

68: THE REDEMPTION

CHAPTER 1

My name is James. Yeah, yeah, an ordinary name. But I'm far from ordinary. You've heard it all before, I know. The Yeerks, Andalites, construction site, the war... But you probably didn't hear about me. I'm not something the Animorphs are proud of. Maybe the only thing they're more ashamed of is what they did to David. But what happened to me and my friends isn't much better.

Near the end of the First War, the Animorphs were discovered. They and their families went into hiding. They decided that they needed allies, others to help them fight the Yeerks. But who could they trust? Who could they be sure were not Controllers? Easy: hosts the Yeerks didn't want. The disabled. So they came to the hospital.

I was one of those disabled kids. See, when I was little, I was in a bad accident. Part of my spine was pulverized pretty bad. My mom took me to the hospital. She never bothered to take me back out. I grew up there, surrounded by the sick, the dying, and the paralyzed like me. It didn't make for a happy childhood. But we got by, all of us. We held on to each other; we had nothing else.

Until the day the Animorphs came. They were honest with

us from the start. They told us all about the war and how desperate it all was. And then Jake gave us the option of fighting. But it was far more than that. He gave us the option to morph, to be whole for two hours at a time. And for a few of us, those who were not born with our afflictions, it was the chance to be whole forever.

I was one of the lucky few who was completely healed. I became the leader of these new Axillary Animorphs. I led them into battle and decided who did what. Sometimes, I felt like I outranked most of the original Animorphs. Stupid, I know, but I had far more responsibility than they did. I had my own people to lead and I was proud of it. Until that final day, when Jake ordered us to make the ultimate sacrifice.

He needed a distraction, a diversion. He needed some way to make the Visser think that we were attacking his ship. He needed to make a sacrifice that no one believed he would ever make. So he sacrifices us, all of us, in a suicidal attack on the Pool ship, all for the sake of realistic drama. It went just as planned; or as feared. The Visser took the ship into the air and amused himself by killing us all. I watched as my friends, my family, were murdered from the sky while they were helpless. Maybe some of them got away. Maybe they're off happily

living their lives in morphs or something.

Me? I ran. I turned and ran away like a coward. There was nothing I could do to help them, nothing except get killed with them. Maybe I should have died with them. For these past few years, I thought that I should have. I believed it was my purpose. But now...now I'm starting to think there's more to it than that. I'm back for a reason; I just need to find out what it really is.

After I fled, I hid for a little bit. I had a strong, healthy body now. But there was nothing left for me on Earth. So when I had the chance, I went off with the Andalites to their homeworld. I was taken in by a xenobiologist and a doctor. Things weren't going poorly, really. And then, without warning, the Drode intervened and I found myself standing in Rachel's living room. Rachel, who I thought had died. And she wasn't alone. I met the other Animorphs and was told all about this new war.

I agreed to fight again. How could I refuse? I had been given the chance to make up for what I did wrong, a reason to keep on living. So now it's in to the fray once more for me. But it's a lot different now. Before, all of the Animorphs kind of kept me at arms length. I was never part of the inner circle,

no matter how many of their core meetings I sat in on. Now, I'm really an Animorph.

It seems to me that all of the original Animorphs are still here, but at the same time, they're not. All of them have changed too much to ever be the way they used to be. Some of them weren't even factors when I joined up. Cassie's a good example. She had left the war to be with her finance, Ronnie Chambers. But she seems to be back now, fighting with once more. And what's odd is that Ronnie seems to be tagging along.

Then there's Ax. He spent some time as the host of the Visser, but after a daring raid on the Blade ship, the Animorphs rescued him. He's different now, too. Angrier, more bitter, and a lot more ruthless. He's been humbled, too, by what's happened to him. He willingly listens to advice from others; even us lowly humans. He bears the scars of this war. In his case, these scars are physical. A bad burn from the acidic blood of a Kelbrid claimed one of his main eyes and left him with a wicked scar.

Marco, when I first signed back on, wasn't all that different from the kid I had briefly known. But recently, everything got to be too much for him. He lost his mind and his memories.

Now, he has some hazy, general memories, but nothing specific. He needs to be reminded every morning who he is, how old he is, and what's going on. He remembers enough that it's not a massive ordeal to convince him that we're telling the truth, but it's still a bit tedious. I'm glad Jeanne takes care of that.

Rachel's a lot different now, too. Unlike the last time I saw her, she's alive now. Jake traded his life for hers. Since she's pregnant with Tobias's child, she can no longer fight in this war. But she still helps us in any way she can; and even in some ways she can't, such as making us food. She seems to have settled down a bit, but I suspect that Tobias might just be putting sedatives in her food.

Tobias is completely different. The last time I saw him, he was a shy, sensitive kid trapped in the body of a hawk. Now, he's an ice-cold general. He seems to be completely fearless and totally ruthless. He's our leader now, the one who we're all putting our hopes on.

And I can't forget to mention Jake. Jake, the reason things have suddenly gotten very complicated. I mentioned that he traded his life for Rachel's? Well, he's been given a second shot at life, under the condition that he kills a Yeerk rebel

named Mersa 528. Mersa has gone on the run and we now have five days to find and kill him. Think that's complicated? That's just all that's happened with the originals.

We've got some "new" members, too. Although I shouldn't necessarily call them that. Jeanne's been on more missions than I have. She's Rachel's step-sister and Marco's girlfriend. On top of that, she's a trained assassin. And did I mention breathtakingly beautiful? Too bad she's already taken. Although if Marco ever completely loses his mind...

Next, there's David. He was an Animorph long before I was, and the reason they waited so long before recruiting more people to help them. David betrayed the Animorphs and tried to kill them. They retaliated by trapping him in the body of a rat. When this new war began, the One, I suppose I should call him by his real name now, Azmaveth. Anyhow, Azmaveth restored David's power to morph. David betrayed Azmaveth and now works for us.

I like David. Part of it is because we have so much in common. He told me once that I am both his equal and his opposite, and I think that's true. This war took everything from David. And it gave everything to me. In spite of that, he doesn't seem to hold it against me. We get along pretty well.

And the fact that we chose the exact same lion as a battle morph means that we tend to work together in a fight. He's got my back and I have his. I don't know if the others trust David, but I certainly do.

Then there's Al; *aristh* Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor. He's Tobias's half brother and David's best friend. Al's also a genius with computers, even by the standards of the Andalites. He's also good to have around in a fight.

Lastly, there's Santorelli. He was an Animorph very briefly. During one of their earliest missions of this war, he died. He was sent back along with Jake to help kill Mersa. Santorelli agreed to return to the afterlife once the deed was done. That's all I know about him other than the fact that he's old enough to be my father. In spite of this, he follows the rest of us without resentment.

All of us were crammed at the breakfast table at Rachel's house, where we seem to have set up camp. With us were some others. Rachel's mother, father, and stepfather, Naomi, Dan, and Jacques. There was also Loren, Tobias's mother, who I sort of knew from the Andalite homeworld, since I did her yardwork there. We were also joined by Menderash-Postill-Fastill, an Andalite who had trapped himself in human morph

at the beginning of this war. He was here on behalf of the Andalite Electorate to investigate Tobias's actions. See, this war had to stay a secret, but the Andalites knew that Tobias was up to something; they just couldn't figure out what. Also with us were Rachel's sisters, Jordan and Sara, as well as Cassie's fiancée, Ronnie. And I can't forget our other two guests.

The Visser, in the morph of a blue-eyed, dark-haired middle-aged human, sat at one end of the table, looking like he wanted to be anywhere else. Next to him stood a massive Hork-bajir. Guraff 427, the greatest warrior in the Yeerk Empire. He and Tobias shared an odd friendship, and I got the impression that Guraff wasn't supposed to be treated like an enemy.

We were all sitting around the table for the same reason. If there was one thing we could all agree on, it was that Mersa 528 had to die. He had gone on the run and the Yeerks were willing to help us find him. With the time pressure we were desperate, so we accepted.

We ate in silence except for Tobias and Guraff, who kept a polite conversation going about their recent battles with one another. I noticed the Visser struggling to eat the food. "Who

cooked this?" he demanded.

"I did," Rachel answered him.

The Visser looked from Rachel to Guraff to Tobias and finally back to his plate. He said nothing. Apparently, not even the Visser is stupid enough to let Rachel know how bad her cooking is.

Funny thing: up until that day, I thought Rachel's cooking was something I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. And now my worst enemy was eating it, and I savored every moment of it.

CHAPTER 2

We ate in silence, mostly because no one dared to discuss why our "guests" were there. Naomi hadn't yet realized she was eating breakfast with the two biggest threats to the continued existence of the human race, and we weren't going to risk her finding out. Tobias had mentioned Guraff only once in her presence, as a business associate. She probably assumed they were here on behalf of the Andalties, since the Visser wasn't morphed when he arrived.

We all finished quickly and excused ourselves. Tobias led us to the Reliquary, the only place we could be sure Naomi

wouldn't overhear us. I guess it's kind of funny: here we were, and all of us were afraid to antagonize an ordinary human woman. Okay, not afraid exactly, but it was definitely something we wanted to avoid at all costs. An angry Naomi made life very, very difficult for all involved.

It was very tense on the bridge. The Visser and Guraff demorphed, which made us all pretty nervous. Ax and Al kept their tails ready, but there wasn't much they could do. I've seen Guraff defeat Ax before, with almost no effort. Heck, I saw Guraff beat Tobias in Howler morph. Neither of the Andalites would be of much use against him, and the fact that Guraff had the Visser to back him up just made things worse.

Tobias seemed calm, though. I don't know if it was just an act or if he was really that unperturbed by the situation, but I bought it. Seeing him so relaxed, lounging on his bed, made me feel a little better. If he thought things were going to get out of hand, he'd be in Howler morph by now. I guess there wasn't much to fear. Besides, Rachel came with us and he wasn't about to put her in any danger.

Silence steel reigned. No one had spoken during breakfast and that hadn't changed yet. Someone needed to break the silence. I guess I decided that person had to be me. "So...what

are we going to do?" I asked. "We need to find Mersa, but how? Where would he go?"

<There are several possibilities,> the Visser told us. <Guraff's ship, the ship Mersa stole, is equipped with a tracking device. We can follow it.>

"Then why do you need us?" Marco asked. "Why bring us into this at all?"

Guraff answered him. "Because Mersa is not a fool. He has several options at this point. He could disable the tracking signal at any time, leaving us lost. He abandon the ship and get a different one, escaping our signal. He could separate from the ship so that following it would lead us in the wrong direction. Or he could remain with the ship and hope that we assume he would never do so."

<So following the ship is most likely a bad idea,> David said. <But it's also the only lead we have, right?>

Guraff nodded. "We have no other options at this time other than a random search."

<At the very least,> Ax continued, <we know that Mersa possessed the ship at one time. Following it may yield clues as to his present location.>

"All of this is stuff the Yeerks could do on their own,"

Rachel pointed out. "Why why bring us into this?"

<Guraff's idea,> the Visser sighed. <He believed that your assistance would be helpful, perhaps even necessary. Although I disagree, Guraff's judgment has proven to be reliable in the past. I am willing to lend him my ear this time.>

"Okay, so," Jake began, "we're about to start gallivanting across the galaxy. How do we go about doing that?"

<The Blade ship-> the Visser began.

"Is a great way for us all to get slugs in our heads," Marco interrupted. "No way am I riding with the slugs."

"Didn't we have this argument once before?" Cassie wondered. "It sounds kind of familiar." Well, if they had it before, I missed it.

"There's a simple solution," Tobias said. "I'll go on the Blade ship. The Visser will go on the Reliquary. Then we both have important hostages. If I get infested, the Visser gets killed. Or if he gets killed, I get infested. Simple enough."

"You're not going off alone," Rachel insisted. "I'm going to be on the Blade ship with you."

"No, you're going to be on Earth where it's safe," Tobias answered.

"Like hell I am. This isn't some ordinary mission, Tobias.

You could-"

"Which is precisely why you're staying here."

"I am *not* going to stay at home while you run off to save the world. Guraff, tell him I'm not going to just sit around and let him do all the fighting."

Guraff looked from Tobias to Rachel. "I think it would be best for everyone if I refrain from involvement in this debate."

"Guraff," Tobias said, "tell her that a pregnant woman has no place in a battle."

"Guraff, tell Tobias that he doesn't own me and I can do what I want."

"Guraff, tell Rachel that if she wants to be a soldier, she has to follow orders."

"Guraff, tell Tobias he's a moron."

"Guraff, tell Rachel she's a bitch."

It seemed like all the air got sucked out of the room. No one twitched. Not even Marco dared utter a remark. After a moment of silence, she slapped him in the face and stormed out of the ship.

Tobias sank onto his bed. "Thank God. I was wondering how I could piss her off so much she'd refuse to come even if I begged her."

We all gaped at him. Quietly, Marco asked, "So...you did that on purpose?"

"Yeah," Tobias nodded. "It's useless to reason with her. So I had to trick her into doing what I wanted. She'll calm down by the time we get back."

"Have you *met* Rachel?" Jeanne asked. "How long do you expect to be gone? She does not calm down. She'll just sit on her anger until she gets to yell at you some more."

"I...hadn't considered that," he admitted. "Maybe I should go talk to her..."

"Yeah, maybe," I agreed.

Tobias turned to Jake. "You can finish making the arrangements. I'll go and smooth this over. Everything should be go for leaving in a few hours."

CHAPTER 3

Tobias left to go and get yelled at and probably hit a few times. I'm pretty sure he's completely lost his mind now. Jake took over from there. "Okay, so I think we'll go with what Tobias suggested."

"I am no longer comfortable with his plans," Marco said. "He definitely didn't think that last one through."

"Nevertheless, we'll agree to it," Jake said. "Tobias and some of the rest of us will ride with Guraff in the Blade ship. Visser Three will-"

<Actually, I'm just going by "the Visser" these days,> the Visser corrected.

Jake shrugged. "Fine. The Visser and the rest of us will take the Reliquary. That should be enough to guarantee some measure of trust. Neither of us could make a move without sacrificing some people too important to sacrifice."

Guraff nodded. "That seems acceptable to me. My Visser?"

<Fine, fine. I will agree as long as the rest of them agree not to tie me up and leave me in the bathroom this time,> the Visser said.

"I think we can probably guarantee that," Jake nodded. "So now we need to look to a few other things."

"Like what?" I asked.

