

In Harmony Restored

By Andy Clark

Formidis Primehive burned. It rang with the cacophony of war. The ground shook until shattered glass jingled and rubble danced. Lasguns screamed and autoguns rattled out their staccato warcries. Artillery sent rhythmic thumps and booms echoing between the tall flanks of ruined hab-blocks, as though along man-made canyons. Smoke filled the air, billowing through the district's rubble-strewn streets from the blazing wrecks of groundcars and blasted mining vehicles.

Yave cradled his pulse carbine and made himself small behind the cratered remains of a drywall. The T'au gun was a reassuring presence in his hands. It was obviously and infinitely superior to any Imperial technology that Yave had used during what he thought of as his old life. It hummed quietly to him, its machine spirit calm and harmonious, so unlike the belligerent ghosts within Imperial machines.

'Oh, but you can be wrathful when you must, can't you?' he whispered to it. *Just like the T'au themselves*, he thought, *not peaceable cowards, but not murderous, wasteful zealots either. They won't shy from fighting, but their first recourse is always words, and when they kill it is for the Greater Good.*

The thought centred him further, filling Yave with the sense that he was fighting for righteous masters and a righteous cause. That was good, he supposed, because today it seemed likely he was going to die for them.

'Fire Team Seven, report,' came the voice of Gue'ui Shenna, his fire team commander, in his ear. She spoke through the small, smooth vox earpieces that Yave and all his team wore; another T'au technology, again far superior to the lumpen vox sets relied upon by the Emperor's soldiery.

'Seven-three here,' came Nauri's reply through the bead.

'Seven-five reporting,' said Tuller.

'Seven-eight here,' Yave added in a low voice. He didn't know how close the enemy might be and had no desire to give himself away.

Several seconds of vox silence followed Yave's words, and his heart sank further. Only four of them left now that the rout was done. Worse than he'd feared. From the oath she breathed before speaking, Shenna felt the same.

'We commend the souls of our fallen to the care of the Greater Good. In death may they enjoy the harmony we all are denied in life,' she said, reverently, then her tone hardened as she pressed on. 'Does anyone have eyes on the enemy? Did they follow us?'

'I don't think so, they were still busy with the Genestealer Cultists,' said Tuller, sounding disgusted. Yave knew how the big man felt; this war had been hard enough when it was just the Imperials they had to worry about. When the Genestealer Cult rose up from the mines and sewers, they had plunged Formidis into absolute anarchy, and the neatly ordered plans of the planet's Gue'vesa liberators had collapsed. The only consolation, as far as Yave could see, was that the sudden uprising had given the Imperials as much trouble as the Gue'vesa.

They have the numbers to plough on regardless though, he thought, sourly. *Not to mention that stringent willingness to feed men and women into the meatgrinder until victory's won.* Such mindless slaughter wasn't the T'au Empire's way. Thus, neither was it the way of the Gue'vesa. Still, all the guerilla tactics, feigned retreats and sudden ambushes in the Empire didn't look likely to win them the war for Formidis.

'You see the burned out groundcar by the corner of Herald's Way and the Thoroughfare Angelic?' asked Shenna. The survivors of her fire team confirmed that they did. 'Rally on that point,' she said, and Yave felt a faint stir of hope at the determination in Shenna's voice. It was banished a second later as combat aircraft shot overhead, fast and low, and left a rippling string of detonations in their wake. Fire rose beyond the ruins in a nearby street. Human voices screamed in terror and pain, and Yave had no idea whose side they were on.

Heart thumping, he forced himself to lunge out from his meagre cover and run, doubled over, through the remains of whatever home or business this had once been. It was so blackened and blasted that he couldn't tell. Rubble, glass and bone crunched under his boots. Drifting smoke turned his breath ragged and wheezing as he ran. Yave clutched his T'au gun tighter. He expected at any moment to feel the sharp burn of a lasbolt hitting him, or to be smashed from his feet by the pummelling impacts of autogun fire.

Neither came. Instead, Yave slid into the shadow of the wreck and was swiftly joined by the last few

members of his fire team. Nauri, sleight and wiry, was formerly a duct cleanser from the midhive guilds. Tuller had been a manufactorum labourer from Smetler's Falls, until he heard the message of the Greater Good. Shenna was stern-faced, short-haired and still boasting the granite-hewn build that life in the planetary defence militia had given her. They all held T'au guns. They were all scorched and bloodied. They all looked scared, but fiercely determined.

'I've heard from Fire Team Four and Fire Team Two,' said Shenna, and Yave's chest unhitched slightly. The thought that they might be facing this alone had frightened him badly. 'They've rallied in the aqua processor shrine just north of here. Lighter casualties than us.'

'Not difficult,' said Nauri, expression grim.

'I've also had word from Shaper Kan'Ghok,' said Shenna, a note of savage satisfaction creeping into her voice. 'He and his entire tribe are pushing up from sector eighteen.'

