

Unity

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode Ten: Check

The soles of his boots click on the metal plates of the floor as Draiman Woods enters Miss Corova's space station. Returning for her, as much as for himself, Draiman steadies himself against a wall while waiting for the subtle vertigo to subside. He looks down the hall as he hears others approaching. Draiman's eyes swiftly scan the voluptuous frame of the black and red swirled Kanorakus woman. Her long, tapering tail, thick at the base but pointy at the tip, sways gracefully with each step. Her crimson bristles rise faintly as her ruby eyes take in his form, a smile spreading across her lips. Beside her, Sashuna, her assistant, follows along.

"Is there something wrong? You aren't on the schedule and we have no inbound orders." Sashuna speaks to him, glancing at a datapad.

"He's authorized." Miss Corova quickly interjects.

"An unscheduled meeting?" Sashuna turns to her leader.

"It's, uh, classified."

"Yes, Miss Corova." Sashuna replies, quickly updating the schedule.

"It's nice to see you." Draiman says, stepping up to Miss Corova.

"And you as well." She leans closer. "Sashuna?"

"Yes, Miss Corova?"

"We'll be meeting for an unknown amount of time. We are *not* to be disturbed." She orders.

"Yes, Miss Corova." Sashuna respectfully bows her head.

Taking Draiman by the hand, Miss Corova leads him down the hall and toward her private quarters. Sashuna, already sworn to secrecy, is flabbergasted that her leader would so readily meet with the man who previously bound and raped her. It being an unscheduled meeting is even more surprising; nothing happens here without due process. Glancing down at Miss Corova's fingers as they pass by her, she notes how her leader squeezes the human's hand, her thumb rubbing his flesh as she clutches him.

"Right this way!" Miss Corova chirps.

"Someone's eager." Draiman remarks.

"Well, we have much to discuss." She retorts.

Disappearing around a corner, Sashuna blinks in a stunned silence. After taking a moment to digest the bizarre sight that's unraveled before her, she heads for the control room to issue the orders. The door slides open with a subtle swooshing and she steps inside.

"Hello, Sashuna." Several females greet her.

"Hello. Today, we're prepping the rest of the Marionettes for another mission. I'm certain Miss Corova will wish to send them herself. Oh! Which reminds me, she's not to be disturbed at the moment; she's meeting with that Slaver captain. Some sort of business meeting."

"Understood, Sashuna." The females reply.

Taking a seat beside a female who types away at a console, Sashuna pours herself a fresh cup of coffee.

“Well, if there’s one thing we can thank the unholy beast’s spawn for, it’s caffeine.” She comments before taking a sip.

“Indeed. We couldn’t fight for the mother goddess without it!” A female chirps.

“... Do you think that our enemies ever find themselves in similar circumstances?” One woman asks.

“I don’t know. I rarely dwell on them.” Sashuna replies.

Looking down at the unwrapped foil package, Stefan carefully sniffs the strange loaf, Tyrian purple in color. Turning his eyes up to Drayusa, who sits beside him in the headquarters lounge, she subtly nods her head. Bringing the loaf to his lips, he prepares himself before taking a bite. His eyes grow wide, briefly glancing down to the fluffy cake.

“Wow! This is awesome!” He exclaims with his mouth full.

“Do you really like it?!” Drayusa asks, her face lighting up.

“Yeah! What is this, anyway?”

“Hanak cake. It’s made from the ground bits of several petrified game animals and flour native to Kanor.” She explains.

“Huh. Game animals?”

“Uh huh!” She nods.

“Had you told me what was in it first, I’d honestly have been too scared to try it, but I really like it.” He remarks. “Where did you get it?”

“I made it for you.” She answers. “It’s a traditional dish for the mother goddess’s first festival, but many bake it throughout the year.”

“I can see why. Thanks for sharing this, Dray, but you didn’t need to go through the trouble.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble!” She assures him, scooting closer.

Sharing a loving gaze, the clandestine couple quickly turn away, playing off their interaction as the rest of the SI9 team enter.

“Hi, August.” Both Drayusa and Stefan greet him.

August watches the couple for a moment before walking into another room without ever once greeting them back.

“Well now... I wonder what’s wrong with him.” Stefan remarks.

