

55: THE PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

My name is Tobias. You might have heard of me. For three years, five friends and I fought alone against an alien force that sought to enslave humanity: the Yeerk Empire. Yeerks, in their natural state, are just little grey slugs. But these slugs can crawl inside your head and take over your body completely.

The six of us were, me, our leader Jake, his best friend Marco, Jake's girlfriend Cassie, and an Andalite kid named Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill. And there was Rachel. Rachel was Jake's cousin and Cassie's best friend. She was also the only person I ever loved. In our final battle, she...well, you know what happened then.

We called ourselves the Animorphs because of our only weapon: the power to morph. We could transform our bodies into any animal we could touch. Once we touched a creature and acquired its DNA, we could become that creature. One of my first morphs was a red tailed hawk. I never really got out of that morph. You see, there is a time limit on morphing. If you stay in one form for more than two hours, you stay like that forever.

A vastly powerful alien called the Ellimist gave me back

my power to morph a while ago. Still, every two hours, I have to go back to hawk or I'm in whatever body I was in forever.

That was the old days. We had a few allies, but I won't go into that here. For the most part, it was just the six of us. For three years, we waged a terrible, bloody war against our unseen enemies. Attack after guerrilla attack against any tiny weakness we could find in the Yeerks. It started out as a delaying action. Then, it turned into a victory.

But none of that matters now. Because that war ended three years ago. Fast forward to the beginning of this story. After our final battle, the last of the Yeerks escaped in a ship and flew out into space. Aximili, we always called him Ax, chased after them for years. Finally, they outsmarted him and ambushed him. They captured him. That was when Ax's second in command, Menderash, came to Earth. He contacted Jake and told him everything. So Jake got Marco and me. I never wanted to see anyone again after the war, but I couldn't turn my back on Ax. He called me his *shorm*. It's Andalite for "best friend." Jake also recruited some special agents he had been training to morph, an American named Santorelli and a French girl named Jeanne. Menderash morphed permanently to human to avoid some legal complications, so he's stuck like

that.

So here we are again. Jake, Marco, Santorelli, Jeanne, Menderash, and me, Tobias. We're deep in an unknown, unfriendly sector of the galaxy on a deadly, secret mission against forces we don't understand. If anyone were to find out about us, it would start an intergalactic war that our own sector of the galaxy did not think it could win.

Does any of this seem a little familiar? If you were with me for the first ride, it should. But just remember: this is a new world with new rules, new dangers, and whole new morphs. You might recognize me, but that's about all you'll recognize. Ready? Then hang on, because this starts out fast...

CHAPTER 1

My name is Tobias. I can't tell you my last name or where I live. I don't know what my last name would be anymore. As for where I live, right now it's somewhere in a foreign sector of the galaxy. I'm writing this because, when this is all over, there I want the survivors to be able to understand who we were and why we did what we had to do. And I'm writing this because maybe, just maybe, someone will read this and have the strength to go on when they might fall without it.

Let me set the scene for you. We came out of Z-space and found the Blade ship, the ship with the last Yeerks in the world, waiting for us. Ax, my friend, had been taken over by some being called The One.

I just heard Jake, my old 'friend,' give the order to our pilot, Menderash. "Ram the Blade Ship." I saw Menderash reach for the controls. Then, I saw him freeze. I looked around.

Nobody moved. Not an inch. No breathing, no blinking, and no wavering of the grotesque hologram of Ax that even now smiled at us with arrogance etched into his mutated face.

I knew this game. <Ellimist,> I muttered. <Come to not help us once again?> Then I heard a voice I wasn't expecting.

"Not Ellimist." I turned to see the Drode. The Drode looked sort of like a purple dinosaur, but his flesh was very wrinkled and his face was way too close to a human face.

The Drode served a being known as Crayak. At first, I thought of the Ellimist as good and Crayak as evil. But I haven't been sure what those words meant for years.

<Crayak, then. As if it matters. What does your master want?> I demanded. I guess most people would be a little thrown by a creature that could stop and start time on a dime. Not me. The whole 'time freeze' gag is old news.

"I remember when you were respectful and shy," the Drode sighed. "I might like this version better. But that is neither here nor there."

<What do you want?> I repeated.

"Come now, Tobias. Surely you don't think that the Ellimist would let his little friends the Animorphs kill themselves like this."

<If the Ellimist cares, why are you here?>

The Drode didn't answer me. Instead, he said, "I'm about to tell you a story. Don't say anything until you hear it. I'm

sure the Ellimist has told you a thing or two about my master, but I'm going to tell you the whole story. Then, you need to decide something. Are you ready?"

I tried to answer in thought speak, but I heard nothing. So I just nodded. Yes, I was ready. Then, just as I had expected, I was no longer in our dimension.

CHAPTER 2

When I looked around, I could see into and through things at once and from every angle. I saw the core as easily as the surface. I could see Jake's unbeating heart as easily as easily as I could see the Yeerk slugs in the brains of the humans, Hork-bajir and Taxxons in the Blade ship commanded by my *shorm*.

I noticed something else. Small threads of light came from every Yeerk and Taxxon in that ship. They all converged at Ax. One great strand, a braid of every other thread, extended from him into a world I could not see even here. I turned to the Drode, who looked 'normal' even in this place.

"As you may know," he said, "my master, the great and glorious Crayak, did not come from your galaxy. In his own galaxy, he had great power. He could control most anything he put his mind to. But there was a greater power than he.

"My master despised this one. He began a war against him. He turned the races of the galaxy against the other one. My master's rival did the same. A long war ensued. In the end, my master lost and was banished from his home galaxy. So he went to yours.

“There, as you know, he met the Ellimist and now they play the same game for the stakes Crayak always wanted. Can you guess what comes next? The being who drove him out is The One, the very creature who has seized your Andalite friend.

“My master did not immediately engage the Ellimist. That would have been foolish. He built himself a base of power in a sector of the galaxy that the Ellimist rarely visited. That was this sector of the galaxy, Kelbrid space. My master’s home. At least, it used to be. A millennia ago, the people rose up and challenged his power. The One gave them the ability to succeed, so my master abandoned this place.”

I could feel that my thought speak was working again. So I said, <So now you want our help. We beat you in our own home so you think we just might be able to take on The One.>

“Don’t be ridiculous. You don’t have even a fraction of Crayak’s power. You are nothing to The One. But you can harm his servants.”

<Go on,> I told him. <Tell me more about The One.>

“Oh, but that would hardly be fair. You’ll have to learn about The One and his servants on your own. I’m sure you can find a suitable source of information if you think about it.”

<And what makes you think we're going to help Crayak?>
I asked. <He hasn't exactly been our friend.>

"Believe me, Tobias, we are on the same side now. You humans proved yourselves stronger than the Yeerks. Crayak has no need of a weak species. We are done with the Yeerks. The One can have them. But humans...you present interesting possibilities. You'll find that Crayak isn't so bad once you get to know him."

<Did you stop to think that maybe I don't care?> I asked.
<I don't want any part of your war. I just want to get Ax and go home.>

The Drode laughed. "Do you really think it's that easy? You can't break The One's power simply by taking dear Aximili beyond this sector of the galaxy. You have to sever him at the source. And to do that, you'll need my master's help."

<So maybe we just leave Ax here. Better that than help Crayak.>

"You still think of my master as your enemy. Very well. Then take this little gift as a sign that my master is on your side. And that, unlike the Ellimist, he doesn't lie to you."

I felt the change the instant it happened. One moment, I

was in my hawk body. The next, I was human. “What game are you playing?” I demanded of the Drode. My voice was raspy; I hadn’t used it in years.

“The games are over, Tobias. The game between Crayak and the Ellimist has collided with the war between Crayak and The One.”

“You said that the Ellimist, and apparently you too, wouldn’t let us die like this. But what can you do? You can’t interfere directly, according to the rules of your game. What’s your plan?”

“What did I just say? The game is over. Or, rather, postponed. The Ellimist and Crayak have all the time in the universe, plus a little extra. They can rest for a few eons while Crayak settles his old score. Crayak can use his full power here.”

“Then why does he need us?” I demanded.

“Why use a sword where a scalpel would do? Subtlety is so much more elegant.”

“I see. So what are you going to do?”

“Aximili seems to have you in quite the tight spot, doesn’t he? Of course, that spot wouldn’t be so very tight if, say, his Z-space engines suddenly engaged and left him thirty trillion

light years away from you.”

“I see. So you save our lives and in return we go after The One. And what do you think we can do? It’s as feeble as attacking Crayak himself.”

“The six of you, alone, against a force far more powerful and advanced than you could ever be? I’m sure you’ll figure something out. Or you’ll fail, in which case Crayak simply delays his attack until he finds another, more suitable species with which to make his war.”

“Meanwhile, you buy me off by giving me back my humanity. But Crayak can’t give me back what I really want, can he?”

The Drode sighed. “Very little is beyond Crayak’s capabilities.”

“But he can’t raise the dead,” I concluded. “Fine. I’ll talk to the others. I can’t see Jake going for it. Or Marco. Santorelli and Jeanne maybe, but only because they don’t know what they’re getting into. Menderash will go along with anything to save Ax.”

“You’ll have to convince the others. But know, Tobias, that if Crayak wins, his power will be limitless. Nothing will be beyond his grasp. Nothing.” That final bribe left in the open,

the Drode brought me back to my own world.

CHAPTER 3

“Hey! Where’d the Blade ship go?” Marco asked. Then he looked at me. “And when did you morph?”

“An old friend of ours just paid me a visit,” I told him.

“The Ellimist?” Jake asked.

“Not exactly. The Drode. He told me that Crayak used to have a strong base of power in this part of space. And that The One kicked him out of here and out of his own galaxy. Now he wants us to help him take The One down. If we succeed, we get Ax back.”

“So it was Crayak who moved the Blade ship” Jake realized. “Now he wants our help. He does us a favor, so we do him one. What do you all think?”

Santorelli shrugged. “I don’t really know anything about any of this. I think it’s best if I leave it up to someone who knows what’s going on.”

“I am going to agree,” Jeanne said. “This is for our commanders to decide.”

Menderash added, “I am no expert on this Crayak, but if he offers us a way to save Prince Aximili, I am inclined to seize the chance. But I will obey my commanders.”

Marco looked at me. “Tobias, is there something you’re leaving out? Like why you’re human right now?”

I sighed. Marco was quick to see through subterfuge. “Crayak gave me back my human body. He wanted to prove to me that he’s trustworthier than the Ellimist. He means what he says. And he wants me to trust him.”

“So are you on his side?” Marco asked me.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “If Crayak wins here, the Drode says he’ll have unlimited power. We’d be condemning an entire sector of the galaxy to his rule. But he wouldn’t be that powerful in our own sector of the galaxy because the rules of his game still limit him there.”

“Sacrifice half the galaxy to Crayak in order to save Ax?” Jake wondered. “I can’t condone that. I’m voting against helping the big eye.”

I said, “The fact is that whatever happens in this part of the galaxy probably doesn’t harm us back home. Our goal has always been to take care of humans first, everyone else second. I think we can make a deal with Crayak. We help him. In return, he leaves Earth alone in his game.”

I looked at Marco. It was me against Jake. Marco’s vote would decide. He looked from Jake to me and back again.

Finally, he said, “For me, my first goal has always been to protect my family. That’s why I was against fighting back in the beginning of the war with the Yeerks. When I found out about my mother, it became about saving her. If I can make a deal with Crayak to protect my family, then I don’t really care what happens to this galaxy.”

IT IS SETTLED THEN, a voice said in our heads. It was great and terrible, like a flood about to shatter a dam into a thousand pieces. We all knew that it was the voice of Crayak. YOUR EARTH IS SAFE IF YOU ASSIST ME AGAINST THE ONE. DO NOT FAIL.

He didn’t have to add that, if we failed, Earth would pay the price.

CHAPTER 4

“So what do we do now?” Marco asked. “I mean, how do we get at a guy who kicked Crayak’s butt? This isn’t like going after the Yeerks or Visser Three or something. We don’t have the slightest clue how to start.”

I answered. “The Drode told me we’d think of something. So I guess we start thinking.”

Jake turned to Menderash. “What do you know of Kelbrid space? Where’s the nearest planet?”

Menderash answered, “As we have traveled through Z-space, I have been compiling a map of the star systems. There is one only a few thousand light-years away. If we were to fly through it, the ship’s scanners would detect any signs of intelligent life.”

“Go for it. If The One is more powerful than Crayak, there must be some local legends about him. We need all the information we can get.”

So Menderash set out into space. I retired to my quarters. And quickly realized that I’d need to do some redecorating. They were furnished for a hawk. Fake trees, a few other places

to perch. Nowhere for a human being.

I guess the trip wasn't that long, but it was uncomfortable for me both physically and emotionally. I sat in a corner of my room and thought about what this war meant.

Crayak wanted me on his side. That much was certain. But why me? Jake was our leader. Why not bribe him instead? Okay, so maybe that wouldn't have worked. The war jaded Jake, but he would never sell out to Crayak. That just wasn't his style.

But what about Marco? He had more influence than I did and he was cold enough to cut a deal. Then again, Marco had millions of dollars back home, a mansion, a T.V. show, and his family in perfect order. What could Crayak offer him?

So it was down to me. There was only one thing I wanted and Crayak promised to give it to me. Long ago, I had done a service for the Ellimist. He had promised to give me what I most wanted. I wanted him to make me human again. Instead, he gave me back my power to morph. That was why Crayak gave me my human body.

I wondered, not for the first time, why these beings had taken such an interest in me. If it hadn't been for the Ellimist, I wouldn't even have existed. My father was an Andalite

warrior named Prince Elfangor. He came to earth and assumed a human form. One day, the Ellimist called him back to his own planet to fight the Yeerks. The Ellimist erased all evidence of Elfangor's time on earth. Except for his son.

The Ellimist helped us Animorphs out a few times after that. And got us involved in his game with Crayak. He seemed to have some special interest in me and that freaked me out.

I remember the first time we went against Crayak. The six of us Animorphs and a friend of ours were transported to a weird planet so many light-years away from our own home that the Yeerks would never reach it without consuming most of the known universe. The planet was occupied by the Iskoort, intergalactic merchants and traders. We were supposed to fight Crayak's champions for the fate of their race.

