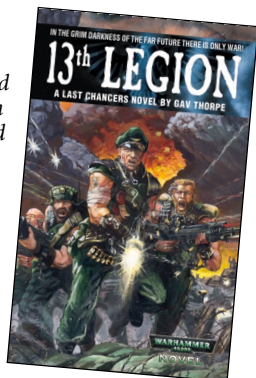


13th LEGION

A Last Chancers Novel by Gav Thorpe

GLANCING OVER MY shoulder I see that we're at the steps to the command tower now. You can follow the trail of our retreat, five dead Last Chancers lie among more than two dozen alien bodies and a swathe of shotgun cases and bolt pistol cartridges litters the floor. A few eldar manage to dart through our fusillade, almost naked except for a few pieces of bladed red armour strapped across vital body parts. Almost skipping with light steps, they duck left and right with unnatural speed. Their fierce grins show exquisitely white teeth as they close for the kill, their bright oval eyes burning with unholy passion.



ACROSS A HUNDRED blasted war-zones upon a dozen bloody worlds, the convict soldiers of the 13th Penal Legion fight a desperate battle for redemption in the eyes of the immortal Emperor. In this endless war against savage orks, merciless eldar and the insidious threat of Chaos, Lieutenant Kage and the Last Chancers must fight, not to win, but merely to survive!

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TWO FALSE HOPE

+++ Operation New Sun in place, ready for your arrival. +++

+++ Operation Harvest preparing to progress to next stage. +++

+++ Only the Insane can truly Prosper. +++

YOU COULD SAY that dropping out of warp space feels like having your body turned inside out by some giant invisible hand. You could say it's like you've been scattered into fragments and then reassembled in the real universe. You could say that your mind buzzes with images of birth and death, each flashing into your brain and then disappearing in an instant. I've heard it described like this, and many other fanciful ways, by other soldiers and travellers. You could say it was like these things, but you'd be lying, because it isn't like any of them. In fact, you hardly notice that you've dropped out of warp space at all. There's a slight pressure at the back of your mind, and then a kind of release of tension, like you've just had a stim-shot or something. You relax a little, breathe just a little more easily. Well, that's how it's always been for me, and nobody else seems to have come up with a more accurate description that I know of. Then again, maybe you don't even actually get that; perhaps it's all in your mind. I know that I'm damned well relieved every time we drop back into realspace, because it's a whole lot less dangerous than on the Otherside. Considering the outfit I'm in these days, that's saying a hell of a lot, because each drop is just a prelude to the next blood-soaked battle.

I'm standing in the upper starboard gallery, along with another two dozen Last Chancers. The row of windows to our right continues for several hundred metres. The wood-panelled wall of the inner bulkhead stretches unbroken on the other side, leaving a massive corridor thirty metres wide where we can run back and forth along its length, but without any nooks or crannies in the featureless room to hide behind. There's only one door at each end of the gallery, each protected by a squad of armymen with loaded shotcannons. Sealed, sterile, contained. Just like the Colonel wanted it. We're fortunate that we're on

exercise when the drop happens. The shutters on the massive viewing ports grind out of sight, revealing a distant blue star. We're too far away to see any worlds yet, we've still got to go in-system under ordinary plasma drives.

Poal strides up to me, sweat dripping off him from his physical exertions.

'Where are we?' he asks, wiping his forehead with the back of his good hand.

'Haven't got a fraggin' clue,' I tell him with a deep shrug. I catch the eye of the naval officer watching over us from the near end of the gallery. He walks over with a half-confident, half-nervous look. Don't ask me how he manages it but he seems to convey a sense of superiority, but the look in his eyes doesn't match it. He glances quickly to check that the armsmen are still close at hand as he stops in front of me.

'What do you want?' he demands, his lip curled as if he was talking to a pool of sick.

'Just wondering where we are,' I say to him with a pleasant smile. I'm in a good mood for some reason, most likely because we're out of warp-space, as I said before, and so I'm not up for any Navy-baiting today.

'System XV/108, that's where we are,' he replies with a smirk.

'Oh right,' says Poal, lounging an arm across my shoulder and leaning towards the naval officer. 'XV/108? That's right next to XV/109. I heard of it.'

'Have you?' the lieutenant asks, jerking himself up straight, clearly startled.

'Oh yeah,' says Poal, his voice totally deadpan, his face radiating sincerity. 'I hear that this place is Grox-country. Nothing but Grox farms as far as the eye can see. They say that folks around here are so keen on Grox they live with 'em, sleep with 'em, even have kids by 'em.'

'Really?' the lieutenant asks, his pudgy little face screwed up with genuine repulsion now.

'That's right,' Poal continues, casting a mischievous glance at me that the Navy man doesn't notice. 'In fact, looking at you, are you sure your mother wasn't a Grox and your father a lonely farmer?'

'Certainly not, my father was a-' he starts back before he actually realises what Poal's been saying. 'Damn you, penal scum! Schaeffer will hear about this insult!'

'That's *Colonel* Schaeffer to you, Grox-baby,' Poal says, suddenly serious, staring intently at the lieutenant. 'You Navy men would do well to remember it.'

