

Disintegration

Chapter 11

A simple patch sealed a hole within a tent.

Ishtar let out a low-pitched hiss. [Never again.]

Afterward, the titanic woman crawled away from the patch and stood back up. She adjusted her slim headset as she looked down at a desk, which was practically her own little world. Suko was kicking his legs in the air while drawing with crayons at a picnic table, while Vasily messed with an old generator. Ishtar sat down next to them, lowered her head, and resumed hissing.

[Hopefully, my scavenging has resulted in everyone receiving proper human accommodations!]

Vasily poured some gasoline into the generator by using a red gas can. "Yeah. It looks like it paid off." He stopped speaking to fiddle with some switches before quickly pulling a cord, causing the generator to roar to life. As a result, some lights within the RV flashed on, lighting up the area. "Hell yeah! There we go!"

The zenari watching his every move blew air from her nostrils. [Congrats, but please don't use that kind of language around little Suko.]

"Alright, but the kid speaks English for some godforsaken reason, so it's probably fine!" said Vasily with a dismissive wave of his hand. "However, I'll stop with the foul language if you have a problem with it."

[Please do. On an unrelated note, I'm assuming there aren't more tools that could allow for another... incident... to occur.]

"Uh... do you mean like last night with Sasha?"

Ishtar nodded. [Correct.]

"What happened to her, anyway?" he asked.

[It saddens me to say this, but I wasn't able to find her in time. Someone else did. And... well, they promptly took care of what they saw as an intruder or an escaped prisoner of war.]

Vasily's face drooped at Ishtar's words. "She... didn't make it?"

[That's also correct. As I've warned Sasha before, I can't guarantee safety outside of this tent. Also, why didn't you stop her?]

"I was asleep until you screamed her name at the top of your lungs!" claimed the man as he crossed his arms.

Ishtar's face scrunched up. [Oh. Fair enough then. Regardless, most of the others don't know that I'm keeping a few humans here, which could cause problems in the future. Naturally, I'd prefer to prevent a similar incident from happening again, and that's why I had to take any potential tools or weapons from the RV.]

"Well, the RV still beats the cage." said the man as he looked towards the empty spot where it used to reside. "I don't really plan on pulling a similar stunt, so no worries, but what's going to happen to me from this point?"

Ishtar stared at the human with unblinking eyes. [It's simple. As I said, you're going to substitute for Sasha by caring for Suko. You'll be treated well if you follow my instructions. As for what happens to you after this conflict... well, I suppose that depends on who wins. We'll figure it out when we get there. Do you have any other questions?]

He shrugged. "Not really."

[Excellent!] said Ishtar as she made an unnerving imitation of a human smile. [I'd prefer to avoid making the mistakes of the past too. I already got what I wanted from you in the form of that recording between you and Sasha, so there's no need for a proper interrogation. Your only role will be that of a caretaker.] She paused to set her elbows on the desk and rested her head in her hands before frowning. [I may request additional tasks, but I will not force you to do them... most of the time.]

"Okay then, but is something wrong?" asked Vasily with a raised eyebrow.

Ishtar monetarily closed her eyes and flicked her tongue. [The incident, for lack of a better word, is still plaguing me. I just can't help but wonder if there was something that I could have done differently... and I don't really have anyone else to talk to about it.]

Vasily looked side to side and shrugged. "Well, you got me."

[Yes, but you are still a stranger.] Ishtar's tail slumped down at her own words. [I'll also admit that I'm still ignorant regarding the ways of your kind. I may ask you some questions to remedy that...]

"That's fine by me." interrupted Vasily.

[Well... good. I suppose that might be important if humanity is going to be assimilated into the Hegemony, and I believe the biggest problem I had with Sasha is that I didn't really understand her. I think she hated me. Then again, that makes her just like my daughter...] Ishtar gradually looked at the ground as she spoke. [And that's why I had to let her go.]

Vasily stared into her eyes with stoic indifference. "Can you really blame Sasha? You almost killed the two of us before deciding that we're going to be your unwilling human servants."

