

Direwolves Are A Man's Best Friend

Being A

Midnight Sonata tale

By

Simon L. Barber
Dramatis Personae:

Chester: Male ringtail professional troublemaker, currently doing part-time work as fighter pilot aboard the Dragon, which also provides a handy way for him to leave town in a hurry. Or leave the entire galactic arm, as like as not.... [Terrie Smith]

Sabaath: Female demon-built direwolf centaur, given formidable powers by her designers - but not one solitary luncheon voucher to keep them fuelled. Has an electrifying personality, even on electronic entities (who have been known to die of shock at first sight). [Simon Barber]

Kiko Ap Rhys: Female mouse mechanic, currently acting as tutor and "big sister" to Sabaath. Has great interest in all social customs and sciences - currently doing an in-depth study of direwolf hormonal responses.... [Reese D'Orrycott]

Sharrown Chattan: Male wildcat Start pilot, taking a Master's degree course in avoiding Chester, Kiko and Sabaath. If there's Trouble around, he'd rather be the cause than the target of it (and there's Trouble around, doesn't he just know it...) [Bruce Grant]

Felina Aniara: Female Catsect (Daemon insect/feline hybrid). Working as armed/unarmed combat teacher and security aboard the Dragon; a walking case of "Forewarned is forearmed". Or the other way around, seeing that she's four armed to start with... [Freddy Andersson]

Minor parts and bit-players:

Ural Deck: Male canine fighter pilot, generally recovering from Chester's latest stunt. [Mark Barnard]

Lettice Earnshaw: Female badger Xenobiologist, tasked with working out how Sabaath ticks (her builders forgot to send the user manual along.) [Simon Barber]

Goodhope Staelsdottr: Female ringtail, who's been looking forward to bumping into Chester again for a LOOOONGGG time... (Simon Barber)

Burgomeister Dantachak: Female Bear; Local peacekeeper and organiser of festivities. Dantachak is proud of her shapely 48-25-38 figure - that's neck, wrists and biceps, naturally. (Simon Barber)

"Now, it's not that I don't want you any more," Kiko Nao Rhys looked up at a genetically remixed direwolf, currently sitting in a cramped cabin twelve star systems nearer the Galactic Core from where they had first met, "but just think of all the Advantages of having your own room."

Sabaath-66 looked down at the diminutive deer-mouse, her ears drooping. "Sabaath be good. Not bring Cute-Chester back to play when Kiko asleep. Not ask Kiko for cuddles when Kiko tired."

The mouse sighed. Since joining the crew of the Dragon three months ago, Sabaath had been sharing her quarters. If "sharing" was the right word: it was rather like being a rowing-boat in dock with a restive battleship - there really wasn't a lot of room to manoeuvre without getting rolled on. True, with Kiko's workaholic schedule, the hours they happened to share awake together in the room were rather few - but the mouse needed her privacy, and Sabaath was often irritatingly eager to find out about absolutely everything.

"After this next planetfall, then," Kiko amended her decision "anyway, you'll be wanting some space for yourself soon, won't you ? It's only another week to next time round, isn't it ?" She patted the grey-furred rump, and felt a rough carnivore tongue slurp affectionately at her ear. That was another reason Sabaath was leaving - it had been bad enough when the centaur had been exclusively chasing Chester for her average one week a month, one end or another. But since the young direwolf had taken to double-dating Chester and Palomar Knight, things had got beyond a joke. She was always dutiful at cleaning their room, along with her other maintenance tasks, but generally left it till the morning after. In the meantime, Kiko found it an off-putting environment for performing her religion's purification rituals, to put it mildly. Most of the room she could reach herself, but on several occasions, she had needed to clean off the ceiling as well....

"Hokay," Sabaath nodded, brightening up "what planet we going to this time ?"

The world of Novy Altai was a green-brown patchwork from orbit, with less than a tenth of the surface covered in seas. Deserts and dry, rolling steppes made up most of the landscape, with great high mountain chains and plateaux holding jealously their precious snows and glaciers which fed the thirsty farmlands below.

"Tis nae exactly urbanised, ye'd say ?" Sharrown Chattan looked down on the surface through the main Bridge screen "Yon communications bands are about as lively as a wet Sabbath day in Troon Delta Minor - I dinnae ken fit's doon there tae interest likes of us."

Captain K'tal Sabre snorted, a gleam in the big feline's eye as he scanned the Galactic Yellow Pages "There's more to this place than there looks. It's not industrialised - there's just four spaceports and some old HellStar cargo launchers on the planet - but what they supply the sector with, you don't use by the kilotonne."

"We 'ave to win ze contract 'ere, to collect and carry ze 'arvest of some vairie special farms," Cresse tapped up the data on screen, the skunk's tail bobbing as she turned. "Medical chemicals - hormonal, tres 'especial. And we must be quick - zey cannot be preserved." She pointed at the next system over "Normally zis world has, 'ow you say, ze monopoly of ze trade. But zey are in civil war this year - and ze plants 'ere are getting ripe without zem."

Sharrown nodded, relieved. This looked like a nice peaceful place to make some honest money, without the usual complications. He doubted he'd need to use his 'Start on this trip - time to make a few more little alterations and test them out before he had to trust his life to the battlesuit again. With one last glance at the peaceful, if somewhat dull, planet below, he strolled off whistling. This trip, he'd have to make his own excitement.

(Novy Altai local lore: Quoted from the seventeen Utterly Cryptical Tomes of the Great Prophet Prozac The Mellow.....)

"NOBODY gets it right ALL the time."

Down in the flight hangar of the Dragon, work went on as ever. There were Puffin and Coyote fighters to maintain, the StormRunner's increasingly twitchy Artificial Intransigence computer to talk soothingly to, and the thousand and one other jobs that a forty-strong engineering crew filled their shifts with.

Unfortunately, the Dragon no longer had forty engineering crew, or anything like it. So what should have been regular shifts to maintain the equipment in tip-top condition, was a non-stop "make-do and mend" operation to try and keep at least a minimum force ready for action.

"You should see us down here when we've damage to repair.." Kiko commented ironically, as three hyperactive Toppers ran screaming down the service shafts with urgent supplies of gaffer tape and bailing wire "THEN, it gets BUSY." Strong though Kiko was for her size, many of the components were simply far too heavy for her to mousehandle by herself. Her roommate was slowly learning the basics of maintenance, and in the meantime earned her keep as a mobile crane and trailer.

Sabaath nodded, passing her electrically-sensitive claws over the front seam of Sharrown's Start. "Systems off, feels safe," she looked down at her friend "we going to open suit up, yes-no ?"

But the mouseling shook her head. "Not that one. It's not due for a service - and since I don't know what Sharry's done to its systems - anything less obvious than missing limbs, I'm not messing with. Besides"- she grinned up at the eager direwolf "Look in the user manual - it clearly says " *If any modifications are made to this product by unauthorised personnel, the manufacturer's warranty is null and void* "!"

A great grey head nodded. "Does that work for Sabaath, too ? Missy Earnshaw and pointy-ear Doctor Felinson make lots changes. Ear all better, all inside bits that don't belong gone."

Kiko examined the proffered ear. Not only was the identifying tag long gone, but the flesh had been pierced, removing one more link with her enslaved past. Various coded pieces of identifying plasteel had been removed from deep implants: the Demon Empire Combat Accountants were known to be fussy about accounting for troops at times, and often bar-coded them.

"You know, you really didn't have to do that... it could have looked quite nice if you'd got a matching set," the mouse murmured.

Sabaath shook her head vehemently. "Sabaath want put holes in things, Sabaath want them dead." Her gaze strayed over to the next bay, where her only real possessions were lying disassembled for cleaning. Despite attempts at building a Dataglove which would work the standard equipment around them, so far the only thing her dewclaws properly worked was the pair of ancient 45 mm projectile cannon pods, their two and a half metre barrels a distinct disadvantage to carry in polite society.

Kiko tutted. "Think of the possibilities !" Her own undetectable weapons were typically carried discreetly, if less than comfortably - but the metal detectors at the spaceports still gave Customs officials double-takes when the screens revealed where her jewellery was installed.

"Sabaath seen possibilities, thank Kiko lots anyway." Part of her education had included a trip through the BioBazarre on Skandelhar, two planetfalls earlier. She could imagine that some folk envied her natural advantages of having built-in datafeeds, and wanted to upgrade their bodies in a way their parents could not have designed. A discreet cranial jack was one thing, but "Special Offer ! Have any three major organs pierced with stainless steel pins While-U-Wait for the price of two - ask about our skull and liver padlocks and bolt shackles !" was an aspect of high-fashion culture she was still less than sure about.

Sabaath turned back to the mecha. Definitely, she thought to herself - suit just like Sabaath. Nobody know what really inside it - except folk who made, and won't tell us....

Just then, the suit's owner swung into view. As he saw Sabaath's ears and tail rise in greeting, the little wildcat winced. Having been one of the direwolf's original rescuers, he was painfully aware that the hexapod hound held a lasting crush for him. With Chester, her other rescuer, this had gone rather further - and several

parsecs further than Sharrown ever wanted to be. Since regaining her full strength and mass of two hundred kilos plus, Sabaoth's "crushes" tended to be literally that.

"Tisnae jist that yon lassie gets carried awa'.... he forced a smile to his face, as he checked the hangar for sub-direwolf sized exits - I wouldnae be minding that sae. She dinnae ken her ain strength yet. Tis the poor loon on the receiving end fit gets carried awa', off tae Sick Bay....

Kiko looked him up and down, her foot tapping. "Well ?" She demanded "We've got work to do. Do you want something, or are you just practising rubbernecking for the tourist trails ?"

Sharrown coughed, looking up at his 'Start. "I wis jist wonderin', fit ye'd be doin' when we hit planetside. I'm readin' up on the culture doon there, an' it says the Harvest time's the time for Festivals. Which is also sports and aye, bettin' on it all. So a few of us had an idea to put a wee team together, and see fit we might do there."

Kiko's tail twitched mischievously, winding round Sabaoth's rear starboard leg. "Too late, Sharry - we're way ahead of you." Triumphant, she pulled out a dataviewer from inside her oil-stained flight suit, and tapped a few keys.

"Novy Altai Customs and traditions," she read out, grinning as Sharrown's ears sank. Obviously, he had accessed the same data she had found the week before. "Trade fairs at harvest time, nomads compete with farmers in trials of skill and strength." Her hand patted Sabaoth's wiry muscled flank, brushing down through the long fur to dwell lovingly on what she supposed was best called her udder "I even checked what order the contests are traditionally in - she'll be perfect." Kiko's whiskers twitched mischievously as she felt the expensive growl of the direwolf's digestion beneath her fingers.

With a sigh, Sharrown pulled out his own copy of the data from one of his capacious vest pockets. "Aye, I'm thinking it too," he cast a suddenly appreciative eye over the ravenous carnivore now nuzzling the mouseling's ears. "First we've the races - and when oor lassie's finished an' famished, THEN there's of a' things, an eating contest !"

"One rare steak, one green salad, and a chicken pall - or Fall, how'd you pronounce that ?" Chester weaved through the tables of the Dragon's mess room, and put the tray down in front of his friends.

Although the crew of the starship was far below its regular complement, they still had to squeeze onto a table - mealtimes were more of a communal affair now, bringing the crew together as often as possible. In the great empty bulk of the Dragon, folk assigned to odd watches might otherwise have gone for days without getting a chance to talk to their friends.

Sabaoth looked on with wide-eyed anticipation. It looked as if she was about to see one of the famous disputes between the staid, tweed-clad scientist and the contagiously outrageous ringtail. Only last week, she'd asked them a perfectly innocent and logical question - if stripy Missy Earnshaw had cubs by ringtailed Chester, would they come out square chequered ? Somehow, the xenobiologist had taken it amiss - as Chester had later confided, "She wouldn't ever let me try. Badgers are monotonous - that means they mate for life."

As it happened, today the badger had more to look forward to than a verbal brawl. Which Chester was grateful for; he had noticed she was wearing her heavy Penn Nine-built hiking boots, the nail-studded imprint of which he had often had to massage out of his fur.

"Eeeh, that's grand." Doctor Lettice Earnshaw accepted the salad, her badger nose twitching hungrily. For her it was lunch, for Chester and Sabaoth it was the evening meal - but they were all planning on synchronising with the planet below them. For the past week, their quarters' lighting had been slowly moving into sync with the landfall site; they had almost adjusted by now. When you had strenuous contests to compete in, arriving tired out by ion-jetlag was NOT a good idea.

The badger inhaled deeply, as she opened the hermetically sealed plate. "Reet glad to see Sharry's hacked t' food processor software like I asked - it does a reet fine Phall now, that's two steps past Vindaloo." She wiped the growing puddle of slobber away from Sabaoth's place at table, and put the sizzling steel dish in front of her. "Troff up ! Get yer fangs round that, lass."

Sabaoth gave a cub-like squeal of delight as the clouds of billowing steam rose up round her snout. She did not need a chair, the centaur simply parking her rump on the floor as she sat to eat - her tail thumped loudly on the deck as she scooped up the grey-brown curry in a handful of chapati bread and chewed ecstatically.

Lettice watched her eat, a fond expression softening her face. Her own cubs would have been at this stage now, had they lived - voracious, carefree as Sabaoth, and growing up strong on a healthy diet rich in asafoetida, garlic and chillies. In Sabaoth's case, it was more medicinal than epicurean; her digestion was geared to consume living flesh and bone by the kilo, several times a day - the general ship's diet was liable to give her acute indigestion unless helped along with a few healthful herbs. And when almost a quarter of a tonne of direwolf develops stomach trouble on board a closed-system starship, the crew notice it.

