

WARHAMMER
40,000

THE LAST CHANGERS

GAV THORPE

Thorpe writes strong, uncluttered narrative, and his characters actually sound like real people. — Tom Holt, SFX

DELIVERANCE

A Kage story

Gav Thorpe

ARGA STOOD UPON the crest of the hill, leaning on his spearstaff, and looked out across the savannah. The rolling grasslands stretched for kilometres in every direction, a yellow sea swaying gently in the wind, broken only by the occasional tree or rocky outcrop. On the horizon he could make out the darker green of the jungle canopy.

The tribesman took out a red-coloured root from an animal skin pouch around his neck and began to chew it. As he crushed the root between his teeth, he felt its juices spreading their effect across his body, loosening the ties between mortal flesh and spirit. His limbs began to go numb and he felt his mind ready itself for the journey to the world of the gods. He looked vaguely up into the yellow sky, his gaze attracted by movement.

From out of the heavens dropped a star, rapidly falling towards Araga, straight as an arrow towards the ridge. This was an omen, but Araga was not sure if it was good or ill. For almost a hundred heartbeats the tribesman watched the object growing larger and larger, until it impacted into the ground at the base of the hill in a shower of mud and dust. It looked like a gigantic egg, made of thick leathery skin and ribbed bone plates. As Araga watched, the egg cracked open, its upper half peeling apart like a grotesque flower. There was a spray of purplish ichor, and a large, gangling shape flopped from the star-egg onto the ground.

The shape stretched itself up to its full height, the fluids of its cocoon dripping from its body. It was over twice Araga's height, and as it stood on two thick legs it unfolded four upper limbs, two of them wicked-looking claws over a man's height in length. Its purplish flesh was protected by overlapping chitinous plates, and powerful muscle and sinew rippled under its dark skin.

Araga's heart began beating faster and faster and he felt cold sweat prickling all over his body, making him shiver uncontrollably as the creature looked around, seeming to sniff the air. With a sudden snap of its monstrous insect head, the beast fixed its hellish glare on Araga, snaring him in the gaze of its red eyes.

With a pace startling for its size, the star-beast bounded up the slope, its forelimbs ripping at the earth to increase its speed.

Araga found himself transfixed, unable to move or shout. He realised this must be one of the creatures from beyond the Void which the newcomers had warned his people about, a predator from beyond the distant stars which had come for his soul.

As the monster sped towards him, Araga felt something nagging at the back of his mind, and realised he could hear a rumbling from off to his right. He wanted to look but could not tear his eyes away from the demon of destruction racing towards him. The creature was only a few great strides away from Araga, its claws arching back to deliver the killing attack.

Without warning, a lightning storm of light lashed into the Void Daemon, blasting it sprawling to the ground, its limbs flailing wildly. Snapped out of the beast's hypnotic spell, Araga span to see metal creatures advancing along the ridge, spitting fire at the monstrous intruder. The Sky Spirits had arrived to save him!

THE NATIVE JUST keeps on staring dumbly at us as we open fire again. I guess it ain't that surprising, considering that to these guys a simple mono-edged knife is a creation of the gods. Dumb locals, if they weren't so stupid they'd be able to fend for themselves and we wouldn't be here risking our necks to protect them. My attention's distracted away from him when the lictor gets to its feet again and the Chimeras have to fire another volley into the creature. I order the rest of the platoon to take up firing positions, keeping up a steady stream of las bolts as we advance. The lictor then leaps at Franx's squad, but even as it races towards them, hissing like some damned Oviran cobra, they tear it apart with their lasguns and heavy bolter. It kind of collapses in on itself, those huge killing claws folding over its body.

I walk up to make sure it's truly dead. You can never tell with these fragging tyranids. Some of them have got powers of regeneration you wouldn't believe. Its dark blood is spattered all over the thin grass, and it certainly looks like a corpse. To make sure, I level my laspistol at its head and fire six shots.

'Okay, Last Chancers!' I call to my platoon. 'Mount up and move out!'

Some of them begin to walk back to the Chimera transports, but Franx, Letts and some others walk over to where I'm standing. It's Letts who speaks first.

'We've been thinking, Kage. We've got the perfect opportunity here. I mean, we've got a great chance to get the hell out of this fragging outfit, once and for all.'

I look at them, not knowing what they mean. What've you got in mind?'

Well,' Franx says, 'it's two leagues to the jungles. The Colonel would never find us in there, and there's plenty of food to forage, shelter, everything we need to survive. We just have to turn the Chimeras south and we're free men again.'

His eyes are intense now beneath his thick curls of hair, and he takes another step forward.

Think of it!' he continues. 'No more Last Chancers! No more fragging suicide missions for the Colonel. No more spending every minute wondering what of a thousand kinds of hell we're going to end up in next. Free men, lieutenant, free men!'

