

## 63: THE HOMECOMING

# CHAPTER 1

My name is Jeanne. I cannot tell you my last name or where I live. Even if I told you what I call myself these days, it would be a lie. My life is a lie.

People who pass me on the street do not know who I am. They think I am only another pretty face. They don't know that I am part of the smallest, most elite army in the galaxy: the Animorphs. They don't know that animals swim through my blood. I can turn into a leopard, a fly, an owl, a red-tailed hawk, a cockroach, and even a Garatron, an alien.

I'm not like the other Animorphs. I wasn't picked by fate or chance; I was chosen by Jake. I was a student in a class he taught on morphing. Another student, a man named Santorelli, and I joined Jake on what we thought would be a short mission to rescue his friend, Prince Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill. Instead, we ended up in another Yeerk war.

But not even the Animorphs know all of my secrets. Only Tobias and Rachel know the full truth. Only they know that I was trained as a Yeerk assassin.

I'm not even sure if I can call myself an Animorph. I'm not sure that term still applies. About half of our army is made up of the original Animorphs: Tobias, Rachel, and Marco. The others two are new.

One of them was Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor; Tobias's half-brother. Prince Elfangor's Andalite son. He's a computer genius and a good fighter. But he is young; a kid. He is no older than the other Animorphs were when they entered their own war.

The second is David. He was an Animorph for a few days. He turned against them. Not long ago, Cassie turned David back to our side. Unfortunately, David is trapped in the body of a rat. At least he can morph.

What happened to the other Animorphs? Aximili was captured. Now he's the host of Esplin 9466: the Visser. Jake died destroying an entire hangar of Yeerk ships; he passed on his leadership role to Tobias. Cassie left the war to be with her fiancé, Ronnie Chambers.

Santorelli was dead, too. He and Tobias had set off to hide a weapon called the Time Matrix in the sun. Tobias returned. Santorelli did not.

I had known Santorelli for about a year. He became like a

father to me in many ways. I never had the chance to know my own father, you see. He was taken from me by the Yeerks. Just like Santorelli.

The other Animorphs didn't know how much that hurt me. I hid my pain and pretended that I was over it. Just another sacrifice of the war.

But when I was alone, I sat in the dark and cried. That was how I usually got to sleep. I couldn't let the others see me cry. They were all so strong, so brave. Cassie was the only one who had ever seen me when I let the mask drop. Now, she was gone and I was alone.

I was alone that night. I was in my room of the motel Marco had rented. He, David, and I lived out of motels now. Sometimes, I envied Rachel. She lived with Tobias and Alloran aboard the *Reliquary*, their ship. It may have been an odd life, but at least it had some stability.

In my hands, I held a tattered old hat. It had belonged to Santorelli. He had given it to me before we went off on our last mission together. I don't know if he knew it would be his last mission. I certainly didn't.

It was a dark green hat. It was darker where my tears struck it. "Santorelli..." I whispered. "If it had been me and

not you, could you go on?"

I knew the answer. When it came to his duty, Santorelli was as bad as any Andalite. He wouldn't give up. That's what kept me going this long.

Someone knocked on my door. I wiped the tears from my eyes and jammed the hat back on my head. "Enter."

Marco came in. I think it's a little odd, now. Back when I didn't know any of the Animorphs, he was my least favorite. He was notoriously unprofessional, for one thing. He was loud, he was rude, and he was insensitive.

Now he was one of my favorites, for all of the above reasons. In the middle of such a terrible war, someone like that is a breath of fresh air.

"Hey, Jeanne. Tobias just called. He wants everyone over at his place as soon as possible. It sounds like something big."

"Any idea what?" I asked.

"Yeah, I think I do. You know that restaurant we all hate?" He was speaking in code, of course. We could never be too careful and Marco was the most paranoid of us all.

"What about it?"

"Well...he heard they're opening a second one."

## CHAPTER 2

We met aboard the *Reliquary*, the ship that Tobias, Rachel, and Alloran called home. As usual, Rachel had a hot meal waiting for us. And, as usual, we were afraid to eat it. Rachel was good at many things. Cooking was not one of them.

Tobias, our fearless leader, ate without hesitation. Slowly, the rest of us joined in. “Okay,” he said. “As you know, Alloran rigged our computers so that they would get all the information the Yeerk computers did. We know from this information that the Yeerks are going to open a second front.”

“Bring it on,” Rachel said. “We can take them.”

Marco shook his head. “No, we can’t. And they know it. We can barely hold our own here. If they open up a whole new invasion, that’s the ballgame. We might as well call it quits.”

Tobias nodded. “That’s why we have to stop this before it even starts. We have to go to where it’s happening and shut it down. Now.”

David sighed. “Guraff will be in charge. Or the Visser himself. I can’t imagine the Visser trusting anyone else with

this. It won't be easy."

I respect David because he knows our enemy. He worked for the Yeerks not too long ago. He understands their inner workings. Also, he has a similar mentality.

"Where is this invasion going to take place?" I asked.

Tobias gave me a slight smile. "Our home town. Another reason we have to stop it now. I'm sure none of you want your families to get infested. Possibly for the second time."

"How do we stop them, my Prince?" Alloran asked. He was in his human morph as well, looking like a younger Tobias.

Rachel smiled. "Blow stuff up." Then, she looked questioningly at Tobias. "Right?"

He nodded. "Complete sabotage. Find where they want to set up their Kandrona and destroy it. Find out where they're building their pool and level the place. Find out what Yeerks are in charge and take them out. Don't give them an opening. Don't let them breathe."

Marco nodded. "Sounds like fun and all, but that will attract a lot of attention. This has to stay secret."

"We can make it look like an accident," Rachel said. "Right Jeanne?"

I shuddered. “*Oui*. We can make it look like *un hazard*.”

“Oh, she’s speaking French again,” Marco said. “Say something else.”

“Marco, now really isn’t the time,” Tobias began.

“Hey, I just learned that we’re about to lose this war. I can’t think of a better time.”

Rachel glared at him “Marco? Do you remember the deal we made?”

Marco turned just a bit pale. “Oh, come on, Rachel. I’m not—”

“No excuses. You know the rules.”

Marco hung his head. “Fine. Carry on, oh fearless leader.”

David, Alloran, and I exchanged glances. I was certain that this was somehow related to the first war, since only the original Animorphs seemed to understand it.

Tobias sighed. “As I was saying, this new invasion is back home. The Visser will probably start it himself. Guraff will take over here, where they’re well situated.”

“This won’t be easy,” David reminded us. “Stopping an entire invasion? Not easy at all.”

“When has it ever been easy?” Marco answered darkly. “We’ve got no plans, no targets, no idea what to do.”



“Well,” I said, “we could try to end the invasion here instead. We crippled them not long ago.

Rachel shook her head. “I want to keep the Yeerks out of my home. Leave this for later.”

Marco answered her. “It isn’t about what we want. It’s about what we can do. But I think it’ll be easier to end this new one. I say we go home.”

I nodded. “It will be easier to prevent than to cure.”

“That’s true,” David agreed. “Take it from a guy who used to carry the plague.”

“You were not a plague rat,” Marco argued. “I know. I caught the rat you morphed. No plague.”

“Maybe I picked something up on that island,” David responded. “You never know.”

“Could we concentrate here?” Tobias asked. “We were taking a vote. Rachel?”

“We stop them at home first,” Rachel said. Then, more forcefully, “They are not getting their hands on my family.” She looked at me. “On any parts of my family.”

“I will go where my Prince commands,” Alloran decided.

Tobias nodded slowly. “Then we’re going for it.” He smiled. “Everyone, pack your bags. We’re going home.”

## CHAPTER 3

Since Marco and I lived out of motels, we didn't have any trouble packing. David, being a rat, had no possessions. Rachel, Tobias, and Alloran lived on the *Reliquary*, so they didn't need to pack. We were ready to leave that night.

Everyone seemed excited about going home. Everyone except for Tobias and Alloran. But then, they never show much excitement.

David was practically hopping up and down. <Marco, I can't wait to see your mansion.>

"It's bigger than I told you," Marco promised.

It seemed like they were becoming friends. I was glad. When Jake died, Marco lost his closest friend. He still had me, but I know that he and Jake shared something I could never share with him.

Marco and David were sitting at the table, eating something that I decided it was better to ignore. Tobias and Alloran were piloting the ship, although it was perfectly capable of doing that itself.

I had been trained to read people when I was being trained as an assassin. It helped to know your target. I saw what Tobias and Alloran would rather I not have seen.

They weren't excited about going home. Of course, to them, it wasn't really a home. This ship was their home. And they, at least, understood that this would be no pleasure mission.

Rachel and I were sitting on the beds. She was on hers, and I was on Tobias's, which was next to it. "So," she said, "I'm having a little problem."

"What is it?"

"Well, I can't decide whether or not to tell my mom that I've been living with Tobias. I don't think she'd approve and I don't want to spend this trip fighting with her. But I'm not sure if I could keep it a secret. Or even if I should."

"I don't know her, so I cannot say how she'll react. But I don't think it's something you should keep quiet about," I told her. Rachel was my step-sister; my father married her mother. Naomi, her mother, was the one she was worried about.

I am aware of how odd it is that I am related to her. It seems like it must be the most ridiculous of chance. But those sorts of things tend to happen around the Animorphs. Tobias

suspects a higher power is at work. I cannot say I disagree, after meeting several higher powers myself.

“Okay. Next problem. When we get home, our family will want us to stay with them. I’m fine with that, but what about Tobias and Alloran?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, they can get by on their own. They could stay here on the ship or with Marco and David. But...I don’t know, it just feels wrong. We’ve been living together ever since I came back from the dead. It would be weird if I woke up in the morning and they weren’t there.”

“Perhaps you should tell Naomi that. She might understand. I think my father would support you. You are adults, after all.”

“Yeah, but...the last time my mom saw me, for more than a day or two at least, I was sixteen. I was just a kid. I know I’m an adult, but she probably doesn’t realize it.”

“I think you should tell her all about it,” I decided. “We have too much to lie about as it is. We should be honest when we can. Tell her about you and Tobias and ask her to let him and Alloran stay with us. If she says no, you can always sleep here on the *Reliquary*.”

“Yeah. Then you’d have the bedroom all to yourself,” Rachel joked.

“I’d share it with you,” Marco offered, coming out of nowhere to sit down next to me. “So, ladies, what are we talking about? Me?”

“Yep,” Rachel answered brightly. To me, she said, “He’s definitely gay. Did you ever notice that he’s never actually had a girlfriend?”

Marco leered at her. “Well, if you’re offering, Xena – Ow! My shin!” He turned to me. “Well, if Rachel isn’t interested you and I could – Ow! My other shin! What is it with you and the shins lately?”

“I was aiming for your head. Maybe if you were taller it wouldn’t happen so much.”

“Tobias, your wife’s being mean to me!” Marco whined.

“He started it,” Rachel called back.

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“Did not.”

“Did –“

“Children,” Tobias called, “don’t make me turn this car around. We’ll go right back to fight the other invasion if you two don’t settle down.”

“Hey, I just remembered something,” Marco said suddenly.

“You didn’t graduate high school?” I offered.

“Not that. We’re on a road trip. Tobias, can we stop and see some stuff?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know...the world’s largest...something or other. I’m sure we’ll pass one.”

“Maybe.”

Marco sighed. “That always means no.”

# CHAPTER 4

<I remain unconvinced. That could not possibly have been Earth's largest ball of twine.>

"It was, Alloran," Rachel sighed for about the tenth time.

<You could not possibly know that for a fact. To have documented every single ball of twine on Earth would be a ridiculous task. Even humans have more sense than that.>

"Wrong again," I told him.

Tobias nodded. "Never under- or overestimate humans, Al. We're capable of some pretty weird, ridiculous stuff."

<I apologize, Prince Tobias,> Alloran began. <But I must insist that it is ridiculous. That cannot possibly be a documented fact.>

Tobias is Alloran's Prince. He was the first non-Andalite to be given that title. Jake had been given it, too, but that had been only honorary. Tobias actually had an *aristh* under his command, which made his title official.

"Hey, Al, we're off the clock. You don't have to call me Prince now," Tobias told him. "We're just with friends now."

<With all due respect, my Prince, is that not always the

case? And, if you do not mind, I like to call you my Prince. It makes me proud.>

“Uh...okay...well then...” Tobias trailed off several times. He does not do well with praise. “I guess...if it makes you happy...carry on.”

