



WARHAMMER

KAUYON

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KAWYON

Thunder rolled across the planet, an omen of dooms to come. No natural phenomenon was this, but the work of warlords and killers, wielders of impossible energies and destructive weapons that tested the bounds of sanity.

Riven by the scars of uncaring industry, the fortress world's surface thrummed with barely controlled voltaic energy. Battle walkers the size of buildings stomped through haywire bastion networks and ruined hivesprawl, their clawed feet cracking the dusty ground. Weapon arms raised, ponderous but lethal; fusillades of missiles and blinding white beams blasted scabbling infantry into ragged scraps of meat.

Through it all charged the warrior knights of the Adeptus Astartes. Their heraldic colours were bright against the planet's pall of dust, cast by millennia of war. The air stung with the fumes of propellant and promethium as hurricane volleys of mass-reactive bolts and goutts of thick flame scoured the enemy from carefully prepared defences. Monastic chants mingled with the Chapter's war cries, benedictions

to the arts of death that preceded the letting of foe-blood in shocking measure. The screams of machines and living creatures mingled as chainswords chewed through alien flesh. And still this was a mere precursor to the carnage the world's defenders would wreak upon their enemies.

Out from artful concealment came Fire caste warriors by the thousand, bound tightly by a culture of honour and sacrifice. Pulse and plasma weapons flashed, blasting holes clean through the power armour of their Space Marine foes. Giant battlesuits loomed, their cutting edge weapon systems detonating battle tanks and scything through entire squads of Adeptus Astartes veterans as if they were no more than unarmoured recruits. The low hum of engines in the air preceded squadron after squadron of xenos aircraft, their strafing runs stitching white death across the trenchlands as spheres of crackling force dropped down to burn the survivors to ash.

Prefectia had been claimed by the Tau, and they had sown its reaches with hidden death.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE



TAU EMPIRE

- Aun'Va
Ethereal Supreme
- Aun'Do
Ethereal
- Commander Shadowsun
Supreme Commander
- Commander Sternshield
Commander
- Commander Swiftflame
Commander



WHITE SCARS

- Kor'sarro Khan
Captain, 3rd Company



RAVEN GUARD

- Corvin Severax
Chapter Master
- Laefin Torovac
Chaplain, 2nd Company
- Kayvaan Shrike
Captain, 3rd Company
- Kyrin Solaq
Captain, 5th Company



HOUSE TERRYYN

- Patriarch Tybalt
High King







WAR ZONE DAMOCLES

Damocles. A single word, yet synonymous with a clash of empires that has riven the Eastern Fringe. When the expansionist Tau spread across the Damocles Gulf, they seized a handful of resource-rich worlds beyond it. In doing so, they roused a galactic colossus – the Imperium of Mankind – and began a war that escalates with each new day.

When the Tau found a way to cross the deadly string of nebulae known as the Damocles Gulf, they encountered the edge of Mankind's empire. There they found a culture they considered moribund. Efficiency and innovation were qualities long forgotten on those frontier worlds; even hope had been smothered by the passing of the ages.

Though it took years to open their eyes to a new future, the people of those planets were slowly swayed by the ideals and negotiations of the Tau Water caste. The rigours of the uncaring Imperium had made their minds fertile ground for the seeds of a new order. World after world fell to the silver-tongued ambassadors of the Tau – those who resisted soon answered to the weapons of the Fire caste instead.

When word eventually reached Terra that an advanced xenos race had usurped several worlds long claimed by Mankind, the Imperium reacted as it always did – with overwhelming force. Using Warp travel as their invasion vector, a battlegroup of Adeptus Astartes and Astra Militarum routed the Tau settlers from the worlds they had claimed, then took the fight directly to the heartlands of the xenos Empire. The Tau reeled, for their defences had

been bypassed and their *kor'vattra* – their navy – hopelessly outmatched. The juggernaut of the Imperial battlegroup smashed through orbital stations and colonies alike, reducing efficient and prosperous worlds to smoking ruin.

On Dal'yth, the Damocles Crusade was finally brought to a violent halt. The Ethereal caste, supreme masters of the Tau race, had sent their finest military minds to lead the war effort there, for Dal'yth was a sept world – a jewel in the crown of the Tau Empire. Months of unbridled destruction followed as the Space Marines of the Imperium matched their aggression and strength against the might of a true Tau stronghold. In the end, it was another force entirely that brought the conflict to an end. The Tyranids, encroaching from beyond the edge of the Eastern Fringe, forced the Imperial battlegroup to disengage in order to defend the borders of their own empire.

The Tau, sorely wounded by the conflict, were content to look to their own recovery. An unofficial truce was established, and after two hundred and fifty years, the Damocles Crusade had been all but forgotten by the lords of the Imperium.



The Tau, in their ambition, did not forget. They crossed the gulf of space once more in their Third Sphere Expansion, this time led by Ethereal Supreme Aun'Va and Commander Shadowsun. As before, many worlds fell.

The wheels of Imperial justice began to turn once more – slowly, but with unstoppable force. This time, battle was met upon Agrellan, a world barren of human life but for twelve massive hive cities whose peaks scraped the cloudscapes of their own pollution. There, the Space Marines brought swift and terrible death to many a Tau cadre, with regiments of Astra Militarum and the towering Imperial Knights of House Terryn lending their strength to the Imperial cause. Once more, however, Humanity found the Tau an adaptable and cunning foe; Shadowsun's strategic brilliance saw all twelve Imperial hives conquered in a single day. Some were besieged, others were gutted due to rebellion or blown apart by weapons of planet-scarring force. The Space Marines found their supremacy on the battlefield likewise broken after the massed deployment of XVI04 Riptides – giant battlesuits so powerful they tipped the balance of the entire war the Tau's favour. Chapter Master Corvin Severax of the Raven Guard ordered the retreat, and Space Marines, Astra Militarum regiments and Imperial Knights alike made a fighting withdrawal. Renamed Mu'gulath Bay by its conquerors, Agrellan was swiftly inducted into the Tau Empire proper.

THE HUNTER HUNTED

Over the course of the war for Agrellan, Kor'sarro Khan of the White Scars swore a blood oath that he would personally take Shadowsun's head from her shoulders. His hunt was remorseless, turning the speed and aggression of the White Scars to the solitary goal of destroying the mastermind behind the Tau's war machine. Kor'sarro Khan met Shadowsun in battle several times, engaging her in person at Acacia Hive and taking battle to her personal cadre at Blackshale Ridge. Despite his best efforts, Shadowsun survived, excelling herself in both strategy and tactics and proving a worthy opponent even at close quarters. Over time, however, the White Scars inflicted such horrendous casualties upon the Tau leader's personal cadre that her cool demeanour was replaced by simmering fury. Perhaps overconfident after securing victory upon Agrellan, she soon took the bait proffered to her – the Knight world of Voltoris. There, she walked into a trap set around House Terryn's ancestral fortress. In the resultant ambush, Kor'sarro Khan wounded Shadowsun grievously, coming within a hand's breadth of decapitating her with his sword. Once more, however, she escaped. The Khan's great oath has yet to be fulfilled, and upon Prefectia, he would pursue it more determinedly than ever.





The commanders of the Imperial armies were infuriated that Agrellan had been taken at all, let alone in so short a time. After regrouping, the various dignitaries assigned to reclaim the lost Imperial worlds held a council of war. They agreed to stage a purposefully slow retreat towards the feudal planet of Voltoris, drawing Shadowsun's fleet after them into an area where she would be badly outmatched.

The Imperium laid a deadly ambush, using Voltoris' most defensible area – the fortress of Furion Peak – as its anchor. The Tau, so sure of their orbital recon scans, vastly underestimated their foes. Within the forests and gulleys of that proud mountain were Colonel Straken's Catachan Jungle Fighters, Shadow Captain Shrike's Raven Guard, and Kor'sarro Khan's White Scars, all hidden from sight by the psychic mists of the Stormseer Sudabeh.

When Shadowsun's army made planetfall at the foot of Furion Peak, the jaws of the Imperial trap closed. Being psychically inert, the Tau were baffled by the storm-magics of the White Scars, who then led the charge to engage their foes at close range. Power fists, chainswords and even combat knives took a heavy toll upon the beleaguered Tau. Shadowsun hunted down and slew Stormseer Sudabeh, causing his mist-spell to dissipate, but by then the gates of Furion Peak had yawned wide. Scores of Imperial Knights sallied forth, cannons blasting the Tau army until the forest road was a churned mess of craters. Many of Shadowsun's most trusted teams had to give their lives to secure her escape. She swore to honour their sacrifice by redoubling her efforts in the expansion of the Third Sphere.

PREFECTIA

Directly in the sights of Shadowsun's new offensive was the Dovar System. Around the star Dovaris orbited the Gilded Worlds, a system impossibly rich in precious metals. Yet mountains of platinum and gold are as meaningless to the Greater Good as notions of individual wealth. The only resources precious to the Tau are those that can be turned to their empire's expansion – such as energy sources that can drive the ever-evolving technology of their fleets.

The planet Prefectia was not only an ideal staging post from which to engineer the collapse of the entire Dovar System, it was also an untapped reservoir of geomagnetic energy. The Imperium, in its typically myopic fashion, had fashioned the world into a planet-sized fortress, for it stood between the xenos-haunted reaches of the Eastern Fringe and the Gilded Worlds. In their ignorance, they had harnessed but a fraction of Prefectia's potential and exhausted the planet's garrison the better to wage war upon Agrellan and Voltoris. This was a fact that offended and appalled the Earth caste scientists who studied it; properly terraformed, Prefectia would become a dynamo that would boost the Tau's conquest of the segmentum into overdrive.

So it was that Shadowsun's expeditionary force turned its attention to Prefectia, the united castes bringing ruin to the planet's bastion networks and munitions hives just as they had to Agrellan. The Imperial commanders, in many ways glad the Tau had pressed no further towards Dovaris, sent in their legions for a new phase of war.



As with so many other conflicts over the millennia, the planet-consuming struggle for Prefectia started with a single mission. A complex aerial ambush launched by the Raven Guard proved more than a match for the aircraft of the Tau. Many xenos craft were sent plummeting in flames towards the planet's surface, amongst them the personal Orca of honoured Ethereal Aun'Do.

As the Ethereal's transport veered through low atmosphere, Aun'Do was ejected safely, his life pod plummeting towards Prefectia's surface. Though the Air caste pilots had been found wanting, they were not without ploys of their own. Many drone decoy pods were deployed alongside Aun'Do's life pod, each identical to the Ethereal's craft. The hunt was on – either the Tau would recover their lost Ethereal in good time, and hence secure a vital boost to morale, or the Raven Guard would strike them a mortal blow.

Chapter Master Corvin Severax himself had issued orders to the strike force that sought Aun'Do; they were not only to locate the downed Tau leader, but capture rather than kill him. Over the course of the wars on either side of the Damocles Gulf, the Imperium had divined that the Tau's Ethereal caste was of spiritual as well as political importance to their society. The interrogation and dissection of such a highly placed being could yield the secrets needed to scour the Tau from the galaxy forever.

It had been Shadow Captain Solaq of the 5th Company whose Thunderhawk had sent Aun'Do planetside, and it was Solaq entrusted with his capture. Anticipating the

trajectories of the scattering life pods as best he could, Solaq launched a series of interlocking strikes against the Tau who were scrambling to retrieve their downed leader. Despite leading many of these actions personally, Solaq found his rapier-swift attacks blunted by the stealth tactics of the Burning Dawn Infiltration Cadre. Though it pained the Shadow Captain to admit it, the Tau force's own leader, Shas'ui Starshroud, was every bit as adept at guerilla warfare as he. Through battle-scarred cities and ember-lit storm fronts, the two forces clashed again and again, each trying every stratagem, ambush and feint they could devise to outguess and outmanoeuvre the other.



The ash-strewn wilderness was streaked with the blood of Space Marine and Fire caste warrior alike when Solaq finally ran his prey to ground. Yet the Tau had one last defence. As a volley of mass-reactive bolts streaked out towards the last of Aun'Do's bodyguard, a shimmering dome of force crackled into being around the Ethereal and detonated the missiles at a safe distance. Aun'Do and the Burning Dawn Infiltration Cadre fell back to a waiting Orca transport, leaving Captain Solaq seething with fury.



CHAPTER 1

THE GRAND RETAALIATION



OPENING MOVES

Intending to claim another swathe of Imperial space, Aun'Va's expeditionary force had forged a path towards the Gilded Worlds and invaded Prefectia in strength. In doing so, the Tau vanguard had crossed swords with the Adeptus Astartes. Commander Shadowsun quickly took charge, using the Imperials' belligerence against them in a series of Kauyon traps.

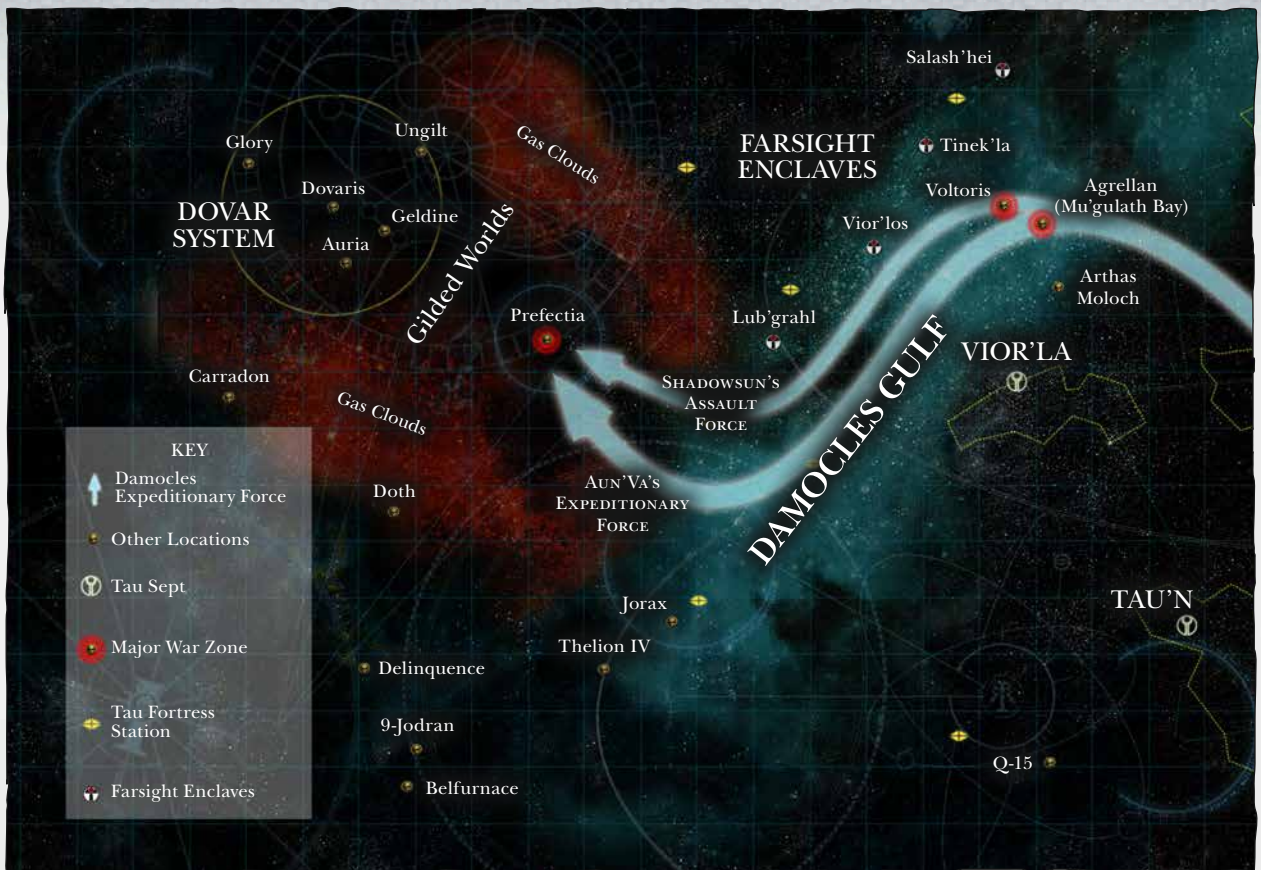
Though the initial clash upon Prefectia had grown intense, the battle for control of the surrounding worlds had barely begun. Bypassing Voltoris as they forged on through the Imperium, the Tau fleets took battle to Doth, Delinquance and Carradon, making inroads into Imperial territory so quickly that the Imperial Navy and the Astra Militarum found them nigh impossible to stop.

As for Prefectia itself, reinforcements were already inbound. No fewer than eight Space Marine Chapters engaged in simultaneous planetstrikes that struck every major landmass within the same terrifying hour. The Raven Guard were foremost amongst them. In a remote briefing with Chapter Master Severax, Kayvaan Shrike was ordered to follow up the initial strikes of Shadow Force Solaq, hunting down Tau Commanders amongst Prefectia's electromine complexes. Using the fissure known as Ventur Scar to anchor their operation, Shrike's plan was to assess the Tau, wait for them to commit in force, then dive in to capitalise on the enemy's position. However, the Raven Guard, watching carefully, found not a single vulnerability to exploit – their stealthcraft was matched step for step by that of Supreme Commander O'Shaserra.

The White Scars showed little such restraint. Despatched immediately after Warp translation from Voltoris, the Chapter sent in as many warriors as it could. Kor'sarro Khan organised sweeping assaults across the planet, but took only his most trusted hunters on the quest to slay Commander Shadowsun. With him rode a Stormlance Battle Demi-company of the 3rd, elements of the 1st Company and a Speartip Strike. Each of the White Scars was anxious to strike a decisive blow before their Raven Guard allies emerged from their hideouts.

At the mention of Shadowsun's name, the Khan's blood ran hot, and his mood became stormy and dark. The grudging respect he felt for her tenacity and skill had not dimmed his desire to claim her head. Yet he would rather it be the glorious blade Moonfang that took her life, not some soot-blackened knife or a bolt in the back. She was a formidable foe, and deserved the clean death he had sworn to exact. The 3rd Company had seen their brothers in the Raven Guard fight with astonishing skill and speed, but that did not mean the White Scars admired their way of war. To hide in the shadows, to watch and wait like assassins in the dark; these notions did not sit well with the Khan.





Having engaged her twice before, Kor'sarro Khan knew his foe Shadowsun well enough. He resolved not to strike straight at the city-sized command nexus to the south-east of the electromine complexes. The chances of her being in so obvious a locale were slim to none, and in his opinion, the location was almost certainly the bait for a trap. Instead, the Khan sought to strike the smaller forces she had deployed around the Southern Scars, hoping to drive his nemesis from hiding – or bring such destruction to her people that she had no choice but to meet him in battle.

Within hours of making planetfall in the no man's land east of Atlassi Hive, the White Scars had identified three Tau outposts in their proximity, in addition to the command nexus. These outposts, each consisting of several walled hexagonal strongholds reminiscent of the castles of Voltoris, were standing vigil over the speedways that linked the hives of the Southern Scars. It amused the Khan to see the Tau adopting the use of defensive structures similar to those that had served Humanity since the days of its infancy; each stronghold had battlements and disc-like towers from which the Tau could rain fire upon any who sought to bypass them. A formidable tactic, to be sure, but one that the speed and ferocity of the White Scars had been honed for millennia to break wide open.

The Khan took the measure of his prey like a circling eagle. He dispatched his ground forces from Thunderhawk landing sites, giving the Tau outposts a wide berth and attacking them from several directions at once. Yet the hexagonal fortifications too were traps, artifices of deceptive lethality laid as lures for the unwary.

After the costly lessons of Voltoris, Shadowsun had dwelt long upon the Imperials' propensity to fortify areas of ground they considered significant. By mirroring this tactic, she led her enemies to adopt the mindset of the siege, and hence fall into a set of interlocking Kauyon traps.

The White Scars split their attack en route to the battleground. They assaulted the individual strongholds simultaneously, intending to deny them any chance of mutual support. The Khan's instructions had been to jink through enemy fire with a zig-zagging 'forked lightning' attack before gaining the walls and engaging each battlement's defenders at close quarters. But as the thrusting speartips of the White Scars assaults drew closer, they found the structures themselves rising on cushions of anti-grav energy and hovering away from them. The mobile defences slowly gathered pace as the storm of fire from the battlements thickened; they were not large structures at all, but linked collections of ramparts that broke apart and moved even as the White Scars charged.

The Tau's network of perfect geometric shapes unfolded. Battlements and towers furthest from the attackers divided and moved outward so their extended arms flanked the onrushing White Scars. Perturbed by this development, the Khan ordered his forces to split off, flanking the outstretched arms of the enemy fortifications in their turn. Tau battlesuits that had been hidden behind each arm were quick to stymie their advance, and the main thrust of each attack found itself enveloped. In moments, the White Scars were trapped in a sleeting storm of plasma that reduced their rugged transports to smoking wrecks.



THE EAGLE GAGED

The electromine complexes of the Southern Scars were of great strategic value, for the Tau had centred their colonisation efforts there. The Space Marines of the White Scars and Raven Guard Chapters, first amongst the Imperial battlegroup to make planetfall, found themselves assailed by a series of carefully prepared traps. Cloaked by wide-spectrum stealth fields, the Tau cadres hidden within the canyons and fissures only revealed themselves once the Imperials attacked O'Shaserra's 'outposts'. Emboldened by these sudden displays of force, the Tau defending the mobile bases surrounded those foes that had sought to do the same to them.

VENTUR SCAR

Strike Force Torovac



Strike Force Shrike



Bladewing Assault Brotherhood



Labyrinthus Demensia

ATLASSI HIVE

Strike Force Kor'sarro



VAEGRUS SCAR

SAMSHEN HIVE

HERACLOS HIVE

ELICIDUS SCAR

KEY

Tau Deployment



Tau Outposts



Raven Guard Deployment



White Scars Deployment



Goliath's Eye
Electromine Complex

ONTUR SCAR



Hunter Contingent Swiftflame

AQUILLON HIVE

Tau Extraction
Zone

Aun'Do
Crash Site

Siphonid
Complex

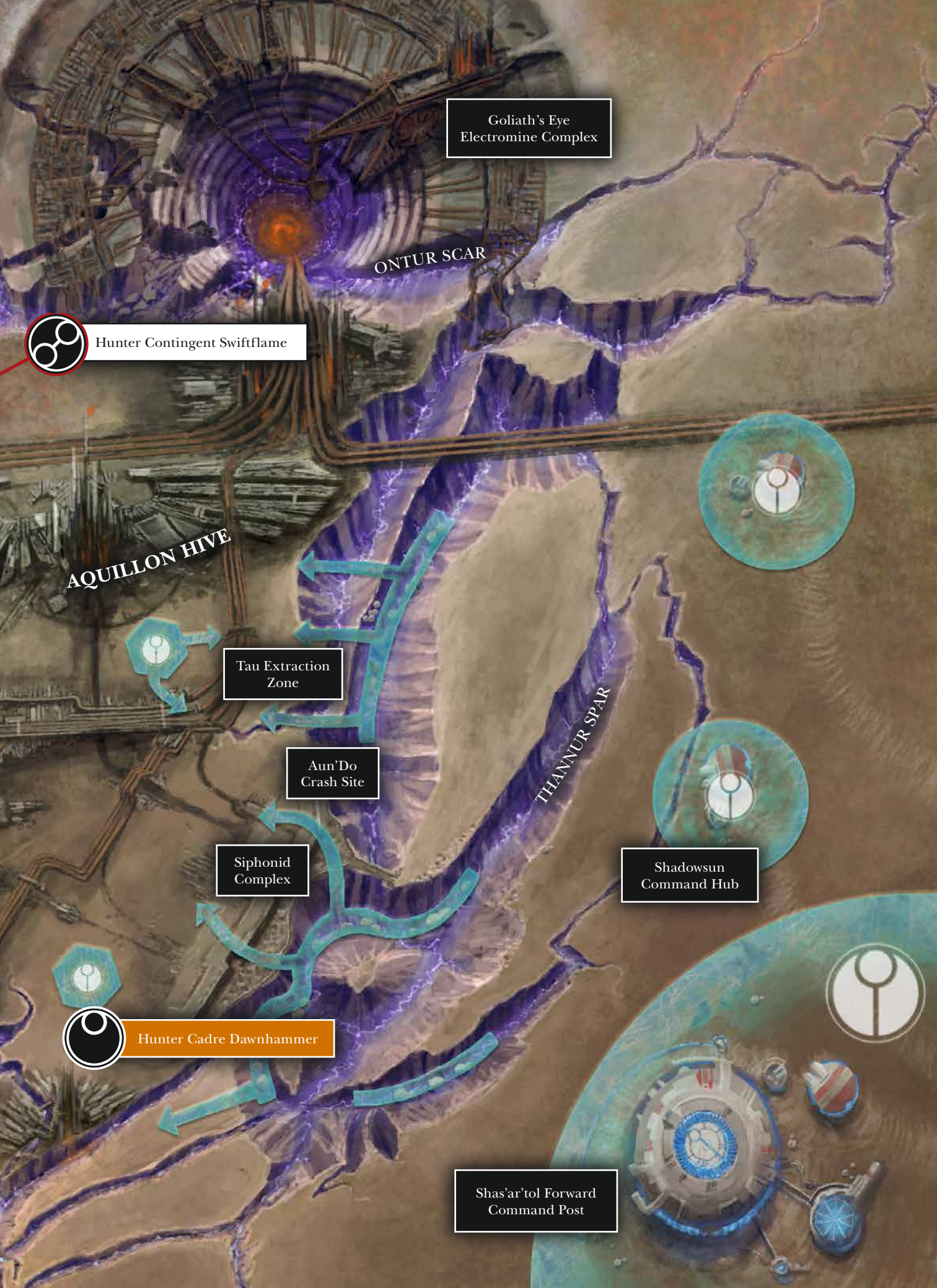
Shadowsun
Command Hub



Hunter Cadre Dawnhammer

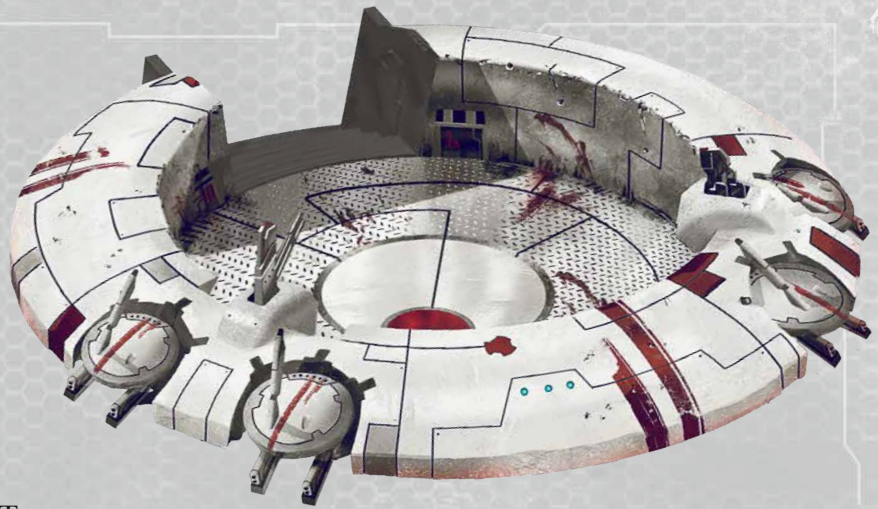
Shas'ar'tol Forward
Command Post

THANNUR SPAR



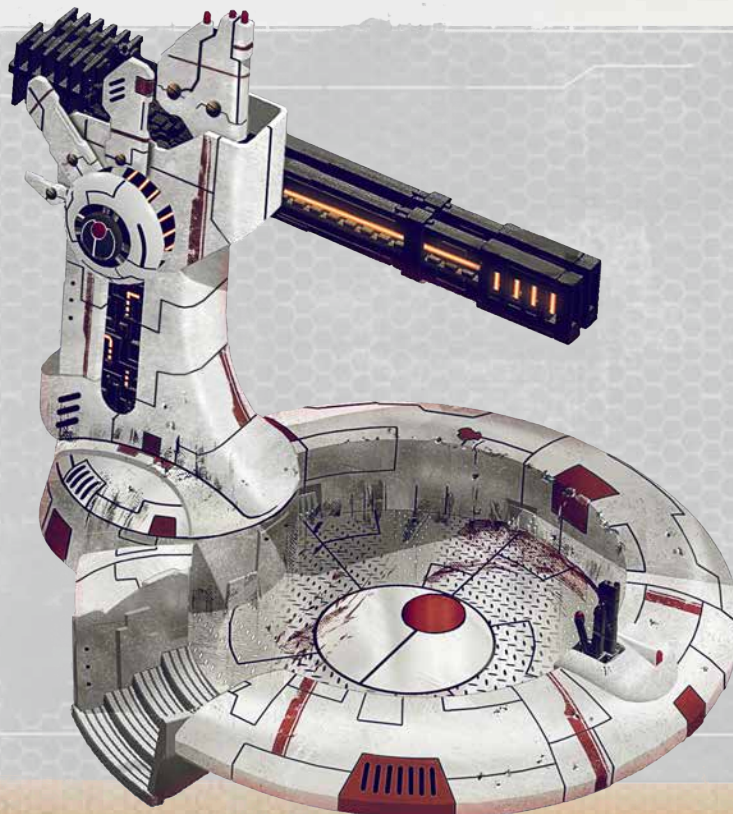
TAU DEFENCE NETWORKS

In keeping with their overall approach to war doctrine, the Fire caste make use of highly mobile fortifications. Held aloft and propelled across the battlefield by carefully stabilised grav-repulsor engines, these self-contained redoubts can be used to attack, defend, or lure in enemy forces the better to ensure their destruction.



TIDEWALL DRONEPORT

The Tidewall Droneport nests four Drones around its circumference. These supporting assets can detach at a single command, swiftly redeploying in order to add their firepower or support functions wherever they are most needed. All the while, the Tau aboard the platform continue to hammer their foes with shots, protected from the furious return fire of the foe by the mobile bunker in which they crouch.

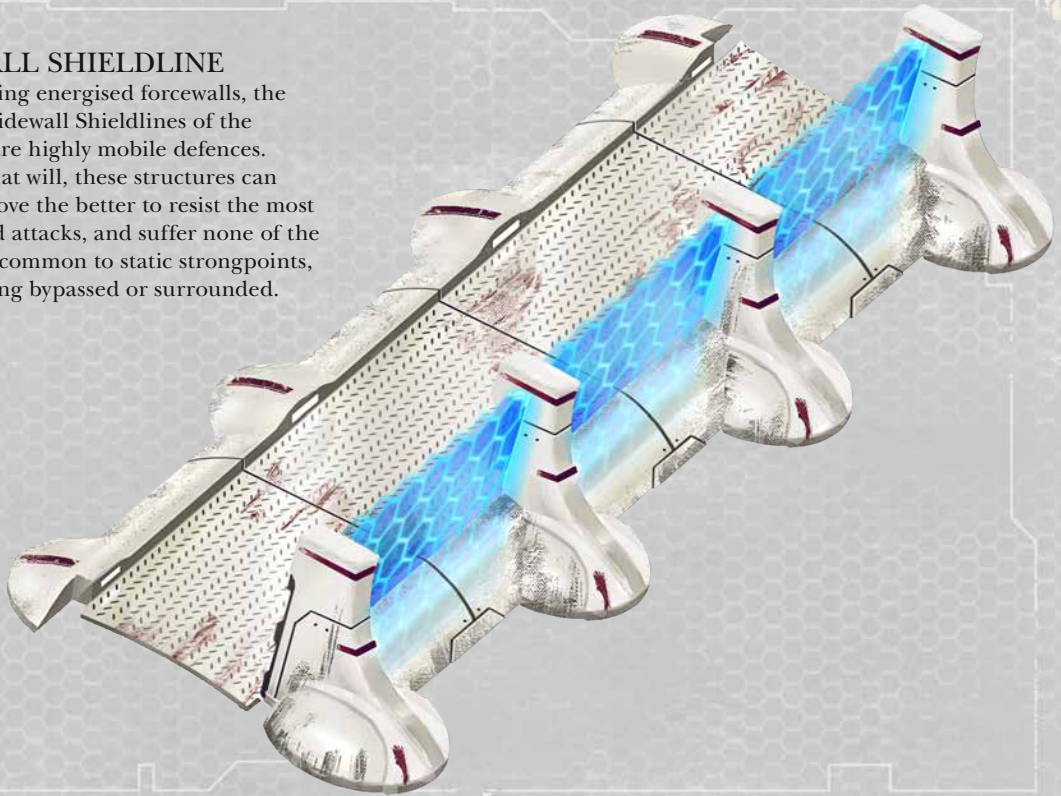


TIDEWALL GUNRIG

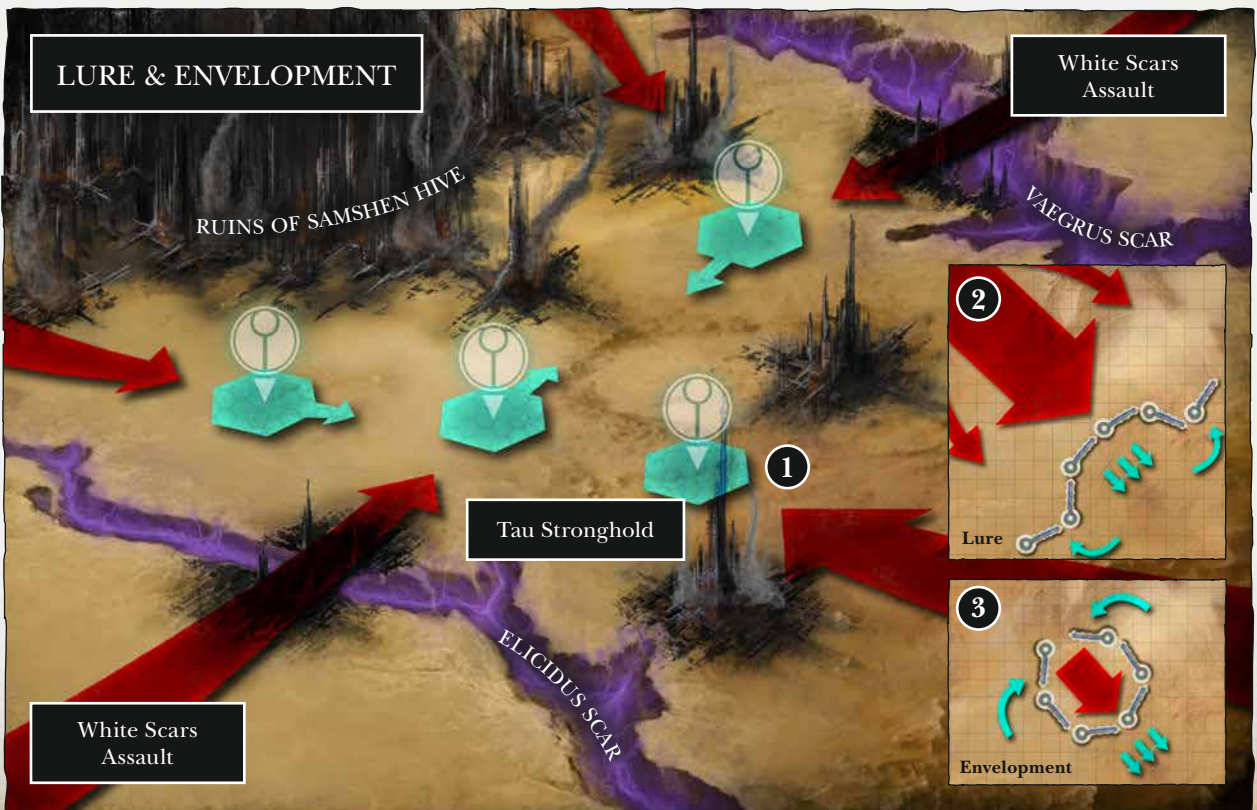
The fearsome firepower of the railgun is the bane of all who face the Tau in battle. Able to massacre infantry with its airbursting submunitions, or destroy even the heaviest tanks with a single solid round, the railgun is amongst the most potent battlefield weapons in the galaxy. Mounted upon a mobile gunrig, it becomes deadlier still, for its ability to support the infantry aboard their floating bunker means that there is no foe the Fire caste warriors and their Tidewall Gunrigs cannot overcome.

