

Lacuna Blue

By Mantrid Brizon

Chapter Five: Daisies

Nearly a month has passed since the shootout on Callisto, as the journey to the moon itself takes just over 17 days. Having survived the skirmish that nearly cost George and May their lives, the crew of the Bannockburn return to Earth, landing in a Soyuzian district to deliver their cargo and the 100,000 credits that George had acquired for the damages. Visibly surprised by their honesty and forthrightness, traits hardly seen in this line of work, the black marketeer, Kazimir, contracts them once more.

With their ship landed on a large pad near a small mountain village in what was once Siberia, the trader's team of hired goons and robotic assistants unload the crates and machinery components.

"Quite a misunderstanding." The Voeldahn, Kazimir, says to George with a thick accent.

George turns to Kazimir, who points a gloved finger at the dents and burn marks decorating one side of the power digger bucket that George had used for cover. George simply nods, his arms crossed before his chest and pulled tightly. His thick coat barely contains his precious body heat, a shiver inching its way into his lower spine. The thick white fur of the wolf-like Voeldahn flutters in the wind. He looks the human over.

“You need a coat like me.” He chuckles, patting a gloved hand at the base of his neck.

“Indeed.” George murmurs.

“Listen, friend...” Kazimir begins, draping an arm over George’s shoulder. “You do good work. I like good workers, and I have much cargo to ship. That deal was not so good, but you handled yourself well. Want to make some easy credits?”

“I’m listening.”

“Good. How does 5,000,000 credits sound?” He asks.

George can hardly believe his ears and neither can Marcus, Prat, May or Whitley, all of whom stand nearby. Though they weren’t intentionally listening in, the black marketeer perpetually speaks with an ‘outside voice’, regardless of the nature of the conversation. Marcus’ heart sinks when he sees the expression on George’s often stoic face. His captain quickly remembers the shootout and has second thoughts. Pushing the man’s arm from over his shoulder, he moves away and squares off with him, standing half a meter in front of him.

“I’m not taking my crew to delivery narcotics, guns or whatever and then try to collect a C.O.D. That didn’t go so well the last time.” George begins in a very strong tone.

“Then what will you do for credits?” Kazimir asks with an amused chuckle.

“Credits up front for the delivery.” George sternly answers.

Kazimir’s expression changes. His short and wide, wolf-like ears lower and his lips twist. His disappointment is evident.

“That does not work so well for me.” He finally replies.

“I can’t risk my crew so that you can get your cargo shipped. It’s not fair to me or them. C.O.D.s are too risky. Credits up front so that all we have to do is deliver.”

Kazimir scratches his chin with his white claws as he considers the offer.

“It’s a reasonable offer, Kazimir, and it saves you a lot of risk. After all, you are shipping cargo to crooks, murderers and terrorists and you’re expecting them to pay you when it gets there.” George reasons.

“Yes, but these guys are somewhat ‘old school’. They don’t want to give up their hard-stolen credits without feeling something in their hands. Sometimes it goes bad, like

with you and those guys on Callisto. Most of the time, not so much. It's not good business to shoot your suppliers or their mules."

"Aw, did you hear that? We're mules." Whitley snickers.

"Shut up, Whitley!" George barks over his shoulder. "I understand, but if you can get them to pay you up front, then you pay us up front and we don't have to worry about not getting paid or having to negotiate with sociopaths." He says to Kazimir.

"Well, alright. I will try this for you, but only because I respect you and I like the way you talk." Kazimir replies.

"I appreciate that. I try to make good points."

"No, I mean your Sijian accent. I could listen to it all day." Kazimir remarks.

"Oh..."

"Though you do make good points. I would rather have the credits now than wait for you to deliver the cargo." He continues. "Give me some time to see if I can convince the buyer. If I do, there will be a whole 1,000,000 credits in it for you and your crew. Up front."

Extending a hand to the black marketeer, George and Kazimir shake on it. In this particular subculture, your word is still very often your bond, even if your word is often worthless. George's, however, is certainly not; he's made that evident with his actions. Returning to the ship, they don't have to wait for long. After half a day, the Bannockburn's line chimes. Answering the call on the bridge, George and the black marketeer speak again. The buyers, a cell of the Jade Dragons located deep in the

young and lush jungles of Mars, need a shipment delivered right away.

“Well, that worked out. And we even get to head directly to Mars for that R&R.” George says to the crew.

