

Disintegration

Chapter 30

An umok auxiliary gave a blank stare as he looked at a flaming car. Unfortunately, half the vehicle remained missing thanks to a car bomb, which crippled his taloned foot as he sat inert on a concrete road. A crowd of humans, including both soldiers and civilians, watched on or screamed at him as he did nothing but release weak chirping sounds from his chipped beak. Meanwhile, a construction crane behind him went about looping a steel cable around his neck, creating a makeshift noose as hydraulics lifted it towards the sky.

Pressure tightened the cable.

The assembled crowd went wild.

Some screamed vulgarities as if the mere pawn caused all their problems.

From there, the umok choked and gasped for air, up until he departed from this world like all his other comrades.

~~~~~

{So I'm merely speaking to... representatives.} said King Dolus, hand cupping his chin. His hologram stayed around the same size as the other well-dressed humans in the room. {If that's the case, I assume that most of your leaders didn't survive the initial zenari assault, or they otherwise went missing?}

A human wearing a green uniform befitting for a general stepped forward. "Either that or we had to take control until a civilian government could be re-established."

Dolus rolled his eyes and sighed. {Lovely.} He walked a little, flicking his twin tails. {And your so-called United Nations?}

"Dissolved." said a woman wearing a black dress.

{Well... that just complicates things.}

After saying this, Dolus returned to sitting on an ornate chair. He crossed his legs. Although his slim outfit had a more formal appearance, its more minimalistic design with a V-neck collar exposed a tuft of white fur on his chest. Not to mention footwraps rendering his digitigrade toes visible. The assembled group of a few hundred or so humans surrounding his hologram projector included anything from military, religious, or civilian leaders crowding a worn-down auditorium.

{Here's the primary problem...} resumed Dolus, breaking the silence. {Your species isn't united like my own. Trying to do individual political agreements with each and every single one of your nation-states may prove to be impractical. It would be easier if I could make arrangements on an international level with all of humanity instead. If we decide to go that route through one organization or another, do we have questions or concerns in that regard?}

The human crowd immediately burst into chaos.

Dolus smirked. He raised his hands and motioned downward as if he were conducting an orchestra. {One at a time, please!}

"What exactly is this Solar Atlas Pact of yours?" asked a politician.

Another raised their hand. "Why exactly do you want us to immediately join it?"

{It's an economic and military alliance of sorts.} answered Dolus, leaning against one of his arms. {We formed it with some sthara threatened by the Hegemony. Mutual self-defense. To streamline things, it's more like what humans may refer to as a confederacy if only to help coordinate and centralize our military forces, among other things.}

"So humanity would lose its sovereignty if we joined it?" asked a journalist recording everything.

Dolus shrugged. {Just a little!}

"That'd be outrageous!" said an American man with a southern tang. "We didn't just fight an entire alien invasion off for y'all to annex us!"

{I mean, it wouldn't be hard.} said Dolus with a toothy grin. {Hypothetically, I could order my berserkers to overthrow your governments and replace them with new ones. Maybe I could even implement some sort of planetwide human federation of nations.} He smirked and kicked his feet in the air. {Wouldn't that be way easier?}

Multiple humans reacted with anything from shock, confusion, and anger.

"I don't believe that would be wise." replied an Indian diplomat in a calm tone.

Dolus cocked his horned head a little to the side. {Why not?}

The diplomat crossed his arms. "Theoretically, we still have enough nuclear missiles to render this entire planet uninhabitable. Some can even strike your fleets. If we can't have this planet, then I suppose no one can if you're *actually* suggesting the idea of betraying and conquering us."

Before the rest of the humans could be whipped into a frenzy, Dolus shook his head and held up his hands. {I made that suggestion as a jest!} he said, laughing a little. {A mere joke! Quite unprofessional on my part due to... cultural and linguistic differences. Or something.} He recomposed himself, closing and opening his icy blue eyes. {But more seriously, it would be an exercise in insanity if we tried to immediately integrate a species that just got introduced to the galactic community through an alien invasion. Forgive me for the mere suggestion; I've just been finding this process frustrating. I mean... I don't believe their leader or a representative is here, but do you honestly think that one Korean country among others would ever agree to have their nation-state absorbed into my little confederacy?}

