

THE FIFTH HORSEMAN

A Mass Effect Novel

by Patricia A. Jackson

Prologue

"⁵And, lo, born of a Child of Orion, the Fifth Horseman will come, and there will be no end of corpses; the Fallen shall stumble upon their corpses."

—from the Book of Orion 1:5
New Intergalactic Bible, Sirius Edition

The Universe is flawed despite assumptions of its perfection. Its fragile tapestry is scarred from its celestial birth, chafed from the wear of existence, and worn thin from the volatile contractions of life and death.

Nothing happens by coincidence. Nothing can be written in stone that fades or by the light of stars that die. Fate is drawn by the desire of the soul.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Mine is a story of abduction: my abduction. It begins with a simple, unassuming woman whose most prized possession was a sniper rifle.

"¹²To be born again in the Word, requires a baptism in blood."

—from the Book of the Nephilim 8:12
New Intergalactic Bible, Sirius Edition

“Rhayven!”

There came a quiet reply. “Aye, sir.”

“Cully!”

“Aye, sir!”

“Jones!”

“Aye, sir!” A boisterous baritone reverberated against the ceiling of the crowded bay.

Twelve names were read from the scrolling, holographic attendance roster. All twelve were answered by unique voices that rose, but briefly, above the thrum of the shuttle's engines before fading into the interior shadows. As the names diminished into the monotonous flight noise, an unsettling quiet took root. There was a tangible tension among the Systems Alliance Marines, crowded in the rear deployment bay.

This excursion was an extremely rare interruption into the crucial last 24 hours of an N7-training mission—the graduate mission. The diversion was even more unusual as it came at the request of the Turian Hierarchy, the Alliance's formidable and deadly former enemy. The First Contact War was over, twenty-five years of deep, muddy history under a scorched bridge. It

remained a raw nerve; however, the animosity between the two species remained a bleeding wound that despite time and diplomatic ministrations had festered.

Decades after the conflict, Systems Alliance and Turian factions worked diligently to bring solvency to victims on both sides of the offense. Neither faction did so out of remorse. Their intentions were a polished veneer of good public relations. The niceties were meant to appease the Citadel Council and to avoid costly sanctions from the greater intergalactic community, who stood to lose their profit margins if peace could not be maintained. Though unspoken in public venues and unwritten in political agendas, there remained a deep-seated animosity among veterans and survivors of the three-month conflict. Thus, there was sound, logical reason for concern among the assembled Marines.

The inspector deactivated his omnitool and beat his fist against the helm door. "Good to go, Chief. Godspeed." Without further word, he exited the bay and sealed the door, pressuring the compartment behind him.

Inside the spartan interior of the Turian combat carrier, six Systems Alliance Marines crouched on the narrow deployment benches of a former foe. The troop compartment was small and crowded with supplies, so the remaining six sat on munitions crates or the floor. Improvise, adapt, and overcome was the Alliance Marine mantra. Shoulder pressed to shoulder, armor rattled against armor complementing the rumble of the deck plates. The Marines sat in silence, raw and edgy, despite this much needed respite from their exhaustive N7 training tour.

Rather than dwell on the unknown and the uncertainty twisting in her gut, Rhayven lost herself in the last four months. By invitation only, 150 N6s entered the grueling 100-day training program. By Day 93 only 41 Marines remained to be put through the final training mission,

informally known as the Suicide Crucible. For the graduates, surviving the arduous tour and its challenges culminated with the distinctive right to wear the coveted N7 designation on their battle armor and was introduction into an elite legion of special forces. The soldier with the highest assessed scores in accuracy, adaptability, survivability, and leadership throughout the testing would earn a step promotion and a commendation ribbon for graduating at the top of their class.

Before the unusual interruption, this final series of missions was meant to be the grand finale of the Suicide Crucible. It began with a four-phase nightmare of harsh environmental shifts to test resolve; collaborative skirmishes to build squad solidarity; last-man standing tactics to strain those newly made relationships; and it would end with a brutal stand-off against waves of veteran N7 soldiers, their mentors, who knew their strengths and weaknesses.

The first mission was a 24-hour navigation exercise to a landing zone hidden in the dankest bogs and swamps of the Louisiana Bayou Preserves. If the mud, muck, and mosquitos were not enough of a challenge, there were the ever-hungry alligators. A scrambled comm signal made matters worse, especially after the sun went down. This was a test of instinctual skill, as vital as any zero-gee drop where Nature's compass was nonexistent. Any soldier who relied too heavily on instrumentation got lost or found themselves chasing holographic ghosts.

Only 36 soldiers proved capable of tracking down the sketchy nav-point. Through a combination of raw luck, backwoods know-how, and jury-rigged tech, the recruits dragged themselves through the fly-infested bogs to the remote LZ. Awaiting them were six shuttles with six seats, each prepped to move promptly on to the next mission. Surrounded by the bitter reality

of their failure and the gators who made their homes in the muck, five stragglers were left behind in the putrid waters of the bayou.

Mission Two was a 38-hour hit and run skirmish through the rainforests of the Amazon Protectorate. Three hundred targets were scattered over a 1000 acres of treacherous ravines, white-water rivers, waist-deep mud, and dense foliage. The targets recorded one shot, one kill, assigning a score to the Marine who made the hit. Failure to make the score board meant being cut from the tour. With the time given, the task was nigh impossible without teamwork. Thus, it was essential for the soldiers to work in squads, helping each other through their strengths, or to work ruthlessly as an independent, striking first and leaving nothing behind to be claimed.

