

## 64: THE LIBERATION

# CHAPTER 1

My name is Rachel. If you really cared, you could easily find out my last name. You could pretty quickly come up with the name of the place where I live. But you'd be in for a surprise, because you'd find out that, according to all legal records, I'm dead.

As you probably know, I died at the end of the First Yeerk War. By now, you probably know that the Yeerks are back. I'm back too, thanks to my cousin, Jake. He traded his life for mine. I can't say it was too terrible being dead, but I *did* miss my family horribly.

My family... Now that's something that's changed a lot. My mom got remarried to a French guy named Jacques. He seems like a good enough guy.

Jacques has a daughter, Jeanne, who is now a fellow Animorph. Jake recruited her before he even knew she was my step-sister. I like Jeanne, but there's something wrong with her. How do I know? She's dating Marco.

Of course, the French aren't the strangest addition to my family. Tobias and Al take that prize. Tobias is a human now, thanks to the Crayak, but he still has most of his hawk

instincts. He tries to hide it from us, but I can see it.

Al, whose real name is Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor, is Tobias' half-brother. For awhile, Tobias and I lived together on his ship, the *Reliquary*, and raised Al kind of like I helped my mom raise my sisters, Jordan and Sara.

It's kind of crowded in my house now. It used to just be myself, my mom, Jordan, and Sara (who, by the way, had to share a room). Now, Jeanne, Tobias, Jacques, and Alloran all live with us as well. If we stay here much longer, we'd have to get a bigger place.

We were only back home temporarily. The Yeerks were opening up a new front and we needed to shut it down. After that, we'd go back to living on the *Reliquary*. It would be kind of a relief, really. I like Jeanne, but I'm not exactly itching to keep sharing my room with her. Especially not now that she's carrying Marco germs.

The reason I'm giving all this information on how big my family has become is to highlight how much skill it took for me to get to the bathroom first every morning. This morning was no exception.

I rolled out of bed, which woke Tobias up. He and Jeanne had traded places for the night, for which I was grateful.

Jeanne had gotten into the habit of waking up in the middle of the night and taking me with her.

Almost immediately, I started feeling a little dizzy and sick to my stomach. This had been happening lately. I probably caught some kind of bug from a trip to the Yeerk pool or something. We *did* spend a lot of time in dumpsters during our missions.

I threw up. Good thing I wasn't into late-night snacks, so there wasn't much to deal with. I was also glad I didn't drink anything at night. This could have been a lot more disgusting.

When I was done, I saw Tobias in the doorway. I think he looked worried, but it's kind of hard to tell with him. His face doesn't show a lot of emotion; he sort of forgot how during his time as a hawk.

“What?” I asked.

He shrugged and nodded towards the toilet. “That. Are you alright, Rach?”

“Yeah. I guess I just had a bad dream or something. You know how it is. That fight in the parking lot a few days ago was pretty bad. So many humans were there...”

He nodded again. “Alright. Jeanne's already making breakfast, so no need to worry yourself about that.”

I sighed. I loved to cook. It kind of reminded me of fighting a battle, really. But Tobias insisted that I not cook while we were back here. He wanted to give me a vacation. Isn't that sweet of him?

What he said next wasn't nearly as sweet. "Marco and David are coming over for breakfast."

I knew what that meant. We'd be planning our next mission. Things hadn't gone too well during our last one. We had blown an attempt to sabotage a new Yeerk recruiting tool and we had been conned into saving the lives of the Visser and Guraff. Even worse, Jordan had become a Controller for a few hours and was used as bait to ensure that we helped.

"Who else is home?" I asked. Aside from Jordan and Jeanne, no one else in my family knew that the Yeerks were in town. We wanted to keep it that way.

"Your mom took Sara shopping. Jacques decided to go, too. Something about picking up a new suit."

"What about Jordan?"

Tobias kept his face blank, his voice flat. "She wants to sit in on the meeting. She knows we won't give her the morphing power, but she wants to help in any way she can. I tried to talk her out of it, but...well, she's your sister, after all. It was

almost like trying to talk *you* out of something you wanted to do.”

I laughed. “And you know how well that works out. Fine, she gets to sit in. But under no circumstances does she get to join in. I’d prefer it if she wouldn’t even speak.”

“I’d prefer it if these meetings weren’t necessary at all. But don’t let the others know I said that. I’ve got a reputation to protect. They think I’m as crazy as you.”

## CHAPTER 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Because I didn’t want to give anyone false hope. I didn’t even want you to think of this possibility unless we actually had a way of pulling it off.”

“What plan?”

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

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

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

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

I figured it out then. “The Visser will call one of us out to fight him. Since he uses Kelbrid that are already infested, he’ll be expecting the Kelbrid to throw the fight. That’s when we get him. We’re going to kill the Visser, aren’t we?”

There was a look in Tobias’s eyes then. It was something I

hadn't seen in a long time. It was hope. Not the half-hope he always offered us or his grim determination to fight on no matter what. This was like back when he thought the Ellimist would restore his humanity. This was pure hope, a belief that life might actually get better. I didn't even know he still had that capacity.

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

## CHAPTER 3

This would be one of our hardest missions, so we decided to get at it that very afternoon, just after lunch. Of course, Marco complained about it for a while, but in the end he had no choice.

Marco and Jeanne snuck off to have some...quiet time, since Marco was pretty sure they were both going to wind up dead. I hoped that Jeanne had enough sense to know when to stop him.

David decided that he'd hang around my place. I wasn't exactly thrilled about that, but I let it go. The fact that Tobias told me to lay off of David had nothing to do with it. I swear. David and Al hung around with Jordan.

I had sent Tobias to the supermarket. I don't know why, but I suddenly had a really powerful craving for zucchini and peanut butter. We had chunky peanut butter, but I needed smooth. After I spent about ten minutes drilling this point into his head, Tobias left.

While I was waiting for him to come back, I amused myself by munching on a cucumber with peanut butter. Yes, the chunky peanut butter. It went great with cucumbers. Not

with zucchini, though.

I heard Jordan laugh at something, so I went into the living room to investigate. I was worried that Al was having some kind of episode. He can be a bit odd at times.

Al wasn't there. It was just Jordan and David, in human morph. "What are you two up to?" I asked.

"What are you eating?" Jordan answered.

"Cucumber with peanut butter. Don't change the subject," I snapped.

"That's disgusting," Jordan replied.

David shrugged. "I'd eat it."

"You'd eat anything," Jordan told him, shooting him a look. I didn't like that look. I knew what kind of look that was. "No, Jordan. David is off limits."

"Uh...what?" David asked.

"Why?" At least Jordan understood what I meant. David, apparently, was as clueless as any other guy.

"For all the obvious reasons. And the fact that he tried to kill me a couple of times."

"Come on, Rachel, don't hold that against me. I've already done all I can to make it up to you. Even Marco forgave me, and you know what he's like."

“Do you mean because he’s a rat?” Jordan said, ignoring David. “Is that why?”

I couldn’t answer her. The rat thing was a large part of it, but I couldn’t tell her that. She’d call me a hypocrite. Still, I knew I had to stop things before they started. What was it with my sisters, anyway? First Jeanne and Marco. And I’m pretty sure Sara has a crush on Al, even though he’s Tobias’s brother. I was *not* going to let Jordan go anywhere near David. Maybe we had some kind of defective chromosome. Why can’t we just stay within the species? And yes, Marco counts as outside of the species.

“Where’s Al?” I asked, changing the subject.

David shrugged. “Tobias called about five minutes ago. He needed help with something. I don’t know what. But you know Al. He rushed off to help his prince.”

“David, shouldn’t you demorph? You’ve been in morph for a while now.”

“Oh. I’ll go do that. Thanks.” David left me alone with Jordan. I glared at her.

“What? I can’t talk to a guy?”

“Not to David, no. He’s trouble, Jordan.”

“And he’s a rat.”

“Yeah, he is. In all senses of the word.”

“So it bothers you that I might like a guy who’s an animal most of the time?”

“Like him? You just met him!”

“And I already know him better than you do, apparently.”

I don’t know what came over me. I don’t know why I did what I did next. I sat down on the couch next to Jordan and hugged her. I realized that I was crying.

“Rachel...what’s wrong? If it bothers you that much, I won’t talk to him again. I...what’s going on? You never cry, Rachel. Not even when you really should.”

“I don’t know...I just...” I couldn’t figure it out either. One minute, I was happily eating a cucumber. Then, I was angry at David. And suddenly, I was crying for no reason. The weird thing was, this wasn’t the first time this had happened. It was just the first time someone was around to see it.

“Rachel, what’s gotten into you?”

“I...I don’t know,” I said. It was kind of true. I didn’t *know*. But I had a guess. But it wasn’t something I could confirm on my own. To know for sure, I’d have to get help from the absolute last person I wanted to get help from.

I’d have preferred to ask Guraff. Or even the Visser.

Maybe even David would have been better. Heck, if the Drode or even Crayak himself had offered help, I'd have taken it rather than do what I was about to do next.

But in the end, I had no choice.

## CHAPTER 4

I flew to Marco's place. It might not have been my best idea, but I had to get there soon. I had to know as soon as possible. If I could find out before the mission, that would be great. If not...then I'd have to be really careful.

A window was open on one of the upper floors of his mansion. That was probably how he and Jeanne had gotten there. Of course, they could have taken one of the cars I knew Marco had in his basement.

I found them in his living room. They weren't doing much. Just watching TV. I was glad, but curious. Knowing Marco, I expected things to be much more adult. I guess I hadn't given Jeanne enough credit.

Even though they were totally innocent, Marco jumped up when he saw me. He raised his hands like I was a cop pointing a glock at him. "We weren't doing anything!" he shouted, his voice suddenly very high pitched.

Jeanne gave me a look that I used to have to give to Cassie a lot. I started to demorph. <I'm not here to interrupt anything,>

"I find that hard to believe," Jeanne muttered.

<I need to talk to Marco. Alone.>

Jeanne was confused, but she left. “I’ll see you later,” she told Marco. “You know where to find me.”

When she was gone, Marc glared at me. “What was that about!? I may have messed with you and Tobias but I never did something like this.”

I was fully demorphed. “It’s an emergency.”

He shrugged. “Fine.” Then, I guess he decided he’d amuse himself by insulting me. “Leotard’s looking a little tight, Xena. Putting on a little weight? I mean, I guess you can now that you don’t have to keep Tobias interested. I just didn’t know you *could* gain weight.”

He didn’t realize how close to home his comment had come. I felt tears in my eyes. So that he didn’t see, I turned and went into the kitchen. I poured some instant Jello mix into a jug of milk. I shook it for a moment, then started drinking it.

“Eating for two?” Marco joked.

I couldn’t stop myself. I hit him in the head with the milk. It spilled everywhere. “Ow! What the hell, Rachel!?”

I shuddered. I had to tell him some time. That was why I was here, after all. “Yeah. I think I might be.”

I didn’t know it was possible, but he went completely pale.

His mouth worked, but no sound came out. I decided to explain why I was there. “What I need is to find a doctor who won’t ask me questions I can’t answer. Like what my name is. I need someone I can trust.”

“Why did you come to me for this?”

I sighed. “Come on, Marco. If anyone would know a doctor like that, it’s you. Believe me, I wish I could have gone to anyone else for this, but you’re my only option.”

“Have you tried appealing to a higher power?”

At least he was making jokes now. He was getting over it. It was his turn to sigh. “Fine, I’ll help you out. But Rachel, you know what this means, don’t you?”

I nodded. “If I’m right, I can’t be an Animorph anymore. I’m out of the fight.”

Marco shook his head. “No. Well, yeah, but that’s not what I meant. It means that you and I are officially over.”

I gave him a look. He just laughed. “I mean, I can’t date a pregnant chick. Or one with a kid. It’s over between us, Xena. Oh well, I guess Jeanne will be happy about that, at least.”

