

Lacuna Blue

By Mantrid Brizon

Chapter Nine: Razor's Edge

James paces before the inner airlock door as the Sol Rogue's ship comes in for a landing. His fingers caress his sore and bandaged hand as he rants and raves to himself about Kelly's betrayal. He had been doing this for nearly the entire 36-hour flight back to Mars. Having dropped off their contraband first, the rogue captain flew James to an airfield near his home out of pity. As soon as the airlock doors open, James bolts out. He turns back just long enough to thank them for the ride before bringing up his V.I. bracelet and hailing a taxi.

His stomach perpetually churns from his intense rage, his blood burning in his veins as though it were made out of a powerful acid. The taxi driver appears somewhat bothered by his death glare and constant muttering. Barely 38-hours after first punching the wall, he storms down the hall of the luxury skyscraper and straight toward his apartment. His teeth chatter and his hands tremor from his anxiety, growing worse with each swift step. Standing before the door of apartment 277, he presses his palm to the plate.

The subtle swoosh of the opening door used to bring great joy to James after a hard day of work, but now it only makes him feel anger. Storming inside of the apartment, he sees Kelly rising from the couch, a terrified look on her face. As James stomps ever closer, she takes a few steps back, bringing her hands up to her chest and facing her palms toward him.

“You...” James growls.

“Baby, I’m sorry! It was a one-time thing!” Kelly exclaims.

“And that’s supposed to make it better?!” He yells.

Little Kyle sits on the floor and begins to cry as he watches his parents argue. Brandy seems confused, looking between the two as she sits beside her younger brother. Kelly places her back against a wall as James balls his uninjured hand into a fist. As he raises his hand in the air, Kelly closes her eyes and turns her head. Suddenly a strong grip grabs James’ wrist, forcing him to spin around.

“You!” James growls.

“Yeah, me. What do you think you’re doing hitting a woman?” Jayne asks.

The Voeldahn with horse-like features stands just over 6 feet tall, with a rather toned, perhaps even muscular build and vibrant amber eyes, like a low fire. His golden colored

hair and tail stand out against the otherwise solid black fur of his body. The two stare at each other with narrowed eyes for some time.

"I asked you a question, man." Jayne growls.

"You don't get to ask me shit you wife-fucking skag. This is all your fault!" James exclaims.

"Not from what she says." Jayne remarks.

"Oh, you talk?" James scoffs.

"How do you think I got to fuck her?" Jayne smirks.

"You bastard!" James yells, yanking his arm away.

Jayne raises his brow in surprise at the sudden strength shown by the unassuming looking human. Staring at the man whose wife he's tainted, he suddenly wonders if he bit off more than he can chew. He quickly shakes it from his mind and maintains his dominant, alpha-male facade.

"Babe! It was just a one-time thing!" Kelly exclaims.

"No, it wasn't. We fooled around before we made our home movie, and I've been filling her up every hour since then." Jayne grins.

"Shut up, babe! I mean..." Kelly chokes.

"God damn you! We have kids together! I loved you so much!" James screams at the top of his lungs.

By this point, the commotion has drawn several nosy neighbors who peer inside the still open door to watch. One uses their V.I. bracelet to place a call.

“I needed your attention!” Kelly yells.

“I was near Earth! I can’t teleport here at will, so you ride this guy instead?! What the fuck!”

“Calm down man.” Jayne interjects.

“Fuck you! This is all your damn fault for not keeping it zipped up you fucking man-whore!”

Jayne shoves James, who stumbles back. Though he may be a businessman now, James used to run with his brother in the slums of Sijia on Earth; he knows how to handle himself. Some skills you never forget. Kelly, who knows of James’ past, jumps between her two lovers. James doesn’t hesitate, shoving her hard against a wall.

“Hey!” Jayne yells.

He reaches for James, but the well-dressed human dives out of the way, his loosened tie flailing as he moves. Before the muscular Voeldahn can spin around and face his opponent, James kicks the back of his knee and drops him to the ground. Within a split second he punches Jayne in the side of the neck as hard as he can, causing his vision to blur, his head to spin and potentially creating a life-threatening clot. Disoriented and now terrified of the human, Jayne struggles to rise to his feet. James leaps upon his

back, wrapping an arm around his throat and initiating a lethal choke hold.

“James! Please!” Kelly cries.