Crayak sent seven warriors against us. They were all Howlers, genetically engineered killing machines, products of Crayak himself. We couldn't outfight them, so we outsmarted them. We forced Crayak to destroy them himself.

Now Crayak wanted me for his pawn. I knew he was using me. But the thing was, he said he could bring Rachel back. Didn't he? Then I remembered. Both of them, Ellimist and

Crayak, have a way of lying without lying. They speak the truth, but it isn't the truth you think it is.

My thoughts were interrupted when my door slid open. Jake stood there. "We're there. And you won't believe where 'there' is."

I went to the bridge and looked over the screens. At first glance, I recognized the place. It looked like Lego land if it were designed by Dr. Seuss. Towers miles high pierced the sky. They seemed to be made of bricks of every color imaginable and some that I don't have words to describe.

There were no railings to keep you from falling over the edge. And it was a long fall. There were staircases that led from one level to the next. There was no pattern or shape to the towers. Just platforms stuck in wherever they would fit.

Aliens moved across every platform. There were many species I had never seen before, native to this sector of the galaxy. But there was one type that was very common.

They had triangular heads with crab-like eyes and little gasping mouths. Their torso was veined and scrunched together, like a living accordion. Their arms had too many joints. The hands ended in two tentacles and a claw. Their legs were oddly shaped so that it looked like they were crawling

backwards on their knees even when they were moving forward.

I couldn't see all of this from the ship, of course. I was just remembering it from the last time I had been here. Here being the planet of the Iskoort. It didn't surprise me as much as it might have. I knew something about Crayak by now: he loved circles.

CHAPTER 5

We met on the bridge. Jake addressed our group. “Tobias, Marco, and I know this planet. It is full of different alien life forms. We shouldn’t stick out much here.”

“Not so, big Jake,” Marco said. “The One will have access to Ax’s memories, or so we need to assume. Which means that he’ll know that humans don’t belong here.”

“How do we know he’s watching the Iskoort?” Jake wondered.

I answered. “It’s a safe bet. We’ve been here before. We have friends here. If we were to come to this sector of the galaxy in search of Ax, we’d probably stop here.”

“Exactly,” Marco agreed. “That means that we should only go if we have morphs that are from this part of the galaxy. Or at least one that isn’t associated with us.”

“Why does it matter if he’s watching us?” Jeanne asked.

“We don’t want him to know we’re walking around here asking questions about him,” Marco answered. “The less he knows about us, the better. But what morphs do we have that can walk around here and not seem out of place?”

“I have a Howler morph,” Jake said. “I can use that. The

rest of you can hide on me in fly morph.” Jeanne, Santorelli, and the other special agents who had been given the morphing power back home had acquired a few of our standard morphs to use in training. Fly, our most common surveillance morph, was the first one they got.

“I have another morph I can use,” I said. “Remember the Nartec?” The Nartec were a race of mutated humans living beneath the ocean. During one mission, I had acquired one of them. “They’re not native to this galaxy, but I doubt The One will be on the lookout for them.”

“Are you sure you can still morph?” Marco asked. I just looked at him. “I mean, we know Crayak made you human. But did he let you keep your power?”

That surprised me. “I don’t know,” I admitted. “I didn’t think to try.” I focused my mind on the Nartec. And I felt the changes begin.

Morphing isn’t painful. If it was, you’d die long before you morphed. Your bones stretch or shrink, your organs rearrange, grow, or disappear altogether. Even your brain alters.

My body stayed pretty much the same. My arms grew a little bit so they were as long as my legs. My skin turned blue.

I looked at my hand and saw webbing grow between the fingers. The same thing happened to my feet.

I felt my eyes grow larger. They grew unfocused and the ship seemed entirely too bright. My sense of smell enhanced. I felt the gill slits grow in my neck. It became harder to breathe. Not impossible, but not as easy as it had been.

I felt an odd sensation as fins slid out of my spine, forearms, and legs. I got a queasy feeling in my stomach as my organs subtly altered for the Nartec's more fishy diet.

Finally, I felt the Nartec mind. When you morph an animal, you get their instincts, not their memories. Still, we had a rule about morphing sentient creatures like Nartec or Howlers. We didn't do it without permission or without necessity.

In this case, the Nartec mind was almost like the human mind. Aside from a strong desire to be in water, it was calm enough. Human enough that it wasn't totally disorienting.

Of course, the desire for water conflicted sharply with my own mind. I had spent the last six or so years of my life as a red tailed hawk. That still felt like my true self.

It was my father, Prince Elfangor, who gave us our morphing power. His ship had just been shot down by the

Yeerks in a battle over Earth. He crash-landed in an abandoned construction site in our home town.

Jake, Marco, Cassie, Rachel, and I had been taking a shortcut home from the mall. We found him and he told us about the Yeerks. Then he gave us our power.

Jake got a small blue cube from his ship. We each put a hand on it. Ever since, there was no turning back. Not for me at least. Marco wanted to give up the whole thing for a while. I thought he was a coward.

At the time, Marco's father was the only family he had. His mother had been taken by a Yeerk leader Visser One. She had left earth and faked her host's death. She was eventually freed and Marco's family was reunited. But for a long time, all Marco had was his father. And his best friend Jake.

Jake's brother, Tom, was a Controller, someone controlled by a Yeerk, from the beginning of the war. At one point, Jake's parents were captured, too. In the end, they were freed but Tom was killed.

It was Rachel who killed Tom. In that final battle, Jake sent her on a secret mission onto the Blade Ship. She killed Tom. And she was skilled by the Yeerks. Then the Blade Ship got away. Ax spent years searching for it. Then the Yeerks

captured him and here we are.

As for me, I never had a family. My father, Elfangor, was taken away by the Ellimist. My stepfather was killed when I was very young. My mother disappeared shortly after that. I was shunted back and forth between my aunt and uncle, both of whom hated me.

In the end, I was reunited with my mother. She didn't remember my father or me. After the war, she went to the Andalite homeworld. I never heard anything about her after that.

I guess I kind of zoned out. I remember Marco saying, <Well look at that. Looks like Crayak is trustworthier than the Ellimist. Who knew?> He was using thought-speech. It's a form of telepathy that we use in morphs. It is also the standard Andalite method of communication.

I looked down at my newly webbed hands. "Weird," I said with a Nartec's voice. I looked up to see that Jake had already morphed to Howler. Marco was a fly. Jeanne and Santorelli were still working on it. Morphing takes practice and they were rookies.

I looked away. Turning into a Nartec may be a little disorienting, but it is nothing compared to the horror show of

watching someone become a fly.

Menderash couldn't morph. He has trapped himself as a human to avoid the legal complications of having an Andalite in Kelbrid space. That was one of the reasons we had to get Ax. Menderash would have to wait in the ship.

Jake turned to me. <Ready?> he asked.

I tried to fake a Nartec smile. <Ready.>

CHAPTER 6

Just because I had been to the Iskoort world before didn't mean that I knew my way around. Not by a long shot. Luckily, Jake and I had a friend who did.

His name was Guide. Actually, it was something longer, but we just called him Guide. Last time we were on the Iskoort world, he showed us around. And we made him a very rich Iskoort.

Finding Guide would be a problem, though. To us, every Iskoort looked the same. <Which one's Guide?> Jake wondered in our heads.

<Look for the Iskoort rolling in huge piles of Iskoort dough,> Marco suggested. <What do you think he'll charge us for help this time? We already gave him our memories, our hair, and Ereks's hologram thingy.>

Erek was an old friend of ours. He is from a race of androids called the Chee. Their own planet was destroyed by the Howlers so they came to live on earth. They've passed as humans for millennia using sophisticated holograph technology. Erek came to help us save the Iskoort from the Howlers.

<Just remember our rule when dealing with Iskoort,> Jake said. <No body parts.>

<I have an idea how to find him,> I said. <Remember how everything on this planet is organized into guilds? There's got to be an information guild or something like that. They'd tell us where Guide is.>

<For a price,> Marco added. <Maybe they'd accept an autograph...>

<I don't think the Iskoort have heard of you,> Jake told him. <Let's find someone and then hash out a deal.>

<Your wish is my command,> Marco said. Then I heard him shout, <Hey, Iskoort! I'm looking for a guy named Guide. Anyone got any info?>

Thought-speak can be used in one of two ways. It can be addressed to a small group of people or an individual. Or it can be broadcast to everyone within range. Marco was shouting at the top of his "lungs."

For the most part, the Iskoort ignored him. They themselves communicated in thought-speech. There saw nothing strange about hearing it yelled at them.

Or course, a few of them came towards us. Probably part of the welcoming guild or something. They spoke to us. <We

are Iskoort of the Gossip, News, and Speculation guild. You seek information about an Iskoort formerly called Guide? We can help you. All we ask is your memories.>

<No deal. We all know how valuable Howler memories are,> Marco said privately. <Don't give them away for this.>

“No,” Jake told them using his Howler voice. “Tell me or I'll give you my claw.” Howlers are about as large as a tall man. They are bowlegged and walk with a swinging gait. Their eyes are a weirdly beautiful blue. They are also faster than your eye can see and able to regenerate lost limbs. Their skin is red and black. On the backs of their hands are steel claws that they can extend or retract. Basically, picture the love-child of Darth Maul and Wolverine.

<There is no need to be hostile,> the Iskoort whined. <I am sure we can make a deal of some kind. There is always something to be had. Perhaps one of your friend's fins?>

“No fins,” I said. “What if I gave you my DNA?”

<I would prefer the Howler's DNA,> the Iskoort commented. <Perhaps I could have him?>

“Not him. There are too many Howlers in the world as it is. Take my DNA or we'll find someone who will.”

<But what could I do with your DNA?> he asked.

“Drink it, sell it, clone it, I don’t care. Take it or leave it.”

<You trade seems acceptable,> the Iskoort decided quickly. <I will show you to the one formerly known as Guide.>

After he collected my DNA, the Iskoort began to lead us to Guide. He started by leading us to a flight of stairs. Jake stopped him before he reached them. “No stairs. You have elevators. Use them.”

The Iskoort was about to protest. Then he caught sight of Jake’s very sharp claws and thought better of it. The elevators made the trip a lot easier.

The elevator went down for a long time. It seemed like an eternity with the Iskoort asking for more body parts every thirty seconds.

At one point, Jake very calmly shoved his claws into the wall of the elevator and used them to carve out a small circular hole. He scratched a message on it and handed it to the Iskoort. The message was two words: you’re next. The Iskoort probably did not read English, but he understood it well enough.

The elevator eventually stopped at one of the bottommost levels of the Iskoort world. <This is the level where the

individual formerly known as Guide lives,> the Iskoort told us. <I cannot help you any further. It is very strange for visitors to come this far down. I wish you luck.> He turned and rode the elevator away, glad to be rid of the Howler and his fishy companion.

<Not exactly where we expected to find Guide, is it?> Jake said.

<I'll say,> Marco agreed. <I smell so much biological waste that this fly might as well be in heaven.>

<This creature seems to have a fixation with excrement,> Jeanne commented. I almost jumped. I had forgotten about her and Santorelli.

<Flies do about two things: fly and smell poop,> Marco told her. <You get used to it.>

We walked for half an hour or so before we came across our first Iskoort in this level. He informed us that he was a member of the Beggars Guild. He told us where to find Guide in exchange for part of one of my scales.

It didn't take long to find Guide after that. We were led to a small hut made out of scrap metal and some of those Lego-looking bricks. The door was unlocked so we let ourselves in.

An Iskoort was there. He looked like any other Iskoort to

me except for one thing: his eyes were wide with terror when he saw Jake. <Please,> he whined, <I'll have your money in a week. I promise. Just don't kill me.>

“I'm not here to kill you, Guide,” Jake told him.

<Guide? I haven't been called Guide since...> he trailed off. <Are you a Howler?>

In response, Jake began to demorph. Marco and I followed. It took the three of us about thirty seconds to demorph. Jeanne and Santorelli were far behind. We had had a lot of practice. They were still rookies.

When our faces emerged, Guide threw himself down at Jake's feet. <You have returned. I am saved. They won't kill me after all!>

Jake looked down at the weeping Iskoort. “You have some explaining to do.”

CHAPTER 7

<It is a sad story,> Guide began. The six of us were sitting in Guide's hut, Jeanne and Santorelli having finished their demorph.

<At first, everything went great. Your memories made me even wealthier than the android's hologram projector.> The Iskoort had a way of copying someone's memories and playing them back like a DVD. It was one of their planet's main attractions. We had sold our memories to Guide to pay for some things we needed.

"If they were so good, what are you doing in the slums?" Marco asked.

<That's just the thing. They were too good. Everyone loved your story. The drama. The horror. The psychological and philosophical implications. But I was foolish about it. I released all of your memories at once.>

"How did that turn out?" Marco wondered.

<It made me a very rich Iskoort, I can tell you. I owned an entire market level by myself. I was in the running for Grand Guildmaster of the Merchant Iskoort. I was on top of the world!>

“The thing about that is, there’s always someone to knock you down,” I pointed out.

<Exactly. My opponent sabotaged me and my campaign. He had some foreigners burn down my market. But worse than that, he started a demand for more of your story.>

“What’s so bad about that?” Santorelli asked. “Wouldn’t that mean more Iskoort watching the memories you produced?”

<They didn’t want the same old memories,> Guide answered. <They wanted new ones. I wouldn’t have had a problem if I had kept some of the memories to myself, but everyone had already seen everything.>

“What happened then?” Jeanne asked.

<With my market gone, my only chance was in the memories. I used what I had left to hire experts to fabricate the ending of your story. >

“But you got caught,” Marco concluded.

<But I got caught,> Guide agreed. <When everyone found out about the fakes, my memory shows were boycotted. I lost everything. I was expelled from the Merchants guild. Only the Beggar’s Guild would accept me.>

“Well, it seems like we can help,” Jake told him. “The war

with the Yeerks is over. We can sell you the rest of our story.”

<That is very generous of you. But what is it that you want from me?> His whine got higher in pitch. I think it was a nervous sound. <Our last meeting was exciting, but also very nearly deadly for me. Is this something like that?>

“No. Nothing that will get you killed. Probably. Let’s start with the basics. What can you tell us about the Kelbrid sector of the galaxy?” Jake asked.

