

67: THE LOSS

CHAPTER 1

My name is Marco. But I really don't have time for introductions right now. I'm a busy man, you know? I'm a guy with a lot of problems. Right now, I had some serious problems. Let me remind you of what I've been dealing with lately.

Okay, I'm sure you know all about the Yeerk war; that's nothing new. What is somewhat new is that our recent ally, Mersa 528, has suddenly decided he doesn't need us anymore. He wants us dead. The problem? We can't let him die because the rebellion will fall apart without his leadership and ambition. And then the Visser will crush it and bring an end to it and us.

The most difficult part about keeping Mersa alive is because a pair of Howlers is hunting him. I'm sure you know enough about Howlers to know that they're basically impossible to stop. The only way to really hurt them is to use Kelbrid poison. Luckily, I have a Kelbrid morph, but it's not too useful against two Howlers at once.

Right then, we were on Mersa's Blade ship, which we had recently stolen from the Visser. The assassins were there, too, looking to kill Mersa. Tobias gave us the order to hustle Mersa

off to the Reliquary and to get him to a safe place while he, Ax, and David held off the Howlers. But there was a slight complication: the Visser.

It must have been his entire fleet waiting outside of the Blade ship for us. Every Bug fighter he still had, along with three transport cruisers and some stuff that looked experimental. Any moment now, they would dock and Guraff would lead packs of Kelbrid into the Blade ship and take it back by force. Not even three Howlers, Ax, and David can stand against that.

All of that, though, was nothing compared to my current problem. Said problem manifested itself in the form of Rachel: a former Animorph who was now Tobias's angry, pregnant girlfriend who was not at all happy that we were leaving the father of her child to deal with Kelbrid and Howlers.

"You are not launching this ship without him," she told Al. He was standing at the control node, already getting prepared. Tobias had given him the order directly. He couldn't disobey. But, see, we knew Al would disobey his Prince for Tobias's own good. He did it before. Someone had to take charge.

I stepped in between the two of them. <Look, Rachel, none of us want to leave them behind, but we can't stay.>

“He'll die!”

<No he won't. The Visser can't afford to slaughter everyone. He'll want as many alive as possible. That means Tobias, too. Guraff wouldn't let him get killed. He'll survive; he always does. But we won't if we stay here and neither will Mersa. Al, launch the ship.>

“Wait,” Mersa protested. “If we fly out now, do you really think we'll make it through?”

<We don't have much of a choice but to try,> Cassie muttered.

Mersa shook his head. “There will be a better opportunity in just a few moments. The Bug fighters are mostly to guard the transports; the Visser can't afford to lose more. The transports will dock and the Kelbrid will start to flood in. At that time, the Bugs will relax their guard. That's when we go. We just need to wait for the better opportunity.”

We all looked at each other. Well, it wasn't exactly looking in my case, since Kelbrid have no eyes, but it was close enough. It was looking in spirit.

<That makes sense,> I agreed hesitantly.

Mersa nodded. “Good. Do you mind if I use the ships communications system to make a quick announcement?”

“What announcement?” Rachel demanded.

“I’m going to tell my men to abandon the Blade ship and regroup at the community center. Perhaps the Blade ship will fall, but not the Rebellion. We must regroup and counter attack.”

I wasn’t sure what to do. If we stopped him, the Rebellion would be destroyed, no question. I never supported Tobias’s plan to help them; in fact, I’ve always been against it. I still was. Especially now that Mersa had tried to kill us. Tobias had ordered us to save Mersa; he hadn’t said anything about the Rebellion. But we did need the Rebellion now. And I couldn’t sacrifice them out of hand like this.

<Fine,> I said. <Make it fast.>

Mersa nodded and spoke into the microphone on the control panel. Al would have cut off his hands if he so much as touched a thing, so I wasn’t worried about him doing something untoward.

“Attention all Yeerks,” Mersa called. “We are abandoning the ship. Evacuate as fast as possible, as many as possible.

Regroup at the pool. We have lost this battle, but we will not finish the war quite yet.

More lights started to flash inside the Blade ship. Now, we could hear the sirens even through the great soundproofing of the Reliquary. The Yeerks were docking. Now was our best chance to get out.

I turned to Al. <You sure you can handle this, Al? I mean, even with Tobias flying, I'd be nervous.>

Al nodded. <I am certain, Marco.>

I took a “look” around me for what could be the last time. Al, standing at the ready, prepared to fly when I gave him the order. Rachel, angry and, for maybe the only time in her life, nervous. She was wringing her hands and fiddling with her hair; definitely odd. Cassie and Ronnie, holding hands now that she was demorphed. James, leaning against the wall, wondering if he'd live or die. Jeanne, looking at me, wondering. Mersa, looking determined and prepared.

Up until now, I had passed him off as just another overly ambitious Yeerk. But now, I saw. He really was a leader. Cunning, ruthless, cautious when it was needed and bold when it was necessary. If we lived through this, he would be a danger. Huh...maybe the Rebellion didn't need our help at all.

CHAPTER 2

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.”

CHAPTER 3

“Marco, we can’t do that!” Rachel insisted.

<I agree,> Al added. <Prince Tobias ordered us to protect him. We cannot now sacrifice him.>

Jeanne shook her head. “He’s a Yeerk. His life is not worth ours. Let him burn.”

I nodded. “Of course, you all know how I feel. It was my plan, after all.”

James nodded. “As much as I hate to give him up like this, we can’t take Guraff. We have to do something.”

“We can’t trade his life for ours,” Cassie insisted. “His life has as much value as ours do. Right Ronnie?”

Ronnie looked cornered. Almost as a distraction, he looked out of the rear view screen. “Look at that...” he trailed off. I did as he suggested and looked. A serious battle was taking place. Or, rather, a slaughter.

Mersa’s people were flying around frantically, without direction. They were desperately trying to break through the blockade, but were failing miserably. They had no organization; just a desperate smattering of aimless pilots. “Looks like all your people are going to get wiped out,” I said to Mersa. “Game over.”

“No, look,” Rachel said. At first, I didn’t see it. But slowly, I saw them. Three Bug fighters who seemed to have a direction; a plan. They were rounding up others. Slowly, a formation grew. They were being shot at all the while, and one of them suffered some minor wounds, but they didn’t stop.

Mersa’s people started to form up around those three. With those at their lead, the Rebels punched a hole through the blockade and began to stream out. I’d guess that three full squadrons escaped. Not a total loss to Mersa’s side, though losing the Blade ship was a heavy blow.

But it wasn’t over yet. The three squadrons turned back around and headed once more for the Blade ship. I guess a full battle was getting ready to happen. Mersa’s people weren’t giving up without a fight.

Rachel turned to Mersa. “You’ve been holding back on us. Who could be flying those Bugs?”

Mersa shrugged. “I have no idea. I didn’t think there was one useful man in my army.”

Guraff’s voice was the next thing we heard. “It’s him. I can feel him. He is the one leading this attack.”

There was something in his voice...I knew who he meant by “him.” Tobias.

Guraff was hesitating, uncertain of what to do. If it was Tobias, and it had to have been, he was still outnumbered two to one. And in space battles, numbers are very important; almost as important as formation.

Now me, I'm no general. I can make a plan just fine, but when it comes to an actual battle, with formations and stuff, I've got no ideas at all. But it seemed to me that Tobias was in better shape. The three squadrons were arranged well, with two holding back and above, providing support for the third, which was leading a charge for the Blade ship.

“What are you going to do, Guraff?” Cassie asked. “You could probably get us; almost certainly. But in the time it takes you to do that, how much damage could Tobias do? He might even destroy the Blade ship. He'll definitely decimate your fleet. How many more losses can your men take? Is it worth it to destroy us? Killing us will bring you a lot of glory, but what honor is there in your own glory when all your comrades die?”

Without any more words, Guraff flew over us, back towards the battle. His two Bug fighters went with him. I looked at Cassie. “I forgot how manipulative you could be. Poor, poor Ronnie. Oh well; he's still better off than Tobias.”

Rachel kicked me in the shin, but I had a lot more important things to worry about. Like whether we should help Tobias or keep going. I had no idea what to do.

I looked around and spread my arms. I meant it as a gesture of helplessness, asking for advice. I didn't have the time to think of any sort of plan. Rachel interpreted it differently. "I am *not* giving you a hug. Ever."

"Then how about some advice? Do we help Tobias or do we continue on to Earth?"

"Help him," Rachel said instantly. Not that I had expected any less of her. I looked around for someone with a rational thought process.

Al's stalk eyes drooped. <Our orders were to get Mersa to safety. We have bought some time, but they will not be distracted for long. We should go now while we have the chance.>

Cassie shook her head. "We can't just leave Tobias and the others to fight alone.

James nodded. "I'm with the girls. I left a lot of people to die a few years ago. I can't do that again. Not if I have any choice."

I was still unsure what to do. What was the rational choice? Maybe, just maybe, we could turn this battle. With the Reliquary's firepower... If we could destroy the Visser's fleet... But could we do it?

Mersa laughed. "Don't you see what's going on? That attack he's leading is just a massive feint. The real prize is us. We weren't the ones who bought time, he was. He's trying to distract them so we can escape. I, for one, suggest that we make use of the diversion he has provided."

I nodded. "Once we're gone, he'll make his own escape," I agreed.

"It *is* something he would do," Rachel agreed. "Fine. Let's go. The sooner we leave, the sooner he does, too."

I took one last look out of the rear view screen as Al hurtled us towards Earth. Mersa was next to me, watching. The two support wings had broken formation and were scattering in the direction of the moon. Tobias's squadron was going to be in a real mess soon, and Guraff was already shooting at him. We may have already delayed too long. It may have been too late. But thankfully, no one else saw. Just me and Mersa.

“Today has been a day of incredible loss for everyone involved,” he said quietly.

I nodded. “Yeah. And it ain’t over yet. There’s one more trial to come; something far worse than this.”

“What could that be?”

I smirked as I so often did. “Rachel will want to make us a snack when we get home.”

CHAPTER 4

Jacques and Sara, Rachel's step-father and youngest sister, were waiting up for us. I guess that was nice of them; especially considering that the rest of the family was apparently sleeping comfortably. That did strike me as a little odd, though; they had to have known we were rushing off into danger.

Rachel seemed to notice it, too. "Where are Mom and Jordan?"

"Locked in the linen closet, unconscious," Jacques said casually. We all gaped at him. Maybe he *was* Rachel's real father. "What?" he said, defending himself. "They wanted to run off to the police or Tri-I or somesuch foolishness. We couldn't let that happen. Sara and I remembered what you said about keeping this war a secret. But the only way we could stop them was to hit them with a Shredder on a low setting and lock them in the closet. We knew you would be fine."

"Where are David, Ax, and Tobias?" Sara demanded. "Why aren't they with you? And what's Mr. Chapman doing here?"

Before I even realized what happened, Jacques whipped out a Shredder and leveled it at Chapman. "Yeerk," he hissed.

Mersa seemed unperturbed. “Yes, but not the one you think I am. You were surprisingly easy to coerce, Jacques. I used to wonder what it was like to betray your own nation. Of course, now I know. It’s...empowering, don’t you think?”

“Not a word out of you,” Rachel snapped. “In fact, you know what? I’ll be right back.” She disappeared up the stairs.

“So,” Jacques continued, “where are David and Princes Tobias and Aximili?” Wow...weird to hear a human refer to ‘Prince Tobias.’

“They stayed behind to hold off the Visser. We...they probably made it. Near the end, they were rallying Mersa’s forces for a counterattack. Who knows what happened?” I decided it was best not to mention that the Rebels were scattering at the end.

I think he sensed that I was holding back, but he didn’t bring it up. Instead, he said, “Rachel will want to cook something. We need to put a stop to that.”

Ronnie turned to Cassie. “Couldn’t you talk her out of it? I mean, you were able to talk down that Guraff guy.”

“Guraff?” Jacques snapped. “Guraff Four-Two-Seven?”

I nodded. “You’ve heard of him?”

“You don’t spend any amount of time as a Controller without hearing about Guraff. He was so talented that he rose to the rank of a Subvisser without even trying. They say he could have been the Emperor one day if he had any desire to do so. He’s come to Earth, then?”

“He’s been here,” Jeanne told him.

“Then how haven’t we lost?”

<Prince Tobias can more than handle him,> Al assured Jacques. I didn’t miss the pride in his voice.

“Then he must be more than I suspected.”

Rachel came down the stairs then, with a gag and handcuffs, presumably for Mersa. I very carefully avoided wondering where she had gotten them from. That was a road I did *NOT* want to go down.

“Like father, like son?” I suggested to Jacques.

Rachel glared at me. At first, I didn’t realize why. Then I remembered that Tobias’s father had abandoned his unborn son to go and fight to his death against the Yeerks. I guess that hit a little too close to home for her. But, as always, she buried any pain she was feeling and snapped at me. “Definitely not. Your father has two wives; you’re going to die alone.”

