

Imagine a picture of Jake turning into an owl

69: The Division

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hey all. No, this doesn't mean I'm coming out of my hiatus. It just means that I wanted to tie up this loose end and get this plot out of my head.

Please point out any inconsistencies between this and MM5; I actually wrote this one first, and although I think I corrected it, I'm not sure I got everything that I needed to change.

Enjoy or go to hell.

If I owned the Animorphs, you wouldn't be reading this for free.

And if I owned Streetlight Manifesto, I'd have better things to do than write fan fiction.

Chapter 1

My name is Jake. You already know the last name. You know my age, the name of my home town, and all of that. You probably even know that I spent a few months on vacation from the whole being alive thing. Now, thanks to some messy work that I still don't really understand, I'm back.

A good thing, too, because things are getting kind of hot in here. Mersa 528's rebellion has been crushed; by us. His life was the price we had to pay for mine. He didn't make it easy, but with a little help from the Yeerks, long story there, we pulled it off.

The problem is that Mersa's death left a vacuum of power around our home. There is no doubt that the Visser will move in on it, especially now that he has full control of his new forces. Maybe I should back up and explain that. During our mission to assassinate Mersa, we found out he had been working for the Pythagi Conglomerate, a powerful alien organization that once controlled our sector of the galaxy. Their power diminished as other races rose to challenge them, most notably the Andalites. But they learned that the Yeerks were back and concocted a plan. That one failed, though, when we killed Mersa.

Enter the Visser. He talked his way into a deal with them. Now, the Pythagi Conglomerate supplies him with ships, weapons, and even hosts and morphs. Needless to say, this is a major setback. There are a few good things, though. The Pythagi Conglomerate declared open war against the Andalites and most of our sector of the galaxy opposes them. That keeps the Pythagi distracted, and it keeps the Andalites from breathing down our necks about what's going on here on Earth.

So basically we're a little stuck. We where we didn't want to be: fighting a war on two fronts. It's a good thing there are more Animorphs than ever before; excluding the Axillary Animorphs. I'm talking about full members.

Soon, we'd need to decide who would go where, who would fight on what front. Tobias and I already decided that he would lead one and I'd take the other. I wasn't happy about it, I was done with the leader thing. But there really wasn't any way I could get out of it. Back to basics, I guess.

At the moment, though, the war was the last thing on my mind. I got the feeling that I wouldn't have many chances to totally ignore it, especially once we thought of something to do about these fronts, so I took what time I could now. Living your life in a state of constant fear and paranoia really gives you an appreciation for the times when you can relax.

I was at the Chapmans' house. Mr. Chapman had been Mersa's host. I had gone to great lengths not to kill him when I was killing the Yeerk. He was really grateful to me for that. He never expected to be free again, or to survive it once he found out we were hunting him.

It was a small dinner, just the four of us. Mr. and Mrs. Chapman, Melissa, and me. "Did you hear the news from Leera?" Chapman asked me. "It seems the Pythagi Conglomerate removed their blockade. They needed the reinforcements to deal with the Anati."

"Good," I replied. "Serves them right for underestimating the big crabs in pink ships. Any word from the Garatrons?"

"Nothing that I've heard. I bet it's covert operations. They're probably working with Andalite commando forces, aiding worlds already claimed by the Pythagi." All his time as a host to powerful Yeerks had given Chapman a

pretty good grasp of the military. I was impressed by it.

I nodded. That made sense. We were referring to the ongoing galactic war with the Yeerks and Pythagi. We had played a bit of a role in it in the very beginning. Another long story.

"It's too bad Leera's basically useless," I sighed. "They don't have the facilities for building ships and the planet was useless to the Pythagi anyway. An air race on a water world? I can't see that going over well."

"Nothing's going well," Chapman sighed back. "The Taxxon blockade is down, and I'd wager anything that they're going to use that world as a staging area for another invasion of Hork-bajir. If they open that up, the Yeerks will be as powerful as they were before..."

I shook my head. "There's not much we can do about it. I'll talk to Tobias later. The Andalites will listen to him now. The only problem is that they might want him to deal with it himself. We just don't have the time for that nowadays."

"He'd go," Chapman insisted. "He'd rather lose the battle for Earth than let the Yeerks loose on the galaxy again."

"If they take Earth, it'll be just as bad," I reminded him.

The two female Chapmans kept their eyes down on their plates. I guess talk of a new Yeerk scourge in the galaxy wasn't what they'd call dinner conversation. Funny thing was, I knew they'd be talking about it back at Rachel's place. Tobias and Ax hardly thought of anything else nowadays.

It seems that all we think about now is war. It's in our homes and it's out where we go to work. Tobias and Ax were professionals at it now. At home or abroad, there was no escape from the war. Now you see why I liked eating with the Chapmans.

Chapter 2

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, *really* 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 b*****, 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.

"We'll 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 War-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.

Chapter 3

I, along with the rest of the house, woke up to the sound of Tobias and Naomi arguing. No, that's not the right word. They were fighting. Again. I didn't want to get involved, but I felt like it was my job. Someone had to calm them down, and Cassie had give up on it. With a sigh, I pulled on some clothes and headed downstairs.

"-prince you are," Naomi spat. "Why are you even on Earth anyway? Shouldn't you be off getting yourself killed by a Piebag or slug?"

"Pythag," Tobias corrected. "It's a good thing you have Jacques' money to live off of because with a mind like that, you're career's going to be over by the end of the month."

"Then I can make a career in the Andalite military. Clearly, intelligence is not a factor."

"Too bad age is."

"You're calling me old now?"

"I'm just saying that it's a good thing you're going to be a grandmother because you already look the part."

"Some people wait to have children. Some of us don't hop into bed with the first alien that wanders past."

"And maybe if you had actually been around to raise your children you wouldn't be having this argument. You know, Naomi, there's a reason you're on husband number two."

"I guess that ties me with your mother. Of course, both of mine were humans."

This was going too far. I mean... Tobias didn't even get like this with the Visser! Tobias and Naomi were inches apart now and it looked to me like each was ready to hit the other. Honestly, I'm not sure which one worried me more.

I pulled Tobias away from her. "Tobias, chill man. Get ahold of yourself." He shook himself out of my grasp and stormed off towards the front door. "Where are you going?" I asked.

"Anywhere but here!" I decided it was important to go after him. I caught up with Tobias at the hangar.

"Hey!" I called.

He spun around. "What?"

For a moment, I wasn't sure what to say. "You can't let her get to you like that, man."

"The hell I can't. Forget it. She doesn't want me here? Fine. I'm leaving. I'm going back to the other front. I cannot stand another day with her."

"You can't go yet," I insisted. "We've got a meeting in, like, five minutes."

"So hold it without me. You don't need me to hold your hand, Jake."

"Yeah, but we need everyone there for this one."

"It'll run fine without me." He paused. Then, "Unless there's something you're not telling me."

"Yeah, there is. Melissa Chapman... She wants to join the fight. She wants to become one of us."

"No. Any other issues?"

My jaw hung open. I was stunned for a moment. "You're saying no, just like that?"

"Yeah, I am. A girl like her is the absolute last thing we need right now. We don't have time for that."

"Time for what? You don't even know her!"

"I know enough. Did she ask you to let her join, Jake?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"So think about this for a minute or two or however the hell long it takes you. Would you ever, ever, choose to fight

this war? If you weren't being poked and prodded and pushed and pulled by all the pandimensional powers that play with people like us, would you do it?"

I shook my head. I had asked myself that question a lot and usually ended up with the same answer. "Not if I had any real choice, no."

"Exactly. So think about this one: what kind of person would go out of their way to join this fight? What sort of person, knowing exactly what they were getting into, knowing the effects of this, knowing all the pain, fear, and paranoia that comes with it, would not only choose to do it, but seek it out?"

I did take a moment to think about that. He had a point. But I trusted Melissa. My gut told me that she wouldn't be a problem. "I still think-

"No, Jake, you're *not* thinking. That's the problem. At least, you're not thinking about the right things. I get that Melissa's suffered from this war, even more than most people. Probably more than anyone but us. You want to help her and you think this will do it. I get all that. I really do. But this war isn't about helping people."

"It's not?" I asked. "To me, that's all it's about. Why else should we fight, if not to help people?"

"We have to fight so that there will still be people to help," Tobias answered. "And if helping one lost girl gets in the way of that, then there is no way I could ever condone it. And there's no way that I can not oppose it. Think about it, Jake. Can you really take that risk?"

"She won't be a problem," I insisted. "I've got to go with my gut on this one, Tobias."

"Your gut, Jake, is famous for being very, very wrong."

"And if I'm wrong again, I'll be the one to pay the price."

Tobias shook his head. "No, Jake. If the commander makes a bad call, it's the soldiers who always pay for it."

Chapter 4

Tobias refused to come to breakfast until he saw Naomi leave for work. Tobias is one of the strongest people I know, and probably one of the wisest. But he can be really immature about some things. Apparently, he refused to talk to Cassie for months after she quit the team to be with Ronnie. Even now that she was back, he still ignored her sometimes out of habit.

Usually, no one ate until Tobias arrived. Mostly because we were all afraid of Rachel's cooking. Rachel is smart, brave, and I'm told she's beautiful. Being her cousin, I can't really judge that last one. None of those things equate to being a good cook. In fact, they seem to combine to form a pretty bad one. Not that we'd ever tell her that. I'm not allowed to come back from the dead a third time.

How bad is her cooking? Guraff can eat it. And in case you forgot, Guraff is in a Hork-bajir body. Hork-bajir, of course, eat tree bark. They can't digest anything else. So, either her cooking is extremely close to tree bark or Guraff is officially superhuman; or superhork-bajir, so to speak. Or maybe superyeerk. I'm putting my money on the bad cooking, though.

Tobias was the only one with the stones to eat her food consistently, but with him gone for the moment, the task fell to me. It's times like this that I really hate being the leader.

We did what we could to munch through it. Thankfully, someone knocked on the door not long after we started. Assuming it was Melissa, I jumped up to answer it. She was as happy to see me as I was to see her. "Oh, good. I was afraid this was the wrong house. It's changed so much."

Making sure Rachel couldn't see, I spat my food out into the bushes next to the front stairs. "Yeah, it's a recent edition," I told her.

She looked from me to the bushes. "Was that some sort of secret Animorph code? Signaling that it's safe?"

I shook my head. "Nah. Just Rachel's cooking. It's...not the most fun part of the job."

"I was joking. Geez, if you guys really do have codes like that, maybe I'm n over my head."

"We're not that paranoid," I assured her. "Well, Marco and David are, but not the rest of us."

I led her inside. She paused as soon as she entered the dining room, though. It was probably the shock of seeing all of us. Rachel, Cassie, Marco, me, Ax, Jeanne, David, Al, James... A lot more Animorphs than she had probably been expecting.

After a few moments, she recovered enough to say, "There's a rat on your table."

<There are two big blue aliens standing here watching us eat, one of whom is missing an eye. There are two people here who used to be dead. Three if you count people we *thought* were dead. And let's not forget the random French chick. Yet of all the weird things in this room, what gets pointed out first? An ordinary everyday rat trying to have a normal breakfast.> David sighed in our heads. <Why me?>

"If it makes you feel better," James told him, "you can have the cheese from my...eggs?" It's a good thing Rachel didn't realize he was unsure what he was eating.

<At the expense of my pride, yes, that would make me feel better. Cheese me, lion twin.>

"Comin' at you, Bolts."

"Oh, right," Marco added. "He's Bolts, I'm Nuts. Jeanne, why didn't you remind me?"

"It hardly seemed important."

"Besides," Rachel joked, "who could forget Marco's Nuts?"

"Nobody forgets my-" Marco cut off as Jeanne and Rachel both hit him, one in the arm, the other in the back of the head. "Al!" he whined. "Your mom hit me!"

<I am very certain that Rachel is not my mother, Marco. Both of my parents were Andalites, as is evidenced by my natural physical form.>

"Yeah, I know that, Al. I was making a joke."

<I was attempting to do so as well.>

"Oh, great," I put in. "He's going through that phase now. Remember when Ax tried to be funny?"

<Prince Jake, with all due respect to both parties, I believe my grasp of human humor was superior to Alloran's at this point in my own stay on Earth.>

"Superior?" Cassie questioned. "Ax, you still don't get why knock knock jokes are funny."

<They are entirely ridiculous!>

"That's the point," Marco argued.

Melissa turned to me. "And you're saving the world?"

"Uh...yeah," I answered.

"Can't you tell by our tight military discipline?" Marco added sarcastically.

"Our our uniforms," James added.

<The crew-cuts,> David put in.

<Our policy of do not ask, do not tell,> Ax said. We all turned to stare at him. <What? I assumed that you were attempting to be humorous by stating aspects of the military that we do not possess. Your military has a policy called "Do not ask, do not tell." We do not. It falls in line with the jokes...>

"Well... I guess it does," Cassie admitted.

"Someone call Tobias; Ax finally gets human humor," Rachel joked.

"Aww, not Captain Bringdown," Marco whined.

"*War-Prince* Bringdown," I corrected. "Let's not promote him. It might go to his head."

