

Chapter 1

Rachel

DAY FIVE

I jumped away from the human warmth I had been clinging to. It was the best my flea brain could do to get away from the Controllers. The further I was from body heat, the safer I'd be when I de-morphed.

I was on the bridge of the Blade Ship. Alone and outnumbered. For my mission to succeed, I would have to rely on the element of surprise.

As I began to de-morph, I hoped very much that I had landed behind a console that nobody was using.

I tried to make my human eyes appear first, but it was no use. Cassie was the one who could control the morphing process. Mine was always unpredictable.

The first human thing to emerge from my growing flea body was my hand. I could feel the cool metal of the ship's floor on my fingertips. As I grew larger and both my arms began stretching out, my knuckles hit something solid, vertical and metallic. I was behind something. I breathed a sigh of relief through my newly-formed human nose.

No one had seen me yet. That was obvious. No one had decided to kill me.

I took a moment to determine my surroundings, barely moving my head for fear of being discovered by someone nearby.

I was crouched behind a wall. Inches from my left ear, I saw the doorway to the bridge. The Controllers were in there and I was out here, in the hallway.

I grinned giddily. I would be a complete shock to them.

I shuffled quietly towards a longer stretch of wall, so I'd have space to get bigger.

I'm ready, I told myself, still not morphing.

"Really?" I imagined Marco saying. *"Even you, Rachel, must know that this is insane."*

I knew, I thought. I knew that there was no chance I would get out of this alive. I had agreed to that. *"Up to you,"* Jake had said. *"Do you really need to ask?"* I had answered.

I would do it because I had to. The others had thousands of Yeerks to defeat and they had a planet to save. I had to stop a handful of Yeerks leaving orbit and I would save a galaxy. There was no way I was going to chicken out.

I began the morph. I imagined the voices of my friends continuing to talk to me, as rough brown fur sprouted all over my body. Things Jake had said. Things the others might have said.

<There is a one in twenty chance you will survive,> said Ax, helpfully. <But it must be done.>

“If anyone can do it, you can,” said Jake. “You’re my best warrior.”

“You can’t,” said Cassie. “There must be another way.”

“Too late now,” said Marco.

“I’m counting on you,” said Jake.

<Rachel.> The last voice brought tears to my still-human eyes.
<Don’t do this.>

My morph stopped. I blinked my eyes dry.

Damn you, Tobias, I couldn’t help thinking. You had to make this harder.

I could imagine his voice more clearly than anyone else’s. For the obvious reason. But also because he’d been trying to contact me for the last hour and a half.

All night and all morning, I’d been alone on the Blade Ship. And I’d been alone in my head. When Tobias first asked me where I was, I almost answered him. I caught myself in time. I didn’t let a word slip. But he kept asking. Jake couldn’t make him stop. And I couldn’t tell him I was all right. Because I wasn’t.

I imagined voices in my mind still. I took them down one at a time.

<Where are you?>

I’m nowhere, Tobias.

<Damn it, Rachel, why aren’t you there?>

I’m dead, Tobias.

Tobias was gone.

“You’d tell me, right? If Jake were asking you to do anything that—”

No, Cassie.

“Rachel. Tell me. What’s wrong?”

Nothing, Cassie.

Cassie was gone.

I continued to imagine Marco and Ax. They were safer, but I would have to get rid of them too.

“I dunno about this, Xena.”

<Your sacrifice will make a difference.>

<Rachel,> a real voice said. *<Go.>*

Jake! It was time. I completed my morph in a hurry and barrelled through the doorway, onto the bridge, not giving myself a second longer to

think about what I was doing. The voices in my head were silent now. My mind was clear.

“Animorph!” the Controllers yelled, whirling around to face the doorway. “It’s an Animorph!”

<You are so smart,> I mocked.

I attacked. I was one crazed grizzly bear coming at them like a tank.

Panicking, half the crew tripped over their own feet while the other half sent a wave of Dracon fire at me.

I was on top of them before the beams could reach the place where I had been. Red light burned holes in the walls and consoles instead.

