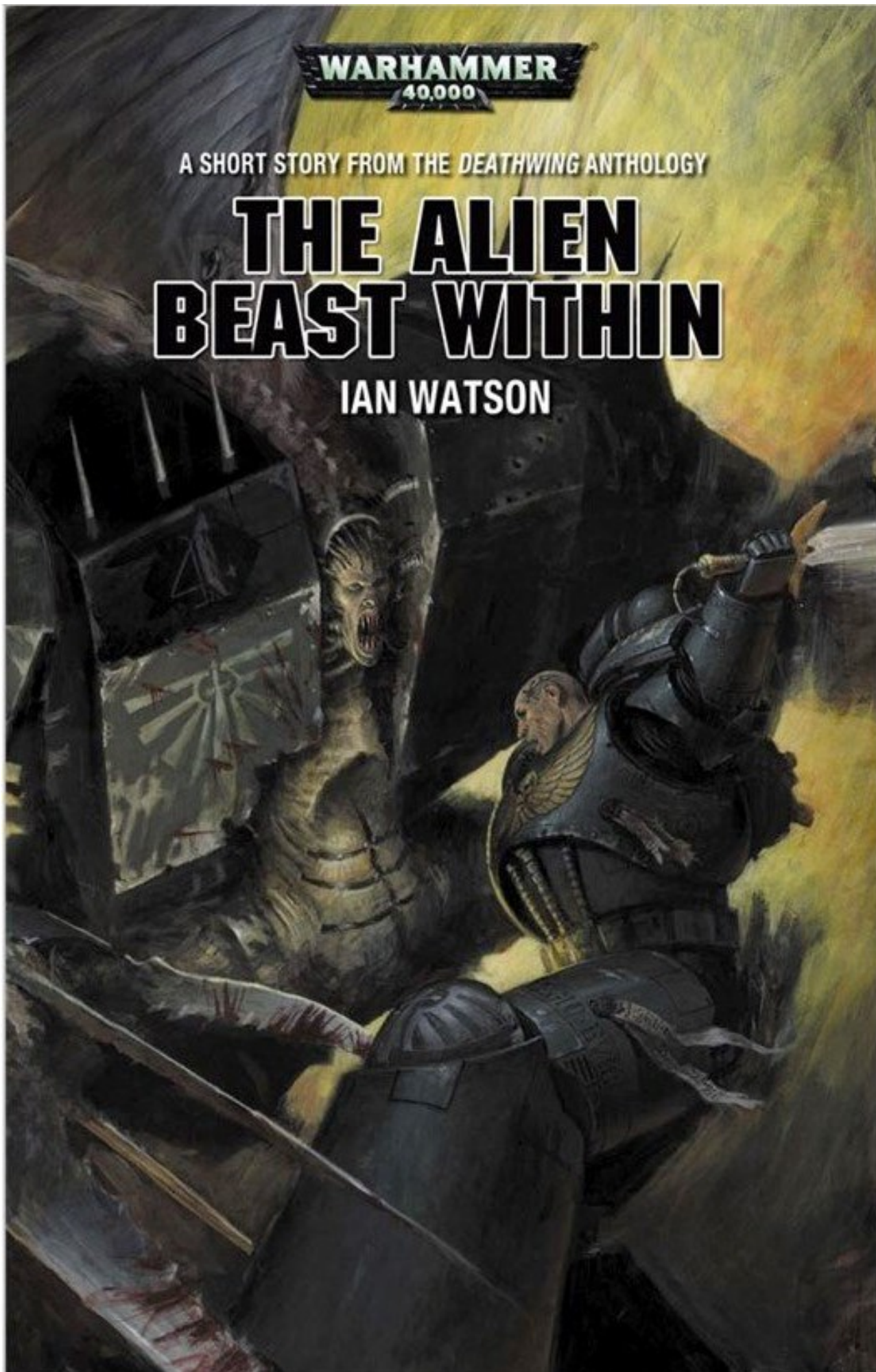


**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

A SHORT STORY FROM THE *DEATHWING* ANTHOLOGY

# THE ALIEN BEAST WITHIN

IAN WATSON



# The Alien Beast Within

An Assasinorum Short Story from "The Inquisition War"

Written by John Watson

THE GIANT EXERCISE wheel accelerated yet again while Meh'Lindi raced, caged within it. The machine towered two hundred metres high, under a fanvaulted roof. Shafts of light, of blood-red and cyanotic blue and bilious green, beamed through tracery windows which themselves revolved kaleidoscopically.

Chains of brass amulets dangling from the rotating spokes of the wheel clashed and clanged deafeningly like berserk bells as they whirled around.

Elsewhere in the gymnasium of the Callidus shrine, high-kicking initiate assassins broke plasteel bars, or else their own tarsal or heel bones. Injury was no excuse to discontinue the exercise - now they must master pain instead.

Others dislocated their limbs by muscle tension so as to escape from bonds before crawling through constricted, kinking pipes. A pump sucked blood dazingly from two youths prior to their practising unarmed combat, and from another before he would attempt to run the gauntlet along a corridor of spinning knives. Scarred veteran instructors patrolled, ever willing to demonstrate to the unbelieving.

Callisthenics machines shrieked and roared and spun so as to disorient their users.

Meh'Lindi had been running for half an hour, trying to catch a fellow assassin who ran vertically above her, upside-down, wearing an experimental gravityreverser belt. She ran in a self-induced trance, imagining that she might presently reach such an enlightened state of

mind that she could speed up inhumanly and loop the loop, stunning her quarry as she passed by. Whenever she was about to put on such a spurt, the wheel speeded up to frustrate her.

Suddenly, with a thunderous crash of engaging sprockets and a screaming of its gears, the wheel halted.

Meh'Lindi was hurled forward violently. Though the event was entirely unexpected, she was already fully alert, and arching herself into a hoop so as to roll. Uncoiling, she somersaulted backwards. She leapt about-face. The wheel was already beginning to turn in the opposite direction. It was picking up speed.

High overhead, her quarry was tumbling. She sprinted, up, up, willing the friction of her bare feet and her sheer renewed momentum to stop her from toppling back down the giant curved track.

Presently a siren wailed, signalling the end of her session - just when she fancied she had a slight chance of succeeding in what was virtually an impossible task.

Dismissing any temptation to feel annoyed, she skipped about, and ran back down the wheel. A filigree gate opened; she stepped out.

'Director secundus invites your presence in an hour,' the wheelmeister told her.

The bald old man, one of whose eyes was a ruby lens, forbore to comment on her performance. As a seasoned graduate of the Collegia Assassinorum, Meh'Lindi should be able to assess that for herself. If not, she was less than devout.

'Invites?' she queried. The director secundus was none other than deputy to the supreme director of the Callidus shrine of assassins. Did such a high official invite?

'That was the phrasing.'

IN A DOMED cubicle in the baptisterium, Meh'Lindi peeled off her clingtight black tunic. As hypersound vibrated sweat and grime loose from her, she gazed at her body in a tall speculum framed with brass bones interwoven and knotted.

She permitted herself a certain degree of admiration over and above mere physical assessment. For she was trained as a pedigree courtesan as well as a sleek and cunning killer. A courtesan - even one who largely pretended to fulfil the role of a pleasure-bringer - must be conscious of sensuality.

Meh'Lindi was tall, long-limbed, with puissant biceps and calf-muscles, though her sheer height diluted the impression of power. Enticing black

tattoos concealed her scars. A giant hirsute spider wrapped around her midriff. A snake, baring fangs, climbed her right leg. Scarablike beetles trod the modest swell of her bosom. Her breasts, which no exercise could mould into weapons, were small and unimpeding, though agreeably firm - dainty little beetle-tipped cones.

Her coaly hair was cropped short so that no one could seize it. In her courtesan role she might, or might not, opt to wear a lustrous wig. Her eyes were golden, her ivory face oddly anonymous and unmemorable in repose. But then, she could alter her features to those of an enchantress - or equally, of a hag.

The director secundus did not summon her. He invited her...

She probed at the word just as the tip of one's tongue might tease at a hollow tooth loaded with catalepsin for spitting into a victim's eye to paralyse him.

It was unthinkable that the secundus dreamed of exploiting this wonderful instrument - herself - which his Collegia had crafted from feralworld flesh, for any private aphrodisiac satisfaction of his own. That would be blasphemous.

Had Meh'Lindi not been a sham-courtesan as well as an assassin, this thought would hardly have occurred to her at all.

Invite. The word hinted at the protocol of the Mors Voluntaria, the permission to commit exemplary suicide which was granted to an assassin who had failed calamitously, though honourably, in some enterprise. Or whose suicide might be required, so as to erase the principal witness of an error on the part of the Officio Assassinorum...

Meh'Lindi knew that she had in no way failed in her vocation.

Puzzled, she anointed the soles of her feet with consecrated camphor oil, her loins with oil of frankincense, and the crown of her head with rosemary, then performed a devotion to the Emperor before resuming her tunic.