TIDEWALL SHIELDLINE

Incorporating energised forcewalls, the hovering Tidewall Shieldlines of the Fire caste are highly mobile defences. Relocating at will, these structures can flex and move the better to resist the most determined attacks, and suffer none of the drawbacks common to static strongpoints, such as being bypassed or surrounded.



LURE & ENVELOPMENT



טו'ב'ט

THE SONS OF THE GREAT KHAN

Like the spear hurled from a hunter's hand, the White Scars punch through the enemy's defences to pierce the heart and deliver a deathblow. For all their lethality and speed, however, the sons of Chogoris on Prefectia faced a challenge more deadly than any they had known before – an entire world of traps set to ensnare, confuse and destroy.

Mounted upon their mechanical steeds, the White Scars roar into battle. The snarl of their bikes' engines is like the growling of hunting beasts, while the hammer of their bolters rings the death knell for foes beyond number. Drawn from the nomadic horse-tribes of their home world, Chogoris, the White Scars are the finest bike-mounted warriors in all the Imperium. They use every iota of their skill as plains hunters to stalk and encircle their quarry before making a killing strike.

The White Scars do not simply mount headlong charges against the odds; though they might appear tribal and barbaric to outsiders, every Space Marine in the White Scars Chapter possesses a deep-rooted pragmatism and a predator's cunning. When they strike, the White Scars are like the storm, their speed that of the howling wind, their strength that of the sky-shattering thunderbolt. Yet they always strive to ensure that the enemy have been scouted, their strength gauged and their measure taken before battle begins.

It was a strike force centred around the warriors of the White Scars' 3rd Company that came to make war upon Prefectia. These huntsmen had already had ample opportunity to learn the strengths and weaknesses of their prey. Led by the noble Kor'sarro Khan, this Great Hunt comprised warriors who had fought in several major engagements around the Damocles Gulf. When Commander Shadowsun led her mighty coalition against the hives of Agrellan, Khan and his warriors had been there, fighting up until the very last moment against the invading xenos. Following that crushing defeat, the Imperium turned the tables upon O'Shaserra and caught her forces in a trap upon Voltoris: there too had fought the Khan and his men.

Prefectia would thus be the third world upon which Kor'sarro's hunt had battled the Tau, and the third upon which his vow to take the head

of the xenos commander would be tested. Though the White Scars won a decisive victory upon Voltoris, Kor'sarro Khan still had a warrior oath to fulfil. This fact did not sit well with the fiery-tempered White Scar, and he would not allow Shadowsun to slip through his fingers again.



Another concern chafed at the White Scars as they deployed onto the dust-choked surface of Prefectia. Far away, across the vast gulfs of space, their home world faced attack from an overwhelming force of Chaos renegades. Word had reached the Khan's fellow captains of this fight for survival, and many of the White Scars were desperate to discharge their oaths of duty in the Damocles war zone so that they might make haste back to Chogoris. They wished to lend their strength to the defence of their home world, or to avenge their brothers should the unthinkable have come to pass.

Thus, all of the White Scars' frustration and anger was directed at the Tau upon Prefectia, and especially against their leader, Commander Shadowsun. Here was a foe who had lived far beyond her deserving span, despite the best efforts of the Khan and his warriors. In doing so, she kept them from the defence of their home world, trapping them in a faraway war for much longer than any could have believed possible. The prey's stubborn tenacity and evasive cunning had goaded the White Scars to new heights of fury, and so they rode out from their first engagement on Prefectia with a righteous fire burning in their breasts. They would run their prey to ground at last, and return her head to Chogoris in triumph.

Sol'kha saw the enemy ahead, a scattering of xenos line infantry filling the air around him with howling volleys of fire. He grunted as shots glanced from his steed's armoured fairing, sending glowing shards of ceramite whipping past his head. Sol'kha knew well that the accursed Tau guns could put a round clean through a battle-brother's armour at this range, and that something more than a headlong charge was needed here. To his left, one of Prefectia's massive pipeways rushed past, its rusted enormity a blur in his peripheral vision. An access ramp sprouted from the pipe's flank. Perfect.

Bellowing his tribe's war cry to the storm-wracked skies, Sol'kha roared up the ramp, its mass shielding him from the flickering fire of the foe. His bike smashed through the brittle railing at its peak, and suddenly he was aloft, wheels churning the air as lightning tore the clouds above. Sol'kha's bike slammed down into the Tau with a horrific crunch, armour crumpling and bones breaking as its sheer bulk crushed two of them into the floor. His roaring chainsword took the head of a third, and then he was through, throwing his steed into a long skid as he wheeled to face the survivors. Dust rose in a cloud as he gunned his engine and roared back toward the reeling xenos, his feral grin a white slash in his blood-spattered face.



WHITE SCARS CHAPTER ORGANISATION



SCARBLADE STRIKE FORCE

COMMAND

Though always despatched at the behest of the Great Khan, a Scarblade Strike Force will often incorporate additional command elements to ensure its strategic efficacy in the field.

STRIKE FORCE COMMAND

LIBRARIUS CONCLAVE

RECLUSIAM
COMMAND SQUAD

CORE

The backbone of any Scarblade Strike Force is a compact force of Space Marines. Often drawn from the Battle Companies of the White Scars, these formations display an exceptional level of speed and mobility.

HUNTING FORCE

BATTLE DEMI-COMPANY

STORMLANCE BATTLE
DEMI-COMPANY

OUTRIDERS

Embodying the speed at the heart of the White Scars' way of war, the Outriders ensure that a Scarblade Strike Force will always be able to outmanoeuvre its luckless foes.

STORMBRINGER
SQUADRON

SPEARTIP STRIKE

STORM WING

BRAVES

Often, a Scarblade Strike Force will incorporate elements of the 1st and 10th Companies, providing veteran killers or stealth scouting assets as the situation requires.

STRIKE FORCE ULTRA

1ST COMPANY
TASK FORCE

10TH COMPANY
TASK FORCE

ARMOURY

It is rare for a Scarblade Strike Force to take the field without supporting elements from the Chapter Armoury present to annihilate the heavy armour and fortifications of the foe.

ARMoured TASK FORCE

LAND RAIDER
SPEARHEAD

ANTI-AIR
DEFENCE FORCE

SUPPRESSION FORCE

STRIKE FORCE KOR'SARRO



Lightning speed and punishing strength characterised the White Scars army that fought on Prefectia. Under the command of the mighty Kor'sarro Khan himself, this Scarblade Strike Force consisted primarily of warriors from the proud and noble 3rd Company. At their side fought supporting elements of the 1st and 10th Companies, while aerial support was lent from the Chapter's Armoury. The Khan's force, built to hunt dangerous prey, was skilled at running a foe to ground and striking hard and fast when the quarry was cornered. Being warriors of the Adeptus Astartes, the Khan's strike force could swiftly turn their hands to whatever task was required; in battles such as Paragus Canyon or the fight for the Andrachon Line on Agrellan, they had fought defensive actions with all the determination and tenacity expected of the Emperor's finest. However, these warriors were huntsmen through and through, and their greatest skill lay in the swift and deadly pursuit of the foe.

At the core of this Great Hunt stood a Stormlance Battle Demi-company, made up of 3rd Company battle-brothers who had fought beneath the Khan's banner on countless worlds beyond the Damocles Gulf. Seasoned veterans of battling the Tau, every warrior amongst them knew to expect cunning, evasion and overwhelming enemy

firepower. Yet they stood undaunted, more determined than ever before to strike down the xenos menace that bedevilled this part of the Emperor's realm. At their head stood Chaplain Jaikhos, a clenched fist of a warrior who, rumour had it, had never shown doubt or uncertainty. Normally sparing with his words, Jaikhos became a bellowing terror in battle, an inspirational firebrand whose transformation was so complete that many amongst the 3rd Company claimed the spirits of war possessed the Chaplain at such times. Beneath Jaikhos' command were three Tactical Squads, proudly displaying the iconography of the White Scars Chapter and the 3rd Company. Each squad rode to war in a Rhino APC to ensure their ability to keep pace with the Khan's rapid way of war, and each bore deadly weaponry, in the form of bolters and flammies, with which to hunt their prey.

Alongside this mighty core of superhuman warriors stood the battle-brothers of Devastator Squad Sahak, who raced to the front line aboard their Razorback, *Vicious Knife*. This small band of expert marksmen brought their potent firepower to their brothers' aid, providing the Stormlance Battle Demi-company with tactical versatility and the much-needed ability to eliminate Tau battlesuits and gunships from extreme range.



The final element of the demi-company, the Land Speeder, *Pale Claw*, was deftly piloted by a pair of battle-brothers who served as advance scouts for their formation and lent their craft's armaments to the fight.

The inclusion of a Storm Wing provided essential aerial support in a theatre of war with constantly shifting air superiority. Comprised of the Stormraven, *Khan's Fury*, and two Stormtalon escorts, *Firebolt Unbound* and *Cloudsword*, the gunships' speed and firepower allowed them to serve in roles as varied as aerial interdiction, ground attack, long-ranged reconnaissance and tank hunting. Here was the perfect instrument with which to strike a mortal blow against any exposed prey.

Finally, Kor'sarro's Spertip Strike formation provided the lightning-fast huntsmen for which his Chapter was famed. Consisting of Land Speeders, several bands of battle-brothers mounted upon bikes, and a detachment of Scout Bikers from the 10th Company, this force possessed sufficient speed and firepower to engage any foe. These warriors could outflank the enemy, encircle their forces, punch through battle lines or eliminate support elements, all the while supporting the resilience and firepower of the rest of the strike force.

MASTER OF THE HUNT

The leader of the Great Hunt, Kor'sarro Khan himself, stands amongst the most lauded heroes of the Imperium. As direct and unyielding as a well-forged blade, the Khan is a warrior of violent determination with no time for the niceties of diplomacy or courtly manners. He is a master huntsman whose every thought is bent toward decapitating his oath-sworn prey. Whether mounted upon his famed bike, *Moondrakkan*, or hurtling into battle in the armoured hold of a Rhino or Stormraven Gunship, the Khan runs his prey to ground with the unflinching tenacity of a born killer. When battle is inevitably joined, his revered blade, *Moonfang*, whistles out in a silver arc to claim the head of his prey with unerring lethality.

Yet the Khan's barbaric exterior hides a deep spirituality and strategic nous that makes him a far deadlier opponent than he might at first seem, for he is also an inspiring leader and cunning tactician. Kor'sarro Khan personifies the tip of the hunter's spear, the hardened point of the blade, and his warriors follow him with a devotion bordering upon worship.

THE BREAKING OF THE BLADES

In the macrostrategy of Kauyon, the Patient Hunter, none were more skilled than Commander Shadowsun – just as there were no souls on the Eastern Fringe more proficient in lightning-fast attacks than Kor'sarro Khan. On Prefectia, these two extraordinary hunters' contrasting skills would be tested against each other once more.

O'Shaserra's traps had been long set, their resolutions rehearsed over and over. Wherever the Adeptus Astartes broke out of her kill-zones, cadres hidden in the canyons and fissures of Prefectia's crust sped in to intercept, closing the net once more. Hundreds of Space Marines died in these opening stages of the war, and a great many more were sorely wounded. Where the mobile defence networks closed upon their prey, the crossfire was so intense that they could hardly reposition without drifting over the pulse-blasted corpses of the fallen. For the moment, Shadowsun remained aloof, content to watch the carnage on her Drone-net relays with a faint smile on her lips.

The Khan, however, was an enemy of surpassing skill. The huntmaster had led his Stormlance Battle Demi-company against the outposts west of Siphonid Complex, a long dam-like structure of ruined habs and generatoriums. With the base being closest to the Tau command nexus hovering in the south-east, the Khan considered the site the most likely to receive swift reinforcement. Rather than assign one of his sergeants to its destruction, he took that mission upon himself, hoping to find a challenge worthy of his blade in the process. He was not disappointed.

The White Scars Captain had organised his attack well in advance. His demi-company roared from the lee of the Siphonid Complex to fall upon the grouped hexagon networks of the Tau. At the same time, a Speartip Strike of bikers peeled off from the strike forces negotiating Vaegrus Scar's labyrinthine infrastructure, taking a sharp eastern course to fall upon the Tau site from the west. The Land Speeders of the Khan's Stormbringer Squadron blasted from the ash storm to the south, effortlessly carving over the crevasses that radiated from Thannur Spar.

The three-pronged attack closed on the Tau outpost with perfect timing. Bike-mounted hunters jinked through incoming pulse rifle fire, leaning in the saddle and using the solid weight of their machines as a shield. Even those knocked down by direct hits righted their bikes and rejoined the attack, for their power armour was proof against the small arms fire of the Tau atop the battlements. The Khan's demi-company attacked from upwind, firing the smoke launchers of their Rhinos and Razorbacks one after another to ensure a thick grey haze preceded their assault. The tactic proved invaluable – without the swirling shroud, the hypervelocity railguns atop the Tau's gun





tower would have crippled the transports easily enough, stalling the Khan's advance and destroying the cohesion of his assault. Their deadly projectiles dented and even laid open the transports in places, but did not stop them. The Razorback *Vicious Knife* slewed to a halt, its side doors thrown open long enough for two lascannon-armed Devastators to take their shots. Twin beams of intense light pierced the smoke, and the barrels of the railgun atop the gun tower crashed down in flame to send Fire Warriors scurrying for safety.

The shas'ui in command of the defence network made note of the terrain and the bikers' speed, and was still confident he had time to blunt and encircle the incoming assault. The missile fire of the Crisis Battlesuits supporting the main garrison sent many oncoming vehicles pin-wheeling into the ash drifts – their intent was to cut the leading elements from each advancing column until their charges were neutralised completely. As the Tidewall Defence Network began to unfold, the firepower of the Tau garrison thickened with deadly effect, yet they had not taken into account the superior skill the White Scars possess in navigating their steeds through war-torn battlefields. With a series of jinks, slides and low turns, the bikers pushed their vehicles to their maximum and hit the defences several moments sooner than the Tau had anticipated.

Even as the ranked Fire Warriors atop the battlements scabbled for their photon grenades, the White Scars were upon them. Battlesuits boosted away, jets flaring, just as the Stormbringer Squadron flew out of the clouds behind them, missiles punching diagonally down to scatter the

Crisis suits in disarray. Red-helmeted veterans roared out of the skies alongside the squadron's Stormtalon Gunship, bolt pistols hammering deadly explosions into the jet packs of their battlesuited prey. Their chainswords were not far behind, whirring around to finish the job wherever their headlong charge sent Crisis suits sprawling.



The Tau gun-sites were soon under fierce attack, the jaws of each trap broken wide. Each rampart structure was hit by hissing melta beams that forced breaches in its outer walls. Rhino personnel carriers followed close behind – teams of Tactical Marines burst out from the side doors to shoulder through the wall breaches in cherry-red gobbets of molten alloy. The Tau Fire Warriors recovered quickly, pouring fire down into the Space Marines clambering up onto the ramparts. Here and there, the defenders sent a White Scar tumbling away, but with the Hunting Force stitching explosive bolts across the battlements, the garrison found it practically impossible to repel the attack. The Khan himself gained the walls, Moonfang swinging in bloody arcs as he roared his Chapter's battle cry. When Terminator-armoured veterans teleported in to join their Captain atop the battlements, the butchery of the Tau garrison force began in earnest.

TRAPS AND SNARES

One of Shadowsun's carefully prepared ambushes had been smashed apart when Kor'sarro Khan's White Scars had struck at the west of the Siphonid Complex, but in doing so, the huntmaster had shown his hand. The retaliation that followed was sudden, pitiless, and devastating – the hallmarks of a Kauyon brought to deadly fruition.

Commander Shadowsun had been watching with great interest as the White Scars attacked. By monitoring which of her bases fared the worst, she divined the most likely whereabouts of her nemesis, for the Khan was the most fearsome of his kind. He would soon find himself assailed in turn, and without a shred of mercy.

O'Shaserra's cadres were hidden by overlapping stealth fields in the fissures running north to south across the blasted landscape. Ever since the Imperials entered low orbit, these independent armies had lain in wait, ready to reinforce any one of the three outposts O'Shaserra had set up as bait for her pursuers. The strongholds, each a self-contained snare, were themselves lures for a larger trap.

Commander Shadowsun and her forces moved in as soon as the Khan's warriors had disembarked from their vehicles. Borne by a shoal of sleek Devilfish transports, Shadowsun's cadre reached the site of the Khan's attack just as the Tau garrison was taking its last stand. Her personal cadre disembarked silently, its Stealth Teams hidden by electromag bafflers as they encircled the battle, while the Riptide kept its distance behind a ruin to hide its location.

As the White Scars closed in, the Fire caste garrison prepared to sell their lives as dearly as possible. It came as a great relief when the Tau turned to find an entire army of allies right behind them. The first sign of Shadowsun's attack was the hissing roar of fusion blasters – aimed not at the White Scars, but at the Tidewall Gunrig. Already damaged, the tower crumpled, toppled, and crashed down. Shouting for aerial backup, Kor'sarro Khan took the head from the last Tau on the rampart a moment before the tower's immense weight smashed down, crushing the Khan and his Terminator comrades into the dirt. Stealth Teams boosted onto the ruined battlements, blasting White Scars from the walkways and pouring burst cannon fire into their sprawling bodies. The Riptide emerged from a distant ruin, heavy burst cannon spitting plasma.

The White Scars were making their last stand when the Khan's emergency request for air cover quickly saw Imperial gunships hurtle in by the dozen. Their strafing runs broke the noose Shadowsun was pulling tight around the Khan's men, driving away her Air caste cover and forcing her to withdraw to safer ground. O'Shaserra had lain low her nemesis, but their vendetta was far from resolved.



Servo-motors growled in Brother Jodhrai's battle plate as he heaved a thick slab of metal to one side, its edge still glowing white-hot from the Tau commander's fusion weapon strike. Nearby, half-buried veterans in Terminator armour shifted and crunched their way out from the rubble of the collapsed tower. Jodhrai left them to it, for there was another fallen warrior he sought. He cut through a spar of metal with a sweep of his power sabre, and Apothecary Charadeh aided him with its remains to lever aside another chunk of fallen building.

There he was. The Khan, dust-streaked and broken, a gore-slicked wedge of metal sticking out from his chest. He was as still as the grave-statue on some departed hero's mausoleum. Jodhrai's breath caught as he stepped closer to scan his Captain's body. Charadeh's narthecium drill whirred to life, just in case the warrior's harvest was due.

'Get that blasted thing away!' yelled the Khan as he surged upright, eyes wide in the blood-streaked, hair-matted mask of his face. Grabbing Jodhrai's chestplate, the Captain yanked himself forward, gritting his teeth as he slid from the metal spar that had impaled his torso. Fluids bubbled pink from the wound as he vented a bellow of anger and pain.

'The xenos hag must die!' roared the Khan, blood flying from his lips. 'Even if we have to scour every inch of this system. Even should Chogoris burn without us. We will find her, and we will take our revenge!'





BLADES OF CORAX

Shadow-shrouded killers, the battle-brothers of the Raven Guard use stealth, daring, and rapid redeployment to pick their foes apart. The enemy are left reeling, unable to execute their own plans for fear of showing their backs to the gleaming talons of the Raven Guard. Before long, all that remain are corpses left for carrion birds.

Cold, calculating and utterly lethal, the Raven Guard are a measured instrument of death to their foes. In these dark-eyed warriors' hearts, the light of the Imperium burns just as hot as it does in any other Chapter, yet the Raven Guard choose to fight from the shadows. Such were the teachings of their Primarch, Corvus Corax, a warrior whose talents in the art of stealth were so great no mortal could perceive his presence unless he willed it. Corax taught his sons the way of cunning and misdirection, forging his Legion into a subtler weapon than those of his brothers. It was well that he did.

Degeneration in the Chapter's gene-seed – possibly brought about following the catastrophes of the Horus Heresy – saw the Raven Guard left with a paucity of genetic material with which to implant new recruits. The Chapter survived its misfortunes, but with a reduced ability to replace its losses that meant that, for the Raven Guard more than any other Chapter, the life of every battle-brother was precious.

Despite all this, the Raven Guard never shrank from battle. If the moment required it, the scions of Corax hurled themselves headlong into battle with murderous intensity, facing the most terrible odds and tearing bloody victory from the battlefield with their talons unsheathed. However, where some Chapters met their foes head on as a matter of course, the Raven Guard always sought to stack the odds in their favour before proceeding to take apart the enemy. Over the millennia, such doctrines have made the Raven Guard an insular brotherhood, their warriors quiet and withdrawn. They keep their own counsel and share strategic intelligence with their allies only when necessary, a tendency that infuriates their brother Chapters to the point of genuine mistrust.

Such was certainly the case in the wars around the Damocles Gulf. Led by their Chapter Master, Corvin Severax, the warriors of the Raven Guard had now fought in countless engagements against the Tau of the Third Sphere Expansion. However,

though they had battled alongside the White Scars, the Knights of House Terryn and other Imperial forces many times, the Raven Guard remained guarded and aloof. They struck at their foes without warning and often without support, and engaged in military actions without informing the wider Imperial army of their plans.

At times, if they believed that their vox channels were compromised and that the Tau might be listening, the Raven Guard even told their allies one thing and then did entirely another. There could be no doubt that the methods of the Raven Guard worked – that much was attested to by the tally of Tau lives they took – but their successes came at a cost. Mistrust ran within the very blood of the Raven Guard, the betrayals of the Horus Heresy stamped upon their gene-seed for all time. Thus – hampered by a lack of communication and empathy – the Raven Guard drove a wedge between themselves and the rest of the Imperial crusade with each new display of disregard.

Vorsus lay on his front, limbs splayed and helmeted head turned to one side. He had slowed the beats of his hearts until they were all but imperceptible, engaging his sus-an membrane to simulate a state of near death while forcing his mind to remain conscious. It was not a pleasant experience, but his discomfort was of no matter. Shadow Captain Shrike had taught him well.

Two vox pips sounded in his helm, a subtle signal from his brothers. As though echoing down a long corridor, the Raven Guard heard footfalls around his prone form, and the muffled chatter of xenos tongues. A foot kicked him in the ribs with a dull clang of metal on metal, though his numbed body felt nothing. Another vox pip came, then a second later the thunder of bolter fire filled the air.

Instantly, Vorsus willed his system to awaken, his consciousness surging to the fore as if he surfaced from deep, dark waters. His twin hearts thumped, then pounded as they flooded his tissues with hyper-oxygenated blood and stims. Within his helm, Vorsus' black eyes snapped open, and a crackle of augmented adrenaline shot down his arms as his lightning claws flared to coruscating life.

Suddenly under fire from all sides, the xenos had turned their backs on the corpse in their midst, firing their energy carbines into the ruins that surrounded them. Now Vorsus leapt to his feet, ramming his claws through his first victim's back before the Tau even realised their danger. He ripped his fists outward, xenos blood jetting as his prey was torn in half like damp parchment. Spinning on his heel amid the rain of vitae, Vorsus swept his claws low, scything the legs out from beneath another of his foes and sending the screaming alien crashing to the ground. With yells of alarm, the Tau began to turn back towards this new threat in their midst, but Vorsus knew they would not be quick enough. The trap was sprung, the prey were caught. Now all that remained was the killing.



BRETHREN OF THE RAVEN GUARD



ARMOURY

Master of the Forge

Techmarines
 Servitors
 Battle Tanks
 Land Raiders
 Gunships
 Centurion War suits

CHAPTER COMMAND
 Corvin Severax
Chapter Master

Honour Guard
 Chapter equerries, serfs and
 Servitors



LIBRARIUS

Chief Librarian

Epistolaries
 Codiciers
 Lexicaniums
 Acolytum



RECLUSIAM

Master of Sanctity

Chaplains



APOTHECARION

Chief Apothecary

Apothecaries

1ST COMPANY
'The Blackwings'

VETERAN
 COMPANY
 Vykaz Kaed
Lord of Deliverance

Veterans
 Dreadnoughts

2ND COMPANY
'The Shadowborne'

BATTLE
 COMPANY
 Aajz Solari
Master of Secrets

Tactical Squads
 Assault Squads
 Devastator Squads
 Dreadnoughts

3RD COMPANY
'The Ghoststalkers'

BATTLE
 COMPANY
 Kayvaan Shrike
Master of the Ambush

Tactical Squads
 Assault Squads
 Devastator Squads
 Dreadnoughts

4TH COMPANY
'The Silent'

BATTLE
 COMPANY
 Aethon Shaan
Master of the Fleet

Tactical Squads
 Assault Squads
 Devastator Squads
 Dreadnoughts

5TH COMPANY
'The Watchful'

BATTLE
 COMPANY
 Kyrin Solaq
Master of the Marches

Tactical Squads
 Assault Squads
 Devastator Squads
 Dreadnoughts

6TH COMPANY
'The Darkened Blades'

RESERVE
 TACTICAL
 COMPANY
 Syras Colfaen
Master of the Rites

Tactical Squads
 Dreadnoughts

7TH COMPANY
'The Whisperclaws'

RESERVE
 TACTICAL
 COMPANY
 Aevaz Qeld
Master of Lies

Tactical Squads
 Dreadnoughts

8TH COMPANY
'The Unseen'

RESERVE
 ASSAULT
 COMPANY
 Reszasz Krevaan
Lord Executioner

Assault Squads

9TH COMPANY
'The Dirgesingers'

RESERVE
 DEVASTATOR
 COMPANY
 Vordin Krayn
Master of Relics

Devastator Squads
 Dreadnoughts

10TH COMPANY
'The Subtle'

SCOUT
 COMPANY
 Korvydae
Master of Recruits

Scout Squads

TALON STRIKE FORCE

COMMAND

The complex tactics of the Raven Guard require significant strategic oversight, and so the Chapter Master may decree that additional command personnel be attached to larger Talon Strike Forces.

STRIKE FORCE
COMMAND

RECLUSIAM
COMMAND SQUAD

DEMI-COMPANIES

The Raven Guard are known for incorporating members of the 10th Company more fully into their strike forces than other Chapters, as can be seen in the use of Pinion Battle Demi-companies at the core of many Talon Strike Forces.

BATTLE
DEMI-COMPANY

PINION BATTLE
DEMI-COMPANY

STEALTH

The Raven Guard are renowned throughout the Imperium for their skill in covert operations. It is the Stealth elements of their Talon Strike Forces that particularly excel in this area.

10TH COMPANY
TASK FORCE

SHADOWSTRIKE
KILL TEAM

SHADOW FORCE

ELIMINATION

When a key target is identified, Raven Guard doctrine demands a single, overwhelming strike to quickly destroy it. This is the role of the Elimination elements of a Talon Strike Force.

1ST COMPANY
TASK FORCE

RAPTOR WING

SKYHAMMER ORBITAL
STRIKE FORCE

BLADEWING ASSAULT
BROTHERHOOD

RAVENHAWK
ASSAULT GROUP

ARMOURY

Though they prefer to make war from the shadows, even the Raven Guard must deploy the roaring might of the Chapter Armoury to support their Talon Strike Forces.

STORM WING

ANTI-AIR
DEFENCE FORCE

SUPPRESSION FORCE

STRIKE FORCE TOROVAC



Ghosting through the cacophonous energy storms and maze-like ruins of Prefectia, the warriors of Strike Force Torovac had become the terror of their foes. Part of a wider Raven Guard deployment that was led by Shadow Captain Shrike and was overseen by Chapter Master Severax himself, this Talon Strike Force operated at the fore of the Chapter's offensive. With a mixture of speed and stealth, its warriors manoeuvred swiftly around their foes, using the tangled, many-levelled terrain to their advantage. Where the Tau sought to pick them off at range with their potent firepower, the Raven Guard pushed in close, forcing their enemies onto the back foot, then launching precision strafing runs to massacre them. Where the xenos attempted to surround them, the Space Marines used intelligence gathered by their Scouts to target key enemy assets, before deploying overwhelming force against the weakened section of the enemy line in order to break free. Ambushes, terror raids, feigned retreats and encircling attacks – all were employed by Strike Force Torovac to great effect, though they found that their foes were just as capable of such shadow-play as they were themselves.

The leader, and strategic genius behind this Raven Guard force, was Chaplain Laefin Torovac. Often using a jump pack to match the manoeuvrability of the Tau

Commanders he faced, Torovac was far more than just a gifted war leader. Had his faith not been so strong, the Chaplain might instead have become a Shadow Captain in his climb through the Chapter's ranks, for his tactical acumen had always been exceptional. However, the hand of the Emperor rested heavy upon Torovac's soul; though he rarely raised his voice to a shout, the zeal that burned in every word the Chaplain uttered was so powerful that he might as well have bellowed. It was for this potent mix of inspirational conviction and strategic nous that Torovac was selected to lead his brothers into battle on Prefectia.

Beneath his command were the warriors of a Pinion Battle Demi-company of the 2nd Company. The heart of this force consisted of three seasoned squads of Tactical Marines, each warrior trained to expert levels in the shadowed doctrines of his Chapter. These warriors moved quickly, even through the tumbledown ruins and chasm-rent wilds of Prefectia, and their abilities in battle were beyond reproach. The remainder of the Battle Demi-company served to provide Chaplain Torovac with an excellent balance of strategic assets upon which to draw. He often took to the field at the head of the formation's Assault Squad, their jump packs allowing them to leap high over the heads of their foes and straight into the heart of battle.



This squad, and the Devastator brothers who fought alongside them, were experts in exploiting every advantage the battlefield offered, using vantage points such as rocky crags and towering ruins to get above the enemy and strike from an unexpected quarter. Finally, the Battle Demi-company's Scouts were an invaluable asset – not only could these brave young warriors counter the hit-and-run tactics of the Tau with their own, but the forward intelligence they gathered helped Chaplain Torovac to direct his brothers with confidence and cunning.

Epitomising the misdirection and sudden, lethal force that their Chapter prizes so highly, the Shadowstrike Kill Team attached to Strike Force Torovac was its secret weapon. Two squads of courageous Scouts represented the force's initial deployment, usually tasked with working their way into the enemy's rear lines. At other times, the Scout brothers were expected to act as bait for a trap, giving the impression of committing themselves rashly against superior enemy forces in order to concentrate or draw in the foe. Only when they judged the moment right would they summon their reinforcements, the Vanguard Veterans of Squads Dorovec and Caravax dropping directly into the fight with jump packs howling. Over-extended and exposed, the Tau found themselves caught between the closing talons of

the Vanguard Veterans and the Scout squads. Such had been the fate of Fireblade Nel'Shos' Strike Teams during the fight for the Voltspires; lured from amid the captured Imperial bunkers, the Fireblade's attempted Mont'ka attack soon became a disaster as his warriors were surrounded and torn apart without mercy.

Lastly – and crucially in a war zone as ever-changing as Prefectia – Strike Force Torovac was blessed with significant aerial support in the form of a Storm Wing. Accompanied by its Stormtalon Gunship escorts, the Stormraven *Bleak Shadow* swept down upon its foes, bursting from the fury of the storm to throw a dark and deathly pall across the battlefield. From vicious dogfights against the fighter craft of the Air caste, to blistering attack runs that tore battlesuits apart and saw Hammerhead Gunships left as blazing wrecks, Torovac's Storm Wing proved its worth time and time again. During the desperate fighting around Cragback Ridge, for example, the Storm Wing detected and drove off a force of Stealth Suits before they could encircle the Raven Guard. They immediately swept back, guns blazing, to knock a trio of Sun Shark Bombers out of the sky mere moments before the Tau craft could pound the Raven Guard into oblivion against the unyielding barrier of the ridge's tumbled cliffs.

ASH AND SHADOWS



The Raven Guard stalked the Southern Scars and the shadows of the abandoned Aquillon Hive, intent on reaping a high tally from the Tau defenders.

It was Kayvaan Shrike of the 3rd Company who had been entrusted with finding and exploiting the weaknesses of the Tau that had claimed Prefectia. The heavily-defended shield zones of the fortress world burned with the fires of conquest. Eight Chapters of Space Marines launched assaults against the forces of a dozen septs across the planet. Shrike had instead chosen to confine his efforts to the electromine complexes of the Southern Scars. He felt sure that a Tau commander would value the raw energy resource they represented. He was equally confident that Shadowsun would not lead from the front line, but instead coordinate the war effort from the least likely of locations in order to escape a confrontation with Kor'sarro Khan.

As the Raven Guard's commanding officer on Prefectia, Captain Shrike had not only the entire 3rd Company under his command, but elements of the 2nd, several Scout Squads of the 10th, the finest Vanguard Veterans of the 1st and a Raptor Wing of gunships from the Armoury, as well as various specialist elements. He split the 3rd Company in two, assigning Scouts to each Pinion Battle Demi-company and keeping his most mobile forces in reserve at Aquillon Hive. Shrike took his own force west into the gullies of Ventur Scar, and deployed 2nd Company Chaplain, Laefin Torovac, to the north.

