

WARHAMMER  
40,000

# THE LAST CHANGERS

GAV THORPE

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

# LIBERTY

A Kage story

Gav Thorpe

PRISON GUARD SERPIVAL Lance suppressed a yawn and withdrew into the sentry alcove a little further to get out of the driving wind and dust. The permanent tempest howled around the roof of the tower, all but obscuring the ruddy lights that shone from the edge of the landing pad only a dozen metres away. He had been on duty for three hours and still had three to go, and he glanced enviously at the light shining beneath the door of the guardhouse to his left. Here he was, wrapped up in his heavy weather coat, hood pulled tight around his face, while the others laughed and played cards inside. It wasn't right for a man of his age. He had served the Emperor on this prison planet for thirty years, and still he was stuck out here on Emperor-forsaken nights like this.

His misanthropic musings were interrupted when the internal comm-speaker squawked behind him. He pressed the receiver rune and bent his aching back to listen closely.

'He's come back. Due to land in a few minutes,' the guard captain's voice crackled over the comm-set. Serpival grunted an acknowledgement and cast his eye into the cloud-covered skies. It wasn't long before the landing beacon sprung to life, a guiding low energy laser piercing the gloom from the centre of the landing pad. Shortly after, answering lights could be seen glimmering in the darkness as the shuttle descended, the howl of its engines growing clearer and dearer as they drew closer and blotted out the noise of the wind.

With a clang of metal landing feet on the mesh surface of the roof, the shuttle settled, its engines at a roar which kicked up the dust into even more violent swirls before cutting out. An erratically wobbling entry gantry extended out from the docking area and connected with the shuttle's hatchway. The door opened and banged against the shuttle fuselage and a tall uniformed figure stepped out. The three guards in the tower spilled out and stood to attention by the doorway into the interior. The Imperial Guard officer said something to them and pointed inside the shuttle. The guards saluted and hurried past to emerge a moment later carrying a heavy bundle.

Curious, and knowing that it was a breach of regulations but unable to stop himself, Serpival ducked out of the sentry post and hurried across the rooftop to the others. They were carrying a man, slumped unconscious in their arms, dressed in full combat fatigues and camouflaged in black and dark blues. As they bundled him into the room, his head lolled towards Serpival and the guard suppressed a shudder at the sight of the man's face. It was horrifically scarred, criss-crossed by weals and cuts, bullet grazes and burns.

The governor has all of the official notification. Lock him up with the rest,' the officer said curtly before turning on his heel and walking back towards the shuttle.

At that moment the new prisoner groaned and came round, shaking his head. The others lowered him to the floor, glancing at the retreating back of the officer. Groggily, the Imperial Guardsman stood up, blinking his eyes to clear them.

'Where the frag?' he asked, still slightly disorientated.

'Ghovul vincularum,' Serpival told him.

'A prison planet?' the man asked for confirmation, his eyes suddenly focussing on Serpival, all dizziness gone, making the guard squirm as if he were looking down the barrel of a lasgun.

'Yes, a prison,' the guard repeated himself, nervous under the evil stare of the newcomer.

It was then that the prisoner followed the gaze of the others. The officer was just climbing through the hatchway.

'Come back here, you bastard! Schaeffer, you sump sudsing piece of crap!' the newly arrived inmate screamed, roughly shoving Serpival aside and taking a step out onto the docking gantry. The officer turned, looked once and then slammed the hatch shut without a word. The prisoner broke into a run, yelling incoherently, and the other guards sprinted after him.

It was Shrank who caught him first, grappling the man's left arm. The prisoner stumbled, recovered his footing and then smashed the extended fingers of his right hand into Shrank's face, who fell away screaming, clutching at his eyes. Frenz swung a right-handed punch, but the guardsman easily swayed to his left, delivering a short kick to the prison officer's knee that made it snap the wrong way, tumbling him to the ground with shrieks of agony.

The shuttle engines roared back into full life, bathing the rooftop in their white glare, the prisoner silhouetted against them, his fist raised, his words of hatred drowned out by the noise.

Serpival and the remaining guard, Janssen, drew their heavy pistols and took aim at the prisoner, who stood there, fist still raised, watching the departing shuttle.

'Try any more of that and I'll plug you, you vicious scumbag!' Jannsen called out.

The prisoner turned around slowly, his face lit by the lights of the landing pad, bathing his scarred features in a hellish red glow. Slowly the man walked back towards them, and Serpival had to fight to remain calm and his grip on his pistol steady as the stranger slowly strode towards them, murderous intent on his face. He stopped a couple of metres away.

'Just take me to my fraggin' cell before I take that pistol off you' the man growled, nodding towards the gun in Jannsen's shaking grip.

The prisoner will lie face down and do as he is told,' Jannsen said, without much confidence.

