

Unity

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode Twenty-Eight: The Rush

Lying in bed, August stares up at the ceiling. With his fur damp and matted, he glances over to his right, where Annette lay sprawled out and on her back. He'd stopped by her home after an extended visit to his sister's, where he told Roku everything. Leaving her a spare blaster for protection, she asked to keep Draz, whom he brought along on the visit. Knowing that August would probably have to deal with rioting, she didn't want to be left alone, or to have Draz wandering scared in August's apartment. With time left, and already near her apartment, August stopped at Annette's. Lying beside his lover, she opens her weary eyes. Looking quite happily at him, her lips curl into a little smile and her fluffy tail swishes.

"That... Was incredible." She sighs with relief.

"Yeah, you were alright." He teases.

With a weakened arm, she gently pushes her lover, who rolls onto his side and quickly wraps his arms around her body. The two Voeldahn lean in, pressing their snouts together as they share a passionate kiss. August, the white tiger, holds his bunny girlfriend firmly, stroking her back with his claws. He hadn't told her the truth about Unity, though he wanted to. As much as it pains him to say it, he didn't want their last moments, should this be it, to be anger and fear; their passion was a much better way to spend their time.

"Are you alright?" She suddenly asks.

"Hm?"

"You look sad, August. Is something wrong?"

"No." He says, leaning in and holding her. "... Hopefully it stays that way."

His V.I. bracelet chirps, distracting the lovers. Lifting his wrist, Annette presses the button for him, as his other arm is tucked beneath her head. The pair read a text message from Miss Ayanda, calling the security Lieutenants to the office.

"I guess it's that time." He sighs.

"Please." Annette gives him a tender kiss. "Be careful."

"I will."

Climbing out of her bed and collecting his clothes, August turns toward her, watching her for a moment.

"Hey... I want you to promise me something."

"Yeah?" She sits up in bed.

"No matter what happens, between now and the next few hours, I want you to stay locked down in your apartment."

"Why?" She furls her brow and cocks her head.

"Just promise me, alright? It's important."

His stern tone sounds like a warning, and his eyes hold a distinct hint of fear. Annette realizes the gravity of his request. She softly nods her head.

"Okay. I promise."

"Good." He says, leaning in for a kiss. "I'll be back."

"And I'll be waiting." She replies with a little smile.

Lying beside each other in bed, Madrid and Sashuna relax with each other after a long and startlingly passionate rendezvous. Perhaps the threat of pain or death has caused them to enjoy each other even more? Suddenly, his home terminal chirps as the mass message is delivered. Madrid keeps an arm around Sashuna, whose vibrant and glistening body is firmly pressed against his. Nuzzling his face, she smells his damp hair as she lay partly over him. Her lips kiss his cheek so tenderly, while his hand strokes her softened bristles, the other hand resting on her side. He gives her a little squeeze as her clawed hands grip his shoulders, her muzzle rubbing against his head.

"Mmm... You certainly know your way around a woman." She coos.

"I try." He smirks.

"You knew exactly what to do with me, even how to mount me without my tail getting in your way. Have you had experience with a Kanorakus woman before me?"

"Yeah..."

"Really?!" She gasps.

"Are you surprised?"

"A little. You don't seem like the type to mate with a Kanorakus."

"You're not surprised about all of the things I've done as a soldier, but you *are* surprised that I've had a healthy and varied sex life?" He chuckles.

"Yes." She bluntly replies.

"Damn... There goes my ego!"

"So... Who was it? Is she on this ship?" Sashuna sweetly asks.

“Yeah. One of them, anyway. It was Miss Ayanda. Does it matter?”

“No... Was I better?!”

Turning his head toward her, he examines Sashuna’s face. Her brow is soft and innocent, her head tilted downward but her eyes upturned, gazing at him with longing. Her faint smile curls up around the corners of her snout. She looks quite expectantly at him, waiting for an answer.

“Someone’s getting comfortable with me.”

“Of course! You’re my best friend, and we’re having sex now!”
She chirps.

“I didn’t mean that. I feel like there was more to that question than curiosity...”

“Wha?” She swiftly sits up. **“I don’t know what you mean by that. I-I just wondered who you liked better! I mean! ... Who you enjoyed mating with more...”** She nervously begins.

“Hey...”

“Isn’t it natural for a woman to wonder how she compares against others, especially when sharing a male?” She continues.

“Sashuna...”

