

Unity

By Mantrid Brizon

Prologue

Marching over the scorched earth, boots thud and metal clank. The sounds of the warriors echo through the open air of the fields. Many battles have taken place here already, yet soon another will occur. Two sides, each with an opposing ideology, prepare for more carnage; after decades they've grown accustomed to conflict. The boots cease their endless marching, and the gears of powerful machines of war squeak as they come to a halt. Overhead, the sky looms like the shroud of oblivion, blackened from the fog of war as much as from the brewing storm. It's as though the sky were preparing to weep for the future dead.

"It's all so visceral, this little war." A commander remarks to her underling.

"Is it?" The underling sighs.

"You don't sound too excited." The commander narrows her eyes.

"Should I be?"

"I think so. We have yet another opportunity to prove to our foes that the mother goddess is the creator of all." The commander explains.

"And how do we do that?" The underling raises a brow.

"By sending them all to her warm embrace, of course!"

"Yes, ma'am." The underling quietly remarks.

With a bowed head the young female's mane sways rather stiffly in the breeze. The commander turns from her female underling and toward another. Sitting in a seat beside the older female, both his ranked and cultural superior, the male underling holds up an electronic device. Pressing a button, he sends a signal to many of the nearby vehicles. Inside a bulbous tank, sitting in the armored turret that bears three massive cannons in a triangular pattern, the crew's commander sees a light flashing blue; it's nearly time to strike.

"Load!" The female commander yells to her crew.

The others spring into action. Opening the hatch to get a better view, the crew's leader pokes her head out from the turret. Her ruby red eyes narrow as she looks toward the enemy, lined in typical fashion across the broken field nearly a mile away. A thunderclap booms and her pointy ears prick. Droplets of cool water strike the top of her blocky snout. Her nostrils, each at a top corner at the front of her snout, flare as she inhales. A blast of steam billows in the brisk air as she exhales. The liquid runs down the smooth but dense hide of her face, which matches her body, pine green in color and with thick crimson stripes.

Her mane is a streak of crimson, formed from bristles constructed like feathers; soft outer shells with a somewhat stiff core for support. It reaches from the crown of her head, along her spine and down to the tip of her tail. Her long, tapering tail sways gleefully as she reaches a clawed hand into her vehicle, taking a handheld comm unit. Wrapping her three fingers and thumb around the middle of the device, she brings it to her ear and waits. Orders will come soon, and then it will be time to fight the unbelievers. How dare they insult the mother goddess by proclaiming that non-angelic beings created them. How could anyone believe that they were seeded by creatures from other planets? When their blood spills and their souls depart, perhaps then they will know their folly?

With her lips curling into a sinister grin, the commander prepares to receive her orders, as do all of her compatriots in the myriad of other tanks. Soldiers on the ground are led by commanders who have radiomen standing nearby. With rifles in hand, the soldiers look to each other with apprehension. None of them want to die, but they know that they must do their duty. This war has raged for so long that the ranks now contain many females, a first in their recorded history. As a matriarchal society, all of the menial and dangerous jobs are held by the males; they have no say in the matter, or any matter, as it were.

“Ready?!” A female voice chirps over the radio. “On my mark!” The voice continues, never waiting for a reply. “Three... Two...”

“What the hell is that?!” A voice interrupts.

“I don’t know! It’s moving so fast! I can’t keep up!” Another cries out in fear.

“Bank left! You’re going to crash in it!” The first shouts in a panic.

Looking into the sky, distant scout planes emerge from the dense clouds, followed by something else. With maws agape, the soldiers all stare into the sky, their eyes wide. Across the mile-long field of death, the enemy drops their weapons and some fall to their knees. The ground shakes as a massive vessel hovers above them all, observing the armies like some kind of demigod. With a long fuselage and curved wings like an eagle’s, a disc-like structure below glows with many lights. A landing gear emerges from beneath the craft, more than double the size of the largest tank in either army. It touches down slowly, yet the ground still quakes, as though in fear.

“What is that?!”

“I don’t know!”

“What should we do?!”

The voices become a cacophony of noise as the general of the army stands to her digitigrade feet. Her metal boots cover her three-toed feet. Though the sky was blackened, choked with moisture, the emergence of the craft has blown the clouds away; a short but harsh downpour follows as the humidity has nowhere left to go. Pelting the warrior's armor and tanks, the droplets clank as they stare in shock and horror. No one dares move. With a trembling hand, the general snatches the radio from her underling.

"Commanders! This must be some kind of new weapon crafted by our enemies! Destroy it!" She growls.

