

Disintegration

Chapter 18

Weapons. Armor. Ammunition.

Regardless of whatever it was, a sthara woman went about organizing it all.

Goggles concealed her hazel eyes. She only took them off to carefully inspect a compact coilgun with a form factor similar to a carbine, revealing more of her fur. Although the fur's general pattern resembled a cheetah, it was the same shade as luscious brown sugar. Similarly colored yet lighter scales underlining her coat also gave the woman a more reptilian look if they didn't override her fur altogether.

Suddenly, the alien's long ears with black tips like a lynx perked up once a tiny intruder entered her tent...

Sasha.

Upon spotting her, the sthara tapped a clawed finger against an earpiece, activating a translator before it glowed green. {What the hells!} she hissed, all while some software made her sound like she had a raunchy human voice. {They're letting a little lass like you out of bed to wander around the place already?}

In response, Sasha sighed as she left a colossal tent flap behind. "Is that somehow a problem?"

{No, no! Well, actually... yes. It's dangerous but also perfect for my own purposes. I've needed a human volunteer of some variety to do several small experiments, coincidentally enough!}

The human wasn't sure if the alien just made a size-related joke, but she nonetheless rolled her eyes. "That's... exactly why I'm here, actually. I was trying to find and assist a woman going by Widget."

Widget set her coilgun aside and put her hands on her hips. {Then congrats on finding me!} She made a sly smile, exposing a single fang. {I'm the one and only!}

"In that case, what do you need?" asked Sasha as she approached the alien's workspace.

Following a few swishes of her draconic tail, Widget crossed her arms. {For starters, I want you to spew as much profanity as possible within the next three seconds or so.}

"Wait... what?!" blurted Sasha, her eyes going wide as she stumbled back.

Ignoring her words, Widget held up three gloved fingers. {Alright. Ready?}

"NO!"

{AND GO!} exclaimed Widget, counting down by lowering her fingers one at a time.

For a while, the human remained silent. She scratched the back of her head and looked in a different direction. "Um... fuck you?"

{Yes! YES! Thank you so much. Keep going!}

Sasha gave Widget a menacing glare. "What the hell is the point of this, exactly?"

Widget made a dismissive gesture by waving her free hand. {I'm just making sure my translation device works properly. When we first got here, we could hardly communicate with any humans we encountered. The latest software update must have fixed any pre-existing errors!}

"...And having me spew profanity was the best way to go about testing that?"

Widget tilted her head to the side. {Why wouldn't it be?}

Sasha narrowed her eyes. "Think of the children."

{Right...} said Widget with a snicker, {You might be tiny, but I'm not gonna treat you like a kid.}

"Yeah, yeah, and fuck you too." said Sasha as she crossed her arms.

{Heh. Thanks!}

"Don't mention it."

{But regardless, Sasha, my translation device used to struggle with human profanity. Some of it still confuses me... even with proper translations! How is telling someone to go reproduce with themselves an insult of some variety?}

"It's not literal." said Sasha, facepalming. "The saying is more of a derogatory thing."

{I've heard humans say reproduce this, reproduce with that, go breed somewhere else... you giant freaks...}

"Widget, are you talking about the word fuck?"

She nodded her head. {I think so.}

"Well... it's a very versatile word. One of my favorites, funnily enough. Humans use it as a noun, verb, and even an adjective. If someone says fuck you, it's like saying I hate you or something along those lines."

Widget tilted her head a bit. {Ah, that makes more sense. Thanks!}

"No problem!" said Sasha, scratching the back of her head.

{I never did get your name, by the way.}

"It's Sasha for short." answered the woman in question. "Oh, and it's nice to meet you!"

Widget adjusted her goggles as she formed a wry grin. {Likewise!} She squinted as she stared down at Sasha, who was standing next to one of her digitigrade feet. {I suppose having a little helper wouldn't hurt for fixing things. However, I'd like to speak to you on a more even eye level... so I'll have to pick you up and bring you to my workbench.}

Sasha shrugged. "Go on ahead. I'm used to it by this point..."

{Well, if you say so!} replied Widget with a flick of her forked tongue.

Rather than lowering an open palm, Widget leaned towards the ground and grabbed Sasha with a few clawed fingers. She then rapidly raised the human onto the workbench before letting go.

Reeling, Sasha spent some time re-orienting herself as she stumbled forward, just to find weapons and tools surrounding her in almost all directions.

"I... I guess that works." muttered Sasha under her breath.

Widget's ears folded down. {Was there a more proper way to go about that?}

Sasha rubbed one of her eyes. "Don't worry about it."