AT THE INVITATION of Tarik Ziz, the secundus, Meh'Lindi seated herself in a double lotus position, facing him.

She bowed her head. The lotus that locked her legs together and the aversion of her gaze were both modes of obeisance towards a superior in his private studium. Thus she signified that she was hampering herself from any assassination bid. True, she could uncoil in an instant and launch herself - nor did a skilled assassin need to be staring at her target. The faint sigh of the man's lungs, his odour, the mere pressure of air in the room located Ziz for her.

But nor would any such traitorous, motiveless attack succeed. Tarik Ziz was reputedly omega-dan.

The black-robed secundus knelt on a brocaded dais, which was also his spartan bed, facing an ancient baroque data-console. His long beringed fingers occasionally tapped a sequence of keys, one side of his mind seemingly involved in other concerns. Tomes bound in skin and data-cubes crowded one wall up to the groin-vaulted ceiling.

A collection of thousands of tiny, burnished archaic knives, many no larger than fingernails, ornamented another wall, resembling a myriad wings torn from metallic moths, shattering the light from an electro-flambeau into quicksilver fragments. 'You may look at me, Meh'Lindi.'

Ziz was swarthy, short, and compact - almost a dwarf, save for his sinuous fingers. The many rune-wrought rings he wore undoubtedly concealed a pharmacy of exotic hallucinogens and paralytic agents, even though the secundus no longer operated in the field. His artificial teeth, alternately of jet and vermilion, were all canines.

'You are one of our finest chameleons,' Ziz said to her softly.

Meh'Lindi nodded, for this was the simple truth. An injection of the shapechanging drug polymorphine would allow any trained assassin of her shrine to alter their appearance by effort of will. This was one of the specialities of the Callidus shrine, the keynote of which was cunning - just as the Vindicare shrine specialized in vengeance, and the Eversor shrine in unstoppable attack.

Under the stimulus of polymorphine, flesh would flow like heated plastic. Bones would soften, reshape themselves, and harden again. Altering her height, her frame, her features, Meh'Lindi had frequently masqueraded as other women - gorgeous and ugly, noble and common. She had mimicked men. On one occasion she had imitated a tall, hauntingly beautiful alien of the eldar race.

Always, with the purpose of eradicating someone whose activities imperilled the Imperium; with the aim of destroying a foe physically or - more rarely - psychologically...

Yet the drug polymorphine on its own was no miracle elixir. The business of shape-shifting demanded a deep and almost poignant sympathy with the person who was to be copied, killed, and replaced. The trick required empathy - deep identification with the target - and inner discipline.

Inject a non-initiate with polymorphine, and the result would be a protoplasmic chaos of the body, an agonising anarchy of the flesh and

bones and organs, an on-going muddled upheaval and meltdown resulting finally in blessed death.

Meh'Lindi was an excellent, disciplined chameleon, exactly as the secundus said.

Though she was no psyker, yet inscribed in the cells of her flesh and in the chambers of her brain was assuredly a wild gene-rune for apeing the appearance and traits of strangers - for metamorphosing herself - which the drug allowed her to express to the utmost.

If she had been born on a cultured world she might have been an actress. On her own feral home world she might have become a priestess of some cult of mutability. Recruited willy-nilly when a child from her barbarian tribe, she could now - as a Callidus assassin - become virtually any stranger, which was a fine fulfilment for her.

Ziz leaned forward.

'Because of your talent, our shrine invites you to participate in an epochal experiment.'

'I am but an instrument,' she replied, 'in the service of our shrine.' Her answer was obedient and dutiful, with the merest hint of caution, as one might expect from a Callidus initiate.

'You are a thinking instrument, my daughter. A wise one. One whose mind must be in perfect tune with the changes you will undergo, or else the result could prove fatal.'

'What changes, secundus?'

When Ziz told her, Meh'Lindi gasped once, as if her dwarfish omega-dan superior had punched her in her muscle-stiffened stomach.

WHEN SHE LEFT his studium, she trotted through the labyrinth of shadowy corridors where any but an initiate would soon be hopelessly lost. Reaching the gymnasium, she begged the wheelmeister to evict a novice from the apparatus, and re-admit her. Scrutinising her, the bald old man seemed to appreciate her need.

Soon Meh'Lindi was running, running, as if to race right away from the shrine, away to the very stars, to anywhere else where she might lose herself entirely and never be found again.

As if the worst nightmare in the world was pursuing her, she sprinted. Thus she vented her feelings of appalled anguish without absconding disobediently to anywhere else whatever. Finally, hours later so it seemed, at a point of exhaustion such as Meh'Lindi had never verged on before, she achieved a kind of acceptance of her fate.

Just as the exercise wheel had changed direction of a sudden previously, so had the wheel of her own fortune reversed shockingly.

Out of binding allegiance to her shrine, on account of the solemn and sinister oaths she had sworn, because the Collegia Assassinorum had made her everything that she was, she must comply.

She was invited to do so, but refusal was unthinkable.

The only alternative was exemplary suicide - to volunteer for a mission that was guaranteed to destroy her, after destroying many other foes.

Meh'Lindi was Callidus, not Eversor. Until now, she had never felt suicidal. Till now. Nor, after her passion-purging run in the wheel, did that alternative tempt her. Even if her shrine, in the unrefusable person of Tarik Ziz, seemed bent on amputating her talent. Aye, mutilating it! By way of an epochal experiment.

\* \* \*

AS THE LASER-SCALPELS hovered over her naked, paralysed body, Meh'Lindi gazed askew at the senior surgeon whose robe was embroidered with purity symbols and prophylactic hexes.

She could move her eyeballs fractionally. Her field of view additionally took in the robed, tattooed radiographer-adept mounted and wired into the brass-banded examiner machine. This towered alongside the operating table like a predatory armadillo, scanning the inner strata of her body with multiple snouts. Its lenseyes projected four infant-sized holograms of herself into mid-air, side by side.

One hologram was of her body flayed so that all her muscles were exposed.

Another revealed only the rivers, tributaries, and streams of her circulatory system. A third dissected out her nerve network. A fourth stripped her skeleton bare. These homunculi of herself rotated slowly as if afloat in invisible bottles, displaying themselves to her and to the surgeon.

The lanky soporifer-adept, who monitored the drips of metacurare that numbed and froze her, sat in a framework resembling a giant spider. Its antennae reached out to sting her insensible, though not unconscious - for her mind must understand the procedure she was about to undergo.

An elderly, warty, gnomelike medicus knelt on a rubber cushion to whisper in her ear. Meh'Lindi could hear him but not see him; nor could she see other adepts in the surgical laboratory who superintended the body implants and extra glands awaiting in stasis tureens.

Meh'Lindi felt nothing. Not the clamp that held her mouth, nor the silver nozzle that gargled saliva from it. Nor the grooved operating table underneath her, with its runnels for any spilled blood or other fluids. Unable to shift her head, yet capable of rolling her eyeballs a fraction, she merely saw somewhat. And heard, the murmurings of the warty gnome.

'First we transect your shoulders and your arms. Later, we will of course be heedful of the topography of your tattoos...'

She heard a laser-scalpel descending, buzzing like a busy fly. The process was beginning.

An assassin could block off agony, could largely disconnect her consciousness from the screaming switchboard of pain in the brain. Thus was an assassin trained. Thus was the web of her brain restrung. How, otherwise, could she fulfil her missions if injured? How else could she focus her empathy without distraction during the polymorphine change? However, during a total dissection such as this some muscles might well spasm instinctively, thwarting the surgeon's delicate manoeuvres. Consequently she was anaesthetised, awake.

The gnome's words registered. Yet in her heart - in her wounded heart - Meh'Lindi was still hearing Tarik Ziz announce how she would be desecrated.

'INITIATES OF CALLIDUS can imitate all sorts and conditions of people. Who can do so better than you, Meh'Lindi? You have even mimicked a humanoid eldar, sufficiently well to convince human beings.' 'And well enough to persuade another eldar for a while, secundus,' she reminded him discreetly.

Ziz nodded. 'Yet we cannot adopt the form of other alien creatures whom we might wish to copy. We are constrained by our limbs, by our bones, by the flesh that is available... What do you know about genestealers, Meh'Lindi?'

At that point Meh'Lindi had experienced a chilling, weakening, cavernous pang, as though her entrails had emptied out of her. It took her moments to identify the unfamiliar sensation.

The sensation was terror.

Terror such as she believed had been expunged from her long since, torn out of her by the root during training. 'What do you know?' he repeated.

'Genestealers have four arms,' she recited robotically. 'Two arms equipped with hands, and two with claws that can tear through plasteel armour as if it is tissue.

Their heads are long and bulbous, with fangs. Their horny spine bends them into a permanent crouch. They have an armoured carapace and a powerful tail...'

Yet it was not the creatures themselves that appalled her. Oh no. It was the implication behind Ziz's question.