“Aww,” Rachel teased, “he’s blushing. I didn’t know you remembered how to do that.”

“I’m just full of surprises. By the way, we’re there. This will be a fun little surprise for your family.”

“*Our* family,” Rachel insisted, looking from Tobias to Alloran to me, making it very clear what she meant.

There was Rachel’s home. My home, too, I guess. We had dropped Marco and David off at Marco’s mansion and now we were going home at last. The *Reliquary* was parked in the hangar Marco had in one of his basements.

Rachel didn’t knock, of course. It was her home, no matter how long she had been gone. She just walked right in. I wasn’t far behind her. I had lived in this house for only a day, but the rest of my family lived here. It was my home, too.

“Rachel! You’re back!” her sister, Sara, shouted. Sara hugged Rachel and, after a moment of hesitation, hugged me, too. She was my step-sister, after all.



She called over her shoulder. “Mom! Rachel and Jeanne are home.” Sara glanced over her sister’s shoulder at Tobias and Alloran. “And they brought company.”

Naomi, our mother I suppose I should say, came into the room. “Oh, I didn’t expect you. I would have gotten Jordan from gymnastics.” She embraced us as well.

Sara led us to the couch. “Does this mean that the war is over?” she asked us.

Rachel and I glanced at Tobias almost in unison. He shook his head. “No, it isn’t over. But we’ve reached a bit of a truce, for now. Guraff is...reasonable, to an extent. We all figured we needed a vacation.”

I don’t know why he lied, but it wasn’t my place to question him. Especially not in front of our family.

Naomi nodded. “Okay. I can live with that. So, Rachel, you and Jeanne will be staying here, right?”

“Yeah. And mom, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about,” Rachel began. “I was hoping you’d let Tobias and Alloran stay here too.”

“Well... Why, Rachel? Couldn’t they stay with Marco or someone? I know he has enough room.”

“It’s not that. It just...the three of us have been living

together. Tobias and I take care of Al and it would be kind of weird of they weren't with us."

"I don't know, Rachel. What kind of precedent would that be setting for Jordan and Sara?"

"The precedent that, when you're an adult, your life is your own?" Rachel offered.

"But where would they stay?" Naomi asked.

Rachel turned to Tobias. "Is the couch good enough for you?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I've been sleeping in trees for the last seven years. A couch is fine."

"What about your Andalite?" Naomi asked.

"Firstly, mom, he isn't *our* Andalite. He isn't a possession. His name is Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor. And secondly, Andalites don't sleep in beds. They sleep standing up."

"Wouldn't your legs get tired?" Sara asked Alloran.

<We Andalites are stronger than that,> he answered. <I assure you that it is no difficulty for me to stand.>

"Don't you need room to graze?" Naomi questioned him.

<If necessary, I am able to feed in my human morph. Sometimes, I find that preferable.>

"Can you do it now?" Sara asked. "I don't want to get

confused at breakfast.”

Alloran looked at Tobias. He nodded and Alloran began to morph. It took about two minutes. He looked like a younger Tobias. Whether it was intentional or not, there was a very strong family resemblance.

Sara nodded. “Oh, he’s cute. Can we keep him?”

## CHAPTER 5

Rachel, Sara, and I were working on our sleeping arrangements. Like the last time we were here, Rachel and I would share Sara's room. Sara would sleep with her sister. And now, Tobias slept on the couch with Alloran nearby.

Sara and Rachel were talking. "So, I guess things are getting pretty serious with you and Tobias, huh?"

"Yeah, you could say that. What about you, Sara? Any guys in your life?"

"That depends. Is Alloran seeing anyone?"

Rachel swatted her arm playfully. "Sara, that's a big N-O. He'll probably end up being your brother."

"Let me think...He's Tobias's half-brother. And there isn't even one strand of DNA that they have in common since Alloran is an Andalite and Tobias is a human."

"Mostly human," I agreed.

"That means that if things work out between you and Tobias, Alloran will be my sister's husband's half-brother who, by the way, isn't even the same species. I'm okay with that. Besides, I was mostly joking."

“I know,” Rachel sighed. “It’s just...I was your age when I met Tobias. And you were always so much like me... I just really don’t want to have to break Alloran’s arms.”

“*Quoi?* Why would you have to do that?” I asked.

“It’s my rule. Guys I know can date my sisters, but I get to break both their arms,” she answered.

Then something occurred to me. “Was that the rule you and Marco were arguing over earlier?”

“What? No, that was...something else.”

“You’re lying! He *does* like me!”

“Well... Of course he does. You’d have to be an idiot not to see it,” Rachel answered.

“Oh, you should totally date Marco. He’s SO cute,” Sara gushed. “And rich.”

“No. No one dates Marco. Not for all the money in the world,” Rachel insisted.

“What do you have against him?” I asked.

“It’s just...he’s Marco!” she answered. “He’s the shrimp. He’s always making jokes no one thinks are funny. He never takes anything seriously. He tries to weasel out of any commitment he can. He showers himself with useless stuff just because he can.”

“*Oui*, but that does not bother me,” I answered.

“But its Marco,” she repeated.

“Rachel, perhaps you do not know Marco as well as you believe you do. You remember him as a thirteen year old kid. But he isn’t a child anymore. He’s an adult. And what he’s been through, what you’ve *all* been through...he isn’t that kid anymore.”

“He may be an adult, but that doesn’t mean he’s grown up at all,” she pointed out.

“No. But I find it refreshing. His jokes, his sense of humor...it is good to have around. I enjoy his company.”

Sara shoved a phone in my hand. “So call him.”

“I *will* break his arms,” Rachel vowed.

“That is a price I am willing to pay,” I answered. I dialed the number.

The phone rang for a couple of moments. Then, “Hey, it’s Marco. This had better be good, Rachel, because I’m naked right now.”

“This is Jeanne,” I told him.

“Oh, sorry. Then don’t worry, I’m not naked. I’m actually in a tux right now. What are you wearing?”

“Why are you in a tuxedo?” I asked.

“My parents are coming over for dinner and I decided to dress up for once. Just to freak them out.”

“Ah. How is David?”

“He’s fine. I put him in the wall and he’s having a blast. That guy’s really just a big child. You wouldn’t believe how easy it is to amuse a rat.”

“I see. I was wondering...”

“I should give that a try some time. Go on.”

“Would you like to take me to dinner some time?”

There was a silence on the other end. I waited. Then, “Yeah, I would. Except that your crazy step-sister would break my arms. It’s a little rule we have.”

“I am aware of it. I do not care.”

“Then neither do I. Broken arms heal, right? Why don’t you come over tonight? You’d like my mom. The two of you have a lot in common, I think.”

I laughed quietly. “Isn’t that moving kind of fast?”

From behind me, I heard Rachel say to Sara, “I guarantee he just said something about sex.” Sara giggled.

“Hey, Rachel and Tobias set the example. I’m just trying to keep up. Come on, don’t you want to beat Rachel?”

I smiled. “Okay, I’ll come.”

“Good old sibling rivalry. Works every time. Okay, I’ll see you in two hours.”



## CHAPTER 6

Exactly two hours later, I was in front of Marco's mansion. His chauffeur had driven me there. I had to endure sharp criticism from Rachel but I thought it would be worth it.

Marco opened the door just as I raised my hand to knock. "Hey, you actually came." He sounded surprised.

"You thought I might not?"

"I half suspected that this was all some elaborate way for Rachel to get under my skin. Come on in. My parents are already here. Although I guess I should warn you about something."

"*Quoi?*"

"My father has two wives."

"That is a bit unusual," I agreed. "But my life is a bit unusual as well, I suppose. I thought polygamy was illegal in America."

"Most parts of it," he agreed. "Thing is, this was complicated. We thought my mother was dead for two years. It turns out she was just a Controller and had to leave Earth. My father remarried a woman named Nora. When we rescued my

mom, Nora was captured by the Yeerks. After the war, when Nora was free, we had a bit of a complication.”

“I would imagine so.”

“Yeah. The real problem was that my father loved both of them the same. He couldn’t choose. Who could? Because it was a special circumstance and because of all he did for the human race, the government decided to let my father marry both of them if they would agree to it.”

“Which they obviously did.”

“Not at first. But then Nora and my mom got to know each other and they agreed to it two years ago.” He sighed. “And now you know why I don’t live with my parents.”

Marco led me into the house. “I don’t suppose I need to give you the tour, since you lived here for a bit. Just make your way to the dining hall. I’ll be there in a moment; I just want to check on David.”

I knew my way around well enough. During the first month or so of the war, Marco, Tobias, Santorelli, and I had lived here since we had nowhere else to go.

I walked into the dining hall. Three people were seated at the massive table, a man and two women. One of them had her back to me.

The man was certainly Marco's father. He was taller than Marco, and lighter, but there were definitely some similarities. He saw me and smiled. "Oh, look girls, we have company."

The woman with her back to me turned to face me. My heart stopped. I was staring into the face of Visser One. "Jeanne!" she gasped.

I knew, intellectually, that this was not Visser One. This had been her host, Eva. I knew she would be here and that this would be very difficult. I thought it would be worth it.

"You two know each other?" Marco's father asked.

Eva nodded. "Yeah, we know each other. I never expected to see you again, Jeanne. How did you end up here?"

I heard Marco's voice from behind me. "How do the two of you know each other? Were you a Controller, Jeanne? I should have guessed, since your father was one."

"She wasn't a Controller," Eva told him. "At least, not for more than a day or two. She was taken by the Yeerks when they started invading France. They would have infested her, but Visser One interfered.

"Instead of making Jeanne a host, the Visser had her trained as an assassin. She wanted to use Jeanne to take out her opposition. Making her a Controller would have given

another Yeerk too much leverage over the Visser, so she saved Jeanne for herself.

“After a failed attempt to assassinate Prince Elfangor, the Visser wiped Jeanne’s mind and sent her back to Earth. I never knew what became of her after that.”

I shrugged. “I lived in foster care, with adopted families. I couldn’t remember my own. After the war ended, I started to remember things. Parts of my past...my family...my training.”

Marco nodded. “That explains a few things. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“Not many people know. I would like to keep it that way,” I answered.

“Fair enough. We’ve all got skeletons in our closets.”

Eva turned her gaze on Marco. “So how did you meet Jeanne, Marco?”

It was his turn to shrug. “Her father, who she just recently remembered, married Rachel’s mother.”

“Jacques is her father? We were at the wedding, Marco. Why didn’t we see Jeanne there?”

“I had not yet met my father,” I answered.

“Then how did you and Marco meet?” Eva repeated.

<Uh, guys?> I heard David’s voice say in my head. <I

didn't mean to eaves drop, but I've got rat hearing. Sounds to me like you should tell some truth here. Not the part about the war, but maybe the truth about Rachel being back.>

I nodded. "We met when Marco was visiting Rachel. She was brought back to us by a creature called Crayak."

Eva actually laughed. "Crayak? He's just a Yeerk myth. Something they talk about when they're grubs."

"Oh, he's all too real," Marco assured her. "He brought back Rachel. We were visiting her, and that's when I met Jeanne. Now that that's settled, let's all eat. Story time always makes me hungry."

## CHAPTER 7

I got home from dinner around midnight. Eva and I had a lot to talk about. I was also surprised at how much I had in common with Nora. And Marco's dad, I learned, was a very intelligent man. He had helped humans to discover Zero-Space on their own.

Marco was actually very sweet. He apologized to me repeatedly and assured me that he would have warned me about his mother if he had known about my history with Visser One. After he got over that, though, he was very charming. I do not know what Rachel was so worried about.

When I got home, everyone was asleep. Sara had fallen asleep on the couch. I suppose she wanted me to tell her about my date, but she could not remain awake long enough. That made me wonder where Tobias was.

My father was on a business trip and was not due home until tomorrow, so he was not waiting. Naomi and Jordan had gone to sleep as well.

When I made it to our room, I learned that Rachel wasn't there. She was probably off with Tobias and Alloran, wherever

they were.

I was alone, at least for now. I didn't know when the next time would be. I knew that we would all be busy over the next few days and, with us sharing a bed, I would not be away from Rachel at night. Now was my only chance to do what I do when I am alone.

I cried. It wasn't as easy as usual. My tears came slowly, silently. The memory of dinner with Marco and his family was too sweet and too fresh for me to really feel sad. Still, I was always able to shed a few tears, even on the best of nights.

