

Lacuna Blue

By Mantrid Brizon

Chapter Four: Near Death Experience

Nearly a month after the 'Earth-Dem Massacre', as it's officially called, the Bannockburn sits within a warp bubble. Her hyper drive hums as she heads for a hidden base operated by The Wildcats, on the terraformed moon of Callisto. Even after the massacre, the majority of her crew found it hard to turn away from the potential income. Though George had said that he wouldn't allow it again, the special circumstances caused him to take another vote after the crew returned to the ship. Marcus and Gretsche were outspoken about continuing their line of work, and the only ones who objected to their new career path.

Marcus would never abandon George for anything short of committing a murder in front of him. Gretsche, meanwhile, would never abandon her boyfriend. Even if she would, her record was tainted when she spent time working for Vogul Shipping. Fired for insubordination, she physically assaulted a superior, though she had just cause. Preventing a forceable rape doesn't matter when the face you are slashing with a razor belongs to your captain. This blemish

effectively renders her not hireable to most ship companies or freelance captains who aren't already breaking the law.

Because of these reasons, the couple decide not to abandon the Bannockburn, her captain and the crew. They reside themselves to tagging along as they delve deeper into the criminal underworld, hoping that they won't be responsible for further spilt blood. Word travels fast in small circles such as these; after supplying the weapons for the massacre, the Bannockburn and her crew find that some factions actively seek them out for contracts, trusting them to deliver their cargo with no questions asked.

Only two days after the Earth-Dem Massacre, George received enough calls on the line that he had given to the nervous men in District 21 that he established a secured and dedicated line for the ship itself. With the Bannockburn now known by name and reputation, they found it easy to find contracts hauling cargo for everyone unable or unwilling to contact a more legitimate company. They have been working steadily ever since, flying all over the colonized solar system and delivering all manner of cargo.

On this particular trip, The Wildcats need food rations, spare parts and fuel rods for their construction machinery and are paying 1,000,000 credits for the shipment. Like nearly all of their contracts, it is a 'Credit-On-Delivery' job. Nearly within range of Callisto but not yet ready to deactivate the hyper drive, the bridge is sparsely populated. Ein mans the helm, Fiona sits at her console and

checks their course, while George sits at a nearby console typically operated by Marcus, examining his ships systems.

“So, when do you think we’ll get some time off again?” Ein suddenly asks, breaking the silence.

“Ready to kick up your feet so soon?” George chuckles.

“Well, yeah! I mean, we’re not working for Democratic or Vogul Shipping. A month flying around in space takes a toll on a man.” Ein replies.

“You can say that again.” Fiona adds.

“A month flying around in spa-”

“Don’t pull a Whitley.” Fiona interrupts him.

“Yeah, I could probably use some time off myself.” George agrees. “After this run, I’ll think about taking us back to Mars for some R&R.”

“I can see it now. Just you and your shadow relaxing in a cozy bungalow on the beach... Where is she anyway?” Fiona asks, her lips curling into a strange grin.

“Who?” George raises an eyebrow.

“Your shadow.” She reiterates.

“Come on, cap’n. Really?” Ein chuckles, turning his chair around.

“Pretend I’m as clever as Prat; explain it to me.”

“May! She’s only *always* a few feet away from you, and of her own free will.” Ein begins.

“I don’t know how she can stand it.” Fiona quips.

“How do you, babe?”

**“A strong stomach and a poor sense of smell, sugar.”
Fiona retorts.**

**“Hey, you never did give me that makeover, doll.”
George smirks.**

“Don’t tell me you’ve never noticed.” Ein continues.

**“Maybe I haven’t. My nose isn’t the best.” George
shrugs his shoulders.**

“No, I... What?” Ein asks in confusion.

**“Even Prat isn’t that dim. She gives off every sign:
turning to face you when you walk into the room, standing
near you or brushing past you when she walks by, the
slightly raised and slowly swaying tail. Every time you talk,
her ears perk up in your direction. I’ve never seen her *not*
look you straight in the eye, and when she speaks to you,
her tone is entirely different from when she talks to anyone
else; soft and gentle, and nowhere near as abrasive.” Fiona
explains.**

“It’s just the sexual tension.” George admits.

