

## WARPED STARS

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That golden giant in the sky seemed to be such a furnace, such a molten crucible. Yet, unlike the sun, it dispensed no heat. Jomi wondered how that could be, but he knew better than to ask. When he was younger a few whippings had deterred him from excessive curiosity.

His Pa's punishments had been well intended. Boys and girls who questioned were perhaps on the road to becoming witches themselves.

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Did mutants really roam Groxgelt by night, hunting for victims, seeking entry into the homes of the unwise? It struck Jomi as a convenient arrangement that the townsfolk were thus exiled to their houses during the cooler hours. Otherwise the taverns of Groxgelt might well have remained open longer. Workmen might have caroused till late, and thus be tired when dawn came, grumpy and lethargic at their labours during the hot day.

Oh but mutants certainly existed, without a doubt. Witches, hoodooists. Here was yet another one, bound upon the wheel. Two hours till darkness...

'This witch uses a cunning trick.' Reverend Henrik Farb, the preacher, proclaimed to the crowd from the ebon steps of the headman's residence. 'He can hoodoo time itself. He can stop the flow of the time stream. Though not for very long... so do not run away in fear! Witness his punishment, and mark my words:

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long... so do not run away in fear! Witness his punishment, and mark my words: the witch looks human, but in truth he is distorted. Beware of those who seem human, yet are not!

Farb was a fat fellow. Beneath his black cloak, leather armour bulged in a manner that, had he been a woman, might have been described as voluptuous.

Womanly, too, was the jade perfume phial dangling from one pierced nostril, intercepting the odours of manure and of bodies on which sweat had barely dried. The tattoo of a chained, burning daemon caged within a hex symbol writhed upon one chubby cheek while he spoke, guarding his mouth and porcine eyes from contamination. Usually the preacher wore loose black silks on account of the heat, which was only now draining away. For combat with evil, though, he must needs be suitably protected. A bolstered stub gun hung from the amulet-studded belt around his rotund waist.

Horses snickered and stamped. Men patted their long knives for comfort, and the few who owned such, their rune-daubed muskets.

'Destroy the deviant!' shouted one fervent voice.

'Break the unhuman!' cried another.

'Kill the witch!'

Farb eyed the brawny, half-naked executioner who stood beside the wheel gripping a cudgel. As usual, the agent of retribution had been chosen by lot.

Most townsfolk might sport wens, carbuncles, and other blemishes of their burnt skin, but few were feeble. Even if so, a puny executioner would only take the longer to perform his task to the tune of jeers and mocking cheers.

'Aye,' declared Farb, 'I warn you that this witch will try to slow down his punishment - stretching it out till nightfall in the vain hope of rescue.'

Spittle flew from the preacher's lips as if he was one of those mutants who could spit poison. Such a mutant had been rooted out a few months earlier, gagged, and broken in this selfsame square. The front ranks of Farb's audience pressed closer to the ebon steps, as if a drop of spray from the preacher's lips might keep their vision clear, their humanity intact.

Farb turned to the standard of the Emperor, which flanked him. The townswomen had painstakingly embroidered in precious wires an image copied from the preacher's missal. When Farb genuflected, his audience hastily bent their knees.

'God-Emperor,' chanted the preacher, 'oh our source of security. Protect us from foul daemons. Guard the wombs of our women that wee mites are not twisted into mutants. Save us from the darkness within darkness. Oh watch over us as we carry out your will. Imperator hominorum, nostra salvatio!' Sacred words, those last, powerful hex-words. Farb snorted through one nostril, spat saliva at the crowd.

Jomi gazed at the standard. That age-old Imperial face was a mask of wires and tubes, which the metallic embroidery persuasively evoked.

'Begin!' shouted Farb.

The wheel, which was powered by a massive, firmly-wound spring, started to turn. It carried the witch around, his limbs bent into a half-hoop. The executioner raised his club.

Nothing happened. The wheel stood still. The stalwart was frozen. Though forewarned, the crowd groaned. The spectators were outside the small zone of hoodooed time cast by the doomed witch; they could still move about - yet hardly a body moved.

'At this very moment,' Farb explained, 'the witch may well be calling out with his mind to some vile daemon - leading it here, showing the way to Groxgelt.'

Jomi wondered whether this was true. If so, why not slay the witch speedily with a knife as soon as captured? Maybe the preacher relished the ceremony for its own sake. Certainly such a spectacle riveted the crowd and dramatised their deepest fears. Otherwise, people might grow careless, no? They might fail to report suspicions of mutants in their midst. A mother could try to protect a child of hers who only seemed slightly twisted.

Though wouldn't the permanent presence of the wheel in the market square put such fear into hoodooists that they would try their utmost to hide their witching ways, and not betray themselves? Jomi puzzled about this.

The timeless moment ended. As the delayed cudgel descended crackingly, the witch screamed. Time paused once again in his immediate vicinity. Presently another blow fell, crushing flesh and snapping bone. Due to his futile evasions the witch did indeed take much longer to be broken, and would take longer to hang draped around the wheel, slowly dying in utter pain. Though what else could the wretch have done?

'Praise the Emperor who protects!' cried the paunchy preacher. 'Laudate imperatorem!' His leatherclad breasts and belly quaked. He panted as he sniffed perfume, blood, excrement, and sweat.

Each time that a new blow fell, Jomi felt a fierce itch at a different location inside the marrow of his own bones, as if he was experiencing a hint of that excruciating punishment through the filter of a pile of pillows. He wriggled and scratched uselessly...

OVER THE COURSE of the next year a dozen more witches and muties died in the square of Groxgelt. A few of the more vocal townsfolk began to ask in their cups whether there could be some sickness unique to the human seed, which did not plague beastkind. Mares did not give birth to foals which developed strange powers as they matured, did they now? Jomi's father, who was a tanner of lizard hides, discouraged any such speculation under his own roof; and Jomi had long since learned to hold his tongue. Preacher Farb encouraged the townsfolk as well as terrifying them. He promised that the Emperor would not let his people drift into chaos.

On Jomi's seventeenth birthday, he dreamt the first dream...

It seemed that a mouth was shaping itself inside his brain. It was forming from out of the very substance of the grey matter within his skull. In his dream he knew that this was so. If only he could turn his dream-eyes backwards, he would see the lips deep within his cranium and, between them, the lolloping tongue that was responsible for the sopsucking sounds he heard in his sleep.

Terror gripped him in the dream. Somehow he couldn't awaken till those internal lips had finished their slobbery mumblings and shut up.

Over the course of the next several nights those interior sounds came more closely to resemble words. As yet these words were too blurred to understand, but they seemed to be coming clearer, almost as if adjusting themselves to the

words that Jomi knew.

Jomi shared a poky garret room with his elder brother, Big Ven. Naturally he did not enquire whether Ven dreamed of a similar voice, nor whether Ven ever woke in the wee hours and thought that he heard a whisper coming from within Jomi's brain. Always the wheel stood in the market place as a warning. Jomi sweated as he slumbered. His straw palliasse was damp each morning.

'Am I becoming... unhuman?' he asked himself anxiously.

Maybe he was only experiencing nightmares. He dismissed any notion of consulting Reverend Farb. Instead he prayed fervently to the Emperor to dismiss the mumblings from his mind.

EACH BLUE DAWN, along with a band of fellow labourers, Jomi walked out of town to the grox breeding station and farm. Stripped to his loincloth and charm necklace, he toiled in an annex of a slaughter shed, sorting offal.

'You're lucky,' his short sturdy mother often told him. 'Such a soft job at your age!'

This was true. The big reptiles were notoriously vicious. If they had not provided meat that was delicious to eat and highly nourishing, and if they had not been so well able to nourish themselves on any rubbish tossed their way, even soil, any sane person would have steered well clear of them. Although the breeding specimens were kept sedated with chemicals, a beast might still go berserk. When penned alongside its fellows, that was the natural inclination of a grox. The meat-stock were lobotomized. When being driven to the slaughter, even these brain-cut brutes could prove fractious. Any grox-herdsman or butcher could lose a finger or an eye, even his life. Virtually all bore disfiguring scars.

The rulers in Urpol, the capital city an unimaginable hundred kilometres away, demanded an endless supply of grox meat for their own consumption and for profitable export. Refrigerated robot floaters carried the meat to Urpol.

'You're well-favoured,' Jomi's mother had also told him, more than once. This was true too. Jomi was clean-limbed and clean-featured, unblemished by the cysts and warts which afflicted most of the population.

It was the farmer's wife, tubby Galandra Puschik, who had assigned Jomi his

cushy billet. Madame Puschik would often wander through the offal shed to ogle Jomi slicked with blood and sweat. Especially she would loiter by the farm pond to leer at him when he was washing off after a day's work. Oh yes, she had her eye on him. But she was too scared of her bullying husband to do more than look.

Jomi had his own eye set wistfully on the Puschiks' daughter, Gretchi. A slim beauty, Gretchi wore a broad straw hat and carried a parasol to shade herself from the bright blue sunlight. She turned up her pert nose at most of the town's youths, though she favoured Jomi with a smile when her mother wasn't watching; and then his heart would beat fast. From occasional words he and she exchanged, he knew that Gretchi's sights were set upon becoming mistress to one of the lordly rulers in Urpol. But maybe she might care to practice with him first.

That day, while Jomi sorted grox livers, kidneys, and hearts, the mouth within his brain began to speak to him clearly, caressingly.

'Be calm,' it cooed. 'Don't fear me. I can teach you much you need in order to survive, and to gratify your young desires. Aye, to survive, for you are different, are you not?'

'What are you?' Jomi thought fiercely; and even then he resisted the impulse to speak out loud, and risk being overheard by a fellow worker. Was the languid voice male, or was it female? Perhaps neither...

'What are you, voice?'

