

Excalibur

Passing of the Sword

Part 1: The Forging

The bridge shuddered as another salvo of golden beams slammed into the cruiser's hull, tearing through battle steel like tissue paper as the pirate ship on the view screen began to bank away.

"Evasive pattern McCloud Baker Seven. Damage report." The dark-skinned but fair-haired man in the Captain's chair seemed barely moved by the battle, his steely grey eyes taking in the whole of the situation on the display attached to his seat. Despite the confidence he attempted to project, there was a undertone of tension that underlaid his commands.

"Major damage to decks seven, eight, and nine; minor damage to deck ten. Environmental fields are holding but we've lost Phaser Seven and power is out to Torpedo Two." The Voxan ensign at Damage Control responded almost as crisply, but the fear he felt came through plain as day. Even if it had not, a simple glance would have caught the way the fox-like officer's pointed ears tried to fold back.

"Redirect power to port shield and bring us to..." Captain McCloud paused as he ran a quick calculation on his display. "Four-three by six-niner, three quarter impulse, then initiate fire pattern Tango Six."

A delicate cough from his left brought his attention to his first officer. The light golden felinoid woman waited only a moment before continuing. "Sir, suggest we throw a tractor beam on them. If we can hold them for another minute, the freighter should be far enough away to lose them in warp."

"Good idea, M'rel." Nodding his approval to the bronze-haired Caitian commander, he swiveled the chair towards Ops. "Billingsly, you heard the Exec. Make it so, and reinforce the port shield while you're at it."

Within moments a blue beam speared out from the lower hull, effectively locking the two ships into one solid object. Blue Phaser stabbed out, probing at the pirate's defenses as golden beams answered in kind. Locally, shields flared blue, then yellow, climbing the spectrum as bolt after bolt clawed at the walls of energy protecting each ship from further damage. Something had to give, and here and there the shields faded to black as beams of pure energy punched through to score the hull further.

"Damage to deck 12!" The Voxxan ensign reported again as his fingers flew across his panel, coordinating the technicians fighting to keep the ship in one piece. "Aux Two is down and Deck Three is losing Life Support."

"Captain, I'm picking up Warp plasma from Bogey One. That last one got a piece of his engine!" The officer on sensors, a large tiger-striped Rakshani felinoid, smiled hungrily. "He is ours now."

"Freighter is clear," Billingsley interjected as he half turned towards the Captain from his forward seat at Ops. "But shields are weakening. Recommend we withdraw, sir."

As McCloud opened his mouth to respond, there was a soundless explosion as golden light speared through the middle of the bridge. M'rel blinked away the afterimage, to find everything burned away down the middle, but a human skeleton. She found herself watching in growing horror as the skull turned to face her, air whistling through the hull breach despite the emergency force field sealing it.

In a ghostly voice, it whispered, "Get our people home."

And with a panicked yowl, M'rel shot straight up in her bed. The lights automatically snapped on to illuminate the room, her claws ripping the sheets as she found herself back in the present, safe in her quarters.

ACT I

"Personal log, Commander M'rel Ngral'rr, April 3rd 2353. It's been three months since the Resolute limped back to Sol system and it seems the Admiralty has finally decided what to do with me. The inquiry found our actions appropriate to the situation, yet the ship was still almost lost. The pirates escaped as well, though empty-handed and with enough damage to keep them from raiding anytime soon."

"The Resolute was condemned and is due to be sent to the breakers, and most of the personnel have already been reassigned elsewhere. I had wondered if I were to be beached more than once, and Raftir knows in some respects it would be a relief."

"Still, I will do my duty, what- and where-ever it may be."

M'rel smoothed her uniform's tunic as she examined her reflection in the turbolift doors. A commander's combadge flashed on her chest against the red and black of Starfleet's Command branch for what she feared may be the last time, as her thick tail twitched behind her

uncertainly. Forcing her ears up straight, she adjusted the top again, nodding slightly as it finally settled properly. Her race wasn't known for being particularly... busty, but she had inherited her figure from her mother, her father's fourthwife and it had always made for an interesting time fitting uniforms. Shareesh had always been against M'rel joining Starfleet too, she found herself recalling and the edge of her mouth twitched in amusement at the thought of herself as a wet nurse. As if!

Almost too soon, the turbolift came to a halt and she shook her head slightly to clear it of her woolgathering. Unfortunately, this also spread her platinum blond hair over her shoulders, forcing her to pause a moment to gather it back up behind her. Still, it was but a moment's respite. Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the corridor and strode down to a brown door marked "REAR ADM SAKOMIZU" and pressed the chime next to it.

"Enter," came from within.

As the doors closed behind her, the elder human behind the desk looked up. With all the aging treatments being developed, it was always hard to guess at a human's age, and the fact he appeared to be from oriental stock just made it worse. Of course he also had inherited the height of that ancestry, and M'rel figured they would be about even in height if he were standing.

"Ah, Commander M'rel. Punctual as always."

"I try to be, sir," she replied, the Caitian falling into a relaxed parade stance and studiously examining a point about a half meter above the Admiral's head.

"Please, take a seat." Sakomizu waved to the empty chair in front of his desk, then seemed to return his attention to the display on his desk as she settled in. "Do you know why I asked for you to come here today?"

"No sir," M'rel responded noncommittally, unconsciously tilting her head a touch. So he had specifically requested her? That couldn't be good.

Rather than explaining, the admiral let her sit in silence for a moment before speaking. "Enrolled directly into the Academy... high marks in most subjects... served as acting first officer during your midshipman cruise... promoted to Commander within four years and assigned as executive officer to Captain McCloud... six years of service since, and nothing but exemplary performance reports." Returning his attention to M'rel, he finished, "An excellent record. Did you know that Captain McCloud had put you in for a promotion six months ago?"

"No sir," M'rel replied. Outwardly she tried to project the same calm as if she was on a starship bridge, but inwardly her mind was filled with confusion. Where was he going with this?

"Well, given your record, I suppose you're wondering why we've kept you beached for the past

few months since the regrettable loss of the Resolute and her captain. Do you have any thoughts on the matter?" The admiral punctuated his question with a raised eyebrow, his expression otherwise neutral.

