

Unity

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode Twenty-Three: Structural Integrity

Sitting alone in a cafeteria, Sashuna looks around the room with her golden eyes. She rests her chin atop the palm of a clawed hand as she turns her eyes toward her food, poking at it softly with a gold colored fork. Six hours earlier she was a prisoner of Unity, hoping that her crimes would merit a swift punishment and a release from the pain of living. She was disappointed, however, when guards returned to the interrogation room where she sat, taking her, Corova and Draiman to the office and processing their release. The trio were given simple clothes, then led away to be interviewed by staff. Assessing their skills, they were more than eager to integrate them with the others who will inevitably be her crew.

Offering her secretarial work, Sashuna was given a strange little card, similar to a credit chit, as well as being assigned an unused apartment on tier one. With five hundred points to her name to start off with, she and her Slaver companions were left to fend for themselves in the city-within-a-ship. Rather than stick together, Draiman and Corova abandoned her, claiming that they had something important to do. Alone, in a massive and unfamiliar vessel, knowing no one and with her lover dead, the depressed Sashuna found a place to eat. Now, however, she's lost her appetite. Sitting in silence, she's as outwardly uncomfortable and alone as she is within.

"I miss you, Korazhu..." She murmurs.

Resting her face in her hands, her fingers cover her closed eyes and her raptor-like snout juts out between the blade of each.

"Hello." A male voice says softly.

Taking her hands from her face and opening her eyes, she looks toward the voice. A man stands before her, just beside the booth she occupies. The pale-skinned human clutches a tray, a warm smile on his face.

"Hi..."

"Do you mind if I sit here?" He asks.

"No, though I'd rather be alone." She replies.

"Would you?"

She raises a brow, watching him as he sets his tray on the table and slides into the booth. He sits across from her without ever waiting for her to respond. He sticks his fork into a pile of strange, yellowish strands, covered in a chunky, blood red sauce.

"Are you... Eating worms?!" She asks in surprise.

"What? Oh! This is spaghetti." He answers, twisting his fork in the matter.

"Humans..." She sighs.

"So!" He begins, taking a bite. "How're you doing?"

Sashuna looks at him, her eyes narrowing in a perturbed glare. Seeing her expression, the human stops mid-bite, realizing the foolishness of his inquiry.

“Right... Well, are the crew treating you well, at least?”

“What do you care?” She snaps.

“I’m curious. I want everyone to feel welcome, regardless of their past.”

“Is that the job they’ve saddled you with? Walk around and speak with all of the newcomers, pretending to care about us?” Sashuna snickers.

“Something like that, minus the ‘pretend’ part.” He answers with a little smile.

Shaking her head, she looks down at her food. Though a Kanorakus dish that she’s familiar with, it doesn’t quite look or taste the same. While it was strange to adapt to the Lomboko, Korazhu made it much easier. Now, aboard Unity, she has only Corova and Draiman. While attentive to her, possibly out of guilt, the lovers have and will always be more concerned with each other. She cannot blame them for this, though being abandoned in a strange place with aliens she’d spent her lifetime opposing certainly upsets and frustrates her. Watching her carefully, the human clears his throat.

“Listen... I know it’s not going to be easy. The rest of us had to get used to this place too. I had a house before, and friends that I won’t see for... A very long time.”

“I’ve lost more than mere friends...” She grumbles, turning her eyes away.

“I’m sorry. Truly. I know what it is to lose people.”

“Do you?” She mutters.

“Yes, and I know that it doesn’t mean much, if anything, coming from a stranger, but it’ll all be okay.” He says softly.

"You don't know anything." She snickers, staring into the distance.

"Well, I never was much for school." He replies, taking another bite.

"Go bother someone else..."

"I'm almost done, then I'll leave you alone. How about this! We don't even have to talk. I'll just sit here." He suggests.

"Good..."

Sitting in silence, Sashuna examines her surroundings. As he'd said, the human doesn't even glance at her, merely eating his spaghetti in peace. Cleaning his plate, he takes a final drink from his cup, slurping the remnants through the straw. Without saying a word, he rises from the booth and leaves. Seeing the empty space, Sashuna suddenly feels badly. Even in silence, the company was somehow comforting. The stranger's empty space reminds her of her loss. Looking back down at her food, which long ago turned cold, she tries to take another bite. It doesn't sit well with her.