Kellan, Sihl’ Ahzen and Ayanda follow behind, stepping into the headquarters. Drayusa lowers her head as Ayanda glares at her; Ayanda’s rage is barely contained. Somehow, the others manage not to notice.

“What are you two doing here so early?” Sihl’ Ahzen asks.

“Catching up on sleep. I mean, work.” Stefan quips.

“Oh, because you always do so much here.” She teases.

“What’s that?” Kellan points at the Hanak cake.

“Some classic Kanorakus food.”

“You like that stuff?!” Sihl’ Ahzen asks in surprise.

“He’s open minded.” Drayusa quickly defends him.

“Besides, she’s going to try a cheeseburger next.” Stefan quips.

“Cheese burger?” Drayusa cocks her head.

Ayanda clears her throat, interrupting their banter. She waves all but Drayusa over to her, issuing them their orders. Assigning them

tasks, most of them meaningless, she sends them away and out of the building. No sooner than the doors close, Ayanda grabs Drayusa by her upper arms. Her lips peel away from her razor-sharp teeth in a furious scowl, her brow furled.

“August has informed me. He’s in charge of finding the spy, though I don’t know why he isn’t turning you in.”

“Miss Ayanda, I-”

“Shut up! I can’t abide traitors... He’s showing you mercy, so it’s out of my hands, but just know that you’ve lost my trust and respect, nor do I believe you deserve a ticket aboard Unity. Until this is over and SI9 is dissolved, you can impress the hell out of me by doing absolutely everything we tell you to. Help bring your little friends some well-deserved military justice.”

“... And what about after SI9 is dissolved?” Drayusa sheepishly asks.

“Afterward, I won’t be your superior anymore. August, however, has asked for my continued silence. On my honor, I won’t ever reveal your horrible secret, but when we’re on board that ship, you’d better steer clear of me.” Ayanda sternly warns.

“Alright you two, knock it off! We’ve got work to do!” August barks from the other room.

Ayanda steps backward into the room, only turning around once Drayusa is no longer in her line of sight. Her visible distrust disheartens Drayusa, who’s already crushed beneath the weight of her many mistakes. How she wishes that she could turn back the chronograph and alter every road leading her toward this point. Only the thought of being with Stefan and a chance to start again with him eases her mind. Collecting herself, Drayusa eventually follows Ayanda inside. Standing around a small table, a computer terminal rests atop it, a holographic screen hovering in the air.

“So...” Drayusa murmurs.

“So, unless you know the coordinates for the Goddess’s Children’s base...”

Drayusa shakes her head.

“Then we need a plan to lure them out or track them down. Have you ever met with their leaders, or any of them for that matter?” August asks.

“No. I have only spoken through encrypted lines.” She answers.

“Do you know roughly how long it takes them in hyperdrive before they reach Earth or Mars?” Ayanda asks.

“No, though I do have an idea as to where their base is.”

With their curiosity peaked, August and Ayanda wrap around the table, just before and on either side of her.

“Where?!”

“It’s within Sol, somewhere in an asteroid belt and disguised as a large chunk of rock.” Drayusa answers.

“Which belt? Is it the solar asteroid belt, or Saturn’s?” August presses.

“Saturn.”

“Well, that narrows it down quite a bit.” He remarks.

“From what I’m told, as a front-line base, it isn’t very large or with a substantial crew.” Drayusa explains.

“Saturn alone is still fifty times larger than Kanor, and Earth is even smaller.” Ayanda remarks.

“I know.” August sighs.

“It would take a long time to scour the belt for a small base.”

“Yeah, I know.”

They sit and think, looking over a chart of Saturn, her moons and the ringlets. While August and Ayanda debate where would be a good place to start searching, Drayusa ponders a thought. Looking down to her V.I. bracelet, she turns her head up, looking to her teammates.

“What if we traced a transmission?” She suddenly suggests.

“That would be a great, if it worked that way.” Ayanda replies.

“Wait a minute... That might be an option.” August remarks.

“It’s such a small signal!”

“But it’s a base. A base transmitter would be more powerful, even a small one. While it isn’t a big signal, if we knew where the base *wasn’t*, we could narrow down the search pattern.” He thinks aloud.

“Check off the locations where they wouldn’t want to hide, send Sol Marine ships to scan the viable areas, and then have her call in.” Ayanda joins in the brainstorm.

