

Extinction Protocols

Part 2

Flóra took a deep breath. She carefully slid a gas mask over her face, securing it in place before she let out a long sigh, exhaling through the filter.

“That oughta do it...” Balázs said, giving her a wide grin. “Looking good, little lady!”

Flóra then opened her eyes, finally looking through the glass lenses. The mask outright obscured her peripheral vision. “I... don’t think it’s impairing my vision too much, but this feels... weird.”

Something more devious flared in Balázs eyes. “You better get used to it. You’re gonna be wearing that get-up at all times while we’re out and about! But here, hold this...” He paused just to hand her an assault rifle with both hands. “This is going to be your best friend from this point forward!”

Her eyes widened before she grabbed the rifle, inspecting it in turn. “Huh. I see...”

The weapon went by many names. The AK-63. The AMM. A Hungarian variant of the far more common AKM, Flóra held the old yet reliable rifle in her hands, glancing at the receiver from the side to see its safety toggle and other simple mechanisms.

Balázs nodded before staring at a paper target in the distance. “Now let’s see how you shoot! Just flick the safety off, toggle it to semi auto, then take a few potshots as a warmup. It should be simple enough.”

Flóra gave the rifle a blank stare before looking back at Balázs. “So... uh... how do I do that?”

He scoffed. “Do what, exactly?”

“Like... all of that?” she replied with her face scrunching up.

Balázs shook his head. “Oh... sorry. Sometimes this stuff is second nature to a man like me. Here, just...” he said, gesturing before approaching her and pointing at the rifle. “Flick that toggle.”

A mechanical click marked the moment Flóra flicked it with her thumb. “Okay. Now what?”

“Then that one lets you select the firing mode.” he continued, lightly tapping the receiver with a finger. “Semi-auto will let you shoot one bullet at a time, and full-auto will empty the magazine in a matter of moments. We usually stick to semi-auto to conserve ammunition, but... there’s always a time and place for full-auto. Understood?”

“I think so...” Flóra said with a frown, toggling the firing mode accordingly.

Balázs then made a motion where he shouldered an imaginary rifle. “Now it should be as simple as aiming and pulling the trigger. Go for the center mass. In other words, aim for the heart... not the head! The torso is far easier to hit as it is.”

She nodded again, imitating him by shouldering her rifle. Flóra aimed with one eye from there, lining up the iron sights with her target. Her muscles tensed up as she squeezed the trigger...

Her heart skipped a beat once a gunshot echoed within their cramped environment. Even her ear protection failed to muffle it fully. Brass rattled against the concrete ground afterward, causing her to shudder as she stared at the target in the distance. Although not exactly in the center, she could see a clear hole in a paper target with a vague outline of a person, striking their shoulder instead.

“Not bad...” Balázs, watching in silence. “But no need to squint or close one eye! I saw that. You already have tunnel vision with that damn gas mask on, so you’ll need to get used to shooting with both eyes open.”

She blinked. “Oh. Well, this is the first time I’ve ever shot a rifle before...”

He grunted in return. “Then muscle memory shouldn’t be an issue for you if you’re new. Take another shot and fire again, because I wanna see for myself if you’re consistent about it.”

Flóra’s face scrunched up as she aimed with both eyes wide open. She opened fire once more...

A pattern emerged over time.

There’d be a flash. A bang. Another slight ding as she punched another hole in the paper target. Each subsequent shot got ever so slightly closer to the center.

Muzzle flashes flared in Flóra's eyes. Something burned in them like a rising fire once she finally struck the target's heart, slowly lowering her rifle with a little smoke rising from the barrel.

Balázs gave her a wide smile... a rare sight to see the least.

"Well done!" he said, patting her on the back. "We'll make a scavenger out of you yet!"

She sighed at his words. "It... it can't be as simple as that..."

He grunted. "Ah, trust me. It's not. I don't think anything can truly prepare someone for what's waiting for us on the surface, much less the real deal."

Flóra glanced at the ground as she contemplated his words in silence.

"So be it." she eventually said, sighing afterward.

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Guards stepped aside at the entrance to the metro. A few opened the fortified gates, allowing an armed scavenger party to depart with Balázs at the head of it.

He elbowed Flóra. "Just stick with me, alright? Follow my lead and you should be fine."

Flóra used one hand to adjust her gas mask. "I... I'll try! At least for Eszter's sake..."

"Just trying might not be good enough." he replied with a grunt, leading the way forward.