<This part of the galaxy hasn’t been called that in centuries. The Kelbrid were a race of warlike conquerors whose power spanned the galaxy. They conquered planet after planet in a campaign for galactic conquest.>

“But...” Marco prompted.

<But their power grew so great that no one would stand against them. All of their foes submitted to them the instant they arrived. With no one left to fight, The Kelbrid turned to civil war.>

“I think I see where this goes. The Kelbrid destroyed themselves, didn’t they?” Jake asked.

<Yes. Well...yes, yes they did.>

“What are you hiding?” I demanded. “What are you leaving out?”

<Nothing that I know of. Those are all the facts I know about the Kelbrid.>

“What do you know that isn’t fact?” Marco asked.

<There is a legend about the Kelbrid. It says that the Kelbrid originated millennia ago. As the story goes, the Kelbrid began as lowly creatures with no intelligence. But a being of great power gave them intellect. They became sentient. Because they were still base, animalistic creatures, they were driven by war and rage.

<This being led them as their master. They obeyed its commands and it led them to glory. Unexpectedly, one creature rose up against the Kelbrid to challenge their power.>

“Crayak,” I said.

Everyone turned to stare at me. Jake and Marco opened their mouths and Guide’s whining reached a higher pitch than I could have ever thought possible. <You have heard this story? > he asked me.

“Parts of it, but go on,” I told him.

<Yes, it the being who challenged the Kelbrid called himself Crayak. Many of the galaxy’s races joined him. In the end, Crayak was banished from this sector of the galaxy forever.>

“What happened to the Kelbrid?” Jake asked.

<They were greatly weakened by the struggle with Crayak. They began to doubt the power of their maker. Although he had banished their enemy, he was unable to destroy Crayak. In the end, they forsook their creator. But when they left him, they were leaderless. The Kelbrid themselves were fools. Their remaining enemies easily defeated them.>

“I thought you said this hadn’t been called the Kelbrid galaxy for centuries. But Crayak was exiled millions of years ago,” Marco pointed out.

<I was getting to that,> Guide whined. <Several centuries ago, the Kelbrid reemerged. We do not know where they came from. But they were every bit as fierce and deadly as the original Kelbrid.>

“So they conquered everyone and then killed themselves,” Santorelli finished.

<Yes. Mostly.>

“Mostly?” Jake asked.

<Travelers have been reporting Kelbrid sightings for the past few years. I have never thought anything of them. After all, if the Kelbrid return, they will simply destroy themselves again.>

“We need to know about another legend,” I told Guide.
“What can you tell us about a being called The One?”

Guide’s whine rose to a pitch so high that the human ear could no longer hear it. “What is wrong?” Jeanne asked.

<We do not speak of The One,> Guide answered.

“Guide, we already did,” Marco told him. “The One was the being that controlled the Kelbrid. Now, what else do you know of him?”

<I can’t tell you. It is too dangerous. It is forbidden. Not even the Beggar’s guild would have me if I told. I would be cast out into the swamp. I would be exiled. It would be the death of me.>

“Guide, do you want our memories or not?” I demanded. “If you don’t tell us everything you know about The One, we walk. End of story. You stay a beggar and end up in a pauper’s grave. Or you can tell us what we want to know and get your life back. Your choice.”

There is one thing you can always count on when dealing with Iskoort. When reason fails, you can always appeal to their overdeveloped sense of profit.

CHAPTER 8

Guide looked at Jake and Marco. <Do the three newcomers know about the Isk and the Yoort?> he asked.

“Three?” I asked. Then I remembered. Guide had only known me as a hawk. “Guide, it’s me, Tobias. The hawk.”

<Ah, Tobias. But who are these other two? Where are Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill, Rachel, and Cassie?>

“Cassie’s back on earth. Rachel...you’ll find out about that later. As for Ax, we can’t say,” Jake told him.

“Why not?” Marco asked. “I mean, the Andalites made a deal to stay out of Kelbrid space. But since the Kelbrid are gone there’s no reason they can’t be here.” He turned to Guide. “Ax was kidnapped by the Yeerks and brought here. We found him, but The One was controlling his mind.”

<That is a tragedy. And a fascinating story. Perhaps...>

“We’re already selling you the memory,” Marco said. “You don’t need to swindle us.”

<Sorry. Old habits are difficult to eliminate. Well, for the two of you who do not know, the Iskoort are not what they seem. They are composed of two parts. The Isk is the outer body and the Yoort is an inner self.”

“Think Yeerk,” Jake told Santorelli and Jeanne.

“But with an important upgrade,” Marco added. “The

Yoort created the Isk and evolved so that each needs the other.”

“From parasitism to symbiosis,” Jeanne said. “If the Yeerks knew about this...”

“We’ve been down that road,” I told her. “The Ellimist told us that the Yeerks and Iskoort don’t meet for another three thousand years or so.”

“What does the whole Isk — Yoort thing have to do with The One?” Marco asked.

<Iskoort legend...I am forbidden to speak of it, but I will make an exception in your case. Iskoort legend tells that the Yoort were brought to this planet by The One. We were separated from our homeworld by a catastrophe that we do not now remember.>

“How do you not remember?” Santorelli asked. “I would think a disaster that took away the homeworld of an entire race would be more memorable.”

“What killed the dinosaurs?” Jeanne asked him. Santorelli shrugged and looked at Guide to continue.

“I did,” I answered her. Jeanne cocked her head. “It’s a long story.”

<Within days, without our Kandrona sun, we were about

to die. Then The One appeared. His power gave us life. It kept us alive. He showed us how to build Kandrona generators so that we could live.>

If you're reading this and you have no idea what Kandrona is, then I have to suggest that you go back and read about the Yeerks some more. It's a good story.

<The One guided our ship to this planet. Then...Then he gave us Kelbrid hosts.> I was shocked. So were Jake, Jeanne, and Santorelli. But Marco was nodding like he expected this. What was he thinking?

<We were happy with the Kelbrid hosts. The One asked us to guide the hosts, to control them. We led them into battle and each time, the mind of the Yoort and the strength of the Kelbrid conquered.>

“So what went wrong? Trouble in paradise?” Marco asked.

<The One had us colonize the worlds that the Kelbrid conquered. We would enslave the minds of the inhabitant species and keep them docile. But there were too many species, too many minds, and not enough Yoorts. In time, all of the Kelbrid were Yoort-free. When the downfall of the Kelbrid came, the Yoort were attacked as well.>

“What happened then?” Jake asked.

<We were driven back off of the planets that we had conquered. In the end, we retreated here. A great council was held. It was decided that we would create symbiontes and set free all of the slaves.>

“And thus the Iskoort were born,” Marco sighed.

<Yes. This planet was once a fortress of the Kelbrid. It was built here because of the many Z-space routes that converged near it. We tore down the walls, leaving only the supporting towers. We replaced the bare, lifeless floors with the colorful ones that we now have. We swore off war with other species forever. Our planet became a neutral meeting ground for different species. Eventually, due to Z-space routes and frequent trafficking, it became the hub of galactic commerce.>

Marco looked pale. With is hard for him to do. He’s Hispanic, and he had done a lot of tanning in his life.

“What’s wrong?” Jake asked him.

“Don’t you see it?” He asked. “The connection? I get it now. I know why the Ellimist and Crayak care what happens to us. I know why Crayak saved us.”

“Congratulations,” came the Drode’s voice. “We have a winner.”

CHAPTER 9

The Drode appeared in Guide's hut. It was starting to get pretty cramped. Especially since no one wanted to get too close to him.

The Drode smiled at us. "The Iskoort are the key, you see. Crayak knew whom the Yoorts served. Naturally, he kept an eye on their cousins, the Yeerks.

"It was always Crayak's plan to use The One's own weapons against him. He bred the Howlers, a race of super warriors to match the Kelbrid. He sent them on hundreds of training missions to hone their skills. He gave them a collective memory so that they could defeat the Kelbrid.

"Crayak wanted to see the Yeerks engulf the whole of your sector of the galaxy. Then, he wanted to merge them with the Howlers. All would be ready for his invasion of The One's galaxy and this section of space."

"But something happened," Marco said. "The One's Kelbrid army collapsed and the Yoorts swore off war. The One had to change his plan."

"Yes, he did. My master did not know what The One would do next but he was not willing to take chances. He

wanted his own army, and so he helped the Yeerks. But there was a complication in his plans.”

“The Ellimist,” I said. “The Ellimist fought against the Yeerks. He helped Elfangor and us.”

“Indeed he did. So Crayak decided to tie up a loose end. He wanted to send the Howlers to destroy the Yoorts. But once again, the Ellimist interfered. He and you, his pets, saved the Yoorts. You aided The One.”

“Did the Ellimist know about The One? Is he on his side?” I asked.

“Who can say? Crayak believes that he was simply meddling as always. But who knows?”

“What does that have to do with Prince Aximili?” Santorelli asked.

“I’m sure you can figure it out if you think hard enough,” the Drode smiled.

Marco thought out loud. “The One lost the Yoorts to control his Kelbrid. His track record shows that he wants the Kelbrid to dominate the galaxy. Without the Yoort leadership, they consume themselves.”

Jake continued. “The Yoorts are useless to him now because of their pacifism. So he needed a new species to

control his Kelbrid soldiers.”

I finished. “Then the Yeerks showed up. A species just like the Yoorts but with a major difference: a violent streak. Just the sort of creatures The One needs.”

“But what does he want with Prince Aximili?” Jeanne wondered.

“Bait,” I answered. “When the Yeerks showed up, they probably told him everything. Including that we Animorphs had defeated them.” Then, I realized what that meant. “So if The One was going to use the Yeerks, he would want us far away.”

“So he draws us off the scent than by making us chase our old comrade into The One’s own territory.” Marco added.

“While The One moves into our own home and finishes off his old enemy Crayak,” Jake finished.

“Wait,” the Drode said. “That can’t be right. No, I’m sure Crayak would have seen that ahead of time.”

“Yeah?” Jake said. “Crayak’s been wrong before. Look at the Yeerks. And the Howlers.”

“Crayak slipped up,” I said. “Guess he isn’t so omniscient after all.”

“My master has more than enough power to defeat The

One now,” the Drode said.

“Then why doesn’t he do it?” Jake asked. “Because he can’t. Face it: he’s scared of getting beat again. That’s why he’s waited here for millennia. Why he didn’t make a move earlier.”

“Crayak fears nothing,” the Drode insisted.

“Yeah?” I questioned. “Then why doesn’t he just take out The One? Because he can’t. But we can.”

“You can?” the Drode laughed. “What could you do against a foe greater than my master?”

“We figured out his plan,” I said. “And we know how to stop him.”

“We do?” Santorelli asked.”

“Yeah, we do,” I said. “The One’s showed us some major weaknesses. But Crayak’s too afraid of him to see them. We aren’t. At least, I’m not.”

The Drode wasn’t convinced. “The One was counting on you thinking this way. He wants you to run back to your own sector of the galaxy. Then he can remain unopposed here.”

“Then why bait us into his home turf?” Marco demanded. “He either wants to finish us off here or he wanted to trick us into coming here so he can move around in our own world

unopposed. With Crayak focused on this galaxy, The One has free reign back in ours.”

“The Ellimist would oppose him,” the Drode said.

“The Ellimist?” Jake said. “I thought the Ellimist was noting but a fool. A meddler.”

“A fool with power,” the Drode insisted. “Nearly as much power as my master has. The One would not dare challenge the two of them.”

“Which is why he tricked you into coming here,” Marco told him. “This whole section of the galaxy is a trap.”

“But what would The One do in our galaxy?” Jake asked. “He doesn’t have enough Yeerks or Kelbrid for a war.”

“Crayak manufactured the Howlers. The One could do the same with the Kelbrid. As for the Yeerks, I know where he could get some,” I said.

“Where?” Marco asked. “All the Yeerks are quarantined on their homeworld.”

“Exactly,” I said. “And who do you think is going to stand in his way if Ax decides to take a tour of the planet? No one knows that he’s been taken. He could walk right in, collect some Yeerks, and walk out.”

“But where would he get the hosts?” Jake asked. “The

Hork-bajir are free now and the Taxxons are either quarantined or morphed into snakes in the Amazon. And I just can't picture Ax walking away with a few hundred Gedds."

"The Kelbrid," I said. "I can't believe that a species could kill itself to the last member because of a civil war. There must be some Kelbrid left and I'm sure The One has them stashed away somewhere, ready to invade Crayak's new home. Probably kept them in his own galaxy, where they'd be safe."

"I will inform my master," the Drode said. "You had better be on your way back to your sector of the galaxy. The One is probably already on his way."

CHAPTER 10

We gave our memories to Guide and made it back to the ship without incident. Menderash was not pleased with what we had figured out. Of course, in true Andalite style, he kept quiet and did as he was told. Barely an hour after our visit with Guide, we were back in Z-space.

I thought I finally understood Crayak. He wanted to use our galaxy as a training ground for his Howlers. Or to find a species capable of taking on the Kelbrid. That was why he used one species against another. It wasn't about sadism or power. He wanted to see a galaxy dominated by a single species because that would be the race to handle The One.

But then the Ellimist arrived. The Ellimist wanted to put a stop to Crayak's plans, so the two of them ended up in their contest. Crayak was willing to wait patiently for the end of the conflict. But then something else happened.

I think The One was watching their battle. And maybe he was more far-seeing than either of them because he saw the future. He saw that the Yeerks would be defeated by us and flee to Kelbrid space. So he withdrew his surviving Kelbrid and waited.

Then, when the Yeerks came, he used Ax as bait to lure us and Crayak away from our home. But why us? Was it just so that Crayak would be looking in the wrong galaxy? Or was it because he thought we could be a threat.

I started to wonder. If he could see that we would defeat the Yeerks, he had to see that we would figure out his plan. Which meant that he was ready for us. Which meant that he wanted us to come after him.

I ran to Jake's quarters. He and Marco were there, talking about something. "Jake," I said, "The One wants us to go after the Yeerk homeworld."

"Why?" Jake asked. "Marco and I were just thinking the same thing. What does he want from us?"

"I think he wants us there so that he can attack Earth," I said. "Think about it. Five humans and an Andalite defeated billions of Yeerks against all odds. Why wouldn't his first move be to take care of the humans?"

