

Unity

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode Twenty-Four: Unresolved

Sitting in his chair, captain 'Madrid' Basile rests his head on an upturned palm, his elbow atop an armrest. For several hours he's sat there while the crew has performed their duties without a problem. The sight of the ever-changing digits on Unity's chronograph is excruciating. It's moments like these when he recalls how his life was before he began to rise in rank. Madrid often pines for the action of his early twenties, when time moved at a fever pitch and when the alarms were constantly sounding. It wasn't all that long ago. Now with naught but his boredom to focus on, his stomach grumbles and growls. He sighs, slumping back in his chair.

"Captain?"

"YES?!" Madrid bolts up.

"I think you need to come and take a look at this."

"Oh, good!" He exclaims.

Leaping from the seat, he races for the console. His face aglow, he hopes that there will be a genuine problem for him to solve, something to end the monotony.

"Look, sir! The engines are all within optimal range and the auto cool-down counter has initiated!" The crewmember happily explains.

“... Oh...”

“Everything’s going according to plan.”

“I see.” Madrid sighs.

“Captain!” Another crewmember calls to him.

“YES?!” Madrid races toward the console.

“You have a call from the directors.”

“... Oh...” He murmurs.

“Would you like to take the call in your private office?”

“Nah!” He waves a hand dismissively.

“But, sir, Director Ashford-”

“Damn, am I hungry!” Madrid exclaims, interrupting him. “I’m taking a break for an early lunch!”

“What about the call, sir?” The crewmember asks.

“I’ll get back to that!” Madrid chirps.

“But, sir!”

“Bye!”

Patting the man on the back, he steps away from the console and walks through the reinforced, sliding double-doors. The crew look to each other as their captain snubs the principal Director of the project. Shrugging their shoulders, the crew return to their duties. The radio operator puts a small headset on, pressing a button and returning to the call.

“I’m sorry, Director Ashford, but something important came up. He’ll contact you as soon as he can.”

Walking down the hall, Madrid hums a little tune, rhythmically snapping his fingers and stepping to the beat in his own head. Swerving around a corner, he slams into someone and the pair topple

over. Landing on the ground with a hard thud, Madrid finds himself on his side, looking at Delilah, who promptly sits up.

“Watch where you’re going you fuuuu-HA! I’m so sorry, captain, sir! I didn’t see where I was walking!” She swiftly apologizes.

“Oh, it’s my fault. I was caught up in the moment.”

Rising to his feet, Madrid holds out a hand, a little smile on his face. Delilah sits on the ground, her large and bushy tail twitching behind her back as the squirrel Voeldahn looks at his outstretched hand. She averts her eyes, looking at the floor by the wall.

“I still should have been more careful.” She murmurs.

“Are you going to let me help you up or what?” He chuckles.

Turning her eyes back to him, she notices that his blue-green orbs look directly into her amber spheres. Reaching out a hand, she rests it on his palm. His fingers coil around her hand, holding her quite gently, as if she were a delicate glass figurine. Rising to her feet, he carefully pulls her up.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I-I’ll be fine.” She speaks softly.

The squirrel girl stares up at the somewhat taller human. The rather athletic, five foot and four-inch-tall woman can feel her temperature rise and heart race as they look at one another; it’s as if she’d just run a mile on her treadmill.

“Wow... You have really pretty eyes!”

She stumbles, succumbing to his words and his touch. Falling forward, he catches her in his arms and her head rests near his shoulder. It's all she can do to keep from trembling.

"What's wrong?!" He asks.

"It's uh... Just a sprain." She answers.

"Damn, now I feel bad. I'll walk you back to your office, alright?"

"N-no! I-I'll be okay." She assures him.

"Are you sure?" He asks.

His brow is soft and his eyes hold a look of genuine concern for her. Delilah can't help but stare at them for a moment, her heart beating swiftly inside of her chest.

"Yeah." She murmurs, nodding her head once.

"Well, alright then. I'll check on you later and see how you're doing."

"Oh, you don't need to bother!" She replies.

"Yes, I do. I care about my crew, and this one was my fault for being an idiot." He insists.

"Okay." She murmurs, struggling to subdue a smile.