"Yes, ma'am!" They all reply.

As the army across from them stands down, the other raises their arms. Tank barrels adjust as they take aim at the ship. Given the order to fire at will, the very ground shakes as they unleash a volley that would have slain one hundred thousand of their enemies. Slamming into the craft, a cloud of black smoke is left from the exploding rounds. With her sharp canines protruding from beneath her thin lips, the general waits for the smoke to clear to see how much of the new weapon is left. Her silver eyes grow wide with horror as the dissipating smoke reveals an entirely undamaged craft.

"How can this be?! ... Again!" She demands.

Once again, a volley is unleashed upon the craft, but unlike the first, many of the tanks have yet to reload. With far fewer rounds striking the vessel, they bear witness to a blue field that appears to absorb the rounds from their most powerful weapons. From beneath a portside wing, just above the disc-shaped structure, a strange looking turret swings in the direction of a tank battalion. With her hands on the edges of the opened hatch, the green and crimson tank commander watches in awe as a green light glows upon the tip of the turret.

“Azkana? Filma thaz blax ee?” A male’s voice speaks, booming through speakers.

“Is that a man?! What’s he saying?!” A commander asks over the radio.

“Flavaloma thudu!” It continues.

All are confused by what sounds like complete gibberish.

“Er... It must be some sort of sonic weapon! Fire!” The general demands.

Obeying their leader, a third volley fires upon the craft. Before the smoke has even disappeared into the wind, two large balls of green light fly out from the smoke, fired from the same point but in two different directions. Striking the ground, it behaves like a ball of snow, or a glob of old engine oil. Rolling into the crowd with blistering speed, it evaporates everything that was once there. The green and crimson striped tank commander stares at the devastation that her tank and crew have avoided by mere feet. The general drops the radio and stumbles back, looking at two large diagonal cuts. Where once there were many tanks and soldiers, now is only a glowing green ooze that melts into the very soil.

With two blasts from the craft’s single turret the battle is over; they’ve already lost many lives. From the disc-shaped structure emerges a long, relatively large cylinder. One half shifts and slides over the other, revealing the glowing white interior. Inside are several beings, dressed in strange suits. Still on their hands and knees, the enemy across from the damaged and demoralized army appear to pray to the craft and her crew. Approaching cautiously, the beings seem to target the hostile army specifically. Though they appear unarmed, all are terrified.

What do these beings want with them? Are they elite soldiers for their enemy? Will they demand surrender? Are they angered by the assault their general ordered upon them, even though it did no visible damage? The trembling general slumps back into her seat, her tail pulling to one side as she sits down. The whip-like tip curls over her knee while the thick base presses into one side of her backrest.

“H-how... How can this be?” She thinks aloud.

Hoping out of her tank, the green and red commander approaches the beings. She can hear the voices of her superiors ordering her to stand down and return to her vehicle, but she ignores them. Curiosity has infected her mind, and she must know who or what these creatures are. Her boots stomp into the soft earth as she pushes through many soldiers, most of them female; a direct result of the years of conflict. Some follow her of their own volition, while many others do not. Emerging from the front lines of the army, she cocks her head as she draws closer to the suit-clad beings. A helmet turns and looks at another creature.

The tank commander’s ruby eyes scan the form of the distracted being first. Both beings are noticeably shorter than her. Though the suit leaves much to the imagination, it appears to be a male. To her shock, he has bizarrely shaped feet, much smaller than her own, and no tail! The being he is looking at is even smaller and more slender, with orbs poking up at the chest. The tank commander looks down at her own two breasts, which are quite ample and push through her uniform. This one must be a female, and she even has a visible, if startlingly thin tail.

Her heart sinks as she realizes that they cannot share her anatomy; they are not enemy soldiers, but aliens. Their opponents were right. Does this mean that these are the beings who seeded their world and gave them life? Does this mean that there is no mother goddess? Was all of this for nothing? The commander’s knees grow weak and she feels the urge to cry as she looks around at the field

that had seen so many previous battles. With watery eyes, she looks at the alien beings, who are now only feet away from her. One raises a hand, facing a palm toward her. She takes a step back in fear.

The smaller female alien who stands beside the male alien must have noticed, as she immediately grabs hold of his wrist and lowers it.

“Fluga! Kafa vanush!” She scolds him.

“Icha.” He shrugs, before turning to face the tank commander. “Ee java tula floko. Xana ju dabu?”

“Ah! Tu bozo mukozo!” The female exclaims to the male.

“Icha.” He says, shaking his head.

