

J A H E

<Come inside, please—all of you. And quickly.>

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tobias start forward, saw him jerk to a stop as Marco's hand seized his shoulder. I heard Cassie's soft, terrified gasp, somehow seeming every bit as loud as Rachel's wild, unbalanced laughter. I felt the crawling tingle of adrenaline flooding my veins, and the tight, breaking-point tension of muscles that didn't know whether to freeze or flee. The alien ship filled my vision as the voice filled my thoughts, both of them impossible to believe, impossible to ignore.

There was a shout, a muffled thud, a *whoosh* of air, and I tore my eyes away to see Marco doubling over as Tobias stepped back, his fists clenched. Without a word, he whirled, running toward the ship, toward the ramp and the open hatch above.

<No.>

Tobias froze in mid-step as if the word had been a magic spell, balanced on the toes of one foot, his clothes and hair like carved marble. Behind him, Marco straightened on

puppet strings, still coughing and wheezing as some invisible force drew him upright and held him there. I fought back a wave of nausea as Rachel's laughter lifted another octave, as Cassie's frightened whimpers cracked and gave way to open sobbing.

Move! I shouted at myself. *Run! Scream! Do SOMETHING.*

But what?

It was a spaceship.

A *spaceship*, in the middle of the construction site, where seconds earlier there had been nothing but dusty foundations casting shadows in the moonlight.

What was there to do?

<There will be peace between you,> the impossible voice said again, and I realized with a blood-freezing chill that it was *my* voice—not some unfamiliar mental interruption, but *my own inner voice*, the words sounding exactly the same inside my head as they would have if I'd thought them myself.

Whatever was talking to us, it was hijacking our own brains to do it.

<There *must* be peace between you,> it continued. <You must come together, all of you, or those you leave behind will be lost forever, and you soon after.>

I looked at Tobias, whose eyes were wide and frightened, his nostrils flaring as he struggled within his unseen restraints. I looked at Marco, whose face was a mirror of my own, his jaw clenched with fear and doubt and indecision. I looked at Rachel, who had choked on her laughter and now stood silent and horrified, a hand over her mouth. I looked at Cassie, at the tears that were streaming down her cheeks and disappearing into the dust at her feet.

I looked at them, and they looked at me.

I'm not psychic, you know. I'm not one of those guys who believes in past lives or déjà vu, or who writes down his dreams and thinks he knows what they mean. Up to that point, I'd never even really *thought* about the future, much less tried to predict it. And even now, if you ask me, I'll tell you that I don't really believe in fate, in destiny.

But I swear, in that moment, when the four of them looked to me, I got some kind of a glimpse of what was coming. I think that's what snapped me out of it, what finally got me moving. Because *not* moving, *not* reacting, standing there and letting things just happen—that's a choice too, you know?

I stepped forward, half-expecting to meet resistance, overwhelmed with relief when I found none. "Why?" I asked, staring up at the ship. I didn't shout. Somehow, I knew it wasn't necessary.

<An enemy approaches,> said the voice in my head. <I have delayed it, for now. There are two-to-the-forty-ninth decoys scattered across this hemisphere, and its methods of falsifying them are slow. But our conversation must begin, for we are close to the obvious target, and luck may favor evil as easily as good.>

I couldn't help it. I shivered. Something about hearing the word *evil* echoing through your mind, put there by someone else, a thought transplanted against your will. I looked over at Marco again, saw him staring back at me, saw him shake his head slowly in the darkness. I knew what he was thinking. *You don't ever get in the car with the kidnapper, man. No matter how bad it is, it's only going to get worse once you give them home field advantage.*

<I am no kidnapper, Jake Berenson.>

My head snapped back toward the ship so fast that my neck cracked. A low, hopeless groan crawled its way out of Rachel's throat, and I felt sudden warmth in my hand as Cassie stepped forward and laced our fingers together.

"Then why do we have to come inside?" I asked. "Why don't you come out here?"

<Because I am dying.>

* * *

"The closest word would be *morphing*, I think. Shapeshifting would seem to be too broad, since you can't take the form of anything that is itself incapable of moving or sensing its environment, nor anything that lacks some kind of a genetic map."

He stood with his back to us, using words that I might have understood if they'd come half as quickly, or if my brain weren't already stunned and punch-drunk. He was moving as he spoke, his hands darting back and forth across a control panel the size of a dinner table, his eyes tracking dozens of strange symbols as they cast their soft blue light onto his skin.

His *human* skin.

"It is done with nanotechnology, in response to focused thought, in a process too complicated to explain. Imagine your body being disassembled and stored in an alternate dimension, while a new body is built from scratch in its place, controlled via a mental link. This is a lie, but a useful one—the new body will respond as if it is your own, will *feel* as if it is your own."

He didn't look like he was dying, didn't *sound* like he was dying. But—he'd said—appearances could be deceiving.

"You will witness arms becoming wings, eyes becoming antennae, skin becoming scales. For a time, you will *be* the other organism. Your true body remains unchanged—sent elsewhere, its processes suspended."

I shook my head, struggling to understand, fighting to make the pieces click and painfully aware that *think harder* wasn't exactly a strategy.

"You expand the library of available morphs through manual acquisition. Simply touch the organism you wish to become, focusing your thoughts in a particular way, and

the system will begin its analysis. The first analysis will take hours, but given the shared ancestry of life on this planet, subsequent acquisitions will be usable within minutes or seconds.”

We were huddled together on what seemed to be the bridge of the spaceship—a vast, cavernous space filled with panels and instruments, shining in a blue glow that cast no shadows, as if it were emerging from the walls themselves. There were kiosks and consoles arranged in a wide arc around the central viewscreen where the alien now stood. Half of the consoles were burnt, blackened and misshapen, wrenched away from the large, ragged hole that had removed most of the far wall. If it weren’t for the curled, springy grass carpeting the floor, the whole thing could have been a set from the next *Star Trek* movie.

I still held Cassie’s hand in mine, the two of us gripping tighter and tighter as sweat made our palms and fingers slick. At some point, my other hand had found Marco’s, just as Cassie had reached out to Rachel. It was embarrassing, childish, but no one had said anything. We were all too frightened to care. Even Tobias had grabbed hold at first, taking Rachel’s other hand as the pair of them led us up the ramp. But he’d let go once we reached the bridge and was now standing slightly apart, his eyes locked on the alien as his hands slid back and forth across the consoles, stroking them the way you might pet a sleeping cat.

Vivid.

It wasn’t exactly a thought. Just a word, floating up from English vocab. It attached itself to Tobias like a bookmark—a feeling, a question, a vague sense that there was something there I’d want to come back to, later. I was afraid. Cassie was afraid. Even Marco and Rachel were afraid. But Tobias ... Tobias was something else. Deep below the surface, some part of my brain logged it, flagged it, grouped it together with three or four other things and started looking for the pattern.

There had been another moment—outside, when the invisible bonds holding Tobias and Marco had loosened, leaving both boys standing on their own two feet.

“We have to go inside,” Tobias had said, turning to face the rest of us, a painful urgency threatening to crack his voice.

“Like hell,” Marco had shot back. “I can think of a hundred reasons not to, and half of them don’t even involve probes.”

Beside me, Rachel had stirred, shaking her head as if trying to clear her thoughts. “This—is real?” she’d asked quietly, speaking to no one in particular. “This is really happening?”

No one had answered her. “It’s a *spaceship*, Marco,” Tobias had pleaded. “This is the most important thing that’s ever happened.”

“So take a picture with your phone, send it to the cops, and let’s get *out* of here.”

“It’s dying. What if it needs our help?”

“It *says* it’s dying. And even if it is, that’s not *our* problem. You can go right inside and catch space AIDS, but I’ve got no interest in getting abducted.”

He’d turned to go. Again, I’d felt my thoughts skidding, my mouth hanging open as I struggled to find the right words to say—

“Marco, wait!” Cassie had shouted.

We’d all turned to look at her, Marco included. Cassie, the whisperer, the quiet one. Cassie who never shouted, ever. I’d squeezed her hand, trying to offer support, or reassurance, or *something*, I wasn’t entirely sure what and probably neither was she. She’d gulped, her jaw trembling, and continued. “It’s just that—it said—it said all of us, right? We all have to go together, or—or else—”

<Or else all of you will die.>

I’d cleared my throat. “Why should we believe you?”

<What would you say, Jake Berenson, if I told you I had seen your future?>

“Bullshit,” Marco had said, without hesitation.

There’d been an amused rumble, the memory of a giant’s laughter. <If I wished you harm, Marco Levy, do you think that you would still breathe? Do you think I need lies to strike you down? I do not even need weapons—if I but hold you for an hour, my enemy will do the rest. What I am offering is *help*—help you desperately need, help that I cannot give unless you come inside. Make your choice—trust and live, or doubt and die.>

After that, there hadn’t been much more to say. Just another one of those moments, when all four of them had looked at me, as if they somehow needed *me* to give the order. And so we’d climbed the ramp, and stepped through the door, which had thankfully stayed open behind us. And there, in the graceful, organic hallways, holding hands like kindergarteners, we’d seen the wounds that had been hidden in the darkness of the construction site—the shattered bulkheads, melted consoles, scorched turf.

It was clear that there had been a battle.

It was clear that the alien had lost.

On the bridge, he entered a final sequence of commands, studied the viewscreen for a long moment, and nodded tightly, an uncannily *human* gesture.

Marco noticed, too. “You’ve been on Earth before.”

The alien—the man—turned to face us, and nodded again. “Yes. I spent several years in human form, in fact. It is—not unpleasant, to wear this body once more before the end.”

I glanced around the bridge, at the alien grass, the domed ceiling, the consoles just a little too tall for comfortable human use. “What do you look like normally?” I asked.

“You will see soon enough, Jake Berenson. But we have sadder matters to discuss,

and only minutes to discuss them, for all my skill and subterfuge. Before we proceed, there is one question you must answer, as honestly as possible.” He paused, and I felt the hands gripping mine tighten further, Marco’s no less than Cassie’s. “Human children, what deeds would you do—what burdens would you shoulder—how far would you go, if the fate of your species hung in the balance?”

* * *

A part of my brain that I hadn’t ever noticed before had awakened, was working overtime, pouring new information into the stream of my thoughts as quickly as it could generate it. I saw my friends’ faces, heard their voices, felt a kind of strange certainty as predictions began making themselves without any help from me.

Rachel: Whatever it takes. Just say the word, and I’m there.

Cassie: Just our species? Just humans? What about everything else?

Marco: Why are you asking us? We’re kids, in case you hadn’t noticed.

Tobias: In the balance of what?

Jake:

I frowned. That wasn’t how brains were supposed to work—was it? Why couldn’t I predict what I would say?

“I think you’ve got the wrong guys, Mr. Alien,” Marco quipped. “We’re barely even teenagers; we probably couldn’t get two miles on foot before curfew.”

The alien said nothing, only shifted his gaze, waiting.

“Are you asking us to leave Earth?” Cassie said, her voice shaking. “Is there—is something going to happen, and you can only save a few people? Only humans?”

Another pause, another shift.

“If there’s a fight, I’m in,” Rachel said, her voice suddenly strong and confident.

Shift.

“What is it?” Tobias asked. “What deeds, what burdens, what fate?”

Shift.

I felt a chill run down my spine, felt cold sweat break out on my forehead. Those eyes—there was something about them, something deep and dark and inscrutable, hiding just beneath the surface. Even if we’d met on the street, I’d have known they weren’t merely human.

I took a deep breath. “You said we have only minutes?” I asked.

“Perhaps as many as forty. Perhaps as few as twenty.”

I turned to look at my friends, searching their faces for understanding, for permission, for forgiveness. Tobias’s expression was a wild mix of hope and despair, Rachel’s a grim mask of determination, Cassie’s a tear-stained portrait of uncertainty.

What did mine look like?

I locked eyes with Marco, who bit his lip and glanced significantly at the ragged hole, at the bright points of starlight just barely visible through the gleam of headlights on the highway. I could see the wheels in his head turning, could imagine his thoughts with an unnerving degree of confidence.

Tick tock, Marco was thinking. *Tick tock*.

I turned back to the alien. "It's not a fair question," I said. "But it's too late to say no, isn't it?"

* * *

He explained it all with cold, surgical precision.

I had thought we were terrified before.

I needed a new scale.

"The operation is currently limited by the inaccessibility of this system through ordinary means of space travel. There is a single pool ship in orbit, supporting a single nexus on the ground. The invasion force has finite resources, and is largely dependent on co-opted Earth technology, which is far inferior to that of the main Yeerk fleet currently blockaded several thousand light-years from here."

Bodysnatchers.

"Even so, we estimate that there are roughly twenty thousand host-ready Yeerks in the subterranean pool at the center of your city, and material to support an infestation ten times that size. The pool is where the Yeerks live in their natural state, and where they must return every three days, to absorb *kandrana*, an essential nutrient."

Slugs. Blind, deaf, defenseless. Just ugly little slugs that crawled in your ear and seized control of your brain. Talking with your voice. Living with your body. Raking through your memories so that they could impersonate you with absolute precision.

An endless, living nightmare.

"In all likelihood, the number of actual Controllers is currently well under a thousand, but even slow exponential growth will eventually reach a turning point. You have until that point, or until outside reinforcements from the Yeerk fleet arrive."

"How long?" Marco asked.

"There is no way to be certain. At a minimum, six months. At a maximum, thirty."

"And your people? The—Andalites? What about outside reinforcements from them?"

The alien shook his head. "The threat is not recognized. My people know little and less of war; they are learning, but without urgency. They see the Yeerks as an irritant, a distraction, a minor problem. By the time seven billion human Controllers begin pouring off the surface of the planet, the war will already be lost."

“But *you* came,” Tobias interjected.

“Yes,” the alien said. “But not to save you. If the Andalites do come, it will be to complete the mission that I failed.”

I felt my stomach twist, felt that same odd certainty, this time wrapped in a layer of the coldest, blackest ice. “You came to kill us,” I said. There was a soft rustle as the others straightened, pressure on my shoulders as the space between us closed. “You came to kill us all.”

“Yes,” he answered. He looked at each of us in turn, his eyes like flint, hard and unapologetic. “You are their food, their weapons, their war machine. Seven billion minds chained to their yoke, seven billion bodies to do their bidding. You are the wave they will ride as they sweep the galaxy clean of all who oppose them. I came to deny them their prize, armed with a weapon that should have burned your world to a cinder.”

I swallowed. Rachel’s eyes blazed with anger while Cassie’s shone with tears. Marco’s face was blank, and Tobias’s fingers were gripping the console so hard that his knuckles had gone white. “But it didn’t work,” I said, uncertain whether to feel horrified or relieved.

“No. It did not work. Now, it is up to you.”

* * *

I let out an involuntary gasp at the second stab of pain, somehow much worse than the first. Reaching a hand up to my ear, I felt wetness, drew my fingers away to see blood.

“This device will blend with your body’s hardware sufficiently well to be preserved during the morphing process. It will fatally terminate any Yeerk that attempts to infest you. Note that while this is a tremendous safeguard for the resistance as a whole, it will do little to protect *you* if you are captured. Yeerks are notoriously—*disinterested*—in unusable bodies.”

He gave the same treatment to Rachel, Tobias, Cassie, and Marco in turn, then walked back to the cabinet from which he’d drawn the syringe and began keying in a code on a smaller, locked compartment. “The device was developed after our second greatest failure,” he said. “During the battle for the Taxxon homeworld, a single Andalite was made Controller, and the resulting betrayal of our species’ secrets led to the destruction of the thirteenth fleet. Alloran’s Fall, on the tail of Seerow’s Kindness.” Opening the compartment, he reached inside and withdrew a small, blue cube, smiling grimly. “We Andalites have abandoned most of our superstitions, but one of the few that persists concerns the special nature of the number *three*. Much discussion has been had over when our third failure will come, and what its consequences will be. I can only

hope that history will not label it Elfangor's Trust."

"Is that your name?" Tobias asked.

"Yes," Elfangor said simply. Raising his hand, he held the cube up where we could see it. It was roughly eight inches on each side, inscribed with shapes and figures like the ones we'd seen on the ship's controls, and it glowed with the same blue light that seemed to be the Andalite's favorite shade. "This is the *Iscafil* device," he said. "It is the sole method of conferring the morphing power upon a sapient, living being. I will use it upon each of you in turn, and then teach you how to use it yourselves, and then key it such that any one of you may trigger its self-destruct sequence remotely, via telepathic link. You will keep it safe, and if you cannot keep it safe, you *will* destroy it."

"Wait," I said, holding up a hand. "Why don't *you* keep it safe, and come with us? I mean, I know you said you were dying, but— isn't your real body in, like, stasis? Why can't you—I mean, why don't you—"

I faltered, and Elfangor looked down at me with a sad, sympathetic sort of smile. "There is a limitation on the morphing power," he explained. "The technology draws its energy from the background radiation of the universe, which is not present outside of normal space. The countdown begins the moment your body is extruded, and if you have not demorphed by the time the clock runs out, the change becomes permanent."

"So you can get stuck as, like, a bird, or whatever?" Tobias asked.

"Worse. The construct body will persist, as it is real and does not require power to maintain. But the pocket dimension will collapse, taking with it your true body and all of the computational hardware upon which your mind and memories are stored. You will simply cease to exist, leaving only the construct in your wake."

He began to poke at the cube, pressing certain symbols in sequence, peering closely at others. As we watched, the blue glow intensified and began to pulse, cycling through a series of patterns. "For an adult Andalite body, the charge typically lasts around one human hour. Your bodies are smaller, and in some ways less complex; I predict you may be able to stretch the time to two, or perhaps even longer. The cube will tell each of you as it transfers the morphing power; you must check the number again regularly, particularly after any significant growth spurt."

"So in a few minutes, you're going to morph back into your own body and just die?" Tobias demanded, an edge of anger creeping into his tone. "Why? Why can't you just remorph? Or call for help? Or use some kind of medkit?"

Elfangor smiled again, this time casting his compassionate gaze around at each of us in turn. "Do not forget that the Visser approaches. He must not know that you were here, or you will never escape with your lives. I will remain behind as a goad and a distraction, to draw his eye from your trail. Perhaps, if I am lucky, I will even purchase a small victory with my death. It is not the worst fate that could befall an Andalite who

would call himself a warrior.”

He turned to me. “Press your hand against the cube, Jake Berenson, and we shall see what fate thinks of a human child’s resolve.”

* * *

“Isn’t there anything else you can give us?” Rachel asked. “Shields? Sensors? Ray guns?”

Elfangor shook his head. “These technologies are all alien to Earth, and thus easily detected and tracked. The cube is risk enough—like an infant given explosives, you would accomplish little, and draw much attention.” He hesitated, then continued. “Also—and please do not take offense—you are strangers to me, and untested. I have some reasons for confidence, but who truly knows what you would do with Andalite military technology, or what those who wrest it from you would find themselves capable of? Better by far to see you fall as humans than to see you rise a threat in your own right; the galaxy does not need *two* such scourges. That I give you even this small scrap of power is a sign of how desperate the struggle has become.”

Marco’s face twisted in the way it did whenever he caught a teacher trying to feed the class bullshit. “So you’re not willing to see us lose, but you don’t *really* want us to win, either. What happens if we *do* take down the Yeerks for you? You’ll be all grateful, and shower us with presents?”

Judging by Elfangor’s expression, he understood the sarcasm every bit as clearly as a human would have. “Your suspicions are not unfounded,” he said, his tone dark. “There is much knowledge among my people, but yet little wisdom. I fear they may learn the wrong lesson from our failure with the Yeerks, and in victory become the opposite of everything Seerow in his kindness intended. Could I arm you against betrayal without committing it myself, I would. But in the end, if humans clash with Andalites....”

Looking back at Marco, he shrugged. “There is reason to hope, however. There are forces larger than any of us at work, and evidence that we have been maneuvered into place by those you might call God. I do not know the future, but I have seen its broader strokes, and can rank possibility far more finely than you would credit. This meeting was not by chance, and if there are few paths to victory, at least be assured that you walk upon the widest.”

