

Chapter 37

Marco

DAY FORTY-NINE

I expected Collette to come in at the front door. Of course it made sense that she didn't. Flying's a much better mode of transportation, especially when you use a wheelchair.

Anyway, she showed up without that.

I'd only just closed the door after a certain pair of people still sleepily protesting my brilliant idea that they leave the house before their morning coffee.

Then when I got back to the living room, there was a hawk outside the window.

I opened it. Collette flew in and de-morphed on the couch.

There was something of an awkward silence after that.

Awkward mostly on my side.

"Comfortable?" I found myself asking.

"I'm fine," she said, smiling. Her eyes took in the room we were in, the kitchen adjoining it and the hallway opening at the other end. "Aren't your parents around here somewhere?"

"No. They're kind of...out."

"Where did they have to be this early on a Saturday?" she asked.

"Breakfast," I answered.

"Oh, they go out for that?"

"Not usually."

Collette furrowed her forehead.

"I gave them gift certificates," I babbled into the silence.

"And an early wake up call, and lots of muffin recommendations."

"You told them to leave? Right before I came over?" She laughed lightly. "Anyone would think you were setting me up."

"I was sparing you their over-interested interrogation routine," I said hotly.

Collette was surprised by my tone. "I know you were. I was just..."

“Oh,” I said, embarrassed. “Right. Big empty house; we’ve got all the crazy gossips going.”

She laughed.

My laugh came out less naturally and I decided to cut straight to the chase.

“So,” I said, sitting in the armchair across from her. “You wanted to ask me for a kind of big favour?”

She nodded. “I said I’d ask you something on Timmy’s behalf.” She took a deep breath and held it.

“Well?” I prompted.

“He was wondering whether you’d mind if he acquired your DNA, morphed you and lived out the rest of his life in your body,” said Collette in one breath.

I gulped. “Is that all?”

“It’s flattering.”

“Oh, I’m flattered,” I assured her. “Honoured, really. Feeling very admired, v-very appreciated—”

“If you don’t want to do it, just say so.”

“Hey, I’m not...” I opened and closed my mouth a few more times. “I mean I wanna help. It’s just the...the sameness, the publicity—”

“It would probably be a boost in publicity,” Collette pointed out.

“Well, sure,” I conceded. “But what about my charming personality? It wouldn’t exactly be a stretch for people to think that we were the same person.”

“Your reputation won’t suffer. Timmy is just as charming as you and way smarter.”

“What?!”

Collette smiled serenely. “All he needs from you is your eloquence.”

“And my movie-star good looks?”

“That too.”

I grinned. “So you do think I’m cute?”

“Hey.” Collette forced back her smile and replaced it with a stern expression. “I’m not going to tell you twice. It’s not good for your ego.”

I hung my head. “I suppose Timmy is also way more modest?”

“Not really. But at least he brags about his brain.”

“I can brag about my brain,” I brightened. “I have the most adorable frontal lobes. The deepest, richest pinkish-gray tones. It’s a crying shame my face covers it.”

Collette laughed. “He’s not as funny as you.”

I glowed. Who wanted to be a human encyclopaedia? Funny was *so much* better.

“So what’s your answer?” said Collette, abruptly.

“You mean do I want to be an identical twin?”

“You two would still be totally different.”

“People won’t be able to tell us apart,” I whined. “Can he at least get a tattoo or something?”

“He’ll get a different haircut,” said Collette, reprovably.

“And a monocle?” I bargained.

Collette considered. “Possibly.”

I stared at her for a few seconds and the answer just popped out of my mouth. “Okay then.”

She smiled. “Thanks.” She started morphing to red-tailed hawk.

My own smile slid off my face. “You’re going?”

“I want to give Timmy the good news.”

“Now?”

“Yeah. Why?” Collette narrowed her eyes in sudden suspicion. “Should I wait for you to change your mind?”

“No. It’s just...you just got here.”

She kept morphing. “I thought you had that thing.”

“What thing?” I said, blankly.

“That thing at the studio. Filming for some interview or talk show or something.”

Oh, that thing. Funny. I’d forgotten all about it.