"Well, there's plenty of room up there," Marco muttered. "You know, with him being brainless and all."

Again, Melissa turned to me. "You're *sure* you're saving the world?"

"Either that or we're totally insane," I assured her. Then I looked at Marco. "Or, you know, both."

Chapter 5

Tobias came in then. He walked right past us without seeming to notice that we were there. Or that we had one extra member. "Tobias," I began.

"In a minute," he interrupted. On his way past the table, he snatched up a...well, a brick... of...let's call it eggs... and made his way into the kitchen. What was he doing? I knew he saw Melissa here; he knew she was coming, and he didn't miss much.

I realized why Marco had called him Captain Bringdown. Somehow, the joyful mood we had just enjoyed seemed to have been sucked out of the room when he came in. We all stood or sat a little straighter; Al practically had a steel rod for a spine. Even Melissa tensed up.

"Al," he called from the kitchen, "we need to work on the Reliquary's translation program. It still confuses the Anati and Pythagi pronouns and prepositions."

<Of course, my Prince.>

Melissa leaned over towards me, almost like she was afraid to move. "Who's that?" she whispered.

"That," I answered, "is Tobias."

"You mean...the same guy who went to school with us for, like, a month? The guy who got Rachel pregnant?"

"Yeah."

"Holy damn. I'd never have guessed..."

About a minute of silence later, Tobias came out of the kitchen. This time, instead of a brick of eggs, he had a bowl of oatmeal. What the heck was he getting at?

"Eat this," he said, handing the bowl to Melissa.

"Ow! It's hot."

"I know. I carried it here."

"But why do I have to eat it?" She looked around helplessly. No one answered her. Honestly, Tobias has started scaring us all lately. Not too long ago, he had tortured and then killed a Controller for information. He was getting further and further down a dark road. And the fact that he was probably still mad from his fight with Naomi didn't help matters any.

"Fine," Melissa sighed, taking a spoonful of the steaming hot bowl of oatmeal. Tobias stood there and watched for several minutes while she ate. We all stood or sat in silence, looking away. I could tell Melissa was getting freaked out. This would be creepy coming from a normal group of people. Here, surrounded by us, with Tobias's expressionless face watching her every move, she was probably terrified.

After she ate about half of the bowl, Tobias held up a hand. "That's enough. Here in the Animorphs, Melissa, we are friends. We are a family. But we are, first and foremost, an army. And in an army, you have to take orders. If you're one of us, I might give you an order you don't understand, for reasons you don't understand or reasons that I won't explain. You'll have to get over your hesitation of that."

"So this was what...some sort of test?"

"Yes, but not in the sense that you mean it. This," he pointed to the bowl, "was instant maple and ginger oatmeal. If a Yeerk eats it, he'll go insane. Any Controller who ate it would be detected very quickly. Before we even think about adding you to the team, we had to clear up that, first."

<We're adding her?> David asked.

"You didn't already discuss this? What do you people do when I'm not around?" Tobias wondered.

"Have fun," Marco answered him. "Not that dodging Kelbrid isn't a party, but it's not exactly what I'd call relaxing."

"Right. Well..." Tobias trailed off. "Melissa has asked to become one of us. I have the morphing cube from when we stole the Blade ship. We have the power. The question is, should we give it to her? For my part, I say no. Quite frankly, Melissa, I don't think you can be trusted."

"Can't be trusted? I ate your oatmeal, didn't I?"

"A test that proves little about your character. Tell me, Melissa, tell us all: why do you want to fight?"

"Because the Yeerks took everything from me. My friends, my family... And now they're back again. I'm going to do whatever I can to make them pay for it. You don't take anything for free."

Tobias shook his head. "That is exactly why I'm against this. Revenge is one of the few wrong reasons I see to fight a war. If you get your revenge, what then? What motivation is left? How much will you sacrifice to get what you want? What risks will you take? You don't know. And more importantly, I don't know. You aren't a risk I'm willing to take. So I say no."

"Well, I say yes," I argued. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I think we can trust her. Yeah, it's about revenge. But it's more than that, too. We've all got our personal reasons for fighting this war. Even you, Tobias. No one ever does anything without a personal motivation. But we're about more than that, too. All of us, even Melissa."

<I know a little something about people,> David said. <I think I'm the resident expert on untrustworthy Animorphs. Now, I don't know Melissa, but I know how she feels. Everyone pays for their crimes, the good and the evil alike. I can't fault anyone who wants to see someone pay for what they've done; especially not someone who is against the Yeerks. I say yes.>

Jeanne nodded. "Jake thought he could trust me. He thought he could trust Santorelli. And James. If Jake thinks we can trust Melissa, then I will side with him."

"I just can't agree," Cassie said. "I'm with Tobias. To join a war for revenge... I can't help someone do that. I'm sorry, Mel, but I just can't. I don't believe in revenge."

<No?> Ax questioned. <So I suppose, if Ronnie died, you would not want some sort of retribution? I find that hard to believe, Cassie. I say yes. I have fought for revenge for a long time. It is a better motivation than most.>

<I must side with my Prince,> Al said in response.

"Al," Tobias said, "you know how there are times when I really want you to make your own decision? This is one of those."

<I see. In that case, I will still side with you, Prince Tobias. I do not know much about Prince Jake's instincts, but I have seen the power of your mind. I trust yours over his. If you are against her joining, then I am as well.>

James shook his head. "It's kind of a hard question to ask, you know? Should I put my life in the hands of a stranger or not? But like Jeanne said: your instincts have been good before. I'll trust them again. I say yes."

"No," Marco said, surprising me. I was sure he'd vote with me. "Yeah, Jake, you chose Jeanne, Santorelli, and James. You also chose David. No offense, Bolts, but we all know what you did. Even I remember some of it. And I just can't ever take the chance of that happening again. If we really need some help, Tobias has the Andalites on speed-dial."

We all turned to Rachel. This was a tough one. She almost always sided with Tobias, but there was still a chance that she'd be on our side. Even though she couldn't fight, we still let her vote. I don't think we could have stopped her even if we had tried to.

Rachel turned to her friend. "You're in this for revenge and payback? Then what do you expect me to tell you? Welcome to the club, sister."

Chapter 6

"She's in this for revenge?" Marco said. "It's like having a second Rachel. Or third," he added, looking at Tobias. Then he turned to Jeanne. "I think we should see other people."

"Jeanne," Rahel added, "I also think you should see other people. Anyone but Marco."

We found a chair for Melissa and then I sat back down to finish 'eating' my 'breakfast'. Now we were waiting for Tobias to give us some instructions. We ate in silence for far too long. I expected Tobias to bring something up, but he didn't.

"So..." Melissa began. "What happens now?"

"This is the part where the Prince of Darkness tells us how he wants us to try and kill ourselves next," Marco explained to her. "Well, Tobias? What've you got for us?"

"War-Prince of Darkness," James corrected quietly.

Tobias shrugged. "I don't know. We've got no information to go on."

"Well, I'm all for sitting around for a day," Marco assured him. "Not that I'll remember it. Is it odd that I have to be reminded that I have memory loss?"

"I think the word odd no longer carries any meaning," I told him. "If we don't have any plans, I think a few of us should go and find Melissa some morphs. You know, the usual array of bugs and some battle morphs."

Tobias nodded. "She's your job, Jake. You brought her into this, it's up to you to make sure she knows exactly where she is. In the mean time, Al will be taking a look at the files we lifted from the Yeerks. Maybe something will turn up. If not, we might have to try the Chee."

"I'll do it," I told him. I didn't like the way he said it, though. It was definitely an order. I was starting to realize that the Tobias sitting across the table from me was a very different man from the one I had given the job to. But maybe this man was better at it.

We finished the meal in silence and then Melissa and I headed out. Since she didn't have a bird morph, we walked to the Gardens. Along the way, I had to ask, "So what do you think of everyone?"

"It's hard to believe I went to school with some of those guys," she answered. "Cassie and Marco. You. And Rachel with a baby... That's a lot to take in, considering I thought she was dead. You've all changed so much. But..."

"But what?"

"But in a lot of ways, you're still the same. Marco hasn't changed a bit, at least."

"What about the rest of them?"

"Well, they're kind of hard to believe. Jeanne seems nice enough, but it's so weird that she's Rachel's sister. And dating Marco. I can't believe Rachel allows that."

"Tobias keeps her in check," I informed her.

"Yeah... James seemed fine, too. David was a bit much to take in, though. I mean... Bolts the Talking Rat? Where'd he get a name like that? And while we're at it, why is he a rat?"

"The answer to the second question is a long story. The answer to the first one is that Tobias is...odd."

"Yeah, I'm starting to get that impression. The Andalites were kind of a shock. I heard about Ax, but I didn't know he was missing an eye. Who was the little one? Al, right?"

"Yeah. He's Tobias's brother; another long story, I think. I don't actually know much about it. He's a solid kid and great with computers. One of the best."

I realized she had left someone out. "What about Tobias?"

"He... He scares me," she decided. "There's something really dark about him. Was I the only one who noticed that all the fun stopped when he walked in?"

"He's been through a lot," I reminded her. "I think he'll unwind a bit once we figure out what we're going to do. He can be cold, but inside, he's really a good man. I mean, a lot of the reason he's fighting so hard is because he promised to end this war before his kid was born."

"It doesn't seem like he's capable of that to me," she said to me. "He just doesn't seem like the warm and fuzzy type. I don't know if I could work for someone like that."

"It's not exactly an optional job," I reminded her. "Now that you're in, you follow him wherever he tells you to go. Although if we split up, he'll probably send you wherever he sends me."

"He just seems so cold..."

"Yeah. When it comes to the war, he is. He can be completely heartless. The Yeerks call him the Devil Prince for more reason than one. But I know what he's like outside of the war. In the rare moments when he actually relaxes and stops being Tobias the Prince and becomes Tobias the man, you can see it. Just watch him with Rachel one time. Just don't watch too long," I added. "Al still has some trouble sleeping from that one."

"Okay, so I met all my new friends. What about my new enemies? I already know about the Visser. Is there anyone else you need to tell me about?"

"Oh yeah. First, there's Salheer. He's a dangerous one. When the Pythagi Conglomerate talked Mersa into rebelling, they smuggled Salheer off of the Yeerk homeworld so he could advise Mersa. When the Visser took control of the rebellion, he let Salheer live since his abilities were useful. He's smart; very smart. He used to be the Yeerk Emperor. And he seems to have a knack for predicting us."

"Right. Salheer. Got it. We'll just have to hit him with the unexpected," she assured me.

"We always seem to. And then there's Kalroth. He thinks the Visser is like some kind of god. He's crazy, but dangerous. He doesn't care what he does along the way as long as he accomplishes his goal. He'd rather die than fail the Visser. Kind of ironic, since failing the Visser typically means death."

"Kalroth. I'll remember it. Anyone else?"

"Yeah. Guraff Four-Two-Seven." What could I say about Guraff? Ah, yes, that was it. "If you see a very large Hork-bajir with a sword coming, then I have only one word of advice. Run."

"Is he that bad?"

"Why don't you ask your father? Let me put it this way: we tell jokes about Chuck Norris. Yeerks tell them about Guraff."

Chapter 7

We didn't have any trouble at the Gardens. It was harder to get morphs nowadays. With a notable percentage of the population having the morphing power, as well as the Andalite tourists, there had to be some regulations about it. It was illegal to morph without a permit, for example; the degree of the offense depended on the animal. A fly, for example, was a misdemeanor and was usually ignored. A tiger, though, would land you in jail.

Likewise, it was harder to acquire animals now. Unless you had a permit to acquire one. To get those, you had to go through the military. Luckily, I happen to have two very good friends who are both Princes. Ax and Tobias took care of all the paperwork.

With our passes, security was no problem. I doubt they would have stopped me anyway, but Tobias had warned me that Cassie's mother had alerted them about him the last time he tried acquiring animals.

We had only one slight problem. "What is it you want to morph?" I asked. "Usually, we just go for whatever we need at the time. Let's see... At the very least, you'll need some air morphs, some bugs, and something to fight Kelbrid."

"Let's start with getting big and nasty," Melissa decided. "What can take on one of these Kelbrid?"

I shrugged. "Not a lot, really. It would have to be something really big, but I can't think of what we have left... We've already got a tiger, two lions, grizzly bear, gorilla.... And a notable amount of aliens."

"What about a Hork-bajir?"

"Maybe. We try not to morph sentient creatures, though. We've always felt that it's kind of a Yeerk thing to do."

"What if I asked nicely?"

"I'm still not really in favor of it, even when we have permission. We try to avoid it all the time unless we have no choice. You sure there's not some sort of animal you like?"

"Well... I've always liked panthers," she decided. "I know there's one around here somewhere."

"Yeah, but how do we find it?" I asked.

Without bothering to consult me, Melissa walked up to one of the security guards and flashed the pass Tobias gave her. "Hi. Can you show us where the panthers are?"

An hour later, she had a panther, a raptor I didn't recognize, a cockroach, a fly, a dolphin, and some sort of owl. It felt kind of like cheating. All that time we had to spend during the first war breaking in, sneaking around, playing tag with dangerous animals seemed like a waste now that we could just walk in and acquire whatever we wanted with help from professionals. Then again, I didn't almost get ripped in half by some animal's claws, so I guess I can't complain.

