

Unity

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode Six: The Devil Among Us

"It went pretty much exactly the way you thought it would."
Captain Woods says to the hologram.

"... And?" His father asks.

"And I succeeded."

"She made payment?"

"In more ways than one." Young Woods says with a sinister grin.

"Hah! Originally, I was kidding when I told you to do that."

"No, you weren't." Woods chuckles.

"You're right... So, how hard was it?" His father pries.

"Heh..."

"Poor choice of words. You know what I meant!"

"Not very, actually. It was odd... Once I started, she didn't fight me like before. A minute or so in, she was as wet as the hydroponics room on Lomboko. Not sure what to make of that..." Woods remarks.

"Sounds to me like she enjoyed it... If any woman would've enjoyed a rape fantasy, it'd be her. A shame though! It takes something away from the punishment aspect."

"I suppose the next time I'll have to *not* rape her. That'll teach her." Woods jests.

"A chip off the old block." James Woods murmurs, a sinister grin on his face.

The pair share a laugh.

"Good job, son. Come on home!" His mother, Erica, exclaims.

"Understood. I'll be back soon!"

Pacing back and forth aboard the craft, Ayanda follows a nervous Kellan and Sihl' Ahzen with her eyes. Both share the annoying tick, though Sihl' Ahzen began after Kellan, following his lead.

"How can you not be hyped up for this?!" Kellan asks August, who sits with his head down. "This is historical stuff! I mean, talk about a movie plot!"

"Imagine, facing your own family, the cause of all our strife!" Sihl' Ahzen chirps.

"I'm... *Really* not looking forward to this." August grumbles.

"What about that talk earlier about arresting him yourself?" Kellan reminds him.

"It's complicated..."

"Is it?!"

"Let me put it this way; it'd be much easier if he just didn't exist." August attempts an explanation.

"You must admit, it's an amazing coincidence." Drayusa remarks.

He turns his eyes to the black and purple Kanorakus woman, a displeased look on his face. Sitting aboard the powerful cruiser, the SM Deliverance, less than a week has passed since he's returned to his duties, his secret mission known only to Ayanda. August and the other agents of SI9 join a small fleet to confront the Lomboko, the

infamous MBX-2160 'Endurance' class ship owned and captained by James Woods. Heavily modified to the point of near unrecognizability, the vessel is the source of more urban legends and rumors than any famous criminal ship; the only craft with as much prestige in the Sol system is the Azilian, ironically owned and captained by August's father, James Woods brother.

"Come on! Aren't you the least bit curious? Don't you even want to know what he looks like?" Kellan excitedly continues.

"No."

"Pfft. Well, *I'd* want to slap the cuffs of that son of a-

"Leave him alone! He clearly doesn't wish to discuss it!" Fizona growls.

Stepping forward, she glares at both Kellan and Sihl' Ahzen, who both look to her and then at each other. Kellan smirks, while Sihl' Ahzen's serrated beak, unable to be manipulated, only accents her single, raised brow. It's become more and more obvious to everyone a part of their team that Fizona has more than a lustful desire for August, though she certainly has that too. If it weren't so amusing, her behavior around him would be quite overbearing. Most assume that this is the reason Ayanda hasn't also reported her, her silent laughter in the background helping to confirm that suspicion.

"Thank you." August says to the orange, red and yellow Kanorakus woman.

Reaching out and taking hold of Fizona's hand, he holds it for a moment, drawing everyone's attention, especially hers. After a short pause, he pulls himself up, playing off the hand-hold.

"Look, I love my parents and everything they've done. I'm proud of them. I feel the polar opposite for my uncle. I hate him and what he

does, but I don't actually want to meet him, hear his voice, or see that ship; it'll make it all real, and I don't want to feel that kind of guilt."

The others fall silent. Sihl' Ahzen looks to Kellan, as if waiting for him to decide her position.

"Fair enough." Kellan remarks. "I'm sorry. I just look at everything from my perspective. I didn't mean to piss you off."

"Yeah. Me too." Sihl' Ahzen adds, looking down at her talons.

"It's alright. Let's just get this over with." August sighs.

"Not much waiting now. Ending hyperdrive in three... Two... One... Disengage!" The cruiser's captain speaks.

The pink and cyan swirls of the warp bubble rapidly fade as the ship exits. No longer a singularity, it would outwardly appear to 'warp' into place by those around it. Soon, the vessel is followed by four more ships, two cruisers and two destroyers. Flying in a subtle V formation, the ships immediately charge their weapons and shields as the conventional engines quickly reengage. Before them sits the Lomboko. All stop and stare as they gaze upon the port side of the immense craft. Roughly seven hundred meters long, three hundred meters tall, and nearly two hundred meters wide at the thickest section, the Lomboko dwarfs the other vessels.

