

Unity

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode Twenty: Captivated

Dashing down the hallway and dragging one of their comrades, August's men look around for their leader.

"What happened?! Where's August?!" One asks.

"He was taken... Call Miss Ayanda."

Pacing before her Lieutenants, a guilt-ridden Ayanda wrings her hands together. Though everyone volunteered to take their team and sweep the Lomboko, Miss Ayanda rejected this offer. She knows full-well that the Council and captain Basile would reject this also, and August himself wouldn't want anyone to die for him. However, she can't and won't risk leaving him behind. Who knows what the Slavers will do, especially when they discover his heritage, which won't take long. After much thought, she stops her pacing and turns toward Sihl' Ahzen.

"Sihl, I-"

"When?" Sihl' Ahzen interrupts her.

"Now, but stand by until I give the order." Miss Ayanda instructs.

"... Understood." A disappointed Sihl' Ahzen grumbles.

The Irakus are very fond of and competent at ship-to-ship combat and Irakus pirates are the most deadly and effective of them all. As a former commando, Sihl' Ahzen was trained to counter them, as are all of the commandos under her command. If Miss Ayanda is forced to send a team in to extract August, there would be no better choice. The dainty yet fierce, bird-like aliens are a force to be reckoned with.

"I hope you're okay, August... I'm sorry I asked you to do this."
She speaks softly to herself.

Standing against a pole on the Lomboko, his hands cuffed at the wrists and pinned above his head, James Woods stands before him. Nose to nose with the galaxy's most infamous criminal, August isn't sure what to expect. Will he flay him alive and sprinkle salt on his exposed muscles? Maybe he'll allow his teenage daughter to rape and torture him, which he's certain she wants to do. Or perhaps he'll suffer electric shock or an old-fashioned beating?

"So... What happens now? Or are prisoners not allowed to know?" August asks, breaking the silence.

"Prisoner?" James raises a brow. "You're my nephew!"

August clanks the handcuffs against the pole, reminding him of his state.

"Oh, those! Sorry!"

James promptly opens the handcuffs, to August's shock. Grabbing his wrists, the Voeldahn furls his brow as James smiles rather warmly at him.

“... Why are you doing this?” He can’t help but ask.

“Are you deaf? I could speak into an ear if that’ll help.” James raises a brow.

“I can hear you. I’m just confused.”

“Well, I said ‘you’re my nephew’. Family are *never* prisoners. Drink?!” James asks with wide grin.

Turning his back on August, he walks calmly away and toward a minibar beside the wall. August follows, looking at his other relatives. Erica smiles and waves, wearing the most elegant dress he’s ever seen in his life. Vivian eyes him suspiciously, but concedes to her father’s will. Taking a set of ice tongs, James drops three cubes into an empty glass. Grabbing a crystal decanter, he pours a drink for himself, in a glass with no ice, and then a second. Taking both glasses, he presents the one with ice cubes to August.

“So, what if I weren’t family?” August asks, cautiously taking the glass.

“Oh, well then we’d probably start with electric shock.” James coolly explains.

“Daddy!” Sasha whines.

“Oh, alright! We’d *finish* with electric shock. We’d start by throwing you to her.” James corrects himself.

“Oh joy...” August murmurs.

Taking a drink from the glass, it’s the best scotch he’s ever tasted.

“Have a seat! Take a load off those feet!” James urges in a loud and bellowing voice.

“Why are you doing this?” August asks again.

"Damn, I thought George's kids would be a little brighter!" James exclaims, taking a seat in another chair.

"It's just... You're hands-down the most infamous and sadistic criminal of the past two centuries."

"Thank you!"

"You're welcome... I just don't understand why my being family matters to you." August continues, sitting down and across from James.

"Family is *all* that matters, boy. Your parents know that. That's why they cling to each other like lint on used gum. I didn't get it at first either, until I met Erica. Now with my kids, all I think about is family. The business is sort of an afterthought, to maintain credit-flow." James explains.

