

Lacuna Blue

By Mantrid Brizon

Chapter Three: In Too Deep

After their dinner, George and May return to the Bannockburn only to find it void of life. Everyone is gone, doing their own thing. While a sleepy May retires to her cabin, George stays up to wait for the rest of his crew to return. Using an illegal modification on his V.I. bracelet, he tracks his crew's whereabouts. On Earth he can use the satellite network to know exactly where they are on the planet, but elsewhere in Sol space, he can only track their distance from the ship; if they are within two miles or less, he will know.

Waiting for several hours without anyone ever returning or even coming close to the ship, George eventually falls asleep as he sits in the lounge.

"Hey!" May's voice startles him awake.

Opening his eyes, he is surprised to see Prat and Donovan in the room with him. While Donovan stands in the

center of the lounge, Prat holds a black marker in one hand as he kneels just beside George who lies stretched out on a bench. Prat's rounded feline face with short snout and rust colored fur is unnervingly close to George, who glares at his head of security. George's blue-green eyes narrow, remaining locked onto Prat's amber eyes. May stands in the doorway, her arms crossed before her chest as she catches the two crewmen.

"Damn... So close, too." Prat mutters.

"Yeah... Want to put that away now?" George smirks.

"Oh, right." Prat pops the cap back onto the marker.

"Maybe next time, buddy. Thanks for the rescue, May!"

"Anytime." She grins.

"Are we in trouble now?" Prat asks.

"You can redeem yourselves by fetching the rest of the crew. I've got something interesting to tell you." George answers.

Perhaps believing himself to actually be in trouble, Prat quickly rushes off to find the others. In short order he rounds up the crew and marches them into the lounge where George, May and Donovan wait for them. George tasked Donovan with fetching the little briefcase while he took a moment to stretch and shake the sleep from himself. As Prat has brings in the last crewmember, a tired Fiona who wears only a white thong and short tank top that reveals her slim midriff, George clears his throat.

“What the hell is this about? I was having a really good dream about a guy.” Fiona asks, rubbing her tired eyes.

“Lovely.” Ein chuckles.

“Was it me?” Whitley asks.

“Shut up, Whitley.” Fiona grumbles.

“So, here’s the deal...” George begins, taking the small briefcase from Donovan. “We’re heading to Earth to deliver this to District 21 in Sijia for 2,000,000. To make a long story short, we’re smugglers now. Have a good night!”

“Woah!” Marcus exclaims as George begins to walk away.

“Yes, voice of reason?” George sighs.

“Do we even know what’s in that thing?” Marcus asks.

“Uh, no. No, we don’t, and I’d prefer not to know.” George replies.

“And you don’t have a problem with that?” Marcus raises a brow.

“Not really. Obviously, you do.”

“Yeah, a little.” Marcus nods.

“Hell, I don’t!” Prat gleefully exclaims. “This is the best paying run we’ve had yet, and we work on a percentage. Maybe I’ll even get to kill someone!”

“Maybe.” George shrugs. “I’ll tell you what. For this run I’ll bump everyone up to 10% pay. With nine of us that’s 200,000 credits each, except for me; I’ll take that extra 10th share because I own the ship and pay for the insurance, food, etcetera.”

“Fair enough.” Fiona says through a yawn. “Need me to set the course?”

“Wait, guys!” Marcus steps up before the crew. “Are we really sure we should be doing this?”

They look between each other for a moment before all responding with their own version of ‘yes’, the cacophony of noise causing him to wince as they shout. Even Gretsch, who often finds herself in agreement with her boyfriend is not taking his side. Reluctantly, Marcus steps back into the group as they all head for the bridge. Though half asleep, they take the time to prep the ship and launch, following the course that Fiona has programmed into the Bannockburn’s computers. After entering hyper drive, Ein sets the autopilot and the crew return to their quarters to sleep.

After the multi-day flight back to Earth, the crew fly the Bannockburn toward the coordinates, finding themselves in the mountains of what was once South America. This portion of Sijia is hardly ever patrolled, nor is there a significant population. The only value to the land is a small Earth based mining corporation and an industrial complex that specializes in munitions, specifically small arms. As they fly by the factory, George can’t help but chuckle as he sees the location where his Anelace XR-9 was assembled before sale.

