

RED NOISE
Being A
Midnight Sonata Tale
By Simon L. Barber

Sharrown Chattan faced a howling mob of berserk Demon Empire troops. There must be thousands o' them, he thought in stark fear, looking out over the wild sea of faces, and clutching the multiple barrelled sound-cannon in his arms. The bayonet glistened wickedly in the cold light of the searchlight - any second one o' them's going to step over yon line, then it's just me an' four others agin the lot o' them....

A chilling siren scream rang through the air. The curtain was up, and there was nothing to do but go through with it or die trying.

"Fit's yon Chattan clan's bonniest son's doin', playin the pipes at a Demon rock concert," his voice was drowned out by roaring sound several orders of magnitude louder, as the crowd suddenly redefined the term "going wild" - "I dinnae ken how affer I get intae these things !"

It had been a peaceful voyage, two weeks before, when he had sat in the Dragon's recreation room idly passing half an hour between finishing his shift and turning in for the night. Sharrown had been tinkering with the artificial Intelligence package of his Mechsuit - the defense system's Artificial Paranoia was becoming excessive, and had caused a few problems.

"Have you fixed that mad mech yet?" Kiko Ap Rhys looked at him from over her cards in the corner game, the mouse's ears twitching in irritation. "I'm not letting it anywhere NEAR my workshop until you've calmed it down."

"Well ... I havnae sae much as calmed it doon, as turned it aff," Sharrown looked up at the roof plating innocently. "Tis sae bonny an idea, Pre-Emptive Armour - disnae hang about tae get hurt." A modern development on Reactive Armour, his Mechsuit was studded with small sensor-equipped explosive "cans" which had just enough intelligence to spot any high-velocity objects incoming, and do their best to disrupt them before the suit's paint scheme was scratched. "The trouble is, their wee brainies cannae judge size affly well." On the last set of exercises, a close fly-by of Chester's fighter had looked rather like an incoming missile at much closer range - Kiko had just finished picking the shrapnel out of the Puffin's tail fins.

The little wildcat strolled over towards the card table. Kiko was dealing, with Chester, Felina and Sabaoth playing, and Deck already out of the game.

Sharrown's eyes lit up. He recognised the game, though this was a variant he hadn't tried in a while - Kiko and Deck obviously had been confident of winning, and neither Felina, Chester nor Sabaoth were worried about losing.

"Your deal." Kiko motioned to Sabaoth. The centaur frowned, looking at her hand.

"Sabaoth bet Sevens - what Sevens do today?" She looked up at the calendar. "Odd day of month, less than ten days since left planet, ship course point into Galactic Hubwards direction... and Sabaoth born-made on world with Unconstitutional Autocracy government.. " she suddenly brightened up. "Cripple Mr. Onion!" She threw her cards down on the table.

Kiko sighed and shook her head. "Wrong game, Sabby. This is variant Fizzbin, remember - you lose the hand. Metaphorically, I mean!" She had seen the close-quarter holograms flash on in Defensive mode.

"Hokay." She looked round at Deck, who was feeling uncomfortably chilly in his bare fur. "Which bit Sabaoth take off this time?"

Just at that moment, across the room W² gave a startled whoop, her wings hiked high in excitement. She had lost her shirt on too many games of Strip Fizzbin before, and had been tinkering with the tuning controls of the sub-space video receivers.

"We're getting Demon Empire broadcasts!" Her huge eyes were wide in a mixture of shock and delight. "It's in Ghak'Vortan - who's speaking that, out here?"

"Ah wondered fit the noise was," Sharrown looked critically at the picture, a ghost of a signal fighting its way through stellar static. "Sounded ta me like some puir body chokin' ta death."

The bat-winged girl thumbed her snub nose at him. "You've no taste." She sighed nostalgically, and leaned forward to listen intently. "Oh- it's commercials. I remember this one - it goes *"You've tried Vla'Hurrg's Unsavoury Pasties? Well, now we've made them Twice as nasty"*. Then the audience sort of gasp, *"Twice as Nasty?"*, and he says *"TWICE as Nasty"*, in a sort of gloat. It's just like home."

"Hmmm." Kiko looked over the table: she still had an Algortian Eight-layer raincoat on, and was starting to consider sacrificing a few layers. "This is neutral territory - or rather, it's so sparsely settled, the

supply lines are too long for anyone to bother invading. I think there's Demon colonists, pirates, Encyclopaedia salesmen and other scum like that lurking about."

Felina put down the diamond-toothed file she had been sharpening her claws with. "I recognise that theme song - isn't that "Pro-Celebrity Assassins"? Keep that channel, Doubleyew - it looks fun."

Sharrown headed off for a well-earned night's sleep. At least, he consoled himself - it should keep them out of trouble for awhile....

Sometime in the middle of the ship's night, he was bounced out of bed by what felt like a collapsing Wall of Sound falling on top of him.

"Fit the Divil..." his stunner was in his paw in an instant, and he wildly looked round. And relaxed, briefly. There seemed to be a major war going on, but it was coming from Sabaoth's room next door.

"Not that yon lassie cannae handle herself," he muttered "but soonest fixed, sooner back tae sleep." He pulled on a set of freshly recharged luminous pyjamas, and trotted out into the corridor.

"Fit's gannin' on in there?" He thumped on the door - and the tortured screams and crashes abruptly clicked off. There came a soft, heavy padding, and Sabaoth stood looking down at him. Her ears suddenly drooped. In the background, he could see what looked like a battle simulator silently running on the screen, W²'s wings blocking most of the picture.

"Sabaoth say sorry. Double-yew say best played loud, Sabaoth see how loud it go."

"Come in, Sharry!" The Demon girl was in her night-dress, the pink bunny motif making a nice counterpoint to her bat wings and arrow-tipped tail. "We got into video range at last - it's coming from Hope's End, our next planetfall - and Red Noise are touring the system when we get there!"

Curiosity may have killed the proverbial cat, but Sharrown had always claimed that wildcats were exempt. "I'm up now, sae I may as well see fit's sae guid about it," he yawned. "All richt - let's be havin' a wee listen - but not sae loud. There's folk tryin' tae sleep aboard." He sat down on one of the big balls of fluffy pink wool that Sabaoth daily spent half an hour determinedly batting around the room with claw-sheathed paws for her Cutening exercises.

"Super! We'll make a convert of you yet!" And W² turned up the volume. "This is one of the rather middle-of-the-road groups: you'll see stuff like it performed every weekend in pleasure gardens and Pain gardens all over the Empire." She sat back in the shadows, the light from the flickering screen casting dancing jewels over her great wide nocturnal eyes.

The concert looked lively. A band was on stage, protected from the screaming mob of the audience by a three-metre deep pit, which was patrolled by maniacally grinning figures in spiked power-armour.

"Fit instruments are they playing?" To Sharrown's untutored ears, it sounded not unlike sticking your head into the afterburner of a Coyote fighter at full throttle - not speaking much Ghak'Vortan, he was missing out on the marvellously subtle lyrics of the romantic ballad being crooned on stage - though "blood" and "kill" seemed to feature largely in what he could make out.

W² pointed at the back row. "Bass section, is a harashtak - that's the one with the three expansion nozzles. Neat ! It's got plenum chamber burning - you can see the shock-diamonds in the exhaust plume... then strings, it's a taskast - that's the one with the electric arcs coming off it. Sort of electron guitar.. the particle beam's not much good in atmosphere, but the Ooooh ! Look at that !" One of the audience had made it alive across the pit while the bouncers were disposing of the rest of the intruders, and had hurled himself onto the stage. "Gotcha - that's what I CALL an player - puts three kilovolts through one of the Licenced, and doesn't miss a note."

"Licenced ?" Sharrown queried, his ears down flat.

The demon girl nodded. "Licenced suicides. If you've, like, really pleased your owner, but your breed's become unfashionable that season, you can get one of those headbands." She pointed at the white band being held up on a severed head that was tossed into the crowd. "It's considered a great honour."

Sharrown suddenly stopped wondering just why so many people deserted from the Demon Empire.

"Hope's End," Doctor Lettice Earnshaw frowned as she flicked through the entry in the Encyclopaedia Galactica. "Ey, but where there's muck there's brass, as t'owld folks said back 'ome. And it's mucky enough, to mek' us a tidy bit."

As an Independent vessel, the Amani Dragon was sometimes forced to take on "interesting" loads to "interesting" places - to boldly go where no insurance premium would reach. Currently, they were heading for Hope's End with holds full of assorted medical supplies, and fifty tonnes of obsolete insecticide.

"Benzy-pyro-monocerol," Ken Felinson winced, looking at their cargo roster. "It disrupts the nervous systems of most insect species - but our contact there pays twenty thousand credits a drum. They CAN'T be using it as nerve gas - that's far too pricey !"

"Aye. Well. Umm." Lettice's whiskers twitched. "I asked DoubleYew-Squared about it. Lass said there's Demon Empire insect species that drink t' stuff like whiskey- when I told 'er it was Twenty years old, aged in the original rusting barrel, she just took out her calculator an' started workin' out 'er cut."

