

Disintegration

Chapter 6

A hologram of Earth emitted in front of Empress Jenessa. Unlike before, she wore golden and gilded armor befitting a warrior queen with similarly ornate weapons strapped to her hips. Not to mention a tail pouch. Meanwhile, countless orange icons on a holographic map indicated the presence of hegemonic forces scattered across the planet. Jenessa's venomous hissing emitted throughout the room as she directed her attention to a small audience of naval officers, ship crewmen, and a sthara admiral standing at the center.

"What do you mean we cannot establish contact?!"

The admiral adjusted his uniform adorned with various medals and ribbons. "The United Nations are refusing our transmissions, my empress. Well, assuming the organization is still intact. We've refrained from targeting Belgium and other nations more willing to listen to our words rather than responding to force... but that fails to explain why the humans are either unwilling or unable to attempt further diplomacy."

"Ah, lovely." said Empress Jenessa before holding her head with one hand.

"Worse yet, it appears that the orbital bombardment strikes have made things worse." continued the admiral. "My intelligence sources claim they only infuriated human civilians rather than making them more willing to surrender. In fact, some nations originally open-minded to the idea of surrendering are now openly hostile towards us, which is probably why human ground resistance is far more stubborn than originally anticipated."

With bodyguards flanking her on both sides, Jenessa stood from her seat and approached the hologram. She glanced at a nearby computer monitor. There, she found footage of main battle tanks and accompanying human soldiers wearing green uniforms, who utilized hit and run tactics against her warriors within the French countryside. All things considered, the humans were the size of toy soldiers compared to the likes of herself. It aroused a snarl from the empress as she tried to grab Earth's hologram with a clawed hand, concealing it from sight as a crimson fist replaced it.

"I will NOT have this entire operation foiled by a bunch of little green men, of all things..."

For emphasis, Jenessa pretended to crush the holographic planet within her grasp.

"...And I am partially tempted to simply bomb this planet into submission if they did not get the message the first time." She momentarily looked at the ground. "Yet, needing to pull our ground forces back would only humiliate our Hegemony." Her piercing golden eyes moved towards her underlings, who stiffened up once she stared at them. "With that in mind, what cunning course of action would you recommend, Admiral Turras?"

The man in question held a clenched fist in front of his torso. Thanks to his white fur, emerald green eyes, and some more reptilian features... he looked like a hybrid between a snow leopard and a snake.

"I would prioritize the most dangerous human nations," he said with his tail slowly swishing behind him. "More precisely, the ones concentrated within Earth's northern hemisphere alongside any that have nuclear weapons. Nuclear retaliation has been minimal so far, but it's still a concern. Most of the southern hemisphere could probably be safely ignored until the nuclear powers either submit to us or fall apart since it would be a waste of time and resources otherwise."

Jenessa shook her head and brought her hands behind her back. "Time and resources are a luxury that we have, admiral."

"Not necessarily, madame... not with the joraxians and their allies present."

At these words, the empress directed her attention to an electronic panel acting as a window, which allowed her to stare deep into space from the safety of her flagship. Hegemony ships with sharp, sleek, and jagged forms surrounded her vessel on all sides. Facing them in the far distance was another fleet, but unlike the homogeneous Hegemony ships, it contained designs descending from a few different species. The only thing their alien ships had in common was the same markings adorning their hulls, which were white and forest green.

Meanwhile, Earth itself gradually rotated next to them. More ships were slowly joining the two fleets over time, resulting in an odd stalemate where the Hegemony controlled one side of the planet while the joraxians reigned supreme over the other. Yet... none dared to approach each other. Jenessa's breathtaking view of the fleets slowly assembling next to the planet was abruptly replaced by a flashing orange icon, cutting off the previous view on the electronic screen.

INCOMING MESSAGE!

"The SAP fleet is attempting to contact us!" exclaimed an umok crewman.

In response, the empress returned to sitting on a luxurious chair at the helm of her flagship, where underlings manning their stations surrounded her on all sides. "How curious. Make sure it is not a cyberattack before sending it through. This will be the last time they have the privilege of speaking to me..."

"Affirmative." replied a sthara woman with a nod.

Mere moments later, the flashing icon transitioned to a live video feed. This revealed a canine creature with snow-white fur, sapphire blue eyes, and two horns sprouting from his head. In some ways, the creature resembled an arctic fox with pink padding adorning areas where paws should be, albeit he was bipedal. He opened his mouth to speak, and a translation device made sense of his vocalizations.

