

MEGAMORPHS #5: A NEW FOE

CHAPTER 1

JAKE

My name is Jake. I can't tell you my last name or where I live. You probably already know; I can't imagine that anyone Earth wouldn't. But if I told you, if I came out and said it, then Azmaveth would count that against us. And if we push him too far, that's the end of all mankind.

You've heard it all before. Yeerks, Animorphs, Kelbrid, Crayak, Azmaveth, and all that. So I won't bore you with all of that. What you might have missed, though, is a very important fact. I used to be dead. Not anymore. I've been given a second chance at life to do what I was always supposed to do. I've come back to fight the Yeerks again.

That wasn't the thing on my mind at the moment, though. I was only thinking about being dead. And wondering why I couldn't remember anything about it. It was almost like it had happened to someone else. They didn't tell me the story, just that it happened. Jake was dead. That's all I knew.

It was on my mind a lot because this was Santorelli's last day alive. His death had been a complicated one. For a while, I thought he died when he and Tobias flew a ship into the sun to

hide the Time Matrix. Then, after we died, he told me the whole story.

Just before he and Tobias were about to kill themselves, a being known as Azmaveth transported him through time. There, he lived as Tobias's stepfather for about three years. And then, he did what he had to do. He and Loren got in his car, and he crashed it. She survived but lost her memory. He lost his life.

He didn't have a choice. If Tobias had had a family during the First War, we have no idea how things would have been different. But it wasn't a risk we could afford to take. So he had to give his life for all of ours. I joined him in the afterlife not too much later.

Then came the offer. Azmaveth was the master of life and death. He could give us a second chance at life. He had already done so for Rachel. We could live again, but on one condition. We had to do him a small favor and assassinate a Yeerk named Mersa 528. We thought it would be easy enough. But it was far more complicated.

Mersa was a Yeerk rebel and Tobias's ally against the Visser. We later learned that the Visser served Azmaveth, who we also knew by the name of The One. Killing Mersa meant

aiding our enemies. We almost didn't do it. But Mersa made our job easy. He went back to the Visser, which eliminated all of our qualms.

And then he made it even easier. He betrayed the Visser again and ran off to his allies, the Pythagi, who were behind his rebellion all along. The Yeerks and us went to one of their worlds. That was where Mersa met his end.

The problem is that there were two of us and only one Yeerk. Only Santorelli or I could live; not both. Santorelli chose my life over his. At least now I know where Tobias gets that from. He remained behind while we went off to kill Mersa. I felt terrible about that because it meant that Tobias would get very little time with him. And Jeanne.

During the early days of this war, Santorelli and Jeanne felt kind of like outsiders. They were the new guys, and we didn't have a history of working well with new guys. The two of them had a special bond, almost a father-daughter thing. I think Jeanne felt deeper than he did, since she didn't remember her real father. Even now that she and her father had been reunited, she still looked to Santorelli when she could.

At least he had gotten to spend some time with Loren while we were away. He never told her everything he knew

about her lost past, though. Tobias spilled that one when got back. Loren accepted it with shocking ease; with even more ease than she had accepted the whole Elfangor thing. She was a remarkable woman, Loren was.

There were only a few of us waiting with Santorelli. We didn't know what exactly would happen, or when. But we did want to be there for it. Loren was there, of course, as were Tobias and Jeanne. Marco had decided to come with Jeanne. He still didn't have his memory back, but she filled him in on everything. I have to admit, when Marco was cracking jokes about Jeanne back when they first met, I never expected anything to actually happen. Or for it to be anything more than a shallow relationship.

Rachel was supposed to be here, too. She didn't know Santorelli well, but in her opinion, anyone who actually treated Tobias well as a child was okay. Plus, she thought of him as family, although that was really indirect.

There was someone else in the room with us, too, someone who had just arrived a moment ago. Someone I never expected to come. Guraff 427. A Yeerk. The Visser's right-hand man. A Hork-bajir Controller with the biggest host I've ever seen. A walking killing machine and possibly our deadliest enemy.

And one of Tobias's closest friends.

No one in the house but we Animorphs knew that Guraff was a Yeerk. Everyone else, Loren included, thought he was a Hork-bajir seer. His host was, but not Guraff. No one would know that he was here to see off the father of his greatest enemy, the man he called the Devil Prince.

I looked over at Tobias. What was this like for him? What could he possibly be thinking now?

CHAPTER 2

TOBIAS

Where the hell was Rachel? It wasn't like her to miss something that she knew was important to me. She and Santorelli weren't close, but still, I expected her to come. I mean, if Marco showed up for Jeanne... For God's sake, even Guraff was here.

Not for long, though. He didn't tell the Visser he was coming here and he had a lot of work to do. I'd have liked to keep him from it, but there was no way to dissuade him. He probably shouldn't have come at all, but he just couldn't help himself. He had to meet the only father I had ever known.

Guraff and Santorelli stood facing each other. Guraff towered over him, but Santorelli was apparently unperturbed. This was their first meeting, and I couldn't imagine it being anything but their last. Few are given a second chance; no one ever gets a third.

Guraff bowed his head slightly. "I am Guraff," he introduced himself. "I am...a friend to your son."

Santorelli cracked a rare smile. "A friend? He sure keeps strange company these days. I've heard of you. You don't

spend any amount of time as a bodyguard for a Visser without hearing about Guraff Four-Two-Seven.”

“And I have heard of you. I am told that your abilities with a Dracon beam exceeded even my own. I regret that we never had the chance to test that.”

“Don't feel too bad. If we had tried it, I'd have started this trip a lot earlier.”

Guraff chuckled. “You show no fear in the face of death. That is admirable, Santorelli.”

“It's only scary the first time.”

Guraff nodded. For a moment, neither said anything. No one did. Only Rachel and I seemed to be comfortable around Guraff. I started wondering whether Guraff feared death. I shook my head. Probably not. What he feared was what death might represent: failure. Dying and failing his Visser and his comrades, that was what he feared, not death itself. He and I have so much in common.

Guraff broke the silence. “I must be going now. Please, give my regards to Prince Elfangor. I cannot thank you two...” He paused and looked at Loren. “...You [i]three[/i] enough. You have given me what no others ever have.”

Santorelli raised an eyebrow. “And what's that?”

“A worthy foe.” He turned to leave. As he passed me, he nodded. “Devil Prince. Give my regards to Rachel. Until next time.”

I nodded back. “Will do. See you on the battlefield, Guraff.” Everyone relaxed when he left. I guess they thought it was a weird, complicated relationship the two of us had. Not really. He's a friend, a very close one. We just happen to fight on different sides of the same war. It's not even that we have very different values or beliefs. We just had the bad luck to be born in different situations. That's probably for the best, though. I don't think there's anyone who can stand up to Guraff and me together. Just ask the Pythagi.

“Some friend you've got there,” Santorelli said to me once Guraff was gone.

“Some enemy,” Marco muttered.

I shrugged. “Why do those have to be different things?” I answered. “With enemies like him, who needs friends?”

“Speaking as one of his enemies, I do,” Marco told me. Again, silence reigned. It's hard to make smalltalk when we all knew why we were there: waiting for one of us to drop dead.

Santorelli grunted. “Guess I should get my goodbyes out of the way, then. I can't have much longer left. Marco... I don't

know you all that good, but I know enough. You're a smart man, and a loyal one, even without your memories. Keep that all around. But the most important part of you isn't your brain or your heart. We've got enough brains and heart in this little army. Above all, you've got to keep the jokes coming. At least if you're driving everyone nuts, it's not the war that's taking them.”

“You've been spending too much time with Rachel,” Marco joked. I raised an eyebrows at Santorelli. That didn't sound like him. He wasn't big on goodbyes.

He looked at Jeanne next. “Uh... Looks like you've been doing fine without me helping you out,” he said at last. “You've got yourself a nice home, big family, allegedly cute boyfriend-”

“None of that replaces you,” she interrupted.

“No one can ever replace anyone,” Santorelli agreed. “But that's the great thing about life. Everyone you meet is someone new. And it seems to me that all the new people you're meeting are doing more for you than I ever could. You're going to be alright without me, kiddo. I made Jacques promise me that and if he doesn't, I'll haunt him. You know I'll do it.”

Jeanne nodded. Then she said something in rapid French. Santorelli shook his head. “I don't know French or whatever that was, but back at you.”

He turned to Jake next. “Jake... Hard to think of something to say to you. You more than anyone know where I'm going.”

“And I'll make sure you're going for a good reason,” Jake told him. “I won't make you regret your choice.”

“Yeah. Good. Just make sure no one else from the team ends up joining me during this thing, you hear?”

Jake nodded. “Got it.”

Santorelli turned to Loren next. “I'm really unsure what to say to you. I can't tell you all about the life we had, so I'll just focus on what we can both remember. These few days I've been here have been worth dying twice. It's been worth dying a thousand times. I'm not going to tell you that I love you, because you don't even know who I am. But I did love you, and if I had the chance, I'd keep on doing it. I guess the best thing I could say is also the most terrible. Elfangor's death was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Loren, understandably, didn't know what to say. Although I had told her that Santorelli had been her husband, she didn't remember him. She didn't have any feelings for him, she

couldn't. I had hoped that maybe, just maybe, she'd feel some trace of something for him. But life doesn't work that way. Not my life, at least.

Santorelli and I went outside and stood on the lawn. “Standing here, with you, wondering when I'll die... Seems kind of familiar, doesn't it?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. You going to start singing again?”

He laughed. “Nah; trust me, they play a recording of my singing in Hell.”

I suddenly realized that here was someone who had been dead and now wasn't. And unlike Rachel and Jake, he seemed to remember it. He could answer so many questions. My mind wandered back to a conversation we had long ago. “Santorelli... Is God real?” I blurted out. “You have to know.”

“It's not about knowing, Tobias,” he said softly. “I'm not going to tell you if he is or not. I'll say this. If he's real, he's gone out of his way not to let us be able to prove it. What would be the point in believing in him if it was easy? 'Blessed are those who believe and yet have not seen.' If he's real, he wouldn't let me tell you. You'll have to decide for yourself whether or not you believe it.”

“It's that way with everything, though, isn't it?” I

responded. “You always have to decide what it is you believe in. Your parents and friends can tell you what they believe and why, but in the end, it has to be you who decides.”

He nodded. “Yep, that's about it. And that's not a question you can answer with your head. It's not something you can rationalize or use logic on. It's not something that you can even think about, really. It's a question of the heart. What do you really believe, down beneath all the stuff we throw in the way to protect ourselves? Does it feel real?”

“I... I don't know,” I admitted. “I don't even know what real is anymore.”

“That's an easy one,” Santorelli laughed.

“Yeah? So tell me.”

“Nah, I think I'll let you simmer on that one for a while. If I answered all of your questions, what would you have left to do? You've got to save something for after the war.”

“I've got a kid for that,” I answered him. Then I realized that he was gone. How long had he been gone? I had been looking at the sky while we talked. When had he gone? Was it just now? Or had he been gone the moment I looked away?

CHAPTER 3

MARCO

Tobias and Santorelli went outside. Only Tobias came back. He didn't say a word to any of us. He just went out into the garage/hangar to do something or other with the Reliquary. I'm pretty sure that's what he does when he's upset, and presumably, he was attached to Santorelli in some way or another.

Jeanne and I just sort of hung around for the rest of the night. We weren't sure what to do, if anything. After all the missions I'm told we've been doing recently, I guess she just wanted to relax for once. I was fine with that. I'm a master relaxer. If there was a competition for relaxation, I wouldn't enter it because I'm too relaxed to care.

After an hour or so, we went to sleep. Santorelli had left us around midnight and after something like that, it was best to just sleep it off. Maybe in the morning Jeanne would be less depressed. Of course, I knew I wouldn't remember any of it at first, but still...

I was just drifting off to sleep when I heard someone open the door. "Marco? Is Jeanne here?" Loren asked.

I woke Jeanne up. Since she has to remind me who I am every morning, it just became more convenient if she slept over. It never went beyond sleeping, though. We weren't about to make the same mistake Tobias and Rachel had. “[i]Quoi? [i]”

“I was just wondering... Did Rachel say she and Tobias were going to be doing anything tonight?” Loren asked.

“No. Why?”

“Well, I thought that maybe Tobias would want to talk, so I went out to the Reliquary. He wasn't there, and neither was Rachel. I checked the house and there's no sign of them. Al doesn't know anything and neither does David. Everyone else was asleep. Should I be worried?”

“Tobias probably just needs some time to be alone,” Jeanne assured her. “You know how he is.”

“But what about Rachel?” Loren asked. “She wasn't here earlier and that's not like her. Do you think maybe something happened to them? Am I worrying too much?”

“Well...” I thought about it. The fact that both were missing wasn't all that alarming. They were always disappearing on us. But Rachel's earlier absence was a bit worrisome. And Tobias always told Al where he would be. He

used AI almost like a secretary sometimes. And Guraff was here earlier. Could he have been up to something?

“Tell you what,” I said. “I’ll check around. Maybe someone else knows something.”

I went to the room Jake slept in first. He was still up, reading something. “Hey,” I said. “What’s that?”

“A book Tobias left lying around. The [i]Art of War[/i]. He’s written a lot of stuff in it,” he answered, snapping the book shut. “What’s up?”

“Loren can’t find Tobias and Rachel. She got a little worried and decided to wake us up. Any idea where the two of them are?”

“Knowing them, whatever they’re doing, I don’t want to walk in on it. I hear AI made that mistake once.”

“I was thinking the same thing. But Rachel was missing earlier, and Guraff was lurking around here...”

“You think Yeerks got them?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I can’t imagine that working.”

Jake nodded. “I’ll go check with the Andalites, David, and James. You ask around up here. We’ll see what turns up. If someone knows, great. If nobody does... We might have to start worrying.”

I nodded and set out for the room Cassie and Ronnie shared. Since her engagement, they had lived with her parents. I guess they found it to be a lot more fun here. Jake also moved in. Come to think of it, I pretty much had, too. Weird, how we adopted this house when I had a mansion not too far away. I wonder how that happened.

I pressed my ear to the door before I knocked. No telling what you might walk in on. I didn't hear anything, so I knocked. Still nothing. The door was unlocked, so I went in. Both of them were awake, reading. Some people are just plain weird.

“Marco? What is it?” Cassie asked me. “Do you need to talk about something?” I knew she was wondering how I felt about the Santorelli thing. We hadn't been close, but he and I had spent some time together and I considered him a friend.

“Nah, just a quick question. Did Tobias or Rachel say they were going to be out tonight? No one can seem to find them and Loren is stating to get worried.”

Cassie frowned. “No, they didn't say anything. Rachel was supposed to meet me earlier, but she never showed up. I thought she was busy with something else. She's not here?”

“No. And she didn't come to see Santorelli off, either,” I

answered her.

Now she frowned even harder. “When did Tobias disappear?”

“Uh...well, the last time I saw him was just after Santorelli...left. He went off into the garage.”

“Is the Reliquary still there?” she asked.

Oh. Duh. “You know what? I didn't check. I guess I'll go do that.”

“I'll come with you,” she offered. Ronnie looked at her. She shook her head. “No, you don't have to come. Get some sleep. I'm sure this is nothing.” She shrugged on a robe. I couldn't help but notice that she still slept in her morphing outfit. I guess it wasn't just me, then.

On our way to the garage, we ran into Jake and Ax. “Going to check on the Reliquary?” Jake asked.

I nodded. “You too?”

<We are,> Ax answered. <If it is missing, we may have a problem. Or it could be nothing at all. Still, the fact that neither of them told Alloran anything disturbs me.>

“Well, let's go check this out,” Jake decided.

CHAPTER 4

CASSIE

It was dark inside the garage. Jake snapped on the light, and sure enough, the Reliquary was in place. “Well, so much for that,” Marco muttered. “Now what?”

<Perhaps they are inside of it?> Ax suggested. <They often prefer to stay there.>

I nodded. “I won't be surprised if that's where they raise their kid,” I agreed. “I know Tobias could live there.”

I found the lower entrance hatch without any trouble and we let ourselves in. There was no sign of Tobias or Rachel. “Do you have a plan B?” Marco asked no one in particular.

“Look,” Jake pointed. There was a cup laying on the floor, near the command deck. Somewhere along the line, they had raised it up and put storage space beneath it. That was where Tobias and Rachel had started keeping clothes and other stuff.

“So Tobias is a slob. We knew that,” Marco answered. Nevertheless, he followed us up to the command deck.

<Perhaps he would leave a drinking utensil lying around, but look around it, Marco.> Some kind of liquid was laying on the floor in a puddle around the cup.

“Hey may be a slob, but he's not that bad,” Jake agreed.
“Looks like he dropped it and ran...”

“That's not a good sign,” I muttered.

“Is anyone else starting to sense some really bad juju?”
Marco asked us. “Because for me, my bad juju is probably like
a pair of cement shoes right now. And just about as deadly.”

<Juju?> Ax asked.

“Yeah, juju. Uh... Do you have a really bad feeling about
all this, Ax?”

<Yes, Marco. My current levels of bad juju are also far
above their normal range.>

Jake and I ignored them. “So, what do we have?” I asked.
“Tobias comes back from the thing with Santorelli. Then
what? He's here and something happens. He drops his cup and
is gone? What could be so sudden? He loves this ship, and
Rachel would kill him if he stained the floor.”

“Some sort of attack?” Jake suggested.

Marco shook his head. “If they were going to come after
Tobias, they'd be serious about it. We'd have heard the sounds
of it.”

<Whatever happened to Tobias likely happened to Rachel
as well,> Ax reminded us. <She is also missing.>

I felt a shiver run down my spine. “I don't like this one bit. I think this is getting serious. Jake... Remember what we started to suspect about Tobias?”

Jake looked at Ax pointedly. “Yeah, I remember.” Then he started morphing to tiger. I went wolf. If we were right, we couldn't have enough firepower to back us up. You don't take an Andalite Controller lightly.

<What is going on?> Ax asked.

“I'm as confused as you are,” Marco assured him. “Why are we morphing?”

<Because Yeerks tend to try and kill us when we call them out,> Jake answered. <We think Tobias might be a Controller. Rachel and Alloran, too. And maybe Ax.>

“Oh. Right. Now I remember. Thanks for leaving me standing here in a human body next to the possible Andalite-Controller. So nice to know you care.”

Ax turned his main eyes on Jake, his stalk eyes on me. <I assure you, Prince Jake, that I am no such thing. Neither are the others, to be best of my knowledge.>

<Well, there's only one way you could prove that,> Jake answered. <But we don't have three days if something happened to Tobias and Rachel.>

<I know a way to prove he isn't one,> I told Jake. <But...well, either way he won't like it. Ax, I have a Yeerk morph...>

<Oh...> Jake trailed off. <I get it. If he's already a Controller, you wouldn't be able to infest him. As much as I hate to do it...>

<No,> Ax insisted. <Cassie, you must understand. I was the host to Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six. The Visser. I cannot imagine a greater hell. Please do not ask me to endure such a thing again. I will not.>

“You know, if he's refusing...” Marco trailed off, stepping away from Ax. He was starting to turn into a gorilla.

<Prince Jake, I am certain that if you take the time you will be able to account for my every whereabouts for the last three days. Most likely, since I was freed. Marco knows that I am not a Controller. He saw the Yeerk leave my head.>

Marco paused. “Well...he's right. I guess I [*i*]did[/*i*] see the Visser crawl out. Could they have infested him later, though?>

<Unlikely,> I admitted. <From what I know of his activities, there really wouldn't have been an opportunity.>

We turned to Jake. He sighed in our heads. <We'll have to trust him for now. But that doesn't exclude Tobias and Rachel

from suspicion. Or any of the others.>

<With all due respect, Prince Jake, I am fairly certain that if we had been infiltrated by the Yeerks, we would have lost this war by now.>

I demorphed. I did it to show Ax that I trusted him, even if Jake didn't. A human was no match for an Andalite. I was putting my life in Ax's hands. Even if he didn't realize it on a conscious level, I knew that on some level, he would appreciate it.

After a few moments, Jake joined us. “Okay, we'll have to trust you. And if we're wrong, then I'm sorry Ax. You did the same thing for me once and I'm glad you did. I'd have been glad even if I hadn't been infested.”

<I understand, Prince Jake. We must be careful, even with each other. But none of this tells us what has become of Tobias and Rachel.>

CHAPTER 5

AX

I was quickly becoming worried. The disappearance of my [i]shorm[/i] was one thing, and there were plausible explanations for it. Rachel's absence, too, could be explained. But the circumstances were suspicious, and so were my friends. They even accused me of being a Controller.

<Perhaps there is some sort of recording in the Reliquary's database?> I suggested. The ship recorded more than the others suspected, more than it was ever intended to. Perhaps there was some evidence of the reason for this dropped cup. And for the lack of an owner.

Jake nodded. "Alright. Go for it."

I placed my hands on the control node and immediately was bombarded with two things. Two messages left in the system. <There are two messages here,> I told them. I accessed the first one.

A hologram appeared in the air before us. There were three figures in it. All three were human. The first was a small human male, with a long nose. His features were almost childlike; perhaps they could be called elfin. His clothing was

a simple grey suit, and his appearance was neatly trimmed.

Behind him was a larger human, with yellow-ish skin, black hair, and slanted eyes. His hair was wild, a mess. He wore a black one-piece jumpsuit that bore something I knew all too well. The insignia of the old Yeerk Empire.

The third figure was Rachel. Her wrists were behind her back, presumably restrained. There was a gag in her mouth; I understand that it is an effective way of silencing a human. Andalties, of course, are much harder to stop. She was leaning on the yellow man's shoulder and appeared to be unconscious. I suddenly had no doubts as to what caused Tobias to disappear so suddenly.

The elfin one spoke quietly, in a nasal monotone. "Greetings, Devil Prince. You can see why we have contacted you. I am Salheer Six-Seven-One. With me is Kalroth Three-Three-Seven, of the New Yeerk Order. I am sure you recognize our guest.

"We have been bidden to give you a message from the one you call the Visser. If you report to the Yeerk pool in your town within three hours and submit to voluntary infestation, she will be released without harm. If you fail to do so, Kalroth will enjoy killing them both. If you attempt any sort of

trickery, both will die. You have three hours, Devil Prince. It is suggested that you use them wisely.” The hologram winked out.

Prince Jake opened his mouth, but I interrupted. <There is a second message,> I told him. I accessed that one, too. An image of Tobias appeared this time.

“Look... I know that you probably came looking for me. It may not be too late. I'm sure you saw that other message. I...I can't let them kill either of them. I just can't. But I can't throw this war away for them, either. So I'm going to save them or die trying. I know I can't stop you from trying to help, so I'll just ask that you try, try, to make sure that no harm comes to either of them.” Again, the image disappeared.

We all stared at each other. “Ax...” Marco began, “when did that first message come through?”

I checked the time and almost fainted. “Almost two hours ago. Tobias left his message shortly thereafter.>

Jake cursed. “That means we have one hour to find Rachel, rescue her, and pull Tobias out of whatever he's going to try to do. Any suggestions?”

“Maybe AI could trace the communication or something,” Marco suggested. “Find out where it came from.”

Jake nodded. “Someone go get him. Right now.” Cassie ran out of the ship. We stood around, trying to think of what our next move could possibly be. There was nothing we could plan without any sort of location, though.

Cassie returned with Alloran after only twenty-seven Earth seconds. Alloran seemed wide awake. And he was very clearly scared and nervous. Any Andalite could recognize the signs. Immediately, he set to work at the control node.

Several long minutes passed. <Alloran, are you making any progress?>

There was a moment of silence. Then, <No, I am afraid not. There is an encryption unlike anything I have seen before. I have no idea how to go about breaking it. It is entirely alien to me. Even the alphabet, so to speak, is foreign.>

“You can do Yeerk technology just fine,” Marco commented.

