

Unity

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode Three: Vexatious

“Why do you look so nervous? We’ve already done this before.”

Stopping in his tracks, the young male turns as if to continue his pacing. Glaring at his compatriot, he merely shakes his head and continues his endless and unproductive hike.

“Is it because of the last one? Is that what it is? ... Speak to me, Korazhu!”

Korazhu, the young Kanorakus male, glares at his companion.

“That Marionette worked perfectly, and we’re set to buy more for her. Everything will be fine.”

“Somehow, I doubt that.” Korazhu replies, closing his icy blue eyes.

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s hard to explain, Zhenashu...”

“Try. I’m curious.”

Korazhu sits on a bench, his tapering tail flopping to one side as he slumps backward against the nearby wall. Staring straight ahead, he appears deep in thought.

"I know it went well, but I can't help but feel that this was a mistake. These methods we're using... The people we're dealing with. They aren't the kind of people we should associate with our cause. Perhaps if we-"

"If we what?!" A female voice snaps.

"Miss Corova!" They both exclaim, Korazhu springing to his feet.

"Do you have an idea about how we should operate now?! I did not know our males existed for such a purpose!" She snarls, slowly stomping toward them.

"I apologize. I just fear for the clan if we continue this path." Korazhu bows his head.

"Allow me to deal with that..."

Corova strokes the underside of his chin with a sharp claw, applying gentle pressure to force him to turn his head up to her. Slightly taller than him, her gaze softens and her eight-inch, crimson bristles lower, losing their rigidity. Ruby red eyes burn through him like lasers, her black hide with red swirls glistening in the soft light of the room.

"Never forget that the mother goddess created us all, Korazhu, with females in her likeness. You exist because it is her will; you exist only for breeding, entertainment, and war." Corova softly scolds him.

"Yes, Miss Corova." He sheepishly replies, turning his eyes away.

"Be a good boy and allow the females to think for you." She coos, her fingers sliding down his neck. "But if you decide to undermine us again..." She grips his throat tightly. "It will be your last mistake. The mother goddess will forgive you, but *I won't.*"

Pushing him back, she snickers as he cowers. Suddenly, the door slides open and a female associate enters.

"You have an important call, Miss Corova!"

The younger female places a hacked V.I. bracelet into a base near one corner. Pressing a few buttons, she begins a video call.

"Yes?" Corova asks the holographic figure before her.

"Unfortunately, your latest shipment was intercepted. I'll send another, in honor of our arrangement, but it will take a little time to reach you." The man speaks in a matter-of-fact tone.

"What?! How did that happen?!" Corova growls.

"Simple. The lawful authorities somehow discovered the drop and intercepted it. I've already made arrangements to correct the error, and the replacement shipment is processing." The man casually answers.

"This is unacceptable! This will delay our immediate plans!" She snarls, bearing her teeth.

"So? Delay them." The man coolly replies.

"Delay?! ... I realize that you were unfortunate enough to be born a male, but I know your mind is at least capable of understanding the importance of our work! Delays are unacceptable!"

"... Tell your men to leave." The man grumbles.

"... Why?" Corova raises a brow.

"Now... If you don't, you'll most likely regret it."

Obeying the black marketeer, to her underlings' surprise, Corova shoos away Korazhu and Zhenashu; only her female associate remains behind. The holographic figure watches with narrowed eyes as the door slides shut behind them.

“Don’t *ever* speak to me like I’m one of your spineless, beta-male drones! I’m not the pushover that they are; I’ll rape you to death if you so much as frustrate me!” The man growls.

Corova is so taken aback that she physically steps away from the hologram, though she knows in the back of her mind that the volatile male image is not a threat.

“Your cause is as important to me as the shit I took this morning. Your credits are all that I care about, and as my best customer as of late, I’ll give your little outburst a pass. You will *not* receive another. Don’t *ever* forget who you’re speaking too, little girl.”

“I-I’m sorry.” The flabbergasted Corova chokes out.

“It’s fine!” The man chirps. “Anyway, I’m sending my best man on this next mission; he never fails. Be ready with the credits, and have a nice day. Oh, and please show him some respect. His temper is far worse and his fuse much shorter than mine. Goodbye!”

Ending the call, Corova stands in shock. Beside her, the younger female associate glances to her superior.

“I’ve never seen a male speak like that to a female before.” She murmurs.

“The Solakus developed differently. Their males did not evolve subservience as ours did... I’m certain he would carry out his threat were we in the same room. Awful brutes.” Corova softly answers.

“Well, perhaps...” The associate pauses.

Glancing toward the younger female, Corova looks expectantly. Realizing that her superior is watching, the young woman bows her head and stares at her feet.

