

# Disintegration

## Chapter 7

A scarlet sun scorched an otherwise arid world.

For Ishtar, it was nothing short of euphoric. The sunlight soothed her cold-blooded scales, and there was something lovely about feeling warm sand sifting between her clawed toes. Once her feet came into contact with an icy walkway composed of stone, Ishtar returned to wearing some sandals that she was carrying, then she approached an expansive spaceport with her scaly tail swaying in synchronization with her ample hips.

A door automatically parted upon sensing Ishtar's presence. Soon, she was greeted by an expansive interior bustling with traffic as other people moved throughout the vicinity. Despite the sheer number of zenari, the area was orderly and clean. Some were organized into neat lines next to security stations, while others walked to the right side of any open spaces, minimizing potential traffic issues. Electronic displays streamed information about ships entering or exiting the atmosphere. A few stray umok or sthara operated an array of adjacent businesses, stalls, and other complementary services similar to those within an airport.

However, what ultimately caught Ishtar's attention was a single word...

"Mom!"

Ishtar's head perked up. She flicked her tongue from her mouth, simultaneously smelling and tasting the air, allowing her to sense something familiar. It quickly became apparent upon spotting a young zenari woman, who was rapidly moving towards her.

The sight made Ishtar smile. "Vinshu!"

After saying her name, Ishtar spread her arms out. Vinshu's tail rapidly wagged. It wasn't long before she embraced her mother with a hug, and onlookers watched on with smiles on their muzzles as the two nuzzled each other. When all was said and done, Ishtar looked down at her daughter. Although she was slightly shorter than herself, Vinshu had the same caramel-colored hide and glistening bronze scales, albeit her eyes were emerald green compared to Ishtar's amber-brown ones.

"Where is your younger brother?" asked Ishtar.

"He should be with his father!" chirped Vinshu in return. "As for me, I decided to arrive here by myself before waiting for everyone else."

Ishtar cocked her head slightly. "I see. Either way, it is fortunate that I was assigned to what seems to be a paradise world so close to everyone else! Speaking of which..."

She paused to stare at her daughter's outfit, which was minimalistic and designed for the hot weather. It was a stark contrast to Ishtar's more modest and traditional attire. More specifically, Vinshu's shirt exposed her slim and muscular stomach, but she lacked a belly button or breasts due to basic zenari biology.

As a result, Vinshu blinked a few times. "Is something wrong?"

"It just seems like younglings these days keep wearing more and more revealing clothing with each generation."

"Ah, so that means my clothes are somehow a problem?" asked Vinshu as she looked at her own sandals.

Ishtar sneered. "Not necessarily. The climate justifies your outfit a bit. However, if your brother wore something like that at your age, I would discipline him for immodestly exposing his torso and forearms!"

Vinshu shook her head. "Okay, elder."

"Nonetheless, we have many things to catch up on!" hissed Ishtar as she motioned at Vinshu to follow her. Afterward, they started strolling through the spaceport. "So... how has your time been in the hegemonic armed forces? It makes an old woman proud seeing a member of her bloodline following in her footsteps!"

At these words, Vinshu glanced at the ground. "It has been... satisfactory."

"Good! Have you decided upon a specialization yet?"

Vinshu's only response to Ishtar's question was silence.

"Perhaps even a leadership position like your mother?"

"Ah... no."

Ishtar narrowed her eyes. "Then what path are you following?"

"Military intelligence." answered Vinshu.

Ishtar immediately scoffed. "Bah. That position is usually reserved for the likes of other species. Plus it is an oxymoron! Regardless, what would make you decide upon... that... rather than becoming an officer or heavy infantry?"

"The aptitude test recommended it." answered Vinshu. "Additionally, it sounded more ideal than the likes of frontline combat on a regular basis..."

"And once again, you defy our traditions." replied Ishtar with narrowed eyes.

"What of it?"

"A member of the Makari bloodline has never traveled the path you are walking, my dear. Just as long as your service does not bring us shame, there shall be no issues, but it is... unorthodox. Some might even call the occupation cowardly. Unbefitting for our kind. Despite that, sometimes taking uncommon routes can lead to more unique destinations, for better or worse."

Vinshu looked to the side. "Traditions are not always a good thing."

