

Lacuna Blue

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Chapter Eleven: Lost

With a straightforward course to Hyperion set, the warp bubble activated and the autopilot engaged, the crew of the Bannockburn resign themselves to the long and boring journey through space. Of all the moons of Saturn, it is the least used and most often forgotten. The trip will take another 16 days, as it takes 17 days to reach Callisto from Earth. Thankfully George keeps the Bannockburn well stocked. A packed commissary and emergency food reserves stowed within the cargo hold could easily keep them alive for 90 days, excluding whatever snacks they've already stashed away in their private quarters.

The crew entertain themselves as they often do. Prat, Donovan, and Ein play cards, quickly learning that Colette is a skilled poker player. George, May and Kira spend their time together roaming the ship, watching movies, exercising in the gym, or just talking. Garin is the most reclusive of the crew, virtually unseen throughout the entire trip; even Rakshasa is often spotted walking the halls or playing with medical equipment and chemicals in the med-lab. On the

last full day of flight, Kira spots George, May and Rakshasa heading for the cargo hold.

“Hey guys!” She chirps, chasing after them.

“What’s up, girl?” May asks with a smile.

“Nothing. What are you doing?” Kira asks.

“Rocky wants to check up on our guests before we arrive tomorrow.” George answers.

“It would be unfortunate if any of the product were lost and we had to take a pay cut.” Rakshasa speaks in an eerie monotone.

“Mind if I tag along?” Kira asks.

“By all means, fuzzy muffin.” George teases.

“I fucking hate that name.” She mutters.

“I know.” He grins.

“Be nice, little bear.” May coos.

“Oh, alright.”

Inside of the cargo hold, Kira sits on the floor and watches as Rakshasa uses a handheld device from the med-lab. Plugging the device into a port at the base of each tank, she is able to read the levels of the liquified food and sedatives, the amount of strength left in the rebreathers that supply their oxygen, and even their vital signs. Crate after crate she checks, moving slowly through every stack. All of the slaves are alive, though their liquid food, medication and oxygen scrubbers are at critical levels.

"We'd better be able to drop them off tomorrow, or we're going to have a real problem." Rakshasa says to George.

"We'll be fine, Rocky. No worries." He assures her.

"I'm merely stating a fact. I *never* worry." She retorts.

"So I've noticed." He murmurs.

"Do you ever feel even a little sad for these people?" Kira suddenly asks.

The others turn and look to her.

"I mean, especially the women. Let's not lie to ourselves. We *know* what's going to happen to them." She adds.

"Hey, they're the ones in the crates, not me. It's not my problem." May callously replies.

"Really?!" Kira asks, more curious than upset.

"Yep." May nods.

"Hmm... What about you, Doc?"

"Nope!" Rakshasa swiftly blurts out.

"And you, George?" Kira asks.

"That's a complicated answer." He begins.

"Is it?"

"It is. You see, most people don't think. They listen to music while taking a jog around their neighborhood at night,

or they walk down an alley to help a stranger who is just bait for muggers. People desperate for work don't think about their safety and end up leaving countries to *possibly* get jobs as a nanny or a housekeeper, only to be murdered, pimped out or shipped in one of these boxes. Does it bother me? ... Yeah... But they also brought it on themselves and that's not my fault."

"Well, that's a valid argument I suppose." Kira shrugs her shoulders.

"And an oft truthful one." Rakshasa adds.

"What about you? Do you feel sad for them?" George asks Kira.

"Hah!" She laughs.

"Good answer." May grins.

The next day, the crew sit in the bridge and exit the warp bubble, swiftly approaching the oblong, porous rock that is Hyperion. With special codes that allow the ship's sensors to pinpoint a beacon emitting an encrypted signal, they find the base in short order. Flying low and carefully over the surface of the moon, Ein closes in on the Con-Tali base. Reaching the structure, they discover that the base isn't really a base at all, but a modified ship, an MBX-2160 'Endurance' class ship that was once a common sight when hyper drives were new inventions.

Only half the speed of a modern ship, these outdated craft are exceptionally large, designed to house up to 1,000 people; a crew of 200 and their families. The Endurance class vessels took multiple years to build, even when at the

peak of their popularity. They utterly dwarf George's VK-95 'Aplomb' class transport. Unlike the 130-meter length of his ship, an MBX-2160 is nearly 700 meters long. The MBX-2160 has a diamond shaped fuselage that is 80 meters wide at the flattened top and bottom, but 180 meters wide in the center, which is 100 meters wider than the VK-95.