As fear and resolution quarreled in the pit of her stomach, M'rel took a deep breath and let it out before speaking. "Yes sir. I believe the reason I have not been reassigned is that as the XO the state of the ship was just as much my responsibility as the Captain's. If I had given better advice-

"Horsepocky." The admiral cut her off, but there was no anger or rancor in his voice. "If we rapped every first officer in the teeth for any losses under their watch, we'd have no captains. While the loss of a cruiser is something we do not like to see, the Board of Inquiry found the command crew blameless in this case. I was on the Board in this case."

M'rel's eyes widened slightly, her tail twitching involuntarily as he paused to let that sink in. The membership of most Boards was never publicly revealed, which meant-

"I saw the sensor logs myself, and when we simulated the same scenario for three different captains, the result was essentially the same, with only the details varying. In fact, we managed to identify the Q-ship as one we had been after for a while, the Bloody Talon - belonging to a self-styled 'pirate queen' only referred to as Raven. We know she is of wolf 'morph stock from the Non-Aligned Worlds, but not much else. As your former ship had the most success thus far, and Captain McCloud is no longer with us, the Admiralty has decided to send you back to this region for your shakedown cruise, in case she resurfaces."

"Shakedown cruise, sir?" M'rel was beyond confused now, her ears splaying in puzzlement as she tried to make sense of what she was being told.

Now, Admiral Sakomizu smiled for the first time since she had entered. "I suppose congratulations are in order, Captain." Reaching into his desk drawer and pulled out a small box on top of a sheaf of paper, then slid it across to the dumbfounded Caitian. "Your orders are all in there, as is your ship details and your crew manifest. If you have any officers you would like to request, please submit them to Personnel by April 13th, and we'll see what we can do. Dismissed."

Unable to process what had just happened, M'rel rose in a haze, taking the box and papers from the desk and striding out of the office on autopilot. By the time she came back to her senses she was in her quarters, papers on her desk and box clenched tight in both hands.

Ever so carefully, she released her grasp on it, the plain wood dark against her white-gold fur. Slowly, she opened it, revealing a silver and black captain's combadge, glittering in the dim light.

From the balcony, the cargo handlers looked like ants pushing around bits of food, an observation that drew a soft chuckle from the observer above.

"Ma'am?" The puzzled, almost submissive query would have seemed odd coming from the grizzled badger 'morph, but for the personage before him, it was expected. After all, this lupine hadn't gotten a reputation from having a sweet and kindly temperament!

The laugh cut off as suddenly as someone throwing a switch as the self-styled pirate queen Raven turned to regard the badger thug and the two young rabbit morphs at his feet.

The guard had to admit she cut an imposing figure, silhouetted against the cargo deck below. Covered in ebony fur, this busty female was obviously modeled on a Terran wolf. Reddish-brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail, while a red corset hugged her upper body, emphasizing her bust, while tight leather pants hugged her hips and legs. Despite her attractiveness however, the badger had heard enough stories that no one would be able to pay him enough to lay with her.

"These are the two I requested from the latest shipment?" Her voice was smooth, like honey, but her eyes showed a hunger as she looked at the two rabbits that sent a shiver down his spine.

"Yes ma'am," he answered as she fully turned and padded over to the three. Kneeling down, she bent down to examine the shivering pair.

Slowly, she dragged her index claw down the male bunny's chest, leaving a line of red in the white of his fur, following it up with a long slow lick. "Mmm... much as I'd love to play with my new toys, I have things to do first. Take them to my quarters."

"Yes ma'am!" As she rose, the badger turned and dragged the two captives by the chains attached to their bindings, feeling the daggers of the pirate captain's gaze pressing against his back.

Raven waited for the lift doors to close before tapping a set of commands into the wristcomp on her forearm, the wolf's eyes narrowing as she reviewed the information on the display.

"Navi, connect me to Andre." The bracer chirped, replacing the figures with a floating display of a bear morph in front of multiple unfamiliar pieces of machinery. She barely gave him time to turn towards the camera before growling, "What the fuck is this shit about needing new warp coils?"

Andre seemed fairly unperturbed, but then he knew he was too valuable in engineering to replace. For now, at least. "It's quite simple Cap'n. That Freddie ripped the hell out of our engines, and I've only kept them together by spit and duct tape since. The replacement plasma

conduits are fine, but we're getting microfractures on the coils themselves now. Either we replace them soon, or we'll find ourselves stranded on the hind teat of nowhere with no warp. Ma'am." The last part seemed added almost as an afterthought.

"Rrrr... very well." Her bracer chirped as she cut the connection. The facilities here were going to charge her an arm and a leg which meant once the work was done, it was going to be time to go hunting again.

"Navi, connect me to Darkstar Accounting, bypass code whiskey-omega-lima-foxtrot-six-niner." Her wristcomp beeped an acknowledgement, and several seconds later another hold display appeared above her wrist interface. Depicted within was a youngish man of European descent, perhaps in his mid thirties, sitting in front of a desk piled high with PADDs.

"Long time no see, Jean. What's up?"

Ears perking and tail stilling in surprise, the wolf 'morph looked around to make sure no one had been in earshot, then hissed "Dammit Jim, I told you not to call me that in public!"

He just shrugged a bit. "Sorry, force of habit. Anyways, your accounts are doing well, if that is what this is about. Haven't even had an intelligence agency sniffing around in the past couple months, for once."

"Good. Listen, I need you to make arrangements for use of the drydock at station K12 and delivery of two sets of warp coils, expedited."

The man frowned at the request, tapping a few commands out. "Doable, but it'll put a dent in your finances if I use the usual back channels. I assume I should?"

"Of course." Raven let slip a soft sigh. "While you're at it, see if your sources can turn up any interesting cargo in the area. Contracts too."

"Will do." There was a short pause, before he added, "I don't suppose-"

"The answer is still no," she cut him off, finishing with a short barked laugh. "I've known you since we were kids, Jim. Trust me, you would not enjoy bedding me as much as you think you would."

Her friend couldn't help but smile, shrugging a little. "Can't blame a guy for trying! Anyways, I got paperwork to work on, so if there's nothing else...?"

"Nope," she responded, returning the smile. "Fair winds."

"And to you."

As the holo display winked out the lupine pirate's smile turned hungry, her thoughts turning to her 'guests' waiting in her quarters. Business was done, which meant it was time for more... pleasant pursuits.