“Yeah, Marco, it’s over between us. Like it never even started,” I agreed. Maybe now he’d stop with his little comments.

Instead, he got an odd look in his eye. “Why is that, Rachel? I mean, there was always something between us. I felt it and I know you did, too. I think everyone felt it. Why didn’t anything ever come of us? Why didn’t we ever even try?”

It was a good question, really, and not one that I had a real answer to. So I just shrugged. “I guess...I guess there wasn’t anything really there, Marco.”

He shook his head. “No. You know that isn’t true. Look, I understand why we never got together after you realized how you felt about Tobias. I understood that. I even backed off. But before then... Why didn’t we ever even try? Was it really only me? Was I just fooling myself?”

I didn’t want to say what I said next, but I couldn’t help myself. I think it was the theoretical pregnancy kicking in. “It wasn’t just you,” I blurted out.

He just looked at me, so I went on. “There were times, Marco... Especially after really hard missions. I wanted someone; needed someone. And the guy I wanted...he was a hawk. There was nothing he could do. And sometimes... sometimes, I used to fly over to your house late at night.”

“What? I never knew that.”

“No, of course not. I never had the courage to wake you

us. Sometimes, I just flew past. Sometimes, I sat in a tree outside, wishing I was brave enough to reach out. But I never did. Something always held me back.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I always knew, deep down inside, how I felt about Tobias. Or maybe I just didn’t think you’d care. Or maybe ...I don’t know, maybe it was fate or God or the Ellimist or someone.”

We sat there in silence for a few minutes. Then, I asked him something I had wondered for a long time. “Do you think it might have worked out between us?”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter anymore. We both made our choices. I chose Jeanne. You chose Tobias. And now you might be carrying his child. What might have been...that doesn’t matter. We have to deal with what is and what might be. As for the past...it’s in the past. Let’s leave it there.”

We shared an awkward hug. Then, he pulled his keys out of his pocket. “Okay, let’s go see the doc.”

## CHAPTER 5

I won’t go into the details of my visit to the gynecologist. There’s no need for you to know. It wasn’t a good story

anyway. All you need to know is that, thanks to advances in medical technology brought to us by our friends the Andalites, I could find out my results in less than an hour.

Marco waited with me. It was so weird. Of all the Animorphs, the one I least expected to be doing this was Marco. At least, counting the original Animorphs.

I remembered imagining this day when I was younger. In my imagination, I was always older. Sometimes, it was Tobias waiting with me, hoping. Sometimes, it was Cassie or Jake. Those were all the fantasies about what would happen if the war was over.

I used to think about other possibilities, too. In one of my imaginings, it was Ax who was here with me, waiting to see whether or not his *shorm* would be a father. Never in my wildest dreams was it Marco who was with me.

“Miss?” the doctor called. Marco and I both looked up. The doctor had a big smile on his face. “Congratulations to you both.”

“Oh, it’s not mine,” Marco told him.

“Oh...well then...I hope the two of you can work this out.”

“We aren’t together,” I told him.

“Well, I’m not here to tell you how live your life, but a child is most stable if they grow up in a two parent home.”

“Hey!” I shouted. “I lived in a single parent home!”

“And you are the paragon of stability,” Marco remarked. “Thanks, doc. See you on the golf course Sunday?”

“I’ll be there, sir. And maybe this time I’ll beat you.”

“Dream on, doc. Dream on.”

Before we left, it occurred to me to ask the doctor a question. “Hey, doctor? What would happen if someone who was pregnant...morphed?”

“Funny you should ask. I read an article about that just this morning, actually. There are several competing schools of thought on the subject, but the general belief is that the child would be stored in z-space; at least, if it was in the early stages of development. No one has experimented with children more than a few weeks into development. To do so would be considered pretty unethical. That kind of research might be legal elsewhere in the galaxy, but no government on Earth allows it. I think the same is true with the Andalites.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

We drove back to my house. In the driveway, Marco looked at me expectantly. “So, how are you going to break the

news to bird-boy? I'm thinking you should make some sort of avian pun. Something to do with eggs."

I shook my head. "Marco, he cannot know about this yet."

"What? Why not?"

"Because we have a mission to complete."

"Oh no, Xena. You are *not* going on this mission."

"I have to, Marco."

"Not a chance. How can you possibly think I'd let you fight in your present condition?"

"Marco, I have to. You guys need me!"

"Not a chance, Rachel."

"You don't understand, Marco. Do you realize how important this mission is? Not just to the war but to Tobias? We're talking about freeing Ax. Ax!"

"Do you think I don't know that? I want to save Ax as much as any other Animorph, but I am not going to risk you and this kid."

"Don't you see, Marco? If we can't save Ax, if this mission doesn't work, it'll break Tobias. I know the act he puts on for the rest of you, but I know the real him, too. He's only a man, Marco. A person can only take so much. If we lose this chance, do you know what that'll do to him?"

“If we lose you, do you know what that will do?” Marco asked. “Damn it, Rachel, do you realize how selfish you’re being? All you’re thinking about is how much you want to fight the Yeerks! If you were really thinking about Tobias, you wouldn’t even be thinking about fighting.”

“Marco, I can take care of myself. I won’t get myself killed and my child will be fine. But if we don’t get Ax...do you know what will happen?”

“No, Rachel. I don’t know what we’ll do even if we succeed. If we fail...I don’t know what that’ll do to Tobias. But we can’t fight this war while trying to protect him.”

“That’s just it. He spends all his energy trying to protect us. You don’t realize how much this hurts him. You don’t see that this is tearing him apart. He always makes the cold, ruthless decision. And every time he does, he dies a little more. Here, finally, is a choice he can make with his heart. He needs this, Marco, or it’ll be the end of him.”

“Be that as it may, I can’t—”

“Do you know what he’ll do if we lose Ax?”

“Yeah, I know. I’ve seen him do it before. For a little while, he’ll be out of it. And then one day, he’ll come back and carry on. I know what he’ll do, Rachel.”

“Yeah, he’ll keep fighting. But it won’t be Tobias anymore. It’ll be some creature that lives inside his body. He’ll have finally lost himself, Marco. That isn’t something I can live with.”

Marco looked torn. Usually, he makes the smart decision. I was trying to convince him to do something stupid. Finally, he nodded. “Okay. But you have to promise me that you won’t get yourself hurt.”

“Okay.”

“I mean it, Rachel. Because if you die, I’ll have to tell Tobias that you took his kid down with you and *that* isn’t something *I* can live with.”

## CHAPTER 6

Everyone was waiting for us when we got inside. Tobias looked mildly irritated. I think it was a look of worry, but he had forgotten what that was supposed to look like. “Is everything alright?” he asked.

For a moment, I was afraid Marco would blurt out my secret. But he just shrugged. “Fine. You know how Rachel is. She just couldn’t stand another minute away from me.”

Tobias sighed and went back to business. “Okay, we’re leaving now. Thanks to the information we got from the *Reliquary*, we know that the Visser is calling in a new shipment of Kelbrid and now we know where it is. The first step is to intercept it.”

“I already don’t like this plan,” Marco asserted.

“Don’t worry, that won’t be the hard part,” Tobias assured him. “The difficulty will come when we find and acquire the leader.”

“No,” Marco insisted. “I am not doing that.”

“I didn’t expect you to. I’m going to do it, but I want someone else to acquire the leader with me.”

Tobias looked expectantly at me. “I’m in.”

“No you’re not,” Marco snapped. “Not a chance, Rachel.”

“Why not?” Tobias asked. He looked from Marco to me and back again.

“She might...get carried away,” Marco answered. “I mean, we’re trying to rescue Ax, right? But if she ends up fighting the Visser and has the chance to kill him, she might do it.”

It was a lie and we all knew it. But Tobias decided to let it go. “Okay. So who else wants to be my backup?”

<I will do it, my prince,> Al piped up.

“You would, but I don’t think you can take the Visser. He’s got a lifetime of experience with that tail. I don’t think David or Jeanne could take him, either. That makes it up to you, Marco. Think you can handle it?”

Marco glanced at me and then nodded. “I’ll do it.”

“Okay then. After we acquire the leader, we need to kill him to keep the Kelbrid from getting confused. One of us will pose as him. If the trip takes longer than two hours, we’ll switch off.

“The next step is the Blade ship. They’ll try to infest the Kelbrid leader. That means at least one of us will end up with a Yeerk in his head.”

Marco was looking worried now. “And what way do we

have around this?" he demanded.

"Oh, we'll get Yeerks in us, but they won't exactly be real Yeerks. Someone will need to morph a Yeerk. Two someones actually, since everyone gets backup."

Marco groaned. "This keeps getting better and better. What else happens?"

"Well, one of us will be fighting the Visser. That will either be you or me, Marco. The other guy will be working on a back exit along with whoever the Yeerk in his head happens to be."

"That only accounts for four of us," Marco reminded him.

"I know. The other two will be waiting in the *Reliquary* to get us out of there."

"How exactly do you plan to get Ax out of there?" I asked. "I mean, we're talking about kidnapping a Visser off of his own Blade ship. That's impossible."

Tobias gave me a wild smile. My own smile. Maybe Marco was right; maybe we were turning into each other. "Nothing's impossible if you have enough firepower. The Kelbrid poison will slow Ax and probably knock him out if he gets enough of it. When he's out of it, we'll grab him and make a break for it. Whoever's in the *Reliquary* will blow open an exit for us. We'll hop on the ship and head back

home.”

Marco sighed. “You know what I’m going to say, right?”

“Yep,” I answered. “You’re going to tell us all of the reasons why this is insane and why it’ll never work.”

“Exactly. And then we’ll go and do it anyway. I guess the question is, who gets to be Yeerks?”

Tobias shrugged. “That’s up to you, Marco. Whoever’s in your head will get to read your every thought, every memory. Every dirty little secret. So who do you trust, Marco?”

Marco moaned. “Well, let’s see. It can’t be David. No offense, but I’m just not comfortable having you control me. As for Jeanne...I’ve got some thoughts that I’d be a lot happier if you didn’t see them. Al...I’ve got some thoughts that a kid his age shouldn’t be exposed to.” Then, Marco gave me a look. “Not that he hasn’t already seen some things he shouldn’t have.”

I pounded a fist on the table. “That was *one time*, Marco! And it only happened because you were paying him to spy on us.”

He just shrugged. “Either way... I guess I’ll go with Xena. I’ve got no secrets from her. That’s the basis of a good relationship, after all.”

Tobias nodded. “Alright. In that case, I’ll take...Jeanne. Al is needed to fly the ship, and David knows more about the Yeerks than the rest of us. They’ll be able to help the most from there.”

I nodded and then turned to my sister. “Well, it looks like you and I get to go on a little shopping trip to pick up something grey.”

“I hear it’s the new black. Let’s go.”

# CHAPTER 7

This would not be an easy mission. I needed to get my hands on a Yeerk and acquire it. And I had to try not to morph, because no matter what the doctor said, I didn't think it was safe to do with a child.

We were stealing Marco's car. Just when we were about to pull out of the driveway, Marco leapt into the backseat. "Marco, why are you here?" I demanded.

"I can't keep an eye on my two favorite girls?" Jeanne and I gave him identical glares. He sighed. "Fine, I'm going. I have to go off with Tobias anyway. I just wanted to tell you to be careful. Both of you."

I knew what he meant. "We'll be fine," I assured him. Jeanne was driving, so I expected her to move after Marco left. She didn't.

"Jeanne, are you alright?"

Slowly, she turned to me. "Rachel...we need to talk."

"What about?"

"About you and Marco."

"Geez, this again? Jeanne, nothing is going on between me and Marco. Tobias and I... Marco is all yours."