As always, I held Santorelli's hat in my hands. He would have waited up for me. He would have wanted to know how things went. And if Marco had been anything less than the perfect gentleman, Santorelli would have wanted to break his neck. Thinking of Santorelli always made the tears come faster.

Suddenly, I felt the bed sag. Someone sat down next to me. I looked up expecting to see Rachel. Instead, it was Tobias. He just sat there. He didn't look at me. He didn't speak. He waited to see if I would ask him for comfort.

I never thought of Tobias as comforting. When I first met him, he had been a grim warrior out for revenge. Now that I

knew him better, he almost scared me. There were times when he seemed superhuman. Or maybe less than human. Either way, he never struck me as being a comforting person.

I guess it always seemed to me that the normal problems of the world couldn't touch him. He wasn't above or beneath them, just...off to the side. It was a different world, not one he lived in. Very few things had power over him and that, I think, is what scared me.

After a few moments, I stopped crying. I could not cry in front of Tobias. Anyone but him. He was our leader. He had to think I was strong. Anyone but he could be allowed to see me weak. Rachel, my sister. Marco. Even David and Alloran would be better. Anyone but him.

But to my surprise, he didn't reproach me. He didn't say anything about weakness, about my not being able to handle the war. Instead, he put one hand on Santorelli's hat, right next to my hand.

He spoke softly. "Jeanne, you obviously cared more about Santorelli than any of us realized. So I'm going to share a secret with you. This isn't something anyone else knows. I haven't even told Rachel or Al this.

"Santorelli was my step-father. Someone twisted time.



Maybe it was just before he died or maybe it was just afterwards; it doesn't matter. They put him in my past, to take Elfangor's place. He was my father as much as Prince Elfangor was. No, no. He was more of a father to me than my real father was.

"I remember him now. I remember how he held my mother in his arms. I remember how he used to sing me to sleep every night with the Star Spangled Banner. And I remember the day that he died. I remember it like it was yesterday. Do you know what I did when I suddenly remembered all of this, Jeanne? Do you know what I did when these memories came back to me, these memories of a happy time I never even knew existed?"

"I did what you're doing now. I cried. I probably cried for hours. It might have been days for all I know. I cried like I cried when I found out that Elfangor was my father. I cried like I cried when Rachel died.

"I don't know if this means anything to you, but I hope it does. We all cry, Jeanne. We've lost too much to ever really stop crying. But you don't have to do it alone. I want to make sure you know that. We'll all cry with you. We've all lost.

"Rachel's your sister. Don't be afraid to show her this side.

And don't be afraid to cry on Marco's shoulder. He's suffered, too. David lost his family to this war; we still don't know if his parents are dead or alive. Al lost his father and his entire childhood to the fight. And me...well, I'm me.

"You're never alone, Jeanne. You're an Animorph. For all the terrible things that means, it also means that you're never alone. You have all of us. If you ever need a shoulder to cry on, we're all here."

I took his advice. I put my head on his shoulder and let the tears come. Gently, he stroked my hair with one hand. He kept his other hand on mine. I caught myself wondering how often he had done this with Rachel.

Finally, after what felt like hours, I was done. In the mirror across the room from the bed, I could see him smile. "So, I guess your date with Marco was pretty terrible, huh?"

I smiled back. Then I heard footsteps. Rachel walked in. "Tobias? Jeanne?"

For a moment, I wondered what she would do. I realized how this must have looked. I thought I should pull away from Tobias, but that would just be suspicious.

Instead, Tobias just nodded to her. "Ah, so you *are* back. I thought I heard the door. Did Alloran have fun at the Gardens?"

I'm sorry I had to leave early, but you know how I am with water.”

“Yeah, he had fun. Did you find what you were looking for?” Rachel asked.

“No. I...I got kind of distracted.” He still hadn't moved. My head was still on his shoulder, his hand on mine.

“Well, we'll find it in the morning. Now either make room for me or clear out because I am beat.” Tobias rose and left, kissing Rachel on the cheek as he passed. Rachel turned to me.

I held up my hands. “I promise that was not what it looked like,” I told her.

She laughed. Actually laughed! “I know that. Even if it wasn't obvious from all that puffiness around your eyes that you were crying, I trust Tobias. And I trust you.”

I smiled. It was good to know she trusted me. “So,” I began, “do you want to know how my date with Marco went?”

“Nah. I don't like to vomit right before I sleep. Gives me terrible breath in the morning.”

## CHAPTER 8

Rachel was already gone when I woke up. I learned where she went as soon as I reached the bottom of the stairs. “Rachel, we are on vacation. You are not cooking while we are on vacation. That is final,” Tobias told her.

“But I *want* to cook,” she insisted.

“You also want to go around stomping Kelbrid but we aren’t doing that, either,” he argued.

“But we have the house to ourselves. Mom and Jacques are at work and Jordan and Sara are at school. You already told Marco and David to meet us here. We always meet over breakfast. Why can’t I cook? It’s not like this is a real vacation anyway.”

“I don’t care if this vacation is real or not, you aren’t cooking today. Jeanne, should she cook?”

It was a trap and I knew it. Rachel was my sister; I had to take her side. But Tobias was correct; Rachel should never cook under any circumstances. There had to be a solution, but what was it?

“Maybe Rachel and I should both cook,” I suggested. “It

isn't fair to make her do it all herself on vacation, but if she wants to cook, we shouldn't stop her. I'll help."

Tobias shrugged. "Suit yourself. I think I'll go and see if Al found anywhere to graze." A moment later, a red-tailed hawk flew out the window.

Rachel and I worked in silence for a while. Finally, she turned to me and asked, "So, I have to know. What was it like going out with Marco?"

"Not nearly as bad as you thought it would be," I told her. "But we were not exactly alone. His parents were there with us. I must confess, it was quite a shock to see Eva again."

"Why? Oh, right, the whole Yeerk assassin thing. She recognized you?"

*"Oui."*

"So I guess Marco knows the whole story now," she said to me.

I nodded. "He knows. So does David. He was in the wall and overheard us."

Rachel shuddered. "I don't care what Tobias and Al say, I don't trust David. How can they forget that he tried to kill us? Are he and Marco friends now? They seem to be spending a lot of time together. They used to hate each other."

I shrugged. “I believe that Marco is as suspicious as you. He is watching David. But David is so starved for friendship that he does not see it. That probably comes from being moved around a lot as a child. He was never able to make lasting friends, so he will grasp at any friendship offered to him,” I said casually.

Rachel just stared at me. “So you, what, a psychologist now?”

I sighed. “It was part of my training. It is helpful to know how a target thinks.”

“So you just got into the habit of analyzing people, is that it?” Rachel asked.

“More or less.”

“Cool. Do me.”

“I am not sure you want me to do that. Most people do not like what they learn.”

“I can take it. Come on, Jeanne, red pill.”

“Red pill?”

“Yeah. Have you ever seen The Matrix? There’s a scene where Morpheus offers Neo a choice of two pills. The blue pill makes him go to sleep and forget about the terrible truth. The red pill shows you the truth, even though it’s pretty bad. I’m a

red pill kind of gal.”

“Very well. Because you lost your father, you feel like you have to protect the rest of your family on his behalf. You have to be strong for everyone else so that they do not get hurt the way you were hurt. But beneath that is just a scared little girl who misses her father. You do what you can to make him proud of you, even though he is no longer around.”

“That’s it? Jeanne, I figured that out years ago. Okay, do Marco. What’s his deal?”

I sighed. “Pretty typical, actually. He uses humor as a defense mechanism because he thinks that the real world is far too depressing. He makes jokes to distract himself from his own pain, especially at the loss of his mother. And now that he has her back, the humor is a habit for him.”

“What about AI?”

“He never had any warmth from anyone growing up. He had to constantly seek approval from emotionless machines or a father who was too busy to spend time with him. So he tries to be the perfect soldier and impress Tobias, his surrogate father. Again, a bit typical.”

“Okay. What about Tobias?”

I shrugged. “What he’s been though has never been

documented psychologically. He would make a fascinating case study for any psychologist. I can only attest to what he was like before he became a hawk.”

“Nah, there isn’t any point in that. That isn’t Tobias. Not the Tobias we know, at least. What about Guraff and Esplin? Can you do them?”

“Not Guraff. I do not know enough about him. As for Esplin...he is a man who lacks purpose. He has achieved all of his goals: he was the first and only Andalite-Controller. He is the highest-ranking Yeerk in existence. He now experiences a lack of purpose, which gives rise to his destructive urges. He wants to conquer Earth for a simple reason. It’s the only thing left on his to-do list.”



## CHAPTER 9

“Ladies, feast your eyes on this,” Marco said, thumping a copy of that morning’s newspaper on the table,

He, David, Rachel, and I were eating breakfast. Tobias and Alloran had not returned yet, but Marco did not want to wait to tell us his big news.

I flipped through the paper until I found what he must have meant. “There’s a new organization coming to town,” Rachel summarized. “A support group for former Controllers and their families. People of all ages are invited. Anyone who was hurt by the first war. Sounds good.”

I nodded. “Someone is trying to help the former hosts and the other victims of the war. That is a very good thing.”

Marco shook his head. “Don’t you see it? David saw it the instant he picked up the paper.”

David nodded. “It’s a trap. Like the Sharing. They target the people who have been traumatized in this war. That way, when their world outlook suddenly gets a lot more positive, nobody thinks anything of it.”

“But...that’s monstrous,” I said. “*Affreux.*”

“Well, it was probably Esplin’s idea,” Rachel reminded me. “He really is a monster.”

“That’s only half the story,” Marco told us. “The support group is being put together and run by none other than our old friend Mr. Chapman.”

“Oh no,” Rachel gasped. “They took Chapman again?”

Marco nodded. “I’m afraid so. Probably his wife, too. At least Melissa doesn’t live in town anymore. She’s safe.”

“What do we do?” I wondered.

“First,” Marco said, “we wait for the Winged Wonder and his sidekick, the Amazing Andalite. Then, we decide what we do. And then we go and run around town trying to find new ways of getting our limbs ripped off. Has anyone actually been bitten by a Kelbrid yet? That might do the trick.”

Tobias and Alloran arrived a few minutes later. They did not take the news any better than we had. Unlike us, though, they had seen the trap instantly. Tobias didn’t even need to read the article to figure out that Chapman would be in charge.

“Okay, I think it’s safe to say that we need to put a stop to this,” Tobias said to us. “Time for suggestions.”

“We wreck their grand opening,” David said. “If their first meeting gets broken up, people might not come back.”

Rachel nodded. “As much as I hate to agree with David, he’s right. I say we burn down their meeting hall. Where are they meeting anyway?”

“The community center,” Marco said, reading the article. “That used to be Yeerk central. I can’t believe they’re using it for the same thing.”

“I cannot believe that no one suspects,” Alloran added. “Even humans must surely realize what is happening.”

Tobias shook his head. “They count on Tri-I for that. Tri-I probably investigated and found that the place was clean of Yeerks. The slugs probably got to the investigator.”

“How?” I asked. “Tri-I knows all about the Yeerks. They use X-rays to scan for them. It would be impossible to make one of them a Controller.”

David shook his head slowly. “There are other allies than Controllers, Jeanne. You just have to get your hands on something they care about. The Yeerks probably grabbed the investigator’s family and held them as hostages.”

“No, that couldn’t work,” Rachel insisted. “Who would sell out the entire human race like that?”

“I would have,” David answered. “Never underestimate how far someone will go to protect the ones they love, Rachel.

Never underestimate desperation.”

David’s statement was met by silence. We all knew that, in the past, he had turned against the Animorphs. It was not a memory any of them wished to relive.

Tobias broke the silence. “I don’t think we can make an actual plan yet. We need to check it out. The Yeerks will have some kind of meeting for those who are already Controllers. That’s what we need to check out. Marco, Alloran, can the two of you find out where and when? Check in the *Reliquary*. The Yeerks may have a record of it.”

“And while Al and I are working on our day off, what will the rest of you be doing?” Marco asked. He sounded half angry, half joking.

“We’re going to check out the community center,” Tobias answered. “There will be a pool entrance there. New security. We need to see it for ourselves. The security probably won’t be active yet. Now’s the best time.”

We went back to eating after that. But I noticed that Tobias and Rachel were much quieter than usual. At one point, I saw her give him a look. I couldn’t read what it meant. He just returned her gaze evenly and continued eating. I know that something passed between the two of them, that some decision

was made, but I do not know what.

Perhaps someday Marco and I could share a silent bond like that.