I can hardly believe it. I've been fighting with Franx for a year, and Letts has been with the XIIIth Penal Legion for twice as long. Like me, like all the Last Chancers, they were thrown out of their regular units for breaking the Imperial Guard's rules in a big way, to serve the rest of their lives in a penal legion. We've walked across a dozen battlefields together, in the worst fighting you can imagine. We've been through them all - suicide assaults, rearguard actions and any other no-hope situation you can think of. It takes more than guts and brawn to survive for that long and I can't believe they're being so stupid now.

What kind of fraggin' scheme is that?' I snap, and their jaws drop. Franx starts getting angry, and I can see the blood rushing to his face. He's gonna start trouble if I don't do something right now.

'Look, boys' I say, trying to calm them down, 'you haven't thought this through, really. There's a tyranid hive ship up there, full of specially evolved killing machines, all hungry to eat you up as soon as look at you. The only reason the sky isn't full of mycetic spores yet is 'cause we've managed to pick off the lictors before they found Deliverance, so they ain't sure where to commit their forces.

'But it's just a stalling action, 'cause we can't get them all, no way -and even if we could, as soon as they find out there's more Imperial transports on the way, they'll send every bio-engineered little fragger they've got onto the planet.

'So the way I see it, you've got two choices. There's your plan, which means hanging around in the open, I know it's jungle but they'll still find you when they come down, and then what kind of chance are you gonna have? Or, you can come back with me to Deliverance, where there's a big wall to hide behind, three hundred more Last Chancers, the Battle Sisters and two thousand natives to help us fight. Your choice, but if you ain't going my way I'm gonna have to insist you go on foot. The Colonel would skin me if I let you take the Chimeras. It's only midday, so you've got eight hours walking to sundown, plenty of time for you to hole up and wait for the damn tyranids to come.'

I see realisation dawning on their faces like the sun breaking out from behind

a cloud. I thought I'd taught them better than this, but it just goes to show that some people never learn anything unless they get taught the hard way. Unfortunately, when you're in the Last Chancers, most people who learn the hard way are food for the worms.

They don't say anything, they just turn around and start walking back to the Chimeras. I take one last look at the lictor, just to be safe. It's strange, 'cause any other type of cadaver would be crawling with flesh-ants on this damn planet by now, and there'd be a flock of carrion birds circling overhead. But there's nothing; not even the bugs will touch a tyrannid. Frag, of all the things in this galaxy, those fraggers make my skin crawl the most.

SO WE FINISH the firesweep, and I'm back in Deliverance, debriefing with the Colonel in the central keep. I can see the rest of the missionary station out of the window, the mid-afternoon sun blazing down fiercely. It's not big, little more than a large village really, half a mile across, with a large central compound, some scattered buildings, and of course this keep, which doubles as an Ecclesiarchy shrine. I can see the men walking sentry on the curtain wall and even at this distance I reckon I can feel their tension.

'Kage!' Colonel Schaeffer barks, and I snap back from the outside world. There's him, me and the other two lieutenants - Green and Kronin.

'As I was saying' the Colonel continues pointedly, 'we've had a contact with the relief force. They are no more than two days away. If we can hold for just forty-eight hours, there will be two whole regiments of Imperial Guard. The wall should be fairly straightforward to defend. It is eighteen feet high, so we just have to worry about their hormagaunts and lictors leaping straight up it; the others we can pick off as they climb up the walls. That leaves only the gate, but that is flanked by two towers with emplaced autocannons, and we can park a Chimera behind the gates themselves to make it harder to force. Any questions?'

Kronin clears his throat nervously and wipes a hand through the thin hair plastered across his scalp. He's a skinny man, kind of jittery in my experience. Emperor alone knows how he had the guts to have his squad incinerate an Imperial temple after stealing the artefacts inside. Even more of a surprise is that the Ecclesiarchy didn't demand his head on a pole and his entrails decorating the roadway.

'What about gargoyles, sir?' Kronin asks.

'No problem' the Colonel assures us. He's ice cold, as usual, as calm as if we weren't going to be fighting for our damned lives in a few days, perhaps even in the next few hours. As always, he's wearing his full dress uniform, clean shaven like he was fresh out of the barracks.

He's a big man, physically I mean, but there's more to him than that. Those cold blue eyes and his own force of will make him seem twice as tall as anyone around. I wouldn't call it 'charisma', 'cause he's a uncommunicative and surly man. He just has this sheer presence that fills the room.

'We have two Hydras and this keep has four point-defence emplacements. If anything tries flying over the walls, we have the firepower to gun them down. In any case, Kage and his platoon are acting as mobile reserve behind the walls. If the tyranids get a breakthrough at the walls or gates, or we get some unexpected visitors dropping down, he'll move in and bolster the defence. Anything else?'

I glance out of the window again and see the sunlight glittering off highly polished armour, which makes me think of something.

'The Sisters. What's the deal there?' I ask, already knowing the answer.