It was Chaplain Torovac who first encountered the Tau sighted near the outlying habs of Aquillon Hive. Torovac was a prudent man, but after days of waiting, even his patience was wearing thin. The White Scars had already launched a high-speed assault on the Tau near Siphonid Complex, but Shrike had asked Torovac to keep long-range vox to a minimum, the better to avoid the Tau intercepting their transmissions. Torovac's Scouts had reported a Tau formation nearby that he judged ripe for a sudden, devastating attack. The Chaplain moved out, ordering his strike force's transports to peel off in a wide loop as the rest advanced on foot. He would crush the Tau contesting Ventur Scar with a double assault; first with a feint, then with a feast of unbound slaughter.

Dulling their weaponry's gleam with the ash crunching underfoot, Torovac's Space Marines slid silently from the shadows of Aquillon Hive's great spires. The Tau army they sought was soon visible on the horizon, for the Raven Guard had crept ever nearer to the foe over the last few days until they were in striking distance. The enemy force, gathered around the ruins of a derelict electromine, matched Shrike's description of a Hunter Cadre. Nothing a demi-company couldn't handle, thought Torovac. He commanded his men to hunker down and wait, guns ready.

Torovac's warriors watched the Tau make ready as a loose cloud of ash betrayed their convoy of heavy vehicles. The Fire caste warriors seemed not to notice them at first, for ash storms were common in this part of the world. In truth, they were waiting for the opportune time to strike.

When half a dozen Raven Guard tanks growled out of the twilight, the Tau quickly formed up into a battle line, many of their teams redeploying onto the Tidewall defences at their back. The Broad­sides in their midst merely swivelled on their waist gimbals before opening hostilities. Raising box-like weapon gauntlets, the battlesuits fired fusillades of missiles that tore into the oncoming tanks with killing force, ripping open hulls and even overturning the Rhinos closing in. Firestorms whirled as small arms fire added to the fusillade, but not a single Space Marine was to be seen, living or dead. The transports were empty, the risky but cunning decoy executed by noble machine spirits alone.

Torovac and his men, having stalked through the shadows the moment the Tau had opened fire, burst from the ruins with bolters blazing. Explosions blossomed across the Tau lines. Sniper fire from Scouts bellied down in the ash took the heads from Tau officers in puffs of blood. Wherever the strike force's Devastators struck, mutilated corpses and disembodied limbs flew into the air in great measure. Chaplain Torovac chanted the Rites of Retribution as he led his demi-company forward, each well-aimed bolt from his pistol sending a Tau warrior sprawling into the ash. The suddenness of the attack was terrifying, a weapon in itself – and one the Raven Guard were well versed in using.



Torovac's surprise attack was impressive, but the Tau's resolve would not crumble so easily. Shadowsun had entrusted the northern Aquillon site to Shas'o Swiftflame, a Vior'lan Commander well versed in the art of misdirection. Torovac had seen vulnerability in the Tau line only because Swiftflame had wished it so. Wherever the Raven Guard had seen five warriors, there were concealed twenty more. Wherever Scout snipers bullseyed Tau officers, they in fact killed line infantrymen who had agreed to play the role of decoys in the name of the *Tau'va*, for their dedication to the Greater Good was total. To Torovac's horror, the structures he had taken for static defences rose upwards and moved away on anti-grav fields, revealing beneath them serried ranks of Tau Strike Teams. Those Fire Warriors crouched behind the battlements stood up, levelling storms of pulse energy into the ranks of the Tactical Marines fighting towards them. The skimmer tanks in the midst of the Hunter Cadre rose up to unveil whole warbands of quill-crested Kroot, the alien auxiliaries hooting and cawing as they bounded towards the Raven Guard on long, muscular limbs. Torovac voxed again and again for back-up, pulling his warriors back into a defensive phalanx and ordering them to take cover where they could.

What had started as a well-orchestrated kill strike had quickly devolved into a desperate struggle for survival.



FLIGHT OF THE RAVENS

The Raven Guard had intended to test the defences of the Tau Fire caste, but just as the White Scars had before them, they found themselves sorely pressed in return. When reinforcements joined the fray on both sides, the sprawling ruins and bastions of Prefectia ran thick with the blood of Space Marine and Fire Warrior alike.

High above the sparse clouds of ash that girdled Aquillon Hive, unblinking eyes stared at the explosions lighting the sprawl. Massed squads of Raven Guard were perched in a nest of decommissioned gun clusters, jump packs like stubby wings behind their broad shoulders. A vox-crackle, a series of tight snapping sounds, and the Assault Marines vaulted from their gargoyle-studded roosts into free fall, angling their arms to correct their headlong dive into a steep swoop. The Bladewing Assault Brotherhood of the 8th headed west, seeking to reinforce Captain Shrike as he led a new assault north of Atlassi Hive. The Veterans of the 1st flipped in mid-flight and touched down half a mile below, leaping from broken pillar to shattered statue before blasting towards the carnage at Ventur Scar.

A Storm Wing roared from the skyshield of a nearby spire, the ceramite fist of a Stormraven Gunship flanked by two smaller Stormtalon escort craft as it overtook the diving Assault Marines. In their wake, two squadrons of T-shaped Tau fighters emerged from the far side of the hive, following the contrails of the Imperial gunships to the battle below. The Stormraven and its escorts, too preoccupied with their attack, continued on their sharp diagonal intercept course for the ground battle. Their assault cannons and heavy bolters spat death even as the gunships pierced the thin ash clouds. Xenos infantry

and battlesuit alike were cut down, guns falling silent as the shadow of the attack craft passed overhead. A disc-like gunrig pivoted as it tracked one of the Stormtalon Gunships, its heavy railgun's hyper-velocity shots punching through the body of the craft with such force its mechanical innards exploded from its hull. The other two craft peeled away, describing mirrored parabolas in the air before coming alongside once more on an attack run that saw the gun tower reduced to a bullet-riddled shell.

In the smoke-shrouded melee below, the Raven Guard were fighting for their lives. Stalking Tactical Marines traded bolt shells for the dancing red dots of Pathfinder markerlights, only to be sent sprawling in puffs of blood by the veering missiles of the battlesuit teams behind the Tau lines. The Devastators, so ruinously effective in the first few minutes of battle, had lost half their number to the flickering crossfire of the Stealth Teams shimmering in the middle distance. Even the Storm Wing found itself caught in the jaws of a trap as the two squadrons of Tau Razorsharks trailing them fell into pursuit patterns. Had the pilots not dived away into Ventur Scar itself, they would have been taken down by sheer weight of fire. Here, the Raven Guard's lack of cohesion with their brother Chapters had cost them dearly. In every warrior's mind, a seed of doubt began to blossom into the notion of utter defeat.

The roar of jump packs came from the north; a sound beloved by all sons of the Primarch Corax. Torovac felt conviction swell in his chest, lending weight to his litanies as he smashed another Kroot warrior into the ash. He ripped his crozius arcanum into a vicious backswing, tearing the head from another warrior even as a strangled war cry came from its wattled throat.

Less than a stone's throw away, the Vanguard Veterans hit the Tau lines like a black storm-bolt, their blades slashing and hacking through the thick of the Tau line. Torovac's chant grew in volume as the screams of Tau mingled with those of the avian Kroot. His spirits soared as he saw the Vanguard Veterans boosting into a powered leap towards the xenos battlesuits, but sank again when a submunitions round detonated in their midst. They had to regroup.

Torovac swept his crozius and his bolt pistol out in a double blow, smashing Kroot to the ground as he struggled to free

himself from the melee. Ahead, a sleeting storm of plasma caught the veterans from both flanks, two of their number spasming with the burning impact before coming apart in rains of molten sludge.

Behind the slain veterans, the Tau had formed several orderly battle lines. Their overlapping fields of fire cut down the last of the Raven Guard charging them. To the west, a line of looming battlesuits levelled missile gauntlets at the Raven Guard fighting the Kroot. A bladed Kroot rifle smacked into Torovac, punching through his gorget seal to cut the side of his neck. He dipped low and jabbed his pistol into the alien's midriff, blasting out its guts with a twitch of his finger. As soon as he and his men had killed the last of the Kroot mercenaries, the Tau gun lines would open fire, and the Raven Guard would all die. But it would not stop him from fighting, not for a moment.

There was a whistle of descending ordnance, followed by a double boom so fierce it sent Tau tumbling from the

ramparts of their grav-platforms. The Tau battlesuits turned, missiles lancing out at something half-glimpsed near the Aquillon habs. Torovac caught sight of an enormous black carapace and a flaring battle cannon that sent another volley of shells into the Tau lines.

'With me,' growled Torovac, 'and bring these xenos mercenaries with us.'

As one, the Raven Guard gave ground to the Kroot. The xenos barked and whooped, mistaking the controlled retreat for imminent victory. Torovac let himself be pushed back into the ruins, muttering thanks to the Emperor for the timely distraction. The Imperial Knight in the distance was lit by the flare of a dozen missiles detonating against its ion shields, stalking backwards even as the Tau battlesuits moved to intercept it. By the time the Tau infantry regrouped and turned their guns once more upon the fight in the ruins, the Kroot lay strewn and broken, and Torovac and his men had faded from sight.





CHAPTER 2

THE JAWS SNAP SHUT



TO HUNT A NEMESIS

Though she had largely remained unseen upon Prefectia, Commander Shadowsun was a priority foe to the commanders of the Adeptus Astartes. Night and day, the elite forces of the Space Marines pursued her without respite, for the Imperium would stop at nothing to see her slain – a fact O'Shaserra knew well, and was keen to exploit.

It was no secret that Shadowsun was the mastermind behind the Tau war machine. Not only had she crossed swords with the White Scars in person upon Agrellan and Voltoris, her image was also broadcast far and wide by the Water caste, for the Ethereal Supreme Aun'Va had long held her up as an exemplar of the Greater Good. Such propaganda only inflamed the tempers of the Space Marine Captains who were eager to see her dead. On Prefectia, the opening engagements of the war had exacerbated matters – Kor'sarro Khan in particular, after his defeat near Siphonid Complex, was now desperate to claim Shadowsun's life and salvage some honour as a result. Many Drone vid-captures of the White Scars Captain roaring and swearing had made their way back to the xenos commander, but she had listened to each autotranslation with no more reaction than an archly raised brow.

The *shas'ar'tol* – the Tau high command – saw a new weapon in the growing aggravation their forces were causing. If the Imperial forces planetside could be goaded into a state of high agitation, it would not be long before they made a costly mistake. Instead of backing away from the sudden surge of aggression exhibited by Prefectia's Space

Marine Chapters and Astra Militarum regiments, the Tau encouraged it. The Fire caste used its own cadres as bait, leaving seemingly vulnerable assets across the planet, only to withdraw from the field in flight-capable transports or melt away into maze-like industrial complexes whenever the enemy attacked in force. Sightings of Shadowsun became so frequent they were often simultaneous, further adding to the Khan's anger as he deployed and redeployed over and over again. Every night, his strike forces burned enough promethium to power a hab-block for a month, every day his warriors chewed through crate after crate of bolter ammunition as they engaged the outlying elements of Tau patrols. And still Shadowsun evaded their grip.

Yet the ire of the Imperial war machine was not to be ignored. Though she had remained one step ahead of her pursuers, Shadowsun could not rest, not even for a moment. Should she stay longer than a few hours in one place, the sound of gunship boosters, jump packs or roaring bike engines would soon be picked up by her perimeter sensors. As the long days of Prefectia's new war unfolded, even the ice-cool Shadowsun felt the fires of emotion flare bright within her.



Shadowsun looked for the thousandth time at her command console's distribution array. Nothing yet; no sign of pursuit. She triggered the helm release, and as the mask slid back, she looked with her own eyes at the horizon, just to make sure. Scowling in embarrassment at such a primitive notion, she closed the helm once more.

Each Kauyon needed its bait, Aun'Va had said, as if she didn't know it. The Ethereal Supreme had told her in no uncertain terms it was time for Shadowsun to act as the lure for her own trap. On Blackshale Ridge, that tactic had almost cost her life, but Aun'Va was right; there would be no bait more likely to bring the leaders of the Imperium into the open. Their bellicose approach to war was close to the point of frenzy. By conjuring just a little more fear and anger, she could ensure the lords of the Space Marines were neutralised for good. She patched a communion request to Commander Sternshield. Of course she would do as the Tau'va dictated. As Aun'Va had asked of her.

But not necessarily in the manner he anticipated.



THE SHADOWSUN COALITION

As Commander Shadowsun's coalition crossed the Damocles Gulf, every warrior knew their duty and was ready to die for it. Upon Agrellan, Voltoris, and dozens of other worlds, they had fought and bled, yet still they stood strong.

Billions of warriors follow Aun'Va and O'Shaserra in the war against Mankind, comprising by far the greatest concentration of the Tau Empire's military might. The Tau view the Emperor's realm as some vast, aged beast. Its every monstrous swipe can destroy an entire sept, but it is ponderous too, old and tired. Thus, like a Fire caste hunting party on the plains of old, Commander Shadowsun leads her warriors to hit and fade, strike and retreat. With every new blow the Tau land, the Imperium

bleeds a little more. Meanwhile, each attack made by the forces of Mankind is sidestepped neatly while the Tau watch for the opportunity to strike the final killing blow. This plan has not been without cost; Shadowsun still bitterly rues Voltoris, her terrible losses on that world serving as a caution against arrogance. Yet with reinforcements and new technologies flowing in a steady stream from the empire at her back, Shadowsun remains confident of victory.



HUNTER CONTINGENT

The Hunter Contingent is designed to be the most versatile template by which large Fire caste forces can be assembled. Such a formation exhibits the strategic balance to face any threat.

COMMAND

HUNTER CADRE

ARMoured INTERDICTION CADRE

RETALIATION CADRE

OPTIMISED STEALTH CADRE

FIREBASE SUPPORT CADRE

INFILTRATION CADRE

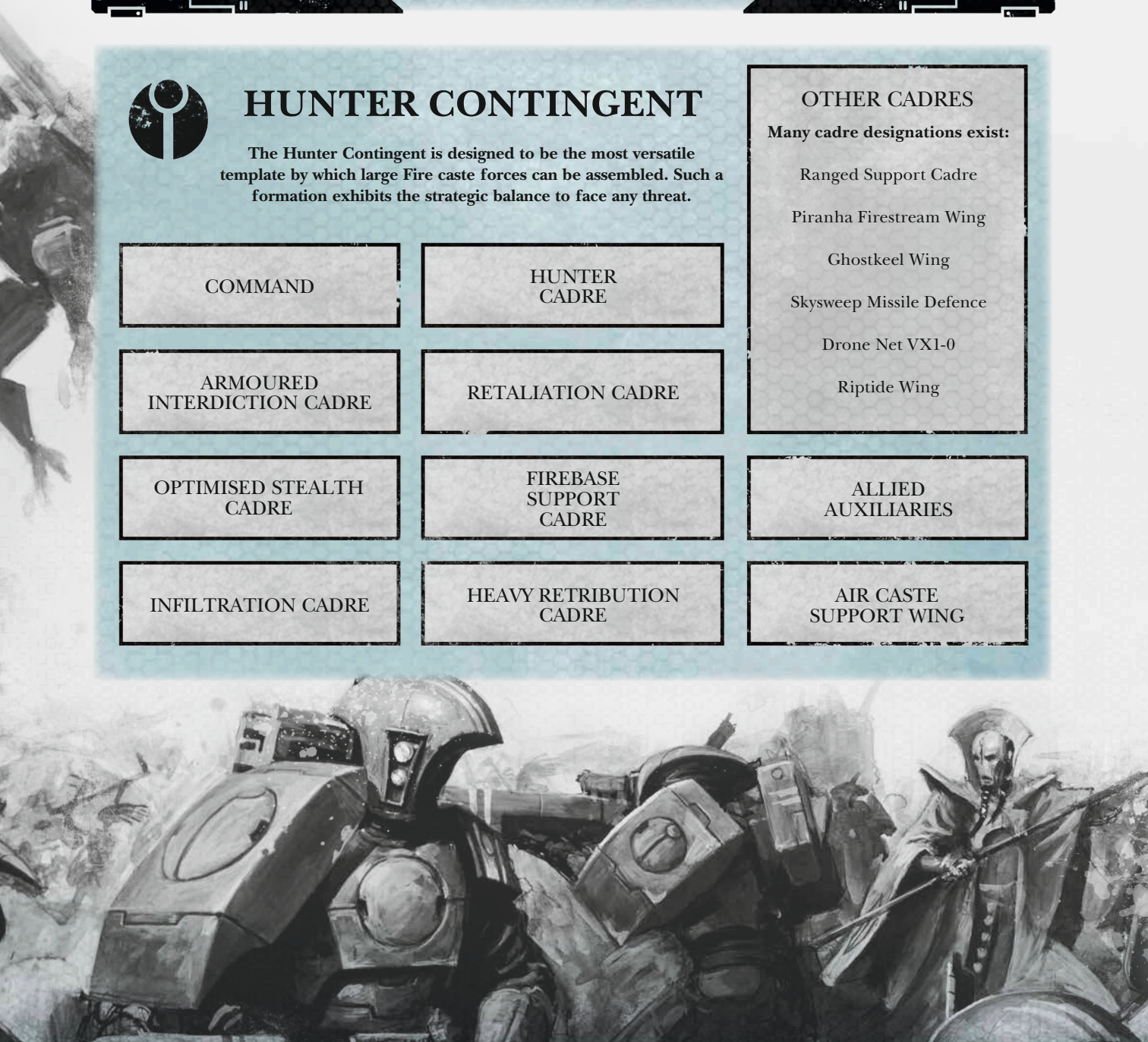
HEAVY RETRIBUTION CADRE

OTHER CADRES
Many cadre designations exist:

- Ranged Support Cadre
- Piranha Firestream Wing
- Ghostkeel Wing
- Skysweep Missile Defence
- Drone Net VX1-0
- Riptide Wing

ALLIED AUXILIARIES

AIR CASTE SUPPORT WING



DAMOCLES EXPEDITIONARY FORCE



COALITION COMMAND
Masters of Unity and Purpose
 Ethereal Supreme Aun'Va
 Ethereal Council
 Commander Shadowsun & Aides



TRANSPORT TASK FORCE

Since the capture of Mu'gulath Bay, the job of the coalition's Transport Task Force has only become more involved. The military strength of the Fire caste is required across the Dovar System and beyond, stretching this force's transport and combat capabilities to the limits.

INTERSTELLAR CRAFT

- 4 Custodian class carriers
- 11 Protector class warships
- 4 Emissary class envoy ships
 - 14 Kroot Warspheres
 - 31 Transports
- 11 Nicassar/Demiurg warships

ORBITAL WING

- 47 Manta Heavy Dropships, 15 modified for Stormsurge transportation
- 20 Orca orbital transports

AIR PROTECTION SQUADRONS

- 2 Barracudas
- 3 Tiger Sharks
- 2 Tiger Shark AX-1-0
- 5 Razorshark Strike Fighters
- 4 Sun Shark Bombers

COMMUNE

The entire Fire caste presence beyond the Damocles Gulf is ultimately answerable to O'Shaserra. However, as operations have expanded out across multiple systems, other proven Commanders have taken on the workload of localised combat coordination.

INSERTION CONTINGENTS

- Pathfinder Recon
- Stealth Team Dropstrike

ENCOUNTER CONTINGENTS

- Hunter
- Armoured Interdiction
- Forward Stealth
- Fire Support

BREAKTHROUGH CONTINGENTS

- Crisis Dropstrike
- Piranha Firestream
- Riptide Rapidstrike
- Breacher Breakthrough

RESERVE ENCOUNTER CONTINGENTS

- Hunter Retaliation
- Auxiliary Exploitation
- Ballistic Support

DENSE ENVIRONMENT CONTINGENTS

- Stealth Removal
- Auxiliary Dispatch
- Sniper Area Denial

SHADOWSUN'S FIRESTRIKE ASSAULT 2-0 HUNTER CADRE

Originally assembled by Commander Shadowsun to facilitate her assault on the Solarus Gate hive node, this formation has since been adapted on the strength of lessons learned at Voltoris and new technologies made available by the Tau Empire. It is now more lethal and adaptable than ever.

Shadowsun and Command Team (Shadowsun & Crisis Bodyguard Team)	XV95 Ghostkeel Team
4 Strike Teams with Devilfish	2 XV104 Riptides
6 Breacher Teams with Devilfish	3 XV8 Crisis Teams
4 Strike Teams	3 Hammerhead Gunships
2 Pathfinder Teams with Devilfish	3 Sky Ray Gunships
2 XV25 Stealth Teams	4 Razorshark Strike Fighters

CADRES

The number of cadre configurations in use against the defenders of the Imperium has only increased since the Tau victory at Mu'gulath Bay.

Hunter	Auxiliary Reserve
Mobilised Hunter	Armoured Interdiction
Firebase Support	Ranged Support
Advanced Insertion	Retaliation
Rapid Insertion	Heavy Retribution
Stealth Insertion	Skysweep Defence Shield
Optimised Stealth	Counterstrike
Crisis Dropstrike	Air Caste Support
Infiltration	Allied Advance

EARTH CASTE SUPPORT WORKGROUP

Combat Maintenance	Pacification Support
Engineering Support	Colony Constructor
Debris Removal	Gue'la Active Study
Resource Reclamation	

WATER CASTE DIPLOMATIC CORPS

- Indigenous Translation
- Diplomatic Arrangement
- Population Rehabilitation
- Worker Transference
- Dogma Disproval

COMMANDER STERNSHIELD

A master of adaptive defence and a deft hand in breaking his foes before they even realise battle has been joined, Commander Sternshield has proven himself invaluable to Commander Shadowsun. He is a level-headed traditionalist driven by a simple, abiding love of his people, and has proven a dangerous foe to the warriors of the Imperium.

No enemy has ever broken through the masterful guard of Shas'o T'au Ta'Sar. The resilience, patience and skill of this veteran Commander are renowned throughout the Fire caste academies of T'au. Sternshield specialises in the Kauyon method of battle, deploying his devoted Hunter Cadre as the shield for which he is named. O'Ta'Sar waits for the perfect moment to interrupt and blunt the enemy's attacks, his cadre surging into battle in a fleet of Orca Dropships with anti-grav defences maglifted beneath their hulls. Around his cadre fly dedicated Air caste escort craft whose task is to ensure the transports make it safely to their drop zone. Piloting a flight-capable Coldstar battlesuit, the Commander often joins these aerial defenders, plunging selflessly into explosive dogfights with enemy fighters and blasting them from the sky.

Once Sternshield's forces reach their target coordinates, he sees it as his duty to be everywhere at once. The Commander oversees his cadre with a perfectionist's touch, dropping from the skies along the line to direct warriors into optimal positions and command the careful placement of Tidewall Droneports and Shieldlines. His Fire

caste warriors calmly ready themselves for the onset of the foe with spare ammunition ready and exfiltration plans firmly committed to memory. They know that the prey will be upon them soon enough, and are confident that Sternshield has already foreseen their every move.

When the enemy attack, Sternshield truly shows the meaning of his given name. Most often, his victims do not expect to encounter resistance in a sector that, just minutes earlier, seemed free of foes. Thus, rushing to reach their intended battle-site, Sternshield's prey run straight into the guns of his ambushing forces, the force of their onrushing blow suddenly and viciously blunted. In the battle that follows, the Commander manoeuvres his forces with masterful skill, knowing when to tilt the battle-line to deflect the aggression of the foe, when to give ground, and when to stand firm and strike back. All the while, as his enemies exhaust themselves against his fluid defences, Sternshield wreaks havoc amongst them. Guns blazing, the dynamic leader can always be found where his followers need him most, striking down those who would harm them with a paternal, protective fury.



SKY THRUSTERS

The XV86 Coldstar's back-mounted thrusters are the secret of its impressive flight capabilities – their vents and intakes thrum with barely contained power.

COLDSTAR HELM

Advanced optics and comms antennae adorn the helm of Sternshield's battlesuit. These components allow him to interface with the Tau communications net, access holo-targeting data from any active source within the combat zone, and effortlessly track the wider strategic picture.



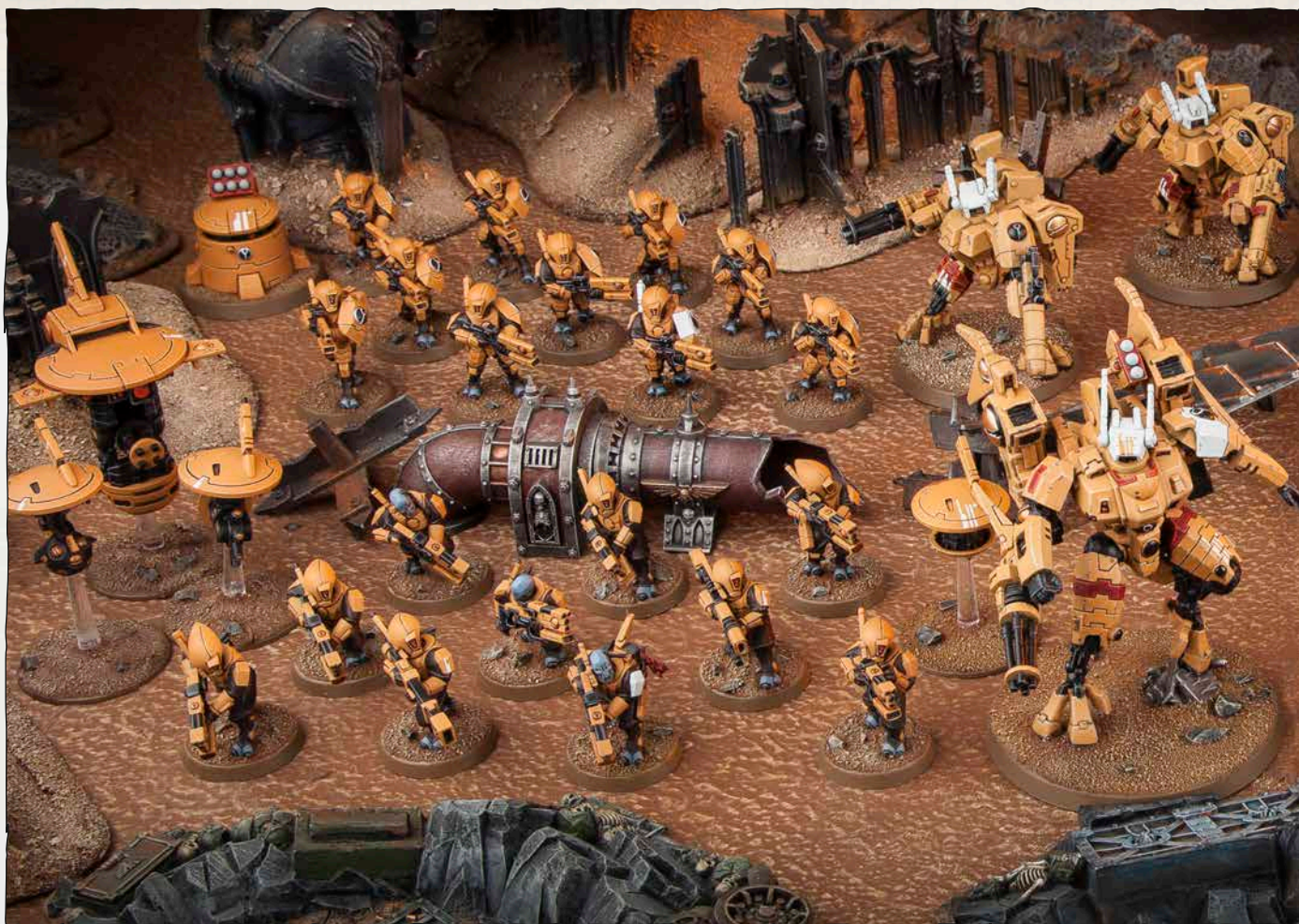
BURST CANNON

Sternshield's high-output burst cannon fits seamlessly to his Coldstar battlesuit. It is mounted to an underslung hardpoint, allowing the Commander to fire accurately on impulse and optimising the effectiveness of recoil dampers within his armour.

NANOCRYSTALLINE ARMOUR

Interlocked and bonded, the nanocrystalline plates of the Coldstar battlesuit are layered with super-insulating carbodine mesh and integral heat-shielding to handle atmospheric reentry and the icy cold of the void.

HUNTER CADRE DAWNHAMMER



Sternshield deployed his Hunter Cadre on Prefectia with speed and precision, keeping them ready to respond to threats at a moment's notice. He utilised a method of Kauyon warfare that proved extremely effective in such actions as the defeat of the Heaven's Crag offensive and the destruction of the famed Imperial Knight Borrallis.

At Heaven's Crag, enemy forces surged in, massing their strength to overrun a seemingly thin line of Tau defences. Yet somehow, with each savage thrust of attack, the Space Marines found themselves stymied, the strength of their blows turned aside or wasted upon targets who were no longer there. O'Ta'Sar directed his Hunter Cadre's every feint and counterstrike with the skill of a master tactician. Fire Warriors and Pathfinders pelted their foes with swift volleys before melting away once more to leave the enemy bloody and wrong-footed. The Commander envisioned his forces as a shield, angled to deflect the furious strikes of the foe, though without the sort of needless attrition and unacceptable losses that so often characterise battles fought by the Imperium.

No matter how hard the enemy pressed their attack, no matter the weaknesses that appeared in their lines, Commander Sternshield never launched an all out

counter-offensive. Instead, he watched with patience while his power-armoured enemies expended their energy in fruitless attempts to land a telling blow. All the while, the Tau sniped away at choice targets, Strike Teams whittling down the foe's strength with enfilading fire while Breacher Teams and Pathfinders launched localised counter-attacks to further stagger the enemy advance.

Mobile defence lines played a great part in Sternshield's plans; over the course of the battle, his warriors used Tidewall Droneports and hit-and-fade attacks to pull the foe at oblique angles across the front of their skimming bunkers and barricades. Then, they rode their gravitic fortifications away from the advancing foe while cutting them apart with massive firepower.

Only once the enemy was reeling, over-extended and weakened beyond endurance did Commander Sternshield strike the final blow. Like a duelling knight finally putting his exhausted foe out of their misery, Sternshield dropped into battle in his Coldstar battlesuit, accompanied by his Crisis Bodyguard Team. Their weapons blazed, eliminating preselected and desperately out-of-position targets with spectacular efficiency. Dropping down alongside Sternshield's escort were Crisis Team Sureflame, led by the



resourceful Shas'vere Tu'volan. Their fusion blasters hissed as they seared through vulnerable rear armour to detonate the clumsy Imperial vehicles in a string of massive fireballs. Flamers roared and burst cannons chattered as the foe's surviving infantry – already panicked and in complete disarray – were finally gunned down and finished off.

In a matter of minutes, a strategy that claimed hundreds of lives over the course of several harrowing days was brought to a bloody conclusion. Soon, only Tau warriors stood triumphant over the mangled bodies of their foe.



MIGHT OF THE AIR CASTE

From speeding fighters to vast, city-sized spacecraft, the Air caste provide the Tau military with all of its air- and void-borne strength. As with all Tau technology, the craft piloted by the Air caste are always being adapted and improved by Earth caste engineers and scientists. By the latter stages of the Third Sphere Expansion, Tau armadas have come to include an impressive variety of strategically versatile strike craft, of which the Sun Shark and Razorshark are but two commonly seen examples. Somewhat larger than either of these vessels is the Barracuda, a heavily armoured, single-pilot patrol ship with a substantial arsenal of ion and missile weaponry. Above this is the significantly heavier Tiger Shark and its variant, the Tiger Shark AX-1-0. Manned by a small crew and their supporting AI, the Tiger Shark is a high altitude Drone deployment platform, while the AX-1-0 carries twinned railguns with which to eliminate the heaviest enemy armour. Finally, massed troop deployment is achieved via the Orca Dropship and, on a vastly larger, cadre-level scale, by the colossal Manta Super-Heavy Dropship.

SWIFTFLAME'S HUNTER CONTINGENT



COMMANDER SWIFTFLAME

Speed, destruction, and a flair for the dramatic are the trademarks of the hot-blooded Commander Swiftflame. Properly known as Shas'o Vior'la Shalas, this hero of the Third Sphere Expansion is young for a Commander. Ever since his first days in the academies of Vior'la, Shalas has proven decisive and forthright in all his dealings, and quick to assert his ability to meet every challenge set before him. Those who questioned his rapid advancement through the ranks were proven wrong, and often looked foolish when his grand strategies became clear. Infamous for his conviction and self-confidence, amongst another people, Commander Swiftflame might have been considered arrogant.

Despite outward appearances, however, it is not pride that drives O'Shalas, but total surety of his importance to the Greater Good and a fear of falling short of his potential. O'Shalas knows that he is a talented, swift-thinking tactician, as well as an excellent marksman and a convincing orator. All of this has come naturally to the Commander, and he has always been painfully conscious of the value of such gifts to the Greater Good. The simple

truth is that every achievement in his career, every victory won and trial passed, has been motivated by Shalas' fear of failing to make the fullest use of his talents, and in doing so, failing in his duty.

O'Shalas keeps such fears to himself, with the exception of his occasional, earnest conversations with the Ethereals from whom he seeks guidance. To the warriors of his cadres, he is a confident, courageous hero, who knows instinctively what actions to take in order to secure victory at a minimal cost. The Vior'lan Fire Warriors trust their Commander implicitly; indeed, though they would never risk saying such a thing aloud, many hero-worship Swiftflame for his outward similarities to the rebel Commander O'Shovah.

It was this total belief in O'Shalas' strategic brilliance that had allowed him to perfect his personal application of the Kauyon on the battlefields of Prefectia. Some among the senior Commanders of the Third Sphere Expansion viewed his tactics as dangerously cavalier. Yet there was no doubting their effectiveness.



On Prefectia, Commander Swiftflame proved to be a master of convincing his enemies that they had him at a disadvantage. In one instance, East of Atlassi Hive, O'Shalas deployed a core of Fire Warriors in skimming tanks, supported by the potent firepower of Broadside battlesuit teams. The warriors of this force advanced aggressively upon a large White Scars patrol, pressing their attack and causing as much damage as they could, as quickly as they could. Amid pulse rifle fire and the coiling blue contrails of railgun rounds, enemy casualties spiralled rapidly and they were forced to give ground swiftly.

