

Imagine a picture of AI turning into a squirrel.

71: THE LESSON

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Some clarification is definitely important here. If you've been following the series, you probably know that John3Sobieski was writing most of book 71 for me. We've had a slight change in lineup here. While John was writing *The Price*, I was doing some work of my own on this book, *the Lesson*. I realized that I was almost done with this one, and that releasing it before *The Price* wouldn't really throw off the series. So, to avoid you readers having to wait longer, I'm releasing it now. The book written by John will be the next one.

Enjoy or go to hell.

If I owned the Animorphs, you wouldn't be reading this for free.

And if I owned Streetlight Manifesto, I'd have better things to do than write fan fiction.

CHAPTER 1

My name is Alloran-Sirinial-Fangor. I believe that at this point, it would be redundant of me to inform you that I am an Andalite *aristh* serving on Earth under my Prince and half-brother, Tobias. I am also relatively certain that you are aware that the Yeerks have returned to Earth and are once again attempting a covert takeover of the planet. So I shall instead begin by informing you of one thing that I am fairly certain you do not know: I suffer from rather severe insomnia.

In my childhood, it was never much of an issue. The automatons who cared for me and taught me had no concept of night and day. When I was awake, it was day and when I slept, it was night. After I no longer was required to live in hiding, it was still only a small issue, as it was very easy for me to obtain certain medications to counteract the effects.

Here on Earth, it is considerably more difficult. I decided to forgo my medications and simply live with my insomnia. It was, after all, only a minor inconvenience. And I have learned that there are a great deal of very entertaining programs on television that only come on at hours when sensible beings would be comfortably asleep.

So, on this night, like so many other nights, I could not sleep and instead amused myself by watching the Late Late show on television. In order to maximize my pleasure, I

had morphed to my human form so that I could sit upon the sofa. I had the volume turned down very low so that Prince Tobias, Rachel, James, and David would not be awakened by the noise. And knowing how thin the walls of our tiny apartment were, I was especially careful.

I was laughing quietly at a joke the man on the television told me. My laughter cut off abruptly when the door swung open. Prince Tobias walked in. Where had he been at this hour? "Prin--"

I cut off again when I realized he was not alone. Two men followed him into the apartment. The first one, directly behind Prince Tobias, had blond hair and was wearing mirrored sunglasses and a trench coat that was a shade of yellow so revolting that it made my eyes water. Behind him was a man who was approximately six and a half feet tall. There were numerous scars on his face, and there were probably more hidden behind his neatly trimmed beard. Like the other man, he was wearing a trench coat, but his was black like his hair. It matched the coats Prince Tobias and James had been issued as part of their occupation; the sunglasses were also identical.

"Al?" Prince Tobias asked, walking towards the kitchen through the dark living room. "What're you doing up?"

"Hey, Toby! You didn't tell me you had kid!" the blond man said, rather loudly.

"Younger brother," Prince Tobias answered evenly. The large man closed the door and stood with his back to it. "Al, this is my boss, Sergio, and his...friend...Nicolai."

Nicolai nodded once, slowly, but that was it. Sergio flopped down on the couch next to me. He looked from me to the

television and back again. "Good choice. If you're up at this hour, there is no excuse not to watch that Scotsman, eh Nicolai? Toby?"

Again, Nicolai nodded slowly. "If I disagree, do I get fired?" Prince Tobias asked; I assume he was joking. I am not especially adept at discerning what is humor, so I have decided to assume that most things are attempts at it. Prince Tobias had turned on the water and was washing his hands with a lot of soap. I wondered why but decided it was best not to question my Prince in the presence of his superior.

"Toby, Toby, Toby, you don't fire friend. You just make sure you never see him again, *da*? Maybe accident happens to him..."

"Are you saying you'll kill me if I don't like Craig Ferguson's comedy?"

"Kill? What is this kill? Nicolai, did I say kill?"

Slowly, Nicolai shook his head.

"There! You see? No killing!"

"You mind keeping it down? If you wake up Rach, no one will ever see *any* of us again," Prince Tobias warned.

"Oh, *da*, she lives here, doesn't she?"

"Yeah; I know I told you that before. So would you -"

"Wouldn't that be rude of me? To come all this way and not pay visit to famous Rachel? No, no, no, no! I am many things, but never rude!" Then he did perhaps one of the

craziest things I have ever seen; and I'm an Animorph!
Sergio leaned his head back and yelled,
"RAAAAACHEEEEEEL!!!!"

The effect was almost instantaneous. Prince Tobias dove halfway across the apartment, seeming to appear in front of us in an instant. His hand was over Sergio's mouth. The soap coating it was pink. Why...?

My mind was drawn to something far more important, though; and dangerous. Rachel stormed out of the bedroom she shared with Prince Tobias. She wore only a night gown. Her hair was a mess, and her stomach, due to the pregnancy, was several sizes larger than it should have been. Her face was a contorted mask of terrifying rage.