In the Dragon's sickbay, Sabaoth was currently resting from her monthly examination. The direwolf was incredibly resilient in some ways, her high-speed metabolism healing wounds and shrugging off toxins with little need of outside aid. "Just put t' bits in room wi' 'er, an' they'll heal up," Lettice had joked more than once. But, like the latest generation of mechsuits, her design put excessive strain on some fundamental areas that were not engineered to take it.

"Up you get," Ken gestured to his patient, and Sabaoth obediently rolled off the joined couches, to stand on her four wide-padded feet.

"Sabaoth feel Good !" The direwolf nodded happily. "All done, hokay ?"

Ken nodded absently, and she bounded off down the corridor.

The sound of alarmed yells and crew being bowled over faded, and Ken turned to the badger. His ears were half-dipped in worry.

"Owt up wi' our lass ?" Lettice queried, catching his look.

The lynx sighed. "No - right now, there's nothing wrong with her. But I've made a few projections - take a look at this." He tapped in a password to a file Sabaoth had not been shown.

Lettice was a Xenobiologist as well as a medic by training, and her own ears fell like falling trees when she saw the graphs and figures on the screen. "It's that treble-speed base-rate o'hers that's t' blame," she growled. "Life expectancy is - WHAT ?" Her nose twitched in shock.

Ken shrugged. "They built her the way you build ammunition in wartime - shelf life doesn't enter into it. If her regenerative system ever got damaged - it'd be like running a mech with the cooling system broken. It'd work for awhile, then things'd start to cook Fast. She's never going to be old, we'd guessed that much. But I can't say when she'll start to find that out."

The badger frowned in concentration. "Let's get 'er biological data out, an' see what we can come up wi' for the lass. Reckon we've enough to work wi', by now."

Sabaoth trotted happily back to her room, and stood outside the door for a minute. The room next door was Sharry-Kitty - even her abbreviated scenting ability could spot the feline's aroma.

Sharry-kitty so NICE ! She thought to herself, a tail hiked in unconscious interest. Sharry-Kitty rescue poor-little-Sabaoth from Demon Empire, along with Cute-Chester to help. Chester cuddle all the time. Sharry-kitty.....

She frowned as she let herself into her own room. Her new berth was lonely - Kiko would drop by every now and then, but it was not like sharing the old room. The little mouse had usually been away working, and often been too tired to do anything but sleep when she got in - but it had been so nice to just cuddle up to her sleeping form, sharing her generous warmth.

"Sabaoth wait two weeks now," she declared to the empty steel room. It was her off-season, as she could feel - and from the exuberantly underlined dates on the ship's calendar on the wall, she had thirteen days before she'd feel in desperate need of company again. Casting her mind back, she suddenly remembered Sharrown asking for a copy of her calendar - the strange thing was, he always seemed to be desperately busy at the far end of the ship at the crucial times - or when she was on-planet, he was off, and visa versa.

Her ears picked up, and she switched on the viewing screen. The signal quality was getting better by the day - Demon Death Rock, she LIKED.

Just a metre away from where Sabaoth sat with her headphones tuned to something loud and lethal, Sharrown was currently frowning over his computer console.

"And now, we'll see fit we's found tae interest us," he mused. Since they had come into range of Hope's End, he had been accessing the outbound message traffic, specifically the ones that linked the public computer boards. On a planet such as that, there was a LOT of encoded transmissions - most of it the usual commercial criminal and smuggling data, which was either of little interest to the Dragon, or too hot to risk handling. He still shivered when he recalled that time Chester had led them on a raid against a fleet of Software Pirate ships

Ten minutes later, he was banging on Sabaoth's door. This was safe enough right now, he knew - though in a couple of weeks, he'd be seeing how far he could get from the centaur's glisteningly ripening interest in him.

I maybe like the lassies big, he told himself, one ear twisted wryly, but I'm no' THAT greedy...

"Sharry !" The door was pulled open so fast the suction sent him in after it. "Make cuddle, yes ?" Sabaoth stood there, naked fur shining in the warm light. She looked down at him with wide glistening pools of eyes, and her nose twitched excitedly.

"Ah - thank ye, but nae thanks," he retreated hastily, pausing at the threshold. "'Tis about yon group ye's sae keen on gainin' tae see, Red Noise."

The centaur nodded happily. "We get tickets, yes? Go see play?"

"Aye - an' it could be they're wantin' tae see us. There's one o' them coded anonymous messages in the Net I jist cracked - they want tae defect, and they'll pay for the trip oot o' here. I wouldnae risk it - but come in and see. There's a group photo ye'll be interested in."

Sabaoth trotted happily after him, round into his room. On the console screen was a publicity shot of the band and its support crew. And apart from the spiked armour and bloodstained headphones, one of the bouncers looked hauntingly familiar...

There was a heavy thump as the centaur sat down heavily in shock, her eyes wide as cannon ports.

"Sister?"

Sharrown nodded. "I cannae read owermuch Ghak'Vortan, but I ken yon numbers. I'll bet me tail that's tellin' us 'tis S-41, one o' yuir lost Sisters!"

"Humph," Captain K'Tal Sabre looked sternly at the hard copy of the photoscan on his desk. "So, they'll promise us ten thousand credits for every band member gets into AMF space alive, and another ten thousand if they all make it. Sounds too good to be true. Why IS it worth that much?"

W² shifted uncomfortably in her chair. They had met in the small Duty lounge just behind the starship's bridge; Sabre could have done all this by communicator, but he preferred to haul up his crew to watch them squirm.

W² squirmed obligingly, her tail snaking to wrap protectively around one leg. "Well... ", she pointed to the concert poster. There is just one LITTLE problem - it's the way they organise their concert tours."

"And?" The big feline towered over her. His ears were starting to twitch; a danger sign they all recognised. The demon girl pointed to the support group, given bottom billing.

"Every time they're touring somewhere there's a chance of another label grabbing them, let alone defecting altogether," she hesitated. "they don't send them out alone. Right now, Red Noise are the major stars. So there's this unknown group, BoneYard, watching them like hawks. They're put in charge of security for the tour - if they do well, it's a better billing next time, somewhere with a higher casualty rate."

"Ah dinnae ken fit this Sabaoth o'theirs is doin' in the band," Sharrown pointed out. "She dinnae seem ta play onny instrument. Hauld on there a sec, fit's this?" He pointed to a big metal structure behind the direwolf in the picture.

"Oh, that," W² nodded. "Electro-chemical drums. Not sure who's playing them. Anyway, their Sabaoth, S-41, she's dressed as a bouncer."

Sharrown shuddered. He had seen their own, relatively friendly Sabaoth in action. People she took a violent aversion to, tended not to bounce - they splattered.

"An' now," back in his own quarters, carefully checked to be 100% free of Direwolves, Sharrown rubbed his paws together as he bent over his console, "Let's get oor selves a' invite tae yon ball."

The booking system of the Tenenport Municipal Concert Hall and DeathDrome was an interesting structure on his screen. It seemed that the frontier world of Hope's End catered for distinctly mixed tastes - and what was standard fare to one end of town, was unspeakably depraved to the other.

"Ooh, an' there's nasty stuff here, all richt," he gloated. "Better not let puir W² hae' a look at this - it'll put lassie off her meals." Palm-court orchestras and piano recitals were things that Demon Empire citizens only went to masked, gloved and drenched in scent blockers, paranoid about discovery. "An' they'll pay - HOW much tae see it?"

His data probe wound its way through the murky maze of the Concert Hall's finances - the kernel of the program had been lifted from an old wristwatch-based SpaceTax Evader game, and soon led him where he wanted to be.

"Oooh, and if they dinnae jist deserve tae lose their money..." he shook his head, grinning while he made a few little adjustments. All money going into the accounts was traceable - but some of the concerts were over-sold, and hopeful customers put in sealed bids, the highest ones getting the last tickets. Since they were sealed until the night of the concert, only the computer knew what was in them.

"And Ah'm sure," a certain wildcat crooned to himself as he logged off, while printers in the distant ticket office roused themselves to life at the central issuing computer's urgent summons, "they'll no' miss the price o' a haf dozen backstage passes, tae see Red Noise next week."

Just at that moment came a knock on the door.

"Come in - tisnae locked," Sharrown called as he logged out of the ELKHORN Intergalactic Masonic network link that had proved so handy, its communications protocol "handshake" being accepted almost anywhere.

"Hidy." W² opened the door; Sabaath loomed fluffily behind her. "We're all ready and packed - one good thing is, there aren't any Customs or anything on Hope's End - there's enough to worry about anyway. Are you taking your Start suit along?"

The wildcat's ears locked rigid in surprise. "Ye can walk doon the street wi' a fully armed mech?" he demanded "Have they nae bye-laws about firefigts or sich?"

Sabaath shook her head happily, and her tail gestured to a large trailer. "Kiko make up new batch nice big pestle shells. Handy in city, yes?"

