

65: THE PACT

CHAPTER 1

My name is Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill. *Prince* Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill. I am sure you know my story. I am, after all, the most famous Andalite alive. You know all about my time on Earth, fighting the Yeerks and aiding the Animorphs. What you may not know is my recent history.

About one Earth year ago, I was hunting the Blade ship, which escaped during our final battle with the Yeerks. I was lured into a trap and captured by a being called The One.

I am told that The One possessed me and controlled my body. In truth, I do not recall any of this. My next memory was perhaps the worst memory of my life. The only one that even comes close is the time when I learned that Elfangor was dead.

I remember feeling a Yeerk against my ear. The One, commanding my body, raised a slug to my head. I screamed in helpless terror as the Yeerk squirmed its way into my brain. I could feel it picking through my mind, reading my memories, learning all of my secrets.

And then...the voice. *His* voice. Esplin 9466. The Abomination; Visser Three; the Yeerk who killed my brother. When I realized who was in my head, when I understood whose slave I had become, I wanted nothing more than to take my life. But, of course, I could not.

I watched, helpless, as my brother's murderer used my body, my morphs, and even my own mind against my friends. For months, I was trapped, fighting those I loved. But then, one day, there came one of the greatest and yet most bitter days of my life. I was rescued.

My friends snuck aboard the Blade ship, knocked me out, and kidnapped me. Their ship, the *Reliquary*, was damaged badly by the Blade ship and was forced to make a landing in the middle of nowhere. They were at a standoff.

In the end, to buy some time, they released the Visser; I was free, but we were still trapped. The Yeerks had agreed to let us go for a small price: me. If I would return to be the host of the Visser once more, my friends would get to live.

We had tricked the Yeerks, though. My nephew, Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor, morphed me and went in my stead. We do not yet know what his fate was. They may have killed him when

they learned that he wasn't me. Or they may have infested him. I pray it was the first.

I knew that we would stop at nothing to free him if he had been captured. It was my fault and my responsibility. But right now, we had another battle to face. My *shorm*, Tobias, was trapped in what I understand to be a very awkward situation no matter what race you are. He and Rachel were attempting to explain to their families that Rachel was pregnant.

I was there for 'moral support', though I must confess that I do not quite understand what that means. Morals are intangible, and so it is impossible for one to support them. Nevertheless, I was there, feeling very uncomfortable.

Rachel's mother, Naomi, and her father, Dan, the latter of which was present through a hologram, glared at Tobias, obviously greatly angered. Tobias's mother, Loren, who was also joining us via hologram, just looked a bit disappointed. Jacques, Rachel's step-father, had decided to leave the room.

"I mean," Rachel said to her parents, "it's not a big deal. Tobias and I were probably going to get married after the war anyway. Now, we just know it's a sure thing. Right?"

Tobias nodded. “Yeah. Eventually. I mean, once this is all over and everything. And there’s probably going to be a lot to do afterwards, with the media and all...eventually.”

<I do not think that was reassuring,> I said to him privately. He just shrugged.

It was Loren who broke the silence. “Well, there isn’t really anything to be done about it, so we might as well just look at the good side of things.”

“What good side?” Naomi demanded.

“Well, for starters, the timing.”

“How is anything about the timing good?” Dan asked.

“To begin with,” Loren answered, “this could have happened during the first war.” That was met with silence. I flexed my tail. Loren added, “And now, Rachel’s safe. She can’t fight anymore, so you don’t have to worry about her.”

Naomi and Dan seemed to relax. “That’s one good thing,” Dan agreed. “It’s just... She’s my little girl!”

“Not anymore,” Rachel said.

“So I’ve noticed,” Naomi muttered.

“The real problem,” Loren continued, “is that they’re short one Animorph now.”

Dan and Naomi stared at her. So did I. I did not think she would be the one to realize that that was, indeed, our current problem. But she did not know the full extent of our troubles.

“What can we do?” Loren asked. “I can still morph. If you need me to fight with you, I’ll do it. Can’t say I want to, but I will if you ask me.”

I was surprised. But I got over my surprise quickly. Loren had once been Elfangor’s wife, after all. Surprise was unnecessary. Of course she would fight.

Tobias shook his head. “No. I was thinking of someone younger. Someone closer to our age.”

“Who?” Naomi asked. I believe she sounded suspicious, but I am no longer as in touch with human emotions as I once was. I have been gone far too long.

Tobias inhaled deeply. “Is Jordan around?”

CHAPTER 2

“No,” Naomi said. “You are *not* getting another of my little girls. I already lost one daughter to this war and I will not let you cost me another.”

“It should be Jordan’s choice, mom,” Rachel told her. “We were all given a choice to make. Jordan at least deserves the option to fight.”

“Would you have ever said no?” Dan responded. “What do you think the chances are that Jordan will?”

“Jordan isn’t me, dad. And she knows what she’s getting into, unlike we did. Jordan understands what’s going on. The rest of us, we were thrown into this war by accident, by chance. She can choose not to fight. We can find someone else. But she deserves the same chance we had. She deserves to be allowed to fight for her planet.”

Naomi glared at me. “What do you think, Andalite?”

I don’t know why she asked my opinion. I did notice, though, that she said ‘Andalite’ with almost the same hatred that a Yeerk says it.

<I am not here to think. I am here for moral support,> I answered. Honestly, I didn't have much of an opinion. I did not know Jordan. During the brief time she knew of my existence, during our stay in the Hork-bajir valley, we did not interact at all. Her mother kept her children away from me as much as possible.

"I'm not surprised," she sneered. "I never figured thinking was your strong suite. You're just a hired killer, aren't you?"

"Naomi, that's enough," Loren said. "I know you're upset but that's no reason to take out on Aximili. He's had a hard enough time lately as it is."

<Thank you, Loren. And if you truly want an answer, Naomi, I have no opinion on this matter. I do not know Jordan. I have to trust Rachel's judgment.>

"I do not want my daughter to be one of you," Naomi insisted. "I've seen what this does to you. Rachel, I barely recognize you anymore."

We heard a new voice then. And yet, at the same time, it was an old one. One we knew all too well. "Well, Naomi, there is another option."

Rachel groaned. Tobias nodded a quick hello to the creature that appeared in the living room. “Drode,” Tobias said. “What brings you here?”

“What is that thing?” Naomi demanded. Dan took a step back in his hologram. Loren just shrugged.

“We aren’t entirely sure anymore,” Tobias answered.

“Call me the Drode,” Drode answered her. “Now, we seem to be at an impasse. The Animorphs need a new member. They want Jordan. You, Naomi, do not want them to have her. How, oh how, I ask, do we resolve this?”

“Get to the point,” Rachel snapped.

The Drode grinned. “Pregnancy’s making you grumpy, Rach. You need to chill.” Suddenly, the temperature in the room got very cold. I could see my breath, as could everyone else.

“Oh, great, he’s started with the puns,” Tobias sighed. “Are you happy now, Rachel? It’s like we’re dealing with Marco.” Rachel decided it was safest to remain silent. “You were saying?” Tobias prompted.

“Well, I happen to know someone who would make a perfect addition to your team, Tobias. And it’s not someone who anyone would worry about.”

“No deal,” Tobias answered. “If we’re getting a new teammate, we’re choosing them ourselves. I am *not* going to deal with another fiasco like what happened with David. It’s going to be someone *we* choose, not you.”

“Oh, but you already chose him,” the Drode laughed. “Of course, neither you or Rachel was there at the time. In fact, I suppose the people who chose him are gone now. What, with Jake...incapacitated, and Cassie too busy to deal with saving the world anymore. Of course, Marco is still around.”

“What are you rambling about?” Rachel demanded. “We never chose another Animorph.”

“Sure you did. You chose more than a dozen. I saw the whole thing. Are you going to tell me you don’t remember?”

“The auxiliaries,” Tobias concluded.

I nodded. <That seems to be the case. But the Drode cannot raise the dead. Nor can Crayak. At least,> I added, looking at Rachel, <not by himself.>

“Who said anything about raising the dead?” Drode asked.

<One of them survived?> I asked.

“More than you’d think. Some of them trapped themselves in morphs rather than morph back to injured human bodies. Ah, such a lovely move by you, recruiting the disabled. It

makes me proud. I didn't even have to influence your decisions at all.

“But yes, Prince Aximili, some of them survived. One of them happens to be a normally functioning, healthy man now. He went off to live with the Andalites and learned quite a few things you might find useful.”

“Who?” Tobias asked.

“His name is...but you know what? I'd rather show you. It's so much more fun that way.”

Suddenly, there was a new person in the room. He was about the same age as Tobias and Rachel. Tall and athletic, with golden-brown hair. He darted his head around, nervous, confused, and afraid. Then, his eyes fell on Rachel. “You? You're supposed to be dead.”

“Back at you, James.”

CHAPTER 3

James was, understandably, freaked out, as my human friends might say. “What’s going on, Rachel? You were dead. I saw your funeral on TV. Who are these people? And how did I get here?”

“Calm down,” Tobias said as soothingly as possible. “We can explain everything. But you have to go first. How did you survive? We thought all the auxiliaries died.”

“Who’s he?” James asked Rachel and myself. “Why is he asking the questions? Where’s Jake?”

<Prince Jake is no longer among the living,> I told James in private thought speech. <No one but we Animorphs know.>

He nodded. “Okay. So who is this guy?”

“Oh, right. I forgot. You probably wouldn’t recognize me as a human. I’m Tobias.”

“Okay. Who’s the purple guy?”

“That’s too long to answer,” Tobias replied. “Just call him the Drode. He’s on our side, more or less. Tell us your story, James. I want to know.”

“Okay, well I—”

“Wait, wait, wait,” the Drode interrupted. My tail twitched. This creature was getting on my nerves. “Why have the poor man tell the same story repeatedly? Let’s gather the rest of the Animorphs, shall we?”

Suddenly, we were in a large dining room. Marco, Jeanne, and a rat I recognized as David, were seated at it, eating. Marco barely looked up from his meal. “Oh, the Drode. What now? Can’t you see I’m eating? I don’t interrupt you during your meals.”

Then, Marco looked up and saw James. “Hey, you look familiar. Have we met?”

<This is James,> I answered. <He did not die during the attack on the Pool ship.>

“That makes one of us,” Rachel muttered.

<He was about to tell us his story.>

“Well, go on,” the Drode urged. Then he sat down at Marco’s table and started eating off of Marco’s plate.

James sat down. “Well, we attacked the ship like Jake told us to. But I hung back, in hawk morph. I wanted to try to keep my people organized. I thought that maybe some of us could get inside and help you. I had to dodge a lot of Dracon beams,

especially once they caught a good look at me. I was in red-tail morph,” James smiled. Then, he looked at the ground.

“When I saw that there was nothing we could do...when I saw that we were all going to die...I...I ran away.” His head snapped up, looking for the accusation he expected. He was met with silence.

I wanted to call him a coward. He had fled to save his own life and left his men to die. I wanted to insult him. But I held my tongue, to use a human expression. We were in desperate need of help and James was our best option at the moment. We could not alienate him. I believe my fiends kept silent for this reason. I know that Rachel probably wanted to attack him.

“Go on,” Tobias said after a pause.

James nodded, relieved. “After it was all over...there wasn’t anything left for me here. But I had a second chance. I had my legs back. I could morph. What I didn’t have was a home and a family. I didn’t have a reason to stay on Earth. So when I got the chance, I went with the Andalites to their homeworld.

“They liked to keep me as a kind of cultural advisor. I ended up working on rights for the handicapped Andalites.

The way they're treated... I never thought of humans as tolerant before."

James shook his head. "But what I think you're really wondering is how I can help you aside from the morphing. I lived with a family of scientists while I was on the Andalite world. One of them was a xenobiologist studying humans. The other worked in the medical field; one of the few doctors on the Andalite world. What I want to know is why I'm here. And how. And what happened to Jake? And what's with that rat? I've got a lot of questions."

Tobias nodded. "Okay. Marco, fill him in. Ax and David? I want to have a little talk with the two of you. Rachel and Jeanne, go and do whatever it is you do when you don't have orders."

"Rachel can't," Marco said. "You're going to be busy." Rachel stole Marco's food from the Drode and dumped it in Marco's lap. "That was completely uncalled for."

