

# 61: THE JUDGMENT

# CHAPTER 1

My name is Cassie. I can't tell you my last name or where I live. There was a time when I could. For the first thirteen years of my life, I could have told you all of that. And four years ago, I could have done it, too. But not anymore.

The first time I had to start keeping secrets was because the Yeerks came to Earth. I'm sure you know all about that. If not, then you *really* need to go back and learn about it.

Now, I have to lie for the same reason. The Yeerks are back. They're in a new town, so we are too. We created new identities. But, see, we can't let this war become public. So we can't let you know what town it is. I won't even swear it's in the Unites States of America.

Long story short, not all of the Yeerks were defeated. Some fled on the Blade ship. They ran into a being called The One and now they work for him. He gave them some new, deadly hosts. He gave them back their leader, Esplin 9644, formerly known as Visser Three/One. He even gave them David, the one who betrayed us.

Who are we? The Animorphs, of course. But not like you might remember us. Some of us are gone. Ax was captured by

the Yeerks and is now the Visser's host. That was what set us onto this war in the first place.

We lost Jake, too. He sacrificed himself to destroy a hanger full of Yeerk ships that could unleash their plague on the galaxy again, much worse that it was already. We lost Jake, but, because of a deal he had cut with the Crayak, we gained someone else.

Rachel was back from the dead. Jake bought her life with his own. Now, it's almost like she was never dead. If dying had changed her at all, it's hard for even me to tell. She's still the same strong, fearless Rachel she always was.

Marco's still here. Still cracking jokes, still being paranoid; still Marco. I know he hurts a lot since Jake's death, but, because he's Marco, he won't let us know or help. He hates pity, even when he deserves it.

Tobias is still here, but he's nothing like he was when we first met him. He's our leader now, for one thing. He's human again, thanks to Crayak. I don't know what to think of Tobias. It's like he's three different people. Sometimes, he as kind and gentle as people say I am. Other times, he as cold and ruthless as Marco can be. Still others, he was hot-blooded and reckless as Rachel. But he hasn't gotten anyone killed and that's

always a plus in my book. I worry though; I don't know how far he'll go to win. I don't know where he draws the line. Sometimes, I'm not even sure there is a line.

We have two new members as well. One is Jeanne. She's French and, we recently learned, Rachel's step-sister. She and Marco like each other, but she's too in awe of Marco (because of the whole Animorph thing) to make a move. And Marco, being Marco, is kind of clueless when it comes to things like this.

Our last new member is Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor. He's Tobias' Andalite half-brother; Elfangor's other son. Alloran's a computer genius; he's as good as the Chee. I don't know Alloran all that well, but he seems like a good kid.

And, of course, there's me, Cassie. You probably remember me. You might have even read about me in history class. Did you ever see a picture of me? Well, if you did, you wouldn't recognize me.

We were in disguise in our new town. Marco now had a blue faux-hawk and matching contact lenses. His usually stylish wardrobe was traded in for tacky shorts and shirts from bands I've never even heard of. Rachel's hair, for maybe the first time ever, was cut short. Aside from that, she looked the

same. As for me...

“Try this one on,” Rachel ordered. She had given me a makeover and was making sure it stuck. My hair was long and straight now. Contact lenses made my eyes green. And my cloths were all...well, the stuff Rachel would make me wear.

Most of us were at the mall that day. Rachel had decided to buy Alloran some new cloths. She dragged me and Jeanne along, too. Tobias and Marco said they had some work to do and disappeared before they could be questioned.

I was glad those two were finally spending some time together. They had never been close, but I think it's because they never knew each other. Now, they seemed to be working better together. Or maybe it was just my imagination.

Rachel handed me the shit she was holding and then turned to Jeanne. “Jeanne, you're pretty much perfect. Just one thing needs to go.”

“What?” Jeanne asked. She was almost as beautiful as Rachel, really. I couldn't imagine what Rachel wanted to change.

“That hat has to go.” Jeanne had taken to wearing a green army barrette.

Jeanne shook her head. “Rachel, this hat was Santorelli's.

He wanted me to have it.”

“Oh. Sorry, I didn’t know. Okay, yeah, keep the hat. Maybe we’ll work around it. Yeah, that’s good. Let’s get you in some cammo. It’ll be a good look for you.”

Santorelli was one of us briefly. He was a hardened military man about twice our age. He was a Controller for a while; a bodyguard for Visser Six. He died on a mission to hide the Time Matrix where it could never be found. He and Jeanne had a special relationship, since they were the only two new members at the time.

We were heading for the Army-Navy store to work on Jeanne’s new look. I was happy because that meant Rachel would stop worrying about mine for a second. Alloran looked about as happy as I did. It was kind of weird to see him smile, since his human morph looked almost exactly like Tobias.

Rachel reached the store. And then, everything stopped. I heard Marco moan, “Oh no. Not this again.”

## CHAPTER 2

Tobias spoke almost right after Marco did. “Alright, which one of you is it? Drode? Crayak? Ellimist?”

I wasn’t surprised to see the two of them. We had been through the whole time-freeze thing before and it had stopped surprising us long ago. The same thing with people popping up when they shouldn’t.

Marco and Tobias were standing about ten feet away from us. Marco was holding a burger, dripping with condiments. Tobias was holding a very large box of frenched-fries. Alloran’s eyes lit up. Silently, Tobias offered the box to him.

THE THIRD TIME IS INDEED THE CHARM, TOBIAS came the answer. The voice seemed to come from everywhere at once. We knew that voice. The Ellimist.

He appeared before us as some kind of alien. He was vaguely humanoid, but clearly different. Instead of hair, he had magnificent, rainbow-colored quills. Four wings came from his back looking like an angel’s. He had four arms and four blue eyes as well. He stood on two feet. I noticed that the tops of his feet were like talons. It looked almost like he could rotate a foot to stand on a talon instead.

“New look,” Marco commented.

“A very old one, actually,” Rachel corrected. “It’s been a while, Toomin.”

“Toomin...” the Ellimist mused. “It has been eons since I’ve been called that. Hello, Rachel. Hello, Animorphs.”

“Toomin?” Tobias asked, raising his eyebrow.

“Oh. Yeah. Didn’t I tell you guys? Just before I...died... the Ellimist told me his life story,” Rachel explained. “Do you mind if I call you Toomin?”

“It is considered improper conduct for one to refer to a gamer by his real name when he is playing his game,” the Ellimist answered.

“I’m betting that’s a no on the whole Toomin thing,” Marco said to Rachel.

“Well, I’m not playing games anymore,” Tobias said. “Just get out of here, Toomin. I’ve had enough of your games. Your games are what took my father from me. And my mother. And my body, mind, and soul..”

I was surprised. None of us had ever spoken to the Ellimist like that before. I knew Tobias didn’t particularly care for him, but he had never been so open about it.

Then I remembered Crayak. Crayak had made Tobias

human again. It was Tobias, more than any of us, who had advocated helping Crayak in his war against The One. What had the price of Tobias' humanity been? Did he go over to Crayak's side?

Crayak was evil. This I knew. The Ellimist may not exactly have been good, but he was trying to help humans.

"Thank you, Cassie," the Ellimist said.

"Oh," Tobias broke in, "now he's back with the mind-reading. How about you let us keep our private thoughts to ourselves? You're no better than a Yeerk."

We all gasped. The Ellimist turned to Tobias. "If it makes you feel better, I cannot read *your* mind. Crayak prevents that."

"I already like him better than you."

Marco tapped Tobias on the shoulder. "Uh, dude? The Ellimist could destroy you and everyone you ever met."

"No. He needs us. That's why he's here."

That might have been true, but Tobias was walking a dangerously thin line.

"Yes, Tobias, I do need you. All of you. While Crayak and The One fight their war, some things are going neglected. Some things need a push in the right direction. And some

things need to be pushed away from each other.”

“And because you ‘never interfere’ you need us to do the pushing,” Tobias concluded.

“More or less,” the Ellimist answered wryly.

“Then I’ll go with less,” Tobias replied.

“You don’t even know what he wants us to do,” I argued.

“Doesn’t matter. We’re in a war here. And it isn’t a part of his game anymore, so he isn’t interested in helping us.”

“You don’t speak for everyone,” I answered. “We should at least hear him out.”

“I’m with Cassie,” Marco agreed. “I don’t particularly care for these little adventures he likes to send us on, but they may be useful. Like the Iskoort episode.”

“I will agree with Marco,” Jeanne said. “If it may be useful, it is not a chance we can pass up.”

Rachel shook her head. “I’m with Tobias. All you care about is your game, Ellimist. We’re in a war here; we don’t have time for a game. Unless this helps us, I’m against it.”

“Alloran?” I asked.

<I will do as my Prince commands.>

“Three to two, then,” I said. “Go on, Ellimist.”

He nodded. “Thank you again, Cassie. I will do as I have

done in the past. I will tell you the problem. I will give you the possible results. Then, I will give you a choice.”

I thought I heard Tobias mutter something about a bull under his breath. The Ellimist continued. “You will choose how this story ends. Many can be saved or many can be killed. What happens is up to you.”

## CHAPTER 3

We listened as the Ellimist explained what was going on to us. “The One and Crayak are fighting their war. They have agreed to certain rules not dissimilar to the ones that govern our game. I was employed to enforce these rules.”

“And you should know that what you are doing now is strictly against them,” came a new voice. The door to one of the bathrooms opened. Behind it was a black expanse with stars zipping by.

Someone came through that door. A tall, very thin man with black hair and grey skin. He wore an expensive, black suit. In one hand, he carried a briefcase. There was something...off about him. Everything seemed off-color, like it was just a shade away from what it should be. The overall effect was disturbing.

“Who are you?” Tobias demanded.

“Like you, I am a servant of the people, Tobias.” His voice was wrong, too. He stressed the letter s, almost like he was a snake talking. His tone and inflections were odd. They were... alien was he best word. His rhythms were off, too. Everything about this man was just a bit off.

“Which people?” the Ellimist prompted.

I felt like he should have given an evil smile, but he didn't. His face remained as immobile as Tobias'. “Whichever people pay me what I ask, of course.” His voice was low, throaty.

He went on. “In this particular incident, I have been hired by...let us call him The One. He intends to make certain that the rules are obeyed by all parties and, to be sadly honest, he does not trust you, Ellimist.”

“What rules am I breaking?” the Ellimist demanded.

“You are offering an opportunity to one side and not to the other. That is in strict violation of rule seven-hundred thirteen, subsection C. I have a signed copy right here if you would like proof.”

The Ellimist shook his head. “So that's why you're here? I do not need to be watched.”

“Regardless, I am only here to serve my purpose...just like the rest of you. Now, I believe we should make sure that everyone is present first.”

The door behind the man opened again. This time, our enemies came out. First was the biggest Hork-bajir I've ever seen. Guraff 427. We had met him on our last mission. He didn't seem like one of the bad ones. Maybe there was still

hope for him.

Next came the Visser in Ax's body. It was hard, seeing Ax. I was a Controller, briefly. I knew what he was feeling. But the Yeerk in my head had been kind; she turned into a friend. Ax was a slave to the monster who had killed his brother and countless others. Every moment must have been torture.

Last came the rat. David. He was once an Animorph. Then he tried to kill us, so we trapped him in the body of a rat. The One gave him back his morphing powers and now he's after us again.

The suited man straightened his tie. "I believe we are missing just one last member." Then, the Drode appeared. The Drode, with his purple, wrinkly body, many jointed hands, and all-too-human face. The Drode, wearing a shower cap and a pink bathrobe.

I know the Drode is the right hand of Crayak. He's nearly all powerful. Either could destroy us without even thinking about. I know all this. I still laughed so hard I cried. So did everyone else. Even Tobias, who I didn't think remembered how to laugh or cry.

The Drode glared at the suited man. Then, his face broke into a smile. "Well, well, well. If it isn't my best friend. I

haven't seen you since that...incident...in New Mexico."

"Ah...yes, Black Mesa. Such a sweet memory."

"And more than profitable for you, as I recall," the Drode added. "How is Gordon?"

"That, I am afraid, is none of your concern."

"Fine. What about Shepherd? Can I have him?"

"As I have told you twenty-seven thousand three-hundred and seventy-nine times: no."

"But you aren't even using him!" the Drode whined.

"Hey!" Rachel shouted. I managed to wipe the tears out of my eyes in time to look. "Is that my robe!?"

The Drode shrugged. "Did you leave it on the bathroom door in the *Reliquary*?"

"That *is* my robe! What...why...you were..." Rachel sputtered, either too furious or confused for words.

Tobias just shook his head. "Imaeus ...why?"

"Because yours is too coarse," the Drode answered.

Imaeus? That wasn't right. It almost sounded like Tobias and the Drode were friends. No, that couldn't be right. Tobias would never go that far to Crayak's side. Would he?

"Why were you using my shower at all?" Tobias demanded.

“Hey, it takes work to look this good!”