<All Yeerk technology is based off of Andalite technology,> Alloran answered. <This...I must admit that I suspect the Pythagi Conglomerate. Some of these symbols resemble things I saw on their outpost, but that is only speculation. I have no idea how to do this. I... I am sorry, I...>

If Andalites could shed tears, Alloran would have been. I

placed a hand between his stalk eyes. <It is not your fault,> I assured him. <All is not lost yet.>

Jake nodded. “Yeah. You go to bed, Alloran. It’ll all be fine in the morning. We happen to know some guys who have been at this a lot longer than you have. The Chee will have this hacked for us in no time.”

Marco sighed. “So it’s another after-hours visit to Tri-I, then? I always hate those.”

“Better than the midnight run to the Yeerk Pool Tobias is probably pulling,” Cassie reminded him. That made me wonder just where Tobias was. Knowing him as I did, he would very calmly assess the situation. And then go in, as humans say, with guns blazing. I only hoped we were not too late to help.

CHAPTER 6

RACHEL

Have you ever woken up with a massive hangover? That's what I felt like when I came to. My mind was fuzzy and it didn't want to do much thinking. Too bad for it I was the one in charge. I tried to replay the events in my mind. I had been walking to Cassie's house. I was supposed to meet her at the barn and help her with some of the stuff she needed done. Just like old times.

I couldn't remember exactly what happened. I don't know where they came from or how many there were. All I remembered was the feeling of a needle in my neck and then nothing until I woke up.

I was tied to a chair. My wrists were handcuffed behind my back. My ankles were cuffed to the chair. I was in a large room. No doors that I saw, and no windows. The only light was one of those big interrogation-type things dangling above my head.

There could have been a hundred men in this room. Or Kelbrid. Or there could be only a few. I knew that there were two, at least. I could see them. One was a short, elfin-looking

guy. He looked pretty harmless. The other was a big Asian man in a black jumpsuit. His hair was all over the place. It made Tobias's look neat.

The elfin man stepped forward. “Ah, you have woken up,” he said in a nasal monotone. “Perhaps introductions are in order, yes? I am Salheer Six-Seven-One, currently in the service of our mutual acquaintance Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six.”

“You will address him by his title,” the second man interrupted. “Show the Visser the respect that is demanded of us.”

Salheer ignored him. “And this is my associate, Kalroth Three-Three-Seven.-”

“[i]Subvisser[/i] Kalroth Three-Three-Seven,” Kalroth corrected.

Salheer continued, “He is a...devout...servant of the one he calls Visser.”

“What do you want from me?” I demanded. It couldn't be information. If it was something like that, they'd have infested me.

“From you, we ask nothing,” Salheer answered. “As long as you continue to breath, you serve our purposes.”

“What purpose?” I asked. “That doesn't tell me anything!”

“If there is one man who Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six fears-”

“The Visser fears no one,” the Subvisser interrupted. He turned to me. “The Devil Prince has been a thorn in the Visser's side. A small creature who the Visser could crush with one hoof if it was worth his time.”

“And yet,” Salheer took over, “he has not done so. The task has instead fallen to us.”

“To [i]you[/i],” Kalroth corrected. “I won't be here to see the end of it. I have to leave shortly if I am to be present at the coronation. The Visser's ascension is not something I will miss for any price.”

[i]Ascension?[/i] I thought. [i]Coronation? What is he talking about?[/i]

“It is just as well,” Salheer replied. “This task is not one that should be entrusted to one who obeys Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six without thought.”

“What need is there for thought?” Kalroth demanded. “The Visser is the greatest of leaders. To question his orders is idiocy.”

Salheer turned to me. “You see, of course, why this task was given to me.” I nodded. Yeah, I got it.

The Subvisser shook his head. "I do not have the time for this. Do not fail here, Salheer. If the Visser does not punish you for it, I will take your life myself."

Kalroth spun on his heel and disappeared from sight. A few moments later, I heard a door open, then close. Salheer shook his head. "I am so pleased I will not be working with him in the future. Zealots are so very unpleasant, do you not agree, Rachel?"

What was going on here? Salheer seemed a lot more candid than a lot of Yeerks. Salheer did not wait for me to respond. "A shame, what Mersa Five-Two-Eight did. Now Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six trust no one outside of his sight. Only Guraff Four-Two-Seven and zealots like the Subvisser."

"What do you want from me?" I repeated. "What is this all about? If you're here to kill me—"

"Ideally, that will not be necessary. We have informed the Devil Prince of your status here. We agreed to release you upon the condition that he turns himself in to us. If he surrenders, you will be spared."

"He'll never do it," I insisted.

"I agree. As does Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six and Guraff Four-Two-Seven. We are quite confident that he will somehow

find you and attempt to rescue you. We are prepared for that. When he comes for you, he will meet his end.”

“I’ve heard this one before,” I told him. “I’m even more confident than you are that he’ll show up. But if you think this is going to end with you walking away, you couldn’t be more wrong. He’ll come for me. And then, he’ll come for you.”

CHAPTER 7

TOBIAS

I knew how to get to the Yeerk pool. There were plenty of entrances, and I knew a few of them thanks to my time working with Mersa. The nearest one was in the community center, a Yeerk command post. So I went there.

I didn't have any intentions of turning myself in, of course. That would probably mean the end of the war and I couldn't do that, even to save Rachel. But I sure as hell wasn't going to sit around while they had her. I'm sure they expected me to do something. They wanted me to come after her. Fine. Let's give the people what they want.

The community center was dark but not entirely closed up. It was easy enough to slip in; no one noticed the seagull that flew through an open window. Once inside, I demorphed and then went to Howler. I was in a hurry, but I couldn't afford to get careless.

I took one step into the hall and instantly saw the guard walking away from me. The poor bastard never saw it coming. My fist clubbed him in the back of the head, dropping him. I took his Dracon beam and then demorphed. I pulled the body

into the room I had just vacated. Then, I acquired the man.

We have rules against morphing sentient creatures, especially humans. But with Rachel's life at stake, those rules meant nothing to me. I already lost her once and I was NOT going to let it happen again. Something as petty as morality wasn't going to get in the way of that.

No one questioned me as I made my way to what used to be Mersa's office. If there was one person here who knew what was going on, he'd be there.

The door was unlocked and unguarded. I let myself in. A Human-Controller sat behind Mersa's desk, shuffling papers and muttering something that the Visser probably wouldn't want to hear. He barely glanced up when I entered. "What is it? I'm busy here."

I demorphed before I spoke. "Maybe you should look again." He did, and went pale. It probably had something to do with the Dracon beam I was pointing at him. I locked the door, not taking the weapon off of him. "You and I are going to have a little talk."

"I'm not talking to you. You already heard the offer for your lover's life. This is not open for negotiation and even if I had the power to do so, I wouldn't."

I fired the Dracon beam. He twitched. “That was the lowest setting,” I informed him. “For a human, it’s just a painful little shock. There are ten settings on this weapon. Every time you refuse to answer my question or I think you’re lying, I will fire it. Every time I fire, I will increase the power level. How long do you think it will take before I reach the one that will kill you? I’m betting four.”

“You think you can intimidate me, you – GAAAH!” I fired again.

“I will also shoot you every time you speak out of turn. Now, I only have one question: where is she?”

“I’d rather die than – GAAAH!”

“That was level two,” I informed him. I kept my voice level, my face expressionless. That wasn’t a difficulty for me; my face was always like that. “I’m guessing you have two more to go. Where is she?”

“I don’t know.”

I nodded. Then I shot him again. He twitched in his chair. “Level three. You know what the interesting thing about Dracon beams is? They’re a lot like Andalite Shredders, but with one key difference. A Dracon beam is designed to be unnecessarily painful. It’s a concept that I am beginning to

like. One more, I think. Where is Rachel?”

“I swear I don't – AH!!!” He sat in his chair, a crumpled heap. I checked his pulse. Still going. So he wasn't dead yet, just unconscious. I thumbed the Shredder back down to one and shot him again. The jolt woke him up.

“It seems I've misjudged this weapon. You survived level four. Congratulations. Now I have no idea when you'll die. Neither do you. Let's try it again.” I grabbed him by the collar and pulled his face close to mine. “Where. Is. Rachel?”

He was sweating profusely. His eyes were wide. Definitely terrified. “I...I can't. I -” He cut off again when I shot him. I checked and he was still alive. This wasn't working. The next level would almost certainly kill him. I needed a new approach. Then it hit me. The window behind the desk.

A zap from the Dracon beam woke him up again. “Perhaps I haven't made things clear. Do you know why they call me the Devil Prince?” I asked him. “Let me show you.” With the butt of the gun, I broke the window. I grabbed a shard of glass in my hand, not caring that it was cutting me.

He decided it was time to run, but a blast from the Dracon beam sent him to the floor. I rolled him onto his back and grabbed one of his arms. “Where. Is She?” I demanded. On

each word, I made a horizontal slash on his arm.

“You can't survive many of these,” I warned him. “If I have to ask you again, you won't live and I will find someone else. The sight of your body should be enough to convince them. So you get one last chance to tell me what I want to know.”

“She... She's in a warehouse on the outskirts of town.” He gave me an address. Whether he was telling the truth or not, I didn't have the time to question it. “You think you've won?” he demanded from the floor. “There are a hundred Kelbrid there. You won't walk away from this alive.”

I turned back to him. “That makes two of us.” Then I fired the Dracon beam at full power. There was nothing left of the Controller except for some bloodstains on the carpet. Then I morphed to my old red-tailed hawk self and flew out of the window. [i]I'm on my way, Rachel.[/i]

CHAPTER 8

MARCO

Normally, Jake would never have let me drive anywhere. I drive too fast for him, and he's fond of telling me I'm a lunatic while I'm driving. But right now, I guess he realized we needed that. And I had a Ferrari. It was the fastest way we could think of to get to Tri-I's local headquarters.

It was just the four of us. Me, Jake, Cassie, and a human-morphed Ax. No one else could fit in the car. Normally, it's only supposed to seat two, but we managed to cram Cassie and Ax into the back. Between the way they were riding and the way I was driving, this was all very illegal.

Illegal enough to get the attention of a police officer we sped past. "Should I outrun him?" I asked.

Jake shook his head. "This shouldn't take long. It'll come back to bite us if we run."

I nodded and pulled over. The officer approached with a shocked expression on his face. "Do you have any idea how fast you were going!?"

I nodded. "Yeah. But see, here's the thing. I'm Marco. The Animorph. And trust me, this is literally life or death so can I

just pay you now and be on my way?"

The officer wasn't sure what to say to that. Ax added, "I am a Prince with the Andalite military. I believe it is considered courteous for you to ignore my violations of minor laws."

"Going nearly one hundred miles above the speed limit is [i]not[/i] a minor offense. I—"

I pulled out my wallet. "Here's...five hundred dollars. Can I go now?" I asked, counting through it.

"Are you trying to bribe me? Because that's an even more serious offense. Maybe I should just take you four kids downtown for a little bit and see if you want to tell me the truth then."

"The truth?" Jake repeated. "We are who we say we are. Marco, show him your I.D."

The officer reached for his radio. "This is Sergeant Stenson. I've got four kids here with a lot of cash and a stolen car. And the stolen wallet from Marco." The radio crackled. I couldn't tell what it said, but Stenson replied, "Yeah, the Animorph. One of them says he's Marco, and the other's telling me he's an Andalite."

The radio crackled again. Stenson turned back to us. "Get

out of the car.”

“What?” Jake demanded.

“Sir, get out of the car. Place your hands behind your head and step out of the vehicle.”

I turned to Jake. “Can't I just gun the engine and get out of here? We don't have time for this.”

He looked like he was about to say yes when he realized something. Stenson drew his gun. “Get out of the vehicle,” he repeated.

“Better do as he says,” Jake sighed. “We can have someone come along to verify our identities and be on our way.”

I muttered under my breath as Stenson frisked me. Then the officer cuffed me. “You know that's just a waste of cuffs, right?” I said. “I mean, I'll just morph and be out of it.”

He left me face-down on the hood of his car and started on Ax. A moment later, the Andalite joined me. “Marco?” he began.

“Yeah Ax?”

“This hood tastes very good.”

“Glad you're having fun,” I said sarcastically. Then I heard something I didn't expect. Tires squealing. I smelt burnt

rubber. And then I heard gunshots. “What the hell?”

Stenson grabbed me and rolled me on my back. I could see that my car was gone. Jake and Cassie were, too. “You think it matters that two of you got away?” Stenson growled. “It’s irrelevant. When I bring him the two of you, the Visser will promote me for sure.”

I glanced at Ax. “Oh, good. A Yeerk. That makes this so much easier.” Then I kicked him...well, where Rachel always wanted to kick me. Turns out that, even if you have a little slug in your brain, that still hurts enough to make a grown man double over.

Ax and I were up and running in an instant. Well, he was trying to run, but he couldn't quite figure out how to do it with his arms cuffed behind his back. He fell over pretty quickly. And I couldn't exactly help him up.

“Pathetic,” Stenson grunted as he stood up. Then he leveled his gun at us. “These are the famous Animorphs? Not a move, Animorphs, or I pull the trigger. With the mood he’ll be in today, even a pair of corpses will get me a promotion from the Visser. Now,” he said, opening one of the rear doors, “get in and don't talk. If anything suspicious happens, I’ll shoot you both, [i]capiche[/i]?”

Since I didn't see much of an alternative, Ax and I crawled into the back of the Controller cop's car. "Let's just hope Jake and Cassie manage to do something without us for a change," I whispered to Ax.

"What did I say about talking?"

CHAPTER 9

CASSIE

Although I understood why Jake told Marco to pull over, I didn't agree with it. We didn't have time to waste and I was sure we could smooth it all out later. I stood with my hands behind my head, waiting for Sergeant Stenson to frisk and then handcuff me.

“Cassie,” Jake whispered to me, “when he goes to take Ax over to his car, get in the Ferrari.” I didn't speak, but I nodded slightly. When Stenson started taking Ax away, I slipped into the car.

Jake slid into the driver's seat. Then he peeled out. We fishtailed, and Stenson fired a few shots at us, but then we were in the clear. “Jake, we can't just leave them,” I yelled at him.

“No choice. They'll be fine anyway,” Jake assured me. “Marco and Ax can handle one police officer. Right now, our biggest concern has to be Rachel and Tobias. We can go down to the station and pick those other two up later.”

I didn't like leaving them there, but it was a little too late now. “I hope we can get into Tri-I,” I muttered.

“Maybe we should call ahead?” he suggested.

I nodded and took out my phone. A quick call to the operator got me the number for the local Tri-I branch. I dialed it. “Hello?” a groggy-sounding man's voice said.

“Hi. This is Cassie. The Animorph. I'm trying to reach the local Tri-I director, I-”

“Ah, Cassie!” It was the same voice, but it had changed. He didn't sound tired anymore. “Thank God you called. There's a lot you need to know about right now.”

“So tell us, Mark,” I advised.

“Not over the phone. When can you meet me?”

“We're almost there, actually. Jake and I are pulling in as we speak.”

“I'll be in my office. It'll be unlocked.”

I led Jake to the director's office. Mark looked like any other guy in a suit, but he was actually one of the Chee. He seemed nervous. I wasn't sure how much of it was intentional. I think that, after so many thousands of years pretending to be a human, he might as well have been one.

“Thank God,” he muttered. “Where are the others?”

“That's the problem,” Jake sighed. “Marco and Ax just got arrested. We have no idea where Tobias and Rachel are.

Rachel got kidnapped by some-”

“Yeerks named Salheer and Kalroth,” Mark finished. “Yeah, I know. That’s just one of the problems I needed to talk to you about.”

“Let’s deal with that first,” I said. “If we don’t find them in, like, half an hour, Rachel and the baby could be killed and I don’t even want to think about what Tobias would do.”

Mark nodded. “Alright. Yeah, that’s the most important thing right now. I’d tell you, but I don’t know where Rachel is.”

“We have the message they sent Tobias in the Reliquary,” Jake told him. “Can you access it remotely from here and try to trace it?”

Mark closed his eyes. Or at least, he appeared to. “Yeah, I can try. Although with all the security Alloran put on the Reliquary, it might take a bit.”

“Get started then,” Jake said. Mark’s hologram disappeared, leaving only a steel and ivory dog-like android in its place. A Chee’s true form. An agonizing ten minutes passed while he accessed things. Then, finally, he nodded.

“I’ve got it,” he told us. “The message was sent from a warehouse on the outskirts of town.” He gave us the address.

“But that's not our only problem.”

“It's our biggest,” Jake responded. “We've got about twenty minutes to get there, think of a plan, and save Rachel.”

“You should at least hear the other news,” Mark insisted.

“Talk fast,” Jake snapped.

I put a hand on his arm to try and calm him down. “Go on, Mark,” I said gently.

Mark nodded. “The Visser's going back to the Yeerk homeworld to meet with the Council of Thirteen. All the Yeerks on Earth are talking about it. They think he's going to declare himself Emperor.”

“Oh...not good,” Jake said quietly. “But how can he get on the homeworld? The Andalites have that place thoroughly blockaded and all...”

Mark shrugged as his hologram reappeared. “No one's sure. But this is huge. Guraff is leaving Earth to be there, and so are all the important Yeerks. If this isn't stopped somehow, the Visser will have even more power than he does already. No one would dare oppose him.”

I nodded. “Yeah. And once he's finally the one on top, who knows what he'll do next?” I asked. “He's all about ambition. Once he climbs to the top of his own species, what's next?”

Complete domination of the galaxy?”

“I don't know,” Jake admitted. “But I know the one thing that we need to know: we've got to stop him. But first, we have to get Rachel. Come on, I'll drive.”

“Wait,” Mark said again. “There's one more thing you should know. And it's even bigger than this meeting.” I know it's not possible, but I swear my blood froze in my veins.

CHAPTER 10

RACHEL

“Do you enjoy light conversation, Rachel?” Salheer asked me. I didn't want to talk to him, but it was better than sitting there with him staring at me silently forever. It seemed like he never blinked.

“Since when do Yeerks like to talk?” I demanded.

“Now, now, Rachel, there is no need to be belligerent. Soon, this will all be over. I am certain that you will find something you would like to talk about.”

“My pregnancy hormones are making me want to bite you,” I shot back. “Want to talk about how you would taste?”

“You want to talk about me? I am flattered, Rachel. I will gladly tell you.”

I sighed. “You're just looking for an excuse to tell me your life story, aren't you?”

“I find it to be an interesting story, Rachel. Perhaps you would enjoy it. I was born in a pool on the Hork-bajir world. When I was very young, I made a bit of a reputation for myself by eradicating some Andalite raiders. I soon found myself a Subvisser.”

“I’m very impressed,” I said sarcastically.

“So was the Council of Thirteen,” Salheer told me. “A few years later, they saw fit to promote me to the rank of Visser. After a few more years, I found myself on the Yeerk homeworld, dealing in politics with the Council of Thirteen.”

“Poor you,” I muttered.

“I would disagree, Rachel. I was very lucky. I became a member of the Council.”

That did get my attention. I sat up a bit straighter. This Yeerk had once been a member of the Council of Thirteen? What was he doing here. Well, since he wanted to talk, “How'd you end up on Earth working for this idiot?”

“After our initial defeat on Earth, the Council was...shall we say...suspended. My career seemed to be over until the Pythagi Conglomerate appeared. They wanted to ensure that Mersa Five-Two-Eight's rebellion was successful, but they feared he was not quite up to the task. They believed I was. Their men smuggled me, as it were, to Earth.

“Once Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six absorbed the remnants of Mersa Five-Two-Eight's rebels into his own forces and learned of my identity, he decided to retain me as an advisor. After all, with Guraff Four-Two-Seven away, he will be in sore need of

good advice.”

“You were a rebel? Then it's only a matter of time before kills you. He'll never trust you,” I told Salheer.

“True, very true. He is incapable of trusting, especially those who have already fought against him. That is why he refuses to let me out of his sights. I will work directly under him until the end of my days, I fear.”

“Good news for you is, that's not going to be long,” I told him. I hated sitting around waiting for Tobias. The whole 'damsel in distress' thing isn't my show. I had to do something. At the very least, I could get some information about these new Yeerks.

“What about Kalroth?” I asked. He was a Subvisser. He had to be important.

“Kalroth Three-Three-Seven is one of Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six's own creations. A Yeerk born and bred under his tenure as the servant of the One. Subvisser Kalroth Three-Three Seven is fanatically devoted to the one he calls Visser. It is...religious...to him. A disturbing number of Yeerks feel similarly.”

“Is Kalroth good at...anything?” I asked. Salheer definitely had to be smart, but Kalroth hadn't come across as all that

bright.

“He is good at obeying his master,” Salheer said simply. “That is the most important thing. Kalroth needs not be feared in any case. He will be working for Undervisser Guraff Four-Two-Seven. I do not have to tell you which of the two you need to fear.”

“Undervisser?” I asked.

Salheer nodded. “It is a rank not commonly bestowed. A Visser may appoint an Undervisser who acts on his behalf. This Undervisser has all the powers and privileges of the one who he serves.”

“I can't imagine a Yeerk trusting another one with all that power,” I said.

“Most do not. But Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six trusts Guraff Four-Two-Seven completely. And I believe that his trust is not misplaced. Guraff Four-Two-Seven was a personal friend to the Emperor. If there is any Yeerk who can be trusted, it is indeed Guraff Four-Two-Seven.

“Why do you do that?” I asked. “Saying the name and number every time. It's really annoying.”

“I do that because it is how I speak, Rachel. Do we not all have our own unique oddities? I do not fault you for yours.

Why must you fault me for mine?"

"Because you're a brain-stealing slug and I want you to burn in hell?" I suggested.

"Perhaps I will one day find that to be my situation," Salheer conceded. "But I can guarantee that Tobias will beat me there. He will be on his way soon. It is worth missing Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six's coronation to witness Tobias's downfall."

"Coronation?" I asked. "Kalroth mentioned that. What's going on?"

"In a matter of hours, Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six will stand before the Council of Thirteen and propose a radical change of power that they will have no choice but to accept," Salheer informed me.

"And why would they listen to him?" I demanded.

"Because Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six has the ability to bring the Yeerk Empire into an age it has only previously imagined."

"Yeah; him and every megalomaniac."

"No, no, Rachel. This is not some mad delusion of grandeur. Actually, I was very impressed by it. Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six thought up this one all by himself. Not even Guraff Four-Two-Seven helped him."

Then Salheer told me exactly why the Council of Thirteen would do whatever the Visser told them to. And I realized that Salheer was right: this wasn't crazy at all. The Visser could wipe all opposition from the face of the galaxy. And we had helped him do it.

CHAPTER 11

AX

I believe that sending the entire car ride to the police station in silence was very difficult to Marco. It may have been a detriment to his health. I myself was not very pleased. We had been captured by a Yeerk. And what was more, we had allowed it to happen. And now there was a very good likelihood that Rachel would be killed and we would be infested.

Stenson drove us into a garage at the police station. Instead of stopping the car, however, he drove through what appeared to be a solid wall. A hologram. Behind it was a long ramp spiraling downwards, no doubt to the Yeerk pool.

“Ax, this ride is scary,” Marco whispered. “I want off.”

“I am similarly disconcerted,” I agreed.

Stenson continued to drive us in silence until we reached the bottom of the ramp. He got out, trained his gun on me, and ordered the two of us out of the car. “We’re going for a little walk. We’re just in time; the Visser is about to leave.”

He marched us through the caves of the Yeerk pool. I will not bother to describe to you every detail of that hell. Let me

simply say that there truly is no worse place in the universe.

We found ourselves in a large private hangar. The Visser stood before his Blade ship, ready to enter it. <Ah, so you spoke the truth,> he said to our captor when he saw us. <Excellent work, Meshem Eight-Six-Zero. You will be well rewarded for this.

Then he turned his stolen eyes on us. <And what fortuitous timing. You are just in time to see me off. I'm paying a little visit to the Council of Thirteen, you see. The time has come for power to change hands, don't you think? I am going to go and...convince...the Council to agree.>

<They have no reason to listen to you,> I said. <It was you, after all, who caused the Yeerks to lose on Earth and brought about your downfall all across the galaxy.>

<Hmm...I and here I thought you Animorphs took the credit for that,> the Visser mused. <But they have no choice but to listen to me. I hold what they all want: a chance to undo the mistakes we made on Earth.>

“Ax, I'll bet you ten thousand dollars he goes off on one of his crazy speeches,” Marco said quickly.