Such overtly aggressive tactics drew the White Scars' full attention soon enough, and before long, the Vior'lan Fire Warriors found themselves falling back in good order before an onrushing enemy baying for vengeance. O'Shalas' Hunter Contingent were well-versed in the art of the fighting withdrawal, and Breacher Teams Windhammer and Crimsonstrike covered one another's retreat while their pulse rifle-armed comrades from Strike Team Redveil lay down long range suppression fire. Soon enough, the enemy were drawn onto the pounding guns of Broadside Team Rising Thunder and the contingent's Hammerhead, where vehicular targets exploded into balls of smoke and flame. It was then that O'Shalas' victims really took the bait. The

hot-headed warriors of Vior'la knew better than most that anger and impetuosity could undo even the finest military mind, and by this point in the battle, they had stoked the fires of both in their foe. Consumed with the desire to exact revenge upon those who had caused such harm – and yet remained infuriatingly out of reach – the enemy committed to a major attack. Battle tanks and elite warriors charged in, confident that they vastly outmatched the Tau forces on the ground, falling right into O'Shalas' trap.

Battlesuits dropped from the skies, Swiftflame himself leading his Bodyguard, Crisis Team Flameblade and the mighty Riptide of Shas'vere Tallas into battle with obvious relish. Then, Sniper Drones and the warriors of Stealth Team Darkfire flickered into view. Their sudden torrent of firepower was complemented by the bark of Kroot rifles as the alien auxiliaries sprang their own ambush, and their outflanked adversaries fell like wheat before a scythe. With shocking speed, the White Scars were torn apart, their every attempt to retaliate only seeing them present their backs to another Vior'lan killer waiting to strike. Finally, as the enemy were on the brink of defeat, O'Shalas' Air caste assets screamed overhead, their shrieking guns and hurtling missiles delivering the killing blow to the remnants of the enemy.



BLOOD FROM THE SKIES

Shadowsun's instructions spread throughout the Tau cadre, triggering *Kauyon* after *Kauyon*. Traps were laid in the air as well as on the ground, and before long, burning wreckage rained down across the Southern Scars.

Whilst the spider at the centre of Prefectia's defence carefully spun her web, her lieutenant Commanders baited the foe on every conceivable front. Foremost amongst them was Commander Sternshield. During early engagements against the Imperium, Sternshield had learned his battlesuit was small enough to evade the macro-scanners of the Imperial armada and sophisticated enough to baffle the auspex sensors of their aircraft. He had made the long, lonely journey into orbit and, using bulk transports for cover, mag-locked his Coldstar to the exterior of the Imperial Navy ship, *Duty's Cull*. By boosting to the hull directly above the command bridge, Sternshield's sensors penetrated the vox-scramblers and sentinel fields protecting the Imperial war briefings from enemy espionage. His autotranslator uncovered secrets invaluable to Shadowsun's initial strategy in several key war zones.

Though Sternshield's sortie had succeeded, it had not been authorised by high command. When Shadowsun assigned the Commander a mission to engage and occupy

the *gue'ron'sha* known as the White Scars, the Commander realised his display of initiative had earned him a place on the most fiercely contested front of the Tau war effort – a place that would test his abilities to the limit.

Sternshield embraced his task wholeheartedly. He took an armoured column across the sprawling desert of Yuteh Clutch – the Fire caste had learned through bitter experience that the White Scars, relying heavily on their vehicles, were especially likely to respond to military targets crossing open ground.

Soon enough, proximity alerts warned of enemies on the horizon, converging fast. The Commander readied his teams. His cadre's infantry elements were ready to embark upon their transports and race away as soon as the gunships at the ends of the column opened fire. Air caste pilots circled high above, ready to engage at a transmitted command. Sternshield's plan was to give ground in the centre, turning his battle line into a deep concave curve



that allowed his vanguard and rearguard to catch the attackers in a crossfire. The tactic had worked against Ork and Arachen alike, and Sternshield saw no reason why it would not work against the brutish humans of the Imperium.

At first, the long-range firepower levelled by the Commander's column appeared to be on target, great plumes of charcoal-grey ash stitching the desert. To his mounting alarm, however, he saw the White Scars veering their vehicles left and right with such skill that even his best tank gunners were missing their marks. The Imperials were closing fast, and they too had aerial support – compact, thuggish gunships with stubby wings and impressive profusions of heavy weaponry. At his command, Sternshield's Air caste cadres moved in from both sides, forcing the Space Marine craft to run a gauntlet in the skies as their fellows did below. The Commander smiled as Razorshark Strike Fighters and Sun Shark Bombers converged on the enemy, cannons spitting.

Then disaster struck. The largest Imperial gunship was surrounded by a corona of crackling white energy, an

aura that swiftly grew into a storm of electricity. Crackling tendrils lashed out like taloned hands, crashing across the Air caste squadrons and knocking them from the skies in blazes of white flame. Sternshield's team leaders suspected some new technology, but the Commander believed it to be something worse. This was likely the *ghu'lach* 'mind science' encountered on Voltoris, much feared and little understood. He could not ask his pilots to answer such a threat. Triggering his jet engines, Sternshield shot vertically into the sky, brought his weapon systems online, and dived, guns blazing, towards the Imperial craft.



TO BRAVE THE STORM

As the main body of the White Scars attack streaked into the Tau lines, the battle in the air grew ever more intense. Commander Sternshield soon had to contend with the terrifying psychic powers of the White Scars, all the while hoping to win a chance for his Air caste comrades to turn the tide of the conflict below.

Truly, the White Scars had brought the storm. The booming din of their bolter fire grew in volume until it rolled across the dune like the roar of the tempest, and the zig-zagging charge of their bikers struck the Tau lines like thunderbolts. The skies were lit by forks of lightning, for the Librarian inside the largest Imperial gunship, Stormseer Guludhei, was summoning ever more power to attend him. The crackling discharges sent the light aircraft of the Tau into fatal tailspins whenever they got close. The sons of Primarch Jaghatai Khan had never taken defeat well, and their vengeance was terrible to behold.

Sternshield swooped into the midst of the Imperial gunships and speeders, swerving through thick streams of bolts and pivoting away from incoming missiles with deft twitches of his engine vanes. Fingers of electricity stuttered through the cloudscape towards him, but the Commander stayed always just out of reach. His burst cannon whirred so fast its quadruple barrel became a dark blur, a steady stream of deadly energies cutting across swerving Land Speeders to hammer into their pilots and send them diving earthward on plumes of greasy smoke. A Stormtalon Gunship burst from the clouds, assault cannons chattering,

but Sternshield's alert systems had marked its approach. Cutting his thrusters, he dropped like a stone before blasting high towards it, punching the gunship's stubby wing as it passed and sending it into a wobbling evasive manoeuvre. His shoulder-mounted missile pod tracked it, loosed a pair of sleek projectiles, and blew it into shards of scything shrapnel. Three more salvos saw as many Imperial craft disengage – in an aerial duel, Sternshield's skill was unmatched. But without their own air cover, the cadre below was still fighting on the back foot.

Below, the White Scars were running amok. At a request from Sergeant Jharato, a Vindicator that was still out of range fired a shell into no man's land, blasting a massive smoking crater in the earth. A moment later, Jharato's squad charged their bikes up its edge and launched high, bolters spitting death into the underbelly of a passing Razorshark. The aircraft nosedived, crashing into the mangled ruin of a Devilfish and exploding in a halo of fiery ash. At the rear of the White Scars line, a pair of Hunter tanks unleashed massive skyspear missiles at Sternshield as he soared high above. For all his agility, he could not shake them off. Time was running out.



The urgent bleep of a hostile target lock filled Sternshield's control cocoon, its pitch rising high as the Imperial ground-to-air missiles roared ever closer. For Sternshield to fire his weapons at the rocketing black cylinders would take a vital moment of respite – a moment he did not have. Despite deploying every evasive manoeuvre and countermeasure he could think of, he had been powerless to shake them. His breath came in ragged gasps as he spiralled hard to avoid a blast of unnatural lightning. The Imperial attack had turned his long-planned Kauyon from lethal order to mind-numbing, terrifying mayhem in a matter of minutes.

The gue'ron'sha seeker missiles were a matter of yards away when inspiration struck. Sternshield leaned hard, sending his Coldstar swerving fast towards a crackling cloud of electricity. At the last moment he hit the emergency down-power icon that turned the battlesuit from technological wonder to inert shell. His control cocoon grew dark, lit only by the two dim contingency capsules of bioluminescent ooze above his head. In the pit of his stomach, he could feel the sensation of falling, his momentum the only thing stopping his metal suit from plummeting straight down to a sudden death in the desert below.

Sternshield stabbed a finger at the activation pad, and the battlesuit sprang to glorious life once more. Screens flashed

and flickered across his sensor suite as he reactivated the flight controls with a series of deft gestures. Through his vision port, Sternshield saw the ground loom. Seconds left at most.

Then, thank the Tau'va, the Coldstar responded. Its failsafes kicked in, forcing the suit's shallow dive into a graceful evasive swoop. The missiles pursuing him had been deactivated entirely by the electric storm, just as he had hoped; they too were on a steady declining course to a fatal impact below. Sternshield came around in a looping roll just as the first of the strange Imperial missiles detonated. Veering in once more, he caught the second under his battlesuit's arm a moment before it struck the dirt. The Earth caste would be greatly interested in such a find.

Sternshield's flight path hugged the dunes as he pushed his Coldstar back into the fight. The Imperial anti-aircraft tanks, thinking him dead, were easy targets – he had his own missiles to launch, and the stolid, bulky things were ill-equipped to make any kind of evasive manoeuvre. He scanned his distribution array; to his immense relief, the Imperial gunship that had summoned the strange storm was far out of position, wrong-footed by his battlesuit's apparent death and resurrection.

'Air caste squadrons, you are cleared to re-engage,' said Sternshield. 'Make it count.'



UNFINISHED BUSINESS

After their narrow escape near Ventur Scar, the Raven Guard resolved to use every trick at their disposal to bring low the Tau. Unable to trace the whereabouts of Commander Shadowsun, their designated target was the cadre of Commander Swiftflame, a Vior'lan leader whose expertise in strategy was becoming famous across Prefectia.

In Humanity's finest warriors, the Fire caste had found a more than worthy foe. To engage them in open battle was to die. Here were enemies that would overcome the odds time and time again; only by outguessing and outmanoeuvring the Adeptus Astartes could the Tau hope to blunt the killing thrusts of their assaults.

Though Prefectia's Space Marine invaders were clearly more advanced than primitive cultures such as Kroot and Ork, Commander Shadowsun knew their warrior mindset of aggression and boundless confidence could be used against them. She reassigned Commander Swiftflame to engage the Raven Guard and wear them down with serial attacks until, in their frustration, they made a fatal mistake. That task would be difficult indeed, for unlike the White Scars, the sons of Corax believed that revenge was better taken with cold precision than hot-headed ire.

After withdrawing at Ventur Scar, Chaplain Torovac was only too happy to rejoin the struggle that was unfolding across the northern reaches of Prefectia. He had lost several battle-brothers to the Tau. A debt of honour needed paying between him and the Commander who had

outwitted him, and he would see it settled in full. Asking leave of Captain Shrike, Torovac led his men into the ruins around the fortress zones in search of revenge.

Hidden amongst the urban decay on the fringe of the fortress zones, the Raven Guard were in their element. Whenever Swiftflame's outriders found flickers of movement in the gloom, they found also death. Each feint and controlled retreat drew the foe into the guns of an ambush force. Each Air caste patrol braving hive airspace was met by a Storm Wing squadron, bursting from the cavernous holes the Tau had carved in the metropolis' flanks to send their victims spiralling from the skies.

Admiral Skychild, known amongst his contemporaries for the compassion he showed towards his pilots, took a personal interest in the losses his caste was incurring around Atlassi Hive. Sending in a single Razorshark squadron as a lure, he waited for the Raven Guard gunships to emerge from their cave-like lairs before sending in a wave of craft so massive it outnumbered the demi-company firing up from the rooftops below. Torovac ordered his force's Storm Wing to take evasive manoeuvres





immediately. His infantry were making little impact, and without thinning the numbers of the Tau, his pilots would surely be dead in minutes.

The Stormraven Gunship *Bleak Spectre* was the first to hit its afterburners, its Stormtalon escorts following suit with Land Speeders darting close behind. The Tau aircraft hurtled in close pursuit, prow cannons and quad turrets spitting lances of white death. Two of the three Raven Guard ships suffered direct hits as the chase intensified, but the rugged Imperial craft were built to last, and powered on through the punishing salvos of enemy fire.

Faster and faster raced the aircraft until the ugly wound of Ventur Scar opened wide on the horizon. Still under heavy fire, the Raven Guard pilots hurtled downwards, carving into the canyon's jagged maw and veering left and right as they plunged deeper. The canyon's tight confines robbed the Tau of much of their numerical advantage, and a full third of their Air caste pursuers peeled off and disengaged. Though Ventur Scar's upper edge was wide enough, in the canyon's depths only a few aircraft could fit abreast.

The Raven Guard and Air caste alike found their skills sorely tested as they careened down Ventur Scar towards the giant sinkhole-mine known as Goliath's Eye. Many a Tau pilot found his wingtip grazing an outcropping of rock, his aircraft careening out of control before smashing apart and tumbling away in a blazing fireball.

The voltaic electricity the Imperium had sought to mine from the Scar was agitated by each burning wreck

swallowed by the depths. Spears of purple lightning stabbed upwards, grounding on both Raven Guard and Air caste aircraft. More Razorsharks and Sun Sharks met a fiery end, but still more came on. A Stormtalon Gunship trailed smoke, systems scrambled by a discharge of violet energy from the canyon walls. Unable to turn, it was easy prey for a volley of seeker missiles streaking out from the aircraft on its tail; in a burst of flame it was gone, the balance tipped even further in favour of the Tau.

Even those Sun Shark pilots who had disengaged were weighing in by releasing their wing-mounted Interceptor Drones. The diminutive constructs, perfectly suited to warfare in close confines and equipped with afterburners of their own, levelled storms of ion rifle fire at the second of the Stormtalons, sending it crashing hard into the chasm wall and tumbling away.

Alarms screeched in each of the Air caste pilot's cockpits as something massive and black streaked down the canyon towards them. The pilot of *Bleak Spectre* cried in harsh joy as the famed Thunderhawk Gunship *Shadowhawk* hammered a battle cannon shell into the ranks of the *Spectre's* Air caste pursuers, blasting one of the white-hulled craft into blazing shrapnel and causing two others to crash into the canyon walls with a sudden pressure wave. *Shadowhawk* passed over the *Bleak Spectre* at high speed, the violence of its passage rocking the Stormraven and sending several pursuing Tau craft out of control. As one the Air caste disengaged, Drones and all, leaving the Raven Guard to regroup.

The war in the skies was not over yet.

TAU BREACHER TEAMS

With their pulse blasters blazing, the courageous warriors of the Breacher Teams take the fight into the midst of the foe. Following belligerent new tactical doctrines devised to dig stubborn foes from cover, it is the Breachers who seize key locations and tear the heart from defence lines with intense, point-blank pulse fire.

Blinding blue light flickers down corridors and illuminates the charnel confines of burning bunkers as the Breacher Teams press the attack. Before the point-blank fire of their pulse blasters, enemy warriors are blown apart in horrific, gory sprays. Particle streams light up panicked victims, causing luckless targets to glow vividly for a split-second before screaming bolts of energy smash them apart. Meanwhile, the Fire Warriors advance with practised efficiency, overlapping their fire and covering one another perfectly. Sensor suites within the Breachers' helms read every inch of the local environment, providing relative personnel positioning, projected fields of fire and probable locations of enemy forces. Rigorously trained to absorb this wealth of information at speed, the warriors of a Breacher Team can stay one step ahead of their foes while laying down devastating fire with their powerful weapons.

The catalyst for the formation of Breacher Teams dates all the way back to the first Tau invasion of Imperial space. It

was observed at that time that, while foes such as the Orks or the Barghesi preferred close assault and would often force the Tau onto the defensive, Mankind took a more static approach. The sprawling bunker complexes and strongpoints of the Imperium were on a scale never before seen by the Tau and, while crude compared to Earth caste workmanship, these fortifications were rugged enough to prove troublesome. Furthermore, an alarming number of Air caste spacecraft were lost to the aggressive boarding actions of the Space Marines, against which there seemed little defence. Increasingly, the Fire caste found themselves forced to commit their strength to one-sided close-quarters battles amid winding corridors and rooms in which there was no space for a battlesuit to deploy. Casualties were high during such costly actions, and so development was begun on the tools necessary to win point-blank fire fights with decisive firepower.

So were born the Breacher Teams. Drawn from the most aggressive and belligerent Fire Warrior cadets, these new teams were trained to take the fight to the foe. Protected by Drone-generated energy shields, the Breachers are able to blast a path into the most heavily defended strongpoint while weathering the blistering fire of the foe. Indeed, though their casualties are invariably high and their lives often short, they have continued in this proud and selfless tradition ever since.

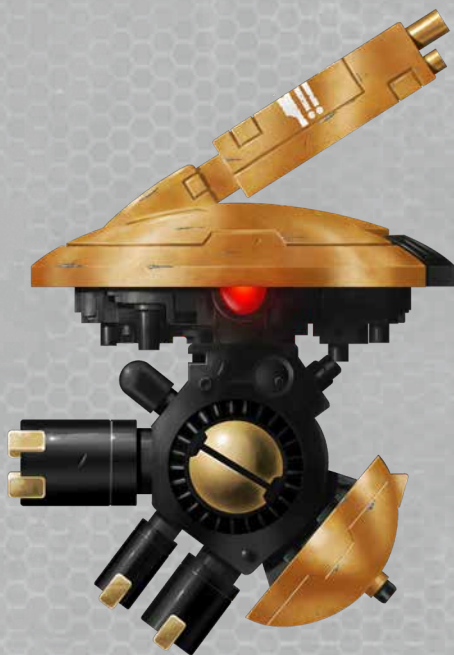




PULSE BLASTER

The signature weapon of the Breacher Team, the pulse blaster exchanges the reach and consistency of its rifle equivalent for sheer destructive punch. It uses a two-stage firing process to enhance the lethality of its plasma-based ammunition. When the trigger is halfway depressed, an invisible volley of negatively charged particles paint the target, priming it for the killing shot to come. Such victims glow with a ghostly light for a moment before their doom is delivered. A twitch of the trigger, and the plasma payload is shot

out, dragged unerringly to its destination with shocking force – far more than a conventional infantry-borne weapon could hope to achieve. At close quarters the pulse blaster's every shot is powerful enough to slam a gory hole through an enemy's chest or even punch clean through the side of a transport vehicle. Though the Tau usually eschew close-range firefights, the worlds of the Imperium are congested with labyrinthine trenches and tumbledown urban sprawl – in such environments the pulse blaster grants unparalleled lethality to its owner.



MV36 GUARDIAN DRONE

The Guardian Drone was developed in response to the unacceptably high rate of casualties amongst Breacher Teams. It projects a mobile, virtually invisible force field – usually calibrated to form a dome over its Tau charges. This defensive field is keyed to a broad spectrum zone of effect, and therefore it is not as potent as those of a dedicated shield drone. However, footage exists of Guardian Drones deflecting the penetrative beams of Imperial lascannons and sending the destructive blasts of battle cannon shells washing over their charges with no more apparent effect than a slight raising of the ambient temperature.

The Guardian Drone's force field is further bolstered by the field amplifier relays worn by Breacher Teams – complex yet compact devices that act as resonators for the drone's emissions, more than doubling their yield and efficacy. These adjuncts to the standard Fire Warrior combat gear are seen as just rewards for the Breacher Teams – any warrior brave enough to enter close quarters combat with the horrors of the 41st Millennium is an asset indeed to the Tau'va, and well worth the extra protection the Guardian Drone affords.



ESCALATION AND BREACH

The tactical skills of both Chaplain Torovac and Commander Swiftflame had been tested harshly, and still they had fresh forces and new stratagems to employ. Back and forth went the deadly game, with neither leader willing to relent. In many ways, it was the struggle for control of the Eastern Fringe in microcosm – and the ultimate victor was just as uncertain.

Commander Swiftflame withdrew after the losses at Ventur Scar. He knew inactivity would gnaw at the war-loving Space Marines far more than the fear of death, and intended to play on that aspect of their psyche. The Tau Fire caste, more mobile than the Adeptus Astartes, retreated to the landscape beyond the urban sprawl and seeded it with a great many traps. Every dead gue'ron'sha was a triumph, and those killed without loss of Tau life most of all. Chaplain Torovac, usually a patient man and all the deadlier for it, was unwilling to languish in inactivity as the other Space Marine Chapters upon Prefectia engaged the Tau in every theatre possible. He sent his scout units on autonomous patrols, seeking their foes in great concentric sweeps. They found plenty of evidence of Tau presence: a malfunctioning Drone here, the wing-tip of a crashed strike fighter there.

When Torovac's scouts closed upon these pieces of Tau technology, they found only death. Remotely-operated gun turrets and Sniper Drones rose out of the ash dunes and opened fire. Smart missiles and pulse weapons tore into the nearest Raven Guard before their return fire blasted the turrets apart. Occasionally, Torovac's warriors found Drone traps already deactivated, crackling with shrouds

of electricity that sent strange readings fizzing across their auspexes. Torovac became ever more cautious, and ordered his sentries back to the fringe of Atlassi Hive. If the Tau Commander had turned the open land against them, he would instead haunt the shadows once more, and force the enemy to come to him.

Ascending the hive's spires via its still-operational mag-lifts, Torovac ordered the Techmarine pilots of his gunships to join him in treating with the machine spirits of the hive's macro cannons. Before long, the Techmarines had repaired the damage the initial Tau invasion had done to those mighty guns, bringing them back to full readiness. Whenever Torovac spied movement from his eyrie, the hive's artillery blasted heavy ordnance into the wastelands on his coordinates. It was not long before Swiftflame's patrols sought the shelter of the urban sprawl once more.

As his cadre made haste into the bastion network girdling the great hive, Swiftflame's Pathfinders infiltrated the Lawhall Atlassi. Their orders were to neutralise the Tactical and Devastator squads raining death into the advancing Tau from its wide rooftop. As the Pathfinders opened fire, the Space Marines leapt from their vantage points



– heavy weapons and all – to an adjacent building’s roof. Mid-leap, they triggered the Krak charges they had seeded throughout the Lawhall, and collapsed the entire structure upon their would-be killers. Appalled, Swiftflame sent in his Stealth Teams. Each shimmering mirage seen in the ruined bastion complexes was a precursor to a terrifying barrage of pulse weapon fire. Accompanying them was the blinding energy discharge of a new and unseen assailant that could blast a Space Marine into little more than a cloud of superheated vapour. In response, the Raven Guard made masterful use of the cover afforded by the ruined bastion complex. Their expertise made them all but impossible to track, let alone to drive out of their defences.

Soon enough, it was Swiftflame that felt the heat of impatience gnawing at his soul. Like most Vior’lans, he was keen of wit and fierce of spirit alike. On some level, it galled him to see the Raven Guard making such efficient use of cover; he had heard the Space Marines eschewed such logical measures in their arrogance. He reasoned that if long-range weaponry could not pry the gue’ron’sha from their hiding places, he would employ focussed short-range firepower instead. As the sun rose on the fifth day of the Imperial counter-invasion, Commander Swiftflame led six Breacher Teams deep into enemy territory. The battle that erupted within the dark confines of the bastion complex was so bloody and gruelling it has proven a salutary lesson for the Fire caste ever since.

Swiftflame’s cyclic ion blaster tore away half of the Space Marine’s torso just as one of the Breachers discharged his own weapon into the warrior’s helm. The shots painted the Commander’s battlesuit with Imperial blood. These warriors were formidable indeed; they were the first enemy troops the Tau had encountered capable of striding through pulse rifle fire without harm. In the face of the Breacher Team’s pulse blasters, however, even Humanity’s super-warriors came apart like burst sacks of meat.

There was a crash, and the rockcrete ceiling gave way in a cloud of dust. Three night-black Space Marines rode the wreckage down to slash crackling talons through Swiftflame’s Breachers. The Commander’s blacksun filter neutralised the dust’s obscuring effects as he fell backwards into a nearby alley, the beam of his fusion blaster catching a Space Marine in mid-leap and cutting him in two at the waist. The bright blue-white of pulse energy lit the crumbling bastion as he rejoined the fight, his battlesuit taking a quadruple stab wound to the thigh even as he backhanded another clawed assailant into the wall. The Space Marine struggled upright, slashing a dust-caked Breacher’s head from his neck just as the Commander blew the Imperial warrior to pieces. The din of battle subsided. Swiftflame’s breath came in ragged gasps as he scanned around. In the space of six short decs, every living thing in the complex, barring Swiftflame, had been slain.

THE SHADOWS CAST LONG

The stakes upon Prefectia, already so dizzyingly high with the Dovar System at risk, were growing higher by the hour. Trench systems were crisscrossed with slashing plasma volleys, ruins were lit by ruby lasers, and outside the built-up areas, tanks prowled by the thousand across dunes of dust and bone. The war for the planet was hanging in the balance.

Long days of war passed, each bringing a hundred new acts of heroism and tragedy. Bellowing commanders and scholarly strategists alike were drowned by the tides of violence that washed across the fortress world. The ancient wisdom of the Codex Astartes was repeatedly tested against the Code of Fire's teachings. Several Space Marine forces distinguished themselves above the others, amongst their ranks those of Captains Shrike and Khan, but it was becoming obvious that the fortress of Prefectia would not fall to a lightning-fast blitz. Keen to secure victory over the xenos, Chapter Master Corvin Severax made planetfall in person. He intended to oversee the Tau's defeat – or engineer it himself if necessary.

Tau high command was just as determined to win lasting victory. Every available cadre was redirected to Prefectia from those planets already conquered, including the most advanced battlesuits the Fire caste could field. Several Ethereals volunteered to bolster morale on the front lines, Aun'Do amongst them, but the real shock came from above even those lionised few. In a speech that touched the hearts of a hundred billion Tau, Aun'Va himself announced he would be descending from on high. Just as he had on Agrellan, the Master of the Undying Spirit would lead from the front to ensure the torch of the Greater Good burned the planet clean of Humanity's corruption.

As for Commander Shadowsun, her star was on the wane. By failing to repel the Space Marines on schedule, Shadowsun had given Aun'Va cause to risk his own life.

It was small wonder the commander was no longer in the ascendent, for the White Scars that hounded her were relentless. She had given her all upon Agrellan, and had not been given a moment's rest since. Every explosion she heard on the front line sounded like the boom of a Space Marine bike's twin bolters, every shadow flitting across the ground the precursor to a gunship or speeder charged with her death. The seed of fear the Khan had put into Shadowsun's heart was taking root, the doom he had dangled over her head oppressive indeed. The thought of his blade haunted her with every waking hour – but at least that threat was in plain sight. There were other forces closing in; sharks sliding through the inky waters in comparison to the Khan's raging bull.

Corvin Severax had ordered his warriors to converge upon Shadowsun wherever she was sighted. The Chapter Master told his Shadow Captains the Khan was out of time, outlining a masterful search-and-destroy battleplan that would span Prefectia. In the past, such manhunts had been met with unqualified success; more often than not, it was Severax who delivered the coup de grâce. Within hours, the Chapter Master expected to have Shadowsun's corpse before him. His Captains made the sign of the Aquila and slid into the night.

Thus far, the Tau Fire caste had encountered the pugnacious, bombastic face of the Imperial war machine. They were soon to realise that under the raw brutality lurked horrors beyond measure, hungry and cunning.

Commander Shadowsun cast a furtive glance through the exterior viewport as the Earth caste worker El'Gruhl unscrewed the bolts from Sternshield's salvaged Imperial missile. She should be out there, baring her throat to the gue'ron'sha in order to trigger the multiple Kavyon she had spent so long meticulously preparing. Still, she had not won the trust of Masters Puretide and Aun'Va alike by rushing into battle. First, the wise warrior learns of the foe.

O'Shaserra forced herself to focus on the matter at hand. Sternshield's assertions that air supremacy was the key to victory had genuine merit. According to his report, the lumpen missile emanated not standard signatures, but something far stranger. Something biological.

The outer plate of the missile was detached with a hiss of unpleasantly

warm air, and the stink of death-gases filled the room. El'Gruhl grunted, taking a step back as Sternshield cried out in horror. Shadowsun frowned and stepped forward. She was confronted by a vision from a nightmare.

A wizened corpse stared up from the missile's interior with an expression of unliving horror. Cables were sutured to every vertebra of its ragged spinal column, and wires jutted from the mummified remains of an opened brain. The cadaver seemed to growl softly as she looked down. Blinking in disgust, she told herself it was nothing more than the gaseous expulsions of natural decay.

'By the Tau'va,' gasped Sternshield, 'what new foulness is this?'

Shadowsun closed her eyes in disgust. The humans were so close to

understanding sacrifice, yet so far from the notion of the Greater Good. For a departed warrior to enter this crude half-life in the service of its fellows was a martyrdom of sorts, commendable in a twisted way. Yet to use a dead body as a weapon... it was vile in the extreme.

'Why do they not merely utilise artificial intelligences, Supreme Commander?' asked Sternshield. 'Are they so backward as to fear them?'

'They believe their machines have souls, Sternshield,' replied Shadowsun. 'Perhaps this is their way of ensuring it.'

'This is wrong,' said Sternshield. 'Such a repugnant race has no place in our stars.'

Shadowsun nodded sadly. 'That is true, Commander. We have seen enough here. Let us proceed with the cull.'

CELESTIAL SECRETS

Whilst Tau and Space Marines matched wits upon Prefectia's surface, a wider battle unfolded in the heavens. This too was marked by Shadowsun's patient genius. On Prefectia's slow-moving moon, Galacrastus, the Tau massed reinforcements inbound from Mu'gulath Bay – though they took pains to keep to the planetoid's dark side in order to evade detection. By waiting for the moon to progress around its orbit they were able to strike their intended destination without the intervention of the Imperial fleet. Their entry through the planet's atmosphere was a vector so direct their foes could not respond to it in time. Such avoidance stratagems became common, for the Imperial armada was a true terror in a direct confrontation. Seeking to learn of the human fleet's ability to burst from nothingness into reality, Shadowsun called up all instances of such sudden appearances and found a correlation – they tended to appear in certain locations on the fringes of the Dovar System, far away from any celestial bodies.

Reasoning that the Imperial ship captains were avoiding areas where a system's star or planet could pull them into its gravity well, Shadowsun sent a flotilla of scout vessels to wait in the empty void outside the Dovar System. Incredibly, her anticipatory calculations proved correct. When an Imperial vessel translated from the Emyrean a few days later, a Tau scouting vessel was close enough to take swathes of new and disturbing data from the roiling anomaly still fading around the much larger Imperial vessel. The crew of the Tau craft intended to take their findings back to the Tau High Command, hoping they could make sense of the strange readings, but they never returned to Prefectia, nor any other Tau holding.







Standing atop the shattered statue of an Imperial saint, Chapter Master Severax watched the 3rd Company enact his battleplan to perfection. Piece by piece they were taking apart the Tau army in the wasteland below. It was a lesson in grim efficiency Severax had employed a dozen times before. Occasionally he voxed a curt instruction to the officers or darted forward to cut a battlesuit in two with his lightning-wreathed talons, but by and large the Chapter Master was content to watch the carnage unfold.

As his men put the last few Tau down with pitiless execution shots, Severax found frustration building within him. His grand strategy was unfolding to deadly effect, as it had on a hundred worlds before, but Commander Shadowsun had still not shown herself. He almost felt a shadow of respect for her stealthcraft. For all their bluster, the swift riders of the White Scars were expert hunters, and evading them on three consecutive planets was no mean feat. Keeping from the gaze of the Raven Guard was more impressive still.

Severax tilted his head back as he thought of the cold vengeance to come. He could wait. In the end, she would be broken and slain, just as her armies would be slain in their turn.

A single tick of sound echoed in Severax's helm. He triggered the vox, a fierce grin slowly spreading across his features. It was the first time he had smiled in six weeks.

'Lord Severax, we have visual on the xenos commander. Accompanying Drones and honour markings match Agrellan and Voltoris pict-captures. It's her, my lord.'

Severax triggered his jump pack, leapt high, and soared into the skies.

THE DOOM OF HEROES

Pride. Slayer of the great and the good, leveller of the cosmic scales, perhaps the deadliest of all mortal sins. And yet that insidious foible haunts man, Space Marine and Tau alike. All too often it is pride that casts a shadow across the lives of the noblest heroes – a shadow upon the soul that only lengthens with every victory.

Shadowsun had made no secret of her presence upon Prefectia, instead reinforcing her role in the war until she had made herself a target above all others. She believed she could defeat the leader of the Space Marine invasion in person, succeeding where even the most terrifying galactic warlords had failed. Perhaps it was pride, too, that drove Corvin Severax to hunt her in person, for the list of his victories spanned the Vault Raptorium twice over.

Dug into a long-dry riverbed east of Aquillon, the trenches of Denechai had been the site of several vicious battles between the Astra Militarum and the Fire caste. Shadowsun's distinctive battlesuit had been sighted there in the last hour of conflict. Taking only a hand-picked squad of Vanguard Veterans with him, the Chapter Master ordered his personal Thunderhawk to pass over the Denechai Strait, debarking in mid-flight to air-drop straight into the hostilities. It would earn the Raven Guard great honour if Severax's talons took the head of the Tau supreme commander where the scimitars and tulwars of the Khan's men had failed.

The battle below had seen most of the strait's Astra Militarum slaughtered by the Fire caste's overlapping fields of fire. The Raven Guard's 3rd Company, as well as scouting elements from the 10th, had attacked from the shadows of the trench network. They had used the Imperial Guardsmen as bait without their knowledge, but the ploy had yielded an advantage – with the cadre spread out before them, they were able to strike back hard. Into this fierce fighting Chapter Master Severax deployed. Somewhere below him was Shadowsun, a foe he had grown to despise. A reckoning was close at hand.

'THOSE WHO CAN OVERCOME THE PRIDE BORN OF CONQUEST, WHO CAN TEMPER GLORY WITH MODESTY, FASHION SHIELDS AGAINST THE BLADES OF THOSE WHO SEEK TO BRING THEM LOW. THOSE WHO LET PRIDE BLIND THEM INSTEAD FIND HUMILITY ONLY UPON THEIR DEATH BED, WHEN IT IS ALREADY FAR TOO LATE.'