'Kage,' the prisoner replied, glancing at each of them in turn and then stepping easily between them, looking back over his shoulder at Serpival. 'Call me Kage.'

I'm standing there wishing this repetitive, idiotic man would just shut the hell up. The prison governor is a sour, hatchet-faced man, crouched like a malevolent rodent behind his massive desk. That desk says volumes on its own - three metres wide, two metres deep, an Imperial eagle burnt into the surface but otherwise empty. He sits there behind it, elbows resting on the deep red wood, his chin resting on the knuckles of his clasped hands as he drones on and on and on. Behind him are two guards with shotguns, and I know there are two more behind me, similarly armed. They really don't trust me in here with their commander.

'Which is why you will adhere by these rules at all times' Governor Skandlegrist is saying, peering at me over a pair of half-moon glasses. He is dressed in layered robes of black and deep red, strangely matching the desk in colour. 'Punishment for infractions will vary depending on the severity of the offence. I have had special instructions from Colonel Schaeffer to keep an eye on you, Kage, and I will do so. I will be watching you like a hawk, and if you step out of line the full force of my authority here will fall upon you. Be warned, you are under close observation, so don't think you can get away with anything, anything at all.'

'Right, I get the picture' I butt in desperately, taking a step forward which causes the guards to pull up their shotguns. At least they're paying attention, which is more than I am. 'Can I just get to my cell now?'

Your disrespect for a commanding officer is shocking, Kage, as is your disregard for the laws and regulations of the Imperial Guard Skandlegrist replies. 'You are a bad seed, Kage, and I have no idea why Colonel Schaeffer wants you to be detained at this facility instead of being on the gallows like you should be,

no idea at all. But, unlike you, I have my orders and I follow them, and follow them I will, mark my words. Yes, I'll be watching you, Kage, very closely, very closely indeed.'

With a gesture from thin, crabby fingers he orders the guards to escort me out. We're near the top of the tower, maybe just a couple of floors down from the landing pad on the roof. The whole tower is a broad cylinder, with just a single elevator shaft linking all the floors at the circle's centre. We stand there while the lift cranks and rattles up from the depths of the tower, the guards still nervous and agitated.

When the conveyor arrives, one of the guards opens the doors, which squeal on rusting hinges with an ear-grinding shriek. A shotgun butt in my back propels me into the interior of the open ironwork cage, and they follow me in, not standing too close, guns lowered at my belly. One of them pulls the lever, to the eighteenth storey I note, and we start to judder our way down the shaft.

'Shrank was my friend, you piece of filth,' one of the guards hisses in my ear over the sound of grinding gears. 'I'm gonna make you pay for blinding him, one of these days.'

I turn and look at him with a patronising smile.

'You try anything, I'll rip your arm off and shove it down that big mouth of yours,' I tell him, meeting his gaze and causing him to flinch.

'I bet!' he says, recovering well. Before I realise what he's doing, he slams the shotgun in his hands straight into my chin, smacking my head against the iron grillwork of the elevator cage. Another one steps up and puts a boot into my gut, winding me badly, while the first jabs the shotgun into my face again, bruising my right cheek. Another three or four blows rain down on me. I take the brunt of it on my shoulders, before they step back, panting.

I crouch there for a moment before straightening up, feeling my right eye begin to swell and close. I roll my neck with an audible clicking and look at each of them in turn through my good eye. I take a good look at them, memorising the names on the tags on their uniforms.

'I'm gonna kill all of you meatheads, and I'm gonna do it slowly,' I warn them, meaning every word of it.

As I step into the cell, the door clangs behind me. There's a rough ironwork bunk on either side of the room; the left one has an occupant. He snorts and wakes, sitting up. He's a huge bear of a man. As the crudely spun woollen blanket falls from his torso, it reveals a mass of hair across his broad chest, shoulders and back. He looks at me in the dim light of the glow-globe set behind a grille in the ceiling, his dark eyes almost invisible under a bushy brow. His hair is cropped short on top, as is his full beard, and over his right eye he has a tattoo

of a pair of dice, mirrored on his left cheek. He gives a wheezing grunt and swivels further around.

'Welcome to Ghovul,' he says, his voice a hoarse whisper.

I ignore him for the moment, sitting myself down on the other bed, nursing the growing bruises on my chest and ribs.

'Guards don't like you then, man,' my cellmate comments, and I look up at him.

'Nobody likes me,' I say quietly. 'I prefer it that way. Puts everybody in the same place. Me and everyone else. Frag, even I don't like me.'

Thor's teeth, man, I can see you're gonna cheer me up with your witty banter the other man grumbles, his fat lips twisted into a sour grimace. 'Name's Marn.'

'Kage,' I say, offering him my hand to shake. As he leans forward, I see he really is hairy pretty much all over. He takes my hand in his massive paw, giving it a firm squeeze which I return. We sit there for a couple of seconds, measuring each other up.