Landing in an open field, a small hovercar with a faded, patchwork paintjob waits for them. To be on the safe side, George rides the cargo lift down to the ground with his entire crew, all armed with multiple weapons as a show of

force. Though George tries to maintain a dialogue with the three nervous men beside the hovercar, they never respond to him. They show him a credit chit and insert it into a chit reader, revealing the full amount of 2,000,000 credits. After this display, they pass him the chit as he hands them the little briefcase.

Opening the briefcase, the men breathe a sigh of relief and George begins to wonder what he has brought upon his crew. Inside the briefcase is a very specific type of drive, used only by the military branch of the League of Nations. A proprietary system, this type of drive is often used to conceal classified data, such as weapon schematics, base and ship blueprints, or even the personal information of generals and other important political leaders. As the men turn to leave, George can feel an opportunity slipping through his fingers.

“Wait!” George calls out to them.

They stop and turn around, the three Voeldahn looking apprehensively at the somewhat intimidating human, his horde of armed crew behind him.

“Y-yeah?” One of the men asks.

“I don’t suppose you have any other work you need done?” George asks with a smirk.

“What the...?” Marcus murmurs.

“Shut up. Don’t ruin this for us.” Prat quietly growls at Marcus.

The three looks between themselves in surprise at George’s question. After a moment, the apparent leader turns back to him.

“You want more work?” He asks with a raised brow.

“Anything you need delivered, we can handle. No questions asked.” George replies.

His ears perk at the last sentence as Marcus’ heart sinks. Even Gretsch begins to wonder if this is really the flightpath that they should be taking.

“Give us a secured line to call, and we’ll see what we can do.” The man says.

George obliges and stands firm as the three men enter their old hovercar and quickly speed off, in the direction of the munitions factory. George can only assume that they are preparing to illegally manufacture military grade weapons of some sort. Once they are naught but a dot on the horizon, which only takes a matter of moments at their pace, George returns to his crew who await him on the lowered cargo lift.

“What did you just get us into?” Marcus asks in a horrified tone.

“I don’t know, but it sounds interesting!” George retorts with a little grin.

“Hell yeah, it does!” Prat exclaims, resting his rifle on a shoulder.

“Finally, a job worth something.” Donovan adds.

“He speaks!” Whitley quips.

“Shut up, Whitley.” Donovan and George respond simultaneously.

“Well... Now what?” Fiona asks.

“Now we wait, babe.” George answers.

“Don’t call me that, sugar.” She grins.

“Whatever you say, doll.”

It doesn’t take long before George’s secured line begins to ring. With his V.I. bracelet temporarily hooked into the ship’s computer, the call comes through the bridge for all to see. As the crew sit around the large screen, watching and listening to the nervous man talk, they are pleased to find that if they wait a mere two hours, several hovervans will arrive to load cargo worth 500,000 Credits-On-Delivery and bound for an unregistered base. Unregistered bases and space stations typically mean that they belong to any number of criminal factions, or semi-legal groups such as the Scrappers or Sectans.

A perpetually neutral faction of renegades, Scrappers are content to collect and reuse or resell the scrap of space, while living away from society as a whole. The Sectans, whose name is a play on the word ‘sector’, are

identical in ideology to the Scrappers in every way, minus the junk-collecting. They live as far away from the warm embrace of civilization as they possibly can, attempting to be dependent entirely upon themselves in tiny colonies, small space stations or even purpose-built spaceships that act as permanent dwellings.

Criminal factions include the Lane Jackers, who are a group of quasi-terrorists. The Lane Jackers prefer to sit in wait with specially modified ships that appear as deactivated relics when scanned. When unsuspecting freighters shut down their hyper drives and head for their destinations, the Lane Jackers awaken their ships and pirate them by surprise. Once they are done, they use or sell the goods to fund a number of anarchistic and convoluted schemes that never seem to have a true purpose.

