

Unity

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode Fifteen: Foiled

Walking hand in hand and toward a room that Corova has yet to enter, Draiman presents the door plate to his new wife. Above the plate and across the door read faded yellow letters on the dark grey metal. “Authorized Personnel Only”. Glancing to Draiman, they speak with their minds; he reminds her of her status and urges her to open it. Using her access, she presses her clawed hand against the plate and a dim green light turns on as the door slides open, swooshing subtly. Entering the room, they see only a large wooden table, oval in shape, and with a dozen seats around it.

The entire Woods family sit in chairs along the right side of the table, with James Woods standing behind the head of the table, pouring a drink from a crystal decanter which sits atop a minibar near the back wall.

“Sorry to cut that honeymoon short.” James apologizes to Draiman and Corova as they approach their seats on the left.

“One full night of not sleeping will have to do.” Draiman grins, pulling out Corova’s chair for her.

“We’ll eventually forgive you.” She chirps.

“I hope so! I don’t want my hybrid grandchildren calling me an asshole before I’ve taught them how to swear properly.” James smirks.

"So, what's this meeting about?" Vivian asks, leaning back in her chair and resting her boots atop the table.

"Hey, bitch, this is ebony wood!" James remarks.

"You look pretty pale to me." Vivian quips.

"Hah! Well, I received a call from a real piece of shit Scrapper. This toothless fucker, who looked like he hasn't showered in years, informed me that Lomboko's new generators have been installed and her hyper drive has been repaired." James begins.

"You didn't take him for his word, did you?" Draiman asks.

"Hell no! How stupid do I look?" James grins.

"We'll get back to you on that." Corova teases.

"I had our resident mechanics triple check the systems and we're officially back in action. So... Where to next?! Anyone?!"

"The Triton colonies give us good stock, and we'll need more if we're going to carry out your little plan. Besides, Neptune is sooo pretty!" Erica explains.

"Plan?" Corova cocks her head.

"There's also the usual places, like Sol's outer rim or even Alpha Centauri." Vivian adds.

"I personally don't think we should go near civilized areas, and the Alpha Centauri colonies are getting pretty big; soon that system will be as populated as Sol." James remarks.

Corova looks to Draiman, who speaks to her in her mind.

"Remember Corova? Six months ago, my dad devised a plan to mold the blank and zombie-like Marionettes into soldiers. We voted in favor, and yours was the first contract we accepted."

With the memories of two lives now shared between them, it often takes them a moment to recall unremarkable events that

happened to the other. Using his telepathic words as a catalyst, Corova relives the moment as Draiman, raising his hand in favor of the plan. The details of which are now known to her, as if she were present herself. In the lowest cargo bay, thousands of slaves sleep in stasis, while hundreds more endure the surgery free brainwashing that was developed by a man named Michael Cost nearly thirty years earlier. This brainwashing previously only developed menial servants and eager sex slaves, but James has allowed his scientists to attempt to unlock their potential as unshakeable soldiers.

“This is just my opinion, but I think we need to hide out for a little while; lie low and wait for the heat to die down. We have enough cargo as it is. The Lomboko can sustain us for years; she already has. Why not relax for a good six months?” James suggests.

“Kicking up our feet already, old man?” Vivian teases.

“And where would you recommend we do that?” Erica raises a brow.

“That’s what this meeting is for! Brainstorm, people! I can’t be the only smart guy... I’m far too handsome for such a terrible fate.” James grins, casually taking a drink of scotch.

Looking to each other, Draiman and Corova converse telepathically.

“Well, last time we drifted through space and simply avoided populated systems. Can’t we just do that?” Sasha asks.

“We can, but that always felt risky. I never really got to unwind the way I like.” James replies.

“That’s because I won’t let you.” Erica winks.

“We have a thought.” Corova speaks up.

“Really now, hive mind!” James quips, looking at the couple.

“It’s a good thing you kept your day job. Are you interested or not?” Corova coolly asks.

"I am, my frightening daughter-in-law. Please, enthrall me."
James says, taking his seat.

"Do you know of 'Project Unity'?" Corova asks.

"I do." James nods.

"Well, I formerly operated the Goddess's Children. Our goal in life was to revert to the old ways, and part of that was by derailing Unity and causing chaos." She begins.

"Which you did quite well." Erica remarks.

