

Disintegration

Chapter 16

Artillery guns sang like a chorus.

Russians wearing gas masks dug trenches and foxholes. A multitude of vehicles surged west of the Ural mountains, bringing fresh soldiers and supplies. Meanwhile, almost every forest was on fire. Such was the general state of things as the mountainside turned into a living hell... a beacon for every human that wanted to fight back against the titanic alien invaders.

Hegemonic forces responded to this resistance in kind. Concentrated orbital bombardments caused outright avalanches, burying fortified Russian soldiers. Overwhelming umok auxiliaries and elite zenari warriors slowly pushed back the human counter-attack. Then their respective units regrouped to the east. Each tank shell lobbed their way warranted several plasma bolts or a flurry of laser beams in return. A column of their hovering vehicles, which were leviathans compared to the already giant xenos, quickly annihilated any hostiles nearby as they led the way for the Hegemony's warriors.

Without warning, a mushroom cloud enveloped the vehicle convoy. Another simultaneous nuclear strike in the distance disintegrated entire warpacks. Human fighter jets escorting the responsible bombers were swatted down like flies as they desperately tried to dogfight bizarre alien drones alongside avoiding other point defense systems scattered throughout the vicinity. One damaged plane with a partially clipped wing rapidly descended from the skyline, ejected its pilot as emergency parachutes sprung into action, then crashed directly into an umok auxiliary on the ground... cleaving the alien into two pieces before what remained of the plane became a crumpled mass of twisted and burning metal.

Simultaneously, nuclear fallout partially washed over the area.

Surviving human infantry were undeterred. Unlike the past, they stood firm within their trenches on a hill while the world burned around them. Any alien infantry approaching their positions were greeted by heavy machine-gun fire supplemented by plentiful tracer rounds, practically painting targets for the successive slurries of RPG rockets. Gargantuan warriors falling to the ground created what felt like shockwaves or earthquakes for a brief moment. Despite this, the hegemonic forces still advanced, overwhelming the humans with a barrage of energy projectiles, and their sheer sizes harmlessly absorbed a majority of the retaliatory small arms fire.

One zenari even went about crushing an ancient Soviet tank destroyer beneath her combat boot, silencing and flattening the previously concealed war machine.

Soon, the remaining Russian infantry were falling back, prompting one officer to activate a detonator. Wounded humans left behind, and aliens alike were caught within the radius of successive explosive blasts. Dormant explosives bundled with oil barrels also erupted into the air, unleashed their contents, then returned the favor... which couldn't be more clear with white phosphorus turning the poor armor and protection of the umok auxiliaries into pressure cookers.

Slowly but surely, the Hegemony was winning the multitude of battles, and many humans were retreating to better positions along the Ural mountains to make desperate last stands against alien forces that outnumbered and outgunned them.

However...

At the flank of one hegemonic unit, a sthara with bright white fur heard a sound. His pointy ears perked up. Once he turned around, he briefly saw a thrown weapon similar to an ax before it cleaved his face in half. Other elite joraxian warriors eliminated stray soldiers with silent weapons ranging from ceremonial daggers etched with engravings to sophisticated crossbows firing massive metallic bolts from afar.

Afterward, all hell broke loose.

Howls and war cries filled the air.

Automatic coilguns continually chipping away at a block of metal launched a whirlwind of white-hot particles that could render bodies into gorey pulps and bloody mist.

SAP spec op teams, whether it be joraxian berserkers or sthara pathfinders, flanked the hegemonic forces. Some approached from the rear, quickly catching them by surprise. Others ambushed them from the sidelines. Regardless of their methods, their cumulative efforts resulted in the Hegemony's entire offensive grinding to a halt... and some opportunistic human tank commanders took advantage of the situation to resume their counter-attacks supported by heavy artillery fire.

Far from the battlefield, a zenari officer observed what was happening within her headquarters from the other side of several electronic monitors, then made a tough call that rattled her underlings to their very cores...

For it would become the first time the Hegemony ever retreated from an engagement with human ground forces.

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Ishtar couldn't believe her eyes.