Slowly, Ishtar glanced at the ground. [Do you... hate me too?]

"I don't think hate is the right word to describe it..." replied Vasily as he broke eye contact, "Just baffled. You almost literally crushed me underfoot one second, and now you're treating me like this the next. It's as if you have a split personality disorder or something..."

[Split personality disorder...?]

He sighed. "I'll explain it. The basic idea is when someone has two distinct personalities that are separate from each other as if they're two different people. Some humans suffer from it. I'm not sure if that condition also applies to your kind, but I do remember you claiming that you're a different woman on the battlefield."

Ishtar gave Vasily a blank stare. [I do not suffer from some sort of mental condition. That's just how things have to be. I'm a battlemaster. I have to be strong and vicious towards all enemies of the Hegemony. Yet, on the other hand, this conflict has been somewhat dishonorable due to its one-sided nature, and it breaks my heart... just... seeing innocent human hatchlings caught in the midst of it. I like to think that the empress would be ashamed if she saw the present state of things.]

"Your species has an empress?" asked Vasily with a hint of surprise.

[Correct.]

"Does that mean the zenari are matriarchal or something?"

The woman shook her head. [Yes. Traditionally, women occupy positions in the military alongside more... political positions. Despite that, the Hegemony still tries to practice gender equality to some extent, mostly to accommodate the other species encompassing it. Men and women are different in some ways, sure, but any disharmony between the sexes would be harmful to the Hegemony itself. We're all brothers and sisters serving our people and a greater family at the end of the day. I've noticed this isn't necessarily the same case for humans, though. Why are the vast majority of your warriors males?]

"That can be a... complicated question."

[How so?]

Vasily scratched the back of his head. "I'm not sure if you noticed, but humans are more patriarchal than your species."

Ishtar scoffed. [It makes me wonder how humans get anything done.]

"It has less to do with culture and more to do with biology." said the man with a death stare. "Well, in my opinion, at least. Things have been changing somewhat recently regarding social issues, but there are still some significant differences between the sexes. Human men produce a chemical called testosterone within their bodies, so they're usually physically stronger if I had to give an example."

[I'm familiar with that chemical. Is that why human males are usually soldiers?]

"Partially, but women can also join if they meet certain physical standards. Most aren't interested in that. I suppose Sasha was one of those rare exceptions."

The zenari used a clawed finger to scratch her snout. [Perhaps that explains it if it's a simple matter of biology... according to you, at least. You see, zenari women are usually a bit larger. Stronger. Our hips tend to be a bit wider for laying eggs. We have some small spikes running down our spines and tails, unlike males, not to mention different formations on our heads... albeit I'm not sure if human sexual dimorphism is similarly extreme.]

"It's not necessarily significant, but you're getting a general idea." replied Vasily as he dismissively waved with his hand. "The issue is still somewhat polarizing among my people. Personally? I'm not sure if integrating women into the military was the best idea per se..."

[Why wouldn't it be?] asked Ishtar with a mild snarl. [Ignoring half of your potential manpower pool, presumably due to sexism, is incredibly foolish.]

Vasily sighed. "I'm just saying that I've been in the military in a while. I've seen what happens. Women that can't meet the physical standards might get themselves or others killed during combat. Even then, they usually have lower physical standards than males. Also, men might disobey orders to protect them. Units with both men and women might have issues with discipline if everyone is sleeping around with each other... especially if it involves officers. And quite frankly? Men are the more expendable ones."

[That's also a sexist statement.] said the zenari with a flick of her serpentine tongue. [Just towards males instead.]

"But it's true!" exclaimed the colonel alongside rolling his eyes. "Allow me to give an example. My country was once invaded many years ago, and it was part of a conflict humans called World War Two. To protect our homes, almost every able-bodied man was conscripted, given a rifle, and thrown at the enemy. Many good people died, but we won in the end. I'm not so sure if we would have been able to recover population wise if a significant number of women perished rather than men since it's usually more ideal for most males to die during a disaster rather than the other way around."

Ishtar narrowed her eyes. [Why is that? And if what you say is true, why would human women be allowed into the military ranks, then?]

