

56: THE ORGANIZATION

CHAPTER 1

My name is Marco.

Just Marco. Marco's all you need to hear before you know exactly who I am. As for where I live, everyone knows that, too. I'm just that famous.

This isn't some delusion of mine. This is real. Too real. My enemies and the threat they pose to me, to us all, is true.

Six years ago, I was just a regular guy. Well, I was cuter than anyone I had ever met, funnier than anyone alive, and smarter than anybody in the world. And humble. Can't forget humble.

Seriously, though, that was then. One night, me, my best bud, Jake, his cousin Rachel, her friend Cassie, and a weird kid we knew named Tobias took a shortcut home from the mall so we wouldn't be late for dinner.

We cut through an abandoned construction site. It was there that we met Elfangor. He was a dying alien with a terrible secret to tell us. Earth was being invaded by other aliens called Yeerks.

Yeerks, in their natural state, are nothing but little grey slugs. But they can crawl into your brain and possess your

body. They have total control over your body and your memories.

They can pass for you even to your closest friends and family. Then, when the time comes, it betrays them to its brothers and enslaves them too. All the while, you have to sit in a lonely corner of your mind and watch.

You probably know all this, or else you've been living in a hole for the past three years. We defeated the Yeerks, my friends and I. But now they're back.

We have to fight them again. This time, it's up to some new faces. Jake, Cassie, and I are the same as always. Tobias is a very different person from the kid who walked into that construction site with us, but he's here, too. Rachel's dead.

We have two new friends. One is Santorelli. He used to be a Controller back during the first war. He was a bodyguard for a Visser. He's tan and burly. Kind of intimidating, even if he isn't any taller than me. The other is Jeanne.

Jeanne is beautiful, with green eyes and black hair. She's French, so she's got a great accent. If there's anything wrong with her, I haven't seen it. She doesn't even seem to be totally insane like Rachel was.

I really didn't want to go back to the way I used to live. All

the fear, paranoia, and blood were too much back then. Would anyone want to do it all again? I know I didn't.

But, of course, we weren't really given a choice. The interdimensional puppet masters jerked our strings again and the next thing we knew it was six years ago, back where we started. All the fear and paranoia came rushing back.

That was why I had a couple thousand alarms on my house. I didn't want the Yeerks coming for me when I was asleep. They were all silent alarms that triggered a small light by my bed. It woke me up instantly.

I bolted upright in my bed as it came on. I glanced at the clock. 2 a.m. No one prowling around my house at 2 a.m. could want anything good. No normal burglar would try to rob me, which meant that it could only be Yeerks.

In a few moments, I could be fighting for my life against whatever monster creatures the slugs had possessed this time around. I sighed and started to morph. I was really getting used to not having to put up with this.

CHAPTER 2

Half gorilla, I opened my bedroom door. Santorelli was on the stairs. He looked at me and just shook his head. “Nothing to worry about. Just a couple of insomniacs who can’t handle turning off the alarms.”

I raised an eyebrow and demorphed. I took the dropshaft down to the ground floor. It didn’t take me long to locate them. They were sitting on a couch in my living room, arguing about something.

“Look at the facts,” I heard Tobias say. “A leopard could never even touch an ostrich. End of story. You can’t beat what you can’t touch.”

“I’ve been a leopard,” Jeanne argued. “I know how fast they are. An ostrich would be dead in a second.”

“You were a leopard for what, an hour? I was a hawk for six years. Trust me, birds always win,” Tobias insisted.

I had no idea what they were talking about, but I decided it was time to put a stop to it anyway. After all, it was really, *really* late at night. Or early in the morning, depending on how you looked at it.

“Um,” I interrupted, “I’m not sure what exactly you two

are doing arguing about leopards and ostriches at 2 a.m., but knock it off.”

“How could you possibly have heard us?” Tobias demanded.

“You tripped one of the alarms,” I answered. “Tobias, why are you even awake? You’ve been asleep for the last two days.”

That was almost literally true. Tobias had had a tough time on our first mission of this new phase of the war. Too many morphs too quickly. I’m amazed he didn’t collapse from that alone. He also took quite a beating from some of our enemies and got a good jerking-around by the One and Co.

“Like you said, I’ve been asleep. I just woke up like an hour ago,” he answered. “I was hungry.”

“So naturally you wake Jeanne up and start talking about bird versus cat,” I said sarcastically. Sarcasm is something I’m good at. Just like everything else.

“I was already awake,” Jeanne told me. “I suppose I have not gotten used to this time zone yet.”

It sounded possible. Then I had a thought. She and Tobias seemed awfully friendly. But it had to be my imagination. Tobias didn’t make friends easily, and definitely not friends

who were girls.

I mentioned that Tobias is different now than he used to be. I'm talking about different as in how Mr. Hyde was different from Dr. Jekyll. Not that this new Tobias is exactly evil, just that different from the old one.

Tobias used to be a dork. He got beat up every day of his life. He was a sad, lonely kid who wanted nothing more than to be liked but he was too shy to try to make any friends. Jake was pretty much his only friend before the war, and Jake barely knew him.

But Tobias spent six years of his life as a hawk, a predator. Now he's got killer instincts and no qualms about spilling blood. And he doesn't really care about friends. Just getting back at the Yeerks for taking everything he ever cared about away from him.

First it was his father, Prince Elfangor. He had to leave Tobias to go and fight the Yeerks. And then the Yeerks killed him. Next it was Rachel. She was one of us and Tobias's girlfriend. She died in our last battle. That was what put him over the edge. He didn't use to be the revenge type. Now, I think that's all he cares about.

So maybe you're wondering why these two and Santorelli

are in my house. And why I have my own personal dropshaft, which is like an elevator without a floor. And why I have so many alarms. The answer is that I am loaded.

I have a mansion so big that even I can't think of enough stuff to cram into it. I have two basketball courts, a football field, a soccer field, a hockey rink, and a baseball field all on the first two floors. The next two floors are full of stuff I've collected from all over the world. There's plenty of room for more. After that, there's my private cinema, complete with concessions stand and a kid to dole out the popcorn. The top floor is bedrooms and stuff for me and my friends.

And of course, there is the basement. My own personal classic car museum. And aircraft hanger. And storage areas for alien spaceships that I managed to talk the government into letting me keep. And aside from the real ships, I've also got life-sized replicas of classic Sci-Fi ships. The Millennium Falcon, the Enterprise, and some more obscure ones from lesser known series.

So, with all this space, Jake decided it was a good idea to saddle me with the three homeless guys. Santorelli and Jeanne couldn't go back to where they lived because we hadn't decided if we wanted the world to know they were back yet.

As for Tobias, he had been living in the woods for the last six years. He didn't have a house to stay in.

So this was my life now. It was all a huge twist of irony, really. I had a bed big enough for an elephant but I couldn't get any sleep. I had a huge mansion but I couldn't get a moment alone. I was possibly the most famous man in the galaxy, but I was about to do something I couldn't tell anyone about.

Life sucks.

CHAPTER 3

We met up the next day in Cassie's barn. It was our usual meeting place, but we had to be careful. Since a lot more people could morph now, animals were potential weapons. The wolf in the stall behind me might as well have been a brick of C4.

The barn was full of animals. Cassie was allowed to keep them because she was an Animorph and we were above the law.

It wasn't the Wildlife Rehabilitation Clinic anymore. That had been moved to a much bigger place not far from here. We were most likely going to be left alone for the time being.

I glanced at Tobias. In the old days, he would be in his own hawk body, sitting in the rafters, keeping an eye out for people coming. I didn't think anyone would be stumbling around here, but you never knew. After all, what is my life if not a long string of events I never thought could happen?

Jake called us to order. He was still the same old Jake. Same brown hair and eyes, same responsible face. He looked older, of course, but we all did. He was a much more serious guy now. But inside, he was still Jake, my best bud and

fearless leader.

Cassie was the same, too. She was still short and black, wearing overalls that didn't quite fit her and boots crusted with who knows what. And, as usual, she was forcing a pill down the throat of a sick buzzard of some kind.

Jeanne and Santorelli stood at attention. I guess they still thought this little army of ours was some kind of military thing. But as far as I was concerned, all of that saluting and marching was just a game. The real job was doing what you were told to do. I was pretty sure Santorelli had that down; he had been in the military all his life. Jeanne I wasn't sure about.

Tobias kept glancing at the door, probably wishing he had his hawk's eyes and ears. But he would get used to it. He was nothing if not adaptable.

Jake said, "Let's review what we know about this new war. One: We don't have to deal with Hork-bajir anymore. Now we're up against the Kelbrid. What do we know about them?"

Cassie spoke up. "They're fast and immensely strong. They have a stinger that we think is poisonous. Also, we are pretty sure it carries an anesthetic. When we were attacked by them, none of us could feel our wounds."

Tobias added, "They don't have eyes, but they can sense

their environment. Probably the whiskers they have. They feel vibrations like a fly or cockroach. That makes it nearly impossible to get the jump on them.”

Jake nodded. “Two: our old friend, Visser Three or whatever he wants to be called now —”

“Esplin,” Tobias interjected.

“Esplin is loose, probably in Ax’s head. The One wants to have him in charge of things because he knows how we think. We know that Esplin’s nothing if not ruthless. He’ll stop at nothing to succeed. Or at least to save his own life.

“Three: Ax is one of them now. That means that the Yeerks now have access to all of his memories, all of his plans, all of his training, all of his morphs. They’ll probably be able to predict us move for move Anything else we know?”

I shook my head. “But there’s a lot we don’t know. What are they planning to do this time? How are they going to start? And what do we do?”

We all looked at each other. Finally, Jake said, “The One’s goal is to conquer humans first. He knows how dangerous we’ll be if he goes to war with us, so he wants to get us out of the way. He’ll take human hosts for his Yeerks.”

“But why?” Tobias wondered.

“What do you mean why?” I asked. “That’s what Yeerks do.”

“Yeerks, yes. But if The One wanted to destroy mankind, he could just do it with a wave of his hand,” he answered me.

Jake shook his head. “But if he does that, the Ellimist and Crayak will be all over him like Ax on a cinnamon bun.”

Tobias nodded. “But his Yeerks have access to Ax’s mind and to the Blade ship. Ax told us once that if the Yeerks wanted to kill a lot of people, they could just ignite the atmosphere with one of their ships. Ax could easily manage it. So why enslave humanity instead?”

We all looked at each other again. I broke the silence. “It doesn’t matter why. The point is that it’s happening. Whatever The One’s reasons, he wants us captured, not killed. So we have to stop him. The question is where to begin.”

“Where we began the first time,” Jake decided, “The Sharing.”

The Sharing was a Yeerk front organization like the co-ed boy scouts. It recruited people and told them it could make their lives better. In the end, they just got a slug in their brains.

Cassie shook her head. “The Sharing’s been disbanded for years, Jake. You know that.”

But I knew what Jake meant. “So there’ll be a new version. We need to keep an eye out for anything like The Sharing.”

Santorelli spoke up. “We don’t even know where to look. This could be in any town in the world.”

Jake and I looked at each other. “You know,” he said to me, “I just somehow assumed it would take place here.”

I nodded. “The One seemed pretty big on making us relive the past.”

“So where do we look?” Jeanne asked.

We sat in silence for a while. Then I had an idea. “The Yeerks won’t want to start from scratch. That would take years and although I bet The One is patient, I don’t think he’ll wait that long. Esplin certainly won’t. What do you think the fastest way to recruit new Controllers is?”

“Something like The Sharing,” Jake answered. “But we’ve been over —”

“Not that,” Tobias interrupted. “The fastest way is to not recruit new ones. To use the old ones.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “There were voluntary hosts. Some people supported the Yeerks and still do. Most of them aren’t in prison because we couldn’t prove they were voluntaries.”

Jake understood what I meant now. “So Esplin calls up these voluntaries and asks them to join up with him again. So they go with him and boom, new invasion started.”

“But how do we find out where it is?” Jeanne asked. “All we know is who it will be.”

“Precisely,” I said. “And all of these people will go where the invasion is. So we get online and track down our favorite suspected voluntary hosts. We watch them and see where they go. If a bunch of them start moving somewhere, then we know where to look. Find where they’re going and we have them.”

CHAPTER 4

I guess when I said ‘we’ would get online, I meant myself. Tobias was computer illiterate as far as I knew. Being a hawk, he had never learned how to use technology.

The others were inept to varying degrees. They could get around well enough, but when it came the finer points of surfing the net, they were clueless.

It was times like these that I really missed Ax. His computer skills used to tick me off because he was light-years ahead of any human. But he was useful to have around and his constant questions about the strangest things kept life interesting.

As I was sitting at my computer, I realized for the first time that one of us might have to kill him. Strange to think of him as an enemy. I wondered if Esplin was in his head right now, reading his memories, laughing at him.

I shook my head and typed another name in the search engine. No time to worry about killing Ax now. That would come when it came and there was nothing I could do about it now.

I scanned the screen, looking for anything incriminating

about this guy. No, he hadn't recently left his job. No, he hadn't made any plans to move away. No, he probably wasn't a Controller anymore. Another dead end.

On a whim, I typed in a name I knew too well: Hedrick Chapman. He was the assistant principal where we used to go to school. Back when we went to school. He was also a high ranking Controller.