“Morph, you idiots! Morph!” Tom raged at his crew. He backed into a far corner and peered anxiously out the bridge doors. “There may be more. ‘All hands report to stations’ I said! Where are Cosk and Murphy?”

“They haven’t answered their communicators, sir!” cried a crewman.

“I’ll kill them,” said Tom. “Soon as we’re done here.”

I thought to kill the Controller I had landed on with a quick bite in the neck. His feeble human hands stuck out in front. Suddenly, a long, sharp spike shot out of one of them. He was morphing. He used his newly-formed weapon to skewer a hole in my shoulder.

It was a little painful. Only a little. Mostly it just made me mad.

“Grrooowwrrrr!” I slammed him into a console. I stuck his spike-arm in his side for safekeeping and swung one of my massive paws into his face. It was a blow that would have knocked a train off its tracks. In this case, it knocked the Controller’s head off his shoulders.

One down and...

I turned around. A flash of human fear countered the grizzly’s utter confidence; there were more than I’d expected.

I hadn’t really noticed while they were human. Now I was looking at an army of monsters. Bipedal and quadruped beasts like nothing on Earth. Sleek, green things with spike-claws. Bristly, black things with claws like clamps. A whole mess of creatures with something sharp, tough or deadly about them.

I took a deep breath and charged.

It was instant pain. Intense and everywhere at once. There were things stabbing, scratching and pummeling me.

I threw my own punches. I sent one of the green beasts flying across the room.

So, I thought, that’s two—

<Aaaarrhh!> I screamed, more with frustration than pain. The Controller I thought I'd taken out had just gotten up again. He leapt back into the fray, which was becoming less and less threatening to him.

Tom hadn't morphed. He leaned against a wall, not remotely worried anymore. "You really are alone, aren't you, Rachel? You don't know what you're putting your poor cousin through right now." He tilted his head with his eyes half-closed, an amused smile playing across his face. "I'll pass it on, shall I?" he said as though to himself.

He looked at me. "Tom wants my crew to stop killing you. Stubborn little wailer he is, wishing you a miraculous escape and all. He's about to see for himself: the only place you're going is the grave."

<I'm taking you with me, Yeerk!> I lunged for him.

Thinking about Tom was confusing. I was here to kill these Controllers. The Yeerks and their human hosts. There was no dividing them.

I got one paw through the wall of beasts. It was yanked back. I was knocked from side to side, backwards and forwards, from one set of claws to the next. I went limp in their clutches.

For the first time since I'd signed up for this mission, an outcome worse than death was occurring to me: defeat.

It wasn't supposed to be impossible. These Controllers who could morph were supposed to be stoppable. The rest of the crew didn't matter. These were the ones with the power.

I had to kill them. I had to kill them all! I couldn't let them...

Without knowing how, I was flat on my back.

Clamp-claws muzzled me. Spike-claws pinned my limbs to the floor.

I caught sight of the view screen. Space. Good old black, star-speckled space. Not the blank white that zero space is. They hadn't made the jump.

I hadn't failed. I wouldn't.

I tried to thrash. I couldn't even twitch.

Something red blotted out my vision. In a distant corner of my mind, I realised I was bleeding.

I was bleeding a lot.

I couldn't see. But I could feel the claws all over me. Holding me down. Tearing me up.

Animal voices rose in triumph.

"Doesn't take all eleven of you, does it?" Tom's voice drawled. "We do have a ship to fl—Ahhh! What the—"

Tom. I could kill Tom. I lodged the thought firmly in my groggy brain. I kill Tom. Controllers stop. Stop.

I reached out with both paws and lashed out at...air. No. Something was wrong. There were too many sounds. Different sounds. Too many...

<Rachel, de-morph.>

Who was that? Jake? Marco?

Tobias?

I couldn't tell. But I knew that somebody was telling me to de-morph. Couldn't do that. The Controllers would kill me before I could kill Tom. I couldn't de-morph now. I couldn't give up. I had to...

