

Imagine a picture of Cassie turning into a polar bear.

73: THE DEFENDER

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Well gang, I'm back at the Neomorphs wheel. This is my third attempt at getting you all a copy of this fic, so I'm just going to cut this note short an

Enjoy or go to hell.

If I owned Animorphs, you wouldn't be reading this for free.

And if I owned Streetlight Manifesto, I would have better things to do than write fanfiction.

CHAPTER 1

My name is Cassie. I could tell you my last name. In fact, I'd be surprised if you didn't already know it. It wouldn't matter all that much even if you did, though. We all live by aliases here on Alpha Front anyway. I'm not giving out the alias; that would make it easy for the Yeerks to find us. And as for my real last name, it's sort of irrelevant. In a month, I'm changing it to Chambers.

I wasn't the only one getting married. Rachel and I were at my house, planning hers. Tobias had finally proposed and we were going through some of the stuff I still had from when the two of us were planning my wedding. She and I were in the kitchen, pouring over my old catalogs.

Tobias and Ronnie were painting the living room. I was hoping that forcing them to work together would get them talking, but instead it just resulted in a room that seemed to absorb any word you spoke in it and respond with silent contempt. At least they were painting it fairly well. That was my second goal.

The small TV in the kitchen was tuned to the news. Rachel's father, Dan, was reading the top stories. In a way, it kind of reminded me of when we were younger. Rachel and I playing together, with her father watching over us. With the silence from the other room, we might as well have been alone.

Rachel's Dad was currently reporting on a story that was very important to us. "Local authorities are still baffled at the apparent demolition of the home of local business man P. C. Rossin." In a small box next to Dan's head, there was a picture of a man I recognized. Or, at least, half recognized. He was in suit, which seemed odd, and his hair was straight. He didn't have that wild look in his eyes, either. But I knew who it was. Subvisser Kalroth 337. Or, at least, his host.

"Yesterday, authorities discovered that Mr. Rossin's entire estate had been completely destroyed.

One officer remarked that it looked like a war zone. Another responded that it looked like Hiroshima. All of the buildings on his estate were burned down, and police found several bodies, though they were unidentifiable. Mr. Rossin is unavailable for comment, though it is confirmed that he is alive and apparently was not at home during the time of the attack. As of the moment, police have no leads in this bizarre case."

That was good. We had been just slightly involved in that. The actual destruction had been accomplished by Sergio and company; we had just used it as a distraction to seal some evidence and information. That, in fact, was the subject of Rachel's dad's next story.

"Our top story tonight is the shocking arrest of local police chief Robert Olin." That wasn't his real name, but you don't need to know his real name. "Early this morning, F.B.I. agents arrested the chief on multiple charges ranging from bribery to illegal arms smuggling. He is currently in F.B.I. custody. A spokesman for the F.B.I. stated that the agency was acting on information given to them from an anonymous source."

Rachel smiled. That source had been us. "Good. Even if he doesn't go to prison, he'll lose his job over this. That takes care of a major threat."

Then her father spoiled our good mood. "Due to the nature of some of the accusations made against him, the International Invasion Investigation Force has become involved. The F.B.I. has announced that they will be transferring Chief Olin to their custody. Tri-I will take over the investigation from there."

That was about when Tobias rushed into the room. "Problem," he muttered. Ronnie came in after him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Rachel gave Ronnie a look like he was an idiot. "How long do you think it'll take Tri-I to find out he's a Controller? Probably as soon as he walks in the door."

"Isn't that a good thing?" Ronnie responded. "Then Tri-I could take over-"

Tobias cut him off. "Not an option. Not now that Crayak and Azmaveth have written in that 'inaction clause'. We *have* to stop Tri-I from learning the truth. Which means we have to grab the Chief before he even gets to Tri-I H.Q."

Tobias was in full leader-mode now. He turned to Rachel. "We need to get in touch with Dan, find out what he knows. Tri-I won't wait on this, they'll get the Chief to them as soon as possible. We're looking at a dangerous mission with minimal planning. We'll need David and Al from school. James is at work right now, we'll need him too. Cassie, I need you to-"

Tobias cut off, staring at the TV. Then he said a word I can't repeat. Rachel covered her stomach as though she could stop the baby from hearing it. "What is it?"

We all turned to the TV, which we had stopped paying attention to. Rachel's dad was going on about a new story now. My eyes caught on before my ears did and I found myself looking at the picture that had replaced that of P. C. Rossin.

The eyes were the first thing I noticed. It felt like his eyes were looking directly into my soul and knew exactly how to hurt me. It was like someone was pouring liquid nitrogen on my heart. His eyes burned me, but it was cold burn. If the Visser had eyes in his natural body, these would have been then.

The rest of his face was unremarkable. He really wasn't handsome at all. He looked unhappy, almost like he was disappointed in me. I think that was his constant expression. His hair was a sort of light brown, maybe blond. It might have just been the lighting in the picture. I knew this man. I had seen him before, though we hadn't spoken to each other.

Vladmir Vladimirovitch Putin.

I realized all of this in an instant. Rachel's dad was making an announcement. "- plans to visit several cities across the U.S. to rally support for the war." He started listing some cities. Omega Front was one of them. So was Alpha Front.

Tobias said that word again. Rachel hit him in the arm. "Stop that."

Tobias shook his head. "This is bad. Ronnie, go get David and Al from school. Rachel, call your father. Rachel, call James and tell him he needs to get back to the apartment now!" He turned to me. "Cassie, you -"

He cut off. The portable holo-emitter in his pocket was buzzing. "What now?"

Chapter 2

Tobias set the emitter on the table. It was vaguely egg-shaped, like a lot of Andalite tech. It was a pale orange, with a red circle at the thinner end and a green lens at the wider part. Down the center was a yellow strip. Tobias put two fingers to the red pad and a faintly-green image appeared above the lens.

Alloran-Semitar-Corrass. I recognized him instantly. He nodded. "Commander-Prince," he greeted Tobias. A voice came out of the yellow part of the device, since this one wasn't capable of transmitting thought speak like a proper one would be. "We just received a very...unusual....transmission from the Yeerks."

"You intercepted a transmission?" Tobias asked.

Alloran shook his head. "No, we didn't. It was sent to us intentionally, which is part of why it is so strange."

"What did they want?" I asked.

"It was from their Undervisser, Guraff Four-Two-Seven." Alloran turned his main eyes to Tobias. "You fought him in the battle above Hork-bajir. I am not sure if you remember who he is."

Tobias managed not to smile. Then again, even when he intends to smile, he usually managed not to. "I've heard of him. What did he want?"

"You."

"What?"

"He wants you to contact him. He left us a communications channel for you to do so. Do you have any idea why he might be doing this?"

"No clue," Tobias answered. "I guess I should call him, though. It's only polite."

Alloran nodded. "Be very, very careful, Commander. Guraff was Esplin's top man and I can assure you from far too much experience that he is perhaps the most dangerous Yeerk in the galaxy. Be very, very careful."

"I think I can handle it," Tobias assured him.

"The electorate will, of course, want to hear the details of your conversation."

"Of course. Is that all?"

"Yes. Alloran out."

Tobias dialed up Guraff's channel. Guraff himself answered. His holographic image was only about a foot high, but there was still an imposing air about him. Not that aura of evil like the Visser or Salheer had. This was an aura of...steel, or iron.

"That was prompt, Devil Prince."

"Well, this is sort of important," Tobias answered.

"Indeed. I hope you do not mind the convoluted method I was forced to use. You have done a very good job of hiding yourself. You know why I called?"

"Of course, though I'm surprised that you did."

"What are you two talking about?" I interrupted. How could Tobias already know what this was about?

Tobias turned to me. "If Tri-I finds out that the Chief is a Controller, we all die. So we have to stop Tri-I from getting him from the F.B.I. Guraff knows this as well as we do."

Guraff nodded. "The Devil Prince knows me well. I have the resources to obtain the chief, and a viable plan as well. Unfortunately, we do not possess the necessary knowledge to bring it to fruition."

"What's the plan?" Tobias asked.

"Something we shall discuss in due time, I think. Before we speak of it, we need information. We need to know when and how Tri-I and the F.B.I. are making the transfer. I am confident that you will be able to discover that. Contact me again once you have, and we will discuss the plan."

"What's in it for us?" Tobias asked. "Why help you instead of doing it ourselves?"

"If you aid us, you will have my resources at your disposal. And I will allow you to keep the Chief. He is of no use to me anymore. Think on this offer and contact me soon. For now, we must both prepare."

"For what?" I asked.

"For Mister Putin's arrival, of course." He cut the transmission and his hologram disappeared.

Rachel came back into the room. "I got James for about two seconds. He said hello, and then I heard a smashing sound and the phone stopped working."

"I was afraid of that," Tobias muttered. "Sergio's got a very strict no-phones policy. It's either because he doesn't want to take the chance of a call to the warehouse getting triangulated by police, or because he's completely insane. Maybe both."

"So how do we contact James?" I asked.

"Call Sergio's office. He'll pass on a message from me to James. Let's go. Ronnie can give us a lift back to the apartment. We've got a lot of work to do. We've got to save a police chief from Tri-I and a world leader from the Yeerks, and God knows how much time we have." He paused. Then he shook his head. "Maybe after this, I'll figure out some way to get my hand son the Time Matrix again and take an ice relaxing vacation somewhere before this all happened."

CHAPTER 3

We all piled into Ronnie's car. Tobias was riding shotgun, the holo-emitter in one hand, Ronnie's cell phone in the other. He was dialing the cell phone now. "Sergio! It's Tobias." He paused and we could faintly hear someone talking on the other end. "Yeah, right. Listen, I need to talk to James, it's important."

Again, we heard a bit of shouting. A minute or so later, Tobias was speaking again. "James, you need to get back to the apartment right now. Something's come up.... Yeah, I know.... I don't know, break your foot or something.... So don't let him cut it off.... Yeah, sure, bring her, too.... See you soon."

Then he called Jake on the emitter. "Jake, we have a problem. Have you been watching the news?"

Since it was a hologram, we could hear Jake's response. "No, why?"

"Putin's paying you a visit."

"What?"

"He's gong to be touring around America, giving speeches in support of the war. One of his stops is back home. I figured you might want to check his speech out. It should be pretty exciting."

"Will do. Is he stopping in your city?"

"Yeah, though I don't know why he'd stop at a little place like this. I'm definitely going to be keeping an eye on him, though."

"Alright. Let me know how it goes."

"I'll keep you posted."

Ronnie left us at the apartment and then went to go get Al and David from school. Rachel paced around the apartment, restless. Tobias sat in a chair. Though he was sitting still, he somehow managed to look just as restless as Rachel did. I knew that both of them were eager to get to work on these problems, but there wasn't much we could do.

Rachel's dad was still at work and couldn't help us at the moment, and we couldn't do much planning without James, Al, and David. We couldn't do anything, and if there's one thing Tobias and Rachel hate, it's sitting around while they should be solving some problem.

"We can't get the Chief while he's in FBI custody," Tobias began. "They'll have him guarded, and there's no way we could pull off something like that without exposing ourselves."

"We could give it a shot," Rachel suggested.

"We could also very easily get killed," I added.

Tobias nodded. "And going after him at Tri-I is even more suicidal. So we'll have to hit them in transit. When they're shipping him from wherever the FBI has him to Tri-I, we jump in and get him out of there."

"My dad probably knows where he is, and he might be able to find out how they're getting him from point A to point B," Rachel continued. "I guess the hard part will be getting him between them."

"What about Putin?" I asked.

Tobias shrugged at that. "We've got no information on Putin. We don't know exactly when he's getting here, how he's doing it, or where exactly he's going to go. Without knowing anything, it's hard to plan."

"Maybe we won't even have to worry about him," I suggested. "You know that Tri-I will be keeping an eye on him, and he's got his own security. Do you really think the Yeerks can come up with a way to deal with that?"

"We're dealing with Guraff," Rachel answered. "I'm not going to take chances. My dad might have information on that, too."

"He'd better. We don't have anything else to go on," Tobias sighed. "If Tri-I doesn't have this info, no one will. There might be some stuff in the Russian government systems, but I don't think I can get access to those from here."

"You're sure?" I asked.

He nodded. "We tried it a few weeks ago, after Putin started gaining more and more influence with the Andalites. We wanted to keep an eye on him, but we couldn't get into his systems from here."

"What do you mean he's been gaining influence with the Andalites?" Rachel asked.

"Putin has been Earth's strongest pro-war advocate. He's constantly urging the other governments to step up efforts to send troops into the battles. The Andalites like him for that, and he's been in contact with the Electorate. They put a lot of weight behind his opinions. Far too much for my liking. I wanted to keep an eye on him, but like I said, it's not easy."

"How do you know that the Electorate listens to him?" I asked him.

"Because the Electorate also consults Alloran on a lot of things and he keeps me informed. He doesn't like or trust Putin. According to Alloran, Putin reminds him of Esplin."

"Can't say I'm a fan of his either," I admitted. "And I definitely don't like that the Electorate consults him a lot."

"I'm more worried about him taking control there," Tobias responded. "And it's starting to look like that's exactly what he's doing. They ask him where to deploy troops, and how. They ask him about negotiating alliance with some of the undecided races. They don't always listen to him, but just the fact that they're asking him worries me."

Rachel nodded. "He can't possibly know more about this than Andalite generals who have been fighting this war for decades. He's totally new to this sort of war."

"Actually, he seems to be succeeding rather well," Tobias admitted. "I'm just worried that by the time this is all over, the Andalites are just going to be Russian puppets. Nothing against the

Russians or Putin; I just don't like the idea of the Andalites being Russian puppets any better than I like the idea of Russia being an Andalite puppet."

I was more worried about that than Tobias was, I think. If Alloran, of all people, said Putin reminded him of Esplin, it was most likely true. No one knew Esplin better than Alloran did. And I didn't like the idea of a world, maybe even this whole sector of the galaxy, taking orders from a man like Esplin.

Chapter 4

James and Kristina came through the door a few minutes later. He was limping badly, leaning against Kristina for support. "What happened to you?" Rachel asked.

"Sergio wouldn't let me go as long as I could still work," James answered. I couldn't help but notice that instead of sitting down anywhere, he had elected to continue leaning on Kristina. I hoped I was reading too much into it. "So I dropped a crate on my foot and broke it so I could come back here."

"A crate of what?" I asked.

James shook his head. "That's not a question we ask." He still wasn't sitting down. "So, what's the emergency?"

"Two things," Tobias said, quickly outlining the situation and what he'd already decided about grabbing the Chief. The whole time, James remained standing. Now, maybe I read too much into things, but when a guy stands around on a broken foot for that long, it generally has to have something to do with a girl. And considering the fact that he was leaning against one at the moment...

