

Lacuna Blue

By Mantrid Brizon

Chapter Fifteen: In The Dark

Touching down on a landing pad nearest the market office, James Woods and his ship, Zebrina, arrive to pick up a shipment of sky dust. Though their burgeoning faction profits in the slave trade, James has tried to avoid actually shipping human or Voeldahn cargo. Instead, he often picks up the sky dust that the Bannockburn brings back, distributing what he can and collecting a percentage. Though not as profitable as also running slaves, it pays better than any legitimate job and doesn't leave a foul taste in his mouth.

Exiting the ship by riding the cargo lift down to the ground, James is accompanied by his entire crew, sans the pilot. It's a practice he began after his first delivery, when the buyers feared that a lone man must have been a cop; no real drug dealer would be so stupid, they said. After a laugh at his expense, James took the lesson to heart. Walking through the courtyard and heading toward the market office, he and his crew enter the building and approach the front desk. A slaver underling immediately calls for his supervisor.

“Mr. Cost, he’s here!” The underling gleefully exclaims.

Stepping out from a back room that’s been added onto the market office, Michael Cost wipes his hands with a rag. With a grin on his face, he steps from the back room, around the counter and approaches James Woods. Extending a hand, James notes the clamminess of Michael’s palm, clandestinely wiping his hand on a pantleg only moments after touching him.

“Good to see you, Mr. Woods. Ready for warm cargo this time?” Michael teases.

“I’d rather risk a drug charge, at least for now. I’m not as good at this as George.” James replies.

“Dipping into the stash, eh? I’ve been using some sky dust but not recreationally.” Michael says.

“There’s a use for that shit?” Bradley asks with a look of surprise.

“There’s a use for everything.” Michael retorts.

Draping an arm over James’ shoulders, he leads the captain away and toward a holographic kiosk, where an accurate inventory is kept. As they walk, he leans in and whispers so that the others can’t hear.

“I’ve been trying to make more docile slaves. Giving them a good beating and tying them down doesn’t always give you the best results.”

“Oh?” James raises a brow.

“I took a few pages out of an archive I read about some country in what’s now Sijia. ‘MK-Ultra’ or something like that. Interesting stuff. Really lets me work, up close and personal.” Michael continues.

“I didn’t know you were medically trained.” James remarks as he touches the holographic screen and examines the stock. “Did George clear that?”

“Well, that’s the thing. I’m not and no. I consider myself more of a self-taught kind of guy. Exploring animals and a runaway prepped me for the real thing though.”

James stops in his tracks, turning his head and staring with a furled brow at the man. How casually he admits to animal cruelty and mutilations, as well as a murder, shocks and appalls him.

“How exactly can you justify that?” James asks.

“Come on, let’s not fool ourselves. The women will be gang raped for life, probably forcibly and repeatedly bred by strange, filthy men. Their best hope is for a buyer to fall in love with them, and fat chance of that when they can wait a while and buy a younger, stupider, better looking model. The men will be made to work hard labor and also probably be gang raped for life, if they aren’t used by sadists who get off by peeling away their skin. A semi-quick, if painful

death being dissected for science is certainly better for them.” Michael explains.

A wide-eyed James cannot believe his ears. He stands frozen in silent horror as the unassuming Michael in clean, business casual clothes continues to speak.

“Anyway, I was hoping you could talk to him for me, once I have better results. I would do it myself but George is... Well... Less than approachable, and his sexy little bodyguard is insanely protective. Hm... I wonder if he already discovered what I’m looking for?” He quietly thinks aloud.

“Yeah, I’ll, uh... I’ll talk to him.” James replies.

“Thanks! I’ve got to get back to work. Select the quantity and my guys will have you loaded and out the door in no time!” Michael exclaims, patting James on the shoulder.

Walking away from the man, James watches the only other human as he leaves. With only his crew to witness the act, he takes a hand and brushes his shoulder, as though swatting away Michael’s invisible filth.

“I wonder what they were talking about.” A curious Brooke asks.

“Maybe we should ask?” Kaley suggests.

“We’d better not. We shouldn’t bother him. If it’s important, he’ll tell us.” Kristen says to the others.