"Please!" said Ishtar with a snort. "It is the essence of our collective wisdom that has survived the passage of time!"

"Yet, the Hegemony's enemies do not care for the old ways. That provides them with some advantages. Well... at least from what I have observed."

Ishtar stopped in place, prompting her daughter to do the same, then she put her hands on her hips. "Like what?"

"Do I even need to mention the perks of cybernetic implants?"

"Well, what you are suggesting is a form of deviancy, Vinshu. Only the joraxians are immoral enough to resort to such invasive measures! Oh, and do not get me started on what happens if a hacker, whether it be a person or an AI, manages to somehow gain remote access to any implants!"

Vinshu directed her attention towards a nearby snack stall as a few others stared at them. "Perhaps we should stop this heated conversation since there appears to be more important matters..."

Following her gaze, Ishtar found herself looking at a food stall. Small insects the size of various dogs were being coated in a sticky substance and allowed to crystallize. A zenari operating the booth scooped them into containers and added different flavorings, much like popcorn. It also helped that the zenari in question was a young and handsome man accompanied by colorful signs scattered around his particular stall.

Both of the women stuck out their tongues with their eyes going wide...

"Pamaken!" simultaneously mewled the two.

Each looked at one another afterward and did a mix of sneering and snickering. Like mother and daughter. Nonetheless, they approached the vendor one at a time and allowed an electronic device to scan devices similar to smartphones. A green light indicated when a payment was processed. Within a matter of moments, Vinshu and Ishtar walked away from the booth with food in tow, albeit the younger one decided upon something spicy, and the older of the two got something sweet. They did a mix of using their purple and serpentine tongues to constrict and suckle on some pamaken to savor it, then sharp fangs made quick work of whatever remained before they gulped it all down.

"Ah, this is so much better!" exclaimed Ishtar as they resumed their journey.

Vinshu made a crooked grin. "Agreed!"

And so, the youthful zenari followed the old soldier. They eventually managed to find seats for themselves near a boarding area, where a constant flow of people entered or exited various ships. Time seemed to pass by in a blur as they casually chatted. As the hours flew by, the sun started setting, and the smiles on their muzzles gradually transitioned into frowns.

Eventually, Vinshu checked the time on her smart device. "Why are they not here yet?"

"I do not know." answered Ishtar. She narrowed her eyes at a nearby electronic sign, which displayed projected arrival and departure times. "It concerns me. The civilian freighter should have arrived already."

"Should we do something?"

"No." answered Ishtar in a firm tone. "I shall do something and you will wait here."

Her daughter cocked her head to the side. "As you wish."

With that, Ishtar walked away with a flick of her tail. She approached the equivalent of a receptionist area and spotted two umok casually chatting behind a desk. A computer terminal and a large microphone partially concealed them. Nonetheless, Ishtar made her presence known by slamming a single fist, making both receptionists jump from their seats a little.

One looked at Ishtar with fear in her eyes. "Uh... can a receptionist help this one with something?"

"Yes." hissed Ishtar between barred fangs. "My husband and son were supposed to be here many hour equivalents ago."

The remaining receptionist perked up his head. "Does the woman recall the specific ship?"

Ishtar answered this question by pulling out her smart device, flicking through a few applications, then showing it to the duo. They both tilted their heads in the same direction once they saw crucial information, such as the ship's designation and departure time.

"Oh." chirped one of them.

"We have been getting tons of questions about that particular freighter from others within the lobby..."

Ishtar looked over her shoulder and spotted various people with concerned looks on their faces. A sthara was even crying at her seat. Afterward, she returned her attention to the receptionists.

"What questions?"

"This one... does not know?" asked a receptionist in return.

Ishtar scoffed. "I do not."

One umok looked away while the other scratched the underside of his beak. "Um... the civilian freighter has sent out a distress signal. The specific type indicated that they were under attack by mactarian pirates. Since then... we have received no further communications."

In response, Ishtar remained silent for several long moments. Images of partially aquatic creatures similar to sharks flashed through her mind at the thought of mactarian pirates. Then she hissed. Consequently, the eyes of the receptionists go wide. There wasn't much they could do to stop the large woman as she leaned forward and grabbed one of them with a clawed hand. "What else do you know?"