"Thank you! Anyway, we failed to find the actual ship's location, so we targeted project sources instead."

"Perhaps you're wondering how they kept the largest ship ever built a secret?" Draiman interjects.

"I'm not, but go on!" James smirks.

"Ass..." Draiman shakes his head. **"The ship is too massive to be built on a planet with Earthlike gravity, and a colony would allow for leaks, so they most likely built Unity as if she were a conventional space station. The Goddess's Children theorized that they were hiding her in deep space."**

"Yes. Our spies amongst the project said they were called 'Exclusionary Zones'; places where conventional surveillance simply couldn't see due to gravitational distortion and planets or stars perpetually blocking the view. We discovered six locations within roughly a week's flight from Sol where a ship could hide from every populated system, but our own limitations prevented us from exploring them." Corova continues.

"Go on!" James listens enthusiastically.

"... We pick a spot and hide there where no one can see us."
Draiman dryly explains.

"Right! I knew that! I just like confirmation!" James eyes dart around as he speaks. **"Well!"** He slams his palms on the table. **"That sounds like a good plan! Who else thinks that's a good plan?!"**

Everyone around the table nods their heads, soon joining with a vote, raising their hands high. Draiman and Corova simultaneously raise their hands in the vote, which is now unanimous.

"It's settled then!" James holds up his crystal glass.

"There are a few zones in particular that I think would be ideal, and we'd be close enough to return to populated areas to collect more cargo without much trouble." Corova interjects.

"Good job, Corova." James says with a warm smile. "Son, you picked a great woman!"

"I know." Draiman says, glancing at his wife.

"I don't say this often but... I'm proud of you. Both you, actually." James speaks, his voice unusually soft and his volume quieter than usual. "Ahem... Anyway, you're all dismissed! Except for you two!" James points to Draiman and Corova. "Follow me to the bridge and show me those 'exclusionary zones'!"

Waking up in his bed, August stretches his muscles and yawns, his lips peeling back around his snout to reveal his omnivorous teeth. Beside him lay Draz, curled into a little ball. Feeling the bed shake, the alien who is the size of a small child, opens his eyes and lifts his head. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes with his little hands, Draz watches August collect some clothing before entering the bathroom to shower and prepare. Standing in the shower stall, August rests a palm against the wall, staring at the drain and watching the water swirling down, after cascading over his white and black striped fur.

He's been rather depressed for nearly the entire week that he's been aboard Unity, beginning after he and Stefan spoke about his relationship with Drayusa. Loneliness has crept in, and Draz's perpetual company and routine visits from his twin sister, Roku, have done little to stave off his pain. Seeing Fizona acting cheerful, blissfully unaware of what their encounters have done to him, doesn't make it easier, and neither do the visible displays of affection that the other two couples share daily in his division office. After washing and

dressing, he enters the living room where Draz scampers in circles and leaps on and over the furniture.

“Are you hungry, buddy?”

“Yaaa! Food time!” Draz chirps.

Cooking a meal of dried meat and eggs, the pair sit down for breakfast. The innocent looking, blue and yellow Skahlzunian tears into his food like a ravenous beast. With razor sharp teeth, it still surprises August, who should be well used to the sight by now. Rinsing and setting aside their china and silverware in the dishwasher, the front door’s control panel suddenly beeps. A surprised August opens the door without even looking to see who is outside.

“Hail!” Roku chirps, waving at him.

“Hey. What’re you doing here?! It’s early as hell; I didn’t think I was even going to see you today.” August remarks, looking at the chronograph on his V.I. bracelet.

“Yeah, well, I didn’t sleep well. I got up early and spent an hour thinking and pacing the living room of my apartment, so I figured I’d do something semi-useful.” She explains, stepping inside of his home. “So, what’re your plans for the day?”

“Well, we still need to run a few checks on the last few internal security systems. We’re down to just the engines now.” He answers, approaching his living room window.

Roku joins her brother and peers outside. A curious Draz bounds up to them, placing his palms and pressing his nose against the glass.

“Oooh!”

“Well, at least it doesn’t look *quite* as dead in here...” Roku comments.

“Yeah. A liner dropped off her passengers last night, after my shift; it was the last wave. Unity’s fully staffed now.” August says, watching the walkways below.

“Well... I guess we should get to work.” Roku sighs.

“Yeah...”

