

Chapter 46

Marco

When I told her the news Collette's whole face lit up. "That is *so* great!"

It was amazing how happy she could be on someone else's behalf. I was twice as excited about the news, just looking at her.

"What did your friends say?" she asked.

"I haven't told them yet."

"What? How long do you have?"

I shrugged. "About an hour."

Collette goggled at me. "Then what are you doing here, silly! Go find your friends. Tell them what's happened."

"I had to stop by here first."

"That's crazy."

"No, it was actually a sensible plan," I insisted. "Someone's gotta know where we are in case the irony gods strike. We try to do something nice and normal, and they're bound to throw in nasty complications. Possibly dire consequences."

Collette leaned forward until her lips were two inches away from mine. "So go, and I'll rescue you if things get dire and complicated."

I stayed very still. "I can't go yet."

She raised her eyebrows. "No?"

"My vibe detector's outta whack again."

"Mmm," said Collette, regretfully. "And you were doing so well."

"Give me another chance. I'll imagine crocodile scales all over your beautiful face."

Collette jerked her head forward and kissed me.

Then she laughed that wonderful laugh. "Now, go!" She gave me a little push. "Go get your friends!"

I backed away with a huge grin on my face and sprang for the door.

It was a beautiful day. Gray, cloudy sky and the sun barely visible. It all had this really lovely radiance I hadn't really noticed before.

I headed for Rachel's. I didn't expect Rachel to be home, but I figured her mom might know where she was. Or maybe Rachel had left a note like 'Gone to make scrap metal out of car wash. Guy who runs it is a big jerk. Be back when I feel like it.'

When I got to her house, I invited myself in. And there was Rachel sitting in the living room with her little sisters.

"I didn't mean to do it," Rachel was saying. "One minute I was doing my homework, and the next I was morphing all over the place. Crocodile, fly, elephant."

"And then the house fell down!" said Sara, excitedly.

"Only part of it," said Rachel.

"Why did you morph an elephant *inside the house*?" asked Sara, breathless with interest.

"I told you," Rachel sighed. "It was an allergic reaction to crocodile DNA. I couldn't help it."

"Did you morph whenever you were near crocodiles?" asked Jordan.

"There were crocodiles *in your bedroom*?" Sara exclaimed.

"No," I chimed in, making them start. "Just a website of Jeremy Jason McCole. Hot, sexy, totally-not-cuter-than-me-and-yet-able-to-pierce-Xena's-armour-with-unresistable-attraction actor boy."

Jordan giggled. "That's why you morphed?"

"That was *not* the reason," said Rachel, glaring at me.

I laughed. "Then that must have been some extremely frustrating homework. I mean you went through three morphs before you could calm down. Must have been math."

"So, it's emotions," Jordan worked out. "Emotions set off the morphing?"

"Powerful emotions," I agreed. "Like sweaty, tingly puppy lo—"

"Jeremy Jason McCole made you morph?" Sara marvelled.

“No,” said Rachel, still glaring at me. “Marco made me mad. And then I killed him.”

Having reached this point in the conversation, I decided to tell her the news and be going along my merry way.

She told me where to find Tobias.

It was in the strangest place. Place with hallways. Lockers. Classrooms.

A bell rang.

While stragglers were still vacating the corridor, Tobias came out of the principal’s office. He was smiling to himself in a comfortable sort of way.

I leaned against a wall, waiting for him to look around. He walked over to me.

“Get to class, young man,” I barked. “You’re losing valuable learning time.”

“Hello, Marco. What are you doing here?”

“Just checking up on your sanity,” I told him. “I had to see this to believe it, man. You’re world famous and qualified for millions of dollars from every talk show on the planet, and you really want to go back to the yawn factory and learn how to write properly punctuated paragraphs?!”

He grinned. “Believe it or not, Marco, I don’t want to spend my life on talk shows.”

“You don’t know what’s good for you.”

“Who’re you to talk? You severed ties with all of yours.”

I shrugged. “They had attitude problems. I’m still gonna be a shallow Hollywood movie star first chance I get.”

“That’s as soon as you find a shallow Hollywood circle that doesn’t mind you having a life?”