“... I’ll contact the Directors.” August grins.

A little more than an hour after he’d landed, Draiman Woods and Miss Corova recover from their exhaustive meeting. His breathing heavy, Draiman’s eyes turn toward the female Kanorakus, watching her intently. Her expression strikes him, peaking his curiosity.

“Is something wrong?” Draiman asks.

“What do you mean?” Miss Corova replies.

“I mean, you don’t look too pleased; I was pretty certain you would be, especially after all of that.” He winks.

Miss Corova turns her ruby eyes up to him. Lying in bed and curled beneath Draiman’s arm, she clings tightly to his body, her claws gently scratching his pale flesh. Finished with their prolonged

rendezvous, their bodies glisten like the silken sheets that cover her mattress. With an arm wrapped around her and pulled against her back, his hand on her side, Draiman rather tenderly strokes her dense, shimmering hide with his fingertips. In a moment that would otherwise be quite romantic, the leader of the terrorist base struggles to answer her newfound lover, the son of the ruler of the Slaver's Union.

"Anytime you feel like talking." He grins.

"I'm fine. Everything is fine." She softly replies.

"Are you sure? I'll give you a one-time offer to confide in me, before my patience runs out; I mean, we're all criminals here." Draiman chuckles.

Turning her eyes away, Miss Corova shifts her head. Resting it beneath his chin and with her pointy ear against his chest, she listens to his heartbeat, reflecting on their situation. Though she's one of the high congregation, she's committed a cardinal sin. No matter how she slices it, the entirety of her behavior with Draiman is unacceptable, yet she's drawn to what her own faith calls 'wretched masculinity'. So great is their hatred for it, her race began attempts to breed it out of their males' millennia ago. Reaching out with his free hand, Draiman strokes her head, petting the eight-inch bristles which have become fur-like in their softness; she cannot hide this display of receptivity from him.

"Fine. Don't tell me." He sighs.

His fingers run through her long bristles, moving toward the side of her head. As he strokes her cheek, her fingers flex and she pulls even tighter, her arms squeezing his trunk impulsively. A feeling of disgust bubbles within her. Disgust that she's allowing herself to be sullied by a male of a lesser species, disgust that she's allowed him to potentially breed with her, and disgust that she's enjoyed every blissful moment of it. What would have otherwise been a brutal assault unlocked a deviance within her own sexuality; she's dominated

males numerous times and enjoyed it, but the feeling of being overpowered was indescribably wonderful to her.

Having now experienced it for a second time with her new lover, she knows that it's not an aberration; she enjoys being at his mercy, and indulging him as his subservient partner. Somehow, it makes her feel more feminine. However, she's even more shocked by Draiman himself. The vibrant, human Solakus Slaver, doesn't prove her religious teachings to be true as he pets her with an almost bizarre tenderness. Even his somewhat blasé offer, allowing her to speak her mind, shows an interest that she wasn't expecting. Even if he only sees her as a purely sexual partner, he still sees her as a partner, showing her far more respect than she's ever shown the males of her race.

These direct contradictions to an ideology she's given her life to collide in her brain. As her attraction to Draiman grows, so does her disgust with herself, as well as her own faction. Unsure of what to do, the nude Kanorakus merely lay there with her human partner, cuddling with him in silence. A familiar chirping draws their attention away from the moment, however, this time it isn't Miss Corova's bracelet that's interrupting them.

"Damn. It's my dad..." He sighs. "Hey. What's up?" Draiman asks, answering the voice-only call.

"Hey, son! Just checkin' in on mah baby-boy!" James chuckles.

"Well, I'm fine, but I'm in the middle of something *very important*. Can't you bother Vivian instead?"

Miss Corova's fingers grip him a little tighter, her thin lips curling into a faint smile as he speaks. For the past several minutes, all they've done is snuggle. Does he truly consider that important? Her heart warms at the prospect.

"I would, but your sister's right here."

"Hi, bitch!" A shrill female voice exclaims.

"So... Where'd you run off too? Without permission..." James' voice turns dark.

"Oh, just for a little ride." Draiman replies.

"Yeah? Just a short cruise? A little spin around the block?" James mockingly asks.

"You were my age once... And since when did I ever need permission to leave home with *my* ship?!" Draiman retorts.