'Polymorphine could never turn us into one of those, secundus.'

'Not polymorphine alone, Meh'Lindi.'

AS THE MEDICUS murmured his commentary, interspersed with pious invocations to the Emperor - echoing those of the presiding surgeon - she squinted askew at the homunculi of herself being dissected open and knew that the very same was happening to herself. Tiny stasis generators were clipped inside her to stop her blood from spurting and draining away.

She was a snared hare stretched out on a butcher's block.

'WE SHALL USE body implants,' Ziz had continued. 'We will insert extrudeable plastiflesh reinforced with carbon fibres into your anatomy.

We will

introduce flexicartilage which can toughen hard as horn. In repose - in their collapsed state - these implants will lurk within your body imperceptibly. Yet they will remember the monstrous shape and strength programmed into their fabric. When triggered, while polymorphine softens your flesh and bone, those implants will swell into full, active mode.'

The mosaic of tiny, glittering knives on the wall had seemed to take wing, to leap

at Meh'Lindi to flay her.

'We will graft extra glands into you to store, and synthesise at speed, growth

hormone - somatotrophin - and glands to reverse the process...'

'But,' she had murmured despairingly, 'I still could not become a perfect genestealer, could I?'

'At this stage that is not necessary. You will be able to transform into a convincing genestealer hybrid form. A hybrid with only one pair of arms, and lacking a tail... One closer to the semblance of humanity - yet sufficiently polluted, sufficiently grotesque to persuade those whom you

must infiltrate. If this experiment succeeds as we hope, subsequently we shall attempt to implant secondary limbs.'

'Into me?' Did her voice quiver?

Ziz shook his head. 'Into another volunteer. You will be committed to the hybrid form, only able to alternate between that and your own human anatomy.'

Meh'Lindi's horror grew. What Ziz proposed couldn't simply be a gratuitous experiment, could it? One conducted merely out of curiosity?

Meh'Lindi licked her lips. 'I take it, secundus, that there's some specific mission in view?'

Ziz smiled thinly and told her.

To Meh'Lindi, that mission almost seemed to be a pretext, a trial to test whether she would perform to specification and survive.

Yet of course, she was no arbiter of the importance of a mission. The art of the assassin was to apply lethal pressure at one crucial, vulnerable point in society, a point which might not always even seem central, yet which her superiors calculated was so. Often a target was prominent - a corrupt planetary governor, a disloyal high official. Yet dislodging a seemingly humble pebble could in some circumstances start an avalanche. A Callidus assassin wasn't a slaughterer but a cunning surgeon.

Surgery...

'You are one of our most flexible chameleons, Meh'Lindi. Surely our experiment will succeed best with you. This can lead to wondrous things. To the imitating of tyrannids, of tau, of lacrymoles, of kroot. How else could we ever infiltrate such alien species, if the need arose?'

'You honour your servant,' she mumbled. 'You say that I will be... committed...'

'Hereafter, when using polymorphine, you will unfortunately only be able to adopt the genestealer hybrid form; none other.'

It was as she had deeply feared. She would lose all other options of metamorphosis. She would be flayed of her proud talent, of what - in her heart - made her Meh'Lindi.

Was it so strange that an outstanding ability to mimic other people could reinforce her sense of her own self? Ah no, not so odd... For Meh'Lindi had been snatched away as a child from home and tribe, from language and customs.

After initial stubbornness - insisting on her own sovereign identity - she had yielded and thereafter had found her own firm foundation, in flexibility.

'I'm also trained as a courtesan, secundus,' she reminded Ziz humbly. A momentary bitter grimace twisted the lips of the swarthy, stunted omega-dan.

'You are... splendid enough to be one exactly as you are. We must be willing to prune our ambitions according to the needs of our shrine, and of the Imperium.

Ambition is vanity, in this world of death.'

Had Tarik Ziz sacrificed his own ambitions in the process of rising to the rank of director secundus? Ziz was in line to become supreme director of the Callidus shrine, and thus perhaps grand master of the assassins, a High Lord of Terra.

This experiment, if successful, might play a significant role in his personal advancement...

'I am but an instrument,' Meh'Lindi echoed, hollowly.

And that was why she had fled to the exercise wheel, to run until she felt utterly empty, empty enough to accept.

THE SURGICAL PROCEDURE had already lasted for three painstaking, pious hours. The whispery voice of the warty gnome was growing hoarse.

A sub-skin of compacted, reinforced, "clever" plastiflesh was now layered subcutaneously within Meh'Lindi's arms and legs and torso. This pseudoflesh was "clever" in two regards. It was sending invasive neural fibres deeper into her anatomy, fusing physiologically. In this, it was cousin to the black carapace which was grafted into every Space Marine as the crowning act of his

transformation into a superhuman. Furthermore, the false flesh could remember the evil contours it was programmed to assume, and would forever override any rebellious impulse of Meh'Lindi to counterfeit a different form.

It was like a map embroidered on supple fabric, which, upon stimulus, would expand, springing into shape stiffly, extruding from its contour lines the mountains of monstrosity.

The anatomical experimentum adepts of Callidus had been ingenious. Likewise, blades of flexicartilage were inset under her finger and toe nails and sheathed her phalanges, her metatarsal and metacarpal

bones. Stubs of the same had been grafted to her vertebrae, to her splint bones and femurs... And elsewhere.

In the phantom holo-dolls hanging above the operating table her new glands glowed as nuggets high inside her chest, not unlike a second set of nipples pointing inward.

Oh, she had been thoroughly, devoutly operated on.

And now the climax was coming, as the laser-scalpels swung down towards her staring face. Instruments came into play around her eyes, her nose, her clamped open mouth, her cranium.

The medicus murmured huskily, 'By submucous resection we now incise inside the nostrils, to elevate the lining membrane from the septum and insert spurs of flexicartilage; thus to develop the genestealer snout...'

And this was happening to her.

'We drill all the frontal teeth to replace the roots with fangplasm...'

And this was happening to her, too.

'We sever the frenulum-fold under the tongue, for greater flexibility of that organ. We perform a partial glossectomy - akin to a coring of your tongue, were it a rose-red apple - to insert a similitude of genestealer tongue...'

And this was also happening to her, as she squinted askance at the spinning stems of silver precision tools, while the gurgling pipe sucked away minced and vaporized flesh.

'Presently: We lift your scalp, so as to trepan the skull. We perform a frontal craniotomy so that islets of skull will spread more easily, to assume the genestealer profile...'

Aye, that profile - and none other!

No eerily elegant alien eldar's silhouette.

No glory-girl's, nor hag's.

No one else's, ever, other than that single bestial shape.

And this was happening to her.

As laser-scalpels sliced her face and skull she screamed within. Boiling outrage welled in her heart. Grievance, gall, and bitterness mixed their corrosive, acid cocktail in her belly. Her spirit shrieked.

Yet, necessarily, she lay silent as a stone.

She lay silent as a marble woman whom ruthless sculptors were carving into an evil idol.

Aye, silent as the very void that now opened in her tormented soul, swallowing her scream, sucking it away as surely as the silver tube sucked away parts of herself.

And in that terrible silence part of Meh'Lindi still listened to the medicus explaining; for she must understand.

ALONE, ALONE, AND now ever more alone, Meh'Lindi walked towards a huge eroded sandstone temple under a coppery sky inflamed by a giant red sun.

That awesome sun filled a quarter of the heavens. Nevertheless, the air was chilly, for such suns yielded only meagre heat.

The temple complex dominated the end of a dusty boulevard lined by arcaded buildings of glazed terracotta with interior courtyards sheltered by domes. The arcades were crowded with vendors of barbecued birds' legs, stuffed mice and hot spiced wine, of holograms of this holy city of Shandabar, of supposed fragments of relics embedded in crystal, and models of relics. Those loggia were thronged with beggars and cripples and conjurers, with fortune tellers and robed pilgrims and gaudy tourists.

Temple concessionaires, some of them retired priests, were selling icons guaranteed as Imperially blessed and, to those who underwent the trivial test of sticking their hand inside a humming hex-box, lurid silken purity tassels, so called. These promised protection from evil in proportion to the size and number and floridity of tassels purchased.

The Oriens temple of Shandabar, built at what had once been the eastern gateway, was in fact the least of the holy city's three major temples. However, it boasted a giant, guarded jar of long, curving, talon-like fingernails. These were undoubtedly clippings from the Emperor's own hands, dating from the mythic days before He had been encased in the golden throne. Due to His immortal power and reach throughout the galaxy, these disembodied nails were understood to continue growing slowly as if still connected to His person. Thus priests could trim and shave off authentic parings for sale to the faithful, who might wear them or grind them to dust so as to drink in potions.

The temple also housed, in a huge silver reliquary, the thigh bones of a Space Marine commander from long ago - and, in a baroque copper cage, what was reputed to be the partial skeleton of a "daemon".