“After all, we’re not linked; you don’t belong to me. Maybe I want to improve so that I don’t lose you? ... I mean, your affection. Maybe I want this special friendship to continue?” She rambles.

“Sashuna!”

“Yes?”

“Get back down here.” He says with a smile.

Stretching out her legs and lying on her side, Madrid takes the Kanorakus woman into his arms, giving the tall, voluptuous but strong

female a long kiss upon the lips. Her thick tail thuds against the mattress as it gleefully twitches behind her. No sooner than their kiss ends, she hugs him tightly and rubs her snout firmly against the side of his head. He can hear her breath as it puffs from her nostrils at the front of her muzzle; it's shivers slightly, most prominently when he begins to softly stroke her. Seeing the signs, he now worries that his earlier reservations were justified.

Only a few days prior, she accompanied him to his home after they'd spent the day together. As they talked, he encouraged her to assimilate, even offering to show her music and movies from Sol so that she might better understand Solakus and Irakus culture, which are quite similar. Remaining in his home, they grew closer and closer, until she suddenly kissed him. Startled, the human did not immediately return the affection and Sashuna began to panic. She admitted her mistake, before swiftly asking him to have sex with her. As she's quite beautiful in his eyes, especially considering he'd already had a one-night-stand with Miss Ayanda, for their mutual stress relief, he hesitated; he didn't reject her but he didn't say yes either.

Considering his inaction to be rejection, a distraught Sashuna began to beg, before he could even collect himself and respond. The pitiful sight of the beautiful, purple and gold raptor-like woman asking him repeatedly to mate with her broke his heart and left him dumbstruck. He tried to talk her out of it, saying that he didn't want to ruin their friendship or complicate matters, but she kept assuring him that this was only casual sex, a woman finding release through a man. She hadn't had one since Korazhu died, though it wasn't all that long ago. She persisted, insisting that her need for him was great.

Guilted by the alien woman that he finds both physically and mentally appealing, he surrendered. Though originally apprehensive, her exuberance in his bedroom made him forget. Her willingness to leave afterward, as if nothing had happened, without him even saying anything, helped prove her point that this was emotionless sex. Now, however, as he lay in bed with her for the second time, he can see how attached she's becoming to him. He wanted to try and be with Delilah

even before Sashuna, and while she might let him pursue the squirrel Voeldahn, his conscience might not. What kind of man would that make him?

For Sashuna's sake, he feels forced into abandoning his previous quest in order to guard her delicate feelings, and it bothers him. His concern for the woman backs him into a corner where he feels that his only option now is to placate her so that her heart doesn't break, regardless of what it does to him. Holding her tightly, he tries to forget all of this and focus only on the beautiful woman whose body is pressed against his own, a body he's already had the pleasure of enjoying, twice. His carnal mind eases his heart somewhat, but only just.

"I'm sorry, I was difficult." She says innocently, her tail swaying.

"No, I'm sorry." He says before kissing her cheek. "I shouldn't have questioned your motives, especially after we already talked about this."

"It's alright. I'm not mad!" She chirps.

"Good. I'd be pretty scared to have you mad at me." He quips.

"I could never hurt you!"

"I know. I was joking." He explains.

"Oh..."

"I'd never hurt you either, Sashuna."

"I know. I trust you; you and I have grown so close."

"We have." He says with a smile, softly petting her head. "It's nice, being with you."

"Yeah. I love spending my time with you too, Korazhu."

"What?" He raises a brow.

"I-I mean! ..."

They both sit upright, startled by what she's just said. Sashuna, however, doesn't correct herself. Her eyes dart away, looking down at her bare legs as she holds herself up atop his bed. Madrid notes her strange posture. She's clearly feeling guilty about something.

"Did... Did you think I was him?" He cannot help but ask.

"No, but... Sometimes... It feels nice to pretend." She admits.

Resting his head in his hands, Madrid is flabbergasted and even a little heartbroken. It's all becoming clear to him; she doesn't act this way because she loves *him*, but because she's imparted her feelings and desires for *Korazhu* onto him. Madrid is left questioning everything about their friendship. Is any of it real, or is he just a cheap replacement for her dead lover?

"I know you're not Korazhu. I... I don't know why I said that... Are you mad at me?"

"I'm... Confused." He sighs.

"About what? It was a slip-up; I didn't mean to say that."

"You didn't mean for me to be me?"

Sashuna pauses, her eyes darting away as soon as he makes eye contact with her.

