

Disintegration

Chapter 29

All for nothing.

Needless death and destruction encompassed Volgograd. Thousands of souls were missing from its once bustling streets, and rubble or debris blocked the various roads. Russian military forces approached the perimeter of the city, disembarking their vehicles as they either entered the ruins or went about trying to clear the way forward.

Other soldiers surrounded Ishtar's corpse...

One man spun a wheel on a disposable Kodak camera. His comrades posed with their weapons in the air as they surrounded Ishtar's head, smiling or making more cocky expressions. Much like her armor, the battlemaster's body became riddled with holes or other damage, including an empty eye socket dripping with purple body fluids as her jaw remained agape.

Moments later, a camera flash captured the moment forever.

Sasha could do nothing but watch on in shock. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" She leaned against Siren's fingertips, standing on her open palm. "We're late! We missed it all! I think I might even recognize the giant bitch the others are gawking at..."

Siren's crimson eyes went wide. {I see Umbra too!}

Rather than approaching whatever remained of Ishtar, Siren completely ignored the cold corpse in favor of rushing towards a black joraxian. Umbra herself sat on the ground, grasping an injured leg with both a digitigrade boot and some damaged armor hastily cast aside. A trickle of red blood in the snow led to her current position. More human troops stood a short distance away from the woman, mostly remaining next to an APC while a brave few walked closer and closer to Umbra's titanic body.

{For the last time, I don't need any more of your help!} growled Umbra between barred teeth.

One soldier poked a single pink toe bean before taking several steps back.

Consequently, Umbra's face and toes scrunched up. {And for the love of Mara, stop touching me too! What the hells is wrong with you people?}

The sudden arrival of Siren and her massive shadow looming over everyone caught their attention, prompting the human soldiers to back off.

{By my gods!} exclaimed Siren, black-tipped tails slumping downward as she kneeled. {What happened, Umbra? Do you need me to take a look at your wounds?}

Sasha stared at the area where a slurry of projectiles partially mangled Umbra's leg. "Jesus Christ."

{Don't worry about me.} snarled Umbra, applying pressure to the affected limb. {Worry about the others! That damned battlemaster managed to pick us off one by one, and for all I know, the two of us are the only ones still alive in the entire commando unit!}

Siren locked up for a moment. {Even the Chief?}

Umbra sighed. {Yes. Even her. I did what I could, but the battlemaster got the drop on us and targeted her first before she bled out. Things just fell apart from there. I don't know if that cold-blooded cunt is the most dangerous or lucky zenari I've ever encountered in my life, but as I said, I lost contact with literally everyone else. She could have somehow killed them all too!}

{How... how is that even possible?} asked Siren, glancing at the fallen battlemaster. {What about the other commando unit you rendezvoused with?}

{Don't make me repeat myself!} replied Umbra, reeling. {It all happened so fast that specific details still elude me. The other commando unit practically vanished! I'd tell you to head into the city to search for survivors, but I lost contact with Widget when she did just that, then I got injured once I went looking for her myself. There might be more hegemonic warriors awaiting you for an ambush if that battlemaster led us all into a clever trap since I doubt she managed this all by her lonesome self, battlemaster or not!}

Siren stared at some distant human soldiers entering the city. {Well, I should have been with them to begin with...} A more determined look appeared in her watery eyes, then she went about carefully placing Sasha on the ground. {If I don't come back, assume the worst.}

"Wait, wait... Siren!" said Sasha, stumbling off a palm and into the snow. "It might be safer for you to stay here while my own people make sure the coast is clear."

{I don't have a choice, Sasha.} said Siren with a swish of her tails. {My purpose is to save and protect others. Not myself.}

"But..."

With that, Siren sprinted away. Sasha recoiled a little from the sheer force as a gust of wind and some snow splattered against her winter coat. Nonetheless, the Siren continued running towards Volgograd with Sasha simply observing her movements.

