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MASS EFFECT™

RETRIBUTION

DREW KARPYSHYN

New York Times bestselling author

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PROLOGUE

The Illusive Man sat in his chair, staring out the viewing window that formed the entire outer wall of his inner sanctum.

The unnamed space station he used as his base was orbiting a red giant-class M star. The semispherical edge of the burning sun filled the entire lower half of the viewing window, its brightness dominating but not completely obscuring the field of stars behind it.

The star was in the last stages of its six-billion-year life span. As the grand final act culminating its existence, it would collapse in upon itself, creating a black hole to swallow the entire system. The planets and moons it had spawned in its birth would be devoured in the inescapable gravitational pull of the dark, gaping maw left behind by its death.

The scene encapsulated everything the Illusive Man believed about the galaxy: it was beautiful, glorious and deadly. Life could spring up in the least likely of places in the most unimaginable of forms, only to be snuffed out in a blink of the cosmic eye.

He wasn't about to let that happen to humanity.

"Viewing window off," he said, and the wall

became opaque, leaving him alone in a large, dimly lit room.

“Lights on,” he said, and illumination spilled from the ceiling.

He spun his chair around so it was facing away from the viewing window, looking out over the circular holographic pad in the center of the room he used to receive incoming calls. When activated, it would project a three-dimensional representation of whomever he was speaking to, almost making it seem as if they were standing in the room with him.

They could also see him, of course, which was why the holo-pad was located so that it looked out over the chair by the viewing window. When the window was active, the Illusive Man would be framed by whatever astronomical wonder the station happened to be orbiting at the time: a bold and powerful visual to reinforce the image he had carefully fostered over the years.

He needed a drink. Not the synthetic, alien-produced swill that bartenders across the galaxy hawked to unsuspecting humans. He wanted something real; something pure.

“Bourbon,” the Illusive Man said out loud. “Neat.”

A few seconds later a door on the far end of the room slid open and one of his assistants—a tall, gorgeous brunette—appeared, an empty glass in one hand and a bottle in the other. Her heels clacked sharply as she crossed the room’s marble floor, her long legs making short work of the distance between them despite her tight black skirt.

She didn’t smile or speak as she handed him the

glass, her demeanor strictly professional. Then she held the bottle out for his approval.

Jim Beam Black, the label proclaimed, *Distilled to Perfection in Kentucky*.

“Three fingers,” the Illusive Man told her by way of approval.

The assistant filled the glass to just past the halfway point, then waited expectantly.

As it always did, the first taste brought him back to the simpler time of his youth. In those days he had been an ordinary man, a typical citizen of Earth’s upper class—wealthy, comfortable, naïve.

He savored the flavor, feeling a twinge of longing for those lost halcyon days: before he had founded Cerberus; before he had become the Illusive Man, the self-appointed protector of humanity; before the Alliance and their alien allies on the Citadel Council had branded him and his followers terrorists.

Before the Reapers.

Of all the enemies in the known galaxy and beyond, of all the dangers that might one day wipe humanity from existence, none could compare with the threat that lurked in the void of dark space at the galaxy’s edge. Massive, sentient starships, the Reapers were ruthless machines completely devoid of compassion and emotion. For tens of thousands of years—perhaps longer—they had watched as alien and human civilizations evolved and advanced, waiting for the perfect moment to come in and wipe out all organic life in the galaxy.

Yet despite the apocalyptic threat they posed, most people knew nothing of the Reapers. The Council had sealed all official records of the Reaper attack on

the Citadel space station, covering up the evidence and denying the truth to prevent widespread panic across the galaxy. And, of course, the Alliance, lapdogs of their new alien masters, had followed along without protest.

The lie ran so deep that even those who'd helped bury the truth had convinced themselves the Reapers were nothing but a myth. They continued on with their mundane existence, too weak and too stupid to acknowledge the horrific destiny awaiting them.

But the Illusive Man had devoted his life to facing unpleasant truths.

When the Alliance turned their back on the disappearing human colonies in the Terminus Systems, Cerberus had taken up their standard. They had even managed to recruit Commander Shepard—the Alliance's greatest hero—to aid them in investigating the mystery. And what Shepard discovered had shaken the Illusive Man to his core.