"This is why I didn't want to do this, Sashuna. I care about you, and I didn't want one of us to get hurt."

"You haven't hurt me." She replies.

"But you've hurt me... Did you want this because you wanted this, or because you missed him? ... Did you really like spending time with me, or were you using me as a distraction because I proved to you that I'd be there? I..." He pauses, his eyes welling up. "I was your friend, and you were mine... Was it even real?"

Seeing the pain in his eyes, Sashuna only now realizes how much this affects him. Still, though, she doesn't know how to answer him. A chirping draws their attention. Without bothering to see who's calling or by what means, Madrid picks up his V.I. bracelet from the nightstand and activates it. Accepting a video call, Miss Ayanda's hologram stares back at him. With the couple's images being projected to her, Sashuna's nude body in full view, Miss Ayanda's eyes bulge. She impulsively looks down toward Madrid's genitals, though on her end, the hologram cuts off before she can admire them.

"Oh! I-I uh... I'm sorry." She apologizes, turning her head away.

"You need to start making audio calls..." He grumbles.

"Clearly... Is that the Slaver girl?" Miss Ayanda asks.

"Is that Miss Ayanda?" Sashuna asks.

"Yes, to both of you. What do you want, Miss Ayanda? I'm a little busy..." Madrid grumbles.

"There's a situation developing, captain."

"When isn't there..." He sighs in frustration.

"Please come to the security offices right away."

"Fine..."

Pressing a button and terminating the call, Madrid turns toward Sashuna, looking at her for a moment before slowly climbing out of his bed. Without the time to wash, he simply dresses in the bundled clothes that the pair have left at the foot of his bed. Sashuna watches him, a little frown on her face. For a moment, Madrid wonders why she's so sad? Is it because he has to leave her? He doubts it, but it's nice to pretend.

"What do you want me to do?" Sashuna softly asks.

“You already know...” He says, zipping up his pants. “But it’s up to you; stay until I get back, or go.”

Slipping on his boots, he sits at the end of the bed, pulling the tabs tightly closed over his ankles. Sashuna doesn’t make a move; she never touches him or attempts any comfort. Somehow, that manages to hurt as well. Taking his blaster, which August returned before leaving the bridge, he holsters the weapon and slips on a shirt. Glancing at Sashuna, she appears deep in thought, with shame in her eyes. Unable to help himself, he reaches out a hand, softly stroking Sashuna’s cheek. She turns her golden eyes upward, looking at him as he stands silently before her. Her lips curl into a faint grin as she closes her eyes and nuzzles his palm.

Forcing himself to leave, he slowly turns and walks out of the room. Lifting up his wrist, he places an audio call to Miss Ayanda. Ring, ring, ring.

“Yes?”

“I’m on my way.” He says.

“Good... I uh... I didn’t know you like Kanorakus girls.” She remarks.

“Yes, you did.” He chuckles.

“That wasn’t just an experiment then?”

“Thought you were the first? If it took you that long to ‘experiment’, then I’m genuinely sorry.”

“Right, well, uhm... Ahem...” Miss Ayanda clears her throat. “Just get up here.”

Ending the call, she stands at the head of the central table in the security office’s main hall. Her Lieutenants all look to her, some with raised brows and others with bemused smirks.

"Probably should've taken that call in your office..." Kellan remarks.

"So... You and the captain?" Drayusa presses.

"Let's just focus on what's important." Miss Ayanda murmurs.

"That's important." Stefan murmurs.

"You know what's really important?! The growing riot we're dealing with out there! Calls for police have skyrocketed since that damn message and people are angry!" Miss Ayanda growls.

"We've already sent in reinforcements." Fizona comments.

"Including *all* of the reserves who answered the call." Sihl' Ahzen interjects.

"And I'm not really sure what you think will happen when we call the captain in here. He doesn't have any soldiers that I'm aware of." August adds.

"He's the captain... His word has authority, even now, with all that's going on." Miss Ayanda explains.

"Honestly, I think that makes him more of a liability at this point." Sihl' Ahzen retorts.

A chirping V.I. bracelet suddenly draws their attention. Everyone raises their wrists, wondering if it's theirs. August accepts the call.

"Draiman? Are you alright?"

"Hey, cousin." Draiman speaks in a hushed voice. "Look, we did what we could, and we calmed *a lot* of them down, but there's a group of rebels that've splintered off. They're heading for the bridge *right now*. About fifty of them. They're looking for the captain. Stop them..."