Leaving together, Roku and August take Draz to the preserve, where nearly sixty more Skahlzunians already wait. Parting ways at the tram station, August rides to the engine level, just before the hangar bay at the rear of the ship. Walking the halls, he passes a few engineers, one of whom is Invar. After a greeting and a short conversation, he continues on to the control room of Engine Pod Four. Inside, Stefan is overseeing a few technicians. Stepping into the room, Stefan glances back at the blonde haired, white tiger Voeldahn. He feels the tension rising as his friend and associate approaches.

He and August have had a strained relationship, in no small part due to August’s sulking. The last time Stefan asked August to open up, a suggestion made to him by his beloved Drayusa, August spent over an hour in self-pity over his failed relationship with Fizona. Her otherwise cheerful and oblivious persona only rubbed salt in his wounds, and Stefan found himself regretting his inquiry.

“So... How are you doing today?” Stefan reluctantly asks.

“I’m still moving.” August sighs.

“Well, that’s good.”

“I guess...” August murmurs.

“... Is something on your mind?” Stefan asks, closing his eyes and preparing for the onslaught.

As he suspected, August quickly irks him with the infinite details of his frustrations. The few technicians in the room routinely glance toward each other, their heads facing the holographic screens as they

work. Stefan clandestinely checks his V.I. bracelet's chronograph as his lonely friend rants for all of fifteen minutes.

"It's just annoying... You know?" August continues.

"Yeah, I sure do..." Stefan sighs.

"I just wish I knew how she felt and why she's doing the things she's doing. It's really bothering me!"

"Look man, it sounds like she just wants dick, so either fuck her on your free time and shut up, or find someone else to be with and shut up!" Stefan barks.

August is floored, standing in silence for a moment. Stefan closes his eyes and exhales, feeling guilty over his outburst. While August's ranting is thoroughly annoying, he's never lost patience with him before. Glancing over to his friend, the Voeldahn stands with mouth agape, his jade green eyes gleaming in the artificial light as he stares in shock.

"Look, I'm... I'm sorry. It's just..." Stefan struggles with his thoughts.

Looking at the technicians, Stefan worries that he's embarrassed August. Taking him by the arm, the two lieutenants leave the room.

"Wow!" One technician chuckles.

"Hey, at least someone finally said it." Another remarks.

Standing in the hallway, August looks more hurt than offended. With his arms crossed before his chest and eyes turned to the floor, Stefan ponders his words for a moment.

"I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to snap. It's just that-"

"No, I'm sorry." August interrupts him. "I know I'm probably driving everyone up a wall. I never assumed I'd be in this situation. Back on the Azilian and on Earth, I thought I was pretty tough. I had a few girlfriends and I certainly enjoyed myself with women in college, but this time was somehow different. She tried so hard, and we took it pretty far. I thought it was all going so well, but now it doesn't even matter. That's what really hurts when I think about it. I'm sorry I've been such a pain in the ass over it."

Seeing the heartache on his face, Stefan's guilt grows. Resting a hand reassuringly on his shoulder, August turns his eyes to him.

"Hey... Don't be such a pussy." Stefan teases.

Both men grin and August can't help but chuckle.

"I meant what I said in there, though I could've said it better. Forget her, man. You can find better, and now there's at least two or three thousand pairs of boobs to browse through." Stefan continues.

Both laughing, the tension eases and August thanks him for his help. Returning inside, they watch over the technicians and keep tabs on their progress.

"So, I woke up this morning and I noticed something." August begins, breaking the minute or two of silence.

"What's that?" Stefan asks, watching a terminal screen.

"It's still kind of eerie in here. Even with a full crew, Unity feels... Empty."

"I noticed that myself." A technician interjects.

"I was hoping that with her full crew, it'd be more like a city." August remarks.

"I doubt she's really fully staffed." Stefan comments casually.

"What do you mean?" August asks.

"This is primarily a Dezonian project, right?"

"It's a joint project." August retorts.

"But to my understanding, we brought it up and they really pushed for it. The Dezonians are a cold, science-oriented race and before your dad, the one and only George Woods encountered them, they only knew the Irakus." Stefan continues.

"What are you getting at?" August raises a brow.

"I'm curious about this myself." Another technician says, turning in her chair.

"I think the Dezonians, who don't have sex to reproduce, have some weird experiment going on. Hell, they don't experience or even have words for love." Stefan suggests.

"That's a bit extreme." A technician comments.

