

Disintegration

Chapter 26

Sasha's jeep traversed across poorly maintained roads within the Russian countryside.

Occasionally, the vehicle slowed down. It went around obstacles blocking the way forward or traversed off-road to avoid areas where the pavement was missing altogether. From there, the engine roared as Sasha sped back up, darting through the landscape with only light precipitation clouding her vision in the distance. Between the occasional swipe of a window wiper, she glanced at a rearview mirror or others to the sides to scan her surroundings, spotting a peculiar message sprawled across one of them.

OBJECTS IN MIRROR MAY BE LARGER THAN THEY APPEAR!

Rolling her eyes, Sasha focused on the road ahead. Her vision became increasingly impaired as a slurry of rainfall and hail began occasionally rattling across the jeep. Better yet, an earpiece buzzed before alien voices emitted from it, filling one of her ears as the patter of precipitation filled the other.

{It looks like Sasha got separated from us!} said Siren.

Widget made a hissing sound. {Isn't the little lass with Umbra?}

{Negative.} said the woman in question, sighing. {We split up. Also, you should probably ask Sasha herself since she's likely tuning in to whatever we're saying.}

{Oh. Right!} replied Siren in a more upbeat tone. {Sasha, what's your location?}

Sasha stared at the road, where fog or mist made seeing anything in the distance more and more difficult. "I... don't know."

{I could just track her position with that device of hers, you know.} interjected Widget.

The Chief suddenly joined the conversation by growling. {Isn't that a huge security risk?}

Widget chuckled. {Not sure if you've noticed, Chief, but the Hegemony sucks at encrypting their communications. I doubt they'd be capable of decrypting ours. Regardless, I have it all under control; tracking the little lass and regrouping shouldn't be an issue at all!}

{So... we're going to link up with Sasha?} asked Siren.

{I'd advise against it.} said Umbra, scoffing. {Hegemonic forces are retreating en masse. Roughly a third of their umok auxiliaries appear to be in open rebellion. As a result, we don't have much time, and I doubt Sasha will be of great assistance when mopping up any stragglers.}

{But what if we encounter other humans?} asked Siren with a whine. {She's probably not too far away. We could just...}

Out of nowhere, a titanic silhouette came into view. Sasha's communications cut off. What started off as a shadow slowly revealed a large pair of feline legs on the road, completely covered in combat armor. Sasha tried swerving out of the way, just to catch the attention of the sthara with snow-white fur. As the jeep went straight towards an adjacent forest, a digitigrade foot stomped downwards, completely stopping it in place once it became pinned underfoot, causing Sasha's body to spring forward with only a seatbelt preventing her from slamming her head against the steering wheel.

[Well, well...] said the sthara with a low hiss, [What do we have here?]

Meanwhile, Sasha's translation device replaced the previous chatter with his masculine voice. Every little movement he made shifted the vehicle's suspension in place, digitigrade toes partially caving in the tarp protecting the jeep in the rear. Sasha unfastened her seatbelt, looking around the vehicle's interior for a possible way out with her mind and heart racing again from yet more sudden danger.

Yet another sthara approached the scene. [We don't have time for this, Afrix.] she said in a feminine tone. [If humans are scurrying about, leave them alone if they're not bothering us. We have to get out of here...]

[Yeah, but look at this one.] Afrix carefully picked up the jeep with both hands, right as Sasha slammed her foot onto the accelerator to make the wheels spin rapidly... all to no avail. [Military.] he said with a smile, shifting the jeep around to avoid the wheels. [My hardware is also picking up some communication signals, so that's an odd anomaly, all things considered.]

In mere moments, Afrix forced the jeep's door wide open with a few clawed fingers. Sasha scurried back to the passenger side, albeit the unstable vehicle shifting around in the air nearly threw her to the floor. However, this didn't prevent the sthara from grabbing her by the legs before dragging her out the door, all while she started kicking and screaming.

"No... NO NO NO!" shouted Sasha as she dangled by her legs. "Not this shit again!"

With a sneer, Afrix dropped the jeep. After flipping over, the vehicle fell in a relatively rapid fashion, just to crumple against the ground as what remained of the tarp became undone. Precipitation kept washing over Sasha as she struggled within his grasp, coming face to face with the alien man and an orange visor covering his eyes. Flashing symbols presumably analyzing her within the confinement of virtual reality vision danced across them. Using his other hand, a single clawed finger delicately pressed against the side of Sasha's head where the earpiece resided.

[Somehow, she has SAP communication tech.] Afrix paused and narrowed his eyes. [How odd.]

A third sthara entered the scene as the feline trio gathered around Sasha. [What's the holdup?]