“I already have two wives,” I answered her. “You nag me constantly.” Then I turned to Jeanne. “And you clean my house. See? The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree after all.”

Rachel also turned to Jeanne. “You clean his house?”

“You know I can’t stand a mess!”

“Then don’t date Marco!”

During this exchange, Al had morphed to human, and Jeanne and Ronnie cuffed and gagged Mersa, who wisely decided to offer no resistance. Cassie was already at work in the kitchen, beating Rachel to the punch.

Huh...that’s kind of an interesting phrase; not to mention a very odd image.

Sara was talking to Rachel now. “David and Tobias and Ax...they’re going to be okay, right?”

While Rachel reassured her sister, Jeanne came to me. “We’ll handle the rest of the family. You get the men together and prepare a defense. If these Howlers survived, they’ll be looking for Mersa and I’m sure they’ll find us here eventually. You need to decide what to do.”

“Why me?” I asked, spreading my arms and looking up at the ceiling. I wasn’t really as reluctant as all that, but I know

Jeanne enjoys the act. And hey, as long as I've got at least one fan, right?

Jeanne forced my arms down, spun me towards the back door, and gave me a shove. I was fine with that. "Uh...if all the dudes can meet me out back for a moment? Thanks." I walked out of the back door.

James soon joined me, as did Al, Jacques, and Ronnie. I was surprised that Ronnie came, but whatever. I didn't have the energy to fight him off. If Cassie's tree-hugger boyfriend, sorry, make that tree-hugger fiancé, waned to sit by while we discussed what we would do when the super space monsters came to kill us, that was his affair.

I leaned against the Reliquary. It was parked in the backyard again. Only Al had taken out the neighbor's fence and notable portion of the ship extended into their yard. Of course, it was cloaked. Still, the demolished fence is a bit hard to miss.

"Okay," I began, "we need to figure out what to do if the Howlers show up. I have a Kelbrid morph, but I don't think that will be able to stop two of them. Let's face it: I'm just not that good. And do we have anything else that can kill Howlers?"

Jacques nodded to the Shredder in his hand. “On full power, this can blow a hole through concrete. It might even be able to puncture the Reliquary. This could stop a Howler.”

“How many do we have?” I asked.

“I have this one. I know Jeanne keeps another one hidden in the house. That is all, I think,” Jacques told me.

<Tobias and Rachel keep two in the Reliquary,> Al added.
<I believe we disarmed Mersa, but he had a Dracon beam.>

I nodded. “Four Shredders. Who knows how to shoot? I’ve had some practice, and I know Jeanne’s an expert. Al’s had some training, too. And we’ll have to arm Rachel; you know what would happen if we were passing out guns and didn’t include her...”

We started thinking of how to barricade the house. We’d get everyone in the living room and pile furniture around the perimeter. That might slow them enough for us to get them. Maybe.

All of that planning was cut short when I heard a woman scream from inside the house. They were already here.

CHAPTER 5

We charged into the house. I was armed. So were Jacques, James, and Al. Of course, being an Andalite, Al was always armed. And, somehow, Ronnie had ended up with his hands on the forth Shredder. I really didn't like the thought of an amateur waving around a fully-powered laser beam gun thingy. Hell, I didn't like the thought of some of the trained professionals I knew waving those things around.

It turns out that our rushing in with weapons drawn was completely unnecessary. The source of the screaming was Rachel. The reason for the screaming was Tobias. He had chosen now to show up, along with Ax and David.

"Was the screaming really necessary?" I demanded. "He's not *that* ugly."

Tobias looked at me over Rachel's shoulder. I briefly wondered how he'd pry her off and when. I knew where a crowbar was... "I suppose that's your way of telling me you're glad I'm not dead," Tobias said to me.

I nodded. "Yep. That's about it."

Tobias looked around the room. His eyes lingered on Mersa, cuffed and gagged. "Seems like you have things well in hand here." Then his eyes fell on Ronnie and his weapon.

“That belongs in the hands of someone more responsible. Marco, grab that from him.”

I don't know if it was just because I was standing next to Ronnie or if it was a subtle jab, indicating that I, Marco, was more responsible than Ronnie. Probably the first; Tobias just isn't that subtle. Especially not lately. Nevertheless, I took the Shredder from Ronnie. He looked glad to be rid of it.

“Uh...where are Naomi and Jordan?” David asked.

Jacques paled. “I suppose I should let them out of the closet now... Rachel, Jeanne, Sara, if you would give me a hand... I think she's less likely to murder me if I'm standing behind you three. Or four, I suppose.”

“You know,” I mused to no one in particular, “this is a very odd family I mean...Naomi's nuts. We know that. And then there's Rachel, who is even crazier; no offense, Tobias.”

He dropped into a large chair by the fireplace. “Offense? I may be crazy, Marco, but I'm not blind. She's nuts. Cary on.”

“Well, Jordan seems more or less normal, but I'm sure that's all a clever ruse. Sara seems to have a thing for our local rat-boy; I'm sure I'm not the only one who noticed. Factor in Jeanne, the trained assassin, and Jacques, the random French guy who seems unperturbed by all the weirdness that goes on

around him. And here's the oddest part: it can only get stranger from here."

"Yeah?" Ronnie asked. "How?"

"Just look around," I told him. "It's pretty much a given that Tobias and Rachel are going to have to get married at some point. That invites all the craziness in his family. Where to begin with that can of worms? I don't even want to start.

"And let's suppose things work out between Jeanne and me. Not that I'm even considering that at this point, but let's say, hypothetically, we got married. Then we bring in not only me, we also are now dealing with my polygamist father and his two wives, one of whom was the host to the former Visser One. Crazy, no?"

"That's not the end of it," David piped in. "Sara was telling me that Jordan seems to have a thing for James. So if we throw him into the mix..."

James turned to David. "I'll date Jordan if you date Sara. Then we're all just one big screwed up family. We could be a TV show of some kind."

I know he meant it as a joke, but I was already thinking of how I'd pitch this to the guys at the network. I'd make billions!

My happy thoughts were cut short when Naomi came storming down the stairs, everyone else following meekly behind her. She stopped in front of Tobias and shoved her finger in his face. “You! I know that was all somehow connected to you!”

He was unphased. I guess that, after living with Rachel, angry blond women don’t intimidate him anymore. “Probably. What, exactly, are we talking about?”

“They locked me in the closet!”

Tobias looked over her shoulder at Jacques. “You’re officially okay in my book. Al! Fetch me my book. Is it still in the Reliquary? Add Jacques’s name.”

“Wait, you actually have a book?” I demanded. “that’s Just weird. I mean...that’s just really odd...”

Naomi wouldn’t be distracted, though. So much for that plan. “This has got to stop. You can’t come barging in here at all hours, running around in the middle of the night, stealing my dinner guests, kidnapping my daughters, dragging them all off to God knows where! If you think I’m going to-”

“Naomi,” Tobias interrupted her, “I have had a very long day. I’m tired. I am going to bed. If you want to rant, do it at Mersa. Al can take notes and fill me in in the morning.” He

shouldered his way past Naomi and made for the back door, heading for the Reliquary.

“Wait,” I said to him. He paused. “How did you get here? What happened in the battle? What about the assassins? Does the Visser have the Blade ship?”

Tobias shook his head. “No, the Blade ship is safely in Rebel hands. The Kelbrid in the hangar were easy enough to handle. One of the assassins sealed off the hangar and depressurized it once it was full of Kelbrid. That handled them; the Visser had the rest remain in the transports.

“As for the fleet, we decimated that. You saw us fighting them?” I nodded. Tobias continued, “Well, I had two thirds of our forces break off. They were supposed to look like they were fleeing wildly. What they were actually doing was getting behind the moon. After a few half-hearted runs on the Blade ship, I turned my squad around and made for the moon. We caught most of the Visser’s fleet in the ambush, despite Guraff’s warnings. Destroyed most of them. The remainder abandoned the attack on the Blade ship. The transports pulled back and we salvaged the ship. A great victory, if you look at it combined with all the other damage we’ve done today.”

“What about the assassins?”

He paused again. Then, he told me, “That’s...overly complicated. It’ll have to wait until morning because I cannot, *cannot* deal with it tonight. I’ll see you all in the morning. Now, I deserve some sleep.”

CHAPTER 6

I had spent the night on the couch, sleeping head-to-foot with James. Do you realize just how insane that is? I am a millionaire. I could *buy* not only Naomi's couch, I could buy her whole house; although Jacques would probably outbid me. He's even richer than I am.

So, not only was it ridiculous that I was even sleeping on a couch to begin with, the guy I was sleeping with (take that however you want) was a guy who, up until a week or so ago, I thought was dead. Why was I even on the couch and not at home? Because our day of fighting brain-stealing aliens was too long for me to bother to get there. At least I didn't have it as bad as Mersa; he had to sleep on the floor, gagged and cuffed.

The night was bad enough. What was worse was the morning. I was woken up at the ungodly hour of 7:30 a.m. That's just not right. And what woke me up? Several things.

One was Jordan and Sara. They had to get up to go to school and I guess they just couldn't avoid waking us. I don't sleep lightly anymore; neither does James. None of us sleep well, no matter how tired we are. School was also the reason for the other thing that woke me up.

“A boy his age should be in school, Tobias. David, too.”

“For the last time, Naomi, Al doesn’t need to go to school! He’s a genius, he’s been taught by machines for his whole childhood, and he’s got more important things to do. He’s already got a better education than me.”

“That was already obvious.”

Yep, you guessed it. Tobias and Naomi were fighting again. This was an argument I had heard a few times before. Naomi insisted that the younger Animorphs, namely Al and David, should go to school. Tobias felt otherwise.

“Naomi, Al doesn’t need to go to school. And even if he did, he couldn’t today. You have no idea what’s going on.”

“I could say the same about you. Do you even know where Alloran *is* right now?”

“He’s...around here. Somewhere. That’s not important!”

“He’s not important?” Naomi asked coyly.

“You know what I meant!”

“No need to shout.”

I groaned. Someone had to shut them up. And apparently, it had to be me. “Both of you knock it off. Tobias, you won’t win; she’s a lawyer. Naomi, you won’t win; this is the guy

who's stubborn enough to talk Rachel into stuff. Can't we just call it a draw?"

"Mistake," James whispered. I agreed silently.

Naomi turned to glare at me. "Do you really want to go into what this deadbeat has talked my daughter into?" she demanded coldly.

"No, Mam," I snapped, shutting my mouth so fast that my teeth clicked. I *really* didn't want to go there.

But Tobias has been getting crazier and crazier lately. "You know what, Naomi? Let's talk about that. Like it or not, Rachel's carrying my child. I'm a part of her life, and *your* life, whether you like it or not. Nothing you say is going to change that. So you'll either have to learn to live with me or live without Rachel."

"Learn to live with you?" Naomi repeated. "Do you realize that from the moment you walked into our lives, everything has been getting worse and worse? Everything was fine in our lives. Until seven years ago. As soon as you appeared, our world started to fall apart. Everything that's gone wrong in our lives over the last seven years all comes back to you. And you expect me to be able to live with you? To look at you and not hate you for everything you've stolen from my family; for

everything you're *still* taking from us? Where the hell do you get off telling me to learn to live with you? And who the hell do you think you are to give *me* an ultimatum? I will not live without Rachel; not again. But I sure as hell won't live with you."

They turned their backs on each other and stormed off in opposite directions. James looked at me. "I can't believe it. You actually managed to make it worse. I didn't think that was possible."

<I'll say,> David said in our heads.

"David? Where are you?" I demanded.

<Hiding under the couch. It's safest to be out of sight when those two are in the same room. I'm worried that one of these days, one of them's going to make the other snap, and that won't end well for any small, furry rodents they see.>

I nodded even though he couldn't see it. I also noticed how everyone else had managed to make themselves scarce. Even Cassie, who normally would rush to defuse such a situation, had remained carefully out of sight. People started to appear now, drifting in from all directions.

It kind of reminded me of one of those old Western movies. It was like how, when it reached High Noon, everyone

hid themselves. And after the big shootout, they all reappeared and started acting like nothing happened.

“Hey, were’s Mersa?” I demanded.

<He’s with me,> David assured me. <When things started, he rolled under the couch like he heard gunshots or something. A smart Yeerk, in my opinion.>

James shook his head. “You know something? We’ve got Yeerks hiding under couches with talking rats. A couch occupied by a millionaire and a former paraplegic. All because a second millionaire’s lawyer wife doesn’t like her daughter’s boyfriend, who just happens to be fighting a war to determine which n-dimensional superpower gets to play with us. Life was a lot less strange when I was living with the Andalites.”