'Before you can understand the answer, you need to learn much. Tell me: what shape has your world?'

'Shape? Why, it's all sorts of shapes. It's smooth and rocky. It's up and down - '

'Seen from afar, Jomi, seen from afar so that hills and valleys are as nothing.

Seen by a bird flying higher than any bird has ever flown.'

'I guess... like a plate?'

'Oh no... Listen, Jomi, your world is globular like an eyeball. Your world is a big

moon that swings around a giant world wholly made of gas, which is an even bigger eyeball. Your blue sun is the hugest eyeball hereabouts.'

'How can that be? The sun's so much smaller than the giant.'

'But hotter, hmm? Have you never wondered why it's hotter?'

'Sure I have.'

'But you thought it wiser not to ask, hmm? Wise, Jomi, wise.' How the voice fondled him. 'You can ask me without fear. Your sun is so vast that its own weight burns it. It's a star; and so far away that it looks like a thumbnail at arm's length. As I myself am far away from you, my Jomi.' The voice seemed to sigh.

'Indeed, much further than your star.'

Jomi continued sorting the slippery, reeking entrails into different trays. 'It can't be a star. The star-lanterns are tiny and cold.'

'Ah, innocent youth. The stars aren't lanterns. Let's take this step by step, shall we? Your moon and your sun and the giant and the stars are all spherical in shape.'

'Spherical?' What words this voice knew, such as the lords in Urpol might use.

'Circular. Think loudly of a circle floating in empty space.'

'I'd rather not!' A circle was the shape of a wheel, the terrible taboo wheel. No man must make any wheel, nor use one save for the punishment wheel, or else witches would triumph and rule the world.

'Calm yourself, sweet youth. The wheel is the beginning of knowledge. I will tell you why, if you will concentrate on imagining a circle. That helps me to... focus on you.'

'Focus?'

'To see you, as through a lens.'

'What's a lens?'

'Ah, you have so much to learn, and I will be your secret teacher.'

When Jomi washed himself later, Galandra Puschik stood with hands on giant hips surveying him as if he was the next day's dinner; and to his horror he overheard her thoughts...

She lusted to run her meaty hands all over Jomi. She yearned to kneed him like dough then bake him like bread in her hot embrace. Farmer Puschik would be going on a business trip away from the farm some day soonish. Then she would enjoy the boy...

Jomi could hear thoughts. It was as if the voice in his head was massaging muscles of his brain that had been puny as threads till now; was tickling sensation into nerves of his mind that had previously lain loose, causing them to knot and knit.

He could hear thoughts. Therefore he was a witch.

'Be tranquil,' the voice advised. 'Yet think loudly of the circle. Thus I can find you. Thus I can save you, my bewitching boy.'

For many days the voice told Jomi about the pleasures and beauties of the wider universe beyond his farming moon where there was only toil and sweat and fear.

The delights and glories that the voice described seemed somehow like memories of memories, echoes of echoes, as if the experiences in question had occurred too many years ago to count, and the voice no longer quite understood their nature, yet felt compelled to recount them even so.

IN THE CABIN of the space cruiser Human Loyalty, Inquisitor Torq Serpilian brooded about the paradox which had begun to haunt him. He keyed his coded diarium and spoke to it.

'It is a week since we emerged safely from warp-space, benedico Imperatorem.

We are in orbit around the gas-giant Delta Khomeini V.' Beyond the quatrefoil tracery of the viewport the huge orange ball of storming hydrogen and methane held on an invisible leash the crescent of a single large moon that gleamed with atmosphere.

'Propositum: for millennia past our undying Emperor has defended humanity against psychic attack from the warp, so that - one far-off day - humankind can evolve psychic powers puissant enough to protect itself...'

Battle banners hung from ochreous plasteel walls which were the hue of dried blood. Bleached alien skulls and captured armour were mounted as trophies. For this was a ship of the Legiones Astartes, the Space Marines.

Yet aliens as such rarely worried Serpilian. Even the most devious of aliens were, after all, natural creatures born and bred in the same universe as humankind. Aliens were as nothing compared with the terrible parasites that dwelled in the warp. On Serpilian's home world a certain unpleasant wasp would inject its hooked eggs into the flesh of beasts and men. Warp parasites could lay their equivalent of eggs in human minds. Those "eggs" would hatch into entities that controlled the body, consuming it and using it to spread contamination.

Other warp creatures could seize human souls and drag them back into darkness to feast upon, slowly. And there were far mightier daemoniac entities too.

Psyker-witches were beacons shining into the warp. They attracted parasites and daemons that could lay waste a world and make its people unhuman.

'Subpropositum: wild, unguided, wayward psykers must be sought out by our Inquisition and destroyed.'

'Counterpropositum: so as to nourish our Emperor, hundreds of fresh young psykers must daily sacrifice their souls - aye, gladly too - to feed his own huge anguished soul.'

Yes indeed, emerging psykers were sought out avidly and sent to Terra by the shipload. Those of high calibre, who could be trained to serve the Imperium, were soul-bound to the Emperor for their own protection, an agonizing ritual which generally left them blind. Exceptional individuals such as Serpilian were allowed to guard themselves mentally. The cream of such free psykers became inquisitors. Yet daily hundreds of those transportees to Terra, duly guided in the blessings of sacrifice, were yielding up their lives in the sucking gullet of the God-Emperor's mind. And elsewhere throughout the galaxy, untamable psykers were being exterminated as witches.

'Paradoxus: we root out as weeds what we cannot harvest. Yet whether we

harvest or root out, the new crop is largely crushed, in so far as is within our power. How then can humankind evolve that independent future strength it so desperately needs?'

Serpilian imagined a meadow of grass being trampled repeatedly for millennia.

He visualized new green blades struggling up into the light only to be flattened remorselessly lest they feed the malevolent creatures of the warp.

Would the Emperor eventually relax his crushing pressure by permitting himself to die? Thus allowing the grass suddenly to sprout up straight and tall and strong, a crop of superhumans?

Yet until that wonderful epoch, utter repression?

'Let me not become a heretic,' murmured Serpilian. 'I must not.' On reflection, he erased this last entry.

During Serpilian's career he had encountered situations sufficient to persuade him of the Emperor's wisdom. He had been a party to enough acts of harshness; had been the initiator of such deeds of necessary savagery - most recently at Valhall II, where enslavers had been invading from the warp and instigating a fierce insurrection against the Imperium.

'The universe,' he told his diarium, 'is cruel, savage, unforgiving. A battleground.

And the darkest enemies hide in the warp, like tigers ever ready to pounce on the human herd. If one of that herd attracts the notice of a tiger, the rest of the herd may be ravaged - or worse, possessed and twisted obscenely into evil.'

Was not Serpilian himself thus forced at times to act like a beast, presiding over atrocities in the service of a tyrant?

Serpilian did not exactly pride himself on his independence of thought. He rather regretted such intrusions of doubt. Still and all, these qualities produced a certain flexibility and ingenuity, thus best serving the cause of the Emperor and of the human race.

His attire reflected that independent demeanour. He wore a long kilt of silver fur, an iridescent cuirass suggestive of the shell of a giant exotic beetle, and a blood-

red cloak with high collar. On both forefingers he wore rare jokaero digital weapons, one of these a miniaturized needler, the other a tiny laspistol.

Orthodox guns were always secreted about his person. Amulets jangled round his neck, making exorcistic music as he moved.

Serpilian was tall, dark, and lean. His drooping black moustache resembled some insect's mandibles. On his right cheek was the tattoo of an ever-watchful eye.

Long before the cabin door opened to admit Commander Hachard, Serpilian expected his arrival. The inquisitor was a powerful senser of presence, who knew where everyone was within a generous radius. An unusual offshoot of this sense allowed him to anticipate intrusions from the warp. That was why Human Loyalty had come to the Delta Khomeini solar system. Shortly after leaving Valhall II, Serpilian had dreamed of a sickly-sweet coaxing voice that was neither man's nor woman's cajoling a bright young mind far far away; and that young mind was... special, in a way that the young Serpilian's had been special, only more so, much more so, it seemed. Thus, even across the light years, and through the immeasurable fluctuating currents of the warpsea, Serpilian heard...

something that resonated with his own psyche; that plucked at his instincts, as if threads of dark destiny bound him direly to that mind and to that eerie, seductive voice.

A casting of the runebones by Serpilian in tandem with a Tarot divination performed by the ship's Navigator had indicated the blue star that was fourth brightest in the constellation of Khomeini...

'We are in orbit around the parent planet,' Hachard reported respectfully, with only the merest hint of reproach, which he would hardly dare voice. 'I thought it diplomatic not to order our captain to orbit the moon itself till I had presented our compliments by comnet to the governor.' Scar tissue on Hachard's chin stood out whitely as though he had been punched. His cheek-tattoo was of a skull skewered by a dagger. His teeth were painted black as a signal that any smile of his was dark. A vermilion badge of nobility - a stylized power-axe - adorned his right knee-pad modestly so that, whenever bending to the Emperor's image during devotions, he should kneel upon this heraldic honour. His gloved hand strayed to the Imperial eagle emblazoned in purple on his lavender dress cuirass, as if to emphasize his unquestioning loyalty.

Serpilian knew that the commander would far rather have returned to the Grief Bringers' base after the action on Valhall II, to take their dead home and to renew their strength.

Even Grief Bringer Marines had been hard put to quash the enslavers disorder.

Losses had been heavy. Only three platoons of the warriors remained. Perhaps the Valhall mission should best have been entrusted to one of the redoubtable Terminator teams, but none had been available. Truly, the resources of the Imperium were stretched thin. En route to Delta Khomeini, during a refuelling stopover at a high-gravity world, Serpilian had commandeered the services of two platoons of ogryn giants as a fighting supplement; also, of a lone, mechanically-minded squat, for the Grief Bringers had lost their tech-priest on Valhall II. It was an uneasy mixture.

