

Lacuna Blue

By Mantrid Brizon

Chapter Two: Just A Favor

Sitting outside of a cheap bar, George and May sit with Donovan, whom George had called back after listening to his brother's request. Still in the same lunar colony where they had landed, May and Donovan sit quietly, unsure of what they are doing. They look to George who seems to be watching and waiting for someone.

"Why am I with you two again?" Donovan asks.

"Because I said." George sternly replies.

"Right. Thanks for clearing that up..." Donovan mutters.

After several more moments of awkward silence, a man walks down the dusty street of the somewhat impoverished end of the colony. Turning his head, the Voeldahn man spots the human and quickly approaches him.

"Mr. Woods?" The man asks.

"That's me." George replies, rising to his feet.

“I wouldn’t have asked had I only saw one human. Your kind are pretty rare, especially here.” The man remarks.

“So I’ve noticed. What do you have for me?” George asks.

“Right. Take this back to James.”

The Voeldahn pulls his hand out of his inner jacket pocket to reveal a single data drive. About the size of a thumb, the drive could easily contain a backup of several computers, storing up to 64 terabytes of data.

“This is it?” George asks with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah. You’re good to go.” The man says, looking over both shoulders.

Without questioning him further, George slips the drive into a pocket and motions to May and Donovan.

“Smart move, bringing protection with you.” The man remarks before darting off.

The comment drives into George’s mind like a splinter. What could he possibly be carrying for his brother that made his lunar contact so paranoid? Has James finally backslid into their old ways? Has he dug himself a nice hole to legally or financially bury himself in and this is his way out?

“Well... That was fun.” Donovan dryly quips.

George doesn't reply. He is lost in his own thoughts.

“Are those crickets I hear?” Donovan adds. “George? ... Hey, George.” He eventually taps his captain on the shoulder.

“Huh? What?” George spins around.

“Are we done here?” Donovan asks.

“Yeah, sure. Go do whatever.” George murmurs.

“Are you alright?” Donovan asks with genuine concern.

George nods his head but doesn't reply. Shrugging his shoulders, Donovan leaves the two and returns to his previous plans. May stays close to George, who does eventually return to normal, though it takes him a moment. He leads her around the colony, showing her the sights, teaching her little things about the dome cities and space travel and generally keeping her entertained. The impromptu date takes both of their minds off of the circumstances and relaxes them.

After several hours together, George finally receives a call from the dock to inform him that the cargo has been removed and they are free to leave. As he leads May back to the Bannockburn he quickly sends a blanket message to the remaining crew, something he always does when they are ready to embark. Arriving at the ship first, they sit together for a moment atop the cargo lift.

“Hey George... I mean Captain.” May begins, speaking softly.

“Yeah?” He turns to her.

“Thanks for bringing me along. I know you didn’t owe me anything back in that bar but I appreciate all you’re doing for me. *I owe you*, actually. You were right; I wouldn’t have been able to stop that guy by myself.” She quietly admits.

“Don’t worry about it, May.” He says with a smile.

“Still... Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. By the way, when we’re not working, you don’t have to call me ‘captain’.” He adds.

“Alright.” She smiles back.

Her tail sways slowly from side to side as she looks to him.

“So, what should I call you?” She asks.

“I don’t know.” He shrugs. “Whatever you like, I suppose.”

“Hey, furless! Showing her a good time?” Fiona’s voice calls out.

“See? Like that.” George chuckles. “Oh, you know... Doing what I can.” He says to Fiona as she approaches them.

“So, not a lot, huh?” Fiona quips.

“Pretty much.”

“How’re you doing, sweetheart? Getting used to us yet?” Fiona asks May.

“I guess.” May replies.

“Good, because soon enough you’re going to realize that you can do a lot better and bolt.” Fiona jests.

“Stop trying to run off my crew.” George casually remarks.

