

Lacuna Blue

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Chapter Twelve: Power Play

After just over a month flying through space, the Bannockburn finally returns to Earth. As soon as they exit the warp bubble, George orders Kira to contact their handlers at the Sol Rogue headquarters. Receiving the coordinates for the new base, as they swap locations on a monthly basis for security reasons, Ein swoops in. This base, located in Soyuz and very near Kira's hometown, is quite new and doesn't yet have a proper landing pad, forcing the crew to make their deal at Kazimir's place.

"Excited to see your dad after so long?" May asks Kira.

"A little. I'm more excited to get the hell out of here, though. This place is a dump." She replies.

"At least he cares about you. You should have heard the tirade he flew into when I told him you stowed away in a crate. He was about ready to tear Prat's head off." George adds.

"Why me?!" Prat exclaims defensively.

"Why not?" Ein snickers.

“You’d better knock it off or you’ll have to fly this ship with no arms.” Prat growls.

“We’d just buy him robotic replacements.” George comments.

“Oh! Then I could play five finger fillet!” Ein quips.

“Man, I could go for a fillet right now...” Prat remarks.

Flying in low, Ein sets down on Kazimir’s landing pad. For once, the weather is calm and the wind is nearly non-existent. Riding the cargo lift down, the entire crew prepare for an extended stay at Kazimir’s base, however small it may be. Standing near the landing pad, the white furred Voeldahn man waits eagerly to see his daughter. A second, much smaller Voeldahn stands beside him, with a hood pulled over their head. Stepping off of the cargo lift, Kazimir rushes up to the group and embraces Kira.

“I have missed you so much, my child!” He exclaims.

“It’s good to see you too.” She replies, holding him tightly.

“I see my friend is taking care of you. You feel... Healthier.” He quips, squeezing her waistline.

“Dad!”

“Nothing else to do but eat and exercise.” George remarks.

“So I see.”

“Dad!” Kira whines in embarrassment.

“Keeping her out of trouble, yes? I like you and I don’t want to have to kill you.” Kazimir grins at the human.

“He’d never let anything happen to me.” Kira swiftly defends George.

“That’s good. I’d be upset too.” Kazimir’s companion speaks.

Kira immediately recognizes the female voice, releasing her father and stepping toward the slender framed Voeldahn. The feline tail swishes as the woman pulls down her hood, revealing her youthful face. A short snout and pink nose sit before vibrant yellow eyes. Her fur is a soft but thick, gray and white two-tone; white is at her front and gray on her upper head, back and tail. Her forehead bears a black mackerel marking like a tabby, with black stripes through the gray of her tail, which sways gleefully at Kira’s appearance.

“Mishka!” Kira exclaims, swiftly hugging the woman.

“Hello, Kira!” Mishka hugs her back.

“It’s good to see you! It’s been a long time! You are working with the Sol Rogues now?!”

“Yes. I’m not just a humble mechanic anymore.” Mishka answers.

“That’s quite a promotion.” May remarks.

“Well, a lot of people went to jail and I’m the only one left, so I’m the new boss.” Mishka admits.

“That’s one way to do it.” Donovan mutters, holding his coat tightly to his body.

**“Come inside! My new workers will unload for you!”
Kazimir exclaims.**

The Voeldahn waves them over, a wide grin plastered across his face. The crew and Mishka follow him into a doorway that caps a subterranean dwelling while a few of Kazimir’s employees approach the pallets with power loaders. Primarily his own living quarters, the dwelling also contains a buried bunkhouse, a place where the crews of several smaller craft can stay while waiting to be, loaded, unloaded, refueled or repaired. A series of folding metal picnic tables beside a simple, handmade kitchenette serve as a commissary.

The crew, Mishka and Kazimir take seats at several tables, and though the crew are prepared to speak business with Mishka, their Sol Rogue contact, she has other plans.

“So where did you buy your product from?” She asks.

“The Con-Tali base on Hyperion.” George answers.

“Really?! Wow! Did you see it?!” Mishka excitedly asks.

“See what?” Kira replies.

“You mean you didn’t hear what happened?!”

“Hear what?” George reiterates.

“That Con-Tali base you went too was spotted by EartSpan! They went in with fighters but the Con-Tali started shooting so EarthSpan hulled the whole base! No one survived!” Mishka dramatically explains.

“Is that what happened?” May asks.

“Yeah! It must have been the day after you were there. No one knows how EarthSpan found it, but Con-Tali are on the warpath. They’ve declared open season on EarthSpan transports and personnel. You guys are lucky you didn’t get caught up in that shit.”

“We’re not in the business of catching shit.” Ein quips.

“I hope not.” Mishka giggles.

“So, about those credits?” Donovan asks.

“Oh, right! 100,000,000 credits, wasn’t it?”

Mishka takes out a credit chit and card reader, charging the chit with the appropriate funds. Her brow raises and her eyes grow wide in surprise as she witnesses George divvying out the substantial pay to his crew right then and there.

“George... I love you. I really do.” Prat gushes, hugging his captain.

“Can I have your children?” Ein teases, joining in.

