

Unity

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode Five: Dance, Puppet

Waking up the next morning, August lay flat on his back. Tucked beneath his right arm, Draz sleeps peacefully. After returning home, the realization that he has potentially lost his place aboard the historical craft set in. After calling his sister to check on her, before sharing his own plight, he then called Invar, his parents, and every other friend he still had; his night was restless, and sleep was only brought about with the aid of a fifth of Martian whiskey. Not one to drink alcohol – he'd seen more than his share of conflicts and fights between the Azilian's crew as a result of it – he found that his system, unfamiliar with the introduction of the compound, acted as an effective relaxant.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he carefully sets Draz aside and slips out of bed, careful not to wake the creature. Still wearing his clothes from the previous day, he takes a fresh set and heads for the bathroom. After a long, hot shower, he dresses himself and enters the living room. He reaches the refrigerator just as Draz begins to awaken. Taking a piece of raw meat from an airtight container, he sets the chunk of flesh on a plate to feed to Draz. Like all other Skahlzunians, he's an omnivore with a distinct preference for meat, often eaten raw.

After all the time that Draz has spent living with him, it still unnerves him somewhat to watch the small, adorable creature ripping apart his food with teeth and fangs reminiscent of the ancient and legendary creature, El Chupacabra. Sitting at the table and eating his

breakfast of instant French toast, he can hear his V.I. bracelet chirping from the living room charging base. Setting his food aside, he approaches the base and takes hold of the device. Clutching it in one hand, he accepts the call from an unfamiliar number with a government prefix code.

“Hello?”

“Good day, Mr. Woods.” The male voice begins. “I’m Director Ashford.”

“Hello Mr. Ashford. I wondered when you’d be calling.”

“I apologize for the circumstances. I’ve received the report from your division leader, Ayanda. Very thorough and honest. Her recommendation was that you be removed from SI9 and reassigned. Typically, a violation of a security protocol such as this would involve outright expulsion from the project. These rules were put in place to prevent leaks in departments with security clearances as high as yours; understand that if enemies of the state knew they could reach you via family, they would do so. These rules *must* be followed, for the good of the project and your loved ones.”

August’s heart sinks. Closing his eyes, he drops his head as he listens to Director Ashford.

“Her recommendation *should’ve* been to completely remove you from the project altogether, and return you to the civilian sector... However, your background and record while an agent give us pause.”

“... Sir?”

“You have a unique insight that most cannot claim, and you’ve been an effective agent thus far. In lieu of expulsion or even reassignment, we’ve instead decided to disregard Agent Ayanda’s recommendation in its entirety. You will remain a member of SI9.” Director Ashford continues.

At a loss for words, August can barely believe the turn of events. What could've persuaded the directors, a group who are known for their cold and ruthless attitude, to ignore his blatant violation of the regulations? For a moment, he considers pinching himself to make sure that he isn't still asleep and dreaming.

"... Mr. Woods?"

"Y-yes sir. I'm still here." August stammers.

"Good."

"I really appreciate this, sir! I care about this project and I'd do anything to protect it!" He asserts, hoping to impress Director Ashford.

"Very good, which brings me to my next point. Make no mistake that under normal circumstances we'd have ignored Agent Ayanda's recommendation and outright expelled you from the project, if not sought out a conviction. Your personal background is of interest to us, and the incident involving your sister has proven something."

"Sir?" August's brow furls.

"We know that the terrorist who struck Miss Woods' division was a Marionette, and we know that you know this as well; Ayanda's follow-up report was *very* thorough. The building that was attacked was highly classified. Few knew of the location, save for the Directors, employees and the security division. Considering that everyone besides your sister died in the blast, and the other divisions have been thoroughly vetted, we believe that there's a leak in the security division. If you were the leak, you'd have called your sister to prevent her demise, which you did. *However*, you most likely wouldn't have risked your position to visit her; you'd continue to act as a spy and leave her be, knowing that she survived.

Considering that you risked and accepted punishment to make contact to check on her well-being, thereby ruining your ability to relay relevant information to a third part, we're under the distinct impression that you *aren't* the leak, nor that you had any knowledge of it. As the eldest son of George and May Woods, you also had direct,

long-term contact with many of the races who are now members of the Solar Council, and long before most were even aware of their existence; you're familiar with how they behave day-to-day. In short, we have an assignment tailored for you, as at this point, we can only be certain of Agent Ayanda and yourself." Director Ashford explains.

