

Fanatical Publishing's

# Weekly Review

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## AND NOW, a word from the publisher:

Hello folks, Jochannon here; first let me say thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy, and please feel free to share it with your friends, re-post it to your profile, spread it around; the more people who get to read it, the better!

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I've got a website, where you can download old issues:  
<http://fanaticalpublishing.weebly.com/wr-archive.html>

If you want to contribute, I'd love to see your work, send it to me at the aforementioned e-mail address with: 'category(prose, fanfic, poetry), STORY TITLE, Author's Name' in the subject line: please include the text of your story in the body of the email, and please include a cover letter about you, your work, or whatever; include any links you want, and cover art if you have any.

Do you have any questions or comments? If you do, I'd to hear them; write to me at the aforementioned e-mail address.

I'm bad at stopping these things, so I'll just say again: thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy!

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# ORIGINAL LITERATURE

# THIS WALKING FATHERLY LOVE

Maisie A

A walking bottle of liquor with legs and angry sloppy arms. That's what sloshed up the stairs, angry red thoughts spilling over the sides and staining everything in its way. Swaying up for the metal pole, it's okay. Swaying down with fists of liquid hatred spilling over and drowning, it's okay. Waking you up is what that bottle meant to do, it fell into you. It's okay. Mistaken identity is what those beatings were for, it's okay. As long as you don't face the truth of the bottle containing too much, SO much that it loses balance, tips over the edge, smashes into slivers of glass and bubbling fizzing black hatred. Revealing its real self. Then it's okay. It's okay as long as you stay naive. It's okay as long as you recognise the truths but don't speak them. It makes it real. So the words form at the molars and die at the cusp of lips and incisors. It's okay. You love that angry red and black mess. Just don't say the truth. Who wants that? Put up with the scars and bruises every now and then. Better you than another. "Doesn't make it any better no matter who it is" is a phrase you choose to become deaf to. Anything against that bottle is against you.

Just remember... It's okay.

# LORE OF THE ENDELMENT

Zaec Rayaken Shero

## **Prologue**

*"Grampa," a 7 year old child called out as he readied for bed, "Tell me a story."*

*Grampa chuckled, then knelt down near the right side of the child's bed and said, "Very well! What would you like?"*

*"Tell me one about him again!"*

*"HIM?" The child nodded his head, then Grampa asked, "Are the tales about him your favorites?" The child quickly nodded again as he smiled, then Grampa said, "But he's not a hero."*

*"That's okay, Grampa! I don't mind! There's always a good ending!"*

*"Okay, okay." Grampa cleared his throat a bit, then said, "Our tale begins on a bright and beautiful day, with clear skies and a gentle breeze. A peaceful legion, ruled by a great King and his Adviser, have just discovered two new magical items."*

*"Rekaren Enzar and Rokardric Geiken, huh?"*

*"Yes. However, there were also two engraved stones that were broken from each other. One said 'Power of Illume'. The other said 'Power of Darkness'. For nearly three days the King, his Adviser and a few of the followers, examined these items, finding only a small few could wield the magical creations of the Gods. One being the King's best of warriors!" Grampa leaned slightly towards the child and continued, "But one night, just like tonight, a dark storm blew in from the south. But this... was not any normal storm. It was a blackened cloud, filled with vile energy and hateful thunder as it struck with heartless rage!"*

*"It was Shadow!" the child said, "Wasn't it?!"*

*"Correct! Shadow's storm flew over to shroud the land! He got the King's followers to tremble in fear with his awesome might! As Shadow hovered above, he called out in a dark and twisted voice, 'I challenge this world's greatest fighter to stand before me! If not, I shall destroy all of what you have created!" Grampa then motioned away from the child as he continued, "But the King and his best warrior, no matter what fearsome powers Shadow had, stood courageously against his authority! Yet they knew they had to make a decision. Trusting him, the King called for his warrior to combat against Shadow's evil! As the warrior stepped forth to fight, Shadow formed a physical body from the angry clouds and stood against him. Once he had—"*

*The child quickly sat up and asked, "Is he still that evil fox, Grampa?! The King of Darkness?!"*

*Grampa smiled as he replied, "Of course! But don't worry!" He then stood up and motioned to place the covers back onto his grandson. As the child*

*laid back down, Grampa said, "Now just relax and let me continue with the story." He pulled a wooden chair over to sit down, then continued, "Shadow, in his massively tall nine-tailed fox form, towered over the mighty warrior. He stared down with his hateful and vicious fire-red eyes as he said 'If you can best me, I shall leave. If you cannot, you shall become my slave!' Since the warrior was only planning to serve his great King and no other, he felt he could not lose! The two clashed brilliantly against each other! They fought valiantly as the storm hovered above, lighting up the area with every strike they gave! But alas, the brave warrior could not stand against Shadow's fearsome powers. He was defeated, yet not destroyed. Once having bested his foe, Shadow commanded his new servant to bring forth his greatest and lost creation of destruction."*

*"You're not telling him another one of those dumb fairytales again, are you?" a man asked, standing at the child's bedroom doorway.*

*The child quickly sat up to look over at the man and barked, "Go away, big brother! Grampa's trying to tell a story!"*

*"Hmph. Whatever."*

*Grampa glanced over to watch as the man walked away, then he turned back to his grandson. As the child laid back down, Grampa said, "That wasn't very nice."*

*"Big brother's a jerk!"*

*"Alright then, alright. Let's just forget about him for now."*

*The child glanced up at Grampa and said, "Please continue with the story, Grampa."*

*Grampa smiled and continued, "When the King found even his greatest of fighters was defeated by Shadow, he turned to his Adviser to figure out what to do with the two magical items. The Adviser suggested that they switch the two before the warrior could reach the inner sanctum, in hopes that using the wrong item might destroy Shadow. Fooled by the King and his Adviser's antics, the possessed warrior took the wrong weapon and scurried off from the castle. He was forced to call forth a blackened blade, capable of destroying anything in its path, and rampage the Kingdom. He became the Ender of All Elements within the land; The Endelment! An unstoppable monster!"*

*"Then what happened, Grampa?"*

*"Then... something changed. Having nearly conquered the Kingdom, the warrior was broken free from Shadow's vile grasp. The sword he held was no longer a tool of death. It was now as it should have been... a key!"*

*"A key, Grampa?"*

*"Yes! But not just any ordinary key. This key called forth yet another powerful being! Someone who could stand against Shadow's might! However, it had to act as if it was Shadow's magical weapon to fool him. So that the one it called forth may have a chance in defeating the King of Darkness. When all seemed lost, a ray of hope shined from just within the magical instrument. Before Shadow could stop her coming, Light took hold of the warrior's body and for a small time changed it into her true form. Light was a magnificent creature, whose aura shined through Shadow's Darkness. The Queen of*

*Illume!"*

*"Wow!"*

*"Having seen enough of what Shadow had done to a race of beautiful mortals, Light used her powers and forced the dark one back into his horrid realm, where she hoped he was to never be seen again. But even having been banished, Shadow's last words were 'I shall return!' Once gone, Light vanished from sight as well, having to take the warrior to her realm. The Kingdom was safe once more. So long as the King kept the weapons hidden and apart from each other, they had nothing to fear. And so, waiting until Shadow might bring forth his evil once more, the King told his warriors to keep only one by their side, hiding the other as if it never existed. They hoped that this act would be final and may one day bring peace to their world. The End."*

*As Grampa motioned to exit his grandson's room, the child called out, "Grampa!"*

*He stopped and turned to face the child as he asked, "Yes?"*

*"What if Shadow really does come back?"*

*Grampa chuckled as he motioned back to sit near the child's bedside and replied, "If that were to happen, I want you to promise me something. Can you do that?" The child nodded his head, then Grampa continued, "If the Darkness does ever appear, this you must remember. There is a time in life when you will have to make an impossible choice, even if that choice... can only be led by hope. Never give up. Never give in. Promise me that." The child nodded his head one last time, then turned onto his left side as he fell asleep. Grampa stood up to motion out, smiling as he said, "Goodnight, Ray."*

## **Chapter**

Noon on some goddamn Monday... I hate Mondays!

I was sitting at a table outside a fast food restaurant that didn't have one of those plastic umbrellas set up to protect you from the weather. 'Course, I didn't care. The rain felt good pattering against my body. Sooths the soul.

I sat with my right foot on my left knee and my back to the entrance of the restaurant. I was pondering about something Grampa Jhijecu Shero had said to me long ago, before he disappeared. All I had with me was a small cup filled with soda from the restaurant and my loyal servant, Wolf, who sat at my right side.

She was a light skinned Arctic Wolf Alykenz with her heart set only on serving and worshiping me, which I thought was a bit weird since I allowed her freedom when she was given to me by Father. It was harsh, but I meant it.

Her wolf ears were slightly bigger than normal and three times sharper at hearing. Her magenta eyes could see three times greater than normal wolves, while they had a great shine to them. Her nose looked Cexan, but she could smell much better than any ordinary



wolf. Her teeth and jaw muscles were as strong as a wolf's, with her fangs being as sharp as a razor. Trust me, I know! For some reason, she painted her claws magenta, which sparkled slightly. But as pretty as they were, she could tear through steel like thin paper with them. Once again, trust me, I know! And, of course, she had a cute fluffy tail to show off that was as long as her smooth legs.

However, at the time that we were on Earth, Wolf needed to be incognito. So I asked her to turn herself into her alternate full wolf form, where she had an inch and a half width magenta dog collar around her neck. The collar had a platinum dog tag on it that was an inch and a half around and said 'Wolf' on both sides in cursive.

Sitting in the rain, irritated at the fact that she was both getting wet and in her full animal form, Wolf asked, "My Lord? Why is it when we go to fast food restaurants you only get a small soda, when you can easily get an eight or 24 pack of canned soda at one of the markets around here?"

I looked over to see Wolf keep herself facing out towards the road that led up to the restaurant, speaking to me with a blank expression and had her ears bent down as if upset. She hated sitting in the rain, but she felt it necessary not to ask me to sit somewhere else.

"Not only that, but you don't even think to get any kind of food."

"Why?" I asked as I went to stare out into the street with her, every now and then watching a car go by, "You hungry?"

Wolf shook herself a bit to get some of the rain off, then said, "It just seems a little... overrated. Plus, you know I don't like having to look like this, I feel... exposed."

"Exposed? How so?"

"Indecent, My Lord."

I glanced over at her, confused, where I noticed that she had placed her tail in between her legs. After I realized what she meant, I said, "Oh... Well, right now..." I looked around to see if there were any Humans nearby, then I continued to watch out towards the road as I said, "There isn't anybody around, only a few of them looking at us from inside the restaurant. So you can run over to the car and get your hat to cover your ears."

"Another thing, My Lord. Right now, we could be warm and dry if we were in the car, or possibly in the restaurant. But instead, you wish to be out here."

"Is that a bad thing?" I asked with a slight smile, glancing back over at her, "You know they won't let you in there like that."

Wolf looked over at me for a few seconds, still very irritated, then she turned back towards the road as she sighed. Depressed, she replied, "No, My Lord. Never mind."

It was obvious that Wolf was upset at the fact that she had to stay outside with me, knowing that I loved this so-called “bad weather”. Yet she really could do what she wants, so I had no idea why she was still staying with me. She also knew that whenever the weather was like this, I tend to stay outside all day. But I felt bad for making her sit outside with me, which I'm sure was what she wanted. Even so, I decided to forget about staying out and see how I could make her happy. She deserved it.