'You're not gonna give me any trouble, man, are you?' he asks, letting go. 'I keep myself to myself, and if you do the same then we'll get along fine.'

'I'm not much for gabbling and gossip,' I reassure him. 'In fact, if these are the last words we say to each other, that wouldn't bother me for a moment.'

'Well,' he replies, rubbing his hand across his head and lying back down again. 'You don't have to go that far, man, but we're cellmates, not friends.'

'Damn right,' I reply, unlacing my boots and placing them neatly under the bed. 'All my friends are long dead.'

I strip off my socks and shirt, slide under the blanket and close my eyes. I'm weary as a poor infantry footslogger after a week's marching, but sleep won't come. My mind is whirling with recent events. After the Colonel picked me up again, I've been in a holding cell aboard the *Pride of Lothos*. Must have been several weeks travelling, crossed quite a few systems I reckon. I didn't see hide nor hair of the Colonel until I got here, and he was leaving me to rot in this cell.

Emperor knows what he's got in store for me. After all, the last words I heard him say were, 'I can shoot you right now, or I can give you one more Last Chance.' I bloody said yes of course, considering he was pointing a pistol at me at the time. But that's all I know. I've got one more Last Chance. I figure that's another spell in the Colonel's suicide squad, the 13th Penal Legion. Another suicide mission or two, another chance to get my arse blown off and back again on some hellhole or other, fighting some poxy aliens or heretics who should know better than to try their luck fighting the Emperor's armies. Maybe I'll be blowing up another city, who can tell?

All I know is that if the Colonel wanted me to just rot in a cell, he would have

left to rot on that prison planet he first picked me up from. And if he wanted me dead, well then he would have just pulled the trigger and blown my head to bits. He's got something in store, I'm certain of that. But I don't really plan on hanging around for it to happen.

With that in mind, and the droning noise of Marn's snoring, I begin to drift asleep.

The clatter of bowls and plates fills the mess halls as the inmates sit down with their food. I'm sat on a bench at a long wooden table, twenty of us to each side, the bowl of soup, the hunk of dark bread and the plate of what may once have been meat but now resembles boot leather in front of me. We sit there patiently, waiting. It's about half a minute before Preacher Cleator starts his sermon. He keeps it short, like he normally does, Emperor bless the doddering old fart, and mumbles something about the bounties of faith and the punishments of sin. Just like he has done for the last sixteen days I've been here. He finishes.

'Praise the Emperor,' we all intone solemnly before grabbing up our knives and spoons and tucking in with gusto. The food tastes like crap, but when you only get cold gruel for breakfast and this sump filth twelve hours later, you'll eat whatever they dump in front of you. It's quite varied, to tell the truth. Sometimes the unidentifiable carcass is seared beyond recognition into charcoal, other times it's so bloody and raw I'd swear the fragging thing is probably still breathing. Never somewhere in between though, never nicely cooked. And the thin, watery spew that passes for soup, well, it probably came out the same animal is all I can say. Doesn't stop me soaking up every last drop with the fist-sized hunk of mud that passes for bread. Better than going hungry, as I learnt from two years of protein chunks on my last tour out with the Last Chancers.

Mam is sat opposite me, wolfing his food down. Thor's blood, but he eats fast. Not an ounce wasted though, it all gets crammed into that maw of his with ruthless efficiency. It's like watching a well-oiled machine at work, both hands working simultaneously, his jaws chewing constantly, barely pausing for split second for him to open his lips and shove another quivering spoonful into his mouth. Thirty seconds and he's done, while I'm barely halfway through the soup, which is piping hot if nothing else. Emperor knows how he stays so big on such meagre rations, because he must weigh at least half as much again as I do.

We all eat in silence; nobody really has anything to say. It's odd, comparing this prison with life on the Pride of Lothos. There was upward of two hundred of us in each of those converted holds, and we pretty much hated each other's guts. But we were a fighting unit, we were in squads and platoons, and had some kind of unity from that. We all had our little groups which we kept to, who we talked to stop ourselves going mental and slashing our own throats or blowing our

brains out the next time we went into battle. Well, after a while, I remember when we first got to Ichar IV, the first war-zone we were deployed on, there was a good eighty, ninety soldiers topped themselves in the first week. I don't know if that was the effect of fighting the tyranids, or the realisation that they were gonna be stuck in one long war until they died, with no respite and no pardons. Well, no pardons back then, at least.