“Wait,” Marco said, his eyes wide with disbelief. “*What?*”

* * *

<Now place your hands upon my flank, and quickly!>

We clustered around him, kicking aside the shreds of his clothes, Tobias and Cassie crying openly, Rachel with fury still etched across her face, Marco with the distant look of desperate calculation. I tried once more to look inside myself, to put a word to the feeling that filled my chest and locked my throat, but there was nothing. It was as if something inside me was coiled and waiting, conserving its strength, leaving me cold and numb.

<Focus your minds upon my form, my essence. Hold the image of me in your thoughts for ten seconds, and listen—you will know when the acquisition is complete.>

I did as Elfangor instructed, looking down at his blue-furred scorpion body, the muscular, segmented tail, the mouthless face with its four eyes, two pointing down, two pointing up. I tried not to look at the gaping hole in his side, at the thick, dark blood that was slowly pooling in the alien turf.

<This body will be one of your primary weapons,> he said, his exhaustion and pain somehow audible in the voice that echoed through our thoughts. <Use it to hide your identity from the Yeerks—make them think that they suffer at the hands of a guerilla force of Andalite shock troops. It is strong and fast, more than a match for Taxxons and able to defeat all but the most skilled Hork-Bajir.>

I looked over at Marco just as his eyes narrowed. Tax-what? Hork-ba-*what*?

<And now, you must go. Down the ramp, and run, as quickly as you can. The presence of my ship has scrambled their sensors, but you must be out of range when the Yeerks land. They know that I cannot be taken. They will bring only death.>

It was an inadequate conclusion in every possible way. There were a thousand things left to be said, a thousand questions unasked and unanswered. For a dangling, eternal moment, the five of us stood, each looking down at the dying alien, unwilling to be the first to turn away.

Then a flicker of movement caught my eye, and looking out through the ragged hole in the ship's side, I saw three sparks of light sliding across the starfield. There was nothing to mark them as special or dangerous; from this distance, they could have been nothing more than planes coming in for a landing at the airport south of the city.

But I knew.

In my very bones, I knew.

"Move!" I shouted, and they did.

* * *

I wish I could forget the rest of that hour. Forget the horror we witnessed, watching from a distance, as the broken Andalite ship fired on the hovering Yeerk vessels, and was fired upon in turn. As the Visser's ship landed and an Andalite emerged. As a monster

erupted out of it and Elfangor died a pointless, hollow death. As a pair of police cars arrived, and the four men inside were dragged to the ground and infested by a group of Controllers led by what looked like our own vice-principal, Mr. Chapman. As those same four men stood and laughed as the Andalite ship burned.

It was my first battle. Not against the Yeerks, but against human nature, against the flaws and failings of my friends, my allies, my fellow warriors. Against Rachel's rage, as she threatened to storm out from our hiding space and march herself to slaughter. Against Cassie's terror, as it shook her to the core and spread like sickness to the others. Against the black desperation that filled Tobias, as if he'd lost his father, his brother, his only reason to live. Against the callous cold that Marco drew about himself like a cloak, as if he could hide from fear and pain by pretending they didn't matter. I fought to hold them together, to keep them from breaking. I begged, I bargained, I commanded and cajoled—and to my surprise, they listened, and we lived.

It was my first battle, but it wouldn't be my last. And as we crawled away through the dirt and the darkness, hoping with every step to wake up from the nightmare, I wondered again what I would see, if I knew myself as well as I knew my friends. Four of them, each with flaws that could easily prove fatal.

Who would watch for mine?

MARCO

I try not to be stupid.

Yeah, yeah, I know—who doesn't, right? I mean, nobody gets up in the morning and sets out to be a moron.

But there's a pretty big difference between not-trying-to-do-it-wrong and actually-trying-to-do-it-right. It's a lot like the difference between telling yourself you're going to get started on that history paper, and actually pulling the books out of your bag. It's just one extra step, just a *little* extra work, but it's one step further than most people are willing to go.

Even people like Jake, who are mostly on top of things. Jake was doing his best, and his best was turning out to be pretty damn good, not that I was surprised. I'd known him since kindergarten, and watching him wrangle Cassie, Tobias, and Rachel was like connecting dots. That fearless leader thing had always been hiding in there somewhere; it had just never had a good reason to come out.

But instinct and charisma can only get you so far. At some point, no matter how good you are, you're going to have to stop and *think*.

I was usually good at thinking. Not just at doing it, but at *remembering* to do it, at doing it *right*. Dotting all the I's, crossing all the T's.

Which made it all the more embarrassing that I hadn't noticed the GLARINGLY OBVIOUS DANGER until it had already passed. Luck—we had survived thanks to sheer, dumb luck, and if we hadn't, I would have died *knowing* it was my fault.

It was 9:03PM. The construction site was quiet and still, the three Yeerk spacecraft having launched silently skyward a few minutes before. The ground in front of us was empty and barren, with nothing to show that Elfangor's ship had ever been there. There weren't even any scorch marks—somehow, the Yeerk weapons had vaporized it with basically zero wasted heat or energy.

Jake had deputized Cassie, who was making soothing, rational noises at Rachel while he did the same for Tobias. I wasn't paying much attention, because I was too busy mentally kicking myself.

The Yeerk sensors had been jammed *by the presence of Elfangor's ship*.

Elfangor's ship *was no longer present*.

Which meant that the Yeerks had probably been *entirely capable of detecting five stupid kids huddling in the middle of an otherwise empty construction site*.

We should have kept running, all the way home. Or better yet, all the way back to the mall, where we could have dropped a few more quarters at the arcade to establish an alibi and then called my dad for a ride.

But no. Instead, we'd stayed to *watch*.

I felt a sharp pain in my palms and looked down to see that my fists were clenched, my fingers curled so tight that the nails were threatening to break the skin. Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to relax, to *think*.

Common sense said that the Yeerks should have seen us before lifting off. It said that they should have torched the low foundation we were cowering behind—or better yet, grabbed us with a tractor beam and dragged us out to be infested like those poor cops.

But they hadn't done that. So either the Yeerks were stupid, or they'd left us alive on purpose, or they just hadn't *noticed* us, or their sensors didn't penetrate concrete, or they didn't care if anybody saw them because they already controlled the internet, or scanning the site wasn't standard procedure and the Visser was an incompetent tyrant whose minions were too scared to take any initiative—

I squeezed my eyes shut. Sometimes my brain does this thing where it refuses to admit that it's finished scraping the bottom of the barrel and is now digging up splinters.

Step one: figure out steps two, three, and four.

We needed to get out of the construction site. We needed to test this whole morphing thing. We needed to talk about the alien invasion going on in the center of our town. We needed to figure out where the center of our town was. We needed to get home. We needed to talk about whether that had actually been vice-principal Chapman, and whether anybody had recognized anybody else. We needed to acquire each other's DNA in case we ever had to cover for each other. We needed to acquire some adults. We needed to find an adult we could trust. We needed to knock out Rachel and Tobias and Cassie before they could do anything stupid—

Splinters.

Okay. We needed to get out of there, check in at home, and then meet someplace safe to talk it all over. Two, three, and four.

And make really, really, really sure that nobody's about to crack and call up their best friend or whatever, because that would be really, really, REALLY bad—

Fine. Two-A, two-B, three, and four.

"Jake," I said.

Jake looked over and held up a finger. I sighed.

Turning away from the group, I looked up at the stars. There weren't many visible, what with the glare of the lights from the mall and the highway. A few hundred, maybe. None of them appeared to be moving. *Probably* none of them were spaceships, but who knew? Elfangor's ship had decloaked right in front of our eyes.

The Yeerk ships didn't, though. They were visible the whole time. Another mistake? Or a technology they don't have?

More mysteries. I looked back down at the dirt, at the place where Elfangor had died.

"The morphing process will take approximately two minutes," he'd said, two minutes before his mouth had disappeared and an extra pair of eyes had sprouted from the back of his head. "You will initiate it with a burst of intense concentration. Simply focus on the desired organism, and visualize the transformation. Imagine it happening, and the morphing mechanism will respond."

I held out my hand. Elfangor's had had seven fingers. I distinctly remembered watching the extra two emerge as blue fur spread across his human skin. One of them had grown like a tumor out of the web between his thumb and index finger. The other had split off of his pinky, like in Mrs. Delphi's life science video on cell division.

Giving in to a sudden, crazy impulse, I let my eyes flutter closed, focused intently, tried to imagine what it would feel like to have seven fingers, four eyes, to feel an extra pair of legs bursting from my abdomen, to sprout a tail whose tip was a deadly, razor-sharp shard of bone. I held the image of the alien in my mind, trying not to notice the words *this is insane* as they floated across like subtitles.

“Marco?”

I opened my eyes and looked down at my hand. It was pretty dark, but I was reasonably sure nothing had changed.

Well, he did say it would take hours to analyze the first samples.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned to see Jake, his eyes two sparks in the deep shadow of his face. “You okay, amigo?” he asked softly.

I let out a low, humorless laugh. “If any of the rest of them answered yes to that question, it’s time to call the nuthouse.”

Jake looked back at Tobias, who was sitting in the dirt a few yards away, his head in his hands, silent sobs shaking his body. “We need to get out of here,” Jake muttered. “Someplace safe, where we can figure all this stuff out. The Magnuson park playground, maybe. Or Cassie’s barn.”

“Cassie’s barn sounds good,” I said. “But home first. Nothing suspicious. Nothing to make it look like we did anything other than spend a boring Saturday night at the mall. If there really are a thousand Controllers already—”

“—then there’s probably somebody close enough to notice if we start acting weird. Right.” Jake scrubbed at his eyes for a moment, then sighed, his shoulders sagging. “I’m going to have to tell everyone it’s time to go, aren’t I?”

I snorted and rolled my eyes, not caring that he couldn’t really see them in the dark. “Hey,” I called out, loudly.

The others all looked up.

“You guys ready to get out of here?”

No one said anything.

“Ooooookay. Um. Look. It’s already after nine. But we need to get together and talk, too. I think—I think we should go back to the mall, chill in the arcade for a bit, and then call for a ride. That way, it looks like we were there the whole time, and just lost track of how late it was.”

I paused, but still no one said anything. They just sat there, staring at me.

“And then, we can all meet up at Cassie’s—everybody know where Cassie lives?”

Crickets.

“Fine, right. We all go to sleep, and then sneak out and meet up at Cassie’s at—let’s say one AM. And we should wait to figure out this whole morphing thing until we’re all together, in case anything goes wrong. Everybody agree?”

As if on cue, Tobias, Rachel and Cassie all turned to look at Jake.

I let out another hollow laugh. That was going to be a problem if Jake ever decided not to listen to reason one day.

Or if Elfangor’s little earplugs don’t work on humans, and the Yeerks get ahold of him.

I shuddered. To cover it, I dropped to my knees and raised my hands above my head, as if in prayer. “Oh, Fearless Leader,” I intoned, kowtowing in Jake’s direction. “Wilt thou call upon the holy spirit of Simon Says, and bestow thy blessing on my humble and unworthy plan?”

Jake shifted uncomfortably. “Since when do you all wait for *me* to decide these things?” he muttered.

No one answered. Except me, of course—I went *ommmm* and he kicked me. Then he said some words, and together we headed back toward the mall, the fate of the human race on our shoulders.

* * *

I expected trouble from Tobias and Rachel. I mean, they’ve both got that whole *don’t-tell-me-what-to-do* vibe going on, you know? Rachel because she’s this total prom queen princess type, and Tobias because he’s this tragic, troubled youth with a bad home life and a leather jacket.

I had *not* expected trouble from Cassie.

“I’m sorry,” she said, avoiding Jake’s disapproving gaze as she peered out at us from over the stall door, her long mane shriveling into the tight curls of her short-cropped hair. “I wasn’t even really trying to. I was just finishing up with Peppermint, and she went all quiet and still, and I wondered if I’d accidentally done the thing, acquired her or whatever, and then I just thought, you know.” She disappeared from view, and we could hear the rustle of fabric, the sound of zippers and snaps. A moment later, she emerged, biting her lip. “It’s just—I’ve literally had dreams about being a horse for my *entire life*. And then my parents went to bed at ten thirty, and I came out here to wait, and I just thought—well, what harm could it do?”

I looked over at Jake, realizing a split second too late that I was being an idiot, that Jake wasn’t actually in charge of anything and that furthermore he was pretty much Cassie’s boyfriend and probably couldn’t be relied on to do the appropriate amount of screaming and yelling that this situation called for.

Sure enough, his expression softened. “That was still a really big risk, Cassie,” he said. “You didn’t even lock the barn door. We just walked right in. What if we’d been Controllers?”

She looked sheepish. “Well, I mean, we *never* lock the barn door, so if my parents *had* come down, I would have had to explain why it was locked, and I just—I don’t know. It just didn’t seem likely, I guess.”

I was going to point out that suddenly being granted the ability to turn into a horse by a dying alien wasn’t particularly likely, either, and that maybe it was time to start taking

unlikely possibilities very, very seriously, but Jake got there first.

For a very loose definition of *there*, anyway.

“You WHAT?” I spluttered, after actually feeling my jaw drop.

It was Jake’s turn to look sheepish, which he *didn’t*, instead crossing his arms and frowning as if *I* was the one who was being unreasonable. “I morphed Homer,” he repeated, matter-of-fact. “In the bathroom, with the door locked, while the shower was running.”

“Me, too,” Tobias said quietly. “I mean, not Homer. Dude. I morphed Dude, my cat.”

“What part of *wait until we can all be there* didn’t make sense to you people?” I said, completely aware that I was about an inch away from shouting. “We’re messing around with alien technology that’s supposedly *shoving our bodies out into hyperspace*. We were supposed to do this together—we were supposed to do this *smart!*”

“Hey,” Rachel interjected. “Who died and made *you* emperor?”

“Who died and made *Jake* emperor?” I shot back. “This has nothing to do with who’s in charge, this has to do with what makes *sense*. With keeping ourselves from getting *killed*. What did *you* morph into—a parakeet?”

“No,” she answered quietly. “My sister. Sara.”

There was a soft rustle as the whole group took in a breath. I felt a cold prickle of sweat break out between my shoulder blades. I’d already been thinking about acquiring people, but thinking about it and doing it were two very different things. Even *I* hadn’t expected that particular line to be crossed so quickly.

“That,” I said, slowly and carefully, “was really st—”

“Oh, shut *up*,” Rachel snapped, leaping up from the bale of hay where she’d been sitting and sticking a finger in my face. “You think you’re the only one here with brains, Marco? My sister is not a Controller. She’s *eight years old*. They don’t *want* her for anything. Besides, if she was, then *I* would have been—don’t you think the very first move a Controller would make would be to infest the rest of her family? And she didn’t notice me acquiring her, because she was already falling asleep—I did it while I carried her up to bed. And there was no chance anybody was going to catch me, because I did it in my room, with the lights out, with the door locked, *and* with the dresser shoved up against it. So take that smug little attitude and shove it, okay?”

“Rachel,” Jake began warningly.

“*No*, Jake,” I said, cutting him off. The hot anger I’d initially felt had cooled into obsidian, and my voice was tight and controlled as I stood to face Rachel. She was a good foot and a half taller than me, but I forced myself to loom anyway, pushing forward so that she had no choice but to take a step back. “Rachel’s right. I’m *not* the only one with brains. Because I never even *thought* about using eight-year-olds to infest entire

families, or how one elementary school teacher could pretty much take out a whole neighborhood. Just put the class down for naptime, open up your Thermos, and there you go—an all-you-can-infest buffet.”

Rachel’s glare didn’t change much, but I saw her eyes widen a little, saw the edges of her mouth compress. Around me, the others had gone rigid, even Jake shocked into silence. “You know who *does* have brains, though?” I continued. “The Yeerks. Maybe a thousand of them already. A thousand human brains, a thousand slaves, except those slaves can’t even *think* without their masters knowing about it. Every idea those thousand people have—every escape plan, every desperate hope, every Yeerk weakness they manage to figure out—the Yeerks *know*. They know *all* of it, can use *all* of it. If just *one* of those people happens to realize, just *accidentally makes the connection* that oh, hey, you know what, elementary schools are this giant weak spot in humanity’s defenses, then it’s game over, because they don’t just get our bodies, they get our minds *too*. Every new Controller counts double, because not only do we lose everything that person could have brought to the fight, the Yeerks *gain* all that.”

I was pushing too hard, could tell that I was pushing too hard, but I didn’t care. I’d been wrestling with the weight of this for an hour, struggling to think through all of the implications, feeling hope slip away, and meanwhile, the rest of them had been morphing into *pets*. I rounded on them, burned each of them with my glare as I tore at their illusions, their happy ignorance. “There is *nothing* standing in their way except us—did you get that? This isn’t some movie, where humanity’s going to rise up and pull some bullshit trick out of its ass. The Yeerks are *winning*. They’ve got a thousand of us already, they could have twenty thousand more in a couple of weeks, and *nobody’s noticed*. Elfangor said the point of no return might be six months away, and that means that tomorrow it’ll be five months and twenty nine days, and we’ve got *nothing* on our side except morphing, and you guys have already decided it’s a *toy*. Did you not see Elfangor get *eaten*? Do you not understand the stakes? He didn’t give each one of us the destruct code for the box because he believes in equality or democracy or some crap like that, he gave it to all of us because he knew that *four of us might die and there might be just one of us left to stop the Yeerks from getting their hands on it*. He was coming to *destroy the planet* because he thought that might be the only way to stop them.”

I ground to a halt. Even though my voice was still quiet, still low and tight, my chest was heaving. The sweat that had begun between my shoulder blades had spread, and I could feel it soaking into my shirt, into the waistband of my boxers. I looked at each one of them in turn, held each pair of eyes for a full five seconds before moving on to the next.

Except for Jake, I didn’t really know these people. They were placeholders,

stereotypes, faces in the crowd—*Jake's cousin, Jake's crush, and that emo kid who hangs around sometimes*. Instead of Rachel, Cassie, and Tobias, I could have been walking home with Phillip, EreK, and Jennifer. Or David, Cate, and Elizabeth. I could have been walking home with Melissa Chapman, who—if Rachel was right—was almost certainly a Controller.

I didn't know these people, but I needed them.

"We're *it*, guys," I said. "Just the five of us. If we don't make it, if we screw it up, then the human race will *actually lose*. So yeah, I think it was *stupid* for Cassie to morph into a horse just to live out some little girl dream. I think it was *stupid* for Jake and Tobias to morph basically defenseless animals when anyone in their houses might be a Controller already. I think it was *stupid* for Rachel to morph her sister *in her house*, when any second her mom could have pulled the whole open-this-door-right-now-young-lady routine. There are seven billion people who are going to live or die based on the mistakes we do or don't make. Being dumb is something we can't afford, and I don't *care* if you all think I'm an asshole for saying it."

Suddenly tired, I turned away from them, closed my mouth and dropped heavily onto a nearby bale of hay. I felt drained, empty, as if I'd just finished running the mile in PE. In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to switch off and let someone else take control.

But I couldn't. And maybe I'd never be able to again.

I looked back up. The four of them were all still frozen, various mixtures of anger, horror, and shame written on their faces as they looked at each other, at the animal cages lining the walls of the barn—at anything but me.

"Cassie," I said flatly, hoping to change the subject. "What's the deal with this place? Why do you guys have all these animals?"

She turned toward me, and I was surprised to see warmth and sympathy in her eyes. "This is the Wildlife Rehabilitation Clinic," she said. "Both my parents are vets, and my dad gets money from the state to take care of injured animals picked up by Animal Control, get them ready to be released back into the wild. We've usually got hawks and falcons who've been shot or hurt during storms, squirrels and raccoons and 'possums who've been hit by cars, sometimes wolves or foxes or deer. We had a small bear one time, but that was a few years ago."

She bit her lip. "Also," she said, hesitantly, "also, my mom is the head vet at the Gardens. I can probably get us in without raising any suspicions. The zoo there has sharks, tigers, snakes, bats, elephants—pretty much everything."

I ran my fingers through my hair. *Evidence that we have been maneuvered into place by those you might call God*, Elfangor had said.

Maybe he'd been telling the truth. Maybe the deck really was stacked in our favor, at

least in some ways.

I looked around at the cages. About half of them were empty, but near the door were four large ones, each with a bird of prey. There was some kind of hawk with reddish feathers in its tail, a black-and-white osprey with one wing encased in plaster, a tawny owl with only one eye, and what looked like a young bald eagle.

