority of Calth's and Veridia Forge's industrial output was shifted to creating vast stockpiles of ammunition, small arms and armour replacements in preparation for the Ghaslakh Crusade, placing even greater strain on the growing colony which was further directed to raise a number of new regiments for service in the Excertus Imperialis.

Despite these measures, some of which were still incomplete with the arrival of the first contingents of the Ultramarines, there was little civil unrest amongst the population of Calth, many of whom were retired soldiers and well-used to the voracious appetite of an Imperial crusade. Those few insurrections that occurred, as private resources and guild workers were reassigned to service Legion needs, were quickly and quietly silenced by the Vigil Opertii, the secretive internal security force of Ultramar.

By the time of Lord Guilliman's arrival from Ultramar, Calth and the Veridia System had become a fortress. The prime warp translation points and various planetary orbits had been seeded heavily with minefields and kill-sats slaved to the Mechanicum's data grid, while deep range system cutters patrolled the fringes of the system, out past the orbital fortress of Veridia Maximus. No unauthorised craft could have survived within the boundaries of the system for more than a few moments, such was the efficacy of the Ultramarines' preparations. Yet all of this was to come to naught, for when the Word Bearers arrived to bring death and destruction to those who had so recently been their brothers, they did so in

the guise of allies, under the authority of the Master of Ultramar to pass all gates and seals without question.

The Beginning of the End

The first ships of the Word Bearers Legion fleet to arrive at Calth were those of Erebus and attendant companies of the Flayed Hand Chapter, translating into the Veridia System around the orbit of Ischara and the Veridia Maximus Starfort nearly a month behind the original schedule set in place for the Ghaslakh Crusade. Still unaware of the Isstvan massacres, the Ultramarines sentinels who witnessed their approach initially ascribed the tardiness of their allies to the same warp turbulence which had also delayed their own ships rather than the darker purposes to which the XVIIth Legion had devoted the time.

Passed through the many layers of protection draped around Calth and the growing fleet sleeping vulnerable at anchor in its orbit, Erebus and his entourage were quickly lost in the controlled chaos of the muster, a few thousand warriors amongst a million other men-under-arms. For a further solar day, Word Bearers heavy cruisers and assault barques continued to arrive in ragged

THE UNMARKED

Of the entire Legion, only five whole chapters of the Ultramarines and a handful of separate detachments from other chapters were spared the Mark of Calth. As with those Legiones Astartes of other Legions who had lived through the Isstvan massacres, an unspoken rift formed between the veterans of Calth and those who had not passed through the fires of betrayal. No official designation to mark the veterans of Calth was ever promulgated amongst the XIIIth Legion, nor did Guilliman ever sanction any division between the warriors of his Legion, yet on those occasions where the Ultramarines gathered afterwards in numbers, the survivors of Calth ever formed a separate body. The bitter wound of base betrayal was one they carried through all their days, the lasting legacy of the Word Bearers' assault on the worlds of Ultramar; trust came to them only with difficulty and always there was a hint of paranoia in their preparations for war and the execution of their campaigns.

Of the so-called 'Unmarked' chapters, two had been assigned to distant Great Crusade forces at the time of the Calth atrocity; the 7th Chapter was divided amongst the vast reaches of the Dominion of Storms and the 10th Chapter was battling through the xenos-infested Eastern Fringe. The remaining chapters, the 19th, as well as those which bore the title 'Evocatiii', the 24th and 25th, had been assigned garrison and training duties amongst the myriad worlds of Ultramar. Though none escaped the fires of Horus' rebellion, none were tested as were those few who had stood against the unthinkable at Calth, none ever stood at the brink of annihilation and the edge of madness as did their brothers.

In the later years of the Scouring, the Unmarked would continuously see assignment to operations removed from the main body of their brethren; even Guilliman seemed averse to their company on campaign, perhaps seeing in them a reminder of days now lost. Eventually, the Unmarked would be among the first of the Legion to be renamed and separated during the Second Founding, and remain perhaps the truest reflection of the Ultramarines of old.

NAME: CALTH

CLASSIFICATION: LEGIONES ASTARTES FIEF-WORLD

SYSTEM DATA: TOW/9330//ZZ/Q

STELLAR GRID: 89-KPAK/L-78

SEGMENTUM: ULTIMA/RIMWARD/EASTERN FRINGE/
ULTRAMAR

NOTATION: PREDOMINANTLY DRY SUBTROPICAL/
MODERATE TO SEMI-ARID

APPROX. FIFTEEN YEAR SOLAR ACTIVITY CYCLE WHICH
RESULTS IN EXTRA-SEASONAL EXPOSURE TO HIGH LEVELS
OF IONISING RADIATION, TRIGGERING PLANET-WIDE
GEOMAGNETIC STORMS TO WHICH AUTOCHTHONIC
FLORA IS WELL ADAPTED.

++[FIEFDOM OF THE ULTRAMARINES LEGION]++

On the eve of the Calth Conjunction, Calth was held by many as an as-yet uncut jewel in the crown of Ultramar, a glittering example of the future. It was long planned that Calth would take its place amongst the greatest of the Five Hundred Worlds and that its name would be known not just within Ultramar, but across the entire Imperium of Mankind.

To that end, since its settlement just a few short generations before the outbreak of the galactic civil war, Calth's infrastructure was rapidly expanded in expectation of future growth. Many of its cities were built as mighty arcologies—self-sustained centres of habitation and production. Many of these arcologies were built within the extensive network of subterranean chambers and tunnels for which the world had become renowned and many housed millions of workers. These centres of population were naturally protected from the extra-seasonal solar storms which assailed the world approximately every fifteen years, and hosted additional shelters to accommodate surface dwellers forced below during especially heavy periods of coronal mass ejection.

In orbit about Calth was one of the most extensive orbital docking, repair and resupply facilities in the entire Five Hundred Worlds and beyond. This facility was built in expectation of future expansion far beyond the extent of Ultramar, and was due to see its most auspicious use to date with the Calth

Conjunction—the mustering of the combined fleets of the Legiones Astartes Word Bearers and Ultramarines in preparation for a joint attack against the Orks of the Ghaslakh xeno-hold. Being a strategically vital node in the infrastructure of the Five Hundred Worlds, Calth was heavily protected by a planetary defence network far in excess of most Imperial planets. This grid integrated over nine hundred orbital defence platforms and thousands of ground sites, from defence laser silos to interceptor launch pads, into one of the most potent defensive networks in the entire Segmentum.

The true value of Calth to the Five Hundred Worlds, and the reason for the massive investment in resources committed to it, was as a potent symbol of Mankind's future. As the Great Crusade drew to a close, the Primarch Horus taking the mantle of Warmaster while the Emperor of Mankind returned to Terra to oversee the next stage in the expansion of the Imperium, great leaders such as Lord Guilliman looked to their own role in that future. The people of Ultramar were immeasurably proud of the realm they had built and looked to a bright future in which Ultramar and the greater Imperium watched benevolently over a galaxy re-shaped by the sacrifice and toil of two centuries of conquest. It stands as one tragedy among countless others that this future will never be realised, due to the perfidy of Warmaster Horus and the Traitor Legiones Astartes.

+++ERUD PROVINCE+++

Primus Muster: Numinus City
/5 secondary muster sites
/29 tertiary muster sites

+++SANACHI PROVINCE+++

Primus Muster: Ithraca City
/3 macro-dock sub-muster sites
/17 support echelon provender nodes

procession, making no attempt to match the precise formations of the Ultramarines and taking up station in otherwise innocuous orbits overlooking the XIIIth Legion ships, depositing an estimated 50,000 Word Bearers and perhaps half a million auxilia units amongst the Calth muster sites.

Sixty-eight muster camps had been created across the surface of Calth, each intended to house several full Legion companies during muster operations, providing drill grounds and munitions storage facilities as well as makeshift barracks. Guilliman intentionally arranged for his own Ultramarines to be

billeted alongside their Word Bearers allies, hoping to foster a sense of unity among the Legionaries, a gesture of trust and reconciliation that served only to make the Word Bearers' coming betrayal all the more devastating. Distributed across Calth by their hosts, the Word Bearers companies

and their cult auxiliaries prepared for the coming storm in the open, under the guise of combat preparations for the Ghaslakh Crusade, stockpiling ammunition, marking the deployment of the XIIIth Legion troops and beginning the occult preparations and sacrifices that would enact the Ruinstorm.

Eager to solidify the bonds between the two Legions, the command echelons of the XIIIth Legion made no attempt to investigate reports of odd behaviour by the Word Bearers or their support units. Those few officers of the XIIIth Legion who questioned the discordant chanting or seemingly

pointless battle readiness drills of the Word Bearers with whom they shared their mustering camps were ignored or, if they persisted, censured.

Few records can accurately define when the killing began on the surface of Calth. Most



historians assume that the Word Bearers acted as one, on the signal of the *Campanile's* death throes in orbit, yet information gleaned from necro-cortical probes and the few survivors of the fighting indicate that it was not so. Whether driven by bloodlust, the burning desire for revenge or simple miscommunication, many of the Word Bearers units began the slaughter long before ships began to rain down from the skies of that world. The most remote of the muster camps, established in the few remaining wilds of Calth, played host to a series of coldly executed massacres as the small contingents of Ultramarines, intended to act as hosts and emissaries of goodwill, were put to the knife by their erstwhile brothers. All along the northern coast, at the edge of the Satric Wastes, the Word Bearers built grotesque monuments to their treachery from the bones of their unsuspecting allies. Such actions cannot be truly considered any form of sane warfare as these isolated camps served only as assembly points that would spare Calth's cities any disruption due to the large numbers of the *Legiones Astartes* drilling nearby, and were mainly reserved for the use of the Word Bearers' late-arriving formations and thus served little strategic purpose. Much debate has been made of the reasons for these attacks, some attributing them to simple bloodlust or madness, while others see a malign pattern to these actions, ascribing them to some unfathomable Colchisian dogmatic practise.

In more populous areas, especially those nearest the great cities and space ports of Calth, such wholesale butchery was absent. Instead, the careful scholar will uncover a number of forgotten reports which indicate that certain XIIIth Legion commanders and their entourages were eliminated some hours prior to the beginning of open fighting on Calth, no doubt falling victim to Word Bearers assassination cadres which had infiltrated Ultramarines staging areas under the guise of friendship. Such cadres rarely survived their murderous attacks. Even confused and shocked, the Ultramarines responded to violent attack with immediate and deadly retribution, but by then the damage had already been done and the rigid chain of command that formed the backbone of the XIIIth Legion was shattered.

IN THE FACE OF ANNIHILATION

When the *Campanile* struck home at the heart of the Ultramarines' orbital defences, sending kilotonnes of debris cascading from high orbit onto the surface below, those contingents of Word Bearers who had yet to

reveal their treacherous intentions turned on the Ultramarines as they were struggling to comprehend the tragedy unfolding above them. Thousands of Ultramarines and their vassals died in the first few moments, cut down at rest or as they rushed to assemble in the face of some unknown assault in orbit. Barracks were turned into abattoirs, warriors slaughtered as they slept and drill grounds were festooned with the crucified corpses of the slain. Across an entire hemisphere of Calth, ships began a stately plunge into the atmosphere, looming over doomed cities suddenly engulfed in mass panic. Even debris that, through sheer chance, failed to plough into one of Calth's teeming cities caused untold damage, sundering vital transit lines and darkening the skies with dust and ash. Each impact only served to cripple the flow of information between the scattered Ultramarines detachments and exacerbate the confusion and panic that followed. With their orbital facilities cast down and the Mechanicum's noosphere communication grid laced with lethal bio-feedback, each of the Ultramarines now stood alone, unable to reach their brothers further than the sound of their own voice. Faced with the unthinkable, the Ultramarines' carefully codified doctrines and precepts failed them entirely, and they stood for a brief moment, helpless in the face of annihilation.

On the verdant fields of Komesh the Ultramarines 9th Chapter died, its half-assembled ranks overrun by a tide of scarlet warriors and armoured vehicles under the command of Foedral Fell. Small islands of cobalt blue shone sporadically across the plains as individual companies and small detachments made brave, but futile stands with whatever weapons and munitions that were at hand. The fighting at Komesh was to be some of the bloodiest of the entire engagement, with upwards of 15,000 Ultramarines slain; the survivors, barely 5,000 strong, would later fight their way free under the command of Tetrarch Tauro Nicodemus in a running battle that would last almost twenty long hours. Further north at the muster camps of Erud, within sight of Numinus City, engines of the Titan Legion *Suturvora* scattered and blasted elements of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Chapters of the Ultramarines Legion.

In the face of these angry metal gods, even Space Marines were as helpless as children, and hundreds died to each salvo the Titans loosed. Only determined resistance from armoured companies of the 1st Chapter forestalled the Ultramarines' complete

destruction; *Shadowword* and *Falchion* super-heavy tanks ambushing Titans as they strode unopposed through the retreating warriors of the XIIIth Legion. Though several Titans were grievously wounded by these attacks, only two *Shadowword* tanks and a single damaged *Falchion* escaped the chaos within the muster zone, part of a column under Captain Sydance which fought its way clear of the massacre.

On the far side of Calth, where night currently reigned, in the sprawling munitions plants of Dainhold, the Word Bearers drove screaming swarms of ragged auxiliaries against the warriors of the XIIIth Legion that had barricaded themselves within the fortified manufactory buildings. Only when the Ultramarines' guns had run dry and the corridors of the manufactory were strewn with the blasted corpses of the fallen, did Nur Asoktan lead the cataphractii-armoured elite of the Flayed Hand forwards to hunt down the surviving Ultramarines. Outmatched and cornered, the warriors of Ultramar fought on with combat blades and improvised explosive devices, severing power to several facilities so as to use the darkness to their advantage.

All across Calth, from the Satric wilds to the cities of Ourosene, the same brutally one-sided battles played out, the Ultramarines assaulted and overwhelmed by those they had expected to stand alongside them, their blood spilt and bodies raised as grotesque trophies. The orbital defence systems of Calth, hundreds of spaceborne weapons stations bristling with cannon intended to cripple the void craft of any attacker, were turned upon the planet by the Word Bearers, searing terrible wounds into the world and utterly annihilating any force of Ultramarines that had gathered in the open and leaving entire cities ablaze, their inhabitants nothing more than charred husks. Yet not all of the battles fought in the first few hours of the fighting on Calth were to the Word Bearers' advantage, whether by luck or some quirk of organisation, a few Loyalist units were not caught unprepared by the Word Bearers' treachery.

The Word Bearers' assault into the coastal bunker network of Sylator Province was halted by a cohort of battle-automata from Legio *Cybernetica* Magenim. Severed from the direct control of their Mechanicum overseer by the dumpshock that afflicted many magos in the wake of the orbital grid's destruction, the battle-automata of the cohort fell back on the core-logic of

THE CALTH MUSTER

Gathering at the command of Warmaster Horus, the world of Calth was host to such military power matched by few other campaigns of the Great Crusade; the forces of the Ultramarines reinforced just prior to the projected assault by the fateful arrival of the Word Bearers Legion, and their allies:

The Legiones Astartes XIIIth Legion – 'The Ultramarines'

- 1st Chapter, 2nd Chapter, 3rd Chapter, 5th Chapter, 6th Chapter, 9th Chapter, 11th Chapter, 12th Chapter, 13th Chapter and 16th Chapter – full deployment at Calth, all at a nominal strength of 10,000 Legionaries. These chapters were concentrated around Calth's primary spaceport at Numinus City in western Erud.
- 8th Chapter, 14th Chapter and 15th Chapter – deployed to Calth after seeing heavy combat in the Eastern Fringe, all at a nominal strength of at least 6,000 Legionaries and slated for full resupply at the munitions plants of Dainhold before loading for transport outsystem.
- 17th Chapter, 18th Chapter, 23rd Chapter and 4th Chapter – comprising those chapters whose order of battle included large numbers of armoured vehicles, especially the 4th, known as the 'Aurorans'. These chapters were assigned to muster in the largely uninhabited continent of Ithraça.
- 20th Chapter and 21st Chapter – known informally within the Legion as 'The Eagles' and 'The Hawks', the 20th Chapter having trained extensively for void combat and the 21st being renowned for the skill of its pilots. These two chapters were assigned to security duties among the orbital platforms and docked warships in Calth's local orbit.
- 22nd Chapter – comprising the majority of the XIIIth Legion's Destroyer assets, and the stores of volatile and hazardous weaponry that characterised their operations. The 22nd Chapter, known as the 'Nemesis' Chapter, was often deployed in small formations alongside other chapter units. At Calth, 2,000 Nemesis Legionaries were mustered along the desolate Thrascias Highlands, furthest from the densely populated cities of Calth.