The Bannockburn has 3 main decks, with a bridge at the center-bow, being 40 meters tall in total. An Endurance has 10 decks, with a bridge house atop the hull of the ship and two-thirds from the bow, nearly the size of the VK-95 itself. Including the bridge house, this ship is 300 meters tall. A powerhouse juts from the portside about one-third from the bow and generates electricity for the small city housed within the craft. It's fed by 6 massive fuel tanks, 3 above and 3 below, which can supply the powerhouse for 3 years when running non-stop and at high-output, each tank holding 6 months of fuel.

The rear engines and hyper drive of the MBX-2160 requires no less than a full-sized nuclear reactor with 6 rods. The Endurance is so large that the Bannockburn can fly into a rear-facing ship bay built into the keel of the vessel and just forward of the rear engines, designed for emergency shuttles, though military grade vessels could house three dozen short range fighters. As they circle the vessel, they are cleared to dock. The massive bay doors slowly inch open, revealing the dark cavern within.

The Bannockburn crawls its way into the bay, the icy blue lights on the port and starboard arms, bow and aft of

the ship barely illuminating the interior. As the outer airlock doors slowly slide closed behind the craft, dim amber spotlights begin to flicker and glow. With the landing gear deployed, Ein carefully touches down on a landing pad, the rectangular feet of the ship scraping the rust brown metal plates beneath. The inner airlock doors slide closed and the crew hear a loud hiss; the air is quickly pumped back into the bay.

Several more spotlights turn on and illuminate a large series of double doors at the end of the bay. George and his crew watch with nervous anticipation as they creep open. They breathe a collective sigh of relief when only one man emerges from the doors, accompanied by a series of robotic loaders. He brings his V.I. bracelet to his lips and speaks, his voice booming loudly from a series of speakers within the bay.

“You just made it! Any longer and we might have been spotted by that EarthSpan base on Titan. You also won’t be able to leave for the next 12 hours, unless you want to get caught. Might as well hang out for a bit.” The man says.

George checks with May and Ein, who quickly verify the man’s story. Hyperion’s orbit, however chaotic, still takes them directly over a legitimate base that could easily spot them and blow the Con-Tali ship’s cover. With no signs of a threat to his crew, George has Ein shut down the Bannockburn’s engines before granting both he and Kira permission to leave. The white furred Voeldahn literally jumps at the chance to follow George and May to the cargo

hold. With weapons slung, just in case, the entire crew of 9 ride the cargo lift to the ground with their haul.

“Good to finally see those beautiful green crates.” The man says.

“They’re olive drab.” Colette remarks.

“Still a shade of green, babe. Anyway, I’m the foreman here!”

“A pleasure. So... Need a hand with the cargo?” George asks.

“Nah. You can only use your hands for so long, am I right?! That’s what some of that cargo’s for!” The foreman chuckles.

Prat and Garin both snicker, though the rest remain stone-faced.

“Sorry. Bad joke. Anyway, my droids can handle it.” The foreman continues.

“Do you have anything going out?” George asks.

“You’re heading back to Earth?” The foreman raises a brow.

“Well, Titan is right there.” George replies.

“... What?”

“You guys aren’t mining water, are you...” George sighs.

“Hell no! Is that what they told you?! Hah! Those guys.” The foreman begins, his long tail swaying gleefully.

"Fucking figures..." May murmurs.

"So, what *do* you make here?" Kira asks.

"Well, babe, we cook up the most potent sky dust you've ever seen in your life." He answers with a smug grin.

"I *hate* being lied too..." George grumbles to himself.

"Easy babe." May coos, gripping his shoulders and tenderly kissing his cheek.

"Is the purity above 80%?" Rakshasa asks.

"Oh yeah! It's so strong that it'll blow the fur right off of you with one sniff! Don't let your humans get it though. You know what that stuff does to their libido." The foreman winks.

"Really?" Kira grins.

"Oh yeah! Through the roof. That and their paranoia; after they rape you a few times, they'll interrogate you for being alien spies or something." The foreman remarks.

"Mmm... Is it still rape if you like it?" Kira asks May.

"What are you paying to transport it back to Earth?" George asks.

"Paying? We sell it wholesale, mister. First come, first serve. Whatever you buy is pure profit on your end, same as the risk."

George's eyebrows raise. He's never had the option to buy weight before. Though he doesn't look back, he can hear the rest of the crew murmuring behind him. They all contemplate the same thing; there is a vast fortune to be made if they were to buy sky dust on their credits and

safely return it back to Earth. Without them asking, the foreman shares the price of the sky dust with George and his crew, all but guaranteeing the purchase. Suddenly, a low buzz emanates from one of the crates.

“Oh, shit! They’re out!” The foreman exclaims.

“Out of what?” Ein asks.

