

59: THE REVIVAL

CHAPTER 1

My name is Rachel. Yeah, *that* Rachel. Rachel the Animorph. The one who died on our last mission. I was killed trying to stop the Blade ship from escaping into space. I failed.

I'm not some nut. This isn't some delusion of mine. This is real. But there are some things you need to know. Like the fact that the mission that I died on wasn't our last one. Because the Yeerks are back.

The ones who escaped met up with a creature calling itself The One. It gave them new hosts, creatures called Kelbrid. Kelbrid are dangerous warriors. They're really strong and fast, and they've got a stinger with an anesthetic poison so you don't realize how badly you're hurt until it's too late.

The One even freed Esplin 9466, formerly known as Visser Three/One. He's their leader again. And he was given an Andalite host: Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill, our old friend and comrade.

The Yeerks are back. Esplin is back. But we've got a secret weapon now, because I'm back, too. The Crayak made a deal with my cousin Jake. If Jake willingly gave his life, I'd get mine back.

Jake blew up a Yeerk Pool ship; with him in it. So Crayak sent me back down to earth. But Crayak, as it turns out, is a jerk. He set me down in the middle of the ocean.

One moment, I was watching from above as Jake lit a trail of fuel leading to the tank of the Pool ship. The next moment, I was being hurled down into the sea. That didn't stop me much. I started to morph. It was a morph I hadn't used very often: sperm whale.

I felt my bones thicken, and then I began to grow. I seemed to stretch on for miles, but at least my buoyancy was adjusting, too, so I wasn't in danger of drowning. Still, it was uncomfortable.

My head widened. It spread out and out. So far out that my eyes were forced around to the side of my head. I could see almost 360 degrees. I could see enough to watch my legs fuse into a tail.

My skin turned white and rubbery. My hair was sucked into my head like spaghetti. My arms melded into flippers. My teeth changed, too.

I could hear my organs shifting and twisting into those of the whale. I knew that if a whale stayed on land too long, the weight of its body would crush its organs. That wasn't

something I wanted to think about.

I knew the morph was complete when I felt the whale's mind beneath my own. It was calm, in control. It was perfectly happy here in the ocean. I wasn't. What I wanted was on land.

I powered up my tail and started to swim. I don't know how fast a whale looks, but I was faster than I expected to be. For all my weight, I could move. I wasn't tons of fat, I was tons of muscle. I was one of the most powerful creatures on this or any planet.

Still, for all my power, I almost jumped when I heard the thought-speak voice in my head. <Hello? Who is that?>

I looked around and saw a humpback whale swimming towards me. <Cassie?> I asked.

<No, I am Aftran.> Oh. Aftran was a Yeerk we had freed and then trapped in the body of a humpback whale. She was one of the few Yeerks who would push for peace. One of the few good ones.

<Oh. Hi.>

<Who are you? No one comes out this far in the ocean, morph-capable or no. And you speak as one who knows Cassie.>

<Well...I'm Rachel,> I said to her.

<I may be a whale but I know Rachel is dead,> Aftran answered. <I hope this is some kind of a joke.>

<It's not,> I insisted. <I was dead; now I'm back. Where are we? I need to find the others.>

<We are several dozen miles from the coast of your home town,> Aftran answered. <The others still lived there when last I checked. I will lead you there but not until you tell me how you're here.>

<A powerful guy named Crayak made a deal with Jake. If Jake died, I got to come back to life. And, well...Jake isn't around anymore.>

<That is a little hard to believe.>

<Said the Yeerk peace-activist turned humpback whale,> I answered. <Everything about this situation is hard to believe. But you've known us long enough to know you can't keep an Animorph down forever.>

Aftran didn't have anything to say to that. We swam on in silence for a long time. When I thought two hours were getting close, I demorphed. Aftran let me ride on her back. That was pretty nice of her, even though she didn't believe who I was at first.

I managed to convince her, though. She had been in

Cassie's mind once and so she knew all of our little secrets. It only took a few to prove that I was indeed Rachel the Animorph.

When we were only a mile or so from home, I slid off her back and morphed to dolphin. I didn't want to be seen yet. Coming back from the dead would cause a lot of problems, especially with the media.

I knew where I had to go. I had to go to Marco's and see Tobias. Of everyone I knew, he was the one to whom I mattered most. I honestly don't think my mother would be as happy to see me alive as he would be.

But I didn't go to Marco's house. I wasn't ready. When I saw Tobias again, I wanted to be at my best. I needed to be rested and well dressed, and not tired and in spandex.

I knew the others wouldn't be there anyway. They were still coming back from the Hork-bajir world. They had just destroyed a Yeerk fleet that would have escaped and terrorized the galaxy anew. Jake had died to stop it.

I decided I was going home. My home. The home I shared with my mother and sisters. I'd have to lie to them, of course, but that wasn't anything new. I had plenty of time to think of lies.

I set my foot down on the beach sand. It felt so good under my feet. I had been to the beach after I had died and it wasn't the same. Maybe it was because Azmaveth, the guy in charge of the afterlife, always knew my death was only temporary.

It felt so good to be alive again. There isn't a term for it, no word that can describe how it feels. For the first time in a long time, I smiled.

I ran home. I was barefoot, wearing my morphing outfit, wet, and I was supposed to be dead. I didn't care. There was just nothing more I wanted right at that moment than to be home once again.

You know what? That guy who wrote the Wizard of Oz got it right all that time ago. There's no place like home.

CHAPTER 2

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-mi, zhou vould not belieze ze day I ahave ahad.” He was 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...”

“Her husband,” Sara answered.

CHAPTER 3

I couldn't believe it. I think Jacques was as shocked to see me as I was to see him. I knew it was a possibility, of course, but I never expected it to happen. My parents had divorced a long time ago and they had both moved on.

Still, when I came back from the dead and just wanted to go home, I didn't expect to be interrupted by some French guy.

Jacques and I stared at each other for the next few minutes, both of us unsure what to say. After all, I was supposed to be dead and I didn't know he existed. Where had they even met?

Finally, I said the only thing I could say. "If its alright with everyone, I'm going to go to bed. I've had a long day."

"Rachel, wait. Don't you want to spend some more time with us?" Sara asked.

"Later. But right now, I'm tired. Very tired." I went up the stairs to where my bedroom used to be. I was surprised at what I found.

The place was a little different but not completely. Sara hadn't girled it all up, at least. Don't get me wrong, I am a girl and I like some girly things. But I'm not in to frills and lace

and pink and the other sorts of things Jordan used for decoration.

Sara had kept the place pretty much the same as I had. The furniture was rearranged and the colors were different but overall it wasn't bad.

I was a little annoyed that my desk had been moved. I used to have it right by the window. Sara came in and stood next to me. "I hope you don't hate it too much. I'll help you change it tomorrow."

I shook my head. "It's fine for now. But why did you move my desk?"

"Because it was in a bad place by that window. I had a hard time reaching it to open it. How did you manage to open and close it all the time?"

"I pretty much always left it open," I answered.

"Even in the winter?"

"Especially in the winter."

"Why? Do you just like freezing to death?"

I thought about lying to her. But there was no reason to do it anymore. Not about this anyway. "Tobias used to come over a lot. He'd fly in the window and land on the desk."

"I never knew that."

“Not a lot of people did,” I told her.

Then, she got an odd smile on her face. She reminded me of Marco for a moment. “And when he came over late at night, what exactly did the two of you do?”

“Sara!”

She shrugged. “Just wondering. I didn’t realize the two of you were so close. I mean, I kind of suspected he liked you because of how he disappeared when you did, but I didn’t know you felt the same way.”

“Of course I did, Sara.” Then, I said something to her that I had never said before. “I loved him.”

“Loved? Past tense?”

I thought about that. “No, I still do. I don’t know what he’s become without me, but I don’t care. If he’s gone totally hawk or if he’s become some other kind of monster, it doesn’t matter to me.”

“That’s sweet and all, but you don’t know what he is now. He might not even be alive. What if he’s dead, Rachel?”

I shook my head. “He can’t be. Tobias...he’s indestructible. I’ve seen it all. The things that have happened to him would have destroyed anyone else. Never him.”

Jacques came up and stood silently in the doorway. Sara

looked from him to me. “I think I’ll go to bed now, too,” she said quickly, leaving us alone.

Jacques pulled out the chair from my desk and motioned to it. I was happy to stand, so he sat down. “Rachel...I am sure you have something to say to me. Do so, *s’il vous plait*.”

I shrugged. “I guess I just wasn’t expecting you. I know my mom wouldn’t have married you if you weren’t at least an okay guy but...”

“But I will never be your *père*, your father.”

“No.”

“And you will never be my daughter.” I nodded again. “And I do not think we could ever be friends. I respect you too much.”

That surprised me. “Come again?”

“You are an Animorph, a savior of Earth. And you saved my life. France was one of the countries infiltrated by the Yeerks, you know. They even had the President for a time. And they had me.”

I raised an eyebrow, so he continued. “I was the first French Controller. I was visiting America on business and I decided to attend one of the meetings of the Sharing.”

I shuddered. I knew what had happened next. They

captured Jacques, held his head in the sludge, and forced a slug into it. Then, they sent him to France, where he was forced to betray those close to him.

“They took everything from me. They killed my wife. But the worst thing they did...they took *ma feminine*.”

And suddenly, I knew. I understood why this man was in my life. Call it chance, call it fate, call it the Ellimist ‘not interfering’ if you want. I knew who this man was. And I knew his daughter.

“Every day of my life until I met Naomi, I cried myself to sleep for my lost Jeanne.”

CHAPTER 4

I didn't know what to do. I didn't know whether I should tell him his daughter was alive or not. I needed to speak to Tobias, Cassie, or Marco.

I didn't know what to do about Jeanne, either. I'd meet her soon, I knew. Should I tell her that her where her father was? Should I reveal that she was my step-sister? Maybe. Or maybe that would hopelessly complicate things.

The decision was taken away from me almost the instant I started agonizing over it. Sara came back into the room. "Uh, Rachel? There's a really cute guy downstairs with a really cute Andalite. They're looking for you."

What? No one could know I was here. Not yet anyhow. But I knew Sara wasn't making things up. She wouldn't do that on my first day back.

I came down the stairs. When I was about halfway down, I could see our visitors. I almost fell down the rest of the way. In the doorway stood a human and an Andalite.

The Andalite looked almost exactly like Ax had when we first met him. The human was tall, dark, and, like Sara had said, really cute. His hair was a dark, dirty blond color and

pretty wild. I felt a very familiar urge to try to come it in place.

I felt that way every time I saw Tobias.

I practically jumped on him. I was dimly aware that I was wearing only a bathrobe and my morphing suit. My hair was a mess. I smelled like whale. But suddenly, none of that mattered.

After a few minutes, I heard a voice. It wasn't Tobias, though. "Hey, Xena. Love the new look."

Marco. He came in through the door and, to my surprise, joined in on our hug. I don't know if he did it for comedy or if he really had missed me but at the moment, I didn't care.

An instant later, I felt someone else join in. Cassie. She didn't say anything; like Tobias, she didn't need to. Both of them could communicate as much with words as without. Marco had to speak because if he didn't make some comment, he just wouldn't be Marco.

After several minutes, I finally had the presence of mind to ask them, "How did you get here so fast?"