'Yes, that's sensible, Commander,' said the inquisitor. 'And have you presented my compliments yet?' Thus did Serpilian emphasize his personal authority, at a time when he nevertheless felt beset by doubts.

'That I have, my lord inquisitor. Governor Vellacott felt obliged to mention that he maintains adequate planetary forces in case of alien attack, and that preachers on that moon root out any psykers fiercely.'

'Would you describe him as an independent-minded governor?'

'Not obstructively so. We are welcome to land and investigate.'

'Just as well for him.'

'He suggested that we wouldn't need too many Marines to cope with a moonful of farmers, where there isn't even any obvious threat.'

Serpilian snorted. 'The level of threat is for me to decide. The worst threat is often the threat that hides itself.'

'The governor suggested - most politely, you understand - that it might be beneath our dignity to blow human rabbits to pieces. I wonder whether he has any inkling that our strength is depleted? Perhaps his court astropath somehow eavesdropped on ours; though I rather doubt it. I suspect he has some guilty reason to fear for his dynasty.'

'Such as irregularities in Imperial taxes?'

'The Vellacotts control the finest grox farms in this celestial segment. Much of the meat and other produce goes to Delta Khomeini II. That's a barren mining world, producing rare metals for our Imperium. Perhaps there are secret financial arrangements.'

'Which are none of our concern.'

'I implied as much, without saying so.'

'Ah, a Marine commander needs many skills, does he not?'

'I thank you, my lord inquisitor.'

Serpilian felt obliged to ask, 'How goes morale?' For the Grief Bringers had also lost their Chaplain in action on Valhall II. Hachard hesitated. 'Be frank. I will not be offended.'

'The ogryns... they stink.'

Serpilian attempted an injection of humour. 'They are famous for stinking. If one cannot tolerate some body odour, how can one bear the stench of scorching flesh in combat?'

'My men will fight alongside the abhumans, with honour. But they don't like it much. Having to share a ship with those Stenches. I suppose, my lord inquisitor, you insisted on pressing the ogryns into service because, being abhuman and frankly thuggish, they're more expendable.'

Serpilian winced momentarily. What Hachard implied was perilously close to unthinkable impertinence; yet Serpilian had invited the commander to be outspoken, had he not? The loss of so many brave fighters in the earlier action -

however justifiable - was a slight blot on the inquisitor's personal escutcheon of honour. Marines would willingly sacrifice their lives. They were not, however, suicide-berserkers. To replace them with "expendable" abhumans somewhat smeared the pride of the Grief Bringers, amounting almost to an error of judgement on Serpilian's part.

One did not polish a fine sword with mud, nor repair a broken one with wood.

Muttering a brief prayer, Serpilian undipped a pouch from his belt. Breathing deeply and slowly to induce a light trance, he cast his rune bones upon a desk of polished black wood. Those finger and toe bones, minutely inscribed with conjurations, had belonged to a rogue psyker mage whom the Inquisition had executed five centuries earlier. Now these relics served Serpilian's psychic sense. They were a useful channel for his talent, a focus.

As he concentrated, the pattern of white bones against black swam till a foggy picture formed, visible to him alone.

'What do you see?' whispered Hachard reverently.

The thought drifted through Serpilian's mind, like some seductive siren song, that it wasn't totally unknown for an inquisitor to sicken of his harsh duties and flee to some lost world, some primitive pastoral planet or other.

Not one such as this moon, certainly! The inquisitor resumed his breathing routine.

'I see a strapping, comely boy. Though his face isn't clear. I see the circle of a portal opening from the warp, and coming through it is... abomination.'

'What species of abomination? Enslavers again?'

A sensible question. The warp entities known as enslavers could open a gateway through the very flesh of a vulnerable psyker and spill out - to do as their name suggested.

Serpilian shook his head. 'The boy's being given an aura of protection now to hide him. He's somewhere within a hundred or so kilometres of the capital city.

He's becoming a powerful psychic receiver. Other psychic talents are sprouting in him. I think he's about to be possessed. Unless we reach him first.'

'To capture him, or destroy him?'

'I fear for his potential power. One day perhaps,' and Serpilian sketched a pious obeisance, 'he might be a little like the Emperor himself. Just a little.'

'Not a new Horus, surely?' What loathing crept into the commander's voice as he uttered the name of the corrupted rebel Warmaster who had betrayed the Imperium, and besmirched the honour of so many Marine Chapters, long long ago. 'If that's the situation, maybe the relevant quadrant of the moon should be sterilised... though that would include Urpol city and the spaceport, and many grox farms. Delta Khomeini II would starve as a consequence... And the moon has orbital defences as well as its surface troops, who would fight us... They won't have much battle experience. I think we could do it. I think. Perhaps with our last drop of blood...'

'Let us pray it doesn't come to that, Hachard, though your zeal is commendable.'

'What is finer than death in battle to defend the future of mankind?'

'If we are in time, this boy must needs be a gift to our Emperor, for His own divine wisdom to judge. Let us head for that moon as soon as our present orbit permits.'

Serpilian uttered a silent prayer that his inner eyesight might pierce the veil that now partially hid the boy.

'THINK OF THE circle,' crooned the mouth within Jomi's head. 'It grows larger, larger, does it not?'

The boy watched a floater of grox meat depart from Puschik Farm. The engine and cargo section were spattered with mystic runes to help hold the vehicle in the air and encourage the robot brain to find its way to the city. Those runes had recently been repainted. If runes faded or flaked off the hull, the floater might stray from its course or its chiller unit might fail.

Clouds of flies buzzed around a couple of sledges on which piles of scaly hides, some barrels of blood, and sacks of bones were setting out for the much shorter journey to Groxgelt, there to be rendered into glue, and sausages, and crude armour. Whips cracked, slicing through the aerial vermin to tickle the draught-horses into action. The runners creaked across stones worn smooth by centuries of such local transport.

No, thought Jomi, the floater would only break down if it hadn't been "serviced"

properly. The meat-transporter was only a machine, a thing of metal and wires

and crystals, based on ancient science from the Dark Age of Technology.

Courtesy of the voice, Jomi knew now that former ages had existed, unimaginable stretches of time unimaginably long ago. The current age was a time of "superstition", so said the voice. An earlier age had been a time of enlightenment. Yet that bygone era was now called dark to the extent that so much had been forgotten about it. So the voice assured him, confusingly. He mustn't worry his pretty mind overmuch about foul daemons such as Preacher Farb prated about. Such things existed, to a certain extent, that was true. But enlightenment was the route to joy. The owner of the voice said that it had been captured by the storms of "warp-space" long ago, doomed to wander in strange domains for aeons until finally it sensed a dawning psyker talent that was peculiarly attuned to it.

'You aren't a witch, dearest boy,' the voice had assured him. 'You're a psyker.'

Say after me: I'm a psyker, with a glorious mind that deserves to relish all manner of gratifications. Which I, your only true friend will teach you how to attain. Say to yourself: I'm the most lustrous of psykers - and remember to think of the circle, won't you?'

The owner of the voice would come to Jomi. It would save him from the entrail shed. It would save him from the crushing embrace of fat Galandra Puschik and from the terror of the wheel.

'Sooooooooon,' cooed the voice, like the coolest of evening breezes. 'Always think of the circle - like a wheel rolling ever closer to you, but not a wheel to fear!'

'Why have we been taught to fear wheels?' An inspiration assaulted Jomi.

'Surely our sledges would run more easily if we used... a wheel on each corner?'

Four wheels which turn around as the sledge advances!'

'Then it would be called a wagon. You're such a bright lad, Jomi. Bright in so many ways.' Of a sudden, the voice grew sour and petulant. 'And here comes spurious brightness to cheer you.'

'Gretchi!'

Her slim limbs, mainly hidden by a coarse cotton frock, yet imaginable as fair and smooth... her breasts like two young doves nesting beneath the fabric... her chestnut hair hanging in ringlets, mostly veiling a slender neck... the huge straw hat shading that creamy complexion... the teasing eyes of a blue so much less daunting than the sun: how could such perfection have issued from Galandra Puschik's hips? Gretchi twirled her pink parasol coquettishly.

Did he gawp?

'Whatever are you thinking, Jomi Jabal?' she asked, as if inviting him to flatter her naively - or even vulgarly, to excite her.

He swallowed. He muttered the truth. 'About science...'

Gretchi pouted. 'Would that be the art of sighing for a girl, perhaps? Fine lords will sigh for me in Urpol some day soon, believe me!'

Could he possibly tell her his secret? Surely she wouldn't betray him?

'Gretchi, if it were possible for you to go much further away than Urpol-'

'Where's further than Urpol? Urpol's the centre of everything hereabouts.'

'-would you go?'

'Surely you don't mean to some farm in the furthest hinterland?' She wrinkled up her nose pettishly. 'Surrounded by muties, no doubt!'

He pointed at the sky. 'No, much further away. To the stars, and to other worlds.'

She laughed at him, though not entirely with derision. Perhaps this good-looking youth could tickle her fancy in unexpected ways?

Should he whisper in her ear, arranging a rendezvous after work to hear his secret?

'Remember the cruel wheel, Jomi,' warned the voice.

'When you come, voice, can I take Gretchi with me?'

Did he hear a faint, stifled snarl in the depths of his mind?

Gretchi simpered. 'Are you pretending to ignore me now? Are your feelings hurt? What do you know of feelings?'

He stared at the twin soft birds of her bosom, yearning to cup them in his hands.

But his hands were soiled with blood and bile, the memory came to him of Gretchi's mother feeling Jomi assiduously in her foetid imagination, exploring and squeezing him, and out of the corner of his eye he noticed Galandra Puschik glaring from the veranda of the farmhouse. Gretchi must have spied her mother too, for she promptly flounced away, turning up her nose as if at some foul reek.

