

A Shock To The System

Being A Midnight Sonata Tale By Simon L. Barber, April 1993

Dramatis Personae:

Chester: Male Ringtail mischief-maker and omnidirectional flirt. Chief of the Dragon's "Away Team", he has so far managed to return from ALL the missions so carefully designed to test his resourcefulness to destruction. (Terrie Smith)

Sharrown Chattan: Male Feline "Start" pilot, gadget-worshipper and computing expert. Would be the ship's No. 1 practical joker, but for presence of Chester. Has too much common-sense to try and win that dubious prize. (Bruce W. Grant)

Kiko Nao Rhys: Female Mouse fighter-mechanic, known for her interest in anything cultural, scientific, or wearing skirts (Sharrown's kilt excepted). (Rees D'orrycot)

Dr. Lettice Earnshaw: Female Badger (Assistant) medical officer for the Dragon. She is mainly qualified in Biology rather than Medicine, but they've faced a lot of species who aren't in the medical literature. Lettice doesn't WANT to be a Doctor -- it's just that her ship needs a Xenobiologist, and she's the best they've got... (Simon Barber)

Sabaoth 66: Female Demon direwolf centaur; a fashion victim in designer Genes. (Two legs bad, Four legs good, Six legs Super!!!) (Simon Barber)

Minor parts and bit-players:

Ural Deck: Mechsuit pilot and Chester's usual saviour. Presently conspicuous by his absence. (Mark Barnard)

W2: Demon renegade and record holder of the most number of jobs attempted and failed onboard the Dragon. Conspicuous by the lack of demands from her former Government to send her back. (Mark Barnard)

NI the Merciless: Tyrant, president-for-life and mandatory No. 1 in the music charts of the planet Bai-Chaznov. Reportedly immortal.

Lord Ashako: Male demon humanoid; envoy on diplomatic mission to the above. Reportedly wishes he was ANYWHERE else.

If it wisnae for yon fluff-fer-brains ower there, Sharrown fumed in the direction of Chester's chair, we'd be back safe on the Dragon right now, instead o' bein' stuck oot the backside o' beyond while the loon works out which wrang button he pressed tae send our Navigational computer tae sleep...

"Gotcha!" Undaunted, the ringtail squirmed back into the pilot's seat from beneath the equipment panel, his lithe figure flowing like furred mercury. "Told you! There's only so many combinations of Reset and Restart buttons on this... stick the boot cassette in, just you watch this one now!"

Chester's wide liquid eyes widened in shocked delight, and Sharrown's contracted to slits, as the head-up display leaped into life. As it was designed to, it showed whatever digital data had been input into the computer banks -- and whoever had been last using the console, had left their own tape in the slot.

"That's verra interestin." Sharrown blinked a few times as a delighted ringtail palmed the recording, clearly taken at one of the famous Love-Houses of Balashebar Nine. "An' a Nav Computer should tell ye what goes where -- but it's Astronomy an' no' Gynaecology that it's meant to be telling ye about!"

The Stormrunner robot continued its ballistic course through the dimly glowing gas nebula. About an hour's flight away, the Dragon was probably just about to send out the search parties right now -- which didn't mean they'd be rescued any time soon.

Outside the window, swirling dust and gas blocked all long-range sensors, as the distant protostar five light-hours away flooded surrounding space with vigorous birth-cries on all sub-light bands. This was a perfect place to stop over and make some tests and adjustments to the great robot's systems -- it could slam its plasma field up to full power as often as it liked, and no sharp ears or long noses would notice.

"Chester, why d'ye ALWAYS hae to pick money-makin' schemes that cause trouble?" Sharrown asked, mainly to himself as the co-pilot dived under the seat in quest of the official boot-up tape for the Nav systems. "Onybody could a' told ye those "Ancient Alien Artifacts" ye picked up in the bazaar on Taskatilan were new as yuir latest codpiece, an' nae worth a tenth o' the scrap value."

"Hey! I know that. You know that. But I only have to sell them to One buyer -- and not everyone knows it! Just have to offload them somewhere they're illegal, so nobody gives me too many headaches about legal proof of authenticity."

"Dinna ye mention heidaches, wi' puir Deck in the Sickbay." The feline resisted the temptation to snap at him. It hadn't actually been Chester's fault that he'd stowed six large and heavy Bakelite statues in the overhead locker -- or that Ural Deck would be the first one to open the door. And it wasn't Chester's fault that the ship had been under thrust at the time, making them weighty enough to knock Deck cold, and ban him from active duties for a couple of days, just when the Stormrunner had a perfect place to test its more conspicuous features. But Chester had been in the neighbourhood, and that meant that things HAPPENED.

Right on cue, the unexpected happened again. Sharry had familiarised himself with the Demon-designed electronics onboard the Stormrunner with a gourmet's delight, and knew them pretty much inside out.

"Now, an' fit's this wee light daein', right the way up here in the communication band?" he wondered aloud. "This board's a richt lashup, but it's made o' wonderful bits o' kit... I should hae something in my notes here." From the capacious vest he wore even over his pressure suit, a datapager appeared, and circuit diagrams flashed across the screen as he traced the panel back through the jury-rigged circuit looms of the prototype ship. Prototypes were fun. Behind the neat panels, a colossal hairball of fibre-optic cables lay just as the engineers had left it, generally with clearly labelled bundles of leads and hand-written notes stuck on the equipment. The "finished product" would have been a mass of tightly fitting black boxes, a hundred times harder to understand.

Chester pulled himself along the ceiling, and whiskers tickled Sharrown's uncovered ears as he looked over his shoulder.

"What's up, Sharry? I didn't think radio could travel a hundred kilometres in this." He waved an elegant paw at the glowing vapour outside. Though of course still an industrial-quality vacuum, it was lit up like a comet's tail, the ionisation cutting them off like a fogbank.

"I dinna ken, masel'..." The feline was lost in thought as he stared at the circuits. "Let's see... fit's it ga'in through a' thae circuits for? Amplifier, pseudo-random descrambler, wide-band signal integrator... Divvil tak' it, this is serious stuff here!" Another light was now on, showing that an automatic recorder under the panel had switched itself on. Sharrown whistled.

"Yon message has the power o' a starship engine pushin' it oot. But it's spread ower hauf the wavelengths on the dial, ten times more than ony sort o' military band I've ever heard o'. An' whit it's saying... we've nae got that code in oor banks. But it's the same pattern ower an' ower again, an' this kit wis built tae recognise an' record onything like it aff its ain bat. I'll bet a bottle of Glengarrow tae a spit in yer een it's a Distress signal -- an' in this glaur, it must be that near we COULD spit on it!"

Chester's ears pricked up, and his eyes lit with mischievous curiosity. "Someone's put a distress signal into code nobody can crack? Now, if that isn't the most amazing thing to do! I wonder why?"

"Heh. They're wantin' tae be rescued, but only by the folk that's expecting tae hear frae them. An' tae the rest o' the universe it's Paws Aff, in nae uncertain way. Which gies me cause o' wonderin' jist fit's sae awfu' important, awa' ower there." Feline and ringtail looked at each other, in a rare moment of mutual agreement.

"Fifteen degrees declination, thirty and twelve arc-seconds Azimuth frae here." Sharrown tried to keep the excitement out of his voice while Chester worked the trackball to swing them into line with the narrow-beam transmission they had drifted onto by chance. "An' let's see if a pair o' guid Galactic Cub Scouts cannae lend a helpin' hand!"

Fifty minutes of delicate boost-and-coast through the thick nebula had carried them further away from the Dragon, and in towards the foetal star at the centre of the great dust and gas cloud.

"Should be onywhere in... Hoy! Chester, pull us up, min! -- There!" He pointed to a dim shape looming out of the fog, not ten kilometres away from the Stormrunner.

As they closed, they made out the shape. A squat, black vessel, with cargo booms empty save for the nearest pod to the main decks. No lights showed; no automatic transponder "pinged" them for their identity codes. But on the other paw, no targeting laser or weapons turret moved in their direction.

"A Demon Military Transport!" Chester exclaimed. Evidently he had found time to keep up with the current "Jane's All The Galaxy's Aerospacecraft" in between his other escapades.

Sharrown nodded, even as he reached for his helmet. "Looks like it's oot o' power, but for that nova flare o' an emergency beacon that's still goin'. Nae sign o' damage, an' nae sign o' life either... Chester, I've got a verra, verra bad feelin' about this ane..."

Of course, they went in. Not immediately, or straight in through the main airlock, of course -- there is a world of difference between bravery and stupidity.

"That's the last o' them," Sharry pressed his helmet into contact with Chester's, as they floated ten metres clear of the black, micrometeorite-pitted hull. "Twelve wee conduction/ induction limpets, sittin' quietly roon' the fore end listenin' tae every little thing happenin'. An' a' comin' thegither here." He pulled out his databook, on which was a blank floorplan of a Haskar 33 Supply/Transport vessel such as the one their Stormrunner was floating two hundred metres behind.

"What's the -- Oh, neat, neat!" Chester exclaimed, peering over the screen. Dots of coloured light assembled on the blank template as everyday electrical events were logged by the reconnaissance probes. In a few minutes, the main power sources and equipment onboard the vessel were clear as the buildings and streets of a city at night.

"Nae footstep vibration, nae intercom traffic, nae doors openin' or shutting," Sharrown summed up after ten minutes watching. "If there's onybody alive in there, they're keeping awfy quiet about it. So, fit dae ye think?"

As has been said before, they went in.

"The air's guid enough, onywise," The feline poked a sniffer probe through the crack in the emergency escape hatch, as they crept in through the airlock. "Hope that bridge circuit ower the hinge sensor hasnae come aff -- or there'll be a bonnie big light shinin' on someone's security monitors right now." He twisted off his helmet to hear better, and stood for a minute stock-still, the only sound being Chester's unconscious fidgeting behind him. No alarms rang; no doors slammed open (or shut); the only sound in the ship was a distant hum of an air recirculator.

"Nobody home!" Chester whispered brightly, his eyes gleaming in the light that shone through the crack in the door. "Look, you can see -- three of the four escape capsules are gone. I wonder what happened?"

"I'm wonderin' that meself, that I am." And with that, Sharrown cautiously opened the hatch, and they stepped into the grim utilitarian corridors of the transport ship.

Ten minutes later, they had stealthily passed through the entire vessel, checking for signs of life. To judge from the bunks, there had been a crew of eight onboard, sometime in the past week.

"Ecch..." Chester's nose wrinkled. "Talk about bad design taste! Looks like they fitted out the ship from the nearest "Bulkhead-U-Like" megastore... and these clothes!" In disgust he held up a two-tone acrylic sweater, back slits indicating a winged ex-owner.

The feline grinned at him, refraining from comment. Chester's own "uniform" had about enough material to make a pair of boots, which didn't include jackboots. Word was, that he had been given his present outfit as a free gesture of appreciation from "Vornseka's World Of Leather * " on Handoval Five, as one of their most regular customers.

"I mean -- it's not that I'm in favour of the War, and all that..." Chester continued, flinging a uniform pair of diamantine flares into the corner, "but whoever wears THIS gear for choice, I'm not inviting into MY solar system." He caught sight of his reflection in a mirror, and preened his fur reassuringly.

"Wheesht now," Sharrown cautioned him. "Ower there -- can ye nae smell somethin' rotten?" His nose led him down to the end of the corridor. This was a dead-end passageway, ending in a blank bulkhead. Blank it may once have been -- but no longer. In the corners, the grey plasteel was splashed and crusted with the dark brown stain of oxygen-breathing blood.

* A subsidiary of "Galaxy of Leather", "Galactic Supergroup of Leather", and "Six-Dimensional Cosmic All Of Leather" respectively. This organisation has put astronomers, not to mention particle physists, into something of an UnSteady State, especially since they have been unable to disprove the "Cosmic Rawhide Thong Theory" that the organisation publicises...

