

Disintegration

Chapter 15

Various colors encapsulated Sasha's vision. It started off with fading blacks and whites before transitioning to red and yellow colors until she returned to reality. As her eyes slowly opened, she saw a blurry and furry outline of a white titan staring down at her.

{By the gods, you're finally awake!} said the creature with a feminine human voice.

Sasha found herself baffled by this sight and the discovery that she was wearing a minimalist headset... her new translation device. She immediately fiddled with it. Afterward, the human noticed various tubes and wires sticking out of her body like a hospital patient, impairing her movement. A closer look at her surroundings revealed she was lying on a massive bed designed for a gargantuan alien rather than a human. The situation could be considered comical under different circumstances. However, it all ultimately sent a chill traversing down Sasha's spine, causing her to shiver as she looked at the other devices attached to her body.

Gradually, the titan brought a clawed hand near her position. {There, there...} she said in a soft and gentle tone, {Everything is fine! You're safe. The last thing we want is an accident, so please don't move around!}

Slowly, the alien used a single finger to caress the hair on the human's head. It made her skin tingle. She blinked a few times, finally regaining her grasp on reality when her vision fully returned to her. Sasha then saw the titan's face. It resembled a canine of some variety, albeit the alien had horns on her head. A striking pair of scarlet red eyes with black sclera surrounding the iris shimmered in the light, staring into Sasha's soul as they glanced between her and a life support machine.

{What's your name, human?}

"Sash... Sasha."

The alien imitated a smile. {Well, my friends call me Siren!} She slightly stuck out her pink tongue. {I'm a joraxian! With that in mind, I need to make a good impression for my species. So... are you hungry? Thirsty? Maybe even cold? If you're feeling any pain, I might be able to alleviate that too!}

"Wait... where am I?" asked Sasha, blinking several times. "When I woke up, I wasn't really sure if I was dead or not."

{No, silly!} replied Siren, snickering a little. {You're in our infirmary!}

Sasha reeled a little. "Our...?"

{Yeah! You see, my species is part of an alliance called the Solar Atlas Pact, or just SAP for short! I'm a combat medic. My unit is here to stop the Hegemony from invading your planet, so we're all friends here!}

"Uh... even the one who found me?"

Siren's two tails perked up. {Oh! You must be talking about Jape! That's his callsign within my squad, and he's been worried sick and wracked with guilt ever since he made you faint!}

At these words, Sasha looked away. "I thought he was... one of... them."

{He's much more friendly than... them!} asserted the alien with a firm nod {Perhaps he can you show you himself. The man might still be waiting outside the infirmary, and he's been checking on your status every single day!}

"Then how long was I out, exactly?"

{A few day equivalents, you poor little thing! Jape might stop moping around if he knows that you're okay, so I'm going to go let him know.} Siren turned to walk away, but she suddenly stopped and looked over her shoulder. {Oh, and would you like to speak to him? The man technically saved your life, but after your reaction towards him, I would understand if you wouldn't be comfortable with doing something like that...}

Sasha spent several seconds in silence and momentarily closed her eyes. "I wasn't exactly at my best when the... uh, misunderstanding occurred. I guess it wouldn't hurt to talk to him now. You know, to clear things up?"

Siren beamed up as she closed her eyes with her tails wagging at the same time. {I'm delighted to hear that, Sasha! I'll be back in just a little bit!}

With that, the white titan walked away. Sasha simultaneously got a better look at her physical form. As before, two white tails with black bulbs of fur at the tip swayed with every step Siren took, much like a kitsune. Her horns and eyes made her look outright demonic in some ways. Like a hellhound. On the contrary, pink paws on Siren's feet, which were wrapped by olive green footwraps, cushioned and silenced her movements as she approached the entrance to the infirmary... a much more fitting feature for someone with an angelic demeanor.

Soon, Siren was sticking her head outside a tent flap. {The human is awake, and she wants to talk to you!}

The human heard some more movement before Siren returned with a similarly sized yet feline looking creature in tow.

