

Unity

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode Twenty-Seven: Choices

Standing over the Dezonian's twitching corpse, several crewmembers cry. They've never seen such violence before, all of the non-military crew having lived only peaceful, civilian lives. August looks over the body, his hand trembling as he holds the compact blaster. He's never committed murder before. Reaching out a hand, Sihl' Ahzen carefully touches his forearm, resting her other hand atop the weapon. She peels the blaster from his grip, placing a hand on his shoulder and guiding him away from the body.

"I-I... I lost my head. I-"

"Don't worry. It's okay. We'll think of something." She says softly to him.

Walking away from the soldier who guards him, Madrid approaches Sashuna, slipping an arm around her waist and giving her a hug. She holds onto the human, resting a hand on the back of his head as she stares at the insectoid's carcass on the floor. Soldiers struggle to lift the heavy body as blue-green brain matter falls from the hole in its face. A female crewmember who sees this turns and wretches. A more collected woman among the group holds her as she cries for the dead alien, as much as out of fear for the rest of them.

"Th-there's got to be another way." August thinks aloud.

"Sometimes, there just isn't." Madrid calmly retorts.

"Shut up!" Sihl' Ahzen snaps. "This doesn't involve you, you fucking traitor!"

"Don't be angry with him because you've lost!" Sashuna growls.

"Defending your human?! Has he tamed you, little dragon?!" Sihl' Ahzen taunts her.

"Keep talking, and I'll snap your scrawny neck like a chicken's."

"I'd like to see you try..." Sihl' Ahzen narrows her fiery eyes.

Her arms dropping to her sides, Madrid panics as Sashuna appears to step away from him. Slipping an arm around her waist, he stands behind her, her tail between his legs as he holds her back.

"Don't do it! Don't stoop to her level..." He urges.

"My level?! ... You're the traitor!" Sihl' Ahzen snarls.

"She's baiting you, Sashuna." He says softly into the Kanorakus woman's elf-like ear. "Please..."

Turning her head toward him, the right side of her snout brushes his lips. He gives her a little kiss, his grip loosening around her waist. Nodding her head, she turns and rests a hand on his left bicep, giving him a little peck on the lips in return.

"Real fucking cute..." Sihl' Ahzen grumbles.

"Knock it off!" August snaps. "I have an idea..."

On August's command, Unity's pilot guides the ship toward the moon of a nearby planet in the system. Void of life and with no atmosphere or useful minerals to speak of, the moon orbits a gas giant that's purplish-pink in color. With Unity now in a safe, maintainable orbit around the gas giant's moon, August and

Sihl' Ahzen escort Madrid and Sashuna to the communications office; they bring the Kanorakus only because August can see how closely connected the captain is with her. Several soldiers accompany them as well, to help control any crewmembers who might be there.

Entering the room that Madrid points out, attached to the bridge and opposite his private office, they find themselves standing before a lone terminal. August approaches the terminal before Madrid has a chance to explain it's use, finding it non-functional.

"What's going on here?!" He turns to Madrid.

"I was going to say..." Madrid sighs.

Pulling away from a guard, he approaches the terminal and opens a side panel. August, Sihl' Ahzen and Sashuna watch with surprise as the human reattaches a board. He's clearly deactivated this device in the past. August is now thoroughly confused. He's been under the impression that captain Marcus Basile has been complacent this entire time. Was he mistaken?

"There. *Now* you can use it."

"Who should we call first?" Sihl' Ahzen asks her comrades.

"Actually, this terminal only communicates directly with the Director's headquarters." Madrid swiftly replies.

"They're in on it! We don't want to call them!" August retorts.

"No one else to call. Sorry..."

"What do you mean?" Sihl' Ahzen asks.

"I mean, the secondary property of the virus disables all communications to the Solar Council and limits broadcasts to the local level. We can communicate with other ships within one astronomical unit." Madrid begins

"I remember that from school! That's what... About ninety-three million miles?" A soldier remarks.

"Yeah... But we're probably hundreds or even thousands of light years from Sol by now. They'll never hear us."

"Then what do we do?" The soldier looks to his leaders.

"We have to appeal to the very people who sent us here and beg them to let us go home..." August sighs.

There's a moment of silence as the group swiftly realize the futility in their efforts. However, undeterred, August activates the terminal and places the call.

"Captain Basile!" Director Ashford's massive hologram exclaims.

"Not exactly." Madrid murmurs.

The holographic man looks over the room, seeing everyone there.

"... What's going on?"

"They've figured it out, Director Ashford. A rebellion has begun." Madrid replies.

"So soon?!" A horrified Ashford gasps. "... What happened?"

"We-"

"I'M NOT ASKING YOU!!!" Director Ashford screams at August.

"... They stormed the bridge, took the crew and myself, found out that they couldn't use the navigational computer-"

"Thankfully we allowed the Dezonians free reign with that one!" Director Ashford chirps.

"And so, they took drastic action..." Madrid sighs.

"Oh?"

