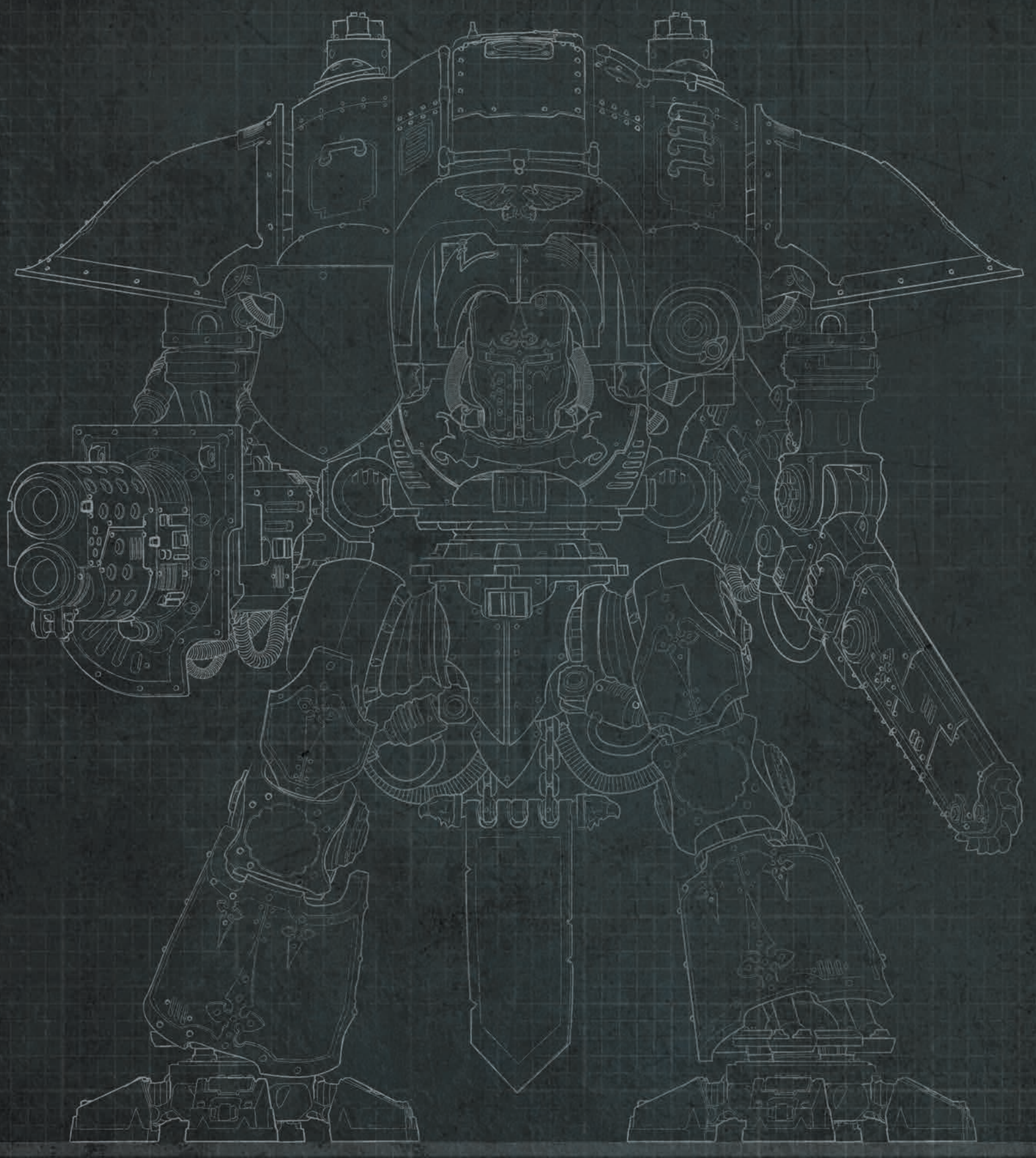


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THE IMPERIAL KNIGHT COMPANION



The Sword and the Shield, the Vengeful Past, The Glory of Ancient Days.

Contents

Introduction 3
Imperial Knights 4
The Great Crusade 6
Knights and the Imperium 8
Chivalric Livery 16
Heroism and Honour 18

Imperial Knights 20

House Terryn 22
House Cadmus 34
House Griffith 44
House Hawkshroud 54

Adeptus Mechanicus Knights 66

House Raven 68
House Taranis 80
House Krast 90

Freeblades 102

Amaranthine 106
The Obsidian Knight 114
Gerantius 122
The White Warden 130
Retribution Incarnate 138
Auric Arachnus 140
The Crimson Reaper 142

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Introduction

Imperial Knights are mighty warriors of the Imperium, each one a towering armoured war machine capable of laying waste to entire enemy armies. The Knight suit is an ancient machine, crafted in the Dark Age of Technology utilising forgotten technologies and lost mechanical secrets. Piloting this fearsome battle engine is a Noble; a descendant of a long and illustrious line of men specially bred to command Knight suits. Raised with the single purpose of waging war, the Noble is a consummate warrior whose actions are governed by an unflagging sense of honour and duty. Nobles hail from Knight worlds, ancient human colonies seeded during the Dark Age of Technology and then forgotten or cut off amid roiling Warp storms. These colonies were unique because they carried with them the secrets of the Knight suit, originally designed to help them survive in hostile environments, but later turned into a weapon of war.

The Knight Paladin and the Knight Errant are the most common patterns of Imperial Knight armour, though there are others. These two principal Knight variants are used extensively by the knightly houses, and each is a mighty weapon in its own right. Standing several dozen feet tall they are armed with reaper chainblades, rapid fire battle cannons and thermal cannons. Each of these devastating devices is more than capable of reducing almost any enemy war machine to scrap metal, and they make short work of infantry and alien beasts. Shielding a Knight from harm are thick adamantium plates. Welded over the Knight's vulnerable workings and fully enclosing the Noble within, this heavy armour provides protection against all but the most determined attacks. An ion shield further protects the Knight; a coruscating energy barrier that can be angled to deflect ranged attacks directed at the walker. Combined, these defences make the Knight suit a truly formidable foe to bring down.

This book explores the heraldry, history and background of the Knights. Many of the famous knightly houses and Freeblades are explored in lavish detail, complete with information on their home worlds, methods of waging war and famous battles.

HISTORY

In this section you will learn about the rise of the knightly houses and their relationship to the Imperium and the Adeptus Mechanicus. For over ten thousand years the Knights have fought alongside the Imperium, from the dark days of the Horus Heresy to the Time of Ending.

BACKGROUND

There are dozens of Knight worlds within the Imperium, scattered across the galaxy from the Halo Stars to the very edges of the Eastern Fringe. Presented here are a selection of the greatest of these houses, including both those allied to the Imperium and to the Adeptus Mechanicus. Discover their origins, their heroes and villains, their traditions and the dark secrets they harbour after more than ten centuries of war. Alongside the knightly houses are the Freeblades, each a unique warrior on a personal quest. These diverse and fearsome warriors each have their own incredible stories that define them.

HERALDRY

In this book you will find dozens of striking photos of the Knight suits, painted in a variety of colours and combinations which show off the endless variety of the Imperial Knight kit. Along with these photos and the expansive detail they provide on the Knights, you will find information on the meanings behind the symbols used. From house crests to victory banners, learn what these icons represent and how they tell of the Knight's glorious deeds and sacred duty.



Imperial Knights



A Knight is a marvel of dark age technology, a towering bipedal war machine piloted by a noble scion of an ancient knightly house. Standing as much as forty feet in height, each Knight suit is adorned with hand sculpted plates of adamantium armour, decorated with ornate heraldry and honour markings. Knights are no less deadly for all their splendour – armed with potent weapons of war and capable of trampling their enemies like insects underfoot, each Knight is the equal of countless lesser foes.

The forge worlds of the Adeptus Mechanicus produce numerous marks of Knight suit, from the swift and deadly line-breaker known as the Lancer to the ponderous, heavily armoured gun platform that is the Knight Crusader. However, two designs in particular have proven enduringly popular for their balance and utility. The Knight Paladin wields a deadly rapid fire battle cannon, carrying easily in one fist the firepower of a squadron of lesser war engines. With its range, versatility and thunderous stopping power, the Paladin's primary armament allows it to bombard the foe from afar or blast them to ruin up close with equal ease. The Knight Errant, on the other hand, suits those Nobles possessed of an especially aggressive temperament. Its thermal cannon is a comparatively short ranged weapon, but the horrifying devastation it can cause is more than worth the risk of closing to bring it to bear.

Of course, the huge firearms of the Knights are not their only weapons. Most Knight suits are studded with heavy stubbers, slaved to targeting spirits and augur-matrices. These are used to mow down masses of lightly armoured enemy infantry, who might otherwise pose a threat to the Knights by their sheer numbers. Furthermore, every Knight wields an enormous reaper class chainsword. These revving, roaring combat weapons are the size of a small tank in their own right, and a skilled Noble can use their reaper to duel even the largest enemy fighting machines. The churning teeth of a reaper are all but unstoppable when brought to bear, whether carving through the chitinous hide of a Tyranid bio-horror, lopping the head from a rampaging Daemon Prince, or smashing heretical war engines to blazing wreckage. Working in concert and bringing their entire arsenal to bear, a force of Knights Paladin and Knights Errant is the match of almost any foe. Yet the Knight suits do not only take to the field armed with mighty weapons.

On board every Knight suit – hidden deep within the armoured shell of the war engine's torso – thrums an ancient ion shield generator. These priceless relics of technology project flat plane ion fields intended to deflect enemy fire, dissipating blasts of laser energy and robbing the force from solid-shot projectiles as they strike the shield. Linked into the Noble's mind impulse control unit, the ion shield can be angled in response to battlefield threats. While this does not provide as all-encompassing an envelope of protection as might a void shield generator, many Nobles claim that their ion shields are infinitely superior. In the hands of a skilled wielder, an ion shield can be redirected with the speed of thought, interposing itself between the Knight and its aggressors. Though callow youths still earning their spurs may find the ion shield hard to handle effectively, a veteran Knight can ensure that he is never left without an ionized bulwark between him and danger. With their shields angled to the fore, a detachment of Knights can stride through even the fiercest incoming fire, their vast armoured forms wreathed in ionized energy and roiling bursts of flame. Meanwhile, should a Noble find himself surrounded by the foe while pressing home his attack, it is the work of moments to redirect his ion shield to protect his vulnerable flanks or rear. In this way do Knights smash their way through enemy lines, ion shields swinging and crackling as they fend off the attacks of the foe.

Even a single Knight, then, is a significant asset upon any battlefield, but the armies of the Imperium can call upon entire knightly households numbering dozens or even hundreds of these towering walkers. When they march to war the ground shakes at their tread, and whole worlds can be brought to heel or burned to ash. Yet the Nobles of the knightly houses are proud, stiff-necked individuals whose loyalties are dictated by complex webs of honour and obligation. How they came into their anachronistic heritage is a tale that spans many hundreds of thousands of years, and one that goes some way to explaining the knightly households' divided loyalties, grudges and obsessions in the 41st Millennium.

THE LONG MARCH

To fully understand the origins of the Knight worlds, one must look far, far back into Mankind's history. Their beginnings lie during the dawn of the Age of Technology. In those years, Humanity forged out into the stars with hope and trepidation in their hearts, seeking to extend their dominion over the vast and mysterious gulfs of space. Though the human race has ever leapt before looking, in this endeavour at least it seems they were cautious. Colony ships soared out from the home world, tiny motes of life drifting through the yawning black immensity. They sought worlds rich in resources, examining each planet in turn for its mining and farming potential. Whenever a suitable world was found, the scout ships would mark it for colonisation.

The duty of settlement fell to the Long March fleets, massive armadas of bulky, city-sized craft packed to the gunwales with human colonists. These ships set off amid fanfares of hope and glory, pushing their way through space for decades at a time before reaching their assigned worlds. Yet it was only upon making planetfall that the true gravitas of their situation would strike many of the Long March colonists. Their transport craft cannibalised to build their first settlements, these people had absolutely no chance of returning to their world of origin. Often the planets upon which they landed were already inhabited, either by monstrous predatory beasts or sentient alien races that resented mightily the sudden appearance of these invaders from beyond the stars. Other worlds boasted more esoteric hazards, from atmospheric shifts inimical to human life to terrifying plagues or strange environmental fluctuations. To protect them against all of these terrible threats, the colonists had their Standard Template Constructs – miracles of technology whose fragmentary remains are still prized to this day by the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Each Standard Template Construct allowed the settlers to mass-produce a specific object or device flawlessly and without the need for skilled engineers. From dom estic tools to weapons of war, the STCs were the single most important tool the colonists possessed to ensure their survival. Foremost amongst these vital devices were those that produced the bipedal exo-suits that came to be known as Knights.

The Knight suits were an incredible asset for the Long March colonists – these machines could stride unharmed through all but the most extreme of environments. They were proof against dangerous atmospherics, high gravity fields, even the hostile vacuum of airless worlds. Most importantly, they could be equipped for combat operations, marching to war against indigenous alien populations or beating back deadly flora and fauna. In this capacity the Knight suits proved all but unstoppable, acting as the mailed fist of interstellar human colonisation and carving out new realms within which Mankind might prosper and thrive.

Even in those early days, the integration software that allowed pilots to bond with their Knight suits possessed mind altering properties. Over the years, notions of honour and duty, nobility and fealty were reinforced in the psyches of those who piloted the great walkers. Gradually, as generations passed, the colonist pilots became at first champions of their people, and then a ruling class. Styling themselves as noble households and taking the colonists they protected as their feudal subjects, the Nobles handed off their more mundane duties to lesser men. Their Knights were armoured and decorated as befitted their station, exchanging their utilitarian outer shells for the full panoply of war. Though there were those who resented the overbearing rule of the knightly households, none could deny that they kept their subjects well protected from the ravages of pirates, raiders and alien horrors.

AN AGE OF DARKNESS

As the Age of Technology reached its pinnacle, the human race saw – and was responsible for – ever greater wonders. Colonisation of space had progressed apace, new methods eclipsing the old Long March ships. Infatuated with their own ingenuity, the human race revelled in its new technologies. On many worlds, they surrounded themselves with thinking machines, courting indolence and dependency even as they reached for the godhood that should surely be theirs. On other worlds, a new age was dawning as the first psychically capable humans emerged, an incredible evolutionary leap that promised wonders beyond anything previously imagined.

Amongst this age of glory and splendour, the Knight worlds remained stolidly conservative and inward looking. Tempered by the whispers of their Thrones Mechanicum, and still taming the wilds of their frontier worlds, the rulers of the Knight worlds cared only for governing their own societies. Foreshadowing the future Imperium, the citizens of these worlds learnt to avert their gaze from the stars and focus on the ground beneath their feet. They were scorned by many as places of stagnation and ignorance, yet these very qualities would see them weather the storm about to erupt.

No scholar alive in the Imperium today knows the exact date that disaster struck, but many place the beginning of the Age of Strife somewhere between M22 and M25. When the darkness closed in it did so with horrifying swiftness. Thinking machines rebelled against their masters, slaughtering whole planetary populations like cattle or plunging them into worldwide wars of mutual annihilation. Societies that had accepted psykers and mutants reaped sorry reward for their tolerance, drowning in blood and atrocity. Monstrous and unnatural phenomena were unleashed that depopulated worlds in mere hours. Colonists died screaming amid madness and horror, or else loosed world-killing weapons and horrifying phages to secure their own destruction before a worse fate could consume them. Warp storms roared into being that cut off worlds or even whole systems, trapping them in hells of their own making from which none would escape.

Amid all this horror, as the darkness engulfed one gleaming monument to human endeavour after another, the Knight worlds simply endured. Their very conservatism and backward nature had insulated them, ensuring they were sidelined and forgotten by those who might otherwise have brought them to ruin. Many houses had eschewed technology, with the exception of their Knight suits, choosing instead to rely on ancient, tried and tested means of survival rather than fallible machines or thinking cogitators, and thus they were well prepared for the coming of the Long Night. They had also protected themselves from psykers, their superstitious natures spurning things they did not understand or did not trust. These draconian measures would save many of them during the Age of Strife, unlike worlds which had given in to the lure of a life made easy by technology and magic. As the lights went out across the galaxy the Knight worlds shored up their defences, stoked their watch-fires, and continued as they had for hundreds of years.

During this time, their neo-feudal societies became ever more insular, the knightly houses consolidating their power bases and defending their borders with grim tenacity. Cut off and forced to fall back on their own means, the Knight worlds became entirely self-sufficient. This reduced many planets to an almost primitive existence as they farmed the land and mined the earth as their ancient ancestors on Terra had done. Under the watchful protection the Knights, the people did not complain, content in the knowledge that they were safe from the horrors that lurked within the forests and jungles of their worlds, or the monsters gazing down at them from the stars. It was during this period of isolation that the caste that repaired and maintained their lords' Knight suits rose to prominence – though they were still vassals of the knightly houses, it was widely recognised that without such craftsmen the armoured suits of the Nobles would cease to function, leaving their people defenceless. Indeed, despite the best efforts of the Nobles and craftsmen both, many Knight worlds did fall into decline, or else were overrun by the creatures that crawled from the darkness of Old Night. Yet many more endured, stoic as ever while the years became centuries and the centuries millennia.

A MIGHTY PRIZE

It was not until the glorious years of the Great Crusade that contact was reestablished with the surviving Knight worlds. Rogue Trader Militant Jeffers was the first to discover one of these scattered enclaves, coming upon the world of Chrysis while pushing back the boundaries of Imperial space. Though the ravages of time had not been kind, still Jeffers recognised the potential in the towering fighting machines and the robust society that supported them. Upon reporting his findings, the Rogue Trader strongly recommended that these Knights be returned to the Imperial fold, for their value as a military asset could not be overstated. Further, he asserted that where one Knight world had survived through the darkness of Old Night, surely more must have done the same. They should be sought out, he urged, and returned to the bosom of their race so that they might aid in the furtherance of the Imperial Truth.

This was to be the beginning of a subtle struggle. Even at the height of its power, the Emperor's realm was one of many vying factions, and all recognised the value of the Knight worlds. Not only were the Knight suits incredibly potent weapons of war, but their planets of origin were still rich in resources. Though the societies of the Knight worlds had been harvesting their worlds' bounty for many thousands of years, their peoples' regression to a more primitive state – coupled with the careful husbandry of the knightly houses – meant that most were still rich prizes indeed. Perhaps most important of all, these were worlds still rich with the marvels of the Age of Technology. Though many devices had been forgotten, abandoned or destroyed as the years passed by, still the Knight worlds were treasure troves of archeotech and mechanical wonders. For this reason, it was the Mechanicum who strove the hardest to seize the Knight worlds for their own.

In those early years of the Great Crusade, the knightly houses were beset by emissaries and envoys seeking alliance or rights on their worlds or within their systems. Rogue Traders, Imperial officials and Tech-magi all entreated newly found Knight worlds for their favour. In most cases these diplomats and messengers would underestimate the political cunning of the knightly houses. Despite the obvious might of the Knight suits, a man setting foot upon these remote planets would often only see the crowded feudal cities and ancient ferrocrete keeps bedecked with flags and banners, with townsfolk using horse and water-driven machines or coal and steam. Even the Nobles themselves in their ancient finery and ornate castle halls seemed like a relic of the past to someone that had crossed the void of space. What they failed to realise was that centuries of infighting and social conflict between the houses had honed their political instincts to a keen edge. Whether diplomats came from nearby provinces or a solar system hundreds of light years distant, the Knight lords could see the lies behind the promises laid at their feet. They would endeavour to forge their alliances with care.

The Great Crusade

As the Great Crusade rolled out across the galaxy, the Mechanicum established hundreds of new forge worlds. Many were built amid the ruins of past glories, worlds once rich in the iron bounty of progress. Others were hewn from unsettled worlds found to be well positioned or heavy with natural resources. Yet regardless of the Mechanicum's stated reasons, it seemed that a surprisingly high number of their newly founded centres of power lay close to one or more surviving Knight worlds. Each time this happy coincidence occurred, the forge worlds' senior Magi wasted no time in dispatching missionaries to aid these long abandoned enclaves of humanity. In return for the Nobles' pledges of military aid, the Mechanicum offered the word of the Omnissiah, and the ancient knowledge that came with it. The artisan castes of the Knight worlds had done what they could to stave off the rigours of time, yet precious few of the Nobles' Knight suits still operated at anything close to optimum efficiency, and many had ceased to function at all. Armour was riveted or even strapped into place. Damaged weapons were replaced with crude alternatives, long iron lances that would buckle after the first blow or bulky, fuse-primed cannon that had to be manually served by gunnery crews. Electric, solar or even steam-powered systems replaced damaged reactors, while ion shields flickered out and became a thing of the past. Yet the Mechanicum could replace all of these systems and more. By inducting the craftsmen and armourers into the mysteries of the Cult Mechanicus, they could provide the Knight worlds with the ability to regain their former glory.

While few refused the Tech-Priests' gift of knowledge, most did not give themselves over completely to the Omnissiah, instead retaining their own independence and swearing their allegiance to the Emperor instead. To this day though, many Knight suits, even those not officially bound to a forge world, bear the cog symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus as a reminder of the eternal debt the knightly houses owe to their benefactors. As for those Knight worlds that wholly accepted the aid of the Martian Priesthood and the word of their Omnissiah, their Nobles had given away much of their autonomy and freedom. Vows of allegiance now obligated the Nobles to lend military aid to the Mechanicum whenever it was demanded. More insidious, however, was the change that had occurred in their artisan classes.

The craftsmen who saw to the wellbeing of the Knight suits endured indoctrination and reeducation at the hands of the Tech-Priests. Most submitted willingly to this decade-long process, for the end result would be unsurpassed skill in the trade that they and their forbears had practiced for generations. As the Mechanicum inducted these craftsmen and artisans into their deeper mysteries, so they renamed them Sacristans and indoctrinated them into the Cult Mechanicum. The Sacristans returned to their worlds offering unequivocal service, yet their allegiance was now to the Mechanicum, body and soul. As the years passed by, the Sacristans established themselves as a religious brotherhood, an order of half-remembered mysteries and veiled secrets. Gradually they began to speak with one voice, soon coming to wield significant political power through the threat of withholding their knowledge and expertise. This did not work on every Knight world, for the Sacristans were still technically the Nobles' vassals, and on some worlds weight of tradition or force of personality cowed the Sacristans into subservience. However, this was the exception rather than the rule. While other organs of the Imperium had blustered, bribed and bullied in an attempt to win the Knight worlds to their cause, the Mechanicum had performed a slow and silent invasion that had left the Knight worlds dependent upon them for their continued existence. Even so, the Mechanicum had not counted upon the fierce independence inherent in the Knight worlds' nobility. So it was that while many Knight Houses would become beholden to the Mechanicum many more would stand apart.



THE BECOMING

A Knight suit is a potent and deadly weapon, but without its Noble pilot it is a hollow shell. The human component in the core of every Knight suit is its heart and mind both, a man bestowed with the martial might of a demigod. The process of bonding with a Knight is a dangerous one however, an apotheosis that not every aspirant survives. Knight suits are ancient machines, with complex and often belligerent machine spirits to match, and only the worthy may break such a beast to their will.

Knights are controlled in a similar fashion to the great war engines of the Titan Legions, through mind impulse control links that allow the pilot to wear their Knight suit like a second skin. Indeed, the fluid direction that a Noble has over his Knight allows an ease of movement bettered only by the alien war engines of the Eldar. However, where the Princeps of a Titan will often inhabit an amniotic tank or be cybernetically bound to his engine's bridge, the Nobles who pilot Knight suits interface with their towering machines through a device known as a Throne Mechanicum.

At the heart of every Knight stronghold is an ancient and enormous structure called the Sanctuary. Each of these buildings appears roughly the same in design, a slab-sided fortress that towers to well over a thousand feet in height. These would originally have been amongst the first buildings constructed by new settlers upon making planetfall, intended both to train new Knight pilots and to house the Knight suits they would drive. Ornamented, adapted, and buried in the trappings of ritual over the millennia, these Sanctuaries would now be utterly unrecognizable to those who built them. Yet their function remains at least nominally the same, for it is here that young Nobles earn the right to pilot Knights, and here that their armoured suits lie dormant between battles.

Within the sprawling, draughty chambers of the Sanctuary are chirurgeries, lumen globes throwing flickering light across their surgical augmentation cages and bubbling tanks of strange chemicals. Here, household medicaes and Sacristans convene, enacting long and elaborate surgical procedures on those Noble sons who will soon come of age. skull-sockets and neural interface plugs are implanted, physical imperfections replaced with augmetics, and stimulant injections delivered to deep muscle tissue and bone-cores. These procedures are drawn out and traumatic, performed with the minimal amount of anaesthesia so as to test the character of these potential pilots. Yet no amount of agony can fully prepare the young Nobles for the terrors that await them in the infamous Chamber of Echoes.

Having been physically prepared to integrate with a Knight, the prospective pilots must face the Ritual of Becoming. In this barbaric rite they are bonded to their Knight in mind and soul, or else prove unworthy and pay the ultimate price. Led to the Chamber of Echoes, deep in the Sanctuary's heart, the aspirants are presented with a number of empty Thrones Mechanicum. Each is set well back within a torchlit alcove, looming menacingly from amid a dense cowl of squirming shadows. The aspirants are instructed to seat themselves in the Throne of their house. Once all aspirants are seated, hooded Sacristans connect each to their assigned Throne Mechanicum. As the ancient devices whisper into life, the Sacristans extinguish the torches and withdraw. They leave the aspirants in utter, pitch darkness, at the mercy of the ghosts bound within their Thrones.

Over the course of the long, horrific night that follows, each aspirant must attempt to bond successfully with his chosen Throne Mechanicum. These Thrones retain echoes of the many previous pilots that have imprinted their psyches upon them, echoes that now race to the fore and induce hallucinations, waking nightmares and shuddering fugue states within the aspirants. Strange nerve impulses race through the young Nobles' bodies, causing them to moan, twitch and convulse. High, terrified laughter and sudden, spontaneous sobs of misery cut through the darkness, accompanied by grunts, muttering and the occasional sudden, chilling scream. As the night wears on, the aspirants will depart the realm of the real altogether, falling into the churning sea of ghosts that resides within the neural network of their Throne. During this strange trance state, each prospective pilot must find within themselves the strength of character to subdue the echoes of the past and drag themselves back to the present. So desperate a trial is this that one aspirant in ten does not survive, their minds burned out by neural feedback or their sanity shattered by hallucinatory trauma. Those who live will imprint their personality upon their Throne Mechanicum, seizing its neural space as a general seizes a fortress and planting their flag for all to see.

When the torches are lit the next morning and the surviving aspirants are freed from their Thrones, it is a changed group of youths-become-men who march from the Chamber of Echoes. The very chemistry of their brains has been altered, the tapestries of their souls unpicked and rewoven just as their own imprint has been branded upon the soulspace of their newly-claimed Throne. Forced to fall back upon their dominant personality traits to survive, the young Nobles will find these characteristics forever exaggerated. The programming of the Throne – and the influence of its possessor echoes – leaves the Nobles with a lingering sense of duty, fealty and nobility that will colour their deeds and decisions forevermore. At the same time, their own emotions and characteristics will affect the Throne they have claimed and the Knight into which it melds. This leaves some suits skittish and twitchy, while others become sombre, aggressive, stubborn or unflinchingly courageous. Over time, a Knight suit will absorb dozens of neural imprints from generations of Nobles, each one becoming a different aspect of the suit's personality. Whatever the case, the Knight suit will awaken only at the behest of its newly imprinted pilot, until such time as that Noble is slain and becomes just another ghost in the machine.

THE DOME AND THE VAULT

All the Thrones Mechanicum that have been imprinted to living Nobles are stored in a single, domed chamber atop the Sanctuary. This vast space, known as the Communion Dome, is often heavily ornamented. Many boast stained armaglass domes depicting deeds of valour performed by the greatest Nobles of the household. Others play host to elaborate ironweave tapestries, holoportraits or automata-statuary commemorating mighty scions and famed Nobles who have piloted the household's Knights. Surrounded by this ornamentation, the imprinted Thrones Mechanicum are arrayed around the chamber's walls. Though vacant, each gives off a palpable sense of imminence, as though its occupant has just stepped away for a moment and will soon take up his rightful place once more.

When the Nobles march to war, they do just that, ascending in pneumo lifts to the Communion Dome and settling themselves into their Thrones. As the neurocabling clunks into their skull-sockets, the Nobles' Thrones tilt backward and slide smoothly into waiting transit tubes. Haloed by the strobing beams of hazard lighting, arrayed in the full finery of war, the Nobles plunge hundreds of meters in a matter of moments, grav-cushioning and mag-rails ensuring their descent remains controlled. Their fall takes them down through the Sanctuary into the Vault Transcendent, where their Knights wait with carapace-docks yawning wide. Wolfish grins of anticipation spread across noble features as the Thrones spiral into the final delivery shafts, thumping neatly into place at the heart of each Knight. Amid the clatter and whine of locking bolts securing and spinal plugs mating, the rising thrum of engines fills the Vault. One by one, the Knights awaken, claxons howling war cries through the Vault Transcendent over the whine of hatch-locks securing and the snarl of reaper chainswords revving up. Linked as one, his heartbeat pounding in rhythm with the throb of his Knight suit's reactor, each Noble mentally takes the helm of his Knight suit and readies his walker to stride to war.

For a Noble, the union of Knight and man is the ultimate expression of knightly virtue and the sole reason for which they were born. Only those who have commanded a Knight suit in battle can hope to understand the power and thrill it imparts. Even the Princeps of a Titan is still only a part of a vast crew, whereas a Noble *is* his Knight. Looking down upon the battlefield from his war machine, the Noble becomes a god of war delivering carnage and death to anything that crossed by his shadow. Few foes are a match for a Knight, most crushed beneath its adamantium feet, blown to pieces by battle cannon fire or shredded to bloody meat by the razor sharp teeth of its reaper. To a Noble, the crawling shapes of infantry or lumbering forms of tanks are merely insects digging in the ground, each one another target to fall to the thunder of its guns or beneath its blade.

Knights and the Imperium

Though the horrors of Old Night claimed many thousands of Knight worlds, hundreds still remain, scattered throughout the length and breadth of the Imperium. A Knight world is ruled over by one or more knightly houses, each of which makes its seat in a towering castle or other fortified fastness. Many of these edifices, especially those of the ruling houses, are built upon the landing sites of the Long March ships, and may even use the bones of these mighty craft as their foundations. Though war and conquest have taken their toll, these sprawling castles remain formidable, clad in ferrocrete and adamantium many metres thick and swaddled in layers of void shielding. In times of peace, many of their labyrinthine halls and corridors sit silent under shrouds of dust. Yet, should war come calling, these fortresses can support teeming garrisons of household militia, and boast arcane weapon systems that date back to the days of the Age of Technology. Unsurprisingly, knightly houses rarely lose their castles to hostile conquest, and then only at a horrendous cost in enemy lives.

Each castle – whether a sprawling mountaintop manse or a slab-sided fortress nestled deep within shadowed woods – sits at the heart of a web of strip mines, agriplexes and breeding paddocks. From their earliest days of colonisation, the Knight worlds were always intended to be self-sufficient and endlessly sustainable, and so they still are. The original Long March colonists brought with them incredible technologies and scientific marvels, and though most ceased to function, some still work, even though the means of their creation or operation are long since forgotten. Great STC-built mining machines churn away below the ground, excavating a steady flow of minerals. On the surface, vast armaglass greenhouses play host to dimly understood machines that stimulate bounteous crop-growth which steam-driven servitors and water-wheel conveyors pick and process. Herds of hardy grox and other, larger livestock roam across grassy plains. When machines break down they are repaired with whatever technology is at hand, so there often exists a strange blend of rustic and modern side by side. Mighty armoured warehouses and complexes of fortified caves house stockpiles of raw resources, ready for use and distribution as the knightly houses see fit. These industries plough endlessly, mindlessly onward, serviced by legions faithful artisans and skilled guildsmen. These simple folk live and die within a handful of miles of their places of birth, content with their lot in life, knowing little or nothing of the Imperium in whose name they toil.

All this raw wealth comes at a steep price. A Knight world is a rich prize, especially in these desperate days, and were it not for the Knight suits of the Nobles these worlds would swiftly fall to pirates and invaders. Even so, many face regular attack by xenos pirates, infiltration by Chaos cults, and the constant threat of invasion and war. The might of the knightly houses is substantial, but they would still be overwhelmed were they to stand against the horrors of the galaxy alone. However, the same riches that attract aggressors also win the Knight worlds their greatest allies.

First and foremost, the bulk of the Knight worlds are tied by bonds of dependency and allegiance to the forge worlds of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Though this arrangement brings benefits to both parties, it is the Omnissiah's priesthood who reap the richest

For those Knight worlds allied to the Adeptus Mechanicus, bonds of obligation will often compel their Nobles to take to the field. When war threatens, the senior magi of a forge world calculate each of their allied Knight worlds' martial strengths. They then extrapolate from this information the quota of Knights they will demand that each knightly house provide. Nearly every knightly household will be expected to muster a household detachment in support of their Adeptus Mechanicus allies, though the size of these detachments can very greatly. Some, gathered from minor houses or those that are already engaged in prosecuting another war, will number a mere handful of Nobles in their Knight suits. However, most households muster detachments of dozens, sometimes even hundreds of Knight suits.

Failure to fulfil the quota demanded of them is seen as the greatest dishonour a knightly house can suffer, and those households who fall short in this way rarely recover from the shame. Notorious cases such as House Ironhelm, who failed to provide their quota after pridefully losing several Knights in an honour duel just days before muster, are cautionary tales to all rulers of knightly houses. More than one ambitious consort has tricked Nobles of a rival house into frittering away their strength, so as to engineer their fall from grace when the Mechanicus calls and they cannot answer.

Yet for all this, it is rare indeed that a Knight world will fail to deliver its full complement of warriors to the muster coordinates. Marching to war alongside the fabled Titan Legions, fighting in the greatest battles of their age, these are things that few Nobles can resist. Better still, service in the armies of the Mechanicus guarantees escape from the hateful ennui of household life for months or even years at a time. Once summoned to war, Nobles are expected to march at the command of the Tech-Magi until such a time as they are dismissed to return to their homes. Should a Knight or detachment thereof perform especially admirably they may be commanded to remain in service of the Legio Titanicus permanently, securing their escape from the rigid family structure of their old lives once and for all.

Though a Knight looms monstrously over most foes, they are as an Imperial Guardsman to a Space Marine when set against even the smallest classes of Titan. Thus, when deployed alongside the god machines, Knights form a fast-moving, comparatively light force of scouts, flanking troops and reserves. They excel in this role, advancing in force to surround and bring down larger war engines, or supporting the advance of the mighty Titans through dense or dangerous terrain. Amid the fire and thunder of these battles, the Nobles stride fearless and full of joy. After all, the grand spectacle of Titans and Knights clashing could not be more different from the life the Nobles are trying to escape.

Knights will also march alongside Space Marines or Imperial Guard, given the correct motivation. Some houses will go to war should they feel their honour has been impinged upon, making common cause with whoever they can in order to carry the fight to the foe that wronged them. Equally, should another armed force within the Imperium come to a Knight world's aid, the houses of that world will forevermore consider themselves indebted to their saviours. This will often lead to fierce competition between the houses to show their gratitude, ever more grandiose household detachments marching to the aid of bewildered but delighted regimental commanders and Chapter Masters until the debt is considered settled. Wherever the Knights march, and whatever their motivation, they bring with them a boundless fury and hunger for war that few can match. Their conviction, their ambition, and their stringent code of martial honour all combine to make them dogged and deadly foes. Meanwhile, the ancient and terrifying weapons they wield lend them the strength to crush whole armies of enemies in a matter of minutes. Wherever the Knights march to war, their ground-shaking might can make the difference between victory and defeat for the forces of the Imperium.

rewards. Each Knight world is a resource production hub of significant value, and the Adeptus Mechanicus are not hesitant in seizing these the proceeds. At least once a year, each Knight world receives a visit from a huge, wallowing Adeptus Mechanicus mass conveyor and its fleet of escorts. These craft settle heavily into orbit, landers and tugs fussing around them like a shoal of pilot fish around a shark. Meanwhile, Mechanicus envoys descend to the Knight world below, their arrival greeted by the noble houses amid much pomp and ceremony. The envoys bring with them new Knight suits and replacement components, freshly manufactured stockpiles of fuel cells, ammunition and rarified chemicals, not to mention robed conclaves of newly indoctrinated Sacristans. Yet for all this, they take far more. Megatons of minerals, ores, food stocks, lumber and all manner of other locally sourced resources rumble up conveyor belts until the holds of the landers are full to bursting. The Adeptus Mechanicus never take more from a Knight world than their calculations indicate it can sustain, yet rarely do they leave the knightly houses with any more than they must. Once their mass conveyor is stocked with the Knight world's bounty and its novitiate chambers are thronging with nervous new Sacristans-to-be, the Adeptus Mechanicus depart once more for their forge world of origin. So it is that, while Knight worlds affiliated to the Cult Mechanicus are more technologically advanced than their Imperial cousins, they are forever bound by their commitment to sate the hunger of their patron forge worlds.

Far more common are those Knight worlds scattered throughout the Imperium that have never succumbed fully to the influence of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Whether they have cowed the Sacristan brotherhoods by force, or have cleverly manoeuvred around them to ensure that the adepts remained subjects, not equals, the knightly houses of these worlds have remained the masters of their own destiny. Of course, such concepts are relative amid the totalitarian, star-spanning realm of the Imperium. These self-determining Knight worlds have given their allegiance to the Administratum and their segmentum commanders, lest they be crushed utterly and without mercy by the Emperor's unstoppable war machine.

Still, beyond a requirement to honour the Imperial Tithe, those Knight worlds that remained their own masters have largely been left to proceed as they wished. All maintain at least a nominal degree of trade with the Adeptus Mechanicus, for they can still buy with resources and with loaned force of arms what they do not earn through servitude. Such arrangements are grudgingly made, however. Many Imperial-centric Knight worlds find themselves obliged to tolerate favouritism and regular snubs by the slighted Adeptus Mechanicus. Yet though they may be poorer in technological terms, and are often forced to fall back on their own means for years at a time, without aid from the distant organs of the Imperium, the knightly houses of these worlds are proud of their independence, and are known to fight all the harder for it.

WAR WITHIN THE HOUSES

During their long years of isolation, the Knight worlds became strange and introverted places. Cut off in the darkness, the planets' populations had no way of knowing whether they might be the last remaining enclaves of the human race. Believing it their duty to preserve what heritage they could from their race's ravaged past, each world developed ever more elaborate and long-winded traditions of remembrance. As the centuries ground slowly past, the reasons for these rituals and rites were lost in the mists of time, yet the practices themselves remained. Every year, the rituals of the knightly houses gained gravitas, even as they lost their original meaning beneath layers of stultifying tedium. By the time the Imperium rediscovered the Knight worlds, each house had its own ludicrously elaborate body of traditions. One house might require that the name of every household lord be read aloud each dawn, every member of the house being forced to bear witness to this repetitive list until well into the afternoon. Another might call upon every sword of every Noble to be presented to the house Sacristans, so that they might be blessed in sixfold binary cant over a period of many hours. Titles and forms of address, ancestor worship and decades of learning by rote, all of these things became integral to life in a knightly house while simultaneously being reviled as the ultimate in tedium. This led to an ever-increasing lust for conflict in order to alleviate the boredom, both on the field of battle and within the machinations of court.

Every Noble is expected to take a highborn consort for his own, both to cement the political alliances of his house and to ensure the furtherance of his line. Yet the wise among the knightly houses know that a consort can be the finest ally a Noble will ever have, utterly loyal and ambitious in a way that only one born to power can be. Indeed, the Machiavellian dances of intrigue enacted by the noble consorts are not for the faint of heart or the weak-willed. As the men of the knightly houses go to war on the battlefield, so do their ladies fight their own battles across ballrooms and feasting halls. Many Nobles are ambitious and cunning in their own right, of course, but with the aid of a consort they become far more dangerous. The Lady of the Keys, consort of Neru Degallio, was recognised as being at least as instrumental in ensuring House Degallio's pre-eminence on Alaric Prime as Neru's strength in arms. Yet for all the politicking that takes place within every knightly house, the Nobles seek above all else the release of marching to war.

THE UNEASY PEACE

The right to pilot a Knight suit is reserved for the first and second sons of each noble bloodline, and those entitled to do so will find every excuse to stride forth in their Knights. Competitions, trials and tourneys are commonplace, and many are used to determine internal hierarchies or even settle contests of rulership over entire Knight worlds. On the three -ringed world of Aaega, for instance, there is a contest every twenty-three years in which the Noble lord of each knightly house must race across the dreaded firesprawl to reach the shrine of St Pollundine. The first Noble to reach the ruin alive and with their suit still operational is declared the winner and secures primacy for their house until the next trial occurs. Many never live to see the shrine's crumbling walls, but this is seen as no bad thing, for it opens up opportunities for advancement and ensures that Aaega's ruler is as resourceful as he can be.

For all that such competition fires the blood of the Nobles, it is open war for which they truly yearn. This is fortunate, as there are causes beyond counting that will compel a house to send forth its Knights. On a localised scale, many of the more isolated or Imperium-affiliated Knight worlds face regular raids by pirates, bandits and xenos. Indeed, such frontier worlds as Doltirian and Launcel IV are near-continual war zones for large parts of the year, the former coping with warbands of Orks pouring haphazardly from the Scholdenrift while the latter lies uncomfortably close to the webway portal most often frequented by the Kabal of the Severed Thought. These raids are largely welcomed by the knightly houses – though the attackers may cause significant damage with their predations – for they provide an excuse for the Knights to march, and fighting these dangerous foes keeps a Noble's skills sharp. When larger, offworld conflicts call, however, most knightly houses are only too ready to answer.

A LIFE ON THE EDGE

There are those Nobles whose households fall, or who suffer personal tragedies or losses of honour so crushing that they can no longer face their peers. A Noble might lose his family to some lethal machination, or lose his brothers in arms, limping from the maelstrom of battle alone and forever changed. Whatever the cause, some Knights choose the life of a Freeblade, setting out alone into the stars to pursue their own agenda. These individuals renounce all ties to house and family, redecorating their Knight with their own personal colours and heraldry. This will often be heavily stylized to strike fear into the foe, or to communicate some underlying meaning known only to the Freeblade himself. These individuals do not travel completely alone, of course, for their Knight suits must be maintained and their needs for space travel met. Instead they roam the galaxy with small, rag-tag retinues in tow, always seeking the next battle in which they may aid the forces of the Imperium and further their own, enigmatic goals. These Knights are strange individuals, their methods and affectations seeming near madness to some. Tales are told of Freeblades who never speak, who bathe in the blood of fallen foes, or who will only fight if peculiar conditions are met. Yet for all this, even a single Freeblade Knight is a mighty boon indeed, and a Knight's peculiarities are likely to be overlooked until battle is done.


Tercyn
08
Tercyn



M25 - Maximilian Terryn, the founder of his house, has visions of a mysterious white stallion which appears to warn of danger. The horse's head on a blue field is taken as the house's emblem.



776.M30 - Lord Brutus Terryn leads the house in the war against the Great Kroktar, a beast that has plagued his people for a decade, finally slaying the monster in the battle of the six swords.



239.M35 - Seuitonius Thucidides Terryn takes the oath of allegiance to the Emperor of Mankind. Under his auspices, Terryn Knights fight alongside the Ultramarines.







Knightly house heraldry has evolved over millennia, from the simple icons and symbols used by the first settlers to the complex designs and pageantry used by their descendents. To a Noble, his personal heraldry and that of his house are as important to him as his honour or his Knight suit. It represents the purest expression of who the Noble is, what deeds he has achieved and the honour he has earned in battle. Within the ancient halls and keeps of a Knight world a Noble's heraldry is used to judge his worth, a lord reading the tale of the Noble's deeds from the icons on his banner without ever speaking to the man himself. For this reason, Nobles take great pride in their heraldry and ensure that after each battle any damage to their banners and colours are repaired, lest a noteworthy deed be lost behind a plasma burn or under a torn piece of armour.

To the uninitiated, a Knight's heraldry can appear as little more than fanciful imagery and a myriad of clashing colours. Those that face the Knight often mistake the colours and patterns of their war machines as the deepest kind of vanity, considering that the men that fight within the Knight suits must be weak or foolish. This is a dangerous underestimation of the Knights, as each mark and medal on their Knight suit has been earned in blood, and is a badge of martial pride. To earn even the most basic heraldry of his house a Noble must prove himself a skilful warrior and man of unflagging honour. Only the most devoted are considered to undertake the Becoming and earn the right to pilot a Knight suit. Thus, to be allowed to wear the icon of his house is not something granted by birth for the Noble sons of a Knight world, but rather something that must be earnt.

Every aspect of a house crest and a Noble's heraldry has meaning. Each curve of a shield or shade of colour is important to the Noble or house that bears it. Even the number of feathers in the aquila, or those framing the crest, can hold a meaning for the house, each one representing a great hero, one of the principal keeps of their world or the millennia a certain pact or alliance has endured.

Before the Knight worlds were rediscovered by the Imperium, and swore their allegiance to the Emperor, their heraldry was mostly limited to portraying the kingdoms and realms of their planet. In the wake of the Great Crusade, numerous Knight worlds were brought back into the fold of the Imperium, accepting alliance with the Emperor of Mankind and his galaxy-sprawling domain. At this point, over ten thousand years ago, Knight heraldry began to expand and evolve. For those houses that took the oath of allegiance to the God-Emperor, the aquila found its way onto the Knight suits and their personal crests sprouted wings, swords and eagle imagery. Over years of war and sacrifice, these icons have grown and developed, each new generation of house lords and Nobles adding to the deeds of their world and strengthening the ties between the Imperium and the Knights. Even so, such things do not happen swiftly, and when a change is considered to a house's crest it may take hundreds or even thousands of years before it is adopted. This is a reflection of the hidebound traditions of the Noble lines and their families that see change as anathema. However, variations of the house crest are permitted under certain circumstances, for particular campaigns or crusades. A lord might add a weapon or colour to the house crest for the duration of the war in question, denoting a special honour to the Knights that bear it. While it is often a subtle change, a different symbol or the aspect of a rampant beast, any Noble will be able to note the change instantly and understand its meaning.

When a Noble dies, usually falling in battle in the service of his house, his personal icons and heraldry are borne back to his home world. These banners, often torn and stained from combat, are hung in the halls of his keep alongside those of his ancestors so future generation might look upon his deeds and remember his glory. A young Noble growing up in such a place must look upon the banners of his forebears every day, noting their heroic achievements and mighty history. These children grow to adulthood wondering if they will earn a place at their ancestors' side, eager to win glory for their house and create a banner similarly bedecked in icons of far-off campaigns and vast crusades.

M24 - Nathaniel Griffith, founder of House Griffith, fights with valour in the Dragon Wars. Slaying the great and ancient dragon Alvirax, he is the first to master the dragonbone lance.



531.M32 - Leaum Griffith becomes the longest running champion of the Field of Adamantium, defeating all challengers for over twenty years in a row.



981.M34 - Paladus Griffith takes the oath of allegiance to the Emperor of Mankind. Dragon's End celebrates with a Grand Tournament that lasts a whole year.







THE ORIGINS OF THE KNIGHT SUIT CAN BE FOUND WOVEN INTO THE HISTORY OF THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS FROM THE TIME OF THE MECHANICUM, AND THOSE HOUSES THAT HAVE FORMED ALLIANCES WITH THE FORGE WORLDS OF THE OMNISSIAH BUILD UPON THE FOUNDATIONS OF THIS ANCIENT RELATIONSHIP. THE HERALDRY OF THOSE HOUSES ALIGNED WITH THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS INCORPORATES MUCH OF THE ICONOGRAPHY OF MARS, AND THE CRESTS OF THESE HOUSES OFTEN FEATURE HARD LINES AND SOLID, GEOMETRICAL SHAPES MORE AKIN TO LABELS OR MARKERS THAN THE STYLISED SHIELDS OF THEIR IMPERIAL KIN. THE COG IS A STRONG FEATURE OF ANY ADEPTUS MECHANICUS HOUSE CREST, THE TOOTHED WHEEL AN ENDURING SYMBOL OF THE OMNISSIAH. CHAINS, TOOLS AND HAMMERS REPRESENT THE INDUSTRIAL MIGHT OF THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS, THE POWER BEHIND THE CREATION OF THE KNIGHT SUIT AND ITS FURY IN BATTLE. FOR A NOBLE OF AN ADEPTUS MECHANICUS HOUSE, THE FORGE IS NEVER FAR AWAY, HIS KNIGHT SUIT AN EXTENSION OF THE TECHNOLOGICAL MASTERY OF MARS. EVEN THOUGH A KNIGHT WORLD MIGHT BE SEPARATED FROM MARS BY TIME AND SPACE THEY WILL ALWAYS BE CHILDREN OF THE RED PLANET, THE OFFSPRING OF THE GOD OF THE WAR-MACHINES.





M25 - Cheops Taranis, house founder, unites the two largest Knight spearhead formations on Mars by besting his rivals. The house emblem is two spearheads on a red field.



976.M31 - House Krast alone survives of the knightly houses of Chrysis in the wake of Horus' betrayal. They adopt the symbol of the gauntlet crushing the serpent to show their hatred of Chaos.



199.M32 - Chefren Taranis leads the charge in his Knight suit against an invading Ork horde. He single-handedly decimates the warlord's bodyguard and kills the greenskin leader.



663.M33 - Cyan Krast leads his forces to a great victory against the servants of the Dark Gods, crushing the Golden Taint warband in the Battle for the Gates of Obsilom.



523.M35 - The rule of Ahkenaten Taranis marks a new age of independence for his house. He forges an alliance with the Fabricator-General that sees House Taranis gain rights of autonomy within the armies of Mars.



203.M36 - Lord Taben Krast offers up his first born son to the Legio Titantius of Mars as a mark of his allegiance to the Adepus Mechanicus. In return the Fabricator-General reaffirms his support of the house's war against Chaos.





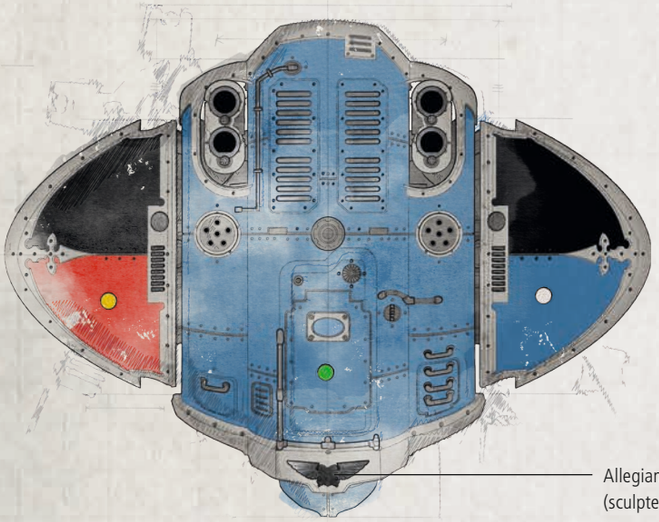
Chivalric Livery

IMPERIAL-ALIGNED KNIGHTS

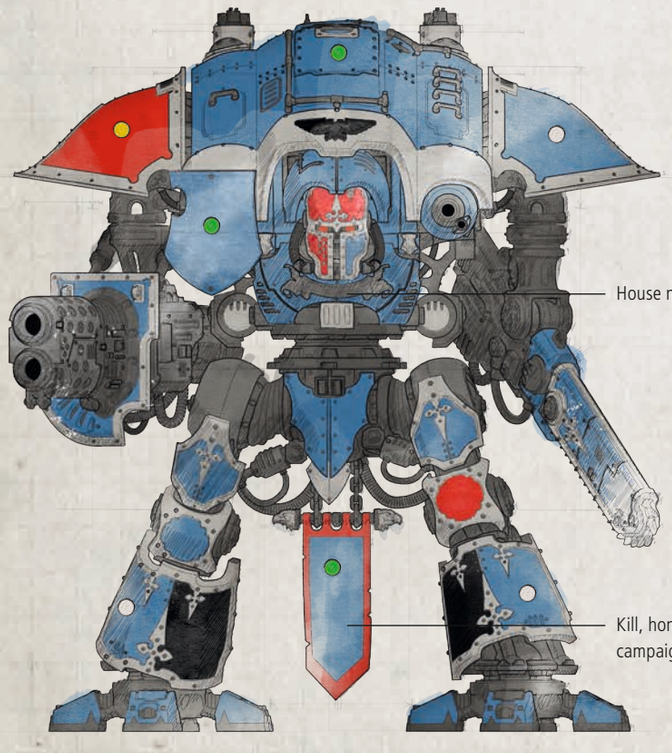
Theory

Identical for all members of the house
- Full house crest
- House emblem
- House livery
- Imperial livery (typically red or black)

Similar but unique to each individual
- Personal emblem
- Personal livery



Allegiance icon (sculpted)



House name in script

Kill, honour and campaign badges

Example

The livery of Sir Dunhand of House Hawkshroud, below, represents a typical example of an Imperial-aligned knight. Hawkshroud adopted black as the sign of their allegiance and so carry this shade and the associated Aquila on their suits' minor plates. Like many knightly houses, all members of this family have broadly similar personal heraldry (in this case a laurel wreath). Hawkshroud is unusual in that these personal designs feature the insignia of their allies, and campaign badges.



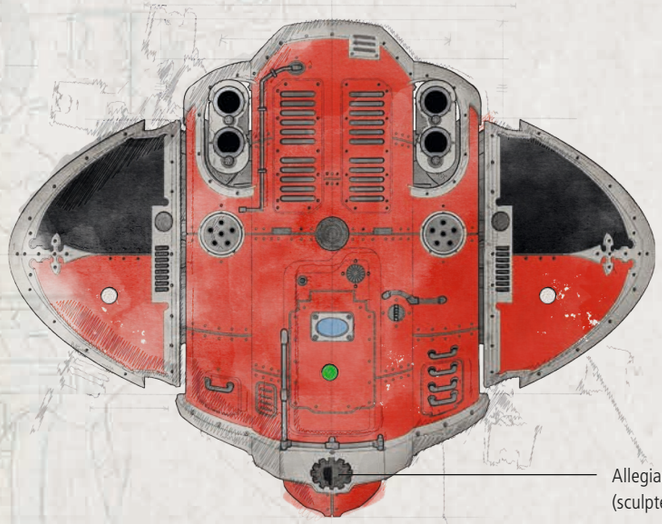


ADEPTUS MECHANICUS-ALIGNED KNIGHTS

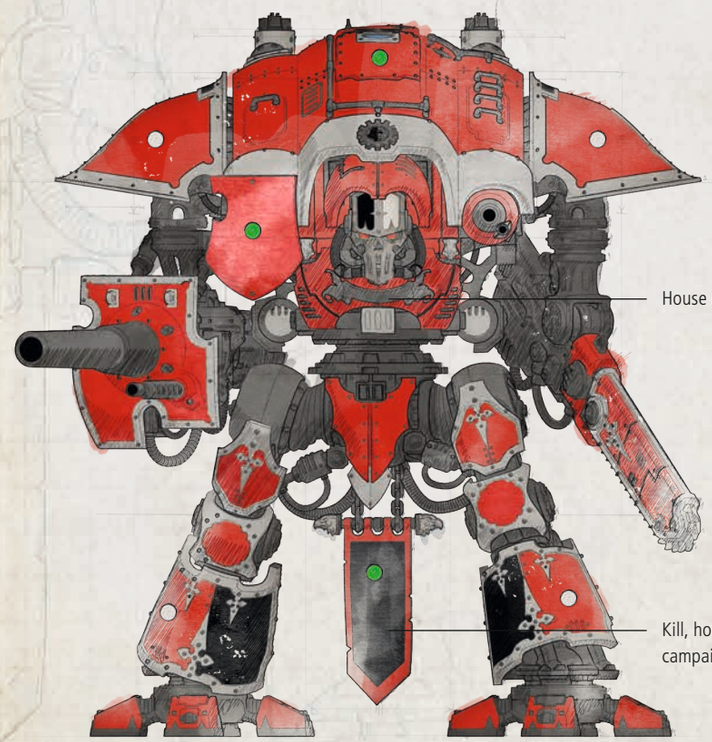
Theory

Identical for all members of the house

- Full house crest
- House emblem
- Major Adeptus Mechanicus livery (typically red, silver or white)
- Minor Adeptus Mechanicus livery (typically yellow or black)



Allegiance icon (sculpted)

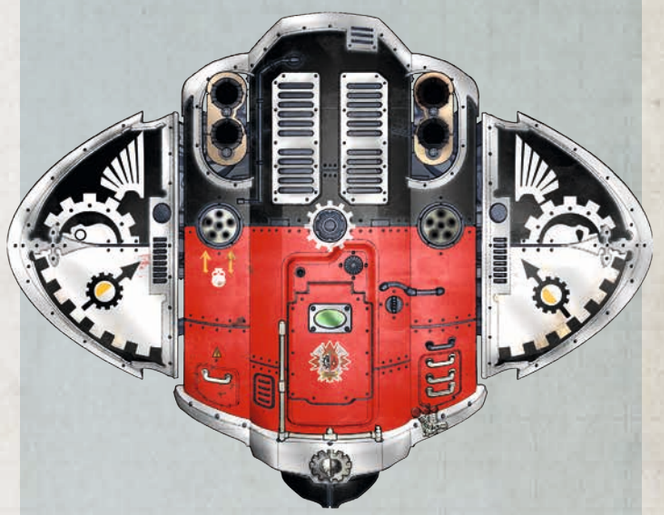


House name in script

Kill, honour and campaign badges

Example

The suit belonging to Sir Xantek of House Taranis, below, serves as an example of an Adeptus Mechanicus-aligned knight. Although houses dedicated to the Machine God are less predisposed to tolerate personal heraldry, this does not, however, preclude individual differences. Here, Sir Xantek has chosen to paint the back half of his Knight's main carapace black. The diagram on the left is, therefore, overly simplistic. Also of note is the common black-and-white half toning of the Knight's faceplate.





Heroism and Honour

HOUSE BANNERS

Most Knights carry a variety of pennants and banners proudly proclaiming their heritage and battle honours. These flags are flown from carapaces and weapons but, most commonly, hang from the pistons that drive the machine's powerful legs. Although the houses remained independent and isolated for millennia, their banners became more standardised when the Nobles bent their knee to the Emperor of Mankind or the Adeptus Mechanicus in his stead. To this end, the banners of both Imperial-aligned and Adeptus Mechanicus-aligned Knights are broadly similar.

The example on the right is the banner belonging to Sir Monteryn of House Terryn, and illustrates the general format. In the upper half of the pennant is the house crest in its full form. All Knights from a single house will carry this identical sigil. The lower portion of the banner is devoted to kill, honour and campaign markings. These will differ from individual to individual, depending on where they have served and what honours they have gained. The exact layout and composition of these honours also varies from house to house. The Nobles of House Terryn favour a relatively simple arrangement of these markings with coloured fields behind the icons.

The kill, campaign and honour badges are a mix of local iconography (perhaps unique to a house) and sigils used by the armies of the Imperium. For example, if a knight serves in an Imperial campaign, his banners would display the official badge for that action, and this sigil would also be worn by any Space Marines or Imperial Guardsmen involved.