Their banter is quite amusing to May, who had never had close ties to many people. The more time she spends with George Woods and his crew, the more she feels like she has found somewhere to belong. The swiftness of this gut feeling is jarring to her, but she adapts almost as quickly. The three of them sit there for a moment before the others trickle in. Marcus approaches with a large hot dog in hand.

“I always knew there was something about you.” Fiona teases Marcus.

“Someone has to do it if you won’t.” He winks.

As they all share a laugh, Donovan and Ein soon approach, followed by Whitley, Gretsche and Prat. Riding the cargo lift into their ship, all of the crew besides May seem surprised when they discover that they aren’t going home but are instead diverting to Mars.

“But sir, weren’t we going back to base?” Whitley asks.

“Not today.” George replies.

“But this is really short notice and I ju-”

“I’m sorry. Did you have somewhere better to be?”

George interrupts Whitley and glares at him.

Whitley falls silent, as do the others.

“Now as far as I know, everyone here is an unmarried, childless loser like myself. You don’t have any real obligations waiting for you on Earth. Mars is only a few days away and we have the supplies for the trip.” George continues, speaking to his entire crew. “I need to do this run and I know my ship like the back of my hand; I can and will do it alone if I have to... I’ll tell you what, though... Stick with me and help me out here and we’ll take some leave on Mars, and if anyone of you, Whitley, want to take off and do your own thing, then you’re free to do so.”

The silence is deafening. After a pause, Whitley turns around in his chair and silently resumes his duties, as do the others. George’s calm yet stern assertiveness makes him even more appealing to May, who can’t help but respect her new captain. They leave the dome city and plot a course for Mars. As the hyper-drive hums and the cyan and pink lights of the warp bubble glow brightly, she realizes that this job may be far more interesting than she had initially thought.

Safely inside the warp bubble, several of the crew suddenly leave; Prat, Donovan and Marcus walk out of the bridge without so much as a word. Gretsche works on her console as Fiona sets a course. Ein engages the autopilot before climbing up from his seat. The black and tan furred Voeldahn man stretches his arms and back before also leaving the bridge. With the Bannockburn's course set and nothing but open space between the ship and Mars, there is nothing to do now but sit and wait.

"Ready to go?" George suddenly asks.

May turns back, as do Fiona and Gretsche. They look to their captain to see who he is talking too. Looking directly at May, he stands just before his chair and takes a few steps closer.

"Go where?" May asks.

"We need to find you a room. You didn't think you were sleeping in that chair for the next few days, did you?" George grins.

"I wasn't sure; I was glad that it's comfortable." May quips.

Reaching out to her, George chuckles as he presents a hand. May takes hold of his hand and rises from her chair. Fiona and Gretsche watch with raised brows while the pair leave the bridge, ostensibly to walk through the crew quarters. George leads her from the bridge and into the

hall, which forms a cross-shaped junction. The path directly in front of them heads toward the cargo area, which they came from; the doors on both sides of this hall are marked with things like 'med-lab', 'workshop' and 'armory'.

Taking the path to their left, May follows just behind George. He follows the path around a corner and climbs some stairs before walking past a sliding door. As they walk, he explains that the right path also leads up to this level; he merely prefers the left hall. Walking past the doors of the crew quarters, May is surprised to find that the doors are rather far apart and each has an engraved name plate on it. After passing several rooms, all with name plates, they pass a room without one.

The Bannockburn, though it can actually operate properly with a crew of 4, can comfortably facilitate a crew of 12. Buying the modules with his crew's comfort and privacy in mind, George opted to purchase small passenger cabins instead of conventional crew berths, most with 4 bunks per room; the Bannockburn's crew each has a private room with a full-sized mattress, small private bathroom with shower stall and the amenities found in most cheap apartments; a dresser, nightstand, small armoire, table and chair, a holo-screen, small fridge, microwave and a food rehydrator are standard in each cabin.

"This one is yours, if you want it." He says, pressing his thumb to the small black plate beside the door.

"Sure." She says with a smile as the door slides open.

“And if you need anything, my cabin is the next one over, on the corner there.” He says as he points his thumb over his shoulder.

