

Unity

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode Twenty-Six: Coup 'd'état

"Well, that couldn't have gone better!" Major Castleman remarks, entering the security office's main hall.

"It couldn't have gone worse, either." Major Forest retorts.

"Agreed." Sihl' Ahzen nods.

"How so?" Kellan asks.

"They accepted it *too* readily. I'd have expected more resistance to losing their free will." The Irakus explains to her lover.

"They're probably simmering right now, looking for a strong leader to help them fight for their freedom." Drayusa adds.

"They sure are!" Draiman chirps, entering unannounced alongside Corova.

"Who the hell are you?!" Major Forest demands.

"It's alright. I have a backstage pass." Draiman quips.

Emerging from her office, the Majors can see Miss Ayanda, their chief, standing in her doorway. She looks to August before turning around and walking back inside, closing the door behind her. Now all of the Majors are curious.

"What's going on?" Major Castleman asks.

“Yeah, this is a little strange.” Major Greene remarks.

“What gave it away?” Major Burns snickers.

“We have something to tell you... Something that you need to know about.” August cryptically explains.

With a simple wave of his hand, he draws the Majors toward him, leading them to the corner terminal. Once at the terminal, he activates the computer and brings up the same batch of unsecured files that Miss Ayanda had used to inform them of Unity’s true purpose. Major Greene looks to him before slowly taking a seat. The others crowd around him and stare at the screen.

“What you’re about to learn, we only recently discovered ourselves.” August assures them.

Their curiosity takes over and Major Greene opens the first file. Meanwhile, sitting back in his chair, his eyes wide and mouth agape, Madrid looks at Sashuna. He can’t believe his ears. The purple and gold Kanorakus looks so vibrant, almost cartoony in her innocence. Her eight-inch-long, golden bristles lower on her head and along the back of her neck and spine, like the ears of a shamed dog. She turns her golden orbs upward, looking at the human and studying his posture.

“Wow... I never would’ve guessed!” He remarks, leaning against his forearms. “So, you? ...”

“Yes, it’s true.” She subtly nods her head. “I aided the Goddess’s Children in an effort to destroy this very ship.”

“Kind of ironic.” He silently chuckles.

“For my part, I’m sorry for what I’ve done.”

“Why?” He raises a brow.

“You... You aren’t upset with me?”

"Hell no! You obviously didn't get far in your efforts or you wouldn't be here. Besides, we all have a past, Sashuna. I have some really god-awful war stories I could tell you..."

"I can imagine."

"But we learn from our past; it shapes our future... For what it's worth, though, I'm sorry about Korazhu. I didn't know." He says, resting a hand on her shoulder.

"Thank you. I appreciate your concern... You're the first I've told." She remarks.

"In hindsight, your behavior no longer surprises me."

"It surprises me."

"Why's that?" He cocks his head.

"I warmed up to you faster than I did to Korazhu... I've never trusted a man, let alone an alien, so fast and so completely." She explains.

"Yeah, I have that effect." He jests, polishing his fingernails against his chest.

"I care about you, and I enjoy your company, Madrid..."

"Hey, so do I. You're not the average terrorist, you know!"

Moving from his chair, it's now his turn to comfort Sashuna. Wrapping his arms around her, he can feel her bristles as he strokes her back. Though somewhat rigid, they rapidly become softer and more pleasing to the touch. Her arms wrap around his midsection as he holds her, petting her head. Sashuna impulsively nuzzles her snout against his chest, enjoying his touch. Madrid can't help but grin as Sashuna takes visible pleasure in his comfort.

"Would you tell me some of your stories?" She asks in a soft voice.

"Only if you really want to hear them."

"I do." She sweetly insists.

Resting his nose near her pointy, elf-like ear, he takes a breath and prepares himself. Taking an event from his distant past, he regales her with the sordid actions of a troubled career. Though his record is superb, his conscience has paid for it. She sits and listens, eager to learn about this intriguing human Solakus who so captivates her. For each story he shares, she shares her own, and on and on for many hours. Meanwhile, the Majors finish reading the last of the files on the terminal in the security office's main hall.

"I think I'm going to puke..." Major Burns remarks.

