

A SANCTUARY OF WYRMS



P E T E R F E H E R V A R I

WARHAMMER
40,000

A SANCTUARY OF WYRMS

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-BEGIN RECORDING-

We walk blindly along a knife-edge slicing into oblivion. If we misstep we fall from our path. If we walk true we fall with our path. Perhaps there is a difference, but I have come to doubt it. Nevertheless, I will honour the Greater Good and allow you to draw your own conclusions from the facts.

I have little time, but even in extremis one must observe the correct protocols. That is what it means to be a tau amongst savages. Whatever else I have lost to this diseased planet, I will not lose that. Therefore know that I am Por'ui Vior'la Asharil, third-stream daughter of Clan Kherai. Though I hail from a Sept of worlds where the wisdom of the water caste is eclipsed by the ferocity of the fire caste, my family has served the Tau Empire with grace since the dawn of the first colonies. As I serve with this, my final account.

And so I shall offer you a beginning. Let it be the grey-green murk that is the perennial stuff of Fi'draah, my new world. As I stepped from my shuttle the planet seized me in a stinking, sweltering embrace and wouldn't let go. Blinking and choking in the smog, I heard harsh voices and harsher laughter; then someone thrust a filtrator mask over my face and I could breathe again.

'The first time is like drowning,' my saviour said. 'It gets better.'

I don't recall who the speaker was, but he lied: breathing this world never got any better.

'You have evidently made powerful enemies for one so young, Asharil,' the ambassador said without preamble, peering down from the cushioned pulpit of his hovering throne drone. His voice was soft, yet vibrant. It filled the spacious audience chamber like liquid silk, the weapon of a master orator. His summons had followed directly upon my arrival and I was mortified by my dishevelled state.

'I do not understand, honoured one,' I blustered, stumbling between respect and revulsion for the ancient who presided over our forces on this remote planet. O'Seishin's authority was a testament to the excellence of our caste, but he reeked of years beyond the natural span of the tau race. His flesh had aged to deep cobalt leather, barely concealing the harsh planes of his skull, but his eyes were bright.

'This is a terminal world,' he continued, 'a graveyard for broken warriors and forgotten relics like myself, not a proving ground for the hot blood of youth. Who did you offend to get yourself posted here, Asharil?' He smiled, but his eyes belied it.

'I walk the water path,' I answered, seeking the natural poise of our caste. 'My blood runs cool and silent, so that my voice may weave—' O'Seishin's snort cut me short like a physical blow.

'I am too old for wordplay, girl!' He leaned forwards and a strand of spittle escaped his lips. 'Why have you come to Fi'draah? Who sent you?'

'Honoured one...' I stammered, struggling to avert my gaze from the lethargic descent of his drool. 'Your pardon, but I requested this posting. I have made a study of the language and customs of the *humans*' – I deliberately used the gue'la word for themselves – 'and Fi'draah offers most excellent opportunities to deepen my insight.'

He appraised me with a distrust so candid it was almost conspiratorial, as if we were both willing players in a game of lies. A game that he was used to winning...

'So you wish to test yourself in the field, Asharil?' He smiled again and this time I saw humour there, though no humour I cared to share. 'Then I shall not deny you. Indeed, I believe I have a most suitable commission for you.'

I will never know why O'Seishin became my enemy in that one brief meeting, but he proved to be the least of the blights awaiting me on this world.

Of the long conflict between the Tau Empire and the gue'la Imperium for mastery of Fi'draah I shall not speak. Mysteries shroud the war like whispering smoke, but I learned little of them before O'Seishin dispatched me to oblivion. Of the planet itself I could say much, for I travelled its wilderness for almost five months, but I will content myself with a single truth: whatever you are told in your orientation, it will not prepare you for the reality of this place. To classify Fi'draah as a 'jungle world' or a 'water world' is to garb a corpse in finery and call it beautiful. Eighty per cent of its surface is drowned in viscid, lethargic oceans that blend into the sky in a perpetual cycle of evaporation and drizzle, wreathing everything in a grey-green miasma that seeps into the flesh and spirit. The continents are ragged tangles of mega-coral choked with vegetation that looks – and smells – like it has been dredged up from the depths. Stunted trees with fleshy trunks and bladder-like fronds vie with drooping tenements of fungi and titanic anemone clusters, everything strangling or straddling or simply growing upon everything else – fecundity racing decay so fast you can almost see it.

Whether Sector O-31 is the worst of Fi'draah's territories I cannot say, but it must surely rank amongst them. The gue'la call it *'the Coil'*, a name infinitely more fitting than our own sober designation, for there is nothing remotely sober about that malign wilderness. A serpentine spiral of waterlogged jungles, it is the dark heartland of Fi'draah's largest, most untamed continent. The war has left it almost untouched, but rumours haunt it like bad memories: of regiments swallowed whole before they could clash... Of lost patrols still fighting older wars than ours... And of ancient things sleeping beneath the waters...

Naturally, I dismissed such nonsense. My task was to cast the light of reason across this enigma and 'unravel the Coil' (as O'Seishin so artfully sold it). I was to accompany Fio'vere Mutekh, a distinguished cartographer of the earth caste on his quest to map the region. Fool that I was, I believed myself honoured! It was only later, when I saw how the Coil twisted in upon itself, that I realised the absurdity of our endeavour. I have often wondered whether O'Seishin is still laughing at me.

