

60: THE OFFENSIVE

CHAPTER 1

My name is Tobias. And I hate the universe.

The universe, you see, is a jerk. It has a way of twisting your world around just when it's where you like it. Or at least, when it's where you can live with it. I don't know if the universe does this for everyone, but it certainly does it to me.

For example: I used to be a normal human boy. My life wasn't great by any stretch of the imagination, but it was bearable. I was passed around between a much-married aunt and an alcoholic uncle, neither of whom cared for me. I was beat up a lot at school. I didn't really have any friends. I dealt with that.

Then, as I was walking home through an abandoned construction site...well, you know what happened there. An Andalite gave me and some 'friends' the power to morph. He told us to fight the Yeerk invasion. So we did, and my world was spun on its head.

Things got worse after that. I liked to morph; it made my life better. But, of course, the universe couldn't accept that. So

I was trapped in the morph of a red-tailed hawk. Maybe it was my fault; maybe I wanted to be trapped. Regardless, the universe arranged the circumstances so that it would happen.

I lived off meals of still-squealing prey. Mice, rabbits, snakes; even the occasional small bird. At first, it was hell. Then, I got used to it; maybe even liked it. Enter the universe.

I was given back the power to morph. I could even morph into my old human self, which would have been great; except for the constant temptation to leave the war and be human again.

I thought I had figured things out. After the war, I'd become a human. I'd live a human life. With Rachel, of course; there's no one else I'd want to be with. But then Rachel died, and I had no reason to be human anymore.

I lived as a hawk again. Not happy, maybe not even content, but still alive. I didn't care about the world anymore; that was a relief. Then, Ax got captured by Yeerks and I went off with Jake, Marco, Santorelli, Jeanne, and Menderash to rescue him.

Long story short, we ended up in a whole new war. The Yeerks are back here on Earth, led by Esplin 9466, formerly

known as Visser Three/One. The slug who killed my father now controls Ax, my *shorm*.

And as if that wasn't enough, the universe decided to break the laws of time and space to mess with me. My real father, Prince Elfangor, had to abandon me on Earth to fight the Yeerks. I had a stepfather, one who I didn't remember until just a few weeks ago.

That stepfather was Santorelli. I don't know how or why, but somehow, he was the one who replaced Elfangor in my life. For a few years, years I can only now remember, I had a happy family. But then Santorelli died, and my mother, Loren, got amnesia and couldn't take care of me.

I had been in a good place with my past until I remembered Santorelli. I wasn't happy with it, but I could deal. I couldn't miss what I never had. Now, I remembered my family, I remembered Santorelli and my mother and I missed them like I could never miss Elfangor.

To top it all off, I was made a human again, thanks to Crayak and the Drobe. They even returned Rachel to life. I could be happy as a human. Except...except for the feeling deep inside of me.

I stood on one wing of my ship, the *Reliquary*. It was a beautiful ship. As black as the Blade ship, with small streaks of white to give it camouflage against the darkness of space. Two sharp wings curved into an egg-shaped cockpit/living quarters. I lived here with Rachel and my half-brother, a young Andalite named Alloran.

But as I stood on the wing, I looked at the sky and felt an almost irresistible urge to fly. I could have done it. I could have morphed to my familiar red-tailed hawk body. But I was afraid that if I did, I would never demorph.

And, there was the hunger. I saw the mice, the rats, the shrews, the voles, the snakes, the rabbits, and I wanted to eat them. Not hunt then, kill them, cook them, and serve them. I wanted to dive down and squeeze the life out of them with my talons. I wanted to feel their warm blood in my mouth as I ripped into their raw bodies with my beak.

The hawk's hunger didn't leave me when I became human. None of its instincts left me. I still felt blind and deaf. For so long, I was a human trapped inside the body of a hawk. I thought I was the strangest creature in all the galaxy. Now, I

realize that I became something stranger than a human trapped in a hawk. Now, I was a hawk trapped inside a human.

Technically, I had spent most of my life as a human. I grew up human and was raised as a human. But for the war, the period of my life that really defined who and what I was, I was a hawk. I always would be.

The smell of pancakes brought me back to reality. Rachel was making breakfast. I flinched. Rachel was good at a lot of things. Cooking wasn't one of them. The mice sounded extra good this morning.

I made a decision. I morphed to hawk. I needed breakfast, not the poison Rachel called cooking. I didn't have the heart to tell her only she had the stomach for her cooking. I still had the hawk mentality that, if I didn't eat, I'd soon die. I couldn't skip breakfast.

I took off. The heat of the ship created a great updraft for me. We hid the *Reliquary* in the woods outside of a small town. The town was the newest Yeerk target. For now, the *Reliquary* was our base of operations. That would change once the others got settled in.

Down below me, I could see Alloran grazing in the shadow of the *Reliquary*. He was being careful not to be seen by anyone, but a hawk doesn't miss much. <Morning, Alloran,> I called.

He looked up with one stalk eye. <Good morning, my Prince.> Technically, I was his prince. I didn't like him calling me that. I was his brother, after all. But it was too early in the morning to argue that with him.

<Alloran, if Rachel comes looking for me, say I went to find Marco. He and I need to talk some strategy. I'll probably be at the motel. She can find me when she wants me.>

That little bit of business taken care of, I angled my wings. It was time to get some breakfast.

CHAPTER 2

I spied my breakfast in a little clearing by the edge of the woods. No, not a rodent or snake. A small motel with a continental breakfast. The motel where Marco, Cassie, and Jeanne has been living for the past few days.

Marco's window was open. Bad mistake on his part. I flew right in. He was still asleep in his bed, despite the fact that it was almost nine in the morning. I ignored him and demorphed.

I needed some cloths, first. If I showed up in spandex, I'd look slightly obvious and we were going out of our way to be inconspicuous. So I took some of Marco's cloths. They didn't exactly fit me, since I was considerably taller than him, but they fit well enough. I wasn't used to good cloths anyway.

Shoes were a problem, though. We never found a way to morph shoes and Marco's wouldn't fit me. I went barefoot and hoped no one noticed. I let myself out of the room and down the stairs.

I got a few looks as I secured my food but no one said anything. There were people wearing less, so my shoeless escapade was mostly ignored. One of the employees looked at me like she should say something but then decided it just wasn't worth the effort.

I sat at a table alone, in the corner. I still had the hawk habit of guarding my food. In my old life, someone could swoop down and eat your meal. Or worse, they could swoop down and eat you.

I noticed the approaching figure before most would have. She wasn't imposing. Short. Black. Just a tad on the stout side. Cassie, my fellow Animorph. But she looked a lot different than she had a few days ago.

Her hair was long and straight. Her eyes were green. I don't know if they usually were or if that was part of her new look, but I think it was the latter. Instead of her usual animal-stained jeans or overalls she wore much nicer, cleaner jeans and a fashionable top instead of her usual flannel shirt. She still wore boots, but they weren't the rubber ones she was used to. These were designer boots; not deigned for sensible work, though.

The makeover was courtesy of Rachel, of course. It was a disguise, so that no one who saw Cassie would immediately recognize her. At most, someone might say that she resembled Cassie the Animorph; no one would suspect the truth.

“Morning,” I said between bites.

She sat down across from me and ate from her own plate. “Good morning. And what brings you here so early?”

I could have lied to her, but there’s never any point in lying to Cassie. She always knows anyway. “Have you ever eaten her cooking?”

She smiled. “Once. You poor thing.” It was half sincere, half sarcastic. That was as sarcastic as Cassie ever got. “So, you left your brother for dead?”

“He doesn’t have to eat what she makes,” I reminded her. We tried not to use names that would be recognized. I didn’t call her Cassie unless I could help it. Likewise, she didn’t say Tobias, Alloran, or Rachel. I doubted that anyone would recognize us based on those names alone, but Marco had insisted and his paranoia had come in handy in the past. “Jeanne still asleep?”

Cassie nodded. “Marco too?” Sometimes, saying our names was unavoidable.

“Yep.”

“What are we going to do about the two of them?” she mused idly.

“I wasn’t aware it was our responsibility to do anything.”

“Well, someone has to,” Cassie insisted. “Rachel used to be the one responsible for it, but she’d rather rip his arms off. And they’re both too...”

“Stupid?” I suggested.

“Too stupid to get together on their own. He’s as clueless as most guys and she’s too scared he doesn’t really like her, no matter how many times I insist he does.” She let out a long sigh. “It’s agonizing to watch.”

“So do what I do. Don’t watch,” I suggested.

She shook her head. “Someone has to do something. Marco deserves someone after all he’s been through. I mean, we each had someone and we still barely made it out whole.”

“Some of us never made it out.” As an afterthought, I added, “And some of us were never whole to begin with.”

“I know,” Cassie said softly. “What I mean is, he deserves someone’s love as much as we did. Everybody deserves someone.”

“Maybe, but not everyone needs someone,” I answered.

“You don’t really believe that.”

“Don’t I? I was fine before I met Rachel. If I had never met her, I would have stayed fine.”

“You can’t possibly be saying that—”

“No, I’m not saying I would have been better off if we never met. But I didn’t need her until had her. I couldn’t miss what I never had.”

“No? Do you miss Christmas mornings with your family? Do you miss your parents?” Cassie shook her head. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine. And to be honest, I don’t really miss those things. I’ve never had Christmas morning. If I saw one, I’d miss not having it. But I don’t even watch Christmas specials on TV. As for my parents...no, I don’t miss them, either. I wish I did; I’d feel better if I missed them. I’d feel more... human. But they were never a part of my life.”

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. Marco. I had been too busy with the conversation to notice him. That kind of thing leaves a hawk dead.

Of all of us, Marco had undergone the greatest change. He was celebrity and would be recognized immediately. So we had to change everything. We gave him a faux-hawk. Contact lenses made his eyes the same shade as his hair: an icy blue. To complete the change, we had replaced his usual designer wardrobe with stuff we bought at the local Goodwill. Plaid shorts and a Reel Big Fish tee, combined with his hemp sandals and plaid fedora, made him almost unrecognizable.

Is it sad that I was a little jealous of his new wardrobe? Of course, I was wearing parts of it. My shirt proudly displayed a picture of the refurbished, Streetlight Manifesto version of the old Catch 22 album *Keasbey Nights*.

He handed me a cell phone. “Hey, nice cloths. A little small on you, though. I hate to interrupt your little discussion, but you’re mom’s on the phone.”

CHAPTER 3

“Hello?”

Rachel’s voice came from the other end. “Oh, so you *are* there. Alloran told me you were off to talk to Marco, but he didn’t know you were there at all. I was afraid you’d run off to do something dangerous without me.”

“When I got here, he was asleep. I grabbed breakfast here,” I told her.

“That’s the second time in the three days we’ve been living together. I don’t think we’ve had one meal since the first day.”

“Uh...yeah...what a coincidence.”

“Well, invite the others over. I’ll have food ready for them. I’ll tell you,” she went on, “I like cooking. It’s kind of like fighting a battle.”

“You have no idea.”

“What was that?”

“Um, nothing. You were saying?”

“Well, first you do your research. I like to think of it as reconnaissance. You look up recipes and stuff.”

“You look up recipes?”

“Of course. Where did you think your meals were coming from?” she asked.

“Uh...from the heart?” I suggested. I was a lame liar. Especially on the phone.

She decided to let it go. “Then, you pick your team. You know, the ingredients and stuff. Then, you throw them into battle and hope your plan works out.”

Marco raised an eyebrow. I guess he could hear her. “Hope your plan works out? No wonder you eat here.” I couldn’t help but smile.

“You know, it might be easier if you and my brother just came here. You know, since the rest of us are already here.” I was desperately trying to spare the others the horror that were Rachel’s meals.

The thing about Rachel is, she can’t be dissuaded. “But it’s private here. We don’t have to be careful what we say.”

“Hold on a minute, I think someone’s talking to me.” I covered the mouthpiece of the phone. “Guys, we have a...

situation. She wants us all go come over for brunch. Trust me, that is *not* a good idea.”

“Why not?” Marco asked. “The *Reliquary* makes great food on its own.”

“Yeah, it does. Rachel does not.”

“How bad could it be?” he asked.

I lowered my voice so I couldn’t be overheard. “Do you remember that time when Jake ate a spider? Better yet, do you remember that time you swallowed Ax?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m jealous of that every time she serves a meal. Honestly, I don’t think even Ax would eat this stuff.”

“He would eat cigarette butts if no one stopped him,” Marco reminded me.

“Believe me, Marco, no one is more aware of his feeding habits than I am.”

Marco, Cassie, and I looked at each other. None of us could think of an excuse. So, reluctantly, I said into the receiver, “Alright, we’ll be there soon.” I hung up.

I rubbed my temples. “Okay, we need to talk strategy.”

“Well,” Marco began.

“Not here,” I interrupted. “If we’re busy planning, she might not realize we aren’t eating.”

Marco nodded. “Maybe I misjudged you, bid-boy. You’re starting to think like me.” Then, he got a mischievous smile. “That explains everything. I knew she was secretly in love with me. I just didn’t realize that, deep down inside, you were just like me.”

I shook my head. Then, I turned to Cassie. “You’re right, we’ll have to do something. But I can’t decide whether to help them or let nature take its course. Nature being Rachel.”

“Help who with what?” Marco inquired.