CHAPTER 7

I went back to sleep after that. I may sleep light, but I also sleep often. I didn't know where Tobias and Naomi stalked off to and I didn't really care. As long as it was quiet. But the quiet never lasts for long. Especially in this house. If things ever got serious between me and Jeanne, I had to be sure to make one thing clear to her: I wasn't going to live with her family.

I was woken up this time by the doorbell. I cracked open an eye and looked around, but no one else was in the room. And the doorbell kept ringing. "Door!" I yelled to no one in particular.

"Just get it yourself!" Jeanne shouted back. Damn it. Maybe both of my 'wives' nag me. I should start looking for a third...

I opened the door to see three people. Two of them looked vaguely familiar. One was a tall, blond guy. He was probably pretty good looking, but it's hard for me to judge. The other was a blond woman who looked so familiar...I knew her from somewhere. It was just out of reach in my mind.

The third was Menderash-Postil-Fastil. He was Ax's Tactical Officer aboard his Dome ship. It was Menderash who

set us off on the little chase that turned into this mess. He had trapped himself in a human morph to avoid some legal complications. Why was he here?

“Menderash!” I said like I was happy to see him. “What brings you here? And who are your friends?”

The woman gave me a look that reminded me of someone. “Oh. I’m hurt, Marco. Really.” That dry tone...so familiar. Then it hit me. She reminded me of Tobias before he started going crazy. “Loren!?”

“Yeah; who did you think I was?”

“What are you doing here?” I asked again. Last I checked, she had been living on the Andalite homeworld.

“The Electorate really started wondering just what it is my son is doing here. He told them he’d only speak to Menderash about it, so they sent him. I decided to tag along. Its about time I paid my son a visit. And I think I need to spend some time with Rachel.”

Oh. Yeah, probably. I nodded. “Alright. Who’s this third guy.”

He gave me a familiar look, too. “I also need to spend some time with Tobias and Rachel.” That look...the tone...I

put it together just before he said, “It’s been too long since I’ve seen my daughter.”

So this was Rachel’s father. I looked around. “Drode?” I asked. “You can come out now.” He had to have been involved. How do I know? Because only his twisted sense of humor could have conceived of this. He just wanted to make this more awkward.

“Who’s at the door?” James asked, coming up from behind me. Then, “Oh. Hi Loren.” He looked at me. “I used to do her yardwork when I loved on the Andalite world,” he explained.

Loren nodded. “Hello, James. I was wondering what happened to you. How did you get here?”

James shrugged. “Weird purple guy.”

Loren nodded again, completely accepting this. But hey, she was Tobias’s mother after all. If anyone could accept something like this, it was her.

“So…” Rachel’s father, Dan if I remembered correctly, said after a pause, “Where is the man we all came to see?”

I shrugged. “He disappeared after a fight he had with Naomi,” I told them. “I don’t know where he could be. Maybe he’s off with Ax and Al.”

“Prince Aximili is here?” Menderash demanded. “Where? He is safe?”

“Slow down,” I said, trying to calm him. “Let’s all go inside and sit down; Tobias will show up eventually. He always does.”

We lingered in the living room for a bit. Loren noticed some food sitting on the table and reached for it. “I wouldn’t do that,” I advised her. “Rachel’s cooking; not even Ax will eat it if we don’t force him to.”

She retracted her hand; a wise woman. The others started trickling in then and we started making awkward, surprised introductions. I managed to get Jeanne away from the others long enough to ask her, “What’s going on?”

“Tobias told us all to get here as soon as possible. Something important. Very important. David and Ax know what’s up, but they won’t tell us. I don’t like this.”

I didn’t either. But then, Tobias arrived. He didn’t take a moment to wonder at the sudden appearance of his mother, Menderash, and the guy who might have wanted to kill him more than the Visser did. Instead, he jumped right into things.

“The assassins are coming here. In moments, actually; I just spoke with them.”

That caused quite a stir. Everyone but the Andalites and David started talking at once. Tobias vainly tried to calm us down. Calm down? He was acting like this was nothing! Mersa was hysterical.

Then we heard a knock on the door. I looked at Jeanne. “Do assassins knock?”

“You’d be surprised how many idiots will just open their doors to you,” she answered. That wasn’t reassuring.

Tobias answered the door. I saw the two assassins over his shoulder and I swear to God that my heart stopped. It was impossible. No, there wasn’t a chance. But I could see them so clearly. It had to be real.

One of them looked over Tobias’s shoulder and waved at me. “Hi, Marco.”

There was only one thing I could say in return. “Hi, Jake.”

CHAPTER 8

It wasn't possible. Okay, maybe it was half possible. See, standing behind Jake was the other 'assassin': Santorelli. But both of them were dead; this I knew. But somehow, somehow they were here, and...working for the One? That just didn't fit.

Okay, maybe it was possible for Santorelli to be alive. He had been presumed dead when he and Tobias flew a ship into the sun to hide the Time Matrix. Tobias had survived, so I guess it's conceivable that, somehow, Santorelli did, too. I could almost see it; almost.

But Jake was definitely dead. He had set off an explosion that destroyed a Yeerk Pool ship and the hangar it had been in. There was no way he was alive; nothing could have survived that. And even if that wasn't enough, I know he was dead because Rachel was alive. Through a twisted deal with Crayak, Jake had traded his life for hers. If she was here, he couldn't be.

"This has to be some kind of trick," I said.

Tobias shook his head. "It's legit, Marco. We had a nice conversation about it after we drove the Yeerks away from the Blade ship. Jake, you want to tell them?"

Jake nodded. “We still haven’t figured it all out yet, but here’s what Santorelli and I know. We were both dead; or as dead as we were going to get, anyway. Both of us were doing some menial work for Azmaveth, the guy who rules over the dead. He came to us with a job.”

Santorelli continued. “It was a simple one, he said. There was a Yeerk who was supposed to be dead. Thanks to Tobias and a few others, mostly Crayak, said Yeerk was alive. A simple job: get in and kill the Yeerk. Something we’d been doing for a long time. And as an incentive…”

“As an incentive,” Jake finished, “the one who killed Mersa got to remain alive.”

We all took a moment to digest that. Then Rachel grabbed Mersa and threw him on the floor in front of Jake, Santorelli, and Tobias. “Well? What’s keeping you? One of you kill him already.”

“It’s not as simple as that,” Tobias said, shaking his head. “Remember what we saw? That suited guy is an agent of the One; or maybe a manifestation of the One himself. Either way, he says he sent Jake and Santorelli to kill Mersa.”

He let that hang in the air. No one spoke. He was waiting for someone to see what he saw. I tried to think about it. What was he getting at? And why didn't he just say it?

Then it hit me like a large gold brick wrapped in lemon. "Oh god! Azmaveth and the One..."

Tobias nodded. "Yeah, that's what we think. They're the same person; or entity."

"Allies, at the very least," Santorelli confirmed.

That was a bit much. And very depressing. I mean, we always knew the One was powerful. But now, this was a whole different mess. Azmaveth was the guy who could raise the dead as easily as blinking, or so I'm led to believe. How could we possibly beat someone like that? Worst case scenario, this war was made public and, in the fight that ensued, Crayak and the One destroyed the universe. So what? Azmaveth could easily bring it back, I think.

"That doesn't make sense," Rachel protested. "I met Azmaveth. He was nothing like the One. He helped me come back to life!"

"And screwed over Crayak in the process," Jake added.

"What does Azmaveth want?" Tobias asked Jake. "What's his stake in all this?"

Me? I couldn't think. This was all too much. It wasn't possible. I've seen a lot of impossible things, but this... "This is just insane," I said slowly. Then I repeated it. "This is just insane. This is just insane. This is just insane. This is just insane."

I kept saying it. I couldn't stop. I wanted to stop; I really tried. But I couldn't. My mouth didn't obey me anymore. Everyone was looking at me now. Apparently a guy repeating the same four words over and over again is more interesting than two dead guys in the living room.

"Marco, are you alright?" Jeanne asked.

I couldn't answer her, of course. I shook my head and kept saying it. "This is just insane." What was happening!?

"Marco, cut it out; that stopped being funny," Rachel snapped. "Besides, we've got more important things to do."

I tried to stop, but I couldn't. I used every ounce of my willpower to shut my jaw but it wouldn't go. Oh God! What was happening to me? It was like being in a morph I couldn't control. This wasn't my body, it couldn't be!

Rachel was starting to look worried now. When she starts to look worried, that's when it's time to be terrified. Then I saw Jeanne whisper something to Tobias. Suddenly, *he* looked

worried, too. Now, Tobias may worry a lot, but if he actually *looks* worried, everything has completely gone to hell.

I wanted to ask what was happening, what Jeanne had said to him. But I couldn't. All I could do was repeat those same four words over and over again. What was happening?

“Get him home,” Tobias told James. “Take Jeanne; she’ll mix him up something to get him to sleep. Maybe that’ll help. Let him sleep it off.”

Then it hit me. It finally happened, just like I said it would since day one. This was all too much for me. On top of everything, my best friend coming back from beyond the grave...that did it. I had finally snapped.

This wasn't just insane; *I* was.

CHAPTER 9

My name is Marco. And my life just got completely and totally out there. I mean...no, I can't even describe it. All I can do is tell you the story like it happened to me; that's the only way I can explain this.

I'm a normal kid. I used to be, anyway. My mother died two years ago, and it sort of messed up my family. My dad stopped working; we barely got by. But all of that was normal, really; it happened to a lot of people. What happened to me was far from normal.

My alarm woke me up. Or...someone's alarm. It didn't sound right. At least the alarm clock was in the right place. I slammed my hand on the snooze button with the ease of long practice. But then I opened my eyes and couldn't even think about going back to sleep.

I was in a massive bedroom. The bed I was in was the size of my bedroom! And the room I was in was as big as my dad's apartment. "What the heck...?" I wondered, rolling out of the bed. At least I was dressed. For a moment there, I was afraid this was some sort of Michael Jackson thing...

I wandered around the room, looking for some sign of the owner. Where was I? Whose place was this? Then I saw

something that me scream. “AHHHH! What the hell!?” See? Screaming.

What I saw was a mirror. And the guy looking back at me must have been about twenty. His hair was just a little long, with a bluish tint at the tips. He was wearing the same cloths as I was. In fact, he was doing everything I was. Oh God...that was me in the mirror. But I was 20!

“What the hell?” I asked again. “What’s going on? What is this? I must be losing my mind! This has to be a dream.”

What to do? What could be done? I was about to look for a phone. I had to call Jake. He always knew what to do, even if he was an idiot. He’d think of something. Then the door opened.

In walked the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. 20ish, with black hair and green eyes. And a body to die for, I might add. She smiled at me; at *me!* “Feeling better, Marco?” she asked. She was French, too. I was starting to like this dream.

“Seeing you, everything’s perfect,” I said, sounding a lot more confident than I felt.

“Back to normal, then. Good. Tobias wants you to meet him at Rachel’s house as soon as you can so he can fill you in on what went on after you left yesterday.”

Now I was totally confused. “Wait. Tobias who? And do you mean Rachel as in my friend Jake’s cousin? What are you talking about? All I did yesterday was go to school and hang out at the mall. The usual.”

Then the name hit me. “Oh, Tobias. That guy who likes to hang around Jake because Jake saved him from getting a swirly one time. He walked home with us from the mall yesterday. Oh, and Rachel and Cassie, too! Why would I be going to meet him at Rachel’s house? What’s he even doing there?”

She suddenly looked very worried; still beautiful, though. Especially when she smiled and said, “Nice try, Marco, but you’re not getting out of going that easily. Come on.”

Now I was getting worried. But I wasn’t going to panic; not yet, anyway. Before I was allowed to panic, there were some steps I had to take. “Hang on; I have to make a call first,” I told her.

She tossed me a phone. Weird...phones were supposed to be a lot bigger. Oh well. I dialed Jake's number. "Come on, come on," I whispered.

"Hello?" A woman's voice. Jake's mother.

"Hey, it's Marco. Is Jake there?"

"Marco? God, you haven't called in years!"

Years? Impossible. I had called Jake just yesterday. Then I caught a look at the mirror again. I started getting that creepy tingling in my spine... "Is Jake there?"

"No, his uncle flew in yesterday. Jake's spending the day with him."

"Oh. Okay. Where are they?"

"Naomi's place, Marco." She paused. Then, "Are you alright? You sound very nervous..."

Good question. "Yeah, I'll be fine. I just need to talk to Jake. Thanks." I hung up. That beautiful woman was looking at me. "What?"

"Looks like you're going to see Tobias after all."

I shrugged. "Guess so." But I wasn't going anywhere with this woman. I didn't trust her; how could I? "A few questions first."

"Okay fine, since you want to be difficult. What?"

“Question one: who are you?”

She laughed a bit. I didn't. I guess something on my face made her realize I wasn't messing around. “You...you really don't know, do you?”