'Kroot! That'll put the fear of the T'au Va into these bastards,' said Yave, feeling a vicious delight of his own. The ferocious and cannibalistic Kroot repulsed him, or at least the ignorant Imperial part of him that even years in service of the Greater Good couldn't wholly expunge. Still, so long as the aliens were tearing the enemy apart rather than him, then Yave was more than happy to call them allies.

'Not unless we can hold the Imperial push long enough,' Shenna replied. 'Spotter drones confirm multiple armour squadrons amongst the Vostroyan advance, and if they make the Triumphal Way before Kan'Ghok can get his tribe across it, they'll turn the place into a shooting gallery.'

'How do we stop tanks?' asked Tuller.

'The drones have identified weak points in the armour seals at the rear of their turrets and engine shrines. Pulse rounds should punch through with enough persistence,' said Shenna, unslinging a heavy canvas pack from her shoulder. 'Also, there's these.' Carefully, almost reverently, she spilled a small cluster of orb-like devices from the pack. Each was the size of a Human fist.

'Electromags. Spirit banishers,' said Nauri, wide-eyed with recognition.

'That's right, and we don't have many so for the love of the Greater Good don't waste them,' replied Shenna, as she rationed out the T'au grenades. Yave attached his three electromagnetic pulse grenades to his belt with the same care he'd once taken handling his machine-stamped triptych of the Emperor, the Primarch and the High Lords.

'Not just us handling them either, is it?' Yave said, as a fresh squall of gunfire erupted from the neighbouring streets. He heard harsh voices bellowing wild slogans as explosives crumped, and automatic weapons thundered.

'Down with the Imperial oppressors!'

'Slay the unbelievers!'

'The Star Children are watching! Ascension is at hand!'

'Those deluded lunatics might actually be of use for once,' said Shenna. 'They can shout about their heretical gods all they want, so long as their guns do the work of the Greater Good. Now let's go. Yave, you're point. Get into the ground floor of that hab-block and find us a solid firing position that we can flank the Vostroyans from.'

Yave saluted and set out at a jog, hearing the scuff and clink of his surviving comrades as they followed close behind.

Into the smokey shadows of the bombed-out hab, through blasted sleep cells and the burned out remains of communal rooms, Yave ignored the sprawled bodies and bone white grins of skulls. He ignored the sick thump of his heart and the ashen dryness in his mouth, praying fervently to the Greater Good as he pushed down his instincts and ran towards the sound of ferocious gunfire that grew louder by the moment.

He reached the front of the building and found it half-collapsed. Daylight and firelight blended into red-gold bands that swirled with smoke where they cut through the gloom. Yave ducked in behind the fallen and decapitated statue of Saint Truculus the Unwilling, and got his first proper look at the fighting in the street beyond.

Hard to believe that an hour ago our defence line had a firm hold of this sector, he thought. The blasted

remains of the Gue'vesa defensive positions were still visible amongst the rubble and ruin, as were the strewn bodies of those who had sought to hold them. They had put up a fierce fight against the Vostroyan advance elements, but when the Genestealer Cultists had emerged unexpectedly from sector twelve, the Gue'vesa had found themselves pincered between the stolid, well-equipped Vostroyans, and the rugged mining vehicles and mutant fanatics of the cults. The results had been as predictable as they had been bloody.

The Greater Good can still prevail, thought Yave, as he watched fur-hatted Imperial Guardsmen pouring las-bolts and heavy weapons fire into the advancing Genestealer Cultists. Mining trucks exploded as they were pierced by missiles or raddled with armour-killing shells. Demolition charges and the beams of mining lasers answered, hurling loyalist bodies through the air and reducing ever more Vostroyans to corpses.

As his ears caught the bowel loosening rumble and squeal of advancing tanks, Yave turned to stare down the street. Even as the first Lemman Russ hove into sight through the smoke, it fired its main gun. The shell whipped down the street, leaving coiling trails in the smoke behind it. It bit deep into the hull of an armoured prospecting buggy, then detonated. The vehicle's torn remains cartwheeled through the air and crashed into the ruins, close enough to make Yave hiss with fear.

More tanks were moving up now, grinding over rubble and bodies, rendering all beneath their tremendous weight to pulp. Moustachioed commanders leaned from their turret hatches, pointing and yelling orders as they eyeballed their targets. More thumping booms, more whistling shells and fiery blasts, and now the tanks' heavy bolters were opening up too, with a relentless chug that shook Yave's lungs.

'Oh throne,' he breathed, forgetting himself. A quick, guilty glance revealed that his three comrades looked as horrified as he, and had fortunately missed his slip of the tongue. Old habits died hard.

The Genestealer Cultists should have been withering before the firestorm. Instead, they redoubled their efforts. Missiles flew from shoulder launchers and suicidal cultists hurled mining charges at the tanks, before bolt shells turned them to red mist. Explosions rocked the battle tanks, shredding the right track from one and setting another ablaze.