"Nothing! NOTHING!" squawked the umok as Ishtar held him a vice grip.

"We are sorry!" said the remaining one as she backed away.

The commotion caught the attention of others present as they stopped what they were doing to stare. Security guards also began heading towards the scene. As for Ishtar, her world started spinning as she released the receptionist, stumbled backward, then pressed both hands against her head. "This... THIS CANNOT BE HAPPENING!"

When she opened her eyes, the receptionists were gone. Not to mention the security guards, civilians, and even her daughter. Her jaw went agape. "Wait... what? Vinshu? Where is she?"

Suddenly, the lights in the facility went out. Although Ishtar could see in the dark, her surroundings appeared to be slowly fading away for some bizarre reason. The woman began stumbling her way through the area as she made her way towards the last known location of her daughter.

"Where did you go, Vinshu?!"

Ishtar could feel her heart thumping in her chest as her eyes narrowed.

"Please say something!" The woman paused to choke back some tears rapidly forming in her eyes. "I do not want to be alone again!"

Over time, her surroundings disappeared. The battlemaster suddenly found herself standing amid a black void where the only company was herself. She frantically looked around in all directions and began muttering to herself.

"Everything is so cold..."

Something that felt like electricity surging down her spine until it reached the tip of her tail made her shudder. Without warning, Ishtar felt the ground beneath her feet dissolving as if it was quicksand. The moment she looked down was precisely when she started falling, resulting in the

woman screaming as tears surged down her muzzle. A bizarre set of sights flashed before her, including snow-dusted corpses next to destroyed human vehicles, a pair of catlike and cyan eyes, and a brief glimpse of her missing son crying. Lastly, an ear-piercing siren caused her to go into a full-blown panic as she swatted claws in all directions.

When Ishtar blinked and opened her eyes once more, she found herself lying on a bed. She jolted upwards while heaving in and out, complete with her tongue sticking out of her muzzle as it momentarily twitched. It took her approximately half a minute to calm down as she held her head in her hands.

"...Not again."

Ishtar internally questioned her sanity when she kept hearing a siren blaring. A quick glance at the room revealed everything was how she left it... except for a bewildered human standing on her desk. She heard Sasha making some faint vocalizations, but without any way of translating them, her barely audible voice came across as complete nonsense if it wasn't interrupted by the sirens.

Nonetheless, Ishtar got to her feet. She urgently walked to the tent's entrance. When she opened the tent flap, a flurry of activity greeted her. Soldiers were scurrying throughout the vicinity with their weapons ready, hegemonic troop transports were arriving as they descended from the skyline, and vehicles were hovering around the area. She wiped away any teardrops still lingering on her face as whatever cold and sad feelings lingering in her heart served as the perfect kindling for a newfound sense of fiery hot rage. Moments later, Ishtar nearly growled at some nearby soldiers helping one another with their armor.

**"What the hell is happening?"**

They stopped what they were doing and looked at her. Ishtar responded with a death stare, and her height advantage over most of them only added onto her intimidating aura. Eventually, an augmented voice emitted from a soldier wearing a helmet. "Joraxian troops have made landfall."

That was all the information that Ishtar required as she disappeared back into her tent. The slits of her eyes narrowed once the sirens stopped blaring, but it did little to stop the woman from retrieving various pieces of gear from underneath her bed. She also ignored a human shouting at her. Then Ishtar began meticulously putting on her armor, albeit it was a complicated process by herself, and soon a chest piece forged from alien alloys overlapped her skin-tight shirt. Once she put on her helmet, augmented reality vision greeted her while a familiar human voice became far more comprehensible...

"-even understand me?!" shouted Sasha as she clenched her fists. "You big, stupid bitch!"

[I can now.] hissed Ishtar while a human voice bellowed from her helmet.

The color practically drained from Sasha's face before she became dead silent.

[Your petty insults only show how powerless you are, Sasha. They do not offend me. As much as I would love to lecture you about your poor and moronic behavior, I have more pressing matters to attend to.] Ishtar paused to strap some armor into place after putting on her boots. [Speaking of which, a worst-case scenario has just occurred. I'm afraid that it could endanger both you and Suko.]