“No. I don't know who you are, I don't know where I am, I don't know what's going on. Last night, I went to sleep. Now I woke up and I'm twenty! This has to be some kind of dream.”

“I guess that makes me the girl of your dreams,” she joked. It was the kind of joke I would have made. Then she shook her head. “Great, I'm starting to turn into you. We're as bad as Tobias and Rachel, you know that?”

No. I had no idea what she meant.

CHAPTER 10

She drove me to Rachel's house and explained a few things, starting with her name and the fact that she was, apparently, my girlfriend. Not bad; not bad at all. But, of course, she had to ruin it by adding that she was also Rachel's step-sister. That, of course, implied that Rachel's mother got remarried when I wasn't looking.

Some of the other stuff she told me was impossible to believe. Like the fact that Rachel was pregnant; with Tobias's child. I just couldn't see that. Not even in the most twisted dream world was that even remotely possible. The rest of it was easier to believe by comparison.

Jeanne led me into the living room of Rachel's house. It was empty except for some guy sitting on the couch. The kind of freaked me out. His eyes were so dark that I swear they were black. The way he looked at me... God, he looked like some kind of serial killer.

"How's he doing, Jeanne?" the guy asked her.

"Not good, Tobias," she answered. Wait, what!?! This was Tobias? Nah, impossible. Not the wimp from last night. No way. But there was something familiar about him... "He...he

doesn't seem to remember much. He told me that when he went to sleep last night, he was thirteen years old. Now..."

Tobias nodded slowly. "Marco, what did you do yesterday?"

I shrugged. "Nothing special. Went school, fell asleep, went to the mall, hung out with Jake and...well, a guy with your name...and then went home."

"What was yesterday's date, Marco?" he asked slowly. I told him. And then he asked me an odd question. "When you went home, did you walk through the construction site?"

"Of course not," I said. "I don't want to get eviscerated by some axe murderer."

Jeanne and Tobias shared a look. "Jeanne, do you realize what that date means; yesterday's date, according to Marco?"

"Yes. That's the date you five met Elfangor in the construction site."

Tobias nodded. "But Marco doesn't remember that. You've got a background in psychology. Ever heard of anything like this?"

"Perhaps...hysterical amnesia. When someone undergoes severe emotional stress, they can lose their memories. It's rare but...well, Marco has had a rare life. Perhaps the shock from

yesterday caused him to forget...well, everything after that day in the construction site.”

“Wait; lost my memory?” I interrupted. “You’re suggesting that I just suddenly forgot seven years of my life!?”

“Marco,” Tobias said slowly, “does the word ‘Andalite’ mean anything to you?”

“Sure. It means the end of a list of things you need to buy for this room. A chair, a desk, and a light.”

“Hmm...his jokes are certainly like they were seven years ago. Marco, what would you say if I told you Earth had been invaded by parasitic slugs that take over people’s brains. And that the only resistance to them was a bunch of kids who could turn into animals. And that those kids overcame these slugs and saved Earth. And that you were one of those kids?”

“I’d tell you that you need to stop beginning sentences with conjunctions. Oh,” I added, “and you’re insane.”

Tobias nodded. Then, he said, “Marco? Turn around.” I didn’t like the sound of that, but I did as I was told. And then almost died from fright. There was a four-legged, four-eyed, death-tailed blue thing standing there.

I jumped back, tripped in the air, and landed on my back. “What the hell is that thing?” I shouted.

<I will try very hard not to be offended, Marco,> I heard a voice say. It was in my head! Was it...the thing?

“That, Marco, is the least threatening Andalite I could find on such short notice,” Tobias explained. “Maybe you should sit somewhere more comfortable; this will take a while to explain.”

I sat there on the floor while he told me a very, very long story about a war between Yeerks, Andalites, and Humans. Along the way, some more people started to fill up the room and add details. A few of them looked familiar, like older versions of my friend. Jake, Rachel, and Cassie were there, as well as a few others I didn't recognize. Then came the most unbelievable part.

They told me that “last night”, we cut through the construction site. And saw an Andalite Prince, who told us everything. And then he helped us to fight: he gave us the power to morph into any animal we could touch. They told me that with this power, we defeated the entire Yeerk Empire and saved Earth.

So far, it was sounding like a story I wanted to believe. It had a happy ending; for me, at least. I was a millionaire. That explained the mansion. I had fame, power, wealth, and none of

the terrible memories that the rest of them had. It sounded great. Until they got to the next part.

“Earth is being invaded again,” Tobias explained. “We’re fighting the Yeerks; again. And you...you’re one of us, again.”

I looked over at Jake. He had been oddly silent about the whole thing. And then I realized that no one told me what happened to the others after the war, just me. “Jake, man...this is all just too much. It can’t be real.”

“There’s one more thing,” Jake said to me. “At the risk of having you relapse again, you should know: I’m dead.”

“Oh you’ve got to be shitting me.”

CHAPTER 11

Nope, he wasn't shitting me. After their loong story, they started showing me evidence; aside from the two aliens and the talking rat who had joined us. They showed me newspaper clippings, a copy of the book 'I' wrote, and even Rachel's obituary. If this wasn't all some long dream, they had to be telling the truth; Jake didn't have what it took to pull off such an elaborate hoax.

"So what now?" I demanded. "What happens now?"

Tobias shrugged. "We have more important things to worry about right now."

"I respectfully disagree," I muttered. But the others seemed to take him seriously. "What's on the table?"

Tobias tried to summarize what I had 'missed' at 'yesterday's' meeting. "Jake and Santorelli have been brought back with the mission to kill Mersa. Whoever takes his life gets to stay alive. The other...well, dies. The problem is this: we can't necessarily afford to kill Mersa."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because Mesa is holding back the Visser. While he lives, we have a chance, a real chance, of winning this war. So I

guess the question is, which is more useful: Jake's or Santorelli's life or Mersa's Rebellion?"

"That's not the question at all!" Cassie argued. "These are lives we're talking about, Tobias. You can't just assign them values and do some sort of calculation to see who lives and who dies."

Tobias ignored her. "What can do more good in this war? What can hurt the Visser the most?"

"Tobias, you can't talk like this. We're talking about human beings. They're not chess pieces for you to sacrifice," Cassie insisted. "I can't believe you're all even listening to this."

<Cassie,> the alien with the missing eye began, <while we do value the lives of humans, especially Prince Jake and Santorelli, we must approach this tactically.>

"Tactically? This isn't some kind of game!"

"That's exactly what it is," Tobias muttered. "That's all this war is to them. We're just pieces in a game. Death seems to be meaningless now anyway. People are jumping across the line all over the place as of late."

Rachel looked from Jake to Tobias. "Some lives mean more to me than strategy. There are some people I just won't

sacrifice for this. That includes everyone in my family. I say we let one of them kill him.”

It was like all the air suddenly went out of the room. I got the impression that those two didn't disagree often; especially about this war. Everyone seemed nervous now, even the aliens; and they were walking weapons. I suddenly realized that this Tobias guy really *might* be some kind of serial killer.

No one else seemed willing to speak. Well, there was one other person. Chapman. I know that's not the name of the guy whose running the show, but when I look at him all I can see is the guy who gave me detention yesterday. He looked old; even older than he was, but it was him.

He was gagged, though. With a sigh, Tobias made a weird movement with his hand. The younger alien untied Chapman's gag. “I think I deserve the right to say a few words, since it *is* my life that is in the balance.”

Tobias nodded. Of course he'd let Chapman speak; he wanted Chapman alive. “I think the tactical advantages to keeping me alive are obvious, so I won't bother with those. If that was what was hanging you up, you'd have decided already. No, no, no; you're hung up on the morality of the thing. Fine. Then consider this: These two, Jake and

Santorelli, had their chances. They chose to die ‘nobly’ for their cause. That’s all well and good and sure, salute them for it. But they still chose to end their lives. They had their chances. If you want to approach this with any morality, how can you take my chance from me?”

<Well, that’s kind of a trap,> David muttered.

Santorelli raised his hand. “Just to avoid confusion, Jake and I already discussed this. The last five years of my life were the best I’ve ever had. I ended my life well; very well. I’m not needed here anymore. But Jake can still do some good. So if you decide that Mersa has to die, it’s Jake who gets to live.”

I didn’t get this Santorelli guy. Who just gives up his own life like that? But the others seemed to take him at his word. Jeanne certainly did, which more or less convinced me I could trust him.

“Alright, look,” I said. “I won’t pretend to understand exactly what’s going on, but what I see is this. On the one hand, I have the life of a Yeerk. On the other, my best friend’s. There is no way I would ever, *ever* choose the Yeerk. I want Jake alive and I want this Yeerk dead. But that’s just the vote

of the guy who apparently forgets the last seven years of his life. Do what you will with it.”

<I...I must obey my Prince,> the younger alien said slowly. <I am sorry, Jake.>

<I’m with Tobias and Al,> David said. He didn’t elaborate. Maybe he had reasons he didn’t want to explain to us; or maybe he was just taking a shot in the dark. Either way, his ballot was cast.

James shook his head. “I’m sorry, Jake. But I have to go with them, too. Maybe once we win this fight, there’ll be another chance, but-”

“Few ever get a second chance. No one is ever given a third,” Rachel said. “That’s about the only thing I remember vividly from being dead. Azmaveth made that very clear. This is Jake’s last shot at life.”

“I still have to stand by what I said,” James said, more quietly. “We have to win this.”

The one-eyed alien scuffed one of his hooves across the floor. <I am sorry, but I most agree with Cassie. We shouldn’t have spared this slug’s life to begin with. Now, when killing him brings us a true gain, we should not hesitate.>

I think that kind of caught Tobias off guard; it's hard to tell, since he doesn't use his face a lot. The vote was split now, four to four. Jake and Santorelli couldn't vote, of course; that would be completely unfair. Chapman, likewise, wasn't counted in the tally. It was all down to Jeanne.

I looked at her. She told me she was my girlfriend. So who would she choose? Would she stand with me and save my best friend's life? Or would she be with Tobias and make the cold, heartless decision. Then she took my hand in hers and I knew I didn't have to worry.

“Jake lives,” she said simply.”

Then I heard a new voice. “Oh you damn dumb fools!”

CHAPTER 12

We all looked around. A wrinkly, purple guy appeared in the middle of the room with his hands on his all-too-human head. “Why, oh why, do you all have to be such idiots!?” he demanded.

“Okay, who and what the hell is that thing?” I whispered to Jeanne.

I guess it heard me. He turned and gave me a half-amused smile. “Oh, now that’s just bad timing.” And suddenly, I remembered everything.

“Thanks, Drode.”

He shrugged. “Oh, no need. It’ll be gone when I am. Not that it matters much to you. You just signed over this galaxy to the One. You just sold all out. With Mersa gone, the rebels will surrender. Then the Visser will, quite simply wipe this town from the face of the galaxy and you along with it. It’ll be easy enough to do. All he has to do is send in uninfested Kelbrid. No one would realize it’s Yeerk activity. With you out of the way, who’s to stop him from taking over? Of course, he holds off now. Because if he tried that now, Mersa could come forward and then it’s all ruined for all of us.

“But no no no no no no no no; you all had to choose Jake’s life over everyone else’s. Why, oh why, must you people be so very stupid?”

Someone started to chuckle. It wasn’t one of us; none of us has a laugh that seems to hang in the air like that. You know how in cartoons, when there’s music, the notes kind of hang in the air, visible? This laugh was almost like that. It wasn’t the sort of evil, merciless chuckle the Visser has sometimes, or even the Drode’s mad cackle. This was a laugh of pure amusement.

“You should have learned all those years ago, Imaeus: humans are not to be toyed with.” He appeared. A tall, thin man in a severe black suit. His skin was kind of grey and wrinkly. Everything about him was just a hair off. I had seen him before. Normally, he spoke with a strange inflection on words and elongated the letter ‘s’. Not this time.

Before my eyes, he started to fill with color. His grey flesh filled with life and became as smooth and healthy as...well, Rachel’s skin would be the best comparison. He ripped off his tie and tossed it away, relaxing. Then his hair started to grow until it reached past his shoulders, a mane of perfectly straight, black hair.

There was a subtle change in his face, too. His eyes turned green. His ears were suddenly pointed. And he got...well, beautiful, really. I mean, if I was a woman... But I wasn't, I reminded myself, looking at my girlfriend. Who, I noticed suddenly, didn't look all that different from this guy. Hopefully, there was no connection there.

"Azmaveth..." Jake whispered. Santorelli and Rachel nodded. Everyone seemed taken aback, even the Drode. Azmaveth himself gave a slight bow at the waist, like a magician after a trick.

He looked at me. "And for my next trick, I shall now pull a rabbit out of my hat." An old, silk top-hat appeared in his hand. He reached inside and pulled out a rabbit. But there was something wrong here. The rabbit was glowing an electric blue.

