

Lacuna Blue

By Mantrid Brizon

Chapter Fourteen: Admiral Woods

“That’s a lot of sky dust...” The Sol Rogue buyer remarks.

“Is that a problem?” May asks.

“No. I just wasn’t prepared for such a big shipment.” He replies.

“But you can unload it... Right?” George raises a brow.

“I can always try!”

“Good. You know how I *hate* to be disappointed.” George warns in a cold monotone.

“Y-yeah... Ahem... This might take a minute. Why don’t you two go hang out in the lounge? I’ll send some guys over when you’re ready to launch.” The Rogue nervously continues.

“Some guys?” May growls as though offended.

“A guy! Singular!” The Rogue quickly restates.

“Good... We’ll see you very soon.” George says, draping an arm over May’s shoulders.

Walking away from the high-ranking Sol Rogue dealer, the Voeldahn man shutters from the encounter.

“Those two freak the fucking hell out of me...” He murmurs to himself.

Walking through the halls of the subterranean base, hidden deep within the mountains of a province in Tongyí, low level Rogues spot the couple and quickly step aside. All recognize the white tigress Voeldahn and her human captain and lover, a rare sight in and of himself. Word of their takeover of the only slaver operation in Tongyí, and the methods used, has driven a nail of dread into their hearts. Entering a large room with a glowing sign above the entrance that reads ‘snowfall lounge’, they are greeted by the awed gazes of many young and impressionable criminals.

Approaching two empty stools near the end of the bar, a female Rogue rises from her seat and hastily departs. May grins sinisterly, her eyes scanning the woman as she passes by, who avoids making eye contact with the tigress. May’s cutesy, black pigtailed with dyed blue streaks sway as she watches the woman with her icy blue eyes, drinking in her anxiety and fear and feeling empowered. Sitting beside each other, the bartender, a Voeldahn man with a muscular build and the appearance of a black furred jackal, approaches the pair.

“What’ll it be?” He asks softly.

“Sol Ale for me.” George orders.

“You want a shot with that?”

“No...”

The bartender appears surprised. Sol Ale is as mild and common a drink as they serve.

“And you?” He turns to May.

“Bloody Mary.”

The sturdily built man begins to mix May’s drink while an automated tap pours George’s ale. The seat that once belonged to the woman, now vacant beside George, is quickly shrouded by a shadow. Taking a seat, a human man sits beside the Bannockburn’s captain. George pays him little attention as the bartender serves their drinks, taking a sip from his glass while May does the same. However, his peripheral vision spies the human, possibly the only one there besides George and Donovan, staring at him with a strange fascination; there is no fear in his eyes as George glances over.

“Can I help you?” George asks with a sigh of frustration.

“I’m sorry! I was staring!” The man apologizes.

“Yeah...”

“My name’s Irving! Jonathan Irving! I’m a ship captain!”
The man excitedly begins, extending a hand.

“Good for you, Captain Irving...” George replies, glancing at his hand but refusing to touch him.

“I’m sorry. I know you don’t know me from Adam, but I’ve certainly heard of you.” Jonathan continues.

“A lot of people have.” May retorts.

“Exactly! I wondered if perhaps I could interest you in a proposition...”

“Such as?” George asks, his curiosity peaked.

“I have a ship and crew, and you have ‘cargo’ needing delivered. Would you be interested in starting your own fleet?” Jonathan proposes.

“You want to work for us?” May snickers in disbelief.

“Of course! I and my crew would get a modest percentage and you claim the bulk. It’d be the start of a whole faction.”

“A faction, eh?” George smirks at the thought.

“Sure. Every group started somewhere. At one point the Sol Rogues were probably just two guys with a fighter, then someone like me came along to play third-wheel. Before you know it, they’re running a third of the crime in the system.”
Jonathan argues.

Now equally intrigued, May turns her bar stool. Resting her clawed hands over her lover’s shoulders, she leans in and rests a chin atop her fingers, peering at the strange, new human. With a somewhat scrawny build, pale skin,

hazel eyes and shaggy, light brown hair, Jonathan Irving is not the most imposing looking criminal either have ever seen.

“So, what’s in it for you?” May asks apprehensively.

“I’m not going to lie; I’m a fanboy. I get paid, sure, but working in a fleet under the Bannockburn and her crew... It’s a fucking honor, to put it frankly.”

“Well, now I’m really flattered.” George smirks.