The Illusive Man dismissed his assistant with a slight nod; the woman spun expertly on her heel and left him alone with his thoughts.

Taking another sip of his drink, the Illusive Man set it down on the arm of his chair. Then he reached into the inside breast pocket of his tailored jacket and removed a long, slim silver case.

With an unconscious grace gained from years of practice, he flipped open the top, slipped out a cigarette, and closed it again in one seemingly continuous motion. The case disappeared into his jacket once more, replaced in his hand by a heavy black lighter. A flick of the thumb and a quick puff on the cigarette and the lighter also vanished.

The Illusive Man took a long, slow drag, letting the nicotine fill his lungs. Tobacco had been part of Ter-ran culture for centuries, the act of smoking a common ritual in nearly every developed nation on the globe. Small wonder, then, that this ubiquitous habit had followed humanity into space. Various strains of tobacco had become popular exports for a number of colonies, human and otherwise.

There were those who even had the audacity to claim that several of the salarian brands of genetically engineered leaf were superior to anything humanity had produced. The Illusive Man, however, preferred his tobacco like his whiskey—homegrown. This particular cigarette was made from crop cultivated in the vast fields sprawling across the landscape of the South American heartland, one of Earth's few remaining agriculturally viable regions.

The traditional health risks associated with smoking were no longer a concern in the twenty-second century; advances in the fields of chemistry and medical science had eradicated diseases like emphysema and cancer. Yet there were still those who harbored a deep, fundamental hatred of this simple act. Ancient legislation passed in the mid-twenty-first century banning tobacco was still in effect within the borders of several of Earth's nation-states. Many viewed cigarettes as morally abhorrent: a symbol of the callous and exploitive corporate indifference that caused millions of deaths in the pursuit of shareholder profit.

For the Illusive Man, however, smoking represented something else entirely. The taste curling across his tongue and down his throat, the tickle of smoke spreading through his lungs, and the warm

rush of nicotine spreading through his system brought both the comfort of familiar routine and the satisfaction of physical craving: two essential elements of the human condition. Smoking was a ritual to be celebrated . . . especially now that humanity's continued existence was at risk.

Smoke 'em if you got 'em, he thought, conjuring up an old line from a long-forgotten source. *Because none of us is going to see tomorrow.*

The Illusive Man took a few more puffs on his cigarette before stubbing it out in the ashtray built into the arm of the chair, then took another sip of his drink.

As grim as things might seem, he wasn't about to give in to melancholy despair. He was a man who tackled problems head-on, and this one was no different.

Commander Shepard had discovered that human colonists were being abducted by the Collectors, a reclusive alien species that served the will of the Reapers without question. Though trapped in dark space, the massive starships were somehow able to exert control over their hapless minions even across millions of light-years.

Acting on the orders of their machine masters, the Collectors had been gathering humans and taking them to their homeworld in the galactic core. There the abductees were repurposed: transformed, mutated, and finally rendered down into organic sludge as part of a horrific experiment to fuel the creation of a new Reaper.

Shepard—with Cerberus's help—had destroyed the Collector operations. But the Illusive Man knew the

Reapers wouldn't simply give up. Humanity needed to learn more about this relentless and remorseless foe in preparation for the Reapers' inevitable return. They had to study their strengths and weaknesses, expose and exploit their vulnerabilities.

Cerberus had salvaged key pieces of technology from the remains of the Collector operation. They were already beginning to set up a facility to undertake the first carefully controlled tests of the strange alien technology. Ultimately, however, there was only one way to gain the knowledge they sought: they would have to resume the Collector experiments on real human subjects.

The Illusive Man knew full well the abhorrence of his plan. But ethics and morality had to be cast aside for the survival of the species. Instead of millions being abducted, a few carefully chosen subjects would be chosen. A handful of victims had to suffer to protect and preserve the entire human race.

The plan to replicate the Collector experiments would progress in secret, without Shepard's knowledge or involvement. The alliance between Cerberus and humanity's most famous hero had been uneasy at best; neither side had fully trusted the other. It was possible they might work together again in the future, but for now the Illusive Man was only willing to rely on his own top agents.

