

The cover art depicts a dramatic battle scene. In the center, a Space Marine in dark, ornate armor stands atop a pile of skeletal remains, holding a chainsword and a pistol. To his left, a Necron in its characteristic yellow and black armor is engaged in combat. The background is a dark, smoky, and chaotic environment with various monstrous creatures and skeletal structures. The overall tone is dark and intense.

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# THE GREATER GOOD

## Sandy Mitchell

When the world of Quadravidia comes under attack by the insidious tau, only one man can defeat the aliens and save the planet in the Emperor's name: the legendary Hero of the Imperium, Commissar Ciaphas Cain. When the aliens call for a ceasefire, Cain expects the worst, and his fears are answered in the form of the dread menace of the tyranids. As a hive fleet approaches Quadravidia, Cain must try to forge an alliance between the Imperium and the tau – but can he truly trust the inscrutable xenos?



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandy Mitchell is a pseudonym of Alex Stewart, who has been writing successfully under both names since the mid 1980s. As Sandy, he's best known for his work for the Black Library, particularly the Ciaphas Cain series. He's recently finished an MA in Screenwriting at the London College of Communication, which left far less time than usual for having fun in the 41st Millennium, and is looking forward to spending more time in the Emperor's service now that it has concluded.

*The Greater Good* can be purchased direct from this website and GW mail order, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, and better bookstores.

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'JURGEN!' I CALLED. 'Where are you?'

'Over here, sir.' My aide rolled to a sitting position, half hidden in the shadow of a wall a dozen metres away, and tried to haul himself upright, one hand pressed to the side of his head. 'I'll be right... right with...' Then his knees folded, and he slithered back down on his haunches. A dark stain was visible beneath his fingers, which admittedly was nothing new, but this one was spreading slowly; had it not been for his helmet, the impact of landing would probably have crushed his skull.

'Stay down!' I called to him, as though either of us had any choice in the matter. 'Just got to see off this pile of unsanctified scrap, then we'll get you to the medicae.' And right after that, I added under my breath, the necrons will take up flower arranging. I tapped where my comm-bead should have been, hoping to summon help, but just got an earful of finger for my pains; somewhere along the way the tiny vox-unit and I had parted company. We were on our own.

The tau battlesuit stepped back off the mashed remains of the expiring Salamander with one foot, leaving the other where it was, looking for all the world like a beast-hunter with a trophy, posing for a pict. Its head turned, scanning the yard, and I looked round frantically for some vestige of cover, only to find there wasn't one. I was surrounded by nothing but bare rockcrete, a sitting target.

I scabbled for my sidearms, feeling better for the weight of the chainsword in my hand, even though against the heavily armoured battlesuit it would be worse than useless. Then the acrid odour of spilled promethium scratched my nostrils, and a desperate idea began to blossom, fertilised by panic. The laspistol in my other hand would barely scratch the thing's paint, but...

The looming figure raised an arm, a vicious-looking rotary cannon swinging towards me; even a single round from it would be enough to vaporise me where I stood. With no more time to think, I pulled the laspistol's trigger.

My aim was true, the las-bolt sparking off the sundered metal of the Salamander, although by this time there was so much promethium vapour in the air it hardly mattered where the round impacted. It detonated at once, a fireball boiling out from the wreck in all directions, close enough to shrivel my eyebrows. A wall of furnace heat arrived with the shockwave, slamming me back to the ground and sending my chainsword skittering off into the shadows. I hung on to the laspistol though, the augmetic fingers on my right hand slower to relinquish their grip, for which I was suitably grateful.

For a moment I dared to hope that my desperate gamble had paid off and that the battlesuit had been immolated in the explosion or, at the very least, damaged enough to discourage the pilot from pursuing us. But of course I'd reckoned without the jump jets. They kicked in at once, allowing the huge machine to ride the shockwave in a

single balletic leap, with no more ill effects than a faint charring around the ankles.

I clambered to my feet once more, only to stagger again as the battlesuit crashed back to earth. This time I remained standing, however, my footing rendered no more unstable than during a typical drive with Jurgen, as the armoured giant plodded relentlessly towards me, shaking the ground with every stride. Raising my laspistol, I sent a desperate couple of ricochets bouncing off its torso plates, but didn't even manage to slow the thing.

Then, by the light of the burning Salamander, I finally saw a way out of the trap, a second loading door further down the wall of the warehouse, this time at ground level. Without another thought I sprinted for it; but before I could get anywhere close the corrugated metal sheet bulged and tore, ripped aside by another of the towering machines as though it was no more substantial than a curtain. It too began to plod unhurriedly towards me, and I retreated a few paces, firing as I went, but for all the effect I was having I might just as well have been throwing feathers at it. After a dozen or so steps I stumbled against something yielding and almost fell, being brought up short by the stout masonry wall behind it as a familiar odour assaulted my nostrils.

'Run for it, sir. Don't mind me,' Jurgen slurred, already halfway to unconsciousness.

'Not an option,' I assured him, certain that by now escape was impossible. I raised my hands, and let the laspistol drop to the rockcrete. Perhaps they wouldn't just gun us down out of hand, if they thought we were harmless. At least we weren't dealing with vicious brutes like the orks, or refined sadists like the eldar reavers, in whose hands we'd be far better off dead anyway.

Then the targeting beam swept my face again, and I flinched, cursing, wishing I'd chosen to go down fighting after all. At least that would have left me with the illusion of possible escape right up to the end, instead of the crushing certainty of imminent ignominious butchery. I braced myself, hoping the Emperor would be in a good mood when I arrived at the Golden Throne, or at least willing to listen to excuses.

'You are commissar hero Ciaphas Cain?' a voice asked, in halting Gothic, the curious lisping accent of the tau amplified by an external vox-system somewhere on the battlesuit facing me.

'I am,' I said, fighting to keep a sudden flare of hope from inflecting my voice. If they wanted to talk, they weren't going to pull the trigger right away, although I was damned if I could see that we had anything to discuss. 'And you are?'

'Ui-Thiching, of the shas'ui ka'sui<sup>1</sup>. In the name of the Greater Good, we ask of you to convey a message to your fellows.'

Better and better. They clearly weren't about to shoot the messenger; I just had to hope Braddick didn't either<sup>2</sup>.

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1. Literally 'battlesuit unit fortuitous gale,' no doubt one of the semi-formal honourific titles tau units acquire to commemorate notable successes on the battlefield.

2. Completely impossible, of course, as Imperial Guard officers, however senior, don't have the authority to execute a commissar; although I suppose Cain can be forgiven the impulse to indulge in some obvious wordplay.

'What message would that be?' I asked, not wanting to seem too eager. For all I knew they were recording this and the last thing I needed was to be accused of collaborating with the enemy to save my own neck.

'We wish the negotiation of a truce,' the tau told me, as though that were the most reasonable thing in the galaxy, just as they were about to snatch the entire planet out from under us regardless.

'A truce?' I repeated, not entirely willing to trust my own ears. 'Are you sure?'

'Completely,' the amplified voice assured me. 'Hostilities must cease at once on this world. The Greater Good demands it. For both our empires.'