"That's, Mortar shells, lassie," Sharrown winced. The direwolf's latest piece of historical re-enactment was not what he would describe as a discreet and concealable piece of self-defence hardware. Kiko had stripped down one of the direwolf's ancient 45mm cannon, keeping the trigger and recoil mechanisms but replacing the two and a half metre barrel with a plain solid steel rod. This was something she had seen in Lettice Earnshaw's history tapes, called a "spigot mortar". No commercial arms manufacturer would let such a cheap and simple weapon ever appear on the galactic market - the shells were simple steel-cased chunks of home-made explosives on a hollow tail unit, without a single logic circuit on board, hurled in a high ballistic arc to impact less than half a kilometre away. And with Sabaath's forebrain taken up with dedicated targeting computer, what she saw, she hit.

"I'd go awfy' light on usin'em," Sharrown's tail twitched as he saw the big ring-finned shells on the trailer as the centaur hauled it past. "I ken they're handy if ye dinnae care about trashin' yon neighbourhood - but law or nae law, I'd be thinkin' there's folk who'd sairly object." That they could come in handy, he'd already seen: the planetfall before last, Sabaath had been entered (by Chester) in an officially non-lethal urban combat contest. The centaur had made herself extremely unpopular, and rich, by defeating sixty million credit's worth of experimental mecha that had been chasing her round a building on the firing range. Twice a minute, she'd simply screech to a halt, ground her recoil plates and lob a ten-kilo practice bomb over the roof there had been absolutely nothing the laser-armed 'Start suit that it generally hit, could DO about it.

The night before they were due to dock at Hope's End, Sabaath was back in the sickbay. For once, she seemed apprehensive about being there.

"Now, lassie," Doctor Earnshaw laid a striped paw on her lower shoulder "we reckons, tha's wearin' thisself out, wi' tha' fast metabolism. Reckon we've found a way to step thi' down a gear or two." She gestured at a wholly unremarkable slow-release implant in its transparent injector tube, looking like three centimetres of cooked pasta. "Inject this under tha' hide, an we'll see if it can fix thi' hormones."

Sabaath backed away, her eyes wide. "Sabaath say no thanks. Sabaath not want hormone implant.... like wicked lady not want make puppies." Her expression hardened. "Sabaath want feel cubs grow in front and back tummy - not do anything hurt chances."

"Honestly," Ken Felinson tapped on the screen. "It's nothing like that - apart from the same slow-release system. This should slow your base heartbeat and everything right down - you won't need to eat nearly as much, and you'll hopefully be able to see whatever cubs you get, growing up. It won't alter your fighting ability; adrenalin will hike your metabolism right back to where it is now, for as long as any emergency lasts. Anyway - if it doesn't work, we can have it out of you in two minutes flat."

The bioweapon looked warily from one face to the other, her targeting holograms a shifting mass of lights. At last, she relaxed.

"Hokay. Sabaath never have wages left after buy crunchy-food. Next stop we go shopping, yes?"

Ten minutes later, Sabaath trotted out of the medical bay with three centimetres of slow-release hormone gradually dissolving into her bloodstream. This should change nothing as regards her potentials - just change gear as regards timing....

"Richt," As the cargo door of the Dragon's shuttle closed the next day, Sharrown rubbed his paws together gleefully. "That's all yon official business ta'en care of - now we've till toneet ta' look about yon town."

Sabaath luxuriously stretched her back legs. She had helped pull the trailers of medical supplies and cask-conditioned vintage insecticide into the spaceport's warehouses, where Sabre was gleefully counting up their payment. "Sabaath go change into hardsuit, yes?"

Sharrown nodded. "*Armed and extremely dangerous*" on this planet described not the occasional renegade, but the average citizen. And it was a role he knew the direwolf was VERY good at.

"Eeh, it don't look such a bad place, I'd say," Lettice Earnshaw stepped aside as Sabaath trotted off to the shuttle's crew compartment. "Looks a bit rough, like - but tha should'a seen Neo-Cleethorps on a Saturday night, back 'ome." She consulted a town plan, and hefted a heavy backpack of some specialist equipment that Chester had parted with only under great protest and threat of a serious kicking. "Concert

starts at eight - Red Noise are on last, tha's got six hours to set it up fer us. Then straight back to t' Dragon, and we're off world before folk know what hit 'em.'"

Sharrown's natural optimism decided to go on holiday for the rest of the trip. This part, he knew, was going to be TRICKY.

By the time Sabaoth had strapped herself into her armoured suit, everyone was ready to roll.

"Now, tha' understands what we've got ta do ?" Lettice queried the fourth member of their team - not one they would have preferred to take along, but the least conspicuous in these crowds .

W²'s huge eyes shone bright. "I go and collect the tickets from the booking office, and make sure nobody follows me. Then we meet in the Combat Tea-shop across the road, half an hour before the concert hall doors open, and take it from there."

The badger sighed with relief. "Aye, that's champion. Just don't goa and forgettin thisself shoppin, like last time."

The demon-girl's wings hiked up defensively. "That was just one little slip-up ! Anyway, I was only ten minutes late - Sabaoth still had some ammunition left, and there weren't THAT many pirates..."

"Out ! Get thisself summat to eat, an' all. Like to be a long evenin'." The badger turned to Sharrown and Sabaoth, and grinned. "Feels reet grand to be in action again, eh ?"

Sabaoth nodded happily, her combat holograms flashing brightly. "We go see concert too - and finish with lots money for crunchy-food, yes !"

Sharrown looked around at the city, a melting pot of half the cultures in the known galaxy, and probably a few Illegal Aliens as well. He watched one scuttle past, its acidic saliva leaving smoking craters in the plascrete of the docking bay.

"I dinna ken aboot ye," he growled "But I ken I'll be glad tae see the back o' this mission already."

It could be said that the Tennenport Municipal Concert hall was a big building - but Lettice's description of "Bloody HUGE" better fitted it. In front was a wide glass foyer, closed except for a ticket booth, with wide stairs visible inside leading up to the seating and concert pits. Around the back it was a complex tangle of service rooms and ductwork, except for the lower two storeys which were hard, smoothly unclimbable plascrete rising out of the service road below.

"Hmmm." Lettice Earnshaw scratched her striped head as they looked at the daunting wall from the top of its neighbouring building - a quick and intimidating interview between Sabaoth and the building's manager had persuaded him to let them go onto the roof, presumably for an afternoon's fun sniping at the crowds. "One o' they windows is t' dressin' room, Red Noise'll be locked up till show starts. Thing is, which one ?"

They were twenty metres from the nearest corner of the building: Sharrown scanned the various barred windows with care. "If I were one o' yon Demon Empire Security folk," he mused "I'd put them in either the lowest cellar, or the highest attic - easier tae keep tabs on oor band."

Lettice scanned the building's plans. "Nowt they can use in basement - it's all open boilers an' that. So ..." she pointed at a tiny barred window just underneath the roof plate, which was festooned with fresh-looking razorwire. "Tha' reckon, eh ?"

"Ah do." Sharrown suddenly grinned. "Let's put some o' Chester's kit tae guid use, jist for the once !"

Three minutes later, it looked indeed as if Sabaoth had come onto the roof for sniping practice; the port side cannon was loaded up and her targeting laser ranged exactly on the window.

"Sabaoth shoot ?" She asked anxiously. Hearing Lettice's grunt, she concentrated - felt that special sensation as her dewclaw's electrical system pulsed once into the PAK 45's ancient trigger - and fired !

There was a soft, apologetic-sounding cough from the great cannon. Normally, the windows of the buildings around would now be shattering under the concussive blast of a kilogram of high-energy propellant detonating, sending a shell screaming downrange at three kilometres a second with enough force to punch through the main frontal armour of a Class 18 Mechsuit - but today, a little more finesse was needed.

"Grand shot," Lettice slapped Sabaoth on the rump encouragingly. The compressed-gas charge had lobbed a fist-sized instrument package unerringly across the fifty metres of air, arcing out no faster than a Penn Nine Death Cricket ball, to impact the window and stick tight to the glass, held securely by the soft adhesive tip. Between there and a fishing reel clipped onto Sabaoth's muzzle brake, now sagged an almost invisibly fine optical fibre.

"Sabaoth do good, yes ?" The centaur sat down, looking on eagerly as Sharrown plugged the fibre into a control box.

"Aye, lassie, that ye did," the wildcat nodded, activating the motor on the instrument that slowly drilled through into the room beyond the window. "But ye may haff tae do it again - 'tis only a guess, we've the richt room."

Lettice concentrated on the tiny screen that now displayed a view of the inside of the room. "First time lucky ! I sees instruments, and bullet-proof gold lame flares - eeh 'eck, who in their right mind'd wear flared trews half a metre across ?"

Sharrown looked up at the cloudy skies, whistling innocently. If Lettice had not yet seen his latest sartorial experiments, there was no need to alarm her right now, when they had enough to do. ...

