

57: THE WEAPON

CHAPTER 1

My name is Santorelli. I'm not your typical Animorph, if there is such a thing. I wasn't one of the originals, Jake, Marco, Cassie, Ax, Tobias, and Rachel. I'm a new recruit, a greenhorn. But that isn't even half the story.

To begin with, I'm old enough to be the father of any one of them. Funny thing is, there are times when they seem a lot older than me. Times when they make me feel like a kid playing at war.

Then there's my name. The other Animorphs won't tell you their last names. But I grew up in a military family. I'm not used to hearing my first name. So I go by Santorelli.

Wondering what that business about new recruits is all about? Here's the short version. Three years after the first war with the Yeerks ended, Prince Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill, Animorph, was captured by the Yeerks. Long story short, they made him a Controller and now they're back to conquer Earth.

The Yeerks have new allies this time. A powerful being called the One. A race of superpredators called the Kelbrid. All the power and memories of Prince Aximili. And they've got the mind of the Yeerk leader Esplin 9466, the Yeerk who tried

to take over Earth the first time.

I used to work at an air force base called Zone 91. The Yeerks wanted to break in and find out what was inside there. They infested me as part of the plan.

For the next two years, I was a Controller. I was a top army sniper, so they sent me to work as a bodyguard for a powerful Yeerk, Visser Six.

When the Yeerks were defeated, I was freed. I wanted to make up for the time I spent protecting Yeerks. I know I didn't have any control over my actions, but I still wanted to do something.

Then the International Invasion Investigation Force was created. It was a global network of agents, both public and secret, who monitored activities around the world to make sure nothing like the Yeerk invasion happened again. I signed up on day one.

I worked for Tri-I, as we call it, for two years. Then the Andalites traded mankind some morphing technology for some cinnamon buns. Jake, the leader of the Animorphs, was offering training courses for government operatives. I had some pull with the higher-ups at Tri-I and managed to get myself in.

Then Prince Aximili got kidnapped. Jake asked for volunteers for a hypothetical mission. Again, I signed up on day one. The next thing I knew, I was on a ship hurtling into a foreign part of the galaxy on a desperate rescue mission.

Then we found out that the whole thing was a trick by the One to get the attention of something called Crayak. I'm still not sure what that's all about except that Crayak is very powerful and seems to be on our side.

We found out that the One was helping the Yeerks to invade again. So we're doing what we can to put a stop to it before it gets too out of hand.

Who are we? First, there's Jake, our leader. There's Marco, a smart guy who's good at planning and Jake's best friend. And there's Cassie, an ecology nut and a pacifist who wants nothing more than to be rid of this war and the Yeerks forever. Those three are all originals.

Tobias is one of the originals, too. He's probably my closest friend among the Animorphs. He's been through more in his life than I can even imagine. He's stared into the eyes of Lucifer and spat in the devil's face. All because of stuff the Yeerks did to him. Too bad for them, Tobias isn't letting that go. He's out for blood and I'm in for helping him.

The last member other than me is another new recruit. Her name's Jeanne. She's a sweet girl, even if she is French. She was recruited from Jake's program, too. Sometimes, I feel like the two of us have something to prove to the rest of them. The other four are living legends. We've got to do our part.

That was why Jeanne and I were up at 0400 hours. One of the biggest problems we faced with this new invasion was that we didn't know where it was happening. We had a plan to find out.

We stole a list of suspected voluntary hosts from Tri-I's world headquarters. I memorized the list and transferred it to Marco's computer. Now Jeanne and I were busy Googling them, trying to find out if a bunch of them were moving to the same place.

Know what? It turns out they were. "Another one relocating to that city," Jeanne said to me as she highlighted another name on the list.

I checked out my guy. He was clean. The last guy on the list. I turned to Jeanne. "He's clean. That's the last of them. How many do we have going to the same place?"

"One hundred and twenty seven."

"Out of how many?"

“Four hundred.”

I nodded my head. “I’d call that pretty conclusive.”

“Really? It’s less than half.”

“Yeah. But do you really think everyone on that list is actually a voluntary? Not a chance. I’d put the real list at about two hundred. And some of the voluntaries probably didn’t agree to go, not now that they really know what’s going on. I’d say one twenty seven is a large percentage. More than I’d have guessed, anyway.”

“So you think we have the location?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“So we should tell the others.”

Again, I said, “Yeah. But not now. Don’t wake up Marco. You know how he gets.” In the morning, we’d give him the biggest news update since he wandered through an abandoned construction site and stumbled across Prince Elfangor. In the morning.

CHAPTER 2

I took the dropshaft to my room. Marco’s the richest guy I know. He’s got a mansion with five floors above ground. I don’t know how deep the thing goes.

In the hall, I heard a window open. It was unusual for someone to be walking about at night. I dropped into combat stance and pulled out my Shredder. I thumbed the setting to stun. I could switch it to kill in the time it would take an Andalite to twitch his tail. Which is faster than you could hope to see.

A dark figure climbed through the window. Then he turned to the wall and keyed in a code to shut off the alarms. He turned and I could see his face in the moonlight. Tobias.

I straightened up and put my Shredder away. “Why up so late?” I asked.

He looked at me. His eyes looked even darker than usual in the moonlight. “I was visiting my father.”

I nodded and turned to leave. Tobias’s father had been dead for years, but I didn’t think anything of it. I could relate. My father had been murdered by the Yeerks just like Tobias’s was and I spoke to mine every day.

What he said next surprised me. “Where are the Yeerks attacking?”

“How do you know I figured it out?”

“Because I know you.”

I started to leave but then I turned and took a look at him.

Something was bothering him. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“What’s right?” he answered. “But I don’t mean that in some abstract, philosophical term. I mean, what’s the right thing to do?”

“Depends on the situation,” I told him.

“Let’s say I had the power to save someone’s life. That I could save millions of lives. Should I do it?”

“Even if it costs you your own.” I could talk to Tobias like this. He wasn’t one of those people whose feelings you had to consider. I could tell him what I thought and not worry about offending him.

“The thing is, to do it, I’d have to use power that no mortal should ever have.”

“Is this a hypothetical question or do you really have this power?” I asked. In this kind of universe, I never knew what someone was capable of.

He turned to the window. “There is a device, a weapon, called the Time Matrix. It can move someone through time and space. I know where it is. I could get to it tonight.

“I could stop the Yeerks from ever coming here. I could stop the Yeerks from ever coming to power in the first place. Maybe I could even go all the way back to the beginning and

stop the One.”

I shook my head. “I doubt the One would be vulnerable to something like that. But that’s a tall order, Tobias. You could do a lot of good. Or you could screw everything up.”

“Yeah. Someone used the Time Matrix once. Visser Four. We chased him through time and stopped him. Thing was, he made some stuff better. In his reality, the holocaust never happened. I killed Hitler.”

He sat down and leaned against the wall. “I wouldn’t stop the Yeerks from ever coming here. That would be going too far, changing too much. But I could go back and save my father. I could bring Rachel back, too.

“I’ve thought about it every day since the end of the first war. I could save everyone I cared about. I know there are some powers no one was ever meant to have. But how can I sit by when I could save them?”

I sat next to him. “It seems to me that what’s been done has already been done and should stay that way. It isn’t our place to change the past any more than it’s that of the One or Crayak. God doesn’t change the past, what right do we have?”

He looked at me. “God? With all you’ve seen, you believe in him?”

I shrugged. “Sure. Why wouldn’t I?”

“I’ve seen only a fraction of the power of creatures like the Ellimist and Crayak. Enough to say that they can do all the things we’ve attributed to God.”

“That’s one way of looking at it. The way I see it, though, I’ve seen creatures with the same kind of power I’d say was that of God himself. If beings like them are out there, why can’t God be, too?”

“Then why does God let them run around doing what they’re doing?”

“The same reason you don’t use the Time Matrix. No one, man or God, should play with the universe like that. Then again, who’s to say He doesn’t? He could change everything all the time. We just don’t remember what the universe was like before this.”

He stood up. “Man, it’s too early for this. I’m going to get some sleep. See you in the morning.”

CHAPTER 3

Tobias saw me long before that. I was woken up by him shaking me by the shoulders. I glanced at the clock. I had gone to sleep only half an hour ago.

I rolled out of bed and grabbed my Shredder. Tobias isn't the kind of guy to wake you without a good reason. "What's up?" I whispered.

"The Time Matrix."

I rose. "What about it?"

"I just realized that Ax knows where it is, just like I do. And if he knows —"

"Esplin knows too. So what do we do?" I asked.

"It's only a matter of time before Esplin realizes that he could have that power. Only a matter of time before he goes after it. We have to beat him to it and move the Time Matrix."

I was awake in an instant. He took off down the hall to find Marco. I went the other way, to wake up Jeanne.

I practically kicked in her door. No time to worry about being polite. Esplin probably hadn't gone after the Time Matrix yet, but speed was the best policy.

"What is wrong?" she asked, bolting upright and grabbing

a Shredder out from under her pillow.

“Tobias just remembered a superweapon the Yeerks could reach out and grab at any moment. We’re going after it. Now.”

She nodded and came with me. Tobias was dragging a bleary-eyed Marco into the dropshaft. They shot up, out onto the roof. I dashed in after them with Jeanne.

We reached the roof and almost bumped into the two of them. “To the basement,” Marco told me. “Lowest level.”

I shrugged but did as he said. We were all assembled in the lowest level of Marco’s mansion, waiting to see just why we were there.

Marco dashed into the darkness. I turned to Tobias. “Why are we here? We have to get Jake and Cassie and flying would be the best way.”

“That’s why I went to the roof,” he said. “But Marco has a better idea.”

Suddenly, floodlights snapped on. Marco was leaning out the side of a ship. A ship I recognized. It was a little transport cruiser from the one we had used to make the journey to Kelbrid space. I guess Marco managed to talk someone into letting him keep it.

We jogged to him. “I thought the ship was lost when

Crayak yanked you back to Earth,” Tobias said to him as we boarded.

“I found this down here a couple days ago. Thought it might come in handy,” Marco answered.

Jeanne shook her head. “This will attract a lot of attention. Flying would be much more covert.”

“Yeah, but a bunch of birds can’t move the Time Matrix,” Marco explained. “The thing is a big sphere, about six feet across. I’m not sure how much it weighs, but I’m not going to touch that thing. That’s how you work it.”

We went to the controls. And just sort of stared at them. Menderash, a former Andalite, had been our pilot the first time around. None of us really knew what we were doing here.

I turned to Tobias. “You spent some time on the Andalite homeworld. They show you how to fly a ship?”

