

# Disintegration

## Chapter 28

Ten joraxians and sthara approached Ishtar's position within two distinct groups. One unit maintained an arrowhead formation with the squad leader at the front and center, while the other retained a simple firing line as the two groups converged on each other.

On the contrary, Ishtar remained stationary. She poked out her plasma rifle from behind a desecrated building. The city's edge provided enough structures to give her some cover as she crouched, hiding behind the tallest buildings still standing.

Some signs of any previous fighting also remained. The massive settlement became almost devoid of life over time besides the occasional swarms of insects making their way to any alien or human corpses from previous engagements. Not to mention the overall damage with ruins and debris scattered across ruptured concrete streets. Ishtar simply observed as the SAP squads regrouped, rearranged themselves into a staggered column formation, then resumed advancing with joraxians leading the way and sthara at the rear to provide covering fire.

The typical tactics.

Eventually, the SAP squads collectively stopped a short distance away from the city.

One large joraxian equipped with a heavy weapon stepped forward first. "It's over!" she shouted through an unencrypted channel as if her booming voice wasn't enough. "The Hegemony has abandoned this planet. Come out, surrender your weapons, then get on your knees so that we can make this quick and painless!"

The other soldiers behind the joraxian pointed their weapons at the various structures, scanning the vicinity as two drones flew overhead.

For a time, silence reigned supreme.

Howling winds only added to a dreadful and deafening tension filling the air.

Meanwhile, Ishtar's triangular sights enveloped the large joraxian's upper body. Flashing indicators revealed her weapon's low remaining power. She only fiddled with her communication device to switch to the unencrypted communications channel, snarling several words...

"I would rather die standing."

The SAP soldiers simultaneously locked onto Ishtar's location with their ears or tails perking up, but only the battlemaster's head and rifle remained visible through the empty floor of a damaged apartment complex.

Within a split second, Ishtar squeezed her trigger. Plasma bolts began emitting from the tip of her rifle's barrel as the power source flashed orange repeatedly...

The large joraxian recoiled.

Other SAP soldiers began immediately retaliating with their own flurries of ballistic weapons fire.

Ishtar hunkered down mere moments later. Plasma bolts collided with the large joraxian's head, throat, and torso. She gradually fell to the ground while struggling to maintain a grip on her machine gun. Metal projectiles from coilguns or gauss weaponry peppered Ishtar's cover, disintegrating steel and concrete as parts of the structure fell apart, kicking up plentiful dust and debris to create a practical smokescreen.

It all provided Ishtar a brief opportunity to escape as she rapidly retreated deeper into the city.

During the process, the battlemaster's combat boots bulldozed anything in her way. Remaining traffic lights, vehicles, or other random objects such as benches were rendered into yet more debris as Ishtar charged down the roads. Her large, scaly tail occasionally clipped the corners of buildings whenever she took a left or right turn, a natural result of her sheer size. A few drones flying high above Ishtar's position surged forward as they tracked her movements, all while the SAP soldiers split into several fire teams before following the battlemaster into the concrete jungle.

Only a flurry of gunfire erupting in front of Ishtar's feet made her stop in place. Pivoting and looking towards the sky, she found a drone strafing the street in front of her with multiple automatic coilguns. Like a trap shooter, Ishtar aimed and fired her weapon at the distant target

with one swift movement, resulting in the drone descending from the sky once plasma projectiles annihilated a few rotary mechanisms keeping it in the air.

"Location confirmed!" shouted a distant voice, echoing throughout the city. "Tracking."

The voice prompted Ishtar to slow down. Although her heavy armor provided a great deal of protection, it made moving throughout the city a chore, especially combined with the bulk of her massive body. She readied her weapon and walked at a brisk pace to compensate until she reached an intersection, huffing and puffing with her nostrils flaring.

Several seconds later, a lone sthara sprinted across the street. Ishtar froze. The alien kept running in a completely different direction, only remaining visible to Ishtar for a brief moment. Barely exposed yellow fur like a cheetah only confirmed that sthara pathfinders were on Ishtar's trail, far more capable of outrunning her than most as they scurried throughout the maze humans called a city.

When a second sthara suddenly popped up in front of Ishtar, she greeted them with several plasma bolts and a snarl, marking their demise as they slumped to the ground like a ragdoll.

The battlemaster then swiftly scanned her surroundings. Some structures provided enough cover to hide her whole body, while others only reached her waistline. With that in mind, she checked the street corner, just to find the other sthara backtracking down the street with their automatic coilgun...