Collette glanced at the clock. “You’re going to be late as it is.”

I got a strange feeling watching her morph. An unsettled sort of feeling. Somehow, talking to Collette right now wasn’t the same as talking in thought-speech or on the phone. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but there was something different going on. I felt like if she left, that ‘something’ would go away.

She morphed and I panicked. I gave myself a mental shake. *So I wanted to talk to her. So what? I could do that later, on the phone.*

She shrank and grew feathers.

Later, on the phone, I told myself.

Her mouth became a beak.

I could call her later. Or...

“I cancelled that thing,” I blurted.

Collette was almost completely red-tailed hawk. <You did?>

“Well, if you’ll just give me a second.” I stood up and reached behind me for the phone. Pressed speed dial nine.

Ring. Ring. “Hello?”

“Yeah, Guy? It’s Marco,” I said.

“You haven’t left yet?!” exclaimed Guy. “We start in five minutes with a live audience! Oh, I can stall them, but you’ll have to hur—”

“That’s okay,” I said. “I’m not coming.”

“Wha—bu—” he spluttered. “I-it’s TV a-and reporters, don’t you care what—”

“Thanks, I knew you’d understand.” I hung up.

Collette was de-morphing. My strange, unsettled feeling vanished when her human face reappeared.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she said.

“Guy will get over it.”

“I thought you said he’d—”

“Quit, yeah.” I sat down on the couch. “But I don’t think I’ve scarred him. He’ll mope a while then find someone else to parade around.”

Collette stared at me. An awkward apology seemed to be creeping up on her face. “I still don’t want to keep Timmy waiting.”

I held out the phone. “Call him. He can come over and acquire me right now.” I winced. “Man, did that sound weird.”

“It’s going to *be* weird,” said Collette. “You know...I wouldn’t hate you if you needed more time to think about it.”

“There’s nothing to think about. Honestly.” I indicated the phone for emphasis.

She took it. “I owe you one.”

“Nah. Just as long as I get my ‘I gave DNA today’ sticker, I’m happy.”

She laughed.

Automatically, a grin spread across my face.

I watched her make the phone call. She dialled the number. Held the phone to her ear. And mouth.

When I realised how much I was watching, I started checking the floor for dust bunnies instead.

She finished telling Timmy what I’d said and there was a long pause.

Glancing up, I saw her face absorbed in careful concentration. She was working out what Timmy was trying to say through his speech impediment.

Her lips moved slightly.

I went back to the dust bunny search. I noticed a couple of CDs sticking out from underneath the couch.

“Timmy’s on his way,” said Collette at last. “He should be here in a few minutes.”

“Great,” I said, looking up again. “So you’ll stay, uh—until he gets here?”

My insides squirmed. *She’d already said she would, hadn’t she? Or implied it? Had I already asked? That would just make me sound—*

“I’ll stay.” She passed back the phone. “All I’ve got to do today are a few chores at home.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“*You* do chores?” she said sceptically.

“Only to really loud music.”

“What music?”

“Uh...” I ducked down to retrieve the CDs on the floor, sliding the phone underneath the couch while I was at it.

I didn't want to go back to the armchair. To the phone holder. It felt important to stay on the couch.

I scooted forward a little as I handed the CDs over to Collette.

She looked down at the first one and back up at me. “Bob Marley?”

“Phase,” I said. “I was thinking about growing dreadlocks.”

Her eyes swept over my face like she was trying to imagine what that would look like. Then she looked down again.

I felt really far away from her even right there on the couch. Too far away to...read the song titles? I knew them by heart. Still...

“Reggae's not bad.” Collette finished reading the cover and slipped it under the other CD.

I kept moving towards her. It didn't seem like I was very close yet. How could I tell while she was looking down at—

“Offspring,” she said. “I have this one.”

“Same CD,” I said, now stuck with not enough couch space to move any closer. “Bet the gossips would pounce on that.”

Collette laughed. “Can you imagine if—” She looked up at me and stopped talking. I could tell by her face that she was a little alarmed.

So, I thought, I really was sitting way too close to her.