Taking a somewhat large device from his belt, he sprays a rust colored smoke. With a wave of his hand, he wafts the smoke over the tank commander and the few warriors brave enough to follow her. They can smell the smoke and briefly panic. Are they under attack? As the tank commander fumbles with drawing her sidearm, her pointy, elf-like ears prick.

“How could you forget the translator microbes?” The female alien asks.

“I’m sorry, but this is my first time being the alien.” The male replies.

“I... I can understand you!” The tank commander gasps, dropping her weapon onto the ground

“Hey, they took effect! That was fast! Now that the language barrier is gone, allow me to introduce myself. I’m George Woods, Captain of the Azilian, and this is my lovely wife, May.”

“Hello!” May chirps.

“... The Azilian?” The tank commander asks.

“Yes. Our ship, right behind us.” May answers.

“You aren’t gods, are you...” The tank commander sighs.

“Are we?” George turns to May.

“No.” She replies.

“Then nope! We’re beings from a planet called ‘Earth’.”

The tank commander falls to her knees, her head bowed and snout pointed at the ground. George and May watch with curiosity as the woman, who looks like a raptor with bristled hair or a dragoness without wings sobs before them. Realizing that she is terribly upset, they step closer. The other warriors lose their nerve and retreat, leaving the commander behind.

“Hey, are you alright?!” George asks.

“Are you feeling ill?!” May interjects.

More beings emerge from the Azilian as the tank commander turns her eyes up toward the surprisingly worried and comforting aliens. The tenderness in their voices soothes her, but with the weight of guilt crushes her down; their kindness and concern are hardly a consolation.

“What a fascinating creature!” Rakshasa comments.

“Oooh, she’s pretty!” Kira chirps.

“I think something’s wrong with her.” May says to Rakshasa.

“Well, I’m not an expert on alien biology; I’ve never seen her race before.” Rakshasa replies.

“How could we be so blind...” The tank commander remarks.

Everyone stops in their tracks. Rakshasa holds up a device, scanning the atmosphere.

“We’ve been at it for so long, it had long since felt normal... How could we do that?” The raptor continues.

“It’s not quite Earth or Mars oxygen, but it’s a nearly identical composition.” Rakshasa says to her team.

Immediately reaching for his helmet, George unlatches the airtight seal around his neck. With a subtle pop, he pulls the helmet up and over his head. With long and wavy, light-brown hair, he brushes aside his beard with one hand, while he sets his helmet down with the other. May soon follows, taking off her helmet. The tank commander turns her eyes, being the first of her kind to look upon the aliens. She’s startled by their appearance. She’s never imagined creatures like these before.

“I can’t believe this is happening...” She dolefully remarks.

“This is a first for us too... Well, second, but first in this specific scenario.” George comments.

“We know how you feel.” May assures her.

Sniffling, the tank commander can’t help but cry. Out of an impulsive need for a physical connection, as well as a nagging curiosity, she reaches out to George, who kneels before her. She rests a hand on his cheek. His light-colored skin is so soft and smooth, while the hairs on his face are also surprisingly soft; they are nothing like her own. Raking his flesh with the dark gray claws on her three fingers, she turns her eyes toward May.

“... Do you?”

Episode One: First Impressions

Waking up to the sound of her alarm, Roku rolls out of her bunk. Sitting up at the edge of her bed, the nude female Voeldahn rests her hands atop her knees, her digitigrade feet resting firmly on the floor. She winces as she yawns, her pointy, feline ears flopping back. Standing up, she walks past her nightstand and the blaster that sits atop it, heading for her dresser. There, her clothes lay waiting for her. She steps into the leg holes of her panties, pulling the silky black underwear over her slender form and firm buttocks, stopping at the base of her long, slender, cat-like tail. She looks at herself in the mirror as she dons a matching bra, her snow-white fur with black tiger stripes evident even in the dim light coming from her nightstand lamp.

Slipping on a pair of dressy black slacks before buttoning up her white, business casual shirt, she prepares for her day. Looking back at the clock, she sees that the time is 09:41. Today is her big day; she's prepared for it ever since she was a little girl. Returning to her bed, she opens the drawer of her nightstand and retrieves a hairbrush. Brushing out her long, wavy, platinum blonde hair, she turns her emerald green eyes to a framed photograph beside her lamp and adjacent her blaster. She pauses to pick up the photo, a little smile creeping across her face as she gazes at the image.