Immediately, Jape reminded Sasha of a feline. He had a familiar pair of emerald green eyes and blonde fur intermixed with lighter scales like a hybrid between a big cat and a reptile. Not to mention a draconic tail lined with fluffy fur going up his spine as it slumped to the ground. Although the man was a head shorter than Siren, he wore a similar olive green uniform. He hesitated as he approached the bed, only doing so after Siren gestured with a clawed hand, and everything about his composure screamed shame and awkwardness from a human perspective.

{Hello again, Sasha.} hissed the man, making a masculine voice emit from her new headset.

Sasha's heart rate increased according to the life support machine, but she put on her best fake smile. "Hey there, big guy..."

He scratched the fur on his head. {I apologize for what happened earlier. I should have known better. Your reaction alone should have told me that trying to approach you was a bad idea, but I was hoping to avoid any misunderstandings...}

"Ah, no worries!"

He let out a sigh of relief. {That's good to hear...}

"But why the hell is your species fighting on both sides?"

Suddenly, Jape's tail stiffened up. He bared his fangs. The pupils of his eyes narrowed in a predatory fashion, expressing an emotion Sasha was all too familiar with...

Anger.

Just as quickly as the flaring anger arrived, the man repressed it as he unleashed a low pitched hiss between clenched teeth, dissipating it.

{They are traitors.}

Sasha shrugged, causing a bit of pain due to something attached to her arm. "Ah... but I'm probably not the only one who's gonna struggle with telling the difference."

Before Jape could react to these words, Siren decided to move forward and stood between the two. {Sasha is just... uneducated, Jape! She meant no offense!} She paused to glance at the human in question. {Right?}

"I'm just not sure why that apparently pissed him off, considering what happened."

Jape crossed his arms and looked away as Siren's voice filled the air again.

{He's from a species called the sthara, Sasha. There are two subspecies. They don't exactly like each other very much. Especially since one joined the Solar Atlas Pact, and the other is aligned with the Hegemony. Usually, the white or yellow fur is a dead giveaway since those are the most common colors, but there are some exceptions...}

Sasha scratched her chin. "Now that I think about it, most of the ones I saw reminded me of a snow leopard." She glanced at Jape, who had his eyes narrowed. "Meanwhile, you're more like a cheetah!"

His face scrunched up. {A what?}

{Jape!} roared a masculine voice as someone new entered the tent, catching the attention of everyone present. It was yet another sthara man. Unlike Jape, the newcomer had green fur gracing his feline form, not to mention similarly exotic purple eyes. A far more alien appearance. The only thing the two sthara had in common was their height at approximately seventy-two feet tall, making Siren look even more massive in comparison since she stood somewhere around ninety.

{There you are!} said the newcomer with a frown.

In sharp contrast, Jape smiled. {Greetings, Enigma... my little brother!}

{Don't even start!} hissed Enigma with his tail swaying. {I don't have time for your jokes; the alpha bitch sent me here on an errand.}

Ignoring his words, Jape strolled towards him with a smug and mischievous smirk on his face. He hugged him with one arm. In response, Enigma squirmed while Jape stood on the tips of his digitigrade toes, furthering his slight height advantage over him.

{You see, Sasha, we both have broad shoulders.} He flexed his free hand to reveal padding on his fingertips. {Brown pads. A physique good for running. That's how you know that we're pathfinder sthara compared to those so-called snow leopard sthara!}

The human raised an eyebrow in return. "Huh. Pathfinders?"

Enigma gently pushed Jape away, then sneered. {Yeah, that's what we were made to do...}

{And the ones fighting for the Hegemony are called operator sthara.} interrupted Jape, raising a clawed finger before pointing at his head. {They got a bit more brains, but we got a bit more brawn... ideal for either combat-engineers or combat-medics, respectively. Our fur coats can also vary slightly, like how Enigma's more unique one earned him his callsign...} The man in question sighed before he continued. {But yeah, hopefully, that clarifies things since we're not evil like those pale and frail dork equivalents!}

Sasha nodded. "I see..."