“If we were...” she started again.

There was a wisp of hair in her face. I had a crazy urge to do something about it.

“...you know,” she said.

“And that would be...” I moved the hair behind her ear.

“...weird...” I forgot to take my hand away. “...because...”

“What?” said Collette, like she wasn’t listening. The way she was looking at me was making me dizzy.

Our eyes locked. I got the distinct impression that I’d been hypnotised.

Hypothetical had taken a wrong turn somewhere. The question of how went in and out of my mind before I knew it was there. The next thing I knew, I was kissing her.

My head got dizzier, but I stayed where I was; Collette was kissing me. I was so focused on this new development in the conversation...

I didn’t notice the bird of prey perched on the window sill, until he said, <My arrival at this particular moment appears to have defeated the entire purpose of my coming.>

Chapter 38

Tobias

DAY FIFTY

I’m sure I never appreciated beds properly back when I was originally human. My mother and I went and got one yesterday. We cleared out the computer den for my new room and put the bed in there.

Waking up in a bed, you don’t get the urge to leap out right away. Not the same way you do when you think there might be a wildcat climbing up your tree. In fact, waking up in a bed comes with the comfortable feeling that there’s nothing coming to eat you. And you can just stay there warm and unworried as long as you want.

When you do get up, the day doesn’t get much harder all at once. I got dressed. Brushed my teeth.

My mother was in the kitchen spreading marmalade on her toast.

I grabbed some bread for myself and popped it in the toaster. While I waited, I poured a glass of milk and munched on an apple.

We finished eating before either of us spoke.

“Any plans today?” she asked.

“Jara and Ket had a new baby,” I said. “They’re having a shower, well, more of a post-birth celebration. Anyway, I told them I’d go.”

“Do you need to bring anything?”

“Jara and Ket say, quote: ‘Have bark. Bark good. Friends better.’”

She laughed. “I suppose a jumper wouldn’t last long on a Hork-Bajir anyway.”

I started for the door, and then remembered. “I guess I need a ride.”

She smiled. “I like baby showers.”

So we drove. It is the weirdest thing watching the world zip by at car level. I couldn’t read road signs until they were ridiculously close.

She parked the car on the last bit of road before the valley and we walked the rest of the way.

Walking I’d done plenty of, but gravity as a permanent concept was still a little daunting. Not being able to just sprout wings and fly...

Most humans can’t do that.

The Hork-Bajir had two treetops pulled together to make an entrance. The trunks were wrapped in ropes of flowers.

My mother went ahead into the festivities.

I stayed behind a moment.

The valley was alive with activity. Nothing out of the ordinary. Just a lot of happy Hork-Bajir going about their day just a little more happily than usual. Children played tag in the treetops. Adults clustered around what I assumed was the newest addition to the Hamee family.

“Tobias?”

I turned to see a girl I recognised as one of James’s people standing in the entrance. “Hi, uh...”

“Erica,” she told me. “Do you know if that’s Timmy over there?”

I looked where she was pointing. “That’s Marco.”

“You’re sure?”

I stared at her.

“I thought Timmy might have switched already,” she explained. “He said yesterday he’d decided on Marco for his new body.”

The guy we were looking at held a big rubber ducky out to Jara Hamee and for a second drew it back protectively. “Tell junior to take good care of him. He loves razor-bladed aliens, but he’s scared of heights.”

I looked at Erica. “I’m positive it’s Marco.”

“Me too,” she said, and walked back through the arched trees.

Jara was most delighted with the gift. He carried the sensitive duck carefully over to Ket and the baby.

Oddly enough, Marco was now standing still, searching the place with his eyes.

I tapped him on the shoulder.

He met my eyes briefly. “Hey, Tobias. How’s life with the new food groups?”

“It’s a nice change.”

“Wish I could say the same for this party’s refreshments.” Marco contemplated the big wooden table filled with a generous supply of fresh, crispy tree bark slices. “Change, yes. Possibly not nice.”