Marco decided it was time to say what I was thinking. “Everyone stop. Tobias, Drode, you two have some explaining to do. Since when are you friends? Since when do either of you have any friends at all?”

Tobias answered him. “Remember how the Ellimist told Rachel his life story? Well, the Drode told me his. He’s not so bad after all. No so different from us, at least.”

The Ellimist glared at the suited man. “Are you satisfied now?” he demanded.

“Perfectly. You may continue, Ellimist.”

# CHAPTER 4

The Ellimist let out a great sigh. “In one week, three fleets will meet each other. One is an Anati fleet. One fleet is Helmacron. The final is Garatron. When these three meet, they will destroy each other.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Rachel butted in. “I can understand the Garatrons being a threat; I’ve fought them. And I can get the Anati, since they apparently fought off the Yeerks pretty handedly. But the Helmacrons? They aren’t dangerous. They’re just annoying.”

“At your current size, yes. But you must understand some things. The Anati are a proud people. The Helmacrons insulted them and the Anati had to retaliate. The two fleets will collide and the Anati will almost certainly destroy the Helmacrons.”

“So what’s the problem?” Tobias asked.

“The Helmacron have enlisted the aid of the Garatrons. The Garatrons exist in extremely low numbers. And the Helmacrons possess a doomsday weapon.”

<What is it?> the Visser demanded. I could see the wheels turning in his head at the thought of a new weapon.

“A shrink ray that will activate if their flagship is

destroyed. Any within three light years of the flagship will be brought down to Helmacron size with no way to return.”

<So a few aliens get shrunk. No problem of ours,> David insisted.

“It is worse than that. The shrink ray will work differently on the Anati. It will destroy them. As for the Garatron...as I said, they exist in severely low numbers. With the fleet shrunk, the Garatrons on it will be unable to reproduce. Their numbers are low enough that, with that many missing from the gene pool, inbreeding will lead to the collapse of the race within three generations.”

The Drode clapped his hands. “I love this game. Ellimist, you can still throw a good party.”

“This slaughter needs to be stopped, Drode.”

“Says you,” the Drode shot back.

“I offer you all the chance to help me. If you succeed, I can guarantee that it will aid you in the future.”

The Drode closed his eyes. “Ah, I see. Yes, indeed it would help. Alright, Ellimist, I’ll help.”

“The One is also in favor of this,”

“So what do we do?” I asked. “How do we help?”

The Ellimist smiled at me. “How do we help. Not ‘What’s

in it for us?’ or ‘Why should we listen to you.’ That, Cassie, is why I choose you to lead my team.”

“Team? We’re picking teams now?” Marco asked.

The Drode nodded. “Of course. Three races. Three teams. I choose Tobias.”

“Esplin,” the suited man decided.

“I think it’s pretty obvious how these teams will work out,” Marco said. “The Drode already chose Tobias. Next, he’ll choose Rachel because she’s his favorite. And then they’ll take Alloran and make their little family complete.

“Since I’ll never help the guy who I’m fighting a war against, I’ll go with the Ellimist. So will Cassie and Jeanne. That leaves the One with Esplin, Guraff, and David. Why draw it out?”

“Because you’re wrong,” the Drode answered. “Think about it. If Esplin, Guraff, and David are all on the same team, they’ll probably just try to kill you. They can’t be trusted. So we have to break them up. So I’ll take Tobias, Rachel, and Guraff.”

The Ellimist nodded. “I will have Cassie, Jeanne, and,” he added, shooting a smug look at the man in the suit, “David.”

I was surprised. He was putting David on a team with us?

Well, I guess it was David or Esplin, but still... Then, I remembered that the Ellimist never did something without a reason. He wanted David here. I just didn't know why.

The suited man nodded. "Then I will have Esplin, Marco, and Alloran."

Marco shook his head. "No way. Not both of them. No one will get my jokes!"

The suited man remained motionless, but the Ellimist smiled. "Humor is important. Without laughter, what are we?"

"Him," the Drode answered, jerking his thumb at the man in the suit. "But I'm not giving up my team." Like some kind of twisted miracle, Tobias, Rachel, and Guraff were suddenly wearing black shirts with "GO DRODE!" in big red letters.

"Then I will trade Jeanne for Alloran. I trust this is satisfactory, Marco?"

"It'll have to do."

We broke off into our teams then. I watched Tobias and Rachel go to the Drode without any sort of hesitation. I didn't understand it. The Drode was a creature of violence and hate. He destroyed for the fun of it. How could they not despise him?

Once, years ago, Crayak had offered Rachel almost unlimited power. He preyed on her sense of justice. He tried to

turn her into a monster by getting her to give in not to her darker side but to her better part. It was cruel, twisted, insidious; and it had almost worked.

Had Crayak gotten Tobias and Rachel? I didn't know. I was afraid that he did. Was there anything Tobias wouldn't have traded to be with Rachel, even his soul? I don't know.

<You're starting to realize it,> David said in my head. <You're starting to realize that the people you trust aren't the people you should trust. You don't really know them. And if you trust them, they'll just betray you. They already have.>

“Not everyone's you, David.”

It was a good reply. It should have shut him up. Except that he replied with something just as good.

<Not everyone's you, Cassie.>

# CHAPTER 5

As suddenly as time had stopped, it started up again. But we weren't in the mall anymore. We were aboard the *Reliquary*, Tobias' ship.

I didn't particularly like it. It was a war machine with enough power to take down an Andalite Dome ship. It was as black as the Blade ship, with little streaks of white to give it camouflage in space. It had two long, sharp-looking wings extending from the egg-shaped cockpit.

The cockpit was pretty big. In the front was the command center, with the pilot's chair and a place for an Andalite (or possibly a Taxxon) to stand and pilot the ship. At the rear was a living area, complete with a kitchen, bathroom, and a pair of twin beds.

Tobias, Rachel, and Alloran lived here, on the ship. Alloran preferred to sleep outside, but he came in when the weather was bad or it was too cold. It was their home. Which was why Rachel was complaining.

“No way. I am *not* having Esplin and David in my home. Under no circumstances. Just shove them out of the airlock now!”

“What about Guraff?” I asked.

She shrugged. “He’s on our team. We don’t have much choice there. But as soon as this is over, he’s out, too.”

Tobias shook his head. “If I shove them out now, they’ll know where we park this thing. That isn’t a chance I’m taking. Esplin, have your Blade ship meet us over the town. Cloaked.”

Marco shook his head. “If we just let him out, he’ll attack us. He’s like a rabid raccoon.”

We all stared at each other for a few moments. We couldn’t figure it out. I decided it was time for me to say something. “Look, everyone, listen up. We’re a team now, whether we like it or not. We agreed to this. Now we have to work together. That means we’ll have to trust each other.”

Everyone but Jeanne, Tobias, Guraff, and I laughed. When Alloran noticed that Tobias wasn’t laughing along, he got kind of embarrassed and stopped. Tobias nodded to me and then stepped forward.

“I’ll trust my team. I trust Rachel more than I trust myself. And Guraff...I trust you.” Tobias had met Guraff during our last mission. They held each other as hostages while Guraff waited for a ride off of a Yeerk space station. There was something different about that Yeerk. He didn’t remind me of

Afran, one of the Peace Movement Yeerks. He reminded me of...I don't know who. But it was someone I knew.

Guraff nodded. "And I trust you, young beast." That was his name for Tobias. It was because Tobias' father was Prince Elfangor; Beast Elfangor to the Yeerks. I got the impression that Guraff admired both father and son. Guraff turned to Rachel. "And I trust you."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because you didn't want to throw me out of the airlock. You will not betray me; not until this mission is over, at least."

I nodded. He was perceptive. But now came the hard part. I turned to Alloran. "I trust you, Alloran." Then, I turned to David. To say that I trusted him would be a blatant lie and everyone would know it. But I had to say something. After all, I was the one who started talking about trust. "David, I trust you."

<No you don't. And I don't trust you, Cassie. How could I? You're the one who came up with your little 'trap me as a rat' plan. None of you can be trusted.>

"For once, I'm with David," Marco agreed, then looked sick at the thought. "Cassie, are you *really* asking me to trust Esplin? Have you finally gone completely insane?"

Tobias shook his head. “It isn’t about mutual trust. It’s about knowledge. I know Guraff won’t betray me because The One wants us to work together. There’s profit in this for David and Esplin if they work with us. I trust that even Esplin will be intelligent enough not to betray us.”

That was one of the things that disturbed me about Tobias. He and I often reached the same conclusions, but he got there with cold, ruthless logic while I got there with my heart.

Tobias’ cold logic got to the rest of them. Reluctantly, they grumbled their lies about trust.

“Okay, next question,” Tobias began. “How do we get there? Rachel, Guraff, and I can’t take the *Reliquary* because Guraff will need to feed. And I won’t use any more Yeerk ships than we have to, so Alloran, Cassie, and Tasty will use this ship.”

Rachel glared at him like she was about to argue. Tobias slowly shook his head. And, like a miracle, Rachel didn’t argue. I’d never seen that before.

Esplin spoke up. <I must have my guards with me. When I go to feed, these two,> he swiveled a stalk eye from Marco to Jeanne, <will attempt to free my host. There must be no chance of that happening. I must use the Blade ship.>

Tobias shook his head. “I’m not leaving those two alone on your Blade ship. Not a chance.”

<I thought you trusted me,> Esplin mocked.

“I trust you not to try to kill us. I don’t trust you not to have them overpowered and infested as soon as you get in your ship.”

“If I may make a suggestion?” Guraff offered. It was weird to hear him speak. He had a Hork-bajir body but he sounded very intelligent. Then again, his host was a Seer. And a voluntary Controller, so I wasn’t even sure who was really in charge.

Esplin sighed then nodded. <Go on.>

“The Blade ship has a panic transport. In the event of massive damage to the main ship, there is a smaller ship that can be launched from the Blade ship. It is entirely self sufficient and is Z-space capable. And all of its doors can be sealed shut. They cannot be opened from outside of the room.”

David nodded; a weird thing to see a rat do. <I see where you’re going. Esplin takes that ship. That way, he can lock the door and feed without the others stealing his host. No one starves, no one gets infested because Marco and the girl have Esplin outnumbered.>

The Visser wasn't happy about it. But it was the only alternative. In the end, Esplin, Marco, and Jeanne took the panic ship. Tobias, Rachel, and Guraff rode in the Blade ship, since Tobias really did trust Guraff's promise not to have them infested; there might be hope for both of them yet. Alloran, David, and I were off in the *Reliquary*.

Just before we docked with the Blade ship to move out our passengers, Tobias turned and gave Alloran his final instructions. "Cassie's in charge of you while I'm gone. Obey her as you would me." Then, with a little smile, he added, "No wild parties while I'm gone, you hear?"

"And David," Rachel added, not sounding at all like she was joking, "if you touch *anything* I'll let Tobias eat you."

## CHAPTER 6

Alloran, since he knew what he was doing, flew the ship. “Alloran, before we go, can we stop by my place first? There’s something I need to tell my family.”

<What is it? You can call them from here.>

“Oh. Yeah. Good point.” I had known that, in the back of my mind. But what I really wanted was to see them again. I was close with my family. I missed them now. And I missed Ronnie.

The others don’t like Ronnie, I think. They probably feel like he stole me from Jake. But it wasn’t like that. Jake and I were done with before I even met Ronnie. And he never asked me out; I asked him.

He was an incredible guy. He accepted all the terrible secrets of my past with just a casual shrug. He knew what I had to do and he didn’t blame me for it. He didn’t even blame me when I had to go off to fight again.

But more than that, he really understood what was important to me. He was as much into animals and nature as I was. But he never let anything come between us. That was the biggest difference between him and Jake, I think. With Jake,

the war was always first. I don't blame him; that's the way it had to be. But that doesn't change the fact that that's the way it was. The war would always come before me. That wasn't the case with Ronnie.

When a hologram of him appeared in the middle of the cockpit, I almost tried to hug him. I managed to keep my composure; no need for David to see that. "Cassie? Where are you? You don't usually use holograms."

"I know. I'm on a ship right now... Look, Ronnie, I need to tell you something. I'm going away for maybe a week or two and I might not be able to call you because it might be too dangerous to send the signals. Don't worry if you don't hear from me for a bit."

"That it?" That was all he asked. He knew better than to ask me where I was going or what I was doing. I hadn't come out and told him that the Yeerks were back, but he knew.

"And..." I didn't want to say it in front of David. But I had no choice. Ronnie was expecting it. "And I love you."

"I love you too." I expected the hologram to disappear, but it didn't he stood there, looking at me. "I love you," he repeated. "And I can't believe I'm doing this as a hologram, but I can't wait on it. I can't wait until you get back to ask

you.”

“Ask me what?” My heart was hammering at my chest, trying to get out.

“Cassie, will you marry me?”

“Yes,” I said instantly. Then, “No.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Well, which is it? This is kind of an important question.”

“I want to. There isn’t anything I want more. But I can’t. Not yet.”