He reacted first. A rapid exchange occurred where a slurry of white-hot metal eviscerated part of a building or rattled against Ishtar's thick armor, prompting her to return the favor with a single plasma bolt. The rifle's power core made an abrupt whining noise. It stopped glowing altogether as the sthara collapsed and created weak hissing sounds.

"For the love of my ancestors..." said Ishtar, double-checking her weapon before thumping the side of it. "Not Now!"

Nearby roaring and howling made the battlemaster's muscles lock up. Ignoring the now wounded sthara, she took several steps towards the dead one. Plasma discharge practically boiled blue blood upon penetrating their armor as they clutched another coilgun, failing to phase Ishtar as she abandoned the plasma rifle in exchange for it, prying the weapon from their dead hands.

From there, Ishtar kept moving without looking back, leaving the sthara behind. She only managed to move a stone's throw away before hearing a distinct buzzing noise. Gazing at the skyline again, she found yet another drone mirroring her movements that lacked any sort of obvious weapon system. Ishtar aimed her new weapon accordingly. An absurd firestorm of tiny metal particles erupted from the comparatively small weapon like a submachine gun, spectacularly shredding the drone despite a great deal of the little bullets missing altogether.

Then a distinct mechanical click marked the moment the coilgun stopped firing.

It caught Ishtar off-guard as the drone fell from the air. She held the weapon with one hand like a pistol, checking a slot in the center used to hold ammo in the form of metal alloy blocks. Her general lack of familiarity with the ballistic weapon only added to her confusion as she fiddled with its reloading system, grunting a little.

"Out of ammo?"

Ishtar's eyes went wide. Looking over her shoulder, she found a joraxian armed with a shotgun several dozen paces behind her. Afterward, another two casually moved in front of her to block the way forward, looking much like demons with the way horns sprouted from their heads.

One nonchalantly strapped an assault rifle to their back, retrieving a melee weapon similar to a tomahawk from their waist. "Try not to kill her if possible..." said the joraxian with a devious smile. "But don't be afraid to shoot her if we can't cripple or disable her first. We want her alive, afterall."

The joraxian next to them prepared an assault rifle. "Got it."

Concurrently, the SAP soldier behind Ishtar exchanged their shotgun for a dagger, moving towards her from behind. They flanked her from both ends. Buildings on the sides of the streets also prevented any easy ways to flee or retreat from the scene.

Ishtar's eyes narrowed as she dropped the coilgun. When the joraxian with the tomahawk began charging at her, she rushed towards her in return. The battlemaster's body became like a battering ram as the two collided with one another. This culminated in Ishtar breaking the joraxian's momentum as she slammed into her, interrupting the swing of the battleax as it merely bounced against Ishtar's metal armor, leaving a dent and stunning the joraxian during the process.

"Nine hells!" growled the joraxian between barred teeth. She blinked several times. Before she could try swinging the melee weapon again, Ishtar grabbed it by the ax head, simultaneously headbutting the joraxian and yanking the battleax from her grasp.

Taking advantage of this distraction, another joraxian thrust a dagger into Ishtar's back. It penetrated a gap in the armor around the shoulder blade with the twisted tri-tip embedding itself into her scaly backside. Ishtar promptly pivoted in place and swung the acquired tomahawk, cleaving through light armor and flesh alike as the razor-sharp weapon forged from alien alloys hacked through the joraxian's throat.

As the joraxian reeled and grasped their neck with blood gushing from a gaping wound, the last one proceeded to aim their assault rifle at Ishtar. They fired a single shot. It struck her in the shoulder, hardly harming a pauldron and arousing another snarl from Ishtar as she tossed the tomahawk. The dagger in Ishtar's back ultimately threw off her aim as she winced, but the thrown ax still managed to lodge itself into the joraxian's arm, causing them to reel and hold the assault rifle with one hand.

"JUST KILL HER!" screeched the other joraxian. "MY GODS!"

As before, the first joraxian charged at Ishtar... despite lacking her tomahawk. She swiped her clawed hands side to side. They failed to do much against Ishtar's armor before the battlemaster swung a fist forward, breaking the joraxian's nose with a soft crunch as the battlemaster fell into a trance. Ishtar punched her several more times in the head and torso, doing further damage with her gauntlets forming metal fists, then she utilized her feet and armored tail to trip her over. A tongue lolled from the joraxian's muzzle as she fell to the floor, demolishing smaller buildings and flattening another with her colossal physical form before blacking out.