The squad dynamics clicked into place, creating cohesive bonds for some and excluding others whose eyes were on the end goal and not the journey. An unexpected monsoon brought the added peril of mudslides and flash floods that claimed the lives of two Marines. Another soldier went missing. The Suicide Crucible carried on despite the tragedy. A fast-moving deluge almost cut the mission short, but instead delayed their Amazon pick up by 24 hours. On mission completion, five names topped the boards, while three others were removed from the testing roster.

Nothing happens by coincidence.

The top five recruits after the Amazon skirmish made an unusual squad of misfits who came together, moved together, fought together, and stayed together. Two Infiltrators, Thompson and McNamara, who believed in their invulnerability. Jones, a Vanguard, a deceptively swift mountain of muscle and flesh. Cully, an Engineer with a combat drone he fondly referred to as Alice. And Rhayven, the only woman, a sniper that remained unseen in the field, even to them.

This was how they went into Mission Three, a team, competing in a capture the tags operation in the smoldering heart of the Sahara Desert. What was supposed to be a game of hide and seek and strike became a frenetic shoot-on-the-run ultramarathon in 130° heat with nothing more than sand dunes for cover. Sand dunes and a wily sniper who never seemed to miss a target.

For 30 hours, the recruits were stalked, hunted, and harried by battle-hardened N7 Marines. Together, they held their ground, fought for maneuvering space, and then withdrew to regroup against an undaunted foe. Rest came in 10-15 minute slivers between skirmishes with a choice between much needed sleep, scant rations, or the cleaning and repairing of sand-logged weapons and gear. Dogged to the very end by their trainers, the remaining 21 recruits managed to fight off or misdirect their mentors to survive the final cut.

Mission Four was an all-out assault where the recruits were meant to hold a ruined military base on the frigid, merciless slopes of Mount Everest. The weather and the terrain would be the least of their worries among other formidable enemies such as dual emplacement turrets, snipers, combat drones, and, as always, veteran N7 Marines trying to dominate and end their run.

Lieutenant Commander Kaira Rhayven held the miracle mile with two other crack snipers to support the front line. Never one to take high ground, she was not present when a powerful sticky grenade took out one of her fellow sharpshooters. The other fell prey to an enemy Infiltrator, whom he managed to take down before his own dismissal from the test. Rhayven was in the wind on a down slope, scouting a potential crossfire trap, whipping-in a pack

of five over-eager Infiltrators with the patience of a seasoned huntsman. The clever ruse bought them a little more time to dig in and fortify their positions.

Through a pecking order carved out of their mission experiences and, they held that line. That was when something quite unexpected happened. A bell rang across the operational field—one dull, protracted pulse that begged no explanation. Cease all fire immediately.

Nothing moved, except the wind and the snow. The echo of rifle fire, pistols, and shotgun blasts faded to silence

A second prolonged tone reverberated from the upslope of the mountain. Someone was critically hurt. That was no surprise. Somewhere nearby, in an underground bunker, there was a VI monitoring the scenario and deciding when a recruit had been through enough or when the mission had grown too dangerous to continue. It had, of course, been overridden by the N7s to prevent any interference. Evidently, it was back online and functional.

The bell signaled across the mountain for a third and final time. Rhayven hesitated to move, not wanting to reveal her hide, but she knew the order behind the third tone. All the recruits did. With obvious reluctance, slowly, exhausted Marines emerged from behind grenade-blackened containment walls, collapsed snow tunnels, and wired ice fissures, where they had wedged themselves in for a final fight. Bewildered Infiltrators became visible against the snowscape, and every soldier slung their weapons and dropped to one knee.

Unless incapacitated, every recruit was to wait in a position of obeisance until one of the marshals cleared them and accompanied them back to the debriefing area. With the injured triaged and the smoke still clearing, only 12 recruits were brought into the conference room and

told unceremoniously that they had graduated from the program. Twenty-eight hours, nineteen minutes, and 5 seconds into the final scenario, and it was over.

By Rhayven's omnitool, they were fifteen hours early.

There was no time given to celebrate. Within the hour, the graduated N7s were shuttled away from the ruined bunker on Everest, showered and fed, and then vetted by a Systems Alliance medical team. The 12 Marines: three Vanguard, four Infiltrators, two Engineers, and three Soldiers were issued new equipment and armor with the N7 rank emblazoned on the chestplate as befitted their newly acquired status.

The 100-Day Test ended as it began—in somber silence. Their mentors stood over them and glared, seeming neither pleased nor disgusted. The Suicide Crucible was over, but the sense of urgency about the mission marshals intensified. Rhayven recognized the look in their narrowed eyes. New orders. High priority. Restricted assets required. Need to know only. Under heavy guard, the surviving twelve Marines were herded together, lined up, and marched double time from the medical-transition barracks to a nearby tarmac, where a combat carrier of Turian manufacture awaited them.