I didn't expect to find anything. He had been a voluntary, but only to protect his daughter, Melissa. Still, it was worth a shot.

Hmm, that was interesting. It seemed that he had decided to move to a town on the other side of the country. He booked a U-haul just yesterday. On a normal computer, I wouldn't have been able to find that out. But this was a supercomputer and I was good with it.

Could Chapman be connected with the new Yeerk order? It was possible. The One seemed fixated on making this one as similar to the other one as he could. But I didn't want to count Chapman as enemy just yet. It could just be coincidence. And I could have been born yesterday.

I heard footsteps in the hall and looked out the doorway to see Tobias and Jeanne. They seemed to be spending a lot of

time together. Maybe I should talk to Tobias about it. After all, I saw Jeanne first.

Then again, maybe I should just mind my own business. Even if they did get together, it wouldn't last long. He just wasn't that kind of guy.

I shoved myself back from my computer. I was getting nowhere with my search and my mind was starting to wander. There had to be a better way to go about doing this.

I took the dropshaft down a level and turned on my T.V. That T.V. also happened to be one of the walls of the room. Nothing says you've made it like a 40 foot screen.

I flipped through the channels for a bit. There wasn't much good on. It was the news hour on just about every channel. Even the Andalite Entertainment Network was just some more information.

I checked the Hork-bajir Network, but that just had Sesame Street. Nothing on any channel.

I was flipping around when some words caught my ear. "The International Invasion Investigation Force released its annual report yesterday. All of Earth's nations were found to be free of invasion. Director of..."

I shut off the T.V. I had an idea. Just to be sure, I called

Jake. I punched his code into the hologram device on the arm of my chair and his image came up. “Marco. What’s up?” he asked.

“I’ve been surfing the net, working on that little project of mine,” I told him. I didn’t think anyone was taping in on the conversation, but you could never be sure. Besides, old habits die hard.

“Find out anything?”

“Looking randomly isn’t working. But what about the Three-F?” I asked.

Jake was silent for a moment. I could see from the look on his face that he was thinking. He got it pretty quickly. “Tri-I would probably have what you’re looking for,” he agreed.

“I’m thinking I should pay them a little visit. Check out their nearest branch, see if they can help me.”

“Customer service isn’t their best field,” Jake answered. “But I could probably help you. I practically founded Tri-I.”

“You and me both,” I answered. “What say we pay them a visit tomorrow? Eight o’clock?”

“Sounds good. Call up that guy we know and ask him to come along. And tell him to bring a date.”

That conversation was all in code, of course. What we

meant was that Three-F would probably have files on suspected voluntaries. And that they wouldn't want to share them. Of course, being Animorphs, we might be able to get on the inside.

But it was just as likely that we would be breaking into their building. Tri-I was secretive. I understood the necessity and respected it. But we needed this information.

We wouldn't be just waltzing over there, though. That would be completely amateur and stupid. That last part about that guy we knew and his date was Jake telling me to have Tobias check out the area. And to make sure he brought backup.

I held down a button on my chair. "Would Tobias please report to the front desk?" I said. My voice echoed through the P.A. system until it could be heard in every room of the house.

"I'm here," he said about a second later. I jumped about five inches.

"That was fast," I told him.

"I was two rooms away," he explained. "What's up?"

"Jake and I think Three-F might have what we need. And we also think we might have to take it by force. We need you to check out the building, see what's what."

“Okay.”

“And bring Santorelli,” I added.

“Jeanne would be better,” he told me. “Surveillance means hawk morphs and her’s is less noticeable than Santorelli’s. A pair of red-tails makes a lot more sense than a red and a Cooper.”

What he said made sense. But I was still a little uneasy. If I didn’t know Tobias better... But that was impossible. He knew what he was doing and if he wanted to take Jeanne instead of Santorelli that was his business. I was just worrying too much. Wasn’t I?

CHAPTER 5

Jake and I arrived at the Tri-I building at 8:00 sharp. It was difficult for me since I haven't gotten up before noon in years. You don't have to obey the laws of nature when you're the amazing Marco.

The International Invasion Investigation Force was known by a couple of quirky names. Tri-I was the most common. There was also Three-F and Two-If. Those came from the abbreviation, IIIF. The "I"s looked like roman numerals. There was a joke about just what the two ifs were.

I glanced out of the corner of my eye at a red-tailed hawk sitting on a telephone poll. It opened one wing. That was Tobias telling us it was safe to enter. I looked at Jake. "About time we go in."

We were greeted like celebrities. Tri-I was largely created by the Animorphs. It was an organization dedicated to making sure that nothing like the Yeerk invasion happened again. It was an agency that spanned every country on Earth, looking for anything that might be a covert alien invasion. Naturally, they would keep files on every suspected voluntary host.

Everyone in Three-F knew who we were, of course. I

smiled when I saw a life-sized poster of myself on one of the walls of the lounge. Below me, there was a caption that read, “A little paranoia never hurt anyone.”

Agents swarmed us, asking for autographs, wanting to take pictures, or just touch us. It was good, but it was also a little creepy. Jake and I managed to fight our way to the reception desk.

“We need to speak to the local director,” Jake told her.

“Right away, sir,” she promised. She meant it, too, because a door behind her opened almost as soon as she said it. “Through there.”

The director rose to greet us. He was a little over middle aged, with a receding hairline and a tightly cut black suit. “Gentlemen. It is an honor, an absolute honor, to meet our founders. And may I ask what brings you absolutely fine gentlemen to me today?”

Jake and I shared a look. This guy was way too excited to see us. He spoke quickly and loudly. His eyes were glistening. But he didn’t move towards us or offer to shake our hands. He didn’t want to get near us. Something wasn’t right.

I tapped my left foot on the floor once. Jake’s right eyebrow rose. *Yeerk?* my foot asked.

Maybe, his eyebrow answered.

“We need information,” Jake answered.

“Anything I can do to oblige you would be my greatest pleasure,” he assured us with way too much assurance.

I fought down several remarks as to what he could do to please us. “We need a list of people you suspect of being voluntary hosts,” I told him.

“As I said, anything I can do would be my pleasure.” There was a pause, after which he added, “But I can’t do that. The International Invasion Investigation Force’s files are strictly confidential.”

“Even to us?” I asked, giving him my friendliest smile.

“I’m afraid so,” he answered. “It would violate several international laws and I have no idea how that would affect our standing in the international community.

“There are many countries who resent our presence and the fact that we are headquartered in America. They think our branches in this country have too much power over the world. If we are seen to be abusing this power, well, that could be disastrous. It could be the end of the organization as we know it.”

“Just for giving the two of us a few names?” Jake asked.

“But we practically rounded Tri-I.”

“I am terribly sorry,” the director apologized. He didn’t sound sorry at all. But that was fine. We planned for this.

We thanked him for his time and left. We walked across the street. <Guy on your tail,> Tobias’s voice said in our heads. We didn’t nod or acknowledge him at all but he knew we had heard.

We didn’t want to be seen looking around for birds. That would tip off whoever was following us that we were being watched and we didn’t want that.

We kept going for a couple of blocks. <Still on you. You’re almost at the spot. Should I tell him to go?>

“You hungry?” I asked Jake.

“Yeah,” he answered. I don’t know exactly where Tobias was but I know he heard it too.

We passed a little alley. A moment later, we heard someone behind us say, “Just do what I say and you get to walk away.”

We turned around to see two guys. One was wearing a dirty trench coat, ripped jeans, and a panama hat. Santorelli.

The other guy was our tail. He had a medium build. Brown hair, a day or so’s worth of beard. Jeans. T-shirt. Sneakers. Nothing special about him. Not the sort of guy most people

would notice following us. But then again, Tobias wasn't most people.

Jake tapped Santorelli on the shoulder. "Is there a problem?" he asked. Whiskers shot out of Jake's face. Black and orange fur started to grow on his body. His ears crawled up the sides of his head.

"No problem!" Santorelli practically screamed. He turned and ran into the alley.

Jake reversed his morph. "You alright?" he asked our tail.

"Yeah. Thanks," the guy said. He turned and went back the way he came. Now that we'd seen him, his cover was blown. He didn't want to stick around.

<You're clear,> Tobias called. Jake and I turned in to the alley. Santorelli stood by a dumpster.

Tobias flew down and landed in the alley. He started to demorph. A pair of flies flew from Santorelli and landed on the ground. In about fifteen seconds, one was Cassie. The other was slowly becoming Jeanne.

I mentioned that Jeanne is beautiful. Well, no one can make morphing from a fly to a girl beautiful. I looked away until it was safe.

"Do you have the list?" she asked in her pretty little

accent.

Jake shook his head. “We go in. Everyone clear on the plan?”

“Oh, sure,” I said. “We just have to break into the most heavily guarded building in town, hack into their mainframe, steal some super-secret information, and make it out undetected. What could go wrong?”

“I can think of about six things off the top of my head,” Cassie answered.

“Only six?” Tobias asked. “Did you get a concussion when I wasn’t looking?”

“It sounds simple enough,” Jeanne said. “Why do you all seem to think something will go wrong?”

Santorelli laughed. “Read a history book. The only certain thing about Animorph missions is that something always goes wrong.”

CHAPTER 6

“What are we looking at?” Jake asked Tobias. “Where do we have an in?”

“Front door,” Tobias answered.

“Really? You want us to just walk in the front door?” I

asked. “Why don’t we just hand ourselves over to the One now and save him the trouble.”

“It’ll be easy,” he said. “None of the windows in the building open, so that’s out. There are only the front doors to worry about. They have bug zappers but they don’t catch insects on people, just ones that try to get in around the edges. We morph to fly, hitch a ride on someone and we’re in.”

“What next?” Jake asked. “Where’s their mainframe? Where do we demorph?”

“Hard to say,” he admitted. “I think the windows have hologram paint on them.”

“Hologram paint?” Jake asked.

“Yeah, hologram paint,” Tobias confirmed. “You paint a window with it then project an image onto the window. It’s good for fooling curious window-washers. Or red-tailed hawks.”

“Why would they bother with that?” Jeanne asked.

“Anyone who wants to break into Tri-I would probably be morph-capable,” I answered. To Tobias, I said, “So what you’re telling us is that you can’t see inside the building at all?”

“That’s about it,” he admitted. “But there are some major

updrafts over the western half of the roof.”

“Well, that’s helpful,” I said sarcastically.

“It is,” Tobias insisted. “That kind of uneven updraft means that the western side’s got something inside it that’s producing a lot of heat. Something like a massive computer grid running twenty-four seven.”

Well, he had me there. Say what you will about Tobias, but he knows wind better than anyone.

“So,” Jake summarized, “we can get through the front door on someone’s body. Then we know we need to check out the western half of the building, starting with the upper levels. We find the computer mainframe, hack it—”

“How are we supposed to do that, exactly?” I asked.

“Well...I just assumed you could do it,” Jake admitted. “You always could in the past.”

“No,” I corrected, “Ax could always do it. But Tri-I probably has Andalite security. I doubt Ax could crack that and I know I can’t. We need another Andalite, and a smart one at that.”

“What ever happened to Menderash?” Santorelli asked. “He seemed smart.”

“We don’t know where he is,” Jake admitted. “When

Crayak or the Ellimist or whoever it was yanked us out of our ship by the Hork-bajir planet, we lost him.”

“I doubt he could crack Andalite security anyway,” Tobias said. “He was an alright guy and a good pilot, but he was just average when it came to computers.”

“We have someone better,” I said.

“We do?” Cassie asked.

“Yeah. Our good buddy Erek King.”

“Who is that?” Jeanne asked.

“He’s an android,” I answered. “There are a bunch of them. They call themselves the Chee. They’re really old and really advanced. Erek cracked the codes of a Yeerk Pool ship in about five minutes. And I’ve seen Chee go through Andalite security in the blink of an eye.”

“I never read about them in any of the history books,” Santorelli remarked.

“We promised to leave them out of it,” Jake told him. He turned to me. “But Marco, we don’t know where Erek is. He’s probably someone else by now, somewhere else.”

“He won’t be easy to find,” I admitted. “Still, we found him once before, didn’t we?”

“By luck,” Cassie answered. “By accident.”

“Maybe he left some kind of clue for us,” I reasoned. “I think we should go and check out Ereĳ’ſ old house.”

“Alright,” Jake agreed. “We’ll split up. Some will go in and get the layout of Tri-I. The rest of us will check out Ereĳ’ſ old house. I want Marco and Cassie with me to check out the house. Tobias will lead Santorelli and Jeanne into Tri-I. “

Something bothered me about that. Why was he putting Tobias in charge of the new guys? Why wouldn’t he do it himself? And was it my imagination or was he putting Tobias and Jeanne together a lot?

“Maybe you and Cassie should check out Ereĳ’ſ house,” I said to Jake. “It’ll probably just be a simple look around; no reason to take half the army. If things go wrong in Tri-I, we’ll need everyone we can get to fight our way out. Half of those agents are morph-capable, after all.”

Jake was quiet for a moment. Then he decided. “I’ll take Jeanne with me. If a fight breaks out, you’ll need Cassie’s experience. And Santorelli’s got enough training that he’ll be helpful.”

“And I am useless why?” Jeanne asked.

“Not useless,” Jake answered. “Inexperienced.”