He shook his head. “Yeah, but Andalite ships aren’t anything like this one. Too many buttons, moving parts. Andalites use a simple thought interface with only a few levers. All have emergency controls under the dashboards, but I never learned how to work those. Only old pilots really know how to do it anyway.”

Jeanne sat down at the controls. She searched for

something. Finally, she pushed a button. The engines roared to life. She pulled a lever and the ship started to lift off. She grabbed some sort of shaft and twisted it. The ship turned until it was facing a very large shaft kind of like Marco's dropshaft.

"What is that?" Tobias asked.

"That?" Marco answered. "That's how I get these babies in here. From the outside, it looks like a water tower. Just fly this thing straight up. The top will retract and we'll be home free. Assuming you can work the cloaking device, of course."

Jeanne looked at the controls for a moment. Finally, she selected a button. "It is working," she assured us. Then she lifted off. A moment later, we were soaring the night sky.

"Let's go to Jake's first," Marco decided.

Tobias shook his head. "Going to Jake's and then Cassie's will waste a lot of time. How about you go and get Jake while we fly to Cassie? We can meet up back here as soon as the two of you can get here."

Marco thought about it. "This ship can get you there and back in a couple of minutes. That's probably how long it would take me to get to Jake. Alright, go for it. See you in five, guys."

CHAPTER 4

We landed the ship in Cassie's yard. Since he knew her better than either of us did, Tobias got out to get Cassie. I stayed with Jeanne in the ship.

I took a seat. "So," I began in a conversational tone, "how do you know how to fly this thing?"

She shrugged. "Most of the controls are redundant, Yeerk inefficiencies. It isn't that hard."

"But not so easy that just anyone could grab a seat and take the ship," I told her. "You learned to fly somewhere. Why not tell me?"

"Why should I?"

"Because if you do, I'll tell you a neat little secret."

"You must go first."

"Okay. I'm married."

She raised an eyebrow. "And why have you not mentioned this? Why do we not know about your wife? Where is she?"

"She was another host, another of Visser Six's bodyguards. A lot of times, it was just the two of us. Things just sort of happened. One day, we just decided we were married. There were no priests out in Yeerk space. None that we met, at

least.”

“What happened to her?”

“Visser Six was very displeased when our Yeerks told him what we had decided. She got a slow death. I got to watch her die.”

“Why was she killed and not you?” Jeanne asked. I could tell she didn’t completely buy my story.

“I was more useful than she was. He had to punish someone, so he made the choice that would cost him less,” I told her.

She was silent for a while. Finally, she answered, “I was an assassin.”

“For the French?”

“For the Council of Thirteen.”

I whistled. The Council of Thirteen was the head of the old Yeerk Empire. They were led by an Emperor and twelve other guys. No one knew who the Emperor was, so it would be really hard for someone to assassinate him.

“So the Council trained you to kill their enemies.”

“No. The former Visser One trained me to kill the Council of Thirteen,” she told me. “I was supposed to begin taking out her opposition. But then the Council began to grow suspicious

of her actions. She had my memory wiped for her own protection. Then, she released me onto Earth.”

“So how do you remember any of this?”

“Things have been coming back to me since I re-learned about the Yeerk invasion. Mostly, I recall bits about my family. I’ve a few relatives, a couple aunts and uncles, but no one closer. Ever since this war started, I’ve started to remember some of my training.”

I nodded. “Who else knows?”

“Jake. You. A few people in the French and American governments. Cassie.”

“You told Cassie?”

Jeanne nodded. “She has this way of speaking to you that makes you want to tell her everything. Like she won’t be ashamed of anything I tell her. Like she couldn’t care less if I was an assassin or a ballerina.”

“I knew there had to be a reason Jake picked you. Must have been a rough life, working for Visser One. I never heard anything but scary stuff about her.”

“I don’t remember much of it.”

“That’s probably for the best. Do you remember much about her?”

Jeanne shrugged. “I recall her more than I do most others. She was a smart Yeerk, and cold and ruthless. She thought she respected her enemies, but there were many times when she didn’t.”

“That was a mistake,” I noted. “Visser Three was the one who brought her down.”

“She hated him more than anyone in the galaxy. She often thought about having me kill him just for the fun of watching him die.”

“I think a lot of people have underestimated Esplin,” I said to her. “Jake told me once that he was a fool. But he still rose to be one of the highest-ranking Yeerks. And he killed a lot of better men.”

I heard a noise behind me. Tobias and Cassie entered the ship. She looked around. “This is one of the weirdest wake up calls I’ve ever had,” she commented. Then she sat down, perfectly content to let us handle things.

“Let’s roll out,” Tobias said. “The longer we wait, the sooner Esplin realizes he could go after the Time Matrix.”

“The Time Matrix.” Cassie shuddered. “That didn’t go too well last time.”

Tobias almost smiled. “Don’t worry. This time, we have

the power. If anyone screws up history this time, it'll be us.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

CHAPTER 5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re wrong,” Tobias disagreed. “That was the most human thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Which is kind of disturbing,” Marco stated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The place we were going to used to be a construction site. There were a bunch of half-finished buildings and stuff. But

that was years ago. Now, it was the most famous monument in the galaxy.

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

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

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

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

She put the ship down in a patch of shadow near the dark statue. Right next to a Yeerk Bug fighter. Jake looked at the

thing. “Not good,” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I don't know if he heard the blast or if he saw it with one of his stalk eyes, but Esplin knew it was coming. A Shredder fires in the blink of an eye. Faster. No time to dodge, no time to run. But there was time for him to bring his Andalite tail between his body and the beam. The tailblade flashed and disappeared.

I opened fire again. But by this time, he was able to get out of the way. Shapes surged out of the darkness. Only then did I realize Esplin wasn't alone.

CHAPTER 6

They were Kelbrid of course. A little over seven feet tall from end to end. Cats' legs beneath a gorilla's chest. One long arm ended in a ten-fingered hand. The other was massive with a foot-long stinger at the end. I knew the stinger was retractable. And that it was poisoned. Black, leathery flesh covered their bodies.

Their heads reminded me of an alligator'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.

Cassie was already morphed. A polar bear. Tobias was rapidly becoming one as well. Jake was turning into a tiger. Marco was almost completely gorilla. Jeanne was slowly becoming a leopard.

But even the others weren't morphing fast enough. The Kelbrid were almost on us. Only Cassie was in a position to fight. And me.

I opened up on the Kelbrid. The problem with Andalite Shredders is that they don't cause pain. So the Kelbrid didn't

stop coming when I shot them. It only made them angry. They came on faster.

The first one to reach us was met with Cassie's claw in his face. The blow knocked him off the ground and through the air. He hit the ground and didn't move.

<Cassie, get to Esplin. Don't let him reach the Time Matrix,> I heard Jake call. Cassie took off. I stayed where I was, shooting Kelbrid.

Tobias rushed past me, then Jake then Marco. Soon the ground beneath the statue was covered in blood. But the fight was eerily silent.

Maybe Kelbrid didn't feel pain or maybe they just didn't have the ability to speak because they never made a sound. Not even a roar of battle. Just totally cold silence as they slashed and stabbed and bit their enemies.

The Animorphs were silent, too. Occasionally, Jake's tiger gave a roar or one of the polar bears would shout, but there were no human sounds. No cries of pain or battle directions given. Not even any warnings.

It was the Kelbrid poison. The stingers had an anesthetic on them. I guess it kept enemies fighting longer, hurting themselves more. It also made the place too quiet.

The Kelbrid seemed to be everywhere. One would be knocked off into the darkness beyond the Time Matrix's glow only to see another one emerge to take its place. There could have been five Kelbrid. There could have been fifty. It didn't matter.

Jeanne rushed past me, a leopard eager for a fight. But I couldn't stand there and morph. I'd be a sitting duck, an easy target for any Kelbrid. I stayed where I was and looked for a clear shot.

It wasn't easy. The Kelbrid kept moving and moving fast. The only time they stopped was when they attacked one of my friends. I couldn't take the risk of my shot hitting one of my allies. I felt pretty useless.

A third polar bear emerged from behind the Time Matrix. I heard Tobias give an enraged shout. <ESPLIN!> A polar bear threw its arms open wide, scattering four Kelbrid. He charged at the Yeerk.

That was when the screaming started. Tobias hit him hard. The two of them fell to the ground. Tobias was on top, hammering Esplin's face with blows that could probably shatter concrete. Esplin screamed. Tobias laughed.

I saw the Controller's hand stretched for the Time Matrix.

I shot it off. A bunch of Kelbrid mobbed Tobias. They dove on him, biting and stabbing. He cried out and was pulled off of Esplin.

The Yeerk rose and turned towards the Time Matrix. Tobias surged at him again, taking the Kelbrid with him. He hit the Yeerk and both of them fell onto the device. I didn't have time to think. I ran towards them.

I slammed hard against the Time Matrix. It felt like the world was spinning around me. I could feel Esplin and Tobias. I could feel their wills like a tangible presence. Now it wasn't only the world spinning, I was time itself.

The world disappeared. Time no longer had any meaning. My mind spun into oblivion. Minutes, seconds, hours, they all streaked by just as quickly. Or slowly. Not like it mattered.

I heard a voice. I think there was a face to go with it. Bigger than anything my mind could understand. The color... there isn't a human word for it. It looked at Tobias.

He was there but not himself. His body was human. Most of it. But he had wings. And an Andalite's tail. And a Horkbajir's blades. Where his face should have been, there was an expressionless steel mask.

TOBIAS. YOU HAVE COME...RIGHT ON TIME. I felt

the presence turn to look at me. SANTORELLI.
INTREIGUING. LET US SEE WHERE THIS LEADS. And
then everything I thought I understood was shot straight to
hell.

CHAPTER 7

The first thing I noticed when I came to was that the ground was red. It felt like soil, but it was the color of blood. I was in some sort of canyon with obsidian walls rising all around me.

Tobias was standing next to me, feeling the walls of the canyon. “Some sort of metal,” he told me. “I have no clue where we are.”

“Maybe we should go hawk and take a look around in the sky?” I suggested.

“That’s what I was thinking.”

He morphed in about fifteen seconds. It took me about three minutes. The feathers came first. They appeared like tattoos all over my body. Then they exploded into three dimensions.

Next came the talons. My toes squished together until I only had three of them. Then a fourth shot out of my heel. My nails turned into sharp claws.

Then I started to shrink. It was like the ground decided it didn’t like me anymore so it was coming up to hit me in the face.

My jaw bulged out and turned into a beak. My ears got good enough to hear my organs twisting, changing to the hawk's digestive system. My new eyes could see every inch of the alien ground.

Then came the hawk's mind. I was hungry. I wanted prey. It wouldn't be hard to find. All I needed to do was get some air and take a look.