Other rough men trailed behind them. Their arsenal included additional Kalashnikov-style rifles, some shotguns, and another man carried a light machine gun with an RPG strapped to his back.

Balázs himself led the way with his CZ Bren 2 rifle pointing in any direction he moved. He emerged from the metro first, holding up his hand once the group found themselves about to walk across an adjoining street.

Everyone stopped in place. Multiple men crouched or aimed their rifles. Stray ash continued to fall from the sky like snowfall, and the wind practically howled down the streets.

Flóra herself froze, petrified by the sight. Ash, debris, and even stray skeletal remains clogged the cracked concrete streets. Even abandoned vehicles showed severe signs of decay. The ashfall dusted just about everything she could see compared to the clean and pristine city from her memories.

“Looks clear at the entrance...” Balázs said, motioning forward. “Move out!”

From there, the more experienced scavengers began moving down the street in sync. Balázs acted as the primary pointman. Everyone formed a loose wedge behind him, which turned into a line over time as they avoided the open street in favor of the cover provided by the sidewalks. More inexperienced members such as Flóra trailed behind them, doing her best to mimic their motions, but she also stayed close to Balázs during the process.

A familiar voice broke the silence from behind.

“Shouldn’t we have the civilians in the rear?” Alajos asked, letting out a sneer.

Flóra glanced over her shoulder, recognizing the young man from the security station. “Oh, it’s you...”

“No need.” Balázs replied, looking straight ahead. “Don’t say another word unless absolutely necessary. We need to maintain a low profile out here.”

Alajos let out what almost sounded like a low growl. “Understood.”

As they resumed moving down the roads, everything became abnormally silent. The sheer vastness of the cityscape and its emptiness showed nothing but a dead world filled with endless ruins. Only light footsteps and stray debris crunching beneath their boots disrupted it, much like rats scurrying among the remains of something that used to be far greater than themselves.

Only a few audible thuds in the distance made the group freeze in place.

Flóra looked left to right, her rifle swiveling alongside her head. “What was that?”

“Giants.” Balázs said, annoyed more than anything else. “We just need to take cover and stay down. Wait until they pass by. No need to panic...”

With those words, the group scurried into the remains of an adjoining building. Decrepit walls riddled with holes joined others falling apart with deteriorating wood and stray bricks. Despite this dreadful state, the structure served as ideal concealment and cover. The various scavengers hid behind decaying furniture, including chairs and tables, keeping their heads down during the process.

As for Flóra, she hunkered behind a wall in the corner. Her heart pounded in her ears as the audible thuds and thumps became louder and louder over time...

Soon, titanic figures emerged from one end of the road. Their lupine forms towered over everything surrounding them with their digitigrade legs constantly slamming against the ground. Any vehicles hardly compared to just one of their feet, and a few were even crushed or compacted by combat boots as the alien giants stomped down the streets. Their movements also caused the ground to slightly shake like miniature earthquakes, the intensity only increasing over time as they closed the distance between themselves and the humans hiding amid the ruins.

Against her better judgment, Flóra took a peek through a shattered window. She saw nothing but their lower bodies and giant tails swishing behind them, albeit covered in armor or other forms of protection. Only the sight of a drone the size of a sedan descending to the ground made her look away and hide, clutching her rifle as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

The droner lingered around the area for a brief moment. Rather than trying to scan its surroundings, it surged ahead again, rushing to the forefront of the alien warriors.

Not long afterward, bizarre vocalizations began to fill the air in an alien tongue...

[CONTACT! DREAKAR INFANTRY ACROSS THE RIVER!]

[HOLD POSITIONS...]

[ENGAGING, ENGAGING!]

Flóra couldn't comprehend a single word. Their booming voices echoed down the streets, deep and powerful overall as they practically barked orders or information to one another.

Bizarre pulsing noises soon joined it followed by flashes of light...

All marked the start of a skirmish between the giants in the playground.

"Listen to me very carefully..." Balázs said in a low tone, rising from his cover first. "Whenever the giants are fighting each other, that's the perfect chance to pass by them undetected. Just don't get caught in the crossfire."

"Okay... but what if we get spotted anyway?" Flóra asked, keeping her head on a swivel.

Balázs returned to the street with his rifle still pointing in any direction he moved. "Well... even then, the big bastards will probably ignore you. I've told you this before. They're far more concerned with killing one another."

Flóra let out a sigh. "I guess that's good?"

"Good for us at least." Balázs said, scanning the surrounding environment once more.

Meanwhile, other scavengers emerged and rejoined Balázs one at a time.

