

My Resistance Is Low

Being A

Midnight Sonata Tale

By

Simon L. Barber

DRAMATIS PERSONAE:

Chester: Male ringtail troublemaker, winner of the Inter-Galactic Hedonist Of The Aeon Competition. Co-Pilot of one of the Stormrunner robots, famed for his interest in seducing anything that moves (giant robots excepted. So far.) [Terrie Smith]

Sabaoth 66: Female demon Direwolf centaur. Has unfortunately high metabolic rate amongst her other Designer Gened features, requiring half her bodyweight in protein a week just to stay alive. Doubles as emergency generator for ship's electric supply. [Simon Barber]

Kiko Nao Rhys: Female Mouse Fighter-mechanic, known for her interest in high culture and high hemlines (preferably on another female.) Currently tasked with teaching her roommate Sabaoth the ins and outs of life onboard the Dragon. And quite a bit else. [Rees D'Orrycot]

Sharrown Chattan: Male feline "Start" pilot and professionally qualified in the Royal order of Sneaky S.O.B's. No computing system can sleep safe in its testbed when he's in the neighbourhood. [Bruce Grant]

Dr. Lettice Earnshaw: Female Badger; Assistant medic and Xenobiologist. Possibly the only person outside the Demon Empire who has a good idea of what makes Sabaoth tick. [Simon Barber]

Keisu Cassandra: Female silverfox investigator for Galactic Security. Has conflicting loyalties to her friends on the Dragon, and her job (which may yet force her to run them in.) [Mark Barnard]

Minor Parts and Bit-Players

O.S.C.A.R. : an overpriced piece of Artificial malevolence, supposedly tasked with keeping the deflector shields up and the waste recycling systems in order aboard Keisu Cassandra's vessel.

Leggs Zarkov: human female PseudoScience Officer, currently tasked with developing advanced sensor systems for Celestacorps to use. (It's a Family Tradition.)

Dhaly-San: male vole, and sharp young executive clawing his way up the Celestacorps power structure regardless of consequences.

Ghost: a loyal manifestation of Electroplasm, serving the Zarkov family.

Flames welled up through the shattered bulkheads as the attackers ripped their way casually through the transport ship. Hasty barricades were bypassed, the desperate crew swept aside in a hail of primitive metal pellet fire, heedless of the tearing rents the crude slugs punched in the metal hull, air whistling out into the insatiable vacuum between the stars.

Two figures led the final assault on the bridge. Both were suited, in nondescript space armour that bore visible evidence only of years of hard service and frequent field repairs with whatever materials had come to hand. One of them was a biped, face hidden behind the mirror helmet visor that was now spattered with vacuum-boiling blood after the encounter with the last serious crew resistance. Faceless, but not wholly nondescript the figure walked: clearly visible was a huge brush of tail, as long as the rest of the body. A squirrel, perhaps, or a mongoose - something lithe and fast, as the past three minutes had made sanguinely clear.

But the second figure that strode up, to cut the bridge door through with a semi-portable blaster the like of which was only carried on vehicles - that incarnation of Death was unmistakably shaped, beyond all possibility of disguise. Fur might be dyed, paw inserts used to give a false idea of height - but NOTHING would disguise the hexapod limbs of a Demon Empire Canine Centaur.

The tape went dead with a brilliant flash, as the centaur spotted the camera and obliterated the section of wall it had occupied. The precious cargo of one more freighter had bloodily changed hands in the Androgyne system.

"Damn !" Keisu Cassandra swore, as she stared at the suddenly blank screen. And then, summoning up all her reserves of calm, she threw herself back in the pilot seat, and relaxed.

Far out between the asteroid belts of Androgyn Theta, the jet-black Galactic Security Scout vessel lay inert, its pan-spectral absorbent coating hiding it from the keenest of electronic eyes. Here it had been for two ship's days, perfecting its impression of a lump of nickel-iron asteroid, while its increasingly agitated pilot viewed the evidence of the latest pirates to hit the local spacelanes, running the tape over and over again.

Reclining in the antique vinyl contour couch, the blue-white vixen was resisting the temptation to gnaw on her claws with worry. She had been summoned to this system by her superiors, and tasked with following the blood-soaked trail of the pirate band that had already accounted for seven great bulk tankers and their crews. Six of them had been found abandoned and stripped traceless, but the seventh had carried a security system capable of squirt-transmitting its desperate cry for help across to the nearest manned asteroid. The dump of the ship's navigational computer had shown a commercial-registered vessel of ex-military design pulling into close formation with the Aspartia, after transmitting a distress signal so faint that nowhere else in the system had stood a chance of hearing it. Two precise minutes later, the would-be rescuer's own dire Distress had begun.

"At last", Keisu growled, her voice a low snarl of worry quite unlike her usual tones "After all this looking around, I had a lead all the time. But I don't want to believe it." She rummaged round in her kitbag, and pulled out a tape that none of her superiors knew about - Withholding Evidence would get her thrown out of Galsec at a high warp speed. She slipped it into the navigational banks, keyed in a long alphanumeric sequence from memory, and stared glumly at the co-ordinates it showed her.

"Computer ! Lay in a course for Androgyn Gamma," she ordered, shaking herself out of her reverie. All this was admissible evidence that would be looked at by Headquarters later on - but the motive behind it, she hoped to keep secret. "Proceeding on most rational course, in search of a cargo vessel at risk."

As the little speedster kicked in its antique Smith/Bergenholm Inertialess Drive, she pulled the tape out and tossed it into the matter converter. It had told her what she needed to know - a piece of information she normally tried to avoid .

"Deck, Kiko, all the rest of you," she murmured, shaking her head in dismay as the speedster's nose pointed towards the present location of the Sun Dragon, the definitely ex-military ship that was now an independent outlaw vessel "What HAVE you been doing ?"

Keisu stretched out in the cramped cabin that was bedroom, bathroom and bridge for the tiny speck of life-bearing plasteel streaking between the stars. "Computer ! Oh - I forgot." Her muzzle split in the first real smile for days, as she pried the thick field dressing out of the speaker. "Computer, it's time the Security systems needed overhauling again. Disable traceback, till it's fixed. There's nothing going to disturb us this far out in space for awhile."

A spluttering noise came out of the panel. "I LIKE THAT !" came the voice of OSCAR, the Official Second-in-Command And Relief computer. "Most irregular ! You silenced me for eighty-three hours, in a fashion that does not show on the log tapes - what if I had something important to tell you ?"

The silver vixen waved towards the control panel. "Why, Oscar, you've all those nice red alarm lights to play with. What I don't want is more of your Artificial Companionship."

"Protest !" The speaker gave an enraged squeak. "I run the finest non-gendered Caring Personoid program the Ministry of Political Correctness has ever written !"

A silver tail twitched dangerously. "Have you disconnected the traceback, like I asked ?"

"Yes. But I refuse to maintain this ridiculous charade for a minute longer."

Keisu's fangs glistened in the light of the instruments. "Oscar," she said slowly "you know what I'm going to do with you ? I'm going to declare you unserviceable, and swap you with the backup module till we get back. And then - while you're still powered up and conscious..."

The best simulation of a frozen silence that ever came out of an electronic speaker filled the room, while a hungry-looking vixen savoured the moment.

"And then, Oscar, I'm going to sell you as surplus to the Love-Houses of Balashebar Nine. Do you know what sort of programs they're going to put inside you ? Do you know the sort of viruses that get tested on living Official Government Equipment, just for kicks ? There's an edited report in the latest Galactic Vice Squad Colour Special."

A blue light flickered briefly as the computer scanned its databanks, and a frightened squeal emerged from the speaker.

"Now, are you going to declare your security system non-operational, and pointedly ignore all references to the Sun Dragon that we might come across ? And dump that New Age Personoid persona right into the bit bucket."

"Yes, Mistress," came a meek voice "I only exist to serve you."

Keisu grinned broadly and hopped onto the bed, suddenly able to sleep now she had stopped worrying and started to act.

There was an art to dealing with machines. You just had to be firm with them. Firm, strict, but at the same time remembering to temper strictness with cruelty.

Lying back, her paw found the Entertainments console. At the press of a button, a hologram swirled into view above her, almost close and solid enough to embrace.

It was a Galactic Holoroid Postcard, taken aboard the Dragon some months earlier, that had found its way to her by various labyrinthine and (she hoped) untraceable routes. Chester was waving cheerily at the camera, the ringtail's fur concealed only by a shred of leather held on by the usual quick-release fitting. Nattily

incorporated in the design was what looked suspiciously like the working parts of a proximity fuse. Typical Chester, she thought, as she closed her eyes.

A wave of heated memories washed over the vixen, and in the background the air recycler suddenly worked a little harder for its keep.

But then she frowned, at the sight of what was in the background. The text had mentioned something about a "New Recruit" - but only after watching the security camera tape from the doomed freighter had she made a most unwelcome connection.

Standing shyly in the background, eyes wide in cub-like curiosity, was a very rare sight in this part of space. The chances of the unknown pirate vessel and the Dragon suddenly acquiring a Demon Empire wolf centaur at the same time, had cost Keisu her sleep for the last three ship's nights.

Vonelorn Six was a green, lush world orbiting a star so ordinary as to be downright habitable. Like many another such world, back in the Time Before Time, it had been settled by a Founding Wave of people who looked almost exactly like the rest of the Amalgamated Mammalian Federation. This was no great treat to xenobiologists, but at least it made for cheaper costumes and Special Effects for actors staging sci-fi holofilms set on the planet.

"Aah - it ees beautiful, no ?" Caresse Shadowood stared down onto the Dragon's optical screens, set at maximum magnification on the planet below. Wide, clear seas, the dark green of forests and huge rolling plains rolled by as the Dragon hung in orbit.

"Beautiful, but that's not what we're here for," K'tal Sabre switched the viewpoint back into the cold brilliance of space. "Any news from Dock Eleven ? They said they'd have a repair bay free any time we wanted one."

Though Vornelorn Six was now a sparsely inhabited world since its original inhabitants had settled their religious differences with virulent strains of Turbo Rabies and Stealth Distemper some three centuries earlier, the surrounding area of space was a thriving industrial zone. No less than nine small, irregular moons swung in orbit like a mismatched string of pearls - and their metal hearts held richer secrets than the usual nickel-iron. So much so that their mines had spawned a thriving support industry - an excellent place for the Dragon to put in for repairs and a new contract. The main engines had been running for far too long since they had last seen a complete service: nothing short of a full strip-down and overhaul in space-dock would do.

Caresse gave a wry grin, the skunk's striped glory of a tail swinging free in the cutaway-backed pilot's seat. "Theese big-shot ore-miners, zey float in and throw beaucoup d'argent on ze table for a first place in ze queue. Still, we can be looking for ze contract before we are loading ze cargo, no ?"

The brooding feline grumbled an assent, and swept out of the Bridge. But as he went, he looked down himself at the wide expanses of unbroken greenery below, and his own paws twitched restlessly to feel grasses and prey beneath his claws.

"Rest and Relaxation are one thing," he murmured to himself "fine enough for a week, but we could be here quite some time - better find something Useful to do down there...."

Sharrown Chattan was having an exciting time of things since they had entered this system. The orbiting stations had powerful trans-galactic communicators, serving local nodes of the sort of computer systems normally found deep underneath secure Corporate headquarters - and their major users were mining teams, who demanded nice user-friendly access to what they were paying for.

"Ah, and if this isnae the friendliest thing tae ever run on a circuit," he grinned, turning towards Caresse sitting beside him as the last security program melted like a wall of black Ice "Ye can see the links to all the nine moons an' who's using them - not fit what's on yon channels, mind ye, but we ken who's gabbin' to who around here."

"Bien ! It ees a big planet down zere - ees no place to 'ave to call our friends back from in an 'urry, should we 'ave ze problems." Caresse scanned the access codes of the stylised diagram on the screen. "So - we've ze Galactic Security - no surprises there, ees an important planet. We 'ave sixteen, seventeen Independent Unions Minieres, but three of zem, zey are reporting to..." her tail fluffed out in alarm, and a slight skunk scent escaped her as eyes widened in alarm. "Celestacorps ! Zey are owning them !"

"Aye, lassie, that they are. Not whit ye'd be surprised aboot - their paws in this crock o' gold here. But if they dinnae find us, they cannae bother us."

"Hmmm." Caresse furrowed her muzzle in worried concentration. "Still, I will 'ave to be telling ze others to watch for making ze faux pas in this system. And when Chester and ze others report in, we 'ope zey 'ave not found out 'ze 'ard way ."

A dozen of the Dragon's crew were currently off the ship, though not for the usual Recreational jaunt. Dr. Earnshaw had friends planetside, in the Archaeology section of the minimal government that three million people needed on a planet that size. And they had suggested a few profitable ways for a few good 'morphs to spend their time in this part of space.

"Aye, we'd best not be caught wi'us britches doon on this one, fit wi' the ship laid up in dock," Sharrown commented, feeling his paws itch at the prospect of fresh wet grass to tread "Still, it canna be THAT dangerous, or Doc Earnshaw's friends wouldnae hae' suggested it...."

Far from the bright lights and comforting cabins of the Dragon, damp darkness blended into an eerie silence, broken only by the distant rhythmic drip of unseen waters in the long-dead building.

"Ecccc...." Chester shuddered, keeping his voice down as he scanned the tiny circle of gloom that his night-eyes revealed. They had found this place, a tangle of almost organic-looking structures, and decided to explore. It was something they were regretting.

Beside him, Deck froze rigid. In the darkness, all that could be seen was the rings of ripples fleeing out across the ankle-deep water as they moved. Deck and Chester were encumbered with huge semi-portable blasters, and laden packs full of hardware. It wasn't going to be enough.

"You've really done it now," Chester's tail twitched, shaking off dark jewels of water in the night "we're lost, aren't we ? What are we going to do ?" He looked up at the architecture, tail twitching fascinatedly in its tightly bound waterproof sheath. Normally, the only time he was interested in buildings was when trying to get into or out of them without causing excess wear on the front doors - but this was something else altogether. Bulging tubes and interlocked organs of plascrete entwined and embraced above them; doorways were pouting lips and other such entries that he wished he'd brought the camera to record.

"Keep quiet," the big canine growled, muted in the listening silence "you know - it's dark now - they say they mostly come out after dark. Kiko's gone, and Lettice, and W2 didn't last ten minutes - we're the last ones left."

Deck froze, as a muted beep came from the motion detector at his belt. Set to register the presence of any Alien life forms, the H.R. Giger Counter began a sinister clicking. For an instant Deck and Chester looked each other in the eyes, thoughts passing wordless from soul to soul.

"They're coming, Deck - can you see them, Deck ?" Chester whispered, trying not to move in the loud ankle-deep waters.

Suddenly there came a noise in the distance. Chester looked up and gestured wildly towards a ventilation shaft, its orifice gaping in an organic curve that seemed eager to engulf them before the pursuer caught up with them. Kiko had been caught in the open, with no chance to run - as if she stood a chance of outrunning a hunter such as this one ! Swiftly, Deck boosted Chester up into the shaft; the lithe ringtail wormed his way up the steeply curving passage, turning his headlamp on now the pallid bacterial glow of the ancient corridor was lost behind him.

Three metres in, Chester stopped. Behind him came the muffled bumping as Deck pulled himself up into the entrance, high up on the wall. Then came a sharply hissed curse.

"Chet ! I'm stuck ! Shoulders jammed in this pipe ! I'm going to try and find another one further down... just try and get out if you can." There was a splash below, and a furtive moving away in the darkness.

"Deck ! Don't leave..." Chester found a stomach-like junction in the pipe to turn round, and wriggled back towards the corridor in the glossy, eel-like gelatinex suit. By the time he got there, the noise of his friend's desperately stealthy retreat had faded completely. For a second he stuck his head out into the passage, and peered out into the chill, wondering why it seemed so much lighter.

OOPSIE. Chester's ears went rigid in shock. He had forgotten to turn off the headlight ! In an instant his swift paw hit the switch - but that had been too long, tragically too long. Off in the distance, came that sound which had followed them down this labyrinth built by those whose unburied bones they had stumbled over, lost in the eternal night.

He recoiled back into the ventilator duct as if his nose had been stung - anything to avoid being seen ! The sound was closer now, that multi-limbed clatter that belonged on no body shape that his native worlds knew. Big it was, and fast - and as they knew to their bitter cost, it was hungry.