"Never mind."

"No, please! Speak, Sashuna. I would like to hear what you have to say." Corova urges her.

"Well... I've heard some of the males call these people devils. Perhaps they are correct and we should not deal with them?"

"A male?! Correct?!" Corova snickers. "Is that possible?"

"Begging your pardon, Miss Corova, but when the Solakus discovered us, we were in the midst of a decades old war. It would have caused our extinction had we not stopped when we did. *Females* started the war; the first few outspoken critics of it were all *males*."

"You don't support the cause? ... Then why are you among the Goddess's Children?" Corova raises a brow.

"I *do* support the cause! There is only the mother goddess, and the other races are lesser; they are not her creations, but the makings of the unholy beast. Unity is also a mistake, a ploy by the unholy beast to lead the faithful astray. This racial mixing is a sin that the goddess won't forgive. However... Our males, while they are lesser to us, are not always incorrect; we could have simply preached to the unfaithful, as they had suggested, instead of waging war." Sashuna replies.

"Mistakes were made so many years ago, but we survived." Corova retorts.

"With the aid of the Solakus..."

"Exactly what are you trying to say?" Corova narrows her eyes.

"I'm thankful that the war ended, regardless of how. That being said, our males have our best interests at heart. Yes, they are ruled by the ice of logic and not the fire of the heart, which the goddess dislikes, but perhaps it is something we should consider? I have yet to hear a male say that our deal with this group, this 'Slaver's Union', is a good idea, and one that will end in our favor. Considering their history, I'm inclined to agree. That's all I'm saying."

Corova looks over Sashuna, her younger associate. Crossing her arms beneath her ample breasts, she lowers her head and sighs.

“When you speak it, it makes more sense... And I agree... However, I’m only one of the high congregation; the others would need convincing, and they were more than pleased with the results. Dismissed.”

“Yes, Miss Corova. Call me if you need anything.” Sashuna bows her head before quickly departing.

Approaching the front door of Invar’s apartment, a worried August checks his V.I. bracelet. It’s been several hours since his voicemail alert went off, and though he looked at who left it, he hasn’t listened to it. Fearful that he’ll receive bad news, he hesitates to open the message. The door slides open and Invar stands in the doorway, Draz beside him and holding his hand.

“Look who’s back!” Invar chirps.

“Yaaa!” Draz exclaims, happily leaping upon August.

“Hey, buddy. I missed you too.” August replies, hugging the small alien.

Invar cocks his head, looking at the message on August’s V.I. bracelet. Floating sideways, the text appears reversed from his perspective, however, it is easily read by Invar. Left-handed, like his father, as are most of George Woods’ other children, all of them took to writing upside down and backwards as a code, mostly to prank Prat, Donovan and Ein.

“Don’t you want to know what she has to say?” Invar suddenly asks.

“Huh?” August turns to him.

With a clawed finger, Invar points at the hologram.

“Oh, damn. I forgot about that!”

“The message, or that I could read it from here?” Invar smirks.

“That last one.”

“So?”

“I don’t know, bro. What if it’s bad news?” August poses.

“All the more reason to listen!”

August looks down at his V.I. bracelet, holding it up. Draz swats at the screen, amused by how the hologram shivers from his touch, yet he doesn’t feel anything there.

“Alright.” August says with a sigh.

Turning his arm toward Invar, his other occupied by his companion Draz, August’s half-brother presses the button for him. They stand in Invar’s front doorway, listening to the message.

“Hey August. You know who this is. I know you’ve got rules, but just send me or mom something. Use a code or whatever but ju-BOOM!”

Their eyes grow wide and jaws drop in shock and horror as they listen to a massive explosion, so loud that it clips on the recording in a jarring and painful manner. Listening to the glass shattering and metal creaking, as though heavily fatigued, they both immediately realize that she was not close enough to be immediately destroyed by it. However, neither knows what happened to Roku. Is she severely wounded? Is she fighting for her life right now, or did she already

succumb in a hospital somewhere? Their hearts race as they listen to the background noise for what feels like an eternity.

“Oh no!” Roku’s voice suddenly exclaims, startling both men.

The sound of shuffling feet is heard soon after, then Roku vomiting. Seconds later, the message cuts off. The explosion is never explained, nor is her status given.

“Oh shit, bro! How old is that?!” Invar asks.

“A few hours...” August murmurs in shame.

“What?! We have to do something!”

“What am I supposed to do?!”

“You’ve got connections! Find out where she is! Make sure she’s okay! She’s our sister!” Invar demands.

“But the rules...”