# CHAPTER 10

<David, Rachel, spread out. Rachel, drop some altitude. A couple hundred feet at the very least. David, get higher. You're a golden eagle; the only reason you'd be anywhere near us if because you want to eat us. Jeanne, get a little closer to me. The only reason two reds would be flying together is if we were mates. Seriously, people, are you complete armatures? Rachel, how many times have we done this?>

That was, of course, Tobias. He was giving us flight instructions, making sure that we did not look too out of place. People watched for morphs now. If we made it too obvious that we weren't real birds, they would know.

Of course, we had a real bird giving us instructions, so we did well. We were in our raptor morphs, on our way to the community center.

<Tobias, are you sure about this?> Rachel asked.

<Of course I'm sure. I *do* know how to fly, Rach.>

<Not that. Going to the community center. You don't exactly have good memories of it.>

<Rachel, we discussed this. The only reason that happened

to me was because I let them catch me. We can't avoid this place because of one bad experience.>

<You nearly died!>

<It wasn't the first time. Or the last. Besides, that's all been over with for years. Taylor's dead, their device is destroyed, and I'm over it.>

<Did I miss something?> David asked. <What are you two talking about?>

<And who is Taylor?> I added.

Tobias sighed in our heads. <One time, just after the community center was built, we investigated it. We thought that the Yeerks had a weapon here, the AMR; Anti Morphing Ray. It's as bad as it sounds.

<To find it, we let the Yeerks capture me. I was a *nothlit*, so the ray didn't work. Then, a Yeerk named Taylor tried to get me to 'demorph'. The others broke me out and we left. End of story.>

<You left out the part where they tortured you for a couple hours,> Rachel added softly.

<Yeah, I did. It isn't important.>

<It's the most important part of the story,> Rachel insisted. <It would be like if Elfangor hadn't said to you, 'Hey, by the

way, Yeerks need Kandrona to live.’>

<Can we have this fight when we get home?> Tobias asked her. <I’m kind of trying to lead a mission here. And for God’s sake, David, fly higher! Jeanne, get closer to me. I’m your mate, not your brother.>

I tried not to think of how Rachel might interpret that, especially with what she had seen last night. I did as I was told.

A few minutes later, we were riding the thermals above the community center. <Okay, I don’t see any guards,> Tobias told us. He had the most experience with this. Years more than the rest of us did.

<How do we get in?> Rachel asked. <Flies?>

<Nah. Even if security isn’t fully active, Esplin will have put bug zappers in place. Insects are out. For all we know, the place is lined with bug poison. No one would think it odd, since the place has been abandoned since the end of the first war. I’m thinking we morph something larger.>

<Like what?> David asked.

<Like you,> Tobias told him. <We’ll all acquire your DNA and head in as rats. Well, Rachel already has a rat morph, so she won’t need to do it.>



<Fair enough. My DNA is yours.>

We landed in an alley a block away from the community center and demorphed. Rachel looked around the alley with distaste. “You know what Marco would say if he was here?”

“Something sarcastic,” Tobias answered.

“Or something about uniforms,” Rachel replied, eyeing his bike shorts and t-shirt the same way she looked at the alley. “But seriously, where did you get those clothes? I do your shopping!”

“Not all of it,” he answered. Then, he looked at a small white rat on the ground and said, “David, stop squirming. You’re making me hungry.”

<Sorry.>

“Marco thinks we need uniforms?” I asked.

“Yeah. He hasn’t mentioned it yet?” Rachel answered. “I’m surprised. I just assumed you had already shut him up about it.”

<Tobias, you’re squeezing me kind of hard,> David said. His voice had a kind of far-off quality.

“Sorry. Force of habit. Okay, you’re acquired. Your turn, Jeanne.” Tobias held David out to me.

David was limp, as most animals tended to be when they

were acquired. I held David in my hands and concentrated. I memorized a mental picture of his body. There was no sound, not much of a feeling, but I knew I had acquired him.

“Okay. Rat time,” Rachel said. “Let’s do it.”

# CHAPTER 11

I felt the changes begin. The first thing that changed was my size. I shrank. Shrinking is like falling, in a few ways. Only, instead of you getting closer to the ground, it feels like the ground is getting closer to you.

When I was rat sized, the fur grew. Thick, white fur shot out of my flesh. Morphing is usually disturbing and this was no exception. Sudden fur is *flippant*; it is creepy.

My nose stretched out until it filled my entire face. My eyes pulled apart. I felt my naked tail grow out of the base of my spine. My legs and arms shrank to the stumpy limbs of the rat that was David.

My whiskers were the best part. I could feel little shifts in the air. It would warn me when a predator came. It would keep me safe. Suddenly...

Nowhere was safe. My whiskers meant nothing. Predators were everywhere. *PARTOUT!* There was no escape. Not in the open. I had to run. Hide. In the darkness. Yes, that would be safe. They couldn't find me there.

I scurried as fast as my legs could carry me. There: the

dumpster. I dove beneath it. I was safe here. It was dark. Darkness meant safety.

Unless there was a cat. A cat could see me in the darkness. A cat was fast, deadly. No, the darkness wasn't safe. NOWHERE WAS SAFE!

But I had to go somewhere. Somewhere where the birds and cats couldn't get me. There had to be somewhere, right? Right?

No. Nowhere was safe. I had to be safe. I had to! But first I needed food. But where? Food was everywhere. This alley was full of garbage. I could live off of that. There was plenty of food here.

But there would be predators, too. I had to be careful. I had to stay alert. If there was a bird, I had to run and hide in the darkness. If there was a cat, I had to hide in a small place the cat couldn't reach. But where?

I was terrified. My heart was racing. My nose was twitching. My ears were ringing. There was an odd sound in them. No, not my ears. It was in my head.

<Jeanne, listen to me. I know what it's like, but you have to control it. You can't let the rat take command, Jeanne. I did that once and was lost for a year! You have to fight the fear.>

<It isn't working, David.>

David? I saw him. He was a rat. He was always a rat. Except...except that he used to be human. Just like I did. <Is it safe?> I asked cautiously.

He shook his rat head. <Nowhere is safe; just a bit less dangerous. Come on, Jeanne, I'll get us inside the community center. There won't be any cats or hawks there.>

<Yeah,> Rachel said, <only Kelbrid and Esplin. That's a lot safer than here.>

<How do you live like this, David?> I asked him.

<I don't know. But it's better than dying.>

<Dying isn't so bad,> Rachel told us. <Although, to be honest, I don't really remember it. The guy in charge probably took away that part of my memory when I came back to life.>

<Falling is easy,> Tobias said to us. <Getting up is the hard part. Speaking of which, can you get us up to the community center, David?>

<Will do,> David answered. <Follow me. Tobias and I both know how vulnerable we'll be out here in the open. To get there, we'll have to cross the street.>

<What if a car comes?> I asked.

There was a pause. Then, <I've done this before.> That

wasn't much of an answer, but it was all that I got from him.

<Okay, it's very important that you do what I say when I say it or we'll be roadkill,> David said. <Okay, wait for it... GO!GO!GO!>

I motored my rat legs as fast as they could carry me. I ran like there was a hawk behind me. <STOP! FREEZE!>

I froze. An instant later, a dark shadow swept over me. The air roared around me. Several cars passed overhead.

<GO!>

I ran again. I could see the grass of the community center before me. <STOP!>

I stopped.

<GO! RUN FOR IT!>

I almost collapsed in the grass. My heart was racing like it was still dodging traffic.

<You know, David,> Rachel said, <you didn't have to yell. It's thought-speak. We can hear you just fine.>

<Sorry, I got a little worried. Okay, that was the first time I did that and it'll be the last,> David answered.

I looked at him. <I thought you said you did that before.>

<Well... Tobias told me to lie.>

<Yeah, I did. It was for your own good. Okay, people, let's

go. With any luck we'll find a better way back.>

## CHAPTER 12

<This place looks so...normal,> I said as we scurried through the halls of the community center.

<That's how they get you,> Rachel sighed. <Plus, this can't be even remotely suspicious. They're targeting former Controllers, people who know their tricks. The Yeerks have to be really careful.>

<Quiet,> David and Tobias said at the same time. To David, Tobias said, <You heard it too?>

<The footsteps? Yeah. Let's get under some cover. When people see a rat they tend to, well, stomp. And when Yeerks see animals...>

<This way,> Tobias said. We squeezed beneath a door and into the room behind it. I felt a slight tingling as I crawled beneath the door.

<What was that?>

<Probably a bug zapper,> Rachel answered. <Good for keeping bugs out. Not so good against rats.>

<Do you two ever stop talking?> David demanded. <Some of us are trying to listen.>



<To what?> Rachel shot back.

“—course, Guraff. I will show you at once.”

<Oh, that,> Rachel amended. <That sounded like Chapman. Do you think it was him?>

<I have never heard his voice,> I told her.

<It was him,> Tobias confirmed. <And apparently, he’s with Guraff.>

<What is Guraff doing here?> I wondered.

<The Visser probably sent him to make sure things are coming along as planned,> David answered. <People tend to work harder when Guraff is involved, whether out of loyalty to him or out of fear.>

<Well, Chapman’s showing him something,> Rachel said. <I say we follow them.>

<Not all of us,> Tobias answered. <We don’t want to be seen. You and I will stay here. David and Jeanne will go.>

<Why them?>

<Because David knows how not to be seen. And I don’t exactly think it’s safe for me to leave you alone with David. And if I leave you here with Jeanne, I know you’ll run off and do something reckless. So you’re going to stay where I can keep an eye on you. Jeanne goes with David. End of story.>

David and I were already on the other side of the door, racing after the two shapes ahead of us. <Keep to the wall,> David suggested. <If they look back, there isn't much we can do but it'll be easier to dodge them here.>

I took a good look at the men we were following. One was dressed in an expensive suit and a pair of shoes that must have cost just as much. He was almost completely bald. And he was scared. That much was readily apparent to me. Definitely Chapman. Guraff was never afraid.

Chapman was walking with a large black man. I could tell by the way he moved that he was in incredible shape. He moved with the power of a prize-fighter and the grace of a gymnast. He had to be Guraff.

<Let's get a little closer,> I suggested. <I cannot hear what they are saying.>

<Not a good idea,> David warned. I did not listen. Information was vital to our mission; it *was* our mission. Nothing could be gained without risk.

David sighed in my head as I raced ahead. <Maybe you shouldn't be spending so much time with Rachel. She's starting to rub off on you.>

I did not bother to respond. I could hear Guraff and

Chapman talking now. Guraff paused and knocked against a section of the wall. “I am not certain of the structural integrity of this building. Could it withstand an attack?”

Chapman nodded. “Not even the Blade ship could break through the force field generators we have installed. No open assault like the ones we suffered on the other front will succeed here.”

“What about stealth?”

“We took some advice from the information David gave us when he still worked for us. All of our guards are equipped with heart monitors, so any activity will alert us. Bug zappers are already in place to destroy any insects. All extremely sensitive areas are protected by Gleet BioFilters.”

Guraff shook his head. “I’ve told the Visser time and time again that BioFilters will not stop them for long. He knows better than anyone that they have found ways around them whenever they wanted to. I have no confidence in passive defenses.”

“I am only following my orders, Sir,” Chapman said quickly. “What do you suggest?”

“Show me how you will recruit more hosts. Show me how you will get them to once more let your kind into their heads.”

“My kind, Sir? Surely I do not hear dissension from you, of all Yeerks.”

“Do you think you threaten me, Mersa 528? I mean your kind. The kind who lives to enslave and dominate.”

“I am a Yeerk. It is who we are. Surely you understand that. You were there at the birth of the Yeerk Empire.”

“Do you know why I fight, Mersa? I am a warrior. If fight for my people, for my empire. I do not fight because I love to kill. I do not infest my hosts because I love to enslave them. I fight because it is my duty to my people. Do not make the mistake of confusing yourself with me. My kind do not inhabit frail, human bodies. That is for those like you. My Yeerks infest the Kelbrid and the Hork-bajir. We are warriors. You are slavers. Never think that we are the same.”

Guraff was calm. He wasn't yelling or shaking Chapman. Nothing like the enraged Visser we were used to. Still, the Yeerk, Mersa 528, looked as if Guraff held him by the throat. Probably because Guraff didn't need to yell or scream or threaten to make his point. He was here, in an ordinary human body; he still gave of an air of death. Then, Guraff turned and continued walking. “Show me, Mersa. Show me where you steal innocent lives.”

