

(or, the lost Sonata tale # 2)

Dramatis Personae:

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

Ural Deck: Canine male: Chester's staunchest supporter (and even HE spends 90% of the time irritated as hell....) (Mark Barnard)

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

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

Skater: Male Ringtail AMF bounty-hunter on Chester's tail – an easy task one might think with THAT tail. Known for always wearing inline skates – one assumes he specialises in paved urban areas...

These Interstellar Airports, Chester thought to himself as he scanned the crowd for his friends - are BORRRIINGGGG. They'd be fine for once in a while - but the same Mid-Galactic Cosmopolitan Culture made them all look exactly the same, wherever you went.

"Chet !" The ringtail turned at the shout, his eyes lighting up and his incredible tail uncoiling in pleasure as he saw his friends coming through the Arrival doors. He waved back vigorously, neatly neck-chopping one of the annoying Charity Collectors in a carefully studied accident before strolling over to greet the shuttle's latest arrivals.

In the crowded concourse, three figures reacted with a mixture of relief and wry acceptance of some strange fate. Chester was going to show them the sights of the town - as the only one of the Dragon's crew who had been there before, the others had reluctantly let him guide them.

The part of town the ringtail led them to was not exactly upmarket. In fact, to judge by the appearance and hungry expression of the locals, the shore party found themselves wondering whether they lived by eating lost tourists, or merely robbing them.

"Sabaoth Like! " Commented that worthy, as she happily padded down the street with her claws clicking on the pavement. Compared with the Demon Empire training camp she had been bred and trained in, it looked twice as friendly. "We make lots friends here?"

"I wouldnae be sae sure o' that, lassie," Sharrown Chattan murmured, keeping an eye on the splendidly bobbing tail ahead, where Deck and Chester led the way "'tis a guid thing we're carrying our cash in Personal Notes - nae guid tae onnyone else on the planet." Despite his best efforts, he had noticed apology slips appearing in his wallet twice today. The pickpocket's guild here always tried to avoid stealing worthless items - and it was a matter of honour amongst them to replace them without being noticed on the return visit.

Sabaoth nodded happily. This was only the third planet she had been to with her new friends - and the first time she had been down without Kiko. Her roommate had been teaching her about all sorts of social interactions - how to strike up a conversation, how to judge someone's intentions, and what to do about it. It was untrue that Sabaoth had experienced an unhappy cubhood - she had rarely had an insecure moment, as an experimental Attack beast in the Demon Empire. All she had had to do was follow orders - and most of those had been "Kill" and "Eat." But this was before she had found her new friends....

"Kiko say Chester's going to show us the parts the tourists don't go to. That nice, Yes ?" She trotted up to Sharrown, her great liquid eyes as wide and trusting as a foal's. The wildcat snorted, catching sight of the conspicuous tail vanishing down a narrower street to the right.

"Ah dinnae ken what I'm doin' wi Chester, jist because he's the only one who's made this planetfall afore," he patted down his pockets, checking that the only open ones were the ones lined with fishhooks. "Whit he means is, we're going tae the places the tourists nivver come back frae."

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“Here it is !” Chester proudly gestured to what must have been the planet Damogran’s most repaired building. “I know it doesn’t look like much - come on, Sharry, cheer up - when have I ever let you down ? This is a lively little place - there’s always something happening.”

The Graveyard Dive was the sort of place, Chester thought as he swept in, teeth gleaming and his several square centimetres of costume resplendently sparkling - the sort of place I really BELONG.

“You HAVE been here before,” Deck murmured under his breath, as they came out through a low corridor into a wide, concrete-lined room “Six of the customers just went out the other way, and the barman’s checking something large and sharp hidden under the bar...”

“Relax, Deck - they know me here.” Chester somehow managed to flow towards the drinks like a river of furred mercury, his every supple joint seeming to blend bonelessly “Barkeep ! Four beers, and make it your finest !” Turning to his friends, his ears quivered with barely suppressed glee. “And what are YOU going to have ?”

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“Sabaoth think people waiting for something. What say, Sharry ?” Sat on her haunches, the direwolf stuck her snout in a big flagon of SynthBrau, though her eyes scanned the crowd intently.

“I’m inclined tae agree.” Sharrown looked around, from their corner table. There were about thirty people in the place - at first glance, he’d thought it was an off-duty bar for some military force. Like most folk he’d seen on the streets of Damogran, they carried ornate fabric or plastic cases round their necks, like extra-large security passes. The native language was a strange one, that he’d barely learned a few words of in written form - but there seemed to be a lot in common with the neck-cases of the other customers here. Apart from the fact that they were universally tough looking, and eyeing each other up as they occasionally glanced up at the armoured clock on the wall.

