

Lacuna Blue

By Mantrid Brizon

Chapter Twenty-Three: Dead To Rights

Following George and his entourage at a distance, James watches as he exits the ship. As his brother and boss walks away from the Zebrina, James burns with anger. How dare George belittle him in front of his future wife? Moreover, how dare he question her loyalties?! No sooner than the inner door closes and he is left in the docking bay, James jumps down from the open cargo hold. He lands nearly twelve feet below, on the half-loaded cargo lift. Rolling, he lands on a knee and springs to his feet.

“What are you doing?!” Erica calls out to him from the cargo hold.

“We’ve got a run to make, and I need a new crew.” He says, looking up to her.

Looking to the nearby dock workers and Slaver’s Union security, he immediately approaches them.

“Who has ship piloting experience?” He asks.

Several masked guards raise their hands. Many were once pirate crews or smugglers, so it is unsurprising that much of the Slaver’s Union staff are veritable multitools.

“Good. You five, help load and then climb aboard. The rest of you, help load.” James orders.

“But sir, George s-”

“What?!” James growls, interrupting the nervous loader.

“N-nothing.” The loader murmurs.

“That’s what I thought... Now load the fucking cargo.”

Unwilling to disobey a captain and the brother of their leader, the loaders and security guards comply. Working swiftly, they load the remaining pallets of sky dust within minutes. James raises the cargo lift, taking his new crewmembers with him. As quickly as they can, they prep for launch without even setting their destination in Zebrina’s computer. Using his docking codes, he leaves the station, cleared by the control room. For whatever reason, George didn’t bother to call them with his V.I. bracelet and rescind his codes.

Giving the order, he has his crew set the destination as they use conventional thrusters to escape from Lagos Depot. A call comes through from the base, which James promptly answers.

“James, you fucking idiot! Get back in here!” George’s voice barks.

“Hello, to you too. I said I could do the run, so that’s I’m doing. I’ll be back in about a week.”

“JAMES!!!”

“Bye.” James says before terminating the line.

Only moments later, the Zebrina is safely hidden within a warp bubble, flying toward Earth. James rises from his captain’s chair, stretching his muscles.

“Well, that was fun!” He says with a sigh. “Now all we have to do is deliver the goods and go home so I can rub it in his face.”

“Sounds like a plan, my love.” Erica coos, hugging him tightly.

“S-so what do we do now?” A crewmember asks.

“Hm? Oh... Pick out your rooms. Leave any personal articles that you find alone though; I’m returning those to my old crew when we get home.” James replies.

“Yes, sir!”

“Wasn’t this load going to another captain?” Another crewmember quietly asks.

“I think it was that new guy. Harvey something...” A third crewmember replies.

“Who cares. It’s mine now. Get some rest. In two days, we’ll be making the delivery.” James interjects.

Looking back nervously, the guards fall silent. Returning to his cabin with his lover, the only sound is the metallic thudding of boots on the floor panels; James is eerily quiet. Upon entering their bedroom, he calmly removes his boots and belt, staring blankly as he unbuttons his shirt. Erica watches him carefully, having never seen this kind of behavior in him before. All things considered, he’s acting quite strangely.

“Are you alright?” She asks.

“I’m just fine. I’ve never felt better.” James calmly answers.

“Really?”

“Mhm. I took charge over George. For once, I slammed *him* onto a desk, and shoved *his* back against a wall.”

“Was George always so mean to you?” She scoots closer, resting a hand on his leg.

“Well, I don’t think he was being mean, per se. He just thinks that he always knows what’s best, and when I disagree, he can be a little... Forceful.” James shamefully admits. “I always wanted to tell him where to shove it. I just... I never had it in me.” He sighs.

“You did a good job today, my love.” She coos, resting a hand on his cheek.

“I did?” He looks at her with puppy dog eyes.

“Mhm... You’re a real man.” She says, kissing his lips tenderly.

“Good.” He says as he suddenly pushes her back onto his bed. “Then let me show you.”

Erica gasps at his sudden assertiveness. Having never been raped, she suffers no flashbacks or fear. Instead, she finds herself incredibly aroused and amused.

“Aren’t you the stud.” She giggles as he pulls at her clothes.

“You have no idea... But you will.” He growls.

Lying in bed together, just over an hour later, Erica rakes her fingernails across James’ bare chest as he sleeps. She looks up to him with her big, brown eyes. Their passionate and intense session only deepened her feelings for him, which were already quite substantial. Though she’d initially only intended to use James as a means of survival, she’s grown so fond of him; she surprised herself when she decided to murder his children, solely so that she could have exclusive rights to his attention.

If it hadn’t worked so thoroughly, she’d feel more guilt for taking their lives; they were the first she’d ever taken. Looking to her lover, she wonders if he could forgive her if he ever found out, considering how attached he appears to be. Pushing the thought of confession from her mind, she

snuggles up to her new lover and closes her eyes, quickly drifting off into a deep and peaceful sleep.