When she asks what kind of ship the youthful looking Jonathan commands, they are shocked at his response. Captain Irving owns an MK-IX ‘Indolence’, a luxury yacht of the highest order. Few are privately owned, most belonging to transport companies. The couple wonder why a man who can afford an 80,000,000 credit yacht the size of the Bannockburn would want to serve as an underling. Whispering to her lover, she asks him for his thoughts before affectionately licking his ear.

Turning his head, George leans closer to May’s feline ear and whispers his answer. He closes his thoughts with a gentle kiss to her cheek, before planting another upon her lips, his hand resting on the side of her snout. Jonathan appears somewhat uncomfortable by their very public displays of affection, but merely clears his throat and awaits a response.

“So!” George exclaims, swiftly turning his head back toward Jonathan. “We’ve decided that you have an

interesting proposition. A luxury yacht isn't an orthodox ship for this kind of work, but that can be a good thing."

"Excellent! When can my crew and I start, sir?!" The captain eagerly inquires.

"Follow us to the landing bay as soon as they send the goon to release us." May answers.

Reaching out a hand, George startles Jonathan by snatching the one he had formerly offered.

"Welcome to the Slaver's Union, Captain Irving."

"Thank you, Sir!" Jonathan gushes.

"Please, just call me 'Admiral'." George grins.

"Absolutely!"

"What's your ship's name, for our logs?" May asks.

"Her name is 'Animus', ma'am." Jonathan answers.

"He called me 'ma'am'." May chuckles.

"I'm sorry! Was it not appropriate?!" Jonathan asks with a worried tone.

"Oh no, it's fine." May swats a hand as though to push aside his fears.

"Oh good!" Jonathan breaths a sigh of relieve. "I'm sorry, I'm just nervous. I've never met my idols before, let alone worked for one."

"It's fine, and stop apologizing." George remarks before taking a drink of his ale.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I mean!”

“Boy...” George chuckles, subtly shaking his head.

Sharing a drink with their new underling, it isn’t long before an exceptionally brave Sol Rogue goon enters the snowfall lounge and approaches the trio. Clearing his throat, he gains their attention. Addressing George by his full name, as his face is well known among the criminal underworld, he informs the captain of the Bannockburn that his ship has been emptied of all cargo. Paying the bartender with a swipe of his credit chit, he silently rises from his barstool with May under-arm. Jonathan Irving follows closely behind, as previously instructed.

Walking through the halls and back toward the cargo area, they pass landing areas for other ships. As each are walled, a doorway separating them all, only the landing gears of large ships or the bow of smaller vessels are visible from the hallway. George glances over his shoulder at Jonathan who walks just behind him, only to notice that the young human is looking at a door they are soon to pass. Turning his eyes to the door, May notices and also looks. They walk past an open doorway to a landing pad for larger craft. The complex landing gear of the bow of Jonathan’s ship is briefly visible, giving credence to his claims.

Returning to their own bay, Jonathan stares in awe at the Bannockburn, his eyes gazing upon the humble VK-95 ‘Aplomb’ Transport as if it were a fabled ghost ship. George silently chuckles and May looks up at him.

“What?” She asks with a little smile.

“Him.” George points with a thumb.

Turning her head, she too snickers at the sight of Jonathan ogling the rather common and plain looking craft. In the criminal underworld, few ships of equal size are modern, as most are not purchased legally; criminals with records labelling them as habitual offenders are often barred from purchasing certain class of vessels, especially in states with Draconian laws such as Tongyí. Only their fighter and bomber class ships are new, while the rest are supplied by the Scrappers, who make a living by refurbishing old vessels and selling them to those without the proper licenses, or large criminal records.

“What’s so fascinating? Your ship is ten times as expensive and one hundred times more luxurious.” George finally asks.

“This is THE Bannockburn! You know people tell stories about this ship, right? I mean, I know mine is technically better, but to see a legend in person like this? Damn!” Jonathan excitedly exclaims.

“What kind of stories do they tell?” May asks.

“A pilot who can fly her like a fighter. Hidden weapons that blasted a hole right out of a base’s airlocked landing bay. A ship that carried several hundred workers to their doom aboard a new, unregistered space station. Shit like that.”

“Damn. I was hoping for some exciting lies.” George remarks.

“Next time, little bear. We just need to step up our game.” She coos, patting his chest.

“This begs the question though... How’d you get such a fancy and high-end ship and wind up *here*?” George asks.

“You really want to know?” Jonathan sighs.

“I just asked, didn’t I?”