“Right. Exactly. And it’ll be the easiest thing in the world,” I declared with unshakable confidence.

Tobias nodded, looking amused.

“Getting back to you, dude,” I went on. “You do know that you’re—”

“Insane?” Tobias supplied.

“Yeah.”

“Well, it won’t be as bad as attending classes. See, the principal was really understanding about my three year absence. ‘You poor kid,’ he said. ‘Three years behind because you were a hawk trying to save the world. You couldn’t help that.’”

“Nice excuse,” I said, laughing. “I should’ve tried that one on my teachers.”

“Anyway,” Tobias continued. “I get this package course that’s supposed to cover the three years’ most essential stuff. I keep up with the homework and I’ll graduate in half that time.”

“So your mom’s going to home school you?” I asked.

“Sort of,” he said. “But Mr Feyroyan has also offered to tutor me.”

I told Tobias the news.

I found Cassie leaving the mall. Actually walking out of the mall like she’d *been inside*. And she was carrying a—

“What is with everybody today?” I exclaimed. “Cassie, tell me that is not a shopping bag.”

“Hey, I shop,” she protested.

“Yeah,” I scoffed. “When Rachel’s steering.”

“She doesn’t know I’m here, does she?” said Cassie, anxiously.

“So it’s a secret mission?” I surmised. “You’re buying your own clothes without Rachel’s approval?”

“I didn’t want it to take all day,” said Cassie.

I whistled. “I doubt you’re doing yourself a favour. You’re probably looking at a week of correctional shopping after buying clothes from *that* store.”

“Thanks for your support.”

I told Cassie the news.

And then Jake. He was in a pretty unusual place too. At the War Memorial graveyard. At Tom’s headstone.

It wasn’t unusual what he was doing. Sitting. Staring.

I walked up behind, almost wishing I hadn’t bothered to find him. “Jake?”

He turned his head to look at me. I thought I saw a smile tug at the corners of his mouth. But it was probably a trick of the light. He turned back to the headstone without saying anything.

“Any preference on colour or wood type?” I asked. “Red, green, mahogany, cedar?”

Jake turned his head again, giving me a questioning look.

“For the house we’re going to build around you. You know, in case it rains and you don’t notice.”

Jake looked for a moment as though he would laugh. “I haven’t been here that long.”

He was still looking at me like he knew I was there. I gave it another ten seconds to make sure it wasn’t a fluke.

“I went to get flowers for...” Jake reached his fingers back to brush the name on the stone. “Before that I was talking to James.”

“I heard.” I sat down on the grass beside him. “So how’d that go?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“That’s great.” I slapped my knees. “Now we parade the head on a stick, and trace the relatives back three generations. Bring on the feud!”

“I mean okay,” said Jake, rolling his eyes. “I shook his hand.”

“No.” I made a blown-away-awed face. “You mean like a civilised human being?”

Jake stood up.

I did too. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with you,” I complained. “You’re up, you’re down, you’re all around, and now of all things something resembling normal.”

“You must have a perfectly rational explanation.” Jake shot me a calculating sideways glance. “Being my psychologist and all.”

I laughed. “Gareth told you?”

“Told me a lot,” said Jake, getting serious again. “James sort of did too. I have to deal with what is.”

The phrase was familiar. “James didn’t tell you that, did he? Sounds like something Cassie would say.”

“They’re a lot alike,” said Jake.

“But they’re not—”

“No,” he cut me off before I could get the words out. “No, that was just me being...”

“Suspicious, jealous, paranoid, hyperactive,” I brainstormed.

“You forgot ‘insane,’” muttered Jake.

“Well, thank God you were. You would have been too boring to qualify for existence otherwise.”

“That bad, huh?”

“You’d understand if you’d been there.”

Jake nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“No time for that,” I said briskly. “You’ve got a busy day ahead.”

Jake blinked. “I do?”

“Uh-huh. A certain Andalite Prince intends to honour us with his presence, and promptly afterwards embarrass us with a few scenes at the food court.”

There was no doubt about it this time: Jake was smiling. His eyes were suddenly shining. “Ax? He’s coming back?”