# CHAPTER 13

Chapman led Guraff into a large room. It looked like some kind of lounge. Couches, TVs, some old arcade games; it looked like it would be fun for all ages.

“The idea,” Chapman explained to Guraff, “is to lure former hosts to us. Our plan is simple enough. We invite them to come here. They have a warm, safe atmosphere in which to unwind. They can share their pain with people who went through the same difficulties.

“We will focus on therapies to get them over their fear of us. It begins with letting them talk about it where they feel safe. My own host would have loved such an opportunity. He would have leapt at this chance.”

“And then what? Talk does little, Mersa.”

“Indeed. Humans believe that the best way to overcome fear is to confront it. So we offer that opportunity as well. We slowly help the hosts to relive their experiences as Controllers. They will be exposed to Hork-bajir, Gedds, and even,” he added with a smile, “an Andalite.”

“But how does this gain us hosts?”

“The therapy ends the same way their ‘trauma’ began. At the Yeerk pool. When they are ready, we will take them down to the pool. We will tell them that it is all fake, all a setup. And humans, being fools, will believe us. And of course, even if they run it will be too late to escape.

“The vast majority of them will walk willingly into our hands. When we tell them to, they will walk down the pier escorted by a pair of Hork-bajir. They will place their own heads in the water. And by the time they realize that this is for real, it will be far too late.”

“The Visser will be pleased.”

“That isn’t even the best part. When they walk out of here, they will be ours. And they will bring more to us. Imagine how many new hosts will join when former hosts are suddenly without fear. And no one will suspect a thing.”

Guraff nodded. Then, “It is only a matter of time, you know. The Animorphs will not let this stand. They will realize what is happening and try to put a stop to it. We must be prepared for every eventuality.”

“Of course, Sir. The security systems are almost active.”

“THEY AREN’T ACTIVE YET!?”

Guraff, I have noticed, is not a man who yells, even when

enraged. When we have wounded him or slipped away, he always laughed and enjoyed having worthy foes. Even when he fought David, who he hates violently, he never yells. For him to be yelling now...

Chapman leapt. "I am sorry, Sir. The Visser has ordered us not to activate them until the first meeting."

Guraff sank his fist into the wall. And I do mean *into*. "What is Esplin thinking? This is asking for an attack. Fine. Do not activate the security systems. But double the guard. Put everyone on high alert. I do not want any of you to relax a hair until those systems come online. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir," Chapman snapped.

Guraff leaned close to Chapman. "If this operation fails, Mersa, the Visser will no longer need you. And I will see to it that I personally retire you."

Guraff stalked off, but David and I waited, hiding under a couch. We did not want to run into Guraff in the hallway. I could hear Chapman muttering angrily.

"Does that fool really think that he's above the rest of us? He's just as expendable as the next Yeerk. The Visser wouldn't hesitate to destroy Guraff if he failed. Then we'll see how his notions of honor help him."

<Do you want him eliminated?> came a thought speak voice. David and I jumped.

An Andalite grew from a bug on the floor. He was more muscular than the average Andalite. His fur was lighter, too. It was almost a silvery blue.

Chapman shook his head. “No. That would anger the Visser. And if you failed, Guraff would know about you. Right now, he assumes that the Andalite I mentioned is the Visser himself. A ‘noble warrior’ like Guraff would never suspect that an Andalite traitor walks among us.”

The Andalite nodded. He must have been among humans for a bit to acquire that habit. <I would not fail. Prince Imrahil-Feyorn-Breeyar has never failed.>

“You had better hope it stays that way, Prince Imrahil. If Guraff has me killed, I shall be sure to have you infested before it is done.”

<Infested? We had a deal, Yeerk. I agreed to aid you if you did not infest me. That was the deal.>

“If I am going to die, I do not much care what the agreement was, Imrahil. It is in your best interest to see to it that we succeed here.”

Imrahil snorted. <I do not fail.>



Chapman laughed. “Your live has been nothing but failure, Imrahil. Always the second, aren’t you? You were second to Prince Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill in that little academy you two attended, weren’t you? And you were not the one to be chosen to come to Earth. And when that Dome ship needed a captain, who was chosen? Not you. No, you were just another warrior under the great Prince Aximili’s command.”

<Silence, Yeerk.>

“Or what? I am all that keeps my brothers from infesting you here and now. That and the fact that the Visser would rather not have another Andalite-Controller to compete with. And if you killed me and fled, where could you go? Not back to your own people. They think you are dead. You could not possibly tell them that you agreed to join us to save your life.

“No, Prince Imrahil, you have nowhere to go. I am all that you have. So you had best be sure that we do not fail here because if I take the fall for this, I will not do it alone. You can count on that.”

## CHAPTER 14

“Okay, let’s review,” Tobias said. We were at Marco’s mansion, where we could talk safely.

“You’re insane,” Marco began. “This is ridiculous, Tobias. Not only do we have to deal with the same old song and dance, which was never a picnic to begin with, but now the Yeerks are learning from their mistakes. We can’t even be seen by the guards or they’ll freak and everyone will know. And on top of that, we have to deal with some Andalite traitor. I’ve never even heard of this Imrahil guy.”

We all turned to Alloran, who just shrugged. <I am sorry. I have never heard of him either.>

Tobias shook his head. “I get the impression he’s been kept a secret, since not even Guraff knows about him. We need to think this through. Firstly, Guraff’s heading up this mission, which means that the Visser is probably not here. That’s a plus.”

“The security isn’t active right now,” Rachel added. “Another bonus. No Visser, no BioFilters... Should be pretty easy to smash the place up. I mean, they can’t meet if they

don't have anywhere to go, right?"

Marco shook his head. "That's only a temporary solution, Rachel. We need to shut the place down for good."

<Expose it?> David suggested.

I shook my head. "Not a chance. We can't let people know what's really going on."

Tobias nodded. "We can't expose them. And destroying the place will only slow them down, not stop them. What we need to do is make sure no one who goes to the first meeting will ever go back."

<Prince Tobias? I believe it would be sufficient if the meeting were to be punk'd.>

We all just stared at him. <uh, Al...where did you learn the word punk'd?> David asked after a full minute of silence.

<I was watching TV,> Alloran started to explain.

"I told you no MTV," Rachel admonished.

<Well, I had to do *something*. And I could not go inside the *Reliquary* because you and Prince Tobias were...fighting.>

Rachel blushed. Not long ago, Alloran had walked in on Rachel and Tobias...sharing a moment.

Tobias broke this new silence. "Okay, I think Al's been spending too much time with Marco. But he's also right. We

need to screw up this meeting. Any plans for pranks that'll cancel the whole thing?"

Marco got a wicked smile. "Sure. First, we gather a sack full of tarantulas. Then, we release them into the building. No one will want to meet in a place that's full of bugs."

<Spiders are not classified as bugs, Marco,> Alloran began.

"I know, I know. Still, I support the sack 'o spiders plan. Any takers?"

Tobias nodded. "It's a start. But how do we get them inside? In order to haul them inside, we'd need bigger morphs than the ones we used for infiltration earlier."

I had an idea. "When we were flying past earlier, I noticed that there were several ventilation shafts on the roof of the building. If we were to release the spiders into the air vents..."

Tobias shook his head. "Bug zappers would get them all. We need to release them directly into the meeting room."

"We could hide as bugs on people who are going to the meeting," I suggested.

This time, Marco argued. "No, it would be way too obvious to the Yeerks exactly who we are and why we were there. If we can find a way to pull this off so that no one

knows we were even involved, it would be great.”

<Hey, here’s a crazy thought,> David said. <Maybe someone should go to the meeting and release the bugs. If we’re bent on using Marco’s spider sack plan, that is.>

Alloran nodded. <Someone could infiltrate the meeting. Guraff would recognize Prince Tobias and Rachel, so they cannot go. At least, not as themselves. Chapman would certainly recognize Marco. I do not think that Chapman or Guraff would recognize Jeanne. David, has Guraff ever seen you in your human morph?>

<No, but Chapman used to know what I looked like. He’d recognize me. And I get the creepy feeling that Guraff would, too. I can’t go.>

Prince Tobias shook his head. “I’m not sending Jeanne in without backup. That isn’t happening.”

“But we have to do something,” Rachel insisted. “Out of all the missions we’ve had, this one can’t stump us. There has to be a way for us to break this thing up.”

Tobias nodded. “I’m certain there is. But let’s all go home for now.” He turned to Rachel and me. “Sara and Jordan should be home from school now, and I’m sure Jacques got back from his trip. You should spend some time with your

family.”

“What about you?” Rachel asked. I guess, from Tobias’s tone, she had gotten the impression that he wasn’t coming with us.

“I’m going to take another look at the community center. Al, you in?”

<Of course, my Prince.>

“You want our help, too?” Marco asked, indicating himself and David.

“Nah. This is simple reconnaissance. No need to attract more attention than is necessary.”

Rachel gave him a look. “You two work too hard.” She tried to sound light, but I heard the truth in her voice. She was worried.

Tobias just shrugged. “Like father, like sons.”

Rachel sighed. Under her breath, I heard her mutter something. It sounded like, “That’s what scares me.”

# CHAPTER 15

When we got home, Rachel almost immediately went off with her sisters. I was relieved to find my father sitting on the couch, watching the television. He smiled when he saw me. “*Bonjour, Jeanne.*”

“*Bonjour, père.*”

I stood there awkwardly for a few moments. We were never sure what to say to each other. I sighed and sat down. “Is anything new happening to you, father?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Nothing too spectacular. I just finished fighting my way out of a terrible contract with some Swedish construction workers. Saved me twenty million American dollars. All I have going on now is a simple catering deal. A local affair.”

“Oh?” I asked. I wasn’t exactly interested, but I needed to have something to talk about with my father.

He nodded. “A support group for former Controllers is having its first meeting on Friday. I agreed to provide the food for free, since I used to be a Controller. I was thinking that I might stay for the meeting. Would you like to come along,

Jeanne?”

My blood froze. I could not allow my father, of all people, to join their group. But this might be even worse. He was donating the food. From a smaller company, that would make sense. It was good advertising. But for a corporate giant like Jacques... It was something a Controller would do.

“I do not think you need their help,” I told him. “You have your family, after all.”

My father shrugged. “Jeanne, I went through something that, thankfully, Naomi, Jordan, and Sara can never understand. I cannot bring myself to talk to Rachel about my time as a Controller, and I cannot do that to you.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged again. “It is not something I wish to share with you. It is my pain, my burden, and I will not have you bear it.”

I sighed. “Please, do not do this. The whole thing makes me very uncomfortable. Doesn’t it remind you of the Sharing?”

He nodded. “Well, that *is* what they’re calling it. It’s a place for us to share our feelings about what happened to us. Chapman is making the Sharing what it always claimed to be.”



I took his hand in mine. “Please, do not go to that meeting. Deliver the food, but do not go.”

He squeezed my hand. “If it means so much to you, of course I won’t go. But I have to ask Jeanne, is there something I should know? Is there something you aren’t telling me?”

I shook my head quickly. Tobias, for whatever the reason, had decided not to tell our families that the Yeerks had returned to town. I would not disobey my commanding officer.

“No, father.”

“So you aren’t going to tell me about your date with Marco?” he asked.

I laughed. “Oh, that. How did you find out?”

He just smiled. “A father knows. So tell me,” he added, smiling mischievously, “am I going to have to add another Animorph’s name to my list of relatives?”

“*Père!* It was only one date. It is far too early for me to even think of marrying him.”

He shrugged. “I thought about marrying Naomi after our first date. You forget that, back in France, many girls your age are already married (A/N: I don’t know if this is true and I don’t particularly care).”

“But we are not in France,” I pointed out. “We are in

America.”

He laughed. “In that case, most girls your age are already pregnant (A/N: I can say it since I’m American, no matter if it’s true or not).”

I couldn’t help but laugh along. We spoke for the next few hours, but it wasn’t anything worth writing about. Mostly, we caught up on what had happened since we parted. As I had expected, he didn’t have any problem with the Tobias/Rachel/Alloran situation.

All the while, though, something scratched at the back of my mind. Something Jacques had said tickled something in my brain, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

I realized what it was in the middle of the night. I bolted upright in my bed, knocking Rachel to the floor. “He’s catering the meeting!” I almost shouted.

Rachel climbed back into bed looking like she wanted to hit me. I’m surprised she didn’t. “Who’s doing what now?”

“My father. Jacques. He’s providing the food for the meeting.”