"Blame the pregnancy hormones."

James raised an eyebrow. "Okay, Marco, let's start with that."

As usual, I did not quite understand the interaction between Marco and Rachel. I dismissed it as irrelevant. Tobias

and I walked out of Marco's house, David riding on my back. When we were alone Tobias turned to David. "What do you think, David?"

<About what?>

"About James. We betrayed him, in a way. We recruited him as an ace up our sleeves. And when we were done with him, we discarded him and left him to die. He didn't say he blames us, but I don't know if I can believe him."

<So why are you asking me?>

"I figured you'd be the one to ask. Do you think we can trust James? Or will he turn out to be...well, like you?"

<Honestly, I don't know. I just met him. But let me ask you, Tobias. What did your gut say about me?>

"Truth be told, David? I think I was the only one who actually said that we *could* trust you. The others...they already knew each other going into this. I was the only stranger. I guess I thought we had something in common. If it worked out with me, I thought it would work out with you. My gut told me we could trust you, David."

<What does it say about James?>

"It says that he feels guilty because he ran and lived while all of his friends died. It says he'll stick with us."

<In that case, I say we don't let him out of our sights.>

CHAPTER 4

David left to begin the spy work. He would tell Marco and Jeanne what was going on. For the first time in...has it really been years?...Tobias and I were alone.

We walked around Marco's yard. It was delicious. Wordlessly, Tobias began to morph. At first, I didn't realize what he was doing. When I saw the stalk eyes, the hands, the tail, then I knew. He was morphing me.

It was odd to look at a younger version of myself. My second self, as I thought of me. In my mind, at least, I have lived three lives so far. The first was my time before Earth, when I was nothing more than Elfangor's little brother. That time was nothing worth remembering.

My second life began when Elfangor's came to an end. It was almost like I had to wait for his shadow to disappear because I could never walk out of it. I was looking at my second self now, since Tobias's morph had not aged. My second self, I think, is my favorite.

My third life is the one I live now. When I was captured, something died inside of me. I will never be the same person I

was when I set out to find the Blade ship. I suppose it's funny because, in the end, the Blade ship found me.

Those who knew me well wondered why I hunted the Blade ship so mercilessly. The ones who did not know me assumed it was because I hated Yeerks. Those who knew me better were confused. I think only Prince Jake, Marco, Cassie, and I knew. It was revenge.

A Yeerk on the Blade ship had killed Rachel. She was my friend, my comrade. And when she died, I lost my *shorm*, too. I wanted that Yeerk dead. The sad part is that I still do not know which one did it.

We fed in silence for a few minutes. Then, Tobias spoke to me. <Ax, we need to talk about our next priority. We'll have to stick with James, at least for now. We need to concentrate on hitting the Yeerks back. So far, we've done almost nothing.>

I wanted to argue, but I knew better than anyone that what he said was true. With the exception of a few successful attacks against minor targets, nothing had happened to hurt the Yeerks; nothing done by the Animorphs, at least.

<These rebel Yeerks here in town,> Tobias continued. <I think we can use them. They want to take down the Visser. If they get him, their leader...what was his name?>

<Mersa Five-Two-Eight,> I supplied. The Visser had memorized that name.

<Mersa. If we can get the Visser, Mersa will be in charge of everything. I think there has to be some way to use them. We need to keep the Yeerks fighting each other. That's our only chance. We can't take them both. The old tiger-wolf plot, as they say.>

I nodded but didn't say anything. Something in his voice told me that he didn't bring me out here to discuss this. <Tobias, what is bothering you?>

He was silent for a long while. Then, <Everything's falling apart, Ax. Santorelli's dead. Jake's dead. Cassie ran away. Rachel's pregnant and has to quit the fight. Al...God, who even knows what happened to him? He might be dead, too. Worse, he could be infested. Do you realize what the Visser could do with his knowledge?>

I nodded. <It is a problem.>

<We hit them as hard as we can and we're getting nowhere. I'm condoning terrible things, I'm *doing* terrible things, and all for nothing. The things I've done...if we survive this, I should be put on trial. I should be locked away, Ax-man. I'm no better than the Yeerks.

<I've always said that I'm willing to become them if it'll keep the rest of the Human race from doing the same. But I'm killing myself; I'm not killing them. I tell myself that, in the end, I'm doing the right thing because I'm doing the necessary thing. But it's hard to believe that when what I do has no effect at all.

<Do you know how tired I am of all of this, Ax? I play the hero, or at least the anti-hero, with all of them. Marco, Jeanne, David, Cassie, Al, and even Jake; they all thought it didn't hurt me. They thought I was invincible. Only you and Rachel know better. Only the two of you know how much it hurts.

<But I don't even tell Rachel how hard it is. Sometimes, Ax, I'm not even here anymore. I wish I was back to the days when I was a hawk, living a simple life. For two weeks, I lived as a pure, true hawk. I lived off of instinct alone. No soul-mutilating choices and no steel masks. I wish I had those two weeks back, now.

<Sometimes...sometimes, I still hunt. The hawk never left me, Ax, even though I'm human now. I still feel the hunger every day. I still want to kill and eat live rodents. I still want to feel the warm blood in my mouth. And sometimes...sometimes, I still do it. I'll fly back to my meadow and sit in

my tree. I'll wait. I'll hunt. And when I see a mouse or a rat or a rabbit, then I strike.

<I still live like a hawk, Ax. I'm no human. I'm no animal. And I'm certainly no Andalite. I'm just...I'm a man going through the motions of three lives. I hunt like the hawk. I fight like the Andalite. And when that's all over, I go home and pretend to be a human. I've always said I was willing to live this kind of life if it would save the world. But I'm not saving anyone, Ax. What's the point of losing myself?>

I was silent for a long time before I could answer. <There is something that the Yeerks have yet to take away completely. At least, from humans. They have not yet stolen Human hope. As long as you fight, you give them that much.>

Tobias snorted. <What good is hope when you've already lost?>

I shook my head. <I have seen the ones without hope. The Visser showed me what the Hork-bajir were like a long time ago. They did not fight. They didn't cry out or scream or beg to be free. They sat quietly and accepted it all. The Humans never did. They always had hope.

<I think you can understand how much that hope means, Tobias. You lived without hope for a time. After Rachel died,

you had no hope. When she returned, do you realize how much you changed? Even the Visser noticed it.

<When you had no hope, nothing to live for, you were reckless. Yeerks feared you. But when you regained your hope, you were unstoppable. Even Guraff is wary of you now. As long as you fight, there will be hope.

<Some day, if we lose, all Humans will have left are the memories and the stories of the Animorphs. But even those stories can give them hope. Even if you lose, you will never be defeated. That is why we fight on.>

Tobias gave me an Andalite smile. <Thanks, Ax-man. I'm glad you're back. Times are tough right now. I'm glad to have my best friend by my side.>

<Unplanned pregnancies can be difficult,> I agreed. I still remembered when Elfangor had to explain to my parents that they would have a grandson named Alloran.

My *shorm* laughed in my head, <Who said it was unplanned, Ax?> Then, he grew serious. <I wanted her out of this fight. I couldn't lose her again. I can't go through that one more time. This was the only way I was sure she'd leave the fight behind. I've been trying for this since the first night she was back.>

I wasn't sure how to respond to that. It took me a few minutes to realize what he was saying. Then, I thought of the proper response. <Marco would be proud.>

<Ax, did you must make a joke?>

<Was it funny?>

<A little.>

<Then yes.>

CHAPTER 5

We went back into the mansion an hour later, since we assumed that would have given Marco enough time to fill James in on the main points of this new war. When Tobias demorphed, his face showed no sign of his earlier feelings.

I could not blame the others for not realizing how he felt. His face gave nothing away, nor did his voice. Only those of us who knew him best, only Rachel and I, could tell, and only because we already knew.

Tobias sat down in a chair at Marco's table and casually put his feet up. The Drode was gone. "Okay," he said. "Time to plan our next move."

"Jumping right into it, aren't we?" James said grimly.

"No choice," Tobias answered. "We've got Yeerks on two different fronts and not enough Animorphs to go around. I think there has to be some way to use these rebel Yeerks to our advantage. Marco? David? Any suggestions?"

"We have to get them to waste their resources fighting each other," Marco answered. "We need to start a fight."

<They're already ready to fight,> David answered. <You think the Visser's going to let them live for more than a few days? I can't see that happening. What do we know about their forces, Ax?>

<Most of the morph-capable hosts were retained by the Visser,> I told her. <That means many of the Hork-bajir and all of the human Controllers from the end of the first war. In terms of sheer firepower, the Visser's group is far more dangerous.>

Tobias nodded. "Okay. What do we know about the ones here?"

"They're led by that Yeerk Mersa Five-Two-Eight," Jeanne answered. "He is in the body of Hedrick Chapman. He seems to be supported by an Andalite traitor named Prince Imrahil."

<Imrahil,> I snorted. <To think that he would betray us to save his own life. It disgusts me.>

"What is it between the two of you?" Jeanne asked me. "When we first heard him talking to Mersa, Imrahil seemed to have something against you."

<He would. We went to the Academy together. He considered himself my rival. I didn't use to take any notice of

him, really. He would compete with me in everything, though.>

“And you didn’t notice?” Marco questioned.

<I never thought of it as competition,> I answered. <I just did as I was told. He tried to do it better and usually failed. He often said that the only reason for my success was because of Elfangor. He is right, in some ways. I would never have been on Earth were it not for being Elfangor’s brother. Imrahil claims he could have won the war here twice as fast.>

They all laughed. “Sounds like a real jerk,” James said after a while. “So how did he end up with the Yeerks?”

<Prince Imrahil was with me when we boarded the vessel on the edge of Kelbrid space. When we were captured, he surrendered. I did not know what happened to him after that; not for a long time. I do not remember anything until the Visser infested me.>

<What do we know about the Yeerks’ feelings towards one another? I mean, obviously Mersa and the Visser don’t like each other. And I’m sure Imrahil hates all Yeerks. I’m willing to bet that Guraff hates Mersa and Imrahil because they’re traitors; same with the Visser. Does any of this help us?>

“Let’s see,” Marco began. “Everyone hates everyone. That’s pretty much what I expected. But I don’t think it’s especially helpful.”

“Who would be more willing to work with us, though?” Jeanne asked. “That is the question.”

Tobias shook his head. “No. They’re both willing to use us to get at the other. Then, they’ll both betray us. The question is, who can we get away from when they *do* turn on us?”

“We’ve slipped past the Visser a lot in the past,” Rachel reasoned. “I think we can get past him.”

<The Visser has almost unlimited Kelbrid at his disposal, Rachel. And now he is not in a good mood. If he has the chance, he will use everything he has to crush you. In the past, he has overestimated the Kelbrid. He will not make the same mistake many more times. He is listening to Guraff more and more. He will not be foolish much longer.>

“If we got them to fight each other, who would win?” James asked. “Who has more power?”

<The Visser, definitely,> I answered. <As leaders, generals, and tacticians Mersa and Imrahil are no match for Guraff. And the Visser controls morph-capable Controllers as well as legions of Kelbrid; not to mention what exists of the

Yeerk fleet. Mersa has a handful of human, Hork-bajir, and Taxxon Controllers, as well as some Bug fighters he was allowed to use, and some transport craft. Mersa's rebellion is soon going to be nothing more than a footnote in Yeerk history; what remains of it.>

Rachel nodded. "Mersa can't win this. He didn't think it through. The Visser's mad now. When he's mad, he breaks things. He's going to do what he was about to do when we rescued Ax. He's going to land his Blade ship and storm the place, killing anyone who gets in his way. Mersa doesn't have a chance."

Tobias forced a rare smile. "Then I think I know our next destination. We need to keep the Yeerks fighting each other. That won't happen if the Visser succeeds. We have to save these Yeerks."

CHAPTER 6

That was met with shocked silence. Marco, as usual, broke said silence. “Tobias, are you nuts? If the Visser slaughters a bunch of Yeerks and loses some of his Kelbrid while he’s at it, it helps us. Why would we save Yeerks?”