I tried to catch his eye again. “After we downloaded Elfangor’s *hirac delest*, I left the transmitter at your place. Did Ax—”

“Yeah, he sent another transmission,” said Marco, not turning his head. “War-princes getting him down. Missions going well. And Kaysted’s now aspiring to *interactive* alien field-researcher.”

I scanned the razor-bladed crowd for a hint of what Marco was looking for.

“Anyway, I’ll get the transmitter back to you,” he said.

“Keep it a while. If Ax really is...” I swallowed. “If he really is gone for good, we should all take turns.”

“Yeah.” Marco turned his head halfway towards me and his face fell a little. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Marco’s eyes settled on a human face just now visible among the Hork-Bajir masses. One of James’s people in her morphing outfit and a makeshift wheelchair that looked Hork-Bajir made. She must have flown here for the celebration. I felt like I should know her name and was finally spared the trouble remembering when I heard Toby call her ‘Collette.’

Before I lost Marco’s attention completely, I decided to ask. “So did anything unusual happen to you yesterday?”

This time, Marco jumped right around to look at me. “What?” he said sharply.

I glanced back at the entrance. “That girl—uh, Erica—she asked if you were Timmy. Apparently he was thinking of making you his permanent morph?”

For some reason, Marco’s face started reddening. “That was yesterday,” he said. “Timmy’s going with his second choice now.”

“Oh?”

“Well, I was his first one. Totally understandable, I mean—” Marco gestured himself up and down to make his point. “So, naturally I was big-hearted and noble and then—”

“You chickened out?”

Marco shook his finger at me. “Weren’t you listening? Me big. Me noble. Timmy actually came over to acquire me.”

“So what happened?”

“Timmy had a sudden change of heart when he flew in on me and Collette.”

I raised my eyebrows. “After taking so long to single you out as his top choice?”

“Turns out I disqualified myself,” said Marco, trying for shame but actually looking quite pleased.

“How did you do that?” I asked.

Marco scratched his nose. “Timmy said...well...there’s a translated version, it goes: ‘I can’t look like someone who is in an intimate relationship with my friend. It would make hanging out with my friend too weird.’”

“You mean—”

“It was an accident,” said Marco.

“You’re saying—”

“It’s not like I could’ve seen it coming,” he went on, defensively. “I mean it was talking and I was into the talking and it was all talking and I was all about talking and then something happened to my head and—”

“You kissed her?” I finished.

Marco’s mouth, left open from ranting, started stretching sideways. He bobbed his chin against his neck a couple of times, lifting his head with his eyes misted over.

His grin vanished in sudden panic. “Do you think James will kill me?”

“That depends.”

“On whether or not one of a dozen others kills me first?”

Marco squeaked.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then why does it depend?” he demanded.

“It’s what you’re going to do now,” I explained.

“I thought I’d check out the buffet.”

“You’re going to see Collette again?” I clarified.

“Well, she’s over there by the bark entrees,” he said blankly.

“But after that.”

“She’ll probably want to see the Hork-Bajir baby.”

“I mean *you*—”

“I like Hork-Bajir babies,” said Marco.

“I mean—”

“What?”

I let my next attempt out in an exasperated sigh. “I dunno. Maybe you have it covered.”

“Oh, that’s me,” he agreed. “Everything under control.”

“You think so?”

“Why, do you think my not noticing Animorphs following me around until just last week is a bad sign?”

I shrugged. “Collette’s got good friends.”

Marco blew air out his nose. “Yeah and mine are useless.”

“Hey—” I started to protest.

“Apparently Jake went psycho on Cassie and James in the middle of a big mission and James had to zinozine him,” Marco cut in dejectedly. “I called the recovery center; you know, to make sure he wasn’t doing anything embarrassing in his sleep.”

I was thrown. “You—”

“They gave his parents the number. I got it from them.”

Marco shot me a half-apologetic, half-annoyed look. “Sorry, you don’t like to talk about Jake.”

I blinked. “He’s in stasis?”

“Just about out of it by now,” said Marco.

“Is Cassie there?”

“She can’t be; too many morph-capable Controllers making trouble at the Pool Ship.”

“His parents?” I asked.