"Well, well, look what the cat dragged in." The look M'rel gave the foxtaur todd as he sat himself down next to her could have melted bulkheads, but the cheeky foxtaur just grinned. "Ok, ok, bad joke, I know. I just usually don't see you here-" He paused to wave a copper-furred arm at the nearly empty lounge around them. "And especially not in civvies."

In contrast to the gold-and-black Starfleet uniform tunic the todd was sporting, M'rel herself was wearing a set of green and gold robes, loosely tied in the fashion of her homeworld; the only sign present of her Starfleet membership being the communicator badge pinned to her chest.

"I know, Marc, but I needed to get out for a bit. Clear my mind." Turning back to the purple glass in her hands, she stared into it blankly, her tail almost limp as she swirled the liquid within. "I finally found out what Starfleet had planned for me."

Marc frowned, vulpine ears angling back a bit. "They didn't cashier you over that whole mess did they? If they did-"

Where his joke failed, his response to the possibility of her losing her commission actually drew a slight smile from the downcast Caitian. "Nothing like that. Seems they decided to boot me into the Captain's chair."

Relief warred with confusion on the foxtaur's face, one ear splaying to the side as he processed what she'd said. "So the Resolute was repairable after all? Scuttlebutt said she was due to be towed to the breakers next Tuesday though."

Rather than responding, M'rel reached inside her robes, pulling out a hot pink PADD and handing it to Marc. As he scanned it, his jaw dropped open, ears perking forward in surprise.

"F.S.S. Excalibur... third of the Moebius class long range cruisers... due to be commissioned May 5th... wow, someone at Starfleet Command must really like you! Congratulations!" When she responded with a muffled hmph, however, the foxtaur lowered the PADD, giving her a concerned look. "I don't see the problem...?"

"That ship," M'rel said, keeping her eyes fully focused on her half-empty glass, "was originally earmarked for the skipper."

"For- ah, I see." Lightly, Marc rested a dark-furred hand on her shoulder. "M'Rel, he'd kick you

in the butt if he saw you moping like this. We both know there's no one else he would have wanted to take over for him."

"I know, but still..." She shrugged a moment. "Knowing it and feeling it are two different things."

"True enough I suppose. Well," he added, leaning his upper torso in to give her a hug, "if you need a friend, don't forget that we're here for you."

M'rel nodded slightly, leaning into the 'taur a bit. "Thanks. I think my biggest problem right now is that I still don't feel like I deserve it."

"But you'll do your duty anyways. You always were a bit of a hard case about that, even back at the Academy."

"And you chased every vixen you saw, you lil' stinker!" Smiling a bit, M'rel nosed into his russet fur, finally fully relaxing. "Thanks for the reminder, though. You sure you aren't interested in becoming a ship's counselor...?"

Marc stifled a snicker at the suggestion. "M'Rel, I'd be more likely to send them running than fix them! Besides, us yard dogs have our own duties to fulfill. Those who serve and all that," he finished with an airy wave.

"Sure there's not just some vixen on the station you got your eyes on?" She responded teasingly, reaching up to beep the foxtaur's nose.

"I plead innocence, milady!," the todd responded, lifting his hand to his forehead and hamming it up a bit. "Forsooth and alas, shall I always be judged a cad and womanizer?"

This time it was M'rel's turn to stifle a giggle. Softly, she drew back and gave the tip of the 'taur's black nose a light kiss. "Thanks again, Marc, I really did need a friend."

"Anytime," he responded, flicking his ears at her and giving her a foxy grin. "So now that I dragged you out of your cups, what's next?"

Picking up the half-forgotten PADD, M'rel deftly swiped through several pages of data, stopping on a list of names. "First, go through this list of officers to see who would be a good fit for my senior staff. Then..." She paused a moment to look out the not-too-distant window at the star-filled blackness of space beyond. "Then I go say 'goodbye'."

The half-melted golden plaque hung forlornly in the dark, bare bridge. Dim starlight trickled through the gaps in the walls, bearing stark testament to the trials this ship had endured; trials

that we're now at an end. A dim blue flare illuminated the room momentarily as force fields sprung into place over the gaps, and air hissed through the vents, creating a final atmosphere for its visitor as the turbolift doors opened.

Tail nearly still, M'rel softly padded into the remains of the bridge, most of the illumination vanishing as the doors behind her closed. Still, she moved through the dim room with nary a pause. As she walked by each station, she trailed her hand along the back, recalling the officers who had manned each one.

All too soon, she found herself looking at the scorched hole where a captain's chair had once rested. Once more she recalled the momentary feeling of intense heat before the protective shields on her chair kicked in, and the turbulence of the back blast of heated air that had nearly thrown her from her seat but for those same shields.

"Well, I made Captain," she spoke to the empty space there, her own voice loud to her ears in the stillness. "Not the way I would have preferred, but I hope I can be half the captain you were."

Continuing the walk brought the Caitian to the damaged dedication plaque, the left side unreadable from the changes wrought by the beam that had torn into the bridge. Still, M'rel could picture it whole in her mind.

"Promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep." She quoted, brushing her fingers across where it had been engraved in the yellow metal, only the last few words still readable. "You've kept all our promises old girl. Sleep well."

At that moment, her combadge chirped, and M'rel tapped it in acknowledgement. "M'rel here."

"Sydney Station here. The tug will arrive in fifteen minutes, sir."

"Acknowledged. I'll be out in five." Tapping it again to cut the link, she took one last look around the bridge she had spent the last few years of her life on. Raising her hand, she saluted those who had given their lives for the sake of others, then turned and made her way back to the turbolift. "Deck 14," she said as the doors closed, leaving only ghosts behind her.

ACT II

The apartment was comfortable, but lacking in decoration apart from a picture of Kà'iit hanging on the wall above a dimly lit LCARS display. With space on starship still being at a premium, M'rel had never been a huge collector of things, and most of that had been lost in a hit to her living quarters during that last battle.

Taking one last appreciative look at the sun setting over Melbourne, she padded back over and slid into the chair, activating her displays with a single swipe across the bottom. A few quick taps brought up a holo image of her new ship.

The Moebius class had been an attempt at a new basic ship design, and it remained to be seen if it would pan out in the long term. Rather than the usual dual-sectioned hull with a boom connecting them, the ship was designed as effectively a single hull for greater structural integrity. Taking a shape similar to a flattened diamond, the main hull fed directly into the squared off star drive section.