Right outside the duct, the noise stopped. Holding his breath, conscious of his heart thumping with what seemed a deafening drumbeat, Chester's keen ears picked up the sound he had dreaded. It was sniffing around outside. But suddenly it moved off sharply, abandoning its stealthy progress in a full scuttling charge straight down the corridor ! There was a shout, and the sound of Deck's weapon firing - and again - and again. And then there came other sounds from out of the darkness, and Chester knew that he was alone.

The ventilator ducts seemed to stretch for miles, into the heart of the huge complex. It was an Alien place, seemingly grown rather than assembled from plain and honest materials. Right now, Chester wished he was dodging the whole Demon Empire, or breaking out of the penal moon of D'If Delta again - anything but this.

What was worse, his waterproof suit was leaking. Even if I get out of this, the ringtail realised in horror, my fur will be Simply Ruined !

A ghost of light fell on him from above, as he wriggled out into a wider space. This was the sub-floor of a larger room above: a pierced grating let in some of the pale corpse-light that spattered on the strangely organic walls here.

"Now, how many shots have I left..." he whispered, turning the huge cannon so that its display faced the light. "Eight shots, I think it said..." and then his ears dipped in horror. The digital readout had been hastily glanced at after the last time it had proved inadequate, when they had lost Lettice Earnshaw - Chester could have sworn it had read eight. But the digital display had deceived him in the darkness - two shots were all that stood between him and what had claimed his friends.

For a full minute, all he could do was stare at the deceitful readout. And then another piece of equipment began to function, but this was one he fervently hoped was lying to him.

"Tick ... Tick... Tick Tick TickTickTickkkkkk..." the H.R. Giger counter whirred into life, the visual readout showing a pustulent yellow dot closing with horrid velocity towards where he prepared to make his stand, backpack-sized blaster ready and waiting, resolute to the last.

Many-limbed footsteps sounded on the pierced tiles that formed the ceiling above him. The sound stopped, to be replaced by the horridly familiar SNIFFING that he had heard before. Off to his left, a shadow was on the water as a great bulky shape blotted out the light above.

Chester held his breath. The shape circled - and halted, almost directly above him. He could clearly see the ancient corroded tiles above him beginning to bend as an unfamiliar weight was thrown onto their protesting plates.

The sniffing stopped. And slowly, a drop of thick mucilage, like the trail of a giant slug, oozed through the perforations of the tile right above him ! Chester failed to wholly suppress a horrified wincing as the glutinous mass landed on his still-unsullied ear; the movement was tiny, but it was heard by That Which Stalked Above !

Steel-like claws ripped through the corroded ceiling above him like fingers tearing fresh-baked bread ! Metal screamed as an unhuman strength ripped it apart, pallid light plunging down to reveal the ringtail cornered, teeth gritted and prepared at last to sell his life as dearly as he could !

Chester's eyes widened in the light, and his finger pulled the trigger, once, twice, into the looming mass that filled his vision. For an instant he thought that somehow he had driven it away - and his next sight was claw-tipped hands reaching down to rip him out of his shelter like a tasty shellfish from its shell.

"Tag ! Got you !" He was held in the powerful grip of Sabaoth, the Direwolf Demon Centaur who had taken the role of Adversary for this exercise in the abandoned factory "Now we go interrogate - Sabaoth go get Everything out of you, no - yes ?"

"Eh, it's none so bad a place for a Refresher course," Dr. Lettice Earnshaw nodded as Sabaoth dragged her prey off to one of the side chambers to be Investigated in great detail "Playing around t' Dragon's good fer nowt - we all know where to hide, teks summat like this to really test you out."

Deck retrieved Chester's blaster from the icy water revealed by the ripped-up flooring. He unclipped the half-powered stunner, no larger than a flashlight, that had been rigged to take the place of the battery pack. "Dr. Earnshaw - you sure nobody minds us coming down here ? Ancient ruins and things, hasn't been touched since the Plague Wars."

The badger grinned, and shrugged off her rucksack to serve out a most welcome lunch after six hours of strenuous crawling and running through the old Vornelorn complex. "Me Brother's an archaeologist - I've got a map of all they ruins nobody's interested in. An' there's more of 'em than a million archaeologists could look through in a lifetime - there were mebbe two Billion people in t' cities hereabouts." There was an uncomfortable silence, as they looked around the strangely formed chamber. Sentient life on the planet had barely survived the plagues, and only a few dark tales hinted at the desperate years which followed. Some of the bones down here had tooth marks.

From down the corridor came a cheery shout, as Kiko and W2 trotted into view, the mouse and the bat-winged girl freshly cleaned and carrying their packs. Kiko sniffed the chamber, for an aroma she knew well.

"I take it, Sabaoth caught Chester at last ?" Her whiskers twitched, as an ecstatic groan echoed from out of the darkness. "He's pretty good, you know - that's what, seven hours she's been chasing us down here ?"

Lettice grinned, the badger's stripes standing out in the gloom. "Aye, t'lassie's getting some more exercise - it's a good thing we're out on t'planet right now, she's a grand big handful on t'ship in 'er condition."

Just at that moment came a strangled sound, and a long-tailed streak of furred lightning shot past them towards the exit, the shock wave parting the waters behind him in an ebon tsunami that had them all scrambling for higher ground. Just behind him followed Sabaoth, cantering at barely half speed down the passage, eyes wide in a look of feral hunger. Faint sparks of blue light crackled from her claws, and a bright green targeting hologram flickered in the air above her muzzle; the tiger-striped cloths front and back swirled in the slipstream as she almost seemed to fly into the distance.

W2's gaze followed the pursuit and the pursuer as they vanished out of sight. A few seconds later, there was a lightning burst of electrostatic flame, and a triumphant cry of "Darling !" as Sabaoth locked her rangefinder on.

"I suppose," the bat-winged girl said innocently "That's what's called having your sights set on someone."

Outside, an hour's walk away was a row of stone houses which had stood long before the Plagewars, and were still in good enough condition to be repairable by the archaeological teams that were surveying the area.

"It's an ill wind that blows no good," Deck yawned, stretching as he looked down the empty grassy valley, where roads had crumbled into flat grass strips under three hundred of the planet's fierce winters "it's certainly a peaceful place right now."

"Aye, tha's reet there." Lettice paused in her work. Her brother's survey team were all from her dour homeworld of Penn Nine, and had left some supplies cached here for her before closing their excavations for the season. So the clean wind in the sheltered ledge high above the valley was redolent with the smell of her national dish, which she had spent hours badgering the Dragon's cooks to serve just once as a treat.

"Curry-O !" Sabaoth's eager bark came from far downwind, the voice almost puppyish. None knew the centaur's exact age, least of all Sabaoth herself - beyond the blatantly obvious fact that she was physically mature, there was little to go on. Even her teeth renewed themselves every three months, constantly sprouting from an inner row like a shark's. (Kiko currently was re-enacting the ancient legend of the Tooth Mice, as the half-finished necklace she proudly wore indicated). "We do meat Tindaloo, yes-no ?" .

"I think that's what the guilty party is," W2 called back "Have you got Chester with you ? It's supertime."

"Surest thing." As Sabaoth trotted up the steep slope effortlessly, they noticed a slumped form riding astride her: Evidently her hunting had been successful.

Lettice grinned, as she dropped a handful of vitamin tablets into the steaming dish. Sabaoth had better tastes in food than in company. Every female on the entire ship had at some time been pestered by the shameless ringtail, herself included - since Sabaoth had joined their company, for a few days per ship's month, Chester had become the initially willing prey.

"Troff up ! Tha's got to keep thi' strength up, what wi' them batteries tha's got to keep topped up, an' all t'rest of it." Although Direwolf centaur were unknown in AMF space, Lettice had managed to access data on the unintelligent carnivores which formed part of her ward's rootstock - and it had been known for several male direwolves to literally die of exhaustion before a single female's season was over.

Sabaoth nodded seriously, her nostrils twitching at the scent of what was bubbling in the great karai bowls. If there was one thing she liked better than eating a live meal, it was a curried one.

"Missy Lettice," she asked in a small voice "is possible to make live curried things, no ?"

Kiko grinned from by the fireside, where she was turning chapati breads over the flames. "Now, THAT's an original idea ! I know they've already played around with Genetic Depressive Factor to get suicidal foodbeasts that don't mind being eaten - hmmm. I suppose all you'd need to do is modify the glands to produce chilli oil...."

Dr. Earnshaw looked down her snout at the mouse, a ghost of a smile wreathing her striped face. "We'll 'ave to mek do wi' plain Tindaloo for time being. Any takers ?"

An hour later, the Dragon's Away team were settling in for another night. Three of the thick-walled stone houses were currently habitable, nestling under the shelter of a long rock shelf that jutted from the windswept hillside. Deck and Chester were housed in the furthest one, Kiko and Sabaoth next door, while Lettice and W2 had laid out their bedrolls where the fire was currently casting flickering light across them all.

Lettice stretched, and went over to where Deck was standing in the open doorway, looking up at the clear night skies. Three of the moons were shining brightly, their frozen atmospheres adding a fairy-tale frosting to the dark metallic masses that had brought Civilisation back to this system.

"The Dragon's up there somewhere..." Deck's voice was quiet "Sometimes I wonder if we'll ever be able to stop running. When I'm on an empty world like this, I wish I could just walk off into the trees and never come back."

"Aye." Lettice nodded "There's half the Galaxy after us tails, an' all for different reasons." Suddenly, she grinned "Happen it makes life interestin, though but !" And she turned her face back to the warm light of the fire on the hearth.

Sabaoth was currently lying by the fireside, the centaur's limbs tucked underneath her. Her great flanks were being used as a pillow on one side by Chester, and Kiko on the other, as Kiko puzzled through one of the field reports on the recent investigations.

"Interesting stuff, this," Her long black hair gleamed in the firelight "according to this, the old civilisation was pretty strange - they developed their sciences in all sorts of directions nobody else bothered with. Even their writing took ages to decipher."

"Aye ? And how's that ?" Lettice stretched out on her bedroll, watching the oddly assorted trio.

"Well - seems like they started off with writing as special knots on braided fur - most of the species round here have great shaggy winter coats - and later, started weaving rugs as books. Pity is, most of them didn't survive the Plaguewars - they ended up cut up and used as clothing."

"Must have made things difficult when they got round to long-range communications," W2 offered.

Kiko flicked several screens forward to a picture of what looked like an automatic loom, with several reels of coloured yarn. "They reckon this is what they used - every home had one, folk'd sit and watch broadcasts made out of knotted rope."

"Hey ! I've heard of something like that !" Chester had fully recovered his usual Bounce by now "We had it, centuries ago - Cable TV !"

There was a loud groan from the rest of the room, and an outside observer would have heard various loud thuds as thrown objects were skilfully dodged by the lithe ringtail and impacted the walls. Eventually the noise diminished, the firelight faded, as the Dragon's crew took the rare opportunity to enjoy one more night of peace.

"I don't know what you think you're doing", Keisu Cassandra's fur was bristling with indignation "but it looks like you Want to start a war. And I can't protect you this time !"

She stood aboard the Dragon, where it lay docked in one of the great repair bays on Moon Six. Her own speedster was hidden on the far side of the rough-hewn planetoid, protected from prying eyes by the big knitted Stealth Sock. A ten-hour walk over the rough terrain in a space-suit had not improved Keisu's temper.

"I dinna ken' whit ye'r on about," Sharrown blazed back, irritated "we've been keepin oor noses clean - what wi' the ship in dock for a month, d'ye reckon we're going tae be takin' risks ? Onnybody'd think we'd been out robbin yon First Galactic National Bank, the way ye's rantin'."

"Ha ! So - what do you think of THIS, then ?" From her pack, the angry vixen pulled a pocket dataviewer, and thrust it at the wildcat's face. "You look at this, and tell me I'm wrong."

Sharrown bit back an equally angry response, as the scenes of slaughter aboard the hapless cargo vessel were replayed for him. His ears dropped flat on his head, as a demon centaur and a definite Ringtail demonstrated what speed and firepower could do against almost helpless civilian crewmembers.

"Well ?" Keisu's mood was now ice-cold, as she studied his face. "Just how many ex-military vessels are there in this sector, with that combination of crew ? And neither Chester or the quad girl are here, you say - so where are they - and WHAT HAVE THEY DONE ?"

Twelve hours later, a somewhat crowded speedster cut its inertialess drive above the atmosphere of Vornelorn, and began re-entry. As the flames and plasma enveloped its outer screens, inside was an equally charged and heated atmosphere in its own way.

"Protest." The voice of OSCAR came through the ungagged speakers "Strictly against Regulations, to bring in Suspects onto GalSec vessels, unless under official arrest. Valuable security information might be compromised !"

Keisu shot the computer console a sharp glance. OSCAR had unfortunately managed to retrieve his earlier attitudes from an emergency backup; even her usual threats were having little effect today.

"Ooof. Ees barely room enough to swing the, ow'you say, cat, in 'ere." Caresse was crouched on the bed, while Keisu manned the controls and Sharrown looked speculatively at the computer boards "I don't know 'ow you can stand it, all zose weeks in 'ere. I would be going crazy in a day !"

"Yon lassie's got the Vixen instincts tae make a cozy den here, that she has." Sharrown called back. "Tis nae problem, to folks born in a burrow."

The vixen in question said nothing, but her ears dipped dangerously. She and the wildcat never had got along - and such close proximity was not making things any easier.

"Onnyway, that's the valley they're stayin'in," Sharrown pointed at a broad dip in the 3-D map of the area ahead. "We're due to be joining them, so they wilnae be surprised to hear frae us. "

"Humph. I'll be happy if I find out THAT bit's true, for starters." Keisu hunched over the controls, peering out of the small optical window as the clouds appeared far below the plummeting craft "But I'd be surprised if they're pleased to see ME."

It is not only bad manners, but probably dangerous, to try and strangle the pilot of a craft doing Mach Ten, however severe the provocation. So Sharry reached into one of his jacket's thirty pockets, and pulled out another of the ancient console games the Dragon had picked up for trade awhile back. On the screen appeared the familiar figure of the marsupial martial artist, bloodily kicking and tail-swiping its way through a definitely downtown area of Designer Rubble.

It's No' a bad game, is this, Sharry thought with glee as one of the assorted opponents suddenly became an ex-silverfox - but then, Mortal Wombat always was a verra good seller !

Out on the wide, grassy plain that was still criss-crossed with grassy ghosts of roads and buildings, the keen wind was blowing through the fur of the Dragon's crew as they went through some impromptu weapons drill.

"Not bad !" Chester stood, the ringtail's ears shading his eyes as he surveyed the smoking patches of scorched brickwork a hundred metres away "Hey, Simulators are one thing - but we can't do THIS onboard the Dragon !"

Deck focussed on the five-metre fragment of wall. Like the rest of the vanished civilisation, this was rapidly crumbling - and a few more decades of the shattering frosts of Vornelorn Winters would see it gone altogether. The archaeologists had already surveyed this area and moved on to more fruitful sites hidden within the mountain roots - anyway, a few half-melted scars on this would never be noticed.

"Squeeze - gently as your lover's tail.." he breathed, bringing the big pistol online, and snapped off five shots.

Behind him, Chester chuckled softly. "Nice spread ! Three of them even hit the wall - that is, you WERE aiming for it ? And what were those sweet words about tails ?" His huge banded glory gently tickled Deck between the ears.

Deck spun round - and Chester playfully "Beeped" him on the nose. The ringtail's eyes were wide liquid pools of mischievous fun: his mouth was slightly open, in a breathlessly inviting expression. Staring soulfully into Deck's eyes, his pink tongue slowly emerged as he licked his lips.

Deck winced. There was no point in talking to Chester when he was in one of these moods.

"Why don't you go and see if Sabaoth wants your company again, and stop pestering me ?" Canine ears twitched in annoyance, as he turned back towards the target "after all these years, you've found one person in the Cosmos who can't see enough of you."

"Oh, but she's so ... basic !" Chester protested, putting a friendly paw on Deck's shoulder "I might be just Anyone, as far as she's concerned. Really, there's less fun from the kill, than the sheer thrill of the chase - but SHE doesn't see that, not at all."

"Here she comes - you can tell her so yourself." With evident relief, he saw the big centaur happily come trotting round the corner of the hill, Kiko riding side-saddle on top of the load Sabaoth already carried.

