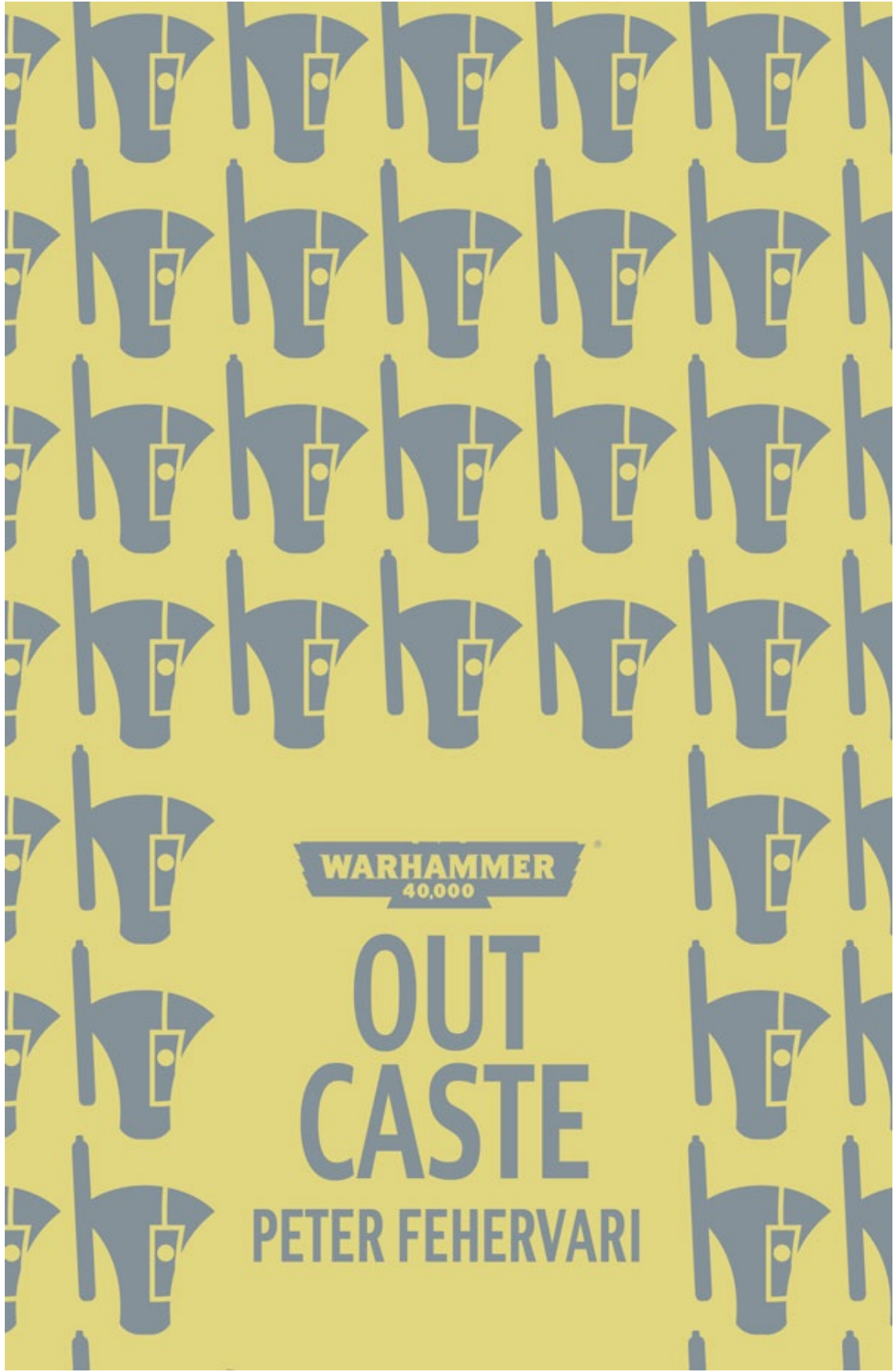




WARHAMMER
40,000

OUT CASTE

PETER FEHERVARI



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'A Tau chooses neither its caste nor its True Name. We are blood born to the first and borne by blood to the second, named for what we have done and might yet do. And like ourselves, our true names are not carved in stone.'