Tobias answered. It was so good to hear his voice. And yet, at the same, time something seemed wrong about it. It wasn't thought-speech. "We took the *Reliquary* at Maximum Burn through Z-space. We made the trip back here in less than

a day. We were in a bit of a hurry to get back. We *might* have warped a little bit of reality somewhere, but I'd say it was worth it."

"But how did you know I'd be here?"

"Because," he said with a little smile, "we know you." Then, he smiled for real and I felt the world get a little brighter. "But there are some people here we don't know."

He looked questioning at Jacques. I introduced them. "Mom, Jacques, Jordan, Sara, this is Tobias. He was a hawk the last time most of you probably saw him." I looked at Sara. "Told you he wasn't dead."

"Dead? Me? I'm indestructible," Tobias said. Then, he introduced the Andalite. "This is *Aristh* Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor. My half brother."

"Your family's so weird," I said to him.

He shrugged. "I have nothing to compare it to." Then, he looked over his shoulder. "Where'd Jeanne get to?"

She came in from outside. I was shocked at how much she looked like Jacques. I guess she didn't want to join in on the group hug because she didn't know me. That was fine with me; I wasn't really a hugging kind of gal.

Tobias and Cassie looked from Jacques to Jeanne and then

to me. I could see the question on their faces. I nodded slightly.

Tobias turned to Jacques. “Jacques? Did you used to have a daughter who was taken by the Yeerks early in the invasion?”

I was a little surprised he just came out and asked that. I’d have to talk to him later.

Jacques nodded. So did Jeanne. “My father was named Jacques,” she whispered.

Tobias spoke to them. “Then this is probably exactly what you think it is. Believe me, it may seem hard to believe but these things seem to happen when I’m around. I used to live only a few streets away from my mother, who I thought was dead. I used to pass her house all the time and I never even knew it And my father...well, my father was his father.” Tobias jerked his thumb at Alloran.

Cassie added, “I know this is all pretty hard to believe—”

“But that’s the best way to describe life with us,” Marco interjected. “If I had a nickel for every time someone called me unbelievable, I’d be a rich man.”

Tobias gave him a look. “You *are* a rich man.”

“You see?”

“Hey,” Jordan asked suddenly. “Where’s Jake? Why isn’t he with you?”

“There was something he needed to do,” Tobias answered calmly, not quite lying.

<Prince Tobias?>

I halfway expected Tobias to tell the Andalite not to call him prince. Instead, he just said, “Go on.”

<From what I understand of human sleeping habits, it is rather late at night. Perhaps we should return tomorrow at a different time?>

He nodded. “You’re the clock. I guess we’ll see you all tomorrow.”

“Wait,” I said. “Mom, Jordan, Sara, Jacques, you can go to bed if you want. I’m going to stay up a bit with these guys.”

Mom, Jordan, and Sara got up and, after hugging me goodnight, left. Jacques didn’t move. “I believe I will spend some time with my daughter, if she will let me.”

He and Jeanne went into the kitchen. I turned to the others. “Hey, I know it’s night and all, but who’s up for a little flight?”

Tobias’s smile was maybe the biggest I’d ever seen it. “I thought you’d never ask.”

CHAPTER 5

We flew, but not very far. Tobias had never condescended to acquire an owl like everyone else, and Alloran didn't have any Earth birds, so he wasn't so well suited for this world. That was fine, since I didn't want to go very far.

We went to the Gardens. It was closed up for the night but we didn't mind. We landed and demorphed on top of the Ferris wheel, on one of the cars. It was one of those old fashioned ones, with the cars that were the size of, well, cars. We had plenty of room.

That didn't stop Alloran from keeping low and to the center, his weak Andalite arms wrapped around the pole that held the car to the rest of the wheel. Marco and Cassie hung back, too.

Tobias and I sat on the very edge of the car, our legs dangling out into space. Heights didn't bother us. And I knew Tobias would like it better up here than he did in a lot of other places.

“Rachel?” Cassie said.

I lay back so I could look at her. “Yeah?”

“I'm really glad you're back.”

It was a simple thing to say. I knew she was glad. And yet it meant a lot to me that she said it. “Glad to be back.” I answered. “I just wish the price hadn’t been so high.”

Marco nodded. “Jake... What do we do about him? People have noticed that he’s missing. He and Tobias took off like what, a month ago? Do we tell everyone that he’s dead?”

Tobias shook his head. “Not if we can help it. It’ll make the Yeerks stronger to know that Jake isn’t around anymore. Esplin will get bolder. If it’s possible...”

“What?” I asked.

“We may have to have a Chee impersonate Jake.”

“I don’t like the thought of some pseudo-Jake walking around,” Cassie said.

Marco nodded. “That was always our agreement with the Chee. If we die, they didn’t keep pretending to be us.”

“I know,” Tobias said, “but we don’t have a lot of options. We’ll have to tell his parents, of course, but the rest of the world can’t know. Not yet, at any rate.”

“I still don’t like it,” Cassie insisted.

Marco looked uncertain. “Me neither, but Tobias has a point. Then again...”

“What?” I asked.

“We’ll all have to leave here soon,” he said. “Jeanne and Santorelli used what we learned from Tri-I to find out where the invasion’s going on, and it’s completely on the other side of the country. We haven’t been able to move in on it because of the Time Matrix and then the trip to the Hork-bajir world, but we need to start worrying about that now.”

“No,” I almost pouted. “Not tonight. I don’t want to worry about the war right now. I just want to relax.”

Marco got a mischievous look on his face. He glanced from me to Tobias. “Relax, huh? Alright then. But you two be safe now. I’ll go and see how Jeanne’s doing.”

He was halfway morphed by the time I got up to swat him. That didn’t stop me. The half-owl half-Marco tumbled off the side of the cart.

Marco rose up above us. <That was so not cool, Rachel. I could have died!>

“If only. It’s not that bad,” I replied. He left in a huff. I noticed Cassie and Tobias share a sleight smile.

“What?” I asked.

Cassie shrugged. “I just think it’s sweet how his first thought is to find Jeanne.”

“We shouldn’t have left them alone for all that time,”

Tobias sighed.

I thought about that. Was it possible? I hadn't been watching them from the afterlife; I didn't much care, to be honest. "Marco and Jeanne? Oh, please no. I'll break both his arms. She's my sister now!"

Tobias looked like he was about to speak, but then a thought-speak voice interrupted. <Prince Tobias? I respectfully request leave to return to headquarters. This...this is no place for an Andalite.>

Tobias smiled. "Go on, then. Get some sleep. We'll be planning tomorrow."

Cassie and I shared a look. Even after three years of my being away, she knew what that look meant. "I'll take Alloran home," she offered. That left me alone with Tobias. Finally.

I was never a very affectionate person and Tobias wasn't used to human contact, so for a while, we just sat there together. Then, he spoke.

"Rachel...I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For what I became without you. I gave up for a time and you wouldn't have wanted that. All I thought about was revenge and battle. When I found out the Yeerks were coming

back...I was glad. I wanted to fight them again. I needed to.”

I patted his hand. “Its okay. If they had killed you instead of me, I would have...I don’t know what I would have done. Maybe I would have gone off for revenge. Or maybe I would have just laid down and cried forever.”

He nodded. “I guess I kind of did both.”

“Maybe that was best. But I’m here now, Tobias.”

“I know.”

I laid my head on his shoulder. His human shoulder. For the first time, we were just a boy and a girl. We weren’t a pair of warriors, we weren’t a hawk-human-Andalite and a girl, we weren’t even scarred children trapped in a nightmare. We were just us. Just Rachel and Tobias.

I suddenly got an idea. “Hey, what do you think the Gardens security would do if they came here in the morning and found us asleep up here?”

He got a sleight smile. “It would be interesting to find out. But if we fell asleep, we might fall off.”

“Well,” I said, “I’m sure we can think of something to keep us awake all night.”

CHAPTER 6

Despite all our efforts, we did fall asleep. I was jolted awake by the Ferris wheel starting up. Tobias, somehow, was still asleep. I elbowed him. “Uh...what?” he groaned.

“We have to get out of here,” I hissed.

He gave me an odd smile. It kind of reminded me of me. “Or maybe we should just let them find us here.”

I threw his shirt at him. “I’m supposed to be dead, remember? This is *not* the way I want the world to know that I’m back.”

He shrugged and began to morph. <It’s your life.> Soon, we were a red-tailed hawk and a bald eagle riding high in the sky.

<So, we’re going to Marco’s?> I asked.

<Yep. We need to figure some stuff out now. And I need to eat; I’m starving.>

<Me too.>

We flew in through an open window on the top floor of Marco’s mansion. We ended up flying right past him as he was walking out of his bedroom. He was wearing a purple, silk robe. I guess he did stuff like that when no one was around.

“Hey! Watch it! Haven’t you two heard of a little thing called a door?”

We demorphed. Tobias was done first. “Sorry. We figured, with the people probably watching this place, it would be best not to demorph in plain sight.”

“Plus,” I started to say. I cut off because Marco had the strangest look on his face. His eyes darted from Tobias to me and back again. Then, he dropped to his knees and started bowing in front of Tobias in some kind of parody of worship.

“You are my god!” he chanted.

I glared at Tobias. “What did you tell him?”

He just stared back at me. “Nothing. I can’t thought speak as a human any more than you can.”

“Not thought speak, guy speak.”

“Say what now?”

It was hard to explain. I’ve noticed that guys have a way of communicating without saying or doing anything. Even the most clueless guy (like Marco) somehow understands it.

Rather than explain, I punched Tobias in the arm. This was *exactly* what I was trying to avoid when I asked him not to say anything about last night.

Tobias was spared from any further abuse when we heard

the WOOSH of the dropshaft. Jeanne and Alloran walked out. “Ah,” Jeanne said, “I thought I saw two birds fly in. Marco, what are you doing? Never mind, I don’t want to know. Stop it. Now.”

Marco snapped to attention. Then, Jeanne added, “And close your robe.” She turned to Tobias and me. “Alloran and I have made breakfast, if you are hungry.”

<Should we not wait for Cassie?> Alloran asked.

I pushed past him on my way to the dropshaft. “She won’t mind. I’m starving. Let’s go.”

“Worked up quite an appetite last night, eh Xena?” Marco asked. Then, he slapped Tobias on the back, beaming like a father whose kid just hit his first home run. I’d never understand guys. Even the good ones, like Tobias, were as bad as the rest about some things.

Jeanne swatted his arm which, to my surprise, actually shut Marco up. I decided right then that I liked my new sister. Then, we all headed downstairs for breakfast. Alloran went outside to graze.

We ate in kind of awkward silence. Marco wanted to make jokes but Jeanne stopped him, so he didn’t have much to say. Jeanne and I weren’t very comfortable with each other. I

mean, suddenly I had another sister and she...well, suddenly she was the sister of Rachel the Animorph. It's a lot to take in. As for Tobias, he never said much.

Cassie arrived and that made things a little better. She and I had a lot to say to each other this morning, and she had a way of including Jeanne that didn't make any of us feel awkward. Of course, since I couldn't resist torturing Cassie a bit, I always steered the conversation back to the same thing. "Tell me more about Ronnie."