"Yeah, this is an awful lot of work to go through just to sit back and take notes." August skeptically adds.

"Is it? I mean, this project has a *real* purpose. We have a mission statement. Unity is a biig ship. Our apartment building alone could house six hundred, and one tier could handle six thousand just at a glance, but *nine* tiers? Don't even get me started on the farm ring. I bet Unity could comfortably house and feed ten times her "full crew", and think about this... The Dezonians have segregated themselves with race specific quarters on tier nine, like they're keeping their distance. Maybe a control group? I mean, who's to say that they aren't taking notes on us right now?"

"Okay... Assume that's true. What would be the purpose?" August asks.

"I don't know. Unity is basically a microcosm for a city, or even a planet. They can watch society from 'Day Zero'. Maybe now they're interested in social sciences? Food for thought." Stefan shrugs.

Stepping back and pondering Stefan's wild theories, August now finds himself a little worried. Everything he's said about the ship appears to be true. Unnerved, August changes the subject.

"So, I hear you and Drayusa are thinking about melding."

"Yeah." Stefan grins.

"Tell me about that. Let's talk about you for once." August smirks.

Standing in the flight control room of the hangar, Drayusa watches as a freighter's keel-side doors open. A cargo lift full of assorted goods for Unity's shops are packed into crates and stacked nearly two-stories tall. Outside, she watches the Irakus commandos scouring the cargo for potential threats. Of all the known races in the galaxy, only the Irakus take security as seriously as the human and Voeldahn Solakus. Their leader, a tiny, four-foot and six-inch-tall female with soft, burnt-orange feathers and ruby red neck fur holds a rifle. Her long, thin, whip-like tail is encased inside of her EVA suit, which covers nearly her entire body. Sturdy, magnetic boots cover her talons.

Glancing back, Sihl' Ahzen sees Drayusa watching her from inside, nodding her head as a greeting but keeping her featherlike fingers on her rifle. Leaving the flight control room as the inner airlock doors close, adding a dual layer of protection from the void of space, Drayusa greets her friend properly.

"Hello, Sihl!" She chirps.

"Hi. You should stay inside the control room." Sihl' Ahzen replies.

“What for?” Drayusa cocks her head.

“In case anything happens. This *is* the hangar bay. If those doors are opened for any reason, after suffering an explosion for instance, you aren’t wearing an EVA suit.”

“An explosion taking out both of those doors? Would we even survive to suffer in space?” Drayusa poses.

“Anything’s possible.” Sihl’ Ahzen murmurs, her fiery eyes watching intently as the crew use power loaders to claim the cargo.

“I’ll be fine, this time.”

“So, what brings you out here?” Sihl’ Ahzen asks.

“I’m thinking of linking to Stefan before melding, but we’ve discussed melding first. I wondered your opinion.” Drayusa says, stepping closer.

“I can’t properly answer that question. I honestly don’t know the details of this ‘meld’ thing you keep mentioning.” Sihl’ Ahzen replies.

Drayusa immediately explains the meld in detail, revealing things that the Kanorakus do not write down in their tomes. Sihl’ Ahzen is amazed, staring up at the much taller Kanorakus woman as she reveals the fusion of two minds.

“Wow... I uh... I still don’t know how to answer you.” A stunned Sihl’ Ahzen admits.

“Well, what are your thoughts? You must have *some*.” Drayusa presses.

“My thoughts are that for as much as I love Kellan, I don’t know if I’d want him in my head.”

“Why not?!” Drayusa looks shocked.

“For one, we’d never get work done.” Sihl’ Ahzen winks.

“Oh...” Drayusa feels herself flush.

“But on a serious note, everyone has secrets that they’re ashamed of. I was a commando before this. I retired and then volunteered for the project to make a better life for myself. Meeting Kellan was just a pleasant surprise. I’ve done some bad things as a soldier, and I’m sure Kellan saw and did things when he was a cop on Mars...” Sihl’ Ahzen continues.

“Yes, but you did your duty. You would both understand that if you could meld.” Drayusa assures her.

“I’ve done things, Drayusa... Things that I don’t even want to remember.” Sihl’ Ahzen persists, her eyes sorrowful as she stares up at the Kanorakus. “He was a cop, but I was a soldier. I wouldn’t want him to look at me differently...”