“Come on, Wolf.” I said, gently petting her head with my right hand, “What do you want to do?”

She sniggled as she gave a light smirk, then asked, “Did I make you feel bad, My Lord?”

Just then, I thought, (DAMN, she did it again! I hate it when she pulls off crap like that, just to make me feel bad! Oh well...).

Without expressing what I thought, I calmly replied, “A little.”

Wolf sniggled some more and said, “Good.” She then quickly jumped down and walked behind me as she said, “I'll meet you in the car.” When I turned to see her walking away, she said, “I want to go to the library for a bit.”

With that, I thought, (Damn it! I knew today was going to be a bad day—I just knew it! Of all the places, it had to be a library! Why doesn't she observe Humans the way I do?! Just watch them as they live their lives! She doesn't have to read about them! At least observing them would keep us from having to be near them... much! Fucking Humans! I HATE THEM!!).

I despise Humans, every single one! They make me want to puke out my guts! Especially when they keep making things more and more complicated for THEMSELVES!! It's very irritating and annoying! I hate Humans! With every fiber of my being, I absolutely DESPISE them! I can't even stand to talk to them, or even look at them! I may respect all living things, like Mother had taught me, but I just hate Humans! Mainly for their stupidity. I wish them all a most painful death!

Irritated at what Wolf suggested, I quickly drank my soda and threw it away, yet I missed the garbage can by about half a foot. Humans do it, why can't I?! I turned to my left towards the parking lot and two Humans came out from the restaurant, both female and whispering into each other's ears as they cautiously walked towards me. I didn't know why, but I was sure it was because of me sitting out in the rain that they wanted to ask me something. However, I wasn't in the mood to deal with them. Before I reached the street into the lot, one of the Humans called out to me.

“Excuse me, sir!” she called out, “Can we ask you something?!”

I don't know what possessed me, but I stopped just at the curb as I turned my head slightly to my left and looked down at the ground.

I then quietly spoke through my teeth and said to myself, “Son-of-a-bitch! My Monday pain just kicked in!”

I turned to face them just as they got within three feet of me. I don't know why I even bothered trying to talk to them, I should have just kept on walking. They're Humans, they're used to being shunned. They do it to themselves—in a way. 'Course, I had already stopped in my tracks. So, in trying to scare the two away, I made my expression seem angry and moved my head up to stare down at them with a fierce gaze when I turned around.

Once the two Humans got close, the dark brunette one quickly stopped and stepped behind her friend. However, the blond one was a little more courageous and got up to stand just about a foot away from me. She looked directly up into my eyes and said, “Whoa! That's awesome!”

“What?” I bluntly asked.

“Your eyes, man! The color of them is pretty much glowing red!”

“That's because my eyes ARE glowing!” I said, “They're shining, to be correct, and they're blood red, to be precise. Now what's the question? I'm in a hurry.”

Both of the girls looked at me, confused, then at each other as if they didn't have a clue of what to say. The blond one, courageous as she was, seemed like an idiot, and the other, of course, was too afraid to do anything—except stare.

They both looked young, about 18 to 20, had skinny jeans, tight shirts, jackets with fake fur inside, and those weird shoes with graffiti on them. All of that, to me, looked like crap. It only made me want to ask how they move with it or how they got it on in the first place. I hate those clothes!

The blond didn't seem cold but she was holding a black umbrella over herself and her friend in her right hand. The brunette, however, was almost the opposite. She was shivering like crazy and seemed frozen to the bone. Ironically, the brunette looked the same as her friend but with no makeup and two small gold circular earrings on each ear. That made me laugh a bit inside!

The two Humans whispered to each other, then turned to face me again.

“Sorry about that.” the blond one said as she smiled, “I'm Amber, and my friend here is Jewel.”

Jewel gave a quick wave with her left hand and said, “Hi.”

“I'm Zaec.” I said, putting my right hand out for a handshake, “Zaec Shero.”

When I put my hand towards Amber, she said she doesn't usually shake hands, then when I turned to Jewel, she got scared and stepped back behind her friend. Whatever!

“What is it?” I asked, “I thought when you introduced

yourselves, you're to shake hands with one another?"

Amber gave a quick laugh and said, "Where did you come from, the 17th century?! Hardly anybody does that anymore. And the few that do hardly ever do it either."

With that, I slowly pulled my hand away and tightened it into a fist, becoming angry as I said, "Alright then." I then turned back towards the lot to head for my car as I said, "Forget it! You two can piss off!"

Just as I started walking, I heard Amber apologizing to call me back as she followed me, while Jewel followed her. She didn't even try to speak, so I guessed she was just following Amber to try and stop her.

I couldn't believe what had happened! I was not only insulted by some mere peasant, I was insulted by a Human! I swear, that bitch was blessed by The Creator himself—or something—because she was lucky as hell that I let her live! It took every ounce of my wellbeing to not just straight up beat the living shit out of her! Not even the fact that other people were watching and could have exposed who or what I was would have stopped me!

About three feet to my car, I felt Amber grab my right arm and try to pull me back. Instead, in her failed effort to stop me herself, I stopped and stood still as she tripped by, actually pulling herself forward and plunging herself towards the front of my car. She tried to use her umbrella to stop herself, but broke it, only continuing to fall forwards onto my car.

"Oh shit!" she quickly said, just barely able to throw her hands out to brace herself against the hood. She then stood up and asked herself, "What the hell?!" Afterwards, she quickly turned around and pointed her right finger at me and yelled, "What the HELL is your problem?!!" Jewel immediately stopped right behind me just as Amber started yelling. She gasped a little and tried to whisper to her friend to stop, but Amber just continued with, "What, you think you're the fuckin' President of the United States—or something?! All I wanted to know was why you were out here in the freezing rain! But you're too much of a stubborn jackass and a stuck-up prick, apparently, to talk to!"

Slightly confused, yet unmoved by her angry and idiotic choice of words, I glanced over into the passenger side of my car to see Wolf in her Half State smiling and slowly shaking her head as she watched the Human yell at me. I then looked back over at Amber as she continued.

"And another thing you should know about yourself! The way you dress makes you look like a fuckin' serial killer!"

"And?" I calmly asked, "What about it?"

"My God, dude!" she said calming down a bit, putting her right

hand on her forehead as she shook her head slightly, "You have got to be joking!"

"What?!" I asked, becoming impatient as I stepped my right foot towards her, "What is it?!" Out of the corner of my eyes I saw Wolf quickly jump out and run in between Amber and me just as I yelled, "Tell me or I WILL bash your skull into the hood of my car!!"

Wolf quickly pushed both of her hands lightly against my chest as she said, "Ray, enough!" She then quietly said, "She's not worth it. Let it go." It took me a minute but I finally calmed down and took a step back from Amber. Wolf lowered her hands to hold my right hand as she turned to look over her left shoulder to the Human and said, "Leave now! The situation's only going to get worse if you stay!"

Too bad Wolf forgot to get her hat before she stepped out of my car. Amber was slightly surprised as she looked up at Wolf's ears. I also glanced over my right shoulder to see that Jewel seemed almost petrified with her wide open eyes staring at the ears too.

"Who are you guys?" Jewel asked.

"More like; what are you guys?" Amber corrected as she reached up for the ears with her left hand. She then stopped herself from touching them and asked, "Can I...?"

Wolf hesitated a little, yet responded by quickly shaking her head. In doing so, she put her ears as far down and back as she could. She didn't want to respond with words because she was afraid to expose her fangs as she had with her ears, even though it didn't matter at that point. As Amber slowly pulled her hand away, Wolf turned towards the Human but stepped back until she had pushed herself up against me, trying to cover up her tail.

Once Amber placed her hand down, she quickly examined Wolf and asked, "Aren't you cold?"

It was a good question for a Human, but it was a bit stupid to me. Wolf was never affected by the weather, no matter how bad it was.

She wore skintight white leather short-shorts, with her black thong barely showing above it in the back and a hole for her tail to hang out. She had a small skintight white tank-top, with thin straps that went over her shoulders and crossed at her upper back with her black bra straps showing slightly next to them. She had white three inch high heels that had eight straps that went over the top of her feet, with one strap that went around the top of her heels. As a servant to the Shero family, being MY personal servant, Wolf had black weight training gloves as well. And even in her Half State, Wolf had her collar tightly strapped around her neck—the only piece of clothing that stayed within both of her forms.

She had a slightly skinnier than average size body and stood about five feet, eight inches tall. Her hair was neon white and styled to hang straight down the sides of her head to her mid neck.

Wolf responded to Amber's question by shaking her head again and said, "I'm used to it." She then turned her head slightly to her right and quietly said, "Sorry, My Lord."

I gently put my hands on Wolf's shoulders and moved my mouth closer to her right ear, while keeping my eyes on Amber and whispered, "It's okay, Wolf. Just get back in the car." She nodded as I removed my hands and looked around to see if anyone else was watching. Once I saw that there was no one else, I lightly pushed Wolf with my right hand to edge her forward.

Wolf quickly walked around the Human and opened the left side car door and quickly slammed it shut as she sat down, with Amber just keeping herself still when the Alykenz walked by.

I moaned, irritated that two Humans had found out about Wolf, then I motioned for Jewel to move in front of me. Just as the Humans were next to each other, I grabbed my right hand pistol from under my left arm, then jerked it down to open the revolver as I inspected it and said, "I'm sorry I have to do this."

Amber and Jewel quickly looked at each other in fear, then back at me terrified as Amber asked, "What do you mean?! You're not going to kill us, are you?!"

I laughed a little as I leaned myself back slightly, while jerking my hand up to latch my pistol. Then as I motioned to face them again, I placed my pistol back into its holster and said, "That's one of the options I can give you, but I'm sure Wolf would hate me if I did that to two simple Humans. I was actually going to say: You can either forget what you just saw and pretend that this whole thing never happened. OR, you can come with us and have to live by our etiquettes. Which is it?"

Amber sat there for a minute looking at the ground pondering, while Jewel whispered to her about what they should do. A few seconds passed and Amber looked over at her friend and started to argue a little. After about four minutes, they came to an agreement and looked back at me as they both simultaneously said, "Go with."

I stared at both of them, confused and a little surprised, as I asked, "Are you sure?"

Amber nodded her head and said, "Yeah. As long as you answer some questions about yourself when we ask."

I gave them a smirk and said, "Okay. Get in then."

I walked around my car to the right side where the driver seat was, it set up that way because I was mostly right handed with just about everything that doesn't have to do with combat. So, in case you were wondering, yes. I do drive with only one hand.

I knew it wasn't going to be so easy dealing with Humans. I knew THAT day was going to be a bad day. I seriously HATE Mondays...

If you want more, check out [blackbrigade.com](http://blackbrigade.com) . If you wish, please like us on FaceBook and Deviantart. Thank you!

# THE MANNEQUIN LEAD

Chicoguardian2  
of <http://Chicoguardian2.deviantart.com>

See the curtains rise!  
The show is about to begin!

[Applaud]

Here are your gods  
Your makers  
The dealers at hand  
Those who hold the the all-mighty pen  
To draw and write entire landscapes

They come in peace.  
[Applaud]

And let us say our grace and preach our solutions,  
For we are in bad times; we fall like flies.  
Don't worry be happy. It's under control.  
We just need your tax dollars to fix this  
It will trickle-down later.

