# KILL TEAM

## A Last Chancers Novel by Gav Thorpe

THE COLONEL COUGHS purposefully. He really hasn't changed a bit. Still that strong, clean shaven jaw, sharp cheek bones and the piercing glare of his ice-blue eyes. Eyes that can bore into your soul and burn through you sharper than a las-cutter. 'There is another mission,' he begins.

'I figured as much,' I reply.

'There is not much time, relatively speaking,' he continues, his gaze constant. 'You will assemble and train a team to assassinate an alien military commander...'



Languishing in an Imperial detention centre, Lieutenant Kage – convict soldier of the 13th Penal Legion – is at the end of the line. That is, until his ruthless old commanding officer returns with one more deadly assignment. Now Kage must whip into shape a new team of the very worst the Imperial Guard has to offer, before leading them on their one and only mission: to assassinate a warmongering enemy general, one of the mysterious alien Tau!

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It's three more days of training in the firing range, on the combat mats and in the mock-up of the tau battle dome before the Colonel informs us that contact has been made with the alien vessel. We assemble in the briefing auditorium, where the Colonel issues us with clothes chests with our disguises. We lug them back to the rooms and prepare for the shuttle. In my trunk are four brown robes, typical of an Administratum flunky. I understand the choice when I put it on and pull the hood up—it hides my face in complete shadow, obscuring the tapestry of scars that covers my face and head. I'll be Brother Kage then, I tell myself with a bitter smile. Probably the only scribe who can't read or write in the Imperium.

There are amused looks from the others as we assemble in the docking bay. Oriel is dressed in a very grandiose and over the top dress uniform, hung with gold cording and medals. The red jacket is almost painfully bright, crossed by a garish yellow sash. Just the sort of pompous and totally meaningless display of opulence you might expect from one of the Imperium's ruling elite. The Colonel wears a severe black suit, with a long-tailed coat draped over one arm. Tanya wears a long dress of deep blue, tight at the waist and high at the neck, her hair cropped really short. Oriel explained that she's posing as a member of the Sisters Famulous, a branch of the Ecclesiarchy that provides housekeepers and chatelaines to the Imperial nobility. Trost, Strelli and Quidlon wear less extravagant versions of Oriel's uniform, while Moerck is dressed in plain white leggings and a white shirt with a soft leather jerkin over the top, looking every bit the gentleman. Oriel walks over to us and gives us each the once over.

'Will you all relax and try not to look like soldiers?' he says with an annoyed scowl. 'This isn't going to work if you keep standing at ease like that and quick march everywhere. Remember, you're civilians!'

We look at each other, and I see that it's true. I try to purposefully slouch a bit more, as do the others. I cross my arms and hide my hands in the sleeves of my robes, as I've seen various Departmento Munitorum scribes and their like do over the years. It's kind of uncomfortable really, and I walk back and forth a bit, trying to get it to feel natural. I feel horribly vulnerable without my arms free and the hood obscuring most of my arc of vision.

'Take shorter strides, Kage, you are not on a cross-country march!' the Colonel calls out to me, from where he's stood at the ramp to the shuttle. I look over at him and he nods, gesturing for me to try it out. I pace the length of the shuttle bay, some two hundred metres each way, keeping my steps half what I'm used to, and I feel like I'm tottering about like a small child. I bend my back a bit more, leaning my chin down into my chest and try it again and it feels a bit more natural, my gait more like the image I have in my head of Clericus Amadiel, the Colonel's scribe on the last mission.

When Oriel is satisfied that we don't stand out like a squad of highly trained soldiers pretending to be diplomats, we get all of our kit on board the shuttle and settle in for the ride. The mood is tense and nervous. None of us have any weapons. If the tau take a disliking to us, there's not a thing we can do to stop them killing us out of hand. I can understand why, though: if this is a peaceful delegation, it'll raise a few eyebrows if we turn up with a small arsenal. That's if the tau have evebrows, I suddenly think to myself, making myself smile. We've not seen a single picture of them. They could be big bags of gas or tentacled squidgy blobs for all I know. I guess from the fake battle dome that they can't be too different from us, physically I mean. The doors were sort of human sized, the steps built for just two legs, so I guess that rules out floating gasbags. I let my mind wander with thoughts like these, preferring to put any thought of the upcoming mission out of my mind.