It says much about the nature of the earth caste that Mutekh approached his impossible assignment without rancour. A robust tau in his autumn cycle, he had a pompous manner that exasperated me, but he was utterly rigorous in his work. His assistant, Xanti, was a placid *autaku* (or data tech) who spoke rarely and never met my gaze. I believe he preferred the company of his neo-sentient data drone to his fellow tau.

The fourth and final person of note was our protector and guide, Shas'ui Jhi'kaara. A fire warrior and veteran of Fi'draah, she regarded the jungle with the tender distrust of a predator who knows it is also prey, and like many alpha predators she commanded her own pack: a dozen gue'la janissaries equipped with flak-plate and pulse carbines. They were all Imperial deserters, lured from the enemy by the promise of better rations rather than ideology, and despite the trappings of our civilisation they remained barbarians. Every night they gambled, quarrelled and brawled amongst themselves, but never in Jhi'kaara's presence. Had they known I spoke their native tongue they would have guarded their words more closely. Listening in on their crude passions and superstitions, I marvelled that their stunted species had ever

reached the stars.

Together we entered the Coil: earth, water, fire... and mud, travelling its strange waterways in a pair of aging Devilfish hover transports. Every few days Mutekh would spot a 'notable feature' and call a halt. Then we would spend an eternity recording some obscure geological phenomenon or ancient indigene ruin. As the cartographer updated his maps and the janissaries patrolled, the jungle would press in, watching us with a thousand hungry eyes that belonged to a single beast.

'It hates us,' Jhi'kaara said once, surprising me as I stared back at the beast. 'But it welcomes us in the expectation that we will grow careless.'

'It is just a jungle, Shas'ui,' I said, squaring up to the warrior. 'It has no thoughts.'

'You are lying, waterkin,' Jhi'kaara said. 'You see the truth, but like all your kind, you fear it.'

'My kind?' I was shocked. 'We are the *same* kind. We are both tau.'

Her face was hidden behind the impassive, lens-studded mask of her combat helmet, but I sensed her sneer.

As our expedition stretched from weeks into months I came to detest every one of my companions, but Jhi'kaara most of all. While I recognised the place of the fire caste in the Tau'va, there was a coiled violence about her that disturbed me. Perhaps it was her hideous facial scarring or her playful contempt... But no... I believe it was something deeper. Like O'Seishin, she had become tainted by this world.

Taint. Such an irrational term for a tau to use; surely one better suited to the Imperial fanatics who condemn otherness for otherness's sake? Perhaps, but lately I have come to wonder whether the fanatics may have it right.

It is time I told you of the Sanctuary of Wyrms.

'What is it?' I asked, trying to decipher the dark shape through its veil of vegetation. Squat yet vast, it rose from the centre of the island ahead, evidently a structure of some kind, but unlike any other we had encountered in the Coil. Despite the obscuring vegetation, its harsh, angular lineaments were unmistakable, suggesting an architectural brutality at odds with the flowing contours of our own aesthetics. Even at a distance it filled me with foreboding.

'The Nirrhoda did not lie,' Mutekh said, lowering his scope.

The Nirrhoda? I recalled the feral, mud-caked indigenes we had encountered some weeks back. Technically 'indigene' was a misnomer since the native Phaedrans were descended from gue'la colonists who had conquered this world millennia ago and then, in turn, been conquered by it. Squat and bowlegged, with huge glassy eyes and yawning mouths, they were primitive degenerates who wandered the wilderness in loose tribes. All were unpredictable, but the Nirrhoda clan, who followed the chaotic arrhythmia of the Coil, were notoriously belligerent. Yet Jhi'kaara had known their ways and won a parley for Mutekh, who had traded trinkets for shreds of truth about their deceitful land. One such shred had led us here.

'They certainly did not lie about the wyrm trees,' the fire warrior observed sourly. 'That island is infested with them.'

I had taken the gentle undulation of the towering anemone-like growths encrusting the island to be a product of the wind... *Yet there was no wind...* Now I watched their swaying tendrils with fresh eyes: at the base, each was thicker than my waist, tapering to a sinuous violet tip that tilted towards us, as if tasting us on the air.

'Are they dangerous?' I asked.

'Their sting is lethal,' Jhi'kaara said fondly, 'but they grow slowly. These must be over a century old. That structure—'

'Evidently predates the war,' Mutekh interrupted with relish. 'We must evaluate this discovery

thoroughly.’ Something like avarice swept across his broad face, revealing another shade of taint: the hunger to *know*. ‘You will clear a path please, fire warrior.’

Jhi’kaara turned the rotary cannons of our Devilfish upon the forest, shredding the rubbery growths into steaming slabs that seemed more meat than vegetable. The trees shrieked as they died, their warble sounding insidiously sentient.

‘It proved a poor sanctuary,’ Xanti said with peculiar sadness. I glanced at Mutekh’s assistant in surprise. He shrugged, embarrassed by my attention. ‘That is what the savages called this place: the Sanctuary of Wyrms.’

Then the janissaries went amongst the detritus with flame-throwers, laughing as they incinerated the flailing, orphan tendrils. One brute grew careless and a whip-like frond lashed his face as it flipped about in its death spasms. Moments later the man joined it in his own dance of death. It was the first time I saw violent death, but I was unmoved. Fi’draah had already changed me.