Rhayven did not question it and trotted up the ramp behind the Infiltrators. Hesitation meant death in the field. In the here and now, it brought the wrath of their mentors. A soldier who had forgotten that lesson took a pistol butt to the temple as he stopped to gawk at the Turian craft. Batt was his name, Harrison Batt. The trailing soldiers dragged him into the rear bay and dropped him on the floor, still unconscious.

Sitting in the rear of the deployment bay, on the floor behind a munitions crate with her knees drawn up to her chest, Rhayven allowed the ship's abrupt ascent turbulence to jostle her

slightly to the left. It was the only way she could glance down at the bold red N7 insignia on her white on black camouflage armor without the movement being obvious. The sense of achievement was surreal.

She bowed her head and allowed herself a slight smile. The movement pulled a strained muscle in her neck. Though freshly bound and dressed, her wounds were quite real. They would heal in a few days and become scars. The sacred lines of a sacred story that was proof of her passage and her right to stand among the most elite of the Systems Alliance Marines.

But first, there was one last test. Despite the paperwork and the graduation, the Suicide Crucible was not quite over.

"⁹You shall wander far from safety and walk among your enemies, but you will not be harmed."

–from the Book of Cherubim 9:9
New Intergalactic Bible, Sirius Edition

"Jesus H Christ!" McNamara gasped. "Steady it up, boys!"

The Infiltrator, egged on by the other two, had climbed into a narrow maintenance shaft. Contorting his armored body, he struggled to fit inside the small access port above the deployment chairs. To assist him, his coconspirators each grabbed a foot and gave him a shove.

"Keep your voice down!" Richardson detached McNamara's pistol to keep it from falling.

Zech stood on the opposite side. "Can you see anything?"

"Not a goddamn thing," McNamara said. He kicked free of their hands and jumped down out of the shaft. Running a quick hand through the soft spikes of his brown hair, the Infiltrator flashed his best smile at his fellow Marines. Rhayven noticed that he was never without that smile, as if it were a barrier to defend his insecurities. "We'll have an answer soon enough."

"Don't need to see it to know what it is." The Engineer was sitting on a munitions crate, his head resting on the carrier walls. He had sandy-brown hair, though it appeared almost black, slicked with sweat. The cooling unit in his brand new helmet had malfunctioned and turned it into a sauna. With a bit of first aid tape and a safety pin, the Engineer jury-rigged a functional repair, not only for himself but four others suffering the same malfunction.

"So tell us, Cully." McNamara crossed his arms over his chest. "What do you hear?"

"Combat frigate. Big girl, too. Big and definitely Turian."

"I don't get it."

"Starting to feel like a goddamn sacrificial piñata." Zech threw his hands up in disgust.

McNamara nodded his agreement. "Why in the hell are we here? With them?"

Their carrier began decelerating. The pilot, who seemed to care little for his living cargo, made harsh work of the inertial dampeners and the front engine ports. From cruising speed he braked abruptly, bringing the craft to an idle drift on a parallel course with the larger ship. The increased noise of the frigate's engines were proof of their proximity.

"Heads up!" Richardson retreated from the narrow corridor leading into the crew cabin.

"Chief Black's on the move."

Chief Black—the Knight Marshall of the 100-Day Test. His was an ancient title from an ancient past when fighting on and off the battlefield was a matter of honor, not just life or death. A time when honor and death were synonymous.

The drill instructors at every level of Alliance training represented the best of their units. They were known for their eccentricities and their expertise as well as their ability to pass on their adept skills to others. Though there had been several larger-than-life instructors along the N7 Training program, running at them, shouting at them, shooting at them, and beating the recruits through their paces, there had been one more feared and respected than all the rest—Chief Black. It was by his sole nod of approval that a Marine graduated from the N7 program or lived in the shadows of that failed attempt.

"Knight Marshall on deck!" McNamara had the presence to bark.

Settled onto their space legs, every Marine in the bay snapped to attention as Chief Black entered from the dimly lit corridor beyond the cabin door.

“Listen up, boys and girl.” He eyed Rhayven in the back of the cabin. He was a soft-spoken man, never needing to shout to command attention. "What we have here is a sensitive diplomatic situation. A situation only Systems Alliance Marines of N7 designation can handle. Can I get an oorah?"

"Oorah, Knight Marshall!" Their voices boomed in the confined space.

The passionate response seemed to please him. "Alliance Command has authorized a joint operation to be executed with extreme prejudice under the jurisdiction of the Turian Hierarchy. I have put my signature on each of you as good to go. While you are on loan to the Turians, you will make nice with the pretty birds and follow all orders explicitly and without question. If you make a shitstorm for the Alliance, HQ will question if I've lost my polish. Have I lost my polish?"

"No, Knight Marshall!"

"Don't fuck this up." He glared hard at each of them. "Fucking up will not do for your first day on the deck as N7s. Am I clear?"

“Yes, Knight Marshall!”

"Questions?"

"What can you tell us, Chief?" McNamara asked. "Dragging our asses out of the Crucible to make nice with the Turians?"

“The op isn't about Turians, McNamara. It's about Krogan. You're cleaning out a rogue stable of Blood Pack.”

There were a few low groans from the assembled Marines, accompanied by a louder number of approving grunts from the Vanguarders who valued a worthy foe.

"These aren't your ordinary Krogan."

"Is there anything ordinary about Krogan?" McNamara asked.