- The Automemorials of Malcador the Hero

Severax smiled without humour as his downward drop turned into a glide, then a swoop. His men had sighted her, far below; the war-queen of the Tau Empire. Totem of a pathetic xenos empire that was soon to meet a bloody end. She would be hidden well by stealth-tech – but, to the eyes of a sky hunter, still visible as a flicker of movement and a shimmering silhouette.

The xenos commander preferred to work unseen, and there was wisdom in that. A true warlord did not roar like a beast at the foe, making himself an obvious target and thereby ensuring history remembered him as a scalp claimed by someone else's sword. No; the wise leader ruled from the shadows, watching and waiting for his moment before bursting out to despatch his foes with certainty and precision.

Shadowsun had been a constant thorn in the side of every Chapter tasked with the reclamation of the lost fortress world. The White Scars had suffered worst of all, compounding the losses suffered upon Agrellan, but over the last few months the Raven Guard had lost far too many warriors to the cursed Tau. Severax swore a silent vow. No more of the Sons of Corax would be lost on his watch.

The Chapter Master and his veterans descended through the mists without so much as a single shot sent to intercept them. They hit the Tau line from above. Ceramite boots smashed the tall ochre battlesuits so hard they sprawled backward into the trenches. Severax's Vanguard Veterans plunged power swords through vision slits, punched four-bladed lightning claws through the alien alloy of chest units, and ripped heads from necks with crackling power fists. The Chapter Master cast around for his true prey, fully confident in the abilities of his men.

There. A flicker of movement, a heat-shimmer mirage in his peripheral vision. Severax dived sidelong as twin fusion beams scorched the air where he had been standing, turning the motion into a curling roll. He clattered into the trenches for a moment only to burst back up, claws slashing at Shadowsun's torso. She too was quick, leaning with impossible agility to escape his double blow. Severax's momentum carried him on. He lowered his head, connecting hard with the bulbous helm unit of his foe's battlesuit. The impact sent a ripple of malfunction across its stealth field. As she staggered backwards he swung a bladed right hook that carved her forearm, fusion

blaster and all, into a gore-spurting mess. The other fusion gun came round, but Severax already had his shoulder beneath it, grasping his foe in a death grip and punching his other claw into her midsection over and over. Blood sheeted down the battlesuit's front, turning it from white to filthy red. Severax gave a hollow laugh as Shadowsun was cut to ribbons by his thrice-blessed talons.

The laugh echoed longer than it should have. Something shimmered at Severax's flank, something with a tread so heavy he felt it through his power-armoured soles.

There was a blaze of light, and Severax was suddenly halved at the waist, groping in horrified denial at the black-armoured legs that kicked and squirted some yards in front of him. The last thing the Chapter Master felt was a blast of fire throwing him into the trench. His vision faded as his half-molten remains thudded into a morass of cooling human corpses.









The XV95 Ghostkeels bounded across the battlefield as if in low gravity, thruster jets all but silent. Their Stealth Drones reinforced and re-calibrated their camouflage fields with every new movement. The team leader announced their presence by killing the Space Marine's leader with two close-range blasts. The other pilots followed suit, opening fire at the gue'ron'sha reeling before them.

It was a singular thrill, to have the unalloyed power of cutting edge wartech at the fingertips. But the gue'ron'sha, as tenacious as ever, rallied within seconds. They poured a storm of mass-reactive bolts into the Ghostkeel team's vicinity, no doubt hoping to score a quick revenge kill. The Earth caste had foreseen this. As one, the Ghostkeels raised their countermeasure suites and ejected clouds of smart flechettes that sought out the oncoming bolts and met them head-on, detonating them prematurely. Not even the light of their explosions reached the Ghostkeels, for their stealth fields turned it aside.

The XV95s pressed home their attack. Cyclic ion rakers bathed their targets in pure white light before smashing columns of intense energy through them in gobbets of flesh and molten metal. Fusion colliders simply evaporated those under their crosshairs. Space Marines roared forward on crude jet packs, only to be blown backwards by concentrated burst cannon fire or picked off by the rail rifles of distant Pathfinders. When the Stealth Teams added their fire to the hurricane of energy, even the Space Marines could not stand before them. The grand Kauyon had begun.



STEALTH AND SUBTERFUGE

The catastrophic damage meted out upon the 3rd Company shook the Raven Guard Chapter to its core, but it was the death of Corvin Severax that was to echo in the annals of history. Once again, the genius of Tau high command had wrong-footed the Imperial invaders, but in daring to bring low a Chapter Master, they courted a drastic response indeed.

Shadowsun's orders from the Ethereal Supreme Aun'Va had been to use herself as bait for a major Kauyon. Yet a true leader demands results, rather than dictates the manner in which they are achieved. Shadowsun had devised her plans accordingly, asking for volunteers from her cadre's stealth suit pilots to impersonate her on the battlefield. Unsurprisingly, every member of her teams stepped forward. Even after the events of Voltoris, Shadowsun was still a beloved heroine of the Tau'va.

The first part of Commander Shadowsun's gambit was to commission ten customised XV22 battlesuits from the Earth caste. They were only too happy to comply, for their weapons scientists considered the model a successful prototype after O'Shaserra's extensive testing. These new battlesuits were fitted with fusion blasters, emblazoned with Shadowsun's own honour markings, and accompanied by C-link and MV52 Shield Drones so they would better resemble their commander's signature wargear.

If Corvin Severax had known the identity of his killer, he perhaps would have been impressed despite himself. It had not been some nameless veteran in the control cocoon of a Ghostkeel battlesuit that had slain him, but Shadowsun herself. Having seen Kor'sarro Khan and Shrike fight first-hand upon Voltoris, she suspected that their superior officers would also be lethal opponents. It had been her intention to lure out the warrior-king of the Space Marines, and the plan had worked spectacularly.

Though she was not afraid to give her life for the Tau'va, she also knew that her death would strike a terrible blow against Fire caste morale. By sending decoys into battle, she ensured that Aun'Va's orders were obeyed, whilst maximising her chances of seeing Prefectia's conquest through to the bitter end. It was the decoy Shue'la who lured Severax into Shadowsun's crosshairs; her sacrifice for the Greater Good would be remembered forever.

With the Raven Guard sent reeling by the loss of their Chapter Master, Shadowsun and her Ghostkeel pilots struck again and again against their Space Marine enemies. The deadly effect of the Ghostkeel was not confined to Denechai Strait, either, for each of the septs had sent dozens of the war machines to Prefectia. Though the Imperium had felt their sting before, they were only now witnessing the power of the XV95 battlesuit en masse.

In every theatre of battle, the Stealth Teams that acted as outriders for each cadre were joined by cloaked Ghostkeels to form Optimised Stealth Cadres. Earlier in the war, the burst cannons of Shadowsun's patrols had picked off enemy patrols and levelled well-placed acts of sabotage against targets of opportunity. Now they took the fight to armoured columns and massed phalanxes of Astra Militarum – and emerged victorious. This wide-scale deployment of stealth tech triggered a new phase of war. Once more, the Tau rose ascendent. Their hold upon Prefectia grew stronger with every passing day.

THE VOID GHOST

After dealing the Raven Guard a staggering blow, Shadowsun turned her dazzling intellect to the demise of the White Scars. Her intention was to turn the prey-fear back upon its propagators; she had seen their shamanistic and superstitious behaviour first hand, and sought to play upon their beliefs in spirits, spectres and monsters to undermine their resolve.

Forsaking her Ghostkeel in favour of a more subtle and familiar tool of war, she joined her Stealth Teams in her beloved XV22 armour and set off into the wastes under cover of night.

When the Khan and his men lit their fires at eventide and told one another stories of their ancestors, they would typically leave a few of their number on guard. Much like Chogorian tribesmen, these sentries would gaze at the horizon rather than the fire so as not to lose their night eyes. Against the stealth tech of Shadowsun, such a primitive tactic availed them not at all.

Cloaking fields deadened the sound of the Tau's approach to the point that not even the sharp hearing of the

White Scars could detect more than a whisper upon the wind. The light-bending cells that kept the stealth suits camouflaged blended Shadowsun's teams with the gloom of Prefectia's night until they confounded even the eagle-sharp eyes of the Space Marine sentries. Unbeknownst to the White Scars, the hunters would surround them. A flash of light in the distance, and each camp's sentries would disappear. Shadowsun tasked her teams with taking what little remained of their victims with them into the night, the better to intimidate and confuse her prey.

Her ploy was successful, after a fashion. It was not long before the shamanistic White Scars were talking of the Void Ghost, the creature that stole away battle-brothers in the night. But far from eroding their morale, the threat of an invisible daemon that had taken their kin drove the White Scars to apoplexies of wrath, each swearing to bring violent destruction upon the force that was haunting them.

There was no room for fear or doubt in a Space Marine's mind. It was a realisation that came to Shadowsun late, but brought with it a glimmer of respect.

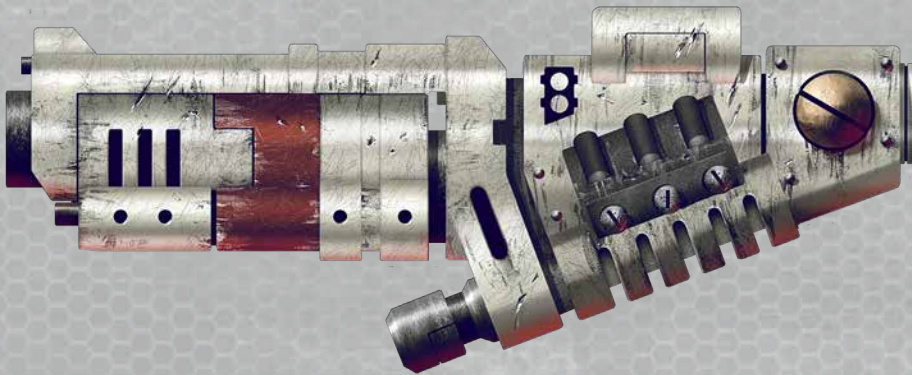
XV95 GHOSTKEEL BATTLESUITS

Huge, deadly and all but impossible to detect until it strikes, the XV95 Ghostkeel is amongst the most effective terror weapons in the galaxy. These mighty battlesuits loom several times the height of a Fire Warrior, and mount a full array of repulsor jets upon their carapace. They are equipped with an arsenal of heavy weaponry, and are supported by a wealth of high-tech hardware and counter-sensory warfare suites. Ghostkeel battlesuits can tear apart entire armoured squadrons and massacre rank upon rank of enemy infantry in sudden ambushes. The firestorm of their onslaught is such that the foe believes a whole army must be attacking them from an unexpected quarter.

Each Ghostkeel is piloted by a single, highly trained shas'vre, a former XV25 Stealth Team veteran. This focussed warrior is supported by an integrated AI that assists him in operating the Ghostkeel's many complex systems and monitors his physical and psychological wellbeing during extended operations. As Ghostkeel pilots spend long periods of time isolated in enemy territory, many form unusually strong bonds with their battlesuit AI. Indeed, in some cases these eccentric warriors become so introverted that they prefer the company of their suit's AI to that of other Tau.

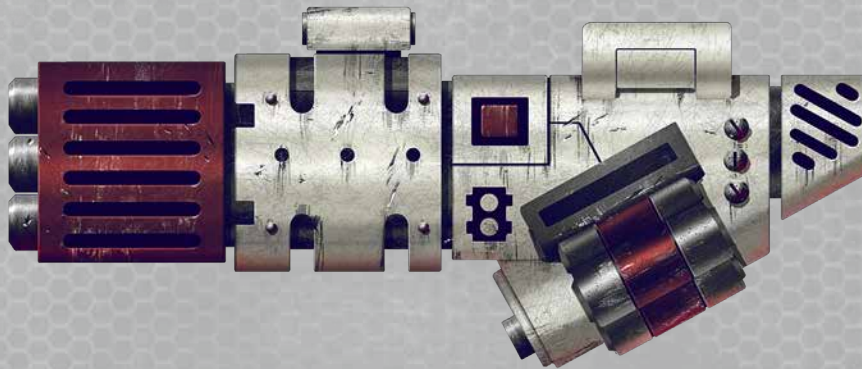
The tactical applications of the Ghostkeel are many and varied, from unleashing overwhelming strikes behind enemy lines to ambush-hunting alongside Hunter Cadres. However, until recently, the Ghostkeel was restricted to covert missions only. In truth, development of these potent battlesuits was completed around the beginning of the Third Sphere Expansion, but it was decreed that these new weapons should remain hidden until their unveiling held the greatest inspirational value. Pilots were chosen from pre-vetted candidates who were extracted from Stealth Team operations and transported to a secret facility on J'ka'vo station, on the fringes of the abandoned sept of N'dras. From here, following orders from Aun'Va himself, the first generation of Ghostkeel battlesuits performed a range of deep-cover operations, from the Vadenfall Station sabotage to the assassination of Carnidal Bocsh. Now, with the success of the Riptide, the time has been judged ripe to reveal the freshly renamed 'Ghosts of N'dras'. Suddenly, this insular band of warriors has been thrust into the light, their existence changing from a secret to a propaganda exercise virtually overnight. Recruitment of Ghostkeel pilots has begun across the empire, as has production of the battlesuits themselves; soon enough the armies of every sept will possess Ghostkeel wings of their own.





CYCLIC ION RAKER

Just like the smaller ion rifles used by Pathfinders, the cyclic ion raker uses a slab of mor'tonium as its power source. However, due to its role as the Ghostkeel's principal weapon system, the raker is calibrated to fire with a complete lack of sound. Those caught in its intense high-energy streams suddenly melt away, their flesh vaporising with such suddenness they often do not even have time to scream. As with all Tau ion weapons, the ion raker can be overcharged by exposing the unstable alloy inside to the atmosphere. The resultant burst of radiation is so powerful it can destroy entire platoons of the foe – though regrettably the pilot within may also sign his own death warrant in the process...



FUSION COLLIDER

The Ghostkeel battlesuit may be armed with a fusion collider, one of the foremost tank-busting weapons in the Tau arsenal. Fitted with power dispersal exchangers, this weapon can fire a searing blaze of energy capable of destroying the most heavily armoured foe without risking detection by enemy imaging. The fusion collider's comparatively short range is seen as little impediment to the Ghostkeel's shas'vre pilot, for the battlesuit has been specifically engineered to enter close range without harm – frequently without even being detected at all. Often the first sign of a Ghostkeel's presence is the mushroom cloud explosion of a choice target detonating from within, flames rippling across the XV95's stealth field as it withdraws into the gloom once more.

טב'ס'ט



WITHDRAWAL AND COUNTER-ATTACK

Amongst the commanders of the Imperium, there are those who spend lives as freely as a gambler spends coin. The lords of the Space Marines are rarely amongst their number. The Adeptus Astartes upon Prefectia desired victory, but not at any cost – they would withdraw to a designated evac site, doing the maximum damage possible in the process.

Within the shattered fortresses of Prefectia, the Adeptus Astartes had fallen prey to a dozen varieties of trap, from the simplest Drone decoy to the grandest of envelopments. The cost had become too high to bear. Though the Apothecaries were able to recover the gene-seed of many of the fallen, there were increasing numbers of after-action reports detailing Space Marines reduced to little more than smouldering pulp or scatterings of disembodied limbs. This included the loss of Chapter Master Severax himself – a dire blow indeed, for he alone knew the greater strategies the Chapter had set in motion. The Raven Guard war effort began to devolve into a series of revenge killings, but its captains eventually recognised the need to regroup. Though it was painful indeed to admit it, the xenos had made Prefectia their own – a great deal of resource would need to be expended in order to take it back.

Yet resource was one thing the Imperium had in great measure. The Imperial fleet, its reserves far from exhausted, sent hundreds of bulk landers to cover the Space Marine withdrawal. Though the Adeptus Astartes were unmatched for raw speed, in terms of pure numbers the Astra Militarum were the mightier force. The Tau could intercept a mere fraction of their orbital landers. Regiment after regiment of Imperial Guard marched from hulking orbit-to-ground drop ships, force enough to hurl the Tau back across a wide front. They took the fight anew to the Tau offensive, buying time for the Space Marines to reconvene. The grinding battalions of the Imperial Guard were slow, however, and the Tau highly mobile. Before long, the xenos forces began to avoid them altogether.

Meanwhile, those Space Marines that took too long to reach the muster point at Goliath's Eye found themselves surrounded, their fighting withdrawals turned to grim last stands as their escape routes were blocked off. Tactical and Devastator companies found themselves cut off entirely, their transports reduced to bubbling slag. Where the distinctive contrails of Drop Pod-borne reinforcements scarred the skies, the Tau would efficiently withdraw from their extrapolated landing sites, their cadres boarding Devilfish skimmers and Orcas to flee the site without hesitation. Once the Drop Pods had thundered down to their recently-abandoned impact point, their Space Marine passengers had no choice but to make a painstaking march across the wastelands in order to reach their brothers.

Though the Space Marines called her a coward and worse, Shadowsun's misdirection tactics were undeniably effective. Her cadres flowed like water around each Imperial push, their apparent retreats often turned to swift assaults in other areas entirely – the last elements of Kauyon attacks that developed from effective to utterly devastating.

Successful evacuation was looking perilously uncertain for the Imperial armies until the largest of the drop ships disgorged its true cargo. With a blaring of war klaxons and a fluttering of ancestral pennants, the elite nobles of House Terryn strode from cavernous hangar bays in their gigantic Imperial Knights. High King Tybalt had a score to settle that his grand ambush on Voltoris had not slaked. Though his vengeance had been slow in coming, it would be terrible to behold.

Shadowsun frowned as she looked down from her vantage point atop the Euclidas Basilicum. The Imperials were establishing evac lanes to a muster point near Goliath's Eye. For now, she was content to let them go.

'Once more the strategic and tactical supremacy of the Fire caste had been made clear to all,' she said, as if to herself.

'It was never in doubt,' said Commander Sternshield. His Coldstar battlesuit held loosely onto one of the baroque spires nearby. How Shadowsun longed to cast the towers down, to shatter them all to dust. Once the Space Marines were gone, that was exactly what she would do. A powerful symbolic gesture: the old empire that had suffocated this world scoured away whilst the clean, smooth structures of the Earth caste rose high.

'Though it irks me to say it,' said Commander Swiftflame, his own Crisis suit shifting into the hot wind around the spires, 'the Mirrorcodex served us well.'

'Do not speak of it!' spat Shadowsun, 'you already risk censure with the losses you incurred at the electromines. Do you seek to bring the Malk'la ritual upon us all? That document must only be used in the most extreme of circumstances, its author is a traitor to the Tau'va. His name must not be spoken, no matter how dire the situation before us.'

Swiftflame transmitted the sign of humbled acquiescence, and said no more.

'It is good to see the morbid ones driven from this world,' said Sternshield. 'There is power here, but it is tainted enough without more Imperial necrosis.'

Shadowsun nodded. 'Strive to remain objective, Commander,' she cautioned. 'There is much about Humanity to hate, but hate can be used against you. We have taught the gue'ron'sha that lesson well today.'

'As ever, you speak the truth,' said Sternshield. 'Do you think these vermin will return to infest Prefectia?'

'I doubt it,' said Shadowsun. 'They may be thugs, but they are not idiots. With the death of the Space Marines' monarch, it is all but certain the gue'ron'sha are a spent force. This planet is ours.'

'For the Greater Good,' said Swiftflame.

'Indeed, Commander,' said Shadowsun, linking her slender fingers in the sign of the Tau'va. 'For the Greater Good.'



For the commanders of the Space Marines, the fighting withdrawal from Prefectia was uncomfortably reminiscent of the Agrellan evacuation. The Tau had proven themselves more than capable of defending against a full-scale invasion, turning the planet from an Imperial stronghold to a trap-strewn nightmare in a matter of months. The Fire caste reorganised its defences, confident they could weather the storm as the Imperium renewed its assault to buy the reeling Space Marines time. Shadowsun had eluded the White Scars and Raven Guard alike, turning the tables on her pursuers to devastating effect, and she could do so again.

The supreme commander of the Fire caste was already being hailed as triumphant. News of her victories upon Prefectia had been spread far and wide. It had reached not only the heartlands of the Tau Empire, but also those nearby Imperial worlds the ambassadors of the Tau had marked as ripe for a more subtle conquest.

That same news had spread all the way to Terra. In the hidden offices of power, events were being put in motion that would change the fate of the Eastern Fringe. Tau high command was already congratulating itself on a job well done, not realising that the sheer scale of reinforcements inbound to the Dovar System would have caused even a Vior'lan's blood to run cold. The Tau defenders of Prefectia had faced only small, concentrated strike forces thus far, and against such elite foes, had proven themselves capable of wresting victory. But they would soon face the goliaths of war for which the Imperium is rightly feared; ponderous, immensely strong, and equipped with firepower fierce enough to level cities.







CHAPTER 3

WRATH AND RETRIBUTION





THE MASTER OF SHADOWS

After Severax's death, the Tau and Imperial forces warring over the carnage decimated each other; the two sides were forced to quit the field if they hoped to maintain any semblance of cohesion. In the wake of the battle, the Shadow Captains gathered in the gloom. One of their number would be entrusted with ultimate command of the Raven Guard.

The strife-filled days leading up to Corvin Severax's death had been a tapestry of cause and effect that sent ripples across Prefectia from pole to pole. The Chapter Master's successor would be chosen from the Captains of the Raven Guard Chapter, but there was little time for lengthy counsel and debate. Most of the warrior-lords were already embroiled in fierce conflicts against the Tau, some fighting for their lives as the Fire caste pressed home their advantage.

Whilst Corvin Severax had been orchestrating his masterful search-and-destroy patterns, Shadow Captain Shrike had been leading the men of the 3rd Company on a series of punitive strikes. Over the course of the last three days, Strike Force Shrike had harried an entire contingent to the point of extinction – and in doing so, laid the bait for a trap of its own.

Shrike had worked in tandem with an artillery regiment of the Astra Militarum. He had ordered them to bombard enemy armour that sought to intervene as his warriors launched a ground assault on the remnants of the harried cadre. Seeing easy prey, Shadowsun had attacked the

Astra Militarum artillery and the infantry assigned to defend them. Shrike had been waiting for such a move, and when he turned back to counter-attack Shadowsun's armies, he spotted the distinctive battlesuit of the enemy commander standing triumphant over the bodies of his Astra Militarum allies.

Shrike's veterans had voxed confirmation of Shadowsun's whereabouts to Corvin Severax, and the Chapter Master had made haste to join the fight, seeking to claim Shadowsun's head for his own. It was that single decision that had cost the Raven Guard its Chapter Master and the majority of its 3rd Company.

With Corvin Severax slain, Shrike and his surviving veterans were forced to improvise, for in terms of firepower they were massively outclassed. By staying to the rear of the nearest Ghostkeel, they used the strengths of the giant Tau battlesuits against them – a stray shot from one XV95 was not recognised as a threat by the countermeasures suite of another, and caused crippling damage to its Stealth Drones. The Raven Guard then concentrated their attacks on the most skilled of the remaining

Ghostkeels – that of Shadowsun herself – and through sheer tenacity, forced her to withdraw.

That night, Captain Shrike and his Command Squad returned to the site of the battle, there to harvest the progenoid glands of the fallen. They did so at great risk, but they survived, and much of the 3rd Company's gene-seed survived with them.

It was likely that this selfless act secured Shrike's status as Severax's natural successor. A series of astropathic communiqués had already been established, counting amongst their recipients the other Shadow Captains of the Raven Guard and even Marneus Calgar from neighbouring Ultramar. The Raven Guard needed a new leader, one so widely respected he could unite the Imperium's armies instead of simply fighting alongside them.

In the end, the decision was unanimous. Kayvaan Shrike, saviour of Targus VIII, Donaka and Yahkee, bane of Waaagh! Skullkrak, bearer of the Laurel Imperialis and patron saint to worlds considered lost or abandoned, would become the new Chapter Master of the Raven Guard.

*K*ayvaan Shrike looked out at the assembled throng. The low lights of the subterranean mine complex gleamed from hundreds of suits of battle plate, each freshly cleaned of grime and gore in honour of the auspicious occasion.

'This night, a great hero of the Imperium has been taken from us,' said Shrike, his head bowed in respect. 'Not for millennia has our proud brotherhood been united under a leader of Severax's skill, who achieved so much with so few blades. It is a keen loss.'

The atmosphere in the complex was as taut as the moments before a thunderstorm. The next few moments were vital.

'Yet that loss heralds a brighter future,' continued Shrike, his voice growing steadily in volume. 'This night, the Raven Guard will make a change. We shall seek the solace of shadows, as we always have, as our father Corax taught us. But from this point on, we will use every weapon at our disposal, every alliance we can forge. We can afford no other course.'

Shrike felt conviction swell in his chest before continuing. This was right. It had to be. All else had failed.

'Here, on Prefectia, we leave in our wake a new dawn. A dawn of fire, of flashing talons raised in a single cause and quenched in alien blood. Though we must gather our strength anew, we will tear the

throat from the foe as payment for their temerity. The Imperium upon Prefectia shall stand divided no more!'

A ragged roar came from the massed Space Marines below. Shrike noticed that many of his battle-brothers remained silent.

'But now,' continued Shrike, 'we depart. Harken well to your vox, for there is slaughter to be done. Let it begin!'

Hailing their lord, the gathered battle-brothers raised their weapons to their new Chapter Master – and a new era in the history of the Raven Guard began.



Two warriors stood wordless in the radiant glare of Prefectia's sunrise, one armoured in black, the other white. The lord in white had gnarled skin weathered by wind, battered and worn by the elements of a hundred worlds. The topknot that crested his bald pate whipped out as long and coarse as the tail of a stallion. His bearing was that of a king, but the shadow of failure weighed upon him. Even the joy of battle could not lift the scowl from his features.

The lord in black was stark by contrast. He had skin of alabaster, unmarred but for a single scorch-mark on his left cheek. His face, too, was stern, his noble features those of a patrician statue. A predatory power emanated from him; though he stood with muscles tensed as if to spring into flight at any moment, in his jet-black eyes was a hint of triumph.

'Well met, you grizzled old buzzard,' said Kayvaan Shrike. 'You can call me Chapter Master now.'

The Khan's nostrils flared, his eyes alight with sparks of indignation. Those sparks caught something inside him. But this day, for the first time in weeks, those fires were those of mirth, not killing fury.

'Ha!' roared Kor'sarro Khan, 'I shall call you a craven, as you deserve, you shadow-licking sparrow!' A broad smile split the White Scar's face, burying his eyes in thick wrinkles even as it exposed ranks of sharp white teeth. He stepped forward and grabbed Shrike's outstretched forearm in the warrior's handshake.

'Chapter Master,' continued the White Scar, nodding in respect. 'I had thought old Severax too cunning to die.'

'The Tau have an alien cunning of their own,' said Shrike seriously, 'and Shadowsun most of all, it seems.'

'True,' said Kor'sarro Khan. His fur-cloaked shoulders sagged at the mention of his nemesis, but when his hand found the hilt of his sword, his bearing grew upright once more. 'She cannot escape my blade forever. Her head shall adorn Quan Zhou's battlements, even if I have to chase her across the galaxy to get it.'

'You may have to do just that,' said Shrike. 'We are too few, now, to achieve total victory. We must ensure the Tau pay as dearly as possible upon Prefectia as we gather our might and collate our findings for the next phase. We must make them bleed. Break their strength so we can claim the Eastern Fringe back once and for all.'

'We this, we that,' said Kor'sarro, eyebrows raised. 'I am not used to the sons of Corax speaking in such a manner.'

'Get used to it,' snapped Shrike. 'We stood apart for too long. It has only seen us fail.'

The Khan inclined his head, looking at his old comrade with new respect.

'We combine our strengths, then.'

'We do. And those of every Imperial warrior upon Prefectia.'

'And those yet to arrive,' said the Khan, looking up at the stars. 'Has there been any word?'

'Their Herald contacted me,' said Shrike. 'Half a day, at most – though even that is perhaps too long a delay against a warlord of Shadowsun's calibre. Still, I have taken pains to ensure the High King's arrival will be... appropriately magnificent.'

'We need more than fighters,' said the Khan, 'no matter the size or pedigree. We must turn the world itself against these usurpers. It is what Prefectia was built for, after all.'

'There is truth in that. But static defences, even hive guns – the Tau simply avoid them. They care not for ground gained, nor lost, come to that.'

'Then we turn the world's anger against them. Conjure the storm from within it and harness it to our will.'

Shrike nodded. 'On Dal'yth and Voltoris alike, psykers proved potent assets indeed.'

'That is because the Tau have no souls, or weak ones at best,' said the Khan. 'No way to counter such measures.'

'Can your Stormseers make an ally of this world, then?' asked Shrike, his head cocked to one side.

'It is what they were born to do. We shall bring the tempest.'

'Excellent,' said Shrike. 'That they cannot predict, with all their sensors and scrying devices combined. Ensure the maelstrom breaks when we need it most, Kor'sarro. The greatest battle yet. The battle that sees White Scar spears, Raven Guard claws and House Terryn lances plunge into the same foe at the same time.'

'Ha,' snorted the Khan. 'Chapter Master Shrike, Uniter of the Imperium. Desperate measures indeed.'

The Raven Guard smiled ruefully. 'I would prefer Shrike, Bane of the thrice-cursed Tau.'

'I suppose I could live with that,' chuckled the Khan. 'You need to bring her out into the open for me, Kayvaan. If you are content to wait and hide, she will spin her web around you until you cannot escape. Instead give her a quarry, a target that she thinks will clinch victory. Soon enough she will lunge for it. But she has to believe it is on her terms.'

Shrike nodded. 'I can do that. She thinks us arrogant. If we appear to overreach ourselves, attack them at a strongpoint, she will be there to claim the glory of our demise.'

'The timing will have to be impeccable, or we will leave this planet under funeral shrouds.'

'Timing, old friend,' said Chapter Master Shrike, 'is something the Raven Guard mastered long ago.'



THE FURY OF THE RIGHTEOUS

Under Chapter Master Shrike's guidance, the previously reserved alliance between the Raven Guard and White Scars Chapters became strong as steel. In doing so, it turned the scattered and isolated assaults of the Imperial invasion into a combined force so potent it could rip the heart from the Tau coalition upon Prefectia.

The military doctrines of the Raven Guard and White Scars could not have been more different. Where the Khan's warriors preferred to deliver decisive blows upon open ground, Shrike's kin operated best in dense terrain where their meticulous strikes could wear down even the largest armies. Shadowsun had seen patterns emerge upon Prefectia, Agrellan and even Voltoris, and had begun to organise each sept's Kauyon traps accordingly. Where the White Scars had charged in, they often found themselves fighting only holographic mirages, the true strike coming from concealed fortifications nearby. Where the Raven Guard had lain in wait for their foe, they found themselves ambushed in their turn, or brought out into the open where long-range support cadres could scythe them down.

However, when the forces of Vior'la and T'au found themselves fighting both Chapters at once, even the best-laid Kauyon traps were found wanting. Again and again the Raven Guard, allowing themselves to be drawn out into the open, provided the anvil; the White Scars, charging from artful concealment, acted as the hammer. Outside the Rhosputen bunker complex, the Raven Guard, engaged in a running battle with an Armoured Interdiction Cadre,

steered their foes into a cross-quadrant strafing blitz that saw White Scars air support tear apart the fast-moving skimmers. When the Khan led a headlong charge across the Hectorid Greatspan, the Vior'lans quickly blocked both ends of the bridge, only to be cut to ribbons by the Raven Guard assault demi-companies hiding mag-locked beneath its suspension arches. Scout patrols lured Shadowsun's Riptides into committing to Kauyon strikes, only for well-placed teleport homers to summon Terminators from orbit, the veterans ambushing the giant battlesuits in their turn.

The other Space Marine companies present upon Prefectia were also united by Shrike's plans. When the White Scars' Hunting Forces were pursued across the Gnarled Wastes by cadres of Air caste fighters, the anti-aircraft fire of Stalkers and Hunters from six Chapters sowed the skies with such a massive barrage of flakk that not a single Tau pilot made it out alive. The Space Marines would not leave without first combining their strengths, preventing the Fire caste from cementing their hold upon Prefectia. Every victory was but another link in the chain that led to the most significant blow of all, a strategy hinging around the electrodam complex known as Brutec Nexus.



Stormseers, bring the sky-death!' shouted Kor'sarro Khan, his hair flying wild in the psychic maelstrom. 'Sudabeh! Time to take your revenge for Voltoris, brother!'

The Khan laughed into the electrical storm, fierce and joyful. Shrike, watching with head cocked to one side, made no comment. Primitivism as a weapon; a bold and extremely risky strategy with so much at stake. Upon Prefectia, however, it seemed to be working just fine.

On the lip of Ventur Scar's jagged chasm, the generatorum fortress of Brutec Nexus was wrapped in a net of crackling blue light. Though the Imperium's attempts to harness Prefectia's energy had centred upon giant helical leech-engines extending into Ventur Scar and Goliath's Eye beyond, the Tau had left the complex virtually undefended. The xenos command point was scant miles away, having skimmed north on gravitic motors. Likely to be bait, thought Shrike – but they would take it, before springing a trap of their own.

Shrike had watched in quiet approval whenever the Tau battlesuits and Drones had launched an assault on the complex, only to fall back, their precious technology fouled by the vast waves of static swirling out from the Stormseers' psychic vortex. The Space Marines too had found their autosenses plagued by howling interference, but Shrike had merely ordered them to remove their helmets. Their mortal senses were more than sharp enough to detect an attack. Still, not all Tau warriors were fully reliant on advanced sensor technology. Even now he could see phalanxes of Fire caste warriors approaching. An hour away by his reckoning. Perhaps less.

'Brother Chaestovoc, report,' shouted Shrike over the storm, darting a look at the red-armoured Techmarine working fast amongst a nest of cabled servitors.

'A challenge, my lord,' said Chaestovoc, the strain in his voice betraying the depths of his understatement. 'The machine spirits are crying out to the Omnisiah for release.'

'Good,' said Shrike. 'The electrostorm is ready for them.' The snap-boom of a massed engagement haunted the cusp of his hearing. 'Trigger the cataclysm, Chaestovoc.'

'Aye, my lord,' said the Techmarine. 'Initiation runes in three... two... one...'

A howling blast of pressure flattened Shrike against the gantry as ten gigantic fireballs of blue-white energy hurtled from the electromine's energy coils into the chasm. The entirety of Brutec Nexus shook as if caught in a god's fist. Shrike boosted up, the Khan already throwing himself from handhold to handhold. Deep below, fat snakes of energy writhed across the length of Ventur Scar. They spread fast into Goliath's Eye. From its depths, they would explode through every fissure – the same fissures in which Shadowsun's reserves lurked. Over a million xenos deaths, by Shrike's estimation. It was almost worth dying for.