The Adepta Sororitas are under Ministorum authority, so we have no direct control over their actions. I have spoken to the Sister Superior in charge and outlined our plan. I am sure they will play their part. The same applies to the levies. They will be manning the walls, and we will concentrate our guns around the gatehouse. That is where the fighting will be fiercest. 'If you need to see me, that's where you'll find me.' No surprise there, then. The Colonel is always in the roughest of the fighting, and he always walks out too. Emperor alone knows what makes him do it. We're here because we did wrong, and got caught. But him? What did he do wrong? I mean, what kind of man would choose to lead an Imperial Guard penal legion? What kind of mind do you need to walk into so many situations where you must be blessed by the Emperor to ever take another breath again, and then march straight out and into the next one? He must be mad, I mean seriously insane.

They say he spends his time on board ship practising ways to kill himself in the event that he's wounded. I take it back about the tyranids. There are some things which are a hell of a lot more scary, because they're in human form. That's what they say he is, a devil in human form, and when he's ready for a fight like now, and you look into his eyes like I'm doing now, you can believe it.

IT'S ABOUT NOON the day after and the tyranids have found us. Maybe a lictor slipped through the net, which wouldn't be surprising considering that for a big brute they can be really sneaky. They can sniff you out ten miles downwind, and they're covered in scales which shift colour so that you can't see them. Or maybe the 'nids just got fed up with waiting and decided to come and get us, wherever we are.

I stood on the wall last night and watched the spores dropping down. Scary sight, believe me. It was like ten meteor storms all at once, these falling stars

coming down, wave after wave of them. There's an old saying: If you see a shooting star you can offer a prayer to the Emperor and he'll grant it.

Well, with all of those flaming stars that's one hell of a lot of prayers to be delivered on, but I decided to use them all in one go, for one big, huge prayer to the Emperor. Do you want to know what I prayed for? I prayed that those shooting stars would stop coming down. But they didn't, so I guess a murderer like me hasn't got the right to pray to the Emperor anymore, which is why I'm here fighting now, serving Him in the only way I know.

Frag, being here, in this missionary station with all these Ecclesiarchy types, it must be having an affect on me. I mean, I know the Emperor's our Lord and is watching over us, but I've always figured that those of us who can, have to watch out for ourselves, 'cause he's there to watch out for those who can't watch out for themselves. Just like we're here to defend the tribes people from the tyranids, 'cause all they've got are crappy knives and spears and brave warrior hearts, which is all well and good if you're fighting amongst yourselves, but against the tyranids is going to be about as effective as trying to stop a Sabre shell from blowing you away by holding up your hands.

But I guess, when you've stood there for an hour and watched your doom come down out of the stars in a constant flow, it'd be nice to know that if this is the time when it goes wrong and you end up with your guts torn out on a lictor's flesh hooks, or some hormagaunt stabs those dagger-talons through your chest, it ain't really the end, that there's someone waiting for you and it wasn't all a waste of time.

I know I've got to ditch these morbid thoughts. Got to stay sharp, otherwise this is gonna be my final trip with the Last Chancers. It's hard though, so hard, 'cause I was there on Ichar IV, I saw what they can do to a world, how they fight. There were six thousand Last Chancers back then. Less than five hundred of us made it out. The regular troops, I hear, lost over a million men defending Ichar IV.

There were Titans there, and Space Marines too, if the rumours are true, and even those eldar turned up, I heard someone say once. All those guns, all those men and we only just won the fight. I've seen so much blood and guts spilled in my life I don't have nightmares any more, but if there's one thing that would give me nightmares, it's tyranids. They're just so different to us. Even orks fight for territory and conquest, but the tyranids, they just consume everything like they're here to wipe out every single living thing in the entire galaxy and they'll never, ever stop until that's done.

Which is why I was stood up on the wall last night, in the freezing wind - you'd never guess that it could be so hot in the day and so cold at night -

watching them coming down. Watching my doom come, 'cause I've got a seriously bad feeling about this one. The hairs on my neck prickle constantly and I feel like I'm dead already, it's just my body that's gotta catch up with the plan.

Which is why I'm standing mere hoping there really is an Emperor, that he listens to our prayers and comes to our aid. But I can't count on that, which is why I'm here now as the sun starts dipping towards the jungles, ready to fight like I've never had to fight before, ready to do anything I can, because deadi is stalking across those plains right now.

THE MAIN ASSAULT wave has hit the walls. The sun's low on the horizon and they attack from that direction to blind us. The Colonel was right about the gargoyles, our air defences were more than a match. About a hundred of them came flying in, diving down onto the fort. The guns opened up, blowing them out of the sky. Some managed to get over the walls, and then the Hydras got them, firing high explosive shells into the broods, blasting them apart. That was horrible, pieces of bloodied and charred meat dropping down on you like obscene hailstones. No time to clear up the mess, though, 'cause the rest of the swarm has just arrived. It's hard to tell what's going on from back where we are in reserve, a couple of hundred paces from the wall.

We've cleared ourselves a killing zone, demolishing the buildings inside the perimeter and using them to make a redoubt around the keep, so that if the tyranids get inside we've got a second firing line. Most of the action seems to be going off around the gatehouse, just like the Colonel said it would. The men are three ranks deep on the walls on the south side, while the Battle Sisters are holding the west wall. There's about half as many of the Sororitas as there are Last Chancers but they seem to be holding out better than we are. Then again, give me a bolt gun and power armour and I'd show you just how mean and nasty a Last Chancer can get.