“Rules?! ... Is this that ‘black mode’ shit?!” Invar growls.

“Yeah. I’m not supposed to contact friends or family.”

“I’m your half-brother, and you’re talking to me right now.”

“The big bosses don’t know that. Your last name is Nazarov, not Woods, and only Ayanda and my team know; Ayanda’s covering for me because of Draz.” August explains.

“And she won’t for Roku? She was the first Kanorakus to meet us when dad and May interrupted their battle. Hell, she joined the crew for a few years! She’s a friend!” Invar retorts.

“She can’t cover for Roku; it’s on record that we’re related. Besides, Ayanda pledged allegiance to Unity; she won’t disobey any more than she needs to, for the good of the project.”

“Unbelievable...”

A visibly distraught Invar steps inside of his apartment, leaving the door open. Poking his head inside, a worried August and confused Draz, who's still a juvenile, watch as Invar grabs a jacket, hovercar key and his V.I. bracelet. Walking up to them, he slips on his jacket and pushes August out of his home, closing and locking the door behind him. Without saying another word, he begins walking toward the indoor hovercar garage. After a short pause, August dashes to catch up to him.

"Hey! What're you doing?" He asks.

"I'm going to find out what happened to Roku, after I make a few calls." Invar snaps before turning his head toward him. "You know, it's really sad when I'm more of a brother than you..."

August stops in his tracks, his chest pierced by Invar's harsh words. How could he say something like that? Watching as Invar leaves them behind, the realization that he's questioning contact with his own, potentially injured or dead twin, smacks him like a hovertruck. Closing his eyes, he turns his head down, awash with shame and guilt. Why didn't he just find a way to clandestinely contact his family? Why did he fail to protect Roku, and why is he hesitating to see her now, in her hour of need? A tugging on his shirt collar snaps him out of his pitiful daze.

"We go home now?" Draz innocently asks.

Turning his watery eyes toward Draz, the little Skahlzunian can see that his caregiver and companion is upset. Unsure of what to do, the small being gives him a warm embrace, clinging to him like his own child. With a sniffle, August strokes his head with his free hand before slowly walking down the hall and toward the garage.

"I'm sorry, but what's the point of all of these questions?" Roku asks the well-dressed human woman.

“To gauge your level of mental stress as a result of the attack.”

“Shouldn’t you wait until I’ve calmed down first, before grilling me like this? It hasn’t even been an hour.”

“On the contrary, the earlier I evaluate you, the better chances we have to avoid long-term mental damage.” The therapist replies.

“I don’t have long-term mental damage! I only narrowly survived a terrorist attack! No big deal!” Roku snaps, her voice shaking and lower lip quivering.

“Miss Woods, by sheer chance, you escaped a blast that claimed your entire team. That one call has allowed you to live another hundred and forty years and see your great grandchildren someday. It’s important that we address this now.” The therapist calmly explains.

Lowering her head, her platinum blonde hair runs over her shoulders, hanging down and framing her soft facial features. She reaches up and runs her clawed fingers through her hair, whimpering and sniffing as she struggles to hold in the tears. The guilt of surviving is crushing her like an anvil, even worse than the loss of the friends that she’d made at her job, though she doesn’t know why. Unable to speak, she merely nods her head.

“I’m going to recommend that you stay here for several days, for further evaluation.” Her therapist says as she types a note on a datapad.

Finished with her patient, Roku is sent to her room. There, she changes into a patient gown and is placed on medical leave by the immediate directors of the project. Lying back in her bed as the sunlight dips beyond the horizon on that long summer day, she is greeted by a nurse who steps inside.

“I’m sorry to bother you but you have visitors.” The nurse explains.

“Isn’t it too late for that?” Roku asks, sitting up in her bed.

“They uh... They look official, if you know what I mean.” The nurse quietly adds.

Nodding to the nurse in confirmation, she leaves the room to bring in her visitors. Two men, one a human and the other a Voeldahn with cream-colored fur, are wearing identical dark suits and ties. One of the men carries a thick clipboard, the body acting as a box for paperwork and writing utensils.

“Hello, Miss Woods. I’m sorry that we have to meet under such unfortunate circumstances. I hope you’re doing well.” The human begins.

“Thanks. I’ll be okay.” She assures the two men.

“I apologize for the forwardness of this visit, but we’ve been sent by the directors of Project Unity. As you know, yours was the second of three teams working in that building, the other two being highly classified projects.”

“It’s all classified.” She retorts.

“Yes, but these were more classified. We believe that your team was picked by convenience due to your location at the edge of the building. As important as logistics are, it’s something we could quickly restore; had the terrorists known their exact target, they most likely would’ve used a smaller device and attempted to place it more strategically.” The human continues.