They both stood looking hard at it for a minute. "D'ye ken whit I'm thinking?" Sharrown said at last, looking around and behind him.

"I'm thinking some pair body came a terrible end right here... see, there's a dicht o' bluid right up there, three metres awa' on the ceiling. An' then it was cleaned up in a hurry... I dinna ken just why. It's nae a guid cleanup, ye can tell."

Chester's ears were pressed flat against his skull as he forced himself to examine one brown-caked corner. "Looks like someone went over it with a narrow scraper, about three fingers wide," he offered. "And they didn't bother, above head height. Almost as if it'd been licked off. But there's... oh, Eccccch!" With a shaking paw, he pointed out a small white sliver caught in the rough-welded seam of the floor plates.

Sharrown pulled a pair of fine tweezers from one of the numerous pockets on his vest, and examined it critically. "I'm nae Doctor Finlay, but I ken bone when I see bone. I think we'd better be verra careful indeed, when we look ower the rest o' this ship."

Another half an hour had shown them all there was to see in the crew quarters. On the bridge, the flight recorder was still running; Sharrown pocketed the tape for later, while Chester went through the pockets of some discarded jackets.

"Humph! Looks like this wis bound for Bai-Chaznov next stop, same planet we're calling at." Sharrown stood up from the navigational computer. "An' here's luck for us -- it's the same Nav system as on oor Stormrunner! Boot tapes an' all... we can find our way back to the Dragon when we've finished. Now, let's see fit life support's got to say for itself!... should tell us wha's using up oxygen in here..." For a few minutes he wrestled with the Demon-specification displays, his whiskers twitching in concentration.

Leaning over his shoulder, Chester irritatingly spotted the green glow off on the edge of the screen a heartbeat before he did, and let out a whoop of joy. "Gotcha! All the way back there in the cargo bay!"

Just at that moment, there was a beep from the communications panel. They whirled round -- as through the crackling static of the Nova came a voice in recognisable Hak'hovic, one of the major Demon languages. Whoever the coded distress signal had been intended for, had heard it.

Sharrown put a finger to his snout, and they silently crept out of the bridge. "Some o' these systems hae Security overrides fae the far side," he whispered as the door shut behind them. "I wouldna reckon ye'd push a video signal far through the murk oot there -- but the ship's computer might start telling yon folk things we'd nae appreciate."

"But what about the cargo hold?" Chester whispered. "We've got to get out of here -- but we're not going to leave before we check that, are we?"

The feline's tail twitched. "Bet your fur we arena'. But we'd better do it fast --" he drew his pistol from its quick-release holster, "-- an' cautious!"

Although the transport was designed to haul eight cargo pods, only one was currently clipped onto the outside. But that was the least of the surprises. "Well now, an' would ye jist look at that," was Sharrown's quiet comment as they reached the stern of the ship. "Thae pods arena' usually pressurised... but this ane is." He gestured to the metre-wide umbilical passage that led through a hole in the ship's hull. "It's nae a cargo pod -- it's an extra cabin, habitable."

"Someone's not taking any chances," Chester pointed to the inner and outer doors of the umbilical passage. Both were heavy plasteel plating -- and exposed wires led to a collar of white tape around the umbilical itself. He sniffed it, and his ears rose in alarm. "Explosive tape! You could cut this pod off from the ship, neat as snipping a rosebud."

"Hush, ye daft gowk -- can ye nae smell folk in there?" With no more sound than a leaf falling in a forest, the slim feline slipped down the flexible tube, acutely conscious of the few millimetres of material between him and the hard vacuum of space. The inner door was open; from behind Chester saw only his tail and rump as he looked through a crack.

Suddenly, Chester saw the feline's tail fluff up in shock, a second before Sharrown wriggled further into the room. And then he heard his voice, almost sick with emotion.

"Get yuirself in here, we've work tae be done. Oh, the pair, pair lassie..."

"Well, I think she'll live. But I can't say a lot more than that."

Three hours later, they were standing in the sick bay of the Dragon. Between them, Chester and Sharrown had wrestled an unconscious figure out of the cargo pod and into the one remaining escape capsule; with the navigational computer properly reset, it had not taken too long for the Stormrunner to find its mother ship and deposit its precious burden onboard.

Doctor Lettice Earnshaw brushed her white brow stripe back in frustration, at the patient that covered two couches. "I don't know how tha' shifted her. Eh, she must'ha been a weight, even famished to death like she is." On the other side of the bed, Ken Felinson finished hooking up the monitoring probes and stared at the readings with a baffled expression.

Lettice looked at the ring of concerned faces, and at the object of their worry. Half covered by a sheet, long grey fur masked the skeletal outlines of a centaur female, in the last stages of starvation. She was improving by the hour; glucose and electrolyte drips had been supplemented by full-protein feeds, and all her vital signs were starting to slowly pick up.

"Tha' says the ship hadn't been abandoned longer than ten days, then?" She looked searchingly at Sharrown, who had not left the centaur's side for a minute.

He nodded. "Aye, the food in the galley wis mouldy enough for that. Ten days back, something made most o' the crew bale oot intae open space, whaur there's no' much chance of bein' found. Jist one or two were left aboard -- we didnae find more than a pocketful o' what was left o' them."

Their badger medic nodded slowly. "Not more than they'd deserve, whatever did it. They must have been starvin' 'er for months. But she's et summat recently, looking at 'er stomach scans. Trouble is, I can't tell tha' much else about her -- our medical records hae nowt to say about Direwolf Centaurs!"

On the scanning screen, Lettice stared at the 3-D map of her patient. Like many centaurs, her basic organ set was duplicated; twin sets of lungs, two hearts, two livers and the rest explained why the Demon empire made such extensive use of them as troops. They were very hard to kill outright, and would recover naturally from what would be mortal wounds for most creatures.

"I can see what most of this is, more or less," she murmured, "but over here -- and here." In her starved condition, the big bulges on the centaur's flanks stood out like great saddlebags, running most of the length of her rear ribcage. "They're vital organs, all right -- the circulatory system's treating them as top priority after the brain... and they're as big as the rest of her glandular system put together... but they don't seem to DO owt! And up here, on the muzzle, those furless patches."

Chester nodded. "I noticed that. Looks neat! Makes her eyes really stand out, I thought."

"Aye. Well. Ummm." Lettice wished, as she often did, that she was a Doctor of Medicine, and not Biology. Dr. Felinson had done his best here as the usual medic; what normal injuries the centaur had, were under treatment. But in this

case, once he was sure the centaur was out of immediate danger, he had given Lettice responsibility for working out just what made her tick. As a researcher, she was best qualified to fathom what was obviously a very strange biology.

"I don't know what THEY do, either," she admitted. "Yet. They're optical, a' tell thi' so much -- they've lenses, and reet big nerve bundles going t' brain. Still --" she shrugged, and covered the patient's flanks with another sheet, "reckon lassie'll tell us about that, when she wakes up."

With the Stormrunner safely stowed aboard, the Dragon had resumed course, bound for the frontier world of Bai-Chaznov. It seemed a likely place to pick up some profitable cargo: standing between the Demon and AMF-controlled regions, it did a thriving trade in many goods and services that regular transport lines would think twice before handling at any price.

As the ship's Day cycle ended, the watch crews handed over their posts and strolled off to eat and relax. But, much to her annoyance, one of them was staying on after hours.

"Honestly! I'd promised I'd drop in on Deck in Sick Bay, and see how he's doing. I promised!" came a high-pitched voice as W2 followed Sharrown towards the Bridge section, her bat wings hiked up in pique.

"Aye, lassie, an' ye can when the Captain's finished wi' us," Sharrown growled, not too pleased himself. "I'm bettin' it's aboot thae tapes I pulled from the Cap'n's Log aboard yon transport vessel. They were nae coded -- but I dinnae speak Ghak'vortan, and ye DO."

As he had expected, Acting Captain K'Tal Sabre was waiting for them with the log tapes in one hand and a worried expression on his muzzle. But behind him on the Navigational screen, was something nobody had expected -- something that would certainly worry anybody.

Silhouetted against the woolly ball of the nebula they had left, were the dark lean shapes of three military vessels. Their transponders were switched on, as was customary in Neutral Space -- even for a sub-unit of the Ghak'Vorta Imperial Fleet!

The Captain watched as their eyes flicked across the screen, and Sharrown's tail bulked up in alarm. "No, they aren't chasing us, exactly -- they're only on Economy Cruise speed. But they spent two hours in that fogbank, and we picked up what sounded very like a nuclear detonation from where that derelict was. Now they're heading right for Bai-Chaznov, sending in clear speech that they're some sort of Imperial Delegation. The locals are preparing to welcome them."

"Ye mean they blew up their ain ship, jist tae get rid o' the evidence?" The wildcat's ears went right up in alarm. "An' they'll be makin' port afore us?"

A nod. "Which means there is -- or was -- something pretty important onboard that transport ship." He motioned towards a tape console. "We make planetfall in eight days. But I want to know what's involved here. There's about six hours of log here, and I want to know what's on them." The hefty feline turned his gaze full on the Demon girl, and his whiskers bristled.

The girl's bat-wings drooped, as she mentally kissed her rest period farewell. "What, right now?"

"NOW."

While W2 glumly started on the tapes, Sharry went in search of the one person who might know something of the background. And he found her exactly where he expected to -- in the ship's library.

"Kiko!" He swept into the room, the Artificial Trendiness computer in his backpack sending waves of garish colour sweeping across his programmable kilt. "Jist the verra person we wis wantin' tae talk tae. Fit does a culture-vulture like yesel' ken aboot this Bai-Chaznov place we're headin' for?"

The mouse's big pink ears twitched in amusement. "Culture? That won't take long. According to this, they've hardly GOT any. Unless public matings and death-fights in the Arena are your idea of sophistication."

"Oh? Disnae sound like the sort o' thing ye'd expect. All I heard wis it's a strict, tight-laced sort o' place."

"Hmph. Depends what you mean. There ARE frontier planets astride the border with happily anarchic cultures, that won't accept either side's influence -- but this isn't one of them. It's a micro-Empire in its own right -- except that it's got nowhere to go. Their Emperor keeps the lid screwed down tight, except for things HE organises -- "Bread And Circuses" may be an old-fashioned way of keeping people happy, but you can't doubt it sometimes works for awhile."

Sharrown punched up the standard gazetteer on the screen by her side. "This says the system's closed tae a' Military traffic, frae baith sides. But we've three Demon vessels overtakin' us aboot now, an' they're gettin' the pipe bands rehearsed for them planetside."

Kiko's tail twitched. "I wonder what they're doing? Whatever, it sounds like trouble for us. Trouble, and with a capital "T". Thinking of those folk, any news on that poor girl you rescued?"

"Nae news is guid news. She's picking up verra fast, Doc Earnshaw's tellin' me -- but she's a lang way tae go. Maybe then we'll be hearin' jist fit it's aboot, frae the lassie hersel'."

As the three black-cloaked vessels swept imperiously past the Dragon, all they saw on their screens was one more war-surplus trading vessel. Nothing of any danger to them -- and besides, they were well used to danger. Quite unlike the sort of bungling fools who got demoted to serving on transport ships...

The captain of that humble vessel watched their departure with considerable relief. In the small rest-room beside the Bridge, W2 listened intently to the harsh, clipped Ghak'vortan language, her tongue poking out between her lips in concentration. The military transport's Captain had the sort of accent she hardly understood herself -- no wonder the Dragon's computers had been able to make nothing of it! As she made notes on the entries, she passed them out to K'Tal, who was looking decreasingly happy the more he read.

It had started off as a regular voyage with food, air and replacement parts to one of the small asteroidal posts facing this frontier of space. But then, their cargo delivered safely, had come Orders to stay there and wait for visitors.