"As I said, social attitudes are changing. Heroic women that fought in World War Two, like the Night Witches and certain snipers, might be responsible for that. My nation still allows them into the military despite some more... traditional elements being prevalent, but that might just be the legacy of communism and how it strived for gender equality."

[What is... communism?] asked Ishtar with her head cocked to the side.

"I don't know if I can explain something like that to an alien!" answered Vasily with a shake of his head and a light chuckle. "Maybe later. Instead, let's get back on topic. My point is that human men typically do dangerous tasks because they're usually physically stronger and more expendable. I mean... pregnant women aren't exactly ideal for potentially dangerous jobs. Men are also easier to replace since sperm is a lot cheaper than eggs... if that makes any sense."

Ishtar crossed her legs as her tail swayed behind her. [That's a crude way of putting it.]

"I'm a crude man."

[Either way, that's not the same case for zenari. We are what you might classify as reptilians, while humans are more... mammalian. For example, pregnancy did not impair my ability to be a soldier when I had children. I simply laid an egg shortly after my husband, and I made a physical connection to compliment our spiritual one, and then he took care of the egg while I resumed my duties as a battlemaster.]

"Ah, so you got a bunch of kids too?" asked Vasily, smiling as he found a decent place to sit down at the picnic table.

Ishtar broke eye contact. [I originally had two hatchlings.]

"So... you must have a few little monsters running around somewhere!"

The alien woman responded by giving him a cold and menacing glare, and something about it visibly sent a shiver down Vasily's spine. [I don't want to talk about it.]

"Oh." The human man looked away and saw Suko scribbling with an orange crayon. "My bad if I brought up something unpleasant..."

[It wasn't intentional on your part, so there's no need for an apology. Just know that I eventually had a son and a daughter, so I suppose that gives us something in common!]

"I guess..." he said with a shrug.

Ishtar made a sly smile and slightly stuck out her tongue. [But please don't allow that little blunder to sour the mood. I'm enjoying this discussion! Even if your people's ways are backward and barbaric, learning about them will be useful for gaining a greater understanding of your species. Oh, and you might learn more about mine too!]

The man gave her a look of disapproval. "Backwards and barbaric isn't exactly the most polite term."

[Ah, I didn't intend to offend you...]

"Don't worry," said Vasily with another sly smile, "No offense taken!"

The alien smiled in return. [Good! Additionally, I couldn't help but notice that you're so much more polite and cordial than Sasha. Why is that?]

"If I'm going to be your captive, I'd prefer to be on your good side!" answered Vasily with a wicked grin.

[... You're freely admitting that it's a matter of manipulation?] Ishtar narrowed her eyes. [That doesn't make any sense. If you intended to effectively manipulate me, you wouldn't have informed me about your plans beforehand, albeit you have already proven that you're something of a little liar.]

"Maybe that's just what I want you to think."

Ishtar blew air from her flaring nostrils and briefly chortled. [Bah! Just as long as you teach me your secrets to properly rearing human hatchlings, I shall allow it. What's my little Suko doing, anyway?]

Vasily peeked over the table and stared at Suko's crayon drawings. One included what appeared to be a poorly drawn vehicle surrounded by fire. Another featured a crying boy among ash and snow. However, the one that ultimately caught Vasily's attention had a stickman human boy alongside a similar yet orange creature with some more alien features.

"...I think he might be drawing you."

Ishtar's face beamed up as her jaw went agape. [REALLY?!]

Meanwhile, Vasily looked at her with a hint of concern and internally regretted his decisions. "Uh... yeah."

[Let me see! LET ME SEE!]

After saying this, Ishtar brought her head to the picnic table with her large tail wagging. Consequently, her face was mere feet away from Vasily. Suko didn't seem to mind her presence as he worked on his next masterpiece, and Vasily took his time picking up the drawing in question. Not really knowing what to do with himself, he held it in front of one of her large amber eyes, revealing the crayon drawing in all of its glory.