“Nothing,” Cassie and I said at the same time. Then, she got kind of a far-off look in her eyes. “I think I’ll go call Ronnie. I’m sure he misses me.”

“Not for too long,” I reminded her. “My brother rigged our phones to be hard to tap or trace, but I don’t know how it will hold up against extreme probing. And we don’t know how safe Ronnie’s phone is.”

Cassie nodded. “I’ll be careful. No more than a few minutes, I promise.” She left to make her call in private.

Marco took her seat. “Hey, I was meaning to ask you about something.”

“What?”

“I need some advice on something. Something I think only you can help me with.”

That was surprising. Unless we’re talking about flying, I wasn’t an expert on anything. “What is it? You have some kind of problem?”

“Yeah, some kind of problem.”

“Is it military or emotional?” Those were the only two types of problems I could think of. A military problem would be like the time Rachel was allergic to a crocodile morph or when Marco was so distracted by his father’s engagement to Marco’s math teacher that he couldn’t morph.

“It’s not exactly military.”

“Then Cassie would probably be the best person to help you,” I told him. I wasn’t trying to brush him off, but it made me a little uncomfortable. And Cassie would be ten times better than I would.

“It’s not something Cassie would know anything about.”

I noticed Jeanne coming up from behind Marco. Cassie was with her. “What are the two of you talking about?” Jeanne asked us.

Marco twitched. Suddenly, I knew what he wanted my help with. “Guy stuff,” he answered. “Did you see the game last night?”

CHAPTER 4

How can I describe my flight back to the *Reliquary*? It reminded me of flying on my way to a mission to the Yeerk Pool. That isn't an exaggeration, it's just the best way to describe how abominable Rachel's cooking was. You heard what she said. Throw them into battle and hope your plan works out.

As bad as her cooking was, though, it had been something of a bonding experience between Alloran and me. After my first meal, Rachel insisted he morph to human and join us from then on. I instructed him how to act, and Rachel bought it. We grew a bit closer through deception.

One by one, Cassie, Marco, Jeanne, and I flew in through the open roof-hatch of the *Reliquary*. Rachel had set up some card tables. Six places were set, with steaming plates of....let's assume it was food....already waiting.

Rachel and Alloran were waiting, too. He was in his human morph. It was a combination of Marco, Jeanne, Cassie, Rachel, and me; heavy on the me. Alloran looked a lot like I

did when I was his age. Of course, thanks to the others' DNA, he was much better looking.

“Good, you're all here,” Rachel said brightly. “I wouldn't let Alloran eat until everyone got here.”

“Poor kid,” I muttered.

Marco just stared in shock. “Tobias, I didn't know Rachel came in housewife.” It was a pretty good description. Rachel, uncharacteristically, was wearing sweats and an apron. Her hair was shorter than it used to be. Now, it came down to just below her ears. That was about enough to keep strangers from recognizing her. After all, she was supposed to be dead; no one would be looking for her.

Despite all of her physical changes, Rachel was still herself inside. So, predictably, she kicked him in the shin. To which he replied, “Tobias, your wife kicked me!” She kicked him in the other one.

“Marco, make up your mind. Is she my mom or is she my wife?” I baited.

He looked thoughtful. “I refuse to answer that question on the grounds that no matter what answer I give, I'll be kicked in another sensitive area.”

“Guess which one,” Rachel replied.

Then it was time to eat. We all sat down. Cassie and Marco, having been warned, looked to me. Alloran did so, too. Jeanne noticed what the others were doing, so she watched me as well. Rachel stared at me, too. “Well, go on. Dig in.” It was almost a dare.

I did as I was told. I tried to pretend that the thing on my fork was a mouse. It wasn't hard, since it had the same general shape as a mouse and I was pretty sure it was still alive. I swallowed without chewing.

Just like that, the tension was relieved. The others, seeing that I was still alive, decided it was okay to eat. A mistake on their part. Cassie was, of course, too sensitive to say anything. Jeanne too polite. Marco too afraid. Alloran was too smart.

After a few bites of my...whatever...it was time for business. “Okay, Animorphs, we need to start planning our next move. Any suggestions?”

“Attack,” Rachel said almost instantly. “We find the Yeerk pool and raid it. Show them that nowhere is safe. Not anymore.”

“And now that Xena has told us to attack,” Marco began, “we can talk about strategy.”

“Attacking *is* a strategy,” Rachel argued. “Think about it. We show up and hit them where they think they’re safest. They don’t even know we’re coming. We’ll scare them to death. Force and surprise, Marco. Our two greatest weapons.”

“If we’re going to use surprise, let’s not waste it on the Yeerk pool. Isn’t there a bigger target?” Jeanne asked.

“Like what?” Rachel responded.

“I may be wrong, but I read that the Yeerks must swim in the pool to absorb mostly Kandrona rays. Is this not so?”

Marco nodded. Then, he got excited. “Oh, I see it now. We use this surprise of ours to hit the Kandrona. They won’t be expecting it, and it’ll be a really hard blow. It’s like getting punched in church.”

“But how do we find it?” Cassie asked. “Last time, we needed help from the Ellimist.”

They looked at me. Like I had the power to summon the Ellimist or Crayak from wherever they lived. “Can’t help you guys there. Any ideas, Alloran?”

He thought about it. <The Yeerks would certainly keep it someplace that is completely under their control. But they would not use the Yeerk Pool because if we found the Pool, which Esplin knows we certainly will eventually, we could destroy the Kandrona along with it.>

Something occurred to me. “Alloran, can the Kandrona rays move through stone?”

<I do not think so, my Prince. Kandrona waves, which are emitted by the Yeerk’s sun on their homeworld, behave like light, as far as we know.>

“That means Kandrona rays can move through glass. That’s probably what the Yeerks are doing. They have it in a building. It shines its waves out of the windows to the Yeerk pool,” I summarized.

Marco caught on. “Which means that the rays, since they can’t move through stone, have to have some way of getting into the pool. Probably through more glass.”

I nodded. “Right. If we can find the place where the rays get into the pool, we can take a look at the building surrounding it. It’ll be big; probably one of the biggest buildings in town. We check out the buildings until we find

one that's run by the Yeerks. That'll be where the Kandrona is. We show up, take them by surprise, and smash the thing."

"Now I'm liking this plan," Rachel said. "But how do we know where the rays are getting into the pool? Wouldn't we have to find the pool first?"

"Yep. So I guess it's time for everybody's favorite past time. Controller hunting. We go out until we see someone we recognize as a Controller. We tail them until they lead us to the pool. Then, we check out the location, find where the Kandrona rays are getting in, use that to find the source, then we do some smashing."

Marco turned to Rachel. "Rachel, your husband—"

"Do you just hate your shins?"

"I'll shut up now."

CHAPTER 5

I realize that, thanks to Marco, there may be some confusion. Let me state, for the record, that I did not marry Rachel. Marco just likes to refer to us as married couple ever since we moved in together. I find it's easier to let the boy have his fun.

And I noticed something else. Rachel may kick him in the shins when he calls her my wife, but I can see that her heart isn't in it. Whether she'll admit it or not, she likes it. And to be perfectly honest, I don't mind it either. Of course, neither of us would let Marco know that. Speaking of Marco...

He and I set out to look for the Yeerk pool. Since Jeanne and Alloran needed some more morphs, Cassie and Rachel set out to help them find some.

As birds, Marco and I were surveying the area. I was a red-tailed hawk again, riding the thermals. He was an osprey, several hundred feet below me and to the left. We couldn't look like we were flying together or it would be pretty obvious that we were morphs.

I decided that now was a good time to finish our conversation from earlier. <So, Marco, you had a question for me earlier...>

<Oh, yeah, that. Um...> He was uncharacteristically at a loss for words. <There isn't any way to say this without it sounding like an insult...>

<That's never stopped you before,> I pointed out.

<Alright. How in the world did you get Rachel? I mean, she's totally out of your league. And you were a hawk, for crying out loud. How did you pull that off?>

<You want some tips?> I answered. <Got your eye on someone, Marco?> I was baiting him. I knew as well as Cassie did who Marco had in mind. But I wanted to hear it from him.

<Yeah, maybe. Let's just say I'm curious.>

<Well, I'm not about to give away my secret lady-attracting techniques for mere curiosity.>

<Come on, man, just one tip. That's all I'm asking.>

<Fine. Impending death.>

<Say what?>

<That's how I got her,> I told him. <I mean, it was always pretty obvious that I liked her. I didn't know how much until

the first time I really thought she was going to die. It was when the four of you were trapped inside the Truck ship and I was stuck outside, playing tag with Bug fighters. She didn't know that she felt the same way about me until she thought David had killed me.>

<So *that's* when it happened. We all sort of wondered when Xena went off the deep end.>

<Well, that's what did it.>

<Let's say, hypothetically, that I don't want to almost die. Or wait that long. Any other ideas?>

<Like I said, curiosity only gets you one tip. Tit for tat, Marco,> I answered.

<So if I help you get some tat, you'll help me get some—>

<Yeah, just like that. So, Marco, who is she?>

<I can't tell you.>

<Why not?>

<If I told you why not, you'd know who it was.>

I decided it was time to make him think I was smarter than I really was. <Marco, the only reason you would refuse to tell me in exchange for advice that's guaranteed to work is because you're afraid. And after all we've been through, very

few things scare you. And I doubt Esplin and Crayak are interested in your love life. Nor are ants and sharks. And the only other thing you're afraid of is Rachel.>

He was silent, so I continued. <And the only reason she'd take an interest in your love life, aside from taking the opportunity to get some payback for all the stuff you've said over the years, is because you had your eye on someone she wouldn't want you to. Like her new sister.>

<You're good. Scary good.>

<I know.> I didn't tell him the truth. That it was very obvious that he liked Jeanne and wanted my help.

<So, any other tips?>

I thought about it. <Well, you do know that, deep down inside, girls like Rachel and Jeanne are as scared as we are, right?>

<Yeah, I know that. You suggesting I put on a tough guy act?> He asked.

<Do I look like *I* put on a tough guy act?>

<Not really. But still...you don't have to act it. You're one of the toughest people I can think of.>

<That's what you think. I was never tough, Marco, never strong. But I've always had less to lose. I don't have a family to worry about or a home to protect. At least, I didn't before. It wasn't that I was ever strong, it was just that there was nothing more they could do to hurt me.>

<How does that help me?>

<If she's ever so hurt that she drops the mask, you have to put yours up. That's the key. You'll both know you're lying, but that isn't the point. Lies can be comforting. When she shows you just how much pain she's in, you have to pretend like you don't hurt.>

<How can I live like that?>

<I don't know. But for me, it's worth it. All the pain, the loss, the loneliness, is worth it if she's with me in the end.>

CHAPTER 6

Marco and I continued to go on our aerial tour of our new home. It wasn't all that different from our old one. There was nothing like the Gardens, the awesome zoo/amusement park back home, but there was a zoo not too far away. An amusement park, too, though it was the opposite direction from the zoo.

Of course, zoos were well guarded now. Some former Yeerk hosts had the morphing power. So did all of the visiting Andalites. Animals were as good as weapons, so the dangerous ones were hard to reach. And morphing anything was illegal.

Not far outside of town were the mountains. Kids liked to go there and hang out in the caves. It was the sort of thing I might have done when I was younger if the universe was just a little bit nicer. There was also a new observatory perched on top; perfect for stargazing. Or communication, now that we humans had discovered Z-space.

There was a beach, too. There was no ocean, but there was a very large lake that had a channel leading to the sea. The lake was polluted pretty badly a decade or two ago, but it was pretty clean now.

And, of course, there was the forest. It wasn't as big as the one I used to live in, but it was large enough to hide the *Reliquary* and Alloran.

That was about it for the landscape. The town was kind of small, but not too much. It had a mall, which pretty much housed everything else. There was a hospital, fire station, the usual. And, for the visiting Andalites, there was a Cinnabon store; Ax would have been in heaven.

<So, fearless leader,> Marco began. <Any plans to find the Yeerk pool? What are the odds that we'll just stumble across it? They try to keep that thing well hidden.>

<I know. But I've logged more hours searching for entrances than anyone. First, we look around and see what the most heavily trafficked areas are, then we check out the smallest one. The mall, for example, will definitely have an entrance, but it could be anywhere. A school, on the other hand, would have one and it would be easier to locate.>

<Searching an entire school would take a while,> Marco pointed out.

