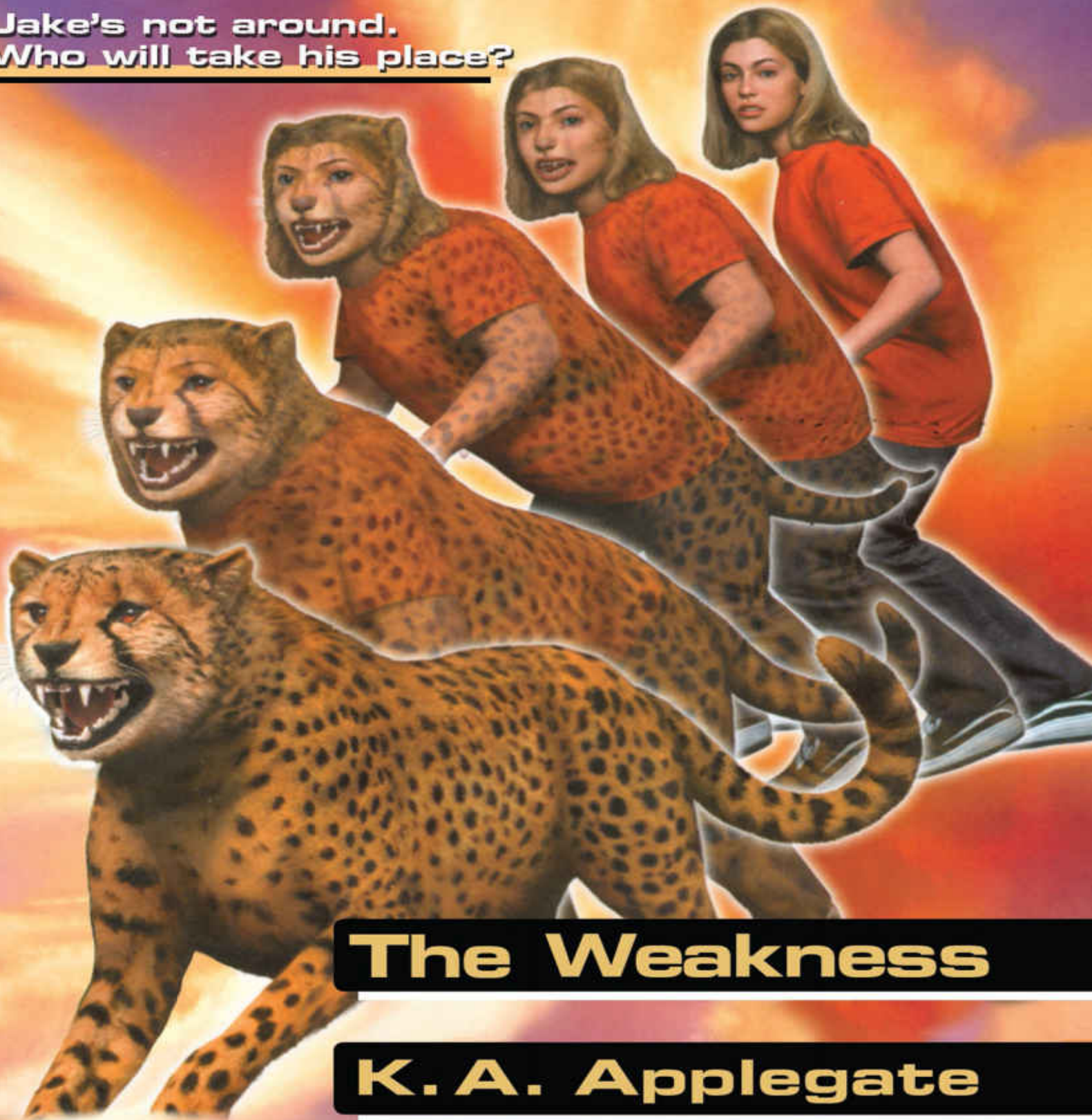


ANIMORPHS™

**Jake's not around.
Who will take his place?**



The Weakness

K.A. Applegate

 SCHOLASTIC



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The Weakness

K. A. Applegate

SCHOLASTIC INC.

For Michael and Jake

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CHAPTER 1

My name is Rachel.

There are times when you'd probably see me and think that's a good name for me. If you saw me at the mall, or at gymnastics class, or at school, you'd look at this tall blond girl and think, *Sure, she could be a Rachel.*

Then there are times when you'd see me and you wouldn't do anything but scream.

This afternoon was one of the normal ones. At least, so far. I was just hanging out with my friends in the air-freshener section of a local gas station.

Okay, so maybe normal kids don't hang out in gas stations on Saturday afternoons. I don't know. It's been a long time since I was a normal kid. Anyway, what we were about to do was definitely not normal.

"I'm just saying, if we're going to be spies, we should have code names," Marco said. "You know, like Ace or Phoenix or something."

"Or Smurf," I said.

"Hey, I'm not that short," Marco said. "I'll have you know I'm approaching average height."

"For what, an eleven-year-old?" I asked sweetly.

"We don't need code names," Jake said patiently. "We just have to—"

"What is a code name?" Ax asked. "Co-duh. Co-duh-nname-muh." Ax doesn't usually have a mouth, so when he does he sometimes gets a little too into it.

"It's when Marco pretends to be cool for five seconds," I said.

"It's a fake name secret agents use for each other so no one knows their real identity," Cassie said. "You know, like double-oh-seven, or, um..."

“Silent Steel,” Marco said. “Dark Menace. Cloaked Venom.”

“Flying Hawk,” Tobias said with a grin, and I squeezed his hand. He looked startled for a second, then squeezed mine back.

Tobias isn't always very comfortable with human touch. It was kind of a big thing that he was holding my hand at all. I guess that's what happens when you spend most of your time as a red-tailed hawk.

Maybe I should back up.

I mentioned that we aren't exactly normal kids. We used to be: we went to school and complained about homework and argued with our parents, and our biggest worry was how we were going to do on the big test. But then one night we walked through a construction site and met the alien who changed our lives.

The alien's name was Elfangor. He was actually Ax's brother, and also, through a strange twist of fate, Tobias's father. Long story there.

Elfangor told us the Yeerks were here. They're a slug-like species that wants to crawl into our ears and take us over. Once they do, once one of them is in your head, you become a Controller: you don't decide what to say, how to move, where to point your eyes.

There are Controllers all around us. There's no way to tell who they are. That's why we made sure to look normal, even Tobias and Ax.

That was the other thing Elfangor did: he gave us the power to morph. He put our hands on a blue box and gave us the power to turn into any animal we could touch. Pick any Beanie Baby on your shelf, and chances are I've turned into it: a grizzly bear, an elephant, a bald eagle, a dolphin, a shark. And things TY would be less likely to make a stuffed animal of, like cockroaches. Ants. Fleas.

Tobias turned into a red-tailed hawk, and he got stuck. That's what happens when you stay in morph for more than two hours. Tobias lives as a hawk now, in a meadow on the edge of the woods, killing prey and eating it to survive. He later got the power to morph again, but he can't stay human for more than two hours or he'll be trapped like that. Unable to fight.

I understand why he makes the choice he does. Doesn't mean I always like it.

Ax never had a human body, though he has one now that he can turn into for two hours at a time. Ax is an Andalite, like his older brother Elfangor. In his natural form he's a mix of human and deer and scorpion, all covered in blue and tan fur. He also has extra eyes on stalks and extra fingers on his hands and he eats with his hooves instead of a mouth. You can see why he used his human morph to go out in public.

Ax's people are at war with the Yeerks, but he's the only one of them within light-years of Earth. He fights the Yeerks with the rest of us: with Jake, my overly serious cousin and our sort-of leader; Cassie, my best friend who never met a designer label she liked or an animal she didn't; Marco, who thinks he is both funnier and cuter than he actually is; and Tobias, the bird who can turn into a boy. And me. Rachel.

I'm all the things I told you I was: tall, blond, into shopping and gymnastics. And good in a fight, though you might not be able to tell that by looking at me. My friends would tell you I'm the reckless one, and maybe that's true. Marco would tell you I'm hooked on violence, and I've been wondering about that more and more.

We fight the Yeerks, the six of us. We use the power Elfangor gave us to slow their invasion however we can. We call ourselves the Animorphs. The Yeerks don't know who we are: they think we're Andalites who crash-landed on Earth and are hiding out, using the morphing power to attack their operations. That's why we have to hide who we are. If the Yeerks found out we were humans, that we have last names and mailing addresses and families we go home to every night...

Well. Our odds of survival aren't very good as they are. I don't even want to know what they'd be if the Yeerks found out our species, let alone our identities.

"I do not believe we need code names, Prince Jake," Ax said. He thinks of Jake as his prince, which I guess is a kind of Andalite military leader. "After all, we have thought-speak."

“Which we’re not using right now,” Jake said pointedly, and Ax looked abashed. Andalites aren’t very used to the idea that people might overhear them.

We all looked around. Subtly. There were a couple of kids in the next aisle, but no one close enough to overhear.

“I think we’re okay,” Cassie said.

“Hey, Ax, I’ve been wondering, is it thought-speak or thought-speech?” Marco asked. “Because I feel like it should be—”

“If we could all focus for thirty seconds,” Jake said, in the voice he gets when people are grinding his last nerve. “The point is, we need to find out what’s going on with this warehouse.”

“And this woman,” Tobias said.

The warehouse was the building across the street from the gas station. The woman was someone we’d seen several times at the warehouse, getting out of a limo with Visser Three.

Visser Three is the leader of the Yeerk invasion of Earth and the only Yeerk with an Andalite body. We first met him when he morphed a horrible monster and picked up the injured Elfangor and ate him.

Yes: ate him.

“So let’s go,” I said. “What are we waiting for?”

“We’re not gonna send everyone in at once,” Jake said. “Four of us morph flies and cross the street to check it out. The other two stay outside in case anything goes wrong.”

“Why would anything go wrong?” Marco said. “Our recon missions never go wrong. Definitely not, oh, a hundred percent of the time.”

I grinned at him, showing my teeth. “Let’s do it.”

“One of these days, I’m going to figure out how to keep you from saying that,” Marco said.

“Here’s how it goes,” Jake said. “We draw straws for—”

Someone popped into our aisle. “Hello, Prince Jake!” he said. “I am ready to obey your commands!”

CHAPTER 2

We all stared. The new guy stared back, out of Marco's face.

We all looked at Marco. Then at the other guy. Then at Marco.

"Uh," Marco said. "Am I losing it, or does he look exactly like me?"

"The likeness is uncanny," Ax said.

"Starfish again?" Cassie said.

There was a thing a while ago where I morphed a starfish and got split into two. It didn't go that well.

"Excuse you, I know better than to morph a starfish," Marco said.

"Ah, you are Rachel," the new Marco said, looking around at me. "I will make a joke about you. It will be very funny, but no one will laugh."

"Excuse me?" I reached for him. "I don't know who you are, but you'd better think twice before you—"

My hand went right through his shoulder. Right through, like it had no substance at all.

"Whoa," Tobias said.

"Prince Jake, I believe this creature may not be entirely human," Ax said.

"Yeah, Ax-man, I'm getting that," Jake said.

I reached for fake Marco again. He dodged away. I dove after him, just as someone else came into the aisle.

"Ha-hah! A fight!" she said. "Excellent! What Yeerks are we going to kill today?"

I stopped chasing fake Marco. The newcomer was tall. And blond. And very, very familiar-looking.

I heard Tobias suck in a breath.

“Okay,” Jake said. “I’m thinking we have a very big problem.”

“Chee?” Cassie said. “They’re the only ones I know who could do holograms like this.”

“Yeah, but why?” Marco said.

“Forget why.” I stalked up to fake me. “You’d better stop using my face right now, or I’ll—”

“What’s that sound?” Tobias said suddenly.

I didn’t care about a sound. I was going to teach this fake me a lesson on face-stealing. But a moment later I heard what he meant: a grating sound, hard to hear over the tinny pop playing through the gas station speakers, but distinct. Almost whiny, like someone playing an out-of-tune accordion. Or like—

“Iskoort,” Tobias said, and my face screwed up in automatic annoyance.

We had met the Iskoort once, on their home planet across the galaxy. The six of us and our friend Erek, a nonviolent android from the race called the Chee, had been sent there to protect the Iskoort from attack, which we did. Barely. We ended up buying food and shelter while we were there by selling the Iskoort our memories, as well as Erek’s hologram technology.

Of course, that was back when we thought there was no chance the Iskoort would come to Earth. Or make contact with any Yeerks. Not for the next three hundred years, anyway.

I reached for fake me. This time I aimed lower than her holographic shoulder. I found a flat, wide shoulder and a thin arm.

Fake Rachel gaped at me as I grabbed onto her. “You cannot apprehend me!” she said. “I am protected by the Iskoort code of interplanetary tourism.”

“Sorry, the what?” Marco said.

“I don’t care about your code,” I said. “You have five seconds to stop using my face before I make you regret it.”

“You mean *my* face,” fake Rachel said.

“Like hell it’s your—”

“Friends!” Someone else had come up behind us. This person looked... weird. He was wearing a suit, but it was more like how a suit might look if it were part of your body instead of something you wore over your skin. He raised his hands, and his sleeves weren't hollow; they were solid, like the sleeve was just a thicker part of the arm. “It's such a pleasure to see you again.”

Jake squinted at him. “I'm gonna make a guess here,” he said. “Guide?”

“Not anymore,” the suit guy said. His voice was weird, too: it sounded electronic, and it kept changing tone, high to low, smooth to rough, loud to soft. Like he had combined twelve different voices into one but hadn't mixed them very well. His face kept shifting, too, the features blurring and resolving so that I couldn't quite tell what he looked like. “I must thank you for the extremely valuable trades you made with me when last we met! Thanks to your assistance, I have ascended to the very top of the Merchant Guild. I am now Keeper of Memories, Transformer of Air, and Founding Provider of Enriching Exoplanetary Experiences. You may call me Mogul.”

“Okay, Mogul,” Jake said. “You want to explain why your people are here, and why they look like my people?”

If you didn't know Jake very well, you might have thought he was calm rather than very, very angry. You would have been wrong.

I was right there with him. The Iskoort were pretty low on the list of species I wanted to run into even when we weren't about to start a mission. And the one I'd grabbed was still wearing my face.

“There is no cause for alarm,” Guide—Mogul—said, in his weird voice. “These Iskoort are of the Tourism and Theatrical Guilds. They are experts in their fields.”

“Let me get this straight,” Marco said. “You're saying this guy who looks like me is a professional Animorph impersonator?”

“Your memories have been extremely popular,” Mogul said, beaming with his not-quite-a-face. I could still hear the whine coming from the diaphragm in his Iskoort chest, even though I couldn't see it. “My first trip to Earth sold out in four microseconds.”

“Mogul,” Jake said, still in that forcedly calm voice. “Just how many Iskoort are here?”

“I could only hire a small spacecraft for the initial journey,” Mogul said. “There are sadly only fifty-seven of us.”

We all sucked in a breath. I went up on my toes to see over the shelves around us. The store was way fuller than it had been—and just at first glance I could see five or six people who looked exactly like me.

“Okay, these guys need to get out of here,” I said.

“Prince Jake,” Ax said. “We must vacate these premises immediately.”

“No kidding.” Jake massaged his temples. “Mission’s off. Okay, Guide—uh, Mogul. Not that we’re not flattered and everything. But do you think you could have your people not look like us?”

Mogul looked bewildered. “But they have come here to have the true Animorphs experience.”

“Yeah, that’s not gonna work,” Marco said. “We have a store clerk who’s going to realize in about two minutes that maybe it’s a little weird that an octuplet convention has come to town. You want to live the Animorphs experience? Maybe don’t destroy the Animorphs experience while you’re at it.”

“We have the greatest respect for the Animorphs,” Mogul said. “We would never do you any harm.”

“Great, just what we want to hear,” Jake said. “So, first step? Don’t look like us. That would be a big help.”

