

Staring back at the items in front of you, you struggle to focus on why you're standing here. No matter how often you try to ground yourself in the now, your mind wanders right back into the room you left and the orders you received. This is it. Your first job is an hour, if not minutes, away from commencing. The job that will tell you if you're worthy of working with the Dinami or not.

A frown finds itself on your face as you think about failure. Months of being on the rack, being tortured in ways even your imagination can't fathom. It happened to you, and the simple act of thinking about it still has you shaking your head, unable to picture it being real. But your body is all the proof you need. What happens if you fail? No one had told you that, whether simply a slip of the mind or for reasons they didn't wish to share. Will you be thrown back on the racks or discarded? Discarded. Would the Dinami desert someone that had seen so much of what they truly were?

Before your thoughts can drift too far down that dark road, the sound of the door hissing as it opens brings new voices. You keep your attention on your own locker but see a vetix walk in with a few others trailing out of the corner of your eye.

"- they failed," a shaph chuckles, crossing their lower two arms. "It was pitiful but unsurprising."

"They were cocky," another insert, "what did they think would happen? You didn't seem phased, Tsering."

"Why would I be?" the vetix questions, continuing to move things around in their own locker. "I had my objective, and I completed it."

"It would bug me," a raza grumbles, "either stay out of my way or do your job. There's a system in place for a reason."

“That’s because you’re a horrible smuggler,” a shaph snickers before motioning to the vetix, “and he’s not you.” You focus back, chiding yourself on how you allowed your mind to move yet again to something else. A weapon still needs to be chosen, and here you are, daydreaming and eavesdropping. Perhaps this is your way of prolonging the inevitable, hoping to place as much space between you and yet another unseeable future awaiting you.

“See you on the range?” Glancing over at the group, you see that all but the vetix are nearing the door.

“Perhaps,” the vetix, Tsering, you remember them calling him. They seem to accept that response and leave. The preparation room is once again silent. You can hear him placing and moving things around, and you use his action as a means to move as well.

“You’re the new recruit? Fresh off the rack, right?” You don’t fully turn, but you glance at the vetix, finding his back still to you and his actions continue.

“Yea.”

“I’ve seen your stats. Impressive.”

“For a terran?” you growl under your breath as you turn to observe him. From what you saw, there were a handful of terrans, and even though most of them were hybrids, they still failed in areas that other species easily surpassed. All but one were common mercenaries; the only other one was a smuggler. You were the first hit-person which seemed to drag a giant spotlight over you. You’re not sure how they choose occupations or what about you said, ‘murderer for pay,’ but here you are.

“For anyone,” he states, turning to face you, the saturation in his eyes heightening for a second before it dims down to what you suppose is their regular color. They’re a lovely dark violet with no visible pupils and only glistening white specks.



You make an immediate right and end up outside where an alien you cannot name stands.

“Good,” the alien says, raising a terminal to your face. Whatever they’re doing, they don’t share with you, and once done, they motion for you to enter the hover car.

“You have a day to finish the job and eliminate the objective. If you are not at the pick-up and your body has not been recovered, you will be labeled MIA and hunted down.”

“And if I fail?” They type something into their terminal before meeting your gaze.

“We will be there in forty minutes.” And with that, they go quiet, answering your earlier assumptions regarding possible failures. By the end of the day, you will have hopefully taken your first life. An action that before now has always been done indirectly. You’ve led plenty towards their death. Watching as they lay on metallic, cold slabs begging for mercy as the saturation fades from the skin and black veins arch across like newly formed chasms.

“One day,” the man beside you reminds. You blink, noticing the entirely different landscape that now rests outside the tinted window. “The only thing that works on your Abacus is your map.” The hover car stops, and after pressing a button, the door closest to you slides open, “get to it, initiate.”

You slide out of the car, and the man zooms off before you can even properly move out of the way. Your clock has started, it would seem.

Blending in with those that you pass by is not a difficult task and once you feel properly assimilated with the stream of limbs, you mentally bring up your map. The target is a couple blocks away and currently not moving. You hadn’t been given much on who he is, just an image, and you can’t even properly utilize the picture since your Abacus search functions are turned off. You understand the purpose of all of this but that doesn’t mean you enjoy it.

They want to see what you could do completely on your own. No Abacus, no information. Nothing more than just a location and what the man would look like.