'HUH!' GRIMM, THE tough stocky red-bearded dwarf, said to himself. 'Huh indeed, a world that bans wheels! Strange and many are the worlds!' The squat pushed back his forage cap to scratch his bald pate, which was scarred from a battle wound on Valhall. As a result of this injury, his skull had been shaved clean, and he was trying out baldness as a style. Fewer nesting places for lice!

Now he would be compelled to leave his beloved trike, mounted with twin cannon, in the hold of the Imperial ship.

Grimm scanned the cavernous plasteel dormitory through his dark shades.

Imperial icons gleamed, each lit by a glow-globe, sharing wall space with cruder battle-fetishes of the giants, one of which was draped respectfully with a ram's intestines from the arrival feast the night before. Scraps of meat, hair, broken bones littered the floor, mashed into the semblance of a brown and grey carpet on which assorted insectoid vermin grazed, or lay crushed themselves. The dormitory had ceased to reek; it had transcended stench, attaining a new plane of foe-tor as though the air had transmuted. Stinks did not usually perturb Grimm, but he wore nostril filters.

'Huh!'

The ogryn, Thunderjug' Aggrox, quit sharpening his yellow tusks on a rasp.

'Woz matter, titch?'

Sergeant-Ogryn Aggrox was a BONEhead, who had undergone Biochemical Ogryn Neural Enhancement. Thus he was capable of a degree of sophisticated conversation. Could be trusted with a ripper gun too.

Grimm, natty in his green coveralls and quilted red flak jacket, surveyed the crudely tattooed megaman in his coarse cloth and chain mail. Several battle badges were riveted to the giant's thick skull.

'I suppose,' said Grimm, 'being forced to walk or ride draught horses keeps the peasants in their places, don't it?'

'Seems use floaters, though,' objected Thunderjug.

'Oh well, you need to hurry fresh meat to the spaceport and up into orbit to be void-frozen. In my not-so-humble opinion banning wheels is going a bit over the top. I like wheels.' Especially the wheels of his battletrike. 'I guess in this neck of the galaxy the wheel represents the godless science of the Dark Age...'

In common with all squats, Grimm was an instinctive technician. Watching Imperial "technicians" sketch hexes against malfunction amidst their rune-painted machinery and hearing them utter incantations to an engine disturbed him mildly. In a sense his own race were in a direct line of descent from the obscure ancient days of science, when warp storms had cut the squattish mining worlds off, to evolve independently.

Oh my sacred ancestors! he thought. Still, everybody to their own religion.

Most of these thoughts were too complicated to convey even to a BONEhead ogryn.

The giant plucked a thumb-sized louse from his armpit and crunched the grey parasite speculatively between his teeth. Just then, ogryn voices bellowed.

Two warriors had bared their tusks. Seizing mace and axe respectively, they began to hack at one another's chainmail in a bellicose competition. Spectators roared wagers in favour of one combatant or the other, or both, stamping their great feet so that the steel dormitory rocked and groaned.

Thunderjug lowered his head and charged along the dormitory. He butted left, he butted right with his steel-plated skull. The quarrellers resisted, butting back at their sergeant, though not disrespectful enough to raise axe or mace against him. Finally Thunderjug seized the two by the neck and crashed their heads together in the manner of two wrecking balls till the fighters subsided and agreed to behave.

'Shu'rup all!' After issuing that command, Thunderjug ambled back, spat out a broken tooth, and grinned. 'Gorra keep order, don' I?'

Grimm removed his fingers from his ears, and combed some mites from his beard. Would he have been happier billeted with the true-human Grief Bringers?

Undoubtedly more comfortable; less liable to be squashed by a reeling heavyweight. On the other hand, he had come to count on Thunderjug as something of a friend, a brainy bull among this herd of buffalos. Grimm prided himself on mixing with all sorts and conditions. He hadn't too much experience of Imperial Marines. There weren't all that many in the galaxy. But they seemed a shade cliquish.

Exemplary fellows, needless to say, but so devoutly dedicated to the traditions of their Chapters. A roving squat, who only gave nodding acquiescence to the worship of the Emperor, saw the universe from a slightly different angle.

From whichever angle, the galaxy was a fairly menacing sprawl of mayhem.

Grimm decided to strip and clean his bolt gun; though without bothering to pray to it.

'YOU WERE BORN under warped stars, Jomi,' sighed the voice. 'Once, the warp seemed merely to be a zone through which our ships flew faster than light.

Oh we were innocent then in spite of all our science! Naive and callow as lambs, such as your sweet self.

Jomi shifted uneasily. Of late, a cloying stickiness had begun to creep into the accents of the voice at times. As if his informant realized this, its tone grew crisper.

'But then all over the galaxy that we had guilelessly populated, psykers such as yourself started to be born.'

'So there weren't always psykers around?'

'By no means to such an extent. When the powers and predators of Chaos took heed of those bright beacons, they spilled into reality to ravage and warp the worlds.'

'Those powers are what Preacher Farb calls daemons?'

'As it were.'

'Then he's right in that respect! You said I shouldn't worry my head about daemons.'

'Your sweet head... your puissant mind...'

From the low scrubby hillside Jomi stared towards the huddle of Groxgelt. At this hour the south pole of the gas-giant seemed almost to rest upon the headman's mansion and the Imperial Cult temple as though that golden ball would crush and melt the biggest buildings that Jomi knew. The sun's blue radiance ached. Due to a trick of light and wispy clouds, a bilious greenish miasma - the colour of nausea - seemed to drip from one limb of the hostile parent-world upon the town.

A skrak flew overhead, seeking little lizards to dive upon, and Jomi sat very still till the unpleasant avian discharged a tiny bomb of acidic excrement elsewhere.

'Ah comely youth, guard your skin,' came the voice, which could spy through his eyes.

'Does Chaos make our sun breed wens and carbuncles on our flesh?' Jomi asked.

'Oh no. Your sun is rich in rays beyond violet. You've been fortunate to resist those rays yourself. You'll be even luckier when I reach you.'

'How does Gretchi know to wear a wide hat and carry a parasol?'

'Vanity!'

'Does she have an extra sense to tell her?'

'If so, she needs it. In other respects she appears senselessly empty-headed.'

'How can you say so? She's so beautiful.'

'And presently she will sell what you call beauty, but only as a minion and a toy; only till she withers.'

'Beauty must mean something,' protested Jomi. 'I mean, if I'm fair and I'm a psyker... isn't there any connection, voice?'

From far away Jomi seemed to hear a stifled cackle of laughter. 'So you subscribe to the theory that body and soul reflect one another?' Heavy irony coloured the reply. 'In a dark sense that's often true. Should Chaos seize a victim, that victim's body will twist and warp... if body there be!'

'How can a person not have a body?'

'Maybe one day you'll learn - how the spirit can soar free from the flesh.' Was the voice telling him the truth? And how could that be the road to ecstasy, whatever ecstasy really signified? As if agitated, the voice began to ramble. 'I was one of the earliest psykers back in the epoch when true science gave way to strife and anarchy... Oh the madness, the madness... I was marooned. Our ship malfunctioned... it died in the warp. All through the dark aeons since, I've heard the whisperings of telepaths from the real universe. I've eavesdropped on the downfall of civilization and on its grim and terrible, ignorant revival... I could never escape. I lacked a beacon that cast a suitable light.'

'How long do aeons last?' Jomi still had very little idea.

For a period there was silence, then the voice answered vaguely, 'Time behaves differently within the warp.'

'Has your body been warped at all?' asked Jomi.

Again, that distant cackle...

'My body,' the voice repeated flatly. 'My body...' It said no more than that.

Phantom gangrene dribbled from the gas-giant.

SERPILIAN PRAYED. 'In nomine Imperatoris... guide us to the golden boy that we may prison him, or rend him, or render him unto You, as You wish.

Imperator, guard our armour and our gaze; lubricate our projectile weapons that they do not jam. Bless and brighten the beams of our lasers; fiat lux in tenebris...'

And cleanse my vision too, he thought. Pierce that aura of protection which

cloaks the boy; and tear away any cataract of doubt.

The depleted ranks of Grief Bringers knelt cumbersomely in their bulging, burnished, insignia-blazoned power armour, which was principally a dark pea-green, with engrailed chevrons of headachy purple. Visors raised, they gazed intently at the inquisitor who wore borrowed vestments, of the slain Chaplain.

Green chasuble; purple apron filigreed with the emblem of the Chapter. The long mauve stole dangling from Serpilian's neck to his knees was embroidered with aliens in torments. Amulets and icons chinked and clinked.

'I have decided I shall bless our ogryn warriors too,' Serpilian murmured to Hachard, who knelt beside him. 'Ogryns are men too. After a fashion. A blessing does not depend on the receiver but on the giver. Does a laspistol possess a brain, commander? A spirit, yes! But a thinking brain? Ogryns have spirits.'

Thus, at this sacred moment, did he condone his decision to dilute the strong wine of the Marines with the crude ale of the barbarian giants. Serpilian could guess what the commander might be thinking. 'Not on my ship they don't have spirits. A few bucketsful to drink, and the place would be wrecked.' Or maybe this was only Serpilian's own guilt speaking to him. That he, a survivor, should be wearing the vestments of a Chaplain who had fought the enslavers so fiercely.

The assembled Grief Bringers' eyes shone with pious dedication. All this, to hunt for one boy... Serpilian's instinct still told him that this mission mattered deeply. If only his vision was clearer! The very veiling of his insight suggested that he and the Marines faced a powerful adversary and might win a great reward.

To Hachard, he whispered, 'Ogryns and Space Marines must be as one body under your command. The former are not simply battering rams. If I do not bless them, we all fail in reverence.'