“They tricked a Dezonian into activating the panel before springing a trap. They used our lives as leverage, but the agent didn’t play ball. The virus was activated early, after our first jump.”

“Wonderful! So, you’ll be on your way then?!” Director Ashford asks with joy.

“Wha?! NO!” August screams.

A frustrated Director Ashford’s eye twitches as his holographic head turns slowly toward August. Looming over the room like a demi-god, he sighs loudly.

“And just what do you think is going to happen now?” He asks the Voeldahn mutineer.

“We just want to go home. We didn’t agree to be soldiers for the Dezonians, nor did we plan on being breeders, having thousands of children and raising them to be soldiers instead.” August begins.

“Well, after careful consideration, we didn’t think anyone would want to take that mission, at least not the kind of people we could count on to do it right. However, the things they’re offering... Well... Let’s be honest; it’s worth more than every life on Earth!”

Nearly all in the room are floored by the Director’s casual exclamation. Only Madrid and Sashuna seem able to comprehend Director Ashford’s philosophy of the ends justifying the means.

“These are technologies that you wouldn’t believe! More enhanced terraforming techniques! Deep space scanners! Interstellar mining and gas giant harvesting! Advanced gene therapy! Cloaking technologies! Teleportation! They’re the best thing to ever happen to our collective races, the same way we were to the Kanorakus, when we saved them from extinction in their civil war! This is a noble sacrifice, for the good of the Solakus! For the good of the Irakus! For the good of the Kanorakus!”

“And for the good of the Dezonians too?” August asks.

“Of course! Complete this mission, and I swear to you, I’ll find a way to send you coordinates taking you back home.”

“What about the invaders on Azavia? The plan was to have us breed an army. Twenty plus years having babies to grow the ranks.” Sihl’ Ahzen interjects.

“Well, so far we’ve never encountered a race with better military tech. The pride of the Solakus is our weaponry and combat prowess; no one matches the human and Voeldahn in battle. No offense to the Irakus and Kanorakus in the room.” Director Ashford replies.

“None taken.” Sashuna nods.

“Hopefully, that trend continues and some nine thousand of you can take over the planet for them.” Director Ashford continues.

“And what if we don’t agree? What if we orbit the moon until you send help?” August poses.

“Help? HAHHAHAHA!!! Help, he says... Listen, *soldier*... After the test jump, we estimated Unity’s speed and it’s astronomical, pardon the pun. You’re something around *seventy light years* from Sol, right now. We can’t register you anymore, and believe me when I say that we’ve tried. No conventional ships will reach you before you die of old age. In the time it takes us to get there, the crews will be out of food, probably out of fuel, not to mention dead of old age as well, and then they have to fly you all back to Sol? ... You’re never getting a rescue.”

“But your plan!” Sihl’ Ahzen gasps.

“You thought we only had one? A second ship is being created right now. Construction started three months before Unity even launched. If Unity fails, she’ll be dedicated in her honor; we’ll claim that you all died or became lost. If you succeed, she’ll be the first in a fleet of grand, colonization battleships... You’re all expendable or invaluable. The choice is yours. Sit there forever, or move your asses and come home in a few years. Get Azavia back for the Dezonians and I’ll figure out a way to bring you home; you have my word.” Director Ashford assures them.

“For whatever that’s worth.” August murmurs.

"More than you can afford... Call me when you've made up your minds; my station is for life." Director Ashford says with a smug grin.

Ending the call, the hologram disappears and August falls to his knees. They're utterly defeated and they all know it. Sihl'Ahzen approaches him, while the guards lower their weapons. Many of them sling their rifles and submachine guns, standing around and looking quite directionless. Madrid returns to Sashuna, staying by her side.

"Hey..." Sihl'Ahzen speaks softly, resting a hand on August's shoulder. "Maybe... We should keep going?"

August turns his head, glancing over his shoulder at the dainty alien. Her fiery eyes are somber, her brow softened by the realization that they're effectively choiceless. Resting his clawed hand over hers, he subtly nods his head. He rises to his feet, his head hanging forward in defeat.

"Think of it this way. You have Draz, your sister, Roku, all of us, and then there's Annette!" Sihl'Ahzen adds, trying to cheer him up.

"You're handling this well." Sashuna silently snickers.

"A good soldier knows when to regroup; we know when we've been out maneuvered and act accordingly. Besides, I have a lover to comfort me, and I'll certainly be needing him now." The Irakus responds.

"Kellan will enjoy that." August mutters.

"So will I." Sihl'Ahzen winks.

Running his fingers through his hair, August sighs as he approaches the soldiers. They're left without options, and every last one of them knows it. At least if they carry out the mission, he'll eventually see his parents again, and can live out his days on a

planet. Looking to Unity's captain, August and Madrid share a long stare.

"Did you really not know?" August asks.

"... I had the clearance and the files, but... I didn't thoroughly read my mission statement, not until we were on that liner to Unity. I assumed it was simply 'captain the Unity', and besides, the other reading material was far more interesting." He answers, glancing toward Sashuna.