"Here."

The human returns, setting an opened box on the table, near her tray.

"Take it home with you." He says.

Sashuna turns her eyes to him, filled with a mixture of anger and sorrow. She can feel herself ready to snap but one look at the man, his eyes somber and lips faintly frowning, makes her pause. He's visibly troubled by her pain, and now she isn't sure what to say to him.

"It hurts now, but it gets better." He says softly.

"... Don't you ever leave?" She blurts out.

Subtly nodding his head, he steps away from her table and turns, continuing his walk and heading for the door. His small acts of kindness and supportive words run through her mind. She's never felt guilty for mistreating an alien before, yet now she does.

"Hey, human!" She calls out.

"I have a name." He says as he turns back.

"I'm sorry..."

"I forgive you, Kanorakus." He quips.

"... What's your name?" She asks.

"People call me Madrid. See you later."

With a little smile, he waves a hand and turns back around, walking through the cafeteria doors and out into the walkways of tier one. She watches him through a window for a moment, as he disappears around a corner. He hadn't bothered anyone else in the cafeteria, only speaking with her. Their little encounter having lifted her spirit somewhat, she packs up her food into the box before setting the plate, cup and tray aside. With nothing else to do, she decides to find her new apartment and make the best of the situation she's in, thankful that the stranger took the time to stop for her.

"I hope this apartment has a bed in it already." She thinks aloud, walking the small streets. "... Whatever you two are doing, I hope it's really important..."

Sitting with his wife in August's apartment, Draiman looks between Corova and Drayusa. The black and purple Kanorakus glares are Corova, her black and gold tipped bristles stiffening from her anxiety and anger. Corova immediately notices her glare; she's

known Drayusa in a past life, when she was her spy, dubbed 'Sway'. As soon as August introduced her to the people he'd invited, the older female, Miss Ayanda, and the younger Drayusa immediately understandably began to watch her. A blue and yellow accented Skahlzunian scampers about the apartment, gaining her attention. He slams his sleek chest into her left leg as she sits at the end of the couch, pressed against her human husband, who sits to her right.

"HAI!" Draz waves.

"Hello there." Corova says, softly petting Draz's head.

"Mmm... Your colors pretty!" Draz chirps.

"You can say that again." Draiman remarks, pulling his arm a little tighter around her waist.

"Alright, so now that we're all here and introduced..." August begins.

He pauses for a moment to look around his packed living room. Sitting on his couch, the nearby chairs and with three on the floor, Roku, Draiman, Corova, Miss Ayanda, Fizona, Drayusa, Stefan, Kellan, and Sihl' Ahzen are all present.

"What did you want to talk to us about?" Miss Ayanda asks, her clawed hands resting on her broad hips.

"This mission... It's wrong." August begins.

"You're damn right!" Sihl' Ahzen chirps, sitting atop Kellan's lap.

"Took the words right out of my mouth!" Kellan adds.

Drayusa, Stefan, Fizona and Roku all agree. Miss Ayanda glares at August, frustrated that Roku and the Slaver's appear to know the truth. How could he violate her trust like this? What does he wish to accomplish with this secret meeting? Draiman raises his hand high, only for Draz to climb over the backrest of the couch and cling to his

bicep. Gently pulling in the giggling Draz, he seats the playful alien beside him, petting his head.

“What’s this mission you’re all pissed off about?” The human Slaver asks.

Having withheld the unfortunate truth while visiting him in Unity’s jail, August and Sihl’ Ahzen happily sum up the mission for him, to Miss Ayanda’s silent horror. Draiman and Corova are visibly stunned, while the others grow only more enraged as they relive the truth of their betrayal yet again. The human Slaver and his Kanorakus wife share a glance; it’s clear to all that they’re communicating with their thoughts. After a pause, Draiman turns his head toward August and sighs.

“Well... I can’t say I blame them, all things considered.”

“... What?” Roku asks softly, shocked by his remark.

“Think about it. The only thing that keeps those soulless fucks from conquering the galaxy is a heightened fear response and wimpy bodies. For their size, they’re pretty pathetic; that’s why they overcompensate with intellect.” Draiman explains.

“With their home world gone, they sought out an ally to use to get it back, and in return they’re handing over everything that makes them great. It’s not a bad trade; this whole charade is a little convoluted though.” Corova finishes for her husband.

