

## 66: THE HUNTERS

# CHAPTER 1

My name is David. Maybe you've heard of me, maybe you haven't. If you know anything about me, I'm sure it isn't good. Maybe one of the others mentioned me in the books they wrote after the first war. Probably not. I'm a part of their lives they tried to forget.

I am...I *was* a human. I was born human, with two human parents, and lived in a human house, eating human food. I suppose my life was never 'normal', but it sure seems like it was compared to what it's become.

My father...well, he was a spy, so we moved around a lot. I never stayed in one place long. Never made any lasting friends or put down any roots. Life isn't easy when you're always the new kid. But I made due. I had my cat Megadeath and my cobra Spawn. They were all the friends I needed, really.

But one day everything went horribly, horribly wrong. I was walking around this new town and went through an old, abandoned construction site. I found a weird, blue box in a wall. I thought I could sell it to someone; thought it might be worth something. I had no idea...

That blue box could give you the power to turn into

animals. Sounds cool, right? But that box destroyed everything. The Yeerks, I'm sure you've heard of them even if you don't know who I am, came to get it. The Animorphs tried to stop them.

In the resulting battle, my house was destroyed. So was my family. The Yeerks took my parents. The Animorphs took me along with the box. And then I guess they thought they did me a favor: they made me one of them.

In the end, I turned my back on them. They didn't care what happened to me. If I lived or died, it didn't matter to them. If my family lived or died, it was of no consequence. But the apathy wasn't what got to me. No, it was the hypocrisy.

Jake's brother was a Controller. But if it ever came to it, the Animorphs would have moved heaven and earth to save him. Tom's safety, happiness, and freedom were at the top of Jake's priority list. And my family? Not even an item.

And there was Marco. His smug superiority complex. His derision and insults. Precious, funny Marco could do what he wanted; Jake wouldn't stop him. If he wanted to insult my family or call me a coward, no one would stand in his way. But if I ever brought something up, I was smacked back down.

We can't forget Rachel, either. Rachel, who thought she was better than the rest of us. She was more or less happy to pretend I didn't even exist. I'd have gladly been with Visser Three any day than spend time with her.

Cassie, of course. Perhaps the most sickening of all of them. She'd moralize everything, tell us that what we were doing was wrong. She tried to make us all conform to her standards of morality in a world where such naïveté is the fastest way to get killed. And she didn't even obey her own morals. She was just as guilty as anyone else.

Ax wasn't even human. An alien who was just here to have us fight the war his people were too lazy or stupid or incompetent to fight on their own. If his people had done their jobs, if they hadn't been such idiots. We would never have been in this situation.

Tobias... That was my mistake. If any of them had understood, it would have been him. He knew what it was like to lose everything. He knew what it was like to have a war suddenly appear and take away what few things you cared about.

If I had reached out to him, things might have been different. If I had had just one true friend among them all,

maybe I wouldn't have done what I did. But I avoided Tobias, ignored him. What happened to him scared me. It was all too easy to see myself becoming what he was.

So is it really so hard to believe that I turned against them? What would you do if a bunch of arrogant hypocrites and aliens stole everything from you and then discarded you? Would you stick around with them waiting to get cut in half by a Hork-bajir? Or would you do something to make it better.

I was not going to sit around and be helpless. I only asked them to give me what was mine. I found the box and I wanted it back. I didn't want to kill anyone. I never wanted that. But I had no choice. They had to realize how serious I was.

But I guess I underestimated just how serious they were, too. They tricked me and trapped me in the body of a rat. They left me to die on a godforsaken rock in the middle of nowhere. They thought they were free of me. But they were wrong.

The Drode came to me with an offer. A chance for revenge. I accepted, of course. But things fell apart, like they always seem to do in my life. When the smoke cleared, I was still just a rat.

I begged Rachel to kill me. I just wanted it to be over. I wanted to stop feeling the constant fear and hunger. I just

wanted some peace. But she wouldn't kill me. She said told me that she knew better than most that inside of a *nothlit's* body, there's still a human soul.

I lived as a rat after that. No more holding on to anything human. There was nothing left for me. David the boy gave up. There was only the rat. Until the day the One came for me.

He sent a servant of his, a man in a suit. He made me a deal. If I agreed to fight with the Yeerks against the Animorphs in a second war, I'd get my morphing powers back. I could even be human again for two hours at a time. And I'd get my revenge against them and against Crayak. I accepted without thinking.

But I betrayed the One, too, and the Yeerks. Cassie and Al convinced me to fight for humanity. Maybe it was the weirdness of morphing the symbiotic Anati with them or maybe it was the years of loneliness and isolation or maybe it was just the Ellimist messing with my brain. In any case, I'm batting for the home team again.

So if you've heard of me, if you know my name, then you probably didn't hear anything positive. History doesn't look at traitors kindly, no matter who they betrayed. When this is all over, if we win, I might end up tried for treason.

But I've tried to redeem myself. I've fought against the Yeerks repeatedly. I tried to turn myself in to them once to save Ax. Maybe when it's all over, that'll count for something. That's pretty much all I can hope for.

## CHAPTER 2

The above speech was really just to explain for you just how odd my life has always been. Even doing something normal has an undertone of oddness for me. Like this particular day. I was going to hang out with my best friend. Normal, right?

Except that my friend has a very screwed up family situation. He lives with his half-brother and uncle, Tobias and Ax, in a house with his brother's pregnant girlfriend, Rachel, and her family, including her French stepsister, Jeanne. Yeah, that sounds kind of messed up, but it gets weirder.

See, my friend's an Andalite named Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor. His uncle is also an Andalite. His brother is not; you figure it out. To top it all off, Al was raised by robots and had to be kept secret because his father, Prince Elfangor, had a lot of very dangerous enemies. So you can see that for me, even something as normal as going to hang out with my best friend is extremely odd.

I felt awkward as I knocked on the door. Part of that was because I was never in the habit of going to visit friends, not having any of them. What made it worse, though, was the fact that I had tried to kill three of the people who lived here. I

think Tobias and Ax got over it, but Rachel still seems bitter. And pregnancy isn't making her any more pleasant. Not to mention that Naomi, Rachel's mother, didn't like me because I was involved with fighting the Yeerks.

The door was opened by Sara, Rachel's very attractive younger sister. Maybe it's kind of sick of me to say that. See, 'technically' I'm 20. But when I was 14, I was trapped as a rat. I didn't live a human life. I didn't really grow up like humans do. And my human body didn't age either. As far as I'm concerned, I'm still a kid. I don't consider myself to be any older than Sara or Al.

"Hi. David, right?" Sara said.

I nodded. "Is Al here?"

"No, sorry. He went to the mall with Rachel and...what's the other Andalite's name again?"

"Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill. We just call him Ax," I reminded her.

"I don't know how you people keep those names straight. Last night, Tobias and Rachel were talking about... something...and they were using all sorts of Andalite names that I can't even believe they can pronounce. And then Ax joined in and it was completely confusing."

“It gets easier with practice,” I assured her. “When you’ve dealt with all the aliens they have, everything just rolls off the tongue.”

“I have the feeling I’m going to be dealing with a lot of aliens,” Sara sighed. “I mean, sooner or later, we’ll have to meet the rest of Tobias’s family and that’ll be awkward.”

I shrugged. For a few moments, neither of us said anything. We just stood there awkwardly on the steps in front of their house. Then Sara said, “You can come in and wait for Al if you want to.”

“Sure, why not? It’s not like I have plans. Who all’s here anyway? I know Jeanne’s over at Marco’s -”

“Oh, so that’s where she went. I knew it. Remind me that Jordan owes me ten bucks. Anyhow, the house is mostly empty right now. Mom and Jacques are at work. Rachel and the blue guys are off at the mall, like I said. Jeanne’s with Marco. Right now, it’s just us, Jordan, and Tobias.”

“What’s Tobias up to? I’ve started to wonder what he does in his spare time. I just can’t picture him relaxing.”

“He reads a lot,” Sara shrugged. “War books mostly. I’ve seen him read the Art of War cover to cover to cover at least ten times. Other war books, too. Just look at this.” Sara handed

me a copy of the Art of War that was lying on the coffee table in the living room. I opened it to a random page. Handwriting that was almost completely illegible filled the margins. Arrows led everywhere, crossing and overlapping and looping so many times that I had no idea what went where. Some things were underlined or highlighted, others crossed out. Those little legal sticky notes marked every page, probably in some sort of color coding system only Tobias understood.

“Uh...wow,” was all I could say.

From the hallway, I heard Tobias’s voice. “-don’t care how many Bugs it would save you, the Reliquary is not going to be pulling your ass out of the fire every time the Visser looks at you funny, Mersa.”

He walked into the room with a small, hologram emitter in each hand. One displayed a 3D image of Mersa 528, the leader of the Yeerk Rebellion. They were our allies, in a sense, even though they were trying to take over Earth.

“The only reason I asked you to help is because I don’t want to expend more Bug fighters than I must,” Mersa responded. “If you really want me to waste my resources-”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I want. I want you so dried up and weak that when I finally have time to deal with you, you’ll

just fall over with a strong breeze. Now hold on for a minute; I've got a bigger idiot on the other line."

Tobias switched off one emitter and turned on the other. This time, it was an Andalite looking perturbed. "Sorry for the interruption," Tobias told him. I don't know if the Andalite could tell, but it was pretty obvious to me from his tone that Tobias was not sorry in the least bit.

"Perhaps now you will answer my question," the Andalite said.

"What was it again?"

"What is the situation like on Earth?"

"No situation at all. Everything's fine and dandy. Thanks for asking. How are things on your end?"

The Andalite sighed. "Prince Tobias, it is obvious to everyone in the Andalite Electorate that something is going on on Earth. Not only was our original fleet over the Hork-bajir world destroyed, there were reports that Esplin 9466 escaped from his prison. Prince Aximili is listed as wanted for questioning, and-

"Oh, you can cancel that thing about Ax," Tobias told him. "But you do want to keep an eye on a Prince Imrahil-Feyorn-Breeyar. I know he's listed as dead, but trust me, he's probably

a Controller.”

“What the sario are you doing on Earth!?” the Andalite demanded. “Dead princes suddenly becoming Controllers, Yeerks escaping from prison-”

“I told you before and I’ll tell you again. I will explain matters fully to Menderash-Postill-Fastill and no one else. And I’ll only explain in person so that I know no one else is listening. If you want to know what’s going on, send Menderash.”

Tobias switched off the communicator and then turned the other one back on. Mersa reappeared. “Okay, where were we?” He wandered out of the room.

I shook my head. “I don’t remember Jake ever doing this much work.”

“It’s not fun to watch what used to be my bedroom turn into a military command center. Thank God Rachel keeps everything somewhat organized.” Sara shrugged. “Do you want to go to the mall or something? It’ll probably be more fun than hanging around here listening to the General yelling at idiots.”

## CHAPTER 3

It was really weird walking through the mall with Sara. Firstly, I was completely lost. Secondly, I kept seeing people who looked vaguely familiar. I think I went to high school with some of them. The third thing was the memories.

In the middle of the mall, I stopped and looked up at the big glass pyramid that was overhead. Sara noticed me staring. “What is it?”

“I almost killed Jake here. It’s...just so weird...”

“It can’t be easy living with something like that.”

I shrugged. “That’s the least of my problems, I think. I just don’t think about it. Of course, that’s kind of hard when it’s shoved in my face like this.”

“Well, let’s go find something distracting. Rachel promised Ax some cinnamon buns in order to convince him to go to the mall; if we find them, I’m told it’ll be plenty distracting.”

“Oh yeah. I’ve seen him eat. We shouldn’t have a lot of looking to do.”

“Rachel’s not going to be happy, though.”

“Why not?”

“Oh...she warned Jordan and me to avoid you.”

“What’s she afraid of?”

Sara shrugged. “I don’t know. She’s been pretty protective of everyone lately. Maybe it’s just everything that’s been happening. She doesn’t want to see someone else in her family get hurt and she doesn’t trust you. Or maybe she’s just worried because the guy she met when she was our age ended up getting her pregnant.”

I laughed. “Yeah, that could be it.”

It wasn’t hard to find Ax, Al, and Rachel once we were looking. There were more than a few Andalites in human morph at the mall, but there was only one Ax. Even after all the odd Andalite eating binges the security guards had seen, they could always be counted on to arrive when Ax was left alone with food.

That was how we found him: alone and being watched by security. At least no one was trying to drag him out of the mall this time. They were content if he obeyed all the necessary laws in his pursuit of more food. Of course, he was still making a scene.

I won’t even bother to describe it to you; I’m sure you’ve heard it all before. Bits of food and condiments everywhere, children gawking, that old bit. It never really amused me and

now it's all really old. Forgive me if I don't go into every little detail of the same old gag.

I grabbed Ax's arm and forced him down in a chair. "Ax, calm down. You've eaten food before. Why must you do this every single time?"

"You're one to talk," Sara muttered.

"And while we're at it, where are Al and Rachel?" I asked, ignoring her. "Shouldn't they be watching you or something?"

"I was hungry so I came to get some food."