Their little children scream and the spectators gasp and murmur amongst each other as James quickly strangles Jayne into unconsciousness. Kelly throws herself upon her husband in a desperate attempt to save her lover. Perhaps she just doesn't want James to go to prison for murder, or perhaps she actually likes Jayne? Maybe he was better in bed and she wants to keep him around for more? The thoughts burn in James' mind and his rage finally explodes from within him. Whatever her reasoning, James is on a mission and Kelly is his target.

Throwing her from him, he smacks her with the palm of his broken hand and drops her to the floor before kicking her in the stomach repeatedly as she lay on her side. She chokes and gasps for breath as James beats her, punching and kicking her for some time before straddling her chest. Jayne groans and shifts on the floor as James leans over Kelly's throat with the arm of his good hand. Applying pressure to her neck, she soon passes out but James doesn't stop. James is suddenly pulled from atop her by a disoriented and weakened Jayne.

“You haven't had enough yet?” James grins sinisterly.

“Hell no.” Jayne coughs, trying to act tough.

“Good, because I haven’t even started...”

James lunges at his rival, tackling him and slamming him against the wall. Jayne is amazed by the sheer strength of the human dressed in slacks, a button-up shirt and a tie. James hooks a leg around Jayne’s ankle and pushes him to the side, forcing him off balance and dropping him to the ground with ease. James straddles his chest and grabs hold of his shirt with the fingertips of his injured hand.

“This is for fucking my wife!” James yells before mockingly smacking him in the face. “This is for filming it!” He smacks him again.

“Get off!” Jayne cries out with a trembling voice.

“This is for emailing it!” He smacks him a third time. “And this is for doing it all with my kids around!” James grabs his throat and squeezes hard.

Jayne never expected James to fight this hard, or to be so skilled at it. He isn’t even breaking a sweat! Before he knows what’s happened, he nearly passes out again. Kelly rises to her feet, stumbling and swaying. Looking over his shoulder, James barks incoherently at her. Also standing to his feet, he pulls Jayne from the floor before heaving him at his wife. The Voeldahn slams into her and the pair topple over. As Jayne lands atop Kelly, his bulk audibly cracks several of her ribs. A bystander turns and vomits from the sound alone and Kelly spits up blood.

As James approaches the beaten and bloody lovers, he cracks the knuckles of his good hand. Intent on strangling his wife to death and then her lover, he makes his move. His plans, however, are suddenly interrupted by the stomping of boots. He turns in time to see several police officers charging in. They tackle James and pin him to the ground, quickly handcuffing him and dragging him off. He screams, cries and thrashes as he struggles against the officers while EMTs enter and tend to the wounded lovers.

Taken outside and stuffed into the back of a police hovercar, the still seething James is flown to the local police precinct and booked on charges of assault and battery. As the police had never seen him actively strangling the couple, he avoids two attempted murder charges. Sitting in a cell several hours later with a freshly bandaged and now properly splinted hand, he mumbles to himself, wondering how his life took such a drastic turn. Was this George's fault for Oberon? Was it Kelly's for being a whore? Was it Jayne's for giving into Kelly's feminine wiles?

Maybe it was James' for having George smuggle for him? As he stewes in his own thoughts, he is interrupted by a visit from a lawyer, an older Voeldahn sent by CVM. He sits in his cell as the feline-looking man sits across from him and opens a briefcase placed atop his lap.

"So, I have good news and bad news." The lawyer begins.

"Can I pick?" James asks.

“Pardon?” The lawyer looks up.

“Which news I hear first...”

“Oh... Sure.”

“Bad news.” James sighs.

“Well... The nature of the charges has caused the board to reconsider your position.” The lawyer begins, nervously clearing his throat.

“I’ve been demoted?!” James’ eyes grow wide.

“No... Terminated.”

“WHAT?!” James rises to his feet.

Thrown into yet another violent rage, the frightened lawyer hits a panic button and several correction officers rush in to restrain James once again. After giving him some time to calm down, the lawyer returns to finish his meeting, this time from the safety of the exterior of James’ cell.

“Sorry, sir. I’m having a bad week.” James apologizes to the lawyer.