“You can deny it all you want, but I have eyes, Rachel. You have feelings for him and I think he feels the same way. And ever since I started seeing him, it’s only gotten more obvious. Just look at what happened a few hours ago!”

“Jeanne, I promise you, there isn’t anything going on between us,” I insisted.

“Don’t lie to me, Rachel. I can see it.”

“No, Jeanne...” I didn’t feel like I had a choice. “I’m pregnant. With Tobias’s child. Marco is the only one who knows. We were at the doctor’s earlier. He was a friend of Marco’s and wouldn’t wonder why someone who was supposed to be dead was suddenly walking into his clinic.”

“So...so there isn’t anything to the two of you?”

“No. That’s why he’s suddenly protective of me. He couldn’t handle it if something happened to me. He’d feel responsible, and I’m sure you know how he feels about responsibility.”

Jeanne nodded. “Okay. But we have to make some rules, then. Like no morphing unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

“Okay, fine.”

“Now...where do we get a Yeerk? Should we just walk into the Yeerk pool and grab one?”

“When Cassie did it, she found a Yeerk who let her acquire him.”

“Where could we find a Yeerk like that?”

“I know where. Hand me your phone.”

Twenty minutes later, we were in the director’s office of Tri-I’s local branch. Tri-I, the International Invasion Investigation Force, tried to do what its name suggested. It was supposed to make sure something like the Yeerk invasion never happened again.

The best laid plans of mice...

The director was one of the Chee. I’m sure you know all about them by now. If I remembered correctly, this one liked to be called Mark.

Mark was happy to see us. “I’m glad you came. I wasn’t sure which invasion you’d decide to fight.”

I nodded. “Look, Mark, we don’t have a lot of time for small talk.”

“Snappy lately,” Jeanne commented.

Mark just shrugged. “Pregnancy does that.”

I glared at him. Did everyone have to know? “How did you figure it out?” I demanded. “I’m always snappy.”

“I can see an extra heat signature in your womb.”

“Oh. Yeah, that would - You can see my womb!?”

“To be honest, there isn’t a whole heck of a lot that I can’t see Rachel. But we Chee always figured it would be best if you didn’t know what our sight was like. We wanted to avoid...well, awkward situations like this.”

“Whatever. We’ve got much bigger problems. Did you bring it?”

“Yep. EreK dropped it off just ten minutes ago. He’s spying inside of the rebel organization again. He’ll probably have some information that’ll help you.”

“Good to hear. Until then...”

Mark sighed. “So impatient. You’d never be able to stand living for thousands of years. Fine, here it is.”

Mark, who usually looked like a distinguished businessman, dropped his hologram to reveal a steel and ivory dog. His head cracked open. There, wrapped up in a bundle of wires and electrodes, was a Yeerk.

Tentatively, I reached out a finger and poked it. “Squishy,” I muttered. Then, I concentrated and felt the Yeerk’s DNA enter my body. I felt a weird, sickening sensation as I did it. Maybe it was because I was acquiring a Yeerk or maybe it was the pregnancy. Either way, it felt wrong.

Jeanne did it, too. Now, there was Yeerk blood in our veins. Forever. I suddenly wondered whether or not that would affect our child. I hadn't even considered that before.

I shuddered. This needed to be finished and soon.

## CHAPTER 8

A few hours later, we got a transmission from Tobias and Marco. They had, somehow, managed to sneak onto the Kelbrid transport and replace the leader. Don't ask me how, I wasn't there. Al and David had remained aboard the *Reliquary* so that they could tell us their progress. We got a transmission from them, too, as soon as we got home.

<The transport will arrive at the Blade ship within two hours. David and I are on our way to retrieve you. Be prepared to depart as soon as we land. The timing will be very difficult to execute correctly.>

<Translation,> David added, <This isn't going to be a picnic. We're on a tight schedule and if we screw this up, Tobias and Marco will get sliced and diced.>

I really didn't need to be reminded of that. Jeanne and I waited in tense silence for almost an hour before they landed in my front yard. The ship was cloaked, but I could hear it. I knew what to listen for.

Jeanne and I dashed aboard almost before they landed. I shoved Al out of my way and grabbed the controls. I was pretty good at flying the ship, after all. And I was in a hurry.

And to be honest, I was scared.

This wasn't going to be a good mission. I could feel it in my bones. Something was going to go horribly wrong. I just hoped that nothing would happen to Tobias. I didn't want our child to grow up without a father. Tobias's father had been lost to the Yeerks and I knew how much that hurt him. I didn't want this kid to have to deal with the same pain.

Anyhow, I was scared. And when I'm scared, I have to act. I have to do something. So, although Al was probably a better pilot than me, I needed to fly the ship. If I just sat there, I'd explode.

When the Blade ship appeared on our sensors, I activated the *Reliquary's* cloaking system. We would be completely invisible to any sensors. Only a visual scan could see us, and the ship was camouflaged for space.

"Okay. How do we get in?" I asked. My plan would normally be to shoot my way in, but this was a stealth mission. I didn't do stealth well. That was Marco's job.

David thought about it. He was a good substitute for Marco when we were in need. <Well...Al, would it be possible for us to survive outside of the ship?>

<That would depend on a great many factors. I suppose the

gravity generated from our two ships would be more or less sufficient to hold us in place with a little care on our parts. Likewise, the heat generated by our craft might keep us from freezing instantly.>

<What about air?>

<How long are you capable of holding your breath?>

<Was that a joke?>

<Do what now?>

I interrupted them. “Okay, so if we park the *Reliquary* above the Blade ship and stay between them, we should be fine. How does that help us?”

<Well, I’m thinking we could use a Dracon beam to make our own opening. Sound like it would work, Al?>

I think that, when Tobias is away, I’m in charge, but David had a good reason for asking Al. He was the tech guy here. A genius, really, even by Andalite standards. He was as good as the Chee.

<Yes, that might work. However, I do not think we have any Dracon beams or Shredders aboard the ship.>

I sighed. Then, I went to the nightstand between my bed and Tobias’s. I unlocked the drawer and pulled out a pair of Shredders. “Here you go.”

<I was not aware that we had those.>

“Yeah, well, Tobias didn’t think it was a good idea to have guns in the same house with a kid, so we tried to be careful.”

If Marco had been there, he’d have made some kind of crack about our being ‘careful’ and my present situation. I’m glad Marco wasn’t there.

I moved the *Reliquary* so that it was just above the Blade ship. Jeanne and Al dropped through the hatch in the floor and began cutting a hole into the Blade ship.

Then, David said the last thing I expected him to say. <So, how’s the baby coming?>

“What!? What are you talking about?” He just stared at me with his beady little rat eyes. “Okay. How did you know?”

<What do you think Jordan and I were talking about? I mean, it was pretty obvious. Between the morning sickness, the weird food combos... I’m pretty sure everyone knows.>

“No. Only a few of us know. Marco, Jeanne, you and the Chee. And Jordan, apparently.”

<That pretty much sounds like everyone you know. Except for Al and Tobias. That’s kind of weird.>

“What is?”

<The two Animorphs closest to you ate the last ones to

know. Why haven't you told Tobias?>

“Because...he'd have stopped me from coming on this mission and I couldn't let that happen.”

<That could be it.>

“Could be?”

<Well, it could just be the usual fear.>

“What usual fear?”

<Maybe you're just afraid that if he learns the truth, he'll be done with you. It happens all the time.> I almost hit him. Then I guess David realized what he had said. <Sorry, I didn't mean it like that. I'm trying to stop assuming the worst of people. Old habits die hard.>

## CHAPTER 9

Jeanne and Al melted a nice, circular hole in the roof of the Blade ship. Jeanne dropped through and was attacked almost instantly. There was a Kelbrid guarding here. I could see the fight, but I couldn't get into it yet.

Kelbrid are incredibly fast, strong warriors. They've got one giant arm with a huge stinger on the end. The other arm ends in a weird many fingered hand. They've got a cat's legs and a gorilla's chest. Big, alligator-like heads with no eyes. Instead, they've got whiskers like a bug's antennae.

They feel very little pain, so hurting them isn't enough. You've got to kill them. Jeanne had fired the Shredder on full power and it took out the Kelbrid's biggest arm. That only slowed it down.

The Kelbrid smashed the side of her head with its good hand. Jeanne stumbled back, stunned. Then Al leapt into the fight. His tail darted and danced, but he couldn't score any deadly hits against the Kelbrid.

The Kelbrid grabbed Al's tail in his mouth and shook his head, sending Al flying. "Jeanne, morph!" I called. I was trying desperately to think of a morph that would help me. My

grizzly bear wouldn't fit through the hole and there was no way I was going in there without a morph. It wasn't that I was afraid, it was because I couldn't risk my child. If I got injured as a bear, I could demorph and we'd be fine. If I was injured as a human, my baby might be hurt, too. I couldn't risk that.

David leapt through the hole, morphing as he fell. Already, he was growing into a lion. A fierce beast, and deadly. Not quite a match for a grizzly bear, but it could go one on one with a Kelbrid.

Not that the Kelbrid would give him a chance. They are a stupid race, but they know how to fight. And with the Yeerk controlling his every move, this Kelbrid was smarter than his uninfested brethren.

He picked up the half-morphed David and started squeezing him. It would be a race against time. Would David suffocate before he became too large for the Kelbrid to choke? I didn't know what to do. I had to help in some way. Maybe there was something on the ship...

Al surged to his feet and swung his tail. He sliced off the Kelbrid's remaining hand and released David. The Kelbrid leapt at Al, trying to bite him.

David finished his morph and jumped on the Kelbrid from

behind. The lion and the Andalite made short work of him after that. It wasn't a pretty sight, and I've seen some disturbing thins.

They morphed after that. It was the best way to get the Kelbrid's blood off of them. Their blood is acidic enough to melt steel, so they had to get rid of the injuries form it.

Jeanne had recovered by this point. "I forgot how tough those things are," she muttered, retrieving the Shredders.

"I think that was one of Guraff's special Kelbrid," I reasoned. "And I think he was uninfested. A Yeerk would have called for help or even retreated once he lost his arms. This one kept fighting, so I think he was genuine."

<Let's just keep going,> David said. <That cost us time we don't have. We've got to find the pool and get you girls into it as soon as possible.>

"Does he ever remind you of Marco?" Jeanne asked me.

I nodded. "That pool comment's what did it. He's right, though. We're cutting it kind of close. How do we get to the pool? Any ideas?"

Al nodded. <I have the schematics of the Blade ship on the *Reliquary's* computer. David and I were investigating it on our way back from the Kelbrid transport ship. I suggested cutting

a hole in this part of the ship for a reason. There is a water conduit not far away from here that will take you to the ship's Yeerk pool.>

“How do we get through it?” I asked. “Fish morph? But I'm the only one with that.”

David nodded. It's weird to see a rat do that. <Not fish. Yeerk morph.>

“Oh. That. Yeah, I guess we'll have to do that sooner or later.” I composed myself. “Alright. I'm really not looking forward to this, though.” Then, I began the morph.

My eyes went first. I was blind. Totally blind. I don't think I've ever morphed something without any sight at all. This was a new experience. Thankfully, I couldn't see the rest of my morph, or Jeanne's.

Of course, I could still feel it. I felt my arms and legs shrivel into nothingness. I felt slime coat my entire body and I wanted to vomit.

I felt the emptiness inside of me as almost all of my organs dissolved into nothingness along with my bones. And my baby, I reminded myself. I did *not* want to spend much more time in this morph. It wasn't a good idea at all. If I could have backed out of it, I would have.

But backing out wasn't a choice now. They needed me. Marco and Tobias needed me. Ax needed my help. After we rescued Ax, then I could stop this.

It would be kind of like what Cassie pulled with David. She needed to leave, so she found a replacement. That was kind of what I was doing with Ax. He'd take my place.