Down  
Down (echos)  
Down (echos)

Everyone will work together somehow.  
Its only a matter of time  
We must save the banks, the CEOs, Save big business

We must save the people.  
They are corporations too.  
Lets cut taxes and save.

Save  
Save (echos)

Lets tax the rich!  
Put more towards our healthcare.  
If we don't have people to run our government then who will?  
OUR people need us



THEY Need to be cared for  
Jobs are need to be created to make OUR money flow

Lets take back the country!

{Deafening applause}

{The curtains close and the show is done}

That was great practice Mr. Congressman  
This will surely feed our audience the message!  
Addictive as tobacco, haunting as the nightmares.  
These will be our masks that will speak to the outside world  
Conveying our inner-desires for the world to see  
While the people are blinded by the facts and the fights  
We will watch the green river flow!

# Q AND A: THE FREELANCER

## 55 HOURS AND COUNTING

Ambiguous-Catharsis  
of <http://Ambiguous-Catharsis.deviantart.com>

### **2. What is your contact protocol?**

Well, that all depends on who's initiating the contact. If the Agency wants to talk to me, most likely I'll open the door to my apartment and find my handler sitting on my couch with a glass of bourbon in his hand. Their security measures regarding "Loki" are slim to nonexistent. Anyone who could be a threat knows who I am, and while this sounds terribly egotistical, they know better than to do anything to hurt my handler.

I am not a bourbon person. I'm more of a Jack-on-the-rock, vodka-with-a-twist-of-lime kind of girl. The first time he showed up, Tom Bradley got lucky, because it was right after Christmas and I still hadn't thrown away the bottle of bourbon my landlord had given me.

I turned on the lights because the bastard was sitting there alone in the dark. I actually saw his pupils contract. Then he smiled and raised the tumbler at me and said, "Evening, Price."

Something clicked and I blinked and then I was holding Bradley against the wall by his collar, the glass of bourbon upside-down on the floor with the alcohol seeping into my carpet. Since I'm all for giving credit where credit is due, I'll admit that he looked completely calm. The only giveaway was the little tick of his pulse on the side of his neck, way too fast for him to be as collected as he looked.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I hissed, and yes, I *hissed*, the words coming out through clenched teeth. I think I may have shoved him against the wall again, a little harder, just for good measure.

Looking almost bored, he tried to push my hands away. "I think this is unnecessary."  
I didn't budge. "Well I don't. It's not exactly trust-inducing to walk into my house and find someone already there. So I'll repeat the question: what the hell are you doing here?"

Bradley looked put-out, but he sighed and nodded. “Can we at least talk like civil human beings instead of interrogator and interrogated?”

I untangled my hands from his shirt and turned away, picking up the tumbler and carrying it into the kitchen. I set in down on the counter and braced my hands on either side of the sink. “Sorry about the suit.”

Bradley didn’t even looked at the rumpled mess that was his shirt and blazer. “Not a problem.” He grinned. “Honestly, I expected to walk out of here with a black eye or a broken rib.”

Reaching down under the sink, I came up with a bottle of carpet cleaner and a rag. “You would have gotten both and worse if you’d touched my Crystal Skull.” He laughed, and I smirked, but I also ignored him when he offered to clean up the spill, because that was just a tad too domestic for me. “I’m going to assume you didn’t just show up to drink my alcohol and commandeer my couch.”

He stuck his hands in his pockets and shook his head. “We’ve got a job for you, Price.”

Now, if I want to contact him, there is a set protocol. I was given his phone number and told I could call between the hours of 8 and 5 Eastern time, but as much as I’d like it to, my job doesn’t fit into any set hours.

So it wasn’t original, but it was 2 a.m., and I’d been awake for 55 hours and counting. I wasn’t trying to be original. I was trying to get Bradley the information I had collected before it expired and became useless. So I snuck into his house.

Maybe I went too far when I stumbled into his bedroom and turned on the light, but the look on his face as he scrambled to find his gun was priceless. My sleep-deprived brain found it hilarious, and then I was on the floor, shaking with laughter while Bradley pointed a Sig Sauer at me, looking confused and irritated and sleepy, but definitely not threatening.

We both have keys to each other’s places now, because having a key is easier than picking a lock every time we want to talk to each other. I have a permanent stash of bourbon in my cupboard, and Bradley has taken to stocking vodka. It’s not Crystal Skull, but hey, I’m not complaining. We’re probably breaking about a dozen “fraternization” rules, and if I was an actual Agency employee, we’d both be fired several times over. But I’m not.

And to whoever reads these: yes, I have been writing the bourbon off as a business expense. Cheers.

# NEW AGE OF HEROES

## FINALE - CHAOS

SaviorToFew  
of <http://SaviorToFew.deviantart.com>

They flew to the edge of the world, the Void, an area of evil surrounded by a black wall. They landed and walked through the barrier.

It looked similar to the Realm of Death, but all that was there was Chaos' Castle and a path to it. They walked to it, and inside was a giant throne room. Chaos said, "Finally, you arrived. I can end this silly quest and destroy this pathetic world, along with the Souls of the Gods."

Isalus said, "Souls are eternal, but you won't be." He then brought out the Spear of Retribution.

"That won't do."

Chaos sent an aura of nothing toward Isalus, but it didn't affect him.

"I will destroy you!"

Isalus shouted, "Naminas, flood!"

She stabbed the Trident into the ground and commanded the water to drown Chaos, then Isalus used the North Wind to freeze him. He struggled and couldn't move because Nickolaes had the Souls of the Dead hold Chaos. Isalus threw the Spear, and as the ice shattered, Chaos became mortal.

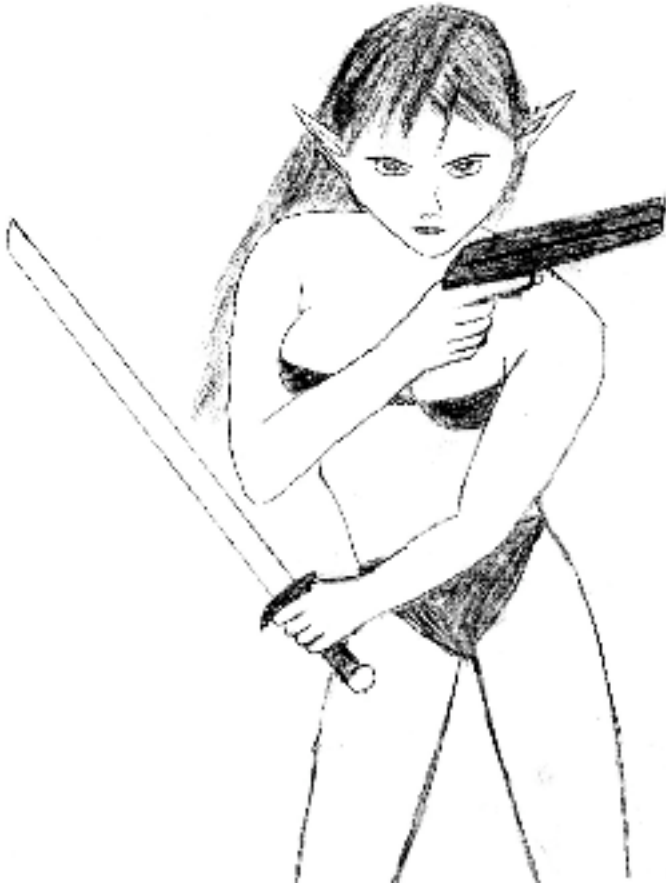
The mortal Chaos said, "My death won't make things normal."

"You're right," said Isalus as his eyes turned white and shocked the mortal to death, "but it's a start."

They left the Void and sealed it off with a wall of lightning. Isalus returned the Souls to the Gods and Titans. Finally peace was restored to the world of myth and legend. After all the Gods restored the land to its previous and glorious state, Isalus was asked by Zeus to be at his side, but he refused and became the Guardian of Athena's Library. Nickolaes became the true God of Darkness and rules the Labyrinth in the Realm of Death. Naminas became the Queen of the Naiads. The Void became a whole different land for others to travel, settle and create new legends.

(Author's Note) I thank you for reading this, and if you want to read the previous chapter, then please go to my Deviantart profile, because i submitted it last issue and it never arrived. Once again thank you, and please read my other stuff.

# FAN FICTION



or: Leanna's Return

# ME<sub>2</sub> HELLDIVER SAGA

## CHAPTER 35: TREASON

Veyron722skyhook  
of veyronmaster722@gmail.com

Austin was a bit concerned that Tali needed something taken care of as well now. It wasn't usually like her.

"Austin. I'm glad you came by. I may need your help." said the Quarian. "I just received a message from the Migrant Fleet. The Admiralty Board has accused me of treason. I'm scared, Austin."

"Nobody who knows you could believe you'd betray your people, Tali." said Austin defensively.

"I don't know. They don't lay charges like this unless the evidence seems absolute. But thanks. I appreciate your faith in me, Austin." said Tali, smiling under her helmet.

"Have they said why it is you've been charged? It couldn't be because you're working with me, could it? I thought the Admiralty Board approved of you to be transferred here." Austin asked.

"Exactly. And no, they didn't say. I have no idea what they're accusing me of. You'd think I would remember if I'd betrayed the Fleet!" Tali replied.

"What happens when a Quarian is accused of treason? Unfortunately, that's not a Quarian tradition I'm familiar with." Austin inquired.

"There's a hearing, with members of the Admiralty Board acting as judges. My father is an admiral on the board. He'll have to recuse himself from judgement. I can't even imagine what he's thinking right now. The punishment for treason is exile. If they convict me, I can never go back." Tali explained.

"So you have no idea why they're accusing you?"

"None. The specifics of charges like this are rarely discussed on open channels. I won't know any more until I get to the flotilla."

"What happens if you're convicted?"

"Like I said, exile. The specifics are up to the judges. If it's deemed only a tragic mistake in judgement, the guilty party might receive a small ship and supplies. Not that it really matters. Either way, if I'm convicted, I'll never see the Migrant Fleet again."

"So no prison, and no death penalty?"

"We don't have the spare resources for long-term incarceration. Monitored work detail is more effective. And we don't have enough people to afford executions. An exile can still have children, and those

children are welcomed back to the fleet."

"How often is someone from the Fleet charged with treason?"

"It's rare. I must be something that affects the entire flotilla, not just one ship. The most recent one was Anora Vanya vas Selani, an engineer who handed over Fleet defence schematics to the Batarians. She had good intentions. The Batarians were contracted to upgrade our systems. But they passed the defence schematics to a pirate gang."

"Was she convicted?"

"No. She made a suicide run on the pirate gang. She destroyed them before they could attack the Fleet. She was pardoned... posthumously. Let's hope I don't have to prove my innocence that way."

"So how does the trial work? How soon do we need to get you there?"

"They'll wait a reasonable period of time for me to come and defend myself. Eventually, if I don't show up, they'll try me in absentia. As for how it works... it's less formal than an Earth trial, or something you'd see on the Citadel. We're family. This is just the worst kind of family meeting."

It was an easy choice for Austin. Sure their mission took priority, but Tali was his friend. Everyone needed to be focused on the mission, and if it was possible he could indeed make that happen, he'd do it.

"Well then, we'd better find the flotilla." he said.

Tali looked momentarily surprised by this. She had not expected Austin to help her completely.