There was another hawk next to me. Smaller. Tasty. It wouldn't be hard to take him. I just had to get my talon around his head and squeeze...

The other hawk took off. I was about to follow him when I heard something that didn't make any sense to me. Some sort of sound. Not a bird sound. And not in my ears. It was right in my head. What...?

I heard it again. <—king Christ! This is impossible! Santorelli, we need to find a way out of this place right now. This isn't right. It isn't right at all!>

I snapped back to myself and was shocked that I had considered eating Tobias. I would never have been able to take him. He knew his morph in a way I never would. If I was lucky.

I flapped my wings, going up to join him. <What is it?> I

started to say. I stopped because I knew.

Beyond the canyon walls was an enormous tower. It was miles tall. Too tall to have been built by anyone who ever lived. It hardly seemed possible that it existed. But there it was.

The whole thing was black. Darker than midnight. Darker than the Blade Ship. It was a darkness that absorbed light. I bet that's what a black hole looked like.

Only after a minute of staring did I see the top of the tower. At the top was some kind of creature. It had no arms or legs. Its head was a single eye. I knew that eye would see us if it turned this way. No one could hide from that gaze.

That wasn't a tower. And this wasn't some planet. It was a throne. <Tobias, what the in the name of God is that thing?>

<Crayak.>

My blood froze. I think I might mean that literally. That kind of thing could probably happen when you're on the body of one of the most powerful beings in the universe.

<How are we here?> I demanded. <Why? Did you bring us here? Esplin?>

<I don't think this was anything any of us decided. Not even Esplin would want to come here. It had to be who or

whatever it was who spoke to us a moment ago. We have to get out of here.>

<But how?>

<The Time Matrix. I don't know what's going on, but I'm sure it's some kind of test. It always is. The key is to get to the Time Matrix before Esplin does.>

<You think Esplin's here?> I asked.

<Yeah. If we are, so is he. I don't know what the deal is, but we'll have to be careful.>

<Crayak likes you, right? I mean, he made you human, after all.>

<Yeah. So?>

<Why not ask him for help? He'll notice us soon.>

<Maybe. But I don't know what he wants to do or what he's planning. For all I know, Esplin did bring us here to get us killed. I don't want to bring the big eye into this unless I have to.>

<So what do we do?>

<We go back into the canyons and make our way to the Time Matrix as far as we can.>

<Do you see it?>

<It'll be at the base of the tower.>

<You're sure?>

<I've done this kind of thing before. Trust me.>

CHAPTER 8

There's something really creepy about wandering around on someone's body. Especially when that body isn't even vaguely human. Not even close.

We were wandering through canyons. That was what I tried to tell myself. Just a hike through a canyon. Not something alive. Just a part of nature. How well do you think that worked out?

"Is this a maze?" I asked Tobias. "I feel like we've passed this...thing...before. Did we go in a circle?"

He shrugged. "Beats me. I don't know any more about this than you do."

"I thought you've done this kind of thing before."

"Never on Crayak's body."

We walked around for another couple hours without finding anything. Then we turned a corner and screamed out heads off.

Around the corner was a creature that made me think of Darth Maul. It had red and black flesh. Its eyes were a pale blue. Sharp claws came out of its wrists. I don't know what its face normally looked like, but I think it was surprised to see

us.

Tobias reacted a lot quicker than I did. A Hork-bajir blade shot out of his wrist. He swung it through the air. The next thing I knew, the alien's head was lying on the ground.

“What the hell is that?” I demanded, pulling out my Shredder.

“Howler,” Tobias answered. “Crayak manufactures them here. I wasn't expecting to run into one, though.”

“Did you make that blade come out on your own?” I asked. “I didn't think you had that kind of control.”

“It was a lucky morph. And a lucky shot. The Howler must have been ten times as surprised as I was or I'd never have killed it.”

“Are they good fighters?”

“One once fought Jake, Marco, Ax, Rachel, Cassie, and me to a draw. Then it walked away.”

I whistled. Tobias smiled. “At least Esplin isn't going to have an easy time of it. The Howlers will tear him apart. They've got this howl that the Andalite brain is really sensitive to. For all I know, it could blow a the Yeerk right out of Ax's head.”

“And probably take Ax's head with it,” I added.

“Probably.”

“You sound happy.”

“We’d be better off with him dead than with him as a Controller.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. I just thought you might want to save him.”

Tobias shook his head. “Back during the first war, Jake thought he could save Tom. That was his goal most of the time. We both know how that turned out. I’m not going to be that foolish. If I ever have the chance, I’ll kill Ax and Esplin both.”

“You’re a cold dude, you know that?”

“It’s a cold world.”

I nodded. He was right. Working for Visser Six, I understood just how bad the world could be. And I knew I would rather have had someone kill me than be a Controller.

I liked how Tobias didn’t have the illusions a lot of people had. We were in a terrible war now. One where death was one of the more pleasant options. Most people couldn’t handle that.

Tobias knelt down next to the Howler. He held two fingers to its throat for a moment. Then he stood up. “Can you acquire

something that's dead?" he asked.

I shrugged. "What you need to acquire is DNA. The DNA probably dies in the cells once the body dies, but there's probably still some in his body, if that's what you're thinking."

He nodded. "I think I just acquired it. I'm going to give the morph a shot. Stand back. Jake told me these things aren't inherently hostile, but I don't want to take a chance."

It took less than a minute. First, his stomach clinched like he was getting cut in half. For a moment, I could see his spine. Then veined flesh covered it. His skin turned red like a really bad sunburn. Black lines like cooled lava drew across his body. Steel claws came from his hands. His eyes turned a beautiful shade of blue.

Tobias nodded. <It's...it's like being a dolphin. I want to play with you. Of course, that would probably end with you dead. It's weird, though...>

"What is?" I asked.

<The last time we beat the Howlers, the Ellimist said we broke them. Jake put the memory of love into their collective. I was told they would never be the same, but I can't find that memory anywhere.>

"It must have gotten erased."

<Must have. We should find you one of these. Then we could move around without much difficulty.>

“You think a morph will fool that big eye?”

<No, but it will fool the other Howlers. Set your Shredder to stun.> He gave me the single scariest smile I’ve ever seen.
<We’re going Howler hunting.>

CHAPTER 9

We didn't have far to go. The place was crawling with Howlers. I don't know how Crayak could stand having them all over him like this, but he obviously didn't mind. If he had cared, he had more than enough power to do something about it.

I was a fly on Tobias's Howler body. He walked calmly through the canyons of Crayak's body. He walked past several groups of Howlers. He didn't want to try fighting more than one of them.

We came across a lone Howler almost an hour later. Tobias approached him. <Get ready,> he told me. I buzzed off and started to demorph. I could sense the vibrations of a struggle. My fly eyes saw a thousand images of two Howlers grappling. One had its claws in the other's throat; Tobias trying to make sure the other one didn't sound an alarm.

I was human now. I needed to be human to acquire the Howler. But I didn't dare to get close. Tobias and the other one were far too dangerous for me to mess with in any morph.

The blades of their wrists clanged off one another. Tobias still held one claw in the Howler's throat. His other hand held

one of the Howler's claws immobile. The Howler's other claw slashed Tobias repeatedly.

His wounds healed almost instantly. No wonder Tobias kept his claw in the Howler's throat. Tobias wasn't losing the fight. He wasn't winning, either. He needed help.

My shredder lay on the ground where Tobias had dropped it; far too close to the Howlers for me to get it. I needed to help Tobias and that meant a morph.

The problem? I had four morphs: fly, cockroach, rhino, and hawk. Flies and cockroaches wouldn't do anything to a Howler. A rhino might, but then I'd be back where I started.

The whole reason Tobias was fighting the Howler instead killing it was because I needed to acquire it. There wasn't enough time for me to demorph and acquire it if he killed it. Then I had an idea.

I morphed again to hawk. I could hear Tobias and the Howler grunting, now. They were both in a lot of pain. It seems even Howlers have their limits. It took me maybe three minutes to become the hawk; three more minutes of pain for Tobias.

I could see him slowing. The Howler was getting the upper hand. In its collective memory, Tobias assured me, it has never

once remembered losing. The thought of defeat never entered his mind. Not so for Tobias. He knew he could lose; he knew he could die.

I took off and gained some altitude. Tobias glanced at me. He pulled his claw out of the Howler's throat and started to sag to the ground. He was tired and hurt. Or so the Howler thought.

My hawk eyes caught the sight of a fly buzzing along near Crayak's body. I don't know why, but it struck me as odd. I didn't think Crayak would let bugs live on him. But I had more pressing matters to worry about. I was dive bombing onto the Howler's face.

I raked my talons across the Howler's eyes as it advanced on Tobias. I wheeled around in time to see Tobias plunge a claw into the Howler's spine. The creature stopped moving.

I demorphed. "Dead?" I asked him.

He shook his head. <Paralyzed. Good thinking. Taking my old job?>

"Not yet," I answered as I acquired the Howler. Tobias finished it off with a claw to the brain.

"You sure it's dead?" I asked.

<Probably not dead,> he answered. <Doesn't matter. Let's

get going. I don't want to stick around until Crayak notices us.>

"I don't think he's paying that much attention," I answered. "He didn't notice the flies on him."

<He's got flies?>

"Just one that I saw." It's hard to read a Howler's facial expressions, but Tobias was surprised. Then angry.

<That fly was Esplin.> That made sense. Tobias continued. <He didn't want to be seen. Instead of running around playing tag like us, he's been buzzing around where the Howlers couldn't see him. Come on, we've got to get out of here.>

I morphed as I ran. It wasn't hard, since I kept the same basic body shape. It was weird, getting faster as I ran. Howlers are bow-legged, so running seems like it should be awkward. It is, but Howlers were still faster than most humans.

It was odd when my vision suddenly turned to Howler sight. I could see faint lines of heat where Tobias had moved. I could see the outline of his beating heart. I realized for the first time that Howlers were even more dangerous than they appeared.

What shocked me the most were the instincts. I didn't feel the rage and hatred I would have expected from a race built

and owned by Crayak. I felt playful. I wanted to play the game we had been designed to play.

It was surprisingly easy to overcome the Howler mind. Maybe it was because only other Howlers were here. Still, I felt an odd reluctance as I did it. The Howler was happier than I was used to being.

Tobias and I followed the faint lines of heat Esplin had left. It's hard to hide from a Howler. We were getting closer, I think. Closer to Crayak's body, at least.

Then, everything stopped. I heard that massive voice again. **IT IS TIME FOR THE TEST TO BEGIN.**

CHAPTER 10

“The test?” Tobias asked. We floated in that odd, white nothingness like we had earlier. “Esplin just reached the Time Matrix. I thought we lost.”

THE TEST HAS NOT YET BEGUN.

