

Disintegration

Chapter 14

Ishtar immediately recognized the emblem symbolizing the Zenari Hegemony.

A red gemstone sat in the center of a diamond-shaped outline composed of gold. Combined with the purple background and a golden wreath adorning the logo, it emitted an imperial and regal aura. It also resembled a reptilian eye. Four similarly golden arrows on the corners provided a sense of order and symmetry with their positions next to the diamond. The design represented many things... whether it be the empress in the center, the zenari surrounding her, or the other four species they intended to make part of their Hegemony spanning across countless suns.



The only thing that bothered Ishtar was seeing that specific emblem adorning the packmaster's shoulder as she spoke to several junior officers...

"That woman shames our Hegemony by wearing that uniform." hissed Ishtar as her tail swayed like a cat. "Killing human civilians benefits us in no way, shape, or form... and needlessly murdering one is not going to endear anyone to us!"

Deimo let out the equivalent of a sigh, blowing air from his nostrils. "Nothing can be done about it anymore."

"Yes, but what will the other humans think? That we will kill them over next to nothing? Does the packmaster want there to be potential partisans if humans believe they have no choice but to fight us to survive?"

"Ishtar, her intention was to set an example to the others..."

She snarled at Deimo's answer. "Then she is a fool. If an enemy submits, then they must be shown mercy and treated well. This incentivizes future enemies to surrender too. If a submitting enemy is murdered instead, that will just encourage future enemies to fight to the death if they believe they will be killed regardless of whether or not they fight back."

"I agree, but the packmaster is our superior. It would be best not to question her. Bluntly talking about her like this is not a wise course of action, either..."

"On the contrary, I do not care." said Ishtar with a sneer. "What she did was extremely impractical and endangers our mission! It would have been different if the humans he killed was a military leader that refused to submit, but it was just some innocent civilian that became the victim of her irrational wrath..."

Deimo looked away and used a clawed finger to scratch his snout. "Speaking of which, there has been recent issues with human partisans, hence why the packmaster is growing frustrated!"

Ishtar scoffed. "Of course."

"They may be the reason why communications are down. Somehow, they keep slipping through cracks in our defenses to conduct sabotage. However, it could also be SAP operatives jamming our communications or yet another storm..."

At his words, the battlemaster looked at the sky, which was cloudy and grey. "So much for springtime."

"If anything else, things might heat up." replied Deimo, shaking his head. "Literally. And... well, metaphorically too. Without the weather being an issue, odds are fighting will intensify, albeit we still need to get our current affairs in order."

Ishtar crossed her arms and gazed at the surrounding tiny town. "For starters, the area has been scouted. Fortifications and sensor systems have been set up near the nuclear power plant. Each member of my warpack has received a guard post, and a rotation system has been established to make sure the research site is constantly protected."

"Good, but you are forgetting something..." said Deimo as he broke eye contact.

"Which is...?"

"Andraste." he answered. "Keep an eye on her. Now that we have moved locations, we can properly investigate the situation and implement better security methods for human prisoners of war. If any go missing, search Andraste's tent and question other suspicious members of your warpack."

Ishtar nodded. "Understood."

"Plus the umok auxiliaries should have finished setting up our tents by now." Deimo paused and placed a hand under his scaly chin before he continued. "Otherwise, that concludes our business, battlemaster. You should retire to your tent for the rest of the day and get yourself settled in... we are going to be here for a while, afterall!"

"Bah. Who knows? Farewell, for now, Deimo."

Following these words, the battlemaster saluted the ensign, then he returned the favor. "Be well, Ishtar."

With a flick of her tail, Ishtar left Deimo behind. She made her way to some tents established on the settlement's outskirts, albeit they were a decent distance away from the nuclear power plant. Unlike the deployment zone, things were calm. Quiet. Not chaotic, loud, and frenzied. It was almost eerie. Ships within the area were scarce, only a handful of vehicles were present, and the tent encampment itself was significantly smaller than the previous one. The only thing that gave the battlemaster solace was seeing various markings and battle scars on the few other hegemonic warriors present, indicating that they were more experienced than most within the military.