Chester's expression was a study in loathing and incredulity; unlike Sabaoth, he had a finely tuned sense of smell and not a holographic gland in place of his muzzle. "Lettice, I swear if I EVER visit your home world, I'm going to take the ship's issue sandwiches with me. Even for a month !" The Dragon's emergency supply of packed lunches was a discovery they had made not long after becoming an independent vessel; it had been one of the secrets contained in the sealed orders that Sabre read as acting captain. In wartime, every AMF ship carried a cache of emergency food separate from the main supply - there had been cases where lost ships had been rescued after months stranded, the surviving crew having eaten their comrades. With a secret food reserve, the idea appeared to be that the most valuable officers could blockade themselves on the bridge

and outlive any siege by the lower ranks - and after a few weeks on HandyWiches, they would be as desperate as a crew whose only inconvenience was mere starvation.

(As soon as he had discovered this, Sabre had released the five tonnes of sealed food to the ship's general supplies - and ninety-nine percent of it was still there. "FuturePruf Brand HandyWiches" had apparently been produced to fill a military contract specifying they would not deteriorate noticeably over ten years in storage - and indeed, it was hard to imagine them getting any worse. Sabaoth found them useful for teething pains with her ever-renewing sets of razor fangs, but otherwise they had been retained as ultimate last-ditch supplies, spare hull patches or the material for occasional practical jokes.....)

Lettice Earnshaw grinned, the badger's snout wrinkling as she sniffed the corrosive fumes wafting from Sabaoth's meal. "Aye, tha's gorra' be brought up proper, like back 'ome on Penn Nine. An' Sabaoth's in need of more'n book-larnin' - since t'lass were an infant, she's been fed nobbut infant-ry rations."

The ringtail clapped a paw over his muzzle, and his splendid tail seemed to droop like a cut flower in hot sun. "Gah... she once gave me a tongue-bath after she'd eaten something like that - what's she made out of, teflon and noble metals?" He shivered at the memory - high concentrations of corrosively fresh chilli on sensitive parts of the anatomy was regarded as a sophisticated pleasure on some of the more outré worlds, but not what he had been expecting at the time.

"Sabaoth finished. Says Thankyew ! We says Big thanks, yes-no ?" With a loud rattling, she licked her stainless steel bowl clean and slapped it upside-down on the table, Demon-style. Felina Aniara looked across approvingly from the far side of the room, her twin tails twitching .

Dr. Earnshaw gave a quiet cough, and pressed her paws together. Sabaoth had seen the elements of religion at the camp she had been bred in - though since there was no sentient flesh she could ritually devour aboard the Dragon, she could no longer practice that particular faith. Instead, the somewhat gentler world of Penn Nine was providing the lead, as the badger launched into the simple mealtime ritual:

"We thanks t' all-Mother fer owt we're gettin'

If there'd been more vittles, there'd 'ave been more ettin'."

Chester produced a set of nose filters - with a costume that skimpy, Lettice had never enquired too closely where he stored all his equipment - and chewed bravely at his steak. "We'll be on Novy-Altai in a couple of shifts - and it's not totally certain how much of a contract we can get hold of. Sure, we could put the whole crop in just one of our holds - I think we've got room in Number One where that consignment of ritual trepanning-knives was that we offloaded last time. But Sabre says we've got to make a good impression with the locals - it's not what you'd call a commercial world down there, they don't make ALL their decisions by counting the credits."

"Aye. Well. Umm." Lettice looked hard at the ringtail. "Sabaoth tells me she enterin' for one of them traditional contests - tha' won't go enterin' 'er for owt dangerous, will tha' ?" Much as Kiko hated "her" fighters and starts getting damaged, Lettice was doubly protective over the big direwolf. Not only would she and Ken Felinson have to patch her up if she was injured, but they would have failed in keeping their ward out of avoidable danger.

Chester's wide, innocent eyes were deep and limpid pools of purity. "Who, ME ?" he explained, a hand spread against freshly-fluffed white chest fur " As if I'D do something like that to the poor girl."

"Aye ? Not like last time tha' put 'er in a "little competition", an' walked away wi' the prizes, ey, Chester?"

The ringtail paused, and cocked his head to one side. "It's what you call providing her with a growth experience. Now she knows she can win planetary sports records - there's not that many males could have splashed the electric fence at that range, let alone women - you said yourself, she's pretty resistant to that sort of shock. It didn't do her any harm - besides, it wasn't our fault about those two spectators, they were WARNED not to stand so close, the fence was sure to arc everywhere with that sort of voltage."

The badger sighed, and felt more grey hairs preparing to emerge on her striped muzzle. If anything, Sabaoth was less vulnerable than Chester, if it came to dodging and surviving damage, as a few little accidents had shown, even the famous Pillow fight incident. But one thing she had learned with equal certainty : if there was trouble to be found, Chester would find it.

Thirty hours later, they began finding out.

"Now, this, is like HOME." Chester took a deep draught of the hot, dry air of the Changta Plateau, the great shelf that ran between the thousand-kilometre naked chain of the Nairan Mountains, and the vast plains that covered most of the continent. The sun beat down fiercely, yet at this altitude there was a definite bite to the air, as everyone noticed how fast and deeply they were breathing. Stepping into the shadow of the Dragon's shuttlecraft, the temperature instantly dropped twenty degrees.

"Sabaoth like this place." The direwolf had her armoured eyelids half-down against the dust and glare "lots of room to run, yes ?"

"We'll do that later, if we get a chance." Kiko stood beside her, looking up at the distant snow-capped peaks. "What I'd really like is to take a trip up there - that's my idea of home." The mouse's ears dipped softly as she scanned the horizon with a pocket imager, steadying her arm on Sabaoth's compliant flank. Up there, she could see high green valleys watered by the melting ice, remote cut-off glens with the silver sparkle of waterfalls just visible even at this distance.... she sighed, and shook her head.

"Right now, we've got business to attend to." She looked around at the shore party; Deck, Sharrown and Felina had been picked as a mixed negotiating team to provide wits and intimidation as required. "I think

the main township is over - there." As she pointed South along the mountain wall, as if in answer came a definite sign of activity. All ears pricked up at a sudden burst of thunder, incongruous in the clear sunlight.

"Fit the.... aye, and if 'tisnae an auld HellStar launcher !" Sharrown exclaimed as the rolling boom echoed across the plains "Ye can tell this is a third-line World - Tis a century since they built the last of yon boomers."

Far off against the horizon a sharp cone lifted into the skies, towering on a plume of blazing white vapour. Incredibly swiftly it ripped upwards through the thin air, pulling a ferocious acceleration as the nosecone already glowed a visible cherry-red on the upward flight. In a minute it was out of sight; bound for orbit with bulk air, water and the less fragile sorts of supplies.

"Sabaoth like !" The direwolf exclaimed, her ears eagerly following the last of the echoes that rolled back from the valleys and mountainsides. She had simple tastes, which included listening to classic Transuranic-rock albums played loud, and diving gleefully into close-quarter combat armed with large calibre gun-howitzers. "What is it, Kiko ?"

"Like Sharry says, it's a HellStar", The mouseling shrugged, pulling out her databook. "Cheap, low-tech cargo lift - all you really need is a precisely focussed bank of masers and the power to run them - I imagine there's hydro-electric works up there in the mountains. Fill a steel shell full of ice, sit it on top of the masers, and zip - up it goes, much more efficient than chemical fuel, no pollution either. Only reason they don't use them everywhere, is the noise - and the little fact you have to launch at twenty gravities or so."

"Lovely little mover," Chester commented dreamily "five minutes off the pad, and she's orbiting free."

"Aye, ah wouldnae want tae be test pilot," Sharrown grinned. "Every metre o' air gets in the way o' the beam, sooooo - it picks up escape speed afore it gets out o' range. I'm a thinkin' tis a guid sort'o world to run it - yon atmosphere's dry as a whiskey store after Hogmanay." They watched the towering plume of condensing steam drift away; the wind was blowing it back to the sky-raking peaks of the mountains, no doubt to fall as snow and turn the unseen turbines to power a later trip.

Sabaoth nodded, staring at the databook as they unshipped one of the Dragon's flatbed cargo transporters and prepared to set off down the bumpy road. As well as so much else, Kiko had been teaching her to read, but it was a slow business - the direwolf had scrambled several databooks already in frustrated electrical fireworks displays - but she was getting there.

Her dearest deermouse cast Chester an accusing glance as she opened the fuel tank of the Space Station Waggon that they had taken to using planetside since Sabaoth's arrival on the team. Cautiously, then deeply she scented the kerosene that the vehicle's manuals recommended as fuel. It had not always been so. Chester's driving style could best be described as "If I've got a set of wheels that CAN make ninety in six seconds flat, then by Klono, I'll DO it, as often as I can !" Six months earlier, Kiko had been forced to totally scrap the engine Chester had been so happily using - having filled the fuel tank with Unsymmetrical Dimethyl Hydrazine had broken not only the speed record for that class of transporter, but every component in contact with the corrosive mech fuel....

"Sabaoth puzzled," that worthy wolven commented, as they neared the outskirts of a low-rise patch of buildings, planted in the midst of a rolling, unfenced plain of tall grasses. "We go ask to carry cargo away, make lots of credits to buy food and neat ammo - why these folk here not do it ?"

Kiko put a slender arm round as much of her friend's waist as would reach, and squeezed affectionately. Sabaoth was an interesting mixture of appalling experience such as the most hardened mercenary would shiver over, and sweet innocence itself. Though she had been raised on a diet that screamed and begged for mercy until the end of the first course, she was a good girl at heart, and knew nothing of socio-economic ramifications.

"This is a poor planet," she gestured out over the empty grasslands. "They can - just - afford to service an orbital station - but starships are expensive. Tens of millions of credits to buy the bare hull, and then you need trained crew to run them, fuel and spare parts - collision and third-party insurance - that's pricey too."

Sabaoth did a quick conversion into units she understood. Shunting the idea of ten million credits into her ballistic senses, in a second her holo-display dumped the answer back. The space station waggon swerved as the sudden illusion of half the plain covered in plump herd-beasts flashed in front of them.

"That's a grand few meals, ee'n for ye," Sharrown chipped in, his ears raised in disbelief. "Sabaoth, lassie - do ye do slide shows a' well ?"

"Anyway," Kiko cast him an irritated glare "They've only got one sort of crop that's really worth exporting off-world, these medical plants. The main ones are only ripe for one season - so if you only want one trip a year, it's hardly worth maintaining a ship all year round. That's why we're here now."

The great grey muzzle nodded. "So anyone can ask, make money from green-stuff, yes ? Anyone can come, take food off our bowls ?"

Chester's tail gave a defiant twitch. "They can try ! But I'd like to see them try it - why do you ask ?"

Sabaoth had been staring off towards the plains for the last few minutes, her big eyes opened to their widest aperture despite the bright sun. She pointed up at the cloudless skies to their left, focussing her telescopic sight at what even now was a tiny orange-glowing speck the others could not have spotted without binoculars.

"Our shuttle still on ground - so other shuttle coming down all hot-burny, somebody else, yes-no ?"

Kiko didn't even turn to check her friend's question.

"Deck !" She shouted in their driver's ear "Come on - put your foot down, get us into town quick - we've got competition !"

"The great loremasters claim that when a body is immersed in water, the water level does only rise in accordance with its volume. Why then that whenever I so immerse, the door gong does ring for me ?"
(Novy Altai local lore: Quoted from the seventeen Utterly Cryptical Tomes of the Great Prophet Prozac The Mellow.....)

The main streets of the city of Tobadac converged in a great empty field, now covered with tents and stalls. Though the streets they had driven down were normal plascrete pavement such as most mid-tech worlds used, two of the other radial roads were grassed avenues fifty metres wide, leading towards the mountains and the open plains.

They pulled up at the edge of the central field, next to an assorted line of groundcars. From now on, it was on foot - much to Sabaoth's delight.

"We go run soon, yes ?" Her ears were pricked up, as she sniffed the assorted scents of roasting meat that even her severely cut-down sense of smell could appreciate "we practice for big race and nice big eat after?"

Kiko shushed her, as Felina pulled out the communications dish. This was an ancient design, a square aerial that archaeologists had found dumped by the thousand in the ruins on various remote worlds where the Creators had switched to cable TV untold aeons ago.

"Hello, Caresse, anybody ?" The giantess swung the ancient plastic and metal dish around as she hunted for an orbital relay "Calling the ScaleFall, calling the ScaleFall." She used the assumed name that the ship's IFF transponders answered to that week "Hello, anybody there ? "

The tiny red light on the back flickered and strengthened as the link established itself. Suddenly they could hear Caresse's inimitable tones, on the distant bridge of the Dragon.

"'Allo ? This ees tres' urgent - so see what Chester ees doing, and tell 'im not to. We 'ave company."

"Yes - we've rather noticed that by now," Felina had to shout as the air shook with the pressure wave of a small cruiser passing over - no mere shuttle this, but a complete starship. "You could have told us before - what did it do, pull itself out of a hat or something ?"

But it was K'tal Sabre whose voice answered.

"Listen," they could hear the worry in the big feline's voice, even through the ancient and jury-rigged communicator link "that ship had a better cloak than most combat craft, though it claims to be a trading vessel - and its engines aren't the kind they put on freighters, either. It's announced it's here to trade commercially - I don't know who they are, but treat them as if they were - US. I'll be in touch - look sharp !"

A silence fell. Sabaoth followed the bulk of the ship with her rangefinders, sizing it up. Class Panjandrum seven, light AMF cruiser, a part of her brain she had no conscious access to told her - obsolete, expect to find in third-line service only...

"What does nice big-tooth Captain say, treat them like us ?" She enquired, head cocked to one side "he mean be nice to them, yes ?"

But it was Chester who answered, the ringtail's huge glory of a tail held high in gleeful anticipation.