“Then what was it?”

THE TEST IS YET TO COME. THAT WAS A CHANCE TO ARM YOURSELVES FOR WHAT IS TO COME. THE HOWLERS ARE A DEADLY RACE. INTELLIGENT, SWIFT, STRONG, WELL-ARMED, AND REMORSELESS. HUMANS ARE EVEN MORE DANGEROUS. YOU WILL BE TESTED WITH THE MOST DANGEROUS OF THEM ALL. IF YOU FAIL, MANKIND WILL FAIL. IF YOU SUCCEED...

There was no sound effect or anything; the trick was all visual. One second, we were in the white space. Z-space, I think it might have been. The next instant, we were on a path between a bunch of reeds taller than we were. And Tobias is a tall guy.

We weren't alone. There was a man with a sword in front

of us. Judging by his clothing, he was someone important from an ancient time. Some Asian country, I guessed. He spoke. I realized the words were some Asian dialect. I don't speak any of them. But somehow, the words made sense to me.

"Who are you?" he demanded. So much authority in that voice...he was a general of some kind. A very powerful one.

"We're demons," Tobias answered. Then I realized that we were both still in Howler morph.

"I can see that." He wasn't afraid. That was odd. "Why have you come, demons? It is not yet my time."

My howler nose smelled smoke. I could see a lot of heat a few miles away. I couldn't see what was burning because of the reeds, but a lot of things had been burning not too long ago.

"A test," Tobias answered. "We are here to test you. Are you the one we seek, mortal?" He played a good demon.

"There is only one Cao Cao," the man answered. Tobias's eyes went wide. So did mine. I knew the name of Cao Cao. He was Tobias's hero and perhaps the greatest general who had ever lived. His military was the marvel of the world; it still was in educated circles. I ran in those circles.

<Santorelli, that smoke, those flames, these reeds...do you know where this is? When this is?>

<Nope. You?>

<Chi Bi.>

<No way.> But it was true. Chi Bi was one of the most crushing defeats in military history. Cao Cao's army of more than a million men formed a great navy to subjugate the south of China. They were destroyed by a force less than half their size due to an incredibly planned fire attack.

Cao Cao looked from Tobias to me and back again. "Well? Is it the way of demons to stand around all night? I am being hunted like a dog. We must move."

Of course. His enemies would be looking for him. He needed to get to safety. It would be a long journey. I knew this much from my history.

"In a moment," Tobias said. To me, he added, <Let's demorph. I don't want to get trapped again.>

Cao Cao watched with mild interest as Tobias and I turned into humans. Then he shrugged. I guess he wasn't surprised that demons could change their form.

We walked for hours in silence. Then, he spoke to us again. "You said you were here to test me, demons. How do

you intend to do that?"

"You'll learn in time," Tobias answered. I was content to let him take charge. He was the Animorph, after all. I was just the army grunt.

We slept on the ground that night, and every other night for more than a month. In that time, we got to know Cao Cao pretty well. He was even smarter than I expected him to be.

One day, he asked us, "Can demons see the future?"

"We can," Tobias answered. "To an extent. Why?"

Cao Cao was silent for a moment. "I want to ask you something about the future."

"Dangerous," I said to Tobias.

He nodded. "Yeah."

"Just one question," Cao Cao insisted. "What will become of my family?"

"When?" Tobias questioned.

"Once I am gone. I am all that holds back the tied of chaos. The land was within my grasp. I could have ended it all. But at Chi Bi...now, I do not know what will happen. Sun Quan will grow bold. He will attack. And with Liu Bei as well. And that Zhuge Liang. Will they spare my family if they take my country?"

“They will never take your land, Cao Cao,” Tobias ensured him. “This, I can promise. Sun Quan will never have any great enough to overcome you. Liu Bei will be the threat. He shall take the lands of Ba Shu and oppose you.”

Cao Cao laughed. “Liu Bei is no threat. No army under his command has ever won a battle.”

“And that will never change. The threat is Zhuge Liang,” Tobias corrected him. “But there is a man in your kingdom named Sima Yi. He can save you from Zhuge Liang.”

“And what about when we are all gone? Myself, Liu Bei, Sun Quan, Zhuge Liang, and this Sima Yi?”

“Then, it will be up to those you have left behind. Zhuge Liang will find his apprentice. Sima Yi will find a greater one. The man Sima Yi chooses will overcome Liu Bei’s land as last. And then he will die.”

“And what about Sun Quan?”

“The Sun family cannot compete with you. They will never have any men to equal yours. In time, you shall overcome them, as well.”

“And as for my family?”

Tobias was quiet. Then, “Your wife will die happily and prosperous. Your son, Cao Pi, shall sit on the throne as

emperor. So will his son, Rui.”

“And after that? Nothing lasts forever, Tobias.” We had given him our names. We didn’t see any harm in it. “I know that my family will cease to hold the throne eventually. But will it go to good men?”

“What is a good man?” Tobias asked him. “Your people say you are a good man, but the people of Liu and Sun call you a monster.”

“A good man is one who knows necessity. Right and wrong are all matters of perception, you know. They change from where you stand. But necessity is always the same. I am good because I have done what is necessary. The land needs to be controlled and, though the emperor cannot do it, I can. It is not right, of course, but it is necessary.”

Tobias nodded. “I understand completely. In my own war, I did much that as wrong but necessary.”

“I did not realize demons fought wars.”

“They’re almost as bad as the wars humans fight.”

GOOD JOB. YOU NOW UNDERSTAND NECESSITY. THAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF THIS TEST; TO SEE IF YOU KNEW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PERCEPTION AND NECESSITY. YOU KNOW

NECESSITY, BUT DO YOU HAVE THE DRIVE TO
CARRY OUT WHAT YOU MUST? THIS NEXT TEST
WILL TELL US.

CHAPTER 11

Again, I felt myself hurled through time and space. Suddenly, Tobias and I were standing in front of a table. Three men were leaned over a map. The writing was Chinese, I think.

The tallest of the three looked up. All were dressed like soldiers. This one held a very dangerous looking pole-arm in one hand. “What are you?” he asked us. It was weird...he didn’t seem afraid.

“Just you’re friendly time-traveling demons,” Tobias answered. “I’m Tobias. This is Santorelli.”

The man’s eyes widened. “Master Cao Cao has spoken of you to us. I did not think you would appear to me. What brings you, demons?”

“Who are you?” Tobias asked.

“I am Zhang Liao. With me are Yue Jin and Li Dian.”

“Where are we?”

“A small camp in the He Fei region south of Shou Chun.”

Tobias turned to me. “Oh god, Santorelli, do you realize where and when we are?”

I nodded and gulped. “He Fei. The greatest battle in all of

history, if you ask me.”

Tobias nodded. “Its memory kept me going more times than I can count.”

Zhang Liao looked from Tobias to me. “Is it safe to assume you know of the large approaching army?”

We nodded. He Fei. Where Zhang Liao and his 800 men held off an invading force of 100,000. By the end of it, the people of that nation, Wu, called Zhang Liao a demon. I knew what we had to do.

“Tobias, we have to fight.”

“Yep. Like that big voice said: we have to prove we’ll do what is necessary. Wei has to win this battle and we’ll help.”

Zhang Liao smiled. “That is good to hear.” He went over the battle plan, which wasn’t much of one. Basically, they’d lure Sun Quan, the enemy leader, across the Xiao Shu bridge, destroy said bridge, and then kill everything in sight.

I knew how this would end. Somehow, Wei would survive until Cao Cao brought reinforcements. But that didn’t mean Tobias and I would survive, even with our powers.

I called He Fei the greatest battle in all of history. Never has a force been so completely outnumbered and yet done something so great. Some people bring up Thermopylae, but

they're idiots.

Thermopylae wasn't nearly as bad as He Fei. The Persian army, contrary to popular belief, numbered little more than a quarter of a million people. And the Greek army had at least twelve thousand.

The Greeks also had the advantage of terrain and of training. The Persian army was mostly conscripts; peasants with chunks of steel. The fact is that the Greeks should never have lost that battle. The mere fact that they failed to stop the Persians just goes to show what an idiot their leader was.

The Greeks didn't even last very long. The first day, they fought off a few probing attacks; maybe a few thousand at the most. And the second day, the fools allowed themselves to be flanked; their advantage had become a trap and they were killed to the last man.

He Fei had a few very important differences. Number one was that the Wei troops didn't have any terrain advantage. Nor were they better trained than their enemies. And one more thing: Wei won; the Greeks lost. 800 men destroyed 100,000.

But now you know what we were up against. Tobias and I stood next to Zhang Liao as the enemy came. And, when the Wu forces reached us, we morphed to Howler and sprung into

action like never before.

Maybe I should have felt bad about killing humans, but I didn't. In my mind, these people had been dead for almost two thousand years. I was just doing what needed to be done.

It wasn't that hard, really. We had our howl, which could take out dozens of men in seconds. It wasn't long before the first wave retreated.

They came for five days. Five days of the bloodiest slaughter I've ever seen. Tobias and I fought side-by-side. Our claws were bloody, as were our feet, teeth, and bodies. We used every weapon we had, and it still was almost not enough.

They just kept coming. Even though they thought we were demons, they still fought. It was almost supernatural...I never even imagined that people could be compelled to do such a thing. I understood for the first time just why the One feared mankind. If this was what we could do...

As terrible as Tobias and I were, Zhang Liao was just as bad, if not worse. His was a power the men could understand: the skill of his spear. It wasn't something supernatural like our howl or our speed. It was something they could comprehend. It terrified them even more than we did.

After five days, not a man would dare attack us. Nothing

could compel them to attack. And, a few days later, Cao Cao arrived. That was the end of it.

We were in the commander's tent when Cao Cao came to greet us personally. He hugged Zhang Liao warmly; a very uncharacteristic gesture, nor was it common in his culture. Then, he turned to us. "Tobias. Santorelli. I should have known." He gave a small smile.

Never had I been closer to death than I had during that battle. Too many times to count, I had almost gone down under thousands of spears and swords. Tobias saved my life more than I knew, and I did the same for him.

We were close, now; maybe even closer than he was to the other Animorphs. Tobias and I had gained a bond that he couldn't share with the others.

THIS TEST WAS TOO EASY FOR YOU. YOU KNEW THAT WEI HAD TO WIN THIS BATTLE; AND FOR THAT TO HAPPEN, YOU HAD TO FIGHT AND RISK YOUR LIVES. YOU HAVE SHOWN ME THAT YOU CAN DO WHAT IS NECESSARY. BUT NOW COMES THE HARDEST TEST OF ALL.