Cassie had been following my gaze. “Do you think we should acquire them?” she asked timidly. “I can pull them out.”

If we morph an injured animal, do we get the injuries?

If we get injured in morph, do the injuries go away when we re-morph?

If one of us acquires an animal, can the others acquire from the morph, or do they have to acquire the original, too?

I shook my head. “Yes. But not yet. There’s something else I think we need to do, first.”

* * *

We’d decided to stay in the barn. The woods would have been safer in terms of the risk from Cassie’s parents, but the Yeerk ships had looked like they were headed for orbit, and it was a clear night. No sense in making satellite surveillance any easier than it had to be.

I was in the farthest stall at the back of the barn, away from Cassie’s three horses, with Jake and Tobias standing beside me. Rachel was just outside the door with her back turned; after seeing what happened to Elfangor’s clothes when he went from human to Andalite, I’d left mine in a pile in the corner. Cassie had stayed up front, where she was pretending to clean an empty cage, ready to head off her parents if they showed up.

Tobias had wanted to do it, but in a surprisingly generous move, Rachel had stepped up in my defense, arguing that out of the five of us, I was the only one who hadn’t gotten to try out the morphing power yet. I wasn’t totally comfortable with that kind of reasoning, but I appreciated the olive branch.

“You ready?” Jake asked.

I nodded tightly, trying not to let my nervousness show as I stood there, covering as much as I could with my hands. It was one thing to play around with imagining extra fingers when you were half-convinced it wouldn’t work. It was another thing to contemplate actually turning into some kind of alien centaur scorpion.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Tobias said. “It’s super gross and disturbing, but it doesn’t hurt.”

I nodded again. Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and focused.

This time, I could feel the changes immediately, feel the grinding as my bones rearranged, the sloshing as my organs liquefied and re-formed into new and complex

structures. I was unable to keep my eyes closed and they snapped open just in time to see the two new legs bursting out of my abdomen, complete with blue fur and dark, suede hooves. Unbalanced, I fell forward, Jake and Tobias reaching out to steady me.

There were a thousand changes, all of them happening in a rush, the two minutes flashing by as every piece of my body's familiar territory was replaced with an alien landscape.

My mouth, sealing shut like a Ziploc bag as my nose flattened and my jawbone melted away.

My ears, turning pointy and sliding upward as my hearing sharpened noticeably.

My arms, withering slightly as they became the slender, graceful arms of an Andalite, complete with seven fingers at the end of each flexible hand.

My spine, lengthening and bending as the middle of my back became a sort of second hip, a hinge that left my upper body not quite upright, like a cobra preparing to strike.

My eyes—my *new* eyes, opening at the ends of two long stalks that sprouted from the back of my neckless head, offering me a full three hundred and sixty degrees of vision.

My tail.

It was the tail that marked the end of the transformation, a thick column of muscle, as heavy as my whole torso, counterbalancing the centaur body. I felt it grow, and grow, and grow, impossibly long, until it was fully capable of whipping over my—was it really still a shoulder?—and hitting targets outside of my arms' reach. The blade of bone seemed to slide out of the shaft like Wolverine's claws, a wicked scythe more than a foot long, as thick as a book at the base and tapering to a razor's edge, a needle's point.

As I lashed it back and forth, unable to resist the sheer sensation of power, I felt the body's brain awaken. There were no thoughts, no memories, no personality—only a strange sort of *reaching*, a cup somehow straining to be filled. It was like a house where someone's mind had lived, the ghost of consciousness still lingering in empty archives, in idle processors. The brain's structure pulled at me, tugged on me, drew my own mind forward as if eager to absorb me and start thinking again.

"Marco?" Jake asked. "You okay in there?"

I turned to look at him with all four eyes, tried opening my mouth and remembered that I didn't have one. <I think so,> I thought at him. <Can you hear me?>

Jake grinned, relief plain on his face. "Yeah, I can hear you. That's amazing, actually."

Tobias tapped me on the shoulder, and I swiveled my stalk eyes in his direction, keeping my main eyes on Jake. "What's it *like*?" he asked.

I considered briefly. <It's—>

<ELFANGOR. BROTHER. HELP ME.>

RACHEL

I straightened in the stall, giving my body a quick once-over to confirm that all of my parts had, in fact, returned to their rightful places. Pulling on my clothes, I called out to the others. “I’m clear.”

The door swung open to reveal Cassie and Jake, both standing with expectant looks on their faces. “Still there,” I said. “Exactly the same as what everybody else heard. The voice goes ‘Elfangor, brother, help me,’ and then there’s like a ten second pause, and then it repeats.”

Jake nodded, the muscles in his jaw tight. “Did you mark the angle?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “Again, same as what you guys got.” I stepped aside so that they could see the two lines I’d gouged with my Andalite tail blade—one in the rough, unfinished wood of the stall wall, and one in the dirt of the floor. “It was definitely coming from under the ground.”

Cassie stepped forward, holding the plastic protractor she’d retrieved from her

bedroom earlier that morning, when we'd reassembled after a long and sleepless night. "It's tough to be really accurate," she said. "But it looks just like yours and mine. Thirty-ish degrees below horizontal."

"And just a little bit south of west," I added, pointing at the line on the ground. "So unless it's coming from the middle of the planet somehow—"

"—then Elfangor's brother is trapped somewhere in the middle of the Pacific ocean," Jake finished. He sighed, scrubbing at his eyes again, and looked over at Cassie's globe, conspicuously out-of-place amid the hay bales and the dull metal cages. We'd tried extrapolating based on the direction the voice seemed to be coming from, had drawn a circle around our best guess as to its origin. It was about an inch across, a tight little loop in the middle of a wide patch of blue.

Just a little bigger than Texas.

"We're definitely assuming this isn't some kind of trick, then?" I asked.

Jake shrugged. "I don't see how it could be, or why anyone would bother. Elfangor's dead. And we're only hearing the message when we're in Andalite morph. I don't know how hack-proof thought-speak is, but if the signal is somehow keyed to Elfangor's DNA..."

"It might not be his DNA," Cassie pointed out. "It could be his brainwaves, or something. I mean, if what we're morphing is an *exact* copy of his body, all the way down to the neurons and stuff..."

"Not important," I interrupted. "What's important is figuring out what we're going to do about it."

Jake and Cassie exchanged glances, and I felt a flicker of irritation. "There might not be anything we *can* do, Rachel," Jake said quietly. "That's thousands of miles away from here. Hundreds of miles from the nearest land. If that circle's in the right place, the globe says the water's over two miles deep."

The flicker turned into a small, bright flame and my eyes narrowed. "So it's not going to be easy," I said, letting my voice go sharp. "Don't tell me you think that means we ought to do *nothing*." I looked back and forth between them, but neither offered a response. "Elfangor *died* so that the five of us could get away. We can't just abandon his brother."

"After the mission to kill us all didn't go according to plan, you mean," Jake corrected. "We don't know who his brother is, or what he'll want, or how he'll react when he finds out Elfangor is dead."

"So your solution is to just ignore him? Leave him to drown, or starve?"

"That's *not* what I'm—"

"Guys!" Cassie broke in. "This isn't—I mean, can we please just wait for Tobias and Marco to get back? Instead of trying to figure it out by ourselves?"

Jake crossed his arms, his mouth clicking shut. I could see him wrestling with his own irritation, struggling to keep his cool. I said nothing, only spun on my heel and began pacing up and down the length of the barn.

It wasn't Jake's fault. I was on edge, overreacting, looking for excuses to argue. I couldn't help it—I hadn't slept at all, and every minute or so, my body would send another wave of adrenaline crashing through my bloodstream. It had been almost fifteen hours since Elfangor's ship had appeared in front of us, and since then, we'd done nothing but stand around and talk.

Okay, that wasn't true. We'd all tried morphing, and we'd gone ahead and acquired every animal in Cassie's barn the night before so that the analysis could run its course. We'd confirmed that the message from Elfangor's brother was, in fact, a message, and not a live communication, and we'd gone ahead and started working out its origin while Marco and Tobias went out into the woods to experiment with the telepathy that seemed to be part of the morphing technology.

But we hadn't *done* anything, and I was starting to unravel. I could feel the pressure of inaction across every inch of my skin, getting tighter and tighter as the seconds ticked by.

On my third lap across the barn, I stopped abruptly. "I'm going to practice morphing until they get back," I said. "I'll use the stall."

I ducked back inside before they could reply, pulling the door shut behind me. Taking my phone out of my pocket, I set it on a small ledge and opened up the stopwatch app, then stripped down. With a deep breath, I pushed *start* and focused all of my thoughts on my chosen target.

Badger, I thought to myself.

I had actually met the badger before, a scarred old male who'd been pulled out from under a log by a pair of hikers in the national park. Cassie and I had been working on homework together on the day he'd been found, and I'd been conscripted into helping while she and her dad operated on his broken back. Closing my eyes, I pictured his thick, wiry fur, his long, hooked claws, his wide, stubby tail.

The first thing I noticed was a feeling of falling. My eyes shot open as my body shrank down, the rest of the barn rocketing skyward. I was barely three feet tall before anything else started to change.

As I watched, my body began to turn colors—mostly black, but with bright slashes of pure white. There was an itchy, tingling sensation, and suddenly everything shattered and shivered and split, a million tiny hairs forming themselves out of what had moments before been smooth skin.

It was about then that my eyesight started to weaken, the world around me blurring as my eyes shrank and receded, changing from bright blue to the badger's beady dark

brown. At the same time, my nose and mouth began protruding, stretching farther and farther forward as the bones of my face rearranged into a long, sturdy snout.

I fell forward onto hands and knees just as my arms and legs began to shrink, sucking up into my body like spaghetti. I felt the connection between my head and my spine disappear as my skull rotated backward, then felt it re-form, the vertebrae clicking into place in their new arrangement. It was like being at the dentist—I could sense what was happening to my body, could tell that it *should* hurt, but I felt it only vaguely, distantly, as if it were happening to somebody else.

It was a good thing, too, because as my claws ripped their way out of my fingers and toes, I not only *saw* the bones inside my hands—I *smelled* them, too. If I'd been able to sense pain normally, I would have been driven completely insane before the morph was even halfway done. Every single piece of me had been torn apart, rearranged, and stuck back together.

With a nauseating sound like cutting meat, my tail pushed out from the base of my spine, and the morph was complete. Holding still, I braced myself for the appearance of the badger's mind.

We'd discovered that our control over the morphs wasn't a hundred percent—which was actually a relief, because it meant we didn't have to figure out how to swim and crawl and fly from scratch. There was a sort of residual awareness, a collection of emotions and instincts that were more than capable of running the morphed body on their own.

For some morphs—like Elfangor's body, or the birds of prey—the effect was pretty mild. There was hunger, and maybe a drive to hunt or hide, and some subtle shifts in what caught your attention, but otherwise, you mostly felt like *you*.

With the horses, though, it was almost impossible to shake the skittishness. It was like being on five cups of coffee—there would be a sound, and the horse body would have already reacted before your human brain had even registered it. And when Cassie tried out squirrel morph, she lost control completely for almost five minutes, tearing around the barn in a panic. The squirrel's instincts were just too powerful, too ingrained, and it wasn't until Tobias dipped back into hawk morph and communicated with her telepathically that she was able to get a grip.

I was pretty confident that the badger would be easy to handle. It was a big and powerful animal, fairly high up on the food chain, and this badger in particular had seemed more bored than afraid each time I'd seen Cassie give him his meds. But I steeled myself mentally, just in case.

As it turned out, I didn't need to worry. The badger was sleepy, confident, and hungry, in that order. It was like sharing my brain with the essence of Saturday mornings. Other than a slightly-higher-than-usual desire to sniff around in the dirt of the

stall floor, I felt completely normal and completely in control.

Rearing, I tried to make out the numbers on my phone. The ledge where I'd left it was only a foot above my head, but the badger's vision was terrible. Everything was blurred, and all of the colors were washed out and subtly shifted. I could see a dark, rectangular shape with something bright moving inside, but otherwise nothing.

Okay, fine. I'd been in morph for—what—thirty seconds? If I demorphed immediately, I could still get a pretty decent estimate of how long the transformation had taken. I was interested in finding out whether morphs of different size took different amounts of time, or whether the technology responded to a harder mental push. Taking one last sniff, I focused on my own body and began to reverse the changes.

My normal human vision returned in time to see the stopwatch tick over from 2:59 to 3:00, and I kept my eyes locked on it for the rest of the transformation. It read 3:47 when the last of the squelching, schlooping, and grinding finished, and I did the math in my head in a heartbeat.

Just over a minute and a half. No different, in other words, than when I'd morphed into Sara or Elfangor. It wasn't enough to lock in the pattern for sure, but it was pretty solid evidence to start with. Human child, dog-sized mammal, or full-sized alien—apparently, size and complexity made no difference.

Resetting the timer, I focused on the squirrel, and began my second morph. My sixth, in total.

Four minutes later, as I returned to human form, I suddenly realized that my whole body was trembling and tired, my arms heavy as if I'd just finished running through my gymnastics routine. Frowning, I took a step, and was just barely able to stop my knees from buckling.

That was new.

"Guys?" I called out weakly. Reaching for my clothes, I overbalanced, my shoulder slamming against the stall wall. I stayed in that position as I tugged on my jeans, leaning heavily against the wood as I slid them past my hips. Stashing the phone in my pocket, I threw my coat around my shoulders and stepped shakily back out of the stall.

Cassie and Jake were over by the barn door, poring over the globe and a sheet full of scribbled drawings and diagrams. They looked up as I walked out, their faces immediately flooding with concern.

"Rachel!" Cassie shouted, as they both ran over to me. "Sit down!"

I levered myself toward one of the hay bales, feeling tired all over, and just barely made it, my muscles giving way as I dropped heavily into a sitting position. "Tired," I said.

"What happened?" Jake asked. "Are you okay? You're white as a sheet." Behind me, Cassie grabbed my shoulders, pulling me back to lean against her thighs and

stomach.

“Morphed and demorphed,” I said, each word a weight that had to be lifted individually. “Twice, rapid-fire.”

“And it did *this*?” he said, appalled. “You look like you did when you had pneumonia last year.”

I shook my head, trying to clear it. “Not like that.” I lifted my arm, let it drop back into my lap. “Not dizzy. Not sick. More like, just ran ten miles.”

I felt Cassie’s fingers gently buttoning my jacket for me, then twitched when they pressed against the line of my jaw. I realized she was checking my pulse, and held still, noticing as I did that my breathing was normal, neither particularly fast nor particularly slow.

“Heart rate’s about fifty-four,” Cassie announced. “A little low, but she’s a gymnast. Totally normal.”

I shrugged my shoulders and tensed my legs. “Not sore, either,” I said. “Just really, really—”

I broke off. I had been about to say *really, really tired*, but in the minute or so that I’d been sitting there, one of the *reallys* had dropped off. Now I only felt like I’d run *five* miles.

“What is it?” Jake asked, still sounding slightly hysterical.

“Nothing,” I replied. “It’s weird. It’s already fading.” I gently pulled Cassie’s hands off of my shoulders and straightened, still sitting on the bale. “It hit me like a ton of bricks, but I’m already halfway back to normal.”

“Don’t stand up yet,” Cassie warned. “You’re still looking pretty pale.”

I nodded, and stayed seated. “Do you think it has something to do with the morphing tech?” I wondered aloud. “Like, obviously, duh. But with the morphing tech *itself*. The nanobots, or whatever.”

Jake shrugged, his expression still tight. “Could be. Elfangor said something about them having a charge. But I don’t see why that would make *you* tired.”

“Some kind of fail-safe?” Cassie suggested. “An automatic shutoff, to stop you from overloading the system?”

“If so, that’s something we’re going to have to do more experiments with,” I said. “Don’t want to suddenly run out of morphing power in the middle of a fight.”

“Like hell,” Jake snapped. “I don’t care about some fight, I care about the fact that my cousin just came *this* close to dying of exhaustion.”

I smiled, feeling the last of the strange fatigue draining away from my arms and legs. “Real sweet, Jake, but I’m fine. Look.” Standing, I shook out my hands and feet, rotated my shoulders and hips.

“Still,” Jake said. “That’s—what—ten transformations this morning? Counting both

morphing and demorphing? Six in the past fifteen minutes. I don't want you doing any more for at least a couple of hours."

"Who's gonna stop me?"

"Rachel—"

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding," I said, holding up my hands as Jake put on his best stern-dad expression. "I'll hold off for a while. But we really *do* need to figure out what the limits are." I looked over at the globe. "Especially if we're going to have to chain morphs together all day while we swim or fly across an ocean."

I looked back just in time to catch Jake's grimace, and then my own voice filled my head.

<Eagle Leader to Eagle Nest. Inbound, ETA thirty seconds, Tobias ate a mouse. Over.>

* * *

"Short version: thought-speak has a range of about three hundred yards, and shouting or whispering doesn't change the range, but it *does* change the volume. It clicks on about halfway through the morph no matter what, and you can thought-speak from *any* morph, including human. It doesn't matter if there's stuff in the way, and you can send things that aren't words, like humming or beeps, but they still translate into the other person's 'voice.' It also has some kind of automatic built-in privacy targeting thingy—I was right next to Tobias and basically thought-shouting, but he couldn't hear me unless I wanted him to. Oh, and side note—we tried acquiring from a morph, and it works. I can now officially impersonate Tobias's cat, Dude."

We were sitting in a circle in the barn, just as we had the night before. Marco was perched on the same high, sturdy shelf where he'd left his spare clothes, his legs kicking and dangling as he looked down at the rest of us. He'd flown in, demorphed in place, and immediately begun talking, a hint of excitement leaking through his doom-and-gloom attitude. Jake and Cassie and I were listening, having already explained about the morphing fatigue while the pair of them were coming out of bird form. Tobias was off to one side, slightly apart from the rest of us, a queasy sort of look on his face.

"Did you check the distress signal?" Jake asked.

"Yeah," Marco said, nodding. "It was just as strong and coming from the same direction even when we went two or three miles out, so it's definitely not just three hundred yards deep underground or anything like that. Oh, and there's something special about it, because when Tobias and I were talking at each other, we couldn't tell where *our* thoughts were coming from."

I frowned. "A homing beacon? Tied right into the message somehow?"

"Makes sense, for a distress signal," Jake said. "Did you guys run into any trouble with multiple morphs? Like what happened to Rachel?"

"Not really," Marco said. "We got a little tired after a while, but we never did four changes back-to-back like that." He glanced at Tobias. "We *did* run into a little trouble with the morph's instincts. Turns out they can take you by surprise pretty quick."

Tobias's mouth thinned to a tight line, and his cheeks flushed. "There was a mouse," he said curtly. "It was like flipping a switch. The hawk just took over."

"Which raises an interesting question, actually," Marco said. "Is there a mouse inside you right now?"

I saw Jake and Cassie's eyes widen with surprise. Tobias's face didn't change—he'd clearly already been considering the possibility, and was none too thrilled about it.

"Because the way the morphing seems to happen," Marco continued, "your body changes piece by piece, right? So theoretically, you might have morphed *around* the mouse."

"Do we really have to talk about this?" Cassie asked, her eyes on Tobias, whose blush had turned slightly green.

Marco shrugged. "No. But the question becomes a lot more interesting when we're talking about bullets, instead of mice."

I shivered. Jake gave a low whistle and stuck his hands in his pockets, while Cassie reached out to put a hand on Tobias's shoulder. For a moment, we were all silent.

Then a thought occurred to me. "Hey," I said. "Actually, that reminds me—you said thought-speak works when you're in human morph?"

Marco nodded.

"You and Tobias morphed each other?"

Another nod.

"What—um. What happened to your clothes? When you morphed?"

"Nothing. We just morphed inside them, basically."

"But they fell off when you morphed into birds?"

"Yeah. They're stashed out by those big rocks, at the edge of the woods. Figured we'd pick them up on the way out."

I frowned. Something was tickling at the edge of my thoughts, but I couldn't quite put it into words.

"What is it, Rachel?" Cassie asked.