We made it home in time for lunch; which, thankfully, Rachel wasn't making. Most of the Animorphs seemed to be elsewhere, enjoying their day off. We knew we wouldn't get many of them; not if we were lucky, anyway. The only one home seemed to be Tobias.

As usual, he was hunched over one of his war books. I admired that about him, the way he was constantly trying to make himself a better leader. But it worried me, too. He needed to relax sometimes. "Why don't you put that away for now?" I suggested.

He shrugged. "Fine. We need to talk anyway."

"What about?" I asked him, sitting down.

"We need to decide who goes where when we split up. We have to choose teams." He glanced at Melissa.

"Perhaps you should leave for now. Rachel's in the backyard with Al."

Melissa shrugged. "Fine by me. Have fun, Jake."

When she left, Tobias shook his head slowly. Then an amused smile crept across his face. "What?" I asked.

"You don't get it? You haven't changed a bit."

"Get what?"

"I'm sure you'll figure it out eventually. It only took you a few years last time. I'm sure you'll get there quicker in round two."

"What are you talking about?"

For once, he actually seemed to be in a good mood. "Don't worry about it. But back to business. Since the Electorate put Al in my charge, he's definitely coming with me, so it seems to me that you should get to pick the first two."

I nodded. "So we're doing this gym-class style?"

"Jake, if this was gym class, I wouldn't be one of the ones picking teams."

"Good point. In that case, I want Marco. I couldn't have gotten through the first one without him. And if I'm taking him, then I think I've got to have Jeanne, too. With his memory-loss thing, he definitely needs her. I can't separate them."

Tobias nodded. "I thought so. In that case, I'll take David. You get Nuts, I take Bolts. Your move."

"Well..." It was down to a choice between Ax, Cassie, James and Melissa. I knew I could use Ax; badly. He was the only one left with any real technological experience. But he was Tobias's best friend and I didn't want to separate them. So I said, "Melissa. I know you don't want to deal with a new recruit. She's my responsibility."

Tobias nodded. "James."

"Not Ax?"

"You need him more. And I'm going to be fighting on the other front, where Guraff is. Which means you'll be up against the Visser. If anyone deserves a shot at him, it's Ax and I'm not going to take that from him."

"Alright, Ax it is. That leaves you with..."

"Cassie," Tobias finished.

"You alright with that?" I asked. "I know you two had your problems... If it's going to be a problem we could swap someone..."

"No. I need her more than you do. You'll keep your people honest, Jake. I know you. You'll hold them to some moral standard or another. Not me. I'm willing to do whatever it takes. What I really need is someone who isn't."

"I didn't think you'd want to be weighed down."

"I don't. But I've found that what I want and what I need are almost always completely different. The two cannot coexist. I could become just as bad as the Yeerks. As heartless, as ruthless... I'm willing to be that if it'll get us the win we need, but I know I shouldn't let myself get that bad. I may not be able to stop myself, but at least I can make sure there's someone around who will try."

Chapter 8

Dinner that night was pretty massive. Not only were all ten of us Animorphs there, Rachel's whole family was there, including her father. He had been around a few weeks ago but left once we went off of Earth at the beginning of this new war. He was back now, but only for a few days. Ronnie and Loren were with us, too. I think I've finally gotten used to Ronnie.

It seemed unusually quiet for a while. Maybe it was because Tobias and Naomi weren't fighting or because, for once, no one was talking about the ongoing war. For whatever the reason, it seemed like a pleasant, normal meal. But, of course, Tobias doesn't do pleasant and normal. "I have some news," he began quietly. Then he looked at Naomi. "You'll be pleased by this. I'm leaving."

"I'll pack your bags," she said instantly. Anyone else would have been joking. Only Jacques's hand on her arm kept her in her chair.

"And I'm not going alone," Tobias finished. "Al, James, and David are coming with me. And I'm asking you to come along as well, Cassie," he added. "Presumably, you'll be bringing Rodger."

"Ronnie," Cassie corrected. "If you need us there, we'll go, Tobias. We aren't leaving too soon, I hope?"

"Don't I get a say in this?" Ronnie asked. "If you go, I have to go."

"You don't have to—"

"Yes, Cassie, I do. I'm not going to sit around at your parents' home wondering if you're dead or alive. Wherever you're going, I'm following. But it's my life, too, and I think I deserve a say in how I spend it."

Cassie thought about that for a moment. "What is it, then, Ronnie? What is it you want?"

"I say we go," Ronnie said simply.

Tobias raised an eyebrow. "If you were just going to agree with her, why did you argue?"

"Because if I didn't argue, then it wouldn't have been my choice, it would have been hers," Ronnie answered.

Tobias gave a little smile. That seemed to be coming more easily to him. "Mayhaps I misjudged you."

Marco looked at Tobias. "Mayhaps?" Someone, please, correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure no one else talks like that. Maybe Shakespeare..."

"Marco, Jeanne, Ax, and Melissa will stay here with me," I interrupted. "We'll defend the home front."

"These fronts need cooler names," Marco complained.

<Something with Greek letters,> David agreed.

"Alpha front and Omega front?" James suggested.

"Which is which?" Melissa asked.

"Well," Marco told her, "I think this one here is Omega, since it's the last place we want to lose. And the other is Alpha, because we were fighting there first in this war.

"That makes sense," I agreed. I turned to Tobias. "How about it?"

He nodded. "I guess that makes my team the Alphamorphs. Kind of catchy..."

"That would make us, what... Omegamorphs?" I decided.

"I believe so, Prince Jake," Ax agreed.

"So that's it?" someone said. Jordan. That surprised me. I kind of expected the non Animorphs to be quiet for this. But then again, my instincts are notoriously bad. "James and Alloran and David just run off without any argument?"

"We don't have a lot of choice," James told her. "Tobias needs us there, so we go. Pretty simple, I think."

"So it doesn't bother you that you don't get a choice?"

"Call it an occupational hazard," James said, giving her a weak smile. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure Rachel will be back and forth all the time. You can drop in for a visit."

Why would Jordan want to visit? Was there something going on there? I looked at Cassie. I had always counted on her for this sort of thing. She gave me a slight nod. Well, that explained that.

Rachel shook her head, though. "I won't be staying here. I'm going with Tobias."

"Stress is bad for the baby," he argued quietly. "It's best if you stay here."

"It's safer if I stay with you," she insisted. "Who do you think is more likely to come after your family: Guraff or the Visser? If Guraff shows up at our home, it'll only be to say hi."

"Tobias can go off and get himself killed however he wants," Naomi told them. "Rachel, you are staying here. So are you, Jordan. And Sara and Jeanne."

To Rachel, Tobias said, "You make a good point. But I'd feel a lot safer if you had somewhere to stay other than the Reliquary. Who knows when we might have to call it into battle? I don't like the thought of you on it in a firefight."

"So you're just going to ignore me?" Naomi asked.

"That seems to be the most productive way of dealing with you," Tobias answered.

Quietly, my uncle, Dan, said, "I'm starting to like this kid." Not quietly enough, judging by the way his ex-wife glared at him. "Uh...could someone pass me a Shredder?"

Chapter 9

After that announcement, dinner basically descended into pointless argument. The civilians, in this case meaning mostly Naomi and Jordan, spent the time making some ridiculous insinuations about who should go where. After Naomi told Tobias to go to hell and he informed her that he was already there, we decided to go our separate ways. Melissa and I went outside. She wanted to try out one of her morphs. Since night had fallen, we decided on owl. I focused my mind on the animal inside of me. It was so long ago that I used this morph... I don't even remember when I acquired it. That made me wonder if I had morphs I didn't remember I had.

It felt familiar, though. The eyes came first, which was great. The night sky suddenly lit up. I could see everything. Every twitching blade of grass, the bark on the trees, every strand of Melissa's hair.

I watched as the feathers appeared on her body. First like tattoos. "Ohhh..." Then they exploded into three dimensions. "OHHH!" She shouted, much louder this time.

<Yeah...I probably should have warned you about that,> I said to her. <Then again, no one warned me...> My transformation was almost halfway done. Like a lot of other things, morphing gets easier the more you do it. For a moment, Melissa just stood there, a girl covered in grey feathers. <You lost your concentration,> I told her. <You have to keep thinking about the animal or it won't work.>

"Okay. I'm trying..." Her mouth pushed out into a beak. She started to shrink. That's about as interesting as the details get, I guess. I mean, it'd be pretty boring if I gave you every tiny detail, now wouldn't it?

I knew she was finished when she took off and started flying. <Melissa, what you're experiencing is the animal's instincts,> I told her. <You have to control this part. It's the hardest part of the morph.>

I followed her through the air for a few moments. I didn't notice any sort of effect. <Think about human things, Melissa,> I urged. <Think about home. About the school you used to go to. About...gymnastics.>

That last part seemed to do it. She slowed down, and her flying got clumsier. But why wasn't she saying anything? Oh, right; she might not know that she could use thought-speak. <Melissa, if you direct your thoughts at me, I'll be able to hear them.>

There was a pause. Then, <Can you hear me now?>

<Yeah.>

<Good!> Then she laughed. <This is soooo cool, Jake. Flying is like... Why would anyone ever bother walking? God, why did we have to evolve without legs?>

<A question I've asked myself a lot,> I admitted. <But flying's even better than a hawk.>

<No way. Not possible, Jake.>

<As a hawk, you can really soar,> I told her. <You can catch a thermal, a sort of pillar of warm air, and just float up a mile or so up. Then, you can just let the air take you and enjoy the ride.>

<And the view. These eyes are amazing! I never realized this place looked so good at night.>

We were flying above town, looking down. It's hard to describe the effect of the streetlights and headlights when you can see through darkness. They were almost blinding. <Yeah, I guess it does.>

<So show me around, Jake. Or do I have to call you fearless leader now?> she joked. I hoped she was joking, at least. Marco was bad enough... At least I think he forgot he used to do that.

<Just call me Prince Jake,> I told her.

<I know you're joking, but I'm so doing that.> Damn! <So where do we fly?>

<The best part about flying is that you don't have to be going anywhere. Getting there is all the fun,> I told her. We flew around town for almost two hours before circling back to Rachel's house.

We demorphed in the backyard. I finished first and then waited for her. "Wow," she said once she was done. "I guess you just took my virginity. Or morphginity."

"Uh...well...I..." I stuttered. What exactly did she expect me to say to that? Then I noticed something. Tobias and Marco were looking out of the windows facing the yard. I could see Rachel and Jeanne with them. What were they up to?

Melissa leaned up against the wall. "It's pretty late. And it's kind of a long walk home..."

"You could always fly again," I suggested.

She turned to me. "I was more hoping I could stay here for the night."

"Oh, yeah. We've got plenty of room." I noticed Tobias giving a slight nod. Marco gave me a thumbs-up. What the heck were those two doing? Sorry, those *four*; I could still see Rachel and Jeanne. "We've got a couple of couches."

Tobias smacked his head. Marco slowly turned his thumb the other way and frowned. What was going on? And how did they know what we were saying? And why did they care?

"I was more hoping..." She paused. "... Do you think you have some room in... your room?"

"Oh. Uh, sure. I could go sleep on one of the couches. Plenty of space for you. I-" At that point, Tobias and Marco came out of the back door.

"We're going to have to borrow our boy here for just a few minutes," Marco told her. He grabbed me by one arm, and Tobias took the other. Together, they marched me off towards the garage.

"Guys, what's going on?" I demanded.

Tobias shook his head. "Jake, we need to have a little talk."

Chapter 10

"A talk about what?" I asked.

Tobias shoved me into a chair in the Reliquary. "The birds and the bees."

"Honestly, Jake," Marco added, "it's pathetic. How do you not know about this sort of thing? Your dad is a doctor!"

"My dad's a pediatrician," I reminded him.

"Isn't that a kid doctor? Who better than a pediatrician to tell you about this?" Marco demanded.

"A gynecologist?" Tobias suggested.

"What are you two babbling about?" I asked.

Tobias sighed. "How to put this...? See, Jake, when a man and a woman love each other-

"He doesn't have to love her," Marco interjected. "She just has to *think* he does. Or, you know, be really cool."

"I know about all that," I interrupted. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Again, Tobias smacked his forehead. "Did you leave a few brain cells in the afterlife? Or, you know, a whole hemisphere? Do you need a neon sign or something?"

"This is Jake we're talking about," Marco reminded him. "So I had Ax take the liberty of making this." He clapped his hands twice and the computer screens of the Reliquary sprang to life. There, in big, electric blue letters were the words **SHE WANTS YOU!!!**

For a moment, I just looked from the screens, to Marco, back to the screens, to Tobias, and back again. Then I shook my head. "You guys are way off. She-

"Jake, even Ax saw it!" Tobias interrupted. "Ax. The guy who was licking the drywall after breakfast. The guy who eats paint chips. Lead-based paint chips. He likes dipping them in engine oil."

"Look, Jake, I may not know much about women," Marco began.

"True," Tobias interrupted.

"-But even I saw this one. Do you realize how painful it is to watch you stumble around like this?"