She flashes him a little smile, extending an arm and resting a hand on his upper back.

"If it makes you feel any better, as soon as I knew what Unity was all about, I tried to figure a way out, for all of us. There really wasn't one; they were just that thorough. I kept the secret only to maintain order, to protect everyone on board from themselves."

"I guess I can understand that." August softly replies.

"Hey... For what it's worth, I'm proud of you. All of you. You put a lot of effort in to doing this. I just wish it would've paid off." Madrid continues.

"Me too... I'm sorry, about before. I was sure you were complacent. If I'd-"

"Don't worry about it." Madrid interrupts August. "I just want you two to promise me something."

"What's that?" Sihl' Ahzen asks, stepping forward.

"Do whatever you can to keep the peace."

August looks over the human captain, his brow furled.

"What're you going to do?"

"You showed your hand, and now we're being forced into the fray early. I'm not sure how many more of your people know, but word will get around. I'm going to nip the rumor mill in the bud and publish a report and the necessary files to the general public. Hopefully, knowing they're stuck between a rock and a hard place pushes them into cooperation, but you never know." Madrid answers.

"We'll do what we can." Sihl'Ahzen assures him.

"Good. I'll put us into orbit for twenty-four hours. In about four, I'll publish the report." Madrid says to them.

"I'll update Miss Ayanda and the others right away... Then I think I'll pick up Draz and see Roku." August thinks aloud.

Returning to the bridge, August and Sihl'Ahzen inform their soldiers about what happened within the comm room. Meanwhile, Madrid rallies his crew, explaining that they'll receive a report on this incident and the reasons behind it in several hours, before sending them all home. Only the necessary among them remain behind, but only long enough to program Unity to maintain orbit around the unnamed moon for twenty-four hours. Summoning maintenance droids, Madrid and Sashuna remain behind as the bridge clears out, sitting beside each other as the robots enter the large room.

Sashuna sits beside Madrid of her own volition; he never asked her to stay, though he didn't tell her to leave either. Her tail curls around him, resting behind him as they sit in silence, watching the droids swiftly dismembering and removing the Dezonian's corpse as if it were trash.

"What do you think those robots think of their job?" Sashuna asks, breaking the silence.

"Thankfully for them, they can't think."

"But if they could, what would they be thinking?" She presses.

"Probably what their day is going to look like tomorrow, and if it'll be easier than today." He answers.

“And what do you think?”

“I just hope we’ll have a tomorrow...” He sighs.

Within minutes, the droids remove the Dezonian’s dismembered corpse and haul it away for composting, like all on Unity trash. Another bot cleans the floor of blood and brain matter before yet another polishes the panels. Rising from the floor, Madrid heads for his office with Sashuna in tow. She follows him loyally, only willing to leave his side when he prompts her. She’s thankful that he never does. Madrid notices how the purple and gold Kanorakus woman hovers over him, but considering how things have gone, he’s glad that she’s there. Her presence alone is a comfort, as he’s grown to trust her more than anyone else.

After taking nearly an hour to collect the proper files for disclosure and draft the detailed report, Madrid asks Sashuna to proofread it for him. She looms over him, her ample bust on his shoulder as she looks over the document. With only minor corrections, Sashuna approves the draft and Madrid sets a timer for a mass message, sent directly from the terminal in his office to every apartment and office terminal within Unity. With the press of a button, they now have only three hours to wait before Unity as a whole learns the truth, straight from their own captain. Madrid’s stomach churns and he feels his tension growing.

“I’m very proud of you.” She says, softly petting his head.

“Thanks. I’m glad you’re here for me.”

“Always.” She insists.

Looking to her, Sashuna flashes him a warm smile. Rising from his chair, Madrid takes a deep breath and sighs, staring down at his terminal.

“What now?” She asks.

“I don’t know... I think I’m going to go home.” He replies.

“I see...”

Looking over at Sashuna, his eyes scan her face and body.

“Would you like to come with me?” He suddenly asks.

A somewhat surprised Sashuna eyes him in kind, her golden orbs scanning him from head to toe, and back again. He’s never been this forward with her before; it was Sashuna who initiated their last encounter, quite literally pleading with the nervous and reluctant human to have sex with her. Though fearful it might alter their already stellar friendship, he gave in. That night the pair had a long and enjoyable session, no strings attached. Curious to see if Madrid would really continue the physical aspects of their relationship, her lips curl gleefully around her snout. She takes a single step toward him.

“And what would we do if I did?” She asks with a soft and sensual tone.

Stepping toward her, his chest inches from her large and perky breasts, he slips an arm around her waist. His fingers and palm stroke the bristles on her back, which have become fur-like in their softness. He rests a hand on her cheek, giving her a cute little peck on the lips, all the while the hand on her back slowly travels downward.

“Enjoy what might be our last day together.”

His hand rests over her buttocks, which he gives a sudden and firm squeeze, making his intentions perfectly clear.

“Mmm... I’d love too.” She coos.