<Your people, Andalite, believe that they have little to fear from us. Although we Yeerks are numerous, we have few hosts

and almost no resources. Even if I were to devote all of my Kelbrid to a war effort, we still do not have the ships necessary to wage a true war. But I have the answer to all of that.

<My deal with the Pythagi Conglomerate, the one I made after you so helpfully eliminated Mersa, guarantees me the necessary resources. Ship, weapons, staging points for the invasions of worlds... The Pythagi can supply it all.>

<Except that slugs do not fight well,> I reminded him.

<No, they do not. But Kelbrid do. How many Kelbrid do you think are in the galaxy, Aximili? More than I could ever hope to use. I see no reason not to donate them all to the New Yeerk Order. I do not have the resources to maintain all that I have here on Earth any way.>

I thought about it. With the Kelbrid hosts, the Yeerks would be powerful. And with the aid of the Pythagi Conglomerate, they could indeed afford to begin a new war. But, <All of your important worlds are blockaded by the Andalites. You could never hope to launch an attack from any of them.>

<True, Prince Aximili. However, the Andalities over the Yeerk homeworld do not expect an attack there. Especially not

from the Pythagi. Never would they expect an open attack from them. A swift strike will be enough to drive the Andalites away for long enough for me to arrive, make my changes, and begin the war anew. And once I have what I want from it, the Homeworld holds very little appeal. There are no major factories, no great number of hosts, nothing worth noting.>

A terrible thought occurred to me then. This might actually work. Open war from the Pythagi Conglomerate was not something my people had ever expected. And our military had been downsized after the First War. Could we stand against this? I was not certain.

<Once my command is finalized, I will lead a strike into the heart of the Andalite homeworld,> the Visser continued. <Your people are unprepared for such an attack. Even if you assembled all of your fleets and concentrated them around your homeworld, you could not match the numbers of the Pythagi. Their resources are virtually unlimited, as are my Kelbrid. This will be the end of the Andalites and with them, the backbone of any resistance to our control.>

“That's pretty clever,” Marco admitted. “How long did it take Guraff to come up with it?”

The Visser shook his head. <This plan, Marco, was all

mine. A slow, quiet invasion may not be my forte, but this is an open war and that is something at which I excel. In one swift stroke, we will destroy all opposition to our empire. And it is all thanks to you.>

“Us?”

<Of course. Had you not killed Mersa for me, had you not driven him to me in the first place, I would never have encountered the Pythagi. Had you not made them realize how useless he was, they would never have sided with me. This was all made possible by you, Animorphs. I suppose I should thank you.> The Visser nodded. <Ah, yes, I have an idea. I will infest you, but not yet. First, you will have the honor of watching my coronation.>

To Stenson, he snapped, <Put them on the Blade ship. They are going to be special guests at my coronation.>

“Yes, Visser.”

“Looks like we're up for a road trip, eh Ax?” Marco said.

<Yes Marco, that appears to be the case.>

“In that case, are we there yet?”

CHAPTER 12

JAKE

This was just one thing piling on top of another. Rachel's situation and Tobias's absence were bad enough. The Visser becoming the Emperor was a real problem. But none of those compared to what would happen if the Visser's plan with the Pythagi Conglomerate succeeded. And it looked like it would unless someone did something.

“We've got to stop this,” I said to Mark. “The Andalties have to be warned. Maybe if they knew ahead of time, they could stop it somehow.”

“What about Rachel?” Cassie reminded me.

I shook my head. “We'll have to trust Tobias to handle that. This...it's...more important.”

Cassie looked down at the floor. I knew what she was thinking. I was sacrificing Rachel's life. Again. But I knew better. I was sure that Tobias could help her. And we couldn't let this plan succeed. It would be a whole new war and we had to prevent that at all costs.

I turned back to Mark. “We need to get in touch with the Andalites. Do you have a ship we could borrow or

something?”

He shook his head. “Sadly, no. Although Tri-I has several craft, they are all equipped with weapons and I cannot give you one or help you to take one because there is a very high likelihood that you would use said weapons.”

“So you're just going to stand here and let this happen?” I demanded. “Why don't you get in touch with the Andalites or something? You could at least warn them!”

“I cannot do that either. Warning the Andalites would result in the Andalites killing the Yeerks and I cannot help them in any way.”

“But by not warning them, you're helping the Yeerks kill the Andalites!” I argued.

“Yes, that is true. The problem is that no matter what I do, violence will ensue. In cases like this, my programming only allows me to take no actions whatsoever. I cannot assist either side in any active way.”

“Mark, I admire that and all,” Cassie said, “but inaction really isn't an option here. We have to do something!”

“There is one way that I can help you,” he told us. “A shuttle is leaving soon to take some Controllers to the Visser's coronation ceremony. Some of our people will be on it.

Although their security measures will search for your usual methods, the Yeerk's defenses will not be able to detect small bugs hiding inside of our bodies.”

I nodded. “Fine. Where can I find this shuttle?”

“I can take you there,” Mark assured us. “Morph now and once there, I will transfer you to another Chee.”

Obediently, Cassie and I started to morph. “Flies,” I told her. I felt the familiar changes. Is it odd that I've gotten used to turning into a housefly? Of course it is; my whole life is odd. Even my death was a little odd.

So, thanks to all the oddness of my life, I didn't think twice about turning into a fly and crawling inside of an ancient robot that looked like a big metal doggie. Did I really just say that? Marco must be getting to me. Cassie and I rode in silence for what felt like half an hour. I knew why she was quiet.

I couldn't explain to her that I wasn't sacrificing Rachel again. I couldn't bring myself to do that. If I thought she was in any real danger, I'd have gone after her and had Tobias give the Andalites a phone call or something later. But I knew Tobias could handle whatever might be going on with Rachel. The Andalities needed my help a lot more than he did.

But sometimes, Cassie just doesn't get strategy and tactics.

She sees the people involved in them. That was a strength in a lot of ways. Like Sun Tzu said, you've got to know your enemy, and no one knew people like Cassie did. But she couldn't separate the people from the tactic. That was her greatest weakness, by far.

And in some ways, it was mine, too. Only once was I ever really able to be completely ruthless. Only one time could I ever see my people as something other than people; faceless soldiers sent to die. The day I saw that, the day we won the First War, was the day I realized that I could never do that again, no matter what the price.

I zoned out for a while, thinking about what we would do, how to handle the situation. If we could break up their alliance, that would be great. But I didn't think we had the abilities to do that. The best we could do was prepare for the Visser's attack. And get used to calling him Emperor. I shuddered at the thought of that.

Then I heard a voice. "Hey guys. Long time no see."

<Erek?> I asked.

"Yeah; who were you expecting?"

<No one in particular,> I admitted. <Up to your old tricks again, huh?>

“I guess so,” he said quietly. “I’m in a bathroom outside of the hangar right now. Once we get into the ship, I won’t be able to talk to you. We’ll have to be very careful, I’m hitching a ride with a Subvisser called Kalroth Three-Three-Seven. He’s just a little crazy and I don’t want to tick him off.”

<Alright. Just let us know when we’re there. And when we need to demorph; I don’t want to spend the rest of my life as a fly,> I reminded him.

“I’m on it Jake. Where are the others?”

<I have no idea,> I admitted. This just kept spiraling farther and farther out of control.

CHAPTER 13

RACHEL

Salheer finished telling me about the Visser's plans with the Pythagi Conglomerate and then looked at his watch. "It seems we have all misjudged your lover, Rachel. He has either failed to locate you or has chosen to sacrifice you for his own freedom. An admirably calculated decision on his part."

No. He had to be wrong. Tobias wouldn't have left me here. He couldn't have. He must be looking at me right now, trying to figure out how to rescue me. He'd appear any moment now. I was sure of it.

Salheer drew a Dracon beam. "It is interesting to see the limits of his love for you. I was told that human love knows no limits. Intriguing, to see such a thing proven false."

He aimed the Dracon beam at me. And suddenly, I felt myself falling. I tumbled down, rolling over myself until I slammed hard against something solid. I opened my eyes and looked around.

I was in some sort of tunnel about as big around as a sewer pipe. I could see a ring of light up at one end. Salheer peered down into the darkness, but he couldn't see me. "What the

hell?” I said mostly to myself.

I realized that the tunnel was coated with something slimy. And then I realized that I had been in an tunnel like this before. This was a Taxxon tunnel. And apparently a very new one; just made. That meant that there had to be a Taxxon somewhere around here. And let me tell you, a wounded pregnant woman is an easy meal for a Taxxon.

I rolled over, still attached to the splintered remains of my chair. That was when I saw it. One of the biggest Taxxons I had ever seen, looking like it was about to eat me. “What took you so long?” I demanded.

<You know,> it replied, <if you kiss a Taxxon it turns into a handsome Prince.>

“Tobias, I am [i]not[/i] kissing you in that morph.” With a sigh, he started demorphing. “What kept you?” I repeated.

<Well, I found this place pretty quickly after I got their message. But here's the thing: there are about a hundred Kelbrid in there. Nothing we have could stand up to that. So I decided to go for a...less conventional approach,> he answered.

He cracked his neck as he resumed his human form. “The thing is, it takes a considerable amount of time to eat through

all this dirt and through the floor. And I had to demorph a few times because I lost control of the Taxxon.”

He helped me up and we started off down the tunnel. “This place is disgusting,” I muttered. “Did you have to use so much slime?”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’ll slow down the Kelbrid.”

“The Kelbrid?” I repeated.

“Of course. Do you think whoever’s in charge is just going to let us walk away?”

“Guess not,” I admitted. “You seem way too calm about all of this.”

“I’ve thought it through.” It was totally dark where we were, so only the fact that his voice had changed made me realize that he had morphed. Howler, no doubt.

“What are you going to do? You can’t fight them all,” I warned him.

“I know,” he said grimly. “Get to the end of the tunnel, the Reliquary will be waiting for you.”

“I’m not leaving you here to die,” I insisted.

“I’ll be fine,” he responded. “Now go; I can’t do this with you here. It might hurt the baby.”

“What... Fine, I’ll go, but don’t you dare go and get

yourself killed on me, you hear?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. If I got killed, you'd find a way to bring me back just so you could kill me for it."

"That's exactly right," I replied. Then I felt around for him. I didn't know if he actually had a plan or not. The others might not know it, but he tends to lie about that sort of thing. If this was one of those times, I couldn't just walk away.

After a moment of hesitation, I kissed him. He laughed a little when I pulled away. "What, you'll kiss a Howler but not a Taxxon?" he said, a hit of amusement creeping even into his Howler voice.

"Sharp teeth, killer claws, big strong arms arms... Howlers are hot," I joked. "Besides, at least they have some humanoid anatomy."

"Where it counts," he said. I could feel him leering even in the darkness.

"Grow up."

"I'll do it when you're safe. Now go!" I realized then why he was yelling at the end. I heard the sounds of someone coming up from the other end of the tunnel. And since Howlers could see heat, I was betting Tobias could see the Kelbrid approaching.

I turned and took off down the tunnel. Or up, I guess, since the part I was running on had an upward slant. I slipped and slid on the goo Tobias's morph had left all around the tunnel. It was hard going and I was tired.

Behind me, I could hear the sounds of a fight. I had no idea how many Kelbrid Tobias was fighting. At most, they could probably only get at him one or two at a time, but even two Kelbrid are enough to take down a Howler if he's not careful. And Tobias was at a slight disadvantage in the darkness. Not a major one, but enough of one that I didn't want to think about it.

After a minute or so of running and sliding, I saw a hole of light up ahead. I ran out into the fresh night air. I climbed out of the hole and almost instantly bumped my head against something I couldn't see.

“He had to park the cloaked ship right over the hole, didn't he?” I muttered, feeling for the hatch so I could get inside. From the hole, I heard the echo of the most godaweful sound in the galaxy. The howl that gave the Howler its name.

The howl doesn't do much to a Kelbrid. But then I felt the earth shake and I heard more noise. It almost sounded like an earthquake. Then I realized what had happened: the howl had

collapsed the tunnel. But Tobias was in there...

He emerged a few moments later, already demorphing. “How'd you get out of that one?” I demanded pulling him into the ship.

“The part of the tunnel I was in was supported better. I intentionally left parts of it weaker, so that they'd collapse. I was in a 'safe zone'. They'll have a hard time following us through that. Come on, we've done enough for today. Let's go home.”

I shook my head. “No, we can't go home yet. This night isn't over. Start driving, I'll tell you on the way.”

CHAPTER 14

TOBIAS

Rachel and I didn't have any time to celebrate her safe return. Not after she told me that the Visser was going to free the Yeerk homeworld and then attack the Andalites. We both knew we had to do something. And I could only think of one thing to do.

I contacted the Andalites. Being a Prince, it's easy enough for me to get through to important people. In fact, I was instantly connected to War-Prince Glorfindel-Learas-Zaknefein. Technically, I was supposed to be taking orders from him. Then again, there were a lot of things I was supposed to be doing.

<Prince Tobias? Where in the Ellimist's name have you been? The rumors we've heard about your actions and Menderash's report have->

“No time for that now,” I interrupted. “We've got some real problems on our hands.” I took a deep breath, unsure how much to tell him. “Esplin Nine-Four-Double-Six has escaped. He infested an Andalite named Prince Imrahil-Feyorn-Breeyar and is on his way to liberate the Yeerk homeworld as

we speak.”

One thing I admired about War-Prince Glorfindel is that he doesn't question it when people give him that sort of news. He didn't waste time asking if I was sure or how I knew this or even how Esplin had escaped. Instead, he asked, <What are his forces like?>

“Kelbrid soldiers, a few morph-capable Humans and Hork-bajir,” I told him. “But the real problem is his allies. He's formed a formal alliance with the Pythagi Conglomerate. He has all their resources at his disposal.”

<I will inform the Electorate at once, Prince Tobias. I will personally lead a fleet to reinforce the Yeerk blockade. Thank you for->

I cut him off. “No, don't bother. By the time you can assemble your forces and reach the homeworld, it'll be too late. He'll overwhelm your defenders there and then just wait for you to walk into his trap.”

<You cannot seriously be suggesting that we abandon our forces above the Yeerk planet,> Glorfindel argued. <We must prevent them from taking that world back at all costs!>

“I would advise against that, War-Prince.”

Glorfindel shook his head. <This conversation goes

beyond us. I am going to inform the Electorate of this and request that they allow you to join them in their council of war. Stand by for the response.>

Obediently, I stood there, waiting. “Tobias, you can't actually be thinking of abandoning them,” Rachel said to me.

“There's nothing we can do to help them,” I told her.

“I don't care. We could at least help them. The Reliquary could probably make it there before the Yeerks did. We could help them fight. Or at least warn them about the attack so they'll be ready for it.”

I shook my head slowly. “The Yeerks will come with overwhelming force. There are times when numbers matter, Rachel, and this is one of them. It'll be a slaughter. Walking into it will only get us killed.”

“We at least have to warn them!”

Again, I shook my head. “We can't do that. We'd lose the initiative if we do that.”

“What initiative? The Yeerks are the ones attacking. At least this way we could take the first step and-”

“And let them know that we know their plans,” I finished. “Right now, they don't know that we know. I doubt Salheer will contact the Visser yet to let him know we escaped; he

seems smarter than that. I think-”

<Prince Tobias?> a new voice said. I turned back to the communicator to see a hologram. Compared to Glorfindel, this Andalite looked very old.

I bowed like I had been told to do when they made me a Prince. “Councilor Lirem,” I said. Lirem-Arrepoth-Terrouss, head of the Electorate and probably the most powerful person in the galaxy, politically speaking. At least, for now.

<The news you bring is very disturbing. War-Prince Glorfindel has informed me that you suggest not reinforcing our people above the Yeerk world. And I hear from your conversation with your...subordinate...that you do not want to offer them any aid or warning. You do realize that would likely mean the sacrifice of every Andalite above the planet, do you not?>

“I realize this, Councilor,” I said quietly. “But right now, I think I know what the Visser's next move will be and I can stop him. If he learns that we know of his plans, I have no idea how he'll react.”

<What do you think he will do after liberating his homeworld?> Lirem asked.

“One of his subordinates told Rachel,” I nodded at her,

“that the Visser will lead an attack on the Andalite homeworld itself.”

<Yes, I see. That is what I expected. I will recall our forces from other less important areas and reinforce the home defenses. He will not be expecting us to be prepared for him. Even if we are outnumbered, the surprise may give us the advantage we need to defeat them.>

I shook my head. “No. He won't attack your homeworld. That's the logical target, the one you'd expect. He wants you to withdraw your forces from other areas to make them easier to attack. I'm not sure what his other targets might be but-”

<Prince Tobias, are you about to suggest that we leave our own world open to invasion?> His tone was soft. I knew he couldn't believe what he was hearing. I also knew that he wouldn't be willing to accept it. I had to convince him somehow...

I nodded. “The fact that a plan to attack the Andalite homeworld was leaked makes me sure it's a lie. The Visser would never be that careless; and even if he was, his subordinates would not be. I think his real target is the Hork-bajir world. Many Yeerk loyalist forces are still quarantined on that planet, and he keeps large numbers of Kelbrid there as

well. With the blockade weakened to defend your world, he could easily come in and claim Hork-bajir.”

<You give him too much credit,> Lirem argued. <Esplin is not that clever. If he was, he would not have lost to a handful of human children.>

“He isn't,” I admitted, “but Guraff Four-Two-Seven is.”

Lirem inhaled sharply. <The God General has returned? We thought he fell in the battle for Earth.>

I shook my head. “Guraff's back, and he's with the Visser. I don't think I need to remind you how dangerous he is.”

The Councilor nodded. <I will convene with the rest of the Electorate. We will contact you presently to decide what we will do.>

I nodded. Soon, I'd have a lot of convincing to do.

CHAPTER 15

MARCO

It didn't take the Yeerks long to realize that letting Stenson guard us wasn't a good idea. We were, after all, the Animorphs. Well, two of them at least. So we got a very special visit from everyone's favorite Hork-bajir.

Ax and I were sealed inside a cell on the Blade ship's detention block. And by sealed in, I mean that the whole place was covered in forcefields, so getting out wouldn't be easy even if we morphed into something really really tiny and tried to crawl away. And if we even tried to start some trouble, Guraff was standing outside, ready to smack us down.

His greeting words to us were, "The Visser would have you infested, but he wishes to see the looks on your faces when he is promoted. Rather foolish, I think. You have been known to be...slippery...in the past. But I will obey my orders."

"So, Guraff," I began, trying to make conversation, "what does the Visser's big promotion mean for you?"

"Very little. My function does not change. I will always be a warrior, regardless of what title my commander holds. The

only thing that will change is the number of men under my command. And with the proper strategy and might, that number means little.”

“I see...” I decided to try again. “So how do Yeerks celebrate? I mean, you [i]do[/i] celebrate sometimes, don't you?”

“To each his own. Esplin will likely torture some of the former rebels in his chambers. I will most likely treat myself to some of the finest bark from the Hork-bajir world.”

“What's it? Bark and pain?” I asked. “No booze, no women, no music? No wild parties when your best friend becomes the Emperor?”

“I enjoy a life of celibacy, Marco. I am devoted entirely to the path of the warrior and to nothing else.”

“No one [i]enjoys[/i] a life of celibacy,” I muttered.

<Must we converse with this Yeerk?> Ax demanded.

I shrugged. “We don't have to. But it'll kill the time.”

A Kelbrid loped in front of our cell and said something in what I assume was it's native language. Guraff nodded and then switched on a monitor outside of our cell. “Although I would prefer to witness this from the bridge, I am not about to risk you two escaping,” Guraff told us.

“What are we watching?” I asked him.

“The liberation of my homeworld.”

“Oh.”

Ax and I stared at the screen. For a minute, it was nothing but the blank whiteness of Z-space. And then, it looked like darkness filled up the screen. Now the bits of white were only the stars. But the stars were the last thing I noticed.

I saw a Dome ship, floating above a green-black planet that must have been the Yeerk homeworld. <Identify yourselves!> an Andalite voice barked over the ship's communication system.

I heard the Visser's voice next. I guess he wanted everyone to hear him. <Have you forgotten me so quickly, Andalite scum? Do yo not recognize Esplin Nine-Four-Double-Six?>

<The Abomination?> the Andalite gasped. <No, it is not possible. You are imprisoned on Earth. You could not have escaped!>

<Once again, the your people have underestimated me,> the Visser sneered. <And now you will die for it.>

<You are outnumbered, Visser. There are ten Dome ships orbiting this world, each with five squadrons of our fighters. Your single ship cannot hope to prevail. You will die here once

and for all!>

The Visser laughed, a sound that I swear to God made my heart stop. <Perhaps you have forgotten how to count.> And then some sort of dark miracle happened. Ships appeared out of nowhere.

They looked like giant sphered studded with weapons and hatches for fighters. Imagine a smaller version of the Death Star with toned-down lasers. That's what these were like. They were giant, even bigger than the Dome ships. And more numerous. For every Dome ship I saw, I saw three of these.

<Pythagi Corrupters? Where did they come from?> the Andalite cried. <All units, move to intercept. Send for reinforcements! This is a full attack!>

<How is this possible?> Ax demanded. <How could they not be seen? This cannot be.>

Guraff turned to face him. “You may recall, Prince Aximili, that I once had the...experience...of meeting the Helmacrons. I was very impressed with their shrink ray technology. When the Visser made his deal with the Pythagi Conglomerate, I advised them to obtain and manufacture this technology. We hid their minimized ships inside of the Blade ship and released them now.”

I had to admit that it was brilliant. And terrible. I watched as the Corrupters fired in all directions. The Andalites never had a chance. Their Dome ships couldn't stand up to the pounding they were receiving. After only a few minutes, the first one fell, and the the others started going.

The panicked cries of the Andalties rang out over the communications system. I guess the Visser had used his stolen knowledge of Andalite technology to hack it. At first, I heard battle cries, Andalites trying to rally each other to fight back. Then their voices turned into cries of panic. And then cries for their mothers. And finally, silence other than frantic calls for retreat.

The few remaining Dome ships tried to run, but met with no success. Even with their domes jettisoned, they couldn't hope to get away. Violet beams from the Corrupters tore them to pieces. The Visser brought down the final one from the Blade ship.

I stared at the monitor, horrified, as we descended onto the Yeerk homeworld. I glanced over Ax and saw that he was in his human morph. Crying. I couldn't blame him. After all, I was crying, too.

CHAPTER 16

CASSIE

Jake and I couldn't see the slaughter that took place, since we were flies. But we could hear the Andalites. Crying for battle, crying for retreat, crying for their mother, and then just crying. It was as bad as being at the Yeerk pool. I always thought that the war we fought was worse than an open war. But now I'm not so sure.

“Where did those Pythagi ships come from?” Erek asked someone. “How the hell did that happen?”

“I don't really know. I heard something about shrink rays. All I know is that Guraff planned the whole thing.”

“And now the Visser's going to take all the credit,” Erek muttered. “I'm going to go to the bathroom and...celebrate.”

The other Yeerk laughed. “Getting a little host-happy on us, Ateriss? But I guess there's no harm in it today.”

Erek went into the bathroom. “You guys should demorph now,” he told us. We did. Once I had eyes, I realized that the real reason Erek came in here was to cry. Tears were streaming down his face and he was hugging himself.

I sat on the floor next to him and put one arm around him.

It went through the hologram, so it probably looked really weird. “Erek, I-”

I cut off when the door opened. A Controller in black jumpsuit stood there, looking from one of us to the next to the next. “I'm sorry to interrupt...whatever the hell you three are doing to each other in here...but the Subvisser wants us all outside immediately. The Visser just landed and the Council of Thirteen is already here to meet him.”