<I know. But I think I know where an entrance is.>

<How?>

<Because I know Ax. And I know Esplin. The Yeerk will take every opportunity to torment him. And what greater torture could Ax endure than to walk past a Cinnabon without eating anything?>

<You think Esplin would put an entrance in a Cinnabon just to torment Ax?>

<Isn't that what I said?>

<Just making sure I heard you right. So, what's the plan? How do we find the entrance once we're inside?>

<We watch. Remember, we came here because this is where the voluntaries were going. We watch the Cinnabon. When we see people we recognize, we go in and take a look around. They'll lead us to the entrance before too long.>

<You're sure?>

<I'm sure. I've done this a lot, you might recall,> I pointed out. <I know how to find a Yeerk pool.>

<Once we find an entrance, it'll still have the works. Gleet BioFilters, Hunter-Killer robots, Kelbrid, Esplin himself...it's not like we can just walk in.>

<Where would Esplin get those things? There isn't exactly a big market for Gleet BioFilters. They're strictly for the government. I'm sure Esplin will get them eventually, but to have them over the entrances so soon?>

<We can't underestimate their resourcefulness. We should try to find out where their cash comes from. If we could cripple that, it would cripple their entire war effort.>

<Not a bad idea,> I granted. <I'll put Alloran up to it when we have a minute. Right now, we need to be watching that Cinnabon.>

<We can't plan and watch at the same time?>

<Marco, you can barely fly and talk at the same time.> Then, I added, <Actually, you can barely fly even when you're quiet.>

He laughed. Then said, <Rachel's starting to rub off on you. Kind of scary.>

We were silent for a few minutes. Then, he added, <She's been a bit of a calming influence on you, too.>

<I didn't know I needed one.>

<Really? Dude, you were nuts. Completely insane. I mean, like, clinically insane. You wanted to jump into battle with anything that moved, you were running off on crazy stunts like hiding out on the Hork-bajir world alone, and you tried to kill yourself. Twice.>

He had a point. There wasn't much I could say to that, so I said nothing. But I guess he thought he offended me. <Dude, I didn't mean it like that. I was just —>

<It's fine,> I interrupted. <Maybe I have been a little nuts. I guess it's just that I didn't really have anything left to live for. Now...now I'm even crazier.>

<Nah, this is probably the least crazy you've ever been.>

<Really? Dude, I thought it was a good idea to move in with Rachel.>

<Oh. Good point. Yep, you're nuts. All is right with the world again. Now, let's go check out this Cinnabon.>

CHAPTER 7

We floated on the thermals for an hour, watching the Cinnabon. I was getting a serious craving. Try watching one of those places and see if you don't want to swoop down and go wild on everything in sight. If you don't, you're a Yeerk.

I tried to distract myself from the deliciousness below me. I thought of anything but food. Marco's new cloths...the Yeerk pool...Rachel's cooking... It helped a little.

<Hey, I think I recognize that guy. Didn't he work in a sporting goods store back home?> Marco asked.

I took a closer look. <Yeah, I think so. Wouldn't call it conclusive, though.>

<Me neither. Why couldn't Chapman show up? That would be enough for me.>

We waited another few minutes. Then, I saw something in the distance. A stretch limo with tinted windows. I had seen that kind of limo before. I had a bit of a premonition. I knew who was riding in the back. I could almost feel his evil emanating from the long, black car.

<Marco, do you see that limo?>

<Yeah.>

<Your eyes are better for seeing through glass than mine. Can you see inside of it?>

<Hold on, I'll go check.> He took wing. Marco was an Osprey. They're fishing birds. Their eyes are adapted for seeing through water. It wasn't that much different from seeing through glass.

<Oh man, this is not good.>

<It's him?>

<It's him,> Marco confirmed. <And he's got a pair of Hork-bajir with him. Probably some of those morph-capable ones from the Blade ship.>

<Probably. Is David with him>

<Not that I see.> That, at least, was good news. David was bad news. He used to be a regular kid, more or less. His father was, allegedly, a spy, so he moved around a lot. He was used to being the new kid.

When he moved to our old home, he found the blue box that gave us our morphing powers. He tried to sell it over the

Internet; Esplin showed up pretty fast to get it. Things spiraled out of control from there.

Long story short, David's family was taken, so we took David. We made him one of us. Then, he turned on us. He tried to kill us and then blackmail us to give him the box. We trapped him in the body of a rat.

That affected us all in deep ways. Marco was the first to see David for what he was. The fact that he didn't try hard enough to stop us from recruiting him still stays with him. He blames himself for not seeing it all through.

Jake was hurt as well. He learned what his limits truly were. For the first time, he found out just how far he would go to protect us. The answer scared him.

Cassie was the one who came up with the plan that trapped him. I know she still carried guilt over that. Heck, the girl still carries guilt over killing a termite queen. I can't imagine how bad she must feel about hurting another human being.

Rachel was the one who actually trapped him. She lured him into the cage we made. She sat and watched as the time ticked away and he became a *nothlit* like me. She found out

just how dark she could be and it terrified her more than anything else we've seen.

Ax was the one who actually counted down the time. He was our clock; when he said so, David was trapped as a rat. It wasn't something Ax would ever talk about; it hurt him a lot to condemn one of the people he was trying so hard to save.

And me...I'm the guiltiest of us all. Of all of us, only I really knew what we were doing. Only I truly knew what it meant to be trapped as an animal. The others didn't understand; couldn't understand. They've never felt their own minds slipping away, being replaced by that of an animal. They've never really gone insane.

I have. I knew exactly what we were doing to David. And I went ahead and did it anyway. He had tried to kill me but that wasn't it. I didn't do it out of anger or revenge. If I had, I'd be able to forgive myself. I did it coldly, calculated; ruthlessly. I knew exactly what we were doing to David. And I went ahead and did it anyway.

Now, he was back, working with The One, the supernatural force commanding the Yeerks. The One gave him back his ability to morph. David works with the Yeerks. He

was a real problem because, on top of being able to morph, he was really smart and careful.

But David wasn't there, so we didn't have to worry about that. Still, Esplin and a pair of morph-capable Hork-bajir was not an easy task.

<They'll be heading for the pool,> I decided. <Let's get inside the Cinnabon. We'll go fly and follow them.>

<You're the boss. But let's not get carried away. The two of us are not going down to the Yeerk pool alone. We'll find the entrance and come back later with the others.>

<Right> I agreed. <We'll find the entrance and then book it. In and out. Simple.>

<Aww, now I *know* something's going to go wrong.>

CHAPTER 8

We demorphed in the alley next to the Cinnabon. That wasn't our best idea. As I mentioned, morphing is illegal. We might as well have been waving nuclear weapons around. But we didn't have time to find a better place to demorph; the limo was only a few blocks away.

I turned to Marco. "Fly time."

He nodded and we began to morph.

Every morph is different. This time, the first thing to happen was the emergence of two extra legs. They shot out of my chest like to long spears being shoved through my back. They waved around crazily, knocking against the walls of the alley since there was no insect brain to control them.

Next, the thousands of tiny, dagger-like hairs that made up a fly's sensory organs shot out of my skin, much as the extra legs had. I could feel the air in the stall moving around me, being pushed around by my breath.

After that, my eyes bulged out like two balloons. For a moment, I could see nearly 360 degrees. Then, my eyes

fragmented into the compound eyes of a fly. The colors of everything became distorted, and there were about a thousand pictures of everything. Since I had some experience with the fly morph, I could understand what I was seeing.

Then my skin cracked into the armor of a fly's body. Black plates covered my arms, legs, torso, and head. My face formed into the long, curling straw that flies had as a mouth. A proboscis, it was called.

Wings grew from my back. Large and gossamer. I spent a lot time in hawk morph, so wings felt natural to me. But these were nothing like bird wings. They flapped crazily fast and there were four of them.

Finally, when all of the other physical changes were complete, I started to shrink. It was sort of like falling except that it seemed more like the ground was coming to me rather than me going to it.

At last, I felt my insides changing. My complex human organs melted into the much simpler systems of a fly. And I could feel my brain, the fly's brain, turning on.

The first thing I felt was hunger. It was always that way with the fly. Especially in an alley. I also felt panic. Vibrations

churned through the air. For all I knew, that might have been the limo pulling up.

I fired my wings and took off. There are two types of flight. There is flight-flight, like what birds and planes do, where they cover large distances and go places. Then, there is fly-flight.

Flies can do anything in the air. They can fly straight up or down, left or right, and any direction in between. They can also stop in mid air and land anywhere at all. Rough or smooth, flat or round, a fly can land there.

And, of course, flies aren't suspicious. They're everywhere. They can hear and kind of see. All in all, they're incredible spies. That was what we needed.

<Try not to be seen,> Marco said to me. <Remember, Esplin's in Ax's head. He knows exactly how we use flies. If he sees even one fly, he'll get paranoid.>

<Right you are.> I took off. Marco followed me. One of the windows was open a crack, so we flew into the Cinnabon.

How can I possibly describe what it was like? As a hawk, I had craved a cinnamon bun. As a fly...the mere scent of the place was...orgasmic. I was drooling from my proboscis. I just

couldn't help myself. I landed on some buns in the window and began to eat.

Do you know how a fly eats? First, it uncurls its proboscis. Then, it salivates on its food. Finally, it uses the aforementioned proboscis to suck up the saliva and absorb the food. That's exactly what I did. And do you want to know the sickest part? It was *still* delicious.

<Oh man, I can't believe I used to give Ax such a hard time about these things,> Marco moaned. <I totally take back everything I've ever said about that boy and food. If I had a fork, I'd eat it, too.>

<Heck, I'd eat my hand,> I agreed. <All six of them.>

We heard a jingling of bells. That probably meant the door was opening. We didn't care. You just don't understand the sheer delicious power of a cinnamon bun. Especially after eating one of Rachel's meals.

There was a buzz of conversation but I barely heard it. Someone was buying a lot of cinnamon buns. So what? I had all the buns I needed right here. This one bun would feed me for the rest of my fly life. It might have been worth being trapped as a fly if I could just live on that bun forever.

Something in the conversation jerked me out of my stupor. It was the clerk saying, “Sir, are you sure you want to take that food into the bathroom with you?”

“Of course. I will never part with my cinnamon buns. Sin. Namon bunz. Bunz.”

<It’s Esplin,> I hissed to Marco. Although no one but him could hear my thought speak, I still felt the need to hiss. Funny how that happens.

<No duh,> he hissed back. <Weird, though. Esplin didn’t used to sound like a mentally retarded third grader.>

<Maybe it’s Ax. It’s probably easier to control him if Esplin acts like he does. And knowing Ax, Esplin will have to try very hard to keep him in check.>

<We can worry about that later. He’s making for the bathroom. Let’s go!>

<Way ahead of you.> And I was. I was the first to leave the precious cinnamon bun. I was practically on the head of one of the men following Esplin.

There were two guards with him. They looked like guards, too. They were the Hork-bajir controllers. Morphs, of course. Say that out loud.

What I didn't understand was why Esplin was buying cinnamon buns. I figured he'd walk right past them to torment Ax. Maybe there was something else...

Marco made it through the bathroom door just before it swung shut. <Close one,> he called to me.

I didn't answer. I was busy watching one of the guards. He went into the middle stall. I followed. He opened the toilet tank and started fiddling around inside. He moved some stuff around. Then...

He flushed. The toilet swung downwards, into the ground. Part of the floor came with it. In the ground was a stairway. Esplin and his cronies descended. Thirty seconds later, the floor replaced itself as through nothing had happened. <I'm guessing that isn't the stairway to heaven,> Marco sighed.

<It's a good thing Rachel isn't here,> I muttered. <She'd cram that bun down your proboscis. Whole.>

CHAPTER 9

“The bathroom of a Cinnabon?” Rachel questioned. “You’re absolutely sure? Because this sounds like something Marco might make up.”

“Why would I make this up?” Marco demanded. We were aboard the *Reliquary* again. Obviously, Marco and I had just told the others about our discovery.

“Maybe you and Tobias were just hanging out at the mall playing videogames,” Rachel suggested.

“They are more sensible than that,” Jeanne said. At least she was coming to our defense. “They were probably looking for women.” So much for that.

“Nah, Tobias likes breathing too much,” Cassie answered her. “And Marco...”

“Doesn’t swing that way,” Rachel finished. Marco looked to me like I might be a source of aid.

“I’d help,” to Marco, “but I don’t want to end up sleeping on the couch tonight.”

“Dude, you don’t even have a couch.”

“Which makes it all the more unpleasant.”

<I am afraid I do not understand. A couch is a piece of human furniture, but why would Prince Tobias find himself sleeping on it as opposed to his bed?>

I opened my mouth to reply but Marco beat me to it. “Because that’s what happens when you get married.”

<I was not aware that was a part of the matrimonial tradition. It was not mentioned in any of the two-dimensional picture collections I have read on the subject.>

“Two-dimensional picture collections...” I trailed off. We all looked at each other.

Cassie practically jumped up and down. “He means magazines. Bridal magazines. Yes, I finally got one!”

“Okay, one point for Cassie. That puts the score at—”

“Where are you getting bridal magazines?” I asked Alloran, cutting off Marco.

He just swiveled a stalk eye at my bookshelf. <From there.> I hadn’t noticed it, but there were a few crammed in with my books. I turned to Rachel and raised an eyebrow. For maybe the only time in her life, she blushed. Actually blushed!

Marco's face lit up. "Aww, isn't that sweet." Then, his smile got even bigger. "Wait, there isn't some sort of... emergency, is there? Something that might force the two of you to get married within the next few months?" Rachel threw a cup at him. Luckily, the cup had come with the ship and the ship was designed to be shot at. The cup didn't break.

"So, under the Cinnabon, huh?" Cassie prompted. Count on that girl to fill an awkward silence.

"Yeah, there," I answered. "We should check it out tonight. I don't know how long we can go undetected but let's not push it. The sooner we hit the Kandrona the better."

"How do we get in?" Jeanne asked. "I mean, if this is Esplin's personal entrance, it must be supremely guarded. Even if he cannot afford Gleet BioFilters for all the entrances, this one will certainly be protected."