Seeing the sincerity in the Irakus’s eyes, Drayusa now has a horrible realization. She spent most of her time working this project in the service of two masters, living two lives. What would Stefan do when he inevitably learns of her life as Sway? She never considered that even knowing her feelings he might look poorly at her for her choices. Maybe he would see her life and judge her on his own moral code, rather than her own? Her heart flutters and she feels herself growing nervous. They’ve spoken at length about the meld, and he knows of the mental connection that they’ll share; she now fears doing so.

What is she to do? Should she tell him beforehand and risk losing him? The fear of that loss makes her hesitate to admit her guilt. Should she take it all back without an explanation? Stefan wouldn’t accept that, nor could she do that to him. Now trapped, Drayusa’s mind races. She’s thankful that Stefan cannot hear these fretful thoughts.

“Oh...” Drayusa murmurs, looking down at Sihl’ Ahzen.

Standing in the control room of Engine Pod Four, August listens to Stefan as he preaches to him about the meld, his brow raised in

surprise at the revelation. Even the technicians, who should be working, cease their duties and turn in their chairs to listen.

“That’s... Intense.” A technician remarks.

“Isn’t it?” Stefan smirks.

“Well... It sounds like you’ll have a very interesting honeymoon. Think of all the arguments you can have without ever losing your voice?!” August teases.

“Shut up.” Stefan chuckles. “We’ll be fine. We’re perfect for each other.”

Thinking back on the revelation, August’s smile fades. Hearing Stefan’s words, he now worries about his friend’s relationship. What will Stefan do when he learns of Drayusa’s betrayal? Could August somehow prepare him for that knowledge? How would he even begin such a dialogue?! Standing in silence, the technicians return to work on a final update for the internal security measures. With the updates installed and the systems checks completed, green marks flash across the screen. Only one more engine requires such updates.

“Well! Tomorrow we’ll get Engine Pod Five and then Unity will be ready to take off and plot her course across the galaxy!” A technician chirps.

“Finally!” Stefan excitedly exclaims.

The primary lights dim as red lights flash; an alarm suddenly beeps. Looking at the ceiling, Stefan and August draw their blasters and turn toward the door. Sliding open, Invar barges in. As both an engineer and one of the reserve militia, he knows all too well what this means.

“Something’s going on in the reactor!” He exclaims.

“Fuck!” Stefan growls.

“Let’s go!” August darts up to his half-brother.

Racing into the hallway with the technicians and other engineers in tow, their boots clank on the metal floor panels. Reaching the engine’s massive nuclear reactor, they find Fizona and her soldiers guarding the reactor’s control room, which contains only one large panel. It’s kept separate from the control room of Engine Pod Four, and serves as a buffer. Invar races up to the panel, being the most experienced with electrical systems among his crew. Sliding beneath it, he checks for signs of tampering, quickly collecting a small toolkit from a pants pocket. Another technician stands with a foot between his legs, looming over the panel and running a systems check.

“What the hell happened?!” August barks at Fizona.

“We don’t know. No one passed us and we didn’t leave the doorway unguarded for even a second.” She replies.

“There’s nothing wrong here, except I can’t check the reactor temperature. A glitch, maybe?!” The technician wonders.

“Hell no...” Invar growls.

His hand emerges from beneath the panel, holding a small and strange device. A technician takes the device from him, examining the grey disc. It bears many small magnets and several lines that look like circuitry.

“What the hell is that thing?” Stefan asks.

“Damnit!” Fizona growls, snatching the device. “It’s sabotage. This is a Kanorakus design.”

“It was stuck to the board and melted the wires; it’s literally severed the connection.” Invar replies.

“And what would that have done?” August wonders.

“Eventually caused the reactor to overheat and meltdown.” Invar explains.

“Shit...”

“The computer’s security software was programmed to alert us if we couldn’t monitor the reactor’s temperature. It runs a check every five minutes.” The technician adds.

“And you’re sure no one was in here?!” Stefan demands.

“I’m positive. Look!” She hands over the device. “This is a timer, written in our native tongue. It was placed there and programmed with a delay nearly two days ago.”

“When did the security cameras become available?” A technician asks.

“Yesterday...” August hangs his head.

“Don’t worry, guys. Get me some wires; I can fix this in no time.” Invar assures them, peeking out from beneath the panel.

“That doesn’t solve the problem though...” August sighs, looking to Stefan and Fizona.