Still they came on.

'Enfilading fire, now, now, now!' shouted Shenna, as the tanks drew near. Yave forced his mind to unlock and his limbs to work. He raised his carbine, sighting as best he could on what he thought might be welding seams on the turret of the nearest tank. The pulse carbine sang as he fired it, each devastating bolt of energy leaving the gun without the slightest recoil or heat. The shots flew true despite Yave's fear, but though they would have cored out a Space Marine's chest cavity, the pulse rounds only splashed from the Lemman Russ' armour with harmless futility.

The others joined him, their fusillade forcing the tank's commander to duck back into his vehicle with a cry of alarm. Tuller hurled an electromag and it discharged with a thrumming crackle that sent lightning spirits dancing across the tank's hull. More pulse fire was whipping down from somewhere above, the other fire teams adding their strength to the attack.

A Lemman Russ shuddered to a halt, smoke spilling from its engine shrine, while another's hull gun cut out in a shower of sparks. Yet, to his horror, Yave realised that all the combined fury of the Gue'vesa and the Genestealer Cultists was only slowing, not stopping these armoured behemoths.

One tank rotated its turret, shots sparking from its armour as it elevated its barrel. The vehicle bucked as the gun spoke. Yave didn't see where the shell hit, but the hail of pulse fire slackened suddenly and horribly. He would have felt more sorrow for the deaths amongst the other fire teams, except that the nearest tank was traversing its sponson heavy bolter directly towards his own.

'Down! In the name of the Greater G-'

Fire exploded and Yave's entire body clenched with the expectation of death. Again, it didn't come. It took his bewildered mind a moment to process the fact that it was the Lemman Russ that had been blasted suddenly and violently apart, and not he and his fire team. Yave blinked stupidly, then gasped in amazement as he heard the distinctive whip-crack of railgun fire. Another tank jerked then detonated, the blue afterimage of a railgun round piercing it through and through.

'The T'au! The T'au have come!' cried Nauri, jubilant. As another tank detonated, a voice came through Yave's earpiece, and a glance at his comrades showed him that they were all hearing it too. The voice spoke Human words with the hard, slightly halting cadence of the Fire Caste, but its message was unmistakable.

'In the name of the Greater Good, all alien auxiliary forces advance and present yourselves. The Sa'cea Sept are here to end your struggle in the name of the Greater Good. Advance and present yourselves.'

Nauri was already up and running for the street, firing her pulse carbine into the retreating shapes of panicking Vostroyans. Yave followed her, Shenna and Tuller keeping pace. As he emerged into the open, the smoke whirled and blew away in rolling banks, thrust aside by the downdraught of powerful engines. He looked up in awe as the silhouettes of three immense Manta Missile Destroyers bellied in low and rained repelling fire upon Genestealer Cult and Imperial forces alike. Swarms of micro-missiles burned through the air and detonated in pinpoint clusters. Battlesuits descended on blurts of jet propulsion, their Fire Caste pilots guiding them in to land with metallic clangs and the whine of powerful servos.

'For the Greater Good, we fight for the Greater Good!' cried Nauri.

That was when they shot her.

The laser blasts came so suddenly that Yave was still processing what he'd seen when the battlesuit swung its gatling laser and scythed more shots through Tuller. The big man went down, half his head missing, his blood misting the air.

'No! No we're Gue'vesa! Gue'vesa!' cried Shenna, her expression crumpling from elation to horror even as Yave cried out in dismay. Shenna brandished her gun as proof, but the only answer she received was the blast of the battlesuit's flamer. Yave reeled back as his fire team leader and friend of almost five years transformed into a raging torch before his eyes.

His mind screamed in bewildered protest.

He tried and failed to understand what was happening.

Had this battlesuit pilot gone mad? Had the enemy done something to the sacred T'au technology, some insidious haunting that allowed them to control the suit from without?

Yet no, as he staggered and stared around he could see more T'au firing upon shocked Gue'vesa as they emerged from cover. Nearby, he heard the crack of Kroot rifles and the alien mercenaries' harsh shrieks as their former allies butchered them.

Shaking his head, tears squeezing from the corners of his eyes, Yave dropped his gun and stared in

bewildered terror at the battlesuit as it stalked towards him.

'Why?' he sobbed. 'What did we do?'

'The Greater Good is sullied by your superstition,' came the pilot's harsh voice through his battlesuit's emitters. 'You must be purged that it might be cleansed.'

Purged, thought Yave, in abject horror. *Cleansed*.

He had heard words like that before, but never from the T'au.

When they kill, it is for the Greater Good, he thought again, trying and failing to understand.

It was his last thought before the battlesuit's guns let fly, and he joined his fallen comrades in the harmony of the Greater Good.