I shook my head and really, really hoped Rachel didn't notice what I was noticing. James was, the last time we checked, with Jordan, Rachel's sister. And if Rachel ever suspected that James had even had so much as an idle thought about cheating on her sister, it would probably take Tobias and Guraff together to hold her back.

"Maybe you should sit down," I suggested to James. I don't know if he understood my tone of voice, but he did sit down.

"Or just morph that away," Tobias suggested. James nodded and began morphing to hawk. Once he was a hawk, he started chuckling at something.

"What?" Rachel asked.

(You'll hear it in a minute or so.)

In about a minute, we did hear two voices as someone started unlocking the door. The first was Al's voice. "- even know what a crush *is*, David."

David's voice responded. "It's like that thing you've got for Kristina." They entered the apartment. David looked around and his eyes fell on Kristina. He let out a deep breath.
"Awkward moment is awkward."

Ronnie turned to shut the door behind them. "Raleigh?" Tobias began.

Ronnie stopped. He'd gotten used to Tobias calling him by different names. "Yeah?"

"Wait outside and let me know when Rachel's dad gets here. I'm going to be on the emitter with Guraff and he doesn't need to know where we get our information. Al, get on the computer and see if you can find out anything about what's going on with Putin. Rachel, I want..."

I sort of tuned Tobias out for a moment after that as Ronnie left the room. The others didn't see it, but I did. Tobias had no idea that he'd just hurt Ronnie's feelings pretty badly. Ronnie didn't want to be an Animorph, sure, but he also didn't want to get relegated to the role of door man.

Especially not when Kristina, affiliated with us only by accident, got to stay and help.

I followed Ronnie without bothering to explain myself to Tobias. He'd go one without me for a few minutes. I closed the door behind me and took a good long look at Ronnie. The signs were there, subtle, almost hidden, but I could see them. He was upset and I knew about what. He was always upset when he was banished from our meetings like a child.

I don't think any of the others could even describe Ronnie. They'd probably just say tall, black, and Rachel and Kristina might add the word handsome, though he definitely wasn't Rachel's type. They never really even noticed him.

Ronnie's the tallest man I know, I think. He's about six and a half feet tall, and athletically built. He basically grew up in the woods, and he still looked the part. He had about two days' growth of beard and black, curly hair that he always kept short, almost military style. He was strong, one of the strongest people I know both inside and out.

The others didn't understand him. When he asked me to leave the war behind a few months ago, they thought he was being selfish. So did I, at first. But then I realized the truth. He wasn't asking me to stop fighting because he hated it. He was asking me to stop because *I* hated it. I was trapped doing the thing I hated most, reliving the nightmare that I had when I was a teenager. He wanted to save me from that, to help me stop. So he took a huge gamble. He wagered my love for him against my sense of duty. And in the end, my love was stronger.

He could have lost me, asking me to quit like that. I think he made a lifelong semi-enemy of Tobias, and maybe the other Animorphs as well. He'd looked weak and selfish in front of them, and those are two personality traits that don't go well with my friends. They had no clue who he really was. He wasn't selfish. And he was anything but weak.

His mother died giving birth to him. His father had been killed by a mountain lion when he was five. He'd gone off to live with his grandfather, an old man who lived in a cabin in the mountains. When Ronnie was fifteen, the Yeerks infested his grandfather. They wanted to keep an eye on

the mountains, looking for the free Hork-bajir. They didn't bother to infest Ronnie until near the end, when they were looking for us in the mountains.

None of my friends had any clue about the pain and loss Ronnie had known in his life. No one had ever bothered to ask him. Tobias didn't even know his name. And Ronnie, quiet, thoughtful Ronnie, never bothered to tell them. He never bothered to fight for their respect. It just wasn't who he was. Because of that, they thought he was weak, small, insignificant. Most of them don't realize the kind of strength it takes to stand by and let that happen. It takes strength to hurt someone; it takes more to let yourself be hurt.

I put an arm around Ronnie. "I'm sorry. Should I – "

He shook his head. "No. At least, not now. You've got important things to do. But...I've been thinking. About what we were talking about last night?"

"What did you decide?"

"No. I don't care if it'd make them accept me more. I'm not going to ask to join you. I'm...I'm not a killer, Cassie. I can't be an Animorph."

I hugged him. "I know. I just wish they'd realize that a war takes more than soldiers."

"I'm not going to be the one to tell Tobias how to fight his war. But you get back inside. Like I said: you've got important things to do."

Chapter 5

When I entered, there were a couple holograms floating. An image of Guraff was hovering above Tobias's emitter. Ax was projecting a map from the emitter on the computer. It was a map of our city, the nearby city where Tri-I's local headquarters was, and the area in between.

One building in our city was highlighted in green, as was the Tri-I headquarters. The green building in our town was labeled PRISON. It must have been where the FBI was holding the Chief. Tobias turned to me as I walked in. "Point A," he commented, stabbing the prison with his finger. Then he poked the Tri-I building. "Point B. And somewhere in here," he circled the area in between, "is where we have to grab the Chief."

(The problem,) David began, now demorphed, (is that we can't let Tri-I know who's behind it. That's going to be a problem. An Operative gets killed in one city. A prisoner gets taken from them in another. If we don't manage to pin this on someone, they're going to get the impression that someone's gunning for them.)

"We can see to that," Guraff answered. "The Apostates and I have been discussing that problem. Several of the Apostates have acquired high-ranking members of one of the local crime syndicates. We can arrange it so that, when we rescue the Chief, there is evidence implicating

that syndicate. They will be blamed, or at least investigated, for the abduction, leaving both of us safe from scrutiny."

I noticed something in Guraff's voice when he mentioned the Apostates. It was difficult to tell, since he was a Yeerk with a Hork-bajir host, but it sounded like scorn, or maybe even disgust. He did not like the Apostates. I had no idea why.

"How are we going to get our hands on him?" James asked.

"We'll think of that once we're sure of the timing and the rout they're taking," Tobias answered. "Guraff, what resources can you provide us with?"

"Vehicles, weapons, and several Apostates."

"And I have your guarantee that those Apostates won't, say, decide to use said vehicles and weapons against us once we get the Chief?"

"You have my word, Devil Prince. You know I would never break it."

Tobias nodded. "That's why I'm agreeing to this, after all. I - " he cut off as Ronnie opened the door.

"Tobias. Company."

Tobias turned back to Guraff without acknowledging Ronnie. "As you just heard, we've got a visitor. Probably best that they don't see a Hork-bajir in the living room."

Guraff nodded. "Contact me again once you know the timing and we will finalize our plans." The image disappeared.

Ronnie ushered Rachel's dad into the room. "Sorry I couldn't get here earlier. It wasn't easy to skip out of work earlier. I had to fake sudden, violent illness during a commercial break. I know you kids are already planning, but you need to move on this *now*."

"When are they moving the Chief?" Tobias asked.

"Tonight. Midnight. And there's good news and bad news about that. It's about the same time Putin's jet is scheduled to land at the airport."

"He's coming *tonight*?" Rachel butted in.

Dan nodded. "I'm afraid so. He kept this very quiet, even from Tri-I. I guess he's paranoid, and rightfully so. Now, Tri-I is going to have every man we can spare keeping an eye on him as long as he's in the states. That means that the Chief isn't going to be as heavily guarded as he would be otherwise."

"It also means that now we know why Guraff is so concerned that we help him with the Chief," Tobias finished.

David nodded. I'd gotten used to animals nodding a while ago. (While we're grabbing the Chief, Guraff's going to be grabbing Putin.)

"We'll have to make sure we work faster than Guraff can, then," Rachel answered. "We get in, grab the Chief, take him back here, and -"

(We don't take him back here,) David interrupted. (I think I know why Guraff wants us to take him. He's probably got some sort of tracking device in or on the Chief. We grab the Chief and Guraff just follows him straight to where we live.)

"An easily solved problem," Tobias answered. "We'll stash the Chief in the Reliquary until Al can remove the tracer. If we keep the Reliquary mobile, Guraff won't get any information from it."

"How do we get him there?" James asked.

"That depends on where we're going to be getting him from in the first place," Tobias answered, turning back to Dan. "Do you know how they're getting him from A to B?"

"By car. A white, unmarked vehicle with three Tri-I Operatives in it. I know the route they're going to be taking, too. I got my hands on the file when my supervisor wasn't paying attention."

"Any EPICs?" I asked, remembering the stories the Omegamorphs had told us of the Tri-I Operative they had met just recently. Carl Yastrzemski. He'd survived a one-on-one fight with Guraff. People like that had to be taken very, very seriously.

Dan shook his head. "There aren't many EPICs, and all of the ones in the area will be covering Putin. Rumor has it that Adrian Rook himself will be personally keeping an eye on Putin."

"That's a plus," Rachel said. "We know that the Yeerks don't have people in Tri-I, which means they probably don't even know about the EPICs. Guraff won't be expecting someone with that kind of skill."

"Skill? Rook could probably strangle a Kelbrid if he got in the mood," Dan laughed. "Your Yeerk friends are going to be in for a nasty surprise."

At the same time, Tobias and Rachel both said roughly the same thing. "That's my favorite kind."

Chapter 6

We had the plan down. Now that we knew the route they were going to be taking, we could plan how to get our hands on the Chief. We finalized our plans with Guraff and went to work. My part was actually pretty easy. I, along with Tobias, would be riding along with one of the Yeerk

crews. David and Al would be working on our diversion and preparing the Reliquary. All that was left was the timing. It'd be tight.

Tobias, James, and I were supposed to meet the Yeerks outside of a random house. We stood there in front of someone's house, waiting for our ride. A red minivan pulled up in front of us. Someone threw the door open from inside. The inside was completely black. The back seats had been removed. Weapons of both Yeerk and human make were hanging on a rack attached to the roof.

James, Tobias and I climbed in and pulled the sliding door shut behind us. There was only one person in the van. A human. He was tall, athletic, with black hair and blue eyes. He wore jeans, a black t-shirt, and sunglasses. All in all, he didn't look very remarkable. Like the sort of guy you'd meet on the street. He was handsome, but not in any way that'd stick out in your mind.

I sat down in the passenger seat. Tobias and James stayed in the back, examining weapons. The Controller put the van in gear and started driving off. I figured some conversation was in order. "So....what's your name?" It seemed like a logical place to begin.

"Eleven." He didn't look away from the road as he answered me.

I had to take a moment to process that. "That doesn't sound an ordinary Yeerk name."

"Where'd you get a name like that?" James asked.

"It was a gift." Again, he didn't look at us.

"From who?" I wondered.

"From the Visser."

"Guys, this is Eleven," Tobias explained, "the Apostate who came up with most of the Yeerk half of this plan." That sort of made my blood run cold. An Apostate had, not too long ago, ripped one of my organs out of my body. The thought that I was now sitting less than three feet from one of them...

"Do you mind," Eleven began, still not turning towards us at all, "if I play some music while I drive?"

James, Tobias, and I looked at each other. Tobias shrugged. "You're the one behind the wheel."

Eleven turned on the CD player. I wasn't sure what I was expecting an Apostate to play, but whatever it was, this wasn't it. It was...

"Apostates listen to Beethoven?" I asked.

"Dvorak, actually," Eleven answered, still not looking at us.

"Dvorak," James said. "Now *that* sounds like a Yeerk name. Dvorak Eight-Three-Four."

That got no reaction from Eleven. It was probable that he didn't have a sense of humor. I was surprised by how calm he was, though. I had expected an Apostate to be like Kalroth, some fanatic burning with passion and denouncing us with every breath. Instead, Eleven just seemed to...well, ignore us. Like we weren't worth his time or something.

Finally, after then minutes of silence, he finally spoke to us, though he still didn't turn his head at all. "You are they one they call the Devil Prince." Obviously, the question was addressed to Tobias.

"That's me," he answered.

"Is it true, then, that you killed Eight with only your hands?" Eleven asked. He didn't seem to have any emotion about it at all.

"I was in Howler morph at the time," Tobias responded. "If Eight is who I think he is, I managed to put my claws into his brain through his eyes."

"And Fourteen? I am told you ran him through with his own hook."

"That one's an exaggeration," Tobias answered honestly. "Al shot him."

That seemed to satisfy Eleven for a time. It didn't satisfy me, though. This was a chance to get some useful information out of an Apostate. I wasn't going to waste it. They were nearly unstoppable in battle. If I could find some sort of weakness...

"Eleven," I asked, "what do Yeerks think of us?"

"Other Yeerks fear you," he answered simply. I would have had to be deaf to miss the word that started that sentence.

"And you Apostates?"

"You are not worth fearing."

"And why is that?" James asked.

"You are a temporary obstruction. No power can stand in the Holy Visser's way for long. Soon, you will all be removed. Why, then, should you be feared?"

Then Tobias asked something I hadn't thought of at all. "Tell us why you are called Apostates. Apostasy is the renunciation of one's religion, yet you serve one who you call the Holy Visser. What have you renounced?"

"The ways of the Old Empire," Eleven answered. "And loyalty to the Yeerk race as a whole. Our one and only loyalty is to the Holy Visser. We have sworn off all other ties. Nothing matters but His will."

There was the insanity I was expecting. It was hidden beneath the calm exterior; probably a result of Guraff and Salheer's training. But now I knew that that calmness was rigid self-control, designed to hold in the crazy.

"So your loyalty is to the Visser. What do you think of serving Guraff and Kalroth, then?"

"The God General is the right hand of the Holy Visser. He speaks with the voice of the Holy Visser, a right he and he alone has. Not even we may claim to do as much."

"And Kalroth?"

"An Apostate in name only. His loyalty is as true as ours, but he is of little practical use."

"Suppose the Visser should die,-"I began.

That actually got a laugh out of him. It was a hollow sound, like someone imitating a laugh. "If you believe the Holy Visser can be killed, your intelligence has been overestimated."

Eleven slowed down and almost stopped. Traffic ahead of us was backed up pretty badly. All according to plan. This was all about to come to a head. "Time," Eleven said.

Chapter 7

Traffic was backed up due to an 'accident' that had happened at the intersection up ahead. Two vehicles had hit each other. Not hard enough to do any real damage, but hard enough that the two drivers were arguing with each other, refusing to move their cars, and holding everyone up. The police got involved, but that just ensured that they'd all be there longer.

The police and drivers were Controllers. All of this was carefully planned to force the Tri-I Operatives to go off of the path they had planned to use. And it looked like it was about to work.

Eleven pointed at a white car not too far ahead of us. "If your information is correct, that is them."

Tri-I Operatives didn't like being delayed. Just as we had expected, they were trying to maneuver towards a wide alley that branched off from the road we were on. On the other side of the alley was another road, which they could use to go around this whole mess.

They would never make it to that road.

Eleven stopped us far enough away from the gridlock that we could maneuver behind the Tri-I car without too much trouble. They turned down the alley. We pulled up at the end they had just

entered through, blocking their exit. A second van, this one black, pulled up at the other end of the alley, blocking their way out.

