

THE GOLDEN RULE  
A Midnight Sonata Tale  
By  
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"I always said, Sabaoth," Doctor Ken Felinson said with a shake of his long, tufted ears "that appetite of yours was going to get you into trouble someday."

In the Dragon's sickbay, an extremely unhappy centaur was currently taking up two cots side by side, and radiating twice her considerable body mass of misery as she lay plumbed into the medical diagnostic system.

"Sabaoth not feel good," came a small voice from an extremely large body, the bioweapon's holographic display showing as hardly more than a will-o-the-wisp flicker "front stomach hurts."

"Aye, poor lass," Lettice Earnshaw studied the readout, her striped forehead furrowed with worry "musta been someone tha' et, disagreed wi' thee."

"Well, it wasn't MY fault," Chester complained as they hauled him into the sickbay "Yes - we did go out together last planetfall - I wanted to show her one of those upmarket bars on the hillside. The place was shut, can you believe it - I was only looking round the back to see if someone'd left a window open - could be dangerous, that."

"And tha' told Sabaoth to do summat, did tha'?" Dr. Earnshaw's heavy Penn Nine built hiking boot tapped dangerously on the floor of the sickbay.

Chester winced. It was a constant source of wonder to him, just how dextrous the badger was with nail-studded boots that weighed two kilograms apiece. Absently he rubbed his splendidly groomed rump in memory of their last little dispute: the bruises to his pride were less easily forgotten.

"Welllll.... the bar SHOULD have been open." His huge tail waved nonchalantly "I told her we were going there - you wouldn't want me to break my word, would you? That wouldn't be honest. Anyway, I'd just got the window unlocked, when along comes this MicroPeeke mutt - you know, all bark and no legs - it'd have had the neighbourhood roused in a minute. You can't BELIEVE how block-headed some of those security police can be - anyone'd think you could just quietly explain things to them, but..."

Lettice gave a warning growl. Idly, she reached down and began to polish the tungsten carbide "tricouni" nails that decorated the highly polished toecaps.

"Anyway, I couldn't let poor Sabby get into trouble, could I?" The ringtail carried on hurriedly. "I didn't TELL her to do ANYTHING - all I SAID was, I'd heard those MicroPeekes made pretty good eating - and if someone didn't stop it barking, we could get in a misunderstanding that'd probably make us miss dinner altogether..." His huge, liquid eyes scanned the sickbay, where his playmate in perdition was currently under sedation "What's there to worry about? I thought you said once, you thought those MicroPeekes were a crime against the canine genetic stock."

"So THAT'S where she picked it up." Ken Felinson growled, looking up from the medical computer. "Next time, just use your stunner and go buy the girl a kebab, or something cooked."

"Why?" Chester's ears were raised in curiosity "she's just got a stomach pain, that's what she told me."

"That," Ken's voice was icy "happens to be a result of Aspillian Liver Flukes, passed on by eating raw infected meat. It's a devil of a parasite to shift - untreated, it can be fatal. And I haven't got the drugs to treat it."

One week later, the Dragon's course brought it to Sacrow Station, the main orbiting structure above Vergil Five in the Sacral System.

"Humph," Captain K'Tal Sabre had taken a break from the bridge as soon as docking formalities were completed, to watch Sabaoth's transfer to the station's sickbay. "You say they've facilities there that can cure her?"

Lettice Earnshaw nodded slowly. "Aye, sir - we'd nowt to touch them flukes. They're reet tough buggers, tha' knows - tek t'standard anti-infestant drugs and laugh at'em. O'course, havin' to wait this long, hasn't done our lass any good either." As they could see, Sabaoth's frame was sharp where the bones were starting to stand out beneath the dull fur: she had lost twenty kilos already. The parasites were interfering with food absorption, in a metabolism that simply had to break down at least two kilos of protein each and every day. Right now, despite all the Dragon's medical efforts, most of that was coming from Sabaoth herself.

The feline's whiskers quivered. Sabaoth was proving extremely handy as part of the ship's Security team: being not only physically powerful but proof against stunner beams, did a lot for her performance. Practical matters aside, Sabre liked her as much as he liked any canine: she had most attractive claws, was an engagingly poor card player, and managed to keep Chester out of trouble for several days a month. (The Captain had wondered how even she managed that - until he had glanced into Sabaoth's quarters. The bed was against the inward-opening door: once inside, Chester had little option but to stay until she was good and finished with him.)

"Our Lass is goin'ta need a couple o'weeks treatment, before she'll be fit again," Lettice commented, her ears twisting in a wry expression "the last bit we can do on board, but their medics'll 'avta keep her for a few days. Is owt for us commercial-like in this system?"

Sabre nodded, reaching for the Galactic Yellow pages. "We're close to the edge of AMF space here - the major operators don't find it worthwhile to operate this far out. No Celestacorps, no Fnord Reaction Motors, no Galactic Express. There'll be something out there."

On the detection screen behind them, two traces appeared at the edge of visibility. As always, the Captain was right.

Three shifts later, W2 and Lettice Earnshaw were visiting the well-appointed sickbay of Sacrow station. While the Penn Nine xenobiologist talked the case over with the medical staff, the demon girl looked through the catalogue of bedside reading material that the station offered. Idly she munched on a grape; one of the ancient hind-brain reflexes led folk to automatically bring grapes to hospitals regardless of whether the patient wanted to, or was allowed to eat them.