Volgograd was up in flames. Fires rather than city lights lit up the night sky, while smoke rising from it could be seen many miles away. On the contrary, the nearby deployment zone acting as their base of operation remained completely intact... albeit littered with their wounded. A plethora of umok were lying on the ground. Tiny glass shards embedded into their flesh marked where Molotov cocktails began burning the entirety of their bodies, resulting in injuries of varying severity.

"Useless auxiliaries..." sneered Ishtar, doing her best to ignore their pained cries consisting of squawking and chirping. She looked over her shoulder, where the rest of her warpack wrapped up their preparations as they disembarked from an infantry transport. "The rest of you better not falter against what amounts to a bunch of little primitives!"

Andraste pointed her plasma caster's nozzle towards the city. "Why... I would never!"

"Then take point and lead the way, specialist."

At the battlemaster's words, Andraste stuck out her purple tongue. "Gladly!"

With that, the warpack formed an arrowhead centered around Andraste. Other warpacks approaching the city took a similar approach as they advanced from several different angles. Ishtar narrowed her eyes and growled as she heard a flurry of random voices speaking through her communication device, whether it be from underlings or fellow warpack leaders...

"They're underground!" chirped an umok.

"Similar uprisings are occurring within nearby human settlements, so it must have been coordinated." hissed a sthara technician. "Recent reports also indicate more SAP forces are making landfall to the east..."

"Just restore order." said a zenari with a deep and booming voice.

"Actually..." interjected Deimo, "We have received new instructions. Every human in the city must be captured or pacified, albeit their fates are up to the discretion of the warpacks."

Andraste's tail perked up before wagging, while Ishtar formed a look of disgust before speaking once more.

"Are you serious, ensign? I thought the goal was to keep human casualties to a minimum!"

Deimo sighed on the other end. "Is it not obvious? The penalty for a revolt like this is usually death for everyone involved. Plus the deterrent measures have failed. Humans have not surrendered, despite the occupation of their major population centers, and some have begun deploying their so-called nukes on cities occupied by our forces."

"Bah... wasn't this madness supposed to be over by now?" asked Ishtar.

"Nothing really went to plan, battlemaster." replied Deimo with a venomous hiss. "However, our orders are vague enough to deal with the situation however we see fit. Preferably only eliminate humans that resist. Anyone else should be ignored or captured since human civilians are going to be transported to a new location... well, as far as I know."

Like many times before, Ishtar blew air from her flaring nostrils and said a single word...

"Understood."

She then looked towards Volgograd itself. A few umok corpses belonging to auxiliary units once garrisoning it now blocked its major roads. Worse yet, the perpetrators were nowhere in sight. It wasn't like the past where the enemy was conventional, but a situation where they blended in among the civilians to become nearly invisible.

Their foes were partisans. Insurgents. Perhaps even terrorists depending on your perspective.

Nonetheless, the chaotic city itself looked like it was undergoing a riot rather than a rebellion. Humans flooded the streets to loot or destroy other buildings. Gunshots occasionally went off. Massive speakers erected by the Hegemony instructed them to stay calm and remain indoors, making them targets for the humans to vandalize or destroy. Although Ishtar's warpack stayed clear of the roads leading to this state of anarchy, another unit used a major one as a walkway, allowing a car bomb to catch everyone's attention with a deafening bang that deprived a sthara soldier of their lower leg.

In rapid succession, the affected sthara lost their footing, fell onto a concrete street, then flattened a few more human vehicles.

"You have to be japing me." said Ishtar as she watched that scene unfold. Other sthara immediately tried to treat their wounded and screeching comrade, forcing their respective warpack to come to a complete halt. The battlemaster then switched to a voice channel meant for her own unit. "Whatever happens, do not worry about taking any prisoners until any and all hostiles are eliminated! Do I make myself clear?"

Andraste nodded. "Crystal clear!" she exclaimed with a sly smile on her face.

"Affirmative!" said several others at different intervals.

Within moments, their formation reached the edge of the dreary city. Some immediate details became apparent. Whether they be ones desecrated by the initial stages of the invasion or the ongoing chaos, damaged or destroyed buildings also blocked some of the more prominent city entrances. Another appeared to be an apartment complex with dull yet pragmatic brutalist architecture towering over some smaller structures.

