

Lacuna Blue

By Mantrid Brizon

Chapter Six: Grandiose

It has been nearly two months since Marcus McKraken's funeral on Mars, which occurred two days after his death. George paid for everything, placing Marcus in the nicest section of the cemetery. Without much choice but to press on, the crew have maintained their criminal ties, running cargo for Kazimir and other black marketeers to various criminal planetary bases and space stations. They opted not to replace their lost engineer, all chipping in to maintain and clean the ship on their own. Making multiple shorter runs to more populated bases near Earth and Mars proved the most practical move.

The Bannockburn's captain and crew are flush with credits but their newfound wealth doesn't give Gretsche any comfort. The two-month pregnant Voeldahn woman works quietly, living her life in perpetual mourning. At first May, Fiona and the others would routinely attempt to lift her spirits and even Prat occasionally tried his hand, but all was for naught. They have since adapted to Gretsche's quiet and sorrowful demeanor. Gretsche wanders the halls of the Bannockburn, a hand resting over her stomach which has

get to show her condition. Her ears perk at the sound of the ship's intercom activating.

"Crew to the lounge. The furless one wants to waste our valuable off-duty time."

"You can't be even a little respectful?" George's distant voice asks in the background.

"No." She happily retorts before turning off the intercom.

Gretsch's lips subtly curl at the corners of her snout. At least everyone else is handling life without Marcus. Their consistency helps considerably to stabilize her wildly fluctuating moods. Promptly turning around, she heads directly for the bridge a level above her. As she walks toward the junction and follows a hall, the door to the bridge opens and both Ein and Whitley emerge.

"Hey, Gretsch!" Ein happily greets her.

"You doing alright?" Whitley asks.

Gretsch nods, holding up a hand as if to wave to the two, though she doesn't move it.

"Still got that 'vow of silence' thing going on?" Whitley asks.

Gretsch shakes her head.

“Oh.”

“Leave her alone, man. She’s still in mourning.” Ein chastises Whitley.

“I was in mourning too, then it became noon.” Whitley chuckles.

“Shut up, Whitley.” Gretsch sighs.

Walking together in silence, the three spot Donovan as he steps into the lounge. Entering right behind him, the entire crew stands within the room, gathered in a semi-circle around George. At the front and near his right stands May, and near his left stands Fiona.

“Now that we’re all here, I had a thought.” George begins.

“For once.” Fiona quips.

“Seriously? This is actually important, so pick on me after business hours.” He says to her.

“Oh, alright.” She grins.

“As I was saying... What has been the biggest issue with all of our jobs lately?” George asks, pacing before the crew.

“That they’re illegal.” Gretsch replies.

“Well, aside from that part.”

“There’s something worse?” Fiona raises a brow.

“Oh yeah. It’s the delivery.” George answers.

**“Well, that’s... Kind of what we do. We deliver stuff.”
Fiona smirks.**

“Maybe we shouldn’t?” George grins.

“I don’t get it. How will we make credits?” Prat asks.

George retrieves a small personal computer from a pants pocket, resting it in the palm of his hand. With the press of a tiny button, the device awakens and reveals the last page that he had open. On the blue holographic screen is an image of a cylindrical space station.

“I don’t want to work construction.” Prat remarks.

“What?” George asks in confusion.

“Good old, simple minded Prat.” Fiona giggles.

“Hey!” Prat growls at her.

“We construct a modular space station and hide it in the scrap fields over the southern pole of Earth, away from prying eyes. Maybe we’ll even imbed it into an old, mined asteroid? Anyway, we construct this base and use it as a hub for contraband in need of transport. Instead of bringing the goods to the criminals, they can come to us and pick it up. We collect a fee for the pickup and storage, charge extra for expedited shipping, and we can even add a bar module and motel near the airlocks for any crooks who want to stop for a minute.” George excitedly explains.

May grins as she watches him, amused by his exuberance. The pair haven't actively told anyone of their status, not that they needed to. Anyone not legally blind has witnessed May moving into George's quarters and seen how they routinely interact with each other.