"Those little, fucking... Bastards!" Major Castleman slams his fist against the wall.

The other Majors are left in a horrified silence. Turning toward their Lieutenants, they're at a loss.

"So, what's the plan?" Major Greene asks.

"Inform your Sergeants and *slowly* reveal the truth to the men. Draiman is going to try and control the refugees; he's our 'in' with them. In a few days, when more of us are ready, we'll make our move." August explains.

"We're with you." The Majors all agree.

Finally exiting the office, Madrid and Sashuna walk side by side through the bridge, stepping back into the main corridor.

"I'm glad we had that chance to talk. I... I really enjoyed my time with you." Sashuna remarks.

"So did I." Madrid replies with a smile.

After sharing an awkward stare, Madrid looks down at his V.I. bracelet. Awakening the tiny screen, it projects a modest hologram, revealing the chronograph to him.

"Looks like your shift is about to be up." He comments.

"I hope I won't be in trouble for missing work."

"I'll take care of it." He says with a smile.

"Thank you." Sashuna smiles back.

"Anytime. Hey uhm... Did you want to get something to eat, before you head home?"

"I'd like that." She says, taking a step toward him.

Leading the way, Madrid and Sashuna pass the cafeteria they normally visit, instead taking a tram to one of the Commerce Pods. Once there, the pair have dinner together at an actual restaurant. Madrid pays her way, and the pair continue to share their little stories. Back and forth they speak, sharing far more than they eat. Neither can recall having as much fun simply talking before, and eventually they find themselves overstaying their welcome at the restaurant. Several hours after arriving, Madrid escorts Sashuna to her apartment, walking her all of the way to her front door. Standing before the opening, Sashuna hesitates, staring into her luxury apartment.

"... Are you alright?" He finally asks.

"Hm? Oh! I'm fine. I just..." She pauses.

A thought occurs to her, but not knowing how well he'll respond to it, and genuinely appreciating his friendship, she pushes it from her mind, at least for now. Sashuna turns around, her hands clasped together before her groin as she looks down at the human Solakus, a little smile curling around her raptor-like snout.

"I enjoyed this, Madrid."

"So did I." He grins. "At the risk of sounding pathetic, you're already my best friend."

"It's not pathetic!" She says, swiftly giving him a hug. "You're my best friend too!"

"Good! Then I guess I'll see you at lunch!" He chirps, giving her a little squeeze.

"Alright, Killer." She teasingly replies.

"Oh, we're nicknaming? Okay... Have a good night, Bombshell." He quips.

The giggling Sashuna flushes at his flattery. Does he truly find her attractive? She watches Madrid walking down the hall for a moment, the pair sharing a final wave before she steps inside of her apartment. Alone once again, she's eager for the next day and the next, when she can spend some time with her new friend, who distracts her from her troubles. Several days pass, all of them uneventful, as far as Unity is concerned. Draiman and Corova have injected themselves into the refugee populace, becoming fixtures among the disgruntled former slaves.

Through careful manipulation, skills they've honed throughout their long criminal careers, they're able to control the rebellious souls. The Majors informed their Sergeants one by one, who then used their best judgement when informing their squad leaders. While most foot soldiers remained unaware of the truth, their leaders carefully bred dissention. Unity's security force proved harder to restrain than the refugees, though they manage only because they're assured that August and his associates have a plan of action. Rumors began to circulate about Unity's nefarious purpose, a natural consequence of the Lieutenants sharing their knowledge with the others.

However, Madrid, Sashuna, Delilah, and the rest of the civilian population remain oblivious to the growing dissent. The crew continue

as they have been, unaware of the potential dangers lying in wait. Leaving her apartment one morning, Sashuna walks along the thin streets, soon joining several other crew, including Adi and Delilah. Talking amongst themselves, they don't notice the thudding of boots swiftly approaching them from behind.

"Hello ladies!" Madrid chirps.

"Hi, captain." Adi and some female coworkers respond.

"Good morning!" Delilah exclaims, her face aglow.

"Hey there, Killer." Sashuna waves, a wide, toothy grin spreading across her lips.