It's about a quarter of an hour since the attack begun when the tyranids get their first breakthrough. I'm watching the eastern end of the south wall when I see a horde of termagants running around and I realise there's nobody else up that end anymore.

'Okay, Last Chancers! Time to die!' I bellow as usual, and then we're running across the killing ground towards the wall, fast as we can. The gunners in the Chimeras take the hint and suddenly there's a fusillade of heavy bolter fire and multilaser shots directed at the termagants. Thirty heart-pounding seconds later and we're leaping up the steps, snapping off shots with our lasguns as we close in. The supporting fire from the Chimeras stops as we reach the top and suddenly I'm surrounded by the creatures.

I see one of them levelling its living gun at me and just manage to take it down before it can fire. All of a sudden, they charge at us, and I rip my chainsword from my belt and get the blades whirling, while the others make ready with their bayonets. The termagants are biting and clawing at everything in their path, and I'd swear they were mindless if it wasn't for the co-ordinated fashion of their attack. As they sweep around me I feel like I'm going to get washed away in the wave, and panic hits me, bile rising out of my stomach as I see those fanged, nightmarish faces all around me. One of the termagants leaps at me, its four upper limbs drawn back ready to attack, but I bring the chainsword round and the blades crash through its carapace, sending thick, alien blood splattering across my face. It tastes foul and I'm almost sick with the stench of it. I put a shot through the bulbous head of another one and then something hits me hard in the back. This thing is latched onto me, and I can't get at it. I feel its claws scrabbling at my flak jacket, hear the material tearing away, and its hot breath is on my neck, a long pointed tongue slithering over my neck. Its jaws latch onto my shoulder and I try to angle my laspistol round for a shot, desperately trying to rip this beast off of me, 'cause I don't want to be killed by some damned termagant. I'm not going to go like this, not like this.

Before it gets the killing blow in, Truko is there, one of Franx's squad, his bayonet skewering the termagant, and I feel it let go and drop to the floor. There's no time to thank him, though, as he gets thrown to the ground, half his face ripped off by a vicious claw. The creature is hunched over him, all six limbs on the ground ready to spring, and its red eyes turn to look up at me. I shoot its legs from beneath it then drive the chainsword into its soft, unprotected guts. Truko's screaming, wailing his head off, but there's no time to give him peace. No rest for the wicked, as they say.

We push them back, inch by bloody inch, to the edge of the wall. I see Franx pick one of them up and hurl it bodily over the parapet, its limbs and tail still flailing around even as it plummets down. I look over the edge of the wall, and I see how they managed to get up. A pile of their bodies stretches two-thirds of the way up the wall, almost three metres high, body upon body upon body, creating a ramp of corpses for the others to run up.

'Grenades! Blow those bodies away from the wall!' I shout, even as I dodge aside to avoid a barbed tail lashing towards my throat. My chainsword bites again, making an ear-piercing screech as it shrieks through chitinous plates. The others heard me, though, and they're tossing frag grenades over the parapet, trying to dislodge the fleshy pile. I see Marshall standing atop the wall, gripping his lasrifle by the barrel and swinging it from side to side like a club, battering away at the brood as it scuttles up towards us. The grenades blossom, sending

bits of torn flesh flying, and something gives. The pile of bodies slides outwards along the walls, falling to the ground leaving smears of blood along the rockcrete.

Then the termagants are falling back, away from the wall. But things aren't over yet, there's something else coming towards us, coming at us real fast. With long flea-like leaps and bounds the hormagaunts speed in, almost flying over the litter of corpses leading up to the wall. We're trying to shoot as many of them as possible as they close in, but there's still twenty, maybe thirty of them when they get to the base of the wall. They stop there for half a heartbeat, bunching those powerful leg muscles and then they spring up, clearing the wall by a good two or three feet, those four deadly dagger-talons jabbing out.

One of them punches its claw into Marshall's shoulder and he grabs its arm in one hand, holding it close. He wraps his other arm around the throat of another as it tries to push past, and then throws himself off the wall, taking them both with him. A serrated claw sweeps up towards my groin, but I manage to get there with the chainsword, lopping off the limb, my laspistol scoring a hit through one of its glassy red eyes. The rest of the fight just blurs into a waking nightmare of hacking and slashing and stabbing, kicking and shooting, punching and screaming, bestial faces and hot breath, flailing talons and ripping daws, blood and filth and guts slick across the walkway, a constant fight until your arms are leaden with fatigue and your brain can't process the information anymore, you're just fighting from instinct and nothing else.

WE MANAGE TO stave off the assault and as the tyranids fall back across the plain a cheer starts up by the gatehouse and spreads along the wall. I let my men cheer along as well, though we've got little to celebrate. The shock of the close call with the termagant is beginning to creep up on me and I look around for something to do to keep my mind occupied and not thinking about how close I came to going down this time. I see the Colonel striding along the walkway towards me, his face as grim as ever. I've never seen him break into a smile, not once.

