

Chapter 4

Tobias

Jake held down a button. A beam of red light shot straight for the Blade Ship's warp core. No way it would miss.

I was ready to gouge Jake's eyes out if it would stop that beam of light.

Maybe I would anyway.

For three seconds that seemed to go on for hours, that red beam stretched towards the Blade Ship. It was inches from the hull...and then it stopped. Sputtered out.

I looked at Jake. His hand was still on the button. He pressed it again. Nothing happened.

No more Dracon beams. I crash-landed on the floor. Relieved beyond belief and suddenly exhausted.

Next came the slight shock of being on the Pool Ship's bridge. The trip up from deck nine was a blur to me. What I remembered clearly was everything I had heard over the com.

<Rachel's on that ship!> I yelled at Jake. <You put her there. One Animorph to 'stop the Blade Ship.' Now you want to blow it up with her inside. What the hell is wrong with you?!>

Jake didn't even blink. He was still looking at the targeting screen. Like he hadn't gotten past that moment yet.

My eyes burned a hole in the back of his neck as I flapped up to perch on a console. I was struggling with a very strong urge to hurt him as much as I possibly could.

<I found Erek,> said Ax's voice in our heads. <He has cut all power to the Pool Ship's weapons. I am attempting to restore—>

<No! Leave it alone,> I told Ax.

<Tobias?> he said. <You are on the bridge?>

<You don't know what Jake's done.>

<I do, Tobias,> said Ax in a private thought-speech whisper. <I am sorry.>

<You don't need to be sorry!> I yelled loudly enough for everyone to hear. <Just leave those Dracon beams the way they are!>

"Tobias," said Marco, dully. "She's already dead."

<You don't know that!>

"Twenty-five to one," Marco snapped. "You think she stayed hidden?"

No. I knew Rachel. If she was there, she was fighting. Or else she was...

<Rachel?>

There was no answer.

She couldn't be out of thought-speech range. She couldn't be...

<RACHEL?!>

<Tobias?> Her thought-speech voice was faint, but I could tell it was only with distance.

I realised that my heart had stopped beating when it started up again at double-speed. <Rachel!>

<Yeah?>

<What do you mean 'yeah'?! You were going to die!>

<What?> said Rachel, distractedly. <Oh, yeah. That was the plan.>

<She's alive!> I told Marco and Jake. <She's still fighting. She—>

Marco was giving me a pitying look.

<Rachel,> I added. <Could you tell them—?>

<Oh, uh, hi,> Rachel opened her thought-speech to include Marco and Jake. <I didn't die.>

They jumped about a foot in the air.

<Sorry, I forgot to tell you,> she concluded.

<Forgot?> I exclaimed. <Rachel! That is NOT something you just forget to tell people!>

<Sorry,> Rachel reverted to private thought-speech.

<What's happening over there?> I asked shakily.

<We're kicking Yeerk butt,> she replied. <Down to nine...make that eight bad guys now.>

<Who's 'we'?>

<Oh, James and his people,> she said.

James and...huh? I did a mental double-take. <But,> I said, blankly. <They were vaporised.>

<Really?> Rachel sounded surprised. <I got a different impression.>

<You mean they're alive?> I gasped.

<Yeah,> said Rachel. <And I figured they'd gone through a lot to get here, but...wow. Vaporised? I had no idea.>

They didn't die. Rachel didn't die because they didn't die. I felt a new kind of relief coursing through me. A giddy kind.

<They didn't die,> I whispered, half laughing. It was too much! I'd already gone through more relief than I could stand. I felt the words bubbling up again. <They didn't die!> I guess I said it louder than I meant to.

Jake made a startled movement.

Marco looked wildly around at me. "Who?"

<Oh, James and his people,> I explained.

"WHAT?!"

<They're okay,> I said, struggling to suppress a burst of giddy laughter.

Marco stared at me with wide, disbelieving eyes.

<I know!> I laughed like a maniac. <I don't get it either!>

"Tobias, what the hell—" Marco began.