Would the Grief Bringers' slain chaplain have blessed the loyal, stout Stenches too? Hachard twitched, but of course made no objection.

'Benedictio!' Serpilian called out loudly. 'Benedictiones! Triumphus! Let your watchword for this mission be: Emperor-of-All.'

'Emperor-of-ALL!' the Grief Bringers chorused in response.

As Serpilian quit the assembly area, he vowed to redouble his exertions to sense the ambiguous presence of the boy. His rune bones continued to thwart him almost as if in conspiracy with the power that was aiming itself at the boy; almost as though those bones were enacting a five-hundred-year-delayed vengeance upon the Inquisition which had stripped the flesh from them.

Very well. He must dispense with their aid. He must use sheer mental discipline.

He must attempt to put himself into the boy's frame of thought - for there was a link of destiny between himself and his quarry, was there not? He must detect the boy by that ploy.

He must forget all that he himself knew of the Imperium. He must erase all that he knew of the arcane wisdom of the Inquisition, garnered over millennia of terrible experiences and steadfast purity and, in Serpilian's case, some decades of duty.

He must imagine himself born on a farming moon. He must visualize his brain coming into bloom with bizarre petals - unseen by his fellow peasants - petals that served as esoteric psychic radar dishes, with unfurling stamens acting as antennae of the mind; each of these stamens tipped with pollen that would prove tasty to a daemon or a predator.

He mustn't ask himself: where precisely is this flower growing? Instead he must ask: how is this flower feeling right now?

He must identify with what he would pluck and present to the Emperor. He must imitate his prey. By that expedient he might dispel the psychic mist. Why, if he concentrated sufficiently well on pretending to be such a boy he might even distract whatever malign force was homing in - as though a heat-seeking missile were presented with a glowing decoy.

But first...

Serpilian had paused deep in thought in a corridor braced with mighty ribs and muscled with black power cables. Now he strode onward to the ogryn dormitory.

He ignored the stink, which was really no worse than the odour of many burst bowels; so he told himself. He disregarded the vermin underfoot, which were really akin to diminutive, edible pets.

'Benedico homines gigantes!' he cried out.

'Shu'rup ogryns!' bellowed the BONEhead sergeant, snapping to attention.

As Serpilian rattled through his litany of blessings and invocations all he received from the bulk of his congregation by way of responses were grunts and belches. These noises might, nonetheless, be signs of ogryn piety. The lone squat technician, clasping forage cap in hands politely, grinned sympathetically and zanily as if that little man felt some peculiar affinity for Inquisitors.

The engines of Human Loyalty were beginning to whine and its hull to wail.

The cruiser was at last descending through the moon's atmosphere.

Concluding with a final resounding Imperator benedicat, Serpilian fled to his cabin and stripped off those chaplain's vestments.

Activating the viewscreen in its wrought-iron frame of death's heads and scorpions, he stared at the flickering, swelling vista of Urpol city below. The spaceport was a flat grey medal pitted with blast-pads. Spires sprouted like thickly waxed hairs. Suburbs were stubble, roads were wrinkles zig-zagging away into the sallow lumpy skin of the landscape. A snaking blue vein was a river, a lake was a haemorrhage, farms were bruises.

He knelt and thought: I am a strange flower growing somewhere in that land.

My lurid, secret petals are ears that hear voices on the psychic winds. My pollen smells luscious to parasites...

He too had once been a strange flower, had he not?

Born into the salubrious upper tiers of the hive city of Magnox on Denebola V, young Torq had been torn between a taste for learning and a sensual nature.

Both, of course, were facets of the search for new experiences.

Yet whereas a youth who seeks solely for madder music, stronger wine, stranger drugs, wilder girls, and for the thrill of danger may presently become a poet or a master criminal or some such deviant, he is much more likely to burn out, to run his adolescent course, and to settle thereafter into self-indulging conformity.

Whereas a studious youth may develop into a useful - even a brilliant - drudge.

Put the two together in one skin, though...

Torq's father was chamberlain to one of the noble houses of Magnox. So naturally, soon after puberty, Torq joined one of the fashionable and privileged brat gangs who rampaged and roused in the latest glittergarb costumes, sporting black codpieces, grotesque jewellery, and plumed helmets fitted with krashmusik earphones. Who wounded and slew with power-stiletos which would spring a spike of vibrating, searing energy into the guts of a rival.

One night, during a raid on the lower tech levels of Magnox, Torq sensed for the first time the presence of ambush. A glowing, multidimensional map of human life-signs swam within his head, distorting, shot through with static, needing tuning...

Subsequently, in that mysterious multivalent map, he was to sense the eerie mauve glow of intrusions from the warp. He led the brat gang against a nest of psykers. These psykers were on the verge of being possessed by daemons. A rival gang were protecting them, and were making a playful erotic cult of them.

Had Torq's gang discovered those psykers first, events might have fallen out otherwise. Avid for thrills, the gilded youths from the upper tier might have made gang mascots of the psykers. Torq might have become a coven leader.

Eventually, pursued by fervent witchfinders, he might have been forced to flee and hide among the scum of the under-city.

Yet events did not fall out in this fashion. Furthermore, Torq had studied and he knew the lineaments of the Imperium rather better than his fellow brats. He thought he understood the strength of its muscles and the way those muscles pulled. His gang bested the patrons of those psykers, who had been pampered and abused by turns. Along with those captured playthings he presented himself to the Ecclesiarchy as a would-be inquisitor; whereby he would enjoy the wildest experiences, within a learned framework.

He hadn't by any means relished all of his subsequent experiences; and sometimes he was dogged by doubt that he was betraying kin-of-his-mind, all be it out of a dire necessity that became increasingly clear to him during his years of training. Piety had become his prophylactic against twinges of remorse. Faith

was his pain-soothing pill, his vindication. Torq still dressed as a dandy, one devoted to terrible duties; and his superiors had smiled - in their thin, astringent way - at such evidence of honourable excess.

'I am a flower, a flower,' he droned, breathing in trance rhythm.

Torq had been somewhat of an orchid to begin with. Whereas the boy he sought was a wonderful weed infesting some flyblown farm. Could he identify? A mauve glow polluted his inner map every which way, refusing to condense into a single signalling spot. That glow masked the brash young hues of the flower.

A fortified palace stabbed upwards, tilted by the angle of the ship's approach: towers, spiked domes, laser batteries. Other chateaux within walled gardens drifted by. Factories, abattoirs. Then a plain of ferroconcrete loomed.

Human Loyalty settled. The familiar throb of engines faded. A klaxon shrieked twice to signal the shutting down of artificial gravity. As the natural pull of the moon, which was a good twenty per cent weaker, replaced the generated gravity, so the ship creaked. The cruiser was at once relaxing and bearing down.

An inquisitor must bear down firmly without such inner relaxation. The gravity of this mission was, perhaps, extreme.

\* \* \*

'I'M R-REALLY DEEPLY honoured,' stammered Reverend Henrik Farb. 'I never set eyes on a Space Marine before, let alone m-met a commander.'

And why should he have? If the Imperium comprised a million worlds, why, there were only a million Marines too.

Musky incense snaked inside the cavernous temple, wreathing icons and writing curlicues upon the air in what might have been the mad script of aliens. Farb, sweating, sucked in tendrils of that smoke like an asthmatic seeking soothing vapours to assuage a panic-stricken attack of suffocation. Candles flickered, contributing their own fainter odour of reptile grease.

This man, who had presumably terrified so many others, was terrified himself.

'Your respect honours our Emperor,' said Hachard. 'So does your dread. But now

you must think clearly.'

The inquisitor had finally narrowed the likely area of search to a quadrant north of Urpol City. The Land Raiders that survived after Valhall II had sped forth on their cleated armoured tracks to the various towns in this zone, crushing the primitive roads, carrying Marines and ogyrns. And it so happened that Hachard himself had come to this town of Groxgelt. If there was to be action, he wished to be as close as possible, not back at the ship awaiting reconnaissance reports.

How could he put this worthy preacher at his ease? 'Tell me,' he asked lightly,

'does the gelt in Groxgelt refer to cash, or to castration?'

Farb stared at his questioner as if he was being posed a riddle upon which his life depended. Could it be, wondered Hachard, that the preacher didn't understand all of his words? The man spoke decent Imperial Gothic; the dialect used on this moon was quite comprehensible.

'Never mind, Preacher. Tell me this: what lad in this community stands out as in any way different?'

Farb's gaze dropped to the Grief Bringer's protruding groin-guard, of a verdigris-smearred skull transfixed by a purple dagger.

'Castration, I think,' he mumbled.

'Concentrate!' snapped Hachard.

'Yes... yes... there's one boy - never caused any bother - prays in the temple here

- good worker, so I hear...' Farb licked his fat lips. 'Attends witch-breakings, though they seem to make him squirm... Son of the tanner labal. The boy has no visible deformities; that's the odd thing about him. He looks,' and the preacher spat, 'so pure. Lately he has been... going places alone, I hear.'

'How do you come by that information?'

'The wife of the farmer who employs him... I, well, I cherish certain feelings for that woman... between you and me as man to man...'

Hachard forbore to sneer at this attempted comparison.

'Nothing illicit on my part, sir... She's... a woman of substance, if you take my meanings. Perhaps if her husband is ever gored by a grox...'

'What of the boy?'

'Why, Galandra Puschik keeps her eye on him, as a good employer should. The boy speaks differently. His tone seems less... local. He uses the odd word she does not understand...'

AS THE GRIEF Bringer strode back to the Land Raider after interrogating the terrified tanner and Goodwife Jabal, who made a better showing, and the hulking stupid son Big Ven, he eyed the ogryn BONEhead and the squat sitting on the uppermost track of the vehicle. Zig-zags of pea-green and purple blotched the plasteel body and the track-walls, mounted with las-cannon ball turrets, of the Raider, less suggestive of camouflage than of a sickly infestation by some poisonous lichen. A cowed crowd of townsfolk were eyeing those who perched high upon the massive vehicle. The sprocketed wheels that moved the tracks were hidden from their superstitious gaze by the casings of armour.