As if on cue, Rachel and Al appeared. It was kind of dangerous for Rachel to go out in public, in case she was recognized. But she was older now than she had been when anyone had last seen her, and with the addition of a few minor changes, it was unlikely that anyone would recognize her.

"Ax! What have I told you about wandering off?"

"I am fine, Rachel. I am perfectly capable of handling myself. I am an adult, after all."

"Only in the broadest sense of the word." She turned to glare at Sara and me. "And what are you two doing here?"

"Tobias is no fun, so we thought we'd try to find you three," Sara told her.

"What was David doing at our house anyway?"

“I was looking for Al,” I told her. “I didn’t realize he’d be here. How many times do you need to drag him off to the mall anyway? It seems like he was here just yesterday.”

“That *was* yesterday,” Rachel informed me. “We’ve got a lot of shopping to do.”

“Why?” I asked.

She looked away. “You should ask Tobias. He’ll tell you.”

“Tell me what, Rachel?” She didn’t say anything. I looked to Ax and Al. “Do you guys know what this is about?”

“Apparently,” Ax told me, “Rachel knows something that we do not.”

“Oh, big surprise. Tobias tells her secrets,” Sara sighed sarcastically. Ah, alliteration. “I’m sure he’ll tell you all soon. Maybe it has something to do with all those aliens he’s been calling lately.”

“Well, you’re supposed to meet him in half an hour,” Rachel told us. “Ax and Al and I were just leaving.”

“There’s a meeting? Why didn’t I know about it?” I demanded. Were they having secret meetings without me? It wouldn’t be the first time...

“Because you’re kind of hard to contact. We told Jeanne to tell you, Marco, and James. You must have just missed the

memo.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Or maybe they didn’t want me there.

“It must have been an accident,” Al said as though reading my mind. “Rachel assures me that this is a very important meeting. One that no one could miss.”

Oh great. That could only mean horrible catastrophes were sure to ensue. Ah, the life of a transforming rat.

## CHAPTER 4

This meeting had a totally different feel to it than the ones I had grown used to. Usually, there was a big meal in front of us (granted not even I could eat Rachel's cooking, but still...). Sure, the atmosphere was never festive, but there wasn't the pervading sense of impending doom that I felt going in to this one.

Tobias was seated at the head of the table, as usual. Rachel took a seat to his left, Ax and Al to his right. I sat at the other end, as far away from Rachel as I could get. Sara had made the wise decision to disappear. Although no one had told her exactly what was going on, I think she realized it was Animorph business and knew to get out of the way.

Marco, Jeanne, and James arrived last. James was an interesting story, I think. He is...my opposite, I suppose. I grew up with a loving family; he was alone. I had a healthy human body; he was confined to a wheelchair for his whole life. But the very thing that was my curse, the morphing power, was a blessing to him. He gained everything I had lost. Maybe it's true what they say: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Marco sat down and moaned. "Oh man. This just does not

feel good. Does anyone else feel all the negativity in this room?”

“It’s going to get a lot more negative if you don’t shut up,” Rachel snapped. At the same time, Jeanne said, “I think part of that is that everyone knows you’re going to say something ridiculous, Marco.” Sometimes, in spite of everything, it’s hard to remember they aren’t related by blood.

“I have some news,” Tobias began. He never sounds happy exactly, but this was definitely beyond his normal tone. He was not happy about this. “The Visser launched an attack on the community center. He sent a transport ship full of Kelbrid and Guraff to attack it, supported by a full squadron of Bug fighters.

“Mersa’s forces met them in space. In the resulting battle, the transport ship was destroyed by the Blade ship. The Visser lost about half a squadron of Bugs, Mersa the same. Early reports suspect that Guraff escaped in one of the Bugs.”

“Why do you sound so disappointed?” James asked. “I thought that was what we wanted.”

Tobias nodded. “It is. Mersa can take care of himself now. Which means that we don’t have to sit here and babysit him anymore. And the other front has been neglected for far too

long already...”

“Wait, you mean...go back?” Marco asked. “What about the fight here?”

“Mersa can’t really afford expand his operations. He has a very limited number of Yeerks at the moment and has to wait some time to breed some more. They’re actually overextended as it is. They got greedy and nervous and grabbed more hosts than they could handle. Already they’ve had to take Yeerks out of Horks and stick them in humans just to keep hosts from getting free. Now’s the time to strike the Visser’s forces.”

“What could we do to them?” Marco asked. “How can we do some real damage?”

Tobias turned to Ax. “Do you want to explain?”

<I would be honored, Tobias.> Ax went through a whole hell of a lot since I met him so long ago. He did a stint as the Visser’s host and that messed him up. And in our last battle, he lost an eye to the Kelbrid. Now, he had a stylish eye patch covering the burn marks from the Kelbrid’s acidic blood. He always made me nervous, but now he scared me.

<The Kelbrid have a few weaknesses. They are driven by an almost Taxxon-like need for battle. But on top of this, they have a very fast metabolism. If not properly and frequently

fed, they starve rather quickly. It takes a great deal to fuel the Kelbrid body.

<In the event that a Kelbrid is unable to feed, it is capable of going into a hibernative state that will prolong its life. When traveling from world to world, the Kelbrid are often in this state. Otherwise, the expenditure of food that would be necessary to keep them alive during the journey would be astronomical. I believe that sums it up, Tobias.>

Tobias nodded. “Right. Here’s what I’m thinking. Ax also told me that the Visser doesn’t exactly feed his Kelbrid. Guraff’s elites are fed, but the others are left to die. This is why he only imports Kelbrid when he needs them. He just doesn’t have the resources to feed most of them.

“According to Ax, he stationed several packs of Kelbrid on the Hork-bajir world. His personal team of smugglers transports them from the Hork-bajir planet to a waiting transport ship beyond the sensors of the Andalite blockade. The transport ship then brings the Kelbrid to Earth. This is faster than waiting for the One to ship him some.”

I realized where this was going. <With the recent loss of that transport ship that Mersa’s people took out, he’ll be importing more Kelbrid. Since he needs them in a hurry, he’ll

use the ones from the Hork-bajir world. If we keep wiping out transports, he can't get more Kelbrid.>

Marco caught on then. "And because he doesn't have the resources to sustain his other Kelbrid, they'll go into hibernation. That'll be a massive blow. And all their facilities will be massively exposed. No amount of humans or Hork-bajir could ever overcome a Howler, two Andalites, a pair of Garatrons, and a couple of lions."

James sighed. "I wish I had a cool alien morph."

Tobias ignored him. "Yeah. This could be the opening we need, now that we know about this weakness in the Kelbrid. It's time for us to strike back. So pack your bags everyone because we aren't coming home until this is all over."

I snuck a glance at Rachel, who was carefully not looking at anyone. This couldn't be easy for her, to have us all leave to fight the war. Now I understood the dark look in Tobias's eyes.

## CHAPTER 5

Being a rat, I had no bags to pack. When I needed cloths, I just borrowed Al's, since we were about the same size. With nothing better to do, I hung out at Marco's while I waited for the Andalties and Jeanne to arrive. The Reliquary was kept in Marco's basement. I figured I'd find James and kill the time with him. He seemed like a good enough guy.

I met him and Marco in the dropshaft. "Oh, there you are," Marco said to me. "Morph to human. I just remembered something I think you'll both like."

I did as I was told. Forgive me for not giving you every detail of it; I'm sure you've heard it all before. The growing, the lack of fur, the slight suppression of my instincts. There's really nothing new to tell you there. All I'd be doing is trying to make this take up more space and make it look longer and more intellectual.

I was in human morph by the time we reached our goal: the first subbasement of Marco's mansion. It was right between the hangar and the grotto. Don't ask me why he needs a grotto; I try to not go in there. The less I know the better.

"What's on this level?" I asked. I had never found any

reason to go here.

Marco smirked at me. More than usual, I mean. “The firing range. I figured, why not have one? You never know when it might come in handy. And it’s a great way to blow off some steam.”

We went down a short, concrete-walled hallway to a massive, steel door. Marco typed in a code and pulled open. Inside was the firing range and armory. One wall was actually just a rack of weapons. All kinds of weapons. Shredders, Dracon beams, and a bunch of alien stuff I’d never seen before. There were also good old human guns of all kinds. Most of this stuff had to be illegal.

James pointed to something on the rack. “Marco, is that C4? And are you keeping it next to two boxes of grenades?”

“Uh...yes and yes. Don’t worry, I’m kind of trained in their use. Nothing should accidentally go off.”

“Marco,” I said, “this has got to be unsafe storage practices. I mean...is any of this stuff legal?”

“Some of it. And some other stuff, like the Shredders, you can get if you have a government issued permit.”

“Ah. And do you have one?”

“Let’s not make this about me. Just shoot something; it’ll

take your mind off things.” He gestured to the stalls. There were six of them, with targets suspended from the ceiling in front of them. I took a close look at the targets. They were all people from Marco’s life. I chose a stall with the Drode looking at me.

I heard the TSWEE of a Shredder and saw green light burn a hole through the target in the lane next to mine. I heard James hiss something. I guess he wanted to try out one of those Andaltie weapons he had seen before.

The weapon in my hands I recognized as some sort of magnum. I don’t know more specifically. I used to be way into guns and could tell you the whole history of a gun just by looking at it. But things had changed a lot while I was gone. Now, I just barely recognized this.

I could have gone with one of the Alien weapons. Most people would have, I guess. But there’s something special, for me at least, about a bullet. You can almost feel it travel down the chamber. There’s something intrinsically deadly about it; and because it’s deadly, it’s exciting. Give me a good bullet over a flash of green light any day. And there’s that special smell, too.

I know my technique was improper. My father had taught

me how to shoot a long time ago. I know I was being an idiot. I had one hand on the weapon and I wasn't wearing anything to protect myself. My father would have been ashamed at my lack of form. I fired anyway.

I emptied six rounds into the Drode cutout. They were decent shots but far from perfect. One round missed it entirely, and another two didn't hit the body. But three of my shots were good.

I heard James laugh as he fired off a shotgun. I tried one, too; it was pretty fun. We fiddled around with all sorts of weapons, including some prototypes Marco had somehow managed to finagle out of the government. We definitely had some things the Chinese military would rather we didn't know existed.

Then, Marco brought out his latest acquisition. A brand new M-16. "Hey guys, I was thinking of giving this to Rachel for her birthday? What do you think?"

"I think that will end with someone getting seriously injured," James answered. "This will end badly for someone."

I nodded. "Someone's going to die."

Marco just shrugged. "We'll see. Oh, look who's here."

Tobias, Ax, Al, and Jeanne came in. Tobias nodded to

Marco. “Our stuff’s already in the Reliquary. We’re ready to go at any time.”

The four of them caught sight of the targets. Then, in unison, they broke out laughing. I didn’t even realize Andalites could laugh. Or Tobias, for that matter.

“What’s so funny?” Marco demanded.

“Nothing. It’s just...” He was laughing too hard to finish the sentence.

“You’re all such armatures,” Jeanne supplied.

<That is indeed the source of the hilarity,> Ax confirmed.  
<Marco, if this is an elaborate joke, you have finally succeeded in making me laugh.>

Al did what he could to remain respectfully silent, although he was still laughing in my head. <David, please tell me you were not the one shooting at the Drode. Were you blinded at the time?>

Ah... friends.

## CHAPTER 6

Before we were allowed to leave, Tobias walked all around the Reliquary, running a loving hand over every surface. The ship had been badly damaged not too long ago. With Mersa's resources and Al's help, he had completely restored it and expanded the cockpit. There was more living space now. Getting ready for the future, perhaps?

Once Tobias was done fondling the ship, we set off. There was a subdued air about everyone. Maybe James wasn't disappointed at leaving, but that would make him the only one. Even I wasn't thrilled about it and I wasn't leaving family behind like the others.

"Alright," Tobias said after about an hour of floating around beyond the atmosphere. "Here's our procedure. Jump in if you have any objections or things to add. Transports are slow and poorly armed, so it'll be escorted by some Bugs; Ax tells me that four is the magic number."

"We can handle four Bug fighters, can't we?" James asked.

"We could handle a Dome ship," Tobias assured him. "After we destroy the bugs, I want to see if we can't find something useful to do with the ship. We'll knock out its engines. I'll blow a hole into the cockpit. Some of you will

board the ship. Interrogate the commanding officer. Fine out all you can about these Kelbrid smugglers. We'll report the smugglers to the Andalites and that'll help to seal up the Visser's operations on the Hork-bajir world."

"Board a ship full of Kelbrid? That didn't go well last time," Marco muttered.

<Too dangerous,> I agreed. <I just don't think it's worth the risk. Besides, if they catch these smugglers, the Andalites might find out what they're transporting and those aren't questions we can answer.>

Tobias nodded. "Yeah, maybe you're right. The Electorate is already breathing down my throat demanding to know what it is we're doing down here. I shouldn't have let them make me a prince. Sooner or later, I'll have to answer to them."

"That won't go over well," James muttered. "Let me ask you, Tobias: do you realize how illegal this war is?"

"What do you mean illegal?"