They are all quite elated at the direct payment, as each of them will receive 100,000 credits; the 10% that George pays them is by far the highest that any freelance captain would ever willingly surrender to his underlings. Returning to the surface, Kazimir and his goons load unmarked crates. Donovan and Marcus both have terrible feelings about the contents of the crates and Marcus soon succumbs to curiosity. With a wall of crates before him and the dealer’s men walking away, he pops one open.

Marcus immediately drops the lid and steps back from the crate. Donovan shakes his head at Marcus, somewhat relieved at the sight of the contents.

“Did you see that?!” Marcus exclaims.

“Yeah I did and thank God it isn’t sky dust.” Donovan replies.

“Harvested organs, Donovan... We’re taking hearts, lungs and livers to the Jade Dragons!” Marcus angrily exclaims.

“Hey, they need transplants too.” Donovan shrugs.

Marcus can hardly believe how casually Donovan is handling the situation. George hears the commotion and approaches, May close behind, as always, while Prat and Whitley watch from a distance.

“What’s wrong now, Marcus?” George sighs in frustration.

“Take a look for yourself.” Marcus replies, lifting the lid again.

George peers inside as clear plastic containers of preserved organs, blood bags and tissue sample for transplant.

“So? Medical supplies. At least it’s not sky dust!”

“You don’t have a problem with this?” Marcus asks in disbelief.

“No, not really.” George shakes his head.

“Good! Then no peeking at my cargo.” The dealer says, emerging from around a stack of crates and pushing the lid closed.

“Those probably weren’t donated willingly, George.” Marcus says.

“Stop talking. I don’t want to hear it.” George calmly replies.

“But George, this is wrong!” Marcus pleads.

“Noted! Shut the fuck up!” George snaps.

With his objections promptly ignored disregarded, Marcus sits in stunned silence as the organs are loaded and George apologizes to the black marketeer for his crewmember's outspoken morality. With the cargo loaded and the payment accepted, George divvies out his crew's earnings right away.

"I'm really starting to like working on this ship." Prat says as he grips his freshly charged credit chit.

After plotting their course, Fiona preps the ship's autopilot for Ein to engage. With nothing else to do but wait for a day and a half, the crew disperse. George heads down for the gym to get a little exercise. He turns when he hears footfalls on the metal plates behind him. Though softer, like a woman's, he knows that they aren't May as he can hear the clicking of claws. Looking over his shoulder, he sees the barefoot Marcus approaching him. He glances over his shoulder at his closest friend, who dashes to catch up to him.

"That didn't take long." George says, looking down at Marcus' digitigrade feet.

"You know I hate shoes. Gretsches took them back to our room for me." Marcus answers.

"What's up, Marcus? Please tell me you don't want to talk about the cargo again." George asks.

“We haven’t talked in a while and I’ve been eating a lot of candy lately, so I figured I’d join you in the gym. Kill two birds with one stone, you know?” Marcus replies.

“Sounds good, buddy.”

Rather than talk, the pair spontaneously race each other through the hall, down the staircase and into the gym. Marcus wins the race, as he often does. Both somewhat less athletic than they would like to be, they gasp for breath after the short sprint. George begins power walking on a treadmill while Marcus sits atop a weight bench and lifts.

“So, how are things with you and May?” Marcus asks.

“Everyone wants to talk about that.” George chuckles.

“Everyone has nothing better to do, and you know that Fiona and Ein can’t keep secrets. Between the two of them, you have a tabloid newspaper.”

“Truth.” George nods.

“So?”

“We’re good, I guess. After that first time, we kind of stayed apart for a few days, but then the tension built right back up all over again.” George begins.

“Is that when Donovan caught you two in the bridge?”

“Yeah.” George nods.

“I bet that was a mood-killer.” Marcus laughs.

“Not like it stopped us after he walked out. After that we agreed to make it a ‘quarters only’ activity and now it’s fairly routine.”

“So, you’re a couple now?” Marcus asks.

“I don’t know. I mean, May is the hottest girl on board.”

“Debatable but go on.” Marcus quips.

“I thought that sleeping with her, repeatedly, would get rid of the sexual tension but it didn’t. Now I find myself thinking about her at odd times, like when I’m alone at night or get up in the morning.” George continues.

“Sounds like a serious crush to me. Maybe more.”

“If I knew how she felt, I’d probably go for it.”

“Try going out on a few dates and see what happens. Talking is also good. You should find the time to squeeze that in there.” Marcus chimes in.

“Even if I do, what about after? That could be jinxing the whole thing.”