Half expecting another gunshot, Ishtar braced herself and focused on the joraxian armed with an assault rifle.

Instead, the battlemaster saw the joraxian drop their firearm entirely. Their arms went limp. The color black encapsulated their eyes as they rolled to the back of their head, foaming at the mouth as their wounded arm spasmed and their face twitched or contorted.

"Great..." muttered Ishtar under her breath.

The joraxian proceeded to explode with blind rage as they discharged an ear-piercing roar. In the blink of an eye, they were already advancing upon Ishtar's position, swinging their claws in her general direction. Unnatural speed made it all the more sudden. Ishtar reacted in kind with a downward motion of an armored elbow, hitting the shorter joraxian in the head and cracking a single exposed horn.

However, the joraxian did not relent in their assault. They outright lunged at the battlemaster with every swing of a clawed hand, scratching paint or even creating minuscule incisions in her armor. When Ishtar appropriately responded with a fist to the face, the joraxian took the opportunity to bite her wrist, clenching onto it with their sharp fangs as the full force of their bite applied a significant amount of raw pressure. Using her free hand, Ishtar began repeatedly punching the joraxian again and again, using the alien's grip on her wrist to manipulate their head by slamming it against an adjacent building.

Still, the joraxian simply did not let go under any circumstances.

More prominently, the tomahawk still resided in their arm. Ishtar managed to grab hold of the handle before ripping it free, splattering her armor with yet more blood. Even more began decorating it as she hacked and smashed away at the joraxian's head, cleaving their face into two pieces, then caving in the skull with a second swing. Finally, the joraxian released her arm from the grasp of their jaws and sank down to Ishtar's feet.

With her hand now free, Ishtar waved it a bit. "Bah. Amateurs!" Mild pain plagued her wrist, prompting her to deliver a swift kick to the responsible joraxian's torso. "ANIMALS!"

Nonetheless, three joraxians were now either dead or wounded. One bled out with body fluids still oozing from their throat, another remained unconscious, and the third had their head pulverized similarly to a melon. Ishtar wasted no time as she grabbed a shotgun from one of the fallen soldiers. She quivered a little with more pain surging down her spine, and the sound of her heartbeat deafened her ears to such a point that hearing anything at all became more of a struggle than usual.

Ishtar shivered a little as she took several steps forward. Shaking it off, she resumed advancing into the Russian city, weapon at the ready as she aimed it in any direction she moved. It put some distance between her and the previous bloody fight, with at least half of the original SAP forces either deceased, injured, or otherwise out of action by her hands alone.

A sudden motion blur caught Ishtar's attention once she turned down a street corner.

Rapid coilgun fire greeted the battlemaster with a blaze of bullets. Ishtar roared and prepared to retaliate with her shotgun, aiming it at another pair of sthara. More metal particles rattled and ricocheted against Ishtar's armor, suppressing her position, while a gauss rifle abruptly punched a hole in her leg. Despite this, Ishtar didn't even react as she cut the two down, concentrated bursts of metallic projectiles shredding anything within a cone of fire... whether it be the sthara or the buildings behind them as the battlemaster returned them all to dust.

Ishtar only stopped firing when the sthara collapsed. Her shotgun's tip glowed a light orange as she kept moving forward, limping a little but otherwise ready for anything. Eventually, she got close enough to see faces behind their visors or pointy ears poking out from their light armor. One had yellow fur, and the other had a more bizarre green coat, a real rarity among sthara that distinguished them from most other pathfinders.

Either way, Ishtar kicked their weapons aside and guaranteed that they were no longer a threat.

Kneeling to the ground, the battlemaster concentrated on her leg. A small hole indicated where a larger gauss projectile penetrated her armor before embedding itself into her body, complete with purple blood beginning to pour out of the fresh wound. She reached into a tail pouch to grab a small canister, quickly spraying its contents onto the injury as foam simultaneously sanitized and clotted any blood still flowing from it. With that accomplished, Ishtar returned the container to an accompanying pocket, just to hear a faint and feminine voice emit from a nearby sthara.

"Jape? Enigma?"

Ishtar aimed her weapon at the sthara, finding a light on their helmets glowing whenever a voice spoke through them. She walked towards one, clenched onto some headgear, then ripped it off as the feminine voice filled the air once more.