There are also the Jade Dragons, a terrorist group opposed to the representative republic established after the fall of the Tongyan kingdom, who seek to create another kingdom. The Tellusians, an eco-terrorist organization named after Tellus, the Roman goddess of the Earth. They resort to piracy and good old fashioned corporate sabotage to stop the exploitation of both Earth and Mars, believing that Mars will soon become a corporate hellscape, which they believe the Earth has become.

The Wildcats, a numerous and sparsely organized criminal faction comprised of disaffected miners, farmers and other general laborers whose records or poor luck keep them from attaining legitimate jobs. The Con-Tali, a strange

terrorist group whose name stands for “Contrary To Aliens” and exists for the sole purpose of destroying the League of Nations and returning every super nation to a separatist and isolationist state. The Con-Tali don’t even believe in trade between the nations and as a result they hate virtually everyone, and vice versa.

Last but not least is the largest and least organized of all major criminal factions, the Sol Rogues. They are nothing more than a low-end street gang who managed to acquire basic space craft and float around Earth and Mars wreaking havoc. They have no real structure, only a few leaders who last until they are arrested or killed, and rarely earn more than enough to buy the next few days rations. They wouldn’t be a real threat if not for their sheer numbers, which at its peak was half the force of the entire Mars security division, a group of 200,000 ships and twice as many pilots.

Due to the vast nature of space, the League of Nations has deemed it necessary to reinstitute the custom of bounty hunting, but with a twist. Pilots must have clean criminal and flight records, take special legal classes and register with an informal militia, dubbed the “Bounty Hunter’s Division”, or “BHD” for short. Only members of the BHD may legally hunt targets, regardless of jurisdiction, and claim bounties. If not for the extensive background checks, many criminals probably would have chosen this line of work, and the BHD remains a small and somewhat insignificant faction.

The legal BHD aside, the cargo that the Bannockburn's crew awaits could be destined for any of these previously listed factions, and even the Scrappers and Sectans are not known for welcoming anyone with open arms. Though the rest of the crew don't seem to share Marcus' concern with even Gretsche downplaying the severity of the situation, in actuality they are balancing on the razor's edge. After what seems like an eternity of waiting, the ship's proximity sensors begin to sound.

Checking the security monitors, Prat and Donovan spot three hoverbuses rapidly approaching their position. Ready the weapons and heading back down, the entire crew once again ride the cargo lift to the ground, meeting the hoverbuses as they park barely a meter from the front edge of the lift, facing the bow. Without delay, a half-dozen Voeldahn men quickly begin loading crates onto the cargo lift, three of them the men from the earlier delivery. They move as though they have been working all day and are racing to finish so that they can go home.

Within minutes, several large stacks of metal weapon crates and various briefcases sit in three piles atop three industrial pallets that sat unused atop the cargo lift from a previous legitimate job. Eager to leave, the leader of the men slips George a note and rests his snout beside his ear, whispering something to him that drastically changes George's expression. The rest of the crew take notice, but they don't say a word as they stand atop the cargo lift. As he returns, George activates the lift, his head held low.

“What’s wrong?” May asks with great concern.

“He told me to be careful.” George softly replies.

“Why?” Donovan asks.

“Everyone...” George begins, turning his eyes up to his crew as the lift slowly rises. “We’re taking this stuff to a Tellusian base.”

“God damnit, George.” Marcus grumbles, shaking his head in disapproval.

“Well... Lets get it over with!” Ein signs.

As the cargo lift locks into place and the airtight door close beneath it, sealing the keel tightly, the crew disperse and head for the bridge. Staying a few steps behind, Prat suddenly grabs George and gives him a bear hug from behind, his chin resting on George’s shoulder.

“Thank you so much, man. You have no idea how happy this makes me.” Prat almost tearfully speaks.

“Great... Want to let go now?” George chokes out.

“Sure, boss! Whatever you say!” Prat gleefully exclaims before dashing toward the bridge.

“Prat’s happy with me... What the hell have I done?” George thinks aloud.

With the Tellusian base still on earth, but stationed in a remote part of Shikamano, an area that was once Australia, they arrive in a matter of moments. Prat and Donovan seem quite pleased, though Marcus, Gretsche and Whitley look

apprehensive; Ein, Fiona and May don't seem to care one way or the other.