Suddenly, Ishtar's augmented reality vision detected dozens of humans emerging from the windows of the complex. They were armed with the typical missile launchers, machine guns, and Kalishnakovs. Additionally, they wore civilian clothes with bandanas wrapped around their mouths and shoulders at most. What followed was a frenzy of sporadic weapons fire, most of which was completely ineffective against the aliens moving towards them/

"FIRE AT WILL!" roared Ishtar, losing herself to a battle trance as she readied her plasma rifle.

A few humans immediately began fleeing from the scene, mostly from knowing what was about to happen next...

Orange plasma bolts glowing like miniature suns slammed into the apartment complex. They warped and eviscerated everything in their way, melting or incinerating various materials that came into contact with them. Humans struck by a bolt practically evaporated. Accurate laser beams fired from the umok warriors easily pinpointed and eliminated whoever survived the initial volley. More plasma projectiles knocked out the building's support structures, causing some metallic parts to glow bright orange before other floors collapsed on themselves, resulting in some cowering humans descending to the lower levels while shouting or screaming.

Meanwhile, Andraste shrugged off the small-arms fire from humans on the adjacent roads as she prepared her plasma caster. The nozzle already had an open flame forming. An ecstatic chortle from her marked the moment an inferno surged forward from her weapon, granting the specialist the ability to rain down fire on the humans like a dragon. She swept the weapon left to right, coating the sidewalks and streets in flames, setting structures such as the apartment complex ablaze... then it outright ruptured from human explosives detonating thanks to the sudden heat surge.

Ishtar only lowered her rifle to analyze her surroundings, where she saw her soldiers following Andraste dangerously close to the buildings. "On me!" she commanded, prompting her warriors to reform ranks on her position rather than the specialist, who resumed stomping her way towards the interior of the city with her literal flamethrower in tow.

As expected, other human partisans faltered against attacks from the other warpacks circling around the city. Similar scenes played out where hegemonic warriors demolished the structures the humans were occupying with their energy weapons. Afterward, the insurgents sporadically retreated. Ishtar wasted no time as she approached the edge of the settlement, ignoring small vehicles and other structures being pulverized by her boots, then walked towards one of the smaller buildings bordering a road leading directly into Volgograd.

With only her head peeking over a building, Ishtar spotted an assortment of yet more awaiting human resistance.

Their fallback position was already prepared for the Hegemony's assault. Improvised blockades cut off a road, providing a tripping hazard for the aliens at most. Some landmines were placed near it. Makeshift technicals with machine guns faced the hegemonic warriors' expected approach, and additional humans hid behind an assortment of fortified positions with their weapons ready.

Despite all their preparations, the last thing they were expecting was a flanking maneuver...

Consequently, Ishtar took a few steps back. With all of her might, she sprinted directly into the structure, and her heavy armor slammed into it like a wrecking ball. The entire thing gradually toppled over. An assortment of rubble and debris fell directly on top of the shocked and surprised human partisans, who tried to scurry away from the building's path of descent.

Several things happened at once.

The building fully fell to the ground, shaking the Earth itself. Ishtar burst through the remains, crushing or kicking anything aside with her feet. She squeezed her trigger several times. Several snapshots were fired. Clustered groups of remaining humans were eliminated by plasma bolts as their vehicles imploded, causing damage within a wider radius and spreading yet more flames throughout the burning settlement.

Ishtar ignored Molotov cocktails falling from neighboring buildings as she finally entered the street itself. Naturally, her warpack followed her through the opening. The aliens' abrupt entrance sent what remained of the humans into a panic, whether they be resistance fighters or civilians. They didn't stand much of a chance against the following onslaught... which included Ishtar ignoring human projectiles targeting her resilient armor, umok rapidly picking people off with their laser weapons, and sthara equipped with light plasma rifles providing fire support while their combat drones hovered above them.

Soon, any resistance scattered with a few parting shots at most. Car alarms went off as Ishtar's warpack collectively walked down both sides of the streets to pick off stragglers. Traffic lights were knocked down by their ankles during the process, slowing them down at worst, and adding to the existing chaos. Their movements seemed slow yet powerful from a human perspective, which stemmed from their large sizes and different reaction times affecting everyone's perceptions.