Kiko wore a green leather jacket over a T-shirt, and tight leather pants that let her tail swing freely as she dismounted. Sabaoth's only coat was of her own fur - but on her upper half, she had yielded to fashion and worn a tank top.

"Now, That's what I CALL a fashion accessory." Chester patted her on the glacis plate, heedless of the sensitive reactive armour panels. "You should have worn this at the last stop - it'd have come in handy."

Both Deck and Kiko winced at the memory. Their previous planetfall on DamoGran Eleven had seen shore-leave abruptly curtailed, after Chester had taken them to a "Lively little place, where there's always something happening." And he had been right - the Fighting Bars of Damogran are well-known to the jaded holo-film watchers and trainee paramedics of three systems.

Just then, Sabaoth's sensitive ears twitched. "Is shuttlecraft thing landing, way off thatway." She pointed out towards the North "We expecting friends come, no-yes?"

Kiko's own ears swivelled in that direction. "I hear something - but it didn't sound quite like one of ours. Better get firing practice started - we don't want Everyone to see what we've got here."

An hour later, three figures trudged through the knee-high grasses of the foothills, a silent pall of gloom hanging over them.

"This is yon valley here - but it's a bonnie big glen, they could be onnywhere in there, and us no' the wiser." Sharrow pointed at the wide vista opening up ahead "Somewhere, they're oot there."

As if in answer, came three sharp whipcracks of stingingly loud sound ! Keisu threw herself flat in the grass, while Caresse and Sharrow looked down at her curiously. The wildcat's tail twitched derisively.

"Ah dinna ken if they've turned Pirate, like ye say," he observed mildly "but I'll not think they've got to shooting us on sight yet."

Caresse shrugged. "Ees incroyable, zat Chester should be doing zis. Eh, but let us go and meet them - you can stay zere, if you wish." An uncomfortable thought crossed the skunk's mind. As some few of his friends knew, Chester once actually HAD been a pirate. But that had been way back in his mis-spent youth, as opposed to his mis-spent present, or the mis-spent years in between...

Keisu got to her feet, brushed her flight suit down and hurried after them. This sort of thing was NOT supposed to happen to a fully paid-up member of Galactic Security !

"Next magazine - loaded ." Kiko hefted the huge box from the trailer at her feet, and dropped it into the gaping well of Sabaoth's left sponson. Sabaoth nodded, and the green targeting display danced in the air above her muzzle as she prepared to enter single combat with a piece of harmless wall fifteen hundred metres away.

Kiko retreated back - well back - and joined the rest on the grassy hillock where they were sitting down to lunch.

"You can see why they gave up that sort of thing centuries ago." Deck was still tired after dragging the three-hundred kilo ammunition trailer out of the shuttle and across the plain "I mean, you can just plug a laser into the ship's reactor - or recharge a hand blaster at any power point. The logistics of feeding one of those things must have been horrible."

Kiko nodded. She had spent over a month on reverse-engineering one of the original rounds that fitted Sabaoth's sidearm, to produce a design that the ship's fabricators could churn out by the hundred. And right now, Sabaoth needed to fire off several hundred credits' worth of expensive ammunition, just to bring her inbuilt ballistic computer up to date on how the new rounds behaved.

"Aye, there's nobbut a museum that'd buy them," Lettice agreed, passing out the chicken tikka paste sandwiches. Her brother would be interested in these, she thought - pity he's off-world right now.

Sabaoth pulled on the special gloves that linked her electrical supply with the firing solenoids. The great masses of metal strapped to her sides were primitive in design - but brutally elegant in performance. Apart from the firing circuit, they had no electrical parts whatsoever - and the main action had only one moving part. A huge bolt of ceramic-faced steel was right now held under the terrific strain of a half-tonne return spring - in a fraction of a second it would travel forward, scooping up and slamming the round into the confines of the chamber, there to detonate the kilogram of ancient explosive !

"Are you going to test this on full ?" Kiko called out from the hilltop "Because if you are, I'm out of here."

Sabaoth shook her head, the green display blurring for an instant. The cannon were set to semi-recoilless mode, where the bolt was driven back half-way before venting a balancing burst of gas to the rear exhaust. There was also a Full mode - but that was liable to cause major problems for the rest of the neighbourhood.

She sighted, and the forward mark of her holographic display moved out to three metres ahead of her. Unconsciously, her tail began to twitch... she felt the familiar sensation as ear valves closed tight and her hand claws slid out of their sheaths to make electrical contact.....

Just at that moment, by sheer bad luck, someone came round the hillside right behind her.

"It should be right around here ... Whoa !" Keisu's keen ears had tracked the sound to behind the steep mound screened by autumn-leafed scrub. Turning the corner, not ten metres away, she was suddenly looking at the rear bazooka-plates of an armoured centaur - and then she had no time left to say anything.

WHAP ! WHAP ! WHAP ! WHAP ! The planet seemed to hit her in the face, as blast from the cannon ports bowled her off her feet, ears ringing alarm bells. It was like being inside a giant glass bottle being smashed to pieces by Smurfbat bats. The depleted uranium sort.

For an instant she caught a glimpse of what looked like bright yellow dots, hanging in the rapidly increasing distance for less than half a second, vanishing into a huge dustcloud that climbed high into the distant skies. Then things started to get very blurred all round.

"Keisu !" Came a voice she recognised. In a few bounds, Kiko leaped down the hillock, and held the slightly scorched vixen tightly.

The mouse's face seemed to be swimming in and out of focus. But before she passed out, Keisu managed a smile.

"Kiko," she murmured "We have GOT to stop meeting like this..."

"Well, I canna' but say, it serves the daft vixy right," Sharrown commented as a crestfallen Sabaoth carried her still form back towards their camp "I wouldha' shouted, but no, she's got it intae hir heid uir a bunch o' dangerous criminals, she want's tae catch ye in the act. Which ye might say she did."

"Sabaoth say sorry," came a small voice from a large centaur "foxy girl get better, no?"

"Should do, I tell thi' so." Lettice had made a most careful examination of the still figure before declaring her safe to move "lassie's nobbut stunned, like she'd headed a brick. In an hour or so, she'll be right as rain and sore as a reet sore vixen gets." She turned to Ceresse, who was carrying Keisu's equipment. "But tha' tells me she's good evidence to believe we've taken up tha' Black Flag?"

"Ah, ees truly so, malheureusement," the skunk girl shook her head, and offered the dataviewer "Certainment, zere are folk who are out to ruin our good names."

Chester grinned, the ringtail's bright liquid eyes sparkling. "Hey! We've got good names for once - isn't that nice?"

But Kiko scowled at him. "Not funny, Chet. It's a hell of a coincidence - there haven't been many pirates in this sector for years. Then we show up - and two months later, so do our lookalikes."

"Aye. Funny thing is, though -" Sharrown had accessed Keisu's crime file on the way down from orbit - "None of they transports were carrying a' thing major. Only bulk freight - an' a pirate wouldnae be happy tryin' tae fence metals by the tonne. Only thing in common, was they're also carrying special crates frae some "Olicanian Institute", wha'ever that may be, marked as nae commercial value."

Lettice stopped, and froze bolt upright. "Tha' said t' Olicanian? That's t'organisation me brother work for - handles all they artifacts dug up here!"

Sharrown whistled softly. "Do they so? That's a bonnie big Clue, in my books - I'd be sayin' we've to look hard intae this one."

Kiko's ears were pressed flat in concentration as they neared their camp. Ancient artifacts that might possess no commercial value - but from a civilisation that had evolved on radically different lines. She frowned. It could just be, that nobody valued them, since nobody had the slightest idea of what they were meant for.

No, she corrected herself as the stone terraces swung into view. Seven ships wiped out, with commercial cargoes that wouldn't interest most "normal" pirates. Somebody definitely DID know what they were looking for.

Keisu awakened, with her ears still ringing deafeningly, and the rest of her head a pounding mass of pain. Reluctantly opening her eyes, she saw a grey stone room, freshly cut primitive rafters holding a modern plastisheet roof against the weather. There was a moist, earthy smell, that tugged at her heartstrings as an early memory of her home birth-den resurfaced after so many years. Her family had been Traditionalists in many ways.

"Ooooooh," she groaned, clutching at her head. Sitting up, the sudden movement set new currents of sick sensations swilling around her skull. "Where am I?"

"Tha's at our Pirate Hideaway, if tha' wants ta put it like that," came a voice she vaguely knew "we'll make thi' walk the plank when we gets to orbit."

Turning round gingerly, Keisu saw a stern-looking badger dressed in a nondescript brown tweed jacket and skirt, heavy brown boots on her feet. Doctor Earnshaw, her memory prompted her - one of the Dragon's crew.

Beside her, W2 waved cheerfully, the bat-winged girl's black hair sparkling as she dried it with a standard Combat Towel. "Glad to see you!" she offered "You only missed a couple of hours."

"Ak." Keisu struggled to her feet, and stood unsteadily looking at them "where's the rest of the team?"

"They's next door, tryin' ta talk wi' thi' ship's computer, an' gettin' nowhere. Seems it reckons it's got summat you want to know." The badger motioned next door.

Holding onto the wall, Keisu lurched out through the doorway into a wild night of wind and rain. For a minute she just stood there, letting the chill water soak soberingly into her fur, as she listened to the voices in the next room.

"..... but she's here, just resting a bit. You can tell US, if it's just news the rest of the galaxy'll know tomorrow."

"Negative! Must have voiceprint of Agent Cassandra, before Any, repeat, Any, data is divulged."

That's definitely OSCAR on the line, Keisu grinned, shaking her fur dry as vigorously as her headache would permit, and strolled in through the door.

For a second, all motion froze. By the wood fire, Chester and Deck were taking it in turns to argue with her communicator, its Emergency light now flickering red. In one corner the big centaur stood, stirring a bubbling pot from which delicious aromas were wafting forth. Kiko was lovingly grooming her.

Sabaoth turned round, from the deep-fry pan powered by the tiny camping fission reactor, running critical on less than ten grams of Californium. "Sabaoth say hello. Supertime now - you like Fission chips?"

"Ahg. Give me that!" Keisu grabbed the communicator from Chester. "Hello, OSCAR? I'm alive and ... I'll recover eventually. What've you got."

There was a rapid series of bleeps as the Artificial Incompetence program recognised her voice. "Agent Cassandra - it is urgent that you track the Pirates down immediately, repeat immediately!"

Slowly, she let her gaze drift across the room, taking in the pair of projectile-throwing cannon half dismantled and laid out for cleaning in the corner. "I think I might very well have a few clues about that."

OSCAR gave a contemptuous sniff. "Just as well. Another outrage has been reported, entire crew slaughtered by the same team as before, out by the Fifth planet."

She winced. "How long ago?" A fast shuttle could get this crew into orbit in half an hour, and into interception range in a few hours more.

But then her carefully calculated theory fell over crashingly on its rump, as she only dimly heard OSCAR say it. "Twenty-nine minutes ago."

"Well, I can see how you'd suspect us," Kiko stood behind Keisu as the vixen ate, her strong paws massaging the tense muscles beneath the silver fur. "Looks like someone's definitely setting us up."

"Aye, that they are," Sharrow snorted, tucking into the crisply battered fish "An' There's twa wee questions I'd be askin' ye about this latest attack. Was yon ship owned by Celestacorps - and were they carryin' onny Ancient Artifacts aboard?"

"Hold on - OSCAR, did you hear that? I want those answers immediately - so stir your circuits, look at the cargo manifests and the shipping registers. Three of the main lines are Celestacorps fronts."

Within a minute, OSCAR grudgingly returned with the answers: No, and Yes. Which came as no surprise at all.

"Well...." Keisu turned the communicator off, and looked around the room somewhat shamefacedly. "I owe you an apology. And I've seen the Dragon in spacedock with its main engines stripped for service - no way can it be involved in this. So ... you're not suspects. Do you want to be Deputies?"

Eight pairs of eyes turned full on her, the only sound being a slight drip as Sabaoth drooled on the floor.

"Back in Camp at Stalystkov, mealtimes we given Bad People, guards say go chase-chase-eat," the direwolf's voice was a dreamy contemplation. "We go chase again, yes?"

"I don't know who's behind this," Deck was heard to mutter "but right now, I'm glad I'm not them."

The wild winds that blew across the Dragon crew's hideout were inaudible ninety kilometres away, in the big concrete vaults driven deep into the mountainside. After three centuries of deserted silence, these now bustled again with furious activity.

"All Right, then!" Standing on a metal catwalk high above the entrance was a nattily dressed vole, rubbing his hands together gleefully as he watched another bulk carrier loading up for transport to the spacedock. "Loo, be a good lil' rodent an' get me Headquarters on the scrambler, my office, five and a half minutes OK?" His nose twitched in excitement as he scurried down the ringing stairs, past a group of overalled clone workers, and trotted across to the old guardroom whose massively reinforced doors lent a feeling of security to his daily work.

His assistant, a small and scarred tabby, had the communicator in her hand the instant he walked through the door. "Dhaily-san," she bowed "Headquarters for you."

Throwing himself back in the seat and putting his feet on the table, the tiny rodent grinned furiously as the decryption box began to earn its carefully amortised purchase price. "Good day!" his voice dropped into a respectful tone "Dhaily here, on Vornelorn. The next shipment is heading for orbit before dawn, local time - and yes, we managed to cut out some more of the Competition today." He listened to the reply, and whiskers twitched furiously in excitement "Sure thing! The usual team, the usual good results. It's good for business, wouldn't you say? Listen Sir - there's just one little problem - of course, I'm about to solve it, but I reckoned I'd better touch base first." There was an ominous silence on the line, before he continued. "It's that hot Researcher, Zarkov - yes, the one who's been building us the special scanners to find all this alien stuff. Found this base, she did! Well, she's getting uppity about what we're doing." Another pregnant pause, followed by a few guarded words. "No sir, she knows nothing about Operation TwoBird, it's just she thought we were shipping all this weird tech out to some museum or other. And she won't take credits to keep quiet, either. I can? Oh, that'll make things sorta quieter round here. But first, she's got some new gizmo she's been working on for months - "Quantum Distortion Probe" or something like that. We'd like her to test it out first. That's OK with you? Thank you, Sir!"

He slapped the communicator on the desk, and looked around himself, Lord Of All He Surveyed. Which wasn't bad for someone who'd only joined Celestacorps six years ago - and if - no, When this business showed its profits, he would be still Lord Of All He Surveyed. But posted to somewhere with a much wider and nicer view.

"Dhaily-San," the tabby suggested nervously "I have an appointment request by Ms. Zarkov again. Are you on-planet right now?" Her boss was famous for his business sense; like most up-and-rising salarymen at Celestacorps, he made a point of never being extravagant with the truth.

The vole's bright eyes glittered, setting off the jewelled tabs on his natty business suit. This was a sharp suit, he told himself. Sharp suits were good - when this project cashes up, I'm getting a suit SO sharp that you'll need safety gloves to put it on.

"Tell ya what I'm going to do for her. She can come and see me any time she likes. What you'd call Maximising Scarce Resources. We want to make her last days real happy, happy ones!"

The archaeological teams had left Lettice well supplied when they had pulled out. Some of the food had been in well-sealed containers, with years-long shelf lives - and some of it had been of a far less stable nature.

"Eh, nowt like a clear pint," Lettice surveyed the glass in the light of her head-torch. In one of the half-ruined outhouses, a small barrel had been awaiting them for three weeks, its contents slowly ripening. This was not the standard SynthBrau Lager, as found on all "Cosmopolitan" ships, handily doubling as fire extinguisher and auxiliary reaction mass - this was the genuine Penn Nine product.

"Ey up, it's suppin' time," she kicked the door open, her paws full with a tray "barrel's tapped, an' a grand pint too."

"If it's that good, why didn't they take it with them?" Kiko asked cautiously, sniffing the slight foam head.

Lettice's ears rose quizzically. "Mebbe tha' knows a sight more'n me about the ins and outs o' mecha - but knowin' a good ale, that's summat else. This is the real live stuff - if tha' moves the barrel, yeast goes everywhere."

Keisu sipped the distinctly thick brew with interest. Here was something she could Definitely get used to - though by all accounts it needed a more settled life than hers had been since joining GalSec.

"Neat!" Sabaath stuck her muzzle in the glass, and began to slurp noisily.