"This will be the quickest and easiest money we've ever made! I'm glad we finally got into a real line of work!" Prat exclaims as he leans back in his chair, his head resting against his interlocked fingers.

"So glad to hear how quickly you've adapted to a life of crime." Marcus murmurs.

"Shut your noise hole, Marcus. Taking honest jobs has earned us exactly jack and shit, with a lot more of the latter." Prat retorts.

"Yeah, but at least then I could sleep at night." Marcus quips.

"Who needs to sleep when credits can buy you so many distractions?" Fiona remarks.

"Spoken like a true mercenary." Gretsche sighs.

"That isn't really a bad thing." May comments.

"Alright, enough!" George barks, gaining everyone's attention. "This might not have been the best idea, but it pays and keeps us busy and I'm fine with that. Now you all know I don't really care about any governments or political ideologies; I care about my ship and my crew. We'll take a vote, the only time I'll ever allow it. By show of hands, who thinks we should keep this up if the deal goes fine?"

Looking to his crew, he raises his hand. Prat, Donovan, Ein, Fiona and May all follow virtually in unison. Marcus

can't believe his eyes, as noted by his look of shock. He turns to Whitley who very slowly raises his hand as well.

"Are you serious?!" He asks the pale, ginger-haired human.

"As long as no one gets hurt, what's the harm? Besides, we already lost." Whitley replies.

"Truth." Fiona nods.

"Never thought I'd be glad to hear him speak." Prat chuckles.

"Well, I'll stick to my principles." Marcus retorts, crossing his arms.

"Like Whitley said, it doesn't matter." May speaks.

May and Whitley are completely correct. Though neither Marcus nor his girlfriend Gretsche raise their hands, it doesn't matter; outvoted 7-to-2, they have no choice but to tag along or leave the ship. Their course has been set for them by the will of the others and they have no real options but to ride it out aboard the Bannockburn. Marcus wouldn't ever abandon George, his closest friend, and Gretsche would never leave Marcus, the love of her life. That aside, she has few prospects available to her after tarnishing her record for insubordination while working on her last ship for a major corporation.

Landing the Bannockburn at the edge of a large, military-like base situated deep in the outback, they are quickly surrounded by armed Tellurian terrorists. Though

the ship can withstand anything the terrorists' small arms could throw at them, they still maintain their stance, possibly as a show of force. A man dressed in a make-shift general's uniform emerges from the crowd, a small personal computer held in the palm of his head. He reads the blue holographic screen and orders his troops to stand down, clearly expecting the ship and her crew.

The entire crew nervously rides the cargo lift to the ground, keeping their weapons visible but slung. Without saying a word, the would-be general of the tree hugging eco-terrorists motions with a hand, waving several fingers. His troops move it and start collecting the cargo from the three pallets, stripping them of their goods in a matter of seconds.

"So, a human captain. We hardly see any of your kind, especially around here." The general says as he takes out a credit chit and chit reader.

"I've been getting that a lot lately." George smirks.

"I can imagine." The general remarks.

Placing the chit in the reader, the screen reveals the amount of credits placed into it. With the amount correct and the cargo removed, the general very politely hands George the chit, shakes his hand and then turns back to his camp without saying another word.

"Well, that was easy." Ein remarks.

“Oh!” The general says as he stops in his tracks and points a finger toward the sky. “I’ll be sure to let them know how well you did. I’m certain that you’ll receive more contracts soon. There’s always more work where this came from.” He says, glancing over his shoulder at the Bannockburn’s crew.

“Wonderful...” Marcus grumbles.

Returning to the bridge, George takes a credit chit from each of his crew and quickly divvies out their earnings, 250,000 per member. Choosing May first, their fingers brush and they hold a gaze for some time before continuing down the line, something that raises several brows. Prat stares at the charged credit chit like a young child eyeing a bowl of candy. It’s not entirely surprising as this is the highest that any of them have been paid after a job in many months, if not since when George initially hired them.

After dishing out their pay, George is left with 500,000 for himself. Taking his seat in the captain’s chair, he wonders if this line of work is really all that bad. As his crew talk amongst themselves as to what they will do with their windfall, George suddenly speaks.