"Take it easy, alright? I'll see you later."

Waving at Delilah, Madrid steps back, turns around and walks away. Delilah quickly disappears around a corner, resting her back against the wall and taking a moment to calm herself. She's never been so affected by a man before, nor felt such a strong attraction. It's almost completely overwhelming. Peeking around the corner, she sighs when she sees that he's gone. With boots clanking on the floor panels as he walks, Madrid glances over his shoulder and back down the hall. Sighing, he focuses on the walk to the nearest cafeteria. He's

yet to even set foot in any of the Commerce Pods, preferring instead to eat alongside his crew.

Reaching the cafeteria and stepping inside, he collects a tray and heads for the main counter to place an order. As he walks through the main hall, passing several tables, most recognize their captain and greet him. He nods in response and waves to a few but pauses when he spots a familiar and vibrant splotch of color. Seated alone, in a corner booth, he sees the purple and gold Kanorakus, Sashuna. Her melancholy look distresses him. After placing his order and collecting his food and drink, he walks toward the corner table.

"Hi. Is this seat taken?" He asks.

Sashuna turns her golden eyes away from her plate and toward Madrid. Her frown recedes, her expression now blank. She shakes her head in reply.

"Oh, good!" He chirps, setting down his tray and sliding into his seat. "I wouldn't want to cut in on anyone."

"Come to bother me some more?"

"Well, damn. Way to make me feel welcome!" He smirks.

"I'd appreciate you more if you didn't show up so often." She quips.

"Is that a problem?"

"Perhaps... If I didn't know better, I'd say you were interested in me."

"I'm curious, yes." He admits before taking a bite of his food. "And I couldn't help but notice that you always seem rather unhappy."

"And what's that to you?!" She barks.

Hearing the anger in her voice, Madrid pauses. Sashuna glares with narrowed eyes, crossing her arms before her chest and beneath her ample breasts.

"I'm not some pet project, something to occupy your free time." She growls.

"... Did you want me to get lost? It's a biiiig ship."

"How I feel is none of your business." She continues.

"I'm sorry. If it really bothers you, I can always find someone else to annoy. I've got lots of people who're just dying to abuse me." He teases.

"... Like Delilah?"

"Huh?" He raises a brow.

Sashuna looks at Madrid, examining his posture and his confused expression. Does he truly not realize her feelings?

"Anyway, I never wanted to upset you, Sashuna, and I don't think of you as a pet project or anything like that. I'm not that kind of ass hole. It just bothers me to see you all by yourself. It's how I spent most of my childhood and I know how lonely it can be; half of why I joined the Sol Marines was to have comradery. I'm just trying to be your friend."

He begins to slide out of the booth, preparing to leave.

"Wait! ... I'm sorry. I don't dislike your company. I... I actually find it somewhat comforting..."

Sliding back into the booth, Madrid wears a little smile.

"I'm just not in a good place right now." She continues.

"It's alright. I won't keep asking about your problems; if you feel like talking, then I'll listen."

"Thank you, Madrid."

"It's alright... Hey, what was that thing you said before? About Delilah."

"You've never noticed?" Sashuna snickers.

"Noticed what?" He cocks his head.

"She likes you. All of the women in the office tease her about how badly she wants to have sex with you."

Madrid blinks, his eyes growing wide at Sashuna's blunt honesty.

"Wow... I uh, I didn't realize..."

"How could you not?" Sashuna raises a brow.

"As a man, I don't easily recognize feelings; you women have to tell us about them." He retorts.

"So I've noticed."

"She is awfully cute..." He thinks aloud.

"Is she?" She asks.

"Jealous?" He teases.

"Hardly..." Sashuna mutters.

"Yeah, you're pretty attractive. I wouldn't be worried either." He smirks.

"Oh?" Sashuna grins.

"Mhm. You're way out of my league; I friend-zoned myself because I knew it was hopeless." He chuckles.

"... Do you ever make sense?"

"Eh, sometimes." He shrugs.

Taking a drink and eating some fries, he reaches for his cheeseburger, only for Sashuna to reach out and steal it. She takes a bite out of the burger.

“The fuck?!” He chuckles.

“Mmm! That’s delicious! ... What? ... I was curious!”