Then the storm screamed like a banshee, and all was light.



THE MIGHT OF HOUSE TERRYN

United, the Space Marines upon Prefectia had struck grievous blows against Tau forces across the planet. Shadowsun was already out for vengeance, but Chapter Master Shrike had one card still to play...

The leaders of the Raven Guard and White Scars had turned the haywire energies coursing across Prefectia's fissures into a planet-wracking storm of electricity. The veins of geoelectric force thrumming under the planet's crust had roiled upwards in each fissure and canyon. In doing so, the Space Marines had caught unawares the Hunter Cadres sheltering in wait upon their slopes and sent a huge portion of their number tumbling into unmarked graves below. However, they had also made themselves the most obvious target upon all Prefectia. Within the hour, the Fire caste had closed on them in the tens of thousands. Even with the psychic storm conjured by the Khan's Stormseers keeping the Tau's lethal battlesuit elite at bay, the perpetrators of the electroquake faced almost certain death.

The Raven Guard and White Scars were preparing to sell their lives as dearly as possible when two immense bulk landers roared through the skies. Ion-class macroshields rippled white as the massing Tau cadres below tried in vain to bring them down. The vast heraldic icons upon their hangar doors slid apart even as the airborne behemoths bellied down near the edge of Goliath's Eye. A moment later, House Terryn announced their presence – not only with the blaring clarions of Baron Artemidorus, but with pounding, rapid-firing battle cannons that sent explosive death into the ranks of the Fire Warriors below. Debark ramps crashed hard into the ash, the war machines behind them starting to fire as they emerged from the gloom. From the cavernous interiors of the bulk ships strode the heroes of Voltorian legend – the Imperial Knights of House Terryn, each walker capable of duelling an army in its own right.

There they are!' cried Artemidorus, his Knight's pace accelerating into a thunderous run. 'I see their colours!'

A thrill coursed through the Noble's body as the rush of battle broke across him. His mind-link pulses were answered with slamming autobreaches and whirring rotaries. A moment of violent recoil, and a barrage of shells hurtled into the distant Tau approaching the lip of Goliath's Eye. They detonated with force enough to throw scores of xenos bodies into the air. Artemidorus shouted in raw aggression before forcing himself to focus.

'Adeptus Astartes at the ridge's edge, under heavy fire,' he voxed to his fellow Nobles. 'Heavy walkers inbound north-north-east; ion shields at clock point two.'

'I have them,' said Tybalt. The High King's Knight Warden loped forward with unseemly haste, his avenger

galling cannon stitching death into the shimmering chameleon-troops to the right flank. Missiles flew from his carapace launcher towards a gunship squadron that had moved to close range, the Tau pilots presumably trying to buy their earthbound comrades time. The volley blasted one of the skimmer tanks into flames as Tybalt barged between the others. Thunderstrike gauntlet crackling, the Patriarch wrenched the entire railgun turret from the second gun-tank and pivoted hard at the waist, using it as a club to swat the third skimmer sidelong into an ash dune.

A xenos strike fighter hurtled out from the sun, hoping to avoid detection as it loosed swerving missiles straight for Tybalt. Kingsward Balthazar flicked out his ion shield to intercept, detonating the seekers upon the invisible force field in ripples of flame. The walker's Icarus autocannons levelled a pinpoint volley of shells in return, and the stricken fighter hurtled

towards them, trailing fire. Balthazar stepped aside at the last moment, the sweeping gesture of his reaper chainsword like the arm of a courtier gesturing for a lady to go first. The Tau aircraft careened past the Knights and crashed in a blaze of energy, its flaming wreckage tumbling away.

Artemidorus spotted an ochre battlesuit soaring down from the skies to land hard atop Balthazar's carapace, missiles spitting from its shoulders into the pilot's door. 'Stubbers on the Kingsward!' the Herald shouted. A moment later, four streams of heavy-calibre bullets converged, punching into the Tau battlesuit so hard it was sent flailing from Balthazar's hull towards the crackling electrostorm at the chasm's edge.

The Exalted Court had come to Prefectia, and it would take far more than xenos tech-magic to hold back the slaughter they had in mind.



THE GLORIOUS FEW



Noble, courageous and utterly determined, High King Tybalt and his warriors had battled the Tau on the Eastern Fringe ever since they had rejected the honeyed promises of the Water caste and hurled them from their world. On Agrellan, it was Tybalt's Knights who had stood guard over the retreating Imperial forces, taking a terrible toll upon their foes despite substantial casualties of their own. In the mighty battle on Voltoris that followed, Commander Shadowsun's Tau forces had been hurled back in disarray, yet the High King did not yet consider honour satisfied.

Now, Tybalt and his bellicose followers sought to crush the Tau once and for all. It was for this reason that the Knights of House Terryn answered the call to war upon Prefectia, pursuing their prey across the stars and seeking another opportunity to annihilate the dishonourable xenos.

At the heart of the knightly deployment upon Prefectia strode High King Tybalt and the valorous warriors of his Exalted Court. They were the cream of Terryn's strength assembled for battle. More than that, these warriors represented the paragons of the house's honour and nobility. Before they began their march into the fray, Tybalt and his Barons swore mighty oaths of vengeance, vowing to crush the enemies of House Terryn no matter the cost.

High King Tybalt led at the front of his Exalted Court, a warrior rendered no less skilled or fearsome by his advanced years. Even before the Tau had encroached upon the systems around Agrellan, Tybalt had been as feared as he was honoured. Now, having personally stood in defence of the retreating forces at Agrellan Prime – and with the crushing Imperial victory upon Voltoris under his belt – the Patriarch was famed throughout the Dovar System as the scourge of the Tau. His Knight, Fury of Voltoris, bore many fresh honour-markings for spectacular kills in battle with the forces of Commander Shadowsun, most notably upon his avenger gatling cannon, which took the lives of the renowned Commander Voidsun and his bodyguard before the gates of House Terryn's stronghold.

At Tybalt's right hand was Baron Artemidorus, piloting his proud and ancient Knight Unbowed into battle in his capacity as the Herald of his house. As energy storms crackled overhead and voltaic geysers roared from the shattered earth of Prefectia, Artemidorus cut through the din with the brazen blare of heraldic trumpets that rang out from his Knight's vox-grilles. With shell, shot and missile he pounded the xenos foe, engulfing them in flame and ruin wherever they dared show their faces. Meanwhile, the noble Herald scanned the battlefield for



threats that his more hot-headed comrades might have missed. Whenever such a target was sighted, Artemidorus cried a ritualised warning to his comrades, their trust in his wisdom and skill such that ion shields tilted into position even before the Knights knew the nature of the threat. In this way were countless volleys of railgun fire and seeker missiles endured, the deadly ordnance exploding in harmless blooms of flame against the Knights' shields.

The remainder of Tybalt's Exalted Court consisted of another three brave warriors – Montereyn, Taurus, and Balthazar. Baron Taurus, piloting the pugnacious Errant suit Honour Intractable, held the ceremonial post of Gatekeeper of Voltoris. His first sworn duty was to defend the holdings of House Terryn upon their home world. It was thus a measure of how seriously High King Tybalt took the Tau threat that he had summoned Taurus to fight at his side upon Prefectia. Baron Taurus was honour-bound to his protector's duties, transferring his role as Gatekeeper to acting as sworn defender of the other Knights within the Exalted Court. As such, he was entrusted not only with executing vicious close assaults against the largest, most threatening battlesuits of the Tau, but also with sweeping the xenos' lethal aircraft from the skies with sawing lines of autocannon fire.

Baron Balthazar, piloting the Knight suit Ever-Stalwart, likewise placed others' lives before his own. However, in his role as the Kingsward, Balthazar's only true concern was the safety of High King Tybalt. Marching alongside his liege, Balthazar raised his reaper chainsword in the High King's defence whenever danger threatened, and placed his armoured steed between his liege and those who would do him harm. During the fierce fighting amid the ruins of the Cathedrum of Saint Pyroclastos, it was Balthazar who shot down over a dozen prowling gunships and Razorshark Strike Fighters that had showed the foolish temerity to threaten his liege.

Sire Montereyn was a recent appointment to the Exalted Court, and a brave prodigy of the High King. Montereyn's promotion to Tybalt's inner circle was in recognition of his courageous actions during the battle for Agrellan Prime, during which he had stood over the fallen wreckage of two brother Knights, guns blazing in their defence until they and their pilots could be snatched to safety. Montereyn and his steed Voltoris Undaunted have taken the place of Baron Darius, who had been detached in his Knight suit Intolerant to bolster the Astra Militarum fighting for the equatorial magnocomplex. The young Noble was determined not to waste such a rare opportunity for glory.

A CLASH OF GIANTS

As the bulk landers disgorged war goliaths across Prefectia, Tau battlesuits surged from amidst the ruins, each levelling a storm of killing energy. A host of XV104 Riptides, so decisive in the battle for Agrellan, had been waiting for the Imperium to commit its heaviest assets, their pilots sent by Shadowsun to secure victory upon this new and vital world.

The arrival of the Imperial Knights was not entirely a surprise to Shadowsun. She had encountered the gue'ron'sha's hulking allies before, and had prepared powerful contingencies in case the looming walkers joined the fight upon Prefectia. The presence of her command hub upon the edge of Goliath's Eye was no coincidence; she had relocated there in order to intercept the withdrawing Space Marines, and ordered her Riptide pilots to muster on its perimeter.

The Knights of House Terryn had duelled with Tau Riptides before, both upon Agrellan and Voltoris. The towering xenos battlesuits stood

as the greatest challenge to the Exalted Court's supremacy they had yet encountered. Even the giant Ork walker-effigies they had fought on Grosphox IV had not claimed such a tally from their ranks. Nonetheless, the sheer disgust the Nobles felt for the xenos war machines drove them to launch into a headlong attack.

Tybalt had mustered his house's finest warriors as well as those allied houses and Freeblades who owed debts of honour to House Terryn. Knight walkers by the dozen made planetfall upon Prefectia, their combined numbers rivalling a Space Marine Battle Company. Barons Yorac and Orpheron had been sent to hammer

the Tau reserves descending from Prefectia's moon to attack the Maven Isles. Capulan and Amaranthine led a concerted attack on the polar seams, and Darius strode through endless ranks of Astra Militarum as they besieged the Tau's equatorial command hub.

Despite the massing of Tybalt's warriors, it was the presence of Taurus, the Gatekeeper of Voltoris, that was the ultimate indicator of Tybalt's intent. It was clear to friend and foe alike that House Terryn intended to end the Tau threat to the Damocles Gulf region themselves, or face the annihilation of their house in the attempt.

With the surviving Raven Guard and White Scars already sowing destruction across the Tau battle line, House Terryn's charge was all but unstoppable. The battleground between Ventur Scar and Aquillon Hive was already dotted with the smoking remains of Tau war machines, many of which had been accounted for by High King Tybalt himself. The momentum of the Knights' arrival carried them stamping through the ranks of Fire Warrior Strike and Breacher Teams. Rapid-firing battle cannons and avenger gatling cannons thundered shells into distant battlesuits until even their shields were found wanting.

In loose squadrons, the Riptides deployed to counter the Imperial walkers, their jet packs sending them leaping through the carnage with impressive grace for war machines of such size. Blazing energies that would have melted even Tactical Dreadnought armour splashed across the carapaces of the charging Imperial Knights from all angles, burning proud heraldry from their pauldrons. Several of Terryn's giant walkers were crippled or slain, left as pillars of fire burning in the wake of High King's Tybalt's Exalted Court.

It did not stop the charge of House Terryn's finest for a moment.





The air filled with the rising hum of nova reactors powering up as the Riptide pilots pushed their weapons systems to the limit. It was a sound the warriors of House Terryn remembered well, a death knell for many honoured brethren upon Agrellan. Whenever the XV104 reactors thrummed loud, the Nobles raised their ion shields towards the sound. A split second later, the incinerating energies of the Riptides' super-charged weaponry burned harmlessly across shallow domes of invisible force.

Charging in an Adamantium Lance attack pattern, the Knights returned fire with their thermal cannons. With their energies focussed on their all-out attack, the Riptide pilots had left little to spare for defence. An entire squad of the giant battlesuits burst into flame and fell sizzling to the ashen ground. High King Tybalt slammed shoulder-first through one of the blazing wrecks, charging headlong into the tank squadrons beyond and slamming his crackling gauntlet through one Sky Ray Gunship after another.

At Shadowsun's behest, a Fire caste cadre arced in from the west, seeking to circumvent the assaulting Knights so they could level fire at their vulnerable rear armour. Into the shadow of the closest bulk lander, Broadside Battlesuits, Hammerhead Gunships and squads of Sniper Drones deployed, a pair of Riptides escorting the phalanx with ion cannons blazing. This flanking attack too had been foreseen by Kayvaan Shrike, the hidden orchestrator of the battle thus far, and he had a deadly contingency held ready.

Storming out from the dark reaches of the bulk lander's hangar bay came a lone walker, a monster from the nightmares of those Tau who had seen its bloody work at Agrellan. It was known only as the Obsidian Knight. The walker's soot-black carapace was emblazoned with skulls and icons of doom, but no scrolls revealed its true name. No war cry came from its vox, no klaxon heralded its arrival. Still, its purpose was terribly clear.

The boom of the Knight's slamming footfalls thundered across the wastelands like the war drum of a tribe of giants. Its charge gathered speed even as its battle cannon pounded shells into the scattering Tau. Each shot claimed nigh a dozen lives. Railgun fire cracked out, but nearly all of the hypersonic projectiles were deflected in blazes of blinding light by the monstrous machine's ion shield. Even the shots that struck home did little more than add new scars to the behemoth's timeworn metal hide.

The nearest Riptide, boosting high over the great black walker, came down hard behind it with fusion blasters levelled for the kill. Far swifter than it had any right to be, the Obsidian Knight turned full circle at the waist, reaper chainsword lashing out horizontally to chew straight through the Riptide's torso. The walker turned back to its rampage, cannon clank-booming shells at the second XV104. The Riptide, torn apart by the Obsidian Knight's chainsword, crumpled in its wake, spraying sparks and xenos gore alike across the walker's piston-driven legs.



Sergeant Gherei relished the feeling of static-laced wind pulling at his hair, the rich tang of cordite on the tongue, and the scent of propellant in his nostrils. The cacophony of roaring engines and detonating ordnance filled the air around the White Scar bikers as they raced to the front line, each crump of distant explosions swiftly following the geysers of fire and dust that burst into life on the horizon. The full magnificence of war battered Gherei's every sense, filling his soul to the brim.

It was nothing to the elation Gherei felt in seeing the xenos scum die in droves as the Adeptus Astartes wrought their revenge with bolter and blade. Yet these were not their only weapons. Alongside the hunting force, great orbs of ball lightning crackled like outriders. Summoned from the haywire energies released at the electrocomplex, the spheres of energy attended every Stormseer and Chaplain riding to battle on this glorious day. Forks of blue-white force lashed out from these orbs to ground upon nearby foes, even seeking out those battlesuits kept hidden by xenos techno-blasphemy. And yet they too were mere

ripples, echoes of the storm of violence that broke across Prefectia. Shrike, after laying low a swathe of Tau lurking in the electromines, had ordered a planetary withdrawal, but there was killing yet to be done.

Through the ashen haze, Gherei saw a squadron of Tau transports fishtailing through the maelstrom. He pushed his steed's engine to the limit, triggering its twin bolters. A hail of mass-reactive bolts hammered into the rear of the nearest xenos skimmer, ripping open its aft hatches and filling their interior with choking smoke. He waved Dhulatai forwards. The impetuous young rider sped alongside the careening transport, hurling a frag grenade into its transport cavity and painting the vehicle's insides with the remains of its passengers. Bolters blazed, plasma guns roared, and the other two tanks went down hard.

Up ahead, giants loomed in the smoke. The arrival of the Imperial Knights had swiftly been answered by the largest battlesuits Gherei had ever seen, each rivalling the walkers of House Terryn in

size. The sergeant smiled wide. Tybalt's warriors were having the best of it, alternating between killing volleys and defensive stances to counter the searing cannonades of the Tau battlesuits. As they came on, the Knights stamped their way through the Tau infantry column. Gherei heard a chorus of cheers from his men as an entire battle line of Fire Warriors scattered from their grav-ramparts towards the dome-like structures in the distance. House Terryn's Knights fought as if they had devoted every waking hour to training for this moment. After Agrellan, thought Gherei, that might well be the case.

The White Scar's fierce smile soured, turning to a puzzled scowl. Behind the Tau line, something else was looming through the smoke and ash kicked up by the battle. Two, three, half a dozen shadows appeared, each huge enough to dwarf the monstrous warsuits duelling on the front line. Gherei was about to vox a warning when one of the immense shadows lit up. A heartbeat later, its impossible firepower tore the sergeant and his White Scar bikers into ribbons of wet meat and misted blood.







The future of the Damocles Gulf had come to Prefectia.

Looming through the scattered ruins on the edge of Aquillon Hive were KV128 Stormsurge ballistic suits, the most powerful war machines the Fire caste had yet brought to battle. Each suit towered over the Riptides fighting alongside them, and boasted far more firepower. Three by three they lumbered towards the front line, their lunging steps punctuated by the fusillades they unleashed. Volleys of soaring cluster rockets, destroyer missiles and fragmentation charges chewed great holes in the ranks of the Raven Guard amongst the ruins. This gruelling barrage was devastating enough, but when the vast weapon systems on their shoulders let fly, time stood still.

A moment of searing blindness, a stab of deafening noise. It was as if some fell giant had scooped an entire section of the wasteland away. Rubble, ash and Space Marine alike simply vanished. Where a defensible position had been a moment before, nothing more than wisps of smoke remained.

The Stormsurges were not alone. Where the Space Marines pressed an assault towards the monstrous killers, light shimmered and bent to their flanks, the only visible signs of XV95 Ghostkeels joining the fight. A sucking shriek of air followed, and more of the Emperor's finest came apart in puffs of atomised blood, the energies that slew them invisible but no less deadly for it. Battlesuits of every description closed in, each one optimised the better to slay the shock troops of the Imperium.

The grand Kaucion continued to unfold, and with it, the truth of the weapons that Commander Shadowsun had been hiding all along.

KV128 STORMSURGES

Towering colossi of destruction, KV128 Stormsurges carry the firepower to annihilate whole columns of tanks, or fell super-heavy walkers with a single earth-shaking volley. Rushed to the front of the escalating war against the Imperium, these mobile bastions have swiftly proved their worth against the numbers and heavy armour of the foe. Though slow-moving and ponderous, a single Stormsurge can alter the course of a battle in seconds. Its armoured resilience and phenomenal firepower make it equally lethal in attack or defence.



The Stormsurge is the first in a new breed of Tau super-heavy war assets known as ballistic suits. Developed by the noted Earth caste weapons scientist Fio'O Bork'an Ishu'ron, these massive bipedal weapon-platforms are an answer to the super-heavy war engines of their foes. O'Ishu'ron recognised that even heavy battlesuits and aircraft such as the railgun-toting Tiger Shark AX-1-0 could be outgunned by the Imperium's Titan-class walkers. Furthermore, when

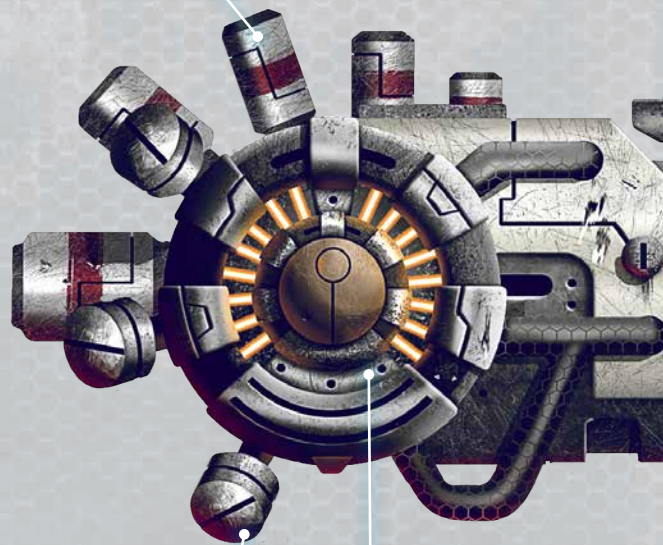
the enemy deployed their mightiest war machines en masse – as was the case during the war for Dal'yth and the Great War of Confederacy – all the railguns and seeker missiles in the empire could not prevent the Fire caste from sustaining heavy casualties. O'Ishu'ron, however, had a solution: the pinpoint application of overwhelming force. Each KV128 is essentially an enormous walking gun-tower, whose purpose is to anchor the Fire caste battle line while laying down an insurmountable weight of covering fire. To this end, the ballistic suit is fitted with a secondary generator specifically to power its Titan-killing weaponry, and is regularly used as a platform to field-test experimental weapons so heavy they have previously only seen use on spacecraft. The Stormsurge is operated by a carefully selected pairing of veteran Hammerhead crewmen, who have graduated through the ballistic suit academies on Bor'kan. The prestige of operating a ballistic suit is not equal to that of donning the Hero's Mantle, but the steely-eyed graduates of the so-called Ves'oni'vash – or 'giantmaker academy' – are honoured by the Fire Warriors for the countless lives they save. Working as a seamless team, the crew operate their towering suit, one piloting the Stormsurge while the other monitors, aims, and fires its weapon systems. In order to keep pace with the fluid strategies of the Tau, ballistic suits are mag-lifted into battle beneath specially modified Manta Missile Destroyers. Once deployed, the Stormsurge stomps into position and unleashes its incredible firepower, annihilating its designated targets before being lifted away once more.

PULSE DRIVER CANNON

Pioneered by the finest of T'au's Earth caste weapons scientists, the pulse driver cannon is a weapon so massive in size and power it can only be borne to battle by a dedicated artillery suit. Emitting a deep bass thrum that rises in pitch as its particle accelerator relays spool up, the cannon builds up force enough to level a building before the volley is released. Once the pent-up energies are let fly, an incandescent beam of blinding intensity stabs out with a buzzing roar. Anything in its path is obliterated in a column of superheated plasma, cast into its component atoms as if a solar flare had lashed from the heart of a sun to scour them from history in one terrifying second.

The pulse driver cannon was originally developed in response to the gargantuan war engines of the Orks. In the latter stages of the Arkunasha War a stationary prototype mounted on the Argap Plateau sent searing columns of deadly white force through the guts and torsos of Ork war effigies time and time again. In recent decades the weapon's deadly power has been matched instead against the Titans of the Imperium; though these boast far more sophisticated technologies than the walkers used by the Ork race, the result of a sustained barrage from a pulse driver cannon has proven to be much the same.

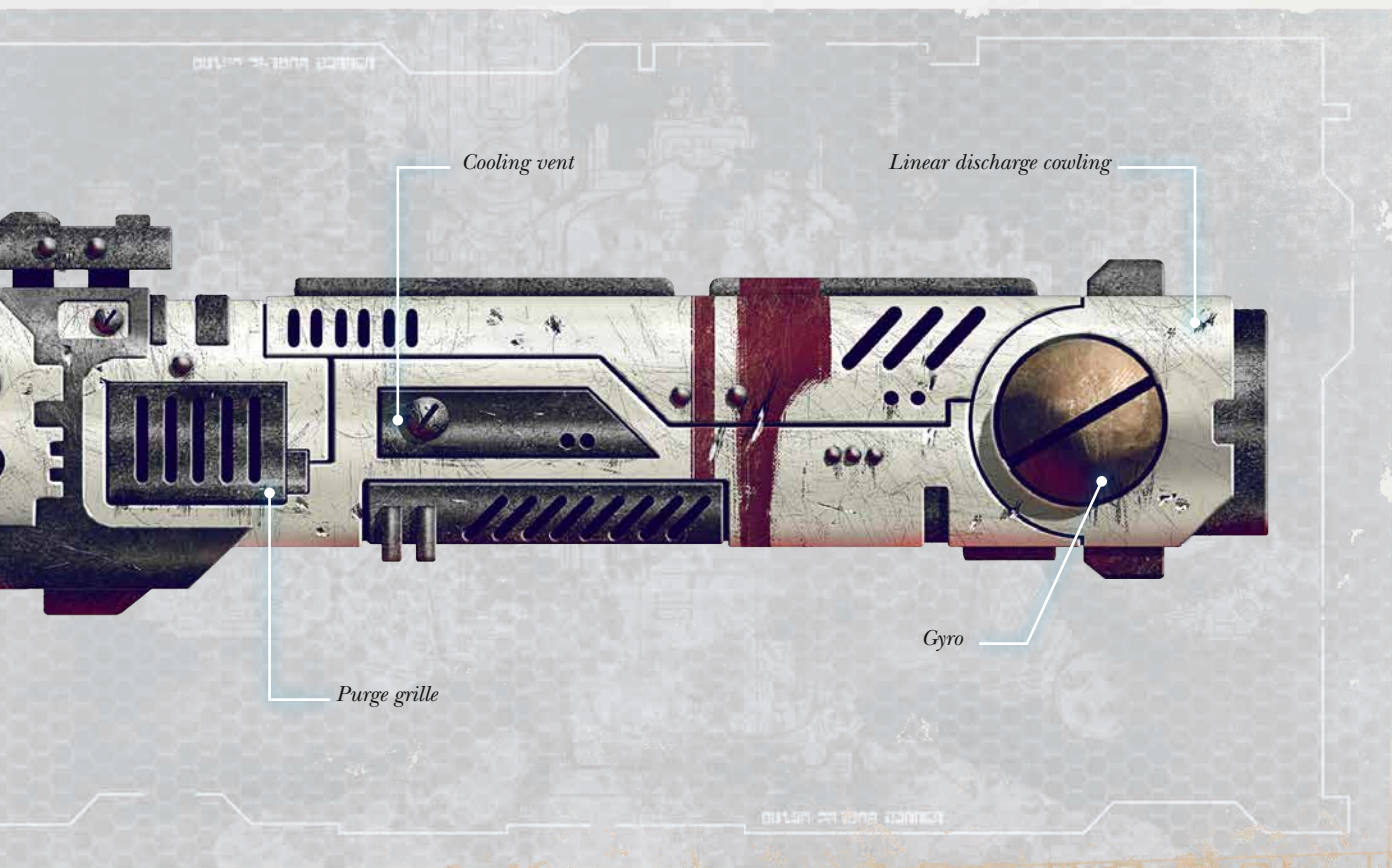
Pulse accelerators



Plasma containment chambers

Particle accelerator chambers

PULSE DRIVER CANNON



THE BATTLE OF GOLIATH'S EYE

Combined, the Fire caste's most advanced war machines became an unstoppable force. A hurricane of munitions was thrown into the oncoming Imperial attack, tearing apart Space Marine transports, gun tanks and even those Imperial Knights that found themselves caught in the teeth of the new offensive.

Though slow in comparison to Riptide and Ghostkeel, the KV128 Stormsurge was the ultimate in firepower. Under cover of night, Shadowsun had lifted nine of the vast machines into the ruins skirting Aquillon Hive and concealed them amongst the Tidewall Defence Networks established there. With her command hub relocated a few miles south of Goliath's Eye, the Imperium had finally taken the bait, and the mighty ballistic suits were revealing their presence to spectacular effect.

House Terryn's Nobles were quick to pour fire into the new threat looming through the smoke. To their dismay, the Stormsurges had shield generators of their own, powerful enough to dissipate a direct hit from a thermal cannon, and the solid ordnance that found its mark exploded harmlessly on thick thermoplastic plating. Tybalt ordered his army of Nobles to carry on firing nonetheless. Every time an Imperial Knight disengaged, its opponent would focus its fire on the Adeptus Astartes instead, and the kill count would rise even higher. Yet with the Knights forced to keep their guns and ion shields facing towards the Stormsurges, Stealth Teams and Ghostkeels haunting the edge of the battle were able to bring their fusion weaponry to bear, cutting the legs from the Knights and detonating their reactors in blazes of incandescent light.

Kayvaan Shrike, quickly adjusting to the magnitude of this new development, commanded a triple-pronged assault from Raven Guard, White Scar and Imperial Knight alike. As the Raven Guard pressed their assault from the ruins, Kor'sarro Khan's own hunting force hurtled from Ventur Scar to strike hard at the Tau flank. The dual assault hit the barely-recovered Fire caste battle line just as its warriors were rallying around an Ethereal ordering them back into the fight. The White Scars had brought more than guns, and blades to the fight; with them came the psychic storm the Stormseers had conjured from the geo-electric power stations. The tempest of energies raged so fierce it caught up spear-like lengths of rebar and even rusted girders from the battleground, hurling them out to impale Tau infantry and battlesuits alike. One of the giant Stormsurge ballistic suits was caught in a vortex of crackling force, its crew electrocuted in a single hideous moment.

At a word from Tybalt, the Knights of House Terryn took their chance, breaking for the edge of Goliath's Eye. Ion shields blazed bright to their flanks as the Tau battlesuits poured fire towards them, but their gambit had worked. The Imperial Knights were no longer surrounded. Now at their backs was a yawning, miles-wide pit that crackled with thick coils of Prefectia's boundless electric power.

The depths of Goliath's Eye growled and roared like the maw of some impossible, lightning-spewing beast.

'Put it out of your mind, men,' ordered High King Tybalt. 'The great pit is our ally here. We will make it so.'

As if to test his claim, a trio of the smaller Tau battlesuits blasted at full speed around the Exalted Court's flank and onto the lip of the giant sinkhole, hoping to level a volley to their rear. Balthazar's autocannons blasted one into tumbled wreckage. A crackling whip of energy lashed from the pit's depths across the other two, sending them tumbling into the darkness.

Shimmering from the side came one of the Tau stealth-machines. It slammed hard into Balthazar, pitching him onto the very edge of Goliath's Eye before boosting away, cannons blazing to send the Knight toppling over. Tybalt flung out his thunderstrike gauntlet, mind-flicking its disruption field inactive as he grabbed

Balthazar's Knight by the pauldron and hauled him to safety.

'You're supposed to be saving my life, Balthazar,' grumbled Tybalt, 'not the other way around.'

In the ruins, the artillery walkers had turned to face Tybalt, missiles streaking out in dizzying profusion. The reeling Balthazar was already locked in a duel with a Riptide. Montereyn charged, chainsword raised, towards a giant suit with a glowing cannon upon its shoulder – and keeled over, cored front to back. Tybalt turned his shield to block a volley of missiles, its circuits overloading even as another xenos warsuit levelled its shoulder cannon at him for a kill-shot. He roared in denial, eyes wide.

The Obsidian Knight was there in an instant, knocking aside the deadly blast with a contemptuous flare of his own shield. The Knight's battle cannon boomed twice in return. Tybalt's hopes sank as the volley soared over the ballistic suit – and then the shells detonated on the outcrop of

ruins above it, sending rubble cascading right into the pilot bay behind the thing's gorget.

Incensed, the Tau concentrated their fire on the Obsidian Knight, but the Freeblade's ability to predict the enemy's ballistics was uncanny. Over and over his shield flickered and changed shape, detonating seeker missiles and splashing aside plasma.

'Fire back then, damn it!' bellowed Tybalt to his Noble kin. 'Our silent friend has bought us a reprieve, so let's use it!'

It was too late. Realising their fire could not penetrate the Obsidian Knight's guard, one of the Tau artillery crews aimed their fire not at the walker, but at the ground by its feet. A blinding column of force ripped a great trench into the bone-dry earth, the seismic shivers so violent Tybalt felt it even through his walker's Throne Mechanicum.

Then the ground fell away into the pit's wide maw – and with it, the Obsidian Knight, toppling end over end into the abyss.



THE BLADES OF SPITE

The Knights of House Terryn cried out in despair at the demise of the Obsidian Knight, and rightly so, for the hero's loss was the tipping point that turned a losing battle into disaster. Their strength spent, the Imperial invaders had no option but to dig their claws as deep as possible, gouging a few last wounds into the Fire caste before withdrawing altogether.

With the firepower of both the T'au and Vior'la contingents upon them, and the lip of Goliath's Eye crumbling away, House Terryn were fighting for their lives. Tybalt frantically shouted orders to his comrades, ordering his pilots to brave the enemy fire and attend him immediately.

As the Tau ballistic suits pressed home their attack, the bulk lander *Cosmic Steed* glided over the corpse-strewn ash. The titanic craft pivoted its own ion shield downward – not, this time, to deflect the anti-air firepower of the Tau, but to protect its broad undercarriage from the electric storm inside Goliath's Eye. Missile explosions rippled along its hull as it lowered itself into the pit, engine backwash flattening anything smaller than an Imperial Knight as the vast drawbridge of its boarding ramp slammed onto the lip of the pit. If House Terryn's Nobles were not amongst the most skilled Knight pilots in the galaxy, they likely would have fallen to their deaths. With Tybalt taking the lead, however, and ion shields covering their retreat, they each made the leap of faith. The bulk lander, built to survive sustained atmospheric re-entry, rode out the firepower chewing at its flanks and pulled away into the night, bearing the humbled court of House Terryn into the skies.

Kayvaan Shrike had lost a powerful asset indeed, but he still refused to give up. Abandoning the cataclysmic battle at the edge of the shattered cityscape, the Raven Guard and White Scars alike sought the safety of dense terrain where their raw physical power could not be neutralised by the guns of the Tau. A series of brutal, blood-spattered skirmishes followed as the Space Marines made their way to Shrike's designated extraction point, each driven as much by bitterness and hatred as by the expediency of an ordered withdrawal. Amongst the smoke-shrouded destruction of the abandoned hive districts, the tactical genius of Chapter Master Shrike came to the fore. Shielded from the Tau's long-ranged firepower, the Raven Guard turned the fight to their own terms, and by using a complex series of feints and shadow tactics, they withdrew with minimal casualties.

The White Scars achieved through ferocity and speed what the Raven Guard had with stealthcraft. Through the battle-ravaged landscape hunted the Khan, desperate now for any sign of his nemesis, gunning his bike towards every heat-mirage and smoking crater in the hope of bringing his quarry out into the open. But Shadowsun was no fool. The battle was won, and she intended to live to appreciate it.



Face me!’ shouted Kor’sarro Khan, acidic spittle flying from his mouth to sizzle on the tumbled statue of some nameless Imperial saint. He whipped Moonfang round in an arc, cleaving a fallen battlesuit’s chest open and hauling the bleeding, half-dead pilot from within.