{Meanwhile, I received mine for my hilarious jokes! For example, why was the umok ship technician sad?}

"Um... why?"

{Because someone killed their entire family!}

Following these words, Jape broke out into this odd sort of snickering and hissing, exposing a blue and forked tongue similar to a snake.

Meanwhile, Enigma gave him a death stare. {I kind of want you to die sometimes.}

He stopped his snickering and sighed. {Ah... I know.}

"And what's an umok?"

Jape's green eyes glanced at Sasha upon hearing her question. {The little guys fighting for the Hegemony. I mean, short for us. They look kind of like... I don't know... feathery?}

{Jape, there's no need to give my patient some kind of information overload.} said Siren with a low growl. {She's exhausted. Overwhelmed, even! Think about what things are like from her perspective... we might be startling her by merely moving too quickly!}

Jape looked to the side. {Maybe I got carried away, but she needed to know that not all sthara are the same.}

{I'm just here to find a backup transceiver...} said Enigma with his ears folding down.

As for Sasha, she made an awkward smile and held up her hands. "Look everyone, it's fine. I'm not scared of any of you." She scratched the back of her head. "Well, not anymore..."

Siren beamed up at her words with her tails wagging. {Oh! That's wonderful to hear!}

{And music to my ears!} interjected Jape as he smiled, revealing a few fangs.

"Just don't be so loud." she continued.

{Oh!} exclaimed Siren, her tails drooping. {Sorry!}

Enigma's feline eyes scanned the vicinity. {So... is someone going to help me, or do we need to wait for Umbra to come back? At this point, she's going to be the only one that knows what's going on out there, but I'd prefer fixing the comms issue altogether.}

Jape pat him on the back, making him reel a little. {No worries, my battle brother! I have your back.}

{Wonderful.} mumbled Enigma.

In return, Jape snickered once more. {Did you check with Widget?}

{No...}

{Well, that falls under her jurisdiction!}

{...And I can't find wherever she is.}

{Then let's go find her and give the little lady some privacy, my brother.} Jape paused to look at the human in question. {And it was lovely to meet you, Sasha! I hope you make a full recovery!}

Even though the sthara had a friendly disposition, Sasha still squirmed a little as she looked at the sthara men towering over her. "Yeah... thanks."

Content with this short answer, Jape promptly walked out of the tent with Enigma in tow. This left Siren and Sasha by themselves. The white titan let out another huff with the fur on her chest puffing out a little.

{Sorry about that.} she muttered. {We're professional soldiers, but sometimes Jape's sense of humor can be immature. It might be a sthara thing. Unless you need something else, I'm going to attend to another pressing matter and allow you to rest once more.}

"I... I feel fine, actually!" claimed Sasha as she stared at the tubes, wires, and who knew what else sticking out of her body. "I'd like to get up and walk around if possible. It's been a while."

Siren looked at the human with her crimson eyes full of concern. {Are you sure?}

"Definitely."

{Then I shall free you from your constraints. Just stay still, please!}

Using a mix of her nimble fingers and claws, Siren began removing the medical devices one at a time. Sasha remained practically paralyzed as she did so. During this tedious process, the white titan did a mix of humming and singing in an alien tongue, and it was oddly relaxing like a lullaby. It took a while, but soon, Sasha was free.

{There we go!} chirped Siren as Sasha finally stood up and stretched her limbs. {It's something of a shame, though. It took me a while to set all of that up, and I doubt that I'll be able to do it again. I had to get REALLY creative...}

As for Sasha, she still reeled from the mild irritation and pain. "Still, you have my gratitude..." she said before pausing, looking down at the rest of her body. Most of her clothes were gone except for some undergarments and small white fabrics wrapped around various parts of her body. Compared to her previous state, she was surprisingly clean, albeit small stuff like dirt still remained beneath her fingernails. "...I think."

