

Lacuna Blue

By Mantrid Brizon

Chapter Thirteen: Found

George sits in his captain's chair and watches the cyan and pink swirls of the warp bubble that shrouds his ship. It's been 35 days since they've last been to Earth, having successfully delivered the slave girls to the ever-grateful Lane Jackers. Taking their payment, Ein and May took them immediately to a dome base hidden on Io, a moon that currently cannot be terraformed. This base, run by the Jade Dragons, has been producing the second most pure sky dust formula; only the now destroyed Hyperion base, formerly operated by the Con-Tali, made better product.

Purchasing the drugs wholesale, they filled the cargo hold to overflowing with the powerful synthetic narcotic. Through long-range communication over a secured line, George maintained regular contact with Michael Cost, who has already expanded their operation considerably. With over 50 new underlings at the Tongyí base alone, and several cells dedicated to gathering more slaves through whatever means Michael sees fit, George expects to return to a booming operation and a full warehouse of both male and female cargo.

Michael has also not been lax with the other half of their business. With Mishka as a go-between and a near permanent fixture at George's base, they are able to sell to the Sol Rogues wholesale, with a fair but considerable markup. Though it would take longer to unload the sky dust through their own network, George and his crew would stand to make double what they earn from selling to the Sol Rogues wholesale. Even the otherwise stone-faced Rakhasa couldn't help but smile after doing the math.

At George's instruction, Michael has begun forming several small gangs dedicated solely to the distribution of the sky dust that George brings back. Still in the process of structuring and recruiting, they are not yet ready to cut the Sol Rogues out entirely, if they ever do, but it's an option that George keeps in mind. As he ponders the future of his burgeoning criminal empire, Ein deactivates the hyper drive. The warp bubble fades away from the Bannockburn, returning it to space, to be powered by conventional thrusters.

Flying in over the southern hemisphere of Earth, the crew are startled by a sudden alert coming through. With their entire fortune once again tied into a single shipment, they cannot afford to be caught; a nosey citizen with a scanner or even a broken-down ship with an active distress beacon could stand in their way. The proximity alert warns of an incoming ship, setting the crew on edge. Prat and Donovan prepare for battle, while Colette raises the Bannockburn's shields and Ein prepares to evade the pursuing craft.

“It’s trying to scan us!” Colette yells over the alarm.

“Evade!” George commands.

“Yes, sir!” Ein replies.

“If they report this, we won’t have any choice but to take action...” George adds.

Though he doesn’t elaborate, he is certain that all of the crew know what he means. Ein gives full power to the engines, taking available power from the weapon systems but not the shields. Colette checks her panel, aided by Garin. They use the Bannockburn’s own scanner to focus on the trailing ship, quickly picking up the pertinent data.

“Sir, it’s an AT-1 ‘Spire’, registered under the name ‘Zebrina!’” Colette explains.

“A Spire? What’s a luxury freighter doing following us?!” George thinks aloud.

“This isn’t a base model, Sir! It’s the high-end version, set-up for long-range transport and exploration. The scans show that the cargo bay is empty. I am also not detecting any enhanced weapons; it’s not much of a threat to us.” Garin adds.

“It’s really fucking fast though!” Ein exclaims.

“It’s gaining on us!” May yells.

“The ship is attempting to scan us again!” Colette shouts.

“Sir?!” Ein asks in desperation.

“What are we going to do, little bear?” May asks, rushing up to George.

“There is one thing... Mr. Hirota!”

“Yes, sir?” Ein glances over his shoulder.

“Let’s try a Crazy Ivan.” George grins.

“Yes, sir!” Ein also grins.

“Mr. Craig and Mr. Kahb!”

“Yes, sir?” Both Donovan and Prat respond.

“Get those weapons ready. Ein won’t need all that power for this one.” George orders.

“Yes, sir!” They reply in unison.

“Buckle up, cupcake.” George says softly to May.

Returning to her seat, she straps herself in, as do the others. It’s a necessary precaution for the Crazy Ivan, a very old and risky procedure dating back to the days of submersible seafaring. Ein reaches over and prepares to adjust the power to the engines individually, setting new parameters. His clawed finger hovers over the button as he bides his time, waiting for the pursuing ship to come a little closer.

“It’s starting a scan!” Colette warns.

Ein presses the button, shutting down both starboard engines for exactly one second. The force of the portside engines turns the ship hard to the right at a 90-degree

angle. Even the dampeners can't mask the force of the shift as the starboard engines kick back on and the powerful thrusters jettison the craft toward Earth. The Spire flies past them at full speed, quickly gaining distance and nearly striking the rear of the Bannockburn as it does so.

"Let's see you keep up now!" Ein gleefully exclaims.

Once again at full speed, Ein heads for the Earth's atmosphere at a dangerous velocity. The proximity alarm soon goes off again, and the crew are left in shock.