[I caught some kind of scout or spy.] answered Afrix, hovering the human high towards the sky. [If this isn't explicit confirmation that humans and SAP special forces are collaborating with one another, I really don't know what would convince anyone at the top of the food chain otherwise.]

[Then let's just bring her with us.] hissed one sthara. [She can join the other prisoners, perhaps even acting as evidence if she's somehow special.]

[I say we just kill her and be done with it!] said another.

These words made Sasha's muscles tense up as she looked at each individual alien while hanging upside-down.

Afrix brought a clawed finger to her chest. [This might sound strange, but I think the human understands us.] He dragged his finger across Sasha's stomach before descending to her legs, nearly penetrating the fabric with a sharp claw. [You do understand me, don't you?]

Sasha started shaking. "I don't..."

[Don't you?] he repeated, ever so slowly puncturing Sasha's pants with a single claw until it pressed against her bare skin. She winced from feeling a tiny prick. Consequently, a sly smile started spreading across Afrix's face as he snickered. [I guess we'll find out once I sink more of my claws into your soft skin, you lovely little thing...]

{SASHA!} screamed a familiar voice.

Afrix's ears perked up. The sthara to his sides raised their laser rifles. Almost immediately, a barrage of ballistic weapons fire struck one down, just for the other to retaliate with a rapid array of laser beams. A few thuds filled the air. Sasha could do nothing but watch as one sthara slumped to the ground, revealing a joraxian with snow-white fur that collapsed a short distance away afterward.

Afrix grabbed and aimed his plasma pistol. [For the love of the empress!]

"Siren?!" said Sasha as her eyes went wide. The other sthara approached the joraxian with the rest of her squad nowhere to be seen. "SIREN!"

[Disarm that bitch and check for vitals!] hissed Afrix. [She shouldn't have snuck up on us like that...]

The other sthara nodded. [On it!]

[As for you...] said Afrix, narrowing his eyes.

An ear-piercing scream cut the man off, making Sasha's ears ring. Within the blink of an eye, Siren jumped back on her feet and lunged at the sthara approaching her previously limp body, cleaving his throat with a swipe of her claws. She only screamed louder during the process. Unlike the borderline slow-motion movements of most titanic aliens, Siren moved just as fast if not faster than a human, quickly disarming the sthara and grabbing hold of them, all while the sthara's hissing transitioned to gurgling as they choked on their own blood.

Afrix sprung into action by aiming his plasma pistol and clutching Sasha with his other clawed hands. [Seriously?!] Plasma bolts simply collided against the other sthara as Siren used his body to protect herself, picking him up and charging towards Afrix's position. Before he could turn tail and

run, Siren closed the distance and tossed her improvised shield aside, then practically pounced on his back.

An odd mix of hissing, shouting, and screaming filled the air.

Sharp teeth sunk into Afrix's neck. He unintentionally squeezed the trigger of his pistol once more, sending another bolt surging nowhere in particular. As this occurred, his remaining hand slammed against the ground, rendering Sasha dazed yet unharmed as his fingers unraveled to reveal an open palm with only her body sprawled across it.

"Fuck, fuck, FUCK!" said Sasha, scrambling away from his fingertips. She soon freed herself from his grasp and fell against cold dirt and grass. After that, it became a matter of crawling away while Siren chowed down on the man, ripping him to shreds with a combination of her claws and teeth as he tried to punch or kick her. They only stopped over time. When Sasha finally looked up at the joraxian, she found blue blood dripping from her maw and entirely black eyes as if they rolled to the back of her head.

"Si... Siren?" said Sasha, voice quivering.

Following these words, Siren stopped tearing chunks of flesh and fur from Afrix's warm corpse. Instead, she simply swallowed whatever remained in her mouth. Her nostrils flared at a constant pace as she sniffed the air, licking the exterior of her muzzle and revealing a frightening array of sharp teeth as she barred her fangs and made low growls.

Sasha put some distance between herself and the fallen sthara. "I'm down here, Siren!" She waved her arms a little, catching the attention of the joraxian rising from the ground. The way Siren simply stared downward with her arms going limp made Sasha cover her mouth with one hand. "Uh, what exactly has gotten into you? You literally mauled all three of them by yourself! Are you hurt...?"

Rather than answering this question, Siren unleashed another high-pitched, ear-piercing roar.

The way Siren posed like a werewolf with her clawed hands in the air did little to ease Sasha's mind...

"Siren?" she whispered, stumbling back.

Siren swiftly stomped directly on Sasha's previous position, crushing nothing but grass beneath her foot. However, it immediately motivated Sasha to get her ass into gear as she sprinted away from Siren, who checked the underside of her boot before diving towards the ground with her arms extended outwards.