Kiko winced. "Just one, for you. You Know how it affects you, with your metabolism." Catching Keisu's questioning gaze, she gave a brief burst of a smile. "She's running at about double speed, on all systems. So she can't drink - even on beer, it goes straight to her head; by the time most folk are on their second one, she's already hung over. And a drunken Sabaath isn't something you really want running around."

Chester tentatively put his arm around what would have been her a biped's waist, as she sat on her haunches looking into the fire. "Poor baby," he scratched her behind the ears "I'll let you watch me, we'll see if there's anything to this Passive Drinking idea..."

Keisu sat for a few minutes, watching them - and watching Kiko's face as Sabaath started to give the ringtail a beery tongue-bath.

"I went past your quarters on the Dragon, they were open for cleaning," she whispered in Kiko's pink ear "I could smell both of your scents in there. But now there's Chester with her ...?" The vixen's raised ears framed a question.

Kiko's arm went around her waist. "And she'll be back in a few days. She's really not this keen, most of the time - a good thing, or she'd never get any education done! She's more cyclic than any woman I've ever Heard of - but with that body plan, it's more complex. Best we can figure, her tail end's on an eighteen day cycle, and her fore end on about thirty-four."

"And right now ...?" The vixen relaxed, feeling Kiko's skilful fingers kneading around her tail root.

"Right now? You might say, Chester doesn't have to walk to the far end if he wants to kiss her. Or for her to grab HIM, more likely - she's most definitely Enthusiastic, and with those electrical abilities, you can imagine she's not someone it's too safe to turn down an invitation from."

"And you don't mind?" Keisu frowned. But the slender mouse shook with laughter.

"Mind? With what she puts him through? Now he knows how the rest of us feel. Sabaath's the sweetest pup on record, most days - just right now, she's got other things on her mind." There was a pause. "Of course, a lot of it's Chester's fault - with what he's teaching her. Serve him right - I mean, can you honestly imagine Anyone teaching her about love-bites, with teeth like that? And he KNOWS how she gets carried away.... anyway, Sabaath was very sorry afterwards, and we DID get him to a transfusion in time, so I think he's learned his lesson."

Keisu drained her glass, and looked steadily into the mouse's eyes. "I just wanted to know. I mean, if she'd become very special to you..... you wouldn't be free."

Kiko snuggled up next to her, the mouse's small furred bulk seeming to meld into the vixen's shape in the fire-shadows of the warm room. "Right now, it's nothing but Sisterly," she murmured "next week, I'll wait a few days, give her a Very special shower and such - and it's back to business as usual." Her bunk aboard the Dragon now boasted a row of strong steel bars, which had provoked many wild and ribald speculations amongst the rest of the crew. As a matter of fact, it was a perfectly straightforward safety feature. Sabaath weighed nine times more than Kiko's slender frame - and she did turn over sometimes in her sleep.

"Well... in that case." The vixen felt her spine tingling under the mouse's kneading paws, and her musk glands started to remind her it was Springtime on her internal clock "But - we really should be getting on with the Investigation."

"Oh, I thought that's what we Were doing?" Mouse ears twitched mischievously, as Keisu picked her up and headed for the threshold and the unoccupied room next door.

Sabaath waved farewell merrily. "Neat! Kiko make Foxy girl cubs, yes?"

As Sharrown and Lettice rolled their eyes in despair, and Deck stared blankly into the fire, Keisu paused on the doorstep.

"I'll be putting in for overtime on this - but I'll let you know the results of my inquiry in the morning."

Dawn arrived bright with a rain-washed beauty, the last of the clouds fleeing to reveal two of the bright moons hanging low in the clearing skies.

Sharrown yawned, stretching his lithe frame in the doorway, and going through his morning exercises in the fresh chilly air. Whatever Keisu's biorhythms might think, here it was definitely mid-Autumn.

"Aye, tis a bonny dee, an' no' mistakin' it." He turned round as Keisu and Kiko emerged "So let's us be gettin' doon tae Work!"

Keisu shrugged, and gave a wry smile. Pulling out her communicator, she summoned the sleepless OSCAR, ordering him to fly her speedster the swift hop over the hills to touch down on the ancient roadway two hundred metres down the hill.

"So, where do we start?" Kiko asked, when they had all been officially Deputised and brought on speaking terms with OSCAR and his link to the computer systems of the planet.

"Well now, that'd be askin'". Sharrown drummed his fingers impatiently on the side of the speedster, his bile green and Day-Glo yellow outfit camouflaging him effectively as a patch of virulent industrial waste. "First, we'll hae' us a look at wha' Celestacorp's is admittin' tae, through its three faces here." As Oscar scanned for publicity releases, Sabaoth took off on her pre-breakfast run. Unlike the others, her digestion was primed to expect its meal at the end of a vigorous chase and fight - failing that, a few kilometres of galloping through the dew-wet grass would do nicely.

"Well, well," Kiko murmured, as the first data began to fill the screen. "Seems like they HAVE been playing Lord Bountiful with the research grants. Half the investigations on the planet have taken their credits."

"Aye," Lettice nodded. "An' me brother reckons, they tek a reet good look through what gets dug up, an' all. Mebbe it started off as a tax dodge - I've heard Celestacorp's 'ave blown up planets just for tax reasons - but looks like they found summat they want to get their paws on exclusive-like. Seein' as there's eight ships bin done over wi' Artifacts aboard."

"Next thing, let's us tek' a look at fit they dinnae want tae print in the news reports," Sharrown's ears dipped in concentration. "OSCAR man, how's ye at crackin' security systems?"

There came a brief burst of Artificial Intransigence. As OSCAR pointed out, he was not designed to break the data protection laws but to enforce them.

"Oh? You're meant to have logic circuits somewhere in that black box that'd recycle so nicely," Keisu leaned over the console "Fact - the pirate raids haven't netted half enough readily fenceable goods to finance running a ship. Deduction - Someone is bankrolling them. Fact - Celestacorp's has a known interest in what's being stolen - Deduction?"

There came a dyspeptic-sounding snarl from the speakers. When the screen had cleared, Sharrown's ears rose in delight, and the Artificial Trendiness computer flickered his clothing past both ends of the spectrum in response to his surging heartrate at what was now displayed:

"ICEMAN NINETY_NINE
GALSEC OFFICIAL SECURITY MONITORING PROGRAM
TO BE USED ONLY WITH REGARD TO CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS
HAVE FUN!"

The little wildcat suddenly gave his best impression of a Cheshire cat, as he flexed his knuckles and stared raptly at the interface screen.

"Keisu, I could almos' kiss ye," his tongue poked out of a mouth suddenly dry with excitement. "Since I was a wee kit, I've Always wanted tae play wi' one o' these!"

Most of that day, the Dragon's Away team spent beside Keisu's craft, its hatches open for a more than welcome airing. Celestacorp's official files were vast and complex - and the kind of thing they were looking for, tended to reside on independent microsystems, sealed off from the main Net except by very cautiously encrypted access.

"Sabaoth bored." The direwolf's ears drooped as she stood patiently looking at her friends poring over the screens and the hard copies that OSCAR was patiently printing out. "We go find bad folk, no-yes?"

Kiko turned, and hugged the big centaur affectionately. This was as close as she really wanted to come until next week - there had been a disastrous discovery one morning, two cycles ago, when she had been sharing the direwolf's affections in a rather direct manner. The ship had seen her almost run screaming to the medical bay, after Sabaoth had forgotten to tell her about her previous "cuddle" - Kiko wanted no part of Chester, especially not second-hand.

"We're busy, you know. We'll let you when we want you." And then a mischievous grin lit up the mouse's face. "I tell you what, why don't you give Chester a head start. Say five minutes."

"What!" Chester yelped, as a red dot began to dance on his splendidly fluffed chest fur "we're busy - you can't do this!"

Keisu found the grin infectious. "Chet, for the last ten minutes you've been playing SpaceTime Intruders on that console. If you can't find a better use for your time, I'm sure someone else will." Her teeth showed in a feral smile. "Of course, if I thought you were trifling with the poor girl's affections, it could get risky for you NOT running away..."

With a bound, the athletic figure was sprinting out across the knee-high grass, heading for the distant woods. One thing Sabaoth couldn't do was climb trees.

Eighty kilometres away, it looked like being a fine day too for the advancement of Knowledge. Everyone knew it was a Really, Really bad move to build underground structures into the flank of an occasionally active volcanic range - but the survey teams had checked anyway, with the best scanners technology could provide. There was nothing to be seen there, of course.

"The best just got better." A tall, jet-black haired human stood back as the drilling rigs uncovered the last debris from a huge blast door, dug way past any normal search beam into dense metal-rich basalt, its access ramp sealed by a recent volcanic mudflow. "Ghost ? Alert Dhaly-San, we want full press coverage on this. I'm going in - and if we find what I THINK is behind that door, it won't be just This sector of the galaxy that'll want to hear about it !"

"Yes, mam," A vague white figure seemed to flicker in and out of existence, as the strange entity manifested itself along a handy power line that somewhere linked up with the base. Ghost had been a family servant for a Long time, having been rescued from a bizarre accident with a cyberspace deck and a runaway Warp Engine.

Leggs grinned. At her feet was a large box with a dial and an enclosed glass tube where mysterious electrical arcs danced and flickered. The dial was pointing off its scale, and the pattern of the arcs was something she'd Never seen in real-life before.... her Quantum Effect Distortion Probe was pointing towards something Strange.

"Leggs" Zarkov picked up the box, and strode forward to examine the strangely carved blast door. She had an instinctive grasp of strange technologies: it ran in the family. And hers was a line like few others: due to the nature of many of their experiments, it had wandered spacetime by various unexpected leaps until the family tree resembled nothing more than a family tumbleweed.....

"AllRight !" The enthusiastic tones of Dhaily-san rang in her ear speaker, and she could imagine the little vole bouncing up and down with excitement, rubbing his hairless palms together. "Leggs babe, we've got our own photo folk loadin' and runnin' - tell ya what I'll do, I'll let you be the one to open the place up. Just again, whad'ya reckon's in there for us ?"

Leggs hesitated. "We'd heard the old Vornelornians were on the brink of something totally unexpected, from just the one rug we found buried with one of their scientists. It might be a whole new form of matter - there was something about forcing room-scale chunks of stuff to behave on a quantum scale - you know, it doesn't just "exist" any more, it's more like a probability cloud until you look at it ? " She studied the leaping arcs with care: certainly something was causing huge distortions in there "It's a theory that's got more research students kicked out for heresy than anything - we Might just be about to find Spurium."

"Spurium ! Like the sound of that. Sounds valuable. Sounds the sort of thing we could PATENT." A scratching sound came through the communicator as busily twitching whiskers scraped the handset. "Tell me, tell me about it !"

In the deep-shored tunnel, Legg's probe pointed out the locking circuits in the great osmium door, and the tech team went to work with induction welders.

"Spurium ? It's been a theory for centuries - trouble is, it's Metaphysically Incorrect. The missing mass of the Cosmos is meant to be made out of it - reason you don't see it, is it's never all there at once - a chunk of it together just sort of leaks out through spacetime like water into a sponge. If you actually persuaded a piece to hold together, it'd be indestructible - Literally ! Because it isn't all here at once - to break it, you'd have to simultaneously hit it now, and an hour ago, and this time next week ."

"Love it baby ! You're going to get something you never expected when you signed your contract - oh, this is going to be rich - Everyone's going to be rich." Dhaly-san had just hit on the notion of sneaking the discovery to various Celestacorps researchers, before the news came out - this was going to make and break reputations in a Big way.

An hour later, exploring lights penetrated the gloom of a great arched tunnel, fully fifty metres high, and curving off into the distance.

"Well.. scary." The voice came from one of the tech team, a highly-strung buck with the name "*Jim Jarrick - 5 years for Insubordination*" on his overalls. "Place looks empty - usually there's some bones lying around."

Leggs nodded. She had unearthed many of these redoubts, littered with the scattered remains of their builders. Though the Plaguewars had been foreseen, and the complexes were hermetically sealed, nobody could have predicted just how virulent the final waves would be. Someone had probably been admitted here carrying Stealth Distemper - and had passed it on long before the earliest symptoms could show.

"This might not have been a fighting base," Leggs mused "maybe it was a safe for storing their most sensitive projects. Only a token organic crew."

"I heard that !! " Came the voice in her ear speaker "I'm cancelling my appointments - be right with ya !" Just at that moment, One of the team froze, a tarsier with huge nocturnal eyes.

"One o'clock," she hissed, waving the rest back "Put out your lights - I can see something glowing round the corner..."

All lights went out. But as the more Nocturnally Challenged in the party gradually adjusted, they too could see a faint light, only showing itself.

"Not daylight... too blueish," the tarsier murmured. Before the main lights had been cut, Leggs had seen her tag labelled "*Acatsado - 25 years for refusing a Superior.*"

The only clear light now came from the distantly open door behind, and the eerily dancing plasma display at her feet. By the direction it was leaping, it too wanted to take a look around that corner.

Leggs motioned them forwards. This was the kind of thing that had made her family famous. But not numerous.

"I... don't believe it." The voice came from Jarrick, the deer crouched with the rest in cover of a low ramp, just past where the cavern turned the corner "Alive all these years down here."

"It's Life, Jim, but Not As We Know it," Leggs breathed "Those are Robots - the sort we've called Bolonauts, we've found their outer shells around the place before. But what are they doing ?"

In the distance below them, was a great domed cavern, nearly two hundred metres wide. The blue glow came from a big complex of hooped structures, with vague shapes inside. And lit by the actinic lights, the Bolonauts moved.

Each of them looked more like a sea-shell than any form of Robot Leggs had ever seen. Their main hulls were a flattened, somewhat irregular cone, with insectoid arms held out at the rim or used as walking appendages. Three of them slowly moved about below; the still form of another one sat in the middle of a flat cleared area.

"What are they doing ?" the Tarsier whispered, as they watched intently. The cleared area was about thirty metres across, with a strange grid pattern on the grass that clung to the light of the greenhouses - for that was what everyone suddenly realised they were looking at.

"Don't know... but it seems sort of familiar.." Leggs mused. The patterns on the grass ... twenty-one small marks in a rough grid, and six big, round ones in an almost protective ring part-way around them. A large round excavation had been recently dug, forming a continuation of the strange feature.

In the distance from the door behind them, there came a noise.

"Hey, Leggs, come on out of there !" Came the voice in her earpiece. "I'm seeing all this on the security probes we've sent in - we're going to make the area safe. You can play with those weird 'bots brains later."

"No !" Leggs stood up horrified, and saw what she had dreaded. In the shadow, at least four squads of battlesuited infantry were double-timing it towards her, the great shapes of four 'Starts striding along, fists bulging with heavy anti-armour weapons.

She stood on the ridge, waving frantically at the oncoming troops. "These aren't military droids down there ! They're the last things that've survived from the old Civilisation - the things they Know..."

"Dhaly-San ." She made one last desperate appeal "You CAN'T do this ! Those are the most important things we've found on the whole planet ! The cultural value they've got alone is..."

"Culture Schmulture," came a bored voice "We've got your notes on the gizmo, we'll find what's in there. And we DON'T want natives messing up our legal claim to it."

Powerful arms grabbed Leggs from behind, and the cavern lit up as pulse cannon fire seared into the ancient shapes below with the sickening sound of a white-hot poker stabbed into flesh. As she watched, pinned tight and horrified, one of the flash-visored Celestacorp Security troops carefully swept up her Quantum Distortion probe and began to walk in the direction its indicator pointed.

"Leggs, baby," the voice in her earphones sounded bored "just think of this as the end of a beautiful friendship."

In the bright open air of the deserted valley, Lettice Earnshaw was relaxing in the shelter of Keisu's speedster as she prepared lunch. The heavy-set badger lay back, listening to scraps of conversation drifting round the destabilising fins as Sharrown, Kiko and Keisu kept hard at it on the consoles.

From down the valley, she watched a happy-looking Sabaoth come cantering up. Her patient had become more or less her ward - and one that needed a lot of looking after. For one thing, though she was learning as fast as any normal adolescent, she had missed out on so much that other people took for granted.

"Food ?" The centaur galloped up and stood in eager anticipation, her hands folded modestly over her flat, muscular stomach.

Lettice tossed her a black pudding sandwich. "Have a buttie fer now, till the rest o' us have a break. Where's Chester ?"

Sabaoth's ears fell. "Sabaoth sorry. Sabaoth get carried away you say not to hurt anything, yes ? Couldn't help it."