As his first-mate and second in command, her word carries genuine authority; the others fall silent. Returning to his crew, James watches the doorway where Michael had disappeared into. His gaze is fixated upon the closed barrier and he appears to be waiting for something.

“So... When are we leaving, captain?” Kristen asks.

“Tomorrow.”

“What?” Several crewmembers ask in unison.

None can understand why James would want to stay. He is not only delaying the delivery to expectant customers, but also keeping the crew and his ship in a base with virtually no source of entertainment. Returning to the Zebrina, the loaders work overtime to prepare the cargo and load it atop the lowered cargo lift. James tries to order them to slow down and stack the pallets at a safe pace, but the overseer explains that Michael ‘punishes’ any who do not work feverishly. Regardless of his intention to stay the night at the base, they have no choice but to work at their current pace.

With the cargo loaded, the crew ride the lift up and into the hold. With the keel-side bay doors locked and pressurized, James relieves them for the day; they immediately disperse for their own rooms, all except for Kristen. Joining him in the dining room, James cooks a meal of steak and eggs with a side of caviar for himself and his first-mate. It brings him comfort, as when he was still a

legitimate mining employee struggling to climb the ladder of success, he often cooked meals for his wife and children.

Carrying the onyx black plates with ornate gold leaf, he presents her meal before taking a seat adjacent to her.

“Thank you.” Kristen says softly, nodding her head and smiling.

“It’s nothing. I use to make stuff like this all of the time.” James replies, cutting into his steak with golden colored silverware. “Besides, we have plenty of steak.”

“Well, it beats the hell out of my last job’s complimentary dinners.” She remarks, taking a bite of eggs.

“Oh? What were those?”

“Freezer burned meat and cheese wraps nuked in a thirty-year-old microwave.”

“Damn.” James murmurs. “Well, in that case, eat up.”

As they share a meal, Kristen attempts to make idle conversation, but James seems lost in thought. He responds with only one or two-word answers. With the tension building, Kristen disregards her own advice to the crew.

“Is something wrong James? You can always talk to me.” She says softly, her tone caring and affectionate.

Sighing, he sets down his golden fork and knife. Dropping them a few centimeters, they clank loudly onto his now empty plate. Resting his elbows on the table, he stares at the bare flatware for a moment, a hand on either side of his head and his fingers running through his hair.

“... James?”

“I don’t know if I can do this...” He suddenly says.

“Do what?”

“This is just awful. Why the hell did any of this have to happen to me? I never should have asked George to get me that data.” He continues, rambling to himself.

“James.” Kristen says louder, resting a hand on his forearm.

He glances down at her clawed hand as she holds him. Turning his eyes to the brown furred, feline Voeldahn, his breath shakes and his bottom lip quivers.

“What did you not want to do?” She asks him.

“This...” He vaguely answers.

“Delivering sky dust? People want what they want; at least we can profit from it, and it isn’t bad work.”

“No, not that. Trading in lives like we do.” He explains.

“We don’t do that, James. Your brother and Michael do, but we haven’t shipped a slave yet.” She retorts.

“And that makes it okay? Do you want to know what Michael said to me earlier today? He told me that he’s been experimenting on some of the slaves he’s collected... Yeah... Trying some sort of sick, mind control experiments. He admitted to cutting into them without anesthesia and said that it would be better for them to die for science than be sold.” James tearfully explains.

“In a sick way, he has a point.” Kristen remarks.

“And yet we’re still doing it... George is shipping slaves, Michael is butchering them, we’re taking the sky dust they bring back and selling it to thugs who in turn sell it to junkies. It’s like the dark side’s cycle of death...”

Rising from his seat, he collects his plate. Glancing over to Kristen’s empty plate, he collects it as well. Looking at her captain, the infatuated young woman takes hold of his upper arm, giving him a gentle squeeze. He turns his head and glances to her hand, his frown curling upward into a very faint grin.

“Do what you think is right. I’ll stand by you. We all will.” She says reassuringly.

Nodding his head, he silently thanks her for her support. Walking toward the door, he pauses and turns back, glancing over his shoulder at her.

“We do have a ship.” James remarks.

“We do.” She nods.