I couldn’t really see his eyes as a hologram, so I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Luckily, he said it. “It’s someone else, isn’t it? Jake. I should have known. I should have—”

“It’s not Jake, Ronnie. Jake’s...he’s gone. I’ll never see him again. It’s just...there are some things I have to do.”

“I know all about these ‘things,’ Cassie. You think I don’t know that the Yeerks are back? You think I’m such an idiot I can’t figure it out?”

“No, Ronnie. I know you know. That’s why I didn’t tell you. You’ve known it as long as I have. I have to fight them, Ronnie. I have to.”

“Why? Why you? We’ve got Tri-I. There are the other Animorphs. You could get anyone to do it. Why you?”

“Because I have no choice!”

“There’s always a choice, Cassie. And now your choice is this. War or peace. Love or fight. Me or the Yeerks.”

“Ronnie, you can’t do this to me, I—”

“And you can’t do this to me, Cassie. I can’t live like this. I can’t sit here not knowing if you’re alive or dead. I can’t sit here waiting for you.”

“Ronnie—”

“You told me I meant the world to you, Cassie, that there was nothing more important to you than me. The girl I love isn’t just talk. Now you have to decide what’s more important: me or everything else.”

“Do you even hear yourself? How can you be so selfish?”

“Back at you. You’re so caught up in this war of yours that you’ve forgotten about the rest of us. Can’t you see how you’re hurting us?”

“Ronnie, I don’t have a choice,” I repeated.

His hologram sat down. I guess there was a chair behind him. His voice was low, now, quieter. “Yeah, you do. You know it, too. It’s easier just to say that you have to fight. Then you can justify it to yourself, to everyone around you. But you always told me that you never stopped believing in peace.

“You once gave it all up. You quit the war. You quit the entire human race. All for Aftran, a Yeerk. I know, I know,” he said quickly, before I could interrupt him, “she wasn’t like the others. And in the end, it turned out that you did a very good thing.

“But here’s my point, Cassie. You gave up everything. For her. For the enemy. How can you tell me you love me if you aren’t willing to do the same for me?”

# CHAPTER 7

<He has severed the communication,> Alloran said unnecessarily.

<Oh,> David taunted me. <Is it hard to decide, Cassie? What's the 'right' thing to do? What would good, moral Cassie do? I wonder, did you think this hard before you decided to trap me?>

I glared at him. He only laughed. <Did I hit a nerve?>

<Enough,> Alloran snapped. <The only thing I hate as much as a Yeerk is a traitor.>

<Ah, the little Andalite trying to sound tough. Kind of reminds you of old times, eh Cassie? Here we are again. The hypocrite, the coward, and me, stuck in the middle.>

<Did you just call me a coward?> Alloran's voice was ice.

<That's right, I did. You're just like Ax was, you know that? Just a scared kid hiding in your brother's shadow. Only your brother...well, he's just a bird, now isn't he?>

Alloran's tail twitched. <You will *not* speak ill of my Prince. I warn you of this only once, traitor.>

<What are you going to do, alien? Use that fancy tail of yours on me? That's the coward's way out. If you kill me, you

don't have to face your problems. You don't have to face your fears. So do it. Prove me right.>

“Both of you cut it out,” I ordered. “We're a team now.”

<And I've seen how you treat your teammates, Cassie. You act all nice and sweet. And then, you betray them.>

“Not unless they betray me first.” That kept him quiet for an hour or so.

But, of course, that didn't last for long. <So, when do I get to hear what happened to the almighty Jake?>

“What do you mean?” I answered guardedly.

<I mean he obviously isn't here. And Tobias, of all people, is running this show. So what happened? Did he die on you?> David laughed. <No, no, no. I bet he cut and ran. He did, didn't he? He ran away. Just like you're going to, Cassie.>

“Jake didn't run. I'm not running. No one's running.”

<Oh? So where is he? And if you aren't even thinking about running away, why don't you just call your boyfriend back and tell him so?>

I couldn't respond to David. And I forbade Alloran from doing so, too. I knew what David wanted. All he wanted, the only thing he could do, was hurt us. So we ignored him. That's what I told him. “David, we are now going to ignore you until

you have something civil to say.”

<Oh, the silent treatment. That really hurts.> Then, <Can I still do sarcasm? I haven’t practiced it in a while because it’s wasted when you’re alone on a deserted island stuck in the body of a rat.>

We ignored him. I had a plan. For years, David had no one to talk to. Now, here we were, two intelligent creatures he could speak with. Only we refused to speak to him. I figured it would hurt him. Turns out I was right. I could still read people, even if I had misread David in the beginning.

<So, Alloran was it?>

<*Aristh* Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor,> Alloran corrected.

<Right. So...I have a question.>

Alloran tilted a stalk eye at me and another at David. I nodded. “Go on.”

<You and Tobias live on this ship, right?>

<That is correct.>

<I didn’t think Andalites slept in beds. Or hawks.>

“Tobias is human now,” I told him. “Crayak’s doing. And that other bed isn’t Alloran’s. It’s Rachel’s.”

David twitched. More than usual, I mean. He was a rat, after all, so he was bound to twitch constantly anyway. <So

you mean that the two of them....>

“Yeah.” I knew it would hurt David a bit. He had developed some kind of sick fixation for Rachel.

<Oh.>

Again he was silent. I was glad. It gave me time to think.

I didn't think about Ronnie. I avoided that like the Yeerk pool. Instead, I concentrated on the task at hand. We had agreed that Alloran, David, and I would go to the Anati. The Anati had been attacked by the Yeerks, so they wouldn't be kind to any Controllers and our group was the only one without a Yeerk in it.

Mostly, though, I thought about the Ellimist. What was he hoping to gain by putting David with me? There had to be an ulterior motive. But what?

Could he want me to bring David back to the Animorphs? But that was impossible. We had tried everything to keep David under control.

But no, that wasn't true. We had tried to force him to accept his new life. We jammed it down his throat the way it was crammed down ours. But that doesn't work for everyone. It hadn't worked for Marco; not until he found out that his mother was the host of the old Visser One.

We couldn't force our life on him and, when he resisted and fought back, we trapped him as a rat. We had thought it was the only thing we could do aside from killing him. But now I realized that there was one other way.

In all our plotting and planning, we had never thought that maybe, just maybe, we could turn David back. Maybe he wasn't too far gone. Maybe all he needed was for one of us to offer a helping hand instead of a killing claw.

Or maybe I was just an idiot girl with too many problems.

## CHAPTER 8

I couldn't sleep that night. Neither could the other two. Alloran paced the deck of the ship. David pretended to sleep but he didn't fool either of us. "What's keeping you up, Alloran?"

<It is nothing.>

"Then why not sleep?" He didn't answer me. I hadn't really expected him to. He had been raised in the Andalite culture where all men were warriors. Warriors and leaders didn't stay up at night worrying. At least, not that they would let Alloran see. But I knew better.

See, I was a warrior. And I knew leaders. Jake used to be up all night constantly. I was up, too. And Rachel, Tobias, Ax, and Marco. We hardly slept during the war.

Still, I knew what was bothering him. It was the same thing that was keeping me up. "They'll be okay, Alloran. All of them. Marco and Jeanne can handle Esplin; Marco might even find a way to free Ax."

I regretted saying that as soon as I said it. It was wrong of me to give him false hope, wasn't it? But then, I've always thought that any hope, even false hope, is better than having

no hope at all.

<I know that, Cassie. But... It is not Marco and Jeanne that I fear for.>

“Oh? You don’t think Tobias and Rachel can handle themselves?” I asked.

<It isn’t that I don’t think they can’t handle anything. Rachel is a strong warrior and Tobias is a great hero. But they trust Guraff.>

“Don’t you?”

<He is a Yeerk,> Alloran answered simply. <I know that not all Yeerks are the same; I know about the Peace Movement. But Guraff is one of Esplin’s only friends, his most trusted lieutenant. Such a Yeerk is certainly as bad as the rest.>

“So you don’t trust Tobias’ judgment?”

<It is not my place to question him.>

“Why not? We always questioned Jake. A leader needs to be questioned, Alloran. Not all the time, like in a battle, but when there is time. Tobias isn’t perfect, you know.”

Alloran didn’t respond. He wouldn’t speak ill of his prince, not even to me. I decided it was time to turn my attention to my other problem.

“David, I want to ask you a question.”

<I want to go to sleep.>

“We both know that isn’t happening. Now, will you talk civilly to me or should we go back to ignoring you?” I said it sweetly. I knew what his answer would be.

<I’ll talk, I’ll talk.>

“Alright. Why did you betray us?”

<That’s your question? I thought you knew people, but you have to ask me why I did what I did?>

“Yes, I have to ask. I can’t figure it out. You hated us and the Yeerks because you blamed us for losing you your family. But you didn’t fight to get them back. You tried to run away instead of helping them. I don’t get it. There had to be more to it than you hating us.”

<That’s because you don’t understand hate. You’ve never felt it,> David answered. <Sure, you’ve been angry, but you don’t hate. Not even the Yeerks, I think. Not even Esplin.>

He was right. I wouldn’t give Esplin the victory of hating him. I wouldn’t do that. “So explain it to me.”

<That would be like you explaining love to me. It’s something you have to feel.>

“Then can I tell you why I think you turned on us?”

<You just said you didn't know.>

"I said I didn't know," I agreed. "I didn't say I didn't have a guess."

<Fine. Why did I do it, oh mighty and wise Cassie?>

"Because we never liked you. We never accepted you. We never treated you as one of us. We kept you at arms length, on the outside. You couldn't feel like you belonged with us. And without your family to belong to, without friends to be with, you had nothing else to do. You turned against us because you were lonely."

<That makes no sense whatsoever. How would fighting the only people who could speak to me get me more friends?>

"It wasn't about making friends. It was about rejection. I can guess what it was like. You were the new kid. And not exactly popular, either. You were pushed away a lot. By all the kids at the schools you went to. And like you kept saying, being with us was like being at school. So you rejected us before we could reject you."

<You're crazy.>

"Said the talking rat."

David was quiet for about ten minutes. Then, quietly, he said, <So what if I didn't want to get rejected? How is that my

fault? You'd never have accepted me. You could never have understood me. Do you know what it's like to lose everything? To suddenly have everything you love stripped away from you?>

“No. I don't know what that's like. I've never been that unlucky. But Tobias has. You could have spoken to him.”

<He isn't even human.>

“No? Are you a human, David?”

<Of course I am.>

“But your body's a rat's body.”

<So what? I'm still a human inside!>

“So is he.”

<No. No, it's different. He's a hawk in his mind. He's *still* a hawk. You think I couldn't see it? The whole time, he was looking at me like food. He called me Tasty!>

“So you don't have a rat's instincts? You don't feel the constant fear of large predators, even when you're morphed? You don't want to burrow deep into something soft and curl up? You don't want to hide in a dark place and nibble on some cheese?>

<It's different!> David insisted.

“If you say so; like you said, I wouldn't understand. But

even if he wasn't human anymore, Tobias used to be. And he would have understood."

<None of you could. You don't know what it's like to lose your family and your home and everything you love.>

"Tobias never even had a family. Or a home. Or anything or anyone to love or to love him. You could have spoken to him. Or to Ax; in a battle that shouldn't even have happened, he was separated from his entire species and he lost his brother. Marco lost his mother. Jake lost his brother. Rachel has no father. And me, I'll help anyone with their problems.

"But you didn't come to us. You hid inside yourself. Do you know why you betrayed us? I do. It wasn't that you hated us or blamed us. It was because you were afraid we might actually like you. That's what did it. Because the one thing you can't stand is being rejected by your friends. That's what you were running from, David."

## CHAPTER 9

Was I right about David? Honestly I didn't know. I went to sleep after that. I used Rachel's bed since I figured she'd freak out if David was anywhere near it. In the morning, I decided it was time to figure out what we were going to do.

Tobias had told Alloran that he was to listen to me, and I knew the Andalite would take that as an official order. "Alloran, what do we know about the Anati?"

We were eating breakfast. For me, that meant scrambled eggs that the *Reliquary* made. For David, it meant just about anything lying around. For Alloran, it was processed, liquefied grass he could eat through his hooves.

<The Anati are an odd race. The individual members seem to be made of several different creatures working together.>

"Like the Nesk?"

<No, not if I understand the Nesk correctly. You know, of course, that the Nesk were all destroyed on Earth several million years ago.>

I nodded. That was a particularly bad memory for me. We had been blown backwards through time, back to when the dinosaurs walked the earth. They were accompanied by two

types of aliens: the Mercora and the Nesk.

The Mercora were good. They were like big, many-eyed crabs. They didn't get along with the Nesk, so they used force-fields to keep the Nesk out. The Mercora were peaceful. The Nesk were not.

The Nesk were ants. Swarms of ants that could form into creatures. It was freaky. They seemed to work together, like any ant colony. Both the Nesk and the Mercora were destroyed when a comet hit Earth and wiped out the dinosaurs, too.