“I’m wonderin’ fit’s gannin’ on in here,” he whispered to Deck “yon ringtail’s grinnin’ like a loon, an’ it looks like the changin’ room for one o’ they Death Badminton tourneys. Ah well, at least the beer’s not ower dear.” He looked at his wrist, and cursed softly when he remembered the wrist watch and televisor had vanished within a few seconds of them meeting at the spaceport. He’d really wanted to take a look at what these folk on Damogran did for entertainment - an Offworlder frequently found a new angle on anything you could place a bet on....

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Not four kilometres away through the crowded streets, there was a far less intimidating cafe, where a far less notorious ringtail sat in the sunshine soberly sampling the local coffee. But unlike Chester, this one was NOT in a good mood.

“Suspect was spotted at the Spaceport, less than an hour ago.” He quietly intoned into his throat recorder while the waiters cleared tables and shooed unlicensed thieves away “identity confirmed when contacted Ural Deck and Sharrown Chattan, both of whom are known associates - positive video ID on them both. Also in the party was a big offworlder female, hexapod, identity unknown. They reached the Gaming Quarter before I could find them - local agents are on the trail, the place is a complete warren, and no vehicles can enter the sidestreets.” He switched off the recorder, and grimaced as he realised how much of an acquired taste Damogranian Coffee really was. “Until then,” he murmured “I need a break - I’ve not slept for three days - my paws are killing me.” He looked down and casually flicked the front starboard wheel of the rollerblade boots that had carried him so far along Chester’s trail on a dozen planets.

Skater was typical of the AMF’s hardy breed of bounty-hunters, in that he stuck to his mission despite the many distractions you were liable to come across in your travels. But, underneath all that - he WAS a ringtail, and gambling was one of the things that they did so well.

“I’ve heard about this,” he whispered to himself, ears pricking up as he looked across the narrow thoroughfare from the cafe to a betting stall. There was a teller busily raking in money, and a huge video screen behind him where the show’s host was expounding the latest attractions.

“And now, PLACE-YA BETS, on this evening’s events. Brought to you tonight from the Crimson Ceiling, the Cratered Hole, the Loaded Glove, and the ever-popular Graveyard Dive. Hostilities will shortly be commencing - after twenty-hundred hours, but there’s NO telling just where it’ll start. Place your bets for that on the blue ticket - individual style points awarded for contestants on the usual rules, that’s the Green ticket. So GET-YA money down, just as soon as the night’s preview HITS-YA screen !”

The view cycled through a series of the planet's famous Fighting Bars, obviously taken with wide-angled lenses from a variety of hidden cameras. The crowd around the booth erupted in a frantic flurry of shouts and arm-waving, as they pointed out their favourite tavern brawlers and slapped their credits on the counter.

Skater grinned, as he watched the scene. Damogran Eleven was generally a peaceful sort of place - possibly their local sport had something to do with it. Anyone with a temper to unleash could stroll into a Fighting Bar, and (unlike on other planets) end the evening with their hospital bills more than paid for. No weapons were allowed - he noticed even the furniture was either bolted down, or lightweight wood that would break over a skull and not through it.