"Some business..." August murmurs, taking a sip of his drink.

"Hey, it pays, and we've taken long hiatuses before! So, what's with that ship and who're you to them?"

"... And if I refuse to answer?"

"I'll be annoyed but I can't torture family so..." James shrugs, holding up his hands like scales.

"It's Unity."

"Really?!" Vivian and Erica simultaneously exclaim.

"Now that's actually a surprise!" James bellows.

"I'm one of the Lieutenants of a security team. My boss, Miss Ayanda, probably already knows I'm gone." August continues, taking another sip of his drink.

"Oh yeah, I remember her!" James nods. "Lots of fire. My daughter-in-law is like that too."

August is stunned. Miss Ayanda never spoke of knowing James, nor does he remember meeting James before. How does he know who she is?

“She’ll certainly send people after you, and probably a lot of them... Well, if you can find a clear path, you might want to run along home then!” James waves his fingers as if shooin’ him away.

August is now completely enthralled by James. He doesn’t really want to leave so soon. There are so many questions he’d like to ask him. Drinking the last of his scotch he sets the glass on a nearby table.

“Wait, I had some questions for you.” August begins.

“Coaster.”

“Huh?” August raises a brow.

James points at the table. Looking over, August promptly takes the glass and sets it atop a nearby coaster. He pauses when he realizes how trivial this is, given the situation he’s in. It’s almost funny.

“Thank you. Carry on.” James speaks.

“What happened to you? Where’d you go? How did all of this start?”

“That’s all, eh?!” James laughs. “While I’d love to share my life’s story with you, kid, but we don’t have the time. Ask your father. He knows all about it.”

“Wha-?! But he was never a Slaver!” August replies, thoroughly confused.

“Really?!” James laughs even louder. “Well, then thank George’s doppelganger for keeping me alive through those early years and teaching me some important lessons! Thank May’s too, while you’re at it. I’m pretty sure we owe at least one of our lives to her.”

Seeing the shock on his face, Erica steps closer and rests her hands on her husband’s shoulders.

"Maybe he really doesn't know." She suggests.

"Well, damn! If that's the case, I'm sorry for the mind-fuck! I'd have bought you dinner first! Haha!" James flashes a toothy grin, visibly amused.

"Oh, you." Erica giggles.

"I could... Teach him." Sasha coos, slowly approaching August's chair.

"Please!" He chirps.

Sasha looks elated, practically salivating at the thought, though he wasn't referring to her innuendo.

"I don't think you want that, kid! She's rough!" James laughs. "Go on, while you have a chance!"

"Wait, I need to know!" August exclaims.

"No, you don't, kid..." James growls, his voice low and stern. "All you need to know is that I'm running the show as well as he ever did, and it's better that way. This is my fate; he found his and I'm glad it isn't here. Now go on! Get out of here you little shit!" He chirps, again waving his fingers rather playfully.

Rising from his chair, he heads for the door, the guards simply allowing him to pass. Stopping, he looks back at the chair where James sits. With most of his family gathered around him, he waves his hand once, his face somber as August stands ready to leave.

"Hey, uncle... Thanks." He says to the Slaver's leader.

"Yeah, whatever!" James snickers.

"Oh!" Erica suddenly exclaims. "Don't forget this!"

She tosses an object to him, which August catches near his chest. It's his V.I. bracelet.

"Good! You've got your wallet, the lights are off, the door's locked and the car's running! Beat it!" James exclaims.

August clips on his bracelet as he leaves the room, and though they didn't return his blaster, he passes scores of Slaver guards who simply nod.

"Good day, Mr. Woods." They all say, as if they know him.

Eventually, he stops seeing Slaver's altogether and returns to a battle-scarred hallway. However, upon finding several naked bodies of slain slaves, he doesn't see any that are familiar. This is a different hall, and he's thoroughly lost.

"Damnit... These corridors all look the same!" He grumbles.

Walking throughout the ship and trying to find his way, he brings up his V.I. bracelet and places an audio call to Miss Ayanda.