"Damn, these guys are good..." Ein mutters.

"What the hell, man?!" George growls.

"It's not my fault! Their ship is too fast!" Ein replies.

"What if we lower the shields and divert power to the engines?" Garin suggests.

"No good. The shields use less power than even two plasma cannons." Colette replies.

"Can we lose them? Be honest, Ein!" George asks.

"No, sir."

"Alright then. Time for 'Plan B'... Prepare the guns and pull another Crazy Ivan. This time make it a 180." George orders.

Ein, Prat and Donovan follow their instructions to the letter. The Bannockburn spins around, facing the enemy

craft as the concealable turrets emerge from the discrete hatches disguised as hull panels. The guns charge and the pursuing ship stops entirely, deactivating its engines and coming to a halt. They drift in space for a moment, outside of both scanner and cannon range and slowly being pulled down to Earth. A warning light flashes on Kira's console.

"Sir, they're hailing us!" Kira exclaims in surprise.

"Patch them through. Let's see who the hell this is."

Kira sends the signal through speakers on the bridge, allowing them all to hear the conversation. After a short period of static, a voice comes through, still fighting the white noise.

"Thi... Es... F... Ze... Ov..."

"What's wrong with the signal?" George asks.

"Looks like it's a slightly different frequency. I'll adjust it." Kira answers.

"Fucking high-end Tongyi ships and their goofy systems. Just because it's expensive doesn't mean it's good." Garin grumbles.

"Here we go!" Kira giddily exclaims.

"I repeat, this is captain James Woods of the Zebrina. Over."

George tries to bolt up from his chair but his harness holds him down, pulling painfully at his waist. He winces for

a moment before unbuckling the harness and dramatically shooting up from his seat. He races up to Kira's console.

"Are we transmitting?" George asks her.

"Just a moment... There!"

"You're awesome." He says, resting his hands on her shoulders.

"I know." She grins.

"I repeat, this is James Woods of the Zeb... Grr... Is this thing on?!" James says in a frustrated tone.

"Hey James... What'cha doin'?" George playfully asks.

"George?!" James asks in shock.

"Oh yeah!"

"I've been looking for you, bro! I was about to ask you for your information since you wouldn't let me scan you, but that's pointless now." James continues.

"Indeed. What's the big idea sneaking up on people like that, anyway?"

"I just said I've been looking for you! It's been months and we haven't talked since that... Thing..." James explains.

"You're lucky we didn't hull your stupid ass!" Prat growls.

"Fuck you too, Prat. So, do you want to hang out or what?!"

"We're kind of busy James." May chirps.

"Aww, come on! We're brothers, man!" James whines.

**“Oh, alright! Set us down somewhere quiet, Ein.”
George concedes.**

“I know just the spot!” May says.

**“That’s my girl. Stay close and follow us to the rendezvous. Be careful; Ein flies like every other Tongyan.”
George chuckles.**

“I remember.” James’ laughs through the speakers.

“I love you too, buddy.” Ein says, holding up a middle finger to George.

“Man, I was hoping for a good space battle too.” Prat mutters.

With the Spire no longer a threat, Ein turns the Bannockburn around and heads for the location marked by May. He flies low over Shikamano, landing the ship in an area that was once the Serengeti of Tanzania. The ships land close to each other, both facing to the west as the sun begins to set. The crew climb up from their seats, not bothering to stop at the armory, though most wear sidearms at all times regardless.

“Man, it’s hard to keep track of time when it’s always black outside of your windows.” Ein remarks.

“You mean neon pink and cyan?” Kira retorts.

“Same thing.”

Walking down the halls and into the cargo hold, they have no choice but to ride the cargo lift to the ground. The

pallets of sky dust, though clearly visible, are at least semi-disguised. A keen eye would see through the subterfuge, but at a glance, the ship would appear to be hauling only sacks of rice and grain to most people. The lift strikes the dirt beneath the ship, a warm breeze blowing over the crew. Their path is illuminated only by the fading sun and the pinkish-orange glow of the evening sky.

George turns to May as she stands beside him, looking her over for a moment. Her black pigtails flutter in the wind and her white fur with black stripes glistens in the dim light. She turns to him with icy blue eyes, grinning at her human lover. Though George smiles at her, he seems disturbed by something. It isn't readily apparent, but she knows him well enough to realize that there is a problem. Immediately concerned, she rests a hand on his forearm and leans in.

"What's wrong?" She quietly asks.

"I... We haven't spoken since Oberon. What if he wants answers?"

"Then give them to him." She says.

"What we did on Oberon..." George murmurs.

"We survived, little bear. He's still your brother, and that's all he will care about."