“Honestly, I’d expect nothing short of a clever and complex scheme from those freaks.” Draiman adds.

“But they’re kidnapping the refugees! They’re kidnapping you!” Roku exclaims, a little whimper in her voice.

“Isn’t that ironic?” Stefan smirks.

“A little. They don’t feel things the way that most people do. People like myself had to learn how to shut that shit off just to get the job done but they’re *born* like that. Or should I say hatched? ...

Anyway, to them all of the women are baby factories and the men are warriors and sperm banks.” Draiman retorts.

“How does this not surprise you?” Corova snickers.

“I guess we’re not used to dealing with monsters the way you two are.” Fizona retorts.

“Obviously.” Corova smirks.

“So, now that we know the problem, what’s your solution?” Draiman asks August.

Leaning forward and resting his forearms on his knees, August rubs his clawed hands together and thinks for a moment. He turns his eyes toward his cousin, watching with curiosity as Draz sits beside and appears to cuddle with the Slaver. The little alien seems quite content.

“The solution is simple... We take over the ship.” He finally answers.

“WHAT?!” Miss Ayanda gasps.

“Fuck yeah!” Sihl’ Ahzen chirps.

“I’m with you!” Kellan adds.

“Us too!” Drayusa speaks for herself and Stefan.

“Who doesn’t love a mutiny?!” Draiman chuckles.

“No, no, no, no, no!” Miss Ayanda speaks swiftly. “We can’t just commandeer the ship!”

“Why not?!” Sihl’ Ahzen asks.

“We *are* the Lieutenants; combined, we command the sum total of the entire security force, a full ten percent of the original crew, and still a substantial military.” Fizona adds.

Miss Ayanda snickers, looking around at the small crowd in the room. It’s readily apparent to her that they’re genuinely contemplating

this course of action; they're completely serious. Her mind races. What will they do with the crew and the freed slaves, who don't yet know that they are never going home? Would they enlist them in their cause? Could they even control them if they did? What of the crew and the council? What would they do to captain Basile or those who staff the bridge? Shaking her head, she brings herself back to the present.

"Are you even thinking this through?!" She snarls at everyone.

Draz hears her tone and cowers, a fearful look on his face. Draiman drapes his arm over the little alien, pulling him close and tucking him underneath his arm as if he were his own child.

"Yes, Ayanda, we are. I think I already have a plan." August retorts.

"That's *Miss Ayanda*!"

"Lay off that shit! It's getting old!" Roku snaps.

"Fizona's right. We control Unity's security. Most of our people are loyal to the chain of command and the cause, but if they were to learn that they've been betrayed, do you think they'd still be so loyal?" August continues.

"You want to tell them all the truth?!" Miss Ayanda gasps.

"Why not?!" Drayusa shrugs her shoulders.

"They deserve to know." Stefan interjects.

"We tell our majors, then captains, then sergeants, and so on until they all know. As for Draiman and Corova here, you two can blend in with the refugees. Spread a rumor about this being some sort of sick Dezonian experiment before they're even told that we aren't taking them home. According to the memo they sent us, captain Basile ordered the refugees to be told about their new living situation within forty-eight hours. Plant a seed of descent; when they learn they're stuck here, it'll blossom." August begins.

"I can't believe I'm hearing this..." Miss Ayanda murmurs.

"I'm positive that most of our people will side with us. When they do, we'll move onto phase two." August continues.

"Which is?" Sihl' Ahzen asks.

"A two-pronged strike. Three security teams will meet with the pissed off refugees, hopefully led by Draiman, and secure tier one and nine. Whichever security team acting as guards for the bridge that day will sit in wait. They'll guard the other two security teams, probably led by myself and Sihl, who will take control of the bridge and the Council chambers at once. We'll make them all step down and commandeer the ship. Hopefully, it'll be a bloodless coup." He finishes.

"Hell yeah!" Sihl' Ahzen chirps.

"Sounds good!" Roku nods.

"Finally, a mission I can support!" Kellan exuberantly exclaims.

"We're in." Stefan says for himself and Drayusa.

"What a criminal mastermind we have here." Draiman smirks.

"I'm so proud." Corova wipes away a fake tear.

Miss Ayanda shakes her head in protest, her arms lifting and hands covering her elf-like ears as she closes her eyes.

