

Imagine a picture of Jeanne turning into an Iskoort.

74: THE UNION

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Gina apologizes for distracting me from my writing. We were...busy.

Okay, I know you've all been waiting a long time for this one, so I won't delay it any longer.

CHAPTER 1

My name is Jeanne.

I have gone by the name Jeanne Gerard, but that is not my name. If you search the records of France, you will find no such girl. Gerard was the name of my favorite foster family. The Gerards were very good to me, and I have called their daughter Michelle my cousin.

I did not think anything could replace the Gerard family in my heart, but I was proven to be very, very wrong. I found my real family almost a year ago. I found my father, at least. And his wife and step-daughters, who truly are like sisters to me.

It is ironic, actually. Rachel, the daughter with whom I am most familiar, I see the least of all. She lives on the other side of the country. And, in spite of my fondness for my family, I do not live with them. Instead, I live with my boyfriend, Marco, in his mansion.

There is a very good reason for that, though. During a particularly stressful episode of our Animorph lives, the effort of reconciling some things, such as his best friend returning from the dead, was too much for Marco's brain. He completely lost all memory of his time as an Animorph. Every morning, he wakes up and thinks he is a thirteen year old boy. He needs to be reminded what exactly has happened.

For a while, he showed some improvement. Instead of having everything forced down his throat, what he needs now are reminders. But still, every morning we must go through the same ritual of me telling him the general story of the last seven years of his life. Every morning, he reacts the same way.

For the last few months, there has been no change, no improvement in his condition. Nor has there been any sign of a cure. Therapy might help, but Marco cannot be sent to a therapist because his actions over the last year must remain a secret. So we have no choice but to wait and think and manage as best as we can.

This morning was no different. As always, I woke Marco up and told him who he was, where he was, and what I was doing in his house. I explained all about the Animorphs, Yeerks, Kelbrid, etc. And, on this particular day, we had to go to my father's house to meet with the other

Animorphs for breakfast. As always, Marco complained about not being allowed to eat ahead of time.

Every morning, it was pretty much the same thing. Lately, it has started to get annoying in the extreme. Marco is funny, at first. But when he has told you the exact same joke in the exact same way every morning for several months, one's nerves begin to wear thin. But, as always, I pretended he never told me his jokes before, I laughed, and I drove him to my father's house.

The mood there was nothing like it was a few weeks ago. Before, it was a comfortable home. Now, the atmosphere was decidedly different. The largest reason for this was because of the news we had gotten from Tobias and the Alphamorphs the previous day. Cassie was dead. She had fought with the Animorphs from the beginning. And suddenly, she was gone.

Her fiancé, Ronnie, took her place, though Jake, Marco, and I voted against it. He wanted to become an Animorph for the sole purpose of killing the Yeerk who had taken Cassie's life, Guraff 427. Jake, Marco, and I thought this was a bad reason to let someone join. Melissa and Aximili thought it was the best on there was. The majority of the vote went in Ronnie's favor.

Aximili was another reason why the atmosphere of the place seemed darker these days. Not too long ago, our lives had been saved by a Tri-I Operative named Carl Yastrzemski. Without his help, we would all have died in a trap the Yeerks set for us. Instead, thanks largely to Carl, we managed to escape. But Carl found out about the Yeerk invasion and Aximili took it upon himself to eliminate Carl without consulting the rest of us. The man saved our lives, and Aximili repaid him by taking his. I cannot really look at Aximili the same way after that.

When I pulled up to the house, it appeared empty, but that was not necessarily the case. My father had installed a Privacy Field over his home. It was an extremely mild type of force field that trapped light, allowing it to enter but not exit. The result of this was that my father could use a holographic generator to project the image of an empty house and yard against the field, creating the illusion that nothing at all was going on. Because of this, we could do things like morph in the front yard without anyone seeing. Marco's mansion had an identical arrangement.

Such systems were common amongst Earth's wealthy elite these days, but my father's and Marco's homes were a bit different. The privacy field could be reinforced with a much more powerful force field that could stop small Dracon cannons. That was one of the many hidden defenses my father had recently installed on his house.

As a result, whenever I came to the house, I could not be sure if there was anyone in the yard or not. This time, the yard was empty. I parked the car and Marco and I entered the house. It still felt somewhat odd not to knock when I entered, but my family almost seemed offended when I was polite.

Jake and Melissa were sitting on one couch in the spacious living room. My father and step-mother were sitting on another. Jordan and Sara were seated in chairs and Aximili stood off in a corner, away from everyone else.

"Why is everyone here?" Marco asked me. "Tobias said he had a big announcement for everyone," Jake answered. "Big enough that it was worth Jordan and Sara missing some school for."

He looked like he was about to explain more, but then the large TV screen that occupied much of the far wall came to life.

Chapter 2

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

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"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."

Chapter 3

"Maybe you should tell us about this trouble," Jake prompted.

"If we're going to be chatting with aliens, I'm taking my daughters to school," Naomi interrupted.
"And Jake? That....thing....is *not* coming into my house."

"If I had my way, he wouldn't be coming into Earth's airspace," Marco muttered.

((What are the Iskoort even doing near Earth?)) Aximili asked. ((It is very far out of your way.))

"Please don't ask him questions," Melissa pleaded. "He's got that look like he's going to start telling a story. I *hate* it when they start telling stories."

Guide looked at Melissa. ((I don't recognize you. It seems you Animorphs have been busy since we last met. You'll have to sell me the memories later. The girl's right, though. I *do* have a story. I think you'll enjoy it, though. After all, I listened to *your* stories. It's only a fair trade.))

"Our stories made you rich," Jake reminded him.

((Well, I'm sure you'll find mine rewarding. The last time we met, I was just barely a beggar, after I lost my position with the merchant guild for fabricating the ending of your story. But the memories you sold me put me back on top! You're all huge celebrities on my homeworld, you know. And I can't tell you how many awards I accepted on your behalf. That was a great trick you pulled on me, too, leaving the ending open like that. The Yeerks returning to Earth! The One invading your home! Fantastic!))

((Please tell me,)) Aximili interrupted, ((that you did not come all this way to buy more memories from us.))

((That was only part of it, I promise,)) Guide responded. ((The Guildmasters were, in fact, engaged in a discussion of sending an envoy to Earth for several months. Those discussions got interrupted when the Pythagi arrived, with Kelbrid in tow. That was quite a shock, I can tell you.))

"They attacked you?" I asked.

((Don't be ridiculous. Have you ever met a Pythag? They didn't come to kill, they came to trade! We have never met such a willing trade partner. You wouldn't believe the things that passed between us. I think it is safe to say that I've become the wealthiest Iskoort in history. But t here is a very big difference between the Iskoort and the Pythagi.

((We Iskoort love trade. Equal trade. I give you something you want and you give me something that I want. But the Pythagi see it as a sort of competition. They want to get something from you while giving you as little as possible. They will lie to you, deceive you. Once, one promised to send me a Yeerk Blade ship in exchange for some charts of Ssri'Kai space. He gave me the ship, alright; a model of one about as long as my tentacle.

((Things like that kept happening. And the more time we spent with the Pythagi, some things became clear. Like that they didn't want us in their sector of space, of which they consider Earth a part. At first, we were willing to agree to that. The Diplomatic Guild signed several treaties promising that we wouldn't interfere with their business ventures on Earth.))

"But here you are," Marco inserted.

((But here I am. My people got tired of being cheated by the Pythagi, so we decided to do a little cheating of our own and send some people to check out their sector of space. I was chosen as the head of the mission, since I'm the only one who has ever actually met a human.))

"You said you were having some sort of trouble?" Melissa prompted.

((Yes, well....A Pythagi representative made it very clear that if we interfered with their business, we'd have to answer to the Kelbrid. We have no desire to see our sector of the galaxy overrun by Kelbrid again, so we took great care to make sure the Pythagi didn't find us here. Except...))

Marco sighed. "Oh God, what did you do?"

((It was completely by accident, you understand. We emerged from Zero-Space near Mars. According to your memories, it was only occupied by the Skrit Na, who might have had some interesting things to trade to us. It seemed like a safe place to stop. So imagine our surprise when we stumbled across some Pythagi fighter ships.

((We decided to do the polite thing and land, as they asked us to. But we sealed our ship shut, so they can't get in. At least, not with their usual weaponry. They have weapons powerful enough to

blast the ship to pieces, but nothing that is both delicate enough to leave the ship intact but also get through our shields.

((So for the moment, we are trapped on the surface of Mars. Right now, the Pythagi do not know who we are, since we have not communicated with them and they would not recognize this ship. It is unique, you see. So at the moment, there is no harm done. But once they get inside and find out we are Iskoort, my sector will be invaded by the Kelbrid and Yeerks as well as yours.))

Chapter 4

((So, my friends, what will it be? I'm sure that flying to Mars and rescuing the diplomatic corps of the Iskoort wouldn't be too much for you to handle. You have done far more difficult things before,)) Guide pressed.

((That...)) Aximili began but trailed off.

"What?" Jake asked him.

((Well, Prince Jake, I was thinking that it might be best...))

"Best to what?" Marco pressed.

((It might be best to leave Guide to his fate,)) Aximili said quickly. Then, more slowly, he added, ((If the Yeerks invade his sector of the galaxy, it will stretch their resources, leaving them weaker in our own.))

"Letting a peaceful race of merchants get slaughtered by the Kelbrid? Yeah, that sounds like something you'd do," Melissa said. It was very clear from her tone what she thought of the suggestion.

Jake shook his head as well. "I can't let that happen, Ax. We want to end this war, not spread it."

"Stop me if I'm forgetting something," Marco responded, "but if we let the Yeerks go around invading other sectors of the galaxy, that means the armies have more planets they have to fight them on, which means it really makes things a whole lot harder for everyone if we don't help Guide."

"Tactically, it makes the most sense to help him," I agreed. "We want to keep the Yeerks contained."

((Do you expect this war to end quickly, once we are finished on Earth?)) Aximili pressed. ((A victory on Earth will be one victory. A victory on Hork-bajir will be another. So will one on the Taxxon world and the Yeerk planet, and all of the Pythagi colony worlds. All of them will come at great cost. Right now, the Yeerk resources seem to be almost limitless. This would help in the long campaign against them.))

"And cost how many innocent lives, Ax?" Jake asked. He seemed to agree with Aximili's tactical assessment, but it was the repercussions of the strategy that he questioned. Melissa seemed to be in the same situation. Marco and I disagreed completely. If you want to defeat an enemy, why let him gain more power?

"If I may?" My father interrupted. We all turned to him. I do not know about the others, but I had forgotten he was there. I assumed he left with Naomi, Jordan, and Sara.

"Go ahead," Jake allowed.

"It seems to me that this is a major strategic decision," my father began. "Is that not the sort of thing you should consult your leader on?"

"Oh...yeah..." Jake admitted. "Guide, can you...undo whatever you did? We were talking to Tobias and you sort of interrupted it."

((Oh, by all means. But, forgive me Jake, I thought *you* were the leader.))

"I was. Then I died and Tobias took over. When I came back, I let him keep the job."

((I am definitely going to want that memory. Died, you say? That's very interesting.))

"Guide?" Marco pressed. "We sort of need to talk to Tobias if we're going to save you."

"We can act without Tobias's authorization," I reminded everyone. "We do not have to get his permission to take actions that we think will help the war."

"She's right, Jake," Melissa agreed. "You don't have to ask him if you're allowed to help Guide or not."

"This isn't about permission, it's about advice," Jake answered. "I'm going to do what I think is best. I just don't know what that is. Tobias usually does."

The image of Guide switched over to a very angry Rachel. She was red-faced and was apparently at the end of some sort of tirade. "-king eyes used to be, and then I'm going to make you eat them, Marco!"

"Why does she always blame me?" Marco asked, looking at the ceiling.

"Historically speaking, it's usually your fault when she's angry," Jake answered.

"Is it? Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Someone want to explain the situation to our new fearless leader?"

"Situation?" Tobias asked from off-screen. He nudged Rachel aside. "What situation?"

"Long story short, Guide's car broke down on Mars and he wants to bum a ride with us," Marco answered.

"Or the Pythagi will kill him," Jake added.

((And the Kelbrid will invade his sector of the galaxy,)) Ax continued. ((If we help him and his people escape from Mars without the Pythagi finding out what they are, we can prevent the Yeerks from invading them. However...))

"If we leave them to their fate, the Yeerks will invade the old Kelbrid Sector," Tobias concluded. He closed his eyes and seemed to be talking mostly to himself. "That would stretch the Yeerk forces thinner. They couldn't afford to keep sending reinforcements to every area we're thinking of attacking. They'd probably pull the troops out of Pythag Coor. If so, someone could strike it and capture all three factory worlds there, not to mention kick their morale in the face. Galuit could do it. No, no, Glorfindel would be better." He trailed off into mumbling for several moments.

Then he opened his eyes and shook his head. "Go and get Guide.""

That surprised me. It sounded like he had already made up his mind to let the Iskoort get invaded. "What was all that planning for if you changed your mind?" I asked.

"That wasn't planning, that was considering the options," Tobias answered. "If the Yeerks invaded the Kelbrid Sector, we need to think about how that would effect us. The answer is that it would weaken them somewhere here. My guess is that the Kelbrid would be pulled out of Pythag Coor, a cluster of four worlds considered to be the center of Pythagi manufacturing power. The Visser would have no problem weakening those worlds, since their only military advantages are indirect.

"Three of those worlds are factories. They produce a whole lot of things, but they're so far from the front lines that it takes a lot of effort to ship anything to any place where it would be useful. It'd be like the Visser to abandon Pythag Coor in order to attack the Iskoort. That would be an opening for us to attack.

"I had to weigh the advantages of maybe getting Pythag Coor against the advantages of helping the Iskoort. If we had Pythag Coor, we could produce a lot of things. But the Iskoort have a whole lot to offer; information, weapons, supplies, and all sorts of things from parts of the galaxy that the Pythagi and Yeerks have never even seen. In the end, I think it's better to help the Iskoort. Maybe they can organize the races in their sector for some military aid against the Pythagi. I think they're worth saving."

