

Lacuna Blue

By Mantrid Brizon

Chapter Nineteen: Lagos Depot

Sitting on his bed in his room, James suffers through a migraine. He had never had them before, not until the day after he first used sky dust. In an effort to make it go away, he used the narcotic a second time. James knew full-well what he was doing; though sky dust is potent to all races, humans are genetically predisposed to severe addiction and the worst of the side effects. After a paranoid delusion nearly exposed the damnable act, he returned the narcotic to the sack from whence it came, having only used barely one gram.

Thankfully, he did not suffer instantaneous addiction, something that had befallen other humans that he had known, and even one Voeldahn boy in the slums where they grew up. Popping several pain killers as though they were candy, he chases it with alcohol. After running out that first time, he now keeps a steady supply of liquor on hand, a fact that bothers his crew, especially Kristen. The oft intoxicated human manages his duties, but when sober he finds himself struggling to sleep with the screaming; the pained groans of the raped and beaten echo in his head.

How he has managed the last sixty days he does not know. Perseverance is a trait necessary for any who'd grown up where he and George did. The level of it, however, surprises even James. To take his mind off of his predicament and his newfound physical ailments, entirely the fault of his own choices, he sits at his desk. Activating his personal computer, in his quarters aboard the since completed Lagos Depot, he selects a photo gallery. James swipes through picture after picture, a smile on his face as he looks at his children, whom he misses terribly.

It is a chronological history of his life before, continuing through the torment that followed his downfall. Scrolling further, he lands on the pornographic video that his wife had made for him, in spite. The still, thumbnail image of her sitting upon the horse Voeldahn in their marital bed makes his blood boil. He saves the image to give him resolve; one day he will make Kelly pay, and he'll have his children back. Scrolling even further, James' lips curl into a faint smile once again. His children play in a yard at their aunt's house, a picture gleaned from a private agent he had hired to follow them.

Unfortunately, James learned much more than he was expecting. Though his children were safe and adjusting, both appearing to be adapting well to his absence, he was appalled to learn that Kelly's fling was not just that; Jayne, the man whom she'd carried on her affair and who was beating to within an inch of his life by James, lives with her and James' children. Scrolling to another clandestinely

taken photo of his young son sitting upon Jayne's lap and hugging him, James loses his temper.

Standing up, the chair flies back and he slams his hand down over the computer, covering the hologram port and masking the entire screen. The burning of the beam upon his flesh is less painful to him than what he had seen, and forced himself to see over and over for the past few weeks. With each stripe across his brain, his resolve grows stronger. Though haunted by the cries of the previous victims, the cries of the newer victims do little to tug at his heartstrings. Although James believes he is simply becoming stronger and more resilient, emotional distance and paranoia are symptoms of sky dust use.

An alarm near his door suddenly chimes; someone buzzes him from outside. Looking at the screen beside the door, James sees George, May and Kira standing outside and waiting for him.

"Well, are you ready?!" George asks.

"We've got 'cargo' to collect." May grins.

"Come on out and play!" Kira teases.

Removing his hand from the device, a dark red mark dots his palm, left behind from the glow of the holographic beam. Shutting down the computer, he collects his black leather coat, the coat's tails reaching past his pants pockets, before taking his customized blaster and several

spare magazines. Holstering the weapon, he can hear the trio beckoning him from outside. Like little imps, they call to him with childlike pleas. Reaching the door, he presses his palm to the plate, opening the door of his two-bedroom apartment to the group outside.

“Finally! Are you ready now? We’ve got space to navigate, boy!” George exclaims, grabbing James by the shoulder.

“Watch the jacket, man! Do you know how many skins I peeled to make this?” James quips.

James’ behavior has darkened over time, and though George chuckles and brushes his shoulder off, it bothers him to see this change. James, once decidedly more innocent and less morbid than George, is slowly but surely morphing into a mirror image; George doesn’t like it. Considering the ramifications of their actions and the stress of the danger they live with on a daily basis, he simply assumes that this is James’ way of coping. However, if George could give James the life he had before and simply cut him in, he would.