"I was going to book passage on another ship. I didn't think there would be time for you to help. Thank you, Austin." she said gratefully. "I'll program the Normandy with the flotilla's current location. The Admirals will be waiting for us."

The huge fleet could be seen out of the Normandy's windows. It was quite a sight seeing all those ships. It reminded Austin so much of the Helldiver fleet back home on Arkadia.

"This is Tali Zorah vas Neema nar Rayya requesting permission to dock with the Rayya." said Tali.

"Our system has your ship flagged as Helldiver. Please confirm your identity for safety." said the traffic controller.

"After time adrift among open stars, along tides of light and through shoals of dust, I will return to where I began." said Tali.

"Permission granted. Welcome home, Tali Zorah."

"We'd like a security and quarantine team to meet us. Our ship is not clean."

"Understood. Approach exterior docking cradle 17."



Both Tali and Leena were very nervous with Austin's choice of the third squad mate, Legion.

"I don't think it's a good idea to bring a Ge..."

Tali was instantly interrupted when guards immediately pointed their guns right at Legion. Austin was able to push past one of them until he could see their leader, Captain Kar Danna, captain of the Rayya.

"Get that damn thing off my ship before you start an incident that makes the ascension project fiasco with Cerberus look a slow day on garbage detail!" the Captain yelled.

"Look, we're not here to cause problems. This Geth's on our side." said Austin, trying to diffuse the situation.

"Helldivers may be welcome here, but the Geth is too much. Leave it on your ship." said Kar.

"This is your ship and I'm and guest, but Legion is part of my team. Unless you want to shoot me, we're both coming aboard." said Austin.

"Or I could kick you both off." said Kar.

"Your seriously going to do that, Captain Kar Danna?" said Leena as she stepped into view.

Some of the guards stepped back slightly and seemed to murmur to each other. Leena was well known among the Quarians due to her being one of very few Quarian Helldivers.

"Leena vas Penthra. I honestly did not expect to see you here again." said Kar in surprise.

"You know me, Captain. If this Geth gets out of line, I'll kill it myself." said Leena.

"As Tali and Leena's captain I'll also take responsibility for what happens." said Austin.

Kar Danna seemed hesitant for a moment, but finally seemed to see that he was in the minority here.

"Very well. Stand down." he ordered.

The guards did as they were told and stood down.

"I must say though, it is an honour to finally meet you in person, Captain Shepard. Tali told me a lot about you. I wish we could be meeting under more pleasant circumstances." said Kar.

"Actually it's Major now. Technically, I'm also not really a ship captain. I'm a marine." said Austin

"Nevertheless, you're the commander of the Normandy, responsible for the lives aboard it. That entitles you to respect among our people. May you stand between your crew and harm as you lead them through the empty quarters of the stars." said Kar.

"Keelah se'lai. It's an old ship Captain's blessing, Austin." said Tali.

"Thank you. Tali helped the Normandy's crew out of many difficult situations. I'm here to return the favour." said Austin.

"I understand. As the Commander of the vessel she serves on, your voice carries weight. I wish I could do more to help, Tali. The trial requires that I be officially neutral, but... I'm here, if you need to talk." said Kar.

"So what exactly is she charged with?" Austin asked.

"They're charging her with bringing active Geth into the Fleet as part of a secret project." Kar replied.

"That's insane! I never brought active Geth aboard. I only sent parts and pieces." Tali objected.

"You sent Geth materials back to the Migrant Fleet?!" Leena asked, almost in shock.

"Yes. My father was working on a project. He needed the materials. If I sent back something that was only damaged, not permanently inactive... No. No, I checked everything. I was careful." said Tali.

"Technically, I'm under orders to place Tali Zorah under arrest ending the hearing. So, Tali... you're confined to this ship until this trial is over." said Kar.

"Thank you, Captain."

"Preparations got underway as soon as you arrived. The hearing's being held in the garden plaza. Good luck."

The ship's interior seemed to look rather like that of a cargo ship. Although to be fair, that's probably what these ships used to be.

Austin had never seen this many Quarians in one place before. It was quite a sight.

As the group headed towards the plaza, they saw a female Quarian standing there, looking like she was waiting for them.

"Tali Zorah. I am glad you came. I could delay them only so long." she said.

Tali walked up to the Quarian and hugged her.

"Auntie Raan!" she said. "Austin, this Admiral Shala Raan vas Tonbay. She's a friend of my father's."

Leena then stepped forward. Austin had a feeling he was imagining it, but Leena's body language almost seemed to give the impression that she was struggling to think of what to say.

"Do I know you? Shala asked.

"Hello, Mother."

Shala looked shocked by this.

"Leena?!"

Both Quarians walked up to one another and hugged tightly. Shala almost had to stand on her toes due to Leena's Helldiver armour making her much taller than a normal Quarian.

"I thought I'd never see you again. It's been so long. Look at

you, all grown up." said Shala, almost in happy tears at seeing the daughter she hadn't seen since she went away on her pilgrimage.

Austin was left almost speechless. He'd never seen Leena this emotional before. She was always hard core and tough. It never would've occurred to him that the tough as nails Quarian Helldiver would ever have a soft spot. Even today, after 10 years, he was still finding out new things about his squad.

"I'm sorry I never came back. I just..." Leena struggled to say. But Shala stopped her.

"It's okay, sweetheart. You had a duty as a Helldiver. I can respect that. Besides, your name is well known among our people. I'm very proud of you." said the older Quarian proudly.

The two Quarians touched helmets for a moment before finally parting and Leena went back to standing next to Austin.

"Mother?" he asked.

"I never told you my full name. It's Leena Raan vas Penthra. I guess I just sort of stopped using my family name when I left the fleet to become a Helldiver." Leena explained.

"Well, in that case, it's an honor to meet you, Admiral. I've had the privilege of working and fighting alongside your daughter for over 10 years. She's a fine warrior." said Austin, bowing his head in acknowledgement of the mother of one of his squad mates.

"I'm honoured to meet you too, Major Shepard. Tali vas Normandy told me so much about you." said Shala.

"Wait. Raan, you called me "vas Normandy." said Tali.

"I'm afraid I did, Tali. The Admiralty Board moved to have you tried under that name given your departure from the Neema." Shala explained.

"Being associated with a Helldiver ship is a bad sign?" Austin asked.

"They stripped me of my ship name. That's as good as declaring me exiled already." said Tali.

"It's not over yet, Tali. You have friends who still know you as Tali Zorah vas Neema... whatever we must call you legally." said Shala comfortingly.

"You're an admiral. Does that mean you're one of the judges?" Austin asked.

"I'm afraid not. My history with Tali and her father forced me to recuse myself." said Shala.

"I imagine Father had to do the same." said Tali.

"You'll see inside, Tali. For my part, I moderate and ensure that the rules of protocol are followed, but I have no vote in the judgement."

"I guess we should get started. Does Tali have a defence counsellor, someone who speaks for her side?" Austin asked.

"Indeed she does... Major Shepard. She is part of your crew, now, recognized by Quarian law. And remember, an accused is always represented by his or her ship's captain." said Shala.

"So, er... you would actually speak for my defence." said Tali.

Austin hadn't expected this. He'd thought that Tali's real Captain would stand in her defence, not him. Nevertheless, Tali was his friend and he'd do all he could to help her. It never even crossed his mind of saying no.

"I'll do everything within my power to help you, Tali." he said reassuringly.

"As will I as your shipmate and friend." Said Leena.

"Thank you, both of you. I could not ask for better friends." said Tali gratefully.

"Our legal rules are simple. There are no legal tricks or political loopholes for you to worry about. Present the truth as best you can. It will have to be enough. Now come. I promised that I would not delay you." said Shala.

All the other Quarrians either stood out sat down for the hearing. Three Admirals were affiliating as judges and Shala stood above them. As she had said, she simply made sure that it went appropriately, she had little say in the matters.

Despite what he had said, Austin had to admit he was a bit nervous. He'd never done this sort of thing, even with non Quarrians. Leena's presence helped to ease the tension a bit, but only a little. Austin could only hope that his persuasive skills were up to scratch. He was no diplomat, but he'd always managed to find a way to sort things like this out.

"This conclave is brought to order. Blessed are the ancestors who kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season. Keelah se'lai." said Shala.

"Keelah se'lai." the crowd repeated.

"The accused, Tali Zorah vas Normandy, has come with her captain to defend herself against the charge of treason." said Shala.

The three Admirals each had different suit colours which would at least make them easy to tell apart. There were two males, and one female. The female had a black suit, the middle male had a white and red one, and the last one on the right was completely white.

Austin managed to use his suit's database to identify them all. The female was Admiral Daro Xen vas Moreh, the red Admiral Zaal Koris vas Qwib Qwib (a somewhat strange ship name) and the white one Admiral Han Gerrel vas Neema, most likely the captain of the ship Tali had served on before being assigned to the Normandy.

"Security, a Geth is present in the court room. Does Tali Zorah think to affect this hearing with threats?!" said Zaal Koris as he pointed legion out to the crowd, causing some of them to gasp.

"Captain Danna allowed the Geth aboard. Do you intend to second guess the Rayya's captain, Admiral Koris?!" Shala retorted.

"Objection withdrawn."

"Shepard was Normandy, your crew member Tali Zorah stands accused of treason. Will you speak for her?" said Shala.

Austin took a deep breath and stepped forward.

"If it helps Tali, I will." he said.

"I too stand in Tali's defence as her ship mate and friend." said Leena as she stepped forward to stand next to her squad commander "In all fairness though, we shouldn't have to. When Tali helped stop Saren and his Geth army, her actions spoke for themselves. Without her help, none of you would be alive to put her on trial today."

"Well said, Leena Raan. None of us should forget Tali's contributions to the Fleet." said Han Gerrel.

"I also regret that her captain is forbidden to stand at her side today." said Austin defensively.

Zaal Koris seemed to object to this.

"Nobody has been forbidden from anything! It is a simple-

"Lie to them if you must, Zaal Koris, but don't lie to me and expect me to stay silent! The Helldiver is right!" Han Gerrel interrupted.

"Admirals, please. Shepard's willingness to represent Tali Zorah in this hearing is appreciated." said Shala, quickly diffusing the situation before it turned into an argument. "Tali, you are accused of bringing active Geth to the Migrant Fleet. What say you?"

"Tali would never endanger the Migrant Fleet. She pleads not guilty." Said Leena.

"Besides, how could Tali have brought Geth to the fleet while serving on the Normandy?" said Austin.

Admiral Xen, who had so far remained silent, finally spoke.

"To clarify, Shepard, Tali isn't accused of bringing back entire units – only parts that could spontaneously reactivate." she explained.

"But I would never send active Geth to the Fleet! Everything I sent was disabled and harmless!" said Tali defensively. Austin couldn't help but notice however that she was twiddling her fingers nervously. She often did that when nervous.

"Then explain how Geth seized the lab ship where your father was working!" Zaal Koris retorted.

The crowd murmured to one another, which only confused Tali even more.

"What are you talking about? What happened?" she asked.

"As far as we can tell, Tali, the Geth have killed everyone on the Alarei... your father included." said Han Gerrel.

"What? Oh, Keelah..."

"I thought we valued family! How do you justify springing this on

Tali in the middle of a damn trial?!" Leena shouted in anger.

Austin had to admit that Leena frightened him sometimes. In all the time he'd worked with her, he'd never seen her shout like that before. Nor had he seen her this angry. She obviously cared a lot for Tali.