"In an effort to cure themselves of the genophage, these poor bastards have been experimenting on each other. They're abominations in mind and body. Even their own kind won't claim them. We all know Krogan are high-priority targets, but these have taken it to another level."

"Krogan kufis, Battarian kufis, it don't matter, Chief." With a wily smile, Lieutenant Randolph Thompson cradled an M-13 Raptor in his arms. "I'll pop them all." As the soldiers around him chuckled, he glanced down the scope of his rifle and pretended to take a shot into a dark corner.

Rhayven believed his nickname was Randy, though she had heard the soldiers refer to himself as MC Smoove. Tall, a bit wiry, and handsome, his black skin was accentuated by the blue lights inside the crew bay. During the Suicide Crucible, he had shown himself to be something of a maverick, who took liberty with his orders. Nothing new with Infiltrators, who needed to be somewhat self-motivated and independent to be effective in the field. He never went so far as to risk lives or insubordination. However, Thompson swayed from the line just enough to keep everyone's adrenaline, including his own, pumping overtime. When the other Infiltrators took issue with Rhayven's leadership on Everest, he put them in line. Those that listened graduated. The others were just a memory.

"What makes these knuckleheads so different?" Randy asked.

“Extensive body modifications. Genetic sludge tampering. DNA augmentation.”

McNamara frowned. "Since when did Krogan know anything about genetic engineering?"

"Aunt Mabel's ice tea made straight from remnants of the Love Canal. Who gives a damn how they did it? They did it, lieutenant."

"Love Canal?" Thompson whispered.

"Twentieth century real estate scandal," Cully replied. "Upscale neighborhood in New York. Near Niagara Falls, I think. Investors built it over a toxic waste dump."

"Damn!"

"All you need to know is they have fortified exoskeletons one inch thicker than the usual Krogan.”

Chief Black's announcement was met with reverent silence. Among the known sentient races in the galaxy, the Krogan were apex mercenaries. It was difficult enough to pierce their natural armor with normal rounds. While you were looking for the sweet spot, the Krogan was bearing down on you with unexpected speed, powerful biotic abilities, and flesh-rending shotguns that shredded armor and bone.

“Each of you will be issued specialized ammunition, courtesy of the Turian Hierarchy. The experimental rounds are a classified design meant to maximize knocking out barriers, shields, and armor. You will be briefed by the Turians.”

Chief Black waited for the approving murmur of voices to settle. “Alliance Command maintains tentative ties with what's left of the scattered Krogan leadership on Tuchunka. We don't want a problem with them, so officially you're not here, Marines. The Turian Hierarchy

has been granted full deniability if this mission goes tits up. Because this is not an Alliance operation, I'll turn this over to the Command Cadre of the Turian Fifth Fleet." He pounded heavily on the crew cabin door.

The rear deployment bay opened onto the spacious inner workings of a combat frigate. A dozen armed and armored Turians stood waiting on both sides of the ramp. Beyond them warning lights flashed and klaxons barked unspoken orders. For a heartbeat, Rhayven imagined that time simply paused and that all attention focused on the handful of Humans staring out from the back of the shuttle. The moment ended abruptly. Officers shouted orders at deck crew, ordnance technicians, and assembled soldiers as the Turians worked fervently toward battle readiness.

"These are your new handlers." Chief Black gave a half salute to a Turian waiting at the bottom of the ramp. "This is your first test under the designation of N7."

"I don't test well, Chief, especially in foreign languages." Thompson winced beneath the responding glare.

"Too bad, Thompson, because if you fail this mission, there's no do-overs. No VI to call off the scenario." He gave the mouthy Infiltrator a coy grin. "Just a body bag. With an N7 printed on it. Now, move out!"

The Alliance Marines gathered their gear with purpose and hurried down the ramp, reluctantly interspersing themselves among the Turian soldiers there on the deck. Heart racing against her sternum, Rhayven glanced back to the transport hoping to take some small comfort from Chief Black's presence. However fleeting.

His eyes were already locked on hers, even as the carrier's engines engaged in preparation for departure. Without breaking their contact, he steadied himself on the deployment railing and held her gaze as he spoke. His voice was lost in the high-pitched whine of the engines, but Rhayven read the words from his lips. "May the wind always be at your back."

Her moment of panic and uncertainty were gone. Respectfully, she nodded to him, knowing him for what he was—a sniper. She had always suspected his MO, but now it was certain.

Chief Black hit the docking door button, cuing the carrier to pressurize the interior of the transport. His figure vanished into the shadows as the rear deployment bay closed and sealed the airlock. The craft hovered several feet above the deck floor before speeding back in the direction of open space. Rhayven and her platoon were left alone in alien territory.

"Welcome to the H-Gnaeus, forward point frigate in the Turian Fifth fleet. I am Major Venne." The Turian that Black had acknowledged straightened his lean figure. Despite this, he was smallest of the Turians. By small, he was still a good six inches taller than Rhayven's slight 5'4 frame. "Please, Alliance Marines, follow me this way."

His words seemed over-rehearsed, too tightly controlled to Rhayven's ears. She felt caught, as if in a trap, a sensation that forced her to concentrate on her breathing. Slowing her breathing was a way to calm herself and control her environment. Her eyes carefully scanned the interior of the frigate's docking bay, looking for a good hide in case something went wrong up front during this diplomatic operation.