{Suit yourself.} replied Widget, rolling her shoulders. {I'll give you a few moments to get a feel for things.}

Naturally, Sasha looked side to side. The gargantuan coilgun immediately caught her attention. It was joined by a similarly huge multitool, thin metal bars, and other various bits and bobs. Other odd sights adorned tables near the adjacent tent walls, such as a plasma pistol usually utilized by hegemonic warriors and a black sheath meant to protect a tail.

Meanwhile, Widget made gradual movements as she gestured with one hand and grabbed the coilgun by using the other.

{Comfortable?} she hissed.

Sasha scoffed. "As much as I'll ever be."

{I suppose I can't fault you for that, considering your circumstances.} Widget paused to drag the weapon across the table, bringing it next to Sasha. {Anyway, are you ready to receive a quick and dirty briefing about our guns and how they work?}

"Wait..." said Sasha, blinking a few times. "Why would I need to know about them?"

{Because if you're gonna be helping me repair weapons, it wouldn't hurt to know a thing or two about them. Hells, it might be useful information if we somehow end up fighting side by side!}

She paused at Widget's words. "I guess it wouldn't hurt..."

{EXCELLENT!} said Widget with a lingering hiss. Her tail swayed more swiftly as she stood on the tips of her toes, re-orienting the coilgun so that Sasha could receive a better view. {The first thing you need to understand, little lass, is that these things aren't like your ordinary human firearms where projectiles are propelled by chemical reactions. They're way more different...} She racked the slide back for emphasis, creating clicking sounds as an ambidextrous reloading system similar to an FN P90 sprung into action. {This is what humans might call a gauss carbine, mass driver, or coilgun... depending on whatever translation makes the most sense.}

"I haven't seen the invaders using anything like that." interjected Sasha.

Widget's nose scrunched up a little. {Well, yeah! The Hegemony is far more traditional when it comes to their energy weapons. SAP specifically utilizes ballistics when possible since they're unorthodox and can counter certain defenses meant to protect against plasma projectiles and laser beams.}

Sasha scratched her chin as she looked at the weapon in question. "Interesting." She saw a mechanism similar to a holographic sight at the top. Certain colored or outright glowing indicators with highlighted alien characters provided various information... whether it be the ammo count, the weapon's temperature, or whether the safety mechanism was engaged.

As Sasha observed, Widget spent some time slotting a thin metal bar into place, loading the coilgun with another mechanical click.

{And there we go!} she hissed. {Ready to fire!}

"Huh. How much ammo can that thing hold, anyway?"

Widget snickered a little. {A shitload!} She pointed at one of the indicators. {The way it works is that multiple mechanisms rapidly scrape an alloy metal bar, so to speak, creating ammo. Electromagnetic coils then propel it. It usually creates a hailstorm of tiny metal projectiles, so you rarely need to reload a coilgun. The real concern is keeping track of your heatsink's temperature and making sure it doesn't get overloaded, albeit you can technically swap it out for a new one too.}

Directing her attention to the handgun nearby, Sasha pointed at it. "What about that one?"

{Oh! You mean the plasma pistol?}

"Yeah."

Widget placed the coilgun on the bench again. {Those hegemonic ones are a bit more complicated. Their ammo capacity is low, and they use cheap, compressed helium as ammo for some safety-related reasons. Superheating the gas can create plasma projectiles and whatnot, but good luck making helium explode or ignite through more conventional means... albeit hegemonic plasma weapons are NOTHING compared to the old school precursor ones using liquid hydrogen as ammo!}

Sasha raised an eyebrow. "Precursors?"

{Ah, shit. I gotta remind myself that you're only human...}

Sasha's only response was yet another sigh before Widget resumed.

{But yeah, they-}

Before Widget could continue, someone new abruptly popped into the tent, interrupting her. Widget ultimately flinched and scrambled for a weapon on her workbench... all while a canine creature with ebony black fur gradually rose to her full height, standing a full head over her. Two swishing black tails lingered behind the newcomer. For a time, Widget stared directly into some icy cyan eyes, which refrained from revealing a hint of emotion as they looked at one another.

At this sight, Widget released her weapon. {Umbra!} she said with a smile spreading across her face. {You scared the hell out of me! I never thought I'd be happy to see you again!}

{Right.} responded Umbra in a light, emotionless, and feminine tone. She glanced at Sasha, allowing the human to gain another glimpse of her menacing cyan eyes with black sclera surrounding the iris. {Why is there a human here?}

{That's Sasha!} answered Widget. {She was lost, but Jape found her and brought her here!}

"Uh... hi!" said Sasha with a hesitant wave of her hand.