The room remained silent for a while as others coughed or glared at one another.

Dolus clasped his hands together. {Right! Regardless of whether you join, the Solar Atlas Pact would be more than happy to act as mediators and guides as we assist your species with rebuilding and recovering on your homeworld!}

A Polish representative with a red and white flag pin cleared his throat. "Actually, mediation is what some of us have been wanting to discuss."

"For now." said a Ukrainian man. "You see, Russian military forces helped us repel invading alien forces from our territory, but now they won't leave certain parts of it." He glared at the Russian

delegation with daggers in his eyes. "Members from their apparent military junta should be here if they want to try explaining that one to everyone else."

A Russian general adorned with medals stood from his seat. "It's a mere misunderstanding," he said, gradually looking at everyone in the room. "We completely pulled out of Poland. If we were going to annex them again, we would have come to an agreement with Germany to partition them first."

A dreary German woman rolled her eyes and sneered. "Really?"

"As for some nations such as Ukraine," continued the general, "We are only protecting Russian speaking minorities within their territory since their own governments failed to do so."

All attention got redirected towards Dolus, who yawned at their words. {Ah... so... do minor territorial disputes really matter when we're discussing the fate of your entire species?}

"Didn't you just say you were going to act as a mediator?" asked the Ukrainian.

Dolus's tails shot up. {Well, of course!} He leaned forward and narrowed his eyes. {Whatever your borders were before the Hegemony's invasion will be respected and enforced by my berserkers.} He looked at the Russian general. {Do we have a mutual understanding?}

Without saying anything, the general stared at Dolus and sat back down.

{Which reminds me.} said Dolus, rolling his shoulders. {The aftermath of this crisis will be a nightmare for everyone involved. Although the Hegemony backed down and things haven't escalated into a full-blown war since they have their own internal issues to contend with, there's also the matter of the abductions and the eradication of your infrastructure leading to mass anarchy. A few human governments surrendered to the Hegemony. Relief efforts from SAP are already underway, but there are some things even I don't have the power to prevent...}

"I thought the Hegemony wanted to exchange prisoners?" asked a spokesman. "Why would they do that otherwise?"

Others in the crowd whispered or murmured among one other.

{I don't know.} answered Dolus in a cold tone. {My sources say they abducted anywhere from a few hundred thousand to millions of humans during their retreat. They allegedly have no interest in returning them. Negotiations have generally been strained in that regard due to our current policy of eventually killing any captured zenari warriors, so I doubt that will go anywhere.}

One general slammed a fist against a table. "Why aren't you counter-attacking them to begin with?!"

Dolus tilted his head up. {Pragmatism. Logistics. It's better to negotiate from a position of strength, and SAP doesn't necessarily have the manpower or resources to invade the Hegemony. We did nothing but give them a bloody nose by fending them off, really.}

"But their empress got blown up by one of our nukes!" exclaimed one delegate. "One of their client species is rebelling!"

{Irrelevant.} replied Dolus. {If anything else, that all gave me a chance to de-escalate things and guarantee the independence of your species.} His tails wagged behind him as he made a more devious smile. {It's a real shame regarding what happened to Janessa the third, though! I loved talking to her and watching her bury herself or her own people. Unfortunately, I can't capitalize on her death or the subsequent umok rebellion without those opportunistic mactarians supporting us first.}

A human woman raised an eyebrow. "Huh?"

"A... mactarian?" parroted another man.

In response, Dolus made a dismissive motion with a free hand. {Another alien species.}