"I didn't... I... I've never seen one up close!" The captain chokes out.

Looking to the ship for the first time, August feels a cold chill rush up his spine. It's as if he's staring into pure evil, and now with a form, it can stare back at him. Sihl' Ahzen notices something, quickly tapping Ayanda and Kellan, who stand on either side of her.

“Look! Someone’s boarding her!” She exclaims.

Turning their gaze, an unassuming, civilian grade gunboat enters a massive docking bay, affixed to the keel, near the aft. Already in a docking procedure, they only catch a glimpse of the ship as it disappears inside, the outer airlock doors slowly sliding closed behind it. A message suddenly pings every ship; the Lomboko hails them.

“Greetings, little ships.” A male voice begins.

“Oh, they’re so adorable!” A female voice chirps.

“Aren’t they? Greetings, adorable little ships! You know who the fuck this is... Turn around before you piss me off.” The male continues.

“This is captain Kraiss of the Sol Marine vessel, Deliverance, and current fleet commander! That’s *not* going to happen!” The captain retorts.

“I concur, you Slaver scum!” A captain exclaims.

“You’re coming with us, dead!” Another boasts.

“Hah! If I had a credit for every time I’ve heard that, I’d consider retiring! Seriously... Turn around and I won’t skin you alive.”

“Do you know who we are?!” A formation captain snickers.

“Do you know who *I am*?! I’m James Woods! I’ve *personally* sold more cargo than you’ve seen in an entire *city*, I’ve killed half that many, and most of them *slowly*! If you give me a reason, I’ll reach over there, right into your fucking skull, and turn your entire world into an absolute nightmare!”

All fall silent as his voice booms. They can imagine the terrible man who growls to them from the grotesque abomination of a ship floating in the depths of space, though none of them want too.

“Prepare to fire!” Captain Kraiss orders.

A countdown emerges on a screen as every ship charges their weapons, their shields at one hundred percent and focused forward. The Lomboko, which faces them broadside, seems unphased by the order and their display. A series of no less than twelve plasma cannons, all turret mounted, turn and face the opposing vessels. The countdown reaches zero and all five ships open fire. The green orbs slam into the side of the Lomboko, dissipating harmlessly in a wave of teal as they strike a shield. Nearly one hundred strikes, and the Lomboko still stands, untouched by the superheated balls of plasma.

They stare with wide eyes, listening to James Woods cackle like a hyena. Suddenly, a series of shots come from the ship. In three waves of six, each wave striking a ship at the far end of the formation, their shields are obliterated, failing entirely.

“Goodbye!” James cheerfully exclaims.

Two more waves finish off the vessels, slamming into the bow and melting through the metal. The second wave annihilates the half-melted bow, reaching to the central core and causing massive explosions of each ship, both violent and radioactive. As a result of the flying debris, and their shields being focused to the front, the two ships on either side of the Deliverance are struck. Massive ruptures in both destroyers cause decompression on multiple tiers, faster than most can even react. Hundreds of crewmembers are sucked into the void of space to die without EVA suits.

“AHHAHAHAHA! That always gets me!” James gleefully exclaims.

“Shit! All power to the shield! All sides!” Captain Kraiss commands.

No sooner than his crew react, the ship to their port side explodes, a result of damage done by the debris of the previous

explosion. With their shields up and protecting the entirety of the hull, the debris slams into the barrier and flies away, leaving the Deliverance unharmed. Though several turrets point at them, causing Kraiss to order evasive maneuvers, the Lomboko never fires. A strange sparking is seen from a portion of the craft and the turrets suddenly retract.

“Damn it... Consider yourself lucky, you little shits! This isn’t over!” James snarls.

Mere seconds after his statement, the Lomboko engages hyperdrive, entering a warp bubble and disappearing into a singularity, leaving the Deliverance behind with the wreckage of her sister ships.

“I... Wha-...” Captain Kraiss stammers.

He visibly reels from the sight of the wreckage of the fleet, which they now must focus on.

“... Check for survivors... Send a distress call to the Sol Marines...” He pitifully orders.

“Yes, Sir.” A crewmember quietly responds.

“How... How was that ship so powerful?!” Kellan gasps.

“I was under the impression that class of vessel was not capable of such destruction.” Drayusa remarks.