Other human military forces went about securing the city itself. As they bypassed alien corpses still blocking certain sections, a man with a scruffy beard and a revolver emerged from a sewer manhole. The soldiers stopped and aimed their weapons. Women and children followed him as they climbed out, blinking once the sunlight revealed the dirt and grime covering their clothes or exposed skin. One soldier handed the scruffy man a bottle of water, who greedily gulped it down, all while the other Russian troops prepared to distribute more supplies from their transports to the shell-shocked and shivering civilians.

{And you.} growled Umbra, breaking Sasha's focus. {I thought I told you to stay put and to keep the other humans out of our way. I also warned you about how Siren could even revert back to her previous berserk state, yet now she's freely roaming around!}

Sasha crossed her arms. "I have a penchant for taking big and stupid risks when life or death is on the line. Siren also seems stable enough now."

{And that's precisely why she went berserk the first time, you fool! If only you listened...}

"Actually, I finally helped!" said Sasha, throwing her hands in the air. "I told my own people about the situation so that they could assist you. I painstakingly removed Siren's restraints before bringing her here to help, yet here you are still being condescending and dismissive when puny humans like me just potentially saved your life!"

Umbra grumbled. {Perhaps you have a point.} She formed a fist with a free hand. {I did soften up the battlemaster for them, but the timely arrival of your kind did prevent her from finishing me off.

However, can you blame me for being like this when you humans have been nothing but a liability by this point?}

Sasha broke eye contact and moved in another direction. "You aliens have done nothing but underestimate us. My only regret is not arriving earlier and helping deliver the final blow if that zenari is who I think it is..."

One of the human soldiers present raised an eyebrow as Sasha passed by him. "Wait, you can talk to them? What's she saying?"

Rather than responding, Sasha ignored the man and made her way to Ishtar.

Umbra groaned a bit. {Do you want me to say sorry? Because I only apologize for underestimating you and your determination. It's an admirable degree of stubbornness I've only encountered from the likes of zenari, but your two species couldn't possibly be more different.}

Meanwhile, Sasha made eye contact with a familiar face. Although Ishtar's head missed an eye altogether, the other amber eye made her indistinguishable. A few minor details immediately stuck out to Sasha as well, whether it be the missing pauldron on one shoulder or the same minuscule dents from human projectiles adorning a few armor segments.

"My god, it is you!" said Sasha, balling up her hands into fists.

Umbra's ears perked up. {What?}

A human soldier approached Sasha's position. "Woah, woah... who are you? What's going on? Based on that outfit of yours, I'm assuming that you're a tanker or something..."

Sasha pointed at Ishtar's head. "THIS! This is the woman who killed my comrades. The damned *prisholet* that kidnapped me before the one behind me saved my life!"

The soldier raised an eyebrow as others watched on. "The hellhound is with you?"

"Yeah, but here's the thing..." answered Sasha, shaking her head. "Did the *prisholet* have any human captives with her?"

In response, the soldier scratched the back of his head. "Uh..."

"She kidnapped a kid and an army officer! Lieutenant Colonel Vasily. I can't recall his full name, but I doubt she just... abandoned them."

"I... don't know what to tell you." said the soldier, shrugging. "We lit her up. Others might want to hear about this though if you have information like that."

A low sound similar to static made Sasha's earpiece light up.

{They're... they're...} said Siren, choking back tears. {Gone.}

In the distance, a few gigantic aliens emerged from the city. One joraxian walked with a limp while another sthara moved around in a disoriented fashion. Unrecognizable faces altogether. More reinforcements poured in from around the perimeter, including more SAP troops descending from ships in the sky or human ground forces approaching from multiple angles. Some joraxian regulars even went about assisting some of the human soldiers, moving significant obstacles aside to allow for the passage of vehicles or picking through the rubble to search for survivors.

Umbra rubbed her eyes in the meantime. {Then I suppose I will be assuming command.}

Another human soldier gestured at Sasha. "I think you might want to come with us. If you can communicate with the aliens using that headset or whatever it is, then top brass will also definitely want to know about all of this."

Sasha raised a free hand. "Hold on. I lost my weapon and I have some unfinished business..."

One soldier chuckled. "Lost your weapon?" He handed her his assault rifle. "In that case, you can borrow this if you need it, I don't even..."