Rachel's private thought-speech stole my attention. <I was worried about you too. I wanted to answer you before.>

<That would've been nice,> I laughed. <It was bad before. Really, really bad. And now nobody died and everything's fine, right?>

<Yeah, uh...>

<Rachel?>

<Look, Tobias,> she said. <It's great to hear from you, really. But I'm a little busy right now. It gives me the upper hand if I'm not distracted.>

<Sorry.> I sobered up in a hurry. <I'll talk to you later.>

<Don't worry,> said Rachel, pausing every now and then as though concentrating on dealing a blow. <These Yeerks should be...dead...any minute...now...and then we'll...join you uunnnhhh...>

<Rachel!>

<I'm okay.>

Chapter 5

Rachel

I gave the green creature that had just stabbed me a retaliatory slash in the face.

“Eeeeshht!” That would be the creature yowling. The green ones made that noise. The black ones only huffed and puffed like big bad wolves.

Tom was no longer a human spectator. He had morphed into a monstrous panther-like creature, making his side an even dozen. Once I had made it back to grizzly, I made James's team sixteen.

Now we were still sixteen and Tom's Controllers were eight.

Technically, we had the advantage. But the Yeerks were putting up one hell of a fight.

Tom in particular was making up for decreased numbers. His claws were long enough to shish kabob just about any animal on our team. In one horrifying moment, he managed to stick them clean through the gorilla's middle.

Tom was yanked clear by the earthen panther and herded away by an angry rhinoceros.

The gorilla fell to his knees.

<De-morph,> ordered the polar bear. <Chantel, Liam; cover.>

The gorilla began to de-morph.
A wolf and a cougar stood guard in front of him.
<I can't find anything's eyes!> cried the scorpion. <Eyes are my thing.>

<Your preferred molestation targets are unlikely to resemble those visual organs among Earthen species with which you are familiar,> said the bobcat.

<Timmy,> said the jaguar. <If you don't stop thinking you're gonna get killed. Just slash things!>

James shared command with two others. Erica was the polar bear. Craig the jaguar.

James wasn't so much giving orders as he was playing full-time defence lion. He went after every enemy winning a fight against one of his people and paid the others no heed. It was a strategy which failed to put much store by self-preservation.

<James, behind you!> I shouted.

James turned too late to dodge the attack. But Tom's claws missed their mark when a hyena leapt onto his head.

Tom caught the hyena's legs in his teeth, flung her out in front of him and swiped his claws at every bit of her he could reach.

James was all over him before a killing blow could be delivered. In a blur of gold and black, the two of them rolled away.

The hyena landed in a crumpled, bleeding heap. Without being told she began to de-morph.

As per usual, every Yeerk who could break free of a fight was aiming to finish a vulnerable Animorph.

I noticed the lion trying to make his way back.

<I've got it,> I told James.

I beat off a green thing on course for the de-morpher and stood ready to beat off more.

It turned out the hyena didn't need much time. She had something of that morphing talent. A little like Cassie before she became scary-talented.

It was amazing how far James's people had come in one month. That's how long they'd been Animorphs. The way they fought, you could tell they had been a team for a lot longer.

It was every Animorph's understanding that no risk was too great when another needed help. In this way, rescuers piled and circled until you couldn't tell who was in trouble anymore. The constant watch on every back spared many injuries.

The stress rate was also surprisingly low. James's people kept their heads at the worst of times. Some talked like nothing strenuous was happening. And I could've sworn I'd heard one of them singing earlier.

<Poison's a no go,> the rattlesnake announced. <I'm working on that strangling thing.>

<Think you could—> the coyote broke off in sudden fear as the black creature he was fighting clamped its claws around his muzzle and made to twist his head off.

“Hey.” The Hork-Bajir pried the creature loose with her wrist blades, yanking it backwards into a savage hug. “What do you think you're doing?” she scolded in that guttural Hork-Bajir voice. “We're here to kill *you*. Getting killed is *your job*.”

<Watch out!> warned the rattlesnake. She was wrapped taut around a green creature that was nevertheless targeting the Hork-Bajir with its spike claws.

<Pass,> said the buffalo.

The Hork-Bajir shoved her captive into his waiting horns and whirled to face her attacker.

We were down to five monsters when a group of human-Controllers ran out onto the bridge, a young, black-haired woman in the lead.

“Mice!” she cried. “We saw mice. We thought they might be...” The woman's sentence dropped away along with her jaw.

<ANIMORPHS?!> Tom roared. <What do you think NOW? Now that they're HERE? Now that they're NOT MICE?!>

The woman wrung her hands. “We tried to stop them!”

<Yeah, that was really funny,> laughed one of James's people.

