

Partial Recall

Being A

Midnight Sonata tale

By

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Dramatis Personae:

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

Lord Ashako: Male Demon lord, currently tasked with arranging a family reunion for Sabaoth's relatives. Is contemplating reassignment to catch leaves falling off trees and reattach them - it'd be a LOT easier.

Skandros-Jones: Hapless demon male researcher, working for Lord Ashako. Collecting a fine set of artificial limbs (his patients tend to have vigorous handshakes).

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It didn't look as if the renegade crew were going to make it this time. From the long-eyed remote camera hovering two kilometres away in the smog-laden air, the Demon forces were closing in - if the renegades could have just got into the tunnels with a few minutes head start, they would have made it - but now it was too late. A ring of mobile plasteel was closing in, and the end was already in sight.

Suddenly, there was only one of the rebels in sight - the camera focussed, and made out the long shape of a grey direwolf, standing at the one entrance to the service shaft, her shape radically altered by the battered pressure armour and the ancient weapon system she carried slung beneath her body, its tubular barrel jerking up in an obscene gesture as she dared the battlesuits to come closer.

Fifteen of the Empire's latest model picked their way over the piled rubble towards the underground station. This was going to be easy - they had already taken out resistance at the market and the brewery in town, while avoiding collateral damage to the Demon-financed theme parks and shopping malls - one centaur girl wasn't going to slow them down much. Soon they would have her prisoner; if the heavy-duty stunners failed, they would simply grapple and overcome her by servo-booster force. Pausing a second on the skyline, they started downhill towards the parking bay where their future captive stood waiting for them.

Just then, everything started to go horribly wrong.

"That wasn't QUITE the way you planned it, I hope?" Lord Ashako stretched his black-webbed wings, as he turned the viewscreen off and regarded his underling with mild disdain. "As I recall, the plan was to eliminate the renegades and take the direwolf alive, with minimal casualties. Would you call the results - entirely successful?"

In the dark, echoing chamber, only starlight filtered through the roof dome to silhouette the Demon commander as he looked mildly down at the officers of his strike force - those who had survived.

A night-black werewolf shifted his clawed paws uncomfortably. "Sir - our suits let us down - the first six of us were ripped before we even knew what was happening!"

"That's hardly an EXCUSE...." the Lordly figure hissed, suddenly ice-cold in fury "Let's just look at what happened - shall we?" The tape played again, and three eventful minutes passed before their eyes.

"Now, we see your target - the one you specifically went in to recapture alive - saying farewell to her friends..." Ashako's tone was mild again for the present "She's kissing one of them goodbye. Isn't that nice? And now they're vanishing into the tunnels, while you slowly stroll towards them. While you're laughing, she's clipping a hundred-round trailer of chemical-propellant projectile ammunition into her sidearm - you mean you really didn't know what it was?"

"Sir!" It was one of the tech officers, insect mandibles clicking the desperation in his voice "Absolutely No energy readings came from it - it was no sort of reactor we were ever told about! Regulations do have absolving clauses in them for discovering new Alien technologies - this was nothing we'd ever seen before."

Ashako sighed. On screen, the direwolf braced herself against a wall and gracefully pulled the thousand-kilo bolt back, cocking what ancient pre-Empire texts had tentatively identified as a "sawn-off 125mm

tank cannon". Grey wisps of frigid gas wreathed the muzzle brake as space-cold liquid nitrogen began to flood the barrel, and they all saw the slight forward sway as the suit's ancient servos powered up and took the strain.

Secure in their own shining new reflective/ablative tiled mecha, the Demon empire's warriors tuned up their repeller fields and strolled forwards to make the capture. Their outer shields alone could refract enough laser energy to melt down the ground around them - the commonest form of mission failure was to get trapped in congealing puddles of lava.

Suddenly the screen whited out with a deadly rose of white flame, like a flower grown in the raging heart of a star ! One of the Demon suits was slammed sixty metres back onto the far side of the street - the others charged into a sudden crystalline blizzard as every pane of permaglas in the building shattered and was whirled up in a frenzied storm with tonnes of dust and rubble, hurled into the shock-heated air spewing out of the muzzle brake and gouging concrete as the huge kinetic-energy cannon ripped into deadly life !

"Of course, the trouble with force fields," Ashako mused, as most of the scene was obscured in a blossoming storm of leaping explosions as combat closed to point-blank range and the lone defender switched up to fully automatic fire "is they don't change the laws of physics, especially as regards momentum. If you fall off a ten-storey building, it won't break - but as kinetic energy is transferred regardless, that isn't a lot of help to you."