"Hey, Bombshell. It's good to see you all today. Enjoying this fine, artificial sunlight?!" He asks.

"Of course! It does wonders for my fur." Delilah chirps.

"Oh, I've noticed." He remarks, his eyes scanning her figure.

Looking back at Madrid, Delilah's sparkling eyes lock onto his, and the two share a gaze. Her eyes scan his face, then his body. The squirrel Voeldahn's heart flutters. She tries to think of something to say; anything at all.

"... What? Is there something on my face?" Delilah innocently asks.

"Two beautiful eyes and... What's that?! ... A nose!"

"I didn't realize you were also a clown." Delilah snickers.

"Us captains have to be multifaceted. You'll understand when you have a job with real responsibility." He teases.

"What we do is very important! ... Kind of." She retorts.

"Right." He chuckles. "You mean polishing a seat with your cute little... Tail." He flushes, as Delilah grins from cheek to cheek. "Phew! That was almost a lawsuit!" He laughs.

"I'd have settled out of court." Delilah coos, slowing her steps and moving closer to him.

"For what?"

"Mmm..." Her eyes scan his body once again.

Several of the women roll their eyes; their routine flirting and lustful looks have evolved beyond cuteness and into a mild annoyance. They often joke amongst themselves that the human and squirrel Voeldahn should just have sex and get it over with. Sashuna, however, watches with a faded smile. Seeing the look on Sashuna's face, and nearing the bridge, Madrid clears his throat.

"Well, you ladies have a good day. I may stop by to see you later." He says looking directly at Delilah.

"I look forward to it." She coos.

"Hey, Bombshell. Do you have a minute?"

"Of course, Killer."

Speaking as though he wants to discuss one of her reports, the other women make their way to the office, leaving the captain and Sashuna standing alone in the hall. Once he's certain that they're beyond hearing range, he drops the facade.

"Are you alright with this?" He suddenly asks.

"Alright with what?" Sashuna cocks her head.

"... Delilah and I, because I still like her. I still want to pursue her."

"I am." She nods her head.

"Are you sure? I saw the look on your face. If it bothers you, I'd-"

"You're overthinking it." She interrupts him. "It's not a big deal."

"I don't know... It looked like it was a bid deal to you, and after the 'talk' we had last night, I feel like it can't not be."

"We did much more than talk." Sashuna coos.

Stepping up to him, she reaches out and strokes his face and neck with the three, clawed fingers of her hand. He rests his hand over hers, holding it for a moment, his thumb caressing her purple flesh.

"This is what I'm saying... You asked me. No, you *begged* me."

"I've never had to do that before..." She murmurs, a somber look in her eyes.

"You said that on Kanor what we did isn't uncommon; I'd already studied your culture after I took this job, so I knew you weren't lying. 'Sex is rarely casual' I said, and you said that you just 'needed my attention' but that it would *never* affect our friendship." He continues.

"You're the first man I had to ask more than once. I've never pleaded for it like that..." She says under her breath, as if ashamed.

"I already feel guilty."

"You shouldn't. It was wonderful, and I slept so well afterward!" She happily exclaims.

"I like you a lot and I care about you, Sashuna. You're a sweet and absolutely beautiful woman."

"I am?" She asks innocently, her smile growing a little wider.

"Yeah. But you're also my best friend, and I don't want to hurt you. How you feel matters to me, so if this bothers you, I want you to tell me so that I-

Leaning in, Sashuna interrupts him with a tender kiss upon his lips. Considering all that they've done to each other last night, they'd somehow never kissed like this before. She savors the moment, drawing it out for some time. Finally pulling her lips away, she nuzzles his cheek for a second before looking him in the eyes.

"I'm not upset or jealous. I know you like Delilah, and that you were attracted to her before I ever asked you for sex. You can still have her if you wish. When she lets you have her body, because we all know that she will..."

Madrid's face flushes.

"Then we won't have to have sex any more. I admit I'll miss it; you're very good at it. However, it clearly bothers you, and I care about your feelings too." She finishes.