With a black claw, she affectionately taps the nose of her father, something he often did to her throughout her childhood and even to this very day. Though she wasn't nervous when she woke up, or throughout any of the previous days, she's finally beginning to worry. After all, this *is* a golden opportunity for the single, childless, twenty-six-year-old Voeldahn woman. Her mother and father built a wondrous and spectacular life for themselves; George and May Woods were literally in history books by the time Roku went to college. Her parents and their ship, the Azilian, are household names to even the lowliest inhabitant of Earth, Mars and the various colonies of Sol.

Throughout her childhood, Roku and her fraternal twin, August, grew up aboard the Azilian. They were only small children when the craft, with a modified hyper drive, made a three-month journey to Alpha Centauri. There, they changed the course or history for the humans and Voeldahn of Sol after a chance encounter of a ship containing two alien races. Though overall technologically inferior to the aliens, the humans and Voeldahn of Sol had much more advanced weapons and shields than the aliens. After brokering a peace which blossomed into a world changing alliance, they then encountered yet another race.

This time, however, the Azilian was the technological superior in all ways, not just militarily. Interrupting a decades old war, her parents effectively prevented the eventual extinction of the sentient, raptor-like creatures now known as the Kanorakus. Far more primitive than any race to have been encountered before, the Kanorakus became the pet project of the people of Sol. This is entirely the result of her parents meddling, and their sway with 'The Solar Council', which they also helped create when brokering the first alliance with the first known alien races.

Unlike previous attempts from Earth's past of bringing nations together, the Solar Council exists for only trade agreements and to aid each other in the event of galactic wars; no race or nation may interfere with the laws and rituals of another race or nation for any reason. No exceptions were made for the Kanorakus, though the Azilian's appearance drastically altered their destiny. While many of the raptor-like aliens accepted the translator microbes and wanted to learn about the races of the world, a subset did not. Clinging to their religious beliefs, the "Goddess's Children" became a small but dangerous terrorist group.

However, no rules prevented the Solakus governments from rendering aid to the Kanorakus interested in adapting to their new alien neighbors. Taking them from a technological level similar to

Earth in the mid-1960s, the Kanorakus by and large embraced the humans and Voeldahn of Sol, with whom they share a unique relationship. After several years of economic and technological aid, in exchange for biological research of their race, the Kanorakus were given the option to create their own colonies with loaned ships, and even the right to move to places within Sol; the exodus from their war-torn home world of Kanor was overwhelming.

Once again, the Azilian made an appearance as the first ship to ferry expatriating Kanor citizens to Sol, something many of the aliens considered a high honor. Recalling her parents list of achievements, Roku wonders if she can ever step out from her parent's shadows. Not only did they achieve everything mentioned before, but they are indirectly responsible for naming the entire collective of Sol; it was their first contact with the Dezonians and their ally race, the Irakus, that earned both human and Voeldahn alike the racial classification of 'Solakus', or 'beings originating from Sol' in ancient Dezonian.

Throughout her schooling, she was perpetually haunted by their shadows, and while her twin, August, seemed unaffected by the fame, she was. How many professors graded her work highly because of her heritage? How many boys flirted with her after merely hearing her name, regardless of physical attraction? How many conversations began with 'what was it like growing up on the Azilian'? As Roku sits mostly dressed, looking at the photo of her family as they were when she was still a teenager, living aboard the now fabled ship, she is startled by a high-pitched ringing. Setting the photo aside, she takes her V.I. bracelet from its charging base. She accepts the video call.

"Hey dad." She says.

"Hey, baby. I hope I didn't wake you!" George chirps from the holographic screen.

"No, I'm up."

"Oh, good. We just wanted to wish you luck on your interview today!" George continues.

"Hey sweetheart!" May exclaims, leaning into view. "Knock 'em dead!"

"Thanks. I'll do my best." Roku says with a little smile.

"I know you will. You always do." George grins.

"You didn't call them, did you?" Roku asks.

"... What?! ... No." George glances away.

"... Seriously?!" Roku sighs in frustration.

"I didn't say anything!" George exclaims.

"We didn't do anything, and further questioning will require our attorney's presence." May teases her daughter.

"Right, well I've got to go. I don't want to be late. Thanks for calling."

"We love you!" Her parents exclaim in unison.

"I love you both too." Roku replies.

She can't help but smile as she speaks the words; her parents constant support and affection melt away her worries. For as much as she sometimes resents their fame that forever looms over her, she cannot deny that she had a wonderful childhood with parents who love her and with a crew who are like family; all still live and work aboard the Azilian to this day. Taking her hairbrush, she runs it through her hair once more before setting it aside. Placing it and her blaster into the nightstand drawer, she slips on a suit jacket and nice boots as she prepares to leave her apartment.