“And I am to become more experienced by being where

there is not supposed to be a fight?" she questioned.

"She has a point," Cassie said quietly.

Jake shook his head. "I've got to go with my gut on this one. I'll go to Ereka's with Jeanne; it'd be stupid not to go with backup. Tobias will lead the mission in Tri-I."

I tried not to show how surprised I was by that. I didn't get it. Why Tobias? Jake was up to something. I knew him well enough to know that. I needed to find out what.

Jake wasn't acting like Jake anymore. In a normal world, that happens to people. In my world, it meant that someone could quite possibly be a Controller. Even Jake could have been one. I'd have to find out, one way or another.

If Jake was a Controller, he had to go. It was as plain as that. And if he had to be...terminated...I would have to be the one to do it. He was my best friend; no one else could do it. If Jake had to die, I would have to be the one to kill him.

CHAPTER 7

We all morphed to birds and flew home. Jake was a peregrine falcon and I was an osprey. He was much faster but I was able to catch up with him. I guess he was waiting for me.

<Wondering why I chose Tobias?> he asked me.

He knew me too well. <Yeah. I don't get it, dude. I'm your best friend, your right hand man. I mean—>

<I know,> he interrupted. <You're the cold one. The calculating one. You don't get the mission mixed up with emotions. Believe me, Marco, I know all that. I was there when you planned your own mother's assassination. I know all about you.>

<So why?>

<Because, for one thing, the new guys don't trust you. Not really. They'll do what you say and they don't think you'll get them killed, but they don't really trust your judgment.>

<Tell them to read a history book,> I grumbled.

<It isn't that they don't think you know what you're doing,> Jake corrected me. <It's more like...if some Andalite had shown up and started giving you orders back during the first war, would you have listened?>

<I'd have done as I was told, probably,> I answered. <But no, not really. I wouldn't trust him.>

<Exactly. The new guys know Tobias better. He led them on their first mission, remember. They know they can trust him.>

I was quiet for a minute. Then I said, <Jake? Cut the crap, man. I know you. This isn't about trust. What's going on?>

<What do you mean?> he said evasively.

<I mean, why are you delegating so much responsibility? In the old days, you'd die before you heard of someone else leading the Tri-I mission. Now you're putting one of us in charge of a vital mission while you take the blow-off job. What's the deal?>

Now it was his turn to be quiet. <You don't know what it's like to have the death of a friend on your hands,> Jake answered. <It's so different from killing an enemy. A friend... Knowing that what you decided cost them their life... I don't think I can go through that again.>

<You were ready to a couple of months ago when we started chasing Ax,> I reminded him.

<I thought I was,> he said. <But I was wrong. When it came time to actually make a decision, I froze. I said the first

thing that came to mind. If the Drode hadn't shown up...>

<So you're afraid to fail? Is that it?> I prodded.

<I'm afraid I'll get another friend killed. I don't think I can go on with this, Marco.>

<So you'll rest up this mission, get your bearings,> I said.

<You'll be back for the next one.>

<No. No, I can't do it. Not for a whole other war.>

<Jake, you're just a little stressed. Just think about—>

<YOU DON'T GET IT!> he shouted in my head. Jake never lost his temper like that. When he was angry, he got quiet. This was something new. He was beyond his usual range of emotion. This was frustration, anger, fear, and pain all at once.

<You don't get it,> he continued, quieter this time. <Every day I wake up and know that I got my brother killed. That I got Rachel killed. That I basically got Tobias killed, too. The Tobias we knew...he's dead now. He died on that bridge with Rachel. I've already lost three people I cared about. How can I be responsible for any more?>

I knew he just wanted to speak, so I kept quiet. I may not be Mr. Sensitive but I could sense a mood.

<You can't understand it,> he continued. <It's because

you're the cold one, the smart one. Because you're Marco. You're a good guy, but you just can't understand some things. I might as well be the one who killed them. I might as well have put guns to their heads and pulled the triggers. And now that I might have to do it all again...now that I might get more friends killed...>

<So you're just going to give up?> I demanded. <What happened to the old Jake? You never gave up before. That's why you beat the Yeerks. Because you never, *ever* gave up.>

<Yeah. But I think...I think part of me died with Rachel and Tobias and Tom,> he said. <Now that I see where everything led me...>

<So you're done, is that it?>

<No, not done. I'll still fight. But I don't think I can lead anymore, Marco. We're all different than we were back then. I'm not the same Jake. I just don't have it anymore.>

<So you're resigning.>

<The only reason I was the leader in the first place...do you remember why it happened?>

I thought back to that night in the construction site. <It just seemed natural. Destiny or something,> I said.

<I was the leader because I went into that ship. But it

could just as easily have been Tobias. We both stood there, at the foot of the ship. The only reason it was me was because he wanted to stay with Elfangor. If he had gone inside instead of me...>

<So you're trying to set him up to take your place? Jake, Tobias is a good guy but he doesn't have what it takes. Like he always said, he's no one's leader.>

<Yeah? I always thought that too. But he's what we need. This war can't break him like it did me. He'll never, *ever* give up. And like you said, that's what won it the first time.>

<Jake, do you really think any of us will ever give up?> I asked.

<Cassie gave up once. You wanted to quit until you found out about your mother. Jeanne and Santorelli...they don't have the same kind of stake in this that we do. But Tobias has more reason to fight than anyone else. And there's something else.>

<What?>

<Have you ever really spoken to him? No, I didn't think so. If you've ever seen into his heart, you'd know that there's something dark inside him. I know it. And more importantly, Ax knows it.>

<So what?>

<Ax knows better than anyone what Tobias is capable of. Probably better than Tobias himself does. And with access to Ax's mind, Esplin will fear Tobias. He's the ultimate enemy for Esplin, really.>

<How do you figure?>

<He's the son of Esplin's archenemy, Elfangor. And now Tobias has some revenge to get for Ax, so Esplin has that to fear. And whatever dark thing lived inside Tobias, it's starting to wake up, and his contact with Crayak is only going to make it stronger. Ax knows all this, so Esplin does too. And I want Esplin to be afraid. If I can't finish this war, I want to leave him that. Something to keep him up at night.>

CHAPTER 8

I was kind of ticked with Jake. It was one thing for him not to want to be the leader any more. That was his decision. But why Tobias instead of me?

So what if Ax knew Tobias better. He could learn to fear me. Like Jake said, I was the cold one. I tried to kill my own mother once. She was Visser One at the time, but still...

I was sure I was the better choice. I was smarter. I know it sounds arrogant, but it was true. In terms of pure brain power, I was the smartest of the Animorphs, the one who could see the line from A to B the quickest.

Would I ever give up now? Not a chance. I knew that. During the hardest times of the first war, wasn't I there along with everyone else, still fighting on?

I decided I had to talk to Tobias about what Jake told me. I'm not one for feelings talks and I'm also not one to give away what someone told me privately. But Tobias needed to know what Jake was planning to do.

I checked back at my mansion first. He wasn't there. Santorelli told me he and Jeanne were out flying around. Again, I felt spark of jealousy. I decided I'd ask Tobias about

it.

I knew some of Tobias's favorite places to fly and, sure enough, he was in one of them. A pair of red tails was hovering over the mall parking lot. The heat from the sun baked the blacktop forming big cushions of hot air that would lift you up a mile high without any effort.

<Tobias!> I called. <I need to talk to you alone for a minute.>

I don't know if you can shrug while flying but I think he did. He peeled away from Jeanne and came to meet me. <What's up?>

There are two types of thought-speech, open and closed. Open was like shouting so everyone could hear you. Closed was like whispering. I was using closed.

<Jake's losing it,>I told him bluntly. I could be subtle when I wanted to, but this wasn't the time.

<How so?>

<He doesn't think he can make any more important decisions. He's afraid to get someone else killed. He's afraid he'll freeze up at crunch time.>

<And?>

<And what? That doesn't sound like a problem to you?> I

demanded.

<I just thought that was the way it always was. It can't be easy to put your friends in harm's way. Didn't he have a problem with it from the start?>

<If he did, he never told me. But that doesn't matter. He used to be able to do it without freezing. Now he doesn't think he can. And I'm not sure either. He's lost his confidence.>

<So we'll have to give it back.>

<How?>

<You're the smart one, > he said.

<And the good looking one. And the funny one,> I reminded him.

<And don't forget humble.>

<Always humble.> then I realized I got distracted.
<There's something else.>

<What?>

<Jake's planning to hand everything over to you.> He stopped flapping for a moment. He spread his wings and let the hot air carry him up. I followed.

He asked, <Why me?>

<Because Esplin will fear you. Because you're not going to give up. Because...>

<Because I wouldn't have a problem getting any one of you killed if it stopped the Yeerks?> he prompted. It was weird the way he said it. It was so calm, so casual. Like a simple fact I should have already known.

<Yeah, maybe.>

<Or maybe it's because I'll listen to the rest of you,> he said. <Do you remember what happened when he put Rachel in charge?>

I heard his voice crack when he said her name. I didn't mention it. <Yeah. She didn't take my advice and things got really out of hand.>

<She didn't take anyone's advice,> he answered. <And you wouldn't have either. Both of you are so sure you know best. Am I wrong?>

I was about to tell him he was wrong, but then I thought about it. I had automatically assumed that I would be the best person to take over if Jake quit. But was it true? Sure, I had some good leadership qualities, but I had some bad ones, too.

I was a bad listener. I was inconsiderate of others. I was kind of arrogant. I was really sure of myself. Those were all liabilities in a leader, I realized. Maybe Jake had a point. Still, I couldn't help but asking, <So why not Cassie?>

Tobias turned to look at me with his hawk's eyes. <You know why not.>

Yeah, I knew. Cassie just didn't have what it took. She would break. None of us liked to think about that happening to any of us but it could happen, especially to Cassie. She was the most naturally kind, considerate, and gentle person I ever met. Exactly the kind of person Esplin would walk all over. She was strong in a lot of ways, stronger than anyone I knew, but she wasn't a general.

<So you're all that's left?> I asked.

<Well, I think he would have preferred Ax, but he's not an option. So yeah, I'm the only other choice.>

I didn't have anything to say to that. So I changed the subject. <So,> I said casually, <what's the deal with you and Jeanne?>

<What do you mean?>

<I mean, the two of you have been spending a lot of time together. Do you have something... going on?>

<Nothing like that. I need to get to know her. I need to know what she's capable of. It's hard to know who to rely on in a combat situation and I need to know if I can count on her.>

<You're not spending as much time with Santorelli,> I pointed out.

<I already know Santorelli. He's a solid guy, brave in a fight, and smart, too.>

<And Jeanne?>

<I'm not sure about her. She doesn't really get the point of what we're doing.>

<Example?>

<She didn't get why we had to be so secretive at Tri-I earlier. She doesn't get why no one can know she and Santorelli are back on Earth. And she doesn't understand what any of this is going to be like.>

<No?>

<No,> he confirmed. <She doesn't realize just how bad a fight is. She thinks this sounds like fun. She wants to go out and fight every Kelbrid she can find.>

<Sound like anyone we used to know?> I asked lightly. Then I remembered who I was talking to. <Sorry,> I muttered.

<No, you're right. I think that might have been part of why Jake picked her to come with us. That's why I'm trying not to get too close.>

<Yeah? Doesn't look like you're trying very hard,> I

commented. I knew I shouldn't have said it but I did anyway.

<Do you think this is easy for me?> he demanded. His voice was quiet in a scary way. <The last time I got involved with you people everything I ever cared about or came to care about was taken away from me. I've got nothing left.>

<So what, you want to take everything back?> I demanded. <Nothing you do can bring her back, Tobias. No one can raise the dead.>

<Are you so sure?> he asked in a creepily quiet voice. <How do you know?>

<Because it just isn't possible.>

<And our lives so far have been totally plausible,> he answered. <That hope is all I have, Marco. Don't you dare try to take that away from me.>

He peeled away from me. I knew better than to follow. We'd meet up with him later and he'd be alright. He just needed time to cool down. He was a pretty cool-headed guy. And if he didn't show up later, if I pushed him away, so what? Then I'd get to show Jake that I could take over.

CHAPTER 9

We went that night. Jake and Jeanne had left for Ereks' house an hour ago. The rest of us were in an alley three blocks away from Tri-I. We would have preferred a closer spot but Tobias assured us that everything within two blocks of Tri-I was heavily monitored.

“So just how are four flies supposed to find their way to Tri-I?” I demanded. “It’s hard to make anything out with fly eyes. How can we make it three blocks?”

“I have a plan,” Tobias answered. “Cassie’s got an owl morph. She can guide us there and keep an eye out outside just in case.”

“And how are we supposed to find our way around inside?” I asked.

“I scoped the place out some more earlier today,” he answered. “The lower windows are just regular glass. I located a bathroom we can use for a demorph if we need one.”

I nodded. “Sounds good so far. What do we do once we’re inside?”

“We make our way to the top floor, west side of the building,” Tobias told me. “We start up there and work our

way down. We look for something like a computer mainframe, some place where we could find some information.”

Well, at least he had a plan. “Then lets go,” I said. It looked like it was going to start raining and, trust me, you don’t want to be a fly in a downpour.