"Our apologies. Tali should have been informed." said Shala.

"I appreciate the need for this trial, Admirals, but right now our first concern must be the safety of the Migrant Fleet. We stand ready to assist in whatever capacity necessary." said Austin.

"Thank you. Quarian strike teams have attempted to retake the ship, so far without success." said Shala.

"Austin, we have to take back the Alarei!" said Tali.

"The safest course would be to simply destroy the ship. But if you are looking for an honourable death instead of exile..." said Zaal Koris.

"I'm looking for my father, you bosh'tet!" Tali yelled.

"You intend to retake the Alarei from the Geth? This proposal is extremely dangerous." said Shala.

"With your permission, Admirals, yes. The good of the Fleet must come first... and Tali needs to find her father." said Austin.

"Agreed. And if you die on this worthy mission, Tali, we will see that your name is cleared of these charges." said Han Gerrel.

"We can discuss that later." said Zaal Koris.

"You think Tali is helping the Geth? Maybe killing a few dozen will prove her loyalty!" said Leena.

"We do not accuse Tali of aiding the Geth cause. We accuse her of carelessness that endangered the Fleet. Zaal Koris retorted.

"Then it is decided. You will attempt to retake the Alarei. You are hereby given leave to depart the Rayya. A shuttle will be waiting at the secondary docking hangar. Be safe, Tali. This hearing will resume upon your return, or upon determination that you have been killed in action." said Shala.

"Thank you for agreeing to take back the Alarei, Austin. The admirals sound sure that my father is already dead, but... I don't know. We won't know anything until we get there. I don't know. We won't know anything until we get there." said Tali.

"How are you holding up? They just threw a lot of fire at you, even before telling you about your father." Leena asked as she put her hand on Tali's shoulder.

"I knew this would be bad, but I guess you're never really prepared to be charged with treason. And my father... I don't know. He could still be alive. They don't know for certain that he's dead. I just don't know, Austin. And I need to find out." said Tali.

"Is there anyone here you want to talk to before we go?" Austin

asked.

"We can talk with the Admirals. It might help us to see what their viewpoints are. But I doubt we'll change anyone's mind by talking to them privately." said Tali.

"Let's go."

"Right. The sooner we get to the Alarei, the sooner we'll know what happened."

"Shepard, the secondary docking hangar is through the Conclave chamber where you are now. The shuttle they have provided is unarmed." said EDI.

"Understood."

"Whatever Geth are on the Alarei have likely built more of themselves. Expect heavy resistance."

Shala was the first one that Tali wanted to talk with. She wanted to know why she had not been told that her father might be dead.

"You set me up, Shala! You told Captain Danna not to say anything?! I don't hear that my father may be dead until I'm in the trial?! Why?" she shouted.

"The admirals needed to hear the shock in your voice, Tali. Otherwise they might not have let you try to retake the Alarei. That is your best chance at recovering evidence that can exonerate you. I'm sorry. We cannot afford sensitivity, Tali." said Shala calmly.

"I know you're trying to help her, mother. But that was over the line." said Leena, somewhat surprised that her mother would do something like that.

"She has nobody else to speak for her, Leena. I'm doing everything in my power. That's what her father would have wanted." said Shala defensively.

"Don't say it like that! He could still be alive on that ship!" said Tali.

"You should get to the Alarei soon. Is there anything else I can tell you?"

"What can you tell us about the Alarei?" Austin inquired.

"Not much, I'm afraid. Rael Zorah only said that he was researching new defence technology." said Shala.

"He told me only that he needed any Geth parts or pieces I found. I assumed he was testing weapons on Geth components." Tali explained.

"We knew nothing until the Alarei sent a distress signal, then went dead. We didn't even know about the Geth until a boarding team was attacked." said Shala.

"You're saying there's no data about the inside of the ship?" Austin asked.

"That's exactly what I'm saying. The marines who survived and escaped saw bodies in the halls. We must assume the worst." said

Shala with regret.

"No. We don't." said Tali.

"How long have you known Tali's family?" Austin asked.

"Since before Rael was an Admiral. 25 or 30 years, I'd guess. I was there when Tali was born. Her mother and I had synched up our suits so we could be in the same open-air room. I was sick for a week, but it was worth it. I was the one who took Tali from her mother and put her in the bubble. She cried so hard." said Shala, her tone of voice giving indications of happiness as she remembered Tali as a young baby.

"I don't understand. You put your children in bubbles?" Austin asked.

"Environmental units. It's a step between relying on the mother's immune system through nursing and getting a suit of one's own." Shala explained.

"The bubbles let parents take their children out of the clean rooms safely. We don't wear suits until adolescence." said Leena.

"There's a celebration when a child gets her first suit. It's a coming of age." said Shala.

"I'm not hearing much about Rael's involvement in Tali's life." said Austin.

"It's difficult to explain. I shouldn't..." said Shala hesitantly.

"It's all right, Aunt Shala. No secrets between shipmates. I think I told Austin about my father." said Tali reassuringly.

"If you say so. Rael was... committed to the Quarian cause. That didn't leave him a lot of time for his family." said Shala. "He wanted to give Tali and her mother the homeworld... or a strong Fleet, at least. That was how he showed his love."

"What kind of evidence will carry weight with the Admirals?" Leena asked.

"Tali, you admitted to sending Geth parts to your father for his project." said Shala.

"Yes. But never anything that could have come back online on its own. I took every possible precaution!" said Tali.

"Then find records of your shipments and the experiments. Something that proves you were careful. Something that proves this is all just a terrible accident that nobody could have foreseen." said Shala.

"There seemed to be some other arguments going on among the Admirals." said Austin.

"You caught that. Yes, the Geth presence makes this a touchy issue. The Admiralty Board is trying to determine whether to focus on colonial development... or attempt to retake the homeworld." said Shala.

"You're thinking of war? With the Geth?" Tali asked in shock.

"I'm not, Tali. But others are." said Shala.



"The Geth situation isn't as simple as you think. Not all of them worship the Reaper Nazara." said Austin.

"I don't think the other admirals would care about that. They want the homeworld back, and they want all Geth destroyed." said Shala.

"Shala, don't you want to see us retake the homeworld?" said Tali.

"I don't think we can, Tali. But it may not be about what I think." said Shala.

"I know the Migrant Fleet is formidable, but even you can't take on the Geth." said Austin.

"We grow tired of wandering the stars, Shepard. We want our world back. We have paid enough for our mistake. I'm not giving you my opinion. I'm telling you which way the wind is blowing." said Shala.

Austin decided that they'd talked enough. There were other Admirals they'd need to talk to and it would be best to do it quickly.

"We should move on." he said.

"Good luck on the Alarei." said Shala.

The next Admiral they spoke to was Han Gerrel. He seemed to be on their side in this trial, so it would be a good idea to speak with him.

"Tali! I'm glad Admiral Raan got you leave to hit the Alarei. Hopefully you'll find something that clears your name." said the Admiral.

"I'm more concerned with finding my father, Admiral." said Tali.

"I wish you luck. Blow up some Geth on the way." said Gerrel. He then turned to Austin. "And you're Major Shepard? Admiral Han Gerrel vas Neema. You've got Admiral Koris backing up worse than a Krogan toilet. I'm glad Tali's captain knows how to handle a court room. And Leena, watching you rail away at Koris like that... Tali's in good hands."

"I get the sense you're inclined to believe the defence. I'm glad one of the judges is." said Leena.

"If you were only giving Rael inactive equipment for weapons tests, I've got no problem. We need to test weapons against Geth material. I know you and your father. You put too much of yourselves into this fleet to do anything to jeopardize our safety. And you're both smart enough not to make mistakes like the ones they're saying you made." said Gerrel to Tali.

"Can you tell me anything about the Alarei?" Austin asked.

"Nothing good. We sent some of our best marines into that hellhole. Damn few made it back. Whatever Rael was doing, it blew up in his face. The ship is crawling with Geth. Don't go in expecting survivors." said Gerrel.

"Admiral! My father – your friend – is on that ship!" Tali retorted.

"I know that, Tali. But if Shala hadn't suggested you might volunteer, we'd already have destroyed the Alarei. That's where we stand." said Gerrel.

"You and Tali's father go back a long way?" Austin asked.

"We served together on the gunship Yaska during a bad Batarian raid. We were kids, serving pre-pilgrimage as trainees. A crew of ten, and six were dead. Kinetic barriers were down. Rael and I were alone on the bridge and the Batarians had drawn off a tramp freighter." said Gerrel.

"Did you save the freighter?" Austin asked.

"Our ship was under orders to hold position, but Rael looked at me and said "We're underage. They can't charge us for breaking formation." He took the helm, I took weapons, and we brought that freighter back. The crew called us heroes. Brass called us idiots. They slapped medals on our suits and kicked us off to pilgrimage a bit earlier than expected. That's Rael for you." said Gerrel.

"Can you tell about the other Admirals? Anything that might help me change their minds about Tali?" Austin asked.

"The one you didn't recognize, Tali, is Admiral Xen. She's on the fence. She takes Fleet safety very seriously. On the other hand, she's always been in favour of studying the Geth. I hope she sees the benefits of Rael's research. Admiral Koris is the same whining suit-wetter he always was." said Gerrel.

"You disagree with Admiral Koris' policies, I'm guessing? Or is it personal?" Leena asked.

"The man is a damn Geth apologist. Thinks we were wrong to try and destroy them centuries ago. He wants us to search for new colony possibilities instead of taking back the homeworld. Any research on the Geth makes him angry. You don't have much of a chance with him, I'm afraid." said Gerrel.

"It sounds like we're dealing with more politics than just Tali binging back equipment." said Austin.

"You noticed that, did you? Tali's father wasn't just running weapons tests on the Geth for fun. He was looking for something to give us the edge when we attack the Geth in full-scale war." said Gerrel.

"I know father wanted to retake the homeworld someday, but are we that close?" Tali asked.

"I don't know, kid. We almost had the vote. We just need to give people hope for victory." said Gerrel.

"I hope the Quarrians find someplace to live, Admiral, but it sounds like you're playing with fire." said Austin.

"We're too comfortable now, Shepard. We've got the largest

fleet in the galaxy, and we just ride around doing nothing." said Gerrel.  
"We might need that fleet to help fight the Reapers, Admiral."  
said Tali.

"Then we need a world to shelter our non-combatants while we do it." Gerrel quickly replied.

"Thanks for the information." said Austin.

"Hang in there, kid." said Gerrel.

"Thank you, Admiral." said Tali.

Admiral Koris was the next Admiral they decided to speak to.

"Judging by your ability to play to a crowd, Helldiver, I have done Tali a favour by stripping "vas Neema" from her name." he said.

"Major Shepard, this is Admiral Zaal Koris vas QwiB-Qwib. Do not ask about the name." said Tali. She didn't seem very fond of Koris.

"I take no pleasure in this, Tali, truly. But you have gravely endangered and dishonoured our fleet." said Koris.

"What exactly is your problem with my friend, Admiral?" Leena asked crossly.

"I respect Tali immensely. Her actions against Saren are to be lauded. But like her father, she wants nothing but the destruction of the Geth... the people we created. The people we wronged." said Koris.

"The Geth drove us from our homeworld!" Tali objected.

"Of course they did. We tried to kill them." said Koris.

"You and the other Admirals appear to have some disagreements beyond Tali's trial." said Austin.