The pride of the Nobles who pilot the great Knight suits is such that they will take any opportunity to proclaim their loyalties and achievements. To this end they often decorate the rear side of banners. Though less visible, these spaces are used for catechisms, rolls of honour and lists of revered ancestors.



FREEBLADE BANNERS

The banners belonging to Freeblade Knights exemplify their individualism. They often echo the livery the pilots choose to apply over the top of their old house colours. Mottos are not uncommon, or alternative versions of the icons these outcasts choose to identify themselves by. Such designs often reflect the fatalistic approach of the pilots - with skulls and other momento mori represented in great number.



Banner of Retribution Incarnate



Banner of the Obsidian Knight

HOUSE DEGALLIO



The Nobles of House Degallio arrange the iconography on their banners in the usual fashion. However, the kill markings on the lower half are framed by images of the sea monsters from the house's home world. Here the Great Behemoth ensnares the Knight's honour badges.

HOUSE HAWKSHROUD



House Hawkshroud has some of the most unusual banners for an Imperial-aligned knightly house. While they retain their crest at the top of the banner, the lower section features the insignia of their allies, typically enclosed in a scroll motif.

HOUSE KRAST



Like many Adeptus Mechanicus-aligned houses, Krast favour black banners with white iconography. They use the pyramid and sun-cog motif extensively and their individual recognition numbers are emblazoned on either side of this device.

HONOUR, KILL AND CAMPAIGN MARKINGS



Order of the Executioner



Ultima Segmentum Campaign



Holy Ordos Alliance Icon



Siege Honour



Legio Kill Marker



Munitorum Kill Honour



Ghoul Stars Crusade Victory Honour



Legio Mortis Kill Marker



Skitarii Alliance Icon



Mechanicum Duelling Medal

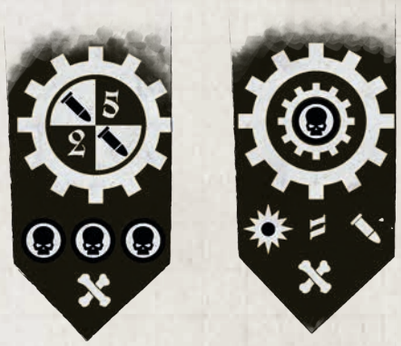


Blessed Laurel-cog



Fallow World Campaign Badge

HOUSE TARANIS



Adeptus Mechanicus-aligned House Taranis follows convention for the design of its banners. Of note is their use of the cog symbol that sits between the full house crest and their honour markings. These large icons are highly formalised. The exact composition has meaning and can denote rank. On the left is the banner of Sir Xantek. His recognition numbers (two of five) are ensconced within the test-pattern layout of the techno-magi. Sir Soberan, on the right, has a double cog. This represents his suit's initiation into the Cult Mechanicus to the second degree.


Teccyn
08
Teccyn
9

IMPERIAL KNIGHTS



House Terryn

The Knights of House Terryn are renowned for their skill at arms and ferocity in battle, each one a master of knightly combat. Ruled over by Patriarch Tybalt on the tropical world of Voltoris, detachments of the house range across the battlefields of the Eastern Fringe, from the cursed edges of the Ghoul Stars to the hellish warzones of the Damocles Gulf. Rumours speculate that the Knights' ferocity in battle and perchant for long off-world campaigns is a reaction to the tedium and oppressive peace of their home world, where convoluted ritual and endless ceremony permeate society. True or not, House Terryn boasts some of the finest Nobles ever to fight for the Emperor.

VOLTORIS, AN OPPRESSIVE PEACE

The world of Voltoris is a tranquil place, largely covered in glittering emerald seas and dotted with jungle-covered islands. Despite its location close to both the Tau Empire and the encroaching Tyranid hive fleets, it has remained largely untouched by war for thousands of years. Even its predators – the carrion vendell or the betentacled kroktars – are little danger to a Knight. This freedom from strife or the ceaseless assaults from xenos raiders has led to a society of tedious ceremonies and tiresome customs.

Under the light of their binary stars the Nobles of House Terryn hold endless court, the expectations heaped on young Nobles driving many to yearn for the call of battle where problems can be solved at the end of a reaper blade. From the moment he awakens to the moment he returns to his sanctum the Noble must observe the ancient traditions of his family, ancestors must be honoured, observances spoken and rituals performed. To ease the burden on their sons, most families have oaths-men that shadow a Noble wherever he goes, standing in for them when they are called upon to make an observance. An oaths-man will perform such tasks as offering up a drop of blood to each of the Noble's ancestors, opening his palm over barely healed scars so the Noble can keep his own hands unblemished. By this same token, it is not permitted for a Noble to finish eating before his guests, and an oaths-man might find himself choking down ale and fermented vendell flesh long after his lord has taken his leave. Oaths-men also suffer punishments, and deliver them, in the place of their lords, leading to all too common situations where servants play out ritualistic castigation upon one another in the name of their masters.

Far from being an unwelcome position, becoming an oaths-man is a proud achievement for the family of one so blessed. To be forced to honour the ancestors of a Noble is to touch the glory of the knightly houses. In fact, many oath-servants have begun lineages of their own, generations of men and women bound to a single family. It is a life of sacrifice lived in the shadow of greatness, but is the closest most common folk will come to the nobility that rule over them.

Beneath the tedium of House Terryn's reliance on ceremony is the ancient weight of the law, and though many lords chaff under the complication inherent in their daily life, the house does not hesitate to punish those that stray from the binding traditions. Men have been lashed to dead animals and set adrift to face the kroktars for mere breaches of protocol, but such a sanction will seldom affect the Noble himself; rather, his oaths-man will obediently take his place.

WANDERINGWARRIORS

It is little wonder that with such a ritualistic culture the young noblemen of Voltoris are drawn to the danger and freedom that comes from piloting a Knight suit into war. Once a Noble has completed the Ritual of Becoming he will find more and more excuses to be in his Knight. Regular 'training' missions are fundamental to the daily routine, with the lord likewise finding reason to help his sons to master their Knights in the jungles and shallow seas around their keeps. Younger brothers can only look on jealously as their older siblings laugh and brag about days spent crashing through the forest canopies hunting for vendell, or using derelict ships as target practice for their cannon.

When Seuitonius Thucidides Terryn forged the formal alliance with the Imperium, he was canny enough to ensure that Voltoris law was changed so that any Knight under arms in the service of the Emperor was exempt from his ceremonial obligations to house and home. Since that time the Knights of House Terryn have sought off-world conflict across the galaxy, pursuing their foes with an aggression born of years of unrequited yearning for war. From the time he reaches adulthood to his twilight years a House Terryn Noble will spend much of his life on campaign, returning to Voltoris only to ensure the continuation of his line and show his fealty to the Patriarch. Even Tybalt, ruler of House Terryn, still leads detachments in wars against the Imperium's foes, though he is over a century old. The keeps of Voltoris are as a result often quiet and empty places, populated by industrious servants and petulant young sons, overseen by jealous wives and daughters. Furion Peak, House Terryn's vast keep, echoes to the sound of song and revelry only when Tybalt and his Nobles are between campaigns. Then, as quickly as they arrived, the lord and his men will depart, leaving the servants to clean the feasting halls and restock the larders for the next time he should grace the keep.

THE LONG HUNT

At the end of the 41st Millennium the Tau Empire entered into its Third Sphere Expansion, and the war across the Damocles Gulf flared again into terrible life. Voltoris itself came under attack from the Tau commander Shadowsun. Though the forces arrayed against them were vast, the Imperium was able to

lay a deadly ambush for the Tau in the shadow of Furion Peak, and the combined might of the Imperial Guard and the knightly houses eventually defeated the xenos, driving them back from the world. In the aftermath, the Tau tried to extract as much of their force as possible from Voltoris. Those Tau that could not reach the landing zones around the peak were forced to retreat into the jungle or made for the open oceans in an attempt to find respite from the Imperial assault. Tybalt personally led households of Knights in pursuit of these xenos remnants, hunting them down before they could must their strength once again. While many of the alien units scattered, Tybalt eventually ran a regiment-sized formation to ground in the Weeping Reefs, the crimson-stained waters becoming a battleground for Knights and Tau battlesuits. Rending their foes to scrap with their reaper chainblades, the Nobles made a bloody example of the Tau. Tybalt was granted the honour of slaying the final alien, cracking open its suit and crushing it between the mighty foot of his Knight and the razor-sharp coral.

Though the battle had been won, Voltoris would never be the same. It was stained by the presence of the aliens and their foul ambitions, while scores of its favoured sons lay dead in the twisted remains of their proud Knight suits. Tybalt vowed revenge upon the Tau as he stood tall over the corpses of their dead, promising much blood to come for this gravest of insults against his house.

THE HONOURABLE COMPANY

Many House Terryn Nobles spend extended periods away from Voltoris, fighting wars on distant worlds under alien suns. These protracted sojourns into the void can sometimes go beyond what is considered dutiful to the house and stray close to the way of the Freeblade. More than one Noble has become lost in the duty of his quest, his single-minded devotion to pursuing a foe or honouring a vow taking him far into the wilds of the Imperium. Patriarch Tybalt accepts that sometimes a Knight's journey will take him beyond the battlefields and banners of House Terryn and to a place where he must forge his own destiny.

This was the case with the Honourable Company. The Company was a detachment of five Knights fighting alongside the Forlorn Crusade in the southern wilds of the Eastern Fringe, that chose the path of the Freeblade to complete an honour-debt for a fallen brother. The crusade had been fighting for centuries to reclaim the Storlar Sector from xenos empires and heretic overseers when the Knights of House Terryn joined their campaign. The Knights played a vital role in dozens of engagements across the sector, from the destruction of the Ork scrap-hive on Orbalok II to leading the breakthrough of the Imperishable Line during the Battle of Bluefire. Each of the Nobles earned a reputation for honour and courage among the crusaders, Imperial Guardsmen and Space Marine battle-brothers saluting the huge Knight machines as they thundered past on their way to the front line.

It was in the closing days of the War of Ashes, against the Swords of Khargoth renegade Space Marines, that the Knights turned Freeblade. The renegades had been fighting a war of scorched earth against the Imperium, falling back across the Laimean System, burning worlds in their wake and throwing armies of mutants, cultists and worse against the crusaders. Khargoth, the warlord of the traitor armies, had noted the prowess of the Knights and had singled them out for retribution. Khargoth's daemonic assassins infiltrated the Imperium's forward camp and murdered one of the House Terryn Nobles while he slept in his pavilion, dissecting his body and laying it out in pieces for his lance-brothers to find. Not only was this perceived as a vile act of treachery by the Nobles; it was also a terrible insult. For a member of the house to die outside his Knight suit was to dishonour him in the most fundamental of ways, a slight that could not be ignored. As one the other Nobles vowed to slay Khargoth and destroy his warband at any cost. In the final battles of the war, the company strove to hunt down the Space Marine renegade, often placing themselves or their allies in great danger. When the Swords of Khargoth escaped from the system the Knights followed, choosing the path of the Freeblade in order to fulfil their vow, and set off into the void after their hated quarry.

Romera woke in a cold iron cage, his side throbbing and his head still raw where the Throne Mechanicum plugs has been torn out. Looking around him the Noble could see a dozens of other cages, surrounded by piles of what looked like scrap. In each of the cages ragged human shapes huddled in the dark. Wincing with pain he limped over to side of his cage, certain that at least one of his ribs was cracked if not broken. Romera smelt the Ork before he saw it, the hulking creature standing guard nearby.

The Noble didn't know why the aliens had taken him prisoner, and he certainly wasn't going to hang around to find out. Though he was unarmed, the empty bolt pistol holster on his hip proving his captors weren't completely stupid, he had a lifetime of martial training and tactical doctrine at his command. As his old lance-master had taught him, an enemy is at his most lax when he thinks he has won. Leaning against the bars Romera made a show of looking beaten, not a great stretch considering the pain he was in. In a raspy voice he called out to the alien.

The Ork grunted quizzically, its beady eyes regarding the Noble in a most unpleasant way.

'Water.' Romera croaked again, leaning out through the bars and beckoning the alien closer.

The xenos loosed a string of guttural syllables from its stinking maw, a savage grin splitting its face at the prospect of violence as it advanced to the cage. Romera deliberately stumbled back out of reach just before it could grab him, but not before pulling something from its belt. Bellowing in anger the Ork rattled the cage door and tried to reach through the bars to get at Romera. The Noble, still clutching the pin from the stikkbomb threw himself to the ground. With a deafening boom the Ork exploded in a shower of ragged meat and metal fragments. Romera, his ears ringing, staggered to his feet. He had no notion of where he was, but he knew where he needed to be: wherever they had his Knight. However, he doubted he could reach it alone. Pushing his way out of the mangled cage door he picked up one of the Ork's battered guns, and used it to shoot the locks off the other cages. Dishevelled and bloodied Imperial Guardsmen began to filter out. When there were a dozen or so rough looking soldiers gathered around him, Romera asked, 'Who here is the lord of your men?'

'Sir, Corporal Pilm, sir,' one of the men replied. He looked uncertainly at his fellows, clearly hoping someone would outrank him. When he saw no one did, Romera thrust the Ork gun into his hands.

'Very well Master Pilm, I charge you with stewardship of these men. You are to follow my lead. I want discretion here – I want to keep these blasted aliens in the dark as long as possible.'

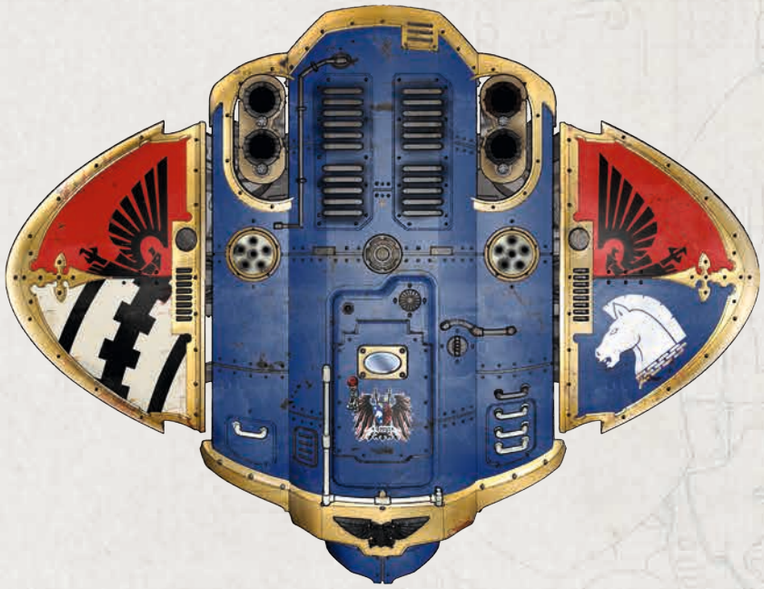
Pilm looked uncertain for a moment longer before barking orders to his men. The ragtag group moved out into the scrap yard, Romera noting it was filled with Imperial ordnance; apparently Ork war-loot. At first Romera wondered why the explosion had not drawn attention, but the crack of nearby gunfire, as the Orks tested their new weapons, seemed to answer his question. Climbing up onto a mound of debris Romera saw his proud Knight, Orks hammering and tearing at its hull.

'You're a Knight, sir… I mean m'lord.' Pilm stuttered, following Romera's gaze.

'No young man, I'm a Noble, but you help me get over there and you'll see a Knight.'



Monteryn, Voltoris Undaunted



Monteryn's moment of glory was when a Razorshark Strike Fighter lined up an attack run on Patriarch Tybalt, its course taking it directly over Voltoris Undaunted. With a scything blow from his reaper, Monteryn hacked the aircraft's tail from its fuselage, sending it spinning into the ground in a cloud of flame and shrapnel.



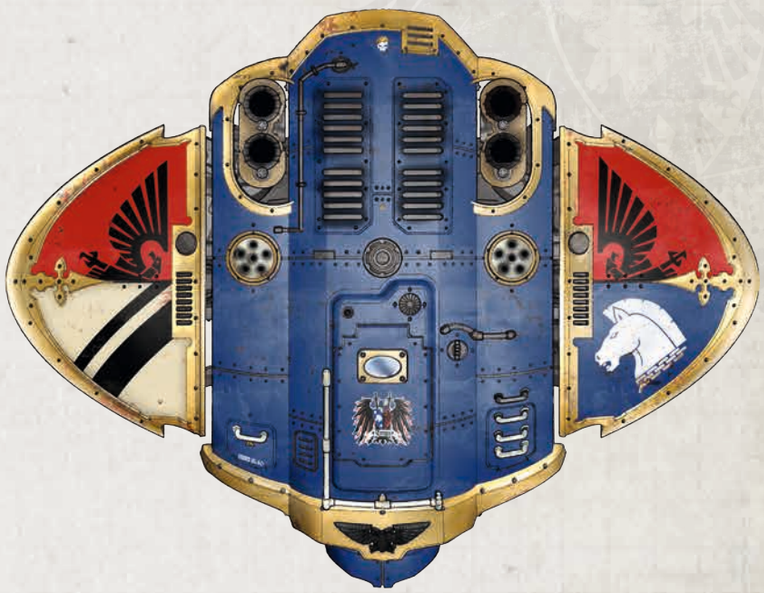
Myrcor, Scythe of Light



On the planet of Tormark Knights of House Terryn led by Myrcor undertook a daring rescue of the Tormarkian governor from jaws of a Tyranid invasion. The Hive Mind unleashed a torrent of creatures against the Knights, and only Myrcor made it back to his lander, the terrified governor clinging to the undercarriage of his Knight.



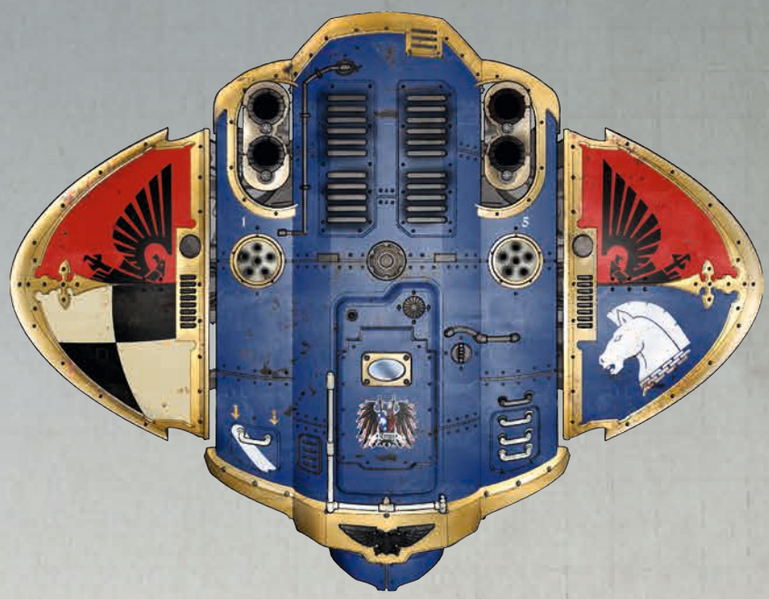
Capulan, Vermilion Shield



Capulan fought in the Ghoul Wars after the machine-dream awoke thousands of metallic warriors from their ancient slumber. In a rare alliance, he sided with Eldar on the world of Oranos. The Knight defended the Eldar psykers while they closed the Nercons' eldritch portal, emptying his battle cannon into endless waves of the foe.



Yorac, Spear of the Righteous



Yorac has lived a charmed life, cheating death at the hands of countless foes. In the scrap-harvest of Scouros IX, Yorac was one of the few survivors of a Dark Mechanicum ambush, his Knight climbing out of the waste reclamators covered in the broken remains of his enemies and allies alike to crush the armies of the Grand Dark Magos.

Orpheron, Unending victory



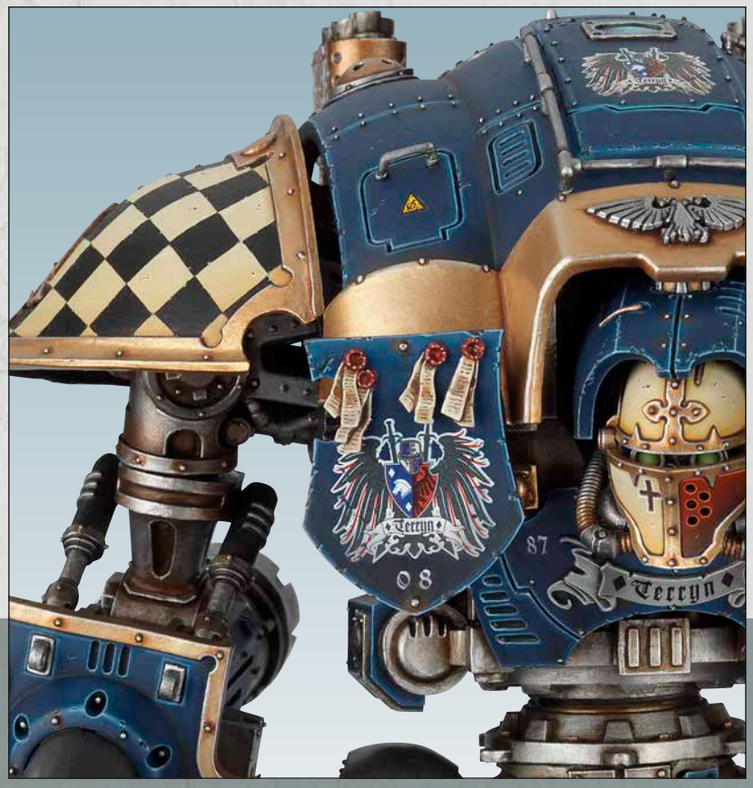
COLOURS OF HOUSE TERRYN

The proud heraldry of House Terryn incorporates the rich blue of their oceans, the white of their pure lineage and the gold of their wealth, both in resources and might. As members of an Imperial knightly house the Terryn Knights bear the aquila as part of their crest, emblazoned upon a red background showing the blood they have given in honour of the Emperor. Purity seals are prominent upon the Knight, placed by Sacristans to protect not just the sanctity of the Knight suit and bless it against the rigours of battle but also to honour its machine spirit. Anywhere there is a vital component to be protected, a mechanism or piece of armour that must not fail, a purity seal might be placed to add the extra defences of faith and righteousness.

The image of the white stallion's head has been a staple icon of the house since shortly after its inception. It is the preeminent symbol of the house and embodies the spirit of the dream horse that guided the first Terryn Nobles when they came to the frontier world of Voltoris. The meaning of the chain around the stallion's neck is not known for sure, though some Nobles see it as symbolic of the control and mastery they have over their destiny. The facing of the stallion's head is also important, and must always be presented on the shoulder facing forward, showing that the Knight is embracing his destiny.



Bereft of heraldry, the bare metal on the reverse of the Knight suit reveals the most functional components of this machine.



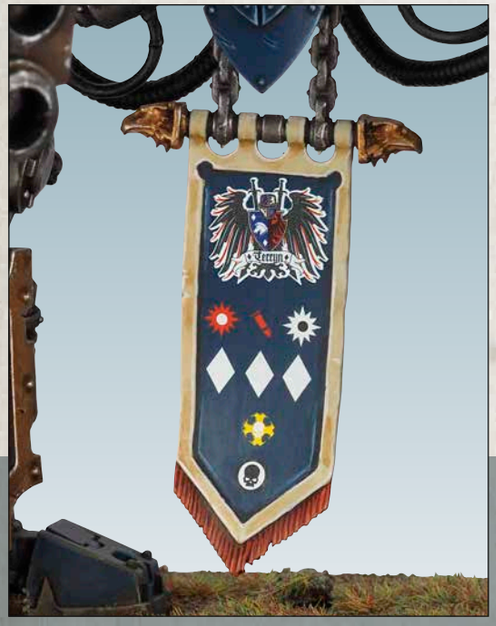
A face plate protects the Knight's lenses and augurs. Orpheron's face plate also bears the quarter of crimson common to Knights of his house.





Orpheron's chequered heraldry and banner icons are symbols unique to him, either won in battle or handed down amongst his ancestors over thousands of years.

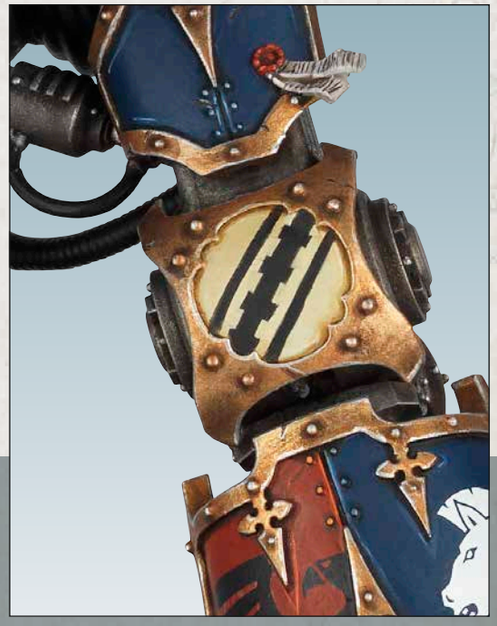
Monteryn's thermal cannon is a formidable weapon, and shows the Noble's preference for close quarters combat.



Monteryn's personal banner shows the numerous campaigns and victories he has taken part in.



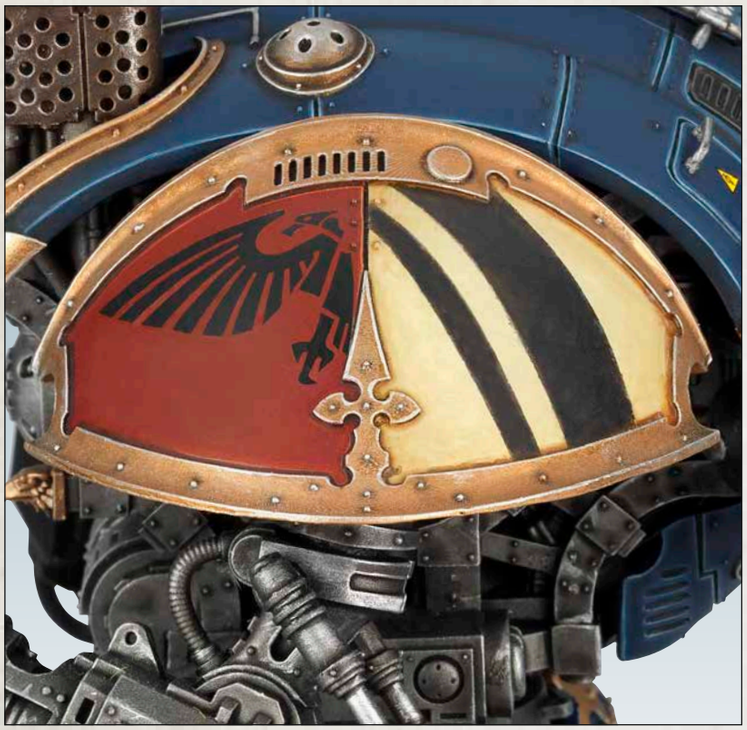
The tilting shield usually bears the Knight's house heraldry, though Nobles will often add purity seals for added protection.



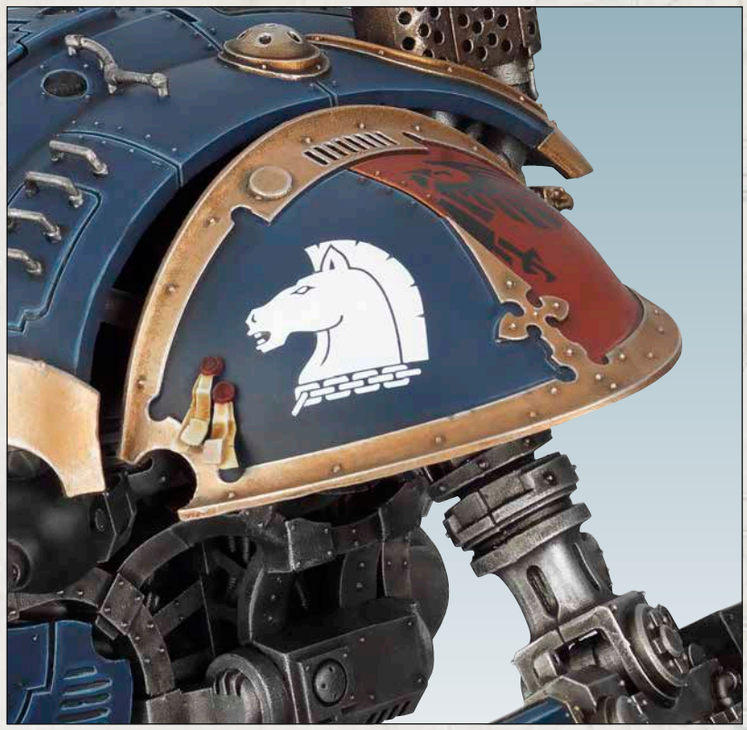
Monteryn's personal heraldry appears in numerous places on his Knight, including his left knee plate.

Monteryn, Voltoris Undaunted





Capulan's personal heraldry appears on his right shoulder side by side with the Imperial aquila, showing his allegiance to the Imperium of Man.



Capulan's other shoulder plate bears the white horse head of House Terryn. This side also bears the halved aquila, showing the importance of the Noble's oath to the Imperium.







Icons in honour of the Imperium, one's House, of victory and maker are all as important to a Noble as the adamantium plates that protect his Knight suit. Here we can see the Adeptus Mechanicus maker's plate and the symbol of House Terryn, as well as the array of individual campaign badges and personal heraldry borne by most Imperial Knights.

Capulan, Vermilion Shield



Yorac, Spear of the Righteous



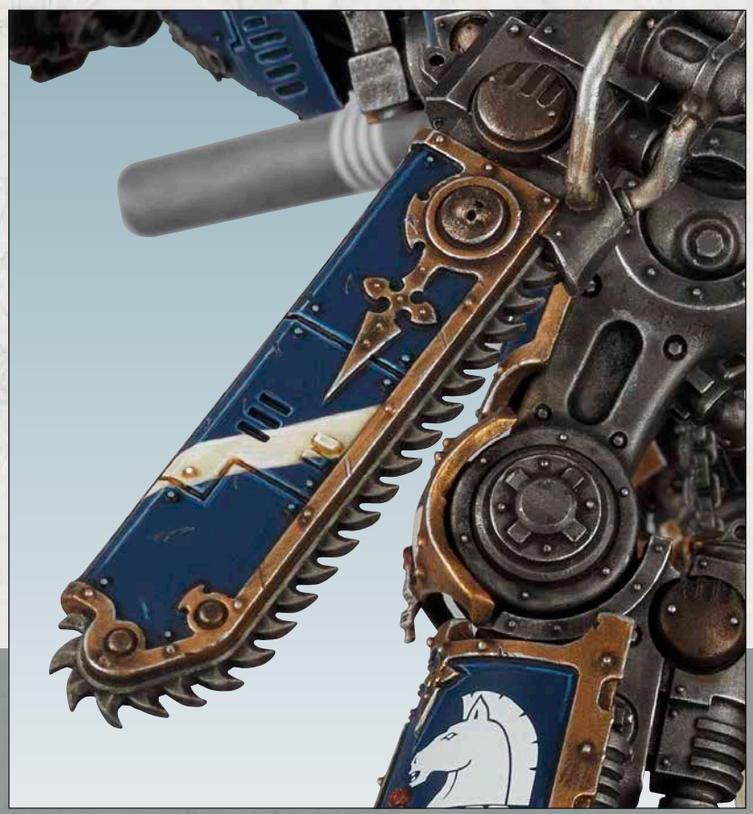
HOUSE TERRYN PERSONAL HERALDRY

Each Knight bears both the colours of its house and the personal heraldry of the Noble who commands it. Yorac, and his Knight Spear of the Righteous, bear the blue of the house, the head of the white stallion and the black demi-aquila on a red field, but also numerous additions unique to Yorac. The broad check design on his shoulder and left knee guard are drawn from his Voltoris family lineage. Each of the families within the household wear differing black and white patterns on their cloaks, a reminder of the clans among the first settlers, before the rise of House Terryn as the dominant power on Voltoris.

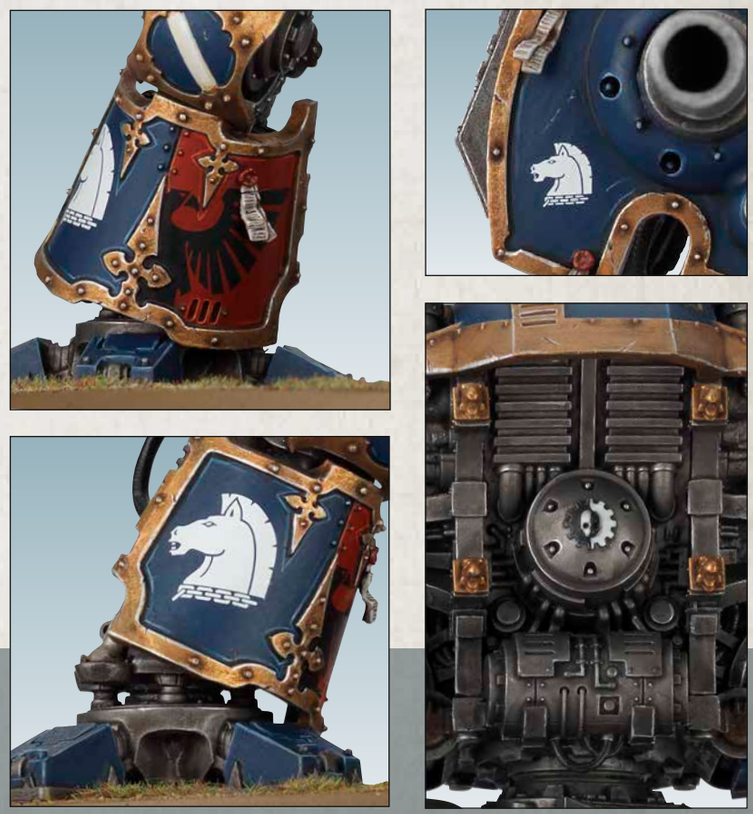
Over time the heraldry of a Knight will change, growing as the Noble gains experience and is tempered by the blood and fire of war. Most notably this will be on his banner, as he accrues badges and icons denoting his many victories and campaigns. However, the Knight suit hull will also bear marks left by the exploits of its Noble. On Spear of the Righteous, Yorac has added a single broad white strip over his starboard salvation hatch. This indicates that he has escaped the death of his Knight suit at least once, climbing free from its smoking wreckage. Far from a mark of disgrace, this proves the Knight's tenacity to continue fighting no matter the efforts of his foes.



Nobles will add 'kill markers' to their weapons when they defeat a noteworthy foe. Yorac has four 'kill rings' on his battle cannon to commemorate the destruction of four powerful enemies.



A Knight's reaper is a fearsome weapon: more than three times the length of a man, it has the power to cut through any armour a foe may sport.



The white horse head is a revered symbol for House Terryn's Nobles and appears numerous times of their Knights' armour, though each suit still retains the stamp of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

House Cadmus



Proud and autonomous, the Knights of Raisa have only ever accepted allegiance with the Imperium as equals, never considering themselves completely beholden to the High Lords of Terra. When the first Rogue Trader set foot upon Raisa he received a cold welcome from its Nobles, and it was many years before the first tentative alliances were formed. They were equally resistant when forced to accept oaths with the forge world of Gryphonne IV, in return for skilled Sacristans and the secret technologies of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Despite the enduring independence of its Nobles, House Cadmus has always honoured the Imperium's call to arms, and has ferociously fought its foes for millennia.

RAISA, THE UNTAMED WILDERNESS

The remote world of Raisa was isolated from Mankind for thousands of years, perched on the edge of the galaxy and staring off into the void. This sense of the far frontier is brought home each night to the men and women of Raisa when they look up and see one half of the sky glittering with stars, the other a void of empty space. For centuries only the Knights protected the people of Raisa from the dark things that crawled, stalked and slithered through its arboreal forests, and at night even the Nobles retreated to their plateau fortresses, leaving the wilds to the beasts and other, fouler things that prowled in the murk. Most feared of the denizens of the dark Raisan woods were the golems. Elemental creations of wood and stone, each golem was a tangle of sentient vines and trees given life by strange energies from the void. With granite fists and obsidian talons a golem was capable of punching through the carapace of a Knight and tearing out its pilot. The only way to kill a golem was to rupture its stone heart, the living rock at its centre in which the resonating energies that held it together dwelt. In a century-long conflict known as the Golem War, the Knights hunted down and vanquished the terrifying beasts, shattering the resonating spires from which they were birthed. It was from this war that Golem Keep, House Cadmus' ancestral home, earned its name – its thick granite walls constructed from the dead stone hearts of the slain creatures.

With the golems gone, races of primitive abhumans flourished in the forests of Raisa. Though these were little match for the Nobles astride their Knights, in large numbers the creatures could threaten the houses and their provinces if left unchecked. At times, whole communities would disappear overnight to the depredations of the mutants, who would melt back into the forests before the vengeance of the Nobles could find them. So it is that now, on Midsummer Eve each year, the Nobles gather at Golem Keep to take part in the great hunt known as the Cull.

THE CULL

Born of necessity, the Cull was at first a way for the Nobles to ensure that nothing ever again challenged their mastery of Raisa, as the golems had done in times past. The abhumans were the primary target of the Cull – though primitive they would occasionally raid the edges of the plateau cities. Where these abhumans came from is unclear, though there are tales told by superstitious peasants that they are a debased off-shoot of the original human settlers, sharing a distant if dubious ancestry with the houses. Whether there is any truth in this it does not stop the Nobles culling their numbers, the high-born families content not to speak of such matters or to consider what they might mean.

The Cull has been undertaken for thousands of years, and is at the core of Raisan society. In the early hunts the Nobles would crash through the forests in their Knights, guns lighting up the shadowy paths and clearings as they cut down anything larger than a vine-vole. At the end of the hunt the Nobles would recount their kills, though there was never any true way of knowing how many actual abhumans had been slain as little remained after battle cannon rounds and reaper blades had done their work. Over time the Cull evolved and became more efficient, especially once alliance was made with Gryphonne IV. The use of sophisticated augurs and bioscanners allowed the Knights to detect the abhumans through miles of shrouded woodland, and kill-counters were added to the Knight suits to remove any doubt as to who reaped the greatest tally. Eventually the Cull grew in importance to become the means by which the ruling lord of the house was chosen. This developed as a result of the favour bestowed upon the Noble who claimed the most kills, and the subsequent influence he had on Raisan politics. The reasoning was to formalise this recognition by granting him lordship, with the understanding it would last for only a year until the next Cull.

For the last thirty-two years Baron Roland of Swinford Hall has led the tallies of the Cull – a feat unprecedented in the annals of the event. The other Nobles of Raica have recently entered into a rare accord, questioning whether it is right that prowess in the culling of base abhumans should determine political might at all. To these dissenters Baron Roland has been heard to say that if they care so much who has lordship they should simply perform better in the Cull.

HUNTING LANCES

The Nobles of House Cadmus have a reputation as peerless hunters, and there are few other knightly houses that can boast the same level of skill when it comes to running prey to ground. The development of hunting skills is a necessity in the wilderness of Raisa, and Cadman Nobles are experts in controlling their Knights in dense surroundings like jungles and woods. The thickly forested continents of House Cadmus' home world are the proving ground for its Knights, the huge green-armoured walkers crashing through the foliage and sending wildlife scurrying off in all directions. From above, the Knights are difficult to distinguish, their adamantium plates blending in with the forest canopy, and making them appear like the ominous shadows of undersea predators gliding through dark waters.

Young Nobles sometimes disappear for months hunting in the woods of Raisa, taking with them a small company of retainers and a favoured Sacristan. This can become a rite of passage of sorts, as the Noble catalogues his kills and tries to out-do his peers by delving deeper into the wilds of the Knight world. Even in a Knight suit there are places that fathers warn their sons not to tread, though more often than not this only makes such sites more enticing. The Tangle is such a place, a briar patch of twisted trees and knotted undergrowth so thick it can snare a Knight. Rumour has it that in the wake of the Golem Wars not all the beasts were slain, and some survived by fleeing into the farthest regions of Raisa. Some families believe that there is a nest of golems within the Tangle, and more than one young Noble has tried to find the truth for himself. Such hunts usually end with the Knights returning to Golem Keep, covered in mud and broken vegetation but empty handed, though always with tall tales of 'things' glimpsed through the trees or just on the edge of augur range. These stories do nothing to sate the nobility and only ensure that a new generation of Nobles will take up the quest.

Even when on campaign, House Cadmus Knights will engage in hunts, forming what are informally known as Hunting Lances to track and kill local creatures. On the death world of Dynak, Knights of House Cadmus aided the Catachan 217th in defeating a major assault by Eldar corsairs from nearby Carrion Rift. After the Eldar had retreated back into the Rift, the Nobles heard tales told by the Catachans of a great beast sighted deep within the swamp-caverns of Dynak. The Nobles immediately boarded their Knights and set off on a hunt that would take them across the drenched surface of the world and down into a vast network of fetid sunken caverns. Eventually the Cadman Knights cornered a gigantic leech-serpent, defeating the beast in a battle that raged for over an hour. The Catachan commander could only nod with approval when the Knights returned dragging the stinking, fanged head of the beast with them.

EDGE OF THE GALAXY

Raisa rests upon the very edge of the known galaxy, with nothing but darkness staring back at it from the void beyond. It is little wonder then that it has suffered strange visitations from out of the Veiled Region. Over the centuries there have been scores of phenomena recorded by House Cadmus, each encounter or event carefully written down in the great Tome of Years held in Golem Keep.

In the Year of Dark Rain, millions of obsidian meteors came hurling out of the galactic void, crashing down into the jungles of Raisa. Men foolish enough to try and drag the meteorite fragments back to their homes – thinking they might have some worth – grew sick and died, terrible black lesions covering their flesh. Eventually House Cadmus decreed the meteors forbidden and gathered together all they could find using Knight suits, sealing them in the depths of Golem Keep. However, those few men who looked upon one of the meteorites and lived whisper that they were covered in strange script and the crudely carved images of Knights.

During the Year of Haunted Words, a light fell from the heavens and landed deep in the woods of the Arborous Basin. That same night the baron left Golem Keep with a few of his men and took their Knights down into the forest. Rumours among the servants of the keep tell of the baron returning with a luminous casket of strange and alien design. Through its transparent lid a willowy woman could be seen, slender of limb and fair of hair with gracefully pointed ears. The same servants say the sleeping maiden was carried down into the vault to be hidden among the most sacred treasures of House Cadmus.

In the Year of Shrouded Stars, a huge comet filled the skies of Raisa wreathed in blue and white fire. As it passed near the Knight world tiny burning stars broke off from the comet and fell through the atmosphere. As they fell into the forest the stars resolved themselves into the broken wrecks of ships, the comet itself an ancient and decaying space hulk. From within each vessel alien monsters and mechanical devils crawled out into the forests. That year the Cull hunted metal men and green-skinned xenos.

Stories of the contents of Golem Keep have even reached the ears of the Inquisition. When Inquisitor Grumund took refuge on Raisa before travelling on into the Veiled Region, he casually asked Baron Roland about these whispers of alien objects and unknown obscura. Roland's response was merely to smile across the feasting table and remind Grumund that he was here as a guest, and should not trouble himself with the gossip of peasants. Glancing around at the room filled with House Cadmus Nobles, all with eyes on the Inquisitor, he wisely chose not to press the point.

Gedren walked up the stone ramp into the Vault Transcendent, his autoquill servitor mindlessly shadowing his steps. Looking up at the towering form of Bastion of Faith the Sacristan shook his head, taking in the countless dents, scratches and rents the Knight had suffered.

'Tertiarius salvation seals appear perished and psalms of binding broken.' As Gedren began to speak the servitor sprang to life, the tiny scratching of its autoquill a murmur in the vast chamber.

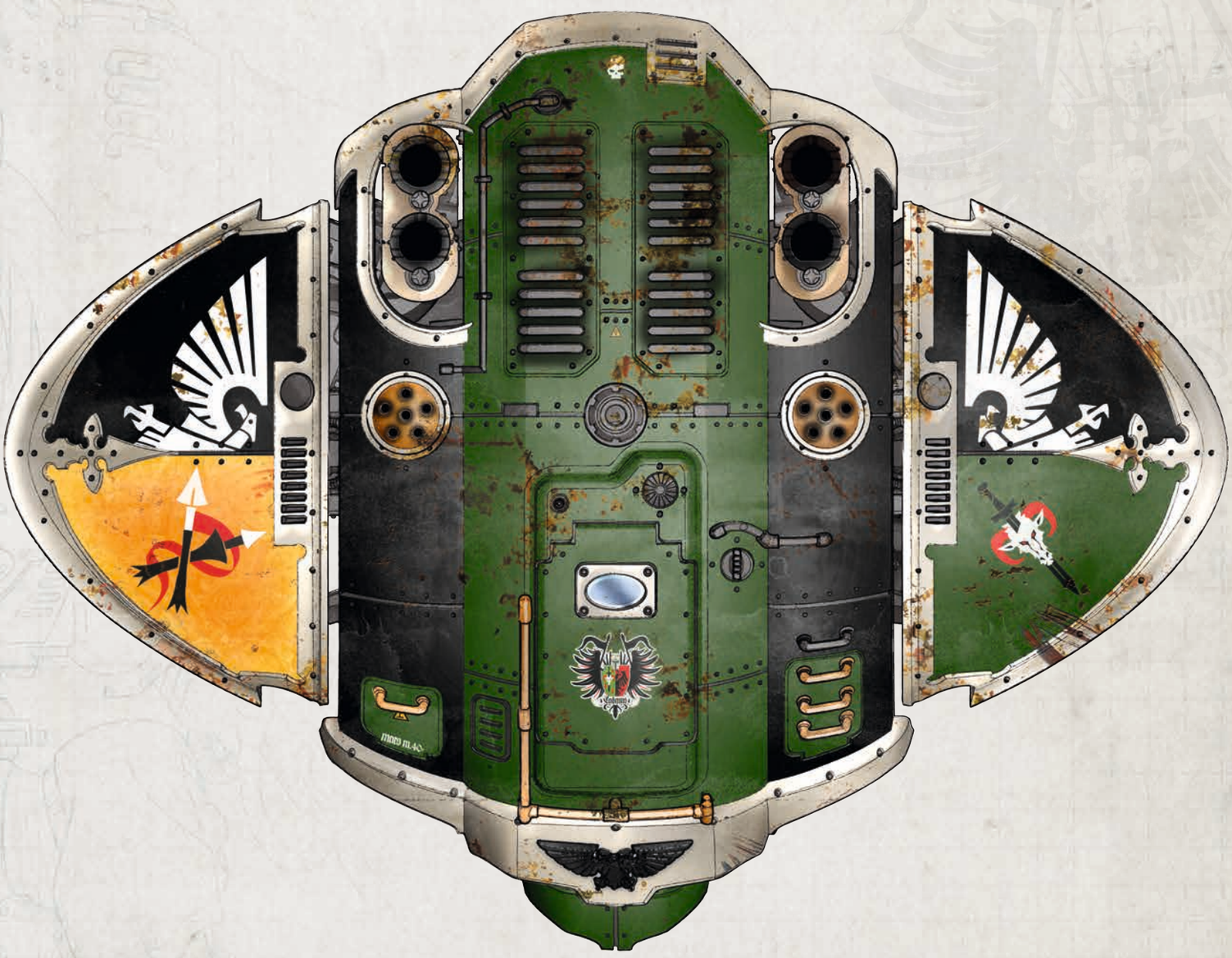
'Forward solleret ruptured, with… xenos mastication of adamantium plate.' The Sacristan craned his neck to have a better look at the damage, his augmented retinal lenses whirring quietly as they took in the broken chitin teeth still embedded in the Knight.
Gedren climbed the gantry cocooning the Knight, taking further stock of its scars; burns from potent alien acids, scorched paint where fires had washed over its hull and dents made by chitinous claws.

All the while the servitor followed close behind, recording his quiet words with a rustle of parchment and quill. The damage was largely superficial, though he noted Lord Albrecht's heraldry had been blemished, bare adamatium furrows showing through the green field of House Cadmus. He would have to inform the house artisans, who would see to its repainting.

Reaching the middle of the gantry, Gedren paused, his vision drawn to some movement behind the thermal cannon vambrace. Leaning in he tapped the huge adamantium plate with his skeletal augmetic hand. A tiny xenos parasite fell to the floor with a mewling squeal, its miniscule jagged mouth gasping at the air. With a wet crunch Gedren stepped on it, feeling as he did so a strange sense of power and kinship with the towering Knight. After a moment the Sacristan moved on, the silence broken only by his occasional comments and the faint scraping of the autoquill.

Malcolm, the Beast Killer





When the shadow of Hive Fleet Leviathan eclipsed the forge world of Gryphonne IV, the Knights of House Cadmus honoured their ancient treaty and came to its aid. Shoulder to shoulder with the Titan Legion of the War Gryphons and the massed ranks of Skitarii, the Knights stood ready to repel the invaders, confident that nothing could defeat their assembled might. They were mistaken.

In the alien maelstrom that followed, countless heroic deeds were wrought by Knights of House Cadmus, most lost forever along with the lives of those who witnessed them.

One of the few Knights to make it out alive was Malcolm, the Beast Killer, hero of the Battle of Thunderhead. The Thunderhead Rail Hub was a key strategic asset for the Imperial forces located in the heart of Gryphonne's manufactorums it allowed reinforcements and heavy weapons to rapidly reach almost anywhere on the northern continent. Malcolm led a cadre of Knights which were defending the rail hub along with a division of Skitarri. Ironically it was this mass of bio-matter which attracted the Tyranids to the hub, and in the first hours of the invasion millions of the xenos descended upon it.

For almost a full day the Tyranids assaulted the defenders in seemingly endless waves, the hauling yards and engine turntables becoming choked with the dead. Across barricades made from train carriages Malcolm and his rapidly dwindling cadre fought back Carnifexes, and Trygons, their adamantium armour scarred with countless claw and fang marks. As day turned to night a new threat appeared, a mighty Hierophant bio-titan climbing over the ruined outer defences of the hub, its vast carapace silhouetted by the inferno of war. With his brothers fallen and the Skitarii heavy weapons destroyed, Malcolm alone charged forward to meet the beast. Almost at once the bio-titan's spore field began to eat away at his Knight's armour, Malcolm's ion shield flickering and failing under the onslaught. Heedless of the heavy damage he was suffering, Malcolm speared the Hierophant with his reaper, its churning teeth biting deep into the monstrous Tyranid's thorax. As a horse might flick away a fly with its tail the bio-titan hurled the Knight across the rail hub with a sweep of one of its claws. Before Malcolm could right his battered suit the Tyranid impaled him on the end of one of its long chitinous legs, punching through his adamantium hull. Just as it seemed Malcolm would be defeated, he raised his thermal cannon, not at the Hierophant, but at the remains of the train he had been hurled into, its carriages heavy with promethium tanks. In a geyser of flame, the bio-titan was engulfed in burning liquid fuel. Within the shell of his Knight Malcolm survived the sea of fire, but the Hierophant was immolated, filling the air with the sickly scent of its charred flesh.

Though the rail hub was ultimately lost, none could question Malcolm's bravery that day, nor the glory he had won for House Cadmus.

Roderick, Hound of Raisa





Lord Roderick is a skilled and pitiless hunter, and favoured lance-brother to Lord Roland. Though Roderick has yet to beat Roland's impressive tally in the Cull, the Noble has consistently ranked second behind the master of House Cadmus. Roland often attributes Roderick's hunting skills to his unusual upbringing. Many years ago, abhuman savages killed Roderick's noble parents while they were travelling to a council at Golem Keep. The young Roderick alone escaped to be raised by a hermit in the wild Raisan woods. For over a decade Roderick learnt to survive with only the weapons he could fashion from wood and stone. He was eventually rescued by Roland during a Cull, where the noble lord mistook him for an abhuman and almost killed him. Roderick went on to reclaim his birthright and has risen to a prominent position within the Knights of House Cadmus.

Roderick has put his hunting skills to good use on dozens of worlds, using his Knight to hunt down the foe relentlessly. During fighting on the death world of Kane's Sorrow, Roderick played a vital role in helping the Catachan 203rd Regiment defeat the Ork forces of the Arch-Arsonist of Charadon. For months the Catachans had been fighting to capture the main Ork scrap fort, designated as Hill 937. In pouring rain and rolling, choking fog, the Guardsmen crawled up the mud-slick hill under constant shoota fire. Even the arrival of the House Cadmus Knights proved indecisive, as the heavy walkers were bogged down as they tried to climb the hill, becoming easy targets for the ramshackle Ork artillery.

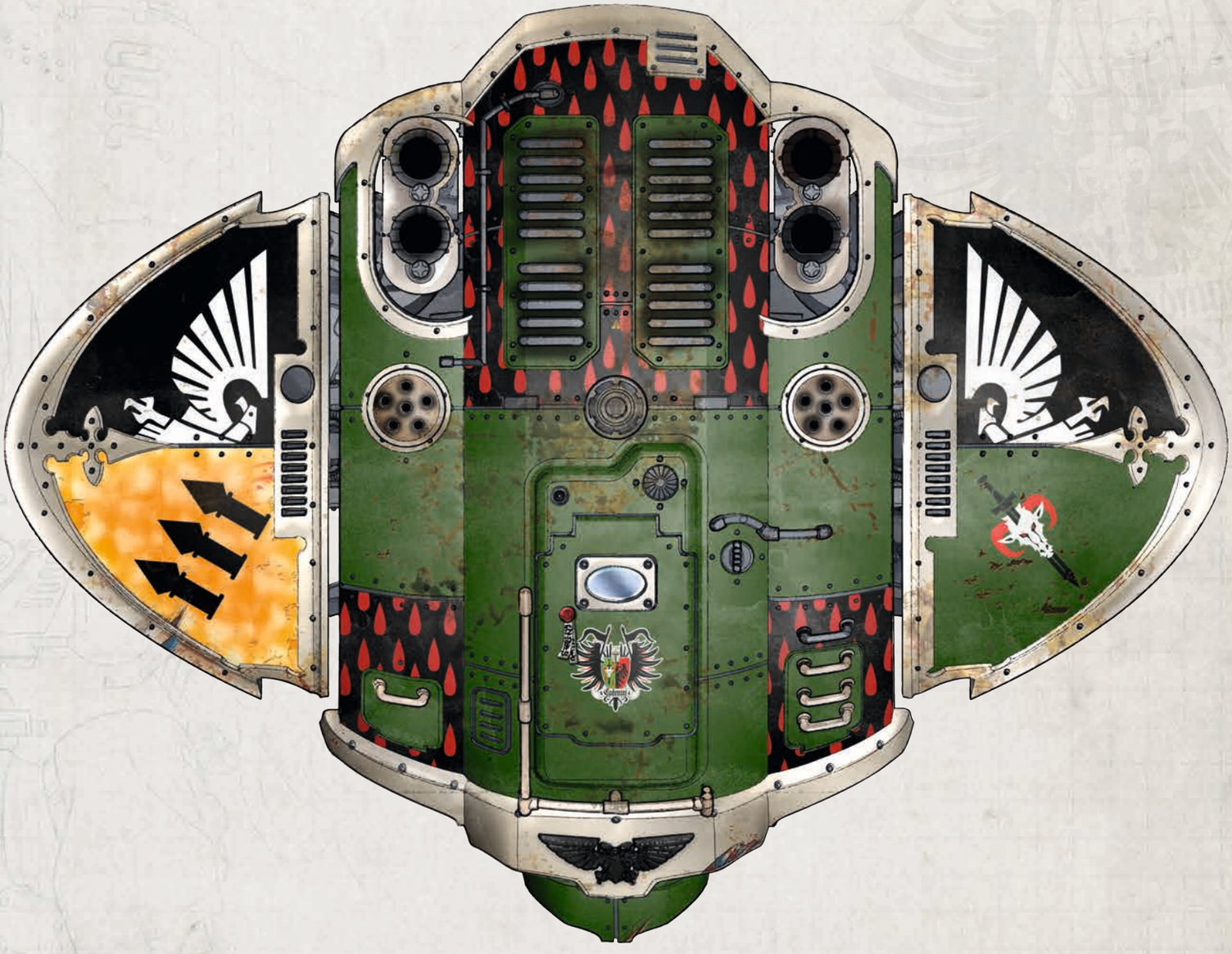
After a number of disastrous assaults, Roderick noted that the Orks often seemed to appear behind the Imperium's forces, arriving as if from nowhere. Following the distinctive alien spoor of the Orks, the Noble uncovered a complex network of tunnels honeycombing the hill and leading to deep bunkers under the fort. Using his cannon to scour the tunnels clean, he was able to open the way for the Catachans and eventually take the hill.

On the planet of Galfranus V, Roderick once again demonstrated his talents, this time against a vanguard swarm of Hive Fleet Leviathan. For months the peaceful agri world had been plagued with reports of strange beasts half-seen in the tangle-orchards or disappearing into the vast avian hatcheries. Seeing the signs for what they were, the Noble took his Knight to the surface and began a systematic hunt for the Tyranids. Roderick followed the lingering pheromone trails of dozens of Lictors, stalking them through the vine-choked orchards like a vengeful giant. Workers would look on in wonder as the Knight suddenly appeared, turning its guns on a line of trees and shredding the chameleonic beast lurking within. After forty days of hunting, Roderick freed Galfranus V from every last trace of alien infestation.

The skills learnt against the Tyranids on Galfranus would later serve Roderick well during the defence of Gryphonne IV. He would be one of the few survivors of that war, taking a heavy toll upon the hive fleet.

William, Bloody Broadsword





When a Noble joins with the Throne Mechanicum especially young, as William did, it can alter his temperament, the feeling of invincibility that comes with being in command of a Knight suit filling his young mind with visions of glory. William's reckless nature brought him close to defeat numerous times – his actions during the defence of Gryphonne IV against Hive Fleet Leviathan won him great glory but almost cost him his life. Having learnt little from the fall of the forge world, William would repeat his mistakes on the hive world of Vaen.