“This is Zebrina, requesting permission to dock.” The new crewmember says over the radio.

“Zebrina, this is Wildcat base ‘Crimson Hessian’, ident code Indigo-Niner-Four-One. You are cleared for landing.” A male voice responds.

“Affirmative Indigo-Niner-Four-One. Landing in t-minus sixty seconds.”

The Zebrina flies low over the Wildcat base, situated in Sijia in a land that was once called ‘Death Valley’. Rich mineral deposits were discovered there at one point, approximately thirty years ago, but the miners that make up the Wildcat’s ranks cleared much of it. It is the unofficial home of the faction, who now prosper in sky dust distribution and old-fashioned piracy. Bronze colored sand flies from the landing pad as the Zebrina touches down. After shutting down the engines, James, Erica and their crew emerge from the ship.

Riding the cargo lift down, the heat is overwhelming. The base that appeared so void is now teeming with life as people scramble to reach the landing pad and the ship it bears. Quickly collecting the pallets with power loaders, James and his crew assist, moving the cargo in record time into a bay built into a cliffside. Entering the base, they are washed by icy cold air, slowing to a crawl as they bask in the climate controlled, subterranean structure. They stand

in the foyer for a moment, their eyes adjusting to the dim light within.

Walking the cargo into a large room just beyond the short hallway from the front doors, the power loaders set down the pallets and several Wildcats use handheld computers with holographic screens to tally the cargo.

“We initially received word that a Captain Harvey Crippen was bringing this cargo.” One Wildcat remarks.

“Yes, I heard that too. It was just a mistake.” James replies, draping an arm over Erica’s shoulders.

“I have never known George to make mistakes.” The Wildcat adds.

James’ brow furls, his blood pressure increasing. The constant reminders of his brother’s dominance agitate him to no end. Glaring silently at the Wildcat, the man can see the rage within the human. Tail swaying, the Wildcat raises his arms.

“But we all make mistakes, right?! S-so... Mr. Woods. Would you like a drink? Maybe a cold meal?”

“Shouldn’t that be a hot meal?” Erica raises a brow.

“When you live out here, you want everything to be cold.” The man chuckles.

“Well, I suppose we could ha-”

A loud explosion startles everyone inside. James ducks down, reaching for his blaster, but his hand rests on an empty holster. George had kept his custom-made weapon, leaving James with nothing. Unlike the Bannockburn, James had left his armory with few weapons, instead storing extra, dehydrated foodstuffs and expensive liquors inside. Erica draws her blaster and aims with shaking hands. Men and women of both races rush inside, donning armor, helmets with full-face respirators and bearing military grade weaponry.

“Sijia police! Drop your weapons!” A man growls.

Blasterfire immediately ensues. Dozens of Wildcats and the Slaver’s Union Guards fire upon the police, who quickly take cover and shoot back. Well trained and capable, the Slaver’s Union guards kill several officers, but they continue to rush inside. It’s as if a tap has been opened; officers pour in by the dozens. Erica fires her blaster empty before ducking down. She struggles to find her magazine pouch. In her panic, she opts to tear the belt from her waist. James watches helplessly as criminals and police officers fall dead and wounded on the ground.

A Slaver catches a round to the skull, right between his eyes. Another is shot by three officers at once, dropped by no less than twenty rapidly fired shots to their torso and immediately after killing a cop with her rifle. The Wildcats refuse to surrender. A hatch opens in the ceiling and an electrically powered minigun emerges. Unsure if it is automated, targeting anyone not wearing an RFID card on

their body, or if it's controlled by an operator, James shrouds Erica with his body, keeping her behind what little cover they have.

The minigun opens fire, killing thirty officers in a matter of seconds. From the opened doors leading outside, a rocket is fired from a shoulder mounted launcher, striking the minigun and destroying it. More officers rush in, though now there are few criminals left.

"Flat on the ground, motherfucker!" A voice screams at James.

Hands grab him and pull him from Erica, before shoving him to the ground. Erica is rolled on the floor by police as one kicks away the empty, custom-made blaster. She rapidly formulates a plan. Looking to James, she mouths 'trust me'.

"Thank God you came!" She suddenly exclaims, forcing tears from her eyes. "He's made me his slave!"

Unsure of what he had even seen, James is flabbergasted. He isn't sure what's even happening. His headache turns to brain fog and he wonders if he will suddenly awaken from a nightmare. The police rip him from the ground like a hawk snatching a snake. Pulled to his feet, they shine a blinding light in his face.

“Holy shit... This is James Woods!” A male cop shouts.

“God damn, we got us a bona fide Slaver’s Union captain!” Another man chirps.

A cop grabs him by the hair and chin, wrenching his face toward them exceptionally hard. James looks at the officer, a Voeldahn woman. Her vibrant amber eyes glare through the plexiglass lenses of her respirator. They turn toward Erica, who cries so pitifully on the ground. Wearing an expensive and skimpy dress, and without a weapon or gun belt, she appears to have been the high-end, personal sex slave of a deranged criminal.