"This is a mistake!" She insists.

"The only mistake we made was listening you and the Council." Kellan retorts.

"Yes, and we plan to correct that." Sihl' Ahzen growls, her fiery eyes narrowing.

"You're going to get people killed!" Miss Ayanda yells.

"And a war with whoever those aliens are won't?!" Fizona snickers.

"It's better to stick with the mission at hand! Perhaps we can negotiate a treaty and derail the Dezonians invasion strategy!" She pleads with her underlings.

"I'm not going to sit around for years and have a half dozen babies for the Dezonians." Roku snaps, her blood boiling.

"Agreed!" Drayusa nods.

"When Kellan and I have children, it'll be when we're ready, and preferably on a planet." Sihl' Ahzen adds.

"... I can't stand by and let you do this." Miss Ayanda sternly warns them.

"And we can't let you stop us..."

No sooner than August speaks those words, every Lieutenant pulls a blaster from their holster. They glare at Miss Ayanda, who stares in shock at her own people. It's readily apparent that their anger won't subside, yet she can't understand why. She's spent so many years in war and seen so much death on Kanor alone that the prospect of living in peace for decades aboard Unity is a Godsend. On this ship, their struggles are over. On this ship, they'll always have another day to look forward too. While she realizes that eventually it'll end when they reach Azavia, the most peace she's ever seen was when she lived and worked aboard the Azilian; Unity is as close to heaven as she's ever been.

For a soldier with a mind as weary as hers, the prospect of yet another fight, even if it's for freedom, feels like too much to ask. Clearly, for her underlings, they haven't had their fill of blood. Looking at her own people, some of whom point their weapons in her direction, she's struck by a realization.

"And what do you plan to do with those? Kill me?! There's no way you can remove my corpse from this apartment without it being seen, nor could you stall when I don't report in. You'd have to give up your plan and come clean or act on it right now! Without your people

knowing why you murdered me and tried to take the bridge, do you think they'd even stop to ask before they kill you? ... Those blasters aren't a threat and you know it." She smugly replies.

"We'll take our chances..." Drayusa grumbles.

"I could always upload that data you gave us from August's home terminal. Within minutes, someone will see it, and within hours, the whole ship will be rioting. We can start this right now and we won't even have to leave this room." Fizona suggests, her lips curling into a sinister grin.

"I suppose they'll call us in to take care of it!" Stefan chirps.

"We do run their security, after all!" Kellan nods.

"That's assuming our people, who were all lied to, will even cooperate with us." Drayusa grins.

"We could always say, 'sure, we'll save you, but only if you get the fuck out of the driver's seat and let us drive home!' They might listen to that." Sihl' Ahzen interjects.

"Either way, it'd be very interesting to see how that plays out." Roku casually remarks.

Once again backed into a corner, Miss Ayanda struggles to accept that this is really happening. The secret is so destructive and the Dezonian's plot so convoluted that any attempts to protect it may now be thwarted with ease by her own people. Her dreams of peace slip through her three, claw-tipped fingers. Unable to hold back, she slumps forward and rests her face in her hands. A melancholy sniffle catches them all off guard; even Draiman and Corova raise their brows. Draz slips away from Draiman, sliding down from the couch and walking slowly over to the pine green and crimson Kanorakus woman.

"I'm just so tired of all the war. It never stops!" She says as she weeps. "I know how horrible it is; even Madrid doesn't want to do this! I was worried I'd have to talk him into following through."

Her audience sit in a stunned silence. Enraged, enthralled and heartbroken all at once, they say nothing as she takes a breath.

“I was never more at home than when I was living on the Azilian... I know they only want to use us; I was nearly sick to my stomach when I saw those files, but just imagine it! Maybe as many as thirty years of peace! Building families and enjoying each other’s company. How many of us even experienced *two* years of uninterrupted peace?! How many of you are even older than thirty?! I just want to slow down, and if I have to run again, at least I’ll have all that time to catch my breath.”

August turns his head down, now realizing why she so fervently supports such a sinister and devious mission. Seeing the breadth of her pain, Draz rests his little hands on her leg as she cries, leaning on her. Taking her hands from her face, her ruby red eyes, now glossy with tears, stare at the humble alien. His little tail sways as he smiles warmly at her, reaching out and hugging her side. The others watch as she lifts him up and holds the being as if he were hers, taking comfort in his presence. It’s all that keeps her from crumbling into ash before their very eyes.