Umbra didn't say a word in return. She only sneered. Afterward, Umbra began sifting through the room, grabbing metallic ammunition for a gargantuan railgun attached to her back. The room remained silent for several long moments as she went about her task, and only the commotion of rumbling and shaking munition containers disrupted it.

Eventually, Widget noticed small dents and even browning blood on Umbra's armor. {Did you just arrive back at our camp?}

{Yes.} said Umbra with a nod, stoically going through the process of reloading her railgun. {I'll give my scouting report to our superior once I finish resupplying myself. I'm almost out of ammunition, you see.}

{We were wondering what was taking so long!} hissed Widget, flicking her forked tongue.

Umbra glanced at her damaged armor. {I was sidetracked after encountering multiple hostiles. Humans and hegemonic forces, to be more precise.} She gave Sasha a blank stare as she readied her railgun, which had flashing indicators glowing green as projectiles were slotted into place. {They were dealt with accordingly.}

Sasha made a look of concern. "Um... are you saying that you attacked humans?"

{Quite the opposite, actually...} answered Umbra with a swish of her tails. {They attacked me first. I retaliated.} She narrowed her eyes a little. {The survivors left me alone after that.}

Sasha's face rapidly contorted from a smile to a frown, all while Umbra nonchalantly checked on a coilgun strapped to her waist.

As for Widget, she raised a clawed finger. {You're... not exactly making a good first impression for Sasha, Umbra.}

The joraxian in question closed her eyes for several seconds and huffed. {That's irrelevant.}

"Then what the hell is your problem?" asked Sasha, clenching her fists. "For fuck's sake, I thought you people were supposed to be the good aliens!"

Umbra made a low growl. {I hold no personal animosity towards your species, human. I'm merely a daughter of Mara. A soldier. I can... and will... defend myself. My primary goal is to eliminate hegemonic warriors invading this planet, and I've been doing remarkable work in that regard. However, humans will be ignored if they refrain from initiating unprovoked hostilities, so it should be simple enough to avoid any... unnecessary unpleasanties.}

"They don't know any better." replied Sasha, shaking her head. "Some humans might think you guys are with the Hegemony or outright invading us too!"

{I know.} replied Umbra, sneering. She moved towards the entrance to the tent. {For now, farewell. Odds are we'll be on the move soon since a variety of reinforcements are arriving en masse.}

Widget's ears folded down. {Are you freaking kidding me?}

Umbra didn't make a single sound as she departed the scene, leaving the two by themselves and arousing another low hiss from Widget.

{Ah... sorry about that, little lass. Umbra isn't exactly a people person, so to speak.}

"Ugh. No shit, sherlock. The difference between her and someone like Siren is night and day!"

{Either way, it sounds like she has some urgent news.} Widget's tail slumped to the ground as she paused. {I still wanna hear what she has to say, though. Odds are she's gonna be rattling off her scouting report to the Chief, so do you want me to carry you with me while I go and check that out?}

"Please do!" answered Sasha. "Just be more careful about it this time..."

Widget snickered at her words. {Right!}

From there, Widget gradually grabbed Sasha with her gloved hands. She shifted Sasha's position to spread across her palm with her legs sifting through the gaps between her fingers. The other hand lightly grasped her back from behind. All things considered, Widget's hands were significantly smaller when compared to someone like Siren, but still more than large enough to support Sasha as she exited the tent.

{Good enough!} exclaimed Widget as she opened a tent flap. {So get comfortable, little lass.}

Soon, they were both exposed to the cold weather. Widget began a short trek through the area as she followed Umbra's footprints spread across the sparse snow. Once she found herself standing next to another tent flap within mere moments, she temporarily used one hand to open it while clenching Sasha with the other. Then she walked inside. At the same time, Sasha's translation device became overwhelmed by a sudden flurry of alien voices sending it into a frenzy.

{What about the others?} hissed Enigma with a masculine human voice substituting for it.

{They have full-fledged battlemasters all the way out here?!} asked the Chief with her deep and booming voice, deafening the rest.

{Do I need to repeat myself?} asked Umbra in a monotone sounding voice. {We don't have much time, hence why I won't provide extensive details... for now. In short, the humans in this region have begun a desperate counter-attack, which complicated my recon mission. More of our forces are also arriving. Allegedly, the Hegemony is calling for massive amounts of reinforcements due to that and some humans outright rebelling in the cities they're occupying.}

{Gods!} nearly roared the Chief. {So much for the grand plan!}

Umbra closed her eyes. {With all due respect, Chief, you should know better than anyone else that plans never survive the first engagement with the enemy.}

From her unorthodox vantage point, Sasha analyzed her cramped surroundings. Virtually everyone was inside the tent. This included Siren as her tails slumped down, Widget as she held Sasha between her fingers, an unamused Umbra, Enigma with his bizarre green fur, Jape as he made a smile that never seemed to disappear from his face... then lastly, their joraxian squad leader, a bear of a woman towering over the rest as she growled...