Initially, none of the N7s moved. Frozen in shock. The moment was too surreal. As the ranking officer among them, Rhayven took the first step toward Venne. She met no one's eyes as

she fell in behind the Turian. Orders were orders. Now their orders were coming from a Turian. There was no room to question.

Following on her heels, the reluctant N7s moved to a combat shuttle on the opposite side of the expansive hangar. The shuttle, like the previous craft, was spartan in its design with little room for anything beyond the simple or the practical. Thankfully, being first allowed her first choice of positioning in the rear of the deployment area, where she stood at attention. The other 11 Marines, leaving a fairly obvious divide between themselves and their new allies, joined her as the eight Turian military types gawked at them from the front.

Venne clasped his hands behind his back. Behind the metallic exoskeleton of his skull, a fluorescent crown of horns extended from the back of his head. His facial features were decorated with stripes of lavender and blue face paint. His expression appeared to soften, a difficult feat for a Turian, as he gazed upon the Human soldiers. "Please, I would ask that you be at your ease."

At her ease would have been with a pistol in her hands, but Chief Black's orders to obey were nonnegotiable. All twelve N7s spread their feet shoulder width and assumed a position of rest, their right feet stamping the deck in unison as all hands went behind their waists.

The gesture of respect, so precisely articulated, gave the Turian some pause. Rhayven thought she saw the hint of a smile, but could not be certain. "Allow me to present my Command Cadre. Captain Darra. He will be commanding the airstrike on our target. Captain Ackos, who will be leading the ground assault. Commander Baatrus will be joining us shortly. They have been handpicked, just as all of you have been chosen for your high level of

performance in the N7 program." Venne gave them a respectful nod. "A belated, but much deserved congratulations is owed to each of you."

Habit and routine took the place of bewilderment. The Marines replied in unison.

"Thank you, sir!"

"Questions before we begin?"

"We're Marines, sir. Chief Black laid it down for us." McNamara made no attempt to suppress the smirk on his lips. "We're in the game. Just tell us what to do. And consider it done."

"Well then, let's waste no more time." Venne tapped twice on his omnitool, bringing up a holographic image of their theater. "This is the planet Qryet. We requested the Systems Alliance assistance in this operation to take down an entrenched mob of Blood Pack, mostly comprised of genetically altered Krogan and their Vorcha underlings." He paused to manipulate the image, giving them an unobstructed view from all angles. "Generally, Krogan have but one combat tactic: Charge forward. These will be no different. To counter them, our intel providers have suggested a four-stage operation to put them down as quickly as possible."

"Put them down?" Zech asked.

"When have you ever heard of Krogan being taken prisoner?" McNamara glared at him with clenched teeth. "Shut up. You're making us look stupid."

"No prisoners will be taken, Lieutenant. That is correct."

Thompson slapped palms with McNamara. "That's what I'm talking about."

The Turian officer straightened his odd-shapely figure, his head spikes altering colors in the lighting. "The sole objective is termination, Marines. Make no mistake. Stage One will be a

strategic airstrike led by Turian fighters to rattle the nest. It is our hope to cause as much damage and as many casualties in that strike as possible before moving on to Stage Two, which will involve Lieutenants Thompson, Zech, Khan, and McNamara. Immediately after the airstrike, you will accompany me. Under cloak, we will tactically weaken the Krogan forces by flanking them and harrying their efforts from the rear as the main force bears down on them.”

“You’re an Infiltrator?” McNamara broke parade rest.

“By Systems Alliance terms, I am, Lieutenant. As a team, we will booby trap, sabotage, and destroy any refuge the Krogan or their minions may try to take in case of a withdrawal.”

“Krogan don’t retreat.” Thompson broke formation.

“But they do know how to dig in and hold their territory.” Major Venne pointed to the highlighted target on the map. “Our task will include the destruction of any mechs, vehicles, or other equipment they may attempt to use against us. For Stage Three of the operation, I give you Captain Ackos.”

A dark-skinned Turian stepped forward with a respectful nod. He wore white face paint of an intricate design that reminded Rhayven of a skull. It was appropriate considering that he would lead the Vanguard down what was surely a hardcore rush to the throat of a Krogan stronghold. "The rest of you will be accompanying me for a full frontal assault." He reached behind his back, producing a heavily modified M-22 Eviscerator shotgun. That earned an approving nod from the Vanguard and soldiers in their squad. “There can be no mistake in judgment here. We will be right there in the trenches, strapped in with the beasts, with little room to maneuver or take cover. We will be fighting on their turf, but not by their rules, and we will give a full measure of what these mad Krogan may be worth.”

“Now that’s what I’m talkin’ ‘bout!” This came from the largest man among them, Lieutenant Maurice Jones. At 6’6, nearly as wide in his armor as he was tall, most of the squad called him Big Mo.

With a gesture of his hand, Major Venne brought the overeager ensemble to silence. “The fourth stage will be as covert as our infiltration team, but just as overt as our frontal assault. This leg of the operation will be executed by my Executive Officer, Commander Turik Baatrus. Nice of you to join us, Commander.”

"Sir, you know punctuality has never been one of my strengths."

"Lucky for you then that you're a crack shot."

