

Extinction Protocols

RetroInferno

Ashes descended like snowfall across the ruins of Budapest.

Once one of the largest cities in Europe, not a single living soul remained in sight. Only ruins, debris, and cinders. Countless black outlines scorched the intact walls and concrete streets, capturing the final moments of its residents like individual crime scenes. Other human figures stayed encased in ash casts, some partial and others fully intact... their facial expressions ranging from complete shock and horror to outright obliviousness as they went about their day-to-day lives like a frozen moment in time.

A massive, lupine foot suddenly stomped onto several ash figures. They disintegrated like dust, either crumbling beneath a combat boot or falling apart from the force of the impact.

The titanic alien it belonged to let out a low growl, glancing at the ground. All the ash figures hardly compared to just one of his clawed fingers. He resumed walking down the street with a huff, ignoring the tiny human figures, then scanned his surroundings with his gigantic rifle at the ready.

Only a distant sight made the lone wolf stop in his tracks. Across the Danube River dividing the city into two, the Parliament of Budapest came into full view, and his icy blue eyes fully focused on this immense landmark.

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“They started building it in 1885...” Flóra said, smiling at the class of children assembled before her. “But can anyone tell me why we named our capital Budapest?”

The class remained silent, some idly kicking their feet in the air or others doing their best to pay attention.

Flóra let out a sigh. “Well... if you don’t know, then I suppose that’s why we’re all here! But do you happen to know the answer, Eszter? I’ve talked a little about it before.”

The girl in question blushed and looked away once she heard her name. “It’s... it’s because there used to be three towns... I think?”

Flóra smiled and nodded. “That’s correct! It used to be three separate cities, but then they each grew large enough to overlap one another.” She paused, turning around to write on the whiteboard behind her. “Buda, Obuda, and Pest! So what does that make when you put them all together?”

“Budapest!” said several children at the same time.

A few more parroted the name of the city seconds later before giggling to themselves.

Flóra shook her head. “Close enough. I mention it because our new capital city needed a new parliament building too. With so many people in the National Assembly, we had to make it extra big. That’s why the Országház took nearly twenty years to build, and it’s still one of the largest buildings ever built in Hungary!”

Some abrupt shaking like an earthquake flickered all the lights in the room. Children also shook in their seats as Flóra shuddered, but eventually, everything went back to normal beyond a lingering silence lasting for several long moments.

“Do we have any questions?” Flóra asked, acting like nothing happened. “Anyone?”

One child raised a hand. “Is Országház still... uh... there?”

Flóra sighed. “It is, actually. People who go out to the surface say it’s still mostly intact! Despite everything, the parliament building still stands, and so do our people!”

Before Flóra could continue, Eszter let out a cough. Her eyes watered and her face turned red as she failed to contain it. What started as a light cough gradually increased in intensity over time, becoming more and more heavy until the poor girl couldn’t hold it back anymore.

Flóra’s eyes went wide. “Oh no...”

Soon Eszter started gasping a bit, struggling to breathe as she kept coughing over and over again.

Another child blinked, bewildered. “Are you okay, Eszter?”

“She’s doing it again!” said another classmate, visibly upset by the outburst.

Flóra rushed into action. She rapidly retrieved an emergency inhaler from her desk, speed walking toward Eszter afterward. Her fingernails removed a small seal like it was second nature. From there, Flóra crouched to the ground, bringing the inhaler to Eszter’s mouth. Eszter let out a gasp as she grabbed hold of the inhaler with both hands, taking a deep breath before she inhaled its medicinal contents into her heaving lungs.

“Is... is that better?” Flóra asked, letting out a sigh of relief. “How are you feeling now, Eszter? Talk to me!”

Eszter could only be described as completely embarrassed, sniffing with her eyes watering. “S-sorry...”

Flóra frowned at her apology. “Aw. This isn’t your fault, sweetie, so there’s no need to say sorry!”

Rather than saying anything in response, Eszter just buried her face into Flóra’s chest. Flóra remained frozen as the girl started to sob and cry in her arms. Flóra stayed perfectly still, hugging her in return and doing her best to support her.

“There, there...” Flóra said, closing her eyes. She spoke in a hushed tone as she cradled the young girl in her arms. “I’ll... talk to Balázs about getting you some more medicine. Everything is going to be okay!”

One child started to moan and groan but went silent the moment Flóra gave them a death stare.