The warp drive itself was also an experiment. Rather than the traditional dual or triple nacelles, the Moebius class sported four nacelles of a shorter and thicker design, looping the warp coils back on themselves. In theory it allowed for much greater warp bubble efficiencies, but at the price of potential instabilities at high warp. There was also some refinements in play that (rumor had it) came from a freighter captain of all people!

Even the armament was an experiment, and one she was unsure if she was in favor of. Missiles had been foregone completely in favor of beam arrays, which cost her some of her stand-off range, but the range on the latest model phasers was-

The chirping of her console shook her out of her musings as a notification popped up showing an incoming call. Closing the file, she tapped accept and leaned back in her chair.

"Ah, Captain M'rel. I was afraid it would be too late over there, given the time zone difference," said the man that appeared on her screen, sporting graying sideburns and a Commodore uniform. "Commodore Braxley, Starfleet Personnel."

"What can I do for you today, Commodore?" M'rel asked as she regarded the officer, folding her hands in her lap.

"I just wanted to inform you that most of your officer selections have been approved. Notifications are going out as we speak, and we expect to have you fully staffed within three weeks."

"Thank you for letting me know. If I may ask, which officers didn't make the cut?"

He looked away a moment, before giving her his full attention once again. "A list should be on its way now, but the main positions we had to reassign were the Operations and Engineering heads. Lt. Commander Anders was in a bad shuttle accident and they expect six months for her to recover. As for Lt Commander Merriweather-

M'rel raised a hand, and the Commodore paused to let her speak. "I knew about that one. Abe

told me yesterday that they'd finally accepted his request for a transfer to the Sydney Station shipyards. He's a good engineer, and my loss is their gain."

Braxley nodded slightly at that. "Well we have candidates selected for both slots, which we will be forwarding within the next couple days. I trust you will find them to your standards."

M'rel nodded her acknowledgement. "I'll let you get back to work then. Good day, Commodore."

"Good night, Captain."

As the image faded, M'rel bit off a sigh. The Commodore's last comment had been bureaucratese for 'You're stuck with them whether you like it or not.' Well, with luck, they'll be competent. And if not?

That's what field promotions were for.

Nestled within an open duffel bag, the beeping PADD was mostly drowned out by the sound of stick against padded metal. Folk of several shapes surrounded the roped-off area as two armored figures circled each other. The smaller one was clad in steel, covered with a yellow and green tabard. The taller one, over a head taller than anyone else present and sporting a striped tail, was armored in boiled leather that was molded to fit an obviously female body of statuesque proportions. Each held a rattan rod at the ready, wrapped in duct tape, an edge marked out with darker tape.

Swiftly, the two closed again and another flurry of blows rung out. As they stepped apart again, the smaller of the two dropped the sword and fell over in an over acted collapse, drawing a laugh from a couple members of their audience.

Extending an arm, the taller of the two helped the fallen fighter back up. "Good fight," a somewhat deep but feminine voice said from within a helm with a attachment obviously designed for 'morph muzzles, and her opponent nodded his thanks.

Deftly, she stepped over the ropes as the next pair of opponents crossed into the list area, fingers already working at the buckles keeping it on. Upon reaching the duffel bag, she lifted the helm off, revealing a tiger-like head, capped with scarlet hair that fell to her shoulders now that it was freed from its confinement.

"Hey Xan, think you got a message. Something was beeping over there," commented the half-armored human woman on the blanket next to her gear as she strapped a vambrace on her shin. "Figured you'd have Todd down fast enough that it could wait."

"Thanks, Sam," the female Rakshani said as she let the helmet fall onto her own blanket with a muffled clunk. A moment later, the gauntlets that protected her hands joined it, followed by assorted spare pieces as she dug her personal PADD out of the bottom of her bag.

Tapping in her personal unlock code, she then held it up to scan a dark-green eye. After a momentary flash, it chirped an acknowledgement, sending her to the main interface screen. A few practiced taps and swipes brought her to her messages, where a flashing red icon topped the list.

Splaying her ears in confusion, Xan opened it up in text-only mode. She'd had this vacation planned for half a year, but if Starfleet had sent her a high priority message, whatever it was had to take priority over entertainment, even if she was doing well in her first tourney! These 'SCA' fighters were hardy and honorable warriors she'd found, even if some of the safety measures were a bit more stringent than in similar groups back home. Even with her physical advantage they gave as good as they got...

Her train of thought trailed off as the message came up on her screen, carrying familiar language she'd been hoping for since her transfer off the Soyuz.

To: Lt. Cmdr Xangra ap Granf ne Xhorngrarg
From: Desk of Admiral R'grarii'takn Srungr, Starfleet Personnel
Priority: HIGH

Message as follows:

Lieutenant Commander, you are hereby requested and required to report to the Federation Star Ship Excalibur at Spacedock Fourteen, Sydney Station by 0900 Earth Standard, 8 May 2353. Thereupon you will take the office of Chief of Security under Captain M'rel Ngral'rr until otherwise relieved or transferred.

Message ends.

Letting out a snort of relief, she sent the acknowledgement that she read and understood her new orders. This 'SCA event' as the Terrans called it should be well over by then, leaving her plenty of time to research her new assignment and Captain. It was just a shame that she was going to have to put this new hobby on hold, but duty calls!

"Yee-haw!"

The falcon dove out of the way, letting out an indignant squawk as the two powered gliders tore on through the space it had been about to fly through, the near one narrowly missing its tailfeathers. Normal tourists were bad enough, but these six-limbed metal-winged devils were even worse! Well, at least the black one seemed to pay more attention than the spotted one. Spreading its wings again, it resumed its interrupted sweep for more delicious snacks far below.

"I told you there's nothing like it!" shouted the pilot of the lead craft over the roar of the engine.

Strapped into the first metal contraption was a feline taur. Despite a distinctly shapely female upper torso, a closer look from below would make it obvious shi was a chakat - part of a race of genetically engineered hermaphroditic felitaurs originally designed to aid in the reconstruction of Earth after the Gene Wars. Now though, those origins were hundreds of years past, and they had long since turned their talents towards exploration and colonization. This one had a fur pattern similar to the Terran snow leopard, with the exception of her hair, which was dyed bright purple and tied back into a ponytail that the wind from her flying kept whipping around. A dark red corset kept her chest in check as she circled back around, blue eyes having caught a glimpse of something glinting in the distance. "I think I see a lake over there!"