Rachel nodded. "BioFilters. Almost certainly Kelbrid. Hork-bajir with Dracon beams or Shredders. Probably some morph-capable humans. Sounds like a party. Just don't ruin the fun with that howl this time," she admonished me.

I shrugged. "Live and let die."

"Promise you won't do it," she insisted.

“Fine, I promise.”

“Why do we need to go in?” Cassie asked. “What purpose will that serve if we aren’t raiding the place? I am not going in there without a good reason.”

“Say it, sister,” Marco said, raising the cup that had been thrown at him.

“Alloran, if we can get you in, can you figure out where the Yeerk pool is in relation to the rest of the town?”

<Of course. It is a simple application of mathematics. Surely you humans can perform such equations yourselves. You must begin with using...I believe you call it the Pythagorean Theorem. By discerning—>

“That’s a yes,” Marco said. “So we use Alloran’s magic math skills to find out exactly where the pool is.”

<Actually, we can only find out *approximately* where the pool is,> Alloran corrected.

“Well then...”

I finished Marco’s earlier thought. “We find out where the pool is. Then, we look around for some sort of lens that will let the Kandrona rays in. We use that to find the building with the Kandrona in it. Then we blow it up.”

“The Kandrona or the building?” Jeanne asked.

“Both,” Rachel said. She looked at me. “Right?”

“Only if you’re good,” I answered.

She gave me a new look, one I hadn’t seen before. “But you like it when I’m bad.”

Cassie and Jeanne shared a look. Marco almost turned white. “Ugh...Tobias, do you mind if I throw up in your ship? Never mind, I can’t stop myself. I have to...” He dove for the hatch. Whether it was for comedy or if he was serious I don’t know.

With him gone, I felt it was safe to say, “Meet back here at nine. Meeting adjourned.”

CHAPTER 10

We decided it was best not to morph flies in the Cinnabon again. Marco and I, arguably two of the most in control of the Animorphs, had barely been able to tear ourselves off of a bun. I didn't want to think what might happen to Alloran.

We had a new plan. Again, we landed and demorphed in the alley. Then, the others went roach. I stayed as myself. I had a great plan to get us past any of Esplin's security, but no one else could pull it off.

Soon, I was a human in spandex with five cockroaches crawling up my leg. Even after all I've been through, I felt like freaking out. Marco, of course, couldn't let it go. <Do you all realize how insane this is?>

<Yes, Marco,> Jeanne sighed like she had heard this rant as many times as we have.

<I mean, here we are. It's nine thirty. We have no parents, no jobs, no school, no reason not to stay out all night partying. And what are we doing?>

<You are wasting our time,> Jeanne sighed again. <We are saving the world.>

<We're turning into bugs, hiding on a boy-turned-bird-turned-man whose father, I'll remind you, was an alien. I mean, the mere fact that he exists is insane enough.>

<Are you done?>

<Not even close. And where are we going on this little adventure of ours? The Cinnabon. Why? Because we can't be trusted as flies, of course. So it makes perfect sense for us to turn into cockroaches.>

<It makes perfect sense for you to shut up,> Rachel added.

<And why are we in this Cinnabon? Why, because our favorite, no offense Alloran, four-footed, two-handed, four-eyed, stinger-tailed alien has a little slug in his head who also seems to have developed a craving for cinnamon buns.>

<Finished yet?> Jeanne asked.

<If not, I'll finish you,> Rachel offered.

<Rachel? I can't even look at you the same anymore. I mean...god, the images!> Marco was silent for the next few minutes. I was grateful.

I walked into the Cinnabon like I owned the place. I intended to pass myself off as one of Esplin's aids. Surely the employees of the Cinnabon were all Controllers or would be soon. This was probably a hub for the Yeerks.

I grabbed a small box of buns and some icing. I started to make my way to the bathroom. As I expected, the clerk didn't stop me and tell me to pay for the buns. He figured I worked for Esplin.

Of course he did say, "Sir, are you sure you want to take that food into the bathroom with you?"

I figured it was a password. Like the old one in the McDonalds back in our town. You'd ask for a happy meal with extra happy. "Of course. I will never part with my cinnamon buns." For good measure, I added, "Sin. Namon bunz. Bunz."

The clerk chuckled. "You sound just like him."

I glared at him. I could glare better than anyone I had ever met. My eyes had never really lost the hawkish intensity they had had for so long. "Fool. Could you really be so stupid as to laugh? For all you know, I could be him!"

The clerk was shaking, all his laughter forgotten. “I’m terribly sorry, Sir! Please, don’t have me killed.”

In response, I began to morph. First, blue fur shot out of my body. Then came the stalk eyes. My legs turned into hooves. A second pair came spurting out of my chest. My arms grew weaker but they also grew two extra fingers on each hand. Last came the tail. I grew out like one long, coiled muscle that just happened to have a blade on the end.

In moments, I had become an Andalite. But not just any Andalite. This was a morph of my very good friend Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill. And therefore, it was a morph of Esplin.

I didn’t morph him just to terrify the clerk, of course. There would almost certainly be Gleet BioFilters at the entrance. BioFilters are programmed to destroy any life form whose DNA isn’t programmed into their computer. Ax’s DNA would be in the computer, so the morph could walk through with impunity. It would get me past any passive defenses.

And the tail would be able to handle most active ones.

I rolled my eyes. The clerk was quivering now. <I do not yet have so many human hosts that I can afford to slay them

out of hand. You'll live for now.> I placed my blade against his cheek. <But if you ever anger me...>

"I am s-s-so v-v-very s-s-s-s-sorry," he stuttered.

I patted his cheek with my blade. <Not as sorry as you will be.> Then, I took my cinnamon buns and went to the bathroom. A moment later, I had opened the passage to the Yeerk pool.

<We're here,> I told them. <At the entrance.>

<The Yeerk pool...> Rachel mused. <Hell's kitchen.>

<Satan's Buffet,> Cassie added.

<Lucifer's cafeteria,> said Jeanne.

<Crayak's [*dopnetn*.> That was Alloran. I chose to assume that a *dopnetn* was the Andalite equivalent of a restaurant.

<Beelzebub's Starbucks.> Marco.

<Mephisto's Café.> Then, at the same time, Marco and I sang, <We're going down, down, down to Mephisto's Cafe – Down, down, down to Mephisto's Cafe – we're going down – And the gears will spin and the sinners sin, but at least we'll give them hell – And the righteous few will spit on you, so bid them all farewell – We're going down, down, down to Mephisto's Cafe – We're going down.>

Rachel sighed in my head. <Guys? Ska's been dead longer than I have. Let's just get on with it.>

<Let's get on with it?> I asked.

<Sorry, I'm still rusty.> Then, summoning her classic style, <Let's do it.>

Marco couldn't help but say, <You know, Tobias, whenever she says that to you, it takes on a totally different meaning now.> The fact that they were flies didn't stop Rachel from smacking him.

CHAPTER 11

<Finally, I met a man with kindness in his eye and fire in his heart. He said you'll never have to choose a side. It's rewarding but oh, the road is hard.... They broke him wide open. Like a dam and a cork that's holding everything inside. You can play the role of rebel. Just be sure to know your wrong from right.>

<Guys, please —>

<I remember it was years ago. You know I still count the days. You and I had quite a ways to go. I never once heard you complain. And you said, “Don't crack, because you might not make it back. And if you do you will be alone and you can't live like that. Well I know when I'm wrong and I sure as hell ain't wrong this time.”>

<Really, this is the last —>

<We're going down, down, down to Mephisto's Café. We're going —>

<How many times are we going to have to listen to the two of you sing that song?> Rachel interrupted.

<That depends on how long this tunnel,> I answered. Let me set the scene for you. At the bottom of the staircase wasn't the Yeerk pool. It was a tunnel. A very long tunnel. Presumably, Esplin had a faster way than walking to reach the other side. We didn't.

So Marco and I had contented ourselves by singing *Down, Down, Down to Mephisto's Café* while we walked. I was still in my Ax morph; the others were still cockroaches. Marco and I had sung the song three times already.

<Prince Tobias, surely there must be a faster mode of transportation through this tunnel,> Alloran suggested.

<Well, we don't have a ship or a car or anything with us,> I answered. <Do you have any other ideas?>

<Perhaps you have a morph that would be faster?>

Oh. Yeah, I did. It was a long, dark tunnel. And Marco, Cassie, Rachel, and I had bat morphs. Perfect for this. <Sorry, I overlooked that. Everyone demorph. We'll do this the fastest way we can find.>

I was glad it was dark in the tunnel. I really didn't want to see the others demorphing. There's something intrinsically terrifying about seeing a friend bubble out of a cockroach. A

few moments later, everyone was done and it was time to remorph.

“Everyone with a bat morph, use it. Those who don’t have one morph to flies. You’ll ride on a bat.>

I focused on the bat DNA within me. I noticed Alloran as he turned into a fly. It was actually a very cool morph. One of the coolest I’ve ever seen.

First, the fly wings erupted from his back. They were enormous; it almost looked like he could fly with them. “A fairy,” Marco commented.

Then, Alloran’s body went from being covered in soft, blue fur to black plates of armor. His stalk eyes turned into the waving antennae of a fly. He went from being a fairy to a monster. It was especially cool because, throughout all of this, he kept his deadly tail.

Then, he shrunk out of sight before the gross stuff started happening. I was glad; I didn’t want that image to be ruined for me. By this time, I was more than half bat.

I was two feet tall with wings and bat ears. The rest of me was pretty much human, although I did feel my internal organs changing to those of the bat.

When I concentrated more on myself and less on the others, the changes finished within ten seconds. There was a time when a morph could take us a few minutes. Now, Marco, Cassie, Rachel, and I were shocked if we took more than thirty seconds.

In a few moments, we were four bats and a pair of flies in a long, dark tunnel. At the other end was undoubtedly the Yeerk pool, the nexus of suffering and evil. I should have been more frightened. Maybe good old human fear is something I've lost.

I used to be afraid all the time. For myself and especially for the others. Then, when Rachel died, I stopped caring. I threw myself into the arms of death every chance I got. Now, I have a lot more to live for, but I'm still not afraid.

Rachel said once that no one's really fearless. Courage is being afraid and doing what you have to do anyway. People without fear are just insane.

So maybe I was insane. It wouldn't be the first time. Marco always said that one of us would snap, that it was all too much to deal with. I lost my mind long ago, when I first became a hawk.

I'd been hit hardest by this war. If anyone had the right to lose it, it was me. That made me feel a little better. <Okay guys, here we go. Remember, we want to keep the element of surprise. In and out, no smashing. Got it? Rachel?>

<Yeah, yeah, no smashing. But we'll get to smash stuff later, right? When we go after the Kandrona?>

<Yeah, then we'll smash stuff. Just keep it in check until then, okay?>

She wasn't happy but she agreed. That little detail taken care of, we unfolded our wings and took off down the tunnel.

CHAPTER 12

It wasn't hard to navigate our way down the tunnel. There was a dim red glow from some lights in the roof that we passed every fifty yards or so. And we could echolocate.

It was pretty cool. A bat can emit a series of squeaks from its mouth. The sound bounces off of objects and the bat 'hears' them and forms them into a picture.

We had an etch-a-sketch view of the tunnel in front of us. That made it easy to avoid smashing into anything. It also made it pretty easy to find the end of the tunnel. Not that we needed help. The growing light made it pretty obvious.

My echolocation told me that the tunnel ended in a square room. I could see a desk, what I thought was a large screen giving off light, a few chairs, and a door. No Controllers were there to be seen. I gave the order and we demorphed.

This must have been Esplin's office. The desk was one of those massive, ancient wooden ones that powerful businessmen use. There was a chair behind the desk, which confused me. Esplin wouldn't need a chair; Andalites don't

sit. There was also an open box of Cinnabon cinnamon buns on the desk. Esplin hadn't been gone long.

What I thought was a screen was actually a window. One-way glass, I was sure. It looked out over the Yeerk pool. One by one, we all gathered around it. We starred, transfixed, at the horror below us.

It was a massive cavern, about as big as three football fields. One half seemed to be for storage. Sheds like the kind you'd find in someone's backyard, barrels of something or other, and stacks of building materials lined the wall. And there were the cages.

They were one of the worst parts. Humans of all shapes and sizes, people from all walks of life, were in the cages like animals. Some screamed and cursed, rattling the bars of their cages. Others cried and pleaded. Still others did the worst thing of all: they sat down and accepted their fate.

Worse than the cages was the lounge. It was an open area not far from the cages. Comfy chairs and couches were arrayed. People lounged on them, watching TV, reading, or just hanging out. These were the worst kind of humans: the voluntaries. The traitors.

These were even worse than the voluntary hosts during the first war. Now, they knew exactly what they were doing. They knew they were selling their freedom. And they did it anyway. David would fit right in here.

Not far away from the cages and the lounge was the pool itself. It was about the size of a football field. The water, the color of molten lead, seethed with the motion of the Yeerks. The slugs swam here in their natural forms, absorbing those precious Kandrona rays.

There were two piers over the water. The first was a wooden one. It was pretty bad. A pair of Hork-bajir would gently take the arms of a Controller. They'd help them to his knees. The Controller would put his head in the pool. And then the screaming would start.

That was where the Yeerk drained form its host's head. For a few hours, the human was free. Free to scream, curse, beg, plead, or cry. That was the first pier and it was pretty bad. The second was worse.

