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“Watch where you’re going, human.”

The krogan Pel had inadvertently bumped into glared down at him, clearly looking for any excuse to start a fight. Pel didn’t normally back down from anyone, especially an alien, but he was smart enough to make an exception for an angry, eight-foot-tall mountain of scaled muscle.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, avoiding eye contact until the oversized reptile thumped away to satisfy his bloodlust somewhere else.

Normally Pel wouldn’t have been careless enough to bump into a talking lizard the size of a small tank, even on the crowded streets of Omega. But he had other things on his mind at the moment. Cerberus had sent him to meet a new Terminus Systems contact, but the contact had never showed. That alone was enough to make Pel nervous. Then, as he was making his way back to his rented apartment in a neighboring district, he had the feeling he was being watched.

He hadn’t noticed anyone suspicious following him, but Cerberus taught its agents that ignoring their instincts was a good way to end up dead. Unfor-

tunately, Omega wasn't the kind of place to walk around while constantly looking back over your shoulder. You had to pay attention to where you were going if you didn't want to end up with a knife in your belly.

An enormous space station located deep in the Terminus Systems, Omega was unlike any other facility in the known galaxy. Built from the remains of a massive, irregularly shaped asteroid, the heavy-metal-rich core had been mined until the asteroid was almost completely hollow, providing the initial resources used to construct the facilities that completely covered every exposed inch of its surface. Its exact age was unknown, although everyone agreed the station had originally been built by the Protheans before they disappeared. However, nobody agreed on which had been the first species to resettle it once the Protheans were mysteriously wiped out.

Several groups had tried to lay sole claim to it over the station's long history, but none had been able to maintain control for more than a few years. Now it served as a meeting place and interstellar hub of commerce for those unwelcome in Citadel space, like the batarians and the salarian Lystheni offshoot, as well as mercenaries, slavers, assassins, and criminals from all races.

Despite the occasional war between occupying species, Omega had developed into a de facto capital of the Terminus Systems. Numerous factions had settled on the station over the centuries, with each new arrival building out sections of the station to suit their specific needs. Their efforts had transformed Omega into the equivalent of a massive floating city divided

into numerous independent districts, each marked by mismatched architecture and haphazard design. From a distance, the exterior of the station looked uneven or even lopsided. Arms added to the main hub jutted out at all angles from the asteroid's surface, with further add-ons extending out from these arms at bizarre angles. And within the various districts the buildings seemed to have been constructed without plan or purpose; streets twisted and turned unexpectedly, and sometimes curled back on themselves to form infuriating dead-ends. Even residents of the station could quickly become lost or disoriented, and the overall effect was highly unsettling for new arrivals.

Pel had been to Omega enough times to get over the disturbing randomness, but he still hated the place. The station teemed with individuals from every alien species; even humans had become a noticeable presence. And in contrast to the ordered, harmonious—almost sterile—coexistence found on the Citadel, the streets of Omega were crowded, dirty, and dangerous. There was no law enforcement; the few rules that existed were enforced by gangs of hired thugs employed by those who controlled each section of the station. Petty crime was rampant, and killings were common.

That didn't actually bother Pel; he knew how to look after himself. He had other issues with Omega. Every corner of the station stank with the mingled odors of a dozen different alien species: sweat and pheromones poorly covered up by the gagging scent of unfamiliar perfumes; the reek of unidentifiable foods wafting from open windows and doors; the pu-

trid stench of uncollected garbage that littered the back alleys.

As bad as the smells were, the sounds were even worse. Unlike Council space, most aliens here refused to speak the common trade language unless absolutely necessary. An endless cacophony of grunts, squawks, and squeaks assailed his ears as he made his way through the crowds, his automated translator useless in the face of obscure interstellar dialects it wasn't programmed to decipher.

The aliens couldn't even agree on a single name for the station. Each speaker called it something different in his or her native tongue. The unpronounceable asari name loosely translated as "heart of evil," the turians referred to it as "world without law," the salarians called it "place of secrets," and the krogans knew it as "land of opportunity." For the sake of convenience, the automated translator Pel wore strapped to his belt translated all these terms into the human word "Omega"—the absolute end of all things.

As much as he didn't want to be here, he had a job to do. Cerberus had sent him to broker a deal with his contact, and Pel knew better than to cross the Illusive Man. Of course, that hadn't stopped him and his team from taking on a few freelance projects over the past year that his superiors might not approve of. That's why it was so important to do things right: complete his missions as instructed; keep a low profile and don't make a mistake that might draw extra attention to his unauthorized activities.

Unless they already know, Pel thought, wondering if his tail was a Cerberus operative. Maybe the whole mission had been a ploy to get him alone on Omega's

streets, where a dead human wouldn't attract any notice.

"Only one way to find out," he muttered, breaking into a run, thankful he wasn't wearing any kind of body armor that could slow him down.