A pleased Madrid takes her into his arms and holds her tightly, stroking the bristles of her back with his fingers, which have become incredibly soft. Sashuna gently pets the human's head, her chin resting atop his skull, and her golden claws and purple fingers weaving through his long, light brown hair.

"I was worried that this would've drastically effected our friendship; a Solakus girl could never do this without eventually becoming jealous." He remarks.

"And if I were to become jealous?" She asks.

"You'd have priority, since we've slept together first. Also, our friendship is different; I'd rather still have you to spend time with and confide in than try to win over Delilah, who for all I know only likes me for my body."

"You're a very good man, Killer." She coos, her smile even wider.

"And you're a good woman, Bombshell."

"So... What do you want to do about this?"

"You really think Delilah would sleep with me?" He asks.

"Without a doubt." She promptly replies.

“... No harm in continuing until then.” He smirks.

“Heh.”

Sashuna chuckles as she caresses his cheek. Her arms wrap around his body, holding him tightly and pressing him into her ample breasts.

“Good! I don’t suppose you’re busy tonight, are you?”

“Captain Marcus Basile!” A voice calls out.

Pulling away from each other, Madrid and Sashuna turn to look down the hall. Sihl’ Ahzen approaches, her little legs moving and boot-clad talons thumping softly on the ground. The whip-like tail of the diminutive, four-foot and six-inch-tall Irakus woman swishes behind her. Her serrated beak glistens in the artificial light. With a large rifle in the birdlike alien’s hands, her long, featherlike fingers gripping the weapon, her fiery eyes glare as she stares at the ship’s captain. Flanking her are soldiers, armed for battle and of various races; some of these men and women are not under her direct command.

She approaches with authority, and both Madrid and Sashuna, experienced in these matters, are immediately put on their guard. Stepping back, Madrid shifts his body, a hand reaching behind a leg and moving for his personal blaster, holstered on his hip.

“I wouldn’t do that!” Another voice growls.

Spinning around, a second group approaches from the opposite end of the hall. Passing the guards who watch the door of the bridge, some thirty meters away, the men leave their posts, joining August Woods as he and his team approach the captain. Sihl’ Ahzen shoves a rifle into Madrid’s back, startling him. Without hesitation, Sashuna reaches out and smacks the rifle from the avian girl’s hands. It flies to

Sihl' Ahzen's left, sliding across the floor panels and distracting several of the soldiers. Turning to Sashuna and drawing a pistol, Sashuna swiftly grabs Sihl' Ahzen by the throat, lifting her from the ground with one arm.

Before her men can even react to save her, Sihl' Ahzen drives an arm into Sashuna's elbow, kicks her boot against her side and backflips from her grasp. She lands gracefully on her feet beside her fallen rifle. Taking the weapon, she aims as she kneels on the floor panels, flipping off the safety switch and directing the business end of her blaster over Sashuna's head.

"Give me an excuse!" Sihl' Ahzen growls.

Sashuna takes a step forward, bearing her teeth in anger as her bristles stiffen. Quickly reaching out, Madrid grabs her bicep, stopping her in her tracks and gaining her attention.

"Don't... Please..." He begs her.

"Yes. Listen to your human, little dragon." Sihl' Ahzen taunts her.

Though enraged by the dainty, birdlike alien, who's nearly two feet shorter and one hundred pounds lighter than her, Sashuna relents. Looking to Madrid, who's visibly afraid for her safety, she backs down. Stepping closer to him, she gives him a nod. Approaching the captain, August disarms Madrid, grabbing him tightly by the shoulder.

"Sorry, but my company doesn't let me carry money." Madrid quips.

"Shut up... Start walking." August instructs.

The two groups of soldiers lead the pair to the bridge, which is now unguarded. Madrid glances toward the men who were formerly protecting the doors, wondering how long they've been planning this attack; it's obvious to him that this is a coordinated effort. Opening the doors, the crew turn to greet their captain, only to rise to their feet in surprise, while a few of the women scream at the sight of armed soldiers pushing Madrid and Sashuna inside at blasterpoint. With a hand motion, Sihl' Ahzen's troops round up the crew.

"May I speak?" Madrid calmly asks.

"You're handling this well." August remarks.

"This isn't my first party." Madrid explains.