Tom turned livid eyes on his human-Controllers. <Don't stand there gawking; kill them!>

James rushed the first to raise a Dracon beam. The shooter was a middle-aged man with red-brown hair and an ugly scar which curved from his earlobe to his chin.

Tsseww!

We all heard James scream as the red light shot from the Dracon beam caught him in the foreleg. The beam burned his leg right off. It travelled up his front, threatening to cut him in half.

A wolf ducked under the beam and wrenched the weapon from the man's hand.

<De-morph,> I said to James.

<Not me. I'm...> James staggered forward on three legs.

<Would somebody please tell him—> I began.

Erica was already on it. She seized James by his mane and dragged him back. She then proceeded to swing her big, white paw into his face over and over again. The blows, no doubt aided by private thought-speech, got James on track to human.

Meanwhile, the buffalo was charging Scar Man with a vengeance.

<No!> The jaguar blocked the buffalo's attack.

The buffalo snorted furiously. <Craig!>

<He's disarmed, Andrew,> said Craig. <If he's not a threat, we don't need to kill him.>

<He shot James!>

<He's a Controller,> said Craig. <The Yeerk in his head shot James.>

More human-Controllers were piling up at the bridge door, all of them armed.

The rhino moved out in front to take Dracon fire.

The jaguar, the wolf, the gorilla and the coyote moved among the shooters, knocking weapons aside.

The rattlesnake wound stealthily around the Controllers' ankles. She and the scorpion were administering mild doses of poison.

Until the Controllers began to sink to their knees, almost every other member of James's team was fully occupied keeping them off the bridge.

It was only me and the Hork-Bajir left guarding James.

There were three morphed Controllers left. The Hork-Bajir was struggling single-handedly against two.

Tom was moving in at the Hork-Bajir's back.

"Grrooowwrrrr!" I barrelled into him, dodging his claws as he spun to face me.

I was bigger. He was faster.

We wrestled in deadly combat.

His teeth were constantly seeking my throat.

My blows beat him back. His claws cut into me at my every miss.

Then I heard his voice in my head. <Rachel.>

I froze.

Tom's claws were drawing back. His voice was so different that I almost forgot about the Yeerk in his head. The way that Yeerk had said my name, it sure didn't sound like he wanted to kill me.

<What're you—> I stopped.

Tom's claws were retracting. Slowly. Jerkily. But retracting. <Rachel!> he said again. So forcefully, it was like he was trying to get the word clear of a gag.

I stared into his fiery eyes. They looked somehow different too. <Tom?>

He could only stare back at me with those strangely softened eyes.

I gaped at his claws jerking around on the floor. I had never seen host rebellion so powerful.

His muffled, desperate thought-speech voice jumped back into my head. <Dapsen. Nine. Five. Six. Seven.> He said it

again more clearly. <Dapsen! Nine! Five! Six! Seven! Dap—>
For a second there was a look of intense panic in his eyes.

Then the look was gone. Tom came at me with fully extended claws.

<Ahhh!> I wasn't ready. Tom's charge knocked me off my feet.

He was on top of me. An instant before he could pin me, I had his front paws locked in mine. I forced his claws back as far as my arms would go. Even so, the claw tips stuck in my shoulders.

I rolled him over. My weight might have crushed him, but his claws were still keeping me at arm's length.

I lunged at his left paw, seizing it tightly in my jaws.

I forced the claws in that paw flat against the floor. The claws in the other paw were slicing into my back.

He was cutting deep.

I was biting hard.

<Aaaaaarrrrgh!> Tom screamed.

The searing pain in my back was lessening.

I bit harder.

The claws jerked clear and I had my chance.

I reared up to my full height. Standing firm on my feet, I scooped Tom up off the floor, digging my claws into his belly. I lifted him bodily over my head.

He twisted in my grip. His claws grazed my shoulder. His teeth scraped my throat.

I brought him down hard and fast. Eight-hundred pounds of raw grizzly power slammed that cat into the floor.

His eyes closed and blood gushed at the back of his head.

I saw exactly when Tom died. I saw the doomed Yeerk beginning to emerge from Tom's black, furry ear hole. The tip of the slug was barely visible before it froze stiff and shrivelled up. Dead like its host.

I was drained. Stunned. Almost sad.

I guess I hadn't come in with any kind of plan to spare Tom the fate of every other morph-capable Controller on this ship. I knew I would have to kill him. Worse, I *wanted* to.

Now that I had, it wasn't much comfort to know that there'd been no other choice.

