

Unity

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode Twenty-Two: Existential Distortion

Swarming the capitol city, hostile forces throw incendiary devices in the form of small yellow orbs. Exploding into green plumes of burning acid, the clouds fuse to the chitin of their enemies, melting down to their organs. Dying in agony, violet colored bolts are emitted by the strange weapons of the hostiles, crashing into the waves of refugees. Many Dezonians flee to safety, though only a few will find it. The massive, insectoid creatures race for the last ship, one of several that have already launched. Their three powerful legs propel the beings with surprising speed. However, none can outrun the volleys of weapon's fire.

A Dezonian with an aquamarine chitin is struck in its mantis-like head, falling forward in a heap. A bolt burns a hole through the chitin, destroying the brain beneath. Leaping upon the carcass and standing proudly, a much smaller being roars and opens fire. With large digitigrade feet with four thick yet pointy toes, the charcoal colored being stands on two legs with muscular thighs. It's body, roughly humanoid in shape, has broad shoulders with powerful muscles. Two, equally strong arms are held high, one bearing the living weapon responsible for the corpse beneath its feet. There's no neck and the body isn't crowned with a head; it juts out near the mid-chest.

Shaped like a teardrop, with the point facing downward and bearing a small mouth, it glares with numerous cobalt eyes. One, as large as a grapefruit, is framed by five more eyes. Each roughly the size of a golf ball, two on the left, two on the right and one above the central eye, they're all angled along the skull to prevent blind spots. Two ears, several inches in length, are wide at the base and taper to points, crowning the head on either side and swept back. Covered in a leathery hide and with no hair to speak of, the strange being shrieks and opens fire as the insectoid Dezonians flee to the last remaining ship.

Not willing to allow their targets to escape, one waves its three-fingered, pincer-like hand. Bipedal monstrosities with thick, cone shaped bodies, the point aiming behind the haunches of their two, muscular, digitigrade legs, race with blistering speed on feet of split hooves that clop loudly. With a dense and leathery hide, ochre in color, the creatures three yellow eyes, forming an upturned triangle, stare with rage at the fleeing Dezonians. Two small and relatively useless arms hang toward the ground, swaying as they move and bearing two fingers and a thumb with a similar pincer-like shape.

Larger arms with reversed elbows are mounted on the sides of their bodies and pulled close to their trunk. Nearing their targets, they spread their outer arms, turning the joints and revealing scythe-like bones, each a meter long. One beast races past a Dezonian, slashing one of its three legs. It falls in a heap only for the others to pounce upon it, slamming the pointed tips of their bone scythes into the chitin and slaying the alien. Barely one hundred of the thousands of fleeing Dezonians reach the ship, sealing themselves in and launching the craft. Though denied their deaths, the attackers have won regardless. The primitive beasts roar with gaping maws, filled with nearly one hundred razor-sharp teeth.

The blue eyed, black skinned humanoids exclaim with delight, dancing on the corpses of the fallen as the last of the Dezonians flee the planet for their lives. Joining several other ships, the Dezonians spend years in uncharted space, flying through hyperspace and

looking for a world suitable to them. Eventually, they find and settle on a planet they name “Dezos”, “Resurrection” in their ancient language. The few who’ve survived, the most intelligent of their species, lay many egg clutches and spend the next three hundred years rebuilding their society on Dezos, though they’ve always desired to return to their home world of Azavia.

“I can’t believe this...” Stefan mutters.

Crowded around the screen, the former SI9 agents are appalled by their discovery. August stumbles back, his knees growing weak. Turning toward a couch in the main hall of the security offices, he grabs the armrest, promptly spinning and plopping down atop a cushion. Fizona covers her eyes with a hand and leans back in her chair, struggling with the revelation. Drayusa and Stefan hold each other, speaking through their thoughts, while both Kellan and Sihl’ Ahzen are overcome by anger. Joining August by the couch, Kellan takes a seat while Sihl’ Ahzen paces before them.

“This is so fucked up...” August sighs, resting his head back.

“How dare they lie to us!” Sihl’ Ahzen growls.

The dainty Irakus stomps her talons on the ground, walking in circles. She waves her wing-like arms, her orange feathers and red neck fur fluttering as she rants.

“Damn them! This is unconscionable!”

“Calm down, babe.” Kellan murmurs.

“This isn’t what we signed up for! Never trust anyone above your pay grade! I learned that long ago when I was still a commando!”

The door to Miss Ayanda's office slides open. She's been tucked away for over two hours while her team read and listened to the messages and reading the dossiers.