It was steel, unlike the first. There, a pair of Hork-bajir dragged a screaming human to the edge. The human would almost always struggle, resist; not that it mattered to the Hork-

bajir Then, the Hork-bajir would force the host's head under the murky water. And a moment later, the human would stand back up like nothing had happened.

That steel pier was where the infestations happened. Where a free human became a slave. It might have been the most evil place in all the world; in all the galaxy. I had been on the body of Crayak himself and even he didn't ooze that kind of pure, malevolent evil.

"Tobias, I know you said no smashing, but..." Rachel trailed off.

I nodded. "I know. I want to do it, too. But we don't have the power to destroy this place. And we can't free those hosts; they'd never make it out alive."

She nodded but the dark look didn't leave her eyes. "Alloran?" I said. He didn't move. He just stared out the window, transfixed. I knew the feeling. "Alloran?" I repeated, louder this time.

He broke out of his trance. <I am sorry, Prince Tobias. What is it?>

"Can you calculate our position?"

<Yes, my Prince. We are approximately four miles west of the Cinnabon establishment.>

“Four miles?” Marco asked. “Wouldn’t that put us under the mountains?”

Jeanne nodded. “Of course. It would be very difficult to destroy this Yeerk pool like you did the previous one. This one is much more defensible.”

“Is it just me,” Cassie said, “or are there a lot of kids down there?”

I looked. “Yeah, there seem to be a lot more than there are adults. Weird. The Yeerks always wanted people in positions of power, not kids.”

“Kids defeated the Yeerks last time,” Jeanne answered. “It is not a chance Esplin would take again.”

“And they’re easy to get,” I decided. “The caves above us. Kids wander around in there all the time.”

Rachel nodded. “They take a wrong turn, get grabbed by Kelbrid, get dragged down here, and that’s the end. Then, they come back again and again. Bringing new, uninfested friends. Subtle recruiting, relying only on the stupidity of kids.”

“That’s just sick and wrong,” Cassie muttered. “To prey on children...That’ a whole new level, even for Esplin.”

“Shhh,” Marco said suddenly. Unlike the rest of us, he was listening at the door, paying attention. His paranoia was a valuable asset. “Someone’s coming.”

We had a few choices. We could have fled back down the tunnel. But this was Esplin’s office, and chances were good that something important was going to happen if we hung around. We could morph something small and hide.

“Go to flies,” I ordered. “We’ll stake this place out real quick. Then we’ll get out of here.”

We all began to morph. But then I quickly realized that my plan wouldn’t work. Jeanne and Alloran were far too slow to morph in time. And someone would walk through that door any moment. It was time for a snap decision.

I stopped morphing I grabbed a chair and propped it against the door. That might slow someone down. Then, I went back to morphing.

The door handle jiggled. Someone was trying to get in. <Blasted human contraption! I am the most powerful Yeerk in

all the galaxy and yet I cannot find a door that works? Do I truly ask that much of the universe?>

The door shuddered again. I heard a muffled voice, but I couldn't understand it. Then, <If I wanted the door removed, I could do it myself. Just open the blasted thing!>

The door shuddered a lot harder this time. Probably a Kelbrid smashing it down. It would be open any second. And I was only half morphed with no time to finish. I needed to hide. But where?

CHAPTER 13

I dove behind the desk. Just in time, too. Esplin walked through the door in his stolen body. He swept his stalk eyes around the room. Saw nothing. Then, he let the others in. I was glad he had taken the delay. It gave me enough time to finish my morph.

I buzzed into the air, careful not to be seen. Esplin would be suspicious of any living thing, even a fly. Especially a fly. He had Ax's memories; he knew how effective they could be.

Esplin wasn't alone for long. Four Kelbrid loped in and took up positions around him. Guards, apparently. The Kelbrid could be trusted, unlike many Yeerks. These ones might not even be infested.

Kelbrid are about as tall as Hork-bajir. Their legs are like a cat's legs, bent back and with clawed paws at the end. They had humanoid chests. Their arms were strange, though. One ended in a hand with ten fingers. The other was a massively muscled arm. There was no hand there, only a single, foot-

long blade. I knew the blade was retractable and covered in an anesthetic poison.

Their heads were strange, too. They reminded me of alligators. They had long snouts with mouths full of razor sharp teeth. Cats ears, swept back against the sides of their heads, twitched constantly. Short whiskers, like a catfish's, dangled from their snouts. They had no eyes.

All of their body was covered with black flesh. They stood on their hind legs, but I could see that they were meant to be on all fours. They were just barely evolved beyond simple predators. They were dumb muscle; Esplin worked well with dumb muscle.

Behind the Kelbrid came Hork-bajir I counted four of them. These were probably some of the morph-capable Hork-bajir from the Blade ship. Their Yeerks had betrayed Esplin, so those particular slugs were probably removed.

Behind the four Hork-bajir came Esplin's rival for evil. David. He was a small, white rat, the sort of thing I used to eat. Hard to believe he had caused us so much trouble.

The Hork-bajir sat down in the chairs. David scrambled up the desk. Esplin spoke first. <Let the record show that this is

our official weekly meeting. All important parties are present as well as four uninfested Kelbrid guards. I am Esplin 9466 speaking.>

<What's going on here?> Marco asked. <Yeerk book club? I didn't think Esplin kept minutes.>

<The first order of business. David, how goes your search for the Animorphs?>

<It's still useless. They can be anyone, anywhere. And since they broke into that compound, they'll have the documentation to back it up.>

<Does our location remain a secret?>

<I don't know. That isn't my job.>

Esplin favored him with an icy glare. Then, he turned a stalk eye to one of the Hork-bajir <Oreon 529, is our location still a secret?>

“Yes, Esplin. No human or Andalite organizations have detected us. And I do not believe the Animorphs know our location. We have left no clues.”

<That is something else we'll have to address. Do not call me Esplin. Call me Visser.>

<I thought you said that the Vissers were a product of the Yeerk Empire and you dropped that title to distance yourself from a failed empire,> David pointed out.

<True. But it helps to have a rank. Otherwise, you may all become too...familiar with me. I am the one and only Visser, the last in the galaxy. I will be addressed as such. You are my Sub-Vissers. Is that clear?>

One by one, the Hork-bajir said, "Yes, Visser."

<Good. Now, our next order of business. No matter how many times you tell me that our location is safe, Oreon, I do not doubt that the Animorphs will somehow find us. They have a knack for that sort of thing.

<Their greatest advantage was that they appeared out of nowhere, struck hard, and then vanished. Not this time. This time, we'll be ready for them. We know our enemy; that is a great advantage.

<You five must know our enemy as well as I do. David has a bit of a head start, but nowhere near the wealth of experience my host offers me. We'll start with their leader. We'll start with Jake.

<In battle, he is most likely to use a tiger morph, though David tells me that he also has a Howler. The tiger is very fast and very, very strong. He will roar when in an emergency, but do not let that frighten you. The sound is harmless. The tiger has some weaknesses. It tires easily, for example. Use that to your advantage. The Kelbrid's poison will be the most effective tool. Instruct them to strike quickly and then fall back. That will handle Jake.

<Next is Rachel. It seems that reports of her death have been...inaccurate. She is, in fact, alive and kicking. She will most likely use a grizzly bear morph. It is even stronger than a Kelbrid, but their poison will sap its strength. The bear has poor eyesight. Surround her, strike quickly, and then retreat.

<Rachel may also use an elephant morph. Its hide is nearly impenetrable, even by Kelbrid. But it has an enormous blind spot behind it. It has poor mobility, though it is faster than one would expect. Attack from behind and then pull back. Hit and run; Animorph tactics used against them.

<Marco is next. He will almost certainly use a gorilla morph in combat. The gorilla is about as strong as a Kelbrid. But its teeth are small and it has no claws, so it cannot do too

much damage to a Kelbrid. One or two can defeat it in a stand up fight. Be warned, though, that Marco is perhaps the most intelligent and ruthless of the Animorphs; he thinks things through. He will likely have a plan. And, unlike the others, he is able to wield weapons.

<Cassie is perhaps the smallest threat in combat. She uses a wolf morph. It is fast and strong, but nothing next to the tiger. However, the wolf will never tire. A Kelbrid or two can handle the wolf. The poison will slow it, and then it can be killed without difficulty.

<These four will be accompanied by a young Andalite named Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor. He is my host's nephew; Elfangor's second son. Like all Andalites, his tail is far faster than a Kelbrid. However, when attacking, he will expose himself. A pair of Kelbrid will be able to bring him down.

<That, unfortunately, is as far as any solid information we have goes.>

<What about Tobias?> Rachel wondered.

<What about Tobias?> David asked, almost echoing Rachel. <He's harder to kill than you might think.>

<I do not know what to make of him anymore. I do not know what morph he will be using for battle. A red-tailed hawk is, of course, no threat to the Kelbrid. They have no eyes, and those are always his target. You all have the scars to prove it.

<Tobias sometimes fought in a Hork-bajir morph. He attacked me as a polar bear once. That has the same weaknesses as Rachel's grizzly. We have also seen a rhinoceros and a leopard, either of which could have been him, though I saw him fighting by the side of the rhinoceros, so I doubt that is him. He was a leopard most recently, but that is likely to have changed.

<Do not forget that he is able to morph my host. That is also a possibility. Do not trust me unless I am someplace an Animorph could not possibly be. Like here, surrounded by Kelbrid guards. Even I am a suspect. Now, let us return to business. Naib 759, you are to present the financial reports.>

“Of course, Visser. Our revenue is up thirteen percent since the last quartile...”

CHAPTER 14

<Let's blow,> Rachel said. <I don't want to sit here and listen to Yeerks drone on about finance.>

<Wait, we might learn something,> Marco argued. <We could find out where they get their funding, or what businesses they control.>

<I say we go,> Cassie chimed in. <It isn't worth the risk of being caught. Not now that we have what we came for.>

<I agree with Marco,> Jeanne insisted.

It was up to me, I realized. I was the leader. These sorts of calls came down to what I thought. Marco made a good point. We could learn a lot of valuable information here. But Cassie had a point as well. If we were caught, even suspected, all our stealth would have been for nothing.

<We'll go,> I decided. <We can always come back next week and listen in. These meetings are structured. They're rescheduled. We can use that to our advantage. But for now, it isn't worth revealing ourselves.>

We left the way we came in. We flew the whole way as flies. According to Alloran, we only had five minutes left in morph by the time we reached the Cinnabon.

Even knowing that we were five minutes from being trapped as flies, even knowing that, in five minutes, Crayak would lose the war against The One and the entire galaxy would suffer, we had a hard time just passing the cinnamon buns by.

<Can't we just stop for a little taste?> Marco whined.

<You can stop. But you'll be spending the rest of your life here,> I answered. <Not that the rest of your life is likely to be very long, since flies live for only a day.>

<Not all flies,> Cassie pointed out. <I think that's just fruit flies. I'm not even sure what type of flies we are.>

<Probably *tacnid*,> Jeanne answered.

<Oh, no, no, no!> Marco wailed. <She's smart, too? That wasn't part of the deal!>

<Maybe she wouldn't seem so smart if you had finished high school,> Rachel shot.

<Hey, *you* didn't finish either, Xena.>

<High school?> Alloran questioned. <Is that human humor? I learned basic taxonomy when I was a small child. I know that humans aren't as advanced as Andalites, but surely you can grasp the basic classification of your planet's organisms! It's hardly Zero space physics, after all.>

<Earth has a lot more animals than the Andalite world,> Cassie pointed out. <It would be impossible for anyone to memorize them all.>

<Even a super-intelligent Andalite,> Rachel added. Andalites have good points and bad points. One of their bad ones is a species-wide arrogance. Even Ax had it, though we did a good job of beating it out of him.

<Hey, I'm done guessing what Andalites can and can't do,> Marco told her. <I mean, Ax practically memorized the entire World Almanac.>

<That's what, a few hundred pages? Earth's known classification is billions of different species. Not even a genius like Alloran can do that,> Rachel insisted.

I had a sudden idea. <Care to make a bet on that, Rach?> I asked her.

<Sure. What stakes?>

<We'll figure that out later. If Alloran can memorize the entire taxonomy of Earth, you'll do something I want. If he can't I'll do something you want me to do.>

<Anything I want?>

<Anything at all.>

<How can I say no to a sure thing?>

By this point, we were in the alley next to the Cinnabon, demorphing. Rachel, Marco, Cassie, and I were human. We were waiting on the others. Rachel turned to me. "How long does he get to do it?"

"Alloran, how long will you need?"

<Once I have all of the necessary data, a week at the most. However, it might take a month or so to gather the data.>

"Then he gets a month and a week," I told her. To everyone I said. "Get wings. Jeanne and Alloran, do you have owl morphs?"

"Yes. Cassie and Rachel took us to acquire them earlier today," Jeanne said.

"Good. Everyone, go to owl."

"We going back to the *Reliquary*?" Rachel asked.

I shook my head. “We know the Yeerk pool is under the mountains. Do you remember what’s on top?”

Marco clicked. “The observatory. The giant telescope can act as a big lens to let the Kandrona rays in.”

“The Kandrona itself might be there,” Jeanne added.

I shook my head again. “It won’t be so close to the pool. But the telescope will be aimed at it. All we need to do is get one look through that scope and we’ll know exactly where the Kandrona is. But we can’t delay on this. David’s looking for us, and he’ll find us eventually. We move on this tonight.”