The battlemaster took the chance to scan her surroundings once the fighting calmed down, then she stopped moving to assess the status of her warpack. "Where is Specialist Andraste?"

In response, Ishtar's underlings looked around. Everyone else was accounted for besides the specialist. A few stared at some hegemonic transport ships and frigates flying overhead as they either provided fire support or landed near the deployment zone.

The lack of an answer aroused a venomous hiss from Ishtar as she faced forward once more... just to spot some humans emerging from a sewer on the far side of the street.

There were two in total. Each one was armed with an RPG, which they aimed at Ishtar. Her menacing gaze made one young man prematurely fire his weapon, while the more experienced one spent several seconds orienting his weapon before squeezing the trigger. The first missile swirled up into the air, just to blow up a section of a nearby office building, and the second moved directly towards Ishtar... all while the duo retreated back into the sewer rather than witnessing the results of their actions. At best, the battlemaster was able to squeeze off a snapshot as she walked towards them, which didn't amount to much once they closed the manhole with a metal cover.

Simultaneously, the remaining rocket detonated against one of Ishtar's shoulder pauldrons. The blast stunned her for a mere moment. During the aftermath, she glanced at the damage, only to find a new dent adorning her armor. An annoyance at most. She growled before kneeling to the ground, then used a free hand to pry the manhole open with a few clawed fingers. Rather than finding her attackers, she discovered a small hole leading to parts unknown deeper into the sewer system.

The warpack promptly secured the surrounding area, but that only included picking off human snipers trying to take potshots at them from afar with ineffective bolt action rifles.

"We are going to need plasma casters to deal with that particular problem." said Ishtar as she faced a sthara soldier. "Do we have more?"

"Andraste was the only one in our warpack that I know of." he replied with a hiss.

Ishtar scoffed. "And she is nowhere to be found!"

The sthara glanced at another city section, where an abnormal amount of smoke rose from some nearby buildings. "She might still be nearby, actually..."



"Perfect." sneered Ishtar, who prepared to lead the warpack towards Andraste's last known location. "I might just kill her myself."

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Umbra carefully moved through a forest. Taking advantage of the natural terrain, she partially concealed her lower body and kept a safe distance away from any potential hostiles. Unlike most joraxians, her armor was black and grey rather than the traditional shades of green... matching her fur as she prowled through the area like a phantom.

Only a pair of cyan eyes were visible from her helmet's visor. Umbra's two tails also had a black mesh protecting them both, which allowed them to sway with each step she took. Natural night vision and sparse moonlight allowed her to see her surroundings, but a strong sense of smell and hearing gave her far more information as she walked uphill. Faint gunshots going off in the distance made her pointy ears wiggle, the smoky smell of something burning resulted in her nose scrunching up, then her eyes went wide upon spotting a city in flames...

Volgograd.

Hegemonic forces were absolutely swarming the area. Infantry and vehicles were assaulting the city itself while aircraft hovered overhead and rained down laser and plasma fire. The doomed human defenders attempted to fight them for every last inch of ground, but it was clearly a one-sided battle as the titanic aliens overran their positions.

As for Umbra, she got into a prone position. A coilgun similar to a submachine gun strapped to her back did little to impair her movements. She focused her efforts on setting up an outright railgun... the joraxian equivalent of an anti-material rifle. An advanced scope synchronized to her helmet's augmented reality vision, providing her with an abundance of information alongside an ability to aim the weapon with surgical precision. Spotting enemies many miles away became as simple as zooming in on distant targets, which were detected by internal computer systems looking for signs of heat and motion.

Most peculiarly, there was the so-called deployment zone. A common hegemonic method for invading planets. The expected structures were present in their standard configurations

accompanied by predictable guard patrols as Umbra scouted it with her weapon's scope. Her helmet automatically took pictures and videos accordingly. The oddest sight involved an abundance of wounded umok auxiliaries being loaded into a transport ship, while sthara carrying cages containing many humans packed people into an adjacent vessel.