“Gareth doesn’t want them coming up. Says Jake’s ‘not ready,’ whatever that means.”

“Gareth?”

“Gareth Ringgold,” Marco elaborated. “Cassie says he’s cool.”

I nodded, not knowing what else to say.

I gazed over at the Hork-Bajir for a while. “I didn’t figure you’d come to this thing. Don’t you have something celebrity-like to do?”

“Nah, I blew Guy off,” said Marco.

I was surprised. “Really?”

“Yeah, you know, Collette came over and I was supposed to go and she was going to go...” His eyes misted over like before.

“And then she didn’t,” he concluded.

I couldn't help giving him an appraising sort of look. "You know, I think James will be okay with you and Collette."

"Because kissing her was really the act of a perfect gentleman?"

"Because you really like her," I corrected.

Marco's grin spread right back up to his ears. "Is that what it is? You mean I haven't just gone completely insane?"

"For you?" I didn't need to think about. "Yes."

"I thought so." Marco gave a great sigh, trying and failing to look mournfully resigned. "Ah, well. Had to happen sometime, didn't it? It's those pesky Irony Gods: 'Who's worked longest and hardest to maintain mental stability? Oh look, it's that Marco guy. Let's make *him* insane.'"

He sighed again. "I got nothing that would talk them out of it. They never listen. I'm just gonna have to accept my fate. That's all. Bear it as best I can." Suddenly, Marco abandoned all pretence and burst out laughing.

I joined in only out of sympathy. He really was looking remarkably insane.

"So, um, nice catching up, man. Good luck with that human thing." Marco's eyes strayed back to the Hork-Bajir gathering. "I'll just be..."

"Surviving your fate?" I said dryly.

"Yep." And he strode bravely towards the sweet, smiling girl gazing at him across the buffet table.

I shook my head. Who'd have thought Marco...*Marco!*
When Rachel found out—

The laugh died before it reached my mouth.

Marco and Collette were now talking, both smiling like their faces were stuck that way.

Suddenly I didn't feel like watching.

I'd assumed if I ever made the decision that I did make two days ago, Rachel would be the first to know.

The Animorphs...when I'd thought about becoming human during the war, I'd been afraid that if I did I would lose them. Maybe that wasn't true now.

But it wasn't like I could check on Rachel. Not the way I could check on Ax or...

Well...maybe there was one other person who could use checking on.

I left the Hork-Bajir valley early. I got home and phoned Jake's parents. They gave me the phone number. I wrote it down.

I dialled the number. My mouth was very dry while I waited through the rings. I was thinking about the last time I had seen Jake. At the funeral.

Just as I was about to hang up, a man's voice answered. "Hello?"

I blinked. "Hello...Mr. Ringgold?"

"Yes," he said pleasantly. "And who may I ask is calling?"

"Tobias," I said. "I'm a friend of Jake's."

"Ah, yes. Cassie's told me about you. How is your hawk/human dilemma coming on?"

"Fine, thanks," I said, too startled to elaborate. "Uh...is Jake okay?"

"Quite well," said Mr. Ringgold. "Stasis went very smoothly. There were no complications."

I let out a breath I hadn't realised I'd been holding. "Good."

"He should be coming round in a minute, if you want to stay on the line."

"No...thank you. Just tell him...tell him I'm glad he's okay."

Chapter 39

Jake

I heard a beep. Then a click. I opened my eyes and caught a bleary image of a mobile phone in a holder on a table.

I was lying down. I rolled my head around to face forward. Opened and closed my eyes until the ceiling came into focus.

“Welcome back, Jake,” a man’s voice said.

Back? Back where? I didn’t want to know.

I closed my eyes again. “Who’re you?”

“A friend,” he said.

“I don’t have any friends.”

“Strange,” said the man. “It’s what Tobias called himself just now. ‘Your friend.’”

I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling. “Tobias?”

“Another caller earlier sounded like much the same thing, although he claimed to be your psychologist.”

“Marco?” I said.

“One especially concerned friend is unfortunately very busy, or she would—”

“Cassie.” I stood up quickly. I got a head rush and my knees buckled.