I love Cassie, I really do. She's more my sister than Jeanne; as much a part of my family as my own sisters and mother. She and I had been through hell together. But Cassie was still adorably shy about some things. That hadn't changed. Some things never do.

That's why I wasn't surprised when, as Alloran walked in, Tobias stood up and said, "Alright, gang. Now that we've all eaten, it's time for business."

CHAPTER 7

Marco, of course, couldn't let that go. "Business? Can't we eat a little more first? We haven't even feed the Andalite."

<The Andalite, as you call him, has already fed, Marco,>

Alloran answered him.

Marco shook his head. “Not human food. We can’t start talking about suicidal plans until our resident Andalite goes nuts over cinnamon buns or chocolate or lighter fluid.”

Jeanne raised an eyebrow. “Lighter fluid?”

Tobias rolled his eyes. “I left the boy alone for five minutes and we almost had to call poison control. For a member of a hyper advanced alien race, Ax sure had some common sense issues.”

“It must come from being male,” I said. At the same time, Jeanne said roughly the same thing. We looked at each other and smiled. Oh yeah, I definitely liked my new sister.

“Yeah, if he was a girl, he would have gone off about boys,” Marco answered. Then, he launched into a parody of my voice. A *bad* parody. “Oh, Cassie tell me about Ronnie! Is he big and strong like Tobias? Or is he—”

“—Short and annoying like Marco,” I finished.

<I fear I am missing the point of this particular bit of conversation,> Alloran mumbled.

Tobias laughed, something that I think he hadn’t done in years. “The Andalite missed the point. Happy now, Marco?”

“Yes, now I’m happy. Now we can get to talking about

suicide missions.”

Tobias straightened up. “Well, that’s the first order of business. No more suicide missions.”

“Does that mean we’re quitting the whole fight?” Marco, of course.

Tobias shook his head. “I mean no more missions like the one Santorelli and I went on. No more like the one Rachel went on. No more like the one I sent Jake on. That stops today. We can’t lose any more Animorphs if we can help it. That brings me to my second point. We need to elect a leader.”

<Prince Tobias? I believe you are our leader.>

He shook his head. “No. Not unless you all say it.”

“Jake chose you,” Cassie pointed out.

“I know. So that’s one vote from Jake. What about the rest of you? Jake may have been our leader, but he always asked for our advice on important matters. When things came down to the really tough decisions, we always voted when we had the time. So now we vote. What do the rest of you say?”

<You are my prince, Prince Tobias. No matter who leads the Animorphs, *you* are my prince,> Alloran answered. <I follow you and you alone.>

“So that’s two votes for Tobias,” Marco tallied. “Jake and

Alloran are in favor of it. Ladies?” He looked from me to Jeanne to Cassie.

Jeanne shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know Tobias as well as the rest of you. I can’t make this choice. I will follow whoever the rest of you choose. We could do far worse than Tobias.”

“Two for Tobias and one vote of abstinence from Jeanne,” Marco counted. “Cassie? Rachel?”

I shook my head. “I tried doing the leader thing. It didn’t go well for me. I didn’t have the balance a leader needs. I was too reckless just like Marco would be too careful.” Marco winced but knew I was right. I continued.

“Ax was too ruthless and Cassie was too compassionate. Only Jake and Tobias had the necessary balance, I think. Only the two of them could balance boldness with caution and morality with the ruthless reality of war. I’d follow either of them to hell and back. I already followed Jake. Now, I’ll follow Tobias anywhere.”

Marco turned to Cassie. “Well...” she hesitated. “Honestly, I don’t know. Tobias, you used to be a sweet, gentle person. But the war changed you in ways the rest of us can’t even imagine. I don’t know if that kindness and gentleness are still

in you or not. I can't say I know what you've been through and I can't say that I know who you are anymore.

“But Jake trusted you. He said that you could lead us and I trust Jake. If he voted for you, then I will, too. Maybe he knew something I didn't about you or maybe not. But if he chose you, then I will too.”

Marco nodded. “That's how I feel. Tobias, you and I have never been close, not even after all of this. I don't know you like I know the others. But Jake knew you, I think, and he said you could win this thing and in the end, that's all that matters. If any of us has the...the ruthless hate it takes to pull this off, it's got to be you.”

Tobias looked at Jeanne. “Jeanne, I won't take this without a unanimous vote. I know you're new and don't feel like you have as much to offer, but you're here for a reason. You aren't like the rest of us, a haphazard collection of kids who took a shortcut home. You were chosen by the best to be one of us. Your thoughts are just as important as everyone else's.”

Cassie shot him an approving look that I don't think anyone else saw. Jeanne sat up straighter. “Well, then I will follow you, Tobias. I have seen what you are willing to do for this war, what you are willing to risk; what you are willing to

sacrifice. I will follow you to the end.”

“Unanimous, then,” Tobias said. “Then it’s time to get down to our next order of business.”

“What’s that?” Marco asked. Then, he added, “Prince Tobias.”

“Your favorite part. Suicidal plans.”

“Oh, goody.”

<Yes, goody.>

CHAPTER 8

“Well,” Tobias began, “thanks to Jeanne and Santorelli, we figured out where the Yeerks are invading now. We couldn’t move in on it earlier but now we have to jump on this. They already have too much of a head start.

“This new town is called...” Sorry, but I’m not going to tell you what it’s called. Or where it is. My reasons will make sense soon.

Tobias continued. “We have a few problems. The first is that we don’t have anywhere to live there.”

“I can take care of that,” Marco answered.

Tobias shrugged. “That might leave a trail. It is vital that no one know we’re there.”

“Why not?” Cassie asked.

“Because if all the Animorphs suddenly pack up and move into the same town and suspicious things start happening, people will figure it out. If this war gets out, then The One gets to use all of his power and things hit the fan. We need to keep our identities hidden.”

“How do we do that?” I asked.

“No one will recognize Jeanne, Alloran, or me,” Tobias

answered. “Cassie, you can be hidden with some minor cosmetic changes. The same thing with Rachel, since no one who sees her will think it’s her. Maybe if we cut her hair...”

I glared at him. He replied with a small grin. He knew I loved having my hair long. “Marco will be the biggest problem, since he’s by far the most visible. I’m thinking haircut, contacts, and maybe some minor surgery.”

Marco shook his head. “If I get plastic surgery, everyone in the world will know. I’m a celebrity, dude. The tabloids will have a field day. And do you really think any of this will stop Ax from recognizing us?”

“It isn’t Ax or Esplin I’m trying to fool. He’ll know it’s us; we’ll be in his face all the time. But he won’t do anything openly; that would make the war public and I’m sure the One gave him orders against that. Minor changes will probably be enough to fool everyone who doesn’t know us too well; no one’s walking around looking for Animorphs, after all.”

“He has a point,” Jeanne agreed.

Marco had something to add. “What happens when Cassie and I disappear off the face of the earth? And how does Rachel explain suddenly leaving to her mom and sisters? Or what about Jeanne; why would she live right after meeting her

father? It'll be suspicious if we all just disappear at the same time and reappear together. People will know."

Tobias nodded. "Alloran and I have been working on that. As much as I hate the thought, we might have to use the Chee."

I shuddered. "I don't like the thought of a Chee living my life for me."

"Neither do I," Tobias agreed. "I figure that Marco and Cassie can probably move away without too much trouble. Cassie can disappear on some government nature thing. As long as she resurfaces every month or so, no one will be too suspicious."

"Except Ronnie," Cassie interrupted. "We always do these things together. Maybe we can tell him?"

"I don't know," Tobias answered. "I don't know how many people we have to tell for The One to consider this thing public."

"He already knows," Cassie insisted. "When you first told me the Yeerks were back, he heard my half of the conversation. I know he figured it out. He hasn't asked me about it at all, which is how I know he knows. He's like that."

"If he already knows..." I prompted Tobias.

“Then we don’t exactly have to tell him,” he finished. “Cassie, just tell him that you have to go, maybe allude to the first war. I’m sure he’ll get the message and know to keep quiet. As for you, Marco...”

“I can’t just disappear,” he said to Tobias. “Even if I leave town, people will expect to hear about me. I can’t just pop up every month or so like Cassie.”

“I know. Alloran and I figure that you can go on an extended vacation, maybe out in space somewhere. Alloran can fake the necessary documentation. We’ll register you with a private ship and staff. No one will come looking for you.”

“Alloran can fake all that?” Marco asked. “Wouldn’t he have to hack Tri-I’s database to do that? I’m pretty sure they keep track of those things and they have Andalite security over the important stuff.”

“He can do it,” Tobias promised. “He’s something of a prodigy. Tell them, Alloran.”

The young Andalite scuffed a hoof almost as though he was embarrassed. <I have had much experience with computers, especially with Andalite systems. Andalite security measures will not be able to stop me.>

“Alloran, like I told you all, is my half-brother. Our father

didn't want anyone to know he had sons; the Yeerks, especially Esplin, would use that as leverage. I was 'safe' here on Earth, but Alloran wasn't."

<My father had a special place constructed for me. My needs and education were seen to by automatons, since it was too dangerous for real Andalites to know where I was. Automatons could not be infested by Yeerks.

<Often, there was not much for me to do, so I began to disassemble and reprogram my caretakers. Once they had taught me everything they could, I changed them from educators to friends. I learned to overcome any computer system known to the Andalites. My automaton friends became just like real Andalites, each with its own personality.>

"Oh my god! He built Chee!" Marco gasped. I did too when I realized he was right. Jeanne and Cassie just stared at the Andalite.

Tobias nodded. "I know. That was why I decided to find him when Jake and I set out to replace Santorelli. Alloran might even be a match for Ereka. He's a miracle, really. Esplin now has access to Andalite technology, which would have stopped us cold in the first war. We actually found a way to one up him."

“Okay, so I’m taken care of,” Marco said. “What about Jeanne and Rachel?”

We sat in silence for several minutes. We knew it would be suspicious if Jeanne and I just packed up and left so soon. Our family wasn’t full of idiots; they’d figure it out.

But we couldn’t figure anything out. We couldn’t accept having Chee live our lives for us, and we couldn’t think of any good reasons why we would suddenly leave. I didn’t want to be the one to say it because it might have sounded selfish, so I kept quiet about what I knew we had to do. Finally, it was Cassie who said it. “We’ll have to tell the truth.”

CHAPTER 9

Tobias nodded. “I can’t think of any other way. We’ll have to tell them what’s really going on and convince them to keep quiet about it.” He looked at me. “And about you.”

He was right. Word couldn’t get out that I was alive again. It would raise far too many questions and I didn’t want to answer people. And it would warn the Yeerks and I wanted to see the look on Esplin’s stolen face when he found himself face to face with my grizzly bear.

Jeanne shook her head. “How can I just leave?”

Tobias fixed her with a hard stare. “Jeanne, I know what it’s like, believe me. But the time you lost with your father is time you’ll never get back, no matter how much time you spend with him now. Staying won’t fill the hole inside of you. Believe me, I’ve tried. It’s too late for Jacques to be your father; the most he can ever be is a friend.”

“So say you.”

“From experience,” he answered. “I always thought my mother, Loren, was dead. Then, just before everything hit the fan, we found out she was still alive. I tried to be with her but it was far too late for us. It’ll hurt to leave Jacques but not as

much as it will hurt if you stay.”

“How will it hurt if I stay?”