'Kage! Clear away the dead. I'm sending flamer teams to clear the front of the wall.' Then he's gone again, issuing orders, getting the wounded divided into those that can fight and those that need to be given the Emperor's grace. That's it, no thanks, no 'Well done, Kage: you held the wall'. Just more orders, more work, more fighting and dying to be done. I detail some of my men to start throwing the bodies over the parapet, and see that the flamer teams are already at work, jets of fire turning the piles into pyres. I leave them to their dirty work and seek out the Colonel.

I find him outside the keep, talking to Nathaniel, the missionary in charge of the station. They seem to be arguing about something.

'But these men need treating, you cannot make them fight again/ Nathaniel's complaining.

'If these men cannot fight, they are dead, missionary. We need every single man we can have for the walls/ the Colonel replies in that low, grating voice of his. It's the first time I've had a chance to get a proper look at him since the fight began. His uniform is soaked in blood, alien and human, but none of it appears to be his. There's not a scratch on his skin, not a fragging scratch. My spine goes to ice and I try not to think about it.

Nathaniel's still arguing, but the Colonel holds up his hand to stop him.

'These men do not deserve your pity' he says, his eyes flashing like sun on ice. They are thieves, murderers, looters, rapists, insubordinates and heretics. Every sin you can conceive of has been committed by at least one man here. More than that, they are traitors. They once served as free men in the great Imperial army. But they betrayed the trust placed in them by the Emperor and his servants. They have broken the proscriptions of Imperial Law and have profaned the Emperor's benevolence with their selfishness and I will, I must, punish them for it/

'Only the Emperor can judge our sins' argues Nathaniel.

'And only in death can we receive the Emperor's judgement' the Colonel completes the catechism. Nathaniel takes a long look at him, then turns away.

'Remember, Nathaniel' the Colonel calls after him, 'serve the Emperor today, for tomorrow you may be dead!' And then, just for an instant, a tiny fraction of a second, there's a ghost of a smile on Colonel Schaeffer's lips, a minuscule hint of satisfaction, like he knows something the rest of the galaxy doesn't.

'Kage!' he calls, like he must have sensed I was there, beckoning me over with a finger. 'As I am sure you know, that was just the first assault. I do not know when the next one will come, so stay ready. It is only an hour until the sun goes down, so I think they will wait until nightfall. I want you and your platoon to stay near the gate. This first attack was just to test out our defences, to count our guns. They know we were most hard-pressed around the gate, so they'll throw the bulk of their forces there next time.

We must hold the gate at all costs, Kage, otherwise it's all over. Stay close to the gate, but wait for my signal. Do not, at any costs, allow yourself to get drawn away from the gate. Is that clear?'

'Perfectly, sir!' I reply, as if I couldn't see the scenario for myself. This time we just faced gargoyles, termagants and hormagaunts.

They're all expendable troops. Next time, it'll be much worse. They'll come in

with the warriors, the carnifexes, and maybe even the big bug himself, the hive tyrant.

'You have your orders then, lieutenant. Snap to it, I want clear fire for everyone in half an hour.' Then he's off again, shouting for Green and Kronin.

THE COLONEL WAS right, as I knew he would be. Emperor take him, but he's always so damned right.

Nightfall comes sharply, the tyranids waiting us out for the moment. I help Kronin's platoon rig up some searchlights scavenged from the Chimeras and get them set up on the wall. The constant hum of the portable generators fills the air, but listening won't do us any good, 'cause those tyranids can move as silent as you like when they want to. That's one of the scariest things about them - the silence. No battlecries, no war chants, just waves of them sweeping on towards you. When they're fighting, they hiss a lot, but I doubt if they've got any real language to speak of. They're just animals, bugs, but they're well organised for all that. They're like the wasps I saw on Antreides, who seemed to know what each other were up to. When one of them found you, the rest would soon come buzzing in, just like the lictors finding the prey for the rest of the swarm.

So I'm up on the wall checking everything is okay, when the searchlights blaze on at last. The stupid grunts start angling them far away from the wall, like they want to get the earliest warning possible, which I can understand. Problem is, the light doesn't hit the ground before it's too weak to show anything.

I grab the nearest one and point it further down, about seventy metres out. I catch a glimmer of movement and shout for the others to train on that point. What I see makes my spine tingle with fear. A sensation, I might add, that I'm not all that familiar with, though far too familiar for my own liking. There's a big brood of termagants out there, crawling through the grass on their bellies, sneaking really close. Behind them are crouched the warriors, big beasts twice as tall as a man, their four upper limbs evolved into a variety of deadly ranged and close combat weapons. They're creeping forward, bony joints and chitinous plates shown up in the white glare of the searchlights.

The light glitters off their eyes, countless shining orbs reflected back at me. Those eyes seem dead, there's no emotion, nothing. Not even a touch of hunger, which is what you'd expect considering that this race devours whole planets. No, the only eyes I've ever seen colder than those white-fire stares are Colonel Schaeffer's, and we all know he's not really human.