"Oh, no. That's NOT what he means. That sort of vessel is probably illegal from the paintwork and transponder inwards - they're folk like us, or more so."

He turned to his friends, who inwardly groaned to see the dreamy look of contemplation on his muzzle. A pink tongue licked sharp white teeth as his gaze followed the cruiser on its landing run.

"It's good enough managing to beat some grey corporate-suit moneygrubber out of a deal. But this looks like being a fair fight - if we win or lose, it's going to be - Interesting !"

At the centre of the miniature tented town was an empty roped-off enclosure, where imposingly dressed folk of various species consulted lists on paper or screen as details of the harvest arrived from outlying areas. On the plains were the farmers, dressed in the heavy linoleum one-piece lapelle-less jackets of a previous century - and down from the mountain valleys came the nomads, with the garnered harvest of deep woods and forgotten valleys.

"Now, you don't get many of those to the tonne..." Deck breathed softly, looking up in awe at the obvious leader of the nomads, clad in a fringed leather jacket whose back bore a vivid invocation to some savage cycle-riding god of the ancients. "I LIKE..." Two metres tall, she was the only biped woman approaching Felina in size in the whole compound, the white she-bear leaning on a metal rod that the cultural accounts of the planet identified as a "flick-poleaxe".

Kiko surveyed the woman they had come to see with the appraising eye of a climber at the foot of a rock face. "You aren't the only one, you know.." She looked across at Chester, whose interest was predictably obvious, as was Sabaoth's possessive stare targeted on him. "Chet, one of these days they're going to find you flattened out like a rug if you keep this up - believe me, being rolled on isn't much fun."

Chester snickered, his tail waving sinuously. "But WHAT a way to go..."

The huge bear gave a snort and turned round, as if she had felt their gaze boring into her back. "Ha ! Offworld merchants ! Dantachak is my name - Burgomeister of the fair." Her voice was a sudden thunderclap. "You come in time - nightfall today, all who wish to bid must register."

Deck coughed quietly, concentrating on the mission in hand. "We're ready to deal , Burgomeister - and then, I believe you've a few sporting events ?"

"Contest come first !" The ice-bear thumped her not inconsiderable chest ringingly. "We proud of our goods - not let just any soft-skin peddler sell what carry Novy-Altai reputation out to far stars. We see who it right to sell to - price talk later."

Just at that moment, a shadow blotted out the sun. They looked up - as three flickeringly sky-blue Stealth parachutes touched down in perfect formation, in a clear space Kiko would have sworn a groundcar would have bent its bumpers getting into.

"Competition's starting early," Felina muttered under her breath. "Must have bailed out at ten kilometres and just pulled the 'chutes .First points to them. Now, why didn't WE think of that ?"

In a few seconds, the three parafoils were stowed in their Stealth Holdalls, and their passengers lined up smartly. Dressed in an unmarked buff-brown uniform, they looked not unlike an AMF special forces team - unarmed they might appear to be, but harmless was not something the Dragon's crew would bet their lives on.

There were no giants amongst them. One was a shrew, a bundle of restless energy and twitching glances - scarcely bigger than Kiko, but twice the mass and no less deadly.

Knife-fighter, martial arts, general hand-to-hand, she decided to herself as she surveyed the threesome. The shrew would be Fast, and carry a mean streak wider than his shoulders. The second was a surprise - one of the species that folk tended to underestimate once, and never get a second chance against. He was a Perma-kit; an adult feline with the looks of a helpless kitten, huge soulful eyes staring out on a big and hostile world. It was usually agreed that the females looked enchantingly cute, but the males tended to carry permanent chips on their adorable little shoulders - many went in for careers such as assassins, Galactic tax inspectors and tabloid journalists. Always they made relentless hunters; the perma-kit bounty hunter Mrreltia was famed for stalking his prey record distances across the galaxy, and only ever bringing back just enough to make for certain forensic identification...

But it was the third, and the tallest of the three, that their eyes lingered on. Slim, fine-boned and deadly as an ancient duelling blade, she had dyed her fur green and black, a camouflage that she would never be without. Slanted eyes were shielded from the sun by the huge sweep of a banded tail that waved luxuriant as an exotic tree. A ringtail, but appearing a very different sort than the usual happy-go-lucky breed they knew so well (to their occasional delight and more frequent irritation).

Dropping her bundled 'chute, the green and black ringtail strode across to Dantachak, and bowed deeply.

"Ground-Captain Goodhope Staelsdottr of the Entropise, here to show our worth, Burgomeister," she snapped crisply, looking up at the huge icebear with no hint of intimidation "We've come a long way for this - when do we start the contest ?"

"Ha ! "Dantachak grunted, and they could see the approving gleam in her eye "We start at sunup. Till then - " her massive paw swept across the tented town, rich with the mingling scents of food, drink and friendly musk "all town folk and wind-riders in town now, on truce to trade and party. Fun to have !"

Ten minutes later, both the Dragon's crew and the Entropise away team were in a low-beamed bar, weighing each other up from opposite ends of the room.

"Well," Deck said evenly "I suppose there's no hard feelings if we beat you tomorrow - first, the least we can do is buy you a drink ?"

The shrew's fur bristled out in rage - but before he could speak, the ringtail's slender hand clamped tight on his narrow muzzle.

"Why, certainly," she murmured, slanted eyes cast low "while you can afford it. The local speciality is an interesting little concoction - something they call TearMreer." She gestured to the barmare, who cradled a gallon-sized bottle carefully, and filled tall glasses with something brown and oily-looking.

Chester whooped as the smell hit him. "Deck ! Bonanza ! I've heard of this - I found ONE bottle, last year - if they're selling it, let's pawn our pouches and go fill the ship's spare tanks up ! " He took a deep sniff, and they saw the pupils of his huge eyes dilate in pleasure.

But it was Goodhope who was the most staggeringly affected. At the first sound of Chester's voice, a strange transformation seemed to wash over her. First of rigid shock, then her whole body seemed to soften, the military-tinted tail waving in unconscious motions as she stared at him in outright disbelief - tinged with something undefinable.

"C..Carbonel ?" Her own eyes were wide and round as crater lakes, as she hesitantly approached him. A slim paw touched his cheek, and she sniffed his fur in a strangely intimate, yet clumsy manner.

"The name's Chester," that worthy drew himself upright, but not out of range of her touch "Chester, of the Scalefall - duly registered independent trader."

There came a high-pitched chirp of harsh laughter from the shrew behind them. "Oh, yes, your name's Chester, and your ship's called the Scalefall - just like ours is the Entropise - and we can prove it, to whoever you like. Call me Rittik - I like the sound of that name. It'll do till I'm off this planet."

"Carbonel." Goodhope's voice was firm now. "Definitely. And are you really going to say you don't remember me ?" With a twitch that eyes could barely follow, she had one of Chester's spare micro-blasters out of its tail holster, and was pressing it to the small of his back.

The room froze. Kiko's own deadly blades were a fraction of a second away from casting - if anything happened to Chester, at least Goodhope would not have time to pull the trigger twice.

Suddenly the green-banded girl laughed, and tossed the blaster onto the bartop. "Well ? You really don't remember ?"

"Yes ! It was on Gargamel nine - that party....or wasn't it that time on Androgyne Beta, with the wet fur contest...." Chester's tail twitched in frustration as he appreciatively looked her up and down. He doubtless had encountered her - but like any particular casual mate, the details blurred with the passing of time. Ringtails tended to forget such things unless given sufficient cause to remember.

Goodhope shook her head, a peculiar gleam in her eye. "Come on - let me remind you." She gestured towards the door. "We've only booked rooms for our crew - but I'm sure I can manage to Accommodate you, one way or another...."

Chester assumed an expression of injured innocence as he turned to his friends. "Don't drink the bar dry," he sighed "you see, I might be gone some time. Duty calls - we have to Establish Diplomatic Relations, or something...." With that, they linked arms and tails, and headed towards the door.

Kiko frowned, eyeing the two depart. Dropping her voice, she turned to her companions. "I don't know why she called him that name. Any ideas, Deck ? You're the closest to him - as close as anyone usually wants to get."

The canine shook his head. "He hardly talks about his past. Just things he lets slip, now and then - and if you add all THOSE up, he'd have to be a century or two old, to have got it all done. So what of it's true, I just can't say."

"Ha ! I can't see Chester being a century old - the Universe wouldn't have held up under the strain !" Kiko's tail swished. "But we DO seem to keep running across people who've met him - those who survived, and aren't locked away in a lead-lined room with silver religious symbols welded over every exit. Anybody'd think he was Sabaoth, with clones everywhere."

They all shuddered at the thought. The direwolf's ears pricked up.

"Chester say he spend two years at monastery, learn bodybuilding." She thought a moment. "That right, Kiko ? He say he learn exer... exercise maybe, yes-no ?"

"Exorcise," prompted Kiko. "It's not popular nowadays, folk think it's Lifeist. Sort of getting rid of evil spirits."

"Sabaoth know !" The direwolf's ears pricked up. "Like time Tetsuo Geist made burny-taste stuff out of rotten fruit cargo - Missy Earnshaw had to pump his stomach out, poured evil spirits down waste recycler."

"Hmmm. Not QUITE like that." Kiko sat back down, and sipped at a far less evil concoction than Geist's durian derived gin that had proved useful in the end for degreasing mech parts with. "I can't really see Chester in a monastery, somehow. Not quite his scene."

"Chester say it lots fun. He get good at exorcising, out every night, laid lots and lots of ghosts !"

There was a loud groan from the company. Sharrown cast a wary eye over the innocent-eyed centaur, standing with her hands placidly folded. Her sense of humour was developing at an alarming rate - a month before, it had only been at the level of creeping up behind folk on her big, soft-padded feet and barking deafeningly in their ear. Preferably when they were in confined spaces - feelingly, he rubbed the bump on the back of his head where she had surprised him getting out of his 'Start.

Heavens help us if the lassie gets it frae Chester, he thought glumly - 'tis nae jist the idea 'o twa o' them, 'at's bad enough - wi' all they Sabaoths running about, there could be dozens tae catch it !

"Well." Deck looked around the bar. "He'll be back when he'll be back. In the meantime - we've got to make DAMN sure we win these contests, with or without him ! There's the wrestling, the running, the skills contests, and the eating contest - between us, we should clear up. We'd better."

Sharrown nodded. The Dragon's economics were perilous at the best of times; often they had to find fuel or components on a "no questions asked" basis, which was not cheap. The big profit margin on this trip was mainly due to Novy-Altai's remote location - but if they went away with empty holds, it would have been an equally expensive trip for nothing. Which was equally true for the Entropise, he realised - they look professional, and they look MEAN.

So it was a surprise when the Perma-kit edged up towards them, his adorable ears twitching, and held out a stubby paw to shake.

"I'm called Jandro," his voice was a falsetto mew "really, I am. " He turned to look at the open door which was still swinging after the two ringtails had breezed out together "There's a few things you ought to know - about what your friend's got himself into."

Kiko yawned. "Chester gets himself into trouble like most folk get into the shower - it's just something he does as soon as he wakes up. He's used to it."

Sabaoth looked down at the little feline with wide-eyed interest, and proffered her wiry hand to shake. "Sabaoth say hello," she said gravely "you friend of tactical-furred ringtail lady, yes ?"

Jandro winced. "She's the ground-captain. I wouldn't tell you this - unless I thought it really might scare you off. If your friend Carbonel's got the sense of a snowball, he'll get out fast."

"Chester," Kiko drawled "is a great friend of ours. We know him, for our sins. Now, WE might conceivably run away if there was something universe-shatteringly dangerous about to happen - but Chester would be in there with cameras ready, selling ringside seats."

There was a long silence. At last, the Perma-kit spoke. "I don't suppose any of you have been to - Pentada Three, by any chance ?"

There was a muted shaking of heads. Kiko looked thoughtful. "Pentada three," the mouseling's ears twitched as she thought. "I've read about that on the charts. Never met anyone from there that I know of . Agricultural world I think, isolated, no imports or export trade mentioned. Nothing but a name on the chart - I don't know how they even get into space, there's no industrial base listed on the whole place. Makes this planet look like Totalopolis Major."

Jandro pulled up a chair, and draped his seriously cute tail over it. "It was wholly settled by Adarists, which is a religion you won't find anywhere else, thank the All-Mother. Oh, they're law-abiding to a fault, you couldn't complain about that. It's a very safe, peaceful place. Nobody's desperately poor, and none are excessively rich; but I tell you, I'd rather be starving in the alleyways of Skandelhar than living on Pentada. You could say they're sort of strict - they don't have prisons, just execution grounds, with three hundred and sixty different death sentences - and though they don't encourage innovative thinking in MOST areas, they put in a lot of practical research there. But anyway, of all places in the cosmos to choose from, Carbonel, who you call Chester, ended up landing there." He sat down, and took a long pull of his Tiamareer. And as they listened, the silence grew deep and cold amongst those who heard the tale.

Pentada Three had been a classic case of Rimworld settlement, with the original stock mainly consisting of in this case of Adarist cultists fleeing the "wickedness" of the home planets in favour of a new start on a world they could shape to their creeds. And like many other planets in the Third Wave of colonisation, the wars had left it isolated for nearly two centuries, free to develop as it wished.

Or, almost so. The original spacedock used by the first settlers was on the tiny moonlet of Adar's Tear, and had been long abandoned by the increasingly inward-looking ground-dwellers. Fleeing from the war before the isolation of the area became complete, came refugees from a score of worlds, who attempted to set up an independent state. The dream soured; the independent state became a Free Company, which in turn ended up as a pirate colony, based a long, untraceable distance from the surviving spacelanes. And so it remained for decades, while a strange pact emerged with the planet below.

