

He killed the kid before it could turn around.

It took one shot to the head. Ehzan scanned the bedroom for anyone else before tiptoeing over to the body. His hands were shaking. From the cold, of course. *Had to be done*, he told himself. It would've noticed him, would've alerted everyone else before he could silence it. It had been watching an entertainment feed—one of the stupid ones with a happy ending, by the looks of it—snug in its bed. The death was quick and painless. Best he could do.

“Sorry, kid,” he whispered. “Orders are orders.”

He dispatched the rest of the family without incident. After the child, all that remained was the main target, her husband, and a small army of guards. All in all, it was only four minutes between Ehzan entering the mansion and him cruising back home on his speeder. The Director would be proud.

Ehzan wondered how late it was, and his mindlink promptly displayed the time in the corner of his field of view. He was still trembling a little, but he smiled nevertheless. This job might be one of his fastest yet, and all well before bedtime.

It was raining when Ehzan reached the penthouse. He parked his speeder and thumbed in at the entrance, fighting to steady his fingers while the security software scanned his fingerprint. The door clicked and swung open, and he paraded into the empty lobby. It smelled of lavender—his favorite—and quaint twenty-first century rap played over the speakers. The AI at the reception chirped a greeting that he ignored as he headed for the elevator. If the bot had the capacity to be offended, it didn't show.

In the elevator, he looked himself over in the mirror. *There it is*. A small drop of blood clung to his sleeve, a sprinkle of black residue on his shoulder. He dusted off the resin then folded the shirt, careful to not crease the sleeves. He could clean off the blood later, but he could *not* wrinkle a shirt this new. Once he finished, his eyes moved over the rest of his body: nothing worth noting.

Only two apartments were on his floor: his penthouse on the east side, and Tadeus' on the west. Tadeus closed his door and hobbled into the hallway as the elevator opened, and the stooped man made for the lift. Upon seeing Ehzan, he squinted and waved.

“Oh, g'day, Ehzan!” His voice shook more than Ehzan's fingers. “You're well-dressed today. Are you dating again?” Ehzan forced a smile before answering the all-too-familiar question.

“Business.”

“Oh, okay. You know, my grandson's your age. He's a doctor...” Tadeus saw Ehzan's face and seemed to reconsider. “I have granddaughters too, if you want. One's a real beauty.”

“I'm fine.”

“Oh, of course. Well, take care-”

Tadeus teetered like an unbalanced lever, and his mouth formed a silent *O* as he fell.

Ehzan rushed to him, extended his arms. He caught Tadeus just before he hit the ground. The old man's eyes were squeezed shut, and his mouth moved rapidly - in prayer, probably. Ehzan

lifted him up and checked for any injuries. *Could've broken his hip again, or worse.* Finally, the man opened his eyes and gasped, as if surprised that he was alive.

"Oh, I must've tripped! Thank you so much!"

"No problem." Ehzan let Tadeus resume his trek to the elevator, now with one hand on the wall.

"Oh, you're a really good guy, you know." *At least someone thinks so.* "Have a nice day, chap." Ehzan smiled and watched him as he disappeared into the elevator. *Nice guy.* He would've killed him, if ordered to.

Ehzan entered his apartment and the lights shone to greet him, revealing the dust motes that coated everything. He checked the time. Just in time for his shower. He undressed, stepped in, and heated up the water until it blared a warning. Still, he couldn't burn away his pain. Plan B, then.

He finished, went to his bedroom, and unrolled the blunt.

It shot straight to his head, overwhelming him in a way he hadn't yet found a way to describe. He was flying now, piercing the sky. The city lay below him, all of the lights and planes and ships. He could just reach out and...

The rush died, and he was back in his room, the wave gone as soon as he had mounted it. The rush lasted less than last time. Unsurprising, but still unwelcome. He checked his fingers and groaned. *Great.* Still trembling. Another blunt, then. *No,* he chided himself. He'd been using only one for the past five jobs, and he couldn't afford to relapse, go back to two. Like the Director had said—the more jobs he did, the fewer he'd need, and eventually not use them at all. Sooner he could kill without these crutches, easier it'd be for everyone.