"... We have been honoured by the visit of a high Count, ranking in the External Relations Court," the first interesting records read. "On his authority, we are to proceed all the way outside the Empire itself! My only concern is for our cargo. He had his own engineers cut an extra entrance right through the outer hull of my ship -- I am not liking this, but they are not people that you question and live long or happily. Now we are waiting this cargo."

"We have waited twelve ship-cycles, and the crew are not liking it. The Base here is little bigger than the ship, and staffed with Draconics who would serve us for Breakfast soon as look at us. I am not as happy as I was about the crew's loyalty, especially if we are going out beyond the Empire's immediate grasp. Two have vanished after walking outside on the asteroid -- the Draconians say they must have jumped too hard and floated away, but I have my doubts. And I am not searching base's Kitchens for fear of what I might find. This is not making Morale any better."

"Another three ship-cycles, but we are making ready to leave! Another ship docked without warning, bolted on a cargo pod without a word of explanation, and departed. I have read my sealed orders -- we are to deliver the cargo to the

Margrave in person, within thirty ship-cycles. This will mean heavy acceleration both ways, it is good the cargo is light. But what it is we are carrying, we are not to know. The inner door is to be sealed and unbroken when we make delivery."

W2 frowned, as she handed the third batch of notes over. "Mostly routine stuff, for a couple of ship days. It's not an Official diary -- more like a personal record. But he says he's heard the crew whispering about what they're carrying. They think it's major treasure, they're going to give to the Margrave, who's running this planet Bai-Chaznov, and like, soften him up towards the Demon Empire. But he's not so sure -- he reckons they wouldn't have sent them unescorted if it was that valuable. And then he says, that's just the sort of thing they WOULD do anyway, just to be sneaky. Right now they're up to the frontier of the Empire, about to go outside."

She closed her eyes in concentration for a few minutes, and then her wings began to tremble in alarm. Wordlessly, she scribbled on the datapad, and handed it to K'tal Sabre, ashen-faced.

"Now outside the Boundaries, into savage Space. Heavy acceleration making all irritable, myself included. Flogged two of crew this morning for fairly trivial negligences... despite that, morale deteriorating. Caught Taryx of Engineering studying space charts. Claimed was looking for nearest repair facilities, but have doubts. All have stopped talking about mystery of cargo. Bad sign. Maybe intending to DO something about it."

"Took key to outer door myself today. Discovered access tube wired with explosives, on MY ship! Lying in tube, heard noises inside. Not talking -- but definitely noises. Had to re-seal door before crew could discover."

"Now decelerating. Bai-Chaznov in communication range, within next ship-day. Taryx and Gyto of Navigation claiming save fuel if route through nebula with shields out at widest, gas enough for frictional braking. Will let try; should keep them happy."

For a few more minutes, the Demon girl scribbled frantically, her eyes wide in shock. At last, she laid her stylus down, and slowly turned to her own K'tal, who was looking dangerously alarmed.

"That's it, sir. End of tape. And they -- well, you'll see." It took all her concentration to hand the last notes over without shaking like a leaf.

"All crew busy on braking manoeuvre, so took key again. Lay in tube, listened hard. Definite sound. Like THUMPING heard in there. Then later, hear scratching, loud scratching as if it can hear me. Got out fast!"

"Mutiny. They have done it well. We are in fast orbit round nebula core, not slingshot. Cannot communicate with Empire. Have locked Bridge door; they cannot break open without damaging life-support circuits. Taryx shout through they going to seize treasure and keep travelling, out far where can spend it. They do not know reach of Empire's grasp! But too late -- Gyto gone down to open cargo pod."

The final entry was disjointed, where W2 had dashed it down word for word.

"Fools! Now too late -- know why explosives round cargo door tube -- would set off at last second from console. It in the ship now. Saw on screen. Recognise it -- thing from Stalystkov. It killing in ship as it goes -- no cameras left, but hear screams. Of all evil luck -- they let it out at worst time, just when BOTH TIMES COME TOGETHER!"

"Heard escape pods go. Stupid. In dense nebula, three-four days before pods braked, fall into star. Better face it here on own ship."

"Quiet now. It ate Taryx. Heard outside door. Have wedged it, but lock is electric, no good against Stalystkov beast. When rested it will be coming for me. Have put out emergency signal, but no time --"

"DOOR BURNING OPEN! THE LIGHT IN THE EYES!"

"Well, I think she's sorta cute."

Dr. Earnshaw looked across at Chester forbearingly, as the ringtail helped her turn the patient over. She ran a striped paw along the sharp corrugations of the centaur's ribcage, and smiled.

"Eeeh, tha'd not be wanting to be the Prince Charming that wakes her, would tha? Poor lass. It'll be awhile yet before she'll feel like doin' owt but kippin' and troffin'."

Chester groomed his long tail, and did his cutest impression of an Arcturan MegaCute. "The thing is, what will we do with her? It looks like she was a prisoner -- and she was being taken to the only unaligned world within range. So we can't let them take her back -- and she's..."

"Aye. The lassie's one of they Demon breeds, tha' don't have to point it out," Lettice sighed, "nobbut a moving target, for any AMF military who sees 'er. Mebbe when she comes round, we'll know better."

The direwolf's naked fur had been carefully washed and groomed, since they had first found her. As indeed had her rescuers -- for she had obviously been weeks in a small pod with no Space-PrivvyTM, and resembled nothing more than a walking biological warfare experiment. Plus, she had been wounded; bright pink furless weals that looked rather like old blaster scars, inflicted maybe a month or so ago.

"Did you HAVE to put her under sedation? Just when we need to talk with her," Chester sat on the edge of a free cot, his tail swinging freely. "I'm sure she'd much rather wake up and have a meal, not just those tubes and things sticking in her." He looked curiously at the stomach tubes now plumbing her into the life-support machine. They had needed replacing four times already; the direwolf's back teeth were massive interlocking chisels, razor edged and driven by cheek muscles the size of the ringtail's two fists.

"Aye? She'd scoff 'erself to death, an' no blaming her," the badger replaced an empty pouch of protein concentrate. "No kindness to keep her awake an' hurting, when she needs all the rest there is. But, it's funny how she's responding so fast..." She frowned, and looked at the medical computer.

The patient had been on constant nourishment for two days now, and all her vital signs were picking up gradually. But apart from simple rehydration, her weight had hardly increased... this was nothing her medical computer could explain to her. Every few hours, Dr. Felinson came over to check on her condition, and went away again to scour remoter back issues of The AstroLancet Magazine in search of a parallel case. Lettice's job was to work out what was a "normal" state of health for such a very abnormal patient to regain.

"In 'er condition, tha'd expect metabolism to shut reet down, nobbut Base rate," Lettice muttered to herself, as she stared hard at the Kirlian scanner. "But she's burnin' four thousand calories a day, fast asleep -- and I know where they're going." The big saddlebag-like organs on her flanks were inflating and plumping out, the blood supply feeding a voracious mystery. Structurally, they were great laminates of alternating tissue types, filling up with sugars and high-energy compounds while the rest of her body was still almost starved.

Suddenly, the screen on the medical monitor gave a flash, as if a voltage spike had gone down the line.

"Damn it! Third time that's happened!" Lettice reset the screen controls. And stared. And looked very closely at the picture that gradually reappeared of the patient's vitals.

"Well, if 'taint a puzzler, this," she said slowly, scratching behind one ear. "It's all changed. Them big saddlebags have shut down to summat like normal. Aye, this I'm reet interested in."

From that hour, as the sensitive cot scales later testified, the centaur began gaining healthy weight in the normal way.

"So, it's five days till we reach docking orbit, eh?" Kiko was swinging lazily in her hammock, reading an antique hardback of "Zen and the art of Mechsuit Maintenance" she had picked up on their last stop. "I wonder who the Captain is going to pick to send down."

The planet Bai-Chaznov sat uneasily astride a border, and it showed. As an isolated Neutral world, it stood no chance against a determined assault by its neighbours -- and indeed it had kept its neutrality assured by making itself extremely useful to both sides. But not by trusting either.

"Yon dirtsideers hae the caution o' a fish in a cat show -- an' I cannae say I blame them," Sharrown nodded, looking through the Trading Regulations they had received earlier on that day. "Jist the one Spaceport on the planet, and jist the one Station on top -- and nae shuttlecraft but theirs allowed in the atmosphere! That, an' a customs search that'd count the fleas on a canine's back, an' issue them wi' visas afore it let them in."

"Hmmm." Kiko turned over in her hammock, which she had slung between a pair of exercise bars in the main rec room. "According to this, there's some ancient ruins not three kilometres from the spaceport. It's not the sort of place you'd go on a rest break -- but on the other hand, it might be the only chance I'll get to see them..."

"I'll nae be happy about settin' paw on ground there, till we ken whit yon Demon ships are up tae. Half the contraband in this sector gaes through Bai-Chaznov -- but that's hardly the kind o' stuff ye'd stick aboard an Official Deputation wi' flags flyin' all the way in."

"No. Unless you already know folk are going to be thinking that -- in which case, you DO."

Cat and mouse grinned at each other mischievously. At last, Kiko voiced the thought that had occurred to them both.

"If it's worthwhile for them to come all this way, it'd be no loss-leader for us to see what's so interesting down there. If the Captain calls for volunteers for the landing party -- well, we've only the guidebook to go on, when it says it's the seediest dive Galactic West of the Frog Star..."

On the surface of the aforementioned world, there were indeed some new arrivals exploring the touristic delights of Bai-Chaznov.

Security Chief Strago hiked his night-black bat-wings up with pleased anticipation, as the heavy gates shut behind them. On the outside, grim-faced Chaznovian guards manned semi-portable blasters to seal off the clean, compulsively tidied streets of the Capital from the outlaw place that was the Oldside.

"This, I LIKE." Strago kicked aside a beggar, turning to his six companions. "Shore leave. As much fun as a napalm tank of fun!" His night eyes scanned the narrow alleyways for the usual mobs of cutpurses and assorted thugs who paid their dues to the Lurker's Guild. The shore leave party were picked from Security, as having survived many a mission despite wearing bright red uniforms as supporting cast for far less expendable Officers.

His lieutenant nodded, exposing finger-length draconic fangs. "Glad we're not expected to march attendance at the Palace, with the Boss. Shame the present for this upstart Emperor didn't make it. Still, I'm told their Arena's a great show anyway."

"Audience Participation," Strago reflected, making an obscene gesture to one of the armoured video cameras that dotted the streets as the sole reminder of the planet's technic present. "Yes. They've got some civilised notions here. In Oldtown, you can be just as civilised as you wanna be, an' nobody cares!"

The Magnificent Seven strode meaningfully down the street, bursts of eerie native flute music seeming to echo in bursts from the darkness, punctuated by sharp whipcracks from upstairs rooms.

Strago struck an antique phosphor match on his lieutenant's scaly snout. Thrusting the Undress red poncho aside, he lit a thin, evilly smelling Narcorillo (hand-rolled from the finest rubber tyre shavings). He turned to his team.

"Men -- there's three kinds of bars in this part of town. The Good, The Bad and the Ugly. Let's go find us a decent, Good one."

The air of disappointment was dense enough to cause a noticeable downdraft in the area as it sank around their spurred boots. But then Strago grinned, swirling round with wings outstretched, hand on the hilt of his David Bowie knife.

"And trash it!"

Still some four days away, the Dragon was having a private celebration of its own.

"Congratulations," Chester slapped Dr. Felinson ringingly on the back, "you did your best -- and still the patient lived!"

Ken Felinson gave a wry grin. "Don't ask me how or why. All I did was guesswork and common sense. It's Lettice who's to thank."

In the narrow sick bay, a long-furred centaur was on her feet. Emaciated and weak, yes -- she wobbled like a newborn fawn, and her eyes looked around almost as wonderingly -- but alive and conscious.