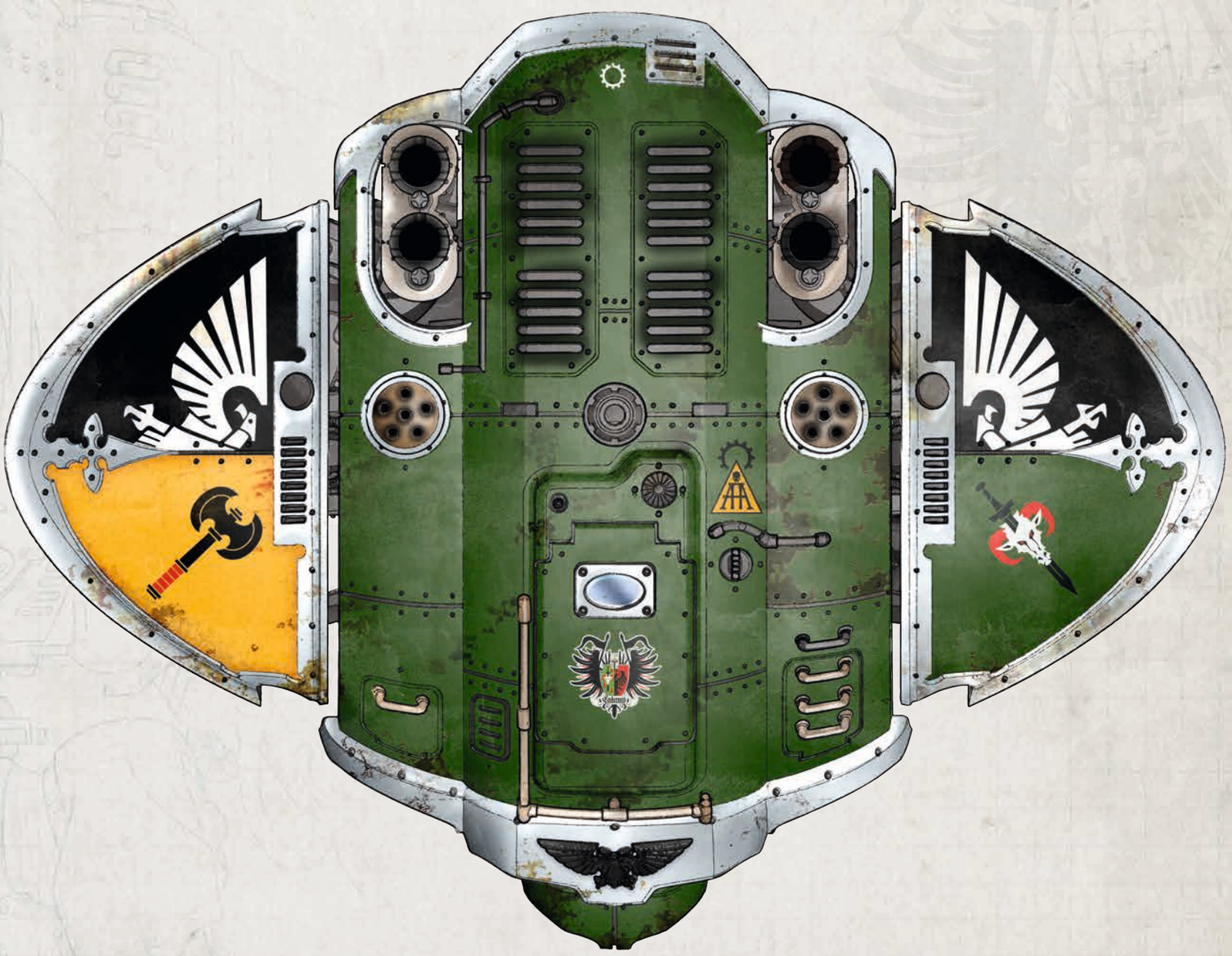
Hordes of Orks had infested the ruins of Hyrdaxion Hive on Vaen, tearing it to pieces and building a gargantuan war machine from the wreckage. William joined the Dark Hunters Space Marines in a first strike against the hive, while the other Imperial forces mustered outside. William guided his Knight, Bloody Broadsword, into the nightmare ruin of scrap and refuse, Dark Hunters Rhinos and Predators racing alongside. For the first ominous hour the strike force encountered no sign of the Orks nor any resistance, crossing corroded bridges and rusted gantries as they slowly climbed up the hive's shattered skeleton. Everywhere could be found the pitiful remains of the millions of citizens that had once inhabited the hive, their dusty, gnawed bones littering the ground.

Eventually William strode into a great central vault, its ceiling reaching up hundreds of feet to form a sagging hive spire. Suddenly the whole structure began to shake and rumble as it came to life, and debris rained down from above, banging off the Knight and the Space Marine tanks. Like some vast mechanical slaughterhouse, the vault itself had come to life and was intent on the destruction of the invaders, blades and saws sweeping down from the walls while mobs of Orks charged forward armed with all manner of burning and cutting tools. Forming a defensive circle around the Knight, the Dark Hunters laid down a punishing wall of fire, William targeting the hordes of Ork war engines.

After less than thirty minutes of furious combat, Ork corpses were piled deep around the Dark Hunters, hundreds having fallen to their boltguns, while scores of Ork war machines lay in smoking heaps of scrap, blown apart by William's cannon, and yet still they came. Only warning whispers from his throne finally made him realise there was no victory to be had. Turning his gun on the hive wall, he blew a hole out into the dusty plain, some three hundred yards below. At the same moment, the Dark Hunters Captain called in an orbital strike from the Chapter's Strike Cruiser. With the Knight covering their withdrawal, the Space Marines leapt and scaled down the sloped sides of the hive, reaching the ground moments before a brilliant beam of energy came arching down from the heavens. William leapt his Knight clear at the last moment, crashing into the ground, shattering its legs and knocking himself senseless. When he came to, the voices of the Throne were for once blissfully quiet, and he enjoyed the sight of the xenos-infested hive burning brightly against the sky.

Baron Roland, Hunter's Fury





Baron Roland is a bold explorer and peerless warrior among the people of his home world, often spending long months on campaign. At his heart the old noble is a hunter and will seek out any chance to hunt a new prey or test his skills, even taking up alliance with Adeptus Mechanicus despite his fierce independence. The Baron was part of the ill-fated Paneum Explorator Expedition into the Ghoul Stars. Magos Paneum had seconded forces from war zones along the North-eastern Fringe to explore the dead world of Kaen IV.

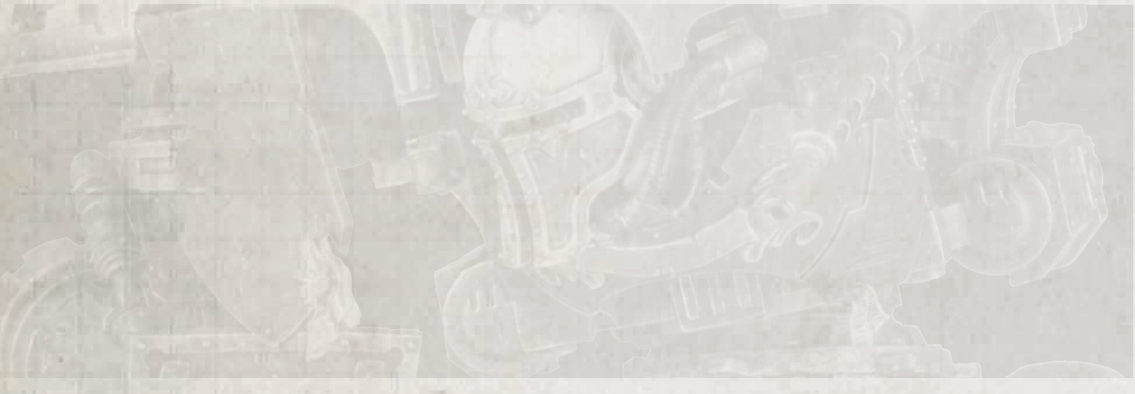
Roland offered aid to the magos on his mission in return for an old debt, choosing to travel in person rather than send another in his place. Under dark, ash-filled skies the expedition made planet-fall on Kaen IV, augurs picking up sensor ghosts and vox echos in all directions. At the head of a column of Skitarii and Imperial Guardsmen a thousand strong, Roland led the way into canyons worn out of bone-white stone by millions of years of howling wind.

Kaen's feeble dying star did little to illuminate its surface, deep shadows lying heavy on the ground like oil slicks. Into this darkness Roland strode, the stablights of his Knight picking out strange patterns in the rock, like the faint remains of writing, their meaning long since wiped away by time. Magos Paneum directed the expedition down onto the floor of a vast crater; its sides reaching up hundreds of metres toward the stygian sky and blasted smooth by an ancient impact. In the centre of the crater an ancient alien artefact rested in the dust. Roland stood guard while the expedition formed up around the object and Paneum began his experimentation.

At first the Baron thought little of the whispered warnings coming from his Throne Mechanicum, but gradually they rose to an almost unbearable din. Roland was triggering his vox to contact the magos when a spear of green light erupted from the alien device, stabbing into the pregnant clouds that circled above. Almost at once shapes appeared, drawn down the teleportation beam into the midst of the shocked Imperial expedition. Necron warriors marched out of the light, raising their gauss weapons in unison before firing into the Skitarii and Guardsmen, atomising armour and bone in crackling arcs of green lightning. Roland tried to fight his way through the gleaming warriors to Magos Paneum but he was too late; he could only watch as a towering Necron impaled the magos on a blazing staff of light. Then, all the Noble could focus on was survival.

Necron Destroyers massed their fire against his Knight while Doom Scythes screamed overhead. Alongside the surviving Skitarii, Roland climbed the side of the crater, the mechanical xenos close upon their heels. Roland alone survived to reach the summit, the broken remains of his foes littering the slope in his wake. Even so, his Knight was heavily scarred by particle beam hits. Under intense fire, an Explorator fleet transport bore him back to orbit, the baron the sole survivor of the terrible battle.

House Griffith



Founded by the great Lord Nathaniel, House Griffith has a long and glorious history boasting some of the finest warriors ever to sit on the Throne Mechanicum. The elite cadre of Griffith Nobles can trace its illustrious ancestry back to a time when their forefathers rode horses into battle against the great winged dragons of their world, fighting desperate battles against the terrible beasts. In their early years on Dragon's End the settlers lacked the means to make use of their Knight STCs, unable to mine the components to make adamantium. In their place genetically engineered steeds were used, fashioned to survive in the harsh atmosphere of the world with filter-lungs and nictitating membranes over their eyes. Astride these mounts the knights, clad in techno-plate and beast-faced rebreathers, would do battle. Though these times are long gone, just like the reptilian beasts themselves, the Nobles still test their fighting skills against each on horseback, each one a great warrior both in and out of his Knight armour. The result is a House of consummate bladesmen, each one deadly in close quarters with a reaper and more than capable of besting war machines many times their own size with a flurry of devastating thrusts and cuts. Indeed, the Knights of House Griffith crave such melee combat, and have earned a bloody reputation for aggressiveness in battle, charging quickly into their foes and rend them to scrap.

DRAGON'S END, LAND OF BEASTS AND FIRE

The world inhabited by House Griffith is a bleak and blasted place, where thick sulphurous clouds hide the sun and volcanic mountain ranges cover black stone valleys in an endless rain of ash. Though its crust is rich in rare and precious minerals, Dragon's End borders on the inhospitable; hostile and dangerous for the unprepared. When the first human settlers arrived on the planet they looked around in dismay, the world as close to a vision of hell as they could imagine, and seemingly devoid of life. Unfortunately for these first humans there was one kind of beast which thrived in the ash wastes of the world, and which would react violently to these newcomers. Called dragons by the humans, they were beasts of flame and ash, each one a huge stone-skinned reptile with vast membranous wings. Fed by the very fire of the world, the dragons spent much of their time wallowing in magma-filled fissures or the boiling caldera of volcanoes, occasionally soaring through ash-choked skies on thermals. The beasts would prove to be both the curse and salvation of the settlers, forcing them to evolve and adapt in unexpected ways just to survive the first terrible years.

THE DRAGON WAR

In the early years of settlement on Dragon's End humans lived in almost constant fear of attack by dragons. Hidden in the billowing ash clouds that constantly obscured the planet's skies the beasts would seek out their prey, glowing red eyes occasionally visible in the gloom. So in tune with their surroundings were the beasts that auspex and augur were nearly useless in detecting them or following their movements, the creatures blending in to the background heat of the world or vanishing into its ash-laden skies. Workers would toil in the near dark glancing fearfully up at the heavens, while equally nervous sentries held tight their lasguns, knowing full well how useless the weapons would be in the event of a dragon attack.

Into this oppressive time of fear and dismay came the knights of Griffith, men who had practised the skills of horse and lance during the long voyage from Terra. When no one else would dare venture beyond the high walls and reinforced domes of the settlers' cities the knights rode out into the wastes seeking out the foe. Though many fell their legend grew, as did their understanding of the beasts. A shiny black stone akin to obsidian was mined and fashioned into armour, the knights discovering it had the power to turn dragon fire, and was hard enough to defend against a glancing blow from a talon or tooth.

At first the knights had no weapons that could kill a dragon, even the most powerful guns possessed by the settlers having little effect on the hides of the beasts. Energy beams and plasma blasts seemed to wash off the dark scales of a dragon like water, while solid rounds needed to hit an eye or open maw to have even the slightest effect. In time, the knights of Griffith discovered the only sure way to slay a dragon was to pierce its heart, and the only thing strong enough to punch through scale and muscle was the bones of the dragons themselves.

The knights were forced to raid dragons' graveyards for the bones to fashion into lances, creeping in while the beasts slumbered to plunder the remains of their dead. These were the weakest of the lances made, their shafts pitted by age and worn away by wind and fire. Even so, it allowed the knights to kill their first dragons, and harvest better lances from the remains. Eventually it became a tradition that a knight would carve his lance from the corpse of the first dragon he slew, tempering it in the cooling blood of his kill and carrying it until his demise.

For years the knights fought against the dragons, taking the battle deep into the fiery wastes, and killing scores of the beasts. By the time the first Knight suits were fashioned House Griffith was well established and had learned much about fighting dragons. With their new weapons of war the noble warriors of Griffith were able to devastate their foes. Although the new weapons proved more lethal and adept at the task, the image of the obsidian armoured knight on horseback would endure as the true symbol of the Dragon War.

After decades of dragon slayers eventually drove the beasts to extinction and freed the world of their curse, it left behind a warrior elite within the settlers' society, long before even the whispers of the Throne Mechanicum helped create a feudal society of Nobles. By the time humans had created the mines capable of refining materials like adamantium to make Knight armour, the Nobles who piloted them were already peerless swordsmen and fighters. This strife-filled history has served House Griffith well in its wars against the foes of the Imperium, each House Noble unmatched in skill with blade and cannon.

This legacy of knightly virtue and might would soon be writ large upon the stars, and though the Dragon War had taken a heavy toll upon the people of Dragon's End it would prove invaluable in their alliance with the Imperium. When the Nobles of House Griffith talk of their ancestors it is tales of the Dragon War they tell, and the bravery that those men that once fought beasts from the horseback. Some rare surviving Thrones Mechanicum still hold memories from that time, filled with the ghostly whispers of long dead dragon slayers.

FIELD OF ADAMANTIUM

As part of their ancient traditions the Nobles of House Griffith still ride horses and train with lance and blade. Though they have little call to use these archaic skills outside a Knight suit, they still employ them in contests between the houses. Disputes between Nobles and within families themselves are routinely settled with duels or jousts. First and second sons become able swordsmen and riders, lest younger siblings usurp their position within the family. Equally martial might continued to hold precedent long after the dragons were exterminated, with the fairest maidens and most favourable matches only go to those who can prove themselves in such contests.

Without a doubt the largest tournament on Dragon's End takes place in the Field of Adamantium, where by ancient covenant the families compete for standing. Under dark cloud-choked skies and across smoking black earth, men clad in gleaming adamanitum plate do battle. Their steeds are genetically augmented to breath the poisonous air of the field as it streams from fissures in the ground and rolls down from the circling volcanoes. The Nobles themselves wear beast faced helms with built-in re-breathers, flared steel nostrils and fanged snouts expelling thick yellow plumes. Combat focuses on the joust, the grand contest at the centre of the tourney, and while lesser events involve melee and marksmanship, it is the joust that draws the attention of the families. Using a complex system of lineage and prestige each Noble is ranked by his skill with the lance and his standing within the societies of Dragon's End. This in turn determines who he is allowed to face and how he might rise or fall within the standings.

For the citizens of Dragon's End the regular tournaments are a central part of their culture, providing a brief and violent escape from the drudgery of the agri-subfarms or scar-mines. The crash of steel lance on adamantium armour or the crunch of bones breaking when rider and horse are sent tumbling to the ground are always met with cheers. From atmosphere-shielded stands people will wave banners, cry out insults and encouragement or even hurl tokens at the field, the tournaments the one place where the citizens are allowed to vent their true emotions, unchecked by the rituals and strict forms of society.

The names and heraldry of favoured Nobles are well known to the common people, their fame leading to the creation of shrines and statues in their honour where prayers will be made for their good fortune at the joust. Grand Master of the Lance Bryce, current lord of House Griffith made his name in this way for unseating a dozen warriors in a single day of contest, and hundreds of shrines still bear his likeness, the people praying for his good fortune.

MEGASAUR HERDS

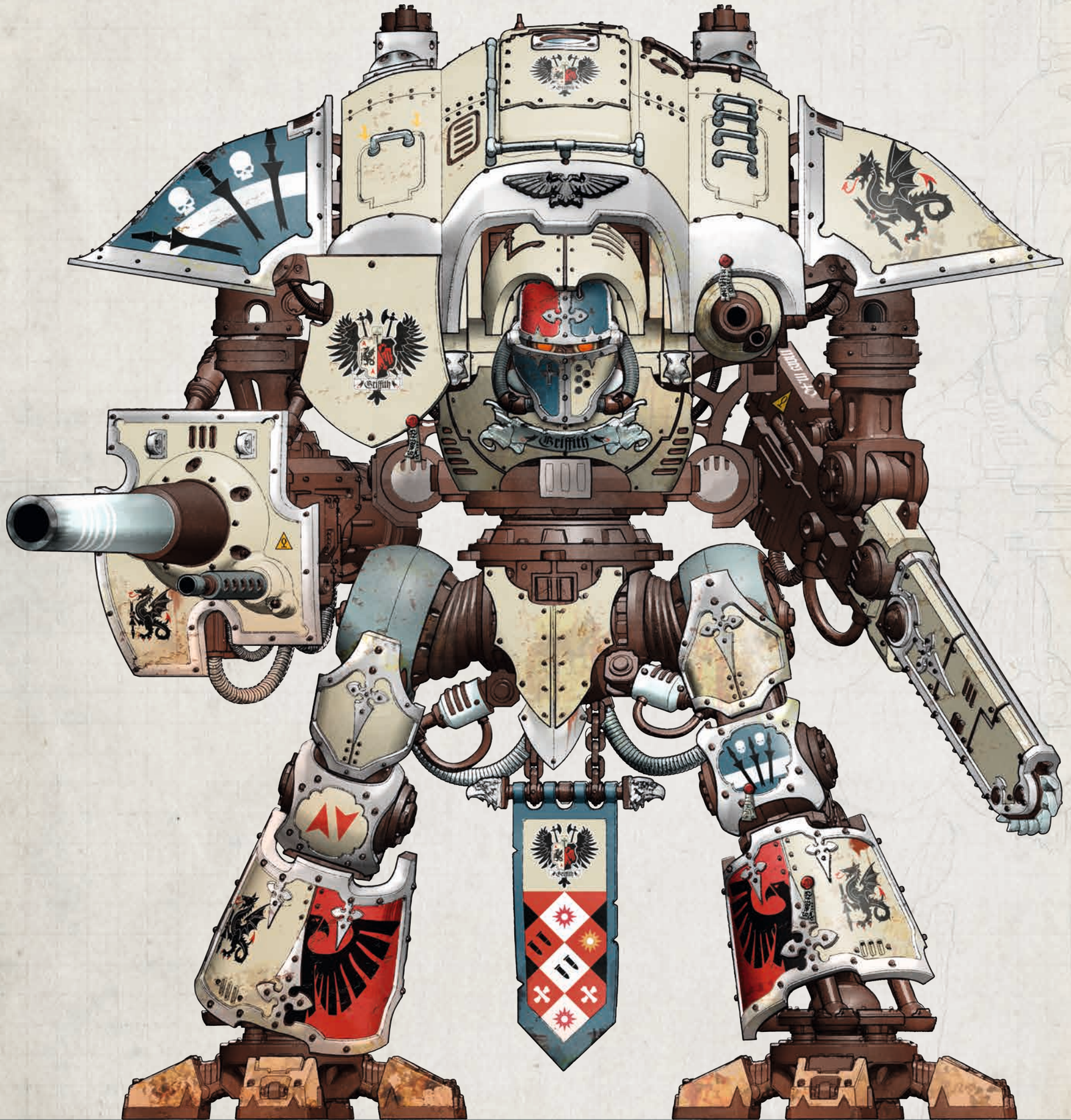
The Megasaur is often cited as the real reason for the dragon's aggression toward the settlers. Herds of the huge beasts were once common on Dragon's End, their thick black hides and mineral rich stone-blood coveted by the early settlers. Unfortunately for the humans the Megasaur were also the principle prey of the dragons. Many of the first dome cities included pens and slaughterhouses where captured Megasaur would grow to maturity on a diet of refined mineral waste, before being butchered for their bones, blood and skin. These enclosures of great numbers of Megasaur attracted dragons, the winged beasts ripping their way into the pens to get at the already fattened prey within.

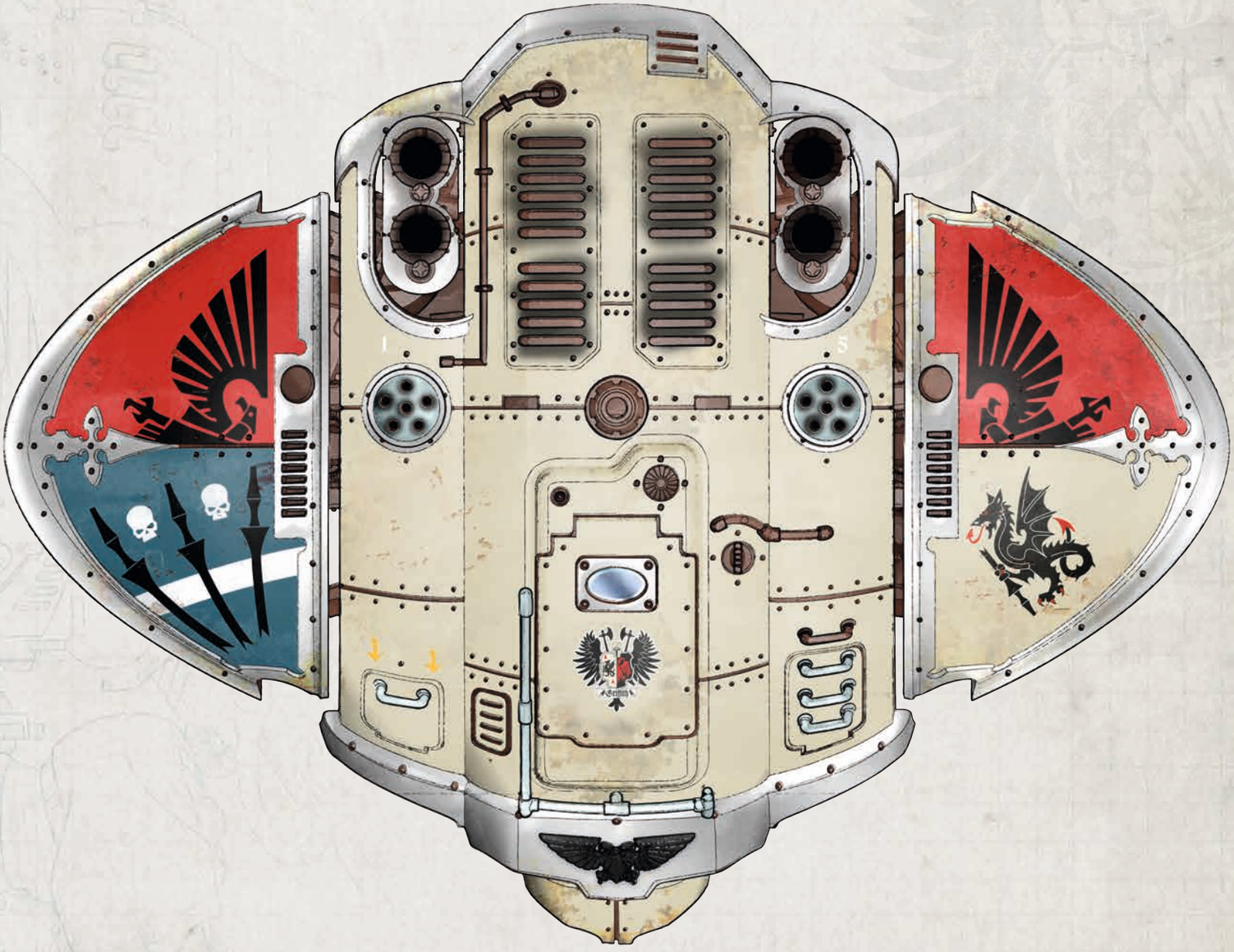
In addition to harvesting the beasts, the Knights of House Griffith would use the Megasaur as bait, staking out a braying beast in the wild to attract dragons. In the end, centuries of exploitation and culling eventually reduced the Megasaur population to a fraction of its former size, those few that survived doing so in captivity. The extensive mines created by hundreds of years of human settlement also robbed the Megasaur of its main food source, those regions once rich in sustaining minerals reduced to wastelands of fire and ash. Even so, the Megasaur still has a place in the tournaments and games of Dragon's End, House Griffith keeping its own stock of the beasts just for this purpose.

For centuries the wastes of Dragon's End have rung with the clash of mighty adamantium blades and echoed to the thunder of battle cannons as the Knights of House Griffith test their skills against each other in sacred tournament. Many of these contests are undertaken in suits of Knight armour, where a Noble will be measured by his speed or bladesmanship and how well he can control his war machine in battle. In these sparring matches alacrity of thought is paramount if a falling reaper chainblade or hurtling cannon shell is to be avoided.

However, not all the knightly trials are concerned with mental grace and skill at arms alone. Some require endurance and, of equal importance, luck. The Rain of Fire incorporates both of these. The scions of the house will haul a seismic charge into the burning mountains above the chosen trial grounds, ancient machines and raw muscle heaving it into place above one of the range's smouldering volcanic rifts. When the Knights signal their readiness, the charge is dropped into the rift to explode deep within the magma river that flows beneath. Centuries of this kind of geological abuse means that the results are always unpredictable and spectacular as the earth heaves in anger and flaming debris is spewed forth in all directions. The Knights will then duel under this onslaught, their Nobles fighting to keep their war machines balanced and to angle their ion shields against both their opponents and the rain of flaming rocks, each Noble struggling keep their footing as the ground bucks and breaks under the adamantium feet of their Knight suit. Other knightly houses are scornful of such reckless use of Knight suits, though House Griffith's Nobles know that it is only through the greatest of adversity that true warriors are forged.

Draekos, the Last Dragon Slayer





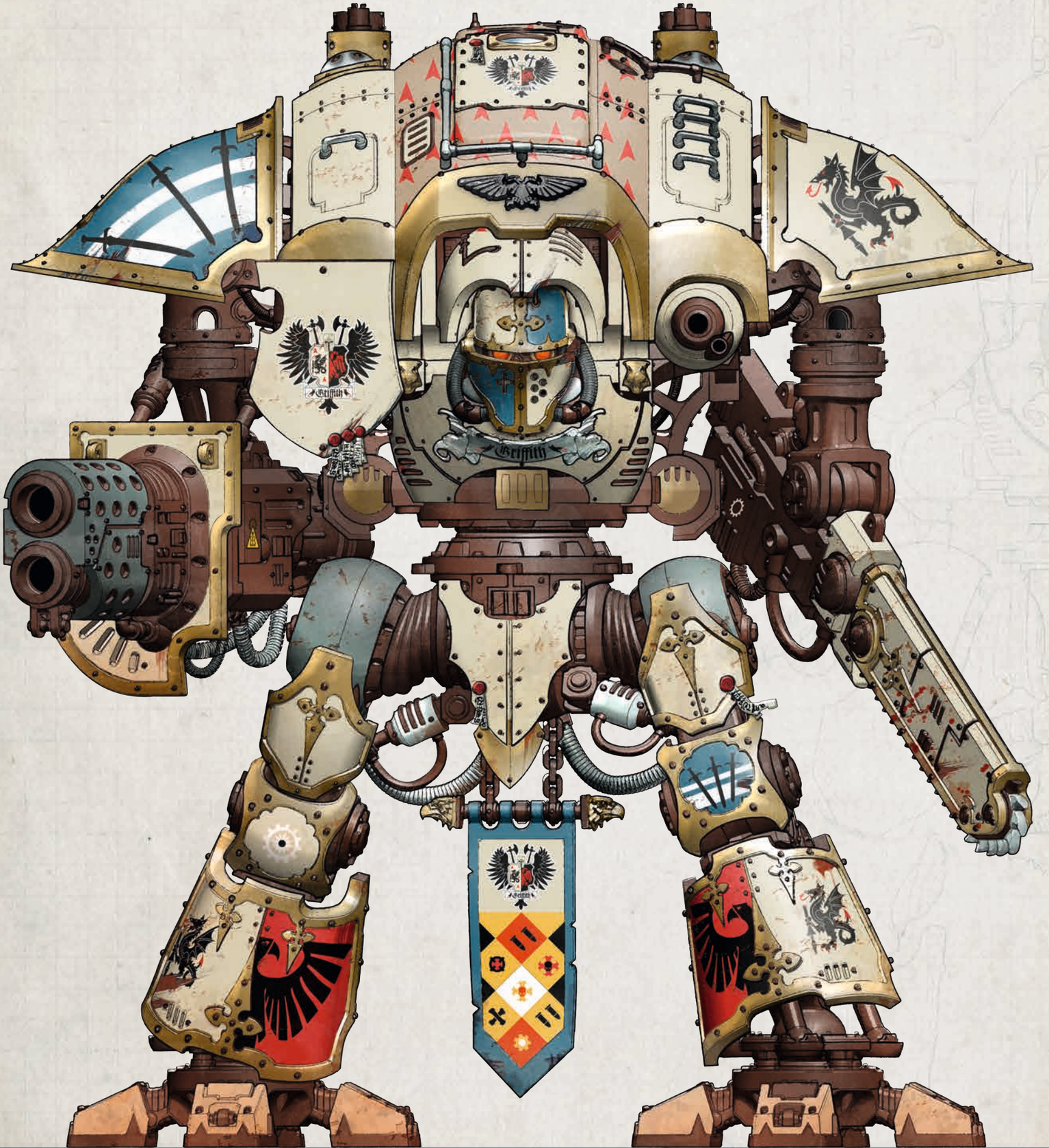
The Dragon Wars raged for years after the arrival of the first humans, but the Knights of House Griffith finally hunted the beasts to extinction. Though it was Nathaniel, founder of the house, who slew the father of dragons, Alvirax, and ushered in the end of the war, it was another who killed the last dragon. The destruction of the dragons hatcheries, combined with the use of the newly fashioned Knight suits, was to be a death sentence for the beasts. Though it would take decades for them to disappear completely, they were encountered less and less. Eventually it was believed the dragons were all gone, though one young Griffith Noble did not accept this and dreamed of following in the footsteps of his forebears. Known as Draekos, the Noble grew to adulthood in a time when the first Knights were at last taking to the field, and to be a Noble was to master this new and powerful technology. Draekos embraced this weapon of war at his Becoming, and ranged far and wide across the ash wastes, searching the volcanic peaks and vast baking plains for dragons. For decades Draekos quested, though others maintained the dragons were all gone. He scorned companionship and family, living for months at a time within the hull of his Knight.

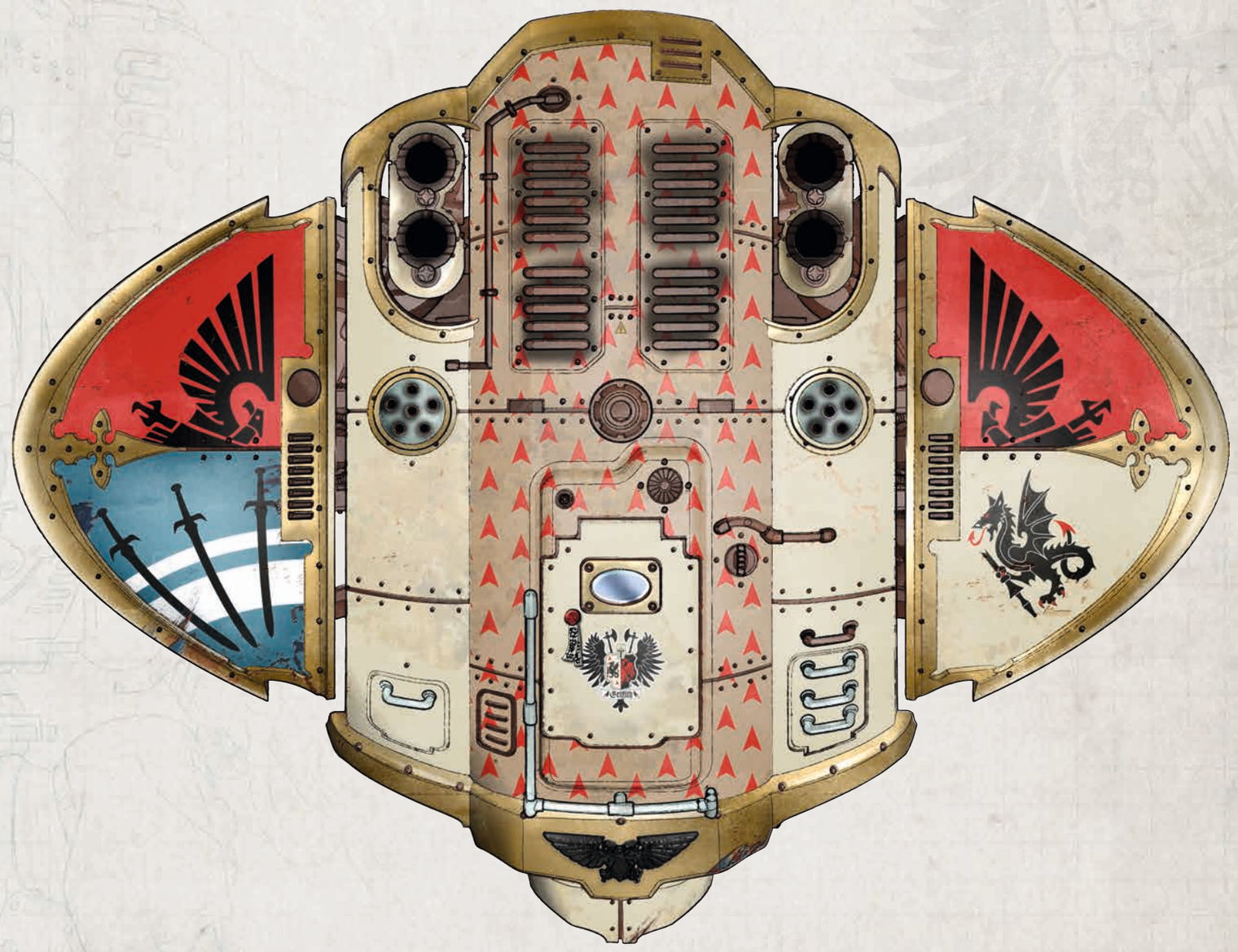
Here the stories of Draekos are many and varied, telling of his adventures as he wandered the wastes of Dragon's End. In one account he saved the Ashlund Landship when it floundered in the Magma Delta. The vast mining craft was doomed to drift out into the Sea of Fire had not Draekos chanced upon it. Fixing chains to his Knight he hauled the craft back to shore, each step throwing up clouds of flames on the scorched ground, as the heavy walker strained and heaved. In another tale, Draekos defeated an army of raiders, the human renegades descending upon the remote settlement of Sunderlight. Draekos was walking the Cinder Highlands when he heard the faint vox cries from Sunderlight, arriving in time to cut down the traitors' cavalry as they charged down from the blasted hills and scatter the survivors to the winds cursing his name and his line.

Finally, Draekos came upon the last dragon. It was a vast, ancient beast that had survived for centuries far from human settlements, its growth unchecked by hunters or Knights. Seeing the Knight, the dragon screamed defiance at Draekos, who raised his blade and charged. The battle between machine and monster shook the ground and cracked the earth. The dragon fought with a ferocity born from the heart of a race evolved only to destroy. Obsidian fangs and diamond talons tore and ripped at Draekos' Knight, peeling back armour plates and cutting through pistons, but the Noble did not falter, impaling the creature on his reaper chainblade. Victorious at last, Draekos carried the creature's skull back to his keep, where it still hangs to this day.

Draekos' legacy was to be the Dragon Lance, a cadre of elite Knights drawn from his descendants. Today his gene-son Draekos the XXIII pilots his Knight, the Last Dragon Slayer, and leads this formation of Griffith Nobles in wars across the Imperium.

Rarthanis, Dragon's Lament



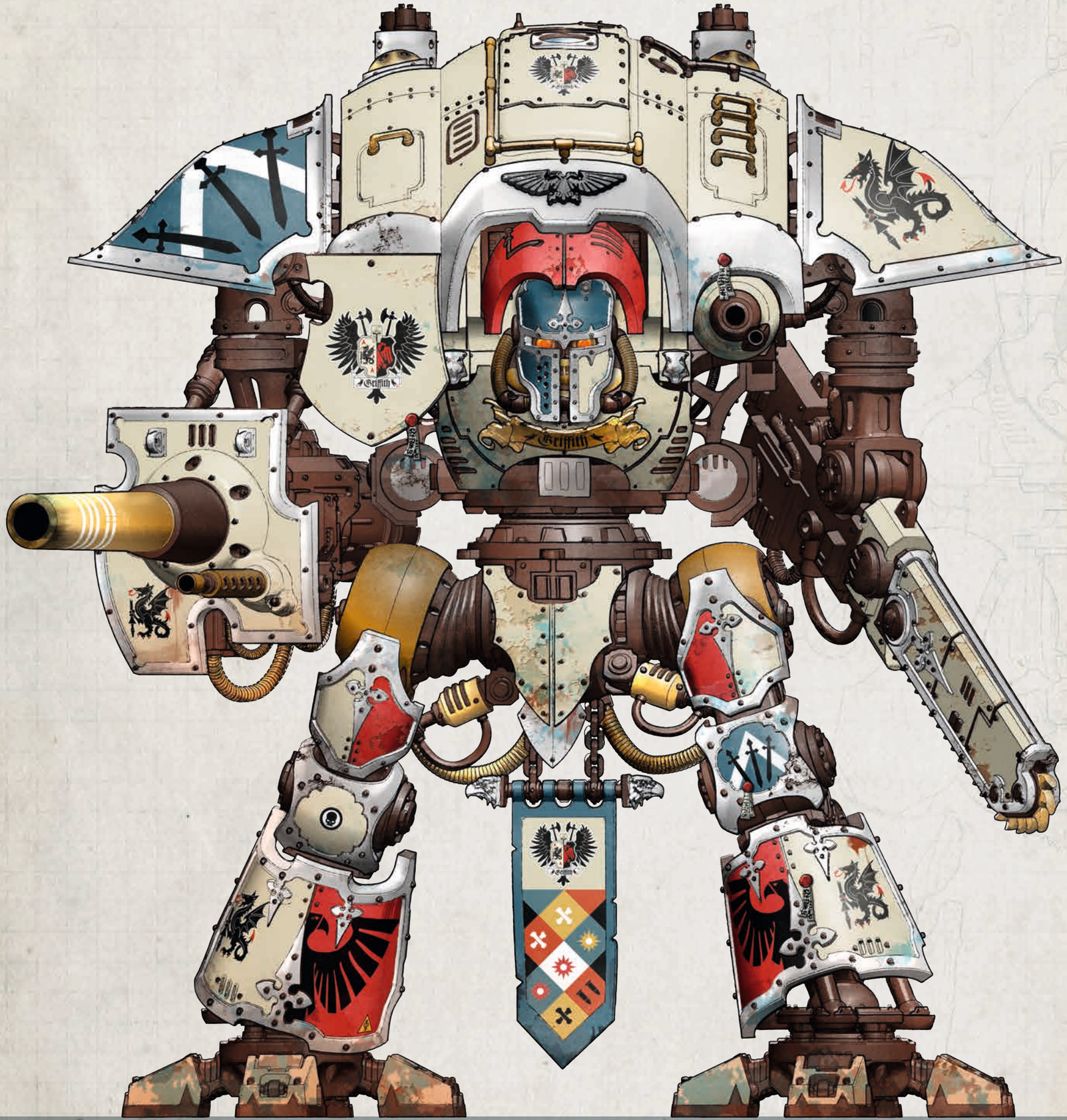


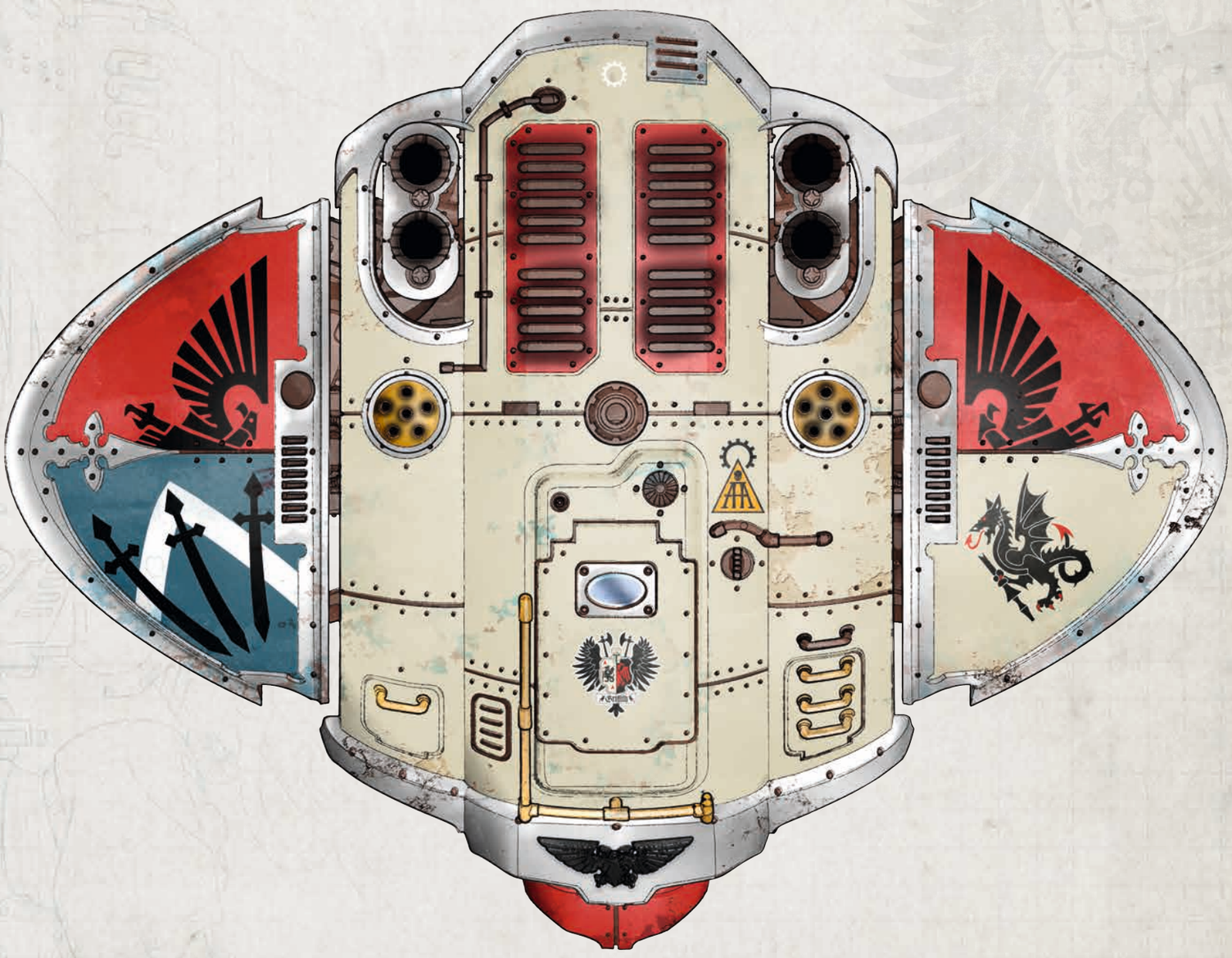
The Posidac System is a relic of the Dark Age of Technology, seven artificial worlds orbiting a captured star. Each one is built around a complex network of suspensors and gravity bafflers, holding atmosphere and soil together against the hungering void. The Griffith Noble Rarthanis was part of Rogue Trader Dragalos' expedition to Posidac IV, a planet where the gravity net had failed over time, shedding minerals and stone into space until only a ball of gas, liquid and ice remained. The expedition dived into the oceans through a vast hole blasted through the ice, Rarthanis following the Rogue Trader down, using a modified suspensor array to guide his Knight through the water.

At first Rarthanis could see nothing worthy of his attention within the cold dark waters, his stablights making out only blind betentacled cephaloids that mindlessly latched onto his armour before falling off, looking for tastier prey. After sinking down through miles of shifting currents and silent stygian water Rarthanis detected faint strobes of light from far below. His Knight creaking and shuddering from the extreme pressure of being at such a depth, the Noble tilted forward and drove toward the light. The Rogue Trader followed in his wake, trying to keep up with Rarthanis, the war machine a looming shadow on the edge of the lander's powerful floodlights. Slowly taking shape within the deep-sea gloom, Rarthanis could make out the remains of a vast industrial city, rusting and mostly dark, abandoned centuries ago by the builders of Posidac. Suspended in a floating field of broken buildings and weed-choked wrecks, the city's remains still flickered with faint lights from within its heart. Rarthanis touched down on the edge of a structure, his Knight kicking up thick clouds of sediment as it strode toward the source. As the Noble crossed the city, knocking fallen gantries and rubble out of his path, ancient eyes tracked his progress. Sealed under the ice and water since the Age of Stife, corroded metallic automata had slumbered, trapped long ago when the city had been sunk by its original inhabitants. Now they saw a chance for freedom, the Rogue Trader's craft their means of escape.

Suddenly the darkness came alive with hundreds of slowly moving shapes, blue and green fire lancing through the deep to strike at Rarthanis and his allies. Turning to face his attackers, the Noble levelled his thermal cannon, sending out a gout of super-heated water and steam that sent dozens of metal men tumbling off into the empty darkness beyond the city. Rising up through their ranks, a huge archeotech war machine sailed through the inky water toward the Knight, its blue oculus glowing with a disturbing intelligence. Churning up the sea, the two war machines fought, trading blows that echoed dully though the deep, until at last Rarthanis pinned the huge rusted construct to the structure and immolated it with a thermal cannon blast. In the aftermath of the battle, Rarthanis helped Dragalos to plunder the sunken city, and the Rogue Trader returned to the Imperium, his holds heavy with ancient technology.

Tristor, Lance of Flame





The Siege of Ironmorn was a decade-long battle for the world of Erokan, fighting the Cythor Cult and their Iron Warrior overlords. The Cadian 1742nd had spent years cleansing Erokan of heretic fortifications, as the cult had transformed the planet into a maze of trenches and keeps. The greatest of the traitor defences was the Ironmorn, a towering edifice built around the former planetary governor's palace and reinforced by the twisted artifice of the Iron Warriors.

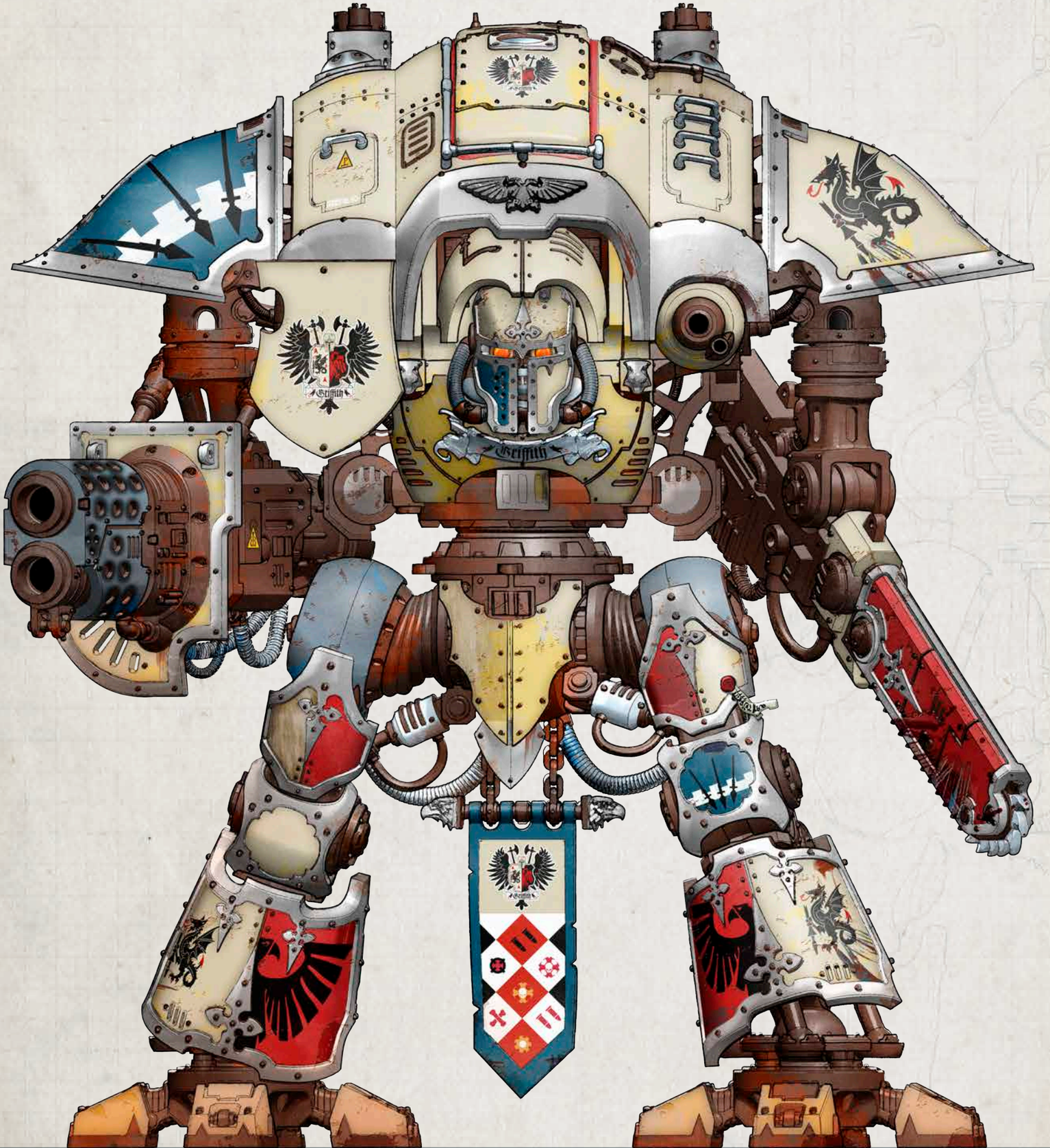
Tristor was among a contingent of Knights sent to break into the Ironmorn, and end the siege in a single bloody assault. Supported by the Cadian 17th armoured brigade, the Steel Tide, Tristor smashed through the heretics' outer defences. Tank traps and gun pits designed to funnel Imperial armour into killzones had no effect on the Knight, its huge stride taking it over trenches, mines and wire. Traitors in pillboxes struggled to elevate their guns to target Tristor, the firing slits designed to repel infantry and tanks, not towering engines of war.

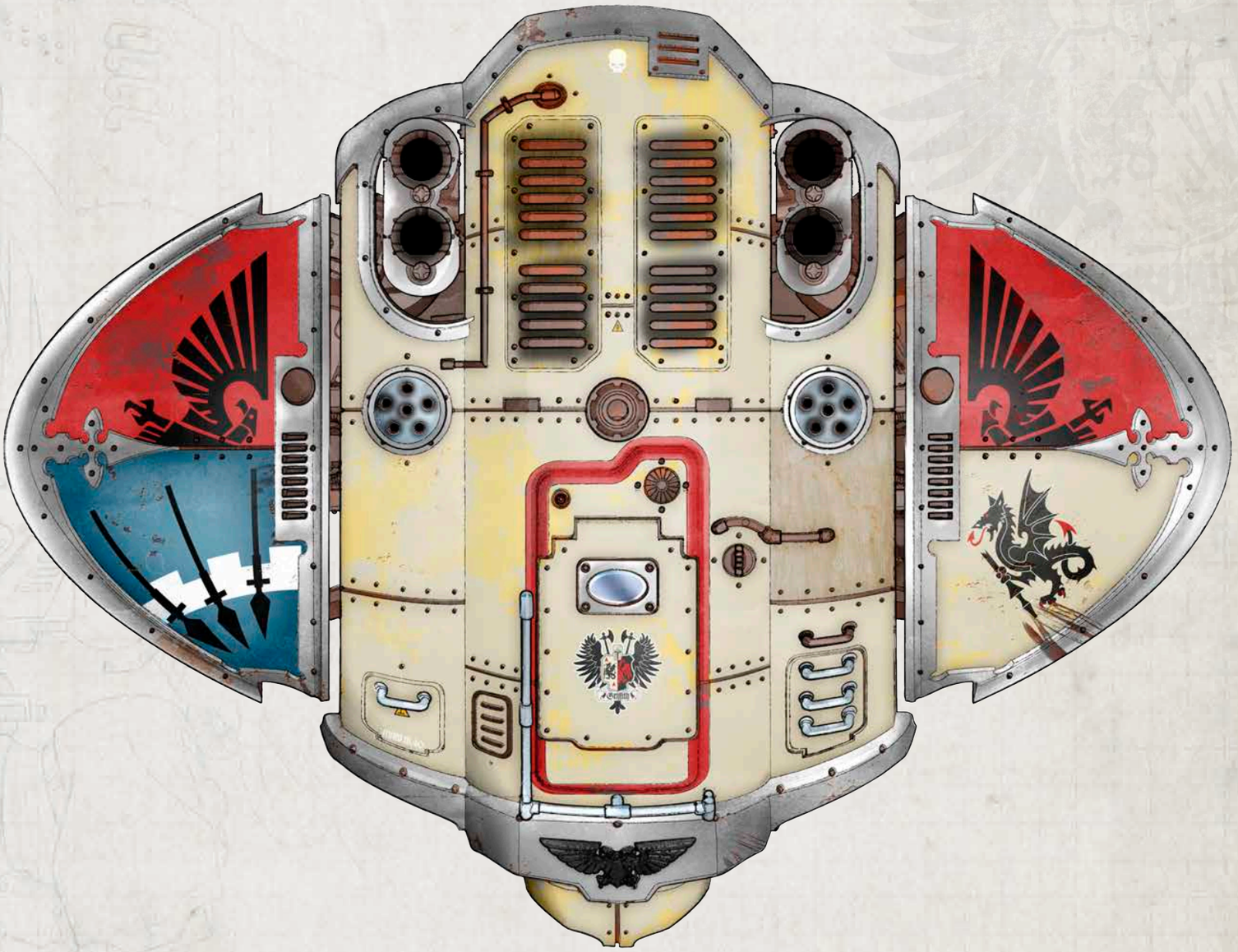
Only when the Iron Warriors entered the fray did Tristor meet true resistance. Crab-like Defilers and howling Helbrutes shambled out from the shadow of the Ironmorn's high walls to stop his advance. While the Cadian armour struggled to push through the layered Cythor fortifications, Tristor fought on alone, his reaper chainsword carving off power flails and hydraulic claws while his battle cannon blew apart anything his blade could not reach. Overhead, traitor heavy weapons fired down upon Tristor from the Ironmorn's ramparts, lasblasts and autocannon rounds sparking and flashing off his carapace. Surrounded, Tristor had no time to deal with the gun emplacements, and was relieved to see the welcoming shadows of his allies appear on his augur array.

Silhouetted against the rising sun, a squadron of Vendetta Gunships screamed across the battlefield, hammering the walls with lascannon fire and hellfury missiles. In an instant the rain of fire from above was transformed into a shower of debris, mangled corpses clanging off the Lance of Flame to fall limply to the ground. Crushing heretic infantry underfoot and pushing aside the wrecks of traitor war machines, Tristor doggedly fought his way to the grand gatehouse of the Ironmorn. As the Knight approached, the traitors intensified their fire, sensing their foe's plan. Tristor's ion shield flared and flashed as he struggled to repel the onslaught until at last, it overloaded with a brilliant flare of light. His armour became so scored and dented that his heraldry was replaced with bare metal scars.

Finally, Tristor stood before the gate, his Knight's augurs questing through the heavy plasteel plates until he located the heavy chain holding the gatehouse counterweight. Thrusting his reaper chainblade directly through the wall and into the mechanism, he severed the chain, its links peeling apart until the weight of the gate sent it crashing down, opening the way for the Imperial assault that would eventually take the fortress.

Bryce, Fires of Valour





The spirit of the first dragon hunters lives on in the heart of every House Griffith Noble. Raised with tales of daring valour and heroic deeds, they seek out the largest foes they can in battle, and bring them low with thundering charges and precise reaper blows. Bryce, lord of House Griffith, embodies this bravery and has proven his right to lead countless times, such as on the verdant moon of Astrum XII, a place of sweeping grassy plains and rolling rain-laden clouds. Honouring debts to the Adeptus Mechanicus, Bryce had led a detachment of Knights to aid their Skitarii armies in purging a base of the rogue Magos Biologis Horsa. The Magos had grounded a void ship in the middle of the Astrum grasslands, the towering craft visible for miles in all directions.

Bryce and his Knights advanced upon the Magos' ship-fortress, ranks of Skitarii and Adeptus Mechanicus armour on their flanks. Preliminary orbital bombardments from the Mechanicus' fleet had destroyed the ship's lance turrets and macro cannon batteries, so Bryce advanced confident that there would be nothing to blunt the charge of his Knight. However, as the Adeptus Mechanicus forces marched into the shadow of the ship-fortress, Magos Horsa revealed the nature of his forbidden experiments, and from yawning hold doors a tide of Tyranids flooded down toward Bryce. Gaunts, Gargoyles, Zoanthropes and Carnifexes crawled, skittered and clawed over each other to get at the attackers. Through the augmented augurs of his Knight Bryce could see networks of scars upon the aliens where Horsa had attempted his heretical experiments.

As the first chitinous waves crashed into the Adeptus Mechanicus line the Lord of House Griffith surged forward, counter-charging into the heart of the swarm. Bryce crushed dozens of scurrying creatures underfoot while his thermal cannon and howling reaper accounted for scores more. From the upper decks of the ship-fortress the Magos' own Skitarii opened fire, raining lascannon and plasma blasts down into the melee. Pushing forward, Bryce fought up the ramp and into the vast cathedral-like hold of the ship, hundreds of Tyranids hurling themselves after his Knight.

In the gloom Bryce discovered another of Horsa's blasphemies, and the means by which he was seemingly keeping the Tyranids under control. In a towering ironglass stasis casket a Hive Tyrant hung suspended in time. Even as he approached, Horsa must have been observing him, and released the beast. Bryce knew he could easily best such a creature, but he had another idea. Aiming his cannon, he blasted apart the bulkhead leading to the upper deck.

As if sensing the Knight was not its true tormentor, the Hive Tyrant charged through the torn wall and deeper into the vessel. As the Noble fought on against the horde, crushing Gaunts and tearing apart Tyranid Warriors, the screams of the Magos across the vox told him that justice had found the heretic at last.

House Hawkshroud



House Hawkshroud has cultivated an impeccable reputation for honouring its debts and keeping its word regardless of the personal cost. Viscount Tudon has never refused a valid request for aid from his allies, and those that enter into oaths of allegiance with Hawkshroud know that when they call for support it will be forthcoming. For this reason the Nobles of Krastellan are often on campaign, honouring the debts of their lords and lending their considerable might to Imperial armies, planetary governors or Space Marine Chapters. So it has been for hundreds of years and so it will remain as long as the yellow banners of Hawkshroud fly above the viscount's grey granite tower, the honour of the house bought and paid for with the blood of its Nobles.

KRASTELLAN, THE HONOURABLE REALM

Located in the northern reaches of the Ultima Segmentum, close to the Blood Angels world of Baal, lies the Knight world of Krastellan. An eerie, haunted place, its desolate moors and black hills stretch in all directions under skies heavy with freezing rain. The Krastellian villages huddle from their perpetual miserable weather in windswept valleys and broken shorelines, their people eking out a life from herding docile heath-cattle or fishing the edges of the foaming, storm-tossed sea. On craggy rain-slick rocks ancient stone keeps are home to the Nobles of Krastellan, where their households and families live in drafty, dripping rooms by the sputtering light of open fires. While other Knight worlds embrace a degree of technology, the Nobles of Krastellan see anything more than is required for the continued operation of their Knights an extravagance and the first step on the road to weakness.

