

58: THE RETIREMENT

CHAPTER 1

My name is Jake. I'm sure you've heard of me. No need to tell you my last name or where I live. Everyone in this galaxy knows my last name. As for where I live, that's a little more complicated.

The town where I used to live, where I grew up, where the Yeerks first invaded, is one of the most famous places in this galaxy.

The other Animorphs and I are leaving that town. Why? In short, because the Yeerks are back. This time, they're controlled by a creature called The One. They've got some new hosts, the Kelbrid. The Kelbrid are very strong, very fast, very deadly aliens from beyond our section of the galaxy.

Alone, Kelbrid are dangerous but beatable. They're not very bright. Barely sentient, really. One rung above animals on the evolutionary ladder.

But the thing about Yeerks is that they take over your brain. They control you. So now you have a very strong, very deadly creature with a Yeerk behind the wheel. Bad? Oh yeah. Real bad.

The Animorphs seemed to be losing numbers quickly.

Only four of our original six members were with us on our last mission. Marco, my main man, Cassie, Tobias, and me. The others were lost.

Rachel died in our last official Animorph mission. I'm sure you know all about that. If not, you need to go back and take another look at the past because I don't want to explain everything to you.

The other Animorph we lost was Ax. He was made into a Controller by The One. Our search for him is what led us to uncover the return of the Yeerks to Earth. Now he's under the power of Esplin 9466, our greatest enemy. The Yeerk formerly known as Visser Three.

I did my best to replace them. An impossible task, so I did the next best thing. I recruited two people with special skills I thought might help us.

One of them was Santorelli. We just lost him. He was a good guy and useful besides. A former soldier and former member of Tri-I, the worldwide network dedicated to making sure something like the Yeerk invasion never happened again. At least they tried.

Santorelli was a Controller during the first war. He served as a bodyguard for Visser Six. He knew his way around any

human or Yeerk security system. He was also a top sniper for the army. Losing him was a real hard blow. But it was nothing next to losing Tobias.

Tobias was, in my opinion, the first Animorph. He was the first who saw Elfangor's ship in the sky. He was the one who stepped up and first spoke to the Andalite prince. And he was the first one of us to morph. And when everyone else wanted to pack it in, he would never let us give up.

We lost the Tobias we knew a long time ago. He first started going when he got trapped in the body of a red-tailed hawk. And what was left of him died with Rachel.

The only reason he came with us this time around was to help save Ax, his closest friend. It cost him what little he had left of his life.

It was my fault. Cassie and Marco tell me it wasn't, but I know better. I gave the order that sent the two of them to their deaths.

We had been going after the Time Matrix, a weapon of unimaginable power. We just remembered about it and we needed to get to it before Esplin read about it in Ax's memories. It was only a matter of time.

Tobias and Santorelli got a hold of it and then suddenly

disappeared, only to reappear a few moments later. I think they went through some adventures in the past or future but neither of them got the chance to tell me about them.

I had a plan to put the Time Matrix beyond Esplin's reach forever. The two of them were the only ones who could and would do it.

The two of them took the Time Matrix and stole a spaceship. Then, on my orders, they flew both ship and Time Matrix into the sun. There was no way they could escape without using the Time Matrix, and I knew that neither of them would do that.

I killed them as surely as if I had cut their throats. Marco tells me I had to do it. That I had no choice. It was give the order or put the entire universe at Esplin's mercy. I know there had to be another way, but I couldn't think of it.

The worst thing is that now I'm stuck still leading. I want to pass the torch, to make someone else the leader. But I can't do that. Because Tobias was my choice and I got him killed.

CHAPTER 2

We were in Marco's backyard. Which was big enough to hold the Olympics. Both summer and winter. At the same time.

It was a perfect day. Warm sun, tall, billowy clouds, and a nice little breeze. Tobias's favorite kind of weather. Perfect for flight.

There were no bodies for the funerals. The sun is about a billion degrees. It didn't leave anything for us to bury. So we just looked at pictures.

Santorelli's picture was from the day he entered the military. He looked good in his uniform, a firm salute at his brow, a rare smile on his face. It was how I wanted to remember him.

There was no picture of Tobias. None of us had any pictures of him. Neither did any of his relatives. There were some pictures of him in old school yearbooks, but they were of the human him. That wasn't the Tobias we knew.

The guy we knew was a red-tailed hawk. We didn't have any pictures of him that way. There weren't even any pictures from after the first war, when he might have been in the

spotlight. He left us nothing material to remember him by except for the cloths he kept at Marco's place.

I stepped forward to speak a few words about Santorelli. I was the one who knew him best; except for Tobias, of course, but he wasn't an option. "Santorelli was one of us for only a little while," I said. "None of us knew him much as a person. But we knew him enough to like and respect him.

"He was big on honor, duty, and courage. He wouldn't play dirty or cheat anyone, not even his enemies. And he always did his duty. He died for it without hesitating. As for courage...I don't think I have words that can talk about his courage.

"He was a man of few words, so I'm not going to talk much longer. He was one of the best men I've ever had the luck to know. He was good in every way. He had morals and he had guts. I don't know if I believe in heaven or hell anymore, but if heaven's real, I know where Santorelli is right now."

Next came the hard part. Tobias. You'll never understand what we Animorphs shared. To spend three years of your life scared, tired, and alone except for five people...to live through the hell we got through...there isn't a word for that kind of

brotherhood.

“I don’t think any of us ever really knew Tobias. Back when we first met him, we didn’t have a clue what was inside him. We thought he was a dweeb, a coward, and weak. We couldn’t have been more wrong even if we had thought that the Yeerks were the good guys.

“Tobias was the strongest person who ever lived. Every day, he walked through stuff that would have killed any of us. He accepted his life, a life most of us never could have accepted.

“All of us had families to get us through that first part. I don’t even mean the war. I mean life itself. But he was always alone, as far back as he can remember.

“The war always hit him first and hit him the hardest. He was trapped in our first mission, doomed to live forever in a body that wasn’t his. Could any of us have lived through that? I doubt it.

“He never gave up, even when he could have. There were so many times he could have walked away and been done with the war. After the Ellimist gave him back his morphing power, he had to decide every day whether to go on or not. Never once did he decide not to.

“He lost everything in the end. It makes me think that the world isn’t a good place at all. Not when a man like him can fight so hard, for so long, and sacrifice so much, and in the end come out with less than nothing. What the hell kind of universe is it when that can happen to someone?”

“He never owed the world anything. He didn’t have the debt to the human race that the rest of us had. Everything he had ever gotten from life was pain and suffering. But still he fought to protect us all.

“Even now, when we needed him, he came. He could have been content without us. But instead he came again to help his friends. That was the one thing we all knew about him. That, whenever someone needed help, he would be there, fighting till the end.

“Of all the galaxy’s heroes, he’s one of the greatest. And the least known. Most humans have no idea who he is, and most Andalites try to forget about him. Only the Hork-bajir, slow as they are, are wise enough to remember Tobias and all he did. I know what he would say if he was here.”

<This little party’s really touching, but why are we standing around? I’m getting a killer thermal up here!>

CHAPTER 3

“TOBIAS!” we all shouted. I looked up in the sky. Sure enough, a red-tail was circling over the backyard. I knew it was him the instant I saw him.

I morphed to a peregrine falcon in about thirty seconds and flew up after him. <You’re alive!>

<I noticed.> Ah, same old Tobias. He could be as bad as Marco sometimes.

<How? And what about Santorelli?>

<I’m not sure how. The Ellimist or Crayak or someone. One second, Santorelli and I were flying to the sun. The next thing I know, I’m in the house I grew up in on the other side of the country.>

<And Santorelli?>

<I’m not ready to talk about that yet. But yeah, he’s dead. Another person I cared about taking a bullet for me. I must be the luckiest guy in the world.>

Yeah, it was definitely Tobias. No one else I know could fight off self-pity like Tobias could. I mean, here he was, talking about losing another person he cared about and saying he was lucky.

<How'd you like the eulogy?> I asked.

<No tears. I approve.>

<Hey,> I said, trying to sound casual, <how did you like leading those missions I've been sending you and the others on lately?>

<It was interesting being the one calling the shots. Deciding whether your friends live or die really puts your priorities in perspective.>

An evasive answer. I suddenly suspected he knew where this was going. He may not have been the smartest guy I knew, but he was more than smart enough. And he knew me too well for me to get away with anything.

<How'd you like to do it full time?> I asked.

He was silent as we floated into a thermal. Marco and Cassie were a few hundred yards below us, keeping their distance. Tobias wheeled to face me, his hawk's eyes inches from mine. With my vision, he might as well have been inside of me.

<You want to give it up?> he asked finally.

<I always wanted to give it up, but I know I couldn't and I still can't. I'll keep on fighting, but I can't make the decisions anymore.>

<You've got to get over the hump, Jake. You've got to try again.>

<I did try again, Tobias. After what happened to Rachel...I didn't think I could keep on leading you. I was so glad it was all over. Then when they came back...I tried. But what I did got Santorelli killed and almost you, too. I can't give that kind of order again.>

<Do you think it's any easier being the one who follows those orders, Jake? Do you really think it was harder for you to tell me to fly into the sun than it was to actually be the one to do it? The pressure doesn't go away when you become a foot soldier.>

<I know that. But I can't keep on living while I send my friends to their deaths. Do you know what it's like to have that kind of guilt?>

<Of course not. I've never sent anyone off to die. No one I didn't kill on my own, anyway. I'm not one for guilt.>

<You carry guilt harder than anyone else I've ever met. That's one of the reasons I want it to be you.>

<I'm no one's leader, Jake.>

<Yeah?> I opened my thought-speak to include the others.
<Hey, Marco. If Tobias was our leader, would you follow

him?>

<Tobias? I've been thinking about that. Yeah, I'd give him a shot at least. He hasn't screwed anything up so far.>

<Cassie?> I asked.

<I saw Tobias when he first brought Jeanne and Santorelli to Earth. He told them to get away while he held off an army of Kelbrid. His first priority was to make sure everyone made it out alive. I'd follow him.>

<Jeanne?>

<Sun Tzu. Know your enemy. No one knows Prince Aximili and Esplin like Tobias does. If anyone other than you can win this thing, Jake, it is Tobias. I would follow him.>

I turned back to face Tobias. <I'd follow you, too.> I closed my thought-speak. <I always thought it should be you in the first place. The only reason I was the leader was because I was the one who went into the ship and got that box. If things had been the other way around...>

<But they weren't the other way around. You were the one who got the box, Jake. Not me.>

<I know Elfangor meant for you to be the one, Tobias. When he saw you, he knew exactly who you were. And he wanted you to be the one who avenged him and beat the

Yeerks.

<There's a reason you're alive today, Tobias. How many breaks have the Ellimist and Crayak and whoever else is out there given you? How many times should you have died but lived? There's a reason Santorelli ended up in the sun and you're here right now, having this conversation.>

<I don't know what they're planning, Jake, but you're playing into their hands with this. You know I'll never do that. Do you remember when the Ellimist gave us the opportunity to save some humans and ourselves and go live on some kind of nature preserve, safe from the Yeerks? I was against that the whole time.>

<I know. That's why it has to be you, Tobias. Because you're the only one who will never, ever stop fighting.>

<Never, ever stop fighting,> he echoed. <It's the most important thing I could do in this universe.> He angled his wings and took off. I let him go. He needed time to think. When he came back, I might have to try to convince him again. If not...then I was finally free.

CHAPTER 4

My bed felt soft and warm that night for the first time in

six years. I knew Tobias would take the job. The war was everything to him. He couldn't risk letting me botch it because I couldn't make the tough decisions anymore.