The reason I feel so bad about that is because it was our fault. The Nesk had a nuclear weapon that could blow us back into our own time and the Mercora wanted us to steal it so we could use it. We did it. And in the resulting battle, we drove the Nesk off of earth. But the Nesk had a little revenge: they altered the course of a comet so it would hit Earth.

The Mercora wanted our weapon to divert the comet. In the end, we gave it to them. But it was too late. Because Tobias made a decision that changed history forever.

Tobias was the one who saw it. The comet had to hit Earth and wipe out everything on it. Without that, humans couldn't evolve. So he had Ax rig the weapon so it would malfunction and the comet would hit Earth.

I'm glad I didn't have to make that decision. I think Jake was glad it was taken away from him, too. I could never have sacrificed an entire sentient species, even to save my own.

I think that was when I first realized that there was something dark and ruthless inside of Tobias. He used to be a lot like me. I knew he had been changed by his time as a hawk, but I thought that was just the predator instincts.

But a predator could never have made that choice. The hawk couldn't have seen what was about to happen. It was a cold, calculated, human decision.

I still don't know how he feels about that. He killed off the entire Mercora race. Does it hurt him? Or can he sleep at night because he did what he had to do. He always told me that was enough for him but I'm not sure.

I realized then that I didn't know anything about Tobias. Not really. I had always thought he was the one who was the most like me. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe we were the complete opposite.

But all of that wasn't the point. "So if they aren't like the Nesk, what are they?"

<The way I understand it, each member is composed of three different creatures. These three make up the creature's

body. Only one part of the body is sentient; the others are similar to animals.>

<What is their society like?> David asked.

<The Anati are a proud people, not unlike us Andalites in mentality. The Helmacrons insulted them and provoked them into a war. It would be best to avoid anything that might be construed as an insult to them.>

“Does the *Reliquary* have any pictures?” I asked. I was trying to think of what the others would have asked.

<I believe so.> A moment later, four holograms appeared before us. One was of a creature that looked like four crab’s legs (as in there were four legs, not four crabs’ worth of legs. That would be a freakin’ LOT of legs!).

The next was one large arm with a hand at the end. The hand had four claws that looked like a bird’s talons. It had three other claws that were longer, more slender, and had many joints.

The last was clearly some sort of head. It was circular, with a single foot that had three toes. It had five eyes arranged in a circle in the center of the face. It also possessed four stalk eyes like Alloran’s, but these were longer and bigger. The top of the head had a mouth. There was no nose at all.

The final hologram was of all three of these together. The legs were the centerpiece. The hand sat on the top. The head was slung, hanging by its foot, underneath the legs. It was a pretty freaky looking creature, and I've seen some strange things in my time.

The strangest thing was that the whole creature was pink. A bright, almost neon pink. I wouldn't have been surprised if they glowed in the dark.

<Looks dangerous,> David decided. <Even if they are pink all over.>

<They are. Their claw is strong enough to crush the bones of a Hork-bajir. The mouth of the head is almost as dangerous as a Taxxon's mouth. Their legs are nearly as fast as an Andalite,> he added, almost embarrassed.

“No wonder the Yeerks wanted them.”

<Actually, they were not originally intended for combat. It seems that the Yeerks wanted to contact them about creating artificial, symbiotic hosts. Except the Anati could not help the Yeerks, so the Yeerks attacked instead.>

“Sounds like the Yeerks we know. So these are the ones we're trying to help?”

<This is them.>

“Any ideas what to do to divert them from their war?”

<No.>

<Nothing,> David agreed.

I thought about what the others would say and took a mental vote. Marco would insist we had a plan. Rachel would have canceled him out. Jeanne would have advocated caution. Tobias would say that we had no choice. We had to jump in and do something. I agreed.

“Well, we’ll wing it. Wouldn’t be the first time.” Then, I thought of something else a certain Animorph would say. “Let’s do it!”

# CHAPTER 10

It would take us another two days to reach the Anati fleet. That left me with two days to think. I tried to concentrate on the mission. I tried to make a plan. But nothing could stop me from thinking about Ronnie.

What could I do? I didn't want to lose him. I didn't think I could stand it. I loved him more than I loved anyone else. I'd give my life for him. If he had asked me two months ago to marry him, I'd have said yes in a heartbeat.

But I couldn't just walk away from the war. I couldn't leave them. I couldn't walk away and leave Rachel to die. I couldn't abandon my friends. Could I?

Ronnie was right. There were others who could fight this war now. It wasn't like the old days when we had no choice but to fight. I could find a replacement and then it would be okay to leave.

David. That was the key. I think that was why the Ellimist put us together. He wanted me to turn David back to the Animorphs. Then I could be with Ronnie.

Ridiculous, isn't it? Like the Ellimist, with all his power, was interested in my love life. He probably just wanted to take

a warrior from The One. I knew that the Ellimist would rather fight Crayak than The One; better the devil you know. Besides, The One probably wouldn't play the Ellimist's game and that was unacceptable.

Still, if I turned David back, I could leave. Six was the magic number; seven never ended well. If I had a replacement, it would be okay, right?

I knew the others would understand if I left. Tobias and Rachel could never be angry with me for choosing love over war. They knew how I felt; they'd understand. Marco might not be happy about it, but he knew what it was like to want nothing to do with this. I think Jeanne would get it, too. She knew how precious love was; she wouldn't fault me for it.

What about Alloran? Tobias couldn't order him how to feel, after all. Well, I could ask. "Alloran, how would you feel about me if I went to be with Ronnie instead of fight?"

He swiveled one stalk eye to look at me. <I do not know. I have never considered the possibility that someone would run away when their people needed them.>

That phrase, run away, told me all I needed to know. He would think I was a coward. But did that matter? I didn't think so. I wouldn't let the opinion of one Andalite keep me from

being with Ronnie.

I made my decision. If I could turn David back, I would go. If not...then I don't know what I'd do. I couldn't live without Ronnie. I just couldn't.

“David?”

<What?>

“I think you should know... I've forgiven you.”

<I don't speak to you just to get lied to, Cassie.>

“I'm not lying. Now, I have to make a decision like the one you did. I have a way out of this war, just like you did. And I'm seriously considering running, just like you.”

<I didn't run!>

“But you wanted to. So do I. And now that I know, really know, just how hard it is, I can't blame you anymore. I do forgive you.”

<Why would you forgive me? I tried to kill you!>

“You tried to kill *me*? I don't remember that. I remember you trying to kill Tobias, Jake, Marco, As, and Rachel. Not me. At least, not me specifically. So it's a lot easier for me to forgive you than it may be for them. But I do forgive.”

<Well, you can save it because I don't need your forgiveness, real or fake.>

“I know you don’t need it. But I think you want it. If I do run, I want my friends to be able to forgive me. And I want to forgive myself. I think you need to be able to forgive yourself for the things you do. How can you live if you don’t? Have you forgiven yourself, David?”

<What’s there to forgive? I’m not sorry.>

“No? Maybe not yet. But if you speak to the others, if they forgive you, then I think you’ll be sorry. But I think you need to forgive yourself before they can forgive you, David.”

<I don’t care about their forgiveness!>

“Not yet. Because you don’t have to look at them every day. Not as friends. But you could.”

<What are you getting at?>

“Do you like working for the Yeerks, David? Does it make you feel good to serve the very creatures who stole your family? I know I could never do it.”

<I don’t have a choice. I either do what The One says or I live as a rat.>

“Perhaps. Or maybe Crayak or the Ellimist will help you. Do you think he’d let The One take away your power to morph if you joined us? I can’t see either of them letting that happen. Not if you joined them.”

<I know what you're trying to do. You're trying to make me come back to your side!>

“Yeah, I am.”

<Why? You can't trust me. Not really.>

“David... When you turned on us, we thought there were only two solutions. We could kill you or we could trap you. None of us ever thought of the best solution.”

<What solution?>

“We never talked to you. We never tried to turn you back. We just assumed you were gone forever. But you weren't. You were just a scared kid. You were desperate, so you acted out of desperation. We didn't even try to understand. We're as much to blame as you are.”

<You don't really believe that.>

“I do. Maybe the others don't, but I do. I don't think you're evil, David. I think you were just scared.”

# CHAPTER 11

<We are approaching the Anati fleet,> Alloran informed us a day later. <They are hailing us. They wish to speak to our captain.>

It took me a moment before I realized he meant me. A hologram of an Anati appeared before me. “Would you please be so kind as to identify yourself before we are forced to destroy any traces of your existence?”

That took me a moment, too. “I’m Cassie.” I gave him my last name.

His stalk eyes stretched to their maximum and his five main eyes widened. “An Animorph? Here?”

“Ah, so you’ve heard of us.”

“You are heroes to us. We fought the Yeerks, too. The war cost us nearly half of our population. But you humans...you defeated them with only minuscule losses. Please, come aboard our ship so that we may feast on you.”

<Feast on you?> David asked.

<I am certain it was a mistranslation,> Alloran assured me. <The *Reliquary*’s translation software was written by humans and I have not yet had time to correct its errors.>

What could I say? “We’ll come.”

“We will prepare the finest hangar on our ship for you, Cassie the Animorph.”

“Thank you. Do you have a name?”

“No. You find that peculiar, I think.”

“A tad,” I admitted.

“You know that the Anati is formed of three parts?” he asked. I nodded. “I do not name my...legs, you would say...as any different form my...my head or my...my hand. We are one and we are strong. Such is the Anati way. Our people are one and we are strong. So we do not name ourselves. We call ourselves Anati; that is all the name we need.”

<Uh...are they commies?> David wondered.

<According to what I understand, they would be closer to Marxists,> Alloran answered. <I do not know why you humans confuse the two. You also confuse Communism with Socialism. Ninety percent of humans I have spoken to refer to Socialism as Communism.>

<What’s the difference?>

<To begin with, true Communism, more properly named Marxism, preaches the abolishment of all social classes while Socialism specifically places some members above others.>

<Like Andalites.>

<No, not like Andalites.>

<You are not going to stand here and tell me that Andalites believe in equality.>

“Guys, cut it out,” I said, trying to pretend I was a leader. “There will be plenty of time for that later. Alloran, dock us with the Anati flagship.”

The Anati ship was divided into three parts, like the Anati themselves. The main body was a hemisphere, flat on the top and round on the bottom. The top was clearly designed for war, even though the entire ship was a pale pink.

Weapons were mounted in a neat circle around the perimeter. They looked like the Anati claws. Definitely cannons of some kind. There were clusters of what looked like Anati eyes here and there. Five holes formed a ring. Out of the top of each hole protruded another claw.

<Those are where the Anati launch their ships,> Alloran informed me. <The claws are sonic-pulse weapons. They emit a very high-pitched pulse that will stun or kill any who it strikes. It is usually placed on a narrow beam so as to avoid unnecessary casualties.>

Below the sphere was what looked like an Anati head. It

was definitely the control bridge. The four stalk eyes that spread out from it looked like they were engines. Alloran confirmed that.

Clinging to the outside of the sphere was what looked like smaller versions of the ship. They hung on by their stalk eyes. On those ships hung even smaller ships that looked the same. The ships got of increasingly small quality until I was sure no more Anati could fit on them.

<That's a lot of ships,> David whispered.

<Yes. According to my calculations, the Anati fleet numbers approximately seven thousand.>

“The Helmacrons and Garatrons wouldn't stand a chance. The Anati will never retreat; not with this much of an advantage. What can we do?”

<I say we go in. Maybe we'll find something. If we can disable the Anati ship, maybe we can stall them until the others take care of the Helmacrons and Garatrons.>

I smiled. This was a huge step for David. He was willing to trust the others. He probably didn't realize what that meant, but I did. He was one step closer to coming back.

Which meant that I was one step closer to getting away.

# CHAPTER 12

There was an Anati waiting for us when we docked. I was a little nervous, but Alloran handled it very well. <Cassie, I am afraid that my initial estimates as to the number of Anati ships were inaccurate.>

“Okay. What do you think?”

<I neglected to calculate the number the Anati could store inside these hangars. The real number may be anywhere from seven thousand to ten thousand.>

Oh. That wasn't good.

I tried to be friendly to the Anati but I don't know if I succeeded. It's hard to tell with aliens. “Thanks. Do you have a leader I could speak to?” I didn't know if they would have a captain. If they were as collectivist as Alloran suspected...

“We have a leader.”

“Oh. I didn't know. I figured that since you didn't name yourselves, you might not put one of you above the other.”

“Our leader is not above us, as you say.” Alloran was translating his words for me, but I find it's easier to write it this way, with the Anati speaking. It avoids confusion.

“The Anati are parts of a whole. But just as the Anati...

head...controls the body, our leader controls us. The whole cannot move without direction from the one.”

He led us through the corridors of his ship. The hallways were weird, twisting at odd angles. <This is to make the ship difficult to navigate,> Alloran explained. <Someone attacking the ship would have difficulty finding anything.>

So the Anati were battle-smart, too. Definitely not good.