"Finished?" She asks her subordinates.

"Did you know this whole time?!" Sihl' Ahzen growls.

"Calm yourself." Miss Ayanda looks to the irate Irakus.

"Please. Tell us the truth." August pleads.

"No, I didn't." Miss Ayanda answers, shaking her head.

"When did you find out?" Fizona asks, still seated at the terminal.

"Within the past few days. I discovered that my clearance was not the highest level. I plead my case to the Council and they relented." Miss Ayanda explains.

August and Drayusa both recall their boss's exclamation from the confines of her office.

"So, what're we going to do about this?" Sihl' Ahzen asks.

"Do?" Miss Ayanda raises a brow.

"What's the plan?" Kellan reiterates for his lover.

"Continue."

"... Excuse me?" Sihl' Ahzen's fiery eyes grow wide.

"You can't be serious!" Drayusa exclaims.

"I'm very serious." Miss Ayanda says sternly.

"Then what was the point?! Why bother to show us all of this?!" August asks, letting out a nervous chuckle.

"Because you deserved to know. I know this isn't what you were expecting, and I wasn't up for this either but we're here now and we

have to make do. We still have a future, so why not hold the course and follow through?" She suggests.

Frustrated beyond words, August takes his leave, ignoring the others who question him. He quickly visits Roku, interrupting her work at her office, which has since returned to normal. Though at first elated to see him, her expression changes when she sees the look that's plastered on his face.

"Are you alright? What's wrong?" She asks with worry.

"Can we talk? Somewhere private."

"How about my office?" She suggests.

"No!" He exclaims.

"Why not?"

"I... Come on."

Taking her hand, August leads her out of the logistics offices, walking toward their apartments. As her building is closer, they head for her home where he knows the Dezonians cannot listen in.

"What's this all about?!" A confused Roku demands, now greatly concerned.

"Sit down... I need to tell you something." He says, preparing to reveal the secret.

Searching for a race capable of aiding them, as they themselves are not competent fighters, the Dezonians eventually charted their new system and discovered the Irakus on a nearby world. Unable to challenge the warlike Irakus, the Dezonians endeared themselves to the smaller, bird-like aliens, gifting them with technology and serving as helpers, advisors and organizers. Cunning and manipulative, they tried to groom the Irakus into the force they so desperately needed to

reclaim their home. The plan seemed to be working, and about fifty years into the two races relationship, they'd constructed a prototype hybrid battleship. Then they ran across the Azilian in Alpha Centauri.

Firing on the strange alien craft without warning, the Irakus and Dezonians were shocked to find that the Azilian had nary a scratch. Returning fire in self-defense, after easily withstanding the barrage, the Azilian, a lightly armed cruiser built for exploration, had bested the greatest military vessel of the aliens. Uninterested in destroying them outright, and not much of a conqueror, George Woods met with the creatures and brought the battleship back to Sol, where the news of the existence of sentient alien life spread like wildfire and cemented the Woods family in history. The eldest children, August and Roku, remember this turn of events vividly.

The military technology of the human and Voeldahn, dubbed the Solakus by the Dezonians, far exceeded the capabilities of the Irakus. Even with a ship built combining superior Dezonian electrical and computer technology, their shields were drained in a matter of seconds and the battleship faced destruction. The Solakus are the undisputed champions of war. Realizing that they were at the mercy of the strange races from Sol, who seemed to live harmoniously, which alone was intriguing to the Dezonians, they talked the Irakus government into signing a treaty and begin trade relations. The Dezonians devised a new plan, now involving the Solakus in their scheme.

A few years later, while scouting away from Irakus and Dezonian territory, George Woods stumbled upon a world with intelligent life. His landing interrupted the civil war on Kanor and the Solakus soon came to the aid of the newest addition to the galaxy's roster of sentient life forms. The Dezonian high council regretted their lack of exploration; the Kanorakus would've made excellent soldiers. Instead, the Kanorakus became indebted to and reverent of the Solakus, whom they now share a unique relationship with. With the exception of the terrorist forces, who are *not* the norm, the Kanorakus flooded the Sol Marines, to show their gratitude and as a bid to become citizens of Sol.

This only furthered the desire in the Dezonians. When George Woods suggested an intergalactic council to politicians, many now eager to lend their ear to the renowned explorer, Dezonians were quick to volunteer their services. They offered technology previously kept in reserve as an incentive, medical technology that drastically increased the lifespans of the other races. When it was proposed to create Unity, the Dezonians saw yet another opportunity and took it. Speaking of their home world, they revealed the nature of the invaders and pled for aid in reclaiming their native planet. None, even the Irakus, knew that Dezos was a refuge from their first, lost world.