Gradually, a wide and crooked smile spread across Ishtar's face. [That has to be one of the cutest things I've ever seen!] She squinted as she took a closer look, and her tail involuntarily wagged in a fashion that thumped against her chair. [I love it!]

Vasily stared at a nearby crayons box and noticed most within it appeared to be broken or missing. "It's not a masterpiece, but the kid is working with what he has."

[As long as he's trying his best!] said Ishtar before making a cute little blep.

What wiped the smile off her face came from a familiar, deep, and masculine voice originating from outside the tent...

"Battlemaster Ishtar. This is Deimo, and I need to speak to you."

Ishtar bared her fangs and made several low hisses, which her slim headset translated and emitted as whispers. [Get in the RV. Hide Suko. **Now.**]

Without saying a word, Vasily nodded and stood from his seat. He picked up the box of crayons, some paper sheets, and a few drawings before walking towards the trailer. It caused Suko to stop scribbling as he looked at the older man with wide eyes. "Mine!" said the boy before waddling after Vasily, eventually following him into the RV. The door shut after the boy entered it, and a mechanical click made it clear to Ishtar that Vasily locked it.

Once this was accomplished, Ishtar got on her feet and unzipped the flap to the tent. The woman was immediately met by the sight of Deimo wearing white armor with snow lightly dusting it. She also felt heat escaping her shelter as her exposed hide became a little more chilly. Putting on her best fake smile, Ishtar disabled her slim headset with a press of a button and stuck out her tongue.

"Greetings, young ensign! Why must you be bothering me this early in the morning?"

"I think you already know the answer to that question." The zenari man paused to gesture with a clawed hand. "I need to speak with you about many things, but you should probably put on your armor first. You have new orders."

"As you wish." hissed the battlemaster as she disappeared back into the tent.

She emerged several minutes later, wearing all of her armor and holding a plasma rifle with one hand, while Deimo remained where he was with his arms crossed and scaly tail swishing.

"Now will the young ensign finally answer my question?" asked Ishtar.

"Yes, but we need to go somewhere a bit more... secluded." said Deimo as he casually strolled away with his arms behind his back.

Ishtar let out a low snarl as she followed him. She had to move a bit faster to catch up, but soon, they walked side by side. Meanwhile, snowfall continued to gradually coat their armor before melting against it. Other soldiers paid the two no mind as they maintained their gear, consumed rations, or moved around the base. Some couldn't help but stare since the duo looked like inverses of each other. More specifically, Ishtar was older and noticeably larger, while Deimo was young and handsome by zenari standards. Whereas the alien man had sapphire blue scales overlapping his black hide, the woman had bronze-colored ones complimenting her own caramel brown flesh alongside black armor that was an opposing color compared to the officer.

"So..." said Ishtar, finally breaking the silence, "Did you find the interrogation recording useful for our efforts?"

The zenari man refrained from looking at Ishtar as he hissed. "Somewhat. There were some useful tidbits of information. However, I found it odd how its contents were heavily edited. If I had to take a guess, Vasily was speaking to another human rather than you based on his tone of voice and choice of words."

"Nonsense!" said the battlemaster as she stuck out her tongue, forming a blep. "I have my ways. The editing was to rid the recording of anything I deemed to be useless to us. Despite that, was there anything specific that you found helpful?"

"Most of the info was useless, actually. We knew about most of the details regarding the nukes already. The only part I found concerning was that some sort of human special operations group destroyed or relocated their remaining nuclear warheads. That means the humans may try to use them during a critical moment with a different delivery system, ultimately resulting in a situation where we cannot stop them from utilizing potent weapons."

Ishtar formed a jagged frown. "If these so-called nukes are just human bombs, I fail to see why they would be so concerning. We are dealing with primitives, after all, and I doubt these nukes are much worse than our conventional explosives."

"Do not underestimate the enemy." said Deimo with a venomous hiss. "On a somewhat related note, I tried to speak with the officer you captured and discovered that he was not contained with the others. Then there are the bizarre reports that I have been receiving..."

"What reports?" asked Ishtar as her blood ran cold.