"This is Widget. The drones are offline, Umbra is still trying to treat the Chief's injuries, and I've completely lost contact with the other commando team. What exactly is going on?"

These words made Ishtar close her eyes, shake her head, and sneer.

"Is this thing working?" asked Widget. A brief pause followed by static crackled from the helmet's speaker. "I'm going to head to your last known location to see what's up. Alright?"

The voice then went silent, resulting in Ishtar tossing the helmet aside. A sharp pain still affected one of her legs as she stomped towards some sizable structures nearby, entering an expansive alley between two large buildings to conceal herself. From there, she sat down. All attention got directed towards her injuries, including the dagger still lodged in her back or the hole in her leg. Ishtar reached behind her back, failing to grab the dagger's handle several times, turning it into an awkward series of maneuvering where she had to slowly and carefully pry it away from her back.

It took some time, but rolling her shoulder allowed her to grab the grip with a thumb and index finger. Ishtar barred her teeth and closed her eyes as she felt nothing but agony, culminating in her pulling the knife out of her back and making her shoulder bleed profusely. With the movement of her right arm no longer seriously impaired, she retrieved the small medical canister and other miscellaneous materials from her pouch again, doing her best to treat her wounds with only her alien biology as a living and walking tank allowing her to bear such torment.

Minutes later, a high-pitched hiss disrupted her as she patted down her back...

"JAPE!"

Dusting off her legs, Ishtar gradually stood back on her feet. She grabbed her shotgun. Her pure bulk let her hold the weapon with one hand while using the other to hold the bloody dagger still dripping with purple blood. A short stroll returned the battlemaster to her previous position, revealing a sthara woman with some visible brown fur kneeling over the other sthara.

Additionally, the brown sthara's back was turned towards Ishtar.

The sthara grabbed hold of Jape's torso, unfastening his armor. Ishtar didn't say a word as she moved towards the sthara, making no effort to hide her presence as she stomped down the streets. Widget slowly stopped what she was doing, tail and ears springing up as Ishtar walked right behind her, up until she could practically breath down her neck.

Widget carefully looked to the side, eyes wide with fear as one glanced at Ishtar. "You..."



Ishtar proceeded to drive the dagger right into Widget's eye socket. Widget let out a gasp. Twisting the tri-tip blade like a screwdriver only served to scramble Widget's insides even more as soft popping and crunching sounds were produced. The sthara slumped down afterward with the knife still embedded deep in her skull, and Ishtar watched on without revealing a single hint of emotion. As before, the battlemaster scavenged for useful materials among the corpses as she grabbed a few coilguns, strapped them to her tail, then moved on from the bloody scene.

Unlike before, the battlemaster made her way to the edge of the city. Her movements were more normalized as she soldiered her way through whatever agony or pain plagued her body. She completely ignored any of the previous carnage she passed by, which included various gruesome scenes...

Fallen joraxians.

Dead sthara.

Umok corpses still littering a few streets.

Even the city itself turned into a husk of its former self with ruins and no humans to be seen.

Out of nowhere, a familiar rattling sound made itself known. Tiny bullets failed to do anything to Ishtar's scarred and battle-worn armor at all. In a somewhat lazy fashion, Ishtar looked to the side, spotting a human armed with a Kalashnikov on the roof of a building. Before he could move away or fully realize the gravity of his mistake, Ishtar slammed a free fist downward, pulverizing him as another red smear graced the knuckles on her gauntlets.

"Humans." hissed Ishtar in a snide tone, waving her affected hand as if she just finished swatting an insect. Facing forward, she moved in one direction again and finally reached the settlement's perimeter with only roads and wilderness far beyond it.

A lone joraxian armed with a sniper rifle awaited her on the other end of one long street.

Before the battlemaster could even react, she heard a bang. Something collided with her head. Ringing filled her ears as her metallic visor bore the brunt of a metal projectile, shattering the one behind it and destroying any camera systems.

Ishtar's vision turned black. She roared at the top of her lungs and fired her shotgun, charging directly at the joraxian until a mechanical click filled the air. Undeterred, Ishtar tossed the weapon aside and grabbed a coilgun from her hip, squeezing the trigger and sweeping the weapon side to side to mow down virtually anything in front of her.

This continued until the coilgun also ran empty...

No retaliatory fire struck Ishtar.