Flóra soon returned to a loose line formation with the others. However, the resulting scene made her freeze in place. "My god..." she muttered to herself.

Huge footprints embedded into the road caught her attention alongside a few flattened cars. Her eyes naturally followed the trail, spotting a few gigantic lupines in the far distance with their drone hovering far overhead. They took cover behind rows of human buildings like sandbags or concrete barriers, firing oversized energy weaponry at distant foes outside her immediate view. Everything about their overall appearances and menacing, jagged armor resembled gigantic werewolves or even direwolves from old myths and legends rather than any lupine found naturally on Earth.

"Don't gawk and stare!" Balázs said, raising his voice. "Move, move, move!"

Flóra snapped out of it. She shook her head before falling back into the formation.

As this occurred, a chorus of war erupted all around them. Distant gunshots on par with artillery thundered in the distance and echoed down the empty streets. Strange alien hollering or even high-pitched hissing faintly joined it. They had no choice but to ignore it all as they scurried across debris and ruins between each street, allowing any fights to serve as distractions for themselves.

Balázs eventually kneeled at a street corner, speaking in a low tone. “Ah... shit.” he said, shaking his head. “It sounds like it’s not just one little skirmish. If they’re fighting all around the river crossings, that’s gonna make things harder for us since we need to reach the other side.”

Alajas looked at the more inexperienced scavengers with disdain. “I don’t wanna repeat myself like a broken record, sir, but this might be too risky if we have fresh recruits with us. Maybe we should head back home or hit a more familiar area.”

Balázs scratched his neck. “We just need to take a gander at the parliament building, then we can do a sweep for supplies on the way back. Nothing more, nothing less. I’m just worried about the fighting or those damned dragon assholes on the other side of the river. At least the wolves usually leave you alone...”

“What about medicine for Eszter?” Flóra asked, nervously scanning her surroundings.

“I didn’t forget!” Balázs said, looking straight ahead. “Take a look at that building across the road.”

Flóra’s eyes went wide. Although subtle, a partially crumbling building had a partially visible sign for a local series of pharmacies. “Oh... oh, I see!”

Balázs grunted. “Thing is, we already hit that one. Others also looted it before us. But if you wanna do a second sweep for meds or anything we might have missed, be my guest.”

Alajas looked side to side. “Is that an order?”

Balázs stayed silent for a long moment. “You know what, Alajas? I have a plan”

“Sir?” Alajas replied, perking his head up.

“I think you’re right.” Balázs said, shaking his head. “Crossing the river might be too much trouble right now, but I need to see it for myself. I usually don’t like to split up the group, but I’m thinking I could take our more experienced guys to scout out the river crossings, then you can watch over the rookies as they do another sweep of the pharmacy before we link back up.”

Alajas contemplated his words in silence for a time, just to sigh. “I don’t fancy being a babysitter, but that’s probably the best course of action.”

Balázs rose to his full stature, motioning the group forward. “You know what to do then. For everyone that’s scavenging for the first time? Form up on Alajas and consider him your new squad leader!” He paused to gesture at himself. “Everyone else? On me!”

With those words, the group split up. A few nervous young men joined Alajas and Flóra as they moved toward the pharmacy. Meanwhile, Balázs and the veterans kept moving forward as they gradually approached another river crossing in the far distance, faint gunfire still echoing down the roads like thunder and lightning from any titanic aliens fighting.

Flóra approached the pharmacy’s entrance first. She frowned once she saw its sorry state with the broken sign and parts of the walls reduced to rubble. “Here goes nothing...”

The front door practically let out a whine once she pushed one open, where light from outside entered the dark interior. A few cockroaches on the floor promptly scattered away from her sight. Nothing but rows of empty shelves could be seen alongside shattered electronics and a broken cash register, presumably from others already robbing or looting the place.

Alajas narrowed his eyes as he walked inside. Once he saw a cockroach, he stomped forward and crushed it under a combat boot before grinding it under his heel. “Ugh. So... first things first.” He stopped speaking just to wipe the mess off his heel. “Sometimes we do a second or third sweep of places we hit already, but it’s like scraping the bottom of a barrel. Look for anything useful. Usually we prioritize the essentials if we can’t possibly carry everything back home, but here? Just grab whatever you can find if there’s even anything valuable left in this dump...”

A young recruit walked into one of the aisles, looking all around the area. “Looks picked clean.”

Flóra immediately went about searching for inhalers and respiratory medications. “I... I’m not seeing anything either...”