"I appreciate a good, hard ride as much as the next bastard; I have no problem with that. What I have a problem with is you taking your gunboat out to visit your whore, while we're trapped, *without a working hyperdrive!*" James snarls.

"Hey, watch it, old man!" Draiman growls.

"Oh-ho!" Vivian chuckles.

"Aww, did I strike a nerve?" James sneers.

"Just watch what you call her!"

"That's a yes!" Vivian laughs.

"Damn, son! Was she *that* good?" James cackles.

The laughter of his father and sister enrage Draiman.

"Fuck you! I'll be back when I feel like it!"

"Oh, come on, don't be a little pu-"

Promptly terminating the call, Draiman then takes the rather drastic step of deactivating his V.I. bracelet. Ever since Miss Corova and her kind were discovered, becoming close to the other races and adopting their technology, she's never known any Solakus, Irakus or Kanorakus to *ever* shut off their bracelet. Taking it from his wrist, he

tosses it aside, entirely missing the nightstand as it falls to the floor with a metallic clank. She sits up, watching him intently as he lies back and becomes comfortable again. Turning to her, he motions with a hand for her to return.

“Why’d you do that?” She asks, sitting beside him.

“That’s obvious, isn’t it? I didn’t want to hear them anymore, and I knew he’d call back.”

“No, I mean... Why did you risk coming out here, just to see me? It’s obviously caused you problems, and you have no obligation to me.” She clarifies.

“Where’s this coming from?” He asks with a furled brow.

“I just...” She hesitates, averting her eyes.

Draiman sits up, turning his upper body to face her. A hand reaches out, resting on her cheek. She closes her eyes and turns her head, pressing her face into his palm. Applying firm pressure, he turns her head back toward him. Opening her eyelids, her ruby spheres stare into his, their gazes locking. Leaning closer, his nose caresses the front of her snout, between her nostrils. His fingers coil, gently stroking her cheek.

“You went through a lot of trouble to track me down after what I did to you. Most wouldn’t have. I gave you what you asked for and even came back. You wanted me to, and so did I... You and I both know why I got angry when he insulted you just now. There’s something about you, Corova...” He says rather softly.

“There’s something about you, too.” She murmurs.

“So stop worrying and let me hold you.”

“Okay.” She says softly.

Wrapping his arms around her, he carefully pulls her back, the pair stretching out on her bed. With her head on his shoulder, she nuzzles his cheek. Draiman, having taken the time to research the Kanorakus more thoroughly during the flight to her base, now understands the telltale signs. Feeling the softness of her bristles on his arm and her customary form of affection, he turns his head and plants a kiss on the lips of the black and red swirled female. Her long, tapering tail flicks in response, thudding atop the mattress. Miss Corova's startlingly innocent gaze as she looks up to him strikes him as unbelievably adorable.

Rarely does he find himself compromised. Their admittedly lewd video calls, interspersed with genuinely meaningful conversation, along with their passionate sessions together, have begun reeling him in. He already feels close enough to defend her against his father, something he couldn't have imagined the day they first met. Now, however, he occasionally imagines her tucked underneath his arm and aboard his ship or walking beside him throughout the halls of the Lomboko.

"See? This is much better." He says with a smile.

"It is, though I feel like it shouldn't be." She remarks.

"Why not?!" He asks, mildly offended.

"... The mother goddess."

"You're worried about that?" Draiman chuckles.

"It's my faith."

"It's misleading." He retorts.

"How so?"

"... Is this really what we should be talking about?"

Looking into her eyes, she waits expectantly for him to answer. Eager to hear his opinion, Miss Corova subtly nods. Struggling with the

dichotomy, she's desperate for an answer, hopeful that Draiman will present her with one.

"Alright... Well, when you scrape off the veneer, we're all pretty much the same; a bunch of self-righteous monsters trying to justify ourselves and get whatever it is that we want. Even those creepy Dezonians follow a similar pattern of self-fulfillment, albeit without the usual 'lust' angle. When we *somehow* manage to put aside all of our bullshit, it's usually because we're helping or placating someone we care about." He begins.

"I suppose..."

"Your faith takes things to the extreme; it certainly isn't the first. Since I'm not a Kanorakus I'm supposed to be some inferior demon spawn, and as a male I'd be lucky to be your private property."