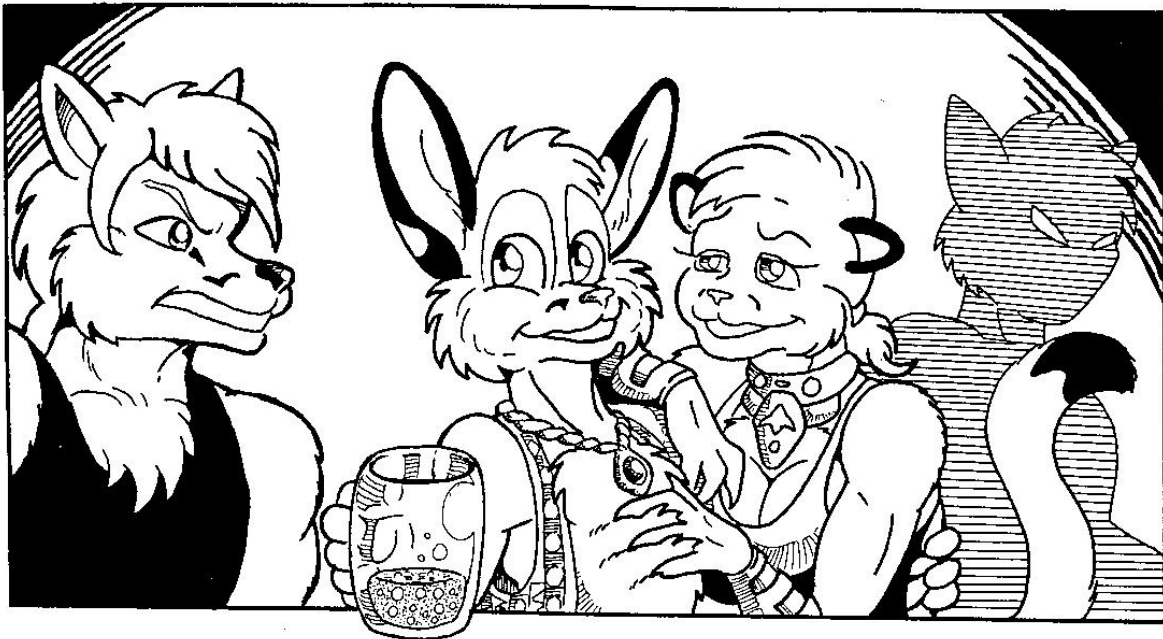
Suddenly, his blue-and-cream tail locked rigid as a huge fluffed-out log. Standing at one of the bars, his arm around the waist of a lithe puma whose chest-script proclaimed her as an adept of the ancient martial art of Origami, was someone Skater had wanted to see behind bars of a different sort, for a VERY long time.

"The Graveyard Dive !" He shouted, waving his billfold high in the air as a dozen pairs of eyes followed it greedily "This, for whoever gets me there !"

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"You know, Chet," Ural Deck said slowly as he finished his second beer, and the crowd at the bar gradually edged apart from each other "I've got a funny feeling about this place." He watched as the barkeeper collected the bottles off the shelves, wheeled them into the back room, and announced that everything but pumped beer was off.

The ringtail cast him a glance, as the tall puma ran her sharp-clawed fingers through his cleanly fluffed chest fur, murmuring something about "Such a waste..."



"What are you worrying about, Deck ? The beer's cheap, and if we're here for more than an hour, it's FREE! I've been here before - me and Aargrash."

Deck recalled the Kodiak bear with a sympathetic twinge of his ribs. She had been on the scene early on in Chester's career - whether she was one of his conquests or the other way around, was a point nobody had agreed on. Like most conquests, it had involved several hard-fought campaigns and a lot of collateral damage.

"Beer nice !" Sabaoth nodded. "Can Sabaoth have another ? Kiko says Sabaoth shouldn't." Her holographic sighting system briefly blurred out of focus: one drawback of her overclocked metabolism was the speed stimulants went through her. A standard evening's entertainment was something she usually looked on with sad envy - by the second beer she was falling flat on her snout, and the "Morning After" arrived six hours earlier than for most folks....

Chester motioned to the barman. "Just the one - until things settle down around here. Say - where IS Kiko ? It's not like her to miss out on a cultural feast like this - Damogran's got some wonderful ethnic customs."

“Kiko busy.” The direwolf’s ears drooped. “Foxy-girl Keisu Cassandra came on ship when you gone - Kiko phoned me, said she’d be tied up for a while. That means she busy, yes?”

Foam erupted out of the glass as Chester almost choked, his eyes watering with beer and glee as he put the flagon down. “Well, you COULD put it like that...”

At that moment, Sabaoth felt an over-friendly paw on her rump. Turning round, she looked down at a muscular otter, clad in the cutaway vest and tail-thongs that seemed popular here.

Otters have a lot in common with ringtails. Lithe, good at dodging, and fleet of foot, they share a common philosophy - usually summed up as - “This may kill me, but MY, won’t it be fun first !”

“I’ve never believed you could have too much of a good thing,” The otter bowed, before his webbed paw slipped further down “and you, fair maiden, are a maid-and-a-half. I am Farado by name - Would’st you sit at my table, before we try better sitting arrangements ?”

The centaur looked over her shoulder, mild curiosity in her wide eyes. If this was two weeks earlier - well, the otter WAS sort of cute, and it was impossible to make Chester jealous anyway. But right now, neither of her options was really open.

“Sabaoth say thanks but no thanks. She with friends already.”

The otter’s face hardened. “That wasn’t the right answer.”