Unveiled, the building was almost profound in its ugliness. It was a squat, octagonal block assembled from prefabricated grey slabs that were as hard as rock. The walls tilted inwards to a flat roof that looked strong enough to withstand an aerial bombardment, suggesting the place might be a bunker of some kind. Circling it, we found no apertures or ornamentation save for a deeply recessed entrance wide enough to accommodate a tank. A metal bulkhead blocked the path, its corroded surface embossed with a stark ‘I’ symbol. Despite its simplicity, the sigil had an austere authority that deepened my unease.

‘I am unfamiliar with this emblem,’ Mutekh mused, running a hand over the raised metal. ‘Your thoughts, Por’ui?’

‘It looks like a gue’la rune,’ I answered. ‘Linguistically it translates as *‘the self’*, but in this context it probably has a factional connotation.’

‘So the gue’la built this place?’ Xanti asked.

‘Oh, I would most definitely postulate an Imperial provenance,’ Mutekh said, clearly enjoying himself. ‘Though it lacks the vainglorious ornamentation typical of their architecture, the configuration and construction materials are manifestly Imperial.’

‘Why would there be Imperials on Fi’draah before the war?’ Xanti seemed confused by the notion.

‘Why *wouldn’t* there be?’ Mutekh proclaimed. ‘Throughout the ages there have been Imperials almost *everywhere*. They are an ancient power that coveted the stars millennia before the Tau’va was revealed to us. There is no telling when they first came to this world. Or why.’

‘This place has the strength of a fortress, but not the logic,’ Jhi’kaara offered, speaking for the first time. ‘The walls are solid, but there are no emplacements or watchtowers.’

‘Perhaps they are hidden,’ I suggested.

‘No, remember this is a *pre-war* relic,’ Mutekh chided. ‘It was not constructed to keep an enemy out, but to keep a secret within.’

‘What kind of secret?’ Xanti asked loyally.

‘The kind that was worth hiding well!’ There was a glint in the cartographer’s eyes at the prospect. ‘The kind that is worth learning for the Greater Good.’ He slapped the bulkhead. ‘Open it!’

There was no obvious access mechanism, but Xanti’s data drone detected a biometric scanner embedded in the bulkhead.

‘For the gue’la it is a sophisticated system,’ the *autaku* murmured, his face lost in the dancing holograms projected by his drone. The small saucer-like machine hovered by the hatch,

interfacing the mechanism with its datalaser and mapping it into territory its master could negotiate.

'I doubt I could deceive this,' Xanti said, 'but it appears the seal has *already* been broken... and crudely reset.' He looked up with a frown. 'Someone has trespassed here before us.'

Despite the damaged seal night had fallen by the time Xanti synthesised the correct trigger. Dead cogs ground into life and the bulkhead rose, groaning at this second desecration. A sour fungal fetor seeped from the dark maw, so dense it was almost visible. Some of the janissaries chuckled as I retched and fumbled for my filtrator mask, but their faces were pale. Jhi'kaara silenced them with a sharp gesture, but I felt no gratitude. Her sealed helmet spared her the stench we suffered. Where was the equity in that?

We entered the cavernous chamber beyond in a practised formation, with Jhi'kaara's hovering gun drone taking point and the janissaries fanning out to either side. Our torch beams thrust back the darkness, but it clung to every corner and crevice like black cobwebs. The burned-out hulks of amphibious transports and machinery loomed on all sides, casting shadows across a graveyard of barrels and crates.

'The invaders closed off the escape route,' Jhi'kaara said, gauging the devastation. 'They destroyed the vehicles and sealed the exit in case anyone slipped past them.'

'Why did no one fight back?' I wondered. 'There are no bodies here.'

'A good question, waterkin.'

Across the chamber the inner hatch lay amongst the detritus, shredded and torn from its recess. Jhi'kaara knelt and ran her fingers over the wreckage. The edges were curled into serrated whorls of tortured metal.

'Chainswords,' she said.

'How can you be sure?' I asked.

'The teeth leave a pattern.' She paused and looked over her shoulder, staring right at me. 'Their mark is... unique.' It was almost a challenge.

'Unique?' As if by their own volition my eyes were drawn to the ghost of a scar running down the faceplate of her helmet, a wound that echoed the rift in her own face. And suddenly I understood why she knew these weapons so intimately.

The destruction petered out in the corridor beyond, but the sense of oppression did not. It shadowed us as we passed through one deserted chamber after another, closing in as we moved deeper into the outpost.

'Smaller teams would cover more ground,' Mutekh protested. 'Your caution is illogical, Shas'ui. This place is long dead.'

But the fire warrior would not split our force, and I was struck anew by the differences between the castes. We worked together for the Greater Good, yet our natures were discordant. Mutekh and Xanti were creatures of reason, while Jhi'kaara was pure instinct. What did that make me?

I brooded over the question as we pressed on, passing through guardrooms and storerooms, the hollow tomb of a dormitory and a mess hall where food still waited on the table, fossilised and forgotten.

'It took them unawares,' Jhi'kaara murmured, 'and it took them swiftly.'

'It?' I asked. 'You mean the invaders?'

'No...'

For the first time she sounded troubled. 'No, I think this was something else.'

We found the first corpse in the communications room, propped up against the vox-console. Shrouded in heavy crimson robes, the mummified cadaver looked more machine than man. Its

face was an angular bronze mask studded with sensors, seemingly riveted to the skull. A pistol was clutched in a bionic claw, the barrel shoved through the broken grille of its mouth. Its cranium had ruptured into a crown of splintered bones and circuitry.