By this time, the Adarist leaders had wholly lost whatever tolerance they might have had for the civilisations outside. The last spaceships had been literally turned into ploughshares and roof girders, leaving the planet regarding itself as a lone spark of goodness in a Galactic ocean of depravity. But every time they looked up at the stars, the Adarists knew in their hearts that they were not alone - somewhere, there were heathens and worse just waiting to swoop down on them.

Strangely enough, they maintained a supply base on the planet for the "Dwellers on the Tear", to use the ancient title of what was now a pirate fleet. They provided food and air supplies, in return for being left alone and unnoticed by the rest of the cosmos - which the pirates were happy to enforce, exterminating any scouting vessels that the curious neighbours sent in their direction. While the dwellers above protected from outside invasion, they in turn were restricted to the one spaceport city and its stockade - a place where few Adarists mentioned except in terms of horrified dread.

"So, that was its only contact with the Galaxy, where anything they had to get from Outside was dropped in." Jandro broke off from his main story, looking around the Dragon's crew searchingly. "The arrangement's lasted eighty years, it's still going strong as far as I know. Only difference is, the Pirates burned their records and are now legitimate - officially. But ten years ago, things had only just started to change."

Life on Pentada was best described as a "Righteous Struggle", meaning that ease was strictly discouraged. The greeting between citizens was always "Hail, Brother/Sister - what are you Doing, what have you DONE ?" And an answer was compulsory - a true and approved one. The depravities of the spacedock city of Portside were lovingly dwelt upon by every preacher on the planet - not only could they be seen at any hour of the day engaged in idle and frivolous pursuits, but it was rumoured that they polluted their bodies with tea, coffee, and other, nameless substances.

But no system can repress everything, and manage it forever. Like carrying water in a sack, the more it is squeezed, the more pressure there is behind its escape. And one fine Spring day, when the grass was bright in the sunshine and the farmers singing in synchronised efforts all across the landscape, Goodhope Staelsdott first travelled to see the sleek craft that defied the Heavens, descending to her homeworld.

That Goodhope was a ringtail girl, was a matter of dark comment amongst her neighbours. Her parents were good solid ursine stock, of respectable employment in the Inquisition - their "daughter" they had simply appeared with as a yearling cub one day, apparently with the Temple's full blessing. What had happened to her real parents, and why, was a question that nobody ever asked. You did not ask questions of a Grand Inquisitor.

That day, she was a properly meek and respectful Daughter Of Adara, her form respectfully covered against the stern gaze of Heaven. She was travelling with her father, so was allowed into areas she could never have otherwise approached: there was a fifty-kilometre deserted belt around Portside, where the Heathen might possibly trespass. The heavy black cowl around her tail was irritating in the hot sunlight, as was her hood - but both were impeccably clean, and her own father had given one of his rare grunts of approval at her costume.

"That doesn't sound a BIT like a ringtail to me," Deck broke in, his ears twisted wryly "It isn't just Chester who's irrepressible - though it has been tried - it'd be like trying to squash a foam bedroll into a thimble!"

Jandro looked at him with a measured gaze. "You could squash anything into a ball of neutrons like a speck of dust - if you use enough force, and don't care about breaking it. Goodhope just hadn't been exposed to even the idea that there were other ways to be - let alone the reality."

Kiko drew her breath in sharply. "I'm starting to see where this is leading."

The feline nodded. "The thing about a civilisation of that sort," he mused "is that you can get away with quite a lot, for quite a long time - folk are so paranoid about minor breaches of The Rules, they don't look any further. But, anyway....."

Goodhope's father had been called away for an extended meeting of the Inquisition - she had been left to carry out her devotions in the secular dining-house where they were staying. From her window, she could see over the stockade, to Portside itself - and what she saw, she wondered at.

There were actually folk there not working ! Neither were they praying - it took her several minutes to come to terms with this. There were women - men too - actually walking around with their tails naked to the heavens, and not appearing to worry about it in the slightest.

Ringtails are noted for their curiosity, and love of the unknown. Had Goodhope only known it, she had been adopted by her step-parents as a challenge for just that reason - to prove that despite all the boastful claims, they were not irrepressible after all - that no-one was truly past Redemption.

Ten minutes later, she had stripped off her outer layers, and was walking into the unspeakable depravity of Portside, feeling like the Great Seeress Fashoda from the Book, who was martyred so extravagantly with the honey and the Arcturan Flesh Sloths. Surely, she could gain great favour with the Adarist Priests, having voluntarily thrown herself into the pit of shame and lived - or become a martyr, a far better fate according to the Teachings.

As it happened, she spent several hours wandering around without being martyred in the slightest. Nobody noticed her in particular; the guards had averted their eyes to the sight of her naked tail as she strolled in through the gates, obviously belonging in the den of Iniquity within. Goodhope felt a delicious thrill at being someone and something utterly alien - it was like diving into an unsuspected river pool, full of strange sights and the new realities of life in an unfamiliar element.

By midday, her stomach was rumbling. Although she might not have spent the day in Righteous Labour, her metabolism seemed grievously ignorant of the fact. Weighing her few coins in her pocket, she followed her nose to a stall that she had been scenting all along in the myriad new sensations.

"Pentada grows all kinds of crops," Jandro said quietly "One of them is the caoco bean. The Adarists only have a few fields growing it, mostly for export - it seems they've forgotten what chocolate does to Ringtail metabolisms. But Goodhope had been given a few squares of it once as a reward for turning in some of her classmates for Deficient Zeal - she scented, she bought by the fistful, she started to eat it."

Kiko winced, her ears lying flat. "I remember what happened last time Chester got an Aestra Egg; the crew spent the next three nights with their doors bolted tight - and I DON'T just mean the women." This had been before the advent of Sabaoth, whose duplicated charms the ringtail had sampled in or out of peak condition. As Chester had pointed out, half the fun was in the thrill of the chase - and it was hard to seduce a fifth of a tonne of bioengineered carnivore when she was sitting on your chest detailing your surrender terms. (The rest of the crew wisely took his word for it.)

The perma-kit nodded, his big eyes wide in the dimly lit tavern. "She must have eaten three times as much as she'd ever seen before - and who should track the scent down but your Carbonel, just in from planetfall and dripping with Credits from a fine haul on the Rim. He couldn't have known who and what she was - all he saw was a pretty ringtail girl sitting on her own, tucking into chocolate he'd smelled as soon as he came into the building - and it's a Pentadan custom to share food with strangers. I rather think she did."

There was a quiet dripping as Sabaoth drooled slightly, and a pair of pale pink hearts began to form above her muzzle. "Nice. So Nice." Her eyes misted over as she imagined the scene, straight out of one of the Romances she could be found with aboard the Dragon, in between practising unarmed combat and weapons drills. "Chester he dashing Pirate captain, sweep her off her feet, yes-no ? Just like in story."

The Perma-Kit turned an inquisitive gaze at her. "I take it you're familiar with him ? They only met for that one day - I've only heard about it second-hand - but I DO know Ringtails."

The direwolf nodded happily. "Chester say I try everything, find out what best. So I try everything, always leave me filled with Delight - he Cute !" Her wide eyes were adoring - much like Goodhope, she had been thrown in somewhat at the deep end, with no preconceived ideas of what was good, bad or biologically impossible. But unlike Goodhope, there was one possible consequence that would not trouble her in the slightest.

Kiko levelled her gaze at Jandro. "Let's guess," she said flatly. "He did sweep her off her feet - after eating all that chocolate, she metabolised it straight into hormones - and ended up doing what Ringtails like to loudly tell us they do best. But so what ? That's what Ringtails are like."

Sabaoth's holographic display blossomed into brilliant hearts. Strong emotion tended to override her conscious control - she had to make a positive effort to suppress her holo-field when playing poker. "Neat ! Chester super to cuddle ! Sabaoth look forward to next week, everything all ready again." She leaned back and patted her long-furred rump. But then her expression changed to one of puzzlement, as she looked from one face to another. The silence lengthened.

At last, Jandro looked from one face to the other. "You did ask how Goodhope managed to leave her planet ? It wasn't till later - she got back to the inn just in time, and nobody noticed she'd been gone - in fact, nobody noticed anything - she didn't know what was happening, not for quite a while."

"Ey up," Dr. Earnshaw cut in "tha's not tellin' us she got 'erself wi' cub from that, art tha ? I know fer fact, Ringtail lasses can control all that. Mebbe most times they don't bother thesselves, but they can."

Jandro nodded. "They can - and if Goodhope had been brought up in a ringtail family, or any sane and wholesome society for that matter, she'd have been taught how. But Adarists - well, they have the same penalty for preventing potential cubs as for killing live ones - and I doubt until she met Chester, anyone had even mentioned the possibility." He winced, and chose his words with care.

"The one good thing is, Pentada IS a law-abiding place - there's only one prison for hundreds of kilometres around Portside. It's the same one they use for the Offworlders; in their case, they just throw them in for things like trespassing, until they can arrange an armed escort back to the Port. So our Captain Standell was in there overnight for public drunkenness, with the only other prisoner being Goodhope - sentenced to death

the next day for Fornication. You really don't want to know how - let's say someone in the Inquisition has a twisted sense of humour."

Kiko winced, and the mouse's eyes squeezed tightly shut. Her fine tail would and unwound from a leg that was trembling in unconscious fury. Behind her, Sabaoth's holographs were hearts no more; a dim close-combat targeting screen was flashing red-edged like blood-wet sword blades.

"Sabaoth Not Like." Came the slightly mechanical voice that they had only heard a few times before, as a harbinger of immediate violence. "Sabaoth think sometime she Go To Pentada."

"And they call you the pirates ...they call YOU the murdering scum." Kiko's own voice was icy. "Yes, thanks for telling me this. I think I'll be able to properly deal with any Adarists I ever run into."

"Aye," Lettice Earnshaw growled. "So, tell on. This Captain Standell, what of 'im ?"

"Captain Standell ? You wouldn't have called him a shining knight, not at all. He'd killed more innocent passengers and traders in the line of piracy than you want to think about - and quite a few of his crew, if he thought he had reason. But for all that, he was the sort of Captain a crew would follow into the jaws of Klono himself - and the idea of adding some Inquisitors to his score didn't trouble him in the slightest. Broke out of the prison and took Goodhope along for the ride - so maybe she did start off as a slave, but that's not a permanent rank in a Pirate vessel. The Cap'n was a handsome sort, and I don't think it all went one way, you might say." He breathed in deeply.

"Goodhope worked her way up. One thing about that sort of religion is when it snaps, it snaps ALL the way. She's ten times as disciplined as most folk, she was brought up to work non-stop, and that's the sort of thing that'll see you right wherever you end up. Imagine that ringtail energy linked to the sort of control ringtails haven't got, and thrown into an "anything-goes" environment where she's convinced herself she's irrevocably lost anyway - whatever she does is OK now - can you imagine it ?"

Deck shivered. Chester was determined enough within his short attention span - but had he put the time and energy into his piracy that he did into his other pleasures, there would be little safety in the Universe.

"Cap'n Standell ran the ship for a couple of years, though he was hitting the bottle pretty hard at the end. It got so bad, his system just wasn't affected by alcohol any more - he went on to drinking Paraldehyde, and he didn't last long after that. We'd all thought of Goodhope as a sort of lucky mascot, we'd take her on missions, she'd take lessons wherever she could find them. Then the Cap'n died, and we got a shock - it hit us that she wasn't the plump little planetsider any more, but pretty well as you see her now - a year after that, she was our Ground-Captain." He broke off, and drained his glass of the sweet liquor.

Sabaoth cocked her head to one side, her ears flopping as she relaxed. "Where pups now ? Bring them on planet, yes ? Sabaoth want meet them - Ringtail cubs so Cute !"

A silence fell. At last, Jandro coughed nervously. "A - er, Independent trading vessel's no place to look after cubs."

Kiko looked up at the direwolf, and her eyes seemed to bore in deeply. "It'd be nice to think that she managed to do what we did with your Sister's cub - put it on ice, till you're really ready to go ahead. Yes - think on those lines."

"Hokay." Sabaoth brightened up appreciably.

Sharrown studiously studied the bottle of TeerMreer they were drinking from, avoiding Jandro's eyes in the pained silence. This drink was a local product, only produced from the native wild plants, which had thrived nowhere else despite decades of well-funded research. The unexpectedly edible, and often delicious plant life had been one of the saving bonuses of Novy-Altai, according to the databooks. Where the original colonists had come from, eleven hundred years ago, and why they came, was a forgotten mystery. But other tales lived on. How the captain's wife had experimented until she found an equivalent to her favourite drink while there was one bottle left on the planet as a cherished reference point - she had at last perfected the recipe, drained the last treasured drops of the offworld brew, and passed the new secret on only to her daughters.

In the meantime, Sharrown thought wryly - ye can try makin' yuir own, wi' haff a bottle o' sherry, haff o' brandy, an' dissolve a couple o' chocolate bars in it. But ye wilnae get onnythin' haff sae guid as this ! Agreeing with Chester for once, he started to work out the interplanetary shipping costs of a barrel of it.

That night they retired early, after only one more round of the sweet chocoholic local brew - seeing that the Entropise's crew were doing the same. The tented heart of the town looked liable to be awake all night; great fires were lit, and whole herdbeasts roasting over glowing embers filled the air with delight - or nauseous horror, according to dietary taste. Somewhere far out on the upwind side of the plains a distant glow showed where the vegetarian species held their revels, roasting alive whole root vegetables and ripping cruel fangs into the veins of defenceless salad vegetables.

"Hungry !" Sabaoth's hologram changed to a fair copy of the "fuel low" icon of a mechsuit. "Sabaoth practice, get good, yes ?" She looked down lovingly at the mouseling at her side, as they strolled through the firelit crowd on the way back to the room they had booked at exorbitant fees in the permanent buildings further out.