With a hint of hesitation, Ishtar pried off her damaged helmet. This fully exposed her bloody and bruised head with bronze scales and amber eyes, still watery with tears as she sniffled. The joraxian was nowhere in sight as Ishtar found herself alone like so many times before. A quick glimpse at the helmet revealed a massive dent where a projectile collided with the augmented reality visor attached to her helmet, completely crumpling the center but otherwise managing to deflect the bullet altogether.

However, Ishtar felt something warm running down her nose. A bloody gash on her forehead dribbled with more purple fluids, but miraculously it was a flesh wound at worst. Ishtar remained calm and collected as she grabbed another looted coilgun from her tail, discarded the now useless one, and approached the previous position of her joraxian foe.

A crooked smile spread across Ishtar's face upon spotting droplets of fresh red blood on the ground that continued all the way down a single street. Like a bloodhound or a shark smelling blood in the water, Ishtar followed this trail. Although the joraxian weaved their way through more unconventional areas between buildings or larger alleys, Ishtar still tracked her to the edge of the city. There, she saw a joraxian with jet black fur clutching their midsection and limping as they made their way to distant woodlands far away from the city itself.

It didn't take long for Ishtar to catch up to her.

Soon, the two were in the middle of empty plains about half a mile away from the city.

Contrary to Ishtar, the black joraxian struggled to walk with her new wounds. Bizarre foam and improvised bandages also covered her injured leg, which resulted in the joraxian using their rifle similarly to a crutch. They eventually stumbled and crumpled down to the dirt... remaining inert.

So naturally, Ishtar retrieved her last remaining scavenged coilgun and walked towards the joraxian with a murderous look in her eyes.

The battlemaster paused upon hearing increasingly louder whirling sounds...

Several gunships approached on the horizon.

Flying tanks. Hinds. Mil Mi-24 attack helicopters. An entire squadron accompanied a column of tanks spread out along both a road and the adjacent plains. Even more reconnaissance or infantry transport vehicles flanked them to the sides, converging on Ishtar and the city from multiple angles.

For a moment, Ishtar sneered. "More humans?"

As if to answer her question, a few Russian tanks appeared on some hilltops. Infantry emerged from the forests. Gas canisters rose towards the sky or surged forward, blanketing both the area around the approaching tanks and the area surrounding Ishtar's feet. Without her helmet or augmented reality vision, they slowly obscured Ishtar's vision of both the injured joraxian and just about everything else in front of her.

Ishtar initially took a few steps backward, then stood her ground. "So be it." She aimed her weapon and chortled. "Defend your homes against the monstrous invader kidnapping your children, little humans! Prove yourselves!"

To accompany her words, Ishtar unleashed another barrage of automatic weapons fire. The stream swatted down a single helicopter as others swerved away and a still visible infantry transport on one of her flanks. The smoke slowly rose until it was around Ishtar's shoulders, obscuring things even more as multiple machine guns began suppressing her position. Hind helicopters approached from both sides as autocannons and machineguns joined in alongside tank cannons with their fast-moving shells emerging from the smoke.

They all struck Ishtar at the same time. High caliber bullets chipped away her protection, and armor-penetrating or explosive tank shells tore even more asunder if they didn't sink into Ishtar's scales. RPG rockets also swirled upwards, a few connecting with her upper torso.

Ishtar snarled and roared as she kept targeting the helicopter or any visible vehicles. Some erupted into flames when the white-hot projectiles eviscerated them entirely. She shifted her position and

swung her tail, stomping forward and intent on crushing anyone or anything that stood in her way. Literally or metaphorically. Unlike the past, the human forces did not break or retreat in the face of this titanic threat, and fast-moving tanks began circling around Ishtar and firing their cannons at her legs by the time they got close enough.

A few autocannons even managed to shred the scales and spikes on Ishtar's head.

It all made Ishtar wince and flinch as she backtracked, mindlessly firing the coilgun and unsuccessfully trying to stomp on the tanks, practically taunting her as they surrounded her from almost all directions.

A brief flash of motion made Ishtar's eyes go wide.

More precisely, an SU-30 flew dangerously close towards Ishtar's head. It unleashed a single missile before pulling away. As Ishtar reeled from all the other vehicles opening fire on her massive body, the missile managed to penetrate one of her eyeballs, exploding shortly afterward. Fire erupted from Ishtar's eye socket as she screamed, going down in flames as she fell over, still squeezing the trigger on her weapon.

The sound the battlemaster's body made when it hit the ground was almost like an earthquake as she finally met her match.