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The class ended much like any other. Some children waited outside the improvised school, waiting for their parents with their teachers in attendance. Other survivors moved throughout the underground metro. However, many children weren’t so lucky. Any orphans stayed behind in the classrooms, playing with toys or resting in their sleeping bags, much like a daycare center.

Flóra smiled as she spoke to some parents. “Oh, he’s such a bright young man! I don’t really have any complaints about him... he’s so well-behaved and always pays attention. But I suppose I’ll see you tomorrow!”

With those pleasantries exchanged, the parents patted their boy on the back before walking away.

Eventually, Flóra began moving in the opposite direction. She passed by a variety of sights and scenes inside the cramped metro. Some survivors remained lined up behind a ticket booth turned into a stand for a soup kitchen, and another station housed dozens of patients lying in minimalist beds within a makeshift hospital... body bags and even bloody rags in full view for everyone to see.

Over time, Flóra reached the metro’s entrance. The gates to enter the metro remained heavily fortified with armed guards manning the booths, and an improvised barbed fence even joined their makeshift defenses.

“What are you doing here, Flóra?” asked one of the guards, raising an eyebrow.

“I need to talk to Balázs.” she replied, letting out another sigh.

The guard grunted. “What for? If it’s for school supplies, that’s not exactly a high priority right now.”

“It’s about Eszter...” she said, glancing at the ground. “Her condition has been... deteriorating.”

The guard grimaced. “I see. He’s still going through with the others in the security station, but I’ll tell them to let you through. Just be warned that he’s not in a good mood...”

Flóra let out another sigh as they stepped aside, opening the gate for her. “Thank you.”

She soon entered a room where several gruff men awaited her. They continued to focus on sifting through bags, organizing their contents into separate piles. This included food, water, ammunition, and medicine among other miscellaneous items.

A gruff man over six feet tall stopped leaning against a wall once he saw the woman walk inside. “Miss Flóra! You must have a very good reason for being here if they let you through so easily.”

Flóra's eyes darted between their firearms and a pile of medical supplies. "I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't serious, Balázs. Eszter's coughing has gotten much worse over the last few days, and she's running low on medicine and any symptom relief medication. I think this condition of hers could kill her if her lungs can't handle it, but I'm hoping she grows out of it or fights it off..."

Balázs grumbled in return. A permanent scowl on his face made it hard to read any emotions beyond perpetual anger and irritation. "And what am I supposed to do about that?" he asked, throwing his hands in the air. "I'm not a doctor. Did you visit the hospital about this first?"

"Well, yeah..." Flóra replied, frowning. "But they don't have what she needs. I was hoping that one of the scavenging teams could look for more medicine at a pharmacy or something."

"Really now?" Balázs said, crossing his arms. "Then would you happen to have Form 990 for me?"

Her face scrunched up. "A what?"

"Form 990." he said before narrowing his eyes. "I thought you went to business school. You should know all about this crap."

She scratched the back of her head. "Isn't that just an old tax form for charity organizations?"

He smiled and nodded. "Yeah, that's it! So... where is it? Do you happen to have one for me?"

"Of course not!" she replied, baffled by his request overall. "Are you joking?"

"I'm just not sure if I'm running a charity organization here." he replied, giving her a blank stare. "I already lost one of my best guys on a scavenging run today, and everyone else is already dependent on us for fresh supplies. So I hope you understand why I might be hesitant to go on a wild goose chase for some super special medicine that may or may not exist anymore. And... as much as I hate to say it, Flóra, the well-being of everyone in the metro is far more important than just one little girl..."

Flóra's jaw went ajar. "That little girl is like a sister to me, Balázs! Is it really that much of an issue?! I'll put on a hazmat suit and a gas mask before heading out to a pharmacy by myself if I have to!"

Balázs made a cocky grin. He looked at the rest of his crew composed of rough men, who stopped organizing the loot to look at him with either grimaces or shit-eating grins. “Tell you what...” he said, making eye contact with Flóra once more. “You have some fire in you, woman! I’ve always liked that. I just don’t think you understand what it’s like on the surface or for my scavenging teams during a supply run. I’ll gladly take you to a pharmacy or two to look for more meds if you wanna act as a... temporary replacement for my crew.”

A younger man gave Balázs a dirty look. “You can’t be serious, boss.”