For a moment, the Tri-I car just sat there. And then the windshields exploded. Yellow beams of light shattered the front and rear windshields. Apparently, Tri-I took no chances. This was suspicious, so their first reaction was to shoot. We hadn't expected them to act so violently so quickly.

Our vans were shielded. Not enough to stand up to their barrage for long, but well enough that it would buy us some time. Now was the tricky part. We couldn't let them see a Ssri'Kai or a Howler. We were limited to normal human weaponry. And we had to be careful not to kill the Chief. At least, *we* did.

Eleven was shooting out of the window on the passenger side of the car. Tobias, James, and I remained in the back. James and I wouldn't be able to help very much, since we had no clue how to use human weapons. And Tobias, apparently, didn't want the deaths of those Tri-I Operatives on his hands.

Of course, he was willing to let Eleven and the other Controllers do the job for him. It was a moral compromise of sorts. Tobias was great at compromising his morals

After a few minutes, Eleven stopped shooting. The sound of gunfire and laser beams no longer echoed in the alley. The Apostate opened the passenger door and climbed out. A moment later, Tobias followed him. I watched through the open door as they made their way to the car. The whole time, I expected to see a beam of yellow light suddenly lance from the vehicle. But none did.

Eleven pulled open the door. A man fell out, not moving aside from the pull of gravity. One of the Operatives, dead. Judging by the fact that no one attacked them, I guessed that the others were dead as well. Two more Controllers from the other van joined Tobias and Eleven and pulled the remaining bodies out of the car.

That was when a red-headed man climbed out on his own. His wrists were cuffed together, and he was blindfolded. He looked only slightly familiar. The Chief, I assumed. Kristina's father. Tobias pulled his blindfold off and his head darted around, confused.

Tobias nodded towards us and James and I climbed out of the minivan. "We're switching cars here. No room to get our minivan through the alley. We have to move fast. These Operatives probably put in an alert to headquarters when the shooting started."

"They did," the Chief confirmed.

"So their backup will be here pretty quickly. We need to get out now. Cassie, you're driving," Tobias finished, climbing into the black van.

I nodded. We had figured this part out earlier. Eleven wouldn't know where we were going, and neither would the Chief. Not that we trusted them to drive anyway. And unfortunately, James and Tobias had no idea how to drive human vehicles. So it was all up to me. Now, I'm an okay driver. Not good, but not as bad as, say, Marco.

Unfortunately, driving a van is not all that similar to driving a car. Everything works the same, but the vehicle responds differently to your commands. I could get the hang of it if I had some time to practice. But time was one of the things that we most definitely did not have right now. So I hopped into the driver's seat and took off into the street.

Traffic on this side of the alley was moving normally. That wasn't fast enough for us. We had to get to the airport in time to stop whatever trap Guraff had prepared for Putin. I drove out in front of a blue car. I cut across into the next lane, almost sideswiping a green minivan. I pulled back into the previous lane just in front of a grey car.

"Be sure not to turn too tightly," Eleven advised me. He was examining some of the weapons in the back of the van. "If you turn too tightly, the van will tip over. The vehicle requires room to maneuver."

Tobias set his emitter on the dashboard. It was projecting a small map of the city. It was the barest outline of the roads, sketched in green and black lines. A single white dot, our vehicle, moved along one road. Seemingly close by but not nearly close enough was a golden star, our destination. "I'll keep you on track," he assured me. "For now, go straight, but be ready to make a right turn in three blocks."

Three blocks goes by a lot faster than you realize when you're driving as fast as you can. I took the turn far more sharply than I was comfortable with, but we didn't flip over or anything, which I guess is a good sign. "Maybe this won't be too hard," I said. It was a hollow thought. I knew things were going to get worse.

Eleven confirmed that when, looking out of the back window, he said, "They are here."

Chapter 8

I glanced in the rear-view mirror. There was a green car weaving through traffic behind us, with one of those red and blue lights on its dashboard. I couldn't tell who was inside, though I could guess that this was a Tri-I car. "What do we do?" I asked.

"Shoot," Eleven answered calmly. "Retract the roof."

"What?" I asked.

"Eyes on the road, Cassie," James said, reaching up from behind me to press a button on the dashboard. That was when I realized that the van had a sunroof. It wasn't too much space, but Eleven could fit through it.

He was tall enough that most of his torso was through it. I could only see what was happening behind me through occasional glances in the mirror. And there wasn't much to hear except for screeching tires and gunfire from Eleven.

The Tri-I car was swerving behind us. Eleven was unloading at it with some sort of rifle. It looked like one I'd seen in a few movies. M-something or other.

"They're getting closer," James warned me. "Might I suggest driving faster?"

I sped up but it wasn't doing much good. The Tri-I car was closing in on us. When there were no more vehicles between us and them, the passenger side window rolled down and a man leaned out, carrying one of the Tri-I rifles. Carefully, he took aim. Then he fired.

The beam should have hit our tire and destroyed it, but the van's shielding deflected it. "I wish they wouldn't shoot at us," Tobias muttered. "It makes this so much harder. Turn left up here, followed almost immediately by a right."

"That seems redundant."

"Yeah, but it might help us lose them. Or at least give Eleven a better shot."

I did as I was told, making a quick left turn followed by a very sharp right one. The whole van tipped towards that side and might have tipped over if Tobias and James hadn't thrown themselves against the other side, putting us back on four wheels. The Tri-I car slowed down behind us, righting itself. That was a mistake.

Bullets from Eleven's gun ripped through the windshield, putting neat round holes in it. I tried not to think about the men who had been in that car. Good people who were trying to protect Earth. The fact that they were now dead made me want to vomit. It made me physically sick. I didn't have time to dwell on it, though. I pulled out into traffic again.

"A second one is coming," Eleven warned us. "And several helicopters."

"Choppers?" James asked. "This just keeps getting better and better."

"Probably news choppers," Tobias added. "Some of them might be Tri-I chasing us, but I'd bet that most of them are just news stations trying to get some shots of what's going on here. Just ignore them. If they get too close- "

"Then I will deal with them," Eleven interrupted. "It will not be a difficult task."

"So just keep driving," James advised, patting me on the shoulder. "Maybe just a tad faster." I did as he said, pushing the van still faster. Now, I don't know if you've ever tried to outrun a determined helicopter but in case you haven't, let me give you a little bit of information: you don't succeed.

"Another car," James warned us as Tobias gave me directions. At this speed, every turn was a near death experience. Only Tobias and James throwing themselves back and forth kept us from tipping over every time I turned. I have no idea how Eleven managed to hang onto the van.

"Pass me the AK Seven-Four," Eleven called down into the van through the sunroof.

"What happened to the M16?" Tobias asked.

"Eleven dropped the weapon into the vehicle. "It is very difficult to aim under these conditions. The weapon is not suited to this particular task. The AK is."

Tobias passed him a different rifle and the barrage of gunfire from our roof continued. I just kept on driving. I wasn't really even thinking about what was going on anymore. All the vehicles on the road blurred together. Every street looked the same. I saw only the path between cars. I suppose it might have been exhilarating. I just found it terrifying.

There was a noise behind me like I've never heard before. Screeching tires, twisting metal, people screaming. "That vehicle is no longer an issue," Eleven assured us.

We weren't safe yet, though. Most of the helicopters were keeping a distance. One wasn't. It was sinking lower and lower, almost above us. Maybe it looked like they were just trying to get a better shot, but I knew better. Tri-I making another attempt to get us.

"Pass me the RPG," Eleven said to Tobias. In the rear view mirror, I saw Tobias nod and get something off of its rack on the wall. It kind of reminded me of a plastic Easter egg shoved into a paper-towel cardboard tube, but bigger and clearly deadlier.

"What does RPG mean?" I called back.

"Rocket propelled grenade," Tobias answered, handing it to Eleven. "Unfortunately, the solution to a lot of the world's problems."

"Or at least our problems," James muttered.

"Our problems *are* the world's problems," Tobias responded.

"Brace my legs," Eleven requested. Or ordered. From him, they sounded like the same thing. To me, he said, "You will need to stop driving. Do so as carefully as possible. This is a difficult weapon to use accurately."

I did as I was told, decelerating as quickly as I dared. Tobias and James held Eleven's legs, keeping him in place. I didn't stop completely. Eleven didn't wait that long. When I was still going at about 40 miles per hour, he fired.

I could see it in the mirrors. I was going slowly enough that I could accord to look away from the road to watch this. I saw a trail of smoke snake through the night sky. Then it collided with the helicopter.

There was a flash of fire as the bomb detonated. The chopper spiraled out of control and crashed into the road, smoking and flaming. I jammed my foot down on the accelerator. I couldn't think about what we had just done. We hadn't just killed Tri-I Operatives. Some innocent people had probably died in the aftermath. It was sickening. If I stopped to think about it, I'd crash and we'd die.

"Almost there Cassie," Tobias assured me. "Just one more thing to take care of." Then he looked up at Eleven. "I'd apologize for this, but you probably wouldn't care."

"For wha - " Together, Tobias and James shoved Eleven upwards, pushing him out through the sunroof. There was a series of thuds as he rolled across the top of the van. In the mirror, I saw him hit the road, rolling. He might have survived. I didn't know. I didn't care. I just kept driving.

"Tell me where to go."

Chapter 9

We were in the old industrial section of the city now. Specifically, in the district that had been virtually abandoned. For any number of reasons, this section of the city had died off, leaving deserted factories and warehouses. This was our destination. Carefully, Tobias guided me through old buildings to our destination.

It was an abandoned factory, missing an entire wall. The inside appeared deserted. I knew better. Without any sort of warning, something appeared, filling the factory. A cockpit like an egg. Two long, sharp wings. It was like a sharp blade sitting in the factory. The Reliquary.

There something was different about it. "Tobias," I began. "Didn't the ship used to have white on it?" It was completely black now, the same light-drinking shade as the Blade ship or the Beast.

"Al and I did some painting," Tobias explained. "We decided we didn't really like the paint job. We're looking at some new designs, but for now we're going to go with the basic, black look."

"A little overdone, isn't it?" James asked. "I mean...no offense, but aren't there a lot of really black ships flying around these days?"

Tobias shrugged. "Does it make it look any less cool?"

James thought about that one. "I suppose not, no."

"Great. Then help me get these guns out of the van. Cassie, you go get Al and David." I turned to go. A moment later, Tobias amended that order. "Just grab David. Best for Al to stay inside for

now. And be quick about it, Tri-I is on our heels and the Yeerks will be following us here right now."

I hurried inside to find Al and David in human morph. "We thought that, considering the Chief's political views, it was best if we weren't so open about what we were," David explained. "What's the deal?"

"Everything went as planned," I informed him. "Tobias wants help getting some weapons out of the van we were using, though. We need people to help carry stuff."

Since they were morphed, all three of us came out to help. When we got there, though, James was carrying stuff. Tobias was talking to the Chief. "Okay, Yeerk, we're pressed for time like we haven't been in a few years, so I'm going to make this really, really simple for you. Your people are going to come after you. If you decide to stay in that man's head, they will not make it in time and you will starve and die. If you crawl out now, I'm going to put you in this van. I guarantee that they have some sort of tracking device in it. That means they'll be able to find you in time to save your life. Do you understand me?"

The Chief nodded. "Yes. I understand. You are telling me that if I do not abandon this host, you will kill me."

"Exactly. So what's it going to be?"

The Chief took a few moments to think about it. Then, slowly, a small, grey slug crawled out of his ear. Immediately, the Chief started creaming. James clamped a hand over his mouth and led him onto the ship while Al and David carried more weapons.

I was watching Tobias, though. He picked the Yeerk up off of the ground and looked at it for a few moments. Then he went into the van and came out with a grenade and several guns, which he handed to me. "Might want to stand back," he warned me.

"Why? What are you going to..." I trailed off, realizing what he was about to do. "Tobias, you can't do that! You promised that Yeerk - "

"We needed him out of the Chief's head," Tobias rationalized. "But we can't let Tri-I get here and find a Yeerk. He has to disappear."

"But there has to be another way! We could keep him in a jar or something where he can't do any harm."

"We could," Tobias admitted. "Then again, this Van has Yeerk technology. The Yeerks aren't going to come after it, you know. They're just going to follow the Chief back to our hideout, or so they plan. They're throwing this van under the bus. That means that Tri-I is going to get here and find it. Then we have a problem. So the van has to go goodbye."

"But why kill that Yeerk along with it?"

"Because the Yeerk has to go good-bye, too. In any event, Cassie, he's going to die. If he comes with us, he starves. If he stays here, he dies a faster death."

"We could return him to his own people."

"You know how dangerous that move would be. Not worth the risk to save his life. At least this way, he gets a quick death. And I don't think Yeerks feel much pain in their natural state."

"You're wrong about that."

He met my eyes. For a moment, he didn't say anything. Then he looked away and said, "Get into the ship, Cassie. You won't want to be too close to this blast."

I wish I could say that in that instant, I saw something in his eyes. Some trace of pity or regret or mercy. Some hint that he felt bad about what he was about to do. I would like to say that he had some ounce of compassion for a Yeerk who was really only following his orders and who had been reasonable and accommodating, even trusting.

But I didn't see any of that in his eyes. I didn't see hatred, anger, or triumph, either. I think that's what scares me most about Tobias, sometimes. Some of the other Animorphs, like Rachel and Ax, hate the Yeerks. I can see it in their eyes and hear it in their voices when they talk about them. They were passionate, emotional...human, in a way; even Ax. Hate is a very human thing.

But Tobias didn't have any of that. He used to, when this war first began again and Rachel was dead. Now, though, he'd lost that hatred. Now, it was cold, mechanical. Not like a human being at all. Just...like a predator. He did what he did because it was what he was built for. The hawk ate rats. The lion hunts gazelles. Tobias kills Yeerks.

I used to think that the worst thing someone could let happen to them is to be consumed by hate. But now...now I don't think that's the case. At least if you're capable of hate, you're still a human being. Now, I think the worst thing you can do in a war is to let go of emotion altogether. Better to be a bloodthirsty crusader than a heartless killer.

Chapter 10

"What was that explosion?" James asked as Tobias entered and sealed the ventral hatch.

"Just taking care of some business," Tobias responded. "Al, get us out of here. Now. Get us up to the inner atmosphere then set her on auto for the airport. I need you to sweep the Chief for tracing devices. The sooner we get those out, the sooner we can find a more permanent place to put him."

Al kicked the engines to life and we pulled smoothly out of the factory. With the wall missing, it was easy enough to get the ship out without scraping the wings off of anything or risking damage to the ship. Landing the ship in there must have been a whole lot more difficult. We climbed sharply almost as soon as we were out and were soon higher than any of the buildings around. Al

kept going until we were in the lower atmosphere. With the ship's advances cloaking system, we were invisible for all intents and purposes.