I had a similar grin on my face. “He should be here in about fifteen of *our* minutes. And guess where we’re going to meet him?”

“Where?”

“You’re not going to believe it.”

Chapter 47

Cassie

It was the construction site. The same construction site where everything had begun. In three years nothing much had happened to it.

I could have believed we'd gone back in time except that there were plaques describing the initiation of the Animorphs which took place there.

"Makes you feel kind of ancient, doesn't it?" Tobias commented.

"Tell me about it," said Jake. "We're history before we're the future."

"This place is so useless now," Rachel complained. "We'll never get anything new in this town if they start roping off every barren piece of land for oh-my-God-Animorphs-stood-here goggling purposes."

"You're not even a little bit flattered?" I asked.

"Sure," said Rachel. "But if they just had a museum with construction site pictures in it, I could be flattered and properly accessorised."

I rolled my eyes. "We don't need a new mall."

"We do if the one we've got keeps leading clueless shoppers astray behind my back," she said.

"Here we go again," Marco sighed. I think he was beginning to feel a little sorry that he'd told on me.

"I got clothes that fit," I told Rachel, stubbornly. "Just the way you like them."

Rachel glared at me. "It's about style, Cassie. Those clothes are totally going to diminish your world saviour image."

"Well, I doubt our arriving company will have much of an opinion," said Jake. "He might go so far as to think that Cassie's clothes have nothing to do with her being a world saviour."

I sent Jake a grateful smile.

Rachel wasn't convinced. "Just promise me you'll use better judgement next time."

"And wear what you tell me to?"

"That's what I said."

I let it go.

"I don't know how you're gonna combine your talents, Xena," said Marco, shaking his head. "I mean what are you going

to work in an office building and beat up people wearing ugly ties?”

“Earth’s gotten a bit more exciting than that,” said Tobias.

I nodded. “Hork-Bajir living here publicly. Androids secretly. Yeerks starting new lives in new bodies. And two Andalites coming here in a shuttle.”

“Yeah,” said Rachel. “We’ll just go on being normally abnormal.”

“Guess I’m going pretty weird that way,” said Tobias.

“Because you’re going back to school?” Jake surmised.

“And then he’s gonna teach ornithology, the study of birds,” said Marco.

Tobias gave him a look. “I don’t think so.”

“Oh, too easy?”

“Too been there, done that,” said Tobias.

“But you owe it to all the ignorant little textbook people to share your invaluable expertise,” Marco insisted. “They need to know what it’s *really* like to ride thermals and eat road kill.”

“You’ll be teaching roach morph, then?” said Jake.

“Yeah and what about you?” asked Marco. “You got any big plans for the future?”

Jake looked at me when he answered, smiling that slow, familiar smile. “Just the one so far.”

“I saw that,” said Marco, as Jake looked quickly away. “See that? I ask an innocent little question and he goes all significant-faced and googly-eyed. Now his face is all red. Anyone else sensing a conspiracy here?”

“Careful,” said Tobias. “I could tell him colours your face has been lately.”

“It’s a conspiracy alright.” Rachel eyed me with shrewd suspicion. “You’ll be inviting me at the last possible second so that you can show up in overalls. You know you’re not going to get away with it.”

I met Jake's eyes again, remembering what we had talked about yesterday. We really had been planning on telling everyone once we had a few details settled.

"Hey, look!" Marco clapped a hand to his head and pointed dramatically at the sky. "It's a flying saucer!"

We all burst out laughing. It was exactly what I'd said in a similar situation three years ago. Except this time, we were expecting an Andalite to fall from the sky. Somehow, this meeting felt even stranger than the first one. Maybe because we were so comfortable with it.

"You know," said Tobias, thoughtfully. "That's what they should build here. A spaceport for alien visitors. It would be useful and appropriate."

"It's a good idea," I said. "I hope that becomes necessary someday."

The shuttle landed. It wasn't much smaller than the fighter Elfangor had come in. It settled on the ground, and out from the hatch came that Andalite's little brother.

"Hi," we all said.

<Hello,> said Ax.

"Nice flight?" asked Marco.

"Where's Kaysted?" I asked. "He did come with you, didn't he?"