“So, is that why we walked by an empty room?” She asks with a little grin and a raised brow.

“I’m just trying to make sure that you’re comfortable.” He retorts.

“Right.”

“Speaking of, if you follow the halls toward the center-bow of the ship, you’ll find a door that leads to a crew lounge that overlooks the bridge. It has a beautiful view, especially when we’re in hyper-drive.” He quickly adds.

“I’ll be sure to check it out.” She replies.

“Right... So... I’ll see you around.” He slowly steps back, as though unsure of what to do next.

“Alright, captain.”

“What did I say about that?” He smirks.

“I’ll come up with something.” She assures him.

Leaving her and returning to his own cabin, May watches as her captain disappears into the very next room. She enters hers and looks around; the cabin is nicer than her apartment on Earth, which she was about to lose had George not offered her a job aboard his ship. Sitting at the edge of the already made bed, she wonders if she should live aboard the Bannockburn and forgo having a static apartment elsewhere. The storage space would hold everything that she owns and actually cares about.

Heading for the door, she presses her thumb to the plate but nothing happens. Loud footfalls echo throughout the hall as George rushes back to her cabin.

"I'm so sorry. I forgot to add you to the system." He chuckles.

After scanning her fingerprints back on the bridge, he adds her to the crew roster and changes Donovan's job title before programming her cabin door for her. With that out of the way and nothing left to do but wait for several days, George leaves her again and returns to his cabin. Entering the relatively soundproof room, a feature he added to all cabins specifically for enhanced crew privacy, he immediately encrypts his signal and calls his brother, James.

"Hey, bro." James' voice answers after a few rings.

"Yeah, hi. So, would you like to tell me what the hell I'm carrying for you?"

"Oh... Well... Maybe you should sit down." James replies.

Gretsch wanders the hall of the crew quarters, walking in circles around the two rectangular blocks, each with 6 cabins. She enjoys the exercise of walking around the ship, though she could easily use the exercise equipment in the small gym two decks below. The white furred canine Voeldahn looks to George's door as she passes by, her

bushy tail swaying as she stares at the name plate. Her boots clank on the metal floor plates as she prepares for another circuit.

"YOU WHAT?!" George's muffled voice cries out.

Gretsch stops in her tracks and turns back to the door. Her ears shift as she stares at the door. After a moment of hesitation, she slowly approaches and leans closer, eavesdropping on his call. She knows that she shouldn't but she can't help herself. It's a struggle to hear him.

"This is a serious crime, James." George growls.

"I know, I know! I just thought tha-"

"No, shut up!" George interrupts him. **"The problem is that you weren't thinking *at all*. Do you know what will happen if I get caught with stolen corporate data? I'll be going to prison for years and you're going to have Mars police knocking on your door."**

"Yeah, I know, but-"

"But nothing. I ought to jettison this drive into space or chuck it into my ship's reactor!" George barks.

"Please don't do that, bro! I need that data!" James pleads.

"... You're lucky I know a back way in, but you're going to owe me for this." George sighs in frustration.

"You're the best, bro! I'll see you in a few days." James says before disconnecting the call.

Gretsch moves away from the door and prepares to start walking just as George exits his cabin. Pressing his thumb to the plate, it slides open and she passes by. She stops and feigns being startled, gasping and resting a hand on her chest.

“Sorry!” George apologizes.

“It’s alright.” She says with a smile.

Gretsch turns to him and rests a hand on her hips, which are rather wide. The well-built woman stands eye level with her captain, weighing a healthy 135 pounds. Her waistline compliments her hips and give her a subtle hourglass figure, made more evident by a noticeable buttocks and ample breasts. Her icy blue eyes, almost vampiric looking, stare at him. The bangs of her short, white hair, which matches her solid white fur, drape over her brow and hang just above her eyes. She looks him over for a moment, noting his anxious expression.

“Are you alright?” She asks him.

“I hope so.” He replies.