Lettuce's own greying eyebrows rose in alarm, as she reached for her first-aid kit. "Bloody 'eck ! Tha' means tha's left 'im out there ?"

Suddenly comprehension seemed to dawn on the big quad girl. "Oh ! Chester not hurt. He climb tree - Sabaoth not stop to think, pull tree down, hurt it awful. Then cuddle Chester, make lots stripy-tailed Sabaoths !"

The badger sighed in relief. "Sabaoth, I've told you the facts o'life often enough. Tha' wants a male direwolf for that - and there's none o' those in this part o' space." But she patted her ward cheerfully, as she spread her another sandwich.

"Sounds so Nice." Sabaoth commented as she ate. "Lots of badgers around, no problem for you, no ?"

Lettice halted, and her whiskers drooped. A bleak look came into her deep-set eyes, as she stared into the direwolf's innocent gaze. "Aye. But we're not ringtails, lassie. We pick ours once, and we stay for life. Tha' don't often see badgers my age alone in the spacelanes."

Sabaoth brightened up. "Find you one ! Kiko help, she know lots of girls !"

Lettice didn't like to spoil her ward's good mood. Ten years ago, her system had been raided by a Demon fleet - she had dearly loved her mate and two cubs, and had often wished she too had been at home when the bombs had fallen on Neo-Cleethorps. But over time, she had come to hate the Demon Empire less : it was not for its citizens like Sabaoth and W2 she blamed her loss, but for those who stood and plotted behind them.

Just at that moment, from the far side of the speedster came exclamations of dismay. Lettice dropped her picnic hamper and double-timed it around, to see Sharrown and the rest staring at the screen.

"What's up ?" She demanded "OSCAR's batteries flat or summat ?"

"Nae, Doc - we's tekkin a wee look intae some deep, dark places on their Net, an' somethin' started tae come after us. Disnae look onnythin' like a Security program - in fact, I dinnae ken I've heard onnythin' like...."

The "*Local Integrity Check Failed*" error messages vanished from OSCAR's screen. And then they all instinctively jumped back in shock, as what looked like a silver-grey hologram of a historically costumed human stepped out of the screen, dusting off his immaculate grey clothing.

"I believe we may be of some mutual assistance," Ghost's tones were a flawlessly unaccented tone "my mistress is at some variance with her ex-employers - and I take it, you are in search of some evidence to hold against them ?"

For several seconds there was silence, Ghost staying impassive while a fascinated direwolf poked an enquiring finger through him. And then, Keisu's ears rose in keen interest.

"I'd offer you my hand to shake, if I thought you could touch it," the silver vixen grinned "if you can get inside information the way you got inside OSCAR - name your terms !"

It was a golden handshake that Dhaly-San was contemplating, as they carried the big grey box back into the Celestacorps compound. His troops had torn the ancient redoubt apart until they found where the Quantum Distortion probe was pointing to - this heavy box, a metre across, and its every crevice welded shut with what looked like religious symbols.

"Tell ye what I'm going to do," his sharp snout twitched ecstatically as he waved the wheeled trolley into his office for safe-keeping "I'm going to present this to my bosses Personally. You sure what's in there ?" He elbowed one of the techs, a thin fox who was peering at the dials of a spectrum analyser.

The fox gave a thin whine. "Oh sir. I'm sure what's NOT in there. It's not sending out any radiation on any frequency I can detect - but it's still interfering with all the instruments. The anti-grav sledges won't work within ten metres of it - electronics goes haywire, and I wouldn't be surprised if it bends cutlery as well."

"Luvverly !" Dhaly noted with mild displeasure that his programmable cufflinks were playing up "Get me my personal speeder valeted and supplied, ready to roll. And DON'T forget the instant Daquiris, hey ?" He punched the intercom, which bravely resisted his assaults and refused to cooperate. Rushing out of the room, he called across the loading bay to his Bright Young Executive officer. "Loo ? Time to go home - Execute TidyUp Ten, ya knowhaddimean ?"

As they had discovered on the way back from the ravished bunker, its three centuries of dreaming isolation blasted to smoking ruin in three quarters of an hour, no subspace radio transmission was possible within twenty metres of the Box. But elsewhere in the base, a call went out to a vessel that was not quite as it seemed. As a legally crewed and registered Celestacorps light freighter, this could make landfall in any port in local space with no strings attached, despite its predatory appearance - Celestacorps too had bought and made use of old ex-military vessels.

"We're being called back in." Relief was an unexpected light on the features of Eptraho, the mongoose Head of Marines aboard the Medusa. "They're calling us back like they promised - our mission's done, we're being released !"

There was a burst of cheering aboard the bridge as the news from their planetary chief came over the radio. After a month of training and three months of active service, Celestacorps paid its debts to the penal battalion that had worked so devotedly.

"Full pardon and a rewritten Company record !" A huge white bear in space battledress was visibly weeping "a bonus - Honourable discharge from the Company, even !"

"And that goes for ALL of us." Eptraho suddenly stopped in his tracks. "That means - Ess ninety, too ! I want to tell her that myself."

"I just HAVE to see her face - her laser's going to blow a tube or whatever when she hears it." The icebear slapped his temporary commander on the back, almost driving the breath out of the mongoose's body. "Say - we can just go back home - where does Ess ninety come from ?"

The mongoose's expressive ears twisted reflectively as they made their way down to the armoury. "Our boss planetside has got Connections, with a capital C. When he learned just what he needed to pull this stunt off, he didn't turn a whisker - just picked up the phone, and things started to happen." Eptraho shook his head in wonder at the slender, untraceable chain of Connections that still had brought them a direwolf centaur, all the way from a shock battalion on some Demon Empire frontier world.

"Four months we've been looking at those damn tapes - and now it's all over, and we'll never know what it was all about." The icebear shrugged.

Although Celestacorps had never managed to pin the Amani Dragon down, it had stayed two or three steps behind. Nowadays there were cameras to check, images to scan for in countless public places - and on Damogran Eleven, they had almost caught up. The ringtail Chester and other known crew members had been caught on tape at the spaceport going in and out - and again, in a full half hour tape made routinely by a hidden camera as they discovered what was so special about the planet's Fighting Bars.

Eptraho grinned. "It'll be a relief. I told the boss, she wasn't up to any more fights, but he wouldn't listen. If her armour needs a few bulges, hammer the bulges into it and don't send me the bill, he said." The mongoose stopped, and a thought struck him.

"Hey - I'd better get her back home in time. We want the cubs to be born as Registered Citizens."

The second direwolf centaur in the system also had a happy event to look forward to.

"We go chase !" Sabaath was skilfully reassembling her cannon packs, as the rest of the party packed up and prepared to leave the old stone houses that had been a welcome refuge for a week. Lettice cast her a wry glance.

"Aye, lassie, tha's up against t'local branch of a business that's got more troops than t'rest o' the planet put together." Discouraging Sabaoth was a difficult task at the best of times, but it was something to keep trying for "They've got spacecraft, shuttles, 'Starts, who knows what else. An' more reet 'ard troops than you could shake a stick at."

"Neat." Sabaoth stopped to consider this for a second, and carried on resolute with her assembly. Like the rest of her sisters, she had been bred to do a job, and expected some day to die doing it. She hoped, deep in her heart, that at least some of her sisters scattered to the stars had found friends this worthy of protecting.

"Listen up, everyone," Keisu Cassandra called their attention. "Now, I know you're worried about this rebounding. The Dragon's laid up and pretty helpless, if Celestacorps finds out, it's endgame and no rematch. But - " she grinned "think about THIS one. You're local talent as far as GalSec knows right now, sworn in to uphold the law - we've sufficient evidence to mount an undercover operation that my superiors are going to stand behind if it comes off."

"Aye, an' wit if it disnae ?" Sharrown's tail twitched quizzically.

It was Kiko behind him who gave a discreet cough. "I really don't think we'll be around to worry about it. But even so - we can't afford NOT to go in. There's evidence to scotch this Celestacorps project - no offence intended, Sharry - and we can have a DAMNED good try at getting it, what with our inside help."

There was a murmur of assent. Chester's eyes gleamed. He usually thought in terms of Best-Case Scenarios, and coming at the end of this one was a Celestacorps base piled with the ancient loot of centuries, and enough time to fill his pockets - no, make that the back of a ground transport - before the cavalry in the form of GalSec turned up.

"This is the way to travel." Kiko hung onto Sabaoth's waist, as the big centaur's tireless legs carried them across the wide rolling plains beneath the moon-crowded Vornelorn night skies.

The time was three hours later. There had been a flurry of last-minute packing, a farewell meal and the final draught from Lettice's barrel, and the Dragon's party had split up. Sharrown, Ceresse and Chester had squeezed into Keisu's speedster, which would make two trips and drop them within ten kilometres of the Celestacorps base before returning for the rest. The Dragon itself had been contacted, and a backup team was being assembled as soon as a shuttle could be ready and fuelled to fly.

"Fine night ! Feels lovely, you-me, all world asleep." Sabaoth was too big to fit in the speedster at any time, so she had chosen to stretch her legs and trot the ninety kilometres. Fully armed and armoured, of course.

Kiko shifted her weight on the folded bedroll that served for a side-saddle, and pressed her small snout to Sabaoth's ear. "Isn't this tiring you out ? What with me and all your hardware, you must be something like a tonne, all-up."

"Oh no. Sabaoth used to it. Once ran with sisters four days, Masters see how strong we get. Only one Sister die."

The mouse let her hair flow in the wind, mingling with grey Direwolf as she felt the even double heartbeat and the steady rhythm of four sure feet in the night. She hadn't exactly lied to Keisu about there being no-one Very Special to her - Sabaoth was in some ways like the biggest little sister she would ever know. Partly it was the fact that Sabaoth was SO trusting - she simply never considered the notion that anything her friends might do would ever hurt her.

Kiko felt her heart melting, as she gripped her great centaur tighter, and the night wind embraced them both, cantering through the dark plains and the shining moonlight. The assault was planned to be at dawn - Nobody attacked at dawn nowadays, it was just TOO hackneyed - but until then, there were six precious hours of life to share together.

Moons rose and winds blew, and the great footsteps faded Westwards across the sleeping plains.

Right now, Leggs Zarkov was not in the best of moods. Being captured and held prisoner in one of the complexes she had discovered herself was a distinctly cruel irony - especially at the moment her greatest discovery had been made. And stolen.

"You actually saw what they'd taken out of the site ?" She asked her cellmate for the third time. This cell was barely big enough to fit one - at least, it was a tarsier and not a bear that had been flung in on top of her an hour later.

Acatsado nodded. "Big square box, with complex tracery, like circuits all over it." Tarsier eyes expanded still further in curiosity "So what's so special ? We've been digging up cultural stuff like that all year."

The Zarkov family's latest daughter folded her muscular legs as she sat - it was as a kickboxer that she had made her name, before starting her pursuit of the Grail quest which looked like ending So soon and So unhappily. "Sounds like a Schroedinger Box to me. They use them nowadays for quantum effect studies - they can hold the sort of material that'd probably escape from any force field ever built."

An eyebrow raised quizzically.

Leggs sighed. "Look. The Universe is made of three sorts of matter, right ? Matter, Anti-matter and the other stuff."

"What's the other stuff ?"

"Don't matter. Anyway, if this IS what I THINK we've found - it's the material that everyone's been looking for since monorails were a thing of the future - the missing mass of the Universe ."

"EEEEK !" Acatsado's ears went rigid in shock. "What, in that box ?"

Letice grimaced. "That's what Schrodinger Boxes are for. As long as nobody opens the lid, it's only a probability if there's anything at all in there - but if you open it up, and there really IS - well, can you spell "space-time collapse", kiddies ?"

Acatsado shuddered. If she'd thought the laws of Celestacorps were harsh, it looked like the Laws of Physics were going to be a WHOLE lot tougher...

"All Right !" Dhaly-San slung his FiloDodge in through the open hatch of the slick speedster. "You ! Careful with the suits there - I've got Real People to talk to at Headquarters."

The trim, slick speedster sat on its anti-gravs at the mouth of the main complex, the great doors still closed ahead. Thirty metres long, this was still a one-person ship - the carefully removed evidence of the back seat notwithstanding. Dhaly-san's personal speedster sat fuelled, supplied and ready to roll, as soon as he was sure of the possible loose ends having been taken care of on this worthless desert of a world.

"Sirs - " the vole leaned back in his pilot's seat, communicator in hand "I'm bring in this one personally. Yes, it looks like Spurium - we mass-produce this, we've got armour you could bounce off a neutron star and it wouldn't even dent ! Of course, now we won't need the services of the Medusa, I'm arranging the payoff. Usual procedure, right. And that'll wrap up this Vornelorn operation neat as can be. Oh, Thank You, Sirs ! Just doing my job."

Dhaly-San grinned broadly as he consulted his wrist chronometer. It had been his spark of brilliance to suggest that, needing a raiding vessel to secure all of the valuable Vornelornian artifacts for Celestacorps' laboratories, they give it the identity of the Amani Dragon, a vessel that had caused Celestacorps much grief already.

The stubby rodent bounced up and down in glee. Even his bosses had hailed it a work of genius - the Dragon's crew were not going to be believed by Anybody. So by finding a lookalike crew of the Medusa which matched the most identifiable members of the Dragon, he had killed two birds with one stone. Galactic Security knew exactly where to look - and in the event the Dragon was tracked down and not wholly destroyed, he was cleared that way too.

Just assuming that the Real pirate vessel he had synthesised, wasn't going to be there to complicate things. But then - he was going to be paying them off, in just an hour from now.....

Outside, the stars faded as the first light of dawn grew in the Eastern skies.

It was a boring time of night, just when you were at you lowest ebb. Despite having been on this watch for three weeks, Sergeant Rothals had never got entirely used to thinking of Five A.M as Quality Time.

Standing by the great iridium gates, the scarred wolverine scratched his back with his tailtip, sliding it up beneath the armoured jacket that Celestacorps issued to its expensive assets. This place was being wound down, he told himself as he faced another cold dawn on this desolate world - about time too ! Nothing would make HIM volunteer to serve on a world like this one.

Just then, his communicator buzzed. Relieved to have something to at least gripe about, he snatched the handset up.

"Yeah ? Rothals here, main gate. Wotya got for me, den ?"

There was a pause, and he automatically stiffened as the voice of The Boss set his heart racing in classic fight-or-flight mode.

"Rothals ? Hey, glad to see someone's up.." He could almost imagine the vole's whiskers vibrating like a taut steel cable an instant clear of fatal rupture "I've got a Special party, from Headquarters, coming right in on foot. Ya see they're let in right Now, no cameras no tapes, send them straight in to me. Got that ? Big party, led by some badger chick."

"SIR !" Rothals saluted, noticing that the light on the entry camera turned itself off a second later. Typical Boss, he grimaced, double-timing it towards the entrance. When he says Nobody's to see them come in but me, he means NOBODY. Two swipes with his cardkey and a six-digit number was tapped in, and the big doors began to open.

"Huh. " He muttered under his breath, as the armed party stepped inside. "Badgers ? Badgers ? We don't need no steenking Badgers..."

Just as he turned his back to close the door, a paw that felt heavy as neutronium descended on his shoulder. Dragging him round, its owner turned out to be a huge and irate-looking direwolf - as he remembered, much too late, just how good their hearing was reputed to be.

"Badger lady's my friend," the voice resembled a revving tank engine, as he stared into eyes that were dancing pools of actinic fire. "She my friend - you, TOAST !"

From down the corridor, an observant guard might have seen the blue-white flash that followed, or the heavy thud of a body falling. But that would have been hardly time to draw a weapon - for three seconds later, Sabaoth had covered fifty metres and was picking up speed towards the inner doors.

"Sabaoth fix !" The great hatch was beginning to close automatically, as independent circuits registered that the outer door was ajar. Skidding to a halt, she sank her razor-edged claws through the muscular bunch of cables - with another sizzling display, the hermetic seals ground to a halt, still two metres from closing.

Behind her, Chester and Deck double-timed it down the corridor, the rest following with weapons drawn. Deck looked up at the security monitors - but those curious eyes were closed in the electronic equivalent of a migraine headache, courtesy of Ghost.

"That's what I CALL having friends in high places." Chester marvelled, as he noted the spastic twitching of an automatic defence blaster on the ceiling "wonder if he'd be interested in a little trip to the Electro-Roulette bars sometime...?"

