

Lacuna Blue

By Mantrid Brizon

Chapter Sixteen: The Slaver's Union

Sitting across from Michael Cost and beside his brother, George Woods slips Michael a series of documents and a ball-point pen. In the grand dining hall of Jonathan Irving's ship, Animus, which sits in a clearing of a Martian jungle, a giddy Michael briefly examines the agreement. Using the Animus as a temporary base, they sit in a comfortable booth and sit expensive cocktails as George inducts the newest member into their new faction; though originally dubbed 'Slaver's Union' as a quip, the Woods brothers opted to keep the title.

With his examination of the document completed, Michael signs the paperwork, agreeing to join the Slaver's Union and serve the Union's goals loyally under penalty of death. This includes increasing the sale volume of slaves and sky dust, never betraying or abandoning fellow captains, though individual crew are never mentioned, and paying the allocated dues that they will require for the proper upkeep of their new space station. Confidently sliding the paperwork and uncapped pen back to George, James glares at Michael.

George examines the paperwork, carefully scanning every word and letter to make sure that it is satisfactory to him. As the first draft of the Union's official captain's agreement, Michael has become the second true Slaver. With a silent nod, George approves and takes a second and third copy. Sliding one to James and another to Jonathan, both men read and then sign their copies. As James' hand grips the pen and he draws his name, his blood boils. Still upset by both his discovery and George's reaction, James' mind replays the conversation over and over again.

"So, what's this all about?" George asks, standing in the cargo hold of Zebrina, their ships parked side by side. "You shouldn't even be on Mars; you're a fugitive."

"I know, but this is *really* important, bro." James insists. "I learned something about Michael..."

"Loyal worker. I'm thinking of promoting him and giving him his own ship." George remarks.

"... What?! Y-you can't do that, man! That'd be a terrible mistake!" James frightfully exclaims.

"And why is that?" George raises a brow. "He's been the most hard working, loyal, and dedicated member. He hasn't left me to run a station alone yet."

Cut by his brother's words, James turns his head.

"You know why I did what I did... You saw the video..."

"I'm sorry." George begins. "I... It's sometimes hard to let things go; I didn't mean to say that."

"It's alright." James murmurs, staring down at the floor.

Resting a hand on his brother's shoulder, George pulls James in and embraces him. After a moment, he pats him on the back, a pleasant smile across his face.

"Let's have a snack and you can tell me all about what's bothering you." George assures him.

"A snack wouldn't be a good idea when you hear what I have to say..."

"Oh boy..." George sighs, unnerved by James' remark.

Walking through the halls of the ship and toward the Zebrina's galley and dining area, James delves into the sordid and grotesque account. Sparing no details, he explains everything to his brother. With his brow furled and face contorted in shock, it is clear that what James reveals disturbs his older brother. Entering the galley, George leans against a counter, his arms crossed before his chest.

"That's when I told the guards to burn the lab down and went back to my ship. After a bit of soul searching, I called you." James finishes his story.

"Hm... It's still kind of funny that you thought you had to sneak through *our* base." George remarks.

“Yeah.” James chuckles. “So... What do you want to do about him?”

“Well, Michael is clearly disturbed, but he’s a loyal worker and he has single-handedly reformed that business; we’ve never been so profitable.” George

“... What are you saying?”

“I’ve been thinking about expanding; I want to promote him and give him a ship.” George answers.

“I’m sorry?” James’ eye grow wide in shock. “I don’t think I understand... Michael has been butchering people and... You want to give him a ship?!”

“It makes sense in context.”

“Does it?” James snickers.

“Right now, Michael is in charge of our base. His primary job is acquiring cargo for us to sell. We sell that cargo, buy sky dust for cheap and earn on the way back. Rinse and repeat.” George begins.

“Right.” James nods.

“Meanwhile, Michael has all of this time to play Dr. Mengele on *our* cargo. If he has a ship and is floating through deep space with a skeleton crew that are *not* disposable, carrying cargo that’s meticulously recorded and maintained for quality, or drugs that can’t be tortured... See what I’m saying?”

“So, by sticking him in a ship, he loses his ability to ‘experiment’ without costing us credits?” James clarifies.

“Exactly, and Michael knows that he is only as useful to me as the credits he can bring in. If he takes even one crate

from the pile to vivisect, I'll take one of his arms as payment."

The serious yet casual manner in which George comments about dismembering Michael unnerves his brother. However, reflecting on their past in the ghettos of Earth, perhaps George is a product of the grimy underworld that, for all intents and purposes, partially raised them.

"That's it, then?" James asks.

"For now... I'll certainly be keeping an eye on him, and his future ship will have some serious modifications made."

Displeased that Michael won't face real punishment, James runs his fingers through his hair and sighs. Gazing at the floor before his feet, he shakes his head slowly in displeasure.

"Hey..." George says as he steps up to his brother, resting a hand on his shoulder. "You did the right thing by burning his lab. I know you aren't happy with this, but he's worth keeping around, at least for now."

"Alright." James murmurs, subtly nodding.

"We're not going to just allow him to indulge in his mental illness. I can promise you that."

"Okay..."

"This might cheer you up." George suddenly chirps.

"What?" James turns his eyes to his brother.

“I have big plans for a new station, and this won’t be like Oberon.”

“Alright. Do you have the plans?”

“I certainly do, James. I’ve been working with the Scrappers in secret to design it, and already contacted a Sectan for specialty equipment that we’ll need.” George says as he removes a personal computer from his pocket. “I even have a name picked out. Dug through the history books to find one suitable.”