Walking through the hallway and toward the main elevator to the ground floor, her V.I. bracelet chirps yet again. Looking at the device, she sees that her twin, August, is calling her.

"Hello." She sighs as she answers the call.

"Well, you sound excited!" August quips.

"I'm a little busy right now."

"I figured. I just wanted to wish you luck. I know you're going to need it, since I don't think mom and dad called ahead." He teases.

"Thanks... Don't you have something you should be doing, like bothering your other siblings?"

"Well, that's quite the attitude you've got there, and I'm calling Kesa, Tammi and Mars later... You know, no one gave me this kind of support when I went for my interview." August grumbles.

Roku stops in her tracks before the eight-foot-tall and ten-foot-wide elevator door. Blue lights flash as the lift rises from the central floor and toward her own.

"You had an interview?! No one told me! Was it for the same group?!" Roku asks excitedly.

"Oh, so *now* you're curious. Well, if you must know, it was." August smugly answers.

"And did you get in?!"

The elevator door opens and several other tenants step inside.

"... Maybe. I guess you'll find out. Or not!" He chirps before abruptly ending the call.

"Asshole..." Roku grumbles.

Lowering her wrist, she realizes that the elevator door is about to close.

"Wait!" She exclaims.

Before the doors can shut, a large teal hand emerges from inside. The bio scanner reads a life form blocking the door and immediately opens them for her.

“Thanks!” Roku exclaims as she steps inside.

“You are welcome.”

She turns her emerald eyes to the being and flashes a pleasant smile before turning away. The Dezonian stands at her left near the wall, all of seven feet tall. Though they have a potentially frightening insectoid appearance, they are a peaceful race. Many still fear them, however, as much for their highly advanced technology as their looks and mannerisms. Had they been as warlike as their first allied race, the Irakus, the Azilian might not have been the strongest of the two ships during the first encounter in Alpha Centauri.

“I beg your pardon, but you look familiar, young Solakus female.” The Dezonian speaks in a somewhat raspy and sepulchral voice.

“I look like a lot of other female Solakus of my breed.” She quickly replies.

“Yes. Solakus: Type 2A. Bipedal with features similar to a native Earth subspecies called ‘cat’. You are different, though; very familiar.”

Looking to the creature, she turns her head up at the alien. All of five-feet and six-inches tall, she cranes her neck as the Dezonian looks down at her. With a head similar to a preying mantis, it looks at her with two of its three eyes. The central eye, milky white and used exclusively for night vision, is closed; the bulbous black eyes for daily use stare at her, the eyelids blinking from the sides. The solid teal alien reaches one of its four arms up, scratching its nearly non-existent chin with both fingers and thumb. Cocking its head, the creature’s lower body shifts, turning to face her.

Three legs like a tripod are attached to a large abdomen that sits horizontally, as opposed to the thorax, which sits vertically. Relatively flat for the size of the alien, the trunk-like legs give them excellent balance, aided by large rectangular feet, each with four claw-like toes on the outer corners. It reaches out a hand, coiling a finger and thumb and pointing its pincer-like appendage at her. It opens its small mouth, the razor-sharp, silver teeth visible as it speaks.

“Yes, I recognize you! Are you not Roku Woods?” The Dezonian asks.

“... I am.” She hesitantly answers.

Several other Solakus in the elevator, both human and Voeldahn, murmur amongst themselves.

“I am honored to meet you, female Solakus. Truly.” The Dezonian adds, bowing its head respectfully.

“Likewise.” She replies, nodding her head in response.

As soon as the doors open only a moment later, Roku powerwalks from the elevator and quickly leaves the gawking riders behind. Entering a garage, she finds her hovercar, a sporty emerald green coupe. Much like her father, she races off with blistering speed, the fans on high and blowing her wavy locks back from her shoulders. As she drives, she reminisces about her life aboard the Azilian, when life was simpler. The hum of the engines, the beautiful pink and cyan swirls of the warp bubble, wandering the quiet and uneventful corridors; she misses it terribly.

After a short drive, she reaches her destination, a massive skyscraper bearing only the word “Milae” near the top in large, glowing green letters. Parking her hovercar in an enclosed garage, Roku steps out, locks her vehicle, and heads for the nearest elevator.