**“I knew it!” Ein sits back, a grin of vindication upon his
face.**

“Settle down. We all did.” Fiona snickers.

**“Even Prat?” George turns to her with a look of
concern.**

**“Oh yeah.” She nods. “Just yesterday after you left the
commissary, May took off and he suggested that maybe you
two were uhm... ‘Exercising’ together.”**

“What, I’m fat now, too?” George laughs.

“Eh.” Fiona repeatedly rocks a hand from side-to-side.

“We’re just looking for confirmation.” Ein remarks.

“You don’t have to show us back scratches or anything, but if you have any...” Fiona winks.

“Well this has been fun. Congratulations on being the first people to embarrass me right out of the bridge. Good night.” George says as he stands from the console.

“What do we win?” Ein asks.

“A modicum of respect.” George smirks.

“You two should just have sex and get it over with. All you have to do is ask her!” Fiona quickly adds as he walks through the door.

As the door slides shut and George leaves the two alone in the room, they stare at the bulkhead for a few seconds before returning to their duties.

“That was fun.” Fiona murmurs.

“Yeah... So... How come you and the cap’n never had any of *that* going on? I mean, with all the jokes and pet names...” Ein asks.

“Who says we didn’t?” Fiona raises a brow.

“Me. I said that.”

“Well, maybe we did? Maybe a late-night rendezvous cured it and now we’re good? ... Or maybe I’m just messing with you?”

“Oh... So, which is it?” He asks.

“Stop talking.” She sighs, turning back to work on her terminal.

“Right... Commencing silence in two seconds.”

Meanwhile, May sits with Gretsche and browses the news networks on her personal computer, fighting boredom with celebrity gossip. The commissary, which is conveniently placed near the small gym on the bottom deck of the ship, is forward of the cargo bay; George often prefers to sit in the cargo bay and think. With the commissary door perpetually open, programmed to close only in the event of an emergency hull breach, May sits with her left side toward the door.

“Anything good?” Gretsche asks, leaning closer to her holographic screen.

“Eh. Rich and famous people being criticized for drug and alcohol abuse or sleeping around. The usual.” May sighs.

“I always found it funny how you can pretty much get away with it, socially, when you’re normal, but if you’re popular and people catch you giving into a vice, you’re damned.”

May turns her eyes to the sound of boots clanking upon the metal plates of the hallway, growing ever louder. As George passes by the open doorway, his eyes staring straight ahead at the bulkhead to the cargo hold at the end of the hall, May’s ears perk and she straightens in her seat. Gretsche can’t help but smile as she watches her, struggling

to subdue her grin. Her tail lifts and sways and for a split-second May begins to rise from her seat but turns to Gretsche, quickly second-guessing herself.

"So, you decided to stay!"

"Where else would I go?" May casually asks.

"Wherever he does." Gretsche quips.

"That's not true!" May defensively replies.

"I just saw you! It's the worst kept secret on this ship, and that's saying a lot."

"And what secret is that?" May feigns ignorance.

"That you like him."

"I just owe and respect him. He's my captain, and a good person. So are you, Marcus and Fiona." May explains.

"True. I suppose that's why you're nicer to us."

"Right." May nods.

"And especially George... Following him around, always watching him when he's in the room, listening to every word he says." Gretsche continues.

"... Yeah." May's ears begin to lower.

"Everyone else, on the other hand, kind of sees you like living sandpaper." Gretsche explains.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, just the other day you told Whitley to go fuck himself. Usually we just say 'Shut up, Whitley' or 'Stop talking'; that's all he needs. I've also never seen anyone of

your stature, or gender, call Prat a 'man-child' to his face." Gretsch continues.

"But he is!"

"That's not the point. The point is that you're a rough stone with pretty much everyone but George. Even Fiona, Marcus and I occasionally see your... What's the word I'm looking for... Your 'abrasive' personality. Have you even yelled at George yet?"

May begins to speak but doesn't have the words to reply, knowing that nothing she can say will clear her case. She turns her head toward the door to the hall, watching it for a moment.

"I..." May hesitates.

"Yeah?" Gretsch asks softly, scooting closer expectantly.

"I just... I want him in the worst ways." May admits.

"Oh..."