I shook my head. "Dunno," I replied. Our clothes had fallen off each time we'd morphed something small. And when Elfangor had demorphed from human to his larger Andalite body, his clothes had ripped and torn. Basically, clothes were completely separate from the morphing process, which was about what you'd expect, if it was based on a genetic scan. Except—

“Elfangor’s clothes,” I said. “Where’d they come from?”

Marco shrugged. “He probably had some stashed away, right? I mean, he’d morphed human before.”

“Those weren’t human clothes, though,” I said.

There was a long pause as everyone gave me the same blank look. “What?” I asked, a little defensively. “They weren’t. The seams were totally weird—they were in all the wrong places, and they didn’t look like they were held together by thread.”

“Leave it to Rachel to pick up on the finer points of intergalactic fashion design,” Jake said dryly.

“Excuse me,” Cassie interrupted, holding up a hand. “I don’t mean to butt in, but can we back up for a minute? I mean, we’ve been doing experiments and figuring stuff out all morning, but we haven’t even stopped to talk about the big picture.”

“What big picture?” I asked.

“Everything!” Cassie said, and suddenly her voice was no longer strong and steady. “All that stuff that Marco was talking about last night! The alien invasion going on in our hometown! Mr. Chapman infesting those police officers! You guys are talking about bullets and—and rescue missions to the middle of the ocean, and we just watched someone get *eaten*, and—we’re just a bunch of teenagers in a barn! What are we going to *do*? What’s the *plan*?”

“We fight,” I said.

“Fight *who*? Fight *how*? None of us know anything about how to—to *wage war*. I haven’t even even *punched* anybody. And how are we supposed to fight anything when we can’t even leave the house without telling our parents where we’re going? This is too big, you guys. Too big. We—we could *die*. Elfangor *died*. Those cops got turned into slaves *right in front of us*. How are we supposed to do anything about *any* of this?”

“Okay,” Jake said, springing to his feet and holding out both hands. “Everybody hang on a sec. Please. Just hang on and take a deep breath.” He looked around the circle for consent, then nodded grimly. “Okay. First off—Cassie, you’re right. We need to start at the beginning. And we need to go slow, so that we all have a chance to talk.”

He paused again, glancing at each of us in turn. “Anybody mind if I talk first?”

“You’re in charge, boss-man,” Marco quipped.

Jake winced, and I raised my hand. “Actually,” I said, “that’s maybe the first thing we need to figure out. Who *is* in charge?”

“Aren’t we all in charge?” Tobias asked. “Democracy, and all that?”

“Democracy means voting,” Marco pointed out. “Which means majority rule, which means if it’s four against you, you shut your mouth and toe the line.”

“I’m not doing anything just because the four of you tell me to,” Cassie said, and there was steel beneath the tremble in her voice.

“Stop,” Jake said, and everyone fell silent again. He took a deep breath, then another, then a third. “I—okay, look. Just for right now. Just for five minutes. You all know me. Rachel, you’re my cousin. Marco, you’re my best friend. Tobias, we’ve been hanging out all year. Cassie—you trust me, right?”

Cassie nodded.

“Okay. So I’m the common link. I’m the one that everybody knows best. For the next five minutes, I’m in charge.”

He paused again, looking around the circle as if giving us a chance to object. None of us did.

“Okay. I’ll go first, then I’ll call on somebody.” He stuck his hands in his pockets, looking down at his feet, his tone neutral and flat. “Okay. Three things. First, are we even going to do this—are we going to fight.”

I felt another flicker of irritation, this one accompanied by a healthy dose of impatience. *Of course* we were going to fight. What was the alternative—just stand there and do nothing?

But I suppressed the emotion, looking around the circle at Marco and Cassie and Tobias, looking at the weight that seemed to press down on Jake’s shoulders.

They were afraid.

“And everybody gets to make their own decision,” Jake continued. “No guilt. No pressure. We all saw what happened to Elfangor. I can’t—we can’t ask anybody to face that. Not if they aren’t ready. Nobody’s in unless they want to be.”

All four of them, terrified. Dealing with it, yeah, but the fear was there, written right across their faces where anyone could see.

Why wasn’t I afraid?

Should I be afraid?

“Second, are we a team. Like, are we in this together, or not. Because if we are, we’re going to have to trust each other. And if we don’t, it’s not going to work.”

I dug down into myself, trying to get a finger on the pulse of my emotions. I had to be feeling *something*, right?

“Third, what should we do. What’s our first step. Because we’ve got Elfangor’s brother out there somewhere, and we’ve got vice-principal Chapman, and we know the Yeerk pool is underground in the middle of town, whatever it is. And we don’t know who else we can trust.”

And then I realized. I *wasn’t* afraid, but it wasn’t because there was no fear inside of me. It was there, deep down—a whole ocean of it. I’d just refused to let it up. Looked away from it. Covered it up with a layer of cold resolve.

Like in gymnastics, when I’d been too scared to do backflips until I’d worked myself into a frustrated rage. Like when my mom and dad got divorced, and I didn’t talk to

either of them for two months. Like last night, when Tobias and Cassie had been in tears, and all I'd felt was fury.

"Fourth, I guess. Sorry. What are the rules. How do we make decisions. What are the lines we can't cross. What do we do if one of us—if somebody—if everything goes wrong."

Was it better to be angry? Or afraid?

I looked around the circle again.

"That's it, I guess. Who wants to go next?"

Angry.

I raised my hand.

"Rachel," Jake said. "Your turn."

I stood up. "I don't have a whole lot to say," I began. I deliberately kept my hands out of my pockets, kept my chin up and my eyes forward. "I've never been in a fight before, either. I don't know anything about war. But right now, we're the only ones with our eyes open. We're the only ones who know, who are free, and Elfangor died to make that happen. Died a billion miles from home. I don't know what good turning into a badger is going to be, but—"

I stopped and shrugged. I looked across the circle to Cassie—my best friend, and the sweetest, gentlest person I knew. "But they can't have my sisters. And they can't have my mom. They can't have my dad, or my friends, or my coach. Not if there's anything I can do to stop it. I'll do whatever it takes—if one of you guys has a plan, count me in. But even if you don't. Even if I'm on my own. Even if it's hopeless. Because thanks to Elfangor, the worst they can do to *me* is kill me. And I'm not going to run away from that—not when everybody else is up against something so much worse."

I sat back down, and silence filled the barn.

"Anyone else?" Jake asked. Cassie raised her hand, and he nodded to her.

"I'm not arguing with any of that," she said. "But how can you possibly fight when every single bad guy is living inside an innocent human shield?"

* * *

By the time we finished talking, the sun was already halfway to the horizon. Tobias left on foot, Marco on his bike. Jake stayed behind to have dinner with Cassie's family, who would drop him off at home afterward. We had all agreed not to risk flying home—not to morph at all, unless somebody's life was at stake.

We hadn't accomplished much. Nobody was out, but only Jake and Marco were really in. Cassie still had too many questions that no one could answer, and Tobias had mostly stayed silent.

We'd managed to agree that Jake was our leader, although nobody really knew what that meant, least of all Jake. In the end, it had boiled down to the fact that he was the only one who linked us all together. And—as Marco pointed out—that he was pretty much doing the job already, and it was working out so far.

We were going to meet up again tomorrow afternoon, at the Gardens. Cassie was fairly certain she could get us back door access to most of the animals, and if she was wrong, we were going to use the trip to scope things out for a possible night mission afterward. Her condition: it would be a non-morphing, non-violent operation. Anything we couldn't accomplish in our own, regular bodies would have to wait. Marco had joked that we should bring spray paint and marijuana as cover; everybody had laughed until Tobias asked how much we would need.

Somehow, that had made it all a little too real.

About halfway through the conversation, I'd started to feel that pressure again, the itch of inactivity that made me want to get up and pace, made my fingers twitch and cut my patience in half. It had grown worse and worse as the others bickered and dithered, until finally I'd had to step outside to get some fresh air. Luckily, an idea had come to me, and I'd spent the rest of the discussion fleshing out a plan in my head.

For everyone else, the war would start tomorrow.

For me, it started tonight.

My house was a couple of miles away from Cassie's, a walk I'd done hundreds of times. There was a small boutique in a strip mall right at the halfway mark, where I'd drag Cassie every once in a while when she showed signs of being willing to wear something other than overalls. They knew me there; it wouldn't be at all out of the ordinary to stop in on a Saturday afternoon and try on some blouses.

More importantly, their dressing room doors went all the way to the floor.

Elfangor had read our minds from inside his ship—had pulled Jake and Marco's names right out of their heads. And whatever was actually going on with thought-speak, it had noticeable, physical effects—if words were showing up in our brains that wouldn't have been there otherwise, then there had to be neurons firing that would have otherwise been dormant—right?

I worked through the implications as I thumbed through the racks. Andalites didn't have a mouth. Thought-speak, for them, wasn't technology—it was how they naturally communicated.

Right?

So they had to have some kind of organ that would let them sense—and alter—thought. That would let them monitor and manipulate the firing of neurons—or whatever it was that aliens had—in someone else's brain. Like the way sharks could sense electric fields, only in both directions.

Which meant that maybe—just *maybe*—we could figure out a way to detect Controllers from a distance.

I headed for the dressing room, armed with enough items to guarantee myself at least half an hour of privacy. I felt a slight twinge of guilt over the fact that I was *already* breaking my agreement not to morph, but I pushed it aside. Besides, technically, I was justified—lives *were* at stake.

Three of them, to start with.

It was cramped in the dressing room. Elfangor's centaur-scorpion body was easily six feet long, not counting the tail. But I didn't need to move—I just needed to *think*.

<ELFANGOR. BROTHER. HELP ME.>

I closed my four eyes and sat as still as I could, feeling the hyperconscious Andalite brain ticking and churning away beneath my own stream of thought. I reached out, visualizing the brains of the people around me, hoping to catch a glimpse, an echo, a spark.

<ELFANGOR. BROTHER. HELP ME.>

Nothing.

I tried relaxing instead of focusing, letting my own mind recede, allowing the Andalite brain to take over. It was like turning my thoughts over to a computer—I could feel my reaction time shrinking, feel my attention dividing into multiple tracks, each capable of running at full efficiency. But there was nothing *new* there—no new senses, no ESP.

<ELFANGOR. BROTHER. HELP ME.>

Frustrated, I resisted the impulse to lash my tail back and forth. There was something I wasn't seeing, some missing piece to the puzzle. Maybe there wasn't an organ for listening to other people's thoughts at all? Just the projector—just the "voice," and it worked on top of whatever inner monologue was there to begin with?

But Elfangor knew Jake's name. It sounded like he knew exactly what Jake was thinking.

<ELFANGOR. BROTHER. HELP ME.>

Sighing inwardly, I began to demorph.

Giving up already?

No. But I was pushing it already, morphing in a public place, and there was no sense in risking it any longer than I had to.

Besides, I had a Plan B.

One of my neighbors, Mr. King, used to work as a dog trainer for the local police department before he retired. Whenever one of the dogs got too old or got injured on the job, he'd take it in. He usually had about six or seven of them living in his big, fenced-in backyard.

Every now and then, I'd run into him as he and his wife or his son—a kid named

Erek, who was in my grade—walked them around the neighborhood. The last time, I'd gotten an earful about his newest acquisition, a German Shepherd named Buzz who'd recently torn a ligament bringing down a drug smuggler on the other side of the city.

A drug smuggler they'd identified when Buzz sniffed out the traces of cocaine from a shipment the guy had moved *two days earlier*.

I'd heard about dogs who could take one sniff of a person, and tell if they had cancer. My mom had told me about dogs that were trained to bark a warning whenever their diabetic owners' blood sugar dropped too low.

I was willing to bet that Buzz would have no trouble sniffing out an evil alien slug sitting in the back of my vice-principal's head.

One hour later, and I was lying on my paws on the sidewalk in front of Mr. Chapman's house, a cheap, dollar store collar loose around my neck, absorbing the warmth from the last rays of sunshine.

I hadn't brought it up in front of the others, but Melissa Chapman had been a friend of mine since elementary school. We'd been on the same gymnastics team for years, and had spent entire summers sleeping over at one another's houses. We'd drifted apart since I'd started hanging out with Cassie, but she was still one of the most important people in my life. She knew me better than anyone, had helped me through my parents' divorce, knew the passwords to all my accounts.

And her father was an alien slave.

As I waited, watching the sun slip below the horizon, a fierce battle raged inside me. Half of me wanted to believe that Melissa was safe, that the Yeerks didn't have any use for her this early in the invasion, that I'd have *noticed* if they'd taken her. The other half had already gone cold as ice, and was planning ahead.

To how I would kidnap her, and take her away.

To how I'd hold her, somewhere up in the mountains, until the Yeerk in her head died of *kandrana* starvation.

To how I'd give her the morphing power, and make her our first recruit.

To how we'd come back, and take her parents, and set them free, too.

But first, I had to be sure.

It was twilight by the time Mr. Chapman's mini-van pulled into their driveway, coming back from their weekly family dinner out. Leaping to my feet, I let out a friendly bark and began wagging my tail. As the doors opened, the German Shepherd brain seemed to hesitate, a wordless question forming in my head.

Friend?

I stepped forward cautiously, nostrils flaring. With a smile, Mr. Chapman reached down, holding out his fingers. I licked them gently, and he scratched me on my forehead.

Yes, I told the dog brain. *Friend*. But I continued to sniff, my human brain digging through the information as quickly as it could.

Buzz's sense of smell was nothing short of extraordinary. Lying there on the sidewalk, I had been able to detect every single person and animal that had passed by since the last rain, a week earlier. I'd been able to smell the food in each of the nearby houses, the water running through the sewers under the street, the gasoline burning in the cars driving by. I could pick apart odors as easily as my human eyes could pick apart colors, and there were if anything *more* smells than there were shades.

But Buzz's animal brain didn't come equipped with a dictionary. There was no way for it to tell "natural" from "unnatural." The suburban world was a crazy mix of organic and artificial, with plenty of perfectly ordinary smells that would have been utterly alien to a wild dog who'd grown up in some forest somewhere.

So I'd expected it to be difficult—maybe impossible—to identify the smell of Yeerk on my first pass. Especially since I didn't really know if all three Chapmans were infested—a strange smell coming from all three of them might have just meant that they all used the same detergent or the same shampoo or whatever.

There was one thing, though, that my dog brain was entirely qualified to detect. Something that millions of years of evolution and thousands of years of breeding had made automatic, instinctive, and immediate.

Mr. Chapman was *terrified*.

It was subtle. Suppressed, as if the Yeerk inside was tampering with the process, shutting down the pathways by which the fear would express itself as sweat and hormones and dilated pupils. I probably would have never noticed, as a human. But to Buzz, it was like an alarm bell. I struggled to maintain control, to keep Buzz's hackles from going up, to keep his own empathetic response from taking over. *Friend*, I told myself firmly, and I forced myself to roll over onto my back, exposing my belly. Mr. Chapman laughed and began rubbing my short, clean fur.

Melissa and her mother came around from the other side of the van. "Who's this?" Mrs. Chapman asked.

Melissa crouched down, offering me her fingers. *Friend*, I told the dog brain again, as I leaned forward and sniffed.

Fear.

Rage.

Despair.

"Must belong to one of the new neighbors," Mr. Chapman said. "There's no tag on the collar."

I sprang to my feet again, letting out another short bark and bowing onto my elbows as if eager to play. Mr. Chapman laughed again, and Melissa turned back to the van,

reaching inside and rummaging around for a moment before drawing out a tennis ball.

“Here, boy,” she said, her voice sounding perfectly normal and happy. “Fetch!”

I reared up onto my hind legs, maintaining the illusion as rage threatened to shatter my control. She threw the ball, and I was after it like a shot, snatching it out of the air and racing back toward the three of them, where I dropped it and began sprinting in circles around the minivan.

My friend.

They’d taken my friend.

Taken her, and her father, and her mother. Taken three people I’d known since I was a little girl. People I’d eaten with, gone on vacations with, shared Christmas mornings with. Trapped inside their own heads, not even able to scream.

Melissa threw the ball again, and I tore after it, this time continuing to run after I caught it in my jaws. “Hey!” Melissa shouted. “That’s not yours, boy!”

But I ignored her, cutting across yards and leaping past hedges until I was half a dozen blocks away. Only then did I relinquish my iron grip on the dog’s instincts, allowing my anger to bleed through, allowing Buzz’s hackles to rise and his lips to curl back, allowing his instincts to lead us to a dark hedge corner, where we didn’t have to worry about anything sneaking up behind us.

It was funny. The German Shepherd’s reaction to fear was basically identical to my own. Buzz wasn’t cowering, he was *coiling*. Preparing to strike, to lash out.

He didn’t want to run. He wanted to fight.

I waited for a few minutes, letting my anger turn from fire to ice, feeling the lightning draining out of my canine veins. Padding back toward Melissa’s, I began circling the neighborhood, checking for other signs of infestation. I stopped to greet three kids, one old lady, and a couple out for a walk. No trace of that sick, suppressed fear.

Just the Chapmans, then.

I slipped into the yard of the house behind theirs, lying down out of view behind a stack of firewood. Marco had said that thought-speak had a range of about three hundred yards, and that it would auto target, being heard only by the intended recipients.

I focused on Melissa and her parents, mentally excluding the Yeerks they were carrying. The alien slugs would hear it anyway—they’d have to. But if my guess was right, they’d be unable to tell it apart from any other thought. It would sound just like Melissa, just like Mr. and Mrs. Chapman, my message translated into their own internal voices, just as Elfangor’s voice had been translated into mine.

<Enjoy it while you can, Yeerk,> I thought. <The Andalites are coming.>

CASSIE

I want to say that I never asked for any of this. That I wish it could all go back to the way it was.

Both of my parents are veterinarians, you know. I'm going to be one too, someday. I've been dealing with death since I was a toddler. Looking it right in the face, in all its ugly, sad, unfair detail. More than Marco, more than Jake, more than Tobias and Rachel, I knew what was coming if we decided to fight in this war. And while I maybe didn't understand exactly how horrible it would be, I *understood* how little I understood. I could see the gap where that awful knowledge would go. And I want to say I'd give up *anything* to stop myself from learning it.

But if I'm honest with myself—really, truly honest—then I can't. Because even knowing what was coming, I was *happy*. Happy in a way I'd never thought I'd be. Happy in a way I'm not sure I could *ever* decide to give up.

And I'd definitely asked for it. Prayed for it. Wished for it a thousand times over.

I don't know what that says about me, as a person. Probably not much. I mean, everybody's got *something* they'd give it all up for, right? Everybody's got a price.

If I really had time to think about it—if some genie showed up and said, you can stop this war right now, and all you have to do is give up the morphing power—well, I'd *probably* make the right decision.

But it hurts to know how bitter I'd be. To know that, deep down inside, I'm *not* that good of a person. That the kind, caring, empathetic face I show the world is only half the story, and if I cared *just a little bit less*, I might sacrifice the freedom of the whole human race, just so that I could feel the wind in my mane, hear the thunder of my hooves as I raced across the fields beyond my family's property.

So fast.

I'd never felt so fast. So strong. So capable. Peppermint's body—*my* body—was a thousand pounds of lean, liquid muscle. I felt like I could run for days, like I could kick a hole through concrete, like I could leap tall buildings in a single bound. For the first time in my life, I was starting to understand what it was like to be Rachel, out there on the gymnastics floor. I was the embodiment of power.

And yet, at the same time, I was at peace. There was no anger in the horse's mind. No ego, no malice. She was happy to be running, happy to rest, happy to nibble at the grass in the cool morning sunshine. She was content just to live, with nothing to prove and no battles to win.

I would have stayed that way forever, if I could have.

<Cassie!> came the voice in my head. <Cassie, if that's you, don't screw around. I'm not going to rat you out to Jake. But I need to talk to you *right now*. We are in crisis mode as of twenty minutes ago.>

I slowed to a trot and looked up at the sky, unable to stop myself from tossing my head. A single bird of prey was arrowing across the blue, its wings pumping like a sparrow's, its flight unnaturally straight. <It's me,> I said, feeling my human heart sink behind the curtain of Peppermint's calm.

<Barn. Demorph. Now. I'll watch out for your parents.>

* * *

I dragged the overalls out from the cabinet where they'd been sitting for months, the fabric stiff and crusted with mud and poop from half a dozen species. "Sorry," I said, as I handed them over the stall door.