For a moment, no one moved. Rachel managed to glare at all four of us simultaneously. Prince Tobias, ever the fearless leader, broke the silence. "...'Mornin', Rach."

"Tobias..." she began softly. But I suppose she could not maintain that tone for more than one word, because her next few sentences came out in a shout. "WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE!?" A Howler would have been hard pressed to match her volume.

"Um... I had to work tonight. Sergio and Nicolai drove me home. And Segio wanted to meet you..."

"So he decided it was sensible to bellow my name in the middle of the night!?"

"You'll have to trust me when I say that this is his idea of polite," Prince Tobias answered. I remained perfectly motionless, hoping that perhaps if I remained still, she

would not see me and decide that I was in some way responsible for this.

She turned to glare fully at Nicolai. "And what do you have to say for yourself?"

Slowly, Nicolai shrugged. That seemed to upset her even more. She turned the full power of her glare on Sergio. "And what about you?"

Then Sergio said something that will perhaps go down in the annals of history as one of the ten most foolish things any human being has ever said. "You were prettier in my head."

CHAPTER 2

Sergio was insane. There could not possibly be any argument about that. He was also very nearly dead. Only the fact that Prince Tobias managed to get between him and Rachel saved his life. He gripped her forearms to keep her from smacking Sergio to death.

I halfway expected her to morph to her grizzly bear and maul Sergio, but apparently she was not so blinded by rage that she forgot the danger morphing might pose to her unborn child. She contented herself with cursing.

She stopped abruptly when she got a good look at the hands that were holding her. "Tobias, why are your hands red?"

"Sergio wanted one of the walls of his office painted," Prince Tobias answered. "He's got a thing for red."

I could not see Prince Tobias's eyes because of his glasses; nor could I see the eyes of the other two. "Take those glasses off and say that," Rachel commanded him sharply.

"What for? You'd know if I was lying to you."

"Take off the glasses and tell me this isn't blood on your hands, Tobias."

"You're being ridiculous, Rachel."

"You expect me to believe your boss dragged you out of bed in the middle of the night to paint his office?"

"You expect me to tell you that he dragged me out of bed in the middle of the night to kill someone?" Prince Tobias responded evenly.

"There's that word again," Sergio muttered. "Such unpleasant word, that 'kill.'"

Rachel glared at him over Prince Tobias's shoulder. "I think I'm going to have to teach you just how unpleasant it is."

"She-bear growls, but does she have claws?" Sergio mused. Then, with absolutely no connection between the two thoughts, he said, "Hey, Toby, James lives here too, *da?*"

"Yeah; but knowing him, he's either hiding in his room or he's jumped out the window by now..."

"I'd send Nicolai outside to look for him, but I think I like having him where I can hide behind him if you let she-bear go." Then, just as before, Sergio leaned his head back and shouted, "JAAAAAMES!"

Slowly, Jame's bedroom door eased open. David was perched on his shoulder. James took a long look at Rachel. Once he was satisfied that Tobias had her in a tight grip, he stepped into the living room. "Hi, Mister Sergio."

Sergio spat on the floor. "Bah! That word, 'Mister!' Do you call friend 'Mister?' Eh? Hey! That might be fun! What do you think, Mister Nicolai?"

Nicolai leaned his head from one side to the other in a noncommittal gesture. Sergio turned to James. "You have rat on shoulder, Mister James."

"Oh...that. It's -"

"I did not know you were one for pet! Me, I like cat. Quiet, unobtrusive. Cat never asked me question. I like rat, too. Quiet, unobtrusive. Never asked me question either."

<Rat fan?> David asked in thought speak that Sergio and Nicolai couldn't hear. <He must not be all bad, then.>

"Yeah, David and I-"

Sergio seemed to materialize in front of James. I am not sure when he left the couch. The next thing I knew, though, he had David in both hands and was holding my *shorm* at eye-level with his sunglasses. "Hello, Mister David."

<Hi, Mister Nutjob,> David responded, again in private.

"Hey, maybe I need pet. What do you think, Nicolai?"

Nicolai shrugged.

"What do you think I should get?" He looked at Nicolai for a few moments. Nicolai made neither sound nor gesture, but Sergio suddenly exclaimed, "Perfect! I get rat! Just like Mister David! Hey, maybe Mister David knows rat looking for new place to stay, *da?*"

<I could put an add in our local newspaper,> David answered privately. James failed to hide a smile.

"Wouldn't that be a little dangerous with your cat?" Prince Tobias asked.

"Cat? What cat? Who says I have cat?"

"You just said you like cats..." James pointed out.

"Of course! I love cat. But I don't have one. I love one million dollars, too, but I don't have that either."