“I suppose I could ask my fellow Iskoort to change into alternate human disguises,” Mogul said. “The technicians in the Art and Design Guild have been working on original holographic designs. Mine is state of the art; is it not impressive?” He spread his arms, the fabric of his suit stretching like skin.

“Great,” Tobias said, sounding vaguely ill. “Really great.”

“Jake,” Cassie said. “We can’t have fifty people in here looking like that, either.”

I had an idea. It was maybe a really bad idea. But it would get them out of the public eye, at least. “Mogul,” I said. “How would your people like to see where the Animorphs hang out?”

CHAPTER 3

“I can’t believe you gave up my barn,” Cassie said to me in an undertone as we left the gas station. We were walking a little bit apart from the Iskoort. Most of them had changed their faces, but now they looked like escapees from a bad stage makeup workshop.

“What? It’s not like they didn’t know about it,” I said.

“What are we gonna do about them?” Cassie asked. “They know about *everything*.”

“I dunno, convince them to leave, I guess?” I said. I looked around at my friends. Jake’s face was pinched, Marco’s closed off, like he was thinking. Ax was darting his eyes around, probably missing his stalk eyes. Tobias wasn’t there; Jake had sent him back up to the sky, to keep watch.

I was a little jealous. I felt so powerless, walking along as a human. We were used to being in danger, but usually when we were walking around as humans we were pretty safe. Usually, there weren’t fifty-seven other people who could put our lives in danger with a single wrong word to a Controller.

It was starting to sink in how much we needed to get the Iskoort out of here.

<Okay, you’re looking pretty clear for the next block and a half,> Tobias said. <You’ll want to turn the corner before the—uh-oh. Heads up, we’ve got incoming.>

Cassie grabbed my arm. A long black limo was slinking its way down the street, toward the warehouse we’d been planning to spy on. There weren’t a lot of reasons for a limo to be in that part of town—only one, really. “Visser Three,” I whispered.

The most dangerous Yeerk in this part of the galaxy, and he showed up while we had fifty-seven impersonators eager to talk about the Animorphs experience.

I started looking around for somewhere to morph.

“Okay,” Jake said in a low, steady voice. “This is fine. He doesn’t need to notice anything. We just keep walking—”

I was knocked almost off my feet. “Hey!” I shouted as someone barreled past me. I might have tried to shove her back, but she was already ahead of me, running into traffic.

It was one of the imitation Rachels. “Visser Three!” she shouted, running into the street to where the limo had stopped in front of the warehouse entrance. And then, as I was watching, she changed.

She didn’t morph. Morphing is a gradual process. The fake Rachel didn’t go through any intermediate stages. One second she was a girl, and the next she was an eight-foot grizzly powering across the street.

Horns honked as cars skidded to a stop just shy of her. One of them crashed into a light pole, and the car alarm started going off. Across the street, the limo door opened, and I saw a woman emerge on the far side—the one we’d seen a few times at the warehouse. Just after her came Visser Three in human morph. In about half a second he was going to turn around and see what was going on in the street.

TSEEEEEEEEEER! A red-tailed hawk dove from the sky, straight at the bear’s face.

If Tobias had hit it, he might have made the bear stop. But instead, he sailed right through the bear’s head and out the other side.

“They have Erek’s hologram technology, but not his force field,” I said. That was why I couldn’t grab fake Marco. Of course, Tobias couldn’t hear me, because I was in human form and couldn’t thought-speak. “Ax, tell him.”

<Tobias, Rachel says they may have the Chee holographic capability but not—>

<Yeah, I got that,> Tobias said. He'd swooped back up to altitude. <Too late, anyway.>

The bear was barreling toward the limo. I saw Visser Three turn. I saw the expression on his face turn from bewilderment to horror, then to anger. The woman next to him leaned in to whisper in his ear.

"Battle morphs," Jake snapped. "Rachel, Marco, find a place to morph. Cassie, Ax, you keep leading these Iskoort to the barn."

<Prince Jake, I should stay and—>

"No," Jake said. "We need them out of here. Any one of them gets taken, and the Yeerks know everything. We need you on this."

"We cannot possibly leave," Mogul said, sounding excited. "The memories of this encounter alone! Priceless!"

"Hey, moron," Marco said. "If you stay, you're not gonna have any memories, let alone—"

"Enough," Jake said. "Rachel, Marco, morph. Mogul, get your people out of here or we'll give you some things you don't want to remember."

I caught a parting glimpse of Mogul's face looking alarmed. I was heading for the bushes behind the gas station. They were big ones that made a shadowy space between them and the wall of the building.

<Rachel, go further in, there are people in the parking lot who'll see you,> Tobias said from above.

I gave him a thumbs up and slid farther into the shadows, already pulling off my outer clothing. We can only morph in skin-tight clothing. I stripped down to my leotard and focused on the image in my head.

Actual morphing isn't instantaneous like the Iskoort's hologram had been. It takes a while for your flesh to melt into a new shape. The order is unpredictable, too. The first thing that happened this time was that my skin thickened and turned gray. I hadn't grown any larger yet, and I was still mostly human-shaped; I was just gray. I looked like a Medusa victim, my body turning stone-colored.

"Oh, that's a nice look," Marco said next to me, before his mouth bulged out into a gorilla muzzle.

I started to grow. Morphing is never pretty. Cassie's the best of us at it, and even she looks like a nightmare most of the time. My head got big first, making me stagger and lean against the wall of the gas station, and then my body started to grow beneath it, bulging out and out and out until I could barely fit behind the bushes. If there were still people in the parking lot, they'd definitely be seeing me soon.

My nose unfurled like an unrolling carpet. My ears grew until I could fan myself with them. I was on four legs now, still growing but almost there: almost seven tons of powerful African elephant.

In front of me, Marco was finished his morph to gorilla. Jake had joined us and was mostly tiger-shaped, weird and hairless. The striped fur rippled over his body.

Morphing is fast, for what it is. It had taken us barely two minutes to go behind the bushes, get undressed, and turn into an entirely different species. But two minutes is a long time when you have a rogue tourist menacing Visser Three.

<If you guys are done, you'd better get out here,> Tobias said. <It's about to get really ugly.>

<On our way,> I said, and raised my trunk and ran out from the bushes, shaking the ground as I went.

CHAPTER 4

There wasn't anyone in the gas station parking lot anymore. In fact, I was willing to bet the whole street was deserted, given what was happening in it.

The limo was still parked in front of the warehouse lot. In front of it, a bear stood on its hind legs and let out a weird sound that was like a roar if you were hearing it on a home video. It was standing in the middle of the street, but that didn't matter, because there were no cars coming anymore. The ones nearby had been abandoned in the middle of the street, their drivers fleeing from the bullets that were flying through the air.

The bullets were from the human-Controllers who were shooting the bear. They were hitting it over and over, but the bullets kept whizzing through, ineffective. The Controllers looked confused and frustrated, but they kept shooting. Probably because they weren't getting other instructions. When you work for Visser Three, you don't take a lot of initiative. Initiative gets you killed.

I couldn't see the woman anymore, or Visser Three. But I had a pretty good guess what the Visser was up to.

The bear wasn't actually attacking the humans. Probably because all it had under that hologram was an Iskoort body, and Iskoort are about as menacing as a substitute teacher. It was just standing there, waving its paws at the air, like it was performing in a circus or something.

<Okay, our goal is extraction,> Jake said. <Don't engage if you can help it. Let's grab that Iskoort and get out of here.>

We thundered into the street. Well, I thundered, anyway. Marco loped, and Jake was a streak of gold-and-black fur.

The guys with the guns noticed us. Some of the bullets changed direction. <Ow,> I complained when one of them struck my shoulder. It didn't slow me down, though. It takes a lot of gun to stop an elephant.

<Hey, idiot bear,> I said, aiming my thought-speak toward the Iskoort. <Time to go.>

It turned and saw me. <You will not take me from my glorious destiny!> it shouted in its native Iskoort thought-speak. <I will destroy Visser Three!>

I swiped at it with my trunk, aiming toward the center of the hologram. It darted out of my reach. I lunged again—and it turned invisible.

I blinked. It wasn't quite invisible: I could see a blurry shape where it was using its hologram to mimic the limo and the street behind it. But I couldn't quite tell where it stopped and ended, and it was making me dizzy. <Jake!> I called.

<On it,> he said. He was a hunter; he was much better at this than the elephant. He leaped at a patch of empty air, and suddenly it wasn't empty anymore: there was an Iskoort, flat under Jake's paws. Its beaked vulture-like face gaped on top of a long, scrawny neck, and its many-jointed arms and backwards-looking legs splayed out on the pavement. The diaphragm in the center of its chest wheezed double-time.

<Why did you attack me?> it cried. <I am an Animorph!>

<Rachel?> Jake said, and I lumbered forward and wrapped my trunk around the Iskoort's midsection.

<Great, let's get out of here,> Marco said. He was bleeding from a couple of bullet wounds.

<Uh, guys?> Tobias called from above. <I think Visser Three's done morphing.>

A massive foot landed next to me, hitting the street with a boom. I looked up.

And up.

I was an elephant. But this morph made me look small.

<You think to swell your numbers with your pitiful holographic technology?> the Visser crowed. The thing he'd morphed seemed to be all legs: at least half a dozen of them, twenty feet long and joined together at the top, thick and round like my elephant legs except about five times bigger. <Ha-hah! We see right through you, despite your attempted visual obfuscation!>

<So, I think we might be screwed,> Marco said.

Another foot thudded down, so close to me I felt the breeze.

<Run!> Jake shouted.

We ran. <He might not follow us,> I said. <Too far, and people will see him.>

<Great. Now we just need to be faster than him,> Marco said.

And weirdly enough, we were. We were outdistancing the legs. Until—

<Ahead of you!> Tobias shouted. The whole world shook as the thing sailed over our heads and landed in front of us.

The impact knocked me off my feet. Me, an elephant. There was ringing in my ears. No, wait, those were actual sirens. I lay on the pavement, stunned, waiting for my vision to clear.

<Rachel, get up!> Tobias shouted, and I staggered to my feet just in time to avoid the foot that slammed down where I'd been.

I was okay. I was alive. But I wasn't carrying anything.

<The Iskoort!> I called to the others. <Where did it go?>

<Ah-hah, I've got one of you!> Visser Three shouted. I turned to see the bear hologram rearing up again, swiping at Visser Three's leg.

<You will never defeat the Andalite bandits!> the Iskoort cried.

<Get away from there, you idiot!> I shouted at it in private thought-speak.

A foot slammed down next to it, where part of the bear would have been if it hadn't been a hologram. <Your hologram technology will not confound me for long,> Visser Three said.

I saw Marco run near the bear, dodging the legs. <Marco, grab the Iskoort!> I said.

<What? You're way closer,> he said.

That didn't make any sense: he was right next to it. Then I saw, out of the corner of my eye, another gorilla behind me. But if Marco was there—

The first gorilla didn't have any bullet wounds. I started toward it—and then the foot of Visser Three's monster came down on my hindquarters.

The pain was blinding. Fire all the way up my spine. I screamed over thought-speak, all my nerves fried, no control over my body.

<Rachel! Demorph!> Tobias said.

I couldn't demorph. Too much pain. But I'd been in pain like this before. We all had. I searched through the fractured remnants of my mind for the image of the human girl, and I began to change.

<Jake, I'm getting her out of here,> Tobias said.

That didn't make sense. A bird couldn't lift me. I had an image of myself, caught on a bird's talons as he flapped his way out of there, and I tried to giggle. But I didn't have a human throat yet.

<Do it,> Jake said. <I'm hurt. We have to get out of here. Marco?>

<I can get one of them,> he said. <But—>

Pressure on my changing body. But not the monster's huge feet. Smaller arms, picking me up. Nicking me with blades. <Hold on, Rachel, we're getting out of here,> Tobias said.

I felt the jolt of running feet while I finished the demorph to human. By the time I was back to myself, we were in an alley several blocks away. I heard more sirens, closer now. "Put me down," I said. "I'm gonna morph again, and go back and—"

<It's too late,> he said. He'd morphed Hork-Bajir, one of the gentle bladed monsters that make up the Yeerk empire's involuntary shock troops. <Jake and Marco are following us. It's over.>

I struggled in his grip. It couldn't be over. I was going to destroy that creep for stepping on me. Then I was maybe going to destroy the Iskoort for putting us in this position in the first place.

Tobias put me down, but he was right: I saw Jake and Marco round the corner into the alley after us. Jake was limping on three legs. Marco's fur was matted with his own blood, and in his arms was an Iskoort. It was wearing my hologram again.

"The other one?" I asked.

Jake shook his shaggy tiger head. <The Yeerks have him.>

The Yeerks had him. I felt helpless rage: at us for running away, at the stupid Iskoort for impersonating us in the first place. We had failed, and now someone who knew everything about us, absolutely everything, was in Yeerk captivity.

CHAPTER 5

<His name is Actor, son of Stagehand,> Mogul said. He was using his native thought-speak instead of his weird shifting voice, now that we were in private. <He is a member of the Theatrical Guild.>

“Yeah, well, I think we’re in for some drama,” Marco muttered.

We were back in Cassie’s barn. The six of us, surrounded by a packed crowd of fifty-six Iskoort. The air was full of whining.

“Do you know what memories he watched?” Jake asked. He looked about fifty years old. “All of them, or…”

<It doesn’t matter which memories he watched,> Mogul said.

“Of course it matters,” I said. I was mad. If I hadn’t gotten myself injured, I could have saved the other Iskoort. “We need to know how badly you’ve screwed us over.”

<Actor is the consummate professional,> Mogul said.

“We must avenge this affront to the Animorphs!” fake me said. She was the only Iskoort still in disguise as one of us. “Attack!”

“There’s our real problem.” Marco jerked his thumb at fake me. “We’ve got a little too much Rachel here.”

“Hey,” I said. “I would never have done something as stupid as that.”

“You sure about that?” Marco asked, with an infuriating smirk.

“Not the point,” Cassie said, cutting me off before I could put Marco in his place. “We need to evacuate our families right away. My parents are out right now, but—”

<You do not need to evacuate your families,> Mogul said. <As I was saying, Actor is the consummate performer. He would never break

character by revealing your secrets.>

<I don't think that will matter much once Visser Three puts a Yeerk in his head,> Tobias said.

<Oh, he couldn't do *that*,> Mogul said. <An Iskoort cannot be infested by one of your Yeerks.>

"They aren't really *our*—" Marco started to say, but Ax cut him off.

<Prince Jake, he may be correct,> he said. <Given the divided nature of the Iskoort, it may well be impossible for the Yeerks to infest them.>

We had learned on the Iskoort planet that the Iskoort weren't one being. They were two: an outer body called an Isk, and an inner body called a Yoort. The Yoort was a slug distantly related to a Yeerk. The Yoorts built the Isk bodies for themselves so that they wouldn't have to infest independent creatures. They were, according to them, pure symbiotes. That was part of the reason we'd been sent to save the Iskoort: the being that had sent us had thought that someday, three hundred years in the future, the Yeerks might encounter the Iskoort and learn a better way.

Seemed like it was about to happen a lot sooner than that, and not in the way we wanted it to.

"So the Yeerks starve out the Yoort and infest the Isk," I said. "They'll still know everything."

<No, no. That would not be possible,> Mogul said. <The Isk has no brain of its own. Only enough of a brain stem to keep its body alive while the Yoort is not in it. There would be nothing for the Yeerk to infest.>

"Mogul," Cassie said. "Are you saying the Yeerks have no way of learning what Actor knows about us?"

"No way until they torture him," Marco muttered.

<Actor would never divulge your secrets,> Mogul said, drawing himself up taller—or lengthening his hologram—and looking indignant. <Even under pain of death. That is what it means to be a member of an Iskoort guild.>

Jake looked skeptical. "If we could believe that—"

<We can't,> Tobias said. <Trust me. They torture him, he'll tell.>

Tobias was recently held captive and tortured by the Yeerks. They didn't get anything out of him that mattered, but he still doesn't like to talk about it.