“You could’ve asked.”

Taking a small knife from his pocket, he reaches over and cuts a corner off of Sashuna’s Hanak cake, picking it up with his fingers and eating it.

“Hey!”

“There. Now we’re even... Damn. That’s really good!” He exclaims.

“Isn’t it?” She grins.

Sitting through their lunch break and for several hours more, Sashuna and Madrid build a rapport, teasing each other and discussing their backgrounds as they eat their food. It’s the first time in days that Sashuna has felt comforted. After their lunch, they agree to meet again. Both are eager to continue their friendship; they go so far as to trade personal contact information. Leaving the cafeteria together, Sashuna continues to her office and resume her work, while Madrid steps into a public restroom along the hall. As he sits on a toilet in a bathroom stall, his V.I. bracelet chirps. Looking at the device, he sees that Miss Ayanda is trying to initiate a video call.

“Damnit!”

Waiting for either the call to cancel or for himself to be done, Madrid sits in silence. Chirp, chirp, chirp. Chirp, chirp, chirp.

“Damnit! Answer! ... So help me, if you’re having sex too...” Miss Ayanda grumbles.

The call fails; he never answers. As she’s about to place another call, she’s startled when her own bracelet chirps. She quickly presses the button and answers Madrid’s audio-only call.

“Madrid!” She greets him.

“Hello, Miss Ayanda. Sorry I missed your call. I was uh... Busy.”

The sound of a toilet flushing in the background brings a little smirk to Miss Ayanda’s lips.

“I see.” She softly giggles.

“Thank God, you didn’t.” He quips.

“Madrid, something’s come up.” She begins.

“Oh?!” He speaks louder over the sound of running water.

“It’s a security concern...”

“Hold on a moment.”

A whirring is heard in the background and then a loud rushing of wind. Miss Ayanda grows frustrated, wondering if her captain is taking this seriously?

“Madrid? Hello!”

Waving his hands beneath the drier, the method deemed the most efficient by the Dezonians, he takes his time, humming a tune to himself. Pulling his hands away, the drier shuts off.

“Damnit, captain Basile!” Miss Ayanda’s voice shakes his bracelet.

“Uh oh. What’d I do? Am I grounded?” He teases.

“Wha-? ... This is serious, captain!”

Leaning against a sink in the public restroom, he listens to Miss Ayanda as she briefly details the recent developments aboard his ship. Now realizing the urgency, he rubs his temples with his fingertips.

“What do you want me to do? ... Captain?” She asks.

“Stop calling me captain, for one. If we’re going to be friends and I’m going to seduce you then don’t be so formal.” He casually begins.

“Alright.” She chuckles.

“As for what to do, we’ve been over this. Step up security and get your people ready a little faster.” He instructs.

“Understood.”

“I get the feeling I won’t be able to stall for much longer...” He sighs.

Ending the call, Madrid rests his head against the wall and closes his eyes. This isn’t what he was expecting when he agreed to command this ship; he wishes for an opportunity to go back in time and stop himself before signing up. Meanwhile, Miss Ayanda sits back in her chair, alone in her office. She cups her clawed hands around the sides of her blocky snout, the claws of all three fingers resting atop her pine green and crimson hide. She takes a deep breath, exhaling

through her nostrils and preparing herself for the inevitable. Guilt creeps in as she closes her eyes, recalling the meeting in August's apartment.

She knows what's caused these problems, and in many ways, she's complicit. If only there was a way to convince the others to simply follow through with Unity's original mission? If only this turn of events could be reversed. However, there wasn't and it can't be. Fear invades her heart; the fear of chaos and blood. It nearly brings her to tears, though she takes another deep breath and calms herself. Emotions won't serve her. She must see this through, whichever way the wind blows.

"I still can't believe how nice the apartment is." Corova speaks telepathically to her mate.

"I know. I wonder if they're all like that?" He replies.

"Probably."

"Considering where we picked up most of our former cargo, I'd be surprised if any of them could even imagine better living quarters." He continues.