Kiko laughed, and ran a slim paw through the long fur, feeling the double heartbeat slow and strong beneath the skin. "Sabaoth always hungry. What's new ? Want a crisp ?" She proffered the packet to her friend. This was another old survival from the planet's founding - in the bar had been one of the legendary PubbyKatts, a sleepy ball of scarcely sentient fur that had evolved over hundreds of generations to exist on a diet of fried salted potatoes. Various sub-species existed, close relatives of Felina's own Furball, but with less privileged sleeping habits. Some had adapted to awaken for lunchtime opening hours, and some were synchronised to the evening trade.

"Crisp ?" Sabaoth tilted her head to one side.

"Yes - you know - oh, yes. In some of the core worlds of the Demon Empire, they still call them chips. What they call actual chips, Intelligence still hasn't found out."

There was a quiet crunching, as the direwolf refuelled with enough calories for a quarter-second burst at full voltage. She was silent for a minute, then turned back to the mouse again.

"Sabaoth still..."

"Sabaoth still hungry. I know. You're a custom-built battle machine, not a fuel-economy model. They didn't build you for the family market." For an instant, a pang of regret passed over her face. Hearing the tale of Goodhope Staelsdottr had brought out much that Kiko usually tried to push into the background. Sabaoth was indeed a high-specification engine, afterburner nailed down and running on redline every second of her fast-clocked life. Whether she consciously knew it or not, there was an overriding urgency to her interest in cubs - her model had no time to waste. A standard-length lifespan was one of the many things sacrificed by the Demon Empire's bioengineers in quest of higher performance: besides, bioweapons were never expected to die of old age.

Firelight gleamed in the wide, trusting eyes that gazed down at Kiko. The deer-mouse was tiny next to Sabaoth, her ears barely coming up to her chest - she had to pick her up to kiss her. Impulsively, she did so, a wide red tongue enveloping the spluttering mouse's whiskers.

"Whoa ! Down, girl !" Kiko laughed, feeling hosts of curious eyes turn to them. "All right - I'll buy you some supper... you're costing me a fortune, you know that ?"

The direwolf's ears drooped. But then they rose slowly, and more than the firelight shone in them.

"Sabaoth say she earn it back, yes, no ? Anything OK, yes ?"

The room they had booked at fairly great expense was in a low, sprawling concrete building far out along one of the great open grass tracks that spilt the town down the middle.

"Place full tonight, yes ." Sabaoth nodded, between bites of her supper. Unlike the room, this hadn't cost much - a great picked ribcage that she had spotted, most of the softer meat already sliced off and served to the less ravenous crowds outside.

Kiko winced at the noise of carnage, as she closed and bolted the door to the dimly-lit room. It unnerved her sometimes to watch Sabaoth eating, as jaw muscles thicker than her own thighs drove chisel-teeth through sturdy bones as thick as her wrist. Once she had woken from a nightmare - she had spread Sabaoth a great banquet all along one of the ceremonial high tables of her lost homeworld. And Sabaoth had eaten - coming closer and closer, dish by dish, till she was right next to Kiko herself, enraptured by the wonderful feast until there was nothing left in the room, nothing but the two of them. AND THEN SHE HAD KEPT ON EATING. The mouse had awoken screaming then, struggling out of the powerful arms she had wrapped herself in a few hours earlier, to run and hide panting in the engineering bay while her wide-eyed roommate tried desperately to find her.

With a look of determination, the direwolf levered one of the great rib bones in her mouth - then put it down while she trotted over to the sink in the corner and scrubbed something vigorously.

"Close eyes, yes ?" The eager voice came from behind her "Give Present !"

Kiko held out her hand, and felt something like a warm blade drop lightly into it. Opening it, she looked into the great wide eyes - and down at the five centimetres of smooth tooth that the direwolf had presented like a freshly-plucked flower, but more intimate by far.

Something seemed to melt in the mouse's double heart, and all recalled nightmares blew away as she looked into the happy face, head tilted sideways and tongue hanging out of the side to drip on the floor. Sabaoth's teeth shed and replaced several times a year - but she only presented them as gifts to a very few . It had become a talking-point onboard the Dragon, to see Chester's growing matched necklace. The ringtail often wore it planetside, and enjoyed others' shocked speculations about whose fangs they were - but her own, larger collection, Kiko threaded and wore in private pride.

"The place IS busy," she replied, to give herself something to think about as her emotions turned over "the town's built by the farmers, it's mostly their crops we're bidding for. But the nomads come in through the big open strips - they don't like gates or fences - twice a year, going up to the mountains and back. They've got their own tents. But Sabre thought it'd be best to book us rooms - we want to get plenty of rest, and I don't think they'll be doing much sleeping in the central field tonight."

The wolf's ears drooped slightly. "Hokay," She acquiesced, folding her legs under as she settled down on the wide, low bed. "But Kiko do whatever she want." Her eyes followed the unaccountably blushing mouse across the room as Kiko washed and scrubbed the fine ingraining of mech oil and exhaust soot from her fingers, and ran a comb through her long, silver-rich black hair.

They undressed, the centaur merely shrugging off the three loose cloths she wore for others' benefit. The roof above was curved and moulded, a smooth organic shape like many of the low-tech worlds used instinctively, and the richer ones copied expensively.

"Sabaoth ask foxy-girl Keisu what Kiko like, last time she here ... before Kiko come in off shift..." the direwolf said in a small voice "she say she do anything for you. Sabaoth too - if Kiko say so, I go away."

Kiko was startled. Neither she nor anyone she knew, had ever heard the direwolf refer to herself as "I" before. Perhaps it was part of being a clone, the thought briskly flew by - they always refer to themselves in the third person, as what's one's concern, is everyone's. But now....

"Oh, Sabby," the mouse threw her arms around her waist. "Don't go. My heart's just not mine to give - but whatever else, whenever she doesn't need me elsewhere..." she buried her short snout in the great heaving

flank. This must be something like Keisu feels with Deck and me, she thought bitterly - it wasn't her fault we both turned up. And it's worse, even - Keisu's almost case-hardened, Sabaoth ... there's so much that Sabby just doesn't seem to pick up. Why did I have to be one of the things that she's built her life around ?

The grey direwolf nuzzled her affectionately, her wet nose caressing the mouse's sensitive ear.

"Sabaoth go away, wait till Chester get back, then," she offered. "Not ever cuddle if make Kiko cry."

"You big lump !" But it was affection in the mouse's voice, as she flung her arms around her anew "you're staying right here." There were, she reflected, many ways to have fun. She had spotted the direwolf leafing through some of her pinups and even watching some of her home movies, with the same desperately puzzled air she wore when studying some particularly abstruse mechanical diagram. The direwolf was SO eager to learn everything - they had even experimented one disastrous evening, with a hundred metres of fibreite towing cable that Kiko was sure would hold her.

Kiko shook her head at the recollection. Either the hybrid girl's natural genetic mix or the Demon Empire geneticists had come up with last-ditch involuntary defence mechanisms which their owner knew nothing about. She should have remembered the direwolf's aversion to tight spacesuits or even clothing - Sabaoth's eyes had glazed over, her hologram sights switched to a mode never seen before, and before she'd managed to get untangled from the cables, large voltages were starting to flash from six sets of fully unsheathed claws. Least of all had Kiko liked the countdown symbol on the hologram, jerking and resetting as if somewhere a colossal struggle was taking place within her, before the strange display finally faded.

The direwolf had been ill for days after that; Kiko's ears blushed anew remembering what she had had to explain to an irate Lettice Earnshaw and Ken Felinson while they leafed through reports of Demon Empire anti-interrogation treatments. Lettice still was scarcely on speaking terms with her.

"You'll be fine at the games tomorrow - whatever they are. At least, you're well qualified for the eating contest. There's a picture of it her." She stretched out a strong arm to the pile of clothing, and tugged free the databook holding the planetary details. "See ? Just your strong suit." On the screen was a scene of great roasted carcasses being served to a team of large and famished-looking contestants. "It says some of the nomads won't eat on the week's journey here, just to work up an appetite." A slender mouse-hand caressed the fur on Sabaoth's rib-sharp body, fingers running the full way to where she had shaved the fur away. "But ... I can think of better ways."

"Sabaoth say YES !" Secretly, the direwolf was relieved that Kiko was in an "unsophisticated" mood tonight. Despite trying hard, she had never really seen the point of involving scaffolding and twenty-tonne rated harnesses to achieve only what she would willingly share anyway. Hearts blossoming from her holo-display, she rolled over as the lithe deer-mouse sprang on her, mock growls filling the room and a blossoming scent from the wolf's musk glands reminding them both that her season was on the way back.

As they passed the room on the way to their own rooms, Sharrown and Deck felt their noses twitching at the aroma wafting under the low-tech doorway.

Sharrown averted his eyes. "Tis a guid thing Chester isnae here a' the moment. Ye ken fit that chocolate does tae the loon - one whiff o' this, an' he'd be through yon door like a batterin' ram - an I dinna' ken that Kiko'd be sae pleased tae see him."

The canine took a deep breath, and walked out of range. "I've given up worrying about Chester," he cast a glance down the corridor "it's like being on an unshielded ship in a meteor swarm - you can't do a thing about what's going to hit, just patch up the holes afterwards. I think we could apply to the Demon Aid Charities for relief - the first natural disaster with a tail."

"Aye. I'm off tae me bed. An I'm boltin' me door - there's maybe clans o' barbarian lassies oot there who'd be pleased to see him, but a ringtail on chocolate - ye never know fit he'll try."

Deck winced, in his case from practical experience. "Felina said she'd stay and look out for him, if she finds he's been caught doing something illegal, immoral or fattening to the Chief's daughter. He just can't be satisfied with a nice safe, friendly native girl.."

"Or Whateffer," Sharrown muttered.

".. Or whatever. There's always a Chief's Daughter involved, these days, or worse. Did I ever tell you about the time on Marsupolis two, when he and that herd of ... oh, never mind, you'd never believe me."

"I would, a' that. I was there the neet he walks intae a bar full o' reptile folk, an' asks for omelettes all round. Guid neet, Deck - we'll see fit's needing tae be fixed taemorrow."

A gradual silence descended on the building, as the night rolled on and the revellers returned. But Chester never came back.

"A nice day for it !"

Morning came, and clear skies stretched from horizon to horizon, the sharp mountain peaks seeming almost near enough to touch as Kiko stood stretching at the window.

There came a knock on the door. The mouse turned. "Sabby ! Could you get that ? And put some.."

Too late, the direwolf had bounded to the door, flicked the bolt and swatted the heavy wooden portal open.

Sharrown stood there, his ears pricking up in surprise at the huge fur-clad centaur who was looking down with her great eager eyes.

"Aye, guid mornin t'ye," he found his voice, looking up from addressing what had been initially at eye-level "Deck's havin' us all meetin' a' breakfast in haff an 'oor - d'ye think ye'll have time to get dressed first ?"

Too late, he recalled that the direwolf had no modesty - the first clothing she had ever owned, he had been at hand to design.

Sabaoth nodded. "Sharry wear nice safety colours, so folk on Dragon can recognise from orbit, yes?"

He grinned, running a claw down his Fluorothermal shorts. "D'ye like it? I've a fine design o' fabric - liquid dye lasers in the weave, body heat pumps it. Keeps ye cool - an when ye've a really hot performance, it shows."

There came an ascerbic cough from Kiko. "IF you don't mind, Sharrown - we've things to organise."

The door slammed shut, and a wolfish squeal of shocked delight penetrated the thick wood.

Sharrown grinned, shaking his head as he made his way down to the dining rooms. He'd spent seven hours sleeping off the last traces of ion-jet lag, and wanted to be in peak shape for today, with no distractions. Tonight though - tonight should be Different.

"Chester didn't come back."

Felina Aniara leaned over the table, her twin tails twitching and the wood scratching beneath her claws as she looked searchingly at the remaining team.

"Not only didn't he come back, but there's six more of the Entropise crew down here and registered for the Games today - they came in on foot, registered at the last minute while we were in the bar. And you know what? I checked the rules - you can't bring on substitutes - the folk who registered are the ones who're competing, no ifs or buts."

"Chester'll be here," Deck shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "He's never let me down ... no, I'll rephrase that. He's never let us down when he knew it was important, if he had any choice in the matter."

"THAT'S what worries me." A stout seat creaked alarmingly as it took the weight of the hybrid warrior's atomically interlocked frame.

For a minute, there was a silence, as they ate steadily. Sabaoth was entered for the races and the eating contests, Deck and Felina for the wrestling - not only the Entropise's team, but the whole of the township would be eligible to enter. Kiko would be doubtless winning in thrown weapons, while Sharrown and Chester were entered for some of the exotic local games of skill. Nobody was entering the less physical events: the riddling and bardic traditions were not something they could pick up from the few pages in the sports guide.

Just then, there was a bleep from the communicator in Sharrown's pocket. He snatched it with commendable speed - without the folding six-metre dish in his backpack, the Dragon was well out of reception range. And nobody else on the planet had his number, except...

"Chester, ye great loon!" The wildcat's fur bristled as he recognised the unmistakable cheerful tones of the ringtail "Where are ye? Ye's had the pack o' us worried stiff about ye!"

There was a pleased giggle in the background, and the sound of a smug Chester. "Don't you worry - I'll be back before the skill contests this afternoon. Goodhope took me up into the mountains, seems she's blood-sisters to one of the clans here ... seems they have to share Everything... can't stop now! Sabre did say we should try and have good Relations with the locals..."

With a delighted squeal, the channel cut off, leaving a furious Sharrown staring at the handset.

Deck growled, the tone sending cups rattling. "I take it back! He's never done that before ... run off when we were counting on him."