“I’m not surprised.” Alajas said, watching on as the other recruits walked down the aisles.

“What about the backrooms?” Flóra asked, glancing back at Alajas. “Did you check those areas?”

Alajas shrugged. “Of course. Again, you’re more than welcome to double check anything we might have missed, but I doubt you’ll find anything.”

She shook her head. “Then why did we even come here?”

“Why do you think?” Alajas asked in return, chuckling. “You kept nagging us about us double checking the pharmacies for medicine. I’m not sure if Balázs thought you’d actually take him up on his offer to join a scavenging party for yourself, but now you get to see the exact crap we’re dealing with on a near-daily basis.”

Flóra scoffed. “Really? I wasn’t asking you guys to do second sweeps to annoy you, I just couldn’t stand watching Eszter suffer. Of course I had to call his stupid bluff if he didn’t wanna bother trying otherwise!”

Alajas sneered at her words. “Well, you got what you wanted, didn’t you? I’m surprised Balasz even allowed it since we’re not fond of dead weight.”

She gave him a dirty look. “Is it because I’m a woman?”

“I don’t care who you are!” Alajas replied, chuckling a bit. “A group is only as strong as its weakest link. I just don’t want some stupid bitch that’s completely out of her element getting us all killed.”

Flóra stared at him for a while. She didn’t grace him with a response as she walked away, slamming the door behind her as the other recruits jumped or awkwardly watched on.

More empty containers and cabinets met Flóra on the other side. Vague footprints from debris, ashes, and even mud lined several key walkways. Beyond what amounted to trash and pilfered boxes, Flóra couldn’t see any medicine whatsoever, even as she searched through the back rooms for several minutes.

“There has to be something left...” she said under her breath, spotting yet another door.

Flóra then pushed the door open before she found herself outside. Nothing but more trash or debris greeted her in an adjoining alley with ashfall blanketing everything surrounding her. “Are you kidding me?” she asked no one in particular, lowering her rifle. “Well, I guess you proved your fucking point, Balázs...”

A digitigrade foot suddenly lowered onto the road in front of her, resulting in light cracks and pops from any debris and ashes compacting beneath a combat boot.

Flóra blinked. “Wha... what?!”

She slowly looked up, seeing one of the giants right in front of her.

Flóra naturally froze in place. Her jaw went agape.

One of the so-called werewolves stood directly in front of her, shadowing over her position.

As for the lupine giant, he simply stared down at Flóra with his tail slightly swishing side to side. Icy blue eyes could barely be seen beyond his helmet’s visor, and he didn’t make a single move for a few long moments. Eventually, he slowly crouched to the ground, barely making a sound before he got on one knee. From there, a clawed hand slowly extended toward Flóra before she saw an open palm spreading out before her eyes, either an invitation or an attempt to grab her...

Fight or flight instincts promptly kicked in for Flóra. She carefully backed away and raised her rifle, unsuccessfully kicking the door behind her in an attempt to open it.

“Really?” she muttered before stumbling a little, forcing the door open by leaning against it with all of her weight.

As this occurred, the lupine giant let out a huff. His ears folded against his head before he rose back to his full height, completely towering over her and appearing far more menacing overall as he held a giant rifle with both hands.

[Typical.] he said with a low growl.

The single alien word sent chills down Flóra’s spine as she scurried back inside the pharmacy.

“ALAJAS!” Flóra said with a raised voice, locking the door before backing away from it.

The man in question strolled into the backrooms, toting a machine gun. “You found something?”

She shook her head frantically before moving away from the door. “There... there’s a giant. Right outside!”

Alajas tensed up. “Seriously? Did they spot you?”

Flóra glanced at the ground. “Uh... yeah...”

“How?” he asked, blinking several times.

“I don’t know!” she replied, looking back at the door. “One was waiting for me right outside!”

“God damn it.” Alajas said with bared teeth. He paused and swapped his light machine gun in favor of an RPG strapped to his back. “Was it one of the wolves or a dragon?”

“A wolf...” she said with blood draining from her face. “They might still be out there! I... I think they tried to pick me up or grab me or something...”

“Of course.” Alajas said, moving to the main pharmacy area.

The other two recruits awaited him.

“What’s going on?” asked one of them.

The other recruit looked at his RPG with wide eyes.

Alajas motioned at the ground. “We’ve somehow been spotted by one of the giants.”

One recruit went pale in the face. “Oh, crap...”

