

Chapter Two

"You mentioned something about the next day being a big day. Why was the next day so important?"

"Three days before a flight the command crew comes on board to begin prep. That's why I was on Wesley's ass. He's on the flight team. They have to check every flight system three times before the ship can legally fly."

"What about you? What made it so important for you?"

"Well, I'm the head navigation officer. Three days before a launch I have to get the flight plans laid out and sent out to Fleet for approval. And I figured that Astrid would be observing the flight prep. If she really was coming on the next flight, she'd be there."

It turned out Wes was right. When I rolled into the docks on my bike I saw the limousines. Wes's rumors almost never turned out to be true. It was an odd sight to say the least; a pair of limousines in a grungy and poorly lit commercial port.

This would be my chance to make a good first impression. I got back on my bike and sped down to the dock side parking structure.

When I made up to the concourse deck I saw her. She was milling about with her guards a few gates away from me. "Here we go," passed through my head as I set.

Before I could get anywhere near the gate, one of Astrid's security guards stopped me. "This area is off limits. Get lost." He was the typical private security type; tall, well-built and very "intimidating".

I wasn't going to have any of his macho act today, not with so much riding on this first impression. "Hey buddy, I'm the head navigation officer for Ms. Marcel's ship." I shoved my badge in his face while I spoke.

He examined my badge for a moment or two before waving me on. I made a b-line for Astrid. "Ms. Marcel? Mind if I have a word?"

She turned when I said her name. If I thought Astrid looked good in the newspapers, they were nothing compared to how she looked in person. She was drop dead gorgeous. Whatever I was going to say vanished from my mind. I had to focus on keeping my jaw shut.

Astrid almost spoke to a brick wall I was so awestruck. In a voice made from pure satin she said, "Yes? What is it?"

Her voice was soft enough that I almost didn't hear what she said. Words just fell out of my mouth, "I, uh, my name is Jake, Jake Grosser. I'm the chief nav officer for the ship."

Astrid turned to face me completely. She was wearing the typical Noble executive attire; a tight dress going down past her knees with her tail stretching up behind and jewelry galore. For the second time I almost missed what she said to me, "You're on the command crew then? Well, this is perfect. I was waiting for one of you to show me around my ship."

I should have responded, but I was lost in her eyes. The news pictures didn't do her justice. Astrid's eyes were a deep, deep brown. The way light was hitting them made it feel like she was stealing my soul. One of her guards tapped my shoulder, snapping me out of my daze. Astrid had an eyebrow raised and a frown on her face. This really wasn't off to a good start.

Just when I thought my chances of impressing Astrid were completely lost, I heard the unmistakable Irish drawl of the captain. "Oi! What're doing in front of my ship?"

Astrid turned to face respond, "Don't you mean *my* ship?"

The captain waltzed up right in front of Astrid and examined her. After a few seconds he let out a thunderous laugh. "Oh it's Ms. Marcel in the fur! I must've forgotten about the memo. Allow me to

introduce myself,” he bowed and kissed her hand, “The name’s Larry McCoy, and I captain your fine vessel.”

Astrid gave the captain a coy smile, “The pleasure is all mine. I was just talking with your chief navigation officer,” she turned to face me, “What was your name again?”

The captain interrupted her before I could respond, “That lad is Jake Grosser, finest map man this side of the solar system. Don’t worry lass, his hands are most capable. In fact, why don’t you have him show you ‘round the ship for this trip.”

“That won’t be necessary; I’ll have my men show me around.” Came her reply.

“I’m afraid I can’t allow them on board miss.”

Astrid looked flustered, “Well why not? Let me remind you that this is *my* ship.”

Captain McCoy responded in a quieter voice than the one he came in with, “I’m sorry Ms. Marcel, Coalition Fleet law dictates that military and private security forces have to be approved by both the company CEO and the ships’ captain. No offense, but I’ll be dead before I let goons on *my* ship. Jake’s a good lad, you’ll be well taken care of in his hands. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have things to attend to.”

The captain gave Astrid another bow and headed off into the ship. She spun around to face me and the rest of her entourage. Her face was contorted into deep, anger filled scowl. “Bring my luggage onboard and then you are relieved.” The guards grabbed her bags and disappeared into the ship.

“You!” Astrid shouted at me, “Bring me to your captain’s office. I may not be a regular on the company’s ships, but I will be damned if my authority is not respected.”

I muttered a “Yes ma’am,” and walked into the ship with her on my tail.

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I don’t think Astrid took quite a liking to the interior of the ship. It worried me that we were in the nicer part of the ship. “Why is my ship in such a poor condition? Don’t you ever pick the place up?” she remarked.

Astrid would learn soon enough that commercial gas mining wasn’t all the advertisements made it out to be. “Our last run was out to a nebula; took us about three weeks to get there. When we arrived at the intended mining site, we found it filled with asteroids. One of the astrogaters said it was probably a moon colliding with its planet. The how didn’t really matter, what mattered was getting the job done as quickly as possible...”

She interrupted me before I could continue, “Listen, I’m sure you are full of interesting stories covering all of your escapades, but I could honestly care less. Just get me to my quarters so I can relax...”

I interrupted her before she could finish, “The faster we did our job, the smaller the chances of the ship sustaining damage became. We weren’t that lucky though. A rock slipped past the ship’s defense system and punctured a live container. If it weren’t for the quick thinking of the engineering crew, the entire ship would have been ripped to shreds. They managed to jettison the container before it detonated. We were still not far enough away when it did blow. Two of the engines were damaged beyond on site repair and there were many, *many* hull punctures. That was three months ago. She got re-declared space worthy just two weeks ago.” I placed my hand on her shoulder gently, “This is not a cruise Astrid. Gas Mining is an incredibly dangerous business. I’ve lost more friends out here than I care to admit. If I’m going to be chauffeuring you for this trip, you need to promise me you’ll take it seriously.”

She didn’t respond right away. I locked eyes with her and posed the question again. Her eyes were filled with what I thought was fear. Astrid shook her head slightly, banishing any emotion and said, “I understand. Now please, take me to my quarters.” She sounded apologetic.

I believed that she had taken what I told her to her. It wasn't my goal to scare her into submission, just to give her a small dose of reality. I put a reassuring smile on my face and lead her through the corridors to the living quarters.

When we arrived in front of her room, Astrid looked about. "Where am I staying?" she asked with a hint of confusion in her voice.

I pointed up to the large room at the front of the bulkhead. "You'll be staying in the first mate's quarters. He was injured during the last mission and isn't ready to come back. I think you'll find it to your liking."

Astrid hesitated and glanced up at me. I nodded her forward, gesturing with my arm. She hurriedly went to her room. The command deck was just past her room so I followed. Astrid's room was just behind me when I remembered that she needed to change into a jumpsuit. I turned and shouted, "Ms. Marcel! There's a command crew jumper on your bed. Change into it and come up to the command deck when you're ready. It's just down the hall." She made what I could only describe as a frustrated grunt. I laughed as I walked towards the bridge.