"Sabaoth say it SO Romantic.." A spray of fractal flowers garlanded the airspace above the table - evidently, she had been practising with more than the built-in combat modes of her hologram glands. "Lovers meet after years and years, just like in book - we get by without Chester, yes? Anyway, Sabaoth think Mrs. Chester much most dangerous of other side."

"MRS Chester?" All eyes turned to the centaress, who was busy demonstrating what the verb "to Wolf" meant as applied to Breakfast. She nodded, her mouth full.

"Sabaoth think Goodhope lady not let him get away twice." Her ears drooped. "SO looking forward to next week - but Goodhope see him first. And Palomar-horsey feeding up on oats and beans for me."

There was a silence. At length, Kiko shrugged.

"Well, he'll be there or he won't. In the meantime, we've our own races to run!"

"So!" The great voice rang out, two hours later, as the crowd on the great central field sorted itself into those who did the sweating/panting, and those who did the cheering. Burgomeister Dantachak pounded on the floor of the makeshift Judges stand with her ceremonial twenty-kilo sledgehammer, as if to emphasise what happened to hecklers around here "Contestants, ready to do battle!"

"Just a formality," Kiko whispered urgently into Sabaoth's ear, seeing her combat display flash on "they used to fight it out for the nomad's right to come through town - now it's just a term for the Games."

"Sabaoth say 'Yar boo sucks, with knobs on.'" The centaress looked most disappointed.

Behind her, Felina chuckled. The Ghak'Vortan language Sabaoth had grown up speaking a limited subset of, was not one of the Galaxy's most refined dialects. Though like all natural languages, it was evolved to suit its speakers' daily needs exactly - there was a whole separate verb-form specifically describing "acts done as punishment/torture" - but there was no word for "Fluffy" in the dictionary.

"Races at an hour before noon," Kiko whispered back to Sabaoth - "do your best - you'll run the paws off 'em!"

The day commenced, building into one long roar of excited spectators and furiously exerting contestants. Sabaoth had actually lost one race, a fifty-metre sprint that a nomad cheetah had beaten her to the line by half a length.

"Sabaoth say sorry," she panted as Kiko threw cooling buckets of water over her "Sabaoth faster, catch him in ten more strides - but two-leggers accelerate better."

"Don't you worry," the mouse grinned, standing back while the great shaggy-furred girl shook herself dry "you've won us the other four - and there's still the eating match for you at sundown !"

As they raced and grappled through round after round of one event after another, the bright sun rose to noon, and a welcome rest for all.

"How'd you do in the wrestling, Felina ?" Deck asked innocently, looking up as the sweating catsect downed a mug of ale from each hand. He had learned to let her buy her own drinks long ago.

Her twin tails twitched. "Won it so far - but I've the finals to do - and there's a rhino in there, I'm looking forward to getting my arms round." Her eyes briefly lost their sharp glitter. "Chester show up yet ?"

The Dragon's crew shook their heads. Suddenly, there was a sharp crash - as Sharrown dropped his glass, and stood stone-rigid, his tail log-stiff in alarm.

"I ken fit's been itchin' at me all day..." he said slowly, looking from one face to another. "We got that call frae Chester, or so we thought..... where'd he say he was ?"

"Up in the mountains, with some nomad girls," Deck shrugged.

But the wildcat nodded slowly, pulling the databook out of his pocket. "Kiko, ye didnae tell me this book was written from haff the Galaxy awa'. There's a heap o' things wrang wi' it - but Ah've been askin' aroon, an I'm no' likin' fit I'm hearin'."

All eyes, and one laser rangefinder, locked onto him. Sharrown winced. "These games, they're held twice a year, richt ? When yon folk in the buckskin breeks come out o' the plains intae the Glens, they all stop aff here first - they'd nae more miss it than I'd miss Hogmanay. So .." he looked from face to snouted face searchingly "Whit's a' body doin' up in yon hills - there cannae be nomads up there, they're all doon here !"

There was a silence. Suddenly, Kiko swore. In several languages, though she could have continued in any one of them for five minutes without repeating herself.

She pointed up at the distant peaks, still some sixty miles away in the clear air.

"The timing's wrong, too - how'd he have got up there in time ? There's no roads you'd take anything short of a grav-lift over, that direction - and I checked, there aren't any grav-lifts round her. You can't get the parts, this planet doesn't make them. And that radio call - did that sound to you like someone down in a mountain valley right over there, on one of these handsets ?"

Sharrown shook his head. "Nae. It sounded more like a powerful transmitter - though it faded fast enough, like it were goin' oot o' range, or ower the horizon.."

"Sabaoth puzzled." That worthy remarked. "Where Cute-Chester, then ?"

Kiko involuntarily looked up. "Were any of you awake at about one o'clock last night ? I thought I heard something, but I was deeply engaged at the time." Her tail twitched unconsciously, as if in pleasurable memory of the use she had put it to.

Felina nodded. "The Entropise didn't stay on the planet long. It's headed off to orbit, is my guess, to wait for the shipment of cargo - or at least, some of it I think Chester, they've collected already !"

Half an hour later, there was a line of dust streaking across the unmade road where the Space Station Waggon bounced along at full speed, away from town, and towards the Dragon's parked shuttle.

"I wish we could have brought Deck or Felina !" Kiko shouted back into the slipstream, to where Sharrown and Sabaoth hung tightly onto the cargo platform "If only they didn't have to go into the finals !"

Sharrown nodded, pressed up close to where Sabaoth hung her muzzle out in the wind, ears and tongue flapping. While he tried to keep out of the spray range, he frantically swung the ancient satellite dish about the sky, looking for the telltale flicker that signified a contact with their friends.

"Ah've got it !" He whooped with relief, as the red light came on. "Jist headin for the horizon ... I hope it's Chen Lu an no' that batty W2 on watch - we've no' the time ta explain."

"The Scalefall responding, over..." the Panda's voice came across the spacewaves as a vast relief "What's the score, Sharry ? It must be about half-time by now."

"Nivver mind that," Sharrown snapped, "we're no' doin' sae bad - but the ither ship's run off wi' Chester ! I dinnae ken if he's all richt - they've nae call tae hurt him, but he was in nae legal state o'mind when he left - where in orbit are they ?"

There was a brief silence. Then the red light flickered briefly, as the Dragon's orbital path carried it towards the mountainous horizon.

"They're pulled up to the main spacedock, bold as brass - just waiting for the cargo to be delivered, like they've won it already ! And we're nowhere near ... we're in high Polar orbit, they're in low equatorial ... we won't cross for, umm, six hours now. Good luck, you're...."

The red light faded entirely, and Sharrown was left looking at the old square aerial in dismay.

"Well, here DOESN'T come yon cavalry," he said bitterly "the Entropise is sittin' up there laughin' at us - if we didnae need Chester for the last match, I'd say keep him an' sairve 'em richt. An' they're just waitin' for yon delivery....."

Suddenly, his tail twitched convulsively, and the thermofluorescent jogging suit flashed in resplendent colours like a startled chameleon.

"They're tied up there expectin, a delivery...." he whooped "Let's gie them one !"

Alex "two-huts" Jackson yawned, as he looked down at the great pit where a scorched steel cone was being lowered into the twelve-metre maw of the launching cannon. It was the end of the shift - the shell was loaded with fifty tonnes of hard-packed ice, all save its cargo-carrying tip - right now, there was not a lot to do. They were scheduled to launch in a few hours, on the space station's fourth pass overhead... like a stationmaster of old, he surveyed his domain with a quiet pride.

"Same old thing," he muttered to himself, the greying borzoi ears flapping in the breeze blowing up from the scorching plains to the South " haven't missed a schedule yet, no call to now.."

Suddenly, he felt an iron-tight grip on his shoulders, and his feet left the floor as something with the strength of an industrial ice-loader lightly picked him up and turned him round. A huge grey-furred shape was looking down at him with the critical air of a housemorph choosing fresh meatcakes in the market. And those razor-fanged jaws swung open, revealing a horrifying array of glistening dentition that was suddenly centimetres away from his face - then, IT spoke !

"Sabaath say it good to make nice change in routine now and again, yes ?"

"I dinnae like this, nae way do I like it," Sharrown grumbled as he flexed his knuckles, looking over the control panels. "Oh, I ken which button tae press - this is set richt up tae give us every launch window - next one's in haff an oor - but it's Sabaath's end o' the ride I'm nae happy about. I dinnae want tae see her flat an' roast like a Motorway Duck !"

"Sabaath LIKE Motorway duck," said that worthy, pulling on her space-suit while Kiko scanned the control room for evidence that their intrusion had been noticed. "Nice roast flat crispy, yes ?"

The wildcat winced. "Ye'll be up there wi' a billion watts o' microwaves goin' up past ye. I ken the cargo bay's shielded - but I dinnae ken how much. Mon, ye'll be pulling twenty Gees, an' the rest ! It tisnae man-rated - I nivver heard o' anybody riding a beam afore."

"That's the POINT," Kiko snapped, her voice brittle with worry. "The Entropise'd blow our shuttle out of the aether as soon as we locked courses - but they're expecting this shell full of air and food - and you said it, NOBODY rides in them. But when they built they built Sabaath, they built her tough: - she'll be lying down, breathing pure oxygen... apart from maybe Felina, she's the only one who can do it."

Sharrown shook his head as he reset the launch parameters. All sixty capacitors, each the size of a four-storey building, were charged and ready to go - all superconductor lines running at zero impedance.... the electro-magnetic launch-cannon was charged to toss the shell into the focus of the maser beams.... just like in the old holovids. But this time, the plot was life and death.

"If ye can get Chester awa' wi'oot doin' a'body harm," he turned to the direwolf pleadingly "Dinnae antagonise them, all richt ? We've haff o' yon galaxy on oor tails a'ready ... we dinnae need anither vendetta."

The great grey head nodded solemnly inside the sealed helmet, as Sabaath trotted down towards the cargo loading lift. "Sabaath be good." And then she was out of sight, with the flat-pressed ears of cat and mouse alike flagging their fears.

Ten minutes passed, and ten more. Sabaath had thrown out her mass of pre-cooked Wurstenburgers from the cargo - before she left the pad, they were liable to get more than a little overdone. And the door was sealed tight; her electrical senses signalled a clean connection on every millimetre of the door seal. Simply being pressure-tight was not enough: one plastic or ceramic gasket would be enough to let shine through a beam of searing energy more than sufficient to serve flash-fried direwolf to the crew of the Entropise.

She grinned to herself as she lay out flat on an improvised contour couch of freeze-dried food pouches. Inside the sealed spacesuit, she had bypassed the air regulator and was gulping pure oxygen for the final minutes, feeling her system race as she hyperventilated with it. If her species had been capable of giggling, she would have done so as she looked involuntarily upwards to the roof and the direction of the space station further out. One way or another, they were in for a surprise.....

A quiet hiss was all the sound that emerged first - loud, but soft-sounding as an avalanche of powder snow, as the launch-cannon pulsed into life. From the bottom of the deep pit, air was displaced as the sixty-tonne shell bounced into the skies like a badminton shuttle from its racquet - hurtled into the air for barely five seconds while the big mirror unfolded its petals to cover the sides of the pit.... uncovering the two-metre gape of waveguides leading from the solid-state masers.....

Thunder smashed across the launch site as the billion-watt beam coalesced, bouncing straight up into the packed ice of the HellStar shell ! Ice detonated like high explosive, transforming into thousands of volumes of water vapour in the expansion cone - only to run into faster and faster torrents of microwaves blasting up to meet it!

Well-chosen was the old name, "Hell Star". Any orbital launch was guaranteed to be spectacular, whatever its energy source. But a chemical or nuclear powered rocket only had to accelerate evenly off the pad - there would be plenty of airspace on the way through the upper atmosphere to pick up speed, all the more efficiently as the viscous air-drag thinned with altitude. But with a HellStar...

"Go, Sabby, Go !" Even in the ultra-shielded control tower, no organic voice could be heard against that maelstrom of power - yet Sharrown saw the mouse's lips move, her face set in fierce determination, paws and

tail gripping the shaking railings tightly as the scorched cone sprinted away - in fifteen seconds the shock-waves were dancing from the nosecone as it punched up through the speed of sound, rising on a lambent globe of recombining hydrogen, the ice blasted straight into plasma by the gigawatt beam punching into Space !

For a long minute they stood, Sharrown and Kiko, watching the white-glowing speck rise heavenwards. All systems were running smoothly: telemetry showed the ice-chamber's great plug nozzle moving to narrow the exhaust ring as the air pressure dropped away outside. In the launch pit, the mirrored petals were bent to their tightest curvature, focusing on a spot now forty kilometres away and rising fast on its pre-set course for a meeting with Destiny.

Kiko shook her head, and turned as the instruments registered beam shutdown. "She's on a ballistic path now... nothing more we can do here."

But Sharrown was no longer looking at the instruments. His tail was fluffed out in alarm again - at the sight of movement in the distance outside, where the loading team had taken cover at the insistent shriek of the automatic launch sirens.

"Let's get us awa, afore yon fine folk git here !" he had the door unsealed and was half-way downstairs in seconds "I dinna ken they'll be happy aboot oor Sabaoth takin' a ride ... she's got nae ticket...."

Back at the contests, the interest was growing as semi-finals were followed by Finals - and the teams were more than evenly matched now.

"Congratulations," Deck panted, as Felina sprang over the side of the wrestling ring, where a huge rhino was receiving medical attention. "I hope you didn't hurt him too bad."

"Nah," the catsect tossed her head back; sweat ran in rivulets down her, witness to the titanic struggle that had brought the entire crowd to its feet "he's tough, that's why I had to lose my temper this round." Her eyes gleamed dangerously. "It takes a LOT to put one of those rhinos on the mat for keeps .. anyway, he's got another arm he can use."