"Do we have any plans for protecting Putin at all?" David asked.

"Just watch for anything that looks like Yeerk activity. If they move on him, we move on them. Anyone tries to get a hand on him, we kill them," Tobias answered. Again, he said it with that lack of emotion that makes me really, really worried.

"That'd sort of give us away, don't you think?" James asked. "I mean, it would be kind of hard for intelligent people not to put it together."

"Now all of you wait a minute," the Chief interrupted. "You need to explain to me what-

"We're going to do with you?" Tobias cut him off. "Very well. First, we're going to fly around for a bit while Al here," he nodded to the control node, which Al was manipulating, "gets out whatever tracking devices the Yeerks put into you.

"Next, we will take you to your daughter and then bring the two of you to a location that we have not yet determined. In the mean time, we are going to ensure that one of the most powerful men in the world – or should I say in the galaxy, considering his influence with the Andalites – does not become a Yeerk puppet. Somewhere in the between, those of us with romantic relationships will probably take some time out to think about them and those of us without them will wish we had them and then cling to what friendship we do have."

He looked over to me. "Does that about cover it?"

"Sounds right to me," I answered.

"All a usual day's work, really," David assured the Chief.

James added, "Nothing to be worried about. We've been doing this for a long time now."

"And we will have the assistance of the International Invasion Investigation Force with this next bit of the mission," Al added.

We all attempted to give the Chief a reassuring smile. I'm sure I succeeded. James' looked forced. David and Al just looked kind of ridiculous. They weren't used to the expression, though at least they weren't as bad as Tobias. He looked like he was about three heartbeats away from ripping the Chief's throat out with his teeth.

Kristina's dad looked from one of us to the other. Then he sighed. "Well...at least I get to die a free man. Now, look, I don't want you to take this the wrong way, really. I'm grateful to you for helping me escape, I really am. And I try to be a reasonable man. So try to be reasonable when I ask this."

"What is it?" I asked. I didn't really like where this was going. Was he going to ask us to take him to his daughter? Or just to let him go now? Both weren't options. It wasn't that, though.

He pointed at Al. "I know what that thing is. Don't let it touch me. I want this alien trash out of my body as soon as possible, but letting another one of those things touch me isn't going to help matters any."

That shocked me for a moment. Then I remembered something I think we had overlooked. Kristina's dad was one of the leaders of the local segment of the Isolationist Party. If there was one thing the IP hated, it was aliens, Andalites as much as Yeerks and Taxxons.

"That 'thing'" Tobias began. I cut him off. At least he sounded angry this time, not just cold. I knew where this sort of argument would lead: nowhere. It would just waste time and make us all bitter.

"Tobias, you two can discuss political philosophy another time. Right now, we need to take Kristina's dad to lie down. I can do the scan myself, although I don't think I'll be able to remove or deactivate anything. We really might need Al to do that, but let's be careful about it. The Chief's been through a lot today and we don't want to upset him more than necessary."

"Crayak forbid we upset a man who hates vital members of our team," Tobias muttered. He looked like he was going to speak further, but cut off when Al told us that the Reliquary was receiving a call from Rachel's dad.

A moment later, a half-sized image of Rachel's dad was standing on the 'dashboard' of the Reliquary. Since the Reliquary's communications system was much more high-tech than Tobias's emitter, he didn't have the usual green tint to him. "Good news, kids, looks like you get to sleep tonight after all," he greeted us.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"We just got word from Putin's people. He's been holding out on us big time. He's not coming by plane."

"Then he's he getting here?" James asked.

"He's arriving in Russia's newest toy: a ship called the *Zaitsev*, the first of Russia's Czar-class capital ships. This little tour of his is just an excuse to show it off. Apparently, Russia is very nearly ready to send troops to the fighting."

((How could he get capital ships made so quickly?)) Al asked. ((It does not seem possible.))

"Apparently, the Russians got their hands on a whole lot of Yeerk tech, including the schematics for a Pool ship. Their technology is based heavily off of a Yeerk design. American will step up her efforts now but its slower going, since we're working with the Andalites and they're always really paranoid about telling us even the simplest things."

"What does this mean for us?" David asked.

"It means we might be getting a break," Tobias answered. "They Yeerks couldn't have been expecting this. Not a capital ship. What's his schedule looking like now, Dan?"

"He's still arriving tonight. But he's going to be parking the ship in the parking lot of our local HQ. Not even Guraff has the stones to try attacking a capital ship in front of a Tri-I building. And not even the Visser is insane enough to order him to do it."

"Alright, you heard the man," Tobias told us. "Everyone gets some rest tonight."

It's funny....even though I knew better, at the time he said it, I believed him.

CHAPTER 11

I couldn't sleep. That's really not all that surprising, I guess, given the fact that the Reliquary's floor really isn't all that conducive to sleep. We couldn't go home until we got the tracking devices out of the Chief, so we were stuck sleeping on the Reliquary. The ship used to have two beds. Now, one of them was in James' room in the apartment he shared with Tobias, Rachel, Al, and David. The other was being used by the Chief.

Al was sanding over him, slowly moving some sort of scanning device over him. It was shaped like a cricket bat and was about two feet long, grey and roughly rectangular with a section of yellow on either side. One side was apparently for scanning. The other displayed the data.

The Chief wasn't moving, though he was breathing. Al was in his natural form, which sort of surprised me. "I'm surprised he's letting you do this," I said to Al as I approached.

((Prince Tobias thought it might be best if this human were...chemically relaxed.))

"Tobias drugged him."

((That is another way of stating it, yes.))

I sighed. Tobias was getting way too casual about that sort of thing. Not that he did it often, just that he didn't seem to think there was anything wrong with drugging a man and letting a creature he categorically hated put its hands on him. The fact that said 'creature' was Al was irrelevant. It wasn't something he should have done, especially not without consulting us.

I ignored all of that for the moment, though. There wasn't much, if anything, I could do. "What's the situation like, Al?" I asked.

((Both good and bad, Cassie. There are two different devices inside of him. One was a simple tracer, just under the skin. A very simple bit of surgery would remove it. I believe you have the necessary skill. I know you do not work with human animals, but this is really little more than making a small incision in the flesh and removing the device. The wound should heal just fine,

and I think I could do it myself, but I thought it best to wait for someone with some degree of experience.))

"That's the good part, I assume."

((Yes. The bad news is that there is a second tracer deep within his thigh bone. Rather easy to implant, but considerably more difficult to remove. I don't know how to go about doing that. I would suggest disabling it rather than removing it.))

"How would we do that?"

((An electromagnetic pulse should be sufficient, but we cannot do that here.))

"Why not? You're telling me that you can't make this ship fire off an EMP?"

((Yes and no. While the Reliquary is potentially capable of creating the necessary electromagnetic pulse, we do not have the facilities to create a small, localized pulse. If we used the pulse that the Reliquary can create, we would knock out not only the tracers, but also all of the ship's systems and, most likely, every piece of electronic equipment within the immediate area.))

"So what do we do about it? We can't fly the Chief around in the ship forever," I pointed out.

((Prince Tobias will know what to do.))

I nodded. Tobias would think of something. "Is there anything I can do, AI?"

((Not at the moment. The surgery is unnecessary, if we are disabling the tracers via electromagnetic pulse.))

I nodded and went over to the command station. Tobias was staring out through a transparent section of the cockpit, seemingly at nothing. His hands were on the control node, though, so he was most likely flying the ship manually, probably just for something to do.

I crossed over and stood next to him, looking out through the window as well. There really wasn't anything to see, unfortunately. "AI mentioned the problem with removing or disabling the tracer in Kristina's dad's leg?" I asked.

Tobias nodded. "That won't be too hard to fix. It's really just a problem of getting a time and place to set off the pulse. When we do, the Reliquary will be disabled along with the tracer, and the Yeerks will know exactly where we are when we do it. So we'll need to find some way to keep the Reliquary mobile while it's not even capable of moving."

"How can we do that?"

"I'm going to land on a freight train."

"You...you're serious?"

"Very," he assured me. "A freight train would provide a large enough surface for the ship to land on, and it would be able to support the Reliquary's weight. Although the cloaking system would cut out, it'd be hard to see the ship on top of the train at night, and provided we choose the right train, it might not even notice the loss of electronic systems. We'd need an old one, though."

"Wouldn't landing on a train be really, really hard?" I pointed out.

"Aren't I a really, really good pilot?" he responded.

"From what I'm told yeah," I admitted. "But I don't have all that much to compare it to."

"Don't worry, if I wasn't good, we'd have been dead a long time ago. No one knows flying like I do."

"Maybe so, but flying a fighter isn't like flying as a hawk, is it?"

"In some ways, no. But that's why the Reliquary's special. The control node translates my thoughts into actions. I know how to fly in ways that others can't even imagine. Things that would be complicated decisions to other pilots are second nature to me; first nature, maybe. I fly by an instinct that no pilot I've ever met has. And the Reliquary lets me make full use of that."

I was about to respond to that when it happened, the thing that we'd been half expecting all night. An alarm went off, and all the lights on the ship started flickering from red to their normal colors and back again. "I knew this was going to happen," I muttered.

CHAPTER 12

James stumbled over to the control panel, rubbing his eyes. "What's going on?"

((We're being attacked,)) David answered as he climbed up James' shirt and also rubbed his eyes. Which, I'm a little ashamed to admit, was pretty adorable.

"Not exactly," Tobias explained. "If we were under attack, the lights would be staying red."

((Then could someone shoot us? This is hurting my eyes,)) David responded.

Tobias closes his eyes for a moment and the flickering stopped. "The fact that they were flickering meant that the Reliquary detected what it thinks is a battle nearby."

"Since when does the ship think?" James asked.

"It's a little difficult to explain," Tobias admitted. "AI?"

"Wait," I interrupted, "you think something's complicated, so your solution is to ask the *Andalite* to explain it? How is that going to dumb it down for us?"

Tobias shrugged. "No idea, but at least he knows what he's talking about."

((It really is not very complicated,)) Al explained. ((The Reliquary's sensors have detected certain elements that it associates with a battle. The energy signatures given off by Bug fighters and Dracon beams, for example, as well as the energy traces emitted by their engines are all things that the Reliquary's computer associates with a battle. Since it has detected these nearby, it has concluded that there is a fight not too far from us and has alerted us to it.))

James sighed. "The ship sounds smarter than I am..."

((To be fair,)) David added, ((That chair over there sounds smarter, too.))

Tobias had decided to ignore them and was instead focusing on steering the ship towards this battle. A green, holographic cube, divided into grids, appeared over a section of the Reliquary's command console; the ship's dashboard, you could say. There were some small, red dots at the very edge of the cube. They seemed to be moving very, very fast.

"The red dots are Bug fighters, right?" I guessed.

Tobias nodded but didn't say anything. Al walked over and poked the cube with a finger and the red dots stopped moving. Then he poked one of the dots. A small black rectangle appeared next to the cube, with a thin, red line leading from it to the red dot. I could read the words in the rectangle without any problem. It was, indeed, a Bug fighter.

Al poked the rectangle and the cube blazed to life again, the Bug fighters zipping around faster than I could really keep track of. James poked the cube a few times, pausing and then resuming it. "This thing is really, really cool, Al."

((Thank you, James. I am rather proud of it.))

"Al," Tobias began, "show Cassie and James how that grid works, then take the primary weapons station. Who has more practice, James or David?"

((David has faster reflexes than James does,)) Al answered. ((Should he -))

"Yeah. David, take the secondary weapons station. You'll be the one to keep Bugs off my back."

David climbed down onto the dashboard and put his paws against an orange oval. Al grabbed the cube at one corner and pulled on it. Oddly enough, the cube expanded, showing us more of the battle that was taking place. Now, we could see that the red dots, the Bug fighters, were encircling a large, grey dot.

((Prince Tobias, we have an unidentified ship; at the center of the battle. Not Yeerk, according to the censors.))

"What are the specs?"

Al poked the dot and a lot of numbers appeared in the black box that appeared next to the cube. ((It is very large, my Prince. Approximately....)) Al paused and double checked. ((Approximately the same size as a Yeerk Pool ship. I have no idea what-))

"The *Zaitsev*" Tobias interrupted.

I was confused for a moment. David seemed to piece it together, though. ((Of course. Isn't this a little obvious for the Yeerks, though? They can't cover this up.))

It hit me about a moment later. If the Yeerks couldn't grab Putin once he landed, they had to get their hands on him while he was in transit. This must have been the Visser's idea. Guraff or Salheer would never have done something so obvious.

"Do you think it needs our help?" James asked. "I mean, isn't it kind of like if the Bug fighters attacked a Dome ship or something? They don't stand a chance."

"I'd bet that the *Zaitsev* is pretty poorly put together," Tobias answered. "Like Dan said, it's mostly just Yeerk tech, slapped together by Russian scientists who probably didn't exactly know what they're doing. I'm not going to gamble Putin's life on their skills."

"But to shoot one of those down," I began.

"They won't want to do that," Tobias interrupted. "Guraff will board the ship and infest Putin. So we're going to have to get on it and stop him from doing that. We- "

((Prince Tobias? There are more unidentified ships approaching. Smaller ones, approximately the same size as the Bug fighters. I have no idea where they might be from.))

"Let's call them and ask," Tobias answered. "Direct a communications channel at all unidentified ships except for the *Zaitsev*. I don't know if Guraff and his troops are on board already, but in case they are, I don't see any reason to give him a warning."

Al nodded and placed his hand on a sort of spoon-shaped, blue section of the dashboard. A few moments later, he nodded. ((The channel is open, my Prince.))

"Begin the feed, Al."

A greenish light started shining from a lens next to the spoon-thing Al had been touching. Tobias stepped into the light. He spoke with a sense of authority that I rarely heard even when he was giving us orders. He was standing straight, his arms behind his back, almost like he was posing for a picture or something.

"This is Commander-Prince Tobias, of the Reliquary. Who am I addressing?"

A second green lens, this one on the ceiling, flicked on. An image appeared directly in front of Tobias. A very, very large man, maybe even as tall as a Hork-bajir, appeared. "This is the International Invasion Investigation Force ship Zero-Zero-Zero-Zero. My name is Operative Adrian Rook. Maybe you can tell me what the hell is going on here."

CHAPTER 13

We were coming into view of the actual battle, now. Through the transparent section of the window, I could see it in the distance. Mostly, it was just flashes of red and blue light, presumably the Bug fighters shooting at the *Zaitsev*.

Al put a hand on the grid for a second and the *Zaitsev* and Tri-I ships turned from grey to green. "Since when does Tri-I have a fleet?" James whispered.

"They've had ships for a while," I answered quietly so that Rook wouldn't overhear us. "When the whole war with the Pythagi started, Jake and I went to Mark the Chee and asked him for a ship, but he said he couldn't give us one because they all had weapons. I think Tri-I has been building their fleet for a while."