CHAPTER 15

The others went to owl morph. I went to my old red-tail morph. I had never acquired an owl. It would have been extremely weird for me, being a hawk and all. And once I was human...I guess I didn't expect to live long enough to need the morph.

Plus, I knew, there would be the temptation. The urge to hunt and kill. As an owl, I'd see all the pretty skittering around on the ground beneath me. And, since the only thing I had for dinner was Rachel's food, I was starving.

The hawk instincts were easier to resist at night. I wouldn't be able to see my prey. That was essential. If I could see it, I might not be able to resist.

After a few minutes, we took wing. It was a decent flight to the observatory and we wanted to get there as quickly as possible. But we also needed a plan to infiltrate it. It was certainly Yeerk owned and operated.

Of course, it was hard to make a plan when we had no idea what kind of security it had. I guess we'd just wing it. We often ended up doing that in the end anyway.

As we approached, I realized it wouldn't be hard to get inside. The giant telescope, which presumably let in the Kandrona rays, came out of a large hole in the observatory's domed roof. A hole we could easily fly through.

<Okay,> I said to the rest of them, snapping into my leader façade, <we can't just fly in there. Anyone sees an animal, they'll figure it all out. We'll go in as bugs.>

<Tobias?> Cassie said to me privately. <We've done four morphs in less than three hours. I'm not sure Jeanne and Alloran have the stamina to do more. Not yet.>

She had a point. No one else would have mentioned that. <I want half the team in the sky to keep a lookout. Me, Jeanne, and Alloran will stay out here. Marco will lead Rachel and Cassie inside.>

<Why is Marco leading?> Rachel asked. I understood her surprise. She assumed she'd be my right hand.

<Because this is a stealth mission and he's the cautious one,> I answered.

Rachel grumbled about it for a bit, but she obeyed. That was all I asked of her. She, Marco, and Cassie landed on the top of the dome and then started morphing to fly.

I rested in a nearby pine while Jeanne and Alloran perched on either side of the building, trying not to be seen. I decided to make conversation while we waited for the others to report. <So, Alloran, do you really think you can memorize the entire Earth taxonomy?>

<I believe so, my Prince. I was taught a number of skills to improve memory. Most of them are simple mnemonic tricks. Added to that is the chip that all Andalite warriors have implanted in their heads. It increases memory, allows for the ability to keep perfect time, discern one's location, and translate any language for which it has enough data.>

<Wish I could get me one of those,> I sighed.

<Didn't Santorelli have something like that?> Jeanne inquired. <I believe he did.>

<Yeah, but it was only memory. He could remember anything he ever saw or heard.>

<I have not heard much about my predecessor,> Alloran commented. <I would like to hear more about Santorelli.>

<He was...a lot like our father,> I decided. <They had the same sense of honor, duty, and courage. They did what their people needed them to do. Had he been an Andalite...the Yeerks wouldn't have gotten far. Not with two Elfangors.>

<I cannot imagine a higher compliment to give someone,> Alloran answered. I didn't blame him. He idolized Elfangor, sure. A lot of Andalites did, including Ax. I wasn't exactly the same.

Elfangor wasn't my idol. I didn't want to end up like him. He was a great warrior, a brilliant tactician, and a ruthless leader. But he was a terrible father. Some day, I figured I'd have a kid or two. I would do better by them than Elfangor did by me.

Still, I could never blame Elfangor. I'd have done the same thing in his shoes. Heck, I *did* do the same thing. For so long, I left my human life aside to fight the Yeerks. No, I could never hold that against him.

And at the end, when I met him, he died well. He didn't beg or plead or try to trade our lives for his. He traded his for ours, strangers. If he hadn't spent so much time explaining everything, warning us, he might have escaped.

That was the only memory I had of my real father. It was one that would always be with me. I think that we have parents to set an example for their children. He set an example, alright. I'd always remember what he did, and I'd use it to help build who I was.

Maybe he wasn't such a bad father after all.

Marco's thought speak broke me out of my thoughts.
<Fearless leader? We've got a problem.>

<What is it?> I demanded. <Were you caught?>

<No, nothing that bad. But we're looking through this telescope. We're supposed to see the building with the Kandrona in it, right?>

<Right.>

<Well, we're seeing the stars. No buildings at all.>

<You're flies,> I pointed out.

<Not anymore. Rachel demorphed. She's an owl and she can't see any buildings through that thing.> This was not good news. We couldn't hang around all night and think it through.

Something occurred to me. <There are coordinates for where that telescope is pointed, right?>

<Yeah.>

<Memorize them and get out. Don't worry about demorphing; you can ride Rachel.>

<That makes both of us.>

<Marco, I hope, for your sake, that she did not hear you say that.>

<So do I.>

CHAPTER 16

It was after midnight, so we decided to call it a night. Marco and Cassie transferred to Jeanne so she could fly them back to the motel. As she, Alloran, and I flew back to the Reliquary, Rachel said what I was thinking. <Kind of early to end a mission, isn't it?>

<Guess so. I'm not used to being in bet before two.>

She was silent for a moment. Then, <Tobias, does it feel like we're doing nothing?>

<What do you mean? We're going after their Kandrona.>

<Yeah. We're *going* after it. But we haven't done anything. We haven't hurt them at all. They're getting stronger and stronger.>

<Like Esplin said, our greatest advantage was that we appear out of nowhere, strike hard, and then vanish. We'll make our presence felt, but we'll do it in the biggest way imaginable. If we play our cards right, many of them might not realize that we destroyed the Kandrona until it's too late.>

< I know, I know. Maybe it's just because I've been back a week and haven't kicked any Yeerk butt.>

Again, we flew in silence for a few minutes. But she wasn't done. <You don't have to protect me, you know.>

<I know,> I sighed. I was smart enough not to try to protect her.

<Do you? You've been all stealthy and secretive; much more than we ever have been before. I can't help but think that maybe you're afraid to have me fight again. That you're afraid to lose me again.>

<Rachel, I'm not afraid of losing you,> I said. <I'm scared to death. Before, I didn't know what I'd do if I lost you. Now, I know. I'd die. Again.>

Rachel started to argue, but I cut her off. <I also know that I can't protect you. Not if I'm going to lead effectively. You're a warrior and I can't be afraid to use you for it. But these jobs we've had lately...they just don't call for a warrior.

<Don't worry, Rachel. When the time comes, I won't try to protect you. It's always the other way around anyway.> I laughed a little, but she knew I was right.

<Prince Tobias?>

<What is it, Alloran?> I figured maybe he was feeling a bit uncomfortable with our conversation.

<You and I have only five minutes left in allowable morph time.> He sounded remarkably calm. <With your permission, I would like to demorph and run the rest of the way to the *Reliquary*.>

I looked below me. We were above the forest. <Go for it. But don't be out all night.> That last part was kind of a joke. I don't know if Andalites had a teenage rebellion stage, but if they did, Alloran should reach his soon.

Of course, Rachel and I had been the ultimate rebels. She and I stayed up all night, lied about where we were, broke into places, and even killed some people. And that was just the stuff we told the others about.

I hauled wing to the *Reliquary*. I knew in my head that I could end up trapped as a hawk again, that I might not make it to the *Reliquary* in time to demorph. But I didn't know, in my heart, which I wanted.

Not yet, I thought. Maybe someday, but they still need you. You can't do this.

When the *Reliquary* was in sight, I dropped low and began to demorph. I ended up rolling along one of the ship's wings until I crashed into the cockpit.

<Home sweet home,> Rachel said, landing gracefully beside me and demorphing. I just leaned back against the cockpit and stretched out my legs. I was winded and in a bit of pain.

Rachel sat next to me. I barely noticed how cold it was. It was a lot colder here than back home, and we were wearing spandex. The weather was the last thing on my mind.

After everything, all the battles, all the fear, pain, and loss, just being next to her made my heart pound. Sometimes, when I was with her, I was more afraid than I was in any battle. Isn't that sweet? Or maybe is it just pathetic.

She was too good for me. I knew it. Everyone knew. Even Marco, who was in many ways the opposite of perceptive, knew it. I didn't deserve her.

"It's the other way around," she said to me. Not until then did I realize I had said that last part out loud. "I don't deserve you, Tobias."

“Please. You could do so much better. You’re smart, beautiful, brave, and yet, somehow sweet and gentle when you care to be. Not necessarily in that order. You could have literally any guy you wanted. Me...I’m just a bird in a boy’s body.”

“Not anymore, Tobias. You’re human now.”

I didn’t tell her about the confusion I was feeling. I hadn’t meant to say that last party anyway. It would only worry her and I already worried her enough. I couldn’t protect her from the Yeerks; I could protect her from me.

“And even if you were still the winged wonder, that doesn’t matter. You’re a hero, Tobias. Like your father.”

“Nah. I’m just some kid in the wrong place at the right time,” I answered.

She shook her head. This really mattered to her. “You’re the greatest hero in the galaxy, don’t you see that? You’re the one who’s going to end the Yeerk threat forever. Because of you, we’ll win this thing. The One will be defeated and Crayak will destroy him. And then Crayak will go away and our galaxy will be in peace from his and the Ellimist’s stupid game. You’ll save more than we can ever know!”

I smiled at her. It was a conscious thing. I never smile by accident anymore. I did it to make her feel better. “And yet, I still don’t deserve you. That’s just how amazing you are.”

Then, I kissed her.

She was surprised. I’m never the one who initiates stuff like that. This might have been the second time it happened. The first was when we were playing with the Time Matrix and she had died. I guess Rachel just had a thing against staying dead.

I heard a rustle of leaves and looked down. Alloran was trying to sneak into the ship without us seeing him. Why? Because he had obviously seen us.

<I am sorry to have...disturbed you, my Prince. Rachel. I will be going now...I wish you a good night...I hope to see you in the morning...> He kept trailing off, flustered.

Rachel and I both laughed. I hadn’t done that involuntarily in a long time, either.

CHAPTER 17

I stretched my arms as I woke up. Yawned. Took a deep breath. And then shuddered. I knew that smell. Breakfast. I tried very hard to pretend I was still asleep. Guess how well that turned out.

“Oh no you don’t,” Rachel said. “I saw you wake up. Everyone’s coming over for breakfast, so look presentable.”

Grumbling under my breath, I rolled out of bed. Alloran was probably out feeding so he would have an excuse not to eat her food. He was a smart kid.

A smart *kid*? No, that wasn’t good thinking. That ‘kid’ was the same age I had been when I entered this war. To start thinking of him as a kid was a bad precedent. He was a warrior like everyone else.

I took my shower in the *Reliquary*’s small bathroom. When the ship was built, did the designers have any idea that someone would actually be living in it? Probably not. Especially since it was given to me as a gift. Why would a hawk need a shower?

After that, I dressed in the cloths Rachel had bought me with money we embezzled from Marco. I didn't particularly like them, but I wasn't stupid enough to argue with Rachel over fashion. She had always chosen my cloths before. That was different, of course. Back then, I barely used them.

"Make your bed," she ordered as I came out of the bathroom. With a barely audible sigh, I complied. Did I think things would be like this when I asked her to move in with me? Actually, I more expected things to be the other way around. I guess people, even people you know better than you know yourself, can surprise you.

I went over to my bed. When we were refurnishing the *Reliquary*, the beds had been an issue. Specifically, whether we should have one or two. I knew that, if I was in the same bed with her all night, I'd never be able to fall asleep.

We had compromised and bought twin beds. They could connect, if we chose to. So far, we hadn't decided to do that. At least, not for a whole night...

I started setting up the card tables for our breakfast with the others. "You're up early," I noted.

“You’re always gone before breakfast. I’m betting this will be a long day and I wanted to make sure you got some real food in you.”

It was sweet. She was worried about me. I was worried about me, too. Could I locate and take down a Kandrona with only her cooking in my stomach? Trial by fire.

<Hey, anyone awake in there?> Marco asked. I guess he was outside of the ship. I brushed a hand across the control node and a hatch opened up in the roof. Two ospreys, a red-tailed hawk, and a peregrine falcon flew in.

The falcon was Alloran. We had realized something about the Yeerks. Esplin knew our bird morphs. He could write the second red-tailed hawk off as Alloran imitating me, his older brother. But there was no way he could overlook the absence of a peregrine falcon; the absence of Jake.

“You know what surprises me?” Marco said once he had a mouth. “No white picket fence. It would complete this little domestic scene you two have going here.”

“Yeah, and it would be only a little suspicious in the middle of a forest,” I answered.

“Yeah. It’ll be so suspicious that people might miss the big black death machine parked behind it,” Marco answered. “Seriously, Tobias, this thing is kind of a security risk.”

“I know. But I can’t park it in the mountains; they’re Yeerk turf. Besides, the long-range sensors will point out anyone approaching. The ship will take off when anyone’s within a mile of it.”

“It doesn’t take off when *we* get within a mile of it,” Marco pointed out.

I was about to answer him, but Jeanne eliminated the need for it. “Marco, sit down and be polite. You’re a guest.”

“Thank you, twisted sister,” Rachel said. “Breakfast is served.”

<I have already fed,> Alloran began.

“One little bite won’t kill you.”