“They aren’t.” Stefan answers.

“Nor that they had modern hull materials or even force shields or generators for force shields.” Fizona adds.

“They don’t.” August replies.

“I’ve never been so terrified.” Kellan admits.

“Neither have I.” Sihl’ Ahzen remarks, leaning gently against him.

“At least we’re alive.” Ayanda interjects.

“Irony, isn’t it?” Kraiss suddenly poses.

The SI9 team turn back to the captain, who stares at his central console as if it weren’t even there. He turns his eyes upward, looking in their direction, his head ever pointing at the console.

“We’re on the Deliverance. The second time in her history that she was the sole survivor.” He explains.

“Well, thank you, Deliverance.” Sihl’ Ahzen says, petting a railing.

For the next several hours, the Deliverance floats through the debris, scouring for any signs of survivors. Unfortunately, the Divest, the only other ship to remain remotely intact, is void of any meaningful life signs. Scanning the destroyer revealed little in the way of salvage; nearly every tier was penetrated, quickly evacuated of air by the space around them. Even if any of the crew inside had been wearing EVA suits, which is not common practice for military vessels, primarily due to their restrictive nature, there’s no guaranteeing that they could even be safely extracted from the mangled hull before they run out of precious oxygen.

Regardless, captain Kraiss orders thorough searches with droids and crew wearing EVA suits and mobility packs, harnesses that contain small air ports for adjusting direction in space. Nothing comes of it. For the next day, the SI9 team sit about the ship, knowing that they’ve failed once again.

“Are you busy?” A soft voice asks.

August glances up, looking at Sihl' Ahzen as she stands halfway down the hall, speaking with Kellan in the doorway of his quarters.

"Uh, no, Sihl. Actually, I was just about to check on you." He answers.

"Really?!"

"Yeah." He assures her.

"That makes me happy." She says, her tail whipping about.

"Did you, uhm... Want to come in? J-just for a minute?" He nervously asks.

Nodding quite happily before stepping inside, Sihl' Ahzen disappears into Kellan's room, the door closing behind her. Several seconds later, the light changes colors as it locks. August silently chuckles.

"So much for the rules." He says with a sigh, glancing down to his feet.

"What rules?"

Looking over to his right, Fizona approaches him from down the hall. Sitting on a bench at a T junction, he was spending some time alone, near the crew quarters.

"Oh, just number three. The one that nearly had my ass." He answers.

"Who's consorting?" Fizona's brow furls as she takes a seat beside him.

"Kellan and Sihl." He motions down the hall with his head.

"Really?! I did not realize!" She exclaims almost excitedly.

"Yeah. I'm going to assume the locked bedroom door has altered their status from 'associates' to 'lovers'." He continues.

"That seems to be a common trait among our collective races."

"What do you mean?" He turns to her.

"After surviving a battle, grateful females would pounce upon their mates and enjoy them as soon as they were home, often without even waiting for their males to enter." Fizona begins, a little smile on her face.

"I see." An embarrassed August remarks with wide eyes.

"It's called 'the joyous mourning', as half would shed tears while the others... Well..."

"I get it..."

"It seems that the desire for companionship after surviving a dire situation, such as our near destruction, is common amongst all of our races. I saw no less than four pairs of males and females slipping away into rooms, many in the throes of passion." She continues.

"Really?!" He asks with surprise.

"Yes." She nods.

"Huh... Well, they'll make it five... Assuming they don't get caught and fired, I wonder if that's going to make the job weird for them?" He thinks aloud.

"It wouldn't for me." Fizona replies.

"Well... I can't really say that I blame them. Near death does make you think." He murmurs.

"About what?"

Glancing over to her, they look each other in the eyes. August suddenly looks around, as if the mere thought could see him punished. As his head turns back toward Fizona, he sees that she's leaning closer. Taking his growing worry as a cue, she slides even closer on the bench, their legs touching. No sooner than she reaches out and gently grips his shoulder, he bolts up from the bench, standing beside

her. The sudden and almost startled appearance of his motion disheartens her. She's taken great care not to overstep typical Solakus boundaries, something difficult for her as a female Kanorakus, unused to such restraint.

Looking once again down every hall from where he stands, he feels an awful dichotomy. He's done everything in his power to stay on the straight and narrow. As a child, he never purposefully did wrong, never violating his parent's rules. His entire life has been by the books, but this situation tests his mettle. He's certainly found her form attractive, as it's nearly identical to that of any other Voeldahn woman. With a dense hide more akin to a dolphin, and the appearance of a raptor, she is otherwise much like one of his own kind; he's sustained a purely physical desire for her since they've met.