W2 was bored. There was not a lot of fun to be had here, with Sabaoth still limited to producing little more than dyspeptic groans as the toxins were purged from her system and the parasites put up a ferocious struggle. The demon girl's notebook protruded from her bag, as always - she had almost completed her survey of the Dragon crew's sexual habits, despite constantly having to update Chester's section.

"Now, THAT'S what I call strange - they let folk see that sort of thing, in Hospital?" She tuned into one of the programmes the screen offered - and winced at the sight of gratuitously cute and fluffy entities performing unspeakably non-violent acts in a nightmarish landscape of pastel colours. "Back in the Empire, they had six different death penalties for being caught with Video Niceys like this." Blushing, she turned over to the external viewer, linked to the station's long-range sensors.

"Well, and how about that!" W2 exclaimed in surprise. The demon-girl's face was wider-eyed than usual as she looked at the screen: idly Sabaoth wondered what would happen if those eyes could meet in the middle.

"We see new folk coming, yes?" Raising herself off the couch, the direwolf moved stiff-legged to see where her friend pointed at the indicator marker of an incoming ship.

W2 nodded. "And I recognise their marker code. It's some folk we've seen before."

Down in the engine-room of the Fourex, a small mob of grey kangaroos were being given the guided tour. This was the only ship of their nationality in this part of space; the negotiations with the Associated Mammalian Federation were proving difficult. If the inhabitants of the Southern Spiral Arm did decide to join, the AMF would have to rewrite all its insignia to include the word "Marsupial" in it somewhere. (The replacement cost of the printed stationary held in the AMF Civil Service And Taxation Department alone was greater than the gross national product of six average star systems.)

"Anyway, Bruce," drawled the first 'roo, waving a long-clawed hand at a colossal structure of pipes and oily equipment housings. "What you have to understand, is why nobody's been able to swipe our stardrive system. These mammals and Demon cobbers, been trying to grab it for years. Even when we take 'em on guided tours, it don't help any."

From the tucker-bag swinging from his narrow shoulders, the boss 'roo took out a large wrench, and started casually juggling with it. Dials above their heads started to twitch for no obvious reason, and they all felt the increased acceleration as the machinery worked harder.

The Fourex's engines, unknown to its designers, incorporated at least three hitherto unknown laws of physics. Just as spacetime "knows" how much to bend in response to a certain mass, and just as neutrinos "know" not to demean themselves by interacting with lower-class forms of matter, the stardrive's space-twisting core "knew" that if it DIDN'T perform in accordance with its engineers' wishes, they would pull off its covers and start to hit it with very large hammers.

"You sure this is safe down here, Boss?" One of the lower-ranking 'Roos asked nervously. Something about the twenty-metre electric arcs that fizzed and crackled above their ears seemed to be worrying him.

"She'll be right, mate," the engineer grinned "Got a rest-stop coming up, plenty of time to show you how to work her. You new blokes can get to work right away - we're off shopping soon as we're docked. Right out of prawns for the barbie."

As one, the newcomers looked at the great empty wire grids that surrounded the white-hot exhaust pipes. Demon and AMF technicians had spent years measuring the exact spacing and configuration of the mysterious structures, incorporating them into their latest (failed) copies of the Southern Arm's arcane technology. The Fourex's crew had standing orders to treat the poor pouchless poms with some respect - but NOBODY had said they had to invite them to their cookouts.

"Sir!" Chen Lu's voice through the intercom disturbed K'tal Sabre's restful evening. "Approaching ships - one you ought to know about." The panda communications officer winced as she heard the Captain's curt response - she had seen him and Felina heading for their cabin an hour earlier, equipped with a three-litre bottle of catmint wine, and doubted her interruption had been welcome.

"All right, what is it?" The big feline's ears were twitching dangerously as he strode onto the bridge. "We're in space dock, what's so urgent?"

The panda pointed to a pair of dots, closely spaced on the screen, with transponder codes and vectors showing their destination as Sacrow Station. "The Fourex is coming in, sir - I just got a call from them. They'll be here in two days - but it's what they told me about the Other one, half a day behind them...."

"Give that here !" Sabre snapped, grabbing the microphone and pointing the tuning control at the Fourex's screen position. There was a brief flicker, and the cast-iron interior of the great marsupial carrier swam into focus.

"G'Day !" It was one of the wallaby tech crew, who fulfilled the same ecological niche as the Dragon's own Toppers did. "Thought we'd see you again. Hey, here's Wayne, wants to talk with ya."

Sabre relaxed slightly at the sight of the Thyacine who elbowed her way into camera shot. He had met their Security chief before - and anyone who could brain a dropbear at sixty metres with a thrown bottle, commanded a measure of respect.

"G'day, Cap." The marsupial wolf looked worried. "Thought it was you. Good thing our scanners don't look at your transponders - you SURE it's just tax reasons your ship has to keep changing its name ?"

Sabre nodded. "We're here for a few days resupplying. Good to see a friendly snout this far out on the Rim."

The marsupial's own ears went flat. "You won't be pleased to see who's on our tails ! Bloody Galactic Security, Customs and Excise branch - they gave us the once-over last system, soon as they discovered what our armour's made of." In place of boring lead plate or expensive force-walls, the Fourex's front hull was lined with several million beer cans, their liquid contents serving as neutron shielding and in-flight refreshment.