Marco and I shared a look that said, “I’m not too sure.” Alloran turned all four eyes on me. From a paranoid Andalite, he may as well have been begging for help on his hands and knees.

Of course, Rachel noticed him looking at me. “Go on, Alloran. It won’t hurt you,” I told him. He looked like I had

just handed him over to the Yeerks. It's a good thing Rachel wasn't familiar with Andalite facial expressions.

We ate, but only for a little while. I knew good conversation would distract Rachel from the fact that we were just shuffling food around on our plates, so I decided it was a good time to start the meeting.

“Okay. Now that we're all here, let's talk about how we're going to find this Kandrona. And then,” I added, sharing a look with Rachel, “let's talk about how we're going to blow it sky high.”

CHAPTER 18

“I’ve been thinking about this all night,” I began.

“Is *that* what you were doing all night?” Marco interrupted, leering at Rachel.

I forced a smirk. I was trying to get back into the habit. If I was ever in it. “Mostly.” Rachel swatted my arm. Worth it. “Alloran, you said Kandrona rays work like light. That means that the Kandrona could be a million miles away as long as it has an unbroken path to the pool, right?”

<That is correct, my Prince.>

“What I’m thinking is this. Esplin knows that, eventually, we’ll go after the Kandrona. And we’ll probably succeed; he knows we always seem to find a way to do it. So his only real defense would be to put the Kandrona somewhere we couldn’t reach it. Like in orbit.”

“But we can get to it up there,” Marco insisted. “We have a ship.” He gestured around him.

“But does Esplin know that?” Jeanne answered him.

“He knows we had air support when we met him in Death Valley,” Rachel pointed out.

Cassie shook her head. “He might know we have a ship, but he won’t have moved the Kandrona. He wouldn’t expect us to find it.”

I nodded. “That’s pretty much what I was thinking. So here’s my plan. The Kandrona is up in orbit. It’ll probably be in some transparent satellite. We’ll just have to fly up there and blow it up.”

“I like it,” Rachel said instantly. “But we won’t get to throw down with any Kelbrid, will we?”

“No, probably not.”

“Aww. I really want to see what those guys have.”

<They are an unusual species. They are capable of walking on only their hind legs, though it appears they were evolved from four-legged creatures. I do not know of any evolutionary circumstances that would lead to their unique fore-legs, though. Very peculiar.>

“That was probably The One’s doing,” I told him.

“Let’s just get going after the Kandrona,” Rachel said. “I can’t stand just sitting around spying all the time. We aren’t the Chee!”

“Rachel? We’re already in orbit,” I smiled.

“No way,” Marco insisted. “Wouldn’t we have felt this thing lift off?”

“Nope, it’s just that smooth. I gave it the command mentally when we decided the Kandrona would be in orbit. We’re already headed for the coordinates the telescope was pointed at.”

“Okay, major points for style,” Marco decided.

I got up and went to the control node. I could control the ship with a thought, but I didn’t want to take any chances. It was a system Alloran and rigged up and, although he might have been as good as a Chee, we didn’t have access to the best equipment.

Alloran took up his position beside me, at the weapon’s station. I could control all of the *Reliquary*’s guns from here, but it was a lot easier if he took some of them. Besides, he had more practice than I did.

The others stood back and watched while Alloran and I closed in on the coordinates. Then, I got another idea. Marco wanted style? I had it. A brief thought activated the ship's sound system. We were swept away by *Bulls on Parade*. Something about Rage Against the Machine felt appropriate.

I closed in on our target feeling pretty good about myself. This would be a total surprise. We'd take them by storm. Our prey wouldn't know what was happening.

Prey. That's how I looked at it. Because, you see, I was still a predator. This was the hunt. We had watched our prey, waited for the right time. And now, we would swoop in and strike. It was perfect.

I felt no fear. A predator never does. Success or death; those are its feelings. Success was desirable. Death was not, but it wasn't something to be feared. It was just another consequence of life. For the predator, there could be no failure. I was calm. I was ready.

Until Alloran said, <Prince Tobias? I do not think that is the Kandrona.>

“No, I really doubt it is.”

<What do we do now?>

“Investigate. If that isn’t the Kandrona, it’ll probably be something important. Guys? Go to battle morphs. We’re going in.”

“I love it when he talks like that,” Marco joked. “It gives me chills. What about you, Xena?”

“You know what’ll give you chills, Marco? Being shoved out of an airlock in the upper atmosphere.”

“Tobias, you wife’s threatening me again. Ow, my shin!”

CHAPTER 19

We had been expecting some sort of transparent ship to be housing the Kandrona. It would stay in orbit above Earth, the telescope aimed at it so the rays would reach the Yeerk pool. What we found was totally different.

It was some kind of space station. It was small, even smaller than the old International Space Station, which was now totally obsolete.

It was shaped a little like the letter U or a boomerang. There was one visible docking point, probably for a Bug fighter to replace the crew when it was necessary.

What got me was that the whole thing looked like it was covered in tin foil. It was ridiculously shiny and reflective. The sun's rays sparkled off of it. It was almost a second moon. I was surprised no one on Earth saw it.

Then, I realized exactly what I was seeing. "It's a giant mirror!" I shouted. "Of course! The Yeerks have the Kandrona somewhere else. This reflects the rays to the Yeerk pool."

<Makes sense,> Marco agreed. <Maybe the Yeerks are getting smarter.>

<Let's hope not,> Rachel sighed.

<So how do we find where the Kandrona is?> Cassie wondered.

<The Yeerks stationed aboard the station will probably know,> Jeanne answered.

<Stationed aboard the station...> Marco mused. <I love your word choice. It's adorable.> If Jeanne wasn't a leopard, she probably would have blushed.

"Let's go, then," I said. I was halfway to Howler morph. It was easily the most powerful morph any of us had, though it didn't look like it.

Picture Darth Maul. Then, give him Wolverine's claws. That's basically a howler. Not as imposing as, say, a grizzly or a gorilla, but trust me, one Howler could take us all down. I know; I saw one do it.

The strangest part of being a Howler was that, unlike any other morph, this one came with memories. The Howlers had a collective memory, a way to share battle tactics. I could dip

into that pool whenever I needed inspiration or advice. I decided it was best to stay away from it.

The memories were a lie anyhow. They contained only memories of victory. Crayak purged any defeated Howlers before their memories could infect the others. We had used that once to defeat the Howlers. That memory was gone, too.

I docked the *Reliquary* over the Bug fighter entrance, opened the floor hatch, and dropped into the Yeerk space station. There was a very small welcoming committee.

There was a pair of Taxxons. I was a little surprised; we hadn't seen them in a while. There were also three Hork-bajir and three Kelbrid. Rachel would be so pleased.

The lead Hork-bajir, a monster almost nine feet tall, opened his beak like he was about to speak. I guess he was expecting us to be there to replace him. After all, the *Reliquary* looked enough like a Yeerk ship; it had the same deadly shape and color that most possessed.

I briefly considered using my howl to take them all out, but that would hurt my friends, too. It was a weapon of last resort. Besides, Rachel made me promise not to use it.

The music blasting from my ship changed. Rob Zombie. *Superbeast*. It seemed appropriate. “Good morning, boys. You wouldn’t happen to know where I can find a Kandrona generator, now would you?”

One of the Kelbrid stepped forward. I could just barely understand what he was saying. “Howler...toy. Kelbrid...stronger...Faster.”

<And now comes with thirty-seven percent APR. If only it came in red,> Marco added. <These guys are thicker than Hork-bajir>

I smiled. <So true. Keep the big Hork alive; he’ll know what we need to know.> Then, I leapt into action. The Howlers were designed by Crayak to destroy; to destroy Kelbrid, in fact. Crayak had intended to infest the Howler race with Yeerks, making them a match for the Kelbrid. But we had broken the Yeerks and ruined the Howlers.

Howlers, you see, want to play. Their game just happens to be fatal. They’re children, having fun. They don’t understand what they’re doing. But that was fine, because I knew exactly what was happening.

The Howler wasn’t the predator. I was.

From my ship spilled my comrades. That was good, but I didn't need them. Two Taxxons, three Kelbrid, three Hork-bajir That was nothing to a Howler. I was already winning.

Then, a gorilla dropped from the ship. <Hey, don't start this party without me!>

A wolf and a leopard followed him, dropping nimbly. They were silent. Jeanne was a trained assassin; she knew there was no need for words. Cassie just didn't like to fight, no matter who the enemy was.

Alloran leapt nimbly down after them, a young Andalite. <Alloran,> I ordered, <Take the Taxxons.>

<With all due respect, my Prince, I believe I can subdue the large Hork-bajir without killing him.> Alloran would never disobey an order, but he wanted to show me what he could really do.

<Gotta walk before you can run, kid,> Marco told him. <Leave the big guy to me.>

Then, last, came the bear. Rachel dropped down out of the ship like a bomb. The station actually shook. She reared up to her full height, even taller than that Hork-bajir <Someone

point me at a Kelbrid!> she roared. At the same time, she roared with the bear's voice.

We were back.

CHAPTER 20

Cassie took off after the Taxxons. That was fine by me. If she wouldn't feel as bad about taking them down, she was welcomed to go for it. Someone had to do it, after all.

Marco squared off against the Hork. That's how I thought of the largest Hork-bajir Jeanne circled around behind the Hork, getting ready. The leopard was a stealthy hunter, an ambusher. The two of them could handle anything the Hork could throw at them.

Alloran placed himself in front of one of the other Hork-bajir. The Hork-bajir looked passive at first. After all, he was fighting a kid. Then, I guess either the Yeerk or the host remembered what Ax could do when he was Alloran's age. The Hork-bajir looked more serious after that.

Rachel charged right for a Kelbrid and a Hork-bajir. I didn't worry about here. She was outnumbered, but she could handle them. I'd seen her take care of far worse fights.

I turned my attention to the pair of Kelbrid circling me. Now that I was paying attention, I realized just how odd they

were. The Howler's eyes could see heat; they could even see the organs inside of a creature.

I couldn't see inside the Kelbrid. They radiated heat evenly. No way to see what was a vital organ. I'd just have to guess. The throat was usually a good guess.

I leapt for the nearest one. He parried my clawed hand with his stinger. His comrade circled behind me. I spun on my lazy-Susan waist to meet the attack. I parried his stinger just in time to spin back around and block his friend.

They were stronger than me. That was readily apparent. I was faster, but that didn't matter all that much while I was flanked. They would dart in, strike and pull back before I could counter attack. So far, I had avoided being hit. But only just barely.

I glanced around and saw that things weren't going well. Marco was on the ground, wrestling the Hork. The gorilla was stronger, but the Hork was covered in blades. Jeanne and Cassie were trying to join in but couldn't get an opening. They circled the pair, restless.

Alloran still hadn't taken out his Hork-bajir. Of course. This was one of the Hork-bajir we had fought during the first

war. He was battle hardened, experienced. He had fought Andalites before. Alloran didn't have that benefit.

Rachel had dropped her Hork-bajir, but the Kelbrid was still fighting her. I could see her wobbling. I could see her bear heart slowing down. It was the Kelbrid poison. She probably couldn't see her enemy anymore.

<Cassie, help Rachel. Jeanne, cover Alloran!> I shouted. Then, I spun around to block yet another stinger. I did something no Howler would ever do, something that no Kelbrid would ever expect. Not even a hawk would pull this one. It was a human move.

When the next attack came, I dove onto the stinger. I felt it go into me, felt it pierce through my back. I was lucky it didn't sever my spine. I didn't feel any pain; that was one of the effects of the poison.

The Kelbrid 'looked' at me with what I think was a surprised expression. I shoved one claw into its throat, the other into its chest. It was harder than I expected it to be. Their hide was thicker than a Hork-bajir's; their muscle was almost like bone.

I couldn't spin my upper half to meet the next attack, so I spun my lower. I hit the Kelbrid in the snout with both feet. He didn't 'see' it coming. The beast stumbled back.

I pulled myself off of the stinger and advanced. I saw that the fight had turned in our favor. Marco had pinned the Hork. Cassie leapt on the back of Rachel's Kelbrid. Rachel finished him quickly after that. Jeanne attacked Alloran's Hork-bajir form behind, which gave Alloran the opening he needed to finish the alien off.

One on one, my Kelbrid was no match for me, even with his friend's poison weakening me. He stabbed me with his stinger, but I didn't care. I severed the arm muscles. It hung limp, half in me. A claw to the throat finished him off.

I leaned against the wall behind me to rest. Howlers regenerated, even lost limbs. I wasn't sure how to kill one aside from dropping it from a mile in the air. My wounds would heal quickly.

Only they didn't. I kept bleeding. My vision was getting blurry. Maybe the Kelbrid poison was specially designed for Howlers. That might make sense...<Prince Tobias?>

<Tobias?> Cassie echoed. <Tobias, morph out. You too, Rachel. It's the Kelbrid poison. It's killing you.>

<Oh, yeah...morph out.> I tried. I really did. I focused on my hawk self. I concentrated as hard as I could. I felt no changes. Nothing.

<Prince Tobias, you must demorph.>

<Ax, don't call me Prince. Jake's your Prince. And don't call him Prince. Hey, do you think I could call him Prince Jake, too?>

<Oh man, he's losing it. Dude, come on, morph out. If you die, we're out of leaders!>

<Tobias, you must demorph!> A new voice. French? I didn't know any French girls...