“I understand. I read the statement that you gave the arresting officers and the admission of the affair by Kelly and Jayne... So, the bad news I told you. The good news is that you aren’t going to be charged with attempted murder, and as a result you can post bail. 300,000 credits and you’re free to go, until trial of course. With her little email video, we might still be able to claim temporary insanity and keep you out of prison, considering you might have seen it more than once, say, just before you came home. I’m certain that we-”

“What about my kids?” James interrupts.

“Right... Well, regardless of the evidence in your email, I don’t think a single judge is ever going to side with you. You did beat her and her lover to within an inch of her life, *in front of the children*, and you had nearly two days to calm down before you got there. Her ‘home movie’ might work for temporary insanity in the assault charges, but nothing we say is going to give you custody of your kids... I’m sorry.”

James can’t help himself and violates an unwritten prison rule; he cries both visibly and audibly. The lawyer is clearly uncomfortable at the situation before him, unsure of what to do. James can hardly wrap his mind around what has happened in barely three days’ time. His wife cheated on him, he lost his job, he will probably lose custody of his children, and now he must attend court for assault. As he sobs, he suddenly has a thought. Medical technology is at a point that only 32-hours after conception a pregnancy can be verified. He wipes his eyes and turns to the lawyer.

“What about Kelly’s condition?” He asks.

“Well... Which one?” The lawyer clarifies.

“You fucking know which one! Did Jayne...” James pauses and hangs his head.

“Oh...” The lawyer clears his throat. “Well, uh... Yes, she was... The beating took care of that though.”

“Oh God...” James grabs the bars. “I’m a fucking killer.”

Their upbringing with their religious grandmother has hardwired James' and George's brains; conception equals life and none can tell them otherwise. The weight of killing an innocent, unborn child with no choice in their creation makes his heart split in two. The pain is actually worse than when he saw the adulterous pornography that Kelly had emailed to him.

"The law is pretty clear on this matter. You're not going to be charged with anything for that, so don't worry." The lawyer assures him.

"Don't worry?! DON'T WORRY?!" James chuckles through his tears. "Do you see where I am?! There's nothing left for me, and now I learn this!"

"It's not all bad. You still have a place on the board! Your shares of CVM can't be taken from you!"

"Just... Get out of here. Come back some other time." James shoos the lawyer away.

The next day, James' lawyer returns and the pair post bail. James is escorted home by police who allow him to pack several bags. Heading for a cheap hotel, as he now needs to be cautious with his funds, James lies on a bed even more uncomfortable than the one aboard the Bannockburn. Staring at the ceiling and wondering what he will do with himself and where he will go, he has a realization. He's already raised his hand to a woman and technically committed murder, two actions he never thought he would ever do.

He's stolen data from a rival mining company, playing them *and* his own company for his benefit. He tried to help run Oberon with George, a station catering to criminals. Perhaps this is just the life that he is forced to live? If that's the case, why not embrace it? Still needing to return to his office at CVM to collect his personal belongings, he will have ample time to guarantee his future and take his revenge on the company at the same time. With his mind made up, James climbs out of bed and sets aside the suit that he'll wear when the time comes.

Returning to his workplace for the first time since he had taken his paid vacation, and without police escort, James heads directly for his office. Few speak to him but all notice his presence. He can't help but feel the stares of his fellow employees burning through him like powerful laser beams. Reaching the door to his office, he is stopped by the president of CVM himself, who shakes his good hand and offers his condolences for his personal and legal situation.

"Oh no, I fully understand." James lies with a pleasant smile.

"Good. I just want you to know that we'll miss you and your go-get-'em attitude." He continues, taking out an envelope from his inner suit-jacket pocket. "This is severance pay, plus a letter of recommendation complete with my signature. Take care of yourself and good luck in court, Mr. Woods."

"Thank you, sir!" James chirps.

He watches the president walk away from him and return with his cronies into a conference room.

“... Bastard.” James quietly snarls.

Heading inside of his office, James slowly packs his belongings into a large box. He cleans his personal data from his terminal while packing the box, as is protocol for someone leaving the company for any reason. After erasing his personal data, he takes a seat at his chair and pours the last of a small bottle of scotch into a crystal glass. Taking a moment to sniff the drink, he sighs gleefully as he prepares his work. Using a special data mining bot inserted through an unregistered “ghost drive” and installed via proxy, James takes the time to steal all of the information in CVM’s primary servers.