"Since it's officially part of the ship, they can't find a form to register it - they HATE that. So reckon they're tryin' to see if we offload it - last port, they searched every bloody ship in dock. Better rattle yer dags and get lost before we get in, or they'll start pulling search warrants on you and your mates !"

Sabre winced. Thanking the Security chief, he put down the communicator and stood awhile in thought. At last, he turned to Chen Lu, and his face was troubled.

"Recall all our crew from the station. We, are getting out of here - FAST."

"It's not fair !" Chester protested, as Deck hauled him towards the Dragon's airlock "the only lively spot in the system, and we've got to leave it to Galsec, and the boomers will have drunk the place dry before we get back. Besides, Sabby and W2 are staying - even Lettice Earnshaw's staying !"

"They," Deck explained patiently, as the ringtail waved farewell to the friendly crowd in the zero-G playroom as they passed "weren't on the crew when we - changed career like we did. So GalSec shouldn't associate them with us. If they spotted any of our enlisted crew here, and check the station's docking records, it could get bad. Very bad. You get the picture ?"

Chester sniffed. His elegant, filmy shirt billowed as he spun round, the extravagantly long tail swirling behind. "And here I am, all ready for some fun. There's not even Sabaoth to look forward to out there - just lots of sweaty miners and messy asteroids. Just when I'd got into condition again - I'd been almost saving myself for Sabby, and those fliers have SO much to look forward to."

Deck ignored his friend's protest as he marched him towards the boarding hatch. Indeed, the big centaur had to stay behind, still a mass of misery on four legs. She had missed out on her season, one of the rarer fore-end rather than tail-end ripenings - or anyway, she had been much too ill to take advantage of it. Both Kiko and Chester were having to retreat with the Dragon, out of range of Galsec scrutiny: he wondered what Sabaoth would find to amuse herself with while they were gone.

"Are you crazy ? You want a WHAT ?" The medic's voice was incredulous as he stared down at his patient. As if centaurs weren't strange enough in this part of space - the request she had just made was downright bizarre.

"Sabaoth feel ill in tummy, not head." The direwolf pointed again at one of the pages of biological modifications in the databook.

"Give the lassie what she wants," Lettice Earnshaw nodded, "We've got t'brass as can pay for it." Critically, she looked down at the big direwolf, and tickled her under the lower ribs. Obliging, Sabaoth rolled over onto her back, her rear legs twitching as the badger scratched her.

"Look," Lettice pointed out to the weasel medic, parting the fur. Normally invisible, pale nodules of bony scale proclaimed a vestigial trace of one of the hybrid girl's less conventional ancestors. "She's got dermal armour here an' here, just breaks through the skin. Built-in hardpoints - tha' can glue or rivet stuff on them, no problem wi' rejection or infection. Which is more'n tha can say for half the rest o'this stuff."

The medic scratched his ears in bafflement, as he paged through the databook. Part catalogue and part entertainment magazine, it was one of the things that Kiko had picked up in the BioBazaar of Skandahar, several stops back. Some folk liked the strangest things doing to them, he reflected - the full-body hair transplants for furless humans were straightforward enough, but he couldn't see the point of replacing perfectly good body organs with polished metal ones, just because they looked good....

"OK - I'll see what I can do. But I don't know what a placental mammal is going to want with one of those."

Four hours later, the Dragon gently disengaged from the spacedock, and began its pre-emptive escape run out towards the asteroid belt past the third planet. Every asteroid was a potential bonanza: its density could be guessed by spearing it with a tractor or pressor beam, giving a measured push or pull, and comparing the result with a laser-interferometer estimate of its volume to work out the density. Silicate rock and Nickel-iron were useless, but every planet had a core, to which the denser material sank - and the asteroidal fragments of long-cooled platinum or iridium alloys, were well worth the fuel cost of bringing home.

"There they go." W2 instinctively waved at the screen. "And here's the Fourex - they're a LONG way from home."

"Aye, they are that." Lettice Earnshaw looked up from her copy of Jane's All The Galaxy's Aerospacecraft. The Southern Spiral arm had a reputation for what had been described as "*Brutally elegant engineering*" - and some of it was less elegant than others.

"Says 'ere, they just melt raw asteroidal alloy in space, don't bother refining it or owt like that," Lettice scanned through the meagre and mainly speculative data on file "Cast t'stuff in big cylinders, cut it off like sausages, stick on endcaps wi' engines and that built on, and there's your starship."

W2 nodded happily. That kind of engineering, she felt comfortable with. The last time she and Doctor Earnshaw had been on the polished nickel-iron can, she had seen how the front plates were armoured. Inside the outer hull were simply three metres of cold, hard ice - which doubled as a perfect refrigerator for keeping the beer cool.

Lettice snorted. She had a great affinity with the marsupial's civilisation - her "roo"mmate at university had been one of the first "flyers" to study in AMF space. As on Penn Nine, their homeworld had mains supplies of beer along with the usual water and electrical outlets - though served twenty degrees colder, in an environment twenty degrees hotter.

"Anyway, tha' reckons they'll be pleased to see you ? Tha's worked out what makes boomers tick, tha' reckons ?"

The demon girl nodded. "I tried to get them interested in my survey - it'd be a perfect control group, to contrast with the other sort of mammals ! But pity is, I only found out on the last day, before we could do anything about it - I was serving on mess duty, and suddenly they all started taking an interest in me..." She ran a furless finger down the waterproof plastic of the "kiss the Cook" apron she had worn on that day. "One of them said he just loved the dress - I've got three whole notebooks ready, I can't wait to find out what's so special !"

