

## Chapter 7

### **Jake**

Rachel came back. Didn't die. She came back with James's people. Ax showed up around the same time.

Tobias said we were waiting for two more.

I wasn't sure what he meant. There were so many people on the bridge already. So many eyes.

I wanted to be someplace they wouldn't see me.

A red-tailed hawk flew in. Not Tobias.

This hawk was a girl. She de-morphed among James's people.

I saw Marco's eyes flicker once or twice in her direction.

*Collette*, I realised.

I remembered a crocodile burning. A girl winking. That was Collette.

Marco had been angry. *"This was the plan? Diversionary tactics means sixteen dead Animorphs? That's them doing their job?!"*

I had pressed the button. My mind had gone blank as I watched the beam stretch towards the Blade Ship. Dimly, I remembered pressing the button again. The Dracon beam wouldn't work and I had no idea what to do next. Tobias was yelling, I knew. I was too numb to hear him.

I had been so sure that Rachel was dead. When she told us she wasn't, it was like I'd been struck by lightning.

I really had been about to kill her.

James's people too.

Marco had stared.

Tobias had laughed. He was with Rachel now. Perched on her shoulder. Ax was with them.

Rachel was talking. "Dapsen nine five six eleven—no, seven! Dapsen nine five six seven."

Ax held his hands posed over a console. <You are certain?>

Rachel nodded. "Positive."

Cassie came. I wasn't sure where she had come from. She'd been a wolf before. I had followed Marco. Cassie had gone somewhere else. Now she was here. Human.

Our eyes met. There was no hostility in her gaze. I couldn't even imagine that there was.

But I probably was imagining her eyes full of concern. Concern for me.

She next looked over at James's people. They were sad, grief-stricken but all looking at her with gratitude.

James walked over to her. He hugged her.

"Collette told us you saved her." James's voice was choked with emotion. "I can't thank you enough."

Cassie hugged him back.

My heart sank. At the same time there was anger rising in my chest. My face was flushed and tense.

I'd been through this before, I knew.

It all came rushing back. My mistakes. James fixing them. Cassie with him.

The hug ended and they kept looking at each other.

I couldn't look away. My feet yearned to move forward, but one step in that direction and I knew I would lose control.

Slowly, I was backing away, moving closer to the group around the console.

"There, that's it!" Rachel stuck her finger in the screen.

<It is a Yeerk designation,> said Ax. <Dapsen 9567. Birth Date: Generation 688, mid-cycle. Rank: Sub-Visser Fourteen. Current Host Body: Hork-Bajir. I do not see what relevance it has to us.>

Rachel grimaced. "He fought the Yeerk in his head to tell me. I know it's important."

<It is entirely possible that it was the Yeerk in his head who was speaking,> said Ax.

"Keep looking," said Rachel.

I stopped behind them. "What—"

Rachel jumped and turned around. Her hand flew to her shoulder to steady Tobias. Her eyes darted uneasily around my face. “Jake,” she said.

Ax looked up at me with his main eyes.

They had been talking about someone. I hadn’t caught a name. “What’s going on?”

“We’re just, uh...” Rachel’s eyes were still unsettled. “Tom told me something. Ax is...” She gesticulated behind her.

Ax went hurriedly back to what he had been doing.

Rachel’s discomfort got worse the longer I looked at her.

Tobias squeezed her shoulder gently with his talons.

I was still lost in what Rachel had said. Something about... “Tom?” I said aloud.

Rachel stole a glance into my eyes before saying in a tense voice: “I killed him, Jake. I killed your brother.”

My mind went numb again. Like ice. “Right,” I said.

Rachel stared. “Did you...hear me?”

“You killed Tom,” I recounted.

I had planned that. I hadn’t planned how I would feel.

What was I supposed to do?

Get mad? Mad at Rachel? Maybe.

Maybe a bad idea.

I was very aware of the hawk on her shoulder glaring at me. Tobias’s eyes were always glaring. For once there was hate behind them. I was sure.

They all hated me.

Cassie’s eyes didn’t hate. Maybe she did. Her eyes never could.

I sensed her near me. Couldn’t feel her. But for a second I thought I saw her hand reaching out to—

<Dapsen 9567 is head of construction at the new Yeerk Pool,> Ax announced.

Tobias fluttered off Rachel’s shoulder to perch on the console. <That’s the Yeerk Pool to replace the underground one?

The one they were building so they could put the Pool Ship back in orbit?>

<Precisely,> said Ax. <I have here a location and a list of...>

Rachel wrenched her eyes from me. “What? What did you find?”

<It’s the personnel on the Yeerk Pool project,> Ax explained. <There is a list here of the workers under Dapsen 9567’s command. The Yeerks. And their host bodies.> Ax’s stalk eyes swivelled in my direction, but he spoke to Rachel. <If you would confirm...>

Rachel’s eyes swept over the screen once and then again more slowly. “Oh my...”

“Come on,” said Marco. “Spill it.”

Rachel turned to me. “It’s your parents. They’re on the personnel list.”

I couldn’t understand the excitement in her face. “Makes sense,” I said. “They’re Controllers.”

“We all knew that,” said Rachel, impatiently. “What we didn’t know before was where they were. Or even if they were still alive. Now we know!”

<Not just them,> said Tobias. <Rachel, your father—>

“What? No, he—” Rachel’s jaw dropped as she caught sight of the file Ax had just opened.

<He’s not a Controller,> said Tobias, eyes on the screen. <He was pretending to be one on the Yeerk Pool project. Dapsen found out and threw him on a Taxxon supply ship, due to arrive at Taxxon Central first thing tomorrow.>

“Wow.” Marco looked at Rachel. “Guess your dad caught that Yeerk at a bad time; they usually have the manners to kill you more directly.”