YOU MUST LEARN THAT ALL THINGS COME TO AN END EVENTUALLY. IT MUST BE SO. THE GREAT

MEN, MIGHTY EMPIRES, AND BEAUTIFUL ARTS
MUST ALL DECAY, ROT, AND FALL IN TIME.

LIFE WITHOUT DEATH BREEDS STAGNATION.
YOU MUST SHOW THAT YOU UNDERSTAND THIS.
YOU MUST UNDERSTAND THAT EVERYTHING AND
EVERYONE MUST DIE. YOU MUST LEARN THE MOST
DIFFICULT LESSON ANY HUMAN CAN LEARN: YOU
MUST LEARN HOW TO LET IT ALL GO.

CHAPTER 12

What we saw next...it was indescribable. We watched as the great empires rose and fell. We saw great men come and go. Some of it was easy to watch; it made us feel good. Others, it was hell.

We watched Cao Cao slowly wither and die. It was terrible. He was maybe the greatest human being to ever walk the face of the earth. To see his life slip away from him...it was the worst thing I had seen yet; far worse than He Fei.

I watched as his empire fell as well. As his children, each generation more incompetent than the last, let it slip through their grasp, I almost cried. When the Sima clan finally took over, it was a relief.

I started to understand death that way. If life went on long enough, decreasing in quality as it went, death would be a welcomed relief. And suddenly, I understood Tobias a little better. He wanted death.

I had seen him be reckless before. He stood alone against an army of Kelbrid back when we first met the beasts. I had thought it was a brave sacrifice at the time. Now, I realized it was a suicide attempt.

Whoever was responsible for showing us these things suddenly showed me something else. I don't think Tobias saw it; he was still fixated on the empires.

It was the life of a boy. Before he was even born, his father had to leave him to go and fight a war. And when he was very young, his stepfather died and his mother got amnesia and couldn't care for him anymore.

He was shunted back and forth between a negligent aunt who was with a new husband almost every year and an alcoholic uncle who, on top of his drinking, was dead inside.

And then things got really bad. The boy lost his body, too. He was trapped in the form of a red-tailed hawk. And as his body left him, his mind slowly slipped away.

I watched as he changed from a gentle boy to a fierce predator. Soon, his heart joined his mind and body as being lost to the Yeerks. And, after they tortured him, he lost a bit of his soul, too.

He didn't hate the Yeerks; he didn't have the ability to hate anymore. He was cold to them. It was a simple matter of necessity for him. The war was nothing more than survival.

In a way, that was the worst thing of all. What was once a passionate, morally courageous, gentle boy became nothing

more than a heartless killer. He even stopped feeling remorse for what he did; he just wrote it off as survival. Tobias the boy was dead.

And then, we came to the single most painful moment of Tobias's terrible life. The day the first war ended. And the day Tobias died. I saw Rachel fighting for her life on the Blade ship.

"Stop it!" I heard Tobias cry. I guess he could see what I was seeing again. "Why show me this?!" he demanded of the being that brought us here. "Do you think I can ever forget anything about that day?"

IT IS NOT ABOUT KNOWING; IT IS ABOUT UNDERSTANDING. THERE ARE TIMES WHEN EVEN THOSE WE LOVE MORE THAN OURSELVES MUST BE SACRIFICED. IT WAS NECESSARY.

"No it wasn't!" Tobias argued. "There had to be another way. I could have gone instead. Or Ax or Marco or Cassie or even Jake. Anyone but her."

I watched Rachel die. At the same time, I watched Tobias die as well. And then I watched with awe as he picked himself up and carried on. It took some sort of supernatural strength, I think, to lose so much and still carry on.

This war took his body, mind, heart, soul, and life. But still Tobias fought on. I understood how he lived his life, now. One foot on the gas, one foot in the grave. He would go until he was stopped, and he wanted nothing more than to just lay down and die.

But he couldn't stop. Because it was necessary for him to fight. He understood that a long time ago. He knew what was necessary, he did what was necessary, and I think he even understood that all things had to die. It was just the order he couldn't accept.

But that was the last bit of humanity in him, I think. Humans, even though they know death is inevitable, fight it anyway. Most fight for life more than anything else. Almost every human would do almost anything to stay alive. And if Tobias ever stopped hurting for Rachel's death, he'd stop being human.

I don't know if he would become something more than human or less. Either way, I realized that, whatever he became, his transformation would be complete. He had suffered far too much for it to be natural. Something out there was hurting him as much as it could. It was forging him into a weapon of some kind. That was the purpose of all the pain and

death he felt. He was chosen to transcend the bounds of human kind.

I realized all this in a flash of insight. Tobias had passed all these tests long ago. It wasn't he who was being tested; it was me. I understood that. But I was also terrified because whatever destiny Tobias would have to face, I didn't want anything nearly as terrible.

YOU MUST LET GO, TOBIAS, the voice said gently. As gently as it could, anyway.

“No. To let go...if we let go all the bad things that happen, we become nothing. We're hollow, empty shells. We must always remember those who have fallen, especially those we wish had not. What's that old Fremen saying? Never to forgive, never to forget.”

AND WITH THAT, YOU PASS AS LAST. JUST AS WE NEED DEATH TO APPRECIATE LIFE, WE REQUIRE LIFE TO UNDERSTAND DEATH. IF WE EVER SEEK DEATH OVER LIFE, WE UNDERSTAND NEITHER. DEATH MUST COME IN ITS TIME; LIFE MUST ENDURE AS LONG AS POSSIBLE.

CHAPTER 13

Suddenly, it was over. Tobias, Esplin, and I were back under the statue. The Kelbrid and Animorphs stood in a ring around us, staring.

Something important was missing from our return: the Time Matrix. It was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly, I realized that, the last time I checked, Esplin had it. Not good.

<The Time Matrix isn't here,> Jake barked. <Let's bail, people. Tobias, Santorelli, you can tell us what happened later. Now, we're out of here.>

We tore out of there and hopped into our ship. Esplin and the Kelbrid made as though to follow us but then they thought better of it. The sun was coming up and they didn't want to be seen. We made out of there safely.

Jeanne brought the ship through Marco's water tower and into his basement. Then, we went off to bed. I slept for a good sixteen hours, to be honest. Tobias and I had been up for far too long; we hadn't slept during the entire He Fei incident, despite Zhang Liao's orders that we get some rest.

I was woken up by very loud cursing. Marco. I rolled out of bed, grabbed my Shredder, and took the dropshaft to the living room.

I immediately saw the source of Marco's temper. Sitting in

the middle of his living room was the last thing I expected. The Time Matrix.

Marco glared at me and Tobias. “How did this get here?” he demanded. “The two of you could have put it literally anywhere at all. But you chose my living room. Why? Have I ever been anything but nice to you?”

“Actually, yes,” Tobias answered. “But this wasn’t us. It was the Ellimist or Crayak or someone.”

“So what do we do?” Jeanne asked. I looked at her and it was obvious to me that she hadn’t slept yet. Maybe something was wrong...

“Destroy it,” Tobias answered.

“And how, pray tell, do we do that?” Marco asked. “It’s the freakin’ Time Matrix.”

Tobias put a hand on the Time Matrix. “It’s solid. Made of matter. Even if its energy can’t be destroyed, its body can be. That’ll keep it out of everyone’s hands.”

“That doesn’t give us a plan,” I reminded him.

Marco shook his head. “No use planning until we get the others here. I’ll call Jake and Cassie. When they get here, we’ll think of something.”

Tobias stayed and watched the Time Matrix. Jeanne,

Marco, and I took the dropshaft up to different levels of the house. I followed Jeanne.

“Is something wrong?” I asked her once Marco was gone.

She shrugged. “It is nothing.”

“Something’s keeping you up at night, Jeanne. You’ve slept for what, one hour in the past day or so?”

“I...I wouldn’t say this to any of the others, but...it was the battle.”

“What about it?”

“I’ve never really fought before. Not like that. I’ve killed, but it was always with a Shredder, or with a Dracon beam. It was much worse than I ever imagined it would be. I’ve never tasted blood in my mouth. Not like that.”

I nodded. “It’s rough, no doubt about it. I remember my first battle like that, back when we first met the Kelbrid. But I’ll tell you this: it was worse fighting the Hork-bajir”

“Why is that?”

“The Kelbrid give an anesthetic, and they don’t feel much pain themselves. The Hork-bajir...it hurts when they get you. I was a rhino and it hurt.”

“So how do you sleep after it? How does anyone?”

“I don’t know. I guess...you just have to forget. Think

about something else, anything else. It is stuff like this that make soldiers into alcoholics and drug addicts. You have to sleep it off and maybe, just maybe, the fear and pain will go away when you sleep.”

“And what if that doesn’t work?”

I put an arm around her. “Then, you’ve got us. The others have been through this before. They know where you are. They tell me Cassie’s good for this sort of thing. She’ll be here soon. Maybe you could sleep after you talk to her.”

“You might have made a good father, Santorelli.”

“Might have?” I feigned anger. “I’m not that old yet, kid. Not till I tell you what it was like in my day.”

I heard my stomach rumble. I hadn’t eaten in far too long. Jeanne patted my arm. “Go and eat, old man. I’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, alright. Just leave your Shredder in your room. You shouldn’t be carrying around a weapon without sleep.”

“Yes, father,” she said sarcastically.

I went to the kitchen. From there, I could hear Marco and Tobias arguing. After about five minutes, they were joined by Jake. The argument boiled down to one thing.

Tobias said, “We need to destroy the Time Matrix once and for all.”

Marco just wanted to hide it. Jake had different thoughts. “We can’t destroy it. We have no clue what it will do, but it couldn’t be good. For all I know, it’ll rip open the fabric of space and time itself. Destruction is too risky.”

“So what do we do?” Marco asked. “Where can we hide it that no one will ever find it?”

“The sun?” I suggested from the kitchen. “Someone could take it, travel to the sun, and leave it there.”

“Whoever did that would die,” Jake pointed out. “Not to mention that the sun might be hot enough to melt whatever material the Time Matrix is made of. Too risky.”

Then, Marco got a look in his eyes. “I have an idea. My father has been working on developing a ship that can survive extreme heat. And by extreme, I mean powerful enough to survive landing in a star.”

“Why would someone need that?” Tobias asked.

“Mining,” Marco answered. “There are a lot of heavy metals in stars. If we harvest from them, we don’t need to do it here on earth. Plus, there are diamonds and gems and stuff in stars from all the pressure.”

“So, basically, there’s a ship that can survive being in the sun?” Jake asked. “Then I think we have a plan.”

“Oh, I am not going to like this,” Marco muttered.
“Especially not if you’re thinking what I’m thinking.”

CHAPTER 14

Marco and I were using his supercomputer to do some research on the ship we were going to steal. Our plan was pretty simple. We would get our hands on the ship, load the Time Matrix into it, then set it on autopilot on a course for the sun.