“Prep the ship for launch; let’s get back to Mars. Anyone want to take some time off?”

“Seriously?” Ein asks in surprise.

“Seriously.” George nods.

All seem pleased at the offer and quickly head for their seats.

“Hell yeah.” Donovan murmurs as he straps himself in.

“I’m going to buy a whole bunch of steak for my fridge.” Ein comments as he charges up the engines.

“I’m buying ice cream.” Fiona says as she plots the course to Mars.

“Ice cream sounds good.” Whitley adds.

“Shut up, Whitley.” She giggles.

“I could use some new clothes.” May chirps.

“I’d like to hang out on a warm beach.” Marcus says.

“You mean ‘we’.” Gretsche remarks, resting a hand on his forearm.

“I’m getting myself thrown out of the fanciest bar I can find!” Prat exclaims, as though to outdo his comrades.

With that, the Bannockburn launches from the Tellurian base and hightails it for space. Following Fiona’s course, they charge the hyper drive and activate the warp bubble. After two days of uneventful hanging-out aboard the ship, playing cards, goofing off and otherwise roaming about the halls, the crew scramble to freedom as soon as the cargo lift touches the surface of the landing pad at a Martian airfield. George, with nothing else to do, spends his time at a beach resort with his closest friends, Marcus and Gretsche.

“This is just what we needed.” Marcus says with a sigh.

He slumps back in a long, reclining beach chair as he feels the cool breeze fluttering his fur. George, pale and uninterested in changing his appearance, sits underneath a large umbrella and drinks an alcohol-free mixed drink while Gretsch plays with the sand, attempting to sculpt a small castle. Always 'plugged in', as George prefers to call it, Gretsch checks her V.I. bracelet within a millisecond of it chiming.

"What's up, Ein?"

"Hey, did you hear the news?" Ein replies.

"What news?" Gretsch asks.

"Hang up and log on to the web. It's on the front page of every major news network." He urges.

The tone of his voice ensnares both Marcus and George, who turn and look. Marcus pulls down his sunglasses and peers over at Gretsch, who looks back at her boyfriend and their captain. The three of them all bring up their V.I. bracelets, using a basic link that receives only the most critical of news stories; holo-screens can scan entire channels and have a full range of programming.

"A massive terrorist attack on Earth!" The voices on their bracelets say in unison.

Taking out his compact personal computer from the pocket of his shorts, Marcus and Gretsch join George at the

table underneath his umbrella. Logging on as quickly as he can, Marcus accesses a new network, as his computer can show images and access the full article, unlike the V.I. bracelet. They crowd around the front of the holographic screen, staring at it with nervous anticipation. To their shock, they see a familiar face; the general they met at the Tellusian base is on the news.

“Led by Kieran McMann, also known as ‘The General’, a large force of Tellusians stormed a meeting between two merging corporations, EarthSpan and Democratic Shipping. Apparently intent on taking hostages, they did not expect additional security, but somehow the Tellusians acquired military-grade blasters and armor. Easily defeating the security force, the battle delayed them long enough for Sol Police to arrive with adequate firepower. After a three-hour standoff, The General gave the order. All six VIPs and an additional twelve of their staff were executed in front of the police before a firefight ensued.

All told, over one-hundred lives were lost, including forty security officers, over a dozen police, and twenty-five Tellusians, who are claiming credit for what they are calling ‘A victory for mother Earth’. Sol Police have been investigating the weapons that the terrorists used, but they say that they have been manufactured illegally from stolen blueprints. Unfortunately, this makes them impossible to trace. The Sol Police and the League of Nations are calling this ‘the most audacious and violent act of terrorism in recent years’.

Marcus feels sick to his stomach and closes the article. George sits in shock and Gretsche covers her gaping maw with a trembling hand. None of them wanted this kind of blood on their hands, nor did they expect it. With his claws digging into the table and his hand tightly gripping the computer, Marcus glares at George. Though he is his best friend, whom he owes his life to, Marcus isn't sure if he can get over something like this.

"Are you happy now?" Marcus chokes out.

"... No." George murmurs, shaking his head.