{Then we'll improvise, as we always do!}

An overall motley crew of six titanic alien people Sasha hardly knew.

{So we're moving out.} said the Chief with yet another growl. {We can't just be sitting here on our asses while other units are already in action! At the very least, did you ever find our sister unit investigating that human military base?}

{I did.} answered Umbra in a stone-cold tone.

The Chief cocked her head to the side. {And?}

Umbra briefly broke eye contact. {All dead. What I investigated of the aftermath indicated that they were somehow caught between human and hegemonic hostiles, resulting in a complete massacre. Rotting corpses also had a noticeable impact on the surrounding environment.}

{For the love of the gods and all of that is holy...} The Chief only stopped speaking to shake her head while baring her multitude of sharp fangs. {I REALLY hope that the stharan saboteurs weren't too excessive with their jamming equipment... because otherwise... that means our long-range communication equipment has somehow been damaged!}

{Does that mean we're abandoning the camp?} asked Enigma, frowning.

Jape scratched his chin. {We might not have much of a choice, unfortunately, my brother.}

{Wait!} said Siren as several people began leaving the tent. {What about Sasha?}

Umbra narrowed her eyes. {What about her?}

{I mean... what are we going to do with her?} asked Siren as her ears folded against her head.

{I wouldn't mind bringing her with me.} hissed Widget, clutching Sasha a bit tighter. {She seems like a good little lass!}

Sasha's eyes went wide from this sudden turn of events. "Don't I get a say in this?"

{No.} said Umbra nonchalantly.

{Yeah, she might end up being a handicap of some sort.} interjected Enigma. {We did our good deed for the day. Just give her some supplies or whatever, then let her return to her people. It'd be her own safety, of course, so no hard feelings. That's just how things have to be sometimes.}

Siren snarled, startling almost everyone to some extent. {We've been over this! I don't want another friendly fire incident, so having her tag along with our unit could avoid those!} Her tails slumped once more. {Sasha said she wants to help too. Come on, Chief!}

The Chief held her head with one hand as she spent some time in deep contemplation. {Fine.} she finally said before staring directly at Umbra. {I've been thinking about it, and there's a decent compromise that I have in mind...}

{And what would that be?} asked Umbra, narrowing her eyes again.

{More specifically, Umbra will now be responsible for Sasha's well-being.}

At the Chief's words, everyone in the tent stopped in place.

Siren's jaw went agape.

Umbra responded with nothing but a death stare. {You're joking, right?}

{Of course not!} nearly roared the Chief. {It's a satisfactory solution as far as I'm concerned! You're a sharpshooter, so you're usually a decent distance away from any fighting regardless of whether you're acting independently. Sasha could serve as a spotter. Maybe even a scout. Additionally, in the unlikely event you encounter any human forces, Sasha might be able to clear things up to prevent any sort of accidents or incidents from occurring again.}

{That's... sound logic.} murmured Umbra. {Unfortunately.}

{Then let's not waste any more time.} continued the Chief. {Hand Sasha over, Widget. She's Umbra's responsibility now. Otherwise, get ready to roll out. We might end up in the thick of things based on what I've heard about the situation so far.}

{Affirmative!} said several people present, albeit at different intervals.

With some hesitation, Widget approached Umbra. {Sorry, lass.} She proceeded to pluck Sasha away from her other hand, then handed her over to Umbra. {Good luck, but orders are orders, unfortunately.}

Sasha was rendered helpless like so many times before as she dangled in the air. "Oh, for the love of..."

Umbra rolled her eyes before suddenly snatching Sasha away with a padded pink hand, just to immediately place her in one of many pockets meant for ammunition and supplies. {And for better or worse, I'll follow them, albeit I have my own unique interpretations of them.}

In the meantime, Sasha was forced to adjust her new position within Umbra's pocket. Her struggles culminated in popping out of it before nothing but her head and upper body were poking from it. She clenched her hands into fists. Indifferent to this, Umbra began walking away, but Siren trailed her for a time to watch Sasha from a short distance away with her crimson red eyes watering up.

{Be careful, you two!} said Siren as she covered her muzzle with both hands.

Umbra scoffed. {I always am.}

"Actually, I think I'd prefer to be with her instead..." muttered Sasha.

{Don't worry.} replied Umbra in a stoic tone. {I'll find some way of making you useful.}

This assertion did little to calm Sasha as Umbra's unit prepared to finally enter the fray with humans, hegemonic warriors, and SAP soldiers fighting for Earth's ultimate fate.