Deck and Sharrown half rose to their feet, and all around the room people looked up at the wall clock. But Sabaoth waved them off, now smiling again.

“Kiko say Sabaoth should always see folk rewarded. I give him something special for bravery, yes? Something he never try before?” Draining her flagon noisily, she turned to face the otter, his fur now almost quivering with excitement. “We do this in private, yes-no?”

As the pair of them headed off towards the restroom - or more accurately, as the otter’s paws dangled a tailspan clear of the floor, Deck’s gaze followed them quizzically.

“I’d understand it if she was in heat again,” the big canine said softly “But it’s not like her... what are you grinning at, Chet?”

The ringtail put down his glass, and moved out of arm’s reach of the rest of the customers. “You might say, he’ll be surprised at what she’s got for him - you know, her claws aren’t the only part that’s wired up to her electrical system?”

From the restroom, there came a passionate groan. Two minutes later came another - and then an ear-splitting scream, as a fizzing blue light sparkled through the shaded glass door. A heavy thump followed, and the smell of scorched fur drifted through the room.

As if it had been some sort of signal, the room erupted into one huge melee! Chester leaped high in the air to avoid a lashing tailswipe from a heavily beribboned grey kangaroo, coming down in a two-footed kick that sent her skidding across the floor! Deck was on his feet and charging in an instant, but two eager-looking beavers pounced on him, dragging him to the floor.

“Fit the divvil’s gannin’ on?” Sharrown shouted above the noise as he dodged one of the light tables that splintered on the wall beside him . Grasping one of the more solid pieces, he swung it in a roundhouse blow at a leather-clad ferret leaping through the air at him in a flying kick.

The wildcat winced at the sound as the timber connected behind the lightly built mustelid’s ear. Missing Sharrown by a metre, it crashed against the wall like a thrown blanket.

“Ten points..” he heard it mutter as it slowly peeled off and collapsed.

Just then, Sabaoth came trotting back into the room, towelling her front end dry. Her eyes lit up as they took in the scene, and a close-order battle hologram snapped into existence over her snout.

“Fight-party, yes !” The silvery third eyelids turned her eyes to slitted mirrors as they snapped down, and she charged across the room like a snowplough towards her friends, bowling over embattled groups left and right. “We stay have fun, Sharry ?” Barely turning round as a white-striped wolverine hurt his fist against the dermal armour of her underbelly, she cheerfully grabbed the arm and yanked its owner in a long ballistic arc that brushed the ceiling before ending in a sickening crash on the bartop.

“Nae we dinnae !” Sharrown yelled, as Deck banged beaver heads together, and Chester dodged every punch that an increasingly irritated black stallion was throwing his way “We’re oot a’ here !” He dived towards the door they had entered by, as it opened.

And stopped dead. Standing in there, his huge brush of a tail almost blocking the evening light of the street behind, was a ringtail he had hoped they had seen the last of. From idly spinning wheel skates to gleefully twitching ear-tips, Skater looked bursting with health, and Extremely pleased to see them.

One of the many thuds was Chester doubling up as he failed to dodge his assailant’s thirtieth attack, distracted by the new arrival.

“Chester !” Skater called into the room “You’re coming with me ! I’ve got you this time !” His skate wheels sparkling, he edged into the room.

For a moment, all eyes turned on him. Then heads turned back, as a piercing whistle from the bar grabbed their attention.

“Offworlder !” Chester shouted, pointing at Skater “Three hundred point bonus !”

The pile of bodies that converged on him was not unlike a tidal wave.....

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“That wilnae hold him for long.” Sharrown panted, a minute later. They had seen half a dozen watchers at the street entrance, evidently Skater’s local talent - so it was through the locked door behind the bar they had crashed, Sabaoth’s electrical burst having popped its solenoid like a cub’s toy.

They looked around themselves. It was a long, narrow room with another door at the far end, evidently leading into an alleyway. But the streets outside were both wide and smooth - Skater would be on them in a minute, as soon as he spotted them in the open.

“Sabaoth say we ambush. Good place for it ?” She flicked back the protective membranes over her eyes, and took stock of what they had. This was evidently the kitchen and storeroom for the bar: four big microwave ovens were set into the wall on each side, while crates held bottles of spirits and liqueurs.

The armoured door from the bar gave an ominous shudder, as something crashed against it. And another, and again - evidently Skater and his helpers had fought past the crowd and were trying to get through.

Chester smoothed down his fur with an elegant brush, and looked round at his friends.

“Well ?” his eyes sparkled brightly “now what are we going to do ?”