<Rachel? Can you hear me?>

I struggled to my feet, ready to power through anything that stood in my way. But there was blood in my eyes and I couldn't see where Tom was. I couldn't feel any of the Controllers around me.

Huh? Where had they...?

<Rachel!> that voice interrupted my dim-witted thoughts again.

<What are you doing? You need to—aaaaahhhh!>

I heard a lion roaring. Angry. In pain.

James. It was James. But what was he...? Why did he...?

<I know it's you, Rachel,> he said. <And I know you probably weren't expecting us. But we're here now and we're going to need you at full strength.>

<But I have to—> I started to explain.

<De-morph!> James insisted. <Then re-morph and get back in the fight. You are not going to die. We've got you covered, so DE-MORPH!>

Not going to die? Oh. In that case...

I began to de-morph.

Chapter 2

Jake

It was me, Marco and Ax on the Pool Ship's bridge. There were Controllers there too, but they were unconscious. Visser One himself lay at our feet, underneath a console.

I was holding a Dracon beam that Toby had left with me. It was set to stun.

Marco leaned against a wall, looking just as lifeless as Visser One's bridge crew.

Ax worked quietly at a console.

It was a strange silence we had here. Like the eye of a storm. Everywhere else on the ship, battle was raging.

Here I had time to think. It was time that Marco and I were both suffering from.

I tried to catch his eye. “Marco, are you—” I took a deep breath and tried again: “Are you going to be okay?”

Marco’s mind was a million miles away. “James,” he said.

I moved closer. “What?”

“James...” Marco’s face twitched. “Asked me if I really cared what happened to—” He put a hand to his mouth like he was going to be sick.

I wouldn’t soon forget the look on his face when he watched Visser One slaughter James’s people.

It was Collette’s death that he had been watching.

“I didn’t know you would take it so hard,” I said.

The remark seemed to incense him. “And if you did you wouldn’t have planned it?”

“Planned?” I couldn’t believe him. “How could you think I planned it? I didn’t want them to die.”

“Neither did James,” said Marco. “You told him to trust you, remember? He did. We all did.”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“I trusted you.”

“You still should.”

“Oh, I would,” said Marco with an apologetic head tilt. “But see, I’ve lost faith in this mantra I used to have, it went: ‘I trust you not to send one of us off to get killed behind everyone’s backs.’”

I sighed heavily. Marco wasn’t about to let up on that subject either. Ax at least seemed able to separate the facts from the emotions. He knew that I’d done what I’d done for a reason.

He was working away on the console, looking rather agitated.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

<This.> Ax pointed to a tiny yellow dot on the console. <It should be blinking.>

“Why?” I said, not caring very much.

<It indicates that transmission is in progress.>

Ax continued working. I saw ‘deck nine’ light up on the data screen. Suddenly, I was caring about that transmission. “Is that to Tobias?”

Ax nodded. <As I said earlier, I intend to establish a com link.>

“Now?” I said, panicked. “What if he hears—”

<If you do not wish Tobias to know about Rachel, you had best not mention it once the link is secure,> said Ax. The respectful tone I had come to expect from him was pointedly absent.

I shouldn't have been surprised. Even if Ax did understand what I'd done, he and Tobias were what he called 'shorm.' Best friends.

Like Marco and I...used to be.

"Ahhh!" Marco was the first to leap back from the console. Visser One was emerging from underneath it.

I leapt back too. Completely forgetting about the Dracon beam, I struck out at the Andalite-Controller with my feet.

He whipped his tail clumsily at me while he tried to stand. Once he had managed it, he roared at the bridge: <WHAT IS THIS ANIMORPH DOING HERE? WHY HAVEN'T YOU—> he stopped. He surveyed his motionless crew with wide, frightened eyes.

Visser One had just realised that he was alone on his bridge. It was just him and us. One of the most feared beings in the universe was up against two human kids and an Andalite half his size.

Visser One bolted. He ran right over Marco in a mad dash for the bridge door.

"Ax!" I ordered.

Ax was already gone. I heard his hooves clattering noisily down the hallway after Visser One.