– The Tau'va

The warrior crouches in darkness, eyes locked on the softly glowing lenses of the helmet in its hands. Remembering. Seeking a name.

When I completed my training and stepped onto the Path of Fire I was summoned before the academy commander alongside my fellow shas'saal cadets for the Naming. Who better to decipher a warrior's true name than the master who has honed that living weapon? While others were honoured for their endurance, or agility, or precision with arms, I was named for my skill in reading the hearts of my comrades: J'kaara, 'the mirror'.

'You have been their shining core,' he said. 'You recognise and draw on their strength, reflecting it back threefold.'

He predicted a path of leadership, confirming what I already knew, that I was first amongst equals. Yes, there was pride, but it was hard earned, for though there is no prejudice against females under the Tau'va, few of us burn brightly on the Fire Path. I dreamt I would eclipse Shadowsun herself.

She frowns at the memory – the arrogance of impossible youth past and the price that will never pass. Sighing, she strokes her helmet with calloused fingers. It

has been with her since her first, all too sweet, taste of war.

A new-forged shas'la, I embarked on my first campaign alight with a conviction that did not flicker in the cold winds of war. Our enemy was the bhe'ghaal, a race of green-skinned beasts that infested vast tracts of the galaxy and made frequent raids into tau territory. They were a brutal, ugly species that lived for war, yet made a mockery of the craft, fighting in mobs that swept about the battlefield intoxicated by their own fury. We spun circles of death around them, luring them into one trap after another, decimating them from a distance with firepower they couldn't hope to match, then falling back before they overran us with sheer numbers.

It was a flawless execution of *kauyon* that confirmed the tau mastery of war... and my own mastery of hearts, for though I did not lead by rank, my comrades followed me regardless, inspired by my example and my words. Indeed, words flowed so freely for me that our shas'ui joked that I must be a waterborn changeling!

I was beyond fear or doubt, certain of my place in the perfect geometry of the Tau'va – untouchable. And when the shas'ui fell, none were surprised that I was chosen to take his place. A veteran in my youth, I believed myself a hero. I was too young to understand that easy victories have no heroes.

She shivers as her fingers find the scar. Abhorrent. Reverent. She traces the shallow fault line from the helmet's crown to the chin. It is a mere ghost of the rift that was once there, but its truth is undiminished.

Fh'anc... Dhobos... Po'gaja... More paltry worlds and petty wars fought against inept or feeble foes, more easy victories to burnish my pride.

Oba'rai...

A small planet on the fringes of the Second Expansion, Oba'rai was uncannily beautiful, its arid plains reminiscent of revered T'au itself. It was a natural home to the people, worthy of risk.

'There are gue'la here,' our cadre shas'o told us. 'Their Imperium lays claim to this world, but their shadow has grown pale in this region, sapped by distant conflicts. If we strike swift and hard the Imperium will turn a blind eye.'

Gue'la – '*hu-maans*'... They were an ancient race steeped in belligerent superstition, yet they were neither fools nor savages. I thrilled at the prospect of

facing a worthy enemy at last. Perhaps I would earn the rank of shas've here.

The disfigured helmet gazes back at her. Challenging. Accusing. It has been crudely repaired by her own hands, functional but ugly. An artisan of the earth caste could have restored it to perfection, but perfection would have been a lie.

The gue'la colonists fought fiercely, but their technology and tactics were primitive beside our own. Only their vaunted Imperial Guard gave us pause – a single regiment who had been promised the planet as a home if they could hold it. The shas'o offered them the opportunity to surrender, but his terms were harsh and they spat in his face. The outcome troubled me because they were honourable foes, but when I mentioned these doubts to my shas've, he laughed.