“Out of everything! The tanks are pre-loaded to run dry at the same time. We have to get them into holding before they start waking up!”

The foreman brings up his V.I. bracelet, calling any available personnel to the bay. Within minutes, at least 50 Con-Tali chemists, engineers, security officers, and other assorted personnel flood the bay. Using several power loaders to carry multiple crates at a time, the robotic loaders and old-fashioned muscle power, the terrorists rush every crate from the Bannockburn’s cargo lift as swiftly as possible. Prat’s ears perk as he hears what sounds like a muffled voice and thudding from inside one of the crates.

George, genuinely bothered by the sight, brings his crew close, waiting at the back of the cargo lift. As soon as the last crate is unloaded, he activates the lift, raising it into the hull of his ship.

“Wait! Don’t you want to buy that sky dust?!” The foreman yells up.

“We’ll think on it. We’ve got about 11 hours left.” George answers.

“Okay!”

The lift locks into place, though the keel side airlock doors don’t close; George left them open. Sighing, George runs his fingers through his long, wavy brown hair.

“Are you alright, little bear?” May coos, gently grabbing his shoulders.

“Yeah. I just... I have a lot on my mind.” He replies softly, placing a hand over hers.

“Thinking about all that money, little bear?” Prat asks, mocking May’s gentle tone.

George spins around, backhanding Prat in the face and splitting his lip. Prat stumbles back, grabbing his snout from both pain and shock. Everyone looks surprised by the brief assault, stepping back from the two men.

“The fuck?! You smacked me like I was some bitch!” Prat growls.

“I smack them like I see them.” George glares.

“If you weren’t my captain I’d-”

“What?! You’d what?!” George snarls, stepping up to Prat.

Their noses nearly touch as Prat quickly looks over the enraged human. Though he has no idea why, something set him off. As George's fingers flex, his hand hanging near his blaster, he can tell that the human is deadly serious. Prat takes a step back, genuinely afraid for his life.

"I'm sorry, man." He quietly apologizes.

Without answering, George sighs and shakes his head. As he reaches a hand out, Prat flinches and takes a step back but George is adamant. Resting his hand on his shoulder, he gives him a friendly pat. Turning back to May, George walks up to her and takes her hand before leaving the cargo hold.

"What the hell was that?" Ein asks

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say he wasn't okay with this job." Kira comments.

"He was about to shoot me." Prat croaks, still in shock.

"Finally." Ein murmurs.

Several hours pass; the crew spend their time as they would if they were in deep space. Sitting in the lounge, Prat, Donovan, Ein and Colette play cards. The ship's intercom suddenly clicks on and George's voice comes through. He calls the entire crew to the lounge. Only a moment later, George and May enter the room.

“Hey there. Feeling better?” Ein asks the human.

“Yeah. Just had to blow off some steam.” George replies, smacking May’s butt.

“I bet.” Donovan smirks.

Within moments, the remaining crew arrive with Kira rushing in first, followed by Rakshasa and then Garin.

“Now that we’re all here, I’ve decided to throw my credit chit at that deal. I know it’s a big risk, but if we do this, I’ll see a nearly seven-fold profit, and that’s a big percentage for all of you.” George begins.

“What can you afford?” Kira asks.

“I have 8,000,000 credits to my name. May volunteered 1,000,000. That makes Earth wholesale value just shy of 60,000,000.”

“Is that all you can afford?! If you want to buy more, I’ll throw in some credits!” Prat eagerly offers.

“Yeah, I’m down for that.” Donovan nods.

Soon, the rest of the crew all volunteer their funds to help pay for more narcotics. This brings their total investment to 15,000,000 credits, and with an earth wholesale value of 100,000,000 credits. The crew agree that in exchange for receiving double their investment, they will also earn their usual 10% from the reminder, while George will keep his 20%, as usual. With 7 hours left before they will be able to leave, the entire crew leave the ship and enter the bay to find the foreman.

Walking through the bay and past the still opened double doors, they find themselves in a hallway. Leading down a long corridor, they walk through the hall, as it heads toward the bow of the ship. They pass through another set of opened doors, now finding a hallway lined with rooms that appear to be low-end crew quarters. As the clanking of 9 pairs of boots and shoes hits the metal floor plates, George stops when he suddenly hears a noise. The thuds and clanks of someone struggling against bondage equipment emanates from a room.

“Please! Please unstrap me! I’m begging you!” A muffled woman’s voice cries out.

“Yeah, I like that. Keeping begging.” An equally muffled male voice growls.

“I won’t run! Please just unstrap me!”

“But I like it like this, baby.” He says in an unnervingly gentle tone.

“No! Not again! Please, God!” She wails.

“Yeah, I’ve got *a lot* more for you.”