"Doesn't matter," Marco replied. His voice was tight, his sentences clipped. Throwing the overalls on, he emerged from the stall without the slightest hint of self-consciousness, stopping right in front of me and looking straight into my eyes. "Cassie.

I'm about to make you freak, okay? I'm going to say some words, and you're going to want to freak. But you can't freak, okay? We do not have time for freaking right now. I need you to promise that you'll hold it together even after I've given you a really, really good reason not to."

I opened my mouth, then closed it again and swallowed. Suddenly the barn felt hot and airless. "Why are you here, Marco?" I asked slowly. "Why are you here instead of Jake or Rachel? Why are you talking to me instead of *to* Jake or Rachel?"

Marco reached out and put a hand on each of my shoulders. "Promise, Cassie. Say the words."

And that's when I felt it. Felt the first glimmers of understanding as the world disappeared out from under me.

Don't act like you didn't see this coming, girl, said the only part of me that wasn't reeling. *It was always going to be too soon—you know that. No such thing as right on time. Not with something like this.*

I tried to take a deep breath, but I could only get about half of one. "I promise," I croaked, not sure why he thought it would make a difference.

"Melissa Chapman and her parents are dead."

There was a complicated half second, during which the world unexploded, started to celebrate, then took a hammer blow that left it cracked and listing. Amazingly, I felt myself keeping my promise, and my hands were steady as they gently lifted Marco's off my shoulders. "How?" I asked, my voice level.

Oh, my God. You don't even care, do you? It wasn't Jake or Rachel, so no big deal?

"Car accident. Head-on collision, late last night. This morning, technically."

"How did you—I mean, where did you—"

"I've had the news going nonstop since Friday, and I've been checking the internet every half hour, just in case. It was on Channel Eight a few minutes ago—seven AM round-up."

"Oh, my God," I said. "Do you think Rachel—"

"I don't know," Marco interrupted. "Probably not. But that's going to be Jake's job, okay? That's why I'm here. There's something else you have to do, and it has to be today."

I could feel my thoughts starting to spin as shock, relief, and self-hatred settled in and began chasing one another. "Does Jake know yet?" I asked.

"No. I'm going to his house next, and we're going to go to Rachel's together. But *you*, Cassie"—he shifted, and I felt his hands slip into mine—"you've got to go to the Gardens."

"What? Why?"

"This is the Yeerks, Cassie. Or at least, we have to *assume* it's them, nothing else

makes sense. All three Chapmans, in a car wreck at two in the morning? And whatever they're up to, it's not good news for us."

"But why—"

"*Think*, Cassie. This weekend, we don't go because of the news, next weekend we don't go because of the funeral. Two weeks until we get anything bigger than a badger? No go. Things are accelerating, and we haven't even started moving yet."

"But I—"

"You're the only one who can pull it off, Cassie. Tell them—tell them you don't want to think about it, you can't handle talking about it, you just—want to be with the animals for a day. Just one day. They'll give it to you. They'll let you go anywhere in the zoo, today, probably places they wouldn't even let you go normally. You'll be able to acquire any animal you need, and then we can copy them off you. You can—you can *use* this."

Something must have been happening to my face, because Marco quailed, his jaw trembling as he let go of my hands and took a step back. "I know," he said. "I *know*, okay? And if it makes you feel any better, I knew that Jake—that you—"

He stopped, took a breath, and started over, not quite managing to look me in the eye. "If Jake were here, I'd explain it to him, and when I was finished, he'd ask you to do it. He'd ask you, and you'd hate him, you'd hate him for being the one to say the words, but you'd *do* it because you *see*, don't you? You *know* it's the right move. So I figured—figured I'd save you both the trouble." He gave a hollow little laugh. "After all, it's not like *our* friendship was going anywhere special. Sorry."

And that's when I realized that Marco didn't know me. That he'd seen the squirrels and sparrows and overalls, and thought he'd understood. That just like Jake, he'd missed the difference between the face I showed the world—the person I *wished* I was—and the girl I really was, deep down inside.

If a genie offered the choice to Marco, he'd make the right move in a heartbeat. I wanted to hate him for that, a little. But I couldn't, so I just hated myself instead.

"I'll do it," I said, my voice still steady. "And Marco—"

He raised his eyes and looked into mine. "Yeah?"

"You don't have to say sorry."

* * *

Large bulldozer morphs—elephant, rhino, gorilla, grizzly, Canadian moose.

Check.

Agile combat morphs—tiger, gray wolf, kangaroo, Burmese python, chimpanzee, cassowary.

Check.

Utility morphs—black mamba, Australian ghost bat, great horned owl, great snipe, Brazilian huntsman spider, star-nosed mole, beaver, ferret, otter, skunk, polar bear, cheetah, bottle-nosed dolphin, tiger shark, dormouse, housefly, cockroach, ant.

Check.

Marco had started to give me a list, but I'd shut him down pretty fast. He may be smart, but this was *my* world. I knew every last inch of the animal kingdom.

The saltwater crocodile could generate over three thousand pounds of bite pressure per square inch, enough to chew through steel pipe like it was beef jerky.

The sting of the tarantula hawk—a kind of hornet—hurt so badly that for the first three minutes, people usually couldn't even stop screaming.

The loggerhead sea turtle could hold its breath underwater the *entire time* we were morphed.

There was a reason I wanted to be a vet.

But there was also a reason that Mom came home looking like a zombie half the time. Working with animals was hot, sweaty, *exhausting* stuff. Over the course of the day, I'd gone through practically every exhibit, talked to nearly every handler. I'd been on my feet for almost eleven hours, racing back and forth as I tried to catch each animal during feeding time or daily checkup, and I'd spent at least ten or fifteen minutes helping out with most of them. I was beat.

And it was going to take *days* for me to transfer all these morphs to the others.

Mom was quiet on the car ride home. I think she wasn't quite sure what to make of my "reaction." Melissa and I hadn't been close—we really only knew each other through Rachel—but this was the first time one of my classmates had passed away. Knowing Mom, she was sitting on top of a big, heaping pile of parental wisdom, and was just holding back until I gave her some sort of signal that I was ready to hear it.

It was going to be a while, though. The last thing I wanted to do was listen to empty reassurances about God's plan, and everything turning out all right in the end. I'd spent most of the day thinking about it, and Marco was right—this had to be the Yeerks, and it couldn't mean anything good.

I leaned my head against the window and let my eyes flutter shut, the lights of the freeway tracing dim patterns on the back of my eyelids. I felt my mother's hand reach over to pat me on the shoulder, then slide up to rub the back of my neck.

Tzzzzzzzz-ZAP.

There was a sound, a touch of pressure, and suddenly my entire body went limp, sagging into the handle of the passenger side door.

What—

My eyes were still closed, behind lids that might as well have been welded shut, for all I was able to move them. I tried to speak, and my jaw refused to respond, my tongue

lying dead inside my mouth. Even my breathing was shallow and irregular, the contraction of my diaphragm sluggish and weak.

Paralyzed.

My mother had touched me, and now I was paralyzed.

Which meant that—

No.

No no no no NO.

I felt the car swerve just a little, the way it did whenever Mom checked the GPS or looked at her phone. There was a soft click, and then something hot and wet touched my neck.

Oh, no, oh God please no—

I could feel myself slipping into a kind of mad panic as the hot wetness slowly began to climb upward, feeling its way along my jawline. I scrabbled frantically inside my head, trying with every last scrap of willpower to move my hand, my head, to open my mouth and scream.

They *knew*.

They had taken my mother, and now they were taking me.

“Welcome back, Eldar three-two-seven,” came my mother’s voice, sudden and cold. “Orders have changed since you went into stasis. The fleet is delayed, and there is a new protocol—free spread is suspended, and no one is to travel alone.”

I felt a sliver of warmth edge its way into my ear, and realized with horror that the Yeerk inside my mother was talking to *me*—was leaving orders in my memory, knowing that its partner would dig through my brain and find them.

“I will provide you with fourteen of our siblings,” she continued. “This host shares sleeping quarters with its mate; you will not be needed during conversion. Stand by as a backup, and prepare to take the human Jake—my host indicates he is the most appropriate primary counterpart for yours. Pass him eleven, and the following command: he is to convert his household, give each member two spares, and await further instructions. You and I, along with Onu Two-nine-nine, are to make arrangements to defend the animal collections against Andalite incursion. The Visser predicts that the Andalites will attempt to acquire Earth morphs, if they have not already.”

The sliver of warmth became a needle, threading deep into my ear, probing, pushing further than anything I’d ever felt. Then the needle thickened into a river of fire as the body of the Yeerk surged forward, tearing its way into my brain.

I felt my frantic desperation reach a peak, felt the last shreds of my composure shatter as the pressure disappeared and the Yeerk vanished into my head. *The implants!* I screamed silently. *They were supposed to kill it!*

There was a spasm of not-quite-pain, a flash of not-quite-light and a deafening not-

quite-roar. Something touched me at every point of consciousness simultaneously, a groping, questing finger poking every thought and feeling and memory at once. I heard a voice, sensed a presence, felt my eyes open at someone else's command—

Then there was a flash of *actual* pain, a searing, electric jolt, and everything seemed to dissolve. For a moment, I saw double, thought double, *felt* double, and then—

Then everything was quiet.

My eyes were open, though my body was still slumped awkwardly into the space between the seat and the door. The car was still gliding smoothly down the freeway, the alien gripping the wheel with my mother's hands.

Hardly daring to breathe, I tried closing one eyelid—my right one, the one she couldn't see.

It worked.

It worked, and / had done it.

The Yeerk was dead. Elfangor's implant had done its job, and the paralysis was wearing off.

I could still feel the panic gripping me, the nauseating horror that threatened to close my throat and send my heart bursting through my ribcage. Any minute now, my mother would realize that something had gone wrong. She had some kind of stunner, and spare Yeerks somewhere—did she have a communicator? Some kind of panic button? Was there some code word I was supposed to give?

How much time did I have?

I watched through watery eyes as we pulled off the freeway. We were coming up the back way, away from the suburbs, taking the long, empty, twisting road that wound its way through the woods and fields.

Come on, think of something, think think, she's going to notice, you have to do something, you have to—

Have to—

Have to—

To—

But there was nothing. My brain was spiraling, redlining, my thoughts going nowhere at a million miles per hour. I was trapped. Caught. Beaten.

—notoriously disinterested in unusable bodies—

They were going to kill me.

They were going to *kill* me!

Oh God oh God okay hang on come on what would Jake do what would Rachel—

I flinched away.

Marco—

No.

“Eldar three-two-seven, report. Are you experiencing trouble with your host?”

My body went rigid, my mind suddenly, completely blank.

“Command. Ispec one-four-two reporting. Possible trouble with conversion of my host’s offspring. Currently in a car on Thistledown Road. Please track my position.”

Lie, you’re supposed to lie, you’re supposed to LIE NOW, CASSIE—

But fear and uncertainty had me transfixed like a deer in the headlights. I couldn’t think of anything, and so I remained silent and still as tears began to trickle down my cheeks.

“Eldar three-two-seven, I am immobilizing your host body. When you regain control, give formal confirmation.”

Tzzzzzz-ZAP.

This time, the paralysis only took me from the neck down, leaving my eyes open. I felt my body sag a little heavier against the door, my head knocking against the window as the car rumbled over bumps and cracks in the road. In another ten minutes, we’d be home, and then the Yeerk in my mother’s head would take my father, too.

And then they’d go after Jake.

“Command. Ispec one-four-two. No response from Eldar. I suspect the offspring is unruly. Will not proceed to host home alone; awaiting assistance.”

The car slowed, drifting, then shuddered to a halt as the tires left the asphalt and bounced into the grass and dirt of the shoulder. My mother turned off the car, and an eerie silence fell.

For a moment, the cacophony in my brain refused to follow suit, as panicked, useless thoughts continued to bounce back and forth inside my skull.

Slowly, though—oh, so slowly—a kind of clarity began to emerge, born of a helpless desperation that sucked everything else down and away.

My mother was caught.

I was caught.

My father was still free.

Not for long, though, whispered a small voice. It sounded an awful lot like Marco.
Not if you don’t get out of this car before the cavalry shows up.

But it was impossible. There was no way out.

Unless you break the rules.

I had almost thought of it, earlier, had flinched away reflexively before the idea could take hold. If I had hit my mother while we were still driving—hit her in the face or the throat, wrestled the wheel away from her and sent the car off the road—

It was the sort of thing Rachel would have done. It was the sort of thing Jake might have done, even. It was the *obvious* thing to do, once you took that tiny little step of admitting that my mother wasn’t worth saving anymore.

But was that an admission I was willing to make?

Well, it doesn't matter now. You're paralyzed.

And it wasn't wearing off, either. The second shock had felt no different from the first, but it had already been at least two minutes, and my body was still dead, useless, utterly unresponsive.

My *human* body, anyway.

I felt my mouth go dry. If I morphed, would the new body be paralyzed, too? I couldn't think of any reason why it would be.

She'll just shock it again, though.

And there was no way that her weapon would fail to work on an Andalite body, which is what I'd have to morph if I wanted to maintain our cover.

Your cover is already blown. They're going to find out you're human about thirty seconds after they start torturing you.

If I *was* going to break all the rules...

Could her stunner take down an elephant?

Yeerk reinforcements were on the way. I didn't know how many, or whether they'd come in a car or from the sky. But either way, I couldn't have much time. Minutes, maybe. Maybe less.

One slim chance.

I began to morph, focusing with all my might on channeling the changes, keeping them subtle and invisible for as long as possible. I didn't even know if that *was* possible—so far, every time we'd morphed it had been random and horrible. But if sheer desperation made any difference...

I could feel the inside of my body shifting and rearranging, feel the changes straining against the boundary of my skin as I fought to control them, to hold them back. The half-numb paralysis began to fade as my own stunned nerves were replaced by new ones, my frozen muscles disappearing as the elephant's swelled in their places.

So far, I had managed to maintain my size and shape. I could feel the morphing tech resisting, growing sluggish as I pushed it further and further away from whatever default plan it wanted to follow. After thirty or forty seconds, it stopped entirely, unable to proceed in the face of my mental restrictions.

Just the right side, maybe. Where she can't see.

Hardly daring to breathe, I slowly started morphing again, my half-human heart thudding in my chest as the fingers on my right hand shrank and my wrist thickened until it was as big around as a coffee cup. I felt my right foot grow snug inside my shoe, felt wiry hairs sprout across the whole right side of my body.

And still my mother said nothing. Just sat in unnatural silence. I wondered if the Yeerk was talking to her—if my mother was even awake, beneath the Yeerk's infestation.

For a second time, the morphing process ground to a halt. I was now the circus freak of the century, half girl and half elephant, my smooth, dark skin transitioning to cracked gray along the line that ran from my nose to my navel.

I took a deep, quiet breath, the air moving strangely inside my patchwork lungs. If I was right, I could finish the morph in just a little over thirty seconds. And then—

What?

THEN what, Cassie?

Every choice was intolerable. I couldn't hit my mother, couldn't risk accidentally killing her. Couldn't abandon her to the Yeerks. Couldn't stay with her, to be captured and tortured. Couldn't take her with me—if she had stunners, a radio, and over a dozen spare Yeerks, she was bound to have some kind of tracking device.

No matter what I chose, I'd be unable to live with myself.

Dad. You can still save Dad.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I focused once more.

I'm sorry, Mom.

The change in size was shockingly swift, as if the morphing technology were making up for lost time. There was an almost immediate tearing sound as my shoes and clothes were reduced to tatters, and a startled "*What—*" from my mother, followed by the sound of her door opening. Barely a second later, the car split open like a baked potato, the glass and metal slicing into my flesh as a ten-ton African bush elephant erupted from my thirteen-year-old frame.

"The girl!" I heard my mother shriek, as I rolled away from the wreckage and struggled to my feet, the last of my bones still stretching and grinding into place. "Cassie Withers, my host's daughter! She just morphed into an elephant!"

There was a sound, a kind of *TSSEWWWW*, and pain like hot knives sliced across my legs, causing one of them to buckle underneath me. I screamed in pain, the sound coming out as a trumpeted shriek.

Holding my injured leg in the air, I limped clumsily in a circle, looking for my mother. She was about twenty feet away from the ruins of our car, a strange weapon in her outstretched hand. She was frozen in place, her entire body trembling, her expression flickering back and forth between rage and determination. She looked the same way Tobias had, when he'd been caught in Elfangor's tractor beam—like some invisible force had rooted her to the spot.

It's Mom, I realized, and the shock was so great that even in elephant form my jaw dropped. *She's fighting the Yeerk!*

I didn't think. Didn't consider the consequences. I just *acted*, instinctively, making the only choice my conscience would allow. Stepping forward, I knocked the weapon out of her hand with my trunk and lifted her up into the air.

I was taking her with me. In three days, she'd be free.

I'd gone only a couple of steps, though, before I heard a familiar, electric sound, and suddenly my trunk went numb and limp, my mother's body tumbling toward the asphalt below. She twisted in midair, trying to get her feet underneath her, and landed at an angle on one leg with a sickening *crack*.

<No!> I shouted, unable to stop myself. Even in the dim glow of the moonlight, I could see blood seeping through her khakis around the sharp, unnatural bend in the middle of her shin. I shook my massive head, hoping that the stunner had only delivered a momentary shock, but no—the trunk was paralyzed, every bit as useless as my human body had been.

My mother's face contorted again as she and the Yeerk continued to battle behind her eyes. She'd gone past trembling and now looked like she was having a full-blown seizure.

"Cassie!" she screamed, her voice strained as if she were lifting a thousand pounds. "Run! Get Walter—aaaaaaaghryour *daughter is dead, fool! And you are next!*"

I stood, still and horrified, as my mother suddenly stopped twitching, the tension draining from her body. "Finally," she muttered, the word loud and clear in my elephant ears. She turned her eyes on me, and they blazed with an alien menace. "They always try. Sometimes they even succeed, for a time. But they all learn in the end."

Pale and sweating, she pushed herself up to a sitting position. "So, Andalite," she said, her voice dripping with hatred. "I see that Seerow's work has continued. Morphing in mere seconds, and without returning to your true form in between. And after holding human form for an entire day! Visser Three will be *exceptionally* interested in learning how you accomplished *that*."

I hardly dared to breathe. A moment before, I had been frozen with indecision, unable to force myself to abandon my mother in the middle of the street with a broken ankle and an alien wrapped around her brain. But now, I was just confused.

It *still* thought I was an Andalite?

"Impressive, that you found the zookeeper's family so quickly. We were sure we had gotten to them first. Perhaps you landed before the battle? A reconnaissance mission, to infiltrate and observe? I wonder how many of you there are."

Was it a trick? A lie, to keep me off balance until it could report back to—

Oh.

Of course.

It was *already* reporting back to the Yeerk command. It wasn't just stalling—its communicator had been on the whole time. That's why it was monologuing like some cheesy cartoon villain.

Which meant it probably really *did* think I was an Andalite.

"I congratulate you on your mimicry, by the way. As good as any Yeerk. I have looked back through my host's memories, and she did not suspect a thing."

Somewhere in the back of my head, Marco was laughing. It all made sense, as long as you started with all the wrong assumptions. I remembered Elfangor's coldness, his arrogance, his reluctance. His willingness to slaughter us all, just to prevent us from becoming pawns in his war with the Yeerks.

Humanity wasn't a player in this war. We were *inventory*. Cattle. Beneath consideration. If you saw a cow firing a rocket launcher, you wouldn't think, *Who gave that cow a rocket launcher?* You'd think, *How'd they make such a good cow costume?*

A huge breakthrough in morphing technology was impossible. A human with the ability to morph was, to a Yeerk, *inconceivable*.

It was a miraculous, glorious, incredibly lucky mistake. And with a sinking feeling, I realized I knew exactly how to capitalize on it.

All I had to do was break my mother's heart, and abandon her to her fate. Save myself, and walk away.

Not just yourself. You can still save Dad.

<Your host is as blind and stupid as the rest of her backward species,> I said, pouring as much contempt and derision into the words as I could. <We took her daughter weeks ago, and she never even noticed.>

I turned away from my home and began limping back the way we'd come as the Yeerk threw back my mother's head and laughed.