XIIIth Legion records of the Calth muster remain highly accurate with regards to their own numbers, and place the total amount of combat-ready Legiones Astartes deployed by the Ultramarines at 185,923 Space Marines.

The Ordo Titanicus Legio Praesagiis – 'The True Messengers'

Long allied to the warriors of Ultramar, the Legio Praesagiis deployed to Calth at full Legio strength, with nearly 118 god-engines landed in the southern continent of Ithraça prior to embarkation.

The Ordo Titanicus Legio Suturvora (Infernus) – 'The Fire Masters'

Secret agents of the Warmaster, this powerful Legio was deployed at full strength to the Calth muster with the goal of destroying the Loyalist Titan force. The Legio, comprising at least 130 Titans, was further reinforced by a demi-Legio of the Death's Heads.

The Ordo Titanicus Legio Oberon – 'The Death Bolts'

Wardens of the newly founded Forge of Anvari, a thrall domain of mighty Accatran, the Legio Oberon had undertaken to provide a demi-Legio force for the Ghaslakh Crusade. However, only two

maniples of god-engines were to make planetfall before the arrival of the Word Bearers forces, grounding in eastern Ourosene and northern Erud. The remainder of the Legio's forces would not arrive until after the fighting had concluded.

The Knight House of Vornherr

One of the largest Knight Houses in the Segmentum, the Vornherr were oathed to fight alongside the Five Hundred Worlds unto death. Aside from a small honour guard of squires and barons left on their home world of Luhnberg-IX, the entire Household, consisting of around five hundred Knights, were mustered at the Platia island-city in Calth's southern oceans.

The Excertus Imperialis

Over a million soldiers of the Imperial Army were mustered for the planned Ghaslakh Crusade, including several established army groups such as the Calaq War Host, and nearly a dozen newly raised regiments from the various cities and agricultural provinces of Calth. Also added to the muster was a number of Solar Auxilia pattern regiments in anticipation of void actions against Ork asteroid-craft at Ghaslakh, including the much renowned 41st Espandor High Guard.

The Legiones Astartes XVIIth Legion – 'The Word Bearers'

Of those who arrived under the banner of the Word Bearers, exact information is more difficult to discern, as many units arrived under false colours and forged identification signals. Based on the pict-records of surviving Ultramarines units and other sources, the following Word Bearers chapters are known to have been present, at least in part, during the Calth atrocity:

- The Exalted Gate Chapter
- The Unspeaking Chapter
- The Twisting Rune Chapter
- The Third Hand Chapter
- The Black Comet Chapter
- The Osseus Throne Chapter
- The Graven Star Chapter
- The Asps of the Sacred Sands Chapter
- The Flayed Hand Chapter
- The Inscribed Chapter
- The Trifold Crown Chapter

In total, it is believed that the Word Bearers deployed no less than 50,000 Space Marines to the surface of Calth, few of which were evacuated. There appears no tactical basis for the chapters selected by Lorgar to participate in the Calth attack. Evidence acquired long after the events of the Battle for Calth suggests that these units were instead chosen for lack of devotion to Lorgar's new path or because of dangerous instability. In this Calth served as the Word Bearers' crucible, burning away those elements of the Legion which had failed to prove themselves adequately to their fickle master.

In addition to Legiones Astartes assets, a great mass of cultic auxiliary units that accompanied the Word Bearers which may have numbered in excess of half a million men-under-arms, though the proficiency and sanity of most was questionable.



their cybernetica cortex and responded to any potential threat, no matter how inconceivable, with deadly force. In the wake of the battle-automata's rampage, a regiment of Solar Auxilia, the 14th Garnide Heavy Infantry, secured the bunker complex and dug in.

In the far north, along the icy shores of Thrascias, close to the remote location chosen by Erebus for the locus of his Ruinstorm ritual, a large force of Gal Vorbak butchered their way through the isolated towns of the region. The fate of those Calth natives captured during these raids is uncertain, but may be linked to the bizarre rituals undertaken by Erebus and other members of the Word Bearers command echelons. This obsession amongst the XVIIth Legion for the pursuit of seemingly meaningless religious rites over more practical concerns led to a number of setbacks during the fighting on Calth.

In the Thrascian wilderness, their obsession with ritual appears to have contributed to the Word Bearers' failure to engage the two thousand Destroyers of the Ultramarines 22nd Chapter mustering in the bleak region, or perhaps they believed that such a small force was no threat to their operations. Unlike other Legiones Astartes units, many of whom reacted with shock and some dismay at the appearance of the Gal Vorbak, an effect these shock troops delighted in exploiting, the veterans of the 22nd Chapter were long inured to confronting the most hideous and malignant xenos encountered by the expanding Imperium. Log excerpts recovered from the battlefields of Calth long after the fighting indicate that the officer cadre of the 22nd Chapter contingent, having no ability to confer with their fellow Ultramarines, made the assumption that the Word Bearers, either in part or as a whole, had been overtaken by some form of xenos contamination. Facing a threat they assumed was capable of suborning the potent physical form of a Legiones Astartes, the warriors of the 22nd swiftly deployed the most potent weaponry at their disposal and the fighting in Thrascias swiftly became a hell of phosphex and rad storms as Destroyers and Gal Vorbak clashed in bitter, unrelenting combat.

A Nightmare made Flesh

Despite a few small victories, the onset of dusk over the capital city of Numinas appeared to herald the end of the Ultramarines Legion. In less than twelve hours, almost one hundred thousand Ultramarines had been slain and the Word

The Warp Flasks

For the duration of the Calth war, the Loyalist formations were plagued by an inability to communicate between themselves. The destruction of both key orbital and surface facilities in the opening stages of the attack had utterly destroyed the vox network that had once allowed instantaneous communication between Imperial units anywhere on the surface of Calth or even in high orbit. Short range lowband vox transmissions were garbled beyond recognition by the worsening solar interference and the bizarre interruption of distant chanting and sibilant whispers. Despite this, the Word Bearers seem to have maintained the cohesion of their forces, displaying few signs that they experienced the same problems which bedeviled the Ultramarines.

Artefacts recovered from Calth suggest they employed a device that operated by transmitting communications through the Warp, thus bypassing the interference which ruined more conventional communications devices. The few accounts of those artefacts recovered from the archives of the Word Bearers hint at their operation; most tellingly in fragments of almost ritualistic verse that speak of enslaved symbiotic warp entities and ritualistic psychic disciplines that predate the arrival of the Imperium on Colchis.

Bearers controlled almost every major city and strategic target on Calth. With debris from the orbital massacre continuing to rain down on the besieged planet, orbital strikes obliterating vast swathes of the landscape and the catastrophic collateral damage caused by any battle between the Legiones Astartes, casualties amongst the civilian population were beyond nightmarish. Millions upon millions of Imperial citizens perished in fear and agony in the first few hours, and millions more continued to die as the fighting carried on. Indeed, the Word Bearers' intent seemed less to persecute the Ultramarines of the XIIIth Legion than it was to cause as much death and destruction as was possible.

This design, for it was not simply bloodlust or madness on the part of Lorgar's sons, was intended to facilitate some malign psychic

ritual on a grand scale. While the deeper religious connotations of these actions amongst the Word Bearers remain unknown to us, the immediate consequences are well documented by the few survivors of the Battle for Calth. Many accounts attest to bizarre aberrant weather patterns during the early stages of the conflict – freak typhoons, unnatural aurora and cloud cover being the most prevalent. As the death toll mounted and the fighting spread, these phenomena became more pronounced and the first instances of manifesting warp entities are recorded. Such creatures were all but unknown to the Imperium at large, the subject of long discredited legend and the ramblings of delusional Astropaths and Navigators, and their appearance only inflamed the abject panic which gripped many areas, even affecting the ranks of

the usually stoic Legiones Astartes. The emergence of these aberrant manifestations follows no sane strategic plan. Indeed, the Word Bearers seem to have treated their appearance as a vital goal in and of itself rather than in furtherance of their military campaign. Most such incursions are noted as occurring in areas where the fighting was particularly fierce or the death toll excessively high, where their rampages, whilst stunningly brutal, rarely impacted on the wider strategic situation.

Not only were the surviving Loyalist elements tormented by the depredations of the Word Bearers' tenebrous allies, but also by the deterioration of the situation in the Veridia System. The Word Bearers had turned the full destructive capability of the Calth orbital defence platforms, as

well as the formidable firepower of their own fleet, against the system's sun itself and the resulting flare in solar radiation was beginning to take its toll on the warriors on Calth's surface. Those not shielded from the sun's glare or protected by the augmented physiology of the Legiones Astartes, were soon blistered and burned, and most would later to succumb to extreme radiation poisoning. Only those scant enclaves that were within one of the few shielded structures still held by the Loyalists escaped this lingering death, though few who still lived could see this as anything but a temporary reprieve.





PART IV: THE BATTLE FOR THE MACRAGGE'S HONOUR

"And he cried mightily with a baleful voice, declaring the abode of heroes is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful beast."

The Apocrypha Terra

The bridge of the Ultramarines' flagship, the *Macragge's Honour*, had been destroyed and all sanity had fled. What occurred next had no known precedent in the annals of the Great Crusade, for while the scions of the great Navigator Houses of Terra had some inkling of what lurked beyond, such knowledge was denied to almost all others, even the Legiones Astartes. The thing that had manifested on the bridge had exploded in a fountain of gore and the force of the detonation had breached the hull. The Primarch, who had been standing at the very eye of the storm, had been blown upwards and outwards through the breach in an instant, the writhing remains of the monster into which Lorgar's lithic avatar had transformed snaring his mighty form in a thrashing mass of spiralling pseudopods and motile shadow.

The bridge crew were given no opportunity to save the Primarch, or even in most cases themselves. A dozen senior officers were swept up in the maelstrom of blood, debris and howling air, and blasted into the void in Guilliman's wake, vacuum snatching the screams from their throats. Shipmaster Zedoff, the veteran captain of the *Macragge's Honour*, was eviscerated by shards of armoured glass, his shredded body dragged from his command throne in a storm of ruined flesh. Even Space Marines had little chance of escaping the chaos, Chapter Master Vared casting away all void-breach protocol as he was witnessed attempting to aid his Primarch by launching himself upwards into the slipstream of blood and wreckage. He was never seen again.

The First Chapter Master, Marius Gage, had been able to grasp hold of a railing at the moment of the breach and pulled himself along the tortured bridge towards the main portal, which was sealing off against the void even as he struggled towards it. Metres from the armoured hatch, Gage came across the grievously wounded Chapter Master Banzor and pulled his fellow Legion officer through the portal as the blast doors lowered. Banzor died soon after, but Gage had no chance to mourn him for the destruction on the bridge was but one torment being visited upon the *Macragge's Honour*. The entire conning tower was disintegrating around him and deafening howls of bestial insanity were flooding the corridors, accompanied by the screeching of tortured metal, the roar of escaping atmosphere and the wet screams of crew being slaughtered.

Those few who survived the destruction on the bridge, almost exclusively Legiones Astartes, for mortal flesh was too fragile to withstand such hurts, were forced to flee downwards, pursued all the while by death as, deck by deck, the conning tower crumbled into the void. If any expected respite upon reaching the main body of the vessel, they were to be disappointed. The barrel-vaulted companionway which passed along the uppermost decks of the *Macragge's Honour* presented a scene ripped bloody and ragged from the worst excesses of Old Night. Crew hands were cut down, blood and severed limbs cast in all directions by things of warp-born shadow and searing empyreal fire. The more experienced warriors knew that catastrophic warp breach could bring on chronic hallucination and mass psychosis, while some were party to the theories that certain anti-life forms were able to exist in the shadowed depths of the Warp itself. But this was no warp breach, for the *Macragge's Honour* was in realspace.

To the beleaguered defenders, it looked as if the entire ship had been boarded by creatures of no catalogued xeno-type at the very height of the battle the Word Bearers had initiated. Only the superior mental conditioning of the Legiones Astartes could bear such a weight of betrayal and horror, and many of the surviving officers reached the immediate conclusion that their traitorous brother Legion had unleashed some form of xenos-terror organism as yet another weapon in their perfidious arsenal.

But the Ultramarines had no chance to mount a coordinated defence of the flagship, for the enemy's numbers were simply

too great. Human crew were slaughtered, their minds overcome by primal terror at what they were witnessing. Lithe, horned creatures congealed of the roiling energies of warp space, whose skin glowed like lava and who carried wickedly barbed long swords, butchered those too stunned or too slow to flee. Other incarnated entities included bloated, plague-ridden corpse-things, one-eyed and drooling and using rusted cleavers to hew the helpless crew like meat on a butcher's block. Still others were deceptively mock-human, lithe and fleet of foot, possessed of viciously sharp claws that they used to sever and stab and gut foes who were stood helpless and enraptured at their approach. These and a thousand other insanities descended upon the flagship, until soon even the shattered chain of command that had survived the loss of the bridge was gone. It was as if a scene of ancient, apocalyptic mysticism was playing out, and the Space Marines of the XIIIth Legion were confronted with nightmarish foes against which the laws of reality themselves held no sway. Chaos, bloodshed and anarchy claimed the interior of the *Macragge's Honour*.

The battle devolved into a bitter struggle for survival as individual warriors were cut off from their fellows and swept into the bowels of the vessel or else overwhelmed and slaughtered out of hand. First Chapter Master Gage and Antoli, so far as each knew the only Legion officers still alive, did what they could to restore sanity, ordering the crew to go to ground, to barricade themselves into whatever compartments they could while any and all Ultramarines, naval armymen and soldiers of the Imperial Army were to rally together. Even this ostensibly straightforward order was almost impossible to enact. Wave after wave of horror flowed through the entire length of the *Macragge's Honour*, witnesses later describing how the angles of the bulkheads and the spaces between shadows were seen to wrinkle and fold in upon themselves before snapping taut once more to reveal savage wounds in the very skin of reality. It was through these wounds, which later would be described as 'micro-rifts', that the creatures came.

Across the ship, individual Legiones Astartes and naval officers fought bravely to repel the invaders. Falling back on long-established counter-incursion protocols, they ordered what responses they could. Entire sections were purged of breathable atmosphere or flooded with toxic gas, while others were plasma-scoured or subjected to brutal extremes of temperature. Nothing

worked. The creatures came on and ever on, impervious to effects that would have scoured the ship of any known life form. Such failures were compounded because the vessel's internal command and control systems had been crippled early in the betrayal, and with so many senior Ultramarines dead and lower tier officers isolated from one another, the same mistakes were made over and over. The Ultramarines' famed ability to analyse any challenge and reason their way to victory broke down entirely, through no fault of their own. Worse still, the creatures were able to shrug off even the heaviest weight of fire from the Space Marines' bolters and other weapons. They swarmed unharmed through hails of fire to fall upon the defenders with otherworldly savagery. The creatures followed no perceivable strategy or logic, and it was apparent they had no objective but to shed blood. It would later be observed that they appeared more to be culling prey than fighting an opponent in any conventional sense, an observation many others would make before the end.