"So painful," Tobias finished, "that Rachel and Jeanne begged us to help you. I mean... Hell, even Guraff would have caught on sooner."

"I wonder if that guy has a girlfriend," Marco trailed off idly. "He told me he's celibate, but... I mean, I'm sure that, by Hork-bajir standards, he's pretty good looking. Don't they go for that muscular thing?"

"Honestly, I've thought of trying to introduce him to Toby, but there's never been any real opportunity," Tobias answered.

"Great," I said. "Why don't the two of you work on that and let me handle things on my own?"

"Because the thought of the previous conversation makes me want to throw up," Marco answered.

"Look, I don't know what everyone's seeing, but there's nothing there."

"Jake," Tobias said, "she came to you to become an Animorph. Not her friends, Rachel and Cassie. Not to me, the leader, She came to you. And look who she chose to teach her how to morph."

"And let's not forget the comment about her morphginitivity and asking to, oh yeah, SLEEP IN YOUR ROOM!" Marco added. "I mean... How the hell could you miss signals like that!?"

I didn't want to believe them for one reason: my pride. I couldn't be this stupid, could I? I mean, for even Ax to spot something like this... Then again, I was kind of out of touch. The only girl I ever dated was Cassie, who always spelled things out for me...

"Listen to us on this one, Jake," Tobias told me. "We know what we're talking about. And if you don't think so, why don't you go inside and ask my tall, hot, blond girlfriend? And did I mention that she's a gymnast?"

"Or you could ask her cute French sister," Marco put in. "You know, the chick who I wake up next to?"

"If you want, we can call Richard and James in here too," Tobias suggested. "I'm sure they'd be happy to help. I mean... Hell, even David would be an improvement at this point."

"At this point, I'd even take the Drode," Marco muttered. Then he looked up at the sky. "And oh God, please don't take that as an invitation. We can handle this without the help of extradimensional powers." Then he looked back at me. "Or maybe not..."

"Okay, okay, you've made your point," I admitted. "So what do I do about it?"

"We could have David pretend to kill you," Tobias suggested. "It worked for me."

"That's your solution for everything," Marco muttered.

"Two words, Marco. Ferris. Wheel."

"Fair enough, oh wise and omnipotent leader."

"Are you going to give me any serious advice or are you just going to keep making jokes?" I asked them.

"I'm going to keep making jokes," Marco answered. "Tobias does the serious thing so much better."

"There isn't much to be done for tonight," Tobias told me. "The girls are probably already grilling her on what your little date was like. Just keep your eyes open for opportunities like...well, like the one you screwed up a few minutes ago. Keep a look out and you should be fine."

"And if it helps," Marco said, "we could hide on you as bugs. We really don't have anything better to do lately. Just ask David and Al; they were in the backyard, letting us know how you were screwing things up."

I learned several things in that meeting. One of them was how Guraff and Tobias could be friends. Sometimes, there isn't much of a line between a close friend and your archenemy.

Chapter 11

Tobias had been right about at least one thing. By the time we got back inside, it was far too late. Rachel, Jeanne, and Cassie already had her stashed away somewhere. More than a little disappointed, I went up to my room and went to sleep. I didn't think I'd be woken up until Tobias and Naomi started fighting again the next morning. The thing about being an Animorph is that a full night's sleep doesn't happen all that often. This was one of those times.

"THIS IS THE INTERNATIONAL INVASION INVESTIGATION FORCE!" a voice roared. I bolted upright.
"COME OUTSIDE IN A SINGLE-FILE LINE WITH ALL APPENDAGES VISIBLE!"

"What the hell?" I demanded. I pulled back the curtain and took a look outside. The street in front of our house was blockaded by large, black vans. Men stood around them, with all sorts of weapons aimed at the house. Andalites were there as well. What was going on here?

"YOU ARE COMPLETELY SURROUNDED. SURRENDER NOW AND NO ONE WILL BE HARMED."

Tri-I? What had we done to them? Well, okay, a few things. Repeated morphing violations, keeping this war a secret from them, breaking into their buildings and stealing information from their computers... Maybe they had a legitimate claim. But how did they find out it was us? What set this off?

"Jake?" Someone said from behind me. I turned around to see Jacques in the doorway. "Tobias wants to speak to you in the living room. I would suggest that you avoid windows if possible."

I nodded. "Any idea what exactly is going on?"

He shook his head. "Not precisely. Daniel and I are working on it. Tobias suspects Yeerk activity."

Daniel? Could he mean Dan, Rachel's father? What could the two of them possibly do about this? "Impossible," I argued. "Not even the Yeerks could pull off something like this. Not without infesting an entire branch of Tri-I, and the Chee in charge of the local branch would have told us about something like that going down."

I had expected everyone to be waiting in the living room, but instead it was just a small group. Tobias was there, along with Rachel, David, and my uncle Dan. Jacques and I were the last to join them. "Where's everyone else?" I asked.

"The basement," Jacques answered. "It is something of a panic room, designed after that building in Death Valley the others infiltrated shortly after Rachel returned to us. In the event of an emergency, it is a safe place to hide for a time. The others are there."

"Tobias, do you have any idea what's going on here?" I asked. "Is there something you did to Tri-I you didn't tell us about?"

"It isn't Tri-I," Tobias told me. "At least, not completely. David, do you want to tell Jake what you saw?"

<Yeah, sure. I'm up at odd hours, being a rat and all, so I saw them start to pull up and block off the street. They also covered the back exit, and any other exit they can think of. They've got some stuff in the air, too, just in case.>
Tobias continued. "David woke me up to tell me about this. Rach and I started getting everyone into the basement. Then Rachel took a look out a window and saw someone."

"Who?" I asked. I suspected Yeerk, but who?

"Salheer," she informed me. "He was talking to one of the guys setting up the blockade; I think that guy was in charge. But I guarantee you it's Salheer calling the shots."

"Which mans," Tobias concluded, "that the Visser is behind this."

"But he couldn't have infiltrated Tri-I," I insisted.

<There are other ways of controlling someone than with a Yeerk,> David said quietly. <If the Yeerks got their hands on something the local director cares about, they could have forced him to set this up.>

"The director is one of the Chee," I pointed out.

"We've manipulated them before," Tobias reminded me. "And after all that time he spent in Ax's head, the Visser knows all about them and what buttons to push, so to speak. I don't know how he found out the local director is one of them; maybe it was just a lucky guess. It doesn't matter at this point. What matters is that we're blockaded in our own home."

<Couldn't we just, you know, walk out?> David suggested. <I mean, what's the worse they could do to us?>

"It if was Tri-I, not much," Dan told us. "But with Yeerks calling the plays, who knows? You could find yourselves in a few feet of sludge."

Jacques shook his head. "The local director must have been removed. Mark, no matter what threats they used, would never authorize this. He would sooner he and his family perish in flames than aid Yeerks."

"Maybe that's what happened," Dan said quietly.

"You sound like you know him," Tobias began.

Jacques and Dan looked at each other. "Perhaps it is time we told them the truth, Daniel."

"Rock, paper, scissors you for it?"

"I will do it, if you are too afraid."

Dan muttered something under his breath. "Fine, fine, I'll do it. The Frenchman weasels out of another one. You really belong in Shield Branch, you know that?"

Chapter 12

"Do you kids know exactly what it is that Tri-I does?" Dan asked us.

I shrugged. "They...watch, I guess. Keep their eyes peeled for alien invasions and stuff."

"Yeah, they do that," Dan agreed. "That's Shield Branch. They monitor...well, a lot more than they're supposed to. They see things and take note. They look for anything suspicious. They're not just about alien invasions, though. Their job is also to keep alien technology from falling into the wrong hands.

"Shield Branch watches. But that's only half of Tri-I. The other branch, Sword Branch, is the one who gets the job done. When a morphing cube goes missing, for example, an operative with Sword Branch gets it back. When Tri-I sees something suspicious, they send an operative to investigate.

"These operatives usually are covert. It's hard to tell who is one. They stay local, working only with their local branch. It preserves secrecy and security."

"You're one of them, aren't you?" Tobias finished.

Dan nodded. "Yeah. I am. When Tri-I opened their doors, I joined up. After what happened to my family in the first war..." He shook his head. "I couldn't let that happen again. And I wasn't going to sit around and trust someone else to get the job done for me. They made me one of their operatives because of who my daughter was."

Jacques took over. "My story is not very different. I joined Tri-I in France when they opened a branch in Paris. I was very useful to them. With all I knew about Yeerks, my business connections, my money... I rose very quickly in their ranks. And my Yeerk had seen fit to train me with weaponry. You may not think it, but I assure you that I am a trained killer."

"So you two are like, what, secret agents?" I asked.

Jacques shook his head and Dan laughed. "Not us," Dan answered. "We do very little for Tri-I. They have special operatives for anything that actually needs doing. Mostly, we just fill out a report every month saying that we didn't see anything unusual."

"Interesting, but how is this relevant now?" Tobias asked.

"When I moved to America," Jacques said, continuing his story, "they transferred me to a local branch. And when I met Naomi, they transferred me here. It has been my job to keep an eye on situations here and look for Yeerk activity. I have not reported anything to them," he said quickly. "I understand the need for secrecy in this war."

"But Tri-I didn't exactly trust Jacques," Dan added. "Since he wasn't a regular at their local headquarters, they thought it was possible that he had been infested. A few little instances here and there made them suspicious that something was going on here and he wasn't telling them. So they sent me. Good timing, too, since I needed to visit Rachel after I learned about the baby."

"Why you?" Rachel asked. "Why not some other operative?"

Dan gave her a little smile. "They figured that if anyone would want to make Jacques look like a liar or an idiot, it would be me. Usually, people aren't very fond of their ex-wife's new husbands."

"Since when has our family been made up of usual people?" Rachel responded.

"That's exactly the it, honey. I like Jacques; at least now that he's taken Naomi off my hands, I don't have to deal with her or her lawyer friends anymore. And he treats Jordan and Sara as well as I could."

"You exaggerate," Jacques responded. "I only give them a home and some occasional words of advice. You will always be their father. This, I know. I find it helps to accept it."

Tobias cleared his throat. "Forgive me for interrupting this...little moment...but is it possible that they know what's going on? And how could the Yeerks have gotten to them?"

Dan shrugged. "If they know, I didn't tell them anything. Maybe they finally figured something out on their own."

"Perhaps we should ask them just what exactly this is all about?" Jacques suggested.

Dan nodded. "Worth a shot. You do the talking; I don't know if they know I'm here."

Jacques went to the communicator. A few moments later, a small image of a man in a suit appeared. Mark, the Chee and director of the local Tri-I branch. "Mark," Jacques began, "there seems to have been a bit of miscommunication. Why are there vehicles outside of my home demanding my surrender?"

Mark shook his head. "Jacques? Good to be seen by you. We've got other things to deal with. I noticed the accountants charged you for seven of those Shredders. That's going to be a bit of a problem."

"Nothing I can't afford. What else?"

"Nothing else. Everything is peaches and cream. Maybe you should swing by tomorrow and we'll talk it all out, huh?"

In the mean time, I'd suggest you listen to the officers at your house. But English isn't your first language, is it?"

"I'll manage," Jacques replied, closing off the communication. He turned to Dan. "You caught all that?"

"Yeah. Looks like we've got to decide between hostage rescue and defending this place. What do you think?"

"Hostage rescue?" I interrupted. "Where'd that come from?"

"Tri-I codewords," Dan answered. "When Mark said, 'Good to be seen', it meant he was being watched. The thing about the accountants charging him for seven Shredders meant that those men out there will come in here at seven o'clock, ready to gun us all down."

"That's three hours from now," Rachel muttered. "We've got to do something about them."

"We've got other problems," Dan told her. "Peaches and cream is the code for hostiles in the building; a hostage situation, specifically. Him asking Jacques to swing by tomorrow was him asking for help. And the bit about listening to the officers, and English being his second language, means that we should not, under any circumstances, trust the men outside. They've been compromised."

"Wow..." I trailed off. "You guys are really prepared, aren't you? I didn't know Tri-I went that deep."

Jacques shrugged. "Tri-I's first duty is a simple one: to never be caught off guard again. We are prepared for every conceivable eventuality."

Chapter 13

"So what do we do about it?" I wondered.

"Simple," Rachel answered. "We scare off these goons out here and then storm Tri-I and get the hostages out. The Reliquary can handle anything outside of the house."

"If we attack them, they'll kill the hostages," Tobias reminded her. "We're talking about Yeerks, so we know they'll do it. Salheer's using Tri-I as a weapon to strike at us so the Yeerks don't dirty their hands with it. When they come in here, they'll be shooting to kill."

<So we either abandon ship to save the hostages or sit here and wait to die,> David muttered.

"We can't abandon this place," Jacques answered. "Perhaps you morphers could escape, but Naomi, Jordan, Sara, Dan, Rachel, and I would be trapped."

Tobias met my gaze. "Jake, I think we chose teams just in time. This sounds like a two-team job. One to stay and defend this place, the other to rescue the hostages."

I nodded. "Makes sense. Who does what?"

"I'm staying," he said instantly. "Rachel can't get out of here, and I'm not going to abandon her. You and your team should go and try to rescue the hostages."