'Is that right, trooper?' the lieutenant spits back, taking a step towards us. 'When the lash is taking strips off your back, you would do well to remember that it's a naval rating doing it to you!'

With that, he spins on the spot and marches off, the thick heels of his naval boots thudding loudly on the wood-panelled floor. Poal and I just burst out laughing, and I can see his shoulders tense even more. It's a couple of minutes before we can control ourselves – each time I look at Poal I can see his innocent face and the lieutenant's enraged look.

'Hasn't even got a damned name,' Poal says when he's calmed down a little, standing looking out of the nearest viewport, looking pale against the blackness of the high-arched window that stretches up at least another ten metres above his head.

'That's worrying,' I agree, stepping up beside him. 'Even the newest explored system usually gets a name, even if it's just the same as the ship or the man who found it.'

'No name, no name...' Poal mutters to himself for a moment, before turning to look at me, his hand and hook clasped behind his back like an officer or something. 'I've just had a thought. No name probably means it's a dead system, no life-bearing worlds, right?'

'Could be,' I say, though I wouldn't really know. Unlike Poal who was brought up by the Schola Progenium, my education consisted more of how to work a las-lathe and parry an axe-blow with a crowbar.

'And a dead system is just the place you'd put a penal colony...' he suggests, looking back out of the window, more interested this time.

'You think they're going to offload us?' I ask him with an incredulous look.

'Course not,' he says, still staring out of the viewport. 'But we could be getting some more men in, that'd make sense.'

'I see your point,' I say, turning and leaning back against the thick armoured glass of the port. 'It's been two and half years, and we've not had a single new member.'

'And maybe he's organising us into one big platoon to make room for the fresh faces,' Poal says, his face showing a thoughtful impression.

'Hang on, though,' I say, a sudden thought crossing my mind. 'Wouldn't it be better to have the old-timers in charge of the squads and platoons?'

'What? Have us teaching them all the tricks we've learned?' he says with a laugh. 'The Colonel knows better than that.'

We lounge around and jaw a bit more, strolling back and forth along the gallery after one of the armsmen prompts us to carry on exercising instead of loafing. We're talking about what we'd do if we ever get out of the Last Chancers when there's an interruption.

'Lieutenant Kage!' a voice barks out from behind me and I automatically stand to attention, the parade drills banged into me so hard I still can't stop myself responding to a voice with that much authority.

'Emperor damn me it's the Colonel,' hisses Poal, standing-to on my left. 'That bloody naval bastard has fragged us.'

The Colonel walks up behind us. I can hear his slow, certain steps thudding on the floor.

'Face front, guardsmen,' he says and we both spin on the spot in perfect unison, moving with instinct rather than thought.

'If it's about that naval lieutenant, sir-' I begin to excuse myself, but he cuts me off with a short, chopping motion with his hand, his gold epaulettes swaying with the motion.

'Between you and me,' he says quietly, leaning forward to look at us face-to-face, 'I do not care what the Imperial Navy thinks of you. It could not be any worse than what I think of you.'

We stand there in silence for a moment as he glances sharply at both of us. Clearing his throat with a short cough he stands up straight again.

'Kage,' he tells me, looking past at the other Last Chancers in the gallery, 'you will be escorted to my chambers after exercise to receive briefing about our next mission.'

'Yes, sir!' I snap back, keeping my face neutral, even though inside I feel like dropping to the deck and beating my head against the wooden planks. The relaxation I've felt in the past hour after dropping from the warp disappears totally and tension seeps into my muscles and bones again. So we're here to fight again. No new recruits, no fresh blood. Just here to fight in some other bloody war. To die, perhaps. Well, that's the life of a Last Chancer. It's all there is left for us.

THE ARMSMAN TAPS politely at the panelled and lacquered door, before opening it inwards and waving me inside with the muzzle of his shotcannon. I step inside, as I've done a dozen times before, and stand to attention, my polished boots sinking into the thick carpet. Behind me I hear the door close and the ring of the armsman's boots standing to attention on the corridor decking.

The Colonel glances up from behind his massive desk and then looks back at the data-slate before him, immediately seeming to forget my presence. He presses his thumb to an identification slate on the side of the data-slate and it makes a whirring noise, which I recognise as the 'erase' function operating. He places the device carefully on the desk in front of him, lying it parallel to the edge closest to me, before looking in my direction again.

'At ease,' he tells me as he stands up and begins to pace up and down behind his high-backed chair for a few moments, hands clasped behind his back. It's then that I realise this was the pose Poal was imitating earlier and I fight hard to hold back a smirk. He stops walking and looks at me sharply and I gulp, thinking for a second that he can read my mind.

'Tyranids, Kage,' he says obtusely, pacing back and forth again, turning his gaze downwards once more.

'What... what about them, sir?' I ask after a moment, realising he was waiting for me to say something.

'Some of them may be in this system,' he tells me, still not looking at me, but from his posture I can tell that somehow every sense he has is still directed towards me.

'So there's probably nothing left for us to do,' I say boldly, hoping that perhaps we'd arrived too late, that for once we'd missed the battle.