“Come on, bro. There’s a lot more skin out there, and both Michael and Irving think we have a real deal here.” George begins

“I just wish I could take Zebrina and my crew.” James grumbles.

“Hey, it’s not your fault your power booster and flux capacitor failed. Oh wait, it IS your fault, and that’s what

happens when you push your core to one hundred and fifty percent while in hyper drive. You're lucky you blew replaceable parts and it didn't just go right into a critical meltdown." Kira retorts.

"I had a deadline." James nonchalantly shrugs his shoulders.

"And now your ship gets a week of unpaid vacation, so quit your bitching and let's get to the Bannockburn." George says with an amused grin.

Reaching the craft, James accompanies his brother and crew as a guest. Riding the cargo lift that's filled with a mixture of sacks of sky dust and surplus weapons, they set a course for Earth, to a remote part of Sijia. It's an uneventful, two-day flight through space as they head for a patch of unmolested rain forest in what was once the bordering lands of Bolivia and Brazil. It's a hot and humid day as the lone ship arrives at a base that, except from an aerial approach, would otherwise be impossible to find.

James watches as Ein prepares to set down, wondering what he might see during this meeting. In the time since Lagos Depot's construction began, word of the Slaver's Union spread far and wide in the criminal underworld. Unfortunately for them, there were others who had already been in this business, like the man who George murdered, placing Michael in charge of his base to serve him. Small but powerful organizations, often flush with credits, they heard of the bold and visible moves made by the Slaver's Union.

None, however, dared reach out. Some were fearful of what the notoriously dangerous George Woods would do to them upon contacting the Slavers, but most were simply unwilling to share their slice of the pie to the upstart organization. Using information gleaned from the Sol Rogues and Lane Jackers, whom they've worked so closely with in the past, George was able to uncover nearly every freelance slaver base on Earth and Mars. He immediately began issuing very simple, encrypted statements to the management of these bases; fall in line with his faction, or experience the consequences.

Contact after contact went unanswered, as George expected. The largest group besides his own was merely an acquisitioning faction; their business came exclusively from the trickery and kidnapping of new slaves. However, they did own a space ship and had over one hundred armed soldiers to protect the business, as well as ties to local, corrupt government officials. Using them specifically to make an example, George allowed Michael and Jonathan free reign to dispose of them.

Devising an unusually complicated plan, Jonathan allowed himself to be targeted while docked in a nearby, legitimate port. During the dead of night, with his cargo lift down, a team boarded and took his crew hostage. Binding and gagging them immediately, they were spirited away to be enslaved. After waiting a day, Michael received an automated message, a programmed signal sent from a device hidden with one of the crew. The Slaver's flew to the base, landed and examined the site.

The many slavers of this once powerful freelance faction lay dead, strewn all over the ground. Animals that came to feast upon their flesh lay dead as well, along with birds that came to peck on the remains of both. Wearing hazmat suits, they walked through the carnage to examine the leftovers. All one hundred and seventy-six freelance slavers, their five hundred plus cargo and Jonathan's crew lay dead. The captured crew were not crew at all; Michael and Jonathan had replaced them with slaves.

Some surgically lobotomized and others merely meek, they stood in for the captain and his people. With devices implanted inside of their bodies, the crew were living weapons. Upon being taken a distance from the ship, sensors activated a timer within their chest cavities and counted down. Reaching zero, the 'crew' were killed with a small explosion that ruptured the chest cavity and allowed a potent nerve agent to escape. Picked up by the wind, the entire faction died in agony, choking on their own blood.

Collecting the data from their computers and transmitting images of their fate to the now defunct group's government contacts, as well as painting the name 'Slaver's Union' on the buildings of the base, the S.U. captains simply left. They claimed the compounds lone space ship as their prize. With nearly one thousand bodies rotting in the sun and leaks within the government's staff, the news spread faster than wildfire. Within an hour of the first report, George's inbox was filled with replies, begging for peaceful transitions of power, or proclaiming disbandment entirely.