"The things I'd do with him and let him do to me."

May sighs as she quickly loses herself in her own lustful thoughts. A surprised Gretsch clears her throat.

"Sorry." May lowers her head.

"It's fine. Not what I was expecting, but no worries." Gretsch replies.

“I just don’t know if he’s interested too, and I don’t want to take the direct approach. God knows I would if he wasn’t always so aloof.” May seems to think aloud.

“Well you should at least talk with him about it. If the tension gets any thicker the hull panels might start to bulge.” Gretsck chuckles.

“Yeah... I’m just not quite ready to embarrass myself.”

After a moment of deafening silence, listening only to the hum of the Bannockburn’s engines in a commissary lit by dim amber lights and the vibrant glow of the warp bubble, May collects her personal computer and rises from her seat. Leaving the room, she turns to look down the hall at the cargo hold, wondering if she should speak to George about their unknowingly shared problem. Unable to bring herself to make the first move, she turns away from the cargo hold and heads for the upper decks and toward her room.

“Those two...” Gretsck sighs before sipping the coffee in her plastic mug.

After another day of flight within the warp bubble, they arrive near Callisto and lock onto The Wildcats encrypted beacon; the signal can’t even be found without authorization codes being installed into the Bannockburn’s main computer. As they are a criminal faction and have no real traffic control, May communicates directly with the base’s commander. Clearing a field just beyond the base for their ship, as the hidden base doesn’t have a constructed pad

large enough for the ship to land on, the Commander sends a small team to meet them and make the trade.

Ever the precarious situation, dealing with social outcasts and criminals, the crew take the necessary precautions. Preparing their weapons, George waits in the cargo hold for the others to arrive while leaving Fiona, Ein, Gretsche and Marcus aboard; they are key crewmembers, should they need to make a quick escape. May is the first to dash into the cargo hold, hopping up and sitting atop a crate of food rations mere feet from her captain.

“Where are the others?” He asks her.

“Donovan was looking for Prat, and Whitley was right behind me, but his fat ass couldn’t keep up.” She answers.

George chuckles, grinning at her for a moment before glancing back down to his XR-9 blaster. George was never fond of using long guns, but he still has one slung. Instead of the typical VT-3 pulse rifle, however, he prefers the JV-8 ‘Shard’ submachine gun. Unlike the VT-3, which is a plasma rifle designed to fire in short bursts or as a semi-automatic, the JV-8 functions identically to his blaster; a fusion of a plasma and rail gun that shaves metal from an ammo bar. With 7.5mm diameter rounds and adjustable velocity, the 180 round cartridge that feeds it holds both an ammo bar and the battery, while simultaneously forming the foregrip of the weapon.

Checking his JV-8 one last time, he leans back against the stack of crates that May has perched herself upon. She notices that he leans subtly in her direction, though he doesn't speak or glance to her a second time. Is that his incredibly vague way of showing interest? She opens her mouth to speak but stops when the cargo hold bulkhead slides open and both Donovan and Whitley walk in. George shakes his head in disbelief as his two human companions drag in the unconscious body of an incredibly drunk Prat.

"What the hell did he do that for? He knew we had a deal to make!" George growls.

"I don't know. Maybe he got the days confused, or maybe he's really a coward and wanted an excuse to not get shot at?" Donovan suggests.

"Stupid skag." George mutters, looking down at Prat.

"We could always dunk his head in a toilet and see if that wakes him up." Whitley remarks.

"Shut up, Whitley." Donovan snaps.

"Fuck it. We'll go without him." George says as he heads for the cargo lift's control panel.

Nodding, the two human men drag their drunk Voeldahn associate away from the lift and shove him into the nearest room. With Prat's snout safely tucked near the base of a toilet, the men return to their captain and ride the cargo lift down to the planet's surface.

"I really don't like this." Donovan remarks, checking his VT-3's battery for a third time.

"Noted." George murmurs.

"Let's just get paid and get away from these guys." May adds.

"I can get behind you." George remarks.

Everyone quickly looks at him.

"That! I can get behind *that!*" He swiftly corrects himself.

George closes his eyes and tilts his head down, feeling his face flushing somewhat. May looks away, hiding the amused and embarrassed grin from the crew.