So it is that much of Krastellan remains hopelessly primitive, peasants farming the damp earth and herding cattle, while the Nobles and their kin live as their ancestors did ten thousand years before. Woven into their society is the Krastellian culture of honour and oath-debt. Even among the peasants a man's word is his bond, and to break one's word is the highest crime imaginable. Such is the impact of honour on society that the citizens of Krastellan are very careful when they speak to one another, using a complex and formal language that outsiders can find difficult to interpret. This is in part a reflection of the painful politeness that the nobility impose upon their people, but largely so that a man knows where he stands. Words like bond, oath and promise hold much weight when used by the people of Krastellan, and more than one outsider has inadvertently entered into a life-debt by making an offhand remark or through casual insincerity.

UNBLEMISHED HONOUR

The Nobles of Krastellan take this oath-giving to even greater extremes, and before a child is born he will be honour-bound to fulfil the debts of his family. This only intensifies as he grows older and undertakes the Ritual of Becoming. A Noble of House Hawkshroud has little say over where he will go and whom he will aid, his destiny given over to the needs of the house. It is the great irony of Krastellan that the more power a man has the less freedom he enjoys. It is said that over a hundred years before Viscount Tudon was born his life had been mapped out for him, every alliance to be honoured, every war to be fought and every world he would ever set foot upon. Marriage among the Nobles is equally restrictive, houses compelled to offer up children to each other's future generations, leading to a complex network of familial connections.

To record these oaths and debts of honour it is the duty of the viscount to oversee the Oath Council, a group of Nobles who keep a tally of the house's pacts and promises. Only the viscount may put an oath to the council and only he may declare one removed. It is of course a never-ending task, as for every pact completed dozens more are added. Little wonder then that Nobles do not complain when they must crusade into the stars to fight the foes of the Imperium – far better in their minds to be tearing apart enemy war machines with their reapers or pulverising massed formations of infantry with battle cannon rounds, than have to oversee the union of their offspring or quibble with other households over ancient promises that have no bearing on their lives.

Krastellian society survives and thrives upon its rigid system of oath and honour, though for a young Noble it can be a long and treacherous path to rise to greatness with his honour intact. A wise Noble does not enter into oaths lightly, as to break his word or go back upon a debt is a greater sin than murder among the nobility. However, the only true way for a Noble to prove his worth is by taking vows and upholding his honour and the honour of the house, his reputation becoming the currency he uses to advance in standing. Thus to be the greatest of the Hawkshroud Knights a man must be both willing to take up arms against the deadliest of foes or most vile aliens, but equally wise enough to know when giving his word upon an impossible task is the same as breaking it.

Nowhere is this more pronounced than when it comes to admittance into the ranks of the Knights of House Hawkshroud. As the oldest and most powerful house on Krastellan, it is a singular honour to serve in the viscount's detachments. Once a Noble is accepted into the viscount's service he is permitted to bear the viscount's winged coat of arms upon his Knight and take the oaths of binding. These oaths give the Noble's house special privileges and rights among its peers, for as long as he serves. Thus to reach the greatest rank within House Hawkshroud a Noble must live a life of sacrifice and honour above even that of his peers. At the turning of each solar year on Krastellan it falls to the Oath Council to judge the worth of each Noble, weighing up their deeds from the past year and the tally of victories against defeats. Family, breeding and wealth are all secondary to the Noble's deeds and reputation, the vows he has honoured and the oaths he has fulfilled either lifting him up or casting him down in the critical eyes of the council.

RITUAL OF THE FORSWORN

House Hawkshroud never forsakes its oaths, but they are often 'gifted' to another. Once a year in the viscount's granite tower, its grey stone dull with rain and tarnished by time, Tudon gathers his Nobles for the Ritual of the Forsworn. This is the time when he may bequeath an oath upon a Noble, or a Noble may surrender an oath to another. It is the responsibility of the viscount to decide which oaths may be gifted in this way, but as with most things he is not above the influence of his Nobles. Newly risen members of the house can therefore expect to be given the oaths deemed either unimportant, or lacking in sufficient glory, by their more experienced brethren, their first forays into the void taking them to remote cursed worlds and crumbling Imperial cities to fight enemies largely beneath the notice of such grand warriors. The most dangerous and difficult oaths are reserved for those that have earned them. Though the Nobles of House Hawkshroud might play at politics they are not cowards, and none would ever consider using their power and influence to spare themselves from battle.

CHAMBER OF CURSES

There is no one more hated by House Hawkshroud than an oath breaker, the very thought of violating his sacred word repulsive to a Noble of Krastellan. There exists in the vaults below the viscount's tower a room sealed by heavy iron gates and guarded at all times by stern faced men-at-arms. Within its gloomy interior a man known only as the Keeper sleeps, his pallid white skin a testament to a life lived far from the light of the sun. In fact the Keeper has spent almost every day of his life in the chamber, brought there by the current viscount as a boy to serve a very special purpose. Very occasionally, perhaps no more than once or twice in a lifetime, the heavy iron gate will creak open and the viscount himself will enter. He will then tell the man a name, no other conversation passing between the two, before the viscount takes his leave.

Armed with the name, the Keeper carves it into the walls of the chamber, to take a place beside only a handful of others. These are the names of House Hawkshroud Knights that have broken their oaths, and the secret of their identity will die with the old man and the viscount. So shameful are the oath-breakers to House Hawkshroud that only when a new viscount is elected does he learn of the chamber. With his dying breath, the viscount's predecessor tells him that he must choose a Keeper to record the names of the oathbreakers and pass the secret on when he in turn is succeeded.

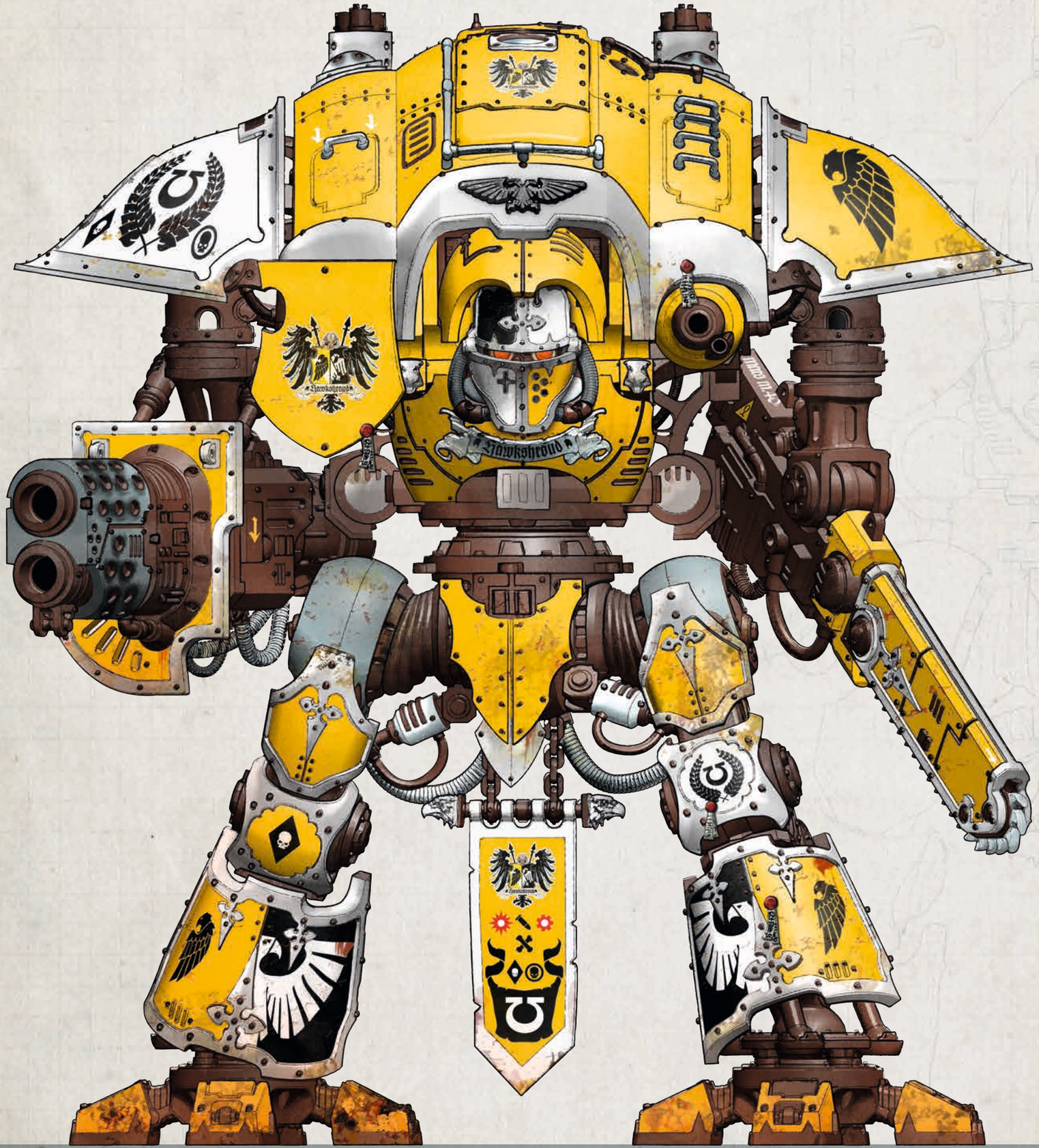
Noble oath-breakers of House Hawkshroud do not fall under the same laws as the common men, and are seldom executed for this heinous crime. Rather, they are stripped of their ties to house and family and are forced to become Freeblades, never to return to their world. Some choose this path willingly as punishment for failure to honour their oaths, though many do not, a Noble's name as much a part of them as is their blood. Either way, they are never spoken of and their true names are destined to be forgotten. Forgotten, that is, save by the viscount and a man who will grow old in a cold, stone room.

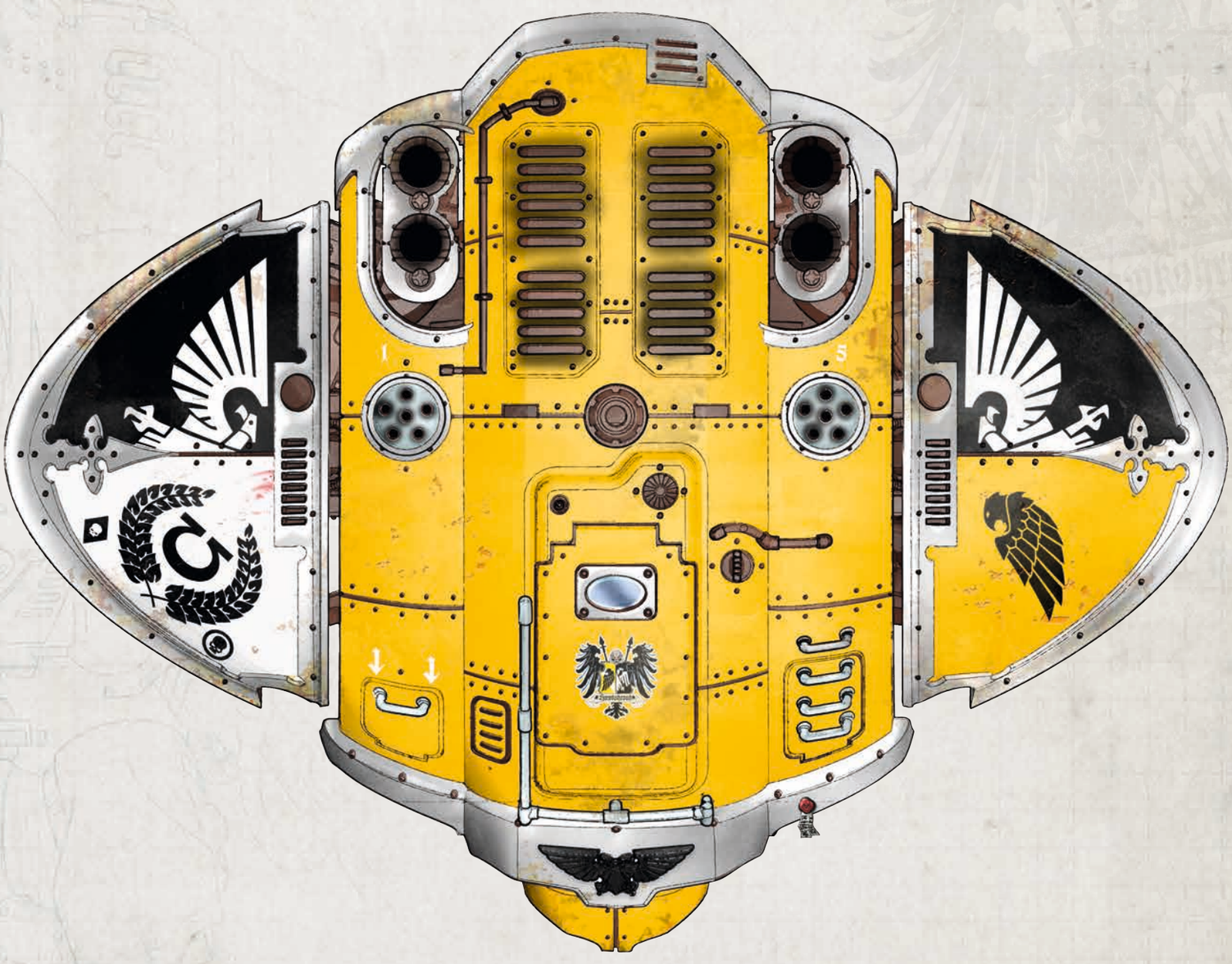
Tormund Eyre was born in the shadow of the Crook-tooth Mountains on Krastellan. As a second son to Lord Erlund Eyre he was destined to sit in the Throne Mechanicum and have his chance to join the blessed Knights of House Hawkshround. However, in his fifteenth year, Horan Fayne, a jealous rival from another family, challenged Tormund's older brother Dorlund to a blood-duel. In the traditions of the mountain families, it was a fight to first blood. It would take place in the howling high passes, the combatants armed only with their birthright-blades. Before his father could forbid it, Tormund swore an oath to Dorlund to be his second, vowing to fight in his place if he could not. Once uttered, not even Erlund dared break his son's oath, though he understood the price it might carry far more than the younger Eyre.

Horan had hatched a plot to remove the Eyre brothers as rivals for the coveted attentions of Viscount Tudon and the Hawkshroud Knights. When Tormund made his oath, Horan saw a chance not only to shame an Eyre brother but also to do away with one for good. Horan bribed a bondsman of Castle Eyre to poison the older brother with the bile-fly sickness, thus ensuring that Tormund would be forced to fight in his place. Tormund was no match for the older Horan, and though the rules of the duel restricted Horan to a single blow that drew blood, he found a way to make the Eyre brothers pay. Plunging his blade into Tormund's spine Horan crippled him, robbing him of the use of his legs and leaving him lying in the bloodstained snow. Erlund was enraged, though he could not make grievance with Lord Fayne for the actions of his son, as no tradition had been breached.
Even without the use of his legs Tormund begged his father to allow him to sit in the Chamber of Echoes when he was old enough, though those broken in body seldom ascend to command Knights. In the end, Dorlund surrendered his chance at becoming a Knight, convincing his father to pass the viscount's single invitation to Tormund. He did not disappoint. Displaying the strongest connection to the Throne Mechanicum for a generation, Tormund had an instinctual and natural affinity with his Knight, able to guide it with a grace and agility that he lacked with his own body. Unfortunately, he also harboured a deep bitterness toward the man that had crippled him and the oath that had allowed it to happen. This vein of bitterness passed into the neural cogitators of his Knight, and in combat he would call upon this hatred to drive his machine on, even past the point of grievous structural damage.

Tormund quickly rose to the attention of the viscount. With acceptance into the ranks of the Hawkshroud Knights he brought great honour to his family, and was permitted to paint his Knight in the yellow and white heraldry of the house. Much to Tormund's anger, Horan has also 'earned' a place among the viscount's Knights, rising from the ranks through one scheme after another, all the while keeping to the letter of Krastellan's rigid laws. Though Horan could not compete with Tormund in knightly duels, the cruel young Fayne Noble was quick to turn the other Knights against him, branding him with a nickname – the Half-Knight.

Kelmort, Unbroken Truth





Even by the high standards of House Hawkshroud, Kelmort has a reputation for honour and honesty. The Noble's adherence to the truth has made Kelmort very unpopular with his fellows who find his manner off-putting in a society built upon carefully worded courtesy and long-winded civility. Even worse is the effect the Noble has sometimes had on the allies of House Hawkshroud.

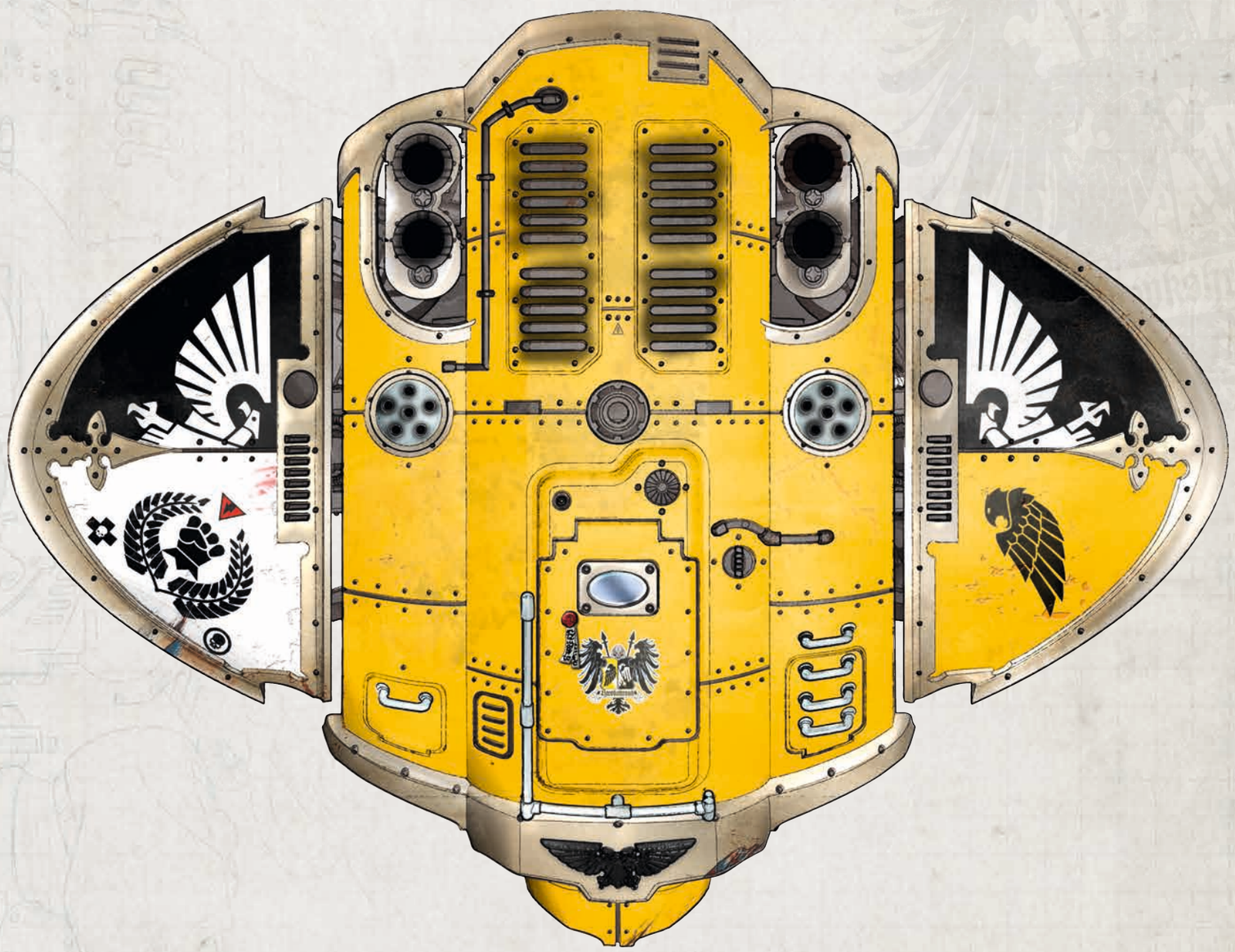
During the long retreat across the hydrogen glaciers of Frosharm XII, Kelmort refused to allow the Frosharm PDF regiments to defend House Hawkshroud's flank. The Noble told the Frosharm General Horban that his men were cowards, who had on no fewer than five occasions fallen back before the Ork invaders and could not be trusted to delay them. Horban flew into a rage at the accusation, demanding the Knights take no further part in the fighting, and that the Frosharm army could handle themselves. Kelmort and his lance-brothers retired to orbit and watched as the Orks systematically destroyed the defence forces. Eventually the Noble returned with Cadian reinforcements to liberate the planet, by which time Horban was a frozen corpse.

Before the Lotus Gates, in the gravity-tunnel between Lotun III and Dotur V, Kelmort once again turned allies into enemies. Sector Lord Botan had ordered the destruction of the ancient archeotech portal to stop the tide of Tyranids ravaging the Lotun system from spreading. Part of the operation required the Lotuni Imperial Guard Regiments holding their end of the gate until it was closed behind them, though this last detail was not revealed to them. Kelmort and his lance-brothers fought for days alongside the Lotuni, battle cannon rounds and thermal blasts turning the ground around the gravity-platform into a mire of mangled alien corpses. When the order came down for the gate to be closed and the Knights to withdraw, Kelmort answered the Lotuni commander's own requests to begin extraction with the news that his role was to remain there and die. Furious at their betrayal, the Lotuni rushed the gates, leaving their posts and forcing the Knights to fight their way back through the portal against both men and aliens.

Kelmort's devotion to the truth has not always been detrimental, and on one occasion it uncovered a nest of traitors in the midst of his Imperial allies. On the parched world of Ormus, Kelmort helped to crush the Redglaive uprising, the Knights breaking the heretic lines and turning the skies black with smoke from their sacked cities. The cult drew the attentions of the Inquisition, and Kelmort was meticulous in detailing the transgressions of his Imperial allies during the campaign. Among the units which were subsequently purged, some actual traitors were uncovered, men that had become infected by the foul teachings of the Redglaive. For his aid, the Inquisitor Tamarick honoured Kelmort, though the Noble considered what he done merely part of his oath, and departed Ormus to fulfil yet another honour-debt.

Tormund, Covenant of War





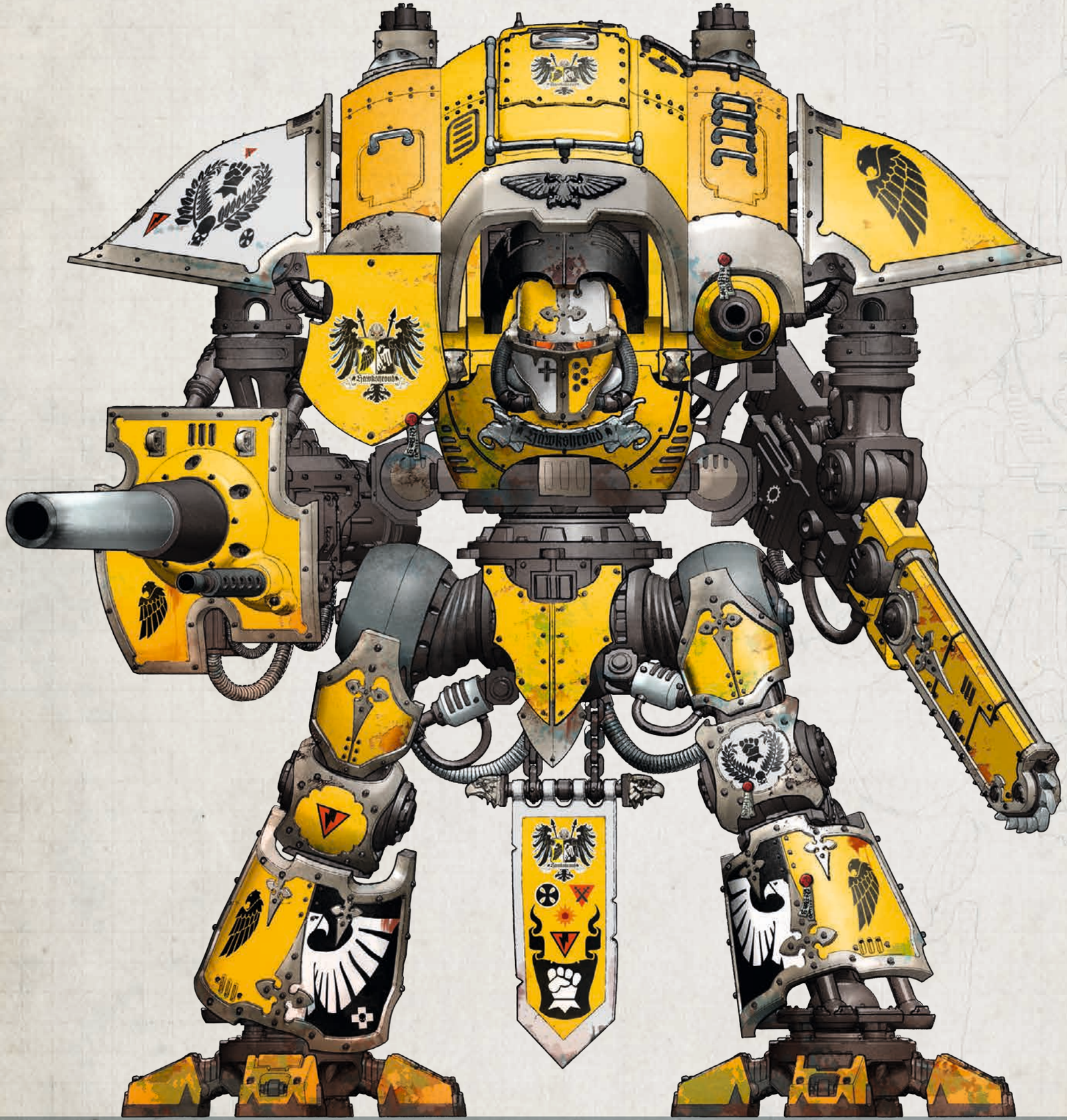
Not all Nobles are able warriors outside their Knight suits, and Tormund, the 'half-knight', is living proof of this. Crippled by a rival while he was but a youth and losing the use of his legs, Tormund still managed to earn a place for himself in the viscount's personal retinue of Knights. With an instinctive understanding of his war machine and a frighteningly strong connection to the Throne Mechanicum, he has proven himself time and again as a formidable warrior, despite the limitations of his own body.

On the world of Portenus Tormund fought the Exogamic Uprising, crushing heretic platoons and battle tanks beneath the feet of his Knight. Free of the scheming and jealous families of the Crook-tooth Mountains Tormund was surprised to be welcomed by the people of Portenus as a great hero. Even his crippled legs were seen as a sign of the God-Emperor's blessing, the highborn of Portenus whispering that his soul had been cleaved and half lived within the heart of his Knight. Against the might of the Hawkshroud Knights the traitor armies collapsed, and in honour of his service to Portenus, Tormund added the Crimson Bones of the Highborn of Hive Elvatus to his banner. Pleased with Tormund's fulfilling of Hawkshroud's oath-debt, Viscount Tudon gifted him in the Rite of the Forsworn with the responsibility for a dozen more such debts. Tormund fought with distinction from the burning plains of Havlok's Folly, against the Ork tribes of the Shattered Teef, to the dry, airless oceans of Cremtous against the Primus Heretek Combine.

As one battle followed another and Tormund grew in skill, the Covenant of War also changed. During the Tyros Gulf Campaign he added the symbol of the Imperial Fists. Along with the nobles Hanrald and Dunhand, he made war upon the Eldar of craftworld Altaitoc alongside the Chapter, and earned the respect of the Space Marines. Constant battle damage and ongoing repairs also made their mark. On Havlok's Folly, Tormund was forced to replace his faceplate when it was torn away by a blow from an Ork Stompa, while in the battle for the sinking deeps on Daemos III, his greaves were melted away by corpse-mist and needed to be completely reforged. Part by part, pieces of his Knight suit had to be replaced, yet its spirit remained the same, and with each battle his personal heraldry grew.

It was on the blasted world of Virmerketh in the aftermath of battle, as he sat high in his Throne Mechanicum, that Tormund received word of the deaths of his father and brother. A bile-fly plague had swept through Eyre Castle, stronger than anything seen before, killing his entire family. Horan Fayne, now Lord of the Fayne family after the untimely death of his father, took stewardship of the Eyre estates in his absence. Though Tormund longed to return to Krastellan and bring Horan to account for his crimes, he had accepted the mantle of the Oathsworn. Instead, Tormund made a vow to himself – one day, when his duty to Hawkshroud was complete, he would return and have his revenge.

Dunhand, Legacy of Honour





Third sons seldom become Knights, as most are too old to undertake the Ritual of Becoming by the time their older siblings perish. Dunhand is one of the few third sons of Krastellan to rise to command a Knight suit, although he has never truly known acceptance from his lance-brothers. Despite his ability with blade and cannon, as well as his unflagging bravery in dozens of battles, he bears the stigma of being a third son, and not becoming a Knight pilot in the traditional manner. Years of this treatment has made Dunhand bitter toward his peers, and what began as an attempt to prove his worth in battle has turned into the venting of his seething anger upon the foe.

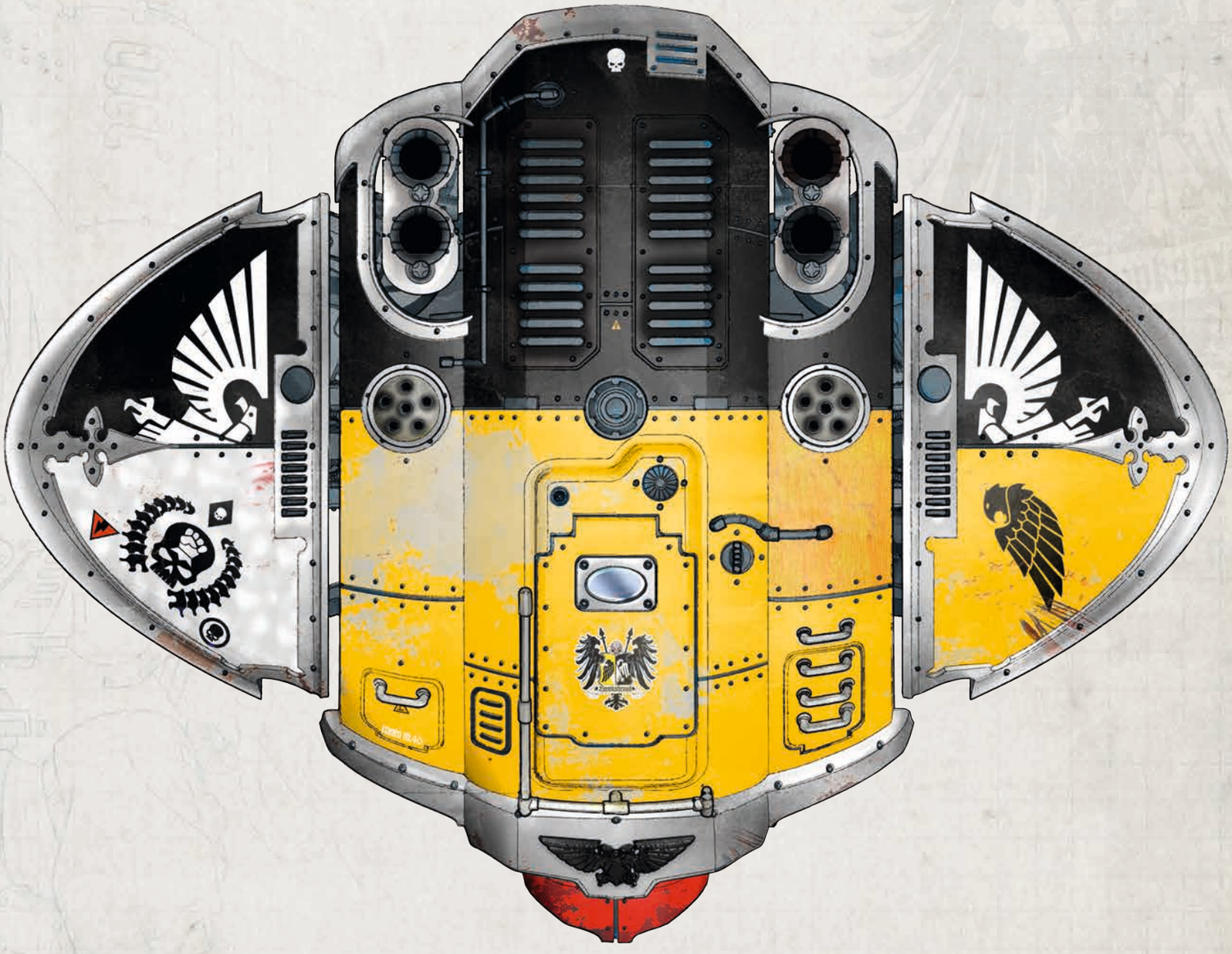
Dunhand is a brooding, joyless man who lives with the knowledge that his dead brothers have long ago stolen his glory. Even the name of his Knight, Legacy of Honour, has become an unpleasant reminder that he is merely honouring their memory. To ease his own pain and quiet the incessant whispers of his siblings from the Throne Mechanicum, Dunhand throws himself into war with a singular fury. In the Oceania Campaign on Kor IX, Dunhand showed his determination against the Word Bearers Traitor Space Marines and their cultist armies, sinking Kor's floating hive city and then hunting down the Word Bearers' leader even as the structure sunk to the sea floor. Only after the walls of the hive burst and buckled under the intense water pressure did Dunhand make his way out into the ocean, his Knight pushing through clouds of floating corpses to walk along the sea bottom to the shore.

On Skyhammer, the frozen moon of Vos III, Dunhand once again proved his tenacity against the foe. In the midst of a freezing shard-blizzard he led an assault against an Eldar pirate base. The aliens had hidden their settlement deep within the ice canyons of the moon, each ravine a channel for the unimaginably frigid wind. His Knight suit slowly seizing up from the extreme cold, Dunhand fought against the Eldar raiders as they fired at him from bunkers in the cliff walls, searing rounds and beams leaving fleeting steam trails through the air. Armour pocked and seared, Dunhand finally reached the aliens' base, cleaving it open to the elements with his chainblade and freezing to death everyone within.

During the defence of the Kel'shan on the eastern fringe, Dunhand found himself first fighting against the Tau, and then at their side when a tendril of Hive Fleet Gorgon fell upon the world. Days of brutal close quarters combat left Legacy of Honour covered in rents and scars, dried alien blood spattered across its heraldry. After years of struggling to find a place within his own household, Dunhand found the philosophies of the Tau and the Greater Good strangely appealing. He was the only Noble to meet with the alien's emissaries, though he never disclosed what was discussed. This fraternisation with the Tau only widened the gulf between Dunhand and his fellow Nobles. However, whether their concerns are justified remains to be seen.

Hanrald, Reign of Justice





Marriage between the noblemen and women of a Knight world is a complex affair, bound up in ritual and ceremony. Before he was born Hanrald was betrothed, the pairing carefully considered for the alliances it would bring and the quality of the progeny it might produce. For years he trained in the martial disciplines of his house until he was fit to undertake the Becoming – only once the sacred ritual was complete would he be considered worthy to meet his future wife Miram. Unfortunately for Hanrald he was called to war only days after earning his place on the Throne Mechanicum. Though he had not met her, Hanrald vowed to honour his betrothal to Miram and return for her. For years Harald was absent from Krastellan, scouring the Pretorus Nebula of Eldar corsairs and earning a bloody reputation among the Imperium's crusading forces there. Unknown to Hanrald, while he brought fire and death to the enemies of the Emperor Miram had died, struck down by a wasting fever, never having known her betrothed. By the time the Noble returned to Krastellan, a veteran of the Pretorus Crusade, Miram had been years in the ground. Overwhelmed by anguish and renewing his vow to his dead betrothed, he set off back into the void to vent his rage upon the enemies of mankind.

For decades Hanrald has fought in wars across the length and breadth of the Ultima Segmentum, becoming a pitiless and bitter old man. Other Hawkshroud Nobles often find Hanrald's presence to be an ominous sign in a battle, the sense that he bears some manner of curse having grown from rumour to full-blown superstition over the years. Many Nobles also find Hanrald's methods disturbing and skirting the edges of honourable conduct for one of their kind. Hanrald has been known to wound foes so he might take his time killing them, infamously spending an hour carving apart an Ork Squiggoth during the battle of Scrap Falls, until the beast's piteous roars made even his allies turn away in disgust. Again, at the Battle of Dunwald Deepwater, Hanrald sealed the separatist ironclads before sinking them, leaving the crews to drown as they struggled to escape their watery tombs.

Rumour has it that Hanrald has forsaken everything but his vow to Miram, including his honour. In recent years his behaviour has become more erratic, to the point that Viscount Tudon has forbidden him from returning to Krastellan until he can fulfil an oath debt to House Hawkshroud. Secretly Tudon would like Hanrald to take the mantle of a Freeblade or forsake his ties to Hawkshroud, but Hanrald remains at least partly devoted to his house, perhaps out of some lingering respect for Miram's family. Whatever the case, Hanrald continues to fight with a ferocity and anger born of years of living with the injustice of Miram's death. His allies, be they Imperial Guard commanders or Space Marine Captains know little of the man who pilots the great war machine that fights at their side, seeing only the howling thermal cannon of one of the Imperium's greatest warriors.




DARK
ANGELS


Raven
mors m.40
mortificom 39

ADEPTUS MECHANICUS KNIGHTS



House Raven

House Raven has a long and proud history serving the Imperium, and has fought in countless conflicts from the heart of the galaxy to the stellar wilderness of the outer rim. Lord Grevan Raven, fourth of his name, is the Iron Duke of Kolossi and sits upon the Adamantium Throne of the Keep Inviolate, greatest of the knightly fortresses and capital city of House Raven's home world. It is his honour to command hundreds of Knights in battle, as well as dozens of households of Nobles drawn from some of the finest lineages in the Ultima Segmentum.

KOLOSSI, THE FORTRESS WORLD

Thousands of years ago Kolossi was a virgin world of verdant plains and forested mountains. When the first human settlers arrived they found an environment conducive to life, with little in the way of natural predators. However, the settlers built legions of Knights, their industries strip-mining the Kolossi continents for materials. Ancient tales tell of an evil that lurked in the darkness of the Kolossi star system, or perhaps within the heart of the star itself, and it was against this evil that the settlers were protecting themselves. If there is truth in these tales time has erased any evidence, leaving only rumour and conjecture in their wake.

In time, the society of Kolossi stratified and House Raven rose to prominence among the settlers, becoming in time a title synonymous with the Knight world. As the rulers of Kolossi came and went each one added to the world's armies and fortifications, stripping away more of the planet's mineral wealth. By the time that House Raven made its enduring alliance with the forge world of Metalica, Kolossi had been reduced to open pits, towering slag heaps and smog-wreathed manufactorums lit only by guttering promethium flares from soot-stained chimneys.

This degradation of Kolossi has only worsened through the millennia. In addition to House Raven's own mineral needs Metalica has added their own demands upon Kolossi, endless shambling lines of mining servitors slowly hacking their way toward the heart of the world. Only a handful of cities remain on the planet, islands of steel and smoke amid the deep-core shafts and strip-mine canyons. Greatest of these is the Keep Inviolate, an adamantium plated fortress over a kilometre high, its glittering peak welcoming home Nobles as they descend from orbit into Kolossi's rolling banks of smog.

The work of centuries, the Keep Inviolate is a fortress to rival the Fang on Fenris or the Emperor's Palace on Terra, its walls hundreds of feet thick and its macro cannon capable of tearing ships apart in orbit. The real power of the keep though lies in its Vault Transcendent. Dug deep into the bedrock of Kolossi, its heavily shielded halls house hundreds of Knight suits, each one ready to stride out onto the scarred surface of their world should it ever face invasion.

A BROTHERHOOD OF IRON

House Raven maintains its power only through the strength of its alliance with the forge world of Metalica. Before the Nobles of Kolossi were reconnected with the Imperium during the Great Crusade, their arsenal of Knights, like their world, was slowly slipping into decay. Without skilled Sacristans to tend their great war machines, many rusted within the shadows of the Vault Transcendent, rendered useless by mechanical fault, cursed machine spirits or flawed repair. The mines of Kolossi were also failing – House Raven lacked the machines and knowledge to reap the mineral bounty of their world, the mines close to the surface long since scoured clean of useful ores. Indentured workers toiled in ancient pits, using archaic tools to chip ore from the unforgiving rock, hundreds dying each day for pitiful returns.

When Lord Gregor met the first ambassadors of the Imperium it was the agents of Metalica that cemented the alliance. A famous tale tells of Gregor leading the Metalica emissaries into the Vault Transcendent to show them the Knights of House Raven. Upon discovering so many of the Knights cold and unseeing, the Metalica Magi expressed their sorrow for the slumbering machine spirits. Beginning to chant, the Magos then called out to the Machine God, entreating reactors to burn bright, sacred oil to stir within blessed hydraulics and neural nets to awaken once more. To Lord Gregor's surprise one of the venerable Knight Paladins, an ancient machine that had remained dormant for hundreds of years, lifted its head toward the chant, its spirit finally stirred back to life by the presence of those with the blessing of the Omnissiah.

Lord Gregor swore an alliance with Metalica and for ten thousand years it has endured. The Sacristan sons of Kolossi are sent to the forge world upon their naming day, to be trained in the rites of the Machine God. Well versed in the secrets of Knight technology, those that serve House Raven excel at their craft, and a Knight never remains idle for long should it fall in battle or suffer some technical malady. As might be expected, the Sacristans wield considerable power on Kolossi, and the Iron Brotherhood, as they are known, divide their loyalties between House Raven and the forge world of Metalica. There are those amongst the Nobles who are deeply suspicious of these returned sons and their motives, even though they must rely on them for the upkeep of the Knights. Indeed, such is the change that comes over a Sacristan when he returns from his years of training on Metalica that his family and lords say he has been 'cast in iron', changed forever from the tearful child which bade them farewell.

TRIAL OF THE COMPANIONS

Centuries ago, Lord Grunwald created the Companions, an elite formation within House Raven made up from its greatest heroes. Numbering only in their dozens, entrance into the Companions is a great honour, and competition between families is often intense. In the early years of the Companions, Nobles were often chosen because of their connections to the Iron Duke, or the status of their family within the hierarchy of the Order Inviolate, the capital city's complex social strata. To combat nepotism over merit, or at least to ensure that a well-connected Noble was also a skilled warrior, in 621.M38 Lord Sukomvald created the Trial of the Companions.

The Trial is an annual event in which those wishing to join the Companions must navigate a perilous series of tests each more challenging than the last. Though the Trial is shrouded in secrecy, rumours whisper that much of it must be completed without the benefit of a Knight suit. So the stories go, a Noble must prove himself an able warrior and cunning adventurer to overcome Sukomvald's tests.

Even before a Noble is allowed to embark on the Trial he must have made a name for himself, gaining glory in countless battles and bringing honour to House Raven. Each year, the current lord of the house will review the deeds his Nobles, and create a list of those he deems ready for the Trials, inviting them to compete. It is a rare privilege to be invited to attempt the Trial of the Companions, and a deep insult to turn it down. House Raven Nobles have been known to retire from decade-long campaigns, even on the eve of battle against hated foes, to return to Kolossi to prove themselves should they receive the call of the Iron Duke.

The Master of the Trial is an office held by the lord's most senior Seneschal, and it falls to him to prepare the tests for aspiring Companions. The Trial takes place in the vast abandoned mine workings of Kolossi, and the Master will spend the year between each Trial changing the test from the previous year to ensure that each one is unique. Even though the Trial changes from year to year, Nobles do not speak of what they face within the depths of Kolossi, what tricks, traps and opponents the Master of the Trial sets for them, while those that fail – and survive – can only hope that the Iron Duke gives them a second chance to compete.

Yornus guided his Knight down the narrow city street, its feet crunching wetly on the bodies of the dead. As the corpses popped and burst a carpet of Rippers scurried away from the Knight, hissing up in irritation at having their meal interrupted. Yornus reached out with his suit's augurs, closing his eyes and seeing through its finely tuned senses. Everywhere the ruined city writhed with Tyranid bio-horrors, the very air thick with caustic alien spores. Days of fighting had turned it into a charnel, where piles of human remains fed the beasts of the Great Devourer. This world was lost, its armies defeated and its people slain. Yornus and his fellow Knights were not here to save the planet, they were here to honour an iron-pact to Metalica.

Sweeping his electronic eyes across the ruins, Yornus followed the magnetic signature unique to his target, finally settling on the pulsing glow of its slumbering reactor. Appearing over the war-scarred skyline the Warlord Titan slowly came into view, lying where it had fallen.

'I have it in my sights,' Yornus voxed to his brethren. 'Form up, and keep watch; the beast may slumber now but it will soon awaken.'

Striding out of the ruins, a dozen other red-armoured House Raven Knights appeared. Gathering around the sides of the fallen Titan, their guns covered the cratered streets and broken buildings. Yornus heard the slab-sided heavy lander before he saw it, descending from the sky on howling engines to land in the shadow of the Titan. Its ramp yawned wide and a company of Skitarii rapidly dispersed, flamers clearing away nearby Tyranids. In their wake came the Princeps and his crew, along with a score of Enginseers. Shielded by the Skitarii, the landing party made their way into the Titan.

From his Knight Yornus could already sense the Tyranids reacting to their arrival. What had begun as mere alien curiosity was now building into a definite response. The Noble identified larger bio-signatures moving toward them. Yornus watched the signals of the swarm gathering around them, smaller weapon-beasts inching closer through the ruins while hulking shapes moved in the shadows.

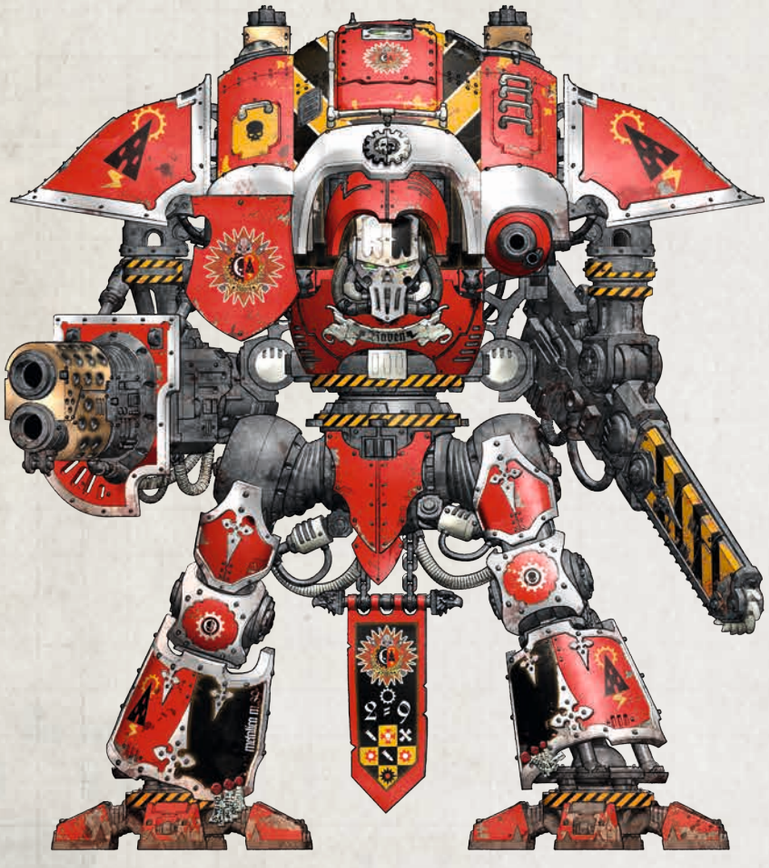
Yornus saw a Genestealer climb into view, hissing a challenge at the Knight. He responded with a burst of heavy stubber fire, turning the creature into purple mist. For a moment nothing happened as the echo of the gunfire rang out across the city. Then the swarm charged. Termagants and Hormagaunts flooded toward the Knights in a chitinous wave. All at once the Nobles triggered their weapons; battle cannons and thermal cannons ripped the ruins apart and spattered the streets in alien blood. Yornus fought relentlessly to buy time for the Enginseers to do their work, but every minute the battle raged the Tyranid swarm seemed to grow in size. Carnifexes and Tyrannofexes joined the smaller creatures, and the Noble's weapon barrels glowed red as he empted hundreds of rounds into them.

Screams across the vox drew Yornus' attention to one of his lance-brethren. He looked across in time to see a brood of Zoanthropes concentrate their fire and bring down one of the Knights amid coruscating arcs of psychic energy. The Noble had no time to mourn his brother, as the ground burst apart in front of him and a serpentine Mawloc emerged from the rubble. Yornus grunted as his heavy stubber clicked empty. A moment later it was followed by his battle cannon, its auto-loader whining uselessly as it tried to cycle a shell that wasn't there. The Mawloc surged forward, latching its jaws onto Yornus' Knight, and diamond-hard teeth bit deep into the adamantium hull. The Noble responded by bringing up his reaper chainblade under the creature's vast head, whirring teeth hungrily chewing through chitin and flesh. The monster thrashed and tore at the Knight as Yornus slowly sliced through its neck, until at last the creature's head came free in a geyser of gore and its corpse fell writhing to the street.

Yornus' reaper sputtered and coughed, its teeth clogged with alien ichor, as he readied himself for the next foe. He didn't have long to wait, as a winged Hive Tyrant swooped down from the spore-choked firmament. Yornus' Knight lumbered forward across a sea of broken alien corpses while thousands of Tyranids clawed and snapped at his heels. Swinging his reaper in a brutal overhead arc Yornus smashed the winged monstrosity from the air, but the chain blade had completely failed. Hissing in rage, the alien beast rose up on leathery wings and charged back at the Knight.

Before the creature could strike, a blinding beam of light lanced across the battlefield, vapourising everything in its path and blasting the Hive Tyrant to ash. With a sound like tectonic plates grinding against each other the Warlord Titan rose to its feet, blotting out the weak sun and casting its long shadow across the swarm.

Yornus laughed out loud within his Knight, the sound of his joy echoed across the vox-net by his lance-brothers as they cheered for the Titan's return. His heart bursting with pride at the sight of the glorious war machine given life once more, Yornus steeled himself once more for battle, moving up to support the Warlord Titan. Now the aliens would taste the true might of the Imperium.



Lornarus, Blade of Fire



Lornarus and his Knight, Blade of Fire, won much honour defending the floating city of Eirebian on the agri-world of Eireius. For ten days Lornarus stood before the gates of the city, holding back a tide of flying bio-horrors even as the Hive Mind consumed the world's vegetation, buying enough time for its people to escape into the void.



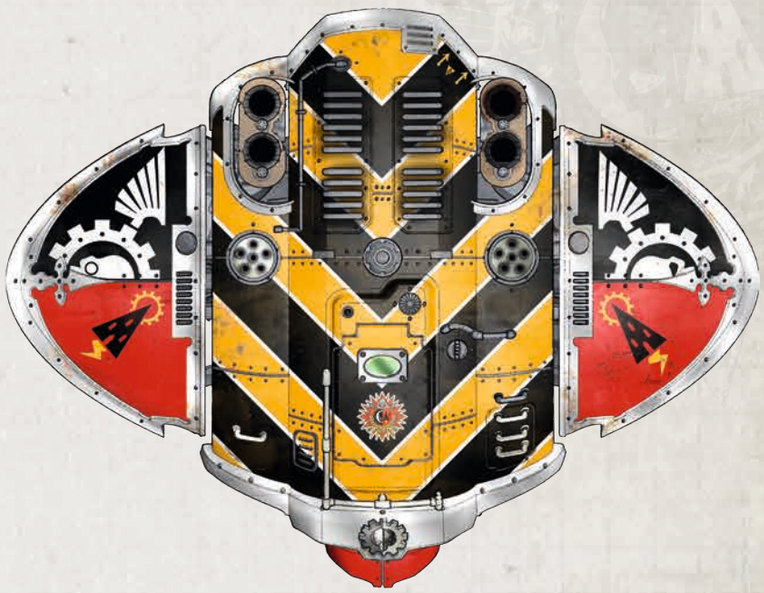
Krewald, Glory Unblemished



Krewald and his Knight, Glory Unblemished, served with distinction in the ranks of Metalica's Legio Titanicus. Fighting alongside the Emperor-class Titan *Hand of Judgement*, Krewald protected the towering machine from lesser threats while its gargantuan guns hammered apart city walls and enemy fortifications in a storm of fire.



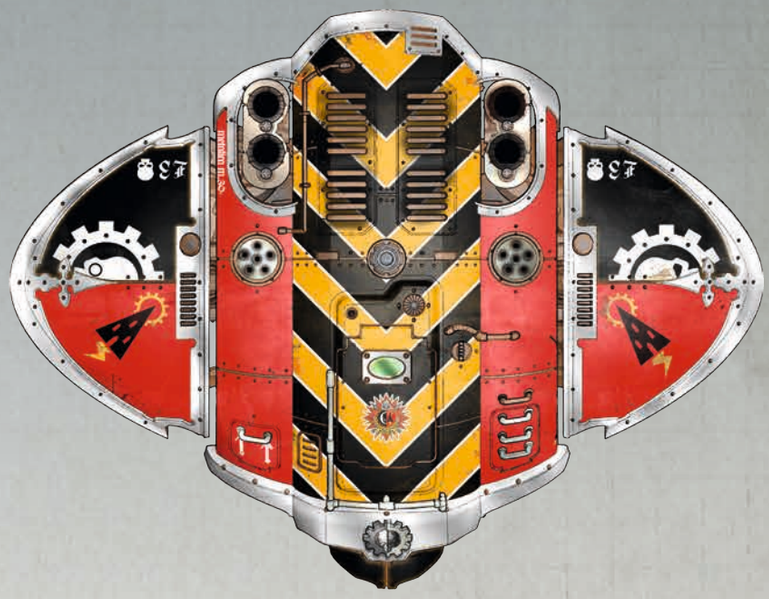
Walkorn, Unyielding Iron



A revered Companion in the 41st Millennium, Walkorn and his Knight, Unyielding Iron, fought many great battles for House Raven against the Ork worlds of the Heloeum Drift. During the battle for the Wilted Bastion, Walkorn personally destroyed the Rok Eye of Mork, when its Warboss tried to teleport it into the middle of the Imperial force.



Havlorn, Steel Guardian



Havlorn and his Knight, Steel Guardian, defended the lord of Praxia when his lander was shot down over the Gorlumda Warzone. While the Imperial Navy struggled to break through to the crash site the Knight stood over the wreck, keeping relentless waves of Necron Warriors at bay until reinforcements arrived to push back the foe.

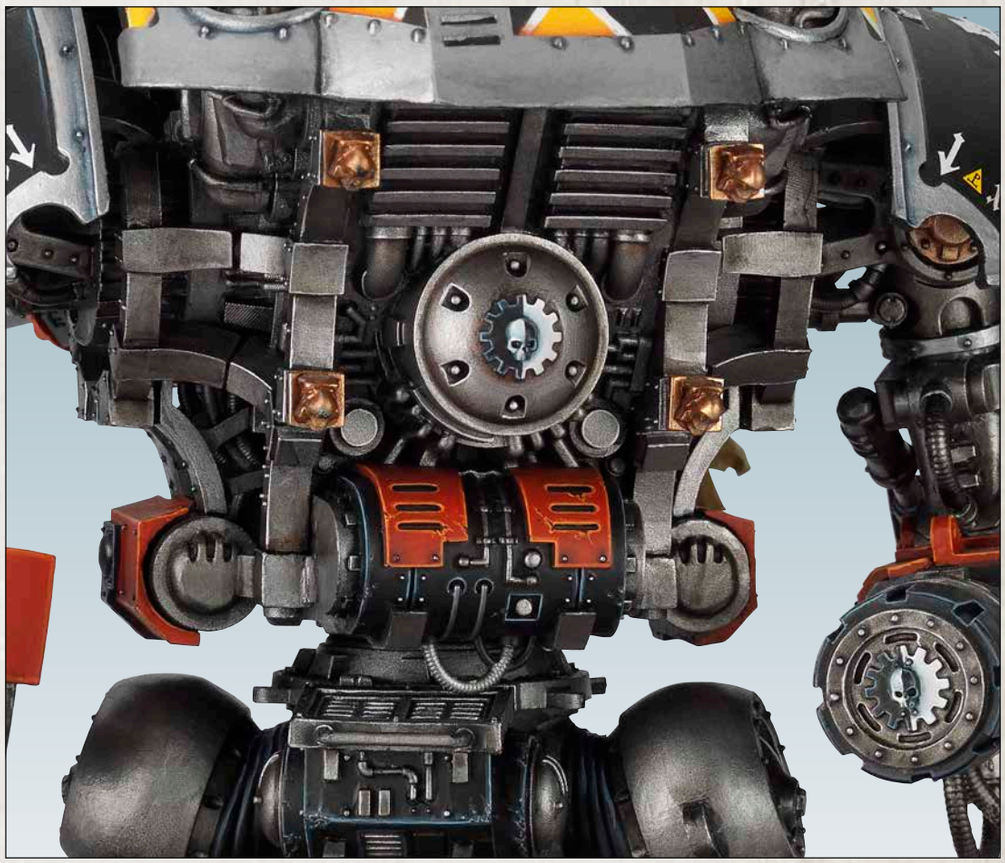
Ursumna, Adamantium Will



COLOURS OF HOUSE RAVEN

The deep red of House Raven honours the ancient world of Mars and their formal alliance with the Adeptus Mechanicus, while the silver and iron on the edges of its plates hark back to the industrial might of the house and shows that under its heraldry hides tons of metal. As an Adeptus Mechanicus house the cog mechanicum features heavily on the Knight suits of House Raven, along with arrows, warning and binding sigils and other industrial icons that would be meaningless to those not raised in the service of the Machine God. The complex inner workings are also apparent, making it clear that only theAdeptus Mechanicus could have created such a machine.

Every inch of a Knight of House Raven is dedicated to the Ominissiah, a living prayer to the god of the Adeptus Mechanicus and his infinite wisdom. Alongside the many devices that comprise the house heraldry, House Raven Knights show the symbol of the Keep Inviolate, the vast adamantium fortress of the house on Kolossi. The keep is a symbol of might and Nobles bear it on their Knight suits as a declaration of the size and strength of House Raven. It is important to all Nobles of the house that they never forget their origins. No matter how far a Noble might stray from Kolossi, he need only look upon his Knight to see his homeland, the image of the Keep Inviolate forever emblazoned upon his war machine.



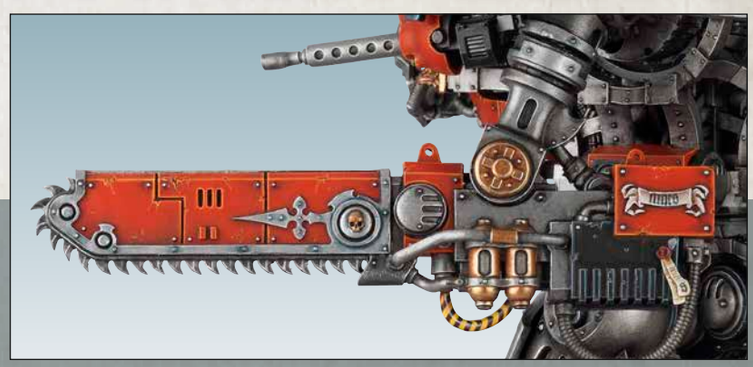
The seal on Adamantium Will's reactor bears the sigil of the Adeptus Mechanicus, showing the sacredness of the machine that lies beneath.