"I didn't follow all that stuff about Pythag Coor, but this means we're going to save Guide, right?" Melissa asked.

I nodded. "Yes. It seems we have a bit of a trip ahead of us.""

Chapter 5

Unfortunately, we did not have any vehicle capable of getting us there. The Reliquary was with Tobias at Alpha Front and although Marco had a few ships in his private hangar, there was nothing suitable for this mission. This would require a stealthy ship, capable of extracting the Iskoort and possibly fighting through Pythagi ships around Mars. That was a difficult order to fill. Perhaps even the Reliquary would not have been capable of the task, since space was limited in it.

We told Guide we'd help him and then lounged around my father's house for a bit, trying to figure out how to go about doing this. Tobias and the Alphamorphs had their own business to take care of, so they left us to figure it out on our own for the time being. Where could we get a ship capable of infiltrating the Pythagi defenses and then getting back out with a cargo hold full of Iskoort?

"Hey, didn't we used to have a ship that would have been perfect for this?" Marco asked. "A Yeerk thing, I think. When we went to go rescue Ax? It's...really hazy in my mind."

"The *Rachel*" Jake nodded. "It would have been perfect. The Pythagi would let a Yeerk ship through, and if it needed to, it could fight its way out. And since there was enough room for us to live in it for a few months without having any major problems with space, I think it could hold the Iskoort."

"What happened to it, then?" Marco asked.

"We don't know," I explained. "When we were transported to Earth by the Ellimist, or maybe it was the Drode, we lost track of the ship."

"So it's probably just floating out there, empty?" Marco questioned.

"Well, probably not," Jake admitted. "Menderash didn't get transported with us. He probably found something to do with it."

"So why don't we ask him where it is?" Marco responded. For several moments, we just stared at him.

((Why did we not think of that?)) Ax wondered.

"It's too simple," Melissa answered. "So only someone simple-minded could have come up with it. I'm surprised Aximili didn't think of it." The change in her tone was pretty clear. She was teasing Marco; she was insulting Aximili. Melissa seems to have taken his indiscretion over Carl harder than the rest of us. I am not sure why.

"Play nice," Jake said to Melissa. "Ax, try to get in touch with Menderash and see what he did with that ship. Everyone else, we're going to need to think of a backup plan for a ship, and a way of pulling this off."

Aximili left the room to call Menderash from elsewhere in the house. I am fairly certain he wanted as little to do with us as possible lately. How would he do on this mission? It was difficult to say. It would be unlike him to be a detriment to the mission. But it was also unlike him to act without orders.

"Well," Marco began, "if the *Rachel* was a Yeerk ship, maybe the Yeerks have another one we could steal."

"Makes sense," Jake agreed. "But where could we get one?"

"The Yeerks have to keep them somewhere," I answered. "'In the First War, they could store them on their Pool ship, but now that is not an option. They must be based somewhere on the ground."

"So where could the Yeerks hide an entire fleet of Bug fighters, the Blade ship, and whatever else they might have?" Jake wondered. "It would have to be somewhere near enough that they could get to the ships in a hurry, but not some place people would look..."

I crossed over to the other side of the living room and pulled up a hologram of the city, looking over it. There weren't a lot of places to hide a respectable number of ships, and all of the few that I could find would hardly be hidden. "I do not see anywhere that would work," I admitted. "Do either of you see anything?"

Jake shook his head. Marco shrugged. "Don't I have a few ships in my basement or something?"

I nodded. "Yes. Not as many as the Yeerks would need, nor as large, but you have a few."

"Well, maybe the Yeerks just have a bigger basement. Aren't they prone to keeping stuff underground?" Marco asked.

"They are," I admitted, "But it would take quite a bit of excavation to clear enough space under the ground for a sizeable hangar."

"Bigger than the first Yeerk pool?" he responded.

"Probably not, no," I agreed.

"So they could just be in some big cavern under the ground. That also means that there has to be some way for them to get in and out. So what we need to do is find something big enough that it can be an entrance for a Blade ship. There can't be many things that size."

"Why don't we just ask my dad?" Melissa suggested. She had been so quiet that I had almost forgotten she was there. "I mean, Mersa was a big time Yeerk, the one who was supposed to be invading there. He's probably the one who figured out how to get ships in and out, right? So my dad probably knows how he did it."

"Looks like Marco isn't the only one who can see the simple solutions," Jake muttered to himself.

"Good idea. You call him up and see what we can find out. Now, once we have our ship, we need to fly to Mars, find the Iskoort and somehow get them out. How can we do that?"

"Lie?" I suggested. "Pose as the Visser's servants and tell the Pythagi we were sent to take care of that situation.""

"They'll insist on some sort of proof," Marco reminded me. "How are we going to fake that?"

"This one I know," Jake answered. "Ax has a Guraff morph. No one questions Guraff. At least, no one smart. He speaks with the Visser's authority. If Guraff tells them we're there to take over, they'll buy it. We just need to get there."

CHAPTER 6

A few moments later, Melissa had succeeded in raising Chapman. Asking him what we wanted to know would not be quite as simple as one might expect, though. While there was no need to deceive him, it was possible that someone might be monitoring communications with him. Someone like Tri-I. Chapman was one of the first people we know Carl investigated when he discovered the situation on Earth. Tri-I almost certainly had eyes on him.

"Good morning, kids. How are things?" he greeted us. I was never sure what to think about Chapman. In the First War, he had sold out the human race to protect his daughter. I do not know whether I feel that he is a noble father for loving his daughter more than the entire human race or that he is a despicable man for choosing the life of one human over the lives of all others. But the help he has willingly given us since Jake freed him from the control of Mersa 528 makes me lean more towards the first. Whatever crimes he may have committed in the past, he was willing to try and make them right.

"Not too bad," Jake answered, "but we were hoping you could help us with some directions. We figured we'd take a swing by a place but we can't quite remember where it is." Jake's tone sounded normal enough, but I was sure Chapman knew he would not call for something so simple. "I think some old friends of yours spend some time there these days."

"I wouldn't exactly call them friends. What place are you talking about?"

"The place where they all like to park when they go to eat," Jake answered.

Chapman nodded. "I know the place you mean. A few years ago, there used to be a sewer pipe that lead directly into the sea. A few months ago, around the time I founded the new Sharing, I was also the head of a community project to fix that."

"I know the one you're talking about," Jake answered.

"Good. They usually park in that area. Might be a bit hard to find, though. You're probably going to have to get your feet a little wet."

"I'm always up for a good swim, dad," Melissa assured him.

"I know you are, honey. But those waters can be dangerous. Make sure you watch yourself."

"Will do, dad. See you later." She severed the communication.

"By the old sewer pipe," Jake said. "Probably not the only entrance but that's the one he suggested using. I think it's under water."

((That would be reasonable. Yeerk crafts can run underwater to an extent. An entrance under the water would be a discreet way to enter and exit.))

"We need aquatic morphs, then," Jake decided. "Jeanne, Melissa, do you have something appropriate?"

"Do I?" Marco added.

"Our dolphins should suffice," I answered. To Marco, I added, "You also have an orca that might do nicely."

"Okay, Ax, Marco, and I go orca. Jeanne and Mel will be dolphins. We'll fly out near the area as seagulls, land in the water, and morph to fish."

"Mammals," Marco butted in, smirking.

"Glorified fish," Jake amended. "We can probably expect some pretty high-end security on this, so I want Marco and Ax hanging back a bit from the rest of us in case we get into trouble."

"One problem," Marco responded. "I can't swim."

"Yes you can," I assured him. "You decided to learn after a time when you almost drowned during an early mission."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, Marco. I am sure you will remember how if you are in the proper situation."

"I hope you're right."

I hoped I was, too. I really couldn't know if Marco's memories of swimming would come back if he needed them or not. It was possible that the situation would call up enough of the appropriate memories so that he could swim. It was also possible that he would not be able to recall the skill, in which case he would be in danger. However, it was better to have him going into the situation confident that he would be alright rather than have him doubt. He already had enough doubts to deal with.

"Alright. We don't have a lot of time, so let's get started," Jake decided. "Time to get some wings."

CHAPTER 7

I had acquired a seagull some time ago, and Melissa got one of her own shortly after joining the Animorphs. However, neither of us had ever tried the morph before so we did not know exactly what to expect. The physical transformation felt familiar enough. A seagull is not exactly like a hawk, but the most important features are similar enough that the experience was not foreign to us.

The mind was a different story. I did not notice it at first, when we were inside. The house was spotless. We let ourselves out through a window Jake had opened earlier, and that was when I noticed the difference. The hawk was a predator. It would notice small animals that it could eat. The seagull noticed what it could eat as well. That list included virtually everything.

I attempted to remain in control and focused on the mission. But that is very hard to do when Jake was shouting ((French fries in the dumpster over there,)) and Aximili was adding, ((There is a bag of potato chips stuck on that fence.))

((Can we attempt to remain focused?)) I suggested.

((Let them have their fun, Jeanne,)) Melissa responded, swooping over me. ((You can be serious when people are trying to kill us.))

((From what I remember about being a seagull, we have two options,)) Marco explained. ((We can fight the instincts and try to ignore all the tasty stuff we see, or we can just go with it and things will be a whole lot easier.))

((Exactly,)) Jake agreed. ((Marco and Mel are right. There's plenty of time to concentrate once we get to the Yeerk pool.))

((Yeerk Pool,)) Marco muttered. ((You just had to kill my happy, didn't you?))

((Would some fried chicken cheer you up?)) I suggested. ((I see some behind that KFC.))

((Wouldn't that be cannibalism?)) Marco responded.

((We have had this conversation before,)) Aximili answered.

((What did we decide?)) Marco replied.

((I do not recall. Prince Jake?))

((No clue. Maybe Tobias, Rachel, or Cassie remembers....)) Jake trailed off, realizing what he had said. Even if Cassie did remember, she couldn't tell us. That comment killed any joy we

might have been feeling while we were flying. I am sure that the others continued to notice bits of food that the seagull could eat. I certainly did. But none of us felt like speaking now.

((I see the pipe,)) Melissa confirmed. That was unnecessary, but I suppose someone felt it was good to break the silence. We could all see the pipe. At one place where the land met the ocean, it was more small cliffs than beach. Out of the side of one of those cliffs, halfway in the water, jutted a sewer pipe. The end appeared to be sealed shut with concrete.

((A Bug fighter could not fly through that,)) Aximili commented. ((However, unless there is another pipe, than we are in the proper area.))

I thought back to what I knew of Yeerk procedures. ((There will be a blast door, either under the water or just above it. They will be using a hologram to disguise it to look like the rest of the cliff. All Bug fighters will have the necessary codes to open it.))

((Yes,)) Aximili confirmed, ((I recall Mersa mentioning something about that when I was the Visser's host. The Visser was not paying very much attention at the time, though. I think I remember the codes, though I am not sure how to input them without a ship of some kind.))

((I'm sure the Visser would have changed the codes by now anyway,)) Jake answered. ((Any idea how we might be able to get in?))

((Knock?)) Marco suggested.

((No, Marco,)) Jake responded.

((Doorbell?))

((I don't think they have one,)) I answered.

((FedEx them a package with us inside?))

((Can someone else talk now?)) Melissa asked. ((I'd like a real suggestion.))

((I'm fresh out of those. Would you settle for a kiss?))

((Marco,)) Jake and I both growled.

((Mostly kidding, I promise.))

((This close to the water, it is possible that there are cracks in the cliff that would lead into the hangar,)) Aximili began. ((Perhaps we could find one, morph to cockroaches, and crawl inside.))

((How are we going to find a crack?)) Melissa asked.

((Bat,)) I answered. ((Or dolphin. Using echolocation on the cliff will reveal if there are any parts that are cracked. The echo will travel longer through cracks.))

((That might work,)) Jake agreed. ((It sounds pretty iffy, though. Are there any other ideas?))

((I have a Taxxon morph,)) Ax suggested.

((Could it chew through the blast doors?)) Marco responded.

((No. But it could chew through that sewer pipe, and then through the wall into the hangar.))

((I think that works better than searching for random cracks in the wall,)) Marco agreed.

((Me too,)) Jake decided. ((Ax, you land and get to that. Marco, you land too and morph to orca. Cover Ax and keep anything in the water from getting near him. There's no telling what the Yeerks have here. The girls and I will keep an eye out up here and let you two know if we see anything that should worry you.))

((Make sure you morph first, Marco,)) I added. ((We would not want Aximili to attack you in mid-morph because he cannot control the Taxxon.))

((Like he needs an excuse,)) Melissa muttered. I do not know who else heard her, but I certainly did. I would need to find out what it was that Melissa had against Aximili. It had to be more than just what he did to Carl. None of us knew Carl well. He was not a close friend. So why did Melissa have so much against Aximili?

CHAPTER 8

I watched from above as Marco and Aximili landed. Their seagull bodies floated on the water as they demorphed. I panicked at one point as Marco disappeared under the water, but he came to the surface a few moments later. Apparently, he did, in fact, remember how to swim. Marco treaded water for a moment or two and then began to morph to orca.

((Keeping your eyes open, Jeanne?)) Jake commented. A not-so-subtle reminder for me to pay more attention to my surroundings and less to Marco. His intent was transparent enough, but it was better than outright admonishment.

((Don't worry about Marco,)) Melissa said to me. ((If Aximili tries anything, I'm sure Marco can handle him just fine.))

((You mean if he loses control over his morph?))

((That too,)) I definitely did not like what she was implying. That Aximili might attempt to do some harm to Marco of his own volition. While I was still hurt by Aximili's actions towards Carl, and my faith in his judgment was now very badly damaged, I certainly did not think Aximili would be some sort of traitor. Apparently, Melissa was not of the same mind.

I am not a naturally perceptive person. At least, not when it comes to dealing with others. But when I was young, the former Visser One trained me as an assassin, and part of this training required that I be able to build psychological profiles of those around me. It helps to anticipate one's target. I rarely used this training on my fellow Animorphs, after the first few months I spent with them.