A soft overhead chime indicated an incoming message from one of those operatives.

"Viewing window on," he said, sitting up straight in his seat and focusing his attention on the holopad.

The lights dimmed automatically as the wall

behind him became transparent. The dying sun to his back cast an orange-red glow over the room.

“Accept,” the Illusive Man muttered, and the image of Kai Leng materialized above the holo-pad.

Like most of humanity, he was a child of a truly global culture. His Chinese heritage was clearly predominant in his dark hair and eyes, but around the jaw and nose were subtle clues pointing to some Slavic or Russian ancestry as well.

“We found him,” Kai Leng reported.

The Illusive Man had no need to ask who he was talking about. A top Cerberus assassin, Kai Leng had for nearly three years been on a mission to track down a single target.

“Where?” the Illusive Man wanted to know.

“Omega.”

The corded muscles of Kai Leng’s neck momentarily tightened with revulsion as he spoke the name—a completely involuntary, but understandable, reaction. The space station represented everything Cerberus despised about alien culture: it was lawless, savage, and brutal. The reflex caused Kai Leng to turn his head, offering a glimpse of the tattoo on the back of his neck: a snake swallowing its tail.

The ouroboros was often used to symbolize eternity, but the Illusive Man knew it had a darker meaning as well: annihilation. Which was, in its own way, also eternal.

Cerberus had discovered Kai Leng a decade ago, liberating him from an Alliance prison camp. The Illusive Man had looked carefully into his past before recruiting him: a marine with N7 special forces train-

ing, he had been arrested after killing a krogan in a bar fight on the Citadel while on temporary leave.

The Alliance had come down hard on the former lieutenant, making an example of him. He was stripped of his rank and sentenced to twenty years in military prison. Kai Leng's long list of documented confrontational and even violent behavior toward aliens had no doubt contributed to the harshness of his sentence. For the Illusive Man, however, his anti-alien leanings were proof of character. That, combined with the fact that he had managed to kill a krogan while armed with nothing more than a standard-issue service blade, had made him a perfect recruit.

In the decade since Cerberus had arranged his escape, Kai Leng had become one of the organization's top wet-work operatives. But he was more than just a ruthless killer. He understood the need to be discreet; he knew how to plan and implement complex and delicate operations.

Now that he had found his target, the Illusive Man's first impulse was to give the exterminate order. But then an idea came to him. He still needed subjects for the upcoming experiments; why not kill two birds with one stone?

"Bring him in," he said. "Alive. Be sure to cover your tracks."

"I always do," Kai Leng replied.

Satisfied, the Illusive Man muttered, "Off," and the holographic image of the assassin flickered once, then disappeared.

He leaned back in his chair, casually swirling the

contents of the glass in his hand before downing the last of his drink in a long, satisfying gulp.

It's been a long time coming, Grayson, he thought, his mood much more cheerful than it had been only minutes ago. But I'll make sure the wait was worth it.

ONE

Paul Grayson knew the Illusive Man was still looking for him. It had been almost three years since he had betrayed Cerberus for the sake of his daughter, but even if *thirty* years had passed he knew they wouldn't give up the hunt.

He had changed his name, of course: Paul Grayson was gone; he went by Paul Johnson now. But creating a new identity for himself was only the first line of defense; it wouldn't hold up should any of the Illusive Man's agents come across his credentials. And his agents were everywhere.

Since its inception, Cerberus had seeded operatives throughout nearly every branch of the Alliance government. There was almost no place in Council space he could run where they wouldn't eventually track him down. So he had fled to Omega.

The Illusive Man had never managed to secure a foothold on the enormous space station that served as the de facto capital of the Terminus Systems. Cerberus was well known for its radical pro-human agenda, making its agents extremely unpopular among the various alien warlords, gang leaders, and despots who held sway on Omega. Even if they sus-

pected that Grayson was hiding here, it wouldn't be easy for them to get to him.

It was something of an irony to Grayson that the skills he had learned while working for Cerberus—espionage and assassination—were proving so useful in carving out a new life for himself as a mercenary on Omega. He had been trained to kill aliens; now he was working for one.