"Then... what's going on?" asked Sasha while she stumbled back.

Ishtar put on some gauntlets, which had tiny openings for the claws on her hands. [Other species hostile to the Hegemony are currently landing on your homeworld. I'm assuming they want to seize this planet and its resources for themselves rather than allowing us to have it.]

"There's even more aliens...?!"

[Correct.] As Sasha reacted with complete bewilderment, Ishtar grabbed a sizable piece of flexible armor designed to cover most of her tail. She was forced to bring her tail to the front of her body before slowly sliding it on, where she simply strapped it into its proper place. [As before, I expect you to take care of Suko during my absence. Any escape attempts will be harshly punished. Ideally, I can also return with supplies and other materials required for humans to survive.]

Sasha looked down from the desk and at the ground, where she saw nothing but darkness. "I'm not sure if I even want to try escaping considering all of this insanity going on..."

Last but not least, Ishtar picked up her plasma rifle. [Have I not been a good host?] Before the human could respond, she activated her weapon's power core, barely illuminating the room with a faint orange glow. [Actually, your answer doesn't matter. You don't exactly have much of a decision in this matter... but we'll talk about that later. It would be for the best if you just accepted your situation.]

Sasha's only response came in the form of crossing her arms.

Meanwhile, Ishtar disabled her translation software. She made sure her armor was secured, then briefly patted down her body with a free hand to make sure she didn't miss anything. Within mere



moments, the battlemaster strolled away from Sasha, exited the tent, and sealed the flap before leaving it all behind to deal with the ongoing chaos.

Her first impulse was to find others within her warpack. Out of the many soldiers swarming the deployment zone, she saw one with distinctive white armor. Rare blue scales visible through the visor of his helmet made it crystal clear who he was. Others were also assembling before him, including familiar faces such as Specialist Andraste.

"Ensign Deimo!"

Despite Ishtar's shouting, the young officer resumed speaking to the others. While grinding her fangs, the battlemaster sifted through their ranks, where she swiftly found other members of her warpack awaiting her. They were all neatly lined up with their weapons at the ready. Some thunder roared above them, but it was hard to tell if it came from a storm, the vehicles, or the many ships flying across the sky.

"...And we will be receiving little to no orbital support." hissed Deimo to the soldiers assembled before him. "Additionally, be warned that humans may actually be able to organize themselves now that they are no longer being relentlessly bombed from orbit. We can thank the joraxians for that. Regarding our own unit, it is being sent to reinforce various soldiers attempting to capture materials and information crucial to understanding the alien technology that these primitive humans are using against us. That is all I have to say since time is of the essence. Are there any questions?"

The various soldiers either cocked or shook their heads.

"Then everyone knows what to do..." continued Deimo, "Move out!"

At his words, the soldiers saluted him. They all took one step back and moved out of the formation, then reassembled themselves around their respective pack leaders. Some followed Ishtar like lost puppies as she forced her way towards Deimo with fire in her eyes.

"DEIMO!"

The man in question turned to face her. "Ah, Ishtar. Do you have any questions or require anything else? I do not have the luxury of being patient."

"Of course!" answered Ishtar. "What exactly is my warpack getting into?"

"As I said, the objective is to assist others with recovering unorthodox human technology." replied Deimo, blowing air from his nostrils.

"And we are doing this while SAP forces are making planetfall?" Ishtar only stopped speaking to scoff. "That is madness. What sort of human weapons are we even talking about?"

Deimo looked to the side. "This one only knows that they are called nukes."

"Nukes...?" repeated Ishtar like a parrot.

"They are apparently some sort of human bombs that destroyed hegemonic troop transports during the start of the invasion." explained the ensign. "Oddly enough, details about them are mostly classified. Our orders are also very strange, all things considered, but I felt obligated to inform you about it anyway considering our circumstances."

"Bah... so be it." muttered Ishtar. "Questioning orders is also proving to be a pointless endeavor."

"Indeed."

Without bothering with responding, she led her warpack away and towards an awaiting infantry transport in the distance. More thunder also made itself known as lightning streaked across the sky. Something about the entire situation sent chills down Ishtar's spine as the word 'Nuke' rattled throughout her skull, but she suppressed her thoughts to focus on the task ahead.