At first, the Solar Council was hesitant to offer aid or construct Unity for such a purpose. However, the Dezonians offered even more hoarded technology. Swayed by greed, Unity was constructed from the ground up for two specific purposes. First, to house a small crew, whose primary mission would be to breed with each other. Over the course of a flight that would take many years, they'd slowly increase the population with a people who'd never lived in Sol or the other worlds, such as Ir and Kanor, giving the Dezonian ruled Council unimaginable control of the crew. Eventually, Unity's inhabitants would reach the target population of two hundred and forty thousand, which is what Unity was designed to comfortably house and sustain.

They would live knowing only Unity, fully trusting the Dezonians to guide them. Many messages between the Directors and the Dezonian council reveal their intentions to devise "incidents" where they may become "lost". The computers are programmed to erase all cartographic data during her first six months of flight, leaving only one path left to them, a direct route to Azavia. This fact would be concealed, blamed on malfunctioning hardware, and Azavia would then be "discovered" by Unity. Knowing that their home world will be waiting, as will their mortal enemy, the Dezonians could orchestrate a "peaceful" mission.

However, this mission would only allow them to incite a war, and in this war, their enemies would be bombarded from space and eventually obliterated by the military might of the Solakus, their second purpose. Unity is a battleship, designed to grow an army only to pit them against hostile forces that drove the Dezonians from their home. Her crew are nothing but unpaid mercenaries, who exist to breed, train and fight for the Dezonians. Upon completion of this mission, estimated to take thirty-five years, Unity wouldn't even be able to return home. A special transmitter, theoretically capable of sending a message to Sol, would convey their success and the Dezonians would relinquish all withheld technology and promptly return to Azavia victorious.

As for Unity and her crew, they'll be left to colonize any nearby worlds, if they can find any; the Dezonians don't want to share their own. They'll most likely never see Sol or their families again. Roku sits in shock, her mind reeling from the knowledge that all she'd hoped for in this project was a lie. Comforting his distraught sister, August holds her tightly in his arms, gently stroking her back as she stares past him and deeply into the wall of her apartment.

"How... How would they explain our disappearance? Everyone signed up thinking they'd be back in a year or two."

"According to the Directors messages, they haven't decided on the cover story. Either a disaster that saw Unity destroyed or that we simply became lost." August replies.

"That's how they'll remember us? ... A bunch of corpses floating in space? Some fabled ship lost to time? A mystery that no one can ever solve but talks about over drinks for entertainment?" She rambles.

"I'm so sorry. I know how much this project meant to you." He says softly, gently kissing her head.

"I thought it meant everything... I thought it was my future..."

Roku doesn't know what's worse. The fact that the Dezonians have manipulated this project for their own ends and lied to the crew? Maybe it's that all of this has been sanctioned by the Solar Council and her many governments, and all in an attempt to gain access to the Dezonian's hoarded technology. Or is it the fact that they're all just cattle to serve them and that the freed slaves are going to suffer the same fate? She's sickened when she realizes that with so many more women, they fully intend for the males to be polyamorous; how else would so many women bear children otherwise? Clearly, the Dezonians don't have morality as the other races understand it.

"What're we going to do?" She asks, her voice softened by her overpowering torrent of emotions.

"I don't know..." He whispers, stroking her back. "But I don't think the others are going to stand for this, and neither am I."

Releasing his sister and rising from the couch, August heads for the door.

"Wait! Where are you going?!"

"There's something I have to do. An order I need to follow." He cryptically replies.

"Are we going to be okay?!" She asks, visibly afraid of what's to come.

"Trust me. I'll call you soon when I know more."

Leaving the apartment, he brings up his V.I. bracelet, quickly placing a call.

"What is it?" An angry Sihl' Ahzen grumbles.

"Have you released the Slavers yet?"

"No, though I was about to. I just walked into the prison office. Why?"

"Don't do anything until I get there... I need to speak to my cousin." He sternly instructs.

"... What's this about?" She asks.

"I'll tell you over dinner. Bring Kellan and stop by my apartment after our shift."

Sihl' Ahzen pauses for a moment. It's obvious to her what his intentions are.

"Okay!" She chirps. "Should I call anyone else? We never did celebrate Draz's birthday. He must be upset!"

"Furious. Call them all, even Miss Ayanda. Draz really likes her."