"Well, just from what I've seen and what Marco has briefed me on, you're formally allied with Yeerks, for one thing. Mersa and his crew? The Andalites won't like that. And you're keeping the Kelbrid presence a secret; that goes against their military laws. And since they made you a Prince, I'm

willing to bet they'll want to hold you to those. You're carrying out attacks without authorization, severe violations of morphing laws, and I'm pretty sure that a lot of what you've done to this ship is illegal. And that's just the stuff I know about.”

Tobias turned to look at James. There was no expression on his face, but his eyes were ice. “Are you calling me a criminal, James?”

“No. Well, yeah, but only in the technical sense. I don't think anyone would actually put you on trial, but...well, if anyone wanted to, they could.”

It was suddenly very tense on the ship. “But they couldn't prove anything unless one of you testified against me. You wouldn't betray me, now would you, James?”

“No,” James said instantly.

“What about you, David?”

<Of course not.>

“I wonder how many times you've made that promise...” I didn't like the way he was looking at me. Like a snack or something. How much of a hawk was he still?

I suddenly realized just how on edge Tobias had been lately. He had been acting more and more like Rachel. He

went with big, destructive plans when a subtle approach might have worked just as well. He had been leading us in ridiculous, suicidal missions. And things had been getting more and more stressful for him as time went on. Dealing with Mersa, covering himself from the Electorate, his friends and family members getting captured by the Yeerks.

There was the possibility that he would snap, morph to Howler, and kill us all. It was a remote possibility, but...

“Chill, Tobias,” Marco said. “None of us would ever testify against you if it came down to it. I definitely couldn’t; I’m as guilty as you. And you saw my armory... That’d get me life in prison at the very least. You’re just too stressed out right now.”

“Yeah, maybe. Maybe it’s because I haven’t killed anyone in a while.”

<That was human humor?> Al asked so Tobias couldn’t hear. At least, I hoped Tobias couldn’t hear him.

<I am not certain,> Ax told him. <David, was he telling a joke or did he mean that?>

<Your guess is as good as mine. But Marco isn’t laughing which tells me that this just got creepier,> I answered. <I’m starting to get worried, guys. You know him better than I do;

are we going to have a problem in the near future?>

<Tobias has always been able to maintain control in the past,> Ax assured me. <I do not think there is anything that we need to worry about.>

Maybe Ax was right. But I didn't think so. I know better than anyone what a man looks like when he's on the edge, and it looked to me like Tobias could tip over at any time. And if he went off the deep end, we were all screwed.

# CHAPTER 7

An alarm sounded and red lights flashed all over the ship. I took a look at one of the screens and it showed that we' would be encountering the transport ship in exactly five minutes provided that no one suddenly changed their velocity. "Show time," Tobias called. "Ax, take the primary weapons station. Al, handle the auxiliaries. Be careful of my maneuvering; they're pretty atypical, Ax."

We closed in on the transport. It looked kind of like those Skrit Na flying saucers you always see on TV. But beneath the dish it had a boxy structure holding engines, life support systems, waste disposal, etc. Jutting out from that was a triangular bridge. More engines hung from beneath the dome. There were a few weapons, but nothing to worry about.

What did make me nervous was the full squadron of Bug fighters accompanying the transport ship. <Twelve of them?> Ax questioned. <That is far more than usual.>

<Why the extra security?> I wondered. I got my answer.

A voice came over the communication system. "So good to see you again, young beast. I missed you in our last encounter. Perhaps if you had been there, noble Prince Aximili would still have all four eyes."

I knew that voice. To be honest, it was a voice that scared me. Guraff 427, probably the only honorable Yeerk in all the galaxy. If he had been any other Yeerk, he would have spoken with the typical sneer. What he said would have been insulting or sarcastic. Not Guraff. He truly did regard Ax as a ‘noble prince’ and he probably really did miss Tobias.

“Sorry I didn’t show up, Guraff,” Tobias told him. I’m not sure what their relationship is like. They almost seem like friends sometimes. Or friendly rivals. “I had some personal business to attend to at home. Rachel’s pregnant, you know.”

“Then you have my congratulations, assuming the child is yours,” Guraff said. “Please send her my regards. Assuming that she is not on the ship, of course.”

“Nah, I left her back home.”

“A wise decision, though not one I can imagine her being happy about.”

There was silence for a moment. To me, it seemed like a tense silence. Everyone was prepared to spring into action at a moment’s notice. Well, everyone but Tobias, who actually seemed relaxed.

“Why the extra security, Guraff?”

“In light of the recent difficulties, Esplin wants to be

certain his Kelbrid arrive whole and intact. I would advise you to turn around now, young beast.”

“Please. Smacking down a squad of Bugs with the Reliquary is like...well, smacking down a bunch of bugs. For your own good, I’ll let you go now.”

“We both know I can never do that.”

Tobias sighed. “Yeah, I know. I suppose it all ends this way. Goodbye, Guraff.”

“Do not count either of us out yet, young beast.” Then the Bug fighters began to move in formation. They broke into three groups. One circled around the transport ship. The other two groups came out to attack us. The way they were maneuvering, we’d be taking two ships from each side.

“Ax, take out the pair directly in front of us. Al, clear our out right side. I’ll see how well these slugs dance.” The Reliquary’s forward guns started to blaze, but their beams were going wild. The Bug fighters decided it was time to start shooting at us.

Al let loose a barrage of Shredder fire at the two fighters to our left. They broke formation. At the same time, Tobias rolled the ship up and to the left.

“Idiots. They forget: altitude is everything,” Tobias

muttered. He angled the ship downwards and dove at the fighters below us like...well, like a hawk on a rat. Again Ax cut loose with forward cannons and again he missed completely.

“Ax, what gives? Have you gone blind?” Tobias cut off when he realized what he was saying and who he was saying it to. The forward cannons blazed again and shredded two of the fighters. Tobias tipped the Reliquary’s nose up and blew past the reforming squads.

<I see you have relieved me of my station,> Ax stated flatly, obviously more than a little disgruntled.

“Sorry, Ax-man, but until you have more practice shooting with just three eyes, I need someone else on this. Does anyone else know how to work these guns?”

“The auxiliary guns are not that different from those on the Yeerk craft with which I have trained,” Jeanne offered.

“Fine. Al, take the primary weapons station. Jeanne, take Al’s place. Ax, keep your eyes out for the other Bugs.” All the while, Tobias was twisting the ship at insane angles, dodging Dracon beams. He didn’t fully succeed, but the Reliquary’s shields didn’t suffer too greatly.

Jeanne’s shooting was a bit erratic at first; probably

because of Tobias's unpredictable flight patterns. But she soon got the hang of it. Within the next minute of the battle, she had destroyed two Bug fighters and Al had vaporized three more.

The remaining three Bug fighters abandoned the transport ship to help their remaining two comrades. *Wait. The remaining three Bug fighters? I thought? <Guys, we're missing a Bug.>*

*<Above us,>* Ax said. *<It almost looks like they're going to hit us.>*

Tobias spared a moment to glance at the view screen on the roof. "Oh sario!"

## CHAPTER 8

He rolled the ship and tipped it one way. The Bug fighter, instead of colliding with us nose-to-back scraped across the tail end of the underside. That got the alarms going.

“Sario! We’re losing oxygen. Al, see if you can get on that. Jeanne, try to grab the primary weapons. Anyone know how to work the auxiliaries?”

<I’ve had a little practice wi->

“Why the hell don’t you have hands? You know what? It doesn’t matter, it’s all thought controlled. Just grab that node with your yummy little paws and start shooting. I think that was Guraff who scraped us; no one else would have expected to survive it.”

Al dashed past me to the rear of the ship. I could hear a hissing noise; apparently the oxygen seeping out of the hole that bug had made. I started to run towards the spot he had vacated. Apparently, James thought it was taking too long. He picked me up and threw me at the node, a shiny silver ball sitting on the control panel.

I placed my paws on it and concentrated. Immediately, it was like I was seeing through the barrels of the guns. Crosshairs floated across my eyes. I didn’t have the kind of

skill it took to manipulate all the guns separately, so I just concentrated them all on one fighter.

There were two Bugs behind us, one of them higher than we were, the other on level with us. I guess the other three were in front of us, since I couldn't see them.

Without warning, the world spun around me. I guess Tobias reversed directions, because suddenly I was looking at three upside-down Big fighters. <Tobias, are we upside-down?>

“Just shoot damn it! AI, how's that leak coming?”

<I am repairing it now, my Prince. We will be fine as long as I am not interrupted.>

<David,> Ax called, <Guraff is coming up from your angle.> A damaged Bug fighter came into view. Half the bottom was scraped off. Definitely the one that had collided with us.

I opened fire on him, but Guraff rolled away. I switched my attention to the other two Bug fighters behind us. I heard Jeanne give a shout. I guess she nailed one of the others.

I unleashed a hail of beams in their direction and managed to destroy one. There was no satisfying explosion, since those don't happen in space because there's no oxygen, but it did

break apart nicely.

“David, get these slugs off my ass!” Tobias yelled.

<I’m trying!> I yelled back, giddy on the rush of battle.

“How’s that leak coming? I need a good hand at my guns.”

<As I said, Prince Tobias, as long as I am not interrupted->

“Ax, help him. James and Marco, watch the screens.”

The remaining four Bug fighters were forming up behind us now, two above and two below. I couldn’t aim at the ones below. Not good. Again I sprayed at Guraff. Again I missed.

“Damn it David now is not the time for learning. You know what? Hawk and rat, David. You drive, I’ll shoot. Got it?” As a matter of fact, I did. It was like when a hawk was swooping down on a rat in a field. We both knew what that was like. And I knew how to survive it.

I maxed out the speed; a considerable velocity. My goal was the transport. Maybe Guraff could risk shooting at it, but if they damaged it, no other Yeerks could possibly survive the Visser’s wrath. That was the safe place.

I almost scraped the bottom of the ship off of the saucer. Heard a sound like breaking glass. “One crash into the transport,” Tobias said. I heard that sound again. “And one crashed into my Shredders. Loop us around, David. Jeanne,

just unload into the transport.”

I did as I was told. I swung back around and then decreased my speed. The forward cannons blazed, green light punching through the weak shields of the transport ship. Guraff and the other Bug fighter knew it was too late. They chose that time to leave. We were too busy tearing up the transport to chase them.

We all took a turn playing with the primary cannons, destroying the ship. There was almost nothing left of it by the time we were done. Maybe it was sick that we got pleasure out of that. Oh well. After all the Yeerks and Kelbrid had done to us, I think we deserved to enjoy it a bit.

“Okay,” Tobias said. “Ten Bug fighters and an entire transport of Kelbrid with no loss to our side. And earlier today, the Yeerks lost another transport and an additional six fighters. I’d say we’ve been victorious today. But it’s time to press our advantage. I’m taking us to ground and then we’re going to hit them where it hurts most.”

“Oh sario,” Marco muttered, earning him a sharp elbow from Jeanne.

“Yep,” Tobias grinned. “The Yeerk pool.”

## CHAPTER 9

Tobias landed the Reliquary in a patch of woods that had been its home a month or so ago. “Time to get all nice and feathery,” Tobias told us, still in a good mood from his recent victory. “Birds, birds, one and all.”

He was almost fully morphed before I even remembered what my bird morph was. A golden eagle, by the way. I guess it’s kind of weird; I’m the only one who grows when I morph into a bird. Again, I won’t give you all the minute details, but I will say this: at one point, I was a rat with eagle talons and feathers. Take in that image if you can.

We left through the roof hatch of the Reliquary, a motley flock of birds. A large red-tailed hawk led us, followed by a peregrine falcon and a northern harrier. A second red-tail and an osprey were behind them, with a third red-tailed hawk and myself making up the rear.

<This doesn’t look too odd,> Marco joked. <Tobias, any reason you’re not biting our heads off over flocking up like this?>

With absolutely no expression in his voice whatsoever, Tobias answered, <The last flocking I did end in pregnancy.>

That was met with shocked silence from all but Marco, who burst out laughing. Maybe killing those Yeerks really had

put Tobias in a better mood. If so, we really needed to be concerned. If he was getting too bloodthirsty...we might need to start looking for a new leader.

<Seriously, though, you're right, Marco. I have an idea. Marco, Ax, and Al, come with me. Jeanne, take David and James and circle around for a bit. Do about a half hour of recon and then meet us in the alley next to the Cinnabon. Oh, and don't be alarmed.>

<Alarmed? Why would we be alarmed?> I asked.

<You'll know when it happens.> With that, he, Marco, and the Andalites peeled off. Jeanne, James, and I separated a bit trying not to look like we were flying together.

We spied out the town for a bit but didn't see anything obvious. That's the trouble with the Yeerks. Just by looking, you can't see them unless they let you. Even if you know the signs as well as we do, you can't tell. Generally speaking, you don't know Yeerks are involved until it's too late.

After about half an hour, we circled back around and went to the Cinnabon. I realized why we might have been concerned. Standing in the alley, barely concealed by a pair of dumpsters and a row of trash cans, were an Andaltie, two Kelbrid, and a nine foot tall Hork-bajir.