Adamantium Will bears the skull face plate of the Adeptus Mechanicus, revealing Ursumna's deep faith in the Omnissiah.







Adamantium Will is a marvel of the Machine God, the intricate workings, unyielding plates and devastating weaponry forged in the Adeptus Mechanicus' factories.



Horlund is a decorated titan hunter, omitting his face plate to better find targets for his deadly thermal cannon.



The thermal cannon is a huge weapon based on melta technology, incorporating massive fuel tanks and an air-cooled barrel.



Red Vengeance has a single strip of chevrons showing its relatively young age and manufacturing date. These are important distinctions for a Noble of House Raven as only the most honoured warriors are allowed to pilot the most ancient machines.



The icon of the Keep Inviolate is a symbol of House Raven's unwavering strength and determination.

Horlund, Red Vengeance



Walkorn, Unyielding Iron



HOUSE RAVEN PERSONAL HERALDRY

Underneath the sacred symbols of the Omnissiah and observances to the Adeptus Mechanicus, every House Raven Knight is unique to its Noble. One of the key elements that differentiates one Knight from another are the use of black and yellow chevrons. These appear primarily on the canopy plate but can be used almost anywhere on the hull of the Knight suit. Originally the chevrons were used to mark the age of a Knight suit, those with the largest and widest ones ancient and precious pieces of archeotech. In time the chevrons took on another meaning for House Raven, identifying the age and experience of its Nobles. This continues even outside the Knight Suits where the Nobles will wear robes and cloaks emblazoned with marking identical to their war machines.

In contrast to the more archaic looking face plates of the Imperial Knight houses, the Knights of the Mechanicum houses use face plates in the image of the Machine God. The stylised mechanical skull prevalent on many Knights mirrors those on Adeptus Mechanicus automata and servitors. It is always a personal choice of a House Raven Noble whether or not to wear his face plate, many arguing that their Knights 'see' better without them.



Few things can stand up to a blow from a reaper chainblade. The secret of the weapon's power is its potent engine which, as can be seen here, comprises almost half the length of the weapon.



Unyielding Iron is an ancient war machine, its canopy covered completely in chevrons indicating thousands of years of service to House Raven.





The silvered adamantium of Unyielding Iron is a reminder of the revered materials from which it draws its strength.



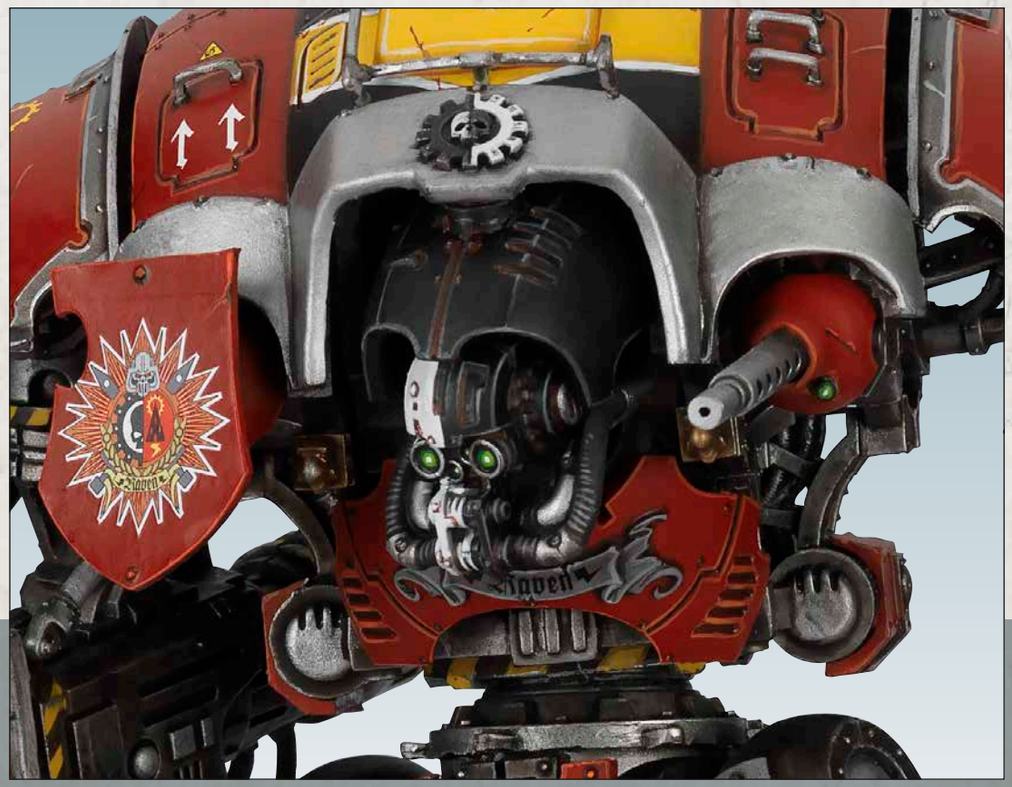
Chevrons on weapons indicate they are technological relics sacred to the Adeptus Mechanicus and House Raven.



Hammer of Mars has the halved symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus beside the icon of House Raven, showing the equal importance of the Martian Priesthood to the Noble.



Rommarus' banner incorporates numbers as well as icons showing his place when he has fought alongside the Legio.



The green lenses of the Knight's eyes hint at the intelligence and cunning of the Noble piloting it from within.

Rommarus, Hammer of Mars





House Taranis

Centuries before the Emperor conquered the warring tribes of Terra, Mars was the centre for Mankind's mastery of technology. Among the wonders born from the forges of the red planet was the Knight suit, a weapon of such fearsome power that the secrets of its creation were as jealously guarded as the mysteries of the Titans themselves. House Taranis can trace its ancestry back to these times; its ancestors were the first to pilot the new and deadly Knight war machines, thousands of years before the establishment of the Knight worlds. In a time before the Throne Mechanicum contained the neural conditioning to create a Noble's sense of honour, loyalty and tradition, the pilots gave their allegiance to the Machine God and the Adeptus Mechanicus.

It was only in the centuries after the bloody events of the Horus Heresy and the civil war on Mars that House Taranis rose to power. It alone remained from the Knights of Mars in the wake of that terrible civil war, and the house would to go on to form a core part of the armies of the Adeptus Mechanicus and dedicate themselves completely to worship of the Machine God. It was a path that would set them apart from the other knightly houses of the Imperium, even those dedicated to Forge Worlds or in sacred alliance with the Adeptus Mechanicus. The Knights of House Taranis stand among the forces of Mars, true servants of the Machine God.

MARS, CRADLE OF THE MECHANICUM

Located in the beating heart of the Imperium, Mars is the centre of the Adeptus Mechanicus and the greatest of its forge worlds. A sprawling world of ancient factories, towering hive cities and maze-like mines, it is home to billions of Tech-Priests and Servitors. In the skies above the planet, gigantic orbiting manufactorums burn bright with the fires of industry, void-lifts ferrying trillions of tonnes of cargo every day down to the surface or up into space. Mars is also the port of the Battlefleet Solar, the largest of the Emperor's warship armadas, numbering thousands of vast and ancient battleships each with the power to kill a world.

In the centre of this teeming industrial planet, the Nobles of House Taranis hold council in spire palaces and void-station keeps. Unlike the Nobles of other worlds, those of House Taranis do not slavishly follow the ancient feudal traditions so common to those who sit on the Throne Mechanicum. Instead they are devotees of the Omnissiah, as much followers of the Machine God as the Tech-Priests they call allies.

The root of this difference comes from their unique past, and the role they have played as part of the Adeptus Mechanicus for hundreds of centuries. The first Nobles of Mars were skilled pilots and favoured Enginseers, who understood their machines in ways their contemporaries could only hope to achieve. As the Knight suits developed, so too did the Nobles, their personalities subtly changed by extensive neural connection to the Thrones Mechanicum. In time the growing sophistication of the Thrones and the Knights themselves meant that only those with a certain genetic makeup or biological heritage would make the best pilots. This led to the formation of houses on Mars and preferential treatment for these specialist servants of the Machine God.

Up until the Horus Heresy and the war on Mars these houses had remained wholly part of the Adeptus Mechanicus, ranked alongside the high Magi of each of the tech-disciplines. They would march to war beside the armies of the Mechanicum, their own livery dwarfed by the cog-skull of their tech-lords. Though the first signs of division between the houses and Mars were beginning to show, even in those early days, it would take a climatic event to throw it into stark relief.

When the Great Betrayal tore Mars in two, many Knights sided with the Dark Mechanicum, falling to the whispered promises of the Chaos Gods. It was a war that devastated the red planet as Titans and Knights fought each other like vengeful gods over cities turned to flame and blood. In the end, only House Taranis loyalists survived from among the Knights, its leaders swearing their fealty anew to the God-Emperor and the Fabricator-General. Since that time, House Taranis have been favoured servants of the Machine God, never wavering in their loyalty or their dedication to its cause.

KNIGHTS OF MARS

Though they bear the names of Noble and Knight, those of House Taranis do not follow the feudal ways of their kin. Having never been forced to survive on a frontier world or build keeps against the dark void, they remain more akin to the Legio Titanicus than their peers from the Knight worlds. Equally, they are not in thrall to the Thrones Mechanicum like other Nobles, the subliminal neural conditioning that creates the rigid traditions of the Knights absent from their own Thrones. The Nobles of House Taranis do not share this secret with their brothers – in their arrogance as the first and greatest of the knightly houses, they see their lack of conditioning as another hallmark of the Imperium's preeminent Knights.

With the might of Mars behind them, the Taranis Nobles have some of the finest examples of the Knight suit at their command, including large numbers of rarer configurations like the heavy Crusader and Castellan patterns, each one tended to by scores of Sacristan-priests of unequalled skill. While they might not share the feudal and hidebound lives of other Nobles, they too understand that martial prowess, and oneness with their machines, can come only through constantly developing and honing their skills in endless practice in their Knight suits.

Across the ancient artificial landscapes and void gantries that cocoon the tiny moon of Phobos, the Knights of House Taranis train alongside the Titan Legions in the specially crafted proving grounds. Above the duelling war machines, the midnight sky is dominated by the huge red orb of Mars, the forge world's millions of factorums and hive cities covering its surface in a burning spider's web of light. Unequalled in the Imperium, the Adeptus Mechanicus' proving grounds use holo-arrays, augur echo masts and transmorphic terrain fields to replicate any kind of environment a Knight might have to fight in.

Across battlefields choked in luminous mist, hard solar rain or coiling lightning wind, the Nobles pit their Knights against diverse enemy-constructs armed with an array of lethal weaponry. Those Nobles that survive the proving grounds become the best of their kind, familiar with a wide range of the Imperium's myriad foes, from the cursed Warp constructs of the traitor legions to the living bio-titans of the Tyranid hive fleets. A master of countless kinds of warfare, a House Taranis Noble knows every potential limitation, strength and weakness of his Knight, eventually commanding the vast machine as if it were a second skin.

PSYCHOSIS-NEURACANIUM

The Ritual of Becoming is a hazardous process. Many of those who undertake its stresses do not survive, or if they do are rendered insane. For the Knight houses of most worlds these damaged family members are an embarrassment to be hidden away, the only hint of their existence the shuffling in a manor house attic or the rattling of chains from a castle dungeon. House Taranis, gifted with the learned presence of the Adeptus Mechanicus and an understanding of the Throne Mechanicum like no other, has a much more practical use for those incompatible with the device's delicate neural matrixes. Known to the Tech-Priests of Mars as the Psychosis-Neuracanium, Nobles that have failed the Ritual of Becoming and survived are still a valuable resource. They are highly trained warriors with an affinity for technology bred into them from birth. Their genetic make-up renders them natural leaders and perfect stock for the bionic enhancements of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Their flesh takes to metal and mechanical devices with an instinctive ease. That their minds have been ravaged by the machine-ghosts of the Throne Mechanicum is of little consequence for their new roles.

Primarily, the Psychosis-Neuracanium are adapted for use as Skitarii captain-overseers. Their forebrains are implanted with emotive-selectors and memory-catheters to keep their rages and madness in check. Skull-plugs and flesh-connectors are then fused with weapon implants or auxiliary augur spines, further enhancing the Psychosis-Neuracanium's ability to perform a battlefield role.

The remains of their personalities are still present in their minds, even if it is only as a mere shadow of their former selves. The natural leadership instilled in them as Nobles makes them ideal candidates to become able commanders. A Skitarii's own machine brain and augmented psyche respond instinctively to the presence of a Psychosis-Neuracanium, their base Mechanicus indoctrination making them react swiftly and without question.

The families of House Taranis willingly give these broken sons to the attentions of the Mechanicus, on the promise that the regiments they lead, and the formations they fight in, will find a place at the side of the household Knights. Though the honour of commanding a Knight is denied to them, these damaged Nobles might still march with their brothers to war.

Lord Vagoran keyed the firing rune, his heavy stubber kicking violently in its housing as it unleashed a torrent of solid rounds. Against petty foes such as these heretic infantry, he was conserving his thermal cannon's fuel, content to watch the tiny ragged shapes at his feet jerk and stagger as stubber fire raked through their ranks. A flickering glyph on his canopy alerted him to a pair of heretic soldiers armed with a missile launcher in an upper story of a ruined hab block. Swinging his Knight's torso around, he sprayed the broken windows with stubber rounds, a cruel smile touching his lips as his fire shredded the wall and heretics in a cloud of ferrocrete dust and blood. Turning his attentions back to the retreating traitor infantry, Vagoran sighed in frustration. Even the brief appearance of a spiked battle tank, promptly detonated with a short, sharp blast from the thermal cannon, did little to hold his interest in the battle.

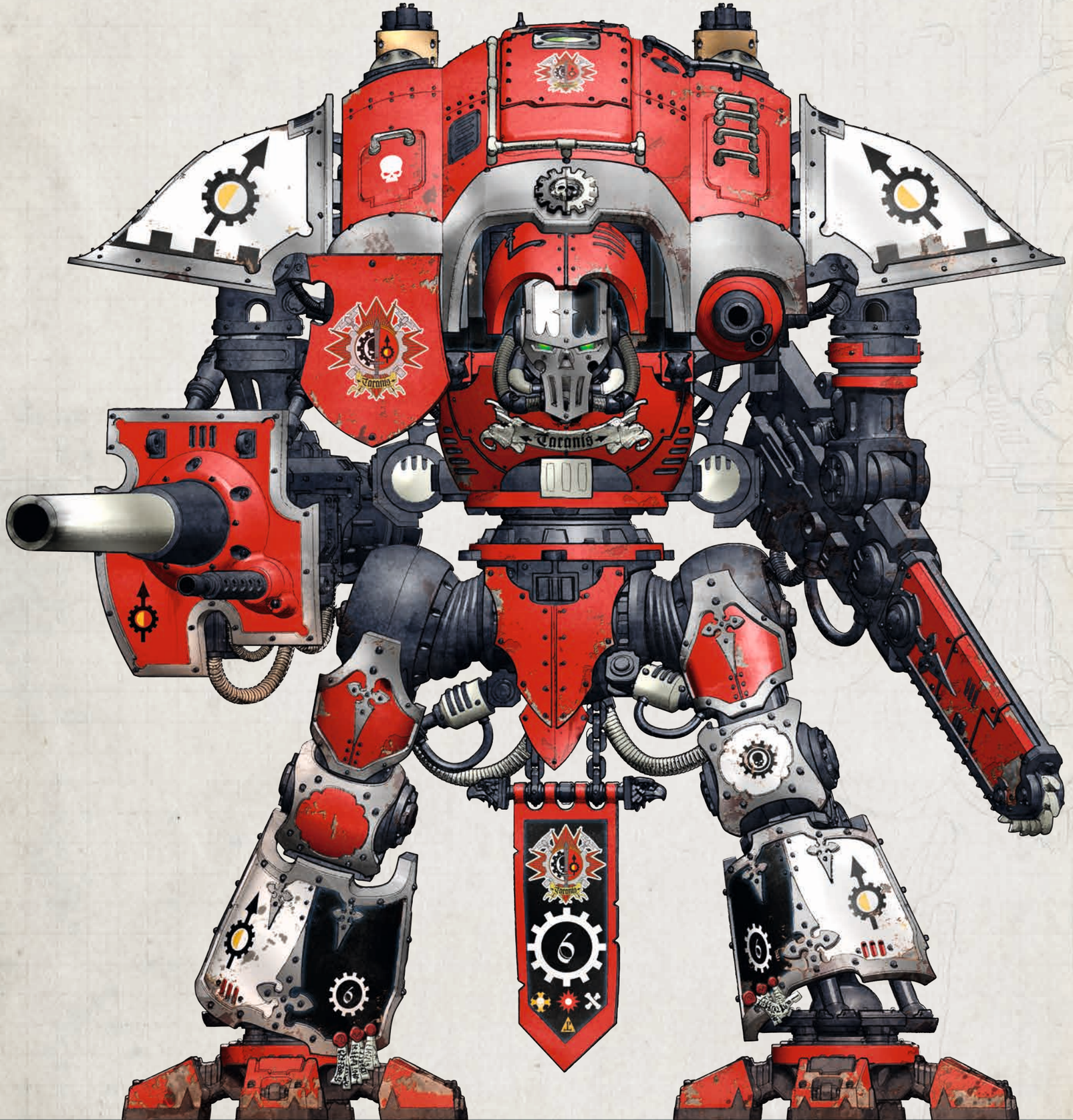
Just as Vagoran was considering leaving the city in search of more fitting prey, a cold shiver washed over him. Feedback from the Throne Mechanicum was far from uncommon, but this was something different, something that his Knight had sensed even before its augurs had registered it. Peering down the length of the city block, its street choked with rubble and heretic corpses, Vagoran thought he could make out a dark shape moving amongst the ruined structures, obscured by billowing clouds of smoke and the haze of a recent artillery barrage. A split second after his Throne screamed a warning, a lance of dazzling light came hurtling out of the darkness, hammering into the front of his Knight with the force of an orbital strike. His ion shield flickered out in that second, but fortunately robbed the beam of its killing power, so that his Knight was only sent staggering backward, its chestplate wreathed in smoke and fire. Vagoran reacted instinctively as only a seasoned Noble is able; a flickered thought sent his Knight striding into cover, even as another plasma beam obliterated the upper floors of the building behind him.

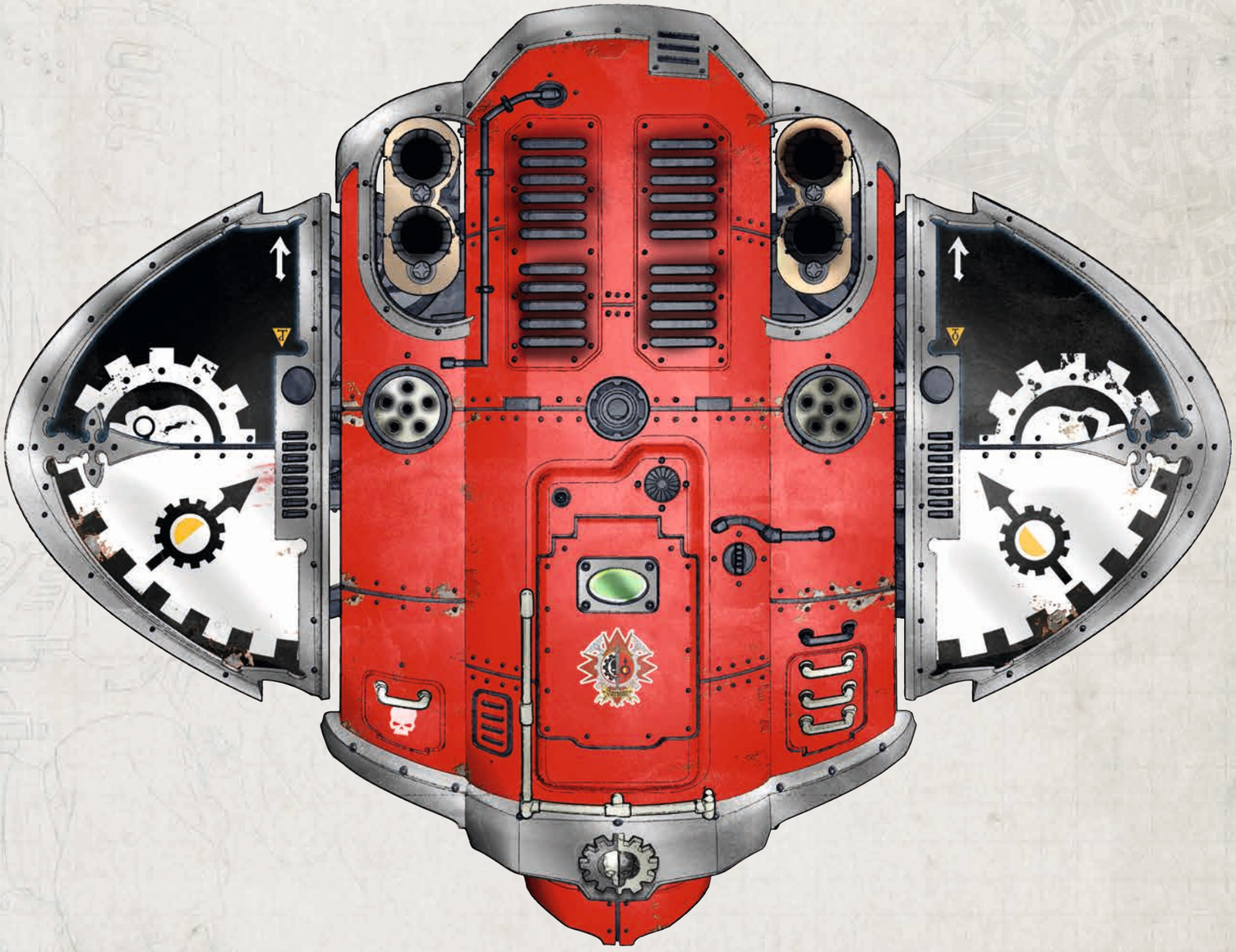
Vagoran's Knight was babbling at him through his Throne, wailing like a wounded beast with dozens of its systems crippled and leaking thick black oil-blood into the street below. With a mental shake Vagoran ignored the howling neural alarms and runes of distress, crashing through a ruined shrine-tower festooned with soaring aquilas to try to find his attacker. His augurs cut through white noise and garbled vox-shadows, and he finally caught a glimpse of the foe he faced. The heretic Warhound Titan stalked through the ruins, its plasma blastgun haloed in a haze of heat. The machine was larger and more well armoured than his Knight, and Vagoran knew he could not face this enemy in an open engagement, its plasma bolts capable of reducing him to so much slag with a few well placed hits. Instead, the Noble used his smaller, more nimble machine to move through the shattered interiors of the ruins, smashing his way from one room to the next, rubble cascading down the Knight's sloped carapace armour.

The heretic Titan had already begun seeking easier prey when Vagoran crashed his way through the wall of a ruined chapel and charged at its back. A concentrated burst from his thermal cannon punched through the Titan's void shield, which fractured into millions of sparks of light as it collapsed to nothing. By the time the enemy had brought around his plasma blastgun it was too late, and Vagoran had impaled the Titan with his reaper. The chainblade's motors roared as it eviscerated the Warhound, its adamantium teeth biting deep into the heretic machine's plasma reactor. For a moment, both mighty walkers stood locked in melee, a torrent of scalding plasma gushing out from the wound Vagoran had inflicted as the heretic crew tried to bring their weapons to bear. Then the enemy war machine exploded in a cloud of flame and debris, sending Vagoran's Knight crashing to the ground, the Noble knocked senseless by the violent, concussive blast.

It was the whispers of Vagoran's Throne Mechanium that roused him. The Noble blinked blood from his eyes as he took in the terrible damage his Knight had suffered, noting it would be many days before it was once again worthy for war. Even so, a savage grin split Vagoran's face when he looked out at the corpse of the heretic Warhound Titan that would never rise again.

Ulantor, the Red Doom





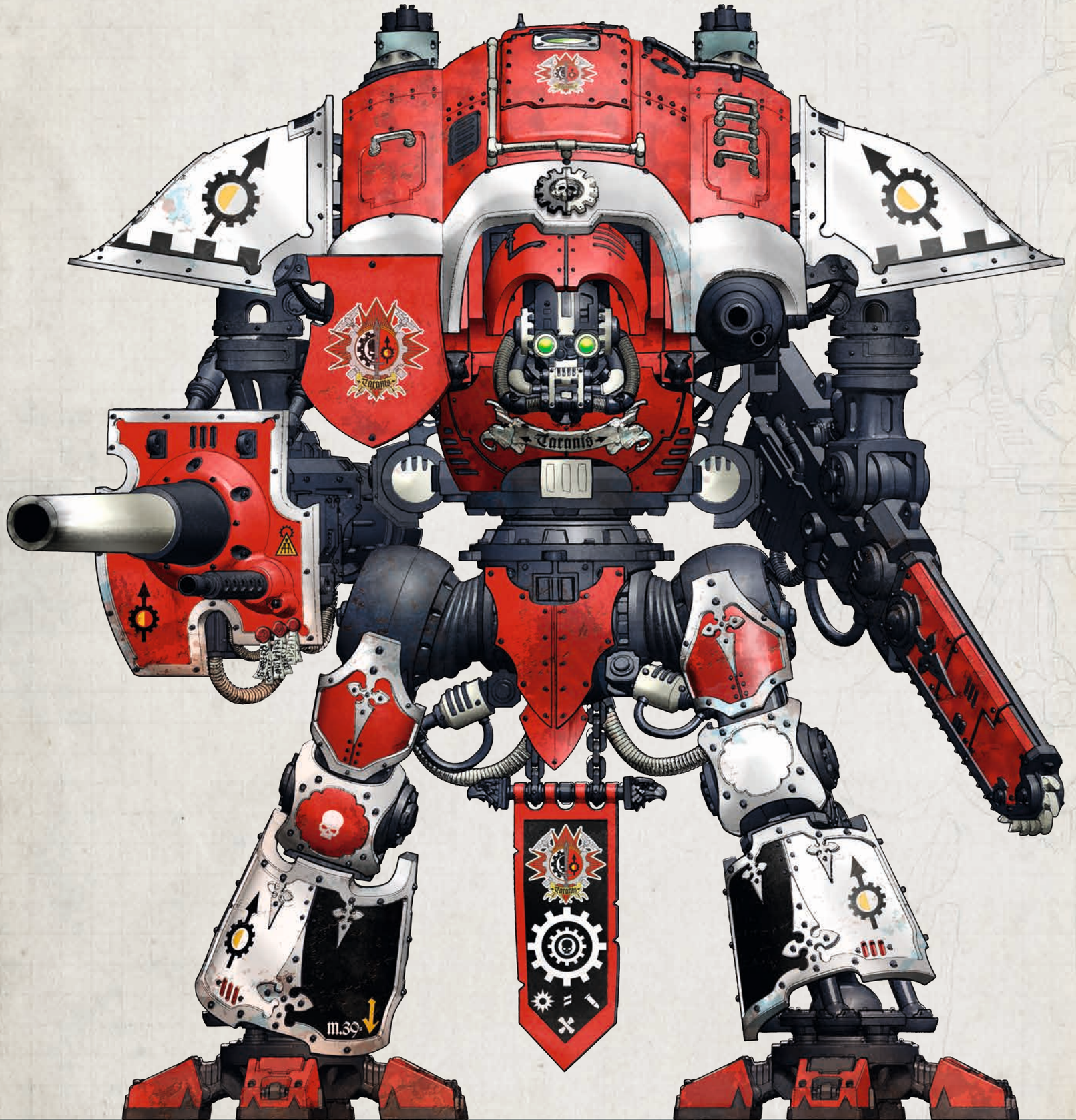
Since the time of the traitor Fabricator-General Kelbor-Hal, Knights of House Taranis have hunted down armies of the Dark Mechanicum wherever they hide within the void. Ulantor won a great victory for Mars against these vile foes on the planet of Hyperior III. Ulantor, and his Knight, the Red Doom, were veterans of the Cold Trade Wars on the western rim, where the Adeptus Mechanicus forge world alliance fought against pirates from the Halo Stars. The Noble tore apart the pirates' bases on dozens of frozen moons and airless asteroids. For this reason he was chosen to support a Skitarii regiment when Dark Mechanicum were discovered on Hyperior III.

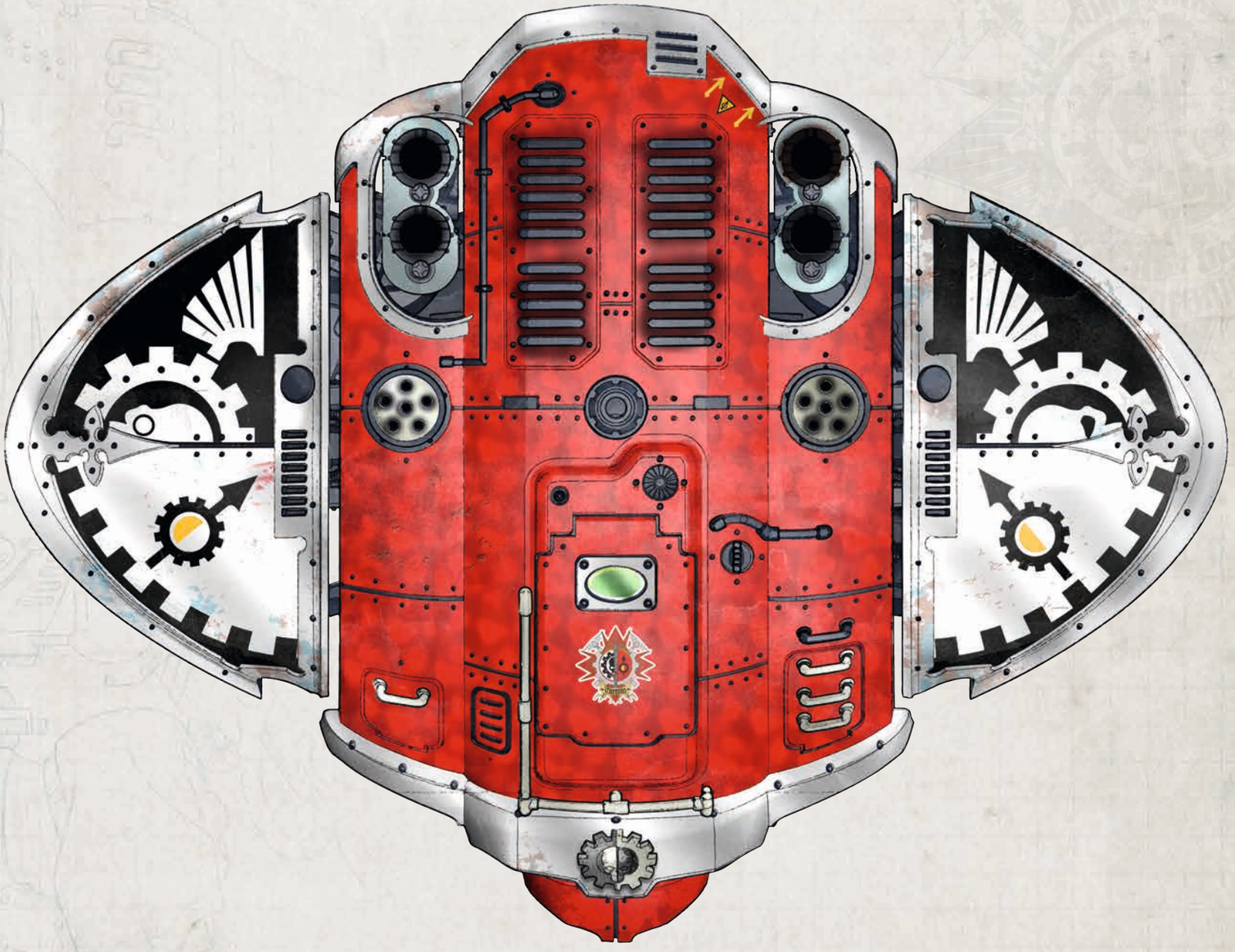
An artificial planet, Hyperior III was part of a cluster of linked worlds – numbered I through VI – connected by a web of transit cables. Constructed by a long dead alien race, the solar-web had decayed over long millennia floating in the void. Only Hyperior III remained mostly intact, the others little more than skeletal remains and debris fields. So as not to trigger the Dark Mechanicum's defences, Ulantor, several of his lance-brothers and the Skitarii landed on the nearby Hyperior IV, using the transit cable to cross the void. Emerging into a world of rusted steel and twisted metal, Ulantor discovered his foes had been waiting for them. By the light of glowing forges and flaring machines the Skitarii skirmished with their dark kin, while the Knights pushed forward under fire from heavy weapons batteries and massive macro cannon turrets. In the first terrible minutes of battle, Ulantor's lance-brothers met their end to these punishing weapons. Fragments of their Knights were sent tumbling out into the void or fell burning to the ground. The Red Doom was the only Knight to reach the defensive line, Ulantor expertly taking advantage of the weapons' ponderous movements and huge size to get in amongst them. With hammering blasts from his battle cannon and screeching slashes from his reaper chainsword the Noble rent open the plasteel shells around the guns, exposing their crews to the vengeance of the Skitarii.

Pressing deeper into the core of the metal planet, Ulantor smashed his way through his enemies' outer defences, leading the surviving Skitarii into the hammering heart of the Dark Mechanicum's manufactorums. Finally the Noble reached the great engines at the heart of the world, crushing scores of vacant-eyed Gun Servitors under the feet of his Knight along the way. Drawing a bead on the towering gravity-couplings running through the planet's core, Ulantor obliterated them with his battle cannon. With a grinding, tortured scream of breaking plasteel, Hyperior III tore free of the solar-web and was sent falling from its orbit.

Ulantor and a handful of the Skitarii fought their way to the surface of Hyperior III, where heavy landers bore them back into the void. From the bridge of the Adeptus Mechanicus cruiser, *Hand of the Omnissiah*, the Noble watched the artificial world as it plunged into Hyperior, breaking up under the star's gravity before being consumed by flame.

Soberan, Omnissiah's Fury





It is not unknown for Taranis Knights to assist Adeptus Mechanicus Explorator Fleets in the same way they fight in the Titan Legions of Mars. In many ways, this role is ideally suited to Knight suits, as they were originally designed to cope with hostile environments and alien worlds. Soberan is remembered on Mars for the service he rendered to the Magos Explorator Gaeren and the Veiled Fleet. Gaeren was an expert in the subversive technologies of the Eldar race, having recovered artefacts from dozens of worlds and started excavations on dozens more. Soberan followed the magos on his journey through the Veiled Region, defending his dig sites from hostile natives and Eldar raiders.

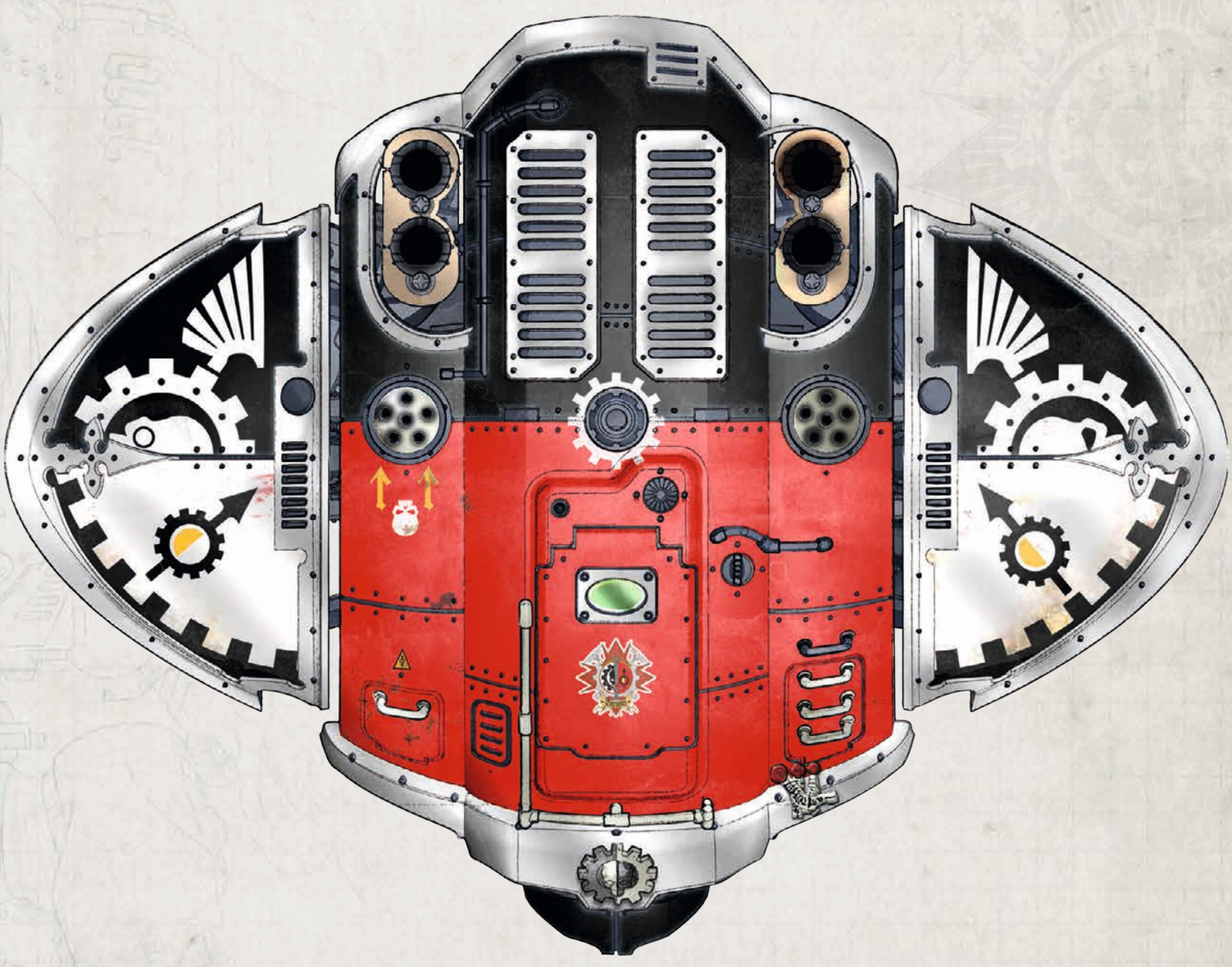
When Gaeren's scout ship crashed while charting the desolate Ghostwilds, Soberan protected the downed craft on the spectre moon of Forlos. Under the pale glow of the Veiled Stars, Biel-Tan Howling Banshees and Striking Scorpions assaulted the forces of the Mechanicus. Skitarii were torn to pieces by flashing blades and screaming chainswords, and only Soberan's presence held the line. The Noble used the full might of Omnissiah's Fury to drive back the Eldar, leaving their Wave Serpents and Falcons as flaming wrecks. Even so, the warhost of Biel-Tan continued to hound Gaeren, their wraithbone ships shadowing his fleet as made for the galactic rim.

In the shadow of the Tanhaus Nebula, vanguard Kraken organisms from Hive Fleet Leviathan beset the Explorator Fleet. The living craft appeared from the depths of a dense debris field, spewing bio-horrors at the Adeptus Mechanicus vessels in bloated, glistening spores. Soberan cleared deck after deck of Gaeren's flagship, crushing Warriors, Genestealers and Hormagaunts underfoot. When one of the void-beasts latched onto the hull of his cruiser, Soberan ventured out into space to deal with it. In the silent vacuum, his Knight's reaper chainsword ripped through the creature's tentacles and fangs, sending it tumbling away into the asteroid field.

When Gaeren met his end on the rain-soaked world of Dreemos, it was Soberan who recovered his body for the Imperium and ensured his research survived. The Magos had discovered the planet of Dreemos by deciphering an ancient Eldar star map which marked it out as a place of importance and reverence to the aliens, and therefore of interest to Gaeren. Unfortunately for the Magos, the Eldar of Biel-Tan had already discerned Gaeren's destination and were waiting for him within the tunnels. Too large to enter the ruins safely, Soberan was standing guard at the landing zone when he heard the frenzied vox traffic heralding the attack. Charging through the crumbling Eldar city, the Knight crashed through wraithbone pillars and ornate gateways to reach Gaeren, but was too late to save the Magos' life. However, with blazing guns and grim determination, he held back the Eldar until the surviving Skitarii could escape the aliens' trap bearing the Magos' body. In time the Noble would carry Gaeren back to the Mars to be honoured by the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Xantek, Blade of Mars





Xantek is one of the Phobos proving grounds' combat instructors. The Noble understands his Knight like few others, and works closely with the Sacristans to ensure it remains in perfect fighting form. To ensure the same is true of himself, Xantek performs punishing and extensive training regimens. Whereas most knightly supplicants learn their craft hunting in the wilds of their home worlds, or when they first taste war, the Nobles of Mars undergo weapon and combat simulations, with the veterans of the house taking turns to instruct its younger brethren.

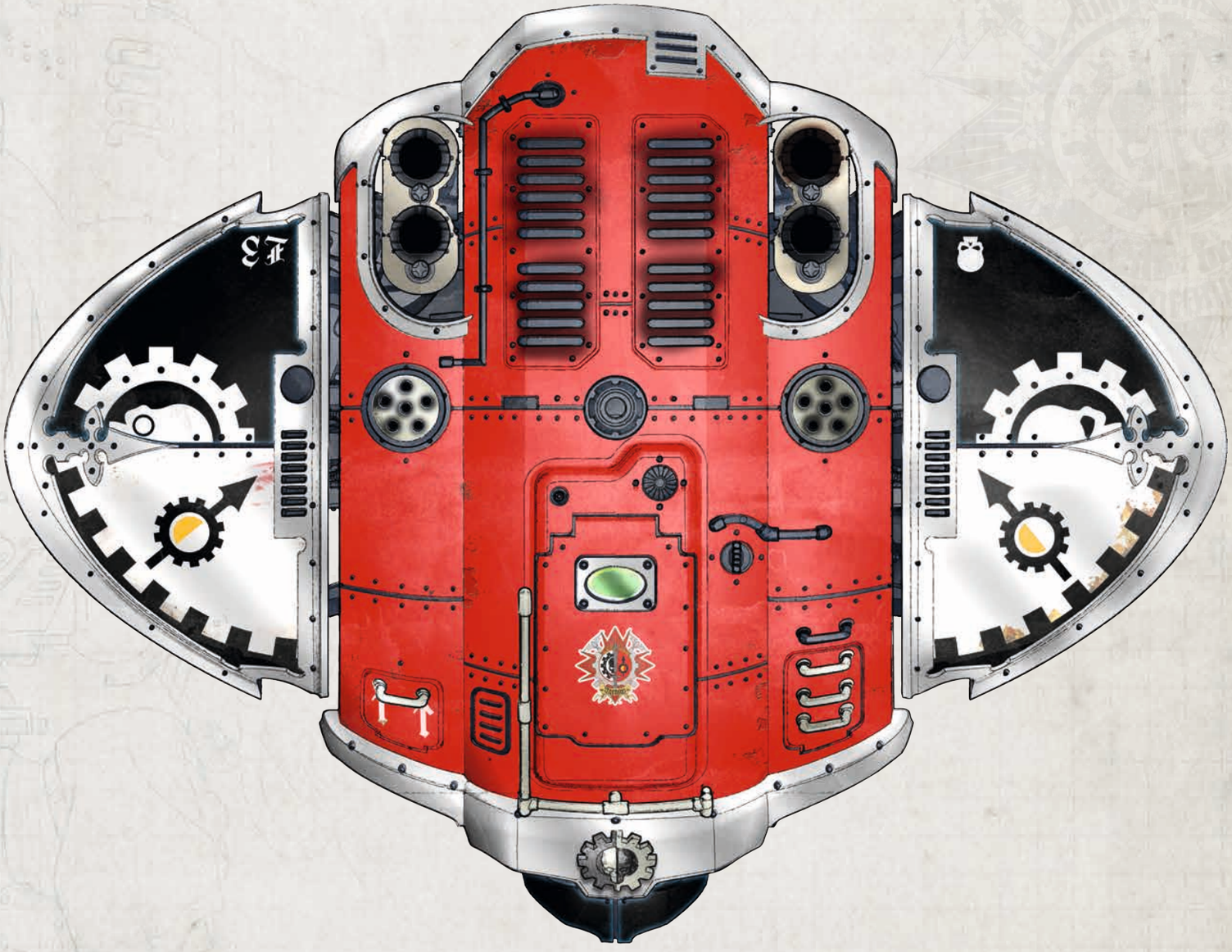
Xantek was a veteran of the Field of Gorgoth, one of the darkest days of the 41st Millennium for the Legio Titanicus of Mars. The world of Gorgoth languished under the baleful light of the Eye of Terror, and had been forsaken long ago by humanity. The Adeptus Mechanicus sent a force to the planet to recover ancient components from a Titanicus manufactorum. Priceless beyond measure, the remains of these machines were to be brought back to Mars for restoration. Unfortunately for the Mechanicus, others had designs upon the ruined manufactorum, and when they arrived the Legio Mortis and their Chaos allies met them upon Gorgoth's blasted fields. Xantek was one of two score Knights to stride out to meet the traitor Titans. In an epic battle that ruptured the earth and turned the sky black with ash, the Knights struggled to hold back the Chaos Titan. Though Xantek and his lance-brothers fought with valour, they were outmatched. The Noble was eventually struck down, a plasma blast overloading his Throne Mechanicum and searing his mind. Dragged unconscious from the field, Xantek was one of only a handful of Nobles to escape Gorgoth alive.

In the aftermath of Gorgoth, Xantek was considered unfit to serve within the Legio Titanicus. The damage to his neural-crown was considered too great to ever allow him the speed and strength he had once displayed. Refusing to accept his fate, the Noble trained relentlessly with his Knight, using the proving grounds as not just a place to pass on his skills to young Nobles, but also to regain his own fighting prowess. Xantek took to spending long hours in the Throne Mechanicum, forcing himself to use his damaged interface-nodes even though it filled him with agony.

Years of pain and sacrifice seemed to do little to restore what Xantek had lost on Gorgoth. His training and skill would be meaningless if he could not convey them into action through the Throne Mechanicum. Finally, risking death and madness, Xantek had his neural plugs removed. For long torturous years Xantek was scorned, though he continued to act as an instructor. After he had allowed his ravaged brain time to heal he underwent the process of implantation once more. One of the few Nobles to ever take the Becoming a second time, Xantek faced his nightmares as he returned to the Throne Mechanicum. When he emerged from the ritual it was as the Noble he had once been, his honour and skills at long last restored.

Vagoran, Giant-Killer





Vagoran gained his first laurel-cog during the Battle of Dusken V. He was dispatched by the Adeptus Mechanicus to deal with the madness of a Daemon-worshipping cult. A cursed world of scorched earth and poisonous air, Dusken V had a single vast subterranean hive city known simply as the Deep. Built into the sides of a vast chasm, it spiralled down into the planet toward the warmth of its dying molten core. For many days, vox contact with the Deep had been lost, though astropaths had detected a Warp disturbance at its heart.

Vagoran marched across the grey landscape of Dusken alongside the Cadian 1313th Regiment, their faces hidden by heavy gasmasks. When Vagoran's thermal cannon carved open the city's towering ferrocrete doors, a great sigh of pain seemed to escape from its depths, as foetid air washed over the assembled army. Heedless of this evil portent and the profane symbols scrawled around the entrance, the Knight led the way into the dark.

Level after level, Vagoran forged down toward the bottom of the Deep, every new section of the city bringing with it new horrors. At first only the vile signs of heresy were present, the eviscerated bodies of hive-enforcers strung up like trophies, or hab-squares choked with corpses from mass suicides. Among the insane graffiti left by heretics and madmen, saner cries for help could be made out. Vagoran could see mournful messages left by the citizens of the Deep, calling out to the God-Emperor for salvation or simply praying for a quick death.

As the army pushed deeper into the city the first skirmishes with its inhabitants began. Mobs of deranged cultists ambushed them from the shadows in bloody, suicidal charges. Armed with scavenged weaponry, the cultists' only real threat was their numbers. Brief, isolated fights soon merged into a prolonged battle, and the Cadians were hard-pressed to hold their perimeter against nearly ceaseless attacks from the floods of enemies. Time and again Vagoran's firepower made the difference, his heavy stubber raking through the heretic ranks while his thermal cannon set buildings ablaze or turned entire mobs to ash.

As Vagoran blasted open the seal to the ninth level of the Deep, the hive was rocked by a long peal of hollow laughter. Even the cultists scattered before the ethereal voice, scurrying back into the ruins of their city. Just as it seemed the sound would never end, sinuous creatures burst out of the broken gateway, their clawed limbs weaving and their cold black eyes hungry for blood. In their wake, a huge bull-headed Daemon emerged, its burning gaze falling upon Vagoran. As Cadians fought and died around their feet, the two huge warriors clashed, Knight and Greater Daemon ripping at each other with claw and chainblade. Finally, the Noble drove his thermal cannon into the Daemon's chest and triggered a burst that sent it screaming back into the Warp, its many Daemon children banished along with it.

House Krast



Chrysis and its Nobles are among the longest-serving allies of the Imperium, the world connected to the Sol System, and Mars, by a long established stable Warp route. House Krast has dominated Chrysis since the time of the Great Crusade, sending its Knights into battle at the behest of the Fabricator-General and seconding its Nobles into the service of the Legio Titanicus of Mars. The most skilled Sacristans outside of Mars service House Krast; its Knights are functionally perfect, blessed by their digital-psalms and binary-hymns. In praise of their skills and in honour of Chrysis' ancient alliance with Mars, the Nobles of House Krast bow down to the Machine God, revering him as an aspect of the God-Emperor and as patron of their world.

CHRYSIS, SCARRED BY CHAOS

The Knight world of Chrysis was the first to be rediscovered by the Imperium in the early years of the Great Crusade. Only a few dozen light years from Mars, the planet was quickly taken into the fold and oaths of allegiance sworn between its lords and the Emperor. Having battled alone against the dark for centuries uncounted, the houses of Chrysis welcomed the chance to be part of this new fledgling human empire. Tragically, they were soon to be swept up in the vast civil war between the Space Marine Legions, as their new allies turned upon each other in a bitter galaxy-spanning conflict. This was to have long and dire consequences for the planet's Nobles; in the final days of the fighting, the arch-heretic Horus scoured their world as he blazed a path to Terra, and almost all the noble families of Chrysis, and their Knights, were annihilated.

Once a lush jungle world, Chrysis still bears the scars inflicted by Horus. Today, what were once continents thick with plants and oceans teeming with life have been reduced to skeletal, petrified forests and vast open basins, empty save for the fossilized remains of ancient sea creatures. The keeps of dead knightly houses still dot the landscape. On shorelines turned from wave-washed beaches into dry towering cliff faces, and on islands rising up above empty seas, their crumbling remains are a constant reminder of the treachery of Horus. In places where virus bombs fell from orbit, great toxic lakes still remain, as deadly now as they were ten thousand years ago. Periodically, huge dust storms scour Chrysis' surface, kicking up chemical clouds that roll across its dry ocean beds, killing anything in their path.

Only the strongholds of House Krast remain, along with the Mechanicum mining platforms still leeching the world for its mineral wealth. In the shielded enclaves of the Nobles some semblance of the world they once had remains, green gardens and artificial lakes protected from the ravages of Chrysis' ruined atmosphere. Even so, it is a parody of normalcy drawn from faded tapestries and half remembered stories. When a Krastian Noble stands atop his keep and stares out through the shimmering haze of its shields he knows his world has been taken from him, and to whom he owes the blood-price for its death.

FIRST TO FIGHT

It is a point of pride for the Nobles of House Krast that they were the first Knight world to make formal alliance with the Imperium during the Great Crusade. That they fought for the Emperor during the Horus Heresy, and suffered greatly in the process, only strengthens their sense of superiority over other knightly houses. After their planet was ravaged by Horus, the Adeptus Mechanicus helped the Nobles rebuild and strengthen their much-depleted households; in return House Krast swore eternal loyalty to Mars. It is a union that has endured for a hundred centuries, the manufactorums of the red planet maintaining the Knights of House Krast and the Nobles heeding their calls to war.

Their ties to the Mechanicus heavily influence Krastian society, and their Nobles offer up prayers to the Omnissiah in the vaulted machine-shrines of their keeps. When the toxic storms wash over their void-shielded castles it is to the Machine God they pray, hopeful that his blessed technology will not fail

them. By contrast with the other knightly houses, Krast contributes more Knights to the Legio Titanicus of Mars than any other, with the exception of Taranis. The Nobles of Krast glory in fighting alongside the Titans of Mars and crushing enemy war machines and fortifications under blazing cannon rounds and howling reaper assaults. Wisely, the current Fabricator-General maintains this eagerness among the Nobles by offering them war wherever the taint of heresy and the stain of Chaos can be found.

Raised on tales of the vile cowardice of those that follow the Ruinous Powers, and growing up seeing the ashes of their world every day from behind flickering energy shields, it is little wonder that the Nobles of Krast have an unquenchable hatred for traitors. There can be no greater reward for a Krastian Knight than punishing the heretic, and in battle the house's young Nobles are prone to recklessness if it offers the chance to claim a prestigious kill such as a super-heavy tank or Daemon engine. The Headtakers are the greatest expression of this hate – House Krast Nobles that have destroyed Chaos Titans and earned their eternal place as heroes of Chrysis.

HAMMER OF TRAITORS

In the middle of the Screaming Sea on Chrysis, on an island which was once a tropical paradise, a towering monument of adamantium stands watch over thousands of miles of dry ocean bed and cursed earth. This is the Hammer of Traitors, and it is here that House Krast records its tally against the servants of the Dark Gods. At the top of the monument are chronicled the greatest kills, the Legio Mortis Titans vanquished by the Krastian Knights. The tally works its way down through Daemon engines, super-heavy tanks and notable fortresses. Toward the bottom are heretic armies that have been crushed; little more than the names of worlds, prominent commanders and cults, and then casualty numbers in their tens of thousands, as if as an afterthought.

The base of the Hammer of Traitors serves a different purpose, and its huge foundation is ringed in chains and collars. It is here that House Krast brings the most hated traitors, Chaos generals, heretics and betrayers, often secretly taken from war zones without the knowledge of the Inquisition. These prisoners are stripped and shackled to the monument to suffer the foul work their gods have wrought on Chrysis. For most the poison air and chemical wind will kill them in hours, choking on their own bile and blood as their flesh burns and peels away. Stronger specimens, such as Traitor Space Marines, have been known to last for days, until a toxic storm washes over the island and flays their flesh away, leaving only scorched, smoking bones behind.

Agents of the Inquisition have on occasion turned their attentions to the knightly house, but always the might of the Mechanicus is there to confound their efforts. These strangers find no welcome on Chrysis, as likely to vanish as those sent to the Hammer. There are also no records of the Hammer of Traitors in any Krast datacore or cogitator conclave, its location known only to the lord of the house and his most trusted Nobles. The Adeptus Mechanicus is aware of the Hammer of Traitors and House Krast's dark secret, though the current Fabricator-General is content to let the Nobles punish their foes as they see fit, provided Chrysis fights for Mars.

Gormarr stalked down the trench line with his squad, his tarnished, twisted power armour glinting in the light of burning bodies. The Traitor Space Marine Lord grinned, showing bloody twisted fangs, as Imperial Guardsmen turned and fled before him. Gormarr let the terrified soldiers get half a dozen steps before triggering his combi-flamer and bathing the trench in fire. He was still enjoying the stench of burning flesh when one of his battle-brothers struck his shoulder pad and pointed over the edge of the earthworks. Climbing up onto the firing-step, Gormarr looked out across the ravaged battlefield. Scattered across a blasted plain of smoking ash and embers, the remains of the Imperium's forces were in full retreat, ragged groups of Guardsmen running for their lives. Gormarr looked down the line of abandoned trenches, pleased to see Night Lord legionaries firing into the routed Imperials, men jerking and stumbling as bolt rounds blasted bloody holes in them. Gazing beyond the immediate slaughter, Gormarr scanned the smoky horizon, hunting for what his battle-brother had seen.

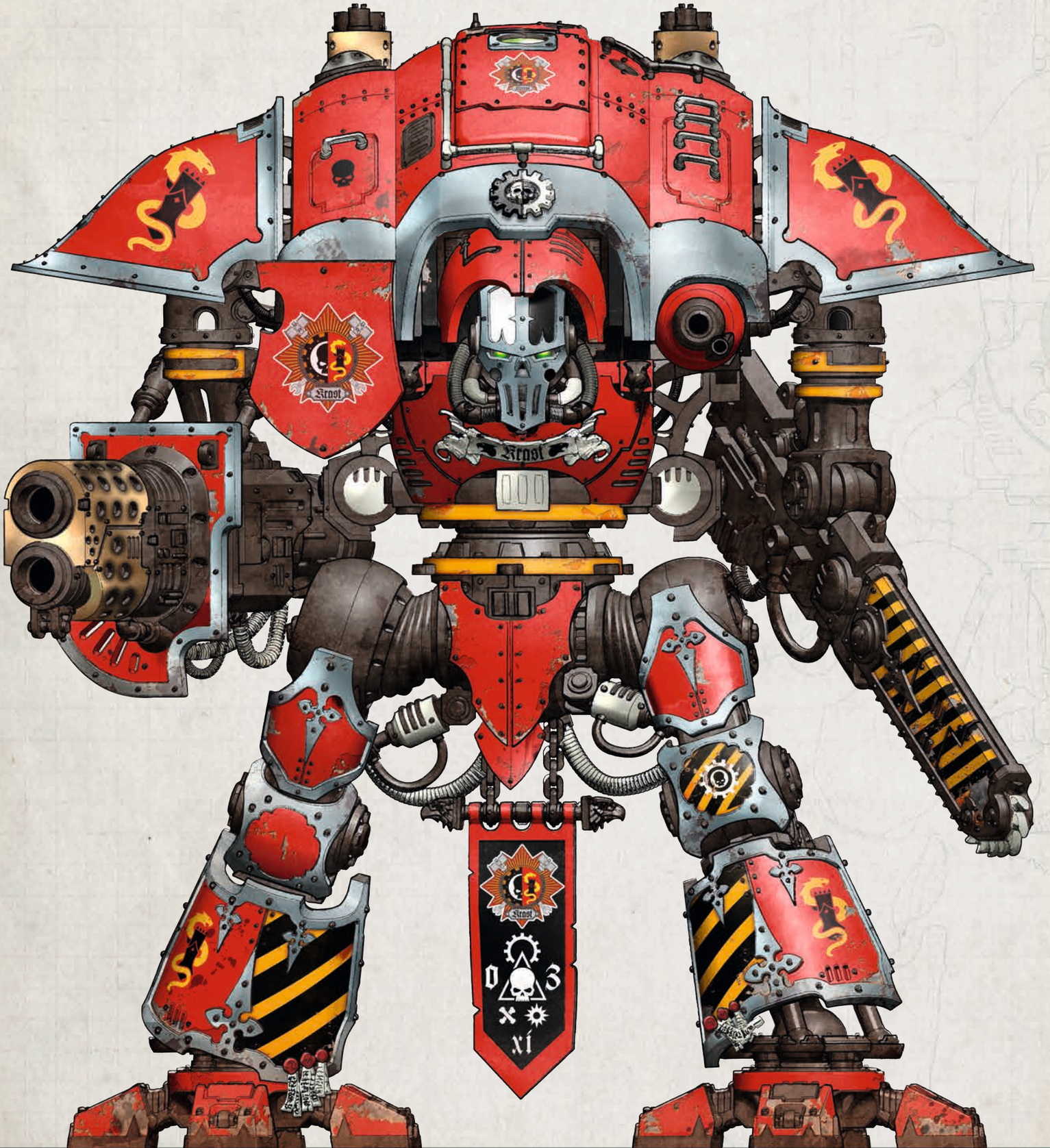
Partially hidden within the haze, a line of red armoured giants were lumbering toward the Night Lords. Gormarr's enhanced eyes could only just make them out through the thick black smoke of burning battle tanks, a dozen huge red-plated walkers. Gormarr quickly leapt back down into the trench, barking orders to his warriors and directing them to turn the Imperium's heavy weapons on their makers. As the light of day faded, the Night Lords hauled Imperial artillery around in their gun pits, turning them toward the approaching Knights.