But now, I thought it time to start using that training on Melissa to find out why she was so upset. Something about Aximili's actions towards Carl. There were two possibilities here. Most likely, what had happened between the Andalite and the Operative represented something to her. The other, less likely one, was that the actual events were what effected her. But that was unlikely unless she actually had some sort of connection to the man Aximili killed.

I glanced down at Aximili. He was a Taxxon now, chewing his way into the sewer pipe through the concrete. I could not see Marco, but I knew he was there. Fear of the orca would keep the Taxxon focused on its task. Self-preservation was one of the few instincts in a Taxxon that could rival its hunger. Sometimes, that failed. Marco once told me of the time he saw a Taxxon eating itself. This was not one of those times.

((Melissa,)) I said privately, ((I have a sensitive question. There is something that I feel I very much need to know.))

((What is it?)) she asked. She sounded somewhat hesitant.

((Did you know Operative Yastrzemski at all? Better than the rest of us, that is.))

((That's sensitive? Jeanne, I'm honestly not sure if I ever even said one word to him.)) Then followed the inevitable question. ((Why?)).

((I am just trying to figure something out. It is not important.)) A minor lie. Finding out what Melissa had against Aximili was very important. To me, at least. And it probably would be to Jake and Tobias as well. I was not sure what Jake would do if I came to him with my thoughts on Melissa's stance on Aximili, but I knew that Tobias, at least, would tolerate no such friction in our ranks. His method of reconciling them would probably be rough, blunt, and extremely efficient. He could be as subtle as any Visser when it seemed appropriate, but I was sure that, if given the opportunity to act with some degree of openness and honesty, he would jump at it.

Aximili gnawed away on the sewer pipe. Most of his body was inside now. The stories the others had told me about the digging prowess of Taxxons were in no way exaggerated. This would not take long at all. It left me some more time to think about Melissa.

I knew now that her issue had nothing to do with Carl himself. It was not as though Aximili killed a close friend or lover of hers. It was about what was represented by their conflict, then.

When Aximili murdered Carl, Melissa saw it was something murdering something else. Something *good* murdering something else good, which made the first seem much less good to her. And so she turned her feeling of betrayal against the avatar of that first concept, against Aximili.

That much, though, was only the most basic level of psychological analysis. Before anyone could begin to heal the rift that was rapidly growing between the two of them, someone would have to figure out what it was that these two men meant to her, both before and after. Ordinarily, that task would have fallen to Cassie. She had managed to turn David to our cause. She could fix the problem between Melissa and Aximili.

Except Cassie was dead. Tobias would be a good choice, but he had so much to think about lately that this was a problem best kept from him for now. It was important, certainly, and he would do everything he could to fix the issue. If the Animorphs did not trust each other, the Earth was lost. But for now, Tobias had other things to deal with. I could keep this patched until someone with more skill in this sort of thing could heal it. Perhaps time would do that.

In order to patch things up, though, I needed to figure out what Carl and Aximili meant to Melissa, and why this had hurt her so much. And I would have to think about perhaps the most difficult part of it all: figuring out how Aximili felt about all of this. Andalite psychology was rather foreign to me. I knew only the most basics, and those were taught by the Yeerks. They could not be relied upon.

I had been taught a number of misconceptions about Andalites. I was told that they were completely heartless, utterly ruthless, and needlessly cruel. They would destroy one race to aid another, and their decision on who to spare and who to destroy was made on a whim. Prince Aximili proved these stereotypes wrong a great many times. He had often proved them correct, on occasion. He certainly had done so with Carl.

((Sea to Jeanne. Do you read me, Jeanne?)) Marco's voice broke into my thoughts. I looked down. Aximili was nowhere in sight. Definitely in the pipe now. Jake was 'speaking'. I guess Marco kept his message private so as not to interrupt Jake or embarrass me.

((- go to our battle morphs. They're all capable of making it through that pipe. Ax will chew a hole into the hangar and we'll book it for the nearest suitable ship. Time is going to be tight, so try not to get hung up on Kelbrid. Whatever happens, make it to the ship, we can heal once we're in the air. Any questions?))

((Does the ship come with an in-flight movie?))

((Yes, but it's in Yeerkish,)) Jake responded. That was unusually witty for him. I think he thought of that one earlier and was waiting for a chance to use it.

((Jeanne, do I speak Yeerkish?))

((Only a smattering of obscenities,)) I answered. ((I am sure they will come to you when the time is right.))

((Well, that settles things, then. Let's go.))

CHAPTER 9

I landed in the water and began to demorph. Ahead of me, Aximili chewed away, now out of sight in the darkness of the sewer pipe. Marco roamed the water around me, protection against Aximili should he lose control over his morph. That did not seem likely at this point. I do not think he could have turned around if he had wanted to.

Fully human, I concentrated on my leopard morph. For this fight, I would have preferred my Garatron morph, but Jake held to an old Animorph rule about not morphing sentient beings. It was a rule only the Omegamorphs followed, and not one that I entirely understood. Arguing with Jake about it, though, would have been a waste of energy right now.

Rather than try to morph in the water, I swam to the pipe and stood inside of it. It was about the same height as me. The water was up to my waist, which would not be a problem. Certainly I was not in danger of drowning. Or being seen.

The transition to leopard was an easy one, and I gained control over my instincts without much difficulty. It was a morph I was used to, after all. Melissa landed in the water next to me, demorphed, and remorphed in a span of about five minutes. She was still somewhat slow at it, though to be fair I was not nearly as fast as Marco, Jake, and Aximili were. Jake demorphed and remorphed next, taking all of about two minutes. Marco took about the same time. In about ten minutes, we went from being three seagulls and an orca to a tiger, a gorilla, a leopard, and a panther.

((Prince Jake?)) Aximili called. He sounded distressed.

((Yeah, Ax?))

((I believe I am beside the hangar now. Once I chew through the pipe, we will be in the Yeerk pool. How should we proceed?))

((You get us in, then demorph. We'll cover you while you do that, then we run for the nearest suitable ship,)) Jake answered.

((And if they don't have something like the one we're looking for?)) Marco asked.

((Then we grab the nearest Bug fighter and take that to Mars. We'll figure out how to rescue the Iskoort along the way.))

((Ah, winging it, then. I have that feeling that tells me this is just like old times.))

By the time we reached Aximili, I could barely see anything. The light filtering in from the end of the pipe was so faint now that even the leopard's keen eyes could just barely make out what was around me. I knew that the others would be having the same trouble, and Marco was probably completely blind.

((Go for it, Ax,)) Jake commanded. ((Everyone else, get ready. There's probably going to be some shooting.))

I heard an odd grinding sound, and then light spilled into our pipe. Aximili pulled back and Jake darted through, followed by Melissa and then by Marco and myself. We were definitely in the hangar. Bug fighters idled in neat rows, waiting until they were needed. At the far end, I could see a shape I recognized. Black. Battle-axe in appearance. The Blade ship.

((That'd do it,)) Marco said quietly.

((No, Marco,)) Jake answered. ((There's no way we'll get away with stealing that.))

((We did the first time,)) I commented.

((With the loss of my eye,)) Aximili added as he demorphed. ((And very nearly the loss of our lives. It would be best to stick to the plan.))

Near the Blade ship were two more ships. They were about a quarter of the size of the Blade ship, much larger than Bug fighters. They consisted largely of one long, boomerang-shaped wing, raked forward with each end finishing in a Dracon cannon. The important part of the ship was like a tapering, flattened cylinder that was on top of the wing. Naturally, they were black.

These ships were exactly like the *Rachel*. Exactly what we came looking for.

As we were taking the sight in, a pair of Kelbrid appeared from around one of the Bug fighters.

They did not hesitate to lunge at us. But that was nothing we could not handle. We had been fighting Kelbrid for long enough that we could handle two of them easily enough.

Marco darted forward and caught the large, stinger arm of one. I pounced on it, sinking my teeth into the back of the creature's neck, then releasing quickly to minimize the damage my mouth took from the Kelbrid's acidic blood.

Aximili parried the stinger of the second one, and Jake slammed the blind alien in its side. The Kelbrid rolled onto its back, and Melissa leapt on top of it, raking it across its sensitive whiskers with her claws. Jake joined in, crushing its throat with both paws.

Aximili whirled and sliced off half the whiskers from our Kelbrid's face. It swung its hand at Aximili in a balled up fist, but that was a mistake. Aximili sliced its wrist off at the hand, and I moved in for the kill, biting the Kelbrid's throat again. It spasmed and died without uttering a sound. Jake and Melissa finished strangling the other one, which also died silently.

((Let's get moving. Another patrol's bound to come along soon,)) Jake said.

Marco grabbed the Kelbrid and dragged them into the pipe. ((When they get here, we don't want them seeing this, now do we? A hole in the wall is suspicious, but less suspicious than dead Kelbrid.))

We made our way through the lanes of Bug fighters, trying to be as quiet as possible. The last thing we needed was the Yeerk pool's worth of Kelbrid on top of us. Killing two Kelbrid was not

difficult for us. Killing five would be difficult. Killing ten would be impossible. If the Pool was alerted to our presence, things would get very, very difficult.

My nose detected a new scent, above the usual smells of the Yeerk pool. It was foreign to me, not something I recognized. I was about to say something when Melissa remarked, ((Do you smell that? I think I've smelled whatever it is before, but I'm not sure. It isn't Kelbrid. Or Hork-bajir.))

((I remember the scent,)) Jake said darkly. ((Somewhere very close by, there's a Ssri'Kai.))

CHAPTER 10

Ssri'Kai. Or, rather, Ssri'Kai-Controller. The thought made me shiver. We had only encountered Ssri'Kai-Controllers once before, when the Visser led us into a trap. If Carl had not arrived during that fight, we would all be infested or dead now. The Ssri'Kai-Controllers comprised the Apostates, the most elite warriors in the Yeerk Empire. The possibility of fighting one was not something that I was looking forward to.

((I only smell one,)) I commented.

((We can take him,)) Melissa said confidently. ((There are five of us, one of him.))

((You might be right, but I'd rather not chance it,)) Jake answered. ((Let's try and avoid him.))

Aximili peered around a Bug fighter with one stalk eye. ((I can see it, Prince Jake. The Apostate appears to be keeping watch over the Blade ship. However, he will undoubtedly see us if we attempt to enter either of the ships we want. Something to divert him would be best.))

((What could distract a highly disciplined Yeerk soldier enough to make him leave his post?))
Jake asked.

((An Animorph,)) Marco suggested.

((I do not think we want to give him one of those,)) I responded. ((Those are not what you would call expendable.))

((He doesn't have to catch one of us, just follow us around for a bit while the others sneak onto the ship,)) Marco answered. ((How fast are those things?))

((Slower than a Garatron,)) I answered.

((So much slower that he would more likely raise the alarm than chase said Garatron,)) Aximili argued.

He had a point, but a plan was starting to take shape in my mind.

((There's just one of him,)) Melissa repeated. ((I say we ambush him, rip out his throat, get on the ship, and head to Mars. We can handle one Apostate.))

((You didn't fight the Apostates,)) Jake answered, shaking his head. ((You were fighting Guraff in that battle, and that's probably the only time when having to fight Guraff counts as lucky. He wasn't trying to kill you.))

((How can you be sure about that?)) Melissa argued.

((Because if Guraff 427 tries to kill you, you die,)) Aximili replied calmly.

((Perhaps a bit of an overstatement, but he's probably right,)) Jake agreed. ((You're good, Melissa, but Guraff has decades of experience and a body that is more powerful than your panther. If he was trying to kill you, you'd have been split in half. I've fought a lot of people over the years, and believe me when I say that the Apostates are probably the best I've ever come up against. Two of them nearly killed four of us, and without Carl's help, they probably would have done it. Do I think that one can defeat all five of us? I don't know, but I don't want to risk that, especially since that sort of noise is going to wake up the whole Pool.))

((What if we give him something to chase that's slow enough for him to follow but too agile for him to catch?)) I suggested. ((I believe that you, Jake, as well as Aximili and Marco possess chimpanzee morphs. While an Apostate could keep up with one, with the chimpanzee's superior agility, he would never be caught.))

((You want one of us to go monkey and dance for the big blue guy?)) Marco answered.

((Approximately, yes.))

((How do we get away from him when everyone else is on the ship?)) Marco questioned.

((I believe this is where the Garatron morph would come in handy,)) Aximili answered. ((If one of us distracted the Apostate and someone else was waiting in Garatron morph, the person in the Garatron body could rescue the chimpanzee and reach the ship long before the Apostate realized what happened.))

((Sounds like a plan, but who goes?)) Melissa asked.

((We need Ax or Jeanne to prep the ship for us by bypassing the security and so on,)) Jake began. ((So that means Ax is out as chimpanzee or Jeanne can't be the Garatron.))

((Why are we only having one Garatron?)) Marco asked. ((Seems to me that if I was the chimp, I'd want as many people ready to grab me away from the Ssri'Kai as possible.))

((Good point. In that case, Jeanne and Marco both morph Garatron. Ax will infiltrate the ship. That leaves me as the chimp. Mel, go with Ax and watch his back, we have no idea who or what is in that ship, or how many are in there. Be cautious.))

Apparently, Jake did not realize that putting Aximili and Melissa together could end poorly. Then again, from what I understand, Jake was famous for not picking up on little things like that. Perhaps, though, that would help the two of them. Being forced to work together might help to close the rift that was growing between them. Count on Jake to do something like that by accident.

((Okay, this could get really dangerous really fast, especially if that Apostate raises the alarm. Ax, how long do you think it'll take you to get into that system?))

((Most Yeerk security these days is based off of what the Visser learned while using my mind. It should not take very long at all. Perhaps five of your minutes?))

((Ax,)) Marco began, ((I've got the feeling I've said this before, but just in case I haven't, they are everybody's minutes.))

((You are correct, Marco,)) the Andalite responded.

((I am?))

((Yes. You *have* said that before.))