"Whatever you need me to do." August replies.

"Good! We want you to go on a bit of a hunt, as it were. As this is a highly classified mission, the details will be delivered personally by a hand-picked member of our staff. We'll send you the details immediately; expect to rendezvous with our operative tomorrow. Coordinates will be sent upon termination of this call."

"Understood."

"... I'm glad we can count on you, son. You're a true patriot." Director Ashford speaks with a rare display of actual personality.

"Uhm, begging your pardon, but what?"

"If you're going to ask about your family, stop right there. As you're still a member of SI9, the rules still apply." Director Ashford interrupts him.

"Sir, I've already called basically everyone I know to feed them the bad news about my obvious reassignment for a flagrant violation."

"That's unfortunate... Well, given the circumstances, we can't have a panicked family searching for you... It could become a problem down the line. Agent Ayanda's report is still being processed. Consider the next few days a probationary period. Use that time wisely; come up with a good excuse as to why you haven't been reassigned, and let them know that they shouldn't expect to hear from you for a while."

"You'll allow that, sir?" August asks with considerable surprise.

"Under extreme circumstances such as these, select rules may be bent."

"Thank you, Director Ashford."

Abruptly ending the call, August lowers his hand and slumps back into a chair in his modest apartment. He can hardly believe the turn of events, staring at the bland wall as if it were a magnificent art piece. As Director Ashford had said, a coded transmission quickly arrives, causing his V.I. bracelet to beep. Pulling him from his brief daze, he collects the encrypted data, copying the information to paper before erasing it from his bracelet's memory. Now with a real mission to worry about, he begins the necessary preparations. After spending a large portion of the day inventing a relatively believable cover story, he then uses what time he has left to call everyone he had last night to inform them of his continued employment.

"That's good to hear. I know how much your work means to you." Roku softly remarks.

"... I hate to chase good news with bad, but you know that once I'm out of probation and receive my demotion, I'll have to break contact again." August sullenly explains.

"I know... I was almost beginning to enjoy your company too." Roku quips.

"Yeah, well, I hate you too, sis." He says with a smirk.

The twins share a pause, looking to each other for a moment as they share a video call.

"Black mode shouldn't last too much longer, right? It's only until the hull's completed and the interior modules are ready for installation?" She asks, breaking the silence.

"Yeah, that's right." He subtly nods. "They consider that to be the most dangerous time for the project; Sol Marines will guard the hull around the clock once it's ready for prepping."

"Those Dezonian construction droids really cut down the time in dry dock; Unity will have an airtight hull in a little under two months and the interior modules are already being tested. We can wait that long." She assures him.

“Good. Try not to get blown up again; I used eight of my nine lives keeping my job after that last one.” He teases.

“No promises; I kind of like all of the sympathy.”

“Always the attention whore.” He chuckles.

“Better than being the other kind.” She says with a smirk.

“True. Well, I’ve got to go. Still have to break it to mom and dad. Take care, alright?”

Ending the video call, August prepares for the final and most difficult notification; he’s saved his parents for last, knowing that they’ll be the most upset by the news. Looking at their shared line which will link directly to George and May’s quarters aboard the Azilian, and their interconnected V.I. bracelets, he holds his finger over the button. Taking a deep breath as he prepares himself, he’s suddenly startled when the screen shifts and his bracelet chirps. Quickly moving his finger to a different button, he accepts the call without even looking at the name or number of the contact. A hologram appears as he initiates another video call.

“Hi.”

“Is it true?!” Fizona asks rather excitedly, grinning from cheek to cheek.

“Is what true? ... You’re not supposed to be calling me!”

“We’re not family, and I’ll deny ever being your friend, not like it’d be a lie.” She quips.

“Hey, it’s your career.” He shrugs.

“So?! Is it true that you’re coming back?! Ayanda just gave us all the update; your security clearance has been reinstated.”

“Yeah, it’s true. The all-knowing Directors decided that I was far too handsome to let go.” He winks.

“Of course.” She coos. “Well, it’ll be nice to have you back! It’s been really boring without you around.”