'Do you believe the shas'o *wanted* them to surrender? This war calls for the Killing Blow, not the Open Hand – a clean sweep, not complications.'

She nods at her scarred shadow, acknowledging the moment when perfection withered and doubt blossomed – the moment when her true name became a lie.

The Guardsmen made their last stand in Oba'rai's primary city, fortifying the walls and rallying a militia of thousands, but it was an empty gesture. Our stealth teams infiltrated the bastion and destroyed their artillery with surgical precision, leaving the defenders helpless against our long-range missiles and railguns. We razed the city without losing a single warrior, yet never once during that nightmare bombardment did the Imperials attempt to surrender. My comrades derided them for fools, but I was silent.

As I expected, the shas'o decreed we would take no prisoners. Scouring the ruins would be dangerous close-quarters work, so he unleashed the kroot, our alien auxiliaries, upon the broken city. They were bloodthirsty avian predators, little better than beasts, but loyal and perfectly suited to the task. *And yet...* The thought of those savages running riot amongst fallen *warriors* reviled me. If the rumours were true, the kroot had a taste for the flesh of their enemies...

She is no longer a shining mirror, but she is still strong and she still serves the Greater Good, not because it is perfect, but because everything else is less so. Now the strength she reflects is dark and fractured, so perhaps imperfection will be her key.

Even now I cannot explain the compulsion, but I disobeyed the shas'o's edict and led my squad into the ruins, lying to them and playing on their trust, seeking something I couldn't name. A swirling miasma of black smoke transformed the city into a shadow labyrinth haunted by charred corpses and twitching things that had no business being alive. Wordlessly we killed them as we passed. It was a mercy, yet I sensed my squad tightening with reflexive revulsion and felt their unspoken question: *why?* They were my closest comrades, the ones I hoped to swear the *ta'lissera* with, yet I had carried them into this filth, rubbing their faces in a carnage we tau prefer to keep at arm's length.

Why?

As we pressed deeper, the moans of the dying echoed around us, sometimes broken by the gleeful hoots of the ravening kroot. In the city square we came upon a pack of the beasts huddled around a mound of corpses and I learnt that the rumours about our allies were true. One of them saw us and chittered, rocking back and forth on its talons, trailing red ruin from its serrated beak. Then it cocked its head and beckoned, sly and mocking, inviting us to join the feast. Two of my comrades retched inside their helmets as we backed away, stumbling in our eagerness to distance ourselves from these vile allies.

Lost in smoke and revulsion, I tripped over a corpse in a smouldering greatcoat and froze. The dead man's eyes were wide open in a face scorched to the bone – *looking right at me*. Absurdly, his high-peaked cap was still intact, its melted rim fused to his skull.

Why? I might have asked it aloud, though of what I have no idea.

The gue'la surged up with impossible, hate-driven vitality, something bright and furiously alive buzzing in his hands, sweeping towards me. I staggered back, throwing up my rifle to block the blow and it was torn asunder in a storm of tortured metal that shook my entire body. I heard my comrades' wild shouts and the burst of their carbines as the whirling chainblade kissed my helmet...

The warrior reaches up and touches the other scar, the one that can never be repaired because it cuts deeper than flesh or bone, proclaiming a darkness that was perhaps always there. Her comrades killed the ko'miz'ar a heartbeat before he killed her, but still a heartbeat too late. Afterwards, they were comrades no more and there have been none since. The flaw has made her an outcast amongst her own kind, denying her the bond of the ta'lissera, but it has also forged her into something more. Crouching in the darkness as the darkness crouches inside her, she finally names her truth: Jhi'kaara, 'the broken mirror'.

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 the Black Library anthology *Fear the Alien* eclipsed it all. His first novel, *Fire Caste*, is scheduled for release in 2013 and he very much hopes the zombie apocalypse doesn't break out before then. Afterwards, anything goes. He currently presides over a dormant Chaos Gate in London.



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