The ship would survive being in the sun, so the Time Matrix would be safe there. And no one could go after it until our sun went nova, and we had plenty of time to wait.

We had a few hang ups, though. Firstly, we needed to find the ship. Then, we needed to figure out how to drive the thing. Finally, we had to get it and bring it back here without anyone noticing it.

“Hey,” I asked, “why can’t we just use the Time Matrix to take us into the ship?”

“Because we’d have to know a location and a time,” Marco answered as he hacked into a government database. “If we knew the exact location, we could maybe do it.”

“Well, we could use it to take us near there if we knew where it was,” I pointed out. “Then we wouldn’t have to bring the ship back here; we could just launch it from wherever it is

and not worry about being seen flying away with it.”

He nodded. “A good idea and not as suicidal as the one’s I’m used to. I’m sure Jake will agree.”

We spent the next few hours searching around on the net. We learned a couple of things. Firstly, the ship we wanted had never gone past the prototype stage. It wasn’t cost effective. That meant there was only one ship in all the world that would work. And it was being kept at Zone 91.

I used to work for Zone 91 which, by the way, is completely different from Area 51. Area 51 was just a conspiracy theory. Zone 91 actually had something. The Animorphs know what’s there but they won’t tell me what it really was. When I ask about it, they just laugh; even Tobias.

We weren’t too far away from Zone 91, so we decided to fly there and check it out. Jake wasn’t happy about the situation. Jeanne was running on no sleep; Tobias, too, though he didn’t show it. And things hadn’t gone well the last time they got involved with Zone 91; Captain Torelli didn’t care if Marco was saving the world, he still hated the guy.

We flew past the usual warning signs. The final one warned trespassers that they would be shot. I knew it wasn’t a joke; I had taken shots at a couple of dumb kids a few years

ago because they didn't think I'd do it. I wasn't shooting to kill, but still...

The place had changed a lot from the last time I had been there. It used to be pretty open, with a few buildings and hangars. Now, it was a fortress.

We could see force field generators at the corners of the base, so we couldn't just walk in. Armed guards patrolled a lot more thoroughly than we used to. There were Gleet BioFilters, Andalite guards, and bug zappers over every entrance to every building and hangar.

That wouldn't stop us. Not when we could just use the Time Matrix to get inside. It wouldn't even be a problem finding the ship, since the hangars were labeled clearly. One read "Experimental Craft" in three foot high letters on the side.

<Bingo,> Jake said. <Alright, we all know what to do. We fly back home, grab the Time Matrix, transport ourselves into the hangar, roll it onto the ship, put the thing on autopilot, and get out of there. Any questions?>

<Yeah. How do we get out without using the Time Matrix?>
> Tobias asked.

Jake was silent for a moment. It was Marco who answered.

<The ship has some Dracon cannons; enough to get it through a wall, at least. Someone will have to take the cannons, shoot us a way out, and then we'll just bail out once we're far enough away to survive.>

<Good,> Jake said. <Any other questions?> There weren't any. <Alright. Then let's get home. This can't be over soon enough for me.>

Everything sounded good. It all seemed simple enough. We'd teleport in, hitch a ride, and then bail. It would all be over quickly. But I had learned something about Animorph missions: nothing ever goes as planned.

CHAPTER 15

The first thing we all did when we got back to Marco's was get some sleep. We all needed it, even me. After about six hours of rest, we gathered in Marco's living room.

Tobias was the only one who had no problems touching the sphere. The last time they had gotten involved with the Time Matrix, Jake had died, Cassie had erased a man's existence, and Marco was just generally freaked out by the whole thing.

In a moment, we were inside of the hangar, looking at the ship. It was huge, even bigger than a Blade ship. I guess its size was so it could carry all of the mining equipment that had been built on to it. If it ever got into production, companies would probably just make several smaller ships out of this one.

It was almost a perfect circle, but with a bunch of engines at the back. It looked almost like a sideways Dome ship. It was completely covered in some metal I didn't know anything about. The whole thing was a dull grey, almost the color of a Yeerk, really.

"Uh...where's the door?" Marco asked.

We all just stared at the ship. It was all featureless grey. I couldn't see anything that might have been a window, much less a door.

"Someone could use the Time Matrix to go inside and find the door," Tobias suggested.

Jake nodded. "Okay. Tobias, you do that. Santorelli, go with him. No one's going anywhere without backup. Besides, you know how to work things better than any of us. If there's security—"

"Which, of course, there will be," Marco piped in.

"—you'll be able to deal with hit. We'll wait out here, but don't take too long. I don't know how often they check the hangars, but we won't go undetected forever."

Tobias stroked the Time Matrix and, a moment later, we were inside of the ship. I was shocked. Although the ship was massive, the inside was almost empty.

"Prototype," Tobias explained. "The real one would have living quarters, kitchens, bathrooms, stuff like that. This will just have what it needs to fly." He pointed at a bank of computers. "That'll be what we need."

I accessed the system. It didn't take long to bypass the security. I had worked as a bodyguard for Visser Six, so I

knew my way around a computer. I could get past anything less than Andalite security measures.

I found the door; it was a hatch on the roof. I opened it and hoped the others could find it. But I discovered something very bad when I was looking for the door.

I tuned to Tobias. “We have a problem.”

“What?”

“There’s no autopilot. They didn’t bother programming it into a prototype.”

We were both silent for a few moments. Jake, Marco, Cassie, and Jeanne dropped in through the hatch. “What’s with the look?” Marco asked. “I don’t like that look. That’s the kind of look someone gets when we suggest a trip to the Yeerk pool. Please don’t tell me it’s something like that.”

“There’s no autopilot,” Tobias told them. I kept looking, praying I was wrong. “Someone will have to drive the ship to the sun or we’ll have to abort the mission.”

Jake shook his head. “We’ll have to call it quits, then. I can’t ask someone to go off and die.”

“Why not? You’ve done it before,” Tobias said to him. I don’t know if anyone else heard just how bitter he was; Cassie did, probably. I don’t think the others realized it.

“That was different,” Marco argued. “That was for the ultimate victory, the end of the war once and for all.”

“And yet, here we are,” Tobias almost spat. “Look, Jake, we’ve got to get rid of this thing. And not just because no matter where we hide it it’ll only be a matter of time before Ax finds it. We’ve got to do it because it’s only a matter of time before one of us breaks and uses it ourselves.”

I could tell the others wanted to argue but knew they couldn’t. The temptation would be too great, I knew. How long could I stand in its presence before I decided to go back and make it so I was never a Controller? How long until I decided to save my father’s life? Or my sister?

And the temptation would be even worse for the others. Jeanne could erase her past so she was never a Controller or assassin. Marco could save his mother before she became a deadly enemy. Jake could save Tom and Rachel.

And for Tobias, it must have been intolerable. He could save Ax, Rachel, Elfangor, and everyone else he had lost. I don’t understand how he went this long without using it. I knew that, now that it was in our hands, he couldn’t last much longer. He knew it, too.

Still, Jake shook his head. “I just can’t do that again.”

“Then I’ll volunteer,” Tobias said. His voice got low. “Jake, we both know there isn’t anything left for me here. If anyone should go, it’s me.”

I backed away from the computer. “I’d go, too. My family’s dead; no one here really needs me too badly. I have less to give up than the rest of you.”

“We only need one of you,” Jake pointed out.

“Yeah, don’t everyone martyr themselves at once,” Marco added sarcastically.

I shook my head. “Someone will have to shoot us a way out of here. The Dracon cannons aren’t controlled by the main computer; it’s a two man task, at the very least. The rest of you can wait as birds on the side of the ship. Once we’re clear, you can bail.”

Jake looked indecisive. Tobias added, “It has to be done, Jake. It’s necessary. We can’t stand around all day debating; they’ll check the hangar soon. Just give the order.”

Finally, Jake nodded. “Okay. Go. Santorelli...it’s been good to know you. I’ll miss you. Tobias...”

There weren’t words he could say. The two of them, and the other Animorphs, had been though something unique, something words couldn’t describe.

Cassie and Jake were crying; Marco almost was, too. But we were spared a tearful farewell because we heard a sharp alarm sounding. They knew we were here.

“Get going,” Tobias hissed. The others started to morph to birds, I started up the ship, and Tobias grabbed the weapon’s controls. He aimed at the hangar door and fired.

Bright green flashes blew away the door. It took a few moments, but we finally had a hole big enough to get out of. Once I was beyond the force field, the others would get out and Tobias and I would go on our way.

We passed the force field, but the computer sounded a warning. Andalite fighters were coming at us from behind, no doubt to take us down.

The others flew through the hatch. I sealed it behind them while Tobias aimed at the ships. He just meant to cripple them, but it would be tough to do.

The computer sounded a warning as their Shredders struck our hull. But there wasn’t any need to worry. This ship was made to withstand the pressure and heat of a star; Shredders wouldn’t hurt it a bit.

We couldn’t outrun the Andalites, but they couldn’t hurt us. It was only a matter of time before Tobias crippled their

engines and forced them to pull back.

Of course, by then, there were others. Human fighters, Andalite, and even captured Yeerk Bug fighters followed us, all trying to bring us down. They aimed for the engines, which didn't feel it at all. They wanted to capture the ship, not destroy it.

I received numerous calls over the com system to surrender. We didn't bother to respond. When we got far enough away from Earth, we kicked up the speed and took the ship into Zero Space. It wouldn't be long now.

CHAPTER 16

Tobias and I spent a day in Z-space because, in Z-space terms, the sun wasn't that far away. During that day, we realized something. There wasn't any food on the ship.

"We'll starve to death in the middle of the sun," Tobias said slowly. "That's not pleasant."

I shook my head. "We could just open a door and let it flash-fry us. That'll be quicker."

"But it might destroy the Time Matrix, too," he pointed out. "We can't risk that."

I shook my head. "So what do we do? Find something sharp or wait to starve?"

"I vote sharp object," Tobias said to me. "No sense in waiting around to die. As soon as we get into the sun's gravity, when there's no way the ship could get out, we do it."

I never thought I'd be talking about suicide so calmly. I had thought about it long ago, back when I was a Controller, but I had never actually done it. There had always been hope. Now...now there was no way out.

Well, we *could* have used the Time Matrix to get back home. We both knew it and didn't even consider it. We sealed

the thing in a storage bay and melted the doors shut. The temptation was too great.

We both avoided fantasizing about being saved somehow. That trap would only lead to depression and that wasn't a path we would take. Better to face it rationally, logically. Best to die without fear.

Without fear. I couldn't do that. I was terrified. I mean, have you ever tried to give your life? Have you ever tried to die? You might think that doing it on purpose would make it easier. Having a reason would make it less hard. You'd be wrong. It's just as hard as dying a pointless death.