Deimo finally stared at her with a pair of rare and frightening crimson red eyes. "Where should I even begin? For starters, some members of your warpack claimed that you and Specialist Andraste brought humans back to your personal quarters rather than turning them in. Another said they spotted you running around last night without any armor. Before I came to speak to you about all those things today, I heard you hissing to either yourself or others within your tent." He paused to cross his arms. "The implications and connections should be obvious."

Ishtar's tail sagged to the ground as Deimo resumed hissing.

"Are you keeping humans in your personal quarters, battlemaster?"

Ishtar looked away from Deimo and stopped in place, forcing him to do the same.

"This is true," she said with a low hiss, which was like a whisper.

Deimo narrowed his eyes and blew air from his nostrils. "Why?"

The battlemaster looked down at the ground. "I... found a human hatchling."

"...And?"

"I could not stand seeing a child suffer like that!" Her face contorted as she spoke, transitioning between flurries of fear, sheer sadness, and raw rage. "So lost, alone, and cold with his parents nowhere in sight! I decided to take him under my care since no one else would!"

Deimo reacted by covering half his face with a single hand. "For the love of our ancestors! That is unnatural. Please do not tell me that you are also keeping this Vasily under your captivity too..."

"That brings me to my next point," hissed Ishtar as she clenched her fists. "I originally struggled to properly care for the human hatchling. The boy was in constant danger due to the size differences. When I interrogated Vasily, I learned that he was very knowledgeable about that sort of thing from being a father, so I decided to keep him to act as a caretaker for the human hatchling. He almost escaped though, hence the incident where I ran around outside last night, but she managed to catch him. Ideally, there will not be any other issues like that."

"Ugh. I suppose that explains most things." Deimo stopped speaking to huff, blowing hot air from his nose, combining with the cold to form steam. "Despite that, it fails to explain why Andraste refrained from turning in her own human captives... and why roughly half a dozen human prisoners are missing compared to the tally count from yesterday."

Ishtar looked left to right, realizing that they were mostly alone. She got on her knees, placed her plasma rifle on the ground, and looked up at the young man with watery eyes. "If you deem it necessary, discipline me for my actions. But... please do not harm or take her human hatchling!" Some tears welled up in her eyes as she coughed while being on the verge of crying, making an odd gurgling sound. "He... the hatchling... **Suko** is all I have left!"

Deimo looked down at her with a mix of pity and disgust. "Oh. Oh no. You... named it."

"He is not an it!" snarled Ishtar as her sorrow festered into anger. "No harm will come to an innocent hatchling if I can help it!"

The ensign shook his head. "And now you put me in a difficult position..."

"Please!" exclaimed Ishtar with a snuffle afterward. "I will not allow the hatchling to interfere with my duties. Additionally, I can extract more info from Vasily, look into whatever Specialist Andraste is doing, or anything else Deimo might want!"

"Anything?" he said with a growl.

Ishtar's eyes beamed up as she got back on her feet, towering over the ensign. "Yes! Anything within my power!"

Deimo froze in place as blood flushed his face. "Bah. This puts me in a precarious situation." He scratched the underside of his muzzle. "For now, I will tolerate what you are doing, but I believe that this is all wrong since the human hatchling should be with his own kind. Perhaps you are not in a good mental state."

"But that is where Vasily comes in!"

The alien man made a dismissive gesture with a clawed hand. "Regardless, this will be tolerated... for now. It is not an immediate concern. Just see what other information you can extract from your new babysitter equivalent and investigate Andraste."

The battlemaster put her hands on her hips as her tail wagged. "Thank the ancestors! I will do what needs to be done when the right time comes, and I thank you for your wise judgement!"

"Right." said Deimo with an annoyed snarl. "With that taken care of, we have more important matters to discuss." Deimo continued walking towards the edge of the deployment zone as he spoke, and Ishtar followed his lead. "As mentioned before, you have new orders. More specifically, a new assignment. Your warpack will be responsible for defending the most important structure within the area now that we are digging in due to the arrival of SAP forces..."

"What sort of structure?" asked Ishtar.

"Humans call it a nuclear power plant."