THE KILLERS CLOSE IN

Unknown to the surviving Ultramarines Legion officers or any of the defenders desperately holding back the tide of horror spilling through the *Macragge's Honour*, a hunting pack of Word Bearers cruisers was closing in on the flagship through the burning void. Though the Ultramarines vessel was far larger than the enemy warships, the *Macragge's Honour* was not only defenceless without its bridge, but its crew could scarcely defend their vessel from boarders whilst fighting a desperate battle for their very survival within. The cruisers took up position about the wounded flagship, matching her now drifting, directionless course before firing close range boarding grapples across the void, tethering hunters and prey together so that the boarding assault could begin. Within minutes, dozens of Word Bearers assault groups were crossing the gulf between vessels. The *Macragge's Honour* was heavily armoured against external assault however, and although her outer skin was studded with scores of air-gates of all sizes, the enemy would have to fusion-burn their way in before a full boarding action could get underway.

Order from Chaos

As the Word Bearers breacher squads were to begin their attack on the exterior of the flagship, the balance of the battle for the vessel's interior shifted. Pockets of organised and stoic resistance began to coalesce,

individual warriors drawn towards leaders able to command the fight-back by their own heroic example.

Chapter Master Klord Empion, commander of the 9th Chapter, was one such leader, a warrior who was attending to duties elsewhere on the flagship when the bridge was breached. Empion was fortunate to have with him at the time of the incursion a large number of warriors and sub-officers from his chapter's command cadre. He quickly built this into the core of a force with which to repel the attackers, and which was soon reinforced as it fought its way along Deck Thirty-five gathering dozens of Legiones Astartes, naval armsmen and Solar Auxilia troops. Empion had no explanation for the

nature of the attack against the vessel, but he knew that only a steady and determined counter-advance towards the forward sections offered any hope of linking up with other forces and holding the ship.

Meanwhile, Captain Heutonicus of the 161st Company had taken command of a small band of isolated Ultramarines initiates only recently ascended to the status of Legionary. The first battle these young warriors fought was against a foe none had any inkling how to counter and for many it would be their last. It fell to Captain Heutonicus not just to keep his charges alive but to lead them in battle, a task in which he excelled despite the odds against him. Barely a quarter of the initiates fighting under Captain Heutonicus

survived that day, but those who did were blooded *in extremis* and many went on to become warriors of great renown. But that was far in the future and numerous indescribable horrors lay ahead as the captain led his force through the fiend-haunted chambers of Deck Twenty in an effort to link up with other survivor groups.

Of all the tales of courage and honour told of the defence of the *Macragge's Honour*, one frequently recounted is that of Sergeant Aeonid Thiel of the 135th Company. At the moment of the breaching of the flagship's bridge, Thiel was under censure awaiting a hearing with the Primarch himself in an antechamber lined with dozens of Lord Guilliman's personal weapons. Confronted

by the first of the attackers, Thiel had reached for the nearest weapons to hand – an electromagnetic longsword and a Kehletai friction axe, both impossibly rare and incredibly potent examples of lost weaponsmiths' arts.

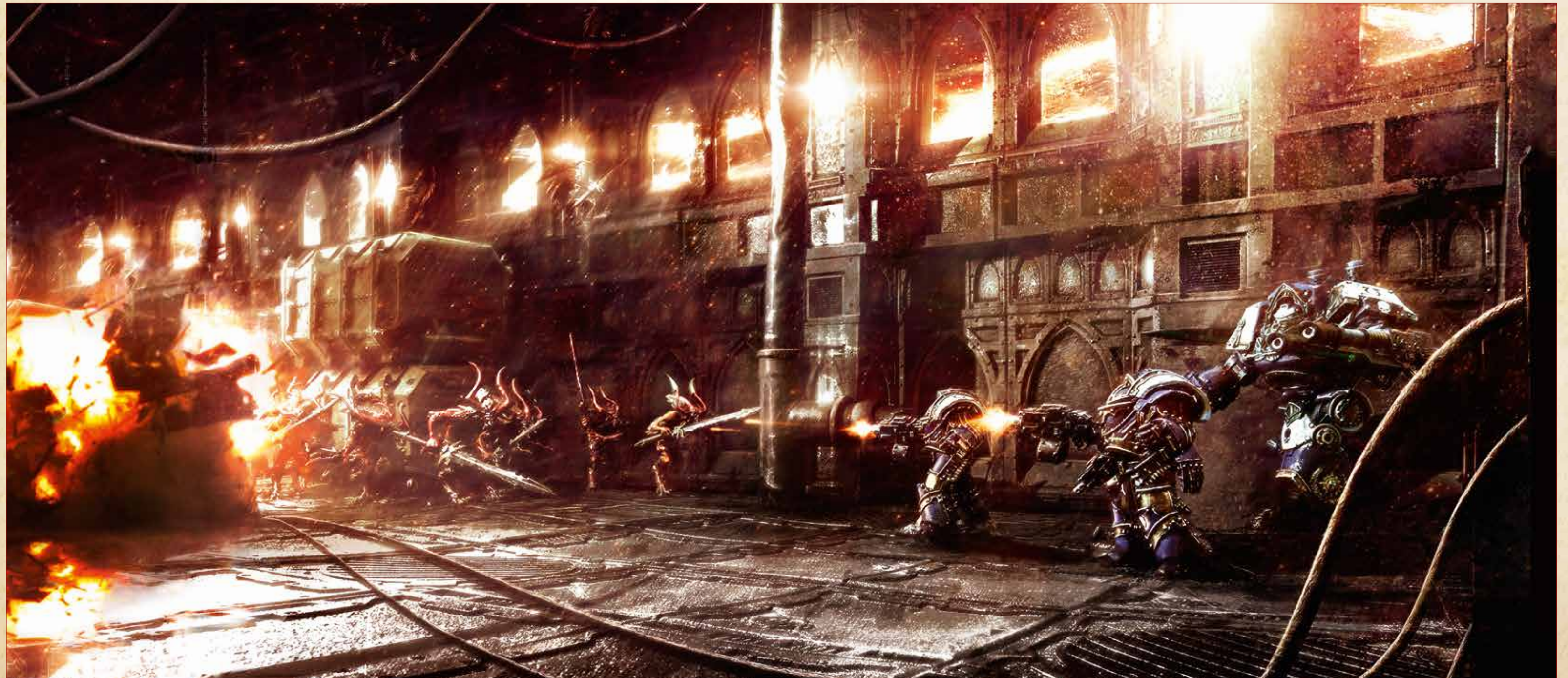
Wielding the Primarch's exotic weaponry, Thiel fought his way through a horde of foes, quickly discovering that the creatures were significantly more vulnerable to the effects of his axe and sword than they were to those of his bolt pistol. Thiel was gifted with the rare ability to think outside of accepted dogma, indeed, it was this very characteristic that had earned him the mark of censure – the red-painted battle helm which he wore still. Thiel named the invaders 'Daemons',

recognising that they were something other than aliens, psychic manifestation or even some unknown xenos strain somehow able to reside within the Warp. He saw that they were creatures from humanity's darkest nightmares in a very literal sense.

As he fought, Thiel came upon other warriors fighting back to back against the waves of attackers. He was soon leading an ad hoc force of several dozen Legionaries, armsmen, Solar Auxilia and even abhuman stokers determined to fight for their flagship. He made brief contact with both Empion and Heutonicus, and between them the three were able to coordinate an advance across several decks that would see them converge in the proximity of the conning tower, or

what remained of it. It was near this location that Thiel encountered the severely wounded First Chapter Master Gage, saving the senior Legion officer from certain death at the hands of a warp-born horror that had already severed his right arm.

Still fighting off the blood-taint of a warp entity's venom, Gage saw straight away that Thiel's methods were working and should be disseminated throughout the whole force. The First Chapter Master agreed with Thiel's observation that the creatures were more susceptible to melee weaponry, though he reserved judgement on the sergeant's theory that this weakness was derived from arcane rituals used to summon them in the ancient myths of humanity. Nevertheless, Gage was



an experienced officer and wise enough to know that in his wounded state he could not lead the force effectively. Tactical leadership was turned over to Thiel while an apothecary stabilised the First Chapter Master, and soon after, the forces under Thiel, Empion and Heutonicus were combined.

MASTER AND COMMANDER

With the immediate situation stabilising, Gage was able to gather information from scattered Ultramarines forces and formulate a plan to retake control of the *Macragge's Honour*. The fate of the Primarch remained unknown and few allowed themselves to dwell on it lest they be overcome with grief and lose what edge they might have retained. Rather, the First Chapter Master ordered the force to make for the flagship's auxiliary bridge, located several dozen levels directly below the destroyed conning tower. This plan was in itself insufficient to gain anything more than the most superficial control of the massive vessel; for that, the skills of an experienced shipmaster would be required, and the flagship's captain, Shipmaster Zedoff, had been slain along with the majority of the bridge cadre.

Here, at last, the fates looked kindly upon the Ultramarines. Mere minutes before the loss of the bridge, the *Macragge's Honour* had recovered a number of salvation craft ejected by the *Sanctity of Saramanth* earlier in the battle, and amongst the survivors was her captain, Shipmaster Hommed. Gage had no way of knowing if Hommed lived or had been slaughtered along with so many others among the crew, but he knew that in the veteran shipmaster lay the best, perhaps the only hope of regaining control of the beleaguered flagship.

It fell to Sergeant Aeonid Thiel to lead the search for the shipmaster, he and his force making for the primary starboard launch deck while Gage and Empion led the remainder of the force towards the auxiliary bridge. The distance was not great and overall the tide of invaders was mercifully receding. Yet many of the warp entities were the equal of a Space Marine and some were considerably stronger, so that even reaching the launch deck cost the Ultramarines irreplaceable losses. When Thiel reached his destination, he found the deck swarming with the same crimson-skinned, horned creatures that he and his warriors had faced in such large numbers at the beginning of the battle. The horde was converging on a single point, which Thiel realised with horror was that occupied by the survivors of the

Sanctity of Saramanth. Shipmaster Hommed had survived the destruction of his vessel and the manifestation of an entire army of warp creatures, yet even as the tides of horror receded, the last of the invaders were descending upon him.

In an instant, Sergeant Thiel saw his chance to rescue Shipmaster Hommed, but he had to act without even a second's delay. He led his force out onto the launch deck, ordering sustained and rapid fire even though he knew the bolts would do little more than distract the fiends. But distraction was exactly what the sergeant intended, for as the horde turned upon this new threat, the creatures' attentions torn from the cornered shipmaster to the attacking Ultramarines, Thiel ordered the loading deck platform upon which Hommed and the other survivors were standing to be lowered. The Ultramarines had to keep the warp entities engaged long enough for the platform to deliver the survivors to safety and so they poured a relentless rain of bolter fire into the horde, all the while taking measured steps backwards towards the deck entrance. At last the shrieking horde closed to within metres of the firing line, and Thiel judged that the shipmaster was safe. With a final step back, the Ultramarines crossed through the hatch and the blast door crashed down. The enraged howls of the warp creatures were as loud as the impacts of their weapons and claws pounding upon the other side of the portal. Shipmaster Hommed was safe.

SERVANTS OF THE MACHINE

As Thiel's force extracted Shipmaster Hommed, First Chapter Master Gage, now largely recovered from his injuries thanks to the superhuman physiology of the Legiones Astartes, led his own force towards the auxiliary bridge. The route took the column through an area of the *Macragge's Honour* that was the exclusive domain of the vessel's Mechanicum contingent; one that had clearly seen heavy fighting already, for the deck was strewn with the severed limbs and cyber-organs of scores of tech-adepts, skitarii, battle-automata and combat servitors. Gage ordered his squads to slow their advance and to remain vigilant for remnants of the wave of warp fiends that had inflicted the slaughter, as well as any survivors that might be there. It was not long before signs of both were detected.

At the heart of the area was a sacred machine fane dedicated to the Ommissiah. The chamber was counted as the holy of holies by the Tech-Priests and the only

outsiders normally permitted to enter were Techmarines, members of the Legiones Astartes who had been inducted into certain of the mysteries of the machine. The chamber was sealed by an armoured portal two dozen metres high and from beyond this came weapons fire intermingled with the now all too familiar sounds of attacking creatures from the Warp. Gage saw he had no choice but to violate the sanctity of the machine fane, and while he held to the secular Imperial Truth and had witnessed the worst excesses of heathen religiosity, he was wise enough to respect his allies' beliefs as mighty gears engaged and pistons spat great goutts of vented gas as the brass portal ground inwards to reveal a sight unlike any other the veteran Chapter Master had witnessed.

The interior of the machine fane resembled the inner workings of a great engine, a towering altar dominating the central space. About this was gathered a group of Mechanicum Tech-Priests of various Orders, each unleashing a relentless stream of fire into a circle of lithe Daemons capering about them. The incense- and smoke-filled air was ravaged by volkite rays and pulsing waves of focused radiation. The attacking creatures, however, were all but impervious to the effects of weapons that could melt the flesh from the bones of mortal men. They shrieked and cackled mockingly at their touch, darting back and forth to deliver graceful, yet utterly deadly caresses with long, razor-edged claws. When the Ultramarines crossed the threshold into the machine fane, the creatures immediately ceased their tormenting of the adepts and hissed in sibilant challenge to this newly appeared foe.

Where Thiel had ordered his Legionaries to fire upon the entities to distract them, Gage's intent was quite different. With a bellowed order, he called for bolters to be stowed and hand-to-hand weapons to be drawn. Combat blades, chainswords and bayonets were all brought forth and the First Chapter Master brandished the Primarch's own friction axe, which Thiel had passed to him, so that all might see and follow his example. Shouting the war cries of Ultramar, the squads advanced in perfect formation to engage the warp things in the measured fury of hand-to-hand combat. Razor sharp claws lashed from nowhere to lacerate power armour and rend Legiones Astartes flesh, and in a dozen seconds the same number of brave Space Marines fell. But more Legionaries stepped into their place in the line. Face to face, the creatures were revealed as nightmarish mockeries of the human form,

their faces both alien and androgynous. They were surrounded by a musk of cloying scent which threatened to overwhelm those battle-brothers dispossessed of their helms with lethargy or delirium.

Following the Ultramarines' example, the tech-adepts cornered at the machine altar cast aside their myriad exotic weapons and took up their ceremonial axes and staves. Blurting binaric war-cant across the chamber, the magos ordered the battle-automata and combat servitors to add their weight to the fight, and soon the tide was turned.

The wicked glee vanished from the warp creatures' leering faces as the realisation of their impending defeat came too late. They were surrounded, the Ultramarines on one side and the Mechanicum on the other as the battle lines pressed ever inwards. A minute later the last of the vile warp-things dissipated to nothing as their phantasmagoric forms were hewn apart by chainswords and pounded into the deck by the massive fists of the Castellax battle-automata.

COMMAND RESTORED

Having secured the shipmaster and the senior Mechanicum magos, the Ultramarines Legion had won a very real hope of regaining control of the *Macragge's Honour*. It was not until both Gage's and Thiel's forces at last fought their way through what remained of the warp incursion and rendezvoused at the auxiliary bridge that either knew for certain that the other had succeeded in their mission. It was a tense wait for the first squads to arrive at the muster point, but it was soon apparent that both forces had achieved their equally vital objectives.

Almost exactly ten hours after the main bridge of the Ultramarines flagship had been breached and their beloved Primarch lost, Shipmaster Hommed, with the aid of the two most senior magos rescued from the launch deck, gained control of the vessel. The auxiliary bridge was activated and control of the mighty war ship invested in Shipmaster Hommed. Within minutes, vox systems were re-awakening and contact was established with Ultramarines units on the surface of Calth for the first time since the destruction of Calth Veridian Anchor by the *Campanile*. These facts might have been cause for celebration in any other circumstance, but with the re-activation of the vessel's communications and augur systems came still more dire realisations. There was still no sign of the Primarch, Legion forces on the surface had been worse than decimated and

of the fleet that had gathered in orbit, barely one fifth of the original number of vessels were battle-worthy. Furthermore, only now was the full extent of the boarding action against the *Macragge's Honour* realised.