Centaur ears pricked up. She and W2 got on excellently; but for once she was ahead of the biped girl. Sabaoth had guessed already what the big grey and red marsupials suddenly found attractive about her friend - much the same feature she was about to acquire herself.

"Sabaoth want look nice for friends come here, yes ?".

It was three hours later, and Dr. Earnshaw had vanished to consult her colleagues over the course of treatment. Although the badger was no doctor in the surgical sense, she had years of experience in studying exotic biologies - and both Sabaoth and the parasites that were fighting a savage rearguard action, were certainly exotic.

W2 sat on the edge of one of the beds, swinging her legs idly. Her eyes suddenly lit up.

"Gosh ! Why didn't you say so before ? There's, ooh, lots we can do for you." Standing, she critically surveyed her friend. "You DO look a bit intimidating, at that. All battleship grey, long shaggy fur, and you never wear anything but those three dishcloths ... that is, when you're not carrying more hardware than Felina. You can't solve EVERYTHING with a hyperkinetic projectile cannon, after all."

"Sabaoth know. But can make a start, yes-no ?"

W2 was, as she liked to tell anyone who would listen, a keen student of people. Whether the "People" in question had two legs, four, or simply a set of adaptable pseudopods that came in handy for breaking the ice at parties, was only of secondary interest. Her species was one of the engineered Demon races, produced with unworkable wings mainly to give the better-equipped Demons something to laugh at.

When your species has endured several millennia of being hated for being Demons, and derided as inferior ones, you start to generate Good Ideas about how the universe could be a much better place if only someone would just listen to you.

"Your trouble, Sabby," she commented, her round eyes glowing with reforming fervour "Is that you just look too aggressive. I mean, it's not as if you'd be giving up any of your Abilities - you've got things like your fighting skills coded in hardware, they don't NEED practice. You'd get on with people a lot better if you didn't intimidate them. Like those Toppers."

Sabaoth nodded, her pains briefly forgotten as she listened intently. W2's notebook had several pages describing the unrequited love of six of the little cat-rabbits for her: simultaneously they claimed to adore her, and live in constant fear of ending up on her menu. It had done little good for the centaur to explain that she never ate friends - except of course as a last request, when she'd be happy to save the expense of a funeral...

"The thing is, to remember the Golden Rule." A set of stub wings were hiked up sternly "always try and arrange good things for people, that you'd like to happen to you - treat them as you'd like to be treated." This was not a philosophy she had picked up in the Demon Empire, where the rule read "*Do unto others what they're thinking of doing to you - but get in FIRST.*"

The bioweapon's holograms humbly displayed a floral bouquet. "Sabaoth say hokay. Where we start ?"

"I don't Believe it. Tha's sure tha' wants to do this, lassie ?"

Lettice Earnshaw stopped dead in her tracks, at the entrance to the sickbay. It had been time to bathe and groom Sabaoth anyway - but this was scarcely what she had expected.

"Sabaoth look Cute, Yes ?" Anxiously, the big carnivore looked up at the full-length mirror above her. W2 paused in massaging in the bleaching fur dye, which had turned the centaurs hindquarters strawberry-blond already.

The badger gave an embarrassed cough, and averted her eyes. The demon girl's wings, she saw, were hiked high in concentration as she worked - a big plastic bag was already stuffed with fur clippings where the most unkempt bits of her shaggy coat were now a thing of the past. (Except for cushion-stuffing, where they could be a thing of the future). "I 'opes that weren't tested on animals," was her only comment as she watched her ward's transformation into something far fluffier.

W2 shook her head, as she looked at the label. This was one of the Demon Empire products she had carried on the Stormrunner when first joining the Dragon's crew. "Don't worry - We don't ever do that. Non-sentients don't respond accurately enough to be a real test - anyway, why spend money looking after innocent animals when you've lots of guilty criminals and suspects to use up?"

"Sabaoth look all couth and kempt. Doubleyew-square do really ept job, yes." The centaur's basic grasp of the language was getting better by the day, though nobody had managed to explain exactly why words like "inept" and "uncouth" only existed as negatives.

"When tha's finished wi' primping, they're ready to start that little job tha' wanted." Lettice looked down at her timetable. Sabaoth's medical treatment had to be every hour, and on the hour, with a full screening every day to check progress - but as long as she felt well enough to walk, she no longer had to stay in the sickbay between treatments. And just next door, a baffled meditech had a catalogue of rather special features that nobody had EVER asked him for before.

"G'day, Sports !" It was the next day when the Fourex finally docked with the station. The navigators Mal and Mike had been trying for a fancy slingshot round the third planet's gravity field, which had changed the schedule considerably. But, as they pointed out, they'd get it right next time.....

Wal and Qantas hopped through the airlock, their ears swivelling at the cheery shout as W2 spotted them. Behind them was Bruce - his newly recruited kinsmen were mostly still tinkering with the engine bay. Some of the main barbecue racks were seriously out of alignment, and needed urgent attention. But one of the other Bruces, a red 'roo, had come along with the first of the landing party: twenty others were staying on the Fourex.

"Ow do?" Lettice Earnshaw extended a striped and friendly paw. "Eeh, it's reet grand to see thi' agin. Shame the rest of us crew 'ad to scarper, sharpish, like."