<Food, for one thing,> David told me. <We'll be out there for probably a few days. We need to eat something.>

"Marco and Jeanne should take care of that," Jake ordered. "We also need to placate the important people. We'll have to disappear for a few days and we need to take some steps so we don't cause another panic. Let's see..."

"Santorelli should be able to talk to the parents. They'll be more likely to listen to him than to us," Cassie suggested. "Ronnie and I need to take care of some things of our own. I mean...we haven't been home in a few days."

<Guraff and I need to be sure we will have access to Kandrona rays,> the Visser said. <And there are other things we have to take care of before we go. We will meet you behind the moon in two hours.>

Jake nodded as the pair left. Everything got a lot more relaxed then. "Okay. Anyone else need to be taken care of?"

"I should contact War-Prince Glorfindel," Menderash said. "I will not tell him what is truly going on; I understand that I cannot do that. But I must give him a preliminary report and let him know that he will not likely hear from me for a few days."

That surprised me. You don't often find Andalites who are so willing to lie to their superiors at a moment's notice. But then again, you don't often meet Andalities who are willing to trap themselves in human bodies, either. Menderash wasn't exactly the average Andalite, I guess. Ax had chosen him as a Tactical Officer, and I suppose Ax wouldn't choose the average Andalite to be his T.O.

"I'll need to talk to my parents," Jake told us. "Wow...that feels weird to say. I guess the rest of you can do whatever you want."

That made sense. David and I didn't have parents; at least, not living parents that we knew of. Ax and Al didn't have that problem either. "What do you want to do?" I asked them.

<It is unlikely that I will find room or time to graze during this journey,> Ax said. <Perhaps we could go to the park?> He sounded hopeful, like we might say no.

<I would not be adverse to that,> Al agreed.

<Yay. I love the park. So much stuff to climb on,> David added. <Of course, I need to watch out for birds and stuff, but they usually stay away from people and Andalites. I should be fine. Not a problem... I think I'll stick close to the blue guys.>

I nodded. "The park it is." Then something occurred to me.

"Let's see if anyone else wants to go. I'm sure Jordan and Sara will want to get out of the house. I can almost guarantee that Tobias is fighting with Naomi and Rachel right now. And probably with Loren, too. And Dan. And possibly Jacques. Damn, he really should not have said that. Let's get out of here."

We filed out of the Reliquary and found Jordan and Sara waiting in the backyard. "Wherever you're going, please take us with you," Jordan said to me. "Marco and Jeanne wouldn't let us come along but we have to get out of here."

"We're going to the park," I told her. "You can tag along I guess."

"Anywhere's better than here."

CHAPTER 4

It really was a beautiful day at the park. Me, I love the park. I know it might sound odd, but I do. Growing up, I could never go and take a walk in the park. Even if I could have walked, they wouldn't let me out of the hospital. So now that I have the option of doing so, I take a walk in the park any chance I get.

I'm not the only one who enjoys it, though. The Andalites love it. They can't really graze back at Rachel's place; not enough room. Many Andalites in town came to graze at the park, so Ax and Al didn't seem at all out of place. Granted, it's not like the place was crawling with Andalite tourists all the time, but people in this town were used to seeing them. This was a major landmark, after all. Andalites on Earth couldn't pass up the chance to check this place out.

David loved it, too. In a lot of ways, David's still a kid. He's been in rat morph since he was fourteen and in many ways, he hasn't grown out of it. It doesn't help that his human morph is his fourteen year old self. Both parts of David, his human and rat sides, loved to climb on things.

While the Andalities galloped around the park inadvertently terrifying small children and adults alike, Sara took David off

to the jungle gym. Presumably, she was there to make sure he didn't get eaten or anything. Weird that writing things like that don't seem odd to me anymore. This left me alone with Jordan.

Silently, I started walking off towards a little section of woods at the edge of the park. She followed, like I knew she would. Carefully, I looked around to be sure no one was watching us. Then I disappeared into the woods with Jordan behind me.

Out of sight from anyone, I sat on the ground and leaned against a tree. Jordan sat down next to me and took my hand in hers. "This really isn't the best idea. One of the others could come here looking for us at any moment," she warned me.

"You worry too much," I smiled. People think Rachel's the beautiful one in that family, and maybe that used to be true, back during the First War. But not if you ask me. Jordan definitely takes that prize.

Jordan was nothing like how I expected her to be when I first met her. I thought she'd be like her older sister. I couldn't have been more wrong. Rachel was reckless; Jordan worried too much. She was far more serious. Not that Rachel's some sort of clown, she certainly takes some things very seriously. But a lot of the time, she's having fun even while doing

something serious. Jordan, on the other hand...

I was glad she was serious, though. It made me seem less so. I felt more relaxed around her. Someone else was worrying about the little things for once. It was a liberating feeling. There some complications, though. Complications she was more than happy to remind me of.

“You know what will happen if someone finds out,” she reminded me. “After what happened with Tobias and Rachel, Mom would kick you out if she knew about this.”

I put my head on her shoulder. “So let's not tell her.”

“But if someone sees us—”

“Like who? Ax? He's the original 'Clueless Andalite'. Al? He's 'Clueless Andalite' version two point oh. He wouldn't rat us out. Speaking of which, David wouldn't do it, either. Bolts is cool like that.”

“You forgot about Sara.”

“Would she really—”

“Yes.”

“How you know?”

“If I had known about Rachel and Tobias back in the beginning, I'd have ratted them out. It's a girl thing.” Not being a girl, I had to assume she was telling the truth.

We sat there in silence for a while, unsure what to say. There were so few moments when we could get away like this, especially now that everyone the Animorphs knew seemed to be squeezed into one house. It was getting ridiculous. I'm really surprised Toby hasn't decided to show up just for the heck of it.

I laughed as something funny occurred to me. "What?" Jordan asked.

"I was just thinking..."

"It's about time." What can I say? She and her sister aren't *completely* different... "What about?"

"What if Toby and Guraff got together?"

She gave me a completely perplexed look. "....."

"Okaaaaay... Never mind. Forget I mentioned that."

But I guess I got her thinking about what was going to come. "You'll be gone for who knows how long," she said softly.

"It'll only be a few days," I reminded her.

"Who knows what could happen?" she said. "You'll be out there with the Yeerks, running around in God knows where, looking for Mersa. You could be killed, James. You could die."

"I'll be fine," I assured her. "It's not like it'll just be me.

More Animorphs than ever before are going off on this mission. This is the safest things have ever been.”

“Why can't the others take care of it?” she asked me. “Not everyone needs to go. They can get by without you for one mission, can't they?”

“Yeah maybe,” I shook my head. “But I can't just sit here while they go off into danger.”

“I thought you said it'd be safe.”

“Well...as safe as these things ever get.”

“That's not very comforting.”

“Did you expect it to be?”

“Can't you just lie to me? Tell me you'll be fine? Tell me everyone will come back okay. Please?”

Could I? It would certainly be easier. But even though she asked for it, it felt wrong somehow. Was that any way for me to run a relationship? I know Tobias never lies to Rachel about the odds, about how things were probably going to end.

But Jordan wasn't her sister. I gave her my best smile. “Yeah. Don't worry; everything's going to be alright.”

CHAPTER 5

We stayed at the park for a few hours. Jordan and I had to spend most of the time in the open, though. We couldn't take the chance of one of them noticing us sneaking off together. The last thing I needed was for Naomi to throw me out of the house; I had nowhere else to go. In theory, I could go and live in the Reliquary or at Marco's place, but that didn't seem to be the best choice. At least here, I was close to the action; and Jordan.

When we got back, we found Tobias and Guraff in the backyard. Tobias didn't look happy. Not to say that he ever exactly looks happy, but this time he was noticeably unhappy. Maybe he was going out of his way to display it or maybe he was finally getting back into human facial habits. Either way, we could tell he was ticked.

“What is it?” I asked as we approached.

“The Visser wants to stay behind while we go off,” Tobias answered. “Of course, I can't let him stay. Like they say: while the hawk's a way, the rats will play.”

<I believe it's about cats an mice, actually,> David interjected. <While the *cat's* away, the *mice* will play. Sound familiar?>

Tobias gave him a blank look. A few moments later, he shrugged. I guess he was trying to remember what to do with his body in response to that. “I was sure it was hawk and rat...”

“Does it matter?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Not really. In any case, I can't let the Visser stay behind. I talked him into coming with us, but on one condition: we all have to ride on the Blade ship. And he gets to bring guards.”

<No way!> David argued. <He'll forcibly infest us.>

“Which is why I got Guraff here to agree to not let him do that,” Tobias informed us. “Guraff is a man of honor. If he says he will stop something like that, I believe him.”

The massive Hork-bajir nodded. “I am beholden to three duties. My third is to my Visser. My second is to my comrades. My first is to my honor. I will not bring shame upon myself by lying to you like this.”

Privately, Ax warned us, <Guraff is an intelligent Yeerk. This is an opportunity to end the war. He will not let it pass just for his honor.>

Tobias shook his head. “Guraff's honor is his weakness.”

“And the Devil Prince's family is his,” Guraff added. “Which is why Rachel will be coming with us. She will

remain with me at all times. The Devil Prince holds me by my honor; I will hold him by what he prizes.”

We all looked at each other. This couldn't be good. Tobias wouldn't agree to this. We all turned to him next. I expected to see him angry. I thought I'd see him argue with Guraff about this. But instead, his face was a cold mask. “Done,” he said quietly.

<This is not good,> Ax said to us. I was pretty sure Tobias and Guraff couldn't hear us. <If Tobias is willing to take such a risk...>

Al nodded slightly, then caught himself. <I cannot believe... He must have some sort of plan. He would never risk Rachel's life. That is one thing of which I am certain.>

<Who knows what he'd do anymore?> David argued. <I'm telling you, he's losing it and I'm getting scared. I have no idea how far he'll go anymore. I don't know where he draws the line. I don't think there even is one anymore. He's way beyond it now.>

Were they right? I didn't know. I never really knew Tobias. When I first met him, he was bird and I tried to avoid him. What happened to him was an all too present reminder of what could happen to me if I wasn't careful. And now...now it

seemed like no one knew him. Ax was his best friend and even the Andalite thought he was starting to lose it. Maybe Rachel knew if he was still sane. Maybe I'd talk to her about it. But she and I were never close; nowhere near.

I saw a hand wave in front of my eyes. "James, are you listening?" Tobias asked me.

"Uh...no. Sorry. What were you saying?"

"I said go and pack whatever you'll need. It'll be a ten day journey, maximum, and I don't trust the Visser's washing facilities. He doesn't even have clothes. Say whatever goodbyes you think you'll need and we'll be off."

I nodded and left. I didn't have a lot of possessions, so I didn't have a lot to pack. I really only knew the Animorphs, and all of them were coming along. Except for Santorelli. He decided to remain behind in case he got tempted to take Mersa for himself. Jeanne wasn't happy about that, but I guess Tobias overruled her. He didn't seem pleased with it either, but he seemed content to let it go.

I had already bid Jordan farewell before we came back. That didn't stop her, though. Like I said, for all their many differences, she is still Rachel's sister, after all.

I was in the bathroom upstairs, getting my toothbrush

when she pulled me into her room. “Please, James, just tell me one more time. Tell me you'll be safe. Tell me you'll come back okay.”

“Of course I'll be okay. You'd kill me if I died out there,” I said with a little laugh. I guess she didn't think it was funny.

“This isn't a joke, James, and it isn't a game. You're going to be out there in space with those Yeerk monsters, headed off to God knows where. This is really serious.”

“It was really serious since the day your cousin turned into a tiger in the children's ward. I know what I'm doing, Jordan, and so do the others. Jake and Tobias can handle the Visser and Guraff. And Mersa isn't a danger to anyone. He's an old white guy in a suit who can't morph. Nothing to be worried about.”

“I know. It's just...”

I took her in my arms. “You worry too much,” I said, just before I kissed her. Then I felt her go stiff. Someone cleared their throat behind me.

I dropped Jordan and spun around. Rachel was standing there, her arms crossed. “This isn't what it looks like...” trailed off, glancing at Jordan, prone on the floor.

For a moment, we were all unsure what to do or say.

Rachel could go either way. She could be enraged at me or happy for Jordan. I didn't think Rachel had any problem with me, after all. But then again, she is Rachel and she just caught me with her kid sister. And the pregnancy hormones didn't make her any more stable.

After a few tense moments, she smiled. "You two really need to start closing doors."

"You're...not mad?" Jordan asked from the floor, sounding more than a little nervous.

"I was when I first found out. But I got over it. After all, it could be a lot worse. Especially when you consider the other guys in your life are either aliens, rats, or your cousin," Rachel told her. "Sara's the one I have to watch out for. And I'm still keeping an eye on Jeanne, too"

"How did you know? And when?" I demanded. We had been so careful...

She laughed. "Cassie told me this would happen that night she and Ronnie joined us all for dinner. I guess seeing the two of you together was a big neon sign to her. She's...good like that. But I didn't know for sure until Tobias told me yesterday."

"How did he know?" Jordan asked.

“He may be an idiot a lot of the time, but he sees everything. And besides, he and I invented this sort of thing; or at least, reinvented it. You think you can pull one over on us?” Rachel laughed again. She was actually amused by this! “Kids, we're the masters. Hell, even when we all moved in at the Hork-bajir camp, mom had no idea about me and Tobias. You two...you're like a kid's finger painting, and we're the Mona Lisa. Now come on; Leonardo's waiting with the Visser's ship.”

CHAPTER 6

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

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

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

This mission was a bit different. Although Hork-bajir Controllers and Kelbrid still roamed the halls, they were not nearly as numerous as in the past. The Visser said they were here to make sure we didn't try to kill him or steal the ship

again. I had my doubts, but Tobias seemed to have faith in Guraff's words. It was a dangerous game he was playing. A Yeerk is still a Yeerk, after all.

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

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

We nodded. Tobias continued. "Now comes the tricky part. What do do with Jeanne? She's the only female here aside from Rachel, and I doubt she wants to bunk with Guraff and the two of us. So, Jeanne, if you don't mind, I'm going to put you with Ax, Al, and Menderash. They may be males, but

they're Andalites. I doubt you need to be worried about your modesty.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Fair enough,” Tobias nodded.