The survivors looked at each other nervously. Lightweight battlesuits weighed perhaps two tonnes unladen - and as they had run for their lives, they had dropped whatever loads they carried. They had run when they saw what head and body impacts of 125 mm solid shot did to their comrades' rigid force-fields; later analysis had shown that many of the suits' internal components rated up to fifty "G" tolerance had been smashed beyond repair. Their biological pilots had fared much the same, but far more messily.

"Out with you," Lord Ashako waved a dismissive hand "you'll find your transfer papers waiting - and a nice red uniform apiece. Our starships' Security teams are always in need of - shall we say - field replacements ? Somehow, they DO seem to get through them."

Turning back to the screen, the majestic figure now wore a puzzled frown, as he played the end of the tape over and over again. The direwolf had fought to the finish in defence of her friends - and when the ammunition was gone, she had flung herself on the remaining Start suits with her teeth and electrically rending claws, grappling them amidst the firestorm while her own suit burned through. Only three of the fifteen had made it to their eager foe, the centaur locking them in grappling combat while the last seconds ticked away on several tonnes of terribly unfashionable high explosive that she must have time-fused before even engaging the first of her foes.

Lord Ashako shook his head slowly, as the front of the tower-block collapsed on the scene, sealing off the tunnels below and crushing all but those troops who had already fled. It wasn't just that the mission had been a tactical disaster for the Demon Empire that worried him. Rewinding the tape back several minutes, he saw the tears on the great grey muzzle as the Sabaoth-Class bioweapon that had been disposed of as a technical failure, kissed her friends farewell and prepared to lay her short life down to let them escape.

"Fifteen million troops under my command..." he murmured, looking up at the cold stars through the crystal dome of his chamber "every one expendable at my order. But none of them - not one of them - given the choice, would do that, for ME."

Lord Ashako swept down the corridors like a stormcloud, sending minions diving for cover left and right in whatever doorways and waste disposal shafts were handy. The personnel of a demon base were skilled at telling when their commanders were in a bad mood - there was some special nuance in the way he flicked the freshly spilled blood off his taloned hands after the morning's staff reviews. There had been the usual promotions and demotions - and getting demoted was generally not a thing you managed to survive in the Empire's forces.

Suddenly he stopped, and a smile played on those saturnine features. Turning on his heel, he strode into the dining hall. Just because he had the cares of several systems to worry about, was no reason to skip lunch.

As their commander entered, a mixed crowd stood to attention. Waving them aside, Ashako sat at a table and studied the menu. Though he was fairly full already, this was more of a social occasion - having a remote and unapproachable commander was one thing. But having a commander who bought you lunch, played with the family like a dutiful parent on videocast, hosted staff barbecues on the Emperor's birthdays and THEN sentenced you to whatever form of execution was fashionable that week - it made things so much more horrible all round.

"Ah, Skandros-Jones," Ashako beckoned over one of his researchers, a lesser breed with non-flying wings. "Come and share my repast - and tell me how marvellously well your project is going."

Skandros-Jones felt the spines on his head rise in sheer terror. Lots of people were invited to dinner with Lord Ashako - and a substantially fewer number came back to tell of it. Grabbing his tray of soya substitute, he nervously sat across to sup with his superior, selecting his longest spoon.

"I'm really quite pleased with your end of the operation, you know," Ashako said mildly, tucking a cute lace bib under his fanged jaw. "But about these direwolves your late predecessor so unwisely released as surplus - how's the recapture program coming along?"

"Sir - I think we outdid ourselves on that one. The initial batch were totally uncontrollable by our usual methods - they really were useless for what they'd been planned for. But...."

"Yes. Go on?" Mild interest ran across the Demon lord's features as he tucked into his meal. Suffice to say that staff demotions took place early on in the morning, to give the cooks sufficient preparation time. Ashako's secret desire was to be a vegetarian, but religious and psychological reasons forbade it.

Skandros-Jones swallowed nervously. Being the bearer of bad tidings was never a safe choice, if you wanted to look forward to a long career. But he suspected that Ashako knew at least as much as he did about the project - and being caught concealing data was a prompt and painful way to commit suicide.

"It's the synergy effect, sir - with mosaic gened creations, you just can't predict how everything's going to interact. You can say I'll take half the genes from this being, some from that, some from another - but what you end up with, doesn't turn out like any of them. That's why we've been unable to simply duplicate the batch - we'd have to have exactly the same nineteen individuals as parents, and they were ... used up. We'd always assumed we'd be able to simply breed more of the class, if they passed the tests. It's like alloying metals - just a tiny addition of something exotic transforms the product entirely."