“You know, if you need to talk...” She offers, stepping closer.

“Always there for your captain.” He smirks.

“Mhm...” She nods. “I live to serve.” She says with a wink.

“Yeah, I bet you do.” He chuckles.

George gives her a gentle and benign hug. Her tail sways as she rests her hands atop his back and her chin on his shoulder.

“You’ve been a good friend for years, Gretsche. You and Marcus both, and I appreciate it.” He says to her.

“Well, you’re always there for us.” She replies.

“Do you think you could fetch that boyfriend of yours while I call the others into the lounge? There’s something I need to talk about.”

“Sure!” She exclaims.

George walks toward the lounge as Gretsche heads for the cabin that she shares with her boyfriend, Marcus. Using his V.I. bracelet, which is linked to the Bannockburn, George makes an announcement calling the crew to a meeting. He doesn’t wait long before all are accounted for, sitting at the tables and relaxing on the comfortable benches running along the walls. George leans against a central pillar between the two large bay windows that allow a superb view of the ship’s bridge only a deck below.

Without hesitating or holding back, George begins by explaining the favor that he is carrying out for his brother; escorting a data drive full of stolen information from a mining company that rivals his brothers. Bluntly admitting the illegal nature of the data, the crew sit and quietly listen

to him speak. George is surprised that not one person, even May, show any real shock at his admission of corporate espionage. Some of his crew, such as Donovan Craig, have had run-ins with the law and even George has experienced the darker side of life, but he didn't expect them to be so relaxed about being accessories to a crime.

"So, are we getting paid?" Prat nonchalantly asks.

"All of you are, but I'm just doing this as a favor to my brother." George replies.

"Alright. Well, I can just tweak the autopilot to shut down at a distance. We'll be able to fly in from one of Mars' jungles and land unnoticed." Ein suggests.

"Quite the criminal mind you have there." George quips.

Ein shrugs his shoulders.

"Hey, maybe a lone cop will show up and I'll finally get to shoot someone!" Prat gleefully exclaims.

"I don't know about this." Marcus begins.

"Don't be a skag." Prat snaps.

"I'm not scared, I just don't think that this is the kind of thing that we should be doing!" Marcus retorts.

"Too high and mighty to get your hands dirty?" Donovan chuckles.

"It's not that. I don't care about those mining companies; they don't care about their employees. I just expected better from us." Marcus replies.

“Always the goodie-two-shoes.” Gretschesch teases him, quickly messing up his hair.

“It’s been one boring cargo run after the other since I joined this crew. If I didn’t have a record, I’d still be in the military seeing some real action.” Prat explains.

“I could use a little excitement.” Fiona coos and winks at George.

Looking over the rest of the crew before locking her eyes onto her captain, May suddenly feels quite at home.

“What about you, May? What do you think?” George asks her.

“Why the hell not?!” May grins.

“At a girl.” Prat smirks.

“What a lovely gang of sociopaths I hang out with.” George chuckles.

Several days pass since the meeting in the lounge and all have made their peace with the situation that George has placed them in. In point of fact, only one person ever truly objected. May quickly adapts to life among the crew, developing a fast friendship with Fiona, who considers her something of a crew protégé, as well as bonding with Gretschesch and Marcus. Though curious about and interested in her captain, the friendly human remains somewhat aloof, as though he were perpetually wandering in his own thoughts.

After a 2-day journey the crew take their places within the bridge. Disengaging the hyper drive near an isolated portion of Mars, the Bannockburn enters the atmosphere and flies low over the terraformed planet. Ein grips tightly to the flight controls as he weaves the ship over several small mountains, keeping them as low as is safely possible. May stares with wide eyes at the lush jungles of Mars. She had heard of the primordial beauty of the planet post-seeding, but photographs don't compare to the real thing.