"Hmm...that is not right at all," Azmaveth mused. Then he shook the rabbit. There was a flash of blue light and in its place was an old man, glowing the same blue the rabbit had been. *He looks kind of like Christopher Lee*, I said to myself.

"Glad you could join us, Ellimist," the Drode sneered. "You're just in time to watch the destruction of the universe. Great job you did, picking these idiots."

Azmaveth laughed again. “The Ellimist had little to do with this. True, he manipulated events so that Marco, Cassie, Tobias, and Aximili would be in this war. And he threw Jake in there to bind them together. But he does not see the true connecting point; he considers it nothing more than a ‘happy accident.’” Azmaveth said that last part looking at Rachel.

“Look what happened without this ‘accident.’ Marco, drowning himself in luxury, trying to fill a void with material wealth. Cassie, devoting herself entirely to animals; she could no longer deal with humans. Jake, who never realized how close he was to suicide. Aximili, burying himself in his work. And, of course, there was Tobias, who effectively gave up on life itself.

“And look what happened when this ‘happy accident’ reappeared in their lives. Cassie has given up what she hates for what she loves. The effects on Tobias are obvious. Marco and Jeanne have been brought together, though more than a bit of work on my part. Do you think it is mere chance that Jacques and Naomi met?

“Rachel’s life is but one example of something that both of you, Ellimist and Drode, refuse to understand. You cannot predict humans. You should have realized that long ago.

Drode, you watched them kill Jesus of Nazareth. You saw then what humans were capable of. And yet you were still so stupid that you decided to play with them yourself.”

“Oh, let’s not bring this up,” the Drode muttered. It’s embarrassing.”

The Ellimist nodded. “I would really rather not relive this event,” he agreed.

Azmaveth pointed at the Drode. “You did that quirky ‘Wildcard’ thing you so pride yourself over. You went down to China and gave power to a man named Zhang Jiao. You talked him into starting country-wide rebellions. You gave him control of the earth and skies. You wanted to see what humans would do. And what did they do? They rose up against all that power and struck it down.

“But chaos still persisted. And you, Ellimist, took it upon yourself to quell the chaos. You manipulated events and aided a man named Liu Bei. You gave him all the advantages. Most of the greatest of warriors served him. Some of the greatest strategists to ever live worked with him. You placed the world in his hands. But what happened?

“Humans rose up against you, too. All of your plans, all of your plots, all of your machinations and manipulations came

to naught. Cao Cao defeated Liu Bei, time and time again. All of your plans were frustrated by a single, mortal man. And by the time they had both passed on to my realms, you had given up. You didn't learn your lesson then and you still haven't: humans are not to be toyed with.”

CHAPTER 13

“Why are you even doing this?” Tobias asked Azmaveth. “If you respect humans so much, why this war? Why all of this? Why not leave us be?”

“I once took you and Santorelli through quite a time journey, Tobias. I showed you that in the end, all things decay and crumble. I showed you that in the end, death and destruction can be a kindness. All things must inevitably reach a conclusion, Tobias; there are no exceptions to this. I cannot *allow* any exceptions.

“Without an end to things, we cannot appreciate them. Without war, we would have peace but we would not understand it. Without slavery and oppression, we would place no value on liberty. And without death, we would have no appreciation for life.

“Why have I done this? Because it is not the quantity of life that concerns me; it is the quality. I would rather see a single world of wise men who understand than an entire universe full of fools.

“It is in humanity, Tobias, that I see the greatest hope for life. Humans will either bring the galaxy into a golden new age or destroy it utterly. I have seen this potential in few. I saw

it in Crayak, long ago. I tested him and his servants. I began my war with him and unleashed my Kelbrid. But I found Crayak wanting, so I banished him to this galaxy.

“I followed him here, to finish him off. I have learned that one must tie off all loose ends. I myself was a loose end, once, and now...now, I am the master of the universe. I would not run that risk with Crayak. So I came here once more and loosed my Kelbrid upon him. I drove him out of his stronghold in what is now known as the Kelbrid sector of this galaxy. And now, after all of that time, I came here to finish the job.

“And then I encountered something startling: the Yeerks, cousins of the Yoorts I had used to control my Kelbrid. They told me of their defeat on Earth, at the hands of the humans. I had been watching humans for some time by then; I saw much potential in them. And when I heard about this defeat, I decided that I had to do what I did with Crayak. The time had come to test humanity.

“So I drew you Animorphs out. I captured Prince Aximili as bait. I lured you and Crayak into this war. All of this, Tobias, is a test. How much can humans overcome? Is there even a limit to what they can accomplish? This, I must know.

Humans could be a great boon unto the galaxy. You could raise it up to something new and beautiful. Or you could bring it into the darkest age it could ever experience.

“I do not mean to suggest that humans will spread across the galaxy doing good deeds and helping others. Far from it. I mean, rather, that humans are adaptable, quick to change, and terrible as foes. Many of your people will be expansionists, wanting to subjugate the other peoples of the galaxy. Others will seek to ensure some sort of galactic peace. Still others will want to conquer, to study, to explore, or simply to exist. In any case, just by being in contention with humans, the standards of the other races of the galaxy will rise. The whole galaxy could be brought up to a new level. Or it could fall to base ambitions and weak desires. That is unacceptable.

“Now, when humanity stands at the edges of space, prepared to go forth into the world, I must know what humans will do. If you prove to me that you will be what I need, good. But if you fail my test, if you prove yourselves to be nothing but basic creatures, then I cannot allow you to expand. If you fail my test, you will be destroyed utterly, removed from the equation.

“So why all of this? A test, Animorphs, a test. Can humans do what is necessary? Do they even know? When threatened thus, what will they do? When confronted by such odds, will they fight on and somehow persevere? How much can they endure before they have had too much? How far can you bend a man before he breaks? That is the reason for all of this. Because I need to know what your race can truly do.”

We were all silent for a few moments as we digested the fact that if we lost this fight, that would be the end of the human race. Period. And if we won... well, he never really said much; just that contention with us would raise the galaxy to a new high.. Slowly, Tobias asked, “So why Mersa? Why does he matter in all of this?”

“He is...an unexpected factor,” Azmaveth answered. “Imagine, Tobias, that you were taking a written test in a school. Suddenly, a new question was added to the test; a question to which neither you nor the instructor knew the answer. What would the instructor do? He would cross it out and not count it. So I want Mersa gone. Your interaction with him has shown me a great deal, but his usefulness to all of us is at an end.”

“He’s still useful to me,” Tobias argued. “To pass your test, I have to win this war, right? Well, Mersa’s helping me do that. You can try to strike him out all you want. But as for my part, if you want him to go, I want him to stay. If anyone wants to change their vote, do it now.”

For a long while, no one spoke. Then, Jake looked to Tobias. “Look...if I kill Mersa, I get to live. But what’s the point in that? Mersa...he’s fighting against Azmaveth, against the Visser. He’s doing more good than I can. I vote that he gets to live. I won’t kill him.”

Azmaveth looked from Jake to Santorelli. “Be that as it may, I gave you seven days for this task. Six remain. You have until then to change your minds. If Jake kills Mersa by the end of that time, Jake will live. If not, Jake and Santorelli will perish. You have six days.”

And then the disappeared. Azmaveth, the Drode, the Ellimist...all gone. And suddenly, it was like I didn’t know these people. I remembered everything that had happened that day, but nothing between this morning and when I was thirteen. All of it was gone. They had taken my memory with them.

CHAPTER 14

We all just sort of lounged around the living room. My entire world was completely destroyed. Overnight, I went from a more-or-less carefree teen to some 20 year old guy who suddenly had to fight a war for the survival of the human race. How had this happened? On the plus side, at least I apparently had a hot girlfriend.

Everyone sort of disappeared after that. Tobias went off with some woman named Loren. Rachel and her father disappeared. The rest of them went off with Jake to inform him of what exactly was going on in this war. I was going to join them when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned around to see another person who had slipped into the room when I wasn't paying attention.

"Marco," he said, "my name is Jacques. I'm Jeanne's father. I know that you remember nothing, and I thought that you would like to talk about it."

I flopped down on the couch. He took a seat in a chair next to it, kind of like a psychologist. "What's there to say? Seven years of my life just...vanished, I guess. I mean...I still feel like a kid. I still feel like I'm thirteen. What can I say to all of this?"

Jacques shrugged. “I know what it is like to lose several years of your life. I did not lose my memories, but I did lose my life. I was a Controller for a long time, Marco. For those years, my life was not my own. My situation was...not quite the same as yours, but perhaps I could be of some help.”

“How?” I asked. What else was I supposed to say?

He was quiet for a few moments. I guess he hadn’t really thought this through. Then he told me, “When I was free, for just a few hours, I would keep a journal. I would write down my thoughts, my feelings. It was impossible to hold on to any of it, though. I could never be sure to find a pencil and paper. I wrote on whatever I could find. Ink, spit, blood...whatever I could use.”

“From what I’ve heard about these Yeerks, I can’t imagine they liked that very much.”

“No, no they did not. They destroyed whatever I wrote. They washed it away or burnt it. They could take away my words, but they could not silence them. They could destroy the writings but they could not destroy the man. That was one victory I never let them have.

“The human is a remarkable creature, Marco. I often hear people speak of things being ‘more than the sum of their

parts.’ If this is true for anything, it is true of humans. We are far more than the things that create us. What are we? I couldn’t list it all. The Yeerks took much from me. They took my family, my home, my freedom, my life... But they did not take me. I do believe we have souls, and that is something that cannot be taken away; it must be given. I never gave them my soul.

“The soul...it’s more than these mortal qualities we recognize. It’s more than thought and emotion and memory and ideals. We can lose all of those but still carry on. They can take everything from us but we will continue to exist. I suppose that what I mean to say is this: You have lost your memory. Much of what made you the man I know is gone. You are your experiences, true; and without them, you are a far different person. But you are also more than your experiences. Much of what made you Marco is gone, but with your memory or without it, you are still Marco.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. As far as I know, people don’t make speeches like that in real life. But then again, my ‘real’ life was suddenly completely screwed up. The world was turned completely upside-down. So who knows what people really do or don’t do? My life had become a b-class

sci-fi movie. After that day's events, I got over judging the world.

Jake came back in shortly after that. It was so weird...he still looked like Jake. Older, yeah, and there was definitely a lot different. His eyes were more distant, his face a lot harsher. But I could still see all the parts of the Jake I knew from yesterday. Even after seven years, he apparently hadn't changed much.

Some other things hadn't changed much, either. Like what we liked to do for fun. We went to the mall, the two of us. We talked and caught up, as it were. He told me about his life; and he told me about mine.

We hung out, just like 'old' times; just like yesterday for me. We ate junk food and played videogames. The games were a different, a lot more advanced. And I guess it was kind of weird for people to see the two of us, two twenty year old guys, playing around like kids. I didn't really care. As far as I could feel, in my heart and mind, I was still a kid.

We stayed out a lot later than I was used to. It was weird... the mall closed at 10:00, but we didn't go home then. That was long past my usual curfew, but I lived on my own now. I didn't have to be home at all if I didn't want to be. So we

stayed out until 2 a.m., just walking around town and looking at how much everything had changed.

I couldn't remember where I lived; I didn't know my mansion's address. I didn't know anything about the place. So we went back to the one place I remembered. We went back to Rachel's house. At least I had been there in this reality.

It was really crowded there now. Apparently, some of us had to be shoved into Tobias's spaceship in the backyard. I had a hard time getting over that, but apparently it was all true. I didn't go there, though; I just couldn't handle that. I flopped down on the couch with Jake at the other end and fell asleep after the most incredible day of my life.

CHAPTER 15

My name is Marco. And my life just got completely and totally out there. I mean...no, I can't even describe it. All I can do is tell you the story like it happened to me; that's the only way I can explain this.

I'm a normal kid. I used to be, anyway. My mother died two years ago, and it sort of messed up my family. My dad stopped working; we barely got by. But all of that was normal, really; it happened to a lot of people. What happened to me was far from normal.

I woke up to an argument. That was weird. Who could have been arguing? It was just my dad and me; no one else lived with us. My mom died two years ago. There was no one else who should have been in our house. So why did I hear a man and a woman arguing?

I opened my eyes and got freaked out. I was lying on a couch in a house that looked vaguely familiar. At the other end was...he looked like an older Jake. What the heck? "Jake?" I whispered. "Where are we?"

He rolled off of the couch. "Oh God; please tell me you're joking, Marco."

"Not this time. What's going on?"

Two people looked over at me from the kitchen; the arguers. One of them was quite a bit older than me. She looked like... Was that Jake's aunt, Naomi? The other guy was about twenty and looked like a serial killer.

The killer looked from Jake to me. "Oh sario; he doesn't remember anything again?"

Jake shook his head, "Doesn't look like it. How do you think we should break the news this time?"