CHAPTER 11

Before we could enact our plan, we all needed different morphs. It was only a matter of time before more Kelbrid stumbled across us, we needed to find a safe place to demorph. The only place we could think of was the hole where we entered. We made our way back with as much stealth as we could, considering that while Jake, Melissa, and I had quiet morphs, we were moving with a gorilla and an Andalite.

What we were going to do would be loud and would need to be fast. For this reason, Aximili and Melissa remained in their battle morphs, on either side of the opening of the pipe while the rest of us demorphed and remorphed. Jake and Marco morphed quickly. I was about half morphed when it happened.

A shadow passed across the opening of the pipe, then a Kelbrid head appeared inside. That was a bit of a mistake, as Aximili immediately decapitated it with two swings of his tail.

((YoualmostdoneJeanne?)) Marco asked. ((Letsnottakeforeveronthis, wehavethingstodo.))

((I know, Marco. Give me another minute.))

((AminuteislikeforeverJeane.))

((You will live.)) It took less than a minute for me to finish morphing, then we were ready to go. Everything seemed to be moving slower. It was a surreal experience. It was like time slowed down for everyone except for Marco and myself.

((Is...everyone...ready?)) Jake began.

((All set to go,)) Marco interrupted. ((Let's get this thing moving, I can't just stand around here. My legs are burning, I need to be running!))

((Just...hang...on...a...few...moments...)) Jake responded with agonizing slowness.
((I...need...to...get...his...attention...first...))

((Then don't just stand around here, go do it!)) Marco argued. He gave Jake a nudge with his tail.

((Go, go, go!))
((No...more...coffee...for...Marco,)) Melissa muttered.
((He...should...at...least...switch...to...decaf.))

((Perhaps he would be calmer if we all moved a bit faster,)) I answered, trying to remain neutral. It was so hard, though. Everyone was moving so slowly! I am not an impatient person, but this was intolerable! Perhaps it was -best that we did not use these morphs often.

Jake lumbered off to attract attention to himself. Aximili, Melissa, Marco, and I remained still. Marco and I would need to rush in and save Jake. Aximili and Melissa needed the time to board the ship. Marco and I were tense, ready to spring into action at the next thing that even remotely resembled a signal.

((I can't just stand here,)) Marco muttered, shifting his weight from one side to another.

I felt the same way. ((Perhaps we should move a little closer so we can watch Jake?)) I suggested.

((Sounds like a plan.)) He started walking forward. We stepped carefully, trying to make sure our hooves made as little sound as possible on the stone floor of the cavern that was the hangar. He and I inched our way up to a Bug fighter and hid in its shadow. There were two rows of Bug fighters between us and the ship we wanted. Jake was crawling underneath the farthest row. Thanks the fact that we were off to the side and the Blade ship was in the middle, we could see the Apostate well enough.

((Here...goes...nothing,)) Jake muttered. Then, he leapt out from under the ship, screeching at the top of his lungs. It seemed to happen in slow motion. The Apostate turned his eyes on Jake. Then, he began aiming his Dracon beam. Jake jumped into the air, grabbed onto the Bug fighter behind him, and climbed up on top of it.

Just as we planned, the Apostate followed him. But the Ssri"Kai-Controller was more agile than we expected. They have very strong legs, and he made it halfway to the Bug fighter in one jump. His dome-shaped feet stuck to the side of it, and in a pair of strides he was on top of it.

This was the first time I really had a chance to actually look at a Ssri'Kai when one wasn't trying to kill me. They have very strong legs, and long arms. Their feet are dome-shaped with suckers underneath them that allowed them to cling to surfaces. They have clawed hands, each with one

long, hooked finger with barbs on it. Their necks are as long as their bodies are tall, ending in arrow-shaped heads with soulless eyes and sharp teeth.

Looking at the Ssri'Kai, I realized something for the first time. The clawed hands, the clinging feet....they were a climbing species. They were fast, agile, and designed for exactly the sort of chase Jake was planning to lead this Apostate on. That was our first mistake, not realizing what our enemy was capable of. But that was the smaller mistake.

By the time the Apostate was on top of the Bug fighter, Jake was on the one next to it. But the Ssri'Kai didn't jump after him. Instead, he reared his head back and shrieked as loud as he could, an ear-splitting sound surpassed only by the cries of ravenous Taxxons or the namesake of the Howler. For a moment, I thought it was a battle cry. It was Marco who pointed it out.

((He's raising an alarm!)) That was our second mistake. We didn't count on the fact that Apostates differed from the usual Yeerk soldier in a very, very important way: Apostates were smart.

CHAPTER 12

((Plan B?)) Marco suggested.

((Do we have a plan B?)) I responded.

((Sure, it goes something like this.)) Then, loud enough for the other Animorphs to hear, he shouted, ((Jake, keep stalling him. Ax, Melissa, run to the ship! We have to get out of here!))

((Ah, so plan B is to panic.))

((That's about right. Now let's go grab that slow monkey.))

There was a problem with the Garatron morph, and that is that it is not good at vertical leaps or climbing. So, in order to get on top of the Bug fighters, we needed a ramp or something. Luckily, I saw one. ((The wings of the Blade ship,)) I said to Marco. ((We can use them to-))

((Climb up the Blade ship and jump onto the bugs, I can see that. Let's run!))

The world seemed to blur a little bit as we poured on the speed. The Blade ship had long wings, and at the end, they were close enough to the ground that we could jump up onto them. They sloped upwards until they were even with the top of the ship. We raced along the wings, climbing higher. I looked around to take stock of the situation.

I couldn't see Ax and Melissa. I had no idea where they would be at this point. Jake was keeping his distance from the Ssri'Kai, but while the Apostate was keeping an eye on him, wasn't focusing on Jake. The Controller was heading towards the opposite end of the hangar.

At one end as a very large piece of dark-grey metal. Ramonite, a so-called 'organic metal' because of its ability to stretch and grow. High-class ships were made using ramonite doors. The hangar door shielded by the hologram of the cliff was apparently a slab of ramonite. I could see a few other such pieces of ramonite, some on walls and some in the ceiling. More exits for Bug fighters. My guess was that the cliff door was the only one large enough for the ship we needed.

At the far end of the hangar, where the Apostate was heading, were what appeared to be blast doors, open a bit. Some Kelbrid were filing through, eager for a fight. More Kelbrid, the ones who had been patrolling the hangar, rushed around on the floor, trying to climb up onto the Bug fighters.

Marco and I reached to top of the Blade ship and took off toward the opposite end of the ship at full tilt. It narrowed to a sharp point at the bridge, and a couple of meters beyond that was another Bug fighter. That was our opening. While Garatrons were bad with vertical jumps, they were great with horizontal ones.

((He's...going....for...a...control...panel!)) Jake shouted.

((We'll get their first,)) Marco answered, jumping off of the Blade ship and onto a Bug fighter. I landed next to him. I kicked my back legs and sailed onto a nearby fighter, with Marco following me. We didn't know what the Apostate intended to do with that panel, and we did not need to know.

((At least the Kelbrid can't get up here,)) Marco remarked. ((And there's no way they're going to be shooting with all these ships to damage. We're safe!))

Naturally, he was immediately proved wrong. Through the opening in the blast doors, I saw something that made my blood run cold. Three more Apostates were approaching. One of them jumped through the doors and climbed up on top of a Bug fighter and then did something that turned my blood even colder.

He began to morph.

A pair of legs exploded from his chest, and his own legs started to get thinner. His arms shrank and grew more fingers as his neck sucked into his torso. He was morphing faster than I thought was possible for someone who hadn't been doing it for as long as the original Animorphs. He was slower than they were, but he was much faster than me. Before he was halfway done, I realized what he was morphing.

A Garatron.

((BADBADBADBADBAD,)) Marco shouted.

((You get the panel, I'll get the Controller,)) I advised as we continued leaping from Bug fighter to Bug fighter.

((Do I know anything about Yeerk security panels?))

((You fight, I get the panel.))

((Much improved.))

Now the other two Apostates were on top of the fighters. And now that they had the leisure, one set off to chase Jake while the last one moved towards us. An through the doors, I could see more Kelbrid coming, and something worse. An Andalite with a hint of silver in his fur, standing calmly in a sea of Kelbrid, with a short human by his side.

((Didn't Carl break Salheer's neck?)) I asked Jake.

He jumped from the roof of a Bug fighter, snagging the Dracon cannon of another and using that to swing himself onto a third. An Apostate was just behind him. ((Yeah...why?))

((Because he appears fine.))

((What...is....your...point?))

((I know of only one way to recover that fast.))

Jake then said some words that would best be left unprinted. ((They've got a cube!))

((Problem for another time,)) Marco answered as we split around the Apostate who was headed towards us. He was a millimeter away from brushing against me with his poisonous quills. I was a millimeter away from feeling like I was on fire.

The Garatron-morphed Apostate was right behind his fellow. Marco whipped at him with his tail, and the Apostate whipped back just as fast. Red slashes appeared on both their flesh. I had no time to spare on their fight, though. The original Apostate was interfacing with the control panel. He was standing on a concrete ledge, with a ladder leading to it. It was about the same height as the top of the Bug fighter nearest to him. A jump I could easily make.

I landed on the Bug fighter and then kicked off again, landing right next to the Apostate. He was not so distracted that he did not notice me, though. He thrust his neck at me as I landed. Even with my Garatron speed, it was hard to dodge. I countered by slashing him across the neck with my whip of a tail. He did not seem to notice.

I whipped at him again, but he fenced the blow away with his bladed head, cutting my tail in the process. He parried every strike I made and countered just as quickly. Guraff had trained them very, very well. I was still faster, but between the threat of his head, his claws, and his quills, it was a fight I was slowly losing. The barbs of his hooks scratched my flesh. The blade of his head cut my tail. His quills got into my skin little by little and started to fill me with their poison.

I heard the Visser's voice barking out orders as he tended to do. ((Seventeen, seal the hangar faster. They will not slip away this time. Five, catch that monkey already, stop toying with him. Nine, get to the Blade ship and make sure they are not on board! Kelbrid, check all other ship! Eight, stop playing with your morph and finish him!))

((Prince Jake,)) Aximili called, ((Melissa and I have secured the appropriate transport. Kelbrid are attempting to get in, but we have sealed the door.))

((Is there roof access?)) Jake asked. I realized that my mind was slowing down. It must have been the poison and blood loss. I could not keep this up any longer. I needed to get to the ship now.

((I am opening it now, Prince Jake. Engines are primed, as are the weapons systems. There were some inhabitants of this vessel, but we have sealed them in various areas for the moment.))

((Then let's go! Marco, Jeanne, get in the ship!))

((Get to da choppa!)) Marco added in what I can only assume was supposed to be an Austrian accent. Apparently, he did not forget that quote. He must have seen it before his time as an Animorph.

I turned away from the Apostate I was fighting and jumped back to the Bug fighter. His hook took out a section of my rear leg as I did so. Jumping would not be easy anymore. Through the still open doors, I could see that the Visser had started morphing something with large, blue eyes and more tentacles than an anime convention.

Jake was being followed, as was Marco. My Apostate was content to seal the hangar. Jake jumped down from the Bug fighters, into the sea of Kelbrid, the Apostate following him down. Jake leapt back out of the throng with a wound in his side. The Kelbrid did the same, with a leg wound. Already, it was slowing him down. A few more jumps and Jake disappeared into the top of one of the transport ships. That was our target.

Marco was still being followed, by an enemy as fast as he was. That was not a problem. ((Jeanneyouwannahelpmehere?)) he asked.

((Of course, Marco,)) I answered. Marco stopped instantly and turned around, engaging the Apostate in a mind-blowing fast battle of tails. That was foolish of the Apostate. I didn't attack him from behind. I slammed directly into him from the side. As he turned, stumbling, Marco slashed him across the eyes. Then we turned to run.

We landed on top of the transport and we could see the opening a few feet from us. ((Ladiesfirst,)) Marco offered. I jumped in, followed a moment later by Marco. We were standing in a lounge area much like the lounge we had on the *Rachel*. Aximili was standing behind the control console, Jake was demorphing, and Melissa was next to him in panther morph.

((Ax, get us out of here!)) Jake shouted.

((I am afraid there is a problem, Prince Jake.))

CHAPTER 13

((Problem!Whatproblem!)) Marco demanded.

((I am not sure where the cloaking device is...))

((Green switch next to a red interface,)) I muttered. So many of the controls on Yeerk ships were redundant, manual controls for things that could be controlled by thought interfaces. I suppose it kept the Taxxons busy.

Aximili began the liftoff procedure while the rest of us demorphed. I couldn't feel the ship rise off the ground, but I assumed it did. I heard several thuds from above me. Apparently, the Apostates weren't going to just let us go. Through the view screens, I watched as Aximili aimed the ship towards the ramonite door. ((That should be sufficient.))

He powered the engines, but instead of shooting forward, the ship just jerked. ((Something is holding on to us!)) Melissa shouted.

We got our answer very shortly. ((Little Animorphs! You expect me to let you get away! I'll pull you back down to the ground, rip open that ship, and eat your still-beating hearts!))

"Damn it, he summoned the Kraken," Marco muttered. Then he turned to me. "What do I even mean by that?"

"You were alluding to a movie you forgot you saw," I answered. "Aximili, does this ship have-

((Rear-facing weaponry? Of course. Would you be so kind?))

"It would be my pleasure," I answered, strolling forward and taking the weapons station. There was a mechanical control designed for Hork-bajir, but I was trained to use those. I activated the screen, toggled it to the rear, and took aim at the Visser's eyes. Much of the screen was blocked by the tentacles that held onto our ship. But there was enough. I did not want to see more than eyes and tentacles. I did not really want to see those, either.

I squeezed the trigger and red beams of light lanced into the Visser's eyes. ((AAAARRHHHH!)) he cried, letting go of the ship. We shot forward so fast that I fell over, as did everyone except Aximili.

((I was hoping you had gained more familiarity with your unstable biped design after all this time,)) he said calmly. I could not tell if he was joking or not. My instinct said no, but Jake and Marco laughed.