“I understand why you want this, Miss Ayanda. It doesn’t make you a bad person for wanting that...” Roku speaks softly, breaking the silence. “But we’ve done so much for this project, sacrificing time and family... Some of us nearly died for it, and even more actually did.”

“We’ve bled enough for something that isn’t even what it was supposed to be. We aren’t going to fight and die for the Dezonian’s home world, and you can’t ask us to.” August calmly interjects.

“We were sold on a lie, and just because we can have a little peace now doesn’t mean that what happens when it ends is worth it, and it doesn’t justify all of the things they’ve done to make it happen.” Roku continues.

“This isn’t right, and it needs to stop.” Fizona adds.

“We can do this right.” Kellan says.

“Let us do what needs to be done.” Sihl’ Ahzen pleads.

Miss Ayanda rests her chin atop Draz’s head. Looking around the room, she can see that most everyone is greatly concerned for her and have come to understand her reasoning. However, this only strengthens their resolve. Realizing that she has no other choices left to her, a weary and heartbroken Ayanda concedes with a simple nod of her head.

“I won’t reveal the plan or stand in the way but I also don’t want to participate in this mutiny. You’re on your own from here on out.” She says under her breath.

“That’s fine.” August replies.

The group once again falls silent, sitting around and watching the unofficial matriarch as she holds Draz for comfort. Draiman glances toward Corova, their minds racing as they debate the potential of this coup. Still hiding the credit chit worth more than most CEOs make in several years, this is their best chance of securing passage back to Sol where they can disappear and live comfortably and in peace together. Also left with little choice, the pair share a little nod.

“Well!” He exclaims as he loudly clasps his hands together. “Now that the party is planned, how about we break out the refreshments?!”

“Yaaa!” Draz chirps.

August heads for his kitchen to retrieve some light snacks and drinks as they prepare to hash out the details of their new mission. Miss Ayanda, however, is true to her word and wants no part of it; she promptly leaves to return home. After sitting and discussing their goals and strategies for nearly an hour, everyone else soon departs, heading back to their own homes for the night. Hanging back, Fizona

is the last to leave. Reaching the door, she rests her hand on the frame, her claws clicking on the wall as she pauses to think.

"Are you alright?" August asks her.

"I'm fine..."

"Worried about the mission?" He presses.

"No, I..." She turns to face him, a strange, almost sorrowful look on her face. "I'm sorry about what happened between us. I don't want to start a fight by trying to explain myself."

"Don't worry about it."

"I just want you to know that I care for you and I hope that we can still be friends and support each other in our time of need." She continues.

"I'll back you up when you need it. I'm kind of over it anyway."

"Oh?" She asks with a surprised look.

"Yeah. I'm sort of seeing this new girl and it's going pretty well." He says with a smile.

"... I see..."

Standing there in silence for a moment, Fizona doesn't move. She's solid as a statue, looking down at her former lover. An unnerved August raises a brow.

"So... Was there something else you wanted to tell me, or were you planning on sleeping in my doorway?" He finally asks.

"Er... I, uh... .. No! Nothing else!" She eventually answers.

"Well, alright then. Have a good night, Fizona."

"You too, August." She says softly.

Stepping into the hall, she hears the door swooshing shut behind her. She pauses, glancing back at his door for a moment. The words were on the tip of her tongue, yet now that she knows that he's found another, she's lost the power to speak them. Fear and sorrow creep into Fizona's heart; she does her best to bury them as she walks down the hall and toward her own apartment, housed within the same complex.

"Hello! Fancy seeing you here!"

A powerwalking Miss Ayanda, having just left August's apartment complex, stops in her tracks. She turns her body slightly, glancing over her shoulder at the friendly and familiar voice that calls out to her. Seeing her ruby eyes glossy and a glistening streak running down her cheek, captain Basile immediately recognizes that she's been crying. The human approaches, a worried look on his face.

"What's wrong?! Are you alright?!" He asks with great concern.

"I'm fine..." She sniffles. **"I'm just having a bad day."**

"Business or personal?"

"I'm sorry?" She cocks her head.

"You're leaving an apartment building." He replies.

"Oh... Well, both, I suppose."

"You should know better than that." He chuckles softly.