A couple of the others seem worried and I tell them to relax. There's no sense worrying now. The plan is in motion and it'll lead us wherever the Emperor cares. Personally, I try not to

worry about anything. There's two things people worry about. There's things they have no control of and they're worried how it'll affect them. Then there's the things they worry about doing or not doing. Either way, it's a waste of time. If it's something you can't do anything about, then all of the worrying in the galaxy isn't going to change what will happen one bit. And if you can do something about it, then do something, don't just sit around and worry, take your destiny in your hands. It's that kind of thinking that's kept me alive and sane all these years.

Sane. I'm beginning to have my doubts about that, which I guess proves that I'm not mad yet, at least I don't think so. Do you have to be sane to wonder if you are; do lunatics just assume they are sane and not question it? I know what the others think, Oriel included, despite his choice to bring me along. They think my mind's more twisted than a rock drill head. I don't see it that way, it's not bent at all. In fact, it's so straight, so focussed on what I am that it might seem mad to other people. They like to clutter themselves up with all sorts of little illusions about who they are, what they're here for. Not me. I worked it all out in the stinking prison cell.

As I said to Oriel, I'm a weapon, nothing more. Point me at the enemy, and let me go. That sort of clarity is more comforting than worrying about if I'm doing the right thing, wasting time and energy agonising with my conscience and my morals. My conscience is the orders I'm given; my morals are the ones I'm told to have. Somebody else can have that responsibility, someone like the Colonel or Oriel. I just don't care any more.

We've been travelling for a couple of hours when the Colonel enters from the adjacent room.

'Here is your chance to get a first look at the enemy,' he tells us, pointing towards one of the wide viewing windows. I unbuckle myself along with the others, and we gather around the thick pane and look out into the stars. It's out there, the tau ship, and we get a good view of it as the shuttle circles, losing momentum to start its landing pattern. It's long and sleek, almost pure white. The main hull is like a slightly flattened cylinder, with a cluster of pods at the back, glowing faintly, so I guess they're the engines. The front end gets flatter and wider, a bit like a subtly squared-off snake's head. There are several outlandish Tau symbols emblazoned in massive lettering along the

side, but I can't make out any sign of ports, docking entries or any other openings. I can't see any gun decks either.

'Is this a warship?' I ask Schaeffer.

'I believe it is non-military in its normal duties,' the Colonel replies.

As we approach, a section of the hull disappears from view, revealing the interior in a blaze of yellow light. It's not like a door slid back or opened, the section of ship seemed to roll out of the way, leaving a perfectly circular opening. We return to our seats and buckle down for landing, the blast shutters grinding up over the windows. It's a few more minutes, which pass with tortuous slowness as we sit there not knowing what's going to happen, until I feel and hear the shuttle landing. With a whine the engines power down, and the Colonel tells us to get to our feet.

'First impressions last,' he tells us ominously. 'From the second we step off this craft we'll be under close scrutiny. Right from this moment, you have to think and act exactly like the people you're supposed to be. We'll try to keep ourselves out of the way as much as possible, but there will be a number of official engagements on board while we are in transit, which good manners dictate we will have to attend. Be on your guard at all times, though. The tau will give us a certain amount of leeway, I hope; after all, we are placing a lot of trust in them not to hold us hostage. Now, move out and act casual!'

We troop after him and the Colonel as they make their way along to the docking chamber. We stand there, Oriel in front, us lined up behind him, and wait for the ramp to lower. My first view of the tau is like nothing I've seen before.

The shuttle bay is flooded with light, and the air is dry and warm, much hotter than I'm used to aboard ship. As we walk down the ramp, I look around, trying hard not to stare. The chamber is like a large oval shape, the floors and ceilings melding with the walls in a continuous line. Everything is a cool pale yellow colour. There's no sign of any hard edges anywhere, no supporting beams, no criss-cross of girders and cranes for manoeuvring shuttles into position. The space is cavernous in its emptiness and I feel swallowed up by it and yet horribly exposed at the same time.

A small delegation waits for us at the bottom of the ramp. There's no guards, no guns in sight. They either really trust us, or they have some other way of dealing with us if we start to cause trouble. Three tau dressed in thin, pale robes stand patiently as we gaze around, studying us with interest.