She gently strokes his arm before giving him a tender kiss on the cheek. With a subtle nod, he silently agrees to attempt to make amends. Stepping forward and off of the platform, May walks by his side while the rest of the crew

follow only a few feet behind. The Spire's smaller cargo lift lowers as the crew of the Bannockburn approach. James stands with 5 others, the crew of his ship. Of the crew, 3 of the 5 are humans, while the other 2 are Voeldahn. James' crew spread out behind him. They look nervously at each other as they meet the crew of the ship that their captain has pursued for some time.

"So... I see your tastes haven't changed." George begins, pointing to the ship behind James.

"Yeah. You like it?" James asks.

"Eh... Expensive and girly, just like always." George teases.

"I would rather enjoy my flights, not pray for them to end as soon as I start. Besides, women love those luxurious beds." James retorts with a sly grin.

"Yeah, I saw." George quips.

James' expression changes, his lips curling down and his eyes darting away. George immediately regrets his words, wondering why he would even hint at Kelly's affair in such a manner. Resting his thumb and index finger against his brow, he closes his eyes and sighs.

"Look, I didn't mean to-"

"Yeah, just shut up, alright?" James interrupts.

"... I'm sorry." George says.

The two groups stand in silence for a moment and James looks to the horizon. His eyes glaze with fresh tears, sniffing quickly before he turns back to his brother.

"Forget it. I'm done with that bitch." James states.

"Good."

"Hey, I'm sorry too. I should have told you before I left. I just... I wasn't thinking straight." James explains.

"Neither was I, James. It just sort of happened." George sighs.

"Did you want to talk about it?" James asks.

"Maybe some other time..."

"Yeah, I get it. Sounds a lot like my situation."

"Oh yeah?"

"Well it's safe to assume you saw the email... I hitched a ride back to Mars and confronted Kelly and her new man." James admits, nervously scratching the back of his head.

"Oh boy... How did it go?"

"You know I can handle myself!" James boasts.

"... How did it go?" George reiterates.

"I put them both in the hospital, right in front of the kids. The assault and attempt charges cost me my job, and the bail took my savings, but I used a few connections to earn a little something as 'severance pay'. That's how I bought my ship." James smirks.

"You conniving bastard..." George chuckles. "Wait... Did you jump bail?!"

“Oh, uh... About that...”

James’ crew is flabbergasted at the revelation. It is obvious from their expressions that none of them knew that their captain was a fugitive from justice. Looking them over, the street wise criminals can tell that most of James’ crew have probably never even had a parking ticket on their hovercars, let alone jumped bail for two counts of assault and attempted murder.

“God damnit James! You never think ahead about stuff like this! That was always your problem! What are you going to do now?!” George growls.

“Relax, bro! The bounty is really small. I can probably earn a bit, turn myself in later and then beat it in court.” James replies.

“You don’t get it, man. That’s not how that works. You ran from the courts... Even if you go back, a guilty verdict is all but guaranteed with a jury, and now you have all new charges to deal with. Think, bro!”

“So, what? I just never got back to Mars? Problem solved!” James chirps.

“You’re missing the fucking point.” George growls.

George looks to James, pitying his brother who looks like a scared and cornered rabbit. Stepping up to him, George gives him a tight embrace, patting the back of his head.

“We’ll fix this.”

“Okay.” James nods.

“We’ve got a new business venture anyway. Might be able to see what some of our connections can do for you.” George adds.

“You make connections transporting rice?” One of James’ crew suddenly asks.

George steps away from James and towards his lover, May. They both glance at the sacks that are shrink wrapped to the pallets on the cargo lift behind them. Turning back to James’ crew, their expressions change. The one who spoke closes his eyes and lowers his head, realizing his error. James steps aside while his navigator approaches, his hands held out before him and palms visible.

“Look, all we saw was rice and grain. I’m sure food corporations have a lot of pull too.” Another says.

“Uh, yeah!” A third nervous nods.

“But James’ bounty.” The first murmurs.

“Shut up.” The second man growls. “Look, let’s just-”

Drawing swiftly from their holsters simultaneously, as if psychically linked, George and May fire upon the five unarmed crew, shooting them down in under three seconds. Shards of hot, electrified metal fly from the muzzle of their blasters as they murder the crew in cold blood, their bodies

dropping down to the ground. Turning to Prat, George nods his head.

“I like fair fights, man.” Prat replies.

“What a bitch.” Colette murmurs.

Stepping up, she and Rakshasa both fire single rounds into the skulls of the five bodies, guaranteeing their deaths. James turns back to the pooling crimson.

“What the hell, man! ... They weren’t cheap!” James callously exclaims.

“They would have turned you in. Relax, bro.”

“Relax? How am I going to get my ship out of here?!” James asks.

“We’ll get rid of the bodies, drop off the sky dust and come back for you, alright? We’ll bring a crew and take you to our new base.” George answers.

“... New base?” James perks.