It didn’t take us long to get into our morphs. Mine felt almost instantaneous. First I shrank. Shrinking feels like falling. Only, instead of you getting closer to the ground, the ground is getting closer to you, like it’s reaching up to hit you. I’ve gotten used to it.

Next came the antennae. They shot out of my head and wiggled around like hyperactive worms. I could sense every vibration of the air with them.

Then there were the wings. They came out of my back, two pairs of them. I buzzed them happily. I couldn’t fly yet, but the wings were still way cool. Then came the not so cool parts.

Little dagger-like hairs sprouted from all over my body. Black chitinous plates covered my body. My eyes bulged out like balloons about to burst. My vision fragmented into thousands of little pictures with the color weirdly off.

I couldn’t see my mouth and I didn’t want to. It turned into

a long, curling proboscis. That was the worst part of the fly. A fly would land on something, spit on some food, and then suck it up through the proboscis. Disgusting even to me. I wanted to swat myself.

Finally, the fly brain kicked in. I felt the urge to buzz around and around, eating the garbage from the dumpster at the back of the alley. But I fought that urge down. I was used to the fly. I could handle it.

All of this took about thirty seconds. Tobias and I were flies while Santorelli was still about the size of a toddler. When he finally was a fly, he had a surprisingly easy time controlling it.

<We used flies before,> Tobias told me. <He knew what he was getting in to.>

I guess Cassie was an owl because she started to give us directions. <Okay, guys,> she said. <Fly ahead about ten yards or so and take a right. That'll lead you around the side of the building. Just go straight until I tell you to stop.>

We did as we were told, more or less. What you have to understand is that flying as a fly is fun. You can do anything you can imagine. Fly backwards, upside down, or even land on a slick surface; upside down. So we played around a little

bit.

<Turn left,> Cassie told us. We did. A moment later, she said, <You're at the entrance. There's a guy near you, looks like he's about to go in. Hitch a ride on him and you'll be in.>

I landed on a green-grey blob beneath me. <Am I on?> I asked.

<You're on,> she confirmed. <Tobias and Santorelli are, too.>

<Good. Now we're one step closer to walking into a heavily guarded building that, with our luck, is probably full of Yeerks and Gleet BioFilters and Hunter-Killer robots and Kelbrid and probably Esplin and Ax, too,> I said brightly. What can I say? I'm a positive person.

CHAPTER 10

The lobby was pretty full. That surprised me, since it was nearly ten at night. But there you go: Tri-I never sleeps.

<Anyone know where the stairs are?> I asked.

<Stairs?> Tobias laughed. <There's a dropshaft, Marco. We just fly up that to the top floor. I don't know when Tri-I decided dropshafts were a good security idea, but whatever.>

<Dropshafts have killed more Vissers than Dracon beams,> Santorelli remarked. <First lesson of Yeerk bodyguard training was that dropshafts were a deathwish. I mean, they're just open tubes anyone could go through. Give me a good old human elevator any day.>

Santorelli used to be a Controller. And a bodyguard for Visser Six. He knew a thing or two about security. It occurred to me he might be able to hack into Tri-I. He was sort of an expert.

<Santorelli,> I said, <do you think you can hack a computer?>

<Tobias and I already talked about this. I could do any Yeerk system, probably. But I don't know if Tri-I uses Yeerk, Human, or Andalite systems. Probably Andalite, which means

I couldn't do it.>

So Tobias thought of that already? Maybe I wasn't giving him enough credit.

Tobias already knew where the dropshaft was from his surveillance earlier. He led us there easily enough. We flew up for what seemed like forever. We couldn't judge distance or see more than a few inches in front of us. The only way we knew we were at the top was because we hit the roof.

<Uh...which way's west?> I asked. Ax always kept track of direction for us.

<I'm facing west,> Tobias told us. <I had Cassie orient me on the way in and I've kept the same direction the whole time.>

Well, wasn't he just Mr. Prepared. At least we weren't wandering around like clueless idiots.

Tobias led us forward quickly. Almost as though he knew where he was going. I decided to ask. <Tobias, where are you taking us?>

<Santorelli, explain it to the man.>

<Top floor is usually for security,> he explained. <At least, it is in human buildings. All sorts of cameras and monitoring systems are run from a single room, almost always at the top

of the building where it's hardest to reach. We figure we can probably find the mainframe from there.>

<I don't like being left out of the planning,> I warned them. <That isn't how we operate.>

<I just thought of it earlier today and Santorelli's the only one I saw before we met up in the alley,> Tobias told me. <I wanted to talk to you about it since you're good with plans, but there wasn't time.>

Maybe he was telling the truth. Or maybe he wanted to show Jake he was smarter than me. But there wasn't time for that now.

<How do we know which door leads to the security room?> I questioned.

<It'll probably be the hardest to enter,> Tobias said. <I'm betting the door will have bug zappers around the edges, or something to keep us out.>

<How do we get in, once we find it?>

Santorelli answered me. <In most places, guards change shifts around twenty-four hundred. The door's likely to open and then we can get in.>

<So we fly around looking for a door that will kill us when we try to get through it?> I said. <How's that going to work?>

Nobody had an answer for that. <See,> Tobias said, <this is why I wanted to talk to you earlier. Any ideas?>

<We could acquire an employee and morph them,> Santorelli suggested. <That way, —>

<No,> I said. <We've got a rule against that. We never morph any sentient being unless we can avoid it. There's got to be another way.>

<Nobody here would recognize Santorelli,> Tobias began. <If we could find him some cloths, he could walk around, pretend he works here.>

<Where do we get the cloths?> Santorelli asked.

<An employee,> I answered. <We just have to get one alone, grab him, take his cloths, and send you to work.>

<Where do we find the guy?> Santorelli questioned.

Tobias and I answered at the same time. <Bathroom.>

Tobias thought aloud. <So we go into the bathroom. Then what? Have someone morph something big. I'm thinking Marco goes gorilla. He knocks the guy out and we give Santorelli his cloths. Sound good?>

I thought. <Yeah, sounds like it would work. Provided no one walks in and sees a gorilla and a naked dude.>

<It's better than a lot of our other plans,> Tobias reminded

me. Well, he had me there.

Being flies, it was really easy to find the nearest bathroom. We just let our fly instincts guide us there. I landed on the floor and was about to demorph when I heard Santorelli tell me to wait.

<Might be security cameras in the room,> he explained.

<Is that legal?> I wondered.

<Tri-I watches everyone else. Why wouldn't they keep an eye on their own bathrooms?> he answered. <Paranoia's their business. I worked for them for two years, actually.>

<Really?> I didn't know that. <What happened?>

<They sent me to join Jake's training program.>

<What did you do?> I asked.

<Don't worry about it.> He said it in a way that I knew meant it was time to drop it.

<So how do we avoid the security cameras?> I asked.

Santorelli told me, <There's usually only one, keeping an eye on the door. Small thing, hidden in the wall. Lens would probably look like a drop of water on the wall. It'll probably be small enough that Tobias could block it with his body.>

A few moments later, I heard Tobias say, <Found it. Go ahead and morph, Marco.>

I was human in about thirty seconds. I didn't pause to rest; we didn't know if there was anyone in here and I didn't want to waste time. About another thirty seconds later, I was fully gorilla.

And right then, a stall door opened. A guy walked out. He kept his head down as he went to the sink. He washed his hands. Finally, he looked up into the mirror over the sink. He saw me standing behind him.

His eyes went wide and I clapped a hand over his mouth. He struggled but without any effect. I got my other arm around his throat and pulled him towards me. After a few seconds, he passed out.

CHAPTER 11

Truth be told, I almost felt sorry for the guy. After all, he was just a regular guy doing his job. And not just any job. He was working hard to make sure that nothing like the Yeerk invasion happened again. But I had my job to do, too.

<Got him, Santorelli,> I called.

A fly landed on the floor. About three minutes later, it was Santorelli. We pulled the guy's cloths off and he managed to squeeze into them.

They were a tight fit, but he managed it. I went fly again and we were out of there. Thanks to Tobias, no one watching the security camera would have seen anything suspicious.

We got into the hallway at about 12:00; 2400 as Santorelli would say. He couldn't speak to us since he wasn't in morph, so we didn't know what was happening.

About three minutes later, I felt vibrations go up Santorelli's body. They lasted for no more than a few seconds but when it was over, he said, "You can demorph now."

We did and found ourselves in the security room. All four walls were covered by monitors with only a six-by-two space cut out for the door. A guy in a blue uniform was slumped

unconscious in a chair. Another guy was lying on the floor not far away from him.

I looked at Santorelli. “You did that yourself?”

“No, my invisible friend helped me.” Sarcastic. I decided right then that I liked Santorelli.

I looked at a wall of monitors. “So we’re looking for anything that could be the main room for the computer mainframe, right?”

“Yeah,” Tobias confirmed. We spread out, looking at the screens. Nothing on my side. “I’ve got nothing,” I told Tobias.

“Same here,” Santorelli answered.

Tobias was staring at the back of the door. “What is it?” I asked. The only thing on the door was a chart of this floor and where to go in case of a fire.

“This says this is the twenty second floor,” Tobias answered. “This is the top floor, right?”

“As high as the dropshaft goes,” I confirmed. “And with no stairs, this has to be the top.”

“Thing is,” he said, “earlier, when I was watching the place, I counted twenty *three* floors.”

“A missing floor? That has to be it,” Santorelli said. “That would explain why there’s nothing on these screens.”

I had a question, though. “Tobias, what made you look at the escape plan?”

He turned and almost smiled. “Because we might need an escape plan. We’ve knocked out three people so far. Tri-I will know they were broken into. We don’t know how long we have until they find that guy or until he wakes up. They’ll sound the alarm and then we’ll need an exit.”

Maybe Jake knew what he was talking about. Tobias seemed to have this leadership thing down. Still, I’d need to see him in a fight. And I wasn’t convinced he was better than me.

“The question is, what floor’s missing?” Tobias asked.

“How does a dropshaft work?” I asked. I thought I had a plan.

“It works by keying thoughts to a transmitter at the entrance to a certain floor,” Santorelli told us. “This secret floor would have a special thought-code that would bring someone to it. I don’t know the physics of it, though.”

“That’s all I need to know,” I told him. “I have a plan. We jump into the dropshaft and think our way down, level by level. When we skip a floor, then we know. We land, go fly, and get up there.”

“Dropping floor by floor is going to attract some attention,” Tobias reminded me. “You know they’ve got security cameras in the dropshaft.”

Santorelli gestured around him. “The guys watching the cameras aren’t exactly in a position to sound the alarm.”

If Tobias was capable of expressing a normal range of human emotion, he would have blushed.

Something occurred to me. “What about the people who see some guy dropping level by level? That’s bound to make someone suspicious.”

Tobias got a weird expression that almost resembled a smile. “We can’t stay hidden forever. So I say we go in battle morphs.”

“No,” I said instantly. “That’s insane. A gorilla, a hawk, and a rhino are going to attract way more attention than three humans. I say you and I go fly and hide on Santorelli again. We send him down level by level. So what if they call security on him? I think we can handle it.”

Tobias was silent for a minute. Then he decided. “Santorelli can’t get into a morph fast enough to get out if there’s trouble. And you’ll be recognized instantly. So the two of you are going to morph to flies and hide on me.”

That made some sense. “Fine.” Still, I couldn’t ignore what I sensed in him a moment ago. “But remember that these are innocent people, not Yeerks. Keep your cool, Tobias.”

A few minutes later, Santorelli and I were flies hiding in Tobias’s hair. He took a uniform from one of the guards and set off down the hall.

A minute later, we heard him whisper, “Dropping.” The dropshaft whizzed by my compound eyes, a thousand fractured images of white, yellow, and grey. “Just skipped a level,” Tobias told us. “We were right above the missing floor.”

Then I heard a new voice. “Who are you talking to?” some guy asked. I felt Tobias’s head look around. Then a vibration ran up his body. My fly senses detected blood.

<Tobias, what just happened?> I demanded.

“Nothing. Just pistol-whipped a guy.” That was unusually violent and ill-thought-out for Tobias. It made me worry a little.

I felt some more vibrations and then we were in sudden darkness. <What’s happening now?> I asked.

“I brought the guy into a closet and shut off the lights. I’ll be morphing in a second.” Sure enough, we felt his body

shrink beneath us. Santorelli and I had to fly off. By the time we landed, he was fully fly.

<What do you think the guys who are going to watch the security recordings think about that?> Santorelli asked.

<It's fine,> Tobias answered. <I put a hat over the camera. They didn't see anything. Now let's go before I forget which way the door is.>

CHAPTER 12

We flew to the dropshaft without any difficulty. How hard can it be to find a big tube? We flew up one level and got out. Then we were on our own in near total darkness.

<Well, this is just perfect,> I remarked brightly. <Now we have no idea where we're going or what's there when we show up. For all we know, Esplin, Ax, and fifty Kelbrid could be waiting for us.>

<We've been in worse situations,> Tobias reminded me.

<Yeah, but there were never only three of us,> I pointed out.

<Esplin might not even have that many Kelbrid, Santorelli reasoned. <It'll probably be twenty five at the most.>

<Well, twenty five. That's a walk in the park,> I muttered. <Does anyone have a morph with night vision?>

<You and I have bats,> Tobias answered. <But I don't want to stand here and morph.>

<So much better to wander around in the dark,> I agreed sarcastically.