“Looks like you’re going away for a long time, you piece of shit.” The disgusted female officer growls at him. “Get this fucking rapist out of here!”

As they drag him away, he can hear Erica speaking ill of him to the female officer who ordered his removal.

“He did so many awful things to me. He wanted to breed me and make more Slavers.” She cries.

“Shh. It’ll be okay. You’re safe now.” The police woman assures her, comforting Erica.

“I wrestled away his blaster as soon as you came. Please help me.”

His heart stings as she speaks, but he is soon led outside. Skin burning from the heat of the sun, his eyes struggle to adjust. Outside are easily one hundred more police officers and at least six armored transports, backed up with two gunboats. Even if he could have fought his way out, he didn't stand a chance; the Zebrina's crew were doomed the moment they landed. Officers gawk as they lead James out from the structure and toward an armored transport. They treat him like a prized trophy.

"Holy shit, that's James Woods." One murmurs.

"I never saw a celebrity criminal before." Another remarks.

"Man, I can't wait to tell my wife and boys about this!" A third chirps.

The mixture of glee and reverence the scores of police officers show him as they name drop his faction bolsters James' ego. Dragged aboard another ship, he is quickly processed. As they fly back to a Sijian prison, he is interrogated and also unintentionally debriefed. As a missing person, Erica Tanaka will be released by the police, who are giving her a ride in another armored transport to the nearest city, where she will be questioned beforehand.

After refusing to answer any questions, James is thrown into a cell aboard the armored transport, clearly designed with prisoner transport in mind. Sitting in the cell

as a force shield is activated, forming a translucent, light blue barrier.

“I can’t wait to see them skin you alive.” A disgusted, female human guard remarks.

“That would be a cruel and unusual punishment, and you lawful types can’t have blood on your hands.” He smirks.

“You’re a fucking pig.” She growls.

“You think so?”

“I know so! What you did to that poor woman, and all of the others...”

“I’ll tell you what...” James says as he rises to his feet. “Open this cell and I’ll show you just what kind of man I am.”

Mockingly blowing a kiss to her, she storms off.

“Pfft. Fucking cops.” He murmurs as he lay on the bunk in his cell. “No sense of humor.”

Walking away from the police station in a large bayside city close to the equator, Erica Tanaka is released from the police station. Allowed to call her family, she instead placed a call and spoke with a Sol Rogue contact. Speaking as if he was her uncle, whom she ran away from, she asked him to call her big brother, who doesn’t exist. By the time the police discover the truth about her family, if they even

bother to check, she'll be gone. As she suspected, they simply allowed her to walk away after answering a long series of questions.

To her surprise, the police gifted her the custom-made blaster and a credit chit, charged with 50,000 credits. It was the emergency funds that James carried in his front shirt pocket. Though typically kept as evidence, the chief of police himself returned the weapon and funds. Acting somewhat enamored and highly sympathetic to the woman, she accepted them meekly and with great thanks. Walking away from the station, she hailed a cab. The red hovercar with black pinstripes waits as she climbs in, waving to her would-be saviors.

"Where too, ma'am?" The driver asks.

"The nearest star port." She replies.

"Yes, ma'am!"

Pacing back and forth in the control room, May sits upon a sparsely populated desk. With her firm buttocks planted atop it, her slender form leaning back, she sways her digitigrade feet covered in black boots, her tail swishing through the air.

"I'm sure they'll be okay, little bear. James is a good captain. He's never had a problem yet." She assures him.

"That's what worries me. Everyone's luck runs out eventually." He murmurs.

After the Wildcats sent confirmation of the Zebrina's landing, they've sat in wait for nearly three hours. With no word in some time, far longer than it should have taken, a call comes through a secured line. As the Slaver technician answers the call, George races toward their terminal.

"James?! Is that you?! What happened?!" He asks.

"I'm sorry, George. It's just me." Erica replies.

"... Where's James?" He asks.

There is an unnervingly long pause. May slides down from the desk and approaches her fiancé. Resting her hands on his shoulders, she squeezes him reassuringly. He slips an arm around her slender waist and pulls her close, keeping her by his side.

"Erica?" May finally asks.

"H-he's... Been arrested." A crying Erica sniffles. "I did everything I could to be released. I had to say bad things about him, but I needed you to know. Please! ... Get him out, George!"

Enraged, heartbroken and guilt-ridden, he looks to May. She nods her head, silently agreeing to support him. Though he wanted to escape this horrible life, he now has a new priority; their plans for a future away from the blood and pain will have to wait, at least for now. Leaning in, he kisses

his fiancé and nuzzles her face. Turning back to the terminal, George clears his throat and takes a breath.

“Sit tight, Erica. I’ll take care of everything.”