"Hello?" She asks, as if unsure of who's calling.

"Hi."

"... August?!" She gasps.

"Yours truly." He quips.

"How'd you get out?! I was about to send Sihl in there to get you!"

"James let me go." He answers.

"... What?"

“Long story. Hey! I’m kind of lost in here! Can you guide me out?”
He asks.

“Er... Sure! Just a second...”

“Good! I couldn’t find this ship’s bathroom if my life depended on it.”

“I’m pulling up a schematic now. You’re close enough to Unity that I can use your bracelet’s signal and guesstimate where you are in a holographic map.” She explains.

“Great!”

“So, while we do that... What’s with James? I don’t suppose you’re bringing him or his Lieutenants in, are you?” She asks.

“Nope. It’s a family business anyway, and all but one of his kids were in the room with us. I figured it was enough to just be set free.”
He replies.

“You’re right. We’ll just omit that from our report.”

“Probably a good idea.” He murmurs.

“Okay, so take the hallway to your left and walk to a T junction, then hang a right! ... What happened the other one?” She suddenly asks.

“Hm?”

“His kid that wasn’t with you. Where’d that one go?” She clarifies.

Dashing through the halls and toward the engine room, Draiman holds the rifle close to his chest.

“I can hear them outside. They’ve blocked us in and the other guards are dead. I’m scared, Draiman.” Corova’s voice speaks in his mind.

“I’m coming, baby. Stay calm. How many are out there?”

“At least a dozen. Hurry! They’re forcing open the door!”

Filled with both fear and anger, he picks up his pace. Turning a corner, he can see well over a dozen escaped slaves using pry bars to try and access the engine room.

“Come on! Maybe we can steer the ship from in there! Push!”
One slave says to the others.

Having killed Slavers already, they would have no qualms about doing it again. This time, however, they risk Corova’s life and that’s unacceptable. Bringing the rifle to his shoulder, the escaped slaves don’t see him at the end of the hall. He doesn’t give any warning before he opens fires, shooting round after round. The slaves scream and panic, firing down both ends of the hallway with stolen weapons. Quickly dropping onto his belly, he lies prone and continues firing until the rifle’s magazine runs dry. With no more metal shards and the battery drained, he drops the rifle, rises to a knee and draws his blaster, quickly emptying that as well.

In a span of roughly thirty seconds, he’s fired all forty-five rounds and killed twenty men who lie strewn about the hallway. He quickly reloads his blaster and races for the door. It opens from the inside, as Corova had watched the battle through Draiman’s eyes. Knowing that the treat is gone, she rushes outside and takes hold of her lover, squeezing him tightly. They kiss over and over again, eager to enjoy each other but they have more pressing matters.

“There’s a ship outside!” Sashuna exclaims.

“Come on, let’s go.” Draiman takes Corova by the hand.

“Where are we going?” Sashuna asks, following them with her lover, Korazhu, by her side.

“I saw the ship from a window.” Draiman remarks.

"We think it's Unity. We're going to try to board her." Corova answers.

"What?! Why?!" Sashuna gasps.

"Are you still planning on destroying it?" Korazhu asks.

"Hell no!" Corova exclaims.

"Then why do it?!" A confused Korazhu scratches his head.

The couple don't answer. They don't need to. They've spoken of this in their minds countless times, though the plan was slightly different. Neither of them truly enjoys this life. Draidan simply accepted his job as a Slaver, and Corova was born on Kanor, in an area with some of the most devout followers of the mother goddess. Indoctrinated at an early age, though she always doubted, she filled the mold that was presented to her. Both would rather live differently. They've lain in bed and stayed up many hours just to scheme. They've considered abandoning the Slavers by taking Draidan's gunboat and credits when the Lomboko finally returned to her usual activities.