<No, I see it,> David said. <Sure, if the Visser kills the rebels now, it’ll help us in the short term. But if his forces are tied up fighting the rebels, it’ll slow both invasions. They can’t devote as much time to us if they’re killing each other.>

<I agree with David,> I said, shocked to hear myself. The Other Animorphs trusted David now. Alloran had called him his *shorm*. I had no choice but to follow their lead for now.

James nodded. “Divide and conquer, right? Don’t think of it as saving Yeerks. Think of it as saving them for later. The longer they fight, the better for us.”

“Exactly,” Tobias agreed. “Do you want to put this to a vote, Marco, or are we going to do it?”

“Let me think,” Marco said. “If we voted, You, James, David, and Ax would be for it. Jeanne hasn’t weighed in yet so I don’t know what she’d say. Rachel doesn’t get a vote—”

“Why not?” Rachel demanded.

“Because you won’t be the one risking your life. And even if you voted, you’d be with Tobias. Forget it, there isn’t any point in voting. I’d lose by a lot. Let’s get it over with, then. How do you plan to go about doing this?”

“Well, Mersa’s men can’t possibly hold the community center against the Visser’s attack. So we have to stop that attack from coming at all. The only way to do that is to beat him to the punch. Force the Visser to pull back his forces before he can even extend them.”

“But how?” Jeanne wondered. “We would have to hit a huge target. I can’t think of anything short of the Visser’s Kandrona generator in the other town.”

I shook my head. <If we were to destroy that generator, the Visser would only attack sooner so that he could use the Yeerk pool here.>

“Ax,” Tobias asked, “the Visser would launch the attack from the Blade ship, wouldn’t he?”

<That was his original plan,> I agreed. <He summoned fresh Kelbrid to use in the attack. The Yeerk pool and Kandrona aboard the ship should be sufficient to sustain his army long enough for them to take out the rebels.>

Marco went pale. His eyes darted from Tobias to Rachel and back again. “Oh no. Tobias, I know that look on your face. That’s the look I always see on Rachel’s face. You can’t be thinking what I think you’re thinking.”

“Sorry, Marco, but you’re right.”

“Oh, please no. Rachel, talk some sense into him. Wait, what am I saying? She probably put you up to this.”

“Up to what?” James asked.

<Yeah, I don’t...oh. Oh no. Tobias, you can’t be serious,>
David moaned.

“I am confused,” Jeanne admitted. “What are you two worried about?”

Marco looked at me pleadingly. “Ax, maybe you can talk him out of this. He might listen to you. Please tell him that this is a bad idea.”

“What idea?” James demanded.

<Tobias wants to attack the Blade ship.>

“Oh...oh no.”

“Not just attack,” Tobias corrected me. “If we destroy the Blade ship, that’s great. It’ll stop the Visser’s attack on the rebels and it’ll hurt the Visser. We might even kill him. But there is a better outcome.”

Rachel smiled. “We steal it. Well, I mean, *you* steal it, since I’m not allowed to come.”

“Why do we need the Blade ship?” Jeanne asked. “We have the *Reliquary*.”

“Hey, I always wanted my own Blade ship,” Marco argued. “Do a little redecorating and we’ll have a sweet setup.”

“Actually,” Tobias said, “I was thinking of giving it to the rebels. It’ll give them a huge advantage; maybe enough that we won’t have to constantly save them from the Visser.”

Again, we all stared at him. Even Rachel hadn’t expected something like this. <Tobias, are you certain you have thought this through?>

He nodded. “Yeah, I have. When you have weak allies, you strengthen them. For now, those rebel Yeerks are our allies and we need to strengthen them.”

“And what do we do when they start shooting at us from said Blade ship?” Marco demanded. “Please tell me you’ve thought up to that point.”

“I’ve considered it. We’ll rig the ship with a self destruct code. It’s simple. We program it into the computer. Then, all

we need to do is activate it from the *Reliquary*. We push the button and the Blade ship goes boom.”

Once more, we were all silent as we considered this. At last, I said, <I will have to trust you, Tobias. This maneuver... it is very risky. It is a terrible gamble.>

“If we want to accomplish something, we’ll have to start taking bigger risks, Ax. And I’m not worried,” he said, giving me a smile as he lied. “I’m a lucky man.”

CHAPTER 7

In the end, we decided to go for it. There were several highly difficult things that we needed to do, though. In order for our plan to work, we would need the aid of the rebel Yeerks. That meant that we had to visit them.

“Here’s our infiltration plan,” Tobias said to us. He, Marco, Rachel, Jeanne, David, James, and I were in the *Reliquary*, preparing to depart. We needed to go over the plan one more time.

“I’ll go in alone, in human morph. I don’t think they’ll kill me on sight; that would be a bit of an overreaction, even for paranoid Yeerks. Just in case, though, I’ll be mostly morphed to Howler. They survive just about anything.

“David will be hiding on me as a flea, in case I need immediate help. It’ll be a lot easier for a rat to sneak away and morph than it would be for a human or Andalite. Marco, Jeanne, Ax, and James will be on me as flies.

“When I give David the signal, he’ll tell you to go. Ax and James are to find the nearest place possible and demorph, then go to battle mode in case I need help. Marco and Jeanne will

get farther away and go to Garatron; if I need help, they can probably get there faster than Ax and James can. Rachel will be in the ship *with the weapons turned off* in case we need some help from there. Any questions?”

Rachel raised her hand. Tobias sighed. “What?”

“Why do the weapons have to be turned off? How can I help you if you keep the weapons turned off?”

“Rach, we’ve been through this. We all agreed, you included, that you cannot be trusted with high-powered Shredder cannons anywhere near potential targets.”

Rachel pouted, which only made Tobias laugh. I did not understand why. Apparently, neither did Rachel. “What’s so funny?” she demanded.

“Nothing. It’s just so adorable when you do that.”

Marco gave him a look. “I think I liked it better when you flinched at human contact and she didn’t know you were alive. Now I just want to vomit.”

Humans, I fear, will forever be beyond my comprehension. Perhaps there was a time when I understood them. If so, I have completely forgotten it.

“Hard to vomit without a throat,” Tobias said. “Time to get morphing.”

I nodded and focused on the fly inside of me. This was a morph I had used so often that it was almost second nature to me. My experience gave me time to focus on other thoughts.

I wondered why it did not feel odd to take orders from Tobias. I wouldn't have wondered if it had been Prince Jake, of course. You see? Even now, after all this time, after my promotions, I still think of him as my prince.

Tobias was a different story. He had always been my friend but never my superior. He had never once given me an order. Unless you count the suggestions he gave during battles as orders. Perhaps, in a way, they were.

He had experience watching a battle. When a lightning-quick decision needed to be made, a call that would either save or end someone's life, Tobias had always been able to make it correctly. I cannot count how many times those directions saved my life. I could almost see some of them, though.

<Ax, go left. Now!>

I dodged left. A Hork-bajir blade cut through the air a millimeter to my right. If I hadn't moved, I'd have been sliced in half. If I had dodged in the other direction, a Dracon beam would have fried me. If I had hesitated even for a moment, if I

had even thought before taking Tobias's warning, I would be dead now. It seemed natural to me.

<Thank you, Tobias,> I said calmly.

<Don't thank me yet, Ax-man. And look out for that Hork-bajir behind you.>

<I see him.> I slashed the Hork-bajir's arm off with my tail.

<Great, but I meant the one with the Dracon beam. Duck when I say to, but not before. Okay...NOW!>

A red line sizzled over my head. I then made sure the Hork-bajir would not be firing a Dracon beam any time in the foreseeable future. <May I thank you now?>

I drew myself out of my thoughts and into my present state. I wasn't controlling my fly body, so it was buzzing around the Reliquary.

<Ax, you alright?> Tobias asked.

I seized control of myself. *<I am fine, Tobias. I was merely reacquainting myself with the particular mechanisms of this morph by allowing its natural brain to manipulate its various maneuvers.>*

<Translation?> David asked.

<He was off in his own little world and letting the fly take care of itself,> Marco answered. <That’s just perfect. Now we’ve got a daydreaming Andalite. Just don’t do that in the fight that’s sure to ensue, alright Ax?>

<I will maintain control of my body in any combat situation that might arise,> I assured him.

If James had the ability to raise an eyebrow, he probably would have. <Was he always this...>

<Verbose?> Jeanne suggested.

<Verbose? Wait a minute,> Marco complained. <How does the French chick know more English words than I do?>

“She has an education that extends beyond the tenth grade?” Rachel offered. To Jeanne, she said, “Does it bother you that you’re dating a man who never even got his driver’s license?”

<Uh, Rachel?> Marco said before Jeanne could answer. <Need I remind you that you’re carrying the child of a man who never got past his freshman year of high school?>

Tobias laughed. <Marco, while you were zoned out in class, Ax was teaching me Z-space physics. With his help, I mastered calculus at the age of 14, for all the good it did me. And that’s my weak subject. I could school you on history or

English. Now let's get going. Do you know how hard it is to keep these Howler memories in check?>

<Your morph has memories?> James asked. <I didn't think that happened, even with sentient creatures.>

<Normally it doesn't,> Tobias agreed. <But Howlers are special. They have a collective memory carefully edited by Crayak to teach them only what they need to win.>

<I didn't think memory was stored in DNA,> James answered. <Everything I learned on the Andalite homeworld told me that was impossible.>

<James, have you been gone so long you've already forgotten?> Marco asked. <Impossible is our middle name.>

<Marco, I believe my middle name is Esgarrouth,> I reminded him. <At least, by human standards.>

<Just an expression, Ax-man,> Tobias said.

Privately, I told him, <I know. But I thought Marco would enjoy it more if I feigned ignorance.>

<You *did* develop a sense of humor!>

<Do not tell Marco; if he learns, he will never stop.>

CHAPTER 8

Tobias dropped out of the floor hatch of the Reliquary and landed gracefully in the parking lot. Not long ago, this parking lot had been the scene of a bloody battle in which the Animorph and the Visser fought side-by-side. Now, no sign of that remained.

The Reliquary was cloaked overhead, so we couldn't have seen it even if we had good eyes. Perhaps Tobias knew where it was; Howler senses are incredible. Either way, Rachel was piloting it and, if need be, Tobias could commandeer it with only his thoughts. It really was an incredible piece of machinery.

Tobias walked slowly towards the community center. There was no need for them to think this was an attack. They would probably be more confused than hostile.

<Stop where you are,> a thought-speak voice demanded. It sounded familiar. Prince Imrahil, I realized. The traitor. <Demorph. All of you. I don't know where the rest of you are, but I am no fool.>

<Could have fooled me,> Marco muttered. <What do we do, fearless leader?>

<Do as he says,> Tobias answered. <The Shredder won't do much to me, but I don't want them to think we're here for a fight. We come peacefully. He wouldn't be out in the open unless the hologram was up, so there's no need to worry about anyone seeing. If things get dicey, you'll be more useful out of fly morph. If need be, I can unlock the guns on the Reliquary.>

<So much for the plan...> David muttered.

We demorphed to see Prince Imrahil leveling a Shredder at a now-human Tobias. He regarded me coldly. <Visser.>

<No,> I corrected. <Aximili. You have much to answer for, Imrahil.>

<*Prince* Imrahil,> He insisted.

<Not anymore. You forfeited that title when you allied yourself with the Yeerks.>

<In order to save the galaxy from another abomination,> Imrahil protested. <What would you have had me do? Become the same twisted creation you were? No, Prince Aximili. I would sooner die than betray my people, but I would sooner betray them than become what you were.>

<I no longer remember what I was,> I informed him.

<But I do. I am not a traitor, Prince Aximili. Not really. I did what I had to do. You of all people know how terrible an Andalite-Controller is. Would you have had another Alloran unleashed on the galaxy? I am loyal to the Andalites; it is out of loyalty that I do this.>

<Loyalty? You are pointing a weapon at a fellow Andalite,> I answered.

<He is a human.>

<He is Prince Tobias, son of Prince Elfangor and as much an Andalite as I am. His rank was granted to him by the Electorate. It is official. He has been accepted as one of us.>

<Accepted? The Electorate cannot order me to accept this...half-breed as an Andalite.>

<This “half-breed” is your superior officer, Imrahil.>

<Even if his rank is official, it is no higher than yours or mine,> Imrahil protested.