Deck nodded. "That was one of the Nomads, right ? I've just watched the Entropise crew win three straight contests - we're still ahead of them by one, is how I read it. But that's pretty fragile footing, and if Sabaoth doesn't get back here with Chet - or if Chet's in no state to play.."

Felina turned. "Hey ! Here's Kiko and Sharry, anyway. I can hear the Wagon pull up." With her double ear system, she had picked up the engine note of the Dragon's runabout, even from the heart of the heaving crowd.

Kiko elbowed her way through the packed mass, ducking under elbows and darting between legs of the larger locals. "Sabaoth's on her way," she panted "up to her now - the Dragon's in quite the wrong orbit. But how're we doing ?"

"We need all the help we can get," Deck commented grimly "you're just in time - Tinyweight martial arts is next after this - you're matched against one of the Entropise crew."

"Which one ? If it's that shrew, I'm in trouble," the mouse's tail coiled protectively round her leg "Felina - can you see who I'm drawn against?"

The huge catsect peered out like a lighthouse over the ears of the crowd. looking back down again, she grinned.

"No trouble. These locals can't be up to much - not if that Permakit, Jandro, got into the finals !"

Kiko breathed a sigh of relief. Here was ONE thing today she didn't have to worry about.

(Novy Altai local lore: quoted from the seventeen Utterly Cryptical books of the Great Prophet Prozac the Mellow...)

"The man who breathes relief at finding no scorpion in his right boot - had best remember to check the left one..."

It was the first time Kiko had faced any of their rivals in the Games: there had been nearly two hundred people competing at first, and only now had the offworlder teams been whittled down to face each other. And each ship had chosen wisely: only two of the Entropise's crew had dropped out, and Sharrown had made it to the semi-finals before missing a catch in the juggling section.(Luckily, the chainsaw's engine had been turned off till the final round.)

"HA !" Came the increasingly irritating bellow of Burgomeister Dantachak, as she strode into one of the rope-walled rings "Final rounds commence. Kiko Ap Rhys, in wooden-blade close combat with Jandro - offworld merchants these, who ask our favour to trade. Fight to third touch or first blade-break !"

Kiko hefted the thirty-centimetre wooden blade in her paw. This had a few refinements for public training: experimentally she pressed hard on the point, and the loud buzz of a contact-switch rang out. And the haft was bored to weaken it: any strike with the power of a killing blow would snap the blade entirely. The mouse grinned: the rules forbade throwing these - but up against that little kitten - no problem, she told herself.

The two were now in the ring. Jandro wore only a light silk-like pair of shorts, his clumsily oversized paws moving with surprising dexterity as he circled warily.

Kiko tossed the knife from one paw to the other, sizing up her opponent. The perma-kitten's eyes never left her for an instant; those big, green, soulful eyes...

Suddenly, Kiko started to notice little details about him. His clean, white fluffy chest fur, the appealing whiskers, not unlike her own, but longer still the graceful moves he made, like a trained ballet dancer, but still with an unstudied innocence that seemed to reach out to her.

Angrily, she shook her head, and lunged. Not one of her sparring partners on the Dragon would have avoided that: instead, with amazement she saw Jandro make the tiniest move, and the blade kissed through the fur under his arm, where she had aimed for his chest. Recovering, she circled again warily, trying to analyse the style she was facing.

While Kiko circled, the miniature feline stood, in an oddly fluid pose, like one of the ancient teachers Kiko had trained under, back on her homeworld. Jandro held his blade relaxed; his left hand preened a plump, fluffy cheek, as his huge eyes bored into Kiko's gaze. It was like staring into twin wells of endlessly deep water, your gaze falling deeper and deeper like a dropped stone in the pellucid depths...

Suddenly, Kiko felt a sharp prod to the ribs, and the buzz of a knife contact merged with the roar of the eager crowd around.

"What the... ?" She leaped back, breaking her gaze from the little feline. Shock and anger flared: somehow, he had just walked up to her - to HER ! and scored a point that would have left her bleeding or dying in a real fight. Again she circled, seeking a weak spot - a lightning feint and slash towards the fuzzy little paw holding that blade missed by a millimetre.

Jandro stood again, his expression a soulful, sorrowful gaze. Kiko felt her eyes drawn towards his soft, downy chest fur she recalled her own daughter, how she had held her lovely, soft fur against her own breast, safe and tight through the long nights.

By a fraction of a second, she avoided the next thrust, aimed with a surgeon's precision at her major heart. The crowd released its breath, in a long groan as she backed out of range.

"Kiko !" She heard Felina hiss from the ringside "what are you DOING ?"

"I..." Kiko suddenly stopped, and her nose twitched with a delicious scent. It was not coming from Jandro - but from the crowd around, a heady cocktail of female aromas blending as the audience concentrated on the Perma-Kitten facing her. And though fighters and sportsfolk often had that effect - she herself was often drawn to contests - this was something far out of the ordinary.

The mouse turned to face her opponent - but this time, avoiding his eyes. Concentrating on the knife and hand, the deadly dance began in earnest, both now with each other's measure and determined to win.

It was long. Where seconds felt like hours, even the impartial ringside clock ticked the furious minutes away as limbs and blades clashed and missed. Kiko's blade made scoring contact once - she turned, and recognised a sacrificial move as Jandro's own bit her tail. Not a "real" killing move at all, but once more would win it for him, under these rules.

Twenty minutes of this, and the crowd were heaving with excitement. Kiko was panting with exhaustion; even her muscular, hard-trained frame was being pushed to the limit, as every reflex was put to its sternest test; every hard-earned move finding its perfect place. And it had to be perfect; under that adorably cute kitten fuzz there were muscles like fibreine towing cable.

"Now..." she gasped, heaving back. Lunging forward, the crowd saw her trip and fall at Jandro's oversized feet - and the sound of a contact buzzer rang out across the suddenly silent ring !

"What happened ?" Deck craned to look across to the ring floor. He had seen Kiko fall, seen Jandro hack down towards her ... and the final action had been hidden under the horizon of the front row.

But Felina whooped for joy. "Deck - she's done it !" Her needle fangs were bright in a dangerous grin "Jandro beeped her for the third time - but she dived right onto those big feet of his, broke her blade on them half a second before he touched her !"

"That was CLOSE." Three minutes later, Felina had carried Kiko on her shoulders through the cheering crowd, and deposited her in the contestant's tent. "Not only was he technically as sharp a bladesman as they make them - now I know how Perma-kits stay alive."

"Huh ?" Deck's ears were down in puzzled concentration.

The mouseling grinned in embarrassment. "Well, they can't go around looking fierce, can they ? Whether it's hypnotism, psionics or whatever - they can turn it on full beam, and you won't even want to harm a hair of their sweet little hides. If it hadn't been me in that ring - or if he'd been female - things would have been different."

Felina's eyes widened. "Yes... I could see, you're the only girl he wouldn't affect so much..... but he almost won, even so."

Kiko's ears burned in embarrassment. Had Jandro brought a sister along with the same skills, that perma-kit would have been up her skirt like a topper through an unguarded pantry window - and she, Kiko, would have enjoyed every moment. Never judge a book by its cover, she reminded herself - and DEFINITELY, never judge a foe by their fluffiness.

"Anyway," Deck glanced out at the scoreboard through the open flap of the tent "Ow - they've just won another one... that's us even. And nothing any of us are in till this evening - just hope Sabaoth can get back in time for tea."

Suddenly, Kiko began to laugh. "We're saved, then," her whiskers twitched mischievously. "If there's one thing you can bet your life on - it's that Sabaoth NEVER forgets a mealtime !"

The contests carried on, as the afternoon drew to a close. Kiko and Sharrown could almost relax - whatever happened, their parts were played, and they could sit around the tents enjoying the tale-telling, verbal duelling and many another battlefield at which the Nomads risked the loss or triumph of their "steppe-cred."

"Aye, ah'm no' worried about fit happens to Sabaoth once she gits in here," Sharrown frowned, looking up at the skies. "But we've no way o' knowing - maybe they caught her, threw her in yon brig wi' Chester."

"Or out the airlock with the rubbish." Kiko voiced her worry. "We sent that innocent young pup to take on a whole ship full of pirates and Goddess-knows what else - was that fair?"

The little wildcat grinned. "Nae. It's nae fair at all - tae yon Entropise crew, o'course!"

Suddenly, there was a distant boom that shook the tent walls. Deck came bursting in, a pair of binoculars in hand. "It's a HellStar shell - one just went straight over - and the markings are the one Sabaoth launched in!"

Despite her tiring day, Kiko was vaulting over the heads of the back three rows and out to see for herself. Indeed - across the clear sky was a long grey contrail, tipped by a fast-moving dot. She recalled her school studies of Hellstars: the empty cones made re-entry point first, spinning slightly to spread the heat over the whole skin - and normally aimed to splashdown in a lake or other biggish water body. Undercarriages were a waste of precious launch weight - especially as what could survive the shock of launch, should survive the shock of splashdown.

"At least," she muttered to herself as they ran back towards the Space Station Wagon "so I HOPE...."

It was obvious from the map where they were headed. Novy-Altai has few straight-paved roads: every one is there for a good and sufficient reason. And the straight, empty road leading up from Lake Spenketsee towards the HellStar launch site was something of a giveaway.

"Just hope the rest of the HellStar crew haven't got there first - you and Sharry'd better keep your heads down," was Felina's comment as they bumped along in the right general direction. "I don't think they really approved of taking one of their shells orbital joyriding - and if they make the connection between you and the Dragon..."

"Richt!" Sharrown nodded, fishing a false nose, false tail and set of fluorescent dyed whiskers from his capacious pockets.

But they had no need for alarm - at least, not on that score. The shell had sprouted stubby tail fins, just big enough to correct wind drift and a few seconds of computational error - and the huge cone had nosed gently in towards the bank, driven by the last momentum that had brought it streaking down from the stars.

"Kiko! Sharry - watch out for unexpected guests I'm going in!" Felina dived into a narrow arm of the lake, cutting across to the farthest muddy shore where the cone floated, barely a quarter submerged. For a minute her friends watched, as they double-timed it around the shoreline: Felina was soon at the cone, examining the sharp cargo tip.

"Hey - how do you open this?" Soon they could all hear her frustrated call across the water "There's no way in!"

Kiko cursed viciously. "Ahk - look, Sharry - by the markings, it's floating door-side down. If we could open it - I don't know, but I think it'd sink." They could see the plug nozzle at the base was flush with the expansion cone, keeping the water out of the great empty ice-chamber.

They arrived at where the Catsect stood waist-deep in water, a baffled expression on her face.

"We'll no' shift that wi'oot liftin' gear," Sharrown groaned "An' the only folk wi' sich kit in these parts, we dinnae want tae bother again." Suddenly, a thought struck him. "Felina - ye's a braw strong lassie - look, can ye turn it in the water? If it's nae held fast in the bank, maybe.."

The catsect wasted not a second. Splashing round to the far end, she was up to her top shoulders in water where she could get a grip on one of the tail fins - with her double-density body, she floated like a marble statue. Experimentally, she heaved. Ripples danced away from the shell as the great steel structure vibrated slightly.

"Right." Her expression was a ferocious smile, as she took a firm grip on the tail fin with her upper arms, and braced against the smooth curve of the shell with the other. Feet firmly planted on the rocky bottom of the lake, the hybrid feline put her insect inheritance to good use.

"Aye.. that's richt, lassie.. she's a'turnin'!" Sharrown splashed down into the cold water himself, ignoring the chill tideline reaching up under his programmable kilt. This time, he reassured himself, I'm wearin' one that'll no' short-circuit in the shower.....

Under the steady heave of Felina's massively muscled frame, the eleven tonnes of steel and ceramic began to turn. Up from below came the entrance door, dripping and garlanded with water-weed: in ten seconds Sharrown had selected his largest sonic screwdriver and got to work on the space-sealed latch.

Behind him, Kiko could only stand and watch; there was only room for one to work. The possibilities ran through her mind: the shell could be empty, Sabaoth might have returned, with or without Chester. And even so the Hellstar vehicles were not shielded or insulated for live passengers. Visions of roasted horrors within tugged at the mouse's imagination.

"There she goes!" With a click, Sharrown unlatched the hatch. And took a cautious sniff: the interior air was baking hot, but no scent of burned fur or flesh reached his nose. And then he pulled the hatch all the way open, and they all saw his ears go flat.

"Felina, will ye' lend us a hand or four," his voice was tight "They're there - but they're no' moving!"

"Sabaoth better now, yes..." . Ten minutes later, the big direwolf was on her paws again. She had wrapped torn-up fabrics round herself and Chester as the shell had re-entered the atmosphere: they had tumbled from side to side, banged against the scorchingly hot interior walls all the way down through the atmosphere. And at the last, Sabaoth had fainted, collapsing in the oven-like air, paws still protectively cradling Chester's still form. A chilling in the lake and a few minutes of fresh air had sufficed to revive her: not so with Chester.

"Goodhope lady say Chester full of barry-something," she commented as Deck and Kiko placed their friend in the recovery position on the flat top of the Space Station Waggon. "She say he not hurt."

Kiko groaned. "Barisitol, I'll bet. Standard anaesthetic - he could be out for hours, no idea how much he's got in him. No side-effects - that's one good thing."

Deck looked up at Sabaoth: she still looked distinctly shaky, and her holographic display was a wan flicker above glazed eyes. One of her armoured third eyelids seemed to be stuck half-way down. "What happened up there ? " He demanded "So, you talked to Goodhope ? And she just let Chester go ?"

But the big centaress shook her head. "Sabaoth get Chester back, never mind how. But killed nobody - now we go win prize, yes ?"