“One day, you’ll wake up and realize that, though you admire and respect him, as much as you enjoy his company, you don’t love him. Not as your father, at least. Realizing that, on top of realizing that you quit the war for him, will hurt more than leaving him now ever could.”

“How can I tell him that?” she asked.

“I think he’ll understand. If he doesn’t, then he isn’t worth crying over. If he does, then you’ll have plenty of time when this is all over.”

We sat in awkward silence for a few moments. Tobias prodded us onto business. “Another thing we need to take care of. Jake.”

“His family must be worried sick,” Cassie said. “He’s been gone for a month...”

“And we know he isn’t coming back,” I finished. I winced at the look on Cassie’s face. I wish there had been a way around it, but someone had to say it. “What we need to decide is what to tell his family.”

Marco nodded. “We could have a Chee disguised as Jake go to his family—”

“I just can’t agree to that,” Cassie interrupted.

“I wasn’t finished,” Marco almost snapped. Of course, no one can snap at Cassie. “We have a Chee disguised as Jake go to his family and tell them that he’s going off with me. Then, no one has to worry about why they don’t see him anywhere and no fake Jake is living his life. It’s the best compromise I can come up with.”

“I don’t like lying about this,” Cassie insisted. “To make them think their son is alive for who knows how long...”

Tobias nodded. “Its despicable, no doubt about it. But I don’t think we have a choice. We already agreed that the world can’t know he’s dead any more than it can know Rachel’s alive.”

“Uh, general?” I said. Tobias looked at me and raised an eyebrow. “I think this is the time you call for a vote.”

He shrugged. “Alright then. Votes. Marco, I assume you’re voting yes to this plan.”

“Correctamundo.”

“Rachel?”

“Yes.”

“Jeanne?”

“I see no alternative. Yes.”

“Cassie?”

“I...I just have to say no. Sorry, but I still vote for telling the truth.”

“Alloran?”

<I will do as you command, my Prince.>

“Of course. So it’s four yes and one no. Sorry, Cassie, but we do this. I think that takes care of everyone.”

“What about Ax?” I asked. “That has to cause some complications, with Esplin walking around in his body. If he shows up in the same town over and over again where suspicious things keep happening, people will figure it out as easily as they will with us there.”

Tobias shook his head. “He won’t show his face. The Andalites have kept it quiet, but he’s a hunted man now. Menderash told them what happened, so the Andalites are looking for him. He’ll stay hidden.

“I think we have it all covered. I want to be ready to go as soon as possible, so I suggest you all get to your assignments as soon as you can. Marco, you have to take a Chee to Jake’s home and pull off your plan. Cassie, you have to tell Ronnie what’s going on. Rachel and Jeanne have to do the same thing. Alloran and I will work on phase two.”

“Phase two?” I asked.

“We have to find a place to live. We need new identities. We need a way to get to our destination; it’s far too far to fly as birds.”

“If you say it, I’ll believe it,” Marco muttered.

“Well, lets get to it, people. Let’s show the Yeerks that no one can keep us down for long.”

CHAPTER 10

Jeanne and I decided to fly to my house. It was weird for two reasons. The first was that this was the only time since we were reunited that I wasn't next to Tobias. The second was that this was the first time I was alone with my new sister.

I wasn't sure what to say to her. I thought about what we had in common: the war. I decided to steer away from that track. I made due with small talk. <So, Jeanne, where did you grow up?>

I was a bald eagle, flying high on the noontime thermals. A thermal is a pillar of warm air rising up from the ground. They were best at noon, when the sun was right overhead. This was easy flying.

Jeanne, a red-tailed hawk, was below me. My wings were much bigger than hers, so I could soar higher. None of the others could fly this high except for Tobias, and that was only because he had too much practice. As I'm sure you know, he used to be a hawk.

<I grew up in Paris. It was...well, about what you might expect it to be. My father was a successful businessman, so I lived the Paris highlife. It was wonderful. Until my father

visited America. He changed here. Now I know it was because he was infested here. At the time, I had no idea.

<When he came home, he was...different. It wasn't anything I could put my finger on, but he had changed. Strange packages started arriving at the house. They were Kandrona generators, it seems, so his Yeerk wouldn't starve.

<One day, I opened one of his packages. I didn't know what it was, but he found me. The next thing I knew, I was on the Yeerk Pool ship. I would have been infested, but then the strangest thing happened.>

<What?>

<Visser One found me. She...it wasn't pity, I know that. I don't know why she chose to do it, but she kept me from being infested. She took me for her own. She trained me.>

<Trained you?>

<As an assassin. She wanted me to destroy her enemies. Esplin, the Council of Thirteen, other Vissers...her list was a long one. She thought that no one would suspect a young, human girl.>

<And you agreed to do her dirty work?> I asked. I couldn't say I wouldn't have done the same thing. At least I'd be taking down other Yeerks.

<No. She thought she could convince me but I never agreed to do it. With all I knew, she couldn't give me to the Yeerks, so she decided that, when the time was right, she would infest me herself.>

<How did that work out?>

<She only did it once. She wanted to test me against an enemy she thought she could kill.>

<Who?>

<An Andalite named Prince Elfangor. I believe you know of him.> It was hard to tell with thought-speak, but I think she was being coy.

<Oh yeah, I know him. She thought you could take him out?>

<That is what she thought. By killing Elfangor, she would eliminate a threat to the Yeerks and embarrass Visser Three. But Elfangor was too much for her. We barely escaped alive. Things were different after that.>

<How so?>

<Now that Elfangor knew about me, she got paranoid. Soon, things got so bad that she decided to give up the whole project. She had my memory wiped and sent me back to Earth.>

<Why didn't she just kill you?>

<I don't know. I think that she planned to use me again some day, when it was safe. I remember most of my past now, but my training still eludes me.>

<What was your life like when she let you go?>

<Not good. I couldn't remember anything. I had no family and no past. I lived in orphanages. When the news about the Yeerk invasion became public, I started to remember things. And now that I'm fighting again, I remember some of my training.>

So my new sister was an assassin for the former Visser One. Cool. That was definitely someone I wanted to have on my side. But this conversation was getting deeper than I wanted it to. I decided to change the subject.

<So, Jeanne, any guys in your life??>

<Well...yes and no.>

<What does that mean?>

<It is complicated.>

I laughed. <Jeanne, I wrote the book on complicated relationships. You know about me and Tobias in the first war?>

>

<I have read some things about the two of you. I admire

you for it, but my situation is a little different. It is far less... unusual.>

<I can deal with that. Come on; dish.>

<There is one whom I believe I have feelings for. But I do not know if he feels the same. I'm not sure if his flirting is serious or if it is just the way he is.>

<*That's* your problem? Jeez, that's no problem at all. Just ask Cassie if he likes you, she'll know. Who is it, anyway?>

<Marco.>

I stopped flapping. If I hadn't been in a thermal, I would have dropped like a stone. I couldn't believe it. Jeanne, who was almost as beautiful as I was, who was smart and brave and *my sister*, liked Marco? Marco the shrimp? Marco the guy who always wanted to quit the war and hide at home? Marco, the only guy who actually thought he was funny? It didn't fit in my brain. There was no way.

<Say that again,> I insisted. <Tell me I heard you wrong. Tell me you didn't say you liked Marco.>

<What is wrong with Marco?>

<Please tell me you mean a different Marco and not the Marco whose house we're living at.>

<I do not mean a different Marco. Why are you acting this

way?> There was a pause. Then, she added, <Do you like him too?>

I swear, if I wasn't an eagle, I would have thrown up. <Oh God, no! I'd sooner date Jake; or maybe even Cassie!>

<Wasn't Jake your cousin?>

<Exactly,> I muttered. <Look, Jeanne, do yourself a favor and stay away from Marco.>

<Why?>

<Because...because he's Marco!> I couldn't explain it any more than she could explain why she liked him. We'd have to have some sort of intervention. This could not stand.

I'd talk to Marco. Long ago, he and I had made a rule about him dating my sisters: he could do it, but if he did, I got to rip his arms off. That rule was meant for Jordan, but it went for Jeanne, too.

All I had to do was remind him of our rule. He knew I'd actually rip his arms off, so he'd back off. Right? That would be the intelligent thing to do. I thought that would do it. But the thing about Marco is that, although he may be smart, he doesn't often do the intelligent thing.

CHAPTER 11

Jeanne and I flew through the open window of the bedroom formerly known as mine. I started to demorph just as Sara walked into the room.

“Oh, that’s pretty gross, Rachel. I’m so glad I never saw you do that when I was little. I’d never have gone to sleep again.” Then, she got a mischievous smile on her face. She looked from me to Jeanne. “And what were the two of you doing?”

I shook my head. “Nice try, Sara, but that’s not Tobias. It’s Jeanne.”

“Oh. Sorry, Jeanne. Anyhow, Rachel, I’m just here to get my stuff. I’m moving back in with Jordan. I figure you and Jeanne will probably share this room, but Mom’s thinking of getting a new house, since our family got a third bigger.”

“Mom always talked about getting a bigger place,” I noted.

“Yeah, but now we can afford it. With mom’s status in her firm and with Jacques’s job, it’s no problem,” she told me.

“What exactly does Jacques do?”

“He...he’s some kind of businessman, I think. I’m not really sure. Maybe he’s in electronics?”

By this time, Jeanne had demorphed. “He’s in everything. At least, he used to be. He was a major supplier for Yeerk Pool construction materials during the first war. It wasn’t his fault of course.”

“Of course not,” I agreed. “We’ve never blamed anyone for stuff their Yeerks did. Sometimes, we don’t even blame the Yeerk. I know Cassie doesn’t. Sara, are mom and Jacques home?”

“Yeah. They decided to take off work today to spend time with the two of you. Jordan’s home, too.”

“Good. There’s something we need to tell all of you,” I said.

“Oh no. I don’t like that tone,” Sara muttered.

“There’s a good reason.”

We walked down the stairs. I stopped to grab Jordan out of her room. She was reorganizing her stuff to make room for Sara. I didn’t tell her not to bother with it. She’d learn soon enough. My mom and Jacques were sitting in the living room, almost as though they were waiting for us.

My mom’s first words? “Rachel, where were you all last night?”

Some things never change. There was no real reason to lie

to her, so I did something new. I told the truth. “I was out with the others.”

“And with Tobias,” Jordan added, singing his name. I glared at her. She just smiled.

My mother opened her mouth but Jacques put a hand on her arm. “Naomi, let her have her fun. She lost out on enough of her life already. If she wants to spend one night out with her friends, that is her business.”

I turned to Jeanne. “I like your dad.”

She smiled. “*Moi aussi.*” I’m not sure what that meant.

“That makes this even harder.” I saw the worried look my mother and Jordan shared. I saw a different look pass from Sara to Jacques. It was a look of...confirmation. They already suspected.

“Look, there is no good way to say this, so I’ll just do it in one go. The Yeerks are back.”

My mom and Jordan gasped and almost fell out of their chairs. Jacques and Sara nodded. Then, Sara passed Jacques some money. I eyed them.

“We had a bet,” Sara explained. “We thought everything was a little too...coincidental. He had his money on a new Yeerk invasion. I thought it was the Chee.”

My mom shook her head. “How can they be back? This is impossible.”