((That's a scary thought,)) David muttered.

"At least they're on our side this time," I reminded him.

((Yeah, but how are we going to explain this away, Cassie? What if they figure it all out?))

That stopped my heart for a few moments. "We'll think of something," I insisted. "We always do."

The whole time, Tobias had been speaking to Rook. "The large ship in the center of the battle is the *Zaitsev*, the ship that is supposed to be transporting Vladimir Putin. It appears that the Yeerks decided to put a stop to that transportation and most likely intend to capture Putin," Tobias explained to him. "My ship detected the battle so I decided to come see what this was all about."

"Glad to have you with us, Commander," Rook answered. "I heard about what happened at Hork-bajir. They say you shot down an entire squadron of Instigators single-handedly."

"An exaggeration," Tobias admitted.

"I'm sure, but don't tell the troops that. If they think you can swat all these Bugs by yourself, the happier they'll be," Rook explained.

"I understand the importance of morale, Operative," Tobias assured him. "And that's why you should probably not tell them that these Yeerks are most likely led by Guraff Four-Two-Seven."

Rook actually looked a little nervous for a moment. "The God General?" Then he smiled. "Now that's what I like to hear. I think it's about time he sees what an Operative can do, don't you?"

Tobias looked away from Rook for a moment. He was probably thinking about Carl Yastrzemski. I know I was. Then Tobias turned back to Rook. "Yeah, I think that's a good thing for him to know. Do your people have any experience in this sort of thing?"

"Nothing beyond sims and a few drills," Rook admitted. "Looks like we should be following your lead. What are you thinking?"

"I need to get onto that ship, Rook. Those Bugs aren't going to let me, and as strong as the Reliquary's shields may be, they're bound to go down under that much fire."

((Prince Tobias,)) Al interrupted, ((more Tri-I ships are approaching. They will be here in approximately ten minutes.))

"You've got reinforcements?" Tobias asked Rook.

"Yeah. We're Zero Wing. First Wing should be here in ten. Second and Third will be here in about twenty, but we can't really plan for any of the others."

"Ten minutes is all I need," Tobias answered. There was this look in his eyes that I knew well. It was the look he always got when all the pieces fell into place for him, that look of realization he had when he saw the solution to all of our problems.

Sometimes, I love that look because it means that someone figured out how to fix things. But at the same time, I hated it, because his solution was almost always bloody. This time was no different.

"Rook," Tobias explained, "I need you and your men to cover me while I land inside the *Zaitsev*. Then, I'm going to trigger an electromagnetic pulse from my ship. That will disable everything electronic within a certain radius. And I plan to make that radius very, very big."

"You think you can cover the whole battlefield?"

Tobias glanced at Al. Al nodded. ((It would require more power than we typically have, but if I diverted all systems to the task, we should have enough power to cover the area.))

"We can do it," Tobias assured Rook. "I'll land in the *Zaitsev* and set off the pulse. When First Wing gets here, they can clean up the Bugs, since they'll just be floating dead. The pulse might disable your life-support systems, though. I assume you have independent backups?"

Rook nodded. "A little piece of tech the Andalites decided it would be safe to teach us to make. Should give us about fifteen minutes of oxygen and our flight suits should stop us from freezing solid."

"Alright then. Form up around my ship and let's start swatting Bugs."

"How do you plan to get off the ship?" Rook asked.

Tobias turned to Al again. "You'll be able to reinitialize the Reliquary quickly after it's disabled, right?"

((Yes, my Prince.))

"Then there's only one thing left." Tobias took a cell phone out of his pocket and hit a few buttons. We stood there for a few moments, looking at him.

((Tobias, what are you-)) Tobias raised a hand, cutting David off. Then, I heard a buzzing noise. He passed the phone around so that we could all see the text message he just got. The three words that every Animorph mission needed in one form or another.

"Let's do it."

CHAPTER 14

Rook's ship was to our right, with another ship above us, below us, to our left, and one to Rook's right. There were some more behind us, in almost a cone-shape. The Tri-I ships had an interesting design, sort of like if someone shoved the letter W through the letter O. The engines were on the lower points of the W, with weapons on the two top ends and the cockpit at the part in the center.

We were nearing the battle now and, thanks to the magnification the Reliquary's window provided, I could see the *Zaitsev*. It was like a half-sphere, with a cluster of engines under it. There were also what several laser batteries beneath the ship, firing blue beams at the Bug fighters. Identical batteries studded the spherical part of the ship. It looked like about half of them were not working, though.

"We're going in hard and fast," Tobias said over the communications channel. "From what I know of Tri-I shields, yours should protect you from the Bugs pretty well, so don't worry about trying to dodge Dracon beams because your reflexes aren't that fast anyway. If a Bug crosses your path, squash him, but don't go out of your way for it.

"Your job is to cover me until I can land in that hangar. Then – and this is very important – you turn and fight. Do. Not. Flee. If you all turn and run, they're going to know something's up and might pull out of range. Try to keep them as close to the ship as possible.

"When the blast goes off, your ship will be completely dark inside. Don't panic. It might be cold but your suits will keep you from freezing. Make sure you have your emergency oxygen unit at hand, though, because you can't count on finding it in the dark. First Wing should be here not too long after your power goes, but just in case they take a few minutes, try not to breathe too much.

"Rook, one of your boys is staying back to inform First Wing of the situation, yes?"

"Affirmative, Commander."

Tobias nodded. "Play time." We all accelerated, though Tobias kept the Reliquary far back from what it could really do so that he didn't outpace the Tri-I ships. Within a minute, we were within firing range. Al and David let loose a barrage of white fire at the Bug fighters. About half of them were buzzing around the *Zaitsev*, trying to disable the remaining gun turrets. The other half had formed up to meet us.

They weren't really prepared for us, though. I suppose it has to do with the nature of war; or at least war as commanders like Tobias and Guraff fought it. They expected us to move or to try and trick them. Maybe go around them or break off and attack from a different angle. They were expecting something more subtle; they thought far too much of us.

We ran straight through them, Shredders firing. David and Al blew a pair of Bug fighters out of our way and we powered on through. The Reliquary's shield disintegrated the debris as we passed through so it didn't harm our ship. Some of the Tri-I ships went through our hole, some made their own. All made it through.

"Why do we have shields and they don't?" James wondered

"Our ships are better," Tobias answered simply. Then, over the channel, he ordered, "Ships Tri-Zero-Eight through Zero-Zero-One-One, loop back. Those Bugs will be following us and I want you to give them something to think about. Pass through their screen again, then turn around and come right back. That will keep them distracted. The rest of you, stay with me."

I could see on the grid that the five ships behind us turned around and passed through the dispersing wall of red dots. A few of the red ones disappeared. We continued onwards, but they were trying to form up a second screen in front of us. And the Bug fighters behind us were advancing towards us in formation.

I informed Tobias of all of this. He laughed. "Okay, Rook, here's a lesson about swatting bugs. I want you and your boys to charge straight ahead, right where they're trying to form up, firing at nothing in particular. Eight through Eleven are to take your places and shoot anything that gets in their path."

It worked perfectly. The Tri-I fighters that had turned around behind us smashed through some of the Bug fighters from the screen we had bypassed. The remainder of them diverged, moving in the general direction of the *Zaitsev* but with no apparent path in mind. They were scattered.

The screen they were trying to form in front of us never came into being. The few Bug fighters that had taken up any sort of formation were disintegrated by Rook and his men, and the others didn't seem to want to take their places. The Yeerks were confused, disarrayed. They didn't seem to know what to do.

"Well, now we know where Guraff is," Tobias muttered. "If he was out here, he'd be fixing this mess. That means he must be in the ship. I'd guess the Apostates are with him. Whoever he left in charge isn't up to this.

We continued on almost unopposed. A few Bug fighters tried to get in our way or shot us from various angles, but they were always either destroyed by one of us, or their Dracon beams were absorbed by someone's shield.

Tobias shook his head. "Guraff is going to be very disappointed when he finds out how bad his pilots are. Rook's rookies could wipe them out even without our help. I think they might be worse than the Pythagi."

Soon, we were next to the *Zaitsev*, approaching a large, trapezoid-shaped hole in the side of the ship. There was some sort of semi-transparent blue field across it. Tobias flew the ship directly through it. ((Localized atmospheric generator,)) Al explained. ((It maintains pressure in the ship, as well as the necessary atmospheric conditions, but allows matter to pass through.))

Tobias landed the ship in the hangar smoothly. "Okay, Alphamorphs: time for part two."

CHAPTER 15

Tobias began morphing to Howler. ((The EMP will disable that atmospheric field, so I'm going to make sure there's some sort of backup so we don't die as soon as we set it off,)) he explained as he and Al left the ship.

I went to check on the chief. He was sleeping peacefully in spite of everything and I was starting to wonder just how many drugs Tobias had managed to slip him. Then I picked up something from beside his bed. It looked like an orange sandwich bag with grey cylinders at both ends. I put one calendar in the Chief's mouth so he'd be able to breathe when the Reliquary's atmosphere cut out.

By the time I was done with that, James and David were both mostly lion. They would have to navigate by scent, since we'd be plunging the ship into total darkness. Lions couldn't smell as good as wolves, but they could smell enough. Their noses would tell them where humans had been, and so tell them the difference between a hallway, a door, and a wall.

I began to morph wolf. When I was about halfway through, I heard a horrible screeching noise, followed by a clang. A moment later, Tobias and Al returned to the ship. ((Found the backup. A large, steel wall that goes where the generator used to be. Essentially a very big garage door.))

He took a look around and then nodded. ((All ready, then.)) Tobias took four of the breathing devices and put one in Jame's, one in David's, and one in my mouth, taking the last for his own. Al put a similar device over his head. One of the disadvantages of not having a mouth. ((Key the sequence, Al.)) He would be staying behind, to get the ship back up and running again for when we were done here, and to keep an eye on the chief.

Al put a hand to the Reliquary's dashboard. A moment later, the world disappeared. I've been in total darkness before, but it's always a shock. One minute, the world existed. In the next instant, there was nothing to see. But sight is not the wolf's major sense.

I could smell David and James, Tobias, and Al. The two lions confused my wolf senses for a moment, since they smelled exactly the same. I convinced the wolf part of me to ignore that. ((Are we all okay?)) I asked.

((I'm sure no one's afraid of the dark,)) Tobias answered. ((We're all fine.))

((It isn't the dark that scares me,)) David muttered, ((it's the Hork-bajir, Ssri'Kai, and Spetsnaz in it.))

I followed Tobias's scent out of the Reliquary and into the *Zaitsev*. I could smell humans, but faintly. They were here hours ago. And I could smell which way they had gone.

((I'm nearly blind,)) Tobias muttered. ((I was counting on my ability to see body heat, but there are almost no heat traces here, and what there was is fading fast. Let's try to be quick and quiet about this. With your jaws incapacitated and my eyes gone, we've got some problems.))

((Remind me how this was a good idea again,)) James suggested.

((Because at least we were expecting it,)) Tobias answered. Guraff and his boys must be shocked. And Hork-bajir don't have very good eyes. We still have the advantage.))

((Can't fight without my jaws,)) David reminded him.

((And Guraff won't want to fight without his eyes. We aren't here for battle, though. We're here to make him leave. But if it comes down to it, I'll still be able to see him and the Apostates and Kelbrid. If there's a fight, we'll win.))

((Here's something we probably should have thought of earlier,)) James began. ((You know these helpful breathing things that keep us from dying?))

((What about them?)) Tobias asked.

((What if Putin doesn't have one?))

((...)) After his silence, Tobias thought some words that I can't repeat, some that were never intended to be used as that part of speech, and some that I couldn't even define.

((At least we'll probably have killed Guraff, too,)) David suggested.

((That is unlikely,)) Al said in our heads. ((There is still a large quantity of air in this ship. The reason the Operatives were in danger is because, due to the small volume of their fighter

cockpits, they did not have a lot of breathable air stored. However, there is quite a great quantity of it on the *Zaitsev*.)

((Good to know we didn't just kill the man we came to protect,)) Tobias said. ((So why are we using these breathing things?))

((I do not know, my Prince. You ordered us to.))

((And you knew there was no real reason for it?))

((Yes, Prince Tobias.))

((Next time I do that AI, question the order, will you? It'll save us all some time.))

((Yes, my Prince.))

I spat out my breathing apparatus. I hate fighting, but I felt a lot better about walking around this dark ship now that I had my jaws back.

We ventured forth into the darkness.

CHAPTER 16

The ship felt hollow. I couldn't smell anything nearby, alive or dead. It was eerie, really, like the entire ship was abandoned. I could smell where people once were, though. I could smell where people had stood just hours before, and my keen nose allowed me to follow those scents through the dark ship, showing me where I could walk and where I could not.

((Is anyone having better luck at this?)) Tobias asked in our heads. Naturally, he was in the lead. ((I keep bumping into stuff.))

((Same here,)) David responded. ((And seeing as we have the same nose, I know James isn't any better off than I am. It's kind of hard to follow these scents...))

((I'm doing fine,)) I answered.

((Good. Then you take the lead. James and David can smell you, and I can see you just fine. I'll keep to the rear in case anyone comes from behind. Try to be as quiet as possible, we don't want a bunch of Russian bodyguards to get startled and start shooting us.))

((You got it,)) I replied, moving to the front of our odd little pack. We moved without a sound, carefully stalking through the halls of the seemingly deserted ship.

((Where is everyone?)) David wondered. ((I don't even smell dead bodies. What's the deal here?))

((Zombies?)) James suggested.

((We would smell those.))

((Maybe everyone abandoned ship when the Yeerk showed up?)) I suggested.

((Reliquary would have detected escape pods.)) Tobias responded. ((Cassie, are you wondering, or do you have a direction in mind?))

((I...don't know,)) I admitted. ((I guess I'm just sort of wandering. Where should I be going?))

((That depends. Do all of these scents seem to be going in the same general direction?))

((Sort of, that's why I came this way.))

((Keep following them, then. We find them, we find the crew. The Yeerks will be headed to the same place, so be ready. There could be an Apostate around any corner.))

((Do you just want to make sure we never sleep again?)) James asked Tobias. ((Now I'm afraid to take a step.))

The scents led me down what I assume was a hallway. After about five minutes of walking at the slow, silent pace we had assumed, we ran into a very serious problem. The scents going horizontally and instead went vertically. And what was worse, my paw met only with empty air. ((We're at a dropshaft, and it smells like then went up. With power out, how are we supposed to use this thing?

((Stairs?))

((Not that I know of. No scents leading anywhere but the dropshaft, at any rate.))

((We fly,)) David suggested. ((Tobias and Cassie have bat morphs, don't they?))