Balázs sneered. “We wouldn’t want her doing something stupid or running out there all alone, Alajos.” He stopped speaking to focus his attention on the young woman. “So what do you say, Flóra? Still willing?”

She looked away for a time before staring at him with a fire in her eyes. “Ugh. I’ll do it if that’s what it’s going to take.”

Balázs nodded in approval. “Good to hear! I’ll have to give you a rundown on some basic rules you need to follow and maybe some training, but we’re going to do a quick scouting mission on the other side of the river in several days. It should be easy enough.”

Alajos grunted. “Does she have any military or police training at the very least?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Balázs said, making a dismissive wave with one hand. “She can just follow us around and haul gear for us, maybe. No need for her to fight unless absolutely necessary. Even if we gave her a gun, it’s not gonna make a big difference against the giants if we stumble into them...”

Flóra focused on the AK-63 another scavenger held in his hands. “Then why even bother carrying any firearms?”

Balázs sighed. “So that we’re not completely defenseless. There’s more threats beyond the giants, you know.”

She cocked her head. “Like what?”

Balázs looked to the side and started counting his fingers. “Like... packs of wild dogs, bandits, some kind of small drones these aliens got... but the biggest threat has ironically become other survivors.”

“Okay, but when is the next team heading out?” she asked, putting her hands on her hips. “Because we need to get this taken care of as soon as possible!”

He held up a hand, signaling for her to stop speaking. “Don’t get too eager, Miss Flóra. As I said, we’re heading out to scout for more fresh locations to loot in a few days, which is when you can join us. The other guys need to rest and recover. I’m mostly worried about exposing my people to any lingering surface radiation on a regular basis... which just means we’ll have to expand and rotate our teams more often.”

“Agreed.” Alajos said, nodding. “But I still don’t like this. If there’s one thing I learned by now, our teams are only as strong as their weakest links. If someone fucks up too often, it could slow down or endanger everyone else to such a point we’d be better off if they didn’t tag along at all.”

“Just relax.” Balázs said, shaking his head. “The rookies have to learn somehow, and a simple scouting mission should do the trick.”

“Well... is there anything I should know ahead of time?” Flóra asked, perking her head up. “I don’t wanna drag everyone else down...”

“We’ll teach you the basics.” Balázs replied, rolling his shoulders. “How to use a firearm, how to use a gas mask, how to avoid detection by the giants... I could go on and on. You’ll be the student for a change of pace.”

Alajos grunted. “It’s gonna take more than a few days to get any new recruits up to speed, boss.”

Balázs grumbled in return. “I’m not expecting these civvies to fight, Alajos. We’re scavengers. Just rats scurrying in the ruins amid a conflict with giants in the playground. We go in, loot what we can, then get the hell out. It’s not rocket science. We won’t always have the luxury of giving everyone extensive training, and it shouldn’t be a problem if the recruits have some basic situational awareness and don’t act like complete idiots once they’re on the surface.”

Flóra glanced at the ground, deep in thought. “Did anyone on your crew do something really stupid before? I don’t know how the scavenging teams usually operate.”

Balázs rolled his eyes. “Ugh. Where do I even begin? Firing your weapon when you don’t have to, running off by yourself, making too much noise, prioritizing stupid stuff we don’t need over essentials such as food and water...” He paused for a moment, giving Flóra a more fierce stare. “And whatever you do, never catch the attention of the giants! They treat us like vermin. Usually you’ll be ignored if they’re fighting each other, but if you’re alone, they won’t hesitate to capture or kill you... and god knows what they do to the people they catch since they’re never seen again.”

Flóra shook her head. “Wait, wait...” she said, blinking several times. “The giants are fighting each other? I heard the rumors, but I thought they were invading our world or trying to wipe us out...”

“Well, they were...” Balázs said before looking to the side. “At least the ones that are practically giant drakes or dragons, but then these other giants who look like werewolves showed up. Now they’re killing each other instead of us. I don’t really know what’s going on myself, but as far as I know, they’ve turned this entire planet into their battleground. You got one faction controlling each side of the Danube river with the werewolves to the west and the dragons to the east. I don’t think they even give a shit about us anymore since they might ignore us altogether if we’re spotted while they’re in the middle of a firefight, but that doesn’t mean you’re completely safe from them either.”

Meanwhile, memories raced through Flóra’s mind. A normal day at her university turned into pure pandemonium with giant alien invaders descending from the sky, indiscriminately killing and bombing everyone and everything in sight...