<At least as flies, we're nearly impossible to detect in the

darkness,> Tobias reminded me. He had a point.

<There'll probably be lights when we get to the mainframe,> Santorelli told us. <You know, from the monitors and stuff.> Another good point. I decided to shut my mouth; figuratively speaking.

A few minutes later, we saw a weird mass of glowing lights up ahead. I don't know what color they would have been to human eyes but to mine they were green, purple, and blue.

<Bingo,> Tobias said. <Now, we don't know if anyone's found out we're here yet, so we need to have a plan. Here's what I'm thinking. We all demorph. I'll hide out in battle morph just in case. The two of you check over the computers for anything that might help us. Sound good?>

<Better than some ideas we've had,> I admitted. We all demorphed. While Santorelli was still demorphing, Tobias disappeared behind a bank of computers.

I looked around. Large monitors surrounded us, walling us in with a maze of technology. There were no keyboards, only red squares on the sides of the screens. Most of the screens were black. A few gave off white and light as they displayed some binary code.

Santorelli put a hand on one of the red squares. It was

Andalite technology that let you direct the computer with your thoughts.

I watched the screen as it jumped to life. Santorelli knew what he was doing. “Human security,” he said to me. “I’m used to Yeerk tech. This is nothing.”

He shifted between screens with lightning speed. I only caught glimpses of what he was looking at. Most of it looked like mundane stuff. Things you’d find on Tri-I’s website.

“Are you retaining any of this?” I asked him.

He nodded. “Visser Six had a habit of giving his men experimental upgrades. I got a little gizmo that gave me something like eidetic memory. Of course, every day at twenty hundred hours, I get a splitting headache.”

“Sounds rough,” I said.

“That’s nothing. This Hork-bajir Controller I knew got a fancy little package that let him digest poisons. But after that, he might as well have been a Taxxon. I had to put him down after he tried to eat the Visser.”

“Sounds like a rough job,” I commented.

“Better than most.” All that time, he never stopped searching the computer. I was beginning to understand why Jake recruited him. I still wasn’t sure about Jeanne, though.

<How's it going?> Tobias asked us.

"Not bad," I said. "Santorelli's really getting down to it. He's burning through the security like Ax th..."

<Through cinnamon buns,> Tobias finished. That was what I was about to say but I stopped myself. Tobias has a lot of psychological wounds and I didn't want to open one of them here. I guess he was cool for now.

"Hmm," Santorelli muttered. "Just ran into a bit of Yeerk security. I should be able to handle this."

"Why do they have Yeerk and human security?" I asked.

"Different levels of access, probably," Santorelli answered. "The first level was top-notch human stuff. Pretty much no human without clearance could have gotten past it. The Yeerks stuff's probably the next level. I have a feeling we'll run into Andalite stuff when we get to the really important information. I can't crack that, so we'll have to hope what we need is in this level."

I watched silently as Santorelli kept his hand on the pad, his eyes wide open and a look of concentration on his face.

The images on the screen slowed their rapid transitions. I started being able to gather more information from them. Lists of low-level operatives and field agents, locations of important

Tri-I offices, general reports form around the world.

A few moments later, the images slowed to a stop and Santorelli stepped back from the computer. “Andalite security,” he sighed. “Nothing I can do about it.”

“You can’t give it a shot?” I asked. “The Andalites might have left some gaps in their system. Remember, they don’t think like most humans. There might be something they didn’t think of.”

Santorelli pressed his hand to the pad once again. I’m glad he did it on his own and didn’t ask me any questions. I didn’t have a clue what I was talking about.

For another couple of minutes we stood in silence. Santorelli with his hand on the pad, his eyes closed, sweat beading on his neck. Me standing still, looking at the white screen and its display of alien symbols. Tobias hiding in whatever morph he had chosen.

He opened his eyes and stepped back. “Something’s off,” he said.

<How so?> Tobias asked.

“I couldn’t get through the Andalite security and into their files, but I did get around it to the next level.”

“There’s a next level?” I wondered. “What?”

“I don’t know. Something I’ve never seen before. I reached it and it was like getting struck by lightning or something.”

<Kelbrid?> Tobias wondered.

I shook my head. “The Iskoort told us the Kelbrid were a primitive race. They wouldn’t have security that outclassed Andalites.”

“No one on earth can crack the top level of Tri-I security,” a new voice said.

Santorelli and I turned to see the director. He was alone, unarmed, and looking completely at ease. The whole thing gave me a bad feel.

I guess Tobias got the same feeling because the next second, I saw something fly over my head. It was off-white and about eight or nine feet long. A polar bear. Well, no one ever said Tobias was subtle.

A polar bear is the largest carnivore on land. Probably the strongest, too. We’re talking muscles that could rip a tiger in half. Bones that make concrete look like glass. It was an unstoppable killing machine.

Tobias hit the director. And crumpled to the floor. He lay on the floor, stunned. Not the director; Tobias. The director

stood still and calm, completely unphased by the polar bear that had just hit him with all the force it could possible muster. There was only one creature with that kind of power.

“So,” I said, “that’s where that last layer of security came from. Tell me, what are the Chee doing here?”

CHAPTER 13

The Chee were designed for a planet with gravity four times as strong as Earth's is. As a result, they were more powerful on earth than you could imagine. They could rip a Hork-bajir in half if they wanted to; I've seen one do it.

Luckily for a lot of people, the Chee are hardwired to be pacifists. They can't harm a living thing for any reason. We freed Ereking from this programming once. He tore thirty Hork-bajir into pieces in less than that many seconds. I'm glad I was unconscious for most of that. I'm told it was the worst thing anyone could possibly have ever seen.

The director's body disappeared for a second. It was replaced with the body of a boy maybe six years younger than I was. Ereking, our old ally.

The Chee used sophisticated holograms to hide from the eyes of others. They lived undetected on Earth for many centuries. Ereking had helped to build the pyramids.

"Ereking?" I said. "I didn't think you'd be the director of Tri-I."

"I'm not. But the regular director is one of us. When he told me you and Jake had dropped by earlier today, I thought

you might pay us a little visit after hours. I switched places with him.”

“Do you all have jobs with Tri-I?”

“A few of us. Many felt that it goes against our policy of not influencing human events, but it is a good way to protect earth without doing violence.”

“A compromise,” I agreed.

Tobias had demorphed by this time. Erek looked from him to Santorelli. “Who are the new guys?”

“Tobias and Santorelli,” I said.

He took a closer look at Tobias. “You look very different,” he said. “Aside from the obvious, I mean.”

“I am very different,” Tobias answered. “Now, I know you didn’t drop by just to say hi, so what do you want?”

Erek was too old to be offended by Tobias’s tone. “I want to give you the information you’re looking for.”

“You’ve always been good for it in the past,” I said. “Who are the voluntaries?”

“It isn’t that simple.”

“It never is,” Tobias sighed.

“Our branch has only the names of the few people we’re supposed to watch,” Erek told us. “The master list is in the

Tri-I world headquarters in —”

“We know where the world headquarters is,” Tobias interrupted. “Why can’t you just hack in and get the names for us? You’re not going to tell me you can’t do it, are you?”

“Well, the thing is, it can’t be done from here,” Erek told us. “You see, the only files on our computers are the ones sent to us by the headquarters. Our mainframe is not actually connected to theirs. It’s that way with all of Tri-I’s buildings. A security breach in one doesn’t compromise the others.”

“So how does information get passed from one building to the other?” I asked.

“Each building has one isolated terminal that isn’t connected to the rest of the system in any way. They’re used strictly for communication. That way, someone couldn’t hack into the mainframe through that system. The only way to get into the main Tri-I mainframe and get a look at that master list is to go to headquarters yourselves.”

I looked at Tobias. “Looks like we’re up for a road trip.”

“Sounds like it,” he agreed. “Any idea how we’re supposed to get there?”

“In style,” I answered. “I’ll take care of it. Now, Erek, what can you tell us about headquarter’s security?”

“Nothing good. It’s probably the most heavily guarded place in the world.”

“We’ve been through that before,” I said.

“Nothing like this. We’re talking security that makes the Yeerk Pool look like a church.”

“You mean they’ve got Gleet BioFilters and Hunter-Killer robots?” Tobias asked. “And armies of Taxxon, Hork-bajir, and humans with orders to kill anything that looks out of the ordinary?”

“Tri-I knows a lot more about morphing than the Yeerks did,” Erek warned us. “They’ve hooked up with the best Andalite design teams to keep everyone out.”

“What’ve they got?” Santorelli asked.

“Bug zappers over every entrance, hologram paint over every window, Gleet BioFilters on the dropshaft, Hunter-Killer robots patrolling the air vents —”

“Rancor beast in the sewer,” I interjected.

“— and every employee is armed with an Andalite Shredder gun. The security guards are all ex-military types, usually from special operations units from all over the world. All are morph capable and pack extremely deadly animals. And one more thing.”

“Darth Vader’s walking around just in case?” I asked.

“The four buildings nearest to it are all full of Andalites and humans who just happen to be armed and trained marksmen.”

Tobias and I looked at each other. “Well,” he said, “at least they’re taking us seriously.”

“Nah, they’re just paranoid,” I answered. “This’ll be easy. No one has ever been able to keep the Animorphs out before. Tri-I doesn’t know what it’s gotten itself into.”

“Optimism? From you?” Tobias questioned. “Now I know we’re doomed.”

CHAPTER 14

We met up at Cassie's barn the next day to discuss what we knew. The six of us lounged around. Tobias kept glancing at the door as though his human senses would warn him of danger.

Jake started the meeting off. I had already called him last night and told him in code what we had learned. We told Cassie when we left Tri-I.

"It seems to me," Jake said, "that if we really want to get to this list, we'll have to break into Tri-I's world headquarters. From everything EreK's told us, it's supposed to be impossible."

Jake, Tobias, Cassie, and I looked at each other. Then we all four burst out laughing. "Impossible," Tobias said. "Right. Tell EreK to take a number."

Santorelli looked from face to face. "I really think you should be taking this more seriously."

"Santorelli," I answered, "We've gotten past the finest in Yeerk security when we were inexperienced and totally unprepared."

"Remember Matcom?" Jake interjected. "They held the

Pemalite crystal there. We couldn't touch the floors, ceiling, or walls. A single photon of light would set off alarms. There were wires hanging all over the place, ready to sound an alarm if anyone so much as breathed on one. We got in there alright."

Jeanne ruined his little speech by adding, "I seem to recall reading that you nearly died on your way out since you couldn't leave the way you came. You tripped every alarm and fought your way out."

I nodded. That was the fight where Ereik unleashed his full powers of destruction. We'd have been dead without him. But he didn't want to be in the history books, so we said we fought our way out. There were no witnesses to say we didn't.

"What about the Yeerk Pool?" Tobias answered. "We got in there more times than I want to count. It was the most heavily guarded place on earth. We managed to get in without too much hassle and get out without being detected."

"Your last excursion blew the entire complex into the ground," Jeanne answered. "That is not the effect we wish to have at Tri-I."

"We made it through the Hork-bajir world without being detected," Cassie responded. "The Yeerks never knew we were

there.”

“Yeah,” Santorelli replied, “the humpback whale falling out of the sky didn’t tip them off at all. Do you know why the Yeerks were able to conquer as much as they did? Because the Andalites got arrogant. They assumed they could take out any threat to them. They gave the Yeerks their opening.”

I quieted. “Yeah, we probably shouldn’t be so arrogant,” I agreed.

Jake nodded. “Tri-I’s got some Andalite security, too. We’ve never gone up against that before.”

“And we might be underestimating good old human paranoia,” Tobias added.

“They’re professional paranoids,” Cassie agreed. “We need to take this seriously.”

“I don’t think we can get any idea what to do unless we actually see the place,” Jake said. “It sounds like we’re up for a little road trip. Marco, you can get us there, can’t you?”

“Jake, I’ve got my own jet,” I answered. “I won’t only get us there. I’ll get us there in more comfort than we’ve ever had before. We won’t have to hide out or get shot at or swatted or bitten by anyone.”

“Sounds kind of like cheating,” Tobias noted.

I shook my head. “For once, we’re not going to almost get killed on our way to the mission. That’ll be refreshing.”

“What do we do when we get there?” Jake wondered. “I mean, we’ll have to survey the building, but that could take a day or two. Where will we stay?”

“Jake, please. Hotel suites for everyone. I’ll take care of it,” I insisted.

“Marco,” he answered, “how can you not see the problem with that?”

I thought. If I rented a bunch of suites there, there would be proof that I was in the area. And if the breakin was detected, they’d remember that I had paid a visit to this branch. And that this branch had been broken into too. They’d have enough to make them suspicious of me at the very least. And Tri-I’s suspicions were the last thing I wanted. They had the same mission as I did. I wanted their friendship, not their suspicion.

“I get it now,” I told him. “So what do we do?”

We all thought about it for a minute or two. Tobias had a plan. “What if we get there and find some place where no one would ever look for Animorphs? Like a little motel or something not far from the building. I mean, it’s the biggest

city on Earth. One of the biggest in the known galaxy.”

Jake nodded. “We hide out there and keep watch on the building for a day or so. We get in, get out, and get back home without anyone knowing we were there. I like it.”