Carts, drawn by cameleopards with humps suggestive of huge inflamed boils, with snaking necks and lugubrious, whiskery, stupid faces, creaked to and fro along the boulevard, carrying sightseers and

vegetables. Balloon-tyred cars and the occasional armoured police or security vehicle growled by. Even the Oriens temple was notably wealthy.

Meh'Lindi wore the capacious brown robe of a pilgrim, with a cowl that hid her features in shadow. Cinching the waist was her scarlet assassin's sash which concealed garrottes, blades, phials of chemicals, and a digital needle gun. Within her robe were other articles of her primary trade.

And what was hidden within her?

Why, the most evil shape. A vile shape that forever constrained her now; that denied her the option of masquerading as anyone she pleased. That shape, which was indelibly inscribed within her healed anatomy - physically implanted in collapsed form - denied her access to any of the sham physiques and physiognomies that she had thought of as... well, sisters, mothers, cousins to herself.

Thus she was utterly alone. Her only doppelganger was a monster; the alien beast within.

Meh'Lindi grieved as she entered a caravanserai near the temple. Camelopards were tethered to steel rings set in the flagstones of the vast courtyard. Ropes hobbled their lanky legs, fore and aft, lest they lash out. Flies buzzed around their orange droppings. Guyed to other rings, tents were pitched under the dome.

Galleries, reached by curving iron stairways, housed three upper tiers of semiprivate rooms with linked balconies. Smoke from several bonfires of dried dung drifted out through the open eye at the zenith of the dome. These fires notwithstanding, the chill of the night would creep in from outside. The more traditional breed of traveller who shunned the shivers of the early hours, and who sought privacy, would rent a tent. Poorer cousins would wrap themselves in bedrolls on the hard flags.

The hunchbacked, sallow-complexioned proprietor asked, in the common language of Sabulorb, 'Seeking lodgings?'

Any assassin was already fluent in major dialects of Imperial Gothic as well as a number of human languages which had drifted far enough from their origins as to bear no resemblance to their roots. An assassin constantly added new languages to her repertoire. Meh'Lindi had done likewise, using a hypno-casque - a knowledge-inducer - on the cargo ship en route to the sandy world of the giant red sun. The electronic tattoo on her palm currently declared her to be the daughter of a planetary governor intent on a pilgrimage.

'Preferring lowest room,' she replied. 'Being from cavern world, surface uninhabitable. Suffering from vertigo and sky-fear.' She pulled the capacious hood even further forward, implying that this headgear was her private cave. She paid the proprietor a week in advance in Sabulorb shekels, exchanged at the spaceport against Imperial credit programmed into her tattoo, and added a shekel as a modest sweetener.

'Being cellar rooms under your caravanserai?' she asked. A reasonable question, given her explanation. She allowed a hint of vulnerability and pleading to colour her voice, though a harder overtone - of someone accustomed to be indulged and obeyed - warned that she was not to be taken advantage of.

'Being, indeed... though not habitable.' The hunchback's palm seemed to itch.

'Being even an old tunnel, perhaps, if this guest is preferring to visit the Oriens by risking sticky cobwebs, but avoiding open sky.'

'Oh no,' she demurred. 'Being pilgrim, same as others. But thanking you for offering favour.' She slipped him an extra half-shekel.

NEXT MORNING MEH'LINDI took the full-scale guided tour of the Oriens temple, alert for signs of covert genestealer infestation, such as any four-armed idol, however small, tucked away in however inconspicuous a niche.

A scrawny, long-nosed priest guided her party. In the Hall of the Holy Fingernails, robed guardian deacons sat hunched on tripod stools around a tall crystal jar of parings, nursing what seemed to be some kind of stun gun of local manufacture. While the guide enthused about the miracle of how the Emperor's nails continued to grow, Meh'Lindi pretended that she was about to make an offering. She contrived to spill some half-shekels far and wide from her purse.

Recovering her coins, she stooped to squint inside the hoods of the guards.

Two of those deacons certainly possessed the sharp teeth and glaring mesmeric eyes of hybrids who could hope to pass for true human, at least in shadow.

Massive candles burned, rendering the rune-mosaics of the walls waxy as the inside of a beehive. Bowls of smouldering incense flavoured the honey of the air.

She thought of cellars under the caravanserai, and of the tunnel. Under this elderly temple there must be crypts and catacombs, and tunnels extending who knew how far beneath the ancient city...

'Now conducting you to the Hall of Femurs,' announced their guide.

Her journey through the warp to Sabulorb had been brief enough, but some years of local time would have passed since whichever spy of the Imperium had left to report his or her suspicions. The infestation by genestealers had plainly been under way for a number of generations. Genestealers would hide, seeking to maintain a facade of normality for as long as possible. Ultimately the evil brood would hope to control the city through their more presentable offspring, and even the planet, while still maintaining the pretence that life was normal.

Long before that stage was reached, the Imperium ought to take utmost measures.

Meanwhile Tarik Ziz judged - cunningly, or rashly? - that there existed leeway for an experiment... Had he consulted with the supreme director of Callidus?

Had the supreme director consulted with the grand master? And had the grand master consulted with... whom? The lord commander militant?

An instrument of Callidus should not dream of asking such questions. Nor did Meh'Lindi understand the hierarchy of the Imperium in its complex entirety. She was but an instrument.

Yet she was aware that the rapid and total destruction of genestealers, wherever found, was a military priority.

'Please coming this way, pious pilgrims-'

In a crypt beneath the temple, the genestealer patriarch - the first of the evil aliens to pollute a victim - would roost on its throne, attended by its offspring in hybrid or quasi-human form. By the fourth generation, these would each be able to sire or bear new purestrain stealers. Had that stage yet been reached? The nominal leader of the brood, the charismatic, human-seeming magus, would undoubtedly have become high priest of the Oriens temple, which would seem to continue to worship the Emperor of all Mankind.

Humans who had been polluted by stealers were mesmerized. The humanseeming offspring heeded a brood-bond so that they loved their bestial cousins and uncles intensely. Would Meh'Lindi, in her altered body, possess enough chameleon empathy to fool that brood-bond?

She almost ignored the sacred, pitted thigh bones of the Marine poised in their reliquary. At that moment, beneath her feet perhaps lurked the fierce, bloated, armoured, cloven-footed patriarch...

Just as inside herself there lurked an example of its bastard progeny, as if it had kissed her deep with its spatulate, seed-planting tongue...

When presently she saw the partial skeleton of the supposed "daemon" in that copper cage, filigreed with hexes and a-crackle with blue sparks - energized so that no daemonic claimant could return - she wondered whether the hunched alien bones were actually those of a purestrain stealer, set up sardonically in that place of honour by the patriarch while the real relic languished elsewhere... The tour lasted for two hours, comprising lavishly decaying halls, sacrariums, and lesser shrines. She saw some evidence of on-going embellishment and repair, yet evidently wealth was not being squandered on the Imperial cult.

The donated shekels, and those gleaned from sale of relics, would be sustaining an ever-extending family of unhumans underground.

When Meh'Lindi and her party at last returned to the great courtyard, a liturgical pageant was about to begin.

'Seeing the blessed Emperor defeating the daemon you were witnessing within!' - cried a herald.

Daemons and aliens were creatures of a very different stripe; and genestealers certainly fell into the latter category, of natural beings. The less known about the daemons of Chaos, the better! Ironically the herald - knowing no better - blared out something forbidden so as to advertise whatever flummery would be staged...

'A shekel apiece, good pilgrims, so that we may be proceeding!'

A scrofulous dwarf scurried to and fro, collecting coins in a sawn-open skull fitted with silver handles, till he was satisfied with the height of the pile. The herald clapped his hands.

The illusion of a huge and ornate, though melancholy, throne room sprang into being all around, cast by hidden holographic projectors. The sandy ground of the courtyard now seemed to be tessellated marble. A horde of gorgeous, abject lords and ladies grovelled before a leering, green-hued, sag-bellied monster sprawling in a great, spike-backed throne. Mutant guards wearing obscene and blasphemous armour kept vigil, cradling bolt pistols and power axes. The "daemon" glowed luridly. Jagged threads of lightning flickered between its froggy hands. Meh'Lindi was wryly amused.

At that moment a parody of Space Marines with brutish, bulbous heads burst into the throne room. They fired explosive bolts at the guards, who fired back in turn. Caught up in the illusion, the audience of pilgrims screamed. Rapidly, as if matter met anti-matter, all of the guards and all of the mock Space Marines died and vanished. So did the lords and ladies, leaving the stage clear...

A tall, aura-cloaked figure entered, wearing a flashing golden crown. A mask of wires and tubes hid the "Emperor's" face. From his outstretched hands sprouted nails which were as long again as his fingers. He gestured challengingly at the daemon - or alien - lord. As Meh'Lindi stared, transfixed, these nails swelled into claws, and an extra set of hands, and arms, burst forth from the sides of the "Emperor's" rib-cage.