You continue growing closer as your steps turn silent, and you creep forward. You stick close to the walls and search for shadows. Every sound tells you to pause, and only after you feel comfortable with moving on do you do such a thing.

The area seems devoid of life despite the fact that your map has led you here. Waiting, you hear nothing to direct you to where your target could be, and everything inside tells you not to advance. Is it more predictable to come through the front or the back? Would it matter? This person shouldn't be expecting anyone, let alone someone coming by to kill them. You're about to move back through the way you came when a bullet ricochets off the wall near you. Heading further into the back alley area, you search for the shooter and find him charging for you. How did he even know where you were? You hadn't made any move and made more than sure not to show yourself.

The alien is one you have seen only in passing. One of the species that were prominent enough for you not to stare but not to know enough about them. You wonder if the Dinami did that on purpose? Part of you screams, yes, everything is starting to feel like a setup, but you have no valid evidence to prove that. A quick assessment tells you that hand-to-hand combat is out of the question. Getting caught too close to those long and muscular arms would be detrimental. Next, you realize just how quick he is and that he favors a charging action that quickly allows him to cover any ground. Paired with long arms, you'll have to make sure not to stop too soon, or you'll still be within grabbing range.

Dodging to the left, your hand wanders to where your gun is still nestled in its holster. You won't have time to grab it. By the time you do, this man will be upon you, and your chances to get a proper shot off will be reduced to zero. He will then try to wrestle the gun from your grip, and far too many possibilities stem from that. You need something else. Another plan, even if it is simply to add a respectable amount of space between you so you can get a proper shot and take it.

Your thoughts are cut off by the man's foot connecting to your knee. You shout in pain as you go down and attempt to move as he grabs his gun, takes aim, and fires.

"Fuck," you growl, leaping to the side and doing your best to ignore how you land on your ankle. The bullet only grazes you, but it's enough to still do an adequate amount of damage. You hiss out, turning to the side and darting through a few of the short passageways until you believe you can stop. It feels like your heart rests beside your ears, thumping like a wild animal wishing to be free. If you had been slower. If you had slipped because of the angle. You could be dead right now. Stupid! That was so stupid. This isn't training or some kind of simulation. This is real.

Taking a moment to get your bearings, you think this through. One of you will die today; you see that intention so clearly in the man's eyes. That was a fact that you once thought you understood but only now do you genuinely realize that one of you will not be leaving here. And if you wish to see what the future holds, blood will coat your hands.

The question of how he knew you were coming and in which direction is what bothers you, but that's a question you must ask once Death's followers have fled from your side. Quickly, you bend down and look over your wound. Not life endangering, and without regenerative abilities, you would have to favor your right. A busy mind slows and replays those words a few times until a plan blossoms. You wish you had time to append it in case one component shifts everything. But you don't, and spontaneity will have to be your ally for now.

Staying where you are, you wait for the alien to come to you. Behaving like prey is something you are all too familiar with. Every part of your past is filled with examples to pull from. You hiss under your breath even though the pain you felt from the open wound has long since dulled into nothing.

Finally, you hear his footsteps to your left, and though you purposely delay your reaction, you trip to your right and hurriedly get up to avoid him. He says nothing as he stalks towards you, and you brandish your knife.

*Right leg. Weight on the right. Wait. Wait.* He charges forward, hoping to throw off your balance, and you do as he desires. Acting as if your left ankle had twisted in the rush of trying to move. He doesn't even bother to hide his grin as he moves in for the kill, the grip on his blade tightening.

*Wait. Wait.*

He stands over you and, with his weapon hand leading, moves to make the final blow. You dodge, using your left foot to launch you to the side and back on your feet. A mix of shock and unpreparedness disallows him from recovering in time to avoid whatever you're about to do, and the sudden despair in his eyes lets you know that he knows this is it. You sink your blade into his spine and twist the knife before his forward momentum can carry him away. He falls, his body convulsing as he screams from the pain. There's no need to delay the kill, so you raise your gun, firing a quick charge at his head.

And that's the end of that. The small alcove you find yourself in shifts into silence. Your first life, you realize. A mix of emotions swarms you but none of them are what you expect. What you expect a terran should feel. It isn't a 'him versus me' argument, and your heart isn't racing under the sudden realization. It is simply something that had to be done, and you did it. Did this reaction originate from years on the racks? Constant specialized torture numbing you to things? Or was this from months, perhaps years, of walking people to their death and watching with an almost calm satisfaction?

And your most important thought: did it matter?