“Crappy roach motels never keep records of who was there,” I agreed. “There’d be no proof we were ever there even if someone did suspect it.”

“Do you really want to stay in a place like that?” Jeanne asked.

Again, we all laughed. “We’ve been in worse places,” Jake told her.

“The Yeerk Pool Ship,” Tobias added.

“Little run-down cabin in the woods.”

“Inside a Taxxon.”

“Inside Marco.”

“On the Blade Ship.”

“On Visser Three.”

“That was the worst.”

“No, the worst was the North Pole.”

“No, the worst was...”

CHAPTER 15

Roach motels are bad enough under most circumstances. To the average person, it is unpleasant at best. To a guy like me who's used to living in his own mansion, it's torture.

"This place is disgusting," Jeanne said, looking over her room. We ended up getting three rooms. Jeanne and Cassie were in one. Jake and I took another. Tobias and Santorelli shared the third. The three of them were next to each other with doors to divide them. We kept the doors open for now.

"It's not so bad," Tobias answered. I noticed he was glaring at a rat. He looked almost...hungry.

"Of course you're right at home here," I said to him. "This is just like where you used to live."

"This?" He looked around. "This is an upgrade. Besides, we've been—"

"In worse places, I know," I interrupted. "Still, this place just doesn't strike me as the staging area for our magnificent plan to save the world."

"It's just like old times," Jake said wistfully.

"That's the problem," I agreed. "We always get stuck in places like this. Okay, it made sense back in the day. We didn't

have any money for a good hotel. But now I'm a millionaire. Is this how millionaires live? No. Absolutely not."

"Here we go," Cassie muttered.

I stood up and started pacing. "Does Bill Gates ever visit places like this? Not a chance. Does Bruce Wayne ever stay in a roach motel? No."

"So now you're Bruce Wayne?" Santorelli asked.

"Yeah. I'm like Batman. I have a mansion, a secret identity, a great mission to protect the world. Batman and I are exactly the same."

"No, Batman was quiet," Jeanne interjected. "And good looking."

How did she do that? She had somehow managed to break down my entire rant. It was going to be a good one, too. A classic. Something to tell the kids about. I decided I wasn't going to take that from her.

"I'm not good looking?" I asked her. "Give me a break. Girls line up to take my picture. They hang posters of me on their walls. They kiss their pictures of me every night before they go to sleep. And in their dreams, I—"

"Am more than five feet tall?" she interjected.

What was with her? Only Rachel and Jake had ever been

able to break up my rants like this. Time to take this fight to a more personal level.

“You don’t have to be jealous of them,” I told her. “There’s plenty of Marco for everyone.”

“All five feet of him.”

I bit back a very vulgar comeback and instead said, “Another short joke? You need to get some more versatility. You don’t hear me making fun of your —”

“Stop it,” Tobias said quietly. I looked at him. He was sitting at the edge of a bed with his eyes shut tight. His hands were rubbing his temples.

“What’s wrong?” Jake asked.

“It’s just...nothing. I just...I need to get some air.” He got up and left.

We all looked at each other, unsure of what to do. I was pretty sure somebody should go after him. Cassie would be the logical choice, but the two of them weren’t close. Santorelli seemed to be his friend but I knew he wasn’t the feelings type. Jeanne and I had caused whatever breakdown he was having so we might not be good choices. I looked at Jake.

He shook his head. “Just let him be. He’ll come back. He always does. Just let him clear his head.”

“What is wrong with him?” Jeanne asked.

Cassie looked from her to me. She answered, “You might not know this, Jeanne, but Marco and Rachel used to fight like that a lot. Maybe the two of you reminded him of her.”

“He needs to get over that,” I said. I know, I know, it was probably the most insensitive thing I could have said. But, as I explained to them, “It’s been almost four years. Grieving is sweet and all, but it’s time he moved on.”

“It isn’t as easy as that,” Cassie argued. “She’s all he ever had, Marco. None of us know what it’s like to lose everything the way he did.”

“I know a little something about loss,” Santorelli said to her. “The Yeerks killed my father and sister and took my freedom. I’ve think I know how he feels.”

“Then why can’t you tell him to get over it?” I demanded of him.

“Because it’s not so easy to get over. I got lucky. I had been expecting my father to go for some time. My sister was killed by accident when the Yeerk Pool exploded. I’m a trained soldier. I’m used to death. For a kid with only one good thing in his life to suddenly lose it... I’m still not over what happened to me. Why should he be?”

“He’s seen more death than most people could ever imagine,” I answered. “We all knew that any of us could go at any second. Every mission might be our last. He should have accepted that.”

“Yeah?” Cassie gave me a hard look. “Why don’t you go and tell him that. Tell him that it’s okay that Rachel died because anyone could have died. Tell him its okay he’s alone because we were in a war.”

What she said cut me deep. I knew I was wrong with what I said. But I was feeling defensive. So I decided to be a little defiant.

“Maybe I will tell him that. It’s about time someone did. Just because he’s had a hard life doesn’t mean we should be all nice and sweet to him. I get it, he’s screwed up. Ignoring it isn’t going to help him.”

A minute later, I was an owl, riding on the night air, looking for a red-tailed hawk.

CHAPTER 16

I found him sitting on a telephone pole. He was staring straight ahead. I don't know at what. I knew he wouldn't have gone far. He never flies at night.

I landed on the pole nearest to him. I knew he knew I was there. Between his hawk's eyesight and hearing and his own natural paranoia, he couldn't have missed me.

Suddenly, I heard him laugh. I almost took flight. <What's so funny?> I asked.

<Look at the screen,> he told me. Only then did I realize where we were. An old drive-in movie theater. He was watching the screen. I saw a gorilla climbing along cables dangling from a roof, being chased by Hork-bajir I remembered doing that. It was one of the movies they had made about our lives.

<Handsome fellow,> I joked. <But what's funny?>

<Whoever wrote this script had no idea what happened in that room,> he said. <They skipped right from a little scene showing that the AMR didn't work and went right to your rescue.>

<What did they skip?> I asked. <I mean, we told them

everything we knew when they asked us. We said you volunteered to be captured. Then they tested the AMR on you. It didn't work. We broke in and destroyed it for good measure.>

<It took you over two hours to get there,> he said to me.

<Yeah. So?>

<Do you know what they did for those two hours?> he asked quietly.

I didn't know. <No. I just thought they waited to make some adjustments on the AMR but we got there before they could try it again.>

<They wanted me to demorph so they could infest me. They wanted me to give them information.>

He let that sink in. They wanted information from him. And Yeerks never said please. <They tortured you?> I asked.

<Yeah. For about two hours. Constant pain. No hope of escape. Nothing to keep me going but hate, rage, and revenge.>

<You never told us that.>

<I know. I try not to let people know when I've had a weak moment. Like back then. Like about ten minutes ago.>

I was about to speak but then I thought about it. He was

actually letting his guard down and I didn't want to hurt him. What would Cassie say right now? <It's okay to be weak, Tobias.>

<Maybe for normal people. I've never had that luxury. When I was a kid, if I was weak, I got hurt. If I was strong... well, I got hurt a little less. None of us can be weak, Marco. Not now, at least. To be weak is to be human; mortal.>

<We are mortals, Tobias,> I said. I couldn't keep a bit of *duh* out of my voice.

<That's what I'm afraid of. We can't be mortals this time, Marco. If we're anything less than gods, we can't win this one.>

<We beat the odds the first time,> I reminded him.

<That was different. The Yeerks were just mortals like you and me. The One...he blasted through Alcatraz without any effort at all. He wiped out the entire Andalite fleet over the Hork-bajir world. If any of us are weak this time, he'll tear us apart.>

<The One agreed to stay out of this,> I told him. <Otherwise, he'd have to deal with the Ellimist and Crayak directly. He can't handle that yet.>

<How long do you think that deal will last?> Tobias

wondered. <The One won't lose Earth. He'd rather let Crayak and the Ellimist unleash their full power on him than give them this victory.>

<Yeah, maybe. But then it won't be up to us anymore. We can tell everyone what's happening.>

<And you think that will actually be the end of our involvement?> Tobias demanded. He laughed. <I never thought of you as nave, Marco.>

<Naïve?>

<Yeah. This isn't about Earth. Surely you of all people understand that. The human race isn't important to the One. This is about us.>

<How do you figure?>

<We beat Crayak. Say what you will, but in the end, the Yeerks were his tools, his plan. And we shattered that plan. Whatever he was up to, the six of us put a stop to it.>

<So what? Crayak's on our side now.>

<Yeah, maybe. But this is about the One proving to Crayak once and for all who is the best. He wants us beaten, killed, or worse. So he'll use the same tools Crayak used, even down to the same Yeerk leader. He doesn't want Earth; he wants us.>

I chewed on that for a few minutes. What he said made

some sense. The One and Crayak had a grudge to settle. We just might be the One's way of proving who was the greatest. That put this war on a whole new level of importance. And danger. With Crayak and the Ellimist defeated, there would be nothing standing in the way of the One and whatever plan he had for this galaxy.

<You see?> Tobias said. <This war is far more important than the first one. We aren't fighting for the freedom of the human race this time. We're fighting for the survival of existence as we know it. And something like that...it's too much to trust to mere mortals. So we can't be mortals, which means we can't be weak. I can't be weak.>

<Maybe not. But it sounds to me like whatever we do, the One will try his hardest to take us down. And if he's got enough power to challenge the Ellimist and Crayak, what can we do?"

Tobias turned to look at me now. <Probably nothing. We just don't have that kind of power. But that doesn't mean we'll give up. Maybe we'll find a way and maybe we won't. But we'll never stop trying.>

<Why do you fight so hard?> I caught myself asking. I hadn't planned on asking that question. It wasn't like me. But

I went with it. <I mean, let's face it. You've got nothing to fight for. No home, no family, no one you love. And we all know how little you care about yourself. Why is it that you've got more fight in you than I do when I have everything to lose?>

<Maybe it's because you have something to lose,> he answered. <You've got your limits; you have a line you won't cross because on one side of that line is everything you have. Once you cross that line, you can't turn back; you'll lose everything. But I've got nothing on the safe side of the line. I've got nothing to lose. So why shouldn't I go on?>

I shook my head. <That isn't the way it works. Having nothing to fight for isn't what makes you strong.>

<No, Marco, it isn't what makes *you* strong. But how would you know? You've never been left with nothing.>

CHAPTER 17

It was two days later when we finally had a plan. We had been watching the building nearly non-stop for two days. It was as bad as Erek had told us it was. We weren't arrogant anymore. To tell the truth, I was scared.

Tobias had put the final piece on our plan. It was as perfect as any Animorph plan could be.

Jake couldn't believe Tobias when he told him he had a way to get into the building without morphing an employee.

We were all sitting in the room Jake and I shared, waiting for him to come back. He flew through the window in hawk morph.

<The building's made mostly of steel, bullet-proof glass, and a bunch of Andalite and Yeerk materials I know nothing about. But the foundation is good old fashioned human concrete.>

"Oh, good. We just have to drill our way through a few feet of concrete without being detected. Our mole morphs should take care of that." Who was responsible for that bit of sarcasm? You guessed it. *Moi*.

<There's a crack in the foundation.>

“Maybe we should warn them. They can sue their contractor,” I responded.

<A crack big enough for a cockroach to fit through.>

“Oh.”

<Yeah. Oh.>

Jake snapped into leader mode. “All the buildings around Tri-I are full of S.W.A.T. commandos as far as we’re concerned. All the alleys are monitored by thermal-imaging cameras that would show us if we morphed. Our nearest guaranteed safe spot is here. What we need is someone who can get five of us from here to there.”

<I got that, Jake,> Tobias assured us.

I saw a problem with that. “Jake, a red-tail is a really suspicious bird to have lurking around your foundation. We need something less conspicuous, like a seagull or something.”

He nodded. “You, Cassie, and I have seagull morphs. It’ll have to be one of us.”

The three of us looked at each other for a moment. Then I heard Santorelli shout, “Nose goes!”

I jerked my hand to my nose. So did Jake and Cassie. “I think Cassie lost,” Jeanne said.

“So Cassie is gull-girl,” Jake decided. “That leaves the rest of us as roaches. Anyone have any objections?”

“Aside from the obvious? No,” Jeanne answered. Santorelli shook his head. So did Tobias.

“Okay then,” Jake said. “Our plan is to divide into two teams. I’ll lead team one to the security command center. We’ll take out the Gleet BioFilters in the dropshaft and the mainframe room. Tobias and Santorelli will infiltrate. Santorelli will hack the system and get the info. Sound like a plan?”

“Yeah,” I confirmed. “That’s what I’m worried about.”

We morphed to roaches. I guess Santorelli and Jeanne had gotten the morph from somewhere. Probably jut grabbed one of the roaches running around the motel.

About three minutes later, we were airborne. <I just can’t help but feel a little left out,> Cassie said to us. <I’ll be out here safe while the rest of you are in Tri-I risking your lives.>

<I know how you feel,> Tobias said. <Remember, for a while I couldn’t morph. I was useless to you. Be glad this is only temporary.>

A few minutes later, we felt a series of vibrations. <Just landed,> Cassie told us. <I’m right next to the crack.>

<Found it,> Jake confirmed. Roach vision is bad but I could still make out the shape of a cockroach disappearing into a small fissure in the concrete.