“Do we know who did it?” She asks.

“You let us worry about that.” The Voeldahn coolly replies.

“All things considered, post-construction, logistics is a lesser division, easily handled by a select few. While your resume and experience are indeed impressive, your position put you in the seat lottery.” The human continues.

“I was always hoping for the chance to actually travel aboard the ship.” Roku murmurs, looking dolefully at her covered feet.

"I'm sorry. I know this must be hard."

"... What do you want?" She bluntly asks in a frustrated tone.

The two men briefly glance to each other before the human clears his throat. To Roku, he seems apprehensive of his next statement.

"With your supervisor and team now dead, you're the last one alive who knows the ins and outs of your division." He begins.

"You effectively *are* your division." The Voeldahn adds.

"The directors are prepared to offer you your supervisor's position, complete with all of the benefits. That includes a dramatically increased pay while you are still here on Earth, as well as a guaranteed seat aboard the Unity as the chief logistics officer. We will be temporarily continuing your division's work by lending you several qualified administrators from the Sol Marines. You'll have a new, civilian team once they've been vetted, and several of them will be granted seats and work with you aboard the Unity after project completion." The human continues.

Roku sits in a stunned silence. She can't believe her ears as they speak. Her elation is overwhelming, though it's quickly followed by a rush of intense guilt. She was fairly certain that her lineage and familial connections would have "won" her a ticket in the lottery, so much so that she often spoke as though she'd bought it herself. A guaranteed seat and a higher position are welcomed changes, though she regrets that over a dozen lives were lost in the process. Sniffling, she turns her eyes away from the men in a feeble attempt to guard them from her tears.

"We understand that this is probably a difficult decision." The Voeldahn softly remarks.

“That’s the problem... It’s not, but I feel like it should be.” She says, looking at the dusk pushing in through a window. “Alright... I’ll do it.”

“Thank you, Miss Woods. These are for you.” The human says as he opens the clipboard. “Sign these and your promotion will be completed.”

Turning her head toward the men, a tear escaping her left eye, she looks at the clipboard. Atop the appropriately sized, steel box, several pieces of paper and a blue ink pen are resting. Taking the pen in her left hand, she quickly scrawls her name on no less than three sheets.

“Thank you, Miss.” The human says, slipping the papers back into the clipboard box.

“Get well soon.” The Voeldahn nods.

They slowly turn to leave, their eyes locked on the young Voeldahn woman. They appear to slow their departure, should she choose to respond, though all she does is subtly nod her head. As they step out of the room and into the hallway, Roku can hear a commotion from outside.

“Where is she?!” A familiar voice demands.

“Sir, it’s past visiting hours, and besides, it’s family members only.” A hospital employee replies.

“I am family! Where is she?!” The voice growls. “Roku?! Hey, Roku!”

Racing down the hall and calling out her name, the two agents stop the shouting male to interrogate him, just beyond the doorway to her room.

“Who the hell are you?” The human agent demands.

“And what do you want with Miss Woods?” The Voeldahn interjects.

“I’m family! I need to see her!”

“We’ll be the judge of that. Check his ident card.”

“Hey, get off of me!” The voice growls.

“Look. He’s part of the project.” One agent remarks.

“Where is she?!”

“One step at a time, sir.”

“I need to see her!” The voice barks.

“You’d better calm down, before we make you...”

With their conversation rapidly becoming more heated, Roku clears her throat and takes a breath.

“Hey!” She shouts.

The bickering stops. Leaning past the agents, Invar’s snout and one eye peek into the room. With a little smile, she holds up her hand and waves. She hadn’t spoken to Invar in quite a few months, and even then, it was an audio-only call, though she thought she recognized his voice. Seeing the recognition on her face, the agents stand down. Allowing Invar entry, he bolts inside, racing up to her bedside.

“It’s so good to see you! I hope you’re alright!” He chirps, his jade green eyes wild with delight.

“I’ll be fine. It’s good to see you.” She grins, her canines protruding.

"You know this man?" The human agent asks as they both step into the room.

"I certainly do. He's one of my brothers; a half-brother... Same dad, though we don't share last names." She answers.

"I see." The human murmurs.

"Apologies." The Voeldahn adds.

Holding up Invar's identification card, the Voeldahn extends a hand, passing it back to him. Invar takes the card, nodding as he pockets it. Without saying another word, both agents and the hospital staff turn to leave, respectfully granting the siblings a brief and impromptu visit.

"It's too bad..." Invar suddenly comments as he takes a seat on a nearby stool.

"What is?"

"You're not disfigured. You had a real opportunity to play the pity card." He smirks.