I wish I could say I had the best sleep of my life that night, but that'd be impossible. I mean, you can't possibly remember every single night of your life, so you couldn't know if one night was the best.

But that aside, it was one of the worst. I had no trouble falling asleep. It was what happened when I did. It wasn't a dream; dreams aren't real. This was.

I opened my eyes and suddenly there was some guy six inches from my face. His brown eyes bored into mine. We both raised our fists.

I took a step back and so did he. Warily, I backed away. And then saw that I was facing a full-length mirror. Oh.

The guy in the mirror was about five years older than me. He was wearing an orange jumpsuit, a stylized A stitched over the heart. His hair was shorter than mine had been in years. Crew cut. He needed to shave. I shrugged. I knew this game.

I was in some sort of parallel future. I had been here before. Or a future like this. I had had to make a decision. Save Cassie or try to save Earth. After I made my choice, I

woke up. I still don't know if it was the right one. Or if there was a right one at all.

Then something happened that I never expected. Even after all my years in bizarre-o-land, population me, I didn't see this one coming. The guy in the mirror walked out and shook my hand.

"Close our mouth, Jake. It is ...unbecoming," he said to me. "Attempt to possess some dignity."

I just stared as he walked over to a bathroom and started to shave. He was casual about it, like he did it all the time. Like whatever he was had facial hair in its regular form. If it even had a regular form.

"Do you know why I brought you here?" he asked. The voice was mine, but it was different, too. The inflections, some of the pronunciations, were different.

"I have no idea why you people do anything," I admitted.

"I showed you a world like this, once. I offered you a choice between your head and your heart. Do you remember anything else I did?"

"You made up that whole fake reality. You did everything in it," I said.

"True. But what do you remember of the people there?"

More specifically, what do you remember about your friends?”

“They were different.”

“How so?”

“Well, Cassie was so cold, so emotionless. She had no compassion, no feeling...”

“She lost that bunch of emotions you think makes her a good person?”

“Yeah.”

“And what about Marco?”

“He was a Controller.”

“Marco was an enemy. And Rachel?”

“Dead. Or crippled, depending on what you felt like showing me.”

“Ax?”

“He wasn’t even there.”

“Do you know what all of those things have in common, Jake?” he asked.

I thought about it. I knew he wasn’t just going to hand me the answer. Guys who did stuff like this didn’t work that way.

“Each of my friends became what I was most afraid they would become. Cassie lost her goodness. Marco became an enemy. Rachel died. Ax was gone, unable to help us. And

Tobias —”

“Was the leader of the resistance.” He let that sink in. He finished shaving and ran a hand over his now-smooth chin. “Supple,” he commented.

He strolled over to a kitchen area and started making a bowl of cereal. Only then did I realize that the bathroom was gone. This room was a featureless grey box until he wanted to do something with it.

“Capn’ Crunch?” he offered, holding out a bowl. I shrugged and took it. A table appeared and we sat down.

“Tell me, Jake,” he said between bites of Capn’ Crunch, “why is it that you fear Tobias becoming the leader of the Animorphs?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. Consciously, I want him to be in charge. It feels like he should be.”

“But subconsciously?”

“I don’t know. He’s got all the right stuff. He’s smart, brave, and ruthless”

“He is completely without ruth,” he agreed. “It is funny, the way humans pretend to despise that and secretly admire it or else pretend to admire it and secretly despise it.”

“What do you want from me?” I asked. “Why bring me

here? And why make me question this decision?”

“Because no one else is questioning it. The others trust your judgment blindly. Well, except for Tobias, of course. Your judgment got too many of his friends killed for him to ever really trust it again.”

“Who are you? And why do you care?”

“The same reason Crayak and the Ellimist care. I have my own stake in what you and your friends do. I want you to be very sure this is what you want, because it isn’t a decision you can ever take back. Tobias will come to you tomorrow with his answer. If you don’t change your mind, there will be no second chance.”

He stood up and walked to a door that appeared in the wall. He turned and looked at me again. Rubbing his chin, he told me, “Make sure you keep it smooth, Jake. That is best for everyone.”

CHAPTER 5

I found Tobias the next morning, floating on a thermal. I coasted up to him. <Make a decision yet?> I asked.

<Yeah.>

<Well?>

<Yeah. If you can't make the hard choices anymore, then I can't trust you to lead us. And this war is too important to risk it on your feelings. If you still want to offer me this, I'll take it.>

I remembered what that guy had said the previous night. I could still taste the cereal in my mouth, even though I barely had taste buds in my peregrine falcon morph. <The job's yours, Tobias.>

<Alright. Then you and I have some things to talk about,> he answered. <First thing is, don't think you're free of hard choices. If we ever split up, I'm putting you in charge of half the team. You're my second in command.>

<Makes sense. Any ideas for your first mission?>

<Jeanne and Santorelli figured out where the invasion's happening. We got kind of distracted with the Time Matrix, but we need to move in there. Secure new identities, start looking for Yeerks. But there's something we need before we go.>

<Yeah?>

<A sixth Animorph.>

I felt a chill go down my spine. <Last time we tried recruiting, we ended up with David.>

<No, we ended up with Jeanne and Santorelli. We've got to recruit someone else and it's going to be the two of us.>

<Why not bring the others?> I asked.

<With Marco's skepticism, Cassie's empathy, and Jeanne's attitude? We'd never find someone to satisfy them all. So it's going to be you and me.>

<Got someone in mind?> I asked.

<There's an Andalite I know. Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor. My half-brother.>

<You have a brother?> I was shocked. I had no clue he had a brother. Somehow, I never thought of Elfangor as a family guy. Or at least, not the kind of guy who would have a girl here and one back on his homeworld. Kind of a new dimension for him.

<I only met him once,> Tobias told me. <He seemed bight. He's young; about as young as Ax was the first time around. That didn't work out too badly for him.>

<Except for the whole Yeerk-in-head thing,> I pointed out.

<Yeah, but that happened *after* the war,> he noted. <What do you think?>

<I'm not sure I like the idea of bringing a kid into this.>

<I'm not sure Elfangor liked it either. It didn't go too

poorly, though, now did it?>

<Just because it worked for him doesn't mean it'll work for us. You're not Elfangor.>

<You wish I was, though.>

<What? No I don't.>

<That's what this whole leadership thing is about, Jake. Remember back when we first found Ax? You hoped he would be like Elfangor and take over this war for you. Now it's getting tough again and you want me to be my father.>

<That's not true.>

<No?>

<No.>

<Well, I'm not in your head. I'm no Yeerk. I'll have to take your word for it. But I guess that isn't the point. We'll pay a visit to Alloran and see what he can do. I'm not going to recruit him unless he's got some skills.>

<And if he doesn't?>

<I've got some other ideas. There's a kid on the homeworld named Elfangor-Semitur-Trilum. Alloran-Semitur-Corrass's grandson.>

Alloran-Semitur-Corrass was the Andalite held captive by Esplin 9466 back when he was Visser Three. He is the only

Andalite-Controller in history with the recent exception of Ax.

<How are we going to get there?> I asked. <Our old ship was lost when we got super-yanked from the Hork-bajir world to here.>

<I have a ship.>

<You have a ship?> I echoed.

<It was a gift. I'll explain later. Wait till you see it, man. This thing flies like...well, like me. Oh, and the guns. So many guns...>

CHAPTER 6

Tobias and I flew to a remote place in the mountains. We stopped in a large valley that used to be the secret hiding place of the free Hork-bajir Tobias had stashed his ship there.

This thing was amazing. From wingtip to wingtip, it was about fifty feet long. It had two wings, sweeping back from an egg-shaped cockpit in the center.

It looked fast. Very sleek and aerodynamic. Of course, Tobias wouldn't have accepted a ship that wasn't up to his standards. And no one knew flight like he did.

It was a wicked looking thing. The entire ship was painted a black as dark as the Blade Ship. There were spots of white scattered here and there. Camouflage against the darkness of outer space.

“Where are the guns?” I asked him.

“You'll see,” he promised. We walked towards it and part of the wall stretched open to let us in. It closed up behind us. That was when I learned that the cockpit was very nice.

It was big enough for a couple of people to live in. In fact, there was a pair of bunks in the rear, between a small kitchen and bathroom. Between the living area and the command

center was a small lounge. I was surprised to see a bookshelf bolted to the floor, the books no doubt secured in place by some Andalite technology.

The control center had two chairs. One was directly in front of some sort of sphere hovering over a control panel. “The buttons and levers are mostly for show,” he told me. “Backup systems. The real thing is the control node. Just put your hands on it and it’ll obey your conscious thoughts. Andalite technology, of course.”

“Of course. Tobias, where did you get this?” I demanded.

“Ax sort of finagled it out of the Andalite military. They sent it to earth and let Tri-I play with it for a little bit. Then they gave it to me.”

“Ever go anywhere with it?”

“Yeah. Took it for a spin to the Andalite homeworld with my mother. She stayed there. I had some guys over there make some special modifications. It’s probably the fastest, most maneuverable ship in this part of the galaxy.”

“You said there were guns, too.” What can I say? After all those years of biting and clawing people, I liked the thought of a nice, clean laser. That’s how wars with aliens were meant to be fought.

Tobias brushed his hand along the control node. The walls and ceiling suddenly turned to clear. I could see the ends of cannons starting to unfold from their hidden hiding places on the wings.

“We’ve got about as much firepower in this ship as a Blade ship,” Tobias told me. “Got to use it once. Scare off a pirate. Could have outflown him, but I wanted to try out the Shredders. The weapons were Earth’s contribution to the ship. Well, most of them.”

“Most of them?”

“There was a limit to how much Tri-I was willing to let me have. I had to get about a fifth of the guns from the Andalite homeworld. And I had the rest upgraded there. Still, most of it came from Earth. If there’s one thing humans can do better than any species in the galaxy, its kill stuff.”

“Just how much power does this thing have?”

“With the proper pilot,” he paused and pointed to himself, “I could bring down a Dome Ship.”

“Why would you want to bring down a Dome Ship? Got some problems with the Andalites?”

“Remember Samilin? You never know.”

Samilin-Corrath-Gahar was the captain about the *Ascalin*.

He was a traitor and almost got us killed. “I usually leave the paranoia up to Marco.”

“I’ll remember that.” Then, with no warning, we took off. The ship was silent as death. Wait, that’s a bad simile. I’ve never seen death be quiet. It usually involves screaming and bleeding and begging for your life.

“Shouldn’t we tell Marco and the others where we’re going?” I suggested.

“Right you are.” A moment later, a hologram of Marco was being projected from the ceiling. “Jake? What’s up?”

“My old friend and I are taking a little trip to visit his mother. Maybe we’ll bring back a souvenir.”

“How are you getting there?”

“We’re taking his car.”

Tobias interrupted. “There’s no need to talk in code. I had the Chee rig this thing with enough signal jammers that no one can eavesdrop. Erek tried and not even he could manage it.”

“You sure put a lot of work into this,” I noted.

The ship knifed through space so fast I thought something had gone wrong. But Tobias was in control. The ship hovered in Earth’s orbit, watching the planet. Finally, Tobias said, “Look at Earth. Both of you.”

They did. He turned to Marco. “When the war was over, what did you get out of it?”

Marco looked at him. “A mansion, a couple million dollars, everything I wanted.” He sounded a little ashamed of it.

“And you?” Tobias said to me.

I thought. “I got my family back. Most of it. I got back being able to sleep at night without having to worry if I would get to wake up the next morning. I got galaxy wide fame and respect.”

“Yeah. I got this ship. It’s all I have to show for my hard work.”

“We never did it for the reward,” Marco reminded him. “Not even me.”