Stepping closer, he rests a hand on her shoulder, giving her a gentle squeeze.

"I don't think we're thinking of the same thing." She remarks.

"Probably, but either way, I'm here for you if you ever want to talk... And I don't ever charge the first session."

“Thanks.” She says with a little smile. “If I need to talk, I’ll remember that.”

“Suit yourself.” He shrugs.

Watching their dialogue from a distance, a wandering Sashuna was looking for her new home when she stumbled across the stranger, Madrid, speaking to the teary-eyed Kanorakus. His concern is genuine, as are her tears. After sharing a brief dialogue, the pine green and crimson striped Kanorakus woman embraces the human, who says a few more words. Chuckling at his remarks, the pair part ways and Madrid continues on, taking a different walkway than the Kanorakus woman. At first, she believed that he was merely an emissary to help her feel welcome, but perhaps this Madrid is just a caring person?

Continuing on her way, Sashuna wanders aimlessly for some time. The screens lining the ceiling depict a beautiful, starry sky and a glowing moon. The floor panels of the walkways gleam in the artificial night. Eventually, she finds her designated apartment building. Entering the lobby, she’s taken aback by how detailed and expensive looking the interior decorations are. Using a simple map and index, which already lists her as a tenant, she finds her floor and suite number. Pressing her hand against the plate beside her door, she finds that it’s already been programmed; her hand and fingerprints were taken when she was processed.

After much anticipation, she stands in the opened doorway with a gaping maw. The purple and gold accented Kanorakus is floored to find that her apartment is fully furnished and quite luxurious. Her dinosaur-like, three-toed, digitigrade feet thud softly on the plush carpeting. A couch appears to be covered in black velvet, and everything has a decidedly modernist theme. Compared to anything she’s had before in her life, this is a penthouse. She decides then and there that while she’s aboard, she should make the best of her life on Unity. Stepping into her bedroom, a queen-sized bed with expensive looking sheets and fluffy pillows await her.

Plopping down onto her belly, she hugs a pillow to test its firmness. To her surprise, it allows her to lie on her chest, holding her up enough to accommodate her ample breasts. Her tapering tail sways through the air and she rolls onto her side, and then her back. Glancing over to the space beside her, the room suddenly feels quite lonesome and her smile fades. Pushing Korazhu's memory from her mind, she rolls back onto her side, her back facing the empty space of a bed they never had a chance to share together. After a bit of struggling, she finally succumbs to exhaustion and falls asleep in her clothes.

Awakening the next morning to a chirping, she opens her golden eyes and looks around the room. The chirping comes from a nightstand. Reaching out and taking hold of the gold-colored handle, she pulls open the drawer to find a charging base and a new V.I. bracelet.

"Hello?" She says, picking up and answering the device.

"Good! You found it!" A woman's voice chirps. "Get ready. Someone will stop by in an hour to show you where you'll be working."

The call abruptly ends. Rising from her bed, Sashuna rubs the sleep from her eyes and disrobes, opening a sliding door. Instead of finding the bathroom, she opens a closet door and discovers a series of traditional and rather expensive looking Kanorakus women's clothes hanging on racks. Briefly looking through them, she finds a flowing purple top with a sheen like silk or vinyl. On the floor are several pairs of boots and shoes of varying sizes, all a shiny black. Taking the top and a pair of footwear that fit, she looks through the drawers and discovers similarly high-quality pants.

Taking these clothes with her, she opens a different door to discover a rather large bathroom. Looking around, she finds that the counter is lined with hygiene products, and her medicine cabinet is already fairly well stocked. She picks up a bottle of pills that are

specifically designed to help ease the cramping of female Kanorakus, who don't respond well to the medicines used by the Irakus or Solakus. She can't help but chuckle. They've thought of everything. Now feeling like an intruder in someone else's home, she swiftly showers, dresses, and walks into the living room.

Entering her fully stocked kitchen, Sashuna reheats the meal she'd ignored yesterday afternoon and sits on her couch. After sitting in wait for barely twenty minutes, a time that felt excruciating in her uncomfortable surroundings, a female Voeldahn Solakus buzzes her door. Following the dainty woman with the short snout, little, rounded ears and a big, bushy tail, she's escorted through several checkpoints as they make their way to the front of the vessel. Sashuna's eyes grow wide in surprise when she sees them passing a large set of double doors with a sign labeling the area as the bridge. Passing the bridge, the woman leads her into an adjacent office area, containing a main hall and several dozen cubicles.