“Uh...what about us?” someone ventured. We all turned and looked at Cassie and Ronnie. Tobias had chosen to ignore them. He was still being really childish about the whole

'Cassie left the team' thing, but I wasn't going to be the one to say anything to him. If Rachel wasn't trying to straighten him out over it, I sure as hell wasn't going to bother.

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

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

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

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

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

"No no no. Batman has body armor. Spiderman's webs

wouldn't stick to Batman's body armor.”

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

“What's that?” I demanded.

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

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

CHAPTER 7

By the time I got to the bridge, Guraff, the Visser, and Tobias were already there. I looked at Tobias. “How did you beat me here?”

“The Visser knows a shortcut,” he answered. “Now, I do, too. Funny what you can see if you know what to look for, isn't it James? Sometimes, stuff someone wants to keep hidden is clear as day if you know the signs.”

That was an...odd...thing to say. My only guess was that he was subtly referring to my thing with Jordan. Or, you know, maybe he was just losing his mind. Maybe David was right. Maybe he was cracking up. A good thing we were getting Jake back, then.

<Guraff, open the communications channel. Tobias, keep your people out of sight,> the Visser snapped. Tobias motioned to us and we stepped back so the hologram of the speaker couldn't see us. Tobias, though, went and stood next to the Visser. <What do you think you are doing?>

“My people are out of sight. I will not be.”

The Visser's tail twitched. <I could kill you right here and now.>

“You could. But you'd never make it off of this bridge

alive. And then you'd miss your phone call.”

<I will cut that smile off of your face. Slowly.>

“And in return, I will cut a smile *into* your face. Slowly. An even trade, I'd say. Now, are you going to answer that or am I?”

<Guraff, didn't I just say to open the channel?>

“My apologies, Visser. I did not think you would want your caller to witness that exchange. I will comply now.”

An image appeared in front of us. It was a little taller than a man. A scaly, light-green, peanut shaped body. Beneath it were two long, muscular, insectoid legs. The talons on the ends of the legs looked delicate but strong, more like hands and claws than any sort of foot. A short, thin pair of arms seemed to grow out of the joint where the legs met the body. It had tiny hands with no fingers and a thumb; like mittens.

The face was not even vaguely human, if you can even call it a face. Just below the center of its body, it had two beak-like mouths. The upper portion of the body held nothing. On top of it was a long stalk with a pair of eyes. Two antennae sprouted from behind this stalk.

The other thing I noticed was the wings. They were bigger than the rest of the body, and looked like a fly's wings. There

were four of them, buzzing constantly at blinding, Garatron-like speed. The thing was hovering in the air.

“Greetings, Visser,” it said in Galard. I know enough Galard to recognize that. Both mouths spoke at the same time, in perfect unison. One had a deep voice, the other a high one. The overall effect was...disorienting.

<Ah. It has been a long time since I heard from my esteemed colleagues in the Pythagi Conglomerate,> the Visser responded. <To what do I owe this surprise?>

The creature's eyes twisted around in a 360 arc. I guess it was looking around to be sure it wasn't overheard. It said something in Galard; I didn't catch most of it. I looked at Ax and Al. “Translation, please?”

<He says he has received a visitor from the Yeerk Empire,> Ax told me as the creature spoke. <A Yeerk by the name of Mersa 528. He went to the Pythagi seeking shelter and some Kandrona generators. They were willing to help him at first. But when they heard his story, they believed it was more profitable to rat him out to us.> As an afterthought, he added, <No offense meant, David.>

<None taken. I'm used to it by now.>

<I am glad you have found him for us. You have saved us

much time. We are already exiting the solar system of our present location and will make the jump to Zero-space in moments. Consider us already on our way. Thank you, ambassador. And what do the Pythagi demand in return for this information?>

The alien said something in Galard again. I caught something about Kelbrid and trade, but that was it. I looked back over at Ax. <He knows that the Kelbrid serve the Visser. He is under the mistaken impression that the Kelbrid still control a large section of the galaxy and he is requesting trading rights there. Typical of the Pythagi.> It didn't sound like he had a very high opinion of them. Most Andalites didn't look fondly on the Pythagi. There was just something fundamentally different between a Pythag and an Andalite.

<Consider it done,> the Visser answered. <Within one of your days, all Kelbrid will have the order to stand down and allow Pythagi vessels to pass through their territory. I assure you that no Kelbrid will accost you in that galaxy.>

“Good, good,” the alien said. “I am glad we have reached a reasonable settlement.”

<As am I. Soon, I will take that nuisance Mersa off of your hands. And then, perhaps we can reestablish our old

agreements.”

“I look forward to it, Visser.” With that, the transmission winked out.

CHAPTER 8

We met back at the suite Jake, Marco, David, Ronnie, and I shared. With the whole team in there, it was crowded. The Andalites morphed to human, and David remained his normal self. That did little to cut down on the lack of space.

“Okay,” Tobias said to Ax, “I think it's time you tell us what we should know about the Pythagi Conglomerate.”

“I believe Alloran would be a better choice to explain them,” Ax told Tobias. “I never paid much attention in xenobiology. James, do you know much about the Pythagi?”

I shook my head. “Bits and pieces. My caretakers were mostly interested in humans. Take it away, Al.”

“Best to start off with the aliens themselves first,” Jake reminded him.

“Of course, Prince Jake. The Pythagi, as you saw, are a semi-insectoid race. A Pythag is omnivorous, but not in the typical sense. One mouth is capable of eating meat, the other of eating vegetation. These lead to different stomachs, which eventually funnel into one digestive system. We are unsure why they evolved this way.”

“God got drunk?” Marco suggested.

Ax, following standard procedure, ignored him. “Their

legs are very powerful. The kick could knock an Andalite or Hork-bajir over, and the claw at the end is strong enough to break a bone in its grip. It is also about as sharp as my tailblade. The Pythagi use their claws to hang on to the trees of their homeworld. They are the second tallest trees in the galaxy, second to those on the Hork-bajir world.

“Their arms are negligible and indeed seem to serve very little purpose. They prefer to use their claws to manipulate objects; not a difficult thing, as they can hover in the air as well as balance perfectly on one leg. They are capable of sustained flight, though we are unsure for how long.

“Their eyes are about as good as human eyes, though their night vision is superior to yours. They have no sense of hearing, but their antennae function like those of the cockroach. This means that they will be able to 'hear' through the vibrations of the environment.”

“Uh...very impressive, Al, but what about their culture?” Tobias responded. “What do we need to know about them in order to deal with them?”

“The Pythagi have...odd values. They are an economic society. All they think about is trade and profit. In the past, they had a history of unscrupulous business dealings. They

even used the threat of military force to pay weaker races into paying them for 'protection'.”

“Got it,” Marco said. “Galactic mafia. Go on.”

“For a long time, the Pythagi organizations competed with one another. They eventually joined together and formed the Pythagi Conglomerate. The P.C. was, for a time, the most powerful organization in the galaxy. However, with the rise of such races as the Andaltes, Anati, and Leerans, they lost a lot of power.

“When the Yeerks began their rise, they encountered the Pythagi early. But they didn't try to enslave the Pythagi. Their physiology makes them impossible to infest. Instead, the Yeerks hired them, mostly for manufacturing jobs. A lot of the equipment used on both sides of the war in its early years came from Pythagi factories.

“As the war went on and both sides became more economically independent, both kept the friendship of the Pythagi by allowing them trading rights in their territories. It was the Pythagi who ultimately profited from this war. And now, it seems that they have found a chance to expand their sphere of influence into the Kelbrid Empire.”

“Why did it take this long?” Jake asked. “They sound like

the sort of race to seek out any sort of profit they can find.”

“Not all that different from humans,” Rachel muttered.

I nodded. “The thing is that the Pythagi were afraid of the Kelbrid. They were never known as a...reasonable...race.

Without some guarantee of safety, the Pythagi wouldn't try it.”

“Why hasn't Earth heard of them?” Ronnie asked.

Ax answered him. “Long ago, we fought a war with the Pythagi. The Andalites of several generations ago disagreed with their business practices, among other things. The conflict was not good for either side, and in the end, my people forged a pact with the Pythagi. They agreed not to attempt to undermine Andalite interests in exchange for...certain concessions...on behalf of my people. Because of this, they have avoided Earth and humans. We have, likewise, shielded Earth from contacting them. I know that there are many humans who would jump at the chance to turn a profit with them. The galaxy is not quite ready for that, I think.”

“So Mersa ran to this Pythagi Conglomerate because he figured he could get them to shelter him until Jake's time ran out,” Tobias summarized. “But now, they've decided they can get a better deal by selling him out to us. So they should have Mersa all nice and gift wrapped for us when we roll in,

correct?”

“That would seem to be the case,” Ax agreed. “But one must remember that the Pythagi are not exactly trustworthy. It may be a trap of some sort. If they believe they have something to be gained by sheltering Mersa and killing us, they will do it without hesitation.”

“They're not the only ones who don't hesitate,” Tobias muttered. “Bring it, I say.”

“That reminds me,” Marco said suddenly. He went over to his luggage and brought a box in wrapping paper. “Xena, I brought this. It's nice and gift wrapped for you. I know your birthday's not for a couple of days but the way I see it, I'll either die or forget, so I might as well give this to you now.”

Carefully, Rachel opened the box. She looked like someone from the bomb squad defusing a dirty bomb. I don't blame her. Marco was Marco, after all, and any random gift from him was likely to be something ridiculous. When she opened the box, though, her eyes lit up. “Marco...I always wanted one of these.”

“Well, it was hell to get. I actually got this one legally and it took a lot more time than I wanted to spend on it.”

Rachel lifted the item out of the box. A brand new M-16. I

remembered Marco saying he was going to give her one. “I wonder if the Visser has a shooting range...”

“He's got a big room for executions. Try there,” Tobias suggested.

She turned to him. “And what did you get me?”

He smiled. “It's a surprise. You'll see. But I guarantee you'll love it.”

The blood left my face. If there's one thing scarier than a surprise gift from Marco, it's one from Tobias.

CHAPTER 9

“James! Wake up!” Jake hissed. Immediately, I snapped into combat mode. I rolled out of bed and started morphing to lion. “Uh...it's nothing serious,” Jake added a little too late.

I looked around. My eyes were already those of the lion, so I could see things pretty clearly. Tobias and Rachel were standing beside the door; Rachel's new toy was strapped over one shoulder. Jake, Menderash, Cassie, and Ronnie were on their feet as well. David was nowhere in scent or sight, nor were Ax and Al. <What it it?> I demanded. <What's serious enough to wake me up in the middle of the night for?>

“Things just got a lot more serious,” Tobias answered. I knew that tone. I hated that tone. If Marco was here, he'd have said something similar. Speaking of which...

“Where's Marco?” I asked, demorphing.

“He and Jeanne are having a little...quiet time,” Cassie answered. Then she turned to Rachel. “I think Jeanne's spent too much time living with you.”

“She's with Marco. Obviously, she hasn't been around me enough,” Rachel answered. To me, she added, “And before you ask, Ax and Al are out feeding in the Visser's private field. Apparently, he has an entire deck of this ship covered in grass

for when he can't feed on a planet. Apparently, he hates the liquefied stuff some Andalites eat on these little trips.”

“And David?”

<Under your bed. I guess your nose never went fully lion. When these two barged in in the middle of the night, I sort of got the better of myself for a few moments. And now, it's kind of comfy down here. That reminds me, though. Does Guraff know the two of you are sneaking out?>

“You leave him to me,” Tobias answered.

“You mentioned that things just got serious...” Jake prompted.

Tobias nodded. “Yeah. Guraff and I were talking about the Pythagi. He doesn't trust them. At all. He's half convinced that this is all a trap and they want to kill us. But we couldn't think up a motivation for them to do it. The important thing is, though, that he got me thinking.”

“It's about time,” Rachel joked.

Tobias gave her a look. “You already told that one. Back when I first mentioned this to you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. But when I did that, I expected Marco to be here. And I didn't think you'd use the exact same wording.”

“I'm sure it wasn't exact.”

“Does it matter?”

“Not particularly.”

<Meanwhile, on the Blade ship...> David intoned.

Tobias shook his head. “Oh. Right. Anyhow... Damn it, where was I?”

“You were thinking,” Jake supplied. He had a look of amusement on his face that I wasn't used to seeing.

“Yeah, that. Guraff got me thinking.”

“It's about time,” Rachel interjected again.

“Don't start that again.”

“Or what?”

“Or I'll hide your bullets.” That seemed to silence her. “If we're all done screwing around...?”

“When are we ever done screwing around?” Jake mused. “Just be glad Marco is...occupied.”

“Why would I be glad about that?” Rachel demanded. “Do you know what he's doing right now? He's probably fu-”

“You were saying, Tobias?” Cassie interrupted. She looked pretty amused, too.

“I was saying that I realized that the Yeerks were looking at a big opportunity here. The Visser holds the power to give

the Pythagi passage into Kelbrid space. They don't know that it's pretty much open to anyone right now. He can use that as leverage to get something extra from the Pythagi Conglomerate.”

“What would he ask for, though?” Jake asked.

“Ships,” Tobias told him. “And guns. We destroyed many of his Bug fighters and transports. His fleet is in tatters. Pretty much all he has is the Blade ship and a few squadrons of Buggies.”

“That's still more than we have,” Ronnie muttered.

“No amount of Bugs could be a threat to the Reliquary unless Guraff was somehow piloting each and every one of them,” Tobias said sharply. “The only threat is the Blade ship, and he's seen how unstable that can be. I doubt he knows about the little surprise Al hid for him, but he just might. Either way, he'll want a fleet. And weapons. And security systems, BioFilters, new Andalite technology, and anything else there is to have. The Pythagi can get just about anything. The only thing Guraff ever heard of them failing to produce was morphing technology. While we're here, the Visser will send us off after Mersa. Meanwhile, he'll be cutting his deals with the P.C. If that succeeds, he'll have a virtually unlimited

source of supplies that we just cannot destroy. We can't let that happen.”

“But what do we do about it?” Cassie asked.

“Jake has to go after Mersa. The Visser has ordered Guraff to go with him. If Guraff's going, he'll take Rachel with him. That means I'm going with those three. Since we know nothing about Pythagi technology, I want Al to come with us. There shouldn't be anything he can't handle. I want you with us, too, James.”

That surprised me a bit. “Why me?”

“Because there is someone back home who will make my life even more of a living hell if I don't get you back home in one piece.”

“Ah.”