A crowd surged down a busy street with some abandoning their vehicles in the face of their might. They left a child behind as she clutched a teddy bear and cried, all while a titanic alien invader stomped down a road a short distance away. Just a flick of a scaly, armored tail against the corner of a building shattered glass and chipped the concrete.

Flóra didn’t hesitate to swoop in. After trying to calm Eszter down, she quickly picked her up, running away with the girl in her arms as the carnage came closer and closer...

She then ran toward the entrance to the metro with the others, chaos and destruction rapidly ravaging the city surrounding them.

Balázs snapped his fingers. “Flóra? Are you still listening to me?”

She blinked several times, then shook her head to snap herself out of it. “Yeah, yeah... sorry. I was just thinking about those first few days... wondering why this was even happening...”

“I’m still not sure myself.” Balázs eventually said, looking away. “No one does. We can only guess and theorize. What I do know is that the dragons seem to want us all dead, but I’m not so sure about the werewolves...”

Flóra raised an eyebrow. “What makes you say that? Is there a big difference between them?”

Balázs grunted. “Beyond appearances? They’re only similar in that they’re around the same sizes and very dangerous. It’s just that the dragons seem to go out of their way to kill humans whenever they can. The werewolves though? As long as you don’t get in their way or provoke them, they’ll leave you alone. Well... usually. I’ve heard that the werewolves might try to capture you alive, but I have no idea why, and I’d rather not find out for myself.”

“Maybe they’re here to help?” she asked, scratching her chin.

“I doubt it...” he said, shaking his head. “All I know is that they really hate the damned dragons! The only reason why they’re even here is probably just to fight them if I had to take a wild guess.”

“So don’t get any bright ideas about approaching them!” Alajos said with clenched teeth. “Just stick with the group if you’ll be joining us, Flóra. Don’t fire your weapon unless absolutely necessary. We don’t need barely trained civilians or women turning into dead weight if they tag along, and it’ll take more than a crash course to teach someone how to actually scavenge on the surface!”

“No need to get so worked up over this.” Balázs said with a roll of his eyes. “This is dangerous work, but it’s completely different from the army. Even a kid could do it. Flóra will learn very quickly once we’re out and about on the surface.”

Alajos crossed his arms. “And if she doesn’t?”

Balázs shrugged. “Then I guess she’ll die? I don’t know. Depends on if she gets cold feet first.”

Flóra broke eye contact for a moment, then stared at Balázs. “I’m doing this for Eszter. If this is what it’s going to take to get her some more medicine, then that’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make!”

“Ah, that’s the spirit!” Balázs said with a smile and a nod. “I’ll be free in the evenings, so just come here in the evenings whenever you’re done teaching the kids, then I’ll show you how to shoot!”

“Assuming shit doesn’t hit the fan...” Alajos replied, letting out another sigh. “I don’t wanna sound like the bad guy, but I got a gut feeling that this isn’t gonna end well.”

Balázs scoffed. “Oh, come on. It’ll be fun! She’ll get to see what we deal with all the time. Maybe she can even take pictures or grab souvenirs to show all the kids once she gets back home!”

Flóra looked away for a moment. “I... don’t wanna be a burden. I’ll try my best to keep up!”

“Your best might not be good enough...” Alajos said, sighing.

“I’ll be the judge of that tomorrow evening.” Balázs said, leaning against a wall once more. “If she can follow basic instructions and has some common sense, then she can be useful. I’m keeping the operation low-risk as it is. I’m assuming you can make arrangements if you’re absent for any of your classes, Miss Flóra?”

She shook her head. “I’ll have to find a substitute teacher, but I’ll drop everything I’m doing if it means we might find more medicine.”

Balázs grimaced. “Fair enough. Just be warned that finding what you’re looking for isn’t a guarantee. But if you’ll excuse me, we still need to organize and distribute all this crap from the previous haul...”

“Thank you again!” she said, beaming up a bit. “I promise that you won’t regret this!”

Some men simply laughed or scoffed at her enthusiasm.

With that, Flóra returned to the metro. However, a certain image couldn’t leave her mind as she left the security station behind. She recalled one of the reptilian invaders with their slitted eyes barely visible behind a strange visor, radiating nothing but malice as they towered over everyone and stared down at all the people fleeing before their feet...

A distant yet crystal clear memory that still sent chills down her spine every time she recalled it.