The pair share a long gaze, lying in bed early that morning. The meld allows them to hear what the other is thinking. Will this be as easy as August hopes? Many of the refugees were collected from colonies. Some were bribed, some were lured with false work, and others outright kidnapped when wandering alone in ghettos. Now aboard a well-known ship, part of a well-known project, they may be eager to stay and enjoy the relative luxury. Though they don't realize the truth yet, will it make a difference to those who came from poverty, who've probably spent their first night in silk covered beds?

Inside of a drawer in the nearby nightstand is the credit chit that will provide the future for Draiman, his wife, and any hybrid human-Kanorakus children that they'll have. Neither wants to spend their

years aboard Unity, unable to travel, see a clear sky and walk on real dirt with their feet. They've discussed their future in their minds. Corova wants a real home, a place to breed. Draiman desires this as well. Neither, however, wish for their children to roam about the halls of cold alloy, looking only to a sky of light emitting diodes. They're worth more than to serve as soldiers and breeders for the Dezonians private army.

Though they've both shared doubts and both felt guilt at one time or another, it's only now that they're trapped aboard Unity that Draiman and Corova realize how inhumane their past actions have been. Wearing their new clothes and washing their new dishes together after a humble breakfast, they stand as slaves within their private and luxurious apartment. They soon leave, walking the red velvet carpeting of the hallway. They know that eventually they'll accompany a large group of refugees to meet with a representative of Unity and her Council to learn that they're never going back home.

Until then, they have work to do. With any luck at all, they'll find other refugees who're eager to return home. Leaving the lobby and approaching the walkway, which looks and functions like a miniature street, they stop and turn toward each other. Sharing a kiss and a long embrace as they stand before their home, not a single passerby raises an eyebrow, minding their own business as they walk along the little road. Corova is surprised that at least one Kanorakus woman smiles at them; she's visibly pleased to see the interspecies couple. Corova's arms wrap tighter around her husband's, her ruby eyes following the raptor-like woman who passes them without a word.

"Do you think she was jealous?" Draiman telepathically asks.

"Perhaps. I take no chances with my husband and the father of our future children." She replies.

"I don't blame you... She'd steal you from me in a heartbeat!"

Sharing a little laugh, they kiss again. Draiman strokes the soft, fur-like bristles that run along the back of her head and neck as their lips meet. Finally pulling away, they speak with their minds, wishing each other good luck before beginning their mission. Though their connection keeps them in touch even when apart, able to communicate telepathically and see through each other's eye, even with hundreds of meters between them, they both must focus on their mission. Draiman looks for groups of male refugees, while Corova targets females, whether they be alone or in groups.

Heading toward the tram system, Corova waits on a platform by herself. Looking around at the others who stand with her, some appear to be Unity's crew but most are curious refugees eager to explore the ship. For all they know, they'll only be here for a day or two; why not explore it while they can? To her surprise, she spots the Kanorakus woman who'd seen them earlier, her crimson hide striped with thick, off-white lines. Her bristles are crimson and white, matching the pattern that coats her flesh. Corova approaches the woman.

"Hello!" She greets her.

"Hi!"

"A remarkable place, isn't it?" Corova asks.

"It is." The woman replies as the tram pulls up.

They board the car and take their seats; Corova sits beside the woman, examining her from her seat. The woman doesn't appear to be part of Unity's crew, making her one of the few Kanorakus among the freed slaves. Looking to her with some curiosity, it's clear that she's wondering why Corova is staying near her. They've never met before today. Feeling the pressure of her mission and her target's awkward stare, Corova struggles for something to say; she needs something that will spark a conversation and allow her to plant the seeds of doubt in Unity and the mission.

"I noticed you earlier." The woman suddenly begins. "You were with that Solakus, the human."

"Yes, I was." Corova nods.

"Are you two close?"

"We are. He and I are linked."

"Really?!" The woman gasps.

The shock on her face is plain to see. What would her reaction have been if Corova admitted that she wasn't just married to the human, but that they've melded as well? Corova narrows her eyes, automatically preparing for the ridicule that she would likely encounter if she were speaking with one of her former underlings.

"That's wonderful!" The woman chirps.

"Er... It is?" Corova cocks her head.

"Of course! It warms my heart to see couples like yourselves. It reminds me of just how far we've come."

"It doesn't bother you that I'm not with one of our males?"