"You know, if you two want to handle this on your own..." Whitley quips.

"Shut up, Whitley." George sighs in frustration.

The cargo lift touches down and the squad find themselves staring at three men. One looks far cleaner and more important than the other two, who stand at either side of him. One holds a JV-5 submachine gun, functionally identical to the JV-8, but smaller, with a capacity of only 60 rounds per cartridge and a fire rate of roughly 500 RPM. The other bears a GS-2 rail rifle, a full-sized combat rifle that functions purely as a rail gun. It uses batteries and pre-

formed bullets inside of a single, changeable magazine that locks into a well in front of the trigger guard. It is semi-auto only and holds 90 rounds per magazine.

“Well! Three humans at the same time! How often do you see that?” The leader says to his men.

George and his crew approach the three. Donovan clutches his VT-3 tightly, while Whitley and May both have JV-8 submachine guns and Anelace XR-20 compact blasters. The much more modern and concealable blasters are identical in function to the XR-9, JV-5 and JV-8, and are fed with a combination cartridge that contains a spring-loaded ammo rod and battery pack, fitting inside of the pistol grip; this gives the Anelace XR-20 a capacity of only 15 rounds per cartridge, but it is far more concealable, easier to maneuver and both faster and more natural to reload.

“Those are some mighty fine weapons you guys have there.” The leader begins, looking over the crew.

“Thanks. Picked them out myself.” George replies.

“Yeah. Mighty fine, and expensive... Who says that crime doesn’t pay?” The leader chuckles.

“A lot of people.” George retorts.

“Well they’re all stupid drogos, and that was a rhetorical question!” He barks.

“Sorry.” George calmly apologizes.

The leader takes out a credit chit and reader, using the reader to show George the amount on the card. It far exceeds the original payment, which puzzles George. Normally people don't bring a credit chit worth 3,500,00 to pay for 1,000,000 credits worth of cargo. Using the reader, the man begins to drain the excess credits from the chit, which instantly and remotely returns it to the owner's primary account.

"Now about that price..." The leader says with a twisted grin.

"Here we go." Donovan murmurs.

"How's about 500,000?" The leader offers.

"1,000,000." George replies.

The Wildcat boss glares at George, narrowing his amber eyes at the human who remains stone-faced.

"600,000?" He asks.

"It's 1,000,000."

"You never negotiated before or something?" The leader asks with genuine curiosity.

"I have, but this is a C.O.D. 500,000 goes back to the shipper, while we keep our fee, which is 500,000. You pay 1,000,000 credits, or that cargo lift goes back up with everything on it." George explains.

"Everything is negotiable."

"Well, my crew's pay *isn't*." George growls.

“You got some sort of problem?!” The leader snaps back.

“Yeah. Fucking assholes who don’t know how to pay their bills!”

Donovan and Whitley ready their weapons. May, who has little experience with anything other than knives, looks to them and imitates their motions.

“Look, I don’t want any trouble here. I’m just a box human, but I can’t make multi-day flights through space and not get paid for it, nor can I not collect for the group that you bought this shit from. Just hand over the credits we originally agreed upon, and we’re good to go.” George calmly continues.

The man’s dour face seems to lighten, a smirk appearing on his lips.

“Alright. We’ll do it that way.”

Holding up the credit chit and card reader, he makes a wide and sweeping motion. Realizing what The Wildcat leader is doing, George jumps back just in time to dodge a shot to his gut from the man’s own XR-20 blaster. The round slices through the top of Whitley’s shoulder and he panics, ducking for cover. The Wildcat goons fire wildly at the crew of the Bannockburn as they all duck for cover behind the strategically placed crates of spare parts. George

scrambles for a new bucket for a power digger, rounds pinging off of the dense metal.

Donovan fires a single round from his VT-3, the blue 10mm ball of superheated plasma burning a hole through the leader's face and straight through the back. As he drops dead and the gray tissue of his brain oozes out of the hole, his two goons panic; they've clearly never seen an actual death before. They shoot wildly at Donovan, who is pinned down. May moves around a crate to try and get a better shot, unwilling to be killed without a fight. Whitley continues to cower behind a crate of spare parts while George waits patiently for the right moment to strike.