"Understood."

"Good. I'll see you soon." He says before ending the call.

August can't help but admire Sihl's tact. Skahlzunians, as "sub creatures" by Dezonian standards, have no birth records. It's the only excuse she could've invented that no one would be able to verify. Making his way to the tram, he calls his sister. Surprised to hear back from him so swiftly, he asks her to come to a party for Draz. She knows that his birthday isn't anytime soon but quickly catches on and promptly agrees. After a short ride to the tram, using that time to gather his thoughts, he exits and races for the prison. There, Sihl' Ahzen and several guards wait for him, though it's otherwise void of life.

"Ready to see him?" She asks.

"Yeah." He nods.

Following the dainty Irakus, they walk through a security checkpoint, on their way to an interrogation room.

"I've already separated him from the others and placed them all in interrogation rooms too." Sihl' Ahzen explains.

"You can let them go. I only need to talk to him." August retorts.

"Actually, I believe he's married to one of the Kanorakus women. I returned his bristle pendant and the black and red one asked for the ring, which fit one of her fingers." She continues.

"Yeah, I figured as much when I saw how she acted to his arrest." He comments.

"I think they've melded, too."

"Really?! Are you sure?"

"They're about as frightening as Stefan and Drayusa; how they always know what I said and did around the other." She says.

"Well, hold her for now if you want but I don't need to see her." He reiterates.

Opening the door to the interrogation room, Draiman sits in a chair at a table, his head tilted down as he stares at the floor. He wears only the clothes he'd found, as Sihl' Ahzen hasn't bothered to properly clothe them. As a former commando for her people, this behavior isn't entirely surprising. August pulls out a chair across from the table, slowly sitting down and looking curiously at the man.

"Ahem." He clears his throat.

Draiman slowly lifts his head, looking August in the eyes.

"Excuse you... I was having a pleasant conversation." The human grumbles.

"So, you *are* melded."

"Surprised?" Draiman smirks.

"A little. I didn't think Slavers had emotions, considering what you do." August replies.

"Don't even start with that shit. I played the cards I was dealt. Do you really think I'd have stripped down to almost nothing and brought my wife aboard this ship if I wanted to sell people like cattle for the rest of my life? Fuck off."

Eyeing the human, August's lips curl up around his feline snout.

"I read your files after you were processed. You, and two Kanorakus... The black and red one, who gave the name 'Corova'... She was one of the Goddess's Children, wasn't she?" August asks.

"Yeah." Draiman sighs, as if bored.

"That's a real woman you got there! What do you think about all of the things she's done? Since you've melded, I bet you could tell me how many men she's raped!"

"Shut the fuck up!" Draiman growls, rising to his feet as the chains pull against his wrists. "You don't know her, so don't judge her! And you don't know me either! ... I've got nothing more to say to you." He says, sitting back down and turning his head away.

August is thoroughly pleased by Draiman's responses. He now knows that Draiman truly cares for Corova and her well-being, and should he learn the truth, he'll certainly have a vested interest in helping August. Furthermore, as a former Slaver, perhaps his skills will prove useful. With nothing to lose, the Voeldahn takes a breath and prepares his thoughts.

"Well, I have something to say to you." He says calmly.

"I don't care." Draiman snaps.

“You should. You’re family... And I like helping my family.”

Draiman raises a brow, turning his head and looking at August.

“My parents taught me that rule too.”

“You want to help me?” The human snickers.

“Sure... But I need your help in return.

“Here we go...” Draiman sighs.

“We’re letting you go.”

“... For what?! Good behavior?!” Draiman chuckles.

“*They* want to let you go.” August reiterates.

“Who’s ‘they’?”

“This ship... It’s... Well... It’s not what it seems.” August murmurs.

Looking over the blonde haired, green-eyed, white tiger Voeldahn who is the son of his uncle, Draiman and Corova are struck by a realization. This isn’t a man who is toying with his captive or even a cop interrogating a prisoner. He’s not trying to become friends or “help him” so that he’ll confess to his misdeeds. His tone and posture are genuine, and August looks bothered by something. The couple share their thoughts telepathically, deciding as one to press him further. He’s peaked their curiosity.

“It isn’t?” Draiman asks.

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s...”

August pauses, looking around the room at the various recording devices. Looking back at Draiman, he sits in silence.

“I guess I’m not the only prisoner here.” Draiman smirks. “Alright. I’ll bite. What do you want, cousin?”

“Come to dinner and bring your wife. I’ll tell you then.”