Stock and bond information, personnel data of other VIPs, upcoming project details and locations, etc. By the time he finishes his drink and sets the glass within his box, the bot’s task is completed. Removing the ghost drive, James slips it into a pocket and then reformats the hard drive of his company terminal. Whistling a pleasant tune as he walks outside with his box of knickknacks, he knows that he will land alright with copies of CVM’s data sitting snugly in his pocket. It’s as good as actual credits.

After returning to his hotel room to set aside the box, James heads for his second and final stop of the day. Using a contact that he’d made when he bought the stolen data

from Brone Mining, he offers the very same rival corporation CVM's data. It doesn't take long to receive an answer, and shortly thereafter he meets an agent for Brone Mining. In exchange for 7,500,000 credits, James sells the ghost drive to Brone Mining. The deal occurs without a hitch and soon James finds himself alone in his cheap motel with a credit chit worth nearly as much as George's ship.

Lying awake that night, James wonders what he will do with his newfound wealth. Where will he live? He can't go home to his own luxury apartment. Does he even dare stay to beat the charges? Looking at the valuable credit chit, he has a realization. If the chit is worth as much as George's ship, why not buy one? It worked for his older brother, and James is a much savvier businessman. Whereas George is a rough diamond, James is polished and set. The next morning, he leaves to see what his options are, just to satiate his curiosity.

He walks inside of a dealership that specializes in large space craft. As Mars' economy has been booming for some time, the dealership is packed with potential customers, many of whom will sign a contract before they leave. After waiting for a moment to speak with a representative, he is greeted by a human of Asian descent, with slicked back shoulder length hair and wearing an expensive blue suit.

"Hello! How may I help you, sir?" The salesman asks.

"Good day. I'm looking for a ship, preferably new, and the smallest size capable of mounting a warp drive.

Luxurious quarters preferred but not required and decent cargo capacity.” James answers.

“You sound like a man who knows what he wants!”

“Of course.” James nods

“I like that. Follow me and I’ll show you our available models that fit your criteria.”

James sits with the salesman for nearly an hour, looking through holographic images of ships and reading their stats and list prices from a special screen that faces him. At first James considers buying a gunboat, the most powerful class of capital ship that civilian’s may own privately. However, he promptly second guesses himself when he realizes that gunboats have very limited cargo space. Considering the wealth that George earned with his *Aplomb*, it’s clear that he will need a transport ship.

He swipes through ship after ship before landing on the AT-1 ‘Spire’ Transport. Though less expensive than George’s VK-95 ‘*Aplomb*’, a ship model he also considered, the smaller and less capable 5,000,000 credit vessel is far more luxurious. The Spire’s hull measures 80 meters long, 35 meters tall, 20 meters wide at the top and 25 meters wide at the bottom, with a vaguely trapezoidal shape. The ship has no wings of any kind, instead with a rounded bow, keel and aft that break up the sharp lines of the cargo area in the center of the craft.

The ship’s trapezoidal cargo bay is loaded through hydraulic, keel-side airlock doors and a cargo lift, very

similar in form and function to the Bannockburn's but smaller. The Spire's hull panels come with a special heat resistant coating that gives it a sandstone color and appearance. A large engine at the aft is flanked by two thrusters with semi-spherical bowls that rotate to adjust thrust, pointing straight when in space or turning 90 degrees to allow for sharp turns or hovering over land.

Two thrusters shaped like miniature conventional rockets at the port and starboard bow near the keel of the ship are mounted on rotating arms. These allow the bow engines to help with acceleration, deceleration and hovering when on a planet's surface. The spaceship is controlled from a bridge built at the aft of the ship measuring 4 meters high, 12 meters wide and 16 meters long. Spire's only require a crew of 4, excluding the captain, who is also considered non-essential to this class of vessel.

In order to decrease the crew count, many control consoles on the bridge are multi-function and the crew are expected to perform multiple jobs. The crew consist of a pilot and dispatcher, navigator and electrical/computer technician, engineer and custodian, science officer and medical technician, and potentially a captain. They live in rather luxurious quarters at the bow of the ship and built to house 10, 5 crew and their spouses, a tradition of Tongyan shipbuilders where the AT-1 'Spire' originates.

Accessing the comfortable quarters requires them to walk through a windowed tunnel that runs along the ceiling and overlooks the cargo hold of the ship, placed neatly

between the crew quarters and the engine room. Other rooms of note, such as a med-lab and commissary are before the engine room and underneath the bridge at the aft of the ship. James stares at the images of the AT-1 with wide eyes and his mouth agape.

