

Unity

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode Eleven: Checkmate

"But you haven't found the spy?" Director Ashford asks.

"No, sir. All indication points to the spy dropping contact; the trail's cold, sir." August replies.

"That's unfortunate..."

"However, in my investigation I did come across something!" August enthusiastically continues.

"Such as?"

"Following the spy's trail, I managed to dig up a few leads. Upon pressuring a low-level female, I was able to turn her into a confidential informant. Releasing the Kanorakus woman, she swiftly returned to her group, who've reassigned her to the very base that has been used as the spearhead for the attacks." August explains.

"Well, now! That is a remarkable turn of events!" Director Ashford exclaims with a rare hint of emotion.

"Yes, sir! Though she doesn't know her coordinates, as they bring everyone there in secret, she knows that the base is somewhere in the ringlets of Saturn. Using a conventional V.I. bracelet and the base's signal booster, Ayanda and I have devised a plan to discover the base."

"Go on."

"We've marked the locations that would be unlikely for a base to be hidden; proximity to moons, near trade lanes, etc. By calling and

conversing with the C.I. for an extended period of time, Sol Marine ships can scour the potential sites and look for the signal.”

“A solid plan. I’ll contact the Solar Council and send the ships right away. Call your informant as soon as I contact you.” Director Ashford calmly instructs.

“And as for the informant?” August asks.

“What about her? ... Oh, you’re concerned. She’s a terrorist; she’ll meet a terrorist’s end.”

Terminating the call, August shuts off the handheld recording device. Having illegally taped the conversation, he exits the office and returns to Ayanda and Drayusa, promptly playing the recording for their benefit. Director Ashford’s rather cold write off of the informant surprises the women.

“It would seem that even our leaders are cruel and ruthless at times.” Ayanda remarks.

“That’s why I didn’t tell him the truth.” August says, tossing the recorder onto the table. “Drayusa made a mistake, but she doesn’t deserve what they’d do to her.”

“Thank you.” Drayusa says, bowing her head respectfully to August.

“You just take care of Stefan, alright? Earn this.” He continues.

Ayanda’s eyes grow wide and she glares at Drayusa in shock. Turning to August, she’s even more appalled that he’d keep the secret for the traitorous woman.

“Don’t even start. Those rules are bullshit, and Unity’s nearly complete anyway; there’s no point in reporting it.” He says to her without missing a beat.

“... I suppose.” Ayanda grumbles.

Now even more thankful for his swift intervention, Drayusa feels even guiltier for her betrayal. How could she believe the clearly incorrect teachings of her former faith and aid the Goddess's Children? Standing with the restrained Kanorakus woman and the Solakus man who's shown her mercy, Drayusa cannot fathom what ever made her turn against them in the first place.

"It's moments like these when I realize that I will never fully understand the Solakus." Ayanda murmurs, shaking her head.

"Everyone deserves a little happiness..." August replies.

"So... How long do we wait here?" She asks.

"You heard the man. We wait until he calls us back and then-"

August's V.I. bracelet suddenly chirps, cutting his sentence short.

"Well, that was fast!" August exclaims as he answers the call.

"It's done. Contact Captain Kraiss and send him the locations you need the Sol Marines to search. The trade lane that the convoy is using to reach Unity is passing Saturn, so a considerable force is already available near there. End this, once and for all." Director Ashford calmly instructs.

"Yes, sir!"

Terminating the call on his own, August follows his instructions to the letter. During the call to Captain Kraiss, who's been placed in charge of the search operation, Ayanda sends the base's potential locations to his console aboard the SM Deliverance.

“We’re already well on our way... Finally, after all this time, we’ll be able to do something about those bloody terrorists.” Krai says with satisfaction.

“It won’t be long now.” Ayanda remarks.

“Keep your eyes peeled.” August adds.

“The Sol Marines will *not* fail.” Krai boasts.

Terminating that call as well, Ayanda and Drayusa turn to August.

“Eyes... *Peeled?*” Drayusa cocks her head.

“It’s an expression.” He shrugs. “Make the call.”

The V.I. bracelet chirps incessantly, sitting patiently on Miss Corova’s nightstand and waiting for an answer that never comes. Sitting in the control room of the small, hidden space station, Sashuna hesitates to call again. With Sway waiting on one line, and news of the failed attack flashing over multiple holoscreens throughout the base, Sashuna is stuck between a rock and a hard place. She looks at the images of Unity’s interior modules launching triumphantly, now guarded by the Sol Marines, then to the V.I. bracelet dedicated to communicating with their spies.