A quick call on the intercom patched in Sharrown and W2, busy at their work but more than intrigued to hear what their labours had brought them. "Hiv ye spoken to the lassie hersel' then?" Sharrown's low voice was in Lettice's earplug.

"Nay. She's still not lookin' reet with it, yet. She's a hefty size, though but, tha' wouldn't have got her out of they tube in a hurry now." Lettice whispered back, then cautiously approached the grey-pelted centaur.

On her four walking feet at last, the direwolf towered above Lettice. Wide, bright eyes looked down on her with an unnerving glitter.

"I'm Doctor Earnshaw," that worthy introduced herself. "You're on board the Space Trader Dragon, we rescued you from the transport ship. Do you remember that?"

A glimmer of understanding seemed to dawn in those great eyes. Lettice had the uncomfortable sensation that she was staring down the waveguides of something designed to burn armoured vehicles into piles of half-molten scrap at several kilometres range. Half a minute passed, and the centaur spoke, her voice surprisingly high and childish from such a ferocious frame.

"Sabaoth zil-zugyo, takhalaska todo, yeg'hrathaskathon jokio."

"Tha' what?" the Badger exclaimed. It sounded rather like the sort of thing she had last heard Kiko say after dropping a large wrench on her own tail.

"Sabaoth zil-zugyo, takhalaska todo, yeg'hrathaskathon jokio."

Lettice turned to the communicator. "Does anybody understand what..."

"Sabaoth zil-zugyo, takhalaska todo, yeg'hrathaskathon jokio."

"... she's saying, please?"

There was a pause. At last, the helpful tones of W2 came over the intercom.

"Well, it sounds to ME like Ghak'vortan with a broad Neo-Birmingham accent. If she's saying what I THINK she is, you've got her..."

"Aye?"

The Demon girl coughed, embarrassed. "She's giving you her name, rank, and serial number."

It said a lot for the medical team's desperation, that they finally agreed to a plot Chester had suggested.

"Well, as long as she thinks she's a prisoner, we're hardly going to get anything out of her, are we?" he had brightly proposed. "So let's take her on a tour of the ship, show her a good time -- even if she doesn't speak the language, I'm sure she'll get the message."

Dr. Earnshaw was heard to mutter something about "Prince Charming" under her breath. At last, she and Ken agreed.

"Poor lass, she's weak as a kitten, or looks it," she commented. "Don't tha' go a-wearing her out now! An' don't go anywhere with her alone."

The ringtail coyly batted his eyelashes. "Why, Doctor Earnshaw, AS IF I'd take advantage of a poor defenceless young direwolf, with nothing to guard her virtue but six sets of razor claws, and the sort of teeth I've only seen on an Arcturan Megagator. Perish the thought."

Lettice counted to ten and thought of her Hippocratic Oath, while her hindbrain carried on with its background task of seeking something large and heavy to hit him with. "Aye. But if'n she falls over, tha' wants more'n one of thi' to get her up agin'."

The intercom crackled, with Kiko's familiar voice. "I'm all done on this job down here. And I speak a word or two of most of the Demon Languages -- don't let Chester go off with her till I get there!"

Chester's tail "accidentally" tickled the centaur under her chin as he turned round. This, he thought to himself, was going to be interesting.

Since embarking on its career as an "independent" trading vessel, the Dragon had seen some strange sights. But the sight of a quadruped girl shyly trotting behind Chester and Kiko, her great eyes taking it all in with a wondering gaze, was surely one of the strangest. There had been no clothes in the pod they had found her in; Dr. Earnshaw had improvised a sheet as a basic horse-blanket, and two tied cloths to cover strategic areas.

"... And this is the Galley," Chester concluded his tour of the main deck. "You can get almost anything the Synthesisers can handle here -- we've quite a range on the menu most days." He turned to one of the Toppers, who was carrying a greasy spoon as a sacred badge of office. "What's on, for our special guest?"

The little hybrid's eyes gleamed, as he flicked through a 50-page guide to the sophisticated nucleosynthesiser system. Surprisingly, all the pages looked identical today.

"Well, you can have Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam and Spam, or Spam with Spam, Spam, Spam and Spam."

At the table, a dozen Toppers began to pound their cutlery on the tables impatiently. A close harmony rang out through the echoing hall.

"Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam; Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, SPAM, SPAM, SPAMMITY SPAM!" White plastic cutlery gleamed menacingly in the tightly clenched paws.

Kiko sighed. "Let's just take a bowl of whatever they can persuade to leave its native pot, all right? We can introduce our guest to the more sophisticated delights later." Her eyes widened unconsciously, as she adjusted the Freudian slip she wore beneath her skirt.

Chester nodded vigorously, as he put his Looming Menacingly correspondence course into practice against the cook.

"Three bowls of the finest, rarest Arcturan MegaSteakbeest, IF you please!" He slapped a palm noisily on the counter.

The little Topper looked back at him undaunted. And something that went "Splut!" dropped pendulously into their bowls.

Back at the table, Chester and Kiko placed the bowl with its pinkish contents in front of their guest.

"Eat! Good!" Chester pointed at his own Spam Surprise *, hoped she had no telepathic Lie Detection skills, and bravely dug into it. The spoon stood up to well past its design limit; unfortunately, so did the meal. The centaur looked on in vacant fascination.

Kiko shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "You know, I've heard things about how the Demon races "get creative" with their underlings. Do you think... she might be a sort of economy version of a sentient species?"

Chester grinned, turning his bowl upside-down and slamming it on the table in an attempt to loosen its contents. "I hope she's house-trained, at least -- she doesn't seem to appreciate good food any more than the folk who cook it in here!"

"Food?" All turned around. The word had come from the Direwolf herself. Kiko whistled.

"Well, so you DO speak some of our language, after all. Yes, Food. Eat!" She pointed at the algal spun-protein with less enthusiasm than she had had before discovering how the ship's waste recycling system worked.

The Centaur looked at the bowl with a puzzled expression. She cocked her head to one side, and poked the contents as if she expected it to run away. Nothing happened.

"Food dead. No good." Her ears drooped tragically. "Hungry!" And then her gaze met the line of Toppers currently tucking into their luncheon meal of delicious "Biomass In A Bun™" at the table opposite, and her eyes lit up with the brilliance of a weapons console suddenly coming online. Her jaws swung open.

"HUNGRY!"

Four seconds later, they had the place all to themselves. But still, as Kiko pointed out, it was rare enough to get a meal down in peace Anywhere these days...

* Recipe for Spam Surprise: take one plump, prime Luxillian Ultra-Pheasant, and hang till the flesh is sending any carrion-eaters in the crew insane with greed. Cook very thoroughly in a handmade clay oven, using only perfectly dried Rigillian Spicewood as fuel, and ensuring the bird is kept basted constantly with Saurian Brandy. Clear the kitchen of onlookers, and announce that Dinner is Served.

The final stage is to thoroughly remove the meat from inside, leaving only the thin crispy shell intact. Stuff with boiled Spam, serve to a roomful of famished gourmets, and RUN.

"Aye, sir, they've persuaded the lassie to eat our stuff an' no' our staff," Sharrown's voice was sharp with a grim humour as he reported to the Captain, his tail twitching. "She's nae too clear on a lot o' things. I dinnae ken if a' her circuits are workin' straight, wi' whit she's been through."

Behind him was the main rec room, where the party had halted its journey to rest. After checking with sickbay, they had brought a hamper that had been sitting in Sharrown's locker since their last planetfall.

"Best cut o' dried an' spiced Arcturan Angus," he looked on as his souvenir found an appreciative home. "She's welcome tae it, but it'll be a gey lang time afore I'll get the like again."

"Nice!" Chester looked on, watching her with fascinated interest. "Say, Sharry, isn't that the famous brand -- the one that's got aphrodisiac qualities so extreme it's banned from half the AMF systems, and taxed a trillion percent in the rest?"

"No."

The ringtail sighed. "Pity. Oh well, it was a nice idea, anyway."

Just then, W2 trotted in, looking brisk and helpful. A blank notebook was prominent at her belt.

Oh no, Sharrown groaned inwardly. No' again. No' jist now. She's gaun' tae open a new chapter o' her book, on wir newest arrival...

The centaur seemed to flinch at the sight of the Demon girl. W2's face fell.

"Yesra'hai uduthna tuk asako. Grashna'la do foto Chunkala," she pronounced, slowly and carefully.

"What's she saying?" Chester whispered loudly.

Kiko shrugged. "Well, that depends. In Horskal, she's telling her not to worry. In Ghak-Vortan, I THINK she just said, "This is a tobacconist's shop, Lord Meldron. My hovercraft is full of eels.""

The prospect of an entire hovercraft full of nice tasty eels seemed to be something that appealed to their guest. Her ears went back up slowly, and hand-claws resheathed themselves. The claws, Sharrown noted with interest, were of an almost silvery sheen. For a minute, she looked from one expectant face to another.

"I hight Sabaoth Sixty-Six," her voice was unsteady. "Give mission briefing, now yes?"

Kiko winced. "Thought so. She's a military model of whatever-she-is. Just our luck."

W2's eyes lit up. "Gosh! Are you one of the new sort? I'd heard there'd been experiments on engineering from the genes up, but I've never SEEN one." She hesitantly ran an exploring hand down the centaur's rear spine. Then her expression changed. "Hang on. I've got an idea -- I'll see how she responds to this." Drawing herself up to her full height, she spread her wings imperiously, and tried for a deep and commanding voice with much the same degree of success as Kiko might attempt a Galaxy weightlifting record.

"Unit Sabaoth 66, immediate report on current mission status!"

There was a blur of movement that even Sharrown could hardly follow, as Sabaoth leaped! But those murderous claws stayed in their sheath -- at the last millisecond, the centaur pulled up short, barely touching W2 with the tip of one paw. Strangely, the lights in the room seemed to flicker.

For an instant, the room was frozen into horrified silence. Then with a slow toppling and a small thud, the imitation Imperial keeled over and collapsed unconscious.

Chester and Kiko were at her side in a second, while Sabaoth looked on in wide-eyed surprise.

"It's OK -- I think she just fainted," Kiko pronounced, dialling Sickbay anyway. "Must have been the shock."

"Aye. Weel. That wisnae sic' a guid idea onyway, I'm thinking," Sharrown grimaced, looking up at Sabaoth who was standing with hands placidly folded, as if awaiting the next stimulus to action. "Ye can bide yer tale until ye want tae tell it, lassie. I'll nae try to gie ye orders, an' that's a promise!"

On the benighted streets of Bai-Chaznov's OldSide, the bright red uniforms of the Demon Fleet's Security detachment took only a few evenings to become a familiar sight. True, they had to send for the occasional replacements or medical assistance -- but none had been fatally killed yet, despite several quite excellent brawls.

Strago was in an excellent mood as he and three of his surviving team made their way through the blood-spattered dark alleyways that night. Shocking various footpads and Piano Assassins into falling off their lurking posts, he broke into riotous song, warming himself up for more solid rioting later:

"Ground, Ground, on the ground, targets abound
It simply astounds how targets abound..."

I'm getting bugged riding shotgun for this same old ship
Gotta find a new place where they give me some lip...
My buddies and me, are getting too well known
Yea, the good guys know us, and they leave us alone

Round, round, brawl around, lovin' that sound
Ain't going to quit while there's foemen around...

Well, we're going on leave; what we really enjoy
Is mating or eating what we'll not just destroy
They'll know why they call us the Demon Empire
'cause they'll give us respect or they're gonna expire..."

He came to an abrupt stop, both in his tuneful howling and his padding progress. "Yes, boys -- and Stagnak -- this is the place. Now, leave some of it standing -- we're coming back here tomorrow."

They paused at an unmarked Green Door. There was an old piano thumping out hot tunes on the far side, and an unmistakable scent of mixed musks eddied out into the alleyway.