“I know. That isn’t what this is about. Marco, you got your mother back. You only profited from this. Everything you suffered through was worth it.”

“Your mother came back, too,” he reminded Tobias.

“It’s not the same. She doesn’t even remember me. It’s too late for me to have a mother. The most she can ever be to me is a friend. Jake, you can sort of relate. You lost your brother.”

I nodded. My last order in the first war had gotten my

brother Tom killed. By Rachel. That's one of the decisions that made me decide to pass the torch if it ever came to war again.

“Now imagine that it wasn't just your brother. That your parents died, too. And that you weren't human anymore and the people you thought might be able to fix you can't. And the only reason you were hanging in for so long is gone. If you have anything at all to show for all you suffered, you'd put as much work into it as I have into this ship. Because it's all I have.”

“What's it called?” Marco asked after a pause.

“The *Reliquary*.”

CHAPTER 7

The *Reliquary* was as fast as Tobias said it was. We cut through Z-space in a week. Z-space was constantly reconfiguring, so you never knew how long it would take to get from one place to another. The same trip could take three years or three days.

Z-space was nothing worth talking about. A big bunch of white nothingness where we could exceed the speed of light. Take that, *c*.

We popped out of Z-space in sight of the Andalite homeworld. I had never been there before. An Andalite appeared in hologram form in the middle of the lounge. “You are flying an unknown ship in restricted space. Identify yourself immediately.”

Tobias spoke up. “My name is Tobias, Captain of the *Reliquary*. We have clearance.”

“Stand by while I check,” the Andalite ordered. A moment later, his stalk eyes perked up. “You are cleared for landing in bay zero-zero-seven at the eastern equator. Welcome back, sir.”

“Good to be back. Do me a favor. Keep my arrival a

secret. No need to get everyone excited.”

“As you wish, sir.”

It was weird to hear an Andalite with a spoken voice. The hologram couldn't project thought-speak, so it sounded like he had a human voice. Disorienting.

We docked. Tobias turned to me. “Best that you're not seen here. It'll lead to something. I want to keep this as quiet as possible.”

“Any ideas? Earth morphs are definitely out. A falcon would stick out here like a Hork-bajir in a bookstore.”

“A lot of Andalites have Earth morphs now. Birds and such. We'd be noticed, but no one would know who we were. Especially not me. So many reds floating around nowadays...”

We morphed to birds. I made it to peregrine falcon in about thirty seconds. He was a red tailed hawk in half that time. For years, he had lived as a hawk. He had only been a human for a couple weeks.

This was the first time I saw the Andalite homeworld and I was glad I was in the air. The entire planet was beautiful. People think Earth looks good, but it doesn't have anything on the Andalite world. Not if you like trees and flowers and all that.

Andalites are grazers. They eat by crushing grass under their hooves and absorbing the nutrients. So for them, it was vitally important that they keep as much of their planet green as possible.

By green, I mean a sort of bluish green that matched the fur of the Andalites. That was the main sort of grass, the kind that covered most of the planet. But it came in other shades and, presumably, flavors.

Andalite trees weren't like our trees. They didn't take up much space. They grew straight up out of the ground, and most looked like giant stalks of multicolored asparagus.

Tobias pointed out some places to me. He had been here before and knew the way much better than I did. Some fenced in areas with multicolored grass in their fields were café's where Andalites could get some different flavors of grass.

There were also a lot of human food chains spread out all over the landscape. Andalites have no real sense of taste. Not like humans, at any rate. So a lot of the ones who could get to Earth acquired human morphs and went to town.

I wondered not for the first time if we were in danger of corrupting the Andalites. I suspected they were easily addicted to stuff, like food or drinks. It wouldn't be a far step from

Whoppers to, say, cocaine. And although Andalites on coke sounds like fun, the thought scarred me. You don't want a whacked out guy who has a tail with a blade that can cut you in half before you realize you've ticked him off.

Tobias wheeled around and led me back to the city where we docked our ship. There were only three cities on the Andalite world. <Alloran's location will be registered with the military,> he told me. <When I saw him, he was on one of the Dome ships guarding the Yeerk homeworld. Someone here will know where he is right now.>

<Why would they tell us?> I asked.

<The Andalites value family a lot. They'd tell me where he is. And they'd probably tell you just about anything if we were willing to tell them who you were. But I don't think it'll come to that.>

<So what, we just go to him and ask him to come with us?> I questioned. <Will he do it?>

<He's part of my family.>

I thought about that. Tobias's family, at least the part he acknowledged, was always ready for a fight. Elfangor, Ax, Tobias. Even Loren, really. If this Alloran kid was anything like them, he'd be the first on the front lines.

CHAPTER 8

Andalites are, by and large, a decent people. There're some bad apples in every bunch, of course, but most of them are decent guys. But they do have some serious personality flaws.

One of which is a very large rod rammed up the collective rear end of the entire species. This is why the secretary in Ministry of War wouldn't break the rules and tell us a single thing.

<I am sorry, sir, but I cannot divulge information about personnel on active duty.>

“But I'm his brother,” Tobias insisted.

<That is unlikely. Our records indicate that his only immediate relatives are his mother and a half brother. And that said brother is a hawk.>

“People change,” Tobias argued. “I am Tobias. Ask me anything he would know.”

<I have no idea what he would know,> the secretary answered. <Unless you can provide some sort of verification, I cannot tell you anything.>

Tobias looked at me. “Was Ax like this when we first met

him?”

“Pretty much,” I answered.

Tobias turned back to the Andalite. “Just get him on a hologram. He’ll tell you who I am.”

<I cannot call him up unless I have proof of your identity.>

“Then Call Elfangor-Semitur-Trilum. He can tell you who I am, too.”

<Again, I cannot call him.>

Tobias slumped and put his forehead on the desk. To me, he said, “Can you believe this?”

“Yes.” Okay, so I wasn’t exactly being helpful. But what could I do?

Tobias looked up. “Call Marco. The Animorph. He’ll tell you who I am.”

The Andalite put his hand to a red square on the desk. After a moment, he said, <I am sorry, but that channel is restricted. It cannot be accessed from any military installation.>

“Sounds like Marco,” I said.

“You’re not being helpful.”

“Neither are you,” I pointed out.

“Fine, then. You do something.”

I stepped forward, “Hi. My name is Jake. Yeah, that Jake. This is official Animorph business we’re on. Will you help us out?”

<I will need to see some form of identification.>

“Don’t you recognize me? I mean, come on. I’ve got the most famous face in the galaxy!”

<And one of the most easily impersonated ones. Besides, all humans look alike to me.>

I looked at Tobias. “Got a backup plan?”

“Who’s in charge here?” he asked the Andalite.

<Prince Asculan-Semiture-Langor.>

“Wasn’t that the guy who led that Dome ship to earth? The one who showed up once the fighting was done?” Tobias asked me.

I thought about it. “Yeah, that was him.”

“He’ll recognize us. We need to speak to him,” Tobias said to the secretary.

The secretary put his hand on the red panel again. A moment later, Asculan appeared at the foot of the dropshaft. His stalk eyes stretched to their maximum length when he saw us. I think he was surprised.

“Prince Asculan,” I said to him. “We need to get some

information and your boy here wouldn't give it to us."

The prince turned a stalk eye to the secretary. <Good work.> To us, he said, <I am sorry, but my men have their orders. What is it you need to know?>

Tobias answered him. "We need to know how to find an Andalite named Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor."

<Why?>

"I can't check in on my own brother?"

<Who are you? We haven't been introduced.>

Tobias turned to me. "This whole human body thing is getting old." To Asculan, he said, "I'm Tobias. The Animorph. You know, the only person who would be calling Alloran his brother. Where is he?"

<He has been sent to serve under Princess Estrid-Corill-Darrath on the Hork-bajir world.>

"Princess Estrid?" Tobias asked. "When did females start getting promoted. Or even recruited?"

Asculan seemed to slump. <You can thank humans for that. Some woman named Oprah started speaking out for "equal" treatment for females. The entire war council was against it, but she swayed the people.>

Tobias nodded. "I know the pain. Thanks, Prince."

CHAPTER 9

After we beat the Yeerks on Earth, they were mostly defeated all across the galaxy. The Andalites were able to blockade their homeworld, as well as that of the Hork-bajir

There were a lot of Yeerk outposts still on the Hork-bajir planet. The Andalites didn't have the ambition or will to go in after them, and humans didn't have the resources. And the Hork-bajir didn't have the brainpower.

I had been to the Hork-bajir world twice. The first time, we came to grow a colony of rebel Hork-bajir to fight the Yeerks. The second time, I came to stop the One from getting a bunch of Yeerks for his invasion of Earth.

What I found scared me to death. The entire fleet had been wiped out. There were no marks on the bodies or any signs of a fight. Everyone just dropped dead.

There were more Andalites guarding the planet now. One of them was our old friend Estrid.

Estrid came to Earth back during the war with some other Andalites. Her mission had been to release a virus that would kill the Yeerks. And possibly a lot of humans as well. She changed her mind and helped us stop the guy who was going

to go ahead with it.

We never knew until then that she had made it off of Earth. Esplin had the planet thoroughly blockaded. It was amazing that she made it out. But then again, Gonrod-Isfall-Sonilli, the guy who flew her off of the planet, was an amazing pilot.

We caught up with her Dome Ship in orbit around the planet. The ship recognized the *Reliquary* and gave us a place to dock.

We caused quite a stir. The entire ship seemed to be waiting for us in the hanger by the time Tobias set the ship down. I guess living legends didn't show up here all that often.

One Andalite stepped forward and bowed his torso to us. <Prince Caysath-Winwall-Esgarrouth,> he introduced himself. <Captain of this Dome ship. Welcome aboard, Prince Jake. Tobias.>

“Finally, someone who recognizes me,” he muttered. “What gave it away?”

<The Reliquary is a unique vessel. I know the pilot. Glad to see you have taken good care of it.>

“The best,” Tobias assured him. “We need to speak to *Aristh* Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor.”

Caysath looked away and scuffed his hoof across the deck.

<I am afraid that is not possible. He has been sent down to the planet with Princess Estrid.>

“Why?” Tobias asked.

<We had readings that indicated that it was possible that the Yeerks were constructing ships down there. We sent her to check it out.>

“Why do you sound disappointed?” I asked.

<We sent her three days ago.>

“Oh.” I turned to Tobias. “We going after her?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I doubt she’s dead yet. It’s worth checking out, at least.”

Caysath led us to the bridge of the Dome Ship to brief us. He was just turning all four eyes on us to speak when I heard a thought-speak voice call out, <Tobias!>

We turned to see a young Andalite running towards us. He was maybe a little older than Ax had been at the end of the war. Tobias didn’t seem surprised to see him. “Elfangor,” he said. “Meet Jake.”

Elfangor stopped in his tracks. Tobias looked at me. “Alloran-Semitur-Corrass’s grandson,” he explained.

<I heard you were here. I can guess that you are going down after Alloran and Princess Estrid,> Elfangor said to us.

<I wish to accompany you.>

I looked at Tobias. He was the leader now. It was his call. I hoped he was smart enough not to let the kid come with us.

“Sure,” he said. “Just wait until Captain-Prince Caysath briefs us. Then we’ll head down to the planet. You have a Hork-bajir morph?”

<Yes.>

“Good. You’ll need it.”

So much for hoping he was smart. I could taste Capn’ Crunch yet again. I had the sinking feeling that by the time this was over, I wouldn’t be able to eat cereal ever again. It would be Poptarts and bagels from now on. Just another sacrifice I had to make for this war.

CHAPTER 10

<We sent her down in this area,> Caysath told us, indicating a section of land in the planet's equator near the south pole.