“Which means...?”

“Which means we have a way in.”

## CHAPTER 16

“This is just disgusting,” I complained.

“It was *your* idea,” Marco reminded me. “And to be honest, I don’t like it very much either.”

“For once, I agree with Marco,” Rachel sighed.

“I am inclined to be of the same persuasion,” Alloran nodded. “This is indeed an unpleasant task.”

“It’s making me hungry,” Tobias and David said in unison. Then they both laughed. We were all in our human forms, crouching beneath Marco’s porch. What we were doing? Catching spiders.

Al looked confused. “That was human humor?”

“Well, bird and rat humor,” Marco said. “Which, of course, isn’t that funny. And I can’t believe there isn’t an easier way of doing this.” With a disgusted look on his face, Marco grabbed a spider and put it in a jar.

“Marco, how can you be freaked out?” I asked him. “Haven’t you *been* a spider?”

“*I’m* freaked out? Jeanne, you look like you’re from a hazmat team. You’re dressed like Gordon Freeman.”

I sighed. I had decided to wear a pair of goggles and gloves while I hunted spiders.

“Gordon Freeman didn’t have goggles,” Tobias corrected.

“Sure he did,” David argued. “Haven’t you seen the cover of Half-Life? He’s wearing goggles.”

“No,” Tobias answered, “those are glasses. Horn rims. Gordon Freeman is a classy guy.”

“Maybe we should ask him,” Marco suggested. “I mean, the Drode sort of implied that he’s a real guy and that stuff in Black Mesa actually happened.”

“I don’t even want to think about that possibility,” David shuddered. “I don’t want to fight Vortigaunts on top of Yeerks.”

“It would be the Combine,” Tobias pointed out. “Haven’t you played Half-Life 2? The Vortigaunts are on our side and humans have to fight against the Combine to free themselves.”

“I haven’t had the chance to play it,” David admitted. “I was a little busy. You know, with the whole rat thing...”

I turned to Rachel. “Do you have any idea what they’re talking about?”

She sighed. “Sadly, yes. But I don’t know why any of you would want to play those games. They hit a little too close to

home for my liking.”

“Yeah,” Marco agreed, “but there’s an important difference. If I die in Half-Life, all I have to do is press a little button and I’m alive again. If I die here, it’s considerably more complicated. Though apparently it *is* possible.”

Rachel sighed again. “Remind me once more why we’re doing this.”

“Because,” I answered, “we have a way to get in. My father is delivering the food. We can hide the spiders in the meals. I don’t like the thought of how this might affect my father’s business, though.”

“He can afford it,” Tobias assured me. “I had Al check out just how much money he has. Trust me, this won’t hurt him in the least.”

“So he’s loaded, then?” Marco asked.

“Richer than you,” Tobias confirmed.

“I’m jealous. Hey, Jeanne, if this works out, we could be one of those Wall Street power couples. What do you think?”

“Do you want to know what *I* think, Marco?” Rachel said before I could answer.

“No. I already know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking of making me eat that spider you’re holding.”

“Stay out of my head, Marco,” my sister warned good-naturedly.

“No can do, sister. I’ll always be the man of your dreams.”

We all laughed, but to be honest, that comment disturbed me a little. One moment, Marco was talking about me. The next thing I knew, he was flirting with Rachel. And no one seemed to mind. I know that Rachel and Tobias trusted each other; I had seen that. I was surprised that they trusted Marco so much.

Then again, I guess that, after all they had been through together, Tobias and Marco were friends enough that Marco would never actually try to steal Rachel from him. And, of course, Rachel would never go.

I was about to say something when Alloran started coughing. Or maybe he was choking. I didn’t want to think about that second possibility. After all, we were down here catching spiders, and the boy would eat anything.

After a few moments, he was alright. We all looked at him quizzically. No one knew what to say. Finally, Tobias broke the silence. “Uh...I think we have enough spiders. The meeting isn’t until tomorrow, so I say we take the rest of the day off.”

“Yeah, because this has been so strenuous,” Marco added.

“Marco, every moment with you is torture,” Rachel said.

“You mean every moment without me, beautiful.”

“In your dreams, gorilla-boy.”

Marco smiled. “You’re always front and center,” he said to her. “My two favorite parts.” Rachel and I glared at him. He decided it was easier to apologize to me than to her. “Don’t worry, Jeanne, you’re there too. It’s *my* dream, after all. I don’t need to choose there.”

“Yeah...” Tobias trailed off, “definitely a good idea for us to go home now, Rachel. You know, before you force all of our spiders down Marco’s throat and we have to catch some new ones.”

“Hey, Tobias,” Marco called. “If you ever want to swap, just remember that Jeanne here is a great cook.”

To everyone’s great relief, Tobias dragged Rachel away before another fight could ensue.

## CHAPTER 17

Our plan seemed simple. Sneak the spiders into the food and we would be home free. But there was a problem. My father would inspect the food before the truck pulled away to take it to the Sharing meeting. That meant that we'd have to put the spiders in during the ride.

We had a plan for that, too. It was actually very simple. The truck would stop by my house so that my father could inspect everything. Then, he would personally drive the truck full of food to the Sharing.

After Jacques inspected the food, Sara would distract him while Rachel hid the spider sack in the truck. The rest of us would be hiding as bugs on her. Once the spiders were planted, she would morph to fly or cockroach and we'd ride along.

You might be wondering why Sara agreed to distract Jacques. We hadn't told her the truth, but she agreed to go along with whatever we had planned. We promised we'd tell her when it was over. What Sara didn't realize was that Rachel and I meant we'd tell her what was going on after the whole



*war* was over.

Marco, in wolf spider morph, was keeping us informed. After all, he had eight eyes. <Okay, Jacques just finished inspecting everything. He seems satisfied. He's going around to the other side of the truck.>

I felt movement. I was in fly morph; we thought that cockroaches would be too weak if the spiders escaped prematurely. Flies could at least get away.

<Are we moving?> I asked Marco.

<Oh yeah, we're moving. Rachel just jumped out of the bushes and is sneaking into the back of the truck.> I felt some serious vibrations. <Rachel's in. She's hiding the sack.>

<Um...does that sound dirty to anyone else?> Tobias mused. If Rachel could have responded, she probably would have said something scathing. Instead, she made no reply.

<Okay, now she's morphing. Tobias, get ready to hide because she definitely heard you.>

<I'm already on it,> he answered.

<Behold: our fearless leader,> Marco intoned.

<Hey, I may be fearless, but I'm neither nor stupid nor crazy,> Tobias shot back.

<Trust me, you're both.>

I heard Rachel's 'voice' next. <Tobias, I —>

<Later, Rachel. You can yell at me after the mission.>

To everyone's surprise, Rachel actually stopped talking. Marco was the one to say what we were all thinking. <Well, he may be crazy and stupid, but anyone with the power to shut Rachel up is someone we should follow.>

I felt vibrations rock the air around my fly body. <What was that?> I asked Marco.

<Jacques just closed the doors. I think we're about to leave.> He was right. A few moments later, I heard and felt the engine start up. <Here we go, ladies and bugs.>

It wasn't exactly a long ride, but everything feels like an eternity when you're in a bug morph. Marco and Rachel started fighting again, but I tuned it out. I think everyone else did the same thing.

<We have been in this vehicle for approximately five of your minutes,> Alloran informed us.

<Okay. I'll get the spiders ready,> Tobias said. <Marco, you need to go to fly now.>

<You're the boss,> Marco said. I could feel the air shaking as the two of them demorphed. Together, they started hiding the spiders in the food. I tried not to think about the

nightmares we'd all end up with. Of course, Tobias and David might enjoy it.

A few minutes later, both of them were flies again. <Okay,> Tobias said, <it's done. Now all we have to do is wait.>

<Why do we have to stick around?> Marco asked. <It isn't like this plan needs us anymore.>

<Because, Marco, I want to see the looks on their faces,> Rachel answered.

In thought speak that I'm pretty sure everyone except for Rachel could hear, Tobias said, <She doesn't get to smash anything or blow anything up. Just let her have this or she'll be impossible to live with.>

<Not my problem, dude,> Marco said, but he kept quiet after that.

Now, I wish we had listened to Marco. Things might have turned out differently. It was a stupid risk to stick around, but we wanted to do it anyway. Maybe it all worked out for the best in the end.

After all, if we hadn't stuck around, I never would have found out about my sister.

# CHAPTER 18

We buzzed around the Sharing meeting for a few minutes. We were just in time to hear Chapman's opening speech. "My friends," he began, "my dear, dear friends. No, my brothers and sisters. We have all been through a terrible ordeal. A more traumatic event than any other in human history.

"But we have come out of it alive. Alive, yes, but not nearly whole. The Yeerks left wounds in us, wounds that may never heal. Wounds that cannot be healed on their own. But together, we can help each other.

"Most of you remember the days of the Sharing. The Yeerks used it as a cover to lure us in and claim us, one by one. They lied to us, made false promises. And like fools, we believed them.

"You remember me standing here as the slug in my head manipulated me. He used my voice to tell you those lies. They used me to get to you. But now, now we use them.

"We have taken what was once theirs, just like they took our lives from us. We have claimed the community center that they built as a gateway to their hell. We have claimed that title,

the Sharing, that they used as a guise. And now, we take back the one thing they never wanted us to receive. Our lives.

“I am here only to help you. And I want to help myself. I joined the Yeerks of my own free will. I did it to protect my daughter. But in protecting her, I condemned many of you. No matter how many times the Yeerk in my head lied to you, it was I, not he, who took that first step.

“I want to try to make it right for you. I want to help heal you. Maybe then I can heal myself. But for now, let’s just stay here, with our family. Let’s get to know each other, the way a family should know one another. When you are ready, I will do all I can to help you heal. Until then, eat, drink, and enjoy yourselves. Welcome to the new Sharing.”

<Not a bad speech,> David admitted.

<That’s how they get you,> Tobias reminded him. <Come on, they’re serving the food. I want to be near the exit.>

<But we can’t see from there,> Rachel whined.

<Oh, fine then. But we have to be careful; they’ll be on the lookout for us.>

<I think they’ll have a little too much on their plates to deal with us,> Alloran assured him.

<Too much on their plates?> Marco gasped, <Did the

Andalite just make a pun!>

<Do what with the what?> was Alloran's answer.

<Never mind,> Marco sighed. I laughed. I was in a good mood. Our plan was going to work. The Sharing would be closed down again and no one would get hurt. Not physically, at least. It was a good mission.

<Oh, Chapman's going for the main course,> Rachel announced. <He's gonna freak!>

Chapman went over to the buffet table and grabbed the handle of the shiny silver dome that covered the plate. He pulled it back and saw about twelve spiders crawling all over the roast pig.

Instead of screaming, he laughed. "Well, well, well. It seems Guraff was right once more. Our Animorph friends have decided to pay us a little visit. But which ones are the real Animorphs and which are true spiders?"

The realization hit me like a brick. If he was talking this openly, then, <Everyone in this building is already infested!> David shouted.

<No duh,> Marco answered.

<Come on, let's go,> Tobias said. <They still think we're spiders. There's time to get out of here.>

Then, I heard a new voice. Guraff's. And not the human morph he had. This was his Hork-bajir body. "Seal the exits. Activate all defenses. The Animorphs are not going to escape."

"How will you ensure that?" Chapman demanded.

Guraff laughed. "I have my ways." Then, to someone else, he called, "Bring in the Taxxon!"

Someone led in the giant worm. It was about as big around as a sewer pipe and about ten feet long. It had red globuleous eyes and rows of tiny, needle-like legs. It also had a giant mouth ringed with sharp teeth. Even my fly thought it smelled terrible.

Guraff held a leash that was wrapped around the Taxxon's upper third. The massive Hork-bajir leaned over the buffet table. "Come now, Animorphs. You do not want to die this way. Demorph and you will have the chance to fight for your lives. Otherwise, I will let this Taxxon devour you."

<Everyone, work on finding an exit,> Tobias instructed us. <The usual ways will be sealed, so look for something unusual. I'll distract Guraff so he doesn't notice us flies.>

To Guraff, Tobias said, <Come on, Guraff. Why don't you come down here and fight us? That spider by your left claw is

real. Acquire him and fight us here.>

“A bold proposition, young beast, but not one that I am about to accept. I would have been dead long ago had I not quickly learned the difference between bravery and idiocy. Now, demorph.”