Miracle of Miracles

It fell to Chapter Master Empion to formulate and oversee a daring counter-boarding assault, drawing on every Ultramarines Legionary his staff could muster. Forty groups, each numbering up to thirty Space Marines, passed through the armoured air gates and advanced on their designated targets. Each was assigned a vital objective, from sabotaging the enemy's docking towers, detaching their void grapple and fusion drill heads, to counter-attacking Word Bearers moving across the outer hull. Using void harnesses to bolster the in-built capabilities of Legiones Astartes power armour, the squads moved rapidly towards their targets, each step a Legionary took under the low gravity conditions powering him forwards tens of metres, each parabolic burn of his harnesses' thrusters carrying him high over the deep valleys and towering hills of the ship's exterior architecture. The Legionaries were dwarfed by the sheer scale of the flagship's form, a city-scaled landscape of iron and ceramite, the wounded surface of Calth visible as it rose above the port side attitude thrusters in a spectacle that under more conventional circumstances would have taken the breath away. But on this day of betrayal, all that the counter-boarding squads cared for was the survival of their flagship.

The Ultramarines soon encountered their hated foe, for there was little possibility of a stealthy approach to battle in such conditions. The cobalt-armoured Ultramarines had been observed as they traversed the slate-grey hull and soon mass reactive bolts were scything through the void on bright contrails. The Space Marines had been created for this mode of warfare and were equipped to the very highest standards, and so the battle was relentless and bitter. Bolt rounds which penetrated battle plate caused partial armour decompression before automated inner seals contained pressure loss and even with a limb exposed to the vacuum, they could fight on for extended periods so long as oxygen reserves were not compromised. Soundless battle erupted across the hull, each Legionary able to hear only his own thunderous breathing and the urgent orders barked across the vox-net. When combatants clashed in melee, impacts sent victims tumbling away through

the debris-strewn void, often trailing a cometary tail of blood globules and vented gas. Yet Chapter Master Empion's primary objective was not the destruction of the enemy boarding squads, as desirable a secondary mission as that clearly was to the Ultramarines. Three Legionaries in each squad carried a melta charge to sabotage the Word Bearers' heavy breaching equipment, and as the battle-brothers of both sides fought and bled, many of these specialists set to destroying the great fusion heads and boarding gantries with well-placed charges, many giving their lives in the process.

At one such objective, the tide of battle had turned inexorably against Squad Six, led by Sergeant Thiel. The Word Bearers had counter-attacked in far greater numbers than anticipated and the surviving Ultramarines were resigned to extracting what vengeance they could before being overwhelmed and slaughtered. But such a fate was not to be and instead something that many later named a miracle occurred. From the void came a demi-god clad in armour of cobalt and pearl, an inaudible roar distorting his usually calm visage. It was Roboute Guilliman, Primarch of the Ultramarines, and he was as a raw force of nature, his usual measured demeanour driven out by cold fury as he slew Word Bearers by the dozen. As incredible as the fact of the Primarch surviving the destruction of the bridge was, what would mystify future generations of gene-smiths was the fact that the Emperor's son wore no battle helm. He had fought for ten hours in a vacuum without any apparent oxygen supply, a feat that even the preternatural physiology of the Primarchs could not entirely account for. Many accept that the body of a Primarch could withstand the effects of ebullism, hypocapnia, pressure-driven body mass expansion and extremes of temperature for extended periods. That a Primarch's body could continue to function without oxygen however is beyond any known capability of even these most awe inspiring of trans-human super-beings.

The Primarch's intervention saved the lives of dozens of his sons. It fell to them though to persuade their gene-father to cease his furious battle on the flagship's outer hull and to rejoin his warriors within. The Primarch had fought for ten hours without respite, his sons believing him lost. Now he was returned to them, and for the first time since the beginning of the Battle of Calth, defeat and extinction did not seem inevitable.

THE ASHES OF CALTH

"Leave no stone upon stone, salt the earth with the blood of the fallen and leave only ashes to mark their passing. Let Calth be the grave marker of the Ultramarines."

Nur Asoktan, the Butcher of Dainhold and master of the Flayed Hand

In every account of the war on Calth, there is little dispute over the overwhelming tactical advantage held by the Word Bearers in the early stages of the fighting. They had complete control of orbital space, with the Ultramarines void craft scattered and broken and the overwhelming firepower of the orbital defence platforms under their control. On the ground, the Word Bearers chapters held all major strategic objectives and had inflicted devastating casualties upon the Ultramarines, leaving the XIIIth Legion with few means to even organise a cohesive campaign against the Word Bearers, let alone prosecute such an offensive.

The fighting around the southern city of Ithraca stands as an exemplar of the bloody, one-sided and yet curiously inept battles the Word Bearers fought across the face of Calth in the brief surface war. What initially appears as a strategically sound assault on an objective held by unsuspecting units of the XIIIth Legion, quickly degenerated into a confused massacre, only complicated by the inexplicable tactics employed by the Word Bearers and those auxiliary units which had long served under their direction. In many cases, the Word Bearers seem to have abandoned all military logic and sought simply to kill and destroy without recourse to any other concern.

Such was the advantage granted the Word Bearers by treachery that the casualties inflicted upon the Ultramarines were crippling despite the flawed tactics the Word Bearers employed. Regardless, the Ultramarines refused to die, denying the Word Bearers the victory they reached for. Even crippled by the destruction of the orbital vox network, bereft of their command elements and battered in body and mind, Ultramarines detachments across the planet put aside doubt and fear, devised methods to

hurt those who had wounded them and put their plans into action with whatever tools of war they could gather to themselves.

Convergence of Might

Ragged Ultramarines detachments from battlefields across the continent went on the offensive instead of running for shelter as lesser warriors might have done, some as isolated commands and others using short range local vox nets to coordinate with other groups of survivors. Leading the bloodied remnants of a dozen companies of the Ultramarines 9th Chapter, the Tetrarch Tauro Nicodemus cut his way through Word Bearers forces under the command of Foedral Fell. Wielding his tired Legiones Astartes like a rapier, he targeted isolated units as the Word Bearers dispersed to ravage Erud Province. Tetrarch Nicodemus annihilated those Word Bearers commands lost to an unpredictable blood rage while avoiding larger forces and slowly made his way to the north-east, following a fragmentary vox signal broadcast from the remains of the fortified manor of the planetary governor at Leptius Numinus.

To the north, in the scrub deserts around the Holophusikon of Calth, a second Tetrarch, Eikos Lamiad, the Iron Warden of Konor, led a mismatched assembly of Imperial Army soldiers and Ultramarines armoured units in pursuit of the same signals. Tetrarch Lamiad and a retinue composed of Solar Auxilia from the 41st Espandor High Guard, a battered Contemptor pattern Dreadnought and a towering Thanatar siege-automata, scoured

the plains for other survivors, while Imperial Army officers organised these stragglers into a column headed towards Lanshear.

Even as far south as the vast forests of Sharud Province, where Word Bearers-allied Mechanicum units and Titans of the Legio Sutturvora had turned the dense foliage into a hell of flame and ash, units of the XIIIth Legion responded to the call to arms. In a display of tactical coordination few other Legions could have matched, even at their best, the few thousand survivors of the 11th and 12th Chapters of the Ultramarines fought a complex war of hit and fade against fire-blackened automata and blood-hungry Word Bearers units. Ad hoc fire teams defended rough fortifications of earth and fallen trees, while other units hastily prepared the next line of defence, exacting a heavy toll in blood for each position the Word Bearers forced them to abandon.

As the fighting wore on, what had begun as a series of isolated and chaotic slaughters slowly began to coalesce. With many Word Bearers detachments disregarding what was once considered standard military practice to engage in inscrutable rituals and wanton butchery, the XIIIth Legion survivors were afforded a momentary respite. For any other than Guilliman's own, such a pause would have meant little; a chance, perhaps, to sell their lives dearly in a glorious but hopeless last stand or futile rage-fuelled assault. For the XIIIth Legion however, it was a chance to grasp victory from defeat. With several task forces of survivors converging on the outskirts of Lanshear, an army that numbered in the thousands and even included a Titan maniple of the Legio Oberon, the Deathbolts, the Loyalists had assembled a response that was capable of achieving more than an honourable death.

Yet while the Word Bearers had sacrificed the strategic initiative, they still held a tenuous advantage in numbers, the initial battles and orbital bombardment having taken a terrible toll on the XIIIth Legion, and unlike the Loyalists, they were not scattered across the surface of the planet and isolated from their commanders. In Lanshear City, Hol Beloth, master of the Graven Star, commanded a force of almost ten thousand Legiones Astartes and uncounted auxilia

The Martyrs of Calth

In the aftermath of the fighting on Calth, it was all but impossible to form an accurate picture of the losses incurred on the combatants. With the surface of the planet rendered all but uninhabitable by the actions of Kor Phaeron, it has since proved impractical to recover many of the fallen or verify the deaths of those who came to Calth with treachery in their hearts.

The Ultramarines recorded their casualties at the moment when Guilliman and the remains of the XIIIth Legion fleet departed Calth at 119,422 Legiones Astartes fallen in combat, with a further 28,392 rendered combat-incapable by battle injuries and trauma. Few of the chapters committed to Calth could muster even a quarter of their nominal strength, and some were so decimated that they faced being reorganised into other chapters and their old designations removed from the XIIIth Legion's order of battle. Most of the injured were evacuated to the surviving craft of the fleet and swiftly returned to combat duties in the crisis that was unfolding across Ultramar, a crisis that forced Guilliman to order the prioritisation of military assets over the stranded civilians in the brief evacuation effort. Almost 40,000 Ultramarines, both wounded and combat-ready, were forced to remain on Calth, some as volunteers, set to the protection of those civilians who could not be evacuated, and others due to the brutal dictates of circumstance. Of the forces of the Excertus Imperialis, details are more vague, but it seems likely that at least half a million men-under-arms perished during the fighting, alongside the entire fighting complement of the Legio Praesagius.

Of the Word Bearers who landed on the surface of Calth, almost none would ever leave. It is estimated that 50,000 or more of Lorgar's sons and an uncounted mass of Auxilia troops were sacrificed in the battle, although only 20,000 are thought to have died in the initial fighting, with the remainder prosecuting the Underworld War on Calth for over a decade after the initial battle.

Just as bitter to the Ultramarines Legion was the damage inflicted on its fleet assets. Never renowned for the numbers of heavy combat void craft in its service, the losses suffered at Calth were crippling and hamstrung any effort to prosecute a war beyond the bounds of Ultramar. Such was the Ultramarines' desperation, missions to salvage the hulks drifting in orbit above Calth were quickly authorised despite the death toll such missions exacted in the deadly radiation of the Veridia star.

troops, reinforced by several maniples of Legio Sutturvora Titans; were the Loyalists to engage such a force head-on, they would have had little hope of a conventional victory. Another target, one of significant strategic value enough to tip the scales of the brutal war unfolding on Calth, would have to be found before the Loyalists would expend their last strength.

Bitter Victories

Elsewhere on Calth's war-torn surface, the fighting knew no pause or ebb in its brutal ferocity. Innumerable battles, both large and small, played out in blasted cities, frozen tundra and burning forests. The entirety of Calth was engulfed in a war that knew nothing of mercy or restraint, and blood was spilled under the bright sun of Veridia as well as the starlit blanket of night. Heroes were born in the crucible of war and perished forgotten and unrecorded by any who yet lived, and the most treacherous of villains

met their ends with none to tell of the deed. Even where they emerged momentarily victorious, the warriors of Ultramar could not help but be dismayed by the cost of their triumph before more foes sought them out.

Sanachi Province and much of the southern continent were reduced to a charnel house as rampaging entities spawned there from the very depths of the Warp, and few would ever live to speak of the horrific events that took place. The Korvel Islands were engulfed in nuclear fire, their populous cities blasted from orbit at Kor Phaeron's command, perhaps for no better reason than to see them burn. The slaughter fields of Komesh were covered with over twenty thousand dead Ultramarines, their corpses and the bodies of the wounded who still lived used to ornament Word Bearers tanks and aircraft. In Sylator, the war engines of the Legio Cybernetica Magenim, long since having exhausted their stocks of ammunition,

sought to stem the hordes of fanatical auxiliaries and deformed Word Bearers shock units with bare manipulator and the strength of their servo-driven limbs, while their masters sought with desperate futility to restore control of Calth's defence systems.

In the blasted ruins of the manufactoria of Dainhold, the remnants of the Ultramarines 8th and 15th Chapters, reduced to less than 1,000 warriors, continued a grim battle against the Flayed Hand Chapter of the Word Bearers. Already worn down by the unending tide of chanting auxiliaries unleashed upon them to drain their munitions, the survivors were little more than desperate bands isolated in the crumbling halls of the manufactoria, and yet they still held after almost a full twelve hours of constant battle. However, measures taken to stymie the screaming hordes of auxiliaries unleashed by the Word Bearers, severing power to lights and heating systems and forcing the merely human auxiliaries to fight in the frozen darkness of Calth's winter night, deterred the power armoured Word Bearers as little as they did the remaining Ultramarines.

With dusk falling over the cities of Erud, half a world away, dawn was arriving over Dainhold's manufactoria, heralding an assault by the elite of the Flayed Hand Chapter of the Word Bearers. Fully two hundred hulking Cataphractii Terminators were unleashed on the exhausted Ultramarines holding out. Trampling a path through the masses of dead and injured auxiliaries who thronged the manufactoria hallways and vestibules, the fresh Word Bearers Terminators tore into the few battered Ultramarines who remained, spending munitions with abandon as they slaughtered the defenders.

With almost no ammunition remaining to them, the warriors of the XIIIth had few weapons left that could stop the rampaging Terminators, yet still each warrior strove to inflict as much damage as they could before death overtook them. Improvised pitfalls and hastily converted industrial tools accounted for several of the heavily armoured Word Bearers, and those officers and veterans who bore powered weaponry potent enough to pierce Terminator plate made valiant stands, but ultimately there was little the isolated and exhausted warriors could do. By the time Dainhold was fully engulfed by the changed and suddenly deadly light of Veridia there remained only corpses, mounted on the manufactoria walls as gruesome trophies by the Word Bearers.





PART V

THE BATTLE OF ITHRACA

"He who partakes of the devil's works will be brought at length to wield the devil's sword."

*The Book of Admonitions
The Apocrypha Terra*

One of a thousand bloody betrayals and desperate engagements that went on to make up that bleak day on Calth, the Battle of Ithracia is notable for a number of reasons, and not simply because of the apocalyptic scale of the forces involved. It can be seen, in no small part, as a dark foreshadowing of what was to come for the Imperium in its struggle with those who had betrayed it as, by its end, terrible and otherworldly forces—unbelievable and unexpected in nature—had been unleashed on the battlefield and carnage inconceivable to sane minds had taken place. It is also of singular note that

the Battle of Ithracia is a lesson to those who would study the cataclysm that befell Calth and the Ultramarines, that it would not only be the vaunted XIIIth Legion that would suffer on that day of ruin, but other forces of the Imperium—some no less august or legendary—would meet their own tragic end in the wreckage of this once fair world.

The Battle of Ithracia then was also to be a war not simply of brother Space Marine against brother Space Marine, but also of Titans and gargantuan war machines, of god-engines and warp-spawned monsters.