I landed on a dumpster. <Okay, Marco and Tobias must be the Kelbrid, but when did Al acquire Guraff? And Ax, why is your eye back?>

I heard Tobias's voice in my head. <Al is Ax morph, from when we rescued Ax and Al got captured. Ax acquired Guraff during that incident on the Blade ship, when Guraff was holding him down.>

<I also acquired Guraff, when he was choking me,> Al supplied. <But although the Yeerks likely cannot tell the difference between Prince Aximili and Prince Imrahil, they would notice Prince Aximili's missing eye, so it was necessary for me to morph him.>

One of the Kelbrid nodded. <I figured,> Tobias said, <that they'd probably step up security in light of everything that's been going wrong for them lately. But they'd never refuse to admit the Visser; especially if he was escorted by Guraff and a pair of Kelbrid.>

“What about the rest of us?” Jeanne asked.

Marco took over. <Ax tells us that the Yeerks probably wouldn't recognize you or James or David if he was in human morph. So morph away and let's get this show on the road. I feel so obvious right now and I really want to eat you guys.

On the plus side, this little tail is fun to swish.>

<Oh, and we took the time to grab you some cloths,>

Tobias added.

We demorphed and then I morphed to human. I didn't ask where they got the cloths and they didn't tell me. The Animorphs used to have a rule against stealing; they made that very clear to me. I assumed Marco would send a check to whoever this stuff belonged to. Or hey, maybe he owned the company or something. I really don't know what all business he does.

We entered through the side door of the building, the one that led inside from the alley. It was locked, but when you're rolling with the Visser, Guraff, and two unusually large Kelbrid, a locked door doesn't stand in your way for any noteworthy length of time.

We basically stormed the place. We walked in like we owned the place, mostly because we were pretending we did. After all, the Visser doesn't step lightly and Guraff is impossible to ignore even when he's being quiet. Kelbrid are likewise visible. As for James, Jeanne, and I...we tried to look like we had some sort of authority.

Al snapped at the terrified looking man at the front desk.

His voice was a perfect imitation of the Visser's. <You! Deactivate the BioFilters; my Kelbrid are not yet registered. And prepare my transportation to the Pool. I refuse to walk down that tunnel. I have lost more than two hundred Kelbrid today and more than a squadron of Bug fighters. You had best not keep me waiting.>

When you have a very angry, very authentic Visser, there are never any delays.

# CHAPTER 10

We arrived at the pool three minutes later. <Is it just me or are the Yeerks getting stupider?> Marco asked. <I mean, they didn't even ask for a password or anything.>

<Here, where their power is strongest?> Tobias answered. <Not likely. Especially since it's well known that we aren't even on this side of the country at the moment.>

This was seeming like one of those days when everything just goes right. I was scared out of my mind. Things never go this well. I knew, I could feel it in my bones, that things were going to end poorly. And still, I had no idea how badly this would go.

We got out of the little train-like vehicle at the door of the Visser's office. Tobias nodded. <Security, Al.>

Twelve seconds later (yes, I counted), Al informed us that the high tech door security was disabled, but the door was still locked. A minute later, Jeanne had us inside. Ax, still in Guraff morph, led the way in, followed by Tobias, Marco, and Al. The rest of us concentrated on morphing. This would all get bloody really soon.

A minute later, the Visser's office was occupied by a pair of Garatron, twin lions, two Andalites, and a Howler. It was

like some twisted version of Noah's Ark. I guess Marco thought so, too, because he said, <You know, if there was suddenly some sort of massive flood, we'd be really well prepared.>

<Guess again,> James countered. <All our morphs are males.>

<Oh. Right. Hadn't thought of that.>

Ignoring them, Tobias nodded to the computer on the Visser's desk. <Ax and AI? Delete everything. Every last thing. And then turn up the temperature in the pool. We're cooking some slugs. It's about time we reminded them that we're here.>

The Andalites went to the computer. Marco and Jeanne took up positions near the back door. James and I gathered at the front. Tobias stood before the one-way glass window and gazed out over the pool. No doubt he was imagining an actual victory instead of the halfway ones we've gained so far.

<Tobias?> Ax called. <You may want to see this. It is a recording of a conversation between the Visser and Guraff that took place less than an hour ago... You need to see it.>

<Project a hologram, then, Ax.>

A moment later, there was a very realistic hologram of a

miniature version of the office was projected on the table. The Visser paced in around the table. Guraff stood at attention. It was too hard to see details of the hologram, but I knew what the Visser's new body looked like.

In our last battle, we had been joined by Prince Imrahil, and Andalite traitor. In the end, Guraff abducted him and gave him to the Visser to use as his new host. Maybe, in a way, it's what Imrahil deserved. But I hope not, because if so then I deserve far worse. And, seeing the upswing Tobias and James's lives have taken, I'm starting to worry that people really do get what they deserve.

"Two transports, Guraff, and sixteen Bug fighters," the Visser raged. Anyone other than Guraff would have been terrified. No, never mind; anyone other than Guraff would have had his head on the floor right now. But the Visser wouldn't kill Guraff; maybe even *couldn't* kill him. I've seen Guraff stand against Andalites before.

"There was nothing to be done, Esplin. We could not have known that the Rebels possessed the Blade ship. And we could not have expected the Reliquary to appear in our transport route. Our Bug fighters are useless against such odds. I advised against the mass transport of Kelbrid from Hork-bajir

in the first place, if you recall. It is far too easy for the Andalites or others to intercept such a thing.”

“It isn’t the loss of the Kelbrid that bothers me. Not even the loss of the ships, really. The Kelbrid are limitless, and ships can be rebuilt. We do not even need a fleet at this point anyway. No, what bothers me is that we’ve started losing, Guraff. Everything was going splendidly, and suddenly we are losing left and right.

“Mersa rebels and we lose our second front; they now appear to be allied against us! My previous host was taken from the Blade ship itself. And then, as if to add insult to the injury, they stole the Blade ship, too! And now we’ve lost more than two hundred Kelbrid, sixteen Bug fighters, two transports, and their staffs, not to mention the Bug fighter crews just in the past twelve hours. And what have we taken from them? Nothing.”

“Yes, you seem to be in quite the predicament,” rasped a new voice. The speaker spoke very oddly. He stressed the letter ‘s’, held it out far too long. His inflections were off, and his rhythms. He sounded more alien than any alien I had ever met. I had heard this voice twice. Once when I was recruited to work for the One. The other time was when we were sent

off on the bizarre mission that ended with me returning to the side of the Animorphs.

The back door of the office in the hologram, the door through which we entered opened. But instead of the tunnel or the transport, the other side was just darkness with stars zipping past. He stepped through.

He was a tall man and unnaturally thin. His hair was the same color as the Blade ship while his skin was an unnatural grey. He wore a suit that matched his hair; the same suit he always wore. For some reason, he held a briefcase in one hand. I don't know what was in it and I never want to know. There was something odd about him, something unnatural; or maybe supernatural. The...color for lack of a better word... seemed...off. Just a hair away from being natural or real. It was somehow very disturbing.

“You have made quite the mess of things, Esplin Nine-Four-Six-Six. Despite Guraff's efforts to clean it up,” the man continued, adjusting his tie as he spoke.

The Visser bowed at the waist. Guraff remained standing, although he saluted the newcomer. “Why have you come?” the Visser asked.

“To inform you that this mess will have to be cleaned up.

You have failed to squelch Mersa Five-Two-Eight's rebellion. This cannot be allowed to continue. Mersa is not a player in this game and cannot be allowed to be a factor. I am going to take care of this myself."

"You are?" Guraff questioned.

"Well...as much as I ever take care of anything myself. I have sent two assassins to deal with the matter. They have seven days to put an end to Mersa and his rebellion. They will do it. By the seventh day, Mersa will be no more."

Ax ended the hologram. <This could be a problem.>

<Thank you, Captain Obvious,> Marco sighed.

<My rank would actually be Captain-*Prince* Obvious,> Ax corrected him.

<Are you joking?>

<Do what with the what now?>

# CHAPTER 11

Tobias cursed. It wasn't sario this time, so I'll try to avoid offending you. <We cannot allow them to succeed,> he said flatly. <Alright, Ax and Al. Roast these slugs and then we'll be on our way. As much as I'd like to press our advantage here, we cannot let Mersa's people fall.>

<How do we know this is even a threat to them?> Marco countered. <I mean, it's just two assassins. How->

<Can we discuss this later?> Jeanne suggested. <We have rather important business to which we should attend here.>

James looked at Marco. <The French chick speaks better English than you do.>

To which he replied, <The short dude has more money than you do.>

<The pool is set to boil. With Yeerk technology, it should happen in the next thirty seconds.>

<Thirty seconds?> I questioned. That was a lot of water to boil so quickly. Was that really possible?

<Unfortunately. Andalite technology could do it in half the time, but it would actually take longer for me to upgrade the system than for me to do it this way. I've just cleared the database. The Yeerks now have zero information. That

includes the codes to stop the pool from boiling.>

<Al, you're a genius,> I told him.

<I am aware.>

Any celebration was cut short, though. The door flew open and in stormed the Visser, followed by Guraff and several Kelbrid. Behind them, I could see more Kelbrid lining the stairs. Maybe all of them in the pool were here. Instantly, they knew exactly what was going on and what caused the sudden commotion in the pool. The Visser hissed out a single command. <End them.> His tail snapped at Ax.

The two adult Andalites squared off. Al took up a position in front of the door. James and I flanked him. We couldn't let the Kelbrid enter the room. If they filled it, we'd all be dead. Marco and Jeanne prepared to handle the Kelbrid who had already entered the room with the Visser. Guraff and Tobias stood before each other. Guraff smiled. "I have waited a long time for this, young beast."

It was like some switch had been pressed. The room exploded in violence. I concentrated on one thing and one thing alone: the Kelbrid in front of me. I had a terrible flashback to the fight on the Blade ship not long ago. We had all almost died. It had been too close. Far too close.

<Hey, why don't we just shut the door?> James called. Then, <AHHH! I hate how much their blood burns.> We slammed the door shut and turned around to see the chaos behind us. Marco and Jeanne were running around in circles, whipping Kelbrid with their tails. But the Kelbrid didn't seem to mind it.

Ax and the Visser stood on the table, tails flashing like lightning. They were evenly matched. Maybe the Visser was slightly larger, but Ax was faster. Both brought a lifetime of experience to the fight. And they had been fighting each other since Ax was Al's age. It was an even match.

I have never before seen anyone stand toe-to-toe with a Howler. Howlers are basically invincible. As fast as Andalites, as strong as Hork-bajir, and with a collective memory to boot. Not to mention regenerative powers and steel claws. And Tobias was a particularly great warrior.

But Guraff didn't budge an inch. He scored a few hits against Tobias but they were nothing that didn't heal almost instantly. Tobias couldn't penetrate the thicket of blades that Guraff was able to throw in his way. Sooner or later, Tobias would triumph because Guraff was not as tireless as a Howler. That fight was just a matter of time, I thought.

Al and I turned our attention to the Kelbrid in the room while James kept himself braced against the door to keep the Kelbrid out. It was a losing effort. They were pushing it open, inch by inch. <Marco, Jeanne, get the door. Al and I will handle these things.>

Twin blurs sped past me and slammed into the door, forcing it back into place. The three Kelbrid formed up around Al and myself. <Still beats eating garbage,> I muttered, diving on a Kelbrid.

Al dodged a Kelbrid stinger and then followed up with a few slashes of his own, drawing some blood. <I will have to take your word for that, David, as I have never attempted it. I have been thoroughly warned against it.>

The third Kelbrid hit me in my side and knocked me on my back. I could see the stinger poised to strike my heart. I roared one last time, a lion about to meet his end. I heard an identical roar and then saw a tan blur as James dove on the Kelbrid. Now the alien was on its back. With a swipe of his paw, James broke its neck.

I didn't waste time celebrating. I pounced back on my original opponent and sank my teeth deep in his throat. I felt some pressure as his stinger went through my side, but there

was no pain. That was one of the effects of the Kelbrid poison. My teeth were burnt out of my head, but it was a small price to pay for the life of a Kelbrid. James helped Al finish off his opponent. The three of us went back to help Marco and Jeanne hold the door. And to watch the other fights.

## CHAPTER 12

<Guraff,> the Visser called, <I fear we may be at more than a slight disadvantage.>

“Flee, Esplin, Take the tunnel. I will hold them.”

<You can’t possibly->

“GO!” And to my astonishment, the Visser hesitated. “My third duty is to my Visser, Esplin. My second, to my Emperor. And my first to those who have shed their blood with mine. You are all that matters. Go now! The world can do without Guraff Four-Two-Seven but not without you, my Visser.”

<If I live, I shall owe you my life.>

“A debt already repaid.” The whole time, they did not stop trading blows.

The Visser leapt from the table and charged out the door through which we had come. <Guraff, the transport->

Guraff slammed the door before Ax could get through, cutting off the Visser’s thought speech. “Will you fight me again, Prince Aximili?”

<I sh->

<Ax,> Tobias interrupted. <This is my fight. Come, Guraff. We are not yet finished.> Privately, he said, <Once I get him away from the door, Marco and Jeanne are to go after

the Visser. Ax, Al, David, and James have to hold that door. I'll handle Guraff.>

<So be it,> Ax sighed, stepping back.