This time, thankfully, she rides alone. The doors open to a grand hall of highly polished onyx. As smooth and shiny as glass, the floors match the walls and ceilings. With no windows in the central structure, it's lit with many artificial lights that glow a bright white. A chronometer on the wall reads the exact time at her location: 'August 9th, 2208, 10:13'

Approaching the front desk several meters from the elevator door, she sees a black furred Voeldahn woman sitting behind it. Beside her stand several more security operatives, wearing matching grey suits and small, dark sunglasses.

"Hello! How may I help you?!" The bunny chirps.

"... Hi." Roku pauses, taken aback by the secretary's exuberance. "I'm here for an interview."

"Project Unity?" The girl asks, a little smirk on her face.

"Yeah."

"Why did I even ask? So many people are here for that lately! The gentleman to my right will escort you to your interviewer's office, after scanning you for weapons, of course." The secretary explains.

"Of course." Roku nods.

She stands aside and raises her arms as the security officer waves her body with a handheld scanner. She's thankful she didn't bring her blaster. Considering the importance of this project, she does all that she can to play by the rules.

"Clear. Right this way, miss."

"Good luck!" The secretary chirps.

Walking through the security checkpoint, Roku follows the yellow furred canine Voeldahn as he leads her through the building.

First one turn, and then another. Looking at the signs on the office doors, it becomes clear that Milae is not the kind of business that she would have expected to run something as grand as Project Unity.

“Excuse me, but what exactly does ‘Milae’ do?” She finally asks.

“Consulting, usually. We specialize in ‘sentient resources’. These offices belong to our business contacts. At the moment, our resources are focused on vetting recruits for the project.” He answers.

“So, Milae isn’t running it?”

“Hell no. We’re just doing the interviews; vetting everyone working on the project. The Solar Council is contracting everything, even the recruitment process.” He explains.

As they turn a corner, a pair of Kanorakus females pass them, walking in the opposite direction. With a height ranging from a minimum of five-feet and nine-inches to a maximum of six-feet and six-inches, both females average six-feet and two-inches tall. One with a black hide bears deep purple swirls and purple eyes, with bristles that are black with gold tips, like frosted hair. Her companion is orange, with thick red and yellow stripes running over her visible extremities. Orange eyes follow Roku, her bronze colored bristles shifting as she bows her head to the type 2A Solakus.

They wear clothing common to their race. Black boots cover their large, three-toed feet reminiscent to a carnivorous dinosaur’s, which thud with each step. Flowing pants cover their digitigrade lower legs and thick, powerful upper legs, over their broad hips and clinging tightly to their slender, feminine waists with a sturdy, buckled strap. Beneath the strap, a ‘U’ shaped cut allows their large tails to poke through. Tops consist primarily of plates of cloth or synthetic materials such as vinyl. They cover only the chest, sides and parts of their backs, with buckles along the sides to affix the clothing to them, as it all must accommodate the bristles running along their spine.

"Are they coming from the same offices?" Roku can't help but ask her escort.

"They certainly are. More potential recruits for the project."

"I wonder how many of them will be a part of it." She thinks aloud.

"Quite a few, I hope. At first, we only had the usual volunteers, but once it went public that it was a Solakus-lead crew and not Dezonian, we were swamped with Kanorakus willing to work there." He answers rather proudly.

"Well, you sound like a fan." Roku chuckles.

"Have you ever really talked to any of them, miss? I mean, *really talked*, for longer than five minutes and about more than just the weather?" He asks, glancing at her.

Roku doesn't answer, feeling a subtle wash of shame. She's often so noticed for her family lineage that she avoids long conversations; she can't recall actually attempting to befriend anyone from the various alien races since she was a teenager.

"Er... Well, no." She finally replies.

"Well, I have. They were walking head-first to their own extinction before the Azilian showed up and changed everything, *and they know it*. They are so grateful that we stopped the war, gave them aid and technology, and trusted them enough to bring them into the Solar Council beside even more advanced races. Some of them come up to me like I'm a long-lost family member. It's kind of heart wrenching, actually. Sure, they're brutish and tribalistic and have some really strange cultural practices, but as far as they're concerned, we're their saviors. I feel for them, and I hope every last one of them gets a chance to prove themselves."

"That's quite an endorsement."

Roku turns her head to look back at the Kanorakus females. Now far down the hall, she reflects on the beings. Certain species always makes her wonder. Her father has been religious throughout her life, even converting her mother and passing his faith on to two of their five children. The aliens in closest proximity to the humans and Voeldahn of Earth, the quasi-reptilians of Kanor, share a completely identical body chemistry and physical needs; neither the Dezonians and Irakus are from Alpha Centauri, and were merely exploring it during their chance encounter with the Azilian.