"Of course not! To witness our kin mixing with the Solakus, the race who saved us from extinction and gave us essentially all of the knowledge and wisdom that we now possess. It's beautiful." The woman explains.

Her expression suddenly changes, becoming melancholy. She stares at her feet and sighs.

"I know that every race has its share of bad people, but... Well, in general they're such a generous and caring race. I've learned so much from them."

It's evident to Corova and her melded husband that this woman must have been captured and enslaved. Guilt hangs heavy over both of them.

"You were on the ship too, weren't you?" Corova asks, seeking confirmation.

"The Lomboko? ... Yes." The woman speaks softly.

"So was I." Corova says, resting a hand on her shoulder.

"Really?! I don't remember seeing you on the liner when they caught us."

"Well, I... I was already aboard, in my own pod." Corova swiftly lies.

"Oh... I'm sorry. I'd bought passage on a ship and hoped to start a new life on Sol; I had nothing left for me on Kanor. The civil war claimed all of my male relatives and most of the females too, and my few friends left alive fled from our home world as soon as they could afford the flight. My ship was captured by a little gunboat and we were forcefully boarded by the Lomboko. I'd survived the war and served in the army for the mother goddess, but I'd never been so scared as when I learned that I'd be sold into slavery. I had almost given up that there were good people anywhere, but then Unity came and rescued us. I thought about being bitter and blaming the Solakus as a whole while I dreamt inside of that horrid little pod, but looking back on my previous beliefs, I'm sickened to realize that before they came and ended the war, I was just as bad. I'd raped males for my own pleasure, and now I was going to be sold for some else's. It was sickeningly poetic... How horribly misled we were by that damned, male-hating faith... I'm sorry! I'm rambling!"

"It's alright." Corova says, resting a hand on her shoulder. "Everything's alright now. We're safe and free."

"Yes. I'm glad to see that you and your husband were rescued together, before either of you could be sold. I bet he treats you well."

"Of course. I have never loved or been loved in such a manner. I don't know where I'd be without him." Corova responds.

"You're going to give her diabetes, babe." Draiman teases her in her mind.

"That's good. I can only hope to one day find a man who I can share such a connection with. I've found that Solakus men of both types are strangely alluring to me, though I think I'd prefer those without fur... Is the sex good?" She asks.

"Hah! I knew that would come up." Draiman chuckles in Corova's head.

"It's incredible. I couldn't have asked for more." Corova proudly answers, her lips curling into a smug grin.

"Aww, thanks babe." Draiman remarks.

"Oh, thank you." Corova telepathically coos to her husband.

"Good!" The woman gleefully exclaims. "Perhaps I'll meet one who's willing to have some fun before we return to Sol. Maybe I'll find one that I really like and then I'll enjoy a relationship like yours."

Corova nods, her smile fading. Another tinge of guilt overcomes her; she doesn't wish to upset the woman now, after hearing her speak. Reaching the tram station, the Kanorakus woman walks away, her thick, tapering tail swaying. Her wide eyes gaze upon the wonders of the ship as she heads for Commerce Pod Two.

"It's okay, babe. I wouldn't have brought it up either... You can find another." Draiman speaks in her mind.

After waiting for a moment, Corova decides to check Commerce Pod One, hoping to find female refugees whom she can gossip with. Unity's artificial gravity is centered on every individual pod; this prevents any foreign objects from being drawn toward the central stalk of the ship through the gaps between the pods. As each pod has its own gravity generator, access to the star shaped series of five pods involves walking along one of two, long, miniature roads or riding a tram-like car. Warning signs at the entrance to the stalks, which

connect the pods to the central spine of the vessel, prepare those who'd rather walk for the dramatic gravitational shift.

Walking along a set of steps, Corova can feel the gravity pulling her toward the tram station below her, but as she steps up and into the tunnel, it abruptly changes. She feels quite comfortable, as if she's now on level ground. Looking back and over her shoulder, she's amazed to see that her tail faces the roof of the tram. In the distance, she can see other refugees looking back. One of them is the red and white striped Kanorakus woman she'd spoken with. She's planted firmly on her feet but at a seventy-two-degree angle in relation to Corova. The alien geometries are mind boggling, which distracts her for a moment.