Erek and I stood up. Apparently, the Controller had been too distracted to think. Before we left, Jake and I morphed to birds and perched on Erek's shoulders. He could carry us easily, and his hologram made it look like we weren't there.

We stood in the assembly in front of the Subvisser's ship. We were in an open field. The ground was a dirty grey color, and green lightning flashed across the sky. Two rows of Kelbrid stood in front of the Blade ship, making a sort of tunnel. At the other end was a group of Controllers in red robes. The Council of Thirteen.

Several Pythagi ships had landed and were disgorging men. I saw Pythagi with spears, Oda cannons, and unarmed Pythagi. But the ones that really caught my attention were the musicians. They started playing what I believe was their

version of fanfare.

Then the Visser emerged from his ship, followed by Guraaff. <Look,> Jake whispered.

<Yeah, I see them.> I could just barely see Marco and Ax in their human forms, looking out from a window of the Blade ship. How had they ended up there? I had no clue, but that police officer was probably a Controller.

Everyone was cheering as the Visser walked between the rows of Kelbrid. No, walked isn't the right word. He was strutting, savoring every second of this. He was finally being treated like the hero he liked to think he was.

It took the Visser a long time to reach the Council. He had to have strutted for at least a mile. Finally, though, he reached the Council. A Hork-bajir Controller in a red robe stepped forward. The crowd went silent, and the musicians stopped playing. "Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six," he began. "Do you know who I am?"

The Visser nodded. <You are Garoff One-Six-Eight.>

The Controller nodded. "Indeed I am. How many of us do you count, Esplin?"

<Twelve,> the Visser said after a moment. I hadn't realized it before, but there were indeed only twelve of them.

Garoff nodded. “Not long ago, one of our members disappeared. Salheer Six-Seven-One has gone missing. One is needed to replace him.” One of the councilors brought a red robe that was probably designed for a human. It would fit over the Visser's torso. “Will you honor us by taking his place, Esplin?”

And then the strangest thing happened. <No.>

Everyone gasped. Only Guraff seemed like he wasn't surprised. “You refuse our offer?” Garoff gasped. “Will you not reconsider? How could we not accept the one who liberated our world? Please, Esplin, join us.”

<My answer remains the same. No.>

This was getting weird. No one dared speak now. What was the Visser up to? “You will be the Emperor, Esplin. There is no one else who we could choose for this. Do you refuse even this much?”

<I refuse,> the Visser said for a third time. <I renounce the old Yeerk Empire. I renounce a power structure that encourages us to turn on each other. I renounce an empire whose leader must be so afraid of assassins that he fears to show his face to his soldiers.>

No one knew what to say to that. The Councilors shifted

nervously. <I have come to propose a radical restructuring of our people. The Yeerk Empire will be no more. It will be replaced with the New Yeerk Order,> the Visser announced.

“What is it that you want, Esplin?” Garoff asked. He sounded worried.

<The Empire encouraged us to kill each other. The infighting it bred is what destroyed our once great Empire. Politics caused us to sabotage each other at every turn. I will not suffer through that again. So my Undervisser, Guraff-Four-Two-Seven, and your former fellow Councilor, Salheer Six-Seven-One, have designed a new system for our people.

<Every planet under Yeerk control will be answerable to the Visser of that world. The Visser will have complete control over the world he governs. It will be his duty to assign Subvisers and Undvisers of his world as he sees fit.

<The Council of Thirteen will remain intact, but with limited power. The Council now has only a few responsibilities: the administration of the homeworld, the appointment of Vissers, the allotment of resources to the various worlds, and the settling of disputes between Vissers. That shall be the extent of their influence.>

Garoff probably looked stunned, but his face was shrouded

by his robes. “And why would we agree to do this, Esplin?”

<Call me Visser. And you will do it because if you do not, my friends and I,> the Visser nodded to the Pythagi, <will just go and find some other world to liberate. I'm sure you will be able to handle the Andalites when they return.>

Garoff went off with the other Councilors to discuss things, but they didn't really have a choice. When he returned, he simply said, “We accept your terms, Visser.”

<Then from this day forward, the Yeerk Empire is no more. Now, it is the time of the New Yeerk Order.>

CHAPTER 17

JAKE

The part that got to me most about the whole thing was the lack of surprise some people showed. The Subvisser, for example, knew that this was going to happen this way. I guess that makes sense. Being a Subvisser, he was probably in on everything.

The Council decided to meet with the Visser and his people in private to finalize the transfer of power. The Subvisser turned to EreK. “Come; we are needed.”

<Why are you invited?> I asked EreK.

He risked a whisper. “Kalroth found out that I don't seem to forget anything. I'm his secretary.”

<That will be very helpful in the future,> I commented. EreK gave no response. Not that I could blame him; any suspicious activities from him would be noticed.

The Council led the Visser and his top men to an underground bunker. I guess the Yeerks like being underground. It's definitely not a place Andalites would go willingly. And it seemed safe from something like an orbital bombardment.

We ended up standing around a big, circular table. Kalroth and Guraff flanked the Visser. EreK stood back a ways, keeping track of everything. Guraff made me nervous. For some reason, I had the strangest feeling that he knew EreK wasn't really EreK. I almost felt like he knew we were here. But maybe I'm just paranoid.

“Explain this new power structure to us in detail, Visser,” Garoff requested.

The Visser nodded. <It is as I said. The Council appoints Vissers, allocates their resources, settles their disputes, and administrates over the Homeworld. A Visser is given complete control over whatever domain the Council assigns them.

<A Visser may appoint any number of Subvissers and Undervissers he sees necessary to carry out his orders. Additionally, the Council will be permitted to appoint one Inspector for every Visser, to make sure that said Visser is doing his task properly.>

“The current ranks, such as Visser One, Visser Two, Visser Three and so on...?”

<Those no longer exist. That system breeds competition to an unhealthy degree.> That was an understatement.

“And the Emperor?”

<What Emperor? Your council may select one of its own as the head of the council, the Emperor, but he will have no powers greater than those of the council. I understand you are without an Emperor at the moment anyway.>

Garoff gasped. “How did you know that?”

<Did you think that Salheer would come to me and not tell me what he gave up? Your own Emperor has devised this system and thinks it superior to the current one.>

Salheer was the Yeerk Emperor? Then he must have been a lot more dangerous than I had expected. But what would become of him now?

“I have rarely known Salheer to be wrong,” Garoff said slowly. “And we have little choice but to agree. Very well, Esplin. Then on behalf of the Council of Thirteen, I appoint you Visser. You are to be given complete control of what military forces we have. What will you do with them?”

The Visser turned to Guraff. <This strategy was devised by you and Salheer. Since he is not here, you would be the best choice to explain it.>

Guraff nodded and stepped forward. “Our objectives are fourfold The two greatest threats to us will be the Andalites and Anati.”

“What about humans?” one of the Counselors asked.

<Smart man,> Cassie mumbled.

Guraff shook his head. “The humans do not have the resources to be a threat. They will offer stubborn resistance when the time comes to claim their world, but they are unable to launch an offensive strike against us. I expect them to attempt to do it anyway, but it is not much to worry about. Only the Andalites and Anati could defeat us.

“To rectify this problem, I propose sending Subvisser Kalroth Three-Three-Seven as an ambassador to the Anati. They are a forgiving people, and Subvisser Kalroth's devotion to the New Yeerk Order will be enough to convince them that we have turned our back on the Empire. I believe Subvisser Kalroth will be able to bring them into an alliance with our people and the Pythagi Conglomerate.”

Garoff nodded. “A sensible suggestion. What else, my friend? What are we to do about the Andalites? And what are the other two problems?”

“Hosts,” Guraff answered. “We have legions of Kelbrid, but their uses are limited. They are incapable of climbing, for example, and their mental abilities are...limited. They are unsuited for subtle work. To rectify this, I propose to send out

two fleets. One will be under my command and liberate the Hork-bajir world from the Andalites. Many of our people are trapped there. We will gain many experienced and cunning warriors from this victory.

“The second fleet will be under the command of Salheer Six-Seven-One, who should soon be made a Subvisser. This fleet will strike Leera. The Leeran hosts will be suitable for the subtle work that the Kelbrid cannot do.”

“Invading Leera will not be easy,” another Counselor argued. “Their only continent has been destroyed. Where could we launch such an invasion? And with what forces?”

<I assure you that Subvisser Salheer has those difficulties well in hand,> the Visser told them. <While my Underivisser and the two Subvissters perform their tasks, I will strike the Andalite homeworld. They will be caught off guard by our mere presence, not to mention our numbers. The Andalites will fall.>

Garoff nodded. “As you wish, Visser. Go, and bring glory to the Emp- to the Order. May the Kandrona shine and strengthen you.”

CHAPTER 18

AX

The Council of Thirteen went off with the Visser and his top people to finalize the change of power structure. I myself was shocked at it. Why would the Visser not claim the title of Emperor? Surely that was what he truly wanted; he did not care about the infighting of the Yeerk Empire. What was he truly after, then?

I was lost in my thoughts for a while, attempting to figure things out and cope with the loss of the Andalites above this world. I was used to the deaths of Andalites. It had just happened so suddenly... Not even I, who had been warned, had really seen it coming.

<Don't react,> I heard Prince Jake's voice hiss in my head. Obediently, I made no attempts to locate him.

<Yes, Prince Jake?> I included Marco in my thought-speech, assuming that he would prefer to hear this conversation as well.

<Cassie and I are here with Erek. We just got to listen in on their battle plans. Listen up, because you'll need to memorize this.>

<I am listening, Prince Jake.>

<Guraff's taking a force to claim the Hork-bajir planet. Salheer's going to attack Leera; some Pythagi ships are going to meet him en route. Kalroth is going to try and convince the Anati to side with the Yeerks, and the Visser is going to attack the Andalite homeworld.>

<We expected that last one,> I told him, <but what can be done about the others?>

<Sit tight for a moment,> Prince Jake ordered me. <We're working on the problem. Erek and I are making our way to your cell right now.>

I looked around but saw nothing for a few minutes. Then, a green light next to the doorway of my cell turned red. The Kelbrid guards, four of them, snapped their heads up, alerted to something. Of course. They did not rely on sight; a hologram would not fool them.

One pounced on something I couldn't see. It bounced off. The other Kelbrid tried to circle around behind Erek, but the hallway was too narrow to allow that. A peregrine falcon appeared out of thin air and landed in front of our cell. <Come on; I don't know how long Erek can stall them, since he can't fight. Sooner or later, they'll get past him.>

Marco and I followed Prince Jake down the hallway as I demorphed. “Do we have a plan of some kind?” Marco asked.

<Some kind,> Prince Jake said carefully. <Cassie knows the Anati; I told her to hitch a ride with Kalroth and try to convince them to side with us when she gets there. Erek needs to join her as soon as he can.>

<What about us?> I questioned.

<You need to get to your homeworld and warn them, Ax,> Prince Jake instructed me. <We'll steal you a Bug fighter; that should get you there, although you'll have to move fast. Marco and I will go and try to help the Leerans.> Prince Jake paused. <Okay, we need to get into some less conspicuous morphs.>

A few moments later, we were three Hork-bajir walking calmly through the Blade ship like we belonged. I knew my way around the ship all too well from my time as the Visser's host.

<What about Guraff and the Hork-bajir?> Marco asked.

<I don't know. Honestly, I don't know if we can stop him there. Even if we warn the Andalite forces there, I doubt they could win. Guraff will have all the advantages, and he's good enough without them. It's best to call those forces back to defend the Andalite world or Leera,> Prince Jake decided after

a pause.

<Any clue where Bird Boy and Xena are?>

<No. Not a clue. But that worries Guraff, which makes me a little happier.>

<Hang on a minute,> Marco said. <This means that either the Visser's going to have to abandon the war for Earth or make it public. Either way, doesn't that mean we won? Crayak and Azmaveth have to leave us alone now, right?>

Prince Jake shrugged. <I'm sure someone will come with a verdict on that soon. Until then, we just have to worry about this.> A few minutes later, we stopped in the hangar. <here's your stop, Ax.>

<What will you and Marco be doing, Prince Jake?>

<Marco and I will make contact with the Leerans. I'm sure that between the two of us, we can get them to listen to us and mount some sort of defense. I don't know much about this Salheer character, but he's very, very dangerous.>

<Why do you say that?> Marco asked.

<Because before he was a Subvisser, he was the Emperor,> Jake said flatly.

Marco and I accepted that in silence. So now, even the former Yeerk Emperor bowed knee to the Visser. And he was

leading an army to enslave the Leerans. I felt in my hearts that Leera would fall. Prince Jake is a great leader, and Marco is very intelligent; but I doubted that they were a match for the Yeerk ruthless, ambitious, and intelligent enough to claw his way to the top of the Empire.

But, as terrible as it may sound, I did not care about Leera at that moment. All that mattered was that the Abomination was leading an army to my home. He meant to enslave my people and kill my family. I would not let that happen. <Good luck, Prince Jake.>

<Once again, Ax: don't call me Prince.>

CHAPTER 19

RACHEL

“I am telling you,” Tobias insisted, “the Visser will not attack your world. If he planned to do that, he would have done absolutely everything to convince us he was going to attack somewhere else.”

<So you have said before,> Lirem argued. <But the risk is too great. We will not abandon our world for some suspected threat against a world that we only halfway control. A withdraw from Hork-bajir will be a welcomed relief.>

We had been in space for two days now, making our way to the Andalite homeworld. Of course, we could pull off to the Hork-bajir planet at any time. Just as soon as Tobias convinced these bureaucrats that he was right. We called home shortly after we left, just to let everyone know we were fine. That was when we learned that Jake, Marco, Cassie, and Ax were missing. But we had bigger problems than that at the moment.

“And what other worlds will you abandon?” Tobias demanded. “Is that how it will be? Every time the Yeerks attack a world, you'll pull back to fortify your own defenses?”

That's a losing strategy and you know it.”

<Would you have us react to every suspected threat? The Yeerks could attack any race, at any time. We may not even know they are doing it. Put yourself in our position, human. Would you abandon your world to aid the Hork-bajir?>

“I already [i]have[/i] abandoned my homeworld,” Tobias shot back. “That's exactly what I'm doing. Do you realize how vulnerable Earth is right now? The humans have almost no spacecraft, and nothing that could stand up to Pythagi capital ships. The Dome ships in orbit are stripped of their weapons. There is a Pythagi outpost on Mars. If the Yeerks decided to attack it, Earth is as good as lost.”

That made me queasy. I hadn't even thought about that. While we were out here, the Yeerks could be doing God knows what. Although I was pretty sure they couldn't attack Earth openly. I think the rules of Crayak and Azmaveth's game still applied. The war for Earth couldn't be made public, but the resurgence of the Yeerks...that was a different story.

<Even if we reinforced the fleet at Hork-bajir, what chance is there that we could stop them?> Lirem questioned. <We made that mistake once before, and it cost us many good men and much of our honor.>

“I can stop them,” Tobias insisted. “I have seen the best that the Yeerks have to offer and I know I can beat them. Just seeing us prepared for them will be enough. Yeerks never fight a battle that they think they will lose. If we steal their advantage from them, they will retreat.”

Lirem was silent. Yet again, all of the holograms disappeared. Tobias sighed and flopped into the captain's chair. “I swear to God, Rachel, dealing with the Hork-bajir themselves would be less irritating.”

I came up behind him and started massaging his shoulders. “What will you do if they don't listen?”

“I'll go to Hork-bajir and fight alone if I have to.”

“You can't win that fight,” I said flatly. “I love a hopeless battle more than anyone, but we can't just throw our wives away like that.”

“It's not just about winning,” he told me. “If people see that the Andalites will readily abandon them to save their own furry blue asses, who will ever side with them? This whole 'Andalites along against the Yeerks' thing doesn't work; especially now that the Yeerks have the Pythagi. Do you remember what kept us going for a while in the First War? It was the hope that, if we lasted long enough, the Andalites

would come and save us. That hope gave us strength. If the galaxy knows that they can't count on the Andalites anymore, that they're on their own, then that hope is gone. But maybe, just maybe, if they see that at least one Andalite is willing to fight and die for them at the expense of his own people..."

"Do you really think that'll help?" I asked.

To which he replied, "Elfangor. One single Andalite died for us. I don't know about you, but even before I knew who he was, what he was to me, I was willing to fight until the death for him."

We were quiet for a few minutes. Then, <Prince Tobias,> Glorfindel's voice called, <you should really see into turning off your communicator when you do not wish to be heard.> The War-Prince's image appeared.

"What did the Electorate decide?" Tobias asked.

<They were going to ignore you until they heard that last part,> Glorfindel told him. <They have agreed to send a small group of reinforcements to Hork-bajir. I will lead four Dome ships, each with a full compliment of Moonrakers, to reinforce the blockade over the planet.>

Tobias nodded. "That'll be all we need. We can hide your forces in ambush, maybe along with some of the regulars.

When the Visser comes, he'll think that your people are busy defending your homeworld. He'll attack, and then we hit him. It'll drive them out of the system and probably back to their own world.”

<We will discuss tactics at a later date, once we rendezvous at Hork-bajir. Until then, keep well, Prince Tobias.>

“And you, War-Prince.” Tobias cut off the communication. Then he noticed the way I was looking at him. “What?”

“Where did you learn so much about war?” I asked.

“Practice?”

I shook my head. “Try again.”

“I read a lot of strategy manuals, Rachel.”

“Sun Tzu never wrote anything about galactic warfare.”

“Taigong Wang?”

“Don't lie to me, Tobias. How did you get so good at this?” I demanded. The fact that he was lying was starting to tick me off.

He sighed deeply. “Okay...You know how the Howler morph comes with memories?”

“Oh God. Tobias, how could you do that? Do you have any idea how dangerous that could be? If you have a head full

of Howler memories, how long do you think it'll be before you start to think like one of them?"

"I know it's dangerous, Rach; that's why I didn't tell you. I didn't want to do it. But one of the fights with Guraff left me no choice. If I didn't have Howler experience, I'd have been killed. I barely survived as it is. And the memories...they help. The Howlers have fought so many wars, and all of the ones they remember are victories. That experience will help us here. I'm talking about lifetimes of battles. I remember more battles than anyone alive, Rachel. And if there's anything that can help us win this war, it's that."

"But at what cost, Tobias?" I asked. "How deep can you dig before you bury yourself?"

"I...I don't know, Rachel. But that's a prince I'm wi-"

"Well I'm not willing to pay it," I interrupted. "You may be willing to mutilate yourself all you want, but I won't let you. I refuse to lose you like that. Promise me you won't do it again, Tobias."

He nodded. "Okay, Rachel. I promise."

Tobias's face never gives much away. But I know him better than anyone. Better than he knows himself, probably. I don't think even Cassie can read him like I can. I know when

he's telling me the truth.

And I knew that this wasn't one of those times.

CHAPTER 20

MARCO

Jake and I spent a very nerve-wracking two weeks in space, hiding out on a Pythagi ship. At least, that's what he tells me. I don't really remember any of it. He also tells me that he very quickly got tired of reminding me who I was and where we were every morning. He also tells me that at one point in the night, I started spooning him. I think he's making that last one up to discredit me.

I'm not sure how we got by undetected; you'd have to ask Jake about all that. The most I can say about the trip is that it ended when we heard a voice broadcast something over the ship's communication system. We were in some sort of engine room or something... I'm not sure what it was, but there were wires and pipes all over the place.

“What was that about?” I asked. I was a little angry, since it happened in the middle of Jake's explanation of why, even though I'm a millionaire, I basically lived with my girlfriend's family and the other Animorphs. Something about that just didn't make much sense to me. On the other hand, I was apparently dating a hot French chick, and that didn't make

sense to me either.

Jake shrugged. “Not sure. I don't speak Galard. Or Pythag. Or whatever language that was.”

As if to answer our question, a human voice came over the communication system. It spoke in a nasal monotone. “This is Subvisser Salheer Six-Seven-One. I am broadcasting this our of consideration for those whose hosts do not understand the Pythag language. That means the majority of you. In ten minutes, we will exit Zero-Space. Within sixteen hours, we will be within the range of Leera's censors. Within twenty hours, we will be close enough to begin our attack. It is advised that you use this time wisely. That is all.”

Jake turned to me. “Looks like we need to get out of here,” he said. “Do you remember-”

“Nope; that's your department.”

“Right. Sorry. Okay...there are hangars all around this place. We just need smaller morphs; or at least ones that won't get noticed. You've got a Kelbrid morph, right?”

“Uh...” I thought about it. That sounded familiar... “Yeah, I do. Me and...someone...”

“Get to it. I'm going Pythag. I doubt anyone will take note of the two of us.”

I nodded and tried to concentrate. What did a Kelbrid look like? Uh... Oh, right. They had those kitty ears, and the whiskers. Crocodile's face, a big chest, that stinging arm. The more I thought about it, the more I changed. And the more I morphed, the easier it became. Before long, I was an unusually massive Kelbrid lurking next to a Pythag.

Pythagi look really weird. A peanut shaped body with stalk eyes, two mouths, skinny arms with mittens for hands, and taloned bug feet. Not to mention the big wings on their backs. Anywhere else, Jake would have stuck out like a Hork-bajir in a bookstore covered in cheese. The Hork-bajir, I mean; not the bookstore. Although I guess that would be pretty obvious, too.

We didn't have to talk to anyone along the way, which was a plus. We had three mouths and no idea how to work even one of them. If anyone had stopped to speak to us, we would have been screwed. Luckily, everyone was too busy getting ready.

It wasn't easy, though. My Kelbrid mind kept wanting me to eat Jake. If it wasn't for the Yeerks on this ship, the Kelbrid would have gone into a feeding frenzy long ago. As it was, it was taking all of my willpower to keep my mouth from snapping up Jake's nice, juicy legs...

We made it to a hangar without me snapping and killing anyone, although I felt myself getting close a couple of times. Inside the hangar, though, things got a little sticky. Jake and I figured we'd just walk in and steal a ship. But there were a few problems. The first being the five Pythagi who were also in the hangar, crowding around a ship that looked like big triangle with thrusters and guns.

One of them, he 'looked' a little taller than the others, stepped forward and said something in his language. <Uh...Marco?> Jake said. <I think it's time you let your morph have a little fun.>

I didn't need to be told twice. Or once, really. I just sort of...let go...and the Kelbrid body leapt into action. Before anyone realized what had happened, my stinger arm cut the lead Pythag in half.

Two pointed Oda cannons at me, and the other two raised spears; which was weird, since that required them balancing on one foot like...what do you call those big pink bird that do that? Oh, right; flamingos.

I jumped on one before he could fire his cannon at me. Jake dove on the other, his strong talons ripping the weapon out of the warrior's hand. I felt a bit of pressure as one of the

warriors stuck a spear in me, but Kelbrid don't feel much pain.

I sank my teeth into what I think passed for the Pythag's neck; that skinny part between their lower and upper bits. Whatever it was that I bit, he stopped struggling. The last Pythag threw his spear at Jake. Jake caught it in mid air. <Sweet! I didn't think that would work. I heard Tobias did it with an arrow once, trying to save King Henry, but I thought he might have been making stuff to impress Rachel.>

<That's great, tell me later,> I said. Then I slashed my stinger across the Pythag closest to me. Jake shoved his spear into the chest of the one who used to have an Oda cannon. I brought the last one down with a blow from my fist, followed by a hearty stomp on the skull. It was...gooey. If my body hadn't loved every second of it, I'd probably have been throwing up.

Jake and I climbed aboard the thankfully empty ship. <Next stop... Jake, what's the planet called again?>

<Leera,> he supplied.

<Are we there yet?>

CHAPTER 21

CASSIE

I've spent a lot of time being nervous. I've been nervous about morphing. I've gotten nervous because I was afraid I might get infested by a Yeerk. I've felt nervous around Jake sometimes, and even around Ronnie at first. So trust me when I say that spending more than a week trapped on a Yeerk transport ship with a Subvisser makes you nervous.