'That may be the case, Kage,' he says slowly, stopping now to look directly at me. 'We are here to ascertain why communication with our outpost on the third world has been lost. We suspect that a small scouting fleet from Kraken was heading this way.'

As he turns to his desk to pick up a transparent copy of a terminal readout, I wonder who 'we' was meant to include. As far as I know, we're a bit of a rogue element really, bouncing about across this part of the galaxy and dropping in on any wars we happen to come across. I've not heard anything about who the Colonel's superiors might be, if he has any at all.

'Do you remember the first battle of these Last Chancers?' he asks suddenly, sitting down again, more relaxed than he was a moment before.

'Of course, sir,' I reply immediately, wondering what he meant by 'these Last Chancers'. 'I could never forget Ichar IV. I wish I could, and I've tried, but I'll never forget it.'

He replies with a non-committal grunt and proffers me the transparency. It's covered in lines and circles, and I recognise it as some kind of star chart. There are tiny runes inscribed against crosses drawn in a line that arcs from one end to the other, but it might as well be written in Harangarian for all that I can understand it. I give the Colonel a blank look and he realises I haven't got a clue what I'm holding.

'It seems that defending Ichar IV was not necessarily the best plan in the world,' he says heavily, tugging the readout from my fingers and placing it in a vellum-covered envelope in the centre of his desk.

'Saving a hundred and ninety billion people was a bad plan, sir?' I ask, amazed at what the Colonel is implying.

'If by doing so we cause five hundred billion people to die, then yes,' he says giving me a stern look, a warning not to continue my train of thought.

'Five hundred billion, sir?' I ask, totally confused and unsure what the Colonel is talking about.

'When we broke the tyranid fleet attacking Ichar IV, much of it was not destroyed,' he tells me, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the polished marble of the desk, his black-gloved hands clasped in front of him. 'That part of Hive Fleet Kraken was simply shattered. Much of it we managed to locate and destroy while the tyranids were still reeling from their defeat. However, we believe a sizeable proportion of the survivors that attacked Ichar IV coalesced into a new fleet, heading in a different direction. It is impossible to say exactly where they are heading, but reports from monitoring stations and patrol vessels indicate that its course might lead straight into the heart of the sector we are now in – the Typhon sector. If we had let them have Ichar IV, we might have mustered more of a defence and destroyed the tyranids utterly rather than scattering them to hell and back where we cannot find them and it is impossible to track them down until too late.'

'So instead of losing a planet, we could lose the whole of Typhon sector?' I ask, finally catching on to what the Colonel is implying. 'That's where five hundred billion people might die?'

'Now do you see why it is important that we know exactly where this hive fleet is heading?' he asks, an earnest look on his bony face.

'I certainly do, sir,' I reply, my head reeling with the thought of what could happen. It's so many people you can't picture it. It's far more than a hive, more than an entire hive world. Five hundred billion people, all of them devoured by hideous, unfeeling aliens if the tyranids couldn't be stopped.

THE DREAM'S SLIGHTLY different this time: we're defending one of our own factories, against shapeless green men I've never seen before. They hiss and cackle at me as they charge, their vaguely humanoid bodies shifting and changing, covered with what look like scales.

A sound close by pulls me from my sleep and I glimpse a shadow over me. Before I can do anything something heavy falls on my face and pushes down over my mouth and nose, stifling me. I lash out, but my fist connects with thin air and something hard rams into my gut, expelling what little air is in my lungs. I flail around helplessly for another second; I can hear the other man panting hard, feel the warmth of his body on top of me. The cloth on my face smells rank with old sweat, making me want to gag even more.

Suddenly the weight lifts off me and I hear a shrill titter and gasp. I throw off the thing on my face, noting it's a shirt, and I glance up to see Rollis. Behind him is Kronin, a sock wrapped around the traitor's throat, a knot in it to press hard against his windpipe. The ex-lieutenant giggles again.

'And vengeance shall be the Emperor's, said Saint Taphistis,' Kronin laughs, wrenching harder on the improvised garrote and pulling Rollis backwards onto the decking. Kronin leans over Rollis's shoulder, twisting the sock tighter, and bites his ear, blood dribbling onto his chin and down Rollis's neck as he looks up and grins at me. Rollis's face is going blue now, his eyes bulging under his heavy-set brow. I clamber to my feet, unsteady, my head still light from being choked.

'Let him go, Kronin,' I say, taking a shaky step towards them. Killing Rollis like this will just get Kronin executed, and me as

well probably. The Colonel's ordered it before; he won't hesitate to do it again.

'And the Emperor's thanks for those who had been bountiful in their gifts would be eternal,' he replies, a plaintive look on his narrow face, licking the blood from his lips.

'Do it,' I say quietly. With another pleading look, Kronin lets go and Rollis slumps to the deck, panting and clutching his throat. I put a foot against his chest and roll him over, pinning his unresisting body to the floor. I lean forward, crossing my arms and resting them on my knee, putting more weight onto his laboured chest.

'You haven't suffered for your crimes enough yet, it's too soon for you to die,' I hiss at him. 'And when you do, I'm going to be the one that does it.'

Kage's struggle to survive continues in 13th LEGION.

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