“It’s Tom’s whole family,” said Cassie, softly. “His parents. Uncle. Everyone he lost to the Yeerks. He’s given us the chance to rescue them.”

Rachel glared at her father's profile. "He went after the Yeerks for a news story. Arrh, I could kill him!"

<Would that not defeat the purpose of a rescue mission?> Ax wondered.

*Rescue?* My thoughts dragged behind the conversation.  
*Rescue my parents?*

James joined us at the console. "Are we about ready to land?" he asked.

"What about the Andalites?" said Marco.

Ax's eyes went wide. His fingers flew over the console.

"Andalites?" said Rachel. "There are Andalites here?"

<They are disabling my virus,> said Ax. <The ship's systems are coming back online.>

"Did I miss something?" asked Rachel.

"Andalite High Command was thinking about wiping out Yeerks with an Earth-shaped explosion," Marco informed her.

"Blow us up?!" Rachel exclaimed. "No way! Let's blow them up first!"

"We don't need to do that," said Cassie, sharply.

"The Dracon beams aren't working," I remembered.

<Erek,> said Ax, tensely. <I will try to—>

"Why don't you try hailing them?" Cassie demanded.

<I *have* tried,> said Ax.

"They wouldn't give him the time of day," said Marco.

"Because they think that Earth is a lost cause," said Cassie.

"They need to know how close we are to saving it."

"You think they care?" Rachel snapped. "They didn't think twice about the Hork-Bajir."

<True,> said Tobias, uneasily.

"That was one Andalite," Cassie argued. "Or a handful anyway. The attack on the Hork-Bajir world was disavowed by the Andalite people."

"Well, we know what this bunch wants," said Marco.

"They won't make the same mistake," said Cassie. "Not when they know—"

“We can’t risk—” I interrupted.

“She’s right,” said James. “They’ll have no reason to attack once they know where we stand.”

Trust *him* to take her side. Quite suddenly I forgot what we were talking about. I had to tell Cassie—

“Ax?” Rachel demanded.

<Whatever Erek did to the Dracon beams...> Ax turned to face us with his main eyes. <I cannot undo it.>

Ax showed every sign of displeasure at the news that he would be unable to shoot at the Andalite ship.

Really, he was relieved. I knew.

Rachel was furious. “Well, get that pacifist idiot back over here before we get fried! Cassie, you know where—”

“He left,” said Cassie, shortly.

“So hail them,” said James.

Ax established the visual link. Two Andalite faces appeared on the view screen.

Rachel, still angry, was biting her lip to keep from hollering at them.

Marco faked a composed expression. Cassie’s was genuine.

Tobias’s hawk eyes were inscrutable.

I wasn’t thinking about the Andalites. I was dimly aware that an order had been given. And I hadn’t said anything.

Ax squared his shoulders. <I am—>

<Aristh Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill,> said one of the Andalites, harshly. <Brother of Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul who broke the law of Seerow’s Kindness when he gave morphing technology to the humans. You are the Andalite cadet who has been plaguing us with messages. The Andalite who sent a virus to disable our ship.>

“And you are...?” Marco prompted.

<Prince Fethyun-Desanord-Villec,> said one.

<War-Prince Zartof-Gecosshir-Tudipmep,> said the other.

“Uh, how do you feel about nicknames?” asked Marco.

<Be quiet,> Ax snapped. Then, to the Andalites: <I must inform you of our status.>

<Your status does not matter,> said War-Prince Zartof. <We have detected the Yeerks that infest this planet.>

<We have control of their Pool Ship,> said Ax.

<Obviously,> said Zartof. <But it is not the only ship. Nor the only Yeerk Pool. Millions of Yeerks dwell here still.>

<The situation is under control,> Ax assured him. <We have all the resources and support we need.>

<What support?> asked Prince Fethyun.

<Free Hork-Bajir who work with us,> said Ax. <A new group of Animorphs. And all the free people of Earth.>

<The humans cannot defeat them,> Zartof scoffed. <This guerrilla war of yours was pointless from the start.>

<There is no longer any doubt that we will win,> said Ax, firmly. <Now that we have the Pool Ship—>

<I am curious,> Fethyun interrupted, <How you managed to commandeer that vessel?>

<We entered through the docking bay,> Ax began.

<Without being seen?> said Fethyun in amazement. <I'd have thought the Yeerks would have tighter security.>

If Ax was about to mention Ereka, he didn't get the chance.

"We used small morphs," said Cassie. "Security was held off when we got to the control room."

<Held off *when you got there*?> Fethyun looked startled.

<You had *inside* help?>

Ax hesitated.

Cassie caught his eye and understood. The Andalites have been fighting the Yeerks for a long time, building up a lot of hate; they wouldn't react well to the concept of a Yeerk Peace Movement.

Before Ax could figure out what to say, Toby's voice came in over the com. "Andalite vessel, I am Toby Hamee, leader of the free Hork-Bajir. My people have secured the ship's Yeerk Pool.

There is no other that presents any significant threat. This planet stands on the brink of salvation.”

<We will destroy the Pool Ship,> Zartof announced. <You have ten minutes to evacuate.>

“No!” Cassie cried.

“You misunderstand,” said Toby. “We no longer require your assistance.”

<You wish to protect the Yeerks aboard,> Zartof accused.

“They will not leave their hosts willingly,” Toby explained. “It will take three days—”

<We cannot consider the hosts at this juncture,> said Zartof.

Rachel lost her temper. “Look, pal, it’s not up to you who does and does not count around here. This is *our* planet.”