Right after this mission.

# CHAPTER 10

I felt someone pick me up. Probably Al. I could sense Jeanne near me, but I'm not sure how I knew she was there. I certainly couldn't see her. I couldn't really hear her, either. Maybe it was bad Yeerk hearing or maybe she just wasn't making any sound. Either way, I still knew she was nearby. Probably in Al's other hand.

I felt a wave of heat. I guess Al or David had cut us a hole into the conduit using one of the Shredders. Then, I felt water all around me. They plunged us into the conduit. <Good luck,> Al called distantly.

I had done something like this before, as an eel, trying to sneak into the Yeerk pool. It didn't work out. I hoped this would go differently.

Water rushed around me. I couldn't see anything, but I could feel the water and the suction. I bumped into something next to me. Jeanne.

<Hey, sis!> I giggled, giddy from the rush.

<Yeeehaaa!> she shouted back.

Vaguely, I thought *Yeehaa? That's a pretty American expression if you ask me.* I ignored it and just enjoyed the ride.

Well, as much as anyone can enjoy a ride that will end at a Yeerk pool.

We knew when the ride ended, too. All of the water pressure that had been giving us such a huge rush suddenly stopped. We were floating freely, carried by our momentum. I slammed into something squishy.

A Yeerk. I shuddered and tried to vomit up the Kandrona rays I was absorbing. Good thing Yeerks don't have mouths.

<How long until they get here?> I asked Jeanne.

<I do not know. I think the bigger question is, though, how do we know which Kelbrid are them?>

<I think only one of them will be a Kelbrid,> I reminded her. <I mean, they both acquired the leader, and since the other Kelbrid would figure out that something was up, only one of them could be the morph, right?>

<Oh. That makes sense.>

Jeanne and I floated around for a bit, trying not to touch any of the other Yeerks. It was probably the most disgusting experience of my life.

Then, I heard a familiar thought-speak voice. <I'm innocent! Innocent I tells ya!>

<Marco, shut up. You've been doing that since they

marched us into this place. Girls, are you in the pool?> Tobias asked us.

<Just waiting for your signal,> I said.

<Rachel's waiting for the signal before she goes nuts? Tobias, I think you're a good influence on her.>

Tobias ignored him. <Marco and I are both in Kelbrid morph. Marco's the leader right now, and I'm morphed as some kind of guard, I think, so—>

<So call me Prince Marco.>

<So Rachel, you'll be the one fighting the Visser. Marco will give you some...let's call his panicked yelling suggestions, but you're in charge.>

<Hey, that's not fair. It's *my* body!>

<Technically, it isn't your body, either. Besides, this is a fight we're talking about. Who do you think would be a better choice?>

<Fine, fine. It'll be nice to get a break from these Kelbrid instincts for a minute.>

<What's it like?> Jeanne asked.

<You know how the Howlers are just children playing a game?> Tobias asked.

<That is what I have heard.>

<It's the exact opposite of that. I've felt predator instincts before, but this is more than that. It's kind of like being a Taxxon. You know how a Taxxon wants to eat just about everything? Well, the Kelbrid wants to fight everything,> Marco told us.

<It just wants to kill,> Tobias agreed. <This creature isn't a predator. It's...it's a murderer.>

I don't think I've ever heard Tobias use that word before. Murder. That implies a crime. He's never been on to blame a creature for being what it was. If he said the Kelbrid was bad, it must have been.

I could sense the Kelbrid above me. One stuck its head into the pool. <Is that one of you?> I asked.

<Nope. I'll tell you when it's me, Xena,> Marco said. <Just hang around near the pier. It won't be long.>

Three Kelbrid went by. Then, Tobias called, <Okay, Jeanne. That's my head. In you go. And try to let me keep charge, okay?>

<Alright,> Jeanne said. I sensed her entering Tobias's head and for a moment, I was weirdly jealous. She'd probably stumble across stuff that Tobias hadn't told anyone, not even me. Oh well. At least I'd get some new blackmail for Marco.

Speaking of Marco, he was next. I bumped a Yeerk out of the way and slithered into his ear. <Oh man,> he groaned. <This is really wrong. That *is* you, right Xena?>

<Oh, is that you in the water, Marco? Sorry, I wasn't paying attention.>

<WHAT!?!?!>

<Just kidding. Yeah, that's me. Okay, steps one and two are complete. We've infiltrated the Kelbrid ranks and gotten past the pool. Time for step three: kidnap the Visser.>

<This is insane,> Marco muttered, using his trademark line. Seriously, he had that line copyrighted after the war.

I used my own trademark. <Let's do it.>

# CHAPTER 11

When I first entered Marco's head, I was scared. Why? Because I could read his thoughts, and I can think of only a very few people whose thoughts might be more disturbed. Maybe David and the Visser, but no one else.

I let the Yeerk instincts take over. I'm glad that Tobias gave me permission to take over Marco because, to be brutally honest, I'm not sure if I could have stopped the Yeerk from doing it on my behalf.

I squeezed into the Kelbrid body's ear. It was pretty easy since the ears had been adapted for Yeerks and the water of the Yeerk pool, combined with my own coat of slime, made it very easy for me to get into the brain.

It was a big brain, but very strange. The human brain has two lobes, whereas the Kelbrid has one. There were wide gaps and deep crevasses perfect for my Yeerk body to fill. I realized that the Kelbrid had an almost symbiotic relationship with the Yeerks. The Yeerk got the body it so desperately craved and the Kelbrid got a calming, controlling influence that it very much needed.

<Oh man,> I said. <The Yeerks could be happy with

Kelbrid bodies forever. And I don't think the Kelbrid mind very much either.>

<I'll say,> Marco said in my head. Which was weird, since I was in *his* head. It was almost like he was talking to himself. <The Kelbrid actually likes the feel of the Yeerk. Creepy. It's...masochistic, I'd say.>

<If it wasn't for the One wanting humans dead and the Visser being power mad, the Yeerks and Kelbrid would be fine. The Yeerks wouldn't need to take other hosts.>

<They'd be so happy together. Hey, that reminds me of a song!>

<I know, Marco. I'm reading your mind. Do not, I repeat DO NOT start singing.>

<So orders my Yeerk master,> Marco grumbled. <Or mistress. Let's get this over with.>

I started walking our new body over to the rest of the infested Kelbrid. It was weird using Kelbrid senses because it was so familiar yet so alien at the same time.

I felt the usual grace that comes with being a powerful predator. I was used to feeling like liquid steel. What was strange was how disproportionate my arms felt. I balled one hand into a fist and retracted the stinger on my larger arm.

Only then was I able to walk on all fours like I was meant to.

<Hey, I have a tail,> I remarked.

<*We* have a tail,> he corrected. <And yeah, I never noticed that before. Probably because I was busy concentrating on all the parts of the thing that were trying to kill me.>

What were even stranger were the senses. The hearing was very good, even better than my bald eagle's hearing. I didn't have a sense of smell or sight. Instead, I had the vibration sense similar to that of a fly or cockroach. I could feel, and almost see, anything that moved. I realized that it made the Kelbrid a superb hunter. Darkness and light didn't matter. If you moved, the Kelbrid would know.

The sense was so refined that I could feel the vibrations from the hearts of those around me. It would be so easy to strike with my stinger and pull that heart out...

I didn't have to deal with the instincts of the creature, so I can't testify to what those were like. Marco was keeping them in check and I, in turn, was keeping Marco down.

That was strange, too, because I could feel Marco's thoughts. I couldn't read his memories, though. Maybe those were stuck in his human brain in Z-space. But I could read anything that passed through his mind.

I realized that I could easily prompt a memory. That gave me an idea. <Hey, Marco. What was your first date with Jeanne like?>

<That's none of your business,> he answered. But as soon as I asked the question, he involuntarily started thinking about it and I could read his thoughts.

Wow. I was surprised. He had been much more of a gentleman than I thought he had been. And I saw a conversation he had with Jeanne after our last mission. I saw Marco remembering how he couldn't think of anything to say to Jeanne. Wondering where to go with their relationship.

And I saw something that shocked me. He actually cared about her. <Marco, I had no idea.>

<Neither did I until a couple of days ago,> he answered. I already knew that.

<Did you get in my head just to spy on me?> he asked.

<Hey, you chose me, remember? Why *did* you choose me? You knew I'd do this.>

And then I saw why he chose me. He was trying to protect me. And my baby. If I was safely in his head, I couldn't be hurt. They'd have to kill him first and then he wouldn't have to live with the guilt of knowing that he had cost Tobias his

love or his child.

<Surprised, Xena?> he asked.

<A little,> I admitted.

<Well, now you know. I don't do guilt. I just can't. That's why I could never lead the Animorphs, you see. Because sooner or later, I'd have to do something that would make me feel guilty. I might have to make a call like Jake did when he sent you to die and kill Tom. Or maybe I'd have to give an order like Tobias that sent Jake to his death. I couldn't live like that. I tried once.

<I tried to kill my mother. It was for the greater good. She was Visser One, after all. But I couldn't do it. I would have been destroyed by that. I can be ruthless, but never guilty. That's why you're in my head, Rachel. Because I won't have to live with the guilt if you got hurt on my watch. The Visser's getting ready to call us out. It's time.>

# CHAPTER 12

We heard the Visser's thought-speak voice boom across the Blade ship. It was weird. He has Ax's voice, but there was no way anyone would ever mistake it for Ax speaking. The only one I'd ever met with such a palpable aura of evil was Crayak. Even the Drode didn't seem to have it.

<You are my newest Kelbrid hosts. I have chosen to have you infested aboard my Blade ship instead of at the Yeerk pool for several reasons.

<There is a contingent of rebel Yeerks where I intended to make a second front in this war. I want them eliminated and I want it done tonight. I will land this Blade ship on the roof of their command center, at the community center in the town. Guraff 427 and I will lead you inside.

<We will kill anyone who opposes us. We will slaughter them until they submit once more to the might of the Yeerk Empire and the power of the One. Yeerks, let your Kelbrid hosts have control in the battles. Kelbrid are good for one thing and one thing alone: killing.

<But first, I must ensure the loyalty of your hosts. By the rites of their race, I will kill their leader in combat, thus taking

his place. Step forward.>

I walked out to where I felt the Visser. I couldn't see him, but I could feel every movement he made. I could feel his stalk eyes sweep over me. I could feel his tail twitch. I could feel his hearts beating. I could even feel the individual hairs on his body swirling when he breathed. I could also feel his lungs.

In private thought-speak, he said to me, <Remember, Auric 729, to make this look real. When I am about to slay your host, enter the pool. You will be given a morph-capable host for your efforts.>

<I think I'd rather have yours,> I growled.

I could sense his eyes widening as he recognized my voice. Marco raged in my head. <Smooth move, Rachel. There goes the element of surprise.>

<Good. I want him to know.>

The Visser didn't back down. He couldn't. Instead, he said, <I will be the cause of your second death, Rachel. The One has told me of the master of death. Few ever get a second chance. No one ever gets a third.>

Then he struck. His tail was fast. Faster than my arm. But I could feel him attacking before he even struck. I could sense

his muscles tensing before he delivered the blow. And thanks to that early warning, I could evade it and counterattack.

I dodged to the side and then swiped at him with my stinger. He parried the strike and attacked again. This time, his tail cut my arm, but I didn't care. The Kelbrid didn't feel the pain. Its body seemed to have a natural anesthetic like the one on its spike.

I poised to attack again. The Visser's tail came once more. It buried itself in the muscles around my neck. I grabbed it with my fingered hand and held it there. With his tail immobilized, the Visser was helpless.

I scratched his flank with my stinger. It was hard not to kill him, but this was a rescue mission. I had to attack him and let the poison of the Kelbrid take its course. I just had to hold on until he fell.