I was right, they're basically humanoid. All three are at least a head shorter than me, and they have delicate, thin limbs. Their greyish-blue skin seems to glisten with some kind of oil, and as the middle one steps forward and bows to one knee in greeting, I catch a sweet scent. I look at his flat face and bald head, noting the yellow eyes and slit-like nose, noticing his lipless mouth and rounded teeth. He stands and opens his arms in greeting, revealing a flap of skin that stretches from his waist to his upper arm, like deformed wings. I suppress a shudder. Nobody mentioned these... these things might be able to fly!

The one to the leader's right steps forward then, mouth curling in a poor imitation of a human smile.

'Welcome to this vessel, one of our newest, the *Sha'korar Aslo*,' he greets us, beckoning us down with a long-fingered hand. His voice blurs the words together slightly, his pronunciation tinted by a husky accent. 'We extend the hand of friendship to our human allies.'

Oriel replies in stilted gibberish, which I reckon to be some kind of formal greeting he's learned for the occasion. This seems to please the tau, who look at each other and nod.

'This is Kor'el'kais'savon, who you may simply address as captain or El'savon if you wish,' the interpreter continues, indicating the tau who had bowed earlier.

I do not speak well your words, the captain explains apologetically, bowing his head slightly but keeping his gaze on Oriel.

'This is Kor'vre'anuk,' the tau nods a head towards the third member of the delegation, who stands watching us impassively. 'I am Por'la'kunas, and will be your voice while on board the Sha'korar Aslo.'

'Please tell Captain El'savon that his hospitality does him credit,' Oriel replies with an officious manner. 'I and my advisors would appreciate some time to rest from our journey before conducting a tour of this fine vessel.'

Por'la'kunas says something to the captain in Tau, who replies with a single word and a glance at Oriel. All this gibbering in Tau is making me nervous. It doesn't seem like Oriel's command of the language is particularly great, and I haven't got a clue what they're saying. They could all be plotting against us,

laughing right in our faces, for all I know. Just another factor of this mission that makes my spine crawl.

'Of course, we have rooms prepared for you,' the translator assures us. 'If you would follow me, please.'

Without a further word, he turns and begins to walk away from the shuttle. Looking ahead, I can see no sign of a door out, the wall continues unbroken all round us. When we're a few metres from the wall, a swirl of small lines appears, making a series of spirals which swiftly expand as a portal opens up in front of us, vanishing seemingly into the fabric of the wall. I glance over at Oriel, but he's maintaining an air of disinterest, gazing about him in a bored fashion.

The others shuffle about nervously, and I can understand their unease. The whole ship stinks of technology gone wild. I glance at the doorway as I walk through and see that the wall is in fact hollow and the segments of the iris-door have simply slipped between the two bulkheads. Still, it's not that reassuring.

The corridor outside is just as featureless as the docking bay, and as empty of people. As with the shuttle chamber, small curved corners seamlessly connect the walls with the floor and ceiling, the pale yellow surrounding us without any other decoration. Or source of light, for that matter. I haven't seen a single glow globe or lighting strip. The more I think about it, the more disconcerting I find the sensation. How can they create light in the air itself? It's not even as if the walls are glowing, it's like the air is charged with light. Just what kind of creatures are we dealing with here? How in the Emperor's name can we trust them on a mission like this?

With a start I realise I've almost broken into a parade ground stride whilst I was thinking about other things. I glance at the others, who walk along in silence, subdued by our strange surroundings. I suspect they're just as nervous as me, even Oriel and the Colonel. I focus my attention back on myself, shortening my step, pulling my head further back into the hood. The air is dry and warm as well, making my throat and nose tight. I turn and look back, and the loading bay has disappeared, the door shutting silently behind us. I feel isolated and vulnerable, stuck on this alien ship with no weapons other than my bare hands.

We follow our interpreter along the corridor and I notice something else. Or rather, it's something I don't notice. The whole ship seems to be still: there's no vibration, no noise, nothing. The ship was most definitely moving when we docked, I saw that as we came in to land. Inside, though, we could be in an underground bunker somewhere.