‘Where is she?’ he roared, shaking his captive so hard his neck snapped with an audible crunch.

A roar of flame, and Kayvaan Shrike crunched down atop the fallen statue, xenos blood sizzling on his hooked claws.

‘She’s gone, Kor’sarro,’ said the Chapter Master. ‘It’s over.’

‘No!’ shouted the Khan, eyes burning fierce. ‘You said it yourself, raven. This race has a twisted honour somewhere inside it, buried in what passes for their souls. She will face me yet.’

‘Her weapon is not the sword, nor the gun. She wields an entire race’s war caste against us. That is where her attention will be spent now. We would do well to follow suit.’

‘You respect her,’ spat the Khan, his weathered features twisted in contempt. ‘Where is your hate?’

‘Tempered,’ said Shrike. ‘Harnessed. Saved for a time when it can blaze bright, instead of eating away at my insides, burning away my perspective. And you respect her too, in a way. Or you would not be going to such lengths to kill her.’

Kor’sarro Khan remained silent, features stony as the fallen saint.

‘This whole world,’ he said eventually. ‘All this...’ he motioned towards Goliath’s Eye with his sword, the blade’s sweep encompassing the sounds of distant battle. ‘This too was a trap.’

Shrike nodded, but said nothing. The Khan cast the Tau corpse into the ash, rubbing his forehead with eyes screwed closed. ‘I see it now,’ he continued. ‘A trap to force us to commit our strongest warriors, then cast them into nothingness as if they were chaff upon the wind.’

‘You fought well,’ said Shrike. ‘Three battlesuits in as many seconds. Jaghatai himself would have smiled to see it.’

‘It matters not!’ shouted the Khan. ‘That we fell for her bait time and time again is a disgrace. A stain upon our honour that can only be washed clean in blood.’

‘Not today,’ urged Shrike. ‘We have dealt the usurpers a dire blow here, but the storm has passed. We must leave now if we hope to gather it anew, old friend.’

The Khan shot Shrike a long, hard look before turning on his heel and striding away.



THE THIRD SPHERE ASCENDENT

With the fighting withdrawal of the Space Marines and the evacuation of House Terryn, the remainder of the Imperial forces upon Prefectia soon followed suit. Shadowsun, her forces already enveloping the last centres of resistance, had secured her dominance beyond doubt. The expansion of the Third Sphere would continue apace.

The deployment of the Stormsurge KV128 ballistic suit was by no means limited to the battle on the edge of Goliath's Eye. In every theatre of war, the looming artillery walkers emerged. Some of their number, in a practice pioneered by Commander Sternshield, were used as the centrepieces of a variant Kauyon where the lure was not only the bait to draw in the enemy army, but the tidal wave that broke it against the unyielding cliff of the wider Tau force. Others formed roving gun emplacements that added daunting firepower to the Tidewall gun clusters. They strengthened the Tau's stranglehold upon Prefectia day by day, blasting apart the remnants of Imperial occupation, pulverising the gun-gargoyles encrusting each dormant hive and toppling the statues of the planet's former owners from every plinth. In a matter of months, the fortress world had fallen completely to its Fire caste conquerors, just like Agrellan before it. To great celebration, the planet was renamed Vas'talos, which means 'boundless scope' in the Tau tongue.

Soon enough, plans were being made for the next stage of the Third Sphere Expansion. Many of the shas'ar'tol believed the consolidation of their gains to be the next step, the better to build the foundation from which

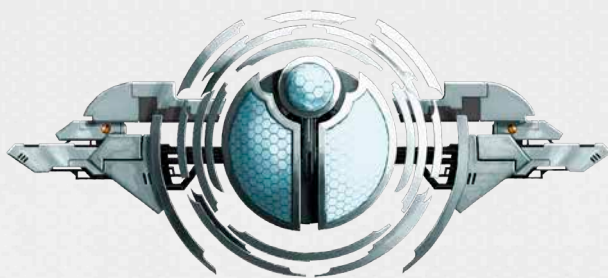
they would strike further into Imperial space. Aun'Va overruled the Fire caste council in person, the wisdom of his speech so obvious his commanders felt foolish they had not reached the same conclusion themselves. The expeditionary force would divide its strength, one half pushing further into the Dovar System whilst the other returned to ensure the supply route to Mu'gulath Bay remained intact.

Across every sept world, colony and orbital station, Prefectia was already being portrayed as the Tau's greatest victory yet. Already plaudits were being given and speeches being made, the Water caste extolling far and wide this latest glorious manifestation of the Tau's destiny. Much mention was made of Commander Shadowsun, her image broadcast across unnumbered holo-screens on a daily basis. The grand Kauyon she had staged upon Prefectia was hailed as a work of genius. She had slowly escalated the engagements against the Imperium's shock troops, many true believers in the Tau'va giving their lives in battle to goad the enemy further and further until they attacked in force, then trumping them with the true strength she had concealed all along. In this manner the supreme commander of the





Fire caste had personally slain the grand monarch of the Space Marines, a grim-faced figure in black armour who had long directed the Imperial war effort, but had only now been lured into the open by Shadowsun's masterful Kauyon strategies. With the death of their greatest leader, the Water caste excitedly reported, the armies of the Imperium would be cast into disarray, caught in a power vacuum which it would take them years to escape.



Featured prominently on every holoscreen from one end of the Tau Empire to the other were the Ghostkeel battlesuits and Stormsurge ballistic suits that had given the Fire caste the edge they needed to defeat the warmongering brutes of Humanity. At the end of every triumphant broadcast, serene images of the Ethereal caste would dominate the screen, telling the Tau that every life lost in the furtherance of the Greater Good was a life well spent, and that no true follower of the Tau'va could believe otherwise.

These broadcasts were kept on loop for many days, not purely for the sharing of information, the betterment of unity and the raising of morale, but also because the Ethereals knew well that conviction was amongst the Tau's strongest weapons. The battle for Prefectia was won, they said, but the war against the corrupt and bloated empire of Mankind was only now beginning. They had little idea how right they were.

The sheer scale and ambition of the war for the Eastern Fringe was becoming one of the wonders of the Tau Empire, feted loud and clear by every one of its citizens. News of the morbid, brutish race they had outwitted and outfought spread far and wide. Every new clutch of Tau youngsters was told stories of greedy, rotten Humans that sought to smother the stars, suffocating all light and hope without ever knowing why.

The news of the Great Victory was also broadcast to those civilisations that had allied themselves with the Tau Empire, and even many who had not. There were those amongst them who realised that under the triumphalist claims was buried a death toll that likely spiralled into the billions. Some of their number, those who had come to truly understand the Imperium of Man, realised that the grandiose war the Water caste spoke of had every chance of drowning the Tau Empire in an unremitting tide of death.

The news soon reached a chain of star systems coreward of the Gulf, long abandoned by the Tau Empire. There, a legendary leader gathered his people and made ready for a war that would change the history of the Tau forever.

THE TITAN AWAKENED

Upon Prefectia, the Tau Empire had proven itself a force to be reckoned with. On a strategic level, their warsmithing was impressive, and their carefully prepared traps had lent them a tactical advantage time after time. The greater battle, however, was yet to be won – not only for the worlds surrounding the Damocles Gulf, but for the Tau's place in the galaxy.

The Imperium had lost Prefectia to Aun'Va's expeditionary force, expertly commanded by the military genius of O'Shaserra. Ultimately, though, the Imperium considered that world of little strategic value. There were more vital targets in the Eastern Fringe, targets to which warfleets had already been despatched via the fickle tides of the Warp. Countless regiments of Astra Militarum, orders of Adepta Sororitas, and macro-level war cohorts from the Adeptus Mechanicus were inbound, slowly but unstoppably, to the greater war zone. According to the assessments of Imperial strategos and war savants, there was no way the Tau could conquer the Gilded Worlds without either abandoning the surrounding systems or leaving their own heartlands poorly defended. Both were courses of action they believed the Tau would never take.

As for the battlegroup assigned to the reclamation of the worlds recently taken, they too had greater plans reaching fruition. With the focus of Fire caste high command upon Prefectia, the Imperium turned its eyes once more towards Agrellan, renamed Mu'gulath Bay by its presumptuous Tau conquerors. Though the twelve great hives of that world had been brought low by Shadowsun's masterful offensive,

and though the planet's rad storms and toxic atmosphere made it all but inimical to new life, the location of the planet made it valuable indeed. More than that, it had become a symbol for the Tau Empire – a symbol of triumph over Humanity that the Imperium could not abide.

The Imperium spans a million worlds, and with every cycle Holy Terra describes around Great Sol, dozens are lost and dozens more settled in the Emperor's name. Yet rarely does a Chapter Master die in battle, and rarer still one of the First Founding, those whose predecessors fought at the side of the legendary Primarchs. Such fallen heroes are not to be forgotten, but to be avenged.

Through the inky void the Space Marines and their allies headed for Agrellan once more, intent on striking the Tau defenders there whilst the pride of the Fire caste was consolidating its gains in a different system. The slight upon the honour of the Adeptus Astartes would be repaid a hundredfold.

There was revenge to be wrought, and in such matters, the Imperium is expert indeed.



The greatvaults of Terran Strategium Gamma-Ninesix were vast beyond all practicality.

So astonishing in scale were they that clouds of incense by-product shrouded the triumphal sculptures of its arched ceilings from sight. Banks of cogitators hissed and whirred, bellows wheezed and inlaid servitor-husks ground their teeth with the intensity of the calculations pouring through their monotasked minds. Amongst the data-reliquaries and chronoprobes stalked hunchbacked, monk-like figures, each guiding a rusted autocart full of hole-punched scrolls to its destination.

Each of the cogitator banks was set into the Strategium's Great Mosaic, a true work of art over three leagues in diameter. Every one of the Terran Strategiums had a similar device, the work of a hundred generations to assemble. This particular mosaic was a stylised representation of those star systems farthest-flung on the Eastern Fringe, and it was the pride and joy of all Gamma-Ninesix's inhabitants.

There was Dovaris, the gold leaf that represented the star's mineral-rich worlds long since flaked from their swirling symbols. There was Belfurnace, the stellar body's faceted amber lit from below to glimmer from the emeralds of verdant 9-Jodran nearby. A stone's throw away was the famous forge world system of Bhodrol Beta, its sun's solar flares stylised as a great spoked wheel that touched upon a dozen librarium-stacks replete with information.

A masked factotum limped under the weight of stacked dataslates as he approached the swathe of glittering, diamond-studded tiles that represented the systems around the Damocles Gulf. Each of the worlds and races of that tempestuous region had its own data-alcove, watched over by the static servoskull of an adept who had once laboured to catalogue it for the betterment of Mankind. It was said that to know and fully comprehend them all was the work of several lifetimes, even for the most skilfully augmented lexmechanic.

The factotum saw something winking in the gloom of a recessed bay, something he had not noticed before. He looked around furtively for the Scriber Provost, but found himself alone. Cringing lest his master's truncheon strike him unannounced, the factotum approached the bay, pulling back his hood over his elongated skull the better to assess his discovery.

Under chiselled, calligraphic letters barely a few centuries old, a steady green light had gone out. A new light had turned amber in its stead. As the factotum watched, the alcove's threat abacus shivered, and the knuckle bones that formed its units slid over by a single decimal point. A scroll-tube thumped above it, the pneumatic relay taking word to his elders and betters.

The letters above the lights spelled a single word, a word the factotum had neither seen nor heard of before.

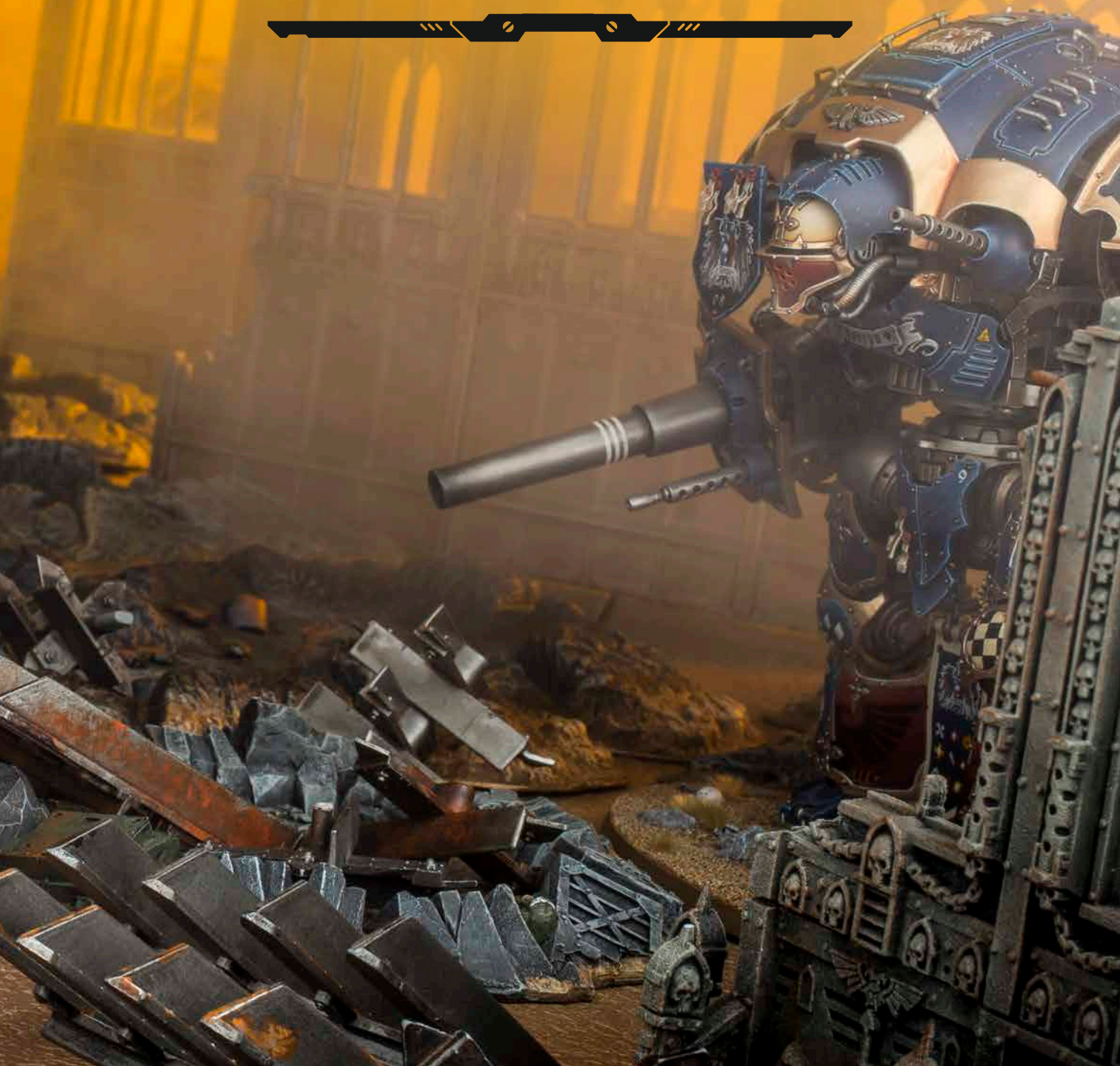
'TAU.'





CHAPTER 4

WARRIORS OF PREFECTIA





T'AU SEPT

The warriors of the T'au Sept are often clad in the yellow and brown shades that mirror their home planet's arid terrain, and these iconic hues are worn across the Empire as a sort of dress uniform. On the battlefield, however, warriors of T'au will adapt their armour to suit whatever environment they are called upon to fight in.

Regardless of their chosen camouflage, T'au warriors always bear markings in the bright white that is their unique sept colour.



Honoured Ethereal Aun'Do wears his sept colour on his armour and robe.



This Ethereal, Aun'Shen, displays his sept colour as writing upon his robes.



Shas'nel Kos'ul, Cadre Fireblade, wears a cloak in the white of his sept.



Shas'la Fyos displays her Strike Team marking on her pulse rifle and helmet.



Strike Team Shas'ui Den'ul shows his sept colour on his shoulder and sensor vane.



Pathfinder Shas'la Meion wields a short-ranged but deadly pulse carbine.

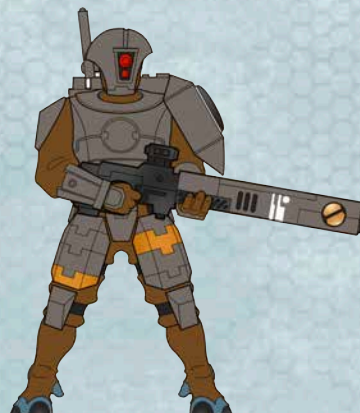


Pathfinder Shas'ui Jun. Note his white shoulder pad denoting rank.

OTHER T'AU UNIFORMS



Pathfinder Shas'la Kasu belongs to an elite cadre with inverted colours.



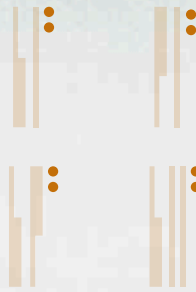
Strike Team Shas'la Vu'an is clad in a shipboard combat uniform.



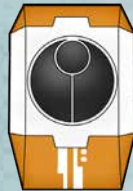
Breach Team Shas'la Dovos wears night war camouflage.



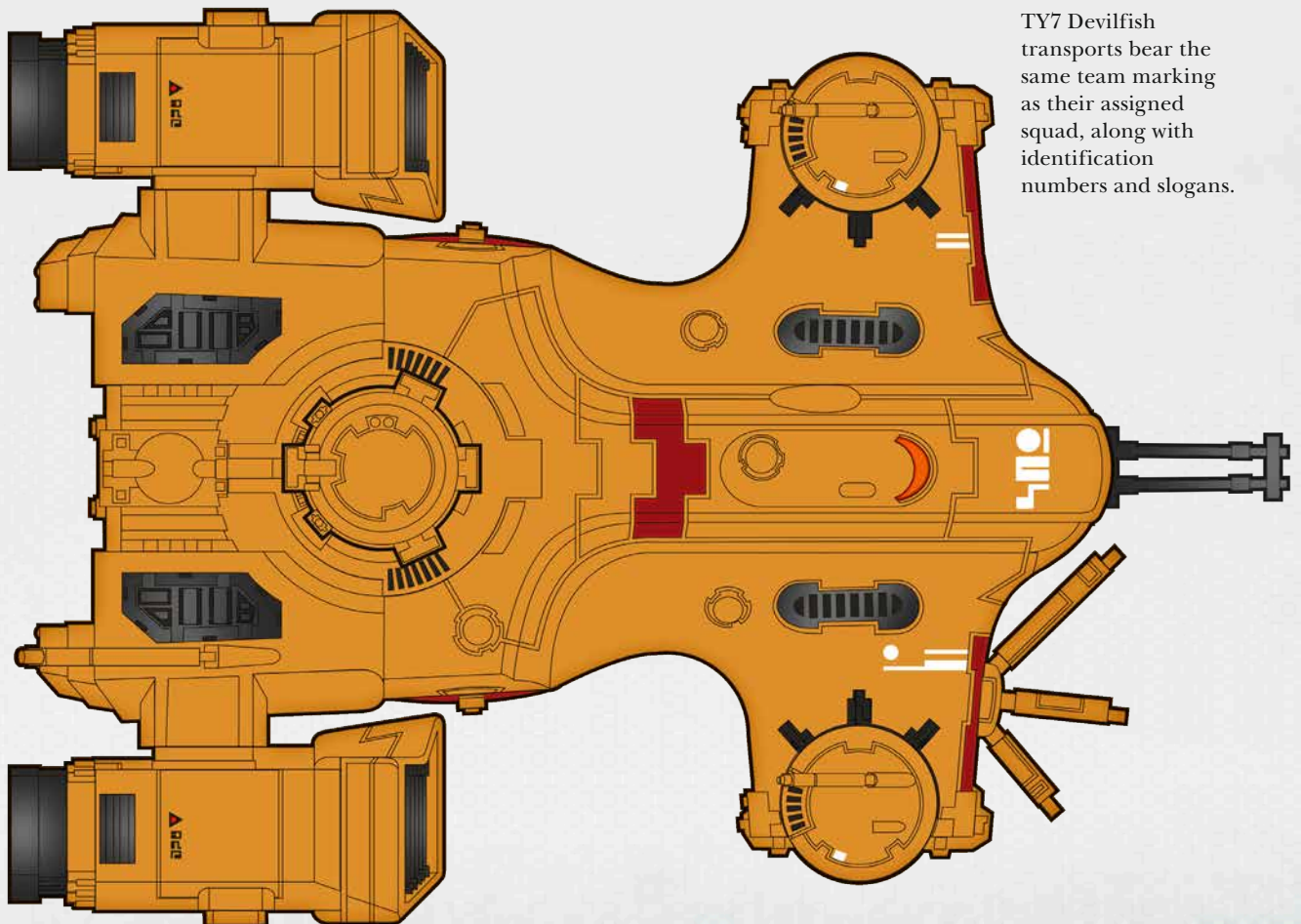
Every team has a unique team marking design. This designator is prominently displayed wherever each warrior chooses upon their armour or wargear and consists of multiple stripes in a specific configuration.



In each cadre, every member of every team bears a cadre marking upon their armour or wargear. This pattern of dots is always applied in the same fashion across the entire cadre, symbolising unity and the deferral of self-interest.

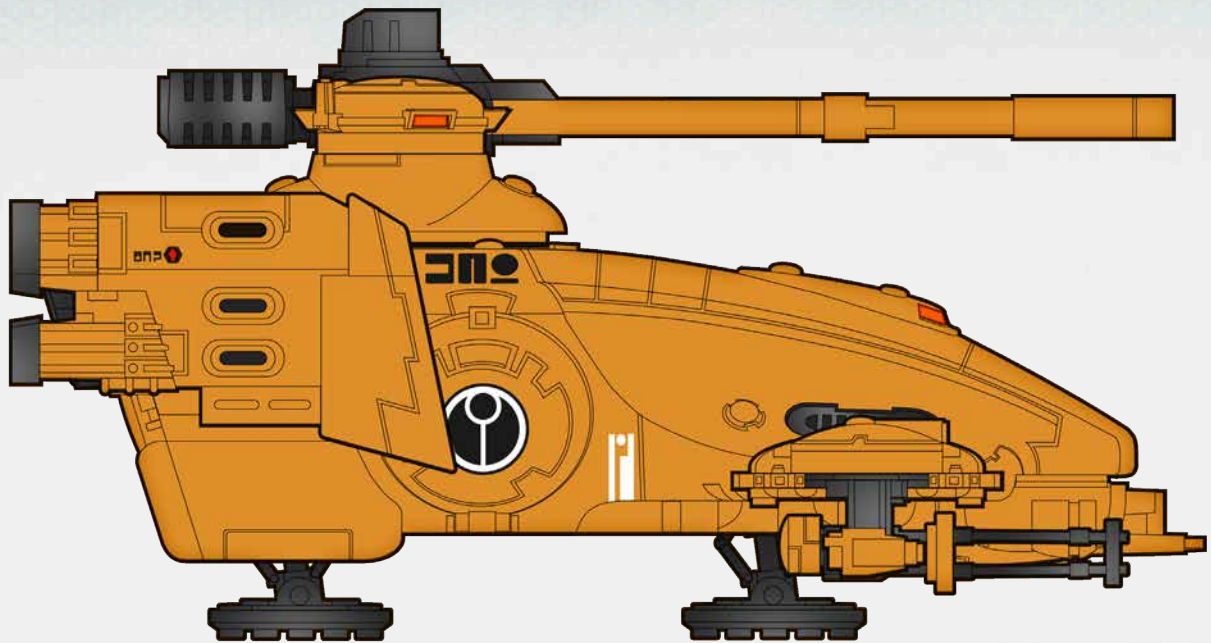


Shas'ui status is denoted by the application of the sept colour upon the shoulder guard and helmet sensor vane.

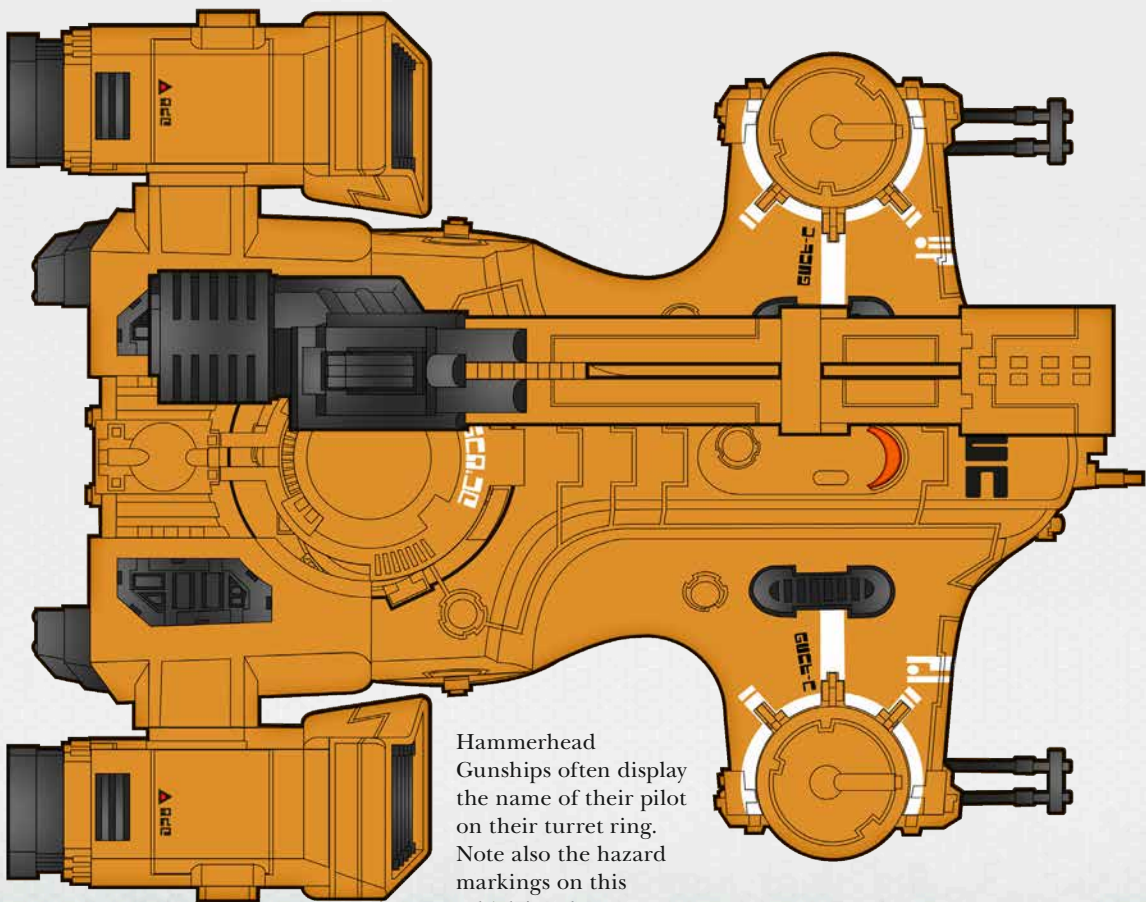


TY7 Devilfish transports bear the same team marking as their assigned squad, along with identification numbers and slogans.

T'AU SEPT

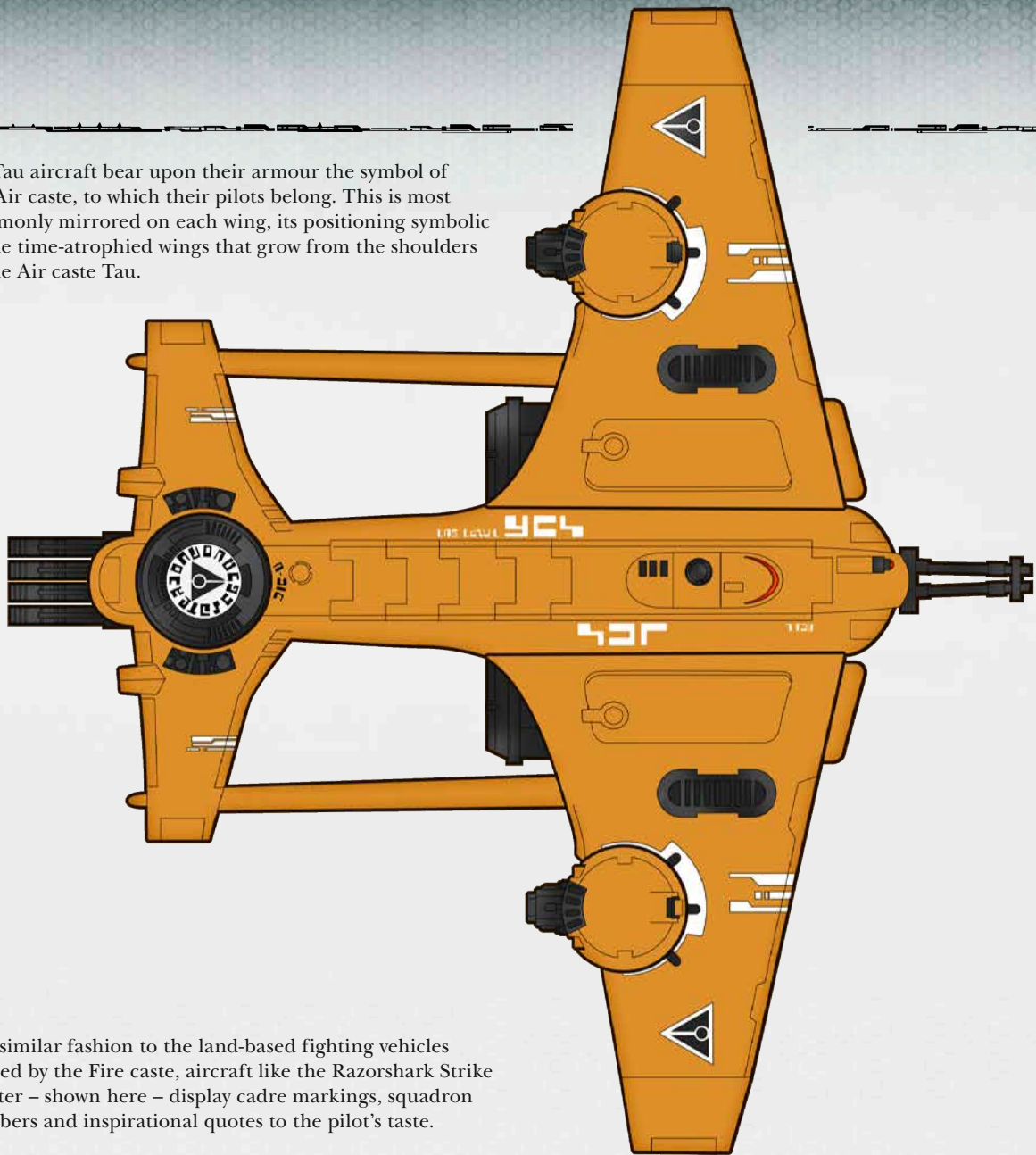


Tau gunships bear vehicle identification numbers upon the front or side of their hulls. They are often decorated with inspirational slogans, and bear cadre markings, shown here to the right of the side hatch.



Hammerhead Gunships often display the name of their pilot on their turret ring. Note also the hazard markings on this vehicle's exhausts.

All Tau aircraft bear upon their armour the symbol of the Air caste, to which their pilots belong. This is most commonly mirrored on each wing, its positioning symbolic of the time-atrophied wings that grow from the shoulders of the Air caste Tau.



In a similar fashion to the land-based fighting vehicles piloted by the Fire caste, aircraft like the Razorshark Strike Fighter – shown here – display cadre markings, squadron numbers and inspirational quotes to the pilot's taste.

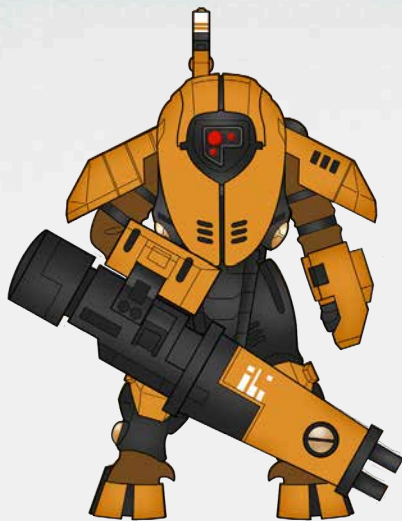
TAU ALPHABET

A	B	C/K	D	E	F/V	G	
H	I/Y	J	L	M	N	O	P
R	S	T	U	W	X		

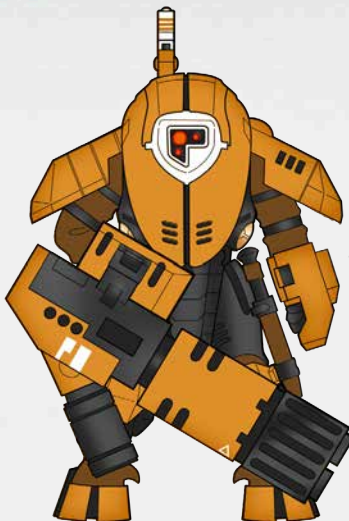


The Tau numerical system is rendered as shown to the left, and used to identify their fighting vehicles. Characters from zero to seven are used in varying combinations, marking out squadrons and applying ascending identifier numbers within them.

T'AU SEPT



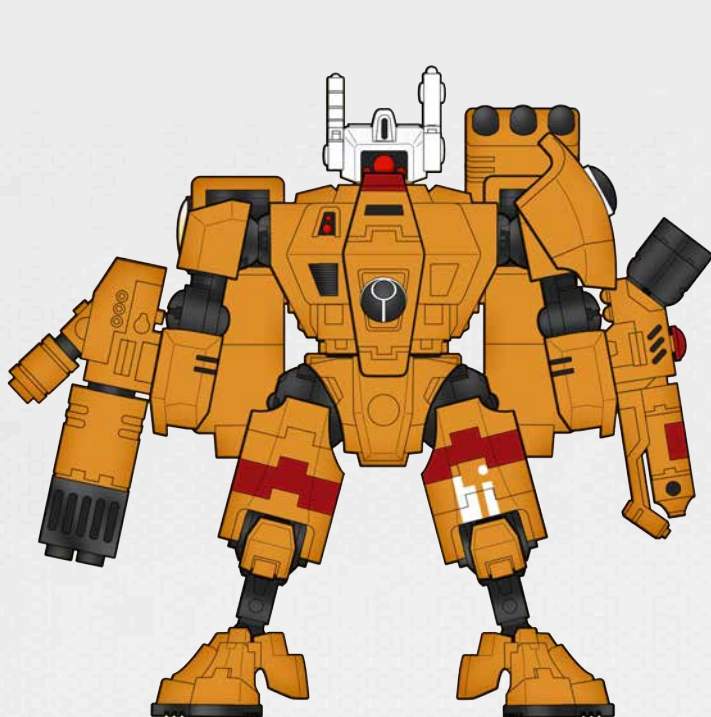
Stealth Shas'ui Vass displays his sept colour upon his helmet sensor vane, and bears his team marking on his burst cannon.