Qantas's ears drooped. "You're sure Chester didn't stow away?" She demanded "Have you searched EVERYWHERE he might be hiding?"

Lettice shook her head. "Just us three - Sabaoth'll be along in a minute. She's not bin so well."

The flier nodded. "We'd 'eard she'd been right crook." But then her ears pricked up again. "But 'ere she comes - strewth, is that her?"

They turned, and saw the centaur slowly pacing along the corridor. An excited bark echoed down the corridor.

"Sabaoth say hello ! All bouncy-friends here, yes-no?"

The new Bruce looked at the newly blonde centaur, now wearing a cute black ribbon collar and three sets of what looked like blue and white sports towels. Her head was tilted slightly, a long pink tongue hanging out as she panted in the warm air spilling out of the Fourex's hatch.

"Who's the drongo dingo, Wal?" He asked in a sub-whisper "Looks one short of a six-pack to me." He turned back before noticing the brief flicker of the bioweapon's combat hologram: boomers did tend to assume that their own superior hearing meant other species were all half-deaf.

The centaur trotted forward, and extended a friendly paw, claws fully sheathed. "Sabaoth shake, yes?" All around, folk edged away, steering well clear of metal fittings.

The unwise boomer accepted the paw - and the corridor lit up with a blue, fizzing light.

"Boomer go Boom, Yes !"

Wal closed his eyes pityingly - Lettice consoled herself with the thought that in her condition, Sabaoth would have probably only output a few hundred volts.

"'Scuse our mate here," Qantas' sharp toe claw nudged the spasmodically jerking figure on the floor.

"Oi - Pull your finger out, Bruce - this is Sabaoth - she's a bonzer brawler, eats Dropbears for kicks. And I wouldn't call Her anythin' you wouldn't call Me to me face - she knows some of our lingo, too."

An hour later, Qantas was in a dire mood, as she and Wal returned from the administration hub of Sacrow Station.

"Bloody GalSec !" Wal's tail thumped against the wall. "They've put the mockers on our shopping trip - we're not being allowed accommodation space on the station. Now, we do LIKE the Fourex, but in the last three months we've seen bloody a lot of it !"

"Hmmm." Lettice Earnshaw sat at her medical scanner, charting the course of Sabaoth's treatment.

"A'Tell thi what - there's nowt in t' rules says we can't do what we like wi' OUR rooms - there's three we've booked tha' can use, no questions asked. That is, if tha's room on thi' ship for us."

"Beauty !" Qantas exclaimed, her wings spread in delight. "Come on, Wal - we'll tell the rest of the boys. They'll love it !"

The badger grinned as the two bounded out. She knew that half the battle with a recovering patient was keeping their spirits up - and Sabaoth had been feeling distinctly miserable. Now - this should prove Interesting.

In their Station room near the Fourex's docking hatch, Sabaoth and W2 finished off the last of their meal together. Dr. Earnshaw had checked that nothing in the Tripe Tindaloo curry would interfere with her

patient's prescription - and in fact, the corrosive meal was liable to send the parasites out waving white flags faster than the official medicine.

The demon girl pushed her plate away. Apart from Lettice Earnshaw, she was the only other member of the Dragon's crew who happily tucked into meals that ate through some brands of cutlery. As the more keenly snouted members of the crew pointed out when assigning her to rubbish disposal or waste recycler maintenance - "With a nose like that - you've got Nothing to lose."

"Sabaoth help with book, yes ?" The centaur looked down over W2's shoulder as the demon girl typed up her rough notes into her databook.

W2 shrugged, shoving the book into her travel bag. They had rapidly re-packed, and were awaiting the boomers' arrival to hand over their keys to the room. Unless GalSec actually ordered a room-by-room search of the station, there should be no problem - as requested, the station management had not technically let the Fourex crew reserve any rooms here. GalSec was less than popular out here on the Rim: it tended to only show up when there was already too much trouble for anything but the more heavy-pawed tactics to be effective.

"Well - I'm only collecting first-hand information..." she sighed. "Chester's told me about these marsupial girls - seems he was sort of Popular that way. But I don't think we'll get the chance to find out about the males - they don't seem too interested in me, and you're sorta offline right now, aren't you ?"

Sabaoth's holograms went into dim Stealth mode - a sure sign she was up to mischief. "Sabaoth not ready normal-ways - but nice-boomers have surprise, yes !"

Just then, Mal and Mike managed to find their way into the room. Their burdens crashed to the floor, and two tails locked rigid. As did sundry other parts of their anatomy - having walked in on Sabaoth before she had bothered dressing, and seen a sight that stopped them in their tracks.

Sabaoth's tail flicked further up, in friendly greeting. Which revealed the expected aft-end view, now unspectacular and uninviting relative to her ripe-peach seasonal display. But it was what was hanging invitingly below her usual mammalian features, that had the two boomers' feet drumming with excitement.

"Well, bugger me dead !" Mal exclaimed, while W2 diligently made highly misleading notes in the "sexual preferences" section of her new chapter "the sheila's gone and grown herself a beauty of a POUCH !"

Aboard the Fourex, two grey 'roos examined their new roommate critically.

"Bit of bloody cheek," Matilda's ears quivered. "Bad enough making yourself look ridiculous. Even worse, when it's such a good job."