"Thanks man. You and Corova stay safe, alright?"

"You too."

Ending the call, August glares at Miss Ayanda. Several of the Lieutenants share his look. Miss Ayanda just called their captain to the security offices, which are relatively close to the bridge; she's placed him on the streets, where a mob is already out hunting for him. Her expression swiftly changes at the horrifying realization. She brings her V.I. bracelet to her face and prepares to awaken it, only to jump when it chirps on its own. She answers the call without seeing who's placed it.

"Hello? ... Hello?!"

The pair can hear many voices shouting in the background, and the rapid thudding of feet.

"Miss Ayanda." Madrid speaks through labored breaths.

"Captain! Where are you?!"

"Near the bridge... Group of people... Chasing me... SHIT!"

The call ends seconds later, leaving everyone wondering. Miss Ayanda steps back, a hand covering her gaping maw. It's clear that Madrid is in imminent danger. Racing around the table, Drayusa heads for the terminal in the corner of the room, followed by several other Lieutenants. Miss Ayanda brings up her contact's list, pressing on Madrid's name. Before her claw can press the various call buttons, Sihl' Ahzen's long, thin fingers coil around her wrist, blocking her view.

"Wha-"

"Don't." Sihl' Ahzen warns her. "If he's hiding, your call could give away his position."

"But this is my fault!" Miss Ayanda whimpers.

"It is... So, don't make it worse." The experienced commando sternly instructs her chief.

Taking a seat before the computer, Drayusa quickly uses a security program to check the unique numbers hidden in the signal of every V.I. bracelet. The bracelets brought aboard Unity have been catalogued, their user's dossiers attached to each specific signal in the ship's database. A search of the captain's name reveals the unique number, allowing them to ping his bracelet and trace the location anywhere aboard Unity. As a designated security terminal, the computer comes complete with all of the software necessary. A holographic map appears, showing a red dot over his location.

"I've got him! He's moving toward the bridge... Walking speed."

Drayusa turns in her chair to face the others.

"There's a lot of signals around his..." She adds.

"I've got a few people in that area. I can pull them away to deal with this." Kellan says as he places a call.

"I'll bring in some of my commandos." Sihl' Ahzen chirps, readying a rifle.

"If he's a hostage, they'll have demands." Fizona remarks.

"Guess we'd better go talk to them." August sighs.

Kellan, Sihl' Ahzen, and August accompany Miss Ayanda to the bridge, acting as her guards and as the superior officers on site. Fizona, Stefan and Drayusa remain behind in the security offices, coordinating the remaining forces who're busy dealing with the angry crewmembers, most of whom are the freed slaves. As they make their way to the bridge, they encounter several of Kellan's police and a detachment of Sihl' Ahzen's Irakus commandos, absorbing them into their group. Nearing the bridge, Miss Ayanda's V.I. bracelet chirps once more. Raising her arm, she sees a video call from Madrid.

“Captain?! Are you alright?!” She asks, as his image appears.

**His face is pulled away; someone else holds his bracelet.
Another human glares at her, his eyes filled with rage.**

“We have your precious captain, and he’s going to take us back home to Sol, or he’s fucking dead...”

With that, the terrorist ends the call.

“Double-time, people!” Sihl’Ahzen growls, hastening their march.

Their boots thud loudly as they race for the bridge at a fever pitch. It doesn’t take them long to traverse the short distance from where the mob hold their captain hostage. The guilt and fear on Miss Ayanda’s face is plain to see, the tension palpable as they move ever closer. Reaching the bridge in record time, they discover a group of Kellan’s police already there. An impromptu barricade, constructed of portable, blaster-proof barriers, form a crescent around the large, opened door. Witnessing the kidnapping of Unity’s captain, they pursued the terrorists.

This must be the group that Draiman had warned them about. As their reinforcements approach, the former agents of SI9 and the chief of Unity’s security, Miss Ayanda, stick out like sore thumbs. A man wearing a Unity police officer’s uniform moves away from the barrier before standing tall. Lowering his weapon to his side, he waves them over, the stripes of a low-level Sergeant visible on a sleeve.

“Sir!” He salutes Kellan.

“What’s the situation, Sergeant?” Kellan asks, saluting back.

“Roughly fifty heads. All male. Most of them unarmed, though a few have blasters. All of them Solakus, most of them Voeldahn, but a few humans too. I think they’re all refugees from the Lomboko. They have captain Basile with them...”