A Turian soldier stepped from the shadows into the bay. While most of the Alliance soldiers had given him little notice, Rhayven had seen him moving in the darkness and had kept her eye on him. Her interest was not because she distrusted him. She was simply intrigued. He had intently been watching her, well before the debriefing began. While he might have appeared to her companions to be a few minutes tardy, he had actually been using the time to inspect the other players on the team.

His face paint was an elaborate pattern in white and gold, unique to any of the other Turians in the bay. “I’m looking for Lt. Commander Kaira Rhayven.”

Rhayven stepped forward as he called her name. "Sir."

“You accuracy scores are off the charts, Lt. Commander.” Baatrus scanned the datapad in his hand. “By of a measure of 90% above the norm, even by Turian norms.”

In that moment, she hated him. Something in his voice was like a dagger, slicing at her confidence.

"You're with me for stage four." He tucked the datapad beneath his arm. "You'll be debriefed planetside."

Her fellow N7s looked at her, but Rhayven could not discern admiration or sympathy in their gazes.

"Have you a decent ranged weapon? Long range?"

"Never leave home without it." Rhayven flippantly shrugged the weight of the weathered N7 Valiant slung at her shoulder.

"What other weapons do you carry, soldier?"

"An M-5 Phalanx, heavy pistol."

"No more?"

"If I do my job effectively, I don't need anymore."

This brought a round of muffled laughter from her fellow N7s who had seen her in action and knew the truth behind her words. Rhayven never took her eyes from the Turian.

Baatrus turned to his commanding officer. "She'll do." An alarm klaxon blared outside in the docking bay. The glow of red warning beacons bled into the interior of the shuttle carrier.

"Right." Major Venne nodded his consent to Baatrus. "That's our cue. We're one hour from show time. Stage Two actors, we're moving in with the fighters. Our ride is standing by just outside this carrier. For the rest of you, make yourselves comfortable. You'll be the last ones on the ground." Venne glanced at his fellow officers and then the Marines. "I am unfamiliar with how Humans bid each other good fortune, but among Turians, times like these require inner resolve. May the Spirits walk with each of you." He quickly moved into the frenzied activity of the docking arena with the N7 Infiltrators in his wake.

Baatrus walked up to Rhayven and stood over her, as if continuing his appraisal that began from the shadows. "Secure your gear, Lt. Commander. While we may be the last stage, we will be the first to hit the ground."

"Before the fighters?"

"That's right. Ever try your hand at rocket rappelling through a planet's atmosphere to get to the surface?"

The dangerous maneuver brought a round of low murmurs from the remaining Human Marines. Rocket rappelling was an extreme deployment measure employing high-powered mass effect fields bound in coils. It was a risky venture from low altitudes, only attempted in desperate moments. To Rhayven's knowledge only 5% of Alliance Marines were even certified for such a jump, and she wasn't among them.

Relaxing her stance, Rhayven rocked back on her heels and dropped her hands to her side. "I'm carrying everything I need, sir. Good to go whenever you are."

"Figures, they put the tits in the back of the action." Batt rolled his eyes.

With surprising speed for his size, Maurice Jones crossed the width of the compartment and slammed his massive palm against the soldier's forehead. He wrapped his long, thick fingers around Batt's face. "You weren't talking that trash on Everest when your dumbass went up the wrong slope and got cornered. She took down two, no...all three of them Vanguards to keep your lame ass in the game."

The other N7s moved away from Batt, a clear act of shunning for the ill-timing of the insult and their approval for Jones' swift correction.

Jones tightened his grip as the Turians watched in silence. "So I'd shut my mouth if I was you, unless you want to be eating through a feeding tube the rest of your pathetic life." A slight blue tinge ringed the massive man's hand, rolling up his arm to his shoulder.

The Vanguard gave the soldier a hard shove into the bulkhead wall. He was aggressive and enjoyed pain, both giving it and receiving it. During the Suicide Crucible, Rhayven had come to respect him as the closest Human equivalent of a Krogan. "If it weren't for her, you wouldn't be an N7."

Chided, Batt sulked away with a bruise swelling on his forehead. Eyes cast to the floor, he threw himself down into one of the deployment benches.

Jones turned to Rhayven. "You got this, little lady?"

"I got this."

"Square in your sights, and I'll be alright." He held up his fist for a knuckle bump.

Rhayven complied. "I'll be watching."

"Counting on it. And when it's done, first round's on me."

"¹⁰Listen well and heed the omens for the voice in your ear may well be the whisper of an Angel."

—from the Book of Gabriel 3:10
New Intergalactic Bible, Sirius Edition

A broken landscape of desolation, Qryet was an inhospitable world. Its jagged, uneven mountain ranges, prehistoric fissures, and shattered stone surface reminded Rhayven of the post-apocalyptic nightmares depicted in popular zombie vids. It was no wonder that only Turians or the Krogan harbored any desire to live there. Each for differing reasons, of course. For the Turians, it was a matter of extending their territorial grasp on the edge of the Terminus system. For any Krogan, the planet would seem like home.

Though mineral rich, the planet would never be viable for colonization or profitable, not even by the most frontier-tough colonization efforts. Strains of expensive minerals were buried deep beneath the surface, so deep that the cost of extraction would far outweigh the value of the minerals themselves. Only a miracle or a significant glitch in nature would make terrafarming a remote possibility as Qryet was essentially a dead world.