It wasn't too difficult, though. As Kalroth's secretary, Erek enjoyed certain privileges, like his own quarters. They were small and cramped, but at least they were private. I spent the whole time in there, hiding behind his hologram when he was there and hiding out in small morphs when he wasn't. It made me nervous, but that was about as bad as it got.

Erek and I mostly spent the time worrying. No one had any idea what had happened to Tobias and Rachel. With any luck, they were back home, safe and sound. But knowing them, they'd be at the front of the bloodiest battle in this war. We worried about whether or not Ax would get to the Andalite homeworld in time to warn them. We worried about Jake and Marco on Leera.

The one thing we weren't worrying about was probably the thing we should have been thinking about most: how to get the Anati on our side. We had thought that it would be enough just to remind them that the Yeerks had tried to kill them. But that was because I was forgetting something very important about the Anati.

The Anati are big on forgiveness; very big. They have a special ceremony for it. It was an Anati forgiveness ceremony that brought David back to us, and that helped me make my now-overturned decision to leave the Animorphs for Ronnie. The Anati could forgive anyone for anything if they felt that they were truly sorry.

Could Kalroth convince them he was sorry? I had no idea. I didn't know anything about Kalroth, but that was a problem I could correct quickly. Erek knew more than enough about him. When I asked him to tell me about Kalroth, the first words out of his mouth were, "He's insane. And that's not a phrase I just throw around. I've met lunatics. I've been on Earth a long time, Cassie, so I've seen a lot of nuts. Kalroth is definitely one of them.

"He's completely devoted to the Visser. It's a religion to him. The fact that the Visser might be wrong about something

doesn't fit into his mind. There is no possibility that the Visser could fail at anything. He's a God to Kalroth, and to a lot of the young Yeerks raised under the Visser's rule. That's part of his plan; he's deifying himself, making sure that no one will ever betray him again.”

“I guess he still hasn't read any human history,” I muttered. “Prophets have a way of dying by violence.”

“So Frank Herbert said,” EreK agreed. “Brilliant man, Frank Herbert. You know, I gave him the idea for Dune? I accidentally told him a little bit about a planet we Chee visited and passed it off as just a story. He ran with it.”

“You're joking.”

“Nope. Maybe later I'll tell you about the time I met a guy named George Lucas. Let's just say that galaxy isn't quite so far, far away after all.”

“About Kalroth...” I prompted.

“He'll obey the Visser without question,” EreK informed me. “And he'll have the same management style. To him, failure isn't an inconvenience, it's a sin and he'll punish it as such. But I'll say this: he's no idiot. He can be very persuasive. I've heard him speak. His passion for all this... It's kind of hard not to be convinced.”

“He ever convince you?” I asked.

Erek laughed. “Cassie, if Adolf Hitler didn't convince me of anything, some little slug isn't going to.” That was about the only meaningful conversation we had during the ride.

It was kind of a shock when we reached the Anati planet. It was the closest planet to its sun, and one of only five planets in it's solar system. The system itself was surrounded by a lot of moons and small asteroids. It's hard to tell what color the planet was because a layer of pink clouds obscured everything.

“Would you please be so kind as to identify yourself before we are forced to destroy any traces of your existence?” came a voice over the ship's communication system. I guess the Anati had noticed us.

“This is Subvisser Kalroth Three-Three-Seven, of the Yeerk Order.”

There was silence for a few moments. Then a different Anati voice asked, “We would be very grateful if you would inform us of the nature of your mission before we disintegrate you as an enemy.”

“I come on a mission of peace,” Kalroth's voice proclaimed. “Years ago, the Yeerk Empire sought out the aid

of the Anati to help us past our parasitic ways. But this partnership failed and, in frustration, the Yeerk Empire attacked the Anati. I have come on behalf of the Yeerk Order to atone for the sins of my people's past. I have come to beg your forgiveness, Anati. And to ask you for something more.”

“What more could be asked? What greater gift is there than that of forgiveness?”

“There is nothing greater. This is a small matter, and one that should only be discussed after we are cleansed.”

“Then come, Subvisser. You will speak to our leaders. If they are convinced of your sincerity, you will be forgiven. Then, we may speak.”

I turned to Erek as we started to land. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

“I gave George that line, too.”

CHAPTER 22

TOBIAS

Thanks to the twists and turns of Z-space, I never knew how long it would take me to get from one place to another. So the trip to the Hork-bajir planet took me a littler longer than it did the last time I had been here. On the plus side, it was a lot shorter than the trip before that. I guess that's just how it goes when you decide to exceed the speed of light.

I was disturbed when I saw the forces around the Hork-bajir world. Three Dome ships. That was all I saw. Where was Glorfindel? True, the Reliquary was faster than a Dome ship, but I expected him to be here.

A Dome ship hailed me as soon as I entered Hork-bajir space. I opened the communications channel and saw, as I expected, an Andalite. He looked vaguely familiar, but I still have trouble telling Andalites apart, though. I recognized the voice, though. Captain-Prince Caysath-Winwall-Esgarrouth, commander of the fleet over Hork-bajir.

<Prince Tobias. I am glad to see you are well. How is [i]Aristh[/i] Alloran?>

“He was fine, last I checked. I left him at home for this

one, though. Things are going to get pretty dicey, Caysath. Do your scouts have any idea where the Yeerks are?"

<Our estimates put them within one day of arriving here,> he told me grimly. <Where is War-Prince Glorfindel?>

"I don't know," I admitted. "I'm sure he'll be here soon. In the mean time, we need to start implementing the defensive strategy we coordinated."

<Most of it is already done. We have contacted the local forces and they have agreed to aid us. There is a Dome ship hidden behind each moon of the planet. The Moonrakers have been sent out on patrol maneuvers. We will appear completely unprepared, as per your suggestions. I must commend you on your strategy.>

"It's nothing," I told him. "We'll have to do this right, since we'll only get one shot at this. I'll dock on your ship."

Caysath and I spent the rest of the day preparing for the battle, catching up a bit, and wondering where Glorfindel was. We were unable to reach him or the Andalite homeworld to ask them. I was starting to get a bad feeling about this. I don't like it when the guy who's supposed to practically double my forces doesn't show up.

Rachel seemed to be in a good mood that night. "What's

got you all excited?” I asked.

“It's just... This is how wars were meant to be fought, you know? What we do back on Earth is fun and all, but this... This is where it's at. And besides,” she added with a smile, “I can actually get back to helping you fight.”

I nodded. “Just no commandeering a Moonraker and trying to outfly me, okay?”

“Scared I'll do it?”

“Yeah, Rach; that's exactly what worries me.”

Neither of us slept much that night; we were too excited. Well, she was excited; I was nervous. If I had called this wrong, a lot of good men would die because of it. My only consolation was that at least I didn't know many of these men personally. That's a small comfort, and a cold one, but I've learned to take what I can get.

The Yeerk and Pythagi ships appeared at around 10:00 according to the Reliquary's clock. First, one Corrupter appeared at the edge of our sensors. Then another, followed by another. Then a whole cluster appeared. “Show time,” I whispered.

I was at the command bridge with Caysath, ready to direct the battle. There were twelve Corrupters in all; four times

what we appeared to have. “Scramble the Moonrakers,” I ordered. “They have to look panicked.”

I watched the sensors as the first Corrupter released a squadron of small, triangular ships. Instigators, they were called. They pursued the Moonrakers, which were flying back to the nearest Dome ship rapidly. Meanwhile, Caysath gave the order to bring the other two Dome ships into position. We would be within firing range of the lead Corrupter in a few minutes.

“Have those Moonrakers turn back on the Instigators,” Rachel ordered. I turned to her and raised an eyebrow. “This has to look real,” she explained. “Andalite pilots wouldn't just run; they can take those ones and they will.”

Caysath gave the order and I watched the Moonraker squadron swing back around. They shredded the Instigators, but that brought them within range of the Corrupter. “Pull them back!” I ordered.

The Moonrakers withdrew towards the Dome ship, but not before we lost half of them to the Corrupter. That fit within my plans, though. It drew the Corrupter closer to the first Dome ship; close enough that the Dome ship, now minus its dome, could open fire on it. Our ship soon joined in, and under the

weight of our combined firepower, the Corrupter quickly disintegrated. Since there are no explosion in space, due to the lack of oxygen, it just sort of drifted apart.

The other Corrupters were closing in now. Four of them were coming head on. Another four were coming from 'below' us, and the last three from 'above.' Caysath turned to me. <Perhaps now would be a good time to launch the ambush. Prince Tobias.>

I shook my head. “Not yet. We need to draw them in closer. Engage the ones coming from above us. Order the other Dome ships to concentrate their fire on the nearest Corrupter. Launch the Moonrakers, and give the local forces the signal.”

Caysath, with obvious reservations, obeyed. Maybe it was because I was commanding this battle or because he didn't want to lose more of his men. But he obeyed nonetheless. I kept an eye on the sensors and sure enough, I saw it. Several new blips appeared, coming from the Hork-bajir world.

A few years back, the last of the Arn had come to the Hork-bajir Valley on Earth and harvested DNA samples from the free Hork-bajir. He made clones of them to fight the Yeerks on the Hork-bajir planet. They had been stealing and

stockpiling Yeerk supplies for years. Now, I was calling on them to help us. And, being lovable, loyal guys, they came.

The problem was, though, that the Moonrakers and stolen Bug fighters couldn't do much to harm the Corrupters. However, the Corrupters had difficulty focusing their weapons on the small, fast ships. Instead, they concentrated their firepower on our Dome ships. Not good.

Then I saw it. One Yeerk ship that seemed to move through the battlefield like there were no enemies. Anything in its path was obliterated instantly. And when I saw it come in and destroy one of the lead Dome ship's Shredder cannons, then I knew that only one man in the galaxy could be the pilot.

A minute later, Rachel and I were in the Reliquary. I could see the ship now. As black as my own ship, and of a similar design. Two blade-like wings, swept forward, held the engines and most of the weapons. The only other thing was a long bridge that tapered to a sharp point at the end. A sleek, fast, and deadly ship. A fitting counterpart to my own.

When I was close enough to see the ship, I opened the communications channel. I heard what I expected to hear, that now-familiar voice. “Who else dares stand before the God General? Come, Andalites; it has been far too long!”

“Caysath,” I said, “now is the time.” Then I contacted Guraff. “Do you miss me that much, Guraff?” I asked.

His ship arced through space and turned to face me. I flew straight at him, an insane game of chicken. Beams flew from each ship, flashing so bright that I almost couldn't see. I was amazed that we didn't accidentally create a Sario rip.

Then we passed by each other, each of our ships a little worse for the encounter. He laughed. “So, the Devil Prince has come after all. Perhaps now this will be interesting!”

I kept my eye on the censors. The two Dome ships had appeared from behind the moons and were ripping into the Corrupters from behind. Maybe Guraff and his Yeerks were used to this sort of thing, but the Pythagi were starting to panic. They were breaking formation. Soon, they were minus three Corrupters.

“Pull back,” Guraff ordered. “Fall back to the nearest moon. We will regroup there.”

“Do not pursue,” I ordered Caysath. “We'll withdraw to the other moon. If we make them desperate, they'll fight to the last. As things stand, we may be able to convince them to retreat. Try and collect any domes you can, and reassemble the Moonraker squadrons.”

“Tobias, we have them on the run!” Rachel argued. “We should press the advantage!”

“What advantage? We're still heavily outnumbered, and we're out of tricks. Our Moonraker squadrons have suffered heavy damage, and Guraff will get the Pythagi in order soon. If we press them now, it'll be the end of the fight and not in the way we want it to end.”

She sighed, but she didn't argue anymore. I flew back to Caysath's ship. He had managed to retrieve his dome. When I entered his quarters, though, he looked very worried. Not at all like a man who had just won a victory. “What is it?”

<During the battle, word came through from the homeworld,> he said quietly. I didn't like the sounds of that. <It is under attack. War-Prince Glorfindel and his reinforcements have been called back to deal with the threat. We are on our own.>

CHAPTER 23

JAKE

Hiding out on the Pythagi ship hadn't been fun. We slept in shifts, moving around constantly, and were constantly terrified. Add to that the fact that I constantly had to fill Marco in on some very important details, and the whole trip...what's the word?...sucked. Big time. Things on Leera weren't shaping up to be much better.

We had some major problems. The first being that I didn't know how to drive an Instigator, and if Marco knew, he had forgotten. So we were making due with trial and error. After we sort of mastered the art of steering, the way a kid with finger-paint masters the art of painting, we felt sort of safe. Until the time came for us to figure out how to work the communications array.

A full squadron of Moonrakers surrounded us within minutes of us entering Leeran airspace. "Thank God Andalites aren't a 'shoot first, ask questions later' kind of race," Marco muttered. "How do we tell them not to kill us?"

He and I fumbled around with the controls for a few moments. Marco was the one who figured it out. Well, sort of.

We're not sure what he did, but a hologram of an Andalite appeared on our 'dashboard'. <You are not Pythagi.>

“Oh, good, Jake. This guy must be in charge.”

“What makes you think that, Marco?”

“He's stating the obvious. Normally, I'd just call him Captian Obvious, but his statement is so obvious that he must be Admiral Obvious. Admiral's the highest rank, right?”

I shrugged. <Are you mocking me?> the Andalite demanded coldly.

“I try not to mock people with large guns pointed at me,” Marco responded.

“Tries and fails,” I muttered. “I'm Jake. The Animorph. This Marco, another Animorph. The Yeerks and Pythagi Conglomerate are on there way to attack Leera right now. We're here to help.”

<Prince Jake? I will put you through to Captain-Prince Galuit at once.> We followed him. Sure enough, a different Andalite appeared on our dashboard.

<This is Captain-Prince Galuit-Enilon-Esgarrouth. Your news is very disturbing, Prince Jake. What do you know of the Yeerk-Pythagi forces?>

“They had around ten Corrupters,” I told him. “I'm not

sure how many Instigators and other ships, but it's a lot. No Yeerk ships that I counted aside from one transport. They're being led by Subvisser Salheer Six-Seven-One, the former Yeerk Emperor.”

Galuit cursed. At least, it sounded like a curse. Then again, it was an Andalite word, so who knows? <We will be at a disadvantage, and Salheer is not to be taken lightly. But with Leera's orbital defenses and the proper strategy, we can hold the planet.>

“What the Leerans?” Marco asked. “Don't they have any ships that could help?”

<None of any use,> Galuit muttered. <With us protecting them, they focused on more...domestic...concerns. They have ships, but their weapons are light and they could easily be destroyed by the swarms of Instigators. It will be up to us.>

Marco, Galuit and I spent the next few hours planning. Apparently, a large body of matter, like a moon, could hide even something as large as a Dome ship from someone's sensors, so we hid a Dome ship behind three of Leera's six moons. Galuit activated the orbital defenses and contacted the Leerans. They were evacuating civilians to safe places and arming their warriors. They would be ready.

It was still terrifying to watch Salher's forces arrive. We looked vastly outnumbered, but it wasn't as bad as it seemed. Thanks to our information, Galuit was able to have four of his ships waiting where the Corrupters would arrive. As soon as the first one appeared, four Dome ships opened fire on it.

I don't know how well-made Corrupters are, but I do know this: nothing, and I mean nothing, can stand up for long against that sort of bombardment. That thing could have been the Death Star, it still wouldn't have lasted more than five minutes.

More came, though, as soon as we finished off the first one. They came in a large mass, all moving at once. A veritable cloud of Instigators flew around them, engaging our Moonrakers. Galuit gave the order to pull back.

Obediently, the Dome ships started pulling back. Soon, they'd be within range of the first hidden ship, behind the nearest moon. And then they'd have a nasty surprise.

Only the Ambush didn't work. As soon as we started pulling back, several Corrupters concentrated their firepower on the moon. In minutes, it was obliterated into chunks of rock, revealing the Dome ship. The ship didn't last long after that. <They've figured it out,> Galuit shouted. <Have all

hidden ships pull back and regroup with the main body.>

Our remaining ships clustered together in a tight formation, waiting for the Corrupters to arrive. Only they didn't. As soon as our ships started moving, they redirected their courses and started to enter the atmosphere of Leera.

<They are landing without destroying their enemies in orbit?> Galuit demanded. <Surely they know they will be trapped down there!>

I didn't like where this was going. Not at all. Salheer had to have been smart; brilliant, really, to be the Emperor. If he was doing something like this, he had to have had a plan. And whatever that plan was, I knew it couldn't be good for us.

CHAPTER 24

AX

After Prince Jake and Marco left me in the hangar, I realized something: a Bug fighter was far slower than the Blade ship, and I was unsure whether or not Bug fighters were Z-space capable. If I left in one, I the Blade ship would leave me behind, stranded by the Yeerk homeworld.

So I hid on the Blade ship. It was not difficult. From my time as the Visser's host, I knew the ship better than anyone. I was familiar with all of its twists and turns, all the shortcuts and secret passages. Attempting to locate me there would have been like attempting to locate Tobias in the woods. I did not want to be found, so I would not be.

I considered attempting some sort of sabotage, but I decided against it. That would make the Visser suspicious and likely alert him to my presence. I wanted to preserve the element of surprise. So I hid in silence, waiting until I heard the news.

It was more than a week later when the Visser made the announcement. <Attention! We will emerge from Z-space in five minutes and be within range of the outermost Andalite

orbital defenses in three hours. Everyone is to report to his station immediately.>

That was what I needed to hear. I took one of the Visser's shortcuts to the hangar and arrived there before most of the Visser's men. All I needed to do was get inside of a Bug fighter and fly it out of there. The only hangup were the guards, but they would not prove much of a problem.

I started to morph. It was one that I had used only once, and had acquired as an act of desperation. The first things that came were the blades, at my wrists, knees, and elbows. My stalk-eyes fused together and became a horn, joined by two more. My face stretched out into a beak.

The details of my transformation are irrelevant, though. The important thing was the end result. Because by the end of the morph, I stood about nine-feet tall. I towered over anyone else in the hangar, including the Kelbrid. I had become Guraff.

I walked calmly to one of the Bug fighters. Of course, it was impossible for the guards not to notice me. "Undervisser!" one of them shouted.

I turned to him. How would Guraff react? With mild irritation, I decided. "What is it?" I said curtly.

"We heard you were leading the fleet attacking Hork-

bajir,” the guard began.

“A ruse,” I said simply. “The Visser believed it was best if the Andalites did not know my real location.” The guard nodded and apologized. I suppose the idea that someone could actually morph Guraff never occurred to him. Not that I blame him. To acquire a creature, you must touch it. There are few who have touched Guraff and lived. I was only one of them by luck and the help of my friends.

Several minutes later, the Blade ship dropped out of Z-space, and I launched my Bug fighter. No one questioned my departure. I encountered no trouble until I came within range of the Andalite sensors.

Three Moonrakers formed up around me. I hailed them before they began shooting. <This is Prince Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill,> I announced. <I bring very important news. The Yeerks have retaken their homeworld and are coming here as we speak. They will be here in an hour.>

The Moonrakers led me to a Dome ship orbiting our world. There, I was brought to Lirem-Arrepoth-Terrouss, head of the Electorate and the leader of our people. <Prince Aximili,> he greeted me, nodding curtly. <You are absolutely certain that our world is the Yeerks' target?>

<I am certain,> I nodded.

<Then Prince Tobias was wrong,> he said quietly. To a nearby aid, he said, <Contact War-Prince Glorfindel. Tell him to turn about immediately. His men are needed to defend our homeworld. Hork-bajir is safe.>

I shook my head. <Hork-bajir is under attack as well. The Yeerks and Pythagi forces there are led by the Undervisser Guraff Four-Two-Seven.>

Lirem lowered his stalk eyes, thinking. Slowly, he said, <Then Hork-bajir will fall. It is a regrettable loss, but it is far more acceptable than losing our own world. Perhaps Prince Tobias will be able to escape.>

<You have had contact with Tobias?>

Lirem nodded. <He contacted us more than a week ago and told us that the Yeerks were about to liberate their world. On his advice, we did not warn our men there or reinforce them. He also told us that the Yeerks would attack Hork-bajir, and advised us to minimize our defenses here to deal with the threat. Had we listened to him...>

<Councilor Lirem,> I said slowly. I thought he needed to hear what Prince Jake suspected about Tobias. <It... There is a possibility that Prince Tobias may have been...taken. Prince

Jake suspects that he may be a Controller.>

All four of Lirem's eyes snapped on me. <That would explain many things,> he admitted. <What do you think of it, Prince Aximili?>

<I do not know,> I admitted. <As much as I detest the thought, I can imagine no other way that Tobias could have known about an attack on Hork-bajir. I fear that we may have been betrayed.>

<I see. We shall deal with matter after we defend our world. Once Prince Tobias learns that he will have no reinforcements from us, his actions will show us where his loyalties lie. In the mean time, we will devote all our resources to defending our homeworld.>

<You should also know that the Yeerks are going to attack Leera,> I told him quickly. <They are led by Subvisser Salheer Six-Seven-One. He was formerly the Yeerk Emperor.>

<Then I will withdraw our forces from Leera as well,> Lirem said coldly.

<You are going to abandon both Leera and Hork-bajir to the Yeerks?> I demanded.

<This is a simple matter, Prince Aximili. In one hand, I have the lives of some other races. In the other, I have the lives

of my own people. I would rather the rest of the galaxy burn and the Andalites still live than see every other race prosper while ours is enslaved.>

<Leera is not yet lost,> I insisted. <Prince Jake and Marco are on their way to aid the defenders. It is possible that we can salvage that world.>

<Prince Aximili, you do not seem to underst-> Lirem cut off when lights started to flash and alarms sounded.

<They have come,> I said.

Lirem walked over to one of the sensor arrays. <They have reached the outermost of our defenses. I count twenty Pythagi Corrupters and the Blade ship. We have thirteen Dome ships in orbit now. War-Prince Glorfindel will arrive with four more. Captain-Prince Galuit-Enilon-Esgarrouth will come with seven more Dome ships from Leera. Between our numbers, our experience, and our orbital defenses, we will obliterate the Yeerks. We need only to hold out until aid arrives.>

I took my leave of Lirem after that. I was needed elsewhere, with the warriors. There was a squadron of Moonrakers that was supposed to be under my command and I needed to meet the men. But there was something I needed to do first.

I contacted the head of planetary communications. <Prince Aximili? What can I do for you, Sir?>

<I need you to do me a favor. I need to speak to someone,> I told him. Maybe Tobias was a Controller; but I doubted it. The Visser would never let such a dangerous host live, or let a Yeerk command him. I believed that Tobias was free and fighting a battle he could not win without the reinforcements he had been promised; reinforcements that were no longer coming.

To win, he would need someone who was as cunning and ruthless as the Yeerks. Someone with experience. Someone who was willing to cross all the distance to Hork-bajir to fight a battle he had little hope of winning. I could think of only one Andalite like that. <I need you to put me in touch with Alloran-Semitur-Corass.>

CHAPTER 25

CASSIE

The Anati were very hospitable to the Yeerks. If I didn't know them ahead of time, that would have surprised me. The Anati world had been attacked by the Yeerks during the First War, in an effort to draw the Andalites away from Earth. It was one of the biggest mistakes the Yeerks made.

We defeated them on Earth, and that hurt them a lot. But the combined Anati and Andalite forces were what did the real damage. Between the loss of respect and moral from earth and the massive losses the Yeerks suffered attacking the Anati, they lost their whole war.

But the Anati are a race that forgives. They were willing to hear the Yeerks out. And unlike most races, the Anati could make peace with the Yeerks without the constant threat of being invaded and enslaved. Like the Pythagi, the Anati physically could not be infested by Yeerks.

Anati are odd creatures. They consist of three parts: four big, crab-like legs, one very strong, three-taloned claw, and a head with a Taxxon-like mouth and five main eyes and four stalk-eyes. These three parts have a symbiotic relationship and

combine to form a single Anati.

Another important fact about the Anati: they're pink. For all their sharp, pointy bits and deadly weapons, I just find it a little hard to be intimidated by them. Sort of how the Visser wasn't all that scary the time we died his fur purple. And I bet Guraff wouldn't be so fearsome if we, say, covered him in cheese or something.