For his men to have to mix with these scratching, farting, dumb-witted, sweating peasants. To have to try to tease some sense out of backyard gossip... After the costly victory over the enslavers - a perilous task that had almost proved beyond the Grief Bringers' reach - this present mission almost seemed designed as an insult, a reproof for losing so many comrades, however gloriously.

No, thought Hachard, that way heresy lies. I must trust the instincts of an inquisitor.

At least the fat preacher had understood well enough the power that Hachard and his men deployed, and the seriousness of the threat to humanity that must have brought such warriors here.

Hachard was fairly sure that he had located the prey they sought, while the inquisitor remained unable to pinpoint him. The commander permitted himself a slight, black-toothed smile, not of superiority but of grim satisfaction.

His return to the market square triggered a flurry in the gawping, fearful - and stupidly resentful - crowd. Yet most gazes flickered back quickly to the crudely

clad ogryn and the squat atop the vehicle. The citizens of Groxgelt could see that the bulky Grief Bringer, with the visor of his helmet raised, was a true man. Did that passive mob of ugly specimens view the BONEhead as more intimidating than an armoured Space Marine? Or, in their squinty eyes, was the grotesque, prognathous ogryn someone to whom they could more easily relate?

Hachard entered the hatch of the personnel den where techcrew and other Marines awaited. The comnet crackled alive as he fingered its rune-knobs, its spirit kindling faithfully.

'Lord inquisitor,' he reported, 'I have identified a possible suspect. Name of Jomi Jabal. Curfew approaches but boy has not returned home. Believed to be out by farm four clicks north-west of Groxgelt town...'

One boy. Against whom: Land Raiders, las-cannons, armoured Grief Bringers, and ogryns.

One boy... plus what else?

'I'm within twenty kilometres of you, commander. Am on my way. Don't let the noise of the Land Raiders alert our target. Advance the final four clicks on foot.'

'Understood.' Hachard switched automatically to battle code to summon the other Land Raiders to rendezvous at speed across country, just outside Groxgelt.

He would have to wait a while, so he stepped outside again. The setting gas-giant peered over rooftops like the disembodied eye of some enormous cosmic parent-creature which was slowly withdrawing its witness from this world so as to allow a cloak of gloom to descend.

'Do wish I had my trike with me,' the squat remarked conversationally from up top. 'Big battle-machines attract missiles and such. Zippy little trikes avoid 'em.'

Hachard recalled the dwarfs name. Grimm: that was it.

'Land Raiders protect little men like you,' Hachard said coldly.

'Huh. Don't know about this one. Armour's cracked. Needs welding.'

'You're supposed to be our technician. Paint another rune. Utter a charm.'

Grimm sniggered briefly; and anger flared in Hachard, at a time when he should be composing himself reverently for combat.

'Wretched abhuman!'

Sensing danger, Grimm gabbled, 'Apologies, Sir. Had me work cut out servicing the suits-'

'Silence! In any case we shall be advancing on foot to begin with; and that includes you, little man.'

Grimm goggled at the Commander's power armour, slapped his own quilted flak jacket by way of comparison, and muttered, 'Oh my ancestors.'

Thunderjug guffawed like distant thunder.

\* \* \*

'SOOOOON,' THE VOICE soothed Jomi. 'Welcome the circle into your mind.'

The voice had told him where to wait: by the biggest grox paddock. Jomi glanced anxiously at the sinking gas-giant. Already the last of the gloaming was upon the countryside. Soon the curfew trumpet would scream out in town, and no one human would be abroad but himself. He would have broken the law. If the owner of the voice did not come, what could Jomi do? Hide till morning?

What, here where mutants might roam? For if muties did not enter the town itself, they might well haunt the open countryside.

Yet he was a mutant too. Why should other mutants be hostile to one of their own kind? Ah, but outcasts would surely be hungry. Jomi's flesh might smell sweet...

Sweet flesh reminded him of Gretchi. If nothing else happened tonight, he could stumble to the farmhouse. He might be able to climb to an upper window, Gretchi's, and tap for admittance. Surely she would admire his daring in venturing out at night to see her? Surely she would reward him suitably. He ached to cup those white doves in his hands, and to explore her private nest of hidden hair, which itself hid...

'The circle! Think of that! Or I may lose focus.'

He thought of Gretchi's mouth open wide. He thought of another part of her opening to him, a soft ring, of whose exact shape and dimensions he wasn't quite sure.

'Forget that foolish minx! She's worthless. I can let you glimpse such lust-nymphs as will make her seem trite and dowdy. I can conjure lubricious courtesans from memory - ayeeee!' Such a pang of anguish and frustration seemed to afflict the voice.

Glimpsing...? And conjuring? The voice had promised to introduce Jomi to delights, not merely show him, as if spied through a window of thick glass.

'You'll be broken on the wheel if I don't reach you,' the voice threatened.

The wheel... Jomi jerked back to reality. What else was his whole life on this damned moon but wretchedness? Entrails and heat and fear and Galandra Puschik's lusts which she would insist on satisfying one day soon, crushingly and disgustingly. He was about to leave all this vileness behind.

Don't think of Gretchi again till after the owner of the voice arrives! He forced her image from his mind. Wheel, circle; circle, wheel.

In the last golden light the horned, scaly, toothsome reptiles milled sluggishly in their corral. Each was the size of a small pony. Their claws clicked on the stony ground. Crop-land dipped away towards the river. Boulders, some the size of houses, punctuated the ridged oat-fields. Carried here by sheets of ice long ago, the voice had told him.

Jomi inhaled. He thought he heard whispers on the wind. He sensed minds: disciplined minds, almost completely shielded from him as if a firescreen stood in front of a blaze of grox dung. Yet some of the heat glowed through.

Could witches who were far cleverer than himself be creeping towards this place, attracted by the voice? No witches who had been broken in the square had ever seemed particularly clever. Of course, extreme pain reduced them to imbecility, to shattered bags of white-hot shrieking nerves, and little more than that. Could they ever have been clever to be captured? Compared with those wretches, Jomi had become educated... somewhat.

Maybe really clever witches had escaped and banded together in the furthest hinterlands far from farms and towns. Thus it had taken them months to trek here.

Jomi could also sense other minds nearby that were dull and slow and fierce.

Was he hearing the thoughts of the groxen too? Surely not...

'Voice,' he questioned.

'Hush, bonny boy, I must concentrate. Oh it has been so long. Soon I will embrace you. Strive to see the circle in front of you.'

He mustn't fail the voice at the last moment; for thus he would fail himself. Nor must he scare it away by hinting at the presence of those other strange strong minds in the vicinity. Those, and the brutish minds. Obediently he imagined a circle and strained his eyes in the dimming light.

Yes!

A glowing hoop appeared, balanced upon the ground a few hundred metres away. Slowly it swelled in size, though it did not brighten. If anything, it grew dimmer, as though to evade scrutiny from elsewhere. Within the hoop was utter night, a darkness absolute.

THE FACT THAT the portal was coming into existence some distance away from the boy - and slowly - tended to rule out the activity of a warp creature such as an enslaver. Warp creatures of that ilk were usually impetuous in their attack.

Nor could the alien eldar be creating this opening. The eldar were masters of warp-gates and such; they hardly needed the type of psychic focus that the boy seemed to be providing. As though anything on this moon could possibly interest the eldar!

This portal was opening almost painfully - if such a thing could be. Almost creakingly, as if its "hinges" had rusted during long aeons of time. Obviously a warp-portal didn't have hinges; but the analogy held.

Grief Bringers in power armour were spreading out under cover of the boulders.

A gang of ogryns was lumbering into position in the almost-darkness.

'If we seize the psyker boy now...,' began Hachard, tentatively. 'We may scare whatever is coming. We must wait till the portal-maker steps through. We hunt for knowledge as well as prey.'

'Knowledge...' Did the commander shudder? 'In the Dark Age,' he murmured, 'they sought knowledge for its own sake...'

Serpilian said sharply, 'Only the Emperor knows what really happened during the Dark Age.' How the inquisitor wished that he too knew. Godless science had flourished back then. From time to time remnants were still found: precious, arcane techniques and equipment of utmost value to the Imperium. Long ago the human race had spread throughout the galaxy like a migration of lemmings -

heedless of the beings lurking in the warp, for it was heedless of its own psychic potential. Innocents, innocents! Puppies in a daemon's den! Like a sudden storm, insanity and anarchy had erupted till the God-Emperor arose to save and unify, to control the human worlds, to calm the psychic tempest with utmost and essential rigour.

Here was a boy, of the possible future-to-be. Here was... what else? Serpilian extended his sense of presence, but mauve distortions dazed his vision.

A ROBOT HIGHER than any building in Groxgelt, a robot that bristled with what Jomi took to be weapons, lurched through the gate of darkness.

'Here I am, dearest boy,' exulted the voice in Jomi's brain. 'Don't fear this metal body. This is the shell that has sheltered the kernel of myself while I drifted alone for aeons in the warp in a derelict megaship. Now at last I can touch the soil of a world. Now I can hope to be a fleshly body once more. Oh the sweet endearing flesh, the senses that sing, the nerves that twang like harp-strings!

And what song did they sing so long ago? Soooooon I shall remember.'

The robot took a tentative step towards Jomi. As if exercising limbs which hadn't encountered the pull of gravity for many millennia, the robot swept an arm around. Energies crackled from the tips of its steel fingers, gusting across the herd of groxen. The reptiles began to snort and hiss and rip at the soil of their

compound, and butt their horns against the fence.