ITHRACA CITY

Perhaps the most important orbital transshipping hub on the surface of Calth, rivalled only by Lanshear in the size and scale of its facilities, the Ithracia Macro-dock comprised three distinct landing zones. Each contained a cluster of interconnected star docks and loading platforms, fed by a labyrinthine array of semi-subterranean storage and logistics facilities. Overall, these landing zones formed an uneven-sided triangle several thousand square kilometres in area. Between and around these vast facilities, Ithracia City had grown. Clad around the vast spider web of arterial roadways and the extensive network of elevated maglev railways designed for transporting priority personnel and cargo transport between the landing zones, the city had formed semi-organically, first as part of the support structure serving the bustling dockyards, then increasingly as a habitation space for the thousands, then several millions-strong population who carried out its industries and their ancillary services. In its overall layout, Ithracia City was complex but orderly and, in addition to the numerous precincts of worker habitation-blocks, it possessed myriad sub-districts centred on storage depots, power generation plants, repair workshops, support manufactoria and Administratum chamber-houses.

Civil and military control of the city and the dockyards was bound to the Ithracia Heliokon—a fortified spire-cluster which, at one and a half kilometres high, was both the tallest structure on the city's skyline and the most heavily constructed bastion in the entire Sanachi Province of Calth. The Ithracia Heliokon served as the primary orbital traffic control interface for Calth's southern equatorial region and the Ithracia Macro-dock in particular, as well as being one of the principal centres of ground-side command redundancy for the planet's defence grid should the central control at Kalkas Fortalice become compromised. Built to withstand direct attack as well as potential crash collision from wayward orbital traffic, the Heliokon possessed its own void shield generators equal to a capital class warship as well as its own missile batteries and defence turbo-laser emplacements to be called on in an emergency.

Bordered to the north by the sea, Ithracia City's coastline was dominated by a thirty kilometre-square industrial aqueduct and desalination facility, known in local parlance as *'The Trident'*, a name owing its origins to its three great water reservoirs. This vital

part of the city's infrastructure provided both drinking water for its population as well as vast quantities of coolant waters for the numerous blast pits and yard facilities of the Macro-dock. Further on, the city's sprawling southern inland edge gave way to an area of barrens and industrial spoil known as the Spur Wastes. Here was to be found the designated ground for wrecking yards, salvage sites and refuse processing operations, a blighted and desolate expanse of ground leading to the rocky barren plains of the Sanachi hinterlands beyond them.

The Titan Muster

When the drum beat of war was heard upon Calth and the vast army of conquest was gathered there for the assault against the Orks that would never be, Ithracia, with its potent resources both as a star port and arms store, as well as its formidable civil infrastructure, was key in the campaign's muster and deployment plans. As the lynchpin of the Sanachi Province muster, and because of the scale of its macro-transshipping facilities, which were able to handle the largest orbital landers and shuttles, coupled with its proximity to large areas of uninhabited barren land nearby, Ithracia City was selected for the singular role as the mustering point for the principal strengths of two entire Titan Legions: the Legio Praesagius (the True Messengers) and the Legio Sutturvora (the Fire Masters), and over two hundred god-engines.

A force sufficient to raze whole worlds to ashes stood awaiting their orders on the city's outskirts like a terrifying second city skyline of baleful figure cast on a gargantuan scale, their sirens piercing the darkness of the night. These two mighty forces, assigned to Landing Zones Macro-Alpha and Macro-Beta respectively, dwarfed all around them, but they were not alone. Several other major Imperial units requiring the use of macro-loaders and supporting Colossi class machine shops, as well as other facilities able to handle the repair, rearming and refit of large numbers of super-heavy tanks, were also accorded Ithracia City as their muster. Of these by far the largest was the Calaq

War Host stationed around Landing Zone Macro-Gamma. The war host was a massive mechanised army group of the Excertus Imperialis hailing from a chain of industrial night worlds known as the Calaq Sequence. This army group comprised three 90,000 strong divisions of mechanised infantry with five companies of field artillery and two full cohorts of super-heavy tanks in support.

In addition, within the city's core inside the subterranean bunker system that spread out from the Ithracia Heliokon, the greater strength of two chapters of the Ultramarines Legion had been temporarily based: the 4th Chapter (the Aurorans), a chapter whose structure was biased towards heavy armour tactics with its own super-heavy division, and the 24th Chapter (the Exitium), which operated as part of the XIIIth Legion's strategic reserve and featured a considerably above-strength contingent of dedicated support ordnance, mobile artillery systems and munitions train. These noted units formed only the most prominent of the forces deployed to Ithracia for the muster operations though, and kilometres of freshly constructed temporary hangars and barrack-blocks had been erected in the Spur Wastes and the Sanachi hinterlands beyond the city's boundaries to accommodate the vast influx.

A further quarter of a million soldiers of the Excertus Imperialis, ranging from feral tribe levy to elite Solar Auxilia elements, as well as more exotic units such as the ochre-liveried battle-automata of the Taghmata Xerxes from distant Accatran, also found temporary home there awaiting resupply, assignment and orbital lift to the waiting fleet and the promised war.

A DARKNESS AT MACRO-GAMMA

Just as so much of the record of the Battle of Calth is fragmentary, so much of what happened in and around the Muster of Calth has been lost to the savagery loosed against the planet itself and the solar-scouring it would suffer long afterward; data-corrosion and the dead themselves taking with them much that could offer explanation and clarity into the events of this apocalyptic battle and its inception. There are however exceptions to this rule and artefact-data where it has survived has offered great insight, for the Ultramarines and their demi-realm were nothing if not meticulous in their record keeping. One such artefact, an arbitrator-notary's personal logos-core found in the wreckage of Arcology Epsilon-XXIV, speaks to the days and hours at Ithracia City before the betrayal. The logos-core contained a report detailing a wave of strange and unaccountable phenomena, and a vast upswing in violent criminal incidents in the region of the Macro-Gamma sector of Ithracia City. The reports date almost exactly in their commencement to the arrival of the Calaq War Host to the Sanachi Province muster some five local weeks before the arrival of the Word Bearers Legion and their auxiliaries in the Veridia system.

The reports range from inexplicable power outages and localised weather and temperature phenomena, to a 300 per cent increase over average of equipment breakages and petty systems failures in the sector. In parallel with this was a steadily escalating pattern of civil disturbances, from an increase in domestic violence in the dock workers' habitation stacks, to a seemingly unconnected web of individuals suffering catastrophic mental breakdown, furthered as time progressed to include a spike in reported murders—often of an extremely bloody character—and a staggering increase in missing persons in the sector (both from the local population and other Excertus Imperialis regiments of the muster assigned to the region). This culminated in the arrival of a forty-carriage maglev worker shuttle train, full at departure but putting into its destination the day before the attack on Calth empty save for blood-spattered walls and a few shreds of gore-clotted clothing. This incident was considered so shocking and inexplicable that the masters of Ultramar, in the shape of the feared Vigil Opertii, had been called in to investigate. The tide of history however would prevent any answers being found.

The final addendum of the report features a commentary by the author that no such strange or violent occurrences can in any way be connected or attributed to the Calaq War Host, despite its general proximity in all cases to the locations involved. It does note the considerable disquiet generally resulting from the war host's noted insularity, lack of cooperation with local authorities and seemingly barbaric and sinister character. Though the report itself notes that such a reputation had preceded the Calaq War Host, and was not uncommon in regards to tithed armed forces drawn from worlds grown savage during the Age of Strife—going so far as to include a reference to the works of the Imperial Iterator-General Emnilda Žmavc who cited the Calaq Hold Worlds as a rare *Res ipsa loquitur* case of a society which had suffered complete social and moral regression while maintaining an almost unaffected technological base after the fall of human-galactic civilisation.

In retrospect, the assignment of the Calaq War Host by the orders of the Warmaster directly to the Calth Muster can now be seen for what it was; an entirely deliberate act, most likely at Lorgar's direct request. It had been the Word Bearers who had brought the Calaq Holds to Compliance during their great post-Monarchia campaign of conquests, and who had also held their strange superstitions to be of a nature that prolonged exposure to Imperial culture would dispel. The powerful Calaq War Host had served on many battlefronts in the intervening years and for a number of masters with great success, as the Calaq's savagery and military expertise, in conjunction with their mental resilience, was found extremely useful in a variety of high-intensity war zones. But with the wisdom of hindsight it can be acknowledged that ignorance of the true nature of the Calaq culture had been deliberately fostered by the Traitors' conspiracy, and the dangers of its ritual beliefs had been fatally underestimated.

THE BETRAYAL AT ITHRACIA

Just as the first great blow of the Battle of Calth was struck and the fleet tender *Campanile* smashed into the planet's supra-orbital ring, wreaking havoc and destroying the Calth Veridian Anchor stations and ravaging dozens of vessels docked there, Ithracia, in the southern hemisphere and with the planet's mass between them and the orbital conflagration, was at first ignorant of what had transpired.

It was mid-morning by the local diurnal cycle and the industry of the port was in full swing, with the activities of the muster having progressed to the stage where the Legio Praesagius and the Legio Sutturvora were at last beginning the embarkation of their Titans to waiting macro-transporters in high orbit in imminent preparation for the coming war. Of all of the forces that had been gathered around Ithracia City, the True Messengers had been given the honour of being the first to depart, and in order to facilitate this, its major strength of Titan engines, some seventy god-engines, had been drawn up into close order at the primary facility of the vast Macro-Alpha landing zone. Several smaller sub-deployments destined for various sub-commands within the future invasion force, designated Battlegroups Argentus, Geryon and Peregrine, were then scattered to other smaller marshalling zones at the edges of Macro-Alpha.

The leading elements of Legio Praesagius, including its heaviest and most honoured Battle Titans, had already boarded the colossal orbital lifter *Arutan* at the centre of Macro-Alpha's primary landing zone, and it would be the *Arutan* which would be the first to carry the Legio's Titans back to the stars. The *Arutan* was a vast, slab-like vessel, a purpose-built Mechanicum Titan-conveyor, itself almost two kilometres in length by nearly a kilometre across and near half a kilometre in height. The lifter was fitted with plasma-thruster engines so powerful no other craft could operate in its vicinity with any margin of safety as it blasted off. To this end, air and orbital traffic across Ithracia City had been placed in temporary abeyance in preparation for the *Arutan*'s departure, and the countdown had reached its end and the colossal plasma thrusters bloomed into fire only moments before, when, suddenly and inexplicably, the vast flow of coordination signals and command and control information from Calth's planetary data manifold fell silent, killed in an instant by the *Campanile*'s deadly work. This silence was the cue for the Traitors to act.

As the *Arutan* rose on its ponderously slow ascent, its engines flaring like new suns rising over the city, force commanders and systems control officers across Ithracia who were not part of the treachery fruitlessly tried to re-establish contact with the signal control network, only to be greeted at first by the maddening absence of transmission which served as an ominous prelude to a slowly rising dirge of incomprehensible chanting and malign data scrapcode, which began to assail any cogitator system that received it, blotting out all else. Elsewhere, the Traitors were not so afflicted; to them the dirge was a sacred call to arms. Engines roared to life and war machine reactors spiked into full power, as on sealed and encrypted vox-channels harsh orders were barked and baying cries issued by discipline masters to their troops as the betrayal swung into operation and fire struck down from the sky.

The first strikes which fell were few but strategically targeted and scheduled by the Word Bearers' plan of attack, lance-beams and plasma-burst cluster barrages unleashed from Traitor vessels in high orbit before they turned on closer prey in the void. Each struck down at Landing Zone Macro-Alpha, raining a blaze of destruction down on the ill-prepared Titans of the Legio Praesagius, slicing through armour caught unprotected by void shields.

With the *Arutan* still ascending above Macro-Alpha, the city found itself at the centre of the storm and was struck a dozen times by the spears of killing light from space. The *Arutan* also suffered through the attack's fury; a lesser vessel would have been immediately destroyed, but the Titan-conveyor was forged on Mars to deliver and extract its precious cargo in the heart of the most tempestuous battle and its armoured hide was more akin to that of a battleship than a simple lifter craft. But still the *Arutan* shook and shuddered under the bombardment, its ascent wavering as its upper hull glowed ember-red with searing heat, when suddenly one of its four great thruster units, slammed again by lance fire, broke away, becoming a fiery missile careening across the city-scape to plunge into the seas beyond, and the *Arutan* began to fall. The huge lifter slewed across the skyline of Ithracia, its Mechanicum Navarchos pilots desperately trying to retain height as the craft smashed the upper stories off habitation blocks and toppled the vent spires off of high-reaching thermo towers as it went, creating a swath of destruction through the city before crash landing in the civic parklands at the city's core.

Though the brief fury of the first orbital attack meted out destruction to the Legio Praesagius, they were not its sole or indeed principal target. Instead, this was the scores of orbital lifters, landed gunships, fighter squadrons and void shuttles caught supine on the ground below, and across these the Traitors sowed total havoc, shattering hulls and rending fuselages, detonating munitions and fuel lines so that entire dockyard complexes became seas of fire rumbling with the percussion of an endless series of secondary explosions as power cells and shell magazines cooked.

The city reeled in shock, but this was but the beginning. All across Ithracia and its vast array of landing zones and marshalling yards, and out into the wastelands and plains beyond, the Imperialis Auxilia in their hundreds of thousands were set cheek by jowl, regiment by regiment, Traitors alongside Loyalists who were not yet even aware of the division, but to whom the reality was about to be made bloodily plain. Just as the treacherous assault from space fell, betrayal and murder were unleashed. At sentry posts and checkpoints, in commissary halls and barrack-blocks, loading bays and vehicle slipways, men and women were gunned down by those they had thought comrades, blades were bared and blood flowed. Grenades were hurled into packed dormitories and on muster fields. Whole battalions waiting in ordered ranks were scythed down like wheat, fired on at point-blank range or simply crushed under the tracks of armoured vehicles of supposed allies in the Imperium's cause. It was a tide of murder; a massacre of a multitude carried out in minutes.

The Clash of the Gods

Little more than fifteen minutes had elapsed from the first fall of the orbital strike when a deep report, louder even than the sound of explosions and disaster sirens that swept the city, was heard, drowning all else out as the ground trembled. It echoed across Ithracia from far beyond its boundaries—a sound that can now be identified as the decamegaton impact concussion wave generated by the hulk of the falling Ultramarines grand cruiser *Antrodamicus* striking Kalkas Fortalice to the north and all but obliterating that fair city. This death cry was answered immediately by the terrifying exultation of a hundred Titan war sirens bellowing at once; the Fire Masters were on the move. Their targets, the remaining True Messengers at Macro-Alpha, however, were still unaware of their intentions and did not respond. Vox

channels were now completely jammed with chanting incantations and endlessly repeated names, which caused many human operators exposed to them to succumb to hysteria or even spontaneous psychotic breakdowns. While the internecine slaughter was at first largely confined to the forces of the Imperial Army stationed around the city and in the mustering camps beyond, other off-world forces from the Taghmata Xerxes to the Titans of Legio Praesagius were at a loss as to how to react, unsure of just who the enemy was or whether some vast accidental calamity was unfolding around them, the true danger not apparent until it was far too late. Great plumes of fire and toxic smoke were already rising above the city from the blasted dockyards and landing zones, and panic was already spreading throughout the civilian population faster than any wildfire. Arterial roadways soon became blocked by multiple vehicle collisions, and crowds stampeded away from the carnage the forces of the Imperialis Auxilia were suddenly inflicting on each other as hundreds of civilian workers and functionaries were killed in the crossfire.

On the south-western flank of the city, the great span of the Spur Wastes which separated Landing Zones Macro-Alpha and Macro-Beta and their respective muster sites began to roil and shake as if localised earthquakes were taking place. Such was the tread of an entire Titan Legion at flank march. Drawn out in a wide, shallow echelon, some seven kilometres end to end, more than one hundred Titans charged to war, the might of the Legio Sutturvora hungering for battle. In their passing, the Spur Wastes were hammered flat, and anything caught in their path, friend or foe, be it soldier, armoured vehicle, bivouac or bastion, was simply pulverised like an insect beneath the tread of the unstoppable god-engines. For all the Titans' breakneck charge, there was method to the madness and strategy, and no Titan from this gargantuan attack wave let forth its weapons until their true quarry was in sight. Rounding the broken line of refineries and tech-reclamation yards which marked the boundary of Landing Zone Macro-Alpha, throwing up a great dust storm around them, at last the vast plasma coils of the Fire Masters began to burn hot and their megabolters wracked their chambers with shells; the unsuspecting Legio Praesagius waited.