<But my rank is higher. I was the Captain of that Dome ship. The ship still exists. You are still my subordinate officer. I take my orders from Prince Tobias. So do you.>

<I take orders from no one anymore,> Imrahil spat.

Tobias raised an eyebrow. “Oh? So I suppose you came out here alone against a Howler because you wanted to.”

Imrahil had nothing to say to that. Tobias continued, “We’re here to talk to Mersa 528.”

<What about?>

Tobias smiled. “We want a truce.”

Imrahil turned all four eyes to me. <A truce?>

<An alliance,> I agreed. <The simple fact is that we cannot fight Mersa and the Visser. But Mersa cannot fight the Visser. Not on his own.>

“We can help,” Tobias said. “The Visser is going to attack here soon. He’ll come down on you with hundreds of Kelbrid. He would have done it already if we hadn’t distracted him by freeing Ax. When he comes, you will not survive. Guraff will see to that.”

<Guraff is nothing to fear.>

I laughed. <You are a fool, Imrahil. I know the stories of that Yeerk. I heard enough about him on the Dome ship on the way here the first time I came to Earth Captain Nerefir himself told me what happened on Utharaon. And I have seen him in action, through the Visser’s eyes. If he fights you, you will not walk away.>

Tobias fixed Imrahil with a look that neither of us understood. The fact that my shorm still had not quite gotten

back into the habit of making the proper facial expressions did not help matters at all.

“Prince Imrahil, if we were up to some sort of trick, I wouldn’t have demorphed. Your Shredder wouldn’t have hurt my morph much. I’d have killed you without any trouble at all. But we’re here, at your mercy. This isn’t some kind of trick or trap. This is us offering you your only chance at survival. But if you kill us or you let us walk away, it’ll be the end of everything. Not just Earth and your life. The One is worse than Crayak, if you even know who he is. If we all die here, it’ll be the end of the world as we know it. You didn’t want to be what Ax became under The One? Then how will you be able to handle destroying the universe?”

CHAPTER 9

“So much for our brilliant plan,” Marco muttered as we marched down the halls of the community center. I silently agreed. Things had fallen apart very quickly.

“It’s a good thing Tobias locked the weapons,” James said. “Rachel probably would have turned this place into rubble as soon as Imrahil appeared.”

<Too true,> David agreed.

“She would probably have destroyed us in the process,” Jeanne added.

<You humans certainly like to talk when you should be silent,> Imrahil commented.

“We like to do a lot of things when we should be silent,” Marco agreed. “For example: Hey, Ax, you want to buy a duck?”

I was caught off guard by the randomness of his question. <A what?>

“A duck.” He looked at me expectantly.

I shrugged. <No, Marco, I do not believe I wish to purchase a duck.>

He hung his head and sighed. “I really thought you had it for a moment.” His head jerked up. “Hey, Tobias, you want to buy a duck?”

“Marco, what are you talking about?”

“Never mind. Jeanne, want to buy a duck?”

“Are you suffering from some sort of fear-induced chemical imbalance?” Jeanne responded.

“James? David? Anyone? How do you people not know how to play this game?”

<This is a game?> I asked. I was unfamiliar with this type of game.

“Okay, I can understand Ax not knowing this, but the rest of you? Tobias, how have you never heard of this? It’s a common game.”

“Apparently not,” Tobias answered. “But I was never one for games.”

“Oh, right. I forgot: you’re no fun. Silly me. Jeanne? You’re fun. What happened?”

“Perhaps this is some sort of American thing that the French are too intelligent for,” Jeanne suggested.

<Like a successful military?> David quipped.

Marco turned to David. “What about you? You’ve been all over the country. You’re telling me you’ve never heard of this game?”

<Maybe a long time ago. But I’ve forgotten a lot of things, Marco. If I held on to everything human, I’d lose my mind completely. I have to give the rat some space.>

Again, Marco sighed. “James. You’re a normal human being. Why don’t you know this?”

James shrugged. “We didn’t play a lot of games in the hospital. I mean, we couldn’t walk, half of us couldn’t talk, some couldn’t move more than their eyes...games really weren’t high on our list of priorities.”

Privately, Imrahil asked me, <Do all humans keep up such an inane stream of speech?>

“Just Marco,” Tobias answered. Imrahil and I stopped in our tracks and stared at him with the eight eyes we had between us.

<How did you know what I asked?> Imrahil demanded. <You could not have heard our thought-speech.>

“I didn’t. But I could guess. I know the impression we give. Now, Marco, what was that game you were talking about?”

“It’s simple. I ask you if you want to buy a duck. You say, ‘A what?’ I say, ‘A duck.’ You ask, ‘Does it quack?’ I answer, ‘Of course it quacks, it’s a duck.’ Then you ask someone else if they want to buy a duck. They ask you, ‘A what?’ Then you ask me, ‘A what?’ I give you the answer I gave you the first time. You pass it along the line until we have a massive chain going. Get it?”

Imrahil said what we were all thinking. <That sounds utterly pointless.>

“Does everything have to have a point with you people?” Marco demanded.

Tobias nodded “Yep. Preferably a sharp one. All the better with which to shut you up.”

“Seriously, you’re turning into Rachel. Do you realize how much you sound like her right now? Does anyone else see this? I for one am very concerned.”

Imrahil turned to me. <You say you were stranded here for three years with these people?>

<To be fair, it was mostly different people. Of the original Animorphs, only Tobias and Marco remain.> I stopped walking again when that thought hit me.

We were dwindling. That could not be denied. First, we had lost Rachel; and, for a time, we lost Tobias as well. Then I was taken. Jake was killed next, although it resulted in Rachel's rebirth and, in a way, Tobias's as well. Cassie left the war to be with the man she loved.

That wasn't a decision I could think about. I never really loved anyone; not in the romantic sense, at least. The closest I had ever come was a brief infatuation with Estrid. That did not last long. I found her after the war and learned that she is, to use the human vernacular, a bitch. I didn't know what Cassie was feeling, so I could not judge her; I could not say that I would not have made the same choice.

Of all us Animorphs, only Marco had passed through this without some horrible problem or personal death. Only he remained whole. Indeed, he had profited from the war. Perhaps he deserved more leeway than we had given him.

<Marco,> I began, <would you like to buy a duck?>

CHAPTER 10

<Of course it quacks, it's a duck,> I said for the fifth time.

<Hey, Imrahil, want to buy a duck?> David asked once the word had come down the line to him.

<I refuse to partake of this...asinine game,> Imrahil said.
<And we're there.>

“Good,” Marco sighed. “Was all that walking really necessary? There had to have been a faster way to get to this room.”

Imrahil didn't answer. Instead, he opened a door. Inside was Mersa's office. It looked like the office of any normal human except for a few things. One of those things was a ring of Hork-bajir guards pointing Dracon beams at us.

Mersa was sitting behind his desk, also holding a Dracon beam. He gestured to the four chairs in front of the desk. “Be seated,” he ordered.

Tobias, James, Jeanne, and Marco sat down. Marco couldn't help but note, “You know? This is almost exactly like all the times I got called to Chapman's office during the first war. Good time, huh?” He looked at Mersa expectantly.

Mersa gave Marco a cold smile. “Hedrick would like me to tell you that you haven’t changed a bit. Useless as ever.” He turned to Imrahil. “Leave us, animal. This is none of your concern.”

Imrahil’s tail twitched, but he didn’t strike. He turned to leave. <Remember what you betrayed your people for, Imrahil,> I said to him. <Remember that you passed up the life of a Prince for the service of one who calls you animal.>

<Remember,> he retorted, <that you are the one responsible for the death of the entire fleet over the Hork-bajir world. If I am an animal, what are you?> He left before I could ask what he was talking about.

Mersa turned to Tobias. “My people recorded the conversation you had with Imrahil in the parking lot. You think you can stop the Visser from attacking us? How? And why tell us? What do you want in return?”

“We’re going to steal the Blade ship,” Tobias answered. “Without that, it will be difficult for the Visser to transport enough of an army to launch a successful attack. Even in the event that he does, the Blade ship will be an invaluable asset to your army.”

“And what do you ask of me in return?” Mersa questioned.
“Surely you demand something.”

Tobias shook his head. “As long as the Visser’s concentrating on you, that’s good for us. Besides, what could we ask of you? To keep defending yourselves? To stop your invasion? Release your hosts? Really, what could we ask of you? Well, except for one thing...”

“Ah, herein lies the barb. What do you demand, young beast, as they call you?”

“The first thing is that you have to help me make the necessary repairs to my ship. It was badly damaged in our last battle and we don’t have the resources to fix it.”

“You give me a ship and I in turn give you one. Fair enough. What else?”

“You have to help us take the Blade ship.”

Mersa was silent for a few moments. Then, “What do you want us to do? Understand that I have not agreed to anything yet.”

Tobias nodded. “This is a dangerous mission. I want some of your people to come with us. Are any of them morph capable?”

“Only the animal.”

“What about you? Your host belonged to a powerful Yeerk. How could you have missed out on getting the morphing technology?”

“By the time our forces acquired the morphing technology, my predecessor had fallen out of favor. When the Visser learned that my predecessor had been seeing you terrorists on a daily basis and suspected nothing, he was furious. The only one he was angrier at was the Yeerk in the human called Tom. But Tom brought him the morphing cube, so Tom was forgiven. My host was imprisoned, his Yeerk starved.”

“Okay. We need Imrahil with us, then,” Tobias decided.

“I will consider it,” Mersa responded. “You must understand that I can hardly trust him; even less than you can, really. If I let him go, how can I ensure that he will return?”

We were silent. Tobias turned to Marco and David. Marco shrugged. David said, privately, <A hostage. We have to give him someone so he knows we’ll make Imrahil come back.>

“Absolutely not,” Marco said, not caring whether Mersa heard or not. “No way are we doing that.” Jeanne nodded in agreement.

Tobias looked at me. “What do you say, Ax? Do we give Mersa a hostage?”

Mersa laughed. “And what hostage could you give me? Which one of you couldn’t find some way to escape? I am not going to underestimate you as it has been done in the past. If one of you agrees to become a hostage, I must have a guarantee that you will remain.”

Tobias took a deep breath. “Me. I...I’m going to be a father in a few months. I have a family. They’re...exposed. If I were to double cross you, it wouldn’t be hard for you to get to them.”

“Tobias, you’re not the only one with a family,” Marco reminded him. “Heck, you and Jeanne have the *same* family.”

“Not quite the same,” Tobias argued. “Sorry, Jeanne, but I’m pretty sure you’re not as concerned about their safety as I am. And as for your family, Marco, they aren’t easy to get at. Your parents know all about the Yeerks; your mother’s the reigning expert, after all. And they could hold out in your mansion for quite some time. I saw your armory.”

“I have an armory? Sometimes I forget all the stuff in that place...” Marco trailed off.

Mersa smiled. “You’re going to be a father, you say? Then I know exactly who I want. Give me Rachel.”

CHAPTER 11

“Not a chance in hell,” Tobias answered instantly. “That is one sacrifice I will never make. Not to save your life, at least. Or to save mine. She is no longer a part of any of this. Do you understand?” His voice reminded me of the time we visited the North Pole.

Mersa nodded slowly. “Then it will have to be you. I was hoping not to take your team’s leader from them on a mission that I need to succeed, but if you aren’t willing to leave her with us, it will have to be you.”

“Alright. Give me a few minutes to confer with my team. Then we’ll get to work on the planning.”

Mersa raised an eyebrow. “You don’t have a plan?”

“Do we ever?” Marco smirked.

We went out into the hallway to discuss. “What’s this about?” James asked. “What is it you didn’t want to say in front of them?”

“Everyone morph something non threatening,” Tobias said. “Except for Ax and David. They can stay as they are. I’ve got no doubts this hallway is bugged, but I don’t think they have a way to overhear thought-speak.”

A few moments later, I was an Andalite standing in the hallway of a Yeerk command center looking at a rat, a pigeon, an owl, a skunk, and a squirrel. Perhaps my life is odd. I do not think Andalites typically end up in these situations. Well, maybe Elfangor.