"Greetings, Jenessa." said the man with a sly smirk on his muzzle. "It's been a while since anyone has seen an empress personally leading a fleet, but of course, it's against an opponent that can't fight back..."

Jenessa's face immediately scrunched up, then transitioned to a scowl at the sight of his smug face. "DOLUS!"

"Yes, that's my name." replied the canine with a sneer.

"What are YOU doing here? Out of every joraxian, I doubted that you would be personally leading a fleet!"

"I'm not." he replied with a roll of his eyes. "I wouldn't needlessly put myself in danger like some sort of idiot pretending to be a military expert. My specialty is diplomacy. So... naturally, I'm here to speak on behalf of the Solar Atlas Pact before this turns into something nasty."

Jenessa scoffed at his words. "Ah, right, right... but where's your wife? I thought she was the one in charge of things. Or... are the rumors true?"

"She's busy." he answered with narrowed eyes.

"Well, some queen she is if her husband has to speak on her behalf."

Dolus gave the empress a death stare. "Sure. Regardless, you are aware that outright invading a pre-FTL species within our territory is a violation of several treaties, right?"

"Nonsense!" said Jenessa as she formed a pair of fists. "This solar system is unclaimed territory!"

"Which isn't true, but whatever." he replied. "Either way, you're directly on our established border. Hence why we're here and need to politely ask you to leave."

Jenessa slammed a fist against an armrest. "ABSOLUTELY NOT!"

Dolus shrugged. "I figured you'd say that..."

"You have no authority here!" continued the empress. "As I said, this is unclaimed territory, and I'd rather not repeat myself again!"

"Well, here's the thing... it's been recently claimed."

"Ugh. Claimed by who, exactly?"

"Me." said Dolus with a grin that exposed a single sharp fang. "As king of the Joraxian Realms, I consider this solar system part of my personal demesne."

Jenessa blinked a few times. "You are joking, right?"

"Yeah, Earth is basically my backyard now." He paused to motion the empress away. "As the locals like to say, I'd appreciate it if you could make like a tree and leave. I'm a very busy man and I'd rather not waste my time driving off trespassers when I could be oiling my tail." The fluffy tail in question swooshed behind him for emphasis. "You know?"

"No!" answered Jenessa before facepalming for a moment. "I do not, in fact... know." Her head shook side to side for several seconds. "Ugh. Talking to you always makes my head hurt. Either way, your claim means NOTHING! Especially if you cannot enforce it!" She paused to point at Dolus with a clawed finger. "BEGONE!"

Dolus shook his head in return. "How typical. Like always, the only language zenari can comprehend is force, so that's how we're going to have to settle things. If you change your mind, let me know, but otherwise... I'm going to give the girls permission to engage!" He made another smug smirk as he held up a single hand, winked, and wiggled his fingers. "Toodles, you~"

With a press of a button, Jenessa abruptly cut the transmission off before Dolus could finish.

"PREPARE FOR COMBAT!" she exclaimed.

A member of the crew gave her a concerned look. "Madame, the joraxians are already on the move!"

"Then have the fleet assume a defensive formation!"

"Affirmative!" chirped an umok.

Like clockwork, most of the varying officers and crew members scattered away. Some transmitted orders to other ships. Most focused on readying the many systems of the flagship, which included activating its durable shields, priming energy weapons, and springing a multitude of conventional engines into action.

"What about the auxiliaries, madame?" asked the admiral.

Jenessa dismissively waved at him. "Have them at the front of our formation while the other ships provide fire support."

"But they'll take the brunt of any engagements..."

"Exactly." she said with a low hiss.

Turras's tail started swaying. "Alternatively, I'd suggest holding the auxiliaries back. If our battleships take the brunt of the assault, they'll likely survive, and our lighter ships could swoop in afterward."

"Umok auxiliaries and their ships can be replaced." replied Jenessa before turning her head upwards. "On the contrary, supercapital ships utilizing precursor technology are irreplaceable. Hence why they shall act as our first line of defense."

"I... I understand." said Turras with his ears folding against his head.

As they spoke, the two fleets converged upon one another...

They couldn't have been more different.

The smaller SAP fleet utilized carriers combined with support craft. Consequently, a swarm of fighters and bombers approached the hegemonic forces, and some accompanying destroyers started firing their railguns. In contrast, the Hegemony's ships were far more traditional. Zenari battleships, umok frigates, sthara cruisers, and some other vessels gathered around a gargantuan

dreadnought... in other words, Jenessa's flagship. Umok auxiliaries surged forward or moved to the front of the formation as the battleships attempted to pick off hostiles with their long-range laser cannons.