<Yes,> Ax answered. <But he became overexcited during the landing and inadvertently spilled our leftover rations all over the shuttle floor. He is inside cleaning up the mess.>

"You made him do that? That's terrible," said Marco.

<It will help calm him down,> said Ax. <And I did want a few moments uninterrupted conversation.>

"Fair enough," said Jake.

"We've missed you," said Tobias.

<And I you.> The warm smile in Ax's main eyes turned to each of us in turn.

"Stuck on rations a full week, you must be desperate for fast food," said Rachel.

<The liquid grass was unappealing,> he admitted.
I searched his face with my eyes. “How’ve you been?”
<All right, I suppose. At times less so.>
“I know the feeling,” said Jake. “Anyway, you’re looking better now.”
<Yes. And you as well, Prince Jake.>
Jake smiled. “I’m still your Prince? You know you’re a Prince yourself now.”
<No,> Ax said firmly. <Just myself. That’s who I am on Earth.>
“Ax-man,” said Tobias, jerking his head pointedly toward the construction site’s perimeter gate. “You’re also a media magnet.”
Ax’s stalk eyes spun in alarm. <I am attracting metallic objects?>
“No, it’s those people,” Tobias explained. “You’re attracting them.”
<Human physiology does not have magnetic properties. And Andalite physiology—>
“Ax,” said Marco. “Let me explain.” He pointed his finger meaningfully. “Those *fiends* are coming to stand between you and your celebratory pig-out. They’ll shove lights and sticks in our faces and they’ll block our path to the food court. We could be delayed for *minutes*.”
<Minutes?> Ax repeated faintly.
“Possibly...” Marco stepped forward “even...” he held his mouth open in suspenseful horror, “*hours*.”
<To survive so many of your minutes and hours without grease...salt...without cinnamon buns...> Ax swayed as though the thought was too much for him. <I have already endured many Andalite weeks without them.>
“I understand,” said Marco, solemnly.
“They won’t.” Tobias looked over at the approaching press. “They’ll never understand.”
“And we’re not stopping to chat,” said Rachel. “Cinnamon-bun-deprived Andalite’s a greater danger to them than they know.”

<I must have my cinnamon buns!> Ax confirmed.

“No beheading!” I cried.

“We’ll run,” said Jake. “One, two...”

“Let’s do it!” said Rachel.

Ax took off.

Tobias ran to keep up. “Ax, what about Kaysted?”

<Just spoke to him,> Ax said distractedly. <He says he is coming. He has to do something for someone first.>

Tobias was confused. “Do what? For who?”

<He will come!>

We ran. Reporters, cameramen and tag-along fans swarmed after us.

“Are you getting this? We’ve got nothing on this species. What is it?”

“One of the Andalites the Animorphs mentioned?”

“No, it’s a mutated-deer alien.”

“Keep rolling, I want every inch of it on tape.”

“You get the eyes? Get the eyes. Those eyes and those legs and that tail...”

Ax had a good lead on them until he got this panicked look on his face and started morphing to human.

“Ax!” Tobias ran back to help him to his uncoordinated feet. “You know morphing in mid-run doesn’t get you there any faster.”

“They want my body!” Ax explained with his human mouth.

“My *Andalite* bo-dee! Bawd. Dee! Dee! Dee!”

Rachel grabbed Ax’s other arm. She and Tobias supported Ax between them while he finished his morph.

“They’re closing in,” said Marco.

“Don’t panic,” said Jake.

The six of us drew together back to back, the enemy creeping in from all sides. They crept in with eyes staring, mouths gaping, microphones jabbing, cameras clicking and flashing.

Ax turned his human head from side to side, looking at the situation he had morphed us into. “I am sorry. Suh. Sawr. Sorrrr. Sor-ree. Sor—”

“It’s okay,” Tobias told him.

“Hey, there’s a new one,” a group of female fans were saying.

“Where?”

“The blue centaur thing. He’s like human now.”

“Check him out.”

“I could take a bite out of him all over.”

Ax’s eyes widened in shock. “*She* wants my human baaawdeeee!”

“Yeah, hang in there,” Marco muttered.