The Hork-bajir world was strange. Long ago, a big asteroid or something had hit one of the poles, squishing the planet. It screwed up the atmosphere and killed almost everything there.

Then the inhabitants of the planet, the Arn, used bioengineering to grow gigantic trees in valleys around the equator. Then they created a species to tend to the trees. Thus the Hork-bajir were born.

When the Yeerks took over, the Arn were killed. We helped the last of them clone the free Hork-bajir from Earth to launch a battle against the Yeerks on the Hork-bajir planet. Now the Arn were all dead. Only their creations remained.

<Those canyons are no place for an Andalite,> Caysath said. <They probably fell and died.>

Tobias nodded slowly. "It's a possibility. But I want to check it out anyway. Jake, Elfangor, and I will go down in the *Reliquary*. What can you tell us about the Yeerk presence in

the area?”

<If they’re building ships, it’ll be strong. There might even be a pool in the area. Otherwise, it will be like the rest of the planet. Little hideaways scattered here and there. Taxxon tunnels making mazes underground. Yeerk snipers in Hork-bajir bodies hiding in the trees with primed Dracon beams.>

“The usual song and dance,” Tobias sighed. He turned to me. “I think we should make a flyby first. Check out the area. See if they have a pool or something. If they’re there in enough numbers, I think we’ll have to get the others for backup.”

I nodded. “But aren’t we in a bit of a time crunch? The longer they’re down there, the less likely it is that we’ll find them alive.”

Tobias thought for a moment. Then, he decided. “We’ll go down in the *Reliquary*. Then, I want you to take the ship back to Earth, grab the others, and come back as fast as you can. Take Elfangor with you. He knows how to fly the ship.”

“You want to go down there alone?” I questioned. “That sounds too dangerous.”

“I know what I’m doing. I’ve been here before. I’ll make a base in the ruins of the Arn city and wait for you there.”

“It’ll take me nearly two weeks,” I reminded him. “That’s a long time. And Estrid and Alloran are almost certain to be dead by then.”

“I won’t be sitting on my hands waiting for you,” he answered. “I’ll be looking. You’ll probably find me back here by the time the others get here. By then, we’ll know.”

“All of this might be unnecessary,” I reminded him. “There might be only a few Yeerks in the area. We won’t know until we look.”

<I can give you a homing beacon to contact us for transportation off of the planet,> Caysath offered, holding out a small, circular device to Tobias.

He took it. “Thanks. Space-taxi.”

<Do you think we will find them alive?> Elfangor asked.
<Alloran is my *shorm*.>

Tobias looked him in his main eyes. “I know what it’s like, not to know if your *shorm* is alive or dead. Wanting to help him but unable to do anything. But don’t worry, we’ll get yours. And then we’ll get mine.”

CHAPTER 11

The *Reliquary* swept over the Hork-bajir world, slicing

through the night sky like a scalpel. We couldn't get too low because of the trees in the way. They were the biggest trees in the galaxy, some of them thousands of feet tall.

Still, Tobias managed to get closer than I was comfortable with. He flew between trees a lot, tilting the ship at crazy angles that I was sure were unsafe. Only the artificial gravity kept me in my place.

If I were with any other pilot, I would have run for the nearest escape pod. But Tobias knew the skies better than anyone. Flying the *Reliquary* may not have been the same as flying as a hawk, but I still felt confident in Tobias.

When we neared the place that Caysath had indicated, I knew that I would have to go back to Earth. The trees stopped abruptly, cut away by the Yeerks.

Tobias pulled the ship up, almost into the atmosphere. "Don't want to warn them I'm here," he explained. "I'll set us down in the city. We can take another look as hawks."

He maneuvered the ship through the air until we were above an empty-seeming stretch of the valley. Below us gaped a hole that led to the core of the planet. Tobias gave me a smile. Then he tilted the ship and let us drop nose-first into the darkness.

You know that scene in the original *Star Wars* movie when they're flying through the trench in the Death Star? It was like that. Except a lot faster. One second, stone walls rushed by on all sides. If Tobias twitched in the slightest, we'd be dead.

The next thing I knew, G forces were snapping my head back and pulling my cheeks around behind my neck. I was plastered against my seat.

We were floating slowly over the ruins of the Arn city. Below us was the molten core of the planet. There were narrow ledges leading to doors in the walls of the canyon.

The entire place was covered in scorch marks. No doubt they came from Yeerk Dracon beams.

Tobias noticed the problem first. "There's nowhere to land the ship," he said to me.

"What do we do?"

"Elfangor, grab the node and keep this thing hovering. I'll go hawk and fly out. Jake will come with me. We'll do some reconnaissance and meet you back here. Whatever you do, don't move unless you've got a fight coming."

Elfangor nodded and Tobias and I morphed. Part of the roof pulled back and we flew out. The planet's core gave me the best thermal of my life. I was above the trees in less than a

minute. Tobias was up even faster.

As we flew, I asked Tobias, <Tell me about Santorelli. When you first showed up, you said you weren't ready to talk about it. Now's as good a time as any.>

<Okay.> He paused. <He was my father.>

<What? I thought Elfangor was your father. The first Elfangor, not the one back in your ship.>

<He was. Biologically speaking. Well, not biologically because he was in a human morph, but...well something. Biologically is the best word.>

<So how is Santorelli your father?>

<I'm not really sure. The Ellimist or Crayak or someone must have screwed with time because he was my stepfather. The man I thought was my father until I found out about Elfangor.>

<And you're just now remembering?>

<Yes and no. I always had the memories. But I never realized it was him until he died.>

<That's a heavy load,> I said.

<I know. I don't like it. Someone has taken too much of an interest in me. By all rights, I shouldn't even exist. The Ellimist said he erased all evidence of Elfangor's time on

Earth. I shouldn't be here.

<And now they've put Santorelli into my life. Into my past. Someone out there is up to something. They want to use me for some purpose and I don't like it.>

<Why not? I mean, no one likes being used, but let's face it, they've only helped you. Like you said, without them, you wouldn't even exist. Sounds to me like you owe whoever it is.>

<That's the problem. I never wanted to owe anyone anything. I've done everything in my power to avoid that.>

<So this isn't in your power to avoid. Some things aren't. You just have to go with it.>

<Maybe, maybe not. But we stood up to Crayak and the One. And I'll stand up to whoever is doing this to me. Maybe I'll help them, but I won't be forced into it. If I have to, I'll fight them to the death.>

<That'll be a quick fight,> I muttered.

CHAPTER 12

<This is bad,> I said. An understatement. I used to leave that sort of thing to Ax, but it was up to me now. At least until we found this Alloran kid.

<We've seen worse.> Tobias was right, but not by much. Half the Yeerks on the Hork-bajir planet had to be below us. Standing around the pool.

Six trees had been downed and put on their sides. The Yeerks had arranged them into an enormous pool. You know that pool by the Washington Monument? Think of something that was about five times bigger.

The trees were lined with Hork-bajir. Not real Hork-bajir, of course. Controllers captured by the Yeerks. More Hork-bajir patrolled the ground, looking for any sign of enemy activity. But that wasn't the end of it.

Taxxons. Like giant centipedes, as big as a sewer pipe. They were crawling all over the ground, digging out tunnels all around the pool. Hork-bajir were going in and out of them.

These guys were prepared for a war. Andalite bombing runs wouldn't do much against them. Not with their underground bunkers. They probably had a pool down there,

too.

<Definitely something going on here,> Tobias said to me. <This is all too neat, too methodical. They're ready for an attack.>

<They probably caught Estrid. Or at least saw her. They see Andalites skulking around and realize the jig is up. They have to be ready,> I answered.

<Maybe. Or maybe whoever's in charge here is just smart.>

I shook my head. Which is strange to do as a peregrine falcon. <It's all too new. The Taxxons are still excavating. If this was just regular preparation, they'd have been done long ago.>

<Maybe they're mining. You heard what Caysath said about ships.>

<Then where are the production yards?> I asked. <They have to build them somewhere.>

Tobias thought about it. <Underground. That's the last place Andalites would think to look. They're an overland species. I doubt any Andalite has ever even been underground.>

I just nodded my head. <That could be it. But you're being

unusually optimistic. The Tobias I knew would have thought Estrid and Alloran were dead the instant Caysath scuffed his hoof.>

<You always said the leader had to pretend there was hope, especially when there isn't any.>

Oh. Yeah. I had told him that once. <So you're going to hold out here for two weeks without any hope at all?>

<I'm used to hopeless. It's my normal. I wouldn't know what do with optimism. But this isn't about my hope. This is about Elfangor.>

<What about him?>

<He's my backup plan, remember? And if we have to recruit him, he has to know that we did everything in our power and some things that aren't to save Alloran. And, to be perfectly honest, it's about me.>

<You? That's a first.>

<Alloran is all the family I have left, with Ax as a Controller.>

<Ax isn't dead yet.>

<No, but it's easier to think of him as being dead. It'll make it easier to kill him if we ever have the chance to do it.>

<You'd just kill him? Wouldn't you at least try to hold him

for three days and save his life?> I asked.

<You once thought you could save Tom. And to be honest, that made things much worse than they could have been. I'm not going to blame you for it, but I won't make the same mistake.>

<Then I hope you can live with that. I doubt I could,> I said to him.

<Jake? You already are.>

CHAPTER 13

We left Tobias in the ruins of the Arn city. He told us he'd be fine. I didn't exactly believe him, but I didn't think he would get himself killed. He knew how to take care of himself.

Then it was just me and Elfangor in the *Reliquary*. He set the ship to autopilot and then relaxed. Tobias had fussed over every little thing the ship did; Elfangor let it take care of itself, which it did better than we ever could have.

The *Reliquary* even cleaned itself periodically. I realized that I could have lived on this ship comfortably. For a little while, anyway. By the time I got back to Earth, gathered the others, and made my way back to the Hork-bajir world, I would have been on the ship for about three weeks. I'd probably lose it by then.

I passed the time by talking to Elfangor. If Alloran was already dead, he would be our new Animorph, so it would pay to get to know him.

One day, I asked him an odd question. "Elfangor, I'm curious. Why did Alloran's father give him that name? Why did Prince Elfangor name his son after his greatest enemy?"

<That is it, Prince Jake.>

“Don’t call me Prince.” It was a reflex.

<But you are a prince. You were granted that rank by the Andalite military after the defeat of the Yeerks on Earth.>

I sighed. I never should have agreed to that, but Ax had talked me into it. “Just answer the question.”

<You must understand something, Prince Jake. Esplin 9466 was Prince Elfangor’s enemy, not my grandfather. Prince Elfangor named his son Alloran to remind him of that. No matter how long he fought the Yeerk, it was the slug who was his enemy, not the Andalite. His son was a living reminder of that.>

That sounded like the Elfangor I had heard about. Then, it was time for the younger Elfangor to ask me an odd question.

<Would you do me a favor?>

“What?”

<Morph the tiger.>

I stared at him. “Why?”

<My grandfather often spoke of his time fighting you. He was very impressed with your tiger morph and I was hoping I could see it. If it is not an imposition, of course.>

I shook my head. Then, I concentrated and felt the changes

begin. It was a familiar sensation, almost natural to me now.

This time, it was the fur that came first. It sprouted thickly all over my body. Orange and black stripes grew from my pale human flesh.

I dropped to all fours as my bones thickened and my joints changed direction. My hands widened into paws. My nails grew into claws.

I noticed the subtle shift as my eyes switched into tiger vision. I was almost blown away by the sudden sense of hearing and smell like nothing I had as a human. My teeth filled my mouth.

Last came my tail. It sprouted in one motion from the base of my spine. I swished it around like the cat I was. Then, I started stalking about the *Reliquary*.