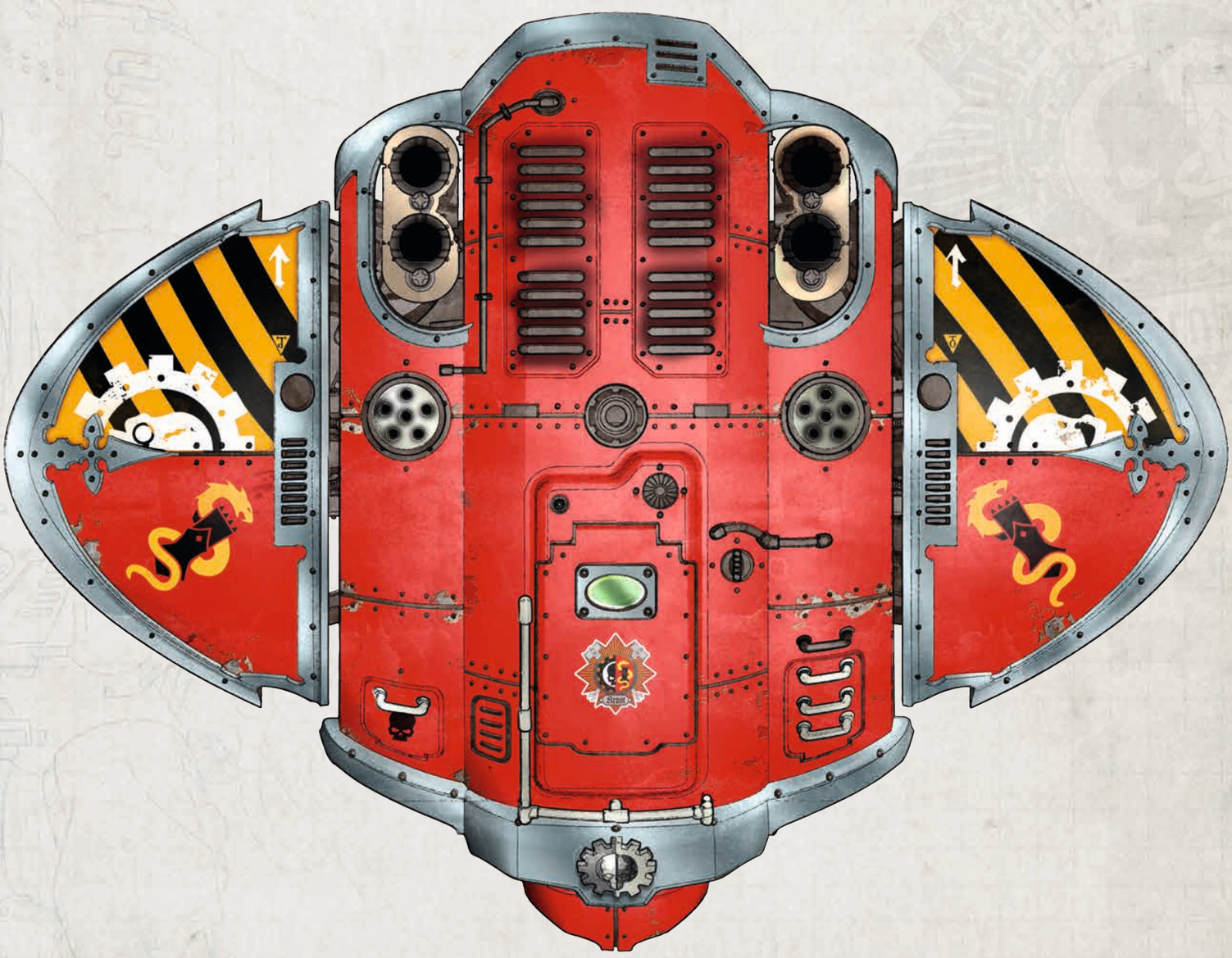
As the Night Lords readied themselves, Gormarr saw the smoke light up like distant lightning, followed by a rumble like thunder. A split second later the fortifications erupted as dozens of battle cannon shells slammed into the trench line. Legionaries were thrown into the air or torn to bits, but his warband stood its ground, their faith in the Dark Gods unshaken. In response, the captured Imperial ordnance thundered back into the gathering night, scores of guns sending rounds arcing back across the battlefield. Where they landed explosions illuminated the approaching Knights and Gormarr could see the flash of their ion shields as they deflected shrapnel. As the last rays of the sun faded, consumed by the smoke haze and clouds of ash, the Knights came within range of lascannons, autocannons and missile launchers. Night Lord Havocs lit up the dark with a storm of blinding las-beams and tracer rounds. Their energy shields rippling with flares and flashes, the Knights continued to pump battle cannon shots into the trenches, their staccato heavy stubbers joining as they closed the final few hundred yards to their foe.

Just as the Knights were about to reach the trench, Gormarr unleashed his armour. A force of Predators rumbled out of the dark, lascannons and autocannons hammering the Knights' exposed flank. Gormarr's own Land Raider, Beast of Darkness, rolled forward, its lascannons firing point-blank into the Knights. The Chaos Lord hauled himself up onto the Land Raider as it ground over the trench. The Knights' formation was fragmenting with the arrival of the Chaos tanks, some of the towering war machines turning to face the swarms of traitor vehicles, others trying to clear the fortifications of Night Lords. Gormarr let out a fierce cry as the first Knight fell, four Predators combining their firepower with a squad of Havocs, the heavy walker's shield overloading before a dozen las-beams tore into its hull.

However, the Chaos Lord's joy was short-lived, as a Knight stepped over the defences to straddle the trench line, turning its thermal cannon on the Night Lords legionaries and Havocs. With a single prolonged blast, the Knight ran its cannon down the length of the trench, the super-heated beam burning everything in its path to ash. In a matter of seconds scores of Traitor Space Marines were turned to vapour, the slagged ceramite of their armour spattered across the defences. Gormarr screamed at his warriors to attack, and his Land Raider ploughed across the battlefield, its lascannons making vivid slashes of light in the darkness. With the trenches silenced, the Knights turned their full attention on the Chaos armour. The tanks were no match for concentrated battle cannon fire and gnashing reaper chainswords. Gormarr's own tank was pitched on its side by a blow from a gargantuan chainblade, adamantium teeth tearing open its hull. The last thing Gormarr saw was a huge metallic foot as it descended on his wrecked Land Raider, and the symbol of a serpent clutched by a gauntlet.

Dagos, Blade of Vengeance





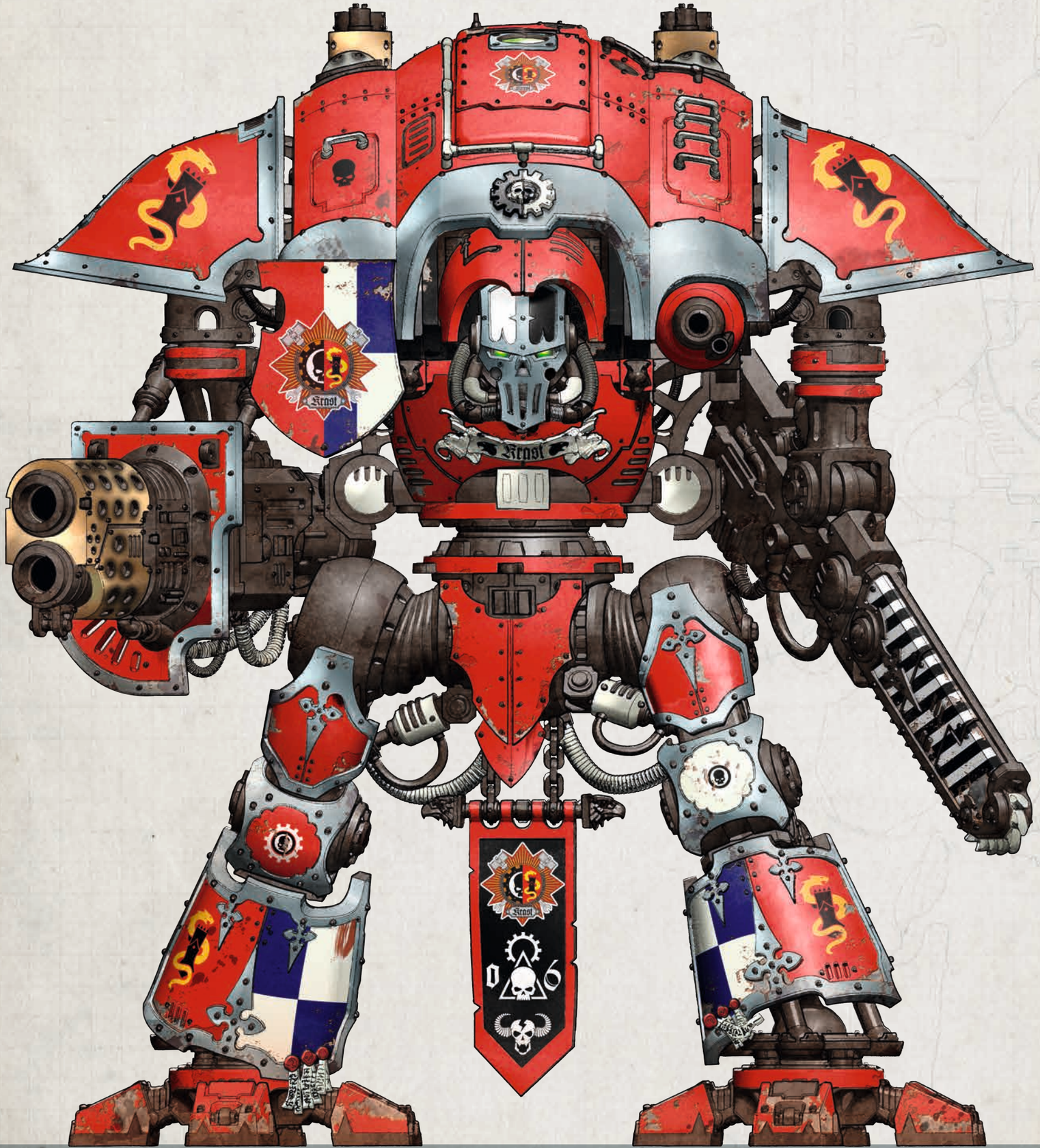
The Vagorn Helfront was a major uprising against the Imperium throughout the Vagorn Sector of the Ultima Segmentum. Dagos, aboard his Knight, Blade of Vengeance, and a detachment of Knights of House Krast, were deployed in the early stages of the conflict to attempt to destroy the Helfront core world of Crematis, and to slay its leader, the Warp-seer Neroteka the Unbound. Almost as soon as the Knights landed on the blasted ash wastes of Crematis they fell into a trap set by the Helfront, and their Imperial Guard allies were scattered and destroyed by the massed armies of the traitors.

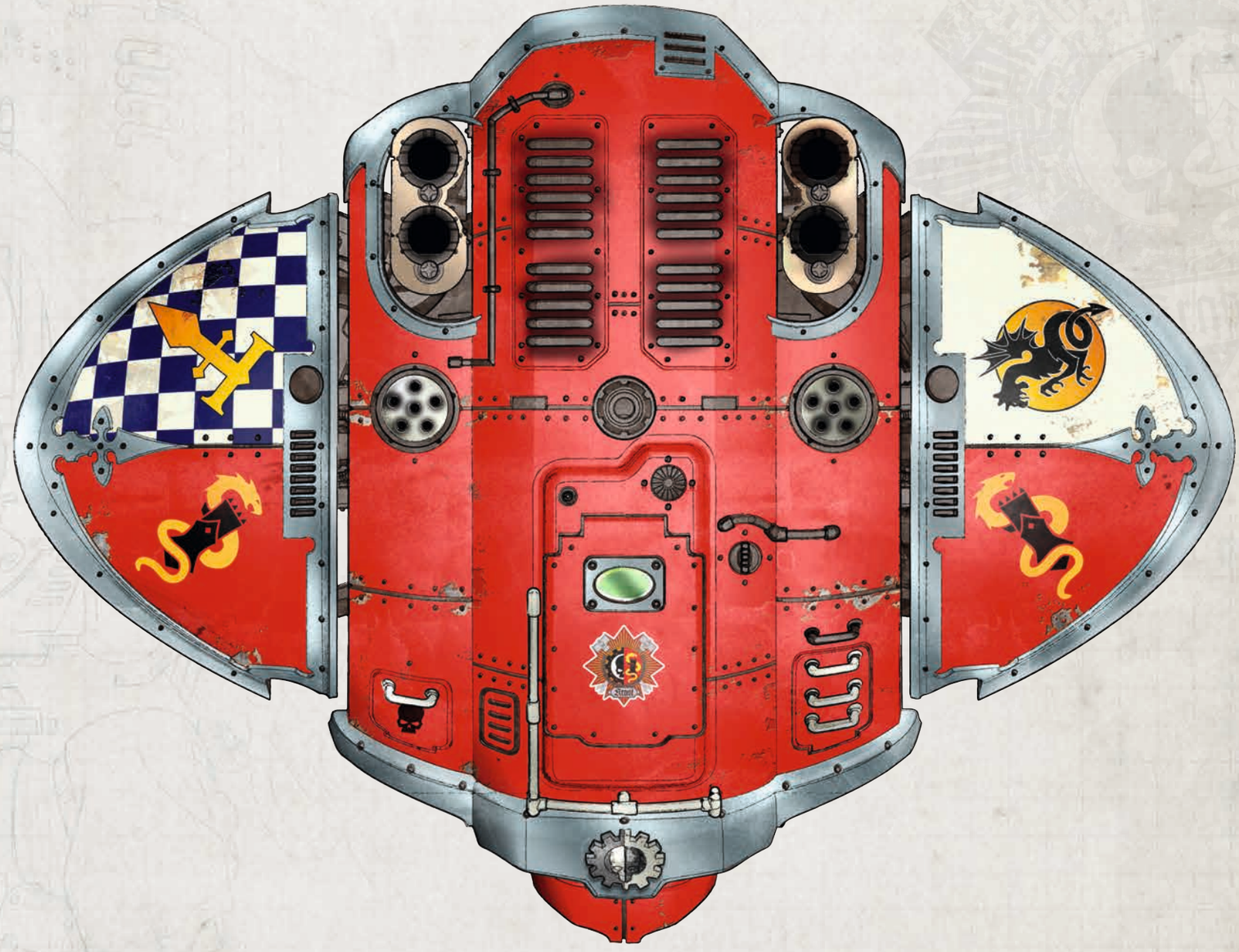
Dagos and his fellow Knights fought valiantly, pushing back the Helfront army and becoming a focal point for rallying Guardsmen. Numerous charges by heretic soldiers were turned back in a storm of heavy stubber and cannon fire, piles of dead enemies slowly forming a grisly rampart around the Knight. Then a trio of corrupted Shadowsword super-heavy tanks came rumbling through the ranks of the heretic army, crushing their own men under their massive burnished tracks in their eagerness to reach the hated servants of the God-Emperor. Augmented by strange Warp-magicks that shielded them from thermal and battle cannon fire, the armoured monsters forced the Knights to fall back. Searing volcano cannon fire cut the legs from one of Dagos' lance-brothers, heretic soldiers swarming over the wreck before the Noble could reach him. Seething with rage, Dagos could only watch as melta charges were clamped onto the side of the downed Knight's reactor moments before it erupted in a mushroom cloud of fire and debris. Determined to go down fighting, Dagos focused his fire on the heavy tanks, renewing his efforts to destroy them. His remaining lance-brother joined his charge but was cruelly cut down by a direct volcano cannon hit, bursting apart in flames. Dagos managed to plunge his reaper into one of the tanks, ripping it in two, but not before the others brought him down with massed lascannon fire.

Its reactor fractured, the Blade of Vengeance fell silent, Dagos trapped in its heart as the traitors rushed forward and claimed his Knight and the remains of his brothers as trophies. However, in their triumph the traitors chose not to destroy the final Knight as they had done with the others, instead bearing him back to their master as a spoil of war. Dragging the Knight behind a Shadowsword, the heretics were forced to break down the gates of their city to present their prize to Neroteka. By that time Dagos had coaxed Blade of Vengeance back from the dead, using his mastery of the Throne Mechanicum to bypass damaged systems and draw power from reserve compactors.

With a shudder and a great blast on its war horn, the Knight came to life once more, breaking free of the chains used to drag it to the city and rising up over the howling renegades. Dagos fired a point-blank thermal cannon blast into Neroteka's palace balcony, obliterating the heretic and all of his generals as they gloated over their victory. Though Dagos was eventually slain by the frenzied traitors, taking hundreds with him in a bloody last stand, he had vanquished their leader and their uprising was ultimately broken. To honour Dagos' sacrifice, a statue commemorating his final act of defiance stands vigil over the entrance to the fortress of House Krast.

Forillus, Headtaker





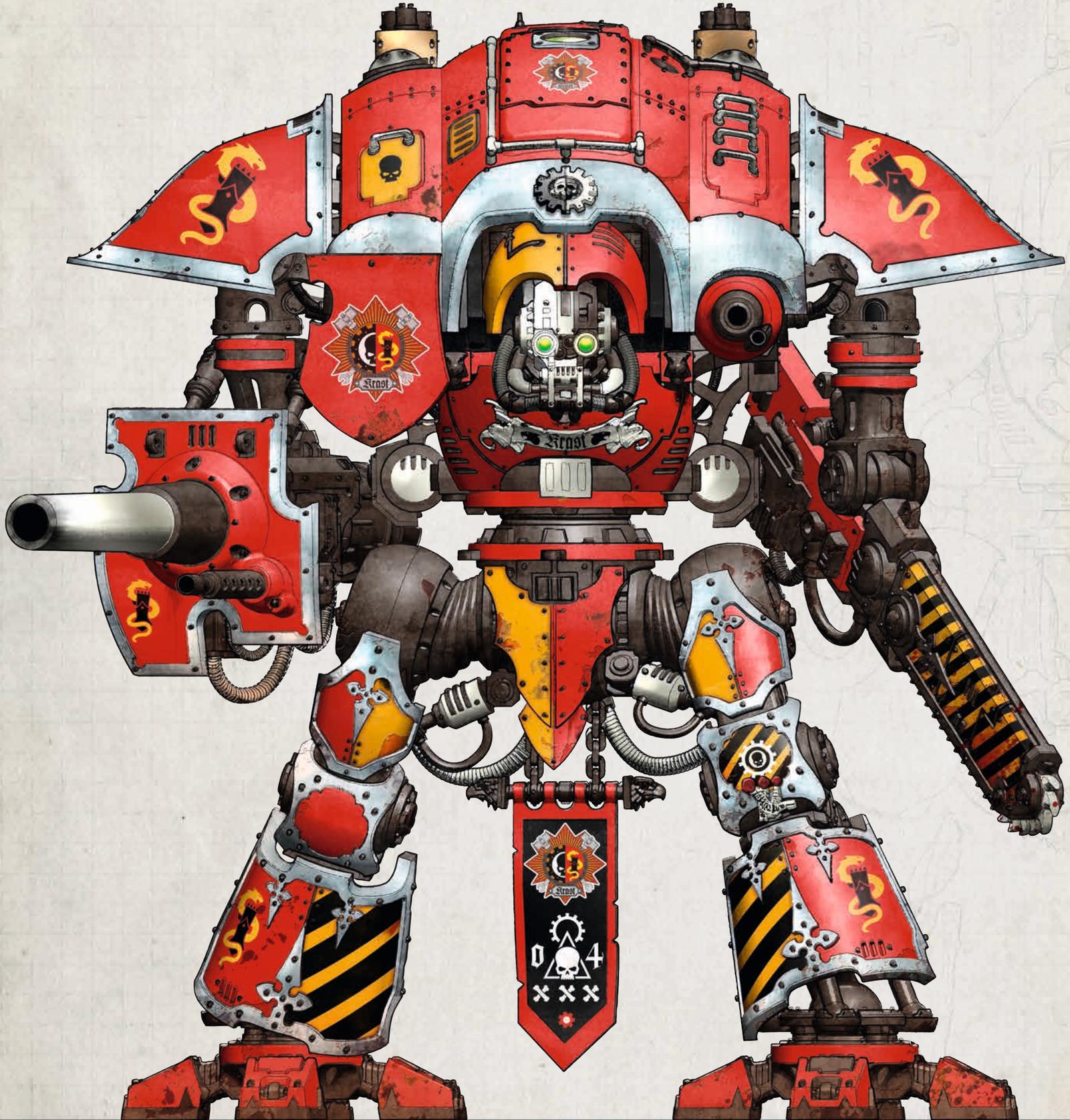
When Waaagh! Spleenrippa descended on Herald's Fall in a green tide, the Imperium responded with swift and brutal retribution against the aliens. Forillus was among a detachment of House Krast Knights sent to cleanse the world of Orks in support of the Cockatrices Titan Legion.

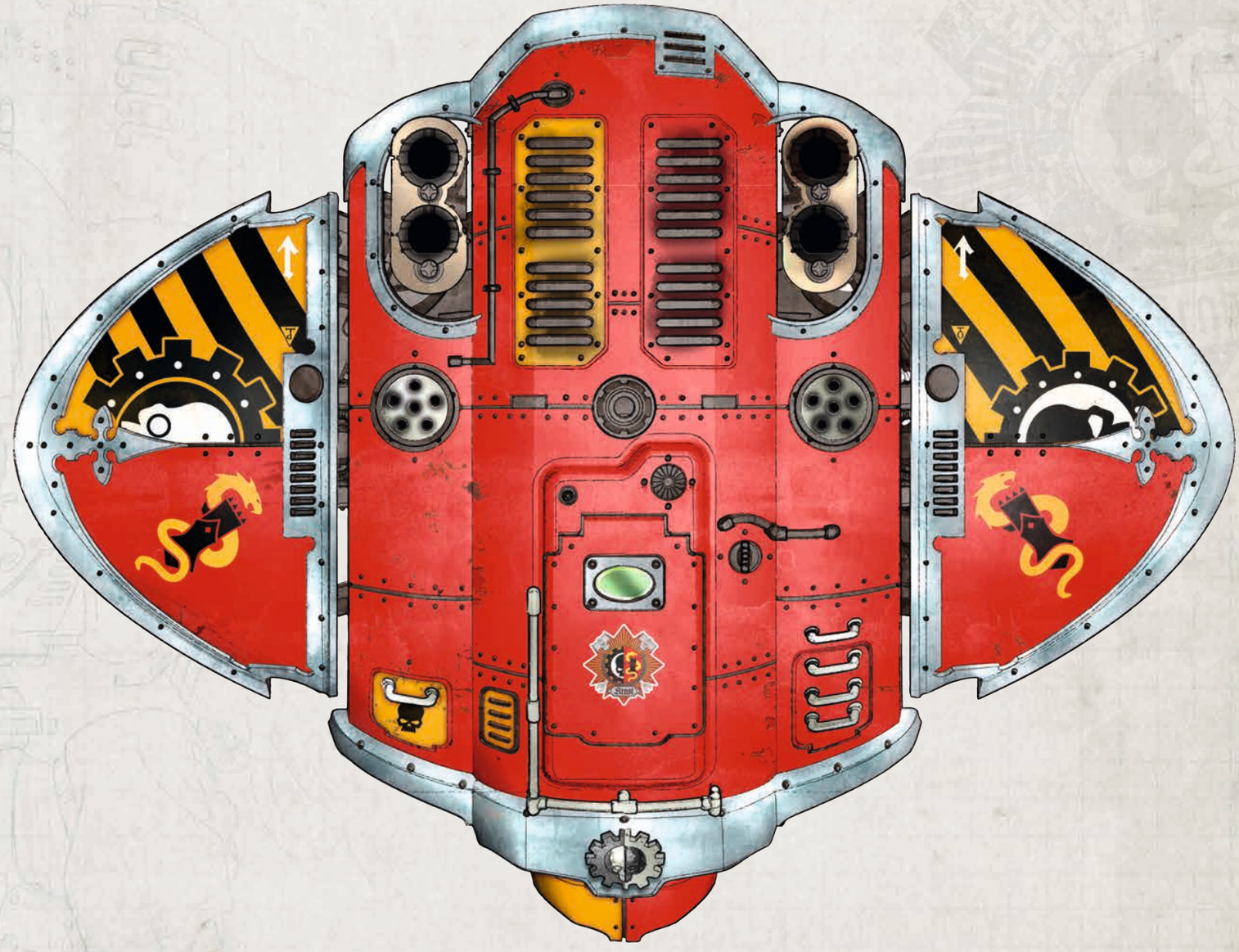
The Imperium launched a massive assault onto Fall's vast southern continent, where the Orks had raised thousands of stinking rust-forts from the bones of their crashed ships. Forillus and his brothers ranged out ahead of the Titans, their Knights wading into the poisonous Ork-infested fens. Spattered in mud, the Knights hunted down thousands of Orks, incinerating the scrap-barges they roamed the swamps in and drowning those that tried to escape by crushing them under adamantium feet. When Spleenrippa heard about the arrival of the Imperium's forces, he charged out into the swamp to meet them in his Great Gargant at the head of a huge army of greenskins, hungry for battle.

Forillus was in the vaguard as it met the tide of Orks, his detachment shielding the larger Titans from assault so they could concentrate on breaking up the horde. The Great Gargant, leading a horde of ramshackle Ork war machines, charged across the bog toward the Knights, its huge feet kicking muck high into the air. Seeing the Titans, Spleenrippa opened up with his twin-linked supa-gatler, the gun whining and barking as it sent a storm of lead at the Knights, ripping apart twisted trees and kicking up a shower of foetid water. Through a hail of fire, the Titans and Knights advanced across the rotting ground, rounds and beams sparking off adamantium hulls or cracking as they struck void and ion shields. The Ork Warboss let loose with his deff kannon array as they closed the distance, the explosive shells sending up geysers of stinking water and vegetation with every shot. Then, with a crash that echoed for miles in all directions, the armies met. Forillus and his lance-brothers scored dozens of blows upon the Great Gargant's hull before the rest of the Stompas, Gargants and wagons arrived in force, the clang and screech of metal filling the air while the muddy fen water turned dark with dripping oil. Driven into a near frenzy by the chance of a good scrap, the Orks tried to mass against the *Ordinatus Mars*, largest of the Cockatrice Legion's Titans. Sleenrippa himself tried to swat aside the Knights, even crushing other Orks underfoot in his eagerness to get to the Titan. Warboss Spleenrippa yelled at his Boyz to stay back – the big one was his and anyone that got in his way would get stomped.

Spleenrippa's hubris was to be his undoing: as the Warboss' attention was diverted, Forillus levelled his thermal cannon at the Great Gargant's head, turning it into molten slag in a single ruinous blast. Headless, the war engine staggered into the Orks, crushing scores into the ground before keeling over to sink into the swamp. For his valour in saving the Titan, Forillus would be honoured by the Adeptus Mechanicus and inducted into their ranks as a member of the Legion.

Daimos, Exorcist of Hate





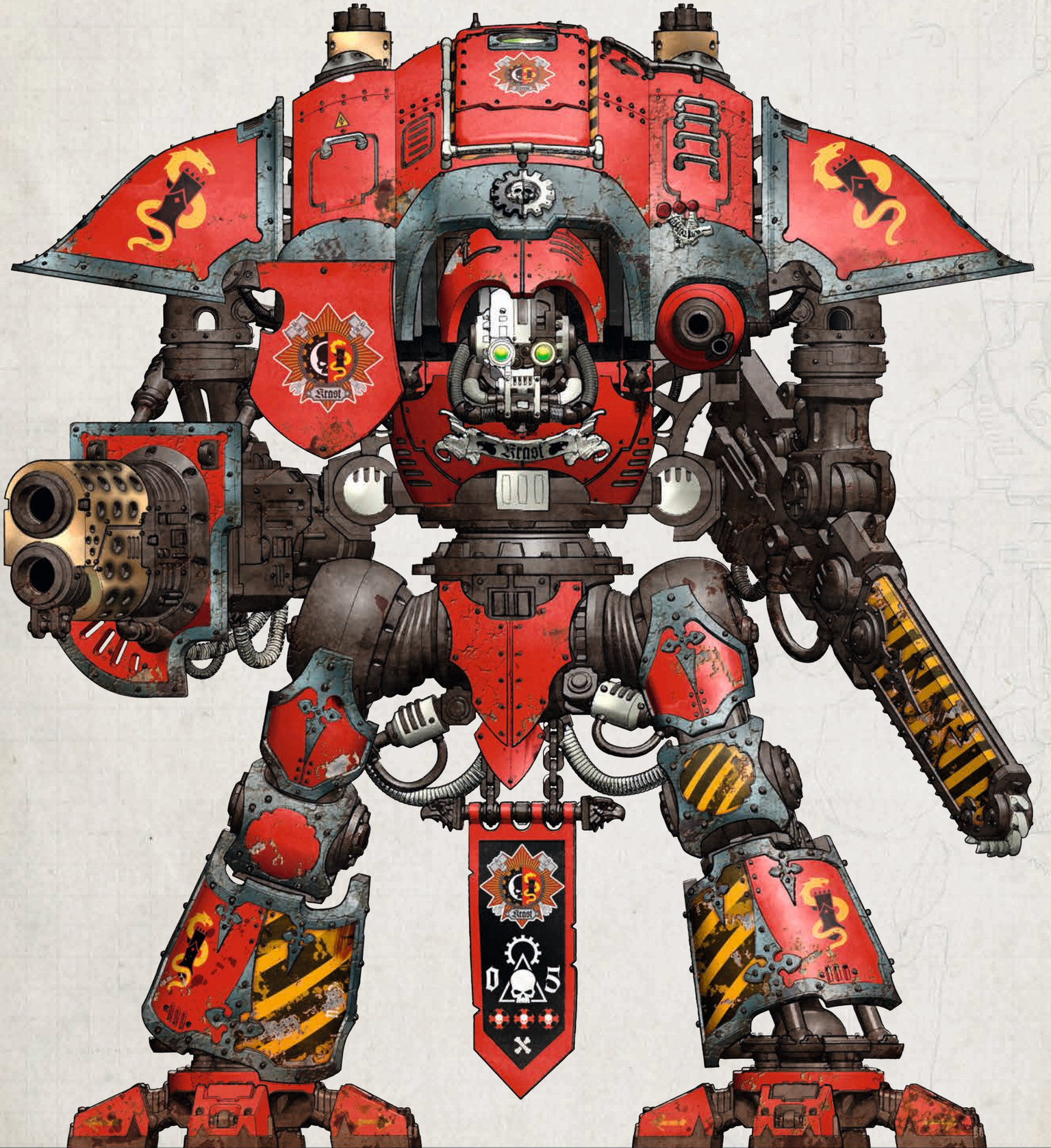
Nobles on Krast learn to hate what the servants of the Dark Gods have done to Chrysis. For many, this anger and thirst for revenge is focused upon their foes, making them fearless warriors in the face of Chaos, but for others the hatred can poison their minds completely. Daimos was raised surrounded by the wasteland of Chrysis, a constant reminder of the treacherous nature of the Ruinous Powers. When he undertook the Becoming, the rampant hatred in his mind was further inflamed by the whispers of the Throne Mechanicum.

The first time he strode to war it was against seditionists on the planet of Forsyn XII, a virgin wilderness world that had spent centuries cut off from the Imperium by roiling Warp storms. As part of the Imperium's armies, Daimos helped to pacify the planet after it had refused the return of the Emperor's rule. In shadowy night-woods the Noble torched villages and hunted rebels, the Forsynians having nothing that could match the might of a Knight.

Though there was no evidence of Chaos taint on Forsyn, Daimos saw Daemons in every fleeting forest shape and heresy in the eyes of every pleading citizen. When the newly installed planetary governor announced the rebellion crushed, Daimos did not accept that the true servants of Chaos had been dealt with. Risking the fate of the Freeblade, Daimos convinced his brothers to follow him on one final sortie into the Forsyn woods. Following an instinct born of rage and tempered by hate, Daimos sought out the scent of corruption on the forested slopes of the Shining Fall Mountains. The Noble had learnt of rumours about a living darkness that lurked in the shrouded mountain passes and vine-tangled caves of the peaks. Following a trail of crude totems made from bone and wood, the Knights climbed up into the highlands, the lumbering war machines silhouetted by coils of mist and weak sunlight.

Daimos' perseverance was to pay off, as the Knights came upon a hidden fortress, cloaked from augurs by eldritch fields and protected by autocannon and lascannon turrets. Erected by traitors, Space Marines of the Alpha Legion, the dark fortress was to be the first chink in the armour of Forsyn and a haven where its rebellious citizens could be turned to the worship of the Dark Gods. Daimos led the charge as the Chaos Space Marines fired down upon them from the battlements. Even in the presence of his hated foe, Daimos methodically tore apart the Chaos fortifications, his cannon fire punching ragged holes in the fortress walls and throwing the broken bodies of traitor legionaries into the air. In an attempt to flee the ruins of their stronghold, the Alpha Legion unleashed their half-trained cultists against the Knights along with captured tanks, heavy weapon platforms and twisted daemonic engines. One by one Daimos crushed these foes, flattening them beneath the feet of his Knight or blowing them apart with his battle cannon. By the time the Noble was done, nothing but ashes and rubble remained of the dark fort, though the Alpha Legion had slipped away.

TEROS, HEXENHAMMER





The taint of Chaos and the psyker's curse are often one and the same, and the Knights of House Krast have been known to make little distinction between the two. Teros was a seventh son of House Krast and it was only chance and a series of coincidences and tragedies that led to him sitting in the Throne Mechanicum. Each of his older brothers either died in infancy, youthful misadventures or training accidents before their Ritual of Becoming. Any fears of a curse or taint in the young Noble were quickly washed away, however, by the blood of his foes. Teros displayed not only a special gift for finding psykers on the battlefield, but also a keen desire to destroy them.

On the battlefields of Kant III, Teros was among the House Krast Knights that held back the renegade warband known as the Purge. During the fighting for the orbital conveyer, the Traitor Space Marines attempted to soil the agri-world's vast grain store with their taint, a strategy intended to starve nearby Imperial systems. Under flashing skies, Teros and his household brethren stalked the Purge's war machines through hills and canyons formed from piled grain. When the Purge's sorcerer, Glotgul, unleashed a torrent of filth to spatter down upon the Knights, the viscous Warp fluids burning and blinding them, it was Teros who turned the tide of battle. While his brother Knights struggled to locate their foes through augurs clogged with daemonic mucus, Teros sensed the sorcerer watching from the armoured gantry of a grain-loader and sent a pinpoint blast from his thermal cannon in the gantry's direction. The resulting explosion obliterated Glotgul and freed the Knights from his Warp magicks, but also set the grain alight. Silhouetted by billowing explosions, the Knights then set about destroying the Purge, leaving broken bodies and smouldering tanks scattered in their wake. Eventually the Imperium's forces were able to drive the Purge from Kant III and save the planet's vast fields from the traitors' poison. Even so, countless citizens starved before the lost grain reserves could be replenished.

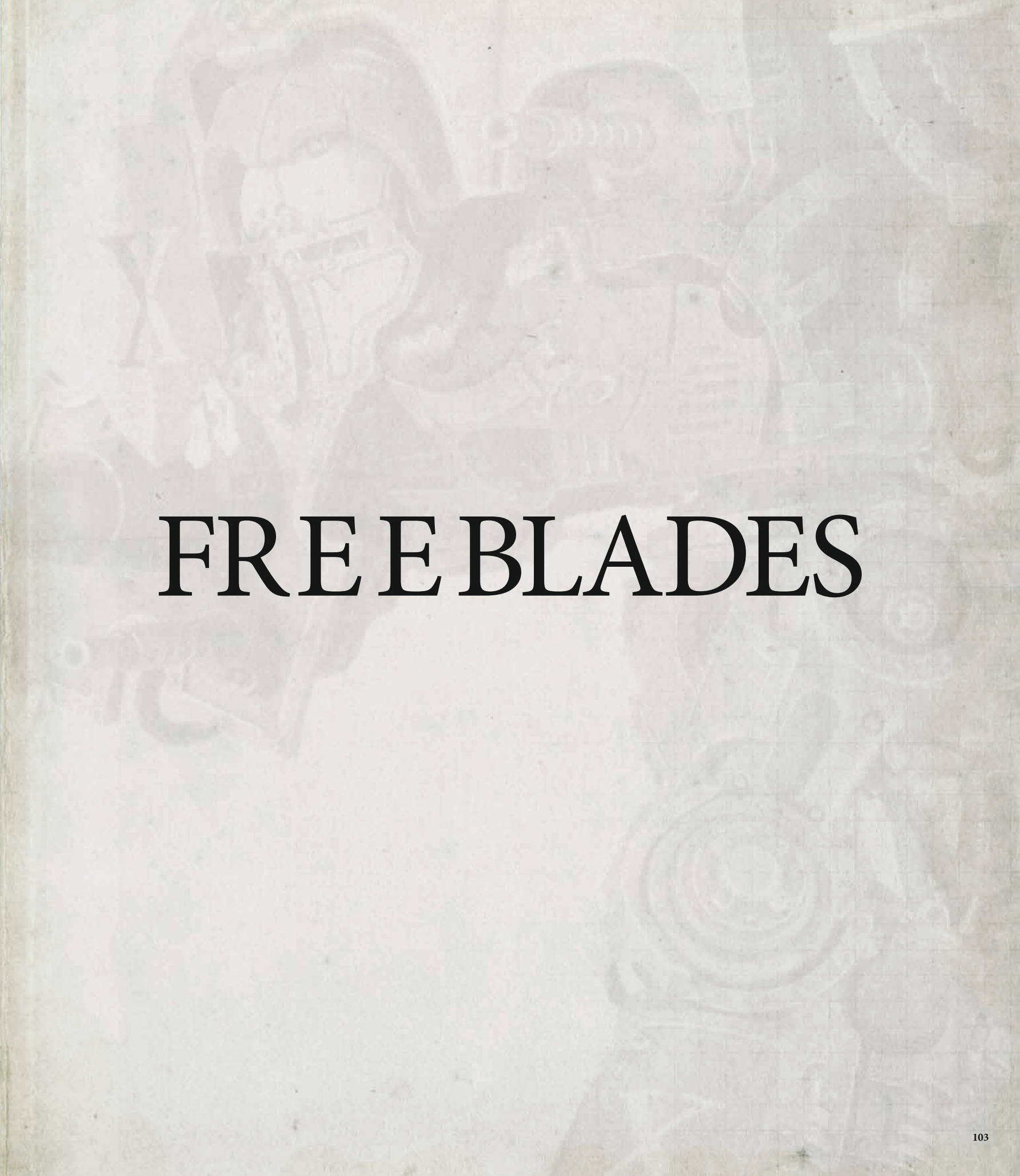
Teros again proved his prowess against the witch fighting Eldar raiders in the Gulf of Aeroth. For years, the alien pirates had plundered the Mechanicus void stations of the gulf, appearing and then vanishing before the Imperium's forces could respond. In an effort to trap the pirates, Skitarii, Imperial Guard regiments and a few House Krast Knights were seeded among the stations.

When the Eldar attacked the solar-sling station of Epsilon Kay, Teros was there waiting for them, having been drawn to the remote outpost from a hundred other possible targets. Led by an alien witch, the pirates used foul sorcery to slip onto the station past the Imperial armsmen, where to their surprise Teros was waiting for them. The Knight smashed apart the invading forces, sending them swiftly into retreat. When the witch escaped back to the pirates' vessel, Teros linked his Knight's advanced augurs to the station's macro cannons, overriding its controls and unerringly blasting the Eldar ship from the sky.


HONOUR




VICTARION



FREE BLADES

FREEBLADES

Not all Nobles are aligned with one of the knightly houses, having chosen another path to honour and glory. These lone warriors are known as Freeblades, and they travel the void on their own personal missions of honour, vengeance or penance. Forsaking the heraldry of their former house, giving up their names and breaking with their past, they become mysterious silent warriors to those they fight alongside. Often they will appear suddenly, drawn by the fires of war, only to depart just as abruptly once the fighting is done; their temporary allies never learning their name. Even so, they can earn glorious reputations through their deeds, and their aid, though often unexpected, is always welcomed.

THE PATH OF THE FREEBLADE

Becoming a Freeblade is always a monumental choice for a Noble, as it forces them to give up everything they have ever known. The bonds of blood forged by birth into a knightly house are no small thing, even more so once a Noble undertakes the Becoming and communes with the spirits of his ancestors that dwell within the Throne Mechanicum. It usually takes a great event or personal tragedy for a Noble to choose the path of the Freeblade, deciding that he cannot fulfil his destiny as long as he serves under the lord of the household.

The reasons for a Noble to become a Freeblade are as varied as the Nobles themselves, and could spring from a burning need for vengeance or a fathomless guilt that can only be tempered by a lifetime of penance. Many of these reasons are tied to some kind of failure – real or perceived – by the Noble, something that he might take far more seriously than a common man. Should a lance-brother fall in battle through the negligence or misdeed of a Noble, it can be enough for him to feel he must devote his days to absolving himself for this lapse. Thus, the same sense of duty and obligation instilled in a Noble by the effects of the Throne Mechanicum can be transformed into an uncompromising drive to complete a personal quest, one that transcends the constraints of house and home world.

Not all Freeblades choose the life of the lone warrior because they feel they must hunt down a deserving villain or keep the memory of the fallen alive. Some are drawn to don the mantle of a Freeblade simply to answer the call of adventure and the glory of battle on far off worlds. These Nobles develop a taste for war that goes beyond many of their kin, until it overshadows their sense of obligation to their house. For them casting off the constraining rituals and ceremony of being part of a knightly household means they can devote their lives completely to battle, wandering from one warzone to the next and seldom leaving their Knight suit.

COMPANY OF HEROES

Every Noble has the right to become a Freeblade; it is an ancient tradition on Knight worlds that should a Noble choose this path his lord must honour his choice. The Noble's name is often stricken from all house records, or sealed away where only the lord of the house might see it. It is part of the rite that a Noble's past is forgotten when he becomes a Freeblade – all he was is washed away to be replaced with the identity he has chosen for himself and the personal quest he now chooses to pursue. Though different Nobles embrace this right to anonymity to varying degrees, all must accept that to take the title of Freeblade means giving up who they once were.

When a Noble becomes a Freeblade he will often take a name for himself, usually to hide his true identity and former house but sometimes also as proclamation of his intent. For instance, the Freeblade Justice earned a formidable reputation hunting down traitor Knights of House Darkon, his moniker leading many Nobles to believe Darkon must have wronged him in the past. Some names are not taken but are given, and more than one Freeblade is dedicated to concealing their identity to the point that where they never communicate or leave their Knight suit. Amaranthine is an example of such a Knight, given this name by allies because of the colour of his armour. The taciturn Knight has never once communicated openly, preferring instead to let his deeds of battle do all his speaking for him.

Many Freeblades move through history unremembered and unheralded, their deeds eventually lost to the long march of years. However, some stand out even centuries after their passing, the legends of their exploits passing from one generation of Imperial citizens to the next, reborn in prayers and parables. Over time, a Freeblade might be reduced only to a name and a single remembered battle, like Pale Reckoning, the avenging warrior that slew the terrible Daemon Prince Kor'talor, or the Knights known as Wrath and Blade of Finality, who stood against the Red Corsairs on the edges of the Maelstrom, turning back their bloody raid on Glorthos Starfort. Vigilantus, the slayer of the Gorehaunter, or the Crimson Glaives who opposed the Eldar pirates on Tarvel III, stand as heroes of equal stature, and like the others their names are destined to live on in rumour and legend for centuries to come.

A LONELY DEATH

Whether he is remembered or not, the ultimate fate for many a Freeblade is to die alone, unsung and forgotten. Even in those rare instances where Freeblades work together, the carnage and tumult of such titanic wars means that before long only one will remain. This sole survivor of years of bitter struggle will fight on, mourning his comrades until he too falls. Tales tell of the remains of Knight suits discovered on remote worlds under cold, dying suns, their rusting frames abandoned for centuries and their livery worn away by the elements. The skeletal remains of the Noble will still be encased inside, hooked up to the Throne Mechanicum, staring out with empty sockets across an ancient battlefield.

Those that come upon such a sight cannot help but see that this is the resting place of a mighty hero who died in the heat of battle. On feral worlds the remains of Knights are an ominous symbol of the sky people, and often worshipped as gods or given offerings to appease the vengeful stars, so they might avert their baleful gaze. Even alien scavengers are wary when they chance upon the remains of a Knight, the ancient wards and seals deadly to those who break them without the Sacristans' skill.

Some Freeblades manage to avoid an unmarked grave or resting place on a forgotten world, either falling close to the civilized planets of the Imperium and being recovered by the Adeptus Mechanicus, or becoming enshrined on the worlds on which they fall, chapels and churches built around the remains of the Knight to honour such a great warrior. Across the Imperium, there are worlds and outposts where the remains of a Knight have become a centre of worship for the Imperial Creed. Still sealed against the world, the remains of the Noble encased within, these Knight suits silently look down on the worshippers, the cold dead lenses of their faceplate reflecting the prostrate figures at their feet.

Freeblades that fulfil their penance may return to their house. The Noble lord of a knightly house is not obliged by ancient law to accept the return of a Freeblade: although a Noble always has the right to take up the path of the Freeblade, no such right exists to guarantee his return to his house. Thus it is always a risk for a Freeblade to return to his house, and he must be sure that his deeds outweigh any ill will he has left in his wake. The lord of the house will carefully consider the reputation the Freeblade has earned, as well as his reasons for returning, before making his decision. Even so, it is rare for a returned Freeblade not to be welcomed back as a long-lost son, his glorious victories added to that of his house.



Amaranthine

The lone Knight Amaranthine earned his name from the beleaguered Imperial defenders of Romaric VII. Most believe the name is a reference to the Freeblade's distinctive purple-red hull, but it is also said to honour an Imperial saint, who wore robes of the same colour. Silent and purposeful, Amaranthine never responds to hails, vox transmissions or any other effort to contact him. However, during the Tiberius Wars, he would heed the tactics of those he fought alongside, avoiding friendly firing lines and vanquishing specific foes, leading the defenders to believe that though he did not speak, he was always listening.

THE TIBERIUS WARS

Heresy spread like a cancer through the Romaric System when planetary governor Jermus Tiberius proclaimed himself emperor of the Cellos Sub-sector. Possessed of an unnatural gaze, any who looked into the shifting eyes of the 'emperor' fell under his spell. Entire cities were subverted by hololiths and cloud-picts before the Imperium could muster its forces. To combat the hypnotic effects of Tiberius, regiments blinded themselves, tasking soulless augur servitors to guide them to their foe, and chaining platoons together to keep them in formation.

Into the civil war on Romaric VII Amaranthine appeared as if from nowhere, the Knight striding into the fray and turning the tide of dozens of battles.

After weeks of bitter fighting, the Imperium forced its way into the emperor's Alabaster Palace, and it was Amaranthine who smashed his way through Tiberius' golden-skinned honour guard and into the emperor's throne room. Unarmed and alone, Tiberius showed no fear as Amaranthine brought a heavy adamantium foot down upon him. It was only then that the false emperor's true nature was revealed.

Even as the Knight crushed him into the ground, Tiberius split into a dozen copies of himself, his daemonic form twisting and shifting while a myriad faces leered up at Amaranthine. The Tzeentchian Daemon then escaped into the Warp, flying far and fast in all directions. Within the week clones of emperor Tiberius had started to take control of a dozen worlds across the Cellos Sub-sector, whole systems falling under his sway and plunging into rebellion and madness. Though Romaric VII had been saved, for the time being, war now raged across the void. Amaranthine relentlessly hunted down these clones, following the scattered Daemons across the stars and always knowing where and when they would appear. The Freeblade alone seemed to have the power to unmask them.

THE BATTLE OF SUNDERSTORM RIFT

Under the boiling black skies of the planet of Keerna, Amaranthine faced the Tzeentchian menace for the final time. After decades of battle and billions of deaths, the Imperium's armies had purged heresy and insurrection from scores of planets across the Cellos Sub-sector. Spearheaded by an Iron Hands strikeforce, the Imperial forces descended on Keerna, a tide-locked hive world of perpetual night. Striding alongside the Space Marines, Amaranthine cleared the landing zones of foes, allowing for waves of Imperial reinforcements to arrive. Smashing apart the heretic heavy fortifications, the Knight tore apart traitor Imperial Guard tanks and artillery as it marched toward the cyclopean bridge across Sunderstorm Rift, the only path to Keerna's hive primus and the Daemon's palace. As Amaranthine set foot upon the bridge, the walls of reality weakened and ripped asunder, thousands of Daemons boiling up from out of the rift. At the head of the mutating host, the Daemon that wore the skin of Tiberius laughed hysterically, throwing twisting blue fire from its tube-like fingers.

Undaunted, Amaranthine charged into the host, crushing Daemons underfoot with pops and bursts of blue and pink fire. At last the Knight loomed over Tiberius, the Daemon cursing him in its foul tongue. With a mighty reaper blow, Amaranthine clove the Daemon in two, the heavy blade biting deep into the bridge. Almost at once the Daemon shifted into a new form – a towering, winged horror – and struck back. For an hour Amaranthine duelled with the Daemon while the Space Marines methodically mowed down seemingly endless tides of gibbering Pink Horrors, leaving the honour of slaying the creature to the Knight. Each time the Knight struck down his foe, it would change into a new form and attack again, one moment a screeching lightning-beaked bird, another a kaleidoscopic serpent with flaming breath or a gigantic stinging insect made of wind and smoke.

Each form Amaranthine bested, until at last, the Knight's armour scorched black by sorcerous fire, he looked down on Tiberius once more. The Daemon had exhausted its many forms, and had only the hypnotic power of its gaze to protect it. However, the Freeblade's will could not be bowed by Warp-magicks. With a cry of triumph, Amaranthine drove his reaper chainsword into the man-shape, the blade's adamantium fangs turning Tiberius into a crimson cloud of blood and meat. The Daemon howled in frustration as it was cast back into the Warp from the ruined remains. Their leader slain, the rebel armies and Daemon hosts of Cellos were scattered and destroyed. Amaranthine himself disappeared into the void, almost as suddenly as he appeared. He left behind countless unanswered questions, such as why he was able to hunt Daemons so successfully, or why he never left his Knight suit. In his wake, Ordo Malleus Inquisitors are still picking over the scarred worlds of the Cellos Sub-sector, pondering the true nature of the mysterious Knight.

THE ICON INCOGNITUS

Freeblades forsake the heraldry of their house when they take up the mantle of the lone Knight. They choose new colours and icons to represent their own personal quest or their newly-crafted identity. In some cases this new heraldry will give hints to those who know how to read the hidden meanings, even if only by omission. Amaranthine's icons tell a story of the Freeblade's origins, even if the Noble himself remains resolutely silent.

A prominent part of Amaranthine's imagery is the Icon Incognitus, depicted as a stylised 'X'. An ancient symbol of anonymity, the X indicates a hidden identity, or a past identity that the bearer has chosen to discard. That Amaranthine wears this icon speaks not just of a past forgotten but of one forcibly rejected by the Freeblade – so disgusted was he with it that he marked himself with an X to wipe away the hated heraldry forever.

Amaranthine is not the first Freeblade to make use of the Icon Incognitus, though he is by far the most famous. Over the millennia there have been many Nobles that have taken on the symbol to show their separation from their past. The Freeblade known as Hour of Reckoning bore the X upon his faceplate to show his hatred for House Miranor, to which he once belonged. Rumours say that rivals within his own house had killed the Noble's family. Choosing the path of the Freeblade, he cast off the distinctive golden faceplate of Miranor and replaced it with a sable Icon Incognitus.

Another Freeblade known to bear the Icon Incognitus is Penitent Blade. The pale grey Knight appeared after the destruction of the Felcarn House, rumoured to have been corrupted from within by Chaos. Stories say that the Penitent Blade is the single surviving member of that family, the only one to escape the Inquisitorial purges and somehow prove his innocence. None now remember the heraldry or livery of House Felcarn, only the tireless efforts of Penitent Blade to vanquish the treacherous cults that plagued his home world, and the stylised X burned upon his hull.

WAR ON PENUMBRA IV

In the years after the Tiberius Wars, the legendary Knight Amaranthine came to the aid of planets and Imperial forces in dozens of brutal wars. One tale that endures from this time is that of the war on Penumbra IV, when Amaranthine helped to stem the assault of Waaagh! Rokgor. Like a plague of rabid beasts, the Orks arrived on the midnight world in their millions, and its nocturnal cities and luminescent mould-orchards were turned into bloody battlegrounds. The Penumbra PDF was reduced to ragged bands of defenders over the course of a single terrible day – handfuls of desperate soldiers fighting from fortified hab-blocks or huge subterranean harvesters turned into mobile firebases.

The Cadian 875th were among the few forces close enough to come to Penumbra's aid, quitting stagnant warzones in the Elorm Sector to help the beleaguered world. Along with the Imperial Guard came Amaranthine. The silent Knight boarded an Imperial Guard heavy transport on Elorm Primus, the ship's captain ordering his men to let it pass. By the time the Freeblade made planet-fall on Penumbra IV, the Orks had reduced the world to a nightmare landscape of burning cities and scorched earth. Warboss Rokgor, having destroyed the bulk of the Penumbra PDF, had turned his attentions to the Spire Nocturnus, the planet's largest and most well defended hive.

Amaranthine waded into the aliens' exposed flank, even as the Cadians prepared for an armoured thrust against the Orks. It was not until the Knight had carved its way through howling mobs of Orks and weathered dozens of chaotic attacks by ramshackle walkers and wagons that Rokgor noticed his army was under attack from the rear. The exhausted defenders of the spire could only look on in amazement as the Warboss, having scaled their fortifications and smashed open the gates to the hive, turned his back on them. Rokgor had heard about Knights but had never had a chance to fight one up close and personal. He wasn't going to let this opportunity slip through his meaty green fingers, and certainly not just so he could smash another city.

Mounting up in his massive armoured Battlewagon, the Warboss set off screaming back across the battlefield toward Amaranthine. The vehicle's massive wheels kicked up torrents of earth and mangled corpses. As Rokgor set off back the way he had come, his Boyz were left milling about not sure whether they should follow the Boss or keep attacking the city. Some of the Nobs were halfway through the gates, bloody choppas in their huge fists, before they noticed the Orks behind them were slowing down. Looking over their shoulders, they could see mobs heading off in the other direction. Parts of the alien horde devolved into brawls as Orks shoved against each other to reach either the Knight or the city, and bosses were forced to crack heads together to restore order. In the end, they decided to attack both. The Ork horde split apart as half rushed to meet the Knight and the Cadians while the others pressed on.

Rokgor screamed at his Boyz to fire everything they had at the Knight. The darkness came alive with thousands of shootas, blastas and rockets. Solid rounds, energy bolts and explosive ordinance tore up the ground around Amaranthine and flashed off his ion shield. The Warboss yelled at the Grot manning the Battlewagon's zzap gun to fire, and the tiny creature grinned evilly as it aimed at the Knight. The weapon's vivid beam slashed across Amaranthine's left leg, scoring the adamantium and shearing through an exposed piston. Falling to one knee, the Knight was forced to plant its reaper in the ground to stay upright. The Warboss readied his power klaw as his wagon closed the distance. Just as Rokgor was about to strike, Amaranthine's battle cannon came up. The last thing the Warboss saw was the hollow, dark barrel flare into terrible life.

With the death of their Warboss, the divided Ork horde turned its rage against the Freeblade. Mobs of Boyz threw themselves at the Knight while the night flashed and strobed with gunfire. With most of their number drawn off to fight Amaranthine and the Cadian companies, the Orks rampaging around the towering gates of the spire were pushed back by the Penumbra defenders. For several hours the Orks fought on furiously, simply enjoying the carnage and killing hundreds of Guardsmen before they were eventually scattered and destroyed. At last, the ground between the Cadians and the exhausted defenders of the spire was littered with nothing but tangled alien corpses and smouldering wrecks. His task complete, Amaranthine vanished once more.

RIVAL FREEBLADES

During the long history of the Imperium there have been tales of rival knightly houses that have fallen to skirmishing and even full-blown war. Just as the houses of Knight worlds can come to blows over differences of honour or creed, so too can the same fate befall the Freeblade. There are rumours among the Nobles and their kin of long-running feuds between certain Freeblades, often those that are forced to fight in the same warzone or find that their own personal quests come to cross purposes.

Examples of these rivalries are scattered through the annals of the knightly houses and the forge worlds which keep histories of such things. One recording tells of the personal war between the Freeblades Emperor's Voice and Fires of Wrath. During the Xalan Apostasy the pious Freeblade Emperor's Voice became a bitter foe of another Freeblade, known as the Fires of Wrath. Wrath considered all those touched by the Apostasy to be enemies of the God-Emperor, while the Voice saw that some were worth saving. During the battle of the Illuminated, when the Saint's Own regiment sided with the Imperium, it was the Voice that accepted their defection while the Wrath still considered them traitors for ever siding with the Apostate armies. Neither willing to back down, the two Freeblades squared off against each other. Though neither fell that day, hundreds were killed as they clashed, and their feud would become a reflection of the war and a warning to others of the unwavering principles a Freeblade can possess.