"What news?" I demanded. "Jake, what's going on? Where are we? Who are they? And why are you twenty?"

The older woman looked at me. Then she glared at the killer. "Is there something you're not telling me, Tobias?" She sounded very angry; then again, she had just been arguing with him...

"Lots of things, Naomi. Mostly because they're none of your damn business and you should stay the hell out of them. Marco has hysterical amnesia. He woke up yesterday and didn't remember anything between that day and seven years ago, the day we walked through the construction site. And apparently, he doesn't remember yesterday, either."

The killer, Tobias, turned to me. "Or maybe not nothing... Marco, does the word Andalite mean anything to you?"

“Sure. It sounds like the list of things you need to get for this room. A chair, a desk, and a light.” But there was something in the back of my mind...I felt it almost like physical pressure there. “But...there’s something more, isn’t there? It means something else.” I was sure of it now.

Tobias nodded. Then he turned around and yelled, “Al, get in here for a moment!” Something came running in. Blue, four legs, four eyes, deadly tail...an Andalite. I remembered! But... it was weird. I remembered the image. I could tell what an Andalite was when I saw one. But what was it, really? It was like...like looking at food at a Chinese buffet. You see it, and you know its food, but you don’t really know what it is.

An Andalite...had to be some sort of alien, I think. I mean...nothing on Earth looked like that. “An Andalite,” I guessed. Apparently named Al. “Is he an alien?” I asked Tobias.

Tobias nodded. “Good; so you remember that much. What else do you know about Andalites, Marco?”

“I...there’s something about...” I knew there was something important but I just couldn’t remember. “Something... I don’t know. There’s something important I’m missing.”

Tobias nodded. “Okay. What if I say the word Yeerk?”

“I...I’m not sure. I just get...a really bad feeling.”

“Better than yesterday,” Tobias said. He turned to Al. “Go get Jeanne; she’s the psychologist here. She should be here to see this.”

A few moments later, the most beautiful girl I had ever seen walked down the stairs and gave me a worried look. Somehow, I knew... “Jeanne,” I said slowly.

She smiled and nodded. “So you remember me. Good.”

“Well...I can put the name to the face. Not that I could ever forget a face like that,” I added, sounding a lot more confident than I felt. There was something else, though... something about Jeanne I wasn’t remembering. Okay, there were probably a lot of things I wasn’t remembering. But there was something really important. “Look...I know this might sound really weird, but...are you my girlfriend?”

She smiled wider. “Good, you remembered that part. That saves me a lot of time.”

Tobias turned to her. “Do you want to fill him in on the parts of his life he’s forgetting? It should be a lot easier this time around.”

Jeanne and I sat down; incidentally, it was on the couch I had woken up on. She told me the most incredible story I had ever heard. A story about the Andalites and Yeerks and their war. As she spoke, I started to remember a few things. Nothing specific, just the general edges. It was like one of those connect the dots pictures. She would draw me an outline and I'd more or less get it. No details, no color, but at least I had some clue what she was talking about.

When she told me about my own war with the Yeerks, I wasn't too surprised, to be honest. I vaguely remembered some parts of it. The name Elfangor triggered an image, and some of the brief stories she told me reminded me of some things. Again, no details, but there were some bits there; enough to get by on. I probably knew as much about this as I did about any other war in history.

When she started telling me about this new war, I said to myself, *No wonder I went crazy*. This war was totally out of hand. Kelbrid and Azmaveth and people coming back from the dead...

We got interrupted, though. Tobias stormed into the room, followed by the others. Jake, Cassie, Rachel, Ax, Al, James, David, Menderash, Santorelli, and Ronnie all followed him.

Their faces, those who had faces anyway, ranged from all sorts of emotions. I couldn't tell what they were thinking or feeling.

“What is it?” Jeanne asked.

“Mersa,” Tobias said, his lips tight.

I remembered a few things. Mersa: Yeerk, rebel, ally... Jake's target. His life was the price for Jake's. “What about him?” I wondered.

“He's gone,” Tobias answered. “He ran off to the Visser.”

“How do you know?” Jeanne asked.

Tobias tossed a book on the coffee table in front of us. [u]The Art of War[/u]. “Open it to the marked page.”

I opened it and read, *“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.”*

Tobias nodded. “I know Mersa. I know what he did, what he plans to do, and why. The rest of us have been talking. I'm with all of you now. It's time for that slug to burn. Mersa has to die.”

Maybe that passage gave Tobias comfort, but as we were walking to his ship, it terrified me. See, I didn't know the

enemy anymore. And I sure as hell didn't know myself. If there was any truth to that at all, I was walking to my own defeat. "Damn, I hope that Sun guy's just cracked," I sighed.

CHAPTER 16

“I just don’t get it,” Rachel complained as we cruised through the sky towards the community center. “Why’d he run away? We said we’d spare his life. Where could he go?”

Tobias shook his head. “Yeah, we said we’d spare him; right after we said we’d kill him. Mersa’s a Yeerk leader, paranoid by nature. How long could he expect that promise to last? How long can we? In his mind, it was only a matter of time before we turned on him or before Jake and Santorelli went against us and did it anyway.”

<But where could he run?> David asked, repeating Rachel’s question. <Where could he go for safety?>

“If I’m hunting him, there’re only two people who could help him,” Tobias said. “The Visser and Guraff. He ran off to them to cut a deal to save his own life.”

“How could he pull that one off?” Santorelli asked. “I mean, he betrayed them and started a war against them. Does he really expect them to take him back?”

Tobias nodded. “Yeah, he does; and so do I. See, it’s about mutual gain. Mersa needs protection from us and Yeerks to expand his operations. The Visser needs Mersa’s facilities, specifically his fleet, and some of his hosts. They’ll sign a

truce. Or, more likely, Mersa will completely surrender to the Visser and put an end to his rebellion.”

“Guraff wouldn’t just let him do that,” Rachel argued. “He’d kill Mersa on sight.”

“If he had his way,” Tobias agreed. “But the Visser wouldn’t do it. He’ll see the benefit and accept Mersa’s proposal. And probably appoint Guraff or a special guard to make sure he stays loyal. At any hint of treachery, Mersa’s life will end by Yeerk hands. But he’ll stay loyal now, I think. He has no other options.”

“So what’s the plan?” I asked. “I mean...you *do* have a plan, right?”

He nodded. “We’ll take the community center from two sides. Group A will go through the front entrance, Group One from the back. We’ll hit them from two sides for maximum damage. It’ll divide their forces and then we can take them.”

“Who goes where?” James asked.

“I’ll lead in Group A,” Tobias answered. “The Andalites and the lions are with me. Jake will take Group One: Marco, Jeanne, Santorelli, and Cassie. I’ll take the head on assault. Jake’s team will go from the rear. Rachel will monitor things

from the Reliquary. Robbie will be sitting quietly and *not touching anything*. Is that perfectly clear?”

We all nodded. Except for Ronnie. “Wait. Tobias, what exactly is the plan?”

“Exactly? Eh...Nuts and Bolts? Care to help me out?”

We all looked at each other. Finally, Jake had the courage to ask, “Who?”

“Oh; that’s what I call Marco and David in my head: Nuts and Bolts. See, the way I see it, I’ve got the master plan; I’m the idea guy. But the two of them can see the little things that make it work; the nuts and bolts. Hence the names.”

I looked over at David. “Well, I guess we know which one I am, huh Bolts?”

<Bolts the Talking Rat. Sounds like a bad kiddie movie.>

“Who else but Marco could go clinically insane and then laugh at a joke that referred to him as Nuts?” Jake sighed. “But Ronnie’s right: what exactly are we trying to accomplish?”

Tobias told us, “Our goal right now is a simple one; your original goal, Jake. You have to kill Mersa. So the first part of our plan is focused on getting you in.”

<Our frontal assault would serve as a distraction,> David said. <While they're busy trying to deal with us, Jake's team goes in through another entrance. They'll encounter lighter resistance.>

I nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense. So Tobias draws them away. We'll find Mersa and Jake will kill him. Then what? How do we get out? And how do we let the other team know we've succeeded?"

We sat there in silence for a few moments. Then the solution to my own question came to me. "Ronnie and Menderash," I realized. "Rachel can set them down on the roof. From there, they should be able to hear all of our thought-speak, if I remember how it works. Once we're done, we can just tell them and they'll tell the other team to get out."

<Doesn't quite work,> David argued. <Who knows what could happen? We could get out of range. Doesn't the community center have a Yeerk pool under it? What if we end up there? Ronnie and Menderash couldn't possibly hear us from there, and Ronnie can't use thought-speak anyway.>

"Okay, here's what I'm thinking," Jake said. "Tobias causes the diversion. How long do we need to get in on our

own? Between two Howlers, a Garatron, a gorilla, and a wolf-”

“Polar bear,” Cassie corrected. “A wolf just can’t stand up to Kelbrid. If the Visser’s here, he’ll have at least a few of them guarding Mersa and I want to be able to handle them.”

I shook my head. “Those halls are probably too small for a polar bear. Go with the wolf; most of the Kelbrid would probably be too busy fighting Tobias.”

<He’s right,> David agreed. <You’ll probably encounter some of them as personal guards, but most of your resistance will probably be Hork-bajir and human Controllers. A wolf should do it. And Marco would probably be best off with his Garatron morph; speed will be best here.>

“Wolf it is,” Cassie consented. I nodded as well. I’d go Garatron with my girlfriend.

Jake nodded. “Okay. So between all of us, this shouldn’t take long. Tobias, I’d say you shouldn’t be longer than ten minutes or so.”

Tobias nodded. <Ax and Al can keep track. We’ll break off after ten minutes. If you’re not out by then, we’ll circle around and come looking for you. If we don’t find you within twenty,

we're going to have to break off and regroup over at Rachel's place. Sound like a plan?"

"Nope, not at all," Rachel said with a smile. Then she said something that even with my amnesia, I can't ever forget. That ever-present kiss of death, that invocation of dark powers, that taunt against fate. "Let's do it."

CHAPTER 17

I watched the others prepare for their battle. The others meaning Tobias, Ax, Al, David, and James. Jake and the rest of us would wait until a little later to morph. Right now, I was watching the rest of them perform their own individual pre-battle rituals.

The Andalites stood off to one side, performing an actual ritual. I didn't pay a lot of attention to it, really, because it wasn't actually any of my business. I'm sure they were saying something, but they kept their thought-speak private. Most of it was a lot of complicated bowing and tail movement. I guess that made them feel ready for the fight.

James and David morphed to lions. It was odd to see a human and a rat turn into the exact same creature, and one so radically different from each of them. <Done,> David said as soon as he finished his transformation.

<Damn,> James cursed as his mane filled in. <I'll beat you next time, Bolts.>

<Keep telling yourself that. Ready to do this thing?>

<You know it.> Then they slapped high-fives. Weird to see lions do, and I'm not sure if it's exactly a high five, per se, since I don't remember how many "fingers" lions have.

It was even stranger to watch Tobias and Rachel. While he quickly became a Howler, which I remember to be one of the deadliest creatures in the galaxy, she reminded him, “When you get back, the Reliquary needs to be washed.”

“I’ll have AI take care of it.”

“You can’t just shove all your housework off on AI.”

“Why not? He lives to please.”

“You’re washing the ship when we get home. And then you have to run out to the store. There’s some stuff we need, especially with all the company we suddenly have. I’ll write up the list while you’re off working. And then you’re taking me and your mother out to a nice dinner.”

“The Andalites don’t give me enough money to constantly support your idea of a ‘nice dinner.’ It’s really cutting into their spending as it is.”

“Fine, joke about it. You’re still doing it. Honestly, why do you even bother to complain? It’s not like it’ll change anything.”

“No, but it makes me feel better.”

“Oh fine then, be childish about it. You’re still going to do it and you’re going to like it.”

“I think I said that to you once...”

“You’re as bad as Marco.”

I turned to Jeanne and whispered, “He is?”

“No,” she assured me. “You’re much worse.”

“Ah; good.”

Then they jumped out of a hatch in the floor, dropping into the parking lot below. A Howler, two Andalites, and a pair of twin lions. Tobias let loose a howl. Not the full force, I don’t think; I have hazy memories that that would be very painful. But it was enough to get attention. <Party’s starting,> he said in our heads. <Get ready, Jake.>

Rachel took the ship over to the other side of the community center. It was completely silent, totally undetectable. We hovered, invisible, waiting for the signal. Jake turned to me and nodded. “Let’s morph.”

At first, I couldn’t remember what a Garatron was or what one looked like. Thankfully, Jeanne took care of that. It was strange to watch her morph because there was no feeling of familiarity about it. When I looked at Cassie, it felt like I had seen her do this a hundred times; I probably had. With Jeanne, I didn’t feel that at all.