"The One is smarter than Crayak and the Yeerks," Marco agreed. "He would know not to count out humans."

"The question is, what do we do?" I said. "He'll have to go and get more Yeerks eventually. But he'll also want to take out the humans quickly."

“We’ll have to split up,” Jake said. “Some of us go to warn the Andalites guarding the Yeerk homeworld about Ax. The others go to Earth and warn the world leaders what’s happening.”

“Who goes where?” I asked.

“The Andalites guarding the Yeerk homeworld will probably only believe Menderash and me,” Jake said. “He and I will have to go there. I want Marco to come with us. If it turns into a battle with the Blade ship, or with The One’s Kelbrid, I’ll want him by my side.”

“I’m not sure the world leaders will listen to me,” I said. “Most of them forget about me pretty easily.”

Jake nodded. “Yeah, they do. But I bet you’ll be able to find Cassie pretty easily. They’ll listen to her. Take Jeanne and Santorelli with you. They need a visit home. And get them some combat morphs. If we fail on the Yeerk world, they’ll need them.”

About five minutes later, I was sitting in my quarters, wishing I had some human furniture. My door slid open. It was Santorelli. “Hey, Tobias. Got a minute?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said. “What is it?”

Santorelli was a big guy. Not too much over five and a half

feet tall, but he was beefy. He used to be in the army and he looked the part of a battle-hardened marine. He was tan, with dark eyes and hair.

He sat down hard on the floor. When he looked at me, I didn't see a guy twice my age. He looked kind of like the kid I used to be. "I guess there isn't any reason to beat around the bush. I'm scared. I told Commander Jake and he told me to talk to you about it."

This was weird. I'm not the best guy to talk to about emotions. Jake knew that. I was no substitute for Cassie, at least. Jake was the closest thing we had to a sensitive guy. Maybe Jeanne was. I didn't know her.

"What are you scared of?" I asked at last.

"Honestly? I'm scared that we're going to get into another war with the Yeerks. I'm scared that what happened to you when you were kids is going to happen to me. But most of all, I'm scared that they'll put one of those slugs in my head again."

"You were a Controller?" I asked. I didn't know that. I hadn't exactly been outgoing with the new recruits.

"Yeah. For about two years. After Desert Storm, I retired from the regular army to work security at an air base called

Zone 91. The Yeerks took me as part of their plan to find out what we had there. When that project fell through, I got transferred to Visser Six's security detail."

"You worked security for a Visser?"

"Yeah. I was a top army sniper. A skill that comes in handy when you're a bodyguard. Visser Six liked to have human bodyguards. It made us seem less threatening, which made us all the more dangerous."

"No doubt. But I can't help but wish you had been bad at your job."

He laughed. "It would have made my life a lot easier. I was finally freed when the Yeerks were defeated. It's funny. I joined Commander Jake's program for a chance to get payback. But now I'm terrified. I don't want to be a Controller again."

I was silent for a few moments. Santorelli said, "Look, I know you're not one of those touchy-feely guys. That's fine. I came here to ask you a favor."

"What?" I asked.

"If it looks like they're about to capture me, I want you to kill me." He said it calmly. Professionally.

"I promise," I said.

“The Commander said you would. The others, Jake, Marco, Jeanne, they’d try to save me. Maybe they’d succeed, I don’t know. But I don’t want to live another second with one of those things in me. You’re the only one on this ship cold enough. Well, maybe Menderash.”

“I’m sure he’ll warm right up if you give him some sugar.” Then, I got an idea. “Grab a bag of M&Ms and follow me. I’ll show you something hilarious. We just need to find Menderash.”

CHAPTER 11

It took us months to get back home. During the long ride back to our galaxy, I got to know Santorelli better. We traded war stories and talked about Earth.

We were sitting in what passed for the ship's lounge when he told me about his family. The lounge was really just an area behind the cockpit with a few couches. It was where we usually ate or just relaxed when we didn't want to be alone. I didn't spend a lot of time in the lounge.

“My parents were both military. They met in Korea. My father was a soldier and my mom was a nurse. He got wounded and she took care of him. He got discharged about the same time that her tour ended. When they got back home, things just sort of happened from there.”

I told him, “My father was an Andalite. My mother was a Skrit Na prisoner. I don't know what exactly happened, but he ended up having to leave her to fight the Yeerks.”

Santorelli smiled, “Yeah, Prince Elfangor. I heard about that. The Andalite government wanted to keep it quiet, but humans always have a way of finding out things they shouldn't.”

“It’s a good thing we do. Otherwise, the Yeerks would have won,” I pointed out. “What else about your family? Did you have any siblings?”

“Yeah, a sister. The Yeerks took her too. She died when the Yeerk pool exploded.” He said it calmly and without accusation, even though it was we Animorphs who destroyed the Yeerk pool and killed her.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“No, you’re not. I don’t hold it against you, though. It was war. And a nasty one at that. You did what you had to do. I’d have done the same thing.”

I don’t know why, but that was good to hear. I guess that I had been worried that I stopped feeling remorse for the cold things we had done. It made me feel a little better to learn that someone else would have done the same thing.

“What happened to your parents?” I asked.

“Both died. Cancer got my mother thirteen years ago. The Yeerks killed my father. They didn’t want one of Visser Six’s bodyguards to have a chance of host rebellion, so they took away what I cared about.”

“Why didn’t they just infest him?” I asked. It wasn’t like Yeerks to kill a good host.

“He was a cripple. Shrapnel from a Korean grenade tore up his leg.”

“My grandfather was in Vietnam,” I said. I didn’t think he would want to keep talking about his murdered family.

“Yeah? I hope you mean on your mother’s side.”

“Yeah. Weird thing was, his brother-in-law was there, too. He was a Russian agent advising the Vietcong.”

“I thought you looked a little Russian,” Santorelli pointed out. “Anyone from that side of the family still alive?”

“Well, my mother was, last I heard,” I said. “My great uncle, the guy from Vietnam, is still alive. I visited him once. He’s a cool guy.”

“You visited him? I heard you’d been living in the woods for the past three years.”

“Not exactly. I was there for the first year after the war. Then, one day, my mother showed up and decided she’d had enough of my moping. We went and visited the Andalite homeland. She stayed there. I checked out my human relatives. Then I went back to the woods.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Santorelli told me. “I don’t like the thought of someone like you wasting three years of his life doing nothing in the woods.”

“I’m not that hopeless,” I smiled. I noticed Jeanne standing behind him then. I still wasn’t used to weak human eyes. I was accustomed to the laser-like vision of the hawk. “Something we can help you with?”

“Commander Jake has just told me that you will be taking Santorelli and me to Earth. I was wondering what we are going to do when we get there.”

I shrugged. “First, we’ll have to find Cassie. She’s the only one with any credibility. If there’s going to be a second invasion, we want Earth to be ready.”

“I see. There is something else I wanted to talk to you about,” she said, looking at Santorelli.

“I think I’ll go and see how Menderash is doing,” Santorelli said. He got up and left. Jeanne sat down.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked. This was the most I had ever said to her. We had been on this ship for a long time, but I hadn’t spoken much with anyone other than Jake or Santorelli. Marco and I never had much in common, and I didn’t see any reason to talk to Jeanne or Menderash.

Jeanne was small, with dark hair and green eyes. She didn’t look a thing like Rachel, but she acted a lot like her. That was one of the main reasons I avoided her. That, plus the

fact that she was French.

“I will be blunt. I have read the book that Commander Jake wrote about the war. I am worried about how you will react to a new Yeerk invasion.”

“You don’t trust me?” I said. “Let me tell you a little secret. That first war wasn’t just bad. It was what hell wants to be when it grows up. Hell has posters of that war on its bedroom wall. Hell made that war autograph its t-shirt. If I didn’t snap then, I’ll make it through this one.”

“Are you so sure? Back then you had Prince Aximili and Rachel to help you get through it. Now, who do you have?”

“I have the same person who got me through the rest of my life. Me. I can handle anything on my own. I always have in the past. If you don’t trust me, that’s fine. Just as long as you follow orders. I didn’t always trust Jake and I haven’t for years. But I do as I’m told because that’s how things get done.”

“Hmmm,” she murmured. “Jake’s book said you were quiet and polite.”

“Yeah, well, that ship sailed a long time ago.”

“That is fine. I think I like this version better.”

“Now you sound like the Drode.”

“I never had any respect for quiet men,” she muttered. “If you are too afraid to speak your opinion, you don’t deserve to have one.”

“Maybe it isn’t fear that holds them back. Maybe it’s brains,” I said.

I guess she had nothing to say after that. Instead, she asked, “Will you be taking us to get some combat morphs?”

“Probably. If the Yeerks are coming back to earth, we’ll need all the warriors we can get. Why? What do you want to morph?”

“Something with power. Maybe a leopard. I always liked leopards.”

“Not a bad choice. I know Jake favors the big cats. If you want real power, though, you should go with something bigger. These Kelbrid are probably even tougher than Hork-bajir. It’ll take more than a leopard to stop them.”

“Oh? You fought many battles as a two-foot-tall bird,” she pointed out.

“That’s different. Birds rule. Nothing beats a bird. Maybe I’ll get an ostrich morph. They’re big birds.”

“An ostrich? And you laugh at me for wanting to morph a leopard? A leopard would destroy an ostrich!”

“In your dreams. Nothing beats a bird.”

“Ostriches can’t even fly. They’re hardly birds.”

I laughed. “You’ve never seen an ostrich fight.”

“And you have?” she asked.

“Well, I can imagine it,” I admitted.

“You’ve never even seen a live ostrich, have you?”

“Me? I haven’t even seen a dead one.”

“And you’re telling me that an ostrich, which you’ve never seen, is better than a leopard?”

“We’ll have to find out when we get to Earth,” I said.

“Ostrich versus leopard. That should be on T.V.”

CHAPTER 12

The ship finally reached our sector of the galaxy a few days later. It took another couple of weeks to reach the Yeerk homeworld. As we neared the planet, the commander of the Andalite blockade contacted our ship.

<This is Captain Tralik-Drashneth-Finarith of the Andalite fleet. Identify yourself or you will be destroyed.>

“They don’t beat around the bush, do they?” Marco laughed. “These guys haven’t changed a bit.”

Jake smiled too. Then he responded. “This is Jake.” he gave his last name. “We have important information regarding Prince Aximili-Esgarrouth-Ishthil.”

<Jake as in Jake the Animorph?> came the stunned reply. You would have thought Jake was the Ellimist for the way this guy’s voice sounded.

“Yeah, that Jake.”

<You are flying a Yeerk ship that was reported stolen many Earth months ago,> Tralik pointed out.

“They’re everyone’s months,” Marco muttered. “Jake, tell him they’re everyone’s months.”

“Yeah, we know the ship’s stolen,” Jake told him. “We

borrowed it. Now let us dock. You and I need to have a talk.”

<Of course, sir. Whatever you say. You are cleared for docking. Please proceed.> He sounded really excited. Then again, meeting the leader of the Animorphs was probably the biggest moment of his life.

Jake turned to me. “When we get there, we’ll arrange transportation to Earth. Remember: find Cassie, then look for evidence of an invasion.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that,” I said. “Good luck with the Andalites. I almost forgot how...prickly they could be.”

“Prickly?” Marco asked. “That’s probably the stick rammed up their species’ collective —”

“Docking now,” Menderash interrupted.

On the Andalite Dome ship, we were greeted as heroes. There had been all sorts of rumors about the disappearance of Jake and Marco. Everything from alien abduction to kidnapping, to another war was said to have happened. To find the galaxy’s favorite celebrities safe and sound was more than they could have hoped for.

While Jake, Marco, and Menderash briefed Tralik, Jeanne, Santorelli, and I toured the ship. It didn’t take long for me to get out of the hallways of the command structure and out into

the dome itself.

Dome ships are the pride of the Andalite fleet. They're really just a giant circular dome on top of a long stick. The stick was the command bridge with weapons, engines, and stuff like that. The dome was the impressive part.

The floor of the dome was covered in different types of grass from the Andalites' home world. There were trees, bushes, and even streams. Andalites were grazers who fed by absorbing nutrients through their hooves. The dome allowed them to feed.

I saw a pair of young Andalites practicing their tail-fighting. Andalites are strange by human standards. Their lower body is like a deer's. They have a humanoid torso with arms and a head where you'd expect them to be. They have two eyes where humans have them, plus two more on stalks on top of their heads. They have no mouths. Their whole bodies are covered in blue-green fur. And at the end of their lower body, they have a tail.

The tail is an amazing thing. An Andalite's tail is faster than the human eye can see. And strong, too. An Andalite could cut off your head and send it rolling on the ground before you had time to wonder where your head went.

It was odd to see young Andalites here. This was no rookie mission. If anything was going to happen here, it was serious business. No place for *arisths*, warriors in training.

Then again, Ax had been an *aristh* when he came to earth. He had been allowed to come along because his brother, Elfangor, was a great hero. These Andalites must have been the same way.

“Hey,” I called.

The two Andalites broke off and bowed to me. <Can we help you, human?> one asked.

I recognized him. His name was Elfangor-Semitur-Trilum. Alloran-Semitur-Corrass was his grandfather. Alloran was the only Andalite ever captured by a Yeerk. That Yeerk happened to be Visser Three, our greatest enemy. It was Visser Three who killed Elfangor and nearly killed the rest of us as well. His son named his own child named after Elfangor, the only Andalite with the courage to try to free his father.

I didn’t recognize the other Andalite. And of course, Elfangor didn’t recognize me. He had never seen me in my human morph. My human body. “You don’t recognize me,” I told Elfangor.

<Should I?> he asked.

“It’s fine. I had a lot more feathers last time we met,” I smiled.

<Tobias?> he asked after a pause.

“Yeah. I’ve had a little work done,” I told him. “How’s Loren?” Loren was my mother.

<She is well. She enjoys our homeworld very much. She is well liked and we enjoy her as well. We have even permitted her to acquire an Andalite morph.>

“That’s good,” I said. “Who’s your friend?”

<Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor,> Elfangor answered. <Your brother.>

“Brother? I don’t have a brother.”

It was Alloran who answered me. <I was put into hiding lest the Yeerks find me. No one but my father knew where I was. With the destruction of the Yeerks, I have been put back into Andalite society.>

“Why didn’t someone tell me?” I demanded.