Returning to the kitchen, James cleans the plates and silverware, returning them to their rightful places, as is his habit. As he washes, he can't stop thinking about Michael and his admission. What if he is merely trying to impress him by acting casually monstrous? What if he is truly torturing the slaves to death, for science? What if James launches with the cargo, makes the delivery and says nothing? As he sets the articles into their drawers and latches them shut, he comes to a morbid conclusion. Whatever Michael is up to, he must investigate before he can act.

Returning to his quarters, he waits until dark. Sitting on his bed, he stares at his Anelace XR-20 blaster, bearing a customized black and gold finish. Glancing to the small porthole with a partially obscured view of the market office, he decides that it's time to act. Taking the blaster, he holsters the weapon, dons an expensive, black leather jacket that reaches past his hips and conceals the weapon, and then heads down the hall. Just before the cargo area is a special hatch.

Opening the hatch, it reveals an expandable tunnel with a retractable ladder that moves with the landing gear. This is a feature common to Tongyan vessels like the AT-1 Spire transport ship, and high-end ships in general, such as Jonathan Irving's MK-IX Indolence yacht. Leaving only the red emergency lights on, he climbs down the ladder and toward the outer airlock hatch, exiting the ship without mooring to a station or portable airlock stairs, and without lowering the cargo lift.

Closing the hatch quietly and carefully, he creeps through the darkened courtyard and silently approaches the front door. As he enters the market office, he looks around for anyone who might see him, resting his hand on his sidearm. Heading over to the door that Michael had entered, he very slowly opens it. Peering inside, he sees only a storage room, though it is filled with medical tools and medical grade cleaning equipment. Standing upright, he walks over to a terminal, activating the device.

Without the basic requirement of a simple password, he simply turns on the computer and begins his search. He can't help but chuckle when he wonders why there isn't a shred of security on the device, only pausing when he remembers that he is standing in the middle of a dangerous criminal enterprise that deals in slavery, drugs and illegal weapons; an intruder would simply be shot on sight, or captured and sold for a profit, or perhaps butchered alive in one of Michael's experiments.

He soon finds records of Michael's deed, stretching back to the first week after he started running the base. One building was repurposed, solely to be used as a medical lab; this room merely holds excess tools and backup data. Copying the data onto an empty data drive, something he had the foresight to bring with him right before leaving his room, he pockets the drive and then shuts down the terminal. Sneaking out of the room and through the market office, he heads into the courtyard and directly for the building that houses Michael's laboratory.

Reaching the door, he finds that it does, in fact, have genuine security. Staring at a plate for finger and palm print scanning, he pulls up his hacked V.I. bracelet, hooking in a thin cable and attaching a hacking device. Squatting down for so long, he loses his balance and lets go of the device. Reaching out a hand, he presses his bare palm against the plate to steady himself as the hacking tool sways in the air, connected to his bracelet via the cable. A green, rectangular light activates in the upper left corner of the plate and the door unlocks, sliding open.

“Oh... Well...” James clears his throat.

Stowing his hacking equipment, he draws his blaster and enters the lab. The door closes behind him and the LED tube lights gradually glow brighter, illuminating the room. His hand drops to his side and his eyes grow wide. The stench of copper and bleach fills his nostrils, his mouth agape as he looks at a room covered in the gore of dozens of victims. Some tables are covered in extracted organs and bones, sitting open on the table and attracting flies. Two tables hold bodies that have been completely hollowed out, their skin peeled away and revealing their skeletons.

A nude carcass of a Voeldahn man lies atop a table, metal shackles holding his wrists and ankles. With a limp, fleshy tail hanging down and a body of light gray fur, half-stained with blood, he is hardly recognizable. If not for the tail, he would not have even known what race of Voeldahn he was. With his hair shaved on his head and his ears

severed, possibly to make vivisection easier, his scalp was cut at the back and peeled forward over his head to reveal his skull. Having cut around the top of the skull with an electric bone-saw, which sits beside the body, his skullcap has been removed.

Sitting beside the body is the bowl-shaped bone, a dark gray chunk of brain matter sitting within it. The stench of blood and the sight of the gore causes James to wretch. Turning, he vomits onto a table of blood-soaked medical equipment. The sound incites a response within the room. Pulling up his blaster and resting his finger on the trigger, he looks past the gray furred rodent Voeldahn who lay dead upon the table. Beside him on another table is another Voeldahn male.