'Mark your targets! Open fire!' I bellow. I see them opening up, first with the missile launchers and autocannons and then with volleys of lasgun fire as the 'nids realise the game's up and they rise out of the grass and charge towards us, a

wave of multi-limbed monstrosities intent on our destruction. I take one last look as they come streaming over the plain, blossoms of fire exploding in their mist, showing up their snarling faces in brief glimpses of hellfire, before jumping down the steps three at a time to get back to my platoon.

'Right, men' I tell them, 'stay steady. Follow my lead, stay tight. If you get separated, they'll pick you off, no problem. When you shoot, aim for the flesh. Your lasguns will have about as much effect on their carapace as punching a Leman Russ. Watch your ammo counters too, 'cause tonight's gonna be a long haul and I don't want to face those fraggin' bugs with just my bare hands.

'One final thing: don't get yourselves killed, 'cause otherwise I'm gonna have to put up with another fresh draft of no-hopers. If you let me go down, sure as hell I'm gonna make sure I come back and haunt you for the rest of your miserable lives, reminding you just what a bunch of fraggin' slack-jawed sons of orks you are!'

That gets a smile. Personally, I couldn't give a frag about all this pre-battle speech crap, but some of them need it, I can tell. Just like me, they're getting awful nervous. I mean, they're a bunch of hard-nosed, thick-skinned meatheads for the most part, but even when you've got nothing but air between your ears you can't get over the unreasoning horror that the tyranids bring out in you. It's not just like they kill you. They devour you, take everything you are, everything you ever were gonna be, and change it and pervert it into something else. It's a horrible thought, I don't mind telling you.

The fire's still pretty steady from the top of the wall, so I guess we're holding out okay. I give myself the luxury of watching the Battle Sisters for a while, fighting alongside the natives. It's a really bizarre scene, I can tell you. You have a thousand or so of those dark-skinned warriors, hurling spears and firing bows, their skin glistening with sweat, their booming war chants echoing down from the wall. And then there's the Sororitas. They're chanting too, their voices raised in constant prayer to the Emperor, a choir all singing as one. I can't make out the words, but it reaches inside me, lifting my spirits. It's a song of defiance and devotion, and as they sing they fire methodical bursts from their bolters, fusillade after fusillade pouring into the darkness, every round sending a streak of light into the shadows from its internal propellant.

Then I see a swathe of the natives jumping in all directions, screaming like mad, clawing at their faces and chests. That'd be a deathspitter then; fires some kind of explosive bug that sprays acid all over the place. Burn through near enough anything, given time, and against the exposed flesh of the native irregulars it's utterly lethal. Dragging my eyes away from the scene, trying to turn a deaf ear to their agonised screeches, I watch what's happening around the

gatehouse.

There's hand-to-hand fighting going on now, and I pick out the Colonel, a glowing power sword in one fist and a bolt pistol in the other. While the others are desperately hacking and slaying, he's just stepping to and fro, felling a foe with every blow or shot, as if the chaos going on around wasn't happening at all. I see the shape of a lictor rise up behind him, but he just turns on the spot, fills its face full of bolts and then chops its legs from underneath it with two swings of the power sword. Calm as you like, as if he were just taking a stroll in the morning air. Damn, but he's so cold, it makes the Battle Sisters seem positively emotional, and the glance they reserve for scum like us would freeze worse than a night on Valhalla.

Then something appears on the western gatehouse that almost makes me swallow my tongue in terror. Silhouetted against the rising moon is the figure of the hive tyrant. It's almost three times as tall as the men around it. Two arms are moulded into some kind of massive living gun, while the other two end in a whip-like protrusion and a serrated bonesword. A thick tail lashes between its legs, tipped with a sting the size of your arm. Mandibles that can chew a man in two snap hungrily in its jaw and its body is covered in chitinous armour and bony protrusions.

It fires the venom cannon into the packed mass on the gatehouse, blasting apart Guardsmen and tyranids alike. Its head stretches back and lets loose a horrifying bellowing screech, which seems to roll along the wall like a wave, sending men staggering in fear, making them pause in their fight so that they're cut down with ease by the termagants and warriors they're fighting. The tyrant steps down from the parapet, its hoofed feet sending splinters of masonry flying as it stamps down with all of its massive weight.

Gazing around, it fixes its evil eyes on the Colonel as he musters his men for a counter-attack. They charge in, las-bolts bouncing harmlessly off the monster's armoured hide, their bayonets snapping against its chitinous plates. Then the bonesword sweeps down and I see a spray of blood fountain into the air as four men are cut down with that single blow. The whip lashes out, its barbs tearing across the chest of another Guardsman, his ragged corpse flung from the wall to land in a limp heap in the courtyard.

Surely even the Colonel has met his match this time. He's chopping his way through a brood of warriors to get at the hive tyrant. There's a pause in the fighting and he glances over the parapet to the ground outside. He stops for a moment and looks over to where we're positioned. With a wave of his arms, he signals us to attack.

'Here we go again, Last Chancers!' I shout out, and start heading for the wall.