As the Bannockburn touches down at the small, out of the way base, James wonders how peaceful this transition of power will be. Landing beside the Bannockburn is the Animus, taking up the only other pad at the compound. Between the two ships, the entire faction and most of their army has joined them, as they had upon assimilating the other freelance groups that offered their surrender. Marching confidently from their ships, some of the crew remain to man the controls, and specifically the weapon mounts and shield arrays.

“What a lovely day to be defeated, isn’t it?!” George asks loudly after taking a deep breath of the musty jungle air.

“Perhaps... It should be raining. That would fit the mood.” A feeble sounding voice replies.

Turning his head, the human grins and strokes his long beard menacingly. Opening his jacket to reveal his blaster, he walks toward the speaker, his crew and nearly thirty armed soldiers flanking him.

“You must be Maria. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” George says, bowing his head respectfully.

“I wish I could say the same...” She grumbles.

Standing barely five-feet and one-inch tall, Maria is an elderly human woman with olive skin and narrowed, brown

eyes. Her once black hair is a salt and pepper gray, glaring up at the man with her wrinkled face.

“No need to be hostile, ma’am.” George speaks.

“Don’t you ma’am me you little shit. I was selling pussy by the truck load when you were just an itch in your papa’s pants. If you hadn’t killed Grégoire and his company the way you did, we wouldn’t even be speaking!” Maria snaps.

“Ooh, a feisty one.” May quips.

“Please, be more polite.” Rakshasa remarks.

“Fuck you, you half-human, half-bunny whore! This has been a family business since before I was born! Who are you to take it from us?!” Maria growls.

With a subtle laugh that grows more potent with each puff of air, George cackles at the tiny, old woman. With a hunched back and a cane made from a hand-carved, twisted branch of cherry wood, she has more fire than he could have ever imagined.

“I respect you.” George begins, resting a hand on his hip. “But we’re in charge, and your family business doesn’t mean jack-fucking-shit to me.”

“Don’t speak to my grandma that way!” A much stronger female voice snaps from the distance.

Turning his head, George sees a woman approaching from the crowd of freelance slavers. A thin but large

breasted human with tanned skin, jet black hair, big brown eyes and soft, pouty lips, she's an incredibly attractive specimen. Virtually every man eyes her from top to bottom and back again, their eyes stopping at certain specific regions. His lips curl in a bemused smirk as she pushes her way to the front of the line, clearly unafraid of him.

"Well, hello there." Prat remarks, his eyes still scanning the woman's body.

"Hello indeed." Kira murmurs, doing the same.

"Is this the former heir to the throne?" George asks.

"You're god damn right!" The woman screams, barely a foot away.

"You've got some balls, ma'am, if you don't mind my saying." George remarks.

"Yeah... Big ones." Prat gushes, staring at her chest.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?! You think that just because you murdered Grégoire and his whole crew, you can just take over?!"

"Yes." George nods.

"Well, you can't!"

"These blasters and ships say I can."

"Silva, stop it!" Maria urges her granddaughter.

"Yes, Silva. Please be silent." Rakshasa adds.

"I don't need her to fight my battles. I was supposed to run this place when she died! How dare you steal this from me!" Silva growls.

She slams a fist into George's chest, a punch that, while decidedly weak, is still stronger than he expected. Growing less amused and more angry, he sighs in frustration. May bears her teeth and snarls, stepping forward at the assault on her lover. Reaching out a hand, George rests it on her chest just beneath her neck. Turning his head to her, he subtly shakes it.

"She wants to run the family business. Let's let her!" George begins.

All look stunned, especially Maria. The old woman twists her lips, fearful of his intentions.

"I think she should start on the ground floor..."