<It was at my mother’s request. She...she was not a supporter of Andalite-human relations. She did not want me to meet my half-brother.>

“Who is your mother? Anyone I’ve heard of?”

<She was a scientist at the Academy named Enril-

Natarran-Ithnils. I doubt you have heard of her.>

I hadn't. At least I knew who these two were related to that they were allowed to be this close to the Yeerk homeworld.

"So, you're my brother?" I said. "Then we have some catching up to do. Did you ever see Elfangor?"

<He used to visit me when he could. It was always dangerous because of the secrecy, but it was worth it. He used to talk to me about the world. About the war. He taught me about honor and duty. Loyalty and sacrifice. Like the sacrifice he made for me.>

"For both of us. I only saw him once," I said. "It was just before he died. I didn't know who he was then. I don't know if he knew who I was either. He probably suspected, though."

<Would you like to hear some of the stories he told me?>
Alloran asked. I had some time to kill. Yes, yes I would.

CHAPTER 13

It took us three days to reach Earth. That was pretty fast, considering that the last time I had been waiting for someone to make the journey, it had taken three years.

I spent the time going over maps of the places where Cassie would probably be. She worked as some sort of nature conservationist. She was always out in the wilderness, saving some endangered tree frog or whatever.

Our pilot hadn't been told who we were. It was better that way. If the Yeerks had beaten us here, they would probably have some way to monitor our communications. We didn't want them to know we were on to them.

We made it planetside without incident. I had the pilot put us down at the airfield nearest to the Gardens. The Gardens was a big amusement park and zoo. It was where we had acquired most of our deadliest morphs. Although finding Cassie was important, we never knew what was going to happen. It never hurt to be prepared.

Getting in would not be as easy. We had just got off from months of space travel. We didn't have any money. We could morph to flies and hide on someone, but we wanted to avoid

that if we could. Getting demorphed would be a problem. Morphing was a crime now.

Near the end of the war, the Yeerks had gained the power to morph. There were a lot of hosts still walking around with that ability. To avoid potential complications, morphing was made illegal. The punishment varied according to what you morphed. Flies were a misdemeanor, but we still wanted to avoid that.

“How can we get in?” I wondered out loud, looking at the front gate.

Jeanne held up a wallet. “Enough here,” she said.

“Where did you get that?” I asked.

“Someone dropped it,” she said. I could hear the lie in her voice.

“You’re a pickpocket,” I accused.

She just smiled. “A girl has to make a living,” she said.

I shrugged. “Just make sure to drop it onto the ground when we’re done,” I told her. It was easy enough to get in after that.

The zoo was much more heavily guarded than it had been in my days as an Animorph. I guess that with the morphing power floating around, a tiger was as good as a loaded gun.

“I have an idea,” I told Santorelli and Jeanne. “Just cover me while I morph.” I shed my outer cloths until I was wearing only the skin tight morphing clothing that I always wore beneath my regular clothing.

When you morph, you can only morph something skintight. We have learned to do more, especially in the years since the Andalites came to earth, but skintight was the easiest. And still, through all the years, no one had figured out to morph shoes.

I started to change. I grew to about seven feet tall. There was an itchiness as my bones stretched, but I had gotten used to that long time ago. Just like I got used to the way I grew a foot in a few seconds.

My feet turned into the tyrannosaurus feet of my morph. My skin turned into leathery armor, a shade of green so dark it was almost black. My face erupted into a hard beak-like mouth. My bones thickened to the consistency of concrete. Muscles piled up on muscles all over my body. My neck turned into one long snaky muscle. A long, muscular tail came out of the base of my spine, complete with stegosaurus spikes. Then came the fun part.

Blades slid out of my arms and legs. Blades at my wrists,

my elbows, my knees, and two sharp horns from my head. The blades were the key to this creature. They were the reason it had been enslaved by the Yeerks generations ago.

Finally, I felt the mind bubbling up beneath mine. There were no predatory urges. In fact, I felt like grazing. I wanted to use my blades to strip the bark from trees and then eat it with my beak. I felt the calm, passive, and easily confused mind of my morph. I felt the mind of the Hork-bajir

Hork-bajir were one of the Yeerks' first host species. They were the perfect targets. Immensely strong, naturally well armed, lightning fast, and mentally inferior. The average Hork-bajir was as smart as a human five-year-old. The Yeerks had little trouble enslaving the whole race.

Many of the Hork-bajir were free now. A great number were freed when we defeated the Yeerks here on earth. But there were many more still enslaved on the Hork-bajir homeworld. There were still a lot of Yeerks outposts there. The Andalites didn't want to go in; the humans didn't have the resources; the Hork-bajir didn't have the brains. So the Yeerks were blockaded in on the planet just like on their homeworld.

Something about that bothered me. At the time, I couldn't say what. If I had realized it sooner, maybe things would have

been different. But right then, I couldn't say why that particular thought was so important.

"A Hork-bajir?" Santorelli asked me. "You might as well be waving around an M16."

"Or a couple pounds of C4," Jeanne added.

<It isn't for combat,> I answered in thought speech.
<Morph to flies and hop on.>

I'm glad that Hork-bajir eyes aren't that great. I was able to see the two of them shrink and transform, but not very well. I lost track of them about halfway through the morph.

I knew they were done when I felt two little pinpricks on my chest. <Are we on?> Santorelli asked.

<You're on. Just keep quiet and do as I say and this will all go smoothly,> I told them. I had a plan. And it was better than a lot of other plans we had had as Animorphs. Everything should have gone smoothly. But that's the thing about being an Animorph. Things never, ever, go as planned.

CHAPTER 14

There was a high fence surrounding the Gardens. It was chain-link, with barbed wire at the top. It was maybe twenty feet high. Not a challenge for a Hork-bajir

Hork-bajir grew up in the trees. They were used to hopping from the limb of one thousand-foot tree to another on their homeworld. A twenty-foot-tall fence was nothing at all.

I leapt at the fence and grabbed part of it. My hands were already at the top, gripping just under the barbed wire.

I pulled myself over without any effort. A Hork-bajir was so amazingly strong that pulling its own weight over a fence was not an effort it even noticed. I have seen Hork-bajir grapple with lions, tigers, and bears. And come up even. Those animals would rip any human to pieces in seconds. That was how strong Hork-bajir were.

I rolled over the barbed wire. Again, my Hork-bajir body didn't notice. Their skin was like armor. I've seen it fend off bites from wolves and tigers, animals that can take down moose with a single bite. Barbed wire didn't even register.

I landed on my feet with the Hork-bajir's amazing agility. Then, I just walked into the Gardens. Hork-bajir had become

a common sight, especially in places with bright colors and shiny things. They really did have the minds of children.

I headed to the zoo. I knew where the doors that had access to the areas behind the cages were. I had been down them enough times.

The Gardens' zoo was made up of many lifelike habitats where animals were kept. Behind these habitats was a maze of doors and hallways that led to areas where the handlers could fee the animals. That was where we were going.

I saw an access door. There were no guards outside of it. That would ruin the mystique of the zoo. I could just walk right in.

The access door was locked. That was no problem. I pulled it off its hinges. This door wasn't nearly enough to keep out a determined Hork-bajir. Even a human with some time and effort could have gotten in.

There were two guards inside, of course, and with their hands on their guns. They paused when they saw me. One turned to the other. "Hork-bajir?" he said to his partner.

"Probably just got lost," his partner said. "You know how they are." I didn't give them a chance to think about it some more. I turned and started to walk away.

The thing about Hork-bajir is, they have tails. A quick jerk of said tail knocked one guard to the ground. I spun around and hit the other in the jaw with an uppercut. He dropped. I kicked the other guard lightly in the head. They wouldn't be going anywhere for a while.

I didn't want to hurt them, of course. But there was no other way to get in. A Hork-bajir was innocent enough to make them think, and strong enough to take them out without much noise.

Of course, I still got noise in my head. <What was that?> Santorelli asked. <What happened to the security guards?>

<They're taking a nap,> I told him. <Just sit tight. We'll be there soon.> My goal was one of the offices. The doors were numbered and I didn't know what animals were where. There had to be a list in some office.

I started to demorph. A Hork-bajir was sort of obvious. I didn't want to fight my way through the guards. It would be way too easy for someone to get seriously hurt. Or killed.

I decided to go fly. Now, flies are basically the most disgusting creatures on this or any planet. They eat by vomiting on food, and then sucking it back up. Their favorite foods are grease and feces. And there is nothing even slightly

attractive about a fly's body.

But they were infinitely useful as morphs. They were overlooked just about everywhere. They could go anywhere they wanted. They could land anywhere, too. And it was actually hard to get killed as a fly. They were so fast and maneuverable that they were hard to kill. I'm sure you've tried.

I shrank back to my human body. It didn't take long. Morphing used to take us about three minutes. Now, it takes me about forty-five seconds.

When the last bits of Hork-bajir had left me, I heard something. A sound I had heard before. The click of a pistol being cocked. And I heard a woman's voice say, "Now put your hands up and turn around."

CHAPTER 15

I turned to see a woman who looked familiar. She was shorter than me and maybe twice my age. She was black and wearing a white lab coat. In her hands was a typical service pistol. She might have gotten it from one of the security guards I downed.

She was wearing a name tag, but I didn't need it to know her name. "Hello, Michelle," I said with as close to a smile as I knew how to give. "It's been a while."

"Don't even think about morphing," she said. "If I see even one patch of fur I'll shoot. Get on the ground."

"You'd really arrest an Animorph?" I said. "One of your daughter's friends?"

"What are you talking about? Who are you?" she demanded. "Don't play games with me. I know the Animorphs. I don't recognize you."

"Of course not. The last time you saw me, I was a red-tailed hawk," I said.

I saw the gun waver. "Tobias?"

"Got it in one," said. "I'm glad I ran into you, actually. I have a few questions."

“So do I. Like how can you morph from Hork-bajir to human without going back to your real body,” she responded. “Not even Cassie can do that.”

There are two limitations on morphing, really. One is that you can't go from one morph to another. You have to go through your original body first. The other is far more serious.

You cannot stay in one morph for more than two hours. If you stay that long, you stay forever. That was why I was a hawk. I was trapped like that in our first mission. The Ellimist gave me back my power to morph long ago, but I stayed as a hawk until Crayak returned me to my human body.

Michelle was Cassie's mom. She was the head veterinarian at the Gardens.

I answered Michelle. “Someone gave me a little help. And I'm looking for some more. I need a list of what animals are where.”

“I can't do that,” she said. “To begin with, I'm not even sure you are Tobias. You could be anyone.”

“If I was someone else, you wouldn't be standing right now,” I answered. “I would have killed those security guards instead of just knocking them out. I would have taken their guns. And I wouldn't have come alone.”

She lowered her gun. "I can't be sure who you are. But I'm willing to give you this chance to leave now because of who you might be. I suggest you take it."

"Can't do it," I said. "I need some firepower. I could stand here and prove to you who I am. I could answer any obscure question about our Animorph missions that isn't in any history book. But I don't have time for that. I need to get some morphs and find Cassie as soon as possible."

"Why? What morphs don't you have? And why do you need Cassie?" she asked.

"I'm not alone," I told her. "I brought two of Jake's students here to acquire some morphs. I've got an urgent message for Cassie from Jake but I can't give it to anyone else."

"Where are the students?" she asked.

Jeanne and Santorelli stepped out from behind her. They had flown off of me and demorphed the instant they heard her. I was doing my best to buy them time.

"Meet Jeanne and Santorelli," I said. "They need some morphs and we're short on time."

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you," she said again. "What you're suggesting is highly illegal."

“I know. But let’s face it: I’m an Animorph. I’m above the law. No one’s going to arrest you or me. Will you help me or not.”

“The answer’s still no, Tobias,” Michelle said again. “I just can’t do it. It isn’t right. The law is for everyone, not just those who have to follow it. I can’t break the law by helping you.”

“Can you at least tell me where to find Cassie?” I asked.

“That I can do. She’s out in the valley the Hork-bajir used to live in. She’s trying to introduce Kafit birds into the ecosystem. I told her it’s dangerous and a bad idea, but she insists on trying it.”

“The valley. Got it. Thanks,” I said. “Since you won’t help us with the morphs, I guess we’ll be on our way.” I started to walk away. Jeanne and Santorelli followed.

“The exit’s the other way,” she told me.

“I’m not leaving,” I answered.

“I will stop you. This isn’t right,” she insisted.

“We both know you won’t shoot me, not even somewhere harmless,” I said.

“You’re right,” she replied. Then, I heard the crackle and hiss of a radio. And I heard her voice say, “Security. There are intruders behind the habitats. Please respond at once.”

There was no time for the others to morph. We took off running.

It was sort of like being in a fun house. There were doors everywhere and they all looked the same. I heard the pounding of footsteps behind me. “Turn here,” I said as I pulled open a door.

“Shouldn’t they lock these things?” Jeanne asked as we ducked inside.

“My father had a saying,” Santorelli answered. “When God opens a window, don’t complain.”

It was dim in the habitat. There were fake trees everywhere. They looked like jungle trees. At least, I think they looked like jungle trees. I haven’t been in many jungles in my life.

I thought about what morphs I had for this. I needed something that could see in dim light. The other Animorphs all had owl morphs. I never got one because it would have been really weird for me, as a hawk, to acquire and morph an owl. I had something better, though.

I felt my body shrink. I stopped when I was about rat-sized. My face pushed out into the typical rodent shape. My ears got bigger in relation to my body. My eyes got sharper,

though the room didn't get any brighter. My feet turned into little claws. Then came the best part.

My arms shrank first until they were just little jointed sticks of bone. Then flesh covered them. Leathery flesh filled in the gaps. Finally, I had my wings.

I felt the animal's mind surge beneath mine. It was jumpy. I didn't like the two big creatures next to me. But I could escape them. I knew the darkness. I was the darkness. Oh yes, nothing catches a bat in the dark.

I took off, fluttering my wings. I zoomed around and around. From my mouth came tiny clicks and squeals. I heard the sound but I also saw it. Sort of like an etch-a-sketch drawing of my surroundings. Echolocation. One of the hallmarks of the bat.

It took me a moment to get control of the bat. When you morph an animal, you get its instincts along with its body. They could be hard to control at first, but I had a lot of practice.