More holograms projected images of worlds with all-encompassing oceans and few islands. Aquatic farms cultivated fish, plankton, and algae en masse. Creatures with webbed hands and feet had an uncanny resemblance to bipedal sharks as they swam through the water with the assistance of their finned tails. Additionally, a complete lack of irises and the color white making up the center of one of their eyes gave off an appearance similar to something far more predatory and primal.

{And yes, they're almost as large as us.} resumed Dolus. {Their so-called Free League is a collection of republic equivalents situated between SAP and Hegemony territory. Nebulas make it hard to

traverse. Despite their... pirate problem... SAP has granted them associate status for trade alongside forming a mutual defense pact. They will come to our aid in the Hegemony invades, but they refuse to support an invasion of the Hegemony itself, putting us all in an awkward deadlock where we can't invade the Hegemony without their support, while the Hegemony has been hesitating to attack us both at the same time.}

Many human delegates simply gawked at the bizarre sight of anthropomorphic sharks with leathery hide ranging anywhere from red, orange, or purple until the hologram disappeared altogether.

{Speaking of which, I'd like to make humanity a similar offer!} said Dolus, standing from his seat and placing a hand on his chest. {Human independence will be respected. Through one political body or another, whether it be a newly formed UN or the World Trade Organization, I'd like for the Solar Axis Pact to one day commence trade with the nations of Earth. We will protect your planet if a majority of human countries agree to a similar mutual self-defense pact.}

An older man with a turban crossed his arms. "So what's the catch?"

{For starters, you'd have to come to our aid if the Hegemony attacked the Solar Axis Pact.} explained Dolus, making circular motions with one hand. {But we aren't expecting much in that regard. No offense.}

More humans piped up one at a time, some voices being drowned out by the others.

"And...?"

"Sounds too good to be true."

"Can you be trusted?"

"There has to be more of a price to pay than that."

{AND...} said Dolus, silencing his human chorus. {SAP might request a few... privileges.}

"Concessions." said a man with dark skin.

{Privileges!} asserted Dolus with a thump of his foot. {They might be temporary, but they would be necessary to carry out any agreements. We would like to use a few moons orbiting planets you refer to as Jupiter and Saturn as naval bases, supply depots, or other installations. Especially one called Titan. This would allow our fleets to protect your solar system more effectively against incursions, while the asteroid belt and Earth itself would serve as effective fallback points.}

The assembled humans whispered or momentarily spoke among one another.

Dolus fluttered his eyes. {And if it's not too much to ask, we might also station a limited number of berserkers and scientists on your planet for defensive or research purposes. It could also be a nice cultural exchange. Besides the possibility of joint military exercises, the presence of SAP military forces will be essential if I'm allowed to establish an embassy in Iceland!}

One human pushed up their glasses. "Uh... why Iceland?"

{It's isolated, and the climate is preferable for my species...} answered Dolus, looking away. {Making it ideal for me if I ever visited your planet in-person!}

"Yeah, but places like Belgium or Switzerland are traditionally used for that."

Most attention got directed towards the Icelandic representative, who tensed up and blushed a bit. "Um. We'd be honored to host his majesty! If he were to establish an embassy in an agreed upon location, pending permission from others..."

{Excellent!} exclaimed Dolus with his twin tails wagging. {Then I believe that covers everything I'd like to discuss for the time being. To implement these measures, would a simple verbal agreement with a majority vote suffice for now until we can establish something more official in the future?}

Almost everyone tried to speak at the same time, making Dolus recoil a little.

"Agreed!"

"Alien soldiers still on our planet?"

"It's not like we were using those other planets!"

Dolus motioned downward as they slowly stopped speaking. {Either that or we can raise our hands in the air to indicate that you support the propositions I made today.}

One at a time, human hands shot up. It took some time, but this soon culminated in a massive majority of the representatives or other leaders raising their hands with few exceptions. The mere sight resulted in a more mischievous smile from Dolus as he locked his hands together, his silky smooth voice filling the air once more.

{Perfect! Then all is going according to plan...}