“Listen, bro...” Marcus says, resting the weight on the hooks and sitting upright on the bench. “Life is way too short to be worrying about bullshit like that. Follow your heart for once. You might find that you’re happier that way.”

“Maybe. I guess when I’m ready I’ll do that.” George sighs.

“Well, don’t wait too long. Life has a habit of speeding up the older you get.”

“Relativity, man.” George chuckles.

“Fuck off with your science.” Marcus snickers.

After 36 uneventful hours flying to Mars, the crew prepare for the drop-off. Exiting the warp bubble on the most remote side of Mars, a common tactic for smugglers

and an equally common place for bounty hunters to hide, they raise their shields and head directly for the rendezvous. They find another ship sitting within a large field created by committing a controlled burn of the recently seeded jungle; many portions of the jungle aren't actually tropical, as this region is temperate. Ein very carefully and skillfully lands the Bannockburn within meters of the smaller vessel.

Men, all Voeldahn, wear the familiar uniforms of the Jade Dragon's. Their black combat boots are laced with jade strings and their black cargo pants using jade buttons, engraved with little dragons. As if that weren't blatant enough, tightly fitting and traditional oriental tunics, black in color but with jade sleeves, are a further hint as to their affiliation. The crew separate as before in the event that they need a quick escape. This time, however, Whitley opts to stay behind. As useless as he was during the last run, George doesn't object and in exchange, Marcus asks to accompany them.

"Be careful, babe." Gretsche says.

"I will." He smiles back.

The couple share a quick kiss before Marcus rises from his seat, passing Whitley who takes his place at his terminal. Donovan, still nervous from the last encounter, repeatedly checks the charge of his VT-3 rifle, while Prat holds two JV-8s, one in each hand. Considering how often he is in the gym, it's not remotely surprising that he would use each like a pistol. Actively keeping May close to him George stays near one of the larger and more durable of

the crates. Unlike the spare parts, organs and blood bags don't add any real protection from gunfire.

To their pleasant surprise, the Jade Dragons are polite, soft spoken and very cordial. They bow repeatedly in respect and are quick to aid the crew with the unload before offering to do all of the work themselves. Knowing the Jade Dragon's extremely archaic culture the way that he does, Donovan suggests that they allow them. The crew somewhat reluctantly sits around as the terrorists collect the cargo quietly and efficiently.

"Man, I'm never going to shoot anyone." Prat grumbles.

"Why do you always want to shoot someone?" May asks.

"That was one of the perks when George hired me. You never heard the story?" Prat replies.

"No."

"Damn girl, and how long have you two been fucking?!" Prat exclaims in shock.

Without hesitating, May slaps Prat across the face.

"Watch yourself, boy!" She snarls.

"Damn, you got yourself a keeper, George." Prat laughs, rubbing his cheek.

May feels herself flush beneath her white and black fur, turning her eyes to George. Though he grins and locks eyes with her, he doesn't speak a word.

"So, I was working for these guys at a small base in Sijia way up in District 3. One day I see this ship landing for a delivery and my buddies and I tried to rob it." Prat begins.

"I'm sure it was his idea." George chirps.

"Maybe... Anyway, my buddies and I tried to rob it, and as we're holding this funny looking human at gunpoint, he asks me if I was happy with my job. I said 'not really', and before I knew what happened I was offered my own room, a solid percentage of the take and the right to shoot anyone I deemed a genuine threat." Prat explains.

"I made sure he knew that becoming angry didn't constitute a threat." George adds.

"After that, I shot my buddies, took their guns and credits and hopped aboard!" Prat cheerfully reminisces.

"That sounds about right." May remarks.

"Never thought I would be stuck with guys like this, though." Prat mutters, pointing a thumb at Marcus. "I don't even know how he got on board."

Marcus hops down from a crate and walks over to George, quickly resting a hand on his shoulder.

"This guy saved my life." He begins.

"How's that?" May asks.

“Long story short, I was 21 and walking through a bad part of town. Some guy in a cheap hovervan with holes in the doors asked me for directions. I thought he looked creepy so I pretended not to know. Walking away from the van, two guys came at me with guns and tried to rob me in broad daylight. The guy gets out of the van, pulls a gun and they all start shooting. At end of the battle, both guys were lying dead and the driver, George, was fine. I caught one in the arm, so he raced me to the hospital and even offered to pay my bill, not like he really could at the time. We’ve been friends ever since. I’m actually his first crewmember!”
Marcus explains.