* * *

Ten minutes in a car at fifty-five miles per hour meant my house was about nine miles away by road. It would take an elephant hours to cover that distance even *without* an injured leg. As soon as I had hobbled out of sight, I demorphed and remorphed.

The European great snipe can travel over four thousand miles *nonstop*, at an average speed of sixty miles per hour, crossing whole continents in days. And if I ignored the road and cut across the forest, I could be home in no time.

How long had I lingered with my mother? It had to have been at least a couple of minutes, plus three or four more in the car. Add in the time it had taken me to change form, and it had been over ten minutes since the Yeerk's first request for backup. Maybe seven or eight since she'd reported my morphing.

I didn't know how long it took the Yeerks to mobilize. If they'd gone straight for the house, I might already be too late. But there was a chance that my misdirection had worked—that they believed I'd gone the other way. A true Andalite would have no interest in the last member of the Withers family.

I rose into the air, my wings pumping seven times per second as I arrowed straight toward my house. I stayed low and close to the treetops, eyes alert for any sign of Bug fighters sliding across the field of stars.

If I'd had human eyes, I wouldn't have been able to see through the tears. The words *too soon, too soon* kept running through my head, a ringtone on repeat.

Could I have saved my mother?

Probably not. But then, I hadn't really even *tried*. The Yeerk had paralyzed my trunk, and I'd dropped her, and then I'd simply given up. Just like I'd given up in the car, when I'd refused to let myself consider running us off the road.

Because I was afraid. Because I wasn't clever. Because I didn't *want* to be clever—not if being clever meant being like Marco or Rachel. I didn't want to have to choose between my father's life and my mother's, or between both their lives and my own. I didn't want to be the sort of person who could calmly consider killing her own mother, even to save the whole planet.

Because that's what I *should* have done, I knew. That's what the Yeerks would have expected, what any real Andalite would have done. From their perspective, my mother was just another tool, and by leaving her behind, I'd missed my chance to deny the Yeerks an important resource.

I might have just blown our cover anyway.

But what was the *point*, if that was how we had to fight? What would we be saving, if we gave up our humanity to win? If we became cold and dark and unfeeling, just to survive?

I climbed a little higher in the sky, fighting for altitude in the cold, dead air. The lights of my house were just barely visible, maybe a couple of miles away. I couldn't be sure, but there didn't seem to be any unusual activity. No extra cars in the driveway, no spacecraft hovering overhead.

Wait.

I rose higher, angling for a true bird's eye view.

There were no cars in the driveway at *all*. The harsh blue floodlights shone down on broken weeds and empty gravel.

I'd thought I was already flying as fast as possible, but somehow I managed an extra burst of effort, my muscles trembling as I pushed them to the limit. Dad was supposed to be home—he'd *said* he was staying home, all day, to keep an eye on the raccoon with the punctured lung, he wouldn't have left except—

I staggered in midflight, my wings losing their rhythm, dropping twenty feet before I could recover.

He wouldn't have left except for an emergency.

Like if Mom had called him to say that our car had been totaled on the way home.

I felt a scream start up in the back of my head, a long, wordless keen of anguish and dread. I'd left her there *conscious*, left her with her purse just a few feet away, with a cell phone and stunners and Yeerk reinforcements incoming—

I banked like a fighter jet, veering off course, turning back toward the winding road. Dad's beat-up old pickup was twenty years old; it could barely go forty miles per hour.

How long? How long ago did she call him?

I could head straight for the road and be there in thirty seconds, a mile and a half from the house. Or I could head back to my mother, get there in maybe three minutes, *nine* miles from the house. Or anything in between. I couldn't see the road itself from the air—the trees were too thick, the angle too shallow for headlights to shine through.

The scream in my head became an actual warbling cry, cutting the night air as I struck out for the middle, unable to decide. I tore across the sky, angling slightly downward for every last possible scrap of speed. <DAD!> I broadcast, just barely remembering to restrict my thoughts so that only he could hear. <DAD, STOP THE CAR! WHEREVER YOU ARE, STOP THE CAR NOW!>

Time seemed to slow as I raced toward the break in the forest, the distance stretching out in front of me. As I neared the road, I banked again, shooting past the treetops and zooming along the yellow lines like a missile, twice as fast as Peppermint had ever run.

Empty.

Empty.

Empty.

I tore around the curves, occasionally rising back over the treetops as I cut across the larger bends. I had hit the road about four miles away from where I'd left my mother, and now I was only two miles out.

Nothing.

I started to call out in thought-speak again, then realized with a shiver of fear just how deeply stupid I had been. If they'd already caught him, or if they caught him *after* he'd heard my desperate pleading—

Shut up and fly.

A mile and three quarters.

Nothing.

A mile and a half.

Nothing.

A mile and a quarter.

Nothing.

One mile away from where I had left my mother, the road curved into a long straightaway, and for a moment I thought I saw brakelights at the far end, disappearing around the next bend.

Please, I begged. I didn't know if I was talking to God, or to the universe, or just to myself. I didn't even have the words for what I wanted. Just *please*.

But the answer was no. As I came around the final turn and flitted up into the trees, I saw my father's truck, parked at an angle next to an ambulance, a fire engine, and two police cars, the lights still on and the driver's side door hanging open. My mother was on a stretcher, sitting upright as she talked to one of the police officers, and my father was on the ground, lying motionless as everyone else moved around him like he wasn't even there. There was a streak of slime on the side of his face, leading to his ear, glimmering blue and red in the wild, flickering light of the police cars. After a minute, he twitched, then stood up and walked over to the wreck, where four firefighters were cutting my mother's car into chunks with what looked like acetylene torches.

He didn't even glance at my mother.

Too soon, too soon.

It was always going to be too soon.

I don't know how I made it out of there. I don't remember where I went. I must have demorphed and remorphed at least once, because it was almost three in the morning by the time I found myself fluttering onto a branch outside of Jake's window.

<Cassie? Is that you?>

There was an owl perched on the ridge of the roof. I hadn't even noticed it.

<Jake,> I thought. I didn't have the strength to add any other words.

<Tobias, actually. Thank God—Jake's been losing it. He's been looking for you all night. We thought—when you didn't come back to the barn, we weren't—>

<The barn,> I interrupted. <You can't—>

I broke off, unable to say it, to force my brain to put together the thought. I wished I didn't *have* to put it together, that there were some way for Tobias to simply *know*. He should've known already—should have noticed that the world had stopped spinning.

<It's my parents,> I said finally, knowing that nothing would ever be the same again. <They've been taken.>

TOBIAS

"This is my family."

"I *know* that, okay? But Jake—look—listen—think it through, man. The Yeerks *know* that we know that they were coming after your family next. Don't you think they'll be a *little* suspicious, if all of a sudden the four of you just up and disappear? It's not like Andalites would care one way or the other."

I was forty feet up, perched in a tree, still in owl morph as I kept watch. The scene below was incredibly clear to my predator senses, as if it were lit up by spotlights and covered in microphones. I could see Jake, his jaw set, his eyes glinting in the light of the distant streetlamp. I could see Marco, whose tone was growing more and more brittle as the long night wore on. I could see Cassie, a short distance away, sobbing quietly into Rachel's shoulder, and Rachel, whose face might as well have been carved from stone.

"Besides," Marco continued, still whispering softly enough that the girls couldn't

hear. “From what Cassie said, it sounds like they only wanted you as cover for *her*. Since she’s—”

He broke off, glancing over his shoulder. “Since she’s dead, they might not even bother.”

The four of them were hunkered down in a tiny patch of woods in the space between two backyards, a few houses down from where Jake lived. They were shivering slightly in the cold, naked except for the towels and blankets that Jake had smuggled out of his house, their breath forming little puffs of mist.

“We are *not*,” Jake bit out, each word icy and sharp, “doing *nothing*.”

To me, his clenched fists were a beacon, plainly visible. To Marco, they probably just looked like shadows.

“Then *what*, Jake? What *are* we doing? Because we don’t even have a place to stash *Cassie*, let alone Tom and your parents. And unless you’re ready to spill the beans on *all* of it, how exactly do you propose to get them all to pack up and leave in the middle of the night?”

The day had started with Rachel crying, had turned into a frantic search that had *Jake* crying, had transitioned into Cassie crying, and now looked like it was headed for a fistfight between Jake and Marco.

At four in the goddamn morning.

<Just light it on fire,> I said wearily.

They both twitched, looking up in the wrong direction, and I rustled my wings to show my position. <I mean, if we just want to get them out of the house without saying anything.>

“You got a lighter, or are we rubbing two sticks together?” Marco shot back, no longer whispering. He turned back to Jake. “Listen, we can’t just—”

“Then we cause a distraction,” Jake said, cutting him off. “We go on the offensive. Turn up the heat so they don’t have *time* to worry about tying up loose ends.”

“How? The only Controllers we know by sight are Cassie’s parents. You want to turn up the heat on *them*?”

“There’s the firefighters,” Jake said stubbornly. “The cops. Probably the teachers and the principal, since Cassie’s mom said they aren’t allowed to be alone. Which means at least one other person at the Gardens, too.”

“Yeah, but *which ones*?”

“Cassie,” Rachel whispered urgently, as Jake and Marco continued to argue. I swiveled my head to look down at them. “Which breeds of dog might be able to sniff out a Yeerk?”

“—if we stake out the station—”

“We’ve got *school* tomorrow—”

“Mom said it was going to be cancelled, out of respect—”

I watched as Cassie sniffed, gulped, squeezed her eyes shut for a moment before answering in a shaky murmur. “German Shepherd. Labs. Spaniels. Vizslas. Border collies. Doesn’t matter, really—they’ve all been used in cancer research. I guess bloodhounds would be the best.”

“Guys,” Rachel called out, interrupting Marco mid-rant. “We could use a German Shepherd morph to sniff out Controllers.”

The boys fell silent. “Cassie,” Jake said, his voice suddenly soft and gentle. “Would that actually work?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Marco cut in. “We’d have to get close enough without raising suspicions, and that’s *not going to happen* now that the Yeerks are on alert.”

<Weren’t we trying to decide whether or not to save Jake’s family?> I asked.

“Actually, what we should be talking about is how to rescue *Cassie’s* family,” Rachel interjected.

“No, we should be talking about how to save the frigging *planet*,” Marco hissed. “Which is a *much bigger deal* than *anyone’s* family.”

Silence fell, and I found myself wishing I had hands to applaud with.

Up until two days ago, I’d never really paid any attention to Marco. He was just this wiseass kid that Jake liked to hang around with, the kind of guy who laughs at his own jokes and then acts like anyone who doesn’t laugh didn’t get it. I’d put up with him because he and Jake were a package deal, and Jake had seemed like the kind of guy you wanted on your side when social services dumped you into a new school in the middle of September.

Now, though, I was starting to see that Marco went a whole lot deeper than he let on. Yeah, he was just another spoiled suburban softie, but he *got* it, you know? He saw through the bullshit, understood how the world *really* worked. Drop Jake or Rachel or Cassie on the wrong side of the tracks, and they’d be conned, mugged, and left for dead before they ever figured out the grownups weren’t coming to save them. Jake and Rachel and Cassie still thought rules were a thing.

Marco, though—Marco knew the score. Which was pretty much the only reason I hadn’t taken off already. Spend enough time out on your own, and you learn pretty quick that some kinds of friends are worse than no friends at all.

<Can we at least agree that keeping *us* out of the Yeerks’ hands is the most important thing right now?> I asked. <I mean, if it comes down to a choice between you and your parents—>

“Our parents are a *part* of staying out of the Yeerks’ hands,” Jake said flatly. “If they get taken, we either get captured along with them, or we get exposed. We’re on thin ice with Cassie as it is, and there’s no guarantee they aren’t just playing along for some

reason or other. We need to decide what we're doing about this *yesterday*." He took a deep breath and crossed his arms. "Options. Everybody."

"Recruit," Rachel answered immediately. "We have the cube. Give them the power, and they're that much better able to protect themselves."

"They're not Yeerk-proof, though," Marco pointed out. "Even *one* of them goes down, and it's all over. Better to just get them out of Dodge—there's only one Yeerk pool, and it's here. Anything outside the county is probably safe for the next few months."

"Yeah, but what could we possibly tell them to convince them to get up and go?" Jake asked. "Even if we told them the truth, what's stopping them from just deciding they know better than us? Telling the cops, or going public?"

"Maybe we *should* go public," Rachel said. "I mean, if the Yeerks want this invasion to stay secret, then we don't—right?"

<Unless it's like, they're being secret because they want seven billion hosts, and they know an all-out war would end up killing half the planet,> I put in. <But maybe they'd still rather have *three* billion than walk away empty-handed. We go public, we could kick off the apocalypse.>

"Or just get laughed at, more likely," Marco muttered. "So far, it looks like they're doing this thing smart, and if they've already got the police, then they've probably got the media, too." He scrubbed at his eyes. "Then again, they're here picking up zookeepers instead of in Washington nabbing Senators, so maybe they're not *that* smart."

"Actually," Jake put in, "there's a problem there. Why did they take Cassie's mother in the first place?"

<It makes sense, doesn't it?> I answered. <I mean, the Gardens *is* the obvious place to pick up new morphs.>

"Yeah, but why would they be worried about Andalite bandits at all? From the way Elfangor was talking, the Yeerks won the space battle hands-down. And it's not like *we've* done anything to get on their radar."

<Maybe they're just paranoid?>

"Or maybe," Marco said, his voice suddenly taut, "maybe there *are* Andalite bandits. I mean, *something* stirred them up, right? We already know Elfangor's brother is out there somewhere. What if *another* ship made it through? We could have allies down here."

I heard Rachel suck in a breath, felt the owl's feathers fluff and stand on end. That would change *everything*—

"No," Cassie said, speaking up for the first time. Her voice was a hoarse croak, and she bit her lip as Jake and Marco turned to look at her. "Not allies. They're fighting to beat the Yeerks. We're fighting to save Earth. That's—those are two different things."

She lapsed back into silence, and a grim silence followed as we all worked through

the ramifications. I found myself remembering Elfangor's cold assessment of the situation, his solemn declaration. *You are the wave they will ride as they sweep the galaxy clean of all who oppose them.*

Maybe we *should* kick off an all-out war. Maybe a few billion dead humans was exactly what the galaxy needed.

I looked down at the others again. Cassie, returned to her quiet weeping, and Jake, pacing back and forth like a caged tiger. Marco, his frustration written in the set of his shoulders and the thin line of his lips. Rachel, uncharacteristically silent. All of them shaken, on the verge of falling apart, and Cassie's parents weren't even *dead*.

I shook my head, fighting to think through the haze of sleep deprivation. The sun would be up in two hours. There were only two possibilities—either the Yeerks were already closing in, or they weren't even coming. And in either case, *this?*

This wasn't helping.

The little voice in the back of my head—the one that told me when to move my money out of my wallet and into my sock, the one that knew exactly which couples wanted an orphan for all the wrong reasons, the one that had first told me to make friends with Jake—that voice had been getting louder and louder as the day wore on.

These people are a mess.

You don't owe them anything.

They're not going to make it, and they're going to drag you down with them.

Get out while you still can.

I looked through the trees, through the dark windows of the nearest house, to the clock on the microwave in the distant kitchen. I had forty minutes left in morph.

<Look,> I said, breaking the silence. <I know I'm not exactly qualified to have an opinion, here. I don't have parents or brothers or sisters to worry about. So stop me if I'm being rude.>

I paused, but they just looked up at me, shoulders slumped and faces drawn. <But Cassie's parents—they're *safe* now, aren't they? I mean, I know being Controlled can't be fun, but—the Gardens—they're important people—the Yeerks are going to protect them, keep them alive. And as long as they're alive, there's hope, right?>

"Tell that to the Chapmans," Marco growled.

Rachel winced as if punched, and I hastened to clarify. <I'm just saying, it's just a matter of time, isn't it? I mean, one way or another, they're going to come after your families. Doesn't even have to be personal. They're coming after *everybody*. So you might as well decide right now, right? Either get them out now—tonight—or go ahead and accept that it's going to happen, and let it.>

"There's still that little problem of what happens when they send a squad out to pick up Tom and Jake and Mr. and Mrs. Berenson, and they come back with just Tom and the

grownups and a story about Jake turning into a pigeon and flying away,” Marco said dryly.

<Only if there are four people in the house when the Yeerks come calling,> I pointed out. <If you can’t think of a way to get *them* out, why not get *you* guys out? Fake your deaths, or run away, or whatever? The Yeerks show up a month from now, and there’s no link.>

“There’s still a link,” Jake said. “Even if we assume they bought Cassie’s story, they *have* to be suspicious. If all of her friends start disappearing, one by one...”

<So don’t *start* with her friends. Start by disappearing some *other* kids, somebody completely unconnected. You guys could be, like, three, five, seven, and nine out of ten.>

“Aaaand we’re back to recruiting,” said Marco.

<You’ve got to do *something*,> I snapped. <Sitting here in the woods bickering until the Yeerks show up is *not a plan*.>

“Fine,” Jake said. He stopped pacing and folded his arms. “We vote.”

“I thought that wasn’t—”

“We vote first, *then* argue about whether or not this should be decided by a vote. A, we get all our families out, tonight, and start working on a plan to rescue Cassie’s parents. B, we start figuring out how to get *ourselves* out. C, we try to figure out a strategy for staying in place.” He paused. “Anybody care to speak up first?”

No one spoke. “Fine,” he repeated. “I vote A.”

<B,> I countered.

Marco and Rachel turned to look toward each other in the darkness. Seconds ticked by, each one adding to my mounting frustration. It had been two days and seven hours since Elfangor told us there were a thousand Controllers already. How much had that number grown since then? How much had it grown while we’d been sitting here dithering?

You’re wasting time, the little voice said. *This family bullshit isn’t your problem.*

Rachel spoke first. “B,” she said, her tone reluctant.

No one but me could see Marco’s raised eyebrow, but the silence implied it well enough, and she continued, looking anywhere but down at Cassie. “I can’t—I mean, I don’t want to—to abandon my family. But we need room to maneuver. We need time to think. And we shouldn’t—we *can’t* put anyone else in the line of fire. Not unless they know what’s going on, and—and can protect themselves. If we stay, then our parents, my sisters, Tom—if the Yeerks figure us out and come in guns blazing, they’ll—”

She stopped, took a deep breath, composed herself and continued. “We get clear now,” she said, “we can build up an army and when we come back, we’ll have help, we can get *all* of them out.”

Marco shook his head. “The problem is, these are *all* terrible choices,” he muttered. “C is just obviously wishful thinking at this point. Like Tobias said, they’re coming, sooner or later. As for A versus B...” He took a deep breath in through his nose and let it out with a sigh. “It’s got to be A. Four families moving out of the county is going to be a *lot* less suspicious than four kids going missing.”

“Three families,” Jake corrected softly, and Marco winced.

I could feel my shoulders hunching, my wings lifting up behind me in an involuntary response to the tension and stress I was dumping into the owl’s brain. I had thirty-six minutes left in morph, and maybe thirty-six seconds of patience remaining.

“Cassie?” Jake asked, his voice still soft.

Cassie said nothing—only shook her head, almost invisible against the dark blue of the blanket Rachel was wearing. “She’s not voting,” Rachel translated.

Jake raised a hand and ran his fingers through his hair. “So we’ve got a tie, then,” he said wearily.

Fuck this. They want to get completely paralyzed over, like, seven people while the world ends, that’s their business.

<No, you don’t,> I said aloud, spreading my wings to their full length and testing the cold night air. <I’m changing my vote.>

“To what?”

<To nothing.>

And with that, I leapt out of the tree and winged my way up into the sky.

* * *

I gave the tiny mouse an extra squeeze with my talon, feeling the bones in its hips pop out of joint. Its squeaks were pitifully loud in the owl’s ears, and I felt more than a little guilt as I held it down with one wing and began to demorph. This didn’t, strictly speaking, have anything to do with saving the world...

A minute and a half later, I was standing naked in the parking lot of the rundown thrift shop, shivering in the early morning cold as I acquired the mouse that lay dying in my hand. Trying to look in all directions at once, I strode across the rough asphalt toward the side entrance.