But all the practice in the world couldn't calm me down when I looked around. I fired an echolocation burst and saw Jeanne and Santorelli. And I saw what was above them, in the trees just over their heads.

<Jeanne,> I said. <Do you remember that conversation we had about the ostrich and the leopard? Well, one of them is here, and it isn't the ostrich.>

CHAPTER 16

I had a plan. It was a bad plan. A very bad plan. But we had used worse plans in the past and come out alive. Most of us.

I knew why the leopard hadn't pounced yet. It was interested in the new humans. When the other humans came in, they were probably careful. They probably brought tranquilizer guns and came in when the leopard was asleep.

It was also interested in the human who turned into a bat. Leopards are smart. Not smart enough to understand morphing, but smart enough to know that it was unusual. I was counting on that.

I landed on the ground and demorphed as fast as I could. It took me about thirty seconds. Then I went back to Hork-bajir. If I was going to mess with a leopard, I wanted some serious firepower.

There were at least five reasons why my plan was a bad one. One: Hork-bajir do not see well in darkness; leopards do. Two: This was the leopard's turf, not the Hork-bajir's. Three: The leopard had no one to protect, while I had to defend Jeanne and Santorelli. Four: I had no idea how many leopards

were in this habitat. And five, the leopard could just attack while I morphed.

I made it to Hork-bajir okay. The bad news was that I lost the leopard. I didn't know where to look. And I couldn't wait for it to come after me. If it did that, I'd be dead.

I turned and shoved a blade into the nearest tree. I pulled it out and then kicked a different one. I started shaking the trees, trying to lure the leopard out.

I heard rather than saw the big cat drop in front of me. As soon as it hit the ground, maybe even before, it lunged me with fangs wide open.

I held up an arm and felt the cat bite down. The pain! I had forgotten how much it hurt to be bitten. But I didn't miss a beat. Combat was reflexive now. I wasn't in control and neither was the Hork-bajir. It was the hawk who ruled now.

The hawk was a predator. And he understood that the leopard was the prey. The hawk knew. The hawk attacked with the strength of the Hork-bajir.

Leopards are small as far as big cats go. Smaller than tigers and lions, at least. It was difficult, but I got a hold on it. It couldn't struggle too much without getting cut to ribbons by my bladed body.

I pinned I to the ground. <Jeanne,> I said. <Acquire it.> She put a hand on the leopard and it calmed down. In order to morph an animal, you have to acquire its DNA by touching it. When you did that, it went into a sort of trance. A perfect time to make an escape.

We booked it out the door. I stayed in Hork-bajir morph. We had a rule about morphing sentient creatures like Hork-bajir We didn't do it unless it was absolutely necessary. I suppose I was breaking that rule, but I didn't really care. I was trying to prevent a second Yeerk invasion. Any price was worth it.

We ran down the hallways. We didn't stop running until we were sure we had passed the big cats. All the while, we heard security guards behind us. A few times, we even heard the click of pistols being cocked. We didn't stop.

"They'll shoot soon," Santorelli said.

"And I can't run much longer," Jeanne panted. Santorelli was in great shape. I was a Hork-bajir Jeanne was herself. She didn't have much chance of keeping up. I had been going slowly enough to keep her in sight. I was sure Santorelli was doing it too. We had to get out.

We were coming to a corner. There was a door dead ahead

of us, and ones to the right and left. <The door up ahead,> I said.

“The door on the right or the left?” Santorelli asked.

I ran flat out at full Hork-bajir speed. Hork-bajir are seven feet tall. Their big, long legs take big long steps. They can run faster than many earth animals. I used that speed and ran straight through the door.

At least, I tried. It turned out to be a big steel door. I bounced back. I turned back to see the small army of security guards massing behind us. Jeanne and Santorelli came to meet me.

“You get the guards,” Jeanne said. “I’ll get the lock.”

I didn’t stop to wonder how. I just leapt at the men. Now, a man with a gun in his hand is usually brave. But no one can be brave when a seven-foot-tall monster from outer space is jumping at you. You never want to see a Hork-bajir jump at you. You’ll have a heart attack on the spot.

Many of them dropped their guns, turned, and ran the other way. A few braver ones kept their guns on them. Then I heard Jeanne say, “Got it!” I turned and we ran through the door. The guards were shaking too badly to hit us with their shots.

We were in an open area. It was one of the outside habitats. In the distance, I could see what was probably a fence. We kept running. Then I realized: I knew this habitat.

I had been here before with Jake on one of our more disastrous missions. He had come here to acquire a certain animal. Which gave me an idea. <Santorelli,> I asked, <how do you like rhinos?>

“Remind me of my dad,” he answered. From what I knew about his father, that was probably a compliment.

<Then keep your eyes peeled. Security’s probably circling around, getting ready to cut us off when we leave the habitat. If I remember correctly, this place has thick concrete walls. Enough to stop a rhino. There’ll be only two exits. The one we used to get in and the one where people stand to look at the rhinos.>

“You got a plan?” he asked.

<We find a rhino. You acquire it. Then you two morph to flies. I morph to hawk, you get on me, and we fly out of here.>

“Sounds good.”

Up ahead was what looked like a big pile of rocks. I slowed down. With Hork-bajir eyes, I couldn’t be sure if it was a rhino or not and you do not want to scare a rhino.

Rhinos are a lot like Hork-bajir. Both are passive grazers. And both are unbelievably strong. They have bones like steel and a hide like a suite of armor. I've seen bullets hit a rhino full in the face and do nothing at all. Not even slow it down.

Santorelli walked ahead. I saw the rocks move. So it was a rhino after all. Calmly, he knelt down next to it, and put his hand on its shoulder. I couldn't tell if it got still or not. It was pretty calm to begin with.

He came back a moment later after giving the beast a pat on the head. "Not as stressful as working for Visser Six," he said to me. In a few minutes, he and Jeanne were flies. I was my old hawk self. And we were out of there.

CHAPTER 17

We ended up at Cassie's barn. It was once the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center. Cassie and her father took in injured animals from all around and healed them. It was one of the places where we got a lot of our morphs. It was also where we held most of our meetings. I was counting on the animals still being there.

Sure enough, I was bombarded by the cries of various animals as soon as I flew in through the hayloft. Birds in cages cried out. Rodents of all shapes and sizes cowered in terror. A lone wolf howled. A pair of horses whinnied loudly.

We were lucky. Cassie's dad wasn't there. I didn't want to go through the same conversation with him that I had had with his wife.

We all demorphed. "Pick a bird and let's go," I said.

"Pick a bird?" Santorelli asked. "I guess I'll go with chicken. Deep fried. Extra crispy."

"To morph," I clarified. "Hawks and eagles were our usual transit morphs. They can fly far and see everything. Not too bad in a fight either."

I saw Santorelli eying up a bald eagle. "*E pluribus Unum,*"

he whispered.

“Please, any bird but that,” I said.

“Why?” he asked.

I just shook my head. I guess he could tell by my expression that I was serious. The truth was, Rachel had a bald eagle morph. I just couldn’t take the thought of someone else having her morphs.

Santorelli stuck his hand into the cage of a Cooper’s hawk. Cooper’s are scary birds. They don’t usually eat mice and squirrels like I...like other birds do. They eat smaller birds. They capture their prey and squeeze the life out of it with their talons. Sometimes, they even drown it.

Shoving your hand into a birdcage is a bad idea. Especially when the bird inside is a Cooper. The hawk took a chunk out of his finger. Santorelli didn’t even flinch. The hawk went limp as he acquired it.

I turned to Jeanne. “Did you acquire something already?” I asked.

“Well,” she looked at the ground and clasped her hands behind her back, faking innocence. “Back when we were first given the morphing power, I *may* have acquired a hawk.”

“Yeah?” I said. “Why?”

“I remember Commander Jake’s face when he spoke about flying. He made it seem like the best thing in the world. I had to try it.”

“I won’t tell Jake. Just get morphed.” I sat down on a bale of hay and closed my eyes. I had morphed more that day than I had in years. Morphing is exhausting, both mentally and physically. I needed a moment to rest. I wasn’t sure how many more morphs I had in me.

When I opened my eyes five minutes later, I was looking at a Cooper’s hawk and...and at a red-tailed hawk. “Jeanne,” I asked, “why a red-tail?”

<It is the most popular bird in the galaxy. Everybody loves red-tails,> she said.

I sighed and then morphed my own red-tailed hawk. It was the body that I had lived in for more than six years. It was almost like I couldn’t remember a time when I wasn’t a hawk. Sometimes, I used to feel like I had always been a hawk. This morph didn’t feel like getting a new body. It felt like going home.

The first thing to change was my eyes. Everything came into focus suddenly. I could pick out individual pieces of hay on the barn floor. I could see the grain of the wood in the

barn's walls. I could see a fly on the opposite side of the barn.

Next came my ears. I heard everything in startling detail. Every sound in the barn. The breathing of the animals and the scratching of a squirrel on the roof. Nothing escaped my senses.

For one glorious moment, I was a human being with the senses of a hawk. *So this is how superman felt*, I thought. Then, I shrank.

Shrinking is sort of like falling. Except, instead of you getting closer to the ground, the ground gets closer to you, like it's rushing up to hit you. I went from being about six feet tall to two in about three seconds.

The feathers came next. They started like an intricate tattoo all over my body. Then, they exploded into three dimensions. Brown, white and red. My tail came with them.

My feet, my weak human feet, became the steely talons of the hawk. These talons had taken more lives than I could count. They were featherless so blood didn't stick to them.

Finally, finally, came my wings. My glorious wings! It felt like I had been born again. Like I had been a cripple suddenly allowed to walk. I spread my wings, flapped them a few times just to make sure they were still there, and then folded them.

I waited stupidly for a moment for the hawk mind to surface beneath my own. I felt nothing. No instincts, no urges, nothing at all. Then I realized. I had never lost these when I became human again. The hawk would always be a part of me.

I took off without any more delay. I had been tired when I started morphing. Now, back in my right body, I mean back in my hawk morph, I was alive again.

I got out of the hayloft and felt warm air billow up beneath my outstretched wings. It was a great thermal. A thermal is a pillar of warm air. You can just wait in one with your wings spread and ride up forever.

I floated there for I don't know how long. It felt so natural, so right. I had come back to Earth hours ago. I had just now come home. I was hungry, suddenly. I hadn't eaten since we had gotten here. And I could see a tasty mouse not too far below me. It was mine. So easy to swoop down, open my wings, sweep low across the ground, seize the little rodent in my talons, and dig my beak in. So easy to —

<Tobias? Can you hear me?> Santorelli asked. That brought me back we had a job to do. The fate of the world was in my talons.

<I can hear you. It's just...give me a minute,> I said I got

my bearings. I knew every detail of the land for the next hundred miles. This was my sky. My home.

I smiled in my head. I knew this place. I knew the way to get to Cassie. I flew out of the thermal and soared towards the mountains. Soon, I would find her and the Yeerks would be stopped cold.

Can you believe I was ever that stupid?

CHAPTER 18

It wasn't hard to get to the valley. Not anymore, at least. In the early days, the few free Hork-bajir lived there. The Ellimist put some sort of...magic spell over the place so that, even knowing where it was, you couldn't find it easily.

That spell was gone now. Maybe it was because the Hork-bajir no longer needed to hide. Maybe the Ellimist didn't care anymore. Maybe it had something to do with Crayak or the One. I didn't know and I didn't really care.

The valley opened before me. I had called it home for a short time. The Yeerks had figured out who we were so we fled there with our families. Not everyone made it, but those of us who did lived there with the free Hork-bajir

Now Cassie was trying to make it home to Kafit birds, a species of animal native to the Andalite homeworld. I had to agree with her mother. It was a terrible idea. But that was Cassie for you. There was a place for every creature.

I saw her long before she saw me. She was with some guy. Roger or Rupert or something if I remembered right. He was her boyfriend and partner in ecology.

I buzzed low over their heads. <Hey, Cassie,> I called.

<Something very important to tell you.>

She looked up. “Tobias? You’re back! Where’s Jake?” She shot a look at Ruben. She and Jake used to have a thing going but it fell apart near the end of the war.

Cassie was short and black, with short black hair. She was wearing her standard workboots and jeans that didn’t quite fit her. She had also brought climbing gear and a heavy backpack. I guess she hadn’t flown here.

Cassie was always the nicest person I knew. She always knew how to stop a fight without hurting anyone. The war was terrible on her. She was a pacifist by design, but she was forced to kill every day. I respect her all the more for it.

<Jake and Marco are busy with something else. There’s something important I need to tell you,> I said again. I told her in closed thought-speak. I didn’t want Rodney to hear. I landed on a tree branch near her head before I continued.

<The Yeerks may be coming back. It’s a long story so I’m only going to tell the short version. The Yeerks now... worship...a being called the One. The One was the thing that drove Crayak out of his own galaxy and into ours. Now the One controls Ax.>

Cassie tried to stay calm, but I could see the sweat that

broke out on her head. I could see the twitch of her face when I mentioned the Yeerks. At least she didn't scream or cry.

<There's more. We have reason to believe that the One is bringing the Yeerks back here to try for a second invasion. It's part of a plan to finish off Crayak. Jake and Marco are guarding the Yeerk homeworld to make sure the One doesn't get more Yeerks. We need you to warn the world leaders of the possibility of a new invasion.>

"Why me?" she asked.

<Jake and Marco are busy, and no one will believe me. They wouldn't know who I am. We need your credibility.>

Cassie sat down on the ground and put her head in her hands. "I can't go through another one, Tobias," she said quietly.

<I know. I'm not asking you to. I just need you to tell everyone what could be happening again. If Jake and Marco fail, the Yeerks will come here. But we'll have allies this time. It will be different.>

"What are Jake and Marco doing?" she asked.

<We think the One might use Ax to get Yeerks from the Yeerk homeworld so he can start a new invasion.>

"Why would he use the Yeerk homeworld?" she asked.

“There are plenty of other places to get Yeerks. Easier places, too.”

<Like where?> I demanded.

“The Hork-bajir homeworld, the Taxxon planet, and even here on earth. We have hundreds of specialized prisons just for Yeerks. There are thousands of Yeerks right here on earth.”