Interestingly, the Irakus' home world of Ir is the next closest to Earth, and they share the second most biological traits, though there are differences. Her father would consider that evidence of intelligent design. Being mammals, the Kanorakus reproduce through sexual intercourse in a method identical to the humans and Voeldahn, and with extremely similar organs, in both form and function. The Irakus reproduce similarly, but unlike the other races, the Dezonians lay egg clutches and have no discernable gender. A single Dezonian could repopulate the species, laying over two hundred fertile eggs in a sitting. However, they can only lay eggs once in their lifetime, and only after maturing, which takes approximately twenty-five Earth years.

The hide of a Kanorakus is not made of scales or plates, but a smooth and dense dermis, much like a dolphin; it's twice as thick as human or Voeldahn skin, though it reacts similarly. The female's bristles, which cover their head and run along their spine, are soft enough to safely and easily touch, but have a dense core and can become quite rigid. Their primary purpose is as a form of body language. Males have no bristles whatsoever, being subservient to their females by nature, though they are roughly the same size. The Kanorakus come in many vibrant colors, from red, green, yellow, blue, orange, purple, white, black and more, with equally unique patterns and combinations.

Their looks and culture aside, they are so alike when compared to the Solakus that Roku has begun to wonder if they're somehow an offshoot. After all, humans and Voeldahn look vastly different, yet

both have coexisted on Earth for millennia. Early history was somewhat rocky, but over time the two races advanced together, fought wars together, conquered the solar system and created an interstellar council together, and frequently intermarry and interbreed. When humanity's numbers fell to frighteningly low levels, it terrified the Voeldahn, and the race's stabilization has only deepened their bond, for the most part.

"Perhaps the Kanorakus are not really all that different?" She comments.

"Perhaps... Here we are! In this room are several offices. Give the secretary your name and she'll call you when your interviewer is ready."

Nodding her head, Roku opens the unlocked sliding door and steps inside. She blinks, her eyes growing wide in surprise. The secretary stands beside her desk, digging through a relatively short cabinet that sits just beyond it. The least common of the alien races, the female Irakus stands on the tips of her clawed talons to peek into the cabinet.

"Why do these Solakus make everything so big?" The alien grumbles.

"On behalf of my people, I'm sorry." Roku quips.

The Irakus stops and turns, her long, tapering tail swaying. She glances over her shoulders, glaring at Roku with large, black eyes with red irises. Perhaps the second most vibrant species, the Irakus are covered in short, fluffy, yet shiny feathers, with a thick tuft of fur that rings beneath their neck like a thick scarf. Females are always warm colors like red, bronze and gold, while the males are always cool colors, such as blue, green and silver; if it doesn't match their feathers, their fur will often compliment it, such as a red female with gold fur, like the secretary standing before her.

With sharp, triangular beaks that are grooved along the edges to form canines and incisors, their mouths house a second set of hinged teeth allowing for the proper chewing of food. A dense, somewhat scaly hide covers their talons and up to their ankles, and when combined with their beaks, the Irakus have a bipedal avian appearance. Long but slender arms have three exceptionally long fingers and a thumb. Covered with matching feathers and soft fur, their fingers can give the mistaken impression of being the tips of wings. The spearhead tuft of fur at the tip of the diminutive Irakus's tail whips through the air as the four-foot and eight-inch tall female steps toward Roku.

"Are you applying for the position of 'comedian'?" She asks with narrowed eyes.

"Not today, but if I flunk out, I might come back for that one." Roku grins.

"... Name please?"

After giving her name, Roku sits down in an oversized chair. It's clearly been designed to accommodate multiple races; the Dezonian's physiology doesn't allow for sitting, though they often draw in their legs to rest atop the floor, much like a lying dog. Sitting and waiting, she routinely checks her V.I. bracelet for the time. Although she arrived early, a common theme for interviews, her interviewer is late. By 10:41, eleven minutes past her scheduled interview, she grows increasingly nervous. Why can't it just be done already? Suddenly, the door opens and a four-foot and seven-inch tall Irakus male with blue feathers and white fur steps out. He glances at her with bright blue irises.

"Roku Woods." The secretary calls out her name.

Rising from her seat and stepping into the office, Roku sees a human male sitting behind an ornate desk. With an ebony wood body and a top of thick glass, several personal effects and an expensive lamp decorate it. Middle-aged in appearance and with slicked back, shoulder length hair, he looks to her with vibrant amber eyes. He quickly stands to his feet, wearing a silver suit and purple tie.