"Green door, one more night without sleepin'," Stagnak grinned, as her chief pounded paint off it. With an enviable sense of direction, the Security chief had dived into the lowest dive in Oldside -- a position for which there were many keen rivals. Sure, he was doing some private business deals in there -- you didn't join the Space Fleet to be poor -- but his backup force had more to do than just sit around at the bar while he arranged things. There were all those narrow, soundproofed cubicles at the back of the establishment to be serviced in FAR more satisfyingly...

Stagnak's tail twisted aside at the recollection, like the shield slipping from an opening weapons port. The pair of cute young male bunnies she had bought last time had BETTER have been saving themselves for her since then! Fangs began to slaver; almost, she hoped they had disobeyed her order.

The Green Door swung open, and Stagnak clattered in beside her chief, her centaur paws stepping high over the threshold. They had definitely shown these groundlings a thing or two last time. The Green Door was a wonderful place for a Demon with a full purse: there was SO much of interest to buy there. Especially for those with a taste for small, fluffy natives with barely compatible biology and gratifyingly loud squealing voices...

Ten seconds later, the volley of anaesthetic darts had dropped the Security team in their tracks. It seemed there WERE some things they had yet to learn about life in the OldSide.

"About the best thing you can say about that ball of rock," Captain K'tal Sabre grumbled as the planet grew steadily in the forward viewscreens, "is it's a good place to make a fast piece of money. IF you get out with your hide still on."

"Ah, monsieur, it eez the cuisine de diable, vraitment," Caresse nodded as she laid in their orbital course, her tail nodding with concentration. "Do we 'ave the scrambled links that, ow' you say, are our breadline 'ere?"

Caresse came from a poor but honest planet. It was in fact SO poor that its founding colonists could not even afford a language; they had been forced to manage with nothing but ancient Maurice Chevalier impressions.

K'Tal nodded. "The offworld traffic's totally controlled through OldSide -- it's a kind of sponsored slum by the spaceport. Seems like the Margrave doesn't care what goes on in there, as long as it makes money." Just then, a red light began to wink on the communications board.

"We'll be in orbital dock in, what, thirty hours?" The big feline turned to his skunk pilot, who nodded. "Good. Because that message channel is one end of our breadline."

For half an hour, the encryption circuits received a strenuous workout as various deals and cargoes were discussed and haggled over. Some cargoes the Dragon would stay clear of at any price; others simply were a matter of negotiation. At last, K'Tal nodded and turned to the bridge crew.

"All right! We've a cargo of native crude turpentine to ship three systems to Gargamel Nine, where they don't use it as paint-stripper -- by all accounts, it's the most heavily taxed perfume on the books. And it's legal to carry until we hand it over -- so we won't have to worry about GalSec sniffing after us for it. General meeting at dayshift end to discuss the landing arrangements."

Dayshift ended, and the meeting came and went.

"It's not fair," Chester yawned, stretching luxuriously. "You get to go on ALL the fun trips."

"Ha! This isnae one o' them," Sharrown muttered. "Backup for yon main team, tae pull their tails oot o' the traps if they yell for help. We'll be one step in behind them, watching their backs doon there -- but fa's gaun' tae watch ours, eh?"

Kiko looked him up and down; he had changed his trousers from an orange-blue check to a vaguely camouflaged pattern of pinks and reds. She privately thought it looked horribly like a medical diagram of various degrees of skin burns. "You heard what they said -- no weapons of any kind allowed on the station, and you can't buy them down planetside either. Oh, they HAVE them, all right -- but the only blasters on the planet are in the Government and the import/export trade. So it's who's best with what they were born with that counts -- that's why Felina Aniara's going in the first group along with Deck."

"An' whit a lassie tae hae on your side in a fight," Sharrown's tail twitched dreamily. The big four-armed feline was someone he looked up to -- even extending his cranked legs, he had little option in the matter...

Just then, came a discreet cough. Turning round, they saw Dr. Earnshaw standing behind them.

"If tha's quite finished wi' dragging her on several orbits of t' ship," she said sternly, "I'd quite like to have me patient back. It's high time she was a-bed."

Both Kiko and Chester gave an involuntary jump. Lettice glared at them. "In 'ospital, you pair o' sex maniacs! I've a lot of work to see what makes 'er tick, and she needs kip. She'll be out ta play termorrer."

As a sleepy Sabaoth was led back towards the sickbay, two pairs of eyes were focused on her retreating tail and angular, bobbing rump. Sharrown's own eyes were focussed on the interesting expressions on their faces. The little feline grinned, and strolled off whistling down the corridor.

He had just realised what the wager would be on the ship's next sweepstake.

While some folk raced around the ship placing bets, Dr. Lettice Earnshaw was busy with some more productive work on the bone of their contention. And "bones" described her, indeed -- despite spending most of the day eating, she was still ravenous for a big, high-protein meal.

"Where do you come from?" she asked cautiously, while the direwolf ate. There had been some cheap frozen sides of Agarian Marsh RatSwine in the medical section, that Ken had planned to use as surgical training for the paramedic teams. But there were greater needs right now; Sabaoth was happily crunching her way through them. Literally. Her face rapt in concentration, those huge chisel-like back teeth sheared and snipped through heavy bones as if they were sugar candy.

"Came from the Camp," she said simply. "Lots others like me. All taken away to stars, then I go too one day."

Lettice sighed. This was not going to be easy. "Do you know any place names, for instance? Or where your parents came from?"

A shake of the head. "Masters say made in Camp. Built there, with eight-tens sisters all same. Some die training, some taken away. I'm last of them all. Big empty camp, wait for ship."

The badger switched up the volume on her recorder. "What happened on the ship? Can you remember any of it?"

Sabaoth's eyes were bleak. "Shut up in big dark thing, lots of banging and noises outside -- get very heavy, then very light lots times. Masters come throw food in -- some fun catching it in dark! One time food hurt me first, long time getting better." She proudly pointed to one of the healed pink scars on her flank, the fur already growing over it since her rescue.

"Got hungry and hungry in dark there -- miss sisters when time comes both ways, nobody to cuddle. Then get hungrier still -- can't remember."

"It's a good thing you can't," Lettice sighed with relief, "there was summat else aboard that ship -- we reckon it must have got into one of the escape pods. If you hadn't have been out of the way -- whatever et the rest of the crew, would have killed you too."

Sabaoth nodded dreamily, as she snuggled down on the medical couch, shifting slightly as her new friend reattached monitoring probes and pointed remote scanners on her. In a few seconds she was sound asleep, content and happy as a pup.

Lettice stood looking down at her for a full minute. Then she frowned, and went next door to her medical computer. She had found out a lot already -- and most of it just didn't make sense.

"Even allowing for the subject's starved condition, her metabolic rate seems too low to explain her food intake," she dictated for her notes, as she scanned the medical computers. "Scans show enormously high throughput of protein in the ribcage organs -- the biochemical action there is the highest I've ever seen in any adult of any species. Plus, her hormonal

levels seem to be increasing." She smiled, and turned off the microphone. "But that looks natural to me. Happen she's one o' they species that go into season in a big way."

She looked at her patient speculatively. As was becoming glisteningly obvious, it was her tail end that was getting ready to make new friends. What Sabaoth had at the front was quite hidden in her fur, and looked almost undeveloped.

"I've always wondered about Centaur metabolism," she switched the recorder back on. "She's got two sets o' glands, and the one circulatory system that shares 'em. But they don't look like they're in sync. Mebbe it's feedback -- one goes on, t' other goes off. And there's organs I've not seen afore; big glands right next to the ovaries both ends. Plus some stuff that looks like protective covers for the eyes, and blast shutters on the ears. She's military all right -- tha' might say she's got fatigues rather than Genes on."

On the couch, she could see Sabaoth's eyes starting to move, as a dream started and her body responded. A back leg began to twitch spasmodically, and her hand claws popped out of their neat feline-style sheaths. Whoever had designed her, Lettice thought ironically, certainly knew what they were doing. I wish they'd provided a User Manual!

She turned away towards the sinks to root out a jar of coffee; her head ached with trying to make sense of it all.

"Anything in the literature about her?" she asked hopefully, as Dr. Felinson looked in on the patient.

The Lynx's ears went flat. "The only thing we've got on centaurs is from autopsies after battle. And there's generally not a lot left to go on -- those things just keep going while there's half of them still attached. She doesn't even fit what data we've got -- there's nothing like all those extra organs on record. And her brain's the strangest thing I've ever seen on a sentient."

"Aye? She's a bit off-colour right now, but I haven't seen owt wrong wi' her responses."

Ken punched a key on the medical monitor, and a cranial scan appeared. "Imagine if you gave someone a full lobotomy. And then grew these areas here -- and here -- to fill the gap. All this visual cortex, full of specialised features that don't seem to DO anything right now! And then imagine if that was genetically NORMAL for her. Which it is."

Gratefully, he accepted the hot coffee Lettice poured him. It looked like being a long night.

In the great white monolith of Plascrete that was the Palace and heart of Bai-Chaznovian power, Lord Ashako was enjoying the hospitality of the Margrave.

"As Envoy to our great Empire, of course I'm prejudiced," he said smoothly. "Anything that forms closer ties with your fair world -- voluntarily, of course -- is to our advantage."

Margrave NI the Merciless, Tyrant of Bai-Chaznovian Space and Ruler of All He Surveyed, was not quite what the Demon Envoy had expected. The official bio had told of a cutthroat pirate who had built up his planetary base and hideout to become a major power in the sector, surviving duels and assassination attempts so frequent that the official texts only mentioned them in terms of yearly graphs, alongside the planet's booming illicit trade figures.

NI the Merciless nodded eagerly, then consulted the royal timepiece. An antique of uncounted age this, dug from the alien ruins beside the spaceport -- its design dated from the early phase in the universal expansion, when digital watches were still considered a Really Neat Idea.

"Oh... would you just back off a couple of metres, be a good chap?" NI waved his guest back from the Royal Presence. "It's that time of day again. Wouldn't want you to get hurt. Now, you were saying?"

Lord Ashako cleared his throat. "It has come to my attention that my Security team, on shore-leave approved by yourself, has been ambushed, and is being held somewhere in your... picturesque city. Since your rules forbid us to take any military action -- it would be APPRECIATED if you could do something about it."

"Oh, yes! Let's see about that. DuQuesne!" The Margrave clapped paws, and a clown-suited figure stepped forward. "This is DuQuesne, of my Department Of Being Ever So Nice To Good Citizens Everywhere. He was thrown out of the Galashavorn Secret Police, you know, for his beliefs. He believes, quite rightly in MY view, that you can find all SORTS of fun things to do with a bacon-slicer."

"Sir? Demon shore party, kidnapping, investigation of?" Duquesne was a tall, green scaled reptilian who had obviously seen his share of troubles. One arm was a metallic construct that shone with fascinating gadgets like a power-tool variant of a Swiss Navy Knife. His other prosthetics, such as the artificial head, were of a plain, wipe-clean stainless steel pattern.

"Sir! Demon shore party, located yesterday. Destined for sale in Arena next week -- in meantime being useful as Entertainments, Public, For The Use Thereof."

The Margrave nodded, and dismissed him with a wave. "You see, there's nothing to be worried about. My citizens are simply testing the lethal dosage of some newly derived hormonal stimulants on them -- some of our ladies have a taste for unwilling males -- and you'll see them later in the Arena. You DID say you would be bringing something special on those lines for me, didn't you?"

Lord Ashako's wings hiked up in acquiescence. The beast from Stalystkov they had promised the Margrave had not been aboard the freighter they had found abandoned. Strago was a fairly valuable Security Chief -- but the goodwill of an entire planet was well worth the price. Besides, he was looking forward to seeing how well he did in the Arena.