After a few moments, though, I started to remember what a Garatron looked like. Like an Andalite, but without the

blade. Smaller, sleeker, more aerodynamic. Insane speed, that was one thing I remembered for sure. There weren't many things faster than a Garatron.

What caught me off guard was the mind, though. I had expected, from everything I had heard, to feel an almost panicked mind, obsessed with movement. I expected restlessness, fear, energy...what I got was totally different.

It was a calmness, an almost meditative peace. It wasn't that I moved quickly; the world seemed to flow slower around me. Everything else was slow; only I moved at the true speed of the universe. That gave me a feeling of peace, a confidence that I had never felt even in...what morph was it? Kelbrid? I wasn't sure.

I turned to Jeanne. We had no stalk-eyes, unlike Andalites, so I had to use my main eyes. I was fine with that. It was easy enough for me to look around and see what was happening; heck, it was easy enough for me to turn around completely to see what was going on around me.

Jake and Santorelli were Howlers, now. I don't remember where they got those morphs. Cassie was a wolf, moving slowly towards us. Ronnie and Rachel moved at a snail's pace. But we were all more or less ready. I focused my eyes back on

Jeanne. <You know this is insane, right? And take it from a guy who apparently lost most of his memory: this is insane. We're two walking armies, a pair of speedy blue aliens, and a wolf, who are sneaking in the back door of a community center that is currently besieged by a Howler, two Andalites, and the lion twins. All because we need to get at a slug who lives in the brain of the guy who used to be my assistant principal just so that my best friend doesn't have to go back to being dead. This is insane.>

<Maybe you remember more than you think,> she said, giving me an indescribably Garatron smile. And then we bolted for the exit.

CHAPTER 18

Jeanne and I were at the door before Jake and Santorelli hit the ground. That's Garatron speed for you, I guess. It was weird, though, watching them fall. They seemed to fall at a normal rate; at least, they fell at the same rate Jeanne and I had. But when they landed, they moved slowly again. It can be disorienting in a Garatron's mind. No wonder the Yeerks didn't take many members of the species as hosts. At least, I don't think they did, but what do I know?

We waited impatiently until the two Howlers and the wolf reached the door. <How do you want to go in?> I asked them.

<The...subtle...approach?> Santorelli suggested. Slowly, or so it seemed to me, Jake nodded. Santorelli drew back a foot and kicked the door. It broke off of its hinges and crashed onto the floor behind it.

<Bio...filters?> Jake asked as Santorelli strolled inside. The older man reached up towards the ceiling and slowly did something.

<Not...anymore... Lead...the...way...Jake.>

<Would you all hurry up?> I demanded. How long had this taken already? Ten minutes to get to the door? Probably not

that long, but it felt like it. <What is it with these people, Jeanne? Are they always this slow?>

<As long as I've known them,> she agreed. <Jake, perhaps Marco and I should lead the way. We can deal with any Horkbajir or humans we come across. And if there are any Kelbrid, we can get back in time to give you some warning.>

<And,> I added, <I won't have to put up with you just casually walking around like we already own the place. I think I remember something about Howlers being tough, but we still do have a bit of a time crunch.>

<Fine...knock...yourselves...out,> Jake said. <But...if...you...come...across...any...Kelbrid...come...right...back... You...can't...take...them...in...those...bodies... You'll...need...our...help.>

<Fine, dad,> I sighed. I offered Jeanne my arm. <Shall we?>

She looped her arm through mine. <Let's.> We set off at what felt to us like a casual stroll. To the others, it was probably blindingly fast. There was no one in the hallways, but the place was far from deserted. The sounds of battle echoed through the place, carrying through the walls.

After what felt like a few minutes of walking – it was probably just a few moments to everyone else – we came to a T-shaped hallway. <Right or left?> I asked.

<In this country? Right; your left is full of idiots.> I think it was a joke, but I couldn't quite remember what she was talking about. In any case, though, we turned and started going down the right hallway.

<Five!> I suddenly heard James's voice say in my head. <Falling...behind...David?>

<Nah...just.....you...do...all...the...hard...work... Four! ... You...know...how...it...goes...in...lion...packs: ... it's...the...females...who...do...all...the...work,> David laughed in my head.

<David,> Al said calmly, <I...believe...that...a... grouping...of...lions...is...called...a...pride... And...six.>

<The...young...these...days,> Ax sighed. <They... really...must...learn...to...keep...their...minds...on...the... battle...at...hand... Nine!>

Tobias laughed. <Hey... I...can...talk...and...fight...at... the...same...time... Thirteen...for...the...record... Make... that...fourteen... But...that's...not...the... fifteen... point...

This...is...too...easy... Where...are...the...Kel – sixteen –
brid..? Where's...Guraff...?>

I looked at Jeanne. <Left?>

<Better than joining in. They're supposed to be keeping
the fight away from us.>

We headed off down the left hall. Behind us, Jake and the
others were just catching up. I guess we had stood there
listening to Tobias's group for too long. <Hey, don't go right;
it'll take you closer to the fight,> I warned them.

<Marco!... Do...you...have...any...clue...where...
you're...going?> Jake asked.

<Not in the traditional sense,> I admitted. <Do you?>

<Santorelli...suggested...the...security...room... It'll...
give...us...a...view...of...everything.>

<Any idea where it is?>

<Somewhere...on...this...side...of...>

<Thanks. See you in a few. Let's get going Jeanne. The
longer I have to watch them, the more I want to run.>

It was only a few minutes until we found something
important. How do I know it was important? The four Hork-
bajir with Dracon beams standing in front of it were a bit of a
giveaway. Time for a little super-speed action.

The first two started to level their Dracon beams when they saw us. A useless gesture; they could never hit us. Sure, the beam would travel even faster than we could, but it was easy enough to keep out of the way of the barrel.

I dashed between the first two; Jeanne could handle them. By the time they had raised their arms to swipe at me, I was past any real danger from them. Instead, I concentrated on the ones in front of me. Now, Hork-bajir are tough. They have very few weak spots. But there is one place you can always count on.

FWAP! One started to stumble back, clutching at his eyes. Before his friend even realized what had happened, my tail lashed across his as well. I grabbed the Dracon beam of one with weak Garatron hands and whipped his wrist and claws until he finally let go.

I leveled the weapon at his friend and fired. The Hork-bajir sizzled and disappeared. I took a few steps back and fried my other opponent. Then I turned to help Jeanne. She was keeping her two enemies at bay, but that was about it. A Garatron tail, though an effective weapon most times, is of little use against the armor-like hide of a Hork-bajir. Instead, Jeanne was

swatting their weapons aside and keeping away from their blades.

I fried the pair, but that was the end of my Dracon beam. Apparently, the trigger wasn't made to move at such speeds. It snapped, the weapon useless now. I didn't bother to get one from another guard; I was sure we'd come across more.

The guards were gone. <Time to find out what's behind door number one.>

CHAPTER 19

It was, in fact, the security room. The guards had been emptied, though; all of them were busy dealing with Tobias and his group. I was just in a room full of computers and monitors. I walked around, watching the slow movements of the people on the screens.

More than half of them were focused on the battle with Tobias. Most of the others were blank. But there were a few that showed me what I needed to see. The half that monitored the west side of the complex had some labels, like “Pool 1” or “Dropshaft A.” Apparently, the entrance to the pool was on that side of the building.

Incidentally, all of the action as happening on the east side, the side the rest of us were on. And I saw on a few of the monitors, something interesting. Some figures moving across the screens. One of them was Chapman, Mersa. Another was an Andalite. A third was the biggest Hork-bajir I had ever seen; and he was carrying a sword, for some reason. The other three were...they must have been the Kelbrid my mind kept mentioning. They were on the east side, heading for the west.

<Damn it if they make it to the pool, we might not get them,> I said to Jeanne.

She nodded. And then made one of those decisions that makes me sure she is, as she claims, Rachel's sister. She called out in thought-speak. <Rachel, if you can hear me, I want you to level the west side of the complex.>

A moment later, I heard a faint thought-speak voice say, <She...advises...you...to...take...cover.> Menderash, apparently, was playing the role of messenger boy.

Jeanne and I ducked down and cowered in the doorway for what felt like several full minutes. Then we heard the explosions. It was a barrage of Shredder fire from the Reliquary, destroying that half of the complex; and ensuring that they would not reach the pool.

Jake, or maybe it was Santorelli appeared at the end of the hall. <What...the...hell...was...that?>

<Just Rachel being Rachel,> Jeanne told him.

I nodded. <Now let's go. She sealed off the pool, but I don't know how long Mersa and the others will stay on visual. They're on the monitors right now. I think I can find them from here.>

Jake glanced at the monitors as the others started to fill the room. <With...that...kind...of...an...escort...you'll...have...to...wait...for...us,> Jake decided. A bit grudgingly, Jeanne

and I followed him and Santorelli down the halls. They were running, but it was still slower than our walking. I was getting pretty disoriented now. The ‘time distortion’ was really starting to freak me out.

<Can’t you people run any faster?> I snapped.

<Hey,> Cassie said to me, <I...may...not...be...as...fast...as...a...Garatron...but...I...bet...I...can...run...longer.>

<Be that as it may, I’d still run farther, and in much less time,> I argued. <Of course you can run longer than me; there’s no reason for me to be running for a long time. It doesn’t take me a long time to do anything.>

After what seemed like minutes, we rounded a corner and saw our prey. And they saw us. They were probably looking for an exit, or an intact entrance to the pool. Mersa more or less cowered behind the Visser and the Hork-bajir, who themselves were behind a row of Kelbrid.

<Ah...it...has...been...so...long,> the Visser sighed. <Jake...Jake...Jake... I.....you...so...much. Believe...me...no...one...was...more...pleased...than...I...to...hear...that...you...had...finally...joined...the...winning...team... But...

who...is...the...other...Howler.? Is...that...my...good...friend...Tobias?>

The Hork-bajir shook his head. “The...Devil...Prince...leads...the...other...attack... As...I...predicted...he...is...a...decoy.”

<Not...that...it...matters,> the Visser smiled. <I...shall...take...what...I...can...get... Mersa...has...told...me...everything...Jake... He...may...be...useless...but...his...life...is...still...more...useful...to...me...than...yours. It...is...time...for...you...to...die...a...second...time... Few...are...ever...given...a...second...chance.; no...one...ever...gets...a...third... Goodbye...Jake... Guraff...and...Kelbrid...advance.>

The Visser and Mersa stood back to watch what would happen. The Kelbrid leapt for us straight away. I knew my limits; there was little a Garatron could do against a Kelbrid. They felt almost no pain from our tails; the best we could do was delay them. Instead, while Jake, Santorelli, and Cassie handled the Kelbrid as best they could, we focused on Guraff.

They told me later that if I had been able to remember what I knew about Guraff, I wouldn't have tried it. If I had my memory, I'd have known I couldn't take him. But I didn't, so I

did one of the most foolish things I'm told I ever did. I charged heat on at Guraff 427.

CHAPTER 20

I was fast, far faster than Guraff. But that didn't seem to matter much. Where could I strike? The position of his blades and his sword, which I now realized looked a lot like a Kelbrid's stinger, made it hard for me to find an opening. All vital areas were defended. And already the Visser was advancing on me.

I lashed at him with my tail but didn't break the skin. I took a step back, waiting for him to expose himself. He turned and sank his fist into the wall, punching a hole through the flimsy drywall that composed the place. <What could he be up to?> I wondered aloud. Then I found out.

He shattered a support beam with his leg. At the same time, he drove his sword into the ceiling, smashing another support. Suddenly, the wall and roof crumbled on me. I was buried under them. The wall wasn't too bad, but the roof was reinforced with pieces of slate. That hurt a lot.

His talon closed around my head. "Speed...is...a... beneficial...factor...in...warfare... But...it...means...little... against...the...knowledge...of...terrain," Guraff said to me as he raised his sword. I looked around for help but couldn't see any.

Jeanne was dodging the Visser's tail. She was hitting him with more than a few strikes, leaving bloody gashes in his torso and flanks, but she was still in no position to help me. Jake and Santorelli had their hands full with the Kelbrid. They stood back-to-back while the Kelbrid surrounded them. It was a stalemate.

Then I saw Cassie. She leapt over the Kelbrid, landed, and leapt again, aiming for Guraff. But the Hork-bajir saw her, too. He snagged her in mid air, catching her by the scruff of the neck and holding her off of the ground like she was a puppy. "You...are...no...warrior...Cassie... You...should...have...remained...at...home."

<Is there a plan B?> I wondered aloud.

<Stall...him,> Jake hissed. <Tobias...and...the...others... will...be...here...in...moments... then...we'll...turn...this... thing...around.>

I started to demorph. Guraff, apparently, was content to let me. The first thing I lost was the Garatron mind. Time suddenly snapped back to normal. <Guraff,> Cassie began, <What honor is there in defending Mersa? He's a rebel and a traitor. How can you defend him?>

“True, Cassie, there is no honor in protecting him. But there is greater shame in disobeying my Visser. I will follow my orders, even if it means protecting the worthless life of this slave-driving rebel. As my Visser commands, so do I obey.”