James had completed his de-morph. He began morphing back to lion.

<Don't, James,> said one of the guys. <Fight's over.>

James gazed blankly around at the motionless battle floor. Slowly, he pulled out of the morph he'd started. "The others," he said. "Is everyone..."

A shuddering gasp from the center of the room jerked James to his feet. "Erica!"

Erica had de-morphed. She knelt beside the lifeless body of a Hork-Bajir. "Judy," she whispered.

<And Craig,> said a small voice in our heads.

Erica clapped a hand to her mouth and turned her streaming eyes on the jaguar. There were deep holes and gashes all over him. Pieces of him cut out by Dracon beams. One of the weapons lay under his paw.

James found the nearest wall and leaned weakly against it.

Others were de-morphing, healing their physical injuries and revealing a different kind of pain in their faces.

I would have given anything, then, to lose myself in another raging battle. These people had saved me and I had fought alongside them. I could fight for them. Save their lives again and again. But I couldn't share their grief.

"Collette," said Erica, quietly. "She needs to know."

"If she's even alive," one of the other girls said.

"She is!" Erica turned wet, angry eyes on the girl who had spoken.

"Shut up, Jesse," snapped one of the guys.

"But we don't know what happened to Collette," Jesse protested. "How do we know she's all right?"

“She’s with Cassie,” answered James. He turned to me. “They’re on the Pool Ship, somewhere on deck ten. It’s out of thought-speech range from here. Maybe from the Pool Ship’s bridge...?”

I nodded. I knew what James was asking me to do.

<Tobias?> I called. <You still there?>

<Never left,> he said readily. <What’s happened?>

Chapter 6

Cassie

I had entered the Yeerk Pool chamber to find a crocodile wrestling with Taxxons. That was Collette. She was protecting a group of Hork-Bajir who were chained to the wall. The intended victims were now competing with quite a few bleeding Taxxons.

Collette ducked out of the fray when a Taxxon tooth nicked her underbelly. Luckily, Taxxons who might have followed the smell of her blood were held up by Taxxons who were trying to eat them.

What Collette hadn’t accounted for were the Hork-Bajir guards. The Yeerks in their heads were in complete control of who they wanted to kill.

I arrived as a wolf and so wasted no time in joining Collette in her fight against the Hork-Bajir guards. It looked like a hopeless situation, but my wolf hearing told me that help was on the way.

Hork-Bajir from Toby’s team rushed in, eager to help, but at first doubtful as to who needed it.

The Hork-Bajir chained to the wall quickly identified Collette as ‘Green Friend.’ Toby’s Hork-Bajir then came to their own conclusions as to the Hork-Bajir beating her up: ‘Yeerks.’

I too was deemed ‘friend.’ Most of Toby’s people had seen my morph before. And I was helping their ‘Green Friend.’

Collette and I were soon cleared of enemy blades.

The two Hork-Bajir groups were well-matched in number, but it couldn't be denied that the Controllers were superior fighters.

Toby's people just didn't have that kill lust.

One, looking quite frantic, dashed away up the ramp connecting decks. Minutes later, he came back with Toby who led a jailbreak.

Every caged and chained Hork-Bajir in the Yeerk Pool Chamber was set free.

The fight's outcome no longer uncertain and the scene getting uglier by the minute, I turned my attention to Collette. Semi-conscious, she was struggling through one of the shakiest de-morphs I had ever seen.

I de-morphed to heal my own injuries. As I completed the transition to human, I thought about becoming a horse and morphed straight on.

I envisioned the horse's powerful muscles in my human arms. They bulged out and began turning the colour of the horse's front legs. I kept them in the shape of arms so that I could lift Collette off the floor.

My back was ready to receive her by the time I had flung her behind my head.

I set my arms down and took two more seconds to form them into legs.

<Grab my mane,> I told Collette, hastily spurting hair out the back of my neck. She clung on with crocodile claws that were slowly becoming hands.

Fully horse, I felt the animal's panic instinct rise to its peak. My human mind was inclined to agree.

One pair of battling Hork-Bajir were whirling their blades far too close to us.

<Hold on!> I cried.

Collette dug her elbows into my sides.

I made a sharp turn and galloped away, weaving past every obstacle as best I could.

Several times I worried that Collette would fall off. But she kept her grip, even when her paralyzed human legs began to replace the crocodile's mobile ones.