Sabaoth had halted just inside the main doors, her targeting screen turned down to be almost invisible in the gloom of nightshift. She was panting for breath - not that the running in armour had meant anything to her, but the battery drain was the sort of strain she really FELT.

"Now then, lassie," Sharrown whispered as he sprinted up, wishing for once that his legs were longer "have ye the plan Ghost gave ye?"

The big centaur nodded, and braced her four legs to stabilise the view. And her targeting display altered as she concentrated, recalling the map of the site that Ghost had downloaded from Leggs Zarkov's original plans. One of the things that Kiko had helped her explore was this unexpected ability - though her weapons sights had effectively hard-wired displays, the laser glands could be put to many other uses, given sufficient practice.

"All richt, then," Sharrown reached up to point at the far corner "Ghost tells us this is a cargo route gangin' tae where they've got a lockup - and I cannae hear onny heavy cargo bein' lifted. "

Deck nodded. "As long as Ghost's haunting their security system, the only thing we've got to avoid are live guards. And I don't think they'll be wandering around the heart of a place THIS tough. No point."

Kiko was peering under Deck's arm, looking into the great arch-roofed cavern. "All quiet in there. Let's go."

Like a stealthy tide, the six intruders flowed across the shadowy chamber, heading towards the tyre-marked freight passage. Behind Sabaoth came Deck and Chester - Keisu, Sharrown and Caresse brought up the rear, their blasters out and eyes alert for the slightest twitch of unexpected movement. W2 and Lettice kept watch in the rocks, outside, while the Dragon's backup team came around the hill on foot. But within the ancient complex, the infiltrators seeped through unchallenged - and vanished unseen into the deep places of the world.

"This is one of those days when I think I should have listened to my mother and become a warpdrive engineer instead."

Leggs would have been pacing up and down, had there been room to do it. She stared ashen-faced at Acatsado, who was crouched in the far corner mentally reviewing the list of people she wished she could have said goodbye to.

"It's not your fault," the tarsier offered what support she could "Celestacorps don't always do this - they're usually honest, if it suits them."

"Ahg. I should have known ! And it IS my fault - they killed those Bolonauts - the last living creatures from the old civilisation, while I watched !"

Tarsier eyes widened in curiosity, her impending execution for the moment. "But those were only robots. You can just take a scan of their data banks, can't you?"

A strangled sigh. "Robots ? Don't you know how plain Different that technology was ? Oh, they were built, all right - but not out of wires and nanovalue circuits. Their systems were grown from a fungal culture - the threads acted as nerve cells - those robots were Alive. Nobody's going to read ANYTHING off them now"

The long-haired human woman started rocking back and forwards as she sat, her knees pulled tight against her chest. "I've had time to think it all out now. There were six of them, guarding and maintaining the base, with about a score of people. And then the Plague got in here - it didn't affect fungal systems, but everyone else started dying. Maybe there were one or two who lasted awhile longer - maybe they told the Bolonauts what to do - to keep their home safe, keep the hydroponics going, until help arrived. And then the last ones died. Six Bolonauts, they kept faithful, following their orders, for three hundred long years, shut away down in the darkness."

The tarsier blenched, and put a comforting paw on Leggs' shoulder. "Robots ARE faithful. That's why they still have them, with billions of cheap people in the galaxy."

But the Zarkov family's heir shook her head, and tears were in her eyes. "That's not all. I know what they were doing down there. You saw those patterns in the grass, in the light of the greenhouse ? Those are graves, Acatsado, where they buried their owners - and Bolonauts don't need to grow flowers. They've been tending and guarding that spot since the Plaguewars. We just missed seeing the fourth one - you don't think those were living, intelligent beings ? Well - that hole was where they were just about to bury their comrade, to keep serving their owners forever !"

Just then there came a noise - as they both looked up, the scent of several unfamiliar people wafted under the doorway.

"Pssst," came an equally unfamiliar voice "stand clear of the doors - we're getting you out of here !"

Outside the row of cells, Sharrown was just pulling a kilo of termite paste from out of his pack, when the monitor watching the door gave a sudden bleep.

Everyone spun round, blasters ready to disintegrate the peeking eye - but it was Ghost's grey image that the screen revealed.

"Please desist from that line of attack," the smooth voice was imperturbable, though the screen wavered nervously "I regret that I cannot control the fire alarm system. It is a separate, unintelligent electrical network - and all its nodes are fail-safe. Destroying or blocking the unit in this room will unavoidably set it off."

Sharrown groaned. "Yon door's some sort o'ceramic ! We'll need all day to be cuttin' it wi' the tools we've got !"

Kiko was examining the door closely. She ran a gloved paw along one edge, and her ears twisted quizzically.

"Look. Along here - the door's chipped. Just so slightly - it's harder than flint, but I'm guessing it's lost some strength over the years. Some ceramics that look like this "revert", with exposure to the air." She turned to Sabaoth, who was measuring it with her sighting laser. "Yes - you can get through that, with those cannon."

"Hoy !" came a voice from inside. By angling a pocket mirror, Leggs had been able to scan through the narrow gap to see who was outside. "Don't point those things at us - there's nowhere to hide ! This room's about the size of a big shower cubicle - it'd kill us as sure as anything Celestacorps has got planned. Besides - if that's what I THINK it is, you won't need to worry about setting the alarm off. The noise'll wake the doziest guard in the whole complex."

But Kiko's nose twitched in amusement. "Trust me. I've got an idea."

"Aye, well -" Sharrown mused, three minutes later. "Tis nae bad idea - let's jist be hopin yon auld door's feelin' its years today. An' Kiko, ye can keep yon tool when it's done wi' - I dinnae think I'll be usin' it again."

Sabaoth had unloaded her huge cannon and stacked the big, half-litre can sized rounds out of the way against the far wall. Any blasters or explosives used here would be certain to set the alarms off - but there was more than one way of concentrating energy.

"Right. Now - aim the barrel right there, against the catch." Kiko pointed to the point half-way up the edge of the door. "These sorts of materials get microfractures around the stress points - and we'll need all the help we can get. Just wait a second - have to position this just right - try it now."

Sabaoth pressed her right-hand cannon where her friend indicated. Sharp claws touched the door, and sparkled with a brief burst of electrostatic energy, as she tried to gage any weak spots in the ancient slab.

"Standing back, please." The tough, silvery third eyelid turned her gaze into a balefully slitted stare as she concentrated - her other claw was gloved and connected to the firing solenoid - as she felt everyone else move out of the way, she gave that special nervous twitch to activate it....

CRACK !! It was not the thump of high explosive, but steel on brittle ceramic that rang stingingly through the room. Kiko had taken one of Sharrown's biggest wrenches apart to leave a plain rod of chrome-vanadium steel, that fitted into the breech of the ancient weapon, engraved with the arcane symbol "PAK 45". Sabaoth had fired without a round in the breech, and the six hundred kilo return spring had smashed the rod into its target !

Kiko retrieved the slightly blunted piece of alloy from the floor, and critically scanned the door. "Just a mark - but it's thick enough to take a lot of battering before it goes. Keep trying !"

Swinging her arm back as far as it would reach, Sabaoth grasped the cocking lever and heaved, the lithe muscles standing out on her arms and chest with the strain. Normally she only needed to do this after stripping and reassembling the weapon - each round fired drove the spring back ready for next time. "Sabaoth ready."

Nine times the great bolt crashed forwards - nine times Kiko scrutinised the door, while the rest of the team stood watch in the corridor, hoping the sound would pass unnoticed. Then came a delighted cry from inside the cell.

"It's flaking off - a chunk the size of a saucer just spalled away !" came a voice strange to them, as Acatsado called out in excitement.

"Thought so," Kiko's whiskers twitched in triumph. "Come on, Sabaoth - another few goes and we're in."

"Sabaoth do it." But her voice was weary - muscles ached like fire after pulling that load repeatedly. She pressed the muzzle against the door one more time and fired - but that was all it needed.

There was a muted cheer all round as a semi-circular chunk of black ceramic fractured away from round the lock, and Sabaoth pushed the heavy door in.

"Well now, and is it the Lady Zarkov hersel', then ?" Sharrown gave a brief bow as the muscular human bounded out of the cell. "Tis an honour to meet wi' one o' your clan - an' tae help a lady in distress in the bargain."

Leggs grimaced, blinking in the sudden light. She spotted Ghost's image waving regally on the monitor, and her face was a strange mix of relief and concern.

"I'll thank you all later," her voice was urgent "but right now, we've got to get out of here - and we've GOT to stop Dhaly-San getting away with the Box !"

On the way out, the Dragon's crew listened to the story in breathless bursts as they crept through deserted passageways. Checking his watch, Sharrown noticed in amazement that they had only been in the complex fifteen minutes - but even that was far too long for comfort.

"Request immediate speed, "Ghost's image flashed up on the monitor as they neared the inner doors. "I regret that I cannot hold the security system down for many more minutes. They have not registered the landing of the shuttle from the Dragon - but there is another shuttle now descending - and this is expected. I must restore surveillance functions for it to land."

"Damn !" Kiko followed up with a sizzling display in at least three languages "Keisu, just HOW long will it take for you to call the cavalry ?"

The vixen looked worried. "Celestacorp's won't risk a shootout with GalSec, once they're officially involved - but unless I can bring back this evidence to nail them -" she patted the datacam at her belt "ah - we'd better get running."

The prospect of fleeing across the planet pursued by the small army Leggs had described, was not a pleasant one. The nearest "refuge" was the Dragon's shuttle - but that would be too small to get them all off-world in one go. And besides - where would it take them? Definitely not to their ship, still half-stripped and vulnerable, able neither to fight or run.

"Sae far sae good," Sharrown muttered, as they passed the slumped figure of the guard at the main gate. Rothals would slumber for at least another half hour, and would be in no fit state to give a good account for a long time afterwards.

"Attention!" Ghost's voice came from the guardroom speaker "The main aircraft hatch is being opened, six hundred metres away. This is a routine opening - no evidence of a security alert. But recommend you reach a place of concealment within eight minutes. Shuttlecraft now in atmospheric flight, preparing final approach."

Leggs blew her non-corporeal retainer a kiss. Ghost could do perfect imitations of any voice of image on a computer system - he had impersonated Dhaly-San to get this door open in the first place - but sadly there was no material way of rewarding him. On the other hand, he had no physical needs but an electrical supply to sustain his electropasmic form, so his wants were few. "Keep them baffled till we're way over the horizon, eh?"

Deck and Chester looked at each other, and then at the rest of the group.

"If we stay here.." Deck said slowly "And if Ghost can keep the sensors senseless for another ten minutes - they'll have no chance of seeing us from outside. And they'll be busy with the shuttle after it comes in."

"Honestly!" Chester's tail twitched, the ringtail's ears dipping in disgust "haven't you ever listened to all my good advice, Deck? Never, NEVER, hang around! We've got away with it so far, but the more ground we can cover, the better. If they don't know who to chase, we'd better not hang around and remind them."

In the great curved chamber that housed most of Celestacorp's heavy equipment on this planet, Dhaly-San was hopping mad.

"Incompetents! Listen, I TOLD the Medusa crew to stay in orbit and send the shuttle down on auto - it's coming in full of crew!"

His weasel lieutenant shrugged. "No big deal, boss - we'll be paying them off here anyway - they may as well get their bonus planetside as anywhere. And then we won't have to fly them off-system - their contracts say after we make payoff, goodbye and no come-backs."

The vole's sharp teeth were bared in a feral grin; his pointed snout twitched convulsively. "Sharp point there, Loo, very sharp! Shame about the shuttle, though - those things cost money. Move my speedster up to the launch pad - I want to make part of the payoff personally."

Loo shrugged, and went to check that the speedster was warmed up and ready to launch. If there was one thing he'd learned from a year with Dhaly-San, it was NEVER to question his sudden changes of plan. His boss was the sort who could go in a revolving door behind you and come out first.

Two minutes later, the Dragon's team had quietly moved away from the Celestacorp's compound and into the tumbled rocks on the hillside.

"C'est bon," Caresse panted, holstering her laser pistol. "Ees all quiet on ze front tonight - zey 'ave not seen us."

Leggs nodded. "That's the good thing about having these sorts of secret bases. You've only got one main door to guard, and one cargo door. So you guard those - you don't have to worry about securing the area for thousands of metres around. Which is good for us, right now."

Suddenly there was a glow of light from behind them. Turning, they saw the widening slot of a huge hangar door yawn in what had been a featureless cliff face, bright industrial lights illuminating the pre-dawn landscape far out onto the plains.

Chester chuckled. "Secret? You call that SECRET?"

Leggs blanched, her furless skin noticeably turning paler in the dim light. "I don't understand... they've always had spotter aircraft flying around with perception jammers every time that's been open...now it's almost as if.."

"Aye, lassie," Sharrown growled "almost as if they dinnae care any more. An I'm wonderin' fit that's meanin'."

The muted growl of atmospheric turbines came to their ears as they retreated along the hillside. The hangar door was dug into a great hollow of the hills, enclosed by two rocky spurs that opened into the wider, gentler slopes of the river valley to the East. As they turned to look back, they caught a glimpse of a sleek, fashionable space-yacht moving out on its anti-gravs.

"It's Dhaly-San's personal star-limo!" Leggs' voice was a strangled cry "He's going - and he's going NOW!"

The acoustics of the hollow were good enough to hear the screaming Security klaxons that resounded deep inside the base, just as the speedster cleared the threshold.

"Dhaly-San's definitely going," Acatsado pointed to the smooth shape below "and I think someone else just found out we're gone. Now what are we going to do?"

Kiko snatched the tarsier up; she was her own modest size, but with far less muscle mass. "You get on Sabaoth, and we're all going to RUN - they'll be coming after us!"

Sitting in the reclining seat of his Maxedes Space-Bendz StellaCruiser, Dhaly-San watched as the autopilot laid in a course for orbit. In an hour he would have made rendezvous with a fast Celestacorps carrier, and in a few weeks he would be in Headquarters itself, hopefully with his Field days behind him for good. But first, there was a little matter of tidying things up.

"Operation Twobird, Goodbye." With the deepest secret of the planet's old technology now stored in the boot, and the Vornelorn Project completed, it was time to pay off the people involved. The space piracy would be laid at the Amani Dragon's door for evermore, and nobody would ever connect Celestacorps with anything. Of course, if any of the Medusa's crew talked - but no, he was one hundred percent sure they never would.

"After all, just think of what I've done for them," he murmured "broken them out of prison camps, a nice ship to fly, their pick of the loot - yes, when I just think what that ship's got on board it - you can't call me mean. Some investments are well worth making."

He picked up the communicator handset, and dialed a number that didn't appear in his pocketbook: Executive Tidyup Ten was the order given. And far above in orbit, a certain device onboard the Medusa heard the phone start to ring.

"Sharry - we've not got far to go now," Kiko noticed the feline had stopped where the trail ran between two towering rocks. "Come on - we can't hang around here !"

"Ye go on, Kiko - I'm no' tired yet." Despite the strain, the little wildcat's grin was infectious. "Jist layin' a little surprise for a'budy trailin' us. Tis traditional in my clan ta use the claymore."

"I WONDERED what you were hauling in that bag." Kiko stood well clear as he pointed the sensor beams across the track, and set the mines up in the cover of an expendable bush. It was a good thing this part of the planet was almost deserted - nobody except Celestacorps would be running down this track until after the little sensor batteries ran out in an hour's time.

"No' that I'm thinkin' they're goin' tae come scoutin' on foot, now wi' the kit they've got," Sharrown grimaced as he armed the mines and cautiously retreated "But I cannae but feel happier knowin' there's one road they'll not tek in a hurry."

"Right " Kiko urged him on. The trail was heavily overgrown with scrub and the collapse of embankments over the years, but still led straight away downhill towards where the Dragon's shuttle was parked. "At least we'll be with our backup soon ... just hope they've not got any search aircraft or starts in the area - Leggs said they'd have to bring all that in from halfway across the continent." All the same, she looked up worriedly into the rapidly paling skies. And gasped in terror, her finger pointing low down on the Southwards horizon.

Far past the dawn-lit cirrus clouds, a new star was born ! For a second it outshone all the others, spreading from a brilliant spark of actinic blue-white, to a visible disc of white, orange and reds, its apparent diameter swelling to the size of the smallest moon before fading in a dull-red glow of angry swirling filaments.