“It’s a long story, but the shortened version is the typical rebellious youth. My father owns a fairly large touring and cruise company. He bought three Indolence yachts and drafted a contract for me to work for him and learn the family business. In exchange for a year’s worth of work without breaks or sick-leave, I’d earn the title to the first yacht and have a renewed contract drafted.”

“That’s quite a deal.” May comments.

“Yeah. I fucking hated it. Catering to rich pricks who treated me like their bitch... I suffered through it and earned that title. I think he thought I was going to stick with it and start earning a percentage, but fuck that. I flew to Soyuz, fired my crew who’d been with me from day one, the buttoned-up suits that they were, and found a new crew at a cheap, sleazy bar. A few short trips ferrying low-end crime bosses around for cheap got me an introduction to the commander of this base, right around the time people started whispering about the Bannockburn. Took odd jobs so people wouldn’t forget I was given a passcode, hoping to meet you one day. Just my luck, right?” Jonathan finishes.

George's eyes scan the young man, whose body language appears genuine. He merely nods in response. A Sol Rogue dealer approaches the group. Though not the same one from before, he is up to date on the goings on of the ship and her crew. Very politely interrupting George, he pulls the human captain and his Voeldahn tigress lover aside. Jonathan watches as George browses a data pad for choice cargo to purchase, with a short list of locations currently demanding the goods. Glancing back at the runaway, George picks cargo and swipes his credit chit.

After speaking to the dealer for a moment, his expression becomes that of shock. However, an insistent George appears to reiterate his instructions. Shrugging his shoulders, the Voeldahn dealer nods his head. Draping an arm over the dealer's shoulders, George says something to him that seems to simultaneously frighten and relax him. Nodding once again, he quickly leaves the two and approaches Jonathan.

"Looks like you're taking a load for your commander. Illegal blasters to a Scrapper base in the old Zone Seven on the other side of Earth." The dealer begins.

"What? Me?!" Jonathan asks, pointing a finger at his chest in surprise.

"Did I fucking stutter? Captain Woods said you're taking cargo for him, so we're loading it. What bay are you docked in?" The man asks.

"Uh, five." Jonathan murmurs.

“Alright. We’ll clear you for departure in about twenty minutes.” The man replies.

Jonathan stands before the man, his mind racing. The dealer raises an eyebrow and then lowers the data pad in his hands.

“Well? Fucking go!” He barks at Jonathan.

“Oh, shit! Right!” Jonathan remarks, quickly darting off.

Racing from the landing bay and through halls, Jonathan Irving enters his own bay to find that Sol Rogues with power loaders are already filling the cargo lift of his yacht. Though he had not left it down, he can only assume that his crew were compelled to open it, and they probably didn’t ask nicely. Entering a small hatch built into one of the rear landing gears, he climbs a retractable ladder in an equally retractable tunnel before entering the main hall of his vessel.

“What the hell is going on? Why are they loading that cargo all of a sudden?” A crewmember asks him.

“Later. As soon as they’re done loading, we’re going to head for Zone Seven.” Jonathan orders.

“Which one?”

“Zone Seven, Earth’s orbit.” He clarifies.

“No one uses that except... Oh!”

“Yeah, now inform the others and get to your post!” He barks at his subordinate.

“Right away, Captain!” The crewmember facetiously salutes him.

Reaching the bridge, the others are already informed with what little details he had given the first crewmember. Most certainly wearing his transceiver, word travels fast aboard a ship. No more than a minute after locking the keel-side bay doors and confirming a stable pressure, they launch and fly directly for space, orbiting Earth on their way to old Zone Seven. Used only by criminals, the Scrappers and of course, members of the Bounty Hunter’s Division, they are careful in their approach.

The pilot takes his time, so as not to appear in a rush to transport someone or something valuable. Reaching the coordinates given to them by the Sol Rogues traffic control group, they request permission to dock and are almost immediately granted it. The Scrappers have been waiting for this shipment for some time; several of their ships have been boarded by BHD members. If given the choice, many Scrappers would simply murder the bounty hunters and jettison the corpse into space, keeping their ship in the process. However, as they already have a less than pleasant reputation for a non-criminal faction, they often travel unarmed.

Shortly after receiving permission to dock, an encrypted transmission pings, alerts signaling the incoming

message. Answering the transmission, Jonathan is surprised to see a video call from none other than George Woods.

“Ah, glad to see you’ve made it!” George begins.