"We still need to make sure they don't follow us," I reminded them. "They won't send Bug fighters, we could just swat those down. The Blade ship would take too long to get going, so that just leaves the other transport. Get out of Earth's shadow and pop into Z-space. That will take us out of their sensors and they will assume we have escaped. We can drop back out shortly."

Aximili nodded and aimed us towards the atmosphere. A few moments later, Earth was behind us. The coast was not entirely clear, though. Ahead of us, there was what looked like a mushroom. An Andalite Dome ship. Several had been orbiting around Earth since the defeat of the Yeerks in the First War.

"Crazy thought," Marco began. "That ship is full of Andalites, right?"

"Yes," I confirmed.

"Our thing with the Yeerks has to say a secret, but they know the Pythagi are on Mars, yes?"

Melissa nodded. "So?"

"So why can't we just ask them to go and get the Iskoort for us? Is there some reason they can't do it?"

"A very good one," Jake answered. "The Dome ships around Earth don't actually have any weapons. If they hadn't agreed to strip those off, the human governments wouldn't have let the Andalites float capital ships around our planet. It's sort of a secret, though. The fact that those ships are there is probably one reason why the Pythagi haven't tried raiding Earth from their Mars base."

((The Dome ship will notice us passing by, Prince Jake,)) Aximili reminded him.

"But they can't stop us without weapons," Marco answered. "So just drive fast. We can lose them in the little jump to Z-space, right? And with them here, it'll prevent the Yeerks from following us. The Andalites see one Yeerk ship, they might think it's just a raid or a scouting mission. But if they see multiple, they'll really get suspicious."

"They do not need to see us," I said calmly. "I know a thing or two about boosting cloaking technology. It was a handy skill for an assassin to have."

I put my hand on one of the thought-interfaces on the command consol and began rerouting power from various systems to the cloaking field to boost its power. Then, I re-angled it so that the cloak would bounce off of the ship's own shields, turning it back in on us. While we would not be completely invisible to sensors, we would appear as a glitch rather than a cloaked ship.

Five minutes later, we were far enough away from Earth that we could make the jump to Z-space. Ten minutes after that, we were back in normal space with the Yeerks off of our trail. "That didn't go too poorly," Jake decided. "We got the ship and didn't get caught. Nor for part two."

"There's still one problem," Melissa began. "When the Andalite and I took this ship, there were some Kelbrid and Hork-bajir on board. We were able to keep them contained by sealing them in other parts of the ship. Everything outside of the lounge and command deck is sealed off. What are we going to do about that?"

"If it wasn't for the Hork-bajir there, I'd say just depressurize those areas and jettison them into space," Marco answered. "But I seem to remember Hork-bajir being nice guys."

"I have an idea," I answered. "I think I can get the Yeerks to leave their hosts. I think we will have to kill the Kelbrid, though."

"The Kelbrid are willing participants in this whole thing," Jake answered. "I don't like to say that a whole species is evil, but we all know that given even half a chance, those Kelbrid would kill us all and Yeerks or no Yeerks, that wouldn't change. On the other hand...to just have them killed out of hand..."

"I will see what I can do about that," I assured him. Then I activated the communications system and spoke to the Yeerks in the back. "Yeerks. My name is Jeanne. I am an Animorph. And I have an offer for you, a chance to save your lives. Leave your hosts and you will be spared. We will put you in a safe containment area and return you to your allies within the day. Refuse, and we will depressurize the areas of the ship that you are in, killing you and your hosts."

A few moments passed. Then a voice returned over the communications system, a gruff, Hork-bajir voice. "There are eight Hork-bajir here, and four Kelbrid. You would not kill eight Hork-bajir hosts, Jeanne the Animorph. That isn't how you operate in this half of the war."

This was apparently an educated Controller. Not the ordinary sort. He knew that Animorphs on one side of the war acted differently from those on the other side. But if he knew that Jake would not want to let us just kill them, then he knew who would. I was trained to anticipate and manipulate my target. And I knew how to manipulate this one.

"These orders do not come from me, Yeerk. They come from the Devil Prince. He has taken control of this ship from a remote location. Leave your hosts or he will kill you."

Another few moments passed. Then, "How do you want to do this?"

CHAPTER 14

A few minutes later, the Yeerks had drained out into the Yeerk pool on the ship and the Kelbrid were locked tightly in the captain's quarters. The newly freed Hork-bajir joined us in the lounge.

"How did you know that would work?" Jake asked me.

"Yeerk psychology was something I spent a great deal of time learning," I answered. "The average Yeerk is motivated by two things: ambition and fear. In order to convince a Yeerk to comply with a request, you must either offer him something he values or threaten him with

something he fears. And according to everything I have been led to believe, the Yeerks fear Tobias."

"What makes you say that?" Melissa asked. "I know he's pretty cold and a good leader, but are they scared enough of him to abandon hosts and put their lives in our hands?"

I nodded. "They know that, while we might not have been inclined to make good on the threat to kill them, Tobias would not hesitate. They fear him greatly. It is difficult not explain if you have not spent a great deal of time with Yeerks. They fear all of the Animorphs, the original ones at least. For a time, it was Jake who they feared most, and now it is Tobias. Returning to the safety of a pool was preferable to confronting Jake and, they thought, Tobias. Reputation is a powerful weapon."

"What now?" one of the Hork-bajir asked.

"Now, we have a plan to carry out," Jake answered. "We need to get something from the Pythagoras base on Mars, and we've got a plan to take it without a fight."

((Prince Jake, I believe these Hork-bajir can be of help to us. We plan to impersonate a delegation headed by the Undervisser. Hork-bajir guards will certainly help our disguise.))

Jake nodded. "Good point. If possible, I'd like for the rest of us to acquire those Kelbrid in the back. That should fool them. So how do we go about acquiring those?"

To my surprise, it was the Hork-bajir leader who suggested a solution. "Kelbrid obey Yaneth."

"Who is Yaneth?" Marco asked.

In response the Hork-bajir tapped his head. "Yeerk."

"Do the Kelbrid obey our Hork-bajir friend, or do they obey his Yeerk?" Marco asked. "I don't want to walk in there unless we know they won't rip us to pieces."

"You already have a Kelbrid morph anyway," I pointed out. "You would be in no danger."

"I would be if everyone else died..."

((If I may, Prince Jake? I could slowly lower the pressure in the room in which we have stored the Kelbrid until it sends them into a hibernative state. You would be in no danger from them.))

"I like the Hork-bajir's idea better," Melissa answered.

"Aximili's has less risk," I argued. "I think his is the best plan."

"I'm with Jeanne," Marco agreed. "'Sleeping Kelbrid are much safer than ones that can bite you.'"

Jake nodded. "I'm with the rest of them on this one, Mel. Put them to sleep, Ax. We'll let them out when we get to Mars, along with the Yeerks. Let's all just rest a little bit until we near Mars's orbit, alright?"

"Melissa, would you mind if we spoke privately for a few minutes?" I asked. Now that we had some time and were going into a dangerous situation, I wanted to try and find out what was behind Melissa's attitude towards Aximili. This could end in a fight, and I did not want to worry that she might not be willing to help him if he needed it. Animorphs need to count on each other.

Melissa shrugged and followed me into one of the barracks that had been vacated. "What is it?"

"I have noticed something that disturbs me," I answered. "It seems like you and Aximili are having some issues with each other."

"Is that all that surprising?"

"Yes, actually. While none of us agree with what he did about Carl-"

"To Carl, Jeanne. What he did to Carl. He wasn't a problem to be solved, he was a person, a human being. And the Andalite murdered him."

"I know that, and it upsets me too, but-"

"That's just it, Jeanne. It upsets you. That's all. It doesn't disturb you, it doesn't sicken you, it just upsets you a little bit."

"Perhaps I should be more upset, but it seems to me that the murder of one man is upsetting you unduly. I am not going to pass Carl off as just another casualty of war or a necessary sacrifice. Aximili killed him, and he did not need to die. But Aximili was being manipulated by Azmaveth. He was not entirely in control of his actions. And for that, I can forgive him. Why can't you?"

Melissa was quiet for a few moments. Then, slowly, she answered me. "I hate Yeerks. You know that. They took my family away from me, and when they started to move openly at the end of the First War, I was one of the first people they dragged down to their pool. My own father held my head under that sludge until I was one of them. When we had a few hours of freedom, while our Yeerks fed, I would hear stories. The hosts talked about you, the Animorphs. But they said you couldn't save us. You were too few.

"We were told to wait for the Andalites. They said they would show up and fix everything. They'd drive the Yeerks away and free all of us. They were supposed to be our saviors, or messiahs. And do you realize what happened? Do you really get it?"

"The Andalites didn't save us, the Animorphs did. The Andalites came afterwards, trying to take the credit. And over time, things filtered out. They were planning to 'quarantine' Earth, leave us to our fate. They were ready to let us get enslaved and then kill us all! Now I know not all Andalites are like that. At least, I didn't think they were.

"I could never forget that Aximili was one of the ones who saved us and ended that war. There were some twisted Andalites, but I thought there were some good ones too. And I still thought that, especially when I joined you guys and got to know Ax better. And then, what did he do? He went out on his own, without telling any of us, and murdered a human being who saved our lives. So yeah, I'm pissed. How can I -"

((Prince Jake, we are entering far Mars space. We should begin the preparations,)) Aximili interrupted.

"You heard him," Melissa muttered. "Let's go get our Kelbrid morphs."

As much as I had learned from her, there was still more to this. IT was not just about feeling betrayed by Aximili. There was something deeper that was bothering her, something that perhaps she was not aware of. And before we could fix this, someone would need to find out what.

CHAPTER 15

We acquired the now-sleeping Kelbrid without any difficulty. However, we did have Marco standing by in gorilla morph, along with the Hork-bajir, just to be sure. He demorphed as we sealed the doors again. "Man....forgot how tiring that gets. We almost done morphing, Jake? I'm beat."

"You'll feel better once you're a Kelbrid," Jake assured him. "Let's get to it. Remember, they have strong violent instincts, so keep yourselves under control. You'll want to attack anything that isn't another Kelbrid, so remember that we need the Hork-bajir to be alive. Since Ax is morphing Guraff, he's going to seal us in this room until we get under control. Everyone clear?"

"It'd be hard not to be," Marco answered. "Let's just get this over with, I'm exhausted."

We were all feeling a little tired. We had done a lot of morphing today. Seagull, battle morphs, Garatron, back to human, and now human to Kelbrid. And Marco was two morphs ahead of me, thanks to morphing orca and gorilla. No wonder he was tired. I am not sure if we ever did more morphing than this.

I concentrated on the Kelbrid I just acquired. Cat ears, whiskers, a crocodile's head and a gorilla's chest. Paws, claws, a ten-fingered hand and one poisoned stinger. That was all I needed to think about right now. I had seen enough Kelbrid that keeping the image of one in my mind was very easy.

The first change happened in my arm. It ballooned to an enormous size as muscles started piling up on top of it. I felt the bones in my hand fusing together as my arm stretched to become the Kelbrid stinger. "That's really not a good look for you," Marco commented. Then his eyes disappeared. "That's better."

My own eyes disappeared after that, so I couldn't see the others morphing. My whiskers were the last thing to appear, and it was a very strange world that I 'saw'. I Had sort of been in a Kelbrid

body before. On the mission to rescue Ax, I morphed a Yeerk and rode inside of Tobias when he morphed a Kelbrid.

I could not see. At all. Kelbrid simply had no sense of sight. But the whiskers dangling from my chin picked up some of the most minute vibrations. I could feel every beating heart in that room, sense the expanding and contracting of lungs, and even pick up the movements of the others' whiskers. I knew where there were walls and other barriers through a sense like echo location, through the vibrations bouncing off of them.

The mind as not what I was expecting. It was much calmer than I thought. There were other Kelbrid with me, but they were not the enemy. Not yet. There was no reason to fight them. I could not eat them. I did not need to prove myself to them. Combat was pointless.

((I think we're good, Ax,)) Jake said. ((You can let us out now.))

((Yes, Prince Jake.))

The door slid open and immediately, the mind I was expecting kicked in. I could smell the Hork-bajir. I could feel them breathing and their hearts beating. ((Keep a grip,)) Jake ordered.

((Who says you're in charge here, runt?)) Marco demanded.

Jake whirled to face him. ((I do. You have a problem with that?))

((Yeah, I have a problem with that. Someone as small as you shouldn't-))

"Control yourselves," Aximili interrupted with Guraff's voice. That had an unexpected effect on me. It was like a physical sensation. Something about the frequency of his voice, the vibrations it caused, made the Kelbrid part of me want to listen. It was like being a dog sprayed with a squirt bottle or smacked on the head with a newspaper. It did not hurt, but it made me pay attention.

That gave me enough time to regain control over myself. The Kelbrid part of me still wanted to attack the Hork-bajir, but I was in control now. ((I am in control.))

((Me took,)) Jake agreed. ((Marco, Mel?))

((Fine here.))

((Me too, Jake,)) Marco answered.

"Good. I have set the ship to land automatically. We will be on the Pythagi landing field within a minute". Aximili lead us out of the ship. The four of us flanked him, with our Hork-bajir 'guards' following behind us. I am sure we looked like a real delegation of Yeerks.

I cannot describe the Pythagi base, since I could not see it. I knew where things were and where they weren't, but I did not have enough experience with Kelbrid senses to make out any sort of details. I sensed a Pythagi fly towards us.

((I don't suppose you speak Pythagi, Ax...)) Jake began.

((Enough to get by, Prince Jake.))

We didn't have to worry about that, though. The Pythagi spoke to Guraff in Galard. I suppose the Undervisser was not known to be fluent in Pythagi. Luckily, Galard was part of my training. I was not fluent by any means, but I knew enough to follow a conversation.

"Undervisser. We did not expect-"

"I despise rudeness, Executive, but I do not have the leisure for pleasantries. Show me to the ship you captured. The Visser wants me to handle this matter personally. There is no telling who or what could be in that ship."