Zartof growled, <We will do what is necessary. If it means destroying your planet—>

“Try it and we’ll ram a hole in your hull,” Rachel shot back.

*The hull. My mind phased out of the conversation. I saw the beam stretch towards the hull. It would make a hole. Burn a hole straight through to the warp core. The Blade Ship’s warp core.*

I phased back in.

Fethyun was wearing a thoughtful expression. <We might concentrate our explosives only in those areas where there are Yeerk Pools. It would minimise casualties.>

“Please.” Cassie looked imploringly into the Andalite’s eyes. “There needn’t be *any* casualties.”

“We will not indulge your denial!” Zartof raged at her.

“There is too much at stake.”

*I knew what was at stake, I thought. Why did they deny that it had to be done? Why didn’t they tell me that it didn’t?*

<Launch your escape pods,> said Zartof. <And we will give you time to outrun the shock wave.>

“You worry about your own people when we’ve cracked your ship like an egg,” said Rachel.

Marco threw his hands in the air. “If everyone could just stop trying to blow things up—”

My stomach clenched.

“—that would be great,” said Marco.

Zartof glared at us all with a face like thunder. I wouldn't have been surprised if steam started rising from his ears. <Either you accept our offer or—>

Fethyun put a hand on his shoulder. <Zartof, perhaps we should wait and see—>

<Wait for what?> Zartof was getting worked up, ranting out of control. <For our enemies to overpower us again because we are weak! The Yeerks have enough host bodies here to conquer five more planets. We've run the risk too long. They will dominate the universe if we do not stop them here!>

<And what of Aximili's claims?> asked Fethyun.

<He does not know what he is talking about.> If Zartof had a mouth, he would have been spitting. <Since when do we stop to listen to half-grown, fool-headed Andalites who live so long among backward, primitive aliens. What is it that this *Aristh* has done?>

<He has destroyed the Abomination,> said Tobias.

Both Andalites were silent then. They stared at Ax. Prince Fethyun with shock and something approaching respect. War-Prince Zartof with disdainful disbelief.

<It is true,> said Ax. <Visser One's body is adrift in space.> More silence.

<We will investigate,> Fethyun said and terminated the link.

The picture on the view screen was replaced with Earth's surface, coming closer as Ax began to land the ship.

Toby hailed us from deck ten. “How did we do?”

“I'm sure we convinced Fethyun,” said Cassie.

<But Zartof outranks him,> said Ax. He was bent low over the console, avoiding our eyes.

“How are you doing down there?” Marco asked Toby.

“The Yeerk Peace Movement is helping us lock down Controllers,” she reported. “Mr. Tidwell says that they can handle the three day supervision from there.”

*I should be doing something, I realised. I should be asking questions.* I thrust one through the ice that seemed to have frozen my thoughts: “The Yeerks in the Yeerk Pool?”

“I’m inclined to leave that one with the Peace Movement as well,” said Toby. “They may have people there.”

“So it’s all good,” said Rachel. “We can go get the parents now.”

*Parents?* A tiny corner of my mind began to defrost.

“Whoa.” James had been watching the view screen. He turned back to us. “There are people out there. I mean a whole lot. We must have attracted attention bringing this ship back. Looks like the civilians want to know what’s going on.”

I was watching his eyes while he spoke. Who he looked at. Cassie. Rachel. Cassie. Ax. Cassie. Tobias. Cassie. Cassie. Cassie.

“So have we landed?” Rachel demanded. “Let me off already. I’ll fly the rest of the way down.” She made to leave the bridge.

Cassie grabbed her arm. “Wait.”

“Yeah right,” said Rachel. “I’m going after my dad before he arrives at Taxxon Central in a kibble truck.”

<There’s still time,> said Tobias.

Cassie kept a wary eye on Rachel as she grudgingly remained where she was.

I was struggling to remember what I was supposed to be focusing on. “How about everything else?” I said.

<I fear that our truce with Andalite High Command is fragile yet,> said Ax. <They may still decide to bomb the Yeerk Pools and all the hosts therein.>

I kept my mouth moving. Heard my words come out. The only ones I could think to say. “They could do that. It’s a small price to pay to rid Earth of Yeerk Pools.”

<And Dapsen’s Yeerk Pool?> Ax ventured.

I shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.”

Marco raised his eyebrows.

Cassie was giving me a look like what I'd said had worried her. "What about your parents?"

*My parents.* I searched my numb brain for the information. *They were Controllers. And...*

"Toby's people won't get through to the valley," said James. "That's a massive crowd outside. And some have guns."

When James spoke to us as a group he spoke mostly to Cassie. Like maybe he thought of her as the leader.

That's what he wanted me to believe.

"Civilians probably would assume that Hork-Bajir are the enemy," Cassie agreed. "They've only ever known them as Controllers."

"So we'll protect the Hork-Bajir," said Rachel. "We'll protect the townies and the parents and the Andalites and the nice, peaceful Yeerks. That's fine. Now can we please *move?!?*"

<In which direction are we to move first?> asked Ax.

<Everything is on the clock,> Tobias pointed out.

"Let's keep it simple." Marco stepped back a little, speaking to everyone on the bridge. "Two search 'n' rescues. Me and Cassie go with Jake. Tobias goes with Rachel. Ax can stay here to chat with Andalite High Command. And James's people stay to do crowd control. One day's work, easy."

Orders. He was giving us orders. And no one even looked at me to see what I'd say.

I didn't care.

## Chapter 8

### **Marco**

I guess it was a good plan, because everyone went with it. It surprised me the way the idea had come out of my mouth. Like I was telling them what to do. Oh, well. Someone had to. Jake didn't look like he was up to it.