“That should do it. Ax will lead Marco, Jeanne, David, and Menderash. Their job is to follow the Visser and make sure he can't cut any deals with the Pythagi.”

<How are we supposed to do that?> David demanded.

“I have no idea. I don't know what he'll try. You'll just have to improvise.” Tobias shrugged. “Sorry. But between you and Marco, I'm sure you'll think of something. Does that cover everyone?”

“I'm going with you, Tobias,” Cassie insisted.

“No you're not,” Tobias and Ronnie said at once. Ronnie continued. “Cassie, this could be really dangerous-”

“Or Mersa could be tied up waiting for us,” Cassie reminded him. “It doesn't matter, I've been in danger before. And I came out of it every time. That's a better record than some of the people in this room.” Jake and Rachel averted their eyes. “They might need some help with this and I'm going to give it to them.”

“Cassie-”

“Ronnie, we already had this conversation. If this war has followed us to our own backyard again, then Tobias was right. It's not done with me and I can't run from it.”

“I know that. I was going to say that I want to come with you. I want to help you.”

“No, you want to protect me and we both know you can't. Just stay with the others, Ronnie. I'll be fine.”

Tobias looked at her, his expression almost readable.

“Does this mean you want back on the team, Cassie?”

Slowly, she nodded. Then she shook her head. “No. I don't want to be. I want no part of any of this. But...you were right. I can't get away from this. Azmaveth, the Drobe, the Ellimist... I

can't run from them, no matter how much I want to.

Ronnie...he understands that now.”

“Yeah, I do. After seeing some of what you people do, what goes on... But what really did it was seeing how you live when you're not fighting. Seeing all of you with your families... I always thought she had to choose war or peace. But now I see. There's the battlefield but after the fight, you can always go home. Unless... unless you don't fight. Then you won't have a home to go back to.”

Cassie took his hand. “That's why I always fought before. So, Tobias, no, I don't want to be part of the team again. But I don't see that I have any choice. I'm needed. I have to fight. The more I run from this, the longer it will follow me. So I'm asking you to let me back onto the team.”

Tobias sighed. “So close, but so far,” he muttered. “Cassie, you can't be fighting for your home. That's the wrong way to go about it. If you want to save your home once and for all, you have to be willing to abandon it for victory. You must be willing to sacrifice everything you love in order to save everything you love.”

Jake nodded, Cassie shook her head. “No, Tobias. That's what a leader has to do. That's why it never could have been

me. Or Marco. Or even Rachel. As ruthless as those two are, they're in this for the same reasons I am. We're all fighting for what we love. It's what we're not willing to give up.”

“Don't forget about me,” Jake added. “I'm the same way. At least, I was until the very end of the first war. All I wanted to do was save my family. If I saved the world along the way...that was always secondary for me, really. And in the end, when I did what I had to do... It destroyed me. I could never do that again.

“But you're right, Tobias. That's what's needed for a final, real victory. That's why I chose you, after all. Because you have it in you to do that, time and time again. Hell, you're doing it right now or Rachel wouldn't be on this ship with us.”

“Well...all philosophy aside...” Tobias said slowly. He held out a hand to Cassie. “In that case, welcome back to the Animorphs.”

Good to see he was finally growing up over that.

CHAPTER 10

It took us two days to reach the Pythagi outpost. A fun fact about the P.C. That Guraff decided to clue us in on. The location of their actual homeworld is something of a mystery. They colonized several planets and even faked documentation to suggest that they had originated from them. No one is quite sure which world is actually theirs.

That was irrelevant, though. In addition to their four 'fake' worlds, there were several outposts in various parts of the galaxy. The one nearest to us, the one where we were told Mersa was, was on the largest moon of a gas giant in a solar system just a few parsecs away.

Guraff brought up a small hologram of the moon for us to see. We were all sitting in the officers' lounge of the Blade ship, which was almost as plush as the suites. “The moon itself,” he told us, “would not be inhabitable by humans, Andalites, or Hork-bajir. Or rats,” he added. “The atmosphere and climate are similar to Earth's; probably, that is the reason why Mersa chose this one rather than the settlement the Pythagi are building on Mars.”

“They're building one on Mars?” Marco asked.

Guraff nodded. “Their treaty with the Andalties prevents

them from actively engaging you. So instead, they are waiting for you to find them. It should not take long.” He turned back to the hologram. “The area of the moon around the settlement is dense forest. The Pythagi report that it is inhabited by many large and dangerous animals.”

The Visser nodded. <I can personally vouch for the accuracy of that statement. I acquired several of my morphs from this very moon. The Pythagi can be very obliging...>

“Why do I have the feeling we're going to end up running through the forest screaming our heads off?” Marco sighed.

“Because we always do?” Jake offered.

“I'll have to take your word for it.”

“What about the settlement itself?” Tobias asked.

Guraff zoomed in on the settlement in the hologram. It was circular, with walls enclosing it, cutting it off from the forest. The walls were fifty feet high and were probably pretty sturdy. In the center of the settlement were two massive towers, with doors spiraling up the sides at irregular intervals. At the top of each tower was a large tube that led to a third, much smaller tower that was connected to both and suspended between them.

“Basically, it is one small city. The most prominent

features are the two towers that hold the Ministries of Interior and Exterior. The Ministry of Interior deals with the issues of the outpost and the Pythagi Conglomerate. The Ministry of Exterior will handle all external affairs. Mersa is currently in a room in that building. We will be told exactly which one when we land. Both are connected to the offices of the Executive, who runs everything for the Pythagi Conglomerate in this sector.”

<Why don't we know which room he is in now?> David asked.

“Because the Pythagi are uncertain. They fear that if they tried to force him into a particular location, Mersa would be alerted.”

“I see,” Tobias nodded. “Anything else we need to be worried about?”

“I do not trust the Pythagi. They have no honor. They will turn against us in a moment if they see an advantage in it. If it comes to a battle with them, you should know a few things. Most do not carry weapons. They will attack you with their talons. Avoid those if at all possible.” Guraff pointed to a particularly long scar on one arm. “Carelessness against them is not quickly forgotten. Those that go armed will most likely

attack you with Oda cannons. They are weapons unique to the Pythagi; few other races have the necessary physiology for them.”

He called up another hologram. It was of a Pythag warrior equipped with what was presumably an Oda cannon. The barrel of the weapon was strapped to his left arm. A closer image showed me that the Pythag activated it by pushing or pulling a switch attached to his thumb. A tube of some kind looped around from the rear of the weapon, across the Pythag's back, and into some sort of canister attached to the right arm. Ammunition or a, I guess. “What exactly does that thing do?” Jake asked.

“It looks like a flamethrower,” Rachel commented, smiling.

“It is...similar. Trust me that you do not want to be attacked by one,” Guraff told her. “I would show you the wounds from that encounter, but that host is no longer among the living.”

“For what that's worth,” Marco muttered. “Does everyone agree to stay dead from now on?”

<No,> the Visser answered. <Now, are we quite ready to depart? I have been orbiting this rock for far too long as it is.>

“Just a few more things,” Tobias answered. Then he

heaved a large, steel case onto the table. He opened it to reveal several Shredders and what I think were Andalite grenades. He took a pair of Shredders for himself and a few grenades.

Rachel did so as well. In addition to her birthday present, she was far too well armed for my comfort. Al grabbed a Shredder and a few explosives. I didn't know what I was doing with a grenade, so I contented myself with a Shredder. Cassie chose not to help herself to anything. Each of the other Animorphs grabbed a few weapons.

Tobias shut the case. "One more thing, Visser. I would not advise touching this. It's a little surprise Al and I cooked up. If you attempt to move it, it will release a pulse that will disable the Blade ship for... Al, how effective is it?"

<It would be faster to build a second Blade ship rather than attempt to repair this one,> Al answered.

Tobias nodded. "Yeah. So I wouldn't suggest touching it. Also, if I'm not back within three days, it will go off anyway. So I'd advise you not to try leaving without us. Okay, now we can go."

Along the way out, though, Guraff helped himself to some of the weapons he had stockpiled over his career. There were a few Dracon beams and some weapons I didn't recognize. Also,

I couldn't help but notice that he decided to bring his sword, the one with the Kelbrid poison. Apparently, the Pythagi were not the only ones Guraff didn't trust.

When we rolled out of the Blade ship, I was feeling pretty good. I was walking out of a giant machine of death, strapped with alien weapons. I was following Guraff and Tobias, both of whom sort of scared me. I figured that between the two of them, Rachel, Jake, Al, and Cassie, we could handle anything the Pythagi might have to throw at us.

But we all made a bit of a mistake. The Pythagi were not warriors like the Kelbrid we usually fought, or like Andalites, or even like humans and Yeerks. They were...more subtle than that. And in a lot of ways, infinitely more dangerous. Maybe what happened to us was a good thing. At least it reminded me of one thing: as dangerous as war can be, peace can be a lot deadlier. At least in a time of war, you usually see the one trying to kill you. And you know why. In peace, the knife always comes from behind.

It's kind of a funny thing. Humans aren't designed to watch our own backs. Our eyes always look forward. Maybe it just means that we were never meant for peace.

CHAPTER 11

Guraff wasn't happy when he found out that half of our team was staying behind to baby sit the Visser. But he didn't pause to argue over it. He just wanted to get in, get Mersa, and get out before the Pythagi decided to get worked up and get us off of this rock immediately. Get.

One of the Pythagi met us almost as soon as we left the Blade ship. We landed just behind the settlement's walls, on a small landing pad the Pythagi had reserved for us. The alien who met us introduced himself in Galard. I can't tell you what his name was. Apparently, the Pythagi speak a tonal language. And since they have two mouths, that means that to pronounce anything correctly, you need at least that many. So I'm just going to give you the closest guess I can. Let's call him Telos.

Telos spoke softly, like he was afraid to be overheard. "Mersa is in the Ministry of Exterior. We expect him to be in room one-seven-two slash zero-five-nine for the next three hours. This is all that we will provide for you. We are unwilling to involve ourselves directly in the assassination of a Yeerk official. You understand, of course."

"Of course," Tobias nodded. "How do we get to the room?"

Guraff answered him. “The Pythagi are capable of flight. There will be a door to the level of the room on the exterior of the building. It will open into the hallway, and we can find the room that way.”

“Or you could use the lift,” Telos suggested. “Mersa will be in one of the private suites. The lift will open directly into his room.”

Jake looked at the building. “The only way we're getting up there is in bird morphs.”

“I guess that means I'm taking the lift,” Rachel shrugged.

“Then I am as well,” Guraff agreed. “And since I have no idea how to operate Pythagi technology, I suggest that we take *aristh* Alloran with us.”

Tobias nodded again. “Right. You three take the lift. Along with Jake. I'll go the other way. James, Cassie, and I will be waiting in the hallway to make sure he doesn't get out that way. We'll block him, Jake guts him.”

Guraff nodded. “A sound plan. But be on your guard. Mersa has proven himself to be far more resourceful than I expected. There is no telling what he will have prepared.”

Silently, we began to morph. I focused my mind on my bird of prey morph. It was a red-tailed hawk. It was Tobias, to

be exact. I won't bore you with the details of the morph, I'm sure you've heard it all before. Just know that Guraff, Rachel, Jake, and Al headed off towards the front door of the tower while Tobias and I turned into a pair of twins and Cassie became an osprey.

Tobias finished even before Cassie did. I guess it was because he was far too familiar with the hawk. He and Cassie were riding a thermal up and up before I was even finished morphing. Once I was done, I followed them.

From the air, I could really appreciate the height of the building. This thing was massive. I did some thinking and realized that, judging by the number Telos had given us, we had to reach the 172 level and find room 059. At least, that's where we needed to go if I understood the Pythagi room numbering system. That's what 172/059 should have meant. Of course, if I was wrong, we were in a serious predicament...

Since this was the usual method of entry for Pythagi, the levels were clearly labeled. It wasn't hard to find floor 172, and we only had to circle the building a little bit to find the entrance, thrown wide open. We flew in and demorphed.

Tobias nodded to me. "Battle morphs. Maximum firepower." He started going to his Howler morph. I focused

on my lion. It was a good thing our bird morphs had forced us to leave our weapons with Rachel, Guraff, Jake, and Al, because they were useless to a lion or to the wolf Cassie was morphing. And the Howler was already a weapon; it didn't need a new one.

The first thing that happened was my mane. It exploded out of my head. Since my hair was already almost the same color as the lion's mane, it looked like my hair was growing at hyper-speed. I caught a glimpse of it in the window. "Not bad," I commented. "Not bad at all. I should look into this." Of course, Jordan would have hated it.

The rest of the morph was normal; as normal as any morph is, at any rate. Nothing worth noting. Cassie, as usual, was done before the rest of us. She darted her head around. <This is the right level,> she confirmed. <I smell human. Only one. It's Mersa, alright. I recognize his host's scent.>

Tobias nodded. "He walked down this hallway just a few moments ago. I can see the heat trail he left; humans run hotter than Pythagi."

<I can smell him too,> I added. I guess I felt kind of left out. <Let's go find us some Yeerk.>

We ran down the hallway. A few Pythagi gave us odd looks

but kept out of our way. We passed several other species, too; most of them I didn't recognize. At last, though, we all halted at the same door. The numbers, which used the Galard numbering system, read 059. This was it.

<Should we...I don't know, knock or something?> Cassie asked.

<I vote for 'or something',> I suggested. <Break it down, we've got the muscle for it.>

Tobias shook his head. “We don't want to alarm him; Jake gets that pleasure.” Instead, he put his ear to the door. We did so, too, listening for the signal.

After a few moments, we heard a whooshing sound. The lift doors opening. “Mersa!” Guraff called. “The time has come to pay for your treason.”

Then I heard the sound of a Shredder firing. And then I heard Rachel say, “Oh damn it. Tobias, get in here. We've got a problem.”

CHAPTER 12

The door broke down without much effort on our part. It was made of wood from the trees surrounding the settlement, so it wasn't doing anything against a Howler, lion, and wolf. The flimsy wood shattered and we leapt inside.

Mersa was standing by the far wall, looking calm. Across the room from him, Guraff, Jake, Al, and Rachel stood with weapons leveled at the Yeerk. There was nothing else in the room; a fact that made me nervous. "What's the problem?" Tobias asked.

"See for yourself," Rachel muttered. Jake fired his Shredder. The beam of green light lanced across the room. But a few feet from Mersa, the beam faded out and disappeared."