"I understand, Undervisser. Please follow me. The weapons we have that are powerful enough to penetrate its shields would certainly destroy it, leaving us with no idea who it belongs to. And the weapons that would not destroy it will not get through the ship's shields. I am confident that you will find some way to resolve the situation."

"Of course, Executive. I do not fail."

((Guide, can you hear me?)) Jake called.

((Jake?)) Guide's voice responded faintly. ((I was expecting you sooner. The refreshments are getting cold!))

((Refreshments?))

((Of course! The crew would be embarrassed if they could not provide something for their favorite celebrities to eat when they came to save us!))

CHAPTER 16

The Executive led us to the Iskoort ship without any argument. Apparently, the Undervisser backed by several Hork-bajir and Kelbrid gained the respect we expected. The ship itself was shaped like Pac-Man swallowing one of those little pellets he is always trying to eat up. It was a large sphere, about the size of the dome on an Andalite capital ship, with a smaller sphere at what I assume must have been the front, serving as the bridge. I later learned that the whole thing was blindingly white and reflective, like fresh snow.

The Pythagi were hovering around the ship. Some were trying to break through the side with Oda cannons, some were searching for entrances, and some were just observing. There were several large, ground-based Oda batteries aimed at the ship, but no one was firing those.

"As you can see," the Executive explained, "the problem is as I explained earlier. We cannot enter this vessel."

"It will not be a problem. Have all your people back away from the ship," Ax answered.

The Executive shouted something in his native language and the workmen abandoned the ship. ((Prince Jake, how are we going to get in? Will it not be suspicious if they open the door for us?))

((What if we find one on our own and 'force' our way in?)) Jake suggested. ((Guide, where's the nearest entrance?))

((The underside of the ship, on the side facing the sun. I will illuminate it for you.))

((Not too brightly,)) Marco warned.

We followed Ax around to the other side of the ship as he tapped against it, pretending to be searching for an entrance. We could not see the glowing portion of the ship, but I assume Aximili found it without too much difficulty, since he led us inside the ship. "Remain outside on guard," he instructed the Pythagi. "I will investigate with my soldiers."

The door sealed behind us and we demorphed. "Would you guard this door for us?" Jake asked the Hork-bajir. "It's the only entrance the Pythagi know about and we don't want them trying to walk in here."

"We guard," the Hork-bajir agreed.

The outside of the Iskoort ship appeared sensible and reasonable. This inside looked like they transplanted a section of their homeworld and put it into this bubble. There were platforms colored in ways that seemed specially designed to harm the human eye, all stacked on top of each other at seemingly random heights, with the least possible number of support structures. Compared to the stark sterility of the walls of the ship, the effect was jarring.

Just as bad, if not worse, was the noise. There were Iskoort everywhere. Thought-speak cries assailed us constantly, as did the incessant whining of their diaphragms. The effect of being in this space with them was like living in a migraine headache.

"Jake, do these things ever stop making noise?" Melissa demanded. "Or do I need to learn to morph ear plugs?"

"Can't plug out the thought-speak," Marco answered.

A gaggle of Iskoort emerged from a lift next to us. ((Friends! Oh, my dear, dear friends it has been far too long since I last saw you! Oh, you must sell me what happened to you during all this time.)) Presumably, that was Guide.

((No, sell the memories to me!)) someone else shouted. ((I will pay you in *grachak* fur!))

((I will pay you in weapons!)) a third one shouted. That was the point at which all of the cries assaulting us stopped making sense. One just flowed into another in a mess of thought-speech and whining diaphragms.

"No one is selling anyone anything right now!" Jake shouted over the noise. "We're trying to rescue you, remember?"

((Rescue me from bankruptcy!)) someone answered.

"No, from death and genocide," Marco answered.

"Jake," I began, "we cannot stay here too long. Sooner or later, the Executive will send a communication about this to Earth, or the Yeerks on Earth will tell the Pythagi here about the ship we stole. Either way, they will realize that we are not who we appear to be. We do not have a lot of time. We need to figure out a way to get the Iskoort from here to the ship without anyone seeing what they are."

((All in good time, Jeanne,)) Guide answered. ((First, refreshments!))

"What do Iskoort eat?" Melissa asked.

"I don't know," Jake admitted as the crowd of Iskoort swept us into the lift. "But they have blue tongues. I can't help but think it's related to that..."

The lift deposited us at a middle level of the ship. From the way the walls curved inwards and then outwards again, I could tell we were entering the smaller sphere that seemed to be attached to the larger one. ((This is the command bridge,)) Guide said proudly. ((Also emergency escape vessel.))

((Why did you not just use this to escape, then?)) Aximili asked. ((You *are* in an emergency.

((The Pythagi would just shoot it down if we tried to fly away,)) Guide answered. ((That and to abandon this ship would be a massive financial blow. I cannot quite bring myself to part with it.))

"You might have to," Jake informed him. "'I can't think of any way we can get this ship out of here."

((You expect us to abandon our ship?)) one of the Iskoorts demanded.

"It's either that or your race is going to die," Melissa answered. "Which is worth more, the lives of all your people or the ship?"

((There are also many expensive things *in* the ship,)) a different Iskoort put in.

"And you think that is worth more than your lives?" I asked.

They were silent for a moment. Then, someone shouted, ((ACCOUNTANT! WE NEED A MEMBER OF THE ACCOUNTANT AND CALCULATIONS GUILD!)) A moment later, all the Iskoort took up the cry until one answered.

((I'm an accountant!))

((Which is worth more, this ship and its cargo or our lives?)) Guide asked him. The accountant Iskoort rushed off somewhere, presumably to do his calculations. ((While he performs his task, what say we eat? You must be starving! Oh, Ax - do you mind if I call you Ax? - you will want to morph to human, you will need a mouth for this.))

((Only one mouth?)) someone asked.

CHAPTER 17

"Just remind yourselves it can't be worse than Rachel's cooking," Jake advised.

"What if it is?" Marco asked.

"Then we will die," I answered.

We were seated around a table in the middle of the Iskoort command deck. The accountant was nearby, putting information into the computer to determine if the ship was, in fact, worth more than their lives.

"Prince Jake, I am frightened," Ax admitted. "I do not want to die due to ingesting substances incompatible with my current morph.""

Several Iskoort put trays in front of us. The were covered by lids, so I could not see what was on mine. I could detect no scent from it either. ((We hope you enjoy it, the chef spent months trying to perfect the recipes. Four good Iskoort of the Culinary Arts and Waste Management Guild died in the process.))

"Those two work together, do they?" Marco asked.

((One leads to the other,)) Guide answered. ((Enjoy.))

One by one, we all turned to Jake. Someone had to go first. "Okay," Jake said, taking a deep breath. Then he pulled the lid off of his tray.

Sitting on the tray was a bacon cheeseburger, French fries, potato chips, and a large cup of what appeared to be some sort of cola. The rest of us had identical foods, except for Aximili. He just had the largest cinnamon bun I have ever seen. We stared at the food for a few moments.

((What were you expecting?)) Guide asked. ((We know what humans eat. We love watching your memories. From those, we learned that you would enjoy a meal of hamburgers, french fries, and RC Cola. Duplicating that particular brand was very difficult. We had to look at the nutritional information on a can of the beverage and, using the information it gave from that, attempt to extrapolate the proper chemical combination. I believe we succeeded.))

"For once, I'm glad we sold those, then," Jake answered. "I always felt really weird with my memories floating around somewhere on your planet."

((Speaking of which, I see that a great deal has happened to you since the last time we met,)) Guide responded. ((I'm sure we can work out some sort of arrangement...))

"Prince Jake, I feel I should remind you that we do not have an overabundance of time, as Jeanne pointed out earlier. Also, we should begin thinking of ways to get the Iskoort from here to the ship we stole."

"If I remember correctly," I answered, "The *Rachel* had two transport craft. We could put some of the Iskoort in those and use them to transfer the Iskoort to the ship we stole without the Pythagi seeing them. If questioned about that procedure, we could perhaps claim that we do not want them to see any of Mars."

"With Guraff's authority to back us, I think that would work," Jake agreed. "Now it's a matter of-"

((I have finished my calculations!)) the accountant announced. ((I first calculated the cost of this ship, as well as the cost of the equipment in it, as well as your wares and the loss that abandoning and destroying them would incur. Then, I calculated expected profit of the average Iskoort over the period of one lifetime, and multiplied that by the population of our race, acting on the generally accepted assumption that war with the Yeerks and Pythagi would mean the effective destruction of our culture. To that effect, I also calculated the estimated loss in profit that would result from such destruction and have arrived at a mathematical conclusion about the worth of this ship versus our lives.))

((What did you find?)) Guide asked.

((The results were staggering. Next to the estimated potential loss associated with the obliteration of our race, the value of this ship is negligible. The long-term profit yielded by our escape is almost immeasurably greater than the cost of this ship.))

"You needed math to tell you that?" Melissa asked.

((It is always good to be certain,)) the accountant answered.

"Okay," Jake began. "We need to get those two transports up and running. Ax, is the ship we stole still primed for travel?"

"Unfortunately, no, Prince Jake. I had to give the appearance that we planned to take a while to investigate this matter. It can easily be re-initialized by someone who knows how to do it."

"Marco learned how to do that sort of thing from Menderash during our initial voyage," I informed Jake.

"I did?" Marco asked.

((You did,)) Guide answered. ((You sold the memories of it soon afterwards.)) Two ideas occurred to me then. One was one I would have to investigate when we had more time. The other was something that could help us right now.

"Guide, do you have those memories here?" I asked.

((Oh yes, I have copies of all your memories. Why?))

"Marco needs things to jog his memory. Perhaps if he saw himself learning, it would stimulate his memory to the point where he would be capable of initializing the ship's systems. Is there a quick way to do it?"

((Absolutely. It is a short enough stream of memory that we can play it very quickly without the risk of neural damage to him. I can have it ready in a matter of moments.))

"Go do that," Jake ordered. "Ax, morph to Guraff. Jeanne and Marco morph to Kelbrid and go with him. Mel and I will prepare the Iskoort here. Marco, ready the ship for departure. Jeanne and Ax will pilot the transports. We should be able to squeeze everyone into the ship with two trips by each of you.

Our preparations took ten minutes, approximately seven of which consisted of Guide beaming Marco's own memories into his brain so that he would know how to start up the ship. The Iskoort might have held the key to restoring Marco's memory entirely. Perhaps, if the entirety of his life was forced into his brain, he would be able to remember the rest of it. It might be a permanent improvement, or failing at that a process Marco could repeat every morning. In any case, it could be a solution.

Marco looked exhausted when the Iskoort removed a headband-type device from his head. ((He is ready,)) Guide answered. ((He seems to be showing some decreased neurological functions, but he was exhibiting those prior to the memory transfer.))

"I'm just tired," Marco answered. "Too much morphing today."

"We only need one more from you," Jake answered. "Just morph to Kelbrid, get to the ship, turn it on, and you can relax."

"One more morph," Marco agreed. "I can do that." He glanced at me as if to ask 'Right, Jeanne?'

I nodded. He could. I was sure of it.

But as I've said before, I know a lot less about morphing than some of the other Animorphs.

CHAPTER 18

((I don't think I've ever been this tired,)) Marco complained once we were done morphing and Ax had again reigned us in with the power of Guraff's voice. ((I mean, I've forgotten a lot, but I can't imagine I've ever been this tired in my life.))

((I am sure you have,)) I assured him.

((I don't think so. Jeanne, you can feel how strong these bodies are. And I feel like I'm going to fall over. If I had eyes, I'd have a hard time keeping them open.))

((As you do not have eyes, you do not need to worry about that,)) I answered.

Aximili led us out of the ship, where a crowd of Pythagi was waiting for us. "'Undervisser. What have you learned?'

"I am afraid that due to the sensitive nature of this information, it is best that I discuss it with my leader before answering questions," Ax responded. He was being clever, not actually lying. Pythagi could literally taste deception.

"In all fairness, Undervisser, this *is* a Pythagi base. We have a right to know who and what we are detaining."

"I agree," Aximili answered. "And if I was at liberty to tell you, I would do so, but that is not an option."

"Undervisser, I must insist-"

"And I must refuse."

"I am the Executive of this colony. With the exception of the areas 'controlled' by the Skrit Na, this planet belongs to me, as do all things on it. That ship is the property of the Pythagi Conglomerate. As such, it is my right to know what is in it and where it came from."

"I agree, Executive, but I am not in a position to divulge that information."

"Let us try this a different way, then," the Executive answered, his tone changing. "I understand that you cannot, for reasons I must assume are good ones, tell me who or what is on that ship. But perhaps you could tell me what is *not* on that ship."

"I am not sure I understand."

"Let us say that it was a Skrit Na vessel but you could not tell us that. You could, perhaps, tell us something to the effect of 'I cannot say that it is a Skrit Na vessel.'"

" I believe I understand now. To that effect, I could not tell you that this is a Ssri'Kai vessel." This was good. The Executive had opened the door for Aximili to explain things without lying. I hoped the chemistry of his body would understand. Presumably, as long as Aximili did not think he was lying, his body would not receive the proper signals to alter its chemistry accordingly.

"Ssri'Kai?"

"I could not tell you that," Aximili answered. "But if it was a Ssri'Kai ship, it would be extremely dangerous for your men to enter it. I can virtually guarantee that they would all be killed."

"What can we do about it?" the Executive asked.

"I have reached an understanding with the occupants of the ship," Aximili explained. "They wish to be taken to a place chosen by my leader. We will use the transport craft in my ship to transport them from their ship to mine so that no one sees anything they cannot be allowed to see."

"Of course, of course."

"Once I have them all on my ship, you may do what you like with theirs," Aximili finished.

"That sounds acceptable, Undervisser. I assume I will be kept informed of everything you learn from them?"

"We will share all information with you that we can," Aximili agreed. I knew that meant he would be sharing nothing.

"Your reputation for honesty is exceeded only by your reputation as a warrior," the Executive responded. "If you say that you will keep me informed, I will accept it as strong as any contract."