When Ishtar finally reached her own tent, things became far more familiar. The patch sealing a hole made the tent she owned apparent enough, and she entered through the main flap. After closing it, the battlemaster was met by her own little world as if she never left the deployment zone behind... which included her bed in the corner, a desk in another, and an RV confined to a cage sitting on the desktop.

"Took you long enough!" exclaimed Vasily as he grasped the bars of the cage. "Are you finally going to let us out now?"

[Once everything is in order.] answered Ishtar as she sifted through a bag on the ground. She then placed a few pallets containing food or water on the desk alongside her computer's microphone. [My apologies. I didn't have any time to unpack my things. A senior officer insisted on the presence of my entire warpack as soon as we set up our tents...]

Vasily looked left to right. "Yeah, whatever. As far as I'm concerned, it looks like we never left Volgograd. Where are we, anyway?"

[You're going to need to try harder than that if you want that sort of information.]

"Ah, come on. Can you at least let me out already?"

The battlemaster took off her helmet and set it aside. [As I said, allow me to organize things before I let you two roam around.]

The human reacted with a grunt as he pressed his head against the cage bars.

Once Ishtar finished unpacking her things, she pressed a button, activating her personal computer. As it booted up, she began removing her armor. It was only a matter of time until her gear was under her bed, a slim headset was on her head, and a computer initializing translation programs synchronized to various devices... allowing her to communicate with the humans once more.

[All finished!] she said with a high pitched hiss. With that out of the way, the battlemaster opened the cage.

"Finally!" said Vasily before he started strolling out of it.

Before he could continue, she promptly picked him up, making his eyes go wide with surprise. Then she placed him on the other side of the desk. Returning her attention to the cage, Ishtar used

both clawed hands to drag the RV out of it. From there, she lifted it into the air and brought it near her head to look inside with a single reptilian eye. The sight of Suko suddenly pressing his face against a window brought a sly smile to her muzzle as he looked at her with a mix of amazement, glee, and curiosity before looking down at the desk dozens of feet below him... then back at Ishtar with his jaw agape.

Upon seeing him and his cute new outfit that included a Christmas sweater, Ishtar's tail began swaying left to right. [Hello there, little one!]

The battlemaster pressed her nose against the window to nuzzle it. Afterward, a gentle flick of her serpentine tongue gave the window the equivalent of a kiss before she slightly stuck it out, forming a blep. Suko recoiled at the sight before falling on his back, then he giggled afterward. Ishtar couldn't help herself as she let out a slight chortle, practically laughing herself, as she placed the RV on the desk with a high degree of delicacy and grace.

"Warn me before you ever do something like that again..." said Vasily as he patted down his officer uniform.

Ishtar sneered. [As you wish. My bad for manhandling you, but you were in the way.]

"And you couldn't have just waited?"

[I was gentle!] insisted Ishtar. [Besides, I was just saving you a trip across the desk.]

"Sure you were." scoffed Vasily. His first apparent priority was moving towards the pallets filled with MREs and bottled water as he spoke. "Regardless, now I can finally grab something to eat..."

Ishtar's pupils expanded as her tail shot up. [Oh! Would I mind if I joined you? If Suko is hungry too, the three of us could finally chat and consume a proper meal together!]

Vasily shrugged. "I don't see why not. I wasn't aware that I even had a choice in the matter..."

[Excellent!] she said as she stood from her desk. [Grab Suko and prepare yourselves some human food as I make my own preparations.]

"What you say goes, I suppose." muttered the man once he reached the pallets and retrieved some foodstuffs.

[Hah! I'm glad that you understand how this all works!]

Following these words, Ishtar got on the ground and resumed searching through her bag. All that was visible from the humans' perspective was the tip of her caramel brown tail waving in the air as it made a slight whooshing sound. It was joined by an odd roar as a generator sprung to life once more. Eventually, the zenari woman returned, albeit she was holding a picnic table in one hand and a brown plastic container in the other. She placed the picnic table on the edge of the desk, almost directly next to herself as she sat in a chair, while Vasily approached her with Suko following him like a puppy.