It took another five minutes and a brief stint as a mouse, but soon enough I was inside, thumbing through the racks of clothes in the dark and wishing that I still had owl’s eyes. Foregoing the secondhand underwear, I threw together what felt like a sane outfit, grabbed some shoes and a watch off the shelf, and left through the front door, ignoring the wail of the alarm as I started to jog down the street.

I was *definitely* going to have to do something about the whole clothes problem.

As I jogged, I focused on Marco, on the DNA I had acquired what felt like weeks ago. As before, there was a feeling of vertigo as my head eased closer to the ground, and a blurring of my vision as my eyes were replaced with Marco's slightly nearsighted ones. The shrinking was followed by a kind of tugging sensation as my hair shriveled and stiffened, going from near-shoulder-length to only a couple of inches long.

There was also—though I hadn't mentioned this to Marco—a *very* uncomfortable sort of tightening sensation in my groin. My parents had decided not to have me circumcised when I was born. Marco's had apparently had different feelings on the matter.

I didn't quite know what to make of that. Clearly, the morphing technology took more than just a DNA sample. There had to be some kind of scanning going on during the acquiring process, or else all kinds of things would have been different—I'd read, for instance, that height had almost as much to do with hormones and nutrition as it did with actual genes.

But the owl I'd acquired had only had one eye, and I'd definitely had two when I morphed it. The same went for Marco's osprey, which had been nursing a broken wing. What was the difference between that and a little scar tissue? It couldn't be based on expectation—I'd had *zero* opinions on the issue of Marco's foreskin until after the morph had finished.

Just put it on the list.

Along with what a Yeerk pool was, which teachers were Controllers, and how long it would be before the air on Elfangor's brother's ship ran out.

The morph complete, I slowed and stopped, putting the size eightish shoes on my now-size-eightish feet. I walked for another ten minutes as my sweat cooled and vanished, until the squat brick structure of the Oak Landing Home for Children came into view.

My home, for the last five years.

I checked my stolen watch, the screen glowing faintly green in the darkness. It was 4:45, the sky still black, the streets empty. I walked down the sidewalk like I had nothing to hide, turning into the parking lot and striding past the low, barred windows until I reached the one that looked in onto my room. My old room, now.

I didn't bother trying to peer inside. It was pitch black, after all, and besides, I knew every inch of it. The four double-decker bunks, two to each wall, with trunks between them and a worn, splintering wooden floor covered in a threadbare gray rug. The peeling paint, broken only by the single mirror and the one old poster for the original release of *Star Wars*. The eight sets of thin blankets, the eight flat pillows, and the seven sleeping boys, three of them snoring like chainsaws.

I crouched down, reaching for the strangely-too-close ground, turning to sit with my back against the rough brick, keeping my eyes peeled for any sign of movement in the

grounds around me. I'd never really been afraid of the dark before, but I'd also never really believed in monsters before, either.

Things change.

<Garrett,> I called out silently, keeping the beam of my thoughts tightly focused.
<Garrett, wake up. Wake up and come to the window.>

Jake, Rachel, Marco—they had families. Marco's dad, Rachel's mom. Rachel's sisters, and Jake's brother Tom. People they loved for no reason at all except habit. People who loved them back.

<Garrett, wake up. This isn't a dream. Wake up and come tap on the glass.>

I didn't have a family. I didn't even, properly speaking, have friends. It's hard to make connections when you're in a different school every year, when the guys in your room are all different ages and they're in and out of foster care and you only have a month or two to get to know most of them and the ones you know for longer are assholes anyway because the good kids don't tend to come back.

<Garrett, it's Tobias. I'm outside—you can hear me, but I can't hear you. Get up and tap on the window so I know you're awake.>

What I did have was Garrett. Garrett, and a promise we'd made to each other, almost two years before, cutting our palms with a shard of glass from a broken bottle and clasp hands while the blood dripped down our wrists. We'd both been put on room restriction for that—half the summer had gone by before they let us out for free play again.

<Garrett, wake up, buddy. It's Tobias. I'm—>

Tap.

I sucked in a breath. This was it—the point of no return. At this exact moment, there was a grand total total of five people on the entire planet who were in a position to make a stand against the Yeerks. If I said one more word, then one way or another, Garrett was going to be *involved*. Was going to be vulnerable, hunted, a conscript in a very small and ill-prepared army.

But he's vulnerable already. He just doesn't know it yet.

<Hi, buddy. It's me. Tobias.>

Tap.

<I'm—um. I'm outside. I'm speaking to you telepathically. And no, I can't hear what you're thinking.>

Tap tap.

<Yeah, I don't know what that means. Look, do you think you can get out without waking anybody up? I'll explain everything once you're out here.>

Tap.

<Okay. Good. And—um. You remember our pact, right? That if either one of us

ever figured out a way out of—>

TAP.

<Careful, quiet! Okay. Right. Listen, you should—you should grab your bag. And anything else you want to keep, because—>

Tap. Tap tap tap tap tap.

<Yeah. I don't think we're going to be coming back.>

* * *

I stared down at the tiny, crumpled note, easily readable in the predawn light. A mess of conflicting emotions swarmed into my brain—suspicion, anger, embarrassment, astonishment, frustration, shame. “Jake,” I called out, loud enough to be heard from any of the nearby cavernous structures. “You just stay put until I’m done here.”

“Who’s Jake?” Garrett asked.

We were standing in the middle of the construction site, not far from the spot where Elfangor’s ship had landed. Beside us was a low, half-finished foundation, filled with hard-packed earth. I had pulled aside a dozen or so of the loose cinderblocks, revealing the dark hole in which Jake had stashed the *Iscafil* device.

“You’ll find out in a minute,” I said darkly, letting the scrap of paper fall to the ground as I hefted the alien cube. “This first.”

Garrett eyed the blue box warily, very obviously standing just out of arm’s reach. “You lied,” he said, a tremor in his voice.

“What?”

“You said you’d explain everything once I came outside.”

“I did. I mean, okay, I haven’t told you the second half yet, but I explained *this* part.”

“No, you didn’t. You said ‘Andalite’ and ‘morphing power’ like those were answers. What’s going to *happen* to me if I touch that thing?”

“It’s not going to hurt you.”

“How do you *know*?”

“It didn’t hurt *me*.”

“Neither do shrimp, but if I eat one, I die.”

I gritted my teeth, suppressing the urge to snap. For one, that sort of thing never worked with Garrett, and for another, he had a point. I’d seen the morphing cube work on exactly five people. That could mean it was completely safe, or it could mean it killed half the people who used it, and we’d just gotten lucky. Elfangor hadn’t mentioned it being dangerous, but something told me the Andalites hadn’t done a whole lot of beta testing on humans.

I dropped down onto one knee, putting my head just below Garrett's chin. "You're right," I said quietly, forcing calm into my voice. "I don't really know what'll happen to you. I don't really know what happened to *me*. It's alien technology, and I probably wouldn't understand it even if Elfangor had explained it for hours. But it didn't hurt me, and it didn't hurt the other people I was with, and you *saw* that it works. Think about it, buddy. Any animal in the world. Any person in the world. You'll be able to go anywhere, do anything. You won't ever have to go back to Oak Landing again."

"Any animal I can touch. For two hours at a time. Two minutes to change. Back to me in between."

I nodded. "Yep. Those are the rules."

<Actually, there's one more rule.>

I stiffened and stood, turning to scan the skeletal buildings around me. "Jake," I warned. "Let me handle this."

<Sorry,> Jake replied, and something in his tone told me that he had switched to private thought-speak. <Your family is your business, but the cube belongs to *all* of us. I'm coming out. I'm in Andalite morph—warn the kid.>

"Who's Jake?" Garrett asked again.

"A friend," I said reluctantly. I looked down at the note lying in the dirt, written in Jake's neat, careful handwriting.

TOBIAS—

Figured you'd come back for the cube. Notice how I DIDN'T take it away and hide it. That's a peace offering. I'm alone...can we talk? —Jake

"Brace yourself," I muttered. "You're about to find out what an Andalite looks like."

There was a soft crumbling sound from one of the concrete structures, the crunch of hooves on gravel. A shadow took shape in one of the open doorways, and I heard Garrett gasp as it stepped out into the gray morning light.

I hadn't really registered it the first time, on board Elfangor's ship. And there had been too many things on my mind the second time, in Cassie's barn. But now, watching the lithe blue shape emerge from the darkness of the half-finished building, I couldn't deny it.

Andalites were *terrifying*.

It was like a centaur, if centaurs had been half-scorpion instead of half-horse. The body, low and wide, rippling with muscles under the short fur. The legs, short and side-cocked, their every motion unnervingly fast, like a movie with dropped frames. The torso, held parallel with the ground, the arms waving like feelers over the dirt, ready to act as a third pair of legs if necessary. The eyes, one pair pointing forward and down,

the other mounted on stalks, swiveling constantly.

And of course, the tail.

It had to be almost ten feet long, a smooth, tapering whip of pure muscle, capped by a reaper's scythe of dense bone. It hovered and dipped and darted in a strangely hypnotic dance, as if following the flight of a drunken mosquito. Beside me, Garrett squeaked and then disappeared over the wall of another low foundation, peering out over the cinderblocks with only his eyes and forehead visible.

"Jake, meet Garrett," I grumbled. "Garrett, this is Jake. He usually doesn't look like this."

<Hi, Garrett,> Jake said, coming to a stop and rearing so that his torso stood more or less upright.

"You're a human?" Garrett asked, his voice shaky. "You're morphed?"

<Yeah. This is Elfangor's body. He let us acquire him before he died.>

"Turn back into a person, please."

Jake gave no response, but the fur covering his body immediately began to shrink, the hairs thinning away to reveal pinkening skin beneath. Garrett watched with wide eyes as Jake's tail and back legs disappeared, as the smooth curve at the end of his torso reformed into head and neck and shoulders. A minute and a half passed, and the Andalite was gone, leaving a thirteen-year-old human boy standing in its place.

I noticed with begrudging respect that Jake made no attempt to cover up, showed no sign of shivering as he stood naked and barefoot in front of us, his hands clasped behind his back. His expression was calm and composed, his eyes sharp and commanding. It was the same look he'd given the three bullies who had me cornered, on the day we'd first met—a look that said you had two options, and only one of them was going to work.

He turned to me. "We ended up compromising," he said. "Marco's getting his dad out. Rachel and I are going to stay on alert for a couple of days. If they come for us, or for any of our family members, we bail. If they don't, we start working on plans to extract everybody. Cassie's on her way up into the mountains already with some spare camping gear Marco had lying around."

"None of that is my problem," I said bluntly.

Jake nodded. "I know. I get it. I got it back in the woods, when you stopped saying 'we' and started saying 'you.'" He turned to look at Garrett, who was still standing behind the low cinderblock wall. "Did Tobias tell you about the Yeerks yet?" he asked.

"After," I said, before Garrett could answer. "Two separate choices. He gets the morphing power either way."

Jake shook his head. "No. I mean, okay, yes, fine, you get to make your own call on that, I'm not the boss of you and we *both* know how to blow up the cube, so there's no point in giving you orders you're just going to ignore. But if he's not in, then he has to

be out—all the way out, like out of the state, where he's not going to leave us vulnerable." He fixed me with a steady gaze. "Same goes for you."

"You don't get to make up rules," I snapped.

"That's not a rule, it's common sense," he answered mildly. "And don't act like it isn't just because you're pissed off. We're still on the same side, here." His gaze flickered over to Garrett before returning to me. "It *also* seems like common sense to say that recruiting ten-year-olds is a bad idea, and to point out that this little kid could be a Controller, and to find out just what the hell you think you're doing right now, but the sun's about to come up and I haven't slept all night and I'm just going to go ahead and ask you to look me in the eye and tell me why this isn't insane."

"I turn twelve in three months and eight days," Garrett remarked.

"My bad," Jake said, his eyes still on me. We stared at one another for a long, tense moment.

You are still on the same side, the little voice in the back of my head whispered. *And he didn't take the cube away. That should count for something.*

"I'm going after Elfangor's brother," I said finally.

Jake's eyes widened in surprise, and I continued. "He's been out there for almost three days. He could be dying, and the rest of you are just—*sitting around*. I'm going to find him, and I'm going to rescue him if I can. He might have intel. Weapons. Alien morphs, maybe. Stuff we can use. And even if he doesn't—we're the only ones who can save him."

The surprise had faded, and Jake's expression was now carefully, deliberately neutral. "Marco still thinks there might be actual Andalite bandits out there," he said.

I shrugged. "So maybe I get there and he's already gone. It's not like I've got anything *better* to do."

"And Garrett?"

"I trust him," I said simply. Jake could draw whatever conclusions he wanted out of *that* statement.

"He's eleven."

"I trust him," I repeated. "And I need somebody to watch my back."

Jake turned to look at Garrett, who had climbed up onto the wall and was now sitting there, watching us wordlessly. "A thousand Controllers," he said softly.

"You see any Bug fighters?" I countered. "Besides, the odds are only going to get worse. Now's the time to take that risk."

Jake shook his head. "Too much risk. There has to be a way to be *sure*. If you wait three days, maybe."

"Look, if we don't get *moving*, the Yeerks are going to win by default."

He looked me straight in the eye. "So it's 'we' again?"

I didn't answer. Just looked down at the cube in my hands, remembered watching each of the others shiver as the morphing technology took hold.

"Yeerks are—aliens?" Garrett broke in hesitantly. "Bad ones?"

Jake gave me a look that said *you want to tell him, or should I?*

"They're bodysnatchers," I explained. "Little slugs that crawl into your ear and take over your brain. Once they're inside you, they know everything you know, and they run your body like it's a remote control car."

Garrett's eyes widened slightly.

"They've taken maybe a thousand people already," Jake said. "Cops, firefighters, EMTs. Some of the teachers at our school. The mom and dad of a friend of mine. They're trying to take over the whole planet. They want to turn each and every one of us into a slave."

"Why?" Garrett asked.

Jake and I exchanged glances again.

"To use us as weapons to take over the rest of the galaxy," Jake answered.

"*Why*, though? What's the point? Like, what do they want in the *end*?"

I blinked. None of us had really stopped to ask that question yet. "Um. I guess because—I mean, they're just slugs, right? They can't see or hear or—or do *anything*, really. Not unless they have a host body to control."

Jake gave a low, quiet whistle, and I couldn't help wincing a little myself. When you put it *that* way, suddenly the whole thing felt a lot less black and white...

Except that every "free" Yeerk means another trapped human. No middle ground. It's literally us or them.

Garrett's head was tilted to one side, his expression thoughtful. "Once they're in, can you get them back out again?"

"We think so," Jake said. "Haven't actually tried, though."

"Can they take over animals?"

"We don't know."

I glanced at the horizon, growing brighter as the sun began to rise behind the clouds. "We need to get out of here soon," I interrupted, holding up the cube. "Jake?"

He raised his eyebrows. "If I tell you not to do this, will you listen?"

"No."

"Then why are you asking?"

"Because you might say yes."

Jake's eyes narrowed. "Elfangor gave us morphing so we could fight the Yeerks. As far as I'm concerned, that's what it's for. You already put the whole human race on the line just by *talking* to this kid. If you use the cube on him, and the Yeerks take him—"

He broke off, shaking his head. "There's not a lot of ways this can play out, Tobias."

You just spent a bunch of points you don't really have. Ask me what Marco would say we need to do about you."

I'll admit it—that one gave me a little chill. "We're still on the same side."

"Are we?"

"I'm trying to get something *done* here."

"By cutting us down from five to four, and bringing in a stranger without any input from the rest of us."

"We're *all* strangers, Jake. Rachel, Marco, Cassie—I don't *know* those people. I barely even know *you*. You're a nice guy, and all, but—I don't trust you with my life. I can't. You're not—*hard* enough. You guys keep acting like we've got time to waste, like there's somebody going to show up and save us."

"Elfangor showed up."

"Exactly! That was our miracle! We're not going to get *another* one."

Jake sighed. "Yesterday—" He broke off, looking at the sky, and started again. "Two days ago, you chose me as your leader."

"That was before you fucking fell apart when Cassie went missing."

He stiffened, his eyes glittering, and I felt my shoulders tense. For a long moment, neither of us said anything.

"Fair," he growled. "I'm not as *jaded and cold* as Tobias the street-smart tough guy. I lost it, a little. Lesson learned. But you don't see *Tom* anywhere around here, do you?"

I shrugged. "I need somebody to watch my back," I repeated.

"Somebody who's not one of us. Somebody you *trust*."

I didn't respond.

"Cuts both ways, doesn't it?" he asked.

I still didn't answer. Just watched as he gnawed at his lip, looked at me, looked at Garrett, looked around at the empty, skeletal ruins of the construction site. As he shifted back and forth, and shivered.

Once.

"Garrett," he said abruptly. "You take orders from Tobias?"

"No." Garrett's eyes were wide, and they didn't quite meet ours, shifting back and forth between my forehead and Jake's. "But I listen to him."

Jake turned his gaze back to me. "Tell him."

I grimaced. "Garrett," I said tightly. "If you take the morphing power, you either have to come with me, or you have to go away. Far away, like England or Canada, and never come back. Because if you come back, they might catch you, and if they catch you they'll catch us all."

"That's a rule?"

"That's a rule."

“Not quite,” Jake cut in. “There’s a third option. You can come back and stay with *us*. With me and the rest of my group. But if you do that, you have to follow *our* rules.”

Garrett nodded silently.

“As for *you*, Tobias,” Jake said, crossing his arms. “I’m sending you on a mission. Go find Elfangor’s brother. Bring him back if you can, or at least find out what happened to him. And if you need somebody to watch your back, you can use the morphing cube—*once*.” He looked Garrett up and down, his gaze measured and calculating. “But it has to be somebody who’s worth the risk. Not just somebody you like or care about. Somebody we can *trust*.”

I bit back a bitter laugh. “That’s how we’re going to play this, then?”

Jake didn’t flinch. “That’s how *I’m* going to play this,” he said. “*You* can do whatever you want. But I don’t exactly see how *us* being enemies helps anybody but the Yearks. Maybe next time you’ll think about that before writing the rest of us off.”

And with that, he turned and strode away, feathers sprouting from his skin as he disappeared among the dark, looming structures.

* * *

<Something’s wrong,> Garrett said.

<You’re just not used to it yet,> I answered. <Try to relax, let the bird do the flying.>

We were both in hawk morph, floating above one of the parks on the edge of the city. Our clothes—and Garrett’s bag—were stashed high in the gnarled oak tree where we had morphed, hidden from the ground by the thick, leafy branches.

I had gone first so that Garrett could acquire from me, then demorphed again to hold him steady in the tree as he attempted his first transformation. It had gone without a hitch, and he’d immediately taken to the air, his delighted laughter filling my head.

Now, though, I could see him struggling, the rhythm of his wingbeats erratic as he fought to maintain altitude.

<Relax!> I called out again. <Don’t try to take control yourself!>

<I’m not!> he answered, panic creeping into his words as they played through my thoughts. <Total autopilot, I swear!>

He began to twitch as I closed the gap between us, his muscles spasming as if he were having a seizure. <Never mind,> I shouted, <take control! Take control!>

<It’s not working!>

Suddenly, his wings folded and he tumbled, plummeting toward the ground three hundred feet below. <AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!>

<Hang on!>

I tucked my own wings and dove, raking my talons forward. We collided a second or

two later, my claws digging into his flesh, his actual scream cutting through the air as his mental one filled my head.

I flapped furiously, struggling to slow our descent, his own out-of-control wings buffeting me as we curved toward the ground. <Hang on!> I shouted again. <This is going to—>

CRUNCH.

I let go just as we slammed into the earth, both of us rolling, a mass of dust and feathers. I'd managed to slow us to maybe twenty miles per hour, and even the lightweight hawk body was stunned by the impact. A sharp pain shot up my right wing, and I let out an involuntary cry as I struggled back to my feet.

<Garrett!> I called out. <You okay?>

<No flying,> he moaned, his body still twitching in the dirt, tiny droplets of blood leaking through his feathers where I'd grabbed him. <No flying, no flying, no flying.>

<Are you okay?> I asked again. I scanned the park around us. It was still early, maybe a quarter to seven, and as far as I could tell, no one had witnessed our wild tumble. There were a few bushes about fifty feet away where we would be able to demorph and remorph, restoring our hawk bodies to full health.