"That's for sure." Sashuna murmurs.

"Go ahead. Ask us what this is all about." August says.

"Well, I don't need to now! Stealing my fun..." Madrid quips. "But I'd still like to know."

"What's the count?!" August asks a soldier.

The man looks over a console, examining it for a minute.

"One hour until the first cooldown!" He replies.

"Alright! So, captain Basile, here's what's going to happen... We drop out of hyperspace for cooldown, you discover that something went wrong, and you turn this ship around and take us all back to Sol." August instructs.

"What for?!" Madrid furls his brow.

"We know what this ship is, captain." August growls, stepping so close that his feline nose presses against the human's. "Did you really think you could keep a secret like that for long? After a year, people would start to question why we aren't going home, why we never dropped out of hyperspace long enough to do any exploration, and then that convenient 'error' wiping out our cartography, leaving us

stranded... People aren't that stupid; they already questioned the number of turrets on Unity's hull, and that small destroyer and gunboat fleet in the hangar sphere."

As August speaks, Madrid's heart sinks. He tilts his head back and closes his eyes for a moment, before staring at the ceiling.

"No one is going to stand for this little mission, and this was bound to happen. Better it happens now, when we're only about a week from home instead of a year, when there's no escape." August continues.

"Miss Ayanda told you..." He says with a sigh, still staring at the ceiling.

"Of course, she did. How the hell could you agree to such a horrible mission?!"

"I didn't know..." He murmurs.

"Bullshit!"

"It's true." Sashuna insists, stepping closer to Madrid.

"I see you've shared the details with her. Is she your lover?"

Madrid stands in silence, staring at the ceiling.

"Hey... I'm talking to you!" August becomes irate.

Pushing his shoulder to gain his attention, Madrid turns his head back toward the blonde haired, white tiger Voeldahn. Staring into August's jade green eyes, he subtly shakes his head.

"You have no idea what you're doing." Madrid murmurs.

“Yes, I do. I’m taking us home... Lock them down! Keep anyone necessary for dropping from hyperspace!” August orders his troops.

With Madrid’s calm urging, the few crewmembers needed step forward. Madrid and Sashuna are handcuffed together, seated on the floor and away from everyone else. With his left arm and her right arm locked to the edge of a console near his attached office, Madrid glances over to Sashuna. Looking back, she’s surprised to find that he smiles at her. Shifting his body and bending his arm, he presses his side against hers, resting his head near her shoulder. Sashuna rests her head gently against his in turn.

“Hey, Bombshell...”

“Yeah, Killer?”

“Your body wash smells great.”

Sashuna giggles, thanking him for the compliment. Sitting in relative silence, the commandeered crew and the mutineers wait for the timer to reach zero. No sooner than the clock counts down to nothing, the subtle whirring of the engines, which all had grown accustomed too, slowly fades. The warp bubble pulls away from Unity, the cobalt blue aura with teal swirls dissipating fast as the ship enters conventional space. The soldiers and unrestrained crew stare in awe as they look at a new star, unseen in person by any mortal being; Unity’s traveled farther in one week than any other ship could’ve travel in years.

“Wow... We’re the first to ever see this.” A crewmember remarks.

“It does feel kind of nice to claim a first.” Sihl’Ahzen agrees with her.

“That was easy! ... Alright, so now we just need to plot a new course.” August thinks aloud.

"Who here has navigational experience?" Sihl' Ahzen asks the troops.

"I do." A random soldier steps forward. "I was one of the navigators for the SM Grozny, a cruiser."

"Get to it, then." Sihl' Ahzen says, presenting the consoles to the man.

"Yes, ma'am."

Pushing the crew aside, the other soldiers keep them under guard. Looking over a console, the man soon finds the appropriate one. Taking a seat at the navigational computer, he begins to work. Strange graphs and a screen full of many dots and lines look like alien writing to everyone not already familiar with it. He presses a few keys, his expression swiftly changing.

"What the hell..."

Click, click, click, as he taps on several keys. August becomes a little concerned, as do several others.

"Uh... Ma'am?" The soldier turns in his chair.

"Yes?" Sihl' Ahzen looks at the soldier.