"I got the kid." said the man as he looked back at the RV, which was now lit up with a plethora of lights. "And in case it wasn't obvious, the generator is up and running again."

[Good!] hissed Ishtar as she gestured at the table. [Now... why don't you take a seat?]

Vasily nodded and sat on the side of the picnic table, facing Ishtar. Suko ended up sitting right next to him, arousing a sigh from the older man as he opened one of his two MRE bags. He sorted through canned meats, crackers, and various dried powders... a few of which were part of hardened blocks. From there, Vasily started dividing them, giving the easy to eat foods to the child while reserving an emergency food block for himself. He also opened the metal containers for Suko accordingly. As for Ishtar, she opened her plastic box with a pop, revealing an assortment of neatly stacked fermented insects.

As she stared at them, Ishtar licked the exterior of her muzzle with her serpentine tongue as if she was licking her lips. [Ah... try not to be too jealous!] She placed the container on the desktop, which was only a dozen feet away from the picnic table, and procured a two-pronged plastic fork small by zenari standards. [This is technically a delicacy from a far off colony world, but its long preservation time makes it perfect as a long-lasting ration!]

Vasily's face scrunched up from smelling something vaguely like vinegar. "Yeah, I'm not jealous at all." He picked up a food bar with the appearance, texture, and taste of sandstone brick. His head swiveled to look at Suko, who enjoyed some Russian chocolate when he wasn't nibbling on crackers or what looked like a can of spam. "I might be jealous of him, though."

Ishtar responded by chortling for a few moments. [Despite that, you're a good man for prioritizing a human hatchling above your own personal comfort!]

"I'm just doing what I'm supposed to do." said Vasily with a dismissive wave of his hand.

The battlemaster used her fork to stab a few insects. They were roughly the size of various canines found on Earth, and she promptly brought them to her awaiting maw and plunged them deep inside before her mouth shut with a snap of her jaws. Her tongue momentarily constricted the insects like a snake, and she suckled on them to enjoy their salty and sour flavor. Eventually, she pulled the fork out of her mouth, and her sharp teeth made short work of the food as she chewed it up before the resulting protein mush became a temporary yet tiny bulge traveling down her throat.

Her tongue stuck out afterward. [Mmm... my favorite!]

Meanwhile, Vasily momentarily clutched an Orthodox cross bound to his necklace and closed his eyes for a few long moments. When he opened them, he attempted to eat his food, which went about as well as biting a brick...

Needless to say, the man reeled from the pain after his teeth barely managed to make a dent.

"Christ!" he exclaimed as he rubbed his jaw, then looked up at Ishtar. "At least it beats bugs..."

[What's wrong with insects?] asked Ishtar before popping another one into her mouth and eviscerating it with a crunch.

"Humans usually don't eat them."

She cocked her head to the side. [Why not?]

Vasily scratched the back of his head. "I guess it might be a social stigma, but most consider them repulsive, myself included. The thought of eating them makes my skin crawl."

[How foolish on your part. For creatures such as myself, insects are an inexpensive, nutritious, and tasty means of sustenance. Not to mention a staple of the zenari diet!]

After uttering these words, Ishtar tossed another bug into her awaiting maw, and Vasily shuddered as he watched her chew it up.

Ishtar let out a short burp afterward. [Pardon me!] She looked down at the petrified man below her. [Is something wrong?]

"The things you aliens eat..." said Vasily, slumping over. "Ugh."

Ishtar tilted her head towards him. [I cannot afford to be picky. I may be cold-blooded, but I require significantly more nutrition than a human. Is my choice of food bothering you all of a sudden, or is it merely watching me eat?]

He made a dismissive wave with his hand. "Don't worry about it. I think a more primal part of my brain is just freaking out since I'm watching a giant reptilian eat meat... or whatever those things are. That's all."