“We’re wasting time,” Sanak grumbled, setting his sniper rifle to the side. He tugged at his combat suit as he shifted to find a more comfortable position behind the stacked crates that were concealing Grayson and him from view.

Grayson kept his own weapon trained on the ship on the far side of the loading bay. He was acutely aware of how careful his batarian partner was to not make any physical contact with him as he rummaged around.

“We wait for Liselle’s report,” he said flatly.

The batarian had turned his head to glare with all four eyes at the man crouched beside him. He blinked the uppermost pair, but the lower set remained still as stone.

“You always want to wait, human,” Sanak snarled. “It’s a sign of weakness.”

“It’s a sign of intelligence,” Grayson snapped back. “That’s why I’m in charge.”

Sanak knew only one way to deal with problems: charge into them headfirst. It made working with him difficult at times. His general dislike of humans—and Grayson’s deeply ingrained mistrust of batarians—didn’t help matters.

The two species had a checkered history. Humanity

had expanded quickly after bursting onto the galactic scene, pushing the batarians out of the Skyllian Verge. The batarians had retaliated with violence, triggering a war between the two cultures—a war the batarians had lost. Now they were outcasts and pariahs in the civilized worlds of Council space—hardly ever seen, regarded with suspicion and mistrust.

On the streets of Omega, however, they seemed to be on every other corner. Since leaving Cerberus, Grayson had worked hard to overcome the xenophobia that had been drilled into him by the Illusive Man. But old habits died hard, and he was in no hurry to embrace the “four-eyed menace.”

Fortunately, he and Sanak didn’t have to like each other to work together. Aria had made that clear to both of them on several occasions.

“Seven targets in total,” Liselle’s soft voice chimed in his earpiece. “All members in position and awaiting orders.”

Grayson felt the familiar rush of adrenaline coursing through his body in anticipation of the kill. Beside him he sensed Sanak training his weapon onto the ship, mirroring Grayson’s pose.

“Go,” Grayson whispered, the single word triggering a barrage of gunfire from the far side of the warehouse as Liselle and her team went into action.

A second later four turians stumbled into view from around the far side of the vessel. Their backs were to Grayson and Sanak, their attention and their weapons focused on Liselle’s ambush.

Grayson released the air in his lungs in a long, slow breath as he squeezed the trigger. One of the turians dropped, the kinetic barriers of his combat suit too

drained by Liselle's opening salvo to stop the sniper round that took him in the back of his bony skull.

An instant later two more went down, courtesy of a pair of perfectly placed shots from Sanak.

I may not like the bastard, Grayson thought as he took aim at the final adversary, *but he gets the job done*.

The last turian had just enough time to take two steps toward the cover of a nearby crate before Grayson took him between the shoulder blades.

There were several seconds of absolute silence before Grayson spoke into his mouthpiece. "Four targets neutralized on our side."

"Three more over here," Liselle responded. "That's all of them."

"Let's move," Grayson said to Sanak, leaping out from behind the cover of the crate and racing toward the fallen aliens.

The turians were members of the Talon gang, and the warehouse was a building deep inside Talon territory. Given the time of night and the remote location, it was unlikely anyone had heard the shots. But there was always a chance, and the longer they stayed the more likely they'd have to deal with reinforcements.

By the time he and Sanak reached the bodies, Liselle and the two batarians that made up the rest of her team were already rifling through their victims' clothes.

"Five kilos so far," the blue-skinned asari informed Grayson, holding up several plastic bags tightly packed with a fine, rosy powder. "Ninety, maybe ninety-five percent pure."

From personal experience, Grayson knew it took

only a small pinch of refined red sand to get a human high. Five kilos was enough to keep an entire apartment complex floating for the better part of a year. A stash this size could easily fetch six figures back in Council space. Which was precisely why Aria had ordered this hit.

There were no actual laws on Omega, no police force. Order was maintained solely by the gangs that ran the space station. But though there were no laws, there were rules. Rule number one: don't cross Aria T'Loak.

"Two more kilos on this one," Sanak said, pulling another tightly wrapped brick from inside the vest of the corpse he was searching.