Far above the city, the sky began to at once darken and became scattered with brief, savage flares of light as the void battle broke out in Calth's orbital space, while at the Ithracia Heliokon, savant-magos and

lexmechanic clades struggled with little success to engage their emergency control protocols to assume control over the city's defences and airspace, or even to gain any kind of accurate portrayal of just what calamity was befalling them, blinded as they were and infected with malign scrapcode which bedevilled their every effort to assert command. It is likely that the Mechanicum Tech-Priests of the Heliokon could well have reasserted such control in time, but it was not time they were allowed, and in their ignorance they also awaited their doom.

Slowly at first and then in gathering numbers, the black smoke trails and fiery comets of burning debris began to fall upon the city, adding steadily to the gathering chaos and the mounting death toll in the streets. One such orb of fire grew more steadily brighter than the others but did not fall; instead it hung there like a portent

of death to come, and such it was. The hovering blaze was in fact the orbital entry burn of the *Dirac's Lament*, a Mechanicum-modified Tritonos class galleass which served as the sovereign domain and principal conveyance of the Ordo Reductor Covenant of Mormoth-Null, and unlike the ships which had unleashed the first sweep of fire from high orbit, it moved with measured and deadly patience. As the *Dirac's Lament* attained its precisely calculated geostationary orbit above the city, it emptied its missile banks towards the surface and, for a brief moment, the burning star was haloed in a many-barbed crown of fire. This was to be no saturation strike by atomantic fusion warheads however, a blow that might have put an end to Ithrace City, as helpless as it was, in a single strike—and on reflection a perhaps more merciful manner—but a far crueller and drawn-out death was in the Traitors' design. The warheads were

instead siege weapons; directed melta charge warheads designed to unleash their power in tightly patterned cones of effect. The greater number of the missile spread fell towards the prostrate Heliokon, its defences in disarray, its void shields stubbornly inactive thanks to the baleful infection in its control systems, whilst other lesser clusters streaked down towards the generator stations of the city and its arbitrator block fortresses—anywhere that would cripple the city and any resistance it might rally.

Exactly fifty metres above their targets and in utter synchronicity, the machine-spirit-inhabited weapons detonated, unleashing blinding down-beams of heat and killing radiation, each equal to that of the radiance of a dying star. Wherever the killing blaze struck, ferrocrete burned to ash and the ash burned to nothingness, plasteel became superheated steam and adamantium flowed

like water. The Ithrace Heliokon ceased to exist, replaced by a blinding wash of light before a vast black mushroom cloud rose up to the heavens like the afterblow of a wrathful god's hammer. A hurricane of superheated air driven forth from the blast tore through the city, howling like the triumph of the damned, bowling ground vehicles through the streets and tearing maglev carriages from their rails like spilled toys. It was to this tumult and its portent that the Titans and scions of the Legio Praesagius at the Macro-Alpha landing zone were turned, their shields and armour plates angled cityward to protect them against the blast, when the Fire Masters slammed into their flanks, their weapons blazing.

A score of Praesagius Titans fell to the Fire Masters' first salvo, and a score more were savaged brutally, their back carapaces rent open, reactor-vessels cracking, or their vast

endoskeletons simply coming apart under the assaults of a hundred of their brethren into twisted wreckage. It was a slaughter of god-engines unprecedented in its speed and scale since the dawning of the Imperium, and still the Fire Masters came on.

The Slaughter of the Innocents

On the other side of the city from the Titan battle that was then erupting, the Calaq War Host broke from Landing Zone Macro-Gamma and fell upon the panicked city like ravening jackals. Having already slaughtered everyone not of their company within the landing zone area, they poured through the streets killing as they came, using the bladed prows of their tanks' dozer blades to create utter carnage amongst crowds huddling for cover, and turning to bayonet and cleaver wherever they could, the more to sow terror and mutilate those they killed, daubing strange sigils in the blood of their victims on their bodies and the flanks of their armoured vehicles. Wherever the Calaq met stern resistance, be it a Loyalist army unit quickly dug in, or even a force of tech-adepts who had managed to engage an emergency lockdown on a bunker-manufactora, the Calaq quickly concentrated strike forces of super-heavy tanks to smash such resistance aside, or unleashed close support wings of Avenger bombers and gunship-modified lifters to saturate the area with fire.

But this tactical expediency aside, the Calaq War Host's goal was clearly wholesale slaughter, and they pursued the workers and the citizenry with a diabolical fury, running them down, penning them in and butchering them like cattle. They held no ground, established no lines of supply or forward bases of attack, they simply pressed on with a relentless, malign hunger to kill while above them, the skies were blackening further and a fresh rain of fire was beginning to fall. But these were not merely the burning debris of dead warships, these were the dark contrails of Legiones Astartes gunships bedecked in the Word Bearers' new livery of dark crimson, and the bright falling stars of drop pods and Ordo Reductor war crucibles.

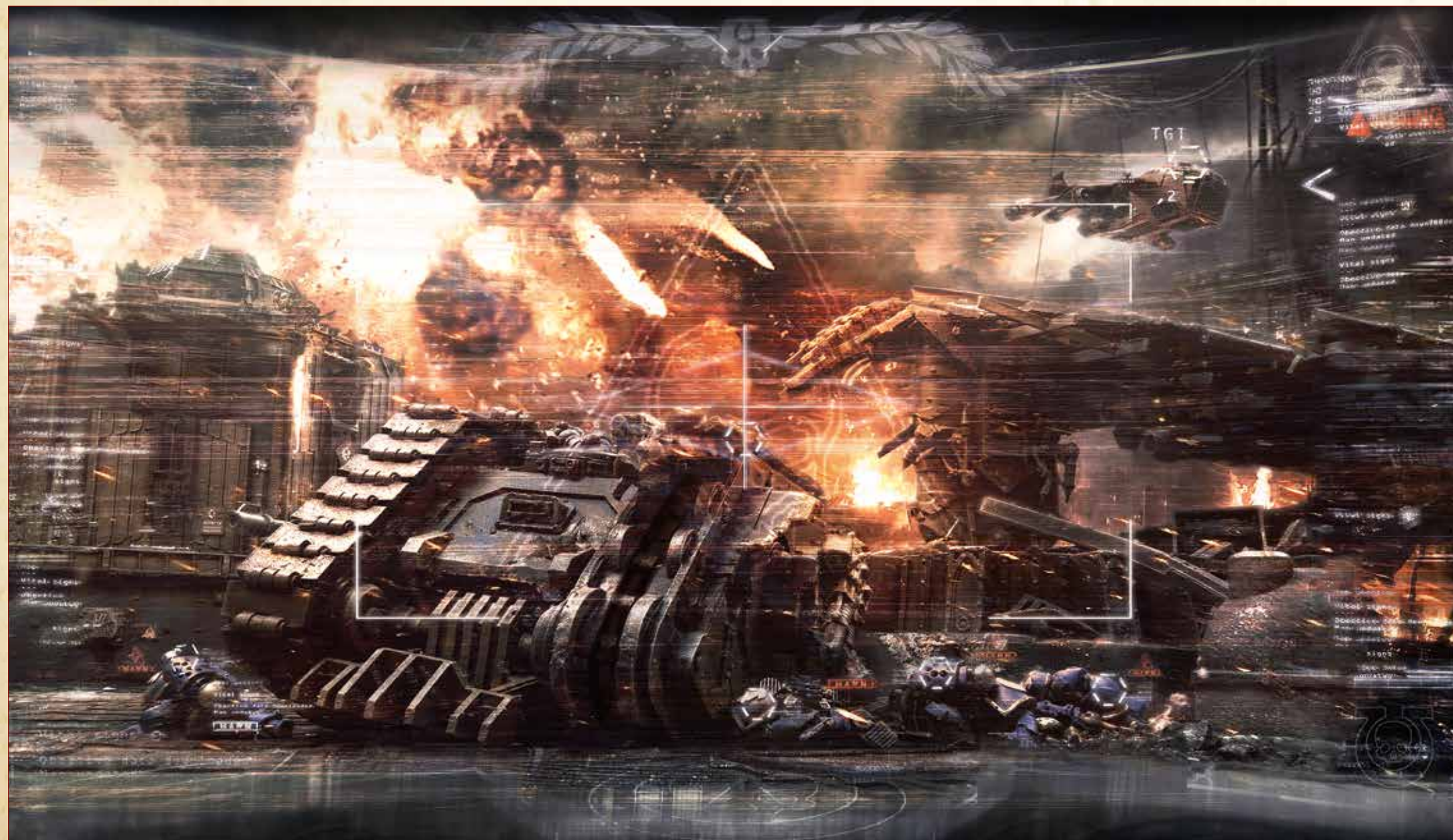
The Fate of the Pegasus

It is a testament to the courage and discipline of the Legio Praesagius that faced with such shocking catastrophe and brutal losses, they succumbed neither to panic nor disarray in the face of the onslaught. Those of the True Messengers who remained active and those ancillary forces who attended them that survived after the initial storm of firepower from the Fire Masters quickly recovered

their wits and rallied. The battlegroup fell into a defensive *'trinity shield'* formation. This comprised three maniples of five Titans each of their most heavily armoured units, all as yet undamaged Warlord class Battle Titans forming a continuous wedge of reactor-overcharged void shields as a bastion wall behind which their lighter units and damaged brethren could rally. But as the air between them and the closing Fire Masters front line Titans was rent with annihilating energy blasts and screaming shells, even this nigh-impenetrable wall of atomantic force began to quickly buckle and waver as the ground before them was fused to black glass and the firmament above recoiled in washing plasma flame.

With the other general officers of the Legio trapped in the wreck of the *Arutian* somewhere in the city and out of contact, and for all she knew dead, field command of the True Messengers fell by seniority to Master-Princeps Rhiko Trieste of the Warlord *Auric Pegasus* at the heart of the shield line. She knew without doubt that the situation was dire; her surviving True Messengers were outnumbered and vastly outgunned by the onrushing world-burners of the Legio Suturvora, who were now closing the final breach of distance between the two lines. She knew that when the Legios collided, the numerically superior, wider-file Fire Masters force would encircle and crush her own and there would be no escape.

Cursing the Traitors, she issued her first and final command as mistress of the Legio Praesagius; all of her surviving units behind the trinity shield formation, some thirty-three god-engines of various classes along with a score of affiliated Knights—nearly all damaged in some way—would immediately fall back into Ithrace City and disperse, finding cover in order to try to restore shield power and blunt the numerical advantage of the Fire Masters in the artificial canyons of the great city and carry on the fight unto the death. The nine Warlords, including her own, would buy them the chance to flee with their blood. To these, she issued a single order; charge. Two of the True Messenger Warlords never made contact with the enemy, one at the extreme end of the formation as it broke caught the weight of weapons fire against it as the shield wall moved apart, its own shields sheering away in a blaze of light before it detonated in a thunder of plasma, while another, its knee joint burned through by a volcano cannon strike, toppled disastrously to the ground in a vast plume of dirt and wreckage. The fallen Warlord's



weapons were still firing blindly as it was overrun minutes later, but the seven-strong counter-shock charge slammed home into the thinner Fire Masters line and splintered it, forcing the attack echelon to prematurely close upon itself to compensate. The surviving Warlords of the Legio Praesagius battled on with desperate fury, each fighting with pride and contempt, and one by one they died.

Apocryphal accounts of the action state that it was indeed the *Auric Pegasus* that was the last of them to fall, the severed head of an enemy Reaver Titan clutched in the Warlord's power fist, its carapace weapons left little more than blackened stumps and its armour running like molten wax under the savagery of the Fire Masters' attack. The nine fell, but their wounded brothers had escaped into the city.

They were not alone. Elsewhere, several of the smaller sub-deployed Legio Praesagius battlegroups had survived, although one, Battlegroup Peregrine, had been annihilated outright by the fury of the *Dirac's Lament's* missiles. Conversely, Battlegroup Argentus, led by the Reaver Titan *Invigilator*, had survived the initial attacks all but unscathed, saved almost perversely by its close proximity to the trailing edge of the Fire Masters' own sub-marshalling area when the orbital assault had occurred. Coming swiftly under attack from the Fire Masters' outlying elements, it had quickly fallen back into the city, but had been tragically unable to warn the main Legio Praesagius force of the calamity that was about to befall it owing to vox interference. This relatively small force would go on to play a key role in the battle to come.

The battle-automata cohorts and armoured squadrons of the Taghmata Xerxes had likewise weathered the storm. After suffering initial losses from orbital attack, they also

fell back towards the city, selecting a heavy industrial zone in its southern quarter as affording the greatest cover. Traitor auxiliaries in the form of the Mordechai Occlusion regiments had thought to bar their way, but the feudal world-raised troops possessed only relatively light armaments and proved no match for the taghmata, which pitilessly eradicated the chanting assault waves, killing thousands, while Mechanicum-affiliated Knights secured the taghmata's flanks as it advanced en masse into the industrial zone.

The initial wave of slaughter and destruction was over. Now the stage was set for the Battle of Ithraça's second bloody phase.

DARKNESS AND FIRE

By the end of the first hour of the Battle of Ithraça, the western sectors of the city had become the scene of a deadly conflict between Titans, the most powerful of all the Imperium's war machines, in a clash of unprecedented scale and ferocity. The Legio Praesagius god-engines, battered and wounded but far from helpless, scattered down the ferrocrete and plasteel canyons and thoroughfares, forming a maze walled in on all sides by sky-scraping multi-level habitation blocks, squat manufactora complexes and hulking modular storage bunkers. The Titans of the Fire Masters followed relentlessly on their heels, their apocalyptically powerful weapons blazing great arcs of bright plasma and screaming shellfire. Soon, the city-scape was a crumbling ruin; towers were toppled into rubble or shot through with gaping rents like bullet-ridden corpses as the Titans did battle, manoeuvring to put such cover as they could between them and the foe or simply using their bulk and power to crash a path through buildings and elevated plazas, uncaring of the results so long as they lived to fight on.

Whole streets were set aflame by the lethal breath of inferno cannon, and crowds of terrified citizens were driven before the battling giants in mindless panic. For the people of Ithraça there was no sanctuary and the death toll was nigh incalculable. Soon the battlelines of the two Titan forces became hopelessly interpenetrated, the burning city-scape forcing the larger Fire Masters force to break up in order to pursue their foes, and the fighting devolved into a score of savage brawls, ambushes, counter-attacks and desperate retreats between small bands of Titans and Knights. The sundered reactors of over-taxed Titans exploded in their bitter

death throes, bringing yet more devastation and sending up great black palls of scalding toxic vapour, which further added to a miasma of dust and smoke which had spread out across the city in a false night. In the midst of this chaos and bloodshed, the Legio Praesagius Battlegroup Argentus, although relatively few in number, at a dozen Titans of various classes still largely intact and under the command of the *Invigilator*, pressed on through the cataclysm with a single goal—the wreck of the *Arutan* and the hope that within its armoured bulk salvation lay.

In the city's eastern sectors, on the opposite side of its core from the crashed *Arutan*, the murderous assault of the Calaq War Host held sway. It was only when armoured figures in praetorian blue and burnished gold began to appear at the edges of the spreading Calaq attack to confront them that at last the stampede of murder met its match. The warriors of the XIIIth Legion were a scattered few at first, members of the 4th and 24th Chapters who had been diverted to smaller sub-deployments across the city's core and who had been caught up in the catastrophic after-blast of the Helikon's fiery destruction. These small commands had immediately rallied and were now independently seeking access to the deep sub-city bunkers in which their brethren had been based beneath the sprawling Helikon complex. The main entranceways to the bunkers around the blasted Helikon were sealed under a seething tarn of molten rock, but slowly auxiliary tunnels were opened up or blasted clear of rubble, often by Tech-Priests and Ultramarines that were under direct enemy fire, and the number of the XIIIth Legion's forces in the fray began to increase; however a great many of their number had already been lost, either incinerated or buried alive in collapses and cave-ins caused by the Traitors' onslaught.