"I haven't even been gone a day." He chuckles.

"Yeah, I know..."

"I'll be back soon, though."

"I'm looking forward to it." Fizona winks. "Well, I'd better let you go."

"Wait!" He calls out.

"Hm?"

"Do we have a line on where those Marionette's came from?" He asks.

With her thin lips curled into a little grin, wrapping around her long and broad snout, she gently nods her head.

"... Well?!"

"What's that ancient Solakus saying? 'Good things come to those who wait'?" She asks him.

"Pfft. I hate waiting..." He grumbles. "You're such a tease."

"I want you to be ready for the big finish." She retorts.

Exiting a warp bubble, the modest gunboat enters Saturnian space. With great caution, it takes a rarely used trade lane, swiftly skimming the atmosphere of the planet. Avoiding the many populated moons of the planet, some of which have been entirely terraformed, such as Titan and Dione, the ship heads toward the rings. At the innermost segment of rings, the ship carefully enters the stream, flowing with the orbiting debris. Moving only marginally faster than the chunks of water ice and rock, they come upon a modest base. The space station, protected by a layer of fused rock, outwardly appears to be an exceptional asteroid; it's merely an illusion.

Too small for even an armored transport to enter for protection, the craft instead is forced to hail the station before mooring with the faux asteroid. Carefully touching down on the surface, an umbilicus, an extendable tube that acts as a protective covering, moves toward the unassuming craft. With tiny air ports around the metal reinforced mouth, it's steered by a pilot from inside the space station, quickly linking with the craft and locking into place. Now covering the primary airlock of the ship, a set of doors which slide vertically, the umbilicus is pressurized and filled with oxygen. Without artificial gravity, the crew of the station head for the ship, floating through the umbilicus without the aid of protective EVA suits.

Having already hailed the vessel, the airlock doors lift, giving them access through an eight-foot-tall by ten-foot-wide opening. The floating crew take hold of the inset rails of the craft, touching down on the marginally extended platform beneath the doors. Sharp claws click on the ground as their three-toed feet rest on the cool metal. Wearing traditionally humble clothing and without boots, they feel the sudden shift as they enter the airlock, the spaceship's artificial gravity now holding them down with the force of Earth's gravity. They step into the room beyond the airlock, face to face with the ship's crew.

In a corridor just beyond the gunboat's bridge, a young Solakus male steps up to the imposing Kanorakus, his face expressionless and his eyes as cold as the void of space. He stands between his crew, and those of the space station. The four males look around at the ship's crew, waiting for their leader to speak. A deathly silence hovers over them like a dense cloud. The human wears a dark suit and long-coat, and is young in appearance, with pale skin, short black hair that's spiked, and thin eyes. In many ways, he almost appears to be Tongyan; humans with genealogy from that region of Earth, which once belonged to long dead countries such as Japan and China, have a distinct appearance.

"Are you the Captain?" A Kanorakus male finally asks.

"I am. Mr. Woods, at your service." The human replies, extending a hand.

"Korazhu." The Kanorakus nods, extending his own.

After a brief handshake, captain Woods motions with his head. Following behind the human, who stands not quite six-feet-tall, they are led into another corridor. Forming a T junction and allowing access to various rooms aboard the gunboat, they see several olive drab crates, all roughly the size and shape of a typical Solakus funerary casket. Tanks mounted on the sides provide the cargo with everything they need for their journey, sedated inside of the crates. Knowing that they would not be able to unload from the cargo lift beneath the ship, the Slaver captain has already brought everything near the airlock.

Seeing the number of crates surprises the four male Kanorakus. They look to each other for a moment, all of them eventually glancing back to Korazhu, who is the designated team leader.

"You look surprised." Captain Woods remarks in a dry monotone.

"We did not know how many Miss Corova had ordered." Zhenashu answers.

"I often forget; most races aren't so... Heh... Never mind." Captain Woods remarks.

The Kanorakus don't bother to ask; they already know what he would've said. They do not know why they allow themselves to be dominated so severely by their females. It isn't as though they can't fight back; they are often stronger and until their numbers dropped as a result of the civil war, were often used as soldiers. In many ways, the males don't even enjoy their powerlessness, yet somehow, they do not rebel.

