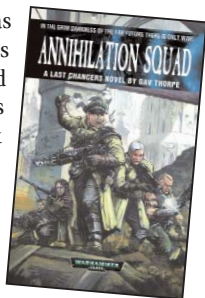


Annihilation Squad

A Last Chancers Novel

by Gav Thorpe

LIEUTENANT KAGE, CONVICT of the 13th Penal Legion and probably its longest surviving recruit, has once more come to the attention of his ruthless old commanding officer, the Colonel. Joined with a brand new team of Last Chancers, Kage is sent on a suicide mission to the war-torn planet of Armageddon to hunt down and assassinate one of the most dangerous traitors to the Imperium – former planetary overlord Herman von Strab. However, the Third Armageddon War is still raging fiercely and the Last Chancers will have to fight through orks, rebels and even the planet itself if they are to succeed in their mission.



Gav Thorpe works as Warhammer Loremaster at Games Workshop, as a member of the Key Design team. He has recently admitted that his books are ghost-written by Dennis the mechanical hamster, but had to write this one himself because Dennis ran off to spend several weeks with a young lady related to the author's girlfriend.

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from ANNIHILATION SQUAD

WARP-DREAMS

It's a dream. A nightmare, in fact. I can tell, because I know I went to sleep on my bunk as normal, wrapped in a thin grey blanket, and there's no other way I could have ended up plummeting down a chasm into a roaring inferno. But it's not really a nightmare, because I'm calm about the whole thing. I should have been terrified as I plunged down into the fiery depths, falling through smoke, my skin burning from my flesh, the flesh blowing away from my bones as ash.

It's a warp-dream, horribly real in every sensation, more life-like than life itself. Everything is sharper, clearer, more bright and focussed. Through eyeballs that have long since exploded into steam, I can see the cracks and crannies of the chasm wall, and small red eyes peering back at me through the fumes. The wind that screams into my cindered ears is sharp and loud. The flames that lick up from below, bursting forth from a river of boiling magma, are searing hot.

So why is there no pain? Why am I not afraid?

I don't feel as if I'm dying, just changing. I was once a clumsy, pain-ridden, emotional husk of a body, but now I am unfettered by its restrictions and my soul is allowed to burst free. Wings erupt from my back, and suddenly I'm soaring on the thermals, swooping and diving amongst the rising flames.

I laugh, though there is no sound. I delight in the freedom, the ease of movement as I climb upwards through the smoke and then kick my legs back and dive headfirst towards the

inferno. The heat washes over me like a soft caress; the blistering heat is like the warm touch of a lover awakening me.

It feels beautiful, and I feel beautiful to be experiencing it.

And then something shudders within me. Something casts me free in the same way that I freed my own body. It takes my wings with it and soars up out of sight, leaving me falling towards the flames.

The terror starts then. It wells up from the pit of my stomach and a scream is wrenched from my lips. My horror bursts forth in a wordless screech as the heat blisters my entire being. Unimaginable pain infuses me; every fibre of my soul suffers vibrant agony.

Perhaps this is damnation. Maybe this is the Abyssal Chaos that I am doomed to be thrown into once my mortal life is ended. To know joy, liberty, and then have it taken away as I am damned for my sins – that is true torture.

I WAKE WITH sweat coating my body. With a shuddering gasp, I take in a lungful of the warm, stale ship's air. I hate warp-dreams. This one has been plaguing me for several weeks, although it's the first time I've had the sensation of fear. Usually it ends with me soaring majestically out of the chasm and disappearing into a halo of pure light.

Reality crashes into my senses, and for a moment I feel a disassociation with everything around me. For a split second it feels like I'm watching it from behind my own eyes. And then everything feels normal again.

The bunk throbs with the vibrations that come from the ship's deck. The air is filled with a steady humming from the machinery that keeps us alive in this hostile environment. The snores and heavy breathing of the other Last Chancers accompanies the relentless droning of the ship's systems, and I sit up and listen, trying to detect some oddity, some change in the eternal harmony that would have woken me. It all sounds normal though. I thought perhaps we might have dropped from warp, after all we must be somewhere near our destination.