<So what is it, fearless leader?> Marco, the skunk, asked.

<Yeah. Why did I have to get all feathery?> the pigeon, James, added. Then I guess he remembered to whom he was speaking. <Not that there's anything wrong with feathers. No sir. Nothing at all.>

Tobias, the squirrel, shifted from foot to foot, looking like he wanted to run around climbing on things. I was a squirrel once. It must have taken great concentration for him to remain still. <You need to decide on a new leader, since I'll be a hostage here.>

<Oh, that,> Marco said. <I would think it's kind of obvious, don't you?>

<What do you mean?> I asked.

Marco turned to me. <Well, if Tobias is tied up here, that means there are only two original Animorphs left to lead this charge. That's you and me. Now me, I don't have the

leadership experience you do. After all, you're the great Prince Aximili of Earth.>

I believe he may have been being sarcastic. David added, <If anyone would know their way around the Blade ship, it would be you, Ax.>

The owl, Jeanne, nodded her head. I wasn't sure they were able to do that. <I agree. What do you think, James?>

<Well, I'm done leading people. If Ax wants to handle it, he can be my guest. I'll follow any of you.>

<Actually,> Tobias began, <I'm thinking this might require splitting into two groups. That will mean two leaders. You need to choose a second.>

That was met with silence. I decided to think "out loud" as humans say. <Well, James has leadership experience, but he is new at this, compared to the rest of us.>

<And I don't want to be the leader of anything,> James added. <Just point me where I can do some good.>

<I think Marco is our only option,> Jeanne proposed. <He is the last of the originals. And we all trust him.>

<Meaning that you don't trust me?> James asked.

<Meaning that they don't trust me,> David told him. <In spite of everything I've done and tried to do. I mean really,

how many times do I have to risk my life for you people before you get it through your heads that I'm different now?>

<About as many times as you tried to take our lives,> Marco answered. <And even then I don't think I can completely trust you. I know why Mersa's tense about letting Imrahil out of his sights.>

<You seemed to trust me on our last few missions. Didn't I pass Tobias's test before we came back here?> David demanded.

<Things have changed. I knew you wouldn't betray Al. But now...>

<Marco, don't start blaming me for what happened to Al. I didn't ask him to go in my place and if I could have stopped him I would have.>

<Maybe you ->

<Enough,> Tobias interrupted coldly. <That bridge has already been burnt. We've just got to cross this one now. There's no point in holding out hope for Al. False hope will just make this hurt worse.>

<Maybe we could rescue him like we did Ax,> James began.

<We're not discussing that,> Tobias said again.

<Fine. So we follow Marco, since Jeanne doesn't want to do it,> David answered. It can be difficult to tell, especially with aliens and *especially* with thought-speech, but I believe he was bitter. Not that I could blame him. Nor could I blame Marco.

<One last thing,> Tobias said. <I'm saying this only to you two, Ax and Marco. If you come across Al...if he's a Controller...you know what you have to do. He's a genius. His knowledge cannot, *cannot* remain in Yeerk hands. Do you understand?>

I nodded slowly, Yes, Tobias. If Alloran is a Controller...>

<You know, giving that kind of order is one of the things that destroyed Jake,> Marco said. <Can you live with that, Tobias?>

<Either I live with it or we all die for it. You know which one I'll pick every time.>

CHAPTER 12

Mersa summoned Imrahil, and then we all met to plan our attack. This was something new for us all. Planning an attack like this was one thing. Planning it with Yeerks and traitors was something else entirely.

Just looking around, I could see how much we changed from our days in the first war. Back then, it would have been the six of us, Jake, Marco, Rachel, Cassie, Tobias, and myself. We would have been in Cassie's barn, where our biggest concern was that someone might walk in and see five children killing time.

Now, we were a different group. Marco was more or less the same, but that was it. Jeanne, who I have been told is a Yeerk-trained assassin. David and Imrahil, the notorious traitors. James, who fled from battle and left his men to die. Mersa, a rebel Yeerk who was by no means a true ally. I was no longer a lowly *aristh* abandoned on a foreign world. I was a Prince, and a recently freed Controller. And Tobias, of course. He was completely different from the boy he used to be.

Instead of the barn, we were in Mersa's war room. A hologram of the Blade ship was displayed before us, hovering over the round table around which we stood.

"Here's my basic plan," Tobias explained. "We go in as two teams. Team One is a diversion. They're supposed to be caught and distract the guards. It can't be too obvious, though. Team A will be the one in charge of getting to the bridge and hijacking the ship."

"When the Visser only gets three people from Team One, he'll know that we're a distraction," Marco pointed out.

<Not if he thinks the missing team is the distraction,> David reasoned. <If he thinks he caught the real threat instead of the diversion, he won't bother to look for the others. They'll just reveal themselves in time and all will be well for the Visser.>

"So how do we convince him the distraction is the real deal?" Marco asked.

"I have a suggestion," James offered. We all turned to him.

"You don't need permission to speak, James," Tobias told him. "What is it?"

“Well, it seems to me that only one of us could actually steal the Blade ship. Does anyone other than Ax know how to fly one of those?” James asked.

Jeanne nodded. “I was trained in it. But Prince Aximili knows the security codes. I do not.”

“Then Ax has to lead Team A,” James surmised. “Would the Visser realize that?”

“If he doesn’t Guraff will,” Tobias told him. “I see where you’re going. If they catch the team with Ax, they’ll know it has to be the real one.”

<And I just happen to have an Ax morph,> David pointed out. <I can probably fake it long enough for the real team to get to the bridge.>

“Alright, let’s go with that,” Tobias decided. “Next, we need to divide up our forces. If we’re talking about sieging the bridge of the Blade ship, I want experienced ones doing it. Ax and Imrahil will go together. David will go with Marco. So, where do Jeanne and James go?”

“If Team A isn’t supposed to be caught, then I’d say send James with them,” Marco answered. “No need for the Yeerks to know about him unless they have to.”

<Yeah, I’m thinking the same thing,> David supplied.

Tobias nodded. “That’s what we’ll do then. Now, we need to talk about procedure. Infiltration. I’m thinking Team One goes in with one of Mersa’s Bug fighters. You can supply us with one, right?”

“I can,” Mersa answered. “We were given a very small air force for our operations here. No more than a handful of Bug fighters and a pair of transport ships. I can spare one Bug fighter on this gamble, two at the most. No more than that, though.”

“Let me guess,” James said. “Team A hides on Team One as bugs? Team One gets captured, Team A breaks off, demorphs, and gets to the bridge?”

“No,” Tobias answered. “How many times have we done that? The Visser will be prepared for it this time. He’ll probably just spray you with Raid the instant he finds you. Every inch of that ship will be bug proof.”

“So what then?” Marco asked. “Blow holes in the ship like we did last time? That would attract too much attention.”

<I have a suggestion,> I told them. <The Visser has a private hangar in the Blade ship. Whenever he leaves the ship in a Bug fighter, the Bug fighter passes through that hangar. It has a separate entrance from all the other Bug fighters on the

outside of the ship. If our Bug fighter broadcast the correct codes, the hangar will open to us without alerting the rest of the ship.>

Tobias, David, and Marco looked at each other. <I don't know,> David began. <What if they're watching the hangar? It's something Guraff might figure out.>

“Do we have a better way in, though?” Marco asked. “Or any way in at all?”

“I suggest you go for it. Now, as for how the other team is going to sneak in...”

“On no,” James groaned. “I don't think I like that look.”

“You get used to it,” Marco sighed.

CHAPTER 13

We spent the next few minutes finalizing the plans. Once we had all agreed on a course of action (by which I mean once we bullied Mersa and Imrahil into agreeing with our admittedly suicidal and, as Marco repeatedly said, insane scheme) we were ready to depart. Minus Tobias, of course.

I was about to lead my team to the Bug fighter we would take to the Blade ship, but Tobias stopped me. “It occurs to me,” he said slowly, “that Rachel is still sitting in the Reliquary and has no idea what’s going on.”

I guess Marco overheard him, because he immediately turned pale and started to speak. “Oh sh-”

“So I think,” Tobias interrupted, “that you should go and tell her what’s going on.”

<Very well. I shall return presently.> I received some glares from the guards, but no one attempted to stop me. That was good. I entered the parking lot. <Rachel, I will need to have a word with you,> I called.

The Reliquary appeared in front of me, idling in the parking lot. The floor hatch was open. I entered the ship to find Rachel pointing a Shredder at my head. “Yeerk.”

<I am no Controller, Rachel.>

“Bulllarky.”

<Whether you believe me or not is of no consequence, I suppose. I am only here to deliver a message.>

“What message? From who?”

<From Tobias. In order to take the Blade ship, we require assistance from Prince Imrahil. But Mersa would not release him unless we could guarantee that we would return him. So we left Mersa one of our own as a hostage.>

“Who?” Her eyes narrowed. She suspected.

<Tobias.>

The Shredder dropped and she turned away from me. “Damn it. Why does he always have to do this?” I suspect she may have been crying, but she would not want me to know or acknowledge that fact. I remained silent.

She still didn’t turn towards me when she continued to speak. “This is how it happened last time. He agreed to let them take him. In the same damn building! Why does he always do this, Ax?”

<He believes he is protecting us.>

“They won’t let him go, you know. Mersa won’t keep his promise. We’ll have to fight our way in there to get Tobias back. Don’t you see that?”

<Mersa must keep his promise,> I argued. <He needs our help. Without us, he is a dead man.>

“If he hands Tobias’s head to the Visser, you know he’ll be forgiven Ax.”

<Trust me when I say that the Visser is not in the habit of forgiving his subordinates. Even when they kill his enemies. If the Visser ever gets his hands on Mersa, only one of them will walk away and it will not be Mersa.>

“But does Mersa understand that? Or is he just desperate. He screwed up big time. He didn’t think this through. He thought the Visser would be too busy dealing with us on the other front that he couldn’t put down a rebellion here. But now it’s very clear what’s going to happen and he’ll do anything to try to come out alive.”

<Mersa is more intelligent than I originally thought,> I told her. <He immediately saw the value in our truce. And once Tobias made it clear that you would not be taken as a hostage->

“What about me as a hostage?”

<Originally, Mersa wanted you to be their hostage. But once Tobias said no, Mersa abandoned that track. He knows when he has been beaten.>

“But do we?” She shrugged and then turned to face me. If she had been crying, there was no trace of it now. “Sorry. I guess I just worry too much.”

I laughed so hard my brain hurt. <Thank you, Rachel. It has been a long time since I have found something truly humorous.>

She looked as though she was about to speak, but then dropped the matter, to use the human idiom. Instead, she grew serious again. If she had ever been joking. “Is...is there any news about AI?”

<None from Mersa’s people,> I admitted. <Tobias suspects that we may encounter him on the Blade ship.>

“Yeah, maybe. You’ll do everything you can to save him, right? I mean, he’s part of our family.”

<I...Rachel, Tobias gave me instructions. We are not to hold out hope for saving Alloran. If we encounter him...>

“No. Ax, you can’t do that no matter what Tobias says. You have to at least try to save AI. We kidnapped a Visser off

of his own blade ship with a hundred Kelbrid watching the whole thing. We stole his host and got away with it. If we saved you, we can get our hands on one Andalite kid.”

<But my orders->

“Screw your orders. We both know Tobias is no god. He makes mistakes, Ax, gives bad orders some times. He’s only human.”

<That is not strictly true,> I reminded her.

“Okay, maybe not. But he’s human enough. If you come across Al, then I don’t care what Tobias says you have to save him. Promise me Ax. Swear it on Elfangor’s grave.”

<I...I do not have a choice, do I?>

“None whatsoever.”

<Then I promise.>

CHAPTER 14

James, Imrahil, and I boarded our bug fighter. We did not find ourselves in the most comfortable of circumstances. Although we Andalites are not too large, we do tend to occupy a non-negligible amount of space. It did not help matters any that James and I did not want to be too close to Imrahil, nor him to us.

I approached the flight controls of the Bug fighter. <What do you think you are doing?> Imrahil demanded.

<I am flying the ship,> I replied calmly. I did not like his tone. It sounded as though he thought he would be the one flying the ship.

<No, *I* am flying the ship.> It seems I was correct.