For the second time that day, the Dragon's Space Station Waggon pulled up on the outskirts of town, and while Deck and Felina carried Chester into their rooms, Sabaoth ploughed through the crowd like a ship through seething waters.

"You SURE you're all right ?" Kiko asked, her voice edged with worry "We've got to win this one ... but we'll enter Felina for it if you're too ill still."

The great grey wolf-girl bravely shook her head. "Sabaoth hungry ! Sabaoth run batteries flat - that why feel weak."

Kiko squeezed her affectionately. The direwolf's "batteries" were her main pride and problem combined: they needed several kilograms of animal protein daily to power their bioelectrical cells. And that simply had to be provided: after heavy use, those great saddlebag-shaped glands grabbed whatever her metabolism could offer. Without food, in a week Sabaoth would be dead of starvation.

"Ah'm thinkin', I can smell it from here - I'm hungry meself !" Sharrown had cheered up considerably at the prospect of Sabaoth entering an eating competition. This was like sponsoring Chester for free-style Troublemaking, or an Arcturan Megadolpin for a swimming race.....

But as they arrived, with one minute to spare, three sets of ears sank flat on their assorted skulls. Not at the sight of the opposition - there were a dozen famished-looking nomads, and as expected, the Entropise had selected Rittik the shrew for this. What shocked them, was the feast that the others were droolingly regarding.

"The book's never been THIS wrong," Kiko muttered, tapping the relevant entry. "See ? It's even got a photograph." As they had seen before, onscreen was a mountain of flesh, whole roasted herdbeasts ready for the ravenous carnivores to fall upon.

"Hey !" Kiko tugged the elbow of one of the officials, and pointed at the feast that Sabaoth was haltingly moving towards. "What is this ? It says here, the ritual's not been changed for centuries."

The tall mare looked down at her, and smiled with a dazzling array of grinding teeth. "Oh, indeed, offworlder. It's always been like this - alternate years, the Wind-riders provide the feast from their herds. This year, it's the good stuff - our farms deliver the best of their crops." She waved a hoof, and the feast began.

"Oh NOOOOOOO..." Sharrown groaned. Whatever you could say about Sabaoth, you had to admit that she always tried her best. But she was a pure carnivore - and right now, she was staring in horror at a huge steaming pile of roasted sweet potatoes.

"Sabaoth say sorry." It was a contrite and shamefaced centaur that lay flat out half an hour later, just outside town - and an extremely sick one.

"Ach, ye tried yuir verra best," Sharrown consoled her from four metres upwind. "Twas nae yuir idea - if it hadnae been Kiko, I'd hae entered ye for jist the same."

"I don't know what we're going to tell Deck and Felina - or Sabre, worst of all," Kiko held her head in her paws. "That shrew won - I should have known, they adjust it according to your body mass. Sabaoth would have had to eat about.... about MY weight of those blasted roots to beat him."

For a minute, there was a silence. But then, they heard a great cheer go up from the enclosure. Evidently, the overall winners had been announced.

Sharrown stood up, stretched himself to his full height, and offered Sabaoth a friendly paw. "Ah well - ye canna have owermuch o' that left inside ye now, by the state o'ye. Let's get ye cleaned doon, an' I bet ye'll soon be wantin' some better fittles. I'll buy ye supper - I saw a local species o' haggis I've a mind tae try, an' it's a sight too big for me."

Sabaoth nodded, her holograms flickering brighter by the minute. "Sabaoth say Thankyew ! Sabaoth moving rooms soon - see big empty one next to Sharry-cat move in, yes ?" A huge tongue licked Sharrown's face - and then Sabaoth's ears fell. "Say sorry again. Felt so happy, forgot was just sick."

Grimacing, Sharrown attempted to clean himself with the standard-issue towel he kept stuffed down his kilt - one way or another, it helped to make a good impression. "An I'll clean meself, thank ye. Aye - here's Felina, come tae commiserate." The prospect of a cheerful main-battle tank on four frisky legs moving in next door was not one he appreciated. Felina, on the other paw....

As they approached, they saw something very odd about the catsect. For someone whose team had lost the match and the contest, she was looking extremely cheerful.

She stopped, and looked from one face to another.

"Do you know," she mused, her tails twining and crossing "the rules here have some very interesting small print. Especially as regards teams - they're great respecters of clan loyalty - one of those tales in the

bardic contest was about someone who dragged himself to the field of battle, mortally wounded - he didn't actually DO anything, but the clan respected his memory for generations for it."

"Nice piece of folklore," Kiko commented acidly "But we didn't enter the bardic contest."

Felina gave one of her famous grins, that had been known to make battle-androids step back nervously. "Maybe we should have listened to them - I certainly did. Do you know, Chester's still unconscious ? But he still turned up for the sleight-of-hand contest: we dropped him there, after pressing his pawprint on the registry tablet. And Goodhope Staelsdottr didn't show up - despite being the captain of her team."

All eyes turned to her. "Which means, in the opinion of the Elders and the Burgomeister..." Felina hummed, all hands behind her back, and her own eyes innocently looking at the sky, "that the individuals who won their contests, won them as individuals. But Goodhope let her team down - and we dragged Chester onto the battlefield, even though he's flat out and getting medical treatment right now..... as a team - WE WON !"

There was a shocked silence. Then Sabaoth's voice rang out.

"So now we afford to buy REAL feast, yes-no ?"

It was two days later, and the Dragon's crew was buying their last souvenirs from Novy-Altai, as the final HellStar shell blasted into the skies, laden with five tonnes of precious medicinal herbs for the Dragon's holds. Sabaoth had declined to ride in one - as she had said - "Sabaoth try anything once. Try some things twice. Maybe let Chester try third way round again - but no more Helstarr ride - that REALLY hurt !"

"Aye, it's nowt I'd fancy meself," agreed Lettice Earnshaw from beside her. A night of chronic indigestion had been the worst result of Sabaoth's flight and feast - the Demon Empire had built her tough.

But Kiko and Lettice had noticed something else about the great-hearted centaur - she was unusually quiet, and often looked upwards, as if expecting to see something. The Entropise had left with surprisingly good grace, buying up some of the minor trade goods - almost as if its main trade was something other than buying and selling.

"T'Dragon's going to be awhile sorting all that," Lettice advised them "We've gorra few days yet here - an' there's things I'd want to hear about. Sabaoth - tha's goin' ta keep mum about this, art tha' ?"

The great grey head shook slowly. "Sabaoth got to tell. Sabaoth think she do something very wrong."

That night, they left the Space Station waggon parked where the road came to an end at the foot of the mountains, and walked on into the cool green valleys. Kiko felt the years lifting from her shoulders as she climbed, up into narrow glens and untrodden pastures where the wild herbs grew, only disturbed once a year to make the rare brews that had brought them across the interstellar void to this far place and this green valley.

At last, they made camp, Chester and Felina exploring one of the side-valleys, while Sabaoth happily carried Kiko up to a high ledge of rock on the mountain shoulder, looking out across the endless rolling plain. Lettice Earnshaw walked beside them, her stout Penn Nine hiking boots bruising sweetness from the short grass and low herbs around them.

"This nice, yes ? For long tale ?" Sabaoth parked her rump to let the mouse dismount. "Sabaoth not know whether to tell Chester this. Chester go sleep all the time, Goodhope stick him with needle after he all tired out, night we come to town." She took a deep breath, and began to tell her tale.

At first, all had gone very well indeed. The Hellstar had lifted at twenty gravities - she had been crushed flat, almost driven through the decking with the terrific acceleration of the launch. But the capsule had been proof against the torrent of microwaves slamming into the packed ice a few scant metres below her; and with her bloodstream supercharged with oxygen, she had kept conscious throughout the punishing climb, until she could breathe again. It had hurt, and she had taken some minor damage - but she was built as a bioweapon, and could have handled much more of the same.

As predicted, she had achieved complete tactical surprise. The capsule was airtight, and made rendezvous with the space station the Entropise was docked at, guided by its automatic beacon. Then the difficult part began.

"Sabaoth open hatch, find all unloading gear automatic," she nodded to herself, her holograms displaying a sketch map of the old-fashioned ring-and-hub space station. There had been no difficulty in finding the Entropise, being the only starship pulled up there. "Nobody see Sabaoth, till much closer."

What followed, was something she found hard to put into words. Almost as if she had told an exceptionally capable, but simple-minded robot its instructions, she had just dropped into her fighting mode - and charged !

Search ! -avoid capture ! -get Chester !-don't kill-....

She dimly recalled the details; the ship had been laid out much as the blueprints in her read-only memory had promised - people had tried to stop her, with stunners. But stunners barely slowed her down; her nervous system was engineered and insulated to coexist with far greater voltages than a mere stunner induced - and at full speed, not one two-legger could stay within range long enough to consider an alternative. Doors there were, and cameras - but not for long. Like boxing gloves, she wore what Kiko had made for her; her right fist was a step-up transformer tied into her "raw" electrical circuits, and her left was a step-down. A door loomed up - one fast scan with her dew-claws pinpointed its locking mechanisms and power supply cables - conductive claws would rip through the joints, and PUNCH ! If the boosted voltage of one paw left any circuit flowing a second later, it would go the other paw's charged razors, and high-ampere currents would surge throughout the violated power supply, wreaking havoc with all in its path.

From door to door she galloped, her every sense fine-tuned to her simple mission. Cameras turned her way, until she gave them her hardest stare; optical-band organic lasers that would barely set wood

smouldering, still wrought unspeakable havoc on the sensitive optical grids. And as she cut her way through, the ship began to die. Lights failed, life support systems wound down - and somewhere, someone made a decision.

All the doors opened for her. And in one roomy cabin, Goodhope Staelsdottr faced her, standing over Chester's gently snoring body, a smile still on his face.

"She not let me take him nice. We talk - then sudden-like, Goodhope-lady try and stop me," Sabaoth said sadly. "She jump at me - I pull claws in - but everything just seem to happen, like fast-cannon keep firing. Empty batteries into Goodhope-lady before can think about it - she alive, put her flat on face like Missy Earnshaw always say, grab Chester, get out."

On the way back, nobody had tried to stop her. She had already cut a swathe of blown fuses through the heart of the ship, and with the main hatch to the space-station jammed open, nobody was going to try firing blasters after her for fear of depressurising the whole place. So she had made it back to the automatic handling station of the Hellstar shell unmolested - and the faithful automatic systems had dropped the cargo pod right back on target, one orbit later.

The direwolf halted. She looked out across the low plain. long shadows sprawling far in the sunset.

"Go on," Kiko prompted. "You did a great job ! You didn't kill anyone - you got Chester back, so we won the contest - there's got to be more to it than that."

"Aye," Lettice Earnshaw said quietly. "Tha's been mopin' ever since tha' got back. What's up wi' thee ?"

"It what Sabaoth see on Goodhope-lady's locker," Sabaoth said, in a small voice. "All powered up when see it, no time to think. Like make film, record it all, watch it later. Only remember when in shell again, going down. It on her wall - Kiko remember what say about Goodhope, wait till right time for Chester-cub ? Like Sabaoth-sister-cub wait on icy place in Dragon sickbay, till Sabaoth ready for carry it ?"

Kiko nodded gently. "It's a nice idea, I said. But I really don't think she could have managed it."

The centaur's display fired up with a confusing pink blush. "Sabaoth know what "surrogate" mean - look at lots of medical-type screens in off-duty time. See picture of Goodhope-lady, in uniform - and other ringtail lady, not look so hard - she look nice. And they both holding lovely cub - Sabaoth hear say, Pirate ship no place for cub. And see other picture of cub, on nice planet somewhere - look eight year old, lovely girl-ringtail - Goodhope-lady put picture next to still-wet photo of Chester. That just before she try and stop me taking Chester back again."

There was a long silence. Then she spoke again, her voice hardly more than a whisper.

"Sabaoth do right thing, yes ? Maybe Chester wake up on Entropise, want to stay..... maybe Goodhope-lady better than Sabaoth for him."

"Eh," Lettice mused. "Tha' reckons she'd drag 'im off, pump 'im full o' Barisitol, haul 'is tail into low orbit an' fake 'is voice wi' ship's computer fer us, if she reckons she'd get 'im any other way ? Nay, Sabaoth - that's no sort'o way of staking 'er claim. "

"Should we tell Chester about it, though ?" Kiko's face was thoughtful. From across the valley, the still air carried sounds of merriment - evidently, either Chester had caught a willing catsect, or visa-versa.

"Sabaoth hurry up and make mind up," that worthy pointed out "three days, and it not head end making decisions any more." Her tail unconsciously lifted to reveal the swelling that was just beginning to fill her bloodstream with hormones that were less than fussy about socio-ethical imperatives.

Three women looked at each other, for a long time.

"It wouldn't do anyone any good," Kiko suggested. "You know ringtails - I'd be amazed if there isn't a trail of Chester offspring clear across the galaxy - and everyone else was perfectly happy with the idea. If this Goodhope wants him, she'd better think of a more honest way to invite him away. And give him a chance to say no."

"Tha's reet there," Lettice agreed. "If in doubt, say nowt. So I'll be leaving you two - good night to ye both."

As the mouse and centaur lay beneath the wheeling stars, Kiko pressed herself to the great flank, kissing away her friend's worry.

"Sabaoth wonder what to say to Chester now... not really think him mine, even for three-day... ringtails not like that. "

Kiko looked up at her, eyes shining in the light of the rising moons. "They're like this land, like this night, like what we've got between us. It's good to share, to enjoy - you don't nail it down, lock it away, or put an ownership brand on it. And if you love it, let it go - if it was yours, it'll come back anyway - if not, it never was yours."

Sabaoth nodded. She still did wonder if she could carry on as carefree as before with Chester - knowing what she did, and keeping it from him.

But, as it turned out three days later - she found out that she could.

The End

