

Chapter Three

"You weren't trying to scare Astrid into submission."

"Of course not! She just needed to know that these flights were no laughing matter."

"There wasn't any better story you could think of; maybe one that didn't involve the almost destruction of her company's ship?"

"Not in that moment, at least not one that would get the point across to her. It was when I interrupted her, that's when I saw the look in her eyes. It was that look of almost fear. That proved to me that she understood the risks involved."

"What were you really trying to accomplish with that story?"

"I don't follow what you mean."

"You and I both know there was almost no risk involved in that flight. 'Expansion's Wake' was making a short jump to an active mining site; the risk of danger to anyone was minimal. What were you really trying to do to her?"

"I just wanted to bring her down to ground. I've seen the business types before: always preoccupied with the next major money scheme. Astrid was different; I saw it when I first saw her eyes. I knew that I could get her on the crew's level. It only served to make her a better leader. If she became one of the crew, she wouldn't be so hasty in making business decisions. I also realized that something was forming between the two of us, something deep."

Wesley was waiting by the door when I reached the bridge. "Guess who owes me an apology."

I sighed, patted him on the shoulder and with a chuckle said, "For once in our life Wes, you were right about something."

"You're god damned right I'm right." He replied.

Wes and I stood in the bridge entry and shot the breeze for a few minutes. Wes hit my shoulder and pointed back down the hallway. I followed his hand and found an even more stunning Astrid standing in a doorway in a command crew jumper. In a flirty voice she said, "Well, how do I look?" Neither of us said a word, but instead stood in the bridge entryway with our mouths agape. Astrid rolled her eyes, muttered "Typical," under her breath and pushed past us. Wes mouthed, "You gonna hit that?" and I promptly punched him in the arm. He gave me the, "What was that for?" face and the two of us walked into the bridge.

It was definitely a sight I never got used to. The bridge was a technological marvel. Stations lined the walls with the captain's chair elevated in the middle. Screens covered the walls above each stations displaying a multitude of information. And at the front was a massive view port. Even now it was still beautiful.

Astrid was standing next to the captain's chair conversing with Captain McCoy. She looked up at me and the captain followed her gaze. When he saw me standing next to Wes he bellowed, "Jake! Come over here lad!" I shot Wesley a look, but he had already gone to his seat at the front. "I wonder what the captain will want me to show her first," I thought as I walked up to him.

"Jake, as we are not set to leave for three days. I'd like you to give Ms. Marcel a little tour around the ship." He grabbed me and pulled my ear to his mouth, "Don't go to the engineering levels though. She really don't need to see those holes." He slapped my shoulder and sent the two of us off.

...

The next two days were completely uneventful. I didn't even see Astrid more than three times. It wasn't that she was avoiding me, our paths just didn't cross. When launch day came around Astrid joined me at my station.

She spoke to me softly, "The captain suggested I sit at your station."

"Did he now?" I replied. I don't know if it was just me, but it seemed like Astrid was going used to my company. "You've been in subspace before right?"

She looked at me with an air of suspicion. "Of course I have, my position on the board requires quite a lot of travel. Why?"

"I bet you've never been on the bridge of the second largest commercial vessel in existence during a subspace launch." I replied. "Follow me." I stood and offered Astrid my hand. "You'll like this." She took it and stood.

The front of the bridge was comprised of large view ports. In front of the view ports sat a set of crash couches. I gestured her to sit and took my place next to her.

"There really isn't anything like it." I said to her, "The size of the ship requires a massive launch. I have yet to witness anything more beautiful than the subspace launch of *Expansion's Wake*."

Wes shouted from back at his station, "Except you of course!" All the command personal chuckled quietly to themselves.

Astrid rolled her eyes and said to me, "Typical." She laughed a little bit.

I caught myself staring at her again. It was the first time I saw her, in photography and the flesh, with a genuine smile on her face. It felt like she was melting my soul.

Once again, I was shaken out of my distraction by Captain McCoy. "Helm, bring up the ship wide com." A sailor nodded to the captain, "Attention all crew, this is Captain McCoy. Prepare for subspace launch in t-minus 1 minute. Course has been laid in for the Barclay system. We'll make shore fall in two days. That's all for now, McCoy out."

The captain set down his communicator and addressed the bridge crew, "Alrighty folks, let's get this show on the road. Helmsmen, initiate subspace launch."

I leaned close to Astrid and whispered, "Get ready," into her ear.

A small ball of light started to flicker into existence a few kilometers in front of the ship. It expanded slowly until it was around the size of house. For a few seconds nothing happened; then, in the blink of an eye, the ball collapsed in on itself and exploded outward in a slew of colors. Beams of light shot out in every direction imaginable. The hole grew and grew until it was about the size of the *Expansion's Wake*. The engines to the rear fired up and the ship lurched forward into the hole.

It felt like reality distorted the moment the event horizon enveloped the bridge. For another moment, it felt like time had stopped. Once the moment passed the ship lunged forward into a stream of light. We were in subspace. While I had a stupid grin stretching across my face, Astrid's mouth hung open in shock. She stood and walked to the view port, placing her hand on the surface. The ship seemed to float in a sea of white water. Something about the whole transition must have shaken Astrid. She almost doubled over and ran towards the exit.

I stood to run after her but the captain stopped me, "She'll be fine Jake. It happens to the best of us. Return to your post and make sure we're going the right direction. We don't want a repeat of Fenris II now, do we?" He laughed lightly and turned to speak to a different crewman.

The thought of disobeying the captain crossed my mind. I didn't though, Astrid was a tough woman, she could handle herself. I let out a frustrated sigh and sat back down at my station. Wes turned to me and said, "Guess she doesn't have her sea legs yet."

I socked him in his arm, "That's for the damn comment. You trying to get me fired?"

He put his hands up in defense, “Relax man, she ain’t that high strung. You’ll be fine. Just take her to the bar tonight for some jazz. Nothing puts the ladies in the mood like jazz.” I wound up for another punch. “I’m just kidding! Learn to take a joke man, jeez.”

I laughed at him, “Remember the time you tried to get into a mailbox’s pants? You cussed me out for hours when I made fun of you!”

“Whatever man, I gotta make sure we all don’t die.” He turned back to his console and I did the same. It wasn’t a bad idea though. I’d take Astrid down to the jazz bar tonight after my shift was over. What better to relax her than some smooth jazz and a glass of wine, or whatever it is the Nobles drink.