"Let's check it out," the black furred pilot of the second glider called back, its wingtips twitching a little uncertainly as it took the same turn a bit wider. "I could use a rest."

Unlike the first pilot, this one was of foxtaur stock, but not completely, as a closer inspection would reveal her as a Stellar foxtaur of the Starwalker breed, fruit of mankind's latest genetic project. Like the chakats from which part of their genetic stock had come, they were also hermaphrodites, though this one was not as well endowed in the feminine aspect as her companion, sporting a simple blue vest that did well enough to hold the modest swell of the foxtaur's bosom. Licking his nose nervously, shi angled the glider downward, wind catching his fluffy back tail much like the other pilot's long feline tail. Where the felitaur had long purple hair however, hers was cut short, nearly blending in with his fur.

The chakat cut his engines first, shortly followed by the stellar as they rode the winds down towards the short grass surrounding the lake they had spotted. Landing at a run, they both came to a halt with varying degrees of proficiency, the dark-furred foxtaur taking a few more meters to reach a standstill.

"Well, Nex, what did you think?" The spotted chakat asked as they both unbuckled themselves from the machines. "Quite the rush, eh?"

"Swiftie... hon... you know I love you but next time we go out to have a picnic can we PLEASE travel in something a tad more enclosed?" Nexus responded as shi pulled out a brush from a bag on the glider chassis and laid himself down to start brushing out his tail from the mess the wind had made of it while flying.

"Aw, Nex..." Swiftwind gave hir a mock pout. "That takes half the fun out of it. Besides," shi added as shi gave hir denmate a wink, "I think you look darn hot all messed up like that."

Nexus paused in hir grooming to blow a raspberry at Swift, but couldn't help smiling despite himself. "We both know that's just your rut talking... but thanks, love."

"Well," Swiftwind responded as shi stretched hir forelegs out a moment, "I seem to recall a certain someone's heat was coming up too..."

"Mmhmm," Nexus responded, working at a knot of fur and not really listening.

"And we're out here all alone," Swift murmured as shi rose back up, slinking towards the preoccupied foxtaur.

"Mmhmm," Nexus responded again, half-paying attention as shi finally got it freed.

"No one but us for miles around," the snowmew chakat practically purred as shi slid down beside hir foxtaur mate and lowered hir muzzle to give Nexus's black-furred neck a few soft links and nibbles.

"MMMMmmrrrrrrr...." The foxtaur practically melted against hir spotted lover, the brush dropping from a now-limp hand. "You keep...m~ that up and....nnnmmmm...we're not going to get to the food."

"We got all day-" Swift started to respond but a sudden twin buzzing cut through the mood like a vibroblade through cottage cheese..

"Or not," Nexus finished with a sigh as Swiftwind rose, cursing softly. As shi padded over to hir bags to silence the Starfleet-issued PADD, Nexus dug hir own out from underneath the ten pounds of roast chicken, still in its thermal-wrap. Tapping in the security code to unlock it, shi skimmed the message that had been important enough to interrupt their trip, then sighed, lifting hir head to look up past the sky at where Starbase One was likely orbiting. "Really?" Shi asked in a whine.

"You too?" Swiftwind grumbled as shi trotted back over, PADD in hand. "I know I'd like to shoot whatever Admiral decided that deployment orders should always be marked urgent, even if it's two weeks out."

Nexus nodded softly. "Yup. Engineering department on some new ship. The FSS Excalibur?"

Swift perked back up at that. "Well, as luck would have it, you're looking at the new senior helmsman of said ship. "

"Oh really," Nexus murmured, a foxy grin playing around hir vulpine muzzle. "Well, since we got plenty of time, it can't hurt to run a few diagnostics."

Swiftwind cocked hir head. "Diagnostics?"

"Oh yes," shi murred as shi turned, lifting hir bushy tail partway, "I better make sure your drive shaft is fully functional..."

Tossing the PADD over hir shoulder carelessly, Swiftwind padded towards the enticing vixen before hir. "In that case, let me show you a few maneuvers that'll push your engines to their limit..."

"Dr Firewalker?"

"Yes?" The blond-haired and cream-colored chakat turned hir upper torso to see who had called hir name, hir brown eyes gazing over the Academy students passing by. Finally, shi spotted a young Voxxan cadet - well, young to hir anyways, considering the ninety Terran winters shi'd seen. He gave hir a little half-wave, but shi could sense the nervousness rolling off him as he made his way over. Swinging her lower torso around, shi greeted him with a short hug in typical chakat fashion, but as he pulled back, shi noted it had only seemed to make things worse. "So what can I do for you, Cadet...?" shi asked as shi straightened hir standard-issue Starfleet Medical tunic and white lab coat.

"Mikels, shir. I wanted to see if you had any openings for Xenobiology 602 next semester..." He trailed off, ears drooping a bit as shi slowly shook hir head, and 'Walker found himself having to slam hir empathic barriers on full to block out the surge of disappointment. Sometimes having a strong empathic sense had some real downsides, shi mused as shi laid a comforting hand on the Voxxan shoulder.

"It's not that I wouldn't love more students, but I've been ground-bound long enough. Once finals finish, I'll be shipping out on a new long-range cruiser that'll be commissioning in a couple weeks."

"Oh," was all he said, but the pressure on hir mental shields let up immensely, allowing the empathic chakat to dial them back down to normal.

"Say," shi added, trying to keep it casual, "you ever been tested for psionic ability?"

That drew a puzzled reaction from the vulpinoid, but at least this wasn't directed fully hir way. "No, why?"

"Just a hunch," shi said with a small smile, before giving him another quick hug. "Well, tail high cadet, and I'm sure you'll get a good teacher next semester."

"Thanks," he said as he returned the hug, and Firewalker could feel he meant it. Turning, he started to jog off towards the building the counselors' offices were in. As shi watched him go, shi made a mental note to drop a line to the Psionics department about the Voxxan. Shrugging a little to himself, shi put hir hands in hir pockets (one of several reasons shi was fond of wearing this jacket, despite it reaching down to hir front knees!) and started back down the sidewalk. What was that ship name they'd told hir... Eclipse? Equinox? No.. Excalibur, that was it!

"Computer, freeze program."