“That’s a much better story!” May grins as she looks to George.

“Whatever. At least I got to shoot people in mine.” Prat grumbles.

As the Jade Dragons load the remaining few crates, Marcus notices something he hadn’t before. On the other side of the last stack of crates is a field of flowers. Rising to his feet, he walks off of the cargo lift and towards the field, intending to pick a few for Gretsch.

“Where are you going?” Donovan asks.

“To pick flowers for my beloved.” Marcus quips.

“Typical.” Prat snickers.

“I think it’s sweet.” May adds, coming to Marcus’ defense.

“Of course you do, but that’s because you’re a bi-”

George promptly kicks Prat in the shin before he can finish speaking.

“Ow! What the fuck, man?!”

“Shut up, Prat.” George smirks.

“I feel like I should have said that.” Whitley murmurs.

The leader of the Jade Dragon crew approaches George and bows.

“Thank you. We’ll take our leave now.” He says softly.

“Safe travels.” George bows back.

“And to you as well.” The Jade Dragon bows again.

Standing roughly 100 meters away, Marcus picks several daisies from the ground, trying to take them by the roots so that they can be planted in a tan vase that he has left unused in the room that he shares with Gretsch. As the Jade Dragon leader turns to walk away, George spots something from the corner of his eye. The Jade Dragons are also very aware of their surroundings, bringing up their weapons as men begin to emerge from the tree line.

“Freeze! We’re here to claim your bounty, Chae-Ku Sin!” A man shouts.

Time appears to slow to a crawl as the Jade Dragons open fire and the Bannockburn's crew drop to the floor of the cargo lift. George looks in horror as Marcus stands between the two sides, caught in the crossfire between the criminals and the bounty hunters. The bounty hunters fire first, rounds zipping past Marcus who brings his arms to his head in a poor attempt to protect himself. The Jade Dragons fire back as elite guards wearing special armor emerge from the nearby ship and scurry off with their leader.

Rounds from the bounty hunters cut into Marcus' arms and shoulders as he tries to run back to the ship, doing his best to keep low. Red mist emerges from him with each strike. George runs toward his best friend as May reaches out for him, unable to hold him back as he races into the line of fire. Right before his eyes, a round from a bounty hunters GS-2 rifle pierces Marcus' skull, blowing out a portion of his face and dropping him to the ground. George pounces upon Marcus' body as the shooting intensifies.

Prat hoots loudly as he kneels against one of the four pillars of the cargo lift, holding a JV-8 along each side and firing wildly. He is clearly having the time of his life. Donovan tries to reach George, but he isn't nearly as eager to die for a comrade, quickly holding his position. To everyone's surprise, George slings Marcus' body over his shoulders. He struggles to stand, relying purely on adrenaline as he rushes back for the ship. Chae-Ku Sin watches from atop the ramp as his fellow Jade Dragons board the ship.

Somehow reaching the Bannockburn without injury, George and the remaining crew raise the cargo lift as the bounty hunters attempt to push forward, bringing out large ground weapons with which to disable the ships. Ein gives the crew a warning before he powers the shields, just in time for the bounty hunters to fire upon the Bannockburn. The round slams into an energy shield, a wave of cobalt blue light emanating from location of the strike. Now safe behind a solid shield, the ship launches as the cargo lift is still rising into the bay.

George kneels over Marcus' body as the others quickly gather around. Marcus isn't moving or replying to George's calls. He rolls him over to check his wounds, though Prat, Donovan, and anyone with working eyes can see that there is no use. May covers her mouth at the sight of Marcus' partially missing face, feeling herself growing queasy. She had seen blood and violence before, but nothing as severe as this. George's eyes well with tears. He can't hold back his emotions, no matter how hard he tries.

"I'm so sorry, Marcus. This is all my fault." He says with a trembling voice. "It should have been me..."

Leaving Ein alone on the bridge, Whitley, Gretsche and Fiona rush into the cargo hold when they fail to get a response over their comms. Gretsche stops in her tracks as she sees Marcus lying across the floor, a pool of blood growing larger at George's legs. They hadn't yet told the crew, but Gretsche has recently found out that she is pregnant.

“Oh God, Marcus. I’m so sorry!” George cries.

Kneels in his best friend’s blood and crying like a little child, George lifts Marcus’ body and holds it. Gretsche’s eyes well with tears, her hands covering her snout as she slowly steps inside. No one, not even Prat or Whitley dare to speak as they watch George rocking slowly back and forth with Marcus’ head and mangled face resting on his arm. May begins to cry, slowly sitting down on the floor at the awful sight. Her eyes glance down to Marcus’ hand, still clutching three daisies that he intended for his girlfriend.