“You’ve been saying that for two days,” I reminded her. “The Blade ship got away, despite my best efforts. Ax, our Andalite friend, hunted it down. He was captured by a creature called The One. The Yeerks all serve The One now.

“There are forces outside of mortal comprehension. The One is one of them. Two others are the Crayak and the Ellimist; I think I’ve mentioned them.” Jordan nodded. “The One hates Crayak, and now that we beat the Yeerks, Crayak loves humans.

“The One wants to destroy Crayak forever. That wouldn’t be bad except that he’s going through Earth to do it. We cut a deal with Crayak: if we help him, he leaves Earth alone forever. He agreed, so we’re fighting The One.

“The One used his power to destroy the Andalite fleet around the Hork-bajir world and steal a Pool ship full of Yeerks. Then, he came to Earth. He freed Esplin 9466; Visser One slash Three. Now, Ax is a controller, the host of the very Yeerk who killed his brother Elfangor and made our lives hell.

“We have to fight the Yeerks again. They’re in a new town on the other side of the country, so we’ll have to go there. We

couldn't think of anything to do but tell you the truth. Jeanne and I have to leave."

"Why you?" Sara asked. "Can't you tell someone? Tri-I's supposed to deal with this sort of thing."

"We could, except for a deal The One made with Crayak and the Ellimist. The One agreed not to use his powers unless the war went public. We have to keep it quiet or Earth will pay the price."

"This isn't fair," Jordan complained. "We just got you back and now you're leaving again? To go off and disappear for another four years. It isn't right. Why does it have to be you?"

"I guess whoever's in charge of this whole thing doesn't think anyone else can do it." I answered.

"Why does Jeanne have to go?" Jacques asked.

"Because I was chosen," Jeanne told him. "About a year ago, Jake chose me to come with him on the search for Prince Aximili. I was chosen to fight this war; I have no choice."

"There's always a choice," my mom insisted.

"Maybe for most; not for Animorphs," I answered. "Look, I know this sucks. Believe me, I really wish it could be another way. But in this show, even the good guys are sadists,

mom.

“Something very important: you can’t tell anyone about this. You can’t mention a war or Yeerks to anyone at all. And you can’t tell them I’m alive. It’ll raise too many questions. Once this is all over, I’ll tell everyone. But for now, Jeanne doesn’t exist and I’m still dead. That’s the way it has to be.”

“This isn’t fair,” Jordan said again.

“I know. This war seems to be the curse of two families and we have the bad luck to be one of them. Jake and I were hit pretty hard by things, and now the rest of you have to suffer. It sucks alright, but it could be worse.”

“How?” Sara asked.

“We could be the other family. Believe me, we’re better off.”

“Who is the other family?”

“Elfangor, the dead hero. Ax, the controller and slave to the one who killed his brother. Tobias, who’s his own can of worms. And Alloran, another kid dragged into our hell. Believe me, you don’t want to be them. Compared to that family, we got off lucky.”

CHAPTER 12

Jeanne and I spent the rest of the day with our family. I had no clue how long it would be before I saw them again and I didn't want to waste a minute of our time together. Jeanne felt similarly.

When night fell, Jeanne and I morphed and flew back to Marco's. I was a great horned owl; Jeanne was still a red-tailed hawk, since she didn't have an owl morph. We would have to do something about that.

When we got back, we found Tobias, Alloran, and Marco gathered around Marco's massive computer. What were they doing? Playing games. "I'm just saying that playing against Alloran isn't fair; the dude's got four extra fingers," Marco whined.

<Perhaps you just have four less than you should.>

"Was that a joke?"

<Do what now?>

"Never mind."

I cleared my throat loudly. Marco and Alloran didn't glance away from the screen. Tobias did, but only briefly. "Hey, you're back. How'd it go?"

“How do you think?”

He shrugged. “Probably no better than the last time you broke the news to them.”

“Jordan took it worse this time,” I told him. “Sara and Jacques actually bet money on it. Jacques made a pretty penny. My mom was...well, she was my mom.”

He grunted to show that he heard. I pitched my voice as coyly as I knew how. “Maybe you three should stop playing games and tell me what our next move is.”

“Hey, this isn’t a game,” Marco insisted. “This is a highly advanced tactical simulation.” I looked at the screen just in time to see Alloran’s character very tactically decapitate Marco’s.

“Marco, why do you feel the need to play violent videogames? You *live* in one,” Jeanne pointed out.

“If I lived in a game, I’d shut the thing off and chill out with some TV,” Marco answered, not taking his eyes off of the screen. “Now don’t distract me, this is a subtle game of strategy.”

Alloran’s character very strategically knocked Marco’s to the ground and then stepped on his throat. The words GAME OVER flashed across Marco’s side of the screen.

Marco wheeled his chair back from the keyboard. “Okay, now we can talk. Alloran and I have been working on this for a while.”

I glanced at Tobias. “And what were you doing?”

“I don’t know much about computers, so I left it up to them. I was just here to provide some feedback and the occasional suggestion.”

“Anyhow,” Marco continued, “Alloran and I were working on our basic problem. That problem was that we needed to create not only fake identification, but also entire fake pasts backed up with fake documentation. That’s all easy enough to fake in one place, but impossible to do on a large scale.”

<However, we discovered something. Prince Tobias suggested that Tri-I might be able to do such a thing. We found out that this was false, but our investigation led us to another detail.>

“Turns out,” Marco told us, “that all the world governments got together and put all important information in one worldwide database. The Andalites use a similar database to keep track of their population, so the humans decided to do the same.”

<If we could access this database, we could forge all of the

necessary documentation to provide believable identities. If we could reach the main computer system, I could bypass the security and create our identities.>

“That’s a big if,” Tobias told us. “The system doesn’t get any input from any external sources, it only sends out information, so we can’t access it remotely. That’s all we know about it. We don’t know where it is or what security it has.”

“So we need to find it,” I said.

He nodded. “We’re working on it. We figured that the world governments would know where it was. There would be a record in some file somewhere. We plan to find that file by cracking America’s security.”

“Wouldn’t we have to break into the White House to do that?” I asked.

Marco laughed. Alloran gave me a look that I wasn’t supposed to understand. But I had seen that look on Ax a lot. It was a look that said, “You’re an idiot.”

Marco spoke first. “The nation’s secrets would be kept in the Pentagon, Rachel.”

<And we would not need to break in. Your government’s computer system constantly receives data from other sources. I

need to access only one of these satellite sources in order to access the main database. From there, it will be a simple matter to extract the desired information.>

“This sounds deceptively easy,” Jeanne noted.

“I was thinking the same thing,” I agreed.

Tobias shook his head. “Finding the system won’t be hard. Getting in will be. This place holds all the important information about everyone on Earth. That will be heavily guarded. It might even be tighter than Tri-I’s headquarters, and that wasn’t easy. We got lucky there by finding a crack in the foundation of the building. I doubt we’ll be that lucky this time.”

He turned to Jeanne. “Call Cassie and tell her to meet us here as soon as possible. We’re going to find this thing tonight and move on it tomorrow. Then, we take this war to the Yeerks.”

CHAPTER 13

Turns out, it was ridiculously easy for us to get into the government's computers. How did we manage it? We had some friends in high places. In this case, the Chee.

We knew that Tri-I would be connected to the American government's database, if only to feed it information. There was a Tri-I regional office in our home town, so it wouldn't be hard to get there. To top it off, the director was one of the Chee, so we could count on help.

Tri-I was a worldwide organization devoted to making sure that something like the Yeerk invasion never happened again. Oops. The International Invasion Investigation Force was a collaborative effort by all the powers in the world. Tri-I had power and influence; and they had information.

I was surprised they didn't have the database we were looking for. Marco explained it to me politely. "Giving them that kind of information would make them too powerful." Then, impolitely, he decided to add, "Duh."

We could have walked in through the front door, if we had wanted to. But that would cause a bit of a stir and we wanted to avoid that. And it was after hours. And, the last time

Animorphs had paid Tri-I a visit, their main branch had been broken into.

We were gathered in an alley three blocks away from the building. Everything closer would have been too well monitored to hide there. We were going to use the same plan Tobias, Marco, and Santorelli had used when they infiltrated it the first time.

“Alright,” Tobias began. “First, all but one of us goes to fly morph. The remaining person goes to owl. Jeanne, Alloran, and I can’t do owl, so we’re out. That leaves Marco, Cassie, and Rachel.”

“No way am I flying cover on my first mission back,” I said.

“Didn’t think so. And I need Marco with me, since he’s been in here before and knows where the director’s office is. That means you fly cover, Cassie,” Tobias decided.

Cassie nodded. “Like last time. That’s fine with me.” She started to morph. Cassie has a talent for it. She can make most morphs look beautiful. The owl was no exception.

First, the feathers appeared all over her body like a tattoo. Then, they exploded into 3D. Her head shrank, but her eyes stayed the same size. Her jaw lengthened and hardened into a

beak. All the while, she shrank.

She spread her arms and they became wings. I heard a grinding sound as the joints rearranged. Her feet turned into the killing talons of an owl. Her transformation was almost complete in fifteen seconds.

All the while, I was morphing. The shrinking came first. This was weird shrinking. Usually, when you shrink, you morph as well. Not this time. Within the first few seconds, I was a fly-sized Rachel. Then, my eyes exploded into the compound eyes of the fly.

The color was weird. There were about a thousand images of everything. I couldn't see more than a few inches in front of me. That was good, since I didn't want to see too much of what was happening to my friends.

I felt the other changes. My spear-like antennae shot out of my head and started sniffing the air. Dagger like hairs developed all over my body. My gossamer wings shot out of my back. An extra pair of legs joined them.

I heard a sick popping as my joints changed direction and new ones grew. There was a squishing sound as most of my organs dissolved to become the fly's digestive system. My proboscis, which I don't even want to describe, grew out of

my mouth.

Then the fly instincts kicked in. I clamped down on them hard because I was used to them. The urge to fly, to gorge myself on the garbage in the alley, were strong, but not something I couldn't handle.

<Everyone alright?> Tobias called.

<Fine here,> I said. <And let me just say that your cloths smell particularly delicious tonight.>

<Uh...thanks. Marco?>

<Please, I'm a professional. Rachel, smell me!>

<No. You stink. I'm a fly and I still think you stink. That's how bad your stench is.>

<AHH! The pain! The agony!> Then, in a private voice, he said to me, <I missed this.>

<Me too,> I whispered back.

<Jeanne?>

<I am almost finished.> Jeanne was a slower morpher than the rest of us, since we had years of experience on her.

<Alloran?>

<I am fine, my Prince.>

Privately, to Marco, Cassie, and me, Tobias said, <I see what Jake meant. That does get a little stale.> Then, aloud,

<Alloran, I'm your brother. You don't have to call me Prince.>

<Of course, my Prince.>

<Cassie, need I ask?>

<I'm overhead, watching you. Whenever you're ready to go, we can be at it.>

<Alright then. Alloran, keep track of our time. People? Let's do this thing.>

If Marco had the ability, he would have rolled his eyes at me. <You know, he's getting to be just like Jake.>

I laughed. <There are worse things. He could be turning into you. Now let's get this over with. I do not plan on spending my night as a fly.>

CHAPTER 14

We had no trouble getting into Tri-I. After about twenty minutes of waiting, a janitor walked through the front doors. We rode in on his head. No alarms sounded. No Gleet BioFilters went off. No one jumped out to attack us. It was almost too easy.