What's wrong today, then?

Scowling, he flung the blunt across the room. If that and the shower couldn't work, hopefully the pictures would.

There were three photos, as always. The first was just him and Miren, wearing their tuxes and clutching each other like there was no tomorrow. Ehzan rubbed the screen to remove a speck of dirt, only to realize that was just Miren's stubble. *Should've remembered.* He swiped right to five years later.

Zara had fought tooth and nail not to be in this picture. Even after Ehzan had gotten the candy she loved and her hamster, she kept trying to escape. Still adorable, even if she was biting his arm. *Still mine.* He swiped another five years.

The last picture they'd taken together was the only one taken in the penthouse, the three of them and Miren's mother in the common room. That night was horrible: how Zara had cried from all of the yelling, how Miren's eyes had smoldered once they were alone, how his words had been everything Ehzan wouldn't, couldn't bring himself to say. He wasn't surprised. Still, he'd apologized, explained himself.

"I do this for *us*," he told the screen. "My life, on the line for *us*. Can't you understand?" The holopad simply glared at him in response. He chunked it onto his bed and went to the balcony.

The capital bustled hundreds of metres below him. Tube trains snaked across the surface while choppers filled the sky. In the distance, space elevators extended their tendrils, reaching for space, and every now and then the light of a fusion drive flared in the distance. Across the street, people marched in and out of a greasy nightclub, the Red Charger, like an army of ants. Ehzan laughed mirthlessly: all of them going about their regular lives, unaware that an entire family had just been murdered in cold blood.

His head rang. The Director was calling.

He sighed and blinked his eyes to answer.

“Director, sir.”

“Ehzan. Is it done?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Attaboy. Was Sazegar up to anything?”

“No, sir. Just... sleeping.” The Director cackled.

“Old hag. She attempted a coup and couldn’t expect this.” *Trying to stop a war isn’t a coup.*

“She did have guards, sir. Also?”

“Speak.”

“Are you sure we should talk through the mindlink, sir? Police could find this.” The cackle again.

“Ehzan, we’ve discussed this. Don’t worry about the government. *I* am the government. Just follow your orders and take your money. Anyways, the attack’ll be staged by tomorrow and the war right after, so no one’ll have time to worry about you. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now, new job for you. One of Sazegar’s associates might know something’s up. Off him.”

“Just him?”

“Whole family. This incident, that’s an accident; two, that’s an example. You’ll work with Javek this time. More details’ll come tonight, the money too.” The call ended.

Another job. Another payment. Another family. Ehzan looked down.

It would’ve been so easy to jump.

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The bar smelled the way a hangover felt. A slimmer of the sunrise snuck past the windows, exposing the dust coating the tables. In one corner, a man in black played cards with three others. Mobsters. Shoddy ones at that, meeting so publicly. In another corner, two thugs slugged it out while their crews cheered them on. *Money’s on the small one.* The other one was big, but not enough to compensate for the lost speed. Sure enough, within a minute Biggie fell to the floor, blood pooled around him. Cleaning bots scurried over to clean up the mess.

“Oi, need anything?” asked the bartender.

“Cup of beer.” He’d already smoked one, but felt he’d need extra today.

“Bit early, don’t ya think?”

“Big day today.”

“If you say so, mate.” She shrugged and left. Ehzan checked the entrance again, then the time. *Great.* Javek usually came first. He waited, hating how each second Javek wasn’t here was one more for him to think about the job ahead. *Two kids this time.* He downed a shot, only to remember his glass was still empty.

The newsfeeds blared the alert.

Even though he knew it would come, he still felt as if he’d had the wind knocked out of him. All of the telescreens switched to the state channel, where a solemn-faced anchor—the Director’s mistress, if he remembered correctly—stood before a video of the burning lunar base.