"I suppose you will need assistance?" Captain Woods continues.

"If you wish to offer it." Korazhu replies.

"Only if you wish to take it..."

Captain Woods' tone seems to challenge Korazhu. His growing resentment for the mistreatment he and his fellow males suffer acts as a catalyst.

"You will help us?" He turns to Captain Woods.

"Are you asking?" Captain Woods raises a brow.

"... You will help us unload the cargo." Korazhu says sternly, taking a step toward the human.

"Better... Crew! Help these *men* with their cargo." He orders with a sinister grin.

With the aid of Captain Wood's half-dozen crewmembers, they move twenty crates from the hallways and cargo bay of the ship. Using levitating lifts that operate on electromagnetism, repelling themselves from the steel floor panels and ceiling, they walk the heavy crates toward the airlock. Upon reaching the umbilicus, they enter zero gravity and carefully push each one toward the asteroid disguised space station. Kanorakus workers hold onto each side, making sure each crate doesn't come close to the edge of the umbilicus and damage it, exposing them all to the vacuum of space.

With the first run of crates, Woods joins them, touching down on the surface of the space station. With a slightly angled doorway leading downward, like the oversized hatch of a root cellar, he steps beneath the vertically sliding airlock doors. Immediately feeling the space station's artificial gravity, he rests a palm on a nearby wall to steady himself from the vertigo, induced by the sudden shift. A female Kanorakus stands near the entrance, somewhat surprised by the appearance of a male Solakus. Opening her mouth to speak, she

begins to ask what he's doing aboard the station, only to be left in shock when he walks right past her without so much as a glance.

Wandering the station alone, Woods glances through several doorways, looking for his target. Having memorized her image and detailed physical description, he ignores the Kanorakus that don't match. Adjusting the buckles that hold her shiny black top to her chest, Miss Corova looks at herself in a mirror. With a claw, she scratches her elf-like ear before running her hands over her fairly long, eight-inch bristles. She knows that she must meet that captain of the Slaver vessel, and is hoping to appear as presentable as possible. Stepping out of her private quarters, Miss Corova's eyes bulge as she sees the human wandering the halls of her hidden base.

"Wha-? Who are you, and what are you doing here?!" She angrily demands.

"Just the woman I was looking for..." Woods answers.

"For what reason?! Start talking before I tear your head from your shoulders!" She roars.

"We've just delivered your cargo to your front door. You could show a little gratitude." He says with a smirk.

"... Slaver?" She nervously asks.

Woods merely nods his head. Miss Corova had never expected the Slaver captain to board her station and search for her. As several others of her faction peek their heads out, she knows that she must act swiftly.

"Still, you'd better have a damn good reason for leaving your ship, little boy!" She snarls.

"I believe it's sufficient."

Walking the halls, Sashuna looks for the human who so rudely moved by her as if she weren't even there. Briefly taken by shock, she failed to follow him until he had turned a corner or two. Now hearing what sounds like an argument, she picks up her pace, racing to find her leader. Turning a corner near Miss Corova's private quarters, she can see the six-foot and three-inch-tall Kanorakus lunging forward. She and several others watch as Miss Corova grips the human by the throat. Sashuna fears that Miss Corova's temper will ruin their business relations, but before she can shout at her leader, hoping to talk her down, the human reacts.

Lifting an arm, he slams it into Miss Corova's inner elbow, bending her arm and ripping her hand from his throat. Taking hold of her wrist and bicep, he spins, pulling her chest against his back before finishing the rotation and heaving her into the wall across from her quarters. Slamming hard into the darkly painted steel, the wind is knocked out of her lungs. As Miss Corova stumbles, falling down to the ground, he takes hold of a wrist with one hand, draws his blaster with the other, and places his boot over her throat. Defenseless and at the human's mercy, Miss Corova closes her eyes and turns her head away.

"Please! Don't hurt me! I apologize!" She begs.

"Don't. Do. That."

"I'm sorry! I-I won't! I just thought-"

"Don't apologize." He continues.

"Wha-?"

"You thought you could win, but I was stronger. I don't require an apology for that, just your attention." He explains.

"I'm listening!"

"You owe a debt..."