Plainly this pageant was designed to confuse the beliefs of onlookers - already confused - so that they would identify the holy Emperor with the image of a genestealer... who would soon tear the fat green daemon-alien apart and claim that throne...

'Fool!' cried a voice. 'This being the climax, not the prelude!'

Behind the goggling, gasping pilgrims a tall purple-cloaked man was rebuking the herald, whom he was hauling along by the scruff of the neck. Like a ventilator cowl or a radar dish, the newcomer's high stiffened hood cupped a long, menacing, yet enchanting face. His cranium was shaved bald. Knobbly bumps above his brows were tattooed with butterflies unfurling their wings, as if beauteous thoughts were bursting forth from chrysalises there.

It was indeed a magus.

Meh'Lindi slipped closer to him.

'Not noticing our error, exalted one,' babbled the herald. 'Being outside of the holorama. Apologizing. Soon rectifying. Recommencing the performance-'

As Meh'Lindi concentrated all her attention on the magus, the man seemed to sense her scrutiny and gazed towards her piercingly. His nostrils flared like a horse scenting fire on the wind.

His gaze was compelling... but did not compel her.

Shucking her hood further forward, the more to gloom her shadowed face, she withdrew, and walked through the illusory walls of the throne room. She strolled away across the gritty courtyard back towards the boulevard and the caravanserai. The bloated sun of dull blood was sinking.

Let her not be distracted by grief at what she must now do! Let her not betray her shrine - even if her shrine had, in a sense, betrayed her. She was an instrument. And now the shape of the tool must change.

THAT EVENING MEH'LINDI crept through a twisting, turning, cobwebbed tunnel, exerting her chameleon instinct. Best that she should be quite close to those whom she copied. The metamorphosis would proceed more speedily; and she by no means wished to linger over it.

The electrolumen in her hand feebly lit ancient, rune-carved stones matted with dusty spider-silk in which the bones of little lizards hung.

Presently she reached an appendix to a deserted crypt, in which a solitary nub of candle burned low. Ahead were branching catacombs lit by the occasional oil lamp, leading towards a brighter glow and the moan of a distant choir.

Her robe was loose, and would accommodate the changes, but she dropped it nonetheless. She did not wish to disguise her new form.

She injected polymorphine, and swiftly hid the tiny empty syringe in a crevice where no one should ever find it. She had left her assassin's sash in the caravanserai. With her hands transformed into claws, she could hardly have manipulated garrottes or knives, let alone a miniature jokaero gun that was meant to slip on to a fingertip. She hoped the device she had rigged up in her room to re-inject her and restore her, would penetrate her toughened body.

Maybe she would be obliged to inject through her eye.

A wave of agony coursed through her, and she blocked it.

She hunched over. Her body was molten. As she focused her attention, the implants began to express themselves. Bumps thrust up along her bending spine.

Her jaw tore open, elongating into a toothy snout. Her eyes bulged. Her arms swelled, and the phalanges of her fingers became long thick claws. Her hips distorted. Now her very skin was hardening into a tough carapace, which she knew would be a livid blue, just as her cordy ligaments were a purple-red in hue.

Fairly soon, she was an extreme specimen of genestealer hybrid, whom no one could surely suspect to be anything else underneath the skin, underneath the carapace.

SHE EXERTED ALL of her empathy as she loped onward through the

catacomb... and into a great subterranean chamber, pillared and vaulted, awash with torchlight, alive with brood kin, many of whom were brutish, others of whom might pass muster as human.

The hiss of many throats silenced the unhuman choir that was serenading, or communing with, the patriarch on its horned throne.

Human-seeming guards directed weapons at her. Broodkin rushed towards her, snarling.

Oh, the hunchbacked steward of the caravanserai had dreamed of a pretty prank to play on this high-born pilgrim daughter from another world. He must have been well aware of what he would guide her into.

Hybrids, more human than herself, formed a menacing circle around Meh'Lindi.

On his throne, nostrils flaring, the patriarch bared his fangs. Through the midst of the deadly cordon, strode the magus, cloak swirling.

'I...,' Meh'Lindi hissed, 'seeeking sanctuary... with my kiiind.'

Issuing from a distorted larynx, over a twisted tongue, her voice was far from human. Yet the magus must be well accustomed to such voices.

'Where coming from?' he demanded, fixing Meh'Lindi with his mesmeric gaze.

'Hiiding on starship,' she replied. 'Imperials destroying my brood, all of my clan but meeee. Craving sanctuareee-'

'How finding us here?'

'Wrapping myself in robe... skulking by night... checking temples. Temples being where maybe finding my distant kin.'

The magus scrutinized Meh'Lindi searchingly. 'You being first generation hybrid... Excellent stealer body, mostly...' He locked his gaze with hers, and she felt... swayed; but was trained to resist ordinary mesmeric enchantments.

The magus chuckled. 'Of course we are not compelling one another... We are only compelling the human cattle. Our own bond being one of mutual devotion. Of heeding the calls, which you cannot heed, being not of our brood.' He turned.

'As I am now heeding... our Master. Be coming with me.'

The patriarch was gesturing with a claw.

'Escort her carefully, brothers and sisters,' the magus told the guards with a radiant yet twisted smile.

And so Meh'Lindi approached the monster on the throne: a leering, fang-toothed, armoured hog of a grandsire alien. Its eyes glared at her from under ridged bony brows. One of its lower, humanoid hands,

adorned with topaz and sapphire rings, contemplatively stroked a fierce claw-hand that rested on its knee. One of its hooves tapped the floor. Loaves of armour-bone jutted from its curved spine, and it rubbed these against the carved back of its throne grindingly, as if to dispel an itch. Its spatulate tongue stuck out, tasting.

Meh'Lindi bowed lower than her stoop dictated, thrusting from her mind any hint of assassin thoughts, soaking up and re-radiating as best she could the ambience of grotesque, evil worship.

'Craving sanctuary, greatest father,' she hissed.

This was the crucial moment.

The patriarch's nostrils flared, sniffing the faintly oily odours of her spurious body. Its violet, vein-webbed eyes, at once odious and alluring, scrutinized her intently. Its gaze caressed her and pried intimately like some dulcet scalpel blade smeared with intoxicating, aphrodisiacal mucus. The granddaddy of evil clicked its claws together contemplatively. One of its hooves drummed the flagstone which was worn, at that spot, into a rut.

No, not evil... That was no way to be thinking of this fine patriarch!

Empathy was the key to impersonation.

Identification.

How Meh'Lindi's yearned to flee from this den of monsters and demi-monsters!

- though of course it was far too late to flee.

Flee? Ha! While the very same monstrosity resided within herself? In such circumstances, fleeing made no sense whatever. For she was monstrous too.

So therefore she must perceive the patriarch as the incarnation of...

Benevolence. Fatherliness. Wisdom. Maturity.

The armoured monster that confronted her personified love. A profound depth of love. Love which quite transcended the passions and affections of mundane men and women - whatever such sentiments might feel like to the possessors.

Meh'Lindi had certainly mimed such emotions in the past. With an assassin's eye she had studied the victims of amorousness, lust, infatuation, and fondness, even if she herself had not been vulnerable...

This genestealer patriarch radiated such a powerful, protective, brooding love - of its true kin, and of itself, of the monster that it could not help but be: the perfect, passionately dedicated, self-sanctified monstrosity.

Yes, love, fierce, twisted love.

And utter, biological loyalty.

And a dream that possessed it, almost like some daemon: an inner vision of its mission.

The mission was to perpetuate its kind. Human beings seemed to manage this same feat almost incidentally and accidentally - all be it that the result was a thousand times a thousand human worlds, many pulsing to bursting point with the festering pus of the human species.

Genestealers were compelled to try harder. They couldn't simply writhe in copulation with their own species and produce a litter of brats.

Genestealers would willingly - nay, compulsively - infiltrate any species. Human. Ork. It didn't matter which. Eldar. To bring about, incidentally, the corruption and downfall of those species.

In a sense, a genestealer almost represented cosmic love. A love that knew no boundary of species. That heeded no distinction between male and female.

Between human and abhuman, human and alien.

So this patriarch was love incarnate! Hideous, enslaving love. Almost...

Its mission also demanded hair-trigger, homicidal fury in defence of its own destiny.

And, at the same time, cunning restraint - intelligence.

Its intelligence knew naught of machines, of starships or bolt pistols, of dynamos or windmills. Tools? Our broodkin can use those things for us! Yet its mind kenned much of glands and feelings, of hormonal motives, of genetic and hypnotic dictates.

The patriarch's rheumy, violet, magnetic eyes, set in that hideous magenta countenance, considered Meh'Lindi in her hybrid guise... Seeing... true kindred?

Or seeing through her? About to turn down its claw? Loving you, she thought.

Revering you. Admiring you utmostly. In the same fashion as she revered Callidus. As she honoured her omega-dan director... (No! Not that one. Not Tarik Ziz!)