"This one got caught in the cross fire," one of the other batarians said, holding up a bag so Grayson could see the grains of sand streaming out of the tiny hole in the side.

"Patch it up!" Grayson snapped angrily, taking a quick step back.

Red sand had no effect on batarians or asari, but one good whiff and he'd be dusted for the rest of the night.

"Aria wants it all," he reminded them. "The whole shipment. She's sending a message."

Known as the Pirate Queen, Aria had been the de facto ruler of Omega for over two centuries. Every other gang paid tribute to her in some form or another for the privilege of doing business on the station. Those that tried to cut Aria out—say by refusing to give her a piece of their red sand trafficking business—suffered the consequences.

“That’s it,” Liselle declared, standing up as she finished her examination of the last body.

Even though his mind was focused on the mission, Grayson couldn’t help but be struck once again by the ethereal beauty of the woman before him. The asari as a whole were gorgeous by human standards: the mono-gendered species closely resembled human females, though their pigmentation was typically blue. Instead of hair they had sculpted, flowing folds of skin covering their scalp, but that did little to take away from their sexual appeal.

Liselle was considered extremely attractive, even among her own kind, and her form-fitted combat suit accentuated every curve. The part of Grayson’s mind that still harbored the Cerberus-bred mistrust of aliens couldn’t help but wonder if it was merely her physical appearance that was so stunning, or if it was something more.

In addition to being a species of biotics, the asari were known to have subtle yet powerful empathic—almost telepathic—abilities. Some believed they used these talents to influence the perceptions of others, making themselves appear more attractive than they actually were. If that was in fact the case, then Liselle was exceptionally skilled at the art.

“Secure the sand and move out,” Grayson ordered, snapping his mind back to the task at hand. “Stay tight, stay alert. Remember—we’re still in enemy territory.”

Following his instructions, Liselle, Sanak, and the other batarians stuffed the packets into their gear before falling in behind him.

With Grayson in the lead and Sanak taking up the

rear, the small troop filed out of the warehouse and onto the district's shadowed streets. Moving quickly, they made their way down the twisting labyrinth of alleys and back lanes, eager to reach friendly—or at least neutral—territory.

It was late, well into the middle of the space station's night cycle. There were only a handful of people out on the streets. Most would be civilians, ordinary men and women from various species who—for whatever reason—lived or worked in the Talon-controlled neighborhood. These were easy to spot: seeing the heavily armed squad, they would turn away or slip into the blackness of a doorway, eager to avoid confrontation.

Grayson noted and dismissed these people with a single glance. He was on the lookout for Talon patrols. Any response to the attack on the warehouse would be random and disorganized; the Talons couldn't have expected Aria to strike at them here, in the heart of their own turf. But the turian gang was one of the few that regularly sent armed cadres out to walk the streets of their territory, as a way to remind people who was in charge. Armed and outfitted as his people were, Grayson knew that if they came across one of these patrols, the turians would immediately open fire on principle alone.

In the end, they were lucky. They crossed over from Talon territory into one of the central districts of Omega without incident. Just to be safe, Grayson kept them in formation for several more blocks, wary of signs of pursuit.

It was only when Liselle put a hand on his shoulder

and said, “I think we’re clear,” that he let his guard down.

“Aria’s waiting for us at Afterlife,” Sanak pointedly reminded him.

Grayson knew full well where their boss was. And that was the problem—everyone knew.

Afterlife was the social epicenter of Omega, a club where the wealthy and powerful mingled with the station’s common folk, all in the pursuit of pure hedonistic satisfaction. Patrons came in search of music, sex, drugs, and even violence, and few left without finding at least some of what they sought.

Aria T’Loak was a fixture at the club, presiding over the pulsating chaos of the crowd from her private booth nearly every night. Her presence was part of what made the club what it was: Afterlife epitomized Omega, as did Aria herself.

“We’re not strolling into the club loaded down with twenty pounds of red sand,” Grayson replied. “We need to stash it someplace safe.”

It wasn’t likely the Talons would be able to mount a retaliatory strike so quickly; even if they did, he doubted they’d have the balls to take a run at Aria in her own club. But the Talons weren’t the only ones he was worried about.