I snorted. <I have seen you fly, Imrahil. I would rather us reach the Blade ship in one piece.>

<[*Prince* Imrahil.>

<*Warrior* Imrahil,> I retorted. <And you are lucky I allow you to keep even that. Treachery is grounds for execution.>

<You speak to me of treachery? You just willingly negotiated a deal with a Yeerk overlord.>

<As did you,> I pointed out.

James shoved in between us and muscled us out of the way with his strong Human arms. A moment later, the Bug fighter rose off of the ground and began to move to the exit of the hangar in the Yeerk pool.

I swiveled a stalk eye to look at him. <You know how to fly a Yeerk ship?>

He shrugged. “I learned a lot on the Andalite world. I lived with scientists, remember? Yeerk tech is easy enough to figure out for anyone with a background in Andalite stuff. Hey, here’s a question they never answered when I asked. Who exactly is Sario and why is the rip named after him?”

Imrahil and I looked at each other. I shrugged. He scuffed a hoof. <You were not paying attention that day either?> he asked.

<There was a game later. And this female...> I trailed off. I had the strangest feeling I had given this explanation to someone before.

<Your...guardians?...did not know either?> I asked him.

James shook his head. “A biologist and a doctor. Not physicists. They didn’t know much about rips. They just told me not to say ‘Sario’ unless I was talking about rips.”

<Oh, well, yes, that makes sense,> I said.

Imrahil dipped his tail in agreement. <Certainly good advice. Especially on the homeworld. On a Dome ship it would be different, but back home...>

“Why can’t I say Sario?”

<Well, I personally do not mind it,> I began.

<Nor do I,> Imrahil jumped in. I suppose he was afraid of being viewed as less masculine than I was.

<But it is best not to use it commonly,> I added.

“But what does it mean?”

I thought of the human words I knew and decided that I was uncomfortable saying any of them. <It is roughly equivalent of the Yeerk word *dapsen*,> I told him. <Except stronger and more offensive.>

“Oh. So how did it get applied to a rip?”

<According to what Elfangor told me once,> I began. I did not miss how Imrahil snorted when I said Elfangor’s name, <if you find yourself in a Sario Rip, you are in deep sario indeed. But that may just be a common myth.>

<Then how appropriate that Elfangor should tell it,> Imrahil commented.

My tail twitched. Imrahil noticed that. <Ah. Do it, Aximili. Fight me. Kill me even. But you can't. If you kill me, you will never get your precious half-breed *shorm* back. Not that you ever could kill me. So I will say whatever I want to say about your filthy cross-breeding disgrace of a brother.>

James punched Imrahil where his jaw would have been if he had a mouth. Imrahil stumbled back, more from surprise than the force of the blow. He glared at James with all four eyes.

“I may not be able to kill you; especially not in this body. But Elfangor is the reason the Yeerks don't own the galaxy right now. Elfangor is the reason I can walk again. Elfangor can do whatever he wants with whoever he wants as far as I'm concerned. And I will not let you insult him. Or Tobias for that matter.”

Imrahil raised his tail. I did the same. <Mersa never said that we had to return you alive, Imrahil. And if you cost us this mission, I will be more than happy to be sure Mersa or the Visser has you infested. It is a better fate than you deserve.>

<How can you even call yourself Andalite?> Imrahil spat. But he lowered his tail. A minor victory. We could not keep

fighting like this. Perhaps once the mission was in full swing, we would get along better. Speaking of which...

“Okay. Thanks to the program we downloaded from the Reliquary, we can keep track of the Blade ship. Man, this Alloran guy really was a genius. The Blade ship is in orbit. It’ll be on the short-range sensors soon. Ax, you’ll need to input the Visser’s code now.”

I nodded and did as I was told. Now it was time for the mission to truly begin.

CHAPTER 15

The Blade ship. The site of my undying horror. The nexus of the most evil things that had ever happened to me. It was there when Elfangor died (which, admittedly, I did not see). It was the site of Rachel's death as well. It was where I was captured, enslaved, and forced to plot the Visser's evil plans. And now, it would be ours. For a time anyway.

“Wow. I kind of forgot what it looked like.”

<It is always a shock,> I agreed.

<Are you certain you used the proper code?> Imrahil asked once again.

<I *am* capable of inputting a code, Imrahil,> I responded.
<Not all of us struggle as you do.>

<No, I suppose not. Some simply have everything handed to them by virtue of their brothers.>

James sighed. “This is going to be a long first day back.”

<Then perhaps you should have stayed out of business where you are not wanted,> Imrahil snapped. James ignored him and instead concentrated on getting close to the Blade ship.

When we were close, a hole opened up in the side of the ship. The Visser's private entrance. Before we entered, I took a quick look around. It was empty but for a pair of Kelbrid guards to welcome the Visser. Satisfied, I nodded to James and he guided the ship in.

That was a mistake. As soon as the front of the ship passed through the hole, I realized that the image I saw was a hologram. Instead of two Kelbrid, there were eight. And a very large Hork-bajir. Guraff 427. They were prepared for us.

<Too late to back out,> I said to James. <We'll have to fight past this welcoming committee. Perhaps the Visser himself is being distracted by Marco, Jeanne, and David. If so, all is not yet lost.>

Imrahil raised his tail. <I will show Guraff the true meaning of a warrior.>

I rolled my eyes. This momentarily surprised me, since I did not know I had that physical capability. It did not work when I attempted it with my stalk eyes, though; I had to content myself with rolling my main eyes a second time.

"Eight of those...things...and that big Hork-bajir? Do we even have a chance?" James questioned.

<There are...alternatives...to melee combat,> I assured him.

<Such as?> Imrahil snorted.

Calmly, I grabbed the controls for the Bug fighter's Dracon cannons. I took aim at Guraff and squeezed the firing button down.

Nothing happened.

"Uh...I'm guessing they disabled those when they realized we weren't actually with the Visser," James said unnecessarily.

<Yes, I suppose so.>

"Escape? Insects?" James suggested.

<Insects will not be of much use,> I reminded him. <The Visser is all too aware of how we use them. And nothing sneaks past a Kelbrid, so small animals are out. >

"But there are too many to fight."

<For a Human,> Imrahil agreed.

"If you want to take them alone, be my guest." Imrahil had nothing to say to that. To me, he said, "Do you have any morphs that might help us here?"

I shook my head. <Not even Tobias's Howler could fight through this many Kelbrid. We have two choices. We can attack, or we can wait and hope they expose an opening.

Perhaps... If these are Guraff's personal, uninfested Kelbrid, they will be loyal to us if we slay him.>

There was really only one thing to be done. I opened a section of the Bug fighter's wall and stepped out. Guraff barked out a command and the Kelbrid formed a half-ring in front of the Bug fighter. Guraff stepped into the center of it.

"Prince Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill himself. It is an honor to finally meet you." Any other Yeerk would have been sarcastic when he said that. But Guraff is not an ordinary Yeerk. "How odd that we were together for so long yet you and I never spoke."

<Hello, Guraff. You seem to have anticipated us.>

"You made a simple mistake. Broadcasting the Visser's personal code would have worked. Except that everyone on this ship knows that the Visser is already on the ship, not on a Bug fighter approaching it. This is some sort of attempt to rescue young Alloran, is it not?"

<If he is still alive.>

"Oh, quite. I have done what I can to ensure that. He is not a host, either. The Visser infested him at first, thinking he was you. But his mind...it was too confusing. Too much information. Even with Alloran's memories, Esplin did not

understand any of it. It is difficult to inhabit the mind of a genius. It tends to drive a Yeerk insane.”

<Your host is a Seer,> I pointed out.

“But, as we know, I am far from the average Yeerk, Prince Aximili.” Guraff shook his head. “But that is neither here nor there. Where are your allies, Prince Aximili? Where is the young beast? And what of Rachel? Surely they would be the ones leading such an attack.”

He turned to one of the Kelbrid near him. “The young beast is not among these prisoners. Put the ship on high alert. He will come and we must be ready.” The Kelbrid loped off. To another Kelbrid, Guraff added, “Prince Aximili and anyone else in that Bug fighter is to be taken to the prison with young Alloran. They are not to be harmed unless it is necessary.”

<I have a proposal for you, Guraff.>

“Oh? I am always willing to listen.”

<I offer you a formal challenge. I swear by my honor that if you fight me in single combat and win, I and any survivors will offer no resistance to you. If I am victorious, you must release us.>

Guraff pug his chin in his hand and visibly thought it over. I knew what he would choose. Even if he was an intelligent

tactician, Guraaff was a warrior at heart. He wanted to fight me. He couldn't pass up a duel with the famous Prince Aximili.

“Very well. We fight.”

CHAPTER 16

James and Imrahil stood in the opening of the Bug fighter to watch the battle. The Kelbrid seemed eager for the fight to begin. But of course, Kelbrid love only one thing more than watching combat: entering it.

I was nervous. That was only to be expected. Guraff had seen more fights than even I had. He rarely lost. Especially when the stakes were high. He wasn't famous by and large, but amongst the higher levels of the Andalite military, his was a name whispered in dark rooms. We knew of him.

He raised both of his bladed arms. Hork-bajir are not as fast as Andalites, not even Guraff's body. That was, perhaps, my only advantage. I would have to make full use of that.

I struck at Guraff before he could react. A shallow cut along his left arm was my only reward. After that first attack, everything seemed to happen in slow motion. He blocked my tail with a wrist blade even as he swiped at me with his other elbow. I leaned my torso back, millimeters from being slashed. I swear he shaved hairs off of my chest.

I was faster, but he had more blades. Many more. I was on the defense now, and losing ground. I'd deflect one arm only to be met with another and a kneeblade besides. It was more than just the physical prowess of Guraff's host. There was refinement to his attacks, a discernible technique so unlike all the other Hork-bajir I fought.

Guraff gave me a Hork-bajir frown. "I am disappointed, Prince Aximili." Then, he caught my tail with one hand and punched it with his right in three different places. I felt the entire limb go numb. Before I could even realize what happened, he followed up by punching me just above my upper heart. A third blow to my throat almost made me black out.

I sank to my knees and he released my fail. It fell to the floor, my blade sounding almost hollow when it landed. <Pathetic as always, Aximili,> Imrahil sighed.

Guraff laughed. "Would you care to fight me as well, traitor? Then by all means, come forward. Or what about you, human? Would you fight me?"

James looked at me. <If you fight him, you will die,> I told him.

"No," James said at last. "Imrahil can be my guest."

<Imrahil,> I said, <If you fight him, he will kill you, too.>

<I am stronger than you, Aximili.>

<Not nearly strong enough. Neither of us is. Even together, we could not stand against him. The only way we'll survive is to do as he said. We already agreed to offer no resistance.>

<You agreed to offer no resistance.>

<So die then.>

“It seems that none of you is willing to fight any more. You agreed that you would offer no resistance. Please stand and follow me. I do not wish to have to resort to restraining measures.”

<I understand.> I struggled to my feet and kept my tail low. A Kelbrid put a sheath on my blade as well as on Imrahil's. Then, Guraff sprayed us with something in a can.

“I cannot take the chance that your allies are hiding on you as bugs, of course,” Guraff pointed out.

We followed Guraff through the halls, down a dropshaft, and into the Blade ship's detention level. The walls appeared to be lined with iron doors, although I know they were much more sophisticated than that. The Visser has nostalgic tastes. “To the left are the torture chambers,” Guraff said.

<Why would I care to know that?> Imrahil demanded.

“So that when the command comes to take you to the left, and it will, Imrahil, you will know what it means. “ Then, Guraff turned to James. “We have not met.”

James looked at me and I nodded. “I’m James.” He gave his last name. “The new guy, I guess, although I joined at the end of the first war.”

“And how did you come to join this fight, James?”

“Uh...magic?”

Guraff looked at me. <Crayak assisted him,> I explained.

“Ah. I am glad to meet you, James. This will be your cell. If you are a man of valor, I will do what I can to see that you are not mistreated. If you are a man like Imrahil, I will do all within my considerable power to ensure that you meet a slow and painful end. Accept your confinement with dignity.”

“Can’t we talk about this? Ax, isn’t there some sort of plan?” James asked even as he was being shoved into the cell by a Kelbrid.