I was supposed to be with him, to let the others know how to rescue him. I wasn't. I hadn't meant to leave him behind, but that didn't make me feel any less crappy about it.

"We can't trust it," I said. "We have to go in and get him."

"Yeah, where?" Marco asked, and then answered his own question: "Yeerk pool. That's where they'd hold him."

"Back to the Yeerk pool," Jake said wearily.

We'd done okay on our last trip to the Yeerk pool. But we'd had insider information. We wouldn't have that this time.

The Yeerk pool is where the Yeerks go every three days to absorb the Kandrona rays that they need to stay alive. It's an underground cavern that stretches under half our city, and it is a place of nightmares. Literally. At least half of my nightmares are about our trips to the Yeerk pool.

"They might not have him there," Cassie said. "If they know we're after him, they might hide him somewhere we wouldn't think to look."

"Community center?" I said. That was where Tobias had been tortured.

"We don't have a lot of time to look," Jake said. "Actor could break any minute."

<Actor is certainly not going to break,> Mogul said indignantly. Then he hesitated. <Though...his resistance may be weakened once he starts to feel the beginnings of Kandrona starvation.>

Yoorts, like Yeerks, need Kandrona rays to stay alive. "How long do we have?" Jake asked.

<He was scheduled to feed this evening,> Mogul said. <But of course we keep a generous feeding schedule. His starvation should not commence until the early hours of your morning.>

"Oh, great," Marco said. "So maybe our lives won't be ruined by this guy telling the Yeerks everything we know, until after midnight when he'll

get hungry and crack. It's like Cinderella, but without Whitney Houston or that guy from Seinfeld."

"So we go in and get this Iskoort out before midnight," Jake said. "We contact the Chee and the peace movement, see if they've heard anything. If not, we go after the Yeerk pool and hope we get lucky."

It wasn't a great plan. If they didn't have him in the Yeerk pool, we probably weren't going to have time to look anywhere else. Assuming we even survived the trip.

<Prince Jake,> Ax said, <there may be another way.>

"Yeah? Good. Let's hear it," Jake said.

<I hesitate to say it because of the obvious risks,> Ax said, <but if the Iskoort were to contact the Yeerks and arrange for a hostage negotiation, they might be able to convince the Yeerks to surrender their prisoner. Even if they do not, we might be able to observe and find out where the Iskoort Actor is being kept.>

There was a short pause.

"Let me get this straight," Marco said. "You're saying the backup plan to find the captured Iskoort is to get even more Iskoort captured?"

"A classic duplicitous stratagem!" fake me said. "Let's do it!"

Marco met my eyes. "Somehow, it's even worse when she says it."

CHAPTER 6

The problem was that we couldn't trust the Iskoort to handle a hostage negotiation. Even one that we half-expected to fail.

<I wish I had known to bring along members of the Guild of Diplomacy and Statecraft,> Mogul said.

<Yeah, because we definitely would have trusted them to get the job done,> Tobias said.

Mogul nodded mournfully. <Exactly.>

"Okay, that is...a lot of Iskoort," Erek said, coming back out of the barn.

We'd decided to take a break from the Iskoort and were standing outside the barn. Fortunately, Cassie's parents were still out at an all-day farm festival, so we were safe. That is, unless Actor caved and the Yeerks found out who we were, in which case none of us or our families would ever be safe again.

"I talked to Mr. Tidwell," Cassie said, coming back from the house. "He hasn't heard anything, but he'll ask around."

"Great, so let's do this," I said. I don't like standing around. We had a problem; we needed to do something to solve it.

"I will contact the Controller Chapman and offer a neutral meeting spot. Noo-trull," Ax said. He was in human morph, since we were outside.

Jake nodded. "I guess the rest of us should acquire Iskoort."

"Good, I was just saying it's been too long since we morphed a seriously unpleasant alien," Marco said. "Or was I saying the opposite?"

"You know, we don't all need to do this," Cassie said.

I looked at her. She met my eye and then looked up at Tobias, who was perched on a nearby tree branch.

It had only been a few weeks since Tobias had been held and tortured. If this went the way it probably would, at least some of us would end up being held again.

“That’s right,” I said. “We only need a few of us to be Iskoort. I’ll do it.”

“Hey, I was just kidding,” Marco said. “I’ve always wanted to walk into certain danger in the body of a tourist.”

“Some of us will have to be in other morphs, to rescue Actor if the Yeerks bring him or to follow in case we get captured,” Jake said, giving me a weird look, probably because I was staring at him so hard. “Three Iskoort, three rescuers.” He bent down to pick some blades of grass, and shortened three of them. “Short blades get—”

“You know, this could get pretty rough,” I said. “It should probably be a volunteer mission. I’ll go.”

Marco’s eyebrows shot up.

“I don’t think—” Jake started to say.

“I, too, will go,” Ax said.

“And me,” Cassie said quickly.

Jake looked annoyed. “Look, we have a way we usually do these things.”

“If the three of us want to go, what’s the problem?” Cassie said.

Now everyone looked surprised. Cassie is almost never defiant like that, and especially not toward Jake.

Marco shrugged at Jake. “I mean, if they want to do it, I’m not gonna argue.”

I made the mistake of looking at Tobias. His raptor eyes were boring holes into me. <I can take care of myself, Rachel,> he said in private thought-speak.

I didn’t say anything. Couldn’t thought-speak back anyway, since I was in human form.

“Fine,” Jake said testily. “That’s great. Let’s go acquire some Iskoort.”

We went back into the barn. <Ah, you have returned,> Mogul said. <May we go now? My people have already created memories of this barn, and we wish to view your other sites of cultural and historic significance, such as the middle school and the Cinnabon.>

“Actually, we’re gonna try to rescue your missing person,” Jake said. “You know, the one who was captured by the Yeerks and is threatening our entire existence?”

Yeah. Jake was definitely not in a good mood. He probably didn’t like the idea of sending Cassie into danger without him. I felt a little bad about that, but not enough to offer to change anything. Besides, I’d be there.

“Mogul,” Cassie said, “would you mind if we acquired your DNA to negotiate with the Yeerks?”

Mogul blinked at her. <You wish to purchase our DNA?>

“No,” Jake said, “we want to rescue the person you lost, and we’re expecting you to help us with that however you can.”

<But DNA is very valuable,> Mogul said. <You cannot expect us to give it to you without a price.>

I could practically hear Jake’s teeth grinding together.

<Perhaps there is something we could trade,> Ax said. <We have created many new memories since the time we allowed you to harvest ours.>

Mogul’s diaphragm started wheezing double-time. <You would sell me the next chapter in the Saga of Earth?>

“We’re not a sci-fi novel,” I said, annoyed, but Marco cut in.

“Sure,” he said. “But not on those terms. We’re a hot commodity on your world, right? Everyone’s into these memories. I bet if you came back with more of them, they’d be lining up to watch them, right?”

<They would not need to line up,> Mogul said. He waved a shiny little contraption, one we’d seen before. <They could download them to watch on their personal memory emitters, enhanced with the holographic technology gained from—>

“Sure, right,” Marco said. “You’d be a top chart hit. Go platinum within a week. Point is, it’s worth a lot to you. So here’s the deal: you help us with what we need to rescue your friend. Then you all get back in your spaceship or whatever and leave Earth and never come back. Capisce?”

Mogul goggled. <But my future tours are already booked. I cannot renege on a deal.>

“Well, maybe you set aside some premium memories for them,” Marco said. “You know, no one else can view them for six months, that kind of thing. They get to brag to all their friends about it.”

You could almost see the gears turning in Mogul’s head. <I could start a subscription service,> he said.

<Mogul is unsurpassed on our home world for his business savvy,> one of the Iskoort said to me in an aside while Jake and Mogul sealed the deal in the Iskoort way, which involved pressing hands to each other’s foreheads. <You are privileged to be able to trade with him.>

“Uh-huh, we’re really thrilled about it,” I said.

“Okay, Mogul, we need three of you to acquire,” Jake said.

<Anything you need,> Mogul said. <Would you like to acquire the Isk or the Yoort?>

“Excuse me?” Jake said.

<Of course,> Ax said. <They are two separate beings. We would not be able to morph the full Iskoort: only the Isk or the Yoort.>

“All right, we morph the Isk,” Jake said. “That’s the outer part, right?”

<You are most welcome to morph the Isk,> Mogul said. <Anything for my most generous business partners. However, I must warn you: an Isk cannot move on its own.>

“It can’t move?” I repeated. “What about when you guys go into your Yoort pool or whatever?”

<The Isk is kept in ultimate comfort while the Yoort feeds,> Mogul said. <Our Isk brainstems are capable of keeping us alive without the Yoort. However, we have no motor capabilities in that form.>

<Great: you created a host body for yourselves that can't run away,>
Tobias muttered.

“We can't just morph the Isk,” Cassie said. “But theoretically, if one of us were in an Isk body, someone else could go into their brain as a Yoort, right?”

<Of course,> Mogul said. <That is what I would advise, if you wish to move while in Isk form.>

The six of us looked at each other. I felt sick. Tobias was right: if the Isk couldn't move on its own, the only way to morph one would be in pairs. One Isk, one Yoort.

In order to become the Iskoort, we were going to have to infest one another.

CHAPTER 7

“No,” Marco said. “That’s all I have to say. No.”

“Oh, come on, you big baby,” I said, even though I didn’t like it any more than he did. It wouldn’t be the same as being infested by a Yeerk. But still, not being able to move, having someone else directing my body...

“It might not be that bad,” Cassie said. “I did it with Aldrea. It was scary, having someone else in control of my body, but I got used to it.”

<It would likely be more invasive than that,> Ax said. <In order to control the body, the Yoort would have to connect closely with the Isk brainstem. As our consciousness would be layered over that brainstem, the mental bleed might be significant.>

This just got better and better. “We can still do it,” I said.

“No choice,” Jake said. “We have to get this Iskoort.”

“Could we do holograms instead?” Cassie asked. “Use the Iskoort holographic emitters?”

Marco shook his head. “Not solid. If the Yeerks take us captive, they’ll notice if we aren’t Iskoort-shaped on the inside.”

“Erek’s holograms are solid,” Cassie said.

We all looked at Erek. “I’ll do it if you want me to,” Erek said. “But—”

“But if the Yeerks capture you and figure out what you are, we’re screwed in new and different ways,” Jake said. “Plus you wouldn’t be able to fight your way out.” He ran his hands through his hair. “We’re gonna have to go with the morph.”

<Great. I’ll do it,> Tobias said.

I looked up at him. He glared back.

“We’re gonna need four people,” Jake said. “Two Isk, two Yoort. I’ll be one of them.”

“Me, too,” I said.

Cassie didn’t say anything. She was biting her lip, looking up at Tobias.

<I, too, will do this,> Ax said. He sounded a little less certain than usual. Andalites are a pretty private species.

I saw the look of relief mixed with guilt on Marco’s face.

“Great, we’ve got our four,” Jake said. “Rachel, you want to go with Tobias?”

“Sure.” I shot him another look. “I’ll be the Isk.”

<Fine by me,> Tobias said.

The Iskoort let us acquire them. I put a hand on the wrinkly arm and focused. Usually animals go quiet when you acquire them, in a kind of trance; this time, the Iskoort kept talking to me, babbling about what an honor it was that I’d be using their DNA. <That you would want to take on my form is the greatest compliment anyone has ever paid me,> it said.

“Uh-huh,” I said, withdrawing my hand and trying to sound neutral.

Then Tobias and Ax had to acquire the Yoort, which meant it had to slither out of its host Isk through the ear. The Isk body was completely motionless as soon as it withdrew, only the diaphragm continuing to wheeze. Powerless. I looked away.

Ax sent a message to Chapman under Mogul’s name. Erek gave us the latitude and longitude of a clearing in the woods where we could meet the Yeerks, and we made them an offer we hoped they wouldn’t refuse.

“And now, Mogul, we need you and your people to hide out for a while,” Jake said.

<Certainly!> Mogul said. <Where would you like us to stand and watch?>

“Excuse me?” Jake said.

<We are very excited for the chance to see an actual Animorphs mission in progress,> Mogul said, while fifty-five other pairs of Iskoort eyes goggled at us.

“Yeah, that’s...not gonna work for us,” Marco said.

It took a while to convince Mogul that he and his tour group could make do with the memories of our meeting with the Yeerks. <But there is a realism you get from in-person experiences,> Mogul said. <That is the principle on which I have founded my tourism company.>

<Yeah, the realism of getting killed by the Yeerks,> Tobias said.

“Hey, you remember your friend who got captured?” I said. “The Yeerks were shooting at him. The kind of bullets that will kill you if they hit you. You come with us to this meeting, you’ll probably get shot at again. You want to be responsible for the deaths of all your tourists?”

Mogul wheezed at me for a minute. <Perhaps we will take this time to explore the town,> he said.

“Not so much that either,” Jake said. “We need you to stay out of sight. You agreed to do what we needed in exchange for our memories, remember?”

There was an even longer conversation after that. But eventually Mogul agreed to take his tourists to a part of the woods that was very far from where we’d be meeting the Yeerks. <Perhaps memories of your natural world will be of interest to the Scientist Guild,> he said halfheartedly.

“I can go with them if you want,” Erek said. “Try to keep them out of trouble. Maybe, uh, help them with the hologram technology,” he said, looking askance at Mogul’s suit.

<That will not be of any interest to me, as I am not in the Technicians Guild,> Mogul said. <But perhaps I could sell them the memories of our conversation.>

“There you go. We’ll have a great time,” Erek said.

“Actually,” Jake said to Erek, “there’s another favor we need from you.”

See, we didn’t know for sure that the Yeerks hadn’t found out anything from Actor. If they had, they’d know exactly where to go to find us. And our families.

“If there’s anything you guys can do,” Jake said. “Maybe pose as us, and warn our families if anything starts to happen.”

Erek nodded. “We can do that. We can also create distractions so the Yeerks won’t be able to pursue them as easily.”

It wasn’t a lot. I didn’t love the idea of my mom and sisters being vulnerable when I wasn’t there to protect them. But we didn’t have a lot of choice. We had to get this Iskoort back.

“Okay,” Jake said. “Time to move out.”

Time to put ourselves in the hands of the Yeerks.

CHAPTER 8

<You have to feel kind of bad for the Iskoort,> Tobias said as we flew along in our bird of prey morphs. <We're really ruining their vacation.>

<Yeah, well, how much fun could they expect to have?> Marco said. <Earth has got to be, like, super low on the intergalactic tourism list. Yeerk invasion, hole in the ozone layer, plus the Backstreet Boys just released a new single. They brought this on themselves.>

<You're just jealous that Kevin's hair is better than yours,> I said. I was struggling a little to keep my altitude because of the tiny and surprisingly heavy box I was carrying.

<That is a lie and you know it,> Marco said.

<Could we not have let the Iskoort continue their explorations in the city in our absence?> Ax said. <Their alternate human holograms are very convincing.>

There was a pause.

<Ax,> Cassie said, <are you saying you thought Mogul's disguise as a human was a good one?>

<His vocal range was broader than that of an average human, it's true,> Ax said. <But surely humans would only admire such an enhanced skill set.>

<Okay, we don't let Ax judge our next karaoke night,> Marco said.

We were blowing off steam. It was nerve-wracking, knowing we were voluntarily going toward a meeting with the Yeerks. Especially one where only half of us would be independently mobile.

<I think I see our clearing up ahead,> Tobias said.

We'd timed our message so that the Yeerks hopefully wouldn't have time to get to the clearing before we did. We didn't want them to have time to set up any traps. Not that we weren't walking into one voluntarily as it was.

<Any sign of the Yeerks?> Jake asked.

There wasn't—not that we could see from the air, anyway. We swooped down into the trees a short distance away.

“Have I mentioned that this whole plan is insane?” Marco said after he demorphed. “Because if not, I just want to register that it is completely insane. It's so out there as a plan that Visser Three is actually jealous.”

I tossed him the shiny little box I'd been carrying. “Heads up, gorilla boy.”