I was nervous on the ship. And when I'm nervous, I make small talk. “What’s it like to be you?” I asked the Anati. “I mean, what is it like to be three creatures together?”

“I may as well ask you what it is like to be so alone. The thought of being a human makes me sad.”

I looked at Alloran. He shrugged, a habit he must have learned recently. <That is what he said,> he defended himself.

“We humans try not to be alone,” I answered him. “We make friends, have mates, form families. We surround ourselves with others. But we’re never connected the way you are, I don’t think. Do your other parts argue with you or anything like that?”

“I have no other parts. The Anati are the Anati. Does your hand disobey you?”

“Sometimes my mouth does,” I joked. I didn’t expect him

to get it. I was wrong.

He laughed. “All make mistakes, Cassie the Animorph. The forgiving of mistakes is a great ritual for us. It is the most joyous of occasions.”

<Is it nice to be forgiven?> David asked. <I mean, do you really feel better?>

The Anati turned three eyes to look at him. “All are one. To be in need of forgiveness, you must do something to separate yourself from the whole. Let me ask you...”

<Rat,> Alloran supplied.

“Human,” I insisted.

“Let me ask you, human. If you lost your arm...but no, you do not have a human body.” I think the Anati smiled, but it was hard to tell because it’s mouth was by my knees. I forgot to mention, but the Anati came up to about my waist, with his claw reaching to the top of my head.

“If your human body suddenly reappeared, would you not be joyful? That is how we forgive mistakes. What was lost has been regained. There is nothing greater to celebrate.”

“What does it feel like?” I asked. “Have you ever needed to be forgiven?”

“All make mistakes,” he repeated. “Have you not done

things for which you need forgiveness, Cassie the Animorph?”

“Yeah. Too many things.”

“That is not true,” he told me. “There is no number of sins that the whole cannot accept. There is no sin so great that all working together cannot handle the burden. Andalite, do you not need forgiveness for some things?”

<Andalites do not ask forgiveness. We do what we must.>

“You may not ask forgiveness, but that does not mean that you have no need of it. I fought by the side of many Andalites when your people came to help us against the Yeerks. There were many who wished to be forgiven.”

“Where they forgiven?”

“Of course. Forgiveness takes only two. One to forgive, and one to be forgiven.”

<Can you always find two? When you’re dealing with non-Anati, I mean?> David asked.

“There is always one willing to forgive. What is harder to find is the one to be forgiven.”

“If...let’s say one of you was a traitor. Would you forgive him if he asked you to?”

“If he truly was sorry for what he did, we would. At the end of the war, the Yeerks asked us for forgiveness.”

“What did you do?”

“Those who truly wished to be forgiven, we forgave. But the ones who were only trying to save themselves, those we destroyed. We have no greater sin than that of feigning forgiveness or the willingness to be forgiven.”

“And you do these ceremonies with non-Anati?” I asked.

“With anyone.”

I glanced at David. I couldn't read expression on his rat face. Or in his eyes. I didn't know if this was sinking in or not, but I think the Ellimist's plan was going to work. My plan, too. If there was every a place where David could find forgiveness, it was here.

# CHAPTER 13

I couldn't tell the difference between the Anati leader and any other Anati, which might have been intentional. Nevertheless, they promised he was the leader, so I assumed he was.

"You are a long way from home, Cassie the Animorph," he said to me. We were in his 'office.' It was surprisingly like any other office. A desk. A weird chair designed for the Anati so that it didn't end with them 'sitting' on their heads. There were a few pink disks on the desk that I think might have held battle plans. Everything in sight was pink. "Why have you come to us?"

"I'm told you're about to make war on the Helmacrons and Garatrons," I answered.

"Garatrons have become involved? That is a mistake on their part. They are fast but not faster than our sonic cannons. Have you come to help us, Cassie?"

"No. We came to stop you. What did the Helmacrons do? Surely there is a peaceful solution."

"The Helmacrons insulted one of us."

<That's it?> David demanded.

“To we Anati, that is a grave crime, rat-man. When you insult one Anati, you insult all. You insult our race, our home, our planet, and everything we believe. We cannot allow such a thing to happen.”

“What about forgiveness? You seem to be pretty big on that,” I pointed out.

“We have asked them to apologize. We were met with more insults and arrogance. The first step towards forgiveness is humility. The Helmacrons have none of that.”

I knew he was telling the truth. I had met the Helmacrons first hand. They’re smaller than a grain of sand but more arrogant than the Andalites and Yeerks combined. They think they’re the masters of the Galaxy.

“They will not be forgiven, Cassie, and we cannot let the insults stand.”

<So you’re going to annihilate their entire race?> David asked. <Even I think that’s going a bit far.>

“We have no wish to kill them all. We will kill enough that they will be sorry they insulted us. If we cannot make them ask for forgiveness, we can make them regret.”

“You can’t fight them,” I insisted. “They have a powerful weapon. If you destroy them, the weapon will go off and kill

you all.”

“That is of no importance to us. We have sworn to avenge this insult even if the price is our lives.”

“But you’ll destroy the Garatrons, too,” I insisted.

“If they side with our enemies, then they are enemies as well. Unless they ask for forgiveness, they will be ended.”

<While I understand and admire your commitment to your honor, is this not going a bit far? If you kill these Garatrons, the entire race will collapse within three generations.>

“You do not seem to understand the Anati way, Andalite. If you are a friend, we will fight with you to the very end. Your people know that. And, as the Yeerks can tell you, if you make enemies of us, we will fight against you until you are gone or we are. We do not believe in middle ground.”

“How can you not believe in anything in between?” I demanded.

“Can you compromise between sin and virtue? What is right is right and what is wrong is wrong. It is as simple as that,” the Anati told me.

“But how can destroying two races over a petty insult be right?” I pressed. “How can that be justified?”

“It cannot. We are sorry that we must do this but it must be

done. They have wronged us and unless they ask us for forgiveness, they must be ended. When it is all over, we will ask for forgiveness.”

“If you kill them all, who is there to forgive you?”

“If there is no one, then we will die from our shame. It will be the end of the Helmacrons, the Garatrons, and all the Anati aboard this ship.”

<This is nuts,> David said. <We’re talking about thousands, maybe millions, of lives. Yours among them! How can you throw that away over an insult?>

“You no longer wear a human shape. I know about the morphing technology. Why did you throw away your human shape, morpher?”

<I didn’t. It was taken from me.>

“As were our lives when we were insulted. Now we go to take them back.”

“I just can’t understand this. Do either of you?” I looked from Alloran to David.

<This defies all logical sense,> Alloran answered. Privately, he added, <These Anati seem as imbalanced as the Helmacrons. This is taking their honor to obscene levels.>

“Perhaps you would understand if you were one of us,” the

Anati suggested. He looked at David. “Are you still able to morph? I have heard of one who can morph even though he was trapped long ago.”

<I can morph,> David answered.

“Then morph me. Perhaps then you will understand why we must fight.”

# CHAPTER 14

It should have been easy. Morph an Anati. But there was a problem. The Anati was not a single creature. It was three different ones put together. That meant that each of us would have to morph a different part.

We knew that the head controlled the rest of the body, so we had to decide who would be the head. “Okay, so one of us will have to be the head. I’m thinking we flip a coin,” I said.

<Why flip a coin?> David asked.

<Yes, how does that aid us in decision making?> Alloran questioned. <What is the significance of this ritual?>

“It’s not a ritual, Alloran. You’ll see how it works.” Except that we couldn’t find a coin. We needed a new plan.

<Rock, paper, scissors?> David asked.

“You don’t have hands,” I pointed out. “I have an idea.” I turned to the Anati. “Think of a number between one and five.”

“I am unfamiliar with human numbers.”

“Okaaaaay...Alloran, pick a number between one and five,” I decided.

<Four.>

“No, don’t say it out loud.”

<I am sorry. This is confusing.>

“It’s not supposed to be! Okay, okay...Eenie, meenie, minee, moe... Catch a tiger by the toe...”

<That sounds like a very dangerous instruction, Cassie.>

<I tried that once. It’s not smart.>

“Everyone shut up!”

“It seems to me, Cassie the Animorph, that you should morph my...head. You appear to be in command.”

“Really? I appear to be in command? If you say so. Fine, I’ll morph the head.”

<In that case, I want to do the claw,> David decided.

<That thing looks pretty nasty.>

<Then I shall morph the legs.>

“Okay, now that we have that covered, we can get to this.”

We each put a hand to a different part of the Anati. We have rules against morphing sentient creatures, but the Anati had asked us to, so we didn’t let that stop us this time.

I concentrated on the weird pink head and the changes started. The first thing to change was my color. My skin stayed the same texture, but it turned the same pink as the Anati. So did my hair. “I look like Rachel if she died her hair and got a

really bad sunburn,” I decided. Then things got odd.

One. Two. Three. Four. The stalk eyes shot out of my head, wriggling around like snakes. David described it best when he whispered, <Medusa.>

Then, my body pulled in on itself. My arms melted into my body. My legs fused together. My entire body sucked in till it was the same thickness as my neck. Then, it sort of retracted until my feet were just below my neck. My toes fused together and then the third foot grew out like a massive tumor.

POP! A new eye appeared just above and between my original pair. POP! POP! Two more eyes appeared, completing the five-eyed cluster the Anati heads had. I had nine eyes in all, now, and four of them waved around on stalks, seeing everything.

All the while, I could feel the disturbing sensation of my insides changing. Morphing never hurts, but it does feel weird. If it hurt, you’d die before you were halfway done.

In this case, the most disturbing sensation was my organs. Most of them disappeared, since they were no longer needed. My digestive system became a lot less complicated. Now, I would eat food and then almost immediately regurgitate what I didn’t need to eat. My mouth widened into an O and then

moved to the top of my head. I reminded myself of a Taxxon. The ring of needle-sharp teeth didn't help much.

Finally, it was complete. Last came the mind. I didn't get the memories of the Anati (thank God) but I did get his instincts. The one that surprised me most was the fear.

I was small and weak in a world where the small and weak were destroyed. I was alone when there was strength in numbers. Something needed to be done. But what?

I saw David and Alloran. Alloran's morph had been about the same as mine. His legs changed to those of the Anati and the rest of him just sort of disappeared. He stood there, probably as scared as I was.

David had turned into the claw. I didn't watch his transformation because I was too busy watching myself and Alloran. Now, I paid complete attention.

The claw had a sort of carapace, like a lobster. That opened up and a dozen needle-like legs unfurled. David started to crawl around. Something occurred to me then. What if the claw was a predator? I was definitely prey.

But then the claw reached Alloran. David used his little legs and climbed up one of the legs. A bunch of tendrils came out of the rear end of the claw and met with a similar bunch

from the legs. They entwined and then pulled together. Then, they seamlessly fused together.

Alloran walked over to me. David plucked me off the ground and rotated me so I was upside-down. I expected to be disoriented, but the Anati eyes rotated with me, so everything was still right-side up.

David pressed me against Alloran's underbelly. My feet found a hold somewhere. I fused with him. And suddenly, all the fear was gone. It was replaced with a feeling of peace. No wonder the Anati seemed so wise. They had a natural peace like...like a whale.

<Whoa,> David gasped. <I've...I've never felt anything like that before.>

<Me neither,> I agreed. I was out of breath.

<It was very powerful,> Alloran agreed. <But now that we are together...I can see now.>

<You couldn't before?> I asked.

<No. I was deaf and blind before David attached you to us. Now, everything is different.>

<Yeah, same here,> David agreed. <I couldn't see or hear anything. I just felt...something. It was like...like there was something I had to do so I did it. And the next thing I knew,

here we are. I'm...I'm not afraid anymore.>

<It feels great,> I agreed.

<No, you don't get it. I'm a rat, Cassie. A prey animal. I'm always afraid. Always. But right now...>

<Perhaps we have not fully controlled the morph,> Alloran suggested.

<Maybe we shouldn't,> I answered. <We're trying to see things the way the Anati see them.>

<I see it now,> David answered. <I get why we have to fight. The Helmacrons insulted us. This other Anati here? He's as much a part of me as you guys are. And if anyone even looked at you guys funny I'd tear his eyeballs out.>

I agreed. I suddenly felt fiercely protective of the other two. <I'll let you know if anyone's coming,> I said. <I'll see it and I'll let you know. No one will surprise us. Now while I'm on the job!>

<No one will lay a hand on you two,> Alloran promises. <I will keep you safe from harm. I swear it!>

# CHAPTER 14

“Do you feel it?” the Anati asked.

<Yeah. We feel it,> I answered. I didn’t have to ask what he meant.

<We all feel it,> David agreed. Then, <Okay, where are these Helmacrons? I’ll show them what happens when you mess with us.>

I tried to sort out what I was feeling. I was the head. It was my job to think. What was this I was feeling for the others? It reminded me of...of Ronnie. I knew what it was now. I loved them.

I loved David and Alloran.