Guraff smiled. Then, he reached down and grabbed the stinger of a fallen Kelbrid. I watched, horrified and fascinated, as he severed the arm at the elbow with one of his blades. He brandished the stinger like a sword.

<What does he need a weapon for?> James demanded.

<He *is* a weapon!>

<Kelbrid poison,> I realized. <The only thing I've ever seen overcome the Howler regeneration.> Suddenly, I wasn't sure who would win this fight.

Guraff leveled his sword at Tobias. "Come, young beast." And then he charged. Tobias deflected the sword, but the momentum of Guraff's assault smashed him into the window behind him. It cracked. Guraff leveled a kick at Tobias and struck. The blow sent him through the window. Guraff leapt out after him.

Marco and Jeanne bolted for the door. I couldn't help but rush over to the window and watch. Tobias stood up, his wounds from the hall and glass already healing. He cracked his neck and raised his fists. Guraff, uninjured by the fall,

raised his sword and advanced again.

It was a blinding display of speed, but it was also more than that. There was true skill involved, not just the flailing of blades, teeth, and claws that we usually do. Guraff knew what he was doing. There was a definite technique to his attacks. The same went for Tobias.

Tobias's claw scrapped across Guraff's face. The veteran warrior jerked his head back just in time to avoid losing his eye, but he had four new scars. His sword tore a gash along Tobias's side, but it didn't look deep.

I realized that James, Ax, and Al were standing next to me. All the Kelbrid were watching, enraptured. They loved battle and here was a great one. The Howler, their ancient enemy, against their new commander. A great fight indeed.

Tobias caught a downward swipe of Guraff's sword with one clad and trapped one of the Hork-bajir's wristblades with his other. He headbutted Guraff in the throat and then kicked him under the chin. Guraff stumbled back but recovered quickly, his poison-dripping blade flashing like that of a samurai. Samurai; that word meant servant. How appropriate that I should think of Guraff that way.

They circled around the boiling pool, each seeking to lure

the other too close to it. I guess it was only natural that they fought their way up the narrow bridge over the pool and onto the wider area where the Kelbrid dominance fights were performed.

Tobias had several deep gashes in him. So did Guraff. Both were tiring. At the same time, both were too infused with adrenaline to even think about stopping. This had gone beyond two men fighting for their lives or even two generals fighting for their nations. Hell, it wasn't even about two conflicting ideals. This had become a primal fight; a duel of gods.

Tobias was getting desperate now. If he slipped up or if Guraff gave him a strong blow, he would fall into the boiling pool. Not even a Howler would survive that.

“KEEEERROOOOOWW!” Tobias cut loose with his most devastating weapon. The reason the Howlers got their name. Even the Kelbrid flinched, and I dropped to the floor and put my paws over my ears. I think Al was screaming in pain, and we weren't near the source

Guraff didn't flinch. Blood seeped out from his ears, but he himself did not move an inch. I can't fathom the strength of will that would take, the self control. The Kelbrid circled up around the pool now and even filled the bridge. There was no

way out for Tobias now.

<Al, cool down the pool!> I shouted. Tobias couldn't stand and fight. He needed to be able to flee. I looked over and saw that Al was already at the computer.

<I will have to rewrite the entire code,> Al said. <This could take...I do not know!>

Tobias glanced up at the window, at Ax. <Get them out of here, Ax,> he said. <That's an order.> Then he turned to Guraff.

<Some words of wisdom, Guraff. 'Death is lighter than a feather. Duty heavier than a mountain.' Robert Jordan.>

Guraff's eyes widened. Then he smiled. "So be it, young beast. So be it." He raised his sword.

## CHAPTER 13

Tobias leapt at Guraff. He landed on the sword. I could see it coming out of his back. His claw sank into Guraff's throat and Hork-bajir blood sprayed everywhere. They sank to their knees, locked in a deadly embrace.

<Tobias, you must move!> Ax shouted. <The pool should be cool enough!> I had no way of knowing if that was true or not. I didn't even know if Tobias could hear us.

Ax didn't wait to find out. He jumped out of the window and fell more than twenty feet onto a stone floor with broken glass. There was a sickening CRACK of his legs breaking when he landed. That didn't stall him for long. He was already morphing. Black and orange fur replaced his blue coat.

James looked at me. <Lions are cats, right?>

<Yes. Yes they are.>

<Which means we have nine lives, right?>

<I suppose so...>

<And we always land on our feet.>

<Oh sario.> Together, we jumped out of the window.

Tobias started to struggle off of the sword, but Guraff held him down. I saw Guraff's beak part, but I couldn't hear what he was saying. Then, I saw something incredible. The pool froze

over. Completely.

Tobias laughed. I didn't even know Howlers could do that. Guraff did, too. And then, for some reason, he let Tobias go. Our badly wounded leader rolled off of the bridge and onto the ice. Ax, a limping James, and I (also somewhat injured by the fall) rushed towards him. Together, we helped him onto Ax's back.

Guraff struggled to his feet, leaning on his sword, already morphing his injuries away. "No one is to stop them. The young beast...no, he is no longer so young. You deserve a new name, Prince Tobias. You have truly earned your own place. You are more than the shadow of your father."

He was morphed to human form now, a large black man in black spandex. Tobias was also mostly demorphed and could now walk on his own. "The Kelbrid have a name for me. In your language, they call me the God General. You have proven yourself my equal, Prince Tobias. So now, I call you the Devil Prince."

Tobias smiled despite his fatigue. "I like it."

We struggled up the stairs and out into the tunnel, Al joining us. He was staring in complete awe at Tobias.

Honestly, I was more impressed with Guraff. During my brief

stay with Crayak, I saw what a Howler could do. But Guraff stood against the best of them. Maybe it wasn't so surprising that the Yeerks had been so much trouble.

“What did you and Guraff say to each other before he let you go?” James asked, now demorphed. I was also demorphed, riding on Al's back. Ax was supporting Tobias.

“He asked if there was any way we could have parted, both still alive.”

<What did you say?> I asked.

“I told him hell would sooner freeze over. And then... then the Yeerk pool froze. That was why we laughed. It was like a sign or something, telling us both it wasn't time to die yet.”

<Tobias, where did you learn to fight like that?> Ax asked. <Your technique was at least as refined as Guraff's.>

“Well...I did something I never wanted to do. I used the Howler's collective memory. I've avoided it because I was afraid that if I let it have power, I'd lose myself in the Howler mind. But I had no choice this time.”

<You are alive,> Al said. <That is the important thing.>

<Perhaps just as important is the death of all the Yeerks in that pool,> Ax added. <Today has been a day of immense loss

for the Yeerks.>

“Speaking of losses and Yeerks, what happened to Marco and Jeanne and the Visser? We seem to have lost them,” James reminded us.

“I’m sure they’re better off than we are,” Tobias assured him. “Let’s just get back to the Reliquary. It’s been a long day.”

The Cinnabon was deserted except for Marco and Jeanne. They were sitting calmly at a table, eating cinnamon buns. Ax’s jaw dropped.

“Oh, hey! Visser got away,” Marco said between bites. “His staff, too. Guess a pair of Garatron convinced them to abandon the Cinnabon for the time being. So I figured, why not grab a few spoils of war. What took you so long?”

“I’ll tell you when we get back to the Reliquary. We’ve got some things to discuss. But before we go anywhere,” he said, leaning over the table, “everyone has to swear to me that Rachel will not find out how close Guraff and I came to killing each other today.”

“What’s in it for me?” Marco asked.

“Swear it to me, Marco. And don’t lie because to Ax, this is a church and he’ll lop your head off if you sin in a

Cinnabon. Swear it or you'll never get to find out why Guraff now calls me the Devil Prince.”

“Devil Prince? Now this I have to hear.”

## CHAPTER 14

When we got back to the Reliquary, Tobias flopped down on his bed, only half awake. We had told Jeanne and Marco the story about what had happened. Marco had vowed to get the security recordings of the fight; whether for blackmail or entertainment, he didn't say.

"Okay," Tobias said. He was lying on his back with an arm over his eyes. "We need to decide what to do now. We've done a hell of a lot of damage to the Yeerks here. I think it's safe to put it on the backburner for the moment. We need to worry about these two assassins."

Marco shook his head. "I say we take a break here and let these assassins run their course. If they destroy Mersa's rebellion and we take care of the Visser, it's all over."

<Marco, perhaps you are not aware of the extent of the Visser's penetration,> Ax responded. <He has effectively usurped control of that entire town. All the power centers, the mayor, the police, hospital, et cetera, are under his control. More than eighty percent of the children are Controllers, and more than sixty percent of adults. Although we may cripple, even eliminate the current Kelbrid presence, it would still be a massive undertaking to root them out.>

James nodded. “What I was thinking is this. You’ve explained it to me that this war needs to stay a secret. But that’s just so the One doesn’t get involved. The One clearly is not on Mersa’s side. So once we get rid of the Visser, we can let the military deal with Mersa.”

<That’s what I’m thinking,> I agreed. <But for now, it’s better to keep Mersa and friends alive. The One wants them gone, which is a plus in my book. And they tie up the Visser, which is another bonus. And the fact is that if we let them die now, all we’ve been through lately will be for nothing.>

“But,” Jeanne said, “Mersa is a danger to our family and our home. He may not be able to expand at the moment, but it’s only a matter of time. He’s a threat to our home. If we can let these assassins do our work for us, I say we do it.

<Al? Ax?> I asked.

<I follow Prince Tobias,> Al told me. I figured that’s the response I would get.

“Ax?” Marco asked. “And don’t say you’ll just do what you’re told. Technically, you’re the highest-ranking officer here.”

<Technically, since Tobias is the captain of this ship, he outranks me,> Ax reminded Marco. <However, if you require

my vote, I will never condone saving the lives of Yeerks, for any reason. For my part, I say let these assassins have their way. Perhaps we should help them.>

Tobias shook his head from his position on his bed. “There’s more going on here than just strategy. The One himself, or at least that suit guy, is getting involved. This isn’t about the war. There’s something more at stake.”

“Oh goodie! The Devil Prince hits the mark once again. Great title, by the way. I love it. I’m having shirts made right now,” came a peppy voice. We all groaned. We all knew that voice.

The Drode appeared, lying next to Tobias. “Hmmm... Rachel’s bed is comfier,” he muttered.

“So move,” Tobias replied, shoving the Drode onto the floor. “What’s going on, Imaeus? What’s at stake here?”

“Possibly the entire war,” the Drode answered. “These two assassins...they aren’t supposed to exist anymore. I don’t know how the One got his hands on them. They could be the key to ending this war for one side or the other.”

<How?> Ax asked. <What is so special about them?>

“Oh, you’ll know when you meet them. Once you see them, you’ll know why they’re so dangerous to you and to the

One. It was a big risk bringing them into this. Something about Mersa must have the One very nervous; something we all overlooked.”

“What makes them dangerous to us?” Jeanne asked. “Are we targets as well?”

“Not that I know of,” The Drode answered. He had, in fact, decided to occupy Rachel’s bed after all. “Yep, much comfier. Really, Tobias, I don’t understand why you insist on torturing yourself. Unless you’re some sort of masochist. I knew we had something in common.”

“So why are they dangerous to us?” Marco repeated.

“Oh, that. Well, think about it. The reason the One can’t use his power directly is because of you; we won’t let him as long as you oppose him. And as long as Mersa’s faction is fighting him like this, dear Esplin can’t bring his full forces to bear on you; he can’t waste them while Mersa poses a serious threat to his power. But with Mersa out of the way, he could use all his power against you. And with what he’s learned from little Ally’s mind, he wouldn’t have any problems getting to you. You wouldn’t last long. And with you out of the way, the One wins. He gets to use his full power to take over Earth or wipe it off the map altogether. That’s it as far as Earth goes.

That's why these assassins are important. Well, that and the other reason..."

"What other reason?" James demanded.

"Does it bother you, Jamie, when someone implies something important and doesn't bother to explain it to you so you're left to wonder just what he was talking about?"

"Yes. Very much so."

"Oh goodie." And then he disappeared. On the plus side, we were all now wearing black t-shirts with a picture of Tobias's face on the front and the words "Devil Prince" in red letters on the back. Yes, even me.

## CHAPTER 15

“Okay,” Marco sighed, “I think it’s obvious that we have to go after these assassins now. But for the record, I do it under duress.”

“Noted,” Tobias sighed. “Take us home, Al, I’m getting some sleep.”

I couldn’t help but be fascinated by Tobias. He was one of the reasons the Animorphs beat me all those years ago. Yeah, Cassie was the biggest part, predicting me like that. And the others all did their parts. But it never would have worked if I hadn’t underestimated Tobias.

I counted him out. I thought I had killed him. Now, just thinking about what I had seen today, I realize I was a fool to ever think I could kill him. And I never should have counted him out. It seems so stupid now.

Tobias was my equal and opposite like James was, but in a different way. We both lost everything to the Yeerks. But in the end, he carried on and I turned away. And now...now, he was the hawk and I was the rat. An appropriate metaphor, I suppose. Now, in Guraff’s eyes, he was the Devil Prince and I was just another traitor.

“What could it be about these assassins?” Marco

wondered.