I went next. A cockroach can fit into a space no thicker than the width of a nickel. The crack in the concrete was more than wide enough.

Inside, we were in a maze of cracks in the foundation. Nothing serious enough to threaten the building, but enough to move around. Jake found a crack leading upwards.

Jeanne, Santorelli, and Tobias came after us. <Follow me,> Jake told them.

<Always will,> Tobias answered. We climbed up for what must have been only ten feet or so. But for every three inches upwards, we had to go five times that horizontally.

After the concrete, we found ourselves in a world of steel beams. It was kind of like being back on the Iskoort homeworld. Our little roach claws were able to grab on to the little protrusions of the steel. It was like extreme rock climbing. Jake, Tobias, and I were used to it.

After nearly an hour of climbing, Jake stopped. He turned to me and said, <Marco? I think we have a problem.>

<What?>

<I'm totally lost.>

<What do you mean?>

<I have no idea how high we are, what floor we're on, or where in the building we are.>

<We're on the eighty-seventh floor,> Tobias told us. Jake and I turned to stare at him.

<How do you know that?>

He laughed. <I might be a roach but I can still feel altitude. I can feel it in my bones. Well, my exoskeleton anyway.>

<Kind of a thin thread to hang by,> I said to Jake privately. There was no reason for Tobias to know I didn't exactly trust his judgment.

<I know. But what else do we have to go on?> he answered. To Tobias, he said, <How much farther do we have to go to reach the roof?>

<Another fifty-five floors.>

<That will be cutting our morph time kind of close,> I commented.

<We've got to risk it,> Jake decided. <Let's haul roach. I don't want to get stuck like this.>

CHAPTER 18

It was time for good news and bad news. The good news was that we came out at the top floor. We even came out in the security command center. Sounds great, right? But we had several problems.

The biggest of those problems was that, judging by the clock on the wall, we had about three minutes left before we were all stuck as cockroaches for the rest of our lives. And if we tried to demorph here, the guards in the command center would probably fry us without hesitation.

<Okay,> Jake said. <We need a plan and we need it now. Any suggestions?>

<We need to find somewhere to demorph,> Jeanne said.

<No time,> Jake told her. <We've got to do this here and now.>

<Then let's find a dark corner,> Tobias suggested. <We demorph there —>

<And get blown to pieces halfway through the morph,> I said. <They've probably got orders to shoot anyone they see.>

<I've got an idea,> Santorelli said.

<Well, get on with it,> Jake snapped. Time was running

out and we didn't have a lot of options.

<I used to work here. In this room. Probably with most of these guys. I don't think they'd shoot me.>

<I...sure, go for it,> Jake said. <The rest of us will try to find a place in here to demorph.>

<Try behind one of the consoles,> Santorelli suggested, walking away. <There used to be nice big spaces back there. We'd hide stuff behind them. Contraband mostly.>

We took off. I got separated from Jake and Tobias. That was fine. I had no idea how we would have fit four people behind a console.

As soon as my roach senses told me I was in darkness, I started to demorph. I was moments away from spending my life as a cockroach and that was not something I intended to do. I'd rather take my chances with the shredders. I had almost been stuck in roach morph before and this was too close.

In my head, I heard Santorelli say, <Apricot.>

<What the —?> Tobias said.

Then I heard another voice. "Sir, someone is demorphing over here. Do we shoot?"

"Stand down. He gave the password."

I was human now. I looked down at Jeanne and almost

screamed. She was halfway between roach and girl and she didn't seem to be getting any closer to either of them.

I knelt down and took her claw/hand. "I know it's hard," I whispered. "You've got to go on. You don't want to be like this. Think human. Think of yourself. Picture yourself. Add details."

Slowly, she started to become more human. I heard one of the men say, "Santorelli? What in God's name are you doing here?"

My eyes were locked on Jeanne's. She looked like she was about to scream. I put my hand over her mouth and shook my head.

"Just dropping by to say hello to some old friends," Santorelli answered. "You mind pointing that thing somewhere else, Johnson?"

"You've been missing for a year," another guy said. "Where've you been? You went off to that training program and never came back."

Jeanne was fully human now. She grabbed me and started to cry quietly. I held her close and pressed her head against my shoulder as much for her comfort as to muffle her sobs. I realized right then that she was a very different person from

Rachel. It was a bit of a relief.

Santorelli answered, “I’ve been busy on an assignment with Jake.”

“Jake the Animorph? No way.”

“Totally. He says hi.”

Then I heard Jake’s voice. “Hi, fellas.” There was a pause. Then, “You wouldn’t shoot an Animorph, would you?”

Another pause. Someone said, “I guess not.”

Jake said to them, “What about an Andalite? Would you shoot an Andalite?”

“No. No, I don’t think we would.”

<Too bad.> Tobias. I didn’t see what happened next. I heard it, though. There was a scream followed by a thud.

Then I heard a sound I hadn’t heard in years. The TSWEEE of Shredder fire. Green light lit up the room. Sparks shot out of machinery. Frantic shouting from humans.

Santorelli vaulted behind the console where Jeanne and I waited. He leaned around the corner firing a Shredder. I don’t know where he got it.

“Marco, morph,” he said as he shot. “These things are only on stun right now; they wouldn’t take down a gorilla.”

I nodded and started to morph. It would take me about

thirty seconds. Thirty seconds is a long time when people are shooting at you.

When I finished, I vaulted over the console. “A gorilla! What the —” The guy cut off as I cuffed him in the side of the head. I grabbed his Shredder and tossed it back to Jeanne.

The room was bigger than the command center in the Tri-I back home. It was circular and about thirty feet from end to end. There were computer consoles arranged like the spokes of a wheel. Men were taking cover behind them, firing Shredders. I saw Jake, crouching behind a computer, firing inexpertly. He didn’t know how to use a gun.

Santorelli was a different matter. He moved like the professional he was, firing a Shredder in either hand. He didn’t fire often, just when he had a clear shot. Each flash of green light dropped a guard.

Tobias was in Andalite morph. He had acquired Ax a long time ago and he was using that now. He used his 360 degree vision to call out targets to Santorelli or warnings to Jake. He also managed to keep up a steady stream of fire from a Shredder in each delicate Andalite hand.

I turned in time to see a guy with his Shredder aimed at me. He fired. I tried to dodge but the thing about Shredder

beams is that the move far too fast for you to even think about dodging them. And these guys were good shots.

My body went numb for a second when the beam hit me. I recovered in a second but by that time, six more beams hit me. I couldn't move. I felt my breathing slow. Darkness swam at the corners of my eyes. There was a sound like rushing wind in my ears.

Then an Andalite leapt in front of me. The guards paused to adjust the settings of their Shredders. What could stun a gorilla might kill an Andalite. Normally, they'd probably have gone for the kill, but we were with Jake, so they'd probably just want to ask some questions.

Tobias had a Shredder in each hand. He opened up on them, spraying green light at everything on either side of him. Someone took a shot at him.

Like magic, like a Jedi, I saw him jerk his tail in the way. The beam hit the blade. Tobias's tail drooped but he kept firing. He turned and opened up on the guy with both Shredders.

I charged at some guys. They all fired on me but their Shredders were still set to stun an Andalite. It was nothing to a gorilla. I landed on them. I don't know if they lost

consciousness but they certainly stopped struggling.

I rolled to my feet only to see that the fight was over. All the guards were stunned on the floor. Nearly every bit of machinery was smoking and sparking.

I heard Santorelli laughing loudly. “God I missed this gig.”

CHAPTER 19

Santorelli went around the room, checking the computer systems. Finally he turned to us and smiled. “We’re in luck. Someone took out the alarm system. Nobody knows we’re here.”

“Did they take out the other security systems too?” Jake asked.

“The Gleet BioFilters are down. Aside from that, the rest is still active,” Santorelli told us. “These things are heavily shielded. I’m surprised they lost what systems they did. With the Shredders on stun, it’s amazing luck.”

“Luck’s half our plan,” I said brightly.

Santorelli went over to one of the less damaged consoles. He started to pull it apart.

“Some sort of security system?” I asked.

“Something like that.” A moment later, he pulled a six pack and some bottles out of it. “Back when I worked here... well, the shifts are long and nothing much ever happened. We had to keep it interesting.”

He broke some of the bottles and left them around the room. “When they tell the officials what happened here, I’m

hoping to make it look like something else,” Santorelli explained.

Jake nodded. “They were drinking on the job. A Shredder went off. Accidents happened.”

We spread out and looked at what remained of the monitors. It took a little bit but I finally located the cameras for the computer mainframe room.

“It’s on the one-hundred and twentieth,” I told them. I turned to see that Santorelli and Tobias had already put on the uniforms of some of the guards.

Santorelli pressed a button on a mostly intact console. “Check,” he said. His voice echoed over a loudspeaker. He told us, “Tri-I’s uniforms all have mics in them, just in case security needs to hear something they’re saying.”

Tobias’s mic was broken; it had been short-circuited by one of the Shredders. The two of them set out through the front door, careful to open it as little as possible. If anyone walking past saw what the inside of the room looked like we were done for.

We waited for a few nerve-wracking minutes until we heard Tobias say, “We’re in. He’s hacking the system now.”

An alert popped up on one of the monitors in the command

center. Apparently, someone was hacking the system. I smiled and pressed a button. The warning disappeared.

Nothing happened for the next five minutes. Santorelli was getting all the information we needed. Things were going smoothly. Then I heard Tobias's voice over the speaker. "Duck!" I think he said duck; it might have begun with a different consonant.

The sound of Shredder fire erupted from the speaker. And I heard another sound. Something similar to the sound of a Shredder but there was a difference I knew all too well. It was the sound of a Yeerk Dracon beam.

Jake heard it too. "Dracon beams?" he wondered. "That means Yeerks. We have to help them."

"They're a good twenty stories below us, Jake," I said. "How do we get there?"

Jeanne piped up. "Give me three minutes and about one hundred meters of rope. Jake, pile as many of the consoles as you can by the far wall."

I looked at Jake. "Do it," he told me. "She knows what she's doing."

I started looking for cables. She was gathering Shredders. She peeled back the covering of one and started connecting

the wires inside with those of a second Shredder.

The sound of weapons disappeared from the speaker. Instead, I heard a voice. “Ah, Tobias. It has been far too long.”

“Esplin,” a voice answered. It didn’t sound like Tobias. He was probably in a morph and the mic was transmitting spoken words instead of thoughtspoken ones. That’s the way holograms work, at least, so I thought the mikes might work the same way. “I’m surprised to see you human. Guess the One realized you couldn’t be trusted with anything that matters.”

Esplin laughed. “Don’t you recognize me? This body? This morph.”

Sudden static filled my ears. Maybe Santorelli’s mic had just shorted out. Maybe he was dead. I couldn’t know.

I yanked a bunch of cords out of the wall and hoped there was enough there. Jeanne had finished whatever it was she was doing with the Shredders. She had two neat little rings of them.

She put one of the rings on top of Jake’s stack of consoles, by the wall. She adjusted the power setting on one of them from stun to the highest level of kill. She ran to the opposite side of the room. Jake and I followed.

Abut five seconds later, there was a blinding green flash and an explosion knocked me to the ground. I was glad I was already crouching. I looked at the hole where the wall used to be. Jeanne had already grabbed her other ring of Shredders.

She picked up the cables form the floor and threw them out of the hole. They held where they were attached to the wall. The rest dangled out along the side of the building.

Jeanne grabbed hold of the cables and started to climb down. She was very fast. I turned to Jake. “Something you’re not telling us about her?” I asked.

“A few things. Let’s just say I chose her for a reason. Santorelli isn’t the only one with useful skills.”

I leaned out of the hole to watch Jeanne. It took her a minute but she reached the bottom of the cable. I hoped she was at the right floor. She tied the Shredders to the cable, twisted a knob, and then started climbing back up as quickly as she could.

<What’s going on?> I heard Cassie demand. I looked to the sky. There was an osprey floating on a thermal. Of course, I couldn’t answer her.

I looked down and realized Jeanne had stopped moving. She was staring straight up at me. Somehow, I knew that she

wasn't going to make it back up here in time. Not unless I did something.

I grabbed the cables and started to climb down. As I climbed, I morphed. My good old gorilla morph. Arms six times stronger than a human's. Skin like leather.

Gorillas aren't as good in the trees as their cousins, the monkeys. Still, a gorilla was ten times the climber I'd ever be. And it was strong enough to carry Jeanne.

When I got close, I reached down and grabbed her. She might as well have been air for all she weighed to my gorilla body.

I climbed up as fast as I could. I guess it wasn't fast enough. I felt the concussion from the explosion. It almost knocked me off the rope. I held on with one hand. The other arm held Jeanne. My legs dangled in the air. I pulled my legs back onto the cable and climbed to the top floor.

I set Jeanne down. <Morph to hawk and fly away,> I told her. <Cassie will help get you to safety.>

The next thing I knew, there was a tiger on my back. <Tigers can't climb ropes,> Jake told me.