It hit me like a brick. <And no one knows what happened to Ax. He could just walk into any Yeerk prison on Earth, take a truckload of Yeerks, and be on his way without trying to stop him. Meanwhile, Jake and Marco are waiting for something that isn’t going to happen, and I’m off in this valley talking to you.>

“Is the One really that clever?” she asked.

<He tricked Crayak into following us into his own section of this galaxy. And he’s smart enough to know what a threat we can be. Yes, yes he is that clever.>

“So what do we do? Where will he go?”

I thought about it for a few moments. Then I realized. <Sun Tzu once said, “Know your enemy.”>

Cassie took that in. “No,” she whispered. “No, not that. Anything but that.”

Rupert was starting to look alarmed. He looked from me to

Cassie. He could only hear her end of the conversation, but it was enough to scare him.

I nodded my head. It must have been an odd thing to watch a bird do. <Yes, I'm afraid so. What Yeerk would be a better recruit to fight us?>

"But not even Ax would be allowed there," Cassie said. "They wouldn't even let me in the few times I tried."

<Maybe they won't just let him walk in, but I don't think they could stop him.>

By this time, Santorelli had landed. Jeanne was still circling above our heads, keeping an eye out. I appreciated that. Jake must have taught them our usual procedure. Jeanne was doing my job.

"Who's this?" Cassie asked, looking at Santorelli. She wanted to change the subject.

<His name's Santorelli,> I said. <One of Jake's new recruits. The other's above us, doing my job.>

"I think I see him," Cassie answered.

<Her.>

"Kind of hard to tell by the morph," she pointed out. "Is that another red-tail?"

<It's the cool thing to do,> I told her. I called up to Jeanne.

<How are things up there?>

<Not bad,> she answered. <You're clear except for that Andalite.>

“Andalite? What Andalite?” Cassie asked.

<You didn't bring an Andalite?> I asked her.

<There's an Andalite a few thousand yards deeper into the valley, behind the trees. He is coming your way, actually,> Jeanne told us.

I looked at Cassie. Neither of us said what we were thinking. But Santorelli did. <Do you think it's Prince Aximili?> he asked.

“I hope not,” Cassie said. She turned to Robert. “Try to get somewhere safe,” she told him. “If this is what we're afraid it is, you don't want to be here.”

Santorelli and I demorphed. I started to morph to Horkbajir I didn't want to be unprepared. Santorelli went rhino.

Cassie started to speak. “Tobias, how —”

“Crayak,” I answered. <I'll explain later,> I said as my thought-speak kicked in.

Cassie stayed human. She could morph to something dangerous in a matter of seconds. There was no need to alarm this Andalite if he was just an innocent Andalite tourist.

Of course, in the long Animorph tradition, our luck wasn't that good.

CHAPTER 19

Prince Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill. He was once an Animorph and my closest friend. My father's brother, too. He and I fought side-by-side more times than I can count. And now the One had him.

He looked like any other Andalite, I guess. I had gotten good at telling them apart, and I knew Ax better than anyone. I would recognize him in any crowd.

He was older now than he was last time we met in person. He was taller, and his tail had gotten longer, stronger. He was the spitting image of his brother, the late Prince Elfangor.

Then the One did his evil magic. A red slit appeared in Ax's mouthless face. It widened into a mouth with red, pointed teeth. He smiled at me. "Tobias," he said. "It has been a long time." He noticed Cassie. "And Cassie. I have not seen you in years."

<Drop the act,> I said. <We know who and what you are.>

"Yet I do not feel your fear. Why are you not afraid, Tobias?"

<The worst you can do is kill me,> I said. <My life is the only thing I have left. What else can you take from me?>

“I can take your planet, your friends, your home,” the One answered calmly. “I can take this galaxy from those two fools, Ellimist and Crayak. I can enslave your people, the Hork-bajir and the Andalites. I can take everything from you.”

<Maybe. But I won’t be around to see any of that.>

“And why is that?” he asked.

<Because to do that, you’ll have to kill me first. Do you think Ax is a match for me?> I demanded. <Come and find out.>

“Ah, but that is beneath me,” the One sighed. “No, no, I have others to do that for me.”

I don’t know where they came from. One second it was just Cassie, Santorelli, Ax, and me in the valley. Jeanne was circling above. I had no idea where Ricky went. Then, we were surrounded.

They were about as tall as Hork-bajir. Their legs were like a cat’s legs, bent back and with clawed paws at the end. They had humanoid chests. Their arms were strange, though. One ended in a hand with at least ten fingers; I didn’t really have time to count them all. The other was a massively muscled arm. There was no hand there, only a single, foot-long blade.

Their heads were the strangest part. They reminded me of

alligators. They had long snouts with mouths full of teeth. Cats ears, swept back against the sides of their heads, twitched constantly. Short whiskers, like a catfish's, dangled from their snouts. They had no eyes.

All of their body was covered with black flesh. They stood on their hind legs, but I could see that they were meant to be on all fours.

<What are these things?> Santorelli asked me. He had finished his morph.

“Kelbrid,” the One answered. “My loyal warriors. Rather stupid on their own. But with a Yeerk in their heads, quite formidable.”

<Wonder how they stack up against Hork-bajir,> I said, looking at my bladed arms.

“You will find them superior,” the One smiled. “Hork-bajir are naturally peaceful. They lack the killer instinct to be truly formidable. But the Kelbrid are natural super-predators. They possess that drive that Hork-bajir lack.”

<Yeah? Well I'm in here too,> I said. <And I bet my killer instincts are more honed than your Yeerks'.>

“That may be. But you are far outnumbered.”

<That's never stopped us before,> I said. <I'm sure you

remember.>

“I have no time to reminisce. There are places I must be. Matters to which I must attend. Goodbye, my *shorm*. Goodbye, Tobias. Say hello to Rachel for me.”

That last comment did it. I don't know what came over me. I guess I just snapped. Here I was, standing before the Yeerks, the creatures who had taken everything from me. Now, I was going to take everything from them. The time I spent as a hawk that day reawakened my predator side. I would not be their prey. Never again would I be prey.

I leapt at the nearest Kelbrid. I guess this surprised the Yeerk. The Kelbrid mind was used to creatures fleeing. The Yeerk didn't know how to react. My elbow blade bit deep into his back.

I thrust my knee blade into his chest. The Kelbrid toppled before it had a chance to react. I turned to face the others. A rhino and a wolf came and stood next to me. I didn't know where Jeanne was. I didn't care.

<Tobias,> I heard Cassie's voice say, <we have to run. We can't stand and fight.>

<I'll never run. Never again!> I yelled. I ran at another Kelbrid. By this time, the others had decided that it was time

to attack. They dropped to all fours. The blade on the back of their larger arm retracted. They balled their other hand into a fist and ran.

That was a mistake. I killed my speed and waited. One came close and lunged at me. It tried to bite me with its alligator mouth. I kicked it in the face with my Hork-bajir talon. It dropped.

A blow to my back sent me sprawling. I felt something warm flow down my back. Blood. My own. I briefly wondered why I didn't feel any pain. Then I was back on my feet.

Another Kelbrid knocked me to my side as the one who had hit me from behind closed in. I could see my own blood on his bladed arm.

I swept my tail back and forth. I cut up their legs pretty badly. They paused. I kicked one in the stomach and he fell. The other jumped on top of me. His bladed arm swung down at my head.

I blocked it with my wristblade. Then I jerked my shake-like head forward. My horns went into his chest. He dropped on top of me. Dead weight.

I pushed him off and stood up. I saw a wolf backed into a

corner by four Kelbrid. I saw a rhino gore a Kelbrid only to be knocked to the ground by another one. The Kelbrid shoved his bladed arm deep into the rhino's side. I wondered why Santorelli didn't cry out. He was tough, but no one was that tough.

More Kelbrid were coming at me. They were everywhere. Three charged at me on all fours. I jumped over them. I landed on the chest of another and dug my talons in. He screamed. It was a satisfying sound. I turned and made for Cassie.

She didn't look good. Blood was all over her. Her fur was matted down with it and she was moving slowly. She was hurt badly. Again, I wondered why she didn't scream.

I stumbled suddenly. I didn't know why. I saw Cassie waver and fall to the ground. From behind me, I faintly heard something large fall to the ground too.

<It's a poison,> I heard Cassie say. <The stingers have poison in them. That's why we can't feel our wounds. It's an anesthetic.>

<Fascinating,> I said. Already my mind was going foggy. I couldn't see clearly. I couldn't think straight. I couldn't hear as well either.

I struggled to my feet. Cassie did the same. <We have to

run,> she said to me.

<I...> I couldn't decide. The Yeerks were here again. And it felt so good to fight. I had forgotten. Had I once hated this? Impossible. This was justice. This was right.

<You and Santorelli run. Get far enough away to demorph. Go to hawk and get back to the barn. I'll meet you there. I'll hold them off.>

<Tobias,> she said in a warning tone.

<Go! I have a plan,> I lied.

She took off. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Santorelli get up and run off into the trees. A few Kelbrid pursued him. Some followed Cassie. Most stayed with me.

<You Kelbrid might be tough in your own galaxy,> I said to them, <but I'm from the mean streets of Earth. You don't have a chance.>

CHAPTER 20

I knew I didn't have much of a chance. I was injured, perhaps fatally; I couldn't know. I could barely see and hear. My arms felt weak and slow. And there were about twelve Kelbrid surrounding me. But I wasn't alone.

I saw the movement in the tree above me. Gold with black spots. A clever face. Long claws and sharp teeth. A leopard. Jeanne.

I had expected her to be there. I knew she was smart enough to use her leopard morph to get the jump on the Kelbrid.

In the moment before she dropped, I realized the mistake. The Kelbrid had no eyes. They didn't rely on sight to find their prey. And they probably used more than hearing. The whiskers were some sort of sensory organ like a bug's antenna or a snake's tongue. They knew where Jeanne was. And they were baiting her.

She dropped onto the nearest Kelbrid. At least, she tried. The Kelbrid jerked his stinger up with incredible speed. She landed right on it. Skewered like a leopard-kabob.

The Kelbrid carelessly dropped her and came for me. They

all did now. I had nowhere to go and no more allies.

They took their time, tightening the ring. All they had to do was wait, really. I didn't know if their poison was deadly or just sickening, but it would finish me off sooner or later. Already I could barely stand. Real Kelbrid probably would have rushed me, eager for the fight. The Yeerks knew who I was and weren't about to take that chance.

<Jeanne,> I said. <Jeanne, if you can hear me, you need to demorph. He cut your stomach open. I'm going to get us out of here, but you have to demorph.>

I forced my mind to focus. I didn't have much more energy. The morphs of the day were catching up with me.

I leapt and grabbed a tree branch above me. I swung myself over the heads of the Kelbrid Controllers. I landed near Jeanne. She was shrinking as I watched. Not quickly, but at least she was demorphing.

I scooped her up. I could barely lifter her. She shrank, but I got weaker too. The poison and the exhaustion were growing as my rage shrank. I was literally sick and tired. But I had a job to do.

I jumped as high as I could and landed in a tree. I stumbled my way through the boughs of the forest trees. Hork-bajir

were specially designed just for this. It was difficult with my ailments, but I managed.

The Kelbrid followed below me. I couldn't outrun them, but I didn't intend to. Soon, Jeanne was her human self again. As long as we stayed in the trees, they couldn't get us. The Kelbrid may have been super predators, but they couldn't climb. I was glad.

I shrank back to my human form. My hearing returned, but that was it. The exhaustion blurred my eyes and dimmed my brain. I could barely lift my arms. I wouldn't be able to morph again.

"Tobias," Jeanne said. She had already started morphing to hawk. "Tobias, you must morph. We have to escape."

"Yeah, I'll, you know..." I said. I tried to focus on the hawk, but I couldn't. It was too much. Too many morphs too quickly. I couldn't make it and I knew it.

I felt strong arms lift me up. I looked around and realized it was a Hork-bajir

<Just rest, Tobias,> I heard Cassie's voice say. <We'll get you to safety. Just rest for now.>

I don't know how long she carried me or how far. Truth be told, I fell asleep. I woke up in the middle of nowhere,

surrounded by pine trees. Jeanne and Santorelli were sitting on the ground, watching me. I didn't see Cassie.

"I think I'm ready to morph again," I said. I was shocked by how weak my voice sounded.

"You need to rest," Jeanne argued.

"No time. We have to get to...to..." I couldn't think of the place.

<Alcatraz,> Cassie's thought-speak voice said. I guess she was up in bird morph, keeping watch. <We have to get there before the One does.>

"Why?" Santorelli asked. "What's at Alcatraz?"

"Not what. Who," I answered. "Sun Tzu: know your enemy."

"I don't get it," he admitted. "Who's at Alcatraz that the One wants?"

<Our greatest enemy,> Cassie answered. <The Yeerk named Esplin 9466. The one we always called Visser Three. The One wants to free Visser Three.>

CHAPTER 21

I could barely morph. I knew I wouldn't be able to fly to Alcatraz. So I morphed to flea. Fleas are tiny little bugs. They don't do much except for drinking blood. The perfect morph for a nap.

I rode on Cassie. The others flew on their own. Again, I fell asleep. Cassie woke me when we were in sight of the island.

Alcatraz was once the most secure prison in America. It was shut down years ago. But it was reopened and redesigned to keep in people like Visser Three and morph-capable offenders. It was guarded 24/7 by veteran Andalite warriors. No one was allowed in or out.

There was nowhere to demorph. We couldn't land on the island because of the force fields that covered it. They would fry us instantly. And Jeanne and Santorelli were too inexperienced to have them demorph in the ocean.

<How do we get in?> I asked.

<We land on the island, demorph, go to battle morphs, and break in,> Cassie said. She didn't sound excited about it.

<We can't land on the island,> I said. <The force fields

will fry us.>

<You'll understand when you have eyes,> she said. I guess we landed because Cassie told me I could demorph. I did and then wished I hadn't.

Bodies. Dozens of them. Dead Andalites lay sprawled on the ground, their bodies twisted at weird angles. I didn't see any blood or wounds. This wasn't the Kelbrid. Was this a new enemy or was it the power of the One himself?

We went to battle morphs. Santorelli as a rhino. Jeanne as a leopard. I was a Hork-bajir Cassie turned into a polar bear.