"If your Majesty wishes it..." he bowed, and turned to leave the Royal Presence. Just at that moment, there was an ear-splitting crash as the roof fell in! He had a split-second's view of a heavy cargo helicopter hovering above the Palace, through the hole its dropped cargo had punched straight through to the throne room -- and of the sixteen tonnes of steel girders that had smashed the Throne and its occupant into a crater in the floor.

Suddenly there was movement in the debris, and NI the Merciless shoved one of the buckled girders aside as the plump bear stood up, brushing the concrete-dust off his pale pink plush.

"Ah, right on schedule," the Toon Tyrant consulted his watch. "I find it so much more honest, to let the People freely voice their opinions, don't you?"

"Well, I honestly think she'd look better in THIS style," Chester held out the costume sketch.

The unused part of the Sickbay was currently looking more like a dressmakers, as Kiko, W2 and Sharrown tried to come up with a suitable costume for Sabaoth.

"This IS a challenge, isn't it?" Chester continued. "We can't even ask her what she's used to wearing -- because she isn't."

Sabaoth nodded eagerly. The only clothing she had ever worn was ballistic armour, which she had hated being confined in. All these two-legged people seemed to cover most of their fur up -- it certainly made things more colourful.

"Clothes Neat!" She looked around in delight at all the attention she was getting.

Sharrown sat, looking on as Kiko tried to translate Waist and Inside Leg measurements into the equivalent Height at Shoulder and Girth Diameter. His own designs had been unanimously howled down -- besides, the ship's fabricator had difficulty with the banana yellow, fluorescent lime-green and ultra-violet emitting fabrics they were based on.

"Well, it's me for yon pillow," he yawned, tired after a full shift. "The morn's morning, it's doon tae yon joyless hole whaur we've tae pick up oor cargo, an' come hame wi' our tails on if we can." He had pressed and ironed his best bulletproof vest and jacket; they were a subdued camouflage pattern, just as regulations stated.

Of course, these things are relative. The environment they blended into was the PetalStorm Jungles of Ska'hal Three, where the skies themselves were Day-Glo orange, and the vegetation was unwilling to come a poor second for colour boldness...

Kiko put on a set of welder's goggles, and looked at him. "You think they'll let you get that gear through Customs, when they won't even let you carry a pocket-knife? If anything's an offensive weapon, that is..."

"Ye've nae taste, the pair o' ye," the little wildcat grinned. "I'll bid ye guid nicht, then."

Twelve hours later, Sharrown was almost wishing he had his Artificial Trendiness computer wired into his outfit, so he could reprogram it to "Urban Camo Retro-Chic".

The four of them stood outside a large warehouse, still within sight of the spaceport. Ken, Klaxon and Tarjon were with him, as they kept a sharp lookout for trouble.

"I feel naked without my hardware," Ken Felinson muttered, as the icy wind blew around them. With Sabaath out of the sickbay, he had come to where his services were more likely to be urgently needed -- and using a stunner gave him no ethical problems where defending his friends was concerned. "So the locals don't want armed foreigners walking around planetside. Big deal! Some of those crates in there are parts and ammo for military mechs, or I'm a Topper."

"Aye, I noticed those masel'," Sharrown scratched his ears thoughtfully. "I'm nae happy wi'oot ony protection in a place like this masel' -- an' I'm wonderin' if we could mebbe use some initiative and local resources. Are ye wi' me, Tarjon?"

The wolf nodded. They were standing in a secure compound, with heavily armed guards patrolling the perimeter where it faced the teeming alleyways of the OldSide. But that could be an advantage -- if the outside area was believed safe, just maybe the buildings themselves had less than airtight security...

"Gotcha." Ten minutes later, they were high up at the back of the building, taking the securing ties off a roof vent.

"Galactic Building Regulations, bless 'em," Tarjon grinned. "All civilian buildings with flammable or explosive contents MUST have emergency smoke vents, or they can't get insured."

Sharrown carefully placed the loosened panel flat on the fire escape. "I'll be in an' oot like smoke, jist ye watch me." With that, he slipped into the dark, turpentine-fragrant roof space of the warehouse.

In a few minutes he was back. "Told ye so! Look here -- tasers, stun grenades -- fill yuir pockets, laddie, it's a few wee presents we've got to take wi' us. An' all of it stolen in the first place; AMF military markings on all the boxes -- so dinnae be shy o' takin' it." His own waistcoat had assumed a definitely pregnant outline.

Just then, there was a noise on the fire escape below them. Without taking a second to look down, they both silently slipped into the roof, and pulled the loose plate across to cover the hole.

"Two of them," Tarjon breathed, as he held the plate tight shut, and prayed nobody looked too closely at it. The footsteps came nearer, and then stopped.

"Heh -- if they try to bug us here, they'll have a tough job of it," a deep voice came from just outside. "I think this should be safe enough. No windows around to bounce a laser pickup off, either."

"Iss good," came a reptilian hiss. "Ssssoo, you iss havink problemss with deal with Demon... party?"

A gruff bark. "They're having problems! This Chief Strago, paid me in genuine money for three crates of low-tech artillery we got from Damogran Nine, all untraceable stuff you could fit on a mechsuit. Then he gets himself nabbed by the Arena crews -- leaving me with the stuff."

"Ssso? Iss good indeed -- iss selling twice to new customer, yesss?"

"Is not good at all. The Boss is checking the warehouse next week -- the stuff is so hot even HE doesn't know it's in there! I'm going to make one last try to pass it on at the Busted Skull tomorrow -- if nobody comes, it'll have to be a demolition job on sixty kilocredits worth of hardware. No, is not good at all! And I never even got to meet this Strago, either!" There was a brief pause. "Say - could you shift it off my hands? Worth sixty, you can have it for ten if it's out of the compound tomorrow."

A dry hissing laugh. "Iss not in Antiques business! Iss good reasons why blasters sell today. Am not wanting be stuck with scrap not selling for another thousands years."

"Damn! That tears it - now I'll Have to hang around the Busted Skull. And just hope they show up."

"Is troubles, yess. But not in recognising -- is no other Demon peoples now in OldSide. You meet, you know them."

There was a grunt of assent, and the two sets of footsteps receded.

Three minutes later, the roof panel opened, and two cautious muzzles poked out. Tarjon's ears were twitching with excitement.

"Sharry? Are you thinking the same thing I'm thinking?"

"Aye, laddie. That indeed I am."

The planet Bai-Chaznov not only banned outworlders from taking their own shuttles into its atmosphere, but it banned them importing communication devices capable of transmitting to orbit. If they wanted to, foreigners could use the pay telephones at the spaceport -- and "PAY" was exactly what they demanded. In large quantities.

So it was that Sharrown and Tarjon were not in the best of moods the next day, as the scheduled service touched down on the concrete pad. Fighting off the universe-wide hordes of charity collectors, they had manoeuvred themselves into one of the carefully designed blind spots currently free of the trenchcoated individuals sporting bright cheerful yellow "Secret Police" badges.

"So, today they're loadin' our cargo, all legal and above board," the wolf mused, "which gives US some time to look around this Oldside, and pick up whatever deal this Demon officer has waiting for him." His long teeth showed in a grin. "Good thing we've got some genuine and unmistakable Demon Empire folk on board! You're sure W2 understood what she's got to do?"

Sharrown craned his neck over to look at the crowd in the concourse. "I telt her plain, that I did. Run up some gewgaw o' a uniform an' come on doon tae us. Then we'll be in an' oot afore onybody knows we've outstayed oor welcome here."

Tarjon nodded towards a giant hologram poster of the pink and fluffy Tyrant. "I'll be glad to see the Dragon again. I won't say this place is unfriendly, but there's something unnerving about public charities collecting to have their own government assassinated..." He ducked out of sight as a pair of yellow-robed collectors strolled into view, their Smart Collection Boxes sniffing for the electromagnetic emissions of credit cards in the crowd. These pests he recognised, as did every other inhabitant of 4-D Spacetime. It had been a major irritation of early space travellers, to have finally crossed the

empty gulfs between Galactic Arms and discover that mendicants of the divine couple, Harry and Eunice Krishna, had beaten them to it.

At that second, a strange transformation came over the little wildcat. His ears bristled, and his tail fluffed out like a log as a mixture of astonishment and horror crawled across his face. Wordlessly, he pointed to the crowd in the concourse.

"I felt the lassie tae mak' it look convincing. She must hae thought I meant bring ALL the Demon troopers we can spare." For a second it looked as if he was going to choke. "Yon stupid, ba' heidit bat-brain -- oot o' a' the worlds she's nae safe tae tak' till, she's gone and brought HER here..."

W2 and Kiko were looking around the concourse, dressed in a splendidly bogus and overstated version of Imperial Full Dress Uniform. But that was not what troubled Sharry.

They had brought Sabaath with them. To the very planet she had been brought as a prisoner in the first place.

"Well, from all accounts there WAS a centaur in the team that got lost," W2 declared brightly, when everyone had stopped shouting at her. "If you want to convince these folk who've never met them -- she'll be perfect. How'd you like her Priestess outfit?"

Sabaath was draped in a loose white barding that reached to her knees fore and aft, with a deep white hood swathing her head and upper torso. Around the bare fur of her waist was a band of religious artifacts -- at least, the interlocked carvings of broken bones and screaming skulls LOOKED fairly anti-saintly. Definitely Low Church, Sharrown decided.

"We decided she'd do well in the sort of obvious disguise folk don't look at twice," Kiko patted the erstwhile Priestess's rump. "Our uniforms are sort of Army Surplus -- hers is Clerical Surplice."

Tarjon groaned. "Kiko -- we thought YOU'D have enough sense not to bring her down here of all places."

But the slim mouse smiled mischievously, shaking her long black hair in the cold wind. "We've found out a few things about her -- she's not as defenceless as she looks, now she's well-fed again. Come on, let's get over to this Busted Skull place -- I could do with a drink."

The Busted Skull Inn was not the kind of place that would feature highly in guidebooks -- there is a Galaxy-wide dearth of fierce, heavily armed guidebook writers with no family commitments, willing to do the fieldwork.

"Nice piece of sculpture!" W2 commented, looking up at the inn sign that creaked above the blaster-scarred door.

That isnae sculpture, Sharrown thought wearily as he brought up the rear of the protective convoy. And this isnae a place whaur the police go around in pairs -- they go in under heavy artillery barrages, wi' air superiority...

Inside, all was dim. The decor that slowly revealed itself looked indeed as if it had been designed to undergo a major battle and not look much more wrecked afterwards.

Kiko nudged their "Officer", who gave a most undisciplined squeal of surprise, and headed off towards the bar.

"Lovely place for a party," Tarjon commented sourly. "Looks like all the customers work at "Mysterious-Hooded-Strangers-Peering-out-of-the-Corners-R-Us". "

In the meantime, W2 had fished out a credit card, and was trying to look suitably commanding at the bar. "Barkeep! Drinks all round -- we'll have whatever the House Special is." The chorus of anguished groans behind her went unheeded.

Something that was mainly spikes and shaggy fur picked up the card and stared at it. "This thing stolen?" A voice like backed-up waste recyclers demanded, from out of a cloud of matching perfume.

W2 shook her head. The being grunted, and pointed to a sign on the wall: "All transactions made with stolen credits are charged 15% commission. Still, why should YOU care?"

It amazed nobody that the tables with backs to the wall were already fully occupied. In a few minutes, they were sitting in a defensive circle in the centre of the room, staring at five glasses full of something that was speedily evaporating at room temperature.

Kiko grinned mirthlessly at their "leader". "This was your idea. Bottoms up -- we can't breach etiquette by drinking before you."

W2 nodded cheerfully, and tossed back about half the glass in one easy action.

Sabaath had been watching this with eager fascination. Her ears rose, and her tail hiked high at the sight. "Kiko," she asked brightly, "will MY face go that coloured, under fur, yes?"

The mouse's own tail twitched with amusement. "I think I'll just order us a Cobra-Cola to drink while we're waiting. It doesn't bite back THAT hard."