‘He shot himself before the intruders reached him,’ Jhi’kaara judged.

‘Or because they reached him too late,’ I offered uncertainly. She glanced at me, waiting as I tested the intuition. ‘He’s the only one we’ve found. Perhaps that makes him different.’

‘He was certainly different,’ Xanti said eagerly. ‘Judging by his extensive bionics he was a Mechanicus priest, probably an important one. Unlike ourselves, the data techs of the Imperium aspire to become one with their machines.’

The *autaku*’s passion surprised me. Abruptly, I realised how little I knew about my companions. We had travelled so far together yet we were still strangers. Was it our castes that divided us, or merely our personal flaws? Uneasily, I put the question aside and concentrated on the facts.

‘Perhaps he summoned the invaders,’ I suggested.

Jhi’kaara considered it. ‘Perhaps he did, waterkin.’

And perhaps I am not the fool you took me for, I thought.

The elevator to the lower levels had been demolished and the hatch to the stairwell was welded shut from within, but that was no obstacle to our plasma cutters. Beyond, a metal staircase wound down into darkness.

Jhi’kaara’s gun drone led the way, levitating down the stairwell as we followed on the spiralling steps, its searchlight diving ahead into the abyss below. As we descended, the walls became brittle and powdery, sucked dry by silvery seams of fungus. In places the filth had erupted into cancerous fruiting bodies, but they were all desiccated husks, seemingly petrified in the moment of blossoming. The stench was dreadful and I kept my filtrator firmly in place. Mutekh and Xanti soon followed suit, but the janissaries suffered stoically, unwilling to show weakness before Jhi’kaara.

They are like dogs trying to impress their master, I thought.

At regular intervals we passed access hatches to other levels, and I realised the bulk of the outpost lay beneath the ground, like a buried mountain riddled with tunnels and caves. Some hatches were sealed, other gaped open, but we ignored them all. Exploring the entire complex would take days and none of us cared to linger here. Instead we pressed on, drawn by a collective sense that the answers we sought lay below. But when the drone’s light finally found the bottom of the stairwell we froze.

‘Emperor protect us!’ one of the janissaries gasped, but nobody reprimanded him for his atavism.

Our path terminated in a charnel pit. Dozens of cadavers were piled up below, mangled and contorted by violent death. The walls around them were pitted with deep craters, suggesting heavy gunfire, but it was impossible tell whether it was bullets or chainswords that had cleansed these dead.

Cleansed. It is another term that sits uneasily with the Tau’va, yet it is the right term, for these creatures were *unclean*. Despite their wounds and decades of decay, it was obvious they were only superficially gue’la. Their withered flesh was stretched taut across misshapen bones, thickening to gnarled plates at the ribs and shoulder blades. Many had double-jointed legs and scythe-like appendages jutting from their wrists. Their faces were atrophied relics in elongated, almost bestial skulls, the jaws distended by hardened, stinger-tipped tongues. Some still wore shreds of clothing, but most were naked.

They shed their clothes like redundant skins when the change came over them...

'We should go back,' I said with utter conviction. For once I suspected the janissaries were with me, but to my surprise they weren't the only ones.

'Asharil is right,' Jhi'kaara said. 'This tomb is best left buried.'

Mutekh hesitated. He was as repulsed as the rest of us, but leaving a mystery unsolved was anathema to him.

'Unacceptable,' the cartographer declared. 'It is our duty to assess, quantify and record this anomaly. The Greater Good demands courage. Has yours failed you, fire warrior?'

Jhi'kaara stiffened. The tension passed through the janissaries in a sympathetic wave and I saw their weapons twitch reflexively towards the cartographer. Even Xanti noticed it, looking back and forth between the opponents with a confused expression that was almost comical. Only Mutekh seemed oblivious to his own peril.

'I will continue alone,' he pushed, 'if you are afraid...'

I thought she would kill him then. I tried to intervene, to rise to my calling and smooth over the discord, but the words slipped away before I could marshal them. Instead, Jhi'kaara found a reserve of discipline I had not credited her with.

'Fire always walks at the fore,' she said. Without another word she stepped down amongst the corpses. And sealed our fate.

We followed the intruders' trail of devastation through a maze of laboratories and workshops that soon became unrecognisable. The fungal veins riddling the walls had grown ripe here, erupting into groping, ropey strands like calcified viscera. Before it froze, the stuff had entwined itself about everything, melting the rigid Imperial architecture into soft organic shapes.

We are crawling through a diseased corpse, I thought, *but what if it's not dead, just forever dying?* I fought to suppress the absurd notion, grasping for the clarity of the Tau'va, but in this cesspit it seemed a flickering, false hope.

The blighted dead were everywhere, snarled up in the weave where they had fallen. Shredded, pulverised or charred, they had died in droves as they swarmed against the incursion, and I found myself wondering at the lethality of their slayers. What kind of creature could carve a swath through such horrors?

We found the answer in a ravaged infirmary where the invaders had suffered their first casualty. The fallen warrior was almost buried beneath a mound of mutants, but there was no mistaking his stature. Alive, he would have been almost twice my height and countless times my weight. *Could it really be?*

'Space Marines,' Jhi'kaara said with something like reverence. 'And where there is one, there will be others.'