Walking further along the corridor, my disorientation grows. There's not a single door to either side, though a few side corridors branch off along the way, melding seamlessly with the one we're walking along. Our guide has remained speechless since leaving the shuttle area, walking ahead of us with effortless steps. I take some time to look at him. He doesn't have the membranes under his arms that the captain has, and is even more slightly built. His robes are light and airy, wafting around him as he walks, like a breeze given shape. Like the rest of the ship, he is surrounded by an air of calm and stillness. Every movement is slight and efficient, he barely swings his arms as he walks, his face set straight ahead without a moment's distraction.

I try to work out what the ship is made from, but it's impossible. There's no welding that might indicate metal; the coloration seems to be part of the material itself, no brushstrokes or drips from paint. I wander along one wall and let my hand briefly brush along it, feeling a slight sensation of warmth from the wall itself.

I watch the others from within the folds of my hood, which is beginning to get uncomfortably hot. I have to resist the temptation to pull it back for some fresher air. That makes me realise that there are no air currents, no artificial winds from cooling vents and air purifier ducts. But the air doesn't taste stale, it's just hot and has no moisture to it. Oriel strolls along behind Por'la'kunas with a languid, rolling gait, the Colonel stepping beside him with a more stiff stride, his attention focussed on the tau in front. Quidlon keeps looking around him, staring intently at the walls and floor, probably trying to figure out how this all works. It could be witchcraft for all I know, like the accursed eldar technology. That gives me a sudden bout anxiety. These tau are obviously decadent enough to blatantly use such strange technology – perhaps they put up with psykers as well? Maybe this guide is not what he seems, maybe he can read minds. This could all be some elaborate ruse to lull us into a false sense of security. I try to think like a scribe, just in case, but my thoughts soon begin to wander.

I wonder if they'll torture us for information, trying to find out the full extent of our plot. What will be their reaction when they find out we're collaborating with their own kind? Or perhaps they'll just kill us out of hand. I know nothing about these tau, nothing useful. I can't work out how they think, how they'll react, what their motivation really is. How predictable are they in combat? How disciplined?

All of these thoughts fill my brain as we carry on walking down this Emperor-forsaken corridor that seems to stretch on forever, unending and unbroken. If they get suspicious there's absolutely nothing we could do, nothing at all. We're in the middle of their ship with no weapons whatsoever. And Oriel said they would be wary. They're probably watching our every move even now, waiting for us to slip up, ready to pounce on any opportunity to unmask us and interrogate us for everything we know about the Emperor's domains and armies. For all I know, this could be some elaborate plot by them, manipulating Oriel so that he's brought us all here, some of the finest soldiers in the Imperial Guard, just so that they can get their hands on what we know.

I start to feel tense, and the pain behind my eyes returns. I begin to sweat even more heavily, glad my discomfort is concealed by the heavy robes. That's just the sort of nervousness that they'll be looking for. If I have another attack here, we're all dead. Perhaps the Colonel was right, perhaps I am too much of a liability.

My mouth gets even drier as the pain in my head increases. I think I can hear the others talking, slightly panicked themselves, but I pay them no heed, concentrating on my own private agony as my heart starts to beat faster.

It must be obvious by now. I feel as if I'm panting like a dog, clenching and unclenching my fists inside the folds of my sleeves. If the translator turns and looks at me now, he'll see something's wrong. He'll either guess we're up to no good, or he'll fetch medical help. Then they'll be able to separate us, get me on my own and go to work on me. Will it be torturers or mind-readers?

I blink heavily as I catch up with someone. Biting my tongue in panic, I glance up. It's the Colonel, who looks across at me, his face expressionless, except for a slight tightness to his cheeks which I know means he's either angry or slightly worried.

'Control yourself, Kage,' he whispers harshly at me. 'Try to relax. The tau expect us to be a bit tense and uneasy, but you look more guilty than a man with a smoking gun standing over a corpse. Remember to breathe in through your nose, it'll help calm you down.'

With that, he quickens his pace again to catch up with Oriel, who glances at him and receives a nod of reassurance in return. I wish I was as confident. I try to distract myself by looking at the others again, but that brings little comfort. Strelli, normally so cocky and confident, gnaws on the nail of his left thumb, darting glances at the interpreter every now and then. Tanya walks along with her head bowed, staring resolutely at her feet, not meeting anyone's gaze. Moerck is the most obvious, in my opinion. He just strides along, his disgust barely concealed as he scowls at the back of our guide. I see his fingers twitch spasmodically, like he's itching to get a hold of Por'la'kunas's neck and squeeze the life out of him.