Walking slowly up to her leader and the strange human, her approaching steps draw his attention. He turns to her, releasing Miss Corova's wrist and drawing another blaster; he points it at Sashuna without even looking. He steps back, keeping one weapon trained on the leader of the space station, while the other sweeps her cohorts.

"Stop! Please!" Miss Corova shouts, a hand clutching her throat. "We'll speak!"

Holstering one of his blasters, he keeps the other in his strong hand. With his weak hand, he takes hold of Miss Corova's forearm and pulls her to her feet with considerable force. With a single head nod he motions for her to enter her quarters. At first unsure of what to do, she hesitates. Growing frustrated with her, Woods pulls her toward the door. She spins around, her back toward the doorway as she faces him. Woods quickly reaches out a hand and places it on her chest, his fingers gripping one of her ample breasts as he shoves her rather violently into her private quarters.

All stare in shock as the Solakus dominates their leader; being a male only makes it all look worse. Once inside, Woods promptly shuts the door. Standing aside, he orders Miss Corova to lock it. She obeys. Stepping back and away from him, she can feel her heart pounding. Her legs bump into her bedframe and she promptly falls backward. Sitting atop her bed and leaning slightly back, she watches the human. He steps closely toward her, a hand reaching into a pocket of his shiny, black long-coat. Retrieving a pair of titanium handcuffs, he tosses them to her. The cold metal bounces off of her toned belly and falls into her lap.

"Put those onto one wrist and lock yourself to a post. I want to make sure that I can let my guard down while we talk, and *not* have to worry about you doing anything stupid." He casually demands.

A frightened and nervous Miss Corova obeys. The links lock into place as she latches the sturdy device onto one wrist, quickly sliding up her bed to finish her mission. Woods takes a seat at one end, his eyes scanning her body as she leans over. With both of her arms extended and her torso turned to one side, he admires her figure. The links click into place as she attaches her arm near the bottom edge of a bedpost. As she turns her head back, she notices his gaze through her peripheral vision, however, by the time her ruby red orbs swing toward him, he is staring her right in the eyes.

"Now, as you know, the Goddess's Children and Slaver's Union have had a business arrangement for some time." Woods begins, setting down his blaster at the end of the bed and taking off his long-coat. "We first sold you slaves to work your little mine on Tazhan, that illegal base you have on Kanor's moon. We even followed special instructions: All males and all Solakus. Payment was slow, but as we mostly deal with special clientele, we were patient."

"I have nothing to do with that! I ju-"

"Stop!" Woods growls, holding up a hand. "We understand that you're just one of your high congregation. However, we also know that you voted to slow payment..."

Miss Corova's heart sinks. How did they acquire such knowledge? All records are sealed. Do the Slaver's have advanced hacking technology, or perhaps a spy amongst them?

"I still don't understand how a single vote can negate the majority, but I digress. While we eventually received payment in installments from your other leaders, it wasn't what we were expecting. Our last order was even worse: a single Marionette, a rather expensive form of slave, and in short order, you blew him up in a terrorist attack. While that wasn't surprising, our total lack of payment was; zero credits to our account and the Marionette was dead the very same day. *That* is a serious problem." Woods continues.

"We'll pay! I'll vote in your favor!" She assures him.

He rises from the bed, stepping away from his blaster. Walking toward her, he continues speaking.

“This order is exactly twenty times larger, and we’re twenty times more anxious for our payment.” Woods says, gently stroking her cheek with the backs of his fingers. “How am I to know that you’ll do what you say? Or that you won’t misbehave in the future?”

“Please! I’ll cooperate!”

“Aww. You look so adorable when you beg...” He growls.

Miss Corova looks up to him with genuine fear, noting the sadistic pleasure he’s taking in her plight. For a brief moment, she recalls her own behavior with her underlings, realizing that she and Woods are one in the same. Her fear only grows at this revelation; he’s nowhere near finished with her. As if to prove her point, the human’s hand reaches down, quickly gripping her side. His fingers begin to loosen the buckle that holds her top to her body. Frozen by the shocking turn of events, she doesn’t react until the last buckle is undone. His hand grips the bare flesh of her exposed breast, carefully massaging it.