Here, it's every man for himself. There's you, and a vague bond with your cellmate, and that's it. It's driving me nuts, and no mistaking. I wake up at first light, well, when the glow-globes on the landing outside the cells come on anyway. I never have been a heavy sleeper, I'll wake up at a gnat's cough. I lie there for maybe three hours before breakfast call. Then we're roused out, herded to the hose rooms to get washed down, then we come down here, to the mess hall at the bottom of the tower. It takes forever, only a handful of prisoners and twice as many guards in the lift at one time. It's a really inefficient system for moving large numbers of prisoners around. Perhaps I'll make a complaint to the governor. Anyway, it takes the best part of an hour to get the two hundred or so prisoners into the hall and then we all queue up again for our slop. We sit there while the guards hand out the knives and spoons and the preacher totters about, waving incense around in the rusty old burner that usually hangs from his belt, staining his white robes brownish-orange down his left leg. Then it's five minutes to eat up, another wait while they count the knives back in, and gather up the spoons and dishes. Then back in groups of twenty up in the exercise hall on one of the middle levels, for two hours. After that, back to Marn's quiet company for nine hours until the whole meal ordeal is repeated for dinner. Then it's lock up and shut up.

Deacis's holy arse, but I'm bored out of my wits. All my bitching about suicide missions and getting my face blown off aside, I'd much rather be out there with the Colonel doing whatever insane thing it is he's doing, than stuck in here slowly getting older, with my brain dribbling out of my ears. My resolve hardens. Another month here and I'm going to be smashing my grey matter out on the walls of that cell, standing over Marn's ragged corpse, screaming and damning Schaeffer's name to the Abyssal Chaos and back. I have to get out of this fragging tower.

Day eighteen, and my desperation is beginning to grow. Last night, Marn's snoring was driving me insane. I can't sleep as it is, even pushing myself to the limits in the two hours of exercise I'm allowed is nowhere near enough to tire me out. I feel so lethargic and tired; this inactivity is slowly killing me. If the Colonel does come back for me, which I'm starting to doubt more and more with each passing day, I'll be a flabby, useless piece of filth, rather than the fit, lean

soldier I was when he brought me in here. Surely he wouldn't let such a good fighter go to waste like that. Anyway, Marn's snoring like a fire klaxon, his wheezing breaths echoing off the walls, driving through my ears right into my brain. I got up, and my fingers were within centimetres of his throat. Hell, he wouldn't have known a thing, my thumbs would've crushed his windpipe before he even woke up. I'd probably be doing him a favour. I must have been stood over him like that for over an hour, resisting that murderous urge.

I work out what anger I can on the sand-filled punch bag, pounding my bare fists into the poorly tanned leather, alternating between imagining Marn's hairy face there and the Colonel's chiselled features. There's just me and them, and I work and work, throwing jabs and crosses, bone-breaking uppercuts, organ splitting body blows, kicks that would burst men's intestines and shatter ribs into dozens of pieces. I picture all this in my mind, and it's easy, because I've done it to real men and seen the effects. I imagine the blood flooding from Marn's nostrils as I drive my elbow into what would be the bridge of his nose. I imagine the Colonel collapsing breathless as the middle knuckle of my left hand slams into his abdomen. Over and over, punishing them with my fists and feet, until even my callused knuckles are raw and bleeding, the thick skin scraped off on the clumsily made punchbag. Sweat pours off me in rivulets, I can feel it rolling down my back, splashing all around me as I wallop Marn with a right roundhouse to his bushy eyebrow. My heart's hammering in my chest, the blood coursing through my body, fuelling the destruction of these two hated men.

Suddenly I'm aware of someone stood behind me. I spin on my right heel, fists raised. There's another prisoner there, I've seen him here every day, obviously, but I don't know his name. Marn's the only person here whose name I know. He's a little taller than me, with muscles bulging out of his ragged vest like boulders. He looks like he was carved rather than grown. His bald head is tattooed with blue flames, as are his massive chest muscles and biceps.

'You've been on that for ages. My turn, trooper,' he says, nodding towards the bloodied punch bag. 'I think it realises you don't like it.'

'I'm not finished yet,' I tell him, turning away and taking up my stance again.

'I wasn't asking,' he barks, shoving me to one side, almost knocking me off my feet.

'Frag off, or I'll kill you,' I warn him, squaring up.

'Go play with the others, pretty boy,' he laughs.

He stops laughing when the extended fingers of my right hand slam into his throat. He reels back and I follow up immediately, slamming a left hook into his jaw, his face already reddening from choking, and then catching him under the chin with the heel of my right hand. I hear shouting and chanting start up around

me, but don't listen, focussing on this bastard in front of me instead. He flails madly, forcing me to duck, and as I rise, my right fist drives straight into his nose, ripping open a nostril and crunching cartilage. He stumbles back against the bare stone wall and I feel rather than see the other prisoners and the guards forming up around us. Their noise is blocked out by the roar of blood in my ears.

A spinning kick to his midriff hurls him back against the wall as he rebounds towards me, and I get my whole body weight behind the next punch, driving it between his eyes and smashing his head back against the unforgiving stone, leaving a bloody stain as he slumps to one side.