We've been travelling for nearly a year now. A single, long, virtually impossible warp jump. I've never heard of such a thing before, I didn't even know it was possible. Usually a ship

will jump into warp space for a short time, and then jump back into the real galaxy a week, or perhaps a month later. Ships that jump further get lost, or are destroyed. I've heard tales of ships that got caught in warp storms, only to emerge five hundred years later, their crews aged by just a few months. And I've also heard of ships that have disappeared for only a week or two, and are then found drifting, the crew nothing but ashes, the ships' logs showing that they died of old age.

Given a choice, I'd rather not travel in the warp. The strange dreams aside, it has got to be one of the most dangerous things a man can do.

But I don't have the choice, do I? I'm a soldier in the Last Chancers. Known as the 13th Penal Legion to everyone else. We're all here because we deserve to be. Each one of the thirty people sharing this chamber with me is being punished for their crimes. I murdered my sergeant because of a woman. Topasz, who lies to my left, is a thief who stole from the officers' mess of her regiment. Keiger, the bearded man to my right, hung his own squad for supposed insubordination. Looters, heretics, mass-murderers, rapists, thieves and all the other scum of the Imperial Guard end up here, doomed to spend their short lives fighting to their grisly deaths in battle.

Well, most of them are. We're different. We're Last Chancers. Our commander, the ice-hard Colonel Schaeffer, has other plans for us. We've got one mission, and that's it. It'll be tantamount to suicide, mark my words, and there are some here who'll wish that they'd chosen the firing squad or hangman's company before we see the thing through. Death is almost as certain this way as it is on the executioner's list.

But we're here because we're too good to waste. We're prime meat for the grinder that is the Emperor's wars. We're specialists, survivors, experts in our fields, and that means the Colonel has chosen to give us our Last Chance. If we finish the mission, we're free to go. Pardoned of all crimes, our souls absolved of our sins so that we might once again be part of the glorious Imperium of the Immortal Emperor of Terra.

Except me, of course. Even amongst these miscreants and frag-headed stains on humanity, I'm even more special.

I'm the Last Chancer who never got away. I'm too stubborn to die, but too mean to stay out of trouble. I'm useful for the Colonel to have around, for sure, and though I used to make his life hell and cause him no end of trouble, I've kind of got over that now. I'm just like the lifers in the other penal legions, except that by following the Colonel I'll see more fighting, more danger and more ways to end up dead than any long-serving veteran in other regiments. I had my Last Chance and I blew it. Now I have to live with it.

The lights flicker on to show that it's now morning, ship time. Obviously it's all artificial, and I swear the Colonel makes the days longer and longer so that we have to work harder. I know I did when he entrusted me with training the last squad. That didn't go so well in the end, and so although I'm still Lieutenant Kage, the rank is now more honorary than it ever was.

The others begin to wake. The chamber is filled with groaning, yawning, stretching and farting. Another day begins.

OUR DAYS START with the slop-spilling contest that passes for breakfast, and a compulsory punch-up between Kein and Glabrand over the seat nearest to the heaters. On the way out I count the cutlery, including the spoons, to make sure nobody's smuggled out anything that could be used as a weapon. It's bad enough that we give them guns to train with. Who knows what they'd do if they were let loose with a fork.

After we've all completed the cautious obstacle course that is a spin around the ablutionary block, it's back to the bunkrooms to see who's stolen what last night. Topasz has managed to acquire half a field rations pack – which nobody owns up to owning since we're not supposed to have any yet – a spare heel from a boot, two decks of playing cards and a small ball of string. After a year, everyone sleeps with their meagre valuables – the odd brooch, chain or ring – on their person or under their pillow. During the theft inspection, Goran and Venksin get into a fight, and Goran wins hands down because he's a big brute of a man. I send Venksin down to the med-bay to see if it's worth getting his ear stitched back on.

After this, and the odd argument, scuffle or backbiting comment, I lead the platoon down to the small stores room to gear up for training. Two commissariat provosts, even meaner and leaner than Navy arms men, guard the door to the armoury. They eye us through the black-tinted visors of their helmets, shotguns held across the carapace armour on their chests. Anyone would think we were a bunch of criminals that might try and take over the ship. Nobody's had that idea since Walken got his head blown off by these two about six months ago. I give them a wave. No reaction.

Behind his worn counter sits Erasmus. His bespectacled eyes peer at us across his stores ledger, his quill-skull hovers over his left shoulder. He's not the fattest man I've seen, but there's a definite softness to him, like butter that's been left out too long and is starting to melt. His small, fidgety hands play with the corners of the ledger. I notice that his nails are caked in grease, and his fingertips smeared with red ink. He smiles at me as I walk in.