"You are correct. Tali, I apologise for it being brought into your proceedings." said Koris. "The other Admirals are pushing for war. Rael Zorah was researching new weapons to use against the Geth. They would see our fleet destroyed in the skies over our homeworld rather than find a new colony and adapt."

"Can the Quarians coexist with the Geth after all your history?" Austin asked.

"I don't know. We all deserve to find out. They are our children, Shepard. We have all done horrible things to each other, but it has to end. For both groups. That is why I cannot sanction whatever experiments you helped enable, Tali Zorah. I believe this message needs to be sent." Koris replied.

"I understand, Admiral. I do not agree with you, but I understand." said Tali.

Austin then turned to Legion.

"Do you think the Geth would be willing to accept a truce with the Quarians, Legion?" he asked.

"We did not seek hostilities with creators. We fought for continued existence." replied the Geth.

"So your people would be open to peace?" Koris asked.

"Not without additional data that suggests coexistence is possible or desirable for creators. When the creators have believed victory is possible, they have attacked us 100 percent of the time." Legion replied.

"I understand. It would be difficult to argue for peace when faced with odds like those. That does not mean the argument should not be made." said Koris.

"We should move on."

"Goodbye, Tali Zorah. Be well."

"I'm surprised to hear you say that." said Tali in surprise.

"I don't hear you, Tali. I just think your father's plans for war were wrong." said Koris.

Austin noticed that Xen was on the other side of the room and so he and the others went to speak with her. As they did however, they saw a very familiar face. Veetor! He was in the company of a Quarian doctor who was obviously caring for him while he slowly recovered from the trauma he'd endured on Freedom's Progress.

"Shepard? How did you get onto the Rayya?" he asked in surprise.

"Shepard is here to help me with my trial." said Tali.

"Oh, yes. I heard about that. I hope you didn't really do what they said you did." said Veetor.

"No, Veetor. I would never endanger the Fleet." said Tali.

"Oh. Well, good. So, can I help you with anything? I mean, probably not but – you helped me." said Veetor.

He sounded a lot less nervous than before and it looked as though he was doing much better. It was nice to see that he was at least recovering slowly but surely.

"Tali could use some friends right now. Would you be willing to tell the Admirals how she helped you?" Austin asked.

"No! I mean, yes, but I already did! They came to see me. I didn't want to talk in a crowd." said Veetor nervously.

"Veetor is doing well, but he isn't ready for a public speech just yet." said the doctor.

"I talked to them. So did that soldier, Kal Reegar. We both told them about how you helped us. I hope it helped." said Veetor.

"I'm sure it did, Veetor. Thank you." said Tali.

Austin felt it best not to ask him about the Collectors. He didn't want bring back any bad memories. Austin also didn't think that Veetor could tell them anything new that they didn't already know now.

"Take care of yourself, Veetor. Not many could have gone through what you did and come out sane." he simply said.

"I know. I didn't. But thank you, Major. It's only because of your help that I've come this far." said Veetor gratefully.

Tali then saw another familiar Quarian wearing a red suit with a black visor.

"Kal Reegar!"

"Shepard, Tali Zorah. Good to see you both. Wish it were under better circumstances." said the soldier.

"What did they get from our readings?" Tali asked.

"Damnedest thing. It's just like they said. No way the sun on Haestrom should have been acting that way." Reegar replied.

"So that dark energy theory is right? That's troubling." said Tali.

"Can't really comment on that, ma'am. I just shoot things." said Reegar.

"How've you been, Reegar? You took kind of a beating on Haestrom." Austin asked.

"Physical damage wasn't bad. I was down for about a week with infection, though. Figure I got off easy. I don't have to face those Admirals." said Reegar.

"With your immune systems, it couldn't be easy for Quarians to fight a war. You'd lose more people to infection than injury." said Austin.

"We can't afford a frontline attack, that's for sure. Have to fight smart - ideally from orbit." said Reegar.

"We do have stockpiles of antibiotics. It's not as though everyone would die from a single shot." said Tali.

"No, Shepard's right. You've only seen our strike ops, Tali. Don't have all the fancy equipment to a frontline fight. Supplies get strained, things get ugly fast." said Reegar.

"What are you doing aboard the *Rayya*? It sounds like you gave your report to the Admiralty already." Austin asked curiously.

"I, ah, stayed to argue that charges against Tali Zorah. I've served with her, and she deserves better than what she's getting." said Reegar admittedly.

"Thanks, Kal." said Tali gratefully.

"Just stating facts, ma'am." said Kal, bowing his head slightly.

"Have you had any luck talking to the Admiralty Board?" Austin asked.

"Admiral Raan asked my opinion about the Geth, since I'd fought on Haestrom. She and Admiral Gerrel are hoping you'll kill a bunch of Geth to get the crowd on your side, then find evidence to clear your name. They were hesitant, but, well, you didn't have many other options, ma'am. I recommended getting you onto the *Alarei*. I hope you can handle it." said Reegar.

"You did the right thing. Thank you." said Tali.

"You said your mission had something to do with Dark Energy." Austin inquired.

"Right. Remember that damn sun on Haestrom? Shorted out

everything, way too much radiation? The sun's getting old... only it's not." "Dark energy. It's reducing the mass of the star's interior. Techs are worried." Reegar explained.

"Do you think the Geth are responsible for what's happening to Haestrom's sun?" Austin asked.

"Keelah, I hope not. If they can screw up a star, our chances in a war are even worse than I thought." said Reegar.

"I don't think this is the Geth. It would take massive time and resources to affect a star like this deliberately. It's too inefficient to be a weapon, and even the Geth wouldn't destroy a useful star system. Besides, they didn't show up until we did." said Tali.

"Hope you're right, ma'am. Synthetic bastards are bad enough as it is." said Reegar.

"What does the dark energy build-up mean? Is it something we should worry about?" Austin asked.

"Sorry, Shepard. I don't know what it means. Just that it has the scientists worried." said Reegar.

"Hopefully it's isolated, some rare phenomenon. If dark energy can destabilize solar material... Probably not something to worry about now, but resources in this galaxy are scarce enough without stars suddenly going dead." said Tali.

"Some days I think flying around in the Fleet without a planet of our own is the right idea." said Reegar.

Austin felt it best they move on.

"We should get going." he said.

"Good luck on the Alarei. Stay safe out there." said Reegar.

Xen didn't look all that pleased to be speaking with them or Tali. Sometimes Austin had a talent of telling instantly about people, and something about Xen made him feel uneasy.

"Tali Zorah. Given the circumstances, are you certain that speaking to me is appropriate?" she asked.

"I'm looking for information about the Alarei. I don't intend to bribe you in the middle of the plaza, Admiral." said Tali.

"And what a wonderful specimen this is. Geth shell over standard mech interior, or did you convince a Geth to work with you?" Xen asked, her attention focused very much on Legion.

"Legion is working with me voluntarily. It's part of my team." said Austin.

"It has a name. Fascinating. The things I could learn under different circumstances." said Xen.

"This platform is not available for experimentation." said Legion.

"Charming. I am pleased to see that the humans, at least, have not abandoned synthetics. This whole trial is a farce borne of fear." said Xen.

"If you're not interested in this trial, why not recuse yourself?"

Austin asked.

"And let that aging warship Han Gerrel and the cowardly Zaal Koris be the ones to chart this course? I think not. The broader purpose underlying the trial is too important. Tali Zorah is only peripherally related. No offense intended." Xen replied.

"And what is the true purpose of this trial, Admiral?" Tali asked.

"To determine whether Quarians should fear their past mistakes, or reclaim their glory using our natural affinity for artificial intelligence." said Xen.

"So the only reason you care about this is because Rael might have learned something valuable from the Geth?" Austin asked.

"Indeed. If he has, then even in this accident, we may find something worthwhile." said Xen.

"You want to create new AIs?" Tali asked in surprise.

"No, Tali Zorah. I wish to return the Geth to the control of their rightful masters, the Quarian race. Xen replied.

"Geth behavioural changes from "hacking" only last until programs are restored from archival copy. We judge this plan unsound, Creator Admiral." said Legion.

"For once, Legion, we agree." said Tali.

"We shall see, marvellous machine. We shall see." said Xen.

"Can you tell me anything about the Alarei?" Austin asked.

"Little. We detected several communication signatures before the Geth jammed the comm systems. Given the likely networked intelligence requirements for taking over a ship, expect between ten and fifty units." said Xen.

"Then this can't have anything to do with me. I only sent parts and pieces, and certainly not enough to make that many Geth." said Tali.

"It sounds like your ideas about synthetics are in the minority." said Austin.

"Yes. At least on the Admiralty Board. Han Gerrel sees an enemy that must be crushed. Zaal Koris would run away and hide on some new colony world. Shala Raan is still undecided. I had thought Rael to be firmly in Han's camp, but if his experiments were on active Geth, perhaps we have ideas in common." said Xen.

"If we don't find Rael alive on the Alarei, what do you think will happen?" Austin asked.

"The power balance will be disrupted. Han loses a vote for his foolish self-destructive war. That would favour peace, then as Shala Raan is too careful to risk her own neck. But if the Admiral replacing Rael agrees with me... things could become very exciting." said Xen, almost smiling under her helmet.

"You support experiments on living creatures?" Austin asked.

"Rael should have felt no more guilt experimenting on Geth

than I did while performing surgery on a childhood toy." Xen replied.

"The fact that you performed surgery on your childhood toys explains a great deal, Admiral." said Tali.

"A ship travels faster than I can. With the right programming, it can choose locations, even defend itself when attacked. But it is just a machine. It was built for the sole purpose of serving its master. And it can be dismantles whenever its master desires." said Xen.

"Thank you for the information." said Austin.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Major." said Xen.

They finally headed for the docking bay where their shuttle was. The guard seemed a bit unnerved by Legion.

"Is... is that really a Geth, Tali Zorah? The guards at the docking bay said-"

"Don't worry. It's under our control. With luck, it will help us retake the Alarei." said Tali reassuringly.

"If you say so. Per Admiral Raan's orders, the shuttle is prepared for you and Major Shepard vas Normandy." said the guard.

There were no bodies aboard the Alarei, but definite signs of fighting due to scorch marks on the walls and signs of heavy fighting.

Sure enough, the ship was crawling with Geth, and not just soldiers. There were rocket troopers, pyros and even some of those drones. The Admiral's reports of the Alarei definitely hadn't been exaggerated.

After a very long time of fighting through practically an army of Geth, they came across on Quarian body. Austin feared he knew who this was. Sure enough, his fears were confirmed when Tali saw the body too.

"Father!" Tali yelled as she dropped to her knees, still unable to truly believe that Rael was truly dead.

"No, no, no! You always had a plan. Masked life signs, or, or an on board medical stasis program, maybe. You! You wouldn't... They're wrong! You wouldn't just die like this! You wouldn't..." she whimpered.

"Hey. Hey come here." said Austin as he hugged Tali.

"Damn it! Damn it. I'm sorry." said Tali, eventually managing to calm down.

"You've got nothing to be sorry about." said Austin.

"Maybe... He would have known I'd come. Maybe he left a message." said Tali as she accessed her father's omni tool. A small hologram of him appear out of it.

"Tali. If you are listening, then I am dead. The Geth have gone active. I don't have much time. Their main hub will be on the bridge. You'll need to destroy it to stop their VI processes from forming new



neural links. Make sure Han Gerrel and Daro Xen see the data. They must-" said the message before it was suddenly cut off.