"And here's where you'll be working!" The squirrel woman chirps, showing her an unclaimed desk.

"I'm sorry, but what exactly will I be doing here?" Sashuna asks.

"They didn't tell you?! Well, no worries! You'll be working alongside a few other ladies, handling the writing and sorting of incident reports! Some might involve the bridge and any problems we have, and others might involve the security teams and our police force! Those will be fun reads!" She exuberantly explains.

"I see..."

"Oh, don't worry! It's an easy job, and our clearance means we earn plenty of points for it!" The squirrel chirps.

Slipping into the cubicle, Sashuna takes a seat at her new desk, looking over a terminal and several office related supplies that are already laid out.

"Let me know if you need anything!" The squirrel happily exclaims.

"Alright." Sashuna nods.

"Hello, girls! How are we today?!" A familiar voice fervently asks.

"Captain! H-hi!" The squirrel greets him with a wide grin.

Several others greet the speaker with the rank, peaking her curiosity. Standing to her feet, Sashuna is flabbergasted to see the polite and gentle human, Madrid, standing in the center of the room. Still dressed in unassuming clothes and without any badges to speak of, every worker somehow seems to know who and what he is.

"Don't do that." Madrid grins, stepping closer.

"D-do w-what, captain?" The squirrel nervously asks.

"That! I was never big on titles."

"Isn't captain a rank?" Sashuna interjects.

"They're all prefixes, and prefixes sound stiff."

"Of course, Mr. Basile!"

Madrid chuckles, gently shaking his head. Approaching the cubicle, the squirrel Voeldahn is visibly affected by the human, her body language changing dramatically. Leaning on the cubicle, Madrid flashes the Voeldahn a warm smile.

"I-I'll be right back." She says to Sashuna before darting off.

His eyes follow her for a moment as she disappears into a nearby room, a sign on the door labeling it as a storage closet.

"She's an odd one, isn't she?" He remarks.

"You're all odd to me." Sashuna retorts.

"Right... So! Do you like your job? Fitting in well?" He asks Sashuna, as he turns back to her.

"I don't know. I only just arrived."

"True, though, I'm sure you'll do fine. Everything gets better, Sashuna."

"Do you mind if I ask you something, Madrid?"

"Not at all!" He chirps.

"When we met earlier... Why didn't you tell me you were the captain?" She asks.

"Would that have mattered at all?" He retorts.

"Possibly."

"Oh... Clearly, I need to change my tactics!" He chuckles. "Have a good day, Sashuna."

"You too, Madrid." Sashuna nods.

Turning to the others, he promptly excuses himself and heads for the door. As she's about to sit back down, one of the other women in the office calls out.

"He's gone!"

"Oh, alright!" The squirrel replies from the closet.

Emerging from the closet, Sashuna notes that the Voeldahn Solakus doesn't even hold anything that might've been stored inside. Approaching Sashuna's cubicle, she lets out a deep sigh.

"Are you alright?" Sashuna asks.

“Oh, I’m fine!” The squirrel chirps.

“What did you need in there?”

“Nothin’.”

“Then why’d you leave?” Sashuna presses.

“You didn’t notice?” A random woman giggles.

“Madrid. He makes it... Difficult to focus.” The squirrel replies.

“Oh?” Sashuna raises a brow and cocks her head.

“Yeah. I needed some space.”

“He makes her hot!” One woman laughs.

“The little squirrel wants those nuts!” Another cackles.

“Shut up...” The squirrel feebly snaps.

“You know it’s true, Delilah!” The women exclaim.

With an embarrassed look on her face, Delilah, the squirrel Voeldahn, tilts her head down as the other women tease her for her crush. No longer interested, Sashun sits back down at her desk and activates her terminal. She swiftly discovers that she has a clearance level of three and finds a series of files labeled as instructional manuals. With nothing else to do, she activates the first file, all the while the girls tease Delilah who stands at her desk. After a little while, they settle down.

“If you have any questions, let me know. I’m supposedly a supervisor here, though you probably couldn’t tell, considering how those skanks were carrying on.” Delilah remarks.

“I think I’ll be alright.” Sashuna replies.