Security kept a tight rein inside the club, but shootings, stabbings, and random acts of violence were common in the streets and alleys surrounding it. Junkies desperate to score or street thugs too stupid to consider the long-term consequences wouldn’t hesitate to go after Grayson’s crew if they thought the payoff was big enough. It was a small risk, to be sure,

but Grayson was all about minimizing risk at every opportunity.

“We hide the sand at my place,” he declared. “Then we report to Aria and arrange a pickup for tomorrow.”

Sanak’s lip curled in disapproval, but he didn’t say anything. Liselle, on the other hand, nodded her agreement.

“Lead the way, Paul,” she cooed. “The sooner we drop this off, the sooner we can hit the dance floor.”

It took them about fifteen minutes to reach Grayson’s apartment. Several times he checked to make sure they weren’t being followed; each time he did so, he couldn’t help but notice Sanak rolling all four of his eyes.

That’s why Aria put me in charge, he thought. I worry about the details.

It was just one of the many valuable lessons he had picked up from the Illusive Man.

His apartment was located in one of Omega’s safest, and most expensive, districts. The guards at the district gate—a pair of heavily armed turians—recognized him and stepped aside so he and his squad could enter.

Reaching his building, he punched in the access code at the main door, instinctively shielding the keypad from Sanak and the other batarians as he did so. The position of his body gave Liselle a clear view, but he’d already given the asari his building code several months ago.

The door slid open, revealing a small hallway leading to a set of stairs and a single elevator.

“Third floor,” Grayson said. “Take the stairs. The elevator’s a little slow.”

He led the way, with Liselle, Sanak, and the others following behind single file. At the top of the steps was another hall, with a single door on either side. There were only two apartments on each of the building’s five floors; that was one of the things Grayson liked best about this building—only a handful of neighbors, and they all respected one another’s privacy.

He went up to the door and placed his hand on the pad in the center. He felt a faint warmth as the biometric scan read his palm; then there was a soft click and the door slid open.

The well-furnished apartment beyond wasn’t large, but Grayson didn’t need a lot of room. A small entryway where visitors could take off their boots and coats led into a sitting room with a single couch and a vid screen. A small window looked out over the street below. Beyond the sitting room was a half-wall separating it from the functionally simple kitchen. Through the kitchen was another small hallway leading to the bathroom and then to the bedroom in the rear. The bathroom was small, but the bedroom was large enough not only for Grayson’s bed, but also for the chair, desk, and terminal he used whenever he wanted to patch into the extranet.

“Just put the bags inside the front door,” Grayson instructed, eager to keep the batarians from traipsing through his home. “I’ll figure out someplace to hide them.”

“What’s the matter, human?” Sanak growled. “Don’t you trust us?”

Grayson didn't bother to answer.

"Aria's waiting for our report," he said. "Why don't you and your friends go fill her in."

Liselle waited until the batarians were gone, then came over and draped her arms around his neck, pressing herself close against him. He could feel the heat emanating off her, and the faint perfume wafting up from her neck made his head spin.

"You're not coming to the club?" she whispered in his ear, disappointed.

Grayson could imagine the sultry pout playing across her lips, and he felt a flush rising up his neck and into his cheeks. Liselle always made him feel like a cradle robber, despite the fact she was at least a full century older than him.

It's different with asari, the churlish part of his mind admonished. They mature slowly. She's still a babe in the woods, and you're a weathered geezer pushing middle age. She's probably got more in common with your daughter than with you.

"I'll be there," Grayson promised, giving her a quick kiss even as he unraveled her arms from his neck and gently pushed her away. "I just have to take care of a few things first."

She turned away from him, letting her fingers trail along the length of his arm as she did so.

"Don't take too long," she called out over her shoulder as she headed for the door. "You might find me dancing with a krogan if I get bored."

When the door closed, he took a long, slow breath to clear his head. The lingering scent of perfume filled his nostrils, but without Liselle pressed up against him it didn't have the same overpowering effect.

Back to business, lover-boy.

He had to find somewhere to hide the red sand. It wasn't likely anyone would break into his apartment, but there was no sense leaving it out in plain sight.

First, however, he had to make a call.

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