I scratched him again, this time along his chest. <Sorry, Ax,> Marco said. <It's Rachel doing this, not me.>

The Visser was desperate now. Desperation gave him a new strength. He pulled his tail free of my grasp and followed it up with a lightning strike to my head. I roared as the blade raked across my face.

<Owww! I can still feel that,> Marco complained.

The Visser's tail came again, but it was slower this time. He was weakening. <Getting sleepy, Visser?> I taunted.

<Fool,> he roared. <I can still morph.>

He started to change. Black and orange started to replace his fur. How do I know? Because I could actually feel the color changing. These Kelbrid senses were scary. They were impossible to sneak up on. No wonder the One gave them an entire galaxy to hunt in. They'd strip an entire planet of prey within only one or two generations.

His morph went awry, though. His tail morphed too early. Suddenly, he was left with no weapons. I struck. I slashed him three times, injecting my toxin into him. He started to morph back.

By then, it was too late. He was too badly poisoned. Even while he morphed away the poison from his tiger morph, I pumped more into his Andalite body.

He wobbled on his feet for a moment. The Visser raised his tail for another half-hearted strike. I punched him in the face with my fist and he toppled.

<Take *that*,> I hissed. <I am the queen! Do you know how long I've wanted to do that?>

<Seven years?> Marco guessed.

My victory was short lived, though. I heard a Controller I didn't recognize say, "What do we do now?"

Another voice answered. "Guraff gave us standing orders. These Kelbrid won't be loyal to the Visser anymore. They have to be terminated. Yeerks, abandon your Kelbrid hosts. We're setting the Gleet BioFilters to destroy all the Kelbrid."

# CHAPTER 13

<What do we do now?> I shouted to Tobias and Marco.

<Grab Ax,> Tobias said. <Jeanne and I'll create a diversion. Get out through the south hallway. David and Alloran are standing by.>

I felt one of the Kelbrid leap at the one who had been talking about BioFilters. He roared with his Kelbrid voice and sank his teeth into the man's neck. Normally, we don't kill Human-Controllers. But I guess Tobias was desperate.

The other Kelbrid started twitching. They wanted to get in on the slaughter, but their Yeerks were holding them back. It was a struggle for the Yeerks. They were paralyzed.

Tobias knocked the nearest Controller to the ground and pointed his spike at the man's throat. <Nobody move. I killed the first one to prove I was serious. Now you know I'll kill this one unless you obey me.>

I felt a Yeerk slither out of his ear. Jeanne demorphed and then morphed to leopard. She held her mouth over the Controller's throat while Tobias demorphed and then morphed to Howler.

<We are leaving now,> he said to both us and the Yeerks.

<Clear a path.>

The Yeerks looked unsure of what to do. Tobias nodded to me. <Get Ax. Run. NOW!>

I scooped up the unconscious Andalite and tossed him onto my back. Then, I retracted my spike and charged on all fours. I guess the Yeerks decided that then was a good time to unleash their hosts.

Marco thought of something that hadn't occurred to me. <Kelbrid,> he shouted. <I killed your leader and now I'm him. I order you to fight the Yeerks.>

Again, the Kelbrid froze. The battle for their minds continued. That gave us the opening that we needed. Tobias, Jeanne, and I dashed into the south hallway. <David, Al, NOW! Get us out!> he snapped. Already, the Kelbrid and Yeerks were stirring behind us. Marco's ploy hadn't lasted long; not that we expected it to.

The roof of the Blade ship was torn off by the *Reliquary's* cannons. Our ship, never more beautiful to me, hovered above us. Tobias climbed through the hatch. I passed Ax to him. His amazingly strong Howler body managed to pull the Andalite into the ship. Jeanne went next.

Marco demorphed and we climbed in last. I was already

slithering out of his ear. No need to be Yeerk longer than was absolutely necessary. And I didn't really want to get all of Marco's memories.

I demorphed in about thirty seconds. "We did it!" I shouted. "We saved Ax!" I couldn't believe it. It was like some beautiful dream.

"Not yet we didn't," Tobias grumbled. "We're trying to make it home, but the Blade ship's following up. I guess Guraff's calling the shots now and he's not giving up that easily."

"What is it with that guy?" Marco wondered.

"If one of us was kidnapped, how far would you go?" Jeanne responded.

"Fair enough."

Tobias wheeled the *Reliquary* about to face the Blade ship. "Guraff," he said, transmitting his speech to the other ship, "didn't we do this before? How did that end for you?"

"I have improved, young beast," came Guraff's rumbling reply. "Have you?"

"No need to," Tobias answered. But I could see in his eyes that he wasn't as confident as he acted.

Tobias ripped into the Blade ship with a barrage of

Shredder fire, but they had their shields up now. The blasts reflect off and disappeared into the blackness of space.

“Al,” Tobias said, “take the auxiliary weapons controls. Bring all firepower to bear on the cockpit. I’m taking all our enemies down in one swoop. Their shields can only take so much punishment before they give in.”

Al nodded and went to his station. Guraff wasn’t idle, though. The Blade ship opened up on us with more guns than I realized it had. What was worse, several Bug fighters detached from the main ship. One on one, we could probably beat the Blade ship. But could we do it while dodging Bug fighters? I didn’t think even Tobias was that good.

“We have to back off,” Marco said as though reading my mind. “Tobias, we can’t take them today. Let’s just be happy with what we have. In a few days, Ax will be free. That’s a good enough day for me.”

Tobias nodded gravely. “Fine. I’m leaving.” He turned the ship around. “Al, keep your fire on those Bugs. Don’t let them near us.”

<Yes, my prince.> I watched on Al’s screen as he shot at Bug fighters. He was keeping them at bay, but the Blade ship was fast approaching. The auxiliary guns weren’t enough to

stop it.

The ship rocked as the Blade ship's powerful Dracon cannons hit us. They hit us with everything they had and our shields were overloaded. Any other attacks might kill us.

The Bug fighters started shooting now that they could actually hurt us. "I'll have to put us down as soon as I can," Tobias said through gritted teeth. We plunged into the atmosphere.

The ship rocked again as more Dracon beams struck us. Because we had descended into the atmosphere now, there were fiery explosions to accompany the unpleasant rocking.

Tobias was an incredible pilot, but no one was good enough to escape this. "Hang on," he ordered. "There's a very thick forest down below. They can't follow us there. I'm going to try to put us down."

His Shredders started ripping up chunks of the forest to make room for us. We dropped hard onto the ground. "This isn't a solution," Marco said. "We're sitting ducks!"

"I know," Tobias sighed. "Grab Ax. We'll have to abandon the ship."

The Bug fighters and the Blade ship appeared above us. "Too late," I whispered, clutching Tobias's hand. We were

about to die.

I held his hand for a full minute. Nothing happened. “Why aren’t they shooting?” Jeanne asked.

<Oh, I know,> David said suddenly. <This is a rescue mission. Shooting us means killing the Visser. They haven’t killed us yet because Ax is on board.>

“So as long as the Visser is alive, we will be too?” Marco summarized.

<Yeah.>

“But in three days...” I trailed off. The Visser would live at most for three days. Then, he would starve to death and there’d be no reason for Guraff to hold back.

Al nodded and finished my thought. <Yes, Rachel. In three days, we all die.>

# CHAPTER 14

We tried not to panic. With the exceptions of Marco and David, we succeeded. Of course, those two wouldn't shut up. <Oh man. I'm gonna die as a rat! I always figured that I could do the human thing when this was over but now...>

"I'm going to die before my show hits its third season! They'll have to kill off my character! Who ends a series abruptly for no reason and kills a main character?"

Tobias was much calmer, which helped. If he was being calm, the rest of us could manage it. Al, as usual, held himself with Andalite detachment. Ax/the Visser was still unconscious. Jeanne and I tried to keep cool.

"Alright, they won't just assault us right away," Tobias said. "Guraff will want to negotiate if he can. He doesn't want any harm to come to his Visser. While he's here, he'll be planning the attack. It'll probably come in the middle of the night, so we have to be ready."

"Why don't we just run for it?" Jeanne asked.

"They'd shoot us as soon as we left the ship," I answered. "There's no way we're walking away from this."

"What if we morphed bugs?" Jeanne suggested.

Marco shook his head. “We couldn’t get the Visser to go along with it.”

David nodded. <I say we wait for Guraff. We’ll see what he wants. Maybe we can negotiate.>

“Maybe,” Tobias agreed. “Guraff’s got a level head.”

It took only a few minutes for Guraff to arrive. In that time, we had tied Ax up and locked him in the bathroom. Marco was standing watch in Kelbrid morph. Al was there as backup, just to be safe.

<How does Guraff know we won’t just kill him?> David wondered. <He’s taking a huge risk like this.>

“He knows me,” Tobias answered. On the view screens, we could see Guraff approaching. He was flanked by six Kelbrid and was accompanied by five Hork-bajir. He left them at the edge of the clearing we had made and came the rest of the way alone.

Tobias opened the hatch when Guraff was a few feet away. Tobias was demorphed, but Jeanne was in her Garatron morph and David was a lion. I had decided not to morph. No need to do more than was necessary.

Guraff smiled when he saw us. “Young beast. Rachel. A pleasure to see you again under more pleasant circumstances.

And Rachel, I *am* sorry for what I did to your sister. I hope you understand.”

Not long ago, Guraff had infested Jordan as part of a plan to save his own life from Yeerk assassins by forcing us to defend him. Things didn't exactly go as planned, but we saved Guraff and he released Jordan without any trouble. I think I mentioned it earlier.

According to Jordan, Guraff had been polite about it. He constantly assured her that it was only temporary and he didn't read through her memories. I guess it could have been a lot worse than it was. And I think he really was sorry.

Guraff wasn't one of those Yeerks who got his kicks out of enslaving other creatures. He was more like...like me. He was a warrior. He loved battle. But more than that, he was a patriot. I know, it's weird to think of a Yeerk as being one, but I got to know Guraff pretty well during a weird mission the Ellimist, Crayak, and the One sent us on.

It's weird to think about Guraff. He's one of the good Yeerks, but he's still an enemy. But if he ever became an ally, he'd lose that quality that made him a good guy. Weird.

“Hi, Guraff,” Tobias said. “I assume you're here to negotiate. What do you offer?”

“As you can see, you are pinned down. We will wait here for three days. After that, the Visser will be dead and we will have no reason to hold back. In three days, we will eliminate any trace of you. But I give you my word that I will let you walk away from this if you meet my conditions. I ask only two things from you, young beast. The first is that you give Esplin to me. I want to save his life.”

“I’ll consider it. What’s the second condition?”

“You must also return Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill.”

“No. Under no circumstances.”

Guraff gave a Hork-bajir smile. “That is what I thought you would say. At first, at least. But the Visser left us standing orders in the event that something like this happened. I am to try to retrieve his host by any means necessary. I hope for all our sakes that you reconsider.”

“No. Never.”

Guraff shook his head. “We shall see, young beast. I think that when the time comes, when you have to choose between losing one of your men and losing all of them, you will reconsider.”

“Maybe. But that isn’t the choice I see now. I see a choice between letting my best friend die a free man or live as a

slave. And I know which he would prefer. Tell me, Guraff: would you sacrifice Esplin to save your men?”

Guraff was silent for a long while. Finally, he said, “I do not know. That is why I will wait to see what you decide. Because I do not know myself in this matter, how could I ever know you? I read something once by one of your human generals. *[i]If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.[i]*”

Tobias smiled. “I thought you might be a Sun Tzu fan.”

Guraff nodded. “Many of your generals were very wise. I see why we lost the first time. But neither of us know either of us in this matter, Tobias. That is why I will wait. But once Esplin dies, I will wait no more. You have three days.”