"You *don't* have a million dollars?" Prince Tobias questioned. His face, as usual, was expressionless, but the surprise was evident in his voice.

"Of course not!" then Sergio gave him a big smile smile with unnaturally white teeth. "I have *nine* million. Speaking of which..." He pulled a stack of money from inside of his coat and tossed it onto the coffee table in front of him. "You did good work tonight, Toby. You get bonus."

"I'm...good with a paint brush," Prince Tobias said slowly.

"Hey...paint brush. I think we call it that from now on. Mister Nicolai, what say you?" Nicolai nodded slowly. "All right! Now we're getting somewhere!"

Rachel had gone quiet, but none of us were foolish enough to think she stopped being upset. Her face was still livid, and every now and then she tried to jerk free of Prince Tobias's grasp. I suspected she was angry beyond words.

Sergio reached into his coat again and took out a silver flask. Leaning back in the couch and putting his feet up on the table, he took a long drink from it. Then he glanced over at me. "You drink?"

"No," I said quietly, still hoping not to attract Rachel's attention.

"No? Me, I drink every day of my life. Even before! My mother, she drank while I was in womb."

<That explains soooooo much,> David said in our heads. This time, James hid his smile behind a cough.

Sergio pulled something new out of his coat. A large cigar. As he fumbled around for a lighter, though, Tobias shook his head. "Not in here, Sergio."

"Huh? Why not?"

"Have you forgotten entirely about the angry pregnant woman I'm holding back?"

Sergio probably looked startled, though it was difficult for me to tell. Between the glasses and my unfamiliarity with human facial expressions, I could not be sure. He may have simply had a stroke.

"Oh yeah! I forgot she was here. What happened to growling, she-bear?"

"I'm thinking of skipping that and just going to biting," Rachel answered through clenched teeth.

"Hey, now that's something! But wouldn't Toby get jealous if he found out?"

Rachel stared at Sergio for a moment. Then, flatly, she said, "This is the part where you leave."

CHAPTER 3

Sergio did, in fact, leave after that. But on the way out the door, he turned back and said, "Mister James, I need you early tomorrow morning at fourteen hundred, *da?*"

James nodded. "I'll be there."

"Good, good. I need some things moved. Nicolai, say goodbye to nice people." As an afterthought, he added, "And she-bear."

Nicolai waved one hand and closed the door behind him as he and his boss left. Only after we heard a car start up did Prince Tobias decide it was safe to release Rachel. He walked back over to the sink and resumed washing his hands.

"Tobias?" Rachel began, her voice sounding very much like her younger sister, Sara's.

"Yeah Rach?"

"If he ever sets foot in my home again, I'm going to do that thing he doesn't like to talk about."

"Audit?"

"Kill."

"Oh, yeah; he's not a fan of that, either."

"I'll probably have to kill Nicolai, too... Make sure we always have some spare garbage bags around, I plan to

put him in several different dumpsters throughout the town."

"Duly noted."

James slowly began backing into his room, but Rachel stopped him. "Not yet, James. First, we all need to have a little talk."

"What about?" James asked carefully. "Sergio said I have to get up early tomorrow, you know."

"He said be there at fourteen hundred. That's two p.m. How is that early?"

"Early for him," James answered carefully. "What do we need to talk about?"

"We need to talk about why Tobias is sneaking out in the middle of the night and coming back with blood on his hands. You were right, Tobias. I *do* know when you're lying to me."

Tobias did not turn around from the sink. "Look...you have to understand that under normal circumstances, I would never have done it."

"So you admit it?"

"It's not what you think."

"I don't think you have any clue what I'm thinking right now," Rachel said sharply.

"Just listen. A lot of money runs through Sergio's hands. And he's pretty paranoid, so he hates keeping it around

where anyone can trace it to him. So he spreads it around. A little here, a little there. That way, there's no record that he has the money, no trace of it going anywhere, and most importantly, no hard evidence if things go south.

"He's got a lot of...friends...who hold money for him. Sometimes, they decide that their friendship is over and make the decision to keep it. After all, it's not like Sergio could go to the police or anything... But he's got other options."

"So you just agreed to go out and kill someone for his money!?" Rachel demanded. I was sure there had to be more to it, though. My Prince has no compunction about killing his enemies; he is a great warrior. But I just could not see him killing an innocent man over ill-gotten money. I am sure, had Rachel been in a reasonable frame of mind, she would have felt the same way.

"Just listen," Prince Tobias repeated. "At first, I wasn't going to do it. But then I saw the picture of the man who had his money."

"I don't care how ugly he is, that doesn't make it okay to--"

"It was Kalroth."