"Pythag forcefield technology," Mersa informed us. "Impervious to all sorts of harmful energy. The Pythagi realized that there was more to be gained by an alliance with me than by letting you kill me."

"What gain?" Guraff demanded.

Mersa laughed. "A simple one. I told them most of what was going on on Earth. Nothing about Azmaveth and Crayak; nothing that needed to be kept a secret. But they know one very important fact: with you and the Visser eliminated, I am

the one who would be in charge of the Yeerk forces on Earth. And with the Animorphs killed, there would be no one left to stop me. With Earth as a foothold, the Yeerks could reemerge and drive off the Andalites once and for all. They are hardly prepared for a second war. They would be taken completely by surprise and destroyed utterly.”

“Why would the Pythagi care about the Yeerks and Andalites?” Jake asked. “What’s in it for them?”

“With the Andalites out of the picture, who would be left to tell the Pythagi what they could and could not do? The Yeerks certainly do not care how they conduct their business or where. We would not seek to impose such ridiculous restrictions like the ones the Andalites forced upon them. Many new avenues of trade would be open to the Pythagi, and many new businesses.”

“What could you offer them that the Visser could not?” Guraff demanded. “He has already offered them the chance to expand their operations into Kelbrid space.”

“And how, oh mighty warrior,” Mersa mocked, “do you think they learned that the Visser had the power to offer them such a thing? I told them all I knew about many things. The Kelbrid do not rule anything anymore. Their sector of the

galaxy is wide open. Already, the Pythagi have made contact with a similar race, the Iskoort. Negotiations are in progress as we speak. What they demanded of the Visser was a test; one that he failed. My offer, on the other hand, is entirely real.”

“So all that was left was to lure us here with bait we couldn't resist,” Tobias finished.

“Of course. I've been in negotiations with the Pythagi before I began my rebellion. We were waiting for this opportunity for a long time. And Jake was so very obliging. I wonder if Azmaveth realizes he has set in motion the downfall of both his own army and that of his enemy.”

“Downfall?” Tobias questioned. “We're not dead yet, Mersa.”

“Too true. A situation that I intend to correct.” The fourth wall, the one across from us, slid into the floor. Behind it were more Pythagi than I wanted to count. About half of them had the Oda cannons that Guraff had warned us about. The other half wore similar weapons, but the barrels of these were longer and thinner. The far wall behind them disappeared as well, revealing even more Pythagi warriors.

Mersa gave us a cold smile. “Even the God General and Devil Prince have their limits. And Tobias, don't think that

your morph's healing powers will help you here. The Pythagi have a new weapon: some handy little darts filled with a synthesized version of the Kelbrid poison. I must thank you, Guraff, for leaving that prototype in your ship. The Pythagi were able to mass produce it very quickly.”

In an instant, this would erupt into a bloodbath. We'd get a few of them, but there was no way we'd survive. <Rachel, activate a grenade and drop it. Now!> Tobias ordered her in thought-speak. <Guraff, with me!> Both of them obeyed instantly.

Guraff and Tobias launched themselves at the Pythagi. The warriors were caught off-guard for a moment and an instant later, the two of them were so thick inside the Pythagi ranks that they couldn't fire without almost certainly killing their own men. Instead, they reared back on one leg and raised the other, the talon ready to strike.

Rachel activated the grenade, dropped it at her feet, and dashed behind me as fast as she could. “Always good to have a lion between you and a blast,” she said to me.

A flash of light blinded me, and the following explosion deafened me. When my sight returned, though, I saw a bit hole in the floor. <GO!> Tobias ordered. He and Guraff turned and

started fighting their way back to us. <Don't wait for us, just run damn it!> Then he reminded the Pythagi of how the Howler got it's name. He let loose with a “KEEROOOOW!” that made my ears bleed. I roared in pain. I couldn't even remember what I was trying to do.

Al, I guess, was thinking a little more clearly. He tossed some grenades of his own into the Pythagi ranks. I couldn't see a thing in a few moments. I dashed for where I remembered the hole being, keeping my eyes shut in an effort to keep them from being burnt out completely.

I landed on the level below us and shook my head. My vision was somewhat returned. Jake had the idea now. He already blew a hole in the floor of this suite as well. There were other holes in the ceiling now, from Al's bombs. Dead or wounded Pythagi lay around the room. Pieces of Pythagi, at least. Tobias and Guraff dropped down behind me. <James, why are you standing here!? Get moving! Jake, drop another level, then blow us a hole into the lift. We'll try getting out that way. Get Rachel out first!>

I dove through the hole and almost crushed Cassie when I landed. <Get back,> she advised. I saw why: Jake was setting an explosive at the doors of the lift. I tore for the other side of

the room and covered my face. After my ears started ringing, I knew the blast went off.

<In, in, in!> Tobias ordered. I dove into the lift shaft without thinking. Only once I was falling through the air did I realize that no one had called up a lift. I was going to fall 170 some odd levels to the ground and I didn't think there was anything that could stop me.

CHAPTER 13

<TOBIAS!> I shouted.

<Already working on it,> he grunted. I guess a free fall through the air didn't bother him. It probably felt familiar.

<Start demorphing. You won't fit like that.>

<Fit in what!?!> Jake demanded. <God, this is insane!>

“No,” Guraff shouted. “Look up!” I did. Something was coming at us; fast. The floor of the lift. But how would that help us? It would just crush us into the floor and probably grind any traces of us into powder.

Tobias was the one of us who was highest up. He spun his torso around; an ability that Howlers have. He pawed at the air for a few moments. Then his claws connected with the floor of the lift. <Shredder me, AI!>

AI obeyed and let go of a Shredder. Tobias snagged it out of the air with the reflexes of a howler. <This is going to suck for a moment...> Then he fired. The flash of green light blew a big hole in the floor. Tobias was stunned for a moment. Then, he recovered and pulled himself inside. <Come on!>

The lift was moving faster than we were. Thank God. I managed to get inside without much difficulty. I hugged a wall, standing on one of the still-intact parts of the floor.

Rachel was next, followed by Guraff, Cassie, and then Jake. Calmly, Tobias hit a button. After a few moments, the lift slowed and then stopped. The doors opened, and Tobias charged out, claws swinging. Guraff was right behind him, his sword at the ready.

Luckily for whoever the occupant was, he wasn't there. The room was empty. "What now?" Jake asked.

"First thing's first," Tobias said, demorphing. There was a gleam in his eye. Then the wall behind him exploded. When the smoke cleared, I saw a shape hovering just beyond it. Black, pointy, deadly...and the place Tobias called home. The Reliquary. "First, we get Rachel out of here."

Predictably, she started to protest. "Tobias, there is no—"

"There are plenty. But aside from all of my obvious, personal objections, you're slowing us down. You can't morph, Rachel, and that's a major drawback. And besides, someone needs to try to find the others. The Pythagi probably ambushed them, too."

Reluctantly, Rachel went for the ship. Tobias added, "Don't hover around here. The Pythagi certainly have some powerful ships around here. I don't want either of you getting blown out of the sky. Once you find the others, go and hide somewhere,

Rachel. I'll give you a call when I need you again.”

“What about the rest of you?” she demanded. “Why aren't you coming? We have to get out of here.”

“Not yet,” Tobias said, shaking his head. Then he looked at Jake. “Not until we get Mersa.”

“We've still got time,” Jake argued. “We could try again tomorrow. I can wait a little bit.”

“No time like the present. They'll be on guard later. Now, though, they won't expect us to be back, especially not after seeing the Reliquary leave. This is our best chance and I don't want to lose it.”

“The Devil Prince speaks truly,” Guraff agreed. “This is a dangerous plan, but we will not have a better opportunity. We must seize this while we can. Whether you come or not, Jake, I will continue on my mission.”

“I guess I don't have much of a choice, then,” Jake muttered. “But how do we go about doing this?”

“We need to find Mersa,” Tobias answered. “He won't wait around in that room for too long. But before we can find him, we need these Pythagi off of our backs. So we're going to have to disappear. Flies, everyone. Rach, take our weapons and get going.”

She gathered up our weapons, but didn't head for the ship.
“Tobias-”

“Rachel, I'll be fine. Paper-pushers and an old guy aren't going to bring me down. Guraff wouldn't let them. I'll see you in a few.”

“Oh, I know that. I was going to say when you get back, the gutters need cleaned, and we're out of orange juice. Oh, and I already told Sara you'd drive her to the homecoming in the Reliquary. Thanks for agreeing.”

“You just spring these things on me when I'm about to kill myself so-” <-that I don't have time to argue, don't you?>
Tobias responded, switching to thought-speak as he became more fly than human.

“Yep. That's exactly what I'm doing.” There was silence for a few moments. Then she said, “I know.” Another few moments passed. “Of course not. Not until I hear you say it when neither of us thinks we're going to die.” There was another moment, then, “Yeah, yeah, I'm going. Just be careful, okay? All of you.”

<Do what with the what now?> Tobias responded.

“Let me rephrase that. If you get killed, I'll make sure Azmaveth brings you back just so I can kill you again. Even

you, Jake.”

<Gotcha. I'll be careful.>

<Hey...Rachel?> I said privately. <If I don't make it back, tell Jordan...>

I think she looked in my approximate direction. It's hard to tell when you're a fly. I could guess what her look said. “*Tell Jordan what?*”

<Tell her... I guess she worries just the right amount.>

“Tell her yourself, James.” Then she was gone, inside the Reliquary and off to safety.

<Tell who what?> Al asked.

<I'll tell you when we get back,> I promised.

CHAPTER 14

When the Pythagi came to investigate the explosion the Reliquary caused, they didn't find us. It's hard enough to find flies; even harder when you're not looking for them. Of course, things couldn't be as easy as hiding out for a bit. Not once Mersa arrived.

He surveyed the damage and nodded. "The Reliquary was certainly here. There is no sign of the Animorphs, but that means nothing. They are notoriously elusive. When I arrived, I brought with me several cans of Human bug repellent. You synthesized them and made more. I suggest using that on this room. Liberally. I will be in the safe room until my meeting with the Executive. No one is to approach me until then. Anyone seeking entrance to the room is to be killed without warning. These enemies could be anyone, at any time, anywhere. Do not take chances."

<That doesn't sound good for us,> I muttered.

<Then we must follow him,> Guraff answered. <If we get into his 'safe room' with him, he will be helpless.>

<Then why are we here?> Jake asked. <Follow him. Try to land on his cloths somewhere. But if you get on the head, avoid the bald spot.>

<Does anyone else feel like they've done this about a billion times before or is it just me?> Cassie mused as we buzzed after Mersa's retreating figure.

<There's one important difference this time,> Tobias pointed out. <This time, that bald spot is a lot bigger.>

<So do you take over for Marco now that he's missing in action?> Jake asked. <Who takes over for Rachel, then?>

<Uh...I think Tobias does that, too,> I answered. <Although Guraff could handle it for now, I think.>

<I doubt that,> Guraff answered. <I lack the courage for such recklessness.>

<And yet,> Tobias responded, <I bet you're standing a few millimeters away from that bald spot we're worried about.>

<As are you, Devil Prince.>

<Hey, Alloran, James and Cassie?> Jake asked us. <Correct me if I'm wrong, but Guraff's one of our deadliest enemies, isn't he?>

<It is so,> Al answered. <Why do you ask?>

<I don't know. He and Tobias seem pretty friendly. I wonder... Nah, couldn't be.>

<What is it?> Cassie asked. She started to sound concerned. Should I be?

<Well...Rachel and Tobias were alone with Guraff a lot, weren't they?>

<Yeah. So?> I asked.

<So... Maybe Tobias isn't Tobias anymore.>

<Impossible,> Al said instantly. <They could never take Prince Tobias. And he would never let them have Rachel. He and Guraff have been friends since shortly after they met. It is unusual, I will admit, but that is the case. They are both friends and enemies.>

<I don't know, Al...> Cassie trailed off. <Tobias...he's been odd since I saw him again. James, Al, what's he like usually?>

<I don't really know him,> I admitted. <I pretty much only see him during missions and meetings. Back home, he's always...out somewhere or else locked away.>

<Locked away doing what?> Jake asked.

<You don't really think he's a Controller, do you?> I asked. It couldn't be. Not Tobias. If he was one of them... He couldn't have been all this time.

<It wouldn't be the first time one of us was infested,> Jake muttered darkly. <Did either of you notice any sort of sudden change in him at some point?>

<After the situation with Mersa began, he did become

more withdrawn,> Al admitted. <But that could be for any number of reasons. The stress of two wars, Rachel's pregnancy, the recent pressure from the Electorate...>

<Or a slug in his brain,> I admitted. <Think about it. How much damage have we done to the Visser since the Mersa thing started?>

<We destroyed several of their transports. And boiled the Yeerk pool. Furthermore, we destroyed their computers,> Al answered me.

<The computers could easily have been backed up some place safe,> Jake told him. <And the loss of those ships and the lives of those Yeerks are sacrifices that the Visser would be more than willing to make for a convincing cover. Meanwhile, he's not only using the Animorphs to destroy his enemies, he can put them in a position to be destroyed once Mersa's gone.>

<Only problem is, the Visser isn't that clever,> I reminded him.

<Maybe the Visser isn't. What about Guraff?>

Oh. I hadn't thought of that. Guraff was smart, but was he that smart? Maybe. But even if he wasn't, was it a chance we could afford to take? <what are you suggesting?>

<Cassie, what do you think?> Jake asked.

<I think... This Tobias we have now is nothing like the Tobias I've always known. Maybe these changes are because of all the things that have been dumped on him. There's no doubt that the only time any of us dealt with this much stuff was after the Yeerks discovered us near the end of the first war. Maybe it is just all of this. But maybe he is a Controller. That would make Rachel one, too. And...>

<And what?> I asked.

<Nothing,> she finished. Then, <James, this is private, got it? If they took Tobias and Rachel, they almost certainly took Al, too. He was on the Blade ship after you rescued Ax, right? Do you really think they'd let a genius like him get away?>

<She's right,> Jake agreed. <Al goes to the Blade ship and gets Yeerked. Then when he gets back, he gets Tobias a slug of his own, and then Rachel just for convenience. And then, all they have to do is wait.>

<Okay,> I said to the two of them. <He could be one. *Could*. But do you really think he is?>

<I don't know. But ask yourself a few questions, James. From what I've been told, Guraff had more than a few chances to kill him. He didn't, and Guraff doesn't strike me as the type to let an enemy walk away. Why is Tobias alive? And who was

the one organizing all of this little trip here? Who decided who slept where? Who is the strongest voice for this devil's alliance we've got going right now?>

<This is starting to sound really, really bad,> I sighed.