Now, however, with the Unity right there, perhaps this is a better opportunity? Racing through the silent corridors of the Lomboko, they stop only to bypass groups of Slavers and escapees who are battling it out. They manage to make their way to the young Woods' quarters, and though they are tempted, they know that if Unity is accepting freed slaves, they can't board her with their belongings and remain unnoticed; the slaves are stores in stasis without clothes. Parting with everything they hold dear, they take only one thing, a credit chit worth twenty-five million. It's Draidan's personal savings, effectively an allowance for routinely serving his father with his gunboat.

Sashuna and her lover stay close, realizing that the silent couple are looking out for their best interests. This makes them ideal, as if they are trying to leave, they may be able to slip out with them. Heading for the portside airlock, where Unity is connected to the Lomboko, they slow their pace. Now moving carefully and looking out for any patrols or escaped slaves, they decide it's time to act.

Draiman and Corova begin stripping off their clothes, knowing that a slave wouldn't have any to begin with. Without any other way to hide the small credit chit, Draiman leaves on his underwear and pants, planning to claim that he stole them from a Slaver.

A few human and Voeldahn slaves have already done this, therefore that wouldn't be farfetched. Korazhu, unfortunately, cannot claim such liberties. Hearing Draiman and Corova's logic, he strips off every last bit of clothing, as does his lover, Sashuna. Unable to part with their jewelry, symbols of Draiman and Corova's marriage, Draiman stows them in a pocket. With nothing left but their V.I. bracelets, they discard those too. Holding his V.I. bracelet, Draiman hesitates to throw it away. As he holds out his hand to drop it, it chirps. To keep it quiet as much as anything, he answers the call on the first ring.

"Son?!" James' voice comes through. "Where the hell are you?!"

"Not so loud, damnit..." Draiman speaks softly.

"What's going on? Is Corova okay, and why aren't you back yet?"

"We're... We're not coming back." Draiman says, his heart thumping in his chest.

"... What?"

He can feel the tension enveloping him, but Corova's voice speaks to him in his mind. She always assures him. The tension melts away.

"We want out, dad. Corova and I..." Draiman continues.

"I see..." James says with a startlingly somber tone.

"Sashuna and her guy too, I guess. I don't know what the fuck they're doing." He adds.

"I'll certainly miss her!" James chirps. "... I'll miss you too. Both of you..." His voice becomes somber again.

"Are you really leaving?!" Erica asks, her voice shaking.

"We don't want to do this anymore." Draiman says to his mother. "This isn't the life we want."

"It's not you. It's us." Corova quips.

His parents and siblings chuckle on the other end.

"Alright... Take care."

"Just like that?" Draiman asks with a bit of surprise.

"I get it, sonny-boy. This isn't the first time I've heard this story... When you find pussy so good it alters your life choices, you know you've got a keeper! Haha!" James laughs.

"Babe, this is serious!" Erica remarks.

"So am I! Take care of her son, and you take care of my son, scary alien daughter-in-law!"

"I will." Corova assures them.

"Good! Have a nice life. Look me up sometime; send photos of my hideous hybrid grandchildren!" James continues.

"Bye son. I'll miss you." Erica sniffles.

"Bye, bitch..." Vivian speaks softly, her voice shaking.

"See ya." Sasha and Maximus reply rather coldly.

"Bye. We love you guys." Draiman says.

"I don't!" Corova teases.

"Hah!" James laughs.

Ending the call, Draiman takes a moment to drop the V.I. bracelet. It's so hard to walk away from his family, and the ship he

grew up on. However, remembering Corova's life, he knows that it can be done. Drawing on her strength, his fingers slowly open and the V.I. bracelet slips out of his grasp. It falls to the floor with a faint tink, though to him it's a thunderous crash. Taking a deep breath, he turns to his wife, taking her into his arms. Her warm embrace and their mental connection eases the pain, though it's still present. Only moments later does he realize that they are topless and hugging, her ample breasts pressing against his chest.

"Later." She grins, hearing his thoughts.