'That's enough,' I hear someone shout and a guard's gloved hand closes around my right wrist. With a simple twist of my hands, I snap his arm at the elbow, not even turning around, and drive the heel of my left boot into the other prisoner's face again, crushing his jaw and cheek, and pounding his head against the wall once more. He flops to the ground and I stamp on his neck for good measure, feeling the crack of his spine snapping like a twig. Then something hard smacks across the back of my neck, stunning me and forcing me to my knees. I see the baton swing across my face and feel a sharp pain across my forehead before I fall unconscious.

I'm stood to attention in the governor's office again, nursing a bump on my head the size of Terra and still feeling groggy. There's six armsmen in here with me this time, I figure that the governor's not one to take chances.

'I am sure I don't have to tell you that this kind of behaviour is wholly inappropriate, wholly inappropriate to a military facility, whether it be a garrison or a prison,' he tells me.

'I understand well the pressures placed upon our inmates, and that occasionally tempers will flare. In fact, given our population, I expect instances of this kind now and then. We have highly trained, aggressive soldiers penned up here, and fuses can be short on occasion with no outlet for that professional aggression. In most cases, I am lenient and understanding.'

'That's very broad-minded of you, sir,' I say, resisting the urge to rub the bruise on my forehead.

'However,' Skandlegrist continues, with a scowl of annoyance, 'I cannot tolerate the death of another prisoner at your hands. Fighting and brawling I consider an unpleasant but necessary evil of running a vincularum. Murder I do not. Murder, cold-blooded or otherwise, is not an option, and an example will be made of you.'

'That's ridiculous,' I snort, earning another stare from the governor. 'I've been trained to kill. That's what I do. What do you expect? It's the whole point of fighting, isn't it?'

'You are trained to fight and kill under orders, Kage,' snaps the prison governor, standing up, his expression hard. 'You were trained to be a disciplined killer, to exterminate the enemies of the Emperor as ordered by your superior officers. You were not trained to kill every man or woman who happens to disagree with you. You are so far out of line, Kage, and you do not even see it. If I cannot convince you, perhaps the whip can. As the authority of the Imperial Commissariat on this world, I sentence you to two dozen lashes, to be carried out before breakfast tomorrow in front of the other inmates. I could, and would, normally order you executed for this heinous, malicious act, but given the specific orders I received from Colonel Schaeffer that is not an option available to me. Take him away!'

He spins on his heel and clasps his hands behind him, ignoring me as the armsmen grab me by the arms and roughly bundle me out of the room.

'Costaz should get the honour,' one of them says to the others. I remember that name; it was the guard who attacked me in the elevator.

The solemn beat of a drum echoes around the exercise hall, whose walls are lined with the assembled prisoners and guards. At one end, a wooden slab with two chains hanging from thick rings is propped up against the wall, the governor stood next to it. Two guards walk in front of me, with four others behind, my punishment escort. At a slow march, we pace across the hall in time to the drum. I look at the sea of faces, recognising none of them; they're just a blur of different coloured flesh all wrapped up in the same drab grey prison fatigues.

'Prisoner and escort, halt!' commands the governor, his voice surprisingly loud and strong. We all halt, our boots dashing in unity on the bare boards of the floor.

'Prisoner, advance!' the governor orders me forward and I step out sharply, my chin high, looking at the chains on the wooden board. I spread-eagle myself against the board, and two guards step forward and clasp the manacles around my wrists, before pulling the chains up, stretching me out, and fastening them to bolts screwed into the top edge of the slab. One of them offers me a leather strap, and I open my mouth and he places it between my teeth. This isn't the first time I've taken a whipping. I know the routine. I bite down hard, vaguely wondering who else's mouth the leather bit has been in.

I hear the dump of the guards' boots as they withdraw and focus my attention on the grain of the wood in front of me. The wood is quite pale, but dark red stains the grooves between the planks, and the deeper areas of grain. There's no mistaking that it's blood, the blood of those who've been punished like this. There are a few score marks above my right shoulder, though I can't think what could have caused them.

It's then that I realise the governor is talking again.

'...in accordance with Imperial Guard regulations,' I hear him finish.

There's a hiss behind me and a short crack a moment before searing pain tears across my shoulder blades as the whip's end opens up a furrow in my skin. I bite harder on the leather, my eyes going wide as agony wracks my back. There'll be no blood trickling down yet, it'll be five or six more before the weals split into cuts and gashes. Another hiss and crack and more pain, this time further down, across the small of my back. It's fleshier down there and the pain seems to spread further around to my sides. I block it out, it's easy at the moment. It was more painful when a tyrannid warrior stuck its bonesword through my thigh on Deliverance. It was a hell of a lot more painful when a spore mine exploded in my face, hideously scarring me for the rest of my life and making one side of my face almost totally numb. Another hiss and crack, and pain explodes across my shoulders again. I don't know if it is the guard who attacked me holding the whip, but whoever he is, he knows his stuff. Four more times the lash rips across my spine before I can feel the trickle of my blood oozing out of the lacerated flesh.