Ax settled the Pool Ship on the ground. He finished with the ship just in time to greet its bridge crew, who were awakening from their stunned states.

All were disarmed and very disoriented. One by one, Ax chivvied them off the bridge. He locked the door behind them and sent a message to Toby.

Meanwhile, the rest of us were morphing.

Tobias opened a hatch in the ceiling while he waited for Rachel to become a bald eagle.

Cassie and I began morphing to osprey.

Jake stood still for a while, oblivious to everything.

When I talked to him, he came slowly back from wherever it was he had gone in his head.

He looked at me: a mess of slowly mutating parts.

And then at Cassie who was a blur of changing features.

Cassie held Jake's gaze, slowing down her morph as though to explain the process more clearly.

I guess Jake caught on, because he started morphing his peregrine falcon.

James's people were morphing. I didn't get a chance to see what.

Rachel and Tobias flew out the hatch in the ceiling, up into open sky.

Outside, there were civilians hollering. Inside, Controllers were hammering on the walls.

Through the noise, a familiar voice entered my head.

<Marco?>

<Collette!> My voice did a funny leaping thing. I brought it down to casual. <Hi.>

<Um,> said Collette. <I'm sorry I didn't answer you earlier.>

I exited the Pool Ship alongside the osprey and peregrine falcon.

<What do you mean?> I asked Collette. <Cassie said you were out of morph.>

<I was, but so was Cassie. I didn't feel like talking to you.>  
<Oh.> I was embarrassed. Now that I thought about it, I guess I had sounded pretty desperate. <Well, uh...I just wanted to make sure Tobias hadn't gone crazy, you know? I mean, he was so relieved about Rachel, I thought maybe the rush had gone to his head. Plus, I had this whole contradictory image to 'Oh, James and his people. They didn't die. They're okay.'>

<I know,> said Collette. <And...I'm sorry about that. I know what it's like to watch someone get vaporised. You didn't know it wasn't real. I should have remembered.>

<That's okay,> I said, not liking the pain in her voice. <I'm okay now. You too, right? Like a carpet beetle?>

<Huh?>

<Bug in a rug,> I clarified.

She laughed. A quieter laugh than usual. Not that cheerful either. <I did morph flea about a half dozen times.>

I soared high on a thermal. <You must have left the center pretty early this morning.>

<Not this morning,> said Collette. <We left the center that day the Yeerks were clearing buildings to land the Pool Ship.>

<No kidding,> I said. <You mean you guys have been staying at the Hork-Bajir valley ever since? How come you skipped out on the welcome party?>

<I guess we weren't so sure we *would* be welcomed. Seems stupid now.>

<Crazy,> I agreed. <You know the Hork-Bajir threw a big bark buffet the last time they had company.>

<I hope they let you use salt and pepper,> said Collette.

<Is that all you'd need?> I marvelled. <Personally, I can't stand tree outside of maple syrup.>

<Mmm,> Collette sympathised. <At least we're headed out of the trenches now.>

<Back to the land of refrigerators and microwave ovens,> I said, dreamily.

<And restaurants, movie theatres, roller-domes.> Her voice was like her laugh, holding enthusiasm in check.

<Think you might try skiing?> I asked.

<That fantasy hasn't been so hot lately,> she said. <I mean with the morphing, flying...there are a lot of animals I'd like to try.>

<I recommend dolphin.>

<Yeah,> Collette's voice lifted a little. <That's a lot of fun?>

<Best part is, it's fun soon to be unmarred by the tedium of world-saving missions,> I said. <We're totally overdue for those hero degrees as it is. Next time the world asks me for labour, I'm going to be a dolphin saying, 'school's out, man. I'm just here hanging with the whales and throwing spit-balls at the sharks.'>

Then came the laughter I remembered. The full-hearted kind.

If ospreys could grin, I would've been doing it.

<How about actual school?> asked Collette. <Did you manage to graduate before refugee camp?>

<I was going to leave a note,> I said. <Something like: 'Hey, assistant principal Chapman, I'm just taking a little stress leave, because you and your fellow Controllers are trying to kill me. It won't affect my grades, will it?'>

<Academics look pretty insignificant next to hero degrees anyway,> said Collette.

<My point exactly,> I sighed, happily.

<And hero definitely is the harder of the two,> Collette went on.

<I dunno,> I said. <We get through these last couple assignments and all that's left are a few lingering nightmares. They fade fast.>

<You would think.> Collette's tone had sagged again.

<What?>

<Oh, just thinking,> she said, uncomfortably. <This time my friends died on a mission that succeeded. They had a chance. So maybe it should be easier. But it's not.>

<Right,> I said, slightly guilty. <Sorry, if I'm being...>

<It's good,> said Collette. <It's better to laugh than to cry. Judy and Craig would understand that. Kelly too, she...she would've been ashamed of how useless I've been lately.>

<She could be pretty hard on you,> I said.

<Yeah. But she was usually right.>

<Now for the math question,> I said in mock thoughtfulness. <With me equalling funny, funny equalling laugh and laugh equalling good...talking to me is actually helping?>

Collette laughed. <It's a start.>

<And your after-school assignment?> I inquired. <What are you guys, anyway?>

<Basically sheep dogs—as in job, not morph. The townies are too freaked to do anything sensible, and they just keep coming. They're being real jerks about...> The rest of her sentence trailed away to almost nothing.