“Rocky. Cole. Please shoot them.” George jests.

Both women reach for their holstered blasters as the two men, their backs turned to the women, release their captain and sit down. A subtle hand gesture keeps both females from actively murdering their crewmembers at George’s command, something he did not expect. To the

others, it might have appeared playful, but to Donovan's and George's trained eyes, it was anything but.

"So... Where are we heading next?" Donovan asks George.

"Actually, I was thinking that since we made so much doing that run, we could do it again, or at least one similar to it." He answers.

"Yeah, but w... EarthSpan blew up our supplier, and we don't know where to get more sla... Er... Cargo." Kira retorts.

"Oh, that's no problem! I have a line on all of that! There's a guy who hires 'workers' destined for the fringe, and a sky dust manufacturer near one of Jupiter's moons!" Mishka interjects.

"What precise coordinates you have." Ein teases.

"I have them on my computer, smart ass." She grins.

Collecting the contact information from Mishka, the others return to the comfort of the Bannockburn, leaving Kira to spend time with her father and old friend. After a night at Kazimir's modest base, the crew prepare to leave. George, having contacted the slaver, who resides on Earth in Tongyan territory, leaves the ship, followed by May and Ein. The others preferred to stay on board, as a stormfront blows in with the icy cold wind. Kira hugs her father and Mishka one last time before joining the others and standing at George's side, gently pushing Ein out of the way.

“What a lovely day for crime, yes?!” Mishka yells over the wind.

“I’d really like to bottle some of that positivity and take it with me!” Ein quips.

“If you come back, *maybe* I’ll share it with you?!” She retorts.

“Are you two done flirting?! Because I kind of need my pilot!” George yells over the wind.

“I had more, but that’s okay!” Ein replies, grinning at Mishka.

The crew rush back to the empty, ice covered cargo lift and ride it up and into the hull of the Bannockburn. Kazimir and Mishka return to the safety of Kazimir’s dwelling to wait out the storm while Ein preps the ship for launch. Flying quickly above the storm, May sets a course for the district of Tongyí where the slave broker resides. The flight takes only a matter of minutes once in the mesosphere. Dampeners prevent excessive G-forces when in atmospheric flight, a standard feature on anything that can reach the stratosphere.

The ship rapidly descends into Tongyí territory, in a district containing mountains in what was once eastern China. Reaching the base, they are surprised to find that it is quite small, being only marginally larger than an above ground version of Kazimir’s private bunker. The crew are surprised to find olive drab crates, identical to those they brought to the Con-Tali base on Hyperion, sitting out in the open for all to see. Many hundreds are stacked at least 5

meters tall in large groups and form what looks like a miniature, green city skyline.

Ein lands the Bannockburn on an unused landing pad near the largest structure. The entire crew ride the cargo lift to the ground, stepping off into a gentle, sweet smelling breeze that sways the lush grasses beneath their feet. It's a far cry from Kazimir's icy hellscape. To their surprise, no one emerges to greet them or even question why the large ship landed in the first place. Though they contacted them via an encrypted channel, business associates usually like to make their presence know.

Following signs written in multiple languages, they head into the largest structure, which is labeled as 'the marketplace'. Inside, the 9 find a large desk that takes an entire quarter of the interior of the structure. Heavily decorated pillars line the furthest edges.

"You must be my new customers!" A gruff voice cheerfully greets them.

Stepping out from behind a pillar stands a large Voeldahn man. With short, round ears, thick and coarse brown fur, and no visible tail, he has the appearance of a bear. Tall and heavyset, the man appears older, with a bit of gray around his long and broad snout.

“Indeed, we are!” George replies, approaching the counter.

“How many were you looking to buy?” The man asks.

“How many did you have?” George retorts.

“My stock is currently 100; all female and under 25 years old. Very healthy; good for breeding!” He answers.

“That’s all? There’s a lot more crates than that out front!” May exclaims in surprise.

“That’s all?! That last order took several weeks to fill. This is a dangerous business and I do not wish to spend what’s left of my life in prison.” The man snaps.

“She meant no disrespect, but we *were* expecting more than that.” George quickly interjects.

“If the old man would listen to me, we’d have more.” A deep voice calls out.

Turning, they face the speaker, seeing a pale skinned human standing near the other side of the room. At 5 feet and 10 inches tall, with a spindly build, his voice does not match the black-haired human, who is equally out of place in the market. He holds a scanner in his hands, staring at the crew with icy blue eyes, a twisted little smile on his face.

“Michael, shut up and get back to work!” The old man growls.

“Whatever...” Michael grumbles.

“Wait!” George calls out to the human.

“What?” Michael turns back.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Michael Cost. I’m a Makahdian, but I got suckered into working here.”

“Suckered? Hah! He lost a bet. He’s my personal slave!” The old man proudly bellows.

“And I keep giving you advice and you just don’t listen!” Michael barks.

“Because you take too many risks! You can’t pluck people off of the street and sell them!”

“Says who?!”

“Says me!”