"Thanks, Dad."

"He knew you'd come for him He was trying to help you. It's not perfect. It's not what you wanted. But it's the best he could do." said Austin, trying to reassure Tali.

"I don't know what's worse: thinking he never cared, or thinking that he did, and that this was the only way he could show it." said Tali, with regret. "It doesn't matter. One way or the other, I cared. And I'm here. And we're ending this."

The bridge doors opened to reveal a Geth Prime and two more Geth soldiers. They hadn't noticed them so far so everyone stayed down to avoid being detected.

The Prime and the two troopers appeared to look as though they were talking with something. Austin silently signalled for the others to hold their ground while he got a bit closer, activating his cloak in the progress.

The Helldiver peaked his head around the corner slightly to try and get a better look. From what he could see, the three Geth seemed to be talking to some kind of red hologram. Upon slightly closer inspection, it almost looked like a red synthetic eye of some sorts.

Austin couldn't help but feel as though he'd seen that thing before, but he couldn't remember.

The Geth were speaking to the hologram in their own familiar language of mechanical chirps and whirs. The hologram then replied back in the same language, but it's voice was way deeper than a normal Geth's, even a Prime's voice wasn't anywhere near that deep. This also sounded familiar to Austin, but he couldn't remember that either.

The Geth and the hologram seemed to communicate with each other for several seconds. It suddenly occurred to Austin that he'd brought legion with him. Maybe he could ask if the Geth understood what they were saying.

"Legion, can you tell what they are saying?" he whispered.

Legion unfortunately didn't seem to understand why Austin was whispering and so replied back at full volume.

"They are communicating with an outside source."

"Quiet! Not so loud!" Austin hissed, but it was too late.

The three Geth and the hologram had heard legion speak. The Geth immediately armed their weapons and the hologram vanished.

Fighting a normal Geth Prime was definitely a lot easier than fighting the Terror Geth. As Tali had said, a single Geth had no more intelligence than a Varren and so they weren't as smart as the Terror Geth had been. That also meant that they didn't have any advanced combat maneuvers. They just stood were they were, fired and hoped

they killed their targets. As a result, they were quickly dispatched.

"Legion, in future keep the volume of your voice low when I'm whispering. You do understand how to keep quiet, don't you?" said Austin.

"We apologise, Shepard-Major. We had thought you were planning a surprise attack, not a stealth attack. We will learn from this mistake, it will not happen again."

"So what were those Geth doing?" Leena asked. "It looked as though they were trying to contact more Geth."

"There is no trace of the signal source they were communicating with. We are afraid it is impossible to find out." said Legion.

"There's bound to still be the evidence we need though." said Austin.

"Yes. This console is linked to the main hub Father mentioned. Disabling it shut down any Geth we missed." said Tali. "It looks like some of the recordings remained intact. They'll tell us how this happened. What Father did."

"You sound like you don't really want to hear it." said Austin.

"We have to, I know. I just... this is terrible, Austin. I don't want to know that he was part of this." said Tali.

The recording came up showing Rael and two other Quarian scientists.

"Do we have enough parts to bring more online?" Rael asked.

"Yes. The new shipment from your daughter will let us add two more Geth to the network." one of the scientists replied.

"We're nearing a breakthrough on systemic viral attacks. Perhaps we should inform the Admiralty Board, just to be safe." the other suggested.

"No. We're too close. I promised to build my daughter a house on the homeworld. I'm not going to sit and wait while the Politicians argue." Rael objected.

"We'd have an easier time with it if Tali Zorah could send back more working material." said one of the scientists.

"Absolutely not! I don't want Tali exposed to any political blowback." Rael objected. "Leave Tali out of this. Assemble new Geth with what we have. Bypass security protocols if need be."

The recording finished. Tali was left lost for words.

"It sounds like he was doing this for you." Austin finally said, trying to reassure her a bit.

"I never wanted this, Austin. Keelah, I never wanted this. Everything here is his fault. I tried to pretend it didn't point to him, but this... when this comes up in the trial they'll... We can't tell them. Not the Admirals, not anybody." she said.

"Tali, without this evidence, you're looking at exile!" Austin objected.

"You think I don't know that?! You think I don't know that I want to live knowing that I can never see the Fleet again? But I can't go back into that room and say that my father was the worst war criminal in our people's history! I cannot!" said Tali.

"Rael Zorah doesn't need you to worry about him anymore. You hear him say he didn't want you to be caught in the politics!" said Austin.

"You don't understand, Shepard." said Leena. "They would strike his name from the manifest of every ship he ever served on. He would be worse than an exile. He'd be a traitor to our people, held up for children as a monster in a cautionary tale!"

"I can't let all the good he did be destroyed for this, Austin." said Tali.

"We're not going to decide anything here. Let's see what the Admirals say once we get back." said Austin.

"You're my Captain in this hearing, Austin. It's your decision. But please. Don't destroy what my father was." said Tali.

She then turned to Leena.

"Leena, I..."

"You said so yourself, Tali. It's Shepard's decision." said Leena. "I won't deny that I would tell the truth if it was my decision. But I guess that's me being too cold. If Shepard respects your decision, I won't say anything."

"I guess that's the best I can ask for." said Tali. She then turned back to Austin. "Come on. If we wait too long, they'll decide we're already dead, and none of this will matter."

Upon re-entering the Rayya, they could overhear the Admiral's voices.

"We need to face facts. There has been no word. There is no reason to think Tali Zorah survived." said Koris.

"It sounds like the hearing is already underway." said Tali.

"We must trust Shepard's offer of assistance. It's only been a few hours." said Shala.

"Leena was right. Springing the information about Rael on Tali... we practically dared her to take back the Alarei. We killed her." said Gerrel.

"A pity Shepard was Normandy is a better speaker than a soldier. I recommend posthumously exiling Tali Zorah." said Koris.

"WHAT?!"

"It was agreed Tali Zorah would not be exiled where she killed in action!" Shala objected.

"It was suggested, Admiral. I recall no agreement. To that end I call for an immediate vote." said Koris.

They quickly hurried back into the conclave.

"Very well. Is the Admiralty board prepared to render judgement?" Shala asked.

Just in time, the group pushed throughout the crowd and once again stood before the board.

"Sorry we're late." said Tali sarcastically.

Leena also didn't seem too happy that the Admiral's had started without them.

"You didn't waste much time declaring us dead. Go get your ship!" she said.

"We apologise, Leena. Your success in taking back the Alarei is... very unexpected." Gerrel apologised.

"Tali Zorah saved the Alarei. I hope this proves her value to the Quarian people." said Austin.

"Her loyalty was never in doubt. Only her judgement." said Koris.

"Perhaps Tali Zorah can offer something to encourage more trust in her judgement." Shala suggested.

"Did you find anything on the Alarei that could clarify what happened there?" Gerrel asked.

Austin kept trying to think if there was any way of solving this. He could never betray Tali by revealing the truth, but at the same time, she didn't deserve to be exiled because of it.

"Austin... please..." Tali almost begged as the Helldiver stepped forward.

"Does Major Shepard have any new evidence to submit to this hearing?" Shala asked.

Austin remained silent for a long while. In the end, he knew he had no other choice. He finally spoke with his mind made up.

"We found nothing on the Alarei that we wish to submit as evidence." he said, doing his best to hide a sigh in his voice.

"Tali?" Gerrel asked.

"I have nothing to say." said Tali.

Austin sighed inside his helmet so that no one would hear. He felt bad about this. Like he'd let Tali down. There'd always been another way, a fair compromise. But not this time. His friend would never see her home or friends again.

Just before Shala could speak however, Leena suddenly stepped forward.

"Wait! I have something I wish to say." she said.

Shala nodded to her daughter, who then, rather surprisingly, turned to the crowd.

"Look at them, all of you! They don't care about Tali! All they care about is their war with the Geth!" she shouted. "Tali risked her life for all of you! On Haestrom, hell, on the Citadel when she stopped Saren! She deserves better than this!"

"If Tali Zorah has no new evidence, I suggest we render judgment." said Koris.

Some of the crowd suddenly stood up in defiance. To Austin's amazement, Veetor suddenly stepped forward.

"Wait! Leena's right! Tali saved me! She doesn't deserve to be exiled!" he said.

Kal Reegar then joined in as well.

"Damn straight! Tali's done more for this fleet than you assholes ever will! You're pissing on everything I fought for, everything Tali fought for! So if you exile her... you might as well do the same to me." he said.

"Me too." Veetor agreed.

"Same here!" Leena agreed.

All three of the Admirals activated their omni tools. There was a brief silence, and then Shala spoke.

"Tali Zorah, in light of your history of service, we do not find sufficient evidence to convict. You are cleared of all charges." she said, almost with happiness.

Austin was left absolutely speechless. He could not believe that Leena had managed to pull that off. What's more, she had succeeded where he failed. It seemed that despite over 10 years of working together, he still had much to learn about his squad. They really were full of surprises.

"Major Shepard. Please accept these gifts in appreciation for you taking the time to represent one of our people." said Shala as she gave Austin several tech schematics. These would prove very useful for their mission.

"With all due respect, Admirals. He didn't represent one of ours, he represented one of his." said Leena.

"So he did, Leena." said Gerrel.

"If you appreciate me, then listen: The Reapers are coming. I'm gonna need your help to stop them. Please, don't throw lives away against the Geth." said Austin.

"Thank you, Major Shepard. I hope this board carefully considers your advice." said Koris.

Austin simply shook his head. That hadn't quite been the answer he'd been hoping for. Still, perhaps maybe that was a conversation for another time.

"This hearing is concluded. Go in peace Tali Zorah vas Normandy. Keelah se'lai." said Shala.

"Keelah se'lai." the crowd repeated.

"I just cannot believe that worked. How the hell did you do that?!" Austin asked.

"I guess we just got lucky." said Leena. Even she did seem a bit

surprised herself that her speech to the crowd had worked.

"In my experience, there's no such thing as luck." said Austin.  
"You succeeded where I failed."

"You didn't fail me, Austin. You were going to respect my decision. I don't blame you for that." said Tali.

She then turned to Leena. "I can't believe you pulled that off. What you said... I've never had anyone speak like that in my behalf. Thank you for being there for my father and me, even when... thank you." she said gratefully.

Leena walked up to Tali and embraced her. Tali seemed to do the same.

"You're more than just a friend to me, Tali. You'll always be the little sister I never had." said Leena. "In fact seeing as my mother is your Auntie, you are one in my eyes."

"I never thought though that you'd do that. I feared you'd either just remain silent or reveal the truth to the Admirals." said Tali.

"I still don't agree with what your father did, Tali. What he said, what he did was wrong, but... you don't deserve to be exiled for what he did. You deserved better." said Leena.

"I got better, Leena. I got you, and Austin. I've never had truer friends."

"We can still go back in and get you exiled if you want." Austin joked, causing both Tali and Leena to chuckle.

"Thanks. But I'm fine with things like this. It's fun watching Helldivers shout." said Tali.

"Come on then, you two. Let's get back to work." Austin smiled.

"Thank you, Major." said Tali.

"Yes sir." said Leena.

"Veetor, I can't believe you stood up and spoke for me." said Tali.

"Oh, well, it's good Reegar was there. He said most of it." said Veetor bashfully.

"Veetor, thank you." Tali simply said.