<I know. From now on, I don't think we can trust Tobias, Rachel, or Al. Or maybe even Ax; he and Tobias spend so much time together...>

<What are we supposed to do?> Cassie moaned. <If we've lost them to the Yeerks, we've basically lost this war.>

<We'll have to worry about that when we get home. For now, let's concentrate on the job at hand. Or claw, if you want to be literal. Let's deal with Mersa first. One slug at a time.>

CHAPTER 15

I was so busy worrying about the possibility that Tobias was a Yeerk that I didn't pay any attention to what was going on now. If Tobias was a Controller, we had a serious problem on our hands. And he might have been too dangerous to try and hold for three days. Our only solution might be to...well, kill him.

I was suddenly very, very glad that Jake was back. This was his call to make, if it even came to that. Maybe we were just being paranoid. But in this war, being anything else wasn't likely to end well. Still, if we didn't trust our own leader, how could we possibly function? I can't deny that Tobias gets more...Visserish...as time goes on. I once pointed out to him that the way he was fighting this war was kind of..., well illegal. And he all but said he'd kill me.

But Jake was right. Whether or not he was a Controller was a problem that we just couldn't deal with right now. Even if he was a Yeerk, his goal was the same as ours: kill Mersa and get out alive. That second part was looking like it was going to get harder and harder.

We hid on Mersa for a few minutes, riding in silence. After about ten minutes of riding, we stopped. And then, I heard a

hissing noise. What was that? There was a taste in my 'mouth'. It was sweet. Oily. What was going on?

<Bug spray!> Cassie shouted. <We have to get out of here, now! Mersa's getting sprayed for bugs before he goes into the safe room.>

She was right. Of course such a simple tactic wouldn't trick him. We had made a big, stupid mistake. But I sure as hell wasn't about die for it. But what to do? <Jake? Tobias? What do we do?> I launched myself off of Mersa, into the air, and flew as far away from him as I could.

<We have to demorph,> Jake answered. <We need somewhere safe.>

<We also need to find our way back. Did anyone not get poisoned?> Tobias asked.

<I only got a little,> Cassie told us. <I could wait here and try to help guide you back...>

<Good. Hide wherever you can. We'll meet up with you as soon as we can,> Tobias ordered.

<Prince Tobias, where should we demorph? I do not think my morph will survive much longer with this much poison in my system.>

<One of the suites?> Jake suggested.

<This close to the safe room, they will undoubtedly be heavily guarded,> Guraff answered. <I suggest one of the platforms on the side of the building. They will be guarded, too, but easier to clear of enemies.>

<Head for one. Follow the air flow,> Tobias commanded. <Everyone, form up behind me.>

We buzzed off down the hallway. I sure hoped Tobias knew where he was going, because I had no idea what he was talking about with the air flow. And my body was starting to get slower. Darkness was swimming at the edges of my compound fly vision, and things were getting hazy. My senses were dull, and even the fly's usual insatiable appetite seemed to be missing.

Then we emerged into fresh air. At least, it seemed fresh. That helped a little bit. But even with my dimmed senses, which weren't too great to begin with, I could see that there were several large figures on the platform with us. Pythagi guards, no doubt. What could be done?

<Al? The guards. Guraff, too, if you don't mind,> Tobias ordered. <Let us know when it's clear, and be quick about it. More will come soon and we can't afford to be caught mid-morph.>

A few moments later, I heard the squawks of startled and terrified Pythagi. Then Al told us, <The platform is clear for now, my Prince.>

It felt really good to get back into my body. It wasn't as good to see what had happened. Three Pythagi corpses lay dead on the platform. One was cut in half horizontally. Another had a deep gash down the middle of his body. A third was bleeding green blood profusely from a wound on his side. I also saw a pair of wings laying on the platform. As if reading my mind, Guraff told me, "I thought it would be amusing for a Pythag to fall to its death."

"Remind me not to go to your comedy tour," I told him.

"I don't know. Rach would probably pay to see that," Tobias responded. Then he knelt down and picked something up. "What's this?" It was a steel spear about as long as a Pythag was tall, meaning it came to about Tobias's height.

"Pythag warspear," Guraff answered, picking up one of his own. "They are designed for throwing, but I can say from experience that they hold up in melee combat as well."

<How does a Pythag throw a spear?> Al asked.

"Note the grooves in the shaft, young *aristh*. It is designed to be gripped in the talon, as you saw when we fought, and

then thrown at an enemy. They are used mostly for ceremonial guards. This version, however, seems to carry an electric charge at the tip. A dangerous upgrade.”

“Cool alien weapons aside, what do we do now?” Jake asked. “Do you think we can break into that safe room?”

“I doubt it,” Tobias answered. “If Mersa thinks he's safe, he's safe. Force isn't an option here.”

“Stealth, then?” I suggested. “Sneak in somehow?”

“He'll be prepared for any of our usual tricks. Do we have anything special?” Jake asked.

“Tunnel through the floor in Taxxon morph?” Tobias suggested. “Have AI hack something to take down the room's defenses? We've got several options here.”

“What about using neither force nor stealth,” Guraff suggested. “I propose guile. Lure him out. Make the traitor come to us.”

<How could we do that?> AI asked.

I looked at the Pythagi around me. One of them was still breathing. That was good. But not because I was worried about him. It was because, for whatever the reason, you can't acquire something that's dead. I turned to Jake and Tobias. “Guys? I think I have a plan. But it's going to require a lot of

effort on Tobias's and Guraff's parts. I don't know if they're up to it..."

I explained it all to them. Tobias smiled grimly. Guraff did so, too, but with considerably more joy. "That sounds like suicide for them," Jake commented.

Tobias and Guraff locked eyes. Together, they picked up the Pythag spears and said, "Let's do it."

CHAPTER 16

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that my plan would likely get Guraff and Tobias killed. I was okay with Guraff's death; it would be great for us. But even if Tobias was a Yeerk, we couldn't lose him just yet. But they were both great warriors. There was more than a small chance they'd survive. Both were notoriously hard to kill.

I concentrated on my part. More specifically, on my morph. The first thing to change was my legs. I always get a little freaked out when my legs morph. I spent so much time without them that now, I get a little worried whenever they're not quite there. Then again, these legs were superior to my real ones. I wouldn't mind having them too much. Of course, I doubt Jordan would like me with Pythag legs.

There was a snapping sound as my knees reversed direction. Then my skin hardened and broke into plates a lot like those of the fly I was a few minutes ago. Green seeped into the plates. My foot twisted into the Pythag talon so similar to that of the birds of prey I was more or less used to becoming. Beneath the surface, muscle piled on muscle. I didn't realize how strong these legs were.

My body neck disappeared as my head sank into my chest.

There was a grinding sound as my entire skeleton restructures itself into something that wasn't even close to terrestrial. My body widened just below my ribs and just above them, to a lesser extent. The area in between shrank a little, giving me the peanut-shaped body of a Pythag.

My shoulders forced their way down, and my hands melted into the mittens that the Pythagi had in place of hands. My eyes squeezed themselves together, and then the stalk exploded out of my head. By twisting the stalk around, it rotated in a complete circle, I could see two antennae SPROUT out of my 'head', if it could still be called that.

Then I felt the wings grow. Four of them, like a fly's, seemed to unfold from my back. They buzzed and jittered despite everything I did to hold them in line. Like all the rest of my body, they were a light-green in color.

Last came the mouths. They grew out of the lower portion of my body. I was glad they came last, because if I still had a human stomach, I would have freaked out right then and quit the morph. Never before have I been anything so obviously not from Earth. I felt the hard ridges inside of my beaks, almost like teeth. I rang my tongues over them. It turns out, a Pythag has four tongues.

Then the Pythag mind surfaced. It's always weird to get the instincts from a sentient creature, because they're almost always dull. In this case, the Pythag had very few instincts. It was content to be there on the platform. But I noticed something. The senses were odd.

The sight was more or less the same as my usual vision, although everything seemed kind of bluish. The antennae worked like an insect's antennae, sensing vibrations. What got me was the smell-taste thing the body had going on. I was absorbing scents from the air, and they were getting stuck on one of my tongues. The second tongue was licking the first and interpreting the scents. I couldn't read Guraff and Tobias, since they were aliens and not programmed into the Pythag instincts, but Jake and AI, also in Pythag morphs, were open books to me.

They were nervous. Worried. Scared. <Jake, are you sure this plan is going to work? I expected you guys to make some modifications to it after I suggested it.>

<I'm sure everything will be fine,> Jake said. I could taste that he was lying. No wonder the Pythagi were successful businessmen. They could literally taste deceit. <I trust you.> That part, at least, was true. <I just wish I could figure out

how to make this mouth speak words.>

<That's a bit of a problem,> I agreed. I glanced down at the spear between my talons. <I'm more worried about this thing.> I hefted the spear with one talon, balancing on the other.

<Trial by fire, huh?>

“Do not worry, James,” Guraff told me. “Most Pythagi warriors do not know how to wield their weapons. You will fit in perfectly.”

“Just remember your job, James,” Tobias reminded me as he began to morph to Howler. “If one of us gets knocked off, you've got to catch us. From this height, the fall will even kill a Howler.”

<Do you have any idea how hard it will be to snag one of you out of the air if you fall?> I asked.

Tobias nodded. “I call it getting breakfast. You'll be fine, James. Jake, make sure you're in position. We'll only get one shot at this and if we pull this off, your timer stops clicking. Al, making any progress on the speech front?”

<I believe so, my Prince.>Then, with his mouths, he said, “With a little patience and thought, I am able to speak coherently.” At least, that's what I think he said. It was kind of hard to tell with the Pythag voice, and he was speaking

Galard. His job was one of the most important.

Tobias nodded. “Then get to it. The guards will be here soon and Cassie must be worried sick.” Sure enough, I saw Pythagi start to gather, flying towards us in a cloud. They were coming, either because they'd seen us or had been told about the ones we killed. Whatever the reason, it was about to start. Jake and I got into position, hiding beneath the platform, hovering in air.

I gripped my spear. <Jake...there's a really good chance both of them will die here.>

He nodded. Or at least, I think he did. Pythagi aren't made for nodding. <Yeah, there is. And if Tobias dies, we're telling Rachel it was my fault. I won't let her blame you for it.>

<You sure you want to do that, Jake? I'm pretty sure you don't get to come back a third time, and she'll definitely kill anyone responsible for Tobias's death.>

<Dying isn't so bad. I'm only trying to get back here because you still need me.> I was about to respond, but then I heard Pythag screams. It had started.

CHAPTER 17

Jake and I emerged from beneath the platform in time to see the mass of Pythagi descending on Guraff and Tobias. The Howler and the Hork-bajir stood back-to-back. Each held a Pythag spear and the natural weapons of their bodies. Not to mention far too much experience. Here, they would meet God knew how many Pythagi warriors. All in an effort to draw Mersa out of hiding so that Jake could kill him.

The platform was about fifty feet long and half as wide. This was all the space they had to fight in. If they fell....well, let's just hope catching them was as easy as Tobias told me it was.

Tobias drew first blood. A Pythag got too close to him and caught a spearhead in the little part between the two sections of its body. Tobias followed it up by clubbing another with the butt of the spear, and then slashing a third with the head. He rolled with his momentum and kicked another in the 'face', and finished it up by slashing the spear across all of their lower sections.

Guraff laughed. "Well done, Devil Prince. Where did you learn that skill?" Even as he spoke, Guraff launched himself at some of his own enemies. He wielded his spear with less skill,

but he was even stronger than Tobias was, and he had even more blades. Four more Pythagi lay dead at his feat in as many seconds.

“A friend of mine named Zhang Liao. It's a long story; I'll tell you later,” Tobias responded as he slashed a few more. They seemed to be doing well, but it was only a matter of time. Neither of them was immortal. Soon, they'd be crushed under the weight of numbers or gunned down. We just had to hope Al got Mersa out here before that happened.

The remaining Pythagi broke and fled. Civilians, I guess. Then I realized what just happened. We had murdered some innocent civilians on their way home or to work. God... That was just wrong.

<Guys...do you realize you just killed some civilians?> I asked. I didn't want them to stop the plan, it was too late now, but I thought they needed to know.

“A shame,” Guraff muttered. “Civilians put up no fight.”

“We don't have a choice, James,” Tobias told me. “We have to lure them out. If we have to kill a few innocents along the way, that's a price I'm willing to pay. I knew that going into this plan. Innocent lives are always lost in war.”

“There is no innocence here,” Guraff answered. “This

platform is a battlefield and they stood before me on it. Death is the fate they hazard. Do you not agree, Devil Prince?"

"In fact, but not in spirit, God General." They cut off, though. More were coming. These ones had spears. "Now it heats up." Tobias hefted his spear and launched himself at the Pythagi; they hadn't even landed yet. He cut down a pair of them, but now they were starting to land. Soon, they covered the platform like a cloud.

Tobias and Guraff wheeled through them with their spears. Tobias was far faster than any of them, and he knew how to use his weapon. They fell before him like dummies, like they weren't even real. A few of them wounded him, but it was nothing the Howler didn't heal almost instantly.

He was drawing heavily on the Howler memories; he must have been. He carved a path through them, down to one end of the platform and back again. It was...terrifying. I saw the fight that had caused Guraff to give Tobias his title of Devil Prince. Now, I was sure the Pythagi would call him that, too.

Guraff was just as impressive, if not more so. He didn't have the memories of the Howlers, but he had his own lifetime of experience. He used his spear as more of a bludgeon, ruthlessly smacking down any who were beyond the range of

his blades. Any who slipped closer were met with a flurry of blades from the massive Hork-bajir. He cut his own path through the Pythagi. After a few minutes of slaughter, he and Tobias met back up in the middle. They stood back-to-back again, ready for any more who would dare stand against them.

They Pythagi stood in a ring around them but dared not come close enough to attack. They were shaking, afraid. Too afraid of their enemies to attack but too afraid of their leaders to retreat. A bad position to be in. But their decision was made for them when even more Pythagi showed up.

These ones carried Oda cannons. And I didn't taste much fear from them. There was some, but it wasn't thick in the air like it was with the others. These ones were the true warriors. They knew fear; they also knew how to master it and do their jobs. The army had arrived. They landed on the platform and replaced the spearmen.