“Get to the back!” Alajas said, returning to Flóra. “Stay away from the doors and windows!”

The entire group then hunkered down in the back. They hid in a small room, treating the entire situation like a natural disaster. However, rather than something more mundane like a tornado or a hurricane, a giant wolf threatened to snatch them away.

“How the hell did you get spotted?!” Alajas asked in a hushed voice, giving Flóra a death stare.

Flóra’s face scrunched up. “I just told you! I took two steps outside and there was one right there! How was I supposed to know?!”

“Shouldn’t we have heard it?” asked a recruit, clutching his rifle while under a table. “The giants aren’t exactly... quiet.”

Alajas stayed silent at these words. “Huh. Yeah, we should have heard it coming...”

“What are we supposed to do?” asked the other recruit.

“I’ll warn the others.” Alajas replied, letting out a sigh. He pulled out a walkie-talkie previously strapped to his hip before flicking a switch. “Balázs? Are you picking this up?”

Some static filled the air for a time until Alajas received a response.

“Yeah, I hear you.” Balázs said on the other end. “We’re heading back to the pharmacy. We found somewhere where we can cross fairly safely. How are things holding up on your end?”

“We’ve been spotted.” Alajas said in a low tone.

Balázs didn’t say anything for a while. “Dragons or werewolves?”

Alajas grunted. “It’s a lone wolf... at least according to Flóra.” he said, giving her the side eye.

“We’re hunkering down and hoping they go away.”

“Shit...” Balázs said, letting out another grunt. “We’ll approach your position and let you know if the wolf is gone. Over.”

Alajas then set the walkie-talkie on a table, just to pick up his RPG again. He spent some time looking over it. “If it comes down to it, I can give the big prick something to think about if he tries anything!”

“What’s that supposed to accomplish?” Flóra asked, looking up at him.

“It’ll buy all of you time to run.” Alajas replied with a dead look in his eyes. “You can go back to the metro, and ideally you stay there.”

Flóra frowned, glancing at the ground, but she didn’t say anything in return.

Time seemed to slow down as the group waited inside the pharmacy.

Every minute felt like an eternity.

They stayed silent, clutching their weapons in the dark with damp and dusty furnishings surrounding them. Only audible breathing through their gas mask filters disrupted the eerie silence as time passed by.

“We’re approaching...” Balázs said through the walkie-talkie. “And I don’t see a single damn giant! Much less any signs of one.”

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Flóra returned to the alleyway behind the building. “I swear, there was one right here!”

Balázs stood beside her, shaking his head. “Well, I don’t see any footprints. The others also said they didn’t even hear a giant outside.”

“I... I don’t know what to tell you.” she replied with an exasperated sigh.

“Doesn’t add up either way.” Balázs said as he scanned the surroundings. “I’m not saying I don’t believe you. It’s just that the werewolves always travel in packs and they aren’t exactly discreet.

Some kind of lone wolf popping up without making a single sound or leaving a trail of footprints would be something I've never seen before. What did he even do once he spotted you?"

Flóra looked away. "He just... crouched over and reached a hand towards me? Maybe he wanted to pick me up? I don't know."

Alajas stood in the doorway, holding an RPG with one arm. "Ever heard of the boy who cried wolf?"

"I'm... I'm not just making it up!" she replied in a more exasperated tone. "Alajas has had it out for me ever since I wanted to join you guys!"

"And for all I know you're just causing stupid drama..." Alajas said, shaking his head. "I just knew you'd be a liability. Can't you save this sort of hysterics and gossip for the metro?"

"Enough!" Balázs said, practically letting out a low growl. "There's no need to act like children. I'm going to give Flóra the benefit of the doubt in case she did encounter an anomaly out here. The giants have all sorts of crazy shit I can't wrap my head around or seen for myself yet. Only rumors."

Alajas sighed. "Very well. Forgive me for my... skepticism."

"But follow me..." Balázs said, sighing again. "We found an area under a bridge we might be able to cross discreetly. It's not a direct route to the parliament building, but it's good enough."

As the group gradually left the pharmacy behind, icy blue eyes observed them in the distance.

The lone wolf stood behind a large building. He peered between a few floors, but even then all his armor appeared completely transparent to the naked. It simply shimmered in the light with only his eyes visible, not to mention the specks of ash descending upon his physical form like snow. With a click of a button, he deactivated his cloaking device, making little to no noise as he took several steps forward.

He continued to maintain his distance from the group, following them like an immense shadow...

Only existing in the corners of their combined visions like a motion blur.