We speculated for the next few hours but agreed on nothing. Jeanne couldn't get over the fact that they were working as a pair; she had always been trained that an assassin works alone. The whole time while we argued, Tobias slept.

Ax finally woke him up when we landed. It was evening now; dinner time. We parked the Reliquary in Rachel's backyard; thank God Tobias was driving at that point because no one else would have been able to fit it in there. There was just barely enough room; the landing had to be almost completely vertical, which is just about impossible to do.

Tobias didn't bother to knock on the door. I guess there was no reason for him to; he *did* live there, after all. And even if Rachel's mother didn't like him (I couldn't really blame her), Jeanne was definitely an official part of the family.

Rachel noticed us almost as soon as we entered. The rest of their family was eating dinner. She startled them all when she leapt up and rushed to the door. I think the rest of them expected to see a bunch of Hork-bajir rather than our motley crew.

She held Tobias and Al close for a moment. I saw her lips

move, but I couldn't tell what she said. It must have been something to the effect of, "What went wrong?"

Tobias said, "Nothing. It went off without a hitch. But... I'll tell you after dinner." In a louder voice, he asked, "What's for dinner?"

Naomi glared at him as he pulled out a chair and sat down. Maybe she was angry he was acting like he belonged, an opinion that she clearly didn't share. Jacques didn't seem to mind, though. He offered Tobias some food and then turned to the rest of us. "Well, what are you waiting for? I cooked tonight, and I've been paid for that in the past."

That got us. We weren't expecting a *good* meal tonight. Ax and Al morphed, but I remained as a rat. James, Jacques, and Marco went to get more chairs. Rachel looked at Tobias like she was about to yell at him to go and help, but she stopped. I guess she saw the exhaustion in his eyes.

He had been so close to being dead just a few hours ago. Had any of the rest of us been that close? Yeah; Ax, Imrahil, Al, James, and I were probably that close during our recent ordeal stealing the Blade ship. And afterwards... afterwards, we sat in a circle and cried; all of us. But not Tobias; not this time. He just kept going.

In the middle of the meal, there was knock on the back door. That was kind of surprising, since it seemed like everyone we knew was here. Who could possibly want to join us for dinner? Guraff and the Visser? Not likely. Well, maybe Guraff, if he was in the neighborhood...

Naomi got up to answer the door. Suddenly, Rachel looked scared. What was going on? Then I heard Naomi's voice. "Oh, hi. We thought you'd be here earlier, Cassie."

Tobias stared at Rachel, who glared back. "She's my friend, Tobias. I know you don't want to see her; that was why I waited until you left."

Cassie walked into the room, led by Naomi and followed by a guy I recognized from a hologram I had seen once. Her fiancé, Ronnie Chambers. He paused in the doorway when he saw the crowd around the table.

Naomi grabbed one of his shoulders and guided him to a seat. "Now Ronnie, no need to be shy. We're always happy to have you here." I didn't miss the venomous glance she shot at Tobias. I don't know whether she was trying to be sadistic or not, but the seat she guided Ronnie to was the one next to Tobias.

Ronnie sat down and started assembling a plate of food.

Then, he paused and pointed to me. “Uh...someone’s pet rat is on the table.”

<Oh, that hurts,> I said. Sara rubbed me behind one ear, which I kind of liked. It made me feel better. Of course, she snapped her hand back when Rachel glared at her.

Without looking at Ronnie, Tobias informed him, in a cold monotone, “That ‘pet’ rat is named David. He is a man with more honor, courage, and loyalty in one whisker than your entire bloodline. He is your superior in every way. Respect him as such.”

“Okaaaay....” Ronnie trailed off, looking helplessly at Cassie, who just shook her head. This was going to be an interesting meal.

## CHAPTER 16

Everyone tried to keep up polite conversation, but I was only focused on Tobias and Ronnie; and a bit to Sara, who kept trying to talk to me. Marco was dividing his time between placating Jeanne and waiting for opportunities to make the Tobias-Ronnie situation worse. Everyone else was pretty much just ducking and covering; even Rachel.

Of course, Naomi couldn't miss any opportunities to demonstrate her distaste for Tobias. "Ronnie," she said, "tell me again what it is you do."

"Well, Cassie and I do whatever we can to help the endangered and wounded animals in whatever parts of the world we're needed. We've made a few trips to the Andalite world, too."

"Oh," Naomi said, "so you *save* lives."

"Well, animal lives... But I *do* consider those nearly as important as human ones. I mean, I'd never choose an animal's life over a human's, but if I can do anything to help an animal, I will."

"Fascinating," Naomi sighed. "And Marco, how is your television show coming along? I heard you're one of the wealthiest men in the state now."

Marco shrugged. “So they tell me. I don’t really keep track of all that. I just ask my accountants, ‘Can I pay for this?’ and they say yes.”

“So you’re so successful that you no longer even have to keep track of how much money you have.” She turned to Jacques. “He’s like a younger version of you. Rachel, what is it that your boyfriend does. If anything?”

Before Rachel could answer, Tobias said, “I kill people, Naomi.” He looked at the knife in his hand for a bit too long for us all to be entirely comfortable. I think he might have been eying the reflection of Ronnie’s throat in it. “It’s a family business. And I’m very good at it.”

That was met with silence until Rachel added, “Mom, he’s a Prince in the Andalite military and the Captain of the deadliest ship in the known galaxy.”

“Oh, that’s right, he’s a Prince. That reminds me, Tobias. A Glorfindel-something-something-”

“Glorfindel-Learas-Zaknefein,” Tobias supplied. “Is that the name you were searching for, Naomi?”

“Yes, that’s right. War-Prince Glorfindel wanted to know what exactly it was you were doing here. He was not very polite in asking. I didn’t know Andalites knew how to curse.”

“You’d be surprised what they’ve learned from humans,” Tobias answered. He was still staring at the knife. I backed up to the edge of the table. See, I know that, even though he’s human, the hawk is still in Tobias. And if he ever loses control, he’ll probably go after me out of sheer instinct.

“Yes, well, he certainly displayed his knowledge of the human vocabulary you taught him when I told him what it is he’s been paying you to do here.”

“And what is it I’ve been doing?” Tobias asked coldly. Naomi knew about the first front, but she had no idea he’d been dealing with Mersa, a Yeerk in her own backyard.

“Well, nothing military, certainly. I just told him about Rachel. And about Alloran disappearing for a few days with you making no apparent effort to find him. And I couldn’t forget to mention that your...friend...” she glanced at Ax, “is now half blind.”

“To be fair, he’s only one-quarter blind,” Jacques offered. “He still has three eyes; that is more than anyone else at this table. Except for Alloran, of course.” The warning look Jacques gave her wasn’t lost on me. A wise man, Jacques; or very foolish. Apparently wise, because Naomi took the cue to be quiet.

Of course Ronnie felt the need to try to bridge the gap between himself and Tobias. I could see why he and Cassie got along so well. “So, Tobias...you’re a Prince. That must be exciting work.”

“Do you like blood on your hands, Roger?”

“What? Well...no, not particularly.”

“Do you like to watch the life leave a man’s eyes? Do you like to feel someone’s heart stop beating under your hands?”

“No! Of course not!”

“Then you wouldn’t find it terribly exciting.” Tobias must not have seen the warning looks Rachel was giving him because I can’t believe the man in whose hands I’ve been putting my life could be stupid enough to go on if he had noticed. “How many people have you killed, Robby? Oh, but that’s a silly question; I doubt you’ve killed any. What about animals? How many animals have you killed?”

“Well...sometimes you have to put one down-”

“Do you enjoy that?”

“No! Why would I? Would you?”

Tobias gave a creepy chuckle. “That was my life for...was it six years or seven? You see David over there?” Tobias waved to me. Nervously, I tried to raise a paw to wave back. It

didn't work well, so Sara picked me up and did it for me. That was kind of weird... "I ate little things like him for meals. You'd be surprised how much fun it is."

Ronnie gave Cassie a pleading look. She relayed it to Rachel, who just glared at Tobias with no discernible effect. "Oh, Rachel," he said suddenly, "Guraff sends his regards and his congratulations."

"Who's Guraff?" Ronnie asked.

"A business associate," Tobias told him.

"An Andalite?"

"I don't see how that's any of your concern."

"I was just--"

"It's best not to talk about what Tobias does for a living," Cassie interrupted him. "Ronnie, why don't you tell Tobias about those birds you saved last week."

"What kind of birds?" He seemed interested finally.

"Golden eag--"

Tobias looked at James. "You've got a background in xenobiology and medicine. Any idea why Ax's eye is still melted out? Take a look at that, Richard. Ax, show him."

"I do not think he would wish to view--"

<Just do it,> I advised Ax.

Ax demorphed, which was disturbing enough. And when he showed us his acid burns on top of that...well, Jordan left to go throw up. That pretty much killed all conversation for the rest of the meal.

## CHAPTER 17

Between Naomi's subtle insults, Tobias's exaggerated creepiness, Sara's weird tendency to touch me, Rachel's glares, and everyone else's terrified silence, it was the most awkward dinner of my life. And trust me; I've had some awkward ones in my time. I, if you've forgotten, have led a very odd life.

We all decided to spend the night there, even Cassie and Ronnie, who were determined to be friendly despite dinner. The day hadn't been particularly strenuous, but we were feeling lazy and kind of drained from the events. Tobias was up to something in the Reliquary; probably avoiding Cassie and Ronnie.

It hadn't been easy for Rachel to find places for everyone. Jordan, Sara, and Jeanne were sharing a room. Cassie and Ronnie were occupying the room that Tobias and Rachel, who were sleeping in the Reliquary with the Andalites, had for most of our stay in town. James and Marco slept in the living room. And me...well, I'm a rat. I can sleep anywhere.

I was sitting on the railing of the porch that overlooked the backyard. I knew, intellectually, that the Reliquary was just inches from me. I could probably touch it if I tried, and I had

stubby little rat arms. But it was cloaked so well that I couldn't see it at all. This was probably good, seeing as Jacques and Naomi would have had a bit of difficulty explaining what an extremely deadly looking spaceship was doing in their backyard all night.

I sensed someone approaching long before a human would have. That's the paranoid gift-curse of the rat. It's better than all those curses that aren't gifts as well, I suppose. I glanced over my shoulder. Sara.

<What brings you out here?> I was starting to feel uncomfortable when she was around.

"I was just wondering where you wandered off to. I keep hearing that it's pretty easy for you to get eaten."

<Glad you care,> I said. I don't know if I was sarcastic or not. I don't know if she was serious about being worried I'd get swallowed by an owl or something. I mean, it's a serious concern, but I didn't think she would be too worried.

"Well, someone has to look out for you."

<I look out for myself just fine.>

That was met with silence. For a few moments, she stood there, unsure what to say. So I guess she said the first thing that came to mind. "So, what do you know about James?"

<Why do you ask?>

“Well...he and Jordan seemed to be getting along pretty well during dinner, which was pretty difficult for anyone to do...”

<Ah. Well, I don't know much. Near the end of the first war, the other Animorphs recruited James and some friends of his to help them fight. James was one of the few survivors; we don't know who the others are. Crayak brought James to us to help us fight the war.”

“Wasn't Crayak the one who brought Rachel back?”

<Yeah, that was him; mostly.>

“So he's a good guy, then.”

<No. Oh God no. He's just using us to do his dirty work. Once he's done with us, he'll discard or destroy us. I know; I've been on the receiving end of his 'help' before.>

“If he's so untrustworthy, why do you work for him?”

<I don't. The decision was made long before I had any choice in it. And as bad as serving Crayak is, serving his enemy is worse. I've been on the receiving end of that, too.>

“So none of you trust Crayak then. Do you have a plan for when he turns on you?”

<No. None of us do. We can't figure out how to twist

powers like that around us. Maybe Tobias...but I think he trusts Crayak. He and Crayak's servant, the Drode, seem to be friends, even.>

“What about that guy he mentioned at dinner? Guraff?”

<Guraff...he's an enemy, too. A Yeerk.>

“It sounded like he and Tobias were friends.”

<They are. It's...really complicated,> I finished lamely.

<Twice today they've almost killed each other but they seem to enjoy it. I think Tobias is losing it. I'm not sure he can tell friends and enemies apart anymore. First the Drode, then Guraff, now Mersa...>

“Mersa's an enemy? I thought he was some guy Tobias worked for or something.”

<Mersa is a Yeerk rebel leading his army against the Visser's own.>

“Oh. But that means Mersa is on our side, then, right?”

<Not really. He still wants to enslave the human race. It's just not at the top of his priority list.>

“So...Tobias is working with the Yeerks?”

<To an extent.>

“Isn't that illegal?”

<He doesn't care.>

She was quite for a few moments. Then, “Does Rachel know about any of this?”