<This was supposed to happen to the others,> Imrahil spat.

Guraff shoved him into a different cell without a word. The Kelbrid departed, leaving me with Guraff. “Soon, you will once more be Esplin’s host, Aximili. Does your honor let you accept this so casually?”

<My honor is anything but casual, Guraff. Surely you understand this.>

“I do indeed. So I will give you your last moments of freedom to spend with your family.” Guraff opened an unusually thick door and gestured that I should go inside.

I walked in and he closed the door behind me. I heard a voice faintly. One that was painfully familiar. <Prince Aximili?>

<Yes. It is me, Alloran.>

CHAPTER 17

Alloran hugged me in the dark. <How did you get here? Have you been captured too? Where is Prince Tobias?>

I waited for him to calm down. <We were captured by the Yeerks. Tobias is a hostage of the rebels. But do not worry, Alloran. All is going according to plan.>

<Forgive me, Prince Aximili, but it does not sound like things are going well at all.>

<We planned to steal the blade ship,> I started to explain. <But it would not be easy. We needed one team to be a distraction and one to actually steal it.>

<Both seem to have failed.>

<The distraction has worked perfectly,> I assured him. <Guraff has been concentrating on us. Concentrating so much, in fact, that he did not notice the flies that flew out of James' mouth after he sprayed us for bugs.>

<James?>

<Oh. Perhaps I should explain that.> After I told him about James.

<So he is a coward,> Alloran surmised.

<Yes, that seems to be the case. But perhaps he can prove us wrong. David certainly did, it seems.>

<And how is the ship going to be stolen?>

<We are the distraction, Alloran. The others were flies hiding in James' mouth, there nothing would detect them. Once we were sprayed, James released them. Marco, Jeanne, and David are going to get to the bridge and hijack the ship.>

<How? It is all heavily encoded, and dozens of Kelbrid could be summoned to the bridge in a moment's notice.>

<Marco and Jeanne were supposed to go back to the Visser's personal hangar, now that it's unguarded. They were to morph to Garatron; with those morphs, they can reach the bridge and seal it off before even the Kelbrid can react. They have probably already done it. As for the other security... Jeanne knows the codes for this Blade ship. The Visser did not change them from his days of rivalry with the former Visser One. Jeanne should have complete access soon.>

<And then what?>

<Then, she will unlock these cells. With David's help, we will get to the bridge and join Marco and Jeanne. Then we will land this ship in the community center and give it to the rebels.>

<Why will we give it to them?>

<Tobias tells me that-> The door swung open. In the light from the hallway, I could see what had happened to Alloran. He was thin and weak. <When did you last eat?>

<The Visser ordered me to be starved. He thought it would be ironic, since we tried to starve him. Guraff fed me when he could, but he had to be careful about it.>

Imrahil stepped out of his cell. <What happened?> he demanded.

<Oh, I'm afraid I forgot to mention a small detail of our plan. *We* were the distraction.>

An identical pair of lions appeared from different cells. <Hello, David. James.>

<Hey,> they both said. One of the lions turned to Alloran. <And you must be Alloran. Nice to meet you. I'm James.>

<It is an honor.>

<Can we cut the introductions short?> David asked. <I'm pretty sure Marco and Jeanne disabled all of the wide alert systems, but it's only a matter of time before we're discovered. We need to get to the bridge.>

We made it out of the prison complex with no difficulty. The guards were probably concentrating on the bridge by now.

That was good news and bad news. Good because it meant we wouldn't have much trouble until we got close to the bridge. Bad because when we did get there...

I could see the bridge. Marco and Jeanne, both in Garatron morph, were working at command consoles. A transparent force field separated them from a veritable army of Kelbrid. Guraff stood just outside of the force field, typing on a keypad in the wall. Presumably trying to override it while Marco and Jeanne tried to keep him out.

Between us and Guraff were the Kelbrid. I raised my tail. Perhaps I could not win. But the hall was narrow. Imrahil and I, stand side by side, filled it. Perhaps we could defeat the Kelbrid this time. David and James, twin lions, guarded our rear. We kept Alloran between us; I doubted he was in any condition to fight.

<Imrahil,> I said slowly, <I think it is time for us to put our differences aside.>

<Agreed, Aximili.>

<Should we have some kind of battlecry?> James suggested. <You know, get us psyched up before we die?>

Imrahil and I met with our main eyes. There was only one thing we could agree on. <The one thing we had in common, Prince Imrahil? For honor and glory?> I suggested.

<For blood and death,> he replied.

<It seems, Prince Imrahil, that we have two things in common.> Then, together, we raised our tails once more and charged the Kelbrid. We were five against an army, crying for blood and death. If we had been against other opponents, they would have been afraid of us.

But these were Kelbrid and they knew no fear. And for all our words, Imrahil and I were just two Andalites against an army. Perhaps I was finally crazier than Elfangor.

CHAPTER 18

The Kelbrid in the rear spun to attack us. I parried his stinger while Imrahil decapitated him. Almost immediately, two more Kelbrid took his place. I struck harder and faster than I ever had before. Every millisecond found my blade in a new place. I knew no peace. None. Just battle now.

Slowly, step by step, Imrahil and I forced our way forward over fallen Kelbrid. But we could not keep it up for long. Already the acid in their blood was burning my flesh and melting my tailblade.

Imrahil parried a strike from the Kelbrid in front of him and I sank my tailblade into its throat. I must have hit an artery because its blood spurted over my face. The pain was unimaginable, yet not unbearable. I felt the pain, but it seemed so far away, almost as though it was Imrahil who had just been blinded in one eye and not me.

Instinctively, I wiped the blood off of my eye with my hand. A foolish move because now my hand burnt as well. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered except for the next step forward, the next blow of my tail, my next breath.

I was aware, dimly, of Guraff giving orders. The Kelbrid were circling around through side rooms, trying to flank us. Already James and David were battling more Kelbrid on our rear. I heard a roar of anguish from both man and beast as James felt the Kelbrid blood for the first time.

<AHHH! What are these things? Their blood burns!>

<It can melt steel,> David agreed. With one stalk eye, I saw him club a Kelbrid in side of the head. The beast looked disoriented for a moment. James sank his teeth into its throat. At the same time, David dove over James to get at the Kelbrid that was attacking James from behind.

Imrahil and I continued to press forward but our strength was failing. My tail felt heavy and my blade was already worn away to little more than a sharp nub. I was blind in one eye and had several gashes along my flanks that I didn't even notice thanks to the Kelbrid poison.

Imrahil himself was not in good shape. One of his stalk eyes was missing, and there were various burn marks along his flank and torso.

The Kelbrid were coming from all sides not. It was pure chaos. It was like the massacre in the Matcom building that we survived only because Erek had been reprogrammed to kill.

No, no, this was worse than that. It was like being in the ant tunnels. Only there had I ever experienced such a fight.

<GoddamnitJeannelowerthedamnforcefield!

Theyneadourhelp!> I heard someone say. Who was it? Marco? My mind was beginning to fade.

<ThereisnothingwecandoMarco.

Wecan'tlowertheforcefield.

Dyingwiththemisn'tgoingtohelphematall.>

I sank my knife of a tailblade into a Kelbrid's flesh, but there was no force behind the blow. I suddenly realize I was lying on my side. Alloran was vainly trying to fight off the Kelbrid, but to no avail. He and a lion were fighting back to back. David probably. Where was James?

Then I saw him. A bloody mess lying next to Imrahil. Imrahil, my lifelong rival. Imrahil the traitor. Imrahil, the Prince who would die by my side. Much is forgiven when one is dying.

David slumped and fell to the ground, his mind fading away as mine was. Darkness swam at the corners of my vision. Everything seemed so far away...The ship was spinning slowly.

There was a leg next to my good main eye. A Hork-bajir foot. The vision from my stalk eyes made very little sense anymore. I think Alloran was fighting Guraff.

Guraff held Alloran's tail in one claw. His other was on my nephew's throat. Alloran's legs wobbled. "Goodnight, sweet prince; and a flight of angels sing thee to thy rest." Gently, he lowered Alloran to the floor.

I seemed to live in two worlds. In one, I could see Marco pounding on a keypad, Garatron fingers flying faster than I could see. Guraff and his Kelbrid waited.

But I also saw something else, almost beyond my vision. Something was replacing the darkness around the edges. Something...something alien, yet familiar. What was this?

There was a voice in my head. <Hey. Sorry, Ax man, but it isn't your time yet.>

That voice...no. Impossible. But it kept going. <You've got to get back up, man. It's not time. You don't get to leave this war just yet.>

A hallucination. It had to be. It could not be real.

<If this isn't real, why do you feel stronger?>

<It cannot be,> I whispered.

<Does it matter if it's real or not, Ax? This strength is real. This fight is real. And you really need to get back up. That's an order.>

<Yes, Prince Jake.>

<Don't call me prince.>

CHAPTER 19

Slowly, I climbed to my hooves. Guraff watched me rise.
<It is not over yet, Guraff.>

“You are stronger than I thought. With your wounds, you should not be able to stand.” Then, with one hand, he shoved me. I fell over.

I struggled to my hooves again and raised my tail. The Kelbrid were watching, fascinated. Guraff shoved me down once more. “Do not make this more painful than it must be, Prince Aximili.”

Again I rose to my feet. <This will be as it must be, Guraff.> I struck with my tail. I did not even break the skin.

For the third time, Guraff knocked me to the floor. “Do not embarrass yourself, Prince.”

I rose on shaking legs. <The only embarrassment would be to remain on the floor.>

He placed one talon on my chest and shoved me down. This time, he held me there. “You are brave, noble, and honorable, Prince Aximili. Do not force me to add foolish to that list.”

<How's this for foolish?> Marco asked.
<We've reprogrammed the biofilter to destroy all Kelbridintwomites.
And once we found your DNA in the system all it took was a little fancy
work to have you set for destruction too. You can stay or go.
It's your choice.

Maybe you shouldn't have spent so much time screwing with Ax.>

Guraff looked at Marco. Slowly, he turned his head back to me. "If I sacrifice this ship, I will not leave without giving the Visser a prize. Your nobility, Prince Aximili, has spared you this time. Remember this."

He took his foot off of me. Then, he hefted Imrahil over his shoulders. To his Kelbrid, he said, "Come with me to the hangar. At least we can stop them from getting the Bug fighters. We will take what we can."

The Kelbrid followed Guraff to the dropshaft and then disappeared out of sight. Only then did Marco lower the force field. He went to gorilla morph and together, we carried Alloran, David, and James into the bridge. Then we sealed it back up.

After a few minutes, we succeeded in waking the others up. They morphed and demorphed to restore their bodies. I

myself morphed to human. I sat in the corner with my arms wrapped around my legs. There is something comforting about that position.

Jeanne sat next to me and put one arm over my shoulder. “You did well, Prince Aximili.”

I did not respond. Marco joined in. “Yeah, Ax man. You had one of the toughest missions we’ve ever faced. And that fight in the hallway...do you have any idea how many Kelbrid you killed? There are going to be more legends about you by the time those remaining Yeerks reach the pool.”

Alloran, in his human morph so similar to the *shorm* I knew during the first war, sat on my other side. I know that he wanted to appear to be a strong, brave warrior. But it was very obvious that he was just a scared child. We all were.

The ship having been put on auto pilot, James and David joined us. We all sat in a heap on the floor, holding one another. No one moved or spoke until the ship’s computer told us that we had entered the atmosphere and were preparing to land. “Guess it’s time for round two,” Marco sighed.

I nodded. “Mersa will not want to return Tobias since we do not have Imrahil.”

“After what we just went through, an army of Hork-bajir won’t seem so bad,” David said. “At least their blood’s just sticky and wet.”

The community center came into sight. I got an idea. “Jeanne, try to hail the Reliquary. It might be in the area.”

Indeed it was. A hologram of an impatient Rachel was soon glaring at us. “Well? I see you got the ship. Is everything alright? Why are you in human morph?”

Then she caught sight of Alloran. “Oh...Al. I can’t believe...I mean, I hoped and prayed, but... I’m going to have a special dinner waiting when you all get home, okay?”