"Nobody home, 'any'ow," the badger concluded, after a minute's scanning. "But that's where they'll be - let's get owwer and wait for 'em."

Ten minutes later, Lettice and Sharrown were gluing ultra-yield climbing bolts onto the Concert Hall's steel skeleton as they made their way up the wall. Sabaoth had cast another, stouter, line across and they had jumared over, the badger moving with surprising ease for her age and build.

"Ye's doin' pretty fair on these ropes," Sharrown panted, leaning back on the climbing harness as they worked their way up towards the window some twenty metres above them.

Lettice slapped another glue patch onto the plascrete wall as high above herself as she could reach, and grinned down at him. "When tha' grows up on Penn Nine, it's the national pastime. When I were a lass, I were first one to free-climb t' North Wall o' Cleckstanworth Edge. Thousand yard head-jamming route, that were - nowt but head and claw-holds on t' whole face." Her tungsten-carbide nailed boots scabbled on the rusting ductwork as she belayed herself into position.

Across the artificial canyon that gaped between the buildings, Sabaoth stood guard. Her cannon was loaded with blanks, which in her case meant the equivalent of a stun grenade that could blow an armoured trooper clear off the roof. In the saddlebags she carried the serious ammunition: the 45 mm tungsten penetrators that could do cruel and unusual things to even "bleeding-edge" technology mecha.

In a few minutes, Lettice reached the newly secured razorwire that had been looped round the window, and proceeded to unsecure it. Swiftly tapping into the fibre cable of the camera looking into the room, she took a quick look around.

"Nobody 'ome," she whispered "hold on tight, Sharry - we may 'avta wait us a bit here."

Barely two hundred metres away in the packed streets, W² strolled wide-eyed through the crowds. It had been a long time indeed since she had been surrounded by familiar horned and fanged faces, and she was determined to make the most of it.

Hope's End was not officially a Demon Empire world. It had no Government to speak of - being ruled by unspeakable tyrants who had no interest in Empires of either sort save their own. But where there was Demon culture, there were commercial traders.....

"Yay !" Her pointed ears twitched, and even her minimal nose could smell the charring objects screaming on a food stall across the road. Dodging the traffic, she trotted over and stood for a moment sniffing hungrily at the plumes of greasy smoke coming from what was sputtering on the black hotplate.

"Could I have a ... MacDonors, with double chars ?" she pulled out a handful of coins. The vendor laughed hideously as he exchanged them for the now-dead thing on the grill, "*specially prepared to our own Unthinkable recipe*", as the sign above proclaimed.

A minute later, W² was strolling down the crowded street, experiencing the exquisite horror of a Demon takeaway. She grinned as she passed a stall promising "*Ears pierced with extreme brutality while-U-wait. Other parts too*". You didn't HAVE to be a masochist to live in the Demon Empire - but it was the one way you were sure of enjoying yourself.

"Ey up, - there's summat 'appening." Clinging to the outside of the concert hall, six storeys above the hard plascrete of the alleyway, Lettice had been wondering if they would have to hang around all day.

Three metres below her, the wildcat crouched in the angle of a ventilator hood, as he steadied the picture on the camera looking through the window above.

"Aye - whisht now, folk are in there," he pressed a claw to his muzzle for silence, and concentrated on the screen.

Inside the room, he could see the backs of four people, and the instantly recognisable rump of a direwolf. The door to the rest of the building was suddenly slammed shut from the outside - but not before he saw the traditional black and white power armour of a bouncer standing outside, complete with heavy-duty stunner and the spinning metal disc blade of a military bow tie.

There were two rooms linked in there, he realised - off to the left was a much bigger one, seemingly windowless. One of the figures turned round to enter it, and he saw the tall insect-like shape of a Trigastan, one of the Demon Empire heartland races. This had been the one playing the electron guitar in the publicity shot - Suiskarno, he recalled the name was.

As he watched, the direwolf began to run her claw-extended paws around the edge of the door, before scanning across the rest of the room. Twice, she picked something small and metallic out of unassuming pieces of furniture, and stared at the offending item with her laser rangefinders until wisps of smoke emerged. For a few minutes she roamed around the room - until she came to the window.

"Oh oh.." Sharrown's last view through the screen was of a set of unsheathed claws coming straight at what he had thought was a well-hidden camera. He yanked the cable out of the receiving screen - just as the transmitter above them exploded with a loud popping, showering them with expensive shrapnel as the direwolf put several kilovolts through it.

"Chester wilnae be pleased - and here she comes !" With a shattering of reinforced glass, the window broke and a sharp-toothed muzzle poked out.

"If tha's Red Noise," Lettice called up quietly "We're folks tha wants ta meet - an I Don't mean we wants tha' autographs."

Ten minutes later, the crowded dressing room was more crowded still. The window had been barred, but the wall panels between the steel girders were barely thick enough to keep the rain out - a few minutes with a vibro-saw had provided a more than adequate new door.

Introductions were made, and the room swept again for bugging devices - and it proved the direwolf's search had been thorough.

"Reet, tha's got an idea o' how we'll get out o' here ?" Lettice frowned. "We can take most of thi' along the wire - but it won't tek weight o' that direwolf."

The Demon lead singer's wings twitched. "We're not leaving her, IF we can help it, you know. Actually, she's part of the band - we'll do a lot better with her along, and not just as bouncer."

"Can yon lassie no' speak for hersel' ?" The wildcat looked up at the huge figure standing impassively.

Suiskarno winced. "She can talk, at times - but she's what you might call "non compost mentis" at her best. Not a snappy conversationalist, but she does love a good tune. It'll be a rare treat, dont'cha know, breaking into a new market."

Sharrown frowned. "I dinnae ken ye'll sell sae many discs aff in AMF space. I hadnae heard o' yon style before, not at all."

Suiskarno grimaced, his wings pulled in tightly. "Actually, it's not really a financial move. It's Red Seas Records, we're on a lifetime contract with them."

"And so ye cannae break it in Demon space ?" The wildcat's ears went flat. "Tisnae oor business, then. Ye've got nae call tae come runnin' tae us jist for the sake o' a better percentage."

The ursine drummer gave a brief growl, Mainstrike's species coming from one of the worlds that the AMF would have taken if someone else had not reached them first. "You, Sir, have no idea what our record companies are like. They have millenia of tradition behind them - everything has to be just so. They could scarcely show their faces in the trade, without a full set of artistes - at least one Young Hopeful, a major Spawnybopper group, a good steady album group, and a tragically-slain Dead group. Trouble is, Red Seas Records just lost their Dead Group, the Chundertones."

Lettice cocked her head to one side. "How d'you lose a Dead group ?" She demanded. "If they've got t' rest of you under their claw, how did t' dead group get away ?"

Suiskarno winced. "We used to be support band for the Chundertones, like BoneYard are for us - then they had their - accident, and we got promoted. It was OK till last month, then someone posthumously remixed their final album. The Label don't know we know this. What they found"

"Silly billies had left these Subliminal messages on the discs," Mainstrike commented languidly "If you play the records forward, and somehow rig up a micro-speaker quiet enough to make out individual words, you get this voice telling you to be good to people, and listen to their opinions rather than slowly feeding their gonads through industrial cheese-graters... of course, that's the end of the Chundertones - which means we're set to take their place, dont'cha know ? When the touring contract expires "- he drew a clawed hand across his throat "so do We."

Lettice's tail twitched. "Nobody'd noticed it on the songs before ?"

Mainstrike stretched out on the chaise short. "The only people who had the tapes were the label's Executives. And you can hardly expect them to go around listening to music, can you ? That's the sort of thing "fans" do. Executives are far too busy doing serious lunches to mess around with that sort of nonsense."

"Anyway." Lettice looked out of the gaping hole where the wall had been, to where Sabaoth 66 paced placidly, her eyes and ears alert for trouble. "We yavta' get thi out o' here - we could do wi' reinforcements, tha' reckon ?"

Sharrown nodded, pulling out the databook with the building's security arrangements carefully labelled - the Masonic communications package really opened doors, he reflected as he traced the route out of the building. Suddenly, he winced.

"I dinnae like ta tell ye," he said slowly, looking at the plans aghast "But oor way out has anlie the one wee exit - right ower yon stage !"

The badger looked at the map, and then from face to face. Amharod was about Sharrown's size, she realised - that is, if the wildcat stood up extending his cranked legs. Looking from one to the other, she suddenly had an idea.

"Aye..." Sharrown's whiskers drooped when he heard it. "I dinnae like onny o' this mission an' this is nae worse - it's an auld trick mind ye, but it jist might work...."

"Sabaoth go find Double-Yew," that worthy wolven repeated under her breath, as she switched on the safety catch of her cannon and trotted downstairs. It was tough turning the corners: even without the sword-bayonet her cannon was more than three metres long. *But at least*, she nodded happily to herself as she cantered out into the street - *it's not bad in crowds - folk make way as soon as they see Sabaoth coming.*

"Double-Yew !" She spotted the familiar figure standing almost at the head of the queue for tickets. In an age of interstellar mass communication, the Demon Empire still made it compulsory for the cheap seats to be sold by standing in line for hours, preferably in the rain.