“Hang? Hang-nuh? In there? Th. Th. There? Hang in where-Er?”

“We’ll protect you,” said Jake.

“Where’s the bird-boy?” a gang of guys started.

“Isn’t that him?”

“Nah. No feathers. He’s not there.”

“That mean the hot blonde chick’s available?”

“I’m going to start bashing heads,” said Rachel.

I grabbed her wrist. “We can’t do that.”

“Just a few nosebleeds,” Rachel begged.

“Gap!” Tobias exclaimed.

Still back to back, we moved towards it. The press closed the gap and we froze in place. We were completely surrounded now. Completely at the mercy of irritating, time-wasting interrogators.

“Were you expecting the alien spacecraft?”

“Are there more aliens coming?”

“Purple tubes in spaceships?”

“Flying eggs? The Boogy Man?”

“No, he uses spaceships too,” said Marco.

“You know the Boogy Man?” a reporter demanded.

“First name basis. We call him Boogy.” Marco glanced sideways at the rest of us. “Anyone remember how we summon him to our aid in times of need?”

“Not helping,” Rachel growled.

“You look like you’re resisting a strong urge to be violent,” a reporter informed her.

“Do you think such urges might not have been fully exhausted during the war?”

“Are you taking anger management classes?”

“Have you considered therapy?”

I kept my hand around Rachel’s wrist. “Now what?”

“I invoke Boogy, I invoke Boogy,” Marco chanted with his eyes closed.

<I AM BOOGY, THE GREAT AND POWERFUL,> a voice boomed in our heads.

Marco’s eyes snapped open.

I tilted my head up and saw spurts of green light bouncing around in the gray, cloudy sky.

<THE GREAT AND POWERFUL BOOGY KNOWS WHY YOU HAVE COME,> Collette continued.

The crowd looked with confusion, anxiety and then with utter terror at the flashing, shouting sky.

One of the fans opened her mouth wide and screamed like the need to do so negated all need to breathe.

“The Boogy Man!” another one said in hysterics. “The Animorphs summoned the Boogy Man!”

“It can’t be real,” someone insisted. “It can’t. It’s just too ridiculous.”

<DO YOU PRESUME TO CRITISISE THE GREAT AND POWERFUL BOOGY, YOU UNGRATEFUL CREATURES?>

The green lights went *Tttssaaappp! Tttssaaappp!* in the clouds.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!”

“You shouldn’t have said that!”

“I do believe in Boogy, I do believe in Boogy, I do, I do, I do, I do.”

“It’s talking in my head. It’s *inside* my head!”

“What are those weird green lightning bolts?”

Ax turned his head to look behind him, teetering so that I had to catch him by the elbows. His eyes followed the lights in the sky back to his parked shuttle.

“Shredders,” he told us under cover of the crowd’s screams. “Shhhhhhhhhhhred. Edders. Extremely—leee—low power. Pow. Wuh. Wuh. Er.”

Between the shredder spurts, the clouds and the rays of sunshine beginning to peek through them, you could barely make out the bird. Collette was just an enormous outline almost all wings. Albatross, I was pretty sure.

She lost a little altitude. I caught a glimpse of a purple, liquid-filled balloon flopping like a fish in her beak.

The green lights came faster and faster, accompanied by her thundering thought-speech, <DO NOT AROUSE THE WRATH OF THE GREAT AND POWERFUL BOOGY.>

Ttssaapp! Ttsap! TtsapTtsapTtsapTtsapTtsap!

“It’s coming closer!”

“Make the Animorphs make it go away!”

“It doesn’t want to go away; it wants us to go awaaaaaaaaay!” cried a guy, complying as fast as his legs would carry him.

“You idiots!” A head reporter grabbed one of her escaping staff and yanked him back. “Pull yourselves together. It’s the Boogy Man; we should interview him.”

“You’ll make ’im mad,” her captive whimpered.

The crowd was thinning. The bolder cameramen still filming non-stop. The bolder fans still advancing on us where we stood.

A girl with a pom-pom was shrieking for “Marco! Marcooooo, let me touch you! Tell me the rumours aren’t true, Marco. You can’t have a girlfriend who’s not me! How could you do that to me?! I like love you!”