Now pretending to be escaped slaves, they wander the halls, looking as frightened as possible. As they continue on toward the portside airlock, they meet dozens of other slaves, some of them armed. Oblivious to the fact that the human male and his three Kanorakus companions are actually defecting Slavers, they travel with them without even thinking twice. Suddenly, they're caught in a firefight when other Slavers emerge, shooting at the escapees. Not realizing that Draiman, Corova, Sashuna and Korazhu are among them, they fire into the crowd while the armed slaves shoot back.

Fleeing with the unarmed escapees, they try to keep their heads down and hurry toward the nearest corner. Draiman and Corova turn the corner, continuing on to the airlock. Sashuna does the same, stopping to call out to Korazhu. Mid-step, a stray bolt slams into the back of his head and drills through his brain, killing him instantly. He drops like a sack of rocks, falling with a loud thud on the metal floor panels before Sashuna's eyes.

"NOOO!!!" She screams.

Stopping in their tracks, Draiman and Corova can see her kneeling over Korazhu's body. Tears stream down her face as she shakes him in a pitiful attempt to make him wake up. Though she knows that he's dead, she can't bear the prospect of losing him.

They'd been a secret couple for months before Corova and Draiman even met, and became an open couple immediately after escaping their terrorist base with the Slavers. She cannot imagine going on without him. Peeking around the corner and looking down the hall, the couple can see the last few slaves fall dead at the hands of the much more lethal and prepared Slavers.

Taking Sashuna by her shoulders, Draiman and Corova drag her away from Korazhu's body, neither of them wishing for her to die as well for the mistake of following them. Slavers turn the corner and fire but the trio quickly disappear around another. Sashuna puts little effort into her escape but her companions simply won't allow her to fail. Turning another corner and following a wall, they race from the Slavers as fast as they can, soon finding armed men in vastly different uniforms.

"Don't shoot!" Draiman and Corova shout, holding their hands high above their heads.

Sashuna is too distraught to play-act but this only serves to their advantage. Quite a few women are nearly hysterical after their ordeal, so her behavior is not something that the Unity's soldiers haven't already seen. Ushering them down the hall, the Slavers stop as soon as they see the soldiers, retreating before a round can be fired. The soldiers find it odd how the Slavers stopped fighting them as soon as August returned. Floating through the umbilicus along with hundreds of other freed slaves, Draiman, Corova and Sashuna board Unity through the airlock.

A relief crew throws a blanket over everyone as they pass through the door and bring them inside. Scores of Irakus commandos stand at the ready, guarding the airlock should the Slavers try to break the lines and assault them. In the hangar, thousands of slaves stand around or sit on the floor, being carefully examined by the now thoroughly understaffed relief force. It's clear to Draiman and his wife that nearly the Slaver's entire cargo has escaped. Thankfully, not a

single slave has seen either of them; they don't acquire the cargo, merely transporting it. Turning to Corova, they share a gaze.

"We made it." Draiman speaks telepathically to his wife.

"We did. I love you, Draiman." She replies.

"I love you, too."

"Well, hello there!" A cheerful voice exclaims.

Turning around, Draiman stares right at August. Promptly attempting to arrest his cousin, Corova immediately attacks August in her husband's defense. Irakus commandos, backed by Kanorakus soldiers, subdue her and Draiman before anyone can be harmed. Sashuna, however, remains undetected.

"Who are these people?!" Sihl' Ahzen asks.

"He's my cousin, James Woods' son." August answers.

"Draiman Woods. A real fuckin' pleasure..." He grumbles as they click the handcuffs on him.

"Well, well, well... I didn't know Kanorakus could be Slavers too!"

"Touch him, little bird, and I'll swallow you whole." Corova growls.

Digging into Draiman's pockets, they find Corova's ring and Draiman's pendant, made from her bristles. The credit chit in his underwear, however, remains undiscovered.

"Oh-ho! Lovers, I see!" Sihl' Ahzen exclaims.

"Give those back!" Draiman growls.