The announcement chime sounded again as the silver holographic disguise fell away, revealing a fairly well-built male wearing a strange orange and silver costume. Stepping over the scaled down buildings, the frozen monster seemed to snarl at his back as he keyed the unlock on the entryway that had revealed itself when the program had paused.

"Yo, Sean." His visitor, a dark-skinned woman in a Starfleet cadets uniform strolled right on past as the door slid open, then shut behind her as she looked around the holosuite, hands on hips. "So this is what you've been up to. What's with the buildings?" She made a half-hearted kick at one for emphasis, but her foot went right through, the material crumpling with ease.

Sean ran his fingers through his short brown hair, looking up to the holographic sky with a 'give me strength' expression. "It's a holo recreation of some old twentieth-century fiction. They had some amazing creativity back then for what they had to work with."

"I'm sure. If it's good enough to keep you from my bed-"

Sean cut her off with an exasperated sigh. "Look Barbara, we discussed this already. It's just not going to work out, so if that's all you came here for, you can take your-"

A loud slap cut him off as she whirled around, catching his cheek with the flat of her hand. Shocked, he started to lift a hand to his cheek as she glared angrily at him. "SEAN SEBASTIAN MONTGOMERY, IF I NEVER SEE YOU AGAIN IT'LL BE TOO SOON!" Before he could say anything, she was already storming out.

Rubbing his cheek, he turned to find a Caitian in an ensign uniform leaning against the doorway. "Heard all that?" Sean asked with a small sigh.

"I'd say half the campus heard that last part. What happened this time?"

"R'gar, my friend, sometimes women just aren't worth the trouble." That got a snicker from his feline friend. "So what brings you here?"

"The same thing I suspect your former mate was here for."

"She's not my- ungh." Sean let out a sigh as he reached up to rub the bridge of his nose. "Just cut to the point."

"She does care for you, in her own way," R'gar responded, then shrugged. "But setting that aside, our assignments have.. been.. posted..." the Caitian's basso rumble trailed off as Sean dashed past him, out the door. "So much for getting them back together," he murmured to himself as he watched the orange jacket disappear around a corner in the distance. "But then, this is why I did not go into diplomacy."

"Computer, save and end program." As the cityscape and giant creature attacking it faded into nothing, he stepped outside and picked up the bottle he had brought in anticipation of the two reuniting. "Well here's to you, my friend, and may you find yourself a proper Firstwife on your new assignment." Slugging back a drink, he let the amber liquid roll down his throat. "And to the FSS Excalibur, may she bring you back in one piece."

Taking another swig of the liquor, he turned and padded off through the lobby and into the night as well, leaving the room to be swallowed by darkness as the computer recognized the building was empty and shut it down.

M'rel stretched a moment, then rubbed her eyes. Lack of an XO meant she had to fill both jobs at the moment, and despite her command mostly existing only in data still, the early morning sun beginning to peek through her drapes told her it still took way too long.

Flicking off the terminal, she rose and padded over to the kitchen, the apartment's computer dimming and brightening the ceiling lights as she passed from one room to the other. After rummaging in the fridge a moment, she pulled out a bottle of something wet and shut the door, taking a sip as she leaned back against the cool metal.

More and more of the crew were showing up by the day, taking up residence either in temporary ground apartments like hers, or finding berths on the station as the yard dogs put the final touches on the Excalibur. She was still short a few senior staff, but her first officer was due to arrive in the next couple days which would lighten her load significantly.

The commissioning ceremony was scheduled for next week, on the 9th, followed by the actual launch on the 12th. She still hadn't received her official orders, but the scuttlebutt was that they would be tapped for anti-piracy patrols for their shakedown cruise. Anything more she'd likely

find out at the party.

M'rel found herself almost wanting to wiggle a little as she recalled the dress she'd chosen for the ceremony and after-party. Rather than replicated, it was made from real silk, and the way it rubbed against her fur was sensuously delightful, almost sinful as her human friends had put it. Even after all these years, she still didn't understand why Terrans thought simple pleasures were so bad to indulge in, especially in this day and age, but then she wasn't Terran, now was she? In fact, the mischievous part of her had made sure the dress was strapless and the neckline low enough that it was sure to drive a few males to distraction that night! The hemline ended at her thighs as well, but that was more for ease of movement than for showing off. Her years of living in space had made her leery of any clothing that would restrict her actions, as sometimes all it took was a second to make the difference between life and death.

Taking another swig, she capped the bottle and replaced it in the fridge. Only a few more forms remained, then she could get some well-earned rest. With a quick stride, she returned to the terminal and woke it back up, stretching again as the dim blue light illuminated the room again. Just a couple more, and then she could finally sleep.

ACT III

"Captain's Log, May 9th, 2353. This is my first entry of what will become many more in the log of the FSS Excalibur."

"The deadline for reporting in has passed, and we are nearly fully staffed now. Work on the ship is complete, and the crew has moved on board. There is a slight tension in the air, I've noticed, a general urge to be about it. Assuming nothing untoward happens, in a few days we should be on our way."

"My head of Operations is among the few that have yet to arrive, but I've been told she should be at the commissioning ceremony tonight. Starfleet Personnel already forwarded me her dossier, but so much has been redacted that it still leaves her an enigma. Still, what was left contained nothing but glowing reports."

"Unfortunately, the other major hole in my roster is my Chief Engineer. It seems the one that Personnel chose happened to choose the day before his selection to go missing. Some Terran tradition called a Vision Quest. For now, my XO has taken over the administrative portion, while the section chiefs for each watch handle the rest."

Stepping into Hyper One, M'rel just closed her eyes, listening to the thrum of the warp reactor core idling and the hustle and bustle of the technicians going about their jobs as her ears

swiveled to take it all in.

"Captain?"

Opening her eyes, she found herself being regarded by a feminine foxtaur wearing Engineering's gold-shouldered tunic. Rolled-up sleeves and splotches of dark green on hir black fur made it plain shi'd been buried to hir elbows not long before.

"Lieutenant..." M'rel wracked her brain a moment to recall hir name, "Nexus, isn't it?"

"Aye, sir," the black-furred stellar foxtaur responded as shi wiped hir hands off with a rag. "Is there something we can do for you?"

"Commander Williams mentioned something about a slight phase variance in his last readiness report, so I thought I'd stop by to see for myself before leaving the ship."