Por'la'kunas takes us down a right turn, then a left, and then two more turns which I would swear took us around in circles but there's no way of telling. He then stops abruptly and faces the wall to the right. He reaches out his frail-looking hand and touches the wall and a moment later another of the strange portals opens up, revealing a room beyond where moments before there had been nothing. I look at the wall closely and see that there's actually some discoloration there, almost like runes or switches manufactured into the material of the wall itself.

These are your quarters,' our interpreter says, indicating the room with his hand. At that moment, another tau steps from an unseen side corridor and walks up to us. He doesn't say a word, simply stands next to the door, back to the wall, his face set. This one is dressed in more workmanlike clothes, a tight-fitting blue bodysuit that is ribbed across the waist and joints, his hands and feet bare, the suit drawn tightly around his neck. As he moves there appears to be no wrinkling or gathering, as if the material is stretching and contracting around him.

'If you require anything at all, please inform me at once,' Por'la'kunas tells us, stepping inside the room, and we follow him in. We are in what appears to be the main living space, a rounded square about ten metres across. A low circular cushion seems to be the only furniture, set into a hollow in the centre of the room and taking up most of the space. Thankfully the

adjoining rooms are reached through curved arches rather than the odd disc-doors. There are ten of them: in eight I can see low, broad beds, without any kind of sheets or blankets, which is strange. From what I can see, the other two rooms appear to be washing areas of some kind, I can just make out a basin-like fixture through the arches.

'Some refreshments, if you please,' Oriel says, not looking at the interpreter but strolling through into one of the bedrooms.

'How do we contact you?' the Colonel asks, leaning forward towards the short alien.

'If you say my name, the ship will inform me,' he replies, taking a couple of quick paces back from the imposing figure of Schaeffer.

'The ship will inform you?' Quidlon says, obviously intrigued by this magic. Out of the corner of my eye I see Moerck make a protective gesture, the sign of the eagle, with his hands. It's the first time I've seen him do anything like that. I suspect it's not part of his commissariat training. I wonder if he's holding up that well. He's not mentally prepared for this kind of action. He's an officer and a leader. His place is in the midst of the bullets and las-bolts, shouting speeches, shooting deserters and leading the glorious charge.

'Yes, of course,' Por'la'kunas replies with a little surprise, totally oblivious to my thoughts on Moerck. 'I will be able to attend to your needs immediately.'

Quidlon looks as if he's going to ask something else but Schaeffer waves him away irritably.

'Is that a guard on our door?' the Colonel asks gruffly, pointing towards the corridor.

'We have found that humans sometimes become lost on our vessels and he is there to ensure that should you wish to leave the room you will have an appropriate escort,' the tau replies smoothly. 'You are, of course, our guests, not our prisoners. While on the ship you may roam almost where you wish, We ask that you only enter certain areas with an escort as they may present a danger or disturb the crew in delicate duties. A full tour will be provided for you when you are rested.'

The Colonel just grunts and darts a look at me. I stand there dumb for a couple of seconds until I remember that I'm supposed to be the menial. I shuffle forward, trying not to walk with too much swagger.

'Bring food and drink, please,' I say, as politely as I can manage, the words almost catching in my dry throat. 'And, is there any way you can make it cooler in here, it's like a bl... like a desert.' I stop myself swearing just in time, and avoid the tau's gaze.

'Of course, forgive my inattention,' Por'la'kunas apologises. 'I shall endeavour to make the environment within your chambers closer to your normal climate.' The tau nods to the Colonel and leaves, the door swirling back into place behind him.

'Isn't this place amazing?' blurts out Quidlon as soon as the door is closed. 'Can you imagine what sorts of things these people are capable of, considering just what we've seen so far about their ship, about the way they conduct themselves. It's so fascinating.'

'They're not people, they're aliens, don't forget it,' Trost grumbles, lowering himself cautiously onto the cushion, as if expecting it to swallow him up.

'I could do with some freshening up,' says Strelli, wandering over to one of the rooms I'd identified earlier as an ablution chamber. He walks in and then comes out a moment later, scratching his head in confusion. 'There's no pipes, no taps, nothing. How does any of this stuff work?'

'It senses your presence,' Oriel says, appearing at the doorway to his room. 'I've made sure we can talk freely here in these rooms, but once we step outside the door, guard your tongues.'