<Um....I know this sounds really bad and all,> David began, <but I think we have bigger things to worry about than the hostages. We need to save ourselves first and then we can worry about them.>

"The hostages are the key," Tobias answered. "That's how they got to the Chee. The Chee can't do violence; not even indirectly. So the Yeerks take hostages and give Mark an ultimatum: give control of Tri-I to one of their people or the hostages die. Since Mark can't let harm come to them, he has no choice but to give the Yeerks what they want. If we rescue the hostages, Mark is free and the problem goes away."

We all just sort of stared at him. "You put that together really fast," I commented.

"It's not all that different from what we did to Erek with the Pool ship," he reminded me. "It makes sense for the Visser to have his men try the same trick."

"Yeah, I guess so," I admitted.

"We've got three hours, so we need to move on this fast. Jake, take your team and get out of here. Go and scout out the area, and do whatever you can. Go in by stealth if possible. If not, smash and grab. If you can't get the hostages, at least try to take out the Yeerk calling the shots."

I nodded. "I'm on my way. Rachel, could you go and get my team for me? I need to talk to Tobias for a moment."

Although she didn't like running my errands, she went. Dan and Jacques decided to go with her.

Tobias raised an eyebrow. "Yeah?"

I shrugged. "It' just... I guess this is it, huh? It's official now. We're splitting up."

"Yeah, I guess so." He sighed. "I just hope I do as good a job leading my team as you always did."

"I think you've done better so far," I assured him.

Tobias shook his head. "Maybe... But I can't help feel that we're losing in a way. We're doing some pretty cruel things. We've killed a lot more innocent people than we ever did while you were running the show. We've been doing whatever it takes to win, no matter the cost."

I nodded. "That's why I wanted you to lead, Tobias. Because you can make the sacrifices we need to make. You can call the shots."

"Yeah. But it makes me worry about what happens after."

"After the war, you mean?"

"After the war," he agreed. "I mean, in the first war, we were careful. We held to rules, standards. Morality. And even then, most of us didn't have much left afterwards. I'm worried about what I'm doing to them. If I keep on the way I'm going, what will be left when the smoke clears? James is a good man; what happens if he keeps following my orders? Al deserves a life of his own, of his own choosing; how can he have one the way I use him? David's been given a second chance at life; and I'm taking that from him. And Rachel... Oh God, the things this is doing to her..."

"The thing is, Jake, that as much as I want to back off, as much as I want to give them this chance and let them retain some shred of their lives and their...their souls, I know I can't. If I back down, the Yeerks will crush us. This is a war, and in war, you can't let up. Ever. If you drop your guard, the enemy will come."

I nodded. "Yeah...that's some heavy stuff. But the thing is, I guess, that you don't have to be fighting all the time, Tobias. Sometimes, you get a quiet moment. For me, I had some at home, with my family. We went to school, and did other stuff. Stuff that wasn't part of the war. It's what kept us going, I think."

"We don't exactly have those options now," Tobias said grimly. "David and James don't have homes or schools or families anymore."

"No? I hate to say it, Tobias, but Naomi does make some good points. Maybe David and Al should go to school. And maybe James could get a job or go to college or something. If they don't have lives outside of the war, they'll become like..."

"Like me," Tobias finished after I trailed off. "You know how much I want to avoid that. Maybe.. Maybe I should look to starting to build a life after this. Look for a home, someplace that is actually attached to somewhere. Get Al in school, get him some friends his age. Marry Rachel..."

"What's keeping you on that?" I couldn't help but ask.

"I...I don't know. I always thought we'd wait until after the war. But now... I mean hell, we're already having a kid. I promised I'd finish this war before he was born but things have changed. With the Pythagi Conglomerate, the rise of the Yeerk Order, the Galactic War... It seems like the war will never be over. Maybe I should stop holding out and just do it."

<Ahem,> David said quietly. I jumped. I had completely forgotten he was there. <I'm glad you two had this little moment and I'm sorry to interrupt, but we *are* on a bit of a schedule here.>

Chapter 14

I assembled my team in the living room. Tobias took his people to the basement to work on the defenses in the event that we didn't get our job done in time. I took a look at my people. Omegamorphs, I had called them. It was a name that I thought would grow on me.

Marco, my right-hand man. Brilliant, ruthless Marco. The clown with the mind of an assassin and the heart of a child. The man kept me sane by driving me nuts. A walking contradiction. Through it all, good times and bad, he had been there, right beside me. Well, usually a few steps behind me, but still there. I couldn't imagine fighting this without him.

Next to him was Jeanne. I thought I had chosen her to be an Animorph, but now I think I was an idiot to ever think that choice was up to me. Or to her. This life chooses you. You can't force it on someone; David was living proof of that. And with the ways she was already connected to us, now I know for a fact that she was chosen long before I met her.

And there was Ax, my other hand. He'd have followed me to the gates of Hell in the first war; now he was ready to do it all again. He was probably the best warrior among us, and one of the smartest. I don't know what Tobias was thinking, choosing me over him. Ax was born for this life. The Andalites had started this mess and if there was one Andalite who could end it, it would be him. He was darker than he used to be, colder and more bitter. But he was still Ax, and it's good to know that if I ever really need a laugh, all it will take to bring back the alien kid I used to know is one good cinnamon bun. Or even a really stale, moldy one. He'd still eat it.

Last was Melissa. It suddenly hit me why Tobias didn't want to take on a new member. She had no training, no practice; no real skills. I'd have to watch out for her this go-round, and in the next few until she got the hang of it. None of us knew her, not really. I was sure she was different from the girl Rachel and Cassie used to know. But we'd know her soon enough. You never really know someone until you see them with their life on the line. When it's kill or be killed, that's when a person's true nature takes over. But I had faith in Melissa. Her father had been strong enough to survive being the host to two of the most ruthless Yeerks I had ever met. If she was half the man her father was, she'd fit right in.

And then there was me. I caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror in the living room. I guess it's kind of funny; I didn't look much different from the kid I used to be. Not unless I looked closely. If I looked into my own eyes, that was when I saw.

I wasn't the kid I used to be when this war began. And I wasn't the man I became at the end. That man... I couldn't live his life. Trading the lies of my family and friends the way I did then... Even for the big, final victory, I couldn't do that again. I had learned my lessons. Maybe the lesson I learned was a stupid one. Maybe it was selfish. But it was a lesson nonetheless. I learned the most important thing a leader can learn: I learned my limits.

I wondered, back during the David incident, where I drew the line. I used to think it was at using my friends, my family, to do my dirty work. I thought it was at taking a human life. I thought it was at so many other places. I kept pushing it back and pushing it back until in the end I pushed myself too far. It had taken death to bring me back from that. And now that I knew where that line was, I'd never cross it again.

I guess- "Hey, fearless leader," Marco said, interrupting my thoughts. "You going to admire yourself until the sun comes up or are you going to tell us why we're standing here in spandex at four in the morning?"

"I'll explain in the air," I told him. "Right now, we need to get outside and get to the local Tri-I headquarters without

anyone noticing. Any ideas?"

"We all have bug morphs, right...?" Melissa began.

"Yes, but they can't get very far on their own," Jeanne told her. "Perhaps we could...what is the phrase?...hitch a ride on some other creature? A bird, perhaps?"

<A bird would certainly be noticed,> Ax pointed out.

"What about a bat?" Marco asked. "I have a bat morph, don't I? Or someone does, right? Someone morphs to bat, the others go to bugs, they jump on batman, batman takes off out of the chimney, and we're out of there."

I nodded. "Alright, good plan. I'll go bat. The rest of you, morph your smallest insect. Um... For Ax and Marco, that's fleas. For Jeanne and Melissa, that means flies."

"Turning into bugs at four in the morning to hitch a ride on a bat up a chimney because some guys in dark vans are outside our house," Marco muttered. "This is...what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Insane?" Jeanne offered.

"Yeah, that's the one."

"You done?" I asked.

He paused. "Not sure. I can't help but think there's something I'm missing..."

<Perhaps you would like to go off on a tangent about uniforms? You have not done that for a while,> Ax suggested.

"Nah, that's not it..."

"Can't we just go ahead and do this thing?" I asked.

"Ah! That's it. Oh Ra-a-a-chel..." He sang.

"Kind of busy here, Marco," she replied from out of sight.

"Just take Tobias's tongue out of your throat for one minute, please?"

"You guys are really going to have to learn to do this without me you know," she muttered, walking into the room.

Then she sighed. "Fine. Let's do it. Happy now?"

"Yes. Yes I am. Okay, like the pregnant blond chick said: let's do it," he repeated.

Melissa looked at me. "Is he going to be like this every time?" She sounded a little unnerved at the prospect of that.

"Every damn time," I smiled.

Chapter 15

It was easy enough to fly up the chimney as a bat. The first time I had done the bat morph, I had to fly through a pitch black room where I couldn't touch the ceiling, floors, or walls. And sensitive wires (which I also couldn't touch) were dangling from the roof. That hadn't been much of a stretch for the bat. Flying straight up the chimney was not even anything worth mentioning.

I emerged into the night air and immediately fired an echolocation burst. The site wasn't comforting. The bat mind noticed plenty of little bugs for me to eat. I was more focused on the five helicopters circling the area. They were probably Tri-I vehicles keeping an eye out for...well, for something like this, I guess.

I fired another burst and saw that one of them was getting closer. The other four seemed to be circling the area.

<Alright, ladies, gentlemen, and Marco,> I said. <We've got choppers here. Five of them. I don't know if they saw us or not, but I'm getting out of here. Hang on tight.>

<I'm glad you said that. See, I was thinking of just letting go and hoping your gravitational pull would keep me attached while you flew around.> That, of course, was Marco.

I ignored his sarcasm and took off in the direction of Tri-I's headquarters. We had broken in before, but only Tobias, Marco, and Santorelli had gotten a good look around. Tobias was at home, Santorelli was dead, and Marco didn't remember, so we were pretty much just flying blind here.

<Five helicopters seems a bit much,> Ax noted.

<Some are probably news choppers,> Jeanne told him.

<Yeah,> Melissa agreed. <I mean, if I'm at a TV studio and see Tri-I pulling something like this, I know I'd send people out to check it out. I don't know how many networks around here have helicopters, but I think at least three of them have do.>

I got a few blocks away and fired another echolocation burst. One of the helicopters was still following us. <Damn, I think they spotted me,> I sighed.

<Who just follows a random bat?> Melissa wondered.

<Someone who knows that any random bat could be an Animorph,> Marco muttered. <Jake, we've got to shake this guy. Otherwise, he'll just follow us, wait 'til we demorph, and then jump us.>

<Yeah, but how?> I asked.

<Tri-I is likely using Andalite DNA scanners to keep track of your morph,> Ax said, thinking out loud. <Visual relay would be very unreliable.>

<If I understand how those scanners work,> Jeanne began, <they will only track a creature of the same general genetic pattern as the one they programmed it to search for, correct?>

<Correct,> Ax affirmed. <They could track a specific creature, but only if they had a DNA sample from it. Since they lack that, they would just program the scanners to track any bats in a certain radius.>

<So if we get outside of this radius,> Melissa began.

<A bat can't outrun a helicopter,> I told her.

<But the scanners could be confused,> Jeanne told me. <If, for example, we came across a group of bats, the helicopter would lose track of which one was us, *ouf*?>

<So where can we find a bunch of bats hanging out?> Marco said. <I wish I could remember where stuff was...>

<If that pun was intentional, Marco, I will smack you once we demorph,> Jeanne warned him.

<The old church!> Melissa and I said at the same time. There was an old abandoned church with a bell tower near the beach. We had gone there a few times on Animorph missions and I guess Melissa knew about it, too. If there was one place we could definitely find bats, it would be there.

I fired another burst. They were still following. <Alright, I'm on my way,> I told them. I pumped my leathery wings as fast as I could. We couldn't afford to play with choppers all night and I had no idea how long saving the hostages would take. Or what we'd do once we got to the building.

The chopper was closing in now. If they caught up to us, the massive winds from the rotors would knock us around pretty badly. I wanted to avoid that if I could; it wouldn't be much fun to do. Tobias had once told me a story about the time he and Rachel had hitched a ride on a cop car, rode it through the street, and then jumped off and snagged onto a moving helicopter. It sounded like something I wanted to avoid repeating at all costs.

Another burst revealed the church and the bell tower not far from me. I was almost there. But the chopper was getting even closer. Already I could feel the wind from the rotors churning the air around me. I flapped even faster. It's amazing what adrenaline can do to you, even when you're a rat with wings. I hope David doesn't get offended by that description.

<Yes!> I shouted as I shot up into the bell tower. Bats were hanging everywhere in there. <Hmm... I wonder why they're sleeping,> I said to no one in particular.

<What, you never just hang out around the house?> Marco questioned me.

<Jake,> Melissa said in a fake whining tone, <please ban Marco from saying 'hang out' while we're playing with bats.>

<They won't be sleeping for long,> Jeanne muttered. <I'm getting some serious vibrations here.>

<Just wait 'til we get home...> Marco said quietly.

<Marco?> Ax said. <I believe you did not wish to direct that particular comment to all of us.>

<Uh...yeah. Definitely not, Ax-man,> Marco admitted.