Swiftly reaching out, George grabs Silva by the arm and yanks her closer. Pulling her in, he wraps his arms around her as she struggles, screaming loudly and in absolute terror. Placing her in a choke hold, he pulls an arm behind her back and yanks upward. Silva drops to her knees in pain, whimpering as she is dominated for the first time in her life.

"That's a good girl. Are we going to place nice?" George asks, speaking softly but menacingly into her ear.

"I-I..."

“Or maybe you’d like to see what happens when someone like you ends up being someone else’s property?” He mockingly kisses her cheek.

“I’d love to show her!” Prat exclaims.

“So would I.” Garin grins.

“Please! Please don’t touch my granddaughter, Mr. Woods!” Maria begs.

“No... She’s not my type anyway. But Prat’s been very well behaved lately.”

“Shit, yeah I have!” Prat excitedly exclaims.

“I-I’m sorry...” Silva croaks.

“What was that?” George turns his head, leaning an ear closer. “I didn’t quite catch that.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Woods. I’ll be good.” Silva pleads.

“Alright then!” George pushes her down and stands tall. “Was that so hard? For being such well-behaved children, as a gesture of good faith, you can still oversee the base. However, you will report directly to my underlings, and they will report to me. Step out of line even once, and I’ll let my whole crew rape you to death.”

“I understand.” Silva meekly nods.

“Now!” George claps his hands together, rubbing them expectantly. “How about the grand tour?!”

Walking through the base and following the slow pace of the elderly Maria, George and his men disarm their hosts and collect the data from the base’s servers. They tap in and alter the codes, commandeering the facility for

themselves and dishing out staged levels of access for the former owners. George makes it a point to explain this in detail, hoping their humiliation will only further push the thought of rebellion from their minds. Continuing on their tour, they are shown the storage area.

Inside thick, plexiglass cells that are lined into neat rows, they contain complete, if tiny, studio apartments. A single bed with a toilet, the lid of the water basin forming a sink, and a small kitchenette are visible. With no knives or other objects that could be used to commit suicide, the cells are occupied by the pitiful, frightened and naked women.

“Where’s their clothes?” May asks Maria.

“We don’t bother with that. They won’t need them for the majority of their lives anyway.” Maria coldly chuckles.

May’s fur bristles and her skin crawls as she looks at the women. Both human and Voeldahn, all of them beautiful and shapely, ranging from frighteningly young to approximately their late twenties, they press their bodies against the plexiglass. Arms outstretched, their mouths move as they plea for rescue. Even the oft stoic and cold George is unnerved; for all of his villainous boasting earlier, he finds that the more he pretends to be a monster, the more he regrets his current career.

Hesitating as he did in the hallway, when he heard that slave girl’s pleas as she suffered a gang rape, he nearly cries. Disgusted with himself, he struggles to merely

continue walking. Slipping her hand into his, May's touch eases George's pain, if only slightly. Walking through the facility, Donovan, Prat, Garin and even Kira, gawk at the beautiful creatures locked in their see-through prisons, like butterflies in jars. Rakshasa and Colette are entirely unphased, walking at the far side of George and May.

"They're so pretty! Where do they all come from?" Kira asks.

"Oh, from all over! Every nation has it's share of beauties, and I manage to bring them here for my very unique business." Maria answers.

"How do you manage that?" May asks.

"Girls this young and stupid are only good for one job, and most of them have plenty of experience already. I promise them some sort of work, or with a fake modeling career and they come running. A bottle of Chloroform and some rope and they wake up here a few hours later." Maria boasts.

May finds Maria's treatment of women disgusting, her stomach churning as the old hag regales her with stories of clever trickery to force women to become sex slaves. Every fiber of her being wants to throttle the life from her aging body, but considering their past deeds, she is in no position to judge.

"Not all of them can be dimwitted beauties. Not every pretty face is stupid." George retorts.

“Oh, you’re right. Most walked through the front door like sheep, but some don’t rush off to job opportunities like stampeding cattle. Fortunately, I find ways to *compel* them.” Maria replies.

“Sounds like you’re good with a harness and quick on your feet.” Prat remarks.