Marco fumbled the box before catching it. “Yeah, you won't be laughing anymore once you're wheezing in front of Visser Three.”

That shut me up. I really wouldn't be.

There wasn't a lot of prep to do. No reason to put off morphing.

I took a deep breath and focused on the Isk.

The first thing that happened was that my neck got longer. Up and up it grew, until I felt like my head was going to snap it. But my head was growing smaller: not much smaller, just sort of...more shriveled. I felt the crunch of my skull shrinking and reforming into a smaller oval.

Morphing doesn't hurt. But sometimes you wish it would, just a little, so you don't feel so much like your body is no longer your own.

The rest of me was changing, too. My arms lengthened and cracked in a few places to form the three-joined arms of the Isk. My shoulders grew broader and flatter, until they were a very wide oval. My legs shrank, my knees fused, and my feet grew out and out to form the weird backwards knees of the Iskoort. The four fingers of my hand merged into two, like I was doing a permanent Vulcan salute, and my thumb stretched out into a long tentacle like Silly Putty about to snap.

But the weirdest part was my chest. The black cloth of my morphing leotard melted away into pink, veiny flesh, and it sort of...folded up. Like a

can of soda crushed from the top. My chest was a giant accordion.

<Okay, that is seriously disturbing,> Marco said.

Across from me, Jake was morphing into his own Isk, and I could see his chest collapse and expand. Mine was doing the same thing, moving up and down with a whine that was grating even to my ears. But that was all the moving I could do.

Then—darkness. Utter blackness, like my eyes had gone out. And silence: I couldn't even hear the wheezing anymore.

<Hey! What just happened?> I shouted.

<What? Nothing happened,> Cassie said. <You're okay.>

<I can't see anything,> I said. Calmly. Okay, maybe not that calmly. But give me a break. I was blind!

<Aaah!> Jake yelped a second later. <Whoa, okay, Rachel is right. These things can't see at all.>

<They must be able to see,> Marco said. <They got so excited about those holograms.>

<It may be that the Isk lack a visual cortex,> Ax said. <If the Yoort comprise most of their brain, they may have no sensory receptors of their own.>

<I think I'm done morphing,> Tobias said. <It's hard to tell in this form, but I don't think I'm changing anymore.>

<Rachel, Marco is going to put Tobias in your ear,> Cassie said.

I didn't want to look forward to that. Someone else in my head, controlling my body, wasn't something I wanted at all. But I couldn't control my body as it was. I might as well not have had a body, for all I could do with it.

No movement. No sight. No hearing. I couldn't even feel the ground under my feet. The air on my skin. Nothing.

Stay cool, I told myself. *Don't panic*. My friends wouldn't let anything bad happen to me. I just had to wait. Wait for someone else to come and control me.

What if I couldn't see or hear anything even when Tobias was in my head? What if I was just a body with no control and no senses?

It's weird, being nervous without a body. I was scared, but I couldn't feel the adrenaline rush like I usually would. I couldn't even feel my own heart beating. I was utterly absent.

I couldn't tell when Tobias was at my ear. Couldn't feel his slimy Yoort body slip in between the delicate bones. My first indication that he was there was a faint image of light. My vision started to return, blurry but clarifying. Then the sound of the wheezing diaphragm: weird and too high, but there again. The feeling of my own skin.

<Sorry, Rachel, it's taking me a minute to get the hang of this,> Tobias said.

And then: another mind, in mine.

I think I shouted. Not out loud. Maybe not even in thought-speak. But I felt Tobias's alarm at my cry. His own answering cry, echoing through my mind. His confusion, his struggle to master the new body, his perception of me, all of it completely open to me. Like his thoughts were my own.

It wasn't just a little bit of mental bleed. It was total. We were in each other's minds.

CHAPTER 9

I could feel Tobias realize the same thing. I could feel his sudden sense of vulnerability. His scrambling, as we both tried to figure out if there was a space where we could be separate from each other. As we didn't find anything.

<I'm sorry,> he said to me. It was like thought-speak, but not. More like hearing your own voice in your head.

I didn't want him to apologize. I didn't want to be weak enough that he needed to apologize to me. But I could feel him seeing that reaction, too, noticing my resentment and defensiveness.

<It's not any better for me,> he said.

I could feel that that was true. I couldn't read all his memories or anything. But what he was thinking, what he was feeling—it all flowed through my mind, present and obvious, like a brightly colored current in a river. Pale blue and warm brown with darker glints in the depths.

He surprised me by laughing. <Yours feels bright to me, too,> he said. <Like—> And I had an image of what he was thinking: my mind as flashing gold fire, blazing high. And then the other half of his thought, the one he didn't want me to see: the shadowed parts, behind the flames, where the light didn't touch. The darker part of who I was.

<Sorry,> he said, and I felt that it was true. Felt the pain of it, in dark currents under the surface of his mind.

He was insecure about me seeing those: the dark, private places of pain. Worried that I would reject him for them. <No,> I said, and I felt his mingled relief and continued worry. His embarrassment.

I tried to turn away, see only the surface. Couldn't quite succeed.

<Are you guys okay?> Cassie asked, her thought-speak voice a surprise in the middle of our mental jumble.

Were we okay? Could Tobias direct my body? He picked up my thought and tried it, moving forward on the bent-back knees. <I think so,> he said to the others.

Across from us, Jake and Ax were moving, too. My eyes were back to normal now, but I couldn't decide where to point them.

<You'd better be,> Marco said. My eyes turned to look at him: high up in a tree, in gorilla morph, little metal box in his hand glinting in the sun. <Because here come the Yeerks.>

My Iskoort ears were surprisingly good. I didn't get to decide which sounds to focus on, but I could hear the engines of the Bug fighter in the nearby clearing.

<Let them come out first,> Jake said. <Then we approach.>

Marco narrated from the tree. <Okay, we've got Hork-Bajir. They're fanning out, checking the clearing. Doesn't look like they're coming this far. A couple of humans...Chapman...oh, and look who we've got. It's the man himself.>

<Visser Three?> I said.

<No, actually, Mr. Rogers,> Marco said. <I know, I was surprised too. I guess he really wanted to be our neighbor.>

<If Visser Three's here, it might mean they're taking our offer seriously,> Cassie said.

<Or that this is going to get really messy,> I said.

I could feel Tobias's fear. It should maybe have made me feel better about him seeing my fear, but it didn't.

<Let's move out,> Jake said. He sounded totally fine; I wondered if that meant he was. If he and Ax were totally cool with this.

We started walking through the forest. Well, no: Tobias started walking through the forest. I was just along for the ride. The only thing I could do for myself was demorph, and I couldn't even do that. We didn't know what would happen to Tobias and Ax if Jake and I demorphed.

The Iskoort didn't move very fast. Not faster than a walking human. But every step was still terrifying. I couldn't keep myself from crashing into things or lurching wildly, and even though I trusted Tobias not to let me fall, on an instinctive level I knew that I was completely out of control. A simple walk through the forest was like a careening carnival ride. I tried to calm myself down, but I couldn't even draw a deep breath. I was in a prison and I couldn't even scream.

I could feel Tobias's surprise in my thoughts. <Why did you volunteer, if you hate it so much? I would have been the Isk.>

I didn't answer. I didn't have to. He could hear my response: the stubbornness that drove me to do the thing I was most afraid of. The refusal to let anyone else take it on.

<It's not because I thought you couldn't,> I thought lamely.

He was silent. I couldn't quite read his thoughts: he was drawing them away a little, like a receding tide, and what I could see was complicated. Then a few things flowing toward me: the need to stand on his own. Happiness that I cared. The horror that I would do this to myself.

<Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you want to do that kind of thing,> he said. <But you can't stop me from doing it for you, too.>

<Yeah, well, try me,> I said.

He laughed, and maybe would have said something else, but Jake said, <Okay, coming into view.>

Enough messing around. Time to face some Yeerks.

CHAPTER 10

The clearing was maybe a hundred yards long, more like a field, really. The Bug fighter was parked at one end of it. Visser Three was in front of it, in his Andalite form, flanked by Hork-Bajir. Only four of them: Bug fighters aren't very big.

I saw all of this because Tobias turned my eyes to look at it. He was the one who stopped us at the edge of the clearing next to Jake.

<Remember, they might have another Bug fighter in the sky, and more Hork-Bajir in the woods,> Jake said. <We have to assume we're outnumbered.>

<No problem,> I said. <That's the plan, right?>

Across the field, they had noticed us. Visser Three's stalk eyes turned toward us. <Friends!> he called out. <Welcome to this magnificent planet. The Yeerk Empire is honored to make your acquaintance.>

<Yeah, right,> I thought, and I felt the echo of the thought in Tobias's mind. The idea of Visser Three being friendly and welcoming was like a benevolent Hitler. Even at this distance from him, I could feel the darkness that always seems to surround him. Evil personified.

The plan wasn't to fight him today. But I didn't like the idea of letting him walk away.

<That's not what we're here for,> Tobias reminded me.

<I know,> I said. But I knew he could feel the part of me that didn't care. I didn't want him to see it, but I also couldn't turn it off.

Hatred is like that. It is for me, anyway. It's addictive, and powerful, and even when you're riding high on it you're a little ashamed of it. This was the darkness Tobias had seen in my shadows.

Ax was the one who responded. We always tried to have Ax talk to the Yeerks, so that they wouldn't find out most of us were human. <I am Negotiator of the Politics and Diplomacy Guild of the Iskoort,> he said. <Who do I have the pleasure of addressing?>

<You may call me Visser Three,> the Visser said, like this was a nickname he was benevolently allowing us to use. The slimy creep. <Come closer, friends.>

We did. A little bit. We needed to keep some distance between us and the Yeerks.

<Cassie, do you see anything?> Jake asked. She was in dragonfly morph, checking for Actor.

<Not so far,> she said. <I don't think they have him in the Bug fighter.> That was okay. We had backup plans for that.

<Allow us to apologize for that silly misunderstanding earlier,> Visser Three said. <Of course if we'd realized our captive was one of your people, we would never have apprehended him.>

<Visser Three is too kind,> Ax said. <We are happy to hear that.>

<Let us make the exchange you suggested in your message,> Visser Three said. And then, a hint of greed in his thought-speak voice: <You did bring the memories?>

<We are honored that the Visser is interested in our humble Iskoort memory harvest,> Ax said. <Perhaps you would like a sample?>

<Yes, please,> Visser Three said a little too quickly.

<Hit it, Marco,> Jake said privately.

Marco was in the trees somewhere to our left with the memory emitter we'd borrowed from the Iskoort. We'd had them load it with a couple of specific memories. Marco pressed the button, and the air between us and the Yeerk filled with a new scene: still the woods, but a very different part of them. The light was different, early evening rather than afternoon. Trees were moving past quickly, jolting a little, like we were viewing them at a gallop.

The memory went on for a few moments. Then it winked out.

<Are you sure that was it?> Visser Three said eagerly. <That was a memory of an Andalite on Earth?>

<Yes, of course,> Ax said. <We have all the memories of the small group of Andalites who dare to menace your great empire.>

<Then let us—> Visser Three started to say, but he was cut off by another voice. A human voice. She was speaking out loud, but our Iskoort hearing could pick up her voice from most of the way down the field.

“We should request another sample,” she said. “This one has too little identifying information. It could be anything.”

<It’s that woman,> Tobias said. <The one from the warehouse.>

I had only seen her once before today, on surveillance duty, but I recognized her, too. She was young—younger than my mom, anyway—and her hair was cut short around her face. She was wearing dark green slacks and a blouse that was a little more business casual than I probably would have picked out for myself, but it worked for her. The woman had taste.

What was more, she still had her head, which was more than I would have expected in someone who’d just contradicted Visser Three.

Chapman gave a fake laugh. “I disagree, Visser, your judgment is as always—”

<Seraya is right,> the Visser said. <Let us have another sample, my friends.>

<I must most humbly beg your forgiveness, Visser,> Ax said. <Unfortunately we brought only the one sample. If you allow us to return to our ship—>

“They’re Andalites,” Seraya said instantly. “Kill them.”

CHAPTER 11

For a moment everything was frozen.

<Andalites?> Ax said. <You must be mistaken, Visser Three. We are Iskoort.>

<I am sure my advisor is mistaken,> Visser Three said with forced amusement.

Seraya waved a hand. “We know they’re connected with the Andalite bandits. The Andalite bandits were with them at the attack this morning. They know we have one of them captive. They want him back, and they’d never send another species to negotiate when they could come themselves.”

<Oh man,> Marco said from the trees. <This lady’s good. Annoying, but good.>

<What my advisor means to say is that we would love to know more about you,> Visser Three said, still in that fake jovial voice. <Perhaps we could invite you on board our ship before we complete the trade.>

“No,” Seraya said. “They’ve escaped from you too many times. Shoot them.”

There was a brief pause in which I waited for Visser Three to explode. Then he said, <You heard Seraya. Shoot them.>

Two things happened at once. The air filled with Dracon fire. And it also filled with an image: one so large that it took up a good half of the field, full of Dracon fire of its own. It was the Yeerk pool, the holographic memory of a battle where we almost lost our lives.

This was one of our backup plans. If we managed to get Actor from the Yeerks, we were going to project a hologram and flee with him in the

confusion. The four of us in the Iskoort would demorph behind the cover and fight until we could get away.

It was still a good plan, even if we hadn't planned to implement it quite like this. And this meant we got to fight. I could get out of this body and into one that would let me take a bite out of Visser Three.

<Bird morphs,> Jake said as Tobias dove my body to the ground, dodging Dracon fire. <Nothing to gain here. Let's go.>

Bird morphs. Right. I shook off the desire to slam my grizzly paw into Visser Three's face. Though if I did, it might give the others time to run away...

<Get them! Go through the hologram, you idiots, it's not real fire!> Visser Three was shouting. We didn't have a lot of time left.

<Okay, Tobias, time to clear out,> I said.

That was the plan: for him to get out and demorph himself so that I could do the same. But he was hesitating. <Rachel,> he said, and I saw his concern: that I'd go grizzly when I should have been fleeing, satisfy the image that wouldn't leave my head of grizzly claws sinking into Visser Three's face.

<I won't,> I said. <I'm not that dumb.>

I was telling the truth: I wasn't that dumb. But I could still feel the draw of it. The lure of paying him back for making us run this morning.

<Okay, fine,> he said. <I'll leave, as long as you promise me—>

An impact like a truck hitting my chest. I didn't know what had happened—had something hit me? And then: fire. Fire along all my veins.

My eyes looked down at my chest. I still couldn't direct them. A smoking hole, straight through, a random Dracon shot that had gotten incredibly lucky.

My vision was already starting to dim.

<Demorph!> Tobias shouted in my head. <Rachel! Demorph, now!>

<No,> I said. I wasn't supposed to. Not with Tobias in my head. We didn't know...but I was losing my ability to focus. Fading.

<I don't care, Rachel, demorph now!> Tobias said. <You hear me? Now! Jake, we're down! Rachel's down!>

I could hear him. Just barely. My mind was drifting. I couldn't focus well enough to demorph. But I was doing it anyway: my arms and legs were changing, without my telling them to. Someone else in my head, making me do it.

The maelstrom of pain slowly faded as my flesh melted back to my own. My own flesh, my familiar healthy human body, emerged from the dying Iskoort frame.

A bare minute later, and I was human again, panting on the ground, while a fake battle raged over my head. The fake battle didn't have any sound, but the real battle did: I could hear roaring, Jake's tiger, and the scream of Dracon fire. The other Animorphs must have turned to fight when they heard I was down.

I could feel Tobias's mind.

<Tobias!> I said. I was in human form, so I couldn't thought-speak in the normal way, but I didn't need to: he was still in my head.

He was scared. I could feel that much, even though he was trying to suppress it.

<Tobias! Where are you?>

<I don't know,> he said. <Rachel? I have no idea.>

CHAPTER 12

<You have to demorph,> I said. <Maybe you'll—materialize, or something.>

<I don't know if that's such a good idea,> he said, a hysterical edge to his thoughts. <What if I'm still in your brain, like a Yeerk?>

<Do you think you are?>

<I don't think so. I think I'm only getting your senses filtered through your thoughts.>

<We have to try something,> I said.