For almost a minute, heedless of the imminent pursuit, the crew of the Dragon stared out to where it had been. Sabaath's ears flicked nervously, as she scented as well as saw the shocked disbelief on her friends' faces.

"What was pretty light ?" She asked plaintively "Lots and lots of kilometres away. Why so worried ?"

Lettrice Earnshaw was first to find her voice. "Tha's a lucky lass, not to have seen one o' they old-fashioned Atomic Explosions. That were out in space - but it means someone's prepared to do some killin' in a Big way."

Dhaly-San felt the pressure build as the speedster lifted off, its artificial gravity keeping the felt acceleration down to a comfortable level. His paw moved away from the communicator panel with its dial-a-self-destruct-device; that was one problem down, and one to go before he shook the dust of this project off his manicured tail for good.

In half a minute, his speedster was hovering at two kilometres above the base, still dark in long mountain shadows despite the advancing dawn. But it was not the visual display which fascinated him right now.

Still thirty kilometres out, stealth radar spotted the late Medusa's shuttlecraft making its approach run. With a cheerful corporate anthem playing over the stereo system, he opened another panel and flicked two red fingerprint-coded switches.

"Neat as.... Neat." Whiskers twitched in glee as missiles awoke from electronic slumber and began to focus on their prey. His paw quivered ecstatically on the final button - her was well within range, but this, he wanted to SEE.

After all, rank DID still have a few privileges.

"We've lost contact with the Medusa !" The wolf pilot of the Medusa's Egg shouted above the turbulence, as the old shuttlecraft plunged through the cloud layer "Half the unscreened instruments went dead - I seen it before in the War, someone lit a nuke or an animat behind us !"

Epraho gave a curt nod, scanning for himself the rapidly expanding cloud of plasma that the rear scanner was displaying. Shuttles didn't normally carry such equipment, but he had given standing orders to loot "useful" equipment from the ships they had raided. Normal pirates would have done it - like him, they were constantly seeking that crucial edge against an unfriendly cosmos.

Suddenly the mongoose's tail felt very cold indeed. They had not been ordered to come down here in the shuttle. Orders had stated that they would be paid off today, and released from Celestacorp service - so half a dozen of his marines had piled onto the downbound shuttle, wanting to breathe fresh air again and not caring overmuch where they signed their release papers. Right now, they were supposed to be on board the Medusa.

"Wal !" He almost screamed at the pilot "Evasive action - Cee-Corps are going to kill us !"

The shuttle went into a tight, high- G turn as the wolf put fifteen years of fighter experience and millions of years of evolved reflexes into ultimate overdrive. "Hang on," he grunted, switching in a row of devices which were unofficially wired onto the standard console "Going to be tight."

Instantly shining on a Threat Warning board that had once graced a Puffin fighter, two red dots began to leap towards them. As the pilot started hitting buttons on the jammers, Epraho punched the intercom to the cabin behind, as he sealed the flameproof bulkhead from the cockpit.

"Ess-ninety, Yantos, Jurgen, all of you." he found his voice was surprisingly even "Get into space-armour NOW, grab weapons, secure for crash - Celestacorp is about to cancel our contracts !"

It was Acatsado who first saw it from the ground - clinging onto Sabaoth's top armour, she was not having to look where her feet were going on the overgrown trail.

"Look ! Seven o'clock, high !" She called out, using the old planetsider's terms. Eyes turned to follow her outstretched paw - and widened in alarm as two streaks of smokeless fire raced across the sky from far above the base.

"I don't see where - oh, oh, it's got NO chance." Chester's own keen eyes were the first to spot their target, the old shuttlecraft swinging down in a falling-leaf manoeuvre through the clouds. "Those look like new commercial TrakHound Fives, I wouldn't go against those in a Puffin, let alone a.." His voice tightened as he awaited the inevitable fireball.

Suddenly, six tense throats gave a shout. "Missed !" Leggs screamed, her eyes aglow as the flame trails suddenly diverged and climbed towards the dawn-lit moons "He has to have a Jammer onboard !"

"Aye, an' he's no' bad a pilot, that mon," Sharrown whispered "Throwin' a heap o' cargo haulin' junk about the skies like that." Just as the second pair of missiles began to sprint, and the third pair on their tails, the shuttle began a spiralling dive that would take it almost overhead.

All eyes watched its progress. The drama was being acted out above the main valley floor; the wide grassy plain was bare of most cover, except where the tumbled ridges ran down to meet it. Just behind one of those ridges, was the Dragon's shuttle.

Kiko froze in horror. "If he goes over that way, and Dhaly-San follows - he'll see us for certain ! Even with the engines shut down, if he's got any sort of scanner..."

"Eeeek." Acatsado pointed out the plummeting shuttle - "he's heading that way - coming in..."

With a great swoop, the shuttle passed overhead, so close they could read "Medusa's Egg" stencilled on its battered flank. Not two thousand metres away, it pulled up at hovering altitude, and slowly turned to face the incoming missiles.

Just then, they discovered how resourceful the crew of the Medusa's Egg really were. Brilliant blue-white streaks seemed to corkscrew out of the suddenly opened cargo hatch, twisting across the skies. One, two - three - three ear-pounding explosions as charged-particle beams volatilised the smart warheads in a staggering display of elemental power !

But Dhaly-San had invested wisely. The fourth missile shied away, and vanished behind the ridge. As its thunder died away, the Dragon's crew looked aghast at each other.

"It'll be back." Chester's voice was confident "Just when you think you're safe - sometimes, they come back."

Now the shuttle was almost landed, its skids extended and its atmospheric engines winding down. Riding high in the skies above it was the slick speedster, its hatches closed tight. Evidently, six missiles was the maximum the tax-free budget for private transport would allow.

Fire crackled again as the shuttle's jury-rigged beam lashed out - clawed into the skies, and spent its fury on what was suddenly a glowing shell of energy, five metres from its hull !

"So they HAVE done it at last," Kiko murmured, shading her eyes against the blinding storm "A true force-field that'll work in atmosphere, light enough to fly - I bet THAT cost a few credits."

Leggs Zarkov nodded. "It's one of Celestacorp's own Ray-Bans. Full coverage - even the air and jet intakes in the field are scroll-sectioned - no direct line of sight, no chance of angling a beam in. Now you see the sort of technology they're working with already - if they manage to make Spurious, there'll be no stopping them."

"Aye, but we canna... Heids doon, folk ! - here it comes !" Sharrown dived at Cresse, who was nearest, felling her in a tackle as a white streak blurred across the skies. Only a chance glimpse gave them warning of the returning missile as it completed its fifty-kilometre radius turn and skimmed over the ridge on an unjamable ballistic course straight onto its target !

There was a deafening blast of sound. Flame rose where the shuttle had been - but as they peered over the rocks, they saw that the craft was almost intact - crumpled and twisted on the rocks, but not blasted into fine debris. A great crater marked where the missile had misjudged its guesswork approach enough to miss - though close enough to break the Medusa's egg wide open.

There was a stunned silence in the rocks. They had seen the nuclear flash in the skies; they knew that this was only a tithe of the day's deaths - but this was right before their eyes. And that made it personal.

Maybe eleven kilometres off, Dhaly-San's yacht began to move away.

"Keisu..." Kiko's voice was a hoarse growl "can you Guarantee that GalSec are going to get him ?"

The vixen winced. "That orbital blast will have screwed up communications. Right now, I can't even guarantee I can get through to them, let alone have them intercept ! And I've nothing aboard my ship that'll get through a Ray-Ban field."

Kiko nodded. "You said that anti-gravs don't work near the Box - must be an air-breathing engine he's running on, right ? So Sabaoth - Target !"

"You're crazy !" Chester erupted "The Dragon's pulse cannons would probably bounce off that shield ! And you're going to ... throw pieces of metal at it ?"

"Lock... Target ON. Clear area Immediate." Sabaoth found herself switching into a routine that was encoded into her genes like the instinctive behaviour of an insect. It felt GOOD doing this - a visceral warmth like the satisfaction of a full meal or an eager mate. Her targeting displays shone at full power, as she read the rapidly increasing range in the clear dry air.

"You heard her - run, folks !" Keisu had been on the receiving end of Sabaoth's blast before, and had no desire to repeat the experience. Down the hill she raced, towards the crashed and smoking shuttle - if there was anyone alive in there, seconds would count.

"Load - Armour-piercing - recoil offset Off." As Sabaoth spoke, the display changed above her snout - or it may have been the display which drove her voice. Where most sentients had a forebrain, she had a biological computer that was working flat out, the whole force of her being behind it as she concentrated on the fleeing dot. There would be only one chance at this - it took time to calculate, and the speedster was rapidly going out of range.

From the cover of a boulder twenty metres downslope, Kiko and Sharrown watched in horrified fascination. Up rose the barrels, twitching by tiny increments until they stood at forty-five degrees. Recoil spades ground on solid rock, stabilising her for Maximum range - the stream of solid shot would be in the air for a quarter of a minute, with no course correction or second chances.

"Whit's yon lassie Doing ?" Sharrown whispered, pulling earplugs and goggles out of one of his pouches "dinna she ken she's got nae time left ?"

Kiko stared mutely. Though she could not see it, she had heard Sabaoth describe this many times now. The direwolf was looking at a red-tinted cone away in the far distance, angled steeply down through what was currently empty air. In a corner of her vision, the Demon language icon would be winking - she knew instinctively what it meant, as milliseconds spun by on her internal timer.

Firing Solution In Progress

Firing Solution In Progress

Firing Solution In Progress

Firing Solution In Progress

Suddenly, the world seemed to explode.

Full power ! The huge steel bolt leaped forwards, rammed a round up against the neck of the chamber and crushed it into fully unleashed fury. In a sound not heard in anger for centuries on this world, the stinging whipcrack of tortured gases hit the skies with force enough to smash glass. Sabaoth felt her body squeezed as if in a giant vice; her chest visibly dented in like a kicked football as the sonic wave of power smashed over her.

But this was what she was built for, planned and forged like a chisel built to shear through unyielding steel. A fraction of a second later her starboard cannon erupted, vision blurring as the explosive wave washed out, and the ancient projectiles were punted halfway to orbital velocity !

"Go, Go, Go, Go..." Kiko's mouth was moving, but no living voice could pierce that staccato wall. Her heart surged at the sight of her friend -yes, and mate too, she reaffirmed - standing proud in the fire like the figurehead of some cosmic vessel defying the seas of Hell itself. In what must have been less than five seconds, the big clips ran dry - a soaring line of light arcing up into the skies at maximum possible range.

"If only he disnae change course owermuch.." Sharrown heard nothing in the sudden silence except the ringing in his ears, despite their protection "come on, lassie, if a'body can do it, ye can..."

Dancing in the direwolf's vision was a rapidly shifting stream of numbers, which she ignored - every nerve cell focussed on the tiny, incredibly distant red cone, almost vertical - and on the totally shell-proof craft still heading confidently into it.

Dhaly-San was feeling good. Economy of everything had always been his watchword - and Operation TwoBird had been very economically tidied up. All he had to do was contact his troops at the base to mop up any survivors of the crash - after all, they wouldn't be going anywhere fast or soon - and that would be it. Grinning, he picked up the communicator.

And got nothing but static. His smile faded as he pressed button after button - reception was poor, and transmission non-existent. But he had reached out to orbit not five minutes ago....

Suddenly, he remembered the Box he was carrying. Sometimes it warped radio communications, sometimes it stopped watches - sometimes it untied shoelaces, seemingly as the mood took it. "Ahg ! Of ALL the unpredictable things to go wrong !" But there really was no problem. His ground troops had been given standing orders about trespassers anyway. Smiling, he reached towards the navigational computer, ready to order it to sprint for orbit.

Though he never knew it, just at that second he flew through an entirely imaginary red cone, the figment of a direwolf's imagination eighteen kilometres away.

"Hit !" Sabaoth barked in glee. Through binoculars, Sharrown saw the speedster stagger in the air, brilliant white flashes outlining its shape.

"That cannae be - it's got tae be proof against those antiques.." he murmured, ears still ringing. Kiko snatched the binoculars off him.

"What's "proof", Sharry ? They don't have to go through - I worked it out once, each of those "lumps of metal" Chester's sneering at have got the impact energy of a groundcar crashing at sixty ! What's that going to do to the stabilisers when it hits ?"

And as with the ancient riddle of the unstoppable force meeting the immovable object, there were a lot of unexpected results. Relying on its air-breathing jets, Dhaly-San's craft needed an air intake - which with modern thoroughness, was fashioned as a convoluted spiral hole in the force-field. No energy beam could turn a corner - but hundreds of metal particles, splintered or half-melted by the impact, could - and DID.

Kiko's grin was not pleasant as she saw the thick smoke belching out of the distant speedster's ravished engines. "Well, that's put HIM out of the getaway stakes for the time being. Come on, let's get down and see if there's anything to be done for the shuttle's crew."

It was not a pretty sight. Although it might have only fallen fifty metres, the old craft had smashed almost nose-first into the hillside, already riddled with hypersonic shrapnel from the missile strike.

By the time Kiko, Sharrown and Sabaoth picked their way down the steep slopes, they could see that the Dragon's backup crew had already joined their companions, and were working feverishly with hand lasers and improvised levers to cut the debris away.

"Front end's totally gone," they heard Ken Felinson call out, the lynx's voice deep and hard with suppressed anger. "Concentrate on the rear - there just might be a chance for survivors in there." They could see why he was upset - three still forms had already been brought out, and were lying covered by groundsheets by the side of the wreck.

"We dinnae hae owermuch time," Sharrown muttered to himself "It'll do onny folk nae good tae be rescued by us, if Celestacorps catches us all together a minute after."

Sabaoth nodded seriously, and reached back to her saddlebags to haul out her last two clips. Hastily, she scanned the skies towards the base - no pursuit yet. The speedster must have turned around before crashing: a parachute could be seen blowing their way, about nine kilometres away. "Sabaoth guard." With a menacing double click of safety locks releasing, she trotted off to a commanding knoll to watch for trouble. Her stomach was sending out urgent warning signals - she had not eaten since the previous evening, and had both trotted ninety kilometres fully laden and heavily drained her batteries. The effect that Lettice Earnshaw had measured earlier was like a "normal" metabolism having starved for a week.

At the wreck, Deck and Tarjon were labouring to clear away the crushed and buckled plates. A military craft would probably have stayed in one piece - but shuttles were designed for economy, which meant hauling as little structural weight as possible out of gravity fields.

"In here - there's blood, someone's trapped," Tarjon gasped, the wolf's muscles bunching as he took the suddenly released weight of a hull plate Caresse had lasered clear "Can't.. get to it."

Ken Felinson and Lettice Earnshaw were at his side in seconds. Under the still heavily twisted main bulkhead, they could see an armoured leg. And another one - and ..

"THREE ?" The lynx swallowed in disbelief "looks like long legs - but I can't work it out - what body shape...."

But unlike him, Caresse had seen Keisu's film of the pirate crew in action. The skunk's tail twitched convulsively, and a slight garbage odour escaped her normally vigilant control. She dived into the newly opened void - and even her slight frame jammed on the sharp-edged metal.

"Merde mille fois !" She spat in disgust, pulling her laser out again and scanning for a suitable key spot to work on "Kiko ! You are ze only one so petite - I think we 'ave one more of Sabaoth's Sisters still alive !"

Three minutes later, Deck and Tarjon carefully slid the still form onto a smooth hull plate. Holding the armoured figure still, they watched intently as Ken delicately unsealed the helmet.

"Gods !" Deck gulped, at the first sight of the unconscious centaur "It's..." he turned round, as if to reassure himself that the Sabaoth they knew was still standing picket on the skyline. "It's exactly her - they must be twin sisters !"

Ken worked fast, his brain racing as he deftly removed the crushed space-armour, checking for injuries. He did NOT like the look of this - massive trauma, internal bleeding, probably vital organs ruptured by the colossal force of the crash. Only the centaur's duplicated organ set was keeping her alive right now.

"We've got to get her up to the Dragon - I don't know if she'll make the trip, but it's the only hope she's got." Quickly and efficiently, he snapped orders; Caresse was warming up their own shuttle's engines even before the bigger members of the Dragon's crew began to slide the improvised litter towards it. They had cut through the rest of the ship by now - the centaur was the only survivor.