“Have they made any demands?” August asks.

“They’ve asked to speak to someone in charge.” The Sergeant replies.

“Alright. Establish a perimeter and keep anyone from getting in the way. I’ll bring my commandos closer and we’ll extract him.” Sihl’ Ahzen says, checking her rifle again and disengaging the safety.

“Yes, ma’am!” The Sergeant nods.

“What?! You’re going to shoot his way out?!” August gasps.

“Yes, I am, August.” She calmly replies.

“Do you think that’s the best course?” Miss Ayanda asks her subordinate.

“They’re emotional. Scared. They won’t listen to reason in a state like that, and I’ll bet fifty Unity Points that their demands are ridiculous. If we start talking, they’ll start shooting, just to prove a point, especially if they think you’re stalling. It’s the only way.”

Listening to Sihl’ Ahzen’s rational, he looks down at the diminutive, four foot six Irakus. Her fiery eyes are startlingly calm; even Kellan is visibly disturbed by how casually she explains her swift resort to violence.

“Sihl... Babe... Are you sure?” Kellan asks, stepping closer.

She looks up at her human lover, lowering her rifle and resting a hand on his forearm. With a cute tug, she brings him down to her level. He bends down, looking her in the eyes.

“Listen, sweetheart...” She coos, nuzzling his face with her serrated beak. “I’ve been doing this for a long time. This isn’t a police action; this is an act of terrorism and it needs a soldier’s touch. I’ve seen this happen many times before and it’s only going to end one way. I love you, Kel, but please, leave this to me.”

Without lips to kiss him, she strokes his cheek with her beak, petting his head with her free hand. Her whip-like tail swishes behind her, only hastening when Kellan returns her affection.

“What’re you going to do, if we leave it to you?” Miss Ayanda asks.

“Bite their heads off, with both sets.” She replies, glancing at the towering Kanorakus.

As if to startle them further, Sihl’ Ahzen opens her serrated beak, revealing her inner jaws. Her razor-sharp teeth shift forward and snap closed, like a great white shark’s, before her beak clamps down with a loud click only a millisecond later.

“The stuff nightmares are made of.” Kellan chuckles.

“You know you love me.” She winks.

“I do.” He grins, giving her cheek a little kiss.

“I can’t believe we’re-”

“AGGHH!” A scream interrupts August.

Racing toward the barricade, the police shout orders into the room. Sihl’ Ahzen’s commandos take point, moving the police out of the way and holding their weapons in an eerie silence. They wait only for the order from their commander. Glancing inside, August and Miss Ayanda can both see that Madrid kneels on the ground before the human who made the demand in the video call. With a blaster in the

terrorist's right hand, Madrid squeezes his right leg, which oozes blood from a fresh wound.

"That was a warning! Send someone in here! NOW!" The man angrily demands.

Sihl' Ahzen glances toward August and Miss Ayanda, a look of affirmation in her eyes. All know how she feels about this situation, and how she'd handle it if given authority. Miss Ayanda, however, looks indecisive.

"Let me move in. Send a distraction and when they've lost focus, I'll take them all out in seconds... Please." The Irakus begs her leader.

"I-I..." Miss Ayanda hesitates.

"Wait. Let me go. I'll talk to them; not as a distraction. Maybe we can work this out?" August interjects.

"Damnit, August..." Sihl' Ahzen mutters.

"I'm waiting! Do you want another hole in your precious captain?!" The man shouts.

"Alright. Get in there, August." Miss Ayanda waves him away, her eyes closed tightly as if afraid to watch.

Sihl' Ahzen grumbles, letting out a little sigh of frustration as she moves away from her leader, taking a position behind the barricade. August steps away from the barricade with his hands held high, walking slowly into the bridge where he looks at the desperate men. As the police had said, all are male and Solakus, with many of them being Voeldahn of various breeds. Under a dozen humans stand with them, one holding his blaster to Madrid's skull. It appears to be Madrid's own weapon, stolen from his now empty holster, after being caught off guard or by numbers too large for him to defend against.

"Make him turn around!" The man yells.

"I... I can't." August begins.

"Bullshit!" The man shoves the blaster harder against Madrid's head. "There's always a way out."

"Did you even read the report?!" Madrid asks, his teeth clenched through the pain.

"Shut the fuck up!" The man yells, pistol whipping him. "I wasn't talking to you!"