<Tigers can't diet, either,> I muttered as I started climbing down again. <At least that explosion should have bought them

some time.>

<Or killed them.>

<Oh. There is that possibility.>

CHAPTER 20

We stepped through the window into a world of nightmares. In one corner of the room there was a polar bear battling four Hork-bajir. A rhino rampaged through computers, smashing stuff beneath his feet and impaling some more Hork-bajir with his horn. A single Andalite stood apart from it, watching it all with amusement.

He turned to face us. Ax looked pretty much the same to me. He was taller, his tail was longer, and he was more muscular. But overall, he looked like the same old Ax. But there was something very different about him.

That was the Yeerk in his head. Esplin 9466. Our archenemy. The Yeerk overlord who failed to conquer Earth the first time around. He seemed the same. He projected a familiar dark aura of malice and hate. I could feel his anger, his rage. And I know this sounds corny, but I could feel his evil.

I thought I had gotten over it during the first war. I thought he didn't scare me anymore. But I was so wrong. I guess I just went numb because standing there, looking at him, I wanted to go home, crawl into my bed, pull the covers over my head,

and cry for my mommy.

When he saw us, he smiled in that way Andalites have of smiling without a mouth. He laughed. <Ah, Jake and Marco. I was wondering where you had gotten to. I didn't think you would leave poor Tobias all alone. But then again,> he cocked a stalk eye at Tobias, who was now only fighting two Hork-bajir, <hasn't he always been alone?>

It felt wrong to hear him use out names. He hadn't known them until the very end of the war. I felt violated, exposed. And he knew it. His smile grew.

<How did you get Hork-bajir?> Jake asked. He was circling around behind Esplin, trying to expose him to me. <And how did you get in here?>

Again he laughed. <These Hork-bajir are some of the few, the proud, the original Yeerk hosts. Morph-capable hosts left over from that fool's rebellion when he stole my Blade ship. Getting in here was no problem. We do not share your pathetic notion of not morphing sentient creatures.>

<What are you doing here?> Jake demanded.

Esplin answered. <I knew that the International Invasion Investigation Force has a lot of information about this much changed Earth. I am here to claim it. And you?>

I answered him. <We figured someone would have heard something about the return of the Yeerks. We wanted to use Tri-I to tell us what to do.>

It was a good bluff. I have no idea if he bought it. Yeerks are impossible to read and Andalites are even worse.

I saw Esplin's eyes widen. He dodged to the side Tobias came crashing down where he was just a moment ago. He backed away until he noticed the rhino coming towards him from the other side.

We had him surrounded. It was our bad luck he was here. It was his bad luck he was going to die here.

He looked from one of us to the other. Then he gave his Andalite smile. <It seems I will not have my prize today. I am perfectly happy with my life. Good day, Animorphs.> Then he charged at me.

I pulled back my fist and meant to plough him to the floor. But he dodged to the side at the last second. He skirted around me and leapt out of the hole in the wall.

We all watched as the Andalite body gave way to a small grey hawk. A northern harrier. Ax's raptor morph.

<Cassie! Jeanne! Go after him!> Jake yelled out the window. But Cassie and Jeanne were nowhere in sight. Cassie

was probably getting Jeanne back to the motel to rest up.

On the ground, Andalites and humans swarmed the building. No doubt these were the guys from the surrounding buildings, responding to the explosion. It was time for us to get going too.

Three minutes later, we were all assorted birds of prey, riding the updrafts over the building, heading for our new, temporary home.

<Well,> Tobias said briskly, <believe it or not, the mission was a success. Santorelli got the list. It's all in his head right now.>

<Well? Do we know where they're going?> Jake asked.
<What do we know?>

<Just names,> Santorelli told us. <But now we have something to look for online. It'll make the search a lot easier.>

<At least it's a start,> Jake sighed. <And at least we didn't kill anyone.> He paused. Then, <Tobias, did we kill anyone?>

<Not that I know of. I try to be gentle with the Hork-bajir. And all the Shredders were on stun. No, I think everyone was fine.>

<An Animorph mission without any casualties?> I said.

<That's as rare as Cassie wearing matching socks.>

<Or you shutting up,> Jake said to me.

I gave him a little shove with my wings. It was good to be flying with my friends. It almost made the whole thing worth it.

CHAPTER 21

I was lying on the roof of our little motel. Guests weren't allowed on the roof, but what did I care? I had a lot to think about. Jake wanting to pass the torch to Tobias. Tobias thinking it was bad to be mortal. Crayak and the One settling a score with our lives. Jeanne. Speaking of whom...

She climbed out onto the roof next to me. "You cannot see the stars out here," she said.

"I'm not stargazing," I told her. "I don't like the stars anymore. That's where all my problems came from."

She nodded. "I liked seeing you fight today." That kind of caught me off guard.

I shook my head. "That wasn't a fight. That was guys with toy guns. Our real fights, they aren't fought with pretty lights and a little numbness. They're fought with sharp claws, long teeth, and a lot of blood. If you ever see someone fight a real fight, you won't say you liked watching it."

She sighed. "Perhaps not." She paused. "I want to thank you for helping me toady."

"What? You mean the roach thing? That was nothing. It's just what Animorphs do for each other. We try to watch each

other's backs and make sure no one gets stuck as a roach. It's in your contract, right below the dental plan."

"Very few people have ever helped me before. It is not something I am accustomed to."

"Now you sound like Tobias."

"Ah, Tobias. He is a difficult one."

"How so?"

"As a commander, I trust him. As a warrior, I respect him. As a person...I rather dislike him."

"Really?" That took me by surprise. "Why?"

"There is something about him that seems to be...less than human. I do not understand it."

I thought about that. I was going to say it was the hawk in him but then I thought about it a little harder. I remembered some things Cassie had said once in the book she had written about the war. "People think that if what it means to be human can be summed up in one word, that word is 'Why?'" I said. "But they're wrong. The word is no.

"Animals can't say no to their instincts. When they are hungry, they cannot deny themselves food. When they are tired, they do not deny themselves sleep if they can help it. Humans can. Tobias...he's lost the ability to say no to this

war.”

“How can that be?”

I remembered the conversation I had had with Tobias at the drive in. “Because this war is all he’s got. The rest of us, we have lives we could go back to if we quit all this. I could go back to my mansion. Jake could go back to school. Cassie has her nature stuff. Santorelli has the military. You have the secret service. Tobias has nowhere to go but the battlefield. He’s got nothing to do but fight.

“It’s an interesting paradox, really. On the one hand, he could try to end this war. Doing so would vindicate all of his suffering. But it would eliminate his only purpose in life. Or he could give up and not suffer anymore. But then all the pain he’s already endured would be for nothing.

“But he’ll never stop fighting. Not only for himself but for everyone else, too. I know he isn’t a religious guy. He doesn’t believe in God, Allah, Buddha, or anything like that. He believes in what he’s decided is right. And he won’t ever stop fighting for that.”

“That sounds like a terrible existence,” Jeanne said.

“Maybe it is. But it’s all he has. So of course he’s not much of a people person. He’s a hard guy to like. Always has

been. It doesn't bother him anymore."

Jeanne shook her head. "But why are talking about him? I am sorry I brought it up."

"How about a different subject, then. Where did you learn to make Shredders blow up walls?"

She looked at the sky for a long while. Finally, she turned and looked at me. "Not yet." She stood up and started climbing off the roof. She flashed me one last dazzling smile.

"Good night, Marco."

"Good night Jeanne."

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

*“I never did lose a battle
But I'm feeling further from the end of war
Deplore
Ignored
And rarely ever self assured
Why does it seem the ones who have everything have nothing inside?
Have nothing inside*

*I don't sleep anymore
I gave it up
Because what we do is not enough
And now they're calling out our bluffs
Have you done a single thing for someone else?
Or do you take, take, take, until your belly is stuffed?*

*How long do you think you can go before you lose it all?
Before they call you bluff and watch you fall?
I don't know but I'd like to think I had control
At some point but I let it go and lost my soul
Sit tight but the revolution's years away
I'm losing faith and I'm running low on things to say
So I guess I have no choice but to regurgitate
The tired anthem of a loser and a hypocrite
Oh! to have died that night I realized it wouldn't last!
Our days were numbered and the reaper tipped the hourglass
The final mayday of our sinking ship had come at last
Oh! to the west, you don't know what it is you're running from
And everybody's laughing loud
Your last chance to make your mother and father proud...”
—A Moment of Violence*

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

57: THE WEAPON

“The Time Matrix,” Jake moaned. We were in the ship, flying to the place the others said the Time Matrix was located. “The last time we messed with that thing, I died.”

“Technically,” Marco reminded him, “that never happened.”

“That whole episode will haunt me forever,” Cassie said, shivering. “All the death we saw. It seems like human history is nothing but death and murder.”

Tobias shook his head. “Only the parts worth altering. I mean, why would Visser Four have wanted to mess with the Renaissance?”

“He wanted to kill Shakespeare,” Marco reminded him.

Tobias nodded. “Yeah, but that was personal. That was to shut his host up. Plus, I don't think Shakespeare counts as the Renaissance.”

“Agincourt,” Jake muttered. “That was one of the worst things I've ever seen. It was inhuman, seeing those knights cut each other down.”

“You're wrong,” Tobias disagreed. “That was the most

human thing I've ever seen.”

“Which is kind of disturbing,” Marco stated.

“It was terrible to see those men die,” Cassie murmured. “To watch them get run through with swords and arrows? It was horrible.”

“Better than any of the other wars we visited,” Tobias said to her. “So much better to be able to look into the eye of the one who takes your life than to be killed in the dark before you can react.”

Marco smiled at him. “That’s a grim way of looking at it.”

“I’d say crossing the Delaware River with George Washington was the worst,” Jake said to them.

“That’s only because you got killed there,” Marco pointed out.

“I’d still say it’s a good reason to hate the place.”

“D Day gets my vote,” Cassie said. “Most of them were our age. If we had been born a generation earlier, any one of them could have been one of you.”

“Not me; I’d have been in Canada the moment the war started.” Marco, of course.

“We’re coming up on the site,” Jeanne alerted us.

The place we were going to used to be a construction site.

There were a bunch of half-finished buildings and stuff. But that was years ago. Now, it was the most famous monument in the galaxy.

It was here that the Animorphs first learned of the Yeerk invasion. It was where they were given the power to morph and told to fight the Yeerks. It was also where Prince Elfangor, the Andalite who told them about everything, was killed by Visser Three, now known as Esplin. Elfangor was Tobias's father.

I noticed immediately that something was wrong. "The lights are out," I said. The other nodded. There were always floodlights lighting up a giant statue in the center of the monument. The statue showed five kids holding onto a cube that an Andalite held in one hand. Now, the statue was dark.

Most people wouldn't have been more than curious about that. We were in full-blown paranoia mode. I gripped my Shredder. "Yeerks?" I asked.

Jake shook his head. "We can't tell from up here. Jeanne, set us down as near as you can get and as close as you can get. If the Yeerks are here, we want to surprise them, but we also need to get down there as quickly as possible.

She put the ship down in a patch of shadow near the dark

statue. Right next to a Yeerk Bug fighter. Jake looked at the thing. “Not good,” he said.

We hustled along the paved paths that led to the statue. We passed several men in security guard uniforms lying on the ground. No time to stop to check for vitals. Or even to harvest a weapon. My Shredder would have to do.

We slowed when we reached the statue. There was a door in the base. It led to a patch of bare earth under the statue. The spot where Elfangor had died. The door was usually locked and sealed by several systems. Right now, it was thrown wide open.

We dashed inside. I guess the Time Matrix was hidden beneath the statue. Jake signaled for us to slow as we neared the end of the short hallway behind the door. It came to an abrupt corner. It should have been too dark to see but something was giving off light.

It was just like Marco had described it. A sphere about six feet in diameter. It was white and shimmering. That was where the light came from.

It silhouetted an Andalite. He stood before it with his tail raised and his arms outstretched. I looked at Jake. “Take the shot?” I barely whispered. He glanced at Tobias. Then he

nodded.

I raised my Shredder. I was one of the best snipers Earth has ever seen. I can fire a Shredder in either hand with near perfect accuracy. I wouldn't miss. But just to be safe, I aimed at the center of his torso rather than his head. No reason to get overambitious.

My thumb turned the dial to the highest kill setting. I would get only one shot and I wouldn't blow it. I felt bad that I had to kill Prince Aximili, but I knew he'd rather be dead than a Controller. I fired.

I don't know if he heard the blast or if he saw it with one of his stalk eyes, but Esplin knew it was coming. A Shredder fires in the blink of an eye. Faster. No time to dodge, no time to run. But there was time for him to bring his Andalite tail between his body and the beam. The tailblade flashed and disappeared.

I opened fire again. But by this time, he was able to get out of the way. Shapes surged out of the darkness. Only then did I realize Esplin wasn't alone.

PREVIEW SUMMARY

The power to morph is a great weapon. The power to alter the past is a greater one. The Time Matrix is the most powerful weapon in all the galaxy. The Animorphs know where it is; but so does Esplin 9466.

Now it's a race to get to the Time Matrix. Santorelli, Tobias, Jake, Marco, Jeanne, and Cassie must reach it before the Yeerks. If the Animorphs get it, history will be safe. If the Yeerks get their hands on that weapon, all will be lost; not just for Earth, but for everyone who opposed the Yeerks...