After our previous ordeal, that did not sound too terrifying suddenly. Nevertheless, all of us but James shared a concerned look. “Actually, Rachel,” Alloran began, “I think I would prefer to dine as an Andalite tonight.”

“I’ll have his dinner,” Marco bluffed.

Rachel gave him a look. “I’m not wasting my cooking on you, Marco. If Alloran wants to feed Andalite-style, I’ll just order in, okay?”

“Perfect,” David said with a smile. The hologram winked out. “Crisis number one avoided,” David said.

“More like crisis number seven, the way this day’s been going,” Marco groaned. “Let’s just nab Tobias and get out of there. God, I wish he had been with us on this mission.”

“Me too,” Alloran added. “When we were all crying...he would not have been.”

I nodded “He would have remained strong for the rest of us. The way I should have.”

“Believe me, dude, you did,” Marco said. “If you hadn’t kept getting up... That was inhuman.”

“I cannot disobey a direct order, Marco. And I do not think I should have to remind you that I am, in fact, not human.”

“Order? What order?” James asked.

This time I remained silent. There was no reason for them to know about my hallucination. If that is what it had been. I always considered myself a man of science, but some of the things I have seen...

We landed the Blade ship in the parking lot. Alloran input the self destruct code, just waiting to be triggered when we needed it to be done. Now, the only thing left to do was get our leader and go home.

CHAPTER 20

I demorphed and found, to my surprise, that my left eye was still burnt away. I also had a few deep scars on my body. Marco took a look at my eye. “Oh man, that’s nasty, Ax. Why didn’t that heal?”

<I do not know,> I admitted. At least my tailblade was restored. If it had not been... <Sometimes, injuries do not heal as they should when morphing. I am no scientist, so I could not tell you why that is.> I looked at James and Alloran.

Both shrugged. “After that sario-storm, I don’t even care,” James said. He looked at me. “Did I use that word correctly?”

<Well, you really shouldn’t use it all,> I reminded him. <Especially not in front of Alloran. But yes, it was grammatically correct.>

“Trust me, James, Alloran’s been through far worse than your cursing,” Marco said. Then he looked around. “Sario. Rachel and Tobias are both gone.”

“Don’t you start saying it,” Jeanne warned. “Let’s just get Tobias and go home.”

The guards at the front looked at us oddly when they saw we were accompanied by an Andalite significantly younger than the one with which we had left, but they did not stop us. One led us to Mersa's office.

Mersa and Tobias were both leaning over a chessboard. We entered to hear Tobias complaining, “-ame of strategy my ass. If this was a real war, my options wouldn't be nearly so limited.”

“You must work within your means,” Mersa replied, moving a piece.

“But why should I? If I set new limits, if I go beyond all the limits, how can I be stopped?”

“Everyone has their limits, Tobias. Checkmate.”

“Not if I move here.”

“Your king can't move there.”

“Why not?”

“Because he just can't. The rules clearly state that.”

“I'm aware of the rules. I play by my own.”

“But then how can you lose?”

“So you see the appeal.” Then, Tobias noticed us. “Oh, you're back. Ax, what happened to your-” He cut off when he saw Alloran.

“Where is Imrahil?” Mersa asked almost distractedly.

<He was captured by the Yeerks,> I answered as calmly as I could.

“Very well,” Mersa sighed. “Tobias, it seems you and I are going to be spending a lot more time together. You had best learn to play by the rules.”

Tobias shook his head. “No, Mersa. You have the Blade ship. I’m leaving now.”

“Well, go on then,” Mersa said, waving his hand to the door. “Make sure to say goodbye to your family. You broke our deal, you know and, as you pointed out, they are vulnerable to my retribution.”

Tobias laughed. Then, it cut off abruptly. A Howler claw sprang out of his wrist. He picked Mersa up by the throat, the rest of his arm already morphing to that of the Howler.

“Let me make this very clear, Mersa. My family is the one thing I will not sacrifice for this war. If anything happens to anyone I consider to be my family, I will blame you. And I will find you. And I will kill you. Is that clear?”

“But...you...need...me,” Mersa hissed, already changing colors either from rage or lack of oxygen.

“Not as much as I need them,” Tobias answered, giving him a Howler smile before he dropped the gasping Yeerk back down. We all turned to leave.

“Do you really think you’ll win in the end?” Mersa asked. “Do you think you can prevail against all of us?”

Tobias glanced at the chess board. “A game is one thing, Mersa. War quite another. In war, your options are limitless.”

“As are our numbers, Tobias. You few...what can you do against us all?”

““For should the enemy strengthen his van, he will weaken his rear; should he strengthen his rear, he will weaken his van; should he strengthen his left, he will weaken his right; should he strengthen his right, he will weaken his left. If he sends reinforcements everywhere, he will everywhere be weak.” Master Sun. It is a simple matter for the few to defeat the many, you see. We need attack only where you are weak. But you, not knowing where you are weak, must strengthen all points. And in doing so, you weaken all points as well. The more you expand, the more you expose yourself. The longer you stretch your neck, the easier it is for the axe to find it.”

Tobias turned to us. “Well, it looks like you’ve all had quite the day. Let’s go. I’m sure Rachel’s going to have a hot meal ready for us.”

“She ordered out.”

“Oh thank God. Or Crayak. Or Ellimist. Whatever. Alright gang, let’s go home.”

CHAPTER 21

Having no means of transportation, we walked to Rachel's house in human form. None of us had much to say about that day. I suppose it could not have been pleasant for Tobias to spend that time with Mersa as his only company. But I think that would have been pleasant compared to the ordeal on the Blade ship.

He noticed we were all being unusually silent. "What happened?" he asked us. "I can see you lost Imrahil. But that shouldn't hit you so hard. He was a traitor, after all. And we've got Al back. Why no smiles?"

"There was...a battle," I began slowly.

"Battle isn't the word for it," James said. "That was a slaughter. How are we even alive?"

"Guraff told them to take you alive," Marco told him. "He wanted to capture all of us."

"How many Kelbrid?" Tobias asked.

I shook my head. "We do not know. It does not even matter. They just did not stop coming. We were in a narrow hallway and they came at us from all sides. Three Andalites

and two lions against an army of Kelbrid. Marco and Jeanne were trapped behind a force field. They could not help us.”

“Have you ever experienced anything like that slaughter?” James asked.

“Santor-” Tobias cut off and shook his head. There was a far off look in his eye. “It must have been terrible.”

“One weird thing,” David began. “It might have just been the death-induced hallucinations, but did Guraff quote Shakespeare after he strangled Al?”

“Did he?” Marco asked. “I never read any Shakespeare.”

“What did he say?” Tobias wanted to know.

Al answered him. “He said, ‘Goodnight, sweet prince; and a flight of angels sing thee to thy rest.’”

Tobias smiled. “So he took my advice. Good. I always thought he’d enjoy *Hamlet*.”

When we reached the house, the others went inside. Tobias, Alloran, and I went around to the back yard. Alloran and I demorphed while Tobias morphed to Andalite. There was not nearly enough room for us to graze properly, but we were content just to walk around for a bit.

Privately, so Alloran could not hear, Tobias said to me, <I know what that battle must have been like, Ax. I've told you about the battle of He Fei, haven't I?>

I thought about it. <Thirty-seven times.>

<Oh. Well...during that episode with the Time Matrix, Santorelli and I ended up there. He and I fought alongside Zhang Liao at He Fei. That was a slaughter, a bloodbath. Santorelli and I were Howlers and we still almost didn't come out of it. There were just so many... And all humans. That battle never left me and never will. I've got my own scars from it.>

<What did you do afterwards?> I asked. <I sat in the corner and almost cried. We all did. What did you and Santorelli do?>

<We celebrated with Cao Cao and Zhang Liao.>

<How could you manage to celebrate after something like that?>

<Because once the dust settled, we were still standing. Life, Ax...it's all just a series of small victories, really. You have to take all the pleasure you can from the little successes. Any day I'm alive, I've won.>

<You did not always believe that,> I reminded him.

<No. But I do now. And you know the reasons.> I nodded. We both looked at the house, full of our family, which was expected to grow in a few months. And we looked at Alloran, grazing happily and completely oblivious to us. I suddenly realized something.

<Tobias, do you see what we've become?>

<What?>

<I remember being on the Dome ship. I would be grazing, just like Alloran. And not far away, there would be the old soldiers, the Princes, talking about war and life and I would not really understand a word of it. We've become them, Tobias.>

He laughed. <Doesn't that always happen? When you're young, you always look at the older ones and think about how different they are from you. And then one day, it hits you: you're exactly the same.>

<I suppose so.>

Rachel came from the house. "Hey, you three! Come on, the food's going to get cold. And Marco won't stop complaining because I won't let him eat until the three of you are with us. Ax, what happened to your eye?"

<Kelbrid,> I shrugged. <Some wounds do not heal as they should. <Captain-Prince Asculan-Semitur-Langor lost a stalk eye to the Yeerks, you may remember.>

“Who?”

<Uh..Ax? She was dead when we met him,> Tobias reminded me. How could I have forgotten that?

<Sorry,> I mumbled. Well, as much as one can mumble in thought speak.

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll have to get you something to cover that scar and missing, eye, though. We’ll go shopping tomorrow, okay?”

<You know he’s going to want cinnamon buns if you take him to the mall,> Tobias reminded her.

“We’ll see how he behaves.”

We all morphed to human and entered the house. It was an incredible sight, really. The dining room table was covered in food. Around the table sat Jacques, Naomi, Jordan, Sarah, and Jeanne. They were Rachel’s family. But also, there was Marco, David, and James, soon to be joined by Alloran and myself. Tobias’s family, in a way.

We all sat down and I was struck by how odd this all was. For all that it had torn apart, this generations-long war with the

Yeerks had brought a lot together, too. It was not, in my mind, a small victory at all.

And now, to leave you with some words of wisdom from
Streetlight Manifesto:

*“Falling, fallen, we all fall down
It only really matters how we stand our ground
And if and when we rise to our feet again
We'll be on our own*

*Everything we built
(It's gone)
And everyone around
(Is stunned)
We just sit here staring blankly
And everything goes numb
Lord, if I felt a thing
I could wrap my mind around this
And prevent our getting singed
Please excuse my enemies
I think they do not know
I will gladly self destruct if they leave me alone
Friend, that's the end of us
Because you're way behind in empathy and overdue on trust*

*Calmly, calmly and patiently
We've seen all the evidence
But still cannot believe
And if and when we rise to our feet again
We'll be on our own*

*Somehow, somehow, we persevere
The questions on our lips fall on deafened ears
And if and when we rise to our feet again
We'll be on our own.”
—If and When We Rise Again*

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

66: THE HUNTERS

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

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

Marco, Jeanne, and James arrived last. James was an interesting story, I think. He is...my opposite, I suppose. I grew up with a loving family; he was alone. I had a healthy human body; he was confined to a wheelchair for his whole life. But the very thing that was my curse, the morphing power, was a blessing to him. He gained everything I had lost.

Maybe it's true what they say: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Marco sat down and moaned. "Oh man. This just does not feel good. Does anyone else feel all the negativity in this room?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<The Kelbrid have a few weaknesses. They are driven by an almost Taxxon-like need for battle. But on top of this, they have a very fast metabolism. If not properly and frequently fed, they starve rather quickly. It takes a great deal to fuel the Kelbrid body.

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

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

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

I realized where this was going. <With the recent loss of that transport ship that Mersa's people took out, he'll be importing more Kelbrid. Since he needs them in a hurry, he'll use the ones from the Hork-bajir world. If we keep wiping out transports, he can't get more Kelbrid.>

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

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

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

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

PREVIEW SUMMARY

Mersa's Rebellion can now defend itself against the Visser and Guraff. It's time for the Animorphs to strike back on the original front of the war. But the Visser cannot allow Mersa's forces to exist. He has unleashed two deadly assassins with only one goal: the destruction of the Yeerk Rebellion.

But the Animorphs cannot allow the Rebellion to be put down. It ties up the Visser's resources and slows both invasions. Once more, David, Al, Tobias, Ax, James, Jeanne, and Marco must step in to defend Mersa. But this time, they may have their match...

Part I of a Trilogy