Sabaoth's holograms flushed an orange fog with embarrassment. The offending organ was actually a synthetic, silicone "skin" glued and welded to her own hardpoints, and covered on the outside with short, blonde fur to match her new colour scheme. But it was sturdy - she had experimented with holding a gallon of water inside : nothing pulled too tightly, or leaked unexpectedly. The detachable shower head had fitted inside her quite nicely, touching her sensitive udder much as Kiko did - and she expected it to need frequent cleaning. Although not a permanent fixture, this should last her till one or another of her usual options were invitingly open again.....

"Anyway," Matilda continued. "You've put it on the wrong way round ! Ought to open the other way - your joey'd end up looking backwards, and end up a bloody historian."

"Dunno," Qantas commented, one ear dipped as she critically surveyed the centaur's latest fashion accessory "Echidnas, theirs go backwards. Koalas too."

"Like Boris, Yes ?" Sabaoth recalled the echidna happily. They had not started on the best of footings: Boris had misheard her ordering "Steak and echidna pie" in the Dragon's mess, when she had actually said "Steak and kidney" - but it had taken nothing more than six broken tables, a few bystanders in sickbay and some boring electronics blasted by stray electric zaps, before they had patched up their misunderstanding.

"Well, I kinda like it." The winged 'roo decided. "I'm sick of those newbies tryin' it on with me - the ceiling's getting dented where I have to kick the pushy bastards out ! I can't tell half of those Greys apart, except by scent. You're welcome to the lot of them."

The centaur's eyes lit up. "Doubleplusgood ! Lots and lots Boomers - and Sabaoth share good things, like in Golden Rule, yes ?"

Installed on the Fourex in Qantas's cabin, W2 sat alone, pensive with thought. The trouble with her survey was, getting it accurate - Chester alone had thrown out all the statistics for the rest of the crew. With anyone else, she would have assumed that some of his stranger tales were simply boasting - but Chester didn't HAVE to boast. Of course, reporting what other folk had said, was a different matter - he had claimed, one of the reasons for his popularity with boomer girls was the usual behaviour of boomer males. "Overzealous", and "more energy than technique" were two of the words pencilled in her "Unconfirmed" category.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in, Sabby !" She recognised the knock: the marsupials tended to thump doors with their tails: fleetingly she realised why they built their ships so ruggedly out of chill-cast nickel-iron.

Sabaoth trotted in, looking pleased. "Missy Earnshaw says here's all pills needed till tomorrow. And nothing mix bad with beer - we invited to party !"

Down in the engine-room, the Boomers had laid on a splendid demonstration of technology.

W2 had wondered at the five-centimetre pipes that wound round the ship, plunging through floors and bulkheads at all angles. When she reached Engineering, she found out.

"Crack Tube !" Came a chorus of happy voices. She heard a series of sharp snaps, and three dozen cans were raised.

"There you are ! Want a Tinny ?" Qantas hopped over to what looked like an old-fashioned pipe organ. She extracted a can from a wire cage at the bottom - there was a hiss of compressed air, and two seconds later, another one appeared. "Got an old cannon autoloader pulling them out of the shielding bays. Cans on draft, beauty idea, eh ?"

Just then, a differently labelled can thumped into the next pipe. It was fluorescent lime green, and labelled "Cola", to ensure nobody tried to drink it. The pneumatique intercom system was another cause of despair amongst industrial and military espionage circles - currently the Fourx had several thousand credits' worth of covert surveillance equipment trying to hide on its hull, listening for internal transmissions. (Which Demon and AMF personnel had listened in on - and had invested thousands of person-hours in trying to decrypt the "Whoosh - Thunk !" they kept hearing...)

Qantas fished a rolled document out of the new canister. "Wal and Wal are going to be down soon - awww, they've got all the tucker in. We're only staying around for a few more shifts."

"We make most of it, yes ? Lots of neat grub ?" Sabaoth had learned that the best way for her to drink anything fizzy was to pour it into a bowl: eagerly she was lapping away at the alien brew.

The friendly flier nodded. "With complements from Boris - he says you're the only one who appreciates good grub 'round here." She pulled a food container out of her satchel, and handed it over.

"Grub !" Sabaoth squealed in delight. As one of the fat white grubs wriggled out, she snapped it up with evident relish. Onboard the Dragon, her tastes for live food were mostly satisfied by the occasional fast-grow fish that Chester had introduced into the diet. The ship's food processors had not yet managed to produce the diet she REALLY wanted - despite introducing motorised plates for her to chase about the mess hall, it was not quite the same thing....

W2 looked at Qantas's satchel. "Do you always use those ? I suppose it'd be handy here - no clothing, and folk don't normally have pockets on fur. But you have - do you store stuff in your pouch ?"

"Cripes, No !" For a second, the flying 'roo looked at W2 in shocked disbelief. Then she moved closer, and dropped her voice.

"You mammals wouldn't know .... you keep your pouch for your joeys. And that's all you ever put in it - which ain't what some of these boomers would try and tell ya. You keep it clean - Without a pouch, they wouldn't look at ya twice."

Enlightenment slowly seemed to spread across the demon girl's face. "Oh - that EXPLAINS things. Just a sec - what do you think of - This ?" She reached into her own bag, and slipped the apron on, tying its big pink ribbons on with decorative loops. The wipe-clean fabric shone glossily in the hard lights of the engineering bay; made for a much less leggy species, it was mini-skirt length on the demon.