It wasn’t the same way I loved Ronnie. It wasn’t romantic love. It was something that went even deeper. This was the kind of love you’d feel for a parent or a child. I’d die for them. In a heartbeat, I’d die for either of them.

And the Helmacrons had insulted them. I couldn’t let that go. The Helmacrons had to pay!

But they could be forgiven. They didn’t understand. They didn’t feel love as we felt it. If they asked it, we would forgive them. I could forgive anyone for anything.

I've never before been something so intrinsically loving. I've been a dolphin, which was happy to its very soul, but it didn't love. Only a sentient creature could love like this.

I felt a trembling in my soul. It was David. He was the claw, so he couldn't cry. But he wanted to. And he cried in his soul. Softly, he whispered. <I'm sorry, Cassie. I am so, so sorry. I never wanted to hurt you.>

And then, a voice I didn't quite expect. Alloran. <It is okay, David. No one blames you. You panicked. Everyone panicked. No one is to blame.>

<Please, forgive me. Everyone forgive me! Cassie, let's have one of their ceremonies. I want to be forgiven.>

<I want to forgive,> I answered. I turned my head to the Anati, my brother. No, not my brother. My self. <I want to have a forgiveness ceremony. I want to forgive David.>

<I want her to forgive me,> David almost yelled. <Please, can't we have a ceremony?>

"Of course! There is nothing we would like more. Everyone will be summoned. I will instruct you in how to proceed," he added.

I/we was/were led to a grand chamber in the center of the ship. We spent a moment rehearsing the lines. Then, once

everyone got there, it was time.

David spoke first. <I have done wrong. I am a traitor. I turned against my friends. I tried to kill them. I tried to scare them. I tried to make them obey me. I am sorry. I am so very, very sorry.>

It was my turn to speak. <David wronged me. He tried to kill me. He tried to scare me. He tried to make me obey him. But he is sorry. He has seen that he was wrong. He wishes to be part of the whole again. I forgive him.>

The lead Anati spoke slowly, reverently. “What was done is done. What has passed has passed. It is done, passed. No longer does its shadow hang over us. We welcome back this human, David.” He turned all his eyes on us. “Come, David, and join your family.”

And then we had a massive feast. It had already been prepared to celebrate my arrival, but now it was so much more important. Now it was a feat of forgiveness. We celebrated David’s return.

I ate. David and Alloran tasted what I tasted. <Oh, this is so good,> David moaned.

<It is even better than engine oil,> Alloran agreed.

<You drank engine oil?> I asked.

<Once, when Prince Tobias was busy. My uncle had told me it was delicious and I wanted to try for myself. I know I should not have done it, but...>

<We won't tell,> David promised. <And yeah, this is way better than engine oil.>

We celebrated for an hour before Alloran told us, <We will have to demorph soon if we wish to avoid remaining in this morph. I... I have enjoyed it, but I have a duty to my Prince and my people.>

<Yeah,> I sighed. It was sad. I knew that, when we demorphed, we wouldn't be this close again. I had to talk to them first.

<Guys...I'm going to leave after this. Once this mission is over, I'm going to marry Ronnie. I'm out of this war.>

I expected Alloran to say something different. I thought he'd talk about duty or honor or bravery. Instead, he just said, <I understand. You love Ronnie like we love each other right now. I could not refuse a request from either of you now. I do not blame you for leaving, Cassie. It is already forgiven.>

<But won't that put the Animorphs down a member?> David asked.

<David...I want you to come back. I've forgiven you and

you've forgiven yourself. I want to quit but I can't unless you agree to take my place.>

He was silent for a minute. Then, <Okay. I'll do it. Just for you, Cassie. But will the others accept me?>

<I will make them,> Alloran answered. <I will make Prince Tobias see that you are not the man who betrayed them. You are one of us.>

Demorphing was the hardest thing I've ever done. I tried to pull away from the other two but I just couldn't. I was like a mother pulling an overturned car off of her child. My strength to hold on to them was beyond physical limits.

So we had to demorph without detaching. That meant that, when we were done, David was on Alloran's back and I was lying under him. After what we had just been through, it was just a little bit awkward.

# CHAPTER 15

We slept aboard the *Reliquary* that night. We knew there was no way to turn the Anati back. We understood it now. Honestly I wasn't even sure we should if we could.

For the first time in a few days, I was fully asleep. No more confusing thoughts were running around my head. The David issue was solved. My problems with Ronnie were solved. Everything was peaceful.

BRIIIIIIIING! BRIIIIIIIING! BRIIIIIIIING!

The alarm jolted me from a dead sleep. It wasn't the *Reliquary's* alarm, which meant that the Anati had encountered something.

I was already morphing to wolf, just in case. Alloran stood with his tail at the ready, a Shredder in one hand. David was rapidly morphing from rat to lion. We would be ready.

An Anati claw rapped on the door. "Animorphs? I do not wish to disturb your rest but we have encountered a situation in which we believe your expertise would be very useful if it is not too great of an inconvenience."

<They have a way of being honestly polite and sarcastic at the same time,> David commented. <It's kind of refreshing

and kind of insulting. And annoying. Definitely annoying.>

We bounded out of the *Reliquary*. One of the Anati was waiting for us. <What's happening?> I demanded.

<We have encountered a Yeerk Blade ship," he answered. "Normally we would just destroy it. We have more than enough firepower to do so. But this is the Blade ship of the former Visser Three and we heard that it had vanished. We thought you might like to be contacted."

I almost laughed with relief. <Don't worry. Some of the other Animorphs are on it,> I told him. To David and Alloran, I said, <Come on, let's go tell Tobias and Rachel the good news. We've got a new Animorph.>

We sped to the bridge, demorphing as we went. When we entered, we heard Marco's voice. "—pay any attention, Rachel? Insulting them is what almost got the Helmacrons wiped out."

A hologram of the Blade ship's bridge was projected in front of us. Tobias, Marco, Jeanne, Rachel, Guraff, and the Visser were standing on it. It looked like the Visser and Guraff were having a conversation, but I couldn't hear it.

Tobias saw us. "Good evening, Cassie. Alloran."

<My Prince,> Alloran returned bowing his head and

dipping his tail. <Was your mission successful?>

Tobias nodded to Rachel, who held up a clear box with a small ship inside. It looked like a cheesy B-movie space ship. I recognized it as a Helmacron ship. “We figured it would be hard for them to fight if we captured the Helmacron fleet.”

Tobias turned his attention to the Anati leader. “On behalf of the Helmacron people, I want to apologize. They are sorry for what they said of your people.”

“How do you speak for their people?” the Anati leader asked. “You are no Helmacron.”

“Nope. But they gave me the position of Ambassador to the Anati if I would agree to let them go after this. They no longer want to fight you and are deeply, deeply sorry for their insults,” Tobias answered.

Rachel shook the box. “Yep, they’re sorry. I can hear them being sorry in there.” Faintly, I heard thought speak voices begging forgiveness and mercy.

“Then they are forgiven,” the Anati leader answered. “I am glad we could avoid bloodshed.”

“What about the Garatrons?” I asked Marco.

He shrugged. “They were easy. They’re really quite reasonable once you get them to slow down and think things

through. They don't want their population destroyed."

"What are Guraff and the Visser doing?"

Tobias nodded to them. "The Visser is trying to figure out what we did to ensure that he won't kill us while we're here. Guraff is helping."

"Well, I have some great news," I said.

I guess David realized I was about to tell them about him. <Wait, Cassie. Not in front of Esplin and Guraff. I could go back to the Yeerks and work as a spy.>

I had forgiven David. Even if it was partly under the control of the Anati morph, I still had forgiven him. I had made him one of us. I would have to trust him.

"What news?" Rachel asked.

My mind was blank. Fortunately, Alloran was paying attention. <I fixed the microwave on the *Reliquary*.>

"Yay! Pizza rolls for everyone!" Marco shouted, overly enthusiastic. Jeanne gave him a look like she was angry at him. Then, she started laughing. Rachel glared at the two of them, but Tobias looked from me to Alloran. He suspected something was up.

"Later," I mouthed.

<Prince Tobias will not be happy about this,> Alloran

warned me.

I nodded. I knew.

<He has not felt what we have felt. He has not shared what we have shared with David.>

I nodded again.

<This may not end well.>

I nodded a third time.

# CHAPTER 16

We were back on the *Reliquary*, all six of us. The Visser, Guraff, and David were on the Blade ship. Guraff and David managed to convince the Visser not to attack us because the Anati fleet would rip the Blade ship to pieces.

Fortunately, Alloran really had fixed the microwave, so Marco wasn't disappointed. Soon, we were sitting around the table, eating pizza rolls.

Tobias looked from me to Alloran. "Okay. Now that it's just us Animorphs, what were you really going to tell us, Cassie?"

Suddenly, I wasn't so sure about this. They weren't the most forgiving bunch of people. Still, I had no choice now. "David's back on our side."

"No he isn't," Marco answered casually, like it was nothing. "Not a chance."

Rachel nodded. Tobias didn't. Instead, in a level, even tone, he asked, "Cassie, is this a joke?"

I shook my head. "Alloran and I convinced him to turn back. I think that might have been what the Ellimist hoped to gain by putting him on my team."

“No way,” Rachel insisted. “David’s a traitor, Cassie. I don’t care if he says he’s on our side, he’s not.”

Marco nodded. “He’s playing you, Cassie. You’re a good person so you want to believe him. And Alloran doesn’t know him. Even if he really thinks he’s on our side, he’ll turn again when things look bad.”

Jeanne was silent. I had expected her to be. She didn’t know David. Tobias was being quiet, too. “Tobias, what do you think?” I asked him.

He thought for a moment. “I think we can sit around all night arguing whether or not he’s really on our side. But that won’t solve anything. What we need is proof. David said he’d stay with the Yeerks as a spy, didn’t he? That’s why he isn’t with us right now.”

“Right.”

“Well...Marco and Jeanne, why don’t you tell them what you told me and Rachel?”

Marco nodded. “You know that the Visser had to feed while we were with him. Well, when the Yeerk was in his pool, Ax and I had a little conversation.”

I saw Alloran look away. I put one hand on his arm. “What did he have to say?” I asked.

“Mostly that he wished there was some way we could kill him,” Jeanne answered. “But there was no way to go about doing it.”

“So then he told us about something the Yeerks are up to,” Marco answered. “They’re smuggling something on to Earth to help them with their invasion.”

<What are they smuggling?> Alloran asked.

“Taxxons.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. Taxxons were big worms, about ten feet long and so thick you couldn’t wrap your arms around one. Even if, for some reason, you wanted to. They have rows of needle-like legs and one big mouth at the top of their heads. They’ve got four eyes for a face and that’s it.

They’re monsters. They’ll eat anything at all. That includes other Taxxons. That includes themselves. I’ve seen it happen. Once, Ax chopped a Taxxon in half and the top tried to devour the bottom. That’s a nightmare I’ll never outgrow.

Marco continued. “The Visser’s getting a shipment of Taxxons delivered to his Blade ship when he gets back to Earth. We’re thinking we should cause a little trouble.”

<But if Prince Aximili told you this, surely the Visser will know that we will attack and he will take precautions,>

Alloran noted.

Tobias nodded. “Yeah. Things will look pretty bad for us. If David sticks with us then, I’ll believe he’s come back. I wasn’t even going to go after the Taxxons until now.”

I nodded. “So we’ll go after the shipment. I’ll tell David it’s time for him to help. If he comes, he’s with us.”

“And if he makes any excuses, he’s David,” Rachel finished. “How much do you want to bet we’ll not be coming home with a new Animorph?”

“How much do you want to bet we’ll not be coming home at all?” Marco replied.

“We’ll escape, at the very least,” Tobias assured him. “I got a little present from the Helmacrons. A shrink ray. In an emergency, we use it. The *Reliquary* will be totally invisible. It’ll get us out of trouble.”

“So that way, we won’t just be outnumbered and outgunned, we’ll be tiny, too,” Marco said brightly, forcing a smile. “Am I the only one who thinks this is insane?”

“You’re the only one who won’t shut up about it,” Rachel muttered.

Jeanne sighed. “Marco, just enjoy your pizza rolls. Think of it as a last meal.”

# CHAPTER 17

The next day, we were close enough to Earth for me to call Ronnie. I didn't want to do it with everyone there, but Ronnie needed to know what I decided. But I had to tell the others first.

"Hey, guys, there's something important I need to tell everyone," I said as we were gathered around the table again. Rachel had made us breakfast. Now, Rachel's good at a lot of things. Not cooking. I envied Alloran right then. Her cooking...well, it reminded me of the animals back home in my barn. The live animals in my barn.

Of course, no one told her. Jeanne was too polite to say it. Marco was too scared. I was too nice. And Tobias and Alloran were far too smart to tell her the truth. So we just grinned and prayed it wouldn't accidentally kill us all.

"What is it?" Jeanne asked.

"I'm...Ronnie proposed."

Rachel actually screamed enthusiastically. "Oh, Cassie, that's so great! When's the wedding? How many? Oh I can't wait. This will be the best thing ever!" Rachel went on about it for the next few minutes.