<What?> I said. <What about...? Collette?>

She answered in a faint, strained voice. <I can barely hear you.>

<But I'm—> I suddenly realised: I was flying. I'd spent the last few minutes flying further and further away from the Pool Ship. <—out of thought-speech range!> I shouted. <So you can't hear me, right?> I scooted backwards in mid-air. <How about now?>

The osprey flying beside me stopped to hover on the spot. <Marco, what are you doing?>

I scooted backwards some more. <Now?> I asked Collette.

<You're going the wrong way,> said Cassie.

<Come on,> I called to Collette. <Just say 'one-eyed, one-horned, flying, purple people-eater' if you can't hear a word I'm saying.>

<No-eyed, no-horned, falling, orange alien-drinker,> said Collette.

I laughed. <Or that if you *can* hear me. Hey, try that with—>

<Marco?> Cassie interrupted. <You might want to tell Collette you'll talk to her later.>

<What?> I yelped. <I was using public thought-speech?>

<No,> said Cassie. <I took an educated guess.>

<You're really scary like that.>

<Marco...> Cassie prompted.

<Uh, Collette?> I said. <Cassie wants me to tune in to my after-school detention now.>

<And James needs help with the people herding,> said Collette, guiltily. <I'll talk to you later.>

<Yeah.> I hovered for a moment, just in case she was about to say anything else. When she didn't, I flew forward again.

This was what always happened. Collette and I only ever talked when we were on missions. We had time while we travelled or waited. Then someone or something would interrupt and we'd have to break contact.

Jake hasn't been much fun to talk to lately. Not that I'm insensitive.

When Collette started asking me questions about Animorph stuff, we sort of became thought-speech pals. Which is like pen pals, only instead of post-office issues, we get Yeerks.

So that's where I was now. Headed for Yeerks who were hiding out in a wilderness not too far from the Hork-Bajir valley. Risking my life for the friend who, an hour ago, I thought I couldn't care less about.

I knew that Jake's family had been his driving force. It was his initial interest in the war when he found out he'd lost Tom to the Yeerks.

Now he'd lost Tom for good. He might have been ready for that to happen. He might even have been ready to kill Tom himself. But whether or not he'd been expecting it, I knew that Tom's death had to be torturing him.

There were probably a lot of things that were torturing him. That didn't surprise me. What had me worried was the fact that we were now on a mission to save what was left of his family and he

didn't seem to care.

<Where's Jake?> said Cassie.

<Huh?> I looked around. No peregrine falcon. <Oh. Uh...>

<You stopped,> Cassie accused. <I stopped to get you. Now we've lost Jake.>

<I didn't know he needed parking,> I protested.

<There!> Cassie sped for a high pile of rocks, where three shiny steel balls the size of beach balls were hovering.

<Hunter robots!> I flew after her. <What're you—>

Then I saw: the hunter robots were shooting at a peregrine falcon that was flying straight at them.

Cassie seized a rock in her talons and tried to drop it on one of the robot's camera lens—that's its visual aiming system.

She missed.

Right behind her, I took a rock in each talon and gained altitude.

Cassie abandoned her second attempt when Jake lost a wing and fell from the sky. I saw him hit the ground. Cassie was beside him in an instant, telling him to de-morph.

<Hey, I'm up here!> I called to the hunter robots. It was stupid. Those things can't understand thought-speech. I kept ranting at them anyway. <That's the bird *above* you. With the rocks? Look at me when I'm threatening you!>

But they made me work for attention. I twisted around in the air until I had a lens in target range. I opened one talon.

BONK!

<He shoots, he scores!> I dropped the second stone.

BONK!

The two visually impaired robots hovered in dizzy circles.

I tried ramming the third one. It plummeted out of my reach, aiming at the girl and the bird on the ground.

Cassie had de-morphed, probably to get Jake to do the same.

<Down!> I told her.

She threw herself flat on the ground and the beam barely missed her.

Suddenly, Jake was de-morphing.

I was ready with a third rock. And believe me, my aim was perfect. I was *so* going to get that last robot.

But the wind must have blown my rock off course.

The robot skimmed the ground where Cassie was. She knocked it sideways with her foot, giving me the chance to land on top of it.

I banged my beak against the lens. It's not one of those beaks designed for drilling holes in trees. <Die! Di—ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!>

"I think you've got it," said Cassie.

I hopped off. The robot, its lens cracked, hovered away in confusion.

We waited while Jake finished de-morphing. His eyes were wide and blank. "Dracon beam," he muttered.

"It's gone," said Cassie.

Jake grabbed at her hand and just as suddenly pushed her away. "You left."

"No, Jake, we're—"

"You're not here." It seemed like every painful expression that had ever existed on his face was cascading through him. He panted out words like he was trying to explain. "The beam. I saw it. You fell. I fell. Couldn't stop it. I was a bird. And they all...you all...left...you..."

Cassie just stared at him with her head on one side, worried.

I was starting to feel edgy, perched on the ground. I flapped hard for sky.

"You're okay," Cassie told Jake. "We're all okay. Just morph back and we can get out of here."

<Uh...> I said, as I gained altitude. <Don't mean to rush you, but it looks like more beam-bots coming.>

"Jake," said Cassie, urgently. "You have to morph back. Back to peregrine falcon."

Jake shook his head violently. His eyes stared unseeingly past Cassie. His limbs thrashed against the ground.

Cassie tried to hold him still. “Jake!”

<Maybe we shouldn’t have brought him along,> I said.

“They’re his parents.”

<He’s dead weight, Cassie.> I scanned the ground around the rocks, hoping to find a cave or something. <If we leave him here and come back—>

“No!” Cassie’s eyes flashed. “He’s safer with us.”

<Well, how do you suggest we...> I left the question unasked.