((Echolocation will help us see, but it won't tell us which way the crew went,)) Tobias responded. ((What we need is a morph that can work in the darkness, get up this shaft, and still manage to follow the crew. Or something that can carry a wolf up.))

((Hork-bajir?)) James suggested.

((Climb up a shaft in total darkness with a wolf on its back?)) Tobias responded. ((Maybe if one of us could morph Guraff, but Al's back with the ship...))

We stood there in the darkness for a few minutes, each of us thinking about our morphs and what might do it. Then it hit me. ((Tobias, don't you have a Kelbrid morph?))

He made some noise that I couldn't spell, followed by, ((Yeah, I do!)) I assumed he was morphing because his scent was changing. A minute or so later, the changing scents stopped. I didn't exactly recognize the scent, but I could guess what it is.

((Can you 'see' anything?)) I asked.

((Nothing,)) Tobias admitted. ((The Kelbrid navigates by vibrations, though...)) I heard him start snarl, as Kelbrid always seem to do.

((Calm down, Tobias, snarling won't help anything.))

((Actually, it will,)) he answered. ((The Kelbrid can sense the sound waves bouncing off of the walls, floor, ceiling, *et cetera*. Sort of like echolocation. I guess that's why they're constantly barking and snapping.))

((And here I just thought it was because they wanted to eat us,)) David muttered. ((How does this help us? We still can't get up that shaft.))

((We can,)) Tobias answered. ((There's a ladder. I think I can smell where they went, but just in case, I'm pretty sure I can carry Cassie up on my back. You and James are going to have to morph something smaller, though.))

((Not to criticize your technique, but you probably should have thought some of this through ahead of time,)) James muttered.

((Call it an off day,)) Tobias responded. We waited for a few minutes until James and David told us they were ready.

((Fly morphs,)) David explained. ((We're on...someone hairy. I think Cassie.))

Next followed an extremely awkward moment in which I tried to climb onto Tobias's back. It would have been easier had I been able to see, but after a minute or so, we managed to do it. My shoulders were looped over his neck. The wolf wasn't designed to do this sort of thing, but I figured I could hold on until we got where we were going.

I can't describe the climb very well, since I couldn't see anything. All I could feel was the sudden pull of gravity when Tobias started up the ladder. I was concentrating mostly on my nose, making sure I kept track of the human scents. After almost two minutes of climbing, I told Tobias to stop. ((We're at the right level,)) I told him. ((All of them converge here.))

((There's an opening to our right. Hang on as best you can, it's going to be something of a jump.)) I got a weird sensation in my stomach, then I felt the shock of Tobias's landing. I crawled off of his back.

((Not fun,)) I mumbled.

((James, David, remorph.))

((You know, might be best if we just stay as is,)) David suggested. ((If we come across another dropshaft, we can't waste time demorphing and remorphing over and over again. We're kind of on a schedule.))

((Good point. Alright, Cassie, let's go.))

We padded onwards, silently, down what I think was some kind of hallway. The smell of humans was getting stronger. ((People up ahead,)) Tobias warned me. He didn't need to. I could smell him.

We crept forward more quietly than ever before. Suddenly, I heard a strange click. Then a heavily accented voice. "Do not move. Move and you die."

((It's okay,)) Tobias responded. ((We're here to help you. You've got the best of the Yeerk army crawling around inside of this ship and if you want to get out of here without lots of bleeding, dying, and infesting, you're going to need our help.))

"Who are you?"

((We're the Animorphs,)) Tobias answered.

Then, the guard said something I didn't think I'd ever hear. "Good. Mister Putin has been expecting you."

Chapter 17

I heard a few quiet noises, like metal scraping on metal, but a human ear wouldn't have heard them. Sudden light nearly blinded me. When I could see again, I saw that two men with guns were standing on either side of a door like a bank vault. Inside, there were more armed men looking apprehensive and a bunch of unarmed people looking extremely nervous. They were huddled around what I assume were battery powered lamps, like the ones you'd take if you were going camping.

I recognized one of them, sitting on a leather couch facing the door. There was an assault rifle sitting on his lap like the ones the guards were holding. He didn't look at all surprised when his guards escorted a wolf and a Kelbrid into the room. Apparently, even that didn't surprise Vladimir Putin.

One of the guards said something to Putin in what I assume was Russian. Putin nodded and responded in kind. His guards swung the door shut, the two men outside remaining at their post. Then, Putin nodded to us. "The Animorphs. I was wondering when you would arrive." He looked over at Tobias. "You must be Commander-Prince -"

((Just call me Tobias,)) Tobias interrupted.

"Of course." Putin turned his attention to me. "Cassie, I presume? If you would like to demorph, you are encouraged to do so. How many other Animorphs are with us at the moment?"

((Two in fly morph, and one Andalite trying to get our fighter started,)) Tobias admitted. ((James, David, demorph.)) His voice was tightly controlled, but it was pretty obvious to me that he was extremely bothered by all this. I was, too. Was Putin really expecting us, or was it an act? And if it wasn't an act, how did he know we'd be here?

We all took a few moments to demorph, Tobias and me less than the other two. Some of the guards and crewmembers looked fascinated; most looked sick. Putin just watched us with a cold indifference. While James and David finished, I took another look around the room.

The walls were covered in guns, grenades, and the sort of things I saw in the back of Eleven's minivan. On one wall was a second vault door. This place was ready for a siege. "This is a panic room?" I asked.

"In a manner of speaking," Putin responded. "This is where the essential crew is to report in the event that the ship is breached. When we were attacked, most of us came here. I do not know how many Yeerks are on our ship, but we might be able to hold them here."

"Where's the rest of the crew?" Tobias asked, looking around the room. There weren't nearly enough people in here to properly maintain a ship this size.

"This is most of the crew," Putin explained. "This ship was not intended to engage in battle. It is a symbol, a prop. This is something for the world to look at and gain hope. It is meant to look inspiring, not work properly. Most of the gun turrets do not work, and most of the levels are empty. The engines and a few turrets are functional, as are the navigation systems and basic life support, but the rest of it does not even exist."

"What do you mean they don't exist?" Tobias pressed.

"This ship is not Zero-Space capable. It is barely capable of ordinary space travel. Most of the decks of this ship are empty, hollow. We do not even have running water. This is a shell, based off of some schematics of a Yeerk Pool ship we recovered."

"So none of Russia's capital ships actual work?" Tobias asked.

"That is not entirely accurate, no. There are no completed models that work as advertised, but within a few months, that will change. Factories in Moscow are producing five more Czar-class ships, all of which will be completely functional. They will be suitable for combat. But not the *Zaitsev*. This ship is meant to fight a different sort of battle."

"What battle is that?" Tobias seemed more intense than usual now. He was really interested in what Putin was saying. Me, I just wanted to get out of here. It was only a matter of time before Guraff was pounding on that door and I didn't want to be here when that happened.

"The battle for the hearts of Earth," Putin answered him. "Now, the war with the Yeerks is a far off thing, something happening elsewhere, to other races. It does not really seem real to Earth. The human mind is not prepared to understand war on a scale of light-years, armies that number in the millions, and entire planets under attack. It is too much for most to understand in any real sense. They may realize it intellectually, but their hearts are not in it.

"But if they see it for themselves, that is a different matter. The *Zaitsev* is not just a ship, it is a catalyst that brings the war to the people of Earth in a form they can see and understand. When they see that one of Earth's nations is actively preparing for this war and is nearly ready to send humans out to die in it, they will realize that this is a very real thing and it will spur them and their governments on to speeding up their production. Of course," he added with what was almost a smile, "I have a feeling that the Americans, in particular, will speed up production if for no other reason than that Russia did."

There was a question I needed answered, though. "Why do you want this war?" I asked him. "Why do you want to get Earth involved?"

"Do you think there is just one reason? They are many and varied. If the Yeerks are not defeated, it will only be a matter of time before Kelbrid walk the streets of Earth. It is because the Yeerks dared to invade our planet and we deserve this chance to strike back. And most importantly, it is because the galaxy as we know it is about to change forever. Now, exchanges of note will not be between countries, but between entire planets and races. What mankind does in this conflict will determine the course of human history from this point onward.

"When the history of this time is written, will it be said that the humans were a race that stood by and watched while others fought what might very well be the biggest war in all of known history? Or will it be said that the humans took command of the situation and led their allies to victory over the Yeerks, Kelbrid, and Pythagi? This war will determine our role in the galaxy for a long time to come, and I intend for that role to be a very important one. So I cannot stand back and let others fight this war. Earth must fight, and Earth must win.

"I will not have my planet be known as the one that did not take a side and sat off in a corner while the fate of this sector of the galaxy was decided. *We* will decide its fate."

"And, by taking control of this situation," Tobias added, "you mean *you* will decide."

"You see," Putin agreed. "I will not claim that my motives are entirely selfless. I am, after all, human. If my plans succeed, then I will be the most renowned hero in this part of the galaxy, the man who brought the military might of Earth to bear and led the alliance to victory. I would be lying if I say that did not appeal to me, but it does not make any of my other reasons less true.

"Of course," Putin added, "there is the obvious complication of trouble at home. That is something we should speak of in private." He rose and led us to the door in the wall.

Chapter 18

The room was completely empty, lit only by one of those battery powered lamps. When Putin closed the door behind us, it seemed even darker than usual, and the shadows the lamp cast on his face made him look even more cold and inhuman than usual.

"Your guard said you were expecting us," Tobias prompted. "How?"

"You have left far more clues than you think, Tobias," Putin answered. "Not many, most of them obscure, but enough that someone who is actively searching can put them together. I know what you have been doing lately. The Yeerks are invading our planet again."

My heart stopped. Literally. I couldn't feel it beating any more. This couldn't be happening. If he knew, then that was the end of it. We were all going to be destroyed. Everyone and everything. It wasn't possible. We had to convince him he was wrong. When my heart decided to start beating again, it was going extra fast to make up for lost time.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tobias answered. His face was calm, like always, and his eyes gave nothing away. He almost looked like a younger version of Putin.

"Do you really expect me to believe that? I will admit that you hid your tracks remarkably well, but there are some things that were impossible to ignore. The biggest red light, of course, was when your associates Jake and Marco disappeared for approximately six months, only to reappear with a very thin excuse for their unexplained absence.

"That in itself could have been overlooked. Yet at about the same time they returned, Esplin Nine-Four-Double-Six escaped from prison. That was never common knowledge, for the obvious reasons, but it would be impossible for a man in my position not to have heard about it."

"Jake and Marco were on vacation," Tobias insisted. "I was with them the whole time. And I can tell you that both of them needed one, and not the kind of vacation where the paparazzi follows them around the whole time. That's why they kept it a secret. As for Esplin, he was probably released by Yeerk agents, true. But you know he isn't on Earth, he's leading the Yeerk army."

Putin shook his head slowly. "The Andalites recently learned that no one has any idea where he is. Perhaps I would believe you were it not for a few other coincidences, such as the break-in at Tri-I's global headquarters. Who but the Animorphs could have possibly pulled that off, and for what reason other than to keep them from finding something out? That was when I began to have my suspicions.

"And then came the start of the war with the Pythagi Conglomerate and the Yeerk Order. Your own actions, Tobias, were what confirmed my suspicions. Why would you refuse to return to battle? Why would you turn down the demands of the Electorate and remain on Earth instead of fighting the Yeerks? There is only one possible reason: the Yeerks were already here.

"That was when I began looking for specifics. And when I noticed that one of the Animorphs moved to a particular city, I began taking a look at it very closely. I noticed reports of some suspicious activity in the area, things being broken or destroyed in a very Animorph-like way. I

noticed the same thing in your home town. There was now no question in my mind about it: the Yeerks are back. The attack on my ship has only served to prove that. When the Yeerks arrived, I knew that you would not be far behind.

"But there is one question that still lingers in my mind. Why would you keep this invasion a secret? I can think of no reason, but I assume that there is a very good one. So I have kept this information to myself. The investigation was a pet project of mine. It would not do for a man in my position to begin saying that the Yeerks are back. Either people would believe me and panic or they would think I was a madman. That is why I chose to visit your city on my world tour. I thought it might lure you out. And now you are here to answer my question. Why the secrecy, Animorphs?"

We all looked at each other. I can't begin to guess what was going through their heads. I'm not even sure what was in mine. Could we tell him? He seemed to know everything else. But what would his reaction be?

And there was another thought in my mind. Would we have to kill this man, too? Could we? And I meant that both in the moral sense and in the literal one. He had an assault rifle, and we weren't morphed. It would not be a fun experience.

It was Tobias who answered, naturally. "The specifics of why we have to keep this a secret are...extremely complicated. To put it as simply as possible, we've agreed to certain terms of engagement, one of which is that both parties of this conflict must do whatever is in our power to keep it a secret. The Yeerk Order at large does not know about the war on Earth. And human governments can't know either. If this becomes public knowledge, then take my word for it: everything you know and love will be completely destroyed."

"Is that what happened to Operative Carl Yastrzemski?" Putin asked.

"You have people in Tri-I," Tobias responded.

"And Tri-I has people within my government," Putin returned. "He knew too much, so you had to kill him."

"Yes, that's about right," Tobias admitted. "We couldn't let him tell anyone. We absolutely cannot let this war become public knowledge. Under any circumstances."

Putin met his eyes for a few moments. I knew that he understood what Tobias was implying. If Putin had any intention of spreading the word, one of the two of them wouldn't be leaving this room alive.

At last, Putin nodded. "You have convinced me of the need for discretion. For now, I will keep this information to myself. However..."

"There's always a price," I muttered.

"Of course. But this is a small one. I believe, Tobias, that your war will reach its conclusion long before mine does. When that happens, you will be free to leave Earth, will you not?"

"I will," Tobias admitted.

"Then this is my price. I will remain silent about what I have discovered and in return, when you have won your war, you will win mine. You will be fight for me. You will be the weapon with which I destroy the Yeerk Order and bring Earth to greatness."

It took a moment for the full impact of Putin's demand to hit me. He was asking Tobias to go straight from one war to the next. It would mean years more battle for him. Years away from Rachel and their child. And he didn't have much of a choice. It was accept Putin's offer or kill him, the man we came here to save and who would bring Earth into the war against the Pythagi. And I knew which one Tobias would choose.

Chapter 19

"I'll do it," Tobias answered. Of course that was his response. When it came down to having to choose between war and his family, Tobias always chose war. I think that he's growing to enjoy it. All that time he spends as a Howler can't be helping. I was going to have to talk to him about that when this was all over.

((How are we going to explain this all to the Tri-I people waiting outside?)) David asked. ((It's kind of hard to cover up the presence of a bunch of Bug fighters.))

"There is a Pythagi outpost on Mars," Putin answered. "Presumably, the Pythagi detected this ship on their long-range sensors and the Yeerks decided to investigate it. The end result is fairly obvious." He said it so naturally, like it was true.