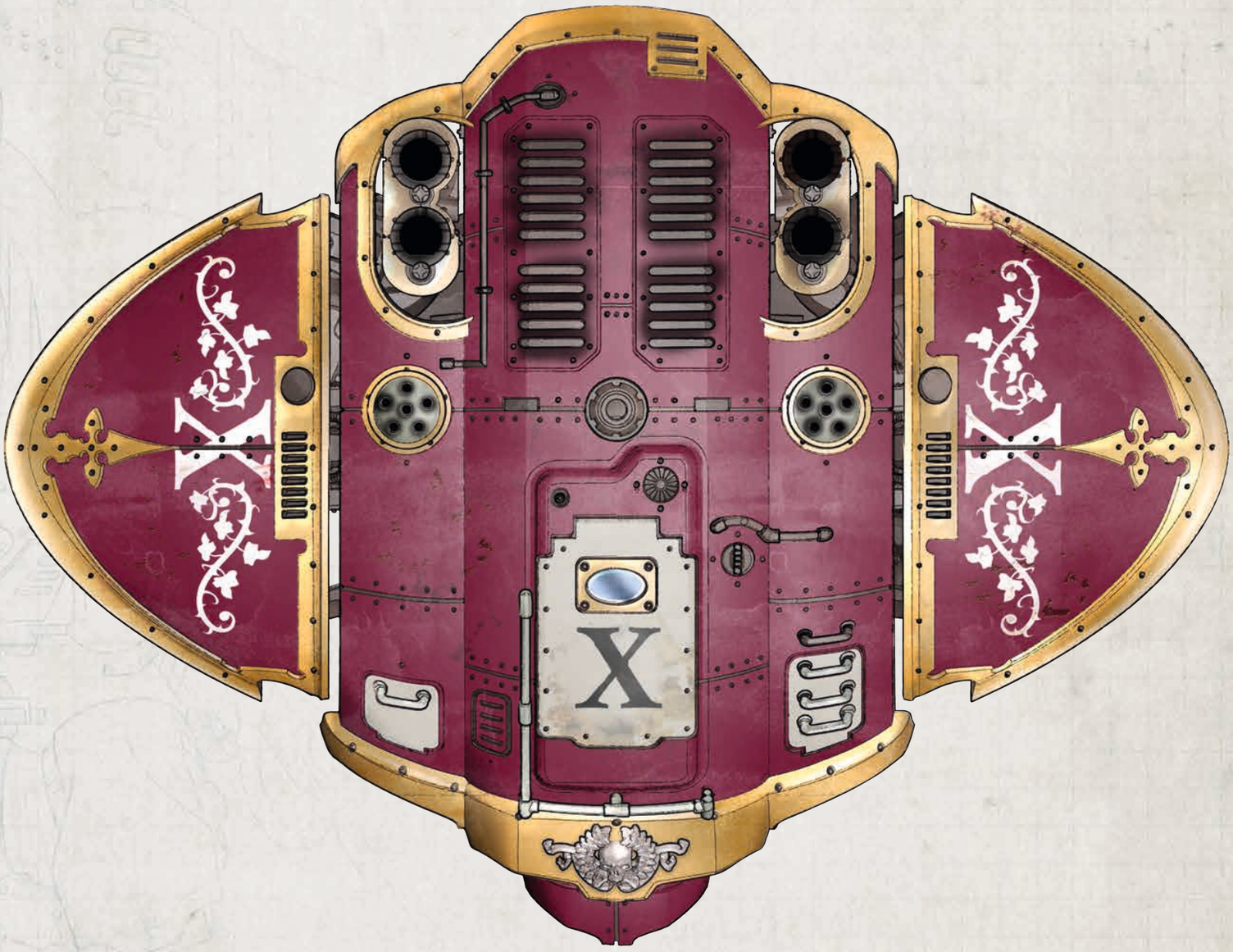
Another legend sheds light on the centuries after the Horus Heresy, a time of great suspicion between the Imperium and its allies, when some Knights stood on the brink of turning traitor or were discredited and defamed by their rivals. The fates of the Freeblades Truth of Mars and Dauntless Valour illustrate the distrust of these times. These Nobles had become rivals over a perceived slight during the Allax Crusade victory processional, as to which of them was to be given the honour of marching first through the Arches of Triumph on Petrum V. Though both were staunch loyalists, and continually tried to outdo the other with their acts of devotion and piety, this incident would consume them both. In the years that followed they levelled accusations of treachery and heresy at the other, playing a cruel game of lies and defamation. Numerous times they even traded blows in battle, each citing the attacks as evidence of weak moral fibre and festering treachery in the other. Ironically, in the end the Freeblades were forced to fight and fall as one when their dire reputations drew the attention of the Inquisition and an attempt was made to bring them to justice.

Amaranthine was almost unwittingly drawn into a similar conflict in the closing years of the Tiberius Wars. The mysterious Freeblade was ever at the forefront of the Emperor's armies as they purged the heretic hordes and pushed back the malign influence of the Tzeentchian Daemon that wore the skin of Tiberius. Amaranthine's reputation for never speaking and for his brutal efficiency was a chink in his armour that the Daemon would use to discredit him. Through a web of lies and deceit, the Daemon spread rumours that Amaranthine was in fact an agent of the Dark Gods, a war machine possessed by a Daemon and sent from the Warp to do the will of Chaos. When the Freeblade purged a city of heresy, or destroyed a powerful warlord or fortress, the Daemon would spin the story that the Freeblade was killing innocents, sacrificing them to his Daemon lords, or that he was actually allowing the true villains to escape each time – after all, why else would another foe always arise in the wake of his victories? The Daemon cited the Freeblade's silence as further proof of possession or compliance with the Ruinous Powers, saying that if Amaranthine were to speak, his true nature would be revealed in a second. So pervasive were these lies that several Inquisitors were drawn into the Tiberius Wars and onto the trail of the Freeblade to try to discern the Knight's true nature, though none risked outright conflict.

In the end Amaranthine's actions were to be the answer he would give to these vile lies. When he clashed in epic combat with his ever-changing foe, none of the Imperial Guardsmen, Space Marines or other Imperial warriors that fought at the Freeblade's side could doubt his conviction to the cause. When Amaranthine finally destroyed Tiberius' Daemon-form, he put paid to any other dissenters, and the Tzeentchian lies were banished for good along with their author.

Amaranthine





Sarn's Folly took place in the months after the Tiberius Wars, when the Cellos Sub-sector was still reeling from the treachery and betrayal sown by the false emperor. Worlds that had once been close allies looked at each other with suspicion, their populations traumatised by war and the daemonic forces that had ravaged their planets. Inquisitors of the Ordo Malleus only added to the tension and misery as they moved among the populations, purging those they considered tainted or in league with the Dark Gods. Amaranthine had only recently risen above the suspicions of the peoples of Cellos, and even then there were those that distrusted the presence of the Freeblade, considering him an ill omen. Among them, the Inquisitor Xander Sarn was unconvinced that Amaranthine was not somehow afflicted by the powers of Chaos. Sarn had long been distrustful of Freeblades, seeing them as a dangerous exception to the rigid social hierarchies of the Imperium and fertile ground for heretical seeds to take root. Numerous times Sarn tried to confront the Freeblade when he was outside his Knight suit, but as Amaranthine was never seen except in battle, and was always encased in his war machine, the Inquisitor was forced to shadow the Freeblade, hoping for his chance to strike. The esteem in which Amaranthine was held by many of the commanders and soldiers of the Tiberius War meant that the Freeblade could freely travel between worlds, carried on the vessels of the Imperial Guard or Imperial Navy, his privacy respected by those that had shed blood at his side.

Unable to lure the Freeblade out into the open, the Inquisitor instead chose to make his move on the planet of Hekos V. The world had suffered terribly during the Tiberius Wars at the hands of daemonic forces, and more still dying in the fires of the Inquisitorial purges that followed. Sarn had learnt that Amaranthine was travelling to Hekos V to help quell the last of its cultist strongholds. The Inquisitor arrived first and used his sway to gather together a force of Imperial Guardsmen to demand the Freeblade's surrender and ultimately to submit him to interrogation. Sarn's forces surrounded the Freeblade's landing zone, and waited.

When Amaranthine walked out into the scorched air of Hekos V, Sarn was standing at the head of a small army, and demanded to meet him face-to-face. As always, Amaranthine gave no response. Long minutes dragged by, and the Guardsmen Sarn had gathered grew restless, whispering of the tales they had heard of the Knight's prowess and terrible might in battle. Other men looked at the Knight and saw only the saviour of their world, not the traitor feared by Sarn. One by one the PDF troopers backed away from the Inquisitor in an ever widening circle, until Sarn realised he stood alone, his men keeping a safe distance from the object of the Freeblade's wrath. Amaranthine strode across the field toward the lone man. Sarn stood his ground, cursing, but Amaranthine simply kept on walking, leaving the powerless Inquisitor behind.

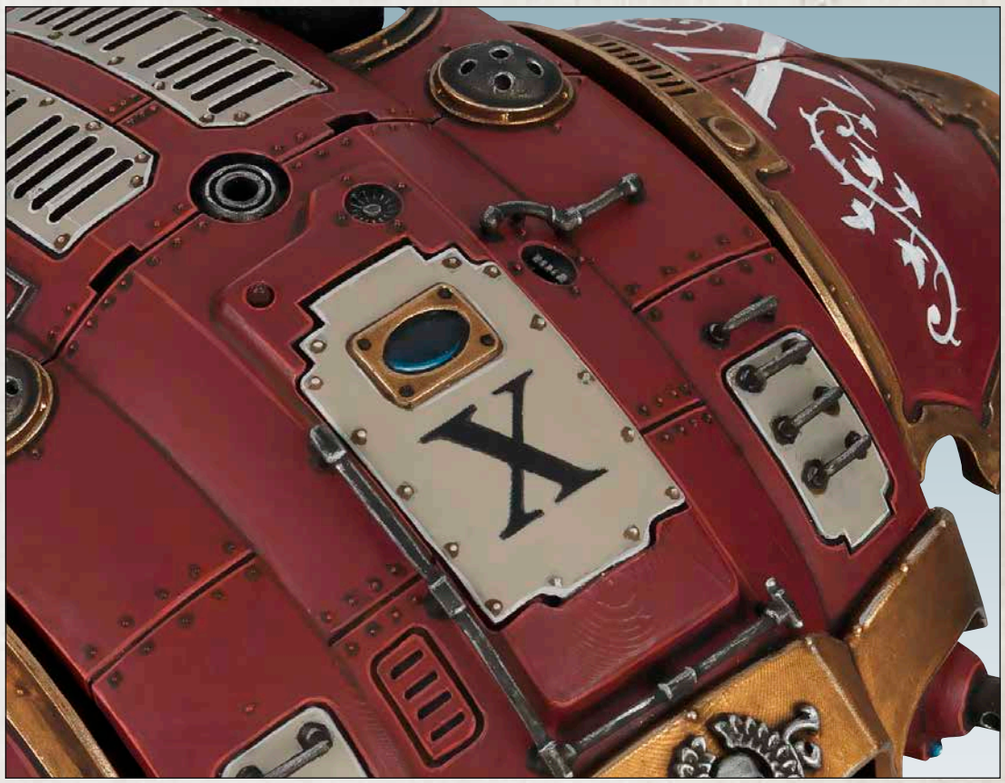


COLOURS OF AMARANTHINE

As we cannot see the pilot of a Knight suit, we must use the colours of his Knight to tell us what they can about him. Amaranthine is a striking Freeblade Knight in his distinctive purple and gold armour. These bold hues speak of his single-minded purpose and focused nature, as well as the character of the man that must dwell within.

Purple and gold are colours that contrast well with each other and have ever been colours associated with royalty and nobility. Gold speaks of artistic sentiment, and is therefore less likely to be found on the utilitarian Knights of the Adeptus Mechanicus, who favour cold steel or adamantium trim. Used here, it adds to the Knight's unique and exotic look, and further marks it out as an individualistic Freeblade.

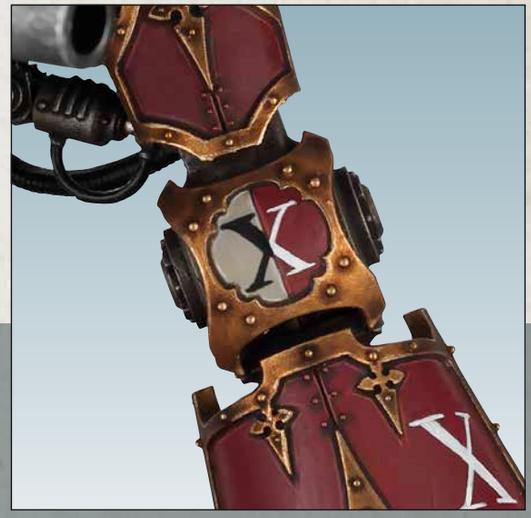
Freeblades can adopt any colour scheme they choose, some using intricate patterns or designs to tell a part of their story or that hark back to their house. Amaranthine has chosen to keep to simple, strong colours and solid panels without the distraction of clashing imagery. This simplicity gives the Freeblade a powerful appearance that means it cannot be mistaken for a Knight still aligned with his house.



The icon Incognitus feature heavily on Amaranthine's carapace, leg plates and tilting plate.







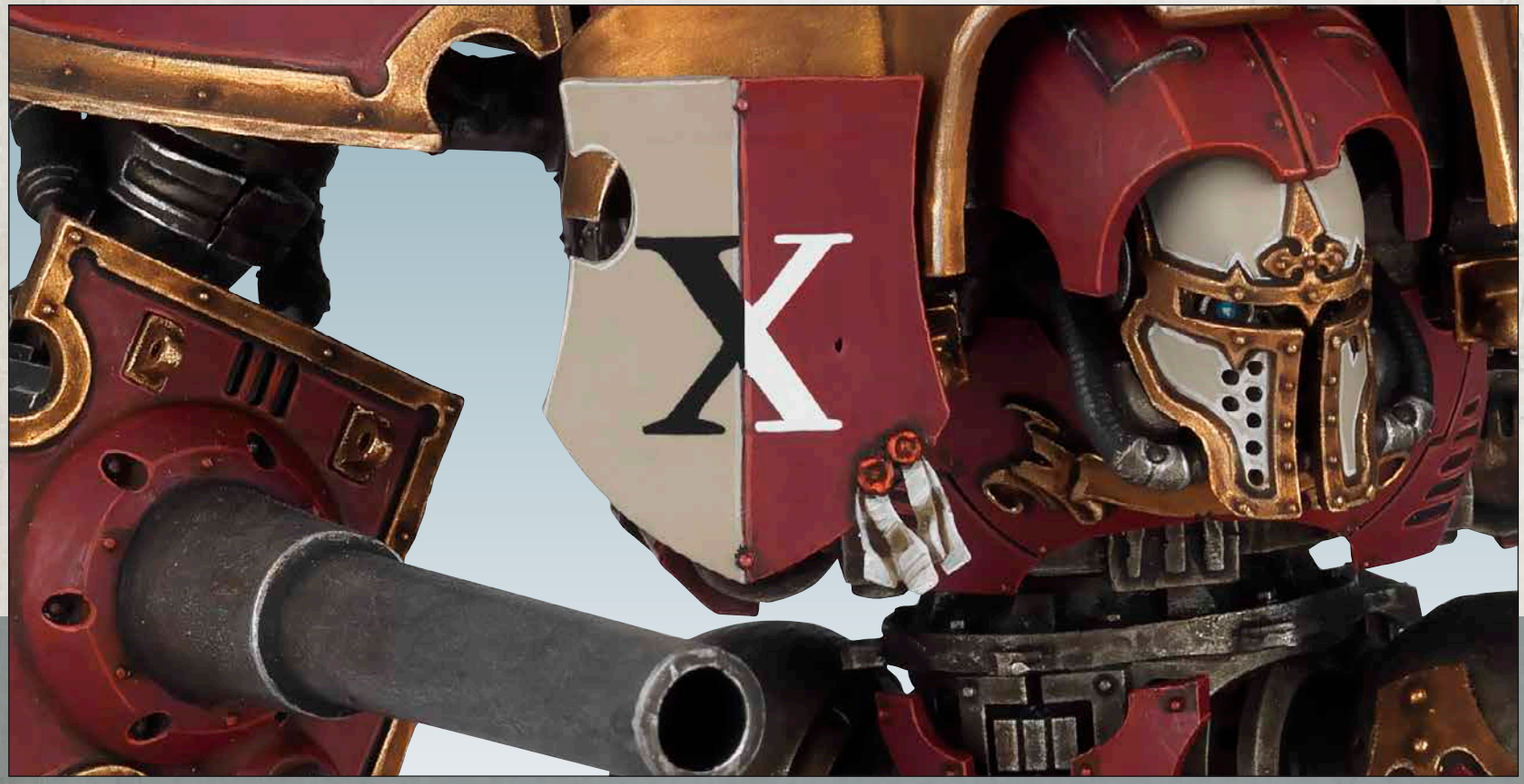
No record of any deeds adorn Amaranthine's banner, further adding to the mysterious origins of the Freeblade.



Amaranthine's armoured leg bears only his simple Icon Incognitus, further adding to his mystery as we know little of his past deeds.



White vine-work imagery helps to frame the X symbol on Amaranthine, and in conjunction with the gold trim hints at his noble nature.



The off-white used on the shield and face plate is a neutral colour that highlights prominent parts of the Knight without overpowering the purple and gold. The white and black of the X contrast strongly, so that the symbol is not lost in the main colours chosen by Amaranthine's pilot.



The Obsidian Knight



The Obsidian Knight first appeared during the Damocles Gulf Crusade over two hundred years ago, fighting alongside the avenging Imperial armies as they pushed back against the expansionist Tau Empire. During those dark days, the black-armoured Knight appeared in dozens of major battles, each time racking up a fearsome tally of slaughtered xenos. Imperial soldiers soon came cheer the sight of the Freeblade whenever he appeared in a warzone, certain that the alien scum were in for a reckoning.

During the closing days of the campaign, the Obsidian Knight disappeared, missing from the Imperial records of the end of the Crusade. In his wake he left behind an enduring legend as the Freeblade that had turned back the Tau advance over the river Scopindus, choking its waters with alien dead, or the warrior who had destroyed the Tau forward airbase on Yalva, his Knight rampaging through rows of Sun Shark Bombers as they stood on the runway. These feats among many others ensured that the Obsidian Knight's legend lives on even in the Freeblade's absence.

RETURN TO DAMOCLES

Two centuries later, when the Tau commander Shadowsun launched her planet-wide attack upon Agrellan, the Imperium moved quicky to fortify it. Even so, only the presence of the White Scars and Raven Guard Space Marines stopped the capital hive from being overrun in those first few crucial hours of the war. Even before the battle for the world's hives began, the Lord of Shadows, Corvin Severax, had laid plans to turn the tide against the Tau by seeking out an ancient warrior. The Raven Guard Chapter Master had heard whispers of an ancient Knight wandering the edges of the Damocles Gulf, purging Tau settlements and protecting human pilgrims. Dispatching his fastest scout ship, Severax sent a squad of Space Marines to find and entreat the Freeblade to war. By the time the Tau attacked Agrellan, the Obsidian Knight was already there to meet them.

Whether or not the Obsidian Knight that accepted the Raven Guard's invitation to war is the same Knight that fought the Tau centuries ago is unknown. Indeed, if it were he would be in his twilight years, a venerable man still made vital and strong by his connection to the Throne Mechanicum. For a Noble to live such a length is not unknown, the machine spirit of his Knight suit granting him a degree of artificial longevity comparable to that enabled by the more advanced rejuvenat technologies of the Imperium. However, the vigour displayed by the Obsidian Knight in battle seems to indicate its pilot is a younger man, in the prime of his life. What is more likely is that the Freeblade is the successor of the original Obsidian Knight, having inherited control of the Knight suit and passed through the Becoming somewhere in the wilds of the Damocles Gulf before following in his forebear's footsteps.

Regardless of the truth behind the Freeblade's identity, his single-minded determination to defeat the Tau cannot be denied. When the invaders set foot on Agrellan, the Obsidian Knight made his presence known, obliterating a Tau armoured column as it advanced on the hive cities. The Freeblade ambushed the column as it weaved its way through the badland canyons, skilfully bringing down the rock walls to trap the Tau tanks before the aliens had even registered his arrival. As the Tau desperately tried to reorganise, the Obsidian Knight walked slowly down the length of the xenos column, blasting apart Hammerheads and Devilfish as he went, until only burning wrecks remained. Even Patriarch Tybalt and the Knights of House Terryn could not help but be impressed by the tactical acumen of the Freeblade. Outwardly Tybalt was disdainful of the Obsidian Knight, having been publicly affronted when he offered the unnamed Noble the hospitality of his field pavilion and the Freeblade declined. However, the House Terryn Patriarch respected the Obsidian Knight's valour, even though he could not bring himself to wholly trust a Noble who would take the path of the Freeblade.

THE DEATH THAT WALKS

The effect of seeing a foe thought long-dead resurface on Agrellan polarised the Tau who faced it. Some Fire Warriors found their will failing them and retreated before the Freeblade's implacable advance while others were filled with a grim determination to fight on, the stories of the black-armoured warrior hardening their hearts. The xenos had legends of their own about the Freeblade, passed down from Fire Caste reports and ancestral records. The black-armoured Knight is known to the Tau as *Korst'La Var*, which means 'The Death that Walks'.

Fire Warrior combat instructors often make reference to this Knight when conducting their lectures on Imperial Knight machines, citing it as an example of the vehicle's deadly efficiency. Drone recordings of the Knight suit taken during the battle for the Auzlan Bridge in the first Damocles War show how it dispatched its foes with unerring accuracy, every cannon round or sweep of its great chain blade destroying Tau armour or scattering formations of Fire Warriors like burning leaves. Of particular distress to the Tau are the recordings of the Freeblade dispatching their commanders, the Knight pinning their battlesults underfoot and then slowly crushing them to death as their brothers watched on.

When Commander Shadowsun claimed her victory on Agrellan and drove the Imperial armies into the void, many of her commanders muttered that it was not a complete victory as the Obsidian Knight had escaped. These fears were to be realised for the Tau on Voltoris, where the Freeblade, fighting alongside the Knights of House Terryn, blocked off the Tau from fleeing an ambush laid before Furion Peak. As the Space Marines of the Raven Guard and White Scars Chapters fell upon the Tau, the Freeblade accounted for hundreds of the invaders with roaring battle cannon and howling reaper chainsword.

In the wake of the Tau defeat on Voltoris, Shadowsun placed a bounty on the head of the Obsidian Knight, a drastic measure for any Tau commander to resort to. With the Freeblade vanishing once more into the Damocles Gulf, she offered an exorbitant reward, along with the favour of her people, to any hunter that could bring down this troublesome foe. The size of the reward has lured dozens of alien bounty hunters and Kroot mercenary warbands to the chase, and they rove the void looking for signs of the Knight, hoping to find its Noble alone and unprotected by his allies. To date those few that have found their prey have clearly not lived to speak of their success.

GRIEF'S LANDING

While the greatest stories of the Obsidian Knight centre on the Damocles Gulf campaigns, both past and present, there are other tales told of the intervening years. During this time it is said that the Freeblade wandered the edges of the Gulf, defending settlements which came under attack from Tau expansionist forces or their alien allies. Remote worlds and forsaken outposts of Humanity still bear the signs of these deeds, and they are carefully recorded in Ministorum tomes or remembered on monuments on worlds where the Freeblade once fought.

On Grief's Landing, a solitary Imperial shrine stands atop the dunes of Carrion Beach. Its stained glass windows look out across the sea to catch the pale blue light of Grief's faded star. One of the panes depicts a towering black war machine fighting a quilled beast, its weapon pinning the creature to the sand. This scene commemorates a battle in which the Obsidian Knight and the sisters of the Order of the Crimson Shroud defeated a Kroot raiding party.

For centuries the planet of Grief's Landing, founded by the infamous Rogue Trader Dyaman Grief, was a peaceful place home only to an Ecclesiarchy shrine and an Adepta Sororitas Convent. During the Tau's Second Phase expansion the settlement came under attack by the young alien empire. Not important enough to warrant a full-scale assault by the Tau, the aliens instead dispatched a Kroot warband to pacify the world for them. The carnivorous mercenaries descended on the planet with hordes of shrieking avian beasts, their vast warsphere hanging in the sky like the eye of a hungry bird of prey.

For days a handful of Sisters of Battle, supported by hastily-armed civilians, tried to hold back the invaders, but against the sheer size and ferocity of the Kroot force they were forced to fall back. Finally the Canoness of the Crimson Shroud ordered her sisters and the few remaining defenders to make their stand on the sands of Carrion Beach, where the world's first and oldest shrine still stood.

As the Kroot launched their final attack against the Battle Sisters, a shape appeared from the sea. A huge, black war machine strode out of the water with the waves crashing against its back. Clicking and cawing in their strange tongue, the Kroot shifted their attack to cut the newly-arrived Knight off from the other defenders. Three hulking Knarlocs charged across the sand toward the Obsidian Knight. The muscle-bound monsters slammed into the Knight, their razor sharp beaks and wickedly curved talons scoring deep furrows in its armour. With the sea still surging around his legs, the Freeblade fought back, driving the Knarlocs back with kicks and sweeps of his battle cannon, trying either to get a clean shot or land a telling blow with his reaper. Meanwhile the Sisters of Battle had been driven back to the ruins around the shrine, fighting with a fury born of faith. Confident of victory, the aliens were already squabbling over the remains of the dead, their beaks bloody as they tore at the corpses of Grief's fallen.

However, although the Knarlocs tore ceaselessly at the Freeblade, flesh and bone proved no match for the Knight's mechanical brutality. Only minutes after the fight had begun, the Kroot beasts had been hacked into ragged meat by repeated reaper blows, and the sea turned dark with their blood. Striding up the beach, the Knight sent a hail of rounds into the Kroot, scattering their warriors and ripping a hole in their flank. The Knight's fearsome firepower forced the aliens back, while their weapons made little impact on the unstoppable war machine. Sensing that the Kroot were close to breaking, the Sisters of Battle charged out of their defences, bolt rounds, melta blasts and sheets of purifying flame adding to the carnage. Under this onslaught the Kroot forces were routed, their army scattering back into the fens and forests that bordered the beach.

The Obsidian Knight remained on Grief's Landing until the last of the Kroot had been driven back into the void. He saw off several further attacks, standing as a bulwark amongst the ranks of the Sisters of Battle and the planet's surviving citizens. Eventually the aliens could sustain no further casualties, and they left the remote world to the humans.

Shas'La Kith fired his pulse rifle again, feeling a faint surge of satisfaction as the screaming human soldier jerked and tumbled to the ground. All along the stone rampart, his comrades were firing into the charging humans, the crazed warriors running forward with fixed bayonets calling out in their coarse, incomprehensible tongue. For three days and nights the Tau had held the ruins of the firebase against the Imperium's forces, each time Kith and his brave cadre casting them back into the smouldering scrubland that seemed to cover this world. A few of the boldest Imperial soldiers even made it to the base of the rampart before being blasted apart by deadly accurate pulse rifle fire. As another of these unfortunates died, his ruined body tumbling down onto a pile of his kin, the remainder retreated back to their lines. Kith had to wonder again at a race that would so willingly sacrifice itself for a god they had never seen or an empire that cared so little for them.

A massive explosion marked the beginning of yet another artillery barrage by the humans, the shell striking the base of the rampart defences and hurling earth and corpses into the air. In their fortifications, the Tau were largely immune to these strikes, though Kith noted with scorn that the retreating soldiers, having failed in their charge, were caught in the barrage. For over an hour the shells fell as the Fire Warriors waited for yet another ill-conceived gue'la attack, their morale high as they checked ammo supplies and weapons. Kith was preoccupied with recalibrating his rifle and so did not hear one of his cadre whisper the name until it was repeated by another: Korst'La Var. It took a moment for it to sink in, Kith unsure why the name sent a shiver down his spine. Then it came to him; the Obsidian Knight, the black war machine, the Death that Walks. Pulling himself up onto the rampart, Kith used his monoculars to scan the edge of the scrubland. Only then did the Tau notice the artillery had stopped falling, the cratered ground around the firebase thick with smoke and silent as death.

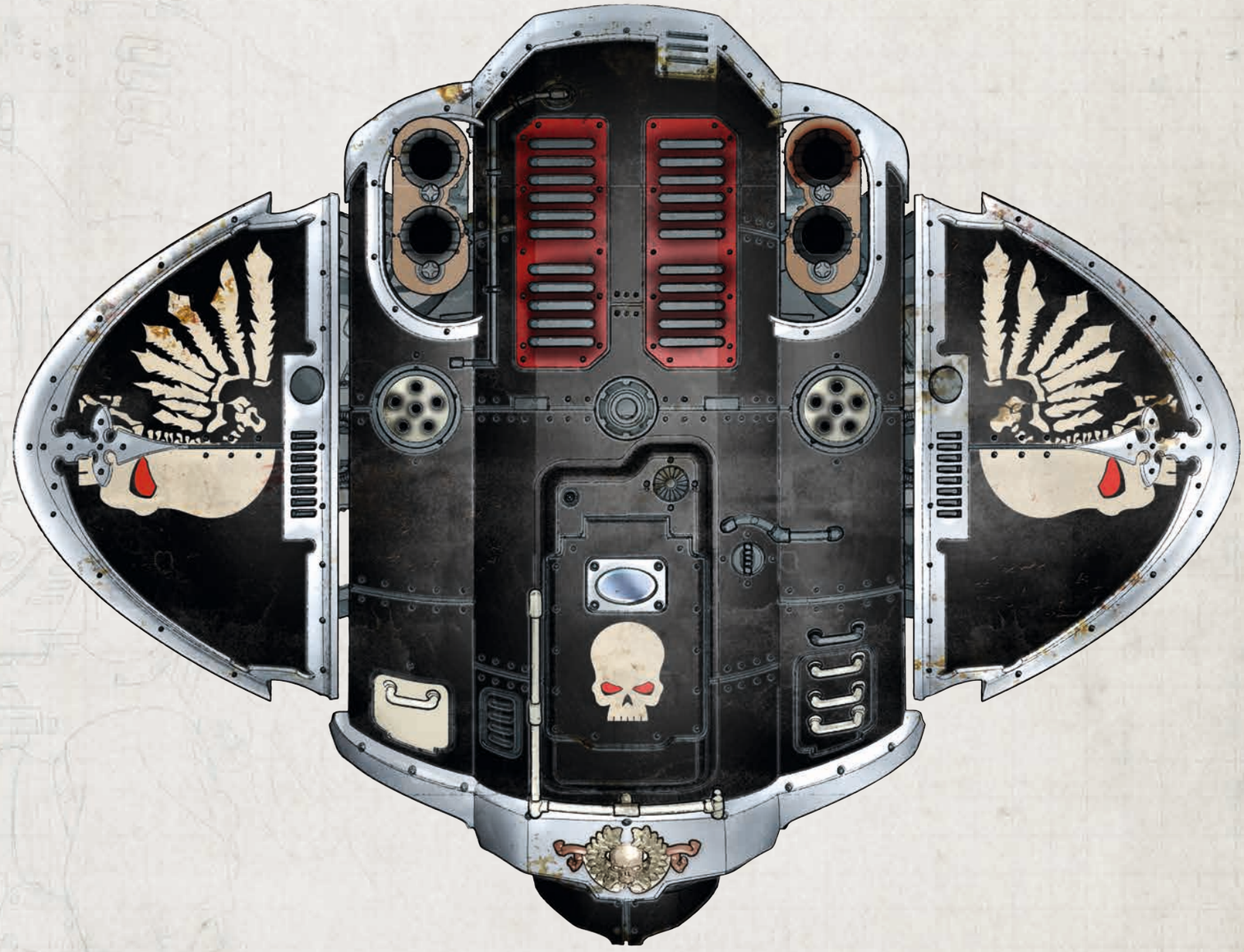
Out of the haze and stunted trees, Kith saw the human war machine appear, its midnight armoured form like the spectre of doom, dully reflecting the sputtering fires of wrecked Imperial tanks. Kith gave the order to stand fast, then sent out a rapid message for support, hoping that there were forces in the area that could match the might of an Imperial Knight. It took all of Kith's training and discipline not to fire at the walker as it lumbered across the battlefield, the Fire Warrior aware there was little his weapon could do against its thick hull and force field. Even so, he could see his cadre gripping their weapons more tightly, each one trying to control their fears in the face of this legendary foe.

Suddenly, two Crisis suits appeared from out of the smoke, their guns hammering into the Knight like spears of burning light. The Imperial walker that had until then moved with slow and steady steps sprang to life. The first shot from its battle cannon snatched one of the battlesuits from the sky with an accuracy Kith would not have believed had he not seen it for himself. The Tau suit was torn apart; one moment gliding gracefully down toward its target, the next reduced to a rain of flaming debris. Even though the remaining Crisis Suit carved deep furrows in the Knight with its fusion blasters, the huge machine didn't seem to register the blows. The second battlesuit was sliced in two as it tried to jet away from its foe, underestimating the reach of the Knight's howling, tearing blade. Kith looked away as the blood-spattered halves fell apart in the wake of the strike.

With the Crisis battlesuits destroyed, Korst'La Var once more resumed its steady advance. Cursing, Kith gave the order to retreat.

The Obsidian Knight





Over the years numerous alien bounty hunters have tried to track down the Obsidian Knight and claim the various rewards promised by the Tau for its destruction. Most have failed even to find a trace of the Freeblade, and those few who have seldom live to talk about their 'success'. However, one tale persists about the Kroot hunter Pek'loc, and how he not only found the Obsidian Knight but, in a strange turn of events, swore to become his bloodkin.

In the years between the first and second Damocles Gulf wars, the Obsidian Knight seemed to disappear. Reports of the Freeblade would appear occasionally, from settlements along the edges of the Tau Empire. However, these tales were often second-hand, or from dubious sources. The babbling survivors of Tau raids would speak of the giant black-armoured war machine that had come to their rescue, or void-farers would tell tales of finding remote Tau landing sites populated only by the corpses of dead aliens and the huge footprints of some terrible walker. Some believed that this was proof that the Obsidian Knight still roamed the stars protecting the Imperium against the expansionist Tau. However, many others considered that the Freeblade was little more than a legend, a story to be told to children on frontier worlds of a sacred guardian of the God-Emperor that could protect them from the alien.

The stories were enough for the infamous Kroot bounty hunter Pek'loc to try and find the Freeblade's trail. Lured in by the high price the Tau had placed on the Obsidian Knight's head, the Kroot set off into the gulf to find its prey. What transpired in those years that Pek'loc hunted the Obsidian Knight is not known for sure, and neither the Kroot nor the Obsidian Knight have ever been known to speak of it, though there is a single common tale told among the drinking holes and trade outposts of this wild frontier region. The story goes that after many adventures and false trails, Pek'loc tracked the Freeblade to Yithic. This strange planet should by rights not even exist, a place of calm in a region of turbulence within the Immaterium. However, Pek'loc gave this no mind, as he knew his prey was near. The Kroot had heard that the Freeblade had travelled here to protect its settlers from some unknown alien menace. When the bounty hunter arrived, he fell into a trap, like the void-farer that had come before him. An ancient gravity-mirror dampened Warp drives in all directions and ships that reached Yithic could not leave the system, their engines rendered impotent. Pek'loc's own ship failed upon entering the Yithic system, the Kroot finding himself in a graveyard of vessels cut off from the Warp – the Obsidian Knight's among them.

Forced to work together, Freeblade and bounty hunter boarded the gravity-mirror leading a rag-tag army of pirates, ratings and pilgrims. The canny hunting skills of the Kroot, along with the might of the Knight, would prove the undoing of the ancient alien sentinels of that cursed place, and together they destroyed the mirror and went their separate ways.

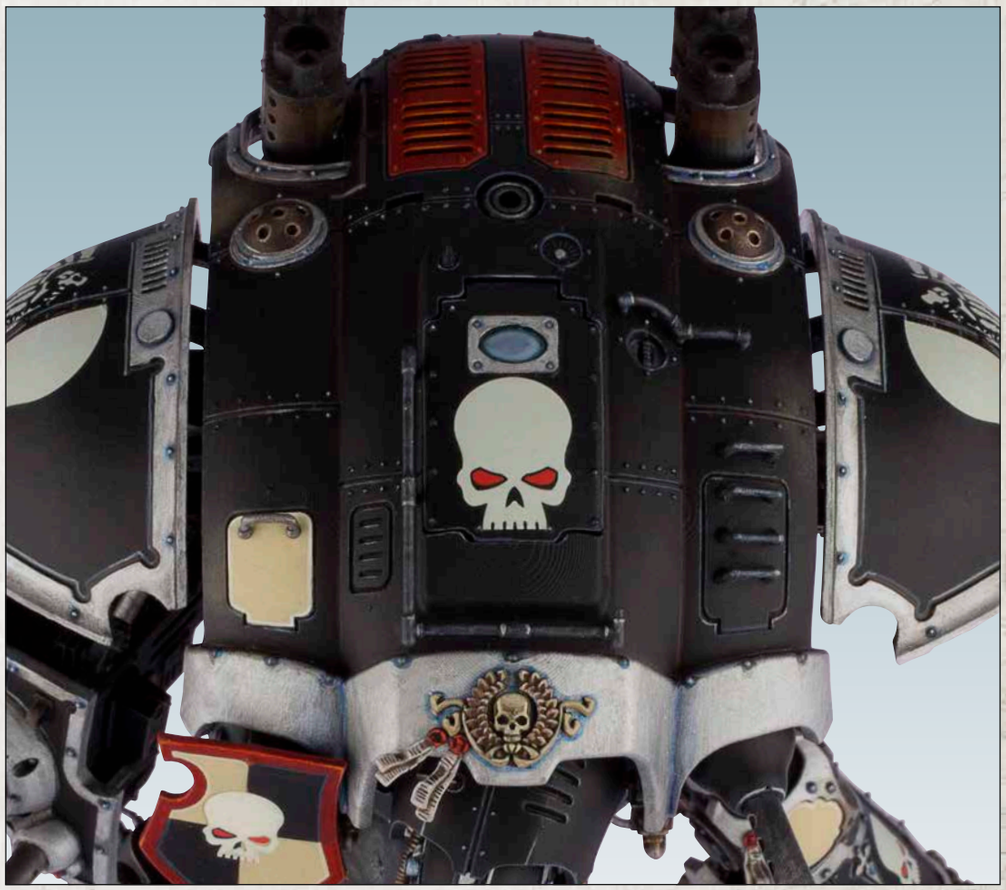

HONOVR

COLOURS OF THE OBSIDIAN KNIGHT

The Obsidian Knight is painted in ominous black with a cold silver trim, reflecting its threatening, single-minded nature and fatal intent. The few colours, such as the crimson on the trim of the tilting plate and the Knight's lower faceplate, only serve as a contrast to accentuate the Freeblade's air of overwhelming menace.

Memento mori feature heavily in the Obsidian Knight's heraldry, the repeated skull motif adding to the aura of death that hangs around this Knight like a dark mantle. That there are no other symbols beyond the red-eyed skull and crossed bones on his suit shows the importance of these icons to the Noble cradled within.

The dynamic pose of the Obsidian Knight shows off the flexibility of the Knight suit. The use of the turned head and raised battle cannon, together with the reaper chainsword's swept-back position, give the impression he is swivelling to smite his foes.



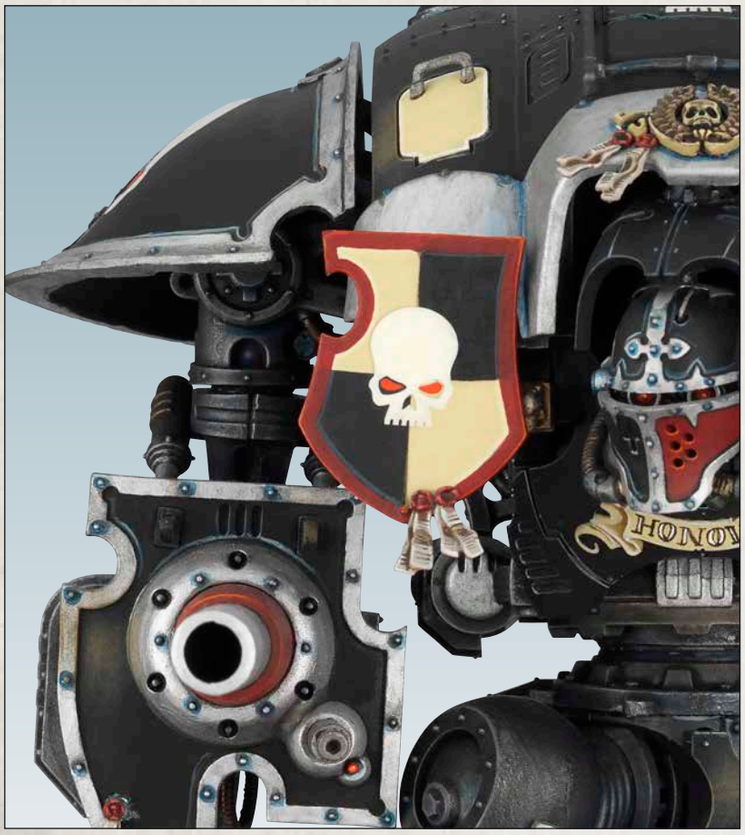
The red-eyed skull glares menacingly out from the carapace of the Obsidian Knight.



The morbid theme of the Freeblade's livery is repeated on his banner, a further testament to his grim demeanour and dire reputation.



Even the plates of the Obsidian Knight's greaves are adorned with baleful icons of death.



The underslung heavy stubber is not only a useful back-up weapon for a Knight but also accentuates the size and power of the battle cannon.



The red lenses of the Obsidian Knight glow ominously from underneath its faceplate in a parallel to the red-eyed skull icons on its hull.



The skeletal half of the Aquila shows the Knight's allegiance to the Imperium, but suggests that it may have decayed over time. It is also in keeping with the strong motif of death that the Obsidian Knight uses, all of his iconography tied to themes of mortality.


HONOUR

Gerantius



Deep in the Segmentum Obscurus lies Alaric Prime, an ancient and hidebound world of toiling peasants and haughty Nobles. Covered mostly in sulphurous seas, the planet is made up of islands strung together in hemisphere-spanning chains or standing alone thousands of miles from the nearest foreign shore. Unlike many Knight worlds, Alaric Prime boasts numerous knightly houses, each masters of a different region. At the centre of the biggest landmass is Sacred Mountain, a blessed peak that rises from the heart of Alaric Prime's largest island. Beneath the mountain there is rumoured to be a vault of archeotech and lost lore, over which Gerantius, the Forgotten Knight, stands guard. Ancient and mysterious, Gerantius has defended the vault, and the world of Alaric Prime, since time immemorial. Whenever the planet is threatened the Forgotten Knight will rise from his tomb, and march upon the enemies of Alaric.

THE DEATHLESS NOBLE

Every knightly house on Alaric has its own theories about the origins of Gerantius, pieces of lore kept by their ancestors and passed down through the ages. Some houses believe the Forgotten Knight is the soul of a long dead Noble, trapped within his Throne Mechanicum. Reduced to skeletal remains, his skull staring sightlessly out of his canopy, the Noble clings to his vows to protect Alaric, all other memories faded away. Others point to old tales of Mechanicum experimentation among the first settlers, and heretical efforts to automate Knight suits. These Nobles claim that Gerantius is the single successful result of these experiments, a pilotless Knight driven by an ever-living machine spirit. How this strange and frightening cogitator was created or what its ultimate directives are the Nobles cannot say, though its mission to defend Alaric seems beyond question.Still other houses and Nobles scorn notions of undead spirits and ghostly apparitions as nothing more than children's stories. These learned men point to similarities between the name Gerantius and those of some of the first families to settle on Alaric, citing this as proof that the Forgotten Knight is in fact a single ancient individual, who sleeps away the centuries in stasis until he is needed in battle. A variation on this story has Gerantius as more than one man, each Noble another link in a chain that stretches back down the millennia, fathers and sons living in secret within Alaric's society until they are needed to don the mantle of the Forgotten Knight.

The truth of course is that no one knows just who or what Gerantius is, no one ever having spoken with the Noble that dwells within its tarnished hull, if indeed there is anything inside to reply to their hails. All that is known for sure is that in times of need he is there, the ancient Knight driving back the enemies of Alaric Prime with his mighty reaper chainsword and thermal cannon.

AN ETERNAL TOMB

For thousands of years, Gerantius has risen from within Sacred Mountain in times of danger, purging daemonic incursions, turning back xenos raids, even saving the world from itself by culling local predators or putting down villainous Nobles. How the Knight endures within its vault and how it knows when and where it is needed is not known. Accounts by those few souls to have entered the vault and returned alive are all different and tell a myriad of stories . Some speak of a psychically activated stasis tomb beneath the mountain in the form of an ancient and rare piece of archeotech. A towering edifice, created using long forgotten technologies, the stores say that the Knight rests within, its frame held between moments for centuries at a time, untouched by the decaying caress of entropy.

Others discount these lies and liken the resting place of the Knight to a pool of enchanted liquid, green and oily to look upon. The Freeblade sleeps away the centuries under the emerald waters, its hollow shell filled with the healing fluids, both sustaining it and shielding it from the passage of time.

Still others discount this as mere fancy, saying they have seen the scrap cave from whence the Knight comes – vast halls filled with the broken remains of every Knight ever to walk the surface of Alaric Prime and fall in battle or vanish into its seas. Tiny blind creatures scurry between the remains, building Gerantius from choice components when he is needed and then breaking him down when he returns. So it is that the Freeblade is not one Knight but all Knights, and when one of the mighty walkers falls in battle and disappears it is to the caves of the Forgotten Knight it comes.

THE IMMORTAL KNIGHT

Numerous witnesses have reported seeing Gerantius destroyed in battle, the ancient Knight having allegedly been torn apart by battle cannon rounds, xenos energy beams or huge alien talons numerous times. While many Nobles of Alaric Prime dismiss these stories as merely the rambling of peasants or the lies of villainous noblemen, others cite ancient records and first-hand accounts from their ancestors as proof that the Forgotten Knight has 'died' more than once. Many Alarician Nobles wonder if Gerantius had indeed been destroyed and, if so, how has he returned? The rumours of a stasis vault and its mysterious technologies are one explanation, the notion being that whatever secrets of the Mechanicum live under Sacred Mountain are inextricably linked to the Freeblade. Peasants believe the Freeblade's return is the result of a force akin to magic. This arcane power somehow gathers up the pieces of the fallen Knight and conveys them back to the mountain where strange energies knit them back together. Learned Nobles scoff at such superstitions, instead suggesting that Gerantius is some kind of advanced Adeptus Mechanicus experiment, which Sacristans whisper about behind closed doors.

More unusual still are the records that suggest the Freeblade has risen again in the midst of battle despite grievous damage. One example was during the Fyre Island uprising, when Gerantius alone opposed rogue Knights and their ill-conceived plan to disrupt the prison workforce, weakening House Degallio. Why the Forgotten Knight chose that time and place to emerge from Sacred Mountain is unknown, though most agree that the freeing of the prisoners would have had some long reaching consequence that only the Freeblade could predict.

Rising out of the sea, Gerantius climbed up onto the rocky shores of Fyre Island. The prisoners streamed from holes in the prison's walls, faltering only when the Freeblade loomed up before them. Three rogue Knights crashed back through the rents they had made in the island's high walls, and marched out to meet the Freeblade. Desperate for their freedom, some of the escaped prisoners charged Gerantius, hurling crudely fashioned mining charges at the war machine's feet. Most of the bombs bounced off his armour or detonated prematurely, killing dozens. Only a few blew up under the Freeblade's feet, but even those caused no notable damage. However, their assault did slow down the Freeblade's advance as it paused to empty bursts of heavy stubber fire into the convicts. This gave the enemy Knights a chance to surround it, and to land telling blows against its unshielded flank. Even though the rogue Knights lost one of their number to the Freeblade's thermal cannon, the others were able to close and fire point-blank, their battle cannons blasting burning rents in Gerantius. Staggering under the twin assault, the Freeblade fell back toward the sea. The other Knights pressed the attack, bringing their reapers to bear and striking devastating blows from both sides. Its armour torn and rent, the Freeblade crashed into the sea; smoke pouring from open wounds across its torso. As Gerantius vanished beneath the waves, the rogue Knights turned back to the prison and their fallen brother.

The rogue Knights had gone only a few steps when one exploded in a blinding flash of flame, as its reactor cracked open to the sky. Nearby prisoners howled and wailed in agony as they were sprayed with superheated metal fragments and radioactive plasma. The remaining Knight turned in time to receive a thrust from Gerantius' chainblade, the ravaged Freeblade risen once more from the sea. With sulphuric water cascading from the scores of tears in its armour, the Freeblade ripped its reaper up through the torso and canopy of the rogue Knight, turning its Noble into an ignominious crimson spray.

For a full day Gerantius stood watch over the prison. Then, when a detachment of loyal Knights arrived, the Freeblade vanished back into Sacred Mountain.

LEGEND OF THE BOILING RIVER

Legends of piles of archeotech and vaults filled with forgotten relics beneath Sacred Mountain have drawn treasure hunters and thieves for centuries. The fact that few have ever trespassed under the mountain and returned to tell the tale has done nothing to dissuade others from succumbing to their greed and following the rumours of vast fortunes for themselves. The true nature of the wonders that lie below the mountain is a favourite topic for the convicts of Alaric Prime's many prison islands. Every prisoner either has his own theory as to what treasures are hidden there, or swears to have knowledge of the prize one way or another – whether through legends handed down for generations or from rumours or hearsay.

The truth is that very few of the stories about Sacred Mountain are based on any kind of fact. The legend of Boiling River is one of the few that at least has some basis in reality, namely that the river does indeed exist. A toxic torrent of sulphurous liquid, the river flows from Sacred Mountain and out into the planet's vast acidic oceans. The legend goes that the river once ran with pure, clear water from some underground spring. This all changed the night raiders came from the stars to plunder the riches hidden in the depths of Sacred Mountain.

The Rogue Trader Belleraphio van Dyne had acquired an ancient key in his travels that led him to the Sanctus Reach, where a greedy Seneschal assured him a great treasure awaited. Thinking to loot the tombs beneath the mountain, Belleraphio unlocked the sacred vault and descended with a team of Ratling mechanics, specialists in archeotech and Mechanicum salvage. While the stories of what they found under the mountain vary, all seem to agree that Belleraphio alone fled from its depths, Gerantius close on his heels.

As the Rogue Trader reached Boiling River, then known by another name, he dived into the cool, clear water to swim back to his lander, which stood on the far side. Suddenly, the roots of the mountain rumbled and shook. The earth cracked and split asunder, and from the dark heart of the mountain toxic waters rose up, polluting the pure river and surrounding the thrashing Rogue Trader. Belleraphio died screaming as the Freeblade watched on in silence, and the waters of Boiling River have remained lethal ever since.

Alicanna staggered into the cave, her bare, bloody feet leaving a crimson smear upon the stone. Leaning against the rough rock wall, she paused for a moment, letting her ragged breathing slow as she tried to conquer her fear. She was not foolish enough to think she had lost them, but hoped that they might think twice about following her into the mountain. The villagers had terrible superstitions when it came to the forbidden peak, though doubtless the lord's justicars did not share them. She was just another commoner who had broken the lord's laws, and if they caught her it would mean a one-way trip to Fyre Island. The howl of the justicars' dogs and the faint light of torches down the slope drove her on, and she pushed deeper into the cave, trying to get as far from the justicars as she could.

Still glancing back over her shoulder for signs that the men had reached the entrance, she didn't see the pit in the dark until her foot came down on empty air. For a second she almost regained her balance, arms flailing for a handhold, but then she pitched forward into the void. For a span of heart-stopping seconds, Alicanna fell through the darkness, waiting for the hard, unyielding stone of the pit bottom to break her fall. When icy water swallowed her instead, she gasped in shock, taking in a lungful of water. Splashing and coughing in the blackness, she somehow made it to a shore, cursing and trying to find her way in the dark.

As her eyes adjusted to the faint light of the cave they settled on a vast vault door, its face shaped like a skull surrounded by a toothed wheel. Hearing no sound of her pursuers, curiosity overcame her fear, and Alicanna crept forward and placed a cold wet hand upon the seal.

At once a faint light sprung up all around her, and with a grinding of stone on stone the door slid back to reveal a bright steel chamber. Peering in, Alicanna could see flashing glass torches. Beyond, a Knight suit stood in a huge sarcophagus of light, its green armour luminescent in the bright glow. Alicanna didn't know what half the things in this chamber were – they seemed to be from a completely different world to the one she knew – but she recognised the silhouette of the Knight. On feast days the Knights would stride past the village on their way to the lord's castle, each one a monster of metal and menacing death. This one looked different though, somehow more righteous than the gaudy giants ridden by the lord's men. Slowly walking across the cavern, Alicanna approached the Knight, her fear now completely replaced by wonder. At last she stood at its feet, gazing up into its visored helm and wondering if a man dwelt within.

An involuntary gasp escaped her lips as the lenses within the Knight's helm seemed to come to life, regarding her as cat might look upon a mouse. Staring into its cold glass eyes, she felt she could see whole lifetimes of war and madness, blood and death reflected there, as if the giant war machine was speaking to her without words. Alicanna felt the pain and destruction that the Knight had wrought, and the violence it had inflicted, all conveyed by those shining dead eyes. The moment passed, and the Knight's lenses seemed suddenly darkened, any sign of life abruptly gone. Alicanna let out an involuntary breath she had not known she was holding, feeling as if she had narrowly escaped some terrible fate. She backed away and fled from the chamber. As she began her search for a way out, she decided that perhaps Fyre Island might not be so terrible after all.

Gerantius





Gerantius has always been surrounded in mystery and the subject of wild superstitious rumour. That the Knight is even considered a Freeblade is only a designation given to him by the knightly houses of Alaric Prime, as he bears no known insignia and seems to hold no allegiance with any known family or lineage. It doesn't help to quell the ghost stories about Gerantius that whenever the Knight rises to oppose the foes of Alaric strange phenomena are observed in his wake. Commoners whisper about crops failing or growing into strange and maddening shapes, animals going mad and attacking their herders or insects gathering together to form words in an unknown tongue, all when the Freeblade walks the land. Equally, many miraculous events are linked to the appearance of the Freeblade, such as the sick being healed overnight or pure rains rolling down from Sacred Mountain to break months of drought. Children born on the day that Gerantius appears are also considered blessed – or cursed – depending on who they grow up to be. The mark of the Ghost Knight is seen as an auspicious thing for a man or woman to bear, and will determine many things about their life. It is said that the Carver of the Smouldering Isle bore the mark, and would cut the symbol of the Freeblade into his victims. Even when he was caught and sentenced to be drowned in sulphur for his crimes, he went to his doom swearing it was the ghost of Gerantius that had compelled him. By contrast, the sisters of the Quiet Storm appoint one of their number as a high priestess on the advent of the Freeblade. A splinter faith of the Imperial Creed, the sisters are a boon to many of the islands of Alaric Prime, travelling the poisonous seas in huge chapel barges, bringing mercy and aid to the unfortunate. In the years they are governed by one born in the shadow of the Freeblade they are considered blessed indeed and do great things for the people.

Much is also made of Gerantius' effect on the dead. Given that many think the Freeblade is himself a spirit from beyond, it is said that when the Freeblade walks the land the dead sleep lightly in their graves and spirits stir within the forests and seas of the world. The first night when Gerantius appears is considered a sacred time in some parts of Alaric Prime. Called the Forgotten Night, in honour of the Freeblade, it is a time when the fabric between worlds grows thin and ghosts roam unchecked. For most, it is a night to hide within their homes, doors and windows locked tight, though for some it is a chance to try to speak with long-lost loved ones.

More distressing to the Nobles of Alaric Prime than these arguably heretical efforts to contact the dead are the instances of latent psykers awakening during the Forgotten Night, as if the Freeblade were somehow unlocking their potential by his very presence. Some say this is because the Freeblade is a psyker himself, and can awaken the curse in others by his mere presence. These rumours are only spoken of in hushed tones, however; the notion of a Knight also being a warp-touched psyker is too horrible to consider.

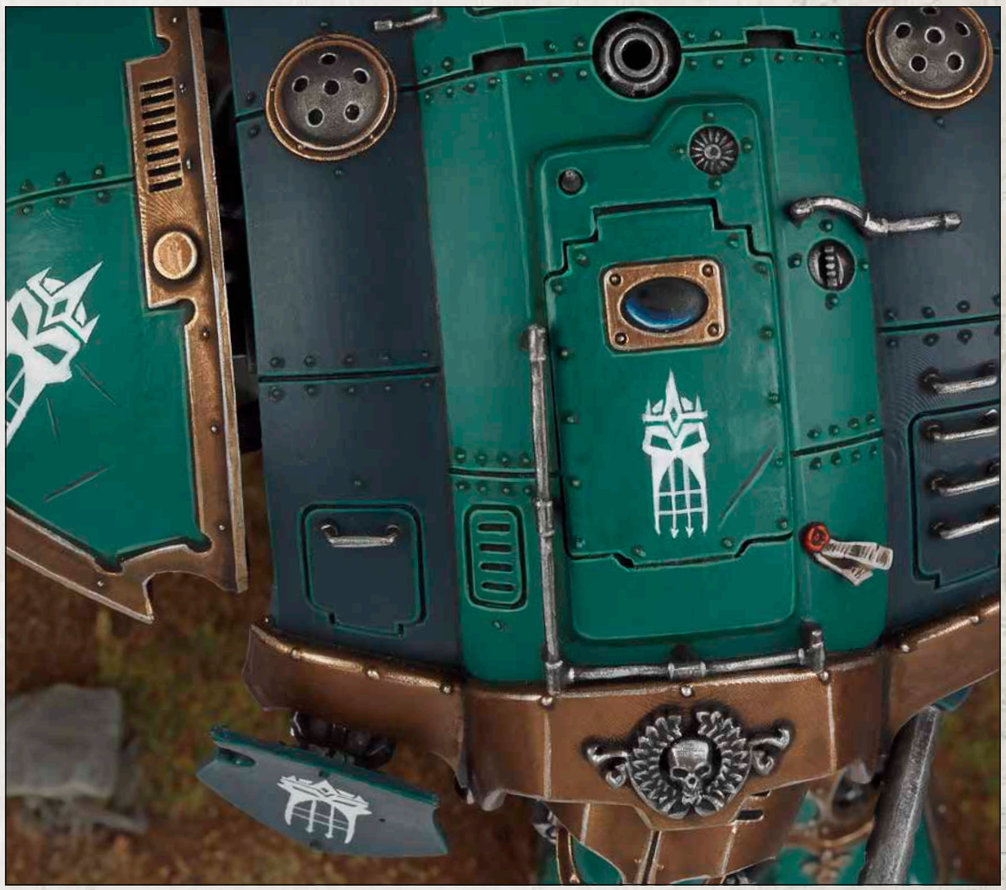


COLOURS OF GERANTIUS

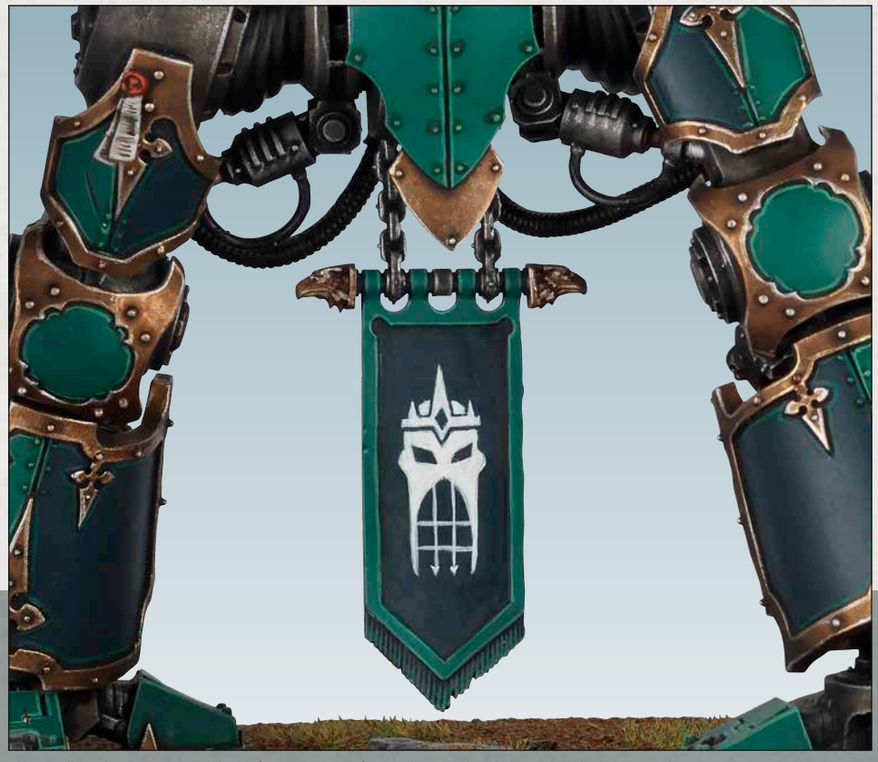
The green and gold-trimmed armour of Gerantius gives him an antique look, like a relic of another age. This evokes his background and the long and mysterious history of the Freeblade. The rich green of his armour is set off by areas of darker green, which break up the shape of his hull.