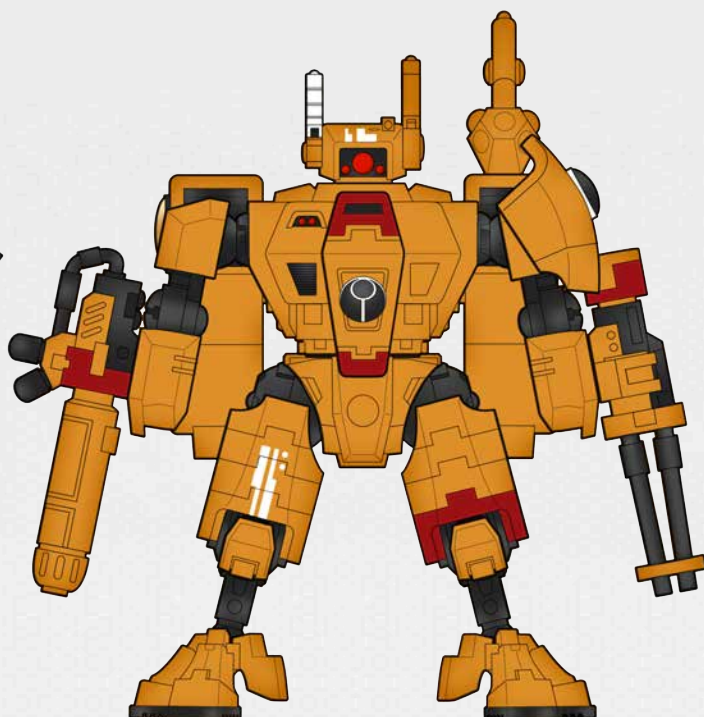
Stealth Shas'vere Nevun's rank is indicated by the use of her sept colour on not only her sensor vane, but also on her helmet face plate.



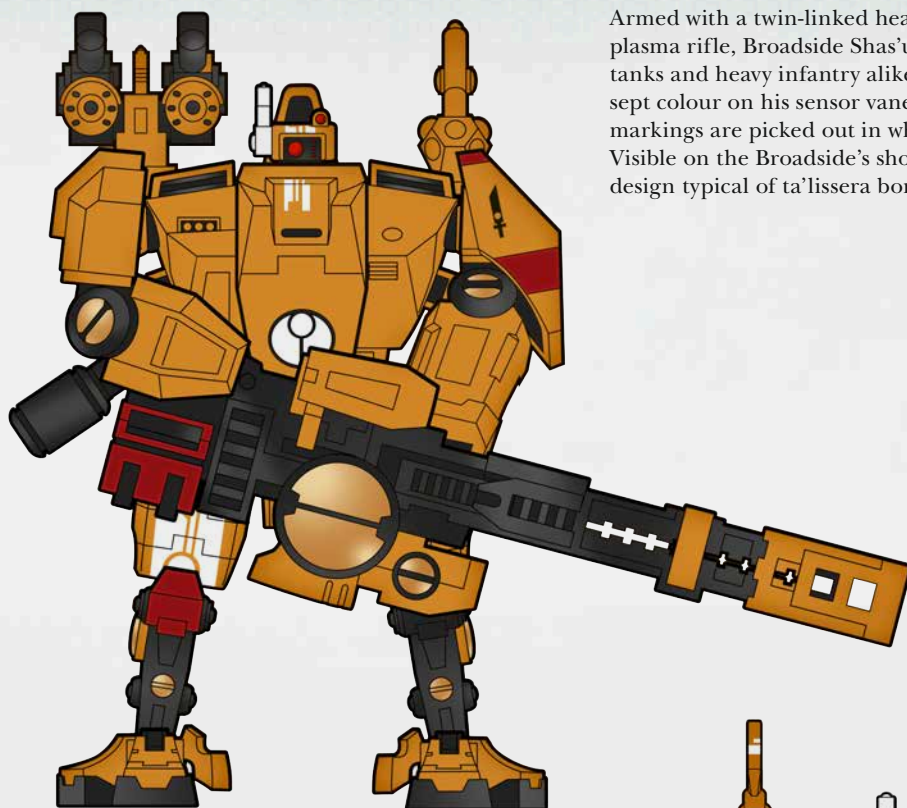
Stealth battlesuit pilots often wear darker colours to aid with their operations, as is shown here with XV25 Stealth Shas'ui Vollessa.



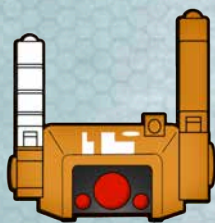
Crisis Shas'vere Jesol's battlesuit boasts a fusion blaster, flamer and missile pod. Jesol's rank is indicated by her helmet, which is wholly marked in her sept colour. Note the cadre marking on her thigh plate.



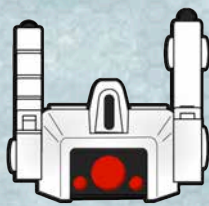
Crisis Shas'ui Lais. A sensor vane in the sept colour denotes Lais' rank, while the red blocking on his armour is a personal decoration often standardised across teams, especially those that are ta'lissera bonded.



Armed with a twin-linked heavy rail rifle and a twin-linked plasma rifle, Broadside Shas'ui Korloss is ready to face tanks and heavy infantry alike. His rank is shown in the sept colour on his sensor vane, while his team and cadre markings are picked out in white on his armour's plates. Visible on the Broadside's shoulder plate is a bonding knife design typical of ta'lissera bonded battlesuit teams.



The helmet of a shas'ui bears a sensor vane in sept colour.



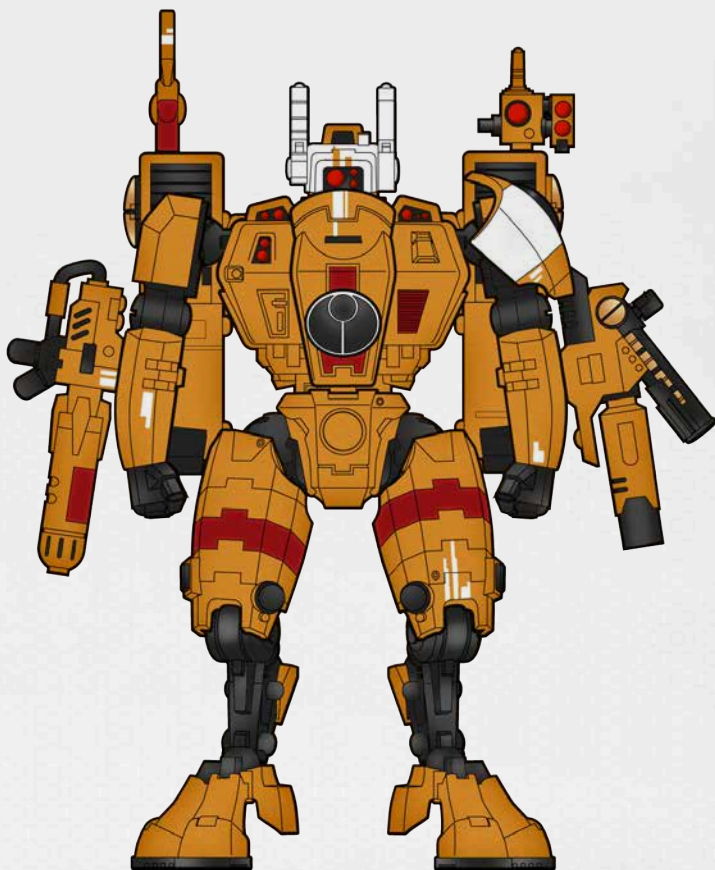
Shas'vre rank is shown by both helmet and sensor vanes in the sept colour.



This helmet denotes shas'el rank, as it is in the sept colour, except for the sensor vanes.



A shas'o helmet is in the sept colour but its markings match the wearer's armour.

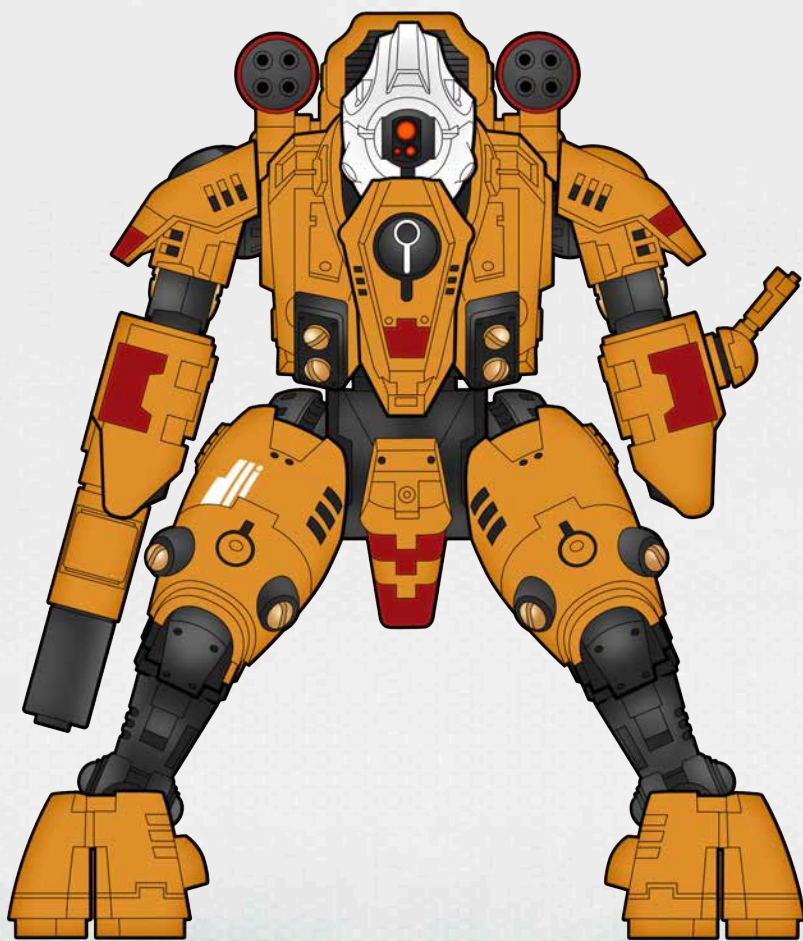
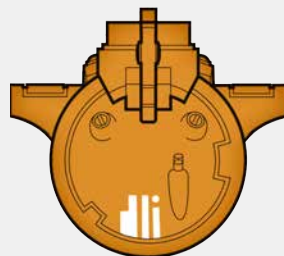
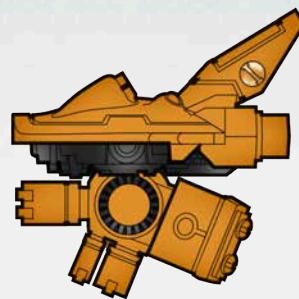


Shas'o Shien, the renowned Commander Swiftwing. His rank is shown in the colouration of his helmet and sinistral shoulder guard, as with a shas'nel or shas'ui. His suit's forearms bear additional honour markings.

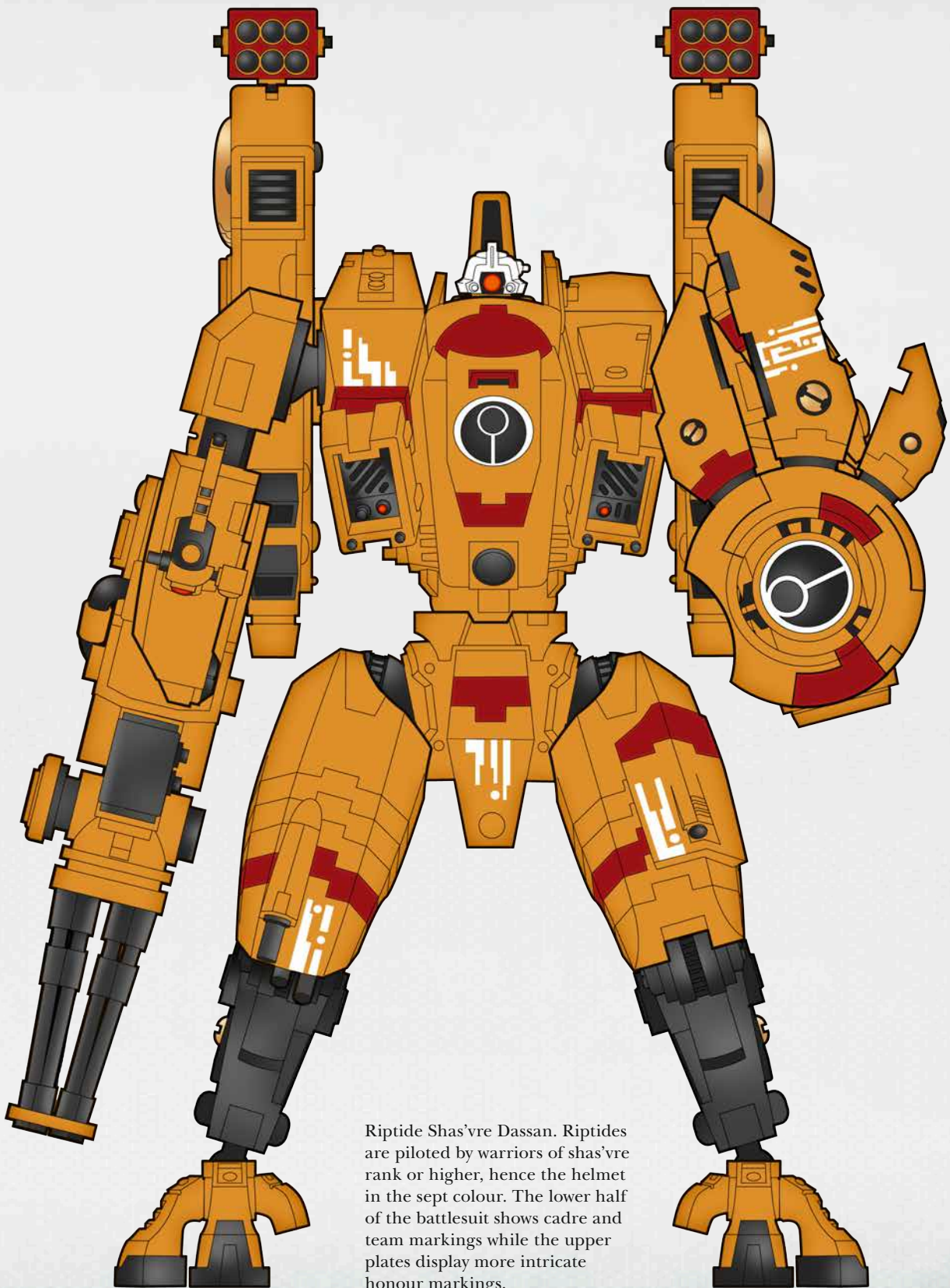
T'AU SEPT



As nominal members of the Ghostkeel's team, the Stealth Drones that accompany the battlesuit will bear the same markings. In this instance, the marking on the battlesuit's thigh is repeated upon the topside panel of the Stealth Drone.

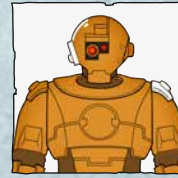


All Ghostkeel pilots are proven veterans of countless stealth operations, and all hold the rank of shas'vre, as shown by their suits' white helmets. Those operating in a Ghostkeel Wing also feature team markings on their armour.

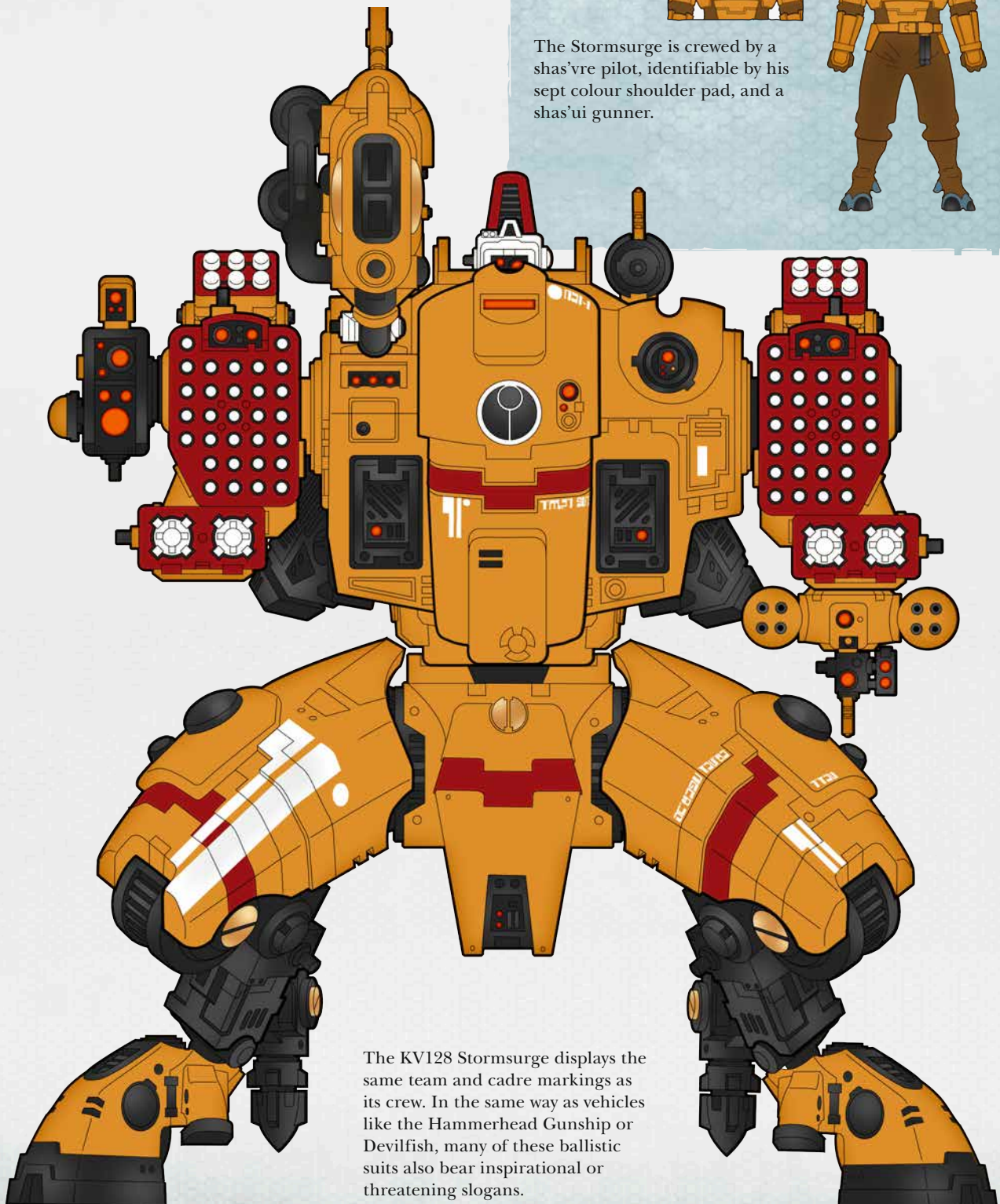


Riptide Shas'ver Dassin. Riptides are piloted by warriors of shas'ver rank or higher, hence the helmet in the sept colour. The lower half of the battlesuit shows cadre and team markings while the upper plates display more intricate honour markings.

T'AU SEPT



The Stormsurge is crewed by a shas'vre pilot, identifiable by his sept colour shoulder pad, and a shas'ui gunner.



The KV128 Stormsurge displays the same team and cadre markings as its crew. In the same way as vehicles like the Hammerhead Gunship or Devilfish, many of these ballistic suits also bear inspirational or threatening slogans.



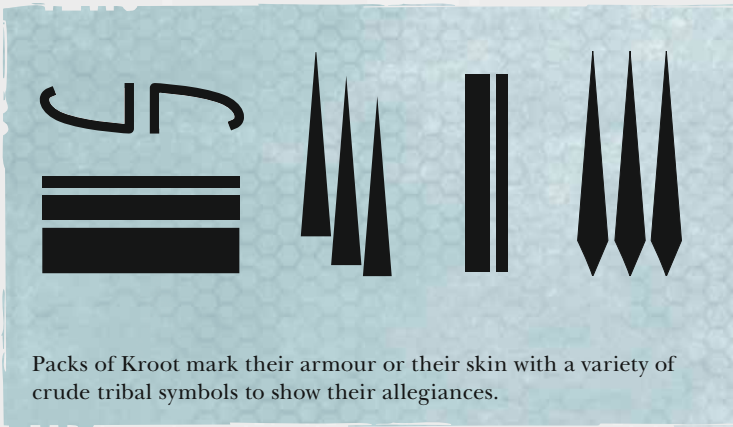
Kroot Khagguk Glekh. Note the sept colour pack markings applied to Glekh's primitive armour.



Kroot Shaper Proghrakk Sprekht. Armed with a hefty kroot rifle, Shaper Sprekht shows his sept colour pack markings on his armour.



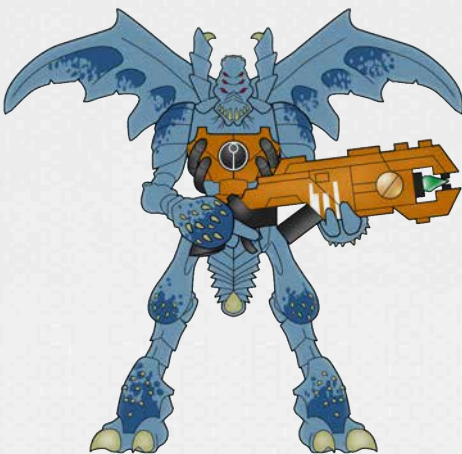
Kroot Aghkyr Tlokkuh. This warrior wears his adopted sept colour in the form of fearsome warpaint.



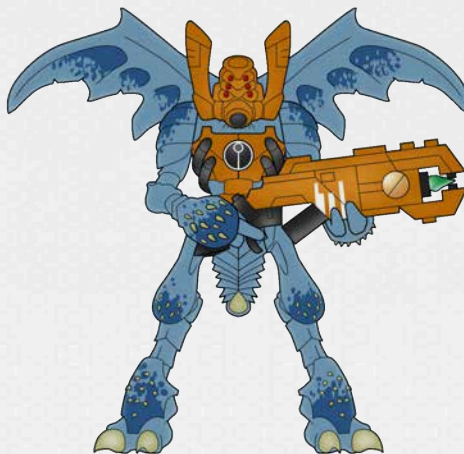
Packs of Kroot mark their armour or their skin with a variety of crude tribal symbols to show their allegiances.



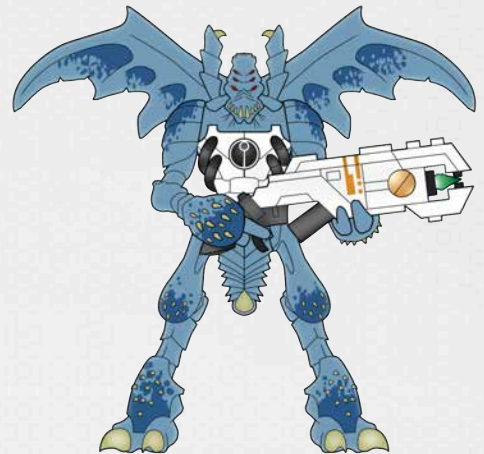
Kroot Hounds bear the same markings as the rest of their pack.



Vespid Stingwing (name translation – One That Flies Like Flickering Light). Note the team marking in the sept colour on its neutron blaster and the use of the T'au camouflage shade.



Vespid Strain Leader (name translation – One That Stings Like The Swarm). Its neutron blaster shows its team marking and it bears the Fire caste symbol on its armour.



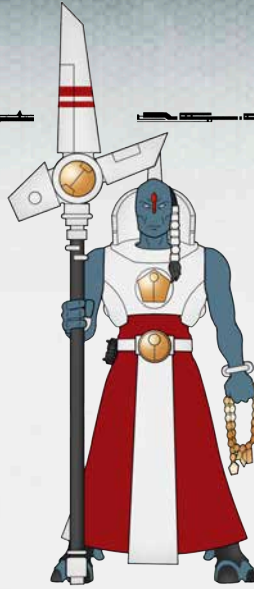
Vespid Stingwing (name translation – One That Rips The Flesh). The inverted colouration on its armour and weapon indicate a position of high honour in an elite cadre.



VIOR'LA SEPT

The armies raised by Vior'la Sept are a striking sight upon the battlefield, thanks in large part to the blazing red of their sept colour. This shade is said to reflect the nature of the Vior'lan Tau themselves, who are famously hot-blooded and aggressive.

Of course, the Vior'lan warriors' armour varies as with all other Tau forces. Thus a cadre fighting in dense swampland might be armoured in browns and greens, while a cadre deployed to an urban war zone would be armoured in blacks and greys, with just the approved dashes of blood red to indicate rank and status.



The venerated Ethereal Aun'Vessol's robes and face markings are the bloody red of his sept.



Shas'nel Aidos, Cadre Fireblade. The Shas'nel's cloak, fatigues and shoulder guard display the sept colour.



Strike Team Shas'la Kau bears his team marking on his helm in the sept colour.



Strike Team Shas'ui Laross' sensor vane is red to indicate her rank.

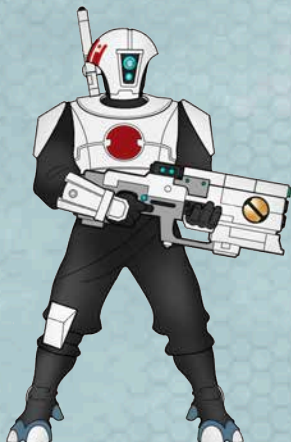


Breacher Team Shas'ui Haido carries a ta'lissera bonding knife on his back.



Pathfinder Shas'ui Dau's rank is shown on his shoulder and sensor vane.

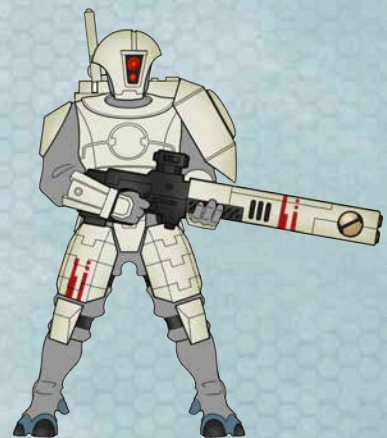
OTHER VIOR'LA UNIFORMS



Pathfinder Shas'la Nai'vo wears a variant of the Vior'lan scheme.



Strike Team Shas'la Manto displays the traditional Tau dress uniform.



Strike Team Shas'la Lauss is wearing ash waste camouflage.



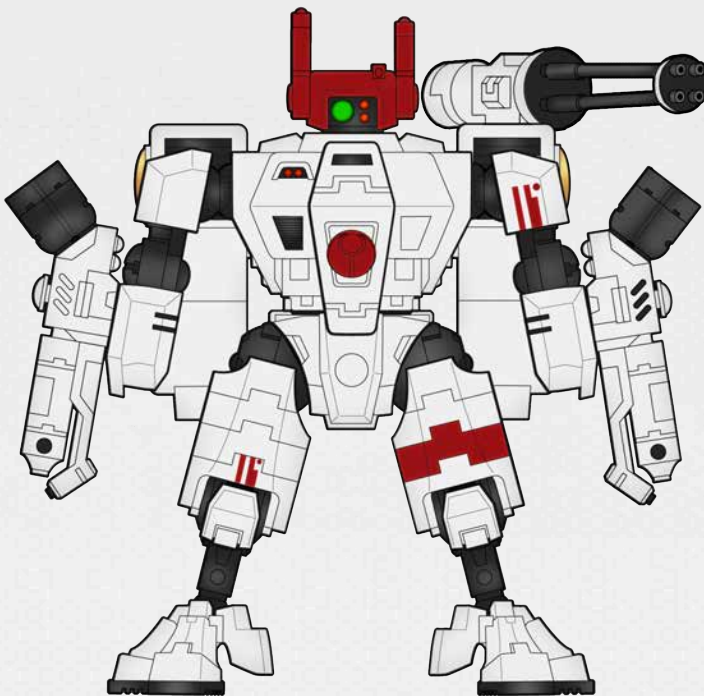
Stealth Shas've Tassar's rank is denoted by her sensor vane and the face plate of her battlesuit, which are marked in her sept's colour.



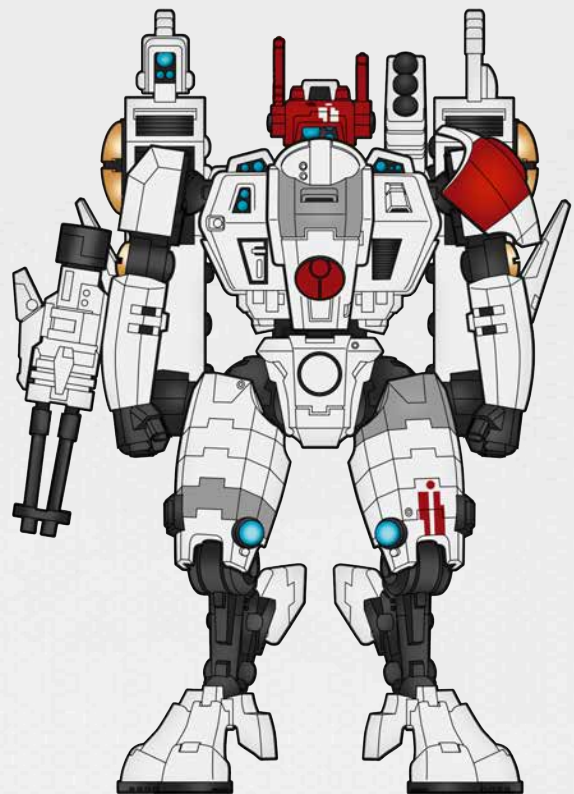
Stealth Shas'ui Fasil's rank is denoted by his red sensor vane. He carries a bulky burst cannon, a weapon lethal to enemy infantry.



Kroot Rkhotsi Ghlok wears white armour plates with red pack markings to match the Vior'la sept armies he serves with.



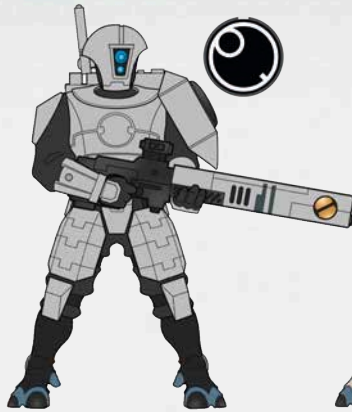
Crisis Shas've Vosai. The shas've's rank is indicated on his helmet and sensor vanes, while the red blocking on his armour plates is a decoration duplicated across his Crisis Team.



Coldstar Commander O'Maisos. The Commander's helmet bears her sept colour, with markings to match her armour's plates. Her rank is also shown by the sept colour on her sinistral shoulder guard.

SEPTS OF THE EXPANDING EMPIRE

The Tau take rightful pride in the glory of their empire and its armies. However, their enlightened approach to warfare prizes practicality and preservation of life over the desire to display their heraldry. Thus, while each sept's traditional colour is used for insignia and indication of rank, the Tau military deploy wearing an enormous variety of colour schemes. Usually these are intended to assist with camouflage, each cadre's colouration dependent upon the conditions in which its warriors fight.



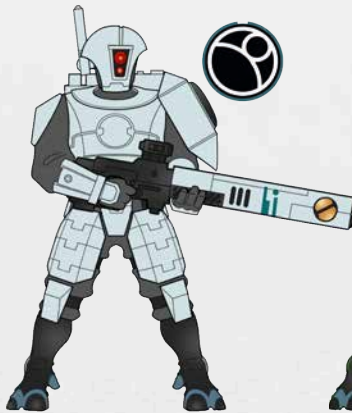
Strike Team Shas'la Daisos of Tau'n Sept, wearing ash wastes camouflage from the Burning Moon War



Breacher Team Shas'la Dvros and Strike Team Shas'ui Taiss of D'yanoi Sept, clad in camouflage issued for swampland operations. Shas'ui Taiss shows his rank on his sensor vane and shoulder plate



Pathfinder Shas'la Nyss and Strike Team Shas'la Porai of Bork'an. They wear the distinctive snowscape scheme developed for the war on ice-locked Yngirheim.



Breacher Team Shas'ui Losad and Pathfinder Shas'la Fyra of Dal'yth Sept. The bright green of this armour was introduced as camouflage against the carnivorous Phoroki, who could not visually register this colour.



Pathfinder Shas'la Goshi and Strike Team Shas'la Shen from Fal'shia, garbed for arboreal zone warfare during fighting on Ko'an Prime.



Breacher Team Shas'la Vess and Pathfinder Shas'ui Dossol from Au'taal Sept. This striking armour colour is worn by warriors assigned as ceremonial bodyguards to the sept's honoured Ethereals.





Pathfinder Shas'la Hyro and Breacher Team Shas'ui Kes from N'dras Sept, clad for nocturnal urban warfare during the Bosrai Clash.

Strike Team Shas'la Fasul and Strike Team Shas'ui Gnos from Ke'lshan Sept, garbed as were all of the shipboard cadres who repelled the horrifying boarding actions of Hive Fleet Gorgon



Pathfinder Shas'la Ylos from Elsy'eir, clad for the volcanic combat zone on Vulkard IV

Strike Team Shas'la Krel from Tash'var Sept, wearing orbital fortress garrison combat armour

Breacher Team Shas'ui Fylot of Vash'ya Sept, wearing ultraviolet night war camouflage

Pathfinder Shas'ui Nos from T'olku, equipped for jungle warfare on Heym's World



Pathfinder Shas'la Ferel of Ksi'm'yen Sept, in the ice world camouflage of the Go'shol patrol

Strike Team Shas'la Tydu of Fi'rios Sept, wearing tundra warfare armour camouflage

Breacher Team Shas'la Jer'em, clad in urban camouflage for the rad wastes of Mu'gulath Bay

Strike Team Shas'ui Fros, warrior of the Farsight Enclaves, clad in O'Shovah's red