I've taken perhaps five steps when something seems wrong. I realise that I'm alone and I stop and look around. They're all just standing there, looking up at the hive tyrant as it butchers another squad of men.

'What the frag is this?' I howl. I grab Sergeant Feonix by his lapels and push him towards the wall, but he turns round and snarls at me.

'This is madness!' he shouts over the cries from the slaughter on the wall. 'That's a fraggin' hive tyrant, it's gonna kill every one of us! We've gotta get the hell out of here while we can. Deliverance has fallen, Kage, face it.' He calms down a little and fixes me with an intense stare. 'There's nothing more we can do! We've gotta save ourselves. You ain't no fraggin' martyr, Kage, and you know it.'

He's right, but then something catches my eye over their heads. There's lights dropping down from the stars again, curving down from orbit towards Deliverance in a long arc. I glance back at the gatehouse, and see the gates shuddering as some titanic beast tries to break them down. I make a decision.

'Look' I tell them, pointing up to the pinpricks of light falling to the south. 'There ain't no escaping Deliverance, boys. That's more mycetic spores coming down, we're gonna be surrounded. There's no way we can get clear of the area before those things reach here.'

Kruzo, from Letts's squad, opens his mouth to argue but I cut him off.

'There ain't no getting outta this one, lads. We're all gonna die in Deliverance. Now I see it two ways. You can die running from the fight, like the thieves and cowards everyone thinks we are. Sure, you can do that, just get over the wall and hide out. But it won't take them long to find you, when you're all alone out there in the night, cowering in the grass, trying not to sh...'

A crash from the gatehouse distracts me and I turn around to have a look. The Chimera behind the gates is rocking heavily on its tracks now, it's gonna go over any second, so I better make this quick.

'For frag's sake! We ain't got anything worth fighting for 'cept our pride. Right now I don't give a frag about the natives, or the Emperor, or the Colonel. But what I do care about is how I'm gonna die, and it ain't gonna be with my back turned or on my knees. I'm gonna go down fighting like a man. If there's any men here with me, then you better come too, otherwise you boys can just go running off to cry, dying on your bellies like the scum you are'

I spit on the ground in front of them and then start walking towards the gate. I'm taking a hell of a risk, 'cause if they don't follow me I'm gonna be standing in front of the gate on my own when whatever it is that's so big and nasty to batter it's way through three feet of plasteel gets through. Then I hear the thud of boots and they're there with me, so I guess the suckers fell for it.

I look up and see that the hive tyrant's gone from the gate tower, but I can still

see the Colonel, slicing away with that big power sword of his. Emperor knows how the frag he managed that one. Well, if I live to see the dawn, I might just find out. With a screech of tearing plasteel the gates are torn apart and the Chimera gets shunted towards us. There's a sound like a tank ramming a building and the personnel carrier is flung upwards, spinning through the air. It crashes down and its fuel goes up, a massive fireball that shoots thirty metres into the air. In the flames and smoke I see a sight that will follow me to my grave, long may it be before I get there.

In the red glare comes this huge tyrannid creature, about four metres tall and just as wide. It's some kind of Carnifex, but nothing I've ever seen before. It's got four massive scythe-like arms, but the bony extrusions across its shoulders jut forward, rows of spikes thrust outwards like it's some kind of living battering ram. Nestled between its immense shoulders, its head is kind of fused with its chest, a large fang-ringed mouth open in a permanent roar. Pieces of twisted metal hang from the spines as it stomps through the smoke and flames like some monstrous devil from the pits of hell.

Without pause, it shoulders aside the wreck of the Chimera and I'm horrified to see that some of the burning vehicle tears off along one of the creature's armoured plates. The debris carries on burning, the flames crawling along the Carnifex's carapace but it just keeps advancing steadily as if nothing was happening.

'Blow that bastard away!' I shout, and everyone snaps out of the spell.

Breiden opens up with the lascannon, a bolt of energy powerful enough to cripple battle tanks scoring a wound across the carnifex's armoured skull making thick, dark blood dribble down the exoskeleton of its body. The heavy bolter in Franz's squad kicks in, explosive shells rippling across legs as thick as tree trunks in a shower of detonations.

But it still comes on, the ground shaking as those massive feet thud down into the dirt. It pauses for a second, its beady eyes reflecting the flickering flames and fixes us with a stare. Its arms arch back, spreading wider than the length of a tank and its cavernous mouth opens to bellow forth a roar that can probably be heard offworld. It breaks into a run, gathering momentum. Lasgun fire, heavy bolter shots and lascannon shots bounce off as it lumbers towards us. Once more its mouth opens for another terrifying roar, but Breiden picks his moment precisely, his aim guided by the Emperor I'm sure, and the next lascannon bolt lands in its mouth, smashing its head to a pulp, scattering fragments of skull across the courtyard.

For a moment I think that even that isn't enough to stop it, as it comes rumbling on towards us, but then the rest of the body catches up with what's

happening and it collapses to the ground with dark, thick ichor oozing out in a gigantic puddle around the mammoth corpse.