<Okay, Marco, lead us to the office.>

<On it, chief,> Marco replied. We followed him for less than a minute before he stopped. <Here we are. Now, how do we get in?>

<Hmm...Okay, we hit our first snag. I think it's pretty obvious that there will be bug zappers under the door so that's out.>

<I could pick the lock,> Jeanne suggested.

<The cameras would see you,> Tobias pointed out.

<Prince Tobias?> Guess who that was. I'll give you a hint: only one person I know calls him prince. <The cameras in this facility are likely of Andalite make and are therefore no larger than a human eyeball. A fly should be enough to block a lens.>

<Alright,> Tobias began. <Spread out and try to find all the cameras. Better yet, only find the ones that would be

watching the door. If we block them all, it'll be really suspicious.>

I drifted around looking for a camera. <Found one,> Tobias commented.

<Got one here,> Marco added.

<I have located one as well.>

I kept looking but didn't find one facing the door. <Nothing else facing the door. I think Jeanne's clear.>

<Alright then. Get demorphing, Jeanne, but don't do it any more than you have to. I want you back in fly as soon as we have a crack.>

I settled next to Tobias. <Hey there. So...seen any good movies lately?>

<I saw part of one about some kids fighting brain stealing aliens.>

<Was it any good?>

<The plot was a little far fetched. And this one guy kept cracking jokes. He was really annoying.>

<Hey!> Marco, of course.

<Prince Tobias? We have been in morph for approximately forty-five of your minutes.>

<They're everyone's minutes,> Marco grumbled. <Tobias,

order him to call them everyone's minutes.>

<We have been in morph for approximately forty-five of everyone's minutes.>

<Is he making a joke?>

<Honestly, I don't know,> Tobias admitted.

<I have opened the door.>

<Good. Let's get going.> We flew through the cracked door. I flinched as I passed through, but I didn't get zapped by anything. That was good. I already had a second chance; no one ever gets a third.

In the center of the room, leaning on a massive desk, was a large, shimmering figure. I knew what that shimmering meant. It was a hologram. There was a Chee waiting for us.

<Hey,> Tobias called to the Chee. He didn't respond. <Maybe something isn't right. Alloran, get under the desk and demorph. If something's going on here, we'll need your tail. Let us know what you see.>

A few minutes later, Alloran reported. <There is a man standing here, Prince Tobias. He seems to be dead. He is not breathing, but he appears to be perfectly healthy.>

<Maybe the Chee's asleep?> Marc offered.

<Maybe. Alloran, get the door.> Once that was done, we

demorphed. “Can you reach Cassie?”

A moment later, we heard Cassie say, <Yes, I can year you Alloran.>

“Keep her posted on her morph time.” Tobias turned his attention to the Chee. He looked like a perfectly healthy middle-aged man. Except that he showed no signs of movement.

“Alloran,” Tobias said to the Andalite, “this is a Chee. He’s an android. See if you can wake him up.”

<Tobias?> Cassie called. <Can you tell Alloran not to tell me every time a minute passes?>

“Sorry. Alloran, only tell her every fifteen minutes or so.”

<Of course, Prince Tobias.> A few minutes later, the Chee’s eyes snapped open. He looked around himself wildly. Then, he relaxed.

“Oh, it’s you. Right now, you can call me Mark. What brings you here?”

He wasn’t hostile; the Chee never were. They were an advanced race of androids programmed for fun, not violence. I saw what happened the one time a Chee was set to kill and it terrified me. Now, all of them were more pacifistic than Cassie.

“We’re looking for some information,” Tobias answered. “The world governments put together a worldwide database with all the important information about everyone in the world. We need to find it and we can use the computers here to learn its location.”

“Well,” Mark answered, “I’m already wired into Tri-I’s systems. I was using them to recharge myself. I could access any information you need form right here. What exactly are you looking for?”

“It would be easier for Alloran to do it,” Tobias answered. “If you don’t mind...”

“Of course not.” Marco’s body disappeared. In its place stood an ivory and steel dog-like creature. A Chee in its natural form. In front of Alloran appeared a hologram of a computer screen. “Simply give me the commands and I will do them.”

It took only a few minutes for Alloran to hack into the United States government database. A few minutes after that, he found us the file we wanted.

<The database is kept in the basement of a building in a place called Death Valley.>

“Road trip to Death Valley,” Marco commented. “Doesn’t

sound that bad. Break in, put in some files, disappear. Nothing to it.”

Then Alloran told us about the security.

CHAPTER 15

Mark made a flash drive with all the information America had on the database. We took it back to Marco's to check in to it. What we found scared us half to death. The place was a fortress.

Alloran brought up a schematic of the building. It was fifty stories. The first was above ground level; the other forty-nine went below the earth. One third of the floors were the offices and things that were needed to keep the place running; the other two thirds were full of guards.

What we needed was at the very bottom; that was the only place to alter information. It would be nearly impossible to get there. There was no way to do it without being caught.

"Let's review this," Tobias said for the fifth time that night. "The entire place has a force field around it, so we can't even try to walk in the front door."

"If we got past that," Marco added, "The Gleet BioFilters all over the building would fry us five times before we found the stairs. Not even a dropshaft; good old fashioned human stairs, crawling with guards."

"X-ray scanners attached to the Gleet BioFilters would

show any bugs riding on them or even Yeerks in their heads,” I commented.

“All hallways are whitewashed, so we’d be noticed as bugs. And the guards are all equipped with heat-scanning goggles; enough to detect any life whatsoever,” Cassie noted.

“And heart-rate monitors,” Jeanne added. “So if we take one out, security control will notice the change in his heart rate and investigate. They’ll notice a change even if he just sees us.”

<All of the guards are morph-capable as well as armed with the latest in human and Andalite technology; a fight might not end well for us.>

Tobias rubbed his temples. “Okay. So, we know this place cannot be infiltrated. Not even a Yeerk could do it. The building is entirely self-contained; no one gets in or out, which means that we can’t even capture and morph some employees. Even if we could, everything has passwords. Not just the computers but the guard posts as well, so morphs wouldn’t fool them for long. And unlike a lot of places, these people are expecting morphs.”

“So what’s the plan?” Marco asked. “There has to be a way in.”

Tobias looked at me and got one of the biggest smiles I'd ever seen on his face. "We attack. A full-out assault. The *Reliquary* has enough power to bust through the force fields; they weren't made to stand up to the kind of firepower I have. We blow our way into the building and get moving.

"Alloran can disable a Gleet BioFilter; hopefully before one fries us. The rest of us will handle the guards. They might have morphs, but we *are* morphs. We can take them."

"All of them?" Marco questioned.

Tobias nodded. "I've got a new morph. It can handle anything they throw at us."

"What is it?" I asked. Whatever it was, I wanted one. I loved my bear, but if Tobias had something more powerful...

"It's a surprise."

"Oh, great. He chooses *now* to get a sense of humor." Marco, of course.

"Tobias, we can't do that," Cassie insisted. "We'd be hurting innocent people."

"I know, but there is no other way. We don't have a choice, Cassie. This is something we need to do. We'll try not to kill anyone, of course. Believe me, I don't like it either, but there is no choice."

“There’s always a choice.”

“Yeah; victory or defeat.”

“It isn’t as simple as that.”

“It isn’t more complicated. If we lose this thing, then, no offense meant, all our moralizing means nothing.”

“But what’s the point of victory if we become as bad as what we were fighting against?”

“I’m willing to become as bad as the Yeerks if it will stop them. As long as the rest of humanity doesn’t get to be like them, then I’ll live with it. I’d rather I become a Yeerk than the human race does.”

“Not everyone’s you, Tobias.”

“I know that. Which is why, if anyone wants to sit this one out, you can do it. But I’ll still go and I know Alloran will. We might be able to do this alone but almost certainly not. If you want to stay here, that’s your business, but I’m going to fight.”

“I’m in,” I said instantly.

“Big surprise,” Marco muttered. “I’m in too. We have to do this, Cassie, like it or not. Besides, I can’t let a girl upstage me.”

“And I can’t let a sexist pig upstage me,” Jeanne interjected. “I am in as well.”

Tobias turned to Cassie. “Cassie, believe me this hurts me too. But this plan was mine, not yours. These orders are mine, not yours. This guilt is mine, not yours. I can take the pain from this. But if you stay behind while we go off to fight, that’s guilt I can’t take from you. Either way, you’ll feel bad about what you did. If you come with us, you can do something good while feeling bad.”

“I guess I don’t have much of a choice.”

“There’s always a choice,” Tobias echoed. “But not everyone has the luxury of being able to say no. And not everyone can say yes. There’s a choice, but not some people can only give one answer.”

Cassie might not have been able to see it, but I could. Tobias’ face didn’t give much away; being a hawk for so long had all but taken away his ability to make facial expressions, and he wouldn’t say what he was thinking, but I knew.

This hurt him as much as it hurt Cassie. I knew Tobias better than anyone. He was a moralizing as she was. But unlike her, he was willing to throw those morals aside when it was a question of victory.

I noticed it back during the oatmeal incident. He was opposed to using oatmeal against the Yeerks; it amounted to

chemical warfare. Oatmeal was an addictive drug to them that would destroy both host and parasite. Morally, he couldn't support any plan that involved it. But he voted in favor of our plan to dump it into the Yeerk pool.

That was the kind of person he was. He had as many lofty ideals and morals as Cassie. But he was as cold and calculating as Marco. And as willing to be violent and brutal as me. That was why he was the best choice as a leader. Like Jake, he had the same qualities as all of us. But Tobias had them in even greater quantity than Jake did.

Jake was part warrior, part strategist, part saint. Tobias was all warrior, all strategist, all saint. That was the difference between the two. Sometimes, with Jake, his saint part won over the rest. With Tobias, that part was totally outnumbered.

Jake often chose to do the moral thing and in a lot of ways, that made the war worse than it could have been. Tobias would never choose the moral road. I knew it, and so did Marco and Cassie.

Only I knew how much it would hurt him.

CHAPTER 16

The *Reliquary* was Tobias' ship. I loved it. It was roomy and easy to control. It looked like someone could live in it; there was even a bathroom, a bed, and the other comforts of home.

It wasn't as big as a Blade ship but it was definitely larger than a Bug fighter. Two wicked wings extended from the egg-like cockpit. There were guns hidden all over the ship, just in case. The whole thing was painted as black as the Blade ship. Streaks of white were spread asymmetrically across the ship; camouflage in the darkness of space.

We weren't bothering with stealth now. Tobias was flying the ship to Death Valley as fast as it would go. We'd be there in a few minutes.

To fly the ship, Tobias just had to make contact with a sphere in the center of the cockpit. The ship would respond to his commands instantly.

“Okay, people, here's the drill. I'll fly in and start shooting. When we have an opening, we all drop out. The *Reliquary* will be waiting in orbit above us. It's keyed to my thought-speak, so it'll come when I call. We'll get in, do our

business, and get out. No screwing around. Got it?”

Marco raised his hand. “What if I have to stop and use the bathroom?” Marco never could let Jake keep a mood tense; why would he be any different with Tobias?

“Marco? If I die, you’re in charge. Get them out.”