I was in complete control of the morph; I had too much experience not to be. Elfangor was completely safe from harm.

He was putting a lot of trust in me, I realized. I know I wouldn't stand in a ship with an alien beast. Especially not after my grandfather filled my head with tales of how deadly it was.

It occurred to me to ask him. <Elfangor, why are you so trusting of me? I could kill you right now.>

<You are Prince Jake, the Animorph. If I cannot trust you, I do not know who I can trust.>

A good answer. Of course, in true Andalite style, he followed it up by saying, <I was told by Prince Aximili that glue is tasty. Is there any aboard this vessel, Prince Jake?>

<Elfangor? Don't eat glue. In fact, don't eat anything unless I tell you to. When we get to Earth, it might be best for you to stay in the ship.>

<Andalites are not so uncommon anymore, Prince Jake,> he pointed out.

<That isn't what I'm worried about.>

<Then what worries you?>

<Babysitting. And Marco. Never eat anything he tells you to eat, he's not a good influence. He'll want to drag you to the mall and make you sample everything there.>

<That does not sound bad.>

<Not for you, but it'll attract attention if we're with you. We try to maintain a low profile on Earth. We're celebrities, you see, and the human media follows us relentlessly. We'd never get any peace.>

<Would I suffer the same difficulties?>

<The grandson of Visser Three? You'd better believe it. If

I have my way, no one will ever know we were on Earth at all.>

CHAPTER 15

It was another boring day on the *Reliquary*. We watched Z-space flash by; there wasn't anything to watch. We couldn't even get TV reception in Z-space because television signals were only broadcasted in real space.

I couldn't listen to music, either; all Tobias had on the ship I found to be pretty dark and depressing. Or else it was pretty violent; too violent to listen to with a kid around, even if he was an *aristh*.

I glanced at some numbers on the computer, calculating how much longer we'd be in Z-space, then I glanced back at the white nothingness.

I looked back at the computer. The numbers hadn't changed. I turned to Elfangor. "Elfangor, the computer..." I trailed off because the Andalite wasn't moving at all.

He was frozen in place. So was the computer. And, I realized, so was the ship. It was hard to tell because Z-space showed nothing, but I realized that was what the lack of numerical movement meant. Time had stopped.

"Good job, Jake," I heard a sneering voice say from behind me. I turned to see the Drode. As always, he looked

like a small, pruney dinosaur with a face that was too close to a human's for my comfort. "It only took you three hours to notice."

The Drode served Crayak. Tobias told me Crayak was on our side now, but I didn't quite buy it. Still, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Then I thought of David. The Yeerks were his enemies, but he turned out to be just as bad, if not worse. Crayak wouldn't forget what we had done to him. And he had a bit of a grudge against me.

The Drode laughed at me. "Big Jake. Jake the Yeerk-killer. Perfect Jake, Fearless Leader." Then he paused. "But you're not the leader anymore, are you? And you never were quite so fearless as you'd have us all believe."

"What do you want?" I demanded. I used to be impressed with the time freeze thing, but it was getting old fast.

"Can't I just pop in to say hi?"

"You could. You just wouldn't. Why did Crayak send you?"

"To give you a choice. To offer you a deal."

"No. No deal with Crayak. Not now, not ever." I refused. I couldn't trust Crayak at all. The Ellimist, who was supposed to

be on our side, had screwed us over with bad deals before; Crayak, who had never been our friend, couldn't be trusted one bit.

“You should really hear what I have to offer,” the Drode said, waving an irritating finger.

“I don't need to hear it. I know the kind of deals your master offers. There is no way I'm ever going to accept one of them.”

“Jake, Jake, this is a unique opportunity. It's one you really can't afford to pass up. You wouldn't want to do it to yourself. Or to poor Tobias.”

I shook my head. “I don't know what you're getting at but cut it out. Just get out of here. Take your poisoned tongue and go.”

The Drode shrugged. “I'm not going anywhere until you hear me out. And in case you haven't noticed, you aren't leaving either. Z-space; nowhere to go, so you might as well pay attention.”

I considered morphing and attacking him, but knew how futile that would be. I don't know exactly what the Drode was capable of, but he had to be beyond physical assaults. Or was he?

He smiled as though he could read my thoughts. Maybe he could. “Would you really try it, Jake? Even if it could work, would it really be better for you to attack me than listen? But please, do it. Give in to that dark nature that you try so hard to hide.”

His face twisted until it was a hideous parody of Emperor Palpatine. “Use your anger,” he taunted. “Strike me down and your journey to the Dark Side will be complete.” He laughed and his face snapped back it’s normal. “But no, you would never do it. You just don’t have it in you.”

I didn’t really have a choice, so I took a seat by he computer. “Fine, talk. Fast.”

“Iofferyouaonceinalifetimeopportunitytomakerightsomeofthemanymanythingsyouvemadesoverywrong,” he said, far too rapidly for me to understand.

“You think you’re funny?” I asked.

“You think you’re intimidating?” he responded. “I offer you a once in a lifetime opportunity to make right some of the many, many things you’ve made so very wrong,” he repeated, slower this time.

“You might not realize this, but neither my master nor the Ellimist has power over the afterlife. That belongs to a

different being.”

“Who?”

He paused. Then, “He would like you to call him Azmaveth. In one of your human languages, it means Strong as Death. My master had something he wanted, so Azmaveth traded Crayak something that my master wanted to get it.”

“What did Crayak have that the guy who rules the afterlife wanted?”

“A boy named David; you might remember him.”

“I might have known. So what did Azmaveth give you in exchange for David?”

His face lit up with the most sadistic, evil smile I have ever seen. “Rachel.”

I saw the trap now. “So Crayak’s willing to bring her back to life. But for what price?”

“A low one, I promise,” the Drode answered. “She was always our favorite and we’re more than willing to put her back in the game. Although, Crayak is a big fan of the new, improved Tobias.”

“What price?” I repeated.

“You already know.”

I did know. Crayak would trade a life for a life, an

Animorph for an Animorph. And there was only one Animorph he truly wanted: me.

“That’s right, Jake. Rachel can come back from the dead. Tobias can be happy again. And the Yeerks can get a whole new kind of fear. All for the small price of your life.”

CHAPTER 15

I spent the rest of the trip back to Earth in a daze. I couldn't stop thinking about the Drode's offer. A few weeks ago, I never would have considered it. I was the leader; Earth needed me.

Now, things were different. Tobias was the leader and I was just another soldier. In that capacity, Rachel was superior to me. She might do more good than I could.

Crayak knew it, too. That was why he waited until I had passed the torch. Leave it to him to find the one offer I might consider.

I've asked myself a lot over these last few years if I would trade my life for Rachel's. If I could go back in time and change it so that I died instead of her, would I do it?

Recently, we came across the Time Matrix and I was given the option to change it. I had resisted the temptation, but it wasn't easy. If we hadn't put the thing in the sun, I might have fallen to it. That was one of the reasons I gave Tobias and Santorelli the order that led to Santorelli's death.

I wished I could talk to Tobias, but that wasn't a possibility. But I'd be with Cassie soon and she'd be a help.

Cassie and I weren't as close as we used to be, but we were still friends and she could still tell what someone was feeling.

Marco would be good, too. He'd look at it objectively and weigh my life against Rachel's. He'd assign us values and decide who would be the bigger help in the war against the Yeerks. And then, because he was my best friend, he'd tell me not to kill myself.

I suddenly realized that I couldn't ask either of them. Cassie would never trade the life of one friend for another and I couldn't ask her to do it. Just asking the question would tear her up inside because she'd never stop asking herself if she was right or wrong.

And there was no way Marco could be objective about this. He could be ruthless, but never this much, even if he thought he could. When all was said and done, we were still Jake and Marco; he'd never trade that for anyone's life.

I couldn't ask Jeanne or Elfangor, of course. Neither of them knew Rachel or me very well. Their opinion wouldn't really be worth very much. No matter how much I respected them as people, they just couldn't fully understand the situation.

As for Tobias...honestly, I have no idea. Part of me would

like to think he'd never consider sacrificing me to save her. Another part would like to think that he wouldn't even hesitate to do it. If he wouldn't trade me for her, maybe he was too far gone for the Tobias I knew to ever come back.

This was a decision I had to make on my own. Just knowing how hard it was to decide made me hate Crayak all the more. He was doing this to torture me. No matter what I did, I was screwed.

If I turned down his offer, I had to live the rest of my life knowing that I'd given up Rachel's last chance at life; Tobias's last chance at happiness. And maybe the entire human race, too.

But if I did it, I didn't know what would happen. I assumed Crayak would get my soul, but what did that mean? Would I be like the Drode, a new servant of his? I didn't know, but the thought was intolerable to me. I could never serve Crayak, even for Rachel.

Then again, Crayak had Rachel now. Could I force her to live a life (so to speak) that I wouldn't? As a leader, I had always been sure never to ask my people to do something I wouldn't. Even at the end, when I sent Rachel to her death, I didn't ask that of her. If she had asked for it, I would have

gone in her place. How could I break that rule now?

These thoughts ran around and around in my head for the next few days. Elfangor noticed my sudden silence but I think he put it down to cabin fever. He knew I had been on this ship for a long time.

He had been on ships for a while, too, I reminded myself. Then again, a Dome ship was hardly the same thing as this fighter. Still, I knew Andalites didn't do well with enclosed spaces. The fact that he wasn't freaking out made me think he was tougher than I thought he was.

Of course, he was the grandson of Alloran-Semitur-Corass, the Andalite who survived being Esplin's host since before I was born. Alloran was a tough War-Prince back in his free days; a ruthless tactician and a brave warrior. He was one of the first to see the Yeerk threat. He was the one who unleashed a Quantum Virus on the Hork-bajir world, killing most of the population so the Yeerks couldn't use them as shock troops.

I've thought a lot about that decision over the years. Would I have done the same thing? Sometimes, I like to tell myself that I wouldn't. And other times, it makes me feel better to think I would. I still don't know if it was right or wrong. I'm not even sure if right and wrong still exist.

I lived in my thoughts for a few days. Then, Elfangor managed to get my attention. <Prince Jake? We have reached Earth. Where shall I land?>

I thought about it. Then, I gave him Marco's address. When this thing landed in his backyard, he'd be really mad. And, when he saw what it could do, I knew he'd forgive me instantly.

CHAPTER 16

Marco and Jeanne came out to meet me on the lawn. Marco, as I predicted, was furious. “Jake! Where did you get that, why is it on my lawn, and why do you have a small Andalite with you?”

“It’s Tobias’s ship, I needed a place to land, and this is Elfangor, Alloran-Semitur-Corass’s grandson.”

“This the souvenir you were talking about?” Marco asked me.

I shook my head. “Maybe, but Tobias is looking for someone on the Hork-bajir world. Do you remember Estrid?”

“The girl Ax had that crush on? Yeah, I remember. She tried to kill the human race, too, Jake.”

That was a complicated story, and in the end, Estrid had turned out not to be so bad, but that wasn’t the point right now. “The Andalites over the Hork-bajir world sent her down to investigate something a week or so ago and they never heard from her.”

“So what? She isn’t our problem,” Marco argued.

“I know, but she had an *Aristh* with her named Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor. He’s Tobias’s half-brother.” Marco opened his

mouth but I raised my hand to stop him. “Don’t ask, I don’t really know. But we have to get Alloran to safety.”

“Where is Tobias?” Jeanne asked.

“He’s still on the Hork-bajir world, so we don’t have a lot of time. Get some things packed, I’m going to go and tell Cassie what’s going on. It’ll take a few minutes, so be ready when I come back.”

Without pausing, I began to morph. Peregrine falcon, the fastest animal on Earth. A peregrine could reach more than 200 miles per hour in a dive. It was one of my first morphs and is still one of my favorite.