My breath caught as she confirmed my suspicion. I had studied accounts and pictures of the Imperium's elite warriors, but they had seemed a distant, almost mythical peril. They were the stuff of nightmares, bio-engineered giants bred to be utterly merciless in the service of their dead Emperor. It was rumoured that a hundred of these monsters could conquer a world.

'What were they doing here?' I wondered, staring at the dead Space Marine in fascination. A helmet with a sharp, almost avian snout hid his features, but I could imagine the face beneath: it would be pugnacious and broad, with skin like toughened leather and a fretwork of scars and tattoos – a face not merely honed by war, but *rebuilt* for it.

Jhi'kaara gestured to the janissaries and they heaved the mutants aside, exhuming the warrior's void-black power armour. Peculiarly, his left arm looked as if it were cast in silver, its shoulder pad carved into a stylised 'I' sigil inset with a skull. More incongruous still was the bright yellow of the opposite pauldron. For all his ferocity, this warrior's grasp of aesthetics had been woeful.

'I recognise this heraldry.' Jhi'kaara tapped the angular fist inscribed on the yellow pad. 'The Imperial Fists are old foes of the Tau Empire, but this...' She indicated the silver pad. 'This I have not seen before. And the Imperial Fists wear *yellow* armour, not black.'

'Wait,' I said, 'this second symbol... Isn't it like the one we found at the entrance?'

'It *is* similar,' Mutekh said, peering at the device, 'but the inset skull is a significant deviation. There may be a connection, but careless assumptions are dangerous...'

'Does it matter?' Xanti asked. 'The gue'la fanatics are all insane. Nothing they do makes sense.'

'Know your enemy as you would know yourself,' Jhi'kaara said, doubtless quoting some fire caste credo. 'There is a mystery here.'

There was certainly no mystery about the Space Marine's death: his breastplate had been cracked open like a shell and one of the mutants had virtually crawled inside his chest as it disembowelled him.

'The Imperium sent its finest warriors to purge this crisis,' Jhi'kaara murmured thoughtfully.

'All the more reason for us to leave,' I insisted.

'No, we cannot.' She stepped away from the dead giant. 'Space Marines do not leave their fallen behind.'

'I don't see the relevance...'

'Do you not? *Think, waterkin.*'

'I...'. The realisation struck me like ice water. 'You believe they failed.'

'Whatever happened here...' she said, sweeping a hand over the mutated horde, 'we must be certain it is over.'

The trail ended at the uppermost tier of a subterranean amphitheatre. Our torches struggled to make sense of the vast space, picking out details but unable to capture the whole, leaving me with the impression of a gargantuan hive woven from grey strands. Hunched in a depression at the centre of the chamber was a pale mound. Thick cords of fungus sprouted from its base, multiplying and tapering as they spread out to insinuate themselves into every surface.

As we descended, it became apparent the mutants had made their last stand here, throwing themselves between the invaders and the heart of their hive, but one-by-one the Space Marines had also fallen. The first lay two tiers down, still gripping his chain-sword though his head was missing. Like his comrade he wore black and silver power armour, but his right pauldron was completely different.

'A White Scar,' said Jhi'kaara, pointing out the crimson flash on the white pad. 'They fought honourably on Dal'yth.'

'There were Space Marines on Dal'yth?' I was appalled by the idea of the Imperium penetrating so deep into tau space.

'They almost *took* Dal'yth, waterkin.' She chuckled dryly. 'Among your caste some truths are left unspoken lest they wither your faint hearts.' Despite her words there was no malice in her voice. We had achieved an understanding of sorts, she and I. Of more concern was the possibility that my own caste had lied to me. Was that really possible? Remembering the ancient manipulator O'Seishin, I found little comfort.

As we continued our descent Jhi'kaara paused beside each of the fallen Space Marines and examined his insignia solemnly: a blue raptor against white... A white buzzsaw against black... She recognised neither of them, but she paid her respects regardless, for each had died hideously and heroically, surrounded by sundered enemies.

'Why would they bear different cadre badges?' I said, seeing how the riddle of their mismatched fraternity troubled her.

'*Cha'ptah* badges,' she corrected. 'Space Marines call their factions *Cha'ptahs*.' I frowned at her awkward pronunciation of the gue'la word '*Chapter*'. 'And to answer your question, waterkin: I do not know. This co-fraternity contradicts everything I was taught about their kind. Space Marines adhere rigidly to their own clans.'

'Perhaps they were forced to fight together,' I suggested. 'Maybe it was a penitence for some transgression. Or an honour.'

Neither theory was reassuring, especially since the dead mutants were growing more fearsome. Some bore no resemblance to the gue'la at all, looking more like the spawn of an entirely different, utterly aberrant race. A few actually dwarfed the Space Marines, their bulk covered in spiny exoskeletal plates that looked strong enough to withstand a pulse-round. All were mottled with a fur of silver-grey mould, but it was impossible to tell whether the fungus had grown upon them or from *within* them.

Abruptly Jhi'kaara stopped, gazing at one of the larger beasts. 'I know what they are,' she said quietly.

'They are mutants,' Mutekh declared, 'evidently the product of some ill-conceived Imperial dabbling...'

'They are Yhe'mokushi, beasts of the Silent Hunger,' Jhi'kaara said. The reference meant nothing to me and the others looked equally mystified. She nodded, unsurprised. 'A predatory species the Tau Empire has only recently encountered. These differ from the bioforms depicted in our orientation sessions, but diversity is in their nature. They are living weapons that can steal form as well as substance, becoming whatever suits their purpose.'