“...with hundreds of thousands dead, this unprovoked attack by Bahram constitutes an act of war by the planet...” The rest of the script washed over Ehzan as the rest of the bar erupted into rage, screeching for war like a pack of hyenas. A minute ago, they were regular people. They couldn’t, wouldn’t have called for war, supported millions, billions of innocents dying. Surely they’d realize this only ended in death. But the screen had said, and so it was—

“Here. Big day today indeed,” the bartender said as she filled his cup.

“Thanks.” She made to leave, but he called her back. He needed to see if they were all the same.

“Think we’ll win?”

“No doubt. Couple o’ rock-hoppers won’t do nothing. They deserve it, too.” Ehzan had expected as much, but he frowned nevertheless. Behind him, a scuffle broke out, seemingly about the war. *At least* someone’s *sane*. He turned to see a horde pummel the guy shouting about peace, and went right back to his beer. He’d need more. The mindlink beeped and told him Javek was now ten minutes late. *Great. Think about something else.*

Ehzan opened his account, saw the five million transferred to Miren, and managed a smile. At least something was still right in the world. Not that Miren would ever thank him for it.

Someone tapped his shoulder. Ehzan didn’t turn around; only Javek had such a strong grip.

“Ehzan! C’mon, gimme a hug.” Javek grabbed and embraced him. Once his bearhug began to suffocate, Ehzan disengaged, and Javek ordered a drink.

“All’s well?” Ehzan asked.

“Course it is! You?”

“Good enough. War might put a damper, though.” Javek guffawed, and Ehzan allowed himself a faint smile.

“You read her script yet?”

“Yup. After this, she says—”

“*It is speculated that certain domestic elements helped Bahram carry out the attack,*” they said together with the reporter. Javek laughed and clinked his cup against Ehzan’s already empty one.

“Smart. When they find out Sazegar’s dead, they’ll say she had it coming. Same with this senator, once we’re done with him.” Ehzan tried and failed to match the glint in Javek’s eyes.

“One minute left.”

“Sounds about right. You got the IDs ready?” Ehzan pulled up the ID’s and biomarkers for the two guards and sent Javek one of them.

“Zal Taghtoravanci. That’s a mouthful.”

“Sure is.” Ehzan looked over his own target. Javan Hammozgar. Twenty-five, female, five years of service. *Not even a fair fight.*

The timer rang inside their heads. Their minute was up. Ehzan nodded to Javek. They copied the biomarkers onto their bodies and exited the bar. While everyone watched the war, they had a family to murder.

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It started off easy enough. The two guards were in one of the spaceport’s backrooms, packing weapons and armor for the senator and his family. As expected.

“Quiet bunch,” Javek said as he holstered his pistol. “Doesn’t feel much different with them gone.”

“Easier that way.” Ehzan stripped the gear off Javan’s body. “Five minutes.” They donned their victims’ suits and stuffed them in the closet, then started hauling the equipment to the Berth 7. The senator’s ship waited for them there.

Another family. Why couldn’t they kill just the senator? Just leave the wife and the kids-

“All good?” Javek yanked him back to reality.

“Yup.” Javek furrowed his eyebrows.

“Don’t get cold feet now. Director won’t like that.”

“That’s an understatement.” Ehzan considered Javek, who hummed as he half-skipped towards the target. Would he kill him, if he backed out? It *was* the rules, after all.

They reached the ship, a small and inconspicuous thing nestled amongst its neighboring, gargantuan pleasure barges. They thumbed in with the fake fingerprints. The airlocks cycled open, and Ehzan remembered the Colonel’s voice. *Y’all care so much ‘bout biomarker this and biomarker that, y’all’d believe a man sayin’ he was a woman if their prints matched.*

That was back in the Academy. Back when Ehzan was somehow eager to kill.