There was an appreciative whistle from across the room, and a clang of a dropped tinnie.

Qantas sighed, and rolled her eyes despairingly. "You two are bloody weird, you know that ? It's like seeing a reptile with tits."

Sabaoth nodded eagerly. "Seen them - Chapter Six - special implants, Yes ! See in same catalogue as Sabaoth-pouch. Some pretty-scale snake ladies, think mammals are nice hot stuff."

An hour later, Lettice Earnshaw had joined the party. Both her friends were proving to be the toast of the town, if the crowd of boomers plying them with beer was any indication.

"Ow do, Qantas," the xenobiologist nodded towards her friend. "We couldn't arrange Chester for t'entertainment - but reckon these'll do, eh ?"

Long ears twisted fore and aft in mischief. "Your mate Sabaoth, she's picked up a sense of humour they shoot you for on some worlds. She asked if we'd co-operate in a little joke she's thought up - do you need her or W2 on the station for awhile ?"

The badger shook her head. "Sabby's got all 'er pills for tonight - just an hour bein' scanned termorrer, is all she'll need. And W2 can stay as long as she wants - looks like this party's going with a bang !"

Qantas grinned. "You could put it like that....."

"And this is me mate, Bruce - not the one you met last trip, he's a red, remember." Wal introduced W2 to a huge grey boomer, distinctively dressed in a dropbear-tooth necklace. "Bruce here is right interested in research and that, ain't you Bruce ?" He gave the grey a sharp dig to the ribs.

"What ? Oh, yeah, fair dinkum I am," Bruce jerked onto alert. "Scuse me there - couldn't take my eyes off you."

"Gosh !" W2's eyes were round with delight. "I've always wanted to spend some time discussing my research projects - I'll bet you've got quite different techniques for collecting data than we do."

"Oh. Right." Bruce looked round her upswept wings, to where he could see Sabaoth nodding eagerly. "I hear you're investigating - social interactions."

W2 nodded. "When I've finished my book, I'm hoping it'll be the definitive guide. Folk everywhere will be using it as a reference book - so if they've never met boomers, or whatever, they'll see what they're missing."

Across the room, Sabaoth saw Bruce and her roommate leave together a few minutes later, a notebook and a supply of "tinnies" at hand. She grinned. What only W2 could have recognised was the icon that her targeting display flashed up: the ideograph that commonly appeared on Demon military documents.

Phase One Completed.

"It's so ... Big !" W2 marvelled, her other hand taking notes on boomer anatomy. "Doesn't that cause you some - problems ?"

"Naw. We're all built that way. And the ladies too - no wuckers." Bruce let the slim hands of the furless humanoid explore to the sharp tip. "It's what we're all used to."

"But - I suppose, if you ever wanted to wear any - protection, it's just a matter of scaling things up to fit." She had stripped to just her apron; her tail was trembling in excitement to its arrowhead tip. "Oh my .. that looks powerful."

"Fair dinkum ! And that's just my feet."

W2 had the boomer's huge foot in her hand, as its owner reclined on his back in her room. Easily the size of her thigh, the huge appendage quivered as its increasingly excited owner felt her move into quite unfamiliar territory.

Just before things started getting too distracting, she glanced at the wall clock. Ten p.m. ship's time - and she'd do her best to write an accurate report on this.....

Outside the room, Sabaoth scarcely needed sensitive hearing to pick up the loud and surprised squealing. She nodded happily, and turned to Qantas.

"Double-yew square not that square. She hard worker - find out ALL about boomers, make reputation in mammal space with book, yes ?"

Qantas shuddered. "Just be here if she yells for help, Okay ? She might be in for a few surprises."

"My... oh my..." W2 relaxed, looking at the clock on the wall. "That was - well, Powerful." Three times in thirty minutes, she thought fleetingly, as she glanced toward her databook. Her arms went round the narrow upper torso of the big grey - I suppose that's why they call them Great greys, she noted - that was Great, not just pretty good.

"Scuse me, sheila," Bruce stirred in her embrace after a few minutes. "Be right back - just got to go to the dunny, get cleaned up for you. Stay right there !" His distinctive dropbear-tooth necklace clicked as he hopped out of the door into the dimly lit corridor, heading towards the bathroom.

Black wings folded as W2 turned over onto her back, grabbing the databook and starting to write up her notes.

"First impression - could confirm Chester's accounts." She tapped in, her brow furrowed with concentration. "I suppose if that's all there is tonight, some folk might be disappointed. Still - " she reached for one of the big bath towels someone had handily left by the bedside "Sophistication's one thing. Like advertising - however good it is, you can't open shop if you haven't got the stock - and they definitively have !"

Just then, the door slid open, showing the now night-dimmed corridor. "That's better. You're lookin' beauty, sheila !"

"I AM ?" W2 brushed the tousled hair out of her eyes. She stroked the boomer's cleaned fur; the showers round here, she marvelled, must be GOOD. And very restorative, she made a mental note as a sharp-clawed hand explored her tail again....

"Sabaoth have to go do something. Back in few minutes."

The party in Engineering was liable to go on all night, according to Wal and Qantas. Looking at her watch, a direwolf went off to make an urgent appointment.

A room was darkened, its air thick with the scents of love. Two shapes were there - one, dimly pale in the half-light, sprawled on her front on the low bed, fallen into exhausted sleep.