'And they are hostile to the Tau Empire?' Xanti asked uneasily.

'They are hostile to *all* life save their own. Like locusts they exist only to consume and multiply, leaving nothing but dust and shadows in their wake. It is said the Imperium has suffered greatly from their depredations.'

We were silent. Here was another ugly truth hidden in the name of the Greater Good. Over the last few months my certainties had eroded away, revealing deception, obsession and horror. *What else had been kept from me?*

Down... further down... More dead Space Marines... First a golden beast's head set against midnight-blue, then another raptor, this one red against white.

'You respect these warriors,' I said, watching Jhi'kaara carefully.

'I respect their strength, Asharil.'

But I sensed her admiration ran deeper. Jhi'kaara was an outsider amongst her own kind, closer to Fi'draah's wilderness than the wisdom of the Tau'va. She was drawn to these warriors for their brotherhood as much as their strength.

By the time we reached the lowest tier we had found eight Space Marines. The last had succumbed at the periphery of his objective, his armour pierced in a dozen places by scything claws. Bizarrely he was still standing, his body wedged on its feet by the mass of corpses pressed against it. Even amongst his brothers he was a giant, but there were other differences. While the rest had painted their left arms silver, both his arms *were* silver – or more likely some stronger metal. Each was an angular augmetic, one terminating in a slab-like fist, the other in an intricate claw whose purpose was probably manipulation rather than combat. His personal heraldry was black, its symbol a stylised white gauntlet.

'Iron Hand,' Jhi'kaara declared. 'Another old enemy.'

'These would appear to be specimen containment units,' Mutekh said, pointing out a pair of toppled glass cylinders that looked big enough to hold the largest abominations. Ropes of fungus were wrapped around them, squeezed so tight the reinforced glass had fractured.

'The fools brought the Silent Hunger to Fi'draah,' Jhi'kaara hissed. I was surprised by the fury

in her voice. She sounded like her *own* world had been threatened.

‘So this place was some kind of prison?’ Xanti asked.

‘Not a prison,’ Mutekh said as he followed the web of pipes running from the cylinders to a corroded bank of consoles. ‘Remember the laboratories we passed through? No, this is a research facility. The Imperials were experimenting on these creatures. Perhaps they were seeking a means of communication...’

‘The Imperium does not seek communion with its enemies,’ Jhi’kaara said. ‘They were looking for a weapon.’

‘But why here?’ Xanti wondered. ‘Is it just a coincidence they came to Fi’draah?’

‘Many of the indigenous fungi are lethal,’ Mutekh speculated. ‘Perhaps they were attempting to synthesise a pathogen.’

‘Then they failed,’ Jhi’kaara said flatly.

‘We do not know that,’ Mutekh protested. ‘The techniques of the gue’la are riddled with superstition, but...’

‘The Yhe’mokushi strain was too strong,’ I said, surprised by my own conviction. ‘When the Imperials infected it... it devoured the fungus...’

Intuition, I realised. *I am neither entirely a creature of reason nor instinct, but something subtler than either.*

‘*It became* the fungus,’ I finished. ‘And then the fungus devoured them.’

My comrades stared at me, then their eyes wandered to the infested expanse around us. Jhi’kaara broke the silence: ‘Search the Space Marines,’ she ordered the janissaries. ‘Gather their grenades.’

‘What is your intent, fire warrior?’ Mutekh demanded.

‘We will complete our enemy’s mission.’ She indicated the monolithic puffball. ‘Sometimes the enemy of your enemy is the greater enemy.’

‘You will do no such thing!’ Mutekh was appalled. ‘We must ascertain what the Imperials discovered here.’ He looked to Xanti for support, but the young data tech avoided his gaze. ‘*Autaku!*’

‘I am sorry, Fio’vre,’ his assistant muttered unhappily, ‘but whatever the Imperials found here... it did them no good.’

‘I will search this one,’ I said, heading for the nearest Space Marine.

‘I trust you know what a grenade looks like, waterkin?’ Jhi’kaara mocked gently. Then she was gone, heading for the upper tiers.

‘Cowards,’ Mutekh called after us. ‘You are all betraying the Greater Good.’

No, we are serving the Greater Good, I thought fiercely. *Even if some of us have come to doubt it.*

Biting down my disgust I dragged a corpse away from my chosen warrior, intent on reaching his utility belt. That was when I noticed the hum. It was faint, but its source was unmistakable: *this Space Marine’s armour was still powered*. Unsettled, I peered up at his archaic helmet. A flat visor covered the right side of his face, but the left was a tangle of bionics clustered around a jutting optical sensor. Up close he seemed more machine than man.

Iron Hand, Jhi’kaara had called this one...

‘Fio’vre, wait!’ The voice was Xanti’s, its urgency irresistible. I glanced round and saw Mutekh standing beside the puffball, a laser scalpel in one hand and a sample container in the other.

‘Wait!’ I echoed, but the scalpel was already descending towards the mottled surface. ‘Don’t—’

The puffball exploded like a bomb.

And that's precisely what it is, I realised, a spore bomb, dormant but not dead.