The battle had been behind us now for several minutes. We were in an empty room. Somebody's quarters, I think. The way things were going outside, it wasn't likely anyone would bother us.

Collette sat propped against a wall.

I was still a horse.

Tobias, calling from the Pool Ship's bridge, was filling me in on everything that had happened.

<So that's it,> said Tobias. <The Blade Ship's under Animorph control.>

<Can they get it here okay?> I asked.

<They don't know how to fly it,> said Tobias. <But it'll get here. Rachel's persuaded one of the human-Controllers to help out.>

<Right,> I said, trying not to imagine what that might entail. <Where did you say Erek was?>

<Deck nine,> said Tobias.

"Cassie?" Collette was gazing at me with a puzzled expression.

<See you later,> I told Tobias.

<Yeah,> he said.

I de-morphed and sat down across from Collette. "I was talking to Tobias. He has news from Rachel."

"Is everyone all right?" asked Collette.

"They've secured the Blade Ship," I said.

"But is everyone all right?" she persisted. I knew by her face that she read the answer in mine. "Cassie?" Her voice trembled. "Who's not all right?"

I watched her fight back panic. She set her face in a tough, determined expression, bracing herself for a blow.

Looking at her, I couldn't help wondering whether there was any way to soften that blow.

Collette's eyes flashed. "Tell me!"

Finally, I just said it: “Judy and Craig were killed.”
Collette’s brave face melted in an instant. “I should’ve been there.”

“You tried to be,” I said. “No one blames you.”

“Don’t. Don’t tell me I—” Collette choked. “I couldn’t help.”

“But you—”

“No!” Collette rocked forward with her eyes shut tight. She rocked back and held herself stiff against the wall, opening eyes awash in tears. “It didn’t matter how much I wanted to save Kelly.”

I remained silent.

“They hold me back,” said Collette, disgustedly. “Keep me safe. I watch. Or I wait.” Collette’s tears were stillborn in her eyes. Nonetheless her misery was heart-wrenching. “It can’t keep happening. I can’t...”

I had no idea what to say.

Suddenly, Collette gasped. She brought a hand to her head in a startled gesture.

I peered anxiously at her. “Collette?”

“Oh, go away,” Collette groaned.

“I’m sorry,” I said, trying not to sound offended. “I’ll—”

“I didn’t mean you,” said Collette.

I stared at her for a few seconds, confused.

Then I heard Marco’s urgent thought-speech in my head. <Cassie, you’re there, aren’t you? Is Collette with you? Tobias said...but I couldn’t reach her. Hello? Cassie?>

I morphed rapidly to wolf. <We’re here, Marco. Collette’s fine; she’s just out of morph at the moment.>

<Right,> said Marco, sounding embarrassed. <Out of morph. Fine. I was just...checking.> In a moment he went on. <The Blade Ship’s docked. We’re meeting Rachel and the others on the bridge.>

<I’ll send Collette ahead,> I said. <I’ll be there soon. There’s something I need to do first.>

<Right,> said Marco.

I de-morphed.

Collette was still looking sullen. “I’m sick of people worrying about me,” she muttered.

I felt a twinge of annoyance. “I’d apologise on Marco’s behalf, if it weren’t for the fact that he watched you die half an hour ago.”

Collette blinked. I saw confusion and then dawning comprehension on her face. I guess her holographic death was only just occurring to her.

It was one of many things that had been occurring to me. Over and over again.

I’d known all along about the diversion. And about Rachel. I let my friends believe everything the Yeerks did.

James didn’t trust Jake to understand. There was a time, not too long ago, when I wouldn’t have accepted that. I would have insisted we let Jake in on the plan. I could have promised James, then, that Jake would agree to it.

I hated myself for not believing that now. But especially since I found out about Rachel, I wasn’t sure I really knew Jake anymore.

Whatever trust Jake had left for me seemed to have vanished over the past few days. At some point he must have realised that I was helping James. He’d talked to me like I’d betrayed him.

I guess in a way I had. But it was as much for my team as for James’s.

The worst of the guilt came with the news that Jake had tried to destroy the Blade Ship. Something he never would have done if he’d known who was on it.

When I thought about what would have happened if Erekat hadn’t...

I sighed.

Me sorting through that stuff was pretty selfish given what else had happened.

I forced my way back to dealing with Collette's feelings. "Look, do you really want people to stop caring?" I asked her.