He cut off when the chopper got close enough to wake up the bats. The tower seemed to shake. And then it exploded into life. Bats started flying everywhere, scattering. I took off with them. In moments, the flock had gathered and dispersed in all directions. There was now no way the chopper could keep track of which one was us.

As we had planned, the helicopter turned and began to head back home. <Okay, now that we lost our tail, we can continue on.>

Ax, of course, added, <I was not aware bats had tails.>

Chapter 16

"So how do we plan to get in there?" Marco asked me. We were a block away from the Tri-I building. We had demorphed in an alley three blocks away and crept closer under the cover of darkness.

"What do we remember about the place's defenses?" I asked them.

"Nothing," Jeanne said. "The only ones who have infiltrated this building are Marco, Tobias, and Santorelli. All we know about it is that it is less defended than their main building."

"Well, we managed to get inside of that once before," I reminded her. "All conventional ways are probably covered. We need something...unusual."

Marco looked around. "Well, see that manhole over there..."

"Marco," Jeanne interrupted, "I am *not* crawling through the sewers in any morph. Is that clear?"

"Go on," I said to him.

"Well, if I know how sewer tunnels work, that should go right under the building..."

"Yeah, but I doubt it has any place that opens up into the building," Melissa reminded him. "I mean, there's not an entrance to the sewers in your basement, is there?"

"I don't recall," Marco said truthfully.

"So we make our own entrance," I told her. "Ax, you've got a Taxxon morph, don't you?"

<Yes, Prince Jake. I believe the morph will serve us well for this. Although I would advise that you all be morphed into something less...appetizing. The morph is impossible to control, especially around food.>

"What *doesn't* a Taxxon find appetizing?" Marco mused. "I can't think of anything."

"Something that can kill it," I told him. "I'm getting a plan now. We all go down into the sewers. Ax chews us a hole. In the mean time, we'll all be in battle morphs. Once we've got our in, we take a look around."

"I love how well-thought-out that ending part is," Marco muttered. "Okay so... Jeanne, what's my battle morph?"

"Garatron," she supplied.

I shook my head. "Not Garatron. They're sentient creatures and we've got to stop using those. We've got rules against that."

"Tobias is not going to stop morphing Howler," Jeanne reminded me.

"Maybe not. But this isn't Tobias's team. I don't know what rules he's going to put on his people, but I do know what ones I'm going to be using. And one of them is no morphing sentient creatures unless it's absolutely necessary."

Marco nodded. "Alright then. What other morph would I use, then? Jeanne?"

"Gorilla," she told him.

"Why don't you do that now and get that manhole opened?" I suggested.

"In the middle of the street?"

"Uh...yeah," I decided. "We don't have time for secrecy. We'll worry about explanations when this is all over. Right now, we've got hostages to save."

Marco nodded and started to morph. "In fact," I said, "everyone morph now." I focused my mind on the tiger inside of me. It was so familiar that I didn't really even have to think about it. It felt natural. The fur, the senses, even the mind... It was all second-nature to me now.

I took a look around. The night may as well have been day to me. Marco, a gorilla, holding the manhole cover.

Jeanne, a leopard. Melissa a panther. And Ax was a Taxxon. <You in control, Ax?>

<No,> he hissed. <But I can control enough.> He set off into the sewers. I jumped down after him, followed by Jeanne and Melissa. Marco climbed down the ladder and replaced the manhole cover.

Ax was about a hundred feet ahead of us, already chewing into the ceiling. <Ax, as soon as you have a hole you can fit through, demorph,> I advised him.

<An Andalite can't crawl through a hole in the ceiling,> Marco reminded me. <He'll have to wait until after he's inside. Sorry, Ax-man.>

Ax ignored us and kept chewing. Only he and Tobias had ever done a Taxxon morph, and I can't imagine what it was like. The hunger of a Taxxon is so powerful that not even a Yeerk could control it. Morphing one must be like being possessed by a demon or something. Not that I know what that's like either.

It only took a minute or so for Ax to get us an entrance. He started slithering through. <Wait, Ax!> I called, if someone's waiting inside there-> I cut off when he disappeared through the hole. I followed, jumping through the hole without much effort. Tigers are cats, after all. Big deadly cats, but still cats.

We appeared to be in some sort of closet. One that already didn't have enough room for us. Ax was mostly Andalite now. <I am sorry, Prince Jake. I could not stand another moment in that morph. I should not have disobeyed you.> <Forget about it,> I told him. <Just get this door open; we can't fit in this room.>

Ax nodded and opened the door. By removing the handle with his tailblade. He exited quickly and I was right behind him. I paused in the doorway, though. A gorilla bumped into me and knocked me over. Marco and I disengaged ourselves and took a look around.

We were in the reception area of the building. What we noticed first were the bodies. Seven of them, lying on the floor. They all had Dracon beams next to them. <Jeanne, Ax, take a look at those bodies,> I told them. <Melissa and Marco, help me make sure this area's secure.>

The three of us broke off and started circling the area. <These appear to be Shredder burns, but they cannot be,> Ax informed us.

<He is correct,> Jeanne agreed. <Although the burn marks are closer to Shredders than Dracon beams, a Shredder would have destroyed a larger area of the body. I do not know what sort of weapon could do this.>

<Maybe human?> Melissa suggested. <I mean, this is Tri-I and all. Maybe they've made their own laser guns. We can't be piggybacking off of Andalite stuff forever, right?>

<Could be,> Marco agreed. <Maybe these Yeerks came to take hostages and security shut them down. Makes sense to me. I mean, you don't run into Tri-I with guns blazing and come out without a scratch, now do you?>

<I don't smell much else on this floor,> I told them. <And I don't hear anything moving, either. I think this place is deserted. Maybe we'll find something up a few levels.>

<I believe Mark's office is on this floor,> Jeanne reminded me. <Perhaps we should look there before we continue.>

<Good point. And I guess I wouldn't smell a Chee. Alright, let's poke around a bit and see what turns up.>

Chapter 17

Jeanne led the way to Mark's office. She had been here once before, although she didn't remember the security systems since she didn't have to break in that time. She and Rachel had come to acquire Yeerks for a crazy mission that resulted in them freeing Ax.

<Ax, open the door,> I ordered. FWAP!

<The door is now open, Prince Jake.>

<You could have just used the handle, you know.>

<I am aware of that Prince Jake. I took more pleasure in it this way, if you do not mind.>

I sighed. At least he was loosening up. <Carry on.>

Mark's office was deserted except for three bodies lying on the floor and one on his massive desk. <The same marks as on the bodies in the reception area,> Jeanne confirmed.

<Alright. Let's get to the dropshaft,> I said. <We'll check on the upper floors. Security's at the top, right? We should look there first.>

We heard it just before we reached the dropshaft. The TSWEE of gunfire. It was echoing down the dropshaft.

<Come on,> I ordered, jumping into the shaft. I didn't float up like I should have.

<The dropshaft seems to be inactive,> Ax said unnecessarily. <Perhaps we should look for an alternate rout.>

<Yeah, they've got to have stairs,> Marco agreed.

The shaft lit up suddenly. I looked up and saw some streaks of yellow light flashing across from one side to the other. Red streaks joined them in moments. <What's that?> I asked them.

<The red light is from Dracon beams,> Ax said. <The yellow...>

<Probably from those human weapons,> Jeanne finished.

The gunfight died down. The red streaks stopped coming, at least. Then I saw something move. A dark figure almost invisible against the darkness of the dropshaft, even to my tiger eyes. It leapt from one side of the dropshaft to the other. A ten-foot jump.

<What the hell was that?> I wondered.

<It would appear we are not alone,> Ax answered.

<Ax, congratulations. You've been promoted to War-Prince Obvious. Why don't you give us a little speech?> Marco suggested. <You think Tri-I has a little help of their own?>

<Let's go find out,> I decided. <Where are the stairs?>

<Logically, they would be nearby,> Jeanne said.

<Found 'em,> Melissa called. She was next to a door that looked like part of the wall except for the handle on it. <In case of emergency, use stairs,> she read.

<I think this qualifies,> I muttered. <Marco, the door.>

Marco nodded and opened it. He started up the stairs first, but I easily passed him. <Any idea where we saw that guy?> I asked. <What level?>

<Um... Try thirty two,> he decided. <I think that's where we saw it jump to.>

I kept going up the stairs. At least the levels were labeled so I didn't have much trouble. The stairs wrapped around the dropshaft, so I was starting to get dizzy by the time I reached level thirty two. I paused. Should I wait for the others to catch up or go ahead on my own?

I couldn't waste time. This guy was probably gone already and I couldn't afford to lose him. Without waiting any longer, I decided to go forward. The problem was that it's hard to turn a doorknob with tiger paws. Instead, I leaned against the door with my forepaws at the top and my other legs on the ground. My weight was enough to break it open pretty quickly.

I was in a hallway, with the dropshaft just a few feet from me. Also a few feet away were some more bodies. Five of them. By now, even I could recognize the wounds. I probably couldn't tell the difference between a Shredder, Dracon beam, and whatever this was, but these wounds looked like the ones on the other bodies.

<This man is very precise,> Jeanne noted, coming out of the stairs behind me. <Note the location of these wounds. All are concentrated on the upper torso. Nothing around the legs or head.

<Could be a woman,> Melissa added, joining us.

<I believe this is certainly the work of a male,> Ax argued as he arrived as well. <I cannot think of many females who would have the requisite skills for something of this magnitude.>

<Uh... Rachel?> I suggest.

<If it was Rachel or someone like her,> Marco reminded me as he closed the door, <some of these guys would definitely have some wounds below the belt.>

<Maybe->

"AHH!" I cut off and snapped my head towards the sound of the screaming. A woman and a man had just emerged from one of the rooms and seen us.

<Calm down mam, It's okay,> I said. <We're here to help.>

"Then maybe," said deep voice, "you should demorph."

A figure emerged from the darkness behind the pair. He was huge, almost seven feet and he had to have weighed at least three hundred pounds. Between his skin color and the clothes he wore, he was almost totally invisible. He wore a black stealth suit, military-looking, and a trench coat. And, oh yeah, he was aiming some sort of rifle made of black metal at us.

<I told you it was a dude,> Marco said quietly.

"I'm Operative Adrian Rook. Who are you?"

I hesitated for a moment. But then I decided to give him the first answer that came to mind. <We're the Animorphs.>

Chapter 18

Slowly, Rook lowered his weapon. He turned to the two. "Take the stairs to the top level. The other hostages are there too. You'll be safe."

The two nodded and ran past us, glad to be out of there. <What are you doing here?> I asked. <And who are you? The name doesn't tell us much.>

"I'm a Sword Branch Operative. That little stunt outside of your home caught my attention, so I called in to see what exactly was going on. When the Director told me what was going on, I came to fix it. What are *you* doing here, Animorphs?"

<That little stunt outside of our home caught our attention, too,> I said dryly. <We know an Operative and he called to ask what was going on. The Director told us in code that there was a hostage situation here so we came to help.>

"What do you know of the situation?" he asked.

<Less than you,> I responded. <What's been going on here, Rook?>

"My partner and I came in through the roof and landed in the security control room. Whoever's behind this put the place on lockdown; she's working on getting our systems back online. So far, all she's been able to do is get the doors unlocked and some of the cameras online. I've been sending hostages up to her for safety."

<You don't know who is behind this?> Marco asked.

Rook shook his head. "Hard to say. They've got Dracon beams, which makes me think the Yeerks got some people to try something like this. They could be terrorists, supports, Controllers... They could just be some nuts or some cult who got their hands on a cache of Yeerk tech. It doesn't matter right now anyway."

<Any idea where they're keeping the director?> I asked.

"No clue. Once Jawa gets the cameras back online, we should know everything. Until then, I'm working on the hostages."

<How do you find them?> Ax asked him.

"These guys have been keeping groups of them in large rooms. Cafeterias, mostly. There's one just a few levels up from here. There should be more in there."

<We'll help,> I decided. <At least until we can find the director. We've got to put an end to this.>

Rook led the way up the stairs. <What sort of weapon is that?> Ax asked him at one point.

"You mean Rachel here? She's a beaut, isn't she? We can't be getting weapons off your people forever, Andalite. So we made some of our own. The guys back at the head branch are working on getting it smaller, like a Shredder or Dracon beam, but I'm happy with this sweet child o' mine."

<You named your gun Rachel?> Marco asked.

"You don't name a gun. The gun has the name from the day it's built."

<Okaaaay...> We were all looking at him a little oddly now. <What made you choose that one, then?>

"I didn't. She chose me. Love at first sight."

<Tobias is missing out on his other soul mate,> Marco said privately.

<Jake, I believe this man may be slightly mentally unbalanced,> Jeanne added.

<Off his rocker,> Melissa agreed. <This dude's definitely a little out of his gourd.>

<While I am not certain of his position relative to his, presumably metaphoric, rocker and or gourd,> Ax whispered,

<we cannot deny his abilities.>

I nodded. <We'll stick with him for now. I think-> I cut off as I heard a buzzing noise. <What's that?> I snapped, looking around.

