

REVELATION

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NINE

Night was approaching on the planet of Juxhi. The dim orange sun was setting on the horizon and Yando, the smaller of the world's two moons, was already approaching its zenith. For the next twenty minutes darkness would reign. Then Budmi, Yando's larger twin, would begin to rise, and the darkness would give way to an eerie twilight.

Saren Arterius, a turian Spectre, waited patiently for the sun to disappear. For several hours Saren had been perched atop a rock outcropping, staking out a small, isolated warehouse in the desert on the outskirts of Phend, Juxhi's capital city. Built in the sheltering stones of a small canyon, the run-down building was completely unremarkable, except for the fact that an illegal weapons deal was about to go down there.

The buyers were already inside: a group of gun-toting thugs with basic military training known as the Grim Skulls, one of the many private security organizations active in the Verge. The Skulls were small, a few dozen criminal mercenaries who had never been worth Saren's attention before tonight. Then they'd made the mistake of thinking they could purchase a stolen shipment of military-grade weapons that had disappeared from a turian transport freighter.

His ears caught the sound of an engine in the distance, and a few minutes later a six-wheeled ATV rolled up and came to a stop beside the shed. A half-dozen men got out; two were turian, the others human. Even in the dim light, Saren recognized one of the turians immediately: a dockworker from the Camala ports.

He'd been following the dockworker for days, ever since he checked the duty logs to see who was on shift when the shipment went missing. Only one worker hadn't shown up for work the next day; figuring out who the thief was had been embarrassingly easy.

Tracking him down wasn't much harder. This entire operation reeked of amateurs in over their heads, from the theft to the buyers. Normally Saren would've turned the matter over to local authorities and moved on to something bigger. But turians selling weapons to humans was something he took personally.

The door to the shed opened, and four of the figures, including both turians, unloaded a crate from the back of the ATV and carried it inside. The other two took up sentry positions beside the door.

Saren shook his head in disbelief as he snapped his night-vision goggles into place. What possible use was there in leaving two men to stand guard outside a warehouse in the middle of nowhere? They had no cover; they were completely exposed.

Raising his Izaali Combine–manufactured sniper rifle to his eye, he fired two shots and both sentries slumped to the ground. Moving with an almost casual efficiency, he collapsed the sniper rifle and slid it back into the

designated slot on his backpack. A more professional operation would have someone on the inside periodically checking on the sentries . . . or wouldn't have left them out there in the first place.

It took him ten minutes to clamber down from his perch on the rock face. By then the twin moons were both visible, giving enough illumination for him to stash his goggles back into his pack.

Whipping out the Haliat Arms semiautomatic assault rifle from where it clicked into place on his thigh, he approached the building's entrance. He'd scouted the warehouse earlier; he knew there were no windows and no other doors. Everyone inside was trapped—further proof he was dealing with idiots.

He pressed himself against the door, listening carefully. Inside he could hear angry bickering. Apparently nobody had the foresight to spell out the terms of the exchange before the meeting; either that or somebody was trying to renegotiate the deal. Professionals didn't make that mistake: get to the meeting, make the exchange, and get out. The longer you're there, the more chance something's going to go wrong.

Saren pulled three incendiary grenades from his belt, primed them, and began to count silently to himself. When he reached five he yanked open the door, tossed all three grenades in, slammed the door shut, and ran for cover behind the ATV.

The explosion blew the door off its hinges, sending smoke, flame, and debris shooting out the opening. Inside he heard screams and the sound of gunfire as the

terrified men inside panicked. Burned and blinded, they started shooting wildly, each side convinced they'd been betrayed by the other. For a full twenty seconds the echo of gunfire reverberating off the warehouse's metal walls drowned out every other sound.

Then everything went still. Saren aimed his weapon at the door, and was rewarded a few seconds later when two men came charging out, guns blazing. He took the first square in the chest with a short burst from his assault rifle, then ducked behind the tail end of the ATV for cover as the surviving merc returned fire. A quick roll brought Saren to the front of the vehicle, and when he popped up his enemy still had his weapon aimed at the back end, waiting for Saren to reemerge. At point-blank range the rounds from Saren's assault rifle sheared off half of the guy's head.

For good measure, Saren lobbed two more grenades into the open door. Instead of a fiery explosion, these released a noxious cloud when they detonated. He heard more shouts and screams, followed by choking coughs. Three more mercs stumbled out of the shed one by one, each blind and gagging from the poison gas. Not one of them even returned fire as Saren mowed them down.

He waited a few more minutes, letting the deadly fog clear, then sprinted from his position behind the truck to the edge of the door. He poked his head inside for an instant, then ducked back out of the way.

The warehouse was littered with a dozen bodies. Some had been shot, several were burned, and the rest were twisted into horrific contortions from the gas causing

their muscles to seize and spasm as they died. Several weapons were scattered about, dropped by their owners in their death throes. The crate they had carried inside on their arrival sat in the middle of the floor, unopened. Aside from that, the warehouse was empty.

Assault rifle in hand, Saren made his way from body to body, slowly working his way from the door toward the back of the warehouse as he checked for signs of life. With the toe of his shoe, he rolled over a charred turian who had fallen near the crate. One half of his face was burned, the carapace crispy and brittle. The flesh beneath it had melted, fusing the eyelids on the left side together. A small moan escaped his lips, and his good eye fluttered open.