"... I can't plot a course."

"What do you mean?!" She growls.

"Are you locked out?!" A startled August steps closer.

"No, sir. I mean, none of these consoles are even *designed* to plot a new course! I can examine and adjust it to within roughly a parsec, but I can't erase the heading and set a new one. That software, and even the keys are completely absent." The soldier explains.

Confused, horrified and furious, August and Sihl' Ahzen storm up to the seated Madrid, who's sleeping rather peacefully against Sashuna.

"Hey!" August yells.

Kicking the boot of his paw-like foot against Madrid's shin, the human is swiftly roused from his sleep.

"Ow! Watch it, you little shit."

"We can't change course..." August growls.

"Yeah, I know." Madrid casually replies.

"... Why not?!"

Madrid chuckles, his head tilting downward.

"What's so funny?"

"Do you think they didn't plan for this? Do you think that maybe they knew that in a year or two people would start to say 'hey, how come we're not home yet'? They've planned for everything, and anything. You lost as soon as you set foot on this ship."

An angry August grabs Madrid's chin, his sharp claws digging into the human's face. To his surprise, Madrid shows absolutely no fear. In fact, from his expression, August doesn't feel like the captain is even taking him seriously.

"Center console. There's a panel that looks like a diode box. Open it." Madrid tells him.

Racing toward the console, August finds the panel without issue, though there are no visible openings. Feeling around, he finds a button near the edge of the console that is protected by a camouflaged cover. Flipping open the shield, he presses the button. The hinged door pops open as soon as he does. August stares in horror at the smaller computer that's built into the console. He turns around, resting his back against the console as he sits on the ground, his eyes glossy as if he's about to cry.

"What's wrong?!" Sihl' Ahzen asks.

August merely points to the console above him with a clawed finger. The Irakus commando and several soldiers rush up to August, looking over the device. They're all stunned to see that the computer is deactivated, the power button replaced with a plate that requires a very specific object to use; the outline of a Dezonian's pincer-like hand stares back at them

"The navigation system was built independent of the central computer, and that console is the only one that communicates with it. It's a hardline connection, with dozens of firewalls and safety measures that prevent it from being hacked. Any attempts to tap into it without that console will cause a small device to literally fry that computer with a localized EMP. They didn't want us to all die for trying though, which is why it's separate from the central computer." Madrid explains.

"Son of a bitch..." A soldier grumbles.

"So, we're stuck in here?!" Another gasps.

"No, wait! ... What if we cut off a Dezonian's hand?" Sihl' Ahzen suggests.

"That won't work either." Madrid replies. "That system is designed with the most advanced software and hardware; it requires the Dezonian to be both alive and not under duress. If their heartrate is too high, it won't work."

"We'll never get one of the Dezonians to turn their private army away from their invaded home world." August sighs sorrowfully.

"... Hold on... What if... What if we trick one of them to activate the console?" Sihl' Ahzen asks.

"How'd we do that?" August asks.

"Yes. Please share." Madrid chuckles.

"We let the crew go and put on a little act. There's the captain's office over there, and we can just double up the security. We'll say it's because of the rumors of dissent. We'll ask a Dezonian crew to show up because of an error in the navigation system, and when they activate the console, we make our move and reroute the ship back home." She explains.

The soldiers are all surprised and impressed by her improvised plan. August looks toward Madrid, who doesn't seem remotely phased by it. Regardless, it's something to try.

"Alright, everyone. We're going to put on a show for our new guest. All we want to do is take this ship home. If they want to hire other people to take on this mission and *not* lie to them about it, that's fine, but this isn't what we signed up for. I don't want to have to hurt anyone, so just relax, act natural, and in a week, you'll see your homes and families again." August explains.

Many of the crew look to Madrid with confusion. They still don't know the truth. Madrid, however, nods in agreement before outright telling them to cooperate with the soldiers. Releasing everyone, some soldiers step outside and guard the doors, while Sihl' Ahzen and many others crowd into Madrid's private office. The remaining guards and August himself, take positions around the bridge, acting like conventional security. The crewmembers return to their consoles while Sashuna stands beside Madrid, who places a call on a special comm system; he speaks directly to one of the Dezonian Councilmembers.