As the pair argue, several more Voeldahn emerge. They encircle the crew and the mouthy Michael, clearly loyal to the old slaver. Several bear weapons, ready to use them at a moments notice. George turns to May, then glances at Rakshasa and Colette, subtly nodding his head.

“I just want to make you more money! Can’t you see that?!” Michael screams.

“Hey!” George yells.

“Well your ways are foolish!” The old man snarls.

“Guys!” George raises a hand.

“Only because you’re too foolish to do it right!” Michael retorts.

“SHUT UP!” George screams, his voice growing hoarse.

The men fall silent and look to George, the customer whom they've been arguing in front of for nearly 10 minutes.

"Now! ... Michael! Do you think you can truly make this business more productive?" George calmly asks.

"Yes, I believe that I can." Michael nods.

"Alright then..."

George turns to face the old Voeldahn, opening his mouth to speak.

"Ladies?"

At his command, Colette, Rakshasa and May all draw their blasters, almost as fast as George himself. They fire upon the old man and his armed guards. Striking him several times in the chest, the large bear's corpse drops to the floor with a loud thud. Rakshasa and Colette murder two armed guards a piece, while May kills one, before any of them can even draw in retaliation. The murders occur in a matter of seconds. All of the others are stunned, even Prat and Donovan, formerly the most hardened of the entire crew.

"Woah..." Kira chokes out.

"That was some cold-blooded shit, man." Donovan adds.

“Damn... How come I didn’t get to kill one?!” Prat whines.

Ignoring their statements, George walks up to Michael, who stares in awe and reverence, as does Garin. Donovan and Prat join in, helping Rakshasa, Colette and May control the remaining men. They fall to their knees and beg for their lives. The women turn to George, awaiting his command. He lowers his blaster, pointing the muzzle to the floor, while holding out his right hand to Michael.

“Want to be my new henchman? You’ll gather the slaves for me and I’ll run my ship.”

“Sure!” Michael exclaims, taking George’s hand without hesitation.

“Good! Everyone who’s not dead will be under your command, or I’ll kill their whole fucking family.”

The women lower their weapons and let the workers up. Colette brushes one trembling man off, his pants wet from urinating on himself.

“No hard feelings. This is just my job.” She says with a pleasant smile.

“Load up the full crates into my ship and do whatever it was you were thinking about doing to expand the business. It goes without saying that your boss isn’t paying for what’s already his.” George grins, holstering his blaster.

“Yes, sir, mister...?”

“Woods... George Woods.”

After claiming the master codes from the computer, with Colette’s skillful hacking, George commandeers the entire slaver base. Promoting Michael Cost as the head of his slave gathering operation, he promises him a moderate cut of the profits in exchange for his loyalty. Michael all but kneels when he agrees to work for and underneath George, excitedly accepting the codes to the Bannockburn’s secured comm link. Returning to the ship, the crew waits as the terrified workers load the 100 olive drag crates of sedated slaves in record time.

At his direction, George contacts a Lane Jacker base on Callisto, offering them the slaves at fair markup, prices he learned from the base’s main computer. It’s a practical decision as the Lane Jackers are almost exclusively tech savvy males in their 20s and 30s. The Lane Jackers jump at the offer, eagerly awaiting delivery of their new companions. May sets a course and preps the autopilot while Ein flies the ship away from Earth’s surface. With nothing left to do, George rises from his seat and heads for the quarters he shares with May, alone.

The door slides shut behind him as he hears the hum of the hyper drive charging up. He sits at the dinette set, waiting for May to return. His right-hand trembles slightly as he sits quietly. Glancing to the extremity, he rests his left palm over it. George’s eyes land on the tan vase, the daisies flourishing above the single piece of Marcus’ skull. Reaching out, he takes hold of the vase and pulls it closer.

“I wonder what you’d say about all of this... You’d probably be really upset, telling me how wrong this is. At least this time I got to choose a better location! ... The Lane Jackers aren’t nearly as brutal or crude as the Con-Tali or the Wildcats... Hell, that gang of techies would probably treat those women very well! I wouldn’t be surprised if those wannabe pirates fell in love with them all...” He speaks to the vase.

George stares at the vase for a moment, his forced smile fading as he pushes it away. He turns his head and looks down at the floor.

“Yeah, I know... But it’s what I have to tell myself so that I can forget about it.” He mutters.

The door slides open and May steps inside. She walks up to George, gently sitting upon his lap and draping an arm over his shoulders.

“Are you okay?” She asks in a soft voice.

“I don’t know...” He replies.

“If this is a problem, we can always stop.”

“Can we?” He thinks aloud.

“I’m only in this for you, little bear. I love you. I go where you go, and I follow your lead.” She says as she nuzzles his face with her snout.

“Thanks cupcake. I love you too, but we’re in too deep now. Might as well ride it out.”

“Mmm... Good idea.” She grins, giving him a passionate kiss on the lips.

“That’s my cupcake. I could just eat you up.” He smirks.

“Also a good idea.” She winks.

“Lock the door.” He chuckles.

“Yes, little bear.” She coos.

“That’s right.” He says, smacking her butt as she slides off of him.