"We've just about nailed that." Turning in place, Nexus padded over to the console in the room beyond as M'rel followed. "Turned out some subcontractor had tried to slip us some shoddy EPS conduits, but the station had some spares I was able to requisition." On reaching the console, the foxtaur lowered hir hind end to sit himself in front of it as shi called up several diagrams. "Computer, run level three diagnostics on the EPS conduits from Frame Ninety-Two to Frame One-Oh-Eight."

As the computer beeped acknowledgement, shi turned hir head to look at the captain. "If I overstepped my authority in requesting the hardware myself, I apologize, but I didn't want to wait any longer to get this fixed. If it passes this time we should be--"

""All diagnostics are within normal tolerances," the ship's computer interrupted, and Nexus turned hir attention back to the displays, fingers dancing over the keys.

"All results look good, sir. We should be ready for launch anytime."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," M'rel said, trying to hold back a smile, "and good work."

The S.S. Monte Cristo cruised slowly through the interstellar void. An older design that had been modified and rebuilt more than a few times, the current iteration consisted of a long rectangular central core, with a large cylinder attached underneath, while the rear expanded out into out-swept warp nacelles.

The bridge of the merchant ship was dim, not from damaged hardware, but from the ship's clock being in the night cycle. A single Voxxan teenager stood watch, trying not to yawn as she

doodled some flower on a PADD.

The calm was short-lived however, as proximity detectors began to flash. Setting aside her drawing, the young vixen called up the sensor displays, now showing an icon marked in the bright orange of an unknown contact. Pressing a pickup on the command chair, she spoke into it with more than a bit of fear, "Captain to the bridge; we got visitors."

A minute later, an older todd stepped through the rear doors, wearing a rumpled shirt and pants while another Voxan female followed behind wearing a dark green bathrobe. "This better be real, sweetling," the graying vixen yawned. "Your father and I-

"It's real, Ganette," the captain interrupted as he tweaked their sensors to try to get a better read. "Warp field strength looks like freighter levels, but the way it's flickering- there she goes," he finished as the blip disappeared as quickly as it appeared. "Looks like she had engine trouble and was trying to make it to lacon station."

His daughter was already at a different station, tailtip twitching as data scrolled by. "I'm picking up a faint distress signal, Dad. Should I set a course?"

"Let's mark the position and let Starfleet handle it," her mother replied, running finger through her own tangled hair. "We've got to get these replicator parts to lacon on time, or we'll lose the contract!"

"Now dear," the father said calmly, "if that was us out there, and someone else saw our engines go out, would you want them to pass us by?"

"No, but-"

"And besides, if they lost more than their coils the might be on emergency life support. Zara, send a message to lacon that we're checking out a merchie with engine trouble, then set course." Angling a pointed ear at his wife, the captain gave her a quick smile. "Don't worry hon, we can squeeze a bit more from the engines afterwards to make the time back."

It wasn't very long before they dropped out of warp, coming alongside a bulk freighter. Unlike the more modular design of the Monte Cristo, the hull was mostly a single piece. Long and rectangular, the ship was dotted with cargo hatches along the sides, with a large hatch on the front that could double as loading hatch or shuttle bay entrance. There didn't seem to be any name painted on the side, however.

"Attention unknown ship, this is the merchant ship Monte Cristo. Do you require assistance?" asked the erstwhile captain.

In a matter of seconds, a wing of fighters dove around the bulk of the ship that had been hiding

them, weapons trained on the merchant ship, while the cargo hatches on the 'freighter' opened up to reveal heavy blasters. Finally, a powerful tractor beam reached out to lock the two ships together, as if to dispel any thoughts of fleeing.

"Attention Monte Cristo," echoed from the speakers as the Voxxan stared in shock, "you will shut down your engines and prepare for boarding. Do not attempt to resist, or we will open fire."

Almost mechanically, the elder Voxxan shut down the engine, while his teenage daughter hugged tight to her mother, trying not to cry. "W- what's going to happen?"

"We lose our cargo, and move on," her mother said, disappointment in her voice.

"If we're lucky," added her father as the cargo shuttle slowly grew larger in the viewscreen.

A day later, a Federation destroyer pulled alongside a dark bulk of a ship. Two suited figures crossed the gap, and entered through an airlock that gaped wide open. When gravity did not kick in, they looked at each other, then proceeded to float up the corridor, until they reached the doors to the bridge, twisted and fused in their moorings.

Forcing apart the jammed doors, they entered into the airless bridge. Flashing a light around, it settled on a single body, slumped over the console, missing it's head.

Outside, flashing spotlights that had been tracing across the hull lit upon two words in black: Monte Cristo.

The lounge had an excellent view of the docked Excalibur, its running lights blinking slowly against the dark of space through the large armorplast bay window. In front of it was a small podium, currently empty. That would be soon to change, M'rel thought as she glanced discreetly at the chronometer on her wrist.

While her hair was unbound in traditional Caitian fashion, she had opted to add a pair of hairclips bearing jeweled butterflies. Her sky blue dress hugged her body like a second skin, but the silk 'breathed' well enough that it felt even more comfortable than her Starfleet uniform. The low neckline seemed to be having its desired effect as well; when she bowed to greet Admiral Sakomizu, it looked like his aide's eyes were going to pop out of his head! Silly Terrans... or maybe just silly males, from the looks that a lion morph across the hall was giving her when he thought she wasn't looking. It's like they kept expecting her to fall out of her dress if she took too deep a breath...

"M'rel!"

Hearing her name through the cacophony of people talking, she turned and saw a familiar figure waving to her. Setting her half-finished glass on a nearby table, she made her way through the small crowd to the blond-haired man in a Commander's dress uniform.

"Bout time you got here, Drew," the Caitian said as she came within easy earshot. "Was wondering if you were going to make it."

"Had to deal with a fight on deck 9. Couple of non-coms decided to start celebrating early." Taking a moment to look her over, the Terran let out a low whistle. "Looking like a dream tonight. Trying to give a few Admiral's heart attacks?"

M'rel let her a slight grin show, though to anyone familiar with her, her ears and tail were telegraphing her amusement. "Since Starfleet Command somehow forgot to specify dress uniforms, I thought I'd have a little fun."

"And tweak some noses while you're at it." Andrew shook his head. "I seem to remember a certain cadet who was afraid to wear anything more revealing than Caitian robes when off-duty, once upon a time."