First came the feathers. They spread across my body like a tattoo. Then, they erupted into the third dimension. It was pretty cool, watching my skin sprout white and grey feathers.

Next came the shrinking. It’s kind of like falling, only, instead of you getting closer to the ground, the ground is getting closer to you. It’s like Earth is reaching up to smack you in the face.

My jaw extended and hardened into a beak. My feet became talons and my arms became wings. I could feel the itching as my bones realigned and hollowed, and my ears could hear the squishing noise of my organs changing to those

of the bird.

Finally came the senses. The sight was far better than a human could even imagine. I could see everything; every blade of grass in the yard, every hair on Elfangor's body. And my hearing was incredible, too. I could almost hear Marco's heart beating.

I took off. It's hard to fly long distances as a falcon because they have small wings. The best way to fly is to ride a thermal, a pillar of warm air, up into the sky and then soar away. Falcons may dive better than anything else alive, but they don't soar as well as hawks and eagles.

Still, I had a lot of practice, so it wasn't too hard for me to get to Cassie's home. I could see her walk into the barn, which was good. There was no reason for her parents to know I was there.

As sad as it may sound, Cassie and I still lived with our parents. We had come too close to losing them, I guess. Marco had managed to move on, but Cassie and I tried to go back to regular lives.

I flew through the hay loft of the barn. <Cassie, I...> I trailed off because I saw that she wasn't alone. She was with her boyfriend, Ronnie Chambers. And they were having a bit

of an adult moment.

Ronnie pulled back. “I’ll, uh, go outside then,” he said to her. He got out of there quickly.

<Sorry,> I said to her.

Cassie shrugged. “It’s not your fault. What’s up? Did you and Tobias get whatever it was you were looking for?”

<Not exactly.> I told her what I had told Jeanne and Marco. She agreed to pack quickly. We would bring the ship around to get her.

Before I left, I felt that I had to say something to her about what I had walked in on (so to speak). <Uh, look, Cassie, about what I just saw...>

“Don’t worry about it, Jake,” she said to me.

<I know, it’s just that...> Should I really say what I was thinking? Probably not. I did it anyway. <You never did anything like that with me.>

“Well, Jake, to be fair, it’s different with Ronnie.” Then, in a voice I probably wasn’t meant to hear, she added, “He has time for me.” Of course, falcon hearing is excellent. I heard every word clear as a bell.

<Cassie, that’s not fair. I wanted to have time for you but with the Yeerks and all...>

“I know. It wasn’t fair to either of us. That’s why it didn’t work out in the end. I’m not blaming you, but that doesn’t change facts.”

<I know. Cassie...> I paused. <Do you ever think we could give it another shot?> I said that very quickly.

She didn’t react like I thought she would. She got really angry. “Jake if you were a human I’d smack you. I’m with Ronnie now, as you clearly saw.”

<I know, I don’t know what I was thinking,> I said quickly. I left before we could get into a fight. She’d cool off pretty quickly. Still, I was in for another very uncomfortable week aboard the *Reliquary*.

CHAPTER 17

“The *Reliquary*?” Cassie asked when I told her the name of the ship. “That’s pretty depressing.”

We were lifting off from the woods by her house, ready to go to the Hork-bajir world. The ship had seemed big enough earlier, but now it was cramped. Four humans and an Andalite just weren’t meant to inhabit it for any extended period of time.

“Why? What does it mean?” I asked her.

“A reliquary is where you put artifacts from the life of a saint. Personal objects, religious symbols, sometimes even their remains. It’s where you put what’s left of a dead person.”

I thought about the ship and about the man who owned it. And about what the name suggested he thought of himself. I didn’t have much to say after that.

The trip was pretty uncomfortable. Aside from the cramped space, there was a lot of awkwardness between Cassie and me.

Marco and Jeanne picked up on that pretty quickly. Jeanne took it as a cue to keep her distance. Marco took it as an invitation to torment us.

Still, I almost welcomed the change. The monotony of the previous trip would have killed me. I noticed it was slowly crushing Elfangor. He had grown silent and withdrawn. It was probably from not being able to feed properly for two weeks. I didn't blame him for being a little depressed.

When we came in sight of the Dome ship, it was a welcomed relief. I contacted Caysath as soon as I could. "Prince Caysath, its Jake. Any word from Tobias or the others?"

On the hologram, Caysath shook his head. "No sign. I had expected word one way or another by now, but Tobias has not contacted us."

"Then we'll go planetside."

"As you wish. I wish you luck, Prince Jake."

"Don't call me prince," I snapped almost automatically. I turned to Elfangor. "We can take you back to the Dome ship if you want."

<No, not if I have a choice. I want to go down and look for Alloran and Tobias.>

I nodded. "Alright, then. Bring up a map of the area we scouted when we were here with Tobias."

Elfangor nudged the control node and a hologram of the

Hork-bajir planet came up. It zoomed in to show an area that looked slightly familiar.

“We need to find a place to land,” I told him. “We know there’s nowhere to set the ship down in the Arn city, but that’s where Tobias will be so try to get us close to it.”

Elfangor nodded and the ship zoomed down towards the planet. We managed to find a clearing of trees not too far from one of the entrances to the city, so we set the *Reliquary* down there.

“Okay, people, its time to think. We’re far behind enemy lines on a very hostile world. Tobias has been here alone for two weeks, so our first priority is to find him. We’ll make our base here, on the *Reliquary*, so if you get separated, come back here.”

We morphed to birds of prey and headed out. I was my falcon. Marco and Cassie were matching ospreys, both bigger than me. Jeanne was a red-tailed hawk like Tobias used to be; she had chosen the morph because red tails were the most popular birds in the galaxy. Elfangor was a Kafit bird.

Kafit birds are strange. They have six pairs of wings, which is five more than any Earth bird I can think of. They’ve also got razor sharp beaks that are even deadlier than the usual

bird of prey. And they're oddly colored; slivery blue and pink, mostly.

I don't know how good its senses were, but I assumed they were at least as good as mine. A Kafit had the look of a bird of prey, so I assumed it had great eyesight and hearing.

We flew towards the canyon that led to the core of the planet. There was a problem, though. We couldn't fly down into it. The updraft made it impossible to do. <Any ideas?> I asked the group.

<I wish Tobias was here,> Marco complained. <The one time his freakish knowledge of flying would come in handy and he's off playing Rambo. Figures.>

I let the updraft take me into the sky. Maybe from up there, I could see better. I was higher than I had ever been before, more than a mile up. And then I got one of my worst ideas ever.

I tucked my wings into my side and dove straight down towards the planet's core. I realized about halfway down that it was a terrible idea. I'd almost certainly overshoot the city and end up incinerating myself.

If I pulled out too quickly, I'd break my wings and that would be the end of me. But I didn't have enough room or

time to get out of the dive slower.

My only chance was to overtake the city and then slowly pull out. I'd have to let the updraft take me into the city and then pull out of the thermal. If I could.

I can't tell you the exhilaration I was feeling right then. Diving from more than a mile high was about the most exciting thing I've ever done. <YEEEEHAAAA!> I roared against my will at the same time I gave a "TSEEER!" of excitement.

<Jake what are you doing!> Marco shouted. Then I guess he realized it because he said, <Oh man this is a bad idea.> A few seconds later, I heard him shout something else. <YEEEEHAAAA!>

One by one, the others joined in. I hoped they figured out what they had to do so they didn't break themselves. I hadn't stopped to explain it to them.

I WOOSHED past the city and almost didn't notice it. Slowly, I extended my wings.

Bit by bit, I slowed, which was good. But I was too close to the core for comfort. I could feel my chest begin to burn. If I got much lower, I'd catch fire.

I managed to pull out of the dive before I actually

combusted, but I was still in pain. I floated up to the level of the city and then turned out of the thermal.

The others were already waiting. It had been easier for them, as larger birds, to pull out of their dives. Marco was ranting as I demorphed. “That was completely, totally, one-hundred percent INSANE!”

When I got my human mouth back, I said, “Marco, that wasn’t half as crazy as some things we’ve done.”

“Oh, it’s up there alright,” he insisted. “You didn’t even tell us what we were doing!”

I shrugged. “I guess I didn’t think you’d follow me so blindly.”

“Next time, we take the stairs.”

CHAPTER 18

The city of the Arn was probably impressive back in its day. Now, it was desolate. The buildings, which had been carved into the sides of the canyon, were scarred by Dracon beams and time.

Everywhere I looked, I could see what were once great machines of the Arn. The Arn were capable of making living, thinking creatures though science alone; that was how the Hork-bajir came to be. These machines were now nothing more than junk.

In all the rubble, we didn't find anything that looked like a campsite. Maybe Tobias had been trying to cover his tracks. Or maybe he hadn't been here very long. Or maybe he was dead.

"Jake, I hate to say it, but it doesn't look like Tobias is here. Or ever was," Marco said to me.

I nodded. "Then he's out in the jungle. We'll find him; we're Animorphs, after all."

We flew out of the canyon. It was kind of a shame, since we had worked so hard to get inside. Leaving was a lot easier than getting in, of course, since we could just ride the updraft

from the planet's core straight up.

After six hours of searching through the skies, we saw no sign of Tobias. I was sure he'd be keeping low, but still...

Then, as we were getting ready to head back to the *Reliquary*, Elfangor saw it. A flash of blue in a bit of open space between the trees below us. <Alloran!>

<You're sure?> I asked, already starting to follow the Andalites.

<I am certain,> he responded in typically calm Andalite manner despite the fact that he was racing through the trees as fast as he could. I was glad he was disciplined enough not to start shouting Alloran's name again.

The young Andalite noticed us and stopped running. He raised his tail instead. This had to be Alloran; no one else would look so much like Ax.

Since, with Tobias missing, I was the leader, it fell to me to speak to the kid. <Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor?>

<Yes. You are?>

<Jake, the Animorph.>

He bowed his upper body. <I am honored to meet you, Prince Jake.>

<Don't call me prince. And stop bowing, this isn't the time

or the place.>

<As you wish, Prince Jake. You are here to bring us off of this planet, are you not?>

<Yeah, that's right. Where're Tobias and Estrid?>

<I will take you to Princess Estrid. She will be better able to tell you where Tobias is than I am.>

We demorphed and followed Alloran. It was a short walk to their hiding place. They had made a base in the hollow trunk of an old, dead tree.

Estrid relaxed when she saw us. <*Aristh* Alloran, I told you not to be seen.> Well, she relaxed as much as any Andalite commander I ever met

<I am sorry, Princess, but being seen allowed me to locate Prince Jake and the other Animorphs. As well as *Aristh* Elfangor.>

<That doesn't change the fact that I specifically told you not to be seen. But there is nothing that can be done about that now.>

I interrupted them. "Look, can you do this later? Right now, tell us where Tobias is so we can all get off this rock."

<It is not as simple as that,> she said to us.

"I was afraid of that," Marco groaned.

<Shortly after we landed on this planet, Alloran and I were captured by the Yeerks. They...forced us to tell them the Andalite broadcast codes.>

“Forced?” Jeanne asked.

“As in tortured,” Marco supplied. “Why didn’t they just infest you? And how did you get away?”

<Tobias rescued us shortly after he landed here. As for the infestation, well, the Yeerk commanders did not trust anyone to have an Andalite host, and none of the commanders wished to infest a female or a child.>

“They’ve gotten picky?” Marco asked.

<Apparently. A good thing, too, because with my knowledge of chemical warfare, the Yeerks would have become much deadlier. But we have a serious problem with the broadcast codes.>

“What, exactly, are those?” I asked her.