Except that whatever was wrong with Garrett's would *still* be wrong, since the morphed body was identical every time.

<No. Flying.>

I shuffled closer, holding my one unbroken wing out for balance. <Did you break anyth—>

I stopped mid-thought, looking down at his crumpled body in shock.

No way.

Slowly, carefully, I extended my healthy wing again, watching as the muscles in Garrett's own wing twitched in response. I flapped once.

Twitch.

Twice.

Twitch, twitch.

I hopped backwards, fluttering, watching as a series of tiny spasms rippled across his body. The second I stopped moving, they ceased.

Holy shit.

<Garrett,> I said. <Can you fly?>

<NO FLYING.>

<You've either got to fly or you've got to climb the tree naked,> I said.

<Naked. No more flying. Never again.>

<Fine, no flying. Can you stand?>

I held still as he rolled over, coming to his feet. <Yes,> he answered.

<The bushes, over there. You can demorph and make a run for it.>

<What about you?>

<I'll wait here until you're demorphed. I think I'm—I think there's some kind of interference between us, from both using the same body at the same time. Every time I move, you twitch.> I extended my wing and flapped it once to demonstrate.

<Don't,> Garrett said flatly. <Bushes. Morph. Tree. Got it.>

I waited until Garrett streaked past me before heading toward the bushes myself. It was a slow, agonizing process, my dead wing dragging behind me, sending shooting pains up through my shoulder. By the time I reached cover and demorphed, Garrett had reappeared, carrying his bag and my stolen clothes.

We left the park on foot, Garrett still visibly shaken. "Didn't you guys *test* that?" he asked, as we passed through the gate and headed down the street.

"Just for a minute," I admitted, embarrassed. "We checked to see if Marco could morph Dude. But he demorphed as soon as we saw that it worked, so we didn't have time to notice."

"Never flying. Never ever flying again."

"Oh, come on," I chided. "It worked fine until I got up there, too."

Though that *did* throw a wrench into the works. I had borrowed a fast-flying morph from Cassie, one that could theoretically make it out to Elfangor's brother in just two or three days. But it had come from the Gardens, and if Garrett and I couldn't share it, we were going to need a new plan.

"Where are we going?" Garrett asked, as we turned a corner and entered one of the nicer suburban neighborhoods.

"Marco's house," I said. "We need to warn the others about the resonance. And he's the closest to the beach."

"Why does that matter?"

"Because Elfangor's brother is somewhere in between Hawaii and Russia."

"We're leaving *now*?"

"He's been out there for three days already. We don't have any time to waste. And if anybody *does* decide to notice that we're gone, it'd be better not to be here."

"How are we going to get to him?"

"Don't know yet. Let me know if you come up with any ideas."

Another quick morph, a brief thought-speak conversation, and we were on our way once more. Traffic was picking up as the Monday rush hour began, and the driveways and street corners began to fill up with kids waiting for their school buses. We moved off of the main roads and began cutting through parks and backyards, avoiding the places where truant officers were likely to look. It was quiet and calm, the morning sun breaking through the clouds and warming our backs as we went.

"We're going to have to stash my bag somewhere," Garrett said, after a long silence.

"We'll find a place," I assured him. We climbed over a fence and crossed the railroad tracks, the smell of salt strengthening as we got closer to the ocean.

"Tobias?" Garrett asked quietly, his voice barely audible over the crunch of our footsteps.

"Yeah?"

"Why me?"

"What?"

"I mean—why not Louis, or Fletcher, or Johnny. They're—you know. Older. Smarter. Braver."

The last word was almost a whisper, as if Garrett wasn't quite sure he wanted me to hear it. I was silent for a while, considering my answer as we cut through a small patch of woods. "We made a promise," I said finally, looking over at the younger boy.

Garrett didn't look up. His brow was furrowed as he stared down at the ground, placing each step with careful precision. Another minute went by before he spoke again.

"I didn't think you were coming back," he said. "When you didn't come home Friday, and then you didn't come home Saturday either. Xander took your bunk last night. We all thought you'd just—gotten out."

"We made a promise," I repeated.

"I'm just saying. If you'd broken it. If you hadn't come back. You could've—I wouldn't've blamed you."

I stopped. After a few more steps, Garrett did, too.

I felt a kind of cold anger coming over me, the product of almost eight years of orphanages and foster homes and shitty roommates and grownups who weren't doing their jobs. Of swirlies and meatloaf and secondhand shoes, flat pillows and no money and no one, no one, *no one* you could really count on, all of it flashed into my head, crystallizing into a single, sharp icicle of bitter resentment. "Fuck that," I said, reaching out and grabbing Garrett by the shoulder, spinning him around to face me. He twitched uncomfortably out of my grasp, but I stayed close, almost nose to nose, looking straight into his eyes as they stared resolutely at my chin.

"You damn well *better* blame me, if I ever pull some bullshit like that," I hissed. "You'd better be fucking *furios*. Don't you *ever* try to play like it's okay for people to just blow you off, like—like you're *nothing*, like you don't *count*."

"Everybody bails eventually," he said softly.

"*No*," I shot back. I held up my hand, the scar from our pact almost invisible among the lines of my palm. "*Most* people bail. Most people don't know what the fuck a promise *is*. But that's *their* problem, not yours."

I turned and started walking again, holding my breath until I heard the rustle of

Garrett's footsteps behind me. We went on in silence for another handful of minutes, as the ground flattened out and the gentle crash of waves became audible over the breeze.

"I'm scared," he said finally.

"Me, too," I replied, looking back over my shoulder. "You don't have to come, you know."

"I thought you needed somebody to watch your back."

"I do. And—look, I *want* your help, okay? You're not—you know how to take care of yourself, and you're somebody I can trust. Nobody else I know is on both lists. But I didn't get you out just so I could boss you around. You want out, just go. Jake's a decent guy, he'll look out for you. Or go to Canada. You can morph, so you'll be able to get food and stuff. You'll be safe there as long as anybody."

Garrett was quiet for another long minute. "It's really happening?" he asked. "The invasion."

"Yeah. You heard about vice-principal Chapman?"

Garrett nodded.

"They killed him. His wife and daughter, too."

"How are you going to stop them?"

I shrugged. "No idea," I said. "But saving Elfangor's brother seems like a good first step."

We stashed his bag under the roots of a half-toppled oak tree and emerged out into the headlands, scrambling our way down the steep slope until we came to the beach. "What now?" Garrett asked.

"Now we try to think of a plan," I said. "We look for animals we might be able to use, or walk down to the shipyard and find a boat that's heading the right dir—"

I broke off abruptly as we rounded the cape, my jaw dropping in shock. For a full ten seconds, my brain simply refused to work, unwilling to believe the signals my eyes were sending it.

"Oh," said Garrett as he stopped beside me, his voice shaky. "Wow. Hey, Tobias—I think I just came up with an idea."

The beach in front of us was packed, over a hundred people milling around, the air filled with the buzz of quiet conversation. Most of them were carrying buckets, the rest snapping pictures with their phones, or just standing there watching. They were gathered around an enormous, towering creature, a wall of gray flesh longer than a train car and almost as tall.

Sperm whale, said Cassie's voice, echoing out of a memory of her barn, two days and two lifetimes ago. *Sperm whale and giant squid. Those are the only big animals we know of that go that deep, and they don't have either one of them at the Gardens. They don't have either one anywhere, as far as I know.*

"This is impossible," I whispered, still trying to convince my sluggish brain to work. It was too convenient, too *perfect* to be a coincidence. I could see the whale's labored breathing, see the pooling of its flesh as it collapsed beneath its own weight. In a few hours, it would be dead. It had beached itself at *exactly* the right time for me and Garrett to come across it.

"Oh," Garrett said. "Is it a trap, then?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to think. That would mean that the Yeerks knew we were human, that they knew about Elfangor's brother, that they could pluck a whale right out of the ocean and that they somehow knew *in advance* when Garrett and I would be arriving on the beach—

No. If they had *that* much power, the war would already be over.

But as I stared at the dying animal, I couldn't help remembering another conversation, this one much more recent than Cassie's lecture on marine biology.

Elfangor showed up, Jake had said.

Exactly! I'd answered him. *That was our miracle! We're not going to get another one.*

"Tobias?" Garrett asked. "What should we do?"

I looked at him. Looked at the whale. Looked out at the endless horizon.

Three thousand miles of water, and somewhere in the middle of it, Elfangor's brother. Calling out for help.

Just put it on the list.

"We acquire it," I said. "And then we watch each other's back."

ESPLIN 9466

Breached the theoretical mass synchronization collapse limit? Eliminated the unitary host-construct dependency? *Tripled* the efficiency of the controller-construct Z-space replacement algorithm?

Impossible.

Esplin nine-four-double-six stared at the report, feeling the odd mixture of fear and happiness that was always his host body's response to bad news. Fear, because they had been one for so long that it felt his own emotions on the deepest possible level. Happiness, because no matter how completely he ruled, Alloran still lived beneath the surface.

Not that he truly wished to be rid of Alloran. Not anymore. It would be so *lonely*, after all, with only one mind in his head. So boring, with no audience. So easy, with no critic.

There were times, though, when the Andalite warrior's joy was a burden that Esplin

tired of bearing.

Esplin scanned the report again, taking separate note of each development.

One—the Andalites had successfully replaced a human girl, with mimicry on par with that of a Yeerk. Conclusion: someone else in the Andalite chain of command had discovered Alloran's little back door.

Two (related)—at least one of them had been on Earth for multiple cycles, long enough to gather sufficient intelligence to choose *precisely* the right human for easy access to genetic material, likely since the arrival of the Yeerk's own invading force. Conclusion: *stowaways*.

(Corollary: *another* upgrade to the morphing technology? The disguised Andalite agent had been executing the acquisition process *in morph* prior to being uncovered. Alternate hypothesis: handheld extractor/scanner, for later integration.)

Three—it had morphed *directly* from construct to construct, in roughly one third of the standard interval, after remaining in disguise for an unknown period of time (but at least eight times the original theoretical maximum). Conclusion: _____?

Beneath the surface, Alloran supplied a string of appropriate Andalite expletives, each tinged with an acid mix of mockery and smug triumph. Esplin responded with a searing lash of pain, and Alloran laughed even as he shrank back into silence.

This was *frightening*. If the Andalites had indeed managed to overcome three (possibly four!) of the morphing technology's largest weaknesses, then the Leeran morph (with all of its disadvantages) was now the *only* method of determining which of his subordinates could be trusted. And if his corollary was correct, and they had somehow infiltrated his ship, then they could be literally *anywhere*, lying in wait for just the right opportunity—to press just the right buttons, to launch just the right people out of an airlock at 0.5c...

(It would explain nearly every obstacle they had encountered so far—every setback, every delay, every frustrating malfunction, so much incompetence and always *just* short of something truly unforgiveable.)

Even the coercive demorphing field, so close to functional, might no longer hold any promise. Changes *that* significant suggested a fundamentally new approach to the entire morphing process, one that could easily rely on a completely different source of power.

With a quick tap of his controls, Esplin initiated the standard lockdown protocol, sealing his quarters and beginning the combination scan and decontamination. Ordinarily, the lockdown took place at random intervals, with a maximum of half a morphing period between cleans, but even that might no longer be sufficient. Esplin had long ago depilated his host's body, to hinder infestation by tiny morphed parasites, but if the Andalites had gone *this* far, who was to say they wouldn't try infiltrating as *bacteria*, to slip through the holes in the decon net?

(On a parallel line of thought, his constant monitoring of Alloran picked up a thread of curiosity, noting with bemusement that his pet warrior was even now unable to ignore the temptation of an interesting problem. Possible applications of the new morphing technology streamed through the link between them, and Esplin filed them away, to be guarded against later. Likely most of the precautions would be unnecessary and redundant—he had yet to meet another Andalite who was a match for Alloran in pure savagery and clarity of thought, who had the same inexorable drive—)

((Alloran scoffed at the backhanded compliment, but could not *quite* suppress the minute wash of pride—))

((((Oh yes, they were *made* for one another, if only the warrior could see past the narrow interests of his native species, and take the larger view—)))

Suddenly Esplin's musings flashed to a halt, all of his speculations ceasing, all layers collapsing into one as he directed every level of attention toward the path of Alloran's thoughts. The process was immediate, automatic, a reflexive response to a trigger Esplin had installed long, long ago, when he had only just begun to learn what it was to govern a mind that was greater than your own:

Alloran was *confused*, which meant that it was time for Esplin to pay attention.

The warrior's mind instantly went blank, his thoughts smoothing into the placid flow of meditation as he tried to cover his involuntary betrayal. Esplin merely laughed, seizing the reins and *forcing* the neurons to fire, unwinding the spool of thought to see what tiny flaw had caught his host's attention.

—and even then, why leave Ispec alive AFTERWARD, a critically-positioned host, it made NO SENSE—

—farther back—

—surely not so utterly shortsighted as to throw away an invaluable tactical advantage on a SCARE TACTIC—

—farther back—

—unless for some reason he WANTED the Yeerks to receive Ispec's report? But what possible justification—

—farther—

—the first, most basic, most OBVIOUS move being to grind the filthy slug into the dust, even a stiff-tailed cadet could not HELP but notice the open communication channel—

Ah.

Carefully, suppressing his desire to leap to a conclusion, Esplin reconstructed the scene in his mind's eye. The mighty Andalite, exposed but triumphant. The lowly Yeerk, cowering in a weak and feeble body. The gloating reveal—you *have no idea of the depth of your failure!* We took the girl weeks ago, and you clumsy, stupid Yeerks noticed

nothing! Yet another victory for the superior Andalite race!

(It would have gone *something* like that, anyway.)

Yes, it was in *character*, all right, character so perfect it was almost a mockery. But the flaws were obvious when you looked at it objectively. If they'd had the girl for weeks, then why the sudden rush to visit half of the animals in the collection?

Obviously, it was a bluff. Some thick-stalked ship-jockey, who had never so much as *heard* the word "espionage," found himself stranded after the battle, moved immediately to acquire local morphs—

—*at least the idiot had followed ONE protocol correctly—*

—and blundered right into the middle of the Yeerks' damage control operation (triggered by some *other* cloud-furred fool?). Desperate, he changed forms, got his leg shot off, and then, unmasked and stranded deep in enemy territory, tried to cover up his blunder with boasting. It made sense.

Except—

(Alloran desperately tried not to object, but he had no *choice*, really...)

—*at that point, WHY didn't the oaf terminate the enemy host?*

It went against every scrap of Andalite military doctrine, half of which Alloran himself had written, replacing centuries of obsolete folly. It was the first lecture given to every cadet who entered the armed forces: You identify the enemy. You find the enemy. You destroy the enemy. End process. You don't *make the enemy squirm by parading tactical information in front of them!*

For a moment, Esplin enjoyed the feeling of camaraderie as he and his host were united by their shared frustration at the eternal incompetence of underlings. Then the moment passed, Alloran recoiled, and they each turned their mind back to the problem, the master eagerly, the pet involuntarily.

Who were the key players? Subject A, a midgrade Yeerk operative, being outwitted by subject B, a stunning example of Andalite mediocrity. In the background: the incoming reinforcements? A frustrated field commander?

The host.

Laughable. Of course Alloran *would* think that—he had to, lest he cease to be able to deny his own irrelevance. Though the human *had* in fact apparently fought her Yeerk to a standstill, so credit where credit was due. Such a wasted effort, only to have her words fall on uncaring Andalite ears. They'd taken her mate within minutes while the oaf blundered off in the opposite direction—

The host's daughter.

Dead. Obviously. Even dust-fed buffoons would not risk the sudden arrival of a doppelganger—

Unless she was cooperating.

Esplin froze, cursing himself. Of *course*—that would not only justify the ill-advised and irrational mercy, it would also explain the swiftness with which the Andalites had learned of the animal collection, and infiltrated its security.

The castigation turned to laughter as Alloran's sense grew thick with horror. Oh, the proud Andalite race, reduced to alliance with planetbound primates! Would they invite the monkeys into space, next? Give them weapons, perhaps? Maybe some of the lonelier sort would morph and seek *mates* among the humans, as rumor said had been done during the conquest of the Hork-Bajir, on the homeworld of the Arn—perhaps Esplin and Alloran would give it a try, together?

Alloran snarled, a wordless expression of pure fury, and Esplin reveled in the wash of hormones that filled the skull where the pair of them lived. Meanwhile, in the back of their shared mind, a lower, slower sort of process began following up on the new hypothesis, working through the strategic implications of a human-Andalite alliance, combining it with all of the other data on the current situation—

(((Cassie Withers, my host's daughter! She just morphed into an elephant!)))

(((We took her daughter weeks ago, and she never even noticed.)))

((Cassie Withers, my host's daughter! She just morphed into an elephant!))

((And after holding human form for an entire day! Visser Three will be exceptionally interested in hearing how you accomplished that.))

(Cassie Withers, my host's daughter! She just morphed into an elephant!)

(Enjoy it while you can, Yeerk. The Andalites are coming.)

Cassie Withers, my host's daughter! She just morphed into an elephant!

Like a rocket launching skyward, the realization tore through every layer of Esplin's attention, each fraction of his mind demanding greater priority for the thought until even Alloran's misery failed to be more interesting.

Unless she was cooperating.

A human that could morph—

A human that didn't have to bypass the mass synchronization limit because it wasn't morphed in the first place—

A human that could transform straight into a construct because *it wasn't morphed in the first place*—

A human that could acquire animals directly, without demorphing to Andalite form, because *IT WASN'T MORPHED IN THE FIRST PLACE*—

A human that didn't stomp its captive into the dust because it hadn't *read* the Andalite war journal, and because the captive hadn't been another faceless Yeerk but the *human's own mother*—

It all clicked into place, a hypothesis far more elegant than any of the others—a single, deft principle that explained *every one* of the oddities that had troubled them

both so far, dispensing with the need for impossible leaps in technology and implausibly incompetent operatives—

((Well, not the oddities aboard ship, but there was no *fundamental* reason to expect those to be related.))

(Esplin ignored the rising echoes of Alloran's seething self-hatred as the warrior realized he had once again guided his master to the solution.)

It had Elfangor's scent all over it—a final, desperate ploy, recruiting a handful of primitives and arming them with the most devastatingly powerful technology in the known universe—

(And *that* was why he had allowed himself to be dispatched so easily, rather than morphing and leading them on a merry chase. Esplin and Alloran *had* been somewhat disappointed.)

A quick explanation (inadequate)—a quick activation (untested! Irresponsible!)—a noble sacrifice (all poor Elfangor ever wanted)—and behold, a brand-new piece made its entry into the game. Morph-capable humans! *Children*, some of them! How many would the Beast have had time to recruit? Seven? Fourteen?

For the third time in as many minutes, Esplin's thoughts ground to a halt, his mind stunned by the sudden recognition of a new expanse of possibility.

Had Elfangor left the Iscafil device in their hands?

(Beneath the surface, Alloran howled with despair at the folly, *the absolute folly*, for they both knew that that was *exactly* what the Beast would have done.)

And now Esplin felt that odd mixture of fear and happiness again, its sources reversed, its flavor subtly but deliciously different. Here was a challenge worthy of his *full* attention, with the potential to strike *years* off the time that his true plan required. They were down there, somewhere—frightened humans with the key in their hands, a key which they would surely destroy rather than allow him to have, a key which not even his fellow Yeerks could be permitted to discover.

Esplin opened a channel to the central command hub. A bladed Hork-Bajir answered immediately, its salute crisp and respectful, its eyes dull and uncomprehending.

Message, Visser Three signed, and the Hork-Bajir signaled confirmation.

The Andalite bandits are cooperating with the humans. Investigate all known associates of Hedrick Chapman, Paula Chapman, Melissa Chapman, Walter Withers, Michelle Withers, and Cassie Withers, and place a full surveillance net on Walter and Michelle Withers. Do not engage; observe and report only.

The Hork-Bajir signaled confirmation again, and Visser Three closed the channel, turning to the small compartment that stood beside his interface.

A little snack, before the real work began...