Sihl' Ahzen dangles the pendant from her featherlike fingers, as if taunting the couple with it. August sees their connection as his friend and associate toys with their captives and suddenly feels a tinge of guilt for turning them in.

"Come on, Sihl." He says, gaining her attention.

"Right. We'll just hold onto these for you!" She says, pocketing the jewelry.

"Let's get them to the jail." August continues, his own men taking over.

Leading Draiman and Corova away, they're suddenly stopped by a shrill cry.

"Wait! Wait! I'm with them!" Sashuna exclaims.

"... What?"

"I'm a Slaver! I'm with them!" Sashuna insists.

Though they initially disbelieve her, they see the horror on the two Slavers faces. Quickly realizing that the purple and gold Kanorakus must be telling the truth, she is swiftly arrested as well.

"What was that?!" Corova asks Sashuna as they sit in cell some time later.

"What was what?"

"You could've gotten away!" Corova growls.

"I figured they'd probably kill you for being Slavers. I saw it as my way out, now that I've lost Korazhu."

Struck by her soft, matter-of-fact response, Corova's left speechless. How would she feel if Draiman died before her eyes like that? She doesn't bother to berate her any further, letting Sashuna weep softly in a corner. Looking across the force shield that holds them in their cells, Draiman sits alone, kept apart from the women.

"Well... At least we're here... What do you think they'll do with us?" Corova asks her lover telepathically.

"I don't know, and I don't care, so long as we're together when it happens." Draiman answers.

Lying back on a cot, he ponders their situation, his thoughts routinely returning to August. He cannot blame him for what he did, all things considered, though he would've preferred it if August kept the secret for him. After all, how else did he escape the Lomboko except being set free by his father?

"I wonder what my dad's doing right now..." He thinks aloud.

Standing before his captain's chair, Madrid Basile looks at James Woods scowling face.

"How dare you steal *my* slaves, you cocky little shit!"

"I liked them." Captain Basile shrugs, calmly mocking the Slaver.

"You have no idea what you've stolen... If I ever catch you or your crew aboard my ship, I'll... I'll rip your entrails out..." James seems to lose steam.

"I have no doubt."

"This isn't over..."

"See you later then?!" Captain Basile asks.

James Woods snickers, subtly shaking his head as the transmission is terminated. For all James Woods talk, he never attempts to target Unity. The Lomboko's guns don't even activate, though he knows that James is fully capable of doing so.

"What's the word from the airlock?" Captain Basile asks a crewmember.

"No more refugees seem to be coming through. Our men have pulled out. All accounted for. Zero casualties and only minor injuries." He replies.

"Good. Disconnect and retract the umbilicus."

"Yes, sir."

No sooner than the umbilicus is demagnetized and pulled away from the Lomboko does the ship begin to move. In only a matter of moments, the Lomboko engages her hyperdrive, escaping into a singularity before the crew of the Unity even know what's happening. No ship of her size is known to enter a warp bubble so swiftly; clearly the Lomboko is not the average vessel. A local transmission suddenly appears on the bridge, an audio-only call from the Council chambers. These two chambers have a direct link to each other at all times.

"Captain Basile, we understand that the crew are aboard and all of the refugees are being attended too." A Councilmember begins.

"Yes. I've notified Captain Kraiss and we'll depart as soon as the Sol Marines arrive to pick them up and take them home."

"Negative. We've already canceled that order. You are to launch immediately." The Councilmember continues.

"... Pardon?"

"Continue. As. Planned."

"They're not our crew! We can't just keep them!" Captain Basile protests.

“The decision has been made to integrate them... This is a direct order from the council.”

“And the Directors?” Captain Basile asks.

“They’re aware.”

Ending the transmission, Captain Basile slumps back in his chair. He knows the full scope of this mission and understands their reasoning. Still, he struggles with the morality of effectively kidnapping the freed slaves. Does this make them any better than the Slavers?

“Orders, sir?” A crewmember finally asks, breaking the silence.

“Plot a course...” He murmurs.

“Yes, sir.”