"Wait... Can I get thrown out of our bar?!" Prat asks with wide eyes.

"How do you dress yourself?" Fiona laughs, resting a hand over her eyes.

"Uh... Yeah?" George raises a brow.

"Hell yeah! That's the first thing I'm going to do!" Prat grins.

"A man who has his priorities straight." Donovan quietly quips.

"So, we're still criminals then?" Gretsche asks with a sullen sigh.

"When we had Marcus' funeral, the leader of the Jade Dragons gave me a wreath for his grave. *The leader.* He calls himself 'Emperor'. Chae-Ku Sin gave his condolences. Two days later I got a call for a cargo run by a lieutenant from the Lane Jackers. Yes, we're still criminals." George replies.

"I'm going to assume that it won't just be us building this thing." Donovan speaks up.

"No. The Scrappers will help with construction materials and the Sol Rogues seemed eager to supply us with muscle to protect it. They have a vested interest as our

best client, but I'll be paying for most of it and hiring the workers." George continues.

"What are we calling the station?" Ein asks.

"Oberon." May answers for George.

"Wait, you knew about this?!" Ein feigns a gasp.

"She helped me come up with the idea." George replies, draping an arm over May's shoulder.

"You two actually talk?" Prat smirks.

"We do other things... Sometimes." May replies, slipping an arm around George's waist.

"How do you find the time?" Fiona laughs.

"Alright, this meeting is over. I'm sick of looking at all of you." George says, waving them away with his free hand.

The crew quickly dart away, all returning to whatever it was they were doing before. George and May head back for their room, as it is fairly late in the day and they still have another ten hours before reaching Mars on their current delivery. Entering their quarters, the couple quickly relax. May flops down on the bed, her tail hanging over the edge and swaying gently as she pushes off her boots with her feet. George takes a seat at the dinette set and activates his personal computer.

"Maybe I should contact James..." He thinks aloud.

"What for?" She asks while removing her belt.

“Well, we have a lot of credits, but stations are expensive. I might be able to sell him a partnership for some of his capital.” He answers.

“That’s a good idea.” May says, pulling off her shirt.

“Yeah... I think I’ll call him.” He says, bringing up his V.I. bracelet.

“How about you do that later?” She asks, slipping off her pants.

Turning to her, his eyebrows rise and his eyes grow wider at her underwear clad form atop their bed. She holds herself up, leaning on an elbow with her tail curled around and draping across her legs. She extends a hand and points to him, slowly and repeatedly drawing her clawed finger towards her body.

“Or I could call him later.” He says as he climbs atop the bed.

“Good.” She coos, resting a hand on his side.

“I thought we do other things?” He smirks.

“Sometimes.” She winks, pulling him closer and giving him a tender kiss.

Meanwhile, James sits at his desk at work. After receiving the data drive from George, he put it to good use. His superiors, unfortunately, did not pass the data along and warn the board. This did not stop the entrepreneurial James, who quickly dumped all of his available assets, totaling nearly 1,000,000 credits, into the stocks of the rival

company whose data he had stolen. The stocks of Brone Mining, the rival corporation, quickly tripled in value when they went public with their findings.

James purposefully bragged about his windfall to several loose-lipped coworkers, whose natural proclivities spread the word of his incredible foresight. Only three days after Brone Mining went public with their findings, James was approached by the senior vice-president of his company, Cybil-Vallin Mining, also known as CVM. Spinning a clever lie, the ever-convincing James explained that his knowledge was merely a gut feeling. With no evidence to the contrary and a written record of his warnings to his superiors, James was made a lucrative offer.

Now promoted above his former bosses, he became an executive for CVM. Using his wealth from Brone stocks, James bought enough shares to become a board member for CVM, with significant voting power. In the few months since his plan was put into action, he now earns more in a week than he could in a year in his former position. Several months after his promotion he has already earned back all that he had spent on the stocks and bonds that garnered him board membership and more.

