

## **Prologue – *Champion Bold* by Michael Bernabo**

*August 15th, 2867*

*Coastal Inn, Atlantic City*

*Earth*

Augustine de Zama rolled over, dragged himself across the bed, and swept everything off his side table in fury. Cans, bottles, and the annoying comms unit fell to the floor, the device still shrieking and flashing its blue light. He cursed and pulled himself to the side, finding the offending device and grasping it. He considered sending the device against the wall, or even out the window, but decided instead to hit the answer button, swiping it up for voice transmission only.

He took a deep breath, enjoying the momentary silence, before holding the unit to his ear.

‘Look,’ he said, ‘I’m angry, unemployed, and hungover, so you better be an attractive woman bearing a job opportunity and a coffee.’

‘Oddly enough, I am an attractive woman,’ a distinctly feminine voice chuckled, ‘and I do bear a job.’

Augustine frowned at the ceiling, the voice crawling through the morning fog. ‘Genevieve?’ he asked, his mind focusing on the memory of a tall, blond-haired woman in a silver dress at another ocean-view hotel room, many decades ago.

‘Dammit, Dez. You’re not thinking about the midship’s ball, are you?’

‘What?’ Augustine asked, shaking to clear his head. ‘No, of course not. When I think of you, I think of dress reds, all the way.’

‘You better,’ Genevieve said, though he heard the amusement in her voice. Genevieve was never a prudish woman. ‘Speaking of dress uniforms, I heard you hung yours up, and that you finally got to punch Ulf Johnson.’

Augustine sighed. ‘That’s not supposed to be common knowledge, nor am I particularly proud of it. Staff officers aren’t supposed to punch each other.’

‘Ulf had it coming.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I’ve met him. Look, Dez, don’t worry about it. We both know officers from secondary colonies rarely make captain. If they didn’t kick you out, they’d find some minor reason to deny your promotion until you go the hint and left.’

Augustine wanted to argue, but he could not. The Confederate Navy reserved captaincies and the flag spots for officers from Earth or the important colonies. Only the most exceptional could hope to get promoted and Augustine, for all his competence, was not exceptional.

Instead he changed the subject. ‘You have a job offer?’

‘I do.’

‘For a corporation?’

‘It is.’

‘Let me guess. Routing convoys to avoid pirate attacks. No, analyzing spreadsheets to find graft?’

‘Commanding a light squadron,’ Genevieve replied.

Augustine paused, certain he had misheard her. ‘Repeat, please.’

‘Commanding. A. Light. Squadron.’ she repeated each word separately.

A thousand questions ran through his mind. ‘I’m not saying I’m interested —.’

‘You are.’

‘—but I am saying I want details.’

‘You know what a commercial expeditionary fleet it?’

‘Of course. One of those big fleets that heads out past the Frontier and into the Uncharted Territories to make trade agreements with alien colonies and governments. They make a lot of money when they come back. IF they come back.’

‘Well, we’ve got one leaving in a month and our light squadron commander just suffered a massive coronary. We need someone else and I want you.’

‘What sort of squadron?’

‘Eight *Delaware*-class light cruisers.’

Augustine chuckled. ‘Seriously? Century old buckets?’

‘It’s what we’ve got for the squadron,’ she chuckled. ‘Yes, they’re old hulls but they’ve been refurbished and retrofitted.’

‘Great,’ Augustine sat up in bed, stretching. ‘Do I report to you?’

‘No. There’s an admiral in charge of the fleet, and three squadrons under him. I’m vice admiral of the heavy squadron, a rear admiral of the transports, and then you’re commodore of the light squadron. All three of us are equal position, just, different ranks.’

‘The other admirals?’

‘Transport rear admiral is Ru Zhu; no military background, purely commercial. Doubt you know her. The admiral himself is Valdemar Mortensen.’

Augustine groaned. ‘Don’t know the name.’

‘Earth born. Eighteenth in his class at Corbet Academy, class of ‘41, in fleet administration and logistics. Made it to Lieutenant, Senior Grade before he left for a lucrative corporate job working escorts for Monarch Shipping. Worked his way up to Vice President of Frontier Convoys.’

‘And now he’s put together a commercial expedition? Why?’

‘He wants to find the Bendradi.’

Augustine scoffed. ‘The Bendradi? He believes in that myth?’

‘Apparently, and strong enough to convince a dozen corporations to back an expedition.’ He heard the tone of her voice change. ‘Look, Augustine. This expedition is leaving in one month, with your approval or not. If you say yes, by the end of the day you will have a cool 1.2 million in your account and a ticket to the Ember Patch. You’ll be gone for at least three years, likely longer, but you’ll be rich enough to buy your own ship when you get back.’

‘If I get back.’

‘Yes, if you get back.’

Augustine sighed. Part of him wanted to say no, to pull another drink from the fridge and just keep working his way downward. But that was despair, and Augustine hated despair. And Genevieve’s offer was the sort of independent command most colonial-born officers could only dream about.

‘Sign me up,’ he said.

‘Great!’ she said. ‘I’ll pick you up at eleven for a working lunch and introduce you to some people. Then you’ll have to pack and store your life.’

‘My life is already packed, so it’ll just be storage,’ Augustine joked. ‘Oh, and Genevieve?’

‘Yes, we’ll probably sleep together during the expedition. Admiral Zhu, too. She’s into all sorts of fun things. You’ll see.’

‘No, not that. Thank you.’

‘Don’t mention it,’ Genevieve replied. ‘And don’t let me down, either.’

‘Right. See you at eleven.’

She ended the call and Augustine sat back. This was a change in fortune. A million credits? More than enough to pay off his debts, store his stuff, and when he got back, settle anywhere in the Confederacy.

First, a shower and shave. Then a visit to the clothing shops on the commercial level and get some new, good clothes. And after lunch, he could figure out what he wanted to bring and what he wanted to leave behind.

For the first time in a month, Augustine de Zama genuinely smiled.