Rhayven struggled to stretch her neck to relieve a throbbing knot on the right side. The stiff collar of her enviro-suit threatened to leave a bruise for her efforts. She had to admit, a rocket rappel during planetary entry, while her least favorite way to exit a shuttle, was an ingenious method for deploying a sniper team. A sniper's strength was not just precision, but stealth.

Unskilled with the advanced deployment technique, she had been a second too late in popping the release carabineer and momentarily experienced the powerful hand of gravity. If it were not for her armored breastplate and the raised, collar attachment, her neck might have been broken in the descent; or worse, her head fully could have been separated from her shoulders at the speed of sound and with the assured certainty of an executioner's axe.

“Still feeling the sting, baby girl?” Baatrus asked. Without the confining walls of the carrier shuttle and the drone of frigate engines, his voice sounded melodious, the vibration soothing away her anxiety.

“I’m fine.” She grit her teeth against the cramp and the Turian's condescending insult. Baby girl? While she was just coming 24, she had earned more ribbons and commendations than some Marines twice her age and was alive to tell about it. Baby girl? Bastard!

She tried to soften her eyes or at least keep them straight ahead of her, so as not to glare disrespectfully at him. The Turian carried an M-12 Raptor over his shoulder. It was heavily modded with a custom scope, trigger port, and a built-in suppression barrel to muffle its bark. The coolant chamber around the thermal clip exchange was of a design she had never before seen. Still, it was just an M-12. A decent enough weapon for sniping, doubling as an assault rifle, but it lacked the true punch of a genuine sniper rifle. The hybrid on his back was an

abomination. With the echo of his voice looping in her head...baby girl...she found yet another reason to hate him.

“I was a second-year cadet at the military academy the first time I tested for my rocket rappel certification. Nearly soiled myself.” He chuckled at the recollection. “Now that I think about it, maybe I did soil myself. I screamed like a colicking newborn the entire way down.” Turik bent down to pick up a rock and gave it a quick toss. “Quite an embarrassment.”

"Did you pass?"

"No. My technique was sufficient enough to pass, but my unseemly behavior caused the instructor to fail me. My father insisted that I needed to revisit the fall." He stretched his neck in all directions. "I'll have a stiff neck for the next week."

She sensed a need in him to make small talk. It was not her way because she preferred the quietude.

“Sorry about the walk, baby girl. But it was the best way for us to get into position without giving away the advantage of surprise.”

Baby girl again! She bit her lip and fought back an urge to tell him that they had only done a klick. During the Suicide Crucible, the recruits often sprinted three klicks, just out of the racks before breakfast.

With a quick gesture of his hand, Baatrus signaled her to go to ground. She dropped without hesitation and rolled into a nearby rock formation. Her small frame allowed her to take complete cover in the stony outcrop. Across from her, the Turian squeezed himself beneath the craggy shelf of a green and beige overhang, his head craned to the side listening.

“Turian fighters?” Rhayven recognized the engine signature.

“You have an educated ear, baby girl. I guess they're about a mile or two off. The operation is about to start. We better pick up the pace.”

Was he now insinuating that she had held them up? Rhayven could not tell, but she made certain she was the first on her feet and moving at a brisk jog toward their designated position.

“May I ask you question?” The Turian soldier too easily matched her pace. His eyes were always on her, as if he continued to measure her worth.

Rhayven shrugged it off as nothing more than the scrutiny of her N7 mentors. “Ask away.”

“I noticed your sniper rifle, an N7 Valiant V?”

“You know your weapons, Commander Baatrus. How impressive for a Turian.” She let the sarcasm fall from her lips with no regret.

“It’s not the weapon that got my attention, baby girl. It’s the ancient Earth word written on the butt: Angelus? Does it have meaning?”

Rhayven stifled a laugh. “That depends.”

“I don’t follow.”

“In Latin, it means angel.”

“Ah, the Spirits that Humans believe in and pray to occasionally. The Turians, well those of us who still believe in the old ways, also believe in Spirits, but I sense there’s something more.”

“It’s the name of a vampire from a vid series in the 20th century.”

“An angel and a creature of horror.”

"You know about vampires?"

"I've read a few of your world's penny dreadfuls. Until my father found out and burned every one." He sighed, his breathing only lightly labored by the pace. "It is an appropriate name, baby girl, for you are both a Spirit that watches over your fellow soldiers and to do so effectively, you are a killer."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

The Turian nodded with a coy wink. "Good, it was meant to be."

A soft, dull tone from her omnitool announced that the designated position had been reached. Rhayven was impressed. Had she been permitted to choose a sniper's nest, this area would have been a perfect choice. A formation of rock wall with large boulders that over time had cracked and settled left just enough room to allow a sniper to wedge themselves between stone and shadow with a small port for a kill shot. Protected from aerial view and surrounded by an unencumbered view, the site would easily undo any counter sniper activity.

Pulling Angelus from the magnetized shoulder holster, Rhayven dropped to one knee and swiftly went through an instinctive routine of inspecting the weapon. The N7 Valiant was in top performance condition, but it was her habit and her obsession. Her inspection took seconds, and within moments Rhayven wriggled into the niche of a large, gray boulder that best matched her armor's color scheme. With a last check of her omnitool for coordinates, she adjusting her scope in the direction of the operation and took a cursory look.