[Bah. I'm probably not going to eat you if you're concerned about that.] replied Ishtar with a roll of her eyes. [So there's nothing to fret about. You're safe.]

Vasily's face scrunched up. "Probably?"

[At the very least, I'd wait for several days in case I ran out of rations.]

The man didn't seem amused as he raised an eyebrow. "How thoughtful of you."

Ishtar chortled to herself. [I'm only joking! You're more useful to me alive, really.]

Vasily continued his attempts to eat the food brick, albeit carefully.

"Speaking of which, what the hell do your people plan on doing with humans after this invasion is over?"

The pupils of Ishtar's eyes narrowed. [Naturally, humans would be assimilated into the Hegemony. I would rather not repeat myself since I'm sure that I've had this conversation before with Sasha...]

"Then what exactly does assimilation entail, Ishtar? At least tell me that much."

[There may not be an exact definition or translation, per se...] she mumbled while looking away, [But I will try to explain it anyway. Humans would become second class citizen equivalents. Their small sizes would allow them to serve various roles... such as operating vehicles, running maintenance routines, and maybe other tasks suitable for their sizes... such as... technical support? Dentists? I'm not sure. Nonetheless, there are many possibilities, albeit it may take a few generations of re-education equivalent efforts to properly assimilate humans by separating them from their parents shortly after birth, which could include having non-humans adopting them.]

Vasily reacted with a look of disgust and horror. "Why the hell would you take children from their parents?!"

[To prevent negative or rebellious influences, of course. Future generations of human children would be taught the ways of zenari too. Unfortunately, my knowledge of these potential plans is limited, and the exact methods differ depending on the species being brought into the Hegemony.]

"So what you're saying is that we'd just be treated as inferiors?" asked Vasily with daggers in his eyes.

[Not necessarily. Whether a human becomes an indentured servant or a second-class citizen would depend on the situation. Maybe properly assimilated ones will be treated as equals. Who knows?]

"How... lovely." replied the man with a roll of his eyes. "And you wonder why humans are still resisting you."

[What's that supposed to mean?]

"Think about it. How would you feel if giant aliens came out of nowhere, turned the capital city of your Hegemony into a crater with little to no warning, then demanded the unconditional surrender of your entire species?"

Ishtar huffed, puffing air from her nose. [So... a role reversal then...]

"That's a good way of putting it."

[In that unlikely scenario, the zenari would submit to a clearly superior foe if they offered some sort of mercy or solace in return.]

He sneered. "Sure you would."

[Allow me to explain, then, you stubborn old man.] The woman only paused to munch on some more insects. [Imagine that there is a storm raging, and strong winds are tearing everything apart. Different creatures deal with it in a multitude of ways... some better than others. The tall grass survives because it is willing to bend in the face of this overwhelming force. Then there is the tree...] She narrowed her eyes. [The old, stubborn tree. It refuses to bend when met by the wind's full fury, so it gets ripped out by its roots and ultimately destroyed. When the storm finally passes by, the tall grass inherits any space the tree once occupied, surviving and thriving during the process.]

"Huh."

Ishtar moved her head a little closer. [Do you understand now? It is an old story told to me by my father to warn me about the dangers of being stubborn, but it stuck with me ever since then. In short, you must be willing to adapt to survive.]

"Funnily enough, there's something similar that happens with trees on Earth, albeit it's a bit different in some cases..."

[Then you must follow a similar line of logic with your own tales and traditions!] replied Ishtar, tapping her claws on the table. [Do tell!]

"Alright. So... there's places on this planet where fire regularly ravages the land, such as the far north. Canada. Certain parts of Russia." He stopped speaking to momentarily point at his face with two fingers. "I've seen it happen with my own eyes. Someone smarter than I am could probably explain the process better, but here's the general jist of it. Grass grows abundant and dries into packed underbrush. Something like a summer storm will rage with lightning striking a forest, causing a small fire. Well, at first. The flames feed on the grass until they grow into a wild and uncontrollable inferno destroying everything in its path! A complete disaster that threatens everything that lives. Despite how dangerous it might be, life still finds its own little ways to survive in the face of it..."