“Oh, my boys do all of that. I haven’t kidnapped a girl since I was in my forties.” Maria chuckles.

James’ eyes look over the rooms. A white furred Voeldahn with tall, rabbit-like ears pleases silently through the glass. Beside her is a dark-skinned human with long dreadlocked hair and an ample bust. He stops dead in his tracks at the thirteenth cell situated to his right. Sitting on her bed and away from the inner wall, unlike the others, a dark haired, pale skinned human female sits. With a scrawny build with hardly any body fat to speak of, her legs are drawn to her chest.

Sitting upright in a fetal position, she gazes at her own feet. As though feeling his eyes upon her, the woman’s head slowly turns. James is bewildered by her beauty, looking at the Tongyan woman who looks as though she could hail from the islands once known as Japan. The soft curves of her cheeks and the gentle angle of her chin is as feminine as he has ever seen. She looks him over, her slightly open lips formed into a very faint frown.

“James?” Donovan asks. “Are you there, man?”

Donovan taps him on his shoulder, gaining his attention.

“What do you sell them for?” James suddenly asks.

Stopping dead in their tracks, they all turn around to stare. Maria chuckles, a twisted grin upon her face.

“You don’t want that one.” She warns.

“Why not?”

“She’s too gloomy. The girls you want are trying to claw their way out. I hear they’re the most fun to break.” Maria responds.

“Well, I’m interested.” James retorts.

“We’re not going shopping.” Prat snickers.

“Shut up, Prat.” George grumbles. “James, you’re technically still married... Remember?”

“And she’s still cheating.” James answers.

“... Do you really want to do that? Who knows what she’s been into before. We are dealing with scum, you know.” George continues.

“Watch it, punk. My family has a strict ‘hands-off’ policy for the merchandise... Anyone who touches one before the sale, has their hands cut off.” Maria retorts.

“See?” James grins.

George sighs, hanging his head and rubbing his temples between two fingers and a thumb.

“Fine... It’s your life.”

“Good, I’ll take her.” James says.

“Open cell #731.” Silva says, waving to a guard who holds a primitive keyring.

“Cell #731: Erica Tanaka. Sijian, speaks only English.” The guard reads off as he unlocks the door.

“So, what do I charge?” Maria asks, looking to George.

“Don’t you remember? We own the place, *and* the cargo. In fact, I think we’ll take a few more. Prat?”

“Yes?!” Prat’s eyes light up.

“Pick out a new girlfriend. You too, Donovan.”

Both men exclaim happily and browse the cells. Donovan picks the dark-skinned human, while Prat takes the white rabbit girl.

“Got to treat my old crew after all the shit they’ve put up with over the years. You’ll get a turn soon.” George says to Garin, Kira and the others.

Looking over to Maria and Silva, both stare at him with daggers in their eyes as he pillages their stock. He can tell that if both women had their way, they’d tear his head off without hesitation. Turning to them, he steps closer.

“Or would you rather I just take them all?”

“What?” Silva asks, her eyes growing wide.

“We’re in charge now. This is Slaver’s Union territory. Don’t you fucking dare challenge me like that; not even one look or I’ll strip you down and shove you in a cage myself.”

“Yes, sir.” They both murmur quietly.

Turning away from the terrified women, George waves a hand and draws his forces around him. Walking through the corridor and back toward the exit, May takes his hand and leans in.

“Good job, little bear.” She coos.

Turning his eyes to a cell, he sees a woman weeping, curled into a little ball on the floor. Struck with the realization that the newcomers will not save her, she stews in a silent agony. His bottom lip quivering, it takes all the strength he has to walk toward his ship. Every day he wishes for a way out, but every day the hole becomes deeper, the walls slippery with his transgressions, the blood he’s spilled and the lives he’s ruined. He turns to May and feigns a smile, though she sees right through it.

It’s time for George to make a choice: Will he continue on, or save himself while he still can, as Fiona, Gretsche and Whitley had done?