Snapping out of her little trance, she prepares to contact traffic control before suddenly realizing that they aren't landing at an airfield; James had sent an encrypted set of coordinates to George the previous day. Approaching their destination, they see a large field hidden within a patch of forest, a large and vibrant city many miles in the distance. Extending the landing gears, Ein carefully sets down the large ship in the clearing. He winds down the engines before turning them off entirely while the majority of the crew prepare for the meeting.

George checks his Anelace XR-9 blaster while Donovan takes an Anelace VT-3 pulse rifle from the armory and Prat collects several large and threatening looking weapons from his personal stash, contained within his private quarters. Passing out a few more weapons, Donovan arms Whitely, Ein, Fiona and Marcus. The less experienced May decides to wait with the pacifistic Gretsche on the cargo lift during the meeting. Prat seems to grow increasingly excited as they ride the cargo lift down to the ground.

He shoulders his rifle and points it toward the jungle several times, as if waiting anxiously for an adversary to pop out for him to shoot. After waiting for a moment, a small speck comes into view, gleaming in the sunlight and slowly growing larger. Taking a range-finder from Donovan, George looks to the craft, his lips curling into a pleased smile. The beige Andera Vassal with black pinstripes quickly approaches the drop-off. It's James' personal shuttle. The smaller, five-seat craft is actually built upon a personal cargo freighter; it functions as a cargo hovervan, but much larger and capable of short-distance space flight.

A rather luxurious craft, the Vassal's exterior is identical to the Andera Moxie, the cargo freighter that it's based on. A 15-meter-long and roughly cylindrical craft with a triangular bundle of 3 small thrusters at the rear and an angled cockpit at the front, the ship has an upright tailfin roughly 2 meters tall and that leans forward at a 30-degree angle. A large, crescent shaped wing wraps around the mid-section and offers support and added protection to the Moxie's cargo bay, or the Vassal's passenger cabin.

The hull shape and standard beige colored panels has earned the ship many perversely appropriate phallus related nicknames and jokes. However, the relatively affordable cost of the ship, its high quality and durable construction, performance, luxurious interior and a myriad of extra features has earned it a place as a top selling personal space craft.

“What’s with the dick ship?” Prat asks with a confused look on his face.

“Yeah... That’s James.” George replies.

The Andera Vassal sets down in the field some distance away. The airlock door opens and James steps out, waving to his brother as he darts toward them.

“His skin almost matches the ship. That’s funny.” Prat snickers.

The brothers briefly embrace.

“It’s good to see you, man.” George says.

“You too, bro. So, do you have the data drive?”

“Oh, damn. I left it on the moon.” George pats his pockets.

James briefly believes him, a look of horror in his wide eyes. George smirks as he whips out the drive and presents it to him, which James swiftly snatches from his hand.

“You’re welcome...” George grumbles.

“Thanks bro. You have no idea how important this is to me and my career.”

"It damn well better be. I'm not some skag who exists to run your errands." George scolds him.

"I know and I'm sorry, but my boss put me in a really tight spot. I didn't know what else to do!" James explains.

"Not ask your brother to smuggle stolen corporate data?" George raises an eyebrow.

"I didn't really have a choice." James retorts.

"Yes, you did, you idiot. There are other ways to get promoted that don't involve criminal acts."

"Yeah, well I don't want to be on my knees that often." James quips.

"Hah!" Prat laughs.

"I'm probably going to come by and visit you soon, smartass. Have a safe flight home." George smirks and pats James on the shoulder.

Racing back to his ship, James scrambles inside and quickly takes off.

"Well that was disappointing..." Prat sighs sullenly.

"Maybe you'll get to shoot someone next time." George remarks.

"So, about that R&R?" Whitley asks.

"Shut up, Whitley." George murmurs.

"I need a drink. Let's go find a bar!" Prat exclaims, resting his rifle on his shoulder.

Boarding the Bannockburn, the crew launch and approach the city as though they had emerged from space. Speaking to the traffic controller, May receives authorization and Ein sets down the ship all over again, this time in a bustling city. Prat and Donovan are quick to depart, soon followed by Whitley, Fiona and Ein. After updating the ship's log George heads for the cargo hold to meet the others, followed by May.