I close my eyes until they water as he carries on, methodically, relentless tearing strips of skin and fat from my back. I lose count and open my eyes again, staring deep into the wood, pretending I'm elsewhere as hot pain burns across the whole of my body. In the short pause between blows, I glance up and see blood leaking out of my clenched fists and on to the chain, from where I'm clenching my hands so hard my nails have broken the skin. I relax them, only to tighten my grip even more when the next lash strikes me.

And that's how it goes on until the sentence is carried out. My eyes are watering, my throat is constricted and my heart is hammering in my chest, but not once do I cry out. I take the pain, and I take it deep inside. Storing it away, using it as fuel for myself. My life has been built on pain, pain that I'll throw back at my enemies. Pain and agony that I'm saving up for the Colonel. As the guards unfasten the manacles, I give a grunt, the only noise to have passed my lips. It's a grunt of satisfaction, because deep inside that pain is boiling around, and it'll come out one day. One day when the Colonel's throat is in my grip. This is just another episode of pain and hate in the life he's created for me, and I'll pay every second of it back to him. Every second.

Its four days of agony before I can even start thinking straight again, laid up in the tower's infirmary, my back swathed in saltwater-soaked bandages. It hurts like a bastard, but the salt will help my tattered back knit itself together. The prison surgeon, some inmate called Stroniberg, had to put a few stitches into the worst of the cuts, but my back was so numb by then I didn't feel a thing. The day

after I'm out of the infirmary, I begin to plot my escape.

There's only one way out of the tower, and that's the roof. If I can get up there, perhaps with a rope or something, I'll be able to scale the outside wall and get to safety. There's one problem. The only way up to the roof is the elevator. I have to find some way of gaining control of the elevator long enough to reach the top. I'm not sure yet how to do that, but I know a weapon of some kind will be needed. I have to work out a way of making a weapon, easily concealed but deadly.

The answer comes to me during dinner the next day. As they've always done, the guards clear away the knives first, keeping careful count of them. I'd never get away with one of them. However, the spoons on the other hand are just cleared away with the rest of the dishes, without too much attention paid to them. At breakfast the day after, I make my move.

Everybody's finishing their gruel, well everybody except my gluttonous cellmate who wolfs his down without taking a breath. Next to me is a slim man, with tawny hair and a drawn face. To be honest I've never noticed him before, I've always sat fixated watching the eating machine on the opposite side of the bench from me. Today, however, he becomes the object of my attention.

I rise to my feet with a roar, smashing his dishes and mine across him.

'What did you say about my mother?' I bellow at him, grabbing him by the collar of his prison vest. He snarls wordlessly at me, and swings a punch which I put my head down into so his fist cracks against the hard part of my brow. I heave him upwards and slam him down onto the table, scattering more bowls and spoons and cold gruel over those nearby. The prisoner opposite and to my right lunges at me across the table, but I drag the skinny guy upward, so the other inmate's punch slams squarely across his face. Letting go of him, I turn to the man on my left, seeing out of the corner of my eye that Marn is starting to lay into the guy who tried to attack me.

Pretty soon, there's seven or eight of them brawling around me. One of them punches me on the chin and I roll with the blow, hurling myself over the bench and rolling under the table. Quickly, I snatch up one of the discarded spoons and shove it into my boot, pulling my fatigues out of them to hide the long handle. I shelter there for about half a minute more, and then emerge as the guards break up the fight. One of them grabs me and pushes me to one side. 'Clear this mess up, troublemaker,' he growls at me, pointing to the broken dishes and scattered cutlery.

'Of course, sir, sorry about that,' I mumble, dropping to my knees and picking up the pieces of cracked pottery and gathering up the spoons. I stand there holding the jumbled mess until another guard turns up with a metal basin and

tells me to drop it all in.

'No dinner tonight, Kage,' the guard with the basin tells me. 'If you can't eat without acting like an animal, then you can't eat.'

'Sorry, sir,' I apologise again. 'I'll watch my temper in future.' Inside I'm grinning like a fool. The plan's starting to work.

It takes three nights of furtive labour to file the edge of the spoon's bowl into a sharper blade. The scraping hidden by Marn's snoring, I spend my night hours rasping the spoon back and forth across the bricks of the wall, under my bed so a casual inspection won't see the score marks. Another four days of rubbing, my hands cramping on occasion with holding the thin handle of the spoon, allows me to sharpen the end of the handle into a point. Perfect for piercing throats, lungs and windpipes. With my weapon sorted out, albeit a bit of a crude one, I turn my attention to what I have to do next.