Sitting around expectantly in a place like the Busted Skull is sure to attract attention. Indeed, in the next hour they were approached by a dozen or more of the regulars, offering deals on merchandise or services that had even Kiko's ears blushing in embarrassment as she declined them. All in all, it was a VERY good thing that Chester had been detained on the Dragon.

"At last," Sharrown breathed, as a voice he recognised was heard at the door. "'At's yon fine fellow we listened in on, who's wantin' us to get a deal aff his hands."

In strode a grim, red-furred bear, ducking under the lintel as he looked round the room. There was a flash of recognition as he saw a bat-winged officer and a centaur, obviously of the Demon Empire -- and he slowly beckoned them out of the inn.

An hour later, they made a rendezvous with an unmarked cargo trailer. Whatever was in it, Kiko at least could hardly fault the location they had chosen.

"I was right," she hauled out her camera. "These alien ruins really ARE worth the trip to see them!"

"The absolute..." Security Officer Strago panted under his breath, "the absolute... utter... utter... BASTARDS!"

You didn't survive wearing a bright red uniform in the Demon Empire for long without learning a few tricks. That afternoon, with the aid of an electrical cable ripped out of the wall and a heavy metal belt-buckle, he had arc-welded his way out of the Arena holding pens where his team were being kept between "engagements".

"If it's not bad enough with what the Natives did," he spat as they rounded a bend in the storm-drain, to see light ahead, "our own Noble Commander just handed us over LIKE THAT!"

He had liberated his team, all extremely sore in far more ways than one. They had wrung the truth out of a hapless guard as they made their way out through the Arena cellars -- and knew they had been abandoned in the heart of a hostile planet, with no way home.

"Sir -- there's one chance," Stagnak was hardly out of breath, as the centaur's four feet splashed through the deep muck, "-- if we can still make the rendezvous at the Busted Skull -- we might still get enough out of the deal to set us up. This is the place to start out, all right."

"Right," Strago nodded. "I was thinking that myself. How'd you all like to get promoted -- first ship we see with the door open, and I'm a Captain, you're officers. With what we're about to get, shouldn't be so hard."

The Demon Empire had a high turnover of officers. Its ancient custom was to send down its Ship's Captain, First Officer and as many of the command staff as would fit in a shuttlecraft, to any dangerous situation where other civilisations would send in the Marines. This did at least have the advantage of keeping the Command staff young and vigorous, and ensuring rapid promotion up through the ranks for anybody who wanted to get there. (It also explained why so many Demon vessels turned Pirate, where they didn't have to follow stupid Standing Orders like that.)

When his weary team arrived at that salubrious establishment to discover "they" had been there half an hour earlier, Strago stopped being angry. Indeed, he was no longer even upset.

The Ghak'vortan language has a word that sounds something like -- Chhraska'trrigighoth'sstacknashtaiiii! Although its precise meaning is mercifully untranslatable, it now described his mood EXACTLY.

In the complex of tumbled walls that slowly crumbled under the weather and the vibrations from the spaceport, the Dragon's crew were about to take part in a little Free Trade Agreement. To be exact, they were taking collection of the locked trailer Strago had traded for -- and they thought getting it Free was quite Agreeable.

"Sign here," the red bear grunted. He had spoken about ten words since meeting them, none of which had included a name. But all the legal documents were in order, plus an out-of-system shipping order for whatever was in the box.

W2 appended a bold squiggle to the hardcopy report, and caught the keys that were tossed to her. Suddenly, a thought hit her. It might have been something of a giveaway to ask what was in the trailer she was supposed to have already negotiated for -- but right now...

"Hey!" she called, as the bear turned away. "You're going nowhere. Not till I check the merchandise over, with my Experts here."

"Suit yaself. All in there, all full spec." Taking the keys back, the dealer reached up and slid the magnetic card in the door slot. Five sets of eyes peered in.

"An' what the divvil do we have here, eh, lads an' lassies?" Sharrown exclaimed. Jumping into the trailer, he opened one of the unmarked, coffin-sized crates -- and gave a low hiss of surprise.

Just then, W2 gave a squeal of alarm. All turned round to see what had alarmed her so. And for once, she was, if anything, underreacting.

Five figures stepped out of the rubble, hefting clubs and improvised spears in a way that made it obvious they knew exactly how to use them.

"Well, well," grinned Security Officer Strago, his wings hiked up in menace. "And what have WE got HERE?"

For a second, all was frozen still in shock as the real and the ersatz Demon Security teams stared at each other. (The red bear had prudently vanished, and was currently breaking every Galactic rubble-hurdling record on his way back towards town.) Then W2 gave a nervous cough.

"I'm sure we can discuss this peacefully, you know..." she began. Five sets of fangs glistened at her.

"OH NO WE BLOODY WELL WON'T!" Strago's control finally cracked, as he leaped forwards. "TEAM, KILL!" In his fist was a metre of heavy reinforcing rod, that flicked out like a fine sabre as he aimed it at his fellow Demon's head.

Suddenly, an immovable force halted that almost irresistible object. Sabaoth had appeared right in his path -- and her paw held the metal bar as if it was still concreted into a building.

Strago's face froze in horror, as obvious recognition washed over him. And it takes no ordinary shock to make a hardened Security Chief suddenly need a fresh set of red uniform trousers.

"The Thing From Stalystkov," he croaked, eyes wide as a surprised toon's. "It's Alive -- and You Brought It Here!" His gaze crawled up towards the metal rod they were both holding.

Sabaoth's bright eyes were glinting in an unholy glee. "Tag," she said cheerfully, matching his gaze. "You're IT."

Opinions differ as to what exactly happened next. W2 always claimed that flames came out of Sabaoth's eyes -- though Kiko saw only what the rest of them did. There was a brilliant white flash, and Strago was thrown five meters across the clearing as if an invisible groundcar had slammed into him! And then the centaur turned round -- and they all saw it.

Dancing in the air above her muzzle was a shifting green display of lights -- and as the Dragon's team remembered the inexplicable organs below her eyes, their function suddenly became more than obvious.

"A targeting display," Sharrown breathed. "Yon lassie's got a ballistic computer in her heid, an' a holo-field gunsight tae match!"

Into battle leaped Stagnak, discarding her conductive spear for the fangs and claws Nature had so abundantly equipped her with, as she stood her ground over her fallen Chief. "You want him," she snarled, all teeth bared, "you come and get him."

Sabaoth's optical glands changed configuration, and a red dot danced on the other's heaving chest. Silvery-sheened claws extended, and her mane bristled as the electric eel-like power plants on her flank prepared to blast the foe with another five hundred volts of bioelectric lightning.

Stagnak's eyes narrowed, as she prepared to die in defence of her Captain, four paws straddling his still form to act as lightning conductors. She knew what the Stalystkov Experiments had produced -- a breed of walking weapons too unpredictable to safely use, yet too powerful to ignore. By ones and twos they had been sent out like this one, to be sold "as seen" to the Demon race's allies, and hopefully, tested to destruction. Behind her, the other three of her team crouched determinedly, awaiting some millisecond opening that they scarcely dared hope for, knowing now what they were facing.

"Sabaoth! Wait!" Kiko's voice cut through the tension. "You don't have to do this!"

Sabaoth's ears dipped, like an admonished cub's. "Why?" she asked plaintively, "They Bad Folk, like given us at camp. We eat, yes?"

Sharrown's own ears dipped, and he stifled a groan. "It was all on yon tapes, an' we didnae believe it," he whispered to himself. "Yon Transport Captain said electrical locks wouldnae keep it oot -- she'd fry their circuits quick as snap. An' the last thing he saw -- The Fire In The Eyes..."

At that moment, the green targeting locks winked out of existence above Sabaoth's muzzle. "Okay," she said brightly, "we not hungry anyway. Not like when Both Times Come Together."

Tarjon's ears twisted quizzically. And then his nose explained the matter to him, as her tail hiked up unconsciously and the scent of what was below it hit him like a bucket of perfume in the face.

Kiko's own nose twitched appreciatively. "That's right -- you might say her power supply's Direct Current, but her control circuits are cyclical -- when one end or another turns on, so does her generator! And it seems like they CAN coincide - then it's Look Out, Galaxy!"

Sharrown coughed, and turned to the other Demon centaur, now relaxed by the barest degree. "So, ye're the ones this gear rightfully belongs to, aye? Ye can tak' it for oor part -- it's nae guid tae us."

Kiko had by this time clambered into the trailer, and was rummaging through the open crates. She sniffed disdainfully at what she found.

"45 mm autocannon -- these things went out of fashion with monorails and digital watches! You COULD put them on a mechsuit -- but it'd be like fitting chemical rocket boosters onto the Dragon. Not much of an improvement. Ecch -- these don't even have ammo management computers -- they're like something out of the Space Ark." With difficulty, she picked up a twenty-round clip of solid-tipped AP rounds, and looked critically at it. "Don't know how old these are, but if you'd found them under these ruins, I wouldn't be a bit surprised."

There was a gentle tap on her shoulder. She turned, to see Sabaoth looking hungrily at the open crates.

"Nice new packs," Sabaoth said dreamily, "been AGES since let try with one. Present?"

It took a second for Kiko to work out what she meant. Then the mouse's ears twitched in amusement.

"We've got the Export documents right here to take them off planet. If you really WANT any of this scrap metal -- help yourself."

Security Chief Strago woke up gradually, and regretted it instantly.

"Ahhhg..." he growled. "That second Pan-Galactic Gargle Blaster was a bad idea..." and suddenly memory came flooding back.

I'm ALIVE, he thought in amazement. Folk whose last sight is a Stalystkov Monster, the next thing they see depends how regular a Temple-goer they were...

"Sir?" came a voice he knew. Gradually the world swam into focus: Stagnak was bending over him, with the rest of his team on watch around, all obviously alive.

"Wha' happened?" His whole body was one big bruise -- it felt like he had gone ten rounds with a mecha kickboxer. Looking around, he saw the big trailer still parked in the ruins in the gathering dusk. Evidently he had missed out on a few hours.

Stagnak gave the nearest thing to a sheepish grin he had seen on that wolfish muzzle. "They let us go. And they only took two of the cannon and a crate of shells -- the rest's all ours. It's not much as a starting stake, but we'll manage."

The Galaxy's newest Freelance Captain struggled to his feet, and tore the Demon insignia off his shoulder tabs. With his team, he was in no doubt they had a good chance. After all, he had what every successful Captain relies on, right here.

"Stagnak," he said gravely, "want to be my First Mate?"

Back on board the Dragon, Sharrown and Kiko had a LOT of explaining to do as the ship prepared to leave orbit. Discovering that their new friend had eaten the crew of her previous ship, and lost full control of her weapons systems roughly every eighteen days, was bound to cause a few questions to be asked.

"Well, first thing I knew, was when I was showing her where I worked," Kiko explained to the command group. "I was fixing the sensor pack on one of the fighters -- Sabaoth got bored watching me, so I gave her one of those antique console games to play with, the ones we picked up last stop. "Trans-Luminal The Lemming", or whatever. It just happened I was looking that way when her player got wiped out. Her ears went flat, and I saw lights start to dance over her muzzle -- just as the game screen went dead. And the sensor pack I was tuning jumped off the scale -- she'd put about fifty amps through the console, fried it to a cinder!"

"Yon lassie saved all oor hides doon there," Sharrown put forward. "If it wisnae for her, we'd be pelts dryin' on a wall right now. Gie her the chance to learn tae eat Spam Substitute and like it -- she only eats whit runs awa' now, but she'll learn better."

The debate that followed was as lively as its subject was deadly. For one thing, there was the sheer logistical problem of feeding a being whose idea of a light snack was twenty kilos of living flesh. The Toppers, many of whom were that weight themselves, did not look entirely happy at the prospect.