Marco used the distraction to dispose of his food. Jeanne joined Rachel in the celebration. Alloran, of course, already knew. I watched Tobias. He didn't react. Somehow, I knew he had already figured out what I had figured out.

When Rachel and Jeanne finally calmed down, Tobias fixed me with his hawk-like stare. "Cassie, would this mean that you're leaving the war?"

His tone was level, even. He understood. I nodded. "Yeah. Ronnie...he said it was the war or him. I thought about it. It's one of the hardest choices I've ever had to make, but—"

"But you decided to take the easy way out," Tobias interrupted. Suddenly, I realized that he wasn't speaking so levelly because he understood. He was angry.

Everyone was quiet now. They looked at me. "It's not like that. Listen, this wasn't easy."

"And yet you made the easy choice."

"It isn't easy," I repeated. "Look, I hate the thought of leaving all of you but I love Ronnie."

"And that's what's important?" Tobias asked. It was almost a hiss.

Surprisingly, it was Marco who jumped to my defense. "Wait a minute, Tobias. Look, I'm not happy about this either,

but Cassie deserves to be happy.”

“There are more important things than her happiness.”

“How can you say that?” I demanded of him. “You, of all people! How can you sit there and condemn me for choosing love over war?”

Then, I saw something in Tobias’ eyes that I’ve never seen there before. He was angry. And not angry like he sometimes got when he saw Yeerks or bullies. This was angry like how Rachel got angry.

“Because I chose war over love every single day. Every single morning I woke up and had to decide just what was important: me or everything else. And now you have the nerve to sit here and ask me how I can condemn you?”

He shot out of his seat, standing up straight. I never realized before just how tall he was. He was more than six feet tall. And I never realized how cold his eyes could be.

“How the hell can you call yourself one of us? How the hell can you call yourself a human being!? To sit down and decide that the whole human race can go to hell as long as you’re happy? You are the worst kind of person, Cassie. You’re nothing but a selfish coward! You’re willing to sell the whole species, the whole GALAXY just for Rodger Chaplin!”

“His name is Ronnie Chambers,” I interrupted.

“And your name might as well be Esplin! That’s the only person who would do something like this. Him or David. No Animorph. Never one of us. So you know what, Cassie? Just go. Leave. Never let me see you again! You and Ronnie or Rodger or Richard can both burn in hell for all I care!”

I have seen Tobias sad. I’ve seen him in his rare happy moments. I’ve seen him angry. I even saw him when he learned that his mother was still alive. But I have never seen him furious. Not like this. Not in a screaming rage.

Honestly, I was scared. I have been scared by people trying to kill me. Now, pretty much nothing else scares me. I was afraid of Tobias right then because he looked like he might kill me right there with his bare hands.

His head darted around. He was looking for somewhere to go. Anywhere but here. He couldn’t look at me anymore. He wanted to get out of there before he did something he’d regret.

He stormed off to the bathroom, the only room that could be sealed off from me. There was something final about the way he slammed the door. Whatever friendship we had, it was over now. I had done the only unforgivable thing in his mind.

I looked to the others. Rachel looked furious, but not

nearly as angry as Tobias had been. She just shook her head at me. Then, she stalked over to her bed and threw herself down, staring at the wall.

I turned to Marco and Jeanne. “Marco...”

He shook his head. “I can’t hold it against you, Cassie. I can’t be a hypocrite. Back in the beginning, I wanted out. I almost left. I would have if I hadn’t found out about my mother. I can never hold it against anyone who quits. Just as long as you don’t betray us.”

Jeanne nodded. “I don’t know what to think, Cassie. I don’t blame someone for not fighting a war. But I don’t understand how you can do it. I guess it just isn’t as personal to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, of all of us, this has affected you the least. Jake lost his brother and, for a time, his parents. Marco lost his mother. Rachel lost her life. I lost my past and my family. Tobias lost everything. Who did you lose, Cassie?”

I couldn’t answer her. I knew I had suffered through things in this war. I did. Maybe no one I really loved had died, but there were losses.

I looked at Alloran. He shook his head. “I have already

forgiven you, Cassie.>

I nodded. "I know. Do you think Tobias and Rachel will?"

He was quiet. Then, he whispered his answer. <If you talk to her, if you give her some time, Rachel might.>

"And Tobias?"

<No.>

## CHAPTER 18

We were close enough to see Earth now. According to the *Reliquary's* sensors, the Blade ship was hiding behind the moon. There was also a Skrit-Na transport loading a bunch of Taxxons onto it. Both would have been invisible to normal technology, but Alloran had rigged up scanners that were as good as anything the Chee might have made.

Tobias edged the *Reliquary* close to the moon. We were invisible as long as we stayed against the stars. “Okay, here’s the plan. I’ll swoop in. The rest of you board the freighter. We know the Visser’s expecting us, so he’ll probably have his boys hiding on the moon, ready to attack. I’ll handle them, but get back as soon as they show so we have a way out. Alloran, your job is to try to get David to join us when things look nasty. If he makes any excuses, he’s dead to us.”

He gave that job to Alloran. He wasn’t even going to acknowledge that I existed. At least he didn’t look like he was going to hit me. Of course, it was Tobias. When normal people would be gritting their teeth or screaming in rage, he looked calm because he forgot how to make facial expressions.

We swooped in on top of the freighter. Tobias fired off

some of the *Reliquary*'s cannons but he didn't hit anything important on the Blade ship.

We landed on top of the Skrit-Na freighter. You know those flying saucers you see in movies? Now you know where those came from.

In our battle morphs, we spilled in through a hatch in the floor of the *Reliquary*/roof of the freighter. Oddly enough, there were no Skrit to be found. Or any Na. Or Taxxons. Just the Visser, a lion I recognized as David, and a half dozen Kelbrid.

<Not the trap we were expecting,> Marco noted.

The Visser laughed. <Amazing. Guraff thought that not even you would be so foolish as to act on information my host gave you. But I knew better.>

I felt a familiar fear wash over me. There was an evil that permeated the air around the Visser. He had Ax's body, but there was a different feel around him. I could almost see the evil rolling off of him like fog. Even after all I've been through, he still scared me.

Guraff's voice chirped over the intercom. "Visser, I request permission to engage the *Reliquary* with the Blade ship."

<Go on,> the Visser urged. <We shall finish them all in one stroke.> When he said stroke, he chopped his tail forward. The Kelbrid came at us.

I felt the ship shudder as both the Blade ship and the *Reliquary* detached. “Sorry, guys,” I heard Tobias say over the intercom. “If I just sit here, he’ll toast the ship. This won’t take long. Just hang on till I get back around.”

Over the freighter’s intercom, I heard Guraff again. “Let us see if you fly as well as you claim, young beast!” He sounded pretty happy.

“Guraff? I fly better.”

By this time, the Kelbrid were on us. This was not good. Marco was a gorilla. Rachel was a grizzly. Alloran was his Andalite self. I was a wolf. Jeanne was a leopard. We had enough power to take on the Kelbrid. Maybe. If we were lucky. But then the Visser started morphing.

His blue fur turned orange. Then, black stripes started to grow as well. I knew what he was doing. It helped that he decided to let us in on the secret. <Do you remember how long I admired this morph?> he asked. <And now that Jake is dead, I see no reason why I cannot have his morphs. After all,> he added with a laugh, <Marco got his stereo.>

It was sick and wrong. But I didn't have time to worry about it. A wolf is maybe a match for a Kelbrid. Kelbrid: seven feet tall from end to end. A cat's legs beneath a gorilla's chest. One long arm ending in a ten-fingered hand. The other, a horribly muscled thing with a foot-long stinger at the end, covered with an anesthetic poison. Black, leathery flesh covered their bodies, as if they had evolved to look sinister.

A flat jawed crocodile-like head snapped at me. Cats ears, swept backwards, were on either side of the head. Thin whiskers dangled from beneath their powerful jaws, probably sensing vibrations in the air to make up for having no eyes.

Kelbrid are fast. Almost as fast as wolves. The key word being almost. I was faster, but their hide was armor. No glancing blows would work here. I had to go for the killing shot or I'd get taken down.

Jeanne wasn't in a good situation. The leopard was an ambusher. She was circling a Kelbrid, looking for an opening she probably wouldn't find.

Marco was fighting off one Kelbrid. They rolled on the floor, Marco trying with all his gorilla strength to keep the stinger from reaching his throat. He was just barely succeeding; that's how strong that Kelbrid arm was.

Alloran was dodging the strokes of a Kelbrid. It was narrow. One solid blow, maybe even a glancing one, and Alloran would be down and helpless. He lacerated the Kelbrid with dozens of slashes, but they meant nothing to these monsters.

Rachel was fighting two of them, but she was weakening. The bear was the strongest morph we had, but the Kelbrid poison made it weaker. She couldn't last long.

The Visser circled the fight, pacing. <Who to destroy first... Marco? He would be no match for a tiger. Rachel? No. The bear is stronger. It has no style, though, and I have acquired something of a flare for that. You can see it here. In the old days, I would have just ambushed you with an army of Bug fighters.> Then, his eyes locked on mine. <Ah, Cassie. The wolf. Yes, that would be most amusing.>

Then, I heard a different voice. <Hey, you ever wonder who'd win in a fight between a lion and a tiger?>

# CHAPTER 19

Esplin stopped cold and glared at David. <You are betraying me, David?>

If lions could smile, I swear David did. <It's kind of what I'm famous for.> Then, he struck.

Esplin went down. Hard. A tiger is a strong animal, maybe as strong as a lion. But you just can't have a full grown male lion drop itself on you and remain standing.

The Kelbrid paused, distracted. That was the opening Jeanne and I needed. Almost at the same time, we lunged. My teeth bit deep into my Kelbrid's throat. I felt his blood spurt in my mouth.

It burned! They were like acid inside. But I still held on. I jerked my head back and forth until the Kelbrid stopped moving. Out of the corner of my eye, Jeanne did the same.

Alloran's Kelbrid fell to the ground. Its head landed a few feet away from the rest of it. My wolf ears heard a sickening CRACK as Marco snapped his opponent's neck.

Rachel actually picked up one Kelbrid and hit the other one with him. Then, with a roar, she broke the Kelbrid over her knee.

<Guraff!> the Visser bellowed.

“I am on my way.... You may want to take a deep breath, Visser.” We all took that advice. One wall of the freighter blew open. The Blade ship hung in the opening. A ramp extended down from it. Hork-bajir and Kelbrid bounded out, each wielding a Dracon beam. That wasn’t something we could fight.

All of the air was instantly sucked out. And it was cold. Freezing, really. We would be dead in moments. Everyone would. Then, the roof ripped off and the *Reliquary* appeared. We leapt aboard. All six of us.

We demorphed as soon as the hatch was closed. My teeth had been burnt out by the Kelbrid’s blood. So had Jeanne’s. The others needed to get the poison out of their systems. David had some nasty wounds from the Visser’s morph.

One by one, we turned to look at him. He was a little white rat. Helpless now. He had delivered himself into our hands, trusting us. Just like we had trusted him.

Then, the Blade ship rose before us on the view screens. The Visser stood on the bridge. He looked pretty ticked.

<The day will come, Animorphs. I will have you. All of you. Especially you, David. There is a special place in my

torture chambers for traitors. Ask Marco's mother.>

"Tobias?" Marco began. "Fry this creep."

Tobias still didn't smile. "Yes sir."

The Visser turned to Guraff. <Can you defeat him?>

Guraff smiled a Hork-bajir smile. "Not yet, Visser. Not just yet."

<Then why are you smiling!?!>

"It has been a long time since I had a worthy foe."

<Sometimes I just don't understand you, Guraff.>

"And I you, Esplin." Then, Guraff's eyes locked on David. "David. The only thing I cannot stand is a traitor. You have no honor. You are a rat inside and out. If we ever meet again, I will kill you."

Then, the Blade ship turned and flew away. Tobias didn't pursue. We had more pressing matters. He turned to David. "So, David. You're back with us now. Is that what I'm to understand, guys?"

Rachel nodded. "Yeah. He jumped into the fight. He could have stood there and let us die. But he risked his life to save ours. Maybe he really has changed."

"What do you think, Marco?"

"I'm with Xena. The David I know wouldn't have done

that. I don't fully trust him, but maybe it isn't too late for him after all."

Tobias nodded. "Okay then. David, you're an Animorph again. But you're on probation."

<What does that mean?>

Tobias's mouth twitched into a smile. "I haven't decided yet. Something about adult supervision, I think."

I smiled. "So you're back up to six Animorphs. Are you happy now, Tobias?"

His anger returned so quick I jumped. "You think that's why I'm angry? You think this is about numbers? This has nothing to do with that! You're supposed to understand people, Cassie? Figure it out! Alloran, drive this thing home. And then, Cassie, I want you off of my ship and out of my home. I don't want to see you ever again."