<Not a chance. I trust you, Guraff, but if we demorph, Chapman will have us infested.>

“I will see to it that he does not. You will either die by my blades or you will walk away free.”

<Chapman won't see it your way.>

“Chapman takes his orders from me. My orders are the orders of the Visser. I am the highest ranking of his men. Chapman will obey me.”

<Oh? If he's so loyal, why hasn't he told you about the little secret he's keeping.>

“You bluff, young beast. He is not foolish enough to keep secrets from me.”

<Oh? Hey, Chapman, how's Prince Imrahil doing?>

Chapman twitched. That was all Guraff needed. The giant Hork-bajir spun around, wrapped one clawed hand around Chapman's throat, and lifted him off of the ground.

Guraff's voice was colder than I'd ever heard it. “Who is



Prince Imrahil, Chapman? What are you keeping from me? What do you keep from the Empire?"

Chapman was turning blue, but he still managed to squeak out some words. "Visser...told...me...lie...about...Andalite."

"An Andalite in our midst?" Gurauff dropped Chapman and spun to face the mass of Controllers. "Show yourself, Andalite. I did not think there was another Andalite-Controller."

A man stepped forward. With my fly vision, I couldn't tell what he looked like. In a few moments, though, he looked like the Andalite David and I had seen two days ago. <I am no Controller, Yeerk.>

"Then you are a traitor to your own kind. And you, Chapman, are a liar. The Visser would never keep such a secret from me."

Chapman struggled to his feet. "You aren't as powerful as you think you are, Gurauff. The Yeerks in this room are loyal to me and to the Visser. They are not your pets."

A sudden gleam lit up Chapman's eyes. "You know, Gurauff, you're getting old. I think that it might be time for your retirement. Oh, but of course; Gurauff the noble warrior would never retire. He plans to die on the battlefield. But that

can be arranged, Guraff. And not a Yeerk here would say that it wasn't an Animorph who killed you. Prince Imrahil, would you like to do the honors?"

# CHAPTER 19

<What do we do?> Rachel demanded. <We have to save Guraff!.>

<WHAT!?!?!?> Marco exploded. <He's a Yeerk, Rachel! And his host is a voluntary Controller. Let them both burn. Even you aren't that insane. That's a Cassie suggestion.>

<I agree with Marco,> I said.

<As do I,> Alloran admitted. <Though I will follow my prince,> he added.

<We aren't helping Guraff. He wants my head on a stick,> David reminded us.

Tobias was silent for a moment. Then, in what I think was private thought-speak, he said, <Guraff, it's time to cut a deal. You can't fight them all. Once they realize that this Imrahil character isn't going to beat you, they'll just fry you with their Dracon beams. We can help you, but you have to unseal the exits. You have to turn off the security systems.>

<Tobias, we are *not* helping this slug,> Marco insisted.

<No, we aren't. I like Guraff, but he's a deadly enemy. If the Yeerks take him out for us, that's a bonus. But he doesn't

know that.> To Guraff, Tobias said, <If you agree, say ‘So be it.’>

“So be it,” Guraff said. To the Yeerks, it probably sounded like he was accepting his fate. He raised his bladed arms and turned to face the Andalite. “We will fight, traitor, and you will die. And then, I will die. But do not think that you will get away with this.”

“We already have,” Chapman answered. “We control half the invasion force. The Visser can’t stop us and continue his own invasion. We are done with that fool. I am the Visser now. No, no, no. Even better. I am the Emperor; who is there to stop me from claiming that title?”

Guraff gave a Hork-bajir grin. “There is still me.”

Guraff leapt at the Andalite. Imrahil blocked the blow, but Guraff’s knee-blade tore open a gash along his flank. Imrahil stumbled and Guraff put a blade to his throat while one impossibly strong arm held his tail.

“Now, you will all listen to me,” Guraff told them. “I am going to walk out of here. Turn off the security system. I will leave and you will get to keep your precious Andalite traitor. Am I clear?”

Chapman laughed. “Do you really think we care what

happens to the Andalite? He's only a prop. An arrogant, useless fool. You should have picked a hostage I cared about, Guraff."

A sudden movement in the crowd caught my attention. Some emerged and shoved a Dracon beam against the back of Chapman's head. Jordan! She was a Controller!

"How about this, Mersa 528. You turn off the security systems. The three of us leave here now. When we get outside, I let you go."

"Who are you?" Chapman demanded of Jordan.

Jordan smiled wickedly. "I'm Guraff. Did you forget? That host is a voluntary. He and I are quite good friends, actually. He was more than happy to help me. Now, shall we go or do we all die here?"

"Turn off the security," Chapman ordered. Guraff's host, Jordan/Guraff, Chapman, Imrahil, and, for some reason, the Taxxon marched outside tensely. We followed.

In the parking lot, Guraff's host released Imrahil. Guraff/Jordan didn't lower his/her Dracon beam. "I have a small surprise for you, Mersa 528. I'm not the only one who heard everything you said. Neither is my host. The Visser has been listening this whole time."

As if on cue, the Taxxon slowly melted into his Andalite form. It was the stolen body of Prince Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill. An Animorph and a hero. Now he was a slave to the monster who had killed his brother.

<Well, well, well. Mersa 528, I must confess that not even I expected this from you. Guraff and I suspected that you might try to kill him, but I never dreamed that you would go so far as to declare yourself Emperor.>

Chapman looked terrified. “Visser! I didn’t...I...I...” Then, a smile lit up his face. “I am sorry, Visser. I shouldn’t have tried to take that title. I think I’ll take *yours* instead.”

From the alleys and buildings around the community center, there emerged Hork-bajir, humans, and Taxxons, all holding Dracon beams.

Jordan, Guraff’s host, and the Visser stood back-to-back-to-back. In a few moments, it would be over. All of our greatest enemies would be annihilated. All we had to do was walk away.

But Jordan was with them and she would be killed, too. That wasn’t a sacrifice any of us were willing to make or even suggest. Marco, Tobias, Alloran, and David were all very cold people but it never even crossed their minds to leave.

<Okay,> Tobias said after a tense pause, <let's find a place to morph.> To the surrounded three he said, <Help is on the way. Try to stall them.>

<And how would you suppose I could go about doing that?> the Visser demanded.

<Try yelling at them for a few minutes. You never used to get tired of that,> Marco suggested nervously. To us, he said, <You know, it goes against every bone in my body to help that guy. Rachel, you're lucky your sister's hot.>

## CHAPTER 20

We landed on the roof of the community center. Idly, Alloran told us, <There is likely a hologram around the area so no one sees the execution that is about to occur.>

<Execution,> Marco muttered. “That’s a good way of saying it.” Immediately, he started to morph to his new battle morph. I was only halfway human.

Soon, a Garatron, a Howler, grizzly bear, an Andalite, and a lion stood before me. <CatchupwhenyoucanJeanne,> Marco buzzed. Then, they turned and leapt off the roof.

David, Rachel, and Tobias roared. Of course, no one could hear David or Rachel over Tobias’s unholy screeching. “KEEEROOOOOW!”

I was halfway to my leopard morph. I thought it might be better for this fight than the Garatron morph I also considered using.

I saw the Controllers stumble when they heard Tobias. He wasn’t using the howl at nearly full power, just enough to give them an opening. And then it was bloodshed and carnage.

The Visser set about him with his stolen tail. He was going



for the kill, of course. He had been betrayed and wanted them to pay in blood.

“Esplin, control yourself,” Guraff admonished. “If these hosts go missing, people will ask the wrong questions.” From his own stolen body, he shot off Dracon beams, stunning any who he hit.

Guraff’s host was using the flats of his blade so knock out human-Controllers by the handful. He was highly effective. But the real terror came from the Animorphs.

Marco zipped around in a circle, knocking down humans when he passed and then making sure they stayed down. Rachel and David ripped into the lines of Hork-bajir. They were totally outnumbered, but the Hork-bajir were taken completely off guard. Seeing a grizzly and a lion leap off a roof will do that to you.

David was fighting with two Hork-bajir and was having a little trouble. Rachel was holding her own against three. Tobias was fighting six at a time; and winning. His Howler morph was the most powerful weapon we had. It regenerated any wounds almost instantly, it was fast as an Andalite, and as strong as a Hork-bajir. He was a creature designed to do one thing and one thing only. He was a killer. Only a few Kelbrid

could hope to overcome a Howler.

Alloran struck here and there, knocking down humans. He and the Visser fought side-by-side, in perfect harmony. Of course. The Visser was using Ax's memories and Alloran had been taught by Ax.

I charged into the fray now and things were getting serious. The humans were beginning to retreat, following Chapman's orders to fall back to the building. The Taxxons were doing the same. But the Hork-bajir were reorganizing themselves and preparing to advance.

I did a quick count. There were nine of us, counting Guraff/Jordan. There were more than thirty of them. Maybe some of us would survive that kind of fight, but I knew I couldn't. Neither could Jordan.

As if he read my mind, Tobias said to me, <Get Jordan and Guraff out of here. We'll hold them off. Go back home.>

I nodded and turned to Guraff/Jordan. <Did you hear him?> I asked.

"I heard. I will fight with Esplin until the end."

<And what a quick end it will be,> Imrahil said, emerging from the mass of Hork-bajir. <Yeerk, does your host know how long I've been waiting for this? I have wanted to prove

that I am the best for so long. Never again will I be second to Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill.>

Marco turned to the Visser. <Haven't you acquired some kind of nightmare creature that could get us out of this mess?>

The Visser sighed. <Yes, but I was saving it for a surprise. Tobias's birthday is coming up, you know.>

Tobias turned to the Hork-bajir. <How many of you does it take to take down an Animorph? Two, three? Four at the most. And how many Animorphs does it take to bring down one of the things he's about to become? Let me remind you: we've never beaten his power morphs. You do the math. If you want to fight what he's about to become, then fine. We'll throw down here and now. But if you want to live another day, turn and walk away.>

Slowly at first, then as a group, the Hork-bajir turned and went back into the building. Tobias turned to the Visser. <Nice bluff.>

The Visser nodded. <I thought so. What happens now, Tobias? I cannot imagine that you would be amenable to letting me walk away.>

<You got that right,> Marco agreed.

<We've got you outnumbered, outgunned and outwitted.>

Tobias nodded. <So get out of Ax's head and we'll let Guraff take you away. Of course, he'll have to get out of Jordan's head, first.>

Guraff nodded. He placed his ear against that of his Hork-bajir host. In a moment, Jordan was gasping. She sat down on the ground very hard. Rachel, although she was still a grizzly bear, sat down next to her and draped a massive arm over her shoulder. <It'll be okay,> she whispered.

In a movement so fast that even Marco couldn't react, the Visser's tail flashed. It knocked the Dracon beam into the air and he caught it in his delicate Andalite hands. He pointed it right at Jordan. After he thumbed the switch to the highest setting.

<Here is what is about to happen,> the Visser said. <You will all demorph. Alloran and David will morph to human. And then you will all, Jordan included, walk away. Guraff and I will return to the Blade ship. Everyone gets to live. Isn't that a happy ending?>

<Well, no one we care about died today. I'd call that a happy ending,> Tobias said. Then, he looked the Visser in the main eyes, but it wasn't the Yeerk he spoke to. <I'll help you,

Ax. Very soon, you'll be free. I promise.>

## CHAPTER 21

When we got home that night, all we really wanted to do was sleep. But we couldn't. Not yet. We needed to talk to Jordan first. We sat on the steps outside of our home.

Rachel and I sat beside Jordan, flanking her. She had been through something terrible and she needed us to comfort her. Alloran stood nearby, keeping quiet. Tobias stood before us, looking almost like he was going to reprimand Jordan.

Of course, Tobias always looks like he's about to give a lecture, since his face is pretty emotionless. He spoke softly, gently. Like he spoke to me when he found me crying. "Jordan, before anything else, I want you to tell us how it happened. How did Guraff infest you? And why?"

Jordan shook her head. "He was waiting here when I got back from gymnastics practice. He said he was a friend of yours. He knew so much about you that I thought he was telling the truth."

"He was, more or less," Tobias answered. "Go on."

"He drove me to the community center. When we were in the parking lot, he demorphed into a Hork-bajir. He held me

down and infested me. You saw what happened after that.”

“Why you?” Rachel asked.

“He thought the Yeerks would try to kill him, and he wanted your help. But he couldn’t find you guys, so he took me instead, figuring that you’d come after me.”