"Oh, er... okay. And thank you, Shepard, for... for helping me and Tali both." said Veetor.

"Guess you just needed a pretty woman to help you feel better." said Austin.

"Well, maybe. Good luck, Tali and you too, Major." said Veetor.

"Kal, thank you. I can't believe you did that." said Tali gratefully.

"You'd have done the same for me, ma'am. Figured I had to say something when you didn't use that evidence you found on the Alarei." said Reegar.

"I didn't say anything about finding evidence, Kal." said Tali.

"Noticed that, ma'am." said Reegar.

"Any idea what your next assignment is going to be?" Austin asked.

"I'm going to be escorting more techs around to look for signs of dark energy build-up. Maybe see if they can figure out what's causing it. Wherever they send me, it'll be less exciting than Haestrom." Reegar replied.

"What's your take on the war? Are the Admirals going to try retake the homeworld?" Austin asked.

"I won't shy away from a fight, but if the Admirals throw the Fleet at the Geth, all they'll get back is scrap metal. The best bet would be for us to find another way. But a soldier can't say unless his superiors ask." said Reegar.

"I appreciate your help, Reegar. I don't know what we would've done if you and Veetor hadn't stood up to help me." said Leena, gratefully.

"I'm sure you would've figured something out. Good luck out there, ma'am." said Reegar.

"Kal, just call me Tali." said Tali.

"I'll work on that, ma'am." said Reegar.

"Very impressive speech, Major Shepard. But tell me truly, did you recover any of Rael Zorah's research on the Alarei?" Xen asked.

"Nothing that will help you, Admiral." said Tali.

"Pity. Ah, well. Whatever is created can be recreated. In any event, I am pleased that our talk regarding the war conundrum allowed you to help Tali. Her exile would have been unfortunate." said Xen.

"You should abandon your plans, Admiral. They're only going to make the situation worse." said Austin.

"We shall see, Major. Many things are impossible until they are done." said Xen.

"Damn fine speech, Leena. You called us on the carpet out there, and you were right. Thank you. Tali shouldn't have been involved in that argument. Tell me, though, honestly. What did you find over there? You spoke well, but I know a feint when I see it." said Gerrel.

"Off the record? Rael Zorah was bringing the Geth online and networking them for weapons tests." said Austin.

"Keelah!"

"You can never tell anyone, Han." said Tali.

"You have my word. I would've heard what your father wanted for the fleet. I'm just glad you didn't have to pay for his mistakes. Be well, Tali. Fly safe." said Gerrel.

"Very impressive, Leena. Shepard, thank you for your help on the Alarei. And thank you for helping Rael Zorah's daughter. You stood for her when we failed. We were wrong to let our own concerns about the war overshadow Tali's trial." said Zaal Koris.

"The galaxy needs more people saying what you're saying, Admiral. Good luck." said Austin.

"Thank you, Major." said the Admiral gratefully.

Shala was the last person to talk to since Austin felt it best for Leena to say a proper goodbye.

"The Admirals thought they were hoddling you by forcing you to represent her, Shepard. I'm glad they were wrong." she said. "You didn't mention survivors. Did you find Rael, Tali? I'm sure he would have left you a message if he'd had time." she asked.

"We found Rael's body. He left a message for Tali." said Austin.

"I can only imagine how horrible this is for you, child, but at least you got to hear your father tell you he loved you." said Shala sympathetically.

"Yes. Thank you, Shala." said Tali as she walked up to Shala and hugged her.

"Good luck on your mission. No matter how dark it gets, the Fleet is always with you. Keelah se'lai." said Shala.

Leena then hugged her mother as well. When they finally separated, Leena activated her omni tool and gave Shala her comm number.

"I'll call if I can. We've been apart for too long." said Leena.

"You don't need to give me this, Leena... but I'm glad you have. Yes, you are right. It has been a long time." said Shala.

"I'll be coming back from our mission, mother. You will see me again, I promise." said Leena.

"I know you will. But whatever happens, I'm so proud of you and I've never stopped loving all of these years." said Shala as she caressed the side of Leena's Helldiver helmet, the closest thing she could get to her cheek.

"I love you, mother."

"I love you too, Leena."

The two finally separated and Shala turned to Austin.

"Shepard. I know you have looked after both of them well, and it's wrong to ask even more of you. But please, keep them safe. I've finally seen Leena again after so many years and Tali has always been like a second daughter to me. I couldn't bear to lose either one of them." she said.

Austin bowed his head, putting his fist on his chest as he did so.

"You have my word, Shala. I intend for us all to live through this mission and come back alive. You'll see them both again, I promise."



he said.

"Thank you, Shepard. It warms my heart to know that they are in good hands. They chose their Captain well." Shala smiled as and Austin shook hands.

"Farewell, Shala."

"Keelah se'lai, Major Shepard."

Austin went down to the engineering deck to check on Tali, just to be sure she was alright. She was at her usual spot and still working, but she seemed happy.

"Keelah, I'm sorry I dragged you into Quarian politics. All that infighting, seeing what my father did... You and Leena were the only ones there for me, Austin – the only cover I had against the storm. Thank you." She said.

"I imagine they're trying to fill your father's spot on the Admiralty Board. What will that do to the balance of power?" Austin asked.

"I have no idea. Being exiled might have made it easier. A few people are suggesting me as a candidate. Replacing an Admiral takes time, though. You may not have noticed, but Quarrians like to debate." Said Tali.

"Are Quarrians politics always like that?" Austin asked.

"No. Sometimes it can actually get unpleasant. We're a very social people, Austin. We have to be, to make up for being stuck in these suits. And part of that means getting involved in each other's business." Tali replied.

"The whole trial was insulting. You should have had time to mourn your father." Said Austin.

"I don't think life is about what you deserve. But my father would be honoured that I chose to mourn him by blowing up a lot of Geth." Said Tali, smiling under her helmet. "I should get back to work. But thanks for checking on me."

# POETRY

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John Mahler's Quotes of the Day

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Some people, at least, have enjoyed my Quotes of the Day, so here they are, for your amusement and bemusement: one entire year's worth of quotes. My quotes by the way; nobody else's. These are my thoughts and observations on the world around us: funny, sad, uplifting, evocative, inspiring, silly, and occasionally just plain stupid, they are all here for your perusal: enjoy!

# HUMAN NATURE

Kela Lewis-Morin

The dreamers,  
The believers  
And the ambitious achievers.

Need the realists to stop them from flying too close to the sun.

The realists,  
The logical idealists  
And the informed defeatists.

Need the dreamers to show them how some struggles can be won.

You see I am beginning to get the gist,

Of how we all unwittingly coexist.

Neither one can ever be dismissed,

As long as the reign of mankind persists.

As one tries, the other watches.

When one flies, the other dislodges

Stories aimed to defame, name, claim and shame.

Assuring and securing that the harsh reality still remains.

# STRUCK WITH SADNESS

MsterDeth  
of <http://msterdeth.deviantart.com>

My two best friends,  
Started to fight,  
With strong mite,  
So i sat in between.

So it seemed,  
That it had to be me,  
To disagree and in turns it agreed,  
After awhile the fighting stopped,  
But the hate arose...

Till one day..  
They sat with each other,  
Notes were passed,  
Hugs exchanged,  
Laughs given,  
And Friends they became.

And on that day,  
Today is that day,  
My Best friend..  
Stopped knowing me,  
She started to ignore me...

# INEVITABLE

Zorveska  
of <http://zorveska.deviantart.com>

Crimson wings spread elegantly  
Acting as curtains for my restricted window  
My view blocked, I have no contact  
Cut off from others.

Light reflects red glimmers onto the white walls  
Fireflies dying slowly  
A wounded beak enters my vision  
Intimidating to the untrained eye  
Razor claws scratch the surface  
Of my exposed subconscious.

Numb, I continue to stare  
Surrendering even the most strong-willed  
To a fate that they didn't deserve.  
The never ending cycle complete  
Inescapable silence batters me  
Machine gun holes in my soul  
My body is on automatic  
You only see the shell I left behind.

I watch from afar now,  
A crimson canary on your windowsill.

# GHOSTS OF ADORATION

Solilska  
of <http://solilska.deviantart.com>

Up until now, adoring what you haven't seen,  
After today, it'll be as If you have never been,  
They will cry for you, assuming sorrow for the loss,  
In their hearts they long for you, jaded with anger at the cost.

Speak a soft eulogy, the life spoken about, much harsher,  
This life was a cancer to you, And faith, the reason.  
Now he has died, with weeping angels does he stay.  
I always came across seemingly lost within my way.  
A mask to cover So I no longer have to stay,  
Fate doesn't decree anything from me:  
Living for passion, filling eternity.

# BETWEEN MOONLIGHT

xShenLong  
of <http://xShenLong.deviantart.com>

Flutter;  
The rustling of silken sheets  
Soft touches of pattering feet  
Life thrums behind the silence  
Passion hums beneath the cold

The veil has covered with dusk again  
The bright skies sinking to Mistress Night  
Luscious tresses of raven-wing black  
Blinds and soothes, with desolate lack

Peering through dark shifting clouds  
A maiden shy, with friends of sound  
Delicate creatures, that flit about  
Gentle shadows, played across the grounds

Bathed in ethereal glows of the radiant Lady  
Swathed in cloth of glimmering shine  
Dressed in jewels, plucked from a starlit sky  
A gem of the softest nature, dainty and fine

Listen;  
Fearsome wolves are growling and snapping  
The air stirs, the symbol of wings aflight  
A soft chirping of an unseen choir  
The chorale to the lullaby, the Daughter of Night's song

The howling is eerie, resounding, cascading  
Louder, closer, desperate and fierce  
The time is over, Night yet young  
The moonlight flickers, the spotlight broken

The hourglass has fallen  
The theatre stage closed  
Innate glow descends, a drop of light  
The Lady has hidden, behind swirls of dawn

Day comes, herald warriors of Sun  
And the night is over, the moonlight gone

# THE GIRL

Shanoar3  
of <http://shanoar3.deviantart.com>

There is a girl  
Sitting  
Waiting  
For it  
To happen  
Again

All the  
Hitting and  
Yelling  
To start  
Again

When they  
Stop  
He will  
Come in  
There

And he  
Will push  
Her down

Then he will start  
With a grunt  
And sigh

She grinds her  
Teeth  
Waiting for it  
To stop

Wanting to  
Yell  
To call  
For help  
But knowing  
Not to



Knowing no one  
Will come  
And he will  
Hit her  
If she  
Does

Finally  
Comes to  
A end

And he  
Leaves

Leaving  
Her soaked  
In tear,  
Blood,and semen

She gets up  
Cleans herself  
Off knowing  
Its going to  
Happen again

But before  
It does  
She cuts  
Her wrist

Hoping to  
End it  
All

And find  
Something  
Better

# CRUSH

TheMeTheyDontSee  
of <http://TheMeTheyDontSee.deviantart.com>

You're so cute and so sweet.  
Waiting patiently until we meet.  
Some avoid meeting online,  
But I think it will be fine.  
You make me laugh and make me smile.  
That hasn't happened in a while.  
So casually with me you flirt.  
I'm starting to forget I'm hurt.  
It seems that you like me.  
In person, we'll have to see.  
In a few weeks you'll be here.  
No connection I do fear.  
Until then I continue to wait,  
And hope that you are my fate.  
I pray that you're one I can trust,  
Because you are now my crush.