<Yeah,> Tobias said. <Yeah, okay. I could try that.>

I had to morph, too, so that I could fight. That was the thing to focus on right now. Not the possibility that something terrible and unknowable had happened to Tobias's body. Had to morph. Had to survive.

I wasn't going to run away this time.

I focused on the grizzly. At the same time I felt Tobias focus on his own bird body. I felt the changes begin: the muscles that layered themselves over my own, my whole body bulking up and growing thicker and taller and stronger. The brown fur that prickled up from my skin. The snout that bulged out, the eyes that dimmed and the sense of smell that sharpened.

I was becoming the grizzly. But something was wrong. <What the—>

<Aah!> Tobias yelped in my mind. He tried to flap his wings in alarm, and I felt the tugging at my own shoulder blades.

I turned my clumsy bear head to peer over my shoulder. I was the bear. But behind me, wings fanned out. Huge ones, blurry to my bear eyes but unmistakable. Like I was some kind of bear angel.

<Tobias, I think we have a problem,> I said.

“*Garflak!*” A Hork-Bajir jumped through the hologram right in front of me. I swung at him instinctively, and he fell back, staggering under the power of my paw. He came at me again, and I knocked him upside the chin.

<Yeah, I think we set this one aside to worry about later,> Tobias said in my head, and I turned to lope toward the rest of the battle. I had to find the others.

It was hard to find anything in the hologram. The Chee-designed hologram projector worked in layers, so that even if you were in the middle of the hologram you couldn’t see cleanly out of it.

Fortunately, a grizzly bear doesn’t rely on sight.

I ran toward the smells and sounds of the others fighting. <Jake! Are you guys okay?>

<Alive so far,> he said. <What about Tobias?>

<He’s with me,> I said. It was sort of true.

<Okay, we’re retreating, people,> Jake said. <Rachel, wherever you are, don’t come this way—we’ve got ship-based Dracon fire, plus Visser Three morphed something with, like, a thousand teeth. Just get to the woods as fast as you can.>

I hesitated. I didn’t like to run from a fight. The Yeerks had almost killed me twice today, and I was mad. Maybe I couldn’t get Visser Three. But if I could just get that woman who told him to shoot us...

My head turned by itself, toward the woods.

<Hey!> I said in my head.

<Sorry, sorry!> Tobias said. <I didn’t realize I was—it’s hard not to do things. Sorry.>

I brushed it off. He wasn’t going to do it again: I could tell that much. I could still go...

Something came at me, and I swung at it. Another bear. No, not a real bear. A hologram.

It was part of the battle we’d had at the Yeerk pool. The bear was reared up on its hind legs, roaring and lunging at Hork-Bajir and slashing them to

bits. Me, my first time in bear morph, losing control and attacking everything around me.

I had been horrified after that battle. I had thought about walking away from the fight. Would I feel like that after this fight, if I went and took a swing at Seraya? Or would I just be disappointed I hadn't gotten Visser Three?

<We have to go,> Tobias said quietly.

He still wasn't going to stop me if I wanted to go join the battle. But he was right. Jake had said to retreat, and I had to figure out how to save Tobias.

I turned and ran toward the woods. As I did, I felt the lust for battle fade slowly out of me.

I was glad it was Tobias in my head. If someone had to see me like this, I was glad it was him. At the same time, I wasn't glad, because it might mean he was trapped. Again. In a form much worse than his bird body.

Don't think about that. No point. <Tobias,> I said, as I loped toward the woods. <Can you remorph? Back to Yoort?>

He was afraid of what would happen, but there weren't a lot of choices. I felt him agree. At my sides, as I ran, the wings disappeared.

<I'm going to try demorphing and then remorphing,> I said, once we'd reached a good distance from the field. I didn't know where the others were, but I could find them later. Tobias was my top priority right now.

<What if...> he started to say, then stopped. I heard the rest of his thought regardless: what if that didn't work? What if he was stuck forever in my mind, in a Z-space void? What if he didn't have a body at all anymore?

<It'll be all right,> I said, putting as much assurance behind the thought as I could, even though I knew he'd see through it. Then I demorphed to human.

The demorph went fine. No rogue wings. Then I morphed again, to the form I never wanted to return to: the Isk.

There was a moment of helplessness, again, as my senses winked out. Then, a moment later, a glimmer of light. Growing, gaining clarity, until I could see again. <Tobias! Is that you?>

<I think so,> he said. His thought-speak voice was shaky. <I think...I'm gonna try leaving your head.>

I couldn't celebrate yet. We didn't know if it would work. But a moment later, my sight went dim. I lost all connection to the world. And a moment after that—no more Tobias in my head. I felt his swirl of fear and doubt and hope retreat sharply until it was gone, and I was left only with my own.

<Can I—> I asked.

<Yes,> he said, and I started demorphing right away. Focused as hard as I could, racing toward that moment when I had control of myself again. And then, finally, I could see. I could hear. I looked down and saw the red-tailed hawk growing swiftly out of the body of the Yoort.

I could move my body again. I was gasping. My hands weren't fully formed, but I reached out to touch Tobias. Hawks don't like to be touched, but I had to: I needed to feel that he was real. I needed to compensate for the sudden emptiness in my mind.

I pressed my forehead to his. "I," I said, and then couldn't figure out how to say the rest of it. I've never been good at asking for things I want, not like this. But maybe because Tobias had just been in my head, or maybe because he knew me pretty well by that point, I didn't have to ask.

He morphed to human, and we put our arms around each other. We sat there on the forest floor for a long time, not saying anything, just holding on.

CHAPTER 13

“They definitely went back to the warehouse by the docks,” Cassie said. She and Ax had followed the Bug fighter in bird of prey morph. Now we were all back in her barn. “We didn’t see any sign of Actor, but it seems like a good bet he’s there.”

“Yeah, I could see Visser Three wanting to check out the prisoner,” Jake said.

“What’s with this Seraya woman?” Marco asked.

<We already suspected she was in charge of the new facility,> Ax said.

“Yeah, but.” Marco shrugged. “Come on, ‘just shoot them’? Doesn’t she know that’s not how supervillains behave?”

<Does seem like it goes against the professional code,> Tobias said.

“So we learn more about her, too,” I said. I wanted to get moving again. I didn’t want to sit around thinking about everything that had happened, or almost happened, that afternoon.

Jake nodded. “Let’s update the Chee, let them know to keep covering for us. Then head out.”

It was about time for all of us to report home for dinner. The Chee would do that for us. And they’d help our families get out if the Yeerks showed up at their doors.

The sun was starting to set as we flew toward the warehouse. Cassie and I morphed owl so that we could compensate as visibility worsened for the others.

The warehouse looked innocuous enough from above. The Yeerks had bought a bunch of land around it and razed all the buildings but one, so it was just the one warehouse in the middle of this huge plot of dusty land.

There was a fence around the lot, high and strong with barbed wire on the top. Not the kind of thing that would keep us out. There was no visible activity at all.

<We have to assume there are defenses we can't see,> Jake said. <Ax, can you tell if there's a force field?>

<There are no visual signs, Prince Jake, but I would assume so,> Ax said.

<We've gotten through one of those before,> Cassie said.

<Force field, probably those mounted Dracon beam cannon thingies, Gleet BioFilters at the entrances,> Marco said. <What else?>

<We should get a closer look,> Jake said. <Cassie, Rachel?>

<I'll go,> I said.

I swooped down toward the warehouse. It was dark out by now, but to my owl eyes the scene was as visible as it would have been under the noon sun.

<Follow the air flow,> Tobias advised from above as I got close. <Go with it, not against it. If there's a force field, there won't be air blowing through it.>

<Got it.> I let the air buoy up my wings as I glided nearer. I didn't want to go too close to the warehouse—just close enough to see what was going on.

Specifically, I wanted to find some insects. They were the ones who would tell us where the force field was.

I spotted one to the side of the building, in the middle of the dusty lot. A housefly, the kind we end up morphing pretty often. It was flying toward the building in its idiosyncratic loopy pattern. It got closer than I would have expected, but then a few feet shy of the building, there was little flash of light and a sizzle of electricity, and it fell to the ground, dead.

<Whoa!> I flared my wings and shot up and away from the building. <Did you guys see that? The force field totally fried that bug.>

<Electrified force field?> Cassie asked.

<It is more likely a diffuse BioFilter field, tied to the force field,> Ax said. <It would not be as strong as a regular BioFilter, but it would kill any insects that came into contact. Some Andalite farmers use them on fields of specialty grasses. It is a controversial practice, of course.>

<You Andalites and your Gleet DDT,> Marco said.

<Hey guys, check this out,> Tobias said.

A car was pulling into the small parking lot just inside the gate. An unfamiliar woman got out, walked toward the building, and held her hand in front of a panel on a short post a few feet from the door. The light on the panel turned from red to green, and she walked through.

<So we should be able to piggyback on someone else entering,> I said.

<There is no doubt a full-strength BioFilter on the entrance,> Ax said. <This woman's DNA, and that of her Yeerk, will be registered on a list of those allowed to enter.>

<So we...capture one of the people about to enter, acquire them and their Yeerk,> I said, wincing a little inside at what I was suggesting.

<We could,> Jake said heavily. We don't like morphing sentient creatures without their permission. But it was starting to look like we didn't have a lot of other options.

<When we have the person captive, how are we going to acquire their Yeerk?> Cassie asked.

There was a short silence. I had some suggestions, but none of them would result in the human and the Yeerk both staying alive. They might not even result in the Yeerk staying alive long enough for us to acquire it.

<There has to be a way,> Tobias said.

There had to be. We couldn't be stumped here. But nothing was presenting itself.

<We need to know more about the building,> Marco said. <We can't go into this one blind.>

<Sounds like it's time for another talk with Ereka,> Jake said.

CHAPTER 14

I hope you guys appreciate all the things I do for you,” Erek said.

We were back in Cassie’s barn. It was fully dark now, maybe eight p.m. Four hours and change until Actor’s Kandrona starvation would begin.

“We’re your biggest fans,” Marco said to Erek. “We’re actually thinking about getting buttons.”

“Did you get the plans?” Jake asked.

Erek nodded. “Jenny has an administrative position in the Yeerk pool. She sent me a copy of the design spec.”

A hologram of a floor plan appeared in midair next to Erek, like a blueprint only more detailed. There were multiple layers, some that looked like electrical wiring or pipes. There were all sorts of notes written too small for me to read them.

“Here’s the entrance,” Erek said, pointing at the door, with the post marked in front of it. “Ax is right: there’s a full-strength Gleet BioFilter on it. You can only get through it by presenting the DNA of a Controller and Yeerk pair on the very short list of registered workers, within ten minutes of their assigned shift time.”

“I got through a BioFilter once, though,” Cassie said. “On my way out of the Yeerk pool. I was going fast enough that it didn’t kill me.”

“You could probably do that here,” Erek said. “But you wouldn’t get very far. There’s a second airlock-style entrance just inside the door of the warehouse itself. If the BioFilter is triggered, both walls of the airlock will go down, the force field will solidify from the inside, and the Dracon

cannons mounted here, here, and here”—he pointed to the plans—“will be able to shoot the intruders.”

“You said the airlock has walls, not force fields,” Marco said. “What if we go fast enough to get under the wall of the airlock?”

“You’d have to go upwards of sixty miles per hour,” EreK said. “And you’d still have the other wall, which would have been down already.” He tapped the diagram. “There’s no way out of the airlock from the inside. And in case of an intruder alert, the airlock would fill with a poisonous gas, a kind of diffuse acid that would kill you in a few breaths.”

“So we don’t go through the door,” Jake said. “What are the walls of the building made of?”

“Six inches of solid steel,” EreK said. “Same as the floor and the walls of the airlock. There’s a ventilation system that draws in air during the brief moments the force field is open, but all ventilation shafts are lined every twelve inches with thick grates with holes point-five millimeters across. Same with the water pipes.”

“There are human-Controllers in there, though, right?” Marco said. “There must be a sewage system. Gotta have some open pipe for that.”

“Ew,” I commented.

“Hey, this is life and death here, have to ask about the poop,” Marco said.

“The facility has self-contained septic storage that’s emptied once weekly,” EreK said. “The next pickup is Thursday.”

<Geez,> Tobias said. <Not that we haven’t given them reason for paranoia, but this is a little over the top.>

“What is this facility even for?” Cassie asked.

“Best we can tell?” EreK shrugged. “It’s a prison.”

“Oh man,” I muttered. There went any chance that Actor wasn’t being held there.

“The good news is, there aren’t any mounted Dracon cannons on the inside of the facility,” EreK said. “So if you get in, all you have to worry about are the Controllers who’ll be trying to kill you.”

“Erek, I’ve changed my mind,” Marco said. “We’re canceling the buttons.”

“So let me get this straight.” Jake put his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands together. “To get in, we have to go fast enough to get through the BioFilter and under the airlock wall before it gets all the way down. Then we have to survive in a room full of acid gas long enough to get out, assuming we can find any way out at all. After that, we have to face down a wall of Controllers with Dracon beams.”

<In other words, we can’t do it> Tobias said.

“Is there any chance you can help us here?” Jake asked Erek.

“I would if I could,” Erek said. “We don’t have any people who are authorized to get into the facility. And even if we did, with such a personalized entrance mechanism, our absence of DNA would almost definitely be noticed.”

“This is insane,” Marco said.

<Are there no Earth animals who could survive this acid poison?> Ax asked.

Cassie shrugged. “Some species of frogs, maybe. They have a protective mucous over their skin that might help. Not sure how long they can hold their breath. But they wouldn’t be fast enough to get through the BioFilter and under the wall.”

“If you can survive the poison, you might be able to get out of the airlock by breaking into the wall here.” Erek pointed to a spot on the wall of the airlock. “You’d need a ton of force, though, and then you’d need to be able to hotwire the control panel.”

“Ax, can your tail blade slice through steel?” Jake asked.

Ax hesitated. <Up to a certain thickness,> he said. <But, Prince Jake, I fear that I could not do this and navigate the panel while breathing acid.>

There was a pause while we all tried to think through our options. Our nonexistent options.

“Are we beat here?” Cassie said.

“We can’t be beat,” I said. “If the Yeerks break Actor, it’s over for us. It’s not just our identities. They’ll know everything about us. Our strengths, our weaknesses, our strategies—everything. Anything he ever saw in our memories.”

“Yeah, well, we should probably be ready for that to happen,” Marco said. “Because there’s no animal we can morph that can do all the things we need it to.”

<Um. Actually,> Tobias said. I looked up at him. He ruffled his feathers. <Rachel and I might have a solution.>

CHAPTER 15

Marco didn't like the plan. That was fair. I didn't like the plan, either.

"It's not just insane," he said. "It's actually suicidal. We're doing this with no chance to practice, and no idea if it will actually work."

"Ax thinks it'll work." Jake sounded like he was dragging the words up from fifty fathoms deep. "And we don't have time to practice. We still have to go see the Iskoort, and get to the Gardens."

If we were going to do this, we were all going to need some new morphs.

"I don't like this," Cassie said. "I should be the one to do it."

"No," I said. "It's my fault we're in this. It's my job."

"That's not exactly—"

"Plus, we already knows it works with me," I said.

She bit her lip, no response to that.

"Cheer up, Cassie, not like we won't all be involved," Marco said brightly.

That didn't make any of us feel better. Fortunately, there was a lot to keep us busy.

We went to find the Iskoort, who were excitedly stargazing while one of the Chee told them stories about the constellations. I didn't recognize the stories; they were either made up, or from cultures that never got around to writing much down. Either way, the Iskoort were eating them up.

<We look forward to the memories of your next exciting mission!>
Mogul said, seeing us off.