“What is wrong, captain?” The Dezonian asks.

“There’s been a navigational error. We need one of your crew to come up here and examine the computer.” He calmly explains.

“And why is that?”

“Because you and I both know that I can’t do anything about the course and we can’t continue the trip otherwise!”

“... Fine. Crewmember sent.”

Waiting for several minutes, the doors open and the Dezonian steps inside. All of eight feet tall, the insectoid’s three powerful legs, at each corner of it’s vaguely triangular and horizontal abdomen, thud loudly on the floor panels. With a chitin of a faded blue, like a darkened sky on Earth, the creature examines the others in the room. It’s head, like a praying mantis, swivels atop it’s thin stalk of a neck. Approaching the captain’s chair, it looks at Madrid. Sashuna stands off to the side, holding a datapad and pretending to perform secretarial work.

“Captain.” The Dezonian speaks with an eerie, throaty voice as it bows its head.

“Finally! We need you to check the console to make sure that it’s working properly. We’re having issues with our computer.” He says, rising from his seat.

“Many soldiers here, captain.” The Dezonian remarks, following the human.

“We’ve heard rumors of dissent among the new crew, especially considering that they didn’t sign up for this.” Madrid explains.

“They will adapt. They will love Unity, in time.” The Dezonian says.

August watches intently as the Dezonian opens the camouflaged cover and pressed the button. The hinged door pops open, revealing

the deactivated console and the insectoid alien presses its pincer-like hand against the plate. The computer activates and the lights flash.

“Now!” He orders.

The Dezonian looks around as the office door opens, dozens of guards pouring out of the crowded room and led by Sihl’ Ahzen. The soldiers already inside the bridge follow August’s lead, swiftly taking both the captain and the Dezonian hostage. Unaccustomed to fighting, the large creature offers no resistance. Standing before the console, August positively beams with delight.

“Now, let’s reprogram this... What the?!”

His heart sinks as he looks over the computer. It isn’t written in a language at all, but a strange code. The hologram projects pages that look as they should, but the letters are replaced entirely by shapes of varying colors. Looking to Madrid, the surprise on his face reveals that he too had no idea, though his softened brow and the shrugging of his shoulders also shows that Madrid suspected this might be a possibility.

“What is this?!” August growls to the Dezonian.

“I ask you the same, Type 2A Solakus.” The Dezonian retorts.

“They want to go back home... They know the truth.” Madrid answers.

“Unfortunate... This is a code.” The Dezonian points one of its two fingers at the holographic screen. “As all now have translator microbes of Dezonian design, all could read the screen if compromised. This code of shapes and colors was developed to prevent that. Only the Dezonians aboard Unity know how to read it.”

The soldiers stare in shock. Even Sihl' Ahzen is amazed by how thoroughly they've planned; they've taken virtually everything imaginable into account.

"Reroute us!" August demands.

"To where?" The Dezonian calmly asks.

"Back to Sol. Anywhere in Sol, so long as it's there."

"As you wish." The Dezonian bows its head.

Stepping forward, it returns to the console with the others watching. It presses a few buttons, typing in squares, triangles, dots and hexagons of many colors. Its hand stops as it prepares to type, the Dezonian's head and its bulbous, black eyes turning toward August.

"Do it, or we'll kill you." He sternly demands.

With another subtle nod, the Dezonian looks back at the console and continues to type. Pressing a button, a loading screen appears on the navigational monitoring console, which is the only one the non-Dezonians have any access too.

"Something's happening!" The soldier at the console excitedly exclaims. "... It... It just wiped out the star charts!!!"

"What?!"

"Yes, Type 2A Solakus. The virus has been activated early." The Dezonian calmly explains.

"Damnit! Damnit! Damnit! God-fucking-damnit!" August screams, slamming his fist on the console over and over.

"And now we continue our journey to Azavia. You should find a fertile female or two and breed; we have a long trip ahead of us."

Enraged, August loses control. Drawing his blaster, he swiftly takes aim and fires, shooting the Dezonian in the head and killing it in front of everyone.