I went over to Marco lying on the floor. I held out my hand.

He grimaced at me. "What do you want?"

I blinked. "I just wanna know if you're okay."

"I'm not," said Marco, bluntly.

"Well, what—"

"Now you know," said Marco, avoiding my hand as he got to his feet. "Was there something else?"

"No, nothing," I snapped. "I don't know why I'm still trying."

"Maybe you're looking to take your mind off all your dead diversions."

My hands balled into fists. "Quit telling me about that! That wasn't my fault!"

Marco looked about ready to hit me. I might've beaten him to it, but at that moment Toby arrived on the scene.

A few steps ahead of her, a Hork-Bajir was making a dash for the bridge controls.

Toby grabbed him and held him out in front of her. "Jake, the Dracon beam!"

I lifted it in both hands and stretched my middle finger to pull the trigger.

Tsseeww!

The Hork-Bajir slumped in Toby's arms. She lay him down on the floor.

"I thought you went to the Yeerk Pool," I said, setting the Dracon beam down on a console.

"Most of my team made it there," Toby panted. "I got held up by a few Controllers attempting to re-take this ship. Nothing to worry about." She nodded at the Hork-Bajir I'd stunned. "Only this one made it all the way up here."

I scanned the floor anxiously. I wasn't sure how much longer the other Controllers would stay stunned.

Toby stepped over the ones in her way. She was staring at the view screen. "The Blade Ship! I forgot. How was it you were going to—"

"Haven't you heard?" said Marco, brightly. "Jake sent Rachel to deal with that. She's there right now, getting thoroughly beaten to death."

"Ah!" I put a hand to my head. I'd just received a strange, sharp burst of something. Thought-speech that was barely in range. I couldn't make out a word of it, but the voice was painfully familiar.

"Tobias?" I gasped. "Wha—? H-how?"

Then I saw. The transmission light was blinking on the console. 'Deck nine' was glowing on the data screen. It was the com link Ax had been trying to open.

Tobias had heard Marco.

I banged my fist against the transmission light.

"I sent her to stop them," I said to Toby. "She can stop them before she—"

I pounded the light again. It refused to stop blinking.

Toby was scanning the Blade Ship. "You underestimated the odds," she informed me. "There are twenty-five life signs on the bridge. All of them register as animals. That's twenty-five humans in morph."

I gaped at her. "That means Rachel...she's one against twenty-four..."

"It is far more likely that she *was* one against twenty-five," said Toby, quietly.

"Ah!" Again I got Tobias's thought-speech, sharp, wordless and coming closer. I looked up from the scan results. "I...I didn't think—"

"That much we know," Marco snapped.

“—that there would be that many,” I stammered. “Th-that’s at least fif-fifteen too many.”

“Oh, well, that explains it,” said Marco, nastily. “Fifteen of them must be on her side.”

“Look.” I pointed at the view screen. “The Blade Ship. It’s drifting. She must have done something to stop it.”

“There’s no damage to the engines,” said Toby.

“Then it could still take off,” I said faintly. “They’re only waiting...for some reason.”

I knew what I had to do.

I moved my fingers carefully over the controls at tactical. They weren’t any different from the ones in Bug Fighters. I had fired Dracon beams from a Bug Fighter before. I could still remember how.

A Hork-Bajir skidded to a halt outside the bridge door and said urgently: “Hork-Bajir free. Hork-Bajir tie Hork-Bajir to wall. Taxxons try eat. Green Friend come. Try help. Grey Friend help Green Friend. Hork-Bajir fight. Need help. Need Toby.”

“On my way.” Toby left the bridge.

It was a wonder to me that Toby could understand her own people.

I turned my attention back to the Pool Ship’s Dracon cannon. Back to the Blade Ship hovering within my reach. I was only going to get one shot. They were waiting. But they were one jump away from unreachable, if I gave them the time to notice trouble on their tail.

I set the co-ordinates.

“Warp core?” Marco raised his eyebrows. “You’re going to blow it up?”

“Ah! Don’t say—” I could almost make out words this time. But it was the thought-speech itself that hurt.