Cassie was halfway morphed to horse before I had even come up with the words to finish my question.

She morphed until there was just a patch of human skin and morphing outfit left on each side of her horse body. And then each of those patches erupted into two sinuous tentacles. They were the tentacles of a Leeran—that’s an alien species that lives on planet Leera. Long story.

Cassie used these tentacles to strap Jake—thrashing like crazy—securely onto her back.

I gulped. <Remember before when I said you were scary?>

<Come on,> said Cassie.

I did. Sometimes there’s just something about a person that makes you want to stay on their good side. You know?

I knew that Cassie had once managed to morph a whale with enormous osprey wings. Pretty freaky, considering that no one else knew how to become two animals at once.

<I forgot we even had Leeran morphs,> I said. <That’s gotta be, what? Two years since we used those?> Looking back, my mind froze up in panic. <You don’t have the psychic thing, do you?>

<Just the tentacles,> said Cassie.

We kept moving. There were more hunter robots along the way. With me navigating from above, we managed to cut them a wide berth.

Jake had gone limp on Cassie's back. Didn't move a finger either to free himself or to get more comfortable. His eyes were wide and blank again.

<He's so lost,> said Cassie, sadly. <I don't think he even remembers where we're going.>

<He'll know when we get there,> I said. <He'll see his parents.>

<But they'll be Controllers.>

<For three more days. So what?>

Cassie sighed. <He's just taking everything so...so badly. If he sees his parents the way they are now...>

<Think maybe he'll flip out?> It wasn't a crazy idea. Jake went pretty nuts back when his parents were first taken. He'd been through so much since I was surprised he'd held together as long as he did.

I had a twinge of unease at the thought. I knew that I had pushed him like everyone else. No one had given him the chance to stop being the leader.

I flew high overhead, while Cassie trotted below. Watching the hunter robots at a distance, I soon saw where the thing they were guarding was.

It was about half the size of the Pool Ship. At first glance, a huge circular pile of rocks. It was the roof that gave it away. The stones up there had been carefully paved to allow absolutely no light through. So a bird couldn't see a glimpse of the inside from the air.

I almost laughed to look at it. Once the Yeerks had the means to run an entire underground city around their Yeerk Pool. Now this little hut in the wild was the best they had left. More even than commandeering the Pool Ship, *this* was the thing that really brought it home to me. *We beat them. We. Won. The. War.*

I found a huge stretch of wall devoid of hunter robots, landed and de-morphed.

Cassie arrived just as I finished.

Unlike the roof, the wall had been made in a hurry. Roaches can get through bad walls. My wolf spider morph could get through this one. I found a chink at eye level and peered through.

It was the Yeerk Pool, alright: one lead-coloured pool of slugs, a few housing structures and about one hundred Controllers. Jake's parents were among them.

"Yeerks must be understaffed, with only hunter robots on guard," I said. "And they don't have any ships."

Behind me, Cassie was de-morphing and lowering Jake to the ground at the same time.

"Shouldn't be impossible, but—" I turned around.

Cassie, fully human, was kneeling over Jake. "He's asleep," she said blankly. "At least...I think he is."

I took a closer look at Jake, still and quiet with his eyes closed. "Must be. He didn't hit his head or anything, did he?"

I could tell from the look on Cassie's face that this hadn't occurred to her. She turned his head gently in her hands, checking for injuries.

I looked out again at the Yeerk Pool. "So assuming we're not planning to jump them...what do ya figure? Ask politely?"

Cassie didn't look up. Her hand rested on Jake's shoulder while she gazed at him with her worried, tilted-head expression.

"Cassie?"

"Hmm?"

"Hey." I pulled her hand away. "You've gotta focus: Yeerks, people, danger. Help me."

Cassie nodded. She stared off into the distance for a moment, lost in thought. Her hand returned to Jake's shoulder as she said, "I have an idea."

## Chapter 9

**Ax**

<By all the bloody tails of Crangar,> said War-Prince Zartof.  
<I see it and I still don't believe it.>

<We have confirmed your story,> Prince Fethyun elaborated.  
<Visser One is dead.>

<And you killed him,> Zartof said in that same stunned voice. <You killed the single most threatening being in all of the Yeerk Empire.>

<Yes,> I said, trying not to sound too pleased with myself. I was still concerned for the safety of planet Earth. For Prince Jake's parents who were currently stationed at a very likely target. For my friends who by now were there as well.

I had already exceeded my bounds as a lowly Aristh. It was a remarkable thing that these Andalites were even listening to me. And I did not want to push my luck.

<If you would care to land,> I went on, swivelling a stalk eye to check on the vast crowd of humans outside. <I can locate a place—>

<We would prefer to dock,> said Fethyun. <Your control of the Pool Ship is absolute?>

<Yes,> I said.

<Clear us for docking,> ordered Zartof. <We will investigate the Pool Ship for ourselves before deciding whether or not any action need be taken.>

My hearts leapt. Zartof was behaving reasonably now. If he approved of what he saw on the Pool Ship, all would be well.

Then I remembered the Yeerk Peace Movement and the Yeerk Pool we had left in their care.

<We will proceed,> said Zartof.

<Of course.> I terminated the visual link to the Andalite ship and activated an audio one to Toby. <An Andalite investigation team is coming aboard,> I informed her. <Whatever the Yeerk Peace Movement is planning to do with the Yeerk Pool—>

“It's been done,” she said. “The Movement has retrieved its members from the pool. The rest they have executed.”

<Oh.> I was surprised. Just a little shaken. I had assumed that the Yeerk Peace Movement would want the Yeerks transferred back to their home world. Evidently, that ‘Peace’ Movement had become more ruthless of late.