<Yeah. But I don’t think she realizes how much she needs to be concerned. He’s starting to lose his mind, Sara. It’s all too much for one person to take. Believe me, I know better than anyone that, when it all reaches a certain point, you break. Tobias is going to snap, and I’m afraid it’ll be soon. And if the way it happens, if the hawk gets loose, then I don’t think any of us can stop him.>

“Wow, that’s really-”

Al appeared in front of us. I guess he just got out of the Reliquary. <David,> he said almost as fast as a Garatron, <get to the Reliquary. We must go now. I will get the others; Tobias is already preparing the ship for departure.>

<Al, what’s going->

<The assassins have struck.>

# CHAPTER 18

For once, it felt crowded on the ship. It just wasn't supposed to carry all of us. All of us being Tobias, Marco, Jeanne, James, Rachel, Cassie, Ronnie, Ax, Al, and me: the talking rat. Despite all Tobias's efforts, he couldn't persuade Rachel to leave the ship. Nor could he keep Cassie out. And despite the overwhelming cry of protest from the rest of us, Ronnie came as well. The idiot thought he could protect Cassie if something bad happened. The idiot thought she *needed* protection.

Tobias was driving us to the community center. <Does someone want to tell me what's going on?> Marco grumbled.

"Same here," James agreed. "Al just ran in the house shouting something about the assassins and then we got herded back into this tin can."

"This tin can is one of the most powerful ships in the known galaxy short of capital class transports like a Dome ship; and we could probably take one of those out," Rachel told him. He was quite after that.

Tobias informed us, "I just got a call from Mersa. His compound was sieged Not attacked, not infiltrated: sieged These two...well, the security footage he salvaged only

showed two of them, but it wasn't enough to see what they looked like. But two of them tried to go in through the front door.”

Jeanne muttered something rapid and French under her breath. “These cannot possibly be the One’s trained assassins.”

“Well...you’ll need to see it.”

That didn’t take long. We landed in the parking lot. There was a pair of Hork-bajir lying in the doorway. I could see them from the Reliquary. Before he opened the hatch, Tobias gave us a two word order that I’ve become familiar with. “Battle morphs.”

If Ronnie wasn’t worried before, he was now. We were a weird mess of shifting, twisting nightmares. The only ones not morphing were Ronnie, the Andalites, and Rachel. Tobias and Cassie finished first and dropped out of the hatch. Cassie wasn’t her usual wolf; she was a polar bear this time.

Next went the Andalites, followed by Jeanne and Marco, nearly identical Garatrons. James and I were the last two. We were both lions. We didn’t just look the same; we were the exact same lion. And just about equally experienced. It was like I was watching my own back.

We followed Tobias down the halls of the community

center. There were bodies everywhere. Hork-bajir, Taxxons, even a few humans foolish enough to get in the way of... whatever went through here. There were burn marks from Dracon beams or Shredders, and claw marks on the doors and walls. What happened?

All of this was bad enough. But what really did it was when we got to Mersa's office. I counted eighteen dead Hork-bajir in that room. <What...what could have done this?> Cassie asked.

James turned one of the bodies over and started inspecting it. <Claw marks on this one. Looks almost like...>

<Like what?> I asked.

<Like knife wounds. Four of them, parallel.>

Without any warning or hesitation, Tobias raked one of his claws across Cassie's arm. <Oww! What the hell Tobias?> We all broke up in shouts and grumbling, but he seemed calm now. But if the Howler took control...

<James,> Tobias said calmly, <look at Cassie's new wounds.> Before James got there, I realized what he was implying, what he suspected.

<Pretty much identical,> James said slowly.

<Waitaminute,> Marco said, <we're dealing with Howlers?>

<That seem to be the case,> Jeanne agreed.

<I thought all Howlers worked for Crayak...> James trailed off. Oh, this was bad. I knew we couldn't trust Crayak, but if he was sabotaging his own war efforts...what the hell could he be up to?

<You know what?> Marco said.

<I say we just get the hell out of here.

We get out of this whole situation. Where is Mersa anyway?>

<He fled to the Blade ship with most of his guards.

They're in orbit right now,> Tobias told us. <We need to go meet with them and figure out what to do.>

<Now we don't,> Marco argued. <If Crayak turned against us, we need to get out of this all right now. We're done with all of this. He can lose his own war if he wants to so badly.>

<I'm with Marco,> Jeanne snapped out. But she almost always agreed with him.

This time, I did, too. <Marco's right,> I told Tobias. <The whole reason we've been fighting is because Crayak and the One were enemies. If they're together now, then I say leave them to it.>

<Can't you see there's more going on here?> Tobias said.

Cassie nodded; an odd thing to see a polar bear do. <This

isn't what it looks like. It can't be.>

<The Drode said these two assassins could be the key to ending this war one way or another,> Ax added <I believe we need to pursue this.>

We didn't bother to ask Al. He would follow Tobias to the end, no matter what. It was down to James. We all looked at him. I knew what was going through his mind. <James,> I told him, <think. Don't act out of fear or regret. Think it through.>

<I did. Let's go meet Mersa.>

# CHAPTER 19

We were following Tobias down the hallway again. I was starting to get nervous. For all we knew, the Howlers were still here. Now, a lion is a strong creature, but it's no match for a Howler. Neither were Garatron; their whiplike tails just can't deal enough damage. So Marco had remorphed. He was a Kelbrid now.

<Stop!> Tobias hissed. I heard it, too. Heavy breathing on the other side of the wall. Tobias looked at Marco. <Go get it,> he ordered.

Marco dove through the wall. And I do mean through. The flimsy wall of the community center didn't do anything against a determined Kelbrid. It exploded away from us as Marco traveled through it, Tobias right behind him with the rest of us following.

We were in a sort of atrium. It was a big, tile-floored room, with an upper-level balcony. One wall was made entirely of windows, letting in the moonlight. That was more than enough for a lion to see.

Already, a fight was breaking out. Marco was on top of a Howler. Bu the Howler, lying on its back, delivered a double-footed kick to Marco's chest and actually knocked the Kelbrid

off of him. Before I even realized what happened, both were on their feet again, squaring off.

Tobias was busy with his own Howler. Their claws flashed in the light, bolts of lightning striking each other. Howlers are always dangerous. Their collective memory means that any battle one of them has seen, they all have seen. They had lifetimes of experience. But Tobias wasn't limited to the Howler memory. And slowly, he was gaining ground, forcing the other Howler back.

Ax and James surged forward and flanked Marco, ready to support him against the Howler. <Thanks, but there isn't much you can do,> Marco told them.

Ax didn't lower his tail. <I am aware of that, Marco.>

I think the Howler looked surprised. He glanced over his shoulder at his fellow. The other Howler was too busy trying to defend himself from Tobias to return the look.

Suddenly, both Howlers turned and ran towards the windows. At the same time, they howled. I dropped to the ground, my paws over my ears. Everyone but Marco and Tobias did the same. Those two were still pursuing the fleeing Howlers.

The glass shattered from the force of the howl. The entire

wall of windows exploded outwards. The Howlers leapt out. Still Marco and Tobias followed. Beyond those windows was a twenty foot drop to the ground. None of them hesitated. I rushed to the edge of the windows just in time to see them land.

Marco landed and bounded off without hesitation. Tobias continued on after taking a few moments for his broken bones to heal. He had gone through a lot today; this was the second time that had happened to him in twenty-four hours.

<The stairs,> Ax commanded. <We cannot make the jump but we cannot allow them to get away. We must meet Tobias and Marco outside. Go, now!>

Jeanne was already gone. That's Garatron speed for you. The rest of us found her outside, waiting impatiently for us to catch up. Cassie came last. Polar bears are faster than you'd expect, but not as fast as Andalites and lions.

We were reassembling to go and find them when Tobias and Marco rounded the corner, walking. Ax looked at Tobias. <They escaped?>

<They had a Bug fighter stashed. They hopped in and took off,> Marco told us.

<Which is why we're heading to the Reliquary at top

speed,> Tobias added. <They're not getting away yet, and they'll be easier to take in the air.>

We piled into the ship a few minutes later after demorphing so we would fit. The Reliquary was lifting off before the hatch was even closed. Tobias could control it by thought if he needed to, thanks to some incredible work by Al. He chose to use that now.

“Jeanne,” Tobias said, “what would assassins do now? They failed to eliminate their target and they were seen. What would they do?”

“With Howlers... I think they would continue after their target. They'll go looking for Mersa. And it probably won't be hard for them to find him.”

“Not hard for me, either,” Tobias told her. “We've got the Blade ship tagged. We can find it anywhere.” Sure enough, ten minutes later, the evil ship came into sight, silhouetted against Earth. And I thought I saw a smaller shadow moving towards it.

<Is that the Bug?> I asked. The view screen magnified. Yep, it was the Bug fighter. Or, at least, *a* Bug fighter. It disappeared into the shade of the Blade ship.

“Why would the Blade ship let them in?” Marco

wondered. “Why would they do that?”

Al swiveled a stalk eye to face Marco. <It seems that their hangar security has been disabled. They do not discriminate between friend and foe. The docking bays are open to anyone and anything now.>

“They disabled the security?” James asked. “I didn’t think that could be done remotely.”

“It could,” Jeanne told him, “but whoever was doing it would have to have an extensive knowledge of Yeerk security. And since this Blade ship belonged to a Visser, that would be some of the highest security the Yeerk Empire ever saw, nearly equal to Andalite security measures.”

<How would Howlers be able to do that?> I asked. <And if they can just disable security, why the bloodbath at the community center?>

“Fun,” Tobias said grimly. “The Howlers wanted to play.”

“Then why did they run?” Marco questioned.

“Let’s go find out.”

# CHAPTER 20

We had no trouble docking. The Reliquary was recognized by the guards and, in light of recent events, they didn't bother to hassle us. We spilled from the ship, twisting and morphing as we went, looking for the Bug fighter. The guards were more than happy to point it out to us.

Tobias, Ax, and Al were all armed. Tobias and Ax had Shredders from the Reliquary, and Al borrowed a Dracon beam from the guards. No one else had thumbs or fingers to work a weapon.

<Ax, do you think we should go for the subtle entrance?>

<Yes, that seems preferable. Alloran?>

<As my Prince commands> The three of them blew a hole several feet wide in the side of the Bug fighter.

It was empty inside. Nothing stirred. <Empty? That's impossible,> Tobias said.

<Maybe it was a decoy?> Jeanne suggested.

<No. I can see heat trails. They were just here and now... now they've vanished. That's impossible.>

We looked around for a few moments. Then Tobias shook his head. <There's nothing to be done here. Let's go meet Mersa.> He turned to the guards. "Put the entire ship on

lockdown. No one is to go anywhere.”

<Will that help?> I asked.

<It won't stop them. But it'll give us some warning,>

Tobias answered. <That's about all we can hope for now.>

The guards took us to the bridge without hesitation. Mersa was waiting for us, his arms folded behind his back, looking at Earth. “Hello, Tobias. Animorphs.”

We remained silent except for Tobias. And Marco. <Hey, Mersa. How's the family? Everyone in good health? Been ATTACKED BY HOWLERS LATELY!?!>

“Ah, Howlers. Yes, I should have suspected. You know, you have dealt the Visser some severe blows lately,” Mersa said with no transition whatsoever. “Some severe ones indeed, Devil Prince.”

<Oh, you heard about that.>

“Word travels fast. But the Visser has counterattacked; I believe you saw the aftermath that the Howlers left behind. I wonder...why would I be attacked by Howlers? You would surely know, Tobias.”

<I don't have a clue,> Tobias admitted. <Your guess is as good as mine.>

“Ah. Well, the speculation isn't important at the moment.

Solutions are what matter. I do not know whether or not these Howlers have infiltrated the Blade ship or not. I know little for certain. I know only one thing.”

He turned around and raised his left hand. The guards aimed their Dracon beams at us. Mersa favored us with a cold smile. “I know that I no longer need you. The Visser is weak now; very weak. I could move in and kill him as long as I survive these assassins. And then the only ones who can stop me are you, Animorphs.

“But I learned the lessons of my predecessors. I will not take the risks they took. Now that I have you, I will finish you once and for all. I’ll destroy you, destroy these assassins, and then destroy the Visser. It will all be over very soon.”

Red lights started flashing. Alarms began to sound. <That would be the assassins,> Tobias said calmly. <Believe me, Mersa, you will not be able to stop them. Your entire compound did not stop them. When they get here, you will die. But I can stop them. You’re lucky that I still need you alive.>

Mersa hesitated, not giving the order or ordering his men to stand down. He was waiting for something to tip the scales. Something had to happen or we’d remain in this stalemate

until...until the assassins got there. Then the scale would tip in our favor.

<Mersa,> I said, trying to sound calm, <have you or your host ever heard the song Ninety-nine red balloons?>

“What does that have to do with anything?”

<Just listen.> And then, I did something I had never done in public before; especially never in thought-speak. I started to sing.

*<You and I in a little toy shop buy a bag of balloons with the money we've got  
Set them free at the break of dawn  
'Til one by one, they were gone  
Back at base, bugs in the software  
Flash the message, "Something's out there"  
Floating in the summer sky  
Ninety nine red balloons go by.*

*Ninety nine red balloons floating in the summer sky  
Panic bells, it's red alert  
There's something here from somewhere else  
The war machine, it springs to life  
Opens up one eager eye  
Focusing it on the sky  
As ninety nine red balloons go by.*

*Ninety nine Decision Street, ninety nine ministers meet  
To worry, worry, super-scurry  
Call out the troops now in a hurry  
This is what we've waited for  
This is it boys, this is war*

*The president is on the line  
As ninety nine red balloons go by.>*

And then came the hard part.