“I... I can’t reach her...” Sashuna sheepishly replies.

“Did I ask for fucking excuses?! Get her on the line!” Sway’s voice growls.

Standing in the room with Drayusa, August leans against the small table. His arms crossed before his chest, he can’t help but grin at the sight. Even Ayanda is surprised by the level of force the often lewd but otherwise meek Kanorakus female can project. On Kanor, she’d be a relatively low status female, as their hierarchy follows a

combination of age and strength; the older and most assertive females are often the pinnacle of the tribe, ruling by emotion.

“I-I’ll do what I can, Sway!” Sashuna’s voice replies through Drayusa’s modified V.I. bracelet.

“You’d better...” Drayusa snarls.

Taking a deep breath and calling once again, the young Kanorakus woman waits with considerable anxiety. Ring, ring, ring. She fears Miss Corova’s response when she finally answers, having explicitly told her assistant to not disturb her while meeting with Draiman Woods, which she’s been doing for nearly two hours. Ring, ring, ring. Once again, there’s no answer. With a shaking hand, Sashuna reaches up and swiftly terminates the connection. Two attempts are enough.

“I still cannot reach her.” She says to Sway.

“Then break down her fucking door!”

“You can’t be serious?!” Sashuna scoffs.

“Deadly...” Sway growls.

Having delayed their spy for just over ten minutes already, Sashuna prepares herself.

“Alright...”

Clutching the V.I. bracelet tightly in one hand, she leaves the control room and heads down the hall, walking nervously toward Miss Corova’s private quarters. Passing a small warehouse, Korazhu spots her, his eyes lighting up. Abandoning his duties, he follows her down the hall. He nearly begins to speak, about to thank her for her late-night visit to his room, but she promptly shushes him, holding up the

bracelet. Still in tow, the pair reach Miss Corova's door, which is visibly locked. With a trembling hand, Sashuna balls a fist, holding it up and facing the knuckles of her fingers toward the metal barrier.

No sooner than she softly strikes the sliding door, a loud alarm begins to sound. Sashuna looks up at the color-coded lights that sit near the bottom of the alarm speakers, horrified to see a flashing pink bulb. It's a proximity alert; an unknown ship approaches.

"Have a nice day..." Sway's voice says menacingly.

Stumbling from her bed, the physically exhausted lovers rush to collect and put on their clothes. No longer concerned with aesthetics, Miss Corova unlocks and opens the door with only a pair of pants covering her; Draiman, meanwhile, has only underwear on. Swooshing open, both Sashuna and Korazhu stare in shock, briefly left dumbstruck as their leader reveals her sexual relationship with the supposedly inferior, human Solakus male.

"Who is it?!" Miss Corova demands, placing her top over her large breasts and fastening the buckles at her sides.

"I-I..."

"What the fuck's going on?!" She continues to press Sashuna.

"Sway called... She-"

"Sway?! ... Oh no..."

"Who's Sway?" Draiman asks, stepping up to his lover as he slides his shirt over his head.

"She was a spy I had within the highest-level security team for Project Unity. I feared that she was losing her nerve, so I ordered the next attack to take place where she'd be stationed." Miss Corova openly admits to him.

Draiman now realizes what Miss Corova does; surviving the attempt on her life, Sway must've turned on them. The incoming ships are probably military.

"Shit... Come on! We've got to go!" He says, taking Miss Corova by the hand.

"But this is my base!" She replies.

"And it's fucking fucked! That's got to be the Sol Marines, and *they will not stop*. In a few hours, this place will be in pieces."

Looking into his eyes, Miss Corova can see the great concern. He can easily abandon her, yet he wastes precious time trying to convince her to leave. Her lips curl impulsively into a warm smile. Clearly, he feels as much for her as she does for him; placing her faith in him wasn't foolish after all.

"Alright." She leans in, kissing his lips. "Let's go!"

"Grab whatever you don't want to leave. I'll make sure my boys prep my ship." He replies.

"Miss Corova?!" Sashuna asks in shock.

Without bothering to answer her assistant, she takes a large bag that sits nearby, the same one she'd used to bring her things aboard the station when she took command months earlier. She rips open her drawers and scoops clothing inside before using her forearms to sweep her personal effects from her shelves. Draiman, meanwhile, uses his V.I. bracelet's short-range comm setting to speak with his ship's crew. Still out of range but closing in fast, the Sol Marine cruiser and two gunboat escorts approach. Their heading leaves no doubt; they know exactly where the base is.