Rook reached into his pocket. "My phone," he muttered, looking at me like I was an idiot. Then he put it to his ear. "Talk dirty to me." We all looked at each other and then back to him. He nodded and made some sounds of agreement. Then he hung up. "Good news. Jawa's got the systems back online. She's going to gas this building in sixty seconds."

<Who is going to do what?>

"Jawaharlal, my partner. She's going to activate one of the building's defenses: knockout gas. The vents will put it into the air and knock out everyone in the building, hostages and hostage takers."

<What about us!?!> Marco squealed.

"I have a mask. I'll be fine."

<And the rest of us?> Jeanne demanded.

"You get a little nap. Don't worry, I'll wake you up soon. The gas is totally harmless. Unless you've got the bad luck to be standing somewhere you shouldn't be, like the edge of the dropshaft. Then you'll have some problems."

<This building has poison gas built into it?> Jeanne asked.

"Comes in handy," Rook replied dryly. "In the event of...well, something like this, the security guys vent gas into the building and it takes everyone out if they don't have the mask for it. Then the security team comes in and does a little cleaning."

<Wait a minute, Rook, I don't think-> HISS.....

Chapter 19

"Wake up, kitty cat," someone said. A sharp scent brought me back to my senses. I snapped my eyes open and saw a woman waving something under my nose. She must have been Middle Eastern or maybe Indian... And no taller than Melissa.

Rook was nearby, waving something under Jeanne's nose. "Told you I'd wake you up," Rook said to me.

<Yeah... Who's this?> I asked, pointing at the woman with a paw.

"Jawaharlal," she introduced herself. "Just call me Jawa."

"Put her in a brown cloak and I bet she looks like one," Rook said mostly to himself.

"You'll have to forgive Rook. Back before he was with Tri-I, he sustained some brain damage. It makes him a little...off. On the plus side," she added brightly, "he doesn't feel pain."

<That could be helpful,> I agreed. <You got the cameras back online?>

"Yeppers. The former hostages are getting their friends to safety right now and locking up the attackers. But we've still got problems. The Director's nowhere in sight."

<You think they took him?> Marco asked.

Rook shook his head. "I doubt it. If he's not in sight, there's only one place he could be. The armory. Every branch has one. It's where we stockpile all sorts of nasty little things. They'd need him to access it."

<Lead us there,> I told them.

Rook hesitated. Jawa shook her head, though. "Sorry, but this is official Tri-I business now and-"

<And without Jake and me, there wouldn't be a Tri-I,> Marco interrupted.

I nodded. <Look, we're grateful for everything you've done, but you can't just cut us out of this now.>

"Sorry, Jake, but there isn't much choice," Rook said. He raised his gun. "You should probably leave now."

<You are a human, Rook,> Ax said calmly. <I am an Andalite. Do you think that you can pull that trigger before I remove the requisite finger?>

"Let's find out..."

For a moment, we all stood there, looking at each other. Then Jawa pushed Rook's gun down. "This is ridiculous. If the freakin' Animorphs want to come, they can come. Put the gun down, Rook."

"She has a name," he reminded her.

Jawa sighed. "Fine. Sorry."

"Don't apologize to me, apologize to her."

She sighed deeper this time. "Fine. Sorry, Rachel."

"Now kiss her."

"I'm not doing that."

Rook shrugged. "Worth a shot." He turned back to us. "Fine, come on then. But stay quiet and you can't tell anyone about anything you see."

<Don't worry,> Marco assured him, <I'm...forgetful.>

Rook and Jawa led the way to the dropshaft and then up a few levels. A few minutes later, we found ourselves in front of a door. Rook opened it in pretty much the same way Ax would have: he shot off the handle and hinges.

Mark was standing in the middle of the room with nine unconscious men around him. He looked like any random guy in a suit, but I knew better. That was a hologram. Beneath it was one of the Chee, a race of Androids that-

Well, I'm sure you know all about the Chee by this point.

"Adrian? Jawaharlal? I'm surprised you actually made it," Mark said. "And the Animorphs."

<Glad you're okay, Mark,> I said. <But we've got some things to take care of right now.>

He nodded. "I know. Adrian and Jawaharlal, I need you to take me to the security room so that I can call back our forces in the field. Go on ahead, I'll be along in just a moment."

Rook and Jawa left, waiting outside. Mark turned to us and whispered so that only our enhanced animal senses could hear him. "This is the Visser's work. He threatened to kill the hostages he took if I did not do as he said. My programming would not allow me to disobey him. He ordered us to blockade your home and to let him into the armory."

<He's in there now?> I asked.

Mark nodded. "Yes, and some of his morph-capable Controllers. There are many things in there that would be of use to the Yeerks and I do not know what it is that they want. This all leaves too many questions. What happened to our security? How were we compromised? And what it is that they really want?"

<We'll stop him,> I promised. <Where is the armory?>

Mark nodded to the wall. "Over there. You'll need the key code to enter, though."

<What is it?> Marco asked.

<Is it six?> Ax suggested.

"No, this code was designed by humans." He rattled off a string of numbers and letters that I couldn't keep track of.

When he was done, I turned to Ax.

<You got all that?>

<Affirmative, Prince Jake.>

<Then let's go.>

Chapter 20

The armory, as it turned out, spanned several levels of the building. A steel ramp corkscrewed around the whole building, leading to different parts of it. Everywhere I looked, I could see weapons. Racks of Shredders and Dracon beams. Partially built ships. Uniforms. Everything imaginable.

<How're we doing on time, Ax?> I asked.

<Unless I lost track while we were unconscious, you have fifteen minutes remaining in your morphs.>

<That's cutting it too close,> Marco muttered. <Although, I don't think I'd mind spending the rest of my life as a muscular, hairy guy. I mean, didn't I always want to be one when I grew up?>

<No,> I answered, <you wanted to be taller.>

<Well, this body has that, too. I say we run out the clock and go get some bananas.>

We ignored Marco and kept going. A few minutes later, we heard a familiar sound. The ding of hooves on steel.

There was an Andalite walking around up ahead. And I had a pretty good guess which Andalite it was.

We turned the corner and, as I expected, saw the Visser. Even after all this time, he still scared me. Maybe it's because, in spite of everything we had done, after all the wars, defeats, rebellions, and everything else, he was still here. Still powerful. Sometimes, he seemed like he was something immortal. Sometimes I thought that maybe he really was the Devil.

<Ah, look who finally arrived,> he said, his voice dripping with its usual arrogance. No, it wasn't dripping. It was a freaking waterfall of arrogance.

Ax turned and grabbed some sort of weapon from the wall. <You have chosen a bad place to stand, Visser,> he said. Then he fired.

A beam of yellow light lanced through the air. But when it hit the Visser, there was a flash of bright bluish-white and the beam reflected off of him, burning a hole in the wall next to him. <Do you like my new toy?> he mocked.

<I must admit,> he said, pacing, <that when Salheer suggested invading Tri-I and seeing what we could find, I was...skeptical. But this little device here,> he tapped something belted around his torso, <certainly makes it all worth it, don't you think? And imagine it, Animorphs. Once I send this off to the Pythagi, all important Yeerks will be equipped with them. And in time, all our warriors will wear them. We will be immune to Shredders, Dracon beams, and anything else you have. It was so very kind of humans to develop this, now wasn't it?>

Hork-bajir started surrounding us. Some were demorphing from small animals or bugs. Others had been lurking, hiding behind experiments or on the ceiling and walls.

<Give it up, Visser,> I told him. <This little scheme of yours failed. Mark is calling back the forces from our home. Tobias and the others will be on their way soon; they probably already are. And there are some Operatives here and I doubt you want them to see you. So give me the device and I'll let you walk away from this.>

<Jake, Jake, Jake,> he said, <perhaps you've forgotten how this works. You, as always, are in no position to demand anything. All the cards, as you say, are in my hand.>

Then his eyes swiveled to Melissa. <And what do we have here? Not a morph I recognize. Tell me, please, which of my old friends is wearing a new face?>

<I'm not your friend, slug,> Melissa spat.

<Hmm... The voice is unfamiliar to me. Let me guess, then...>

<He's toying with us,> Marco muttered.

<I know, but->

<Jordan, perhaps? Rachel's sister would make a logical choice, after all.>

<We're not playing games here, Visser,> I growled.

<Not Jordan, then. Hmm... Surely little Sara is too young. What other females do you know? You have stumped me, Animorphs. Perhaps I should ask Salheer; he is very clever.>

<Give us the device and we'll tell you,> I tried. It seemed pretty obvious that this wasn't going to get me anywhere. I tried to guess how many Hork-bajir there were. Could we take them? Maybe. But it wouldn't be a picnic.

<You can't guess?> Melissa spat. <You took my parents from me and left me to die alone and you can't guess who I am? You can't even remember my voice!?!>

<Melissa, don't give him the satisfaction,> I warned her.

All four of his eyes snapped towards her. <Melissa... Ah, yes, the girl. Your father cared about you very much. So much that he traded the human race for your freedom. How do you like that, Melissa? He betrayed his own people, sentenced thousands of them to slavery. Do you enjoy being responsible for that?>

Melissa made my decision for me. She leapt at the Visser. He swatted her aside with the flat of his tailblade and stepped back. <Did I hit a nerve? Jake, I am disappointed in you. You used to have much better control of your people. You are slipping. It is painful to watch.> Then, to his Hork-bajir, he said, <Almost as painful as this will be. Put them out of my misery.>

Chapter 21

The world seemed to explode in a frenzy of blades, teeth, and claws. Jeanne and Melissa were both dealing with a Hork-bajir. Marco and I each had two on us. Ax was attempting to fight off three at a time. We were holding our own, but just barely.

I dodged the blade of one, but the second caught me in the side. It had been a while since I felt a Hork-bajir blade cut into my side that way. I roared, turned my head, and chomped deep into his arm. He tried to shake me off, but trust me when I say that you don't just shake off a tiger. When I finally did come off, I had about half a foot of his arm in my mouth.

That was one Hork-bajir out of the fight, but the second one hadn't been idle. I had three new gashes along my flank and back. He and I glared at each other. If I went for the throat, I might get him, but he'd probably impale me. I faked a lunge and it worked. He flinched. I swatted a paw at his leg and swept it out from under him. The Hork-bajir dropped to the floor and I pounced on top of him. I sank my teeth into his throat. He twitched for a few moments but he soon stopped struggling.

I rolled off and spat the taste of Hork-bajir blood out of my mouth. There are some flavors you never get used to. I took stock of the battle, looking to see who needed my help the most. Jeanne was doing well enough, and Marco was down to only one enemy. Ax was still fighting two of his three.

My eyes locked on Melissa. She was bleeding pretty badly. Her Hork-bajir was scratched and bleeding but he looked steady on his feet. Then I realized the problem. <Melissa, use your jaws,> I told her. <The claws don't do much against a Hork-bajir. Like this.> I leapt on him.

The Controller spun and raised an arm but it was too late. My weight knocked him down and my teeth finished what Melissa had started. <Oh, okay. I get it now. Thanks Jake.>

I turned back to the fight and rushed in to help Ax. Melissa went to aid Jeanne. <Oh,> the Visser said, <did I forget to show you the little gift the Pythagi gave me? I think you'll like it.> Then he started to morph.

The two surviving Hork-bajir pulled back and stood in front of their changing Visser. His forelegs fused together into one long, strong leg. His back legs and hindquarters sucked in. His body became like a tube, almost like a Taxxon's body. But out of it grew six arms, each of which had a blade at the end of it. His head became nothing but a mouth with a ring of red, globulous eyes around it.

<Do you like it, Animorphs?> he mocked. <I know how much you all missed those amusing morphs I used to let you see from time to time. Thanks to the Pythagi, we can have all that fun again! How wonderful!>

<This guy is really starting to piss me off,> Melissa muttered. <Can't we just kill this b*****?>

<We're trying,> Marco promised. <It's harder than it looks.>

We all paused, unsure how to attack this thing. With six bladed arms, it wouldn't be easy. <No one wants to make a move?> the Visser laughed. <Then I suppose I will.> Then he jumped. See, it turns out that his single leg was actually like a massive spring. He jumped right in the middle of our little cluster of Animorphs.

Ax parried one of his arms. Marco grabbed hold of another. Melissa, Jeanne, and I dodged the ones that came at us. Marco swung around and wrapped his arms around the Visser's body. Ax sank his tailblade into his flesh.

<I seem to have a monkey on my back,> the Visser mocked. Then he pried Marco off of him with one of his blades. The gorilla flew about five feet and lay on the ground, bleeding from the chest.

Another blade smacked Ax to the side. <This is a wonderfully stupid creature, Aximili. So stupid that it takes a long

time for pain signals to reach its brain. Useful, you can see. Perhaps you would like to try again?>

"Visser," one of his guards said, "*galhack frish Salheer draskna.*"

<Fine, fine, go about it, then. I'll be done shortly.> Melissa snarled and leapt at him. Again, the Visser batted her aside easily. <Really, now, you already tried that once today. Why would it work the second time?>

<Why won't you just kill me!?!> she demanded. <Just split me in half next time and get it over with.>

I shot a look at her. <Melissa, what->

<Far be it from me to refuse a lady,> the Visser laughed. Then he swung a pair of arms at her. I did the only thing I could think to do. I jumped in the way. I landed on the ground with two less legs and a massive chunk of my back ripped out.