In the same way as she revered... the Emperor on Terra. This clever, loving patriarch was her Emperor here. Her great father-of-all.

Did it possess a personal name? Did any genestealer? The patriarch grunted wordlessly.

Beside her, the magus rocked to and fro, heeding the alien monster's mental sendings. A hybrid from another star system need not be similarly attuned to those.

'Granting refuge,' murmured the magus at last. 'Embracing you in our tabernacle, and in our crusade.'

The patriarch closed its eyes, as if to dismiss Meh'Lindi. It folded its humanoid hands across its jutting, carapace-banded belly, and seemed to drift into a reverie.

Its claws twitched rhythmically. Perhaps it was numbering its children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Of whom, Meh'Lindi of course was not one. So though it accepted her into the fold, or at least into the fringe of the fold, she was hardly a total communicant, as were all others in this subterranean stronghold.

And how many there were! Brutishly deformed broodkin rubbed shoulders and preened and sang praise. They hissed intimacies to one another. They went about their cult duties. They kept watch and ward. They nurtured the juveniles of the clan, some of whom were marked with the taint, others of whom almost appeared to be sweet, comely children, save perhaps for bumpy brows and the eerie light in their eyes.

As Meh'Lindi gazed at a nursery area, she wondered how many of the deadly, infected children she might need to kill before she could leave this place.

If the patriarch - in the wisdom of its alien glands - had chosen to tolerate her presence, the quasihuman magus retained an edge of scepticism.

'Most welcome refugee from far planet,' he said, 'how being speaking Sabulorbish so readily?' He stroked one of the butterflies - of saffron and turquoise hue - upon his knobbly forehead, as if deep in thought.

'After hiding on ship? After skulking in city? What opportunity of learning?

Seeming remarkable to me! Knowing of the plurality of languages in the galaxy.

Many worlds; many lingos and dialects, hmm?'

The magus was sufficiently persuaded by her body; that passed muster. How could he disbelieve the evidence of the hybrid body that he saw before him? He could not. Yet he had come up with a question which she had hardly expected from a fanatic posing as high priest of a

somewhat dodgy provincial cult devoted to miraculous Imperial fingernails.

His question was cool and logical.

Ought she to have burst in upon the genestealer clan inarticulately, unable to express herself at all? Incoherently? Babbling in some off-world tongue, without explanation?

In that event, she might now be caged behind bars strong enough to hold even a genestealer, while her hosts investigated her at their leisure.

Meh'Lindi's mind raced. She was Callidus, wasn't she?

'My human mother beeeeing a Psittican,' Meh'Lindi hissed. 'You hearing of planet Psitticuss? Itsss lingo-mimes?'

No such planet as Psitticus, the parrot-world, existed. In an Imperium of a million worlds, no one individual, however well informed, could know much about more than a tiny fraction of planets. Better, by far, to name a world which didn't exist, than one which did, concerning which she might conceivably be faulted...

'Ah,' said the magus. 'You enriching my knowledge. Being a fertile world for our kind, that Psitticus?'

'Inishhhially. Then the killerssss coming, in the cursed name of their Emperor...

The ruthlessss Space Marinesss... blasting my familieeee, missssing only meee.'

'Condolences. Have you been seeing inside our temple up above?'

'Only from a disstance,' lied Meh'Lindi.

'We are using theatrical skills to ensorcel the superstitious pilgrims. We are confusing their image of the God-Emperor with that of... Old Four Arms.' The magus nodded towards the throne, his tone humorously affectionate in that moment. Oh how the magus basked in an embracing, patriarchal love... of the foulest breed. How he relished the monster's wisdom. What a twisted parody of fondness the man exhibited. A fondness that did not make him exactly a fool, however...

The patriarch had nodded off. Its claws and fingers spasmed fitfully as, bathing in adoration, it dreamt... of what? Of mating with human beings gulled here or dragged here by its broodkin? Of the glory and ecstasy of disseminating its genes, carving its own image into the tormented flesh of the galaxy?

'After we are expanding here enough and consolidating our hold enough,' the magus declared, 'we shall be smuggling missionaries out

to other worlds to stage religious pageants - to spread the cult of the true, four-armed ruler of existence.

We shall be subverting other temples, other pilgrims, other worshippers of that moribund god on Terra - of that brittle stick, that rag-doll locked in his golden commode.'

His eyes glowed. 'How vivid, how alive a four-arm being! How truly superhuman. What other species truly uniting all the strife-torn stars? What other breed of being physically making men and aliens into cousins? And nurturing and preserving the myriad worlds for its breeding ground forevermore? Nor ever casting aside the heritage of men or aliens - those being like nourishing milk to the four-armed ones!' 'You being wissse,' hissed Meh'Lindi.

'Oh yes, myself studying reports and rumours of other worlds that we might be making our own. But, dear refugee, you being tired and famished. Was I speaking of mere milk? Ha! You be coming this way...'

Meh'Lindi was indeed ravenous. Soon she was feasting on imported grox steaks and offworld truffles and sweetmeats bought with donated shekels. She and the brood tore into the dainties with their fangs. She fed, but took no gourmet satisfaction in the costly foods.

What of the hunchbacked proprietor of the caravanserai? He had to be in league with the stealer clan. Or at the very least he had to be aware of their existence, in relatively friendly fashion. Would he otherwise have mischievously told the lone lady traveller of the tunnel?

If Meh'Lindi remained long amongst the broodkin, and the hunchback noted her absence - then decided to pry into her room, and into her belongings - might he report his puzzlement to the temple guards?

If Meh'Lindi died here, would she care? If she was torn apart by the enraged kin of that vile form which possessed her, would that matter? Would the genestealers, in the act of destroying their own semblance, symbolically annul what desecrated her, as no other death could, thus bringing her a moment's blessed balm before the long dreamless sleep of nullity?

Yes, by Callidus it mattered!

And by Him on Terra it mattered.

Yet had not Callidus... betrayed her?

How long dared she remain here? Alternatively, did she dare to try to leave?

Brooding, Meh'Lindi picked her fangs clean with a claw. She lay that night in the torch-lit vault among monsters and demi-monsters, a monster herself.

\* \* \*

SHE WOKE EARLY.

She woke into a nightmare - and almost cried out in horror. A convulsive spasm

racked her. She flinched from... ..from herself.

For she was the nightmare. She herself. None other.

Oh there were times in the past when she had woken in metamorphosed bodies.

In comely bodies. In ugly bodies. Even in an alien, eldar body - ethereally beautiful, that one had been, radiantly lovely...

But she had never woken as a monster.

An assassin was trained to respond instantly, to come wide awake at once and attack instantly, if need be. Yet in that brief instant of awakening Meh'Lindi was almost impelled by the nightmare of reality to attack her own altered person.

She rolled over, rose to a crouch, and stretched... casually, attempting now in alien body language - should any eyes be scrutinizing her - to express relief at finding herself amongst monster kin. Her spasm had merely been the instinctive reflex of the fugitive, the supposed former stowaway amidst hostile human beings. Had it not? Had it not?

A snouty hybrid guard had indeed been eyeing her, she noted. A couple of young whelps of the brood, as well. Another hybrid raised its head, darting a look in her direction. Here was family, hypersensitive to an occult, sticky web of relationships, to hormonal bonds of gossamer that were nevertheless as strong as the steel of a coiled spring.

She was now a fly in that web, permitted to conduct herself as a guest spider. It was a web that would spin outward from here, and from other genestealer lairs - so the magus dreamed - to entrap all sentient creatures of the galaxy in its domineering, adhesive embrace.

As any sensible being - honed to survival - would, in a new environment, she roamed.

The brats and the guard ambled after her as she sauntered, stooped, hooves clicking flagstones, through crypt and vault lit with aromatic oil burning in golden lamps, hung with tapestries depicting abstractly the deserts of Sabulorb, its seas of sand. Here was a librarium full of tomes about worlds, worlds, worlds.

What a hunger for worlds a genestealer must feel. What a blind, frustrated hunger - until a captured species of breeders gave it the means to sate its greed.

How appropriate that next to the librarium was a great kitchen and larders piled with extraterrestrial imports.

Here, behind a gaol-like barred door was a treasury, banded chests a-brim with shekels. Behind other bars, an armoury storing different treasure: stun guns, stub guns, bolt pistols, lasrifles.

In a birthing chamber, adjacent to a well-equipped surgery, several hugely pregnant females lay in silk upon the softest feather beds - human-seeming females, bestial females side by side.

Meh'Lindi noted stone stairways leading upward; vaulted tunnels that vanished away darkly. She memorized the subterranean layout, matching it against her recollection of the temple above.

Here, a long stone ramp led up to a great trapdoor that would rise on chains.

Garaged below: a long purple limousine with toughened, reflective, curtained windows, its radiator grille a great grin of brass teeth, its armoured panels studded elegantly with chromium-plated rivets. The magus's personal transport, no doubt. Could it be that the patriarch himself ever rode unseen through the dusty streets of Shandabar, leering out at its... pasture of people, its great paddock of prey?