“Looks like we have a winner.” The salesman chuckles.

“Where?” James chokes out.

“Where what?”

James motions with his right hand as if signing an invisible document.

“Oh! Right here.” The salesman grins.

James signs and leaves the salesman flabbergasted by paying for the ship immediately and in full.

“It’ll take a day to prepare your new ship, Mr. Woods! In the meantime, we have access to a reliable job board where you may build a crew to run her on whatever endeavors you might undertake.” The salesman giddily explains.

After paying for his ship and the tax, he is left with 2,250,000 credits to his name, more than enough to get started. Though tempted to celebrate the purchase, he still feels a tightness in his chest that hasn’t left since he watched Kelly and Jayne’s video back on Oberon Starport.

He returns to his cheap hotel to spend a final night, lying awake and staring at the ceiling for many hours before finally succumbing to exhaustion. Awakening to a call from the ship dealer, he is quick to pack his meager possessions and head for the airfield.

His ship is even more beautiful in person. The tightness in his chest briefly dissipates as he rides the cargo lift up to program himself in as the owner and captain of the ship. Pressing his hand to the plate mounted to the captain's chair on the bridge, he is given the chance to name his ship. He pauses for a moment, considering his options. Thinking back on George and the Bannockburn, he grins. George had named his ship after a famous ghost ship, conveniently sharing a name with the captain of this vessel. Perhaps that could become a theme for him as well?

After taking a moment to think about it, he enters a name: Zebrina. Though James doesn't share a name with the captain of his ship's namesake, it's good enough for him. With his ship christened and belongings brought on board, he relishes in the rather fancy furnishings of his vessel. Decorative woodwork covers the metal panels, adding more class than weight. The extremely comfortable mattresses came standard with sets of silver, golden, ruby, sapphire, amethyst and emerald bedsheets and pillow cases made of genuine silk.

The Zebrina's commissary, med-lab and even the small armory are decorated with themes to match the rooms function. Paneling covering the bulkhead of the armory

depicts spears and swords, medical symbols line the med-lab walls and depictions of golden fruit and commonly eaten animals make up the décor of the commissary. It's almost too much luxury, but James can't help relishing the attention to detail that Tongyan ship builders are known for.

Two weeks pass and James has lived on board the Zebrina, still waiting for a court date and without any contact with his lawyer, children or Kelly. His prospects are exactly zero and he has yet to hire a crew. Though he spent a considerable sum stocking his ship, roughly 120,000 credits, he hasn't yet even started the engines. As he sits in the commissary alone eating a rehydrated steak for breakfast, he watches the local Martian news.

"We interrupt your previously scheduled programming to bring you this special report!" A female voice exclaims in usual melodramatic fashion.

"What now?" James sighs, taking a bite of his steak.

"A space station has been discovered in a field near Earth! Recently constructed and unregistered, this station is thought to be a new base for a criminal organization like the dreaded Sol Rogues or Lane Jackers!"

James stops mid-bite and stares with wide eyes at the screen. To his horror an image of Oberon flashes, but it looks horribly damaged.

“The station at first appeared to be the victim of piracy, possibly due to another faction preemptively destroying it. However, the few remaining survivors, though barely coherent, told a different story. Left to die by whoever authored the construction of the base, they began to starve. Murder, rape and even cannibalism became the norm in this icy prison, a hellscape in the void of space!”

“Oh God...” James chokes out.

“The station’s computers listed 400 workers, but only 38 were found alive. Blood, bones and bodily waste littered the living quarters of the station. Many of the survivors had to be forcibly committed into a mental asylum after being driven insane by the trauma of their situation. The Sol Police are calling this the most heinous crime in recent history, and possibly of this century! Full story, tonight at eight! And now back to ‘Tetrahedron Of Wealth’!”

James races from the table and heads for his room, promptly accessing his personal terminal there. Using the job board for the first time, he posts an add looking for a crew for exploratory work within local Sol space. He knows what will happen if he leaves the planet and he doesn’t care. He will accept the warrant for his arrest and subsequent bounty for violating his bail agreement. If George abandoned Oberon, something horrible must have happened, especially for James to have never heard from him. With any luck, he will find a crew within the day and can begin the search for his missing brother.