~~~~~

A teenage zenari girl with bright blue eyes and scarlet red scales shivered. "I do not think I am qualified for this..."

"Neither was your sister." said an older zenari man, nearly identical to his daughter besides his golden eyes. "Look what happened to her when she refrained from listening to my advice. No empress acts alone, my dear."

She broke eye contact. "But... you said an empress might be tutored and taught for years if not centuries before they take the throne."

"Emphasis on the word might." he replied, holding up a clawed finger. "In dire circumstances like this, Malyni, you might be forced to become an empress early."

Malyni glanced at the ground. "What if I do not want to?" She held up her arms, where her gold-embroidered sleeves fit loosely around them. "This outfit is tacky and I think it is too big..."

The zenari man crouched down to get on a more even eye level and snarled. "Do not ever say that again. This is your birthright! If the potential stress or responsibilities are concerning you, remember what I said. No empress acts alone. Other lower nobles and other high ranking military officers have been keeping order and for now you will be nothing but the Hegemony's face."

At his words, Malyni blinked a few times. "What does that mean?"

"A figurehead, my dear." he hissed, placing an arm on her shoulder. "I will be acting as your regent until you come of age in several solar cycles."

"But what about the umok, the humans, and whatever happened to my older sister..."

The man pressed a finger against her snout. "All taken care of, my dear. Most umok have remained loyal and fleets with eight super dreadnoughts are ending their rebellion as we speak. As for the humans, they are better off being left alone. Your sister losing one of our priceless precursor ships and her own life against them has been humiliating enough already, even if we still have a dozen or so to spare, plus the joraxians are now protecting them too."

Malyni placed a hand against her head. "But..."

"Just do as I say and all will be well." said the man, patting her on the back. "Now let us not keep everyone waiting. It is not going to be like traditional coronation ceremonies, so time is not a resource we can afford to waste."

"As you wish, father." said Malyni in a weak tone.

With that, she followed him out of an ornate room lined with ceremonial clothing. They traversed down an adjacent hallway with truly stunning architecture. Most of the structure was composed of stone or steel with many columns or pillars to accommodate giant beings such as themselves. Heraldry and other emblems lining the walls symbolized the Hegemony and the empress herself.

Sthara servants, zenari butlers, and umok underlings attended to the needs of the palace. Malyni bypassed them as they tidied up the general area or replaced the previous empress's physical or digital images. Eventually, she reached a narrow corridor. She stopped in place for a mere moment but ultimately followed her father to a balcony overlooking an area directly in front of the palace.

What Malyni saw only made her paralyzed.

Crowds were assembled outside the palace grounds. Ships, including an outright dreadnought, were in low orbit as they hovered above her in the sky. Unlike any previous ceremonies, zenari warriors were all over the place as they kept the crowd in check or otherwise secured the palace grounds. Similarly titanic structures from the bustling urban surroundings were visible in the far

distance, some of which resembled spires challenging the skyline, a feat of engineering in and of itself. Before Malyni could even contemplate turning back, she looked over her shoulder, spotting a pair of elite zenari vanguards blocking the only way back into the palace.

A combination of her father gently pushing on her backside and an umok gesturing at Malyni forced her forward, despite the blood draining from her scales. Countless people, including those on-world or off-world, watched the ceremony thanks to camera drones floating around the palace. Yet another custom golden throne with other decorations sat in the center of the balcony itself, prompting Malyni to sit on it, albeit it was a bit too large for her to fill completely.

Nonetheless, an umok placed a crown on Malyni's head.

A familiar cry echoed from countless people throughout the arid landscape of the zenari homeworld...

"THE EMPRESS IS DEAD. LONG LIVE THE EMPRESS!"

They were historic words filling the pages of history for many species, but humanity earned a special spot for making such an event possible through one simple truth.

Pride always arises before it leads to one's destruction.