Turning back and walking down the long walkway, she enters Commerce Pod One and begins her search. Finding a small group of refugees exploring a shopping center, all of them are Solakus. Two are human and three are Voeldahn. Walking past them, she can overhear them speaking about Unity. She turns a corner and stops, listening in on the women for a moment. Turning her eyes, she can see them vaguely through a reflective surface, a trick she'd learned from her meld with Draiman.

"I mean, I'd heard of this ship and her mission before the Slaver's caught me, but damn..." A dark-skinned human says.

"Yeah. I'd heard it was backed by the Dezonian government, but I never guessed a race as cold and calculating as the Dezonians would make a craft so comfortable." A fox Voeldahn interjects.

"Those bugs creep me out." An Asian human adds.

"I never trusted them before, always experimenting and studying." The dark-skinned human says.

"It bothered me when they told the Solar Council not to help the Skahlzunians because they had no value." A mouse-like Voeldahn remarks.

"Maybe we were wrong? I mean, I know they wanted this to be a long exploration. They even made a false sky and built this city-like atmosphere. It's really nice in here." A deer Voeldahn says.

"It's just so bizarre." The mouse continues.

"Yeah... I feel like this is a bit much for a two-year mission." The Asian human agrees.

Walking by Corova, she waits for a moment before following the girls at a distance. They gossip for some time, sharing details about their capture, details that Corova would've considered quite personal. It's clear to her that these aren't the kind of females who can keep a secret for long. Perfect. As they browse a clothing store, they once again direct the conversation to Unity and the Dezonians.

"Hey... Have you noticed how these stores don't cater to the Dezonians at all? It's like they left themselves out of a ship they half-built." The mouse remarks, holding up a miniskirt to her body.

"Huh... I hadn't noticed that..." The pale human says, looking over a dress.

"Doesn't that seem weird to you?" The fox girl asks.

"Now that you mention it..." The doe murmurs.

"Pardon me, but I couldn't help but overhear." Corova interjects.

The girls turn and look her over curiously. None of them speak a word.

"I was having lunch not too long ago and overheard some of Unity's crew." She continues.

"Yeah?!" The girls all ask.

"I learned that the few Dezonians on board actually have their own tier all to themselves."

“That’s strange.” The dark-skinned human remarks.

“I wonder why that is.” The doe innocent comments.

“There’s a reason for it, and a reason for why they don’t sell Dezonian stuff...” Corova says softly, leaning closer to the group.

“What is it?!” They ask impatiently.

Meanwhile, Draiman heads deeper into tier one and enters a cafeteria. Purchasing a drink, he takes a seat and examines his surroundings. Some refugees sit at a booth near the door, crew are scattered about at various tables, and a long-haired and bearded human with pale skin speaks with a purple and gold Kanorakus woman, who seems to enjoy his company. He finds a place to sit. The booth of refugees are all Solakus, both human and Voeldahn. Conveniently, it’s the booth directly behind his own. Sitting together and eating, they talk about what they’re going to do when they get back to Sol.

“Man, I was having a serious dry spell before those fucking Slaver’s nabbed me.” A human says to the others.

“It’s safe to say they weren’t going to sell you to a rich princess.” One laughs.

“Not with my ugly face.” The human chuckles. “Now that I’m free though, I think the first thing I’ll do is head to a bar and pick up a drunk slut.”

“Yeah, that makes a lot of sense...” A canine Voeldahn snickers.

“Doesn’t it?! I can hardly wait to get back to Earth.” The human chirps.

“He meant that’s a stupid goal.” Another human remarks.

“How so?!”

“Look around! There’s practically two women for every guy here. You don’t need to wait until we get home to Sol to find pussy.” A feline Voeldahn explains.

"You think so?!" The first human asks.

"Yeah. You might want to try your luck now, because when we get back, they're going to need to be drunk." The dog man teases.

"Fuck you." The human smirks, holding up a middle finger.

"He's got a point. I'd settle in if I was you." Draiman interjects.

"What's that?" The cat man asks, glancing over his shoulder.

"I just said that I think you'd better settle in."

"Why?" Several men ask, raising their brows.

"I doubt we're going back to Sol."