Siren smiled. {You're welcome! I'm assuming that you want your clothes back?}

"Of fucking course."

{I see, I see...} replied Siren with a few rumbling growls. {I had a feeling that humans had a nudity taboo. Hence the precautions. Hopefully, you don't have too many objections to the measures I had to take for properly cleaning and caring for you!}

Sasha made a dismissive gesture with a free hand, waving these concerns away. "You did what you had to do. Hell, at this point, you might as well be my guardian angel!"

While this exchange occurred, Siren procured a plastic bag containing Sasha's clothing and other garments before placing it on the bed. {I've never heard that expression before, but based on how that translated... I'm flattered! I wasn't aware humans had guardian spirit equivalents!}

Sasha's face turned a little red. "Ah, it's nothing..."

{Now... do you need some privacy?}

"If you wouldn't mind looking away." answered Sasha as she approached the bag. "It'll only take a minute for me to throw my clothes back on since I still wanna talk."

{Oh! As you wish!} The white titan complied with the request by standing up and looking in a different direction. {No rush though, so take your time!}

At her words, the human opened the plastic bag. It was large by human standards and remarkably small by alien ones. Nonetheless, she put on clean clothes in a record amount of time. Once this was accomplished, she patted down her uniform, albeit it still had a large hole near the front from where a zenari claw punctured it, not to mention various damage it sustained while she was stuck in the wilderness. She remedied this to some extent once she found some random articles of clothes in the bag, including a winter jacket, then the woman overlapped them with her uniform to create various layers of insulation.

During this commotion, Siren put on some digitigrade combat boots and similarly black gloves, albeit they had no tips to allow her claws to stick through.

"All done." announced Sasha as she patted down her new outfit. Despite the otherwise mish-mash of clothes concealing her slim form, matching colors revolving around black and brown made it somewhat aesthetically pleasing. "What do you think?"

The white titan stuck out her tongue as she kneeled and looked towards her. {Aw! Your little outfit looks adorable!}

"I'll try to take that as a compliment..." replied Sasha, rolling her eyes. "Thanks for adding some other stuff to the mix, by the way!"

{There's no need to thank me, Sasha! If that's all you need, I'm going to speak to one of my superiors. Will you be fine without me here for about an hour equivalent or so?}

She nodded. "Don't worry. This is practically heaven compared to being a prisoner of war!"

Siren's nose scrunched up. {That's... oddly specific.}

"Yeah. I'm not sure if the clothes made it obvious, but I'm in the military."

{Oh? You're also a warrior?}

"Well, I'm a tank driver." explained Sasha. "I had to abandon my vehicle, then I got captured by a zenari shortly afterward. Eventually, I escaped. That's the short version, but you already know the rest."

{Good heavens!} said Siren with her eyes going wide. {In that case, my superior might want to talk to you!}

"Then I suppose I can tag along and get a good look of wherever the hell I am if you wanna make that happen."

Siren broke eye contact. {I don't know. That might be dangerous since I'll have to carry you.} She paused to pull out what looked like small rubber caps from a shirt pocket, then she began placing them on the tips of her claws. {But I do need to speak to my superior anyway. It would not only be an excellent opportunity for you to meet her, but it sounds like you have a wide variety of useful information as well!}

Sasha tilted her head. "Like what? I've been stuck in the wild for god knows how long and I might be the sole survivor of my unit, so I'm a bit out of the loop."

{That may be true, Sasha, but we're still trying to figure out what the entire situation is like for humans.} As Siren spoke, she finished putting the rubber tips on her claws. {Plus some still shoot at us. Either way, having a human around could be very useful... especially for communication purposes since our translation software isn't always reliable!} The white titan then placed a single hand on the edge of the bed, creating a platform with her padded pink palm. {With that in mind, I'm going to need to carry you for your safety and convenience. I know it might sound scary, but I need you to...}

Without any hesitation, Sasha strolled directly off the bed and into Siren's open palm.