There was no fire or fragmentation in the blast, but the concussion threw Mutekh across the tier, slamming him against the consoles with bone-breaking force. I saw his body rebound a heartbeat before everything was smothered in swirling grey smog. Clutching my mask tightly, I screwed my eyes shut and crouched, sheltering beneath the Iron Hand. The scattered janissaries cursed as the spore cloud rolled over them, then the curses turned to choked screams as their lungs drowned in filth. I heard them stumbling about as they fought to escape their torment. Someone opened fire blindly, his pulse-rounds sizzling as they ripped through the congealed air. Someone else screamed his last as a wild round struck him.

That was a mercy. The only kind remaining to these men...

I risked a glance as one of them fell to his knees alongside me. The toxic whiteout reduced him to a vague, flailing silhouette, but I could see his entire body heaving violently, as if in the grip of some bone-deep tremor.

Not bone-deep. This quake ran much deeper than that.

I heard his flesh seething as its muscles contorted into new shapes, stretching his skin taut in the struggle to contain the chaos beneath. Suddenly he screamed, spewing blood and spores as his back arched inwards at an impossible angle. The spine broke – then snapped back into a sleek, predatory curve. Vicious spikes erupted along its length, racing to catch up with his rapidly elongating cranium. His arms shot out in a welter of shredded fingers, propelled by the bone scythes surging from his wrists. He tried to scream again and his tongue burst free, thickened and barbed, like a stinger-tipped snake.

It looks like there is a wyrm tree growing inside him, I thought wildly. Any moment now, the newborn hybrid would turn and see me...

'Fio'vere! Where are you?' Xanti called as he came stumbling through the mist, his faithful drone hovering beside him. He saw me and raised a hand in relief. 'Asharil! Did you see—'

The hybrid leapt. Propelled by powerful, double-jointed legs it streaked through the air and was upon the *autaku* before he saw it coming. The bone scythes slashed down, impaling him through the shoulder blades and pinning him to the ground. His shriek was cut off as the beast's tongue shot out like a spring-loaded blade and punched through his filtrator mask. His legs kicked about spastically as it wormed its way down his throat, stinging and seeding him with spores. The abandoned data drone twittered in confusion and a scythe flailed out and sent it spinning my way. I covered my head as the saucer smashed into the Iron Hand and toppled beside me with a forlorn squawk.

The smog had thinned out, the spores settling over the chamber like softly luminescent dust. By their pallid light I saw that none of the janissaries had escaped the change. Some were still going through the final trauma, but five were racing towards a solitary figure on the topmost tier. Jhi'kaara was kneeling, tracking the approaching hybrids with her pulse rifle. She fired, but her chosen mark darted aside with shocking speed. I imagined her cursing then, angry but not afraid. *Never afraid...* She fired again, then once more in quick succession, the first shot tricking her target into the path of the second. The round struck the hybrid mid-leap, throwing it to the ground in a writhing heap. Before it could right itself a third shot sheared through its skull. A kill, but it had cost her precious time.

With a chattering yowl one of the creatures leapt onto Jhi'kaara's tier, but she ignored it, intent upon a more distant mark. Before I could shout a warning, her gun drone swooped from the shadows and lanced her aggressor with its twin-linked guns, almost tearing it in two. Whirling round, the saucer sped towards another hybrid, spitting fire, but the beast danced about in ragged avian bursts, bounding between the floor and the walls as it charged. At the last moment it rolled low and sprung up beneath the saucer, latching on to its rim. The drone spun

about, firing furiously as it tried to dislodge its attacker, but the beast was too strong. I imagined the machine's primitive logic core assessing probabilities and weighing up options. It found its answer within seconds and self-destructed, incinerating the hybrid from the waist up.

I had no more time to spare for Jhi'kaara's battle. Done with its prey, Xanti's attacker sat up on its haunches, sniffing the air while its victim writhed beneath it in the throes of change. I looked around, hoping for a fallen firearm... cursing myself for refusing to carry one... desperate for a clean death...

'Power...' The voice sounded like the wheeze of a dying machine. *A machine that spoke Imperial Gothic...* I looked up and saw the impossible: the Iron Hand had inclined its head towards me, its optic glowing a dull red, like a doomed sun. Beneath that merciless blaze water turned to fire and I became a creature of instinct. Grabbing Xanti's battered drone I hauled, staggering under the weight as I raised it to the giant like an offering to some primal god. The burden was as much philosophical as physical, yet my path seemed clear.

The galaxy was tainted and taint had to be cleansed...

A metal tendril uncoiled from the warrior's helmet, swaying about like a blind snake. Then it struck, its sharpened tip drilling through the drone's casing with a whine of ruptured metal. A moment later the snake became a leech, burying itself inside the broken machine's innards and sucking it dry of power. Power to reignite its master's hatred.

Honest hatred!

I heard Xanti's assailant rise behind me, but my world had narrowed to the awakening Iron Hand. I knew my sanity had gone, unravelled by O'Seishin's lies and Fi'draah's truths. All that remained was horror and the will to face it.

For the Greater Good...

The rest was a blur. The hybrid howled behind me and its kin answered from all sides. I spun round as it leapt, its virulent tongue extended towards me. The Space Marine's fist met the beast in midair like a turbotram, punching clean through its ribcage. He cast the corpse aside as the others fell upon him in a chattering, screeching mob. There were four in all, fully transformed and almost mindless in their need to rend and tear and infect.