“Easy.” The man pressed me into a sitting position on the couch. “I promised your parents I’d get you home in good condition.”

I turned my head all around. The place looked suspiciously like a very normal living room. A very nice living room. There were plants and pictures. Big, green, leafy stalks and soft, washy water colours.

I looked at the man. “How long have I been here?”

“Three days,” said the man.

“I’m a Controller?”

“No,” he said, looking rather amused that I had felt the need to ask.

I looked down and saw a small, plastic tube taped to my inner forearm. “I’m sick?”

“Just a little dehydrated.” The man removed the tube and stuck a band-aid on the place where it had been.

I looked again at the room. “I’m insane?”

“That one’s up for discussion,” he said cheerfully.

Right, I thought edgily. Got me all calm and subdued in a calming, subduing little room and now you want to unearth my problems.

“My name is Gareth,” he offered.

“Uh-huh.” I ran my fingers over my head. “What—” I couldn’t find any bumps. “What happened?”

“It was a chemical,” he explained. “Zinozine we use to put Controllers into three-day stasis. James happened to have one handy when you—”

“James!” I exploded.

Gareth spoke mildly. “I believe he thought you in need of some rest.”

“He thought I was getting in the way!” The scene returned vivid and clear to my mind. It came less organised out of my mouth. “There was—a few more minutes I could’ve—she was—and then he—and now they—”

“I am fuzzy on the details,” Gareth interrupted. “But it seems to me whatever it was you were trying to do didn’t work.”

“Because I didn’t have a plan.”

“You don’t have a plan now.”

“Right, that’s the plan.” I stood up.

Gareth made a grab for my shoulders. “Stop and think for a minute. You’re not making any sense.”

“Fine!” I circled around him to get closer to the door. “I’m getting out of here anyway.”

“I would rather you didn’t,” said Gareth.

“You can’t stop me,” I said derisively.

“No,” he agreed. “Nor would I attempt to hold you here against your will if it were possible. I meant what I said as strongly recommended advice.”

“Nice try.” I turned away.

“Is there a time I can tell your parents to expect you home?” he said at my back.

“I’m not going home.”

“Then where will you stay?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t care,” he said sadly.

I whirled round to glare at him. “So what? It doesn’t do any good. I had to win. Make the world happy. They don’t want to look at what really happens. They have to keep trying, because I’m not dead. I don’t want their pity. I don’t want anyone’s pity. I don’t want yours!”

“I want to help you,” he said.

I laughed. “Why?”

“I owe your brother a favour.”

“Tom?” I made a harsh noise in my throat. “He’s dead.”

“I’m well aware,” said Gareth, soberly. “But that doesn’t change what he would want for you.”

“How would you know?” I said, heading for the door. “You didn’t even know him.”

“No, I did. I used to talk to him at the Yeerk Pool, when we chanced to be in the same cage.”

I stopped leaving. The words ‘at the Yeerk Pool’ seemed to have hit me in the back of the head.

I looked over my shoulder at Gareth. “You were a Controller?”

He nodded.

The words hit me again. The part about cages. Cages where involuntary hosts were kept while the Yeerks were not in their heads.

I turned all the way back to face Gareth. “You *really* knew Tom?”

“For an odd five minutes every now and then, yes,” he said.

I stood stunned for a moment.

Gareth spoke into the silence. “I met Tom on my first night at the Yeerk Pool. I’d been a Controller for barely three days and he’d been enslaved for over a year. He put me to shame.”

“What do you mean?” I said, stepping closer.

“I was ready to give up,” said Gareth. “For three days, I’d struggled to regain control of my body. But I was helpless. With

every second that passed the Yeerk in my head made that crushingly clear. When I first experienced freedom again, any hopes I might've had vanished the instant the cage door closed on me. I gave in to the whole thing at that moment. Might as well have been a voluntary Controller."

He spoke so bitterly, I had a stirring of sympathy. "Anyone would feel..."

Gareth nodded. "The strongest there were felt hopeless sometimes. I couldn't tell you differently of anyone who has ever been a Controller. But what I can tell you about Tom is that he *never gave up.*"

I suddenly found that I was sitting on the couch again. And I was listening hard.