"Hey..." August says in a soft and gentle voice.

As Madrid falls to the ground, the man swiftly points his weapon at August, aiming for the blonde haired, white tiger Voeldahn. The blaster twitches in his grasp; he's clearly never done something like this before. As a show of submission and cooperation, August takes his weak hand, very slowly drawing his blaster from his holster before setting it on the ground. Kicking it toward the men, he watches as a nervous terrorist picks up the blaster, trying to get a good purchase on the weapon before aiming it poorly at the now unarmed agent.

"There's no need for violence. Please. We can work this out." August continues.

"Can we? We don't want to work anything out. We just want to go home." The man insists.

"... We can't do that. We physically can't. The star charts were erased, and the Dezonians won't turn us around." August explains.

"We can get a rescue!" A random terrorist suggests.

"We're too far for any other ship to find us before we're dead of old age. The Director's knew about this; they've abandoned us and are building a second ship." August replies.

"No one's that cruel!" A man remarks.

"What if we called and pleaded ourselves?" Another suggests.

"You can try, but it won't work. There's only one way out."

The man's fingers flex repeatedly around Madrid's blaster as he aims the weapon between August and the captain.

"Then we'll just have to kill him!"

"You still won't go home. He can't do what you want; you'd be a murderer for nothing." August speaks softly.

He takes a step closer, his brow soft and eyes gentle. They plead with the man and his cohorts. Several weapons point in his direction, unmoved by his passion.

"Please... Stop this before you hurt anyone else. Before it's too late. We can make this work."

"You don't know what this is like! You signed up for this!" The man screams, his face red with anger.

"You're wrong... I *do* know what it's like. *None* of Unity's crew had a clue what we were really getting into."

"Liar..." The man sobs.

"I led a mutiny this morning... We tried to take us all home, but we failed... We learned the lengths they went too; it's impossible. I was so angry; I did something bad... I killed a Dezonian. I murdered it, right where you're standing. I shouldn't have done that, just like you shouldn't be doing this, and I regret it, just like you will when this is over... Please..." August calmly explains.

"I have a wife! I have kids!" The crying man begins. "Those fucking Slaver's lured me in with a false job in a mine! All I know is mining... They took everything from me! When I came here, I thought I could finally go home... Hug my son, kiss my baby girl, and make love to my wife of ten years... And now it's all gone. Do you think they'll still be waiting after I'm declared legally dead?! Do you think my wife won't find someone else while I'm stuck here, missing her?! **DO YOU KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE?!**" He roars, drool running down his chin.

The mob's leader drops his blaster to the floor and falls to his knees, resting his face in his hands as he cries like an infant. August approaches slowly, kneeling down only a few feet away from him, his hands still held high.

"We can still go home, but they want us to do something first. There's a chance. Please."

"I don't have two years to give." An armed terrorist remarks.

"I-I..." The crying leader sniffles. "I fucking hate you..."

He reaches for the blaster as dozens of boots thump and clank behind him. Before he knows what's going on, the leader fires a shot at the ground, several rounds ripping into his chest and face. A chunk of skull and an eye are blown away right in front of August, who's splattered with his blood. He falls to the ground, trying to stay out of the line of fire as Sihl' Ahzen charges in with her commandos. Their sturdy armor and short stature serve them well against the lightly armed and untrained civilian mob. In a matter of seconds, scores of shots are fired into the room, bodies falling into heaps.

August looks down at his clawed hands, lifting them as he feels a sticky pool growing beneath his body. Looking to his right, Madrid bleeds from a new wound in his stomach, while another pool runs under his legs. Looking frantically around, the lights from the blaster fire flash a blinding white. Several corpses leak fluids, staining August's fur and clothing. Disgusted and horrified, he tries to crawl away, a palm slipping in the crimson puddle. He lands face-first on the floor, in someone else's blood. A hand grabs his shirt collar, pulling him with surprising strength.

Turning his blood-stained face toward the being who drags him from the skirmish, he stares in shock. Sihl' Ahzen pulls him along, one dainty hand on his clothing and the other on a rifle, which she fires

one handed with ease. Her eyes are unflinching as she shoots several terrorists without hesitation, whether or not they're even armed. She drops him coldly to the ground by the door, the police rushing in to drag him further from the room with gloved hands. He looks inside to see the commandos guarding Madrid's body, one of them checking for signs of life.