"Ah, Roku Woods! Apologies for the delay. I'm just running a little behind. It's a real pleasure to meet you. I'm Kale." The man says, extending his hand to her, over his desk.

"Yes, I remember you from the video call." Roku replies, shaking his hand.

"It was a very good interview. This is just the final process." Kale continues, making himself comfortable in his black leather seat.

"Well, I hope to exceed your expectations." Roku says as she takes a seat in the chair before his desk.

"I'm sure you will... Roku; such a strange and intriguing name, if you don't mind my saying so." Kale remarks.

"It's fine. My mother's side of the family has a strange tradition of naming their children after months of the year. When I was born, my parents decided to keep it going, but with a twist. Roku is some ancient language's word for 'June'." She explains.

"Fascinating!"

Kale sits in silence for a moment. To Roku, he almost appears to be savoring the moment.

"I'm sorry, but I can't help but gush. I couldn't even conduct this interview if it wasn't for your family." Kale begins.

"How's that?" Roku raises a brow.

"When they made first contact and came back to Earth with the Dezonians and Irakus, I was sixty-one. All the tech that we gleaned from our new friendship with them... The average Earthling made it to

their eighties before, but now it's double that. I still look the same as I did when their existence made the news." Kale explains.

"It was quite the achievement." Roku murmurs.

"The advanced medicine, faster-than-light space travel, discovering and saving the Kanorakus... You must be so proud of all that your family's done." He adds.

"... Even my uncle?"

Kale's smile fades. Glancing down at the table, he is at a loss for words. While George and May Woods are famous, James Woods is *infamous*. Still leading the small but feared Slaver's Union, James and Erica are hunted by every lawful faction in existence. Even the alien races who are a part of the Solar Council consider them dangerous criminals to be destroyed on sight. There are no less than a dozen books written about the Slaver's Union, though none of the author's know that George was the founder or even a part of it. Turning his eyes to the young, attractive Voeldahn woman that he's interviewing, Kale hesitates to speak.

"We all make our own destiny. That's why I want to be a part of this project. I believe that I have what it takes to really make a difference. I'm not my mother, my father, or my uncle. I'm just me, Roku Woods, but given my knowledge and experience, I'm confident that's more than enough."

Kale can't help but grin; Roku oozes both confidence and experience. Bringing his hands to his lips, he presses his fingertips together. They sit in an awkward silence for several moments, merely looking at each other.

"This isn't just shaping *your* destiny, it's shaping *everyone's* destiny." Kale begins.

"Isn't that a bit of an overstatement?" Roku raises a brow.

"Oh, I don't think so. This project is the first of its kind. The governments of every race in the Solar Council have come together to build one ship, melding Solakus, Irakus and Dezonian technology. When the Unity is complete, she'll be the largest, most powerful, and first multi-racial crew to include aliens. The Unity and some six thousand recruits will launch on a multi-year mission to reach the opposite end of the Milky Way, testing advanced scanners to map planets for colonization, among other advancements. It's a purely experimental craft. Hell, they might even discover more alien life along the way! The possibilities are limitless!"

"I feel like I've heard this concept somewhere before." Roku remarks.

"It's quite possible. It's certainly a good idea; I can imagine a lot of people coming up with it. This is the first time we could ever make it a reality though. Solakus tech is the best for defense and offense, Irakus tech is sturdy, efficient and easily maintained, and Dezonian tech is the most advanced; their sensors and engines are unmatched. Throw it all together and you have 'Unity', the first of its kind."

"It sounds almost too perfect."

"Well, there are problems. The first being the Goddess's Children and some other xenophobic terrorist factions. Most of the Kanorakus are being hired as security and soldiers to protect the Unity, before and after completion. Then there's logistics; taking into account multiple species basic dietary needs, etcetera. A laundry list of other issues..." Kale sighs, sitting back in his chair.

"Well, as I mentioned on my resume, my education and personal, lifelong experience has prepared me for a project exactly like this one."

Kale sits back in his chair, looking at a little plaque on his wall. After a long pause, he turns his eyes toward Roku, who sits and waits patiently. Kale doesn't speak but merely stares.

"Uhm... You can begin the interview now." Roku softly speaks.

"Heh... No need." He chuckles.

Reaching into the left breast pocket of his suit jacket, the tan-skinned human retrieves a small card. Roughly the size of his pinky fingernail, it contains terabytes of data. Setting it atop his glass desk, he slides the card toward Roku. Inside the card is all of the information and contacts that she will need.

"Welcome to Project Unity."