Confronted by the Calaq War Host's wanton butchery of the very men and women of Ultramar they were sworn to defend, many of the Ultramarines in the eastern sector fringes turned immediately to counterattack, just as those to the west became embroiled in the Titan battle. Striking with a righteous and avenging anger terrible to behold, they plunged into the blood-soaked ranks of the Calaq, their power armour resistant to the war host's small arms and offering precious little vulnerability to be exploited by knife blade or bayonet point. The superhuman Ultramarines killed with machine-like efficiency, the bodies of the Calaq riflemen exploding apart in hails of bolter fire or

slashed apart by whirling chainswords. The Ultramarines' desire for vengeance, however, did not fray their discipline and where they met concentrations of enemy combat walkers or armoured vehicles, they held back until heavy weapons could be brought forwards to deal with them.

Quickly co-ordinating as best they could, the Legiones Astartes formulated a strategy by which they used the city's topography to their advantage and the terrain of the soaring habitation blocks to gain the higher ground. From there they used concentrations of missile launchers and lascannon to strike down upon an enemy whose tactical sense seemed rapidly replaced by rabid madness and bloodlust. But even as the Ultramarines' few held out against the Calaq's many, the vast reverberations from the west of the city, which shook the ground and rent the air, drowning out even their own pitched battles, told them that far more terrible struggles were raging elsewhere whose outcome would yet decide Ithraça's fate.

Apocalypse

The strange malady of wrath which first revealed itself within the Calaq War Host soon began to show evidence within the other Traitor forces as well. Wave upon wave of other Traitor Auxilia and cult forces began to hurl themselves against the improvised defences and barricades the Taghmata Xerxes had quickly set up in the southern industrial zone they had marked for their stand against their foes. These waves came so thick and so fast that the carefully calculated kill zones became swamped with bodies, and the weapons of the defenders began to overheat and magazines ran dry, such was the relentless, suicidal fury of the enemy.

It was an enemy spurred on now by hulking crimson-armoured figures in their midst; Word Bearers whose power armour the magos now registered as having become corrupted with non-blessed adornments and modifications, such as jutting, bladed horns rising from their helmets and burning sensors gouting psychotropic incense from their backpacks. These Word Bearers, identified in after-action data extractions as carrying the iconography of the Chapter of the Unspeaking, bought with them recognisable Legiones Astartes heavy armour and weapons, as well as devices of unrecognised pattern and murderous power which, in conjunction with the relentless human and abhuman attack waves, started to cause significant damage to the hard-pressed battle-automata and Adsecularis cohorts of

the Taghmata Xerxes. Vastly outnumbered and now seriously threatened, the Taghmata were forced to slowly begin giving ground so that they could fall back in an ever-shrinking series of redoubts and hastily, though efficiently organised, defensive perimeters.

Nor even were the Legio Sutturvora and its mighty Titans exempt from this unreasoning madness. Although Sutturvora had been the holy name gifted to the Titan Legion on its inception on Mars at the dawning of the Great Crusade, they had taken another cognomen, that of 'Infernus' in the popular parlance of their peers, while the rank and file of the auxilia who had seen their work had dubbed them simply the 'Fire Masters'; it was a name in which they had come to revel, and on this terrible day, never had it been more deserved.

As the hours wore on, less and less did the Fire Masters seem to operate as a coherent fighting force and more as akin to nightmarish and murderous beasts let loose to savage the city like creatures of ancient myth. Tactical considerations slipped aside in their desire simply to kill, and while some of the Fire Masters Titans continued to pursue their chosen foes in the dwindling ranks of the Legio Praesagius, others, having lost sight of their quarry, simply began to turn on the panicked and fleeing masses of humanity before them, slaughtering thousands as they went and shattering tower blocks filled with screaming innocents for the seeming pleasure of seeing them fall. Against these fleeing masses, the Fire Masters employed tactics used previously only against worlds that had shunned the Imperial Truth or xenos forms marked for utter extermination; with the raw power of their battle sirens, they drove people staggering, bleeding and deafened from cover and corralled them like stampeding cattle into streets and loading-bay defiles where only fire and death waited, and none were spared.

As baleful as this madness proved for the people of Ithraça, for the grievously wounded remnants of the Legio Praesagius it offered a vital respite, as had the Fire Masters force been able to concentrate properly on the wreck of the *Arutan*, all would have been lost for the True Messengers. As it was, when Battlegroup Argentus forced its way through to the crash site, along with a ragged support column formed of less than a company's worth of Ultramarines survivors and a tercio of the 312th Solar Auxilia, it found only a single hulking Nemesis class Heavy Battle Titan and a pair of Warhound Scout Titans

alongside a cadre of Fire Masters skitarii barring their way, where they might—and perhaps should—have found a triumphant demi-Legio gloating above a smouldering crater where the *Arutan* had been. Even this would prove a deadly match, for while Battlegroup Argentus had the numerical advantage in Titans, the Fire Masters Nemesis—the darkly renowned *Revoka*—was a true Titan-killer of appalling power, alone able to destroy any Titan of the True Messengers' number in a single volley of its gargantuan weapons. Knowing that time was not on their side and their only chance to reach the *Arutan* was in an all-out attack, Argentus engaged without hesitation.

THE DRUM BEAT OF HELL

Across Ithraça, as across Calth itself, war raged, but at Ithraça, no one side had the upper hand. By the sixth hour of the fighting, more Ultramarines reinforcements had moved into the city by gunships and Rhinos from the west to add their strength to the Loyalist forces. These were the surviving companies of the 17th and 18th Chapters, fighting their way clear of ambushes and dogged by aerial attack by the Word Bearers Black Comet Chapter's void strike wings. The commanders and squad leaders of these companies had guessed rightly that although Ithraça City offered no safe harbour, to remain exposed on the plains beyond meant certain death, as already the Word Bearers, in control of the planetary defence network and all but unchallenged now in orbit, were commencing a renewed and savage bombardment of the southern hemisphere.

Separated from their battle-brothers by tens of kilometres of burning cityscape, the surviving force of the Ultramarines 4th Chapter had solidified around the leadership of Sub-captain Mantargo. He had led a break-out from beneath the city of a sizable proportion of his chapter's armour and mobile artillery, deploying it in a stroke of strategic brilliance to the high ground offered by the city's great Trident Aqueduct system, whose massive construction, built to hold vast tonnages of purified water, had yet withstood the ravages of the war. Holding off probing attacks from Traitor Reductor Thallax strike forces, from there Mantargo directed deadly counter-battery fire across the city's northern reaches and coastline, and channelled reinforcements to where fighting was thickest. But for all Mantargo's effective command, he was still limited in his reach by the incessant jamming of all long range vox and signal traffic by an incessant chanting of repeated words and phrases on all channels

The Glorious Dead, known to the annals of the Collegia Titanica as the Nine Paragons of Ithraça

- *The Auric Pegasus*
- *Sabris Regnum*
- *Plutarchos*
- *The Lion of Mars*
- *The Silver Thorn*
- *Reason's Thunder*
- *The Will of Adamant*
- *The Triumph of Accatran*
- *Chrysaor's Wake*

[not duplicated here on grounds of potential mimetic contamination] which had intensified to the point that soon resembled nothing so much as a maddening drum beat.

At the site of the *Arutan's* fall, after the mighty Fire Masters Titan *Revoka* had been defeated but at great cost to Battlegroup *Argentus* and its allies. The Legio *Praesagius* Warlord *Evocatus* and the Warhound *Deathrunner* had also been destroyed, while the commanding *Invigilator* and its two surviving comrades had been badly damaged. The remnants of the battlegroup, along with the last survivors of the Legio saved by the sacrifice of the nine, were now holding out in a desperate last stand around the *Arutan*. They were under heavy fire from increasing numbers of Traitor infantry and freshly encroaching Fire Masters Titans as Loyalist Techmarines and Mechanicum work teams laboured to free the half-buried and heat-buckled main assault bay doors of the crashed macro-lifter. But their hopes had already been proved sound, as contact with those within had ascertained that some of the heaviest units of the Legio *Praesagius* had survived, though they were rendered impotent. Contained as they were, they could not activate their void shields and did not dare trigger their weapons to burn their way out due to certain lethal back-blast in a compartment awash with spilled fuel and munitions.

To the south-east at this hour, matters for the Taghmata *Xerxes* were becoming increasingly desperate. The arrival of a Household of Loyalist Knights from the stranded House *Vornherr* detachment at *Ithraca* had bought a temporary respite, but the *Xerxes* had shortly afterwards found themselves pinioned between the living waves of Word Bearers-driven cult troops and the crimson and black liveried siege-automata of the Ordo *Reductor* of the Traitor cohort of Covenant *Mormoth-Null*, which had sought them out for destruction. While the scions of House *Vornherr* bought time with their steel and their blood, the magos of the Taghmata *Xerxes*, cut off from outside contact and aid, enacted a desperate plan, working feverishly to dismantle and reconfigure a large plasma reactor unit which had been until then the beating heart of one of the great manufactora of the city, the plasteel-clad ruins of which now constituted the Taghmata's final redoubt.

Seven point six hours after the battle had commenced, the Taghmata *Xerxes* launched its counter-attack. Utilising its last reserves of *Castellax* class battle-automata as a fighting



wedge, relying on their servo claws and power blades to cut their way through the enemy, the charge of the battle-automata cleared a path to the heart of the Word Bearers-driven horde. Into this breach, three damaged but still-functional Thanatar class siege-automata dragged the modified reactor, now rebuilt into a highly unstable plasma bomb of prodigious explosive power. Oblivious to their fate, the cultic horde drove on afresh to the attack, while high above aboard the *Dirac's Lament*, the master of Covenant Mormoth-Null, the Archmagos Barbatos Hexad, known as 'the Worm' to the commanders of the Great Crusade, perceived the danger and ordered an immediate withdrawal, but it was too late.

Having determined that victory was logically impossible, the magos of the Taghmata Xerxes activated a program of mutual destruction, detonating the bomb. An area of roughly a half kilometre in diameter was immediately burned to vapour, while beyond that, the blast wave reached out to ravage an area equivalent to twenty-three city blocks, charring flesh to cinder and twisting metal into smouldering wreckage.

The explosion which destroyed the southern heavy industrial zone, despite its tremendous power, went unnoticed at the *Arutan* crash site, such was the firepower and destruction being unleashed between the warring Titans across the Demesnus Parklands. The sacrifice and determination of Battlegroup Argentus, now reduced to only the half-crippled *Invigilator*, had not been in vain. Just before the beginning of the seventh hour, the *Arutan's* assault door had been lowered and the most powerful units of the Legio Praesagius were unleashed into the fray, among them the *Immortalis Domitor*, a Warmonger class Emperor Titan, whose power and stature dwarfed even the two full maniples of Warlord Titans which accompanied it from the *Arutan's* hold. The massed firepower of these fresh god-engines smashed flat the parklands in a three kilometre radius, destroying outright the Fire Masters Battle Titans *Deus Vassago*, *Orias*, *Consecratus Inferna* and *Tyrant's Fist* in their opening salvo.

The tide was turned. The *Immortalis Domitor* led the vengeful Titans of the True Messengers in a scouring of the western sectors of the city, operating as a single, co-ordinated group. Though the vox and signal interference had now reached a crescendo, the Titans reverted to the age-old practice of communicating through the deafening

cries of their war sirens. They faced enemies—be they Titan engine or levy infantry—seemingly overcome by pure homicidal rage, blundering and killing almost at random, and against these madmen the co-ordinated power of the Legio Praesagius was unstoppable. On their respective battlefields, the separated elements of the Ultramarines consolidated their forces and began a targeted series of attacks, taking advantage of the sudden shift in the fortunes of war in their favour. They also began to channel such civilians as had survived to evacuation via newly secured sub-city routes to the underground arcologies thirty kilometres to the west of Ithraça. Hampered by the anarchy and vox-storm as much as by the devastation that had engulfed the city, this was a near impossible task and the flow of refugees only merely a trickle. Against all odds, the Loyalist forces were retaking Ithraça City, and the enemy was in disarray. The eighth hour was at hand.

From Beyond

The first indication of what was to come was the sudden cessation of the blinding vox interference which had blanketed the city. The silence that followed was ominous after such a horrific tumult, but was soon replaced by a blizzard of Loyalist signal; isolated units attempting to reconnect with their commanders, distress calls, demands for casualty and situation reports, and a myriad other desperate impeachments for aid, obedience and information as the survivors of the Traitor onslaught sought order amid the anarchy of war.

Across this fresh cacophony cut a high priority vox burst from the Legio Praesagius Warhound Titan *Lacardio*. The Scout Titan had been despatched into the smoking wasteland of the industrial zone where the Taghmata Xerxes had made their defiant end, shielded as it was against both heat and radioactive fallout, in order to search the area for survivors, Loyalist or Traitor, and respond accordingly. It reported arriving at scenes of burned bodies fused with twisted metalwork raised up almost to form a concentric forest of macabre trees, evidently not consistent with any known weapon or blast effect, while its auspex and sensory equipment were nearly overloaded with contradictory life signs and energy readings, which seemed empty one second and filled as if by a multitude the next. Shortly after its initial report, its transmissions cut out and repeated attempts to raise the *Lacardio* by both the *Immortalis Domitor* and several Ultramarines Damocles command vehicles operating to

the north were fruitless for several minutes when a single final burst of garbled signal suddenly came in: "... impossible... winged figure, not a Titan but taller than us, out of a fog... cannot be living... Omnissiah, is that thing alive?... red like blood, auspex screaming... register... blood fog... it cannot be... thousands... armour compromised... hel... Machina Salvea Potenti... save!"

Of the *Lacardio*, no further report was ever made.

HELL AND RUIN

No concrete narrative of the concluding horror of the final hours of the Battle of Ithraça can be given. Such reports which remain beyond the eighth hour are fragmentary and much data, even drawn from systems pertaining to recovered Legiones Astartes wargear, Mechanicum cogitator and Cybernetica necro-cortical extraction, is often incomplete, corrupt and unreliable. Eyewitness testimony is if anything more unreliable; very few who faced what was to come in battle survived, and of those who did, their recollections are by their very nature compromised by direct exposure to what they witnessed. What can be conjectured with some accuracy was that in the ruins of Ithraça City, a number of spontaneous ruptures in the fabric of corporeal reality occurred; breaches between our reality and the Warp through which a vast torrent of hostile entities emerged into the city.

Of these schisms into the empyreal maelstrom beyond, the largest and most powerful occurred at the site of the death of the Taghmata Xerxes, while others occurred at what seems at first glance to have been random placement throughout Ithraça City and the marshalling yards beyond. However, savants have since theorised that this placement was in fact keyed to locations of bloodshed and massacre of particular enormity, and indeed the malevolence and wanton slaughter perpetrated by both the Calaq War Host and the other Traitor Auxilia under the puppet-like control of the Word Bearers was in fact calculated and carried out to this exact end.

Against such horrors which came howling forth, whose nature was as yet unknown to the Ultramarines and the Titans of Legio Praesagius alike, there was no preparedness and no ready counter. Already spent and reduced by long hours of unexpected combat of the most violent intensity imaginable, the Loyalist forces were almost immediately

outmatched and overwhelmed as thousands of malefic warp entities appeared, ranging in form from tides of bestial vermin, to nightmarish mockeries of the human form whose speed and might matched the power of the Legiones Astartes themselves. Similarly, vast and terrible monstrous forms whose stature rivalled even that of the Battle Titans materialised, while indescribable horrors soared above the battlefield, driving mad those who looked upon them. The skies rained down steaming acid as the ground trembled and the dead screamed and juddered to baleful half-life, corposant fires burning in their skulls, and something very much like the apocalyptic myths of Ancient Terra was visited upon the beleaguered survivors of Ithraça.