Kalroth's ship docked with one of the Anati capital ships. The main body of the ship was a hemisphere, flat on top and round on the bottom. The top was studded with weapons and hangar doors for launching ships. Beneath the sphere were the engines, which looked a lot like Anati stalk eyes. All Anati ships looked the same, it was just a question of size after that.

When Kalroth went to meet with the Anati ambassador, he took Erek with him. That meant I was coming, too.

I was starting to get nervous. It just hit me that this all fell on my shoulders. If the Yeerks got the Anati, I wasn't sure how we could stop them. They were one of the most powerful races in the galaxy. The Andalties needed their help. And I was the only one here to get it for them.

A few Anati led Kalroth, Erek, and some others off into a small room. I could only think of one thing to do: keep riding

on Ereik. I was pretty sure the Anati would protect me from the Yeerks once I let them know I was here. One thing was for sure, though: the time for secrecy was long past.

“Thank you, friends, for hearing me today,” Kalroth began. “I have come to demonstrate my sincerity. Let me tell you the story of the Yeerks. When I am finished, you will understand. We were a peaceful people, once, content on our homeworld. But then the Andalites came.

“They showed us the stars. They taught us of a world, a universe, far greater than our own. They raised our eyes up from the mud and showed us miracles that we never could have imagined. And then...then they shoved our faces back into the mud. They refused to let us share in any part of their paradise. They meant to keep for themselves what should belong to all.

“So we rose up against them. We fought them and started to see for ourselves the wonderful universe that they would never let us have if we did not pry it from their lifeless hands. That was the beginning of the Yeerk Empire, in its days of glory and honor.

“But those days did not last. Soon, we were consumed by petty infighting. Vissers and Subvissers killed each other and

sabotaged the war efforts for their own personal gain. The Empire fell into corruption and decadence. And instead of focusing on taking what should be ours, they turned their ambitions to claiming everything.

“But such a corrupt organization was doomed to fail. The infighting of the Vissers caused much dissension and death within the Empire's own ranks. Some turned into traitors, and fought openly against their former masters. Still others called for a return to the mud, to cast off the pervasive evil of the Empire and return to a simple life on our own world.

“And in the end, the Empire fell apart. A few humans defeated our mighty army on Earth. Your people and the Andalites destroyed our vast fleet around your own world. All across the galaxy, the Empire fell into ruin, as it was always meant to. But that was not the end of the Yeerks.

“I mentioned that there were rebels. A few of them stole a Blade ship and fled beyond the reach of the Andalites or the former Empire. They fled into Kelbrid space, where they could at last be free of the sins of their people. They were repentant, and they atoned for their crimes.

“And then came The One, a being of such power that life and death are nothing to it. The One can cross the boundary

between life and death as easily as I can raise my hand. The One gave us forgiveness, and more. He gave us our mission. To wipe away all evil and corruption from the galaxy. To seek out and strike down all who would repeat the mistakes of the Yeerk Empire.

“But more than this, he gave us a great leader, his Chosen One. Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six. Once, he was a Visser, as decadent as the rest, if not more so. But he, too, has learned from his mistakes and seeks atonement. The One sent us to him, and he to us. And now he leads us in our mission.”

<Hang on just a minute here,> I shouted. Then I flew off of EreK and started to demorph from fly.

“Subvisser Kalroth,” I heard EreK say, “the Anati would like me to request that you lower your weapon, since using it on this newcomer would force them to destroy you and they would rather not do that.”

I was human again in less than a minute. Kalroth, EreK, and a few others were standing with drawn weapons, but their Dracon beams were lowered. An Anati was standing between me and them. “Hello, Cassie,” EreK said, again translating from Anati for me.

“Have we met?” I asked the Anati.

“You have met some of us. If you have seen one of my...legs...have you not seen enough to have seen me? You have met some of us, so you have met the whole. We all welcome you. You voiced an objection to Subvisser Kalroth's story? We would be pleased to hear your opinion.”

“Wait,” Kalroth interrupted before I could begin. “This woman is a spy! You would hear her out?”

“We will, and with pleasure. She saved many of our lives in the past, and we thank her for it. She has had the experience of being one of us, and for that we honor her. Continue, Cassie.”

I gulped air in my throat. I'd have to make the argument of my life. I suddenly found myself really wishing Rachel was here. She's not the first person I'd pick for a diplomatic mission, but I really needed her right now.

CHAPTER 26

MARCO

I guess I'm never in a good mood these days. It's probably because, every morning, I wake up to get more and more bad news about the war on Leera. Of course, first, someone has to tell me what Leera is and, oh, by the way, **WHY THE HELL ARE THERE ALIENS EVERYWHERE!?** Not that I remember this happening more than once, but Jake assures me that it was pretty much a morning ritual now.

This morning's news was pretty bad. Salheer had landed his ships on Leera. It turns out that Pythagi ships float; at least, these ones did. They were modified to carry less troops and ships and instead carry more material to help them be buoyant. The Pythagi ships rested on top of the ocean that covered all of Leera, with bridges made of Instigators connecting them.

At first, Galuit was content to let them sit there. They weren't doing anything, and he was trying to get in touch with the Electorate to ask for reinforcements. They were proving difficult to contact; we weren't sure why.

Then we learned something very bad in the worst possible way. It turns out that Kelbrid can swim. Very well. See, all of

their muscle helps them to float and swim. I guess that's what that little tail is for. And they have really big lungs, so they can hold their breath a long, long time.

We found this out after the Leeran leadership contacted us and let us know that one of their 'safe havens' for civilians had been attacked by the Kelbrid. Almost everyone there had been killed without warning. Raids like that kept happening, and there was very little that the Leerans or Andalites could do to stop them.

Worse, Salheer had resorted to seriously messing up the planet. He was using Oda cannons to raise the temperature of the sea. And his destruction of several moons was really throwing off the tides. Leera was on its way to a serious ecological meltdown.

We tried to get them off of the planet, but with no luck. We had lost more than a dozen squadrons of Moonrakers trying to drive them out of the water, and even lost a pair of Dome ships. They were pretty well set in, and it looked like they were intent on destroying Leera slowly.

Then we got the message. Salheer invited Galuit and the Leeran king to join him in a truce conference via hologram. The Leerans saw little choice and accepted. That didn't leave

us with much choice either.

Galuit, Jake, and I stood on the bridge of the Dome ship, looking at the holograms before us. The Leeran king looked like any other Leeran to me. And by that, I mean he looked like a big, yellow frog with tentacles.

Salheer didn't look dangerous. He looked like...well, like one of Santa's elves. But we've all learned better than to judge someone by their appearance, especially when dealing with Yeerks. It's what's inside that counts. Specifically, what's inside their head. In this case, it was a very intelligent and ruthless slug.

“Captain-Prince Galuit,” Salheer greeted him in his nasal monotone. “I am surprised to see you here. Have you not gotten the communique yet?”

<What are you talking about?> Galuit demanded.

“Oh, but it is not my place to say. I am sure the Electorate will contact you at any moment now. They should have done it several days ago. Perhaps the Visser is more effective in locking down communications than we expected.”

<You called us to address the issue of a truce,> the Leeran prompted, attempting to steer the conversation back to the issue that concerned him.

“Ah, yes, the truce. As you see, your highness,” Salheer said, with almost the hint of a smirk at the title, “we are prepared to destroy your world and its people. However, we would like to avoid this if you give us what we desire.”

“You want to enslave their people,” Jake said flatly. “I can't speak for the Leerans, but I know I'd rather see my world destroyed than enslaved.”

“Yeah, how's this going to work?” I asked. “You only enslave a few of them and let the rest go free?”

“Why, what a lovely idea. The Yeerks have no use for your aged and weak, or for the very young. So we will request that all mature Leerans offer themselves as hosts. They will be released when their age begins to be a factor. After they are released, they may do as they please.”

We all looked at each other. <I sense no deception from him,> the Leeran king said to us. The thing about Leerans is that they're psychic. So if he didn't think Salheer was lying, he was probably right. Or Salheer was the universe's greatest liar. Since he was a powerful Yeerk, that wasn't out of the question.

<You offer us a choice between temporary enslavement and permanent destruction. To fight when my people cannot win, to sacrifice all their lives, would be foolish.>

“No!” Jake and I shouted.

<Your Highness, you cannot->

<But I do not believe our race is done for yet,> the Leeran king finished with resolve. <We still have the aid of the Andalites. And soon, more will come. And other races. No one will ever let the Yeerk Empire rise again. We will have countless allies; more than you can imagine. We need only to hold out until then.>

Salheer chuckled. “You believe the Andalites are here to help you, your highness? I wonder why the Andalites are still here. Captain-Prince Galuit, have your friends the Animorphs not told you about your homeworld?”

<My homeworld?>

“Why yes. Did they forget to mention that, at the same time I set out to subjugate this planet, the Visser himself was leading fleet to your own homeworld? I am amazed you have not been called back to aid them.”

Galuit turned to Jake and me. <Is this true?>

“I don't know anything about it,” I said truthfully.

Jake nodded, though. “Yeah, it's true. I knew that if I told you, you'd abandon Leera. And I couldn't let you do that. If the galaxy sees the Andalites abandon everyone to save

themselves, you'll never have any allies in this conflict. So yeah, I kept this from you for your own good.”

<My own good!? My people are being invaded and you claim that this is for my own good? They need my help! We must withdraw at once!>

“Galuit, wait a minute,” I protested.

<No, Marco, we cannot wait a minute. What is there to be gained here? Our only hope was to hold out for reinforcements and mount an offensive. That hope is now gone, and has been replaced with the possibility that my world is being destroyed and my people enslaved. Now, when my people need my help most, I will not abandon them!>

<You are going to abandon us, Galuit?> the king asked.

<I must, your highness. For the good of my own people.>

Salheer chuckled again. “I do have a certain fondness for Andalite mentality. Save yourselves first. Only then, if you have the strength to spare, do you aid others. It is a shame our people are so bent on destroying one another. We would enjoy each other's company greatly. There is a reason Prince Seerow aided us, after all.”

<You be silent, Yeerk!> Galuit raged. <All forces, this is Captian-Prince Galuit. The homeworld is under attack. They

need our help and we are going to give it. All forces, pull out. We are withdrawing from Leera. May the Ellimist help them. May he help us all.>

As I watched Leera get smaller and smaller in the distance, I wasn't sure what to say. But, as always, I figured something out. I turned to Jake. "You know what this has in common with a math test?"

"What, Marco?"

"We failed really, really badly."

Jake nodded. "Yeah, I guess so. But it's not over yet. Maybe we can think of a way to get some extra credit."

CHAPTER 27

RACHEL

“This isn't working,” I muttered. Tobias, Caysath, a few basically faceless advisors, and I were, as usual, on the command deck of Caysath's Dome ship. Almost all of our remaining forces were concentrated around our moon. One of our Dome ships was on the surface of the planet, aiding the free Hork-bajir.

Guraff's forces were divided. About half of them were on the planet's surface, already beginning the ground invasion. The other half were in orbit, concentrated mostly around the other moon. We were basically paralyzed. “Sitting here isn't doing any good,” I continued. “Especially since we know reinforcements aren't coming. It's just us.”

<Captain-Prince Caysath,> one of the advisors piped up, <I believe it is best for us to withdraw. With our homeworld under attack, and with our inability to aid this planet, we have no other options.>

“There's one,” I argued. “We could attack. Maybe we could drive them off, or at least out of orbit. If we can drive their orbiting ships away, their ground-based forces will be

helpless.”

“Easier said than done,” Tobias muttered. “No open attack is likely to succeed here.”

<What I don't understand is why the Undervisser has not destroyed us already,> Caysath commented. <If he massed his forces, where would be nothing we could do. We would be forced to retreat or die.>

“He doesn't want to destroy the fleet,” I answered. See, I knew Guraff. And I knew the reason he hadn't ripped us to pieces. “There's only one thing in this fleet that even crosses his mind: Tobias. If he comes to destroy us, it's pretty certain that Tobias and I will escape; the Reliquary's fast enough to get away from the Corrupters and Instigators. Tobias is the one man Guraff thinks can beat him. So he wants to keep Tobias where he can see him.”

Tobias nodded. I knew that he had figured that out before I did. But he didn't want to be the one to say it because he hates to sound arrogant. <Why is he so worried about Prince Tobias?>

“He and I have...a history...” Tobias said guardedly. He still wouldn't even mention Earth, in case the battle for it wasn't over yet. I didn't see how it could still be considered

going on, but he figured it was best to be careful.

“I can't think here,” Tobias muttered. To me, he said, “I'm going back to the ship. Maybe I'll be able to pull something together.”

Once he left us, Caysath asked me, <Why will he not contemplate retreat? It is the most advisable course of action here.>

I shook my head. “For now, yeah, it is. But in the long run, he doesn't think it matters if we lose our ships here. When people see that the Andalites are willing to fight to the death for their freedom, we'll have some allies. But if they see that we'll just run every time things get tough...”

But there was something else, something I wasn't about to tell Caysath. I think the Howler memories were already starting to effect Tobias. The Howlers had no memories of defeat; they believed that they would always win. And I think Tobias was starting to think that way, too.

I left to go and find him. I entered the Reliquary and heard the shower running. It may not have been my most well-thought-out idea, but I figured I'd surprise Tobias by joining him. But when I pulled open the door, it wasn't Tobias.

It was a Howler, sitting under the water with crossed legs.

“Damn it Tobias, you promised you wouldn't do this again,” I said.

He looked up at me. “I'm sorry, Rachel. But I can't win this one on my own. I need help. Maybe somewhere in my memories-”

“In the Howler memories,” I interrupted.

“Maybe somewhere in them, there's a way to win. It's the only thing I can do, Rachel. Sima Yi, one of Cao Cao's greatest strategist, had a saying. 'When you can attack, attack. When you can't attack, defend. When you can't defend, flee. When you can't flee, surrender. When you can't surrender, die.' We can't defend, flee, or surrender. So our only options are to find a way to attack or die. And I don't consider that last one a viable option, do you?”

“No. But this isn't the way, Tobias. How long until-”

“We already had this argument, Rachel. My life is a small price for me to pay for victory here.”

“Maybe for you. But not for me. Your life doesn't belong to you anymore, Tobias.”

“I know that. It belongs to mankind, and the the Andalites and to everyone who-”

“No, it doesn't. Your life belongs to me. And you're not

allowed to lose it unless I let you. And I'm not going to lose you like this. How much power does Crayak have over us already, Tobias? I'm not going to let you become one of his children.”

“Can't you see that we don't have a choice, Rachel?”

“You want to quote Sima Yi? Fine then, here's a quote for you. 'There is always a choice. In any and every situation. It's usually the choice between bad and worse. But it's still a choice.’”

“Who said that one?”

“You did.”

He looked at me for a long time. Then he demorphed. “Yeah, I guess I did. If I lose myself to the Howler, that's bad. But if I lose this world, if the Andalites lose this war, that's worse.”

“If the Andalites lose this war,” I responded, “that's bad. If I lose you, I'd die again. You know I don't just say stuff like that, Tobias. I mean it. I cannot, [i]cannot[/i], lose you.”

We sat down on our bed. We used to have twin beds, but we replaced them for one that was larger than both. I forget who suggested it. It doesn't even matter. “Tobias, you have to decide now what's important to you.”

“This,” he said instantly. He looked around. “My home...my family...and you, most of all. I'd never sacrifice you for anything, Rachel. No matter how much I may need to some day, I can't do that.”

“Then don't sacrifice yourself,” I answered. I put my head on his shoulder. “If something happens to you, I'm going to make sure the same thing happens to me.”

“I know. It's just...hard for me to worry about myself when everything else seems so important.”

“So let me worry about you,” I said. “That seems to be all I do anyway,” I added, a little bitterly.

“You'll be back in the fight soon,” he promised. “A few months and you'll be ready to fight again. And I'll make sure Guraff's there to personally welcome you back home.”

“Sending a giant Hork-bajir to kill me as soon as I get back into the fight,” I muttered. “You're so sweet.”

“I try.”

I was about to say something else when the communications array lit up. Tobias got up to answer it. “This is Prince Tobias. What ship is calling?”

Then I heard a voice I knew all too well. One that still made me want to crawl under the covers and hide sometimes.

The voice that still haunts my nightmares. <This is the Jahar. Do you recognize my voice?>

Tobias nodded. “Yeah.” Even he looked nervous, and he almost never shows any emotion. “Yeah, I recognize you.”

<Then introductions are not in order.>

“No.” Alloran-Semitur-Corass needed no introduction. “You've come to help us, War-Prince Alloran?”

<I am no longer a Prince. I have retired. And I have not come to help you. I have come,> he said, <to kill Yeerks.>

“I appreciate the help,” Tobias said. “But... Sorry, Alloran, but you are only one man.”

Alloran laughed. It was so different from the Visser's laugh that I almost wanted to smile. <You think I have come alone? I have been around a long time, son of Elfangor. And I still have some friends.>

CHAPTER 27

AX

Something was troubling me about the Visser's movements. Although his Corrupters had moved to encircle us, they did not engage us actively. We held back because we were waiting for reinforcements. What was the Visser waiting for? The same thing, most likely, either from Leera or Horkbajir. Or perhaps for the Anati to arrive to aid him.

Glorfindel was waiting in Z-space, ready to begin his attack at Lirem's signal. All we waited for was for Galuit to arrive with the Leeran forces. And, with any luck, Prince Jake and Marco. I wished we could have received some word from Cassie about the Anati situation, or from Tobias and Rachel, but that was not to be.

I was with Lirem when we finally got the message from Galuit. <This is Captain-Prince Galuit-Enilon-Esgarrouth, reporting for duty, Counselor Lirem. What are your orders?>

<What is the status on Leera?> Lirem asked first.

<There is no status. The Leerans are entering talks with the Yeerks in an effort to save their planet, which will be destroyed if they continue to resist. They hope to hold out until

we are able to aid them, but there is little hope.>

<I see. In that case, your orders are simple. Contact War-Prince Glorfindel and rendezvous as close to the homeworld as you can. You are to engage the Yeerk forces immediately. We will support you from the homeworld. They shall be caught between us and destroyed.>

<Understood. I will contact you when we begin our attack.> After that, it was several hours of nervous waiting. I was with my squadron, ready to launch.

And then the order came down. <Prince Aximili? It is time. Launch all fighters.> That order...it had sounded so familiar. Where had I heard it before?

And then I remembered: that was the last order Elfangor had ever got. No, not the last. That one had come from me. So I gave that order to my squadron. <Go burn some slugs.>

My squadron led the way out of the Dome ship's hangar. It was my task to strike the first blows against the Pythagi and Yeerk forces. Although I myself am no great pilot, I was supported by some of the best. There was little to fear from the Instigators. And if we kept our heads about us, it would not be difficult to avoid the Oda cannons of the Corrupters.

My sensors detected Galuit and Glorfindel approaching,

their own Moonrakers nearly within range of the Pythagi forces. <This is it,> I told my squadron. <As the humans say: let us rock and roll.>

A flight of Instigators poured out from one of the Corrupters. That ship started firing their cannons at us, but we evaded their beams without much difficulty. In moments, we were on the Instigators. The targeting computer locked onto the lead Pythagi ship. I fired, and a beam of green light split the enemy fighter in half.

This scene seemed to repeat itself all around me. My squadron tore through the Instigators, each of us destroying at least two or three as we buzzed over them. <Begin the second pass,> I ordered. Obediently, my squadron circled around to destroy even more Instigators.

A large blip on my sensor array went dark. One of the Corrupters had fallen. Several more went dark soon thereafter. We passed by the Instigators again and ripped into them, suffering no losses on our side. We were beating them. No, we were slaughtering them.

One of my pilots laughed over the communications channel. <This is the best the Yeerks have to offer? This is too easy.>

It suddenly struck me that he was entirely correct. This was too easy. <Counselor Lirem,> I called, <how many ships have we lost?>

<None, Prince Aximili. They are helpless against us.>

No, that was wrong. It was impossible. Something was drastically wrong here. I gave my squadron a new order. <Locate the Blade ship. There is something...wrong..here.>

<Prince Aximili, that is not your objective,> Lirem reprimanded me. <Turn about and engage those Instigators at once!>

<Counselor Lirem, with all due respect, this is very, very wrong. There is some sort of trick here and we need to find out what. I do not like surprises. Whatever they are planning, the destruction of the Blade ship will end it. And...> I paused. <It is a matter of my honor,> I added. <The Visser killed my brother. I have yet to avenge him.>

<Very well, Prince Aximili. It seems you are not needed for the Instigators after all.>

<Prince!> my wingman chirped. <We have located the Blade ship, in a cluster of four Corrupters.>

I led the charge in between the Corrupters. Several flights of Instigators met us. This time, we did not get by unscathed.

We lost half the squadron before the Instigators fled back to their hangars.

There, looming like the shadow of death, was the Blade ship. I hailed the ship. <The time has come to settle this,> I called.

The Visser's hologram appeared before me. He was laughing. <Prince Aximili...ever the image of the Andalite soldier, aren't you? Courageous, arrogant, and above all, foolish. How many of my traps will you walk into? How many have you stepped into already?>

<What are you talking about?> I demanded. We had the Blade ship surrounded, and the Corrupters couldn't fire at us without the risk of hitting the Visser. <We have you surrounded. You->

<Yes, yes you do. Just as I wanted you to. Prince Aximili...no, I think I should call you Ax. We've been through so much together,> he mocked. <Galuit is here. Who is defending Leera? Who is defending Hork-bajir? The Anati? The Rakam Garoo? Earth? You have abandoned all of those worlds in favor of your own.>

<Once we destroy you here, what will be left?> I responded. <Victory will be swift after your death.>

<Perhaps. But do you not see that this is a wasted effort? Doesn't this all seem...a bit too easy?>

A chill went down my spine. <What are you getting at?> I demanded. What was he up to?

<The Pythagi Conglomerate has vast resources. Enough that they can spare the materials to construct the outer shell of a Corrupter. Give it a few engines, toss in some weapons and a skeleton crew and it looks just like the real thing, wouldn't you agree? You are fighting phantoms, Ax. Only these four Corrupters and my Blade staff are fully staffed. And, of course, those Instigators were drones; machines with what small level of intelligence the Pythagi could give them.>

<This whole attack...>

<Yes, it is a feint. And a very good one, I might add. We leaked some information into our own ranks about this attack. We assumed that it would get back to your people eventually. And what better way to make it seem real than to go myself? And what did you do? Exactly what we wanted you to. You pulled your forces out of the other parts of the galaxy and left them open to us. Leera is within our grasp now, and Guraff has surely subdued Hork-bajir by now.>

<Impossible!> I shouted back. <You're lying; you aren't

this smart. Not even Guraff could have planned this. It is not his style.>

<True. But Salheer, on the other hand... He was the Emperor for a reason. This was all his plan. Even my refusal of the robe and throne.>

<Why that?> I asked.

<Shall I tell you a secret, Ax? We've already shared so much. If I became the Emperor, what would I be? Just another Emperor. But to be the man who founded the Yeerk Order, who liberated his people from the Andalites and the antiquated ways of the Empire... One becomes more than a man. He becomes a symbol. Like me. My power was never secure until I was able to refuse it.>

My sensors lit up as Bug fighters poured from the Blade ship. Instigators launched from the Corrupters. We were vastly outnumbered; there was no choice but to turn around and retreat to the main fleet. I should have attacked instead of spoken. I had missed this chance.

I burned with shame as I flew back to the lead Dome ship. The Yeerks had played us all for fools. No, not all of us. Tobias had seen through it. Or was he just another Controller? Impossible to say. But if he was still one of us, he would be

holding out on Hork-bajir. We had lost Leera. But maybe, if we hurried, we could salvage Hork-bajir.