Calling for an evacuation, Miss Corova, Sashuna and Korazhu race down the hall with Draiman. Reaching the airlock, they don't

bother waiting. Over two dozen of the station's crew are already waiting there; they, along with the others who trickle in, quickly exit the base, floating through the umbilicus and entering Draiman Woods' gunboat. Stepping into the bridge just to the left of the airlock, Draiman keeps his arm around Miss Corova's slender waist. With a snap of his fingers, a guard aboard the ship darts toward them. Silently pointing at her bag, the guard slings his rifle and takes the bag from her.

"Place it in my room near my bed." Draiman instructs.

"Yes, sir!" The black and purple clad guard chirps.

"Then watch the airlock and close it on my mark." He continues.

"Yes, sir!"

Miss Corova watches the guard racing off to carry out his orders, before turning her head toward the human. Though he stands about four or five inches shorter than the six foot and three-inch-tall Kanorakus woman, she feels as though she's looking up at him. A bizarrely enjoyable subservience overcomes her as he keeps her beside him, his arm around her as if she were his property. If this is his natural state, then perhaps her race has been doing everything backward? Leading her further into the ship, Sashuna and Korazhu follow a few feet behind, visibly unnerved by both the unfolding situation and their changing environment.

"This is Corova. She's my new lover and second in command. Understood?!" Draiman sternly asks his small crew.

"Yes, sir!" They reply in unison.

"Good! Now, keep me updated on the status of the cruiser and give it a scan. I want to know as soon as we have to close those doors." He instructs.

Stepping up to her leader, Sashuna leans closer.

“But what about the others on the base?” She asks in a hushed voice.

“What about them?” Miss Corova turns her head toward her.

“Are we just leaving them behind?!”

“Not all of them.” Draiman interjects, claiming both female’s attention. “I’ll leave those doors open as long as I can and save whoever can make it but the second we’re in real danger, I’m locking the rest out and tearing that umbilicus off.”

“And you’re fine with this?” Sashuna asks her leader.

“I’m in total agreement.” Miss Corova replies.

“Don’t worry. You’re already home free; we’ll be back on the Lomboko before they can touch us.” Draiman confidently assures them.

“What will happen to us then?” Korazhu asks.

“I don’t know. Corova’s coming with me, but I suppose if you want a job working with the Slavers...” Draiman replies.

“And abandon the cause?!” Sashuna gasps.

“... Fuck the cause.” Miss Corova retorts, draping an arm around Draiman in solidarity.

The two Kanorakus are left speechless at Miss Corova’s words. Her visible display of support and affection for the human only further obliterates their ability to act. With only Corova given status among Draiman’s crew, they usher Sashuna and Korazhu out, sealing the bridge while they prepare. Only one Slaver remains visible, the mask wearing, rifle wielding guard who stands between the outer and inner airlock doors, waiting for his boss’s order.

“Well now! What do we have here?!” Captain Kraiss says over an open channel.

“A Slaver gunboat and a terrorist space station!” Another chirps.

“You really only have one of those things, and we were done with that base anyway.” Draiman sneers.

“Shut down your engines and prepare to be boarded.” Kraiss demands.

“Or what?!” Draiman laughs.

“Or I’ll huff, and puff, and blow that fucker open!”

“You don’t have the balls, and if you do, you sure as hell don’t have the strength!”

The Slaver captain’s obstinance and arrogance surprises captain Kraiss, who commands not only his cruiser but the two gunboats. As military grade ships, both gunboats should be more than a match for the humble looking civilian vessel docked on what would otherwise be an unassuming asteroid.

“Sir, I count sixty-five heads out here, minus your woman.” The airlock guard’s voice comes through the internal comms.

Turning to Miss Corova, she nods her head.

“Alright! That’s it! Lock her up!” Draiman chirps.

“Yes, sir!”

The SM Deliverance moves closer and closer to the base, nearly within targeting range of their main cannons. Suddenly, other, much smaller asteroids, explode in clouds of dust; they’re static defensive turrets in disguise. The gunboats break off, struggling to avoid the cannon fire from the turrets, while the SM Deliverance is far more powerful a ship than they were ever designed to combat. Unphased by the onslaught, Kraiss doesn’t even both to alter his course; one turret is rammed and destroyed by the cruiser as it bears down on the Slaver gunboat and terrorist base.