"Why dae ye nae ask the lassie hersel' fit she's got tae say?" Sharrown asked plaintively. "I think she's doon in Engineering, havin' a few wee modifications fitted."

Just then, the object of their arguments trotted in. Sabaoth was proudly wearing a full harness, that carried the pair of FOAL "45" cannon they had taken as tribute from Strago's hoard. As her head moved, the barrels twitched and swayed on their Smart Pivots, slaved to the ballistic computer that sat where most sentients kept their forebrains.

"Kannone Neat!" Sabaoth exclaimed happily, heedless of the spectators ducking for cover as her hologram sights flicked into life. Only Sharrown and Kiko noticed that the big magazine wells were gaping empty. "We go and use, yes -- no?"

A dozen pairs of eyes focussed warily on the direwolf centaur, who was standing placidly with hands folded. At last, the decision was made.

"She can stay with us," K'Tal Sabre decided. If the truth was honestly told, he had a healthy respect for any females with bigger claws than his own -- and Incisor Envy was not one of his many uncorrected personality traits. "We can hardly hand her over, after all this. Besides which, to quote an ancient phrase -- I don't know what she'll do to the enemy, but she scares the hell out of ME!"

"Party time!" Chester swung into the main Rec room, in an especially resplendent (un)dress uniform. "She can stay - and if that's not cause for celebration, what is?"

The ship's crew immediately voted with their feet, as an instantly recognisable double-timed footstep was heard in the corridor behind him. Tarjon, Caresse and Deck exited immediately to dig out treasured bottles they had been keeping for special occasions -- and the rest simply exited, their tails vanishing with noticeable red-shift as Sabaoth trotted in.

"Thank Everyone!" she said brightly. "Like back with all Sisters again -- but now we all stay together, yes?"

Chester grinned, the ringtail's ears twitching. "Oh, yes. I'm sure we'll All get used to you eventually -- this is a friendly ship."

There was an acidic cough from behind him.

"Ahem," Kiko stood in the doorway, her arms crossed and her tail twitching from side to side. "IF you've quite finished with the poor girl, Dr. Earnshaw's asked me to show her how the facilities on the ship work. That's one thing she will have to get used to. Party at the end of this shift, everyone?" With that, she took an obedient Sabaoth by the hand and led her off down the corridor.

Had Chester been wearing his Programmable Posing Pouch, it would have turned lurid green with envy. Sure, Sabaoth had a lot of fur, and it had picked up shovelfulls of Bai-Chaznovian dust which needed cleaning -- but still...

Sharrown arrived just in time to catch the expression on the ringtail's face as the mouse and direwolf turned the corridor towards the showers. And, turning silently, he scurried off to recalculate the odds on the ship's sweepstake.

"Nice!" Sabaoth's voice rang through the soap-rich steam ten minutes later. None of the personal cabins had showers that would fit half of her all at once -- but Kiko had covertly moved brushes and towels into one of the big decontamination chambers by the shuttle airlocks.

"Oh, yes... very nice." Kiko ran a foamy hand through the long wiry fur of the direwolf. She was almost face-to face here -- that is, her ear tips were just brushing under Sabaoth's jaw -- and she was definitely enjoying the view.

"A coat like yours takes a LOT of brushing..." she suggested, reaching for the comb attachment for the shower head. A long-toothed comb combined with powerful needle jets of hot water was highly efficient at reaching right to the skin -- and besides, it was a delight all of its own.

Kiko pressed the comb into the short grey fur of her own chest, feeling the fur balloon outward with the hot pressure. "Would you like it if I did... this?" She looked up at her new friend. Sabaoth nodded eagerly.

"All right..." The mouse's pink tongue tip showed as she concentrated. Half cleansing, and half massaging the thick sheets of lithe muscle beneath the fur, she began to take long, slow sweeps of the brush down the vertical part of the centaur's spine, delightedly feeling her shiver in pleasurable response. And then round to the front -- which was one area Sabaoth had no unusual attainments.

"You're very neatly built," she commented admiringly, letting the tingling spray dwell on the soap-crowned furred mounds that were so conveniently at eye-level. "I know you don't like clothing much -- at least, you'll never need any structural support. Are all your sisters like you?"

Sabaoth nodded, and her ears drooped. "All in batch just like me -- all same age. Have to tell apart by tag." She held one ear inside-out; there was a small round hole as if for an earring. "Sisters all together, trained, nice to cuddle when like this." Her tail rose expectantly.

The mouse's own naked tail rose in company. "Oh, MY. You really ARE a sight for sore eyes." Gradually, Kiko worked her soap-slick way back along the flanks, to admire the view from the other end. As she massaged the bony rump, the centaur gave a shudder and her back legs braced apart instinctively, wedging into the corners of the shower while the mouse paid loving attention to her. Sabaoth's eyes glazed slightly as the needle jets were put to teasingly expert use first on her tail, then below it. Slim mouse fingers gently groomed aside the wiry fur all around, as Kiko's almost prehensile tail swung forward in anticipation...

Suddenly, Sabaoth spun round, taking Kiko by surprise and snatching her up to press noses, pink against black. "Cuddle?" she asked excitedly.

"Definitely. Oh, any time you want." But then, Kiko's whiskers twitched in annoyance. "But Dr. Earnshaw's expecting us right now. Ahh! Just when we were getting cosy."

If Lettice Earnshaw had opinions about Kiko arriving at the medical centre riding bareback on her patient, she kept them to herself. At any rate, there now seemed nothing remotely wrong with Sabaoth, now freshly washed and obviously the recipient of thorough and loving grooming.

"Eh, looks like tha's saved me a job," was her only comment. "I's abaht to ask tha', if tha' knows a body who'd keep 'er groomed for me. Tough job for the lass who can't reach own backsides."

"Kiko fix it," Sabaoth nodded gravely.

The badger cast an appraising eye over them. "The trouble starts at troff time -- tha knows, wi' no bait, tha'd be starved and dead in a week?"

Kiko winced. "Her batteries are that hungry? Isn't there any way of switching them off, or at least turning the dial down a bit?"

Lettice gave a moody snort. "Ask 'er designers. She's a Construct, built that way. I've 'ad time to go right over her code map, and there's tricks they built in that don't show. Those claws of 'ers, they've got biological wiring I've not seen like of. Sabaoth --" she pointed to the exit, "can tha' feel where t' electrics are on t' door?"

"Surest." Sabaoth trotted over. Extending her silver-black sabres, she ran them up and down the featureless doorframe. "Feel here -- and here -- and here." She pointed at three spots.

"I take it she's right?" Kiko's ears were rigid in fascination.

Lettice nodded. "Quite a lass there. But there's nowt comes for free, in biology or owt else -- costs her four times t' energy thee an' me need to live, even allowing for t' size o' her. If she's not feedin' 'er systems half her body weight a week, she's the one gets et." But then, strangely, she smiled. "So I've put folk workin' on the problem. Fact is, I got a volunteer."

Two hours later, Dr. Earnshaw finished a full examination, while Kiko looked on in fascination tinged at times with envy. But not all the tests were physical; like all the Dragon's crew, Sabaoth needed a psych evaluation if she was to be trusted with any real duties.

"She's not so dumb as she sounds," Lettice concluded, much relieved. "What she don't know, is because no-one's ever taught her owt but how to be a guard dog. She's picked up some more of the language already, an' she's working hard on the rest. In fact, her whole metabolism's twice ours and more -- she's got twice the potential in more ways than one. Leave her to settle in, she should do right if she's kept fed."

Kiko leaped to her feet. "Is that all?" She had been checking her watch at irritatingly brief intervals, and was relieved to see Lettice nod cheerfully. "Come on -- you can't be late for your own party!"

As Sharrown arrived at the main rec room, his first thought was that Chester must have booby-trapped the door. The ringtail's expression was one of innocent glee, which had most people checking for water-bombs or itching-powder as a reflex action. Then he noticed the big covered trolley hidden behind Chester's substantial and freshly fluffed tail.

"Quite a drinks cabinet ye must hae there," he observed cautiously, still eyeing the place for tripwires. "I've jist got the one bottle, masel'."

"Oh, I've got better than that -- in a way." Chester's voice was neutral. "You see, Sharry, I've got a new hobby. It's a surprise." And as the room filled up, he refused to say any more about it.

Ten minutes later, they were still awaiting the guest of honour.

"I hope she's nae detained by the Doc," Sharrown commented to Deck. "I'm getting hungry waiting around. Can ye no' smell something guid in here?"

Deck was about to reply -- when the door slid open. Kiko stood there, in full party dress. "Ladies and gentlebeings," she announced proudly, "our newest crew member!" And Sabaoth shyly stepped in, to the cheers of her newest crew and friends.

The party had been going for over an hour, and Sabaoth had started to learn some of the more anatomically feasible dances.

"But now --" Chester announced himself, "for a special treat for our guest. From now on, I've got a new interest, I'm sure she'll be willing to share with me." While Kiko glared at him, he swept the cover off the trolley. All eyes turned to it, and then to Sabaoth. Her expression was the enraptured gaze of a young cub unwrapping its birthday presents.

"FISHEEEEE!" she squealed in delight, and tore across the room like a meteor. In a fast-grow tank was a Vorian MegaCarp fully a metre long -- which was squirming in her sharp-clawed grasp a fraction of a second later.

"It's a good thing no-one here's an ardent vegetarian," Kiko murmured above the loud crunching as Sabaoth demonstrated the power of three-inch razor fangs and a fifteen-inch bite. "At least with her, you know it'll be quick -- she doesn't play with her food, however many legs it's got."

Two minutes was all it took for the fish tank to empty and the direwolf to be filled for the time being. But then, she was trying to eat politely in front of her friends. When the last fin fragment was gone, she trotted over to Chester.

"Sabaoth say Thankyew. Cuddle?" and she threw her arms around him, the ringtail's fur crackling with static as her batteries burped off excess voltage. Then she turned round, and her face fell as she caught sight of Kiko's own expression.

"Cuddle?" The direwolf's ears twitched, as she hesitantly offered the mouse her other paw. Slowly, she looked from one to the other.

Nobody noticed Sharrown quietly leave the room, and dash towards the nearest terminal of the impartial ship's computer. But in the next few minutes, the party quietly broke up, most of the crew leaving with embarrassed grins on their muzzles. W2 was last to leave; as she sneaked one last glance through the door, she was busily scribbling in her notebook.

The next day, Dr. Earnshaw spotted Sharrown walking past sick bay, looking extremely pleased with himself. "Oi! Get thi'sel in here." she beckoned sternly.

Sharrown stood meekly, trying to practice the air of injured innocence he had so often seen on ringtail features. The badger stood glowering at him, hands on hips.

"Gambling's one thing, Sharry," she waved an admonishing finger at him, "but it's not right when it concerns personal lives of t' crew."

"Ach, how wis I to know that's how I'd be winnin' the sweepstake?" The wildcat's eyes were fixed on the ceiling. "If ye look at the bet, the wordin' only says which o' Kiko or Chester she'd prefer to be in company wi' -- we werena' expecting her tae prove it like that in front o' all of us."

"Humph," Lettice frowned. But then her eyebrow rose. "How'd tha' win ALL the pot for thiself? Happen she chooses one or t'other, the pot gets spilt."

Sharrown paused at the door, on his way to his morning duties. "Why, I was the only one tae bet that the sweepstake would be a draw, no' a clear win." He turned and looked at her, eyes sparkling. "Wis it nae you that said it first -- she's TWICE the lassie one of the rest'll ever be."

Finis

Special thanks to Bruce Grant, for taking the time to fine-tune Sharry's accent. They both speak Doric, which is very far from the stage Scottish accent, and is spoken in the area of the East Coast around Aberdeen. My best effort had poor Sharry sounding Glaswegian! NOT the idea!

(Note: Lettice Earnshaw's accent is average Yorkshire, my own native tongue. Lettice is NOT Scottish.)