Marco shot the flashing com-link indicator a sideways look and fixed me with his cool, unconcerned gaze. “Someone in your mind?”

I clenched my jaw and stared straight ahead at the targeting screen. I double-checked the co-ordinates. The Dracon cannon was locked on the Blade Ship’s warp core. There was only one more button I had to press.

I could feel eyes on me. Accusatory eyes all over me. More eyes than there really were.

“I’m not killing Rachel!” I yelled. “She’s already dead!”

“Yeah,” said Marco. “You already killed her.”

<Jake!> Tobias’s voice cut through my mind like a knife. He’d heard everything. He knew who I was aiming for. He knew who I had used.

“Everyone draws their own line...” Something I had once told Rachel came floating out of my memory. I had used her then to get to David – the Animorph gone wrong. We’d talked afterwards, about what I’d done.

“I used to think my line was drawn at using my friend, my cousin...” I had been sure then that I’d gone too far. I’d stepped over the line.

The memory made me laugh. What kind of sin had I known then? The line was long gone now. It had to be. Someone had to win this war. I couldn’t come out of it clean.

<Jake!> Tobias’s thought-speech was louder now. Closer. He was coming to stop me. I had to do it now.

Marco was there with me. He wasn’t going to stop me. But he wasn’t going to do it for me either.

Ax would...maybe. But he had gone after Visser One.

Toby had gone.

It had to be me. My choice. My burden. All I wanted was for someone to take it away from me. *“My line was drawn at using my friend, my cousin, to do my dirty work...”*

Tobias would stop me. I was waiting for him to stop me. Waiting for my hand to move. One button. One shot and it would all be over.

<Jake, tell me you’re not going to do this!>

My hand moved. *“Guess that turned out not to be true...”*

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a blur of feathers flash through the doorway. <STOP!>

“Sorry, Rachel,” I heard the memory of the conversation end.

I pressed the button.

Chapter 3

Ax

My hearts pounded. My chest heaved. I was running faster than I had ever run before in my life.

I was ready to do what I had failed to do for three years. I was ready to avenge my brother’s death.

Elfangor had been weak, injured and alone. The Visser had Elfangor surrounded by an army of Hork-Bajir and Taxxons. He had morphed a monstrous beast and devoured my helpless brother.

Now, Visser One had no army. He had neither the time nor the space for a monstrous morph.

And he was running away.

<Coward,> I yelled after him. <Filthy coward! Are you afraid to fight me tail to tail?>

<Give up, Andalite,> he said scornfully. <You will never kill me.>

<Then why not turn around and stop me?> I challenged.

Still Visser One ran.

He entered a turbo lift. I made it inside before the doors closed.

Visser One hastily opened a side door in the turbo lift. My tail blade missed him as he ran on.

I followed him down the rough-textured ramp connecting the ship's decks. It was better traction for my hooves. Even so, I had to slow down to avoid hurling into the walls where the ramp curved.

We left deck fourteen. I chased Visser One all the way down to deck eleven. Here he left the ramp and leapt around a corner.

I caught up with him outside the Pool Ship's shuttle bay.

I saw his stalk eyes widen in fear as I swung my tail blade at the back of his neck. He dodged before I could decapitate him. But I had managed to slice both his stalk eyes off his head.

He screamed. He was in pain. But again, I also sensed terror.

He turned around to look at me with his main eyes. A split second later, our tails clashed. Again and again, we blocked each other's attack.

He leaned one hand against the wall behind him. His other arm stuck out beside him as he whipped his tail in front of him.

He got in a few hits. I got in a few hits. In a minute I was covered in cuts and my opponent was missing an arm.

His scream convinced me that he was already dying. His tail sagged as his body shook in spasms of pain. And for a second I hesitated, unsure whether I should give him the honour of a quick finish or just wait for him to bleed to death.

But stopping to think was a mistake.

Visser One pulled his remaining arm out from behind his back. He was holding a Dracon beam. I was too busy wondering how he had managed to pull it off the wall when he couldn't see behind him to notice when he fired.