# CHAPTER 15

It was my turn to babysit the Visser. I wasn't morphed because it would be impossible to fit a grizzly bear and an Andalite in the bathroom. At least, that's what I told Tobias. I didn't tell him I didn't want to morph because my grizzly was male and I didn't know what might happen.

David was in rattlesnake morph for protection. If the Visser somehow escaped, David would poison him into submission again. Of course, that didn't stop him from making threats.

He had been yelling his head off for the last four hours. He was finally starting to run out of threats, which was a relief. Unfortunately, his current threats and insults were getting really bad.

<I'll have you all decapitated! That's a punishment I use only on the lowliest of my minions. How do you like the sound of that?>

I shrugged. "I just don't see it happening, Visser. I mean, you're tied up here in the ship. You won't be decapitating anyone any time soon."

<Do you really think you'll get away with this? Guraff

will rescue me. He holds all the cards. You've underestimated him. It is only a matter of time.>

"Maybe. But I can guarantee that it'll take him more than three days. How long do you actually have, Visser? Do you have all three days left? Or are you even weaker than that. My bet? You last two as the most."

<I fed almost two days ago. I have exactly sixteen hours and twenty four minutes left to live,> the Visser answered.  
<You do not have that luxury.>

David laughed. <Give it a rest, Visser. The threats and intimidation aren't working anymore. If we're going down, you're going down with us. That's enough for me at least.>

<Ah, yes. David. I remember you so well. Do you remember the day we met? I do. I met your father, as I recall. Oh, he thought he was a brave one. But he screamed and cried like...like your mother.>

<Shut up! Don't talk about my mother!>

<Do you want to know what happened to her? She gave in easily, right from the start. Oh, she cried the first time she was infested, but after only one week, she didn't have to be caged anymore.>

<You're lying.>

<I don't need to. You would be amazed how many people break so easily.>

“Stop it,” I told him. I didn't want David to do something we'd regret.

<Can you make me? Let a dying man have his wish.>

Neither of us answered. The Visser decided it was time for a monologue of his thoughts. <I do wonder about life sometimes. How would things have been different if, for example, my twin had been the prime and I the lesser? Would he have become the first and only Andalite-Controller? How would the war for Earth have gone? Would Elfangor have lived? Would you, Rachel?>

“Little too late for you to wonder,” I answered evenly. “And if you ask me, you *are* the lesser.”

<Oh? Am I a lower form of life than he is? I am many things, but not a cannibal. For all that you may hate about me, do not make things up. I do not eat my own race.>

<No, you just kill them when they disagree with you,> David shot back.

<Would you say that is amoral, David?>

<Obviously.>

<How odd that you of all people should lecture me on

ethics. How many have you betrayed, David? You betrayed your family—>

<I did no such thing.>

<Oh, but you did. You betrayed them when you were greedy. You betrayed them when you saved yourself instead of saving them. You betrayed them when you decided to fight against the only hope they had of ever being free again.>

“Funny that you should talk about betrayal,” I said.

<Me? A traitor? No, no, no Rachel. I am a patriotic Yeerk. I fully embrace everything that it means to be a Yeerk. I have never betrayed my superiors. I have been betrayed by them and retaliated, but I have never turned against them.>

“Tell that to Edriss.”

<She betrayed me, not the other way around. She is the one who released you so long ago when I had you trapped on the Pool ship. Were it not for her, the war would have ended that day. She is the traitor, not me.>

As much as I hated him, as much as I wanted to argue, he had a point.

The bathroom door opened. Tobias was there. “Rachel, David, you can go now. You need to demorph anyway. It’s time for my shift.”

I shook my head. I knew he would need me for this. This would be the first time Tobias actually spoke to his father's killer. There was no way I was leaving.

# CHAPTER 16

The two of them stared at each other in silence for a long time. The Visser had four eyes, but Tobias's eyes still had the look of the hawk about them. I was reminded vaguely of the staring contests Tobias and Ax used to get into. They'd get to do that again, soon.

The Visser broke the silence. <Well, Tobias? What is it you want to say to me? I'm sure you've fantasized about this moment for a long time. What will you say to me? What could you say? I feel no remorse for what I've done, no guilt. Words, you see, are meaningless to me. Action is what matters.

<What do you want to say, Tobias? What can you say? What is it that you even hope to accomplish by speaking to me? Do you think I will ever apologize for anything I did? Will you apologize to me for all the men you killed? The hosts you freed? The time I spent in prison? No. We are, both of us, warriors, Tobias, and warriors do not feel guilt.>

Tobias continued to stare at him in silence, so the Visser kept speaking. <Do you know what I did when I learned who you were?>

"No." He didn't ask to hear it. He knew the Visser would

tell him anyway.

<I morphed into a Rakin Ghoula. Do you want to know why? Because it is the only creature in the known galaxy capable of kicking itself in the back of the head and in the teeth. To think... all those years ago, you were sitting right next to me. I could have had you infested. But I thought you were a waste of a Yeerk.>

“I know. I heard you say it to the lawyer. You said Elfangor’s son should have been a worthy foe. What do you say now?”

<Now, I laugh at my ignorance.>

“That’ll involve a lot of laughing,” Tobias answered. “Do you know what I vowed that day?”

The Visser nodded. <Presumably, that you would find yourself in this very situation. Like your father, I am now helpless in your grasp. Funny, I think it, that you will do to me what I did to him. Such an ironic world we live in. Aximili does not appreciate it; I hope you do.>

Again, they glared at each other for a few minutes. I guess I can’t blame them. What do you say to the person who killed your father? And what do you say to the son of the man you killed, especially when you aren’t even the least bit sorry?

Again, the Visser broke the silence. <Do you know what it's like to feel your life slipping away?>

“Yes,” Tobias and I answered at the same time.

<Then you know. I am starving now. Your friend, dear Aximili, is fighting harder. He thinks he can overpower me. But he is still foolish.>

“Better to be a living fool than a dead genius,” I said.

<Many would disagree. But I do not have the strength to argue anymore. I will speak my final thoughts to you so that someone remembers. How will you like that?>

“I’d prefer it if you’d be quiet,” I answered. “Tobias, isn’t there some way we can duct-tape his mouth shut? Isn’t there an Andalite equivalent of a gag?”

“Chloroform?” he suggested. “But I want to hear this. Go on, Esplin. What are your last thoughts? After all this time... after these seven years in Hell, I want to know what the devil has to say.”

<I think...this war has gone on so long now. I was a young Yeerk when it all began. I may be one of the last left who was alive before the Yeerk Empire. I think all of the original members of the Council of Thirteen are dead. It may just be me now. And Guraff.

<Do you know? He was the first of us all. He had a Gedde host way back in the beginning. He stole a Shredder and used it to kill an Andalite. [i]He[/i] drew the first blood in this war. In a way, this is all because of him. But he was lucky. He was frozen and left in space, so now he's younger than me. But he's still old.

<It is strange. I am an old man, now. I can feel it. How many Yeerks have aged to death? Very few. Most take a pair of mates and reproduce. Strange, isn't it?>

Suddenly, the Visser started to laugh. <Can you imagine it? A Yeerk produces thousands of offspring. Can you imagine a thousand Yeerks just like me? The galaxy would be on its knees in no time. I see what Elfangor did with just two sons. If I gave life to thousands...

<Wouldn't that be ironic, though? I, who have killed more than most beings have ever even seen alive, could end my life by giving life. It is almost worth it just for the irony.>

"But that won't happen," Tobias answered. "Instead, you're going to shrivel up and die here, on this ship."

<But I will never really die, you know. No, no. I will always live on in the nightmares of mankind and of the Andalites. I will always have a place in history. No one will

ever forget Esplin Nine-Four-Double-Six.>

“No. But how much do you think we’ll remember of you? We won’t remember the real you. In ten, twenty years, you’ll be a joke. Cartoon parodies of you will spring up all over the place. You’ll be a pun. That’s what we do to our villains. We make fun of them and suddenly, they aren’t scary anymore.

“One day, I’ll have a kid. And he or she will be sitting on the couch on a Saturday morning, watching the TV. I’ll hear him or her laugh at something on the cartoon and the punch line will be you. It happened to Satan. It happened to Hitler. That’s what’s going to happen to you.

“I can hear the late night comedy people, too. David Letterman. I know you know who he is; Ax and I watched him often enough. One day, I’ll be watching his show and he’ll have a list: top ten things on Esplin Nine-Four-Double-Six’s tombstone. And I’ll laugh because in every ridiculous joke, there will be a kernel of truth. Hell, Marco will probably be the one reading the jokes.

“That’s what you’ll become, Esplin. You won’t be some phantom in our nightmares. You’ll be a running joke. That’s all you’ll be when this is all over. Just another pun. After all the fear, all the death, all the hatred, all the pain you’ve

caused, you're going to bring us laughter. That's the ironic thing about your death."

<I think...I think I will rest now. Good night, Tobias.>

The Visser slumped. Then, slowly, a stalk eye twitched. <[size=80]Tobias?[/size]> whispered Ax's voice. The Visser's presence was gone now. It was just our friend.

Tobias put an arm around his *shorm*. "Hey, Ax-man. Don't worry. It's almost over. Tomorrow, you'll be free. We'll fly to the Cinnabon and you can eat as much as you want. Won't that be great?"

There were tears in Tobias's eyes. I never realized until that moment just how much this meant to him. <[size=80]Yes, Tobias. That will be great.[/size] > He paused. <[size=80]I am very tired. I don't know why I'm so tired. I haven't done anything in so long. Why am I so tired?[/size]>

"Don't worry about it, Ax. Just go to sleep." Tobias held Ax close to him and stroked the fur along his back. It reminded me of the time Al had had a nightmare. Tobias found him in the kitchen, sleepless. He calmed him down and got him back to sleep.

I rubbed my stomach. Yeah, this kid could do a lot worse for a father.

# CHAPTER 17

Guraff came again the next morning. Tobias met him for breakfast. I was surprised that Guraff was able to eat my cooking. Hork-bajir bodies are made for eating tree bark. They can't digest anything else.

I am either a really good cook or a really bad one. I'm betting good, since we always meet over breakfast.

Guraff started the conversation. "I have found the records Esplin was keeping of his feedings. He has a little more than six hours left to live. I'll ask you again to return him. If not, then this all ends in six hours."

"And if I give you Esplin without Ax?" Tobias asked.

"I do not know. Esplin will insist that we secure his host. But you will not be on a time limit anymore. Perhaps you would be able to think of a way out, though I doubt it. We put a force field around your ship, so you can't walk out of here. You won't get away unless I let you."

"I'll have to discuss this with everyone. Guys," Tobias called, "we need a vote. Do we let Esplin go or not?"

"If we're all going to die anyway, I say we let Ax die free," Marco answered. "As much as I'd like to take the Visser down

with us, we might be able to make a plan with enough time.”

<I’ve already got a plan,> David answered in what I pray was private thought speak. <But I need more time to work out the kinks.> To everyone he said, <I’m with Marco.>

Jeanne nodded. <We can at least give Prince Aximili his last days as a free creature.”

“Al?”

<I will obey your decision, Prince Tobias.>

“Of course. What about you, Rach?”

“Does it matter? Even if I’m against it, I’m already out voted. Let’s hand the slug over.”

Tobias nodded. “Marco, go gorilla and get Ax out here. Tell the Visser he gets to go home.”

Marco morphed and went off to the bathroom. A moment later, Ax was tied up on the floor <Guraff. You came for me. I’m touched.>

He must have been really out of it. “I’m here, Esplin. Don’t worry. You’ll be okay soon. But first, you need to get out of the Andalite.”

<What?>

“That was the deal. We’ll come back for your host later. Right now, you need Kandrona.”

<But I...alright.>

We watched as the Visser, our greatest enemy, emerged from his host. He was a tiny slug. I could have squished him in my hands. It was almost impossible to believe that...that thing...had caused so much death. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't been on the receiving end of it all.