“Oh yeah! We’ve got a lot of catching up to do, now help us move the bodies. Prat, Donovan? Care to join us?”

“Is that really even necessary?” Donovan asks.

“Yeah. There’s no one here for hundreds of miles and the animals will probably eat them.” Prat adds.

“We don’t half-ass our work. Strip their valuables and we’ll hang them in front of the Spire’s thrusters. They’ll burn right up.” George retorts.

“Why *my* thrusters?!” James whines.

“They’re *your* crew.”

“You are so awesome.” Garin gushes, looking over the human corpses. “Can I help?!”

“Sure, why not.” George replies.

Garin rather excitedly takes the legs of the nearest human. Kira, May and Rakshasa remove their jewelry, credit chits and other personal effects, returning them to James. Using some old ropes from inside of the Bannockburn’s cargo hold, they string up the carcasses directly in front of the thrusters, tying the ropes to points within the housing so that all of the evidence will be eradicated at once. With their work completed, George and his crew head back for the Bannockburn, stepping onto the cargo lift and activating it.

“Enjoy the view of the giraffes’ grazing! We’ll be back for you!” George shouts to James.

Returning to the Zebrina, James steps aboard the cargo lift and rides it up and into the cargo hold. He walks through the now silent halls of the ship, taking a moment to reflect on his former crew. Though he did not allow himself to grow too attached, knowing that he would one day have to fire them, he never anticipated it ending this way. Heading for their quarters, he collects their belongings and gathers them into several boxes. Among their belongings are family photos, some containing children. It pains James, who misses his own.

Crushing the picture within his hands, he promptly heads outside with the boxes and sets them ablaze before returning to his ship. Sitting in the pilothouse of the craft, he sits in the navigator's chair and looks to the horizon. In the distance, he can see giraffe as they walk through the darkening field, pulling leaves from the trees. It's a serene scene, one that he finds quite relaxing given the circumstances. After watching them for some time, he sits back in his chair and closes his eyes.

A loud beeping startles him and he nearly falls from his chair. Bolting upright, he peers through the windows and into the pitch black of night. Checking his console, which bears several clocks for several planets and Earth time zones, he sees that several hours has passed since George left; it is nearly midnight where he is. Looking at another console, the warning is a proximity alert. Flipping several switches, he activated the exterior flood lights, illuminating the area.

No sooner has he touched the switches does he see the Bannockburn coming in for a landing. With docking lights flashing, flood lights on and her gears extended, she carefully sets down in virtually the same spot as were she was previously parked. James darts from the room, down the stairs and into the main hall before heading further below deck and into the cargo hold. Riding his cargo lift to the ground, he sees George and several other figures approaching his ship; he doesn't recognize the others.

“What the hell, man?!” George exclaims, his arms outstretched.

“What?” James asks with confusion.

George points toward his ship, his arm at an angle and aiming for an engine. Turning around, James sees the strung-up corpses of his former crew. Several vultures sit atop the thrusters, pecking at their faces; James had forgotten to incinerate them.

“Oh! Oops.”

“Yeah... Here’s your new crew. Trained, eager to work, and they won’t ask any questions, thankfully.” George says.

“Ooohh, he’s cute!” A female Voeldahn remarks.

“Wow. Now *this* is a ship!” A male Voeldahn exclaims.

“Uh... Thank you!” James replies.

“Was he talking to me?” The girl murmurs to another.

Stepping into the Zebrina’s lights, James can see his crew for the first time. Five characters approach the cargo lift, their boots clanking atop the metal as they climb aboard. Of the five, two are males, three are females and all are Voeldahn, something that makes James feel a little uneasy and self-conscious. The two males have a rabbitesque appearance, while one female is fox-like, and two are feline.

“The girls are Kristen, Kaley and Brooke, while the two guys are brothers, Billy and Bradley. They’re all Sijian, which I thought you might appreciate.” George explains, pointing each one out as he names them.

“Thanks. Gives us more to talk about, I guess.” James replies.

A female with a feline appearance and solid light-brown fur like darkened sand approaches him. She is the same female who commented earlier on his looks. Extending a hand, she grips James’ tightly and shakes it, grinning cheek to cheek.

“Hi. I’m Kristen! It’s good to meet you! I’m your new navigator!” She giddily exclaims.

“Easy girl.” Billy replies.

George turns around and heads back for the Bannockburn, waving the back of his hand as he disappears into the night.

“Wait! Will I see you anytime soon?!” James calls out to his brother.

“I’ll contact you when we’re settled in. Until then, stay out of trouble!” George yells back.

The sound of George’s cargo lift whirring prevents James from replying back or asking further questions,

though he has hundreds of them. He looks toward the five new faces, trying to remember each of their names. Turning to the main panel, he presses a button and the lift begins to rise, taking them into the belly of the spaceship.

“Well... Welcome to the Zebrina!” James sighs.