"Why do you say that?" The dimwitted human asks.

"I overheard some of her crew talking. This is a long-term mission, and they're taking us along for the ride. I heard them worrying about if we'd notice them stepping up security, for when we find out." Draiman explains.

"... HAH! That's some serious shit you've been smoking, buddy. Can I have some?" The dog man teases.

"Yeah! What're you on?" The simpleton snickers.

"I'm just repeating what I overheard from the mouths of gossiping security as I walked by." Draiman coolly retorts, taking a drink through his straw.

"They can't just kidnap us!" The cat man exclaims.

"Shh! ... This is a Dezonian project. Who knows they're up too? Do you remember their reaction to discovering the Kanorakus? They were *very* eager to bring them into their home system, but the Kanor people were all over us for stopping the war and flooded into Sol." Draiman begins.

"Yeah, I do remember that. I was a teenager at the time when a few million flooded the suburbs of Mars. An older Kanorakus girl came onto me in a park just because I was Solakus... Took my virginity practically on the spot... One of the best lovers I've ever had." The smarter human reminisces.

“... Right... The Dezonians weren’t happy about that, though. They offered to terraform a moon orbiting Dezos just so they could house them all.” Draiman continues.

“Yeah, that was a little weird.” The feline Voeldahn recalls.

“And then we found the Skahlzunians, and they told us to let them die out because they weren’t useful...” Draiman reminds them.

“That was some cold-blooded shit.” The canine Voeldahn shakes his head in disapproval.

“My sister adopted one.” The cat man remarks.

“My point is, they built half of this ship and nearly funded the whole project, yet I haven’t seen even one of them on the crew... Just saying, don’t be surprised if we’re in it for the long haul.”

The men pause for a moment, thinking over his argument. Rising from his seat, Draiman heads for the dispenser to refill his drink. Walking back toward the table, he passes the men on his way to the door.

“Hey, what’s your name?” One of them calls out.

“Draiman.”

He speaks without stopping, stepping through the door and back into the little streets of tier one’s small city. Heading for the tram station to try a different Commerce Pod, at his wife’s telepathic suggestion, he comes across a group of three Voeldahn men. Speaking with these men, their suspicions are evident, and planting the seeds of doubt in the Dezonian’s honesty is easy. One of these men, wolf-like in appearance and with a strange mixture of bluish, white and black fur, patterned like a fox, follows along and boards the tram with him. Their conversation is overheard by no less than twenty people, all of them refugees and nearly a quarter of them being male.

Corova, meanwhile, has spoken to at least three other groups of women. Most discount what she's said, unwilling to accept the possibility that things aren't what they appear to be on the surface, though some show a genuine curiosity. Either way, her words will reverberate throughout the female refugee populace. Several hours later and making his way through Commerce Pod Three, Draiman spots the red and white Kanorakus whom Corova had spoken with on the tram. Sitting at a bench with the doe and mouse Voeldahn from Corova's first group, he overhears their gossip about the Unity's purpose and the Dezonians possibly sinister intentions.

He doesn't bother to interject but instead passes by without a word. Enthralled by the other women's gossip, the Kanorakus woman doesn't even spot him. They continue this for some time before finally growing bored and hungry. Speaking telepathically, they agree to meet at a restaurant on Commerce Pod One, which Corova had seen and found interesting. Passing a pair of Unity's police, who patrol the area, they stop and listen to transmissions coming through their earpieces.

"Shit..." One grumbles.

"On our way, sir." The other says.

"Good!" The Sergeant chirps.

Sighing, he leans against a wall in the call center, located within the police station.

"This isn't good..." He murmurs.

"But you see what we mean, sir? With a crew this size, even with the refugees, we weren't expecting to deal with these kinds of problems or at least not in this volume." A dispatcher comments.

"This is the sixth call we've had in an hour. One call was from one of our off-duty guys asking for backup!" Another interjects.

“What should we do?” The first asks.

“Take the calls. I’ll contact the Major...”

Walking through the offices of the police station, the Sergeant nervously knocks on Major Castleman’s closed door. The door slides open and a voice yells out from within.

“Come in!”

Stepping into the office, the Major waits expectantly for a moment while the Sergeant hesitates to speak.