'What makes you so sure?' Tanya asks. We all fall silent as the door opens soundlessly and our guide returns. Behind him hover five trays, bobbing along on their own as if they were alive. I hear an involuntary hiss escape Trost, who springs to his feet.

The tau seems to be bemused at this reaction, and I realise we're all staring at the food with wide eyes.

'The food is not to your liking?' he asks innocently, what I take to be concern on his face.

We exchange incredulous looks, and it's Quidlon who recovers first.

'Ah no, the food will be fine, we were not expecting it to be delivered so, um, swiftly,' he says quickly, a brief smile flashing across his lips. 'If you would like to, um, leave the food with us we have some matters we wish to, um, discuss amongst ourselves, if that would not be impolite of us.'

'Of course, I understand,' the tau replies evenly with a bow of his head. 'Please take as long as you require.'

He bows again as he leaves, the trays floating across the room to hover about knee height over the communal cushion. Moerck leans over and peers underneath one of the floating trays, scowling like a cudbear with a sore head.

'How does it stay up?' he asks, straightening stiffly and looking at Oriel.

'I should have expected this,' he sighs, rubbing at his forehead and walking further into the room. 'The tau employ a great many of these things, which I believe are called drones. I've never seen one working before. It must be some kind of antigravity technology. You'll have to get used to them, apparently they're all over the place on the tau planets, running errands, taking messages and such. Think of them as odd looking servoskulls, mindless but capable of following simple orders and performing basic tasks. Of course, these are merely constructs, they have never had a soul like a servo-skull. One reason the tau must halt their expansion into our space. Who could tell what mad, heretical notions might grip the populace if they heard of such abominations?'

A growl in my stomach reminds me that I've not eaten yet today and I walk over to the food and plonk myself down onto the cushion. The nearest servitor-plate appears to be carrying some kind of fruit, a garish yellow thing that smells sweet. I take a small bite and its juice runs down my chin. It's like honey, with a tang of something else I can't identify. The others stare at me, waiting to see if I keel over and go blue or something. I nod to them and point to the trays.

'Tastes pretty good, tuck in,' I tell them, picking up a star-shaped green thing and giving it a nibble. It's smoky, with a bitter aftertaste like hot caff or chocolate. There's some dishes of blue-coloured rice. The only utensils provided for eating are some spindly paddles which appear to be no use at all as far as I can tell, so I use my fingers instead. The others settle down as well, and we compare the various foodstuffs, passing our own judgements on the fruits and vegetables on offer.

As I chew on a bread-like stick the size of my finger, a thought occurs to me.

'None of this is meat,' I say to the others and they agree after a moment's thought.

'The tau do not eat flesh apparently,' confirms Oriel. 'I don't know if it's a biological thing, or maybe religious. There's not much data on that aspect of their culture.'

'I think it's time you tell us some more,' Strelli says to Oriel. 'What other surprises are there?'

'Are you sure it is safe to talk here?' the Colonel asks, eyes narrowed as he looks around the room.

'Perfectly sure,' confirms the inquisitor leaning back on one elbow, his other hand clasping a shallow dish of grape-like juice. 'Alright, I'll give you a broad overview of what we've found out in the last couple of hundred years. For a start, the Tau race is lucky to be here at all. Extensive research into some of our oldest records has recently shown that several thousand years ago, we almost wiped them out. Luckily for them, warp storms prevented the colonisation fleet reaching their home world. In the last six thousand years they've grown into the civilisation we will be seeing shortly.'

He downs the rest of his drink and places the glass back on the nearest tray, which drifts off towards Tanya with its load.

'As you have already seen, they have no respect at all for the limitations of technology,' he continues, using a fingertip to wipe some food debris from his beard. 'As far as we know they are utterly heathen, with no kind of formal religion. The closest they have are the ethereals, their ruling class. The ethereals are in charge of everything supposedly, but it's the other castes who do all the work. The air caste, for example, are our hosts at the moment. They run the ships. Then there's the water caste, like our friend Por'la'kunas, who do all the diplomacy and bureaucracy. We'll being seeing more of them when we arrive on Me'lek.'

Will Kage and his team succeed in their mission into Tau space, or will their own bloodthirsty natures betray them? Read the conclusion to this desperate adventure in KILL TEAM.

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