The albatross made a sharp turn, dropped slightly lower and released the purple balloon. It flop, flop, flopped down from the sky and burst right on target.

The stuff that came out was nothing like zinozine sinking *into* a head. It was stinky, honey-coloured stuff staying very much *on* the head. It dripped all through the girl's hair, over her forehead and down the back of her neck.

“Ohhhh-UggHH! OhmyGodohmyGodohmyGod!” The girl tore at strands sticking into mats and got her hands all covered in goop too. She danced on the spot, wailing like a two-year-old. “Ewwwwwwwwww! Ew! Ew! Ew! It's like Boogy Man guts or something. What's that alien freak got against my ha-*airrrrr*?!”

Marco was doubled over laughing.

The shuttle's shredders stopped firing. A moment later Kaysted bounded out of the hatch. <What'd I miss? Oh!>

Kaysted staggered back from the sheer incredibleness of what he was seeing. His main eyes were wide and his stalks swivelling madly in every direction. <Oh, they're *everywhere*! Pink ones and brown ones and white ones and red ones! Oooooo and they've all got artificial skin and mouths and everything!>

Kaysted spoke as though watching a spectacular show. Judging by the way cameras were moving to encircle him, his performers thought it the other way around.

<NOT SO FAST. NOT SO FAST. I HAVE TO GIVE THE MATTER A LITTLE THREAT.> Collette found some sunlight and made a sudden swoop to drop her winged shadow lower.

“Ahhh!” Teenage girls threw raincoats over their perfect hairdos.

One full-grown man threw himself flat on the ground.

<Ax?> Kaysted called uncertainly.

Tobias waved his arms. “Over here!”

<Ax!> Kaysted ran towards him.

Evidently, Ax had shown Kaysted his human morph. Our appearances he was less solid on.

<Hi, Tobias, Cassie, Marco, Rachel and Prince Jake!> he said to us at large.

“Hi,” I said.

“Welcome to Earth,” said Jake.

<I've gotta get me a mouth!> Kaysted turned towards what remained of the media crowd.

I grabbed his shoulder. "You have to ask."

"Yes. Yuh. Eees. We went over that," Ax assured me.

<Can I morph your body for temporary use in the human eating facility?> Kaysted asked a cameraman.

The guy was completely thrown. "Wha—? Morph my—? Wh-what an impertinent question! Yes, it's most—"

"Yes," said Marco. "You hear 'yes'? I heard 'yes.'"

He pressed Kaysted's hand against the guy's face.

A few reporters away another cameraman was tailing Rachel, snapping picture after picture of her at every angle he could manage.

"Move," said Rachel, sweetly.

The man disregarded the advice.

Rachel gave him a nosebleed.

Tobias caught my eye and grinned. "Can't say she didn't warn him."

Kaysted was morphing to human.

"Don't forget about—" Jake began.

But Kaysted didn't need any encouragement. With great enthusiasm, he was covering his every emerging human part with borrowed jackets, vests and hats from the press.

Rachel winced as she looked at the end result. "Gonna have to do something about that."

"It's her agency for intergalactic fashion victims!" Marco enthused.

Tobias joined Ax in his efforts to herd Kaysted toward the mall doors.

We were all running again with only a handful of reporters in pursuit.

<GO AWAY AND DON'T COME BACK TOMORROW,> Collette told them.

I tripped. Jake stopped. I grabbed his outstretched arm and he pulled me to my feet.

“You must be careful,” Ax warned Kaysted. “C. Care. Fullll. Running on two legs makes it hard—Mmm. Ake. Sssss—it hard not to fall over. O. Vvvver.”

I saw Marco swing his head up to check the sky before he said, “Hard? *Hard?! Ax-man*, don’t scare the tourists with your crazy misconceptions.”

Marco ran backwards. “It’s so easy.” Kicked his feet high in the air. “So not dangerous.” Spun in circles. “I could do this all day! All day long without—” And fell spectacularly on his butt.

“You see?” Ax said obliviously to Kaysted.

We ran for the food court. And loud, joyous thought-speech laughter followed us all the way there.