Well, it was hard for me, at least. Tobias didn't seem to mind. In fact, he smiled a lot during the day we spent in Z-space. For him, the long road finally had an end.

We came out of Z-space. The sun was brighter than it ever had been before. We could see it on the ship's external sensors and it nearly blinded us. We were almost in the gravity well, almost at the point of no return.

Tobias handed me a sharp chunk of metal from somewhere on the ship. "Any regrets?" he asked me.

I thought about it. "Too many. You?"

"Not enough."

I raised an eyebrow, so he explained. “There’s so much I should feel worse about. So much more I should regret. But my greatest regret...I wish I could have killed Ax. He wouldn’t want to live like he is now. I only wish I was taking him, or at least Esplin, down with me.”

I nodded. I felt the ship shudder violently; we were trapped now. Just before I made the cut, I started to sing. Softly at first, but louder once Tobias joined me. It was my favorite song, the one my father would sing me to sleep with every night when I was young.

“O say can you see by the dawn’s early light
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming
Whose broad stripes and bright stars, thought he perilous fight
O’re the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming
And the rockets’ red glare, the bombs bursting in air
Gave proof though the night that our flag was still there
O say does that star spangled banner yet wave
O’re the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

Yeah, I know, I’m a hopeless patriot. But I was a lifelong military man and there wasn’t a song I loved more. And it was a beautiful poem, too. In those final moments, I learned one last thing about Tobias, something I never suspected. He could

sing like Pavarotti.

I raised my chunk of steel over my wrist and gritted my teeth. “Tobias?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“Any time. And hey, don’t worry. I’ll see you soon. I’m sure Cao Cao and Zhang Liao have a lot to say to us. And I’ll have to introduce you to Rachel and Elfangor.”

I nodded. “See you on the other side.”

CHAPTER 17

HELLO, SANTORELLI. The voice didn't have any form, just a voice that vibrated every part of my being. I could feel it in my bones, my brain, and my soul.

I wasn't in the ship anymore. It was kind of like being in Z-space. At least, everything was white and featureless. Maybe I was dead; or maybe someone had yanked me out of that ship before I could finish the job.

“Who are you? Crayak?”

NOT EXACTLY. YOU HAVE TAKEN ORDERS YOUR ENTIRE LIFE. FROM YOUR FATHER, YOUR COMMANDING OFFICERS. FROM JAKE AND TOBIAS.

“Why are you here?”

I AM HERE TO GIVE YOU YOUR FINAL AND MOST IMPORTANT MISSION.

I couldn't help myself. I didn't ask who he was to give me orders. Clearly he was powerful enough that I should be listening. “What is it?”

NO ONE IS BORN WHO AND WHAT THEY ARE. THEY MUST BECOME THAT. EVERY MAN MUST BE TAUGHT WHAT TO BELIEVE. EVERYONE NEEDS

SOME GUIDANCE.

BUT WHAT OF THOSE WITH NO GUIDANCE? WHAT ARE THEY TO BECOME? MOST ARE WHAT YOU WOULD EXPECT AND THEY HAVE NO NEED TO BE ANYTHING MORE. BUT THERE ARE THOSE WHO MUST BE GREATER THAN THAT.

I don't know how I knew where this was going. Maybe it put the thought in my head. I just knew what this was about. "Tobias."

YES, TOBIAS. HE IS A MAN OF GREAT IDEALS. GREAT WISDOM. HE VALUES DUTY, HONOR, COURAGE, AND, ABOVE ALL, NECESSITY; HE VALUES THEM MORE THAN HIS OWN LIFE. MORE THAN ANYONE'S LIFE. BUT HOW IS HE TO LEARN WHAT TO VALUE?

HIS FATHER, ELFANGOR, WAS FORCED TO LEAVE HIM. HE NEEDED SOMEONE TO TEACH HIM WHAT WAS WORTH FIGHTING FOR.

ONLY THREE PEOPLE OTHER THAN TOBIAS KNOW WHAT HE TRULY BELIEVES. ONE IS DEAD, AND THE OTHER IS A CONTROLLER. YOU ARE THE ONLY OPTION, SANTORELLI. YOU MUST SHOW HIM

WHY HE MUST FIGHT WHEN THE TIME COMES.

“You mean you want me to be...what, his father?”

IN A SENSE. THE ELLIMIST REPLACED ELFANGOR WITH ANOTHER TO RAISE TOBIAS. A MAN WHO WAS VERY MUCH LIKE ELFANGOR IN TEMPERMENT, WISDOM, AND PHILOSOPHY. YOU ARE SUCH A MAN.

“But Tobias doesn’t remember any sort of father.”

NOT YET, NO. BUT HE WILL SOMEDAY. AND HE WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER THE LESSONS YOU MUST TEACH HIM.

MANY WONDER WHY HE FIGHTS. HE OWS THE WORLD NOTHING. HE HAS NO NEED TO BE LOYAL TO HUMANITY. HE COULD HAVE RUN AWAY FROM THE WAR SO MANY TIMES AND BEEN SAFE. YOU ARE THE REASON HE NEVER DID.

IF YOU DO NOT TEACH HIM WHAT HE MUST LEARN, HE WILL BECOME EXACTLY WHAT THOSE WHO SAW HIM BEFORE THE WAR EXPECTED HIM TO BE. AND WITHOUT HIM, THE YEERKS WILL WIN THE FIRST WAR. WITHOUT HIM, HUMANITY WILL BE DESTROYED.

I nodded. “Doesn’t sound like I have much of a choice.

Okay. Then there's something I have to do first."

I KNOW. I WILL HELP.

THE TIME WILL COME SOON WHEN TOBIAS WILL NEED STRENGTH. AND WHEN HE REACHES OUT FOR SOMEONE TO HOLD HIM UP, THERE WILL BE NO ONE.

HIS ONLY STRENGTH CAN COME FROM WHAT ONCE WAS AND WHAT MUST BE. HE WILL NEVER GAIN STRENGTH FROM WHAT IS. YOU MUST TEACH HIM TO REMEMBER, SANTORELLI. BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY, MOST IMPORTANTLY, YOU MUST TEACH HIM TO *DREAM*.

I don't know what happened, but suddenly the entire universe was under my feet. Everything in the universe was there before my eyes. Most of it made no sense, things I couldn't even begin to comprehend. Even the familiar stuff, like life and death, were different with the whole picture. Nothing made sense. Not to a mortal.

ALL OF THIS EXISTS ONLY BECAUSE OF A DREAM. EVERYTHING IN YOUR UNIVERSE AND EVERYTHING BEYOND IT. ONLY REFLECTIONS OF THE MIND. THEY HAVE FORM AND FUNCTION ONLY BECAUSE OF THE DREAMS OF THOSE WHO CREATED

THEM.

THIS IS WHY YOU MUST TEACH TOBIAS TO DREAM. HIS DREAMS WILL ONE DAY BE ALL THAT THE UNIVERSES HAS. ALL OF EXISTANCE WILL HANG ON ONLY TO WHAT HIS MIND AND HEART CREATE.

A door appeared in the air in front of me. It led into a little house. There was a woman standing by the stove. She was tall, blond, beautiful. And obviously pregnant.

I knew who this was, what I had to do. I stepped through the doorway. “Hello, Loren. My name is...”

CHAPTER 18

I lived with my new family for three years. Every day, I woke up expecting to die. I knew Tobias's father died when the boy was young, that his mother disappeared at the same time. I had no idea when the day was coming but I knew there was no escape.

Well, I guess there was. I could have left. That might save Loren. But I knew what had to happen. Loren had to disappear. And I...I had to die. It all had to happen so that Tobias would be as strong, as cold, as unbreakable as he would one day become. Because if he didn't turn out that way, Earth would pay the price.

I was doing what I was doing in the service of Earth. I was giving my life in the service of Earth. That didn't bother me. I was a soldier and had been for life. I accepted that my life might be required at any moment. And I wasn't going to hesitate. Maybe I'm nuts. I don't really care.

What I didn't expect was how much I came to love both of them. I guess I was a good choice to replace Elfangor because I loved Loren as much as he must have.

I loved Tobias, too. It was strange, at first. I knew him so

well, knew what he would become. It was hard to treat him like a son when he had been my brother.

I remember one time in particular. I was laying on the couch. He was curled up next to me. Less than a year old and still an adorable baby. I looked at him and realized that this must have been something like how Joseph of Nazareth must have felt.

Do you know what it's like to look at a baby and know what he'll become? Nah, you probably don't. I looked at that child and knew that he would one day be the one who saved us all. Not alone, of course, but Earth couldn't survive without him.

It was the fairytale life everyone dreams about and knows will never happen. I was the king of my castle. It was a nice little place in a good part of town. I had a great job as the chief of police. All of my military training made me totally overqualified. Although I hadn't been in the service yet, I still had all of my skills.

Come to think of it, I was in two places at once. One of me was out in the world. The other was taking care of this family.

My queen was perfect. I know, nobody's perfect, but if she had flaws, she hid them from me. I didn't mind. She was

gentle, sensitive. And tough enough to make the Yeerk Emperor run and hide under his bed. My kind of girl.

And, of course, there was Tobias, our prince. Loren called him Prince Tobias a lot. It always made me laugh because I knew who his real father was: Prince Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul. That title isn't necessarily inherited by Andalites, but it was still ironic.

I had to fight the urge to change history every day. Mostly, it was about my brother. He was an alcoholic and terrible with kids. I knew that Tobias would spend a lot of time in his house and I wanted more than anything to change him, to make Tobias's life better after I was gone.

Thank God I didn't.

One day, I woke up and just knew that it was the day. My last day alive. So I made the most of it. I cooked everyone breakfast in bed. The best I could make. I used almost every ounce of food we had in the house to make sure I covered everyone's favorites.

We went to the park. For a few hours, we just lay in a field, looking at the clouds. I remember Tobias saying, "I wish I could fly."

I laughed and ruffled his hair. Only three years old and

he already knew what life held for him. “Some day, kid. I promise.”

Loren and I decided to go out that night. Get some dinner as grownups. You know, eat somewhere where the menu doesn't come with crayons.

Just before we left, I walked Tobias over to the fireplace. I pulled out a false brick from it. Inside was a letter I wrote. “You'll remember this when it's important,” I told him. He just nodded.

I turned to go but then realized this would be the last time I would see him. Not chronologically or whatever, but the last time in my mind. I needed to say goodbye.

“Tobias, you've become more to me than I could ever have imagined. We've been through so much, you and I. And yet we've been together for such a sort time.