{...Trust me.} The white titan blinked a few times. {Oh. I wasn't expecting things to be that easy!}

"I think I've just been desensitized to giant aliens at this point," said Sasha with a shrug, "And I'll definitely trust you over a damned zenari. If anything else, this is nice in comparison to how they... well, SHE decided to treat me."

{That's...}

"I'd rather not talk about it. Not yet. Let's just get out of here so that you can give me a tour of this joint."

{As you wish.}

Siren slowly moved her hand away from the bed and brought it to her lower chest, allowing the white titan to create a relatively safe location once she started using both of her hands to hold, cradle, and protect Sasha with her fingers acting as a guard rail.

Afterward, Siren made her way outside with her small passenger. Once they left the tent, the two were immediately assaulted by the bitter cold as harsh weather enveloped their surroundings. Rainfall was lightly falling in every direction, the wind sounded like it was slightly howling, and their breath became visible with each one they took. However, the human was more surprised by the sight of only three or four tents close together or adjoined at most, and this apparent outpost appeared to be nestled between a valley bordering a forest.

"Wait..." muttered Sasha as she put on her jacket's hood and clasped her hands together. "This is it?"

Siren's ears folded down. {Um... yes? What were you expecting?}

Sasha's face scowled up. "I've only seen like... three SAP soldiers so far. Not an army. The place I escaped from had entire platoons, massive vehicles, and multiple spacecraft swarming the entire area. This is a joke in comparison!"

Siren frowned at her words. {Keep in mind, we are what you might call the first ones in. Special operations. Recon. Whatever the equivalent might be since there are multiple teams like ours. The mission is to contact local human forces and gather intelligence before more ground forces are committed to any fighting.}

"Well, you're outmanned and outgunned in that case." said Sasha as she huddled against the black fabric of the giant gloves shielding her.

With a sigh, Siren used another hand to create a ceiling for Sasha, cupping her. {We always have been.}

From there, the white titan walked towards another tent. Warm air rapidly replaced the cold when she eventually entered a dimly lit room, mostly due to glowing electronics serving as the only light sources. This included various computers tucked away into the corners. Then the human saw another alien. What could only be described as a large canine similar to Siren sat on a massive chair and spoke directly into a microphone.

{Testing, testing... one, two, three.} said the canine with a deep yet feminine voice filling the room.

She received nothing but white noise in response. It eventually died down from a speaker, transitioning to silence. The woman let out a low growl as she stood from her seat, showcasing auburn red fur and an amazonian form barely visible amid the soft lighting. An absolute bear of a woman. Once she glanced over her shoulder, glimmering golden eyes stared directly at Sasha.

{Ah, Siren! I see that the human is alive and well.}

{Indeed!} she replied. {And it looks like you're still having trouble with the comms, Chief...}

The Chief let out a sigh. {Naturally. I still have no idea if it's because the transceiver is damaged or others jamming our equipment.} She took a few steps forward, showcasing some curved horns before looking down at Siren and the human she was holding. {But now we also have a guest... so... what's your name, little lass?}

"I... I go by Sasha."

{Sasha, Sasha...} said the Chief as she clenched her teeth. {I like it. Rolls off the tongue!} Her face formed a toothy grin. {Welcome to our humble encampment! I'm not sure if this will translate well, but we're in the middle of what you might call a... complete shitshow.}

Sasha scratched the back of her head. "No kidding."

{Yeah...} she continued, growling. {Supplies are running low. Other ground forces haven't arrived for whatever the reason. My scout hasn't returned yet. Another fireteam sent to investigate a human military base completely vanished shortly after arriving on this godforsaken planet. Nothing personal, but now I gotta deal with taking care of some human Jape found and took pity on...}

"And here I am thinking I was gonna meet another nice alien." mumbled Sasha under her breath.