W² waved happily. "Sabby ! Almost there - how's things ? "

The direwolf stopped, looking puzzled. "Sabaoth feel funny. Not feel bad - feel all fizzy inside." She frowned, and shook her head.

"Missy Earnshaw say Sabaoth go in now, not wait for concert," Sabaoth's hologram showed a brief burst of video special effects. "You wait see Missy in front-hall, she come out make-arrange things." The hologram brightened. "Sabaoth go on stage, yes !"

The demon girl patted her on the rump. "Good luck - break their legs." Suddenly her eyes widened. "Sabaoth - your tail !"

Turning round, the direwolf looked at a blonde tail that had unconsciously locked sideways, pressing tight against her rump as W² wiped her unexpectedly sticky hand dry on the fur. Her ears rose in surprise.

"Sabaoth back-tummy all ready - but it not proper-due for ten days." Her hologram tried for a tentative heart. Suddenly, she laughed.

"Missy Earnshaw and Doctor Felinsson put implant under Sabaoth-skin. Say it change speed and timing things - but they not think-expecting this."

"Gosh." W² handed over the direwolf's ticket, and smiled. "This'll make things easier. I think they'll let you in to see the group now - you've got all the right qualifications " she waved the pass. "This one, you can forge, THAT, you can't."

From inside the dressing room, there was an oddly spaced footfall that Lettice and Sharrown found familiar. Suddenly, into the room came a figure clad in battle armour - who stopped dead, screeching to a halt with all four feet locked at what she saw. A backstage pass dropped to the ground.

"Sister !" Sabaoth's ears went up, and hearts blossomed on her targeting hologram. "Me Sabaoth sixty-Six, remember yes ? All sister in camp at Stalystkov ?"

It was a strange sight, Sharrown realised - like looking at the Sabaoth he knew standing in front of a mirror. But there were some differences - aside from retaining her original slate-grey pelt, the band's bouncer seemed to have had a harder time of it, wide discoloured strips of fur showing where great scars had healed badly. The eyes seemed vacant somehow - the last time he'd seen their Sabaoth look like that, was after Chester had entered her for the "drink the metre of ale" contest. With the fast direwolf metabolism, all kinds of stimulants had unpredictable and generally rapid effects.

Frowning, Sabaoth trotted up to S-41, who gazed at her incuriously. She reached towards the big earphones her battered sibling was wearing...

"For Quarlon's sake, Don't Take Them Off !" Suiskarno rushed forward. "She'll go bonkers - it's not feeding time, either."

"Why Sister not recognise Sabaoth ?" That worthy cocked her head on one side. "Why wear ear-things ?"

Amharod winced, her tail thrashing. "We got Ess-Fortyone third-hand - actually, our Manager picked her up cheap. She was the last survivor of this Shock Brigade, nobody knew what to do with her - so

we took her on. Seems every time they went into action, they'd pumped her full of something called HyperFrenz, it's a combat drug."

Lettrice Earnshaw winced. "Eeh 'eck ! I've heard o' that muck - it's one o' the few illegal ones nobody wants t' buy. T'aint reliable - it does stuff to tha' brain tha' don't want to know about."

Amharod pointed to the headphones. "We used to just turn her loose into the pit, each performance. The band and crew have full-coverage earphones on, saves your hearing. One show, she got them ripped off by a Licenced - and she calmed right down. Hardly killed anyone the rest of the whole performance. So we took her to the doctor, and then we discovered ..."

"Music soothes the savage breast, and all that," Suiskarno said, reclining languidly. "She's got a tape loop of our latest album playing, keeps her stable. Just as long as she keeps it on...."

Lettrice's ears went flat. "I'd like ta get t'buggers as fed 'er wi' HyperFrenz, and feed 'em to 'er, tail-first. I've remembered one o' the side effects. On some species - it doesn't wear off. Folk get stuck that way."

Just then there was a knock on the door. Lettrice, Sharrown and Sabaoth dashed into the next room, while S-41 stood across the connecting door like a barricade.

Two mecha-clad bouncers cautiously opened the outer door, their insectoid forms glinting in the dim light of the service corridor.

"Yer on in half an hour," one of them growled - and did a quick double-take at the sight of the gaping hole where the window had been.

"Mice", Mainstrike commented blandly.

"Hold it - one, two, three..." the other bouncer pulled out a publicity photo of the group, and made a swift head-count. He relaxed. "All there - and that window's forty metres up. No problems." With that they vanished, and the door slammed shut.

Lettrice poked her snout round the inner door. "Grand stuff. That's step one. Reet, lads - let's be off." She uncoiled the length of climbing line from her belt, and secured it to a girder. "Amharod, tha's first out wi' me. Sharry, swap yer harness for 'er jet-pipes."

"But I cannae play yon pipes !" The wildcat protested, as the grinning Demon feline began to warm up the gas turbine engine of the six-barrelled instrument.

"Oh, you'll be fine," Amharod blew him a kiss as she began to slide down the rope after Lettrice. "Nobody's ever noticed, but I can't either."

From outside, they heard the savage roar as the main doors were opened, letting the screaming mob surge in like water spilling through a shattered dam. Downstairs, the cameras were already rolling, as the wave-front of packed fans negotiated the twists and turns of the corridor. The final ten metres descent into the concert pit was a steep-turning spiral ramp with no safety barrier and several tripwires near the top - the management subscribed to always starting the evening's entertainment as they meant to go on.

"I feel bluidy silly in this getup," was Sharrown's comment "At least yon lassie disnae wear a dress."

Suiskarno nodded sagely as he stepped back to examine the wildcat's stage costume. "Wouldn't be very practical," he observed. "I suppose you COULD make it out of flameproof fabric, but there's all this burning mech fuel gets poured on the stage in the last number, and flames DO tend to rise."

"Sabaoth LIKE !" Apart from the earphones, the Direwolves now looked almost identical, Sabaoth's honey-blonde fur mostly hidden in the spare suit of spiked battle armour. The cannon had been left with W², who was shamelessly posing with it in the foyer - with the backstage passes Sabaoth had got into the changing room posing as a groupie herself.

"Now, here's yon plan o' Lettrice's, we'll jist try and pull it aff," Sharrown brushed down the Kevlar gold lame glitter-suit. "BoneYard are on first, then us, then them again - all yon security's between us and the stage. When they're on for the last time, we rush them frae behind." He hefted the harashtak, strapping its power pack on and randomly squeezing the control sack. Half a metre of smoking flame and a sound as of an Arcturan MegaBison in pain emerged.

"Not bad at all," Suiskarno commented. "Why did you tell us you couldn't play ?"

The concert hall echoed to roars and screams as the first set got underway, BoneYard playing up a storm. Lettrice tore across the alleyway, dropping off Amharod in the Combat Tearoom across the street. She memorised the demon feline's costume, making sure she could tell her apart from the other Amharods who were wandering around, shapeshifters from planet Wanna-B.

"I'll be back," she said grimly. "Just don't start any fights, eh ? Tha's not bein' paid ta do so right now."

Dodging the traffic again, she boldly strode in through the PlasGlass doors of the foyer. About a score of assorted folk were milling around - she spotted a familiar figure innocently stroking the writhing tentacles of a Maidsbane plant, obviously ignorant of how its seeds were spread by mammals.

"It's a great concert, isn't it?" W²'s eyes were round and brimming with enthusiasm and the Maidsbane's soporific musk. "You hardly need earplugs, out here." She proffered a greasy paper bag. "Want some? I thought you might be hungry after all that."

The badger's species was officially classed as "Omnivorous", but there were limits. Lettice tentatively chewed the brownish thing inside, and grimaced. "Tha's sure it's the contents and not the bag, tha' sposed ta eat?"

W² shrugged. "Tasted pretty normal to me. It's a fungal and algae substitute-derived burger. Not everyone can afford to eat real algae protein, you know - you need uncontaminated waste to feed it on."

Lettice sighed, realising that things had been going FAR too well so far. And as her communicator peeped in her pocket, she had a nasty foreboding that it was going to get worse - only in emergency were the Dragon's crew supposed to break radio silence. She snapped open the device, and pushed the earphone jack into her greying ear.

"Eh, Madame Earnshaw," Caresse's voice was faint, the signal barely making it through the steel and plascrete around them. "We 'ave ze problems. Our cargo, it eez late in arriving, and ze gates are closing for the evening - We shall not be able to do ze loading until ze spaceport opens, tomorrow. Quelle dommage!"

"It's a sight more'n a bloody shame," Lettice's ears went flat, as the implications sunk in. "We're comin' out wi' our "guests", tha' knows, an' we wants ta be as far away as we can get -"

Just then, there was a growl on the receiver and the Captain's voice came online. "Listen, Doc - I know it's going to be tough - but we can't endanger the ship. Don't, repeat don't, bring our Guests anywhere near till we're ready to lift off - you can hole up for the night, can't you?"