"I was thrown into that cage, I sank to the floor and Tom just started talking to me. What was my name? What did I think of Yeerks so far? And..." Gareth paused to entertain a reminiscent chuckle. "What was I doing, collapsing in a heap like that? Was that how I planned to get out of this?"

"There was no way you could've—"

"Well, that's what I tried to tell him, but he'd have none of it. Gave me quite a pep talk, he did. Told me all about the Andalites. Andalite bandits were fighting the Yeerks, he said, and they had the Yeerks downright terrified too."

I was flattered. It wasn't the way I'd have described the Yeerks' respect for us back then.

"He told me about host rebellion," Gareth went on. "He knew of cases in which human hosts had fought hard enough to gain control of their eyes, their voice, or even their limbs for minutes at a time! He said that he himself had managed it once to warn his brother, uh you, about the Sharing."

I remembered. The Yeerk in Tom's head had been trying to recruit me into the Yeerk organisation. For just a second, Tom's face had twitched. And there'd been a scared look in his eyes. A look that told me not to join.

I pulled quickly out of the memory, as Gareth started talking again.

“He finished by telling me that at the very least I was free right now. Five minutes every three days and I wanted to waste them feeling sorry for myself? He said I should make life as miserable as possible for my captors while I had the chance.” Another reminiscent look spread over Gareth’s face. “He made a real scene all on his own, of course. Hork-Bajir guards never dragged Tom to or from a cage without complaining.”

I stared into space, imagining it. My eyes felt hot as I brought them slowly back to look at Gareth. “He never stopped fighting.”

“Not as long as I knew him.”

“How long was that?” I asked.

Gareth now began to grin in anticipation. “Last time I happened to share a cage with Tom, he told me something that I and every other Controller already knew. Something that made him more confident, more determined, more hopeful than he’d ever been before.”

My throat felt tight. “What was that?”

“That his brother—his own little brother!—was the one who’d been fighting the Yeerks the whole time. His brother, Jake; his cousin, Rachel; and their friends. It was humans who were fighting for Earth. Humans he knew he could count on. They would protect his parents, Rachel’s family, everyone he’d ever been afraid he would hurt. He’d lived so long in fear of what the Yeerk in his head might do to you, Jake, and to your parents. I can’t tell you what it meant to him to know that you had been fighting the Yeerks with him all along.”

My eyes were burning in their sockets. My constricted throat threatened to suffocate me.

“I didn’t protect my family,” I choked. “They were all Controllers in the end.”

Gareth raised his eyebrows. “What end was that? Saved your parents, didn’t you? And Tom...well...got his dying wish, anyway.”

“Dapsen 9567,” I breathed.

Gareth nodded. “I don’t suppose he was ever too worried about his parents, as long as they were alive. He knew you would save them. He just had to find a way to tell you how.”

Knew I would...had to find...oh, God...

I sank deep into the soft couch. My eyes...my throat...my whole body hurt.

Host rebellion, I remembered. There was an internal battle being fought over Tom’s claws. One side wanted to kill me with those claws. But it was the other side that was winning. It was the real Tom.

“*He fought the Yeerk in his head to tell me,*” Rachel had said. “*I know it’s important.*”

I rocked and writhed on the couch. My chest heaved with painful, dry-eyed sobs. Each gasping breath brought something back.

“I killed him, Jake,” said Rachel. “I killed your brother.” I was past pretending that there was any other way. I couldn’t save Tom. My parents were the same story.

“Everyone he’d ever been afraid he would hurt,” said Gareth. “He knew you would save them. His own little brother!”

All at once, the tears came. They flooded my cheeks in a steady stream.

Gareth didn’t say another word. While I cried, he sat there beside me. Quietly. Patiently. Like he could sit there forever waiting for me to stop. He wrapped a blanket around me while I shivered and shook.

I was sure his kindness would kill me.

I cried and cried and cried.

It felt like blinding light in my eyes. Like hot coals in my stomach. Like a knife in my heart.

It felt good.