'Lieutenant Kage, how are you?' he says in his thin, stammering voice. 'Wh-what'll it be today? Close quarters? Knives and bayonets? Or perhaps rifle drill? Or maybe heavy weapons training? I still have that Phassis-pattern grenade launcher for you to try out, but you're not interested in that, are you?'

Erasmus, or Munitorum Armourer-scribe Spooge as he is known officially, has a way of making every sentence a question. I have no idea how he does it, or if he's even aware of it, but it's impossible for him just to make a statement.

'Grenades and demolitions, dummies only,' I tell him and his smile turns to a pout.

'Dummies?' he says. 'No live charges? How will your men learn if they use decoys and dummies all the time? I mean, I know there was that poor business with Morgan the other week, but do you think the others will stop being so sloppy if they're using dummies?'

'PLEASE WAIT WHILE your munitions are being prepared, if you don't mind?' says Spooge.

One of the provosts opens the armoury door and I see a servitor tottering away between the racks on six skeletal,

artificial legs. Its arms have been replaced with a lifting hoist. Scraping and clanking, it works its way along the shelves, picking out crates and canisters. It loads them onto the flatbed back of another servitor, doubled up under a heavy plate. There are tracks where its legs were that grind across the grated floor. Its withered arms are bound across sagging breasts, life support tubes have been driven into its ribcage. The monotonous hissing of artificial lungs reverberates through the air. Drool hangs from its slack lips. The servitor's blank eyes look straight through us as it trundles out of the door, coming to a halt just in front of me.

'Load up,' I tell the squad, trying not to wonder who the servitor was before she was changed, or what affront against the Machine God she had committed to earn the wrath of the tech-priests.

Gearred up, we make our way back along the ship, passing through humid, pipe-filled corridors above the engine rooms to the training deck. It was a loading bay once, but as it is the largest space on the cramped ship, it was turned to a more useful purpose. Seventy-five metres long and twenty-five metres wide, it's just about big enough to be a firing range, as well as a drill square. We ripped out most of the cranes and other machinery to make more space, dumping them before we jumped into warp space. With the help of the tech-priests we kept a couple rigged up for moving heavier objects around. They're useful for days like today.

'Get the tank ready,' I say, and the squad falls out to their assignments. A year in the warp, and drill every single day, they must have done this fifty times already. Still, no soldier is happy unless there's someone shouting at them, so the three sergeants, Blurse, Candlerick and Fiakir oblige, haranguing them for being slow and sloppy as they trot down to the far end of the chamber.

The 'tank' was devised by the Colonel. Made from welded-together packing crates and bits of old machinery, it's a blocky, square replica of a real tank, complete with turret and a gun made from old cable pipe. We moved a set of rails, which had previously run into one of the side chambers, so that they stretch for three-quarters the length of the training hall. Pulled

along the rails by a loading winch, the tank can actually pick up a good speed for about twenty metres. We also have a dummy aeroplane, made of wood, thirty metres up in the overhanging gantries, which we can use to simulate an enemy strafing run.

The air in the chamber is sweaty and thick with grease as the platoon gets to work; hoisting the tank onto the rails and hitching up the winch. Almost half of the air filters on the ship have now broken down, and the air is becoming so stale it's difficult to breathe. Schaeffer, typically, sees it as part of the training. 'Good for working at altitude,' he says. I don't mind it at all; in fact it's almost welcoming. It reminds me of the rank atmosphere of the hive factories from my home on Olympus. I grew up breathing oil and stinking of sweat.

With the tank rigged up to go, the platoon falls in again. They stand to attention, to varying degrees, as I walk along the length of the lines.

'Squad one, fall out for tank operation,' I order, stepping out in front of them. 'Squad two, demolitions detail, escarpment setting.'

The two nominated squads run to their positions, while the third strolls over to the wall to watch the proceedings. On the mesh floor, we've painted outlines of different terrains – in red there is a three-way junction in an urban area, in green a clearing in a forest, and in yellow a defile through a mountain valley. All perfect sites for infantry to ambush a tank.