The elevator only stops at a floor when it's time for meals, ablutions or exercise period, and at those times, there's always a bunch of guards and other prisoners around. Certainly too many people for an efficient escape attempt. I need to think of some way to get the guards to make a special visit, only one or two of them preferably, and somehow get them to open the cell door at the same time.

Its two sleepless nights listening to Marn's incessant droning snore before the answer comes to me. It brings an ironic smile to my face when I think about it. I rise up in the dim glow through the vision slit in the door and pull my pillow dear from my bed. I stand over Marn, considering my options, and decide this is the best one. I lean down and place the pillow over his face, pushing ever so slightly harder and harder so as not to startle him. He wakes up briefly, eyes staring wide at me in accusation, but lack of breath pushes him into unconsciousness a few seconds later. I pull the pillow off, and check that he's still breathing, but only shallowly. I don't want him dead yet. Taking my makeshift knife from where it's concealed under my mattress, I roll Marn onto his side. I count down his ribs and probe the sharp end of the spoon between the fifth and sixth one, almost effortlessly sliding the point back, puncturing his lung. I let him flop back and then sit on my bed and wait.

It's several minutes before his breathing gets more and more laboured, and then flecks of blood start appearing on his lips. Soon, more is bubbling up into his mouth and I decide it's time to act.

Running to the door I shout through the grille at the guard stationed a few doors down.

'Quick!' I call to him. 'Something's wrong with Marn. I think he's got a pox or something, lungrot maybe.'

The guard stride over towards me, his expression full of suspicion.

'Look for yourself,' I say, backing away from the door. He shines a handlamp through the grille onto Marn, the small circle of light settling on his face and the trickle of crimson from the corner of his mouth. The guard swears and I hear him pound off across the landing. A couple of minutes pass before the clank of the elevator sounds from the shaft, followed by the rusty creaking of the guard opening the doors. It's another tense three or four minutes before the elevator returns.

'Back into the far comer, Kage,' I hear the guard order me, and I do as he says, my hands behind my back concealing the sharpened spoon.

There's a rattle of keys and the door opens. There are three guards stood there, and between them a medical orderly. He's dressed as a trustee, one of the sycophantic inmates who's got extra responsibilities by behaving himself and toadying to the governor or guards. They step inside, and the orderly bends over Marn, checking his breathing. I wait, poised to act, until the guards are looking at my dying cellmate.

Three steps and I've crossed the cell, slashing the blade across the jugular of the guard closest to me, blood fountaining through the gloom. I kick the next guard hard in the chest, hurling him against the wall, and wrap my arm around the startled trustee's throat, the point of the spoon hovering next to his right eyeball. The third freezes where he is, hand hovering over the pistol at his belt.

'One wrong move and he dies,' I snarl as the winded guard clammers to his feet, his face aghast under a thick mop of black hair.

'What the hell are you doing, Kage?' he asks quietly, his eyes straying to the corpse of his comrade.

'Back out onto the landing, meatheads,' I tell them, tightening my grip on the orderly, who squeals on cue.

'You can't go anywhere,' the dark-haired guard continues, trying to circle to my right, but I swivel on my heel, dragging the trustee with me, to keep him in view.

'I said to stay still!' I snap, ramming the spoon into the orderly's eye, who screeches briefly before collapsing. I hurl the body at the circling guard and dive at the other, who pulls his pistol free a moment before my hands close on his wrist and snap upwards, cracking open the bones in his arm. I snatch the gun from him as he collapses backwards cradling his arm and round on the remaining warden.

'Don't,' I warn him, the muzzle of the pistol aimed squarely between his eyes.

'Drop your weapons,' I say, and he does as he's told, unbuckling his belt and letting it clatter to the ground. 'Now out through the door.' I wave him on his

way, darting a glance at the guard with the broken arm, but he's slumped on the floor, whimpering. Hooking his weapons belt over my shoulder, I follow the guard on to the landing.

We make our way over to the elevator and I push him inside before swinging the doors closed behind us. Switching the pistol to my left hand to keep him covered, I crank the lever fully to the right, and the conveyor begins to rumble into motion.

Floor by agonising floor we slowly crawl our way up the centre of the tower, the progress of the elevator marked out by an illuminated dial set above the doorway. We're twenty floors short when a klaxon starts to sound out, an escape warning.

'They're onto you,' the guard says with satisfaction. 'They've got orders to kill you if you resist. Give yourself up or you'll die.'

'You won't see it,' I tell him, pulling the trigger of the pistol and blowing half his face away. As the gunshot's retort still echoes around me, the elevator creaks to a halt, and then begins to descend again. I try the lever desperately, but there must be some kind of external override. I glance around the conveyor and notice the maintenance access panel in the roof.