“I don't need to worry about your future. I already know what it holds. It scares the living hell out of me but I can take it. When you grow up, even before then, you'll be one of the most important people in the universe.

“Life isn't going to be easy for you. It'll be hard and painful and scary, and sometimes it'll just plain suck. But you'll get through it because of all the things we taught each

other.”

I leaned in really close and whispered the last part into his ear. “By blood you’re not my son. But I’m glad I have you instead of a child from my body. I’m proud to call you my son. I’m proud to give you my name.

“You’re going to lose two fathers to this war that you don’t know anything about yet. First your biological one who had to fight. And now me who has to die so that you can win it when you need to. I’m so, so sorry for what has to be done. It’s my duty. And it has been my honor. Courage, my son.”

Getting behind the wheel of that car was the hardest thing I ever did. It would be so easy to run, so easy to get away. All I had to do was stay home with my wife and son.

I remembered what Tobias had told me about temptation. When you’re weak, without power, they tempt you with evil. They ask you to use your little power to hurt and destroy. But the temptation to do evil can be easy to resist if you recognize it. Evil isn’t the threat to the world.

When you have true power, they tempt you with good. They try to turn you away from necessity and towards what you think is good. That was the temptation that caught Seerow so long ago; it was the temptation that caused Cassie to give

the morphing power to the Yeerks, which made her more than partly responsible for Rachel's death. And it was the temptation I felt now.

My hands were shaking as I gripped the wheel. "Are you alright?" Loren asked me.

I nodded. I couldn't say anything to her about what was going to happen. I looked past Loren, out the car window, into our house, and at Tobias. "He'll be fine. That's all that matters."

I drove away into the night.

CHAPTER 19

TOBIAS

I'm not sure what happened. One second, Santorelli and I were singing the Star Spangled Banner and flying into the sun. The next thing I knew, I was in my old house. I hadn't been there since I was very little. It was the house I shared with my mother and stepfather.

My stepfather. As I thought that, images flashed through my mind. Conversations with him. Things he told me. Him telling me almost word for word all the beliefs I had ever told him, and the thoughts Cao Cao had shared with us during our flight from Chi Bi.

I sat down hard on the floor. Santorelli. I could see his face clearly in my mind now. I could see him as he spoke to me before I went to sleep at night. When he kissed me goodnight. And I could remember clearly his face and his words the day he and my mother left. She returned. He never did.

I remembered what he said about the fireplace. I went to it and pulled out the brick. There, inside the hollow block, was an envelope. On one side was my name.

I opened it with care. It had survived more than a decade

in this brick. I didn't want to ruin it now. There were three letters inside of it. The first one I read was from Santorelli.

Tobias,

By the time you read this, you'll know everything about your past. About who I was for you and who you were for me. And you'll know that I'm not good with words. You got that from your mother.

This is mostly just to explain, since I already got to say goodbye. I know that for you it wasn't the last time we saw each other, but for me it was. And the goodbye's really for me. After all, you didn't go anywhere, did you?

I did something that was maybe a little wrong. I thought about the other people you loved or would have loved if fate didn't have more important things planned for you than happiness. I got them to write you a goodbye letter, all the things they never got to say to you in their lives.

Someone, I don't know who he was, helped me with this. I think maybe he was that Ellimist guy you talk about sometimes. These letters are ones they wrote after their deaths. I didn't read them, so I can't give you any hints.

Like I said, no goodbyes here, so I'll just sign off like any good soldier should.

—Santorelli

I brushed a tear out of my eye and opened the next letter. The handwriting was stiff, awkward. Whoever wrote it wasn't used to writing. Didn't look like they were even capable of writing at all. The writing was like a third grader's, though the spelling was impeccable.

Tobias,

I am glad to be given this last chance to communicate with you. I have met you only once. Even then, I knew who you were, who you must be. Who else would have tried to remain behind with me to face Visser Three? No one but my own son.

By now, you may know that you have a half-brother. He is an Andalite named Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor. With the Yeerks mostly defeated, he will have come out of hiding. I will now tell you what I told him the last time I saw him.

Knowing the inevitability of death was what made me appreciate life all the more. I spent my life destroying. I did it for a good cause, but I was a killer. I took the lives of innocents so that the guilty may be punished. I sacrificed the innocent to save the innocent. It was a terrible existence. But it is one that I could not ignore.

What I had to do was terrible. But it was necessary. We

must all do what is necessary, be it right or wrong, good or evil. It is our burden, the curse of our family. It is a curse I wish I could remove, and yet one that I never would.

Now that I am gone, you must see for yourself what is in the universe. You must decide what is necessary. And once you have decided, you must always, always do what must be done, no matter how wrong it may seem at the time.

Know, my son, that you do not stand alone. There are unnumbered people in this galaxy. And there will always be one who will stand with you. When the time comes, you will know him. When you meet him, do not hesitate to do what you must do.

It will not be quick and it will not be easy. It will be slow and terrifying, painful and difficult. It will torment your soul and haunt your dreams for the rest of your life. You will suffer, but you will never suffer alone. This is all I can promise.

—Prince Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul

CHAPTER 20

I took out the final letter. When I opened and saw the writing, the neat, slanted lines, the graceful stroke of the pen, I knew its author instantly. My hands were shaking so badly I had to set the letter down to read it.

Tobias,

You know I'm bad at speaking what's in my heart. It just isn't who I am. But this is all you have of me, so I'll do it. Just this once.

I know you don't want to read about how much I loved you. About how you were all I had to hold on to sometimes. About how many times I would have been dead, insane, or worse without you. You already know all that and there's nothing you hate more than someone telling stuff you know already.

I'm not a words of wisdom kind of gal. I'm not going to write down a bunch of platitudes like "Know yourself" or any of that Lao Tzu stuff. Like I said, you hate being told stuff you already know.

I'm just going to warn you. I'm watching. I can see what you're becoming. You're letting hate take you over. It's turning

you into someone you never were before. It makes you strong, sure, but so do steroids. Fight all you want. Kill every Yeerk you can get your hands on. You know how I feel about killing. But don't hate them while you do it.

The biggest difference between you and me was that, no matter what happened, no matter what they did to you, you never hated them. That was one of the reasons I needed you. Because a lot of times, all I could feel was hate.

It's time to let go, Tobias. Time to move on. I know you don't want to, that you might not be able to. But I was watching when you told Marco that bit about the line. About how on one side, you have what you have and on the other you have nothing. You said you crossed that line because you didn't have anything on this side of it. But ask yourself, why haven't you moved on?

You've got to cross that line, Tobias, because Esplin won't hesitate to do it. If you think he was bad before...well, just be glad you can't see what I see. You've got to cross the line not just for your own psychological and emotional well-being. I know you don't give a rat's ass about that; that was always the last thing on your mind. You have to cross it for the sake of everyone. Duty, honor, courage, necessity; all that Santorelli

stuff you remember now.

This last part I don't need to say to you but I'm going to do it anyway. Just to tick you off one last time. Never, ever stop fighting, Tobias. That's the most important thing of all. No matter what, you have to keep up the fight until you really can't fight any more. It's the most important thing you could do in this universe. Never give up.

I love you,

Rachel

“I love you, too.”

I fell to my knees and laid my head on the floor. I could hear my tears hitting the wood. I don't know how long I was like that. Could have been hours. Hell, it could have been days.

Finally, I stood up. I put the letters back where I found them, just in case. Then I stepped outside. The sun was rising in the east. “As long as the sun rises,” I said to no one. “When that stops, I'll stop. Until then...” I looked to the sky where I imagined the Blade Ship hovering. I made the most obscene gesture I could think of. “As long as the sun rises.”

Rachel was right. I didn't need her to tell me to go on. Because I remembered something Santorelli had said do me

once, back when we were first getting to know each other. When duty calls, a Santorelli always answers. Well, duty was calling. And I was the only Santorelli we had left.

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

*“So tell me friend: how's it going to end?
When the shit goes down
And there's no one left around to get your back
You'll crack
You'll smile and agree with everything they say
They'll try to tell you that it's all okay
But it's not and you're shot and you're bleeding pretty bad
And you can't stop thinking about the things you never had
Like a wife and a kid and the things you never did
You're running around
You're living a life that's empty in the end, my friend
No, you'll take back all you've said
Oh, when the regrets fill your head
Trust me I've been there before
I would not wish it upon my greatest enemy
What irony
Once friends, but I find: you'll have to learn this lesson on your own*

*So I waited by the phone but that phone never rang
And I sang so loud so I wouldn't hear the bang
When the bang never came
And I never got the call: Fuck it! Thank you! I love you all!
Some are going to say that we're doomed to repeat
All our past mistakes
Great
But that's not me
And even if it was I would always disagree
Because in the end I always get the better of me*

*I've got a gun in my hand but that gun won't cock
My finger's on the trigger but that trigger seems locked
I can't stop staring at the tick-tock clock
And even if I could I would never give up
With a vest on my chest, a bullet in my lung
I can't believe I'm dying with my song unsung
And if and when I die won't you bury me alone?
Because I'll never get to heaven if I'm singing this song:
Oh, I'll take you where I've been
Oh, I'll show you what I've seen.”*

—Point/Counterpoint

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

58: THE RETIREMENT

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

<Yeah.>

<Well?>

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

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

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

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

<Jeanne and Santorelli figured out where the invasion's happening. We got kind of distracted with the Time Matrix,

but we need to move in there. Secure new identities, start looking for Yeerks. But there's something we need before we go.>

<Yeah?>

<A sixth Animorph.>

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

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

<Why not bring the others?> I asked.

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

<Got someone in mind?> I asked.

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

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

<I only met him once,> Tobias told me. <He seemed bight.

He's young; about as young as Ax was the first time around. That didn't work out too badly for him.>

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

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

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

<I'm not sure Elfangor liked it either. It didn't go too poorly, though, now did it?>

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

<You wish I was, though.>

<What? No I don't.>

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

<That's not true.>

<No?>

<No.>

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

recruit him unless he's got some skills.>

<And if he doesn't?>

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

Alloran-Semitur-Corrass was the Andalite held captive by Esplin 9466 back when he was Visser Three. He is the only Andalite-Controller in history with the recent exception of Ax.

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

<I have a ship.>

<You have a ship?> I echoed.

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

PREVIEW SUMMARY

The Animorphs need a sixth member. They can't trust many people, and only a few would be good candidates. But they know someone who could be a good choice: Tobias' half-brother, Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor. But nothing is ever easy for the Animorphs; especially when a trip to the Hork-bajir homeworld is involved.

Jake, Tobias, Marco, Cassie, and Jeanne must find the young Andalite, lost and stranded on the Hork-bajir world. But things are worse than they seem. Because while the Andalites and humans have been relaxing after the war on Earth, the Yeerks have been building...