The other figure surveyed the scene mainly through the two infra-red pits below her eyes. Though providing only a crude, low-resolution display, it was good enough for the task. First, a little adjustment to the wall clock - then, the nose and infra-red detectors spotted areas that needed attention.

W2 shivered in a luxurious dream as she was turned over. A snout explored the pouch of her apron, cleaning its contents. And then she shivered again, moving to accommodate where a skilled tongue affectionately cleansed her. Then, she slept.

The Demon Empire is well known for its little experiments in genetic manipulation. Outsiders tend to only recognise the most obviously modified products, such as centaurs with laser stares that can set flammables alight, and electrical systems that can power their own fur driers. But apart from the artificial genetic rebuilds, Natural selection, in the broadest sense of the term, still goes on.

W2's species was, like the others, given its fixed place in the hierarchy. And each level "owned" the ones below, in a distinctly hard-fought order that the bottom layers were genetically incapable of doing anything about. So it was that the smarter and uglier ones were sent off to combat units, leaving the cuter members of the species around to pass their genes along. And of those, the ones which survived "ownership" by the larger species, passed those abilities along to their children.

Which was, on the whole, just as well for one particular Demon girl right now.....

"Oi ! Sheila ! You awake !" A grey nose nuzzled her in the half-light.

With a drowsy smile, a slim hand explored, and found something worth awaking for. And relative to her homeworld's social customs, a charming and elegant seduction style..... actually asking her first....

W2 looked up at the wall clock. She'd only been asleep a quarter of an hour, the light outside still dim. Eleven thirty - and most of the night ahead. Frowning, she noticed something.

"Bruce ? You've lost your necklace, haven't you ?"

"Ooops ! " The rest of the boomer stiffened for an instant, then relaxed. "That's right, love - left it off after I went to the shower. Wouldn't want to scratch ya."

"Mmmmh hmmm," She gave a delighted shiver as gentle claws caressed her, and dimly registered surprise as she discovered the eightfold folded towel underneath her was fresh and dry. He must have changed it for me - How Nice of him, she thought, as her tail slid aside once again - this'll Definitely go into the survey writeup....

"Aye, it's bin a grand party, though but," Lettice Earnshaw yawned, as she unerringly tossed the last dead can into the recycler with the skill born of years of Penn Nine Death Cricket contests "but I'm off to me bed now. Anyone seen Sabaoth ?"

Even Qantas' wings had started to droop. "She's gone off down the next corridor with some of the new cobbbers," the flier waved towards the door. "Want one for the road ?" With a familiar "Whoosh - Thunk !", a frosted can appeared in the pneumatique dispenser.

Lettice staggered slightly as she arrived in the corridor. And steadied herself again as she stared in surprise at the scene.

All the rest of the ship was brightening up as local "dawn" approached. But this was still under night-conditions - as Sabaoth emerged, and dropped a thick towel into a wheeled laundry basket.

"Ey up," Lettice's eyebrow raised as she watched one grey boomer head out towards the shower, and hand over a sharp-toothed necklace to another entering the room. "Just wot's goin' on ?"

The centaur's holographic display twinkled mischievously. "W2 LIKE boomers. She all sad if everything over in hour. She teach me Golden Rule - always do good things for friends you want happen to you. And all Boomers look same to her - not have real nose to tell apart, so she just cuddle anyway. Nice bouncy-boomers !"

W2 awoke again, after a night that seemed to have gone on forever. She looked at the clock - that couldn't be right !

"Bruce have to go," she heard Sabaoth's disconsolate voice from the next bunk. "You sleep all next day, nice dreams yes ?"

The demon girl shook her head to clear it. "I've been asleep twelve hours ? And I ... oh, my." She surveyed the scene. Sabaoth had remembered to leave the evidence of the final shift change - else W2's gullibility would be another part strained to maximum capacity.

The centaur nodded cheerfully. "Cute-Joey on the way, yes ? Lettice say have to get real working pouch, carry till ready. Qantas say teeny Joey out in two months, if takes after Bruce. Want tissue ? Not worry, can't harm now." She proffered a disposable wipe.

W2's eyes went wide. A wry smile was on her face.

"You'd better leave the box. And get me some more of these towels...."

As the Fourex made ready to depart two shifts later, Qantas and Lettice Earnshaw said their farewells by the airlock. The Galsec ship was busily going over the cargo holds of all outgoing craft, searching for beer-smuggling activity.

"How's yer mates ?" Qantas's ears twisted in embarrassment. "Hope they're not taken crook after all that."

The badger laughed. "W2's writing up 'er report, serious as can be. An' she's sketching up some maternity aprons - I'd best go tell 'er it's not genetically possible. She seems right took wi' the idea. An' Sabaoth's encouragin' er."

The flier winced. "They're bloody weird, the pair of 'em. Pouches on mammals - and I bet I know what they let the greys do with them, too. " She shivered. "Strewth ! Once that book of hers gets published - we'll never hear the end of it. " But then, a slow smile spread over her face, mirroring the badger's own.

"O'course - there is one good thing." There was a pregnant pause. And Lettice finished it for her.

"Your Boomers 'ad better get shaping up, and tekkin' their vitamins. When that gets 'er writeup - they'll spend the rest of their lives, havin' ta live up to it !"

The End

Thanks to Steve Kerry for the use of Mal, Mike, Wal, Qantas and the crew of the Fourex!