<No problem then,> I said to Toby. <Just get ready to—>  
“Greet your Andalites,” said Toby, grimly. “You told them that we have everything under control?”

<They must confirm,> I said.

“Oh, must they?” Toby huffed. “Very well, I’ll tell my people: ‘*Hruthin* come. No bad. Hork-Bajir tolerate *Hruthin*.’”

<Toby, these are no ordinary *Hruth*—uh, Andalites,> I said reprovingly. <They are a Prince and War-Prince.>

““Hork-Bajir tolerate especially stuck-up *Hruthin*,”” she amended and terminated the link.

Although Toby has reason to be prejudiced against my people, it was hurtful that she would call us arrogant. We are, after all, extremely technologically advanced. We are the greatest warriors, the greatest scientists in the entire galaxy. *A little* respect was only fitting.

Prince Fethyun and War-Prince Zartof met me outside the docking bay with a dozen other warriors.

To my surprise, an Andalite youth came aboard as well. He was noticeably a few years younger than me.

Prancing a few steps ahead of the dignified Andalite warriors, he was gabbling away in loud, excited thought-speech. <This is it, isn’t it? The ship with all the aliens! Yeerks and Taxxons and those two-legged pink things. Oh and Hork-Bajir! The ones with the big blades and the really tiny brains? Are there Hork-Bajir here, Fethyun? War-Prince Zartof—?>

<Yes, yes,> said Zartof, impatiently. <There’s one right over there. Now move along.>

The youth became quiet as he approached the Hork-Bajir. He waved his arms high over his head, as though to announce his presence. He then proceeded to mime out a greeting, moving slowly, spreading his arms and fingers wide.

I was very embarrassed for the young Andalite when I saw who the Hork-Bajir was.

“I regret I am too primitive to understand your impressive gestures,” said Toby. “Perhaps if you would condescend to use speech we should get along better.”

The Andalite dropped his hands and emitted a small thought-speech whimper. Backing away rather hurriedly, he bumped into Fethyun who placed a steadying hand on his shoulder.

<My brother,> said Fethyun. <Aristh Kaysted-Binsrube-Ivagmiss.>

The Andalite cadet was probably about the same age I was when Elfangor took me along on his missions. It was a sort of unofficial rule that the siblings of great Princes be allowed privileges which other Arisths were denied.

<Stay with Aximili while we conduct our search,> Fethyun instructed his brother. <We will meet you here.>

He, Zartof and the other Andalites fanned out to explore the ship.

Kaysted kept a fearful eye on Toby as he sidled closer to me. <I didn't know that they talked,> he mumbled. <Honest, I didn't.>

<It is quite all right,> I said consolingly. <Toby is very understanding and took no offence, did you, Toby?>

“None,” said Toby, looking daggers at Kaysted.

He jumped and moved to stand behind me.

<Most Hork-Bajir are actually quite friendly,> I assured him.

<And is it true they eat *tree bark*?> said Kaysted, nervously.

Toby flashed him her nightmarish Hork-Bajir grin and walked slowly away.

Kaysted watched her go with morbid fascination. <Whew,> he said quietly to me. <I don't think that went too well. You got any Taxxons I can meet?>

<Those do *not* eat tree bark,> I said pointedly.

<Living flesh, right?> Kaysted sighed. <Maybe not such a good idea then.>

He spun his stalk eyes in idle circles over his head, wondering what to do next.

This spot where we stood had very recently been part of a Yeerk-operated vessel. The Pool Ship had been a raging battle zone for the last couple of hours. It was somewhat disconcerting to have this Aristh here now treating the place like it was one big play field.

<You're Elfangor's brother, right?> he said at length.

<Yes,> I said with just a touch of my old annoyance, always being referred to as 'Elfangor's brother.'

<He was really something, wasn't he?> said Kaysted, eagerly. <It was this planet he came to, wasn't it? And he gave the aliens some of our technology.>

<Morphing technology,> I confirmed.

<And broke the law of Seerow's Kindness doing it,> said Kaysted. <I guess a lot of people think he was pretty stupid.>

<If that's what you—>

<I didn't mean *me*,> said Kaysted. <I think Elfangor was awful brave doing what he did. Going over the big heads in the Andalite hierarchy. I mean he just did exactly what he wanted and didn't let anyone get in his way.>

I bristled at the interpretation. <Elfangor acted for the benefit of another species and would never have dreamed of breaking Andalite law had their need not been so great.>

<Oh,> said Kaysted, slightly disappointed. <But I thought he broke all sorts of laws when he became a Prince. He was like a radical or something.>

<I am afraid that you have accumulated many false ideas about the universe,> I said loftily.

<Oh, yes,> Kaysted brightened. <Like those two-legged, pink—>

<Humans,> I said. <And they come in many colours.>

<Ohhh,> said Kaysted, his eyes wide. <I'm sure I've got them all wrong too. Is it true they have a *fifth* sense? And hooves

on their faces? And skin that they can take on and off? Oooooo.>  
He shuddered. <Wouldn't that *hurt*?>

<That skin is what the humans call 'clothing,'> I explained.  
<It is artificial skin which they place over their actual skin.>

He stared. <Why?>  
<Without it they are vulnerable to environmental hazards and societal ridicule,> I answered.

<Wow,> said Kaysted.  
<As to hooves on their faces, there are none. You may have that notion confused with the human 'mouth.'>

<A *mouth*!> said Kaysted, excitedly. <Like the Taxxons and Hork-Bajir have? Humans have *that sense* too, don't they? That sense that mouth-aliens have? What's it called?>

<Taste,> I said and for a moment I lost myself in the thought of it. There is at least one human invention which challenges Andalite superiority: the cinnamon bun. Also chocolate. Grease. Salt. Cigarette butts...