Sergeant Candlerick stands by the winch, looking at me for the command, while Sergeant Blurse details his squad for the mock attack, positioning them behind the outlines of rocks and in small crevasses in the 'valley' walls. I like Blurse, he's a barrel-chested man with a thick moustache, and very much a traditionalist. I cause him a few problems though, because in his experience the Imperial Guard is run by NCOs like himself, while the officers are just around to make sure everything looks nice. In his regiment, the 38th Cordorian Light Infantry, he was used to the officers just giving him the nod and expecting him to sort everything out. Then he had to go too far, and anticipate the orders of his captain one time too many, leading an attack against a traitor camp. It would have

been good if the captain had not already ordered an artillery strike a few minutes later, so that half of Blurse's platoon was blown apart by their own gunners' shells. Blurse was thrown in the brig. He carries a shrapnel scar across his chin. Despite that, he still retains an ingrained respect for the officer class. I simply don't fit into that mould. I'm vicious, dirty, cunning and I know exactly what I'm talking about. I've been in the Last Chancers for five years now. I'm perfect sergeant material as far as he's concerned, but the lieutenant's cap confuses him.

I give the signal and the winch grinds into life with a throaty growl, hauling the tank forward. Candlerick ups the gear and the tank lumbers forward quicker as it enters the 'defile' of the ambush site. Blurse gives a nod to his demo man, who rolls out in front of the tank with the dummy charge clasped against his chest. He waits for it to pass over. The magnetic charge clings to the underside of the tank as it continues, and I count for a five-second timer.

'Detonation!' I bellow and Candlerick kills the winch, bringing the tank to a halt. Within a second, the assault squad are out of their hiding places, leaping onto the immobilised tank. They tear open mock hatches and drop their fake grenades into the interior before jumping clear again.

'Emperor's teeth, what do you call that?' I shout at the squad as I stride down the hall towards them, stepping over the winch chain to march up to Blurse. 'Fall them in, sergeant!'

Blurse shouts them into line, and the ten of them stand there, looking straight ahead, avoiding my gaze. I can feel the smirks of the other two squads behind me. The bearable thing about being bawled out by an officer is watching it happen to someone else. Not me though. I turn to Fiakir's squad, lounging by the wall.

'Trooper Cardinal, what did squad two do wrong?' I ask. The man looks at me as if caught in a sniper scope; his thin smile turns to a look of horror, and sweat beads in his thinning hair.

'Sir?' he says, glancing left and right, seeking inspiration.

'Surely you realised that Trooper Dunmore exposed himself too early,' I say, referring to the Guardsman who had placed the charge.

'Yes, sir!' replies Cardinal, licking his lips nervously. 'The driver would have seen him and been able to take action, sir.'

'Don't lie to me, Cardinal!' I rage, storming back up the chamber towards him. 'Trooper Dunmore timed his attack perfectly. Suspended rations for you today, Trooper Cardinal. The rest of the squad piled in too soon. What did they forget, Fleschen?'

'I do not know, sir!' snaps the burly corporal, staring blankly ahead.

'Stupid, fat...' someone starts to mutter, but he or she falls silent as I pass my gaze along the line.

'That's a tank, in the Emperor's name, containing an engine and shells,' I say, and I see realisation dawn on the corporal.

'Secondary explosions, sir,' the corporal says. 'Squad two failed to wait and see if the charge set anything else off, sir.'

'That's right,' I say, turning and waving a finger to Blurse. 'Squad one on the winch, squad three ambushing in a town. Sergeant Fiakir, I want Trooper Cardinal on the demo charge, seeing as he's such an expert.'

AFTER FOUR MORE hours of training with the dummy tank, during which I suspend rations for another three of the platoon because they got into a fight with each other, we return the dummy charges and grenades and then retire back to the ablutions chamber to clean up for lunch.

Responsibility for cooking is shared between the three squads, with Blurse's unit on food detail today. Not that it takes much, opening packets of dried rations, boiling them in water that's been reclaimed Emperor knows how many times in the last year.

I elbow my way into a space on the cramped bench with Candlerick's squad, who are tucking into the reconstituted slop with little vigour. I spoon the gruel in without ceremony, noting that it tastes of salt and not much else. The corporal, Festal Kin-Drugg, catches my eye and I give him the nod to speak.

'I can't see how this anti-tank training will be much use, sir,' he says, waving his spoon around.

'How so?' I ask.

'Infantry support,' Festal says, putting the spoon down. 'No tank commander's going to roll into a town or forest without infantry. We would never go in with just a tank.'