“*You’re* the one with the mystery super morph,” Marco muttered.

We started to morph. I went with my favorite: grizzly bear. First came the claws. My finger-and-toenails shot out till they were like knives. Muscle started to pile upon muscle. I was growing till I was seven feet tall.

My bones were like concrete. I could rip an elephant open if I wanted to; I was just that strong. The sharp teeth filled my mouth. For one glorious moment, I was a human with all the killing power of the bear.

Then the fur exploded all over my body. It shot out of my skin like hyperactive worms. My jaw bulged out to the snout of a grizzly bear. My hearing and sense of smell got better. My eyes got blurry and I became really nearsighted.

In about ten seconds, it was complete. This had been the last morph I used in my life; now I was really back. I was where I belonged, in the body that I belonged in.

I looked around at my friends. Marco was an oh so familiar gorilla. He was strong enough to pick up and throw a raging Hork-bajir warrior; I'd seen him do it. A good animal to have on our side.

Cassie was a wolf. She was almost supernaturally fast, with jaws that could take down a moose. No humans would pose a threat to her. I bet she could dodge bullets.

Jeanne was a leopard. I'd never been one or fought one, but it looked dangerous. It reminded me a little of Jake's tiger, so I trusted her. She wasn't as strong as the tiger, but she was even faster and more agile. And I bet she had more stamina.

Alloran was his Andalite self. Maybe most people wouldn't have thought a kid Andalite was that dangerous. But he looked a lot like Ax and I knew just how deadly his tail was. Ax had saved my life more times than I could count. He once took out a crocodile all alone. I trusted Alloran's tail.

And Tobias... <Jesus! You *really* should have warned us before morphing that thing.>

He was about the same size as his human body. Red and black flesh covered him. Sky blue eyes gazed at us with a deathlike glare. His pointed teeth were drawn back in a smile.

His hands had claws on the back, sort of like wolverine.

His midsection was on a ball-like joint, so his torso could spin 360 degrees. He didn't look as impressive as a grizzly or a gorilla, but he was far more dangerous.

Tobias had morphed a Howler. They were a race bred by Crayak to do one thing and one thing only: to kill. Once, a Howler had fought all of us, Jake, Marco, Cassie, Ax, Tobias, and me, to a draw. We had run away from the fight; he had walked. If Tobias wanted to, he could have killed us all.

<Where did you get that?> Marco demanded. Then, his tone got suspicious. <What deal did you cut with Crayak?>

<No deal. When Santorelli and I got involved with the Time Matrix, someone took us to Crayak himself. Santorelli and I acquired Howlers. Now, I'm probably as dangerous as anything Esplin ever morphed.>

We were quiet for a moment. Then, Tobias said to us, <We're just about there. Get ready, this is going to be fast and bumpy.>

He and I shared a look. I knew what he was expecting; what they were all expecting. And I couldn't disappoint them.

If a bear could smile, I did. <Let's do it!>

CHAPTER 17

Tobias came in low and fast. He opened fire on the base. It looked like a little circular building only one story high in the middle of the desert. We knew better.

When Tobias' Shredders hit it, the force field glowed a purplish blue. We could see the outlines of octagons. <Fascinating,> Alloran commented.

<What is?> Marco asked.

<This building uses an octagonal force matrix. Most use no more than a hexagon.>

<What does that mean?> I responded.

<This building must be designed to withstand more force than we anticipated.>

<That isn't good,> Cassie muttered.

<Don't worry,> Tobias told us. <This thing's as powerful as a Dome ship; they can't possibly be expecting that kind of force.>

He was right. We soon punched several large holes in the force field. Enough that we could fly in. Tobias guided the ship through and then opened fire on the building. In less than thirty seconds, he reduced the entire top floor to rubble and

glass.

A hatch opened up in the floor. Tobias dropped through and immediately made his way to the stairs. Alloran was right behind him. I was behind Alloran. Marco, Cassie, and Jeanne brought up the rear.

The *Reliquary* disappeared into the night sky. There were no alarms sounding; the building probably had a more sophisticated system.

Turns out that the building didn't have stairs so much as one giant ramp that spiraled around the entire place, right to the bottom. We wouldn't have to go through any other places on our way to our destination.

Unfortunately, that meant that the entire security force was waiting for us on the ramp. Overhead, we could see Gleet BioFilters every ten feet. Shredders, mounted on turrets, extended from the ceiling.

Hundreds of people were waiting for us. One third was leveling Shredders at us. Another third was morphing. The last third was made of Andalites.

<Uh...Tobias?> Marco began.

<I know. Alloran? Morph to fly. I don't think you'll survive this any other way. I'll stall them.>

<What are you up to?> I asked. I knew he had a plan. He might risk his life but not all of ours.

“Hello, people of Earth,” he began.

A man stepped forward. He was thirty something; tall, with black hair, grey eyes, and an Italian suit. In one hand, he held a briefcase. With the other, he straightened his tie. “What are you? What do you want?”

“You first. Who are you?”

“I’m the Administrator; I am in charge of this facility. Who are you?”

“Just a concerned citizen.”

A large, black guy came forward and stood next to the Administrator. “Sir? The BioFilters are prepped. Just give the order and they’re all dead. Standing orders were to eliminate all threats, but with all our people here, we’ll need an order from you. The BioFilter shouldn’t kill any of us, but it could blind some of the ones in morph. Not how you expected to spend your first day back after your vacation, is it Sir?”

“No, it certainly isn’t.”

Tobias interrupted before he could give the order. “You asked what I was? I’m called a Howler. Would you like to know why?”

Then, he cut loose with the most unholy sound in the universe. His howl, tuned by Crayak himself, was designed to destroy the brains of those who heard it. I was a grizzly bear and it made me want to cry. Now I knew why Tobias wanted Alloran to morph; as an Andalite, he might have died.

My vision went red. Blood vessels broke in my eyes. Everyone in the building screamed in agony, but nothing could top that howl. It took a full minute for my vision to clear.

When I could see again, I was shocked. All of the guards were lying on the floor, their hands over their ears. Some were twitching; some weren't even doing that. The Andalites had blood coming from their ears.

<Are they...?> I trailed off.

<No, they're still alive,> Tobias assured me. <I can see their hearts beating. They'll live. I held back.>

Then, I saw one of them move. The Administrator. He stood up and brushed himself off. He straightened his tie and then turned to face us.

He seemed completely unharmed. "Not bad. Who am I speaking to? I see Marco, Rachel, and Cassie, but I seem to have some new faces to deal with."

<He knows who we are?> I demanded.

<Don't react,> Marco hissed. <He's just guessing. He knows we've used these morphs, so he's playing it off like he knows us.>

"I don't see Jake, Tobias, or Ax. That's a new Andalite, slowly demorphing from fly. Much slower than Ax ever did. I see no hawk, so the leopard must be Tobias. So you," he said to Tobias, "must be my old friend Jake. Congratulations on the morph; it's even better than the tiger."

"Jake? You seem to be confused. Who are you?"

He laughed. It was a maniacal cackle, really. It was like something you'd see on a cartoon villain. Even Esplin was never that cliché. "What, you don't recognize me? I'm hurt. Wounded. I remembered you, after all. Even after all this time."

"Who are you?"

"Ah, big Jake. Jake the perfect leader. And Cassie; sweet, nice, moral Cassie. And Marco, the wonderfully cold jester. Tobias, the bird with the mind of a boy. And my very favorite. Rachel: Xena, warrior princess. But none of you took the time to remember me?"

I shivered. Because there was only one person who would speak to us like that. Only we Animorphs knew about Marco's

nickname for me.

“Esplin,” Tobias said. He figured it out, too.

Then, the Administrator cracked the most evil smile I’d ever seen. “No.” Then, he demorphed.

First, he shrank. His fancy suit billowed around him like a tent. It folded over him so I couldn’t see the rest of the transformation. A minute later, though, something crawled out of the suit. My heart stopped.

CHAPTER 18

It was a rat. I knew exactly which rat this was. <David,> I whispered.

<Ah, you figured it out. Surprised?>

<Not really.> I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

David was once an Animorph. He had found the blue box that gave us our morphing power. He tried to sell it, so Visser Three tracked him down and took it. And he took David's family.

David was a hunted man. He could never go home and no one could be allowed to see him. We decided to make him one of us, so he could fight the Yeerks.

In the end, he betrayed us. He turned against us. He tried to kill us and then he tried to force us to give him the blue box. We had responded by trapping him in the morph of a rat. We left him on a deserted island and that was the end of it. We thought.

He had returned once, with Crayak's help. He wanted to trap me with him; I don't like to think about why. Crayak used it as opportunity to try to turn me into one of his tools. I resisted the temptation and beat David. Things got difficult

after that.

David had begged me to kill him. He didn't want to live as a rat anymore. I didn't know what the right thing to do was. It might have been merciful to kill him, but it would still be a murder. I knew better than most that, inside of a *nothlit's* animal body, there was still a human mind.

I walked away and left him as a rat. I don't know if it was right or wrong, but I did it anyway. Maybe there wasn't a right decision; that's what I chose to believe anyway. I let David live. Maybe he could redeem himself in the future.

But apparently not. <How are you here, David?> I demanded.

<I could ask you the same question. I heard that you were dead.>

<I was. Now I'm back.>

<I did the same thing you did. I cut a deal. I was done with Crayak, of course. That didn't get me anywhere the first time. And that Ellimist character wouldn't have me; I just wasn't his speed. But then I found the one who would.>

<The One,> Tobias said.

<Right. He made a deal of his own with someone to get me. He sent me to the Yeerks a day ago. Esplin was shocked to

find me; almost as shocked as Ax was.

<They couldn't infest me, of course. Nowhere to put a Yeerk in a rat's head. And if they infested me as a human, sooner or later I'd have to demorph and the shrinking would kill the Yeerk. Instead, they made me an ally.

<This was my first assignment. Esplin wanted control of this place. Since they have all those scanners, a Controller couldn't infiltrate it. But a morph could.

<We nabbed the real Administrator when he was on vacation. He's the only one with the luxury of leaving this place; an oversight on the part of those in charge. I acquired him and, after a Yeerk who infested him gave me all the important information I needed, I came to work.>

His "voice" took on a new tone. <I bet you think you're pretty clever, getting in here and taking out all the guards. But you've overlooked one thing. The Gleet BioFilters are keyed to my thought-speak; it was a step I took when I first got here. With one thought, I'll have you all erased from this world.

<It's kind of sad, really. All that time and now you just walk into your own death. I guess you aren't so smart after all, Jake.>

Tobias smiled. <I wonder just how smart *you* really are,

David. You thought to key the BioFilters to your thought-speak. But did you remember to input your own DNA into the computer? Because if you didn't, they'll fry you, too.>

<Of course I took that step.>

Privately, Tobias said, <He's lying. I just saw his heart rate jump enormously.> To David, he said, <So blow us up. What's keeping you?>

<Man, I *really* hope you're right about this,> Marco moaned.

<No, no. That would be too easy. Where's the fun in that? Maybe you could try begging for your lives first. That would make it more interesting. I might even decide to listen.>

<What's keeping you, David?> Tobias asked. <You're one rat against a Howler, a grizzly bear, an Andalite, a gorilla, a leopard, and a wolf. You'd better do it fast because we can be on you before you can twitch. And I'm hungry, David.>

David bolted. He scampered past us. Tobias swung a kick at him, but the rat dodged under an unconscious guard. Tobias threw the man aside, but David was gone.