<Yeah, that's why we're doing this, really,> Marco said. <For the ratings boost.>

Next we took a whirlwind tour of the Gardens, the combination zoo-and-amusement-park where Cassie's mom works. The amusement park was still open this late, a giddy sea of colored lights, but the zoo was quiet and dark. I guess they try not to mess with the animals' natural rhythms too much or whatever. There were probably some workers around, but we didn't see them. No one there but the animals and the Animorphs.

When we'd done everything we needed to, we landed in the slightly mangled bushes behind the gas station where it had all started this morning. The gas station was closed, no lights aimed toward the parking lot, so it was the perfect shadowy spot to morph.

"I still think I should do this," Cassie said once we had all demorphed.

"Nope, sorry," I said. I had had enough of being powerless that day. I wasn't going to be a passenger on this trip.

"It makes sense for Rachel to do it," Jake said. "We need you on the inside, Cassie."

"Yeah, speaking of inside," Marco said. "Am I the only one concerned about this? Like, what if we all just disappear?"

<Actually, that is an interesting scientific question,> Ax said. <Andalite physicists have long posited the existence of further non-spatial dimensions located inside Z-space, of corresponding increased complexity. It is possible that we will be extruded into a dimension past Z-space, called Y-space, where—>

"Nope, forget it, sorry I asked," Marco said. "Morphing now. Let's get this clown car on the road."

Marco and Cassie were morphing first: Marco into the Isk, Cassie into the Yoort. Once they were fully morphed, we fed Cassie into Marco's ear.

Marco demorphed to human. Then he made a face. "Wow, I would just like to register that this is seriously weird."

"Is it working?" Jake asked.

"Fas as I can tell. Don't let too much grit get in my slime, okay?"

It was Marco's turn to morph to Yoort. Ax morphed to Isk, and they did the same thing Cassie and Marco had done: Marco went into his ear, and Ax demorphed.

<Marco and Cassie wish you to know that they are alive and have not yet splatted on any Z-space windshields,> Ax said. <Those are Marco's words, not mine.>

"Can they not thought-speak to us directly?" Jake asked, sounding a little alarmed.

<Their morphed bodies are not present in our dimension, so they cannot thought-speak,> Ax said. <Though I believe either of them can access my thought-speak centers. I am a silly pony-boy.> He paused. <That was Marco.>

<Yeah, we gathered,> Tobias said.

Jake was the next to morph Isk, while Ax morphed to Yoort. Once Ax was in Jake's head, Jake demorphed and morphed Yoort, while Tobias morphed Isk.

I fed Jake into Tobias's ear. Then he demorphed, and it was just the two of us—or so it seemed. But I knew everyone else was there, too, seeing out of Tobias's eyes.

"Let's do this," I said to him.

<Hey, it just occurred to me. Once you're an Isk, how am I going to get into your ear?> he asked.

We hadn't thought of that. Once I was an Isk, I'd have no power to move, and Tobias would be a slug. "I'll lie down to morph," I said.

Tobias hawk-walked to stand next to my ear as I lay on my back and began the morph. It felt even worse morphing in that position: I was powerless from the start. I kept thinking someone might come along and see me lying there, my chest folding into a wheezy accordion and my feet growing toward the sky.

The world disappeared like it had the other times I'd morphed the Isk. I focused on staying calm and waiting. Tobias would be there any second.

I felt his approach again as the faintest glimmer of sight. Then his mind swam into mine.

We had wondered if it would be a complete overlap of all six minds, or more like a chain: my mind touching Tobias's, Tobias's touching Jake's, and so on. That had been one of the risks—that not everyone would be able to reach me. But as soon as Tobias's mind touched mine I knew we wouldn't have that problem.

They were all there. I didn't want to see into their thoughts, but I couldn't help it. Jake was running the mission parameters over in his mind, antsy about his own inability to step in if anything went wrong. Ax was nervous about being able to pull off his role. Cassie was worrying about the things that might go wrong with us reading each other's thoughts like this. Tobias was a familiar anchor point, the one presence that wasn't new to me. And Marco—

<Are you humming the *Gilligan's Island* theme song?> I demanded.

<What can I say, it's an ear worm,> Marco said. <Get it? Ear worm?>

He was treated to five minds groaning in his direction. Well, four. I don't think Ax got it.

<Everyone quiet,> I said. <I have to morph again.>

It was time to go in.

CHAPTER 16

I focused on the first morph.

This was the easy part. Funny to think that, when I'd never done this morph before. Usually a new morph is about as challenging as morphing gets. But this was only the beginning.

I'd acquired this morph just this evening. I'd landed in its enclosure, and Tobias had acquired it to keep it calm while I demorphed to human. It had looked at me lazily while I acquired it, its tail twitching a little on the grass. The fastest land animal in existence. A top speed of 75 miles per hour, with an acceleration of four seconds. The South African cheetah.

<Whoa,> Marco said as I fell forward onto my hands—my forelegs, now. <This is trippy.>

<Yeah, it takes a while to get used to,> Cassie said.

I could tell they were all creeped out by the changes happening to my—our—body. All except Cassie and Jake, who'd been through this kind of thing before. Morphing is always disturbing, but I didn't want to imagine what it would be like to feel your body changing without you being able to control it.

Depending on how things went, I might find out.

My body was still changing. My spine lengthened and curved, my ribs expanding and my gut sucking in to form the signature hollow shape of the great cat. My tail schlooped out behind me, movable, ready to help me keep my balance as I ran. My face flattened, and my eyes widened and drifted apart for peak binocular vision. My nostrils grew to let me catch my breath more quickly. I took a breath, and the world sprang into the brilliant detail of a thousand different scents.

I had morphed a house cat before. I expected this morph to feel familiar. And it did, in some ways: the senses, the shape of my body, the liquid grace of a cat's movements. But a house cat is maybe ten pounds of grace and power. I was easily ten times that. A solo hunter who could outrun any land animal alive.

The cheetah's instincts rose within me. Honestly, it was almost impossible to notice them with all the other minds already taking up space. The cheetah was calm. Confident. Alert, ready to use its awesome reflexes, but it knew it was the baddest thing around.

<Pretty great, right?> Jake said in my head.

<Definitely,> I said. <Faster than your tiger.>

He made a skeptical noise in my head. <I'll believe that when I see it.>

He was being a little silly. But I could also tell he was invested in the answer, while knowing *that* was silly. This thought-sharing thing was weird.

The next step was to hang out in the shadows and wait. Hopefully not too long. It had been at least twenty minutes since Marco and Cassie had started morphing.

<Twenty-one of your minutes, to be precise,> Ax said.

<Whoa,> Cassie said, and I saw what had surprised her: all of a sudden I could *feel* Ax's time sense. The slow, steady progression of seconds ticking by, each of them precisely measured, adding up to an instinctive knowledge of exactly what time it is.

<It's really not that remarkable,> Ax said, a mixture of embarrassed and smug.

<I just always figured you swallowed an alarm clock as a child,> Marco said.

<That is incorrect,> Ax said. <As I can read your thoughts at the moment, I know you had no notion that—>

<Hey, hey, easy on the thought-reading,> Marco said. <I was really into *Peter Pan* when I was little, okay?>

<You watched it earlier this year,> Jake said.

<I'm being thought-bullied,> Marco said. <I'm going back to the *Gilligan's Island* theme song.>

It was definitely kind of awkward. Now that we had nothing to do but wait and watch, it was hard not to think about things I didn't want the others to hear. I could feel the others doing the same thing: Ax embarrassed about his nerves; Cassie relieved that she wasn't on the outside and guilty for feeling like that; Jake trying not to think about Cassie.

<It's the pink elephant effect,> Cassie said. <The harder you try not to think about something, the harder it is not to think about it.>

<If you all sing with me, we can do harmony,> Marco said.

<Sh,> Tobias said. <Look.>

A car was pulling through the open gate of the Yeerk facility. I bunched up my hindquarters, ready to go. My tail flicked over the pavement behind me. This was our chance.

<We cannot go yet,> Ax said. <The airlock is not on the right setting.>

<Huh?> I said, but even as I asked it, I saw what he meant. The outer door was down already. It would presumably open for the person to go through, but by that point the force field might be closed again.

<It was open this afternoon,> Tobias said. <I think maybe we have to wait for someone to leave, and then someone else to come after that.>

I twitched my tail nervously, glad I could do that much. The others couldn't move at all.

Actually, they probably could. They were a series of Yoorts, controlling each other; they could all probably control *me*, if they tried to.

<We won't, though,> Cassie said. <Only when you ask us to.>

I knew that. I trusted them. But I also knew how easy it was to accidentally mess up. It was just another source of unease to shove aside.

A few minutes later someone exited the facility. A guy, maybe in his twenties, wearing shorts and socks with sandals. The socks didn't match.

<Come on, don't the Yeerks have any pride?> I complained. Then, <Jake!>

<What? I'm not saying I'd wear it, just that it doesn't look that bad,> he said, while Marco snickered in our heads. <Marco, I can *tell* that you agree with me.>

<What, *moi*? Of the impeccable fashion sense?>

<Anyway, the outer door is up,> Jake grumbled. <Next person to arrive.>

It took six and a half minutes for the next person to arrive. It was impossible not to count the time, now that I was aware of Ax's time sense. My cheetah muscles kept bunching and relaxing, impatient with stillness. Then, finally, another car pulled into the lot.

A middle-aged woman got out, wearing a dark-blue pantsuit. She swung her purse over her shoulder and walked up to the check-in post.

<Here we go,> I said. I uncoiled my cheetah body and hauled out of there.

CHAPTER 17

The speed!

I'd been a bald eagle in a dive. That's at least twice as fast as a cheetah. But let me tell you, when you're on the ground, seeing bushes and parked cars and fence posts zoom past you, it feels way faster.

There wasn't a lot of traffic on the road at night. It almost didn't matter. At the speed I was going, the chances of me being hit by anything were very, very small

I learned later that the cheetah's body is built so that its lungs expand every time its forelegs stretch out and contract again when the back legs catch up. Air was being forced in and out of my lungs without my having to work at it. All the energy of my powerful body was focused on running.

<Okay, I'll admit it, this is even cooler than the tiger,> Jake said.

I crossed the street and entered the Yeerk lot in seconds. I wasn't quite at top speed yet: I didn't want to blow it. Had to wait until the woman scanned her pass.

She fumbled in her bag. "Stupid security measures," she muttered. I slowed, drawing in deep breaths, silent as only a cat can be.

She found her pass and held it to the scanner. The light turned from red to green.

I was off.

"What the," she shouted as I blazed by her. The air filled with the *BREET BREET* of the Gleet BioFilter alarm.

<Now, Jake, now!> I screamed in my head.

The wall was coming down. I raced toward it. And as I did, I felt my face begin to change. The flat profile of the cheetah's face bulged out and out, the skull gaining thickness and the nose growing pointed. I could hear Cassie in my head coaching Jake through the morph, but I couldn't pay attention. I had to concentrate on running.

Almost at the door. Slowing down now. My swollen skull was weighing me down. I couldn't breathe as easily as I wanted to. I streaked under the door, seconds before it slammed the ground, and turned at just the right angle to crash into the far wall.

The impact rang through my entire body. My frame was too fully cheetah to absorb it easily. I stumbled back, disoriented.

<Rachel! Breathe!> someone shouted.

Oh, right. I took in a deep breath, as deep as my cheetah lungs would accommodate, and closed my eyes, just as a hissing sound started from the corners of the room.

My skin was already changing. The fur was retracting, replaced by slime that started to ooze from my pores. You know the feeling you get when someone shows you something gross, like your skin is crawling? It was like that, only all over my body.

At the same time, my internal organs were shifting. It was a subtler feeling, but still not a great one. A little like the jolt you get in your gut when you realize you're about to throw up. My lungs were changing, my heart, my circulatory and respiratory systems, less cheetah and more dolphin. Already it was easier to hold my breath.

<Okay, I can see how this was disturbing for you guys,> I said. My body was changing, only it wasn't me doing it. I could feel Cassie's intense focus on the wood frog, and Tobias's on the dolphin.

Three different animals. Nothing we'd ever tried before. And somehow, impossibly, it was working.

My body was completely different than it had been. My legs were shrinking, victims of Tobias's dolphin; none of the rest of us could keep our focus on a specific part of an animal the way Cassie could.

Ax was going to have to, though, right now.

The first sign that he was succeeding was my tail starting to grow. It wasn't balancing me anymore; it was getting heavier and heavier, more and more muscular.

Then my front legs started to grow.

<No, Ax, it's supposed to be the arms,> Jake said.

<I am aware.> Ax's strain came through in his words and in my mind. <The limbs are...poorly mapped onto this body.>

I was starting to feel like I could use a breath. <What if we did the tail thing first?> I asked.

<Go ahead,> Ax said, clearly still distracted.

Okay, I hadn't been planning on using the Andalite tail myself. But also: Andalite tail. Cool.

I lifted it over my head. It was surprisingly easy to lift. I opened my eyes the smallest amount, ignoring the sting as the acid pricked them, and drew back my tail and swung it at the part of the wall I'd dented with the rhino nose.

<Aah!> I shouted at the impact. It didn't quite hurt; it was just... noticeable. The blade sank a few inches into the wall. I drew the blade out and slashed again, cutting in deeper.

All of this was taking a lot of oxygen. My lungs were starting to feel a little desperate. But I'd gotten through to the wiring. Sparks flew when I drew my tail blade back.

Unfortunately, I couldn't do anything with the wiring yet, because I still didn't have hands. <Ax, any progress?>

<No,> he said. <I do not believe I can do this.>

CHAPTER 18

<Okay, that's not great,> Marco said. His voice, even inside my head, was casual, but I could feel the fear bubbling up in his mind.

We were all afraid. All except Cassie. <Come on, Ax, you can do this,> Cassie said. Her voice was completely relaxed, even though she was still maintaining the slime coating on my body through all the other changes. We'd put her on the inside so that she could help control the other morphs, but she couldn't handle two at once. Not without Ax doing some of the heavy lifting. <Focus on your arms. Your hands. Think about the last thing you did with them: where were you standing? Did you look down at them?>

There was a tugging at the top of my head. A stalk eye popped out, and immediately started to burn in the acid. There was a collective yelp of pain in my head. I closed the eye, but the delicately furred skin was burning anyway.

<Come on, come on,> I muttered. I was getting lightheaded.

<I am not sure if this is possible,> Ax said, panic moving in a wave through all our minds.

<It is,> Cassie said, managing to sound completely confident.

The crazy thing was, she was. It wasn't just her thought-speak voice. Somehow, there was no doubt in her mind, not even a trace of one.

I'd never felt that kind of belief before. I'm a pretty confident person, and I would probably have said Cassie had a lot more doubts about a lot of things. But now, when it came to motivating someone else, she was able to put them all aside and believe.

And because she believed it, I was sure it was going to happen. <Find your arms, Ax,> she said, and I felt the jolt of hands and arms growing

above my overly long cheetah forelegs.

Five morphs. *Five* morphs. I was giddy with it, or maybe with the oxygen deprivation. I flexed the slender Andalite fingers.

It was an awkward shuffle to get close enough to the wall to let Ax's Andalite hands work. None of my limbs were exactly matched at the moment. But I inched over to the wall, and he started fiddling with the wires.

<I can't believe this is working,> Marco said. <I thought for sure we'd be dead by now.>

<Not yet,> I said. But I needed air, and soon.

Ax had to control my body for this part. I couldn't have followed his instructions quickly enough. But I could track his thoughts as he matched wire to wire. They were more focused than my thoughts: he was insulated from the lack of oxygen by the layers of the morph. My vision was starting to get fuzzy—from the need for oxygen or the acid in the air, I couldn't tell.

I felt Ax's moment of triumph a split second before he announced it. <Prince Jake, begin your rhinoceros morph,> he said, and my body started changing again as he touched the two wires together and the wall of the airlock started to rise.

The Andalite arms were the first things to disappear. My front legs shrank, and I fell forward. But my body was bulking up. The traces of other animals were disappearing as the rhino took over. I let go of the cheetah entirely and let Jake take control. My head was swimming, my mind drifting.

The wall rose slowly. I was more than half rhino by the time it rose high enough for me to see. I looked out, into the sea of waiting human-Controllers.