Reaching over with her free hand, she begins to struggle, fighting the human with all she has. Unfortunately, however, he is too powerful. Quickly straddling her legs, she’s unable to kick. With both hands taking hold of her one free wrist, it isn’t hard for him to pull it to one side, stretching it out. By the time she considers biting him, he’s already lifted himself off of her and moved to the other edge of the bed. Using a second pair of titanium handcuffs, he locks her wrist to the other bedpost. Taking his long-coat from the bed, he retrieves something from an inner pocket.

Her eyes grow wide as he reveals a Kanorakus muzzle. Now considered too cruel, even by the standards of the Goddess’s Children, the device fits over the head of a male to hold his jaw

closed. Miss Corova, however, has found herself employing one on her space station numerous times. With bound arms and Woods quickly straddling her lap, he soon overpowers her once again, locking the device to her head. Miss Corova is now utterly defenseless.

“I wonder if you’re trying to comprehend my actions... How well prepared I am...” Woods speaks aloud as he latches her muzzle to her head. “Remember your conversation with my boss? ... My father?” He asks, sitting back, atop her lap. “He said something about raping you to death. Consider this a warning...”

Standing outside the door, unable to open it, Sashuna and several others attempt to listen in. Though they hear muffled voices and what sounds like a struggle, the thick metal door makes it difficult. They already considered cutting through the door, but the fact that Miss Corova’s station was designed with multiple airtight modules means that it’s too thick to be done swiftly. If they should try, the capable Solakus warrior might take her hostage, or have killed her before they succeed in entering. Without direction or knowing what’s happening inside, they simply stand around and wait. Soon, more sounds are heard.

Miss Corova growls into her muzzle and attempts to kick as Woods pulls at her only remaining clothes, her pants. However, her thrashing makes it exceptionally difficult. Eventually, a frustrated Woods merely rips them from her body, tearing the fabric with hard yanks. Now lying naked atop her own bed, she glares at Woods as he stands to his feet. Humming a pleasant tune, he carefully removes his boots, then his shirt. He turns back, grinning at her as she begins to tremble. He reaches up a hand, politely waving to her as the other unbuckles his belt.

Soon enough, he’s as bare as she. Climbing back onto the bed, he situates himself; he forces her legs open before slithering between them. Grinding himself against her, she quivers, grunting and growling into her muzzle. This continues for nearly a minute, until he’s ready to

progress. Leaning forward, his chest pressed firmly against hers, she feels the tip of his nose as it brushes against her point ear.

“Remember... This is your fault, and it’ll happen again if you continue to be a problem.” He whispers.

Miss Corova grunts, wincing and arching her back as he begins.

“Nng! See? ... I’m not so little, am I?” He chuckles.

Just outside, the group listens curiously. The sounds of strife have abated, replaced by an incredibly faint noise. The muffled sounds remind Sashuna of groans, even moans, though she can’t be certain. Minutes tick by and the noises continue. Many of her associates decide it’s not longer pertinent to wait. It no longer sounds as though Miss Corova is in immediate danger; they must have reached some sort of agreement. Sashuna turns and walks down the hall, only to stop and look back at the door. Unable to simply walk away, she turns back and leans against a wall, content to wait and see what’s going on.

“Ahh! Now *that* was a good punishment, don’t you think, my beautiful little puppet?” Woods exclaims, looking over his shoulder at Miss Corova.

Lying on her back, her arms outstretched, she turns her ruby red eyes down and toward him. She curls up her lips and bares her teeth but the muzzle is tightened to capacity. She cannot open her jaw even a millimeter to answer him, effectively preventing her from responding coherently.

“Yeah, I thought so too.” He chuckles. “Twice is good enough. Once was from my boss, while the other was for grabbing me by the

throat in the hallway. Too bad you didn't try something else; you're easily good enough for three, and that's saying something."

Buttoning up his shirt and taking his long-coat in his hand, he swings it over a shoulder, holding it by a finger. He takes his blaster and slips it into his holster before approaching the bedside. Taking a small device from a pants pocket, he reaches up for her hand. Miss Corova tries to pull away, but in a surprising moment of compassion, Woods drops his long-coat to the floor and strokes her cheek with his free hand, shushing her and assuring her that he isn't trying to hurt her. She looks to him, their eyes locking. Out of his peripheral vision, he could swear that the tip of her whip-like tail flicks.