Guraff didn't let them get the chance to fire off those weapons. He charged at his opponents and was soon so thickly surrounded that they couldn't possibly shoot without killing their allies. From there, he went wild on them, killing anything that moved. It almost seemed like he took opposition as a personal insult. It was offensive to him that anyone would dare

stand against him.

Tobias wasn't so lucky. He charged at his foes, too, but they were ready for him. One of them cut loose with the canon. I saw a field of purple particles shoot at Tobias at high speed. They faded out of sight when they touched him. So did the parts of him that they touched.

After less than a second, his left arm was completely gone, and so was part of that side. The skin had been torn away, leaving only blackened bone and pouring blood. He stumbled blindly for a moment. Then, he tipped over the edge of the platform. The Pythagi were content to let him fall. I wasn't.

I plunged down after Tobias. He was screaming in agony and I couldn't blame him. If that had been a better shot, he'd probably be dead, no matter what body he was in. Those cannons were deadly, even worse than Dracon beams in my opinion. No wonder the Andalites had wanted to keep those weapons away from Earth.

He fell for what felt like minutes. In reality, it was probably only a handful of seconds, but that feels like forever when you're trying to save someone's life. I sank my talons into his shoulders. Yes, plural; his wounds were already healing. <See?> he grunted. Even in through speak, I could

hear the pain in his voice. And I could taste it in the air. <Not that hard.>

I powered my wings and managed to haul him back up to the platform. The warriors were too engaged to notice me. Guraff was still cutting them down, but he was slowing, tiring. And he was wounded. Spear wounds, electrical burns, and cuts from their talons were all over his body. Tobias howled, not nearly at full power, and dove back into the fray.

The reappearance of Tobias, seemingly in perfect health, was just too much for the Pythagi. Some broke and fled. Some fired wildly, killing allies. Still, a hardcore few gathered to continue the fight.

Then I saw what we had been waiting for. A Pythag led Mersa to the platform above us, off to the right, where he could see this battle. That Pythag must have been Al. He did his part and lured Mersa out. Not even the paranoid Yeerk could resist seeing Guraff and Tobias die under the weight of hundreds of Pythagi warriors, crushed under their own arrogance.

Then one of the Pythagi separated from the wad and landed next to Mersa. In an instant, the Yeerk found a talon wrapped around his throat. <Hey, Mister Chapman,> Jake

said. <Sorry I'm late.>

CHAPTER 18

Everyone stopped. The warriors turned to see what was happening. I landed on the platform, next to Al. <Where's Cassie?> I asked him privately.

<She will join us shortly. Mersa's area is cleared of guards. She is morphing there.>

Mersa was turning blue, and blood was starting to seep out over Jake's talons. But something was wrong. I could taste it on Jake. He was losing his nerve. <Jake, what gives?> I demanded. <You're stopping.>

<Yeah, I know. The thing is... I know he's a Yeerk, okay? But when I look at him, all I see is myself strangling my Principal. I know a lot of kids had that fantasy, but I... I still see Mister Chapman. I've known him for so long... Chapman is an innocent person. And I'm killing him for no other reason than to save my own life. That's murder, James, pure and simple.>

<Yeah. To save your own life,> I reminded him. <I can't think of many people who would argue against that.>

<But Chapman isn't the guilty one. It's the Yeerk who did all this. And even he's not as bad as the Visser. Damn it, how did it come to this, James? Why does an innocent man have to

die so that I can live? Why do I have to kill a lesser enemy instead of the one who ruined my life and stole my brother from me? Why do I have to punish everyone except for the one who deserves this?>

<Because...> I didn't really have any answer aside from the obvious one. <Because you have to do it. If you want to put it all right, if you want to punish the Visser, then you have to do this. It sucks and it's wrong. But it's something that you have to do. Isn't that why we do all this?>

<Yeah, I guess you're right. It's like I told Cassie, long ago. It's hard to fight evil without doing some along the way. But...> He directed his thought-speak to Mersa now. <Listen, Mersa. Please.... Don't take Chapman down with you. He doesn't deserve this. After all he's been through, don't force him to die this way.>

“Please, don't...tell me you're...appealing...to my heart...Jake,” Mersa gasped.

<Let me put it another way, then. I still have some time left to live. When did you last feed, Yeerk? Do I have time to starve you to death? Maybe I do, maybe not. But I'm willing to die trying. Because I swear that I will not kill any more innocent people to save my own life. That sort of thing catches

up with you in the end. I won't kill Chapman. But I swear to God I will kill you. So you can starve to death, or have a quick one. It's up to you.>

“Look around...Jake,” Mersa hissed. Jake kept his eyes locked on Mersa's, so I did it for him. The Pythagi clustered in the sky around us. Tobias and Guraff had somehow joined us on the platform, along with a wolf. “Either way...you're dead.”

“I beg to disagree,” Tobias said, hoisting an Oda cannon and a spear. “These Pythag have no interest in fighting us. Your life is not worth theirs, Yeerk. It's just not...profitable.”

To demonstrate their agreement, the Pythagi turned and slowly flew away. Mersa was alone with us on the platform. <What's it going to be, Yeerk? We can call up the Reliquary in a few minutes and have you tied up safely, waiting to die of Kandrona starvation. Is that how you want to go out?>

Mersa's eyes darted to Guraff. “Guraff. Please, help me. I will be loyal again. I can help you. I have knowledge that could win you this war once and for all.”

“Tell me first and I will spare your life,” Guraff said slowly. “Upon my honor.”

<Guraff, that's not an opt-> Jake began to say.

“Let him speak, Jake,” Tobias interrupted. I was about to

protest. Presumably, Jake was, too. Was this the possible Yeerk taking over? Or did he know something? I sensed deceit coming from him, but I found honesty, too. <Let's see where this goes,> I advised Jake.

<Fine. Speak, then. Fast. And we'll deal with it then.>

Mersa turned his head towards Guraff as much as it would go. “The rebellion... It wasn't my idea. Do you think it's a coincidence that I ran to the Pythagi? That they sheltered me? That they were willing to spend so many of their own men for me? The rebellion was their idea.”

“I find this hard to believe,” Guraff muttered. “Another desperate plot to save your own life.”

“It's true! The Executive of this outpost contacted me shortly before I began my rebellion. It was he who advised me to push for a second front. It was he and his other agents in the Yeerk Empire who gained me my position.”

“To what end?” the Controller demanded.

“A simple one. With Earth under our control, the Yeerks could rise again. And to fight a war, we'd need industry. And who better to provide it than the Pythagi? We'd obliterate the Andalites and the few others who stood in our way. The Yeerk Empire would sweep across the galaxy. And as our power

grew, so would the profits of the Pythagi.”

“What evidence do you have of this?” Guraff questioned.

“The obvious kind. The Visser gave me little funding to begin with, and none after my rebellion began. Where do you think my funds came from? My Bug fighters? The Pythagi were producing a Blade ship for me, and were designing a new Pool ship. They supplied me with weapons, too. They were the masterminds behind all of it!”

“A claim that we will have to investigate,” Guraff said. “I will see to it. As soon as you are buried.”

“Buried? Guraff, whether you believe me now or not is of little matter. But surely you should wait until after you investigate this to sentence me to death. You swore upon your honor that-:

“Guraff’s word of honor,” Tobias interrupted quietly, “does not extend to traitors.”

Guraff nodded. “And you, Mersa, are thrice a traitor. First, you betrayed the Visser. Then, you betrayed the Devil Prince and returned to the Empire. And now, you have betrayed us again. No more. If the Visser has his way, you will be starved. If I have mine, it will be very slowly; I have learned much from Esplin when it comes to tormenting enemies. But you

have one final choice. You can leave your host now and die a painless death at Jake's hands. Which do you choose, Mersa?"

Mersa sighed. "Well played, Tobias. You were right when you said that chess was not a game of war. Real war is so much more complimented. No other pawn has ever been given such a choice of deaths. But know that I was just that: a mere pawn. Or perhaps a rook; there can be no denying my importance to these plans. But in the end, we are all pieces to be sacrificed.

"You are no different. I know enough about Crayak to know that this will not end well for you. He will betray you and destroy you, as he always does. When you are no longer of use to him, he will cast you aside and remove you from this game, sacrificed for whatever gain he sees. So it is with us all.

"So be it, then. I will join you all beside the board very soon. And," he added with a slight smile, "if there is one thing this has taught us, it is that death is far from a permanent state. I have a feeling that Azmaveth will find use for me yet. I will see you soon, Animorphs."

Finally, the small, grey slug crawled out of Chapman's ear. It's always weird to see the Yeerk behind everything. To think of all that happened and realize that it's all because of the

ambitions of something that's just a few inches long.
Something that any child could squish and not notice.
Something that looks like French food. <How are you going to do it?> I asked him.

<The fast way. I'd toss him, but I want to be sure he's dead,> Jake answered. He squeezed the Yeerk in his talons until they closed altogether. In just a moment, Mersa 528, leader of the Yeerk Rebellion, our one-time ally and then enemy, was no more.

Guraff bowed his head. "He was a traitor. A liar. Untrustworthy, dishonorable, unreliable, and in many ways a fool. But he was cunning, adaptable, and able to accept the misfortunes of life. For all his flaws, he is a Yeerk worth remembering. He will not be memorialized honorably as many Yeerks would, but we will not forget him. Of this, you can be certain. And so it ends."

"Not yet," Tobias said, shaking his head. "If Mersa was telling the truth, we have to cut this off at its source." He looked up, towards the small tower that connected the two much larger ones. The tower of the Executive. "This day isn't over yet."

CHAPTER 19

“You think he might have been telling the truth?” Jake asked as he demorphed.

“I think so. Mersa's ambitious, but he's also a very cautious man. And an intelligent one. He had to have known what sort of chance his rebellion had, how it was probably going to end for him. Something pushed him over the edge, gave him the guts to do it. And it makes sense that it was the Pythagi.”

“I say we call it a day,” I suggested. “Meet up with the others, make sure they're safe, and then figure it out from there. With Mersa dead, we don't have a time crunch anymore. And besides, we have to get Mer- Chapman out of here.” I looked at the man laying on the floor. He was conscious, but I don't think he remembered how to move. He needed some help.

“James is right,” Cassie agreed. “We need to take care of Chapman. Let's deal with the Pythagi tomorrow. Or even leave this place for good.”

Jake nodded. “It's best to make a plan for this one. We need some time and some rest. It's been a rough couple of hours, after all.”

“”There is little urgency needed here,” Guraff reminded

Tobias. “The Pythagi will take time to rethink their plans for Earth. With Mersa destroyed, they may abandon that gambit altogether.”

<Although I agree with Guraff, I will not argue against you, my Prince.>

“If you all think so, I guess I don't have a lot of choice,” Tobias sighed. He was silent for a moment. Then, “The Reliquary should be on its way. Al, how far away can I control it with my mind?”

<I do not know, Prince Tobias. We have never tested the range of control.>

“Probably something we should have done.”

<Perhaps.>

Chapman stirred, then slowly climbed to his feet. “I have to thank you all. Especially you, Jake. But Mersa was telling the truth. The Pythagi are behind this. The Visser and your friends might be dead or in serious danger. Rachel, too. Their fleet will be following the Reliquary. Mersa didn't forget about it.”

Tobias paled. “What can we do about that?”

“The Executive could call it off. But his tower will be nearly impossible to get into. And he probably won't agree to

anything.”

“I can be very...persuasive,” Tobias assured him. “How do we get in?”

“There are two entrances, one at the top of each tower.”

“I guarantee he has a private entrance. Do you have any idea where it might be?”

“He needs no entrance,” Chapman insisted. “He never leaves his tower. You'll have to use one of the two entrances that I know about.”

Tobias glanced at the floor of the platform. Next to him sat a spear and an Oda cannon. “Or we could make our own. Everyone, get wings. Preferably big ones. We're going to pay a little visit to the Executive.”

Again, I morphed Pythag. So did Jake and Al. Jake carried the Oda cannon, and Al kept the spear. I carried Chapman as gently as I could. We couldn't leave him on the platform to get snapped up by the next Pythag who happened to wander past. Tobias was a red-tailed hawk, Guraff a golden eagle, and Cassie an osprey.

Jake landed on the top of the shaft leading from our tower to that of the Executive. Then he very calmly blew a hole in the wall large enough for Guraff to squeeze through in his

host's natural body. <Who wants to lead this charge?> he asked.

Tobias demorphed, and then started going to Howler. "I'll handle it," he assured us, picking up the spear AI had carried for him. "Let's see just how much this guy will pay for his life."

Tobias leapt through the hole, followed by Guraff, then the rest of us. I guess Jake chose a good spot to fire, because we were right inside the Executive's office. A Pythag in what seemed to be some sort of blue cape, fitted to make room for his wings, sat behind a desk.

"Ah," he said in English, "I was wondering when you would arrive. Please, Prince Tobias, put down the spear. There is no need for weapons in negotiations."

"You and I seem to have different definitions for that word," Tobias answered, leveling his spear at the Executive.

The Executive sighed with both mouths. "I called off the hunt for your friends shortly after it began. You will be pleased to know that none of them were killed, despite my best efforts."

"Why call it off?" Tobias asked.

In response, a section of one of the walls disappeared.

There stood the Visser. <Ah, Tobias. What kept you?>

The Executive chuckled. “The Visser entered into negotiations with us shortly after we began the hunt. We called it off for the time being. And once we agreed on a deal, we decided to let you have Mersa for yourselves.”

<Rather generous of them, if you ask me,> the Visser told us. <You have no idea the concessions I had to make in order to convince them not to turn against Mersa. After all, if the Pythagi get a reputation as an untrustworthy race, who would do business with them?>

“Ah, and such a deal it was,” the Executive said with a smile in his voice. “But I have no more need of any of you on this planet. You may leave as soon as you wish; it is recommended that you do so soon.”

“So, what... You launch a Yeerk rebellion, try to take over Earth and run out the Andalites, and we're just supposed to walk away?” Tobias demanded.

“Many distasteful things are done in business and war, Prince. Perhaps, in the future, we could have some sort of alliance. You need resources and the Pythagi Conglomerate is more than happy to provide them for a modest fee. But until you are willing to talk business, I have no use for you.”