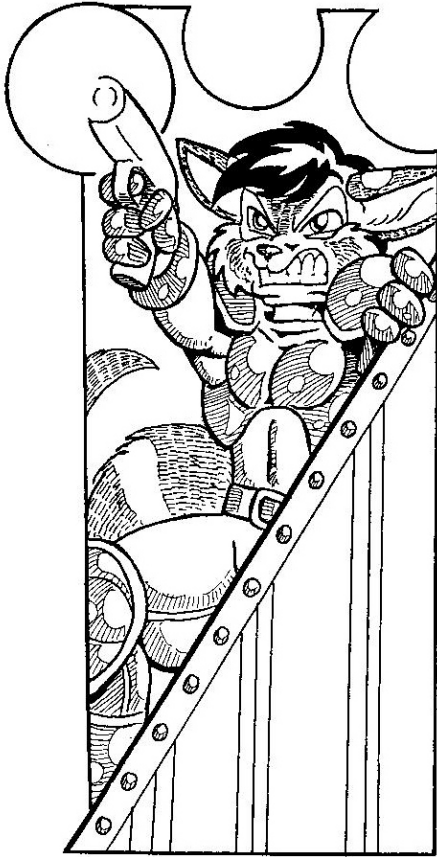
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Outside, Skater concentrated on the big steel door while his six hired hands, mongrel canines all, held off the brawling mob that were still hard at it in the room around them. It was getting quieter - fully half the folk who had been in at the start were either lying unconscious, or had staggered out to be treated by the game-sponsored ambulances outside.

“Trapped like rats ... no offence intended to rodents..” he grinned, the pain of his bruises going almost unheeded as he directed the battering ram. That was something else the fugitive was going to pay for - the bounty only mentioned Chester being returned alive and able to face trial, not whole and undamaged. And they’d have a long, long voyage home together...

With a final crash, the door sprang open, and Skater sprayed his stunner around the darkened room at its widest spread. No falling thuds of bodies rewarded him.

“They’ve got to be in here..” He muttered to himself, as he stepped forwards, stunner in hand as he groped for a light switch. “Phew - smells like a distillery in here....”



Skater, one of the AMF's most distinguished bounty-hunters, discovers firing an electrical stunner into a darkened room can have unexpected results...

(All Artwork Freddy Andersson 1994)

Two hundred metres down the street, Sabaath's ears pricked up as they recognised the familiar rolling boom of a Fuel-Air explosion.

"Skater-ringtail stop following, yes?" She turned round to see the smoke cloud beginning to billow behind them.

"Aye, likely so - but dinnae slow down till we're back on yon shuttle." Sharrown clung to her shoulders as the diminutive wildcat tried to hang onto the galloping centaur "It's farewell frae me tae Damogran - if he's not hurt owermuch, he'll be calling yon local bobbies after us now."

"Where - did - you- learn to DO that, Sharry?" Deck panted for breath, as they hailed a passing ground transporter "It certainly saved our hides."

"Oh, I imagine it was something they teach you in the Kit Scouts," Chester dismissed the idea with a wave of his exceptional tail - he admitted to very few principles, but one of them was to distance himself from bright ideas he should have thought of himself.

Sharry had grabbed bottles of the most potent liquor from the shelves, smashed the front glass of the row of six microwave ovens that lined the kitchen and poured a bottle into the cooking space of all of them. While the rest of the party cleared the back door he had switched the ovens onto full power, dodging the spewing clouds of vapour that had instantly began to spray into the room. And the last thing he had done before leaving was to turn off the lights - then break the glass in the old-fashioned filament bulbs. They would burn out in an instant as soon as the power was restored - with nice hot flashes.

Sharrown grinned. "Got the idea frae my ain Uncle's distillery, back home ... I was only a wee kit when a retort seal blew - one spark and it took the roof off a treat, did the alcohol vapour."

Sabaath nodded seriously. "Kiko says it's dangerous in large quantities - always does give Sabaath a headache."

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Outside what remained of the Graveyard Dive, Skater lay looking up at the pretty stars that wheeled around him in unsurveyed constellations.

“Boss ? You all right ?” One of the local guides ran skilled fingers over Skater’s joints, checking for broken bones and relieving him of his wallet. “Good thing these doors are matchwood - you didn’t touch the ground till you’d gone five metres through the outer one !”

The ringtail groaned, his head swimming. Everything seemed still attached, and hurting enough to still be working. But then he grimaced, as he recalled the last scent that had filled his nose before everything had got so loud and bright....