Turning his eyes toward her, he's horrified by the expression he sees. With sorrowful eyes, she stares towards his feet, her lips curled into a frown. She appears on the brink of tears, and his guilt erases his desire to obey the rules. Kneeling down, he rests a hand on her leg, though that doesn't gain her attention. After calling out her name and receiving no answer, he rests a hand beneath her chin, gently yet forcibly turning her head toward him.

"Fizona... It's not what you think."

"Isn't it? You don't desire me at all. I repulse you, don't I?" She asks with a whimper.

"No, you don't!" He exclaims quite loudly. "You have no idea how badly I..."

Fizona's eyes evolve, instantaneously shifting from a look of sorrow to that of hope.

"... I just don't want to break the rules... But you... You're making it difficult." He admits.

“Really?! You’re not lying to please me, are you?!” She asks.

“I don’t like lying. I’m telling it like it is.” He insists.

“Oh, good! That makes me happy!” She exclaims, lunging forward.

Pressing her chest firmly against his, he can feel her ample breasts, the firm yet soft globes smooshing against him. As she nuzzles his cheek with her snout, her tail whipping from side to side, he cannot help but hold her in return. The bronze colored bristles that run along her spine are long and soft, far softer than he remembered when she gave him one. Fizona controls their rigidity, both consciously and subconsciously; he knows from the studies conducted by Rakshasa aboard the Azilian that the softer the bristles feel, the more receptive the female is at that moment. His resolve melts as he strokes the now almost fur-like bristles.

“Maybe.” He suddenly says.

“What?” She asks in confusion.

“After you gave me one of your bristles, you gave me until after black mode was finished to answer you. The answer is ‘maybe’. Let’s see how we feel after this first.” He explains.

“After what?”

Standing to his feet, he takes her by the hand, leading the taller Kanorakus woman away from the T junction and down the hall. At first, she wondered if they were going to slip away into his quarters, but as they pass August’s room entirely, she grows more perplexed.

“Where are we going?” She asks.

“First, to get something to eat. After that, who knows? Let’s see where this leads us.”

"And what is the point of all of this?" She wonders, still struggling to comprehend his actions.

"I want to get to know you. Learn about what makes you tick." He answers.

"There are biology holotapes for that."

"That's not what I mean." He says, stopping in his tracks. "Listen, Fizona..." He takes a breath, turning to face her. "Our cultures aren't the same; we have wildly different ways to approach this. I can tell that you're serious, and that trying to keep me comfortable has been hard for you, but bear with me. I want to learn about you. Your past, what you like, and what matters to you. That's important to me."

She cocks her head as he speaks, her lips curling into a little grin that grows wider with each word he speaks. She can feel a warmth in her chest, his genuine interest both intriguing and appealing to her. Though she's researched Solakus courting methods during her free time, Fizona finds herself appreciating the more in-depth approach that they often take when choosing long-term partners. This is something her race has never done, and it's a refreshing change. The fact that August hasn't accepted her advances right away tells her that he doesn't want to merely enjoy her body, something that she's been hoping for.

"I'm *certainly* attracted to you, and I like you on the surface, but I don't want to just jump into bed with someone I'm not actually familiar with, so to speak. Substance over volume."

"This sounds like the Solakus courting method called 'dating'." She remarks.

"It is."

"And the rules?" She reminds him.

"You said it yourself. Black mode will be over soon enough. That's enough time to get to know each other better." He answers.

"... What do we tell everyone else?"

"That we're having lunch and taking a walk. Two SI9 agents stuck on the same ship, staving off boredom with company. Tomorrow, it'll just be us 'talking'." August explains.

"Hm... Cover stories work best when they have hints of truth."

"So?"

Looking down at him, she considers the possibilities. Though she was hoping for a more immediate result, the fact that he's finally reciprocating at all makes her exceptionally happy.

"I feel like steak." She answers, her lips curling into a grin.

Without delay, they pick up their pace, walking together toward the Deliverance's galley. Initiating small talk, August begins by asking for details about her personal life, sharing his own in kind. He knows that she was hoping for more, and though he could have given in, he reminds himself that going about it this way will give them more substance. As a member of SI9, Fizona is guaranteed a seat aboard Unity as well. When black mode is over, if this works out, he'll have much more to look forward to than mere adventure.

"I can't believe this!" James growls.

"It's been overhauled one too many times. If we push her now, we might be laid out for a while." The engineer answers.