He stormed off to the bathroom again. David turned his rat face to me. <Was that really Tobias?>

I nodded. "Yeah, that's him."

<Wow. He didn't even get that angry when I tried to kill him. Still, I guess I can't blame him. You can't see why he's so upset?>

"No. I thought was because he was losing a warrior.

Now...now I don't know."

<Oh. I know.>

"What is it?"

<It isn't that he's losing a warrior. It because he just lost one of his only friends.>

## CHAPTER 20

In spite of everything, I went to the *Reliquary* the next day. I needed to talk to Tobias and Rachel. Of all the Animorphs, I thought they would understand.

Alloran was outside, grazing. He saw me. <Cassie? I do not think Prince Tobias would like you being here.>

“I know. Can you get Rachel for me? I need to talk to her before I go back home.”

He nodded and then obeyed. It almost surprised me that Rachel came out to meet me. “Okay, Cassie. Talk. Tell me how you can do it.”

“Rachel, I thought if anyone would understand it would be you and Tobias. You know how I feel about Ronnie. If Tobias asked you to give up the war for him, would you do it?”

She was quiet for a moment. We were deep in the forest, in a little clearing. Finally, she shrugged. “I don’t know. I’d have wanted to, I know that. But I’m needed here. We have to fight, Cassie.”

“That’s why David’s here. You aren’t losing a warrior.” Then I remembered what David had said. “And you aren’t losing a friend.”

Rachel shook her head. “My friends wouldn’t leave me in this. They wouldn’t walk away while I still fought I died for this, Cassie. How can I forgive you for walking away? This war cost me my life!”

“I know. And if it had cost me mine, I’d be able to accept that. I can let it take my life. But I can’t let it take Ronnie. Rachel, you know what it’s like to love someone more than life itself. You and Tobias are lucky. You can be together through all of this. Not Ronnie and me.”

“Why not? Can’t you ask him to join us? Tobias would let him if it kept you around.”

I shook my head. “This was never meant for him, Rachel. I don’t think it was ever meant for me. I’m not strong enough for it.”

“Cassie, you’re one of the strongest people I know. Only you have been able to hold onto your beliefs though all of this. That takes a strength I can’t even imagine.”

“But it isn’t enough. How can anyone do it, Rachel? How can you give up what you love more than life, more than anything? How can you throw that away to fight a war you hate? And if you do throw it away, how can you live like that? How do you do that and not destroy yourself?”

After a moment, she answered, “I don’t know.”

I took her hand in mine. “Rachel, you’re my sister. I love you. I don’t want to leave you like this. Not with you hating me. I can’t take that.”

She shook her head. “I don’t hate you, Cassie. I could never hate you. I’ll still be here for you. And if you want any help preparing your wedding, you know where to find me.”

I hugged her. She isn’t a hugging kind of person, but she made due. “I know. Thanks, Rachel. Thanks for everything.”

I turned to leave. Tobias was standing in the shadows not far away. Alloran was next to him. <I thought the two of you might have something to say to each other.>

Tobias shook his head. “I’ve got nothing to say to her.”

Rachel looked at Alloran. “Alloran, let’s go and...be not here. Sound like a plan?”

<Yes, that sounds like a very good idea.> They disappeared into the woods.

“Tobias, why can’t you understand? I—”

“That’s the thing, Cassie. I do understand. I completely understand. I know exactly what this decision is. I know just how easy it is to walk away from this to be with the person you love. What I don’t understand is how you can actually go

ahead and do it.”

“How can I do anything else? I love Ronnie more than anything. How can I walk away from him? How can I give up what I love for what I hate and not destroy myself? How can anyone do that?”

“Why don’t you ask my father? He left my mother. He left me. To go and fight a war he hated. Because he was needed. And now you can’t ask him because he’s dead. He died for this war, Cassie. He gave up everything he loved just to die in a pile of rubble in a failed construction site with only five random kids to hear his last words.

“Or why don’t you ask me? Every day, I had to decide what I was. Was I Rachel’s boyfriend? Or was I a warrior. Every single day, Cassie, I had to pass up the girl I loved. I had to look at the pain in her eyes every time I morphed back to hawk. Every. Damn. Time.”

“I can’t do that, Tobias! Can’t you see that? Not everyone is as strong as you! Not everyone can be so strong all the time! I’m only human, Tobias. I don’t know what you are that you can do that without destroying yourself but it isn’t me.”

“Who says I’m not destroying myself?” he hissed. “It kills me all the time! Every day was hell. Every time I make a

decision like that, it kills me.”

“Then how can you do it?”

“Because the decision either kills me or it kills everyone else,” he answered.

“And that’s enough for you? Does it really help you sleep at night just because you tell yourself you’re doing what you have to do?”

“No. But I’d rather I take the burden than the rest of the world suffer for it.”

“I’m just not that strong, Tobias.”

“No. No, you aren’t. You’re weak, Cassie, and foolish. This won’t protect Ronnie and it won’t protect you. Will you really be able to sleep, knowing that you abandoned us for your own selfish gain? [i]That[/i] is something I wouldn’t be strong enough to handle.”

He turned to leave. “Tobias, please. Isn’t there any way you can forgive me?”

He turned back to look at me. “No. No, there isn’t. Because when it really got tough, when things really got hard for you, you ran away. And there is no way I can ever forgive that.”

“So...so we’ll never be friends again, will we?”

“I’d sooner be friends with Esplin. At least he’s no coward.” He started walking away again. “I never want to see you again, Cassie. Never again.”

After that, I flew back to the motel Jeanne, Marco, and I had been living in. I went to the phone and dialed the number. “Ronnie? It’s Cassie. I’m coming home.”

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

*“Take-backs and sweet regrets, that's all that we have left  
No one is looking out for anyone but number one  
One to one, two to dance, we all get our sweet romance  
Though sour grapes will turn to wine its all just vinegar with time  
And oh, I want to know, we all want to know  
How can anybody treat somebody so?  
She said it hurts too much  
I said it will never hurt enough  
No one will ever see these cuts  
No one will ever call this bluff  
But that's just the way that it goes  
And when he left us he said, "It's not so bad"  
That motherfucker he took everything we had  
And when I'm thinking back, I'm counting all the ways  
Nobody helped us so we dreamt of better days  
And we sang: "Yeah that's just the way that it goes"  
Yeah, we used to be in love (my love!), but now we're just in like  
And we broke all our promises and baby that ain't right  
Because you don't know what it's like to lose it all  
Take it back, take it back because you don't know what it's like to be on the receiving end of it all.”*

—On the Receiving End of it All

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

## 62: THE PRODIGAL

We took Marco's car to the mall. A car is a human vehicle that...well, I suppose that by now, even Andalites are familiar with such common human technology. And I certainly do not need to explain what the mall is. Any Andalite who has ever visited Earth has been to the mall.

We stopped to eat at an establishment known as McDonald's. I was slightly confused because I had seen the same establishment in other places such as the Animorphs' home town and on the Andalite homeworld. "Marco, how can Mr. McDonald be everywhere at once?"

"What?" He was clearly as confused as I was.

"I have seen places operated by Mr. McDonald before. How can he maintain all of them?"

Marco seemed to be thinking. Then, he smiled. I think it was a sign of amusement. "Al, McDonald isn't a person. He's more of a symbol. He owned the first McDonald's and a few of the ones that came after that. He's dead now. Someone else owns all of this."

"Then why are the restaurants still named after

McDonald? They are no longer his.”

“That’s just the way things go,” Marco shrugged.

“Humans are very confusing.”

“You bet we are. Now what do you want to eat?”

Another human peculiarity: food. Other races eat, of course; even we Andalites absorb nutrients through our hooves. But no other races have the sheer variety of consumables that the human race has.

And yet they have deemed it wrong to eat some of their most delicious foods. Motor oil, for example, is not a viable option for food at a McDonald’s. Chicken, however, is completely acceptable. Perhaps it is because there are many more chickens than there is oil.

Jeanne shook her head. “Marco, he and David will eat everything if we do not stop them. Just order for them. David, Al, and I will find a table.”

Marco sighed. “Since when do *I* do the grunt work?” Jeanne whispered something in his ear. I did not know what she said, but it seemed to have an odd effect on Marco. His face reddened and then he smiled. “Well, when you put it like that...”

We sat in a booth near the rear of the establishment. David

darted his head around nervously. I do not know if he was really nervous or if it was just his rat instincts. “We shouldn’t be here. Didn’t I tell you it was a Yeerk pool entrance?”

Jeanne shrugged. “We cannot avoid every entrance. Just act natural. We are safe in a public place.”

Marco returned and obviously noticed David’s uneasiness. I myself was a bit uneasy. I was not afraid of doing battle here, unlike I believe David was. These were Human-Controllers; no match for us. I was only worried about what would happen without our Prince to give us directions.

“What’s with him?” Marco asked, nodding his head to David.

“Slugs,” David sighed.

We ate in silence after that. I tried very hard to concentrate on my food. It was difficult to eat as a human. I attempted to eat at a stately pace like the others so as not to attract attention. Still Marco said to Jeanne, “Look at Al rip into that. What he saw must have really freaked him out.”

“He is as bad as David.”

I glanced at David. His face was covered in condiments and trace amounts of food. In the reflection of the window, I saw that I looked no better.

Pretending to be human is hard.

“Hey,” David hissed, “listen to those two guys at the table next to us.”

David still had all the instincts of a rat, so he was constantly looking and listening to everything. Any sound could be a predator. I do not know what it is like to live with that kind of fear.

That is not to say that I have no fear, of course. But we Andalites have learned to ignore our fear. It is a weapon that the Yeerks have used to terrible effect before and it is not one that we could allow to work against us.

Now that I was trying, I could hear the two men. “...miss Guraff’s briefing?”

“I was in the pool and couldn’t hear. I didn’t come to you to get a hard time about it. So, was there anything important or not?”

“Oh, you have no idea. Do you know how he started it? Guraff stood up in front of the entire pool, in his big Hork-bajir body and said, very calmly, ‘Jake is dead.’”

“No way.”

“Guraff wouldn’t lie to us. He’s no Visser, just another soldier. He tells us what we need to know.”

The second man was silent for a few moments. Then, “I can’t believe it. That devil is finally gone. Any idea how he died?”

“Remember that explosion we heard about that wiped out our fleet on the Hork-bajir world?”

“That was him?”

“Yeah. He took twenty thousand of us down with him, not to mention the entire fleet.”

“Well, at least we don’t have to deal with him anymore. Taking Earth should be a piece of cake now.”

The first man shook his head. “You didn’t hear what he said next. He told us that the guy in charge of the Animorphs now is even worse.”

“Worse? How could it get worse?”

“It’s Tobias, the Beast’s son.”

Again, the second man was silent for a few moments. “Is he as bad as his father was?”

“Guraff thinks so. He might be worse. Haven’t you heard the rumors? He’s insane. The Visser’s host keeps telling all of the other hosts he can reach. Jake held back. He had limits, morals. Tobias doesn’t.”

“You believe it?”

The first man nodded. “Yeah. My host is usually in a cage next to the Visser’s. The things he’s told me...they’re either pure fiction or completely true. And I’m leaning towards true. I was there when the young beast took out that Truck ship all by himself. Thank the Kandrona I was in a chopper. I think only five or six people survived that.”

“The young beast, huh?”

“Yeah. That’s what Guraff says. And to make things even worse, David turned on us.”

“Well, I never liked him anyway.”

“He’s still dangerous. The Visser gave us orders to capture any Animorphs we can. But Guraff wants David’s head on his desk. About the only thing he hates is a traitor.”

“Was that it?”

“Nope. More bad news. Rachel’s back from the dead.”

“No way.

“It’s true. Guraff had a nice long conversation with her during that little disappearing act he, the Visser, and David pulled a few days ago.”

The second man sighed loudly. “Anything *else*?”

“Uh...yeah. Tobias isn’t the beast’s only son. An Andalite, Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor, is with them now.”

“So, let me make sure I’ve got this right. Jake’s gone. That’s good. Rachel’s back. That’s bad. The beast’s sons are fighting us now. That’s very bad. David turned against us. That’s bad, too. All in all, this is a very bad situation, you know that?”

“Yeah. Guraff, though...he seems happy about it. He’s obsessed with Tobias. The young beast, he calls him. Says he’s a worthy foe.”

“Now I’m getting scared. Didn’t Guraff once try to take on that Dome ship outside of the Taxxon world in a Bug fighter?”

“And he came out to tell the tale.”

“Yeah. I’m scared.”

# PREVIEW SUMMARY

The Yeerks know everything. They know Jake's dead. They know Rachel's back. They even know that Alloran is working with them and that Tobias is calling the shots. And they're scared.

Alloran, Tobias, Rachel, David, Marco, and Jeanne have a plan to use this fear against the Yeerks. They want to prove that they can do whatever they want to the Yeerks and they can't be stopped. But Tobias may be going over the edge, and Alloran may have to make the hardest choice an Andalite can make. He'll have to choose between what his Prince orders and what his Prince needs...