They started to scream.

“What is that thing?”

“Oh God, look at its skin!”

“I think it's still growing!”

“You idiots, shoot it!”

That last voice was followed by a burst of Dracon fire. But then: air. A good, clean gust of it from the room.

I breathed deep. By this point I was mostly rhino. I ignored the Dracon fire that striped my side and charged straight toward them.

The screams changed pitch. There were two Hork-Bajir in the crowd; I charged at them, bowling them over. A Dracon beam hit my shoulder, but I didn't care. I was an armored tank. The Hork-Bajir blades felt like paper cuts on my sides.

"Should we capture it?" someone shouted.

"No, just—wait, where is it going?"

I was running down the hall toward the first corner, Dracon beam fire fading behind me. A rhino isn't as fast as a cheetah, but it was plenty fast for me. Faster than a human, anyway, and I didn't think those two Hork-Bajir would be getting up to chase me anytime soon.

I was exhausted. The strain of all the morphing was hitting me, trickling down the line of Yoorts in my head. But I had just broken into the most secure Yeerk facility we'd ever seen. There was no high like it. That would teach them to think they could keep us out.

<Ready, Marco?> I said.

<The mate was a mighty sailing man—>

<Marco!>

<Sorry! It's actually stuck in my head now!>

He started focusing on the gorilla. I waited for the arms to appear. Instead, the skin on my back started softening, the hair thickening.

<Um, pretty sure that's the wrong body part,> I said.

<Sorry,> Marco said. I could feel his frustration, the borrowed exhaustion. <This co-morphing thing is really hard to control.>

<No time right now,> Jake said. <We find the Iskoort, then figure out how we're going to carry him out.>

Erek had told us there'd be windows in the cell doors. Unfortunately, my rhino eyes weren't quite good enough to make out where the windows actually were. <Uh, Cassie? You think you can help me out here?>

It took a minute, but then I felt my vision sharpening. My own eyes, from the DNA Cassie had acquired from me months ago.

<Thanks,> I said. <You should market this to Precision Vision.>

<How come it looks so easy when she does it?> Marco complained.

Most of the cells were empty. I had to go two-thirds of the way down the corridor before I found one that wasn't: I could just make out an Iskoort form huddled in the corner. <Bingo,> I said, and charged at the door.

It took a few tries before the lock gave. The full rhino body barely noticed the impact. I could have kept doing this all night.

The first thing I smelled when I was through was blood. Weird blood, saltier and also somehow fishier than I expected. It was coming from the Iskoort in the corner.

I went over and nosed at him gently. No movement. No sound either, I realized. His diaphragm wasn't wheezing. With my human eyes, I could see the dried blue-black blood that had poured down his front, like his throat had been slit.

<Uh-oh,> I said.

<We should check for a pulse,> Jake said. <Maybe you can morph a—>

A whirring sound. I looked up. There were walls sliding down around the room: new ones, at least as thick as the airlock doors. I leapt toward the door, trying to slide under them, but they were already too low. The rhino body bounced off, back into the room. I was trapped.

But not alone. There in the corner of the room, pointing a Dracon beam at me, was Seraya.

CHAPTER 19

“Wow, I was hoping you’d come, but I didn’t think you’d actually pull it off,” Seraya said.

She looked completely at ease, standing in the corner of the room three feet from an angry rhinoceros. I was impressed.

<Well, we’re hosed,> Marco said.

We try not to talk to Yeerks. But Ax was buried too deep in Z-space to thought-speak to her right now. <You know that Dracon beam can’t stop me if I charge you,> I said.

“No, but you wouldn’t be able to get out of this room again,” she said. “Besides, I don’t think you will. Not when I’m just a defenseless human. It’s not in character for you Animorphs.”

I stopped breathing.

She held up something: small, shiny. An Iskoort personal memory emitter.

“Funny thing,” she said. “Did you know the psychic lock on Iskoort technology breaks in the event of the owner’s death?”

Everyone’s fear and horror were hitting me at once. It was hard to hold it all at bay.

“So now I think we should have a conversation,” Seraya said. “Which one are you? Sounds like Rachel. Didn’t think you had a rhino morph, though.”

<Don’t tell her anything,> Jake said.

<What does it matter?> Marco said, thoughts rising hysterically. <She already knows everything!>

<We don't negotiate with Yeerks,> I said to Seraya.

"I know," Seraya said. "You don't want them to know you're human. It's amazing how well you've hidden that from the Yeerks so far. Do you know you have Visser Three convinced you couldn't be anything but Andalite warriors? But I've seen what you are. You. Your best friend Cassie. Your cousin Jake. His best friend Marco. The bird-boy, Tobias. And Ax. The one actual Andalite among you. I've seen it all."

<No way,> Cassie said in my head. <She can't have watched our memories that fast.>

<Don't you remember?> Jake's thoughts were weary. <We used those on the Howlers. You get all the memories at once.>

<Does anyone else know?> I asked Seraya.

"I'm not a fool," she said. "I know what this information is worth. I'm not giving it to a buffoon like Visser Three. I'm taking this to the Council of Thirteen." She paused. "Of course, I did encrypt the data and back it up to our computer network so that someone would find it eventually if anything happened to me."

<She's lying,> Marco said instantly. <She's not the kind of person who would hand Visser Three a victory like that if she weren't around to make it happen.>

<She might prefer revenge on us,> Ax said.

<Cassie?> Jake said.

<I'm not sure.> She sounded frustrated. <I can't get a read on her.>

<That doesn't help you if you're dead,> I said to Seraya.

"True," Seraya said, "but I don't have to worry about that." She tapped the memory player. "I've watched all your memories, remember? I know you don't kill people in cold blood." She put a hand on her chest, smiling beatifically. "Not a poor, innocent human like me."

<Okay, I really don't like this lady,> Marco said.

<You killed the Iskoort,> I said to Seraya. <Maybe I'd kill a murderer.>

"Try bluffing someone who hasn't watched all your memories," she said. "If you were going to kill a human for their crimes, you'd have killed

David.”

David was a kid who found the Escafil device—the blue box Elfangor used to give us the morphing power. We’d used it to make David the seventh Animorph. He’d used the power to try to blackmail and kill us.

He was a nothlit now. We’d made sure of it.

That wasn’t an option with this lady. I pawed at the ground with a front hoof. <So what do you want?> I asked. <Why corner me like this, if you already know enough to take us down?>

“Good question,” she said. “You know, I wouldn’t have chosen you for a negotiator. I was hoping Jake would be here, or at least Marco. But I guess you’ll have to do. Here’s the deal: I’m prepared not to tell anyone what I saw in your memories—if you give me the Escafil device. Hand over the morphing cube, and these memories stay a secret from the Yeerk Empire.”

Everyone started talking in my head at once. I didn’t need them to tell me what to say, though. <You must think I’m an idiot,> I said. <If we give you the blue box, you’ll still betray us to your Council, and then you’ll also be able to offer them the morphing cube.>

“Could be.” She smirked. “But it doesn’t seem like you have a lot of choice, does it? Either I tell them, or they find out soon enough anyway.”

<We could take you captive,> I said. <Bust out of here, hold you for three days. I bet your host would be pretty willing to tell us how to delete the computer files once you’re out of her.>

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” she said. “Unfortunately for you, I’m not a Controller.”

<Excuse me?> Tobias said in my head.

<What the—what is she, then?> Jake asked.

Seraya was already talking again. “You Animorphs are so deluded,” she said. “I guess that’s what happens when children fight a war. You actually think you can keep the Yeerks from taking over humanity. You can’t. The only way to win is to side with them.”

<No way,> Cassie said. <She can’t be human.>

<You're the one who's always talking about humans having free will,> Marco said. He was trying to sound cool and detached, but he was shaken up by the idea, just like the rest of us.

<The Yeerks don't let humans stay uninfested,> I said to Seraya.

"They do if you're worth enough to them," Seraya said. "I've made it clear to Visser Three how valuable I can be, and what my terms are. He knows that if he puts a Yeerk in my head, I'm done. There's no Yeerk in Visser Three's organization that can do what I can do. Look at this facility — the Yeerks haven't designed anything half as effective at keeping Andalites out."

<Still didn't keep us out,> I said.

"I admit I'm curious about that," she said. "But honestly, I half expected that you to break through. You seem to get through everything the Yeerks throw at you. That's why I had a secondary goal." She waved the Dracon beam at me. "Trap you, and get you to listen to my proposition."

I was starting to feel antsy. The rhino didn't like being in the enclosed space, and neither did I. <What do you even want with the blue box?> I asked.

"I'm not an idiot, either," she said. "I know the reason Visser Three hasn't killed me yet is that he doesn't think a human could be real competition to him. And I think he's right: the Council of Thirteen is never going to give a human a rank at all, let alone a high one. I don't want to be on the outside looking in, valued but never a part of things." She grinned toothily. "I want to become a Yeerk."

I actually took a step back. I felt everyone's recoil, and Ax's profound disgust. <You want to be a Yeerk?> I repeated.

"The facts speak for themselves," Seraya said. "The Yeerks have done more to spread their empire in a few decades than any race in the history of the known galaxy. In the last year alone they've gone from thousands of human hosts to tens of thousands. They're about to expand beyond this city. It's the winning side. Of course I want to belong to it."

I pushed aside my and everyone else's alarm at the numbers. We could think about that later. <You want to control someone else,> I said.

"Who wouldn't?" She shrugged. "Humans are so vulnerable. Yeerks can slide into our brains and we're walking prisoners in our own lives. My brother was a Controller—that's how I found out about the invasion. The Yeerk in his head was weak: scared of his own failures, looking for a confidante who wouldn't turn him in to Visser Three. But even a weakling like him was able to dominate my brother completely. That's what I want, and you're going to help me get it."

<She's a monster,> Cassie said.

It was harsh language from Cassie. But she was right. Seraya was horrifying.

<Maybe we can't win,> I said to Seraya. <Maybe after all this, we still lose. But at least what we're fighting for is worth something. The world you want to be part of—it's empty. It's not even worth fighting for.>

"I know you think so," she said, "and that's why you won't kill me." She tucked the Dracon beam into the back of her waistband. "Look, I'm helpless," she said, spreading her hands. "So? What's it gonna be?"

CHAPTER 20

“I’ll remind you that if you say no, your secret will get out,” Seraya said. “All your family members, rounded up and infested. The six of you hunted down one by one.”

She was right. I needed a way out. But I couldn’t find one.

<We obviously can’t give in,> Tobias said in my head.

<No,> Jake said guardedly. He was holding something back—a thought I couldn’t quite see.

<But if we don’t give in, it’s all over,> Cassie said.

“They’ll know where to find you,” Seraya said. “I can tell them everything you know. They’ll find each of you and put Yeerks in your heads. Cassie. Tobias. Your sisters, Jordan and Sara. I wonder if you’ll scream? I wonder if they’ll make you watch, or if they’ll infest you first and make you turn them all in?”

I charged at her.

I didn’t even think. Just did it. I wanted to see her speared to the wall. To see her guts smeared all over the steel. I hoped she wouldn’t die right away, just so she could feel the pain of it.

I got half a step before I was stopped by invisible strings. Everyone in my head, taking control at once. At least four different cries of <No!>

I stopped, shaking. How dare they stop me? Who were they to tell me—like they were better than me—

<We can’t,> Jake said. <Not like that. She has copies of our memories.>

He felt sick with it. His sickness trickled into my thoughts: the stale, weary feeling of having been right where I was before. Wanting to kill the

person who was hurting his family. Wanting it so much he was blinded by it.

Oddly enough, that helped. Seeing that made some of my own rage fade. And then I started to feel it from the others. They weren't trying to think about it. But they couldn't help it. I had called it out of them.

Ax's vicious anger against Visser Three. The times he'd imagined paying him back for his brother's death. And Marco, his hand around the Yeerk who'd infested his mother, fighting the urge to squeeze his fingers tight. Even Cassie: those moments in battle when she'd wanted nothing more than to rip the other guy's throat out. When, for just a brief instant, nothing mattered but winning the fight.

And Tobias. Tobias was the only one who hadn't stopped me. He understood how bad it would have been if I'd killed her. He'd felt it, the echo of every life he'd taken, even hunting, even in battle. They built up inside of him until there was hardly room for anything else sometimes. But he hadn't stopped me. He wouldn't turn away from whatever I chose.

<Whatever you are,> he said to me, in thought-speak that would have been private if it could have been. I felt the force behind the words.

<Whatever you do.>

The rhino body didn't have any of the reactions I, Rachel, the human, might have had right then. If I had been human—but I wasn't. I was a rhinoceros, in a cell with the most dangerous Yeerk we'd ever faced.

We couldn't just kill her. But what could we do?

“Oh, and in case you're thinking you can get out of here, and then you and your friends will figure out how to cheat me out of the box, or trap me like you did your friend David,” Seraya said. “Once we set a drop time, I'll put a timer on the memory data in our computer system. If I disappear, or you cheat me out of the box, the data will be released to the whole Yeerk empire.”

<Giving her the box won't help,> Marco said. <If she becomes a Yeerk, that just means we'll have a brilliant Yeerk high up in the Empire who

knows all about us and wants to take us down.> He paused. <And, you know, we're already close enough to that with Visser One.>

<Maybe we can have Erek hack the Yeerk computer system and get rid of whatever data she uploaded,> I said.

<Can we trust that, though?> Cassie said. <It's all our memories.>

<It cannot be all our memories,> Ax said suddenly. <If my calculations are correct, the amount of data the Iskoort extracted from our memories measures in the yottabytes. Iskoort information technology is extremely sophisticated in its ability to extract and compress data, but even the amount stored in a personal memory emitter would be multiple zettabytes. I do not believe Yeerk computing is advanced enough to transfer such a large amount of data in a period shorter than a few days.>

<So maybe she only transferred some of it?> Tobias said.

<Or she's straight-up lying,> Marco said, eager triumph trickling into his thoughts. He was already jumping to the end point. <We know she doesn't want to hand Visser Three a victory. And she's been pretty busy today, interrogating an Iskoort, getting a bunch of new memories. Did she really have time to mess with hiding a bunch of data on a Yeerk server that she probably doesn't understand very well? Easier to say she did it than to do it.>

<So she might not have left a record at all,> I said to the others, eyeing her. That changed everything.

The thoughts swirling through our shared brain space were different now. Jake was the first one to articulate them. <I don't know if we can trust that she didn't leave any data behind,> he said. <But if we wanted to risk it, and send Erek in to do cleanup...>

<Then what?> Cassie asked, an edge to her thoughts.

<Then it might be better if she didn't leave this room,> he said.

<Say the actual words, Jake,> Cassie said angrily.

<He's saying we should kill her,> Marco said.

<We don't do that,> Cassie said.

<Don't we?> Tobias said. <We killed Visser Four. And his host, John Berryman.>

<We kept him from being born,> Cassie said. <It's not the same.>

<Worse, maybe,> Marco said. <And we kill people all the time.>

<In battle,> Cassie said. <Not in cold blood.>

<You were the one who thought I should kill Visser Three's twin,> Jake said. <This woman is way more of a threat to us.>

<That's not a good reason to—>

<She deserves it,> I said bluntly. <She killed the Iskoort, and she's threatening all of us. We pay her back for that.>

I could see Cassie's thoughts swirling around. Her concern for us, if we made this decision, and for me, if I had to deliver the blow. Her knowledge that she wasn't being quite rational in light of everything else we'd done. I saw her thoughts about Karen, the little girl Controller who had found out about us when she was alone with Cassie. I saw Cassie's relief that she hadn't had to kill Karen, and her hope that we'd find a way out here, too.

<This woman isn't Aftran,> Jake said, as gently as he could. <There isn't always a way out.>

<And she's not being controlled,> Marco said. <No innocent human host.>

<We've done things in the past we're ashamed of,> Cassie said. <That doesn't mean it's okay to do them now.>

"I'm waiting," Seraya said. "My subordinates won't disturb us until I raise the walls. How much time do you have left in that morph, anyway?"