"How long is 'a while'?" The young Woods asks.

"How long is 'forever'?" The engineer retorts.

Standing in the generator room, James looks over the equipment with his son by his side.

"Let this be a lesson to you. No matter how badass you are, and no matter how much you want them to know it before they die... Just kill the fuckers and be done with it! I let my pride get the best of me and now we're going to need to call those fucking Scrappers again. Low down, scheming little pieces of shit..."

"Yes, dad." The younger Woods nods.

"Sir? Are you busy?" A voice asks over the intercom.

"No! I'm sunning myself on a Martian beach! I have all the time in the fucking universe!" James facetiously answers.

"Right... We have a call. They're asking for 'captain Woods'." The voice continues.

"Captain?! I'm a fucking *Admiral!* ... Well?! Who's calling?!"

"A 'Miss Corova'." The voice answers.

"Oh boy... This *will* be interesting. I'll be right up!" James chirps.

Dashing up several tiers with a childlike glee, he soon finds himself sprinting toward the bridge. Entering the bridge, he sees Miss Corova, a bland, somewhat sullen expression on her face as she looks away from the screen.

"Why, hello there, Miss Corova! You're looking *aroused*. What a wonderful *pleasure* it is to see you!" James teases.

"Damn it! That's the wrong captain! I meant the young one, you idiots!" Miss Corova snaps.

"Well! Aren't we petulant today?" James laughs.

"I made sure the funds transferred to your account, now connect me to the young captain... Privately!" She demands.

"Looks like someone made an impression." James smirks.

"Fuck you!"

Amused by her feistiness rather than enraged, he decides to comply. Before transferring her call, he uses the intercom in front of her.

"Son? Helloooo! Son! Pick up, pick up, pick up, pick up, pick up, pick up, pick uuuup!"

"What?! What the hell is it?!" The young Woods growls.

"Find a private place to accept a video call." James replies.

"Oh... Patch it through to my room."

"Right away." James chuckles.

He waves at Miss Corova's image before patching her through, being certain to give her little time to reply. Sitting on his bed, having returned to his private quarters aboard the Lomboko after leaving the generator room, Miss Corova's hologram appears on the far wall. She immediately looks surprised, gazing upon him for a moment. Sitting upright, the young Woods can't be sure what her expression indicates. Shame? Rage? Pain? Is she surprised that she had the nerve to speak to him, or that he accepted her call after what he's done?

"Did you decorate that room yourself?" She finally asks.

"Uh... Huh?!"

"It's nice!" She chirps.

"Thanks... I did."

"I'm sure you're wondering why I'm calling *you*, of all people." She begins.

"It crossed my mind." He coolly remarks.

"I just wanted to say that... I know why you did what you did, you bastard, and I won't *ever* forget it."

Woods raises a brow at her words. She almost coos as she speaks the final few. Unable to resist the urge, he leans back on his bed as if completely unphased.

“Neither will I.” He winks.

“... Do you have a first name?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“What does that matter?! I want your first name and a direct number!” She snaps back.

“Woah, bitch! You only wanted my name earlier!”

“So?” She shrugs her shoulders.

“You call me and then start making demands like I’m one of your fucking drones? I’ll give you whatever I damn well please!”

“Mmm... And what would that be?” She innocently asks.

Stepping into the bathroom, shortly after ending his conversation with Miss Corova, the young Woods stands before his sink. Looking at himself in the mirror, he pauses for a moment before slowly disrobing.

“I can’t believe I gave them to her.” He chuckles. “I wonder if she’s going to start calling me all of the time now? What will those conversations even sound like?” He thinks aloud.

Removing his long-coat, he prepares to strip off the rest of his clothing before showering but pauses when he sees something strange on the shiny, black garment. Looking closely, he discovers several crimson bristles from Miss Corova’s back. How did these find their way onto his long-coat? They don’t often fall out, nor does he recall setting his long-coat on her bed, though he might have and simply doesn’t remember. As he ponders the circumstances of their arrival, he chuckles when he realizes where they must’ve come from.

During the rape, Miss Corova wriggled and writhed beneath him, her tail whipping about ecstatically. In retrospect, it looked less like fighting an assaulter and more like pleasure from an excellent lover. The friction against her bed could have pulled out a few bristles, and the hard thumping of the frame and mattress bounced them off and onto the floor. When he dropped his long-coat on the floor to comfort her, it could've picked them up from there. Impulsively reaching out, he touches the bristles.

“Wow...” He murmurs, rubbing them against his skin. “These are *really soft!!!*”