As one man quickly changes magazines in his GS-2 rifle, May rises from her position. At the same time, George swings out and aims from his position within the power digger bucket with his XR-9, always instinctively going for a sidearm. They fire simultaneously at the same man, both hitting him center-mass and dropping him to the ground. He writhes in agony as his buddy, the only remaining healthy Wildcat body, fires at May with his JV-5. She quickly ducks down behind the crates and crawls further away.

George and Donovan both fire upon and kill him within seconds. The last Wildcat is no longer crying out, hopefully having died from massive trauma or blood loss, which can occur in less than a minute. As the crew rise up to see the aftermath, George quickly races for the dead leader, taking his two-tone XR-20, credit chit and card reader. With the reader still active, he begins to type in the amount.

“Let’s rob them blind and get out of here!” Donovan suggests.

“Steal from The Wildcats? Are you crazy? I’m taking the 500,000 they owe us for the shipment, plus 100,00 for damages.” George replies.

“What about the cargo?” Donovan scratches his head.

“We’re taking it back to the shipper. That was the ‘damages’ part.”

With a charged credit chit, George walks toward the cargo lift and in the general direction of May. As Donovan helps a wounded Whitley, the injured man glances at his bleeding shoulder. From his peripheral vision, he sees a horrifying sight.

“Look out!” He yells, right into Donovan’s ear.

Donovan, George and May quickly spin around to see the last Wildcat goon holding the GS-2 rifle and aiming directly for May. George pounces upon her and they fall to the ground as the man begins firing, rounds pinging off of the cargo crates behind them. Donovan flips the selector switch and fires three burst of 5-rounds each into the man’s torso and face, guaranteeing that he is dead and unrecognizable. George lay atop May, both of them looking to the dead assailant for a moment before glancing back at each other.

A somewhat nervous George clears his throat and lifts himself off of her before extending a hand, swiftly yet gently pulling her up from the ground. Not willing to stay any longer as alarms begin to sound at the nearby base, they race to the cargo lift and activate it, riding it up and into the bay. Before the lift is even halfway up, George uses his V.I. bracelet to order Ein and Fiona to prep for launch and take-off, even if the lift isn't fully seated yet. Ein knows better than to ask him why he would give him such an order, quickly engaging the engines.

The cargo lift locks into place before the Bannockburn has risen more than a few meters from the ground. The landing gears retract only moments after the keel-side airlock doors shut. Wildcat fighters begin to lock onto the Bannockburn, which charges her shields as a precaution; Ein doesn't wait for instruction to raise them. With the hyper drive already charging, he engages it before the fighters are close enough to be a genuine threat. Once in the safety of the warp bubble, they breathe a sigh of relief.

"Well... What a fun trip!" Ein nervously chuckles. "I could use that vacation now."

"Right, after we go back to where we picked up this shit and drop it off." George commands.

"Understood. I'll plot a course now." Fiona nods.

"Can we please do something about my shoulder now?" Whitley asks, still holding the wound.

“Shut up, Whitley. You and Gretsche get down to the med-lab and stop bleeding all over my floor.” George smirks.

“What the hell happened? And why did I wake up with my face by a toilet?” A hungover Prat asks, stumbling into the bridge.

“Passed out drunk. You missed the drop.” Donovan grumbles.

“I did? ... Hey, what happened to Whitley?”

“Oh, yeah, he got shot.” George casually answers.

“You had a shootout without me?!” Prat loudly whines.

“... Yeah! Next time don’t drink before a big meeting.” George retorts.

“I thought that was tomorrow.” Prat murmurs.

“Knew it!” Whitley exclaims as he walks slowly past Prat.

“Shut up, Whitley.” Prat mutters.

“So, what about the jobs? Are we finally done with smuggling now?” Marcus asks.

“And miss out on the pay? No. We’re just not doing any more Credit-On-Delivery jobs again.” George answers.

Shaking his head disapprovingly, Marcus rises from his control panel and heads for the broom closet. As the ship’s engineer, he also performs the custodial work; he uses a small mop with a replaceable head to soak up Whitley’s thin blood trail. After setting their course and with the auto-pilot engaged, the crew disperse and go their own way. Most

return to their cabins or roam about the ship on the multi-day journey back to Earth. At first George lies down in his room. Unable to sleep after the action, he walks around the crew quarters a few times before heading for the lounge.