"Aren't you two coming?" George asks the couple.

"No. We'd uh... We'd rather stay here." Marcus replies as he drapes an arm over Gretsch.

"Oh, I see. Well, don't go shaking the hull panels loose." George quips.

Riding the cargo lift down to ground level, the crew disperse like cockroaches when a light is turned on. May looks to George, who hails a taxi with his V.I. bracelet.

"So, what are your plans?" He suddenly asks her.

"I don't really have any. I've never been to Mars." She replies.

"Plenty of fun things to do here." He remarks.

"And I've still never been to Mars." She retorts.

"Then what are you going to do?" He asks as a taxi swiftly approaches.

"I don't know. What're you doing?" She asks.

“Visiting my brother and his family.” He says as he opens the rear sliding door.

“Sounds like fun. Can I come?”

George pauses and turns to May and raises an eyebrow, a hand on the outer panel and one foot inside the taxi.

“You’d want to go?” He asks in surprise.

“Sure! I don’t really know what else to do but be bored on the ship and listen to other people getting laid.” She smirks.

“The cabins are virtually soundproof.” He reminds her.

“I got the feeling that wouldn’t matter.” She giggles.

“True... Well, I guess if that’s what you want, you can come along and waste your time with me.” He grins.

Moving back, he lets May into the taxi first, before climbing in behind her. Giving the driver the address, the man takes off and races at breakneck speed. He makes sudden and sharp turns as though he were a pilot chasing down a fleeing target, jostling his passengers about the rear compartment. Stopping as quickly as he started, George stumbles from the back of the cab. He reaches inside to insert his credit chit to pay the driver. May takes a moment to collect herself before climbing out.

As she steps out, she still suffers vertigo from the horrific ride. Stumbling about, she trips and falls forward, only to be caught by George, who has now regained his balance. Held firmly in his arms, he steadies her. May's heart flutters and she struggles to maintain balance, but this time it's not from the vertigo.

"Are you alright?" He asks her softly.

"Y-yeah." She murmurs and nods her head.

"Good."

They stand there for a moment in the subtle embrace. She turns her eyes up to him and peers at the blue-green orbs that stare back at her. Leaning a little closer, her pink nose nearly brushes his.

"You can let go now." She whispers, a little grin on her face.

"Oh, right." He says as he pulls his hands away.

They walk down a pristine sidewalk in awkward silence, occasionally glancing toward each other. Approaching a large skyscraper, they make their way to the elevator. The man at the front desk seems confused until George pulls out a little tab attached to a small ring hooked onto his pants. Waving the tab before a large blue plate beside the elevator door, it appears to be a form of key. George seems to know exactly where they are going. He presses the elevator button to take them to the 27th floor.

"So, do you live on Mars?" May asks.

"Hell no. I don't have a reason to. I have a cheap little apartment in District 19, but that's it. Honestly, I spend more time on the Bannockburn than at home." He replies.

"I see."

After a quiet elevator ride, they head down a hall with very few doors and May realizes that these must be large and luxurious suites. George approaches a door marked with the number 277. Knocking loudly, they wait for a moment. After about a minute the door slides open and a human woman stands in the doorway. About 5 feet and 4 inches tall and weighing 120 pounds, she is an attractive human woman with a toned body, large breasts, big green eyes and flowing blonde hair. Her eyes grow wide when she sees George standing there. She quickly gives him a hug.

"It's good to see you!"

"It's good to see you too, Kelly." George replies.

"So, is this your girlfriend?" Kelly asks, turning to May.

"Well, more like a partner." George replies.

"Is that what they call it these days?" Kelly asks as she shakes May's hand.

"May Fyre. Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise, May. Any friend of George is welcome here." Kelly replies.

Kelly motions with a hand, inviting the two inside.

"I didn't know your last name was so cool." George whispers to May as they step into the apartment.

"Fyre-Woods. That should be our crime duo name." She remarks.