She trotted lithely back from her tour, to the main family chamber. All these tunnels and chambers below the temple were a sewer of alien evil - of an evil compelled by a foul, cunning, imperative joke of nature to be none other than just that; evil that even wore a mask of ultimate community. However, Shandabar City was also plumbed in the sanitary sense. In a privy, Meh'Lindi defecated her transformed supper of the previous night and before flushing that away with a push of her claw wondered whether her excrement had been doubly metamorphosed, the food transformed not only into dung, but into identifiably genestealer dung.

Perhaps her bowels remained her own. Perhaps her dirt was the talisman of her identity.

If so - considering the keen senses of genestealers - thanks be for plumbing. In the Callidus part of her she made a mental note to mention this aspect of her mission. Could an assassin, transformed into an alien, be tripped up... by an all too human stool?

THE BROOD HAD stirred. The brood fed - she too - and dispersed about their duties, though the throne room was always well visited, as if kin loved to bask regularly in the presence of their patriarch.

That vile eminence, which had snoozed nightlong in its horned throne, stirred at last.

Immediately its violet eyes, rheumy from slumber, sought out Meh'Lindi. It beckoned with a claw.

Its hybrid guards were alert now. The magus hastened to its side as Meh'Lindi approached, sidling deferentially. Not bowing, no. Straightening herself somewhat, indeed. She had decided by now that a frontal stoop might be misconstrued as the attack-crouch.

The magus rocked gently to and fro, heeding.

'We being the dreamers of bodies,' he said to Meh'Lindi. 'We kissing the dream of ourselves into the bodies of human beings, a dream that is enrapturing them.

Our grandsire was dreaming of your body, New One.'

Meh'Lindi experienced a brief squirm of courtesanly disgust, of the apprehension felt by a paramour when first confronting a singularly bloated and repulsive debauchee - that virgin instant before professionalism and pretence triumph. But of course, a genestealer was quite without sexual lust as such. A genestealer's loins were blank save for an anal vent protected by a tough flap.

She projected her semblance of love.

'Grandsire's dream was highlighting patterns on your body, which indeed he is perceiving faintly, now that his dream has been showing him those... Dim, distorted images of spider, snake, strange beetles...'

The patriarch could see the trace of her tattoos! Those should have been engulfed, submerged, by the purple-red pigment of her swollen new muscles, by the deep blue of her horny carapace. Certainly they had seemed to vanish utterly when she had first transformed herself, with Tarik Ziz and surgeon adepts as audience. No human eyes had spied her eerie - her provocatively sinister - tattoos, which so much spelled out herself, as to be her own private heraldry.

No human eyes.

The mesmeric, veinwebbed orbs of the granddaddy of evil saw somewhat differently.

'Aaah,' she sighed. 'On Psitticuss, being many large poisonousss arachnids and serpentsss. Mottled skins of the human lingo-mimes

mimicking those... My human mother passing such blemishes on to me. Slight birthmarksss...'

The patriarch grunted several times, ingesting her story like a hog its swill. The magus glared sceptically.

'A variant upon genetic inheritance of acquired characteristics,' he said primly, 'being the genestealer glory. That, and the later expression of our own lurking somatotype. Yeah, the pirating of genes - the boarding of the vessel of an alien breed's body - being what is giving us our holy name. But for a human being to be transmitting her personal acquired marks as opposed to a capacity for acquiring such-' Damn his clever mind and his grubbing in that librarium!

'Not understanding,' hissed Meh'Lindi; and truly she didn't.

It was all irrelevant. All utterly irrelevant.

From the direction of the tunnel by which she had first entered the lair of the brood, hustled the hunchbacked, yellow-faced landlord of the caravanserai.

He held Meh'Lindi's discarded robe and the device she had rigged up in her room that held the syringe of polymorphine. Around his neck he had draped her red sash.

'Being treachery! Bewaring!' he cried.

Guards raised their bolt pistols, staring around for an enemy.

'Seizing that New One!' spat the magus, saliva spraying at Meh'Lindi. Four strong hybrids leapt to pinion her by the arms.

For a moment she stiffened, as if in surprise, both testing their vigour and about to fight, yet then - before they would even have sensed resistance - she relaxed.

She could probably throw them off.

What then?

Could she trigger a salvo of explosive bolts, some of which might strike the patriarch? If she leapt at it? Bolts that would destroy her in the process, too...

No, the brood wouldn't recklessly put their patriarch in such peril. They would surely hold their fire at close quarters.

With her claws and fangs alone she, a hybrid, would never be able to kill a fullblown, mature patriarch. Who might loll. Who might snooze. Yet who was probably the most lethal fighting creature in all the galaxy. Whose claws could rip through a Space Marine's powered combat armour as if that was a mere sheath of thin tin.

She couldn't hope to snatch a boltgun. Her claws were too crude to operate the trigger.

The sash left behind in her lodging... the improvised frame for the little hypodermic... where else could she have left those? And her robe in the tunnel... where else?

Nevertheless, she felt that she had walked into a trap of her own making - marched into it through self-hatred. Or at least through hatred of what Tarik Ziz had done to her.

The patriarch crunched its claws together malevolently. The magus almost jiggled with the power of its sendings. That mesmeric, clever leader of the brood was a puppet now, his true role blatantly apparent - that of a lordly, willing slave to the gross granddaddy. For that magus, who boasted of the glory of the genestealers, was not a full genestealer himself. He wasn't a purestrain. He was a sublimely talented, puissant tool of the patriarch and of the genestealer mission.

A tool. Just as Meh'Lindi herself was an instrument.

And thus it would be under the perverted, loving tyranny of genestealers triumphant: a cousinhood of captivated, obedient, cattle-like species, lowing their praise of their predator.

It seemed almost as though genestealers had been, well, consciously devised... to enslave the different races of the galaxy, to prepare the ground, to sow the seed which something else unimaginable might reap...

Meh'Lindi thrust this speculation from her mind, as the hunchback proclaimed slyly: 'A pilgrim woman coming to my caravanserai, from a cavern world saying, seeming an imperious princess in disguise. Then finding her gone, and this sash of many deadly marvels in her room - some enigmatic, some plain in purpose such as a garrotte - and this device for injecting some substance.

Discovering her robe in the tunnel I was telling her of, prankfully, so as to be presenting a fine fertile vessel to our lord, His tongue to be kissing deep... A New One being here! And where is that covert princess of the caverns, eh?'

'Cousin,' said the magus, 'we too are having our suspicions of the New One.'

'Oh, are we?' retorted the hunchback.

'Yet that a pilgrim woman should be becoming a mighty hybrid... being contrary to anatomy.'

'Big galaxy, cousin! Full of strange marvels, no doubt!'

'Being well aware.'

'Pedantically aware, at times! Despite charisma of glowing eyes, despite charm of handsome countenance, and splendid limbs!'

'So there we are having it,' said the patriarch's supreme puppet. 'You yourself might be being magus, but for your exaggerated deformity, and because of your lacking sufficient... grace. So our grandsire was not countenancing you, my jealous, loving cousin. Thus you are seeking undermining me, maybe, with this story of a woman.'

Was it possible, thought Meh'Lindi, that the hunchback and the magus might quarrel bitterly enough to allow her some grace, some leeway?

No. For the patriarch arose, exerted its control of kindred.

'Bringing that needle against the New One,' ordered the magus. 'Piercing a part. Testing...' He mused. Though which part? 'Where...? New One, will you be sticking out your tongue?'

'That ssstooped man planning poissoning this refugee?' Meh'Lindi asked, as if in ignorance. 'This being assylum in your tabernacle? Yet... willingly, trussstingly, I am obeying my newly adopted lord.'

As she had hoped, at the hunchback's approach, two of the hybrids who had held her moved aside out of the way. The patriarch was watching her fixedly, unblinkingly. She let herself be limp in the grip of her two remaining captors.

Two. Only two.

Yes, she relaxed. However, in her spirit she was back inside the exercise wheel, racing, accelerating. Within her a fly-wheel was accumulating momentum, ready to release it in one great burst, in one transcendental surge of power that would carry her right over the top. A spring was winding up, coiling tight.

She must be utterly lucky too...

Yet luck was often a gift of grace; and who was more graceful than a Callidus assassin? She prayed fervently to the God-Emperor on Terra. Never had she needed his grace more.

The wheel spun wildly. The spring tightened towards that point where it must either snap or be released.

Utterly lucky... if she was to succeed before she died.

For surely she would die.

A suicide song keened through her soul, the harmony of exemplary suicide.

And of course at such a moment an assassin - by bidding farewell to self - could survive and survive, weaving through a host of foes and weapons, killing, killing; as did her cousins of the Eversor shrine.

But she was Callidus. And Callidus had betrayed her...

So something was missing from her song.

Rage arose in her once more. Utmost fury at her violation. She saw the patriarch before her as a monstrous Tarik Ziz who could blithely implant this vile form within a violated human being.