“What are you going to call it?”

“We’re going to call our new home, ‘Lagos Depot’. Catchy, right?” George smirks.

“It has a dark, morbid ring to it.” James answers after a pause to think. “Just don’t let Michael run it...” He warns.

“The only thing he’ll be running for us is cargo.” George assures him. “You, though... There’s a place at the top for you.”

After a detailed conversation about Lagos Depot and the future site for their base, the brothers spent the night in their own ships, waiting for the others to return. The Animus, captained by Jonathan Irving, was tasked with her first delivery. Once made, Jonathan and his crew returned to the base to collect Michael, who was ordered to appear for a summons. After waiting in the jungles of Mars, far away from prying eyes and away from all commonly used trade lanes, the Indolence yacht and her passengers arrived.

Using the much more luxurious craft as a temporary meeting place, Jonathan's and his crew did their best to host the gathering. Though Jonathan himself understood the etiquette required when caring for guests, his crew did not. Thankfully, George subtly hinted at the importance of the meeting. As a precaution, more experienced female slaves were awoken. With shock collars in place and no hope of escape, they were given an ultimatum; serve on the Animus caring for their guests in all possible ways, or be sold to God-knows-who.

A white, bunny Voeldahn slave girl in her late teens or early twenties pours a drink into Michael's glass. He rudely waves her away only for George to also receive a drink from the kidnapped slave.

"Thank you, miss." He says softly to her.

"Uhm, you're welcome." She sheepishly responds.

"Your hard work is appreciated." He adds with a nod.

"Want to take her in back and reward her? Maybe show her your 'appreciation'?" Michael snickers.

"No need to be rude." George calmly says to Michael, still looking at the slave girl.

"Can you really be rude to a slave?" Michael asks.

George slowly turns his head, glaring at Michael with fiery eyes.

“You can be rude to anyone.” He briefly explains.

Surprised by the genteel nature of their leader, she wonders how he can command such a force when he doesn't appear to be an unkind or violent man. As the four captains continue their meeting, George outlines plans for a hierarchy, making it clear that they will soon recruit more captains from the criminal underworld to join them in their endeavors. As the founder, George claims the top position for himself, declaring that his job will be to oversee security for their faction and especially their new headquarters.

All are intrigued by the prospect of a new base; even the slaves desire to hear. However, George insists they continue in a linear fashion; he isn't finished laying out his hierarchy. Speaking to James, he places him in charge of public relations. Michael is visibly perturbed by this.

“Why does he get to be in charge of PR?” Michael can't help but interrupt.

“Because I said so.” George replies.

“I can talk to people too.” Michael retorts.

“So I've noticed.” George smirks. “But James is a former businessman, and a competent one at that. He could sell you your own back teeth if he wished; he's in charge of public relations and negotiations with other factions. End of story.”

Brushing off Michael's objections, George presses on. He turns to Jonathan, who is visibly surprised that he's even being mentioned. As the newest and least experienced of the group, George gives him a new job, one that he believes that Jonathan will grow and excel at. Jonathan is made the overseer of the Slaver's Union captains. In his position, he will monitor the other captain's, use the knowledge gleaned from James to communicate what cargo is worth taking and when, and also spend his time recruiting new captains.

"Does this mean that I'll oversee the Bannockburn too?" Jonathan asks.

"That *is* your job. When we want to make runs and not sit at home, we're going to need direction." George answers.

Jonathan can hardly contain his excitement. Michael looks expectantly to George, curious as to what responsibility he will grant him. Unsurprisingly, his experience has earned him the position of logistical overseer. However, unlike his former position that allowed him access to slaves for his experiments, Michael will not be directly responsible for cargo acquisition. Instead, as an overseer, he will promote someone he trusts and oversee them.

When Lagos Depot is operational, he will do the same, appointing someone to run logistics for their home base and overseeing that person as well. Now without access to test subjects for his twisted experiments, Michael's frustrations boil over.

“Maybe I should operate the logistics myself until I can properly train my successors. I *am* very good at acquisition.” Michael suggests.

“Pick someone today and call them. We’re starting this right away. Jonathan will probably have work for you anyway.” George commands.

“Why does he get to tell me what to do?” Michael barks.

“Because I trust him to do a good job, and because you’re a part of this faction, a captain who he will oversee.” George calmly answers.

“I don’t know if I like how this is structured...” Michael remarks, crossing his arms and turning his head away.

“I wasn’t asking if you did.” George grins.

“Why can’t I just run logistics a little while longer?!”

“Because I heard about what you’ve been up to. We don’t profit off of butchering cargo before we can sell it, and I personally find it distasteful that you insist on making them suffer through whatever the fuck you were doing to them.” George politely answers.

“I was trying to make a better slave! I was *this close* to success!” Michael growls, holding up a hand and measuring with his thumb and index finger.

“Relax, Michael.” George says.

“If James hadn’t strolled in and burnt it all down, I’d have docile zombies serving us right now!” Michael stands to his feet in anger.

Sighing in frustration, George draws his blaster and sets the weapon on the table.

“Sit down, Michael, and shut your fucking mouth before I tear your tongue out and shove it up your ass.” George casually remarks.

“If you do that, who will oversee logistics?” Michael asks, slowly sitting down.

“I will. Make no mistake, you’re only as useful to me as you allow yourself to be. If you become a problem, there’s an olive drab crate with your name on it...”

Michael slowly sits down in his seat, lips pressed tightly together and his teeth clenched. Though his blood is boiling, he is powerless to stop George, his boss, at least for the moment...