Guraff nodded to us. "You will likely deal with Esplin now. He will probably decide to get a new host and just blast you. If you intend to get away, I'd work quickly. Good luck, young beast."

"I'll see you later, Guraff," Tobias promised. It was a taunt, really. He was implying that he'd get out of this.

"Okay," Tobias said once Guraff was gone. "We need to think of something. David, you had a plan?"

<More or less. The Yeerks want Ax, right? And Guraff said he'd let us go if he got Ax, so—>

"No. They Do. Not. Get. Ax. Period."

<That wasn't what I'm suggesting. What if one of us morphed Ax and turned ourselves over to the Yeerks?>

"No. I can't send someone off to get infested."

"Tobias," Marco said, "if this isn't done, we're toast. And that's the end of Earth. And the rest of the galaxy, since

Crayak will lose his war. Heck, it might be the end of the universe.”

Tobias was silent for a long time. Then, “If anyone’s going to do it, then, it has to be me. I already have an Ax morph. And I cannot, [i]cannot[/i] send one of you off to do this.”

“Tobias, you can’t go,” I protested.

“I have to, Rachel. If someone has to go, it has to be me. That’s all there is to it.”

“But...” I tried to tell him, but I just couldn’t get it out of my mouth. I couldn’t tell him he was going to be a father. And to be frighteningly honest, I’m not sure that would stop him. His own father left him to fight, to do what he had to do. Would Tobias be any different?

“Look, I know it’s terrible, but there is no way I can order any of you to do this. I can’t even ask you to volunteer. I—”

“No, Rachel’s right,” Marco agreed. “You’re the leader, man. We need you. Without you, it’s game over. Someone—”

He cut off because the bathroom door exploded. Three Hork-bajir leapt out, followed by a pair of Human-Controllers with Dracon beams.

“How...?” I began even as I stared to morph.

<They must have been hiding as bugs on Guraff’s body,>

David shouted.

“Dammmmm herrroww,” Marco started to say something but cut off as his gorilla jaw bulged out.

“Stop morphing,” one of the humans ordered. “I’d prefer to take prisoners, but I’m just as happy with corpses.”

We all froze. No one moved. <This is bad,> Marco commented. <Rachel, would now be a bad time to tell Tobias that little secret we’ve been keeping?>

“Now would be a very bad time, Marco.”

<Okay then.>

We all froze, unsure what to do. I don’t think the Controller expected us to listen. Well, one of us didn’t. In the blink of an eye, the Controllers were still holding their Dracon beams, but those hands weren’t attached to their bodies anymore.

<Sweet save, Ax,> Marco said, hitting a Hork-bajir over the head with a chair.

I swept a paw and batted a Hork-bajir into the wall. Tobias, half Howler now, leapt halfway across the room and snapped the last Hork-bajir’s neck.

FWAP! FWAP! Ax knocked out the Human-Controllers. <Just like old times, is it not?> Ax said in that dry, understated

way Andalites have.

<I'll say,> I agreed.

<I have not done that for far too many of your years.>

I'm pretty sure gorillas can smile, since Marco did. <Ax, how many times do we have to have this conversation? They are everybody, years, everybody's hours, and [i]especially[/i] EVERYBODY'S MINUTES!>

Tobias turned to Jeanne and Alloran. "This is a historical reenactment of a very famous debate. Pay attention."

<Just as long as Marco doesn't go off about uniforms,> I grumbled. For the first time, Ax laughed.

<Hey!> Marco shouted. <He finally gets human humor!>

<Do what with the what now?>

## CHAPTER 18

Ax and Al decided to sleep in the Scoop under the ship that night. I couldn't blame them. David was with them, trying to work out the remaining issues he had with Ax. Marco and Jeanne had decided to go for a walk before we all died.

I didn't know how much walking they could get done inside of the force field, but I didn't really care. After being in Marco's head, I trusted him a lot more with Jeanne.

I lay on my bed, trying to sleep. I knew I couldn't. I couldn't let Tobias go off in Ax's place. Something had to be done, but what? Then, I heard Tobias talking.

“Hey...it's Tobias. I know, I've never called you before. I've never reached out to you before. I guess because I never thought you were real, especially not after all that I saw. But... well, Santorelli believed in you. That counts for something.”

What was he doing? Was he on the phone with someone? I looked over at him. I guess he thought I was asleep. He was kneeling by the side of his bed, his hands folded, his eyes shut. Oh. This was new.

“I guess I know how you feel now. I know what you felt that night they killed you. You had to give yourself up for the

sake of everyone else. But I guess my situation's a little different.

"I have to sacrifice someone. Anyone but me. That's the worst part, I think. If it was me walking off to this...but it's not. I'm stuck between two choices. Both intolerable. I can give one of my friends up to slavery. Or I can give up the universe to the One.

"I guess when I put it that way, it doesn't sound like such a hard choice. But which of my friends? That's the hard part. I guess, in a way, it was easier for you, maybe. You knew who to send. Your son. But what am I supposed to do? Just what the hell am I supposed to do?"

He was crying, I realized. This was what I was afraid of. Tobias always made the cold, heartless decision. He once sacrificed an entire sentient race and all of the dinosaurs to save mankind. He would make a choice. But that choice might destroy him.

I heard his tears stop. "Okay. Okay, that's the only way. Yeah. Ax will take over the fight. And I...I'll go to the Yeerks. And once the others are safe, I'll take my own life. That's all I can do." He climbed into bed, pulled the covers tight over him, and went to sleep.

I snuck out into the scoop. Marco and Jeanne were just getting back from...whatever it was they were doing. "Okay," I said, "We've got to do something. I just heard Tobias...well, he was praying."

Marco winced. "That's getting desperate for him."

"Yeah. He decided what he's going to do. He wants Ax to take over his job as leader. And Tobias is going to go, in Ax morph, to the Yeerks. And once we're safe, he's going to kill himself."

<No!> Ax shouted. <I'd sooner be a Controller again than let that happen.>

<I think we all would,> David agreed. <One of us has to go in his place. The question is, who?>

"Draw straws?" Marco suggested.

"Not for this," I argued. "Someone has to volunteer."

"Well, not you," Jeanne said. "You're pregnant."

Ax and Al's stalk eyes stretched to their maximum lengths. I think they were surprised. <Congratulations,> Ax said after a moment.

"Yeah. She gets to be out of the running," Marco grumbled.

<Guys...> David began. <It should be me. I'm the only

one. If I go, they can't keep me as a Controller because every time I demorphed, I'd kill the Yeerk. They get me, infest me, and find out what really happened. By then, you're all long gone.>

<And then what happens to you?> Al asked.

<Then, Guraff probably kills me.>

“David, I don't like the sound of that plan,” Marco said. “I mean, you're not my favorite person, but...”

<It's the best way. Besides...I think I want to do it. I've done so many bad things... There's so much I need to make right. This is all I can do. I hope that this can make it up to all of you. Uh...especially those of you who I tried to kill.>

Marco held up a finger. “Okay, that's one vote for Davy-boy. That's one out of six. Anyone else going to vote?”

I shook my head. “One out of five, Marco. If I can't run, I can't vote.”

“Fair enough. Maybe you should go back inside, Xena. We don't want bird-boy to come out looking for you. How would we explain this to him?”

I nodded. “Okay. Uh...whoever goes, just know that...I... You're saving my family. Thank you.”

## CHAPTER 19

Tobias woke up the next morning looking like he hadn't slept. I knew he had. He was tossing and turning all night. I almost wanted to tie him down, but that wasn't part of the plan. Although we might have to do it later...

"Morning," he grunted. He looked like he wanted to say something more meaningful, but he didn't. Instead he just got up and started making some coffee. Like nothing was wrong.

Jeanne and Marco, who had been sleeping on the floor, woke up as he fiddled around in the kitchen. "That's not Rachel in the kitchen, is it?" Marco asked, not opening his eyes.

"No, it's Tobias," I answered.

"Good." Marco looked like he wanted to go back to sleep. Why didn't he want me in the kitchen? I could cook while pregnant. Oh well.

Ax, David, and Al came in through the floor hatch. Tobias turned around. "Good, everyone's here. I...I made a decision about who to send."

"We know," I said. "I heard you telling God about it. We can't let you do it, Tobias. And don't try to argue because we

aren't going to put up with it.”

“Rachel, I—”

FWAP!

The flat side of Ax's tail blade smashed into Tobias's head. He wouldn't be awake for some time. Long enough for us to do what we had to do.

<I cannot help but feel a bit guilty about that,> Ax muttered. <But we do what we must.>

Next, he contacted the Blade ship. Guraff spoke to us, since the Visser was still waiting for his host and wouldn't condescend to take anything less than an Andalite. <Guraff 427, it is I, Prince Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill. In order to spare the lives of my friends, I will turn myself in.>

“Good. Walk outside of your ship and go the edge of the force field. We will drop the force field. The *Reliquary* will fly away. And then we will pick you up. If you run, if you flee, if you fight back, we will destroy the *Reliquary*. Is that understood, Prince Aximili?”

<I understand. Allow me a moment to say goodbye to my friends.> Ax turned to us. <Are you prepared?>

<Yeah,> David said. <I hope this makes up for some of the stuff I've done. Guys...thanks for the second chance. Or third.

Or maybe fourth. Thanks for forgiving me.>

FAWP!

We all jumped about a foot as Al's tail blade came down on David's head. He was unconscious like Tobias. "What the hell was that about?" Marco demanded.

<David is my *shorm*,> Alloran answered. <I cannot allow him to do this. I will go in his place. I acquired Prince Aximili last night. This is my duty, as a brother, friend, nephew, and warrior. I will go.>

"Well..." Marco trailed off. "Well, hurry up, we're running out of sacrificial lambs. Al...I'll miss you. You're a good kid." Marco gave him a brief hug. "You reminded me a lot of all the good times we had back when we were still young. You helped give back something that I never thought we could get. Thanks."

Jeanne knelt down and kissed him where his cheek might have been. "I hope that I one day have a child like you." Then, she said something long in French that I didn't catch.

Al apparently understood it, though, because he nodded and said, <I feel the same.>

Ax said the only thing he could think of. The highest compliment he could give. <[i]Aristh[/i]; no, [i]Warrior[/i]>

Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor, you are just like your father and brother.> They touched tail blades in the Andalite fashion. Then, I guess they decided that wasn't enough, because they hugged human-style.

Al turned to me. I'm not ashamed to admit that I was crying. I mean, Tobias and I had been raising this kid. We were a family. "No matter what happens, Al, no matter what that slug says or does, we'll always be your family."

<I know. Thank you, Rachel. I...You are as much my family as Prince Tobias is. I love you both.> I think that was the only time I've ever heard an Andalite say that. <Please let Prince Tobias know that.>

We all embraced him one last time. Then, he morphed to Ax. It was weird, because it was like watching Ax grow up in fast motion. Kind of like how we all had to grow up really fast. It made me want to cry some more. The pregnancy hormones probably had something to do with that, too.

The hatch opened and Al walked out like the proud Andalite warrior he was. I had no idea what would happen to him. He might just be killed. He might be infested. I had no idea. But at least Tobias didn't have to live with knowing it was all because of him.

We sealed the hatch and watched. Tobias was stirring. He stumbled to his feet. “What’s...no...NO! AL! [b]NO[/b]!”

Marco and I pulled him back from the view screen. “[size=125][b]ALLORAN NO[/b][[/size]!”

Tobias pulled free and surged for the control node. The hatch opened. He tried to dive out. Again, we pulled him back. “Tobias, no,” I said. “You have to get us out of here.”

“No! I can’t leave him! It should be me!”

“Tobias, it can’t be you. We need you. All of us.” I took his hand and put it on my stomach. “[i]We[/i] need you,” I repeated. “Both of us.”