Ishtar snarled before forming an odd smile. "This is just an attempt to goad me with a rebuttal of some variety, isn't it?"

"Eventually..." continued Vasily, undeterred by her words, "The inferno sweeps through any nearby areas like an invasion force. It claims the lives of any animals who fail to run, the grass already bending to its will, and the air itself by choking it with smoke. Meanwhile, the trees within the forest stand firm and endure the flames. Despite however strong or stubborn they might be, most die as readily as the grass, withering away until they practically turn into charred corpses... creating ashen piles."

[Then presumably, the forest is gone afterward.] interrupted Ishtar. [A true catastrophe! One that could have been avoided... but regardless, other plants eventually replace the trees, correct?]

Vasily shook his head. "No, no. Well... sort of. The forest survives." He glanced at the little one as he played with his crackers. "If anything else, the sacrifice of a few old trees secures a future for its seeds so to speak..."

Ishtar's face scrunched up. [Elaborate.]

"You see, some trees evolved to survive those sorts of disasters. Their bark became harder and more resilient from forest fires naturally occurring every few years. Some even release fire resistant seeds once the outer shell is burned away, allowing them to take root in the ashes afterward. Then the seeds thrive since there's little to no competition, plenty of sunlight, and the nutrient rich remains of other plants providing them with plentiful sustenance. It's unfortunate, but natural. Sometimes, forest rangers do controlled burns of the woodlands to prevent more chaotic forest fires from starting in the first place."

[Humans intentionally burn their own forests?] asked Ishtar with a sneer. [I agree with the assessment that other things must die to nourish yourself, but that sounds stupid and pointless.]

Vasily nodded. "We do deliberately burn our forests, but that's another topic. The fires are inevitable and controlled ones eliminate potential fuel sources, but I'd rather not go on a tangent about it."

[Ah.]

"Either way, the forest survives the inferno because the trees give up everything to ensure the next generation is better off..."

[If you're making some sort of analogy, Vasily, my example included a hurricane. Not a forest fire.]

"Regardless, I'm sure something similar occurs," he replied with a shrug. "High winds are excellent for spreading seeds, after all."

[Sure...] she scoffed. [But the Hegemony is practically a hurricane for the likes of you humans. Bow to us, and you'll survive with a brighter future for your children!]

"Really?" asked Vasily with a raised eyebrow. "No. You're more like a wildfire. You indiscriminately bombed us regardless of whether we were willing to surrender, giving some reluctant nations no choice BUT to fight. You know... to protect ourselves and our families. Our children. Yet, you're acting like simply giving up and possibly handing over our kids is the most simple and natural thing in the world!"

[Defiance needs to be punished.] hissed the battlemaster. [Reprisals tend to be effective in that regard, albeit it backfired in your case.]

"Would you do it?"

Ishtar tilted her head up. [Do what?]

He crossed his arms. "If someone bigger than you walked in here, demanded Suko, then pointed a gun at your head while threatening to kill you both... would you just hand him over without a fight?"

[What?!]

"Oh, and they killed your empress over next to nothing since she didn't immediately give in to similarly overwhelming demands."

[What a ridiculous assertion!] said Ishtar as she raised a fist in the air, ready to slam it on the table. However, the sight of Suko in his adorable little sweater gave her pause, rapidly evaporating her anger as motherly and predatory instincts collided with one another. Instead, Ishtar unclenched the fist to expose her clawed fingers, which she glanced at. [I would rend someone's throat with my claws before I would ever allow someone to take Suko away from me...]

"Why? If you can't stop someone from harming you or Suko, shouldn't you just do whatever they want?"

[No... I...]

"What if your superior came in here without warning and demanded for Suko to get thrown in a freezing cage, where you'd never see him again?"

Ishtar remained silent for several seconds before he resumed.

"Sure, you might not be human, but you can surely see why people might have a problem with your apparent plans to separate human children from their families, right?"