Now calmed, he scans her palm with the device, saving the image on it. Collecting his long-coat from the floor, he returns it to its place over his shoulder. Setting the device down on a nearby table, he takes out a keyring with only two primitive metal keys. One key she recognizes as a key to her muzzle, while the other must be for the handcuffs, which are of Solakus design. Leaving the keys on the table, he collects the device and heads for the door.

"It's a good thing you're using outdated panels, puppet." He comments, standing before the door. "If you had the newer models that require body temperature and a pulse to open, I'd have to let you go first, and I can't be sure you'll be a good puppet and obey, at least not yet anyway."

Miss Corova's eyes bulge nearly out of her head. Does he truly plan to leave her displayed like this, for all to see? She will lose all credibility as a strong leader if any of her people walk in on her, bound and abused in such a manner.

"You know, you should really close your legs, unless you want them to see my mess." Woods teases her. "Oh! And feel free to deduct

the cost of your pants from this order's price. I do apologize for that. Collateral damage, I'm afraid."

After waiting for well over twenty minutes the door finally opens. As the only one still standing outside, Sashuna is apprehensive to approach. The young human steps outside, glancing from left to right rather cautiously. To her, it appears that he is worried more would be outside. Is he fearful of an attack? Spotting Sashuna, he quickly waves her over. Rushing up to him, she stops just beside the door.

"I hope you're one of her trusted associates." He begins, speaking in a near whisper.

"I am." She nods.

"Good. I don't want anyone else to see this."

His words confused the female until he waves her inside. Sashuna stops in her tracks. Lying atop the bed is her leader, Miss Corova. Sweat drenched and naked as the day she was born, save for her muzzle and bindings, her smooth, black hide with red swirls glistens in the artificial light. She glares at Sashuna and the bold human Solakus. The man points to a table bearing a set of keys, one of them familiar and the other alien in design.

"Use those to unlock her, but wait until I leave the room and make it down the hall." He instructs, waving his blaster about.

Sashuna nods, silently agreeing to his terms. She walks over to the table, across from the foot of the bed and takes the keys into her hand. Unable to contain her curiosity, Sashuna glances to her right, looking over at Miss Corova. She can feel herself flush at the evidence of her assault, still fresh and oozing from the appropriate orifice. She turns back to the man, but he's gone. Dashing toward the door, she peers down the hallway, only to see his form vanishing around a corner. Turning back to her leader, she takes the key that holds her

muzzle, swiftly removing it from her head. Sashuna then unlocks one wrist, only for Miss Corova to grab her arm.

“... Get out.” She softly growls, her voice trembling.

Subtly nodding her head, she hands Miss Corova the keys before turning and leaving the room. No sooner than she is in the hallway does she begin sprinting, racing to catch up to the human. Certain that he’s heading back for his ship, she follows a path directly toward the airlock. She turns a corner, and then another. Up ahead, she can see the man. He glances back to her, a little smile on his face, though he doesn’t stop walking. He appears wholly unafraid. Sashuna slows her pace as she catches up to him, walking beside him and looking to the human for a long while.

“... What did you do to her?” Sashuna finally and quietly asks him.

“You know what I did. I punished her in a fashion that you could appreciate.” He says with a wink.

“I... I didn’t think...”

“Here.” He says, turning to her. “This is for being a good little spy.”

Passing her a credit chit, she looks at the charged object in the palm of her hand.

“Don’t feel guilty. We all got what we wanted: The Slaver’s will be paid, you have your vengeance *and* credits, and I enjoyed the best body I’ve ever felt. Twice.”

"But what you did to her... I... I knew you'd do something, but... That?! How am I supposed to look at her and *not* feel guilty?" She asks.

"Buy yourself something. Sleep it off. Get drunk. Do whatever you have to do. You're on the fringe, and this is just how life is on the dark side... Have a nice day!"

Reaching the airlock, and with the twenty olive drab crates accounted for, in a large room to her right, Woods steps out of the space station's airlock. Floating in the umbilicus, he pushes himself toward his ship, quickly reaching the door and disappearing inside. As the last Slaver still aboard, the crew of the station close the airlock doors and disengage the umbilicus, all while Sashuna stands there, the credit chit clenched tightly in her fist...