Alas, she could never vent her scalding vengeance upon the director secundus, account of her oaths, her loyalties...

But she could aim all of that venom at the patriarch.

Now the wheel was white-hot. Now the spring was razor-edged.

The hunchback held the hypodermic in its framework towards her snout. By a sudden slump, with a twisting spin, with a violent upthrust of her arms, she shucked off her captors. In her claws she seized the framework. She rotated it in a trice. Brushing the hunchback aside, she threw herself at the patriarch, that jutting little needle aimed at its left eye.

The patriarch uttered a squeal - more of surprise than of a pig being impaled.

What, impaled by a pinprick, even in the corner of one eye?

Snarling, the patriarch was already batting Meh'Lindi aside. She rolled. She rose, to grip the magus as a shield. Some lurid magenta blood flecked the patriarch's eye. Some violet liquid seemed to leak. It reared its mighty head and roared.

This stupid, insignificant injury was as nothing to it. Nothing. A flea-bite. Pure, raw, ravaging genestealer now, the patriarch reached out its claw-arms.

Yet it did not attack at once. Perhaps perplexity at the feebleness of her assault caused it to pause. Perhaps, detecting no further threat, it was turning its senses inwards, attempting to diagnose what substance had entered it. A poison?

Hardly! How soon, dear Emperor, how soon?

Abruptly the polymorphine began to work - on an untrained anatomy, on a creature which had no idea of what was happening to it, and hardly enough time to guess by introspection.

The patriarch's body rippled as its carapace softened, as though a coating of worms crawled underneath its previously horny hide. Its head distorted sidelong.

Its injured eye solidified into a marble ball. Its teeth fused together - then, as it howled, the joined teeth softened, to stretch like rubber. Its claws began to bud teeth. Its lower, simian hands became floppy pincers.

It was in flux. Nothing could teach it how to hold its form intact. It vented excrement. Its tongue pressed out between the elastic teeth, longer, longer, thinner, thinner. The monster - even more monstrous now - collapsed back across its throne. And now, in its one true eye, Meh'Lindi could see how fiercely, how desperately it was willing itself to keep its shape amidst the anarchy that engulfed it.

Willing itself. Yet failing, since it couldn't perceive the proper shape of its own internal organs... while those swelled or pinched or stretched. And since it was in flux, its broodkin were in confusion. Appalled at its continuing transformation, they were rocked by its now incoherent sendings.

The patriarch's organs and appendages were dissolving and reforming while its tormented will still endured. Suddenly its softened thorax split open. Pulsing mauve and silver coils spilled out, liquefying. The exposed innards of the true master of the Oriens temple melted into protoplasmic jelly.

With her own claws Meh'Lindi crushed the arms of the magus. She drew up her stealer knee to break his spine. Throwing him at the nearest guards, she darted to the hunchback. Seizing him under one arm, she bore him away, the sash still hanging round his neck.

As she raced into a tunnel that would lead to a certain stairway, explosive bolts whined past her inaccurately, detonating against the stonework, spraying splinters. Behind her, broodkin screeched as the patriarch's death agony communicated itself. Confusion, chaos - then an onrush of broodkin in her wake intent on vengeance.

SHE EMERGED IN the Hall of the Holy Fingernails, and sprinted for the great doorway through the reek of candle smoke and incense. Pilgrims scattered. She tossed a hybrid deacon aside, eviscerating him with her free claw, as brutish broodkin boiled up into the hall behind her.

Outside, a morning pageant was in progress. She rushed through the illusory walls of the phantom throne room just as the parody Space Marines were opening fire at the green daemon's guards.

As guards and Marines died and vanished, along with the grovelling lords and ladies, for a moment the gawping audience of pilgrims and

tourists must have imagined that the monster Meh'Lindi and her struggling burden were a part of the spectacle.

Then the caricature Emperor entered behind her, gesturing with those extraordinary fingernails. Rushing around him, bursting right through his holographic image, snarling parodies of humanity invaded the throne room.

The brood had temporarily lost all leadership. A salvo of bolts winged into the crowd, blasting bloody craters in flesh. For the spectators were in the way. Their toppling corpses nevertheless served to shield Meh'Lindi. She leapt through the phantom wall into the actual sandy courtyard - and raced. Behind, she heard no more firing; only hideous screams. Nor were the broodkin following her out into the open, under the ballooning red sun.

Perhaps a collective caution prevailed. Perhaps the broodkin were busy slaughtering all witnesses of their wanton exposure prior to withdrawing. Or, insensate, the brood may have decided to wreak their wrath, bare-handed, sharpclawed, any available human victims. Certainly none escaped through the illusory walls - which, in their panic, may have seemed all too real.

Voices cried out around Meh'lindi in disbelief or pious terror about a "daemon" on the loose.

Sirens of armoured militia vehicles were beginning to shriek, but Meh'lindi was an expert at evasion. Darting down one side alley, then another, she found a sewer hatch and tore it open. She thrust the hunchback down inside the tiled hole to drop to the bottom with a splash, then inserted herself with legs and bony back braced, so as to slide the lid back into place above her. Difficult, with claws instead of fingers!

In part-flooded, stinking darkness, she regained hold of the hunchback. She squeezed him.

'Ssso, would-be magusss,' she wheezed, 'I being helping you, eh? You mussst be waiting for a new puresstrain being born, to whom you shall becoming uncle...

then high ssservant and oracle. Who better?'

'What being you?' the hunchback managed to ask, terror and cunning warring in his voice.

'An ally... Would you seeeeing a miracle?'

'Yes. Yes.'

'Tiny electrolumen being in my sssash. You lighting it.'

The hunchback groped for a long while before the tiny light brightened the cramped cloacal tunnel they were crouched in.

'Being needle in my sssash. Hold it out at meee. And I am becoming harmless to you then, as a pilgrim woman, hmm?'

The hunchback nodded. He held the needle firmly. Meh'Lindi bit the tip of her tongue between her fangs. Impaling the injured, softer inner tissue upon the sharp needle point, she pressed her tongue forward to discharge the drug into herself.

Soon her body was molten. Soon her implants were slackening, shrinking. The hunchback stared, goggle-eyed.

SHE SPAT SOME blood from her mouth. Despite the stenchful surroundings, hunchback now gazed hungrily at the nude tattooed body amazingly revealed to him.

'Safer as a woman,' he agreed, licking his lips. 'Softer to be questioning - about this wondrous liquid that is altering bodies. With such guile we could be disguising our hybrids perfectly.'

He shifted his left hand from behind his back. On one finger he wore the jokaero needle gun. While the convulsive changes had distracted her, while her vision had glazed, the hunchback had filched that miniature weapon from her sash and slipped it on. Or maybe he had already transferred the tiny gun to the pocket of his robe much earlier, recognizing it for what it was, and determined to reserve it for himself.

'Not being fooled into thinking this a ring, princess. My cousin being duped, perhaps. Not I. Ah, how poetically you were bending his spine, making him just like me in death.' He pointed his armed finger at her.

'When I am bending my finger sharply, this gun is discharging, I am supposing?'

Yes. By and large. Yes. The hunchback might well succeed in firing the gun.

'Staying here a while till excitement is dying... Then sneaking to my fine establishment, and into a certain cellar. You ravaged my clan, witch. Softer to question, ah yes.'

He was wrong. Meh'Lindi was herself again, no longer encumbered by clumsy claws and a stoop. Once again, she was a Callidus assassin. If the environs were cramped, what of that? She shuffled ever so slightly.

FIVE MINUTES LATER, during a moment of mild inattention when boots rang on the sewer lid overhead, the hunchback died quickly and silently - throatpunched, nerve-blocked, broken-necked - without even crooking his finger once.

Meh'Lindi was ravenous after the change. She had to feed. She only knew one immediate source of protein. The proprietor of the caravanserai had stared at her hungrily.

Now she repaid the compliment, somewhat reluctantly.

In her famished state, his corpse tasted sweet.

SHE BALLEED UP his robe to haul behind her, tied to one ankle. She reasoned that she should crawl for a mile or so to escape from the immediate neighbourhood.

Some pipes were to prove tight and deep in effluent. She needed to dislocate her joints and hold her breath. She did so. She was an instrument. She was Callidus.

WRAPPED IN THE hunchback's sodden robe, cinched with her scarlet sash, she trotted through the city under the cold constellations, heading back towards the spaceport.

Patriarch and magus were both dead. Yet the evil clan remained. Maybe the city militia would react and call in heavy assistance. Or maybe the local forces were themselves infiltrated by hybrids. Meh'Lindi had no intention of discussing matters with any militiamen in Shandabar.

She had infiltrated a genestealer stronghold - for a night and a morning - and had survived. By luck. Through rage. And courtesy of polymorphine, misused as no assassin had misused the drug before. Perhaps that would be a bright enough feather in Tarik Ziz's cap...