His eyes widened. “You mean...”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

He was silent. Ax flew the *Reliquary* home. We couldn’t stay to see what happened. I hoped, no I prayed, that Alloran had been killed. That would be kinder.

It’s a sick world where the death of a child is the lesser of two evils.

## CHAPTER 20

Tobias was in too much shock over that day's events to celebrate Ax's return. That didn't stop him from taking us to the mall where Ax could get the one thing he loved more than his own freedom.

"That's nine cinnamon buns in one sitting," Marco counted. "I didn't think he could do it."

Jeanne just stared, disgusted and partially terrified. "I thought Alloran and David were bad but this..."

Ax's human face was completely covered in icing. I mean completely covered. He was trying to eat himself. David and Marco decided to drag him off to the men's room to clean himself up. They needed Jeanne's help to drag him away from the tenth cinnamon bun that was still sitting on the table.

"So..." Tobias said at last. "I guess you and I need to talk. Why do I get the impression that I was the last one to know?"

I smiled weakly. "Because you were."

"Okay. Well... I think it's kind of obvious that we have two choices at this point."

"Two?"

"Yeah. You can get an abortion and keep fighting. Or you

can keep the child, but that means you're out of the war."

"I never considered that first option and I'm not going to start now," I answered. "We're keeping this baby."

"I was hoping you'd say that. We'll need to start looking for your replacement. Any suggestions?"

"I don't know. Jordan said she wanted to help but I don't want her involved in this."

"We'll put that on the back burner. I think the other issue is...we'll have to get married at some point."

"Is that a proposal?"

"Not yet. Believe me, Rachel; you'll know when I'm proposing. The whole galaxy will know. I'll probably call in favors from entire alien races. I'm pretty sure the Helmacrons owe me..."

"Please, no Helmacrons," I pleaded.

"We'll see." He was silent for the next few moments. Then he gave me a small smile. "You know, I think this is a good thing. It gives me more reason to fight."

"Yeah?"

"Definitely. I'm going to make you a promise, Rachel. Our child will grow up in a world where he doesn't have to be afraid of Yeerks. I'll finish this war before he's born."

“Or she,” I reminded him.

“Or she,” he agreed.

I shook my head. “I just don’t know what I’m going to do without the war, though. For so long, it’s been who I am.”

“Rachel, that isn’t true.”

“Yes it is. I loved it, Tobias. I still love it.”

“Rachel, it was never the war you loved. What you loved was to be needed. The people of Earth, everyone on the whole planet, needed your help. That’s what you loved. You’re the kind of person who needs to be needed.”

“You think so?”

“Of course. Rachel...long ago, I needed someone. Anyone at all. You barely knew me, but you were there every time I needed anything. That’s just who you are. That’s what you love. And believe me when I say that no one is going to need you more than this baby. You’ll be fine without the war.”

“But it’s just such a huge part of who I am,” I repeated. “I mean, without it, what would I have become? I wouldn’t be who and what I am today.”

He nodded. “Yeah. But are you happy with who you’ve become now?”

“I guess so. Yeah, I think I am.”

“Then why do you need the war anymore?”

I didn’t have an answer to that. He went on, “Rachel, we both needed this war for so many reasons. Without it, neither of us would have had a future. I’d be dead in an alley by now and you’d be...I don’t even know but you’d hate every minute of it. But we both got what we needed from this. You got your purpose in life.”

“And what did you get?” I asked. I knew what he would say. But I wanted to hear him say it.

He kissed me. “I got you.”

“Got her knocked up,” Marco chimed in. They had returned. “Xena, bird-boy, that’s sweet and all, but do you mind? I’m trying not to vomit and after watching Ax eat, it’s kind of hard already. Don’t push it.”

“Oh my god, I just realized something,” I said.

“What? Al was the only one who knew how to fix the microwave?” Marco asked.

Jeanne elbowed him. Hard. “Too soon,” she hissed.

“No. What am I going to tell my parents? And Jacques? Sara? And Loren? Oh god, that’ll be awkward. I think I’ve said maybe five words to Loren in my whole life. She doesn’t even know I’m alive!”

Tobias put an arm around me. “Don’t worry. We’ll figure it all out. Parents can’t be as scary as some of the stuff we’ve seen, right, Ax?”

“I am not sure I agree, Tobias. I remember when Elfangor had to tell my parents that he had a son. He was frightened.”

“You kids want to see frightening?” Our heads whipped around. The Drode was walking towards us through the middle of the mall. Judging by how no one looked at him, he was either invisible or he looked totally normal to them.

“Drode,” Tobias said. “What brings you here?”

In response, he shoved a ridiculously oversized cigar in Tobias’s mouth. “Congratulations, that’s what. The Ellimist was too stiff to stop by, but I could take some time out of my busy schedule to congratulate my two favorite Animorphs.”

His voice lowered. “And I’m willing to bet that this little bastard is going to be quite the demon. I’ll probably love him. I can’t wait. I can’t help but notice something, though.”

“What?” I asked.

“You seem to be missing an Animorph. I thought you came in a six pack. If you ever want a new guy, all you have to do is call.”

“What’s the price?” Marco asked. He looked at me.

The Drode laughed. “Oh, I’m not going to ask for their child if that’s what you’re worried about. He’ll come to me in his own sweet time.”

“Or she,” I corrected.

“Trust me, it’ll be a boy. My price, Marco, is that I get to pick your new teammate.”

“Why do you care who we get?” Jeanne asked.

“Why do I ever do anything? Didn’t anyone ever tell you, sweetheart?” The Drode laughed. “I’m the Wildcard.”

With that, he disappeared. Tobias still had the comical cigar. “He knows I don’t smoke,” Tobias grumbled. I gave him a look and he sighed. “On weekdays,” he amended.

Marco snatched the cigar. “I bet Crayak has the best stuff,” he remarked.

He and Tobias shared a look. Tobias smiled at me. “We’ll be right back. Ax...stay here. You get way too hooked on stuff way too fast. There’s no way you’re getting some nicotine.”

Jeanne and I watched as Marco and Tobias disappeared with the Drode’s cigar. Jeanne turned to me. “Does it ever bother you that stuff like that doesn’t seem odd anymore?”

I smiled. “That’s our life, sister. That’s our life.”

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

*“When you wake up  
Everything is going to be fine  
I guarantee that you wake in a better place  
In a better time  
So you're tired of living  
And feel like you might give in  
Well don't  
It's not your time*

*And even if it was so  
Oh I wouldn't let you go  
You could run run run run but I will follow close  
Someday you'll say, "That's it, that's all,"  
But I'll be waiting there with open arms to break your fall  
I know that you think that you're on your own  
But just know that I'm here  
And I'll lead you home  
If you let me  
She said, "Forget me."  
But I can't.”*

—A Better Place, a Better Time

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

## 65: THE PACT

“No,” Naomi said. “You are *not* getting another of my little girls. I already lost one daughter to this war and I will not let you cost me another.”

“It should be Jordan’s choice, mom,” Rachel told her. “We were all given a choice to make. Jordan at least deserves the option to fight.”

“Would you have ever said no?” Dan responded. “What do you think the chances are that Jordan will?”

“Jordan isn’t me, dad. And she knows what she’s getting into, unlike we did. Jordan understands what’s going on. The rest of us, we were thrown into this war by accident, by chance. She can choose not to fight. We can find someone else. But she deserves the same chance we had. She deserves to be allowed to fight for her planet.”

Naomi glared at me. “What do you think, Andalite?”

I don’t know why she asked my opinion. I did notice, though, that she said ‘Andalite’ with almost the same hatred that a Yeerk says it.

<I am not here to think. I am here for moral support,> I answered. Honestly, I didn’t have much of an opinion. I did

not know Jordan. During the brief time she knew of my existence, during our stay in the Hork-bajir valley, we did not interact at all. Her mother kept her children away from me as much as possible.

“I’m not surprised,” she sneered. “I never figured thinking was your strong suite. You’re just a hired killer, aren’t you.”

“Naomi, that’s enough,” Loren said. “I know you’re upset but that’s no reason to take out on Aximili. He’s had a hard enough time lately as it is.”

<Thank you, Loren. And if you truly want an answer, Naomi, I have no opinion on this matter. I do not know Jordan. I have to trust Rachel’s judgment.>

“I do not want my daughter to be one of you,” Naomi insisted. “I’ve seen what this does to you. Rachel, I barely recognize you anymore.”

We heard a new voice then. And yet, at the same time, it was an old one. “Well, Naomi, there is another option.”

Rachel groaned. Tobias nodded a quick hello to the creature that appeared in the living room. The Drode. “Drode,” Tobias said, “what brings you here?”

“What is that thing?” Naomi demanded. Dan took a step back in his hologram. Loren just shrugged.

“We aren’t entirely sure anymore,” Tobias answered.

“Call me the Drode,” Drode answered her. “Now, we seem to be at an impasse. The Animorphs need a new member. They want Jordan. You, Naomi, do not want them to have her. How, oh how, I ask, do we resolve this?”

“Get to the point,” Rachel snapped.

The Drode grinned. “Pregnancy’s making you grumpy, Rach. You need to chill.” Suddenly, the temperature in the room got very cold. I could see my breath, as could everyone else.

“Oh, great, he’s started with the puns,” Tobias sighed. “Are you happy now, Rachel? It’s like we’re dealing with Marco.” Rachel decided it was safest to remain silent. “You were saying?” Tobias prompted.

“Well, I happen to know someone who would make a perfect addition to your team, Tobias. And it’s not someone who anyone would worry about.”

“No deal,” Tobias answered. “If we’re getting a new teammate, we’re choosing them ourselves. I am *not* going to deal with another fiasco like what happened with David. It’s going to be someone *we* choose, not you.”

“Oh, but you already chose him,” the Drode laughed. “Of

course, neither you or Rachel was there at the time. In fact, I suppose the people who chose him are gone now. What, with Jake...incapacitated, and Cassie too busy to deal with saving the world anymore. Of course, Marco is still around.”

“What are you rambling about?” Rachel demanded. “We never chose another Animorph.”

“Sure you did. You chose more than a dozen. I saw the whole thing. Are you going to tell me you don’t remember?”

“The auxiliaries,” Tobias concluded.

I nodded. <That seems to be the case. But the Drode cannot raise the dead. Nor can Crayak. At least,> I added, looking at Rachel, <not by himself.>

“Who said anything about raising the dead?” Drode asked.

<One of them survived?> I asked.

“More than you’d think. Some of them trapped themselves in morphs rather than morph back to injured human bodies. Ah, such a lovely move by you, recruiting the disabled. It makes me proud. I didn’t even have to influence your decisions at all.

“But yes, Prince Aximili, some of them survived. One of them happens to be a normally functioning, healthy man now. He went off to live with the Andalites and learned quite a few

things you might find useful.”

“Who?” Tobias asked.

“His name is...but you know what, I’d rather show you. It’s so much more fun that way.”

Suddenly, there was a new person in the room. He darted his head around, nervous, confused, and afraid. Then, his eyes fell on Rachel. “You? You’re supposed to be dead.”

“Back at you, James.”

# PREVIEW SUMMARY

The Animorphs are losing members rapidly. First Rachel. Then Santorelli, followed by Jake. Cassie left and Alloran was captured. And now Rachel must leave the fight once again. The Yeerks are pressing in on two fronts and the Animorphs are down to just five members.

To top it off, the Visser has infested Alloran. Alloran was a technological prodigy; with his mind under their control, Yeerk security systems would be unmatched in all of the galaxy. Their weapons would be the best in the known universe. Ax, Tobias, Marco, Jeanne, and David need help. So when the Drode offers them a new teammate, they have no choice but to accept him. But how far can they trust someone chosen by the Drode; especially when it's someone they abandoned and left for dead...