“That’s Another thing Chester’s got on the charges sheet for when I run him in.” His singed fur was another, but like the Fighting Bars of Damogran, that was covered by insurance.

“Yes, Boss ?”

“That was a totally CRIMINAL waste of fine Saurian Brandy.”

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Back at the spaceport, they dashed in to scan the departure board for the next orbital flight.

“One leaving in twenty minutes,” Deck pointed to the big board “Not to the spacedock we’re at, but - we can hop across any time. I’m NOT hanging around here any longer than we have to - this is the first place Skater’s going to check.”

“Richt, laddie ! Twenty minutes - I dinnae like it, but we cannae be oot o’ here onny the sooner. Och, and where’s that ringtail loon gone now ?” Chester had taken one look at the departure board and vanished at high speed into the crowd.

The wildcat and the canine hustled their conspicuous centaur friend across to a coffee bar, out of line of sight from the entrance. While they grabbed a scalding hot brew, Sharrown looked around them in ill-concealed annoyance.

“That’s the last time I’m ever gannin’ tae follow yon fluff-fer-brains around a planet ! He could’a got us all killed back there - an’ it’s goodbye to our Shore leave, wi’ not sae much as one good evenin’ tae show for it !”

“Ahem.” They turned round, to see the surgically modified smile of a uniformed charity collector, a sabretooth lemming with one of the infamous SmartBox collecting devices. “Would you care to contribute to our registered Ecological Charity ? The populations of Peyo’s Lesser Tinted Smurfoid have dropped to a fraction in the last ten years - even now they’re in severe danger of extermination at the hands of ruthless paladins and bounty-hunters.”

“An ye’re gannin’ tae save them frae extinction ?”

The lemming grinned, rattling his box. “Of course not ! Slimy bastards, those vermin are - we’re going to finish the job Properly !”

Sharrown grinned back, rummaging in his pocket for change. “Hauld on there a tick, an’ I’ll - aw, divvil tek’ it ! Yon local dips hae cleaned me oot o’ Damogran coins again.”

Suddenly Chester reappeared, looking highly pleased with himself. “Oh, Sharry ? And Deck, and especially Sabaoth - I wouldn’t like you to leave here on a low note. This is for you.” He tossed three small but heavy-sounding bags onto the table in front of them. “Oh, and I even got your watch back - it’s been in safe-keeping, don’t you worry.”

Sharrown grabbed the watch and wrist TV. It LOOKED like his - yes, there was even that scratch on the screen it had got when escaping from the Campbell clan - he’d really been in the soup back there. Strange, though, that it had vanished as soon as Chester had met them - and that Chester had brought it back again....

“Just what’s this money FOR, Chet ?” Deck demanded as he peered into the sack, tossing the lemming a much-appreciated coin as he did so “I’ll bet it’s one of your schemes again. I won’t ask, except - just how illegal IS it ?”

The ringtail’s ears dipped, and he looked at his friend reproachfully. “I’m shocked, Deck... you really thought that I’D do something... ILLEGAL ? No, this is Perfectly on the level.”

There was a strangled feline snarl, as Sharrown flicked through the channels until he found what he’d suspected all the time. Turning up the sound, they could all hear the main sporting network as the show ended.

“And a BIG thank you to all our contestants tonight - from the Loaded Glove, the Crimson Ceiling, the Cratered Hole and the Graveyard Dive. Of course, no points could be awarded for the booby-trap explosion - but we like to see our shows end with a bang anyway ! The legitimate melee points have been awarded as normal to our regulars,

not to mention that offworlder team that “took the Dive” in such a BIG way tonight ! Payments have been made to them, folks, and we’ll look forward to seeing your third visit to our happy, peaceful planet !”

There was an ominous silence as three sets of eyes looked up at Chester, who was nonchalantly grooming his tail as he studied the distant ceiling. As the announcement of the shuttle’s boarding cut through a sea of otherwise murderous intentions, he jingled the heavy sack of negotiable metal coins thoughtfully.



“After all,” he pointed out cheerfully. “I only said I’d pay for a quiet little drinkie, with nothing going wrong. I didn’t say this was the planet it’d happen on, did I ?”

Sabaoth nodded her grey-muzzled head. It was only a few weeks till the next time she’d be getting interested in the shameless ringtail again. And just for this, she’d show him some of her very special talents.

Sharrown caught her speculative gaze, and the little wildcat winked at her. Next time, the one who ended up with a Shocking Surprise would be Chester !

The End