With his ears and skullcap also removed, his brain still sits within his skull; it's as visible as any person's face. His organs are also pulled from a massive cut in his abdomen and hooked to machines that sustain his life. The sight is appalling, and James' eyes water as the shackled man lay atop the table.

"Oh God... I'm so sorry... This is all my fault." James says to the vivisected man.

The man mumbles into an oxygen mask, trying to speak. James leans closer to hear what he has to say, but the man merely screams in agony. Though muffled partially by the mask, the shrill sound stings his ears and causes

James to jump back. He hurriedly aims his blaster and with tear-filled eyes fires twice, splattering brain matter and bits of skull as he executes Michael's victim.

"I thought I heard someone in here..." A voice says sternly.

Spinning around, James aims his blaster at Michael and several guards, who all immediately raise their hands in surrender.

"Hey, if you wanted me to kill him, all you had to do was say so." Michael chuckles.

"What the fuck is this shit?" James angrily demands.

"This? ... Practice."

"It's got to stop."

"But I'm so close to a breakthrough!" Michael exclaims in desperation.

James doesn't back down. Aiming his blaster, he glances to Michael's guards, who merely glance back to the human who operates their base, and the human who is related to their employer, George Woods. None make a move for a weapon.

"So... What happens now?" Michael asks.

"Now I talk to George about this... See what he has to say."

"Is that really necessary?" A nervous Michael asks.

"Your damn right it is." James growls.

"I see... And what if I don't want you to do that?"

"Uh, boss..." A guard murmurs, tapping Michael on the shoulder.

"What?"

"You know we're not stopping him, right? And you're not armed..."

Sighing, Michael hangs his head and waves his hand, allowing James to leave. Without delay, or holstering his weapon, James walks past Michael and the guards, keeping his weapon ready.

"One thing I don't understand..." Michael remarks, stopping James as he passes him. "Why didn't you just turn on the lights and walk in? You practically own the place."

"I guess I just forgot... I'm not used to having that kind of power." James replies.

"Oh... Fair enough, I guess." Michael shrugs.

"What should we do with this stuff?" A guard asks James, pointing a thumb into the room.

"Destroy it... I already copied his 'research'." James commands.

"Yes, sir!" They chirp.

Stepping outside, he holsters his blaster while a frustrated Michael watches the guards as they pour accelerants all over the floor, preparing to burn down his lab on James' orders. Gritting his teeth and with a balled fist, Michael watches helplessly as his superior returns to his ship. The glow of the fire that consumes his lab illuminates the courtyard as James opens the hatch and climbs back inside the Zebrina. As he walks through the hall and toward his quarters, Kristen, dressed only in night clothes, wanders the hall.

"Hey! I wondered where you were! I was coming to check on you, but you were gone!" She exclaims.

"Yeah, I took a walk. I-... You came to see me in a nightgown?" James asks with a raised brow.

"Oh... Uh... I..." She stammers.

"Never mind. Can we talk?"

"Sure!"

Entering his quarters, James explains what he did and what he saw. Kristen is visibly horrified. The mere description of what he witnessed makes her feel ill.

"Well..." She says with a sigh, trying to control her nausea. "Now we know what Michael is in the dark."

"I don't know what to do. Everything is getting worse, more evil. I just want it to stop and be simple again, but if I

tell George, he might do something just as bad..." James confides.

"I think you should tell your brother. He's in charge; he can make it stop." She says, resting a hand on his shoulder.

"Right..." James nods, his fists clenching each other and resting beneath his chin. "Can we speak more tomorrow? I have a call to make and I would rather do this alone."

"Alright... I'm just down the hall if you need me." She says.

Rising from his bed, she takes a step, stopping only to turn and lean in. Kissing his cheek softly, she squeezes his shoulder comfortingly before stepping out of the room and closing the door behind her. With his strength boosted from her care and companionship, he lifts an arm and brings up his V.I. bracelet. Taking a deep breath, he places an encrypted call to George's line, his heart racing as the bracelet beeps, waiting for his brother to answer him.

"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*."