“What did I do to deserve this?” She whimpers.

“Alright, shut up! You’re making this weird.” The man grumbles.

“Babe?” May calls softly to George.

George turns back, glancing over his shoulder at her. The crying slave girl’s wails are soon silenced entirely,

possibly by a ball gag or a cloth being stuffed into her mouth. Now only able to hear the sounds of the man's loud grunts of pleasure, the creaking of wood and the thudding of her body against her device, George's eyes water. Looking at the others, his focus landing on every female crewmember, he notes that none of them seem remotely phased by the slave girl's terrible plight.

May and Kira, specifically, look to him with great concern, as though they did not even hear her cries; they are purely concerned with whatever is upsetting George. Not wanting to appear weak in front of them, he takes a deep breath and shakes it from his mind, turning back to the hallway ahead. He marches on, briefly leaving them all behind. They quickly catch up to him and May leans in closer.

"Are you alright?" She asks.

Her tone is soft and tender, something she didn't show when they heard the cries of anguish from the molested slave girl. It somehow quells the turmoil within his heart, making him forget about the suffering of a complete stranger whom he brought there.

"Yeah... I'm fine." He murmurs.

Quickly finding the foreman in a lounge further down the hall, they make him an offer. To their surprise, their

15,000,000 credits will buy all of the sky dust that he has to offer. Making the purchase, they return down the hallway and back to their ship. The entire deal takes all of several minutes. Walking back through the hallway, George turns his eyes, glancing toward the door where the earlier sounds had originated. It suddenly slides open and a Voeldahn man steps out.

The unassuming man with rabbit-like features adjusts his pants and tucks in his button-up shirt. The well-dressed man reaches into the room and retrieves a lab coat from a hanger by the door. Donning the garment, an embroidered badge labeling him as a chemist can be seen. Passing the room, he turns his head to look at the chemist, noticing another man inside, who quickly drops his pants. He appears to have been watching and waiting the entire time.

Without stopping or looking back, George never sees exactly who is in the room, or what she is strapped too; he'd rather not know. George and his crew enter the bay to find that robotic loaders are putting 6 pallets of sky dust atop the lift, the exact amount they've purchased. Quickly boarding the cargo lift, he activates it and closes the keel side airlock door. Turning back, he glances at the double doors of the hallway.

"Mr. Hirota?" George begins.

"What's up, cap'n?" Ein replies.

"Prep the ship for takeoff. We're getting the fuck out of here."

“But, the doors...” Ein retorts.

“Let me worry about those... Prat!”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to shoot something?” George grins.

“Always!”

Walking down the hallway that leads to the bay, the foreman pushes a faded button beside a door. Creaking open, the gears pull the door to the side and allow him entry. He steps inside of the room where they’ve strapped down a slave girl for entertainment. A man pulls up his pants, having just finished with her.

“Damn, I’m sorry... I’m normally not that fast but it’s been a long time.” The man says to the semi-conscious slave girl.

“Which one are you?” The foreman asks.

“Huh? Oh, uh... I think the 6th? That dickhead, Steve, went twice in a row.” The man answers.

“Fucking Steve.” The foreman chuckles.

He glances to the black furred rabbit Voeldahn who lies strapped to a wooden bench which is bolted to the floor. Her fur is matted with sweat, among other things. A ball gag sits in her mouth with a leather strap holding it in place.

“Well, I’m going next so jus-”

A loud blast and a rush of air cuts him off, mid-sentence. Pulled back by a powerful force, the other man is sucked from the room, his face slamming into a closed bulkhead across the hall and splitting his head open. The foreman holds on for dear life as the vacuum of space pulls him back. Losing his grip, the man is drawn through the hallway, along with the oxygen. Flying into the bay, the ship’s emergency systems kick in a few seconds too late; he is trapped in a depressurizing room without a suit.

His body slams into the Bannockburn’s rear landing gear, breaking his back near the shoulders and causing his body to fall limp. Having fired through both sets of airlock doors with the ship’s plasma cannons, he flies into void of space, smacking into a jagged rock on the surface of Hyperion before finally succumbing to the nothingness around his flesh. Ein flies the ship through the massive hole, made in only a few shots. These MBX-2160’s are not nearly as sturdy as modern craft, a major reason for them falling out of use, regardless of their other, rather impressive capabilities.

“Was that really necessary?” Donovan asks his captain.

“No.” George grins, looking at the foreman’s body through the window. “But it was pretty damn funny.”

“Hell yeah, it was!” Prat laughs.

“Set a course for Earth. Let’s get rid of this shit as fast as possible.” George orders, resting his hands over May’s shoulders.

“Yes, sir.” She grins.