I contacted Lirem. <Counselor, this attack is a feint.> Already, the Yeerks were retreating, leaving behind only the shells of the Corrupters and the Instigator drones. <Prince Tobias was right.>

<Apparently so. Damn it. Then our next destination is clear. Captain Galuit, turn your forces about and return to Leera. Take seven more Dome ships of your choosing. Perhaps it is not too late to salvage that world. War-Prince Glorfindel, resume your course to Hork-bajir. Be sure to take Prince Aximili and the Animorphs with you. We have not lost just yet.>

CHAPTER 28

CASSIE

“Kalroth is lying to you,” I warned the Anati. Kalroth and I had been giving these arguments for what felt like weeks now. We met once every three days with the Anati, with each of us arguing our points. The Anati still had not made up their minds. “The Yeerks haven't changed a bit! He doesn't regret anything the Empire has done; he's trying to do it again. They haven't changed, and they do not want to be forgiven.”

“We have changed indeed,” Kalroth argued. “The Yeerk Empire is no more. All Yeerks now swear fealty to the Yeerk Order.”

“A rose by any other name,” I argued. Then I realized that the Anati wouldn't understand what I meant by that. “You can call it whatever you want, but nothing has changed.”

“The Order seeks only peace,” Kalroth shot back. “We have made an alliance with the Pythagi Conglomerate. We now seek the friendship of the Anati.”

“Meanwhile, you kill the Andalites wherever you find them,” I pointed out.

“We killed the Andalties over our homeworld because

there was no other way for us to enter it. We kill the Andalities in other places because they will do the same to us. Will the Andalites ever forgive us for the crimes we now repent? You certainly have not, Cassie. Andalites have many virtues; forgiveness is not one of them.”

I wanted to argue with him, but he had a very good point. And I sensed something I hadn't expected: honesty. He truly believed what he was saying. I could almost believe him. But whenever I thought that maybe, just maybe he wasn't so bad, I remembered his bit about the Visser being some sort of Chosen One.

“Maybe you're not like the Empire, Kalroth. But the Visser will never change. He will always be merciless, ruthless, cruel, and above all ambitious. He doesn't want forgiveness or peace. All he wants,” I said, “is everything.”

“The Visser liberated his homeworld from the Andalites. The Council of Thirteen offered him the position of Emperor for it. Do you know what the Visser did? He refused the title, three times. He proclaimed an end to the Empire once and for all. He established the Order. If he was truly the man you claim, Cassie, why would he do that? Why would he give up absolute power and authority to build a government without

the infighting and corruption of the Empire?”

“If the Order is any different,” I responded, “why does Salheer Six-Seven-One serve in its army? He used to be the Emperor! He is the pinnacle of everything you claim to fight.”

“He has renounced his leadership and sworn to serve the Order,” Kalroth reminded me. “He, too, has changed. Surely you, my Anati friends, know that one may stray from the path and return to it again. This is all we ask: that you forgive us our crimes and aid us in setting things right.”

“Even if the Yeerks have changed,” I argued, “why side with them? The Andalites stood by you before when the Yeerks tried to destroy you. Even if you forgive the Yeerks for that, how can you stand by and watch as the Yeerks kill the very people who were ready to die for you? Worse, how can you even consider helping them?”

“The Andalties are far from sinless,” Kalroth snorted. “On the Hork-bajir world, they released a Quantum Virus and destroyed most of the population. Thousands; no, millions, of innocents died because of them. They were prepared to destroy your world, Cassie, when they thought they would lose it to us. And they would have done the same to the Anati if they believed they could get away with it. You ask how they

can stand with us? I ask how anyone can stand by those imperialist murderers called Andalites.”

I needed to try a new tactic. Something that would really reach the Anati. They were understanding us, but they were not feeling it. I needed to touch their hearts. And unlike Kalroth, I had had the experience of being an Anati. I knew the way to their emotions.

“Yes, the Andalites have done terrible things,” I admitted. “But let me ask you: once you have joined together, do you ever separate? Once your claw and legs and head become one Anati, could you ever even consider breaking apart? I know you can't. The very idea isn't just ridiculous to you; it's terrifying.

“So how could you ever think of breaking away from the Andalites? Maybe you didn't choose the best allies. But does that matter at this point? You're one, now. Andalite and Anati stood together; they must still stand together. It was your alliance that broke the backbone of the Yeerk war machine. As one, you spared the galaxy from enslavement by an Empire that the Yeerks themselves now claim to renounce. The Andalites have become part of the whole. Can you ever turn your backs against that?”

“The Andalites-”

An Anati cut Kalroth off. “I believe we have heard all we need to hear. You, Subvisser Kalroth, make an excellent argument. And we truly believe that you seek forgiveness for the crimes of the Empire. But you do understand what it truly means to be Anati. Our allies are joined with us as one, just like our bodies. One who does not understand cannot be allowed to be a part of the whole.”

The Anati turned to me. “But the Andalites, too, fail to understand. We accepted their aid and their alliance in a time of desperation. Now, the question of continuing it must be considered carefully. It would be hypocrisy to accept them when they have the same faults for which we rejected the Yeerks. Hypocrisy, too, is something we cannot accept.

“But you, Cassie, understand. You, a human. So we will stand with humans. If your race supports the Andalites, we will fight with you to the last. If you support the Yeerks, we will aid them. If you remain neutral, so shall we. It is all in the hands of mankind now.”

I gulped. I didn't want to be the one to break it to him, but there's something I've noticed. It's always a very bad idea to leave things in the hands of mankind. Who knew what Earth

would do? Most would want to avoid this war. Others would even want to support the Yeerks. We could be looking at fighting World War Three over this. Or maybe Four; I wasn't sure if the Yeerk war counted as World War Three.

I took a deep breath. "I guess I'll have to be going, then," I said to them. "Earth needs to be told about all of this."

"Whatever you decide, Cassie Animorph, we will be at your side. Always."

CHAPTER 29

TOBIAS

If you can attack, attack. If you can't attack, defend. If you can't defend, flee. If you can't flee, surrender. If you can't surrender, die. Those are the options of any army. Right now, it was down to the first or the last. So we really didn't have any choice but to launch a desperate attack.

I had a plan. I would never attack without one. But it was one that required great sacrifice. But here's the surprising thing about Andalites. It's not hard to find volunteers for a suicide mission; it's deciding between all the volunteers.

“Is everything ready, Caysath?” I called from the Reliquary. I was alone on the ship. Despite all of her objections, I had forced her to remain on the Dome ship with Caysath. And by 'forced', I mean I locked her in a closet until after I had left. I couldn't think of any other way to stop her from coming with me and I couldn't carry out my plan if she was on the ship with me.

<All is ready, Prince Tobias. Alloran and his forces are in place, prepared to launch their attack on your signal.>

Then it began. I flew straight for the opposite moon, the

one the Yeerks controlled. With me were two Dome ships and their Moonraker squadrons. The domes were long gone by now, lost in the first days of fighting.

There were four Corrupters orbiting the moon. All broke off to engage us. The other Corrupters were on the ground, overseeing the subjugation of the planet. Guraff was there, too, although I knew the battle would draw him quickly.

“Concentrate all firepower on the moon,” I ordered the Dome ships. “That includes capital weapons and Moonrakers. We have to destroy that rock!”

It turns out that a hunk of rock in space is no match for two Dome ships, a few squadrons of Moonrakers, and the Reliquary. Within minutes, large chunks of the moon were breaking off, obscuring our sensors. It would be hell on the tides, but Hork-bajir did not have any large bodies of water.

But we were far from safe. Almost as soon as we destroyed the moon, we lost one of our Dome ships. I had expected that, though. It only had a skeleton crew, just enough to work the weapons. These two Dome ships were here for only one reason: to destroy that moon. We didn't expect them to return. “Alloran, now is the time!” I called to him, hoping that he got the message.

The large chunks of the moon showed up as blips on my sensors. See, moons have a lot of metals in them, including the ones that ships are made out of. So the sensors detected them and, judging by the size, told me that they were small fighter ships of various types ranging from Moonrakers to Skrit Na ships.

The remaining Dome ships were coming to reinforce us now. Our second skeleton Dome ship went down, but not before it took out a Corrupter. The remaining ships joined the fight. The Corrupters weren't much of a match for us now that we weren't horribly outnumbered. Dome ships had grown and adapted through decades of desperate warfare. The Corrupters were just a scientist's drawing.

Another Corrupter fell, but one of the Dome ships was starting to look pretty shabby. They had lost their starboard engines and some of their weaponry. But the Moonrakers made up for that. The Instigators couldn't stand up to their precision. They skillfully, no, artfully, were disabling the weapons on the Corrupters.

Then my sensors informed me that Corrupters were approaching from the planet. The Pythagi had called in their ground-based reinforcements. Just as planned. The Reliquary's

computer was sure to take special note of a ship it had seen only once before. Guraff's ship.

I swung away from the fight and turned to meet him. I had to make sure Guraff wasn't paying attention to the battle. He had to be focusing on something more important: me. "Nice ride, Guraff," I hailed him. "What do you call that?"

I swear I could hear him smiling. "The Beast. I named it after an old friend."

"I'm sure my father would be proud," I told him. Then I flew straight for him. "We both know what you really want here, Guraff. You want me. So why don't you come and get me?"

"How right you are, Devil Prince. All forces, engage the Dome ships. Leave the Reliquary to me." Guraff took off after me. That was when I found out that the Beast was very, very fast. But the Reliquary was still faster.

He chased me through the skies above Hork-bajir, spraying Dracon fire here and there. He winged me a few times, but the shields were taking care of that just fine. I looped around, trying to get a shot at him. But the Beast, though slower than the Reliquary, was more maneuverable. I couldn't manage to get a shot at him.

“Alloran!” I called over the secure channel, “GO!”

Over the open channel, the one that everyone in the battle could hear, I heard an all too familiar voice. <It almost feels as though I have gone back in time,> Alloran said coldly. <I find myself here again, fighting Yeerks above Hork-bajir. How...amusing.>

The Jahar appeared, coming out from one of the larger chunks of moon. And it wasn't alone. Other assorted ships appeared. Moonrakers, Garagron Strikers, Rakam and Garoo fighters, and even a few Skrit Na craft. All had snuck in under the cover the shattered moon provided. They appeared on the Pythagi sensors, but they were indistinguishable from rocks to anything other than a visual scan. Then they hid, waiting to spring their ambush.

“Alloran? Here? Impossible!” Guraff gasped. He turned to engage the Jahar. That was a mistake. I turned the Reliquary about and attacked him from behind. Finally, I got some solid hits on the Beast. The Jahar joined in. Not even Guraff could stand up to that kind of attack for long.

Alloran and I chased him through the battle. I guess it's kind of ironic, really. The Visser's former host chasing a ship named after Elfangor with the help of Elfangor's son. But I

didn't have time to dwell on irony. Victory was more on my mind then.

I saw the Garatron ships darting around so quickly that even the Reliquary's computers couldn't quite keep track of them. I saw at least a full squadron fly into a hangar of a Corrupter. A few minutes later, that Corrupter exploded. About half of the Garatrons made it out. I don't know what they did in there, but God bless them for it.

Alloran's appearance had had the desired effect on our enemies as well. They were stunned and afraid. Guraff was too busy with us to think about rallying his forces. But I guess someone else was able to figure it out. The Corrupters started to descend back towards Hork-bajir.

“How could I have lost my head?” Guraff demanded when he realized what was happening. I had expected him to retreat to the surface, but instead, the Corrupters and the Beast started to gather over the north pole of the planet. Getting ready for a counter attack.

I took stock of our forces. Things were starting to look up. The odds weren't nearly as bad as they were before. But we had lost two Dome ships, and one of the remaining ones was badly damaged. We couldn't afford to press the attack now that

they were in formation again.

“Pull back to the moon,” I ordered. “We've won today, but let's not push our luck. There isn't enough to go around as it is.”

There were two possibilities now. Guraff and I could sit around waiting for help to come. Whoever got reinforcements first would win this fight. But neither he nor I were much for sitting around and waiting. And I knew Rachel wouldn't let me hear the end of it.

“Alloran,” I called, “any ideas for a follow up attack?”

CHAPTER 30

JAKE

It was great to see that Ax was safe, and even better to hear that Tobias and Rachel were, at the very least, alive. Of course, when we heard about their situation, we were considerably less happy. And the fact that the Andalites might arrive at Leera only to find a graveyard didn't make us very happy, either.

There was some good news, though. We managed to make contact with Cassie and the Anati. “Good news and bad news, Jake,” she told me. “The good news is that the Anati won't side with the Yeerks. But they won't go with the Andalites, either; they say they'll side with Humans.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What did you say to them?” I asked.

We were all on the bridge of War-Prince Glorfindel's Dome ship, the [i]SkySeeker[/i]. We being myself, Marco, and Ax. Cassie was joining us via hologram from an Anati ship headed towards Earth. We still hadn't been able to make contact with Tobias.

Cassie shrugged. “I don't even know anymore. But I've managed to get in touch with the leaders of all the nations

what have achieved space flight and look like they will have ships capable of Z-space flight soon or already have them.”

I nodded. “Good. When can we talk to them? We have to convince them to side with the Andalites.”

“They're all standing by, ready to talk via holograms. All we were waiting for is you, Jake.”

I sighed. Of course it had to be me. I might not be the leader anymore, but I was a celebrity. So was Marco, but I was the one everyone recognized as the leader. I was probably the only one who could get humans to work together for once. I wish I was a more persuasive speaker.

“Okay, tell them I'm ready,” I told her. A moment later, more holograms appeared. The leaders of America, Canada, England, France, Germany, Switzerland, Israel, India, Russia, Japan, and China appeared before me. I wouldn't have know who all of them were, but Glorfindel's technicians had helpful little flags displayed over their heads.

“Um...hi...” began.

“Great introduction, Jake,” Marco muttered. “Remind me not to let you write my eulogy.”

“My name is Jake,” I said. I always felt more confident when I started with that. “You probably know me. I was an

Animorph. And well... I guess I am again. There's no easy way to say this, so I'm just going to jump right into it. The Yeerks are back. They freed their homeworld and they're back to trying to take over the galaxy.”

That got some mixed reactions. Some of them, the European, Canadian, and Japanese guys, started mumbling and looked really scared. The President of America looked pretty nervous, and so did the Israeli, Indian, and Chinese leaders. The Russian guy looked calm, though. I took a good long look at him.

Honestly, he scared me. He was scary the way the Visser is scary. He had that same aura of darkness about him. Like evil was pumping through his veins instead of blood. His eyes were like little chips of ice. They were so cold I almost thought he could freeze me solid with a glance. Vladimir Putin has that effect on people.

John McCain once said of Putin that, “I looked int his eyes and saw three letters. K, G, and B.” Now I know what he meant. I was looking at a man who was, in all ways, a heartless killer. There was no limit to how far he would go to get what he wanted. Anyone in his path was much better off just getting out of the way. Under any other circumstances, I'd

have avoided speaking to him. But now, I knew that he was exactly the kind of man we needed.

Once they all quieted down, I continued. “The Andalites are fighting them again. And the Leerans, and some other races. But the Yeerks have their own allies: the Pythagi Conglomerate and the Kelbrid. Between the three of them, they've got more resources than the Andalites can handle, and they've got some very good leaders. The Andalites need our help.

“There is another race, the Anati, who have agreed to fight wherever humans fight. Whatever the human race decides, the Anati will support them. With their help and ours, the Andalites and the other free races can win this war. But if we don't help them, the Yeerks are just going to spread again and consume everything in their path.”

The President of America shook his head. “I don't have the authority to commit America's armed forces right now. Not for a prolonged engagement, anyway. And I can't sign any treaties with the Anati without the Senate's approval. Until we get the legislation through, my hands are tied.”

All of the European guys gave a similar response, as did the Japanese, Israeli, and Indian leaders. The Chinese leader

just shook his head. “My people have problems of their own. Why should we give our lives for the war of the Andalites? No matter how the Yeerks fare against them, China will stand strong. Why should we fear the Yeerks?”

To my surprise, it was Glorfindel who stepped forward. <Have you forgotten your own history? Do you recall the story of Zhuge Liang and the Nanman? Perhaps I should remind you. In Nanzhong, a rugged territory of southern China, there lived the Nanman. They were fierce and cunning warriors, bound together with every man as the brother of the others. They were unified and strong.

<But then came the great strategist, Zhuge Liang. The Nanman fought against him. Seven times, Zhuge Liang captured their leader, King Menghuo. After the seventh capture, Menghuo swore to serve Zhuge Liang and his lord, Liu Bei. But as soon as Zhuge Liang left, the spirit of the Nanman rose again and they rebelled once more.

<Your people are strong and unified. But the Yeerks will crush you repeatedly. You may never give in, but you will never be victorious. But if you strike them now, before they can invade your land, you have a chance at victory.>

“How did you know that story?” I whispered to him once

he had finished.

<Prince Tobias tends to use such stories a lot when discussing strategy. I have retained a few of them. I find that they come in handy.>

Before the Chinese leader decided, Putin started to speak. “Yes, we could join this war and die for the Andalites. Or we could join the other side and die for the Yeerks. We could sit here on our own planet and wait to be destroyed. Or we could make the greatest choice of all. We could fight, not for the Andalites or the Yeerks or for anyone else. We could fight for Earth, for mankind.

“Long ago, Vladimir Lenin had a vision. A world where all men were brothers, comrades. He began in Russia. He toppled the corrupt Czarist regime and tried to make life livable for the common man. Ultimately, his plans failed. The Soviet Union fell into decadence and corruption and in the end, it collapsed in upon itself. But though the way became corrupted and twisted, and although the Soviet Union failed, Lenin's vision still lives on.

“I, too, dream of a world where all men stand together. Where all on Earth join hands as comrades. We will always fight with one another. Most of you in this room think me an

evil man. A monster. Because I have done what is necessary to secure a future for my people. And in doing so, I have been forced to destroy the futures of many others. So be it.

“The Yeerks invaded Earth. They attacked my planet, my people. And that is not something I will ever forgive. If left unchecked, they will do it again. I will not stand by and wait for that to happen. I will fight. My people will go to war. But not for the sake of the Andalties or the Anati or the Leerans or the Garatrons or the Rakkam or the Garoo or any other race. Mother Russia will fight for Mother Earth.”

It was a good speech. And I almost believed that he actually cared about what was best for Earth. But then I looked into his eyes. They were still as cold as the deepest parts of space. I had no idea what it was he was after, but I knew one thing for certain: he was in this for the good of Earth as much as the Visser was in this for the good of the Order.

CHAPTER 31

RACHEL

Things were looking up. Guraff's forces didn't dare descend to the planet because they knew we'd obliterate them from orbit. And although he already had a lot of Kelbrid loose on the Hork-bajir world, they weren't much of a threat to the Hork-bajir. Kelbrid can't climb. The Pythagi troops on the surface were a bit of a problem, though.

Tobias and I didn't spend any time alone for the next few days. We were always with Alloran and Caysath, trying to figure out a way to attack. We couldn't come up with anything better than to just go for it and see how things played out. It actually wasn't as bad of a plan as it sounded.

The Pythagi troops were inexperienced, and their Corrupters were inferior to Dome ships. Although we were still outnumbered, by about two to one, we had them outclassed. With the experience of the Andalite warriors and the power of the Dome ships, we still had a chance.

We weren't the ones to make the next move, though. Our sensors lit up in the middle of yet another endless strategy meeting. The Corrupters were on the move, headed for our

position. Before Caysath even gave the order to prepare for battle, Tobias and I were headed for the Reliquary.

“Rachel, stay-”

“No! You locked me in the closet last time. I'm not missing another battle, Tobias. Besides, you can use my help. You can't work all of the Reliquary's guns by yourself. You couldn't even if you weren't flying the ship.” He wanted to argue. I know he did. But he didn't have the time. So he sighed and kept going.

A few minutes later, we were assembled for battle again. One of our Dome ships was still badly damaged from the earlier fight. We kept it between the two good ones, hoping that maybe it would survive this fight but knowing full well that it most likely wouldn't. We had removed most of the Andalites from the crew, since we needed veterans on ships that we expected to survive. Most of the work on that one had been taken over by Hork-bajir.

The Dome ships had longer range on their Shredder cannons than the Corrupters did, so we got to be the ones to start shooting. It didn't slow the Corrupters, though we did destroy one before they were within range of our ships. They kept coming and soon, green and purple light was flashing all across the sky. From the plant below, it probably looked

beautiful. Even here, there was a beauty to it.

Then something happened. The weakened Dome ship stopped shooting at the Corrupters. Without warning, it opened fire on Caysath's ship instead. "Oh-" I cut off as the dome shattered, along with parts of the bridge.

The other Dome ship was turning to fight now. This was getting very ugly very quickly. The weakened ship was quickly torn to pieces between the two of them, but Caysath's ship was too badly damaged to salvaged. "Caysath," Tobias called, "get to a Moonraker and flee to the remaining Dome."

<We Andalites believe that a captain should fall with his ship, Prince Tobias.>

"Ships can be rebuilt. But you only live twice; most people only get one shot. Don't throw it away over this ship."

<You make a compelling point. I am retreating.>

The rest of Caysath's crew remained, though. They fired furiously at the Corrupters, and destroyed one before their own ship broke apart.

They had three Corrupters left. We had one weakened Dome ship. "That last ship will have to retreat," Tobias said angrily. "All forces, withdraw to the remaining Dome ship. Once all ships are in the hangar, retreat to Z-space. We'll meet

with you two parsecs from here.”

“What happened to letting people know we'd fight to the death?” I asked.

“We've made our point,” he said. I knew he didn't believe that. He agreed with me. “But this isn't a full retreat. I plan to come back in a few hours. Guraff's forces will be on the ground by then. We can take them by surprise and maybe salvage this thing.”

I could tell he didn't believe that, either. But he was willing to try it. “So why aren't we going with them?” I asked.

“Because someone needs to keep the Yeerks busy while the other ships withdraw,” Tobias answered. “I've always bragged that this thing could take down a Dome ship. I guess it's time I actually tested that theory.”

He steered straight for a Corrupter. I don't know how that would have ended. Before we started shooting, the Beast came to intercept us. “It seems this round goes to me,” Guraff said over the open channel. “I wish that it had not come at such a high cost.”

“It's not over yet, Guraff,” Tobias said bitterly. “How did you manage to get one of our Dome ships?”

“It was a simple matter; made easier by your decision to

withdraw many of the Andalites from that ship. We were able to infest many of the natives and arm them. I also sent in some of my elite veterans from...other conflicts.. The Hork-bajir on that ship were no match for mine; the Controllers were far more intelligent. They overpowered the Hork-bajir and overran the Andalites. Once we had control of the Dome ship, it was just a simple matter of turning it against you.”

“A good move. One that I didn't see coming, I'll admit.”

<Prince Tobias,> Caysath said over the private channel, <We will be prepared to retreat very soon. Are you coming?>

“I'm coming,” Tobias sighed. To Guraff, he said, “Looks like I wasn't a match for you, Guraff.”

“Nonsense. I would call this an even battle. I had the advantage of great numbers. You had experience, reinforcements, superior weaponry, and equal cunning. I would say that you are indeed a match for me.”

“Glad to hear you say that. But I must be going now.”

“Now, Devil Prince. As much as I would enjoy fighting you again, I would not be much of a general if I allowed you to escape. I am afraid that this battle was our last. Goodbye, Tobias.”

CHAPTER 32

MARCO

We emerged from Z-space in the middle of a firefight. Three Corrupters were firing at an approaching Dome ship. Moonrakers, Garatron ships, and a few miscellaneous other craft were all over the place, fighting with Instigators. The Jahar was chasing a long, black ship, which was chasing the Reliquary.

“Looks like Bird Boy needs us to pull his feathered rear out of the fire again,” I sighed to Jake and Ax.