The first came head-on and died in a heartbeat, its skull pulverised by a pneumatic punch to the face. His armour grinding like rusted cogs, the warrior swung at the waist and grabbed another by the throat, squeezing until bone and cartilage collapsed into paste. In the same instant he rammed his manipulator claw between the jaws of a third. Its head convulsed violently as the claw became a whirling rotary blade inside its mouth. He yanked the tool free in a storm of shattered bones as the final hybrid vaulted onto his back, scythes poised to hack down. Before it could strike, a bolt of energy punched through its skull, throwing it from its perch. I glanced up and saw Jhi'kaara kneeling a few tiers above us, her rifle levelled.

Cleansed, I thought, every one of them.

'Asaaar...haaal...' The voice made my name sound like something dredged up from a polluted ocean. I turned as Xanti hauled himself up, using his malformed scythes like crutches. His movements were clumsy, crippled by the capricious mutation of his muscles, as if the fungus was baffled by tau physiology. His face had stretched into a death mask, the lower jaw almost touching his belly, but his eyes were unchanged, staring at me with agonised recognition. *Pleading...*

'Asaaar...' Xanti's barbed tongue surged towards me. The Space Marine shoved me aside, but the stinger lashed my shoulder as I fell. A terrible numbness seized my arm before I even hit the ground. Dimly I saw Jhi'kaara vault from the tier above. She raised her rifle to her shoulder and advanced on the abomination, firing as she came. She didn't stop until it was a charred ruin. Then she turned her wrath on Mutekh's broken, spore-saturated body. The cartographer

never stirred beneath the barrage. Perhaps he was already dead, but I doubt Jhi'kaara cared. The last thing I saw before consciousness slipped away was the dimming red light in the Iron Hand's optic.

'Power...' he whispered. And then we both faded to black.

'You were fortunate,' Jhi'kaara said when I awoke. The numbness in my arm had faded, leaving behind a dull ache. 'Its sting did not carry the infection.'

Then by unspoken consent we fed the Iron Hand, gathering the janissaries' weapons and power packs and offering them up to his ravenous mechadendrite. Our ritual was without sense for the enemy of our enemy was destroyed, leaving only the enemy, yet we never hesitated. We were both creatures of instinct now, bound by an imperative stronger than the Tau'va.

'How long have you waited?' I asked the giant when we were done. The Imperial Gothic came easily to my tongue. It always had.

'How...? Long...?' His voice was slurred and electronic, the syntax broken. 'Very – long...'

'How did you survive?'

He turned his optic on me, weighing me up like an iron god. Abruptly the visor covering the right side of his face slid aside. In place of flesh and bone I saw a formless grey tangle riddled with electronics and corroded rivets.

'The Flesh – betrays,' he said, though he had no lips, 'but the Machine – is faithful.'

I saw his doom then. His body had succumbed to its wounds, but his depleted augmetics had endured, cradling his consciousness as life slipped away. Half-corpse, half-machine he had stood frozen in this chamber for untold decades, burning with impotent rage as his dead flesh was consumed. Denied sleep or the deeper oblivion of death, he had watched as corruption blossomed within and without. I saw him descending into madness, then clawing his way back in the hope of redemption... then falling again. How often had that cycle repeated? And where did it stand now?

'Your mission is complete,' I said carefully, indicating the tattered spore bomb. 'We destroyed the taint.'

'You did – Not. This was – Nothing – just another Tendril – of the Corruption. I watched it grow – then grow stale – over the long – Long – long...' He faltered as his splintered mind strove for coherence. 'The Root – survives...'

He stepped towards the centre of the chamber, moving with surprising grace. We followed and saw the pit for the first time: a dark slash in the ground where the mega-fungus had bloomed. On closer inspection I saw it wasn't a pit at all, but a steeply inclined tunnel, its walls resinous with fungus, like the aperture of a titanic blood vessel. Or a stalk...

The spore bomb grew from here, I realised, and the corruption is still down there, rooted deep in the ground.

'The mission is – Incomplete.'

Like the Iron Hand's mission my story is incomplete, but that is of no consequence. My purpose is not to entertain you, but to warn you. Jhi'kaara will carry this log out of the Coil and ensure that it is heard and heeded. This undying tomb must be quarantined lest we fail to destroy its voracious legacy. *We?* Yes, I have chosen to accompany the Iron Hand on his final duty. I am no warrior, but I can carry grenades and we will bear many into the unclean bowels of this place. Jhi'kaara argued against it, of course, telling me it was her duty to make the final descent.

'You should bear the word and I the fire,' she said, but it could not be.

You see, I cannot return. Jhi'kaara was wrong: Xanti's sting did carry the contagion. Though his touch was fleeting I can feel the taint stirring in my blood like the promise of lies. I don't

know how long I have, but I will not hide in the darkness until the blight takes me. Besides, my corruption is more than blood-deep, for I have fallen from the Tau'va. I am no longer a creature of water or fire, nor indeed of sanity, but I can still serve. I shall descend into the pit alongside my enemy and purge the unclean... For the Greater Good.

- END RECORDING -

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PETER FEHERVARI slipped into the parallel surreality of television almost twenty years ago and never quite escaped. As a rogue editor, his life is an eternity of cuts and mixes to quench the dreams of thirsting producers while actually getting things on air. He has cut promos for many well known television shows, but winning a place in a Black Library anthology eclipsed it all. Since then his short stories have appeared in *Heroes of the Space Marines* and *Xenos Hunters*. *Fire Caste* is his first novel. He currently presides over a dormant Chaos Gate in London.



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