I felt the beam burn a hole in my flank. I staggered back, groaning.

The Dracon beam was shaking in his frail Andalite fingers and the second he relaxed his hold on the trigger, it slipped from his hand.

He turned and ran into the shuttle bay before I'd recovered from the surprise attack. The doors closed behind him and they would not open for me. He had obviously locked them from the inside.

I did not have time to waste on code-breaking. I snatched up the Dracon beam the Visser had dropped and turned the setting higher. I blasted down the door.

Visser One was only a few steps ahead of me. But he could still win this if he got to a shuttle.

He almost had a hatch open by the time I was within tail's reach again.

I got between him and the shuttle.

He backed away. I swung my tail in casual arcs in front of his face. Every swing drove him one step backwards. Without his stalk eyes he could not see what it was I was backing him into.

Finally, I pressed my tail blade up against his throat and typed a code into the pad on the wall beside him.

A door slid open at his rump. His back hooves staggered backwards. I slapped his face with the flat side of my blade. The blow sent him all the way inside the tiny room. I pulled my tail clear before the door slid closed again.

The Visser was trapped in a room with two doors. The one in front of him was part of the shuttle bay. The one behind him was part of the Pool Ship's outer hull.

<Wh-what...> Visser One's thought-speech was weak and full of fear. <What are you doing? You can't—>

I opened the door behind him and heard the last scream he would ever utter as he was sucked into space.

I couldn't help gloating, just a little. <That was the direction in which you were headed, was it not?>

I stood still, looking reflectively at the Abomination. It was too incredible to be true. Yet there was no doubt that he was now very, very dead.

Having established that, I next wished for some grass to wipe my tail blade on. I wondered whether I felt like morphing to heal my minor injuries.

A word burst abruptly into my head, so loud it was likely that several decks had heard it. <STOP!>

My hearts did a double-thump. <Tobias?> I called.

No answer.

Slightly panicked, I ran from the room. Outside the shuttle bay was the ramp. I went down two decks and quickly found the room I was looking for. It didn't take me long to realise that Tobias wasn't there.

Then, swivelling my stalk eyes to look behind me, I saw something suspicious. Directly across from this control room there had been another

one, sealed off by a door that no code had been able to open. Where that door had been, there was now a wall.

My hand disappeared behind the wall, touching only air.

I stepped through the hologram and climbed awkwardly past what remained of the door.

Inside stood EreK the Chee in his natural android form.

The door had been torn down and folded into a twisted heap of shrapnel.

The Chee are hard-wired pacifists. Ironically, they also have the physical strength to be masterful killing machines.

The area which EreK had broken into was obviously restricted. Even the Yeerk Peace Movement had been unable to access it.

I stared at EreK with all four eyes. <What are you doing?>

“Hello, Ax,” said EreK. “Trouble outside?”

<It has been dealt with,> I said.

“So I see.” EreK turned on his human hologram. His holographic eyes surveyed my blood-stained tail with displeasure. “You never had a plan to contain Controllers. You were scrambling for control of this ship too long to save anyone. You knew, didn’t you? You, Jake, Marco. You planned to kill anyone who got in your way. You killed off your own people to distract Visser One.”

My tail twitched at the accusation. <That was not intentional.>

“I try to tell myself the same thing,” said EreK, slowly. “But I was the one who got you all in here.” He tapped his android head, a sad, tortured smile on his holographic face. “I never forget.”

<Tobias told us that you left,> I said.

EreK shook his head. “Turned out my programming wouldn’t allow that either.”

I moved closer to the controls that EreK had been fiddling with. My main eyes widened in shock as they took in the alterations that he had entered into the ship’s computer.

<The Pool Ship’s Dracon cannon is no longer under Yeerk control,> I told him. <Your interference now hinders *our* progress.>

“It’s a weapon and it’s pointed at someone.” EreK’s face was dark and resolute. “I don’t care whose progress it is.”

I spun my stalk eyes to look into the deserted room across the hall. <Where is Tobias?>