They passed through the empty hallways toward the crew quarters, where they’d strap in. The only others on board were the senator’s family; soon as they reached orbit, they’d strike.

“I’ll go say hi,” Javek said. He set off for the senator’s cabins—near the bridge, according to the schematic. Ehzan stayed on course. As he progressed, the walls changed. They weren’t standard industrial panels anymore: paint ran along the sides, imprints of child-sized hands peppered about. Every now and then, there was an old-school digital photo of the family on the walls. The target,

wife, son, daughter. They smiled in each picture, their teeth blindingly white. *Stupid. They'll fall off when we take off.*

He got a transmission from Javek as he entered the crewroom and answered after buckling up.

"I got them tucked in, told them to stay in their own cabins the whole trip. I'm coming over. You all set?"

"Yup. Two minutes until performance." *Performance.* That was one way to put it, murdering an entire family for the crime of wanting peace. Ehzan exiled the thought from his head and waited. Javek came and settled in, and they were off.

Ehzan ran through the plan as the ship roared beneath him. He had the easy part, the adults. Two shots and it'd be done. Javek had the kids. Even as the ship pressed him against his seat, Ehzan managed a smile. He could do this. He had the easy part.

The intercom had barely announced that they could leave their seats when they burst out of their cabins. They ran to the bridge. Javek forked left. Ehzan bulled straight ahead. He reached the senator's room, keyed in. It clicked open, he marched inside.

The senator and his wife sat in their bed. He glared at his holopad while she stared at the ceiling, her mouth moving in what seemed to be prayer. Upon seeing him, they jolted upright and studied him wide-eyed.

"Did something happen?"

They didn't have time to scream. Ehzan called Javek.

"Done." A laugh, then a gunshot.

"Got one. The boy's up and about, though."

"Find him. Sooner the better." Ehzan disconnected and surveyed the room. Another stupid painting, pills by the bedside, even a bathroom.

The toilet flushed.

Ehzan's heart jumped, threatening to leap out of his chest with each deafening thump. He waited, prayed he had just misheard, but sure enough, the door opened and a little boy waddled out. He stared at his parents, didn't seem to notice Ehzan yet. *Now.* He aimed his weapon. Quick and painless. He pressed down-

"I don't want to die."

Ehzan cursed under his breath. He kept the gun trained, but stopped squeezing the trigger.

"Please. It'll hurt." *Stop. Talking.* Trembling, Ehzan linked to Javek. *He* could do it.

"I-I found him." He hung up and turned back to the boy.

"Why?" he whimpered. He was no more than ten, and with that round face and little pout, he could've been Zara's twin. His eyes were saucers, and he clutched his mother's limp finger with both hands. Something trickled down his leg. Ehzan lowered his gun.

"Just following orders." The words came by habit. "Sorry." He stepped towards the boy. He raised the weapon again, fought to keep it from slipping.

But he walked past the boy and instead turned to face the bedroom door. It'd be easier if he didn't look at him. *Just do it.* He'd never get another assignment. The payments would stop. They'd probably kill him, too. He knew too much. *Just let Javek do it.*

Ehzan gave the kid one last look and made his decision.

Javek walked in. A moment of silence. He cocked his head, then his gun.

"You left him for me?"

The gunshot rang throughout the room.

They screamed, brains splattered the room, the weapon finally jumped out of his hand. The smell of blood assaulted his nose, strong enough for him to taste the metallic undertones. The body hit the ground with a thud, what remained of its head in a horrific contortion of fear.

Ehzan began to cry.

It started as a small lump in his throat. Once it broke free of his mouth, the rest followed in an interminable cascade. Ehzan leaned back, only to fall to the floor, and sobbed with the force of a person being skinned alive.

* * *

He didn't know how long he had been crying. He lay splayed on the floor, his hair matted into a mass of keratin and tears. The world tasted of salt.

The kid stared down at him.

"Why did you save me?"

"I follow my own orders now."