He darted and dodged through the crowd, spinning and wheeling his way past startled aliens, ignoring the unintelligible threats and curses they shouted after him. He veered sharply down an empty side street lined with garbage cans, trash bins, and piles of refuse. Racing past several closed doorways, he ducked behind a large trash bin, crouching low. From his pocket he pulled out a small mirror, angling it so he could see back down the length of the alley without having to peek his head out and expose himself.

A few seconds later his pursuer skidded into view, coming around the corner from the main street into the deserted alley at a full run. The figure was small, about a foot shorter than Pel, and covered head to toe in dark clothing. His pursuer's face was completely obscured by a tightly wrapped scarf.

The figure stopped and stared down the length of the alley, head turning from side to side looking for some sign of where Pel might have disappeared to. His follower pulled out a pistol, adjusted the setting, then began to move forward cautiously, weapon ready.

Pel could have drawn a weapon of his own; he had several to choose from: the trusty Hahne-Keder pistol strapped to his hip, the knife in his belt, or the small emergency zip-gun in the heel of his boot. The figure didn't appear to be wearing any kind of combat suit that might be equipped with kinetic shields, so a sin-

gle well-placed shot would be lethal. But killing his pursuer wouldn't tell him who was following him, or why. Instead, he simply waited silently for his adversary to approach.

The figure continued to advance, staying in the middle of the alley, obviously trying not to get too close to the doorways or refuse containers where an enemy might be waiting to leap out. But his pursuer's head was still turning side to side, hesitating to stare at each potential hiding spot a fraction of a second too long.

His target was close now, maybe ten feet away. Peering in the mirror, he waited until the figure's head turned away from him and then charged out, coming in hard and focusing his attack on the weapon hand of his too slow to react opponent.

Grabbing the forearm with his left hand, he used his right to bend the wrist holding the pistol inward, redirecting the weapon so it was pointed back at the owner. The whole time he kept his legs churning, using his momentum and size to drive his smaller adversary backward and off-balance.

They crashed to the street, the pistol jarring loose, and Pel heard a distinctly male grunt from his opponent. They wrestled briefly, but Pel was bigger, stronger, and had the advantage of being on top when they hit the ground. He twisted the other man so he was lying facedown, then Pel looped his forearm under his chin, applying pressure in a choke hold. His free hand still clutched his enemy's wrist, and Pel bent the arm up behind his prone opponent's back.

The man beneath him struggled and squirmed. There

was a wiry strength to his limbs, but he couldn't overcome the advantages of Pel's size and leverage.

"Who are you?" Pel hissed in his ear, using the common trade language. "Who sent you?"

"Golo," came the strained reply.

Pel loosened his choke hold slightly. "Golo sent you?"

"I *am* Golo." Pel's translator relayed the words in English, but he recognized the speaker's native tongue, and the unmistakable sound of words being spoken from behind a sealed enviro-mask.

With a grunt of disgust, Pel rolled off the quarian and stood up.

"You were supposed to meet me in the bar," he said, not bothering to help his contact up from the ground.

Golo got to his feet gingerly, checking to see if anything was broken. He looked pretty much the same as every other quarian Pel had meet. Slightly shorter and smaller than a human, he was wrapped in several layers of mismatched clothing. The dark scarf that had covered his face had been torn away during their scuffle, revealing the smooth, reflective visor of a helmet that obscured his features.

"My pardon," the quarian answered, switching to English. "I set up the meeting so I could watch you from a safe distance, to make sure you were alone. I've had too many meetings in the past where the person I was supposed to meet was only a lure to draw me out into an ambush."

"Why is that?" Pel wondered aloud, his irritation growing. "You make a habit of double-crossing peo-

ple?” He was too pissed off to be impressed by Golo’s excellent command of a human dialect.

“My word is my bond,” Golo assured him. “But there are many who dislike quarians. They think we are nothing but scavengers and thieves.”

That’s because you are, Pel thought to himself.

“I was going to follow you back to your apartment,” the quarian continued. “And then make face-to-face contact with you there.”

“Instead you drew a weapon on me.”

“Only for self-defense,” Golo objected. “When you ran I knew I had been spotted. I was afraid you would try to kill me.”

“I still might,” Pel replied, but it was an empty threat. Cerberus needed the quarian alive.

Golo must have sensed he was out of danger, because he turned his back on Pel and retrieved his weapon from the ground.

“We can go to your home and continue our business in private,” the quarian offered, securing his pistol somewhere inside the folds of his clothes.

“No,” Pel replied. “Somewhere public. I don’t want you to know where I’m staying.” *You’ll probably come back later and rob me blind.*

Golo shrugged indifferently. “I know a place not far from here.”

The quarian took him to a local gambling hall located in the district. A heavily armed krogan standing at the door nodded slightly as they entered. The sign above his head said “Fortune’s Den” in many languages, though Pel doubted anyone ever got rich in this place.

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