What fleshly body was the kernel of this huge machine hoping to be? As the juggernaut took another lurching step in Jomi's direction, he began to sweat. He crouched.

SERPILIAN SHOOK THE bag of rune bones at his waist so that he sounded like an angry rattlesnake, then switched on his energy armour. Beneath his cloak subtle forces wove a cocoon that clad his body, and his cuirass glowed faintly.

He too now heard that voice inside his own head, and shivered at the treachery which the ancient survivor must intend. It was hoping to seize control of the boy's brain and body, dispossessing his spirit, casting that into the limbo of the sea of souls.

The inquisitor stared at the giant gunmetal-grey relic, trying in vain to classify it.

It was squatter than a Battle Titan, its limbs less flexibly jointed, nor did any obvious head protrude from the top of its chest in the way that control-heads jutted, turtle-like, from Titans. However, it looked almost as formidable. And what was more, it housed someone who had endured literally for aeons.

Serpilian knew of no mechanical system other than the Emperor's enormous immobile prosthetic throne which could sustain a person's existence during entire aeons.

What remnant of flesh and bone could possibly lurk inside that mobile juggernaut? Only the head and spinal column of the castaway? Only the naked brain, bathed in fluids? Or maybe - could such a thing be? - only the mind itself, wrought within some intricate interior talisman by ancient eldritch sorcery?

That robot was treasure.

Its occupant hoped to steal a human brain which housed such great psychic potential, to add to its own psychic powers... Whosoever controlled such a boy...

Serpilian suppressed within himself a tenuous twinge of traitorous ambition.

Was he being corrupted by proximity to this monster from the past?

'It's ever this way,' Hachard commented grimly. 'A thin line confronts the foulest enemies. Yet, thank Him on Earth, that line is stronger than a diamond forged in a supernova. Permission,' he requested, 'to summon the Land Raiders?'

'Yes. Do so. But only as a reserve. I don't wish the robot destroyed utterly.'

Hachard radioed in battle code.

As the two men stood under a sheaf of stars, a voice piped:

'Sirs! Sirs!' It was the squat, accompanied by the ogryn BONEhead. 'Surely that's a robot from the early Age of Strife, sirs! The portal must lead to a space hulk in the warp, mustn't it? Where else could such a robot have lurked? That hulk could contain a wealth of ancient technology.'

'Yes, little man,' agreed Serpilian. 'I do believe that's so.'

At that moment the curfew trumpet shrieked from afar, as if that tocsin were the signal for battle.

'Commander, disable the robot. Shoot off its legs.'

Hachard rapped out orders. Almost immediately plasma and laser beams stitched the deepening night. Yet the beams glanced away, deflected by some shield - or even by an aura of invulnerability. For the mind within that machine was potent, was it not? Had it not had mad, lonely aeons during which to examine and hone its powers?

The robot's own inbuilt lasers and plasma cannon fired back, tracking the sources of the energy beams. At the same time a wave of confusion lapped at Serpilian's mind. The creature in the robot possessed psychic weaponry too, so it seemed.

Perhaps something else shared mind-space with the occupant of that plasteel refuge, something that one wouldn't exactly classify as human company...

Serpilian had seen to it that the Grief Bringers wore protective psychic hoods.

Still, in that first onslaught two Marines broke cover impetuously, rushing directly towards the robot. Their suits glowed, then incandescenced. The overload

filter in Hachard's radio stole away their screams. Another brave man took advantage of the diversion to advance at a powered run from a different direction, clutching a melta-bomb. He was obviously hoping to sacrifice himself by detonating this against one of the robot's feet, thus destabilizing it. Plasma engulfed him; the night erupted briefly as the bomb's thermal energy gushed prematurely, liquefying his suit. The Space Marines quickly resumed more disciplined fire.

As Serpilian squinted at the flaring, stroboscopic scene, he could tell that the robot had halted, though it showed precious little sign of disablement. Beams simply slid off it, bouncing away into the sky.

A grim hill hove into view, then another.

'Land Raiders arriving on station,' said Hachard. 'If we aim their las-cannons at one leg in concert we should bring it crashing down soon enough.'

'What if the shielding and the aura hold? Even temporarily? Fierce energies will recoil unpredictably. The boy may be evaporated in the backlash. If the lascannon beams do break through, the robot might explode.'

Couldn't Hachard guess at the value of this artefact from elder days? Maybe not.

He only saw a present menace to the Imperium. Of all those present, save for Serpilian perhaps only the squat realized... The inquisitor could hardly confide in him. Indeed, he might need to silence the little man.

Once again, Serpilian felt a thread of heretical temptation insinuating itself within his soul, and muttered a prayer. 'Asperge me, God-Emperor. Cleanse me.'

'Permission, sah,' requested the sergeant-ogryn. 'My men... strong. We charge at the robot? Wrestle it on to its side?'

Hachard laughed; and it occurred to Serpilian that the wave of confusion might have affected the minds of the ogryns peculiarly. Unlike the Space Marines, the abhumans had been shielded only by their own dense skulls and by their brutish, if violent, thought processes. The confusion might only now be surfacing in their brainiest representative, the sergeant.

'Why not?' said the commander. 'Listen carefully, sergeant: send all your ogryns

round to the north side. Yes, in that direction. Over there. Then you come back to report. As soon as my Marines cease fire, your ogryns must charge. Do you understand?'

'Yus, sah.' Thunderjug stomped over to his troopers and bellowed at them for a while.

'Couldn't one of them scoop up the boy?' suggested Grimm.

'They'd probably tear his head off by mistake,' snapped Hachard.

'Um... Commander, sir.'

'What is it now, abhuman?'

'Isn't a charge by the ogryns a mite suicidal?'

'Not necessarily,' intervened Serpilian. 'The robot replied to fire with fire. But the ogryn charge might confuse it. I take it that that's the commander's intention, rather than him implying that his hands are being tied.'

'Huh,' said Grimm.

Thunderjug returned and stood to attention.

JOMI CLUNG TO the ground in terror as the air blistered above him.

'They'll need to change their tactics,' advised the voice. 'A lull must come - and I think I can cause a diversion. When I say run, sprint to me as fast as you can, ducking low. I can take you inside this body. I can transport you back through the portal. Better the warp than death, don't you think?'

The sizzle of lethal beams almost convinced Jomi. Almost.

'I shall save you, Jomi, save you. I am your safety...'

The voice began to drone hypnotically, bewitchingly. It promised joys, it promised lusts, fulfilments - yet seemed savagely bewildered as to what these might be. Did Jomi hear a background hint of crazed laughter? His body twitched, puppet-like. He threw up his hand reflexively, and a low, stray laser

beam seared his wrist superficially. The pain jerked him free from the growing enchantment, plunging him again into a tenain of terrible fear.

'Are you man or woman?' he gasped.

'I hardly remember.'

'How can you not remember such a thing?'

'It became unimportant... Yet a ghost reminds me of the flesh! A goading wraith within. Ah, Jomi, Jomeeee, I know so much, and am so separated from all that I knew. My ghost cries for a body to carets and sculpt to its desire... Come to me soon, Jomeeee, when I call-'

FROM THE VOICE'S moaning words Serpilian gathered ample confirmation that its owner had been a psychic eavesdropper on millennia of war-torn history and even of hidden pre-Imperium history. How the inquisitor thirsted for its knowledge.

But the ancient survivor was also, he strongly suspected, possessed.

Possessed by a daemon of the warp.

This was an unusual species of possession, for the survivor plainly owned no body at all, other than the vast metal body of the robot. The survivor consisted only of mind, wrought within a talisman of crystal wafers or some other occult material, a talisman which strove to maintain the stability of that mind - strove with a fair degree of success, considering the awesome timespan, yet of necessity imperfectly. The daemon had no tangible flesh to twist and warp and stamp its mark upon. It could only lurk impotently, glued to the imprisoned mind, tormenting it spasmodically by stimulating memories and sensuous hallucinations. Maybe the goad of the daemon was what had prevented the survivor from lapsing into sloth...

The voice spoke of science. The truth was corruption. Conduzio: its science was heresy.

Serpilian must not thirst for that!

And now that the castaway's dark scheme to possess Jomi had failed - a cursed,

daemon-inspired plan! - the survivor was intent on at least carrying the boy back into exile with it.

At Hachard's command the Grief Bringers ceased fire...

\* \* \*

JUST AS THE ogryn squad was commencing its assault, the robot aimed a plasma blast low at the grox compound, crisping several beasts yet also tearing a long gap in the fence. Serpilian sensed the aura of venomous intent which the mind in the robot - daemon-assisted? - directed at the reptiles to stir their blood lust.

Ripping at one another, groxen burst free of their captivity and rapidly were attracted towards the thundering giants. All plasma and laser fire had ceased.

The psyker boy staggered erect and stumbled towards the robot; seeing which, Serpilian let out a cry of frustration.

'Catch that lad for the Emperor, Thunderjug!' shouted Grimm, as if he was a commander. 'And don't pull his head off unless you have to!'

No appeal could mean more to an ogryn. Tossing his encumbering ripper gun aside, Thunderjug Aggrox bared his tusks and pounded towards the distant youth. The dapper little squat sprinted after the ogryn, trying his best to keep up, panting, 'Huh! Huh! Huh!'

Careless of his own safety, Serpilian loped after them, blood-red cloak streaming, the very image of avenging angel. The boy must be stopped! A hatch was opening in the lower casing of the robot to welcome the lurching youth.

Just then, the stampeding groxen met the charging ogryns. The insensate animals leapt, clawed, bit, and gouged. They tore chunks of flesh, yet an ogryn hardly heeded such trivia. Ogryn fists smashed grox skulls.