Kelly quickly excuses herself to tend to her children. Looking at a series of framed photos on the wall, May realizes that Kelly is James' wife. Taking a seat on an expensive looking black leather couch, a 5-year-old girl suddenly trots out of a room. She briefly pesters May by trying to grab the Voeldahn's swaying tail before Kelly emerges with her 2-year-old son in her arms.

"Brandy! What are you doing?!" Kelly asks the girl.

"Playing with the kitty lady." Brandy answers honestly.

"I'm sorry if she's bothering you." Kelly apologizes to May.

"Oh no, it's fine." May assures the mother.

"Here. Play with your V.I. glasses." Kelly adds.

"Get them hooked while they're young." George murmurs. "So, where's James? I thought he'd be home."

"Oh, he's at the office. He's been working late a lot these days." Kelly answers.

"Really?!" George sounds surprised.

May notices that subtle changes in his posture; he grows more tense.

“Yeah. He won’t say it, but I don’t think the company is doing so well and I worry about him. I told him to use that glowing resume of his to find a new job, but he’s too stubborn. I think he feels like he’s put too much into that company to just walk away from it.” Kelly continues.

Quickly changing the subject, the group sits and chats about nothing important for a little while, until James finally returns. Startled by the sight of his brother and a crewmember inside of his house, he stops dead in his tracks. As May glances over to him, she imagines an audible gulp of anxiety accompanying the look on his face.

“H-hey, bro... What brings you here? And so soon?” James nervously asks.

“Just came for a visit.” George answers in a dry monotone. “Don’t you remember? I told you I would during our last call...”

“Right. It completely slipped my mind.” James murmurs. “Two seconds.”

“Indeed, it did...”

James leaves the living area and enters his study.

“I’ll be right back.” George says to May, resting a hand on her leg for a split second.

As James sets his briefcase down atop his oak wood desk, he turns when he hears the door sliding shut behind him.

“What’s going on, bro?” James asks.

“I thought your story was a little odd, so I thought I’d come by and make sure you were okay. Imagine my surprise when I found out that you were at work...”

“Hey, I wanted to come home but I just had a ton of paperwork to do.” James says defensively.

“Lie to me and I’ll break both of your legs right here.” George quietly growls, glaring at his younger brother.

“Alright, alright.” James’ quietly exclaims as he raises his hands to his chest in surrender. “So, I wasn’t totally honest with you... My boss didn’t put me up to anything. I bribed the data from an insider myself.”

“What is it, *exactly*?” George sternly asks.

“Data on preliminary scans by a rival mining company. I figured if I could get my bosses to act first, I’d see a real promotion and we’d start earning again. If they didn’t see reason, then I’d put my credits into the other company’s stocks instead.” James admits, nervously scratching the back of his head.

“You little con-artist...” George shakes his head as he approaches his brother.

James can't help but smirk as he shrugs his shoulders. George chuckles as he rests a hand on James' shoulder. Suddenly and without any warning, George shoves James backward toward his desk, slamming his back against the top of the desk as his hand quickly grips his neck.

"I *hate* being lied to. The next time you pull a stunt like this, either tell me what's *really* going on, or I'll rip your tongue out, and then you won't even be able to get promoted that *other* way." George calmly warns him.

"Alright, I will." James chokes out.

"Good!" George exclaims, pulling his hand away. "Well, this has been a fun visit, but we really should be going."

Exiting the room, Kelly and May look toward the door.

"Well it's been fun, but we need to get back to the ship. We have a long flight to Earth." George says to the pair.

May doesn't hesitate, jumping up from the couch. From the expression on her face, he can safely assume that she is quite relieved. Saying their goodbyes to James and his family, George and May leave the luxurious suite and walk down the hall. Using the tab, he opens the elevator and presses the button for the ground floor.

"So, what did you and your brother have to talk about?" She asks.

**“Oh, we just had to clear up a little misunderstanding.”
He casually replies.**

“Was that the thump I heard?”