[You're not zenari.] said Ishtar in a cold stone fashion. [You would not have the same privileges... at least until you're assimilated. Hence why your children would be separated. In the end, you would be subservient to us like other species within our Hegemony, which I personally consider preferable to annihilation.]

"Huh. Second-class citizens. Even Suko?"

Ishtar broke eye contact and made what sounded like a growl. [I do not want to continue this conversation.]

"Whatever." scoffed Vasily. "God forbid anyone is like that stubborn old tree who gave its life to protect its seeds from the storm. They would be foolish otherwise, of course."

With a hiss, Ishtar exposed her fangs and pointed at the man with a clawed finger. [Listen, little man! Do not act disrespectful towards me. I thought that, at the very least, you were far more compliant and mature than the previous human!]

Vasily continued attempting to eat his food. "I already told you that I don't care if I live or die... and I'm not trying to be disrespectful."

In response, she rubbed her eyes. [You have already submitted to us. Are you aware that the usual penalty for defiance after the fact is death?!]

"I'm just putting things into perspective." he said before taking another bite of the food brick. "We don't have to talk otherwise."

For a time, Ishtar remained silent as she stared at Suko. [Fine!] she hissed. [I will concede to a few of your points. We backed your species into a corner like a wounded animal, giving you no choice but to fight ferociously. Things were also handled carelessly. As an instrument of the empress, I'd die if she commanded it, albeit I can't help but question her wisdom at times since she's young and has already earned a reputation for being brash and impulsive...]

Suddenly, the sound of emergency sirens wailing sent Ishtar into silence.

"What's that?" asked Vasily, his eyes full of concern.

The battlemaster didn't immediately answer his question. Instead, she rapidly went about retrieving her weapons and armor. Just as quickly as Ishtar discarded her gear, she instinctively slid everything into place with mechanical clicks and pressurized hissing filling the air. In the end, she placed a helmet on her head, providing her with augmented reality vision, then she grabbed her plasma rifle with its triangular aiming reticule flashing on.

[Stay here.] she commanded while fiddling with the weapon. [Hide inside your mobile home if you hear anything along the lines of fighting.]

"Got it."

With that, Ishtar made her way outside. She was met by the site of her warpack mobilizing. Like her, they readied their own weapons and gear as they formed into a group around a dozen people strong. Some had new equipment. Most prominently, Specialist Andraste stood to the side and had a mischievous smile on her face as she stuck out her forked tongue and fiddled with a brand new plasma caster.

"Are we under attack?" asked Ishtar as she approached the group.

Andraste flipped a switch, allowing flames to slightly emit from the tip of her plasma caster like a flamethrower. "Technically, no." She paused to sling the weapon over her shoulder. "The humans are just getting uppity, but the new gear Deimo requisitioned should solve that problem!"

Ishtar narrowed her eyes. "That fails to answer my question."

"Communications are finally working again." said Deimo as he approached the group from behind, catching the battlemaster off-guard. "Most of us are being sent to deal with the situation in Volgograd..."

"Are they rebelling?" asked a sthara soldier within the squad.

Deimo tilted his head to the right. "It is an outright uprising. Humans somehow broke through our forces to the far east, encouraging others to resist as well. Even worse, SAP berserkers and commandos are exploiting the situation. And... bah. As far as you need to know, a firestorm has erupted and we need to immediately deal with it before things spiral out of control, so let us get moving!"

"Affirmative!" said several soldiers simultaneously, which included some sloppy salutes.

With no time to waste, they made their way to awaiting infantry transports. Reactions varied. Most of the umok in the squad showed signs of fear, scrunched up sthara faces appeared confused, while the zenari remained mostly stoic. One exception included Specialist Andraste. She looked outright happy, bubbly, and giddy as she held the nozzle of her plasma caster... outright violating safety procedures by having it on before any combat was initiated.

As for Ishtar, she couldn't help but contemplate Vasily's words as fire danced in her amber eyes.