“Well, he was more or less correct,” I said. “How bad was it?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “It could have been a lot worse. He was very clear when he told me it was only temporary. And he was...polite, I guess. He didn’t read my memories or anything. It could have been a lot worse.”

Jordan shook her head. “So, I guess that thing about the truce was a lie. I thought it might be. The Yeerks are back here again. And you’ve got to fight them. Again. But why didn’t you tell us the truth?”

We all turned to Tobias. He shrugged. “I guess I was trying to protect you. I figured the Yeerks wouldn’t try to infest anyone who was close to us; it wouldn’t turn out well for them. I thought it was worth a shot to keep you safe. Besides, I don’t plan on staying here for long. This is a new front and we still have the chance to stop it before it starts.”

“We failed tonight,” Rachel said bitterly. “We failed pretty

badly.”

I shook my head. “No, Rachel. We discovered an entire dissident Yeerk army. That’s a massive thorn in the Visser’s side. It’ll help us. “

“I want to help,” Jordan said suddenly. We were all surprised. At least, Rachel and I clearly were. I think Alloran and Tobias were, too, but it’s always hard to tell with them. “I want to fight the Yeerks,” Jordan repeated.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Tobias said, shaking his head.

“Why not? Don’t you think I can handle it?” Jordan insisted. She sounded a lot like Rachel right then.

“Oh, that’s not it at all. It’s just that the number seven never really works out for us,” Tobias answered. “Trust me, if we ever have an opening, you’ll be the first one I call.”

Jordan nodded, although I could tell she didn’t believe him. Suddenly, her head snapped up. “Hey, where was Jake? I mean, I heard he was on vacation with Marco, but if Marco’s back, shouldn’t Jake have been with you guys?”

Again, we all turned to Tobias. With the Andalite bluntness he must have gotten from his father, he answered, “He’s dead. He traded his life for Rachel’s. That’s a long story. You can



hear it tomorrow. For now, know that he died well. He took more than thirty thousand Yeerks with him.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

Tobias shrugged. “I don’t know. But it makes *me* feel better. I’m sure you girls have a lot you want to talk about, so Al and I are going to go get some sleep.” He kissed Rachel goodnight on his way inside. When Alloran walked past her, Rachel gently rubbed his head, between his stalk eyes.

When they were gone, Jordan turned to Rachel. “You really care about them, don’t you?”

“I love them,” Rachel said with total sincerity. Then, her face got hard when she turned to Jordan. “I want you to understand what they did for you tonight. Tobias and Alloran fought by the Visser’s side. They helped the monster who took their family away from them. They did it for you. I want you to understand that.”

“Rachel,” I said, “it sounds like you’re blaming her.”

“Does it? Sorry. I just want you to know that they care about you as much as Jeanne and I do. Tobias and Al are part of our family, Jordan. Do you understand?”

Jordan nodded. “Yeah, I understand it all now.”

## CHAPTER 22

I still couldn't sleep that night. Maybe it was because of what happened or maybe I just wasn't tired. I didn't want to be here right now, though.

I rolled out of bed and accidentally work Rachel up. She groaned. "You have *got* to stop doing that."

I nodded. "Sorry. I think I'm going to go for a quick flight around the town. If I'm not back in an hour, Tobias can have my side of the bed and I'll sleep on the couch."

I morphed to owl. Just before I flew away, Rachel gave me an accusing stare. "You're going to go see Marco, aren't you?"

<What gave you that idea?> I asked. Had I been going to see Marco? Consciously, I wasn't. In my heart, I guess I was.

Rachel softened her look with a smile. "Because the only time I woke up in the middle of the night and decided to go for a fly was when I was going to see Tobias. Just...don't do anything stupid, okay Jeanne?"

I laughed. <Please, you set the bar for stupid late-night visits. Don't wait up, Rachel.>

I took wing on the night air. It wasn't hard to find Marco's

mansion, even if I hadn't already known exactly where to look. Surprisingly, there was an open window on the ground floor. I flew in and demorphed.

About thirty seconds later, a gorilla and a lion rounded the corner. Marco sighed in my head. <Jeanne, how many times do I have to tell you to shut off the alarms?>

David looked from Marco to me and back again. <Uh...if Rachel asks, I didn't know you were here.> He slinked away, leaving me alone with Marco.

Marco demorphed and gave me one of his smiles. I still can't decide whether I like them or hate them. It's a nice smile, but it is always followed by something like what he said next. "You just couldn't keep away, could you?"

Why did I want to come to him? A look crossed his face. He suddenly got serious. "Why *did* you come here, Jeanne? Is something wrong?"

"No, I just...I just wanted to see you," I said lamely. How pathetic did that sound?

He surprised me then. He didn't make some snarky comment or mean joke. Instead, he gave an honest smile instead of his usual mocking smirk. "I'm glad you came. I kind of wanted to see you, too. Except if I flew into your

bedroom in the middle of the night, Rachel might hit me with a baseball bat or something. Kind of hypocritical of her if you ask me...”

“Yeah...” I trailed off, realizing that I didn’t really have anything to say to him. Was it ever this difficult for Rachel and Tobias?

“It was probably a lot harder,” Marco said. I hadn’t realized that I had said that last part out loud. “I mean, hey, at least we’re both human, right?”

“That is always a plus,” I agreed. Still, silence reigned.

Marco shrugged. “So...did you just come to look at me?”

“I guess...I guess I did.”

“Well, do you mind if I sit down somewhere then? I get tired of standing all day.”

We went to his living room and sat on the couch in silence for a bit. At one point, he did that lame fake-yawn thing. It was a joke, really. I know because he over exaggerated the yawn and couldn’t stop smiling when he did it. When he tried to take his arm back, I kept it around my shoulders.

Finally, he thought of something to say to me. “You know, Jeanne, back when we first met, I’d have done anything to get you here. And now that you are here...I don’t know where we

go from here. I mean, if you were any other girl, I know where I'd try to take this. But with you..."

"Why am I different?" I asked.

I could tell that what he said next wasn't easy for him to tell me. He wasn't used to letting people inside. "Because I actually care about you. This is...it's really new for me. Damn, how did the others do this all the time?."

I shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it's just easier for them. Maybe...maybe we aren't supposed to be together, Marco. Maybe this is all a big mistake."

"Jeanne, I know for a fact that everything that has happened in my life has been nothing but one enormous, massive, Texas-sized cosmic mistake. But so far, it's all worked out for me. Maybe we just need to give it some time. So we don't always have something to say to each other. So what? It took Jake and Cassie years to get together."

"But what do we do now?"

Marco sighed. "Well, now I think you go home. I go to sleep. And when either of us really has something to say to the other, we'll say it. Until then..."

He kissed me.

I repeated what he said. "Until then."

And now to leave you with some words of wisdom from  
Streetlight Manifesto:

*“Oh! Friend! You look too deep at the cover of the magazine  
But the words inside they come across deprived  
And they force feed shit, but you still subscribe  
And you watch, but you don't see  
You touch, but you don't feel  
And you'll rue the day they'll try to take it away  
But they know you'll never fight it if they keep it the same*

*Did you lose faith?  
Yes, I lost faith in the powers that be  
But In doing so I came across the will to disagree  
And I gave up, yes I gave up and then I gave in  
But I take responsibility for every single sin*

*Soon everyone will see, and everyone will know  
That the things we hid were irrelevant and it's all just part of the show  
And the blemishes and scars that made us who we are  
We're told to cover up, but we've taken enough  
And we're not going to stop until it's taken apart  
Come one, come all to observe the fall  
Free tickets to the free for all  
And it never ends, it goes around against  
And we're all bit players in the scheme of things  
And I hope someday you'll find*

*All the answers to the questions on your mind*

*In time you will cross the line and you'll realize that everything you thought was right.”*

—The Blond Lead the Blind

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

## 64: THE LIBERATION

Jordan suddenly looked very nervous. I get the impression that she hadn't really thought this through. She was surrounded by the Animorphs, the guerrilla warriors fighting off alien slugs. This was no pleasant breakfast conversation.

Of course, Marco didn't seem to understand that. "You know, they always told he this was the most important meal of the day," he began.

"Stop now," I ordered him. Knowing that he would never listen, I warned Jordan, "This part isn't worth listening to."

"Trust me, it's funny," Marco promised. Since he was speaking mostly to himself anyway, he continued as though I had never interrupted him. "What makes it so important? Is it because this is the meal during which we think up new ways to get ourselves killed?"

"Are we at the funny part yet?" Jeanne asked.

"Or maybe it's because it's the meal during which I get to harass Tobias and Rachel. So, Jeanne slept on the couch last night. What were the two of you up to?" Marco winked at me.



“Is this the meal where I get to make you swallow a whole grapefruit?” I answered.

“A little hormonal, Xena?” he asked. “Is there something you should share with the group?”

“Marco...” Jeanne began in a warning tone. Jordan looked around, uncomfortable. She didn’t know this was a usual occurrence.

Although usual, he was still making me mad. And he showed no signs of stopping. “Are we going to hear the pitter-patter of crazy little bird feet?”

“Our new mission,” Tobias interrupted before I could answer. “We send Marco as an ambassador to the rebel Yeerks.”

Marco got the hint and shut up. Finally. Just then, David and Al came into the room. They had been morphing out of sight from Jordan. It’s a pretty disgusting thing to see and we didn’t see the need to screw her up more than she had been already. Jordan had been scarred enough by having Guraff in her head.

Guraff was the Visser’s right hand man. He wasn’t evil like the Visser, but he definitely wasn’t on our side. Actually, he kind of reminded me of me.

David pulled out a chair next to Jordan. Al took one next to me. David spoke up, “Do we have a plan?”

Tobias nodded. “Actually, it was *your* plan, David.”

David choked on some eggs he was eating. Whether it was out of surprise or because he was inhaling them like an Andalite was beyond my ability to judge. Both David and Al were chewing through breakfast like Pac Man.

“My plan?” David finally asked. Jordan was giving him a strange look. She was probably just disgusted by the way he ate. I guess years of living as a rat does weird things to you.

Tobias nodded. “Yep. Remember when you, Al, and Jeanne took that little trip to the Yeerk pool and fiddled with their computers? When you came back, you told me a little idea you had. I think I figured out a way to make it work.”

David and Al stopped eating and instead just stared at Tobias. “Do you mean it?” Alloran asked finally.

“Yep. I’ve thought it through and I think I’ve worked out the perfect plan.”

“Hold on, hold on,” Marco interrupted, “what’s going on? Why are you making plans without the rest of us, Tobias?”

“Because I didn’t want to give anyone false hope. I didn’t even want you to think of this possibility unless we actually

had a way of pulling it off.”

“What plan?”

Tobias went on slowly. “When they were in the Yeerk pool, Jeanne, David, and Al witnessed a Kelbrid dominance ritual. They do it every time the Visser gets a new shipment of Kelbrid, to ensure their loyalty.

“The Visser picks out the leader of the pack and fights him. Because the Kelbrid hosts respect strength in battle, they’re loyal to the Visser. It makes them very easy for the Yeerks to control, but it also makes the Visser know that he can trust the Kelbrid.”

I didn’t understand what he was getting at, but Marco figured it out. “Oh man. You’re not about to suggest what I think you’re going to, are you?”

“I’m pretty sure I am. These rebel Yeerks are a problem for the Visser, and we all know how he deals with problems. He gets the biggest hammer he can and he smashes them. He’ll be calling in more Kelbrid. And when they come, we’ll infiltrate them.”

I figured it out then. “The Visser will call one of us out to fight him. Since he uses Kelbrid that are already infested, he’ll be expecting the Kelbrid to throw the fight. That’s when we

get him. We're going to kill the Visser, aren't we?"

There was a look in Tobias's eyes then. It was something I hadn't seen in a long time. It was hope. Not the half-hope he always offered us or his grim determination to fight on no matter what. This was like back when he thought the Ellimist would restore his humanity. This was pure hope.

"No, Rachel, we aren't going to kill him. We're going to steal his host." He smiled involuntarily for the first time in a long time. "We're going to save Ax."

# PREVIEW SUMMARY

The Animorphs can't fight a war on two fronts. It just isn't possible. The time has come for a desperate strike against the Yeerks, an attack so damaging that it could stop an entire front of the war. The time has come to rescue Ax.

It will be a dangerous, deadly mission, even if things go as planned. And they never do. But it isn't enough for the Animorphs just to rescue their old friend. Rachel makes a terrifying discovery and she'll have to make a choice that will change three lives forever...