Some of the unmanned SAP fighters were among the first casualties. Red laser pulses or orange beams incinerated a few while others exploded into fireballs. Simultaneously, destroyers split off from the main SAP fleet, allowing them to act as more effective snipers as they spread themselves out. Their white-hot kinetic projectiles practically cleaved auxiliary ships into multiple pieces, disabling or destroying an array of frigates. Hull breaches resulted in umok being sucked into the cold depths of space. From there, lifeless bodies and survivors floated among wreckage and debris that used to be their ships, creating a new hazard in and of itself as the unmanned spacecraft came into contact with them.

"Target one of their carriers." commanded Jenessa as she watched the battle unfold from the comfort of her chair. "You know they are just going to retreat once we deal with their drones anyway. Typical joraxian tricks..."

"You heard the empress." said one of the junior officers.

"And let me know when we are ready to fire!"

"As she wishes."

With the battle beginning in earnest, whatever remained of the umok auxiliaries tried to fight off the seemingly endless fighters and bombers. Any semblance of order vanished. Manned hegemonic fighters, frigates, and larger destroyers tried to effectively duel the SAP forces with their point-defense weapons or smaller laser weapons. More massive yet slower-moving plasma bolts occasionally managed to eviscerate a fast-moving drone. Alongside SAP ships providing covering fire, the auxiliary forces took heavy casualties, albeit it bought plenty of time for zenari battleships to either get into position or provide retribution in return with their various weapons.

"The ion cannon has been fully charged, my empress."

Jenessa turned to face the zenari responsible for delivering this news. "Then you know what to do... OPEN FIRE! I want every last carrier in their fleet annihilated!"

A nervous nod accompanied her instructions.

As a result, the flagship slowly turned towards several of the carriers in the far distance. Components of the ship glowed bright blue. During these movements, the drone swarm rushed past the first line of sacrificial auxiliaries to target the zenari battleships. It made no difference to the precursor dreadnought as point-defense weapons quickly dealt with any hostiles foolish enough to get too close to it. Over time, its primary weapon activated, which spanned the entire ship as two arms contained the ion cannon within the center. An absurdly massive beam gradually erupted from the vessel, disintegrating anything that happened to be in its way, striking a far off carrier faster than the speed of light.

The aforementioned carrier suffered severe damage and became partially crippled as lights around affected areas flickered on and off. Amid this carnage, sthara cruisers made short work of the unmanned fighters and bombers with their own drones. Then zenari battleships started targeting enemy destroyers. All at once, the SAP offensive began to fall apart as they stopped their assault to retreat, albeit the only exception was a few stragglers acting as a distraction.

"They're falling back, my empress." announced a junior officer.

"Do NOT let them get away!" snarled Jenessa in return. "I want these imbeciles to be eradicated for trying their usual hit and run tactics with such a small fleet!"

Turras held up a clawed finger. "Keep in mind, it could be another joraxian ploy..."

"A what?"

"A... false retreat, madame. It could be a means of luring us directly into a trap. Either that or they weren't expecting the ion cannon."

Empress Jenessa cocked her head to the side. "Are you suggesting that we should allow them to get away, admiral?"

"No." he answered firmly. "Just don't split up our forces when possible. If you decide to pursue them, the entire fleet should do so to deal with any nasty surprises. In essence... all or nothing."

She slammed her fist against her chair once more. "Then we shall dedicate our full might to their destruction!"

"Of course..." he muttered.

And so, the entire fleet moved in a somewhat ordered formation. Over time, they left Earth behind. The SAP fleet they were chasing made chaotic movements during their hasty retreat, leaving plenty of confusion in their wake. A few unmanned drones remained, albeit they were dogfighting stray umok auxiliaries before being swept aside by the rising tide of the Hegemony's counterattack.

"Can I get an estimated time for how long it will take for the ion cannon to fire again?" asked Jenessa.

"Approximately twenty-two second equivalents." answered a sthara technician.

"I want to target the same carrier until it is destroyed."

The sthara nodded. "Consider it done."

As the SAP destroyers and surviving drones returned to the main fleet, they converged on their carriers. Without warning, a wormhole appeared next to them. Jenessa and the others braced themselves for the worst as they prepared for whatever might come out of it. Instead, the entire SAP fleet rapidly entered the wormhole, gradually vanishing from sight.