Within a split second, Sasha snatched the Kalashnikov from his fingertips. She pointed it at Ishtar's remaining eye. Sasha then aimed and fired the weapon in rapid succession, startling the surrounding soldiers as she squeezed the trigger and walked forward.

"FUCKING BITCH!"

Bullets poked holes in Ishtar's still intact eyeball in an abrupt blaze of glory while other rounds were absorbed by her thick hide or scales.

"LOOK WHO'S SMALL AND INSIGNIFICANT NOW!"

In a matter of moments, an empty click indicated when the weapon ran dry.

"You got exactly what you deserved!" shouted Sasha for emphasis, huffing and puffing a little with her hands still shaking.

With that accomplished, Sasha stomped back to her previous position. She handed the soldier his weapon back, shoving him a little as she walked towards a nearby infantry transport. The other humans reacted with either bewilderment, laughing, or other forms of bemusement while Umbra merely rolled her eyes at the sight.

"I like her already!" said one of them.

At the same time, nothing but death and destruction remained in the wake of the soldiers on the city's outskirts. Structures once reaching towards the skyline gave way to humans retreating underground like rodents, only for countless civilians to re-emerge as if they survived a terrible storm...

Marking a new beginning for humanity as a whole.

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"Did you kill her, Specialist Andraste?"

Two other zenari flanked the woman in question, holding her by the arms with her hands bound by handcuffs. "I did no such thing!"

Deimo paced back and forth, his footsteps echoing throughout the ship. "You two were at odds with one another. You told me she was dead. Every second we spent still on the ground, we risked the entire evacuation operation being compromised, and I wasn't going to throw that all away over

one soldier. But now I have others claiming you two got into some sort of physical altercation before the battlemaster broke off." Finally, Deimo stopped in place and gave the specialist a death stare. "I want nothing but the truth."

"Okay, okay..." said Andraste, chortling a little. "She knocked me unconscious and left me for dead. I don't know what happened to her, but I merely returned the favor with some potential misinformation!"

The blood drained from Deimo's scales. "May my ancestors forgive me then." He motioned at the two zenari warriors behind Andraste. "Take her away and keep an eye on her. We can have a military court go over this later once we collect more evidence and possibly available recordings."

"As you wish, ensign." replied a single warrior.

Andraste simply smirked in a crooked fashion, lightly laughing to herself as they dragged her away.

"And figure out which human she stored in a spare boot." continued Deimo, sighing. "I do not wish to know what that demented women did to him, but he might be able to provide some details if she broke formal protocol with something as absurd as that!"

The other visible warrior nodded as the trio departed the room, an automatic door sealing them within an adjacent hallway.

A sthara technician in the room recording everything also disabled a drone equipped with a camera. "Done." She focused on Deimo as he sat on a chair, resting his face in both hands. "Are you... alright, sir?"

"No." answered Deimo, hissing a little.

They both stayed silent for a while.

"This has been nothing but a complete disaster." said Deimo, taking a deep breath. "The empress presumably died on her flagship. Our assault on Earth failed. We are backing out altogether and allowing the Solar Atlas Pact to have free reign over that miserable dirtball of a planet, so I cannot help but feel this has been all for nothing."

The sthara shuddered a little. "Sir. With all due respect, it's not your fault and out of our hands now."

Deimo sat up and pounded on his chest. "I played a role in this complete catastrophe. Battlemaster Ishtar might be dead or captured because of a rash decision I made under tremendous pressure. This will haunt me for the rest of my days!

At these words, the sthara glanced at the ground.

No words were exchanged for a while.

"I actually do believe what the Hegemony stands for." said Deimo in a low tone. "Galactic unification by any means necessary would bring about an era of peace and prosperity, not to mention preparing the galaxy against an existential threat if those things ever returned..." He looked upwards to stare at the sthara. "But now? I think these humans are going to hate us forever. They'll never forget what we did. We underestimated them for their small sizes, and now our Hegemony is likely going to be weaker than ever before with everything spiralling out of control."

As the destroyer drifted through space, nothing but white noise accompanied Deimo's words, joining other remnants of the grand hegemonic fleet in defeat.

Nevermind everything falling apart.