Instinctively, Umbra aimed at a sthara soldier carrying frightened humans into a transport ship. She narrowed her cyan eyes once she had a target within her sights. "Not yet." she whispered before focusing her attention elsewhere.

More precisely, the city itself. Hegemonic warriors plagued the outskirts, and Umbra's elevated position let her peer directly into individual sections of Volgograd. A massive statue of a human woman holding a sword stood defiantly over the surrounding ruins. Ironically, at a few hundred feet tall, the war memorial dwarfed all of the alien invaders... and it remained completely intact thanks to its isolated position on a lone hill within the city center.

Fittingly, a recreation of the battle of Stalingrad played out in nearby locations...

Whereas the alien warriors could overwhelm the city's exterior, the interior was a different matter altogether. Narrow streets funneled them into kill zones. Human resistance fighters were hiding in almost every nook and cranny. Their mere energy weapons proved inadequate for urban warfare or close-quarters combat once rockets, Molotov cocktails, and sticky bombs rained down on them from any nearby buildings. A few aliens resorted to simple yet effective measures such as punching holes in the walls, eviscerating structures and humans hiding on the other side, not to mention outright flattening hostiles underfoot.

One odd exception made Umbra narrow her eyes. A lone zenari warrior was walking through the city and setting almost everything on fire with her plasma caster... all while she chortled and giggled. She only stopped setting everything on fire to chase after some humans scurrying into a sewer manhole before they slammed the cover shut. Afterward, the zenari playfully flicked the circular hatch away with a single clawed finger, placed the tip of her caster into the hole, then unleashed hell as her weapon went to work... incinerating anyone that happened to be beneath her feet.

Afterward, the zenari stuck out her tongue and walked away with a skip in her step, circumventing Umbra's ability to target her once she disappeared behind a building.

With all the information she needed and the misfortune of witnessing that carnage, Umbra prepared to leave some parting gifts for the Hegemony. Her heads up display gave her an ammo count of four. Panning her weapon optics left to right, she eventually spotted another zenari warrior rounding a corner, who carelessly shattered several windows once an armored tail brushed against them.

"One." growled Umbra before pulling the trigger.

A loud thump filled the air.

Following a few tense moments, the projectile met its mark... tearing through the zenari's throat. They abruptly dropped their weapon. From there, they clasped at their bleeding neck, which oozed purple blood, then stumbled backward before tripping over a large truck and falling onto the hard concrete streets.

Umbra then targeted a few nearby umok auxiliaries witnessing this event with their beaks agape. "Two." she said to herself, firing her weapon once more. Thanks to some angling, a metallic projectile eventually punctured the upper torso of one umok... just for it to pierce the lower body of the second auxiliary behind them... killing or wounding them respectively.

As if on cue, another zenari entered the scene. More precisely, a full-fledged battlemaster personally leading her warpack through the city. Heavy armor, intricate emblems, and a dent on her shoulder pauldron made her extensive experience obvious enough. A remarkably juicy target. Umbra wasted no time lining up a shot, allowing automatic systems to do most of the calculations and other work on her behalf.

"Three." she said with bared fangs.

There was another thump. Minimal recoil. For several seconds, the bullet descended from the sky before striking the battlemaster in the thigh... making her gasp as she gradually lost her footing. Her warpack immediately took cover, and only a few tried to protect the wounded battlemaster as they tried to drag her to safety.

Content with her work, Umbra folded up a weapon mount and slowly stood up. Some sentries and drones were already approaching her position. She specifically aimed at the distant deployment zone once more, found a sthara standing still as they leaned against a ship, then squeezed her

trigger one last time. It took a while, but a bullet soon nailed the sthara right between the eyes before going straight through his skull, ultimately ricocheting against the ship's armor as the sthara slumped over.

Umbra momentarily closed her eyes as an ammo counter repeatedly flashed, indicating that the weapon was empty. "Four." she said with a hint of satisfaction.

She then carried her railgun with one hand and retrieved a coilgun with the other. Following this, Umbra rapidly ran downhill in the exact opposite direction of her pursuers, fading away into the forest as the darkness of night shrouded her physical form. With that, her recon mission was complete, and dead or wounded hegemonic warriors were left in her wake... but the hard part would be returning to the rest of her unit.