"Bloody Nora!" Lettice swore, invoking the War-goddess of Penn Nine "I hears you, Capt'n, but tha's really dropped the lot of us in it ... we've Promised them we're going ta do t'job. Aye well - we'll manage." Snapping the receiver shut, she turned to W². "Listen, lass, get out there an' find us some rooms, near the spaceport. Summat none too pricey, an' not too far off - we're a bit conspicuous, like, wi' them Direwolves."

The Demon girl nodded happily, as she reluctantly unwound a gently probing tendril from her thigh. "I think I saw just the place, on my way in here," she turned to go. "Meet me at the rendezvous we were going to use anyway, right?"

Lettice nodded, as with determinedly hunched wings their local talent dodged the Venus Mechtrap plants and trotted off into the crowds.

"Five minutes - yer on!"

The voice of the mecha-clad bouncer outside boomed into the room.

Sharrown looked desperately around at the rest of the band, loading their instruments and tightening armour straps on the costume. This was it - he looked longingly at the gaping hole in the wall, and slowly turned back towards the door. The concert hall's own "minders" knew how many were in the group, but had had little contact. It should be easy enough fooling them, and getting as far as the stage where BoneYard and the Label's professionals were gathered to cover the exits.

Sharrown remembered something W² had once told him about the punishment of piracy in the Demon Empire. When caught, especially excessive pirates (or what she'd described as a "really cool kill score") were given the chance to test out new torture and execution techniques, or enter the music "Biz". BoneYard had been one of the crews who had taken the tough way out.

"Tally-ho," Mainstrike yelled, punching his fist in the air "We'll knock 'em dead!". Like the rest of the group (except S-41), he came from one of the Demon Empire's core worlds, that had passed through the stage of calculated brutality millenia before the rest of the Empire. Touring with a hotel-and-audience-trashing band was regarded as an exquisite piece of Historical Re-enactment.

The door opened, and the two insectoid minders gave another quick headcount - with a quick grin at the shape of the naked centaur just visible as a shape under the big bed in the next room. "All accounted for - you're on."

They followed their "escort" down interminable ill-lit windings, past maintenance rooms, prop storehouses, low-security dressing rooms and shafts leading down to dimly-glimpsed flooded caverns from whose echoing depths phantom operatic voices drifted up. Soon all other sound was drowned in the terrifying howls and screams of Boneyard's debut album, played loud.

"I've heard o' dry ice on the set, but this is ridiculous," Sharrown grumbled as the corridor filled up to his waist - reminding him to stretch his legs up to match Amharod's height.

Suiskarno nodded, fingering his electron guitar. "It's the bass speakers," he explained. "Cooling system. They burn a litre of tri-nitrohexane a second, at full volume, good quality Brisant Wave Modulation sound takes some doing. Low notes played loud, you can actually see the blast wave ripping into the audience." He handed out earplugs to the rest of the group. "Better secure these - remember what happened to Mahov Wall we used to tour with." He grinned savagely at Sharrown. "Brains went completely. The label had to find them jobs on breakfast-time chat shows."

Suddenly, they came to an airlock door big enough to drive a groundcar through. Their insectoid guards stopped and sealed the helmets of their mechsuits, and motioned them forward.

Sabaoth, Sharrown, Suiskarno and Mainstrike stepped into the heavily padded chamber, which seemed to be shaking violently. One door slammed shut, and a series of lights like a cargo-bay door indicator warned them the other was about to open.

"Here we go," Sharrown swallowed, dry-mouthed. He ran his paws up and down the control tubes of the harashtak, feeling it vibrate like a power-blade in his grasp, the exhaust recoil twisting against his grip.

And then the doors slammed open, and Red Noise were live on stage.

"Just Play !" Sharrown read Mainstrike's lips - thankfully it was not Suiskarno, whose insectoid mouthparts were distinctly trickier. He saw the drummer fire up the ignition circuits of his electrochemical drums - each beat made connection and detonated an aerosol slug of fuel-air mixture in the kit.

Here gaes nothin, the wildcat thought to himself - *it's the divvil's ain racket, but they dinnae seem tae mind....* calling up a sound reminiscent of a battle-damaged Mechsuit turbine, he began to pick up the beat.

Sabaoth's pupils widened to great dilated lakes as the sound washed over her. The genes of half a dozen species of attack beasts were in her blood, and her powers were approaching their peak along with her unexpectedly early Season. She leaped into the pit, the first row of fans already screaming in frenzy after the warmup act - switching to her primitive instincts, all she saw was a raging sea of foes out for her blood. Those great jaws gaped open, and the first wave went over the top of the barriers into the pit.

I hope she disnae tek it too seriously... Sharrown just found time to wince, as he watched his friend hurling bodies into the crowd - *one evenin' o' this, and she'll undo all W²'s Cutenin' exercises... we dinnae really want to leave a heap o' bodies behind us, een if they paid for it...*

Sabaoth was the "Centaur" of attention - half the cameras were trained on her as she whirled and raged in the pit, half a dozen berserk foes throwing themselves on her with teeth and claws. Dimly she recalled that none of the crowd wore the white headbands of a Licenced Suicide, this not being a Demon core world - so although teeth ripped and sharp claws slashed, the fallen were being dragged away by junior bouncers for healing rather than disposal.

"Go, Sabby, Go !" The wildcat howled, exultant, "Ye can tek'em !" He had almost got the hang of playing the harashtak now - at least, he knew which bits made higher and lower notes. Stepping up to full volume, a metre of flame crossed with shock-diamonds howled from its nozzles as he sent the music up in a wild skirling that he felt rather than heard Suiskarno and Mainstrike keeping pace with, improvising as the great figure whirled and fought in the pit, enjoying every brutal instant of it.

One of the insectoids was coming over the barrier now: massively strong limbs and integral armour making it a foe to fear. Dancing round, Sabaoth first swatted a were-mouse against the walls of the pit, and moved to face the insectoid's four grappling arms, a centaur like herself. She locked in a hungry embrace, and they crashed over, her white electric fire spilling out across what she now saw was a metallic-inlaid exoskeleton, earthing in a spectacular but fruitless display. A sharp-edged front finger jabbed at her throat, drawing blood on the tough blonde hide.

There was a tearing howl of exultation as the pain finally put the Direwolf into top gear. The back rows were cheering loud enough to be heard above the white-hot speaker cones as she flipped over, grasped the insectoid by its front limbs, and heaved with her utmost strength. There was a moment of flight - and then a thunderous impact on the plascrete as the jointed form hit the wall like a crashing groundcar.

And if they had thought the crowd had gone wild before - those present suddenly found out the true meaning of the word.

"I cannae go on again," Sharrown's tail was scorched and drooping after a full forty minutes on stage. All the band were overheated and exhaustedly panting inside their armour, in the cool of the airlock - the stage was briefly empty while the bands changed shifts and the audience surged out into the foyer to cool off and excitedly count the casualties so far.

"Cheer up, old bean," Suiskarno still managed to look elegant even after the main set "That's it. Look outside." He raised the armoured flap they had discovered covering a thick Plasglas window overlooking the stage "Only the regular security out there. Once we got across that stage, we'd be into the corridors on the far side - which lead straight out."

Sharrown nodded, still panting. "Aye - and if Boneyard's finishing aff, we'd best wait till they're worn out wi' playin, afore we make oor break. We'd best send a'body tae pick up Sabby's sister, Ess Forty-One."

Sabaoth herself was still happily roaming around the pit and empty stage, waiting for the last number. Eyes bright with mischief, she spotted the instruments intended for BoneYard, and trotted over to examine them.

Sabaoth feel GOOD, she told herself - as Ken Felinsson had promised, the adrenalin had brought her metabolism back up to its normal supercharged speed, and her blood rushed with excitement. It was boosting her whole system, she knew - shudderingly, she ground her rump against the hard wall, feeling the pressure welcome as never before. Her holograms briefly snapped out of close-quarter combat mode, as she speculated hungrily what she was going to do when she returned to the Dragon that night - it was a shame cute-Sharry was always busy, she reflected hungrily - still, cute-Chester always do Very nicely....

A screaming attack siren announced the end of the interval.

"Right - change over. Mr. Chattan, keep your mask on and your legs stretched. BoneYard will be coming right past us."

"Ah ken yon idea," Sharrown nodded. He rose to his full height, just as the inner chamber door swung open - and the four surviving members of BoneYard entered the small airlock. (They had started the concert with five, but the lead guitarist had made the mistake of trying crowd-diving before becoming popular enough for the fans to want to catch him.)

All of the rival group were reptilians, their integrally armoured hides reinforced with glittering ceramic panels. They swept past Red Noise with hardly a whisper - Sharrown had heard they came from the far side of the Empire, and spoke a completely different language.