They spend so much time in the cargo hold that Ein eventually sets down in the forest when he is certain that they aren’t being followed. Leaving the ship’s engines running and the shields up, he races down to find the others, shocked at the sight of Gretsche weeping over Marcus’ body. Even Prat sheds at least one tear as they disrobe and wrap his corpse. They prepare it for a proper burial, fully intending to give Marcus the respect and dignity he deserves by buying him a plot in a Martian cemetery.

Resting his body away from the pool of blood, George orders a crying Fiona and distraught Ein to head for a major city on Mars, the very same where James resides. They don’t hesitate. May watches as George himself cleans up the blood of his best friend, picking up a piece of skull from the ground and saving it. Sopping up the blood and collecting the brain matter, George doesn’t allow anyone else to help him, as though he were self-punishing for Marcus’ death.

After reaching the city, they contact the proper authorities, concocting a story that they will believe.

As night falls on Mars and the crew struggle to cope with his death, May walks the halls toward George's quarters. Unwilling to disturb him should he not be in the mood, she knocks on the door rather than barging in. As the door slides open, George stands before her with a tan vase in his arms. He has already cleaned himself up and changed his bloodied clothes.

"What's that for?" She asks.

"Marcus was going to use this. Gretsch didn't want the flowers, so I'm keeping them." He replies.

With a hand motion, George invites May into his home aboard the ship. She sits on his bed as he sits down at a small two-person dinner table fused to the wall. She watches him and his perplexing behavior as George places a layer of dirt in the vase before burying the saved chunk of Marcus' skull, placing another layer of dirt and planting the daisies in the top layer.

"Now he won't ever be gone." George says softly.

He stares at the vase for a moment before hanging his head. His long hair runs like a chestnut waterfall as he buries his face in his hands, weeping uncontrollably. The guilt crushes him like the gravitational force of a black hole.

Quick to act, May walks up to George and rests a hand on his shoulder and another on his head, pulling him closer so that he rests against her toned belly.

"It's not your fault. You did everything you could and we all saw it." She assures him with a soft and gentle voice.

"I should have done more." George chokes out.

"You couldn't have. He knows that you tried your best, and I know that Marcus wouldn't hold a grudge. He loved you."

"I'm going to miss him." George murmurs.

"I know."

She pulls him gently from the table and brings him over to his bed. Sitting him down atop the bed, she gently pushes him back so that he'll lie down, even removing his boots for him. As May begins to walk around the bed, intending to sit with him, George reaches out and grabs her wrist.

"Please don't leave." He whimpers.

Her heart burns, both from his grasp and the somewhat frightened tone of his voice. Sitting down on the bed, May crawls over to him and lies down beside him.

"Thanks." He murmurs.

“It’s alright. How long do you want me to stay?” She asks, testing him.

“Can you stay the night?” He replies.

“Yeah.” She subtly grins.

After kicking off her own shoes, May lies back down with George, both of whom are otherwise fully dressed. He quickly pulls her in, wrapping an arm around her while the other tucks underneath his own pillow for support. She scoots back as he spoons with her, resting his chin atop her shoulder and placing his face near hers.

“Are you alright?” May asks, glancing over her shoulder.

She mentally rests her face in her hands when she realizes the foolishness of her question.

“I care about you, May... You’re very special to me.”

“Really?” She asks, her heart fluttering.

“Yeah. I need you to know that I enjoy you for more than just sex. I always like being around you.” George admits.

“Me too.” She softly replies.

George gives her a tender kiss on the cheek and seems to relax. After a pause, her curiosity gets the better of her.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me before, like after the first or sixth time that we slept together?”

“Life is too short, but I didn’t really realize that until today. If something happens to me or you, and I damn sure hope it doesn’t, I didn’t want it to be left unsaid.” He answers.

“Well, I’m glad you said it.” She coos.

“Me too.”

Satisfied with his response, May is content to lay silently beside him. Though the circumstances leading up to his confession were horrible, she can’t help but be glad that it pushed him into it. Closing her eyes, she pushes her backside against him even harder and drapes her tail over his waist. As the pair fall asleep together, Gretsch lies in her bed alone. Unable to sleep, she stares at the empty space no occupied by a framed photograph of the couple. With a hand resting on her stomach, she wonders what her future holds, if anything at all.