I was about to say something, but cut off when I heard a sound I have become too familiar with: gunfire. "That would be Guraff," Tobias sighed. "Mister Putin, we need to get you off of this ship, for your own safety. We have a ship in your hangar, and it should be prepared to go any minute now. We'll take you down to Earth and drop you off at Tri-I's headquarters where you'll be safe but we need to go *now*."

((With Guraff right outside that door?)) David asked. ((I don't think you want him following us to the Reliquary, especially since it isn't functional at the moment.))

Tobias thought about it for a moment. "I can lead him away. I morph to Kelbrid, make sure he knows it's me, and lead him off in a different direction. The rest of you go for the Reliquary. Once you're there, I'll ditch Guraff and meet up with you."

((How can you be sure he'll follow you?)) David asked. ((Guraff isn't the type to get distracted. He'll go where Putin goes.))

"It's too dangerous anyway," James answered. "If he gets his hands on you, you're a dead man, and then we're all screwed."

"If Guraff's going to get his hands on anyone, it's best that it's me. I'm the one most likely to survive a fight with him," Tobias answered. "And he'd definitely follow if someone morphed Putin and followed me."

"I am not sure I like the idea of one of you running around with my DNA," Putin began.

"Your DNA or your life. Your choice," Tobias reminded him.

"A fair point. My genetic material is yours."

Tobias closed his eyes. "Here's what I'm thinking. I morph Kelbrid and Cassie morphs Putin. The rest of you make your way to the Reliquary. After you're a safe distance away, Cassie will morph to wolf and meet you there. I'll keep leading Guraff on to try and give you some time. Sooner or later, he'll realize what I'm doing and break off the chase to go and find out what happened to Putin."

"How do the rest of us know where the Reliquary is?" James asked.

"Rattlesnake," I answered. "David has one, and they hunt by smell. I don't know exactly how good it is, but I think he'll be able to follow the scents we left on our way in. And as long as he can keep the rattling under control, he can probably slip out without someone noticing him."

((Okay, so how do we hide Putin?)) David asked.

"Simple," Putin answered. "I morph something small and ride on you."

That made us all turn to him again. "Are you implying that you're morph-capable?" Tobias asked slowly.

"A gift from Counselor Lirem-Arrepth-Terrouss, a personal friend of mine," Putin answered.

"You have a morphing cube?" I demanded.

"Do not be ridiculous, they would not give me one of those. Not yet, at least. But Lirem did see fit to give me the power as a sign of good faith."

"Doesn't that break one of their most important laws?" James asked.

"Yes, it this sort of thing is very explicitly prohibited by the law of Seerow's Kindness, which is why it would be best if you do not mention it to anyone. Although the Electorate wrote in a proviso for extenuating circumstances two years ago, they would prefer that this not be common knowledge."

Tobias nodded. "Alright. David, morph rattler. Cassie, acquire Mister Putin and get morphing. James, morph to fly, Mister Putin morph the smallest animal you have."

((Question,)) David began. ((If Putin can morph, why doesn't the real one go with you?))

"Because he couldn't find his way to the ship," Tobias answered. Already he was morphing into a Kelbrid. I stood in front of Putin for a moment, trying to figure out where to touch him to acquire him. It feels really weird, trying to think of where to touch a man who repulses you.

He was willing to throw all of planet Earth into a war because it was better for him that way and because it'd get Earth a bunch of respect from the rest of the galaxy. And maybe it would, but I can't put the respect of aliens over the lives of humans. But Putin didn't think twice about it. Neither, it seemed, did Tobias.

At last, I grabbed Putin's hand and concentrated. His eyes glazed over for a few moments as he was acquired. Then, I concentrated again and slowly, I became Vladimir Putin.

Chapter 20

More specifically, I became Vladimir Putin in a leotard. Trust me when I say you DO NOT want to try and picture that. As James put it, ((I don't know whether this is funny or disturbing.))

Or, as Tobias said, ((I'm so glad I don't have eyes.))

A minute or so later, David was a rattlesnake, Vladimir Putin and James were flies on his back, Tobias was a Kelbrid, and I was the leader of Russia. I think that Animorphs are the only people who ever have to say things like that.

I pulled on Putin's clothes and picked up his gun, which felt really weird in my hands. ((Everyone ready?)) Tobias asked.

((Ready,)) I said. I pulled open the vault door. The technicians and unarmed crewmembers were huddled to one side, though some of them were looking at the guns on the walls with interest. The armed guards were standing ready. Some must have been outside, because there was a lot of gunfire coming from out there. Others were remaining back here as reinforcements.

((We're evacuating Mister Putin,)) Tobias informed them. ((When the Yeerks realize it, they'll come after us. When they do, seal the door. Tri-I will be along shortly to help you out. He'll be safe with us.))

The guards didn't exactly look like they believed him, but since I wasn't objecting, they assumed he was telling the truth. Outside of the panic room were two hallways. From one came the sound of gunfire. We had come from the other one.

We ran. I made sure to keep a hold of Tobias with a leash we had made from Putin's jacket. Getting lost wouldn't be a good idea. David was wrapped around Tobias's foreleg, ready to separate at the proper place.

((How do we know they'll follow us?)) David asked. ((They didn't see us leave.))

((When I was speaking to the soldiers, I made sure the Yeerks could hear,)) Tobias answered as we ran. One thing surprised me. For a man of his age, or of any age, Putin's body was in great shape.

Very soon, I started to hear snarling Kelbrid behind us, following us. But we weren't far from the dropshaft. Tobias began climbing down first. I had one end of the leash tied around my wrist, which was really the only way I could be sure to keep a hold of it while climbing down the ladder. I was partway down when I had an idea.

I still had Putin's rifle, on a shoulder strap. ((Hang on a moment, Tobias,)) I called. We stopped climbing downwards for a moment. I started firing blindly upwards. I couldn't be sure if I hit anything, but there was at least a measurable effect. An overly eager Kelbrid ran a bit too fast and didn't stop in time. Even while it fell down the dropshaft to its death, it snarled and barked at us.

I was momentarily blinded as a bright light suddenly appeared at the top of the shaft, shining directly on me. I could just barely see the silhouette of a Hork-bajir holding a flashlight. A very, very big Hork-bajir.

((Okay, now we climb!)) I practically shouted. Tobias continued climbing down, hopping off at a random level.

((I already let David and the others off. They're on their way to the ship. Putin warned me of something, though.))

((Why didn't he warn me, too?))

((He didn't want to distract you from the climbing and shooting. If Guraff gets the ship's power back online, the ship will go into lockdown mode. Security doors will start closing all over the place, and seal off some important things like the hangars. We don't know if Guraff's working on that or not, but if he is, we need to get to the hangar before those doors close. So if the lights turn on, run like hell.))

((Got it.))

We took off down a random hallway, ducking into rooms, doubling back, and trying to cause as much confusion as possible, Tobias was basically just dragging me along all over the place, with me having no idea where we were. I was completely lost and confused. I hoped Guraff and the Kelbrid were as well.

After what felt like an eternity of this, I heard Al's thought-speak voice very faintly in my head.
((Rel...restored....depart...))

((I guess that means he's ready to go,)) Tobias said. ((Here's where we split up. Morph to wolf and follow our scent back to the Reliquary. I'll see you there.))

We stopped and I began to demorph. It took less than thirty seconds, and thirty seconds later, I was mostly wolf. You can morph faster, after you have some practice, and I had a lot of it. And I always was pretty good at it. ((Wouldn't bat be better?))

((For sight and escape, yes, but do you know how to get back to the ship?))

((No,)) I admitted, finishing my wolf morph. ((See you there.))

I bolted out of a doorway, navigating by smell. It wasn't like seeing at all, but it kept me on the right course. ((Good luck, Tobias.))

Chapter 21

I dashed down a long hallway as fast as I could. Wolves can run forever, but they aren't sprinters. Still, I was pretty fast, when I wanted to be. I stopped dead in my tracks, though, when a sudden light appeared at the other end of the hallway. A blindingly bright light from Guraff's flashlight.

"That wolf is Cassie, unless I am much mistaken her. Capture her." A half dozen Kelbrid began bolting towards me, with Guraff in their lead. I turned and ran the other way. ((Tobias, we have a problem. They're following me, not you.))

((Okay...um....)) his voice was faint, but still clear in my head. ((Meet me back at where we separated. I'll draw them off. Get to the ship *now*.)

I followed my own scent back to where it originated. ((Tobias, I really hope that Kelbrid I smell is you.))

((Me too, Cassie.)) A moment later, Guraff burst through what used to be a door, his flashlight blinding me yet again. Before he could speak, though, a dark shape soared over my head and smashed into Guraff's chest. That was my cue to run, so I did. I jumped over Guraff and Tobias, running past some mildly surprised Kelbrid as I did so.

I kept sprinting towards the dropshaft, ignoring the yowls of the Kelbrid behind me. I also tried to ignore the stabbing worry I felt over Tobias, but that didn't go so well. There was no way he could win that kind of fight. I hoped he was still running.

When I made it to the dropshaft, I had to pause to think. My nose told me I needed to go down, on the other side of the dropshaft. That was good, because it meant I didn't have to demorph. It was bad too, though.

It meant I had to jump;

I backed up a couple yards and then ran forward as fast as I could. I leapt. While I was in the air, I thought for a moment about how pathetic it would be if I fell to my death. After everything I'd been through to be killed by gravity just seemed kind of silly. Honestly, I had trouble convincing my brain it was a possibility.

I heard my leg snap as I landed. I was on the right level, but I was stuck with a choice: demorph to heal, remorph, then continue on, or just limp along as I was? I decided to chance it. Morphing would only cost me a minute. Limping would probably take longer, and I'd be wounded, too.

I was in my human body, rubbing my leg. It wasn't sore, but it felt like it should be. It felt just a little funny to me, but that was all in my head. After a moment, I got to my feet and began to morph again.

That was when it happened. I was blinded completely by the sudden burst of light. It was so stunning that I actually fell over and cried out. My ears were ringing, but over top of that I heard a rattling sound like a garage door closing. A few moments later, my vision finally started to come back, though my eyes still hurt. What just happened?

My head cleared and I realized what was going on. The lights in the ship were on. Which meant so was the power. And that meant that the rattling noise I heard was probably those security doors.

I began to morph as fast as I could, pushing myself like never before. But as I morphed, I heard the snarling of Kelbrid coming from the dropshaft and said several words I can't repeat, in addition to a few that I learned from Tobias, which I can't spell because he learned them from Sergio.

I turned around. Six Kelbrid were in the dropshaft, coming down towards me. A few levels up, I could see Guraff, looking down. Our eyes met and he jumped. He fell faster than the Kelbrid, I guess he wasn't using the dropshaft's gravity-altering capabilities. His talons slammed onto the deck so hard I swear it shook, though I guess that's not really possible.

I turned and ran as fast as I could towards the ship, Guraff chasing me. He was gaining on me, with his Kelbrid right behind him. I don't think I've ever run faster in my life. If I could make it to the Reliquary, to my friends, I'd be safe. They could help me.

I rounded a corner. Just one more to go and then I'd be in the hangar. I was going to make it! I turned around the last corner.

And stopped dead in my tracks. Between me and the hangar was a grey door. No, not a door, because doors open. This was a wall. And it was separating me from the hangar. Blocking me in with Guraff. I looked around but there was nowhere else to go. No doors or other hallways connected to this one. The only way to go was back.

Guraff turned the corner, his Kelbrid behind him. I had to get past him. There *had* to be another way into the hangar. There *had* to be.

((Cassie! Where are you?)) Tobias shouted in my head.

((I'm outside the hangar. There's a security wall in my way,)) I answered.

((I'm on the level above you. Hang on, I'm going to have Al-))

((I can't hang on! I'm looking at Guraff and six Kelbrid right now!))

He said one of those things I can't spell, followed by some things that I refuse to. ((Okay, Cassie, I'm going to have Al fire on that door, but you need to get out of the way. He's using the Reliquary's cannons, and those make a real mess. You have to get out of that hallway.))

((I can't. Guraff's blocking the exit.))

Tobias was silent. Guraff was, too. He watched, waiting to see what I would do. A cornered Animorph is a dangerous one, and he wasn't going to walk into a trap.

((Then....you're going to have to get past him somehow,)) Tobias said softly. He knew what he was saying. He didn't think there was any way for me to do it. I'd have to try. ((As soon as you're out of the way, let me know and Al will blast down that door. Then I'm coming in to get you.))

There was a chance for me to escape, to survive. I could do it.

All I had to do was get past the God General.

Chapter 22

I shook my head. No. I couldn't think of him as the God General. He was Guraff. A Hork-bajir controller, like dozens I'd fought before. Bigger and stronger maybe, and more experienced. But he wasn't immortal. He was just a Controller. I could do this.

I dropped into my usual combat stance and growled. That seemed to be what Guraff was waiting for, though. He raised his sword. "I'm afraid this is where it ends, Cassie. I am honored that it is I who has the privilege of claiming your life."

((Guraff, we don't need to fight.))

"We do, Cassie. It is who we are."

((It's not who *I* am.))

"Is it? You have been at war since you were thirteen years old. You fought against my people for three years. True, you devoted what time you could to healing, but when battle called once more, you came. You are a warrior, Cassie, whether you like it or not."

((I fought because I had no choice, Guraff.))

"Just as we have no choice now. I cannot let you go, Cassie. Surely you know that."

((You can't infest me either,)) I warned him. ((I'd rather die in this body than live as a Yeerk slave.))

"So be it. I would rather that be your fate, too. We Yeerks are a cruel people, and you deserve better than that."

((Guraff, just answer me this. You know what your people do is wrong. You hate taking slaves and conquering worlds. So why do you support them? I can understand not opposing them, but how can you lead their armies in doing something you know is wrong?))

"You say you are not a warrior, Cassie. Then tell me, why do you fight, when you believe it to be wrong?"

((I...)) I thought about it. This was a question I thought about a lot, but no one ever really pressured me to answer it before. ((Because my planet needs me. My people, my friends, the ones I love. They need me to fight for them, no matter how much I hate it. No matter how wrong I think it might be.))

"You and I are not so different in that regard, Cassie."

((No, I guess we're not.))

"I read the book you wrote after the First War. It...sickened me. You fought for so long and learned nothing from it. I am glad to see that you have learned at least one thing now, before the end."

((What do you think I've learned?))

"If you do not think that the war you fight is right, at least realize that it is necessary. To begin a war is a choice, made by leaders. But to fight a war is required of those who have been called.

You do not have to agree with the reasons for the war. But you can always find something of your own that is worth fighting for. I do not agree with the reasons for our war. I do not want to enslave, to dominate, to destroy. But for my friend, for Esplin, I will gladly give my life."