Several seconds later, Siren hit the dirt. The impact momentarily made everything shake like an earthquake. Sasha tripped over herself as she ran away, and Siren repeatedly swatted at her position with clawed hands. Siren's mouth also went agape, exposing a menacing maw with gore still decorating a pink tongue and canine teeth, just for her to lunge at Sasha before snapping her jaws shut.

A cold nose bumped into Sasha's back and nudged her forward as she narrowly avoided a grisly fate only a few feet away from Siren's muzzle. This failure only aroused more growling from Siren. She got on all fours before standing once more, buying more time for Sasha as she made a beeline for the nearby woodlands.

Sasha's heart pounded in her chest. Her eardrums. Raindrops descending down her face only made it harder and harder to see. Her heart almost stopped altogether as another figure emerged from the treeline...

Umbra.

Sasha stopped in her tracks for several seconds, gasping for air. She simply stared. Umbra had what could be best described as an annoyed look on her face, strolling towards Siren and holding what resembled a baton. Her two black tails swayed behind her with every step she took, eventually bypassing Sasha altogether, completely ignoring the human as she fled past her combat boots.

Without any hesitation, Siren charged towards Umbra with a snarl and claws fully extended. Umbra reacted in kind by swinging her baton. Siren's vocalizations transitioned into yelps as the weapon hit her square on the muzzle, electrocuting the woman with white fur standing up altogether. This only happened over and over again as Umbra began a relentless assault with her baton, countering her opponent's moves by stunning Siren and eventually knocking her off her feet as she fell down.

For good measure, Umbra shocked Siren one more time with the baton before pinning her back beneath a metal boot.

Once Sasha stopped running and looked over her shoulder, she saw Umbra standing over Siren's limp body. She simply retrieved metal cords from her waist, allowing her to start tying up and restraining Siren. It prompted Sasha to approach them as Umbra practically hogtied Siren, bounding a blend of her hands, feet, and even her muzzle as she remained unconscious.

"What the hell was that?" asked Sasha with her voice rising in tone.

Umbra looked at Sasha and said a few words before holstering her baton.

However, Sasha's translator failed to make sense of it. Sasha adjusted the device on her ear with a look of confusion, then it briefly emitted some white noise that made her shudder. Getting a general idea, Umbra approached Afrix's corpse. She swiftly sifted through his personal possessions, plucking his plasma pistol away with one hand and retrieving a tiny metal device with the other before she crushed it between a clenched fist.

{Is that better?} asked Umbra, not bothering to make eye contact.

Sasha reeled a little. "At least I can understand you now..." She stopped to look at Siren, who appeared angelic and peaceful in her unconscious state compared to the demon that possessed her before. "What the hell happened? Siren just tried to kill both of us!"

{I noticed.} said Umbra in a cold tone. She approached Siren again, glancing at the scorched fur and the accompanying cauterized wound on her arm. {Here's the short version. You were nearby, so Siren split from everyone else to find you before the Chief could come to a clear decision about that. She got shot. Our little sthara combat technicians here played a role in that if they had a jamming device, making Siren more concerned for you once your comms got abruptly cut off, then I suppose she must have gone completely berserk.}

"Berserk?" repeated Sasha, looking between the two joraxians. "What do you mean by berserk?"

{Look...} said Umbra, sighing. {I don't have much time to spell everything out for you. But oh well. Although we're trained to control it, my kind can be sent into a more murderous state of rage if we experience enough mental, physical, or emotional trauma. Hence the term berserk. It's a tranquil

fury at best if you can keep your wits, but at other times, people completely lose it, and they won't distinguish between friend or foe.}

Sasha stared at Siren. "Will she be okay?"

{Probably.} said Umbra as she walked away. {She might not even remember anything that happened while going berserk. In case she relapses, we're going to need to keep her like that for a while.}

Before Sasha could say anything, Umbra fired her newly acquired plasma pistol. The bolt struck Afrix in the torso, punching a hole through his chest. She then walked towards the sthara struck down by Siren's assault rifle as they kept weakly breathing and hissing thanks to their delirious and heavily wounded physical condition.

Another thud of the plasma pistol silenced them. Meanwhile, another voice buzzed in Sasha's ear...

{Umbra, what's your status?} asked the Chief.

She approached the third corpse and squeezed her trigger, then raised a free hand to her helmet. {Just mopping things up.}

{Did something happen?}

Umbra nodded at Sasha while walking toward her. {Sasha ran into some stray combat technicians. Hegemony-aligned ones, obviously. Siren got shot trying to save her, so she went berserk, then I had to restrain Siren before making sure Sasha was okay.}

Sasha rolled her eyes. "As if!"

{But they're both still alive, right?} asked the Chief.

{Affirmative.} answered Umbra.