However, the robot noticed the boy's pursuers and swivelled a weapon arm, opening fire with a raking of explosive bolts. Serpilian dived flat. Ahead of him, the ogryn's mighty legs pounded onward for a dozen more strides before the giant crashed to the ground. The squat darted past; his cap had fallen off, or been snatched away by a bolt. Then a blast grenade, launched from a tube in the

robot's arm, exploded near him. The shock wave picked the squat up and threw him several metres.

Sprawled on the stony dirt, Serpilian stretched out his right arm, forefinger pointing the jokaero needler. One needle in the boy, and he would be paralyzed.

The range was somewhat extreme for such a tiny, lightweight dart. The target was moving. The inquisitor strove to aim.

At that moment, when Jomi was barely twenty metres from the inviting hatch, he halted...

A PSYCHIC MAELSTROM of savagery and pain whirled around Jomi. The death-shrieks of those who had died, the berserker fury of ogryns as they fought the reptiles, the terror of all the energy beams and explosions...

these suddenly culminated. A lurid radiance seemed to flare in his mind, as if doors were flying open, behind which fierce furnaces raged, cauldrons of inchoate energy.

'Jomeeee! You've almost reached meee! Run just a little bit more and leap inside meee!'

Looking up at the towering machine, Jomi suddenly perceived it - by that blazing light from within him - not as a mountain of metal in approximately humanoid shape, but as...

...AVAST, NAKED Galandra Puschik looming over him lustfully. Her legs were squat trunks. The hatch was her secret opening. Her enormous torso, thick with fat, writhed with desire to entertain him. Her great muscular arms reached out...

'Jomeeee! My dearest delicious boy, my joy-!'

What confronted him was a robot again. Yet the light from within him did not cease. It changed hue and wavelength, so that he peered appalled into the world of what-might-be...

ASSISTED BY A tentacle, he had leapt into a womb of steel, a metal pod barely large enough to stand up in. The tentacle withdrew, and he was thrown upon the floor as the robot rocked, starting to march back towards the portal, brushing

aside the brawling bodies of brutal giants and rabid groxen. Its cleated feet crushed deep craters. The hatch was descending, to close him in.

Through it, while still open, by the resuming, spasming light of energy beams Jomi glimpsed a man in glowing breastplate and blood-red cloak - a thin, tall man with a drooping black moustache and a staring eye tattooed upon his cheek

- sprinting frantically towards the decamping robot.

Jomi could hear the man's thumping thoughts. 'Even if I can paralyze him... too late to drag the boy out...! At least cling to some handhold on the robot... Don't lose it entirely, or all has been in vain... Accompany it, willy-nilly, through the doorway of darkness... Will there be air on the other side of the portal? Will all atmosphere have long since leaked out of the hulk? Will there be only vacuum, to boil my blood and collapse my lungs like empty paper bags? My energy armour will be no protection from that fate...'

The hatch closed, plunging Jomi into utter obscurity and silence. The body that carried him lurched and swayed.

Presently little lights winked on. Jomi hugged his own body protectively. How could he escape from this pod? Surely he couldn't live inside this miniature chamber even if the machine fed him? He imagined the narrow floor aswilt with his urine, in which nuggets of excrement bobbed.

'Welcome to my kingdom,' the voice purred. Bitter mockery tinged the accents Jomi heard in his mind. 'Our kingdom, now-'

('Mine tooo...') A malicious, disappointed echo seemed to haunt the voice, perhaps unheard by it, perhaps all too familiar. ('Failure, feeble failure... But here's a soft body at least...')

The lid of a small porthole slid aside. Jomi pressed his face to the thick plascrystal as floodlight beams lanced from the robot. He stared at a great grotto of metal, from which several steel tunnels ran away into stygian gloom. Strange machines jutted from the plated floor and from the ribbed walls. A debris of loose tools and cargo floated like dead fish in a dank pond.

'There's one other such machine as mine on board,' the voice confided, as if oblivious of the soft, sinister echo that Jomi had heard. 'It has been inactive for

millennia, lacking a person's mind to fill it, but I can revive it now. With my science, I'll put you into it. First, of course, I'll need to cut away your body-'

('That'll be an exquisite hour or so...')

Jomi vomited in terror.

' - soon, before you use all the air I sucked in on that moon. Once you're activated we can play games. Hide and seek, for instance... You'll need to rely on the resources of your lovely mind. At least I'll have company now. Oh the madness, the madness. Maybe my imaginary companion will go away. Into you, maybe...'

A figure in a blood-red cloak drifted into view, out in the giant grotto. Its frozen arms stretched out vainly towards a vista which, prior to the flare of illumination, it couldn't possibly have seen...

WHAT-MIGHT-BE - and might still be - vanished. Jomi still stood before the robot.

'Daemon, daemon, hidden daemon!' he shrieked at it. He spat. Reaching into his memory for an incantation, he recalled Farb's prayers, and howled:

'Imperator hominorum, nostra salvatio!'

'Jomeeeee! Do not betray meeee!'

The whitehot cauldron inside Jomi spilled over. The inner furnaces, so suddenly revealed to him, gushed psychic fire. Hardly knowing how, he sprayed a fountain of defensive mental energy, ill-focused yet incandescent, at the voice, which would have betrayed him.

'Nostra salvatio, hominorum Imperator!'

'Aiieeee!' cried the voice, keening through his head like a scalpel blade attempting to sever the sinews of his new-found psyker ability, raw and unshaped as yet.

Recoiling, his brain in agony, Jomi nevertheless summoned another spout of hot repulsion to hurl at the robot.

THE BOY'S RAW power! And his piety too, all be it born of terror! Bathed in the backwash of inner light from the volcanic upheaval within the boy, with his own senses extended Serpilian had partaken of Jomi's vision of what-might-be.

As if an actor in Jomi's dream, the inquisitor had experienced the death-agony of passing through the portal. Of collapsing lungs. Of utter, absolute chill... He had also known Jomi's claustrophobic, dreadful dismay. Moments later Serpilian found himself still sprawled on the battlefield; and the battlefield was a blessed place by contrast.

Scrambling up, Serpilian signalled back towards Hachard, hoping that the Commander could see and would understand his gestures. Then he resumed his reckless run towards the boy who was holding the robot at bay, like a rat defying a bull. He no longer pointed his jokaero needler.

Casting his own aura of protection, Serpilian seized Jomi by the shoulder.

'In the Emperor's name, come with me to safety! Come swiftly, Jomi Jabal!'

HACHARD MUST HAVE understood. As soon as Serpilian had hauled the boy to some reasonable remove, and had ducked with him behind a boulder, the lascannons of the Land Raiders opened fire. Shaft upon shaft of searing energy lanced at the robot. The Space Marine infantry added their contribution.

Wounded ogryns scattered, abandoning the remaining groxen which had been preoccupying them.

Had the giants not engaged with the savage reptiles, by now one of those might have attacked Serpilian or the boy...

The robot launched jets of plasma and energy beams. A Land Raider exploded, raining hot shards of plasteel. Several Marines fell victim to beams and jets. The Imperial energies cascaded off the robot's shields, pluming into the sky, rendering the landscape bright as day.

Yet now the robot seemed confused. It backed. It lumbered. Perhaps the mind within was anguished. Perhaps, infected by Jomi's vision, it imagined that it had passed safely back through the portal, though the nightmare evidence was otherwise. Perhaps it was running low on energy.

At last an Imperial energy-beam tore loose a weapon arm. Another beam pierced the vulnerable hatch. Part of the robot's mantle flared and melted. Still firing -

but falteringly now, seemingly at random - the great, damaged machine stomped back towards the portal. Land Raider beams focused in unison upon its back, so that it seemed to be propelled in its retreat by a hurricane-torn, white-hot sail woven from the heart of a sun.

As it entered the portal, the robot incandesced blindingly. A detonation as of a dozen simultaneous sonic booms rocked the torn terrain. Glaring fragments of the robot's carapace flew back like angry boomerangs, like scythes. The bulk of its disintegrating body pitched forward, out of existence, vanishing.

SERPILIAN DEACTIVATED HIS energy armour, and Jomi, smeared with dirt and stinking of sweat, wept in his arms.

'I shall,' vowed Serpilian, 'recommend you for the finest training - as an inquisitor yourself.'

The boy cried, 'What? What? I can't hear! Only the awful terrible thunder.'

'Your hearing will return!' Serpilian shouted into the boy's streaked face. 'If not, that can be repaired with an acoustic amulet! One day you will serve the Emperor as I serve him. I came a long way to find you!'

AFTER A WHILE, Jomi listened to Serpilian's thoughts instead and began to understand. This cloaked figure had come a long way to find him. Why, so had the voice; so had the mind, and the daemon, in the robot...

Jomi would be sent far away from the wretched moon, to Earth itself. He thought fleetingly of Gretchi; but as the voice itself had suggested, that kind of yearning seemed to have become extremely insignificant.

GROANING, AND RUBBING his head, Grimm ambled back to where the BONEhead lay sprawled; but it was undeniable that Thunderjug's whole skull, including the riveted battle honours, was missing. The dwarf patted the toppled giant consolingly on the shoulder. 'Huh!' he said.

Bilious-hued power armour loomed. Commander Hachard himself stood over the ogryn.

'I watched him charge,' said Hachard's external speaker. 'The other subhumans remain alive - I think so, by and large - but not their sergeant. The Grief Bringers are... honoured, by his bravery.' Ponderously, the Space Marine Commander saluted.

What about me? thought Grimm. I nearly got bloomin' blown to pieces. But he said nothing. It was Thunderjug who was dead.

Bending, assisted by the squat, Hachard dragged the ogryn's corpse into his powered arms.

As Grimm gazed up at the indigo sky, the stars stared back down at him blindly.

The portal had disappeared a while since, yet a tremor seemed to twist the night air, warping the heavens. Or was the distortion due to moisture in his eyes?