"FIRE!" screeched Jenessa, "FIRE EVERYTHING! THEY ARE GETTING AWAY!"

The ion cannon hardly had time to aim before erupting once more. It slightly moved diagonally, taking out some destroyers before they retreated through the wormhole, which shrunk until it completely disappeared.

Jenessa simply stared and remained silent for several long moments during the aftermath. "Cowards!"

"Um... madame." said a zenari officer.

The woman in question turned her head. "Yes?"

"We're receiving reports of joraxian berserkers on the ground."

"What?!"

"In other words, our forces on Earth are currently engaging them."

A nearby monitor shifted to show the empress more footage on the ground. From the vantage point of a soldier's helmet, a camera recorded a standard Hegemony squad advancing through the ruins of a human city with umok and sthara accompanying the zenari squad leader. Drop pods were falling from the sky, and the fireteam was moving directly towards the landing sites. They soon stumbled upon a trio of empty drop pods embedded directly into a concrete road and a few adjacent structures.

Out of seemingly nowhere, roaring accompanied the sound of an automatic shotgun rattling. One by one, umok scouts at the front were struck down by kinetic projectiles punching through their frail bodies, then a hailstorm of bullets targeted the heavy zenari troops. Leading this assault was a joraxian berserker holding down the trigger of their weapon while walking forward. The design of her dark green armor was outright demonic thanks to its curved horns... and a sthara wearing similar attire accompanied her and fired a ranged weapon similar to a coil gun from a safe distance.

The camera shifted as the soldier wearing it looked to the side, just to find another joraxian swinging a weapon similar to a tomahawk towards their head. Once it shattered the helmet's visor, the video feed abruptly cut off, just to be replaced by the color black... providing a black mirror for the empress as she exposed her sharp fangs.

"Ah, so it was a diversionary attack..." interjected Turras, "Troop transports must have slipped through during the fighting. There might be more if they were hiding behind Earth's moon, so I'd suggest proceeding with caution."

In response, Jenessa tapped her claws against an adjacent table. "So... pursuing them with the entire fleet was a mistake. However, I doubt they would just land their ground forces without any orbital fire support."

As if on cue, a few alarms went off. Electronic monitors transitioned to a crude map of the solar system. Various green blips combined with live footage from lighter scouting ships showcased the SAP fleet emerging from a distant wormhole with their damaged carrier missing and some fresh reinforcements.

"Bah..." grumbled Jenessa, "Maintain our formation and get back to supporting our warriors on the ground. We will strike their fleet again if we have to!"

More words weren't even necessary. Both of the fleets rushed towards Earth. Some ships attempted to take inaccurate potshots during this process, but the projectiles only made the shields of the larger vessels flare at best. However... once they approached the planet itself, the SAP fleet started circling around to the other side of Earth, putting them outside the effective firing range of the

Hegemony's ships. The goose chase only continued from there. Both fleets attempted to find cheap ways of attacking each other as SAP forces fled, resulting in an odd situation similar to before where each fleet controlled one side of Earth.

Meanwhile, Jenessa watched this all unfold with an unamused look on her face. "Why must they always use these sorts of tactics?"

A flashing icon then appeared on one of the main monitors once more.

"We have another incoming message, madame."

"DECLINE IT," she snarled to a technician. "If I have to speak to Dolus again, I will consider performing a ritualistic suicide!"

"Understood."

With that, the notification disappeared. The fleets eventually stopped moving to resume the previous stalemate. Some began immediately providing general support to the ground forces as smaller ships descended to Earth's atmosphere.

"Perhaps we should consider splitting the fleet afterall," said Turras as he observed the ships in action. "If they try pulling a ridiculous stunt like that again, they would end up being flanked on both sides. However, maybe they want us to split up the fleet to more easily pick us off... it's all a precarious situation."

"Then what would you have me do, admiral?"

"Firstly, we need to call for more reinforcements," he answered with a flick of his tail. "Secondly, we need to consider getting you to safety since this might escalate into another war with the joraxians. Lastly, I can take over from here..."

"Leave?" said Jenessa with her head tilted to the side. "Why now?" She stopped speaking for several seconds to stare at the emerald green planet outside of their ship, where countless battles were raging across the world. "It would be bad for morale when things are about to get so... very... interesting."

Her golden eyes then became fixated another hologram of humanity's home...

For what would be known as the invasion of Earth had only just begun.