"Who . . . who are you?" he croaked.

"A Spectre," Saren replied, standing over him.

He coughed, spewing up dark phlegm that was mostly a mix of blood and poison.

"Please . . . help me."

"You are in violation of interstellar law," Saren recited in a cold, passionless voice. "You are a thief, a smuggler, and a traitor to our species."

The dying man tried to say something, but only coughed again. His breath was labored: the acrid smoke from the incendiary grenades had seared his lungs, damaging them so badly he hadn't been able to breathe in enough of the poison gas to kill him. If he received immediate medical attention there was still a small chance he might survive . . . but Saren had no intention of taking

him to a hospital.

Snapping his assault rifle back into the slot on his thigh, Saren dropped down on one knee and leaned in close to the other turian's flame-ravaged features. "You steal weapons from your own people, and then you sell them to humans?" he demanded in a fierce whisper. "Do you know how many turians I saw die by human hands?"

It took a tremendous effort, but somehow the burned man managed to mutter four faint words in feeble protest through his scorched lips. "That . . . war . . . is . . . over."

Saren stood up and pulled his pistol in one smooth motion. "Tell that to our dead brothers." He fired two shots into the turian's head, ending the conversation.

Pistol still in hand, he resumed his inspection of the bodies. He noticed two human corpses near the back wall of the warehouse, noticeably less gruesome than the others. The grenades had detonated up near the front of the building and these mercs had taken less damage. Even the poison would have dissipated by the time it reached all the way back here, explaining why the bodies weren't twisted and contorted like the others. They must have been killed by friendly fire.

He approached the first one carefully, then relaxed when he saw clear evidence that the man was truly dead: six finger-sized holes in a tight pattern showed where the close-range blast of a scatter gun had torn through the front of his protective vest, creating a single fist-sized hole as the rounds exited his back.

The final corpse had fallen facedown in a pool of his

own blood. The scatter-gun that must have inadvertently killed the man beside him lay on the ground . . . a hair's breadth away from the body's limp, lifeless hand.

Saren froze, suddenly wary. Something wasn't right. His eyes scanned the motionless figure, seeking out the lethal wound. There was a gaping hole in the side of his upper thigh, the likely source of all the blood, but because of how he'd landed, no other injuries were visible.

His eyes snapped back to the thigh: blood still should have been dripping from the wound, but the flow was staunched. As if someone had sealed it with a quick application of medigel.

"Move your hand away from your weapon and roll over," Saren called out, raising his pistol and holding it in both hands as he aimed it at the corpse, "or I'll shoot you right now."

After a second, the hand slowly drew back from the scatter-gun. The man rolled onto his back, gasping loudly for air: he'd been holding his breath as Saren approached, trying to play dead.

"Please don't kill me," he begged as Saren took a step toward him, the pistol trained on the spot right between his eyes. "I didn't even fight in the First Contact War!"

"Some Spectres arrest people," Saren said, his tone casual. "I don't."

"Wait!" the man screamed, scrambling back until he was pressed up against the wall. "Wait! I have information!"

Saren didn't say anything. Instead, he lowered the gun and gave a short nod.

"It's another group of mercs. The Blue Suns."

Every Spectre working in the Verge knew the Blue Suns were a force to be reckoned with. A small but well-known group, their members were both experienced and professional. The exact opposite of this crew.

"Go on."

"They're up to something. Something big."

"What?"

"I . . . I don't know," the man stammered, wincing as if he expected to be shot for the admission. After the second it took him to realize he was still alive, he plowed forward, speaking quickly.

"That's how we got in on this buy. The Blue Suns were supposed to take the shipment, but they pulled out. I heard they got a major job in the works. Something they didn't want to risk by drawing the attention of a Spectre with a weapons buy."

Saren was intrigued. Whatever they were up to had to be big: the Blue Suns almost never turned their backs on a deal they'd already negotiated. If they were trying that hard to keep Spectres out of the picture, it meant he damn well better find out what was going on.

"What else?"

"That's all I know," the man said. "I swear! If you want more you need to look at the Blue Suns.

"So . . . do we have a deal?"

Saren gave a derisive snort. "Deal?"

"You know . . . I give you information about the Blue Suns and you let me live."

The Spectre raised his pistol again. "You should've negotiated before you spilled your guts. You've got nothing left to bargain with."

"What? No, please! Don't—"

The pistol put an end to his protests, and Saren turned and walked calmly back outside, leaving the carnage of the warehouse behind. He'd alert the local authorities once he got back to Phend so they could retrieve the stolen weapons . . . and clean up the mess.

Saren's mind was already on his next job. Initially he'd dismissed the news of Sidon's destruction. He figured it would eventually lead back to some radical splinter group of batarian rebels, a retaliation against humanity's efforts to push their main rivals out of the Verge. But if the attack wasn't the work of political terrorists, then the Blue Suns were one of the few private security organizations with the capability to pull it off.

Saren had every intention of finding out who had hired them and why. And he knew just where to start his investigation.

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