I breathe a sigh of relief, glad that those useless fraggers decided to follow me after all, otherwise I'd be little more than a smear along those claws by now. However, just as my heart rate drops to something just below a million beats a minute, the rest of the tyranids start to pour through the opening. At the front is a brood of warriors, deathspitters and devourers firing as they advance.

Men are going down all around me and a stray spatter of acid splashes onto my arm. The pain is almost unbearable and I stoop to grab a handful of dirt to rub the acid off. My right arm's almost numb, so I drop my laspistol and grab my chainsword in my left hand. The lead warriors go down to fire from the lascannon and heavy bolters, but there's more and more of the things pouring through the gap now. I look around to see how the platoon's holding out, and I see there's only about two dozen of us left now.

Franz catches my gaze and I see his desperation turn into fierce pride in that single glance. As if a subconscious order is given, we all charge forward, throwing ourselves at the tide of beasts sweeping into Deliverance. My chainsword bites flesh and I hear an inhuman shriek of pain. I'm not really looking at what's happening, I'm just chopping left and right, hacking blindly, knowing that I can't miss in the tight press of alien creatures swirling around me.

Then a massive clawed paw, larger than a Cthellan cudbear's, comes out of the darkness, smashing me across the face. My head spins and I only dimly feel a sharp blade cutting across my thigh. I feel something wet and sticky pouring down my legs and I gaze down numbly, seeing my blood spilling to the dirt. I try to take a step forward but all my strength seems to have been sapped from me. I drop to my knees, feeling rough alien skin rasping against me, pushing past, leaving me for dead.

Then a shadow descends and I feel like I'm falling, falling down a deep, dark hole.

My ears pick up singing, my mind ringing to the sound of angelic voices singing the praises of the Emperor. So this is what it's like to die. There is an Emperor after all, and I shall receive my judgement, just like Nathaniel and the Colonel said. My thoughts are getting slow, but for the first time in ten years of fighting I feel proud. I didn't run this time, I stayed. I'm dying, but I went down fighting. Surely that's got to count for something.

I CAN HEAR voices, shouting, orders being bellowed. So I guess I'm alive then, and I really was right about those falling lights. I try to open my eyes, but the left one seems closed up. I raise an arm, feeling so weak, and touch my temple.

Instant pain tells me that there's a bruise the size of a small moon up there, and it's probably blood crusting up my eye. My right arm is swathed in bandages and won't move at all.

Through my good eye I see there's troops running backwards and forwards, and I watch a line of three Leman Russ tanks warming up, ready to go out of the gate. I guess I'm propped up against the redoubt; I can feel rough stonework poking into my back. I turn my head slowly left and right, wary of dizziness and nausea, and I see that there's others like me, bandaged and bloody, all along the redoubt.

The Colonel walks past and he notices that I'm awake. He strides up and stands in front of me, thankfully blocking out the bright light of the sun. I can't see his face, it's in shadow, but he's looking down at me.

'Still alive then, Kage?' he demands, his voice as gruff as ever.

'Fraid so, sir. Guess I can't kick the habit just yet.' I try to manage a smile, but my face is just a mass of aching and pain.

'I head what happened' he says, dropping down on one knee so that I can see those icy eyes as they fix me with their stare. 'Tell me one thing, Kage. You could have run out on me, you had the chance and you have done it before. What made you fight?'

I fix him with my good eye, returning his gaze with a steady look of my own.

'Well, sir, it's like this' I explain. 'I saw the lights coming down, and I knew they were Imperial Guard transports. Mycetic spores just come straight down, but they had a landing trajectory. So I knew that Deliverance was saved. Thing was, though, we had to hold out, 'cause if the tyranids got into the compound we'd all be dead. There's nowhere to run from those creatures/'

The Colonel frowns at me. 'So why did you tell your men that there were more spores coming down, rather than the relief force?' he asks.

'You must know why, sir' I reply, because it seems so obvious to me. 'If I told them that help was on the way, they'd lose what little stomach they had left. They'd think they could give up, get away from here. But like I said, there wasn't any escape from Deliverance, not a chance. So I did the only thing I could. I stripped them of that false hope, I gave them nothing to live for except life itself.

'You see, sir, when you ain't got frag-all worth fighting for, you'll still fight to be alive. Give a man a chance to back down and he'll take it, but give him nothing and he'll grab what he can with both hands and not let go for as long as he can. He'll fight to his last breath just to take one more breath, to feel his heart beat just once more before he dies. If you stick a man in the middle of a fight and give him a gun, he'll fight like a cornered rat cause there's nothing else he can do.

'That's the way the Last Chancers work, sir. It's exactly what you do to us all. We ain't got no choice but to fight, and fight good, 'cause if we don't, we're dead. None of us wants to die so we'll do all we can, everything that's possible including going on your damned suicide mission just to breathe one more time. It's why I fight, why they fight.'

He just grunts and stands up. He turns to walk away but I call after him.

'There's another reason why I'll fight my damnedest, sir!'

He spins around and looks at me, an eyebrow raised in question.

'I-I ain't gonna give you the fragging satisfaction of seeing me dead just yet, sir!'