"Then we will have no problems." Aximili turned and began led us back to the ship. ((I will take the first transport,)) he explained. ((Jeanne, I believe it will be safe enough for you to follow soon after, but I think it would be best if you remained with Marco during the initial stages of his task, just in case there is a problem.))

((Understood,)) I agreed.

We entered the ship and Aximili immediately started off for the small hangar that held the two transports. ((We should demorph now, Marco,)) I prodded when we entered the lounge of the ship.

((Yeah, I know,)) he answered, settling his chin on his larger arm. ((Just let me get up the energy. It'll take a moment.))

I waited patiently for a few moments while Marco sat there. And then I noticed that his heartbeat had slowed. So did his breathing. It took me a moment to realize what had happened. He was tired that he fell asleep.

((MARCO!)) I shouted. ((WAKE UP!)) I nudged him with my stinger.

The reaction was instantaneous. He snapped into a standing position and before I realized what was happening, my body was dodging as his stinger scraped across my flank. Why was he attacking me?

Of course. He woke up in a Kelbrid morph, with only 13 years worth of memories. He would have no idea what was happening and was probably in the grip of the Kelbrid's instincts.
((Marco, you need to calm down.))

He lunged at me, his maw wide open. I swept my weaker arm in front of me to block him. His jaws clamped down on my forearm and I heard the bone snap. I had little choice but to counter attack, so I stabbed my stinger into his leg, hoping I wasn't severing an artery.

Marco jerked his head back and forth sharply. Kelbrid can take a great deal of pain before they notice it, but it felt that. I screamed at the top of my 'lungs' but Marco didn't stop. I stabbed my stinger into his leg and side again and again, but he didn't feel it.

Then, he jerked away from me one last time, taking my whole forearm with him. My arm was hacked off at the elbow by his teeth. Now, even the Kelbrid was screaming. Blood was gushing out of my wound like I had rarely seen before. Perhaps if I had really been fighting, I would not have suffered so badly, but I was holding back. That is not an option with Kelbrid.

I held my arm to my chest in an attempt to slow the bleeding with little effect. I could not concentrate on the wound anyway. Marco slammed his full weight into me and I rolled over on my back. I could hear extremely faint thought-speak, too faint to make out. It had to be coming from him.

((Marco, listen to me!)) I cried. He struck down at me with his stinger, but I parried it with my own. ((This is not a bad dream, Marco. This is real!))

Again he struck, and again I parried him. He tried to hold down my working arm with his weak one, but I shrugged that off and scratched him across the chest. ((You are not in control of yourself, Marco. You are a human being. You are not a Kelbrid. This is not your body.))

He paused. ((Marco. My name is Marco.))

((Yes, it is. And you are a human being.))

((But...no, I can't be. If I was then I wouldn't...))

((You have temporarily assumed the body of a Kelbrid. An alien.))

((Kelbird. Kelbrid...right...Kelbrid. I'm not a Kelbrid. I'm human. My name is Marco.))

((Yes, you are right. You need to become human again, Marco. Right now. I cannot remain in this body much longer, it is dying.))

((How can I do that?))

((Think about yourself as a human,)) I explained. ((Close your eyes and think about Marco the human. Just keep your eyes closed and concentrate.))

While Marco demorphed, I did the same. For once, I finished before he did. Several minutes later, we were two humans in the blood-soaked lounge. Marco sat on the floor, his arms wrapped around himself. "I don't want to do that again."

"You won't have to," I answered. At least he wouldn't have to remember any of this. I pointed towards a chair. "Go and rest. You need it."

"I'm not going to sleep if I can wake up like that again."

"You won't, I promise," I told him. Then I said something I really should not have. "This is all a dream, Marco. Just a bad dream. Go to sleep and when you wake up, you won't even remember it."

CHAPTER 19

With Marco unable to help us, transferring the Iskoort over to our ship took a little longer. Aximili had to make three trips while I made the final one after I prepared the ship for departure.

The ship was crowded with the full Iskoort delegation and our new Hork-bajir friends, but we made some room just before we left. We released the captured Kelbrid and Yeerks onto Mars, keeping our promise.

((As soon as the Kelbrid and Yeerks explain that we are Animorphs, the Pythagi will begin shooting at us,)) Aximili warned us.

"Then fly fast," Jake advised.

((I think that they will be otherwise occupied,)) Guide said calmly. ((You see, we could not allow them to get the information or merchandise on our ship, so we left a little surprise for them.))

"A surprise?" I asked.

((Yes. There is a certain gas contained in the ship that has the unfortunate side effect of exploding when exposed to oxygen and carbon. We set the ship to vent all of its other gasses except for that one, and then to seal itself up completely. The instant someone enters that ship and exhales carbon dioxide, the resulting explosion will completely destroy the ship and everything in it. And just in case that does not succeed, we have also set the ship on a self-destruct timer. The Pythagi will get nothing from us.))

"I'm starting to warm up to these guys," Melissa admitted. "How is Marco feeling?"

I had explained the situation to them when they first arrived, since they had, quite naturally, asked me where all of that blood came from. Marco had refused to sleep at all, and when the Iskoort came, Marco put himself in with them so that the noise would keep him awake. He was too cynical and paranoid to accept my explanation that it was all a dream, especially because so much of it felt so familiar.

"This experience might mentally cripple him if we do not somehow address it," I admitted. "I think we must take steps to prevent this sort of thing from happening again. An idea has come to mind that might resolve his difficulties permanently."

"You think you have a cure?" Jake asked.

"We must keep in mind that Marco's disorder is not a physical one. His memories left him because his mind could not reconcile the fact that you returned from the dead, Jake. It is a psychological problem. However, when he has things explained to him, he remembers them fairly well. This suggests that his mind has now prepared itself for the shock that caused him to lose his memories in the first place. The problem is that those memories are only there in a vestigial sense. I believe that if we could give them back, he might be able to retain them."

"We've tried explaining things to him," Melissa argued. "He always forgets it the next morning."

"We are giving him definitions and stories, not memories," I answered. "But the Iskoort can actually give him his memories back. They have them recorded and we can use their technology to insert his own memories back into his mind."

The Iskoort had salvaged some things from their ship that they were not willing to part with. One of those things was the machine they used to project memories, as well as Guide's extensive collection of memories. We had the capabilities to carry out this plan.

((It is risky,)) Guide answered. ((When we show memories, we edit them, since no one wants to watch every single moment of someone's life. They are edited for both time and content. There is a finite number of memories a brain can process. This tends to vary from species to species, but I would estimate Marco to be at the low end of the spectrum to be safe. We would have to take it slowly, but we could have it done over the course of a few days, if we did nothing but that, allowing for necessary biological functions.))

"You know a lot about this," Jake commented.

((I made a fortune in the memory business, Jake. I should know all there is to know about it. I would like to begin as soon as possible, and preferably while Marco is asleep. His brain will be more suggestible to outside influences then.))

((What are the possible risks?)) Aximili asked.

((There are a few. He might lose touch with reality, unable to distinguish between past and present, or dreams and reality. He might go completely insane. He might forget everything he knows. If we take things slow enough, though, we should be fine.))

"Anything else?" Jake asked. I could see he was thinking about it, but I knew what his answer would be. He would not agree to anything that might make Marco lose touch with himself or reality, but he would let Marco decide that for himself. I was of the same opinion.

((I would recommend performing the procedure in complete isolation. For something like this, I think having as little external input as possible would be preferable. I would also like to keep him unconscious during the whole thing, preferably with sedatives as blows to the head might have an adverse effect. I must confess that this has never been done before.))

"I'm not sure about this, but it's Marco's brain," Jake answered. "I'll go get him so we can see how he feels about this."

Jake returned a few minutes later with Marco. "Jake explained the whole thing to me," he greeted us. "I'm going for it. I just...I can't keep going on like that. Knowing that I might wake up like that again and hurt someone else...I can't live that way. If there's a way to fix this, then I want to take it."

I took his hand in mine. "Are you-"

"Sure? God no. But I'm going to do it anyway."

"Marco," Jake began, "if things don't-"

"Jake, man, don't say goodbye or anything. I need a positive attitude for this sort of thing. If I go into this depressed and thinking that I'm not going to come back from it, it might totally screw up my whole personality. So no goodbyes, okay? I'll see you in a couple of days."

Marco turned to go with Guide to a room we had forced the Iskoort out of so that Guide could begin right away. We wanted to know one way or the other before the wedding. I knew Marco didn't want goodbyes, but I couldn't let him go like that, knowing that he might not come back. After so long, I had started to forget that we Animorphs were mortals and that sometimes, things just didn't work out for us. Cassie's death reminded us all of that. Before, I would have known that Marco might not be coming back from this, but it wouldn't have felt real. Now, it was all too real.

I grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around to face me. He didn't want me to say goodbye, but I had other ways of telling him. I pulled him close to me and kissed him like I am sure I have done in his dreams a thousand times. "You owe me one," I told him, turning him back around to go with Guide. "Pay me back when you remember."

CHAPTER 20

The next eight days were spent waiting by everyone. We Animorphs were all waiting to see if Guide and the other Iskoort could heal Marco. We were also waiting the day of Tobias and Rachel's wedding. At least we knew how the second one would play out. Tobias and Rachel would be married and literally no force on Earth could stand in the way of that. What would become of Marco was another story.

It was the eighth day of his treatment and, according to Guide, it would be the last day. Marco had been kept sedated in his mansion the entire time, so no one had any idea how things were progressing. Not even I had been allowed to see him. At least the Iskoort were taking the matter seriously.

We also took the next eight days to deal with Cassie's death, something that we had been forcing ourselves to avoid before. We all had our own ways of dealing with it. Jake was withdrawn, talking almost entirely to Melissa. Aximili was similarly withdrawn, doing whatever it was proper for an Andalite to do for the death of a friend and comrade.

David and Al seemed particularly pained by Cassie's loss. At first they spoke little, but after four days of that, Sara started dragging the two of them all around town, forcing them to have a good time. They seemed a little happier after that. My step-sister was remarkably good at cheering them up.

James did not seem particularly broken up about Cassie's loss, though I do not know him well. It is possible, perhaps probable, that he did his mourning on his own, where the rest of us could not see. Ronnie attempted to do the same, with no success whatsoever.

We rarely saw Ronnie over the next eight days, which was unfortunate. We had been hoping to take that time to get to know him better. He remained in the room he and Cassie had shared during their stay at my father's house. His activities consisted of drinking and crying, usually at the same time. He would drink until he passed out, and when he woke up he would continue doing so.

I do know that there were at least two days when he was not drinking. On the first of those days, Tobias took him to the Gardens to get some morphs. I know that on the other day, the two of them were sparring, though I do not know where. As I understand it, Tobias spent some time drinking with Ronnie as well, and I understood why.

Tobias knew exactly what Ronnie was going through. Tobias was someone Ronnie could trust, someone he could relate to. Someone who had suffered the same pain and come out stronger for it. Tobias was carefully building Ronnie's loyalty, which would prove to be very important when

Ronnie went on active Alphas duty. It was a good plan, and one that I chose not to interfere with.

I spent a good deal of time with Rachel and the rest of my family, making certain everything was ready for the wedding. It was a slightly confusing service for several reasons. Rachel's family was Jewish, though not very devout, so there were some customs that were simply going to be ignored, like the tradition of the bride and groom not seeing each other for a week before the wedding. Also, Rachel refused to fast on the day of the wedding, and I am not going to try telling a pregnant woman not to eat.

To make things more complicated, there were some Andalite traditions that Tobias and Rachel insisted be adapted for humans. That was a bit complicated as well. While I helped with all I could, though, I was still focused on two problems: Marco and Melissa.

I finally came to the conclusion of both those problems on the same day. I was in Marco's comic book gallery, waiting for the final verdict on his condition from the Iskoort. I heard the door open and Jake announce himself and Melissa. All of the Animorphs would be arriving today.

Melissa sought me out. "How are you feeling, Jeanne?" she asked me.

"More nervous than I have ever been," I answered. This was the first time I had a chance to talk to Melissa alone in a while. I decided to use that time to get to the bottom of her problem with Aximili. "But let's talk about something else. Last week, we were talking about your problems with Aximili."

"Do you really want to bring that up?"

"Yes, I do. I would like to try and resolve all of my problems today. I consider this one of them. I understand that you feel betrayed by the Andalites, and by Aximili in particular. But there is more to it than that."

"Yeah, there is. I've been thinking about this for a while, trying to figure out why the murder of a relative stranger bothers me so much."

"Did you think of anything?"

She nodded. "Yeah. It isn't just what happened to Carl, or how I feel about what Ax did. It's also about all the rest of you. About how you don't even seem to care when someone dies. Ax murdered Carl, and did he have any sort of punishment from it? A few dirty looks and some harsh words, but that's it. And when Cassie died, it was like you'd all feel sorry when you had the time for it, but not when there were more important things to do. Stuff like this just doesn't seem to bother you anymore."

"It still bothers all of us, Melissa," I answered her.

"But not like it should. I'm not saying we should feel bad for killing Yeerks or Kelbrid or Pythagi or Ssri'Kai or even Hork-bajir. But when humans die, it's like you don't care anymore. Jake told me about how hard you all tried back during the First War to keep humans from dying. Now it's like you barely even notice. And maybe you do still feel bad, but not as bad as you should."

"And that upsets you? That we have accepted our roles as soldiers?" I pressed.

"No, it's not that! It's that...we're supposed to be the good guys. But look at the things we do, the people we kill, and how little remorse we show for it. We're supposed to be heroes, but..."

"But we aren't heroes, are we?" I answered. "At least, not all the time. I know what you're feeling, Melissa. I had a hard time dealing with it, too. Before I became an Animorph, I read every book on them that I could find. I watched every interview, I learned all I could. I thought that I was going to be a hero, too. I didn't understand what being an Animorph really meant."