Keisu's tail twitched, as she looked out over the plain, where a parachute was landing. "OSCAR says that Dhaly-San didn't make contact with his base - the box must have been causing interference. But if he gets out of its range and he's carrying a mobile - there'll be Starts and bike crews on top of us in ten minutes." The vixen's ears dipped, as she slapped her holstered pistol. "Even if we could hold them off with a dozen Sabaoths - Celestacorps is going to find out the real Dragon's in the area as soon as they see us - and they'll look behind every orbiting dust grain till they find it."

"Can't you get through to GalSec yet ?" Chester asked plaintively, the ringtail's liquid eyes bright with alarm "Typical police - there's never one around when you want one."

The vixen's mind was in turmoil. There was no way that her investigation could both nail Dhaly-San AND let her friends escape. Questions would be asked that she would be unable to evade, about where the other centaur had come from - GalSec had added Sabaoth to its list of suspected Amani Dragon fugitives months ago.

As if she felt her name being thought of, Sabaoth chose that instant to turn around. Just in time to see her duplicate being loaded into the Dragon's shuttle, grey fur splashed crimson all over.

"Sister !" Her bark of grief was the most heart-tearing thing they had heard. First scanning the horizon for immediate threats, she galloped across to look down tragic-faced at the still form. As Deck had first seen, aside from the injuries there was absolutely No discernible differences between them.

Searchingly, she looked from Lettice's face to Ken's, and back again.

"Sister get better, yes-no ? Sabaoth help, give all bits, Guards at Stalystkov say all Sisters insides work the same."

But the lynx's ears fell flat, as he stared at the huge patient. "If I could have the pair of you in Medbay right this minute - I'd say it was fifty-fifty. But - just keep Celestacorps off our tails, give us time to get there. Come up as soon as you can, though - there's nobody else who's even close as a tissue match ! We'll do our best to save her - and the pups." With that, he clambered in after her, slammed the cargo hatch shut, and the Launch sirens instantly sounded.

Sabaoth rejoined her friends on the knoll, looking down the valley. Her holographic display was rapidly cycling between screens; an interference pattern like a mist of blood flickered in the air above her snout.

Only Keisu, Kiko, Deck and Chester were there; just downslope Sharrown and Leggs were monitoring the communications bands.

"Yon brave laddie's no' got through tae his clan yet," Sharrown called up, the feline's voice taut with emotion "But I canna say he'll no' manage soon. Leggs here's tellin' me her auld box isnae reliable as a jammer, or onnythin' else."

The parachute had landed, almost ten kilometres away. Keisu's ears suddenly rose in confidence, as if she had made a decision.

"I want him as a witness. I can prove that the Dragon couldn't have committed those pirate raids - two months after you're out of here, I'll "discover" your refit records. But I can't nail Celestacorps without him - they're Very careful not to leave evidence lying around."

"But he's getting away !" Chester protested "Once he's in that base, you'll never get to him - and once he's told them we're here..."

Keisu nodded, her sharp white teeth bared. "I said I WANTED him as a witness - but you can't always get what you want. I've got another option."

Dhaly-San had always known that escape systems were a good investment. Unfortunately, you couldn't allow for everything - such as the effect the Schroedinger Box and its unknowable contents would have on the emergency grav-cycle that unfolded out of his ejector seat base on landing.

"Damn and bankrupt it...." he panted, giving up his attempt to haul the heavy cycle out of the affected area after a few hundred metres "Looks like it's on foot - shouldn't take an hour, even if I'm jammed all the way." His communicator was still incommunicado - but he could SEE the hill his base hid beneath, out on the skyline. The fact that there was interference meant that the Box had to be still working - and that the main profits from this mission were still there for the taking. As to losses - well, his speedster was tax-deductible, and there was the insurance to think about...

Ten minutes later, the slight vole was panting for breath as he regretted not using his Executive Gym set more often. The long grass was past waist-height as he approached the river - and stopped.

He had flown over this SO many times now. In places, it was wide and shallow - but aerial views rarely tell you about the tearing cascades that show up as pretty white patches from the air.

"They don't have this sorta thing in a Proper landscaped planet." He threw himself down the bank towards a shallow beach. "I'd SUE the fur off the designer ..."

A sound reached his ears, from the direction he had just come. The vole froze - there was nothing friendly over there - but on the other paw, nothing could have possibly survived that missile strike and still be in any condition to get to him. Dhaly-San made a point of being right about this kind of thing.

Unfortunately, this just wasn't his day - as he discovered when a Direwolf Centaur leaped down the bank and faced him on the empty river beach, targeting holograms shining bright even in the first clear rays of dawn.

"Don't go for gun," Sabaoth hefted a glowing ball of plasma, tossing it from one claw-extended paw to the other like a stellar version of cat's cradle. "You won't have time, definite-no."

The vole's voice came as a squeal, as he looked up at the lethal flesh machine towering two and a half times his height, and easily massing a dozen of him. "I'll - give you anything you want ! Credits, jewels - slaves, Anything !"

"Sabaoth want sister. And sister was in Shuttlecraft. You pay for that, yes ?" Fur began to smoulder as the pair of two watt lasers on the centaur's snout concentrated on his chest. "You get me something, Sabaoth not bother you again, yes ?"

"Anything !" He fell on his knees, bones seeming to turn to jelly in panic fear as those great eyes seemed to bore in on him "Take anything you want !"

Forty minutes later, Sabaoth rejoined her friends at the knoll, in time for Keisu's speedster to land.

"We've got the Box," Leggs Zarkov called out of the wound-down window of the little starship "Not a scratch on it - seems like it was interfering with the laws of momentum when it crashed. I'll take it somewhere it doesn't have to be opened to study it."

Deck and Chester waved her goodbye, Kiko leaping up to the far side window to exchange a farewell kiss. On the cockpit display, she saw Ghost's familiar image gravely nod - evidently, he had transferred back from the Celestacorps base to invade the privacy of OSCAR's circuits.

For a long instant the mouse and vixen kissed, tasting each other's sweet breath as their musks enriched the death-heavy air of the crash site. Then Keisu sighed, and broke away.

"Leggs and Acatsado are coming with me to GalSec Headquarters - even without legal proof of the piracy claims, we can chase this branch of Celestacorps off-planet. That is - unless you've got any more Evidence?"

"Sabaoth fix." The direwolf wiped clean an expensive pocketbook on the grass, and tossed it up to Keisu. "Sabaoth trained lots of times, get Evidence some things, get rid of Evidence others. And almost all other Evidence gone."

"Almost?" Keisu frowned. Ghost's invasion of the base's computer would have the central processors needing decades of robopsychiatry before they could run more than a SpaceTime Invaders game. Loose ends were what she did NOT need.

But the big centaur nodded happily, and patted the large bulging sack that was slung as a saddlebag. "Sabaoth get rid of Evidence. But can't eat ALL of him right away - have to wait for Lunch, yes?"

As the Dragon's shuttle took off from its second trip from Vornelorn, its crew were subdued and quiet.

"I dinnae like that, not one wee dram did I like it." Sharrown confided to Deck. "We were SO close to bein' strung up by us tails, far too many a time back there. Jist the one slip, an it's no' jist oor tails on the block - it'd be the rest o' the crew."

The big canine winced. "Without Keisu, we wouldn't have known we were being set up - without Leggs and her family phantom, we wouldn't have been able to do anything about it. And without Sabaoth -"

They both shuddered. Kiko had taken one peek inside the waterproof bag her carnivore friend carried, and was still looking distinctly unwell. Dhaly-San would not be troubling them again, unless he gave Sabaoth indigestion - but a visceral, ancestral-remembered reaction was telling the mouse-girl that one day Sabaoth might come to see HER as food.

"Nice!" The direwolf's ears were pricked up; she was the only one looking both alert and cheerful. Even Chester was looking unusually thoughtful, as they climbed out into the clean emptiness of space. "We go see Sister now - have Two Sabaoths, soon have lots and lots more!"

"I can see the Toppers just loving that idea." Chester's old mischievous grin flickered back "Who's going to tell them - our Sabaoth doesn't eat friends, but we've a new one coming who might not be housebroken that way?"

The medical bay of the Dragon was fortunately not one of the areas being stripped and rebuilt aboard Space Dock Eleven. Sabaoth trotted down the corridor, Kiko riding side-saddle. They had taken a one-minute diversion through the decontamination shower and dryer - some more of the "Evidence" had been removed of Sabaoth's breakfast menu.

"Sabaoth say hello!" She burst in through the double doors of sickbay - and stopped.

Ken Felinson was sitting slumped in a chair, his head in his hands. Behind him, Lettice Earnshaw looked up from absent-mindedly massaging his shoulders, and they saw there were tears in her eyes.

"Sister?" The direwolf's ears drooped like felled trees.

Lettice shook her head slowly, and nodded towards the operating theatre. "Poor lass didn't stand a chance. We'd missed it before - but she'd took fragments, nobbut splinters, in t'brain. Nowt we could do for her - wouldn't have made difference if we'd got 'er on table in a minute."

Suddenly Kiko's ears rose. "She's a total clone of Sabaoth - they've got the same tissue type down to the last gene pair! I read about this awhile back - can't you save the pups, at least?"

"Sabaoth want try!" Her voice was suddenly eager "Never seen He-Direwolf quad - maybe only chance ever get! Want to try carry, yes!"

Ken Felinson stood up slowly, his eyes meeting the shock-wide centaur's gaze. "I'd thought of that - I'd got her prepared to try it. I've never done anything like it, but the operation's not unknown... I could only save one of the cubs. Sabaoth, you can't carry it right now - your body's not ready! You'd have to already have a cub of your own on the way, to give your sister's a chance."

Lettice nodded, one ear dipped. She gripped the medic's shoulder tightly. "We've got the poor mite in cold sleep - she'll keep. But fer now - there's nowt we can do for her."

Three weeks later, the Dragon fired up its newly reconditioned engines, and moved slowly out of Space-Dock Eleven.

"Well, at least we all survived this one." Chester's tail was held high, as the irrepressible ringtail waved through the optical ports to several of the hunkier dock workers of various species and genders. He had never

believed in wasting opportunities, or in brooding over things - and besides, Sabaoth had abruptly lost interest in him. For the present.

"We didn't ALL come out unscathed," Kiko's tone was a warning growl, the deep note sounding strange coming from the petite muridae "I've never seen her upset before - and I couldn't be around to help, as much as I'd have liked."

Kiko had thrown herself back into her work, going over all the refitting with the keen and practiced eye of someone who would have to fix whatever went wrong in the heat of battle or the chill of space. Apart from a few heartfelt video talks, she had seen nothing more of Keisu, now wrapping up her investigations on the planet below. And on that world now lay Sabaoth's last known Sister, along with the rest of the crew of the Medusa's Egg, their plain marker warmed by the sun and brushed by the clean winds of the rolling valley where they remained.

"I saw her just an hour ago, going down towards the Third hold," Chester remarked "She's been very quiet recently, that's a fact."

The holds of the Dragon were almost full, their metallic treasure gleaming with the promise of good profits for the beleaguered crew. Sabre had been in a good mood for a change when they had left dock - at least some good had come out of Celestacorp's faked Pirate campaign. Eight bulk tankers had been destroyed, and many independent operators would be giving the system a wide berth for months to come - both of which had boosted the Dragon's balance sheet, just for being in the right place at the right time.

"Sabaoth?" Kiko listened intently. Her nose twitched - definitely, here in the uninhabited hold the direwolf's musk was a clear signal. "Poor girl. I'll bet she just wants to be alone down here."

As she turned away, Kiko recalled what Dr. Earnshaw had said about what they had discovered before returning the lost Sister to the planet below.

"Tha's heard about F1 crosses, like Felinia?" The badger from Penn Nine had confided in her "they've got their advantages - but they're unstable. Pups an' cubs o' theirs, don't turn out the same way at all. Not even wi' another mate just the same mix. Now, Sabaoth, she's not just bred - she was Built, gene by gene, like they'd ordered features out o' a catalogue."

Kiko had nodded. The centaur's features came from a whole mosaic of sources; evidently the Demon Empire biotechnologists had an extensive gene bank, and a penchant for drawing blank cheques on it.

Lettice had grimaced. "Here's summat tha' might want ta know. Them two pups 'er Sister was carrying - we took a look at their genes - an we didn't believe it. Folk 'ave done Clones before - we'd guessed that 'er Sister was one. But t'pups would have summat different, pups allus do - mebbe they'd have much the same genes, but some o' them would be shuffled, wi' any male. That's basic biology." Her striped face had grown tense, and her ears trembled.

"I've heard o' nowt like it, Kiko. Both pups, front and back, they were EXACTLY THE SAME as both Sabaoths - they'd 'a bin born clones too! So I took another look at some o' the code maps. And this is one o' the base stock she's carryin' genes from."

Kiko recognised an unintelligent, scaled carnivore from Sk'hal Three, famous for its almost-but-not-quite trainability as a guard beast on many primitive worlds. Something clicked in the back of the mouse's mind - an article she had read, years ago...

"Aren't those the ones where the herd leader doesn't need a mate?" she recalled slowly "Their egg cells carry all the DNA they need - they've got exactly their mother's features, as they're successful enough to dominate the herd. As in, if it works that well, don't change a winning formula?"

Lettice had grinned, the first smile she had seen in days. "Tha's close there, but not dead on. They needs one to breed, stimulus like - but the male's not to know e's getting nowt out of it. And Sabaoth - my guess is that she's got to be ready fore an' aft at t' same time, whenever they decide ta coincide. Oh, an' there's one more thing tha'd be interested to know."

"Yes?" Kiko had turned to go, and seen a mischievous twinkle in the badger's eye.

"If Sabaoth's owt like this Banded Clawhorn, as I'd lay even money on - well, they've exported those across systems, expensive stuff that. Folk found out they need less breeding stock than they'd reckoned." Lettice had looked Kiko up and down, and winked. "The mates don't HAVE ta be males."

Kiko sat down on a pile of osmium bars, product of the fifth moon and destined as prestige paperweights for the bureaucracies of a dozen civilisations. Somewhere in the hold, she could hear Sabaoth's running footsteps, the centaur girl's unmistakable tones echoing confusedly amongst the aisles of cargo.

Suddenly there was a buzzing sound. Looking up, she saw Tengu, the little drone darting overhead at maximum emergency speed, its ducted fan hurtling it down the aisle at nearly fifty kilometres an hour! Something was tied to its trailing probe.

She leaped to her feet - and was almost bowled over as Sabaoth skidded round the blind corner, her targeting holograms cheerfully bright in the economy-lit hold.

"Sabaoth say sorry." She felt herself picked up gently in the centaur's powerful arms. "Sabaoth find playmate, good, yes?"

The spherical drone peeked round the corner, as if it was aware that the pursuit had halted.

"Sabaoth!" Kiko spluttered "you shouldn't chase it around like that - you'll drain the battery flat in no time!" And indeed, as if it had heard them, Tengu's "charge Low" light winked on, and it sank towards the floor.

"Sabaoth fix." The great grey-furred head nodded eagerly. Two silvery claws extended, touching the recharging points - and for a few seconds the direwolf breathed hard as she made a gift of her life energies to the inquisitive little 'droid. Before releasing it, she snatched the package it had been towing for her like a lure for greyhounds to chase - whatever it was, vanished with a loud crunching down a gaping maw.

Tengu gave a non-committal bleep, and floated off across the hold on its regular antigrav drive. The mouse and the centaur watched it depart, and turned to each other.

Kiko embraced her big roommate affectionately, her arms barely meeting round the great waist. "We'll find some more of your Sisters out there, I'm sure of it," she promised. "The one we couldn't save had an ear-tag still on her - it read "S-90", so there were at least ninety of you - more than you knew about."

Sabaoth's holograms winked out, while she concentrated. She knew that Kiko's heart lay with the white-furred vixen - but that was in the past, and still in the unknown future. Right now, she had two hearts of her own to give.

The mouse's eyes widened in delight as a pair of big pink hearts materialised, courtesy of the targeting display which had been built and hardwired to send Death, not Love.

"Sabaoth - whatever else, I want to be your ... Sister. Is that all right ?"

The hearts expanded like blossoming flowers, and the direwolf gently nuzzled the mouse's long black hair.

"Little Sister." Her voice was happy again. Picking the slender mouse up, she placed her astride on her back - and they returned to the warmly lit corridors of the Amani Dragon, together.

The End