The miracle mile. From that distance, she could see the stronghold and the deep trench leading up to it. It was quite a fortification, very defensible, but not from a sniper's kiss. Three vorcha sauntered outside a dusty hole in the ground that led into the bunker. She let Angelus'

scope hover over each of them. Five seconds. That is all the time she would have needed to put a bullet into each of their skulls.

“Your performance profile claims that you have an 100.7% accuracy ratio,” Baatrus said. She could see him squeezing into a position under a rocky crag. There was only enough clearance to see his face. “How is that even possible?”

“Haven’t a clue. I just shoot things. I don’t keep statistics.”

He laughed, despite the somewhat caustic response. “But your accuracy drops to a 96% when under fire. Why is that?”

“Might have something to do with that fact that targets don’t shoot back. They don’t throw grenades or deploy combat drones either.”

“Point taken.” Checking his own weapon, Turik sighed and gave her a hard, quizzical look. “I hope that I do not offend you by calling you baby girl?”

Though her helmet hid the peevish reaction on her face, Rhayven turned her head and pretended to be readjusting her scope. “No, sir. Why would I be offended?”

“So I have insulted you.” There was genuine surprise and then disappointment in his voice. “Your surname, Lieutenant Commander, is distinctive in my language. In my native tongue, it would be pronounced raevaenia. It is a word that every Turian rejoices to hear on the day their bondmate gives birth. It literally means baby girl. It is also the scientific name for a very rare and very fragrant flower—raevaenia lunarus menaeus.”

Cheeks growing hot with shame, Rhayven laid her head against the rifle butt.

“It’s customary on my world that when a girl is born, the parents are given one of these rare flowers, also known as the Menae Moon Lily.”

“What makes it so rare?”

“Because it only grows on the dark side of Palaven during the eclipse of its largest moon, Menaë, which occurs every ten years.”

“Since when did Turians care about flowers?”

“A warrior cannot exist solely for the purpose of war. We have our moments. I fancy myself a poet at times.”

“A poet?”

“In that final hour, dread not, when Death seems assured. Beckon to the One and she will rise before you, ebon wings unfurled, damp with the mist of your last breath. Recognize her by the bright blade of deeds, by the armor of valor and by a sacred name, solely this—Conqueror...Betrothed of Death. Sacrifice your life unto her glory and by her side you shall stand...forever.”

“That's beautiful.” Rhayven was actually impressed.

“I won't claim ownership of it. It's a prayer to a Spirit—a warrior spirit. Consider it my apology for any offense to you. No matter how slight. My father always tells me I have no talents of a diplomatic nature.”

"He seems stern, your father."

"I've been a handful most of my life, so it's well deserved."

Rhayven twisted her head to look at him from beneath her rock. "No offense offered, Commander Baatrus. None whatsoever." It was her apology to him.

“Good, let's talk strategy. Lives will depend on us today.”

“Copy that.”

“After the fighters complete the initial run, a combat shuttle will execute a strategic drop over that channel. Your squad mates and mine will be sent down into it, and they will march right up to the bunker where the fighting will be thickest. We're here to save as many lives as we can and keep the path open all the way to the objective.”

“I can hold my own with an assault rifle, sir. Close quarters are part of the specialized N7 training. Maybe I should be down there with them.”

“I have no doubt that you can handle yourself in any given situation, Lt. Commander. I've examined your record. That's why you are here. With me. Your skills with a sniper rifle are far more valuable.”

She shrugged against the rock. “Makes sense, I guess.”

“More sense than you know, baby girl—” He caught himself.

Rhayven chuckled. "It's alright, really."

The Turian recovered with a grin. "This battle will not be decided down there, but right here." He slammed home an unusual cartridge of green ammunition and handed her a munitions pack with a similar load. "Reload."

Following his orders, Rhayven gently slid the cartridge into her rifle, and then glanced at the thermal clip. In the slot, she saw the same green rounds. Their odd, green metallic color identified the polished tungsten shells, but she could not discern the strange design of the bullet head.

“Your military dossier is impressive. It's not often that a Human gives so many veteran Turian soldiers pause. But, I chose you for this task, not just for your accuracy. To be that good, you have to possess discipline and patience. Accuracy, discipline, and patience makes for a

deadly equation. With our combined efforts here today, the majority of these men will be eating supper tonight.”

“What's on the menu?” Rhayven indicated the thermal clips he had given her.

“Something new the Salarian tech boys are just now field testing. Tungsten rounds with specially designed hollow point tips. Or rather, insertion tips. Behind the head, there's a chamber filled with Kyyoid gas.”

“Poisoned rounds?”

“The gas itself is harmless, but once vented there is an inert alloy inside the round that, without the gas to suppress it, becomes volatile and explodes.”

“A compressed, explosive round.” Rhayven grinned at the wickedness.

“Very effective against Krogan and their thick skulls.” He held up one finger of the three on his hand. “One shot, one kill.”

“Five rounds in a clip?”

Baatrus laughed softly, the ridges of his nose momentarily moving together in amusement. “I was told five was a lucky number among Humans.”

“Personally, two is my lucky number, but I'll go with five today. Thank you.”

“You are more than welcomed, baby girl. Put them to good use. We'll need more than luck to win this day.”