<Not your usual style,> I remarked.

<The wolf didn't have a chance against the Kelbrid. I need something bigger. Something meaner.>

<I approve,> Jeanne said. <The polar bear is powerful. Maybe I should get one.>

<Getting this one was no picnic,> Cassie told her. <We ended up at the North Pole. This morph was what kept us alive.>

<Keep it quiet,> I said. I was tired and not looking forward to this. I didn't want any unnecessary chatter. It wasn't so we wouldn't be heard; we were using private thought speech. I just didn't want to hear them talking. I was tired, cranky, and

needed some quiet.

We walked down the dark, deserted halls of Alcatraz, hearing and seeing nothing. We relied on Cassie and Jeanne to give us information. Hork-bajir and rhinos have terrible eyesight.

We walked for what seemed like hours until Jeanne finally heard it. The steady clop-clop-clop of Andalite hooves on the floor.

We rushed ahead. Polar bears and rhinoceroses are not stealthy by any means. We charged forward and rounded a corner into the heart of the prison.

He was there. The One in Ax's body. And he was holding a lavender colored cube that was the prison of Visser Three.

The One turned a stalk-eye to look at us. "You all survived the Kelbrid. That is impressive. I was right to be wary of you."

<Ah, my old friends,> I heard the Visser's voice say. <What kept you? You never visit anymore. Solitary confinement is so tedious. I believe your people mean to make me die of boredom.>

He was confident now. Arrogant. The Visser we knew. <Visser,> I began.

<Please, call me Esplin. The Vissers were a product of the

Yeerk Empire. That empire is no more. We are all servants of the One now.>

<You serve no one but yourself,> I pointed out.

<Ah, Tobias. You know me so well. But the One was kind enough to place me in command of the conquering of Earth. So nice of him, don't you think? Not many would give me a second chance such as this.>

<A bad move,> I told the One. <He was only dangerous with his Andalite host.>

“So true,” the One smiled. Then he raised the box to his head. I knew what he was about to do. And I couldn't let it happen. Visser Three had murdered Elfangor, Ax's brother. Ax would rather me kill him than let that slug touch him.

I lunged at the One. And stopped in midair. I couldn't move. It was like the air was solid and had grabbed me. The One smiled.

“Did you really think you could stop me?” he asked. “I would have preferred not to dirty my hands with you, but since you insist on being a nuisance, I have no choice.” He raised his tail slowly.

“Now, now,” came the Drobe's voice. “Someone is not playing fair.” Crayak's servant appeared next to Ax. So did a

second creature. Its skin was an electric blue. It was human shaped, with white spots where its eyes should have been. In an instant, I knew what it was; who it was. The Ellimist.

The One turned. “Ah, Crayak. And the Ellimist if I am not mistaken. I am so glad to see how you have grown. It makes me proud.”

The Ellimist answered. When he spoke, it was not with a voice, but with a sound that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once. WE CANNOT ALLOW YOU USE YOUR POWER THIS WAY.

“Ah, but can you stop me?” the One posed.

“My master would fight you,” the Drode said. “The war would surely destroy everything in this galaxy. Nobody wants that.”

“What do you suggest?” the One said. “You would prefer that I just give up and go home. That will not happen.”

THERE IS A SOLUTION, the Ellimist said. YOU HAVE YOUR SERVANTS. WE HAVE OURS. IF YOU USE YOUR POWER DIRECTLY, SO WILL WE. IF YOU USE ONLY YOUR SERVANTS, THE YEERKS, THE KELBRID, AND THE LIKE, WE WILL NOT INTERFERE. THE CHOICE IS YOURS.

The One thought about that. Finally, he said, “I will agree to your terms if you agree to mine. You must keep our war secret. The galaxy must not know what is happening. If they learn of this, I will not hold back my power.”

He looked at me. “I will see you soon, Tobias.” With a laugh, he disappeared. So did the box with Visser Three. Then, so did I.

CHAPTER 22

I hit the ground in Cassie's barn. I was human. So were the others. Me, Santorelli, Cassie, Jeanne...and Jake and Marco.

Marco looked around. "Let me guess: Crayak."

"Maybe the Ellimist," I told him. "We've got a situation here."

"I know," Jake said. "Nothing happened at the Yeerk homeworld, but we got a distress signal from the Hork-bajir world. When we got there..."

"Everything was gone," Marco said. "All of the ships were still in orbit, but the crew was dead. Thousands of Andalites all killed without a mark on them."

"The One," I answered.

"We figured," Jake said. "We were flying back to Earth and we popped up here. We think the One liberated a lot of Yeerks from that planet."

"He also liberated Visser Three from this one," I said. "I think he gave Ax to him."

"What are we supposed to do against a guy with the power to wipe out an entire Andalite fleet?" Marco wondered.

"The Ellimist and Crayak are keeping him in check. We

only have to worry about the Yeerks and Kelbrid.”

“You’ve seen the Kelbrid?” Jake asked.

“I’ll tell you about it tomorrow. Right now, I need to take a nap.”

“Right now, we need to warn the world what’s happening,” Jake said.

“We can’t,” I told him. “The One says that if we tell what’s happening here, he won’t hold back. And Crayak would rather kill us all than see us end up in the One’s hands.”

Marco stood up. “It sounds to me like we’re talking about another Yeerk invasion here,” he said. “Another war like the first one.”

“Sounds like it,” Jake agreed. “Animorphs version two-point-oh. The rematch of the millennium. If you want out, say so now.”

Jake looked at Marco first. Marco smiled. “Jake, man, you know me. I’ll complain the whole time, say that this is suicide and that we should just go home, and worry about ourselves. But I’ll always be with you. To the death.” He gulped on that last sentence. “I must be insane.”

Jake turned to Cassie. She sighed. “Jake, you know me. I don’t want to do this. But I’ll do it. At least, until you find

someone else who can. I can't just sit by and let the Yeerks invade again. You know that."

He turned to Santorelli. "I know I'm just a rookie, Commander Jake, but you can count on me. When duty calls, a Santorelli will always answer. Besides, the Yeerks took my life. I'm itching for some payback."

Jake looked at Jeanne. She smiled. "I always loved reading about your war. I never dreamed that I'd get to be part of it. Today I did more than I ever thought I could. I will fight."

Finally, he looked at me. "Tobias...", he began.

"Save it, Jake. You know that I can't say no. They have Ax. The monster who murdered my father is loose again. And the creatures that killed Rachel are out there still. To top it off, the One said he'd see me soon. I'll see him sooner than he thinks. I'm in. I'll ever run from the Yeerks. Never."

Jake nodded his head. "Then it's unanimous. The six of us fight the Yeerks. This isn't gong to be fun and it isn't going to be easy. Everyone get some sleep. We'll meet tomorrow morning here to talk strategy. And one more thing. Jeanne and Santorelli?"

"Commander Jake?" Santorelli said.

"Don't call me commander," Jake smiled.

Santorelli smiled as though he knew the inside joke that made Marco, Cassie, Jake, and me smile. He saluted “Yes, Commander Jake.”

EPILOGUE

Sorry, but I guess I lied a bit. Things haven't changed too much after all. We're still on earth, still fighting the same old Yeerks. We've even got the same guy leading them. But there are two differences, at least for me: Ax and Rachel.

I don't know how I made it though the first time. I couldn't have done it without them. Now, I've got nothing but myself. In a way, it's kind of liberating. There's no one to worry about now. No reason to hold back. I'm coming for the Yeerks like never before.

They killed my father. They killed Rachel. They abducted and twisted Ax. They took my body, mind, and soul. Now, I'll take everything from them.

I was a hawk for too long for me to ever really be human again. I'm a predator, in mind and heart. I have a new prey. Win or lose, the Yeerks will not be able to go to sleep at night without worrying if I'll come for them. I will be the monster that haunts their nightmares. I am the predator.

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

*“Well, It doesn't really matter if you lead or follow
Everybody's laughing like there's no tomorrow and even if there was,
Would you still go following your friends?
I don't know where we went wrong, we're still singing those same sad songs
"It's my life, not your life, I'll end it when I want"”*

*And now I'm off to save the world once again
But I don't know how I'll pull it off this time
I think I'm going to drown
Now he's off to save the world once again
But he don't know how he'll pull it off this time
I just know I'm going to drown*

*And it's the saddest song you'll ever hear
The most pain you will ever feel
But you grit your teeth because it don't get better that this (know this)
And you'll try to explain as the blood leave all your veins
And you can't think of anything that you would change”
—The Saddest Song*

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

56: THE ORGANIZATION

Jake and I arrived at the Tri-I building at 8:00 sharp. It was difficult for me since I haven't gotten up before noon in years. You don't have to obey the laws of nature when you're the amazing Marco.

The International Invasion Investigation Force was known by a couple of quirky names. Tri-I was the most common. There was also Three-F and Two-If. Those came from the abbreviation, IIIF. The "I"s looked like roman numerals. There was a joke about just what the two ifs were.

I glanced out of the corner of my eye at a red-tailed hawk sitting on a telephone poll. It opened one wing. That was Tobias telling us it was safe to enter. I looked at Jake. "About time we go in."

We were greeted like celebrities. Tri-I was largely created by the Animorphs. It was an organization dedicated to making sure that nothing like the Yeerk invasion happened again. It was an agency that spanned every country on Earth, looking for anything that might be a covert alien invasion. Naturally, they would keep files on every suspected voluntary host.

Everyone in Three-F knew who we were, of course. I smiled when I saw a life-sized poster of myself on one of the walls of the lounge. Below me, there was a caption that read, “A little paranoia never hurt anyone.”

Agents swarmed us, asking for autographs, wanting to take pictures, or just touch us. It was good, but it was also a little creepy. Jake and I managed to fight our way to the reception desk.

“We need to speak to the local director,” Jake told her.

“Right away, sir,” she promised. She meant it, too, because a door behind her opened almost as soon as she said it. “Through there.”

The director rose to greet us. He was a little over middle aged, with a receding hairline and a tightly cut black suit. “Gentlemen. It is an honor, an absolute honor, to meet our founders. And may I ask what brings you absolutely fine gentlemen to me today?”

Jake and I shared a look. This guy was way too excited to see us. He spoke quickly and loudly. His eyes were glistening. But he didn’t move towards us or offer to shake our hands. He didn’t want to get near us. Something wasn’t right.

I tapped my left foot on the floor once. Jake’s right

eyebrow rose. *Yeerk?* my foot asked.

Maybe, his eyebrow answered.

“We need information,” Jake answered.

“Anything I can do to oblige you would be my greatest pleasure,” he assured us with way too much assurance.

I fought down several remarks as to what he could do to please us. “We need a list of people you suspect of being voluntary hosts,” I told him.

“As I said, anything I can do would be my pleasure.” There was a pause, after which he added, “But I can’t do that. The International Invasion Investigation Force’s files are strictly confidential.”

“Even to us?” I asked, giving him my friendliest smile.

“I’m afraid so,” he answered. “It would violate several international laws and I have no idea how that would affect our standing in the international community.

“There are many countries who resent our presence and the fact that we are headquartered in America. They think our branches in this country have too much power over the world. If we are seen to be abusing this power, well, that could be disastrous. It could be the end of the organization as we know it.”

“Just for giving the two of us a few names?” Jake asked.
“But we practically rounded Tri-I.”

“I am terribly sorry,” the director apologized. He didn’t sound sorry at all. But that was fine. We planned for this.

We thanked him for his time and left. We walked across the street. <Guy on your tail,> Tobias’s voice said in our heads. We didn’t nod or acknowledge him at all but he knew we had heard.

We didn’t want to be seen looking around for birds. That would tip off whoever was following us that we were being watched and we didn’t want that.

We kept going for a couple of blocks. <Still on you. You’re almost at the spot. Should I tell him to go?>

“You hungry?” I asked Jake.

“Yeah,” he answered. I don’t know exactly where Tobias was but I know he heard it too.

We passed a little alley. A moment later, we heard someone behind us say, “Hand over your wallet.”

We turned around to see two guys. One was wearing a dirty trench coat, ripped jeans, and a panama hat. Santorelli.

The other guy was our tail. He had a medium build. Brown hair, a day or so’s worth of beard. Jeans. T-shirt. Sneakers.

Nothing special about him. Not the sort of guy most people would notice following us. But then again, Tobias wasn't most people.

Jake tapped Santorelli on the shoulder. "Is there a problem?" he asked. Whiskers shot out of Jake's face. Black and orange fur started to grow on his body. His ears crawled up the sides of his head.

"No problem!" Santorelli practically screamed. He turned and ran into the alley. Jake reversed his morph. "You alright?" he asked our tail.

"Yeah. Thanks," the guy said. He turned and went back the way he came. Now that we'd seen him, his cover was blown. He didn't want to stick around.

<You're clear,> Tobias called. Jake and I turned in to the alley. Santorelli stood by a dumpster.

Tobias flew down and landed in the alley. He started to demorph. A pair of flies flew from Santorelli and landed on the ground. In about fifteen seconds, one was Cassie. The other was slowly becoming Jeanne.

I mentioned that Jeanne is beautiful. Well, no one can make morphing from a fly to a girl beautiful. I looked away until it was safe.

“Do you have the list?” she asked in her pretty little accent.

Jake shook his head. “We go in. Everyone clear on the plan?”

“Oh, sure,” I said. “We just have to break into the most heavily guarded building in town, hack into their mainframe, steal some super-secret information, and make it out undetected. What could go wrong?”

“I can think of about six things off the top of my head,” Cassie answered.

“Only six?” Tobias asked. “Did you get a concussion when I wasn’t looking?”

“It sounds simple enough,” Jeanne said. “Why do you all seem to think something will go wrong?”

Santorelli laughed. “Read a history book. The only certain thing about Animorph missions is that something always goes wrong.”

PREVIEW SUMMARY

The Animorphs know that that the Yeerks are back. But they don't know where, who they have infested, or how powerful they are. One group, the International Invasion Investigation Force, a world-wide network devoted to stopping something like the Yeerk invasion from ever happening again, may have the answers.

But Tri-I isn't willing to give away secrets. And they have security that is supposed to be impossible to crack. It's up to Marco, Jake, Tobias, Cassie, Jeanne, and Santorelli to find a way or the Yeerks will go unchecked in their conquest of planet Earth.