<All fighters, engage the Instigators. Dome ships, concentrate all firepower on the Corrupters!> Glorfindel barked. To Ax, he said, <Take your squadron and assist Prince Tobias.>

Ax hadn't waited for the order, though; he was already almost off of the command bridge. <War-Prince Glorfindel?> a thought-speak voice gasped. <We did not think you would ever arrive.>

<I am sorry for the delay, Captain-Prince Caysath. The Yeerks lured us back to the homeworld with a feint. I am amazed you were able to hold out.>

<We would be dead now were it not for you.>

I ignored their chatter and concentrated on the sensors. The Corrupters were starting to retreat, and whatever ship had been following Tobias broke off. That didn't stop the Dome ships from firing. Only one Corrupter, a few squadrons of Instigators, and that big black ship made it away. Everything else was destroyed.

The Reliquary docked with us. Glorfindel, Jake, and I were in the hangar waiting for it. Ax led them in. I was shocked at how bad the ship looked. There were chunks missing from it, the sides and cabin were all shot up, and several of the guns seemed to be missing. The crew didn't look all that much better.

Tobias looked like he was about ready to collapse and sleep for days. His eyes were bloodshot and had some pretty massive bags under them. His hair was even more messed up than usual, and it looked like he had been sleeping in the same clothes since...well, since that night with Santorelli weeks ago.

And Rachel...I was shocked. Even Rachel looked like hell. Hair a mess, dirty clothes, here eyes were half-lidded. And she was definitely starting to show. If there was anyone who didn't know she was pregnant before, it was pretty obvious now.

“Someone get me a camera,” I shouted. “I need photographic evidence that even Rachel can look like crap.”

“Marco, I'd make you eat that camera, but there are two reasons for me not to do it. Number one: I'm tired. Number two: you won't remember any of this.”

Damn. She had me there. “Things get a little tough for you, Xena?” I asked. “See how bad things get when I'm not around to keep you two in line?”

Tobias walked past us and went to Glorfindel instead. “War-Prince, this battle isn't over yet. Guraff will be back with reinforcements soon. We need to establish a defensive line now. And start attacking their ground-based structures now. There are God knows how many Kelbrid and Pythagi down there, fighting our Hork-bajir. We-”

<You have done more than enough, Prince Tobias,> Glorfindel interrupted him. <Caysath told me of the odds you faced. It's a miracle you won.>

“Won? We didn't win. Guraff had us cold at the end there. We got lucky. If you hadn't shown up just then, we'd all have been dead.”

<You were outnumbered two to one,> Glorfindel argued.

“And we had every other advantage. Terrain,

reinforcements, superior training and weaponry; and we still were going to be annihilated.”

<We control Hork-bajir,> Glorfindel began.

“We control the atmosphere. For now. The ground is largely in Guraff’s hands. He’ll be back. I know it. Probably with the Visser himself.”

<That is a worry for another time, Prince Tobias. I will contact the Electorate and inform them of how matters stand. In the mean time, all of you are to rest. You have earned that much at the very least.>

Despite the ship’s injuries, we all went back to the Reliquary. I for one didn’t mind; it was bigger than my quarters; by far. For a few minutes, we all sat there in silence. Then, Jake finally said, “Okay. So...what’s been going on with you guys for the last few weeks?”

Tobias shrugged. “Not much. Rachel got kidnapped, I saved her. We flew here, fought some Yeerks, got saved at the last possible moment by sheer luck. The usual. You?”

“When we heard that Rachel got kidnapped, we tried to go and find her,” Jake told him. “We figured we’d have one of the Chee trace the signal. But on the way, Marco and Ax got arrested by a cop. Cassie and I ended up with the Chee alone.

That was when he told us that the Visser was getting some kind of promotion. So we hitched a ride with Erek and ended up on the Yeerk homeworld.”

<Our story is similar,> Ax told him. <The police officer who arrested us was a Controller. He brought us to the Visser, who wanted us to witness the birth of the Yeerk Order.>

Jake continued. “Cassie and I heard the Yeerks' battle plans. They were going to attack Leera, Hork-bajir, and the Andalite homeworld. Also, they were trying to get the Anati as allies.”

Tobias nodded. “I knew they were going to make a feint at the Andalite world. Salheer was far too willing to give that information up. If the Visser was actually going to attack there, he'd do everything he could to make things look the opposite. I tried telling the Electorate that, but...”

“How did you know they'd be here?” I asked him.

“Educated guess. The Yeerks already have allies on the surface, and the blockade here is thin thanks to the damage the One did way back when. If I was a Yeerk, this is where I'd attack.”

“Good call,” Jake admitted. “Marco and I ended up hiding out on a Corrupter headed for Leera. We met up with Galuit

there, and we did some damage to them, but Salheer outsmarted us. We thought he'd try to fight us, but he didn't. He just landed and started tearing the planet apart. Now I know why. He knew we'd get called away to save the homeworld from the Visser's false attack. All he had to do is wait.”

“He might be a better general than Guraff,” I agreed.

Tobias shook his head. “You can't compare them. Guraff's a general; Salheer seems to be a strategist, a tactician.”

“What's the difference?” Rachel asked.

“A general wins battles; a strategist wins wars. Guraff could keep fighting battle after battle and win them all, but that wouldn't win him the war. Salheer, though... If his plans had all worked, the Yeerks would have won already. All major resistances would be removed. Who would be left to oppose them? That's the difference.”

He took a breath. “It's like how Sima Yi and Xu Huang-”

“No,” Rachel interrupted. “I can't sit through another Chinese history lesson. No way.”

“Come on, it's just a passing-”

“I said no.”

“But-”

“No means no, Tobias.”

Tobias snorted. “Please; with you it means yes at least half the time. And the other times, it's accompanied by a bloody nose, so I don't get confused.”

It looked like they were getting ready to fight. I guess it's not surprising, considering all the stress they had to have been feeling lately. Still, we didn't want to be there for it. Tobias and Rachel stared at each other for a few moments. Then, Tobias stood up. “What I really need now is a hot shower. Something relaxing.”

He went off into the bathroom. None of us dared say anything when, a few moments later, Rachel got up, too. Then, Ax whispered, <Should we leave?>

“Yes,” Jake said at the same time I said, “No.”

Jake looked at me. “Marco, if we stay, they'll find out. And if Rachel finds out, Jeanne will find out. Is that really a conversation you want to have when you get back? You'll be taking enough crap for being gone for three weeks with only the occasional call to let her know you're not dead.”

“Good point. Let's blow.” Bad choice of words.

CHAPTER 33

CASSIE

The Anati ship managed to meet up with Glorfindel's Dome ship after only a few days of travel. It was so good to see everyone alive and well. This had all started out so badly that I almost expected to find Tobias and Rachel dead. Of course, when I arrived, we found everyone in a meeting.

Glorfindel stood on the bridge of the Dome ship. With him were Caysath, Alloran, and Tobias, along with the other Animorphs. They were joined by holograms of the Electorate. Alloran was finishing up some sort of speech. <...his unshakable courage in battle, indomitable force of will, and his great service here on Hork-bajir as well as in the First Yeerk War. For these reasons, I urge you, esteemed members of the Electorate, to promote Prince Tobias to the rank of War-Prince.>

<We will take your suggestion into consideration,> Lirem assured him. <But our first order of business is to determine who will carry on the defense of Hork-bajir. The Electorate and I are in agreement on this matter, and we believe that Prince Tobias is the best choice for this task. Will you accept

this mission, Prince Tobias?>

Tobias opened his mouth to answer, but then closed it. I realized why a moment later. The images of the Electorate were no longer moving. Nor were Caysath, Alloran, and Glorfindel. It was just us. “This again,” I muttered.

Then something strange happened. A giant, multileveled cake appeared in front of us. It said, 'Congratulations' in big purple letters on it. Then the Drode exploded out of it, covered in cake. “Heeeeere's Drode!”

For a few moments, all we could do was stare at him. He held his position, his eyes darting from one of us to the next, a twisted smile frozen on his face. Finally, Marco said what we were all thinking. “Drode...what the hell?”

“I figured the whole time-freeze thing was getting kind of old,” the Drode answered. “But, onto business.” Suddenly, he was wearing a Speedo and holding a beach ball. I don't know why I found the Speedo so disturbing, since he usually doesn't wear clothes, but it still creeped me out. “Oops; wrong outfit.”

Then he was in a suit, holding a briefcase. “We've got some stuff we need to clear up. Namely, what do we do about the war on Earth?”

“That doesn't seem like our biggest problem anymore,”

Jake told him.

“Wrong again, Jakey,” the Drode told him. “See, here's the thing. According to the terms of the treaty Azmaveth and Crayak signed when we agreed to make this war covert, the only planet that actually matters is Earth. The rest of the galaxy can burn; we can always put it back the way we want it later.”

“How can the war for Earth stay secret anymore?” I asked. “That seems kind of impossible.”

“It's actually quite simple. You, little Animorphs, all go back to Earth and keep fighting the Yeerks. Leave the rest of the galaxy to the Andalites and their little friends. I'm sure they'll be able to handle it. That Russian seems like my kind of guy. Maybe I'll pay him a little visit.

“The important thing is that you go back to Earth. Keep fighting there like this war isn't even going on. My bet is that Azmaveth will send the Visser and friends back there, too. Without them, the Yeerks really won't be able to do much to stop you.”

< Surely the Visser's actions broke some sort of rule,> Ax protested. <Is there no penalty for that?>

The Drode shrugged. “I tried. But it was up to the Ellimist,

and he's got a bit of a grudge against me. He ruled that it was the Pythagi who made things overt. They contacted Mersa, which broke the seal. He says it was they who were responsible for the Yeerk-Pythagi alliance and not the Visser. So he says that since these overt actions are the actions of the Pythagi and not of the Yeerks, they don't violate our secrecy agreements.”

“So...what?” Tobias asked. “We all just go back to Earth and pretend this never happened?”

“Pretty much,” the Drode admitted. “This might help you, though. At least Glorfindel won't be breathing down your neck all the time, Tobias. That's got to be a comfort.”

“It's a small one,” Tobias muttered.

“That's what she said.”

“That doesn't joke even make sense there,” Rachel argued. “It doesn't fit.”

“That's what she said.”

I rolled my eyes. The Drode could be...childish...when it amused him. “How long are you going to do that?” I demanded.

“That's what she said.”

Jake shook his head. “Someone get him out.”

“That's what she said.”

<I fail to understand the humor in this,> Ax told us. One of his stalk eyes was fixed on Marco, who was rolling on the floor laughing.

“Let me explain it to you,” the Drode began. “See, humans have a wonderful tendency to-”

<I believe I am safer not knowing.>

“Are you sure? I brought some puppets; visual aids might help. Puppets are the answer to everything.”

“Drode,” Rachel growled, “I've had a long couple of weeks and I'm not in the mood to spend time listening to you...be weird. I don't know if I can actually rip your skinny, wrinkly arms off, but damn it I'll give it a shot if you don't pipe down.”

“Uh...anyhow, job well done, Tobias,” the Drode said. “Cassie, it's so good to see you're still willing to let everyone else do the dirty work. Aximili; glad you haven't gotten into the habit of thinking yet. Jake, Marco: it's been wonderful to watch you fail yet again.” And with that, he disappeared. Because even extradimensional beings should be afraid of an angry pregnant Rachel.

CHAPTER 34

AX

When the Drode returned us to normal time, Tobias declined the Electorate's offer to guard Hork-bajir. However, he could not stop them from promoting him to the rank of War-Prince, as well as the rank of Commander. The latter is bestowed upon the captain of a single small ship. Since the Reliquary was now recognized as a ship of the Andalite military, the title was a necessary endowment.

Caysath was given the position they had offered Tobias, as the captain of the fleet defending Hork-bajir from future invasion. Glorfindel was assigned to begin clearing the Yeerks from the surface of Hork-bajir. Galuit was sent to Leera in an effort to liberate the world from the Yeerks.

The United States of America, Russia, China, England, Canada, India, Japan, and Israel agreed to give their military support to the Andalites in the war effort. With it came the full support of the Anati.

Many other races agreed to support my people as well. The Garatrons, Rakam, Garoo, Leerans, and several other minor races pledged what support they could give. But many others

also submitted to the Yeerks. Through it's economic power, the Pythagi Conglomerate held much sway over minor worlds and races. It left many of them little choice.

The lines were drawn now. The Second Yeerk War was now to become a full-scale one. Perhaps this war would be the last one we would need to fight with the Yeerks. Perhaps now, with the help of the rest of the galaxy, we could undo the mistake Seerow made.

But that was not my battle to fight. We convinced the Electorate to give us a 'temporary leave of absence' due to our services in this and the previous conflict with the Yeerks. We were sent back to Earth. According to official military records, those of us who were registered members of the Andalite military were on what humans called a vacation.

But the Electorate did not let us go before Lirem gave us a clear message. If he felt that our services were needed, he would summon us back to the battlefield without hesitation. Refusal to answer his call was not an option. I knew that this was an especial danger for Tobias; the Electorate would want him back in the fight as soon as possible.

So we found ourselves back on Earth, back at Rachel's house, like it all never happened. Thankfully, we managed to

convince the Electorate to keep quiet about Rachel's existence and not to release any images of Tobias. Tobias knew that no one would look at him and see a war hero; he liked it that way. It made covert operations much easier. If everyone knew his face, it would be very difficult to maintain secrecy.

It was during our first night back on Earth that I found myself alone with Prince Jake and Tobias. We were standing in Rachel's back yard, gazing up at the stars. I was wondering if somewhere out there, my people were fighting even now. Dying, light-years away from me.

“Thinking about the war?” Prince Jake asked. Tobias and I both nodded. “Me, too. I can't get over Leera. We're probably going to lose that planet. Millions of civilians have already died there. I can't help but feel it's my fault.”

“You did all you could,” Tobias told him. “You even went so far as to risk letting the Andalite homeworld get taken so that Galuit wouldn't withdraw his forces. You did far more than most people would have done. The mere fact that you were able to give them some kind of warning is more than anyone else could have done. You and Marco did all you could to save that world. Nothing that happens there is your fault now.”

Prince Jake nodded but said nothing. I could tell he wasn't convinced. <Prince Jake,> I told him, <I, too feel responsible. I should have seen through the Visser's trick.>

Prince Jake shook his head this time. "It's not your fault, Ax. None of us could have predicted that would be a feint. We didn't know Salheer was that smart."

<Tobias predicted it,> I pointed out.

"I had help. The Howler memories... Without them, I'd have been annihilated on day one."

<I suggest you be careful about delving into those,> I reminded him.

"Yeah...Rach and I had a long conversation about that. It made me realize something. I've been living my life...upside down. My priorities have been...inverted."

"What does that mean?" Jake asked.

"I've been putting the important stuff first. I've boiled everything down to four goals. The war against Azmaveth, saving the galaxy from the Yeerks, keeping the Animorphs alive, and doing what I can for my family."

<It sounds to me like you have everything in the right place,> I told him.

"Yeah. It sounded like that to me, too. But...it's like

building a pyramid. The war against Azmaveth is the most important thing, the biggest block. And keeping my family happy...that's a petty goal by comparison. It's like the smallest little block in the whole pyramid.”

Prince Jake nodded. “So you're putting the big stuff first. That sounds right to me.”

“Yeah, it does. But if you try and build a pyramid like that, it'll tip over. You can't use the little stuff as the base or it'll all collapse. If I spend all my time fighting the war, I'll break. And I'll bring my family down with me. So I've got to do it backwards. My family has to come first. Then the other Animorphs. Then it's defeating Azmaveth. And then I can concentrate on wiping the Yeerks from the face of the galaxy. Helping my family and preserving the Animorphs won't take too much away from the war. I just have to remind myself of one simple thing.”

“What?” Prince Jake asked.

“One, two, three, four. My goals. One: my family. Two: my people. Three: Crayak. Four: the Yeerks. As long as I keep all that in mind, I think I'll be able to make it out of this alive. That's more than I ever hoped for the first time around. Still...”

“Still what?” Prince Jake questioned.

<He still feels selfish about putting his family first,> I answered. I knew Tobias. He never felt right if he was considering his own happiness and well-being. But it sounded to me that if there was any way he could fight this war and keep his family intact, it was what he suggested.

“Does it bother you?” Prince Jake began. “All the people who died in the fight for Hork-bajir. The Andalites, the Hork-bajir... Do you feel guilty about that?”

Tobias shook his head. “No. Guraff told me something once. A general can't think of his soldiers as men. He has to see them as currency. It can't be a question of lives. It has to be a question of how much you're willing to spend to buy what you want. When you start thinking of your people as...well, people...then you can't make the decisions you have to make. No, Jake; I don't feel bad about it at all. We're leaders; we don't have the luxury of feeling bad.”

I know Tobias better than almost anyone. But not even I could tell if he was lying. I did not want to think much more about it, so I changed the subject. <Do you think we will win this war?> I blurted out. A ridiculous question.

Prince Jake shrugged. “I don't know, Ax man. This Salheer guy's a lot smarter than anyone we've met before. The Pythagi

have a lot of resources, and the Yeerks are getting a lot of allies. I have no idea.”

“We'll have to wait and see,” Tobias said. “If this war needs us, it'll find us. It always does. And when that time comes, I'll be ready for it. I'll have my Shredder nearby and a plan ready to go. But until then, we've got work to do here.”

“Yeah,” Prince Jake sighed. “The Yeerks, the Kelbrid, Azmaveth, the-”

“Actually, I meant that Rachel wants me to move some ridiculously heavy antique crib into our room. And I can't lift that thing alone.”

Prince Jake and I grumbled about helping him, but we went without really minding it. It was in these little moments, these everyday domestic scenes, that we could find the strength to go on. It may seem selfish to put one's family before the war effort. But only we could fight this battle for Earth. And without things like this, we could not go on. So, although we complained the entire time, I knew that this, here, was what I was willing to die for.

And now, to leave you with some words of wisdom from
Streetlight Manifesto:

"I still remember that day like the day that I said that I swear:

I'll never hurt myself again,

But it seems that I'm deemed to be wrong, to be wrong;

Gotta keep holding on,

They always play the slow song.

When they come for me I'll be sitting at my desk

With a gun in my hand wearing a bullet-proof vest

Singing, "My, my, my how the time does fly

When you know you're gonna die by the end of the night!"

Said Hey!

I still remember when we were young and fragile then,

No one gave a shit about us, 'cause times were tougher then,

Feelin' so good! Crusin' the hood!

Straight into the real world the rich kids never understood,

But I don't care, I can fade away to anywhere,

Don't stop 'cause you might get dropped!

And if you do, who's gonna pick you up?

Well I won't,

Well I won't,

They always play the slow song."

-Keasbey Nights

Don't miss the next installment of the Animorphs series:

69: THE DIVISION

Mr. Chapman's phone went off. He answered it quickly. "Yes?... What?... Okay, close it up and don't tell anyone about it. I'm on my way. We'll see you soon." He turned to me. "They need me down at the school. The maintenance staff thinks they found a doorway to the old Yeerk pool. This probably leads to the rebuilt one and I can't let them wander into it."

"Maybe I should come, too," his wife suggested. "I was always better at remembering the entrances than you were. You'd have missed a lot of feedings if it wasn't for me."

"Thanks a lot," Chapman muttered sarcastically. "I'll see you around, Jake. Stop by the school some time. You could give a lecture or something. I'm sure the kids would actually listen to a war hero."

"High school kids?" I asked. "They wouldn't listen if George Washington himself told them about the Revolutionary War. And trust me, he's a cool guy."

"You did not meet George Washington," Melissa said, speaking up for the first time.

“Well,” I defended as her parents left, “I didn't exactly meet him. But I saw him and heard him speak. And Marco stole a pair of his boots.”

“Bulllarky.”

“No, seriously. It wasn't a good trip, though. I ended up... well it's a really, really, [i]really[/i] long story. Let's just summarize by saying that the meeting of two random hippies can be a very important thing.”

Melissa gawked at me. “What the hell are you talking about?” she asked slowly, shaking her head.

“Animorph life,” I answered, taking a bite of whatever was in front of me. “It's a little out there.”

“I'll say. Didn't I hear you say something about Bolts the Talking Rat earlier?”

I nodded. “Like I said: out there.”

Neither of us spoke for a while. Melissa's a quiet girl. She's...tiny, really. Just a little over five feet tall and maybe a hundred pounds. It's not that she's got some sort of eating disorder; she's just always been light. Rachel always said she'd have made a great gymnast, and I agreed. She used to do that sort of thing but gave it up during the First War; she just stopped caring about it.

It's a shame that happened to her. She could have had a great life. Smart, kind of bold, blond, pale...beautiful, really. It's kind of weird, actually. She was one of Rachel's best friends when we were young. I knew her a little bit; as much as I knew Cassie before the war. But I had never really noticed her before. Maybe it was because she was so quiet. Or because she was Chapman's daughter. Most likely, it was because I was too busy noticing Cassie.

Something occurred to me then. "Hey...the staff didn't really find anything, did they?" I asked her, referring to her parents' excuse.

She shook her head. "Took you long enough. I don't come to these dinners just to hang out with my parents, Jake. I need to talk to you about something. Something important."

I waited, silently. When she didn't speak, I prompted her, "Go on..."

"It's just... The Yeerks are back. That...that monster, Esplin, is back. He's the one who took my family from me. Do you know what it was like, Jake? To watch my parents suddenly stop loving me? I-"

"They didn't stop loving you," I interrupted. "Rachel told me-"

“Yeah, I know. But that's how it felt. But was just as bad was that my two best friends left me, too. Rachel and Cassie were suddenly too busy for me. They stopped caring. I can't blame them, they had a lot more important things to do than worry about me. But during that war, Jake, everyone I cared about, everyone I loved, left me alone. When the Yeerks finally came out into the open and took me, I was almost relieved. At least I thought it was over then.”

I wasn't sure what to say. I wasn't good at making people feel better. She wasn't finished, though. “And now they're back. And they took my daddy again. The war is back. And I'm not going to just sit around this time, Jake. I can't go through that again.”

“What...what are you going to do?” I asked carefully.

“Whatever I have to. If I have to go to Tri-I with what I know, I will. I'll tell them everything. But I know what you said about this staying secret, so I really don't want to do that. What I want to do,” she said, “is join you. I want to fight the Yeerks with the rest of you. With Cassie and Rachel...with you. They took everything from me. Now I want to make them pay for it.”

I didn't know how to respond. This wasn't what I expected.

Not at all. But my instincts are notoriously bad, I guess. If my gut says left, we should always go right. “I don't know, Melissa. Are you sure you know what you're getting into?”

“I'm sure, Jake. It can't be worse than what I lived through the first time.”

I nodded. It had to have been tough on her. I know I couldn't have gotten by without my friends. It was a wonder she didn't turn into some kind of drug addict or something. “I'll have to ask the others,” I decided.

“[i]We'll[/i> have to ask them,” she corrected. “If it's up to them, I want to make my case in front of them. Do I have to have an appointment or something or can I just show up?”

I laughed. “I'm sure I can get our resident Prince to clear his busy schedule. Why don't you show up for breakfast tomorrow? We're having a meeting then to decide what to do about these new problems. And we might need a new Animorph. Ax and Tobias could get pulled off of Earth and put into service at any time.”

“You think I could replace them?” she asked. I could tell she didn't believe it.

“No. None of us can. But it's better than nothing.”

She nodded. “Then I'll be there. And Jake, there's one

more thing I wanted to talk about...”

“What is it?” Our eyes met. For a long moment, she didn't speak. Then she shook her head.

“Nothing. Just...thanks.”

“Uh...sure. No problem.” As much as what she said was making me think, I couldn't stop wondering what she didn't say.

PREVIEW SUMMARY

The lines have been drawn. The galaxy is at war, and Earth is no exception. The time has come for the Animorphs to split up into two different armies; they cannot hope to win any other way. Who will go where? What will happen when an old friend, the daughter of a former enemy, asks to join the team? And what does she really want?

On top of it all, the Yeerks are not sitting silently. They have somehow seized control of the local Tri-I branch and are using it to strike at the Animorphs. Jake and his team must infiltrate their complex once again and put at stop to the Yeerk manipulations. But when Tri-I is involved, things are not always what they appear. They tend to be far more dangerous...