“Yeah, we just arrived. I-... How did you know?”

“I called ahead and told the Scrappers that it would be in their best interest to warn me as soon as you arrived.” George answers. “Which reminds me, you passed the test. Now send a crewmember down to your cargo hold, find the crate marked with the number ‘941’ and open it. It’s easy to find; they left it on the top layer of a pallet placed nearest your cargo bay access bulkhead, or so they said. He’ll need to type in this passcode. Write it down and don’t fuck it up. ‘01100010 01101111 01101111 01101101’.”

“Uh, what’s that for?” Jonathan asks.

“And why is it so damn long, and in binary?” A random crewmember interjects.

“A) It’s important, so shut up and go do it. B) Because I have a twisted sense of humor.” George answers.

As suddenly as the transmission began, George disconnects it without so much as a ‘goodbye’. Seconds later, contact information for the Bannockburn comes through. Not taking any chances, Jonathan and several of his crew head for the cargo hold to find crate 941 and find out why it is so important. As George stated, a pallet near the cargo bay bulkhead contained crate 941, sitting on a corner and facing the doorway. Opening the unlocked crate, they lift the lid and stare in shock and horror.

A series of plastic explosive sits inside of a foam-lined case, a detonator with a digital clock face staring back at them. With a timer counting down in cobalt blue digits, it leaves them barely six minutes before it explodes. It is suddenly clear that George had expected them to race there; his pilot's cautious flying nearly cost them their lives. It is also clear that George placed the device to guarantee Jonathan's seriousness, and eliminate an enemy if the young captain ran off with his property. Jonathan finds himself amused, developing even more respect and admiration for George Woods.

"Boom." A crewmember remarks.

"What?" Jonathan turns to the woman.

"It just came to me." She replies.

Taking out a slip of paper with the passcode written on it, they carefully yet nervously press the keys. Upon reaching the last digit, the screen flashes blue and the detonator deactivates, the numbers turning off and preventing the explosion.

"Who the hell is this guy?!" A male crewmember asks.

"Admiral Woods..." Jonathan murmurs, chuckling silently.

"Wait... As in George Woods? The captain of the Bannockburn?!" A female crewmember asks, a hint of fear in her voice.

“We almost died, and wouldn’t have seen it coming. Is that really the kind of person you want to work for?” A male crewmember asks.

“I respect the tactic! The criminal underworld needs more guys like him.” Jonathan retorts.

Sitting in their quarters atop their bed, George and May cuddle with each other as the ship floats through space, headed for Mars.

“You know, maybe it is a good idea to expand.” May suddenly comments.

“You think so?”

“Yeah! That Irving guy is working out so far.”

“I’m not good at recruiting.” George remarks.

“Maybe we don’t have to.” May says as she sits upright, turning to face her lover. “We could promote some of our own guys and give them cheaper, smaller freighters or something. Maybe we’d give them local runs while we get the bulk shipments into deep space?”

George sits up, contemplating the suggestion. With a finger running along his bottom lip, he subtly nods as he looks at the sheets near her digitigrade feet.

“That’s not a bad idea... Michael comes to mind, and maybe Garin.” He says.

“Michael for sure, but maybe we should wait on Garin...”
May remarks.

“Why’s that?” He glances to her.

“Honestly, I just don’t trust him.” She bluntly replies.

“He is a little rough around the edges.” He agrees.

“He’s more than that. He’s a racist psychopath.” She growls.

“Easy girl.” George chuckles.

“It doesn’t help that his hatred happens to target my little bear and his kind.” She says, reaching out and stroking George’s cheek with the backs of her fingers, her tail swaying. “I’d rather you found someone else; someone who has a low probability of turning around and murdering you.”

“Alright.” He nods. “I promise not to promote Garin.”

“Thank you.” She grins.

As the pair lean in and share a kiss, George’s V.I. bracelet suddenly chimes. Sighing, he turns his head and retrieves it from the charging mount that sits upon a nightstand. Looking at the screen, he sees that the caller is his brother, James. Tapping the screen, he holds the bracelet near his face.

“Hey.” George says with a sigh.

“Hey, bro! We need to talk.” James begins.

“Yeah, about your timing?” George smirks.

“No. We need to talk, *in person*.”

“That sounds important.” George remarks.

“It is. Where are you right now?”

“We just left for Mars on a run. We’ll be there in a couple days.”

“Alright. I’ll meet you there.” James says.

“It’s that important?!” George asks in shock.

“Yeah...”