We looked at each other for a few moments. Then, Tobias hurled the spear at the Executive. It stopped in the air and then dropped to the ground a few feet from his desk. “I thought so,” Tobias sighed as he retrieved his spear. “There's nothing to be done, then.”

“I have already taken the liberty of hailing your ship for you,” the Pythag said calmly. “You would do well to teach Rachel to mind her mouth. Such language is...unbecoming in a female of any race.”

“That's a matter of personal taste,” Tobias murmured.

CHAPTER 20

It was a silent ride home on the Blade ship. The Visser had given the others the slip in the forest outside of the settlement shortly after we left. He spent the rest of the day negotiating with the Executive. They were hunted by the Pythagi for a bit but slipped away. That's what they get for following Animorphs in the great outdoors. They spent the rest of the time on the Blade ship, worried sick.

The only eventful thing that happened was when we all got back together, including Rachel and the Reliquary. Tobias decided it was time to give her a gift of her own. That gift was one of the Oda cannons he had taken from a downed Pythag; he kept the spear for himself. He was quite fond of the weapon. Needless to say, Rachel was very pleased to have a flamethrower that disintegrated whatever it touched. I hoped Tobias had remembered not to give her ammunition for it, too. But, knowing him, he had gone out of his way to make sure she had extra.

Jake, Cassie, and I decided only to tell David what we had started to suspect about Tobias and some of the others. He was the only one we could be sure wasn't a Controller. You can't infest a rat, after all. But the others, we left in the dark. We'd

deal with it when we had some idea.

We got off of the Blade ship and into the Reliquary as soon as we got back into Earth's airspace. Even if the Reliquary was Yeerk property now, it felt safer. Maybe it was because there was no room for a fight, with all of us crammed in there.

Tobias didn't talk much. I knew by now that he was disappointed with the way things had gone. We hadn't been able to stop the Visser from cutting a deal. In fact, ultimately, he was the one who had saved us. Now, he probably had all of the resources of the Pythagi Conglomerate at his disposal. That was very, very bad.

But we got Jake back. I never even imagined that it was possible. Then again, I never imagined that I'd be able to walk after my accident. Or that I'd be turning into animals. Or that I'd survive the First War. Or that I'd end up in another one. Or Jordan. But I've come to realize that nothing is impossible, just improbable. Of course, anyone who pays any attention to life, the universe, and everything already knows that.

It turns out, there was a surprise waiting for us at home. Weird how I've come to think of Jordan's house as home. But it is home, for as long as we're still here. I had no idea where

the war would take us now, but for this little bit of space, this was my home. I'd die for it.

My home had gotten bigger. Jacques had gotten tired of squeezing us all in one place and had bought the houses on either side of his own. One was completely gone, replaced with a small hangar, where we could put the Reliquary and anything else we needed to park there. The other house had been converted into a guest house, with room for all of us, and enough room for Ax and Al to graze if they kept control of themselves. It's amazing what you can do when you have money. I don't know what happened to Jacques's neighbors, but I was sure they were much, much wealthier.

When we landed in the hangar, we found everyone waiting for us. They were amazed to find Chapman with us, alive and free. Rachel immediately called up his family and invited them over. I guess she'd have some explaining to do, but that was here business.

When I saw Jordan, it was so hard not to rush up and hug her. That was all I really wanted to do. But I held myself back. I didn't want Naomi to kick me out of her new house, and I was sure she would. Her disposition hadn't improved while we were gone.

All of us Animorphs, along with Menderash, the Chapmans, Loren, Santorelli, Rachel's, Jake's, and Cassie's families, gathered together in quiet celebration. We had a feast like it was Thanksgiving. I guess, in a lot of ways, it was. I can't imagine anything we could be more thankful for. The impossible had happened, again. Chapman was free, Jake was alive, the Yeerk rebellion was crushed, and we all had room to breathe. A good few days, I guess.

But after time went on and the civilians went away, Tobias grew serious again. He had been even more quiet than usual that night, and hadn't even bothered to fight with Naomi. He spoke only to Loren and Santorelli and even ignored Rachel for a bit. Something was wrong. Didn't he ever let up? Apparently not.

It was just us Animorphs when he decided to tell us the news. "This isn't over. Not by a long shot. There are still Yeerk forces in this area. The Visser won't destroy them, though. With Mersa gone, he'll absorb them. He'll take one front, Guraff will take the other."

"Which one do we defend?" Marco asked.

"Both," Tobias answered him. "We've got the men for it now. We're not giving them an inch. They'll get nothing they

don't pry from our fists. I don't want to sound arrogant, but I'm pretty sure I'm the only one here who can handle Guraff, so I'll have to go wherever he goes. Someone has to lead the troops on the other front..."

One by one, we turned to Jake. He shook his head.

"Tobias, I'm done with the leader thing. I-"

"Jake, you know what Azmaveth wants from us. He doesn't want to beat us. He wants us to break his army. He wants to lose. He wants mankind to win. That's why he sent you back. Mersa was just an excuse. He's stacking the deck against him."

"But I don't have it anymore, Tobias," Jake insisted. "I can't get my friends killed anymore. I can't make the calls you do. Today, I couldn't kill Chapman; you wouldn't have thought twice about it. Set Ax over them. He can handle it. Who better to fight the Visser than him?"

<The one who defeated him the first time,> Ax answered simply. <I know that you don not want this, Prince Jake. That is how I know it should still be you.>

"If you grow too fond of command, you become like Esplin," Cassie agreed. "But you don't want to do this. You want to do as little harm as possible. You want to keep us safe,

above all else. That's how I know I can trust you. Besides, Jake, you heard what I said to Tobias. We can't run from this, none of us. Call it fate, destiny, or the plans of the big guys upstairs. Whatever you want to call it, we don't really have a choice for this. You came back from beyond the grave for this. It can only be you.”

“Come on, man,” Marco teased. “You're not going to weasel out of this one, now are you? That's something I would do. Besides, it's your *responsibility*,” he joked.

Jake gave a slight grin. “He said it. The 'R' word. Now I guess I don't have a choice, do I?”

<There's always a choice,> David said. <You can always decide to turn your back on it all. But trust me: you don't want to go down that road, Jake. It's dark and scary and leads you right back where you came from if it doesn't drive you over the edge.>

Tobias nodded. “You could say no, Jake.”

“Nah,” Rachel insisted. “If he could say no, he wouldn't be Jake. He's a sucker for responsibility, aren't you?”

Jake laughed. “Yeah, I guess I am. Fine, then, I'll do it for you. For now, at least. Just until you mop up Guraff. Then you're back in charge again. Shouldn't take you more than a

few weeks, the way you work.”

“So who goes where?” Jeanne asked. “Who fights on which front, under which leader?”

“That’s a question for another time,” I answered. “For now, let’s just sit back and enjoy this one. We’ve earned it.”

It seemed to me, as I looked up at the stars, that we had all gotten something of a redemption. Not for our past sins and crimes, nothing like that. I mean it in the more literal sense. We had been given back something for what we gave; that’s what it means, really. We gave it our all, and we finally got something back.

I looked around the table and realized that, impossibly, all of the Animorphs were together again. Tobias, Rachel, Jake, Marco, Cassie, and Ax. All of them were here. But so were the rest of us. David, Jeanne, Alloran, and even me, James. We were an army, and a family. Representatives of a race that may be on its way out forever. But for all we had given, all the pain we suffered, the staggering price we paid, what we got for it isn’t something I would ever trade. There was nothing greater than this. Well, maybe one thing.

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” I told them. Then, I went off to see if I couldn’t find Jordan. If there was nothing else worth

fighting for, I had all I needed in this house here. These people made it all worthwhile. For them, I would do this all again. And I knew I would do it. I wouldn't stop until this was all over.

Once, long ago, I ran away because I didn't think there was anything I could do to help the people I loved. Now, I knew that I would never do the same thing. No matter how bad things got, no matter how obvious our end was, I would never run from these people. I would live here or die here, but here I would stay.

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

*“I still remember that night it was the 4th of July,
Still engraved in my mind and I'm not surprised,
Gang wars no guns, hand to hand,
Your black, I'm white, they're purple,
But i still down understand,
I'm gonna be alright, I'm gonna be okay, everything is gonna be fine,
Back off, I wanna be alone, I wanna think it out and I'm thinking that I want to go home,*

*Looks who's laughing now (look who's laughing now),
Pull it off some how and I said,
As I pass her by, I can see her cry, and I'll never forget,
The look that was in her eye, and when the music you know it played,
On and on and on so wont somebody tap her on the shoulder tell her life goes on.*

*3 years, 2 months, 1 week, 4 days, I am always counting down
cause there ain't no easier way so trust me, you know that I tried,
and if I say its easy than you know that I told a lie.
I'm gonna be alright, I'm gonna be just fine,
I down 5 billion left to go, am I next in line do I really want to know*

*Look who's laughing now (look who's laughing now),
Pull it off somehow and I said,
As I pass her by, I can see her cry, and I'll never forget,
The look that was in her eye, and when the music you know it played,
On and on and on so wont somebody tap her on the shoulder tell her life goes on.”*

-On & On & On

Don't miss the next installment of the Animorphs series:
MEGAMORPHS #5: A NEW FOE

I was quickly becoming worried. The disappearance of my *shorm* was one thing, and there were plausible explanations for it. Rachel's absence, too, could be explained. But the circumstances were suspicious, and so were my friends. They even accused me of being a Controller.

<Perhaps there is some sort of recording in the Reliquary's database?> I suggested. The ship recorded more than the others suspected, more than it was ever intended to. Perhaps there was some evidence of the reason for this dropped cup. And for the lack of an owner.

Jake nodded. "Alright. Go for it."

I placed my hands on the control node and immediately was bombarded with two things. Two messages left in the system. <There are two messages here,> I told them. I accessed the first one.

A hologram appeared in the air before us. There were three figures in it. All three were human. The first was a small human male, with a long nose. His features were almost childlike; perhaps they could be called elfin. His clothing was a simple grey suit, and his appearance was neatly trimmed.

Behind him was a larger human, with yellow-ish skin, black hair, and slanted eyes. His hair was wild, a mess. He wore a black one-piece jumpsuit that bore something I knew all too well. The insignia of the old Yeerk Empire.

The third figure was Rachel. Her wrists were behind her back, presumably restrained. There was a gag in her mouth; I understand that it is an effective way of silencing a human. Andalties, of course, are much harder to stop. She was leaning on the yellow man's shoulder and appeared to be unconscious. I suddenly had no doubts as to what caused Tobias to disappear so suddenly.

The elfin one spoke quietly, in a nasal monotone. "Greetings, Devil Prince. You can see why we have contacted you. I am Salheer Six-Seven-One. With me is Kalroth Three-Three-Seven, of the New Yeerk Order. I am sure you recognize our guest.

"We have been bidden to give you a message from the one you call the Visser. If you report to the Yeerk pool in your town within three hours and submit to voluntary infestation, she will be released without harm. If you fail to do so, Kalroth will enjoy killing them both. If you attempt any sort of trickery, both will die. You have three hours, Devil Prince. It is

suggested that you use them wisely.” The hologram winked out.

Prince Jake opened his mouth, but I interrupted. <There is a second message,> I told him. I accessed that one, too. An image of Tobias appeared this time.

“Look... I know that you probably came looking for me. It may not be too late. I'm sure you saw that other message. I...I can't let them kill either of them. I just can't. But I can't throw this war away for them, either. So I'm going to save them or die trying. I know I can't stop you from trying to help, so I'll just ask that you try, try, to make sure that no harm comes to either of them.” Again, the image disappeared.

We all stared at each other. “Ax...” Marco began, “when did that first message come through?”

I checked the time and almost fainted. “Almost two hours ago. Tobias left his message shortly thereafter.>

Jake cursed. “That means we have one hour to find Rachel, rescue her, and pull Tobias out of whatever he's going to try to do. Any suggestions?”

“Maybe Al could trace the communication or something,” Marco suggested. “Find out where it came from.”

Jake nodded. “Someone go get him. Right now.” Cassie

ran out of the ship. We stood around, trying to think of what our next move could possibly be. There was nothing we could plan without any sort of location, though.

Cassie returned with Alloran after only twenty-seven Earth seconds. Alloran seemed wide awake. And he was very clearly scared and nervous. Any Andalite could recognize the signs. Immediately, he set to work at the control node.

Several long minutes passed. <Alloran, are you making any progress?>

There was a moment of silence. Then, <No, I am afraid not. There is an encryption unlike anything I have seen before. I have no idea how to go about breaking it. It is entirely alien to me. Even the alphabet, so to speak, is foreign.>

“You can do Yeerk technology just fine,” Marco commented.

<All Yeerk technology is based off of Andalite technology,> Alloran answered. <This...I must admit that I suspect the Pythagi Conglomerate. Some of these symbols resemble things I saw on their outpost, but that is only speculation. I have no idea how to do this. I... I am sorry, I...>

If Andalites could shed tears, Alloran would have been. I placed a hand between his stalk eyes. <It is not your fault,> I

assured him. <All is not lost yet.>

Jake nodded. “Yeah. You go to bed, Alloran. It’ll all be fine in the morning. We happen to know some guys who have been at this a lot longer than you have. The Chee will have this hacked for us in no time.”

Marco sighed. “So it’s another after-hours visit to Tri-I, then? I always hate those.”

“Better than the midnight run to the Yeerk Pool Tobias is probably pulling,” Cassie reminded him. That made me wonder just where Tobias was. Knowing him as I did, he would very calmly assess the situation. And then go in, as humans say, with guns blazing. I only hoped we were not too late to help.

PREVIEW SUMMARY

It seems that the Yeerks are at it again. They've kidnapped Rachel and are demanding Tobias's life as a ransom. If he doesn't turn himself in, Rachel and her child will be killed. Unwilling to involve the other Animorphs in this, Tobias set out alone to make his choice. While trying to find Rachel and Tobias on their own, the other Animorphs became separated. Marco and Ax were arrested. Cassie and Jake found themselves swept up by the Chee.

The Visser is poised to become the Yeerk Emperor and gain virtually unlimited power. He has found a cunning new advisor in Salheer 671 and a devoted servant in Kalroth 337. With these two and Guraff, who will be able to oppose him? But over it all looms a shadow more terrible than any the Animorphs could have predicted. This war is about to get completely out of hand. There are evils other than the ambitions of the Yeerks in the galaxy, and now the time has come for the Animorphs to face them...