<Then your Visser commands you to stop talking and finish this fool,> the Visser snapped.

<Guraff!> I heard Tobias shout in my head. He rounded the corner, followed by the Andalites and lions. The latter four were bleeding a bit but otherwise unharmed. Tobias was unscathed by the melee he had waded through. <Put them down and fight a battle worth having.>

The Visser’s tailblade was at my throat in an instant. Guraff raised his sword and stepped away from me. Jake and Santorelli broke apart from their struggle with the Kelbrid. Jeanne backed off as well. Guraff tossed Cassie to the side. She hit the wall and helped but was fine in a moment.

“It seems, Devil Prince, that you have us outnumbered. Not even I can fight three Howlers and two Andalites, I do not believe. Are we to meet our ends here?”

Tobias nodded. <I think it was finally time this all ended. The Drode was right: these two ‘assassins’ are the key to ending this forever. Just remember,> he added for the rest of

us, <that Jake has to be the one to kill Mersa or Jake won't get to stay alive.>

<Ah, yes,> the Visser sighed, <I had forgotten about that.> He leapt back from me; his tail was suddenly at Mersa's throat. <So if I kill Mersa, it is as good as killing Jake. Here is the deal, then. You are all going to turn and go home. If you do not, I will kill Mersa, effectively killing Jake.>

Guraff caught on. "Your benefits are simple, really. You could attack us here, but that would condemn Jake to death along with who knows how many of your other people. Or you can retreat now. All of us will live and you can perhaps try again another day. The choice is yours."

I was still mostly morphed, so I could still use thought-speak. <Wait, Tobias; I have an idea. Don't decide anything yet,> I called privately. Then I turned to both Mersa and Tobias. <Do you see what you've walked into here? At the slightest sign of a problem from us, the Visser will take you as a hostage. You're not safe with him at all. Soon, you'll have the chance to run. I'd suggest you take it. After all, once you survive the next five days, Jake and Santorelli won't be hunting you anymore. You can go back to your rebellion. But I can guarantee that if you stay here with the Visser, you won't

live to see the end of that. If you understand what I'm telling you, if you agree, say, "Don't I get a say?">

Mersa looked from me to Tobias and then to the Visser.
"Don't I get a say?"

<Let's go,> Tobias sighed. <Die another day, Mersa.>

CHAPTER 21

My name is Marco. I'm writing this because Jeanne told me to start keeping a journal. When I wake up every morning, I think I'm a thirteen year old kid living some weird dream. Only once things happen, when I see or hear something familiar, do I begin to remember. I need something to jog my memory. So I'm writing this.

I'm told that yesterday, we were in a big battle at the community center. And that afterwards, once we came home, we sat around trying to figure out what to do next. And after a fruitless day, I fell asleep on the couch. All of that sounds vaguely familiar. When I woke up, I had no idea where I was.

Jeanne was there, though, first thing in the morning. She had slept on the floor next to me the whole time. I don't know if she was always that...devoted...to me but she seems to be so now. Maybe it takes some extraordinary problem to make someone care about you. That certainly worked for Tobias and Rachel; maybe this was what Jeanne and I needed.

Over breakfast, she held my hand as she reintroduced me to everyone and told me the story of my life. It should have sounded ridiculous; I should have called it insane. But I

remembered bits and pieces of it. Just enough that I didn't think I had somehow woken up in a house full of lunatics.

Not that the house wasn't full of lunatics, of course. No, they were all nuts in their own way. Naomi had a soul-deep loathing for the guy saving the world, Rachel was in love with a guy who was still half-bird, Jacques was probably the only island of sanity here. Loren and Dan had arrived to deal with Rachel's pregnancy. Menderash had shown up to oversee just what it was Tobias was doing on Earth.

Jake and Santorelli (who kept shooting awkward looks at Loren) were back from the dead. Cassie was, too, in a way. Ronnie was getting to know everyone just like I was. Jordan kept flirting with James, who had once left all of his friends to die while he ran off to the Andalite homeworld. Sara did the same thing with David, a.k.a. Bolts the Magic Talking Rat.

Ax, the one-eyed Americanized Andalite was devouring Rachel's inedible cooking, as was Al, who was raised by robots. And let's not forget that his half-brother was an entirely different species. Tobias himself sat at the head of the table, the craziest of us all. I remembered that much.

And under it all covered Jeanne and I: the lunatic who lost his memory and his mind and the girl who cared for him

enough that she was willing to help me get it back each and every morning if that was what it took. Yeah, our little family was more than a little insane.

Then the doorbell rang. Sara ran off to answer it. A moment later, she called into the dining room, “Hey, Tobias? There are two people here to see you.”

“I’m eating,” he called back. “This better be important. Do these two have names?”

“Yeah. Esplin and Guraff.”

Everyone dropped their silverware. We knew those names. Sure enough, Sara lead them in. I don’t know many people who would lead a scarred Andalite and a massive Hork-bajir into their living rooms. Maybe she had gotten use to the oddness of life around us.

Ax and Al held their tails at the ready. The rest of us were prepared to morph. Jacques put a hand inside of his jacket, no doubt fingering a Shredder.

“This tension is hardly necessary,” Guraff said to us. “We find ourselves on the same side now, Animorphs.”

“How so?” Tobias asked.

<Mersa has run off,> the Visser said icily. <He stole Guraff’s ship and is headed for...we are not sure where. We

suspect any number of places. The Yeerk homeworld, the Hork-bajir and Taxxon planets, and Guraff even suspects that he may flee to the Andaltie homeworld or to some sector of Kelbrid space.>

“We cannot control him,” Guraff continued. <The only thing left to do is kill him. That is what you want as well. We cannot cover all of this territory alone. So I have come to propose a temporary alliance. You have five days until Prince Jake’s time runs out. I suggest you decide quickly.

We all turned to Tobias. I didn’t remember much about him, but somehow I knew what he would decide. He gestured to the table, “Have a seat, Guraff. We’ll get started right after breakfast.”

“We just got crazier,” I whispered to Jeanne. Now look what we had added to the mix: the bloodthirsty perfectionist Esplin 9466, the monster who still haunted our nightmares. And Guraff 427: the Yeerk Chuck Norris. Yeah; no wonder I went insane.

And so Yeerk, Human, and Andalite broke bread for the first time, united in a common goal: the destruction of a traitor. We could agree on one thing, at least: blood and death. But if we could agree on this, then perhaps there was actually hope

for a peace sometime in the future. Not with the Visser, certainly; not while the Yeerks were being used by Azmaveth to test us.

But I began to see now what he had been talking about. Humans...we could go either way. When we saw the gain in it, we were capable of working with our greatest enemies. And when there was no longer any gain, we could discard them. Now I understand why Azmaveth hoped for us and feared what we might do. After all, no one knows what a human will do. Not even the most powerful being in the universe can tell how the human mind will bend.

There's a reason people shouldn't mess with Earth.

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

*“And it's been forty days
I've tried forty ways
You will never quite leave your sins behind
They'll haunt you, taunt you until the day you die
You will never really go
You'll just think about it much but you'll need to know how the story ends
So you'll sit around, even though you should just go
Tell your friends what you have heard, show them all the lies unlearned
And when you really go, you will really know you were never meant for Earth
What's it worth?
If we're going to break it down with any logic, it's absurd

And no matter where we go, we are not alone
When the silence turns to cries of "Why?"
What a way to begin: we inherit sin
And nobody's going to quench your thirst when the well runs dry
And nobody's going to hold your hand on the day you die.”*

-Forty Days

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

68: THE REDEMPTION

The Blade ship was terrifying on the outside. Jet black, long, pointy...you know what it looks like by now. There's no doubt from the outside that you're looking at a weapon of death. It has two very clear purposes: to kill, and to transport people to do more killing.

The inside was far different. The crew quarters, weapons stations, engine rooms, storage bays, hangars, etc. were all the usual spartan interior, the sort of thing you'd expect from a powerful Yeerk warlord. But the luxury quarters where the Visser and his most trusted officers and guests slept were a lot different.

I had been on the Blade ship before, a few times, but I had never been to this part of it. It had never been on pleasure missions. I'll never forget the hellish battle we fought to steal the thing; I can't forget because I see it every night in my nightmares. That slaughter had cost Ax his eye and almost cost all of us our lives.

This mission was a bit different. Although Hork-bajir Controllers and Kelbrid still roamed the halls, they were not

nearly as numerous as in the past. The Visser said they were here to make sure we didn't try to kill him or steal the ship again. I had my doubts, but Tobias seemed to have faith in Guraff's words. It was a dangerous game he was playing. A Yeerk is still a Yeerk, after all.

The luxury quarters, though, represented anything other than the usual Yeerk utilitarian tastes. Red carpeting stretched from wall to wall. Those walls, incidentally, were painted a matching red. Spherical hatches studded the walls at intervals. They led to the suites where the Visser and his top men slept and lived aboard the Blade ship. The lighting was soft, in strong opposition to the glaring of the interrogation lights that lit the rest of the ship.

The Visser left us alone in the biggest suite (well, third biggest anyway; the top two went to the Visser and Guraff) to figure out where we'd sleep. Tobias decided to make a chart. "Okay...Rachel has no choice but to stay with Guraff. So that's where I'll be as well. Jake, Marco, and James should be able to share a place, correct?"

We nodded. Tobias continued. "Now comes the tricky part. What do do with Jeanne? She's the only female here aside from Rachel, and I doubt she wants to bunk with Guraff and

the two of us. So, Jeanne, if you don't mind, I'm going to put you with Ax, Al, and Menderash. They may be males, but they're Andalites. I doubt you need to be worried about your modesty.”

Marco snorted. “Sorry. It was the use of Jeanne and modesty in the same sentence.”

<I do not believe he used the name Jeanne in that sentence,> Al corrected.

<I'm with the blue dude,> David agreed.

I nodded. “Bolts is right. He never said Jeanne, Marco.”

Marco looked around. “You mean my witticism was wrong? Damn; I guess I'm still off.”

Tobias cleared his throat. “Moving on... David, as a rat, can go anywhere. But I'd like you where I can keep an eye on you in case of trouble. You alright with bunking with me, Rach, and Guraff?”

<Uh...that's kind of a scary and volatile combination,> David pointed out. <If it's all the same to you, can I be with Jake, James, and Marco? They all seem less likely to...well, snap and eat me in the middle of the night.>

“Fair enough,” Tobias nodded.

“Uh...what about us?” someone ventured. We all turned and looked at Cassie and Ronnie. Tobias had chosen to ignore them. He was still being really childish about the whole 'Cassie left the team' thing, but I wasn't going to be the one to say anything to him. If Rachel wasn't trying to straighten him out over it, I sure as hell wasn't going to bother.

Tobias shrugged. “Do I care what you do? Figure it out yourselves.” With that, he turned and headed off towards Guraff's suite. He was carrying the last half of Rachel's luggage; not even Guraff had been able to carry all of it in one trip.

Jake turned to Ronnie. “Well, I don't think Cassie will mind rooming with Jeanne and the Andalites. And Ronnie, you're more than welcome to stay with us. Visser Three loves to be comfortable. I'm sure there'll be enough room. And if not, Marco and I can always share a bunk. Wouldn't be the first time, now would it buddy?”

“Uh...I don't know, would it?” Marco answered. “I still don't know details, Jake.”

“Well then, let me fill you in on some that you've forgotten. Batman will always beat Spiderman.”

Marco shook his head. “No...something about that just sounds wrong. Doesn't Spiderman shoot webs? He'd just tangle Batman up, end of story.”

“No no no. Batman has body armor. Spiderman's webs wouldn't stick to Batman's body armor.”

“From what I recall, Jake...” The argument trailed off as the two headed into the suite. I was about to follow, but then lights started flashing and a soft siren started going off. “What's that?” I demanded.

Guraff raced past me. “A transmission we were not expecting. This will be important.”

I sighed. “It's always something with you people.” Then I took off after the lightning fast Hork-bajir.

PREVIEW SUMMARY

The end is near. Mersa has taken off and is on the run. The Animorphs' only chance to find him is to deal with the Yeerks once again and chase the rebel to wherever he fled. But when you deal with the Yeerks, suspicion, paranoia, and deception can be found in abundance? Can the Yeerks be trusted or have the Animorphs walked into another trap?

On top of the Yeerks, there are other alien races that may not be trustworthy. James, Alloran, Cassie, Jake, Tobias, and the other Animorphs have more than enough to deal with. It won't be easy to find Mersa and kill him before Jake runs out of time. And to top it all off, the one person they all count on may be the very last person they should trust...

Part III of a Trilogy