As he sits in his office, James prepares himself for a meeting that he's been waiting for since he was promoted. Unfortunately, it wasn't until recently that he was able to carry out this meeting. With his hands clasped together atop his desk, an older Voeldahn man enters the room. James conceals his grin with his balled, two-handed fist.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” The man nervously asks.

“Yes, I did. It’s good to see you again, Bryant.” James begins.

“Likewise.” Bryant nods.

“I wish it could be under different circumstances...”

Bryant’s eyes grow wide, his ears perking and focusing on James’ voice.

“S-sir?” Bryant chokes out.

“I’m sorry, Bryant, but we’re going to have to let you go.”

James tries not to audibly laugh as he fires his former boss, the very man who disregarded his warnings and cost CVM millions of credits. Unfortunately, this wasn’t enough to fire the man but he had recently authorized the opening of a shaft that wasn’t properly secured. The ensuing collapse killed several workers and worse, in CVM’s mind, damaged company machinery. Bryant knows his mistake, as evident by his lowering ears and downward gaze. James is surprised by how well he is taking the news.

“You...” Bryant subtly shakes his head.

“I’m sorry?”

“You were waiting for this ever since you got promoted.” Bryant accuses him.

“You opened a mine shaft that cost company property and employee’s lives.” James calmly answers.

“*You* told me to open it! I followed the instructions that *you* gave me!” Bryant angrily yells.

“And had you properly secured it before digging the shaft, we wouldn’t be here right now.”

“I was given an unreasonable timeframe and I did the job to the best of my ability.” Bryant retorts.

“If the timeframe is unreasonable and unsafe, you bring that to our attention. Those men would be alive and at home with their families right now.”

“Don’t pretend you give a shit about those men, you little bastard!” Bryant screams, frothing at the mouth.

James rests his hands on the armrests of his comfy chair, a finger pressing a specially designed panic button that immediately summons security.

“I’ve been doing this job since you were a kid sucking on your whore mother’s breast! I worked with your father and he was bastard too!”

“Are you done?” James calmly asks.

“Not by far you greedy, power hungry con-artist!” Bryant growls, lunging at James.

Falling atop the desk as several armed guards enter James' office, the burly agents grab Bryant by the belt. They yank away him from James before his clawed fingers can clutch the human's throat.

"Let me go! I'll kill you, James! You've ruined my life and you killed those men! Get off me!" Bryant yells as the security officers drag him out of the office by the arms.

The door slides shut and James runs his hands along the collar and sleeves of his suit jacket. Smoothing out the wrinkles, he quietly chuckles.

"That was fun." He speaks to himself.

With Bryant now but a memory and his other tasks for the day completed, James is quick to leave the office. Flanked by armed security as he leaves the CVM headquarters on Mars, he climbs into his luxurious Rapid Birr, the most expensive hovercar on the market, and races home. No matter how high up the ladder he climbs or how much he earns, the best time of any workday is still when he can return home, or at least the fantasy of it.

Parking his 750,000 credit hovercar, he is greeted by the front desk clerk as he enters the luxurious apartment complex. He prepares himself, taking a deep breath and slowly exhaling as he rides the elevator to the 27th floor. After a painful walk down the long hallway, James enters

the luxury apartment where his wife and children reside. As the door slides shut behind him, he grins at his wife Kelly. She steps up to him with their son in her arms. Little Kyle grabs at her long blonde locks, giving them a quick tug.

“Hey babe.” James says with a smile.

She grins, her big green eyes narrowing slowly.

“About fucking time!” Kelly growls.

“It’s great to see you too.” He murmurs.

“I told you I needed a nanny!” She growls.

“Right...” He sighs.

“I still want to go out, you know. We haven’t had a date in a while.” She continues.

“Sure, let me just get right on that.” James mutters as he sets down his briefcase.

“Don’t you fucking condescend me! You don’t know what I have to go through at home!” Kelly screams.

“I wasn’t doing that babe.”

“Yes, you were!!!”

Little Kyle begins to cry from the loud noise, biting on his own hand and turning away from his mother.