((I think I understand now.)) At least, I understood what it was about Guraff that scared me. He showed me exactly how it was that good people could do terrible things. It would be so easy to become him. That was the trap, in this or any war. It was what the good guy shad to avoid. And, in a way, it was what we needed to embrace, too.

He's just a Hork-bajir, I reminded myself as I prepared to lunge. I didn't want to fight him, but I needed to get past him. *You can do this.*

I shot forward like a bullet. I was only halfway there when I felt something sharp slash across my face. I stumbled to the side and slammed into the wall. My blood dripped from Guraff's sword. I didn't feel any pain from the wound, but that would be from the poison on his sword.

He stood, ready for my next attack. He wasn't going to make the first move and I knew why. Guraff knew I was trying to escape, and he wasn't going to give me an opening. He was going to bleed me out until I couldn't fight any more, then move in for the kill.

I darted forward again, but this time I was ready for the sword. I stopped short, dodging it, then lunged again. Of course, Guraff doesn't go down that easily. I heard my jaw crack as his fist connected with it in a sharp uppercut. And he followed through, with first his wristblade then his elbow cutting me up.

I fell to the deck and forced myself to my feet. I just barely dodged to the side as he raked one talon at me. I turned and sank my teeth into his ankle. That turned out to be a bit of a mistake because I couldn't detach myself in time to avoid his fist striking my head again.

I released his leg and stumbled back a bit. I continued stumbling when the flat of his sword smashed into the side of my head. Then he kicked me in the throat and I almost fell over. I slumped against the wall. I was panting, gasping for breath, and I could hear this weird gurgling noise. I think Guraff punctured something in my throat.

((Tobias,)) I called weakly.

((Cassie, you sound faint. Are you in the dropshaft?))

Did I really sound that far off? ((No...I'm still near the door. I can't get past Guraff. You have to blow it now or I'm going to die. I can't get out. You have to.))

((Try to stay as far away from it as you can,)) he decided. There was no hesitation there. Guraff and I watched each other, him waiting to see if I was finished or not. Then, there was a sound like a baseball hitting a wall.

The security wall shook but it was still completely intact. ((What the hell did Putin make these things out of?)) Tobias demanded. ((Al, fire again!))

I heard the sound again, but with the same effect. Not even the Reliquary was punching through them. "It seems your friends are impatient, Cassie. I am going to have to finish this now."

((Guraff...))

I poured all the strength I had left into one last, desperate effort. I leapt over his sword and ducked under his wristblade. I was inside his guard now. I jumped and sank my teeth into the lower part of his throat and hung on.

Darkness swam at the corners of my vision, slowly creeping forward. I looked to the side and could see that Guraff had impaled me. His sword was cutting right through my body and coming out the other side. I released my jaws. I couldn't hang on anymore.

I fell to the deck for the last time and Guraff pulled his sword out of my side. He stood over me for a moment, gripping his sword in both hands. "Goodbye, Cassie. Though you do not call yourself a warrior, but you died as one."

CHAPTER 23

Ronnie

By the time everyone came back to the apartment, it was so late it was early. Kristina, Rachel, and I weren't worried. Why should we have been? They weren't expected home at all that night. But we should have worried.

Instead Rachel was in her room, and Kristina stole James's, and I was asleep on the couch. I was the one who heard the door open and I rolled to my feet lazily. A man I didn't recognize came in, looking pretty apprehensive but mostly sleepy.

Kristina came out of James's room slowly. "Dad!" she yelled, rushing forward and hugging him. Rachel came out next, more slowly and holding a Shredder. She lowered it when she realized that everyone had come home.

David and Al were in human morph, but they were quickly changing back to their regular selves. James stood off to the side, looking at the floor. Tobias came in last and closed the door, turning all of the locks on it.

But if Tobias came in last... "Where's Cassie?" I asked.

David and Al joined James in looking at the ground. Tobias remained facing the door. "Where's Cassie?" I repeated, my voice lower.

"Where is she, Tobias?" Rachel insisted.

Slowly, Tobias turned to face us. He didn't look at the ground. He met my eyes, then Rachel's. Slowly, he took a deep breath. Then, with two simple words, he destroyed my whole world. "Cassie's dead." He said it so simply, so flatly, without any emotion at all. It was like he didn't care.

I had to have misheard. That couldn't be right. It was my mind playing a trick on me, I was groggy. "What did you say?"

"She's dead, Ronnie," he said again. "There was nothing we could do, we couldn't get to her in time."

"Nothing you could do? What - what happened!"

"The Yeerks attacked a ship Putin was traveling in. We went in to get him out. And in the process, we had to split up in order to make sure we snuck Putin out. Cassie got cut off and trapped by Guraff. There was a security door in the way and we couldn't get through it. We tried everything, Ronnie, but by the time we blew it open, it was too late."

"What do you mean it was too late?" Rachel demanded.

"She was already dead," Tobias said slowly. "She was trapped in there with Guraff and six Kelbrid, she never had a chance. We tried, Rach, you have to believe me, we *tried* to get in there to help her. We hit that door with everything we had and it wouldn't go down! There wasn't anything I could do."

I wasn't sure what it was I was feeling. There was mostly numbness. I couldn't take it. It didn't fit into my brain. Cassie couldn't be dead, it wasn't possible. But under that numbness there was something else, a warm feeling that was slowly spreading through my blood. It was like I had swallowed fire.

"Who did it, Tobias? Who killed her?" I demanded.

"It was Guraff," Tobias answered. "Ronnie, please, if I could do anything - "

"You can do something," I said. It was so clear in my mind, what had to be done. "You can help me kill him."

"Ronnie," Rachel said slowly. I didn't look at her. I couldn't see anything except for Tobias's eyes meeting mine. Everything else was red. Now I knew what this fire was. It was hate. It was rage. It was that which makes good people do horrible things. It was what would give me strength to do what I needed to do.

"I'm going to kill him," I said slowly, through gritted teeth. "But I can't do it. Not yet. I need your help. I need you to make me an Animorph so I can kill him."

I could feel everyone's eyes on me. I knew why. I wasn't acting like myself. I wasn't acting like Ronnie who always just stood in the background, who watched the door while they had their meetings. And there was a reason for that.

I wasn't that Ronnie anymore. My whole life was changed, in one instant. So much of who and what I was depended on Cassie. She was a part of me, the best part. And how she was gone, taken from me. I knew that the Animorphs weren't to blame. I knew it wasn't their fault. I wasn't going to blame anyone except for the one who was responsible. And I was going to kill him.

"Ronnie," Tobias said slowly, "you're not in the right frame of mind to make this kind of decision. Take some time to think - "

"I am going to kill him whether you help me or not," I interrupted, speaking as slowly as I could. "The only chance I have is if I'm an Animorph. But if not, then fine, I'll go and do it on my own. I don't care. I want him dead. That's it. I want to kill that Yeerk. And if you're not going to help me, then go ahead and let me go off and die. But if you want me to succeed, then help me. Teach me how to kill. It's what you people do."

They were all silent for a few moments. As always, it was Tobias who started talking. "Ronnie, I know how you feel - "

"YOU HAVE **NO IDEA** HOW I FEEL!" I shouted. "YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO - "

Tobias shoved me into a sitting position on the couch. "Yeah, Ronnie, I *do* know what it's like! If anyone knows what it's like, it's me! I know *exactly* what it's like to lose the only thing you care about in a single moment. I know what it's like to watch helplessly as the one thing that makes your life worth living is taken away from you. I know what it's like to feel your soul die inside of you while your body and mind live on."

I sat there in silence for a few moments while my brain tried to take control back from whatever was controlling my body right now. Yeah, Tobias did know. He loved Rachel as much as I loved Cassie. He knew what it was like to lose everything.

He continued speaking, softer this time, less intense. I think it was the first time I saw any ounce of human emotion from Tobias. "There are no words in any language, no similes or metaphors that can describe what it feels like. It's something that you can't understand unless you've felt it and if there's a god I pray to him that the people around me don't have to understand like I do."

He took another deep breath. "That's why, if it's up to me, I'll let you join us. I'll teach you to fight. I'll teach you to kill. Maybe that's what you need. So for my part, I say you're in."

"In," Rachel said instantly.

((In,)) Al added.

((In)) David echoed.

"In," James nodded.

"I'll call Jake and the Omegamorphs," Tobias said. "We'll have to get their opinions, but I think they'll agree. And they need to know what happened to Cassie. Everyone...get some sleep if you can. It's going to be a rough morning."

"I just hope you know what it is you're getting into, Ronnie," James warned me.

"I know, James. I think I know better than anyone else who volunteered. I've seen the life you have to live. I know it from a perspective that no one else has ever had. I know exactly what I'm signing up for. And it's worth it, if I just get to kill him."

It's what Animorphs do best...

And now for some words of wisdom from Streetlight Manifesto:

A moment of silence, please, for those who never get the chance

They show up to the party, but they're never asked to dance

The losers, the liars, the bastards, the thieves

The cynicists, the pessimists, and those that don't believe in nothing

I never met a loser that I didn't see eye-to-eye with, I declare

I stare into your eyes

But you look right past me into the air

What's it like to stand in your shoes?

To have never felt the belt of somebody's abuse?

I take the bottle and I tip it to all my heroes that have passed

Alas, you have left us, but your stories they will last

Uninspired by the recruiting call

Independent we stand

Independent we fall

So tell me: how long do you think you can go before you lose it all?

Before they call you bluff and watch you fall?

I don't know, but I'd like to think I had control

At some point, but I let it go and lost my soul

Sit tight, but the revolution's years away

I'm losing faith and I'm running low on things to say

So, I guess I have no choice but to regurgitate

The tired anthem of a loser and a hypocrite

Oh! To have died that night, I realized it wouldn't last

Our days were numbered and the reaper tipped the hourglass

The final mayday of our sinking ship had come and passed

Oh! To the west, you don't know what it is you're running from

And everybody's laughing loud

Your last chance to make your mother and your father proud.

- A Moment of Silence

And don't miss the next installment of the Animorphs series:

74: The Union

Tobias looked tired, but that was no surprise. I could tell, from the quality of the image and from what I could see in the background that they were in the Reliquary, though I could not quite figure out what the others were doing. "Everyone's present?"

"All here, General," Marco answered.

"Commander," I whispered into his ear, correcting him.

"Right."

"Good," Tobias continued. "This announcement is...pretty important. We've all had a really tough time of things lately. I don't need to list everything that's gone horribly long in the last month or two. So I thought it was important that you all hear some good news.

"Firstly, we managed to find something to do with the Chief. Vladimir Putin has offered to bring him and Kristina back to Russia, where he'll be away from the Yeerks. They aren't sure if they're going to accept his offer yet, but if we can't think of anything else at least that problem is solved.

"Also, although Putin has refused to call off his world tour, I managed to get him to agree not to go to your town. The Yeerks just couldn't resist trying something there. As it is, now he moves with a Tri-I escort and should be safe, though he has us on speed dial just in case. He's going to cite the presence of the Isolationist Party in your town as a reason for cutting that from his trip.

"I -"

"Tobias, just get to the important part," we heard Rachel interrupt him from somewhere off-screen.

"I'm getting to it," he called over his shoulder. Then he turned back to us. "Alloran informed me that, as a result of Russia's new Czar-class ships, the major elements within the Electorate are pushing for giving the Americans and a few other countries more help in developing their own. I don't think the Andalites could live with themselves if Yeerk-based ships went off to war before their own pet projects."

"Tobias!" Rachel called again.

"I'm getting there!" He called back. He turned back to us. "Also according to Alloran, the political climate on the Andalite homeworld is starting to take a turn. It's possible that Lirem will lose the upcoming election, if the right Andalite runs against him. There's widespread criticism that he's too slow to act. Alloran is thinking of tossing his hat into the ring, so to speak, but that would probably do more harm than good. He's not a popular man.

"Word has it that the Leerans are -"

At that point, Rachel shoved Tobias out of sight. "Ignore him, none of that is important. Because of all the bad stuff that's been happening lately, we decided that everyone needs something happy. So we're moving the wedding up. We're getting married in a week."

"How did you manage all that rescheduling?" I asked.

"Lots of yelling," Rachel answered, smiling.

From somewhere out of sight, I heard Tobias add, "Plus, Al hacked some peoples' records."

"That too. Anyhow, this is happening in a week and if anything happens to screw it up, Marco, I'm going to crucify someone with objects I find lying around the house. And I left some very painful things in my bedroom."

"I still say you should have brought those," Tobias added. "We could have used them."

Marco turned to me. "This is one of those things that I'm better off forgetting, isn't it?"

"I try not to think about it," I admitted.

Suddenly, the image of Rachel and the Reliquary disappeared and a new face took over, in a new ship. My initial reaction upon seeing the face that stared at me was to flinch. It was roughly triangular, with a pair of short stalk eyes and a blue-rimmed mouth.

Said head was on the end of a vulture-like neck. Unlike most aliens I'd seen, this one was wearing a shirt, and what appeared to be an expensive one at that. However, around its midsection, the shirt stopped, exposing veined, pink flesh. It had two arms, each jointed three times and ending in a tentacle with a pair of clawed fingers on either side.

"Jeanne, what is that thing?" Marco asked me.

"I'm not sure. I know I've seen one before," I trailed off.

((What, you do not recognize your old friend Guide the Iskoort?)) the alien asked, sounded vaguely wounded.

"Marco lost his memories," Jake explained.

((Ah. Well, then it is a lucky thing that I have a copy!)) Guide sounded very pleased with himself at that.

"You have what?" Marco demanded. He turned to me. "Okay...I don't remember who or what this thing is, but I'm pretty sure I've always wanted to punch him in the stomach."

((Oh yes, you very much have,)) Guide agreed. ((That's okay, though, the internal conflict really helps sell these things. Thanks to you, I've made my fortune back, and then some!))

"So why are you calling us?" Jake asked.

((Why, how could I pay a visit to Earth and not stop by to visit the people who made me the wealthiest Iskoort on the planet?))

((And?)) Aximili prompted.

((And...I seem to be having some trouble that I think you would be able to help me with.))

"Oh yeah," Marco said to me. "I remember what it was I hated about this guy now."

Preview Summary

The Animorphs have encountered some strange aliens in their time. Some are terrifying, some are helpful, and some are downright annoying. So when Guide the Iskoort makes a trip to Earth, it really isn't all that surprising. Nor is the fact that he's gotten himself into some trouble and wants the Animorphs to bail him out. And as always, there are more complications.

Guide has angered the Pythagi Conglomerate and now, his entire race is in danger of being exterminated by the Kelbrid. On top of this, Marco's memory loss is beginning to cause real problems, not only in his relationship with Jeanne. It has become a threat to his life as well. To find the solutions to the present problems, Jeanne, Marco, Jake, Melissa, and Ax will have to make a journey to the past, or there isn't much of a future...

((You too, Cassie.))