The easy thing to do would be to run forward. Save all of us. They'd stopped me before; would they stop me now? Could I save them all from this decision?

No, I couldn't. Because they could each stop me on their own. If they didn't, that was a decision, too.

<We need to vote,> Jake said. <We need to be together on this. I say she dies.>

<I agree,> Marco said. In his thoughts, it looked inevitable. <We can't turn her in to the justice system or whatever. We're the only ones who can decide, and we know she deserves to die. I'm with Jake.>

I had already made my decision, when I'd run forward. That had been in anger, on impulse, but I stood by it. <She dies,> I said.

<I will not vote,> Ax said. <I follow Prince Jake.>

<No,> Jake said. <Not in this, Ax. I'm not going to order you to be part of this. You have to decide for yourself.>

I could feel Ax's unease at that. He wasn't sure how to think of Seraya: she could be seen as our prisoner, but she had put herself into the prison voluntarily. <Andalite laws are not clear on this,> he said finally. <I will vote to kill her.>

Cassie and Tobias hadn't voted yet. <I think we should only do it if it's unanimous,> Tobias said. <It's all of our body right now, in a way. I don't think we should make anyone be a part of this against their will.>

<All right,> Jake said. <It has to be unanimous.>

<Then I vote we do it,> Tobias said.

Cassie was the only one left to vote. She didn't want to be part of this. She wanted to pass it off to someone else. I could see that so strongly in her thoughts. If there was a way to put this choice on someone else's shoulders, she wanted to take it.

But Cassie is strong, and she's honest. I could see her recognize that impulse for what it was and set it aside.

<Seraya deserves death,> Cassie said finally. The words hurt her to say. <I don't want us to be the ones to give it to her, but I think we have to.>

<All right, then,> Jake said quietly.

"Well?" Seraya tapped her fingers on her hip. "I know it's tough to give in, but—"

I lowered my heavy, armored rhino head. And I charged.

CHAPTER 21

She wasn't expecting it. But she was fast: she pulled the Dracon beam out of her waistband and shot me point-blank before I reached her.

It didn't help her. The rhino was already charging. She hit me in the shoulder, and I slammed her into the steel wall of the cell.

I've killed a lot in the war against the Yeerks. I've killed as a grizzly, an elephant, a Hork-Bajir, a wolf; I've killed Hork-Bajir and Taxxons and Yeerks and even humans. Sometimes I even love it. More than I should, I know. But I didn't enjoy this. Whatever she was, she was still a human, and she was utterly in my power.

I tried to channel the rage I'd felt when I'd charged her before. The frustration of being denied a fight again and again all day. But this wasn't an impulsive kill, or a kill in battle. This was an execution. I couldn't find any rage at all.

I crushed her body against the wall and felt my horns touch steel.

I drew back. My shoulder burned from the Dracon shot she'd landed, but I would survive. Her body crumpled and fell to the ground.

If I'd been human, I might have retched. Rhinos don't have that kind of a reaction. To the rhino, she might have been a threat before. Now she wasn't.

It was a little too easy to see it that way as a human, too. She had threatened our lives, and I had killed her.

Not just me. All of us.

I felt their reactions. Tobias's bruised acknowledgment. Jake's mingled guilt and relief. Ax's worry that we had done the wrong thing. Marco's

attempted detachment. And Cassie's horror, her pained cry at the loss of life.

It was too much. And yet I needed it. I needed to know they felt it with me.

<We should figure out how to get out,> Jake said heavily. <She must have had a way to open the walls.>

I didn't want to approach the body. I couldn't do anything as a rhino, anyway. I demorphed, the rhino body melting away to human.

The smell was a little less strong in my human form. But it was still there: the smell of death. Seraya's and Actor's. One we had caused, and one we had failed to prevent.

I breathed through my mouth as I went up to Seraya's body. Her legs were mostly intact; I looked through her pants pockets with shaking hands and found the memory emitter and another little piece of metal, not much bigger than a quarter. It had one button on it.

I ran my fingers over it. I couldn't press it until I'd morphed again.

<Before we do anything else,> Marco said. <Should we all separate?>

I was strangely reluctant. But there was no reason not to at this point. I morphed Isk again, for what I hoped would be the last time. Once I was fully morphed, Tobias slithered out my ear, and I lost my senses of sight and hearing and smell and touch.

Not just that. I lost the others in my head. The quiet was a relief, and also a loss: there was no one to bear anything with me. No one to share the shame and guilt and horror.

It was all right. I knew they did.

I demorphed. Tobias demorphed, too, and morphed to Isk. Then Cassie, then Jake, and one by one the other Animorphs appeared. All six of us in the room, visible and real.

Tobias fluttered to my shoulder, even though there was no real reason for him to do so. I rubbed my head against his wing. "Battle morphs?" I said, speaking aloud for the first time in an hour.

Jake nodded. "They probably have quite the welcome waiting for us."

We morphed. I felt the familiar grizzly bulk take over my frame. As I finished the morph, the grizzly mind rose beneath my own.

Such a simpler mind than the ones that had been in my head recently. It was tempting to sink into it. The grizzly didn't care about guilt or shame. It survived however it had to. But I had to stay sharp. We weren't home free yet.

Once we were all morphed, Ax pressed the button that would raise the walls. They went up slowly, and as soon as they were a foot or so off the ground, the Yeerks started shooting. They didn't notice the cobra slipping through the gap, ready to sink his teeth into a few Controller ankles.

The screaming started a few moments after the shooting. By the time the wall rose enough for us to charge, the Controllers were in chaos, trying to figure out what was making some of them scream and fall.

The rest of us charged out and made the chaos worse.

I can't deny that there's something I enjoy about battle. The straightforwardness of it, attack and kill, simple as that. But I had no heart for this one. I knew what it was doing to my friends. I had felt the sickening echo of violence in their minds. So many battles. So many deaths. And here we were again, killing more humans. Killing more Hork-Bajir. Even Yeerks: they were dying, too. They might have deserved it, but that didn't make it a lot easier.

I wondered if Cassie's mind still felt like it had after Seraya's death. That bottomless anguish.

We got out. The Yeerks didn't have enough people in their prison to keep us there. They'd counted too much on the strength of their walls. We fought our way to the door, and Ax connected the wires he needed to let us out.

We brought the memory emitter with us. We brought Seraya's Dracon beam, too. Once we were out of sight of the building, Ax turned the Dracon beam on the emitter, and it dissolved into particles in the air. No Yeerk would ever use it again.

CHAPTER 22

<I can't thank you enough for the deal we struck,> Mogul said, waving his hands excitedly next to the Iskoort ship. <These memories will bring much joy to many on our home world.>

"And profit to you, right?" I said.

<Unimaginable profit,> Mogul said happily.

We had broken the news to Mogul that Actor was dead. He was bummed, but the new memories seemed to be overshadowing that.

<The only misfortune is that the most recent set of memories do not include six unique perspectives,> Mogul said. <A mission involving an Iskoort would have been the prize of the collection. I just hope people aren't too disappointed.>

"Yeah, sorry we couldn't try to rescue your friend in a way more convenient to your bottom line," Jake said.

<I accept your apology, and thank you again for your generosity,> Mogul said. <Farewell, friends!>

He went to join the other Iskoort on their ship, which looked like a blocky boomerang made of Legos. It rose into the air and winked out of sight.

"Do you think we're making a mistake, not letting them come back?" Cassie said. "They're basically Yeerks who found a better way. We could be taking away the Yeerks' chance to learn from them."

"We came close enough to having the Yeerks learn from them, thanks," Marco said.

<They do still have a specimen in their prison,> Ax said. <Perhaps they will examine it and learn the secret.>

“Doesn’t seem very likely,” I said. Tobias and I had flown by the prison that morning. It was gone: the entire warehouse, completely vanished. The fence was even gone. We figured they’d turned Dracon beams on it from space. If Seraya had left any of our memories on Yeerk computers, they’d gone up with the building. Erek couldn’t find any traces of them in the Yeerk network.

<The Ellimist did say the Yeerks wouldn’t learn from the Iskoort for three hundred years,> Tobias said. <Maybe we’re the reason why.>

It was a little bit sad that we’d taken away a chance for the Yeerks and Iskoort to properly meet. But mostly I just felt relieved it was over. The last thing we needed was another group of Iskoort running around on Earth with our memories.

Besides, we had other plans to think about at the moment.

“All I’m saying is, you’ll be missing out,” Marco said while we walked back to Cassie’s house.

“Good grief, Marco,” I said. “We just had aliens visit from outer space. Do we really need more sci-fi in our lives?”

“No, see, *The Matrix* isn’t alien sci-fi,” Marco said. “It’s cool-alternate-reality sci-fi.”

“Oh, so like the only reality where you could be cool,” I said. “Got it.”

He pointed at me. “Hey. I’ll have you know there are *multiple* alternate realities where I’m cool.”

“Haven’t you already seen *The Matrix* like six times?” Jake said.

“Yeah, one more and I think I can get that dodging-bullets trick down,” Marco said.

“I was hoping we could watch *You’ve Got Mail*,” Cassie said.

“You’re joking, right?” Marco said. “Tell me you’re joking.”

<*You’ve Got Mail* is a high-stakes human emotional drama,> Ax said. <Tobias and I found it highly enjoyable when we watched it last week.>

<Uh, Ax, remember how we weren't going to tell anyone about that?>
Tobias said from above.

<Is it a surprise?> Ax asked. <Joe Fox is very good at surprising Kathleen Kelly. However, he did not succeed at helping her retain her book-selling establishment.>

"Yeah, we were all really bummed about that," I said, winking up at Tobias.

In the end, we went with *You've Got Mail*. Cassie's parents already had it on VHS, and anyway, it was kind of nice to watch something where no one was in danger of losing their lives.

Tobias and Ax morphed to human. Cassie made popcorn, and Ax ate the whole bowl before anyone else got any. Marco complained about the sappiness and then spent five minutes shouting at Tom Hanks when he didn't go into the cafe to meet Meg Ryan. Cassie sat on Jake's lap, and I leaned my head against Tobias's shoulder, and the six of us vegged out.

It wasn't quite the same. I knew what was in all their heads now. I had seen Jake's cool calculation and Marco's insecurity about being known and Ax's anxious desire for righteousness and Cassie's fear of what we were becoming. And they had seen me: all the dark impulses, the impatience, the rage. I had seen their judgment of me.

I had seen Tobias, withholding that judgment. Accepting me for what I was.

Maybe it would never feel the same again. Seraya had told us the Yeerks were expanding; there were going to be a lot more battles coming. More tough choices. I wasn't going to have a chance to step away from the darkness.

But for now, there was a mindless movie to watch. I held Tobias's hand in mine and let myself enjoy the moment, however long it lasted.

The author wishes to thank Elise Smith for her help in preparing this manuscript.

(LEARN THE TRUTH.)

DON'T MISS

ANIMORPHS™ #38

THE

ARRIVAL

Crumph! Crumph!

The thudding of fists against human flesh is not a pleasant sound. It is particularly sickening when heard through a metal pipe. The sound echoes and is magnified.

“That’s enough. Stop it,” a human voice commanded. The sound was muffled, vague, indistinct. I was feeling the voice through my six legs, through my antennae.

“But he’s told us nothing,” a second human argued.

I should not call them humans. They are human-Controllers.

There is a difference.

Human-Controllers are humans whose bodies have become hosts to the Yeerk invaders.

Yeerks! Foulest creatures of the universe. Gray slugs who enter the body through the ear, fit themselves into the human brain, and take over. Mind and body.

Of course, not all hosts are human.

Visser Three, leader of the Yeerk Earth invasion, has an Andalite host.

My name is Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill. I am not human. I am Andalite. The only Andalite among the group that calls itself the Animorphs. Four

humans. A red-tailed hawk. Me.

We are the resistance. We fight the Yeerk invasion until help from my home planet arrives. Or until we die.

The latter possibility seems ever more likely.

It would be unwise to tell you very much more. The Animorphs and I have many secrets to keep. And I, as an Andalite, have the secret of my own race to keep.

Crumph!

The sound again. Had we not been on the pipe we would not have heard it. Roaches feel vibrations. The pipe carried those vibrations directly to us.

We were making our way up a corroded, rusty metal pipe within the interior wall of a two-story office building. Our mission, to rescue our friend and collaborator, Mr. King. We had all seen the front page article on The Sharing, the Yeerk front organization. We had been suspicious that the paper had become yet another Yeerk-run organization. Mr. King had thought it safe to break into the offices of *The Chronicle* and examine their computer data, find the truth.

Apparently that was a mistake.

“Talk!” human-Controller Two shouted. “What are you doing here? Who are you? Why are you snooping?”

Crumph!

“I said stop it!” human-Controller One repeated angrily. “If you kill him, Visser Three will execute us for wasting a potential host body.”

There was a long pause before human-Controller Two spoke again. “Visser Three will execute us for incompetence if he finds out we couldn’t beat the truth out of a mere human. Let’s kill him and incinerate the body. Visser Three will never learn that we failed.”

“Visser Three will wonder why we did not simply infest him and learn the truth.”

“I tell you there is something wrong with this human. I tried to enter the ear canal, but it’s blocked in some way. You don’t believe me, you try it!”

<Ax? What happens if they hit the Chee with a Dracon beam? Can they fry him?> Prince Jake asked me in the thought-speak language we use while in morph.

<I am assuming that it would depend on the amount of power used. A low setting might only disturb the Chee's holographically projected body. It would reveal the android beneath. But a full-power setting could very possibly destroy Mr. King entirely. Which would be worse from our own narrow perspective? It is an interesting question.>

<Thanks, Spock,> Marco said, using the human tone I've come to recognize as sarcasm. <Sure you're not a Vulcan?>

<Vulcans are fictional creatures,> I replied. <And not a particularly convincing creation. Variations among real alien species tend to involve more than cosmetic variations in ear formation and eyebrow alignment. As I believe you may have noticed.>

Marco said, <Hey! Who just crawled over my back?>

<Sorry,> Cassie said. <Lousy visibility.>

The sound of a new blow came echoing through the pipe again. "Talk! Talk or we'll kill you!"

We were inside the wall. To one side, the torture. On the other side? We would have to find out.

Prince Jake's voice was sharp and urgent. <Follow me and get ready to morph.>

<Why doesn't Mr. King just walk out of there and save us a whole lot of trouble?> Marco asked.

<What's the problem, Marco, missing the Rugrats marathon?> That was Rachel. Rachel never found reason to resist action.

For my own part I sympathized with Marco. The Chee were frustrating. Very useful allies. But also liabilities. My human friends have a certain sentimental sympathy for the pacifism of the Chee. I do not.

<Rachel, have I mentioned that I consider you the most attractive cockroach around? Psychotic, yet with a certain cockroach style.>

Rachel laughed. <Anyway, there's two of them and five of us. So don't wet yourself.>

<We're here,> Prince Jake announced.

<Any idea where "here" is?> Cassie inquired.

<Here's where there's an eighth of an inch crack,> Prince Jake explained. <That's good enough for me.>

Prince Jake navigated a bend in the pipe and crossed to the wall itself. Above him was a tiny thread of light. I followed.

Prince Jake flattened his body. Disappeared between two boards.

I did the same.

We emerged into the light. I fought the instinct to panic and retreat back into the baseboard. I waved my antennae, checking for danger.

<All clear,> Prince Jake announced, although his roach senses were no better than mine. He had to be making an educated guess. <Demorph!>

<Let's rock and roll,> Rachel said.

Rock and roll is a type of human music. Its relevance to the battle before us was a mystery to me.

About the Author

The Animorphs series, written by Katherine (K. A.) Applegate with her husband, Michael Grant, has sold millions of copies worldwide, and alerted the world to the presence of the Yeerks. Katherine and Michael are also the authors of the bestselling Remnants and Everworld series. On her own, Katherine is the author of *Home of the Brave*, *Crenshaw*, *Wishtree*, and the Newbery Medal–winning *The One and Only Ivan*. Michael is the author of the Gone and Front Lines series.

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