"We're taught it's how she favors her daughters."

"But why doesn't she favor her sons? What made them so undeserving? They can't control their gender before birth. Punishment for a crime that's out of their hands?" He snickers.

"Females are chosen to rule for their passion; men think with the heartless logic of a machine, while women are warmth. The mother goddess prefers the warmth of the heart." She retorts, falling back on her religious teachings.

"The mother goddess is just another means of control that dominates others for their own gain. *Some* religions are altruistic – Buddhism and Christianity come to mind – but this one isn't. It just gives the Kanorakus women an excuse to rule the world, and it didn't make it any better. As I recall, you were knocking on the door of extinction because of your 'passion'."

Backed into a corner, Miss Corova feels herself reaching the crossroads. In her mind, she stands at a fork with a sign pointing in each direction. One says 'faith', while the other says 'Draiman'. She's never felt like this before, and it's entirely his fault; she decides to listen to her new lover, choosing his path instead.

"I can't deny your points. You've certainly disproven many of her teachings already. While you can be a brute-

"Hey, you like it!" He grins.

"I do..." She sheepishly admits. "And while you can be that way, you're warmer than many females I know. The more I dwell on it, the more I realize that both genders are equally warm and equally cold."

"Thinking for yourself is a godsend, so to speak." He remarks, softly stroking her face.

"If you don't mind my asking, do you have a faith?"

"I've researched many, and I know most of the backgrounds and facts about the religions of our collective races, but I'm not picking any one in particular." He answers.

"But don't you have a code? Something to give you a foundation?" She presses him.

"The Slaver's Union has only one rule: Able-bodied adults only. No children, elders, or the mentally or physically disabled are to be targeted. *Period.* Aside from that, my parents gave us a second rule to live by, unrelated to the business. 'Family over all'. Your spouse, kids, siblings and parents take priority over pretty much everything, even business. Those are the only rules I really live by, and it's served me well. Everything else is just an unnecessary complication to an already difficult life."

Listening to him speak, she cannot deny his logic or his reasoning. For the first time in her existence, she finds herself truly questioning the mother goddess and her teachings. Though the foundation crumbles beneath her clawed, three-toed feet, Draiman has already prepared a new one for her to stand on. The disgust she felt earlier subsides as Miss Corova makes her choice; clearly her ideology is flawed, so why persist? Draiman isn't the inferior sub-creature that she was always told he would be. Contrary, he's an elegant, capable being that she can now freely admit to finding both physically and mentally appealing.

Her attraction grows, as does the burning in her heart. Miss Corova will no longer bind herself to her admittedly narrow-minded cultural and religious mores. She gives whatever feelings she already has for the human Solakus free reign to flourish. Recalling his words and how swiftly he defended her against his own blood, she can safely say that he's developed some level of feelings for her as well. Hopefully, he will do the same.

"I like those rules." She begins, nuzzling his cheek. "I can learn so much from you, if you're willing to teach me." She adds, before giving him a lick.

"I don't mind being your private tutor." He replies, kissing her lips and snout.

"Please..." She coos.

Nuzzling his face, she buries her snout between his neck and shoulder, her hands gripping tightly to his biceps. With his temperature rising, Draiman is swept up in yet another moment. He pushes her gently yet firmly onto her back, climbing atop and quickly mounting her. Her tail runs between his legs as he positions himself. Gazing up at him, the pair stare into each other's eyes. With her breathing turning heavy, she narrows her eyes and brings her head closer. Meeting her halfway, they share affection in the manner customary to the Solakus, kissing over and over again.

"Would you ever want to come back with me and meet my family?" He suddenly asks.

Miss Corova is briefly taken aback. She never expected such a turn of events, though all things considered, none of this was predictable. With her voice stolen by the shock, she grins and silently nods, before pulling him in and holding tightly. Her claws gently stroke the flesh of his back, only to rake across him as he begins.

“Oh no... That’s not good...” Sashuna murmurs.

The women in the control room stare in horror as several holoscreens show a delayed news report detailing the failed attack on the launching modules. As they look upon the screens with horror, a V.I. bracelet chirps. With only one use for that particular device, Sashuna answers it.

“Yes?”

“It’s Sway. I need to talk to Miss Corova...”