Growling from the Chief emitted on the other end. {That's good, but now our only medic is out of action. We're already a bit behind schedule if we intend to link up with the other commandos...}

{I say we have Sasha watch over Siren.} replied Umbra, smirking a little. {She can let us know if something happens, and I can return to you as soon as possible.}

{That's... risky.} said the Chief.

Sasha put her hands on her hips. "Don't I have a say in any of this?"

{You want to be useful, right?} asked Umbra, kneeling to the ground. {This is finally your chance! Just make sure one of our own is still breathing by the time we come back for her. We don't have much time to spare, so if we try to extract Siren for treatment now, tons of Hegemony forces will slip away from us.}

"Wait..." said Sasha, recoiling. "They're falling back?"

{Do I need to keep pointing out the obvious by saying yes?} asked Umbra in return. {More lives are on the line if we can't support other SAP units currently closing around their remaining strongholds.}

Shaking her head, Sasha grunted. "Isn't Siren wounded?"

{Lightly.} answered Umbra. {It's nothing too serious. The Hegemony and their energy weapons cauterize any wounds they make, so it's not like she'll bleed to death... not like one of their warriors getting shredded by our ballistic weapons fire.}

{Then I suppose we have a plan!} said the Chief in a more hearty tone. {Sasha can keep an eye on Siren, and Umbra can come back to us.}

{Got it.} said Umbra before exchanging the plasma pistol for her sniper rifle. The compact gauss weapon unfolded and extended itself as she prepared it for action. {I'll be with you shortly.}

{Good.} said the Chief. {Until then!}

Sasha rubbed her eyes. "Ugh."

Like so many times before, Umbra began moving away from Sasha without even looking at her. {But do take care of her, Sasha. Siren is a good woman. I took no pleasure in knocking her on her ass, and it would be a real shame if she died trying to protect you.}

Looking at the ground, Sasha balled her hands into fists. "I don't know whether to thank you or to tell you to go fuck yourself."

Umbra smiled a little. {You're welcome!}

With that, the distance between the two grew. Sasha's communication device became inert and silent. She sat on the ground a short distance away from Siren's face, resting her head in her hands as she found herself becoming small and insignificant again. Only odd chatter and static coming from her jeep made a few creative ideas form in her mind as time passed by...

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A hegemonic destroyer in dangerously low orbit hovered inside Earth's atmosphere.

It provided batteries of plasma fire to support any warriors below. Transports flying above the deployment zone ferried people and war material from Volgograd directly onto the ship. Scattered soldiers of the Hegemony made a disorganized effort to rally around the area, including some carrying their wounded. Others had to contend with anything from random pockets of umok rebels, columns of human tanks peppering them with shells, or the hit and run tactics of SAP commandos.

Deimo clung to his plasma pistol as he watched everything unfold. His soldiers had a protective perimeter around the deployment zone and even the nearby human city itself, letting the most wounded warriors be extracted from the area first. A few new transport ships made their way to the ground as he scanned his surroundings, spotting what remained of Ishtar's unit alongside the other warpacks under his command as human artillery harassed other warriors from afar.

"Where is Battlemaster Ishtar?" he asked over the communication network.

"Unknown." said a sthara technician. "Her comms have gone dark."

"Let me guess..." hissed Deimo, "Network problems? Human saboteurs? SAP jamming devices?"

For a time, no one dared to answer his question.

"Unknown." repeated the sthara.

"But her unit is here, isn't it?" he asked, snarling a little. "The packmaster will have my head if I try to delay our evacuation any longer..."

The sthara's hissing cut him off. "Lone contact approaching, sir."

A live video feed displayed on Deimo's visor. Only one zenari with heavy armor walked towards the deployment zone without even having a weapon in hand, utterly unfazed by the ongoing chaos.

"Patching you in, sir." said the technician.

The feed transitioned to show the interior of a helmet. From there, Deimo saw a familiar face with emerald green scales and golden eyes, albeit bloody and bruised from nearly being beaten into a pulp.

"Specialist Andraste!" he hissed. "For once, I am happy to see you. Ishtar's unit is now fully accounted for with yourself present, but I do not know what happened to the battlemaster herself!"

Andraste gave a blank stare. "Oh. Right. Her." She made a crooked smile, showcasing some missing teeth as she stuck out her tongue. "She is dead!"

The blood drained from Deimo's scales. "I see." He promptly cut off the live feed, and Andraste rejoined the others boarding the sparse infantry transport ships. One of his fists slammed against a table, rattling some containers and electronics sprawled across it and even his bodyguards as they looked at one another.

"DAMN IT ALL!" he roared. "This planet can go to hell! We are getting out of here!"

True to his word, Deimo immediately abandoned the campsite with his last soldiers in tow, leaving behind tents and human ruins as they prepared to board the destroyer with all the other warriors.