"And ? For the Sabaoth-class weapon?" Ashako playfully ruffled the spines on the head of a passing Spawn Scout, dropped a coin in its collecting tray and handed it a mal-mal. (Citizens of the Demon Empire simply did not eat things with names like "bon-bons".) He always liked to be seen giving to a good cause - the base's Spawn Scouts were currently raising funds to conquer several primitive worlds on the Necronius Sector, entirely on their own initiative.

The researcher coughed nervously. "They didn't respond well to normal discipline - the casualty rate was unacceptable, especially amongst the handlers. So we released them - we didn't think they'd have the intelligence to do more than follow orders or die trying - after all, half their brain's a targeting and tactical computer. But they're sentient after all - permanently half-juvenile, but as intelligent as most of our troops. And the way they behave.." He drew a shuddering breath.

"I did hear that some of them were slightly - shall we say, of challenged Sentience.." Ashako murmured. His underling bristled with indignation.

"Sir ! Please - your language ! NOBODY uses words like "challenged" any more, unless they're talking about duelling."

There were social conventions that even Ashako had to put up with. He sighed. "Very well - as they say in that ridiculous modern jargon, they'd "Gorn all Spazztik In De 'Ead". Is that more correct?"

Skandros-Jones relaxed, mollified.

"We couldn't predict how their behaviour was going to turn out. As it happened, they'd make hopeless armies, but excellent bodyguards - once they give their loyalty to someone, that's IT. Money won't buy them, and as for threats - they'll defend to the death, so what can you threaten them with ? That's why we've tried recapturing them directly."

"And of the eight you did capture, why have we not seen them?" Ashako almost purred, an eyebrow raising. "They were not unmanageable at Stalystkov where they were built, or so I am told."

Sweat beaded the researcher's brow. "We built them too well, Sir ! Once they were out, they made sure we'd never take them back. Six had to be destroyed when they attempted to escape - the last two, we placed under neural paralysis - they were conscious, but we made sure they couldn't move a single voluntary muscle. But that wasn't enough. You know the species we got the genes for the electrical system from, Sir ? The Varsovian Spark-eel, it's got a sort of last-ditch defence, doesn't do the individual any good, but stops predators making a habit of eating the species. If you sink your teeth into one, it blows its batteries - sort of a three thousand volt self-destruct charge. And both those direwolves waited till they had our investigators in skin contact before they chose to do it."

There was a pause. "This is getting a very expensive project, Sir - no results, no prospects of any, and the Sabaoth-class bioweapons aren't getting any commoner. We only built a gross of them, and there's ninety confirmed as destroyed. Already, we've lost thirty-five point one personell for every one we even attempted recapturing." That did not divide up exactly, he knew - the point one was accounted for every time his standard-issue right arm jerked up in a salute whenever stray electrical fields triggered the self-test routine.

Lord Ashako ate silently, watching the nervous sweat run down Skandros-Jones' face. The Empire's bioengineers had produced some useful projects, though reliability was always a problem. Half the time, a new species proved to be useful for something totally different than its designers had intended.

Behind the food serving counter, a team of malicious blue dwarves created in earlier experiments flipped ersatz spam burgers and spread them with margarine substitute, their silly-looking chef's hats damp in the humidity. Less than two handspans tall, their scaled-down brains had proven inadequate for their intended Scout role, but as artificial vermin they made an excellent nuisance weapon. Cheap spacewarp generators could

project them over unguessable distances with a good chance that some would survive the trip; quite possibly they now infested distant worlds that had never HEARD of the Empire.

One of the rare females of the species caught his attention and waved, her curly blonde hair nodding as she batted her long eyelashes at the Demon Lord.

Mistake of scale, Ashako thought as he waved cheerfully back at the Peyoid Beastlette. Another problem had been their almost total lack of a sense of perspective, he reflected as the twenty tiny males glared hatefully at him, greasy spoons clenched aggressively in their tiny fists - She probably thinks I'm her size, just a LOT further away

Suddenly, Ashako smiled. "This too is a sense of proportion, you might say. If the Direwolves won't let themselves be captured once they know we're after them - then we'll have to be subtle about it. Capture them in such a way they don't realise it's happening."

"Sir ! Brilliant idea - but how ?"

The demon lord's smile increased as he rose from the table. "That's your problem. I only give the orders around here."

A silence fell.