"For months, I really couldn't deal with that. I would find places to be alone and I would cry. It felt like the things we had to do kept getting more and more wrong. First invading Tri-I's headquarters, then the deaths of Santorelli and Jake, then the deals we made with Mersa...I couldn't feel like a hero, after seeing all the bad things we did. I can see now why you direct your anger and frustration at Ax. With everyone else you've seen killed, you can argue that they deserved it, that they were in some way bad or evil and that we were still good. But Carl...there wasn't an ounce of evil that we could see in him, and he got killed just like any Kelbrid, in the end. Another casualty we caused. Whatever beliefs you had about us being heroes, Aximili shattered them."

"So how do we do it?" Melissa asked. "We're not the good guys. Not with all of the things we do. What does that make us?"

"There are many types of heroes in this world," I answered. "And I will not claim to know what kind we are. But I do know this. The Yeerks want to take every last sentient being in the galaxy and turn them all into complete and abject slaves. I know that Azmaveth is testing humanity and that if we do not pass his test, our entire race will be exterminated more completely than we can imagine. We have to fight this war, and we have to win, because the consequences if we lose are unacceptable. It isn't how we fight that makes us good or evil, it's what we fight against."

"Do you really believe that?" Melissa responded. "Yeah, maybe that makes sense, but when we get right down to it, do you really think that's true?"

"Sometimes," I admitted. "Other times it just seems like something I'm telling myself so I can feel a little better."

"Well, which is it?"

"It doesn't matter," I answered. "How I feel about it doesn't change the reality of it, and that is perhaps the most important thing to understand about being an Animorph. Whether we like it or hate it, it is who and what we are and we all have to find a way to live with it or it will destroy

you. Look at what happened to David. The first time, he couldn't find a way to live with being an Animorph and the result was a series of actions that nearly destroyed him and threatened all of Earth. Marco could not deal with it and he lost his mind.

"I hope, Melissa, that you can find some way to cope with the life you now have. I would hate to see something happen to you. But I also hope that you do not try and cope by blaming Ax."

"Lovely words of advice, Jeanne," I heard Marco say from behind me. I turned around, ready to ask him how things had worked. Before I could speak, he kissed me. "I owed you that one."

CHAPTER 21

"Wake up, Jeanne," Marco said, shaking me awake. "We have to get ready for Bird Boy and Xena's wedding." The full impact of what he said hit me almost instantly. Marco remembered his nicknames for them. He remembered it was their wedding day. He remembered me.

Marco remembered.

"So it worked," I said happily.

"Extremely well," he answered. "Things after when I lost my memory are a little hazy, but I can remember the important things."

"I am very glad to hear that," I replied, moving to get out of bed. Before I could, Marco took my hand.

"Like, I remember how you sat with me every single morning and told me my own life story over and over again. I remember you putting up with the exact same jokes every day. I remember that you never gave up on me for even a moment, Jeanne, and I don't know what I can say other than thanks."

"I can think of one thing you might say," I answered.

"The thought had occurred to me. But I just don't know if I'm ready for that. I always thought it was just a word, but now...now it really means something to me, and I don't want to say that to you just because of the situation. It would feel...less honest or something."

I nodded. "I suppose I'll accept that answer for now. There is something I want to give you," I added.

"Oh yeah?"

"But not until after the wedding. Get dressed."

We did not have far to go, since the wedding was being held on Marco's lawn. Since not many people knew that Rachel was alive, it was a small ceremony. We had told a few that she had

actually been captured by the Yeerks and that we had rescued her, but we did not tell the world at large. There would have been a media frenzy and questions we were not prepared to answer.

Some people knew she was alive, though, and with the exception of most of our enemies, all of them were here. There were chairs set up on the lawn where the guests would sit. Rachel's half was populated mostly by humans. Tobias's half held a large collection of aliens. There were multiple Andalites, a large collection of Hork-bajir, and even one Yeerk. That Yeerk was, of course, Guraff 427.

I was not sure if he would still be invited to the wedding after killing Rachel's best friend. I guess his friendship with Tobias and Rachel was deeper than I suspected, and that worried me.

But this was not the day for that.

Oddly enough, Guraff was wearing a tuxedo, specially tailored to accommodate a Hork-bajir body, complete with sheathes over most of his blades. And he seemed to be chatting very animatedly with a Hork-bajir female. "Marco, who is that female Guraff is talking to?"

"I think that's Toby," Marco answered. "We haven't spoken to her in a while. We should really get back in touch with her."

I saw some people I recognized as Chee, but no Erek King. As I understood it, no one had heard from him in a while and that was starting to worry me too.

In accordance with one of the Jewish wedding traditions they had decided to follow, Rachel was seated on a throne, receiving guests. Tobias was being surrounded by well-wishers.

Traditionally, they were supposed to sing songs and make toasts, but Tobias does not know many people who are in the habit of singing. One person he did know who was in that habit was a Russian man whose name I did not catch. He sang very, very loudly.

Eventually, the ceremony itself started. Tobias put a veil over Rachel's face, and then he was escorted to the canopy. Ordinarily, his parents would have escorted him, but that was not an option. There was a similar custom among the Andalites, so in accordance with that, Tobias was escorted by the two people responsible for his safety, his *shorm* and his commanding officer.

Aximili and Captain-Prince Glorfindel.

Dan and Naomi escorted Rachel to the canopy. She circled around Tobias seven times, finally stopping at his right side. Then a rabbi said the appropriate blessings in Hebrew, so I cannot provide a translation.

Then came the most Andalite part of the service. Guraff came forward and handed something to Tobias, then left. Tobias held it up so we could all see it. It appeared to be about a foot of a Hork-bajir's blade. He lowered it and turned to Rachel. "This was given to me as a gift, from a very good friend. It has the power to take my life. Since I do not have a tail blade, I offer this to you instead. My life is yours now, and should you choose that it is unworthy of you, then you may take it from me."

Rachel took the blade and raised it to Tobias's throat. "Commander-Prince Tobias-Sirinial-Santorelli. You have offered your life to me. I find it worthy." She lowered the blade and handed it to Tobias, who stabbed it into the ground between them. If this was an Andalite wedding, that would have been the conclusion, but there was one more thing to do.

Tobias took her hand and held a ring so it could be seen. "Behold, you are betrothed unto me with this ring, according to the law of Moses and Israel." He slid the ring on her finger. By all the laws of the Jewish people, they were now husband and wife.

There were some more blessings, and Tobias and Rachel had to sign a marriage contract, but at this point, that was really just formality. I understand that there was supposed to be a little wine involved, but they chose to forgo that due to Rachel's pregnancy.

After that came the moment that every human recognized. They placed a glass on the ground wrapped in a cloth and Tobias smashed it with his foot. We all shouted ""Mazel Tov" and gave them an enthusiastic reception as they went from the canopy to a room in Marco's mansion. I do not know what it was they were doing in there, but I will say that when they came out, Tobias was missing his tie and Rachel was lacking lipstick.

I won't go into detail about the celebration we had afterwards. It lasted for hours, with lots of singing, dancing, and drinking. The last one of those usually led to more and more of the first two, which put people in the mood for even more drinking.

I was doing a bit of drinking myself, so my memory slightly cloudy on some points, but unless I was badly mistaken, I thought I saw Guraff and Toby leave together. I also thought I saw Naomi and Tobias shake hands, but that had to have been the alcohol.

"So," Marco said to me when people were beginning to leave, ""Tobias is now your brother."

"It is a very strange thought," I admitted.

"Your family now contains two secret agents, a girl who came back from the dead, a girl who seems to have a crush on a rat, an alien who was raised by robots, even more aliens, and, of course, Tobias, who I no longer know how to describe."

"When you put it that way, it does seem exceedingly odd," I agreed. Tobias was now my brother-in-law, and by extension, so was Al, and to some extent the rest of their Andalite relatives. Strange indeed.

"Now, Marco, I believe I promised to give you something," I began.

"Oh right, you did. What was that?"

"I would rather show you than tell you. This was something I have wanted to give you for months now, but I would not do it unless I was sure you could remember. I think it will be worth the wait," I answered, taking his hand and leading him to our bedroom.

Mazel Tov.

And now for some words of wisdom from Streetlight Manifesto:

*"The day will come as sure as the ever-setting sun
All of those that self-imposed will find themselves so indisposed
And we know not what we do (Can you hear their call?)
Will we ever make it through?"*

*As they watch us fall from the sky to the ground to the sea
Woe is me, woe is me, no one will save you now
We can only look away (away!), away-way-way-way-way
We will not be victims there`ll be no victims of to speak
And only then will we be free*

*And up will rise the meek
And when we fall we will fall together
No one will catch us so we`ll catch ourselves
And where we roam we will roam forever
No one will understand what we meant*

*Now, with the line drawn in the wet sand
You need to tell us where you stand
Sitting, waiting, watching, rotting, everything they warned us of is true
Now tell me what we`re all supposed to do
They`re coming after all of us with everything they`ve got
With the fury of a soldier who will answer to his God
So how will we fight? When all we have is logic and love on our side*

*And when we fall we will fall together
No one will catch us so we`ll catch ourselves
And where we roam we will roam forever
No one will understand what we meant""*

- We Will Fall Together

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

MEGAMORPHS 6:

Survivors of the Kelbrid

"Erek? What about Erek?" I asked. "We haven't seen or heard anything from him in months. Some of us were getting worried."

Mark nodded. "There's a reason for that. Months ago, the Yeerks sent a diplomatic detachment into a sector of space beyond what used to be called Kelbrid space, looking for some new allies."

((That could be a problem,)) David admitted.

"You don't know the half of it. The species they're trying to ally with is one you've met before."

"Who?" Jeanne asked.

Mark took a deep breath. I have no idea why the android felt the need to do that, but he did. "The Ssri'Kai."

We were silent for a moment. Finally, Al broke the silence by saying, with typical Andalite understatement, ((That could have an extremely adverse effect on our current war.))

"That is one way of putting it," Mark agreed. "Erek has been doing what he can to sabotage the meetings to keep this from going through, but according to his last transmission to us, the Yeerks are tired of waiting. They want their new allies now and infestation is much quicker than negotiation. Erek is trying to stall that, but he needs help. Someone who can shut down the Yeerk operations there. And that isn't something he can think of to do without hurting anyone."

"So we're what, Erek's hit-men?" I asked.

"In a sense, yes," Jeanne answered. "We cannot allow this plan to succeed, James. You must see that."

"I'm not arguing," I responded. "'I was just making sure we all knew that we were being called from the other side other galaxy to do someone else's dirty work.'"

((Yeah, I know that's what we're doing,)) David responded. ((And if it stops the Yeerks from getting more Ssri'Kai, I'm all in. Two Ssri'Kai beat James, Cassie, Al, and me without much of a fight. We can't let them get an army of them. For that, I don't mind being an android's hired gun.))

"Hired gun?" Ronnie commented. "If we're smashing Yeerks, I'll do it for free. I need the practice."

((I would like to have Prince Tobias's permission but as he is currently unavailable and has advised me to act on my own judgment, I support the idea of putting a stop to this.))

"Just so long as we all know that we're basically assassins, I'm in," I answered.

"Being an assassin is not as bad as it may sound," Jeanne replied. "I am in as well. Melissa?"

"You have to ask? I'm with Ronnie. I'd do this even if there wasn't any sort of advantage in it."

((Do you have any idea how to get us there, Mark?)) David asked. ((Tobias and Rachel took the Reliquary, and Marco, Jake, and Ax are off in the ship we stole when we had to rescue the Iskoort.))

"In order to get that far in time to be of any help, you would need a ship faster than any built by Andalite, human, Yeerk, or Anati. There is only one ship that can move fast enough to get you there in time. It was built by those who built me: the Pernalites."

((I remember Prince Tobias mentioning the Pernalite ship, but he said it was at the bottom of the ocean,)) Al responded. ((How could we get it?))

"Unfortunately, the ship has been moved. Did the other Animorphs ever tell you about the Nartec?"

"Fish people who collect boats and do in appropriate things with them," I summarized.

((I thought they built cities with them,)) David argued.

"That's not an appropriate use for a boat.""

((Fair enough.))

"They collected the Pernalite ship," Mark continued. "We aren't sure where they're keeping it, but you need to get it. They could do a lot of damage with it if they figure out its secrets, and you need it for transportation."

"What harm could a bunch of mermen do? I thought that ship was harmless," Ronnie muttered.

"For one thing, they could set all of us Chee from converse to kill," Mark answered. "I am sure none of us want that.""

((Probably even less than we want an army of Ssri'Kai fighting against us,)) David answered. ((How do we get to the Nartec city?))

"According to the details we received from the other time the Animorphs went there," Mark answered, "orca or dolphin morphs should dive to the appropriate depth to reach the city. Alloran, do you think you can memorize the appropriate coordinates?"

((I believe so, with a little study of the appropriate underwater area.))

"Alright. Be careful. They weren't very happy with the other Animorphs the last time they went there. I believe it involved lots of stabbing and some attempts to extract DNA in a very primitive manner."

"Let me make sure I'm summarizing this right," I began. "We have to dive deep under the water into a hidden aquatic city, where we will probably end up being impaled by fish people, so that

we can steal a spaceship built by ancient dogs so that we can fly it to the other side of the galaxy to stop the brain-stealing aliens from stealing the brains of the most dangerous species we've ever met, all without the help of the most experienced members of this team because they are all busy elsewhere. Right?"

((You have objections?)) David asked.

"No, no. Let's go get some flippers."

Preview Summary

After months of no contact, the Animorphs have finally gotten word from Erek King about an alliance the Yeerks are trying to form with the Ssri'Kai. But with Tobias and Rachel on their honeymoon and Jake, Marco, and Ax away on official military business, it falls to David, James, Jeanne, Al, Melissa, and Ronnie to stop the Yeerks from infesting the Ssri'Kai leaders.

But there is more to this plan than meets the eye, and the Animorphs will find themselves embroiled in a furious battle for the future of all Ssri'Kai space. Farther away from home than any human has ever been, and without the experience of the original Animorphs to help them, these Animorphs are in for the biggest fight they've ever had.