The golden trim of Gerantius' armoured plates is tarnished, and his metallic components have a weathered and worn look to them. This reinforces the sense of antiquity the Freeblade carries with him, giving the impression that his Knight suit has endured centuries of war. Faint scratches on the hull and the workings have a similar effect, and the overall impression given by the Knight suit is that of a much used weapon; scored and scratched but still deadly.

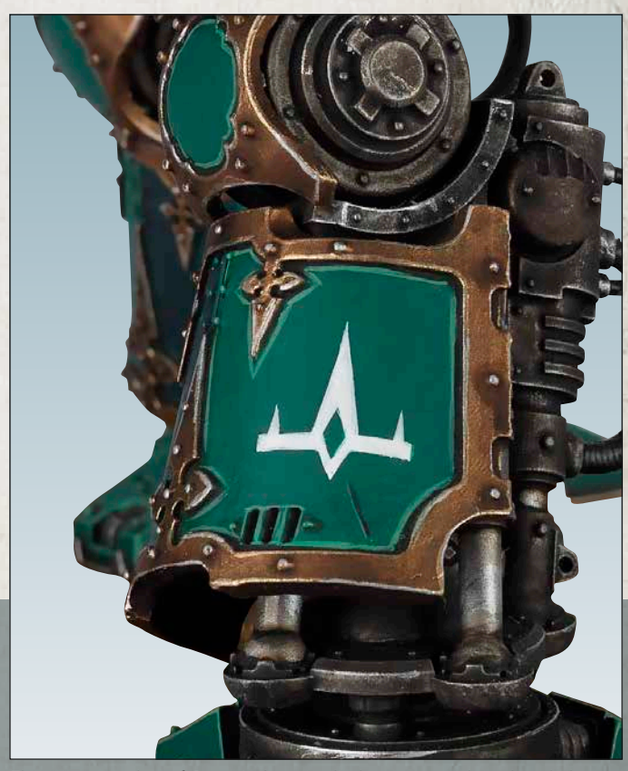
The prominent symbol on Gerantius is the portcullis-skull, an icon that speaks clearly of the Freeblade's position as the defender of Alaric Prime and is reminiscent of the vault of Sacred Mountain. The skull also bears a crown, a symbol of rulership and nobility, which may provide some insight into Gerantius' past. Whether or not this means that the Freeblade was once a great lord or hails from a highborn line is not known. It could simply signify that the Freeblade is the greatest defender of his world; lord of Sacred Mountain and guardian of the people of Alaric Prime.



The reflective lens glinting in the centre of Gerantius' canopy hints at magical origins and eldritch technology.



The skull and portcullis symbol of Gerantius reflects the Freeblade's role as both a protector and immortal guardian of the world of Alaric Prime.



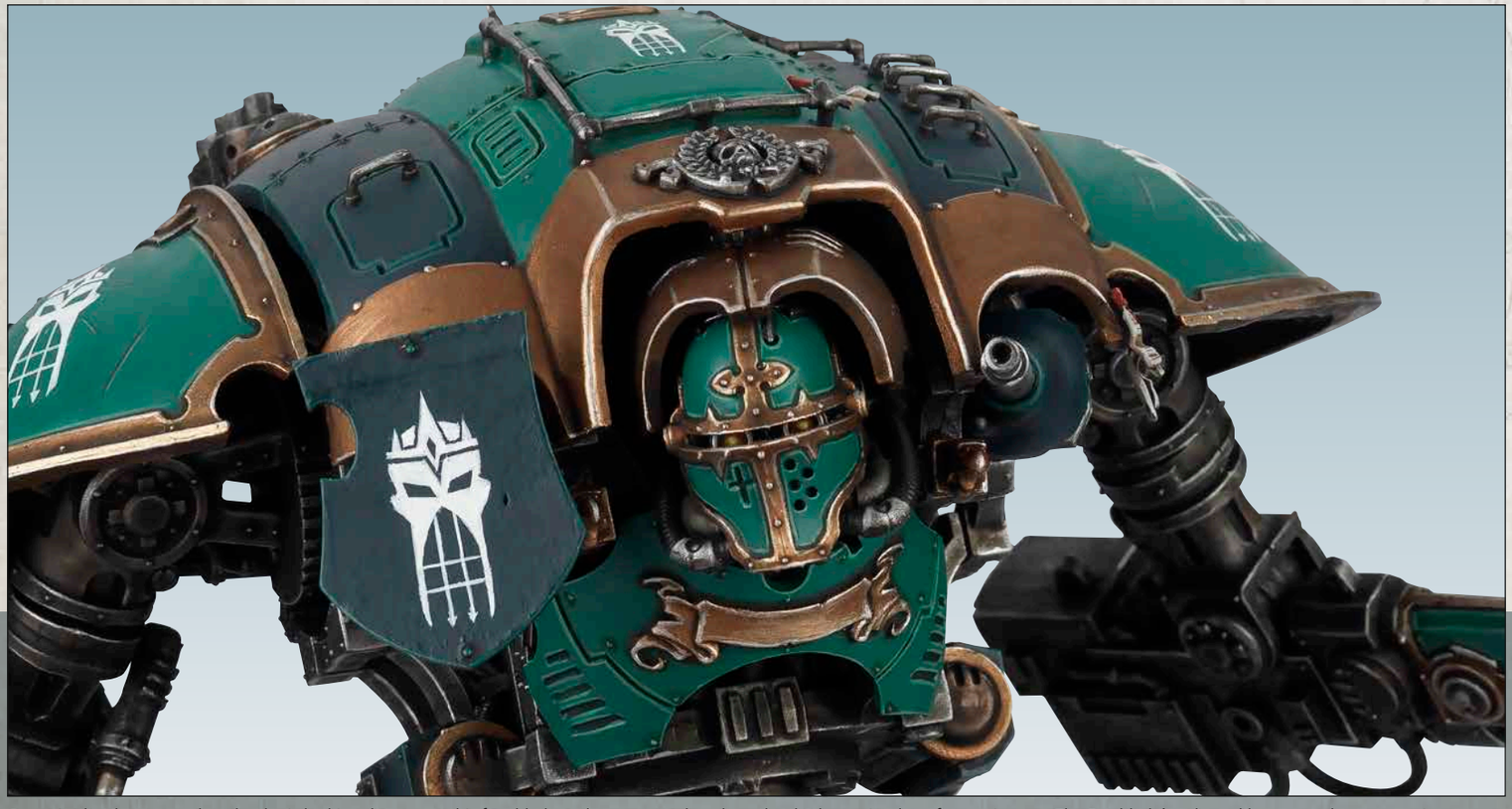
The outermost plate of Gerantius' greave displays a crown-shaped symbol, though its importance to Gerantius himself is unknown.



The copper-gold and emerald green colours on Gerantius' shoulder plate compliment each other and contrast with the oily workings of the weapon arm beneath.



Gerantius' reaper, like that of all Knights, incorporates a powerful motor to turn its biting blade, capable of cutting through even the hardest armour.



Gerantius has been posed so that he is looking down upon his foe, blade and cannon ready to be unleashed to smite them from existence. The Freeblade's coloured lenses can be seen staring through his ornate faceplate, implacable and unknowable.



The White Warden



Neru Degallio was once the lord of House Degallio, his Knight, the White Warden, a symbol of the power and influence of his family. A master of scores of Knights and Nobles, Neru was feared and respected in equal measure. For decades he oversaw the rise to power of his house, eclipsing all others until the name Degallio became synonymous with Imperial might and the ancient majesty of the Knights themselves. An old and skilled warrior, Neru was a veteran of countless battles and had a feel for war matched by few others on his home world of Alaric Prime. On the battlefield he could anticipate where and when to strike to best effect, bringing the awesome might of his Knight to bear with precise and brutal force. He demonstrates these skills still, but under the mantle of the Freeblade. Known now as the White Warden, after his famous Knight suit, Neru has left his world behind to sail the void and bring battle to the enemies of the Imperium.

A SUNDERED HOUSE

When the Red Waaagh! attacked the Sanctus Reach, Alaric Prime was the last world to feel the wrath of the Orks. After a long and terrible war, the Orks were repelled, though only at great cost to House Degallio. The house was left a shadow of its former glory, its strength lost with the deaths of scores of its finest Nobles and the destruction of their Knights. The house's lord, Neru Degallio, had won victory over the Orks alongside his Imperial allies, but at a terrible cost. As the most powerful knightly house on Alaric Prime, it had fallen to Degallio to weather the brunt of the fighting, and of all the house's Knights and Nobles, only Neru survived. In the aftermath of this pyrrhic victory, the families of the fallen sons placed the blame of so much death squarely upon Neru's shoulders. The lord of House Degallio found himself unable to answer their accusations or the predations of the other knightly houses, and when his own consort disappeared in mysterious circumstances, Neru turned Freeblade, taking the name of his Knight and leaving Alaric Prime behind.

The White Warden sought out battlefields across the Imperium, venting his anger upon heretics and xenos in the name of the God-Emperor. The Ork race in particular felt the wrath of the Freeblade, the grudge he held against them from Alaric Prime a burning splinter in his heart. His hatred of the greenskins was the single aspect of his past he would never let go. In the Felcarn System, the White Warden personally destroyed the hulking Ork Stompa known as Hivekrusha. Imperial Guardsmen watched on in awe as the Freeblade moved deftly beneath its guns, too close for the effigy to use its terrible firepower. After scoring dozens of hits, the White Warden left the Ork war machine wreathed in fire, its xenos crew scrabbling from holes and hatches in its sides. Standing silently over the wreck, the White Warden watched the metal beast burn, only moving to shred the survivors with stubber fire when they tried to crawl to safety.

A KNACK FOR WAR

The White Warden is a canny tactician, and has displayed an instinctive feel for the ebb and flow of battle. In numerous engagements the Freeblade's tactical acumen has outshone that of both his allies and his enemies, allowing him to turn the tide of a war or snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. During the Helfyne campaign the White Warden fought for months alongside the armies of the Imperium, time and again proving himself the decisive factor in their battles. The Imperial commanders of the Stygian 23rd and Cadian 917th Regiments, with whom he conferred on occasion, were even known to defer to the old Noble's judgement. They have benefited from the Freeblade's encyclopaedic knowledge of war, drawn from decades both on the battlefield and studying the thousands of Tactica Imperialis volumes possessed by House Degallio. While no formal arrangement exists, and the rare meetings between Imperial officers and the Freeblade are officially ceremonial in nature, the White Warden's influence on Imperial tactics is undeniable.

ASSAULT ON THE SHARDLUNG HEIGHTS

The White Warden has become an inspiring sight on the battlefields of Helfyne War Zone. His presence often heralds a turn in the tide of battle and the fortunes of the Imperial forces. During the assault on the Shardlung Heights, the Freeblade was in the vanguard, pushing through the Chaos defences and blasting ragged holes out of the traitors' trench lines and pillboxes with his rapid-fire battle cannon. In turn, the Slanneshi Chaos Lord Kormunda singled out the Knight for retribution, ordering his daemonic war machines to tear it to pieces. As shell-shocked Guardsmen watched on from the cover of craters and burning wrecks, the White Warden battled against a pack of crimson-eyed Maulerfiends. The metal beasts' furnace breath washed across the Freeblade as they circled for the kill. Like rabid dogs the machines snapped at the Knight's armoured legs, teeth and claws scoring metal while their magma cutters bit into the walker's pistons and hydraulics.

A stricken cry rose up from the forward Imperial Guard companies when they saw the White Warden fall to one knee, seemingly brought low by the daemonic machines. However, this was just another ruse of the Freeblade, tricking the frenzied beasts into massing for a final charge, and clearing firing lines for the massed heavy weapons of the Cadians and Stygians. Caught in a fusillade of lascannon blasts, krak missiles and autocannon rounds, along with the White Warden's own battle cannon, the Daemon Engines were blown apart. The last one exploded mid-leap, transformed into a shower of flaming debris before it could strike.

Hauling himself onto his feet, the Freeblade turned his attention once more to Kormunda's defences, as the Chaos Lord howled in rage over the destruction of his pets. The cultists who were manning the bulk of the traitor fortifications were beginning to waver in the face of the Knight's assault. In places where there were no Chaos Space Marines to hold the line, whole group of heretics turned and ran. Sensing a shift in the battle, the White Warden abruptly changed his position to charge a seemingly valueless point in the enemy line. Quick-thinking sergeants ordered their platoons after him, and when the White Warden made his breakthrough against what turned out to be an abandoned gun battery, his allies poured in after him and turned their newfound weapons on the foe's forward elements. Cursing the Knight in the name of the Dark Gods, Kormunda was forced to fall back, leaving the smoking ridge to the victorious forces of the Imperium.

FINAL BATTLE FOR THE TWELVE BRIDGES

The White Warden has travelled across the void since leaving Alaric Prime, seeking out battlefields from one end of the segmentum to the other. When the Freeblade learned of the war on Hellund XI, and the Ork hordes that ravaged the world's cities and people, a familiar hatred surfaced within his heart. The war on Hellund had burned for almost a century by the time the White Warden arrived. The planet was plagued by the remains of a forgotten Waaagh!; generations of Orks fighting on for the pure joy of battle. Against them, the Imperial Guard had sent a steady stream of regiments, though never quite enough for a decisive victory. As a result, Hellund had become a ruined planet of broken cities and fearful citizens. To grow up on this cursed world was to be born in trench-villages and cave-keeps, where one's existence was measured out in the steady thump of artillery fire.

The war had stagnated into a number of bitter engagements, Orks and men smashing against each other across a no man's land of rusted tanks and broken ground. Neither side had the numbers or the guns to break the other, and so the war dragged on. One of these battlefields, soaked in the blood of generations of men, was known as the Twelve Bridges. In the early years of the war the bridges crossed a strategically vital river, each one connecting towns and cities important to the defence of Hellund. Decades of fighting later, cities, towns and bridges had gone, having been rebuilt and destroyed again dozens of times. Even the river had gone – Imperial ordinance and orbital strikes had turned it into little more than a muddy ditch. All that remained were the armies and their fortifications, each watching each the other over tangled lines of razorwire and gun pits.

When the White Warden strode into the Imperial firebase on the edge of the Twelve Bridges, mud-spattered Guardsmen peered out of their foxholes in awe. Even the Orks across what used to be the river noted the arrival of the white-armoured Knight, chuckling to each other that there was sure to be a good scrap in the offing.

His voice booming through his Knight's vox-casters, the Freeblade informed the Imperial commander he was going to lead a charge to break the Ork line. When he did, he warned, the Guardsmen had better be close upon his heels. Striding out onto the muddy riverbed, the White Warden levelled his cannon at the Ork lines, heralding the start of the battle with a booming retort. Chanting in their guttural tongue, the Orks banged their choppas and shootas against their scrap barricades as their Warboss came to edge of the ditch to see what the humans were up to. Seeing the Freeblade marching toward the Ork scrap barricades, the Warboss let out a deafening bellow. He levelled his big shoota and unleashed a roaring stream of fire. A second later the rest of the Orks joined in, the air whining and cracking to the sound of hundreds of Ork guns. Like an unstoppable juggernaut, the Knight came on. The Orks were unable to check its advance as it climbed up the far bank, pushing aside rusting tank traps and twisted lines of wire.

The Warboss was still yelling and firing his gun when the huge adamantium foot fell upon him with a grisly crunch. In the Knight's wake, thousands of Guardsmen pushed across the river, breaking through the Ork mobs and turning the tide of what would be the final battle for the Twelve Bridges.

WORLD OF THE WHITE WARDEN

The White Warden was once the lord of House Degallio, an old and powerful Noble with dominion over much of Alaric Prime. A great political leader and warlord, Degallio built up his house on a planet of bitter rivalries and constant skirmishing between the noble families. Over long years of bargaining and politicking, and exploiting the mastery of the sea granted him by Isle Degallio, Neru Degallio eventually saw his fortunes eclipse those of the other Nobles of Alaric Prime.

For much of his life, the Neru enjoyed only success and glory. That came to end with the arrival of the Red Waaagh! and the doom of his house. Over the course of a single, blood-soaked campaign of unimaginable carnage, House Degallio would be brought low, its Knights destroyed and its power broken in countless battles to defend Alaric Prime. His losses would drive the White Warden onto the path of the Freeblade. Even so, he would never forget the world he had once called home.

Located in the Sanctus Reach on the edges of the Segmentum Obsurcus, Alaric Prime is a hidebound feudal world with a regressive society. Much of the planet is covered in thick sulphurous seas, viscous chemical tides and currents devoid of all but hardiest of life-forms. Dotted across the burning acidic oceans are islands chains and a handful of larger land masses, their coasts scoured clean by the sea but their interiors blessed havens of verdant life, fed by flourishing self-contained eco-systems. On these islands, the black stone keeps of the Nobles brood from rocky outcrops and coastal bluffs, thousands of indentured labourers toiling in their shadows.

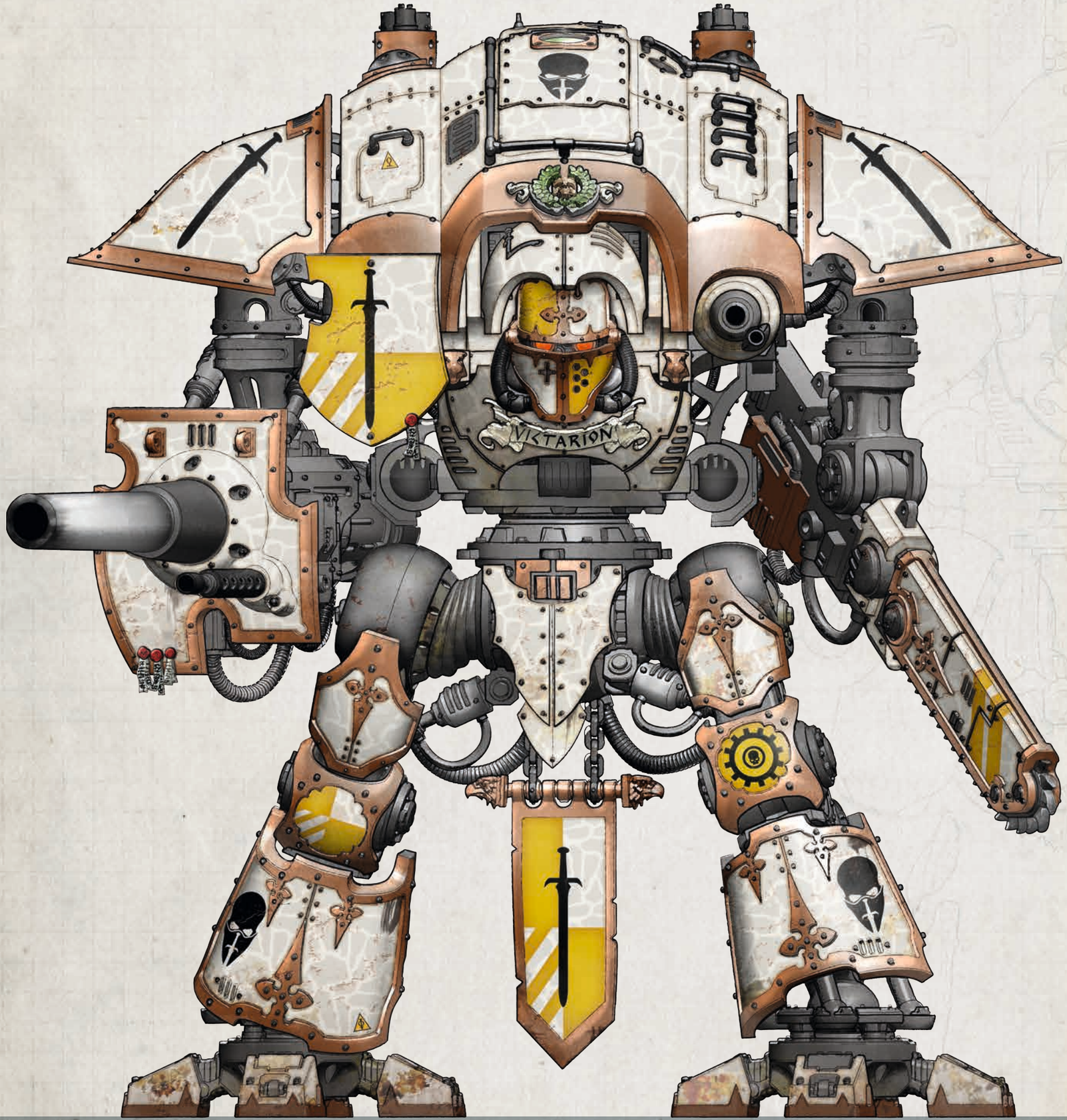
Technology is limited on Alaric Prime as the result of ancient law, and most souls live simple lives of hard labour, scratching at the ground with tools of wood and iron. For their part, the Nobles pay little attention to the hard lives of their people, consumed as they are with their standing amongst the knightly houses or with gaining glory on the field of battle. Only the spectre of their ancestors and the foreboding presence of Sacred Mountain with its holy significance keep the Nobles in line. Located on the largest of Alaric Prime's islands, on land owned by none of the knightly houses, the mountain is a shrine to everything a Knight should aspire to, a reminder to the Nobles of their honourable purpose and the lynchpin of their many laws and traditions.

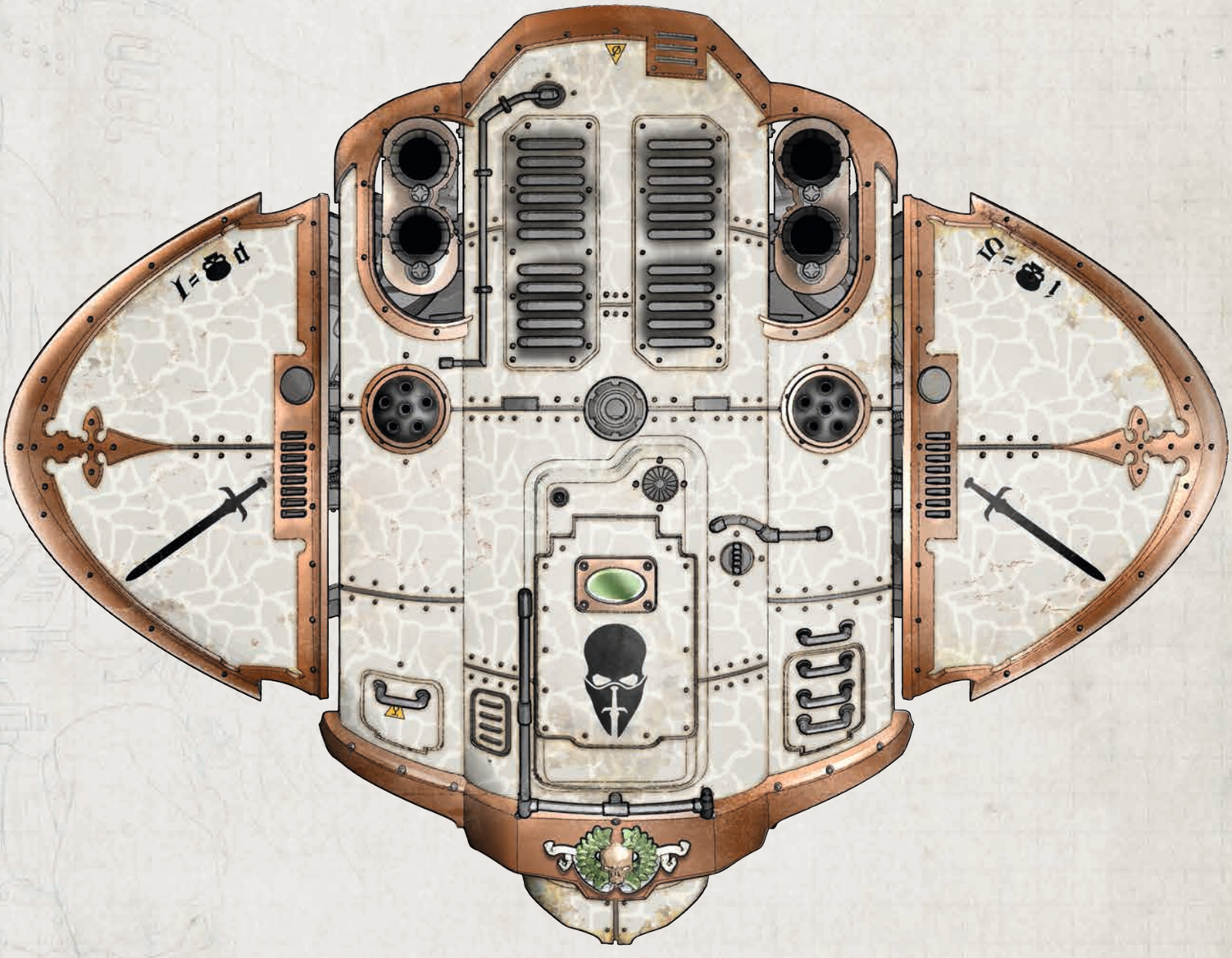
When there is serious dispute between the houses, they will gather in the shadow of the Sacred Mountain to resolve their differences, praying to the spirit of the planet's founding father to guide them. Countless legends are woven into the lore of the mountain, speaking of a divine army that sleeps at its core, or of the souls of slain Nobles dwelling there to watch down upon their descendants. That it is the resting place of the Freeblade Gerantius only adds to the significance of the mountain, and the place it holds within Alarican culture.

Alaric Prime is a world repressed by law. Over the millennia, countless minor laws have been added to those first set down by the founding families, often when one house attempts to increase its power or diminish the control of another. For instance, during the blight-years of 671-677.M36, House Brahmica was reliant on solar-powered barges to feed its canal-crossed islands. A congregation of houses led by House Kamata managed to forge a new law prohibiting the ferrying of grain during daylight hours, citing an increased risk of bile fly infestation. The result was the starvation of thousands of Brahmica peasants and the family's fall from favour. Often, laws end up hurting the peasants more than their masters, and while a house might decline in power it is the common folk that will pay with their lives. Indeed, most Alarican laws do not apply to Nobles, though they are honour-bound to enforce them. For this purpose each house employs numerous Justicars, men charged with ensuring the populace follow Alaric's many laws and punishing those that do not with incarceration in one of the world's many prisons. This draconian enforcement of a system that has never seen a law repealed or changed means that more than two-thirds of the planet's population are imprisoned, many for crimes such as sneezing on the vernal equinox, stepping on the shadow of a convict, or drinking ale brewed by a bald man. Relatively few of those incarcerated in the island penitentiaries are there for offences such as theft or murder.

Ironically, the truly lawless thrive within the antiquated legal bedlam of Alaric, becoming overlords of its prisons and de-facto taskmasters. These criminal overseers rise to power through threats and violence, cowing the other convicts and knocking them into line. When the Nobles need hands to farm their lands or craft their goods it is the criminal lords that answer the call. The most notorious of the penal colonies on Alaric is the smoke shrouded volcanic island of Ignivitch. In the basalt mines the convicts hack stone from blackened walls, filling steam-barges bound for fortresses across the planet. If a convict should survive the years of backbreaking labour on Ignivitch he might rise to become an overseer himself, hardened by the criminal company he keeps. Houses like Degallio care not from where the stone, steel or grain comes, or who applies the lash to see it gathered, only that it fills their storerooms and warehouses.

The White Warden





House Degallio draws power from its command of the sea, and more specifically the floating behemoth that is Isle Degallio. A vast seaborne city, the isle is miles across, built from the hulks of hundreds of huge ocean-going craft. Smoke billows from steel chimneys that clutter the skyline, along with iron masts and fluttering grey banners bearing the symbol of Degallio. Gantries and decking crisscross the hulls of ancient vessels, their original size and shape lost beneath years of successive layers of new construction. Farms and factories are crammed into the island's bilges and holds, churning out war materiel and kelp-victuals for the Nobles of the house and for its people.

Over the centuries the island has grown in size and shape, thousands of House Degallio commoners living their lives without ever setting foot on dry land. While the Nobles spend their time on the upper decks and crenellated promenades, with the sky overhead and the horizon all around, commoners must work in the shadow of their betters. Heads bent low, they toil ceaselessly, the smell of oil mixing with the sharp, fishy stench of sulphur-kelp, one of the few life forms able to survive in Alaric's inhospitable seas.

More than merely an oceanic city, the island is also a formidable weapon, every rusting spire and welded hull housing rows of cannon. Lord Neru Degallio's military might is vastly augmented by the isle, for its firepower is unrivalled on Alaric Prime. The Old Walrus, as Neru is sometimes known because of his huge moustache, has won more than one war before it has even begun by sailing the isle into range of his enemies' fortresses. What the Lord of Isle Degallio cannot best with cannon he wins through politics, aided by his consort, the cunning Lady of the Keys, who is rightly feared among the noble courts.

In the constant skirmishing between the houses and families of Alaric, House Degallio is often called upon as moderator because of its strength. Should a house manage to convince Lord Neru of the righteousness of its cause, that house is almost assured of success, for the shadow of Isle Degallio is enough to put an end to any serious resistance. However, this is not to say that Degallio cannot and has not been challenged over the years, though when it happens it is almost always the result of a coalition of other houses. The most recent incident was during the War of Fetters, a minor skirmish over the incarceration rites of the houses and who could send their convicts to which islands. Houses Kestren, Kamata, Velemestrin and Brahmica all allied against Degallio when it attempted to claim universal rites of fettering that would allow it to send its convicts anywhere. The allied Knights blockaded key penal colonies, imprisoned their guards and sank any barges that tried to land. Degallio brought his isle into the fray, breaking several blockades, but against the combined strength of four houses it was not enough – the isle could not be everywhere at once. In the end, Degallio conceded its rites, though it remained a sore point for Lord Neru for many years.


VICTARION



The White Warden incorporates a mixture of silver, bronze and gold for its mechanical components, highlighting the complexity of the Knight suit.

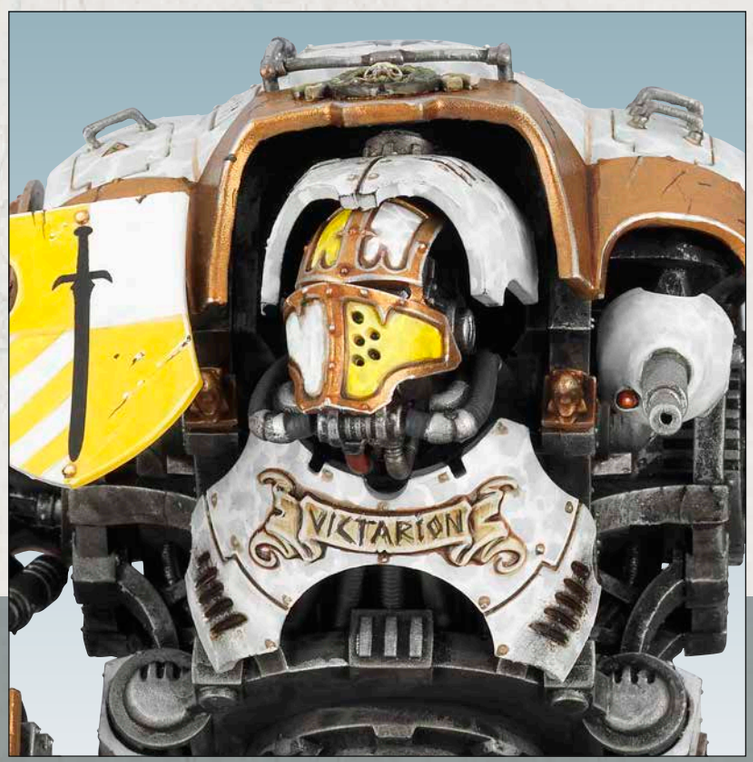
COLOURS OF THE WHITE WARDEN

The White Warden still bears the eggshell-dappled colouring and gold-trimmed plates of House Degallio. This serves as a reminder for Neru of his past and the glory he once held as head of the Degallio house. Since becoming a Freeblade, the white has also come to stand for his purity and righteousness, standing out bright and clear on the battlefield.

The white hull also allows us to see the signs of years of use upon the White Warden. The soot that has gathered around the exhaust vents and the tarnished metal surfaces give the impression of a Knight that has seen long campaigns and much combat.

The pale yellow and quartered pattern of the White Warden's shield compliments the white hull without overpowering it, while the reaper chainblade is painted almost entirely in metallic colours, its dark shape a reminder of the fearsome martial prowess of House Degallio and of Neru himself. Yellow stripes on the sword tie it in with the Knight's livery.

The White Warden also displays additional details, like the Mechanicus warning symbols on the reaper's motor, the back of the reactor housing and the battle cannon gun shield. These are placed by those trained by the Adeptus Mechanicus to ward against tampering and to protect the sanctity of the machine spirits beneath.



The banner Victarion is an honour marking celebrating the many glorious victories earned by Neru when he was lord of House Degallio.



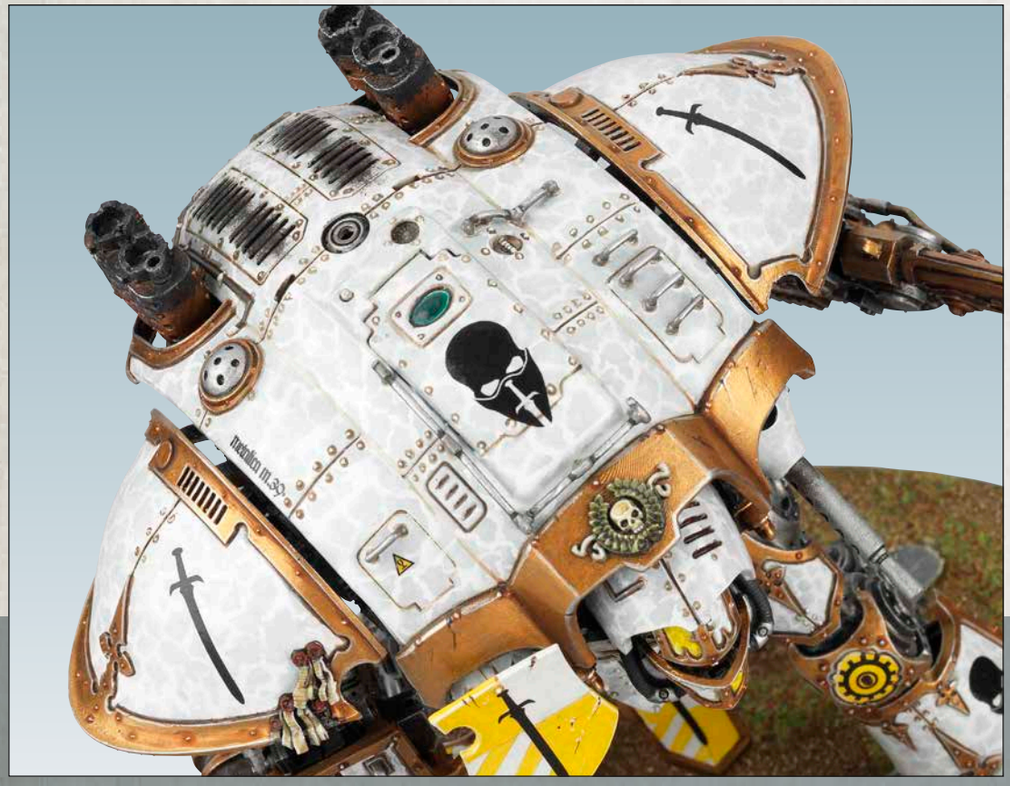
The White Warden's tilting shield displays a quartered device marked with a simple black sword – a mark of Neru's status as defender of his house.



The golden trim of the White Warden's plates is mirrored by that of the suit's banner, and the ornamented crosspiece it hangs from.



The bladed mask is a symbol that Neru adopted when he became lord of House Degallio, depicting the threat that would lie behind his words.



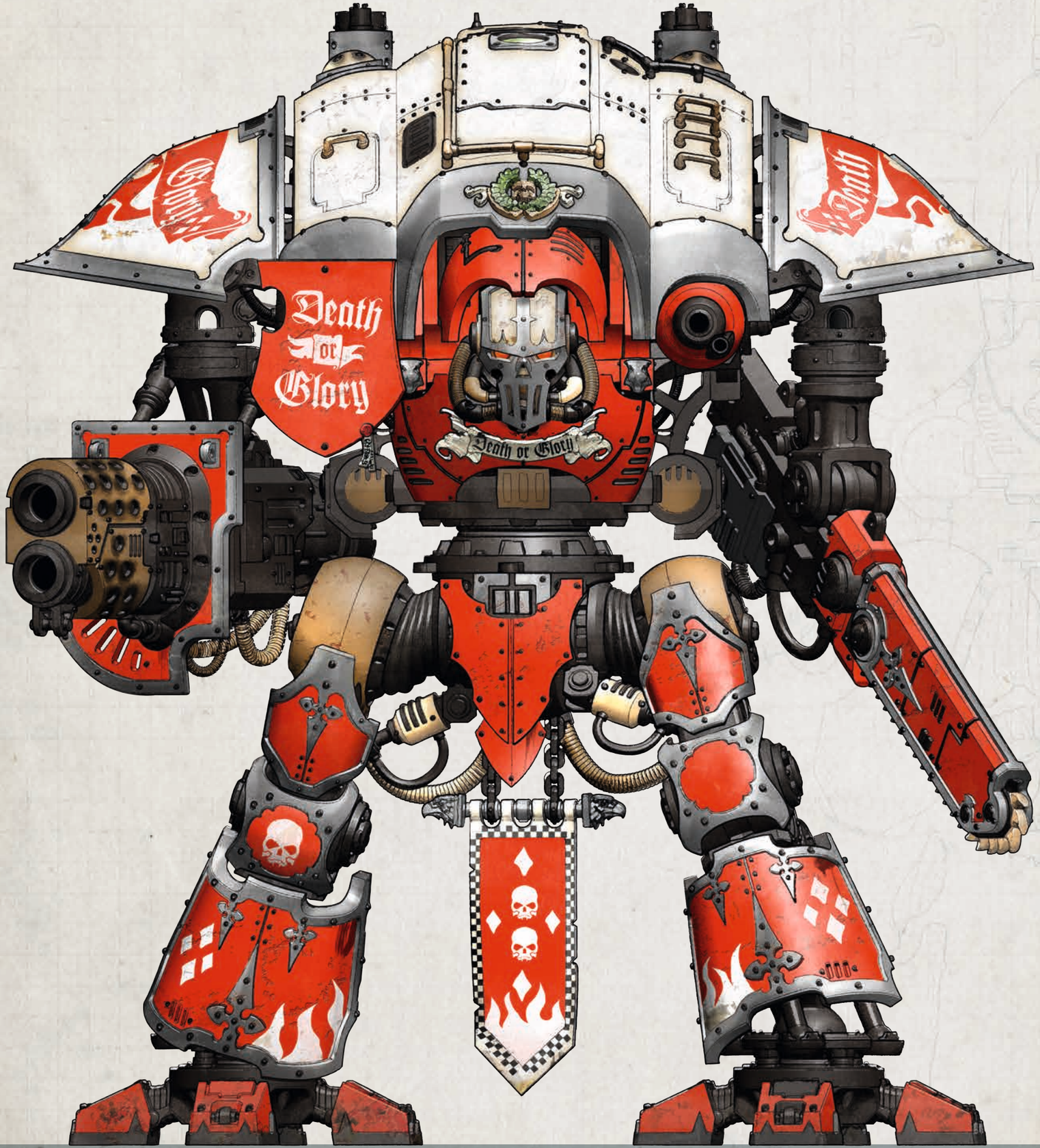


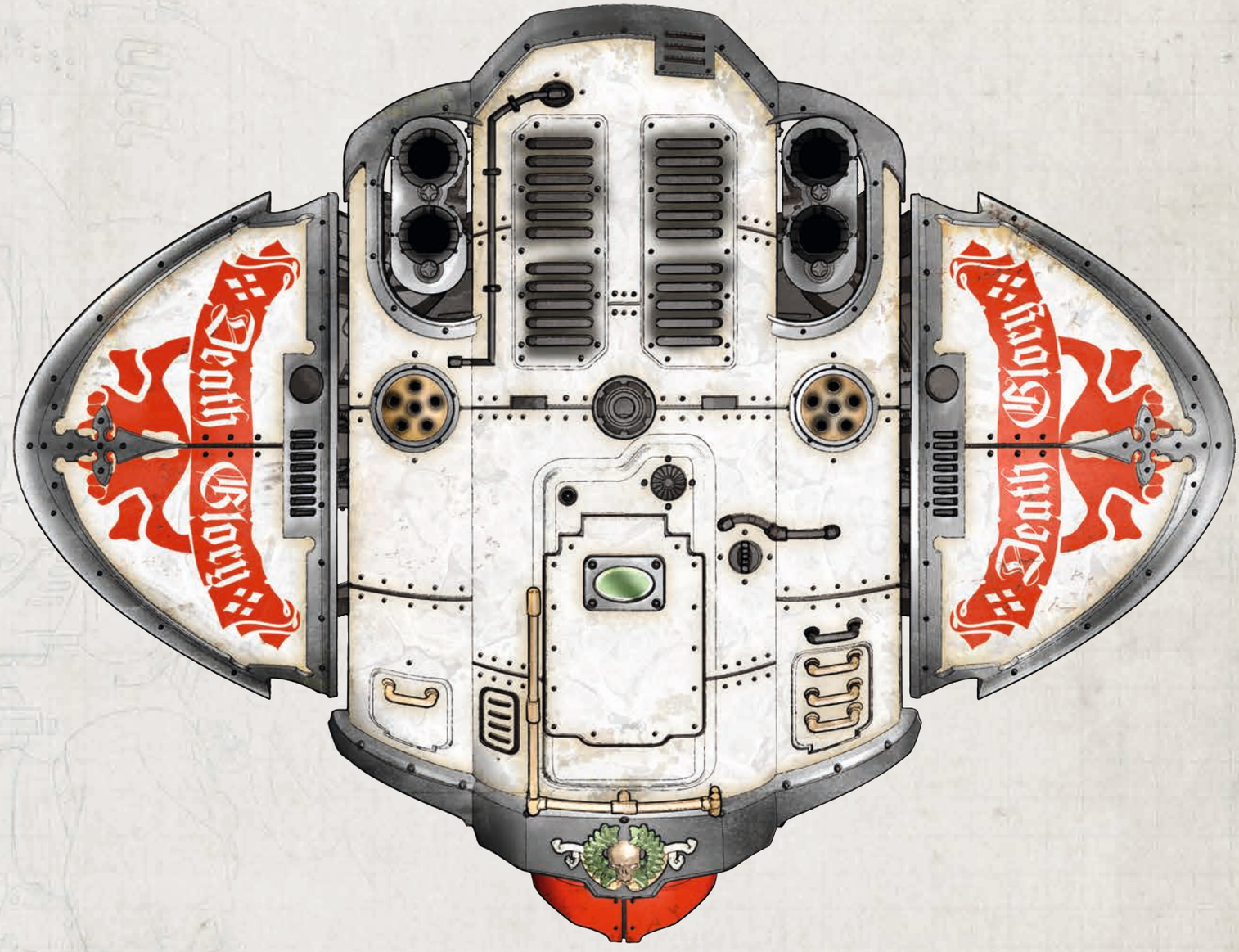


The dappled pattern that adorns the Lord of House Degallio's carapace carries over onto the suit's shoulder plates and greaves, creating a pale backdrop for the black symbols proudly displayed on each curved plate.



Retribution Incarnate





Though the true origins of Retribution Incarnate remain a mystery to the Imperium, Munitorum pict-recordings and Administratum archives mark the war for Synn Secundus as the Freeblade's first appearance. Synn Secundus lay in the path of Lord Macharius, and the Warmaster demanded its surrender. In his desperation, the Jade King of Synn turned to agents of the Dark Gods to deliver him. The Warmaster responded with unforgiving force, and dispatched General Arrian – leading twelve regiments of Imperial Guard, and Knights from House Arokon and House Reinharn – to crush all resistance.

Arrian chose to make a daring strike right into the heart of the Jade King's domain, ignoring reports of ancient baroque vessels sighted on the edges of the system. The battle began with Imperial warships clearing a landing zone using orbital fire, creating a staging area from which the Imperial forces could assault directly into the subterranean citadel of the Jade King. In a matter of hours, hundreds of thousands of Imperial Guardsmen, hundreds of tanks and dozens of Knights were mustering amid the smoking clearing. Expecting only light resistance from poorly equipped PDF units, the army advanced into the jungle, the Knights leading the way.

However, for weeks Alpha Legion Traitor Space Marines had been preparing for the arrival of the Imperial forces, and as the loyalist soldiers entered the jungle they came under attack from all sides. Helbrutes and Forgefiends crashed through the undergrowth to tear into Guardsmen and smash apart tanks, while carefully concealed Predator tanks and Land Raiders laid down a withering storm of fire. Blinded by the jungle, the Knights could do little to support the Imperial Guard. Lothar, one of the House Reinharn Nobles, found his Knight entangled by heavy writhing cables strung among the trees, and before he could free himself he was forced to watch as a swarm of Defilers pulled down his younger brother's Knight, tearing it apart with their jagged pincers.

The loyalist forces fell back to their landing zone, thousands of soldiers dying screaming in the jungle as they tried to flee from the Chaos forces. Lothar was one of the few Knights, and the only member of his house, to make it out of the jungle. Enraged, Lothar turned upon the traitors as they attempted to surround the clearing. His furious charge caused such carnage that the Chaos forces were momentarily checked, falling back before his rage. This gave his allies precious moments to evacuate their forces back into orbit, though Lothar was not among them. In memory of his sacrifice, Arrian posthumously awarded the Noble the Medallion Crimson and named the engagement in his honour.

Days later, when the Imperial Guard were fighting their way through the fortifications of the Jade King, a battered Knight limped back toward their lines. At first it was believed to be a survivor of House Reinharn, but when hailed the lone warrior identified himself only as Retribution Incarnate.

Auric Arachnus





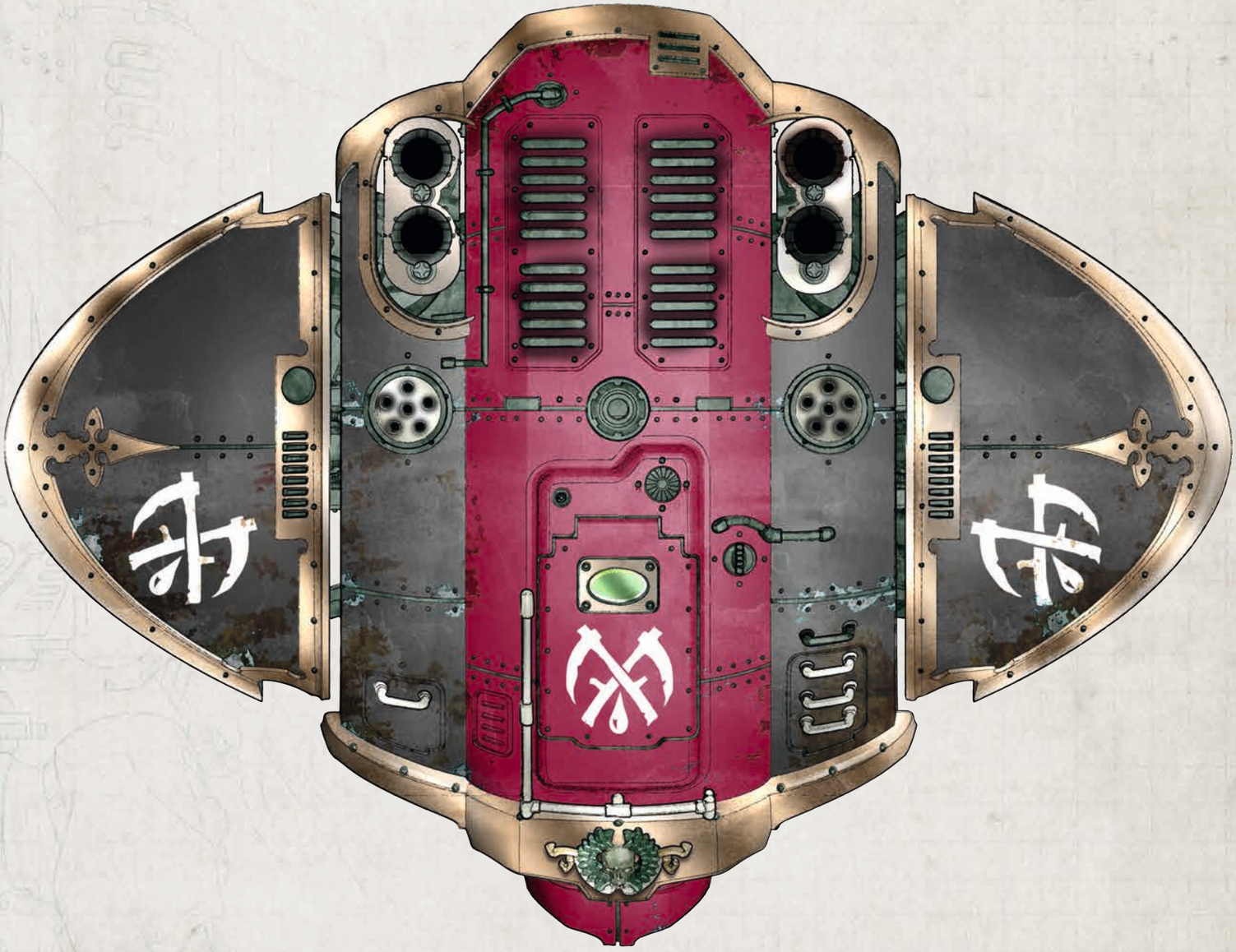
When the shadow of Hive Fleet Behemoth fell across the Ultima Segmentum, Imperial armies rallied to repel this new and disturbing foe. Among them was Auric Arachnus. When the Tyranids came to the garden world of Prandium, Auric Arachnus stood beside the Ultramarines as they struggled to save the planet from annihilation. Across fields of crimson flowers and golden trees the defenders mauled the alien swarm, the Freeblade's battle cannon churning up the earth and his reaper chainsword tearing into the enemy. After weeks of battle, blessed Prandium was turned from a peaceful paradise into a nightmare of gore-filled trenches and ravaged battlefields. Spattered with alien ichor and dented by fang and claw, Arachnus was forced to retreat from Prandium along with the Ultramarines, leaving it to the hungering hordes of Hive Fleet Behemoth.

As the Tyranids pressed in upon the Ultramarines, the Chapter was forced back to its home world and Auric travelled with them. While Marneus Calgar deployed his fleet to engage the Tyranids, the Ultramarines dug in on the frozen surface of Macragge. Arachnus earned enduring fame during the battle for Cold Steel Ridge, holding back waves of Tyranid bio-horrors. Whenever a lumbering Carnifex or burrowing Mawloc hit the trench lines the Freeblade's reaper would cut it down, a single blow tearing it to bloody ruin. However, the arrival of the Swarmlord changed the tide of battle, and what had begun as the slaughter of a mindless horde became a desperate fight for survival against an ever-evolving foe. As Calgar struggled to counter the swarm's tactics, Auric Arachnus fought a valiant defence, turning back breakthroughs and crushing monstrous xenos assault organisms. Even so, the Tyranids' superior numbers wore the defenders away hour by bloody hour, until Calgar himself was forced to concede the field after being gravely wounded. The Freeblade was one of the few Imperial warriors to escape, fighting his way to his transport and retreating toward the southern polar fortress.

While the Swarmlord directed the assault against the northern polar fortress, a Dominatrix, a rare colossal Tyranid leader-beast capable of projecting the will of the Hive Mind over vast distances, led the swarm in the south. Arachnus arrived as the Dominatrix was directing an all-out assault on the hard-pressed garrison, and he ordered his transport to land him directly in the middle of the swarm where he could engage the Dominatrix. Leaping from the open hold of his heavy transporter, the Knight raced toward the vast beast, his ion shield turning back a rain of living ammunition. Before the swarm could react to defend its queen, Arachnus carved its head from its body with a mighty blow from his chainblade, sowing confusion and disorder among the Tyranids. Without the powerful psychic presence of the Dominatrix to direct the Tyranid swarm, the Freeblade was able to rally the southern defenders. Together they turned back the alien horde, ensuring that they were among the few to survive upon the surface of Macragge, holding out until Marneus Calgar's return.

The Crimson Reaper





The Crimson Reaper first appeared during the Rithguard Crusade, as the Imperium fought to reclaim the Fallow Worlds. On the oceanic planet of Eutoria, regiments of the Cadian 723rd were embroiled in a battle for the floating equatorial islands against feral Ork tribes. Their commanders had underestimated the magnitude of the Ork infestation and, in the opening hours of the battle, thousands of troops had been lost as their landing zones were overrun. As the second wave of Cadians desperately tried to hold one of the islands against the Ork horde, the Freeblade appeared from the ocean, water cascading from its hulking frame. The Cadians' ragged cheer was cut short when the Knight charged across their lines to get to the foe, heedless of the Guardsmen it was crushing underfoot in the process. Even though the battle was turned by the Freeblade's charge and its fearsome use of both thermal cannon and reaper chainsword, the Cadians would not forget the callous disregard the Freeblade had shown for the lives of their comrades.

The Freeblade proved his worth on a dozen more planets, though he showed little concern for the crusading forces at his side. At the Siege of Vos, the Knight saved the Baneblade *Fist of Faith* from capture by heaving it back over the Imperial ramparts, but killed a score of defenders in the process. During the assault on the Lightning Canyons of Zorgan, the Crimson Reaper ruined a carefully-laid Cadian ambush by opening up on the Eldar vanguard before they had walked into the jaws of the trap. Though the Freeblade's might helped the Imperials win the day, the Knight accounting for no fewer than three Wraithknights, the Imperium's losses were much higher that they might otherwise have been. When the battle for the ancient hive city of Cascadian came to a bloody conclusion, the Crimson Reaper slew the Warlord Syorkor. Though this was a great victory, the Rithguard Crusade's Warmaster, Honlo, had hoped to publicly humble Syorkor in a trial before executing him, a path denied to him when the Freeblade crushed the Traitor Legionnaire underfoot.

Little is known about the Crimson Reaper or the Noble that pilots it. He is seldom, if ever, seen outside his Knight, and when he is he wears a full-face mask of black and red, marked with the distinctive crossed scythes of his heraldry. Rumours and stories about the Crimson Reaper are always rife among the ranks of the men he fights alongside, tales of the ominous masked Noble told and retold around campfires. Men whisper to each other that the Crimson Reaper wears a mask because he is not human, but a fearsome blood-drinking mutant cursed by his kin and cast out into the void. Others say the Freeblade is afflicted by some ancient family curse to collect the souls of those he slays, trying desperately to meet some impossible tally of death. Then there are those that insist that his Knight was once commanded by an insane Noble, and that its Throne Mechanicum has become tainted by madness. Regardless of whether or not there is any truth to these tales, the fact remains that the Crimson Reaper has a seemingly unquenchable thirst for battle, and woe betide any that stand in his way.

Marching to War

The exciting tales of honour and heroism featured throughout this companion will no doubt have kindled the desire to set loose your own collection of Imperial Knights on the tabletop battlefields of the 41st Millennium. Whether you wish to reenact the past glories of the great houses of the Imperial Knights, add one of the famous Freeblade Knights to your collection, or perhaps even form your own knightly house or forge a legend for a Freeblade Knight of your making, there are a number of handy products that will aid you in this venture.



Imperial Knights Transfer Sheet

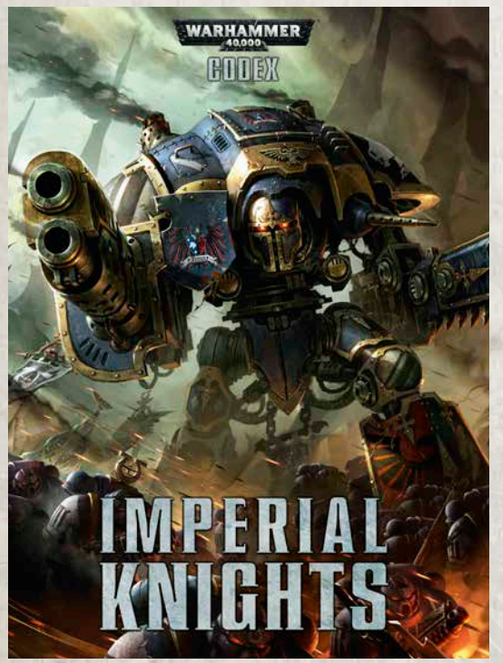
In order to make it is easy as possible to add some high quality details to your collection of Imperial Knights, the Tech Adepts of the Adeptus Mechanicus have produced a fantastic transfer sheet. This invaluable sheet is crammed full of elaborate crests, battle honours, emblems and quotes, enabling you to lavish your Knights with appropriate iconography.

The great houses of Hawkshroud, Griffith and Krast are all represented on this transfer sheet (Houses Terryn, Cadmus, Taranis and Raven all feature on the transfer sheet included in the Imperial Knight box set). The iconography for some of the lesser knightly houses are also included on this transfer sheet, including Degallio, Mortan and Vulker. Another exciting aspect of the Imperial Knights transfer sheet is the inclusion of the personal emblems borne by some of the legendary Freeblade Knights featured in this book – the White Warden, Auric Arachnus and the infamous Crimson Reaper – making it simplicity itself to add these mighty Knights to your collection.



How To Paint Citadel Miniatures: Imperial Knights

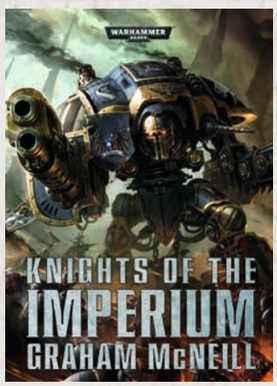
This handy digital painting guide gives detailed stage-by-stage instructions for painting no fewer than six different Knights – one each from Houses Terryn and Raven, as well as the following four Freeblades: the White Warden, the Obsidian Knight, Gerantius and Amaranthine. By using these techniques, you can paint any Knight you choose.



Codex: Imperial Knights

Codex: Imperial Knights is an essential gaming companion, enabling you to field formations – even armies – of Imperial Knights in your games of Warhammer 40,000. This book chronicles the rise of the knightly houses more than fifteen millennia ago, when Mankind first set out across the stars and established the Knight worlds. This extensive history later tells the story of the Imperial Knights' subsequent reunion with the emergent Imperium during the Great Crusade after many centuries of isolation, and how the Adeptus Mechanicus developed especially close ties with many of the knightly houses.

Codex: Imperial Knights includes full rules for using the two most common patterns of Knight suit in battle – Knights Paladin and Knights Errant – as well as profiles for the unique weaponry they utilise, such as the fearsome reaper chainsword and deadly thermal cannon. The heraldry of the great knightly houses is also presented in great detail, with further examples of the livery of Knights that have earned renown across the Imperium.



The Black Library Novella Knights of the Imperium

As the innumerable Tyranid swarms of Hive Fleet Hydra descend upon the Imperium, the noble Knights of Cadmus and Hawkshroud answer the call to war. However, recent losses suffered by Baron Roland's household have led to a weakening of their ties to the Adeptus Mechanicus – with so much at stake and the eyes of the priesthood upon them, can they put aside their own rivalries long enough to repel the hated xenos before all is lost?