“James dropped his briefcase.” He explains.

“That must be one heavy briefcase.” She comments.

“A lot of paperwork.” He quips.

“I guess.” She chuckles.

“Are you hungry? Want to go get some dinner?” He suddenly asks.

“Yeah, sure!”

Though surprised, she is glad to be spending a bit more time with him, and this time it will be relatively private. George leads them toward a nearby restaurant that he has apparently visited before. They enjoy a pleasant conversation as they walk, but George seems somehow distracted. He focuses his eyes on several random surfaces, each time his expression becoming less jovial and more serious. Reaching out, George takes May’s hand and interlocks their fingers. She’s quite surprised by the sudden gesture, but even more startled when he turns a corner and begins to run.

May is a fairly athletic girl, but still struggles to keep up with him, nearly pulled along by the arm. She asks what they are doing, but he seems too focused to realize that she has even spoken. Turning another corner, they duck into an alley. As May gasps for breath, George pulls her across the alley and into a blind spot. Drawing his blaster with his left

hand, he holds her near his right side. She can suddenly hear the sound of heavy footfalls catching up to them.

“Hurry up and find him! They can’t have gone far!” A deep voice orders.

Flipping off the safety catch on his blaster, they squat down near a large trash bin. A well-dressed man with three cronies, all of them Voeldahn, walk by the alley. One goon takes a peak into the alley but doesn’t look nearly hard enough to see his targets just beyond the corner of the trash bin. Turning around, George doesn’t waste any time, pistol whipping the man and grabbing him with his right arm, which wraps around his throat in a very dangerous choke hold. The others spin around, drawing compact blasters at them, only to lower them at the sight of the armed human holding their friend hostage and using him as a shield.

“Hah! What an idiot.” Their leader exclaims.

“You need better goons.” George jests.

“Tell me something...” The man says as he lights a cigar. “How did you know we were following you?”

“I watched you in the reflections on signs, windows and what-have-you. You weren’t hard to spot staying in a group like that. Next time, put one of your men in front and another across the street, that way the tail can be alone and further back. Less conspicuous that way.” George explains.

“Smart man. Real smart. Makes me wonder why you didn’t encrypt that call to your brother.” The leader says.

George's heart sinks. Had he followed James' initial instructions, he wouldn't be in this situation.

"I thought he was overreacting." George admits.

"Clearly, he wasn't. Don't worry though, because I just want to talk and make you a little offer." The leader says before taking a drag on his cigar.

"I'm listening."

"I know. I was smoking." The leader retorts after blowing a cloud of thick smoke.

"Right..."

"Anyway, I'd like you to head back to Earth and deliver something to Sijia's District 21. Drop off one little briefcase and you will receive a loaded credit chit worth 2,000,000." The man offers.

"That's it?" George raises an eyebrow.

"2,000,000 credits isn't chump change!"

"Not that, I meant the job. 2,000,000 is a nice number!" George explains.

"Oh... Yeah, that's it!" The man says as he drops a pile of ash, seemingly for dramatic effect.

His goons holster their weapons, so George holsters his. As his shield comes too, he drops him with a thud onto the ground.

“Alright. Deliver it to the Bannockburn and I’ll g-”

George stops mid-sentence as the man presents a miniature briefcase roughly six inches tall by eight inches wide and barely one inch thick, slipped into a large pocket sewn into his expensive looking mauve over-coat.

“Well now... That *is* a little briefcase.” George remarks.

“I wasn’t raised to lie. Good thing I learned to cheat and steal.” The man chuckles. “Here’s the coordinates.” He adds, slipping him a folded piece of paper.

With the deal completed, the man snaps his fingers and walks away. His two goons help the third up from the ground before catching up to their boss. Turning back to May, George looks down at the small briefcase in his hand.

“Ready to go to dinner now?” He asks with a smile.

“Yeah. You really know how to show a girl a good time.” She says, smiling back as she steps up to him.

“I have my moments.”