Ramming the pistol into my belt, I jump up and smash the panel open. Leaping again, I get a grip on the edge and pull myself on to the elevator roof. Above me, dimly lit by sparsely placed glow-globes, the shaft stretches upwards out of sight. I see the doors to other levels passing me, and walking to the edge, I look down and see light pouring from several entrances not far below me, where the guards have forced the doors open. I can't stay where I am, too much of an easy target.

There's a ladder running the length of the elevator shaft, up the wall just across a small gap. It's no big matter to grab one rung as I slowly descend, and pull myself on to it. Dragging the pistol free, I aim at the receding shape of the elevator's braking block and fire two shots. There's a hiss of hydraulic fluid spraying into the gloom, and the elevator picks up pace, accelerating down the shaft. I've been climbing for several seconds before there's an ear-shattering crash from below as the lift hits the bottom of the shaft.

I haul myself upwards as fast as I can, more light pours into the shaft from opened doors above and below me. Something ricochets off the wall next to me, accompanied by the sharp crack of a pistol. Soon more bullets are flying, tracers amongst them, some of them passing close by, others way off. The guards can't really see me, they're aiming blind. I pull myself up a few more floors, the fire pinging and screaming around me, and then pause for breath. At that moment, the door on the opposite side swings open, and I hang there face to face with two

trustees and a couple of guards.

I react first, bringing up the pistol and emptying the clip into them, punching them off their feet in a hail of bullets. The shots at me intensify from above, and I swing off the ladder into a small maintenance alcove just to my left. Crouched there, I discard the empty pistol and pull the other free from the belt, throwing that down the shaft as well.

I crouch at the edge of the alcove, and fire a few shots upwards, aiming for the rectangles of light that indicate the open doors above me. There's a scream and a guard comes toppling out, falling past me. Realising that it's only a matter of time before they get me if I stay here, I jump back on to the ladder and carry on climbing.

My shoulders and arms burn as I drag myself up rung by rung, the wounds in my back opening again and causing blood to trickle down onto my fatigues and soaking my vest. I pause occasionally to fire at the shapes of guards I see peering and shooting from the open doors above, and by keeping their heads down in this way make good progress.

I've climbed perhaps two dozen floors when the elevator chain begins to grind into action once more, so I figure the crash didn't take it out of commission permanently. I redouble my efforts, pulling myself up rung by rung, trying to outrun the approaching lift whilst also firing up at the opening above me.

More shots flare around me from below, and I glance down and see firing through the open work elevator roof, about ten storeys below me. I fire back down at them, trapped in a horrid crossfire. Swinging desperately from the ladder, I wait until the elevator is just a few floors below, before jumping off the ladder, firing down as I leap on to the roof. I land with a clang of boots and roll automatically, falling through the open maintenance hatch into the midst of the guards inside.

I fire the pistol point-blank into the gut of one and twist, bringing the butt of the pistol smashing across the face of another. I punch a third in the throat, crippling his breathing. Another already lies on the floor, holes stitched across his chest. I stand there panting as the lift grinds its way upward, taking me to the top of the tower.

Just before I reach the last level, I ram the lever into the halt position and the brakes squeal in protest before the elevator comes to a stop. Climbing out on to the lift's roof once more, I pull myself up to the doors to the roof. Now with two more pistols claimed from the guards lying dead and unconscious in the lift, I brace myself on the inside of the door, trying to detect any movement on the far side. I hear and see nothing.

I crash my shoulder against the doors and they fly open, a guard on the far

side giving a startled yelp as one of them smashes into him. I roll through the opening, arms crossed, firing the pistols to either side of me, before coming to my feet and spinning around, the guns blazing in my hands. Three more corpses litter the floor behind me as I sprint out onto the roof.

There's a massive storm raging, lightning flickers all around and thunder rolls. The wind howls across the tower, stinging my flesh and whipping up a cloud of dust and grit. Behind me I hear more shouts, and realise that there are more wardens spilling from the guardhouse. I pay no heed, and run for the edge. I'll climb down by hand if I have to.

I jump up onto the parapet that runs around the tower roof and stop. In the light of the storm, I look out over Ghovul. Far below me, the tower stretches down onto a rocky mesa. Beyond that is a flat, featureless plain. Everything is grey and rocky, with no shelter from the elements, no cover to hide in, nothing to drink from, nothing to eat, just barren rock and gravel. As far as the eye can see. Distant lightning shows me that the plain stretches on far into the distance. There are no hills, no mountains, nothing, just a massive expanse of desolation.

There's nowhere to go.

I hear shouts from behind me and shots whine past. I raise my hands above my head and let the pistols fall from my fingertips, feeling numb.

Nowhere to go, nothing to do except wait here for the Colonel.

The Colonel. As I think about him, the pain flares up inside me, the burning anger builds in my gut and chest. I clench my fists above me as the guards close in, and scream into the storm.

'Schaeffer!' I shriek. 'Come back here, you bastard!'