<The weapons of every Andalite ship are equipped with a computer code that prevents the weapon from targeting and firing upon other Andalite ships. It is to avoid losses to friendly fire. But with the broadcast codes, the Yeerk ships will register with the computers as being Andalite craft.>

Marco saw it at once. “So the Yeerks will come off the

planet and destroy the Andalite fleet because the Andalites can't fire on them. Then they're free to spread out from the Hork-bajir world."

I added, "And because of the losses they've suffered here before, the Andalites won't really have the manpower to stop them. It'll be the first Yeerk war all over again."

"So why not just call the Dome ships out in space and warn them about this?" Jeanne asked.

<I would, but the Yeerks are jamming all communications to and from the planet. Tobias has been attempting to find the jammer, but with no luck so far.>

Marco shook his head. "Even with those codes, the Yeerks would need a pretty big fleet to break off of the planet. They'd need a lot of Bug fighters and a few Blade ships. And to launch a new invasion of another world, they'd need at least one Pool ship."

"They have them," I realized. "Estrid and Alloran were sent down because the Andalites suspected the Yeerks were building ships. I'm willing to bet they have a Blade ship or two, maybe even a Pool ship. At the very least, they have enough Bug fighters to cause a serious problem."

Estrid nodded. <Tobias says they have three Blade ships, a

Pool ship, and several squadrons of Bug fighters. He has been investigating their underground production yards while looking for the jammer. He says he has a plan to destroy the entire thing, but he would need to wait for your help.>

I sighed. Marco groaned. “I knew it. Alright, Jake, let’s go find Tobias and save the galaxy. Again.”

CHAPTER 19

Estrid and Alloran led us to the mouth of a Taxxon tunnel. <Tobias made this himself,> she explained. <It leads into their hangar. He should be at the bottom somewhere, watching and waiting for you.>

“Okay, so what morph?” Marco asked.

“Hork-bajir,” I told him. “They’ll blend in.” In a few minutes, we were all Hork-bajir. Normally, we don’t morph them. We have a rule against using sentient creatures for morphs, but there wasn’t much choice here.

We walked though the tunnel. Taxxons are like giant centipedes, as big around as a sewer pipe, so we could fit in the tunnel. Of course, we didn’t have a lot of room in there. <Jake, dude, watch the tail.>

<Sorry,> I said to Marco. We reached the end of the tunnel and just stared. The hangar was enormous. Several squadrons of Bug fighters were there, as well as three Blade ships and, true to Tobias’s information, a Pool ship.

<This is bad,> I said. <Where’s Tobias.>

“Right behind you.” I spun. He was there, in his human body. In one hand, he held a Yeerk Dracon beam. In the other

was something that looked like a machete made out of a Hork-bajir blade.

<Alright, Tobias, you've been at this for two weeks. Any plans to take this place down?>

“Yeah, I've got one. Most ships, like the Bug fighters and Blade ships, don't use combustible fuels anymore. But Pool ships still need them for some things, like cooking facilities. They always have a massive fuel tank in one of the legs.”

<How do you know?> Marco asked. He made a point. Tobias's knowledge of Yeerk ships was almost suspicious.

“I've been paying attention. I saw them load the tank. If that tank blew, the resulting explosion would destroy the remaining power sources on the ship and blow the whole thing sky high. And that would take down this cavern, too, crushing the entire fleet.”

<So why not just Dracon the tank and be done with it?> I asked.

He laughed softly. “That tank is made to withstand the fire power of the Shredders on a Dome ship. This toy,” he held up the Dracon bean, “wouldn't do a thing to it.”

<So how do we take it down?> Jeanne wanted to know.
<How do we set the fuel to flames?>

“We get inside of the ship, make our way to the tank, and blow it from inside.”

<Wouldn't that kill us?> Cassie asked.

“Probably. At least, it'd kill the person who did it.” He shrugged. “That's why I'm going to blow the ship. The rest of you are going to help with the distraction.”

<What? What distraction?> Estrid asked.

<And what do you mean you'll do it?> I demanded of him.

“I mean that if anyone should be the one to blow up the ship, it should be me. As for the distraction...remember those Hork-bajir the Arn cloned a few years back?”

<Yeah. What about them?> Cassie asked.

“They've agreed to make a bit of a raid. It'll get some of the guards away from the Pool ship, making it possible for me to get in there and blow it up.”

<Tobias, this whole attempted suicide thing you've got going on is getting old,> Marco complained. <Do I have to go to your funeral this second time, too?>

Marco was joking, but I could hear the fear in his voice. We'd lost too many as it was. <Tobias, there has to be another way.>

He shook his head. “Believe me, I wish there was. I know

that any one of us here would do it, but it has to be me. I've got the least to lose."

And suddenly, I saw the way out of the trap. I could see the answer to destroying this hangar and doing the right thing in Crayak's twisted little game. <I'll do it,> I said to Tobias.

"I know you would, but it should be me."

<No, you don't understand. Look...a few weeks ago, the Drode came to me. He told me that Crayak would make me a deal. If I died...Rachel could come back to life.>

There was a shocked silence. After almost a full minute, Tobias nodded. "I know."

<You know?>

"The Drode told me, too. He figured that, if you didn't willingly give your life, I'd take it from you to get her back."

<Did you consider it?>

"Not once. Think about it, Jake. Do you think Rachel would be very happy with me if she came back from the dead and found out I murdered you?"

Marco laughed. <Knowing Rachel, she'd think that was a very sweet thing to do.>

"Yeah, maybe. But anyway, no, Jake, I won't kill you. And I won't send you to your death. We could try to leave and

warn the Andalites, but it will take them some time to fix the code problem and by then it'll probably be too late. It's you or me, Jake, and I'm not going to order you to die."

I nodded. <Tobias, you're the leader now. You have to make the decision because I know I can't order you to your death again. Think about it tactically. Who can we afford to lose more: you or me?>

He was quiet for a long time. Then, he said, "If we lose me, I'm gone. If we lose you, we get Rachel back. I don't want to choose her life over yours, Jake, but..."

<Yeah, I know. And, just so you know, the fact that you had to think about it means a lot to me. It tells me that I put the right guy in charge.>

"Alright, then. Jake, do you want to say it or should I?"

<I'll handle it.> Then, <Let's do it.>

CHAPTER 20

Before the mission, it was time for a tearful farewell. I didn't have any difficulty with Estrid, Elfangor, and Alloran; I didn't really know them.

Jeanne was a little different. "Jeanne," I said to her, "I know you don't think I chose the right person for this, but trust me, I have no doubts. You've got what it takes to be an Animorph. I know you worry because you hurt after a fight. That's a good thing. You don't have to worry about yourself until it stops hurting. When you can go to sleep at night, then you have a real problem on your hands.

"Don't feel like you have to prove anything to any of us. It'll come in time, don't rush it. Be brave, not reckless. Be cautious, not cowardly. Be ruthless, not cruel. It's a fine line we walk as Animorphs. Only a very few can do it. You're one of them.

"Rely on the others. They're all there for you and always will be. Marco can be cold, but he'll always be ready to help. Cassie will feel what you feel twice as hard. And remember that no matter how bad your life gets, Tobias has had it worse. He'll always be there to remind you that everything could be

so much worse.”

I wasn't sure what to say to Cassie, so I just held her for a minute. Finally, I whispered, “I'm sorry we can never have what we used to have. I can't tell you how much you meant to me, but I think you know. I think I meant the same thing to you.

“I know that I used to get annoyed by your moralizing, and I'm sorry. Someone has to keep us thinking about right and wrong. I know you think you lost yourself in the war but I swear that isn't true. As long as you still worry about losing yourself, you aren't gone.”

I broke away from her. “I hope that if anyone makes it out of this alive, it's you. You've got so much waiting for you back home. A family, a nice job, and a boyfriend who really does care about you and trust you. I hope he takes good care of you. I hope he gives you what you deserve.”

I turned to Marco. “Dude, I don't know what to say to you. You've been my best friend since as long as I can remember. You're my brother. Your constant jokes kept me sane; no matter how bad they were.”

He gave a weak smile. “Jake...”

I didn't let him finish. “I can't thank you enough, Marco.

Of all of us, you have the most to lose now. You've got your family, your home, your money—”

“All of which means nothing while my best friend gives his life,” Marco interrupted. “Jake, man, don't do this. Leave it to someone else. We need you, man. You're Jake, the fearless leader.”

“Not anymore, Marco. That's Tobias's job now.” I could see tears forming in his eyes. I knew how he hated to cry, how he didn't want anyone to see him with any weakness.

“Marco, you always told me there were two ways you can look at life. You can cry about how horrible it is or you can laugh at how screwed up it all is.”

“There's nothing funny about this, Jake,” he said. “You can't die. Not you. You're Jake. You're my main man and I...I love you.”

I hugged him briefly. “I know.”

“We need you,” he insisted. “We can't fight this without you. You're the heart and soul of the Animorphs. Without you leading us...”

“Tobias leads you now.”

“He can take the job, Jake, but he'll never be what you are. He'll never be my best friend, and he'll never be that guy who

Cassie used to cry with. He'll never be all that you were. This isn't just about the war, Jake, it's about life! You're a part of mine in a way that no one else ever could be."

"I know, Marco, I know! Do you think this is easy for me? But don't try to make me change my mind because I'm almost ready to do it. If I get cold feet, if I back out, the Yeerks will be loose again and maybe be even worse than before."

"There's more to life than just this war, Jake," Cassie pleaded. "There's more to who and what we are. We aren't just soldiers, we're people, too."

"Not anymore," Tobias said quietly. "We gave that up when we were thirteen, when we agreed to fight in this war. We let my father turn us into weapons; that's all we are now."

Cassie looked like had slapped her. "How can you say that? You of all people?"

"Because I've been affected more than anyone else. I used to be like you, Cassie. I used to think that the world was basically a good place. That right and wrong had their lines. That there were some things good guys just didn't do. Hell, I used to think good guys existed. Now I know better."

Marco rounded on him. "This isn't about war to you. You just want to sacrifice Jake so you can get Rachel back! That's

all you care about. You sold your soul to Crayak for it and now you're doing his dirty work to get Jake out of the picture!"

I could tell Tobias wanted to hit him. That he might have done it if I hadn't made him the leader. But a leader needed to keep his cool, so Tobias did.

I guess Marco realized he had gone too far. He got quiet again. "Jake, you're more than just the leader. You're my brother. You're Cassie's friend. You can't just expect us to sit by and give that up."

I pulled both of them close. "Guys, I wish there was another way. A better way, I should say. But I always said a leader should never ask someone to do something he wouldn't be willing to do himself. I asked Rachel to give up her life. I asked Tobias and Santorelli to do it, too.

"Now its my turn. If I don't do this, I can't look any of you in the eye ever again. If I do live, I can't lead anymore. This is my chance to die for something. We all have to go sometime. We all knew this war could claim us at any moment."

"We just never thought it'd be you," Cassie said, wiping away tears.

"I know. And I never thought any of us would last this long. Now, its time for me to go. I love you both. And...I'm

sorry about everything.”

Marco lightly punched me in the arm. “You’d better be.”
We started to morph to Hork-bajir when he put a hand on my
shoulder. “And one more thing.”

“What?”

“Can I have your stereo?”

CHAPTER 21

Tobias led me to the ship. He knew his way though security now. He could recite any passwords they asked him for, give any information they wanted. He got me into the Pool ship without difficulty.

It took a bit of work but we found our way to the fuel tank. It was dark, and Hork-bajir have poor eyesight, so we used a flashlight; an electric torch, if you prefer. I stood on top of the tank, pointing the Dracon beam at it.