As the sliding door opens, he is surprised to find May inside, sitting by herself and looking out one of the large windows that overlook the bridge. She turns her head and smiles warmly before peering through the window once more. George walks up to her and takes a seat on the same bench but a cushion away.

“How are you doing?” He asks.

“Fine, thanks to you.” She says softly.

“You’re welcome.”

She turns her eyes to him and impulsively scans his body, seeing the XR-20 blaster still in his waistband.

“You kept it?”

“Huh?” He asks in confusion.

She points a clawed finger toward his pelvis. Looking down, he sees the blaster and finally remembers it.

“Oh, yeah. Well, I like the two-tone black and silver look. Besides, it’s special.” He explains.

“It is?”

“Yeah. It shot Whitley. It’s a keeper.” George smirks.

May giggles before scooting a little closer. She rests a hand on his shoulder and looks him straight in the eyes.

“Thank you for saving me. I don’t know where I’d be without you.” She says.

“Me too.” He murmurs.

A somewhat embarrassed and very surprised May looks away, turning her head toward the window again. Unsure of what to say or do next, she stares at the swirling pink and cyan light of the warp bubble. George watches her, struggling with the dichotomy between his logic and desires. He soon decides not to hold back if he has the opportunity.

“It’s so beautiful.” She says with a sigh.

“Yeah, you are.”

She hears the grumbling of the seat cushion as George scoots even closer to her. Turning back to him, they stare at each other for several seconds, though it feels like hours to them. As if on cue, the two simultaneously lean in and hold each other, their lips pressing tightly together. It doesn’t take long for it to progress; their tongues glide and wrap around each other’s as the two passionately kiss. Her trembling hands grip his back, while his firm grasp on her

slender waist pulls her ever closer. They end their kissing to gaze at each other for a moment, catching their breath.

“My room or yours?” She asks.

“Mine.”

Ein and Fiona walk down the hall and toward George’s quarters. Though they don’t wish to bother him, they are both curious about their destination. Ein wonders if they should approach from a distance, allowing for a quick escape in the event that the shipper is unhappy with the return. If they do this, Fiona will need to adjust the autopilot from her terminal. They stand before the door to his quarters, knowing that George leaves it accessible to all of the crew, in case of an emergency.

“So, are you going to open it?” Fiona asks him.

“Me? Why me? He likes you more.” Ein replies.

“Probably, but it was your idea.” Fiona retorts.

“I don’t want to do it.” Ein whines.

“Well, I’m not going to.” Fiona crosses her arms.

They glare at each other for a moment before Ein realizes that there is no point in arguing with her.

“Damnit...” He grumbles.

Ein places his hand on the plate and activates the door, which quietly slides open. With both of them peering inside, their eyes grow wide and ears perk. Atop the bed and laying across the width, their feet toward the door, an undressed May straddles George's hips. She moans as his hands hold her slim waistline, gently sliding down to her hips before reaching up for her breasts. All the while she sways and bucks her hips, riding her captain to the best of her ability. With her tail up and swaying, and George's legs dangling over the side of the bed, the pair see everything.

Quickly backing away, a grinning Fiona presses her hand onto the plate and closes the door. Neither George nor May seem to notice that they were just caught in the act, distracted by the sensation, with the faint sound of the door drowned out by the sounds of their pleasure; it helps that the lighting in the various rooms and hallways are identical. Ein blinks several times before rubbing his eyes. Left in shock, and not eager to see his fellow crew in such a private way, he tries to block it out. Fiona seems to dwell on it for a moment with a perverse giddiness. They begin walking down the hall to their own quarters.

"I guess we'll just ask him tomorrow." Ein finally says.

"Yeah... Well, at least he took my advice!" Fiona chuckles.

"I can't recall him ever doing that before."

"Taking advice or...?" Fiona winks.

"The first one. I wouldn't know anything about the other, thank God."

**“Of course you don’t. We haven’t had ‘the talk’ yet.”
She teases.**

“When I’m old enough.” The 30-year-old Ein smirks.