I turned my head to look at the Visser's morph. He was missing one of his blade-hands. I noticed it sitting on the floor near Ax. The creature's green blood dripped from his tailblade. <Perhaps you should demorph, Prince Jake.>

<Yeah, I'll...you know...do that...> I said slowly. It was getting hard to think. I had been here before. Darkness was coming. It was peaceful there. No more war, no more Visser, no more blood in my mouth... Why had I ever wanted to leave that place? Why had I ever wanted to come back here? Why would anyone choose to be alive?

<Come on, Jake,> Melissa whispered, nuzzling my ear. <You've got to demorph. We need you. Imagine being human. Think about...>

I tuned her out as I started imagining things. My human life the way it had been. Home, school, the mall...the construction site, the Yeerk pool, the Hork-bajir valley... My home, the students I taught, the car I used to have... The *Rachel*, the One's devastation over the Hork-bajir world, the hangar full of Yeerks... The ones I had killed... The ones who had killed me...

And then I started imagining a new life, one I hadn't yet lived. Maybe it was because she was the one who I heard last, maybe it was because of the thoughts Tobias and Marco put in my head, but I was imagining a life with Melissa. A home...kids... a real life.

"So that's why anyone would choose to be alive," I whispered. With a human voice. I opened my eyes.

The Visser was gone. My friends were humans now, too. There was a large hole in the wall. I could see the moon through it. "What happened?" I asked, rubbing my head.

"Well, here's the thing," Marco told me. "See, we were kind of forgetting that while we may not have been able to get our claws into the Visser's morph, there are, oh yeah, a WHOLE FREAKIN' LOT of guns lying around this place. So, being the guy with hands, I grabbed one and started shooting."

"But what about that device he had?" I asked. "Shouldn't that have stopped the beams?"

<It would have, had he been wearing it,> Ax agreed. <But he had to remove it to morph.>

"Where is he now?"

"Gone," Melissa said bitterly. "He got away. And he probably took that thingy with him."

Jeanne nodded to the hole in the wall. "The Hork-bajir made that while we were fighting. Salheer arrived in a helicopter shortly after you passed out. When Mark called Tri-I's forces away from our house, he got suspicious and came to check things out."

I nodded. "So the Visser got away with the device. That's bad. Real bad."

Marco nodded. "On the other hand, none of us are dead."

"Yeah." I met Melissa's eyes. "Thanks for that."

"Hey, it's in the contract, right? Right under the health care?" she joked.

I shook my head. "Not the way this economy is going. We had to cut the health care out."
"Damn. And I was going to go have my teeth whitened when we got home."

Chapter 22

In spite of everything, none of us could get back to sleep when we got home. Jacques was cooking breakfast when we walked in. "You cook?" I asked him.

"I'm French," he answered simply.

I was too tired to think about whether that made sense or not. I needed to find Tobias; I knew he'd want to talk about what had happened. He wouldn't be happy about all the attention we had gotten.

I found Rachel first. "Where's Tobias?" I asked.

"He's doing some work on the Reliquary," she answered. He did that when he was angry. "I guess waking him up at four in the morning and locking him in the basement with my mother wasn't a very good idea; especially considering that she doesn't like being woken up at four a.m. either."

I went off to the garage/hangar. I found Tobias inside of his ship. What was he doing? Sitting in the pilot's chair drinking a bottle of rum and flipping through a book. "I thought you were working on the ship," I told him.

He jumped a bit when he heard me but settled down when he realized I was alone. "Jake, think about something for a minute here. I'm not a mechanic. I'm not a computer programmer. I don't make furniture, paint stuff, or anything like that. What sort of work could I possibly be doing?"

I shrugged. "So all those times you came here to 'work on the ship', you were just coming here to drink?"

He nodded. "Yeah, but I figured that wouldn't go over all that well with Rachel." He held the bottle out to me.

"Rum?"

I shook my head. "Nah; I'm still underage," I reminded him. "And with all the laws I have to break, I want to try and show a little respect for the ones I don't."

"Poor you. How'd the mission go?"

I shrugged. "Some success, some failure. It was two Tri-I Operatives who did the hostage rescuing. All we did was...well, let the Visser get away with some sort of shield device," I admitted. "So I guess it went pretty badly."

"And Melissa?"

"She need some work. Practice, mostly. And..."

"And what?"

"She kind of worried me today. There was a point when when asked the Visser to kill her."

Tobias nodded. "I thought something like that might happen. Rachel said I was crazy, but..."

"Thought what might happen?" I asked.

"Think about Melissa's life, Jake. Losing her parents to the Yeerks not once but twice, seeing her friends all move on without her... It's the kind of life someone could be desperate to escape. And this job... It's not one for people who are overly invested in their own lives."

"You think she's suicidal?" I demanded. Maybe Melissa was a little on edge, but definitely not that.

"I don't know. I don't know her. But I'm sure I don't have to tell you, of all people, how much easier dying can make everything. It's always a temptation, to just end your life and and let all the problems of this world slip away."

"Yeah, I... I was thinking that. I was sort of dying in the fight against the Visser. I started remembering death...how peaceful it was. I wondered why anyone would ever choose life."

Tobias nodded. "I've thought about it. During the First War, I thought about it a lot. After I got trapped, I tried it once. I tried to fly straight into some glass in the mall. Thank God for Marco, because he saved my life that day. When

Taylor was torturing me, I thought about it. About how much better it would be to be dead than be here. And after Rachel died...”

“Yeah... So what's the answer, then? Why did you go on? Why did I?”

“Because...because Marco saved my life. Because Elfangor did it, too. All of you did at one point or another. Your life...well, my life at least... it doesn't belong to me. What is it that the Andalites say? 'My life is not my own when the people have need of it.' I'll always keep on living because I don't have the right to die.”

“Do you really think that, Tobias?”

“I don't know. I think it, but I don't know if I believe it. What I do believe is this, though. I've had everything taken from me. And I mean absolutely everything. Bit by bit, everything I loved was stripped from me. In the end, the only thing I had left was my life. And that's the one thing that can never be taken away. Once you lose that, it's game over. Not until then. As long as you have your life, you're not done yet.

“So I'll always choose to live, because by choosing to live, I win. The mere act of choosing life means that you haven't been beaten yet. No matter what happens, no matter how bad it gets, you still have your life. Sometimes, it feels like it's impossible to keep living. Believe me, I've been there. But that's when you know it's time to change your life.”

“And how do you do that, though?” I asked.

He shrugged. “You find something to live for, If your life alone isn't enough for you, then give it to something greater. Find a cause, a dream, an ambition... It's what kept me going. It's what drew you back here. There are countless causes in this world. I'm sure everyone can find at least one thing to believe in.”

“And if you wake up one day and find out that you're believing in a hopeless cause?”

“Then I'd say you found a cause that needs your life a lot more than any other. One worth giving your life for.”

I realized then that he had been looking over my shoulder. I turned around to see Melissa standing under the roof hatch. “Uh... Breakfast is ready,” she said quietly. “If I'm interrupting, I could-”

“Not at all. Interruptions come with life,” Tobias said, giving her a rare grin. “I just have to finish some work here in a minute.” Then he raised what was left of his bottle. “Here's to life.” I followed Melissa out of the ship. I was halfway out when Tobias called, “Oh, and Jake? One more thing.” He clapped twice. I took a look at the screens and nodded.

“Here's to life,” I echoed.

And now for some words of wisdom from Streetlight Manifesto:

*“And I don't know much, but I do know this
With a golden heart, comes a rebel fist
I can't help agreeing with those that would not quit.*

*And it makes me sick when I think of it
All my heroes could not live with this
and I hope you rest in peace
Because with us, You never did!
And K.D.C., you were much too young!
And you changed my life!
But I draw the line at suicide!*

Here's To Life!!”

-Here's to Life

Don't miss the next installment of the Animorphs series:

Animorphs #70: The Memories

I went into the house after that. I doubted I'd be back in here any time soon. In some ways, it made me a little sad. I had come to like the place. But there were plenty of things I hated about it. The biggest thing being Naomi. I don't know if you've ever seriously considered murdering someone in cold blood, but if you haven't, have a conversation with Naomi and you'll know how it feels.

Everyone was there. Naomi, Jacques, Jordan, and Sara. Ronnie and Cassie. Menderash, too. This was the last time I'd see him for a while, too. He was heading back to the homeworld. The Electorate had sent him here a couple of months ago to find out what I was doing on Earth. Now, they didn't care what I did on Earth; they just wanted me off of it.

The Omegamorphs were there. That's the name we gave to Jake's team. He, Marco, Ax, Jeanne, and Melissa were lounging around. They wouldn't be going anywhere. Loren, my mother, and Dan, Rachel's father, were standing with packed bags. They would be coming with us. Dan lived about an hour's drive away from Alpha front, and he decided he wanted to catch a ride with us. Loren was coming with us all the way.

Naomi was clearly torn. She wanted Rachel to stay as much as she wanted me to go. But where one of us went, the other followed. I'd be glad to get away from her for a while. She was as bad as my other relatives. I said my goodbyes to her first. "See you in Hell, Naomi."

"I can't imagine a worse punishment."

I nodded to Jordan and Sara. Jordan doesn't like me very much, I don't think. She's a lot like her mother. And I think she blames me for taking James off to Alpha front. The two of them have a thing going and she wasn't happy that I was taking James away from her.

"Can I come visit you guys sometime?" Sara asked. She liked me more than most of her family; probably because she's so much like Rachel. And she seemed to be pretty good friends with Al. And, as weird as it sounds, I get the impression she has a thing for David. I try not to think about that one.

"No," Naomi said instantly.

"Any time you want," I told her. I turned to Jacques. I guess it's kind of weird, but he and I don't have any sort of relationship. He's Rachel's step-father, but neither could ever come to think of the other in terms of father and daughter. He respected her too much, and she already had a father. Technically, if and when Rachel and I get married, he'll be my father-in-law. But we all know my track record with fathers. I didn't get attached to him. He was just...some French guy who we lived with for a little bit.

"Keep an eye on them," I told him, nodding to the Omegamorphs. "Especially Marco."

"It is Jeanne who needs watching," he replied. "Take care of your family, Tobias."

"Back at you," I responded. Then I turned to Ax. "Ax..."

<I deeply regret that I am not going with you, Tobias,> he said after I trailed off. <I long for the day when we will fight side-by-side once again.>

"Don't worry. We will," I assured him. "Cao Cao wouldn't have gotten very far without his Xiahou Dun." I knew he wouldn't understand that little joke. And I didn't have the heart to tell him the Xiahou Dun was Cao Cao's most trusted general, even after he lost an eye in battle. A man named Cao Xing shot it out with an arrow. Xiahou Dun

pulled out his eye and ate it; he said he couldn't throw it away because his mother gave it to him. And yeah; he was nuts.

I turned to Marco. He wasn't one for nice goodbye speeches, and I...well, I've never been much for talk. So I told him something I thought he'd appreciate. "I'd give you a nice long goodbye speech, but you'd forget it."

He nodded. "Good point. Do I get a hug at least?"

"Not from me."

"Rachel?"

Rachel gave him a look. Then she shrugged. "What the hell? You won't remember it."

After she hugged him and he stopped celebrating exaggeratedly, I turned to Jeanne. "Keep him on a leash." Then I thought about that statement. "Never mind, he'd probably enjoy it."

Melissa looked from me to Rachel. "What exactly is it that you two do to each other?"

I turned to her. Melissa was our newest Animorph; and I still wasn't happy about it. It was far too late in the game to start tossing in rookies. Worse, I'm afraid she might be suicidal. I think she might be in this just to find a way to get herself killed. But I had been outvoted on this one. "Take care of yourself. Melissa," I told her. "Or let Jake do it for you."

I wasn't sure what to say to Jake. He was my fellow general, the other leader. He may say I'm in charge, but as far as I'm concerned, he's at least an equal. I decided to say the only thing one general could really say to another when one marched out to war and the other stayed behind. I looked around the house and told him, "Good luck."

"It'll all be here when you get back," he promised. "Watch yourself out there, Tobias."

I nodded. "Guraff's dangerous, but he's not anything I can't handle. And I don't think Kalroth will be much of a threat. It's Salheer who worries me. You sure you can handle him?"

"No. And I'm not sure I can take the Visser, either. But we don't have a choice, do we?"

"There's always a choice, Jake. But we made ours."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess we did. Good luck, Tobias."

Preview Summary

The time has come for the Animorphs to officially separate. Tobias must lead the Alphamorphs off to fight Guraff and Kalroth, leaving Jake and the Omegamorphs to defend the homefront. But with this separation comes more than just a change in the war. Tobias has decided that its time for the Alphamorphs to have lives outside of the war. But the Electorate is not happy about Tobias's refusal to return to the front lines of the galactic war. And life becomes very difficult when one displeases the Electorate. Things are getting out of control, and Tobias will be forced to seek help in a place he swore he never would. The past is about to catch up with him, and Tobias is about to learn that the son does indeed pay for the sins of the father.