"And I seem to recall a certain other cadet who made it his mission to open her up," M'rel responded, still smiling.

"And I'd say he did a hell of a job," Andrew finished before returning the smile and holding out his hand. "If I didn't say it before, it's good to be working with you again."

Clasping his arm in return, M'rel gave it a gentle squeeze. "And it's good to have you aboard... XO."

After a moment, they stepped apart, Andrew glancing over her shoulder a moment. "It looks like someone else is coming to pay their respects, so I better mingle. Meet you at 7th Heaven later for a drink?"

"Consider it done," the Caitian responded as her old friend turned to make his way towards the buffet. Andrew Williams had been a close friend back in her Academy days, but she hadn't spoken with him in years. She hadn't expected to get him of all people as her first officer, but as the human's say, one shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

A gentle cough drew her attention to a short white rabbit 'morph standing nearby. Long brown hair draped across her shoulders, above the Lieutenant Commander's badge on her dress uniform, while deep blue eyes watched her expectantly. Once she saw she had the Captain's attention, she saluted sharply. "Lieutenant Commander Aina Reinhart, at your service sir."

M'rel splayed an ear, tilting her head just slightly in a Caitian equivalent of raising an eyebrow. "At ease, Commander. What can I do for you?"

Aina dropped the salute, visibly relaxing. "Just reporting in, sir. I had to take civilian transport from Chakona, and the ship got delayed en route." As M'rel slowly nodded, the lapine woman gave a small sigh. "Honestly, I barely had time to replicate a new dress uniform, considering my luggage is still on the far side of Alpha Cen."

Now that caused a smile to dance around M'rel's muzzle again. "You'd think in several hundred years baggage handling would be down to a science, but it never changes does it?"

"Not at all," Aina responded, giving her a slight exhausted smile of her own, before adding a half-forgotten "Sir."

Before anything more could be said, a third person emerged from the folk milling around on the floor, nodding to each of them. "Captain. Commander."

"Admiral," they both responded, almost in unison, though Aina fell almost immediately into a parade rest.

Admiral Sakomizu gave both of them a slight bow before continuing. "I hate to interrupt, but if I could have a moment of the Captain's time...?"

"Of course," M'rel responded, glancing towards her fellow officer. "I was just greeting my head of Ops after her trip." Turning completely to face her, she gave her an apologetic half-smile. "We'll have to catch up later."

"Until then," Aina responded, nodding to both before turning to pad off towards one of the snack tables.

The two watched her go, then walked off towards the edge of the lounge. "Would this be better in private, Sir?" M'rel asked curiously, tail slowly swaying as she leaned a shoulder against the wall.

Sakomizu shook his head. "Sometimes public areas are the most private. Besides, I just wanted to give you an idea of your upcoming orders." M'rel's ears perked at that but the elder male lifted a hand. "Unofficially, of course."

"Of course," she responded, firmly stepping on her urge to press him for as much as possible.

"You should have already received your first set, for a one month anti-piracy patrol near the Non-Aligned Worlds. Once that is complete, barring unforeseen circumstances, we'll be detaching your ship on exploration duties past the Tigris Reaches." As her eyes widened and

tail stilled, Sakomizu gave her shoulder a pat. "I just wanted you to know that it was because we have confidence in your abilities, and not lack thereof, that motivated this decision."

"Thank you, sir," she replied, her voice slightly husky with gratitude. "I appreciate it."

Inwardly however, she felt like yowling a cheer. Independent command of that sort was something most Captain's dreamed of, and just like her new ship, here it was being handed to her. All she had to do was prove her ability to handle it... and that sobering thought calmed her back down.

A gentle chime from her chronometer interrupted whatever the admiral had been about to say next. "Looks like it's time for the show," he said, offering his hand. "Good luck, Captain."

"Thank you, sir," she said, clasping forearms for a moment before they parted to find seats before the stage.

Standing atop it was a stern older gentleman, Admiral's bars flashing on his chest opposite the combadge marking him as the commander of the Sydney shipyards. In most situations, the combadge would have been enough, but some bureaucrat had determined that dress uniforms should include separate rank pins as well. Presumably the thought was it made everything more "ceremonial" but M'rel and most others felt it was just to show off to the civvies.

As everyone else took their seats, M'rel noticed several others who, like her, had opted for formal clothes over mess dress. There'd been a slight doubt at the back of her mind about whether her outfit had really been a good idea, but spotting others who had thought the same helped put her at ease as the port admiral began to speak.

"Good evening. Tonight, we have gathered to honor a tradition extending back to the days when we were but explorers challenging the oceans of our mother planets, trusting in the stars we now travel to guide our way."

"The traditions may have differed between our various worlds, but there was one constant between them. A ship was not just an inanimate object, but a living thing with its own spirit that protected the brave sailors who drove it into the unknown. Today, we welcome another ship into this grand tradition."

"But first," he added, stepping away from the microphone, "a word from her captain."

M'rel felt everyone's eyes on her as she rose and made her way onto the stage. She could feel the old doubt in herself start to stir, but she forced it back down and took her place at the mike, squaring her shoulders as she spoke to the assembled crowd.

"We are protectors, but we are also dreamers and explorers. We have sent great world-ships

into the void, housing entire fleets to see what we may learn. Even now, colony ship's launched centuries before may still be crawling towards a distant point of light, in the hopes that they will find a habitable planet at their journey's end."

"This ship, and others like her, is our next step forward into the unknown. With them we are able to be both protector and explorer. Whether facing local evils, or traveling unknown frontiers, Starfleet will be there."

"Space is a dangerous place, but within it lies our future."

"Thank you," she finished, stepping back and allowing the port admiral to retake his place at the podium.

"And so, people of the Stellar Federation," the port admiral said as the middle pane of the bay window opened, a force field flickering in the gap, "I give you the FSS Excalibur!"

Taking a champagne bottle from beneath the podium, he threw it at the shimmering gap in the window. Like a shuttle leaving its bay, it passed through the field keeping in the atmosphere, tumbling end over end as it crossed the gap between the station and the docked starship. The silence in the room dripped with anticipation as the audience followed it's progress. A few seconds later, it reached the hull, shattering against it soundlessly as the room's occupants let out a collective breath of relief.

"And now, the real work begins," M'rel murmured to herself.

TO BE CONTINUED...