“Look at what you did!” She continues.

“What I did? All I do is damn near everything.”

“Excuse me?” She chuckles in shock.

“I pay all of the bills and provide for you and the kids.”

“Oooh, big man.” She mockingly waves a hand in his face.

“You’re the one who didn’t like any of the nannies we interviewed, so don’t fucking complain, you skag.”

Kelly gasps, a look of shock on her face as though she just walked in on the scene of a murder. James smirks at her silence, feeling as though he had won a great battle. James can never win, a fact that he is quickly reminded of as she smacks him across the face as hard as she can. Taking up his briefcase, the wealthy executive and ruthless business makes a hasty retreat for his office. Kelly snickers as her husband pushes past her, quickly sliding shut and locking the door behind him.

Resting his briefcase down beside his desk, he heads for his mini-bar which is built into a globe of Mars. Fixing himself a strong gin and tonic, he walks over to his desk and drops down into his comfy, red leather wingback chair. The fingers of his free hand stroke the brass buttons holding the leather to the cushion beneath his arm, a nervous tick he does often. His eyes turn to a picture frame that sits atop his desk. James takes a sip of his drink before setting the glass atop a coaster and leaning forward, picking up the framed photo.

Lights imbedded in the oak wood ceiling of his office emit a soft glow. The amber beams bounce off of the glass protecting the image beneath. James looks over the black and white photograph of his brother George, an image taken nearly three years earlier when George first bought the Bannockburn. The port-bow engine is clearly visible as the backdrop. James silently chuckles but soon grows sullen when he realizes that Marcus was the one who took the photograph.

James hasn't seen George since Marcus' funeral, nor have they spoken. James had never seen George so emotional before, even when their own father died. Marcus meant a great deal to his older brother. He examines the photograph and takes another sip of his drink before slumping back in his seat.

"I wonder where you are right now." He thinks aloud.

Gasping for breath, both George and May lie beside each other. Covered in a thin layer of sweat and damp, matted fur respectively, the couple gaze at each other.

"I better call James now." George chuckles.

"Alright, babe." May grins.

Trying to rise from the bed, May quickly grabs his arm and pulls him back. Leaning over her, George rests on his elbows as they share a few kisses.

“Better be careful or we’ll wind up starting another fire.” George winks.

“You can just put it out again.” May coos.

George moves from atop her and reaches for the charger where his V.I. bracelet sits. May climbs up from the bed and heads for the bathroom to wash up as he places a video call. The little blue light of the camera glows and George looks down. Suddenly remembering that he is undressed, he quickly rotates the bracelet so that the camera only shows his face. James rests his now empty glass atop the coaster beside the picture frame as his V.I. bracelet suddenly begins to chime.

“George!” James exclaims as he accepts the call.

“Hey bro.” George’s holographic head says to him.

“Where’ve you been?”

“Around.” George answers.

“I figured. Anything interesting going on lately?”

“Oh yeah...” George grins.

Kelly sits on the couch of their living room sofa in a fancy and tightly fitting black dress. Kyle and Brandy sit on the floor, playing with their little toys. Kelly sighs in frustration, her arms crossed over her chest and tucked beneath her ample bust.

“Are you serious?” James asks in disbelief.

“Do I look like I’m joking?” George replies.

“You never do, but... The Earth-Dem Massacre?! And that’s the kind of stuff that you want get me into?!”

“Not the terrorism; we just deliver of the means to commit terrorism.”

“Is there really a difference?” James raises a brow.

“Oh yeah. This station will streamline the entire process, and will insulate us from that action too... So, are you in?”

James hesitates to answer, his eyes scanning the room of his well-furnished office. The stolen data aside, all of his wealth was earned through traditional, cut-throat business tactics, all very legal. Kelly sighs and heads for the door, finally fed up with waiting. She angrily pounds on the barrier with the bottom of her fist. The loud thumps frustrate James and cause George to pause.

“Hurry the fuck up!” She growls.

“Alright... I’m in.” James nods.