Collette dropped her eyes. There was just a hint of shame creeping up on her pain-stricken face.

"James and the others are on the bridge by now," I said, gently. "They need to see you."

Collette nodded. "I need to see them."

I sat patiently as she morphed to red-tailed hawk.

Not knowing how to work a turbo-lift, I pointed her towards the ramp I had used. "It's deck fourteen," I said. "Just follow the ramp four floors up. You'll see the numbers on your left."

I watched her out of sight before setting my feet on the same ramp. I was going down one floor. Down to deck nine.

The ramp was rough on my bare feet. I concentrated on the wolf's padded paws and felt those pads spread out on the soles of my human feet. It felt weird, but made walking easier.

I morphed my feet back to normal at the first touch of smooth, level floor.

"Erek?" I called.

I ran my hand along the wall, searching.

"Cassie?"

"Erek?" I moved my hand further along the wall. "Where are you?"

"You're alone?"

"Yes."

An area of wall up ahead shimmered and disappeared.

Erek moved the room's crumpled door out of my path as I approached. He closed the hologram-wall behind me.

For a moment we just stared at each other. I wasn't sure how to go about saying what I'd come to say.

"Jake send you?" asked Erek.

"No. I just came to..." I took a deep breath. "Erek, I'm sorry about what happened."

"*You're* sorry?" he sounded incredulous.

“Yes,” I said. “We brought you here under false pretences.”
Erek shook his head disbelievingly. “Jake told you about that? I hear he’s been shutting you out lately.”

“A little,” I said, uncomfortably. “I don’t see what that has to do with—”

“You didn’t know,” said Erek.

“I did,” I said. “I wasn’t sure what would work. What wouldn’t. When we talked to you, we made it sound like...”

“No one would get hurt,” said Erek, bitterly. “I should have known better; this is a war.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “But we’ve involved you before without violating your program. We had no right to start now.”

“Nice thought,” said Erek.

“I understand if you hate me—”

“I wouldn’t have expected it of Jake myself,” Erek spoke as though he hadn’t heard me.

“If there’s anything I—”

“I don’t hate *you*,” said Erek, bluntly. “I don’t believe you deserve it.”

“Neither does Jake,” I said.

Erek’s face hardened. “Tell that to your auxiliary Animorphs. The military.”

“James’s people didn’t die,” I told him. “At least, not most of them. They went to help Rachel on the Blade Ship. The military never left the base. Your friend Jennifer created the diversion. The whole thing was holographic.”

Erek looked stunned.

“And things could’ve been worse all around,” I said. “James’s people managed to spare every human-Controller on the Blade Ship. I mean the ones who couldn’t morph. And there were lots on the Pool Ship too. The Yeerk Peace Movement—”

“It’s okay, Cassie.” Erek placed his gentle android hand on my shoulder. “Thank you for telling me. I’ll be okay.”

I smiled weakly. “I would hate to think otherwise, considering what happened.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jake didn’t know what James had done. Didn’t know they’d secured the Blade Ship. Jake was going to...stop the Blade Ship from leaving.”

“Blow it up?” Erek stomped on my euphemism.

“You stopped him,” I said. “You drained the Dracon beams.”

Erek shrugged. “It was something I had to do. A guilt lifter.”

I nodded. “For me too.”

Erek raised his eyebrows. “You?”

“I knew about James,” I explained. “I could have told Jake. It would have been my fault if Jake had destroyed the Blade Ship.”

Erek looked like he disagreed, but he didn’t say anything.

I went on: “It could have been so terrible what everyone would have gone through. I don’t know how we would’ve—”

“Because if I hadn’t drained the Dracon beams...” Erek eyed me shrewdly. “Jake would have had a lot more guilt to live with.”

I blinked. “It’s not about Jake.”

“I think it is,” said Erek. “You’re grateful that he didn’t have to go through worse. You want him to be okay.”

“Erek...” How had this gotten so complicated? “Look, I just wanted to thank you. All of us, we...we owe you a lot.”

He smiled. “Thanks, Cassie.”

There was a long silence.

Then he said, “I have to go. You’re bound to have company here soon. Media and the like. I don’t want the Chee to be discovered.”

“We won’t tell anyone about you,” I promised.

He smiled again.

I turned to leave.

“Cassie?”

I looked back at Erek.

“I hope Jake will be okay. You can tell him I said so...if he asks.”