"Tobias?" Rachel. Oh, Rachel. "Tobias, I need you to be human. Be human, Tobias."

<Not yet,> I whispered. <Not until they're gone.>

"They're gone, Tobias. The war is over. You can be human again."

<Yeah? Okay...okay...>

CHAPTER 21

I opened my eyes. I couldn't see anyone's beating heart, so I guess I was human again. It didn't feel that much different from being a Howler. Except, in the back of my mind, there was no vast reservoir of past Howlers. Now, it was just the two of us. Just the hawk and the human. I wasn't sure which one was me.

I stood up and took stock. The Hork was still subdued. Marco held him down. Alloran kept his tailblade at the Yeerk's throat.

I walked over to the Hork. I had to seem calm, in control. I knew how to do this. I had been...interrogated...by the best of them. I'd get what I wanted from this Yeerk. I just hoped I didn't have to torture him. I don't know if I'd have had the stomach or the time for it.

"Do you know who I am, slug?" I asked. I kept my voice cold. I was good at it, since I still wasn't used to using it. My face was likewise blank.

"No."

Of course. He wouldn't recognize me. Only two Yeerks, as far as I know, had seen my human face. So I morphed to the hawk. I watched as the recognition grew in his eyes. The hawk, he recognized. <Now do you know who I am?>

“You are Beast Elfangor's son.”

<Ah, so you've heard of me.>

“We all have.”

<And did you hear that your people tortured me? Do you know that story, Yeerk?>

“I know.” Then, he added something I didn't expect. “I was there.”

<I learned a thing or two then. And I will use what I've learned unless you tell me where the Kandrona is. I don't have all day, Yeerk.>

I could see him weighing his options. I realized that he was too articulate to be a normal Hork-bajir. His host must have been a Seer.

“I will not betray my people.” An odd thing for a Yeerk to say. Maybe...maybe this one was different.

<Do you hear your host's screams, Yeerk? Do you—>

“Guraff. Guraff 427. That is my name, young beast. Not Yeerk.” Definitely an odd Yeerk. I was used to arrogance from Yeerks. Deceit. Subtlety. Not open defiance.

<I do not have all day, Guraff. I will make you a deal. You will leave your host. I will leave you here. Who knows, maybe your fellows will arrive to help you before you dry out and shrivel up like a slug in the sun.>

He laughed. It wasn't mocking laughter like the kind Esplin gave. It was real laughter. “Do you not know, young beast? You father once made me the same offer. He froze me and ejected me into space.

“It was decades before I was picked up. I was lucky enough to be caught in the orbit of a small moon orbiting the star I was aimed towards. When they finally thawed me out, do you know what I did? I followed my old commander, Esplin 9466. I followed him to Earth.

“I remember working one of the gun turrets on the Blade ship. I remember seeing the Andalite fighter cutting through our forces. Somehow, I knew, knew exactly who was in that fighter. When he stopped to watch the Dome ship, I took my shot. I shot down the great Beast Elfangor.

“And then we followed him to that abandoned construction site. And I left the ship and took up my position guarding the perimeter. I watched the beast die. And then, I heard the most peculiar sound.

“I heard a human vomiting, just a few feet from me. I turned and do you know what I saw? Five children.”

We were frozen. This Yeerk was the first Yeerk we knowingly saw. “That wasn’t the last time I saw you, either. So many battles, and you never remembered me. I changed hosts from time to time. I had no choice. My hosts had a way of winding up dead. But I could always get a new one. Esplin and I were friends.

“I was the first morph-capable Hork-bajir controller. I was the commander of the Blade ship when the Visser wasn’t around. That was how I ended up with the rebels, fleeing into Kelbrid space.”

Marco spoke up. <You think telling us your life story is going to stop us from killing you?>

<He’s stalling,> Alloran said. <The Yeerks were expecting to be replaced. He’s trying to delay us until reinforcements arrived. They may already be on their way.>

Alloran was right. So I made a decision. <You seem smart, Yeerk. So I'll offer you that deal one last time. Get out of your host or I'll kill you both.>

I saw the Yeerk start to crawl out of the Hork-bajir's ear. Not until the slug had dropped to the floor did Alloran take his tailblade from the Hork's throat. And that's when things got out of hand.

CHAPTER 22

The Hork rose to his feet. He seemed unstable at first. Not surprising, since he may have never walked on his own before. He opened his mouth, trying to speak.

Like lightning, he struck. A closed fist hit Alloran in the cheek. The Andalite stumbled back. The Hork whipped around and grabbed Marco. His wristblade was at the gorilla's throat.

"I'll make this simple," the Hork said. He held out one clawed hand. "Give me Guraff. We'll wait here for my friends to arrive. I'll leave with them. That will be the end of this. Do you understand me?"

We were shocked. A voluntary controller? And a Seer at that. It was the last thing we expected.

Everyone looked at me. It was my call to make. Trade the life of a Yeerk for Marco's life? Definitely not worth it. This Hork might be a dangerous enemy, but we needed Marco. <Alloran, give him the slug.>

<Yes, my Prince.>

The Hork slid Guraff into his ear. Shook his head. Then, smiled. “There, now. That wasn’t so hard. Now, I’ll give you a chance. Get back into your ship. All but my hostage here, of course. You’ll wait in there. When my friends come, I’ll go with them and leave your friend here.”

<And what’s to stop you from Draconing the station once you’re out?> I asked.

“What’s to stop you from blowing up my ship as I leave?” he answered. “I am a man of honor, young beast. I trust that you are as well.”

<Yeerks have no honor,> Alloran snapped.

“Oh? Tell that to the Yeerk Peace Movement.” I could see that he had hit a nerve with Cassie.

<Enough, Guraff.> Privately, I asked Marco, <Are you okay with this?>

<Okay? Am I okay? I’ve got the Incredible Hork here with his blades at my throat!> He sounded hysterical, but the gorilla didn’t move an inch. <Yeah, I’ll be fine.>

<We’ll agree, but on one condition.>

“You want me to take you as my hostage instead.”

<How did you know?>

“I would do the same thing in your shoes. I don’t like to lose my subordinates.”

<Yet you say you’re friends with Esplin.>

“The Visser and I disagree on some things... But we went through a lot together. Did you see the hell that was the Hork-bajir world? Esplin and I survived that together. We huddled in a bunker, quaking in our Hork-bajir hosts, watching as a Quantum Virus destroyed those around us. That is a bond that can never be broken.”

I perched on Guraff’s wristblade. He released Marco and instead put one hand to my neck. “Make a move, Marco, and I will slay the young beast. I would very much regret that.”

<I’ll bet,> Marco muttered. Privately, he asked me, <Does it freak you out when they say our names?>

<A little.>

“If I kill him, you’ll kill me. What is to be gained? Now go to your ship and wait.” Marco did as he was told.

Guraff and I waited in tense silence for a long time. Then, abruptly, he asked me, “What happened to Jake?”

I had to lie, of course. Knowing of his death would only make the Yeerks stronger. <This isn't our only front. He's leading the rest on the other mission.>

"I prefer it this way. I have no desire to meet him. But you, young beast...you are a different story."

<Why am I different?>

"Because you are something of a myth among us. Part of it is because you are Beast Elfangor's son. Part of it is because of what we've seen you do. I was there when you destroyed that Truck ship. I was one of the few survivors. I fought you when you led those two Hork-bajir to freedom.

"I saw the best of us torture you. She was even better than Esplin and armed with the latest in torture technology. And she could not break you. That is when the story started to spread.

"You were a rumor that we whispered to one another in the safety of the pool. We feared the hawk, even Esplin. And when we learned that you were none other than Elfangor's son...many of us were terrified. I must admit, I was shocked to learn that you weren't leading the resistance."

If the Yeerks feared me...then there was something I could exploit. <I lead it now,> I told him.

“What about Jake?”

<He still fights, but he has passed the torch on to me. He feels the same as you, Guraaff. He feels that it should always have been me.>

“Then we have something new to fear. The young beast... Rachel, back from the dead... But, of course, you want me to tell the others about you. You want me to spread the fear.”

<That’s right.>

“I’ll have no choice, of course. The Visser must be told. His Sub-Vissers will know. And soon, everyone will. A little more terror spread by the young beast.”

CHAPTER 23

Guraff and I waited for more than an hour. Then, a single Bug fighter came to get him. The *Reliquary* hovered above the space station, watching it like a hawk. Once the Bug fighter was out of sight, my friends landed and got me.

We floated around the station for a moment before I sat down at the control node. “The Yeerks know we’re here now,” I told them. “And they know we’re after the Kandrona.”

“That’ll basically put it out of reach,” Marco groaned.

“Basically, yeah. So I say we take what we can and force a smile.” I aimed and fired. The *Reliquary* had enough firepower to take down a Dome ship. The little station blew into a million pieces. “Now at least their rays won’t be reaching the pool. Not as crippling as I’d like, but its something.”

Would that even hurt the Yeerks? Maybe, maybe not. They might have a backup station aboard the Blade ship. But knowing Esplin, he hadn’t thought that far ahead. A spare Kandrona, yes. A spare giant mirror, no.

I thought about Guraff. Mostly about what he had called me. Young beast. I liked the sound of that.

We were flying back home. Jeanne asked, “So...is this a victory or a defeat?”

“Let’s call it a draw,” I answered.

“In other words, a defeat,” Rachel said at the same time Marco said, “In other words, a win.”

Cassie smiled at the two of them. “There were six of us when we left. There are still six of us. That hasn’t happened in a while. I’ll call it a win.”

We went back to the woods and landed the ship. Then, the six of us flew to their motel. This wasn’t the one they had been at the previous day. Staying too long in the same place would be suspicious. This motel was different. This motel had a pool.

Marco was more than happy to show Jeanne the pool. A human-morphed Alloran, totally not understanding what was going on between the two of them, joined in on their little splashing game.

Cassie, Rachel, and I rested in chairs by the poolside. Cassie sighed. “What are we going to do about those two?”

“Break his arms,” Rachel answered. “He knows the rule. He can date my sisters, but I get to break his arms.”

“Rachel,” I said, “remember that bet we had going about Alloran and taxonomy?”

“Yeah.”

“If I win, you have to let Marco date Jeanne.”

“What!? No way!”

“Yes, way. I already agreed to do anything you want if you win,” I reminded her

That calmed her down. “Yeah, you did. And there’s no way Alloran can do it. Nothing to worry about.”

“Hey, guys,” Cassie said, “your brother just went off the diving board. Does he know how to swim?”

“Not as a human,” I sighed. To Rachel, I asked, “Whose turn is it to pull him out?”

It was her turn to sigh. “Mine. I’ll be back in a moment.” She went off after him. Cassie gave me a look.

“What?”

She smiled. “Your little family’s just so cute.”

I forced a smile. It wasn’t as hard as it used to be. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

Then, she got a more serious tone. “Tobias, you *do* know what Rachel wants if she wins your bet, right?”

I thought about it. The way she had thrown herself into her new domestic role. The way she took care of Alloran as much as I did. The bridal magazines. “Yeah, I know what she wants.”

“Do you think you’re ready for that?”

I put on my sunglasses. Aviators, of course. I leaned back, looked at the sun. I thought about my life. The small part of it that didn’t involve the war. And I thought about how much it had grown. “The young beast is ready for anything, Cassie.”

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

*“They broke him wide open
Like a dam and a cork that's holding everything inside
You can play the role of rebel
Just be sure to know your wrong from right
I remember it was years ago
You know I still count the days
You and I had quite a ways to go
I never once heard you complain
And you said
Don't crack, because you might not make it back
And if you do you will be alone and you can't live like that
Well I know when I'm wrong and I sure as hell ain't wrong this time”
—Down, Down, Down to Mephisto's Café*

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

61: THE JUDGMENT

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

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

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

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

He appeared before us as some kind of alien. He was vaguely humanoid, but clearly different. Instead of hair, he had magnificent, rainbow-colored quills. Four wings came from his back looking like an angel's. He had four arms and

four blue eyes as well. He stood on two feet. I noticed that the tops of his feet were like talons. It looked almost like he could rotate a foot to stand on a talon instead.

“New look,” Marco commented.

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

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

“Toomin?” Tobias asked, raising his eyebrow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thank you, Cassie," the Ellimist said.

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

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

"I already like him better than you."

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

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

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

“Yes, Tobias, I do need you. All of you. While Crayak and The One fight their war, some things are going neglected. Some things need a push in the right direction. And some things need to be pushed away from each other.”

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

“More or less,” the Ellimist answered wryly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Alloran?” I asked.

<I will do as my Prince commands.>

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

He nodded. “Thank you again, Cassie. I will do as I have done in the past. I will tell you the problem. I will give you the possible results. Then, I will give you a choice.”

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

PREVIEW SUMMARY

The Ellimist must once again call on the Animorphs to keep the balance in the galaxy. Now, Cassie, the other Animorphs, and Alloran must race against time to keep three entire races from being wiped out.

But there is a complication. According to the rules of their war, The One must be given the same chances as Crayak. So the Animorphs and Yeerks divide into three teams. For the first time ever, Animorph and Yeerk must work hand in hand.

But Cassie doesn't fully trust her fellow Animorphs, and David isn't making things any easier. And someone else has arrived to make things even more complicated for Cassie... Ronnie Chambers.