I look at him for a moment, and then at the rest of the squad.

'You were a drop trooper, right?' I say and he nods. He was one of the elite first company of the 33rd Kator Gravchute Regiment, in fact. He led an unauthorised landing to loot a town behind enemy lines, after it had been abandoned in advance of an ork attack. 'Used to operating behind the lines, then?'

'Yes, I'm trained as a pathfinder,' he says with a shrug. 'What of it?'

'So you're trained in sabotage, guerrilla activity and the like, then?' I ask, and he nods again. 'What do you think we're going to be doing?'

'I don't know,' Festal says with a shake of his head. 'The Colonel hasn't breathed a word about our mission.'

'That's right,' I say, finishing off the gruel and dropping the spoon into the bowl with a clatter. 'I don't know what we're up to either, but I'd bet my life it's something secretive. Not on the frontline, where tanks and infantry move together, but behind them, on tracks and roads, waylaying convoys and such.'

'You can't know that for sure,' says Gurter, another member of the squad. 'From what you've told us, we could be doing anything. For all we know, we could be on mine clearance or something.'

'Don't talk nonsense,' says Candlerick, slapping a meaty hand on the table. 'I'm not as sharp as some here, but I know that you don't ship thirty men across the stars like this just to clear a minefield! From what Lieutenant Kage has said, we'll be up to our necks in it, and no mistaking.'

'Have you not had anything from the Colonel, no hints at all, no mention of any particular type of training?' says Festal, leaning forward to talk quietly. I lean forward and whisper in his ear.

'Nothing,' I say, sitting back. He gives me a scowl and I smile at him. 'When the Colonel wants us to know where we're going, and why we're in such a hurry, he'll tell us. I've learned not to worry about it too much. It's all the same. One way or another, we're going to be up to our necks in cack and blood, and before it's over most of us'll be dead.'

They look at me for a long moment.

'What?' I say. 'Haven't you been listening to me? You're in the Last Chancers now, and when all's said and done, we don't have much of a chance.'

'There've been survivors,' says Gurter, glancing to the table to the left where Lorii is sitting with Blurse's squad. 'We might get through this. How long have you been following the Colonel, eh?'

I follow his gaze and then look back at him, resting my elbows on the table. I steeple my fingers against my chin.

'The difference being, Trooper Gurter, is that I'm invincible,' I say. 'What have you got going for you?'

He frowns and says nothing, turning his attention to the last few scraps of gruel in his bowl. The others glance at me as I stand up and step over the bench.

'Inspection in one hour,' I remind them. 'Full kit for the Colonel, right?'

They nod and mutter as I turn away. As I walk out into the central corridor, and turn left towards the wardroom where the Colonel's made his lair, I feel a twinge of pain in the back of my head. Knowing what's coming, I quickly make my way to the ablutions chambers, closing myself in one of the small cubicles there.

The pain extends forward, growing in intensity as it reaches my eyes. It feels like my brain is on fire. The off-white walls start to blur and dance in front of me, like pale flames. My ears are filled with the thunderous beating of my heart. I fall to my knees, my senses flaring with agony, and retch into the toilet bowl.

The roar of my heart turns into a drumbeat, before rising in volume to become like the deafening pounding of an artillery barrage in my ears. I go blind for a moment. Everything turns white. I find myself back on Typhus Prime, just outside

Coritanorum. The ground is erupting around me from the orbital bombardment that paved our way into the rebel citadel. After a few seconds, I realise I'm no longer on the muddy fields of Typhus Prime, but in a grey desert, and the explosions are from bombs being dropped around me.

My whole body shudders. Part of me knows it isn't real, but my senses tell me that it's happening right now. The hallucination starts to fade, and I vomit the gruel over the floor and collapse sideways, slumping against the cubicle wall. A moment before my sight returns to normal, I see and hear something indescribable. It's a mess of confusing colours, clashing with each other amid a torrent of high-pitched screams.

I sit there for a few minutes, panting heavily. The pain subsides to a dull throb. It's happening more regularly, and it scares the hell out of me. In fact, I'm terrified of what the truth might be. The warp-dreams, Inquisitor Oriel's hints during the Brightsword assassination, the moments of instinct in combat when I seem to know what's going to happen a couple of seconds before it does. I have to face the awful fact.

I think I'm a psyker.

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