At the Avaris Plaza, a gaseous malignancy like a great dark storm cloud writhing with blind serpents, each hundreds of metres long crushed the Reaver Titan *Knossos* in its coiling embrace, while the last of the valiant 312th Solar Auxilia known to have had thus far survived the battle made a last stand against what witnesses have since described as a 'wild hunt' of ghostly luminous beasts and bladed chariots, sacrificing themselves so that a column of refugees could flee into the tunnels below. Nor were the attacks from beyond limited to the Loyalists and the wretched civilians of Ithraça; the denizens of the Warp it seems were utterly indiscriminate in their attacks, save for the Word Bearers who, it is testified by unverifiable accounts, passed among them as if charmed. The surviving magos and Cybernetic cohorts of the Traitor Covenant Mormoth-Null it appears were not spared the ravages of the warp entities' claws and flame, and immediately began to withdraw to their crucible drop ship, and blasted off for the *Dirac's Lament*, which promptly broke orbit.

At the field command post of the Ultramarines 4th Chapter at the Trident, a shifting, dog-headed entity sprang from the ruptured body of a Word Bearers captive and swelled to the size of an Imperial

Knight as it tore through the Legiones Astartes around it, feeding and growing more powerful as it killed, until at last it was felled by a desperate close-quarter airstrike via Fire Raptor gunships. This incident itself bears disturbing parallels to similar reports elsewhere on Calth that day, where by identical means monstrous entities appeared, each repeating an identical certain word [*which is here withheld*] indicating that some form of manifold or gestalt entity was involved in all of them.

This attack in which he himself was injured, coupled with terrified reports that flooded in from across the city, convinced Sub-captain Mantargo that this was no longer a war it was possible to win, and even resistance would offer a futile death. His general evacuation and dispersal order issued to his forces at the thirteenth hour was quickly taken up in the northern sectors, where the warp entity attacks were least severe, and in these regions many fled into the tunnels or commandeered gunships and surviving transports to escape the city—particularly from Macro-Gamma, which had been largely spared orbital attack as it had already been occupied by Traitor troops at the start of the battle.

Elsewhere, desperate flight and bloody pursuit had already become the general state of affairs against a terrifying foe whose shapes were as myriad as its numbers seemed limitless. When the signal for retreat and escape reached the southern and eastern regions of the city it went unheeded, likely either because the few humans remaining were by now too desperately fighting for

their lives to heed it or simply there was no one left alive; certainly no extant record from any survivor in these sectors has ever been recovered for analysis.

Of the Legio Praesagius, it is recorded by the testimony of their few survivors—the wounded crew of crippled Titans who alone were ordered to seek rescue—that it was immediately understood that for the dozen or so Titans that remained to the Legio, there could be no escape. The *Arutan* certainly would never fly again and no lifters capable of handling a Titan remained anywhere in Ithraça, save for those in the hands of the retreating Fire Masters at Landing Zone Macro-Beta. With many of the survivors of the Legio Sutturvora having seemed to have regained their senses just as the baleful signal interference cut out, they were themselves now in full retreat to their landing zones, burning everything, friend or enemy in their wake. Escape by that means was equally impossible. The True Messengers then took the decision to fight on rather than stage a futile break-out to the wastelands, where they might be picked off easily from the air. Their lot would be to fight on against the tides of horror which were renewing each moment, and by their sacrifice buy time for what remained of the Ultramarines Legion, loyal Auxilia and the civilians of Calth to live to fight on elsewhere.

No Titan of the Legio Praesagius is known to have survived the Battle of Ithraça, but it was through their sacrifice that more than four thousand Ultramarines were to escape its hell-haunted ruins and swear vengeance for the dead.



EPILOGUE

"The only sight more grievous to the eye than a battle lost is a battle won."

*Attrb. Duke Artur
Warleader of Ancient Terra*

By the twentieth hour of the Battle of Calth, many had resolved themselves to the fact that the XIIIth Legion would very likely die beneath the baleful glare of the poisoned Veridia star. Not a single Legionary abandoned himself to despair however, for the Legiones Astartes — and especially the proud sons of Roboute Guilliman — were wrought of sterner stuff. The Ultramarines in orbit and on the surface of Calth fought boldly on, determined that if this day was to herald the death of the greater portion of their Legion, history would recount that they went boldly to their deaths and made their treacherous brother Astartes pay dearly for their betrayal.

Even in the midst of such total and overwhelming betrayal, there were those who from the outset had fought to assert mastery of their own fate. The Primarch was one such, for the tactical and strategic insight bred into him by the Emperor's gene-smiths ensured that he would ever strive to win the war, even should the battle appear lost. First Chapter Master Marius Gage was another, for in activating the auxiliary bridge of the *Macragge's Honour*, he had regained the initiative in orbit and made possible the events that followed. Another was the captain of the 4th Company — Remus Ventanus — whose initial reaction to the betrayal and the sequence of events set in

motion on the surface formed the fulcrum of the Ultramarines' resurgence and led ultimately to the wresting back of control of the Calth Defence Grid. At that point, the Battle of Calth turned.

The key to victory lay with the defence grid, consisting as it did of many thousands of weapons emplaced on the surface and aboard the platforms in orbit. The fell genius of the Word Bearers had gained control of the grid early in the battle through the Traitor Mechanicum's integration of their tainted machine code into Calth's command and control systems. When at last it was possible for the Ultramarines forces in orbit and on the surface to share intelligence and coordinate their actions, the fight-back well and truly began.

It took the form of two simultaneous operations; one in orbit and the other on the outskirts of what remained of Lanshear City on the surface. On the ground, Captain Ventanus rallied what he could of the Legion's strength and launched an all-out assault on the Lanshear Guildhall, his mission to gain access to the data-engine sealed in its basement, the only one of its class not infected with the Traitor Mechanicum's poisoned machine code. Having done so, allied loyal Mechanicum would be able to purge the enemy code from the system. But control of the grid would only be gained when the enemy's grip upon its master systems was wrested from the Word Bearers and their Traitor Mechanicum allies. That could only be achieved by disabling the overseer data-engine on the Zetsun Verid Yard orbital station.

The surface battle began with Captain Ventanus leading a large and heterogeneous force into the ruins of Lanshear. The spearhead of this advance was a company of Land Raider tanks, and behind them came the bulk of the Ultramarines 4th Company, bolstered by the many varied elements of other units it had swept up since the betrayal hours before. The advance was further supported by a company of Shadowsword super-heavy tanks and various battlefield support vehicles, a cohort of Mechanicum skitarii and the remnants of the Neride 10th.

As Ventanus' column pressed along the main arterial transit, it encountered its first enemy presence, a Warhound Scout Titan of the Legio Mortis. Its void shields pounded out of existence by the column's numerous Predators, Whirlwinds and Sicarans, it fell to the Shadowsword to strike the killing blow.

With the Warhound slain, the Ultramarines Land Raiders led the advance on the Word Bearers' positions about the guildhall. When the charge struck home, the battle devolved into bitter and savage carnage and the Ultramarines fought with a righteous fury born of the myriad injustices heaped upon them by their erstwhile brother Legion. Scores fell on both sides, the Gal Vorbak joining the fray and cutting down Ultramarines with war cries born of the madness of the Warp, but the sheer fury of the Ultramarines attack carried them through their enemy's lines with unstoppable force.

Ventanus had reached the guildhall, but even as his Mechanicum allies awakened the data-engine, they perceived they were too late, their sacrifices for nothing as a massive enemy force was detected closing on the guildhall. With the cold clarity of the machine, the Mechanicum measured the survival of the strike force as scant minutes, but they fought on with relentless and noble resolve, the defence bolstered when a second wave of allies converged on the guildhall. The 111th and 112th Companies were led not by a Legion officer, for their command cadres had been decimated, but by a single sergeant named Anchise, whilst alongside them came

THE RE-TAKING OF THE ZETSUN VERID YARD

The final act in the battle for Calth Near-Space took place on the Zetsun Verid Yard, the orbital platform captured by Kor Phaeron, the Word Bearers Master of the Faith, soon after the betrayal of the Calth Conjunction. It was from this station that the Word Bearers' Mechanicum allies subverted control of the Calth Defence Grid, which they used to poison the Veridian star, shatter Veridia Forge and strike down Ultramarines warships with impunity. It was the Primarch himself who led the assault on Zetsun Verid Yard, utilising the flagship's teleportation array to do so. Failure in this mission would have resulted in the death of the Primarch and the entire assault force, for the long range teleportation would drain so much power from the flagship's reactor that extraction by that method would not have been possible. Guilliman judged the risk worthwhile though, for if the defence grid was not disabled, his Legion would meet its death either way.

With the boarding assault led by a Primarch, it could be expected that there was little that the Word Bearers could do to oppose the Ultramarines. The Word Bearers however were led by Kor Phaeron, a man so steeped in the raw power of the Warp that he came close not just to repelling the attack, but to slaying Roboute Guilliman. It was in Kor Phaeron that Lorgar had invested responsibility for the death of Calth, the Ultramarines mustering there and even, if the opportunity presented itself, the death of Guilliman himself.

When Guilliman and Kor Phaeron finally faced one another on the master control deck, the Word Bearer unleashed a sorcerous beam of black light so powerful it drove the Ultramarines Primarch to his knees. At that moment, Kor Phaeron might have killed a son of the Emperor, a feat no mortal had ever performed, but even as he pressed the blade of his warp-tainted ritual athame to Guilliman's throat, he stayed the killing blow and instead whispered an offer he had no right or authority to make. Kor Phaeron promised Guilliman a position of honour at the side of Horus and Lorgar if he would only foreswear his oaths to his father.

Guilliman's answer was unequivocal. As Kor Phaeron had been speaking, the Primarch had been rallying his strength. In a movement too rapid for the human eye to follow, Guilliman punched through the Word Bearer's armour and closed his fist about the traitor's beating heart. The last sight Kor Phaeron witnessed was his own heart torn from his chest and cast aside upon the metal deck.

Zetsun Verid Yard was finally under Ultramarines control and within moments the fearsome power of the entire Calth Defence Grid was turned upon the Word Bearers, both at their warships in orbit and upon their ground forces ranging across the surface.

the 19th Company, known as 'the Honoured', under Captain Aethon. From another quarter still came a host of mortal soldiery and armour led by no less a worthy than the Tetrarch of Konor, Eikos Lamiad, and the Dreadnought Telemechrus. Yet, with the Zetsun Verid Yard still under enemy control, all their efforts were as nothing.

And then salvation. The first that Captain Ventanus and the Loyalist forces outside and around the Lanshear Guildhall knew of the re-taking of the Zetsun Verid Yard was when the heavens erupted in flame and the Word Bearers and their allies, pressing

in from all quarters, were consumed in blinding incendiary fire. The yard had finally fallen and the Mechanicum in the guildhall data-crypt below finally had control of the defence grid.

Hell rained down upon the Word Bearers and their auxiliary forces across the surface of Calth. In an instant, the Ultramarines' imminent extinction had turned to deliverance and a planet-wide counter-attack exploded as from nowhere. The Word Bearers were forced from the offensive to the defensive as they were assailed by orbital strikes and then overwhelmed by the

blooded and vengeful hosts of the surviving Ultramarines Legion, Mechanicum and Imperial Army.

But the fury unleashed upon the Word Bearers was not reserved for those Traitors on the surface. The instant the Word Bearers' attack on Ventanus' force was defeated, the grid was turned upon the enemy ships in orbit. No fleet could survive such punishment. Word Bearers warships that had served for decades through the bloodiest actions of the Great Crusade and come through the terrible void battles fought to contain the Loyalists at Istvan V were

annihilated by the dozen. Until that point, Calth Near-Space had been alight with the burning debris of slaughtered Ultramarines Legion vessels. Now it exploded with the fiery wreckage of Traitor warships so dense that for future generations it would form a visible and hazardous ring about the devastated planet.

On the bridge of the *Infidus Imperator*, havoc reigned, for Kor Phaeron had been teleported back to the Word Bearers flagship, somehow still alive despite his heart being torn from his chest, but too wounded to assume command. Seeing the vessels of

the Traitor fleet being destroyed all about him, the shipmaster of the *Infidus Imperator*, Sire Antonius Antwark, saw that they had contributed all that they could towards the invocation of the Ruinstorm and that their death could serve no possible service. Antwark ordered the *Infidus Imperator* to come about and make full speed for the edge of the system where it could safely translate into the Warp.

The Word Bearers flagship would not escape so easily however. Roboute Guilliman, on the shattered command deck of the Zetsun Verid Yard, was informed of its escape by Marius Gage. The Primarch immediately ordered his First Chapter Master to take the *Macragge's Honour* and run the *Imperator* down—the account of Gage's pursuit of the enemy flagship though is a tale for another volume. Suffice to say that Guilliman would remain ignorant of the fate of his beloved vessel and his most trusted Legion officer for many years until word of the epic clash that led to the destruction of the *Infidus Imperator* finally reached Macragge.

THE LOOMING SHADOW

Though the Ultramarines were victorious, they would not be afforded the luxury of reaping the fruits of that victory. Even as the Primarch Roboute Guilliman reviewed the terrible events of the thirty hours or so since the destruction of Calth Veridian Anchor by the *Campanile*, his surviving counsellors and advisors, in particular a delegation representing his fleet's most senior Navigators and Astropaths, came before him with dire news indeed.

The first trouble placed before the Primarch was the issue of the Veridia star. It had been grievously wounded by the Word Bearers in some manner they could not understand and the solar winds emanating from it were inexplicably poisoned. The surface of Calth, its atmosphere already grievously injured by the Word Bearers' bombardment, was rapidly destabilising to the point that it would soon be impossible for unprotected mortals to walk upon it. The only possible course of action was to evacuate all civilians and all Legiones Astartes and other units on the surface into the vast subterranean arcologies in an effort to provide some shelter, however tenuous, from the fell light of the Veridia star. Captain Ventanus, the hero of the Battle of the Guildhall, would take this duty upon himself, and a worthy account of his deeds in the subsequent battles would fill an entire tome on their own.

The second crisis brought to the Primarch's attention was at that time only partially understood, but already astrotelepathic messages were relaying desperate pleas for aid from all over the Five Hundred Worlds of Ultramar. The Traitors' assault on Calth was not an isolated event; other attacks were being reported across dozens of other systems. In a moment of stark clarity, Guilliman saw what the Word Bearers had intended at Calth—they had planned the extinction of the Ultramarines so that the Traitors could reave unopposed across those stars under his protection. In this they had failed, for while the Ultramarines had suffered unprecedented losses, the Legion had rallied and was yet a formidable force. Guilliman's vengeance would be terrible indeed, and well earned.

But here the Primarch's counsellors set their final piece of ill news before him. The Warp, which had been turbulent and capricious for the past year, was now rising towards a storm of unprecedented fury. Worse, it was now closing in around the Veridian System and any vessels that did not leave in the coming hours might be stranded there for years.

In the manner for which he had become so well known, Roboute Guilliman listened to this flood of portentous omens, considered their combined import, and stated clearly his solution, which was this. The fleet would embark what units it could, prioritising armoured units and the few surviving Loyalist Titan god-engines. Those infantry units remaining would withdraw into the arcologies to continue the Battle for Calth, a conflict that would develop into the decade-long Calth Underworld War.

At the last, Guilliman took his leave of the once-bountiful world of Calth, the would-be jewel in the crown of Ultramar which had stood for so much that now could never be realised. Before the Primarch ordered the fleet to depart, the Warp closing in all about it, he swore to return to Calth and to deliver it from the Traitors. It would be many years and many battles, across five hundred worlds and more, before that promise could be delivered upon.

But it would be delivered upon, for Roboute Guilliman, Primarch of the XIIIth Legion and Master of the Five Hundred Worlds of Ultramar, had sworn it.