"I'll get farther with my stunningly good looks." She retorts.

"True. The pity card was hand-crafted for men."

"Especially you." She quips.

"Heh... It's good to see you." He says, gently resting his hand over hers.

"You too. How did you know I was here?"

"I made a few calls. Right after I found the hospital, I let mom, dad and May know all about it." He answers.

"No, I mean... It hasn't made the news yet, who survived and died; Project information is kept under lock and key. How did you know?" She asks again, pressuring him with her innocent expression.

“... August... I’ve been babysitting Draz, his pet Skahlzunionian. He picked up the little guy and had your voicemail on his screen. We listened to it in the hallway.”

“What? ... So, why isn’t he here?!” Her voice subtly shakes.

“I’m sorry.”

Leaning in, Invar wraps his arms around her slender frame, giving Roku a tight and loving embrace.

“I’ll be here until his shift comes up.” He teases.

Though Roku softly chuckles, he knows that she’s heartbroken. The line rings as August waits for an answer; calling headquarters, he’s certain that someone will be there. Driving his hovercar, he wrestles with which direction to turn. Should he go home, or to SI9’s headquarters, to look into Roku’s whereabouts?

“Hey, man!” Stefan chirps.

“Hello, August.” Ayanda, Drayusa and Sihl’ Ahzen greet him.

“Hi everyone. Is the whole team there, or just you four?”

“Just us; Fizona and Kellan went home. Why?” Drayusa asks.

“I’ve got some bad news. I received a voicemail from my sister, and I listened to it.” He begins.

“August, what did I say about tha-”

“She was at the target location!” He promptly interrupts Ayanda.

“What?!” Several voices gasp.

“Oh no...” Drayusa murmurs.

“I heard the bomb go off! That’s where they were targeting!”

“Is she alright?!” Stefan asks.

"I don't know. She survived the blast; I heard her afterward, but..."

"Why didn't you contact her?!" Sihl' Ahzen asks.

From her tone, she sounds far more appalled by his inaction than the revelation of the attack. Considering the Irakus' belief in clan loyalty, being nearly as binding to them as the Kanorakus, August is surprised by her remark. It only makes him feel worse; if *she's* upset with him, how do the others feel?

"He's forbidden." Ayanda quickly interjects, coming to his aid. "And he still is. I will look into it for you, but you are not to have any contact with Roku, is that understood?" She calmly asks him.

"Ayanda, please!"

"*Do not* force me to call my superiors. You *will* be removed from this branch, and possibly the entire project."

August drives in stunned silence, trapped between a rock and a hard place as Ayanda threatens him.

"... Alright. I'm sorry." He sighs.

"That's not right." Stefan grumbles.

"How can you do that?!" Sihl' Ahzen asks in horror.

"Those are the rules, and I obey them."

"Doesn't your mother goddess want you all to live by your heart; love, hate, fear, etcetera? This is cruel and it goes against that." Sihl' Ahzen poses.

"She's a lie; I'm not bound to those rules, and my orders stand."

"They're bad rules!" Sihl' Ahzen shouts.

"Please reconsider." Drayusa interjects.

“Are you questioning me?”

Turning the wheel as the others bicker, angering the usually calm and collected Ayanda, August abruptly ends the call and heads for home. Opening the door as they finally return, Draz walks slowly inside, watching his friend and caretaker as he drags his feet. The little alien might not be a full adult yet, but still at his level of intellect and emotional maturity, he can see something's wrong. Sitting at the edge of his bed, August rests his face in his hands, his short snout protruding between the blades of his hands. Stepping inside, Draz's feet pitter and patter.

“No sad.” Draz says softly, grabbing his arm. “Get better.”

August looks toward the blue and yellow alien with tear filled eyes. Does he mean that things will become better, or is he ordering him to not be sad? Unable to decipher his message, he softly pets his head. In a sincere attempt to comfort August, Draz climbs up and shoves himself beneath his arm, snuggling against him.

“Sometimes things don't just ‘get better’, buddy.” August quietly explains.

“Then fix.” Draz responds.

Looking down at Draz, he struggles with the dichotomy in his heart. This project and his job mean the world to him, but Roku means more. What holds him back now is the shame; how would she react to knowing that he failed? Not only did he fail to protect her by stopping the attack, but he failed to come to her aid when she needed it. Wiping his eyes, he looks to his terminal near a small work desk. Being highly secured, government issued hardware, he could use his SI9 privileges to at least see if Roku is in any of the nearby hospitals, even without the headquarters' database. If nothing else, he can check her status.

August knows that he owes his twin sister her far more than that, but at least it's a start.