Tobias spoke to me. <You'll hear an explosion; that'll be the signal for the start of the raid. You'll know when everything has calmed down. That's when you blow the tank, since we'll be gone.>

<Okay.> Then, a thought occurred to me. <Tobias, what if this doesn't work?>

<It'll work. I had Estrid calculate it mathematically and she assures me that the explosion will destroy everything within a mile of this place. It'll take the Yeerks a long time to recover.>

I nodded. <Okay. Look, Tobias...I'm sorry about everything. I've made your life—>

<Stop it. You never have to apologize to me for anything you've done. You've done what you needed to do and I can never blame you for that. Besides...once, long ago, you were nice to me when no one else was. You can never understand what that meant to me; what it still means to me.>

<I know what it means. If I asked you to die here instead of me, you'd do it. Believe me, Tobias, I know.>

<Knowledge is one thing; understanding is something else,> he said. It sounded like a quote.

<Tobias, I don't know what to say to you. In a way, it was easier with Marco and Cassie since we were so close. But with you...>

<So don't say anything. You know I wouldn't.>

I nodded. <Did you or Santorelli say anything comforting to each other before you...?>

He nodded. <I asked him if he had any regrets. Do you, Jake?>

<Too many to count.>

<That's what he says. But I'll tell you, Jake, that you shouldn't. I believe that it doesn't matter how you lived if you died well. I could have forgiven Esplin if he had died nobly; there's still a chance, I suppose.>

I laughed a little bitterly. <I guess anything can happen.>

<Yeah...> He paused. <Jake, I didn't want to say this in front of the others but...there's a chance you'll make it out of here.>

<What? How?>

<If you make sort of a fuse, and I mean a long one, you might be able to light it and morph to cockroach before it explodes. If anything would survive the blast, it'd be a roach. I didn't want to get the others' hopes up, though.>

I nodded. <A good decision. I'll give it a shot if I can find something to use as a fuse.>

<Just puncture the tank and let some liquid spill out. It'll burn for a bit before it reaches the tank. You might have enough time.>

He turned to go. The whole thing struck me as wonderfully metaphoric. He was walking into a dark tunnel, not knowing what was ahead of him. He had to make it out so he could lead the others, just like me.

<Tobias, take this.> I passed him the torch.

I heard the explosion outside a few minutes later. Alarms sounded on the Pool ship. I knew that, beyond these walls, my friends were fighting for their lives. I waited for the fighting to

die down.

After the alarms shut off, I waited some more. I needed to make sure they were far enough away from the area that the blast wouldn't kill them.

The waiting was the hardest part. I was so tempted just to fire off the Dracon and get it over with. Finally, after about fifteen minutes, I decided it was safe. Besides, the others must have been worried sick when the blast didn't go off. I didn't want them coming back for me.

I punctured the tank with my talon and then demorphed. I watched as a bit of the clear-greenish liquid spilled out. I used my bare foot and wiped it a path away from the tank.

When it was as far from the tank as I was confident leaving it, I started to morph to roach. I didn't get far before I had to fire. I couldn't lose my eyes or my hands.

When my vision broke into compound eyes, I reversed the morph a bit so I could see again. My hands were shaking so much I didn't think I could do it. Was it this hard for Rachel, Tobias, and Santorelli? Maybe, and maybe not.

The three of them were born to be warriors. Santorelli had trained for it all his life. And I don't know what Rachel or Tobias would have become without the fight. I do know that it

wasn't a happy picture.

I thought of Rachel and Tobias. Soon, they'd be together again and Tobias could finally have a little bit of happiness. And I thought of Ronnie and Cassie. I even thought about Marco and Jeanne, even though I didn't think they were together (not yet at any rate). Thinking of their happiness made me just a little happier.

Tom, I thought, I'll be there soon. Then, I fired.

CHAPTER 22

I sat across the breakfast table from myself. I didn't know if I was alive or dead. Whoever was playing the role of me was a good person to ask. "Am I dead?"

I (he) smiled at myself (me). "For now. The manner of your death was wonderfully ambiguous, Jake. I could always bring you back if I chose."

"So who are you? Crayak? No, this doesn't have his look about it. Not the Ellimist...Azmaveth?"

"Correct."

I nodded. "And what about Crayak and Rachel?"

"Crayak has been forced to live up to his end of the deal. Rachel will return to life. As for you and Crayak...we seem to have had a bit of a misunderstanding over you."

"Oh?"

"I gave him the power to restore Rachel back to life if you willingly gave yours. Crayak was under the misguided impression that, in that event, your soul would belong to him. What gave him this notion I cannot begin to guess."

"In other words, you cheated him."

"In other words." Azmaveth smiled. "But have you learned

from your final experience, Jake? Do you see now why you feared that Tobias would become the leader?"

"No. He hasn't screwed up. He's done everything right. He's put his life on the line to save the rest of us. He didn't let his emotions get in the way. And he got us out of an impossible situation. I don't know what I could have been afraid of."

"You were afraid that he would not screw up. That he would do everything right. That he would put his life on the line to save the rest of you. That he would not let his emotions get in the way. And that he would get you out of an impossible situation."

"I don't get what you're saying," I told him.

"You were afraid, Jake, that he would be good at what he did."

"That's ridiculous. I hoped he would be good. That's why I chose him."

"Think about it, Jake. If you were not the leader of the Animorphs, what would you be? I can tell you. I cannot see all the futures, but I can see most of the possibilities. And in almost every one, do you know what you are?"

"No clue."

“Nothing. A mid-level management guy in an office building. A nine to five job. A tie. A cubicle. People pass you on the street and do not notice. If you are not the leader, Jake, you are just another man.

“The thing that worried you most about Tobias is that he would be everything you hoped he would be. You did not want Tobias to be what you wanted him to be because if he was, there would be no need for you. That is why you feared his being the leader. Not because you expected him to fail, but because you expected him to succeed.”

“So what happens now?” I asked him. “What do I do while you decide whether or not to bring me back to life?”

“You have options. You can watch the others, though that is usually excruciatingly painful; Rachel learned that the hard way. I myself look on it as a form of torture.”

“What else can I do?”

Azmaveth gave a small smile. “It is difficult to run things in the afterlife. I could use help. But before that, there are some things you must know. And some things you just want to see.”

The door opened. In walked Tom, my brother; the one I had had Rachel kill so many years ago. “Hey, midget,” he smiled.

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

*“And it's too late to leave this life behind
Everybody's speaking using words they can't define
And it's not my choice but I embrace it nonetheless
You brag of your indecency like a monkey beats its chest
You brag of your indecency like a monkey beats its chest*

*And I don't care who you are or what you've done
Everybody equals out when all the songs are sung
We will sing them loud and we will sing them until we pass
You're shattering our innocence like a bullet through a glass
You're shattering our innocence like a bullet through a glass*

*So hey: I don't care if you go now or if you stay
Oh your back is bleeding, you're bleeding on me
That'll be the day when the sun falls down
The angels may weep but I'll hear no sounds but hey*

*I take that back I won't stop singing when I'm dead
I'll sing from the great beyond, I will echo in your head
And if you think taking your life will set you free
You've got something to learn, it's called humility
You've got something to learn, it's called humility*

*So hey: I don't care if you go now or if you stay
Oh your back is bleeding, you're bleeding on me
That'll be the day when the sun falls down
The angels may weep but I'll hear no sounds but hey*

*Gone! everybody's crying
Now you're gone
And everybody's missing you: from apathy to sympathy
This new found love is new to me
And I can hear you laughing in your grave
Everyone's forgiven
Now we're saved
Everybody's sins absolved
What's the point denying
When we all know we are lying to ourselves
(And you can't keep that smile off your face).”
—That'll Be the Day*

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

58: THE REVIVAL

It was ten o' clock at night and my front door was locked, which was to be expected. We never left it unlocked at night back when I was alive. But we still kept a key in the same place, so I had no trouble getting in.

“WOOT! WOOT! WOOT!” An alarm? That was new. Then something occurred to me: did my family still live here?

I had been keeping track of some things while I was dead but it had been too painful to watch my family. I felt like I didn't have a choice but to watch the Animorphs, but my family was a different story.

Then someone stumbled down the stairs. She was only a few years younger than me, but she looked pretty different. Her hair was dark, and she wasn't as tall as I was. Still, I would recognize her anywhere.

“Jordan,” I said to my sister.

She stood there, staring at me. I couldn't blame her. She knew I was dead; she had watched them cremate me. For all intents and purposes, I was a ghost.

“Mom! Sara!” she shouted. She was calling for my mother

and my other sister. They stumbled down the stairs too and stared just like Jordan was. I guess the apple really doesn't fall far from the tree.

"Hey, guys," I said, smiling. "I know this is a little hard to accept, but I'm real. I'm alive."

My mom shook her head. "No. This has to be a dream. You're dead, Rachel. The others saw you die. We cremated you! I was at your funeral."

I couldn't tell them the truth, so I went with the lie I had. "That wasn't me, mom. The Yeerks didn't kill me, they captured me. What you saw was a Yeerk they made morph me. The others lied to you because they didn't want you to know that I was out there somewhere, working for the Yeerks."

"Then how did you get here?" Jordan asked.

"A powerful alien named Crayak helped me," I answered, more or less truthfully. "I've got my life back and the first thing I wanted to do was go home. I know it's hard to accept —"

"It's impossible," my mom insisted. "We've spent years thinking you were dead. And for you to just show up in the middle of the night like this is just—"

"Mom!" Sara interrupted. "Rachel's back. Can't you see

that? That's what really matters. I don't care how or why or what she had to do, I just care that I have my sister back."

Sara came forward and hugged me. Jordan did it, too. Finally, almost reluctantly, my mother did, too. "I'm sorry, Rachel, it's just...this is impossible."

"I know," I said to her. "You've been saying that for the last couple minutes."

Jordan was getting us some food. I was grateful because, truth be told, I was starving. I hadn't eaten in more than three years, after all.

My sister came into the room with a plate loaded high with junk food. She still knew me well. As I gorged, she asked me one of those awkward questions. "Do your friends know you're back?"

My friends. No one in my family would use the term Animorphs. Of all our families, mine had the most difficulty coping with the war. When we had whisked them off to the Hork-bajir valley, my mother had tried to escape several times. It was a little embarrassing, really, since I was always the most gung-ho for the fight.

I shrugged. "They might. I haven't seen any of them yet, though. They're not on Earth right now."

“Why not?” Sara asked.

I shrugged. “Beats me.” It was a lie, but I was used to telling them. I had hoped, once the war was over, the lies would end. Too bad.

“Well, Sara can move out of your room now, I guess. She’ll have to share her room with Jordan again.” my mom said. Jordan almost looked like she was going to argue, but then she realized that her sister was back from the dead so she kept her mouth shut.

Sara shrugged. “As long as we have Rachel back.”

Then, the door opened. A man came in, acting like he belonged. He was tall, with dark hair and green eyes. “Ah, Naomi, you would not believe the day I have had.” Except it sounded like “Ahh, Nay-oh-mij, zhou would not believe ze day I ahave ahad.” He was French. Very French.

Who was this random French guy in my house at ten at night? I looked at my mom. She suddenly seemed very uncomfortable. “Uh...Jacques, this is Rachel. Rachel, this is Jacques...he’s...what’s the best way to say it...”

“Her husband,” Sara answered.

PREVIEW SUMMARY

Rachel's back! Just in time to leave again. The Animorphs must leave home to fight the Yeerks on the new front. But that's easier said than done. They can't just disappear and they'll need new identities when they arrive.

All of the world's information is stored in one supercomputer in Death Valley. They can create entire new lives from there. But it just might be the most heavily guarded building in all the world, and there's a surprise waiting for the Animorphs. And he's not happy...