

Chapter One

"So there was a rumor that an executive was coming aboard for an inspection flight. What's the big deal?"

"It's a huge deal! We may have one of the biggest ships in the commercial fleet, but it's still dirty in the lower decks. Life at sea still isn't all it's cracked up to be."

"What would happen if the executive was displeased by the performance of the crew?"

"Probably fire the captain and hire a new crew. Obviously the transition would happen over time. The 'Expansion's Wake' is the money maker. You can't just take it out of service for a month or two to integrate a new crew. It'd be economical suicide."

"You thought that your friend, Wesley Bennice, was just trying to rile you up then?"

"At first, yeah, but when he mentioned her name, that's when it started to sound more realistic."

"And by her you are referring to Astrid Marcel?"

"Yeah, she was on the board of intersystem affairs for the Marcel Corporation. That night when I left the bar I really thought about what Wesley told me. To be honest, she was the perfect choice to go on an inspection flight. For one thing she's the daughter of the CEO. She's also on the board for all the outer system affairs. There really wasn't a better choice."

"Why the CEO's daughter?"

"Anyone of the remaining crew will give you a different answer. A couple months before the incident the company set a motion to get diversity spread through the fleet. Humans basically manned the miner fleet by themselves while the Nobles ran the company."

"For the record, please elaborate on who the 'Nobles' are."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"I never kid son."

"'Nobles' is sailor speak for the Delians. Everyone knows that."

"This is official; we need to speak in official terms. Anyway, what happened after you left the bar?"

It was just like any other night out in the port. I was walking around the streets, enjoying the atmosphere when I heard Wesley's voice yelling at me from a bar. "Jake! Get your ass in here. I gotta talk to ya."

I mulled it over for a second or two. If I didn't go in, Wesley would patronize me for the entire flight. If I did, well tomorrow wouldn't be a very fun day. I decided that a headache for a day was better than a headache for two weeks.

Wesley grabbed me and yanked me up to the bar. He ordered me a glass of whisky and proceeded to tell me his all-important news. "Jake, Jake, Jake, we're going to have a higher-up on this next flight! That's why we're only going across the pond to Barclay. Captain McCoy wants to keep it as short as possible."

I knew Wesley was just spewing his usual amount of bullshit. He always claimed that each flight was going to have something special on it. "You are so full of shit Wes," I told him. "Let me guess, the CEO himself is going to be gracing us all with his presence. You know that executives, let alone Nobles, never go out on commercial vessels."

Wes looked a bit hurt by my words, "No asshole, not the CEO, it's his daughter. Astrid Marcel. She's on the board of intersystem affairs. Just 'cause I'm drunk don't mean you can mock me."

I didn't want to give him credit, but what Wes was saying actually made a bit of sense. Astrid Marcel was one of the heads of the intersystem affairs board. They handled all the relations with other

mining companies and made sure we didn't have problems on flights. She had the technical experience to handle an inspection flight. She may be a female, and a Noble at that, but she was the CEO's daughter. If anyone tried to get in her pants, they'd probably get shoved in an airlock and spaced.

I didn't respond to Wes for quite a while. Eventually he got fed up with my pondering. "Jake! Snap out of it. I know you got the hots for the CEO's daughter, but you ain't never getting anywhere near her!" He laughed his drunken laugh, not realizing the gravity of what he said. Messing with the boss's daughter got you killed or worse. But Wes was drunk, so I didn't hold it against him.

"Alright Wes, I have shit to do tomorrow. Gotta get ready to fly and what not; speaking of which, why aren't you getting some sleep. You have a ship to fly in a few days."

He growled at me in his alcohol fueled stupor, "Ahh, you're just a party pooper. Go home and sleep ya big baby."

Before I said good bye I told the barkeep to cut Wes off. He may be able to handle quite a bit of alcohol, but he really did have to fly a miner in three days. The last thing we needed, especially if Astrid Marcel was coming onboard, was a hung-over pilot behind the wheel of a 483 billion dollar gas miner. Wes was responsible, though, I trusted him.

The bar was behind me and my apartment waited just down the road. "I'll do a little digging on Astrid Marcel when I get back." I thought. Wes was probably full of shit, but it never hurt to do a bit of preparation.

That night I really didn't get any sleep. After a few hours and a few cups of coffee I had learned all I needed to about Astrid Marcel. The most predominant thing I noticed was her looks. An article I found described her as "An angel truly worth of the title 'Noble'." They weren't kidding. Astrid was absolutely beautiful by anyone's standards. She was slim, had perfectly proportioned breasts and a nice ass, if I don't say so myself. When I looked at her photo, I got a little lost. I felt like she could ask me to kill my mother, and I'd do it. That thought sent a shiver up my spine. I read a little later that she used her looks to persuade a few high ranking officials in other mining companies to give their potential mining grounds over to Marcel Corp.

If she really was coming on *Expansion's Wake*, she'd be spending most of her time on the command deck. Not only is that where I work almost ninety percent of my day, but it's also where my office is. Astrid would probably try to pull a trick on one of the command crew, myself included. No matter how much power you had, going aboard one of the largest commercial gas miners full of burly human males was an incredibly intimidating task. She would try to find someone to show her safely around the ship; someone who knew all the ins and outs. "Maybe this could be an opportunity to get in bed with management," I thought. "I show Astrid around the ship and she gets me a promotion. And hey, maybe Wes was right, maybe I might get something extra."

I laughed a little bit. Fat chance a girl like Astrid would even contemplate dating a guy anywhere near the mining industry. She was off limits anyway. A promotion, on the other hand, was just the sort of thing Astrid could do.

I thought to myself, "Tomorrow is going to be a good day," before turning off my computer and sliding into my bed. Tomorrow really will be a good day.