“We’re within their range!” A Slaver shouts.

Lifting off of the asteroid’s surface, Draiman’s crew now prep the ship’s weapons. Draiman’s generosity may have cost them, as he waited until Corova’s people were all aboard. Ordinarily, he’d have been a memory before Krai even began talking but the young Woods, the son of the most infamous and bloodthirsty criminal in Sol, worried about how Corova would react to abandoning her people to die. Never has he ever been so affected. However, as he looks to her, his arm around her waist, he cannot bring himself to regret what he’s done.

“Charge the hyper drive. If they want a fight before we can jump, we’ll give them one.”

“Yes, sir!”

The two Sol Marine gunboats close in, weaving around and passing the turrets. The Deliverance’s smaller cannons make short work of the dozens of turrets, destroying each one in a fiery blast, requiring only a single shot. Firing their main guns, the military gunboats attack the Slaver vessel, a barrage of green plasma striking and dissipating over the craft’s shields. Somehow, it survives unscathed. Responding to the assault, the agile ship begins evasive maneuvers, weaving around asteroids and spinning through the icy void of space. With little standing in the way, captain Krai orders his crew to fire the main cannons, swiftly obliterating the now empty base.

The remaining unused Marionettes, still in stasis, and the equipment left behind are all that’s lost, which isn’t much to the terrorists. Now focusing on the much faster gunboat, Krai and the Deliverance press on, attempting to catch up. Briefly losing the trailing gunboats by flying around an exceptionally large asteroid in the ringlet, Draiman’s ship curls backward, appearing behind the two Sol Marine gunboats. With a forward-facing cannon on a gimballed

mount, it fires two shots. Teal spheres fly out of the cannon and slam into the rear of each gunboat, blasting through their shields and obliterating their hulls.

Krais watches in horror as the overpowered cannon does something that only a ship of at least a destroyer class can. Now without the faster gunboats to chase them, and their engines fully charged, Draiman prepares to activate the hyper drive.

“Wait! ... I can’t resist.” He says to his crew.

Well out of range and gaining distance, Krais is left chasing a ghost, knowing that he won’t ever be able to catch the fleeing Slaver ship. Suddenly, a voice comes through the open channel.

“How many times is it now? Three? Keep chasing me and there won’t be a fourth.”

With his villainous taunt complete, Draiman presses the button himself, activating the hyper drive and forming the warp bubble. Krais watches helplessly as the ship, already tiny when viewed in the distance from the windows of the bridge, disappears into a singularity.

“Damn you...” Krais growls.

With the threat now gone, Draiman opens the bridge to the rest of the ship. He’s briefly struck by the sight of the packed hallway leading through his modest gunboat. The Kanorakus stand shoulder to shoulder, their eyes turned to their leader who stands beside him. Miss Corova keeps her arm around Draiman, walking proudly through the halls, to the shock of her subordinates turned refugees. As if to flaunt it, she nuzzles his face as they walk, swiftly turning a corner and entering his private quarters.

"It's nothing like my... *Our* room on the Lomboko, but it'll do." He says.

Closing the door behind them, she sees her bag at the foot of his bed. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she turns to Draiman who takes off his long coat and shoulder holster, hanging them up on a rack by the door.

"It'll take us a few hours to snake around and reach the Scrapper base where the Lomboko's moored, but we'll be alright. You're safe now." Draiman says, sitting down beside her.

"Thank you."

"When we dock, I'll take you to meet me family. They won't do anything; you're with me." He continues, gently stroking her soft bristles.

"I'd like that very much." She softly replies.

"I'll see if they can accommodate your people, too."

Leaning into him, they share a gaze. Reaching up a hand, he gently strokes her face.

"I'm glad I was there. I'd have missed you." He admits.

"I'd have missed you too." She replies, closing her eyes and pressing her face into his hand. "Draiman."

"Yeah?"

"When we return to the Lomboko, I... I want to meld with you."

"Alright!" He chirps.

Miss Corova's ruby eyes grow wide in surprise. She'd feared that he'd say no, or at least wish to discuss it. For a moment, she wonders if he even knows what it is that she's asking of him.

"You... You understand what it is to meld, right?"

"Oh, yeah. I did my homework after we started getting... Close."

"And you still wish to do it?" She sheepishly asks.

Unable to think of a better way to answer her or ease her mind, he leans in and gives her a kiss.