Suddenly, the lead singer turned round, and fixed Sharrown with an icy stare. The wildcat's spine felt as if someone was pouring freezing water along it - and somehow he knew that the mask and costume he wore was no disguise at all. The reptile grinned, its mouth a gape of needle fangs, and the outer door slammed shut.

"Er," Sharrown tapped Suiskarno on the shoulder "did ye ken, some o' them are psykers ? An' one o' them jist read me doon ta the label on me vest."

The lead singer winced, his mandibles twitching. "Psykers ? I'd heard a few of that race are." He stared around the narrow airlock in horror.

"We're in trouble, chaps," Suiskarno slammed open the inner airlock door, to reveal the welcome bulk of the band's own direwolf, come down as reinforcements. "S-FortyOne ! Boneyard'll be away to tell the rest of Security the minute they finish their last set. Even if we could get past them - they'll work out we're going to defect, and it wouldn't take much to seal off the spaceport."

Just then there was a hollow boom, echoing through the corridors. Alarm bells screamed, and the video screen of the stage went dead.

"Fit's gain' on ?" Sharrown yelled, shooting to his feet.

Mainstrike frowned. "Looked like someone firebombed the stage again. Bit of good luck, eh ?"

"Rather. I say, let's leg it in the panic, shall we ?" Suiskarno fixed the bayonet on his electron guitar, and leaped towards the vision slit. "Coast's clear. Tally-ho !"

Sharrown grimaced. "Dinnae look yun gift horse in t' mouth - come on, let's get out wi' Sabaoth - an' get shiftin' !" With a heave, he swung the outer airlock door open, and almost choked on the acrid fumes that filled the air outside. All the stage lights were out, and the familiar screams of the audience showed BoneYard had put on a good last act.

They tore across the smoke-filled stage, shoving aside figures looming out of the darkness. Up from the dark sprang a huge figure, Sabaoth 66's limited infra-red vision at its best with all the dimly smouldering objects around.

"Follow Sabaoth ! Sabaoth see way out !"

Crashing through the screen of fans heading for the main exit, they sprinted into clear air on the far side of the complex. It seemed an eternity of steps and passages before they arrived at the foyer, with its Venus Mantrap plants lurking innocently in their pots awaiting incautious stragglers from the concert.

"We're oot - an' they'll be richt on oor tails." Sharrown's ears went up as he saw Lettice Earnshaw holding the door open - in a few seconds the rest of the crowd would come flooding up from the burning theatre. Lettice was already running as Sabaoth reached her.

"Change o' plan - we'll have to split up," Lettice nodded under her breath, as they nonchalantly strolled out of the building until they were out of sight of the security cameras. "Meet you at the rendezvous, Sharry - I'll tek rest o' them through back gennels."

The security alarm suddenly screamed behind them, a harsh metallic buzzing synthesised from the frequencies that a dozen species found most irritating. Its echoes rang across the town.

"Divvl tek' it !" Sharrown yelled above the racket "we're oot' o' here !"

Sabaath picked her shorter-legged friend up and sat him astride her back, while she picked up into a fast canter. Just round the corner she accelerated - and screeched to a halt, almost colliding with an unexpected crowd.

Right under one of the alarm speakers, a flashing blue-white light slashed stroboscopic shadows across the street. Three or four dozen slave-caste Demon Empire colonists were packed in there, mindlessly heaving and dancing in a jostling mass.

Sharrown found a moment to approve of their interestingly patterned fluorescent clothing as Sabaath squeezed past unnoticed, the dancers twitching and jerking with eyes glazed over.

"I dinnae ken yon style - is it some Demon Empire craze ?" He yelled in Sabaath's ear as she picked up speed on the far side.

She nodded. "Double-Yew say it start as Undead fashion - so it called G-Rave music. And dance based on computer-damaged robot suit gone all twitchy."

As they rounded the next corner, Sharrown cast one last look back. Several of the dancers were bopping up and down, punching their fists in the air. Even above the buzzing drone, he could hear their chanting.

"*Mechno ! Mechno ! Mechno !*" "*Mechno Mechno Mechno !*"...

Ten streets later, they slowed down to a walk in the better-lit main streets. Sharrown tapped Sabaath to stop, and slid down off her back.

For a minute they stood in a shop doorway, listening for signs of pursuit. And then the wildcat noticed the smug expression on Sabaath's face.

"Out wi't, whatever it is," he demanded. "Ye ken fit happen, there on stage, do'ye not ?"

Sabaath cast huge innocent-looking eyes at him, in a trick she had learned from Chester. "Sabaath only do good thing - reload band instruments fresh when we go, save time."

"Oh aye ? And jist fit were ye loadin' em with ?"

"Sabaath see good pirate band, BoneYard, put proper fuel in instruments. Fill with pirate-furry fuel. Say something like that on container, covered with nice bright symbols."

"Looked tae me like they exploded when they started to play.... " The wildcat paused, suddenly remembering what some experimental mecha ran on - such as the bouncers' own suits. "Somethin' like "pirate-furry" - Sabaath, d'ye mean Pyrophoric fuel, explodes at a breath o' oxygen ?"

The big centaur nodded happily. "Pirate-Furry fuel, Sabaath learn read nice-smart, yes ?"

They spotted W² at the street corner, disguised as an incompetent secret policething. She waved cheerfully.

Sharrown groaned - and then the groan changed to a grin.

Wi' tradecraft as bad as hers, he told himself, there's naebody who's watchin', thinks we're up ta mischief now. Naebody could be that incompetent...

"Hidy," The demon girl gestured up at the building behind them. "Lettice did say to find some cheapish rooms near the spaceport, where nobody's going to ask questions..."

The wildcat's ears sank flat on his skull. "Aye, and ye've done it, lassie." He read the flaking notice inside the doorway. "Rooms available by the hour or night - full range of companions and accessories available on request." He turned to Sabaath. "Well, who's ta go on first watch, then ?"

W² gave an embarrassed cough. "You're the last ones to get here - everyone else is booked in - and they don't DO single rooms. I thought it'd attract attention less if I booked you in together."

The wildcat's fur bristled in horror. "Ye mean - me and ..." he seemed to slump, his tail brushing the pavement.

Sabaath nodded happily. "Sabaath got nice big SURPRISE for Sharry-kitty." They trotted into the building, while W² distracted the batrachian bellhop with loud demands for a ripe Maidsbane plant to be delivered to her room right away. As they left her to it, Sharrown noticed that her famous Notebook was out; from the blank page displayed, she seemed to be about to commence a new chapter.

"Lettice say Dragon not ready go-fly till hour after dawn," the direwolf looked down with wide and eager eyes as they found the shabby windowless room on the second floor. "Say all rest up nice till five tomorrow - ten minutes to Spaceport then. Lots and lots of time."

The wildcat cast her an suspicious glance, as she locked the door on him. "Aye, I'm thinkin' ye must be tired oot, after all that fightin' on stage. Ye jist get yuirsel' some shuteye, an I'll keep watch." He noticed the hastily applied bandage at her throat as she removed her armour. "D'ye need help wi' that cut ?" Suddenly, his ears welt up in shock and he sat down heavily on the bed, his legs turning weak at what he saw.

Sabaath eased herself out of the rest of her battle armour, and looked round at him over her hindquarters, the tail suddenly locked sideways. She winked at him.

"Sabaoth feel lovely after nice-fight," her holograms flickered into a floral design. "Front-end do fine left alone. Other end, need lots and lots attention from Sharry-Kitty, yes?"

Sharrown looked wildly around for somewhere to run, as the huge centaur gazed lovingly on him.

Oh nae, he groaned to himself. After all this time, yon lassie gets me where she wants me. Tis the first time I've ever wanted tae see that idjit Chester burstin' through yon door, like the Aerospace Cavalry in yon auld films.....

In most films he had seen, the hero or heroine was saved from a fate worse than Death at the last instant, leaving with their virtue intact. Unfortunately, Sharrown was currently on a world dominated by Demon culture - and in those circumstances, their film producers had VERY different ideas about what made for a happy ending.

Dawn came, and Lettice Earnshaw knocked on one door after another. There was nothing on the news, and no particular activity in the street outside - except at the spaceport, where the Dragon reported itself loaded and ready to go.

"Ah telthi ta get some kip," she growled as a sleepy-eyed W² opened the door. The demon-girl's wings were deliberately spread wide to block what was in the room with her, but an empty champagne glass and a sack of high-potency plant tonic were visible on the floor.

"Gosh." W² yawned, wiping pollen away. "I remember! We're supposed to make a neat and sneaky getaway, aren't we? How's Sabaoth and Sharry? You know, Sabby's sort of - keen right now, says it's some hormone or other you gave her."

The badger's whiskers drooped. "She IS?" She demanded "An' tha' put 'er in room wi' Sharry? Tha' knows he's no fan o' four-footed femme fatales, like."

An embarrassed grin spread across W²'s round face. "Well, SHE seemed happy with the idea - and I didn't have enough money left to buy Sharry an extra room - not after paying for some, er, extras for me. I had to make things look convincing, after all."