<We won't find him,> Tobias warned us. <Believe me, once you lose sight of a rat, you won't find it again. Let's just get to work. I don't know what kind of backup these people

have and I don't want to find out.>

CHAPTER 19

We made it to the room we wanted without any further incidents. The single circular wall was one giant screen. Alloran disabled the BioFilter and we went in. The door to the ramp closed behind us.

Alloran walked over to one of the control panels and placed his hand to the large, red square where a mouse might be on an old human computer. <This might take a few minutes,> he warned us.

It turned out that the security on the system wasn't all that advanced. It wasn't even Andalite security. I guess they were counting on their army of guards stopping any intruders.

"Why so much security over all of this?" I asked. We had demorphed except for Tobias; he would handle anything that might come up.

Marco gestured at the computer. "Do you realize how much information and power is here? A criminal, for example, could get the social security number of everyone in the world. If he took just a dollar from everyone, he'd have more than six billion dollars and hardly anyone would notice they were missing anything."

“Its more than money,” Tobias said, using his Howler voice. “Watch this.” He put his hand to one of those red squares. A name flashed on part of the screen. TOBIAS — I watched as his last name changed to FANGOR. Then, his name disappeared. “Do you know what I just did?”

“What?”

“I no longer exist. At least, not as far as any records anywhere in the world are concerned. I have no social security number, no fingerprints, no DNA, no family, no home, no past; nothing. With this kind of power, Esplin could make someone disappear.”

Alloran turned to us. “Everything is ready. Your new identities are prepared.” From a slot in the keypad, a bunch of things started to pour out.

Birth certificates, diplomas, social security cards, driver’s licenses, and all sorts of other forms of identification were fabricated in just minutes. We were whole new people without much effort.

“Now to cover our tracks,” Tobias said.

Alloran went to each of our entries. He changed some things. Our fingerprints, DNA, blood types, and other vital information were swapped randomly with other people from

throughout the world.

“If someone fingerprints us or checks our DNA,” Tobias explained, “we don’t want them to find out who we really are. Now, our fingerprints and DNA and whatnot are registered to our new identities, not our old ones. Our old lives are officially over.”

“I wish,” Marco grumbled.

We decided it was a good idea to get out of there, so we morphed and made for the exit. No one had any idea how long we had until some of the guards woke up and we didn’t want to stick around to find out.

We weren’t worried about media coverage. No one would mention this incident. After all, whoever took over here wouldn’t want to report a break in to his superiors. No one would hear about what we did.

Apparently, though, someone heard. At the top of the ramp, in the rubble of the top floor, waited some people. An Andalite we all recognized. A familiar rat. An army of Kelbrid.

Kelbrid are dangerous creatures. They’re more than seven feet tall from end to end. They’ve got a cat’s legs beneath a gorilla’s chest. One long arm ended in a ten-fingered hand. The other was horrible muscled, and it had a foot-long stinger

at the end. Tobias warned me that the stinger was retractable. And that it was poisoned. Black, leathery flesh covered their bodies, making them blend in with the night.

Their heads reminded me of a crocodile's. They had the same flat jaws and little noses. Cats ears, swept backwards, were on the sides of their heads. Their heads were eyeless. Thin whiskers dangled from beneath their powerful jaws, probably sensing vibrations in the air to make up for having no eyes.

<Ah, it's a regular reunion,> Esplin sighed. <Do I see my little nephew Alloran? Are you too old to give your favorite uncle a hug?>

He turned all four eyes on me. <And unless I am grossly mistaken, someone has come back from the dead. Hello Rachel. What brings you back here? Wasn't the shopping good enough in the afterlife?>

I shuddered. Back in the beginning, Esplin scared me. I thought I was over it. But I was wrong. He was just as scary as always. There was a soul crushing evil that came from him. Not even David gave off that aura. It was almost supernatural.

Another thing creeped me out. He was using our names, which just felt wrong. It was disgusting. I thought about poor

Ax, enslaved to this monster.

He turned to Tobias. <How many Kelbrid to you think you can fight? Not enough, I'm sure. And your howl will not be of any use here. David and I will find it very unpleasant, of course, but the Kelbrid are far too dumb to be affected. You have two options: surrender or die.>

<I guess Ax isn't helping you with your banter,> Tobias muttered. <Here's my counter offer. Get out of his head or I'll kill you.>

<You seem to be outnumbered,> Esplin returned.

<I'm full of surprises.> There was an edge to Tobias' voice and a smile on his face.

Esplin noticed it too. <What could you possibly do? The Chee certainly couldn't help you here. And you couldn't have gotten Hork-bajir to this valley. No, no, I'm afraid all of your resources are quite tied up. None of your old tricks are of much use here.>

<I know. I've got some new ones.>

The ground started exploding. Shredder cannon rained down from above, cutting into the Kelbrid ranks. Because of my bear eyes, I couldn't see the *Reliquary* as it swept over the Yeerks, but I could hear it. And I could hear Esplin barking out

orders.

<Fall back to the Blade ship. We'll take them from the skies.>

<Get into the *Reliquary*,> Tobias ordered us. We obeyed and then demorphed.

Tobias, demorphing as he walked, grabbed the control node. "We can take them. This thing was designed to handle the Blade ship."

"You can't fight the Blade ship *and* an army of Bug fighters," Marco pointed out.

"Can't I?"

I put my hand on his arm. "Tobias, I know you want Esplin and David dead, but this is too risky. Don't throw everything away on this gamble. Let's just get out of here we'll live to fight another day. There will be another chance."

"Too risky?" he said to me, raising an eyebrow. "If you say it, it has to be really insane." He turned the ship and we flew home.

CHAPTER 20

I was in my bedroom, probably for the last time. When this was all over, Jeanne and I might move in with my family and

they'd get a bigger place.

Sara was with Jordan that night, so Jeanne and I shared my old room. Since we both kept insisting that the other take the bed, we compromised and shared it. That was the reason for the next thing we heard...

<Oh! This is too good to be true! Thank you, Ellimist or Crayak or whoever is responsible for this! I take back everything I've ever said about you.>

I shot out of bed. Jeanne did the same, a Shredder in her hand. "Marco? Where are you?" I demanded.

Tobias and Marco flew in through my open window. Tobias landed expertly on my desk; Marco crashed into the wall.

"What brings a guy like you to a place like this?" I asked, smiling. I looked over and saw that Jeanne was helping Marco up off the floor.

"I should have stuck to hiding in the bushes outside," Marco muttered.

"That was a joke?" Jeanne asked.

Marco shot a nervous glance at me. "Sure, a joke."

Tobias demorphed. "Why don't you get him some food, Jeanne? He wouldn't stop complaining the whole flight over

here. It was making me hungry, too. I was about to swoop down on the first mouse I saw.”

The two of them went downstairs. “Why did you bring him?” I asked.

“To distract Jeanne.” Then, he kissed me.

It surprised me because Tobias wasn’t the type to do that. Only when one of us almost died, and I was almost always the one who started it. Neither of us are very affectionate people.

“Did you come just for that?” I asked.

He was silent for a moment. Then, he asked me, “How did you like the *Reliquary*?”

“I loved it. I could live there.”

“Well...would you really like to?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know what sort of living arrangements we’ll have to make in our new home and I thought I might stay on the *Reliquary* for a bit. Marco could put the rest of you up in a nice hotel if you want it. But I was thinking maybe you wouldn’t mind...”

“Moving in with you?” I finished. I thought about it. “Sure, I’m in. But we’ll have to do some redecorating.”

“Why?”

“It’s sooo dark,” I pointed out, exaggeratedly. “And you’ll either need a second bed or a bigger one. And we’ll have to make room for Alloran, which will take a lot of remodeling.”

“Alloran?”

“He’s *your* responsibility now,” I pointed out. “He’s going to live with us to.”

“You, me, and a kid? Maybe I’m moving too fast.”

“Too late now. We’ve got a lot of time we have to make up.”

“Well, let’s get started.”

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

*“You were gone when we found you
You were practically surrounded, you were trapped
But the opposition stalled, their blood ran cold
When they saw the look of love in your eyes*

*Maybe the times we had, they weren't that bad
And everything else was part of the plan
We sang: "I don't know where we go from here"
This is the alpha, omega, beginning and the end
And we all just idolize the dead*

*So you were born, and that was a good day
Someday you'll die, and that is a shame
But somewhere in the between was a life of which we all dream
And nothing and no one will ever take that away*

*You had a love and that love had you
And nothing mattered, you were fine
And some will complain, they're just bitter, what a shame
They know that loving and losing is better than nothing at all*

*Maybe the times we had, they weren't that bad
And everything else was part of our path
We sang: "I don't know where we go from here"
This is the anthem, the slogan, the summary of events
And we all just idealize the past*

*So you were born, and that was a good day
Someday you'll die, and that is a shame
But somewhere in the between was a life of which we all dream
And nothing and no one will ever take that away
And someday soon my friends, this ride will come to an end
But we can't just get in line again.”*

—Somewhere in the Between

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

60: THE OFFENSIVE

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

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

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

Rachel and Alloran were waiting, too. He was in his human morph. It was a combination of Marco, Jeanne, Cassie, Rachel, and me; heavy on the me. Alloran looked a lot like I did when I was his age. Of course, thanks to the others' DNA,

he was much better looking.

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

“Poor kid,” I muttered.

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

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

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

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

“Guess which one,” Rachel replied.

Then it was time to eat. We all sat down. Cassie and

Marco, having been warned, looked to me. Alloran did so, too. Jeanne noticed what the others were doing, so she watched me as well. Rachel stared at me, too. “Well, go on. Dig in.” It was almost a dare.

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

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

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

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

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

“Attacking *is* a strategy,” Rachel argued. “Think about it.

We show up and hit them where they think they're safest. They don't even know we're coming. We'll scare them to death. Force and surprise, Marco. Our two greatest weapons."

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

"Like what?" Rachel responded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I nodded. “Right. If we can find the place where the rays get into the pool, we can take a look at the building surrounding it. It’ll be big; probably one of the biggest buildings in town. We check out the buildings until we find one that’s run by the Yeerks. That’ll be where the Kandrona is. We show up, take them by surprise, and smash the thing.”

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

“Yep. So I guess it’s time for everybody’s favorite past

time. Controller hunting. We go out until we see someone we recognize as a Controller. We tail them until they lead us to the pool. Then, we check out the location, find where the Kandrona rays are getting in, use that to find the source, then we do some smashing.”

Marco turned to Rachel. “Rachel, your husband—”

“Do you just hate your shins?”

“I’ll shut up now.”

PREVIEW SUMMARY

The Animorphs have finally arrived at the new invasion spot of the Yeerks. Now they need to plan their next move. For once, they have total surprise on their side and they intend to use it to strike a huge blow against the Yeerks.

They have a plan to find the Kandrona generator and destroy it. It'll be a terrible blow to their enemies and a great victory in the war. But when Tobias, Rachel, Alloran, Marco, Jeanne, and Cassie attack a Yeerk outpost, they meet a new foe who is far more than meets the eye...