At least one commando executes a surrendering terrorist, shooting him in the head, while the others scour for survivors, their fingers on the triggers. Though the Kanorakus have a reputation for strength and brutality, he wonders if maybe that should go to the diminutive Irakus instead.

"Are you alright?!" Miss Ayanda asks, looming over August.

"... Why?" He asks her.

"Take him the hospital and check him for blood borne pathogens." Kellan instructs, his gaze miles away.

It's clear to August that Kellan is unaccustomed to such violence, even with his history as a Mars police officer.

"Why?!" August asks again, grabbing Miss Ayanda's wrist.

"Sihl' Ahzen was right. He was going to kill you. I made a choice."

He chokes back tears as he looks into Miss Ayanda's unapologetic eyes. The pained groans of dozens flood their ears, and the rancid, metallic stench of their blood fills their nostrils, choking those unaccustomed to it. Boots thud toward August, who's quickly wiped down with a rag by several officers, who check him for blaster wounds. The boot-clad talons of an Irakus stand before him as he stares at the ground. His jade green eyes turn towards the being, gliding up their body and fixating on their face, before looking at his blood covered blaster being presented to him, grip first.

"Are you okay?" Sihl' Ahzen asks him with audible concern.

"... Yeah..." He mutters, taking his blaster from her.

"Alright, he's clear; no wounds. Just the blood stains." An officer remarks.

"Ready to take him to the hospital?" Another asks.

"I'll take myself..." August murmurs, standing to his feet.

"Are you sure?" Sihl' Ahzen asks.

"We can take you. You might not want to walk around alone." Kellan adds.

Standing beside and slightly behind his Irakus lover, the red-headed human rests a hand on Sihl' Ahzen's shoulder. It's clear from his body language that he's already coming to terms with what's going on, and is sticking by her side. She rests a hand atop his, stroking his skin with her thin, feather-like fingers.

"I'll be fine..." August softly insists.

"Captain?! Captain!" Miss Ayanda exclaims.

All of the agents turn to watch as Madrid is carried out on a folding stretcher. Curious about his fate, the blood-stained August approaches the human, watching his limp hand bouncing in the air with each step, as two Solakus police officers carry him out on the stretcher.

"Hey..." Madrid struggles to open his eyes.

"You're going to be okay, captain. I promise." Miss Ayanda assures him.

"You promise a lot of things." He speaks softly.

"Yeah... But I'm trying." She murmurs, her eyes heavy with shame.

"I know." He groans.

Madrid glances around, seeing August as he walks beside his stretcher, matching the officer's pace.

"What happened to the other guy?" Madrid asks.

"He's..." August hesitates to answer.

"Are you okay?" Madrid continues.

"I'm fine, captain."

"Good... Go to my apartment... Building nine, apartment forty-one. If she's there, tell Sashuna what happened..." He croaks.

"I will. I promise."

Slowing his pace, August turns back as the police officers guard Irakus commandos who pull bodies out of the bridge, stacking them like cordwood in the corridor. Approaching the officers, August's heart breaks as the dead miner is laid out like slain game. Why didn't he just stop? He had the chance to see his wife and children, but now it's gone, and they may never know what happened to him. Kellan approaches a police officer, who struggles to breathe through what appears to be a panic attack. After coaching him through it, he looks over the bodies, his hand on the officer's shoulder.

"We really need to stop killing men aboard this ship..." Kellan thinks aloud.

"Why's that?" Sihl'Ahzen asks as she approaches her lover.

"You women already outnumber us. What do you think it's going to be like in a year?" He poses.

"*No one* is stealing you from me..." Sihl' Ahzen replies, taking hold of his unoccupied hand.

"I know." He says, smiling down at her.

Tallying the bodies, twenty out of fifty rebels are dead, five are critically injured and may yet die, and the rest have superficial injuries or are uninjured, though they'll all be taken into custody. With Unity's captain being rushed to the hospital, August snaps himself out of his daze. He has a new mission. On his way to the hospital, he visits the captain's apartment building. Several knocks go unanswered. Using his V.I. bracelet, which has several updates for the high-level security officials, he hacks the door panel. Unlocking it from the outside, he enters Madrid's apartment, calling out Sashuna's name.

With his bloody blaster drawn, he moves from room to room, checking for any potential threats, such as looters. The apartment is empty. She's already left. Holstering his weapon, August decides to finish his trip to the hospital, but only after visiting Roku and Draz, and then Annette; they need to know that he's alright.