Lettice looked down to where an eager green tendril was winding around the furless ankle, and sighed. At least one ripe, orange-sized seed pod had found a way of carrying its contents out of Hope's End - but then, even the vegetables had more sense than to stay around here.

Half an hour later, the deserted alleyways echoed disturbingly loudly to the footfall of two Direwolves on point patrol.

Sabaoth felt her sister's presence like a comforting ray of warm sunlight; after so very long, she was back with her own kind. This city still slept, and the sight of heavily armed hybrids padding through the street on missions of their own was not an uncommon one in this culture. Less well-armed people coming out to question what they were doing, though, THAT was a rarity, she thought as the open ground to the Spaceport came into sight - something to do with what Missy Earnshaw calls Natural Selection....

S-Forty-one froze, her holograms switching to stealth mode. Sabaoth backed up and went into cover hull-down behind an overflowing rubbish skip, the big ammunition trailer towed behind her. You couldn't have everything, she frowned briefly - Kiko make these on sale-or-return, Sabaoth use them and fire off months wages.....

"Sabaoths see four heavy-mech suits strung out in open by dock gates," she whispered into her snout microphone. "All black-spiky armour, Class Fourteen design, symbol black circle with writing in middle painted on front-plates."

Fifty paces behind them, Suiskarno groaned. "That's Red Seas Records' logo. They must know we'd try and get off-planet. The Label keeps a unit of Chaos Roadies on their payroll for this sort of thing."

Sharrown's ears dipped. The Dragon's firepower was useless right now - the idea had been to rush into the ship and punch straight for orbit. What nobody could afford, was a fight which would reveal which of the twenty ships parked were involved in the getaway while it was lying vulnerable on the ground.

"We're on our ain on this one," he whispered to Lettice "If I had me Start suit, it'd be a better bet. What'll we dee now?" Class Fourteen suits were the best-but-one available on the Surplus market, he knew - ultrahard ceramic armour, and enough onboard jamming equipment to persuade most brand-name missiles to turn tail and head for their firers.

The Penn Nine badger looked down at her heavy leather boots, studded with tungsten nails. They were one tradition of her homeworld - but there were other good ones that she found useful, such as a handy sense of tactics instilled by years of combat with the Lancastrae raiding over the borders.....

"Suiskarno, get thisel' round t' corner, let them see thi'," she snapped, "When I gives t' word. We're goin'ta give them mechs summat to chew on before breakfast!"

Outside the spaceport fence, there was a cleared area nearly a kilometre across: roads criss-crossed open grass, scarred with the evidence of many a landing that had not quite made it on target. It was wide open in the growing light, with hardly enough cover to hide a snake.

Four Chaos Roadies waited impatiently out there, all eyes and scanners focussing on the streets leading out of town, the buildings rising in an almost uniform wall eight storeys high. No traffic was on the roads yet, save for the loading lorries in the secure spaceport behind them. Bored and edgy after staring at their staring plane focal radar displays all through the night, the four mechsuits stood like chill statues.

"There !" The voice-link crackled, as a low-light camera on the first suit's muzzle zoomed in to the canyon-like break in the buildings. "Main road - it's the lead singer." A furtive figure had sidled into view, done a quick double-take at the sight of the guarded spaceport, and ducked back into cover - but not before the suit's image intensifier had caught a good look at him.

Chaos Roadies are trained in mech-to-mech grappling skills, and are as good a shot with stunner and lasers as anyone else, given the stabilised sights of their armour. But it is also well known, just how they despise having their creativity stifled by boring tactical plans - however much they might benefit from a moment's forethought.

"Gett'im !" The first figure yelled, and they charged in line towards where they had seen Suiskarno. Ignored by all of them was a double spot of visible-spectrum laser light, which they brushed through at full speed towards their helpless prey.

Five hundred metres away, a low concrete shed hid from view two Direwolves. Only one of them could see the charging mecha - a scarred grey wolf in headphones whose electrical claws were grasping tight the metal drainpipe of the roof her head was peeking over.

Below her in a pit, Sabaoth felt the electrical pulse through the metal as her sister silently signalled the Mechs were over the first line. With pre-readied reflexes, the faint jolt of current through her left paw caused her right one to spring open - and release the finned bomb it had been holding.

"Off !" She barked excitedly, feeling the heavy kick of the spigot mortar even with its baseplate securely grounded. The recycled cannon's recoil system jerked and heaved as she grabbed another bomb, lined its tubular tail up with the launching rod and released it, sending it soaring high in the air after the first one.

Alarm lights screamed in the mechsuit's cockpit displays as their radars picked up the big, slow-moving objects incoming. Tens of thousands of credit's worth of computing power instantly went to work, seeking the telemetry that these missiles were sending, in an effort to jam their controls or detonate their advanced proximity fuses in flight. They failed - and guided by unjammable gravity, the prehistoric contact fuses slammed into the concrete ten metres ahead of the first Roadie.

The mortar bomb was a huge chunk of ancient high explosive - six kilos of something called "aluminised Cyclonite" that Kiko had found in ancient history tapes. From the cover of the alleyway, the Dragon's team and Red Noise could see the blast wave smash across the open field as it knocked the mecha down like skittles, sending them skidding on their backs across the hard concrete.

"Four more, lassie," Sharrown spoke into the communicator. "Ye can tek' a look - then bracket'em both ways."

The direwolf stuck her snout up alongside her sister's for an instant, then ducked back down. Part of her specialised forebrain was a precise spatial memory - given one good look, she could keep the ground outside in mind as well as if she was staring at it. Two more bombs arced out, neatly straddling the rising roadies fore and aft, then left and right - and then there was an ominous pause. It was obvious that the next ones were not going to miss.

"Ye've done it !" Sharrown's voice was exultant in Sabaoth's ears. "Yon tinheads are waving a' sort o' white flag." There was a pause. "It's his britches - musta' had an escape hatch in back o' the suit ta get 'em aff - and by the look o' things, ye've REALLY scared'em."

Out on the cratered field, the four mechs were unscrewing their helmets and pulling the power packs out of their laser cannons. Before they had finished they saw two Sabaoths were standing guard over them, one with a horrendous cannon that swung from one suit to the next.

"Sabaoth sister say she disappointed not fight," one of them said, the voice surprisingly small for such a huge and threatening figure. "You run back to city quick, before her headphone batteries wear out, yes ?"

The Chaos Roadies had no idea what she meant. But neither did they wait around to find out.

"So, that's ten thousand apiece, and the bonus," Captain K'tal Sabre rubbed his paws together as they left orbit two hours later. "That's what I CALL a successful operation."

"Aye, well," Lettice caught herself from revealing just what a close thing it had been. "Red Noise are 'avin' a look at the local music scene where we're goin' - it's four weeks off, an' we've another Direwolf mouth to feed."

The feline's ears dipped slightly as he mentally subtracted a chunk of the profits. Then they rose again hopefully. "Couldn't you - step her down a gear or two, like you did with our Sabaoth? It didn't seem to harm her - she's looking very full of herself."

Sabaoth's ears and tail eagerly went up, and she opened her mouth to respond - just as Sharrown sharply elbowed her in the ribs.

"If ye affer tell a'budy aboot that," Sharrown muttered beneath his breath "I'll tell yon food processor to serve ye nothin' but salad. I'm awffy sair at ye." He yelped and rubbed his elbow where it had come in contact with a plate of her dermal armour, and wished that was the most of his aches. Chester, he reaffirmed, was MORE than welcome to her.

Lettice gave a discreet cough. "It's got some - side-effects, that we're working on," she admitted. "We might try it, we've a month or so." Suddenly, she smiled. According to the rest of the band, S-41 was entirely "normal" for a direwolf apart from the drug-induced mental skewing that might indeed resolve itself someday. Which meant that before they next made planetfall, according to the usual timing there would be two centaurs competing for Chester's attentions. For several femtoseconds, she almost felt sorry for the ringtail, as she reviewed the ship's low stocks of stimulants and vitamin supplements. Then she grinned.

"Good thing is, reckon we can fine-tune things eventual-like, ta bring our lass online both ends whenever she wants. Tha' knows, she's got to be in sync if she wants to get us our first shipborn crew." She discounted W², who had not yet realised what her sudden craving for greenhouses and soft peaty beds signified. Maidsbane plants were technically parasitic rather than symbiotic, but never caused more damage to their hosts than the unexpected shock of their germination symptoms.

Sabaoth's face and holograms lit up. "Sabaoth say Super!" Direwolf pups were a rarity still - and the Dragon's sickbay held one of her other dead Sister's unborn pups in suspended storage, till Sabaoth was capable of carrying it. *Of course*, she mused, *have to make own Sabaoth-pups first to get all ready ... good thing not need find Direwolf male, there aren't any ...* still, there were alternatives nearer at hand.

Suddenly, her holograms blossomed anew. "Sharry! Lets go see Sister - make proper introductions, yes?"

She looked round eagerly, but there was nothing to be seen of Sharrown but a softly swinging exit hatch.

The End.