<Aximili!> Kaysted was tugging on my arm. <What's *taste* like?>

<Indescribable,> I answered with a sigh.  
Presently, the investigation team returned. Zartof proclaimed the Pool Ship secure and admitted that I had been right to suggest any further military action unnecessary.

<Come, Kaysted, back to the ship,> said Fethyun. <Join us, Aximili?>

I was startled by his tone. Not an order. It was an invitation.  
<Yes, certainly.> I followed him.

In the Pool Ship's docking bay, I went aboard the Andalite ship—the *Garibah*.

Fethyun led me onto the bridge. I knew right away that it was more than the on-duty crew assembled there. There was a pilot. A tactical officer. And for every station usually operated by one, several Andalites just standing there.

Stalk eyes turned as I entered. Before I had gone two steps, everyone was staring at me. When I saw what was in the large, shallow box at their feet, I knew why.

It was Visser One. Cold and stiff from the vacuum of space. One arm and both stalk eyes missing.

They were taking the body back home. The *Andalite* body. It was difficult to remember the Yeerk I had fought, when I looked at that blue-furred corpse.

<It is just as well,> said Fethyun, as though he knew exactly what I was thinking. <Alloran has suffered much. He is finally at peace.>

Zartof swept a cloth over the body and ordered it taken to storage. He turned to me with savage pleasure in his eyes. <The only Yeerk with an Andalite host wielded terrible power. You have ended him.>

<After all this time...> said the pilot, in awe. <*You*, an *Aristh*, destroy the abomination.>

<An *Aristh* no longer,> said Fethyun. <I say we make him a full warrior.>

<No.> Zartof's stalk eyes travelled slowly around the bridge, capturing everyone's attention. <I will make him a Prince.>

<No way,> said Kaysted, staring at Zartof in a very unprofessional manner. <Even Elfangor had to wait two years.>

<Aximili has waited three,> said Fethyun, thoughtfully. <That is how long he has been marooned on this planet, helping these aliens fight the Yeerks.>

<And now he has done, for all the free peoples of the galaxy, a great service.> Zartof strode forward and looked at me with all four eyes. A sign of respect. <You, Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill—Brother of Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul, Son of Noorlin-Sirinial-Cooraf and Forlay-Esgarrouth-Maheen—are now *Prince* Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill.>

Every Andalite on the bridge except Zartof and Fethyun inclined their heads low.

I outranked them, I realised with a jolt. It made me nervous to look at all those Andalites. *Me, a Prince?* Could such a thing really happen so suddenly? One minute an *Aristh* and the next...

Kaysted, I noticed, was waving his stalk eyes cheekily at me above his respectfully inclined head.

Somehow the sight eased my nerves.

The heads lifted and I straightened my shoulders in an attempt to look more confident. However many times I may have dreamt of this moment, nothing could have prepared me for the shock of reality.

Fethyun smiled. <Come with me, Aximili, and we will find you some decent quarters for the journey home.>

My hearts fluttered wildly. <Home?>

<Why, yes,> said Fethyun. <We are going right now.>

<Now?> I repeated, weakly.

<Zero space will not maintain its current configuration much longer,> Fethyun explained. <When conditions change our course becomes difficult to navigate.>

I just stared at him. Crazy. I hadn't realised until now that I would be facing this choice. Remain stranded far from home, living among aliens. Or leave Earth. Leave my human friends.

My voice shook slightly as I addressed Fethyun. <We will return?>

<Whatever for?> said Fethyun. <The humans, as you say, have won. We have no purpose here.>

<We will stay in contact?> I asked.

<No,> said Zartof. <The law of Seerow's Kindness applies here. Further communication with these aliens could lead to an exchange in technologies which we cannot condone.>

<Aximili?> Fethyun looked at me uncertainly. <Are you not ready to leave?>

<In...in a little while,> I said, my hearts pounding. <Please, I want to say good-bye.>

<We can wait thirty Earth minutes,> said Fethyun, gently. <If that is enough time, say good-bye, Aximili, and then come home.>

I nodded. It was a human gesture I had picked up. Fethyun didn't understand it, but he continued to smile at me with his eyes. The way Andalites do.

I felt very guilty about betraying his trust. He did not know that my friends weren't even here to say good-bye to. Only James's people had remained behind at the parked Pool Ship.

Tobias, Prince Jake, Cassie, Marco and Rachel were away on missions and I couldn't track any one of them down in thirty minutes.

It was all right. I had no intention of saying good-bye. Not entirely.

Quietly, I left the *Garibah*. Once on board the Pool Ship, I began to run. I found the nearest computer and accessed the Yeerks' inventory records.

I gathered the components I needed. Things like gairtmofs, fleers and Z-space transponders. In ten minutes, I had two sets of everything.

I was making a transmitter. Similar to the one I had left in my scoop at the Hork-Bajir valley. Only this time I had *all* the proper technology. For the one in my scoop, I had been forced to substitute unattainable parts with primitive equipment from the human facility 'Radio Shack.'

The humans have transmitters there that they call 'walkie-talkies.' Unfortunately, these are not capable of transmitting messages across any number of light years. Another human invention, 'the telephone,' is equally ineffective in that way.

There are approximately eighty-two light years between the Andalite home world and Earth. That was how far my messages would have to travel. That was how far messages would travel back.

My fingers trembled as I finished building the two transmitters. A Prince for less than an hour and already I was breaking the law.

Perhaps Elfangor would have been proud of me.