*<Nine un nine kriegsminister  
Streichholz und benzinkanister  
Hielten sich für schlaue leute  
Witterten schon fette neute  
Riefen: Krieg und wollten macht  
Mann, wer haette das gedacht  
Dass es einmal soweit kommt  
Wegen nine un nine luftballons*

*Ninety nine dreams I have had  
In every one a red balloon  
It's all over and I'm standing pretty  
In the dust that was a city  
If I could find a souvenir  
Just to prove the world was here...  
And here it is, a red balloon  
I think of you and let it go.>*

Mersa stared at me for a moment. Everyone stared at me. I've never seen a lion, a Kelbrid, a polar bear, a Howler, and a bunch of Hork-bajir with their mouths open like that before. Then, Mersa shook his head. "What does that have to do with anything?"

One of the doors to the bridge was knocked inwards. Two

Howlers strode in confidently, though they paused when they saw us. <Oh, just buying some time. Ready to point the guns somewhere else, Mersa?>

## CHAPTER 21

The Howlers looked from us to Mersa and back again. Mersa sighed. “Kill the assassins.” I breathed my own sigh of relief. Of course, he couldn’t help but add, “And then kill the rest of them.”

The guards leveled their Dracon beams. And nothing happened. One of the Howlers spoke. “A fun fact about Blade ships. The Vissers tend to build in some neat little systems. Like one that suppresses Dracon beams in the event of a mutiny. A little work with the security system and it was easy enough to activate. Your weapons are useless. You’re down to your blades.”

“Blades it is,” Mersa said. “Hork-bajir, advance.”

Tobias had other plans. Privately, to us, he said, <Even if we save Mersa, he’ll kill us. There’s one solution: evacuate him. I’ll hold the Howlers. The rest of you, get Mersa to the Reliquary, He can’t kill us then.>

Could Tobias hold two Howlers? Maybe. But he was right. They were here for Mersa’s head and if we kidnapped him, we would save both him and ourselves.

Tobias took a step forward, since the Hork-bajir were obviously unwilling to do so. “Why are Howlers working for

the One?”

The Howlers looked at each other. The second one spoke. “You’ve got it all wrong. We don’t serve the One.”

“I saw the One tell the Visser and Guraff that he was sending you to deal with Mersa and his rebels,” Tobias argued. “You work for him.”

Again, the Howlers looked at each other. “Guraff?” the first asked.

The second Howler shrugged. “Beats me.” He turned back to Tobias. “Step aside. We aren’t here to fight Animorphs and we don’t want to.”

Something about that struck me as fundamentally wrong. What kind of Howlers were these? Did they even know who sent them? Or were they being played, too... Tobias was right: there was definitely more going on here.

<Go,> Tobias said to us. He raised his claws. “You don’t want to fight? We share a body, but that seems to be as deep as the similarities go.”

The first Howler raised his own claws silently. The second did so with some reluctance. “You want it to be this way? Fine. Let’s do it.”

They exploded in a frenzy of violence. I’d have liked to

watch, but I didn't have the time. We had to make a run for it. But at the same time, I couldn't leave Tobias there. Maybe it's stupid of me, but I'm still trying to make up for all I did in the past. And leaving Tobias to fight off a pair of Howlers wasn't going to do it.

But I was just a lion. A strong beast, but nothing against a Howler. Maybe if I got one from behind, caught him off guard, I could survive. But I couldn't even hurt them, really. Any wounds I inflicted would heal instantly. Howlers healed just about anything.

Then I took a good look at Marco. And at his stinger. And I got a plan. <Sorry,> I said to him. Then I dove on him. As I had hoped, he raised his stinger to fend me off. I sank my teeth and foreclaws into his arm. I felt his acidic blood but more than that, I felt my mouth and paws go numb. The poison. That was what I needed.

<Thanks,> I called, already turning back to the fight.  
<Now get Mersa out!>

Ax dipped his tailblade in Marco's wound and came with me. Al, Cassie, Marco, James, and Jeanne started hustling Mersa off with a few Hork-bajir. With any luck, they'd get him to the Reliquary and away from these assassins.

Amazingly, Tobias was holding his own. He had both claws of one Howler trapped in one of his own. He was kicking said Howler in the chest repeatedly even as he fended off the strikes of the second assassin with his free hand. It was incredible, but it couldn't last.

The trapped Howler shoved hard and knocked Tobias over; it wasn't that difficult, seeing as he was standing on one foot. The Howlers looked at the door through which Mersa left, no doubt seeing the heat trail he left for them to follow. They were distracted. Which gave me my only chance.

I dove on one. My claws pushed deep into his chest. My teeth missed his throat, instead sinking into his shoulder. My aim was a bit off, probably because of the poison that was no in my system. Ax leapt at the second Howler, his tail flashing.

One of Ax's Howler's arms dropped to the floor. Thanks to the poison on Ax's tailblade, the arm didn't grow back. Tobias rolled to his feet, ready to keep fighting.

My Howler kicked me in the chest a couple times and winded me. I released my jaws and he pushed me off. I was definitely dizzy from the poison now. And from the three kicks he leveled into my skull. The blade ship was spinning.

Suddenly, I heard Rachel's voice. It was coming from the

Blade ship's communications system on the bridge. "Tobias, we have a problem. Mersa and the others are here, but it won't be safe to launch the ship."

"Why not?" Tobias demanded. The fighting had stopped dead for the moment. The five of us glared at each other.

"Because I think the Visser's entire fleet is waiting for us. Guraff says hi."

"Launch anyway. Ax and Al can get you through."

"But you're--"

"I said launch, Rachel."

"I'm not leaving with--"

"Alloran, launch the ship. That's an order."

"Prince Tobias, with all due respect--" Al's voice was cut off by Tobias once again.

"Go. Now! Take Mersa back home and keep watch over him. The Visser will want to seize this Blade ship, not destroy it. He'll board us; we'll deal with him then. Now go!"

"Okay..." Al trailed off. "Launching in three...two...one..."

I assumed he launched. Tobias looked at the Howlers. "You say you don't work for the One."

"Better to die," both said. I think they gave us ironic

smiles, but who can tell with Howlers?

“And you don’t know who Guraff is?”

“No clue,” one confirmed.

“You’re about to find out. He works for the One. He’ll come in here with hundreds of Kelbrid, as many as he can cram into his Bug fighters. We’ll have to fight him. Will you?”

One nodded, then the other. “Yeah, we’ll fight with you, Tobias. And if we survive this, we’ll explain everything. But then we’ve got to kill Mersa.”

Again, the alarms sounded. We were being boarded. Ax raised his tail and stood ready to fight. I flexed my claws and shook my mane, trying to clear my mind. <Great. If we survive.>

[b]To be continued...[/b]

Even though it's not over yet, you still get some words of wisdom from Streetlight Manifesto:

*"The story doesn't end here  
Don't fear for our hero ain't near the end  
My friend  
Let's take it back to how it all began: with a Proposition  
And proposition starts with a capital p  
"Or at least for me," is what he said to himself  
But himself ain't a lot when he's got nothing left  
Of what was once a man, loved and loving  
He took that trip that turns something to nothing  
Right and wrong  
There's not a lot a difference when you're singing that poor man's song  
And that song it goes just a little like this:  
  
Ski mask (check)  
Sawed off (check)  
Guilty conscience, fear of death (check check check)  
Everything went numb when he stumbled upon what he thought  
Was going to be another means to the end  
Silence  
Sirens  
It all went down like his nightmare the night before  
I don't want to hear  
I don't want to be near  
I do what I got to do just to keep my nose clean."  
-Everything Went Numb*

Don't miss the next installment of the Animorphs series:

## 67: THE LOSS

A chunk of the Blade ship's wall stretched open enough for the Reliquary to fit out. I could see Bug fighters dotting the sky. I didn't bother to count, but just by looking there had to be more than two squadrons. And that's just from my view. The Visser probably had the ship surrounded.

I demorphed; no use being in a Kelbrid body now. We were all back in our human forms (except for Al, of course). Someone had to give Al the order, we all knew that. Every intelligent bone in my body railed against it, though. Fight our way through that blockade? Suicidal. Insane. Completely, totally, one hundred percent nuts.

I turned to Rachel. "There have to be at least two squadrons of Bug fighters out there," I said to her. "No matter how good Al is, we can't drive them off. Do you realize how insane this is?"

She nodded. "Of course. Are you going to give the order or am I?"

"What if we say it at the same time?" I suggested. Somehow, I felt that if anyone was going to pass this death

sentence, it should be her. Or Tobias, since they were turning into the same person. Seriously. It's starting to worry me, but that's a problem for a different time.

At the same time, Rachel and I said that little thing she's famous for. "Let's do it." Al muttered something about humans and then launched the ship. The thrust knocked me on my back.

"What gives, Al?" I demanded. "The ship's always been smoother than that."

<I am sorry, Marco. I am using full thrust in the hopes that we may get beyond them before they realize it is us.>

That, apparently, wasn't in the cards. Two Bug fighters broke off from the mass surrounding the Blade ship. So did another ship. It looked very familiar. It was the same model ship as the Rachel, the craft we had used when searching for Ax at the beginning of this mess. There wasn't the sense of evil emanating from that ship that told me the Visser was present. But it still had an aura of...steel, I'd say. There was only one person it could be.

Cassie looked at the ship on the view screens. "Whose ship is that?" she asked. I guess she could feel his power, too. Not many people have that kind of aura. Elfangor had it, I think.

The Visser had a different one. There were some people who just radiated a feeling.

Rachel gazed on, her eyes cold. “Guraff,” she whispered. She looked at Al and then shook her head. “You can’t take him, Al. You have to run.”

“Maybe you should show a little faith in the kid,” Ronnie dared to suggest.

Rachel rounded on him. “Do you know who’s following us? That’s Guraff four-two-seven, one of the greatest warriors this or any galaxy has ever known. He has been fighting since the beginning of this war. Al has been fighting for what, a few months? Not a chance of us taking him.”

Al nodded and angled towards Earth. The Bug fighters were still behind us, but Guraff’s ship was rushing forward to cut us off. It was fast; even faster than the Reliquary. I didn’t know that was possible.

He stopped in front of us, his bridge facing ours. Then we heard his voice over the communication system. “Hello, Devil Prince. We met again so soon. Perhaps we are indeed fated to destroy each other this day.”

It was Rachel who answered him. That was fine with the rest of us; Guraff made us uncomfortable. He was a Yeerk, the

enemy, but he and Tobias seemed to have some sort of weird friendship. Rachel, too, apparently.

“Tobias isn’t here, Guraff,” she told him. “He’s waiting for you on the Blade ship.”

“Then it seems he will meet the Visser instead. Esplin is leading that attack personally. You stole his Blade ship from him while he had no host. His pride means that he must take it back with his own hands. Or tail, as the case may be.”

“There are three Howlers on that ship, one of whom is Tobias,” Rachel told him. “Even if they’re killed, they’ll get the Visser before it’s all over.”

“Perhaps; but somehow, I doubt the Devil Prince will be overcome even if all the Kelbrid who live stand against him. It is not yet his time.”

“Who is this guy?” Ronnie whispered to me.

I whispered back, “The guy who can go toe-to-toe with a Howler and come out on top. And just to put that in perspective: all of us in this room, even if we worked together, probably couldn’t last more than three minutes against a Howler.”

“Maybe we can reason with him.”

I gaped at him. But then shrugged. “Anything’s possible, I

suppose. I think he really wants to fight Tobias anyhow. Go for it.”

Ronnie stepped up to the mic. Everyone looked at him.

“Hi, Mr. Guraff. I’m Ronnie Chambers.”

“Should I know you?”

“Um...no, not really.”

“You are another Animorph?”

“No. I’m Cassie’s fiancé. Look, I’m sure we can work something out. We don’t want to fight you and I’m pretty sure you don’t really want to fight us. So why not just let us go?”

“I am a warrior and you are on the battlefield. Why should I not slay you?”

“Because...just look at us! Alloran is just a kid. Cassie was done with this war. I’m a civilian. Marco’s just an actor who got caught up in this. And Rachel’s pregnant!”

“Although I would regret to kill Rachel and her child, I walk the path of the warrior. All who stand on that path must be swept aside. Such is our way. Rachel understands.”

“Okay,” I said, “how about this. We have Mersa Five-Two-Eight here. You let us go and in return, we’ll give you him.”

# PREVIEW SUMMARY

Things are escalating. The Visser is getting desperate. Guraff grows bolder with each day. Mersa has decided he no longer needs the Animorphs. But they still need him, and the assassins are still after him. Enemies press in on every side, while the powers that be watch eagerly, still manipulating events.

But there is more at stake here than just victory or defeat; more than life or death. The secret of the assassins is revealed, as is the true nature of the One. And the man behind the curtain steps forth. Now, it's gone far beyond Yeerks and humans; beyond Crayak and the One. Now, Marco, Jeanne, Tobias, Ax, Al, David, James, and Cassie will come face-to-face with the most powerful being in the universe...

**Part II of a Trilogy**