“Well?! Did you have something to say or are you just here to admire my good looks?” Major Castleman smirks.

“Sorry, Major! We’re uh... We’re having a little problem, sir.” The Sergeant answers.

“... What sort of problem?”

Hearing the news for the first time, the infuriated Major sits in his office and listens as the Sergeant briefs him on the series of calls. Refugees of both genders have begun demanding to know when they’ll be taken home, while some of them even accuse the crew of lying to them, regardless of their answer. These reports were made by police, many of whom stumbled across the arguments while they patrolled their beat. However, a select few have begun small brawls, fights that only ceased when police officers were called to intervene. With an original crew of six thousand, only one hundred are full-time police officers, and now the populace is nearly thirty percent larger.

With an escalating state of affairs aboard Unity, they realize that they can’t contain a problem such as this on their own. Shooing

the Sergeant from his office, the fuming Major is forced to contact Kellan.

"Hello, Major Castleman." Kellan says, answering the call.

"Hello, sir. I'm sorry to bother you, sir, but we have a problem..."

"What's going on?" Kellan asks.

"Well, sir, apparently there are rumors spreading among the refugees that we aren't taking them to Sol before we continue on our mission." Major Castleman begins.

"I see..."

"We've broken up six fights already, one of which involved an off-duty officer. We've also received dozens of calls of lesser disturbances; verbal confrontations between crewmembers and refugees."

"Any ideas where these rumors started?" Kellan asks, feigning concern.

"I don't know. Probably some guy starting shit. Everyone who watches the news about this project probably heard how fast Unity is supposed to be. Maybe they thought that we'd be back by now?" Major Castleman theorizes. "Any word when we can get these people off of our ship?"

"Major... I uh... I was told by my superiors that... We're not taking them back to Sol." Kellan admits.

"... Excuse me?"

"I was supposed to send you a memo about it tonight, for you to read tomorrow morning."

"I'm sorry, sir, but what's this about the refugees?"

"The Council have ordered captain Basile to continue with the mission. They're going to be integrated, Major." Kellan answers.

"I uh... I don't know if they're going to take too kindly to that... Sir..." Major Castleman murmurs.

“The other Lieutenants are well aware of this. You’ll have support from Bravo and Charlie. I’ll brief their Lieutenants right away and try to send more men to reinforce your patrols and the police station.”

“Thank you, sir!” Major Castleman chirps.

“Major...”

“Yes, sir?”

“Be ready for *anything*.” Kellan sternly and sincerely warns.

Ending the call, Kellan sits back in his chair. Resting his hands over his face, the pale human runs his fingers through his red hair. He fears for the safety of his men, who are his responsibility. When they planned this in August’s apartment, none of them could estimate just how swiftly a rumor such as this could spread. How long have Draiman and Corova even been spreading it? Four hours, if that? Sighing with mild frustration, he worries if this will all go according to plan. He doesn’t want blood on his hands. Rising from his chair, he leaves his office and walks across the hall. Finding both August and Stefan in their adjacent offices, he calls them into the hall to speak to them at once.

“What’s going on?” Stefan asks.

“I’m hearing about fights... Between the refugees and the crew.”

“Damn...” August mutters.

“Alright, well... I’ll inform my Major and we’ll get this party started.” Stefan says.

There is no enthusiasm in his voice as he speaks. All are well aware that this plan of theirs might not operate as smoothly as they’d hoped. A troubled August doesn’t say a word, merely nodding his head in silent support of Kellan and his police force. Entering their offices, they place the necessary calls. Kellan, however, knocks on Miss Ayanda’s door. It slides open and he steps inside. Neither speak

a word to each other, merely staring at each other for a moment. Miss Ayanda's eyes burn with resentment and anger, while Kellan keeps his head lowered, his shoulders sagging, a clear posture of guilt.

"Problems?" Miss Ayanda grumbles.

"Yes. There's a rumor spreading among the refugees and fights have-

"Fucking great!" She snarls. "Get out..."

Slithering out of her office and leaving her alone, Miss Ayanda presses a button and closes her office door. Using her V.I. bracelet she places a video call directly to Captain Basile. Ring, ring, ring. Ring, ring, ring.