{It's not like she's going to take up much space or resources!} exclaimed Siren. {The amount a human needs is trivial compared to us!}

{I'm not talking about that, Siren. We're in the middle of the wilderness. Any humans we've encountered have either been hostile, uncooperative, or they ran away. I hate to say this, but this human might end up being a burden if we can't safely return her to her people.}

Sasha crossed her arms. "A burden is the last thing I wanna be after everything that happened."

{I meant no offense, lass. It's not your fault. You're some of the smallest sentients I've ever seen, and now you're dealing with literal giants in your backyard. This scuffle is purely a dispute between the Solar Atlas Pact and the Zenari Hegemony at this point, and I don't want the people we're trying to protect getting hurt because they decided to try and help us. I mean... I'm probably going to have to watch every step that I take from this point forward with you around here. That's how fragile your species is compared to us, and it makes you a liability.}

{Chief!} said Siren with her mouth going agape.

The Chief threw up her arms. {I'm only telling the truth! Nothing more, nothing less. Just one zenari could take on an entire squad or platoon of humans. Not to mention all the crap that can occur when your people are caught in a firefight between us!}

{Uh... like with Umbra?}

{Yeah.} replied the Chief with a hesitant nod. {The less said about that, the better... but let's just say some collateral damage is unavoidable when SAP and Hegemonic ground forces are fighting over a human settlement.}

In response, Sasha gave a look of disdain. "Right. You might think I'm some sort of liability alongside the rest of my kind, but we still managed to do some damage. We gave those scaly bastards a bloody nose, at the very least! I personally drove a tank that..."

{Sasha is right!} said Siren, cutting her off. {She's a member of the local human military forces! Oh, and she escaped from hegemonic captivity! I'd imagine that she has a ton of useful info and she could help us if we happen to stumble into more humans in the future!}

{Does she remember where exactly?} asked the Chief in return.

"Volgograd." answered Sasha.

Her answer made the Chief's eyes narrow a little. {Ah. That's not too surprising. That particular city was swarming with their forces last time I checked, and we're not too far away from it either. The zenari also specifically targeted and occupied major human cities when they kicked off the invasion, so that's probably how you got caught.}

Sasha broke eye contact. "Correct. However, I was stuck in a tent most of the time, but I'll tell you what I do know. When I escaped, I saw dozens if not hundreds of huge soldiers, vehicles, and ships near some sort of massive base on the outskirts of the city itself."

{We knew about that deployment zone already, actually. It's a major one. Tons of supplies and soldiers regularly being ferried in and out. Hard to miss from orbit. So... you probably don't have any vital intel for us, Sasha.}

"But..."

{Sorry, but the reality is that you're probably going to have to stay here for your safety and to avoid getting in our way. You're probably not gonna be that useful. If you really want to leave, we can give you supplies or something, but then you're on your own.}

"But I'm sick of it!" shouted Sasha as her disappointment festered into fury. "Of this... this treatment. As if I'm worth less than nothing, just because I'm smaller than someone else! I'm tired of being helpless. I'm tired of watching a bunch of fucking monsters ravaging my home while I'm powerless to stop them. So please... let me help you somehow. I can talk to other humans on your behalf, substitute for your missing scout, or anything else you might want!" She got on her knees. "Please!"

As Sasha spoke, the Chief glanced at the ground. {I'm sorry. At best, you could take on a non-combat role, but it'd be highly situational... like with Widget and her tech support. Maybe you could help her with that...?}

"Then put me on the ground, and I'll immediately go find and talk to her myself!"

{But Sasha...} said Siren.

"NOW!"

Without arguing any further, the white titan gently placed the human on the floor. After that, Sasha swiftly stomped towards the entrance with her fists clenched and muttered to herself. She barely opened the tent flap following a short struggle, then she disappeared from the view of the aliens. In the end, the two giants looked at each other with concern sprawled across their faces, albeit the older woman barred her fangs while the younger one's eyes watered up.

Unbeknown to everyone involved, a great battle raged to the east, where counter-attacking human forces were far from helpless as they pushed westward...