That silenced Rachel. "So Kalroth is --"

"No, he's alive. He has a compound outside of town, just inside the mountains. We went there, but after seeing the security, Sergio actually had a rare bout of good judgment and decided not to chance it. We waited until we saw Kalroth leave in a limo and then we followed him. When he got out, we attacked him. He got away, but Nicolai put at least one bullet in his arm. I shot one of his bodyguards

and ended up in a fistfight with the other. Sergio destroyed the limo. For all his oddities, maybe because of them, that man is a wizard with a grenade."

Rachel sat down on the couch. James did the same. "What does all of this tell us?" she asked.

"I don't want to make any conclusions yet," Prince Tobias answered. "I'm going to call Cassie tomorrow and get her over here to talk about things. Maybe we can piece some things together. This night was very helpful, though."

"How so?" James asked.

<For one thing, now we know where Kalroth holes up,> David answered. <And we've got some idea of the security around it. It may have been tough for a few mafia thugs->

"Let's not use that word," Prince Tobias interrupted.

<Sorry. Mafia goons->

"The other word."

<It might have been too much for a few...friends...but with a little poking around, I'm sure we can think of something. And who knows? Maybe we don't even have to do the deed ourselves,> he added.

"You lost me at the end there, Bolts," James told him.

Prince Tobias was the one who answered, though. "Kalroth has apparently been taking money from...friends. Probably to help fund Guraff's war effort. Taking Kalroth out will be a major blow to the Yeerks. He's not dangerous like Guraff,

but I think he's sort of a symbol to them. If we can get rid of that, it'll cripple their morale."

"I get that. But why did David say we might not have to do it ourselves?"

"'Friends' get upset when you don't give them their money. I'm willing to bet this is not the only time Kalroth's done this. We don't have to siege his compound. If we can just get him out in the open, get rid of his bodyguards, and make sure some of the other people he's angered are in the area...things will take care of themselves from there."

<Kalroth getting killed by Animorphs in battle is one thing,> David agreed. <Getting gunned down by thugs is just sort of embarrassing. That might hurt them even more than us killing him would.>

Tobias nodded. "We can all talk more about it later. But I'm exhausted. And I'm sure Rachel wants to get back to bed. You and David need to get to sleep anyway, Al."

"Why is that?"

"Don't play that game. I know you forget almost nothing. You've got your first day of school tomorrow."

I winced. I had been hoping he would forget.

CHAPTER 4

I understand, intellectually, why Prince Tobias decided to have David and myself attend a human school. Currently, the war consumed our entire lives. Prince Tobias did not want to see it consume who we are the way it had him. It was a noble sentiment; but I still did not want to go to school. Something deep within my soul rebelled against it.

Rachel woke me up by throwing some clothes on top of me. She still seemed to be a bit angry from the previous night's...festivities. Silently, I morphed to human and dressed myself. I have gotten rather good at it; I usually get the clothing on the proper appendage on the second try.

It was not my usual human morph. We knew that Alpha Front was heavily infiltrated by the Yeerks, and that important Yeerks might recognize my human morph. So I had tweaked the DNA a bit to produce a morph that looked suitably different from my usual one.

At first, David and I had been extremely apprehensive about attending school. We feared that we would be virtually surrounded by Controllers. But some data we had retrieved from the Yeerks revealed that much of the younger population of the town was uninfested. Although the Visser had infested numerous people of my approximate age, Guraff had added few more. The Visser, having been defeated by children before, was somewhat obsessed with making sure that did not happen again. Guraff had no such obsession. While we would still need to exercise caution, it would not be the minefield I had feared.

David and I...I am going to use the word 'ate' though I do not think it is precisely accurate...ate the objects Rachel prepared for breakfast. During that time, she dragged James out of bed. He was supposed to walk us to school. While I would have preferred for Prince Tobias to walk us there, there was not a Yeerk on Earth who did not know him by sight.

"The new kid yet again," David muttered as we walked. "Let's hope this goes better than it did the last time."

"What happened last time?" James asked.

"I got cravings for cheese and a fear of cats."

"Oh; that."

James abandoned us a block away from the school. Although he was less easily recognized than Prince Tobias, they had been seen together a few times and it was entirely possible that he would be recognized as well.

Ronnie met us outside of the school and then led us inside. He spoke briefly to the principal, got directions to our first class, and then took us there. "Cassie or I will be back at the end of the day to pick you up," he told us.

I nodded. Ronnie left us and we entered the classroom. We were introduced by the teacher and directed to seats near the back of the room. Then we sat through perhaps the most boring experience of our lives. It was a history class. Which would not have been so bad, except that that it was the history of the Yeerk War. Although it is a subject that I am understandably fascinated in, the teacher could not possibly provide a single fact that I did not already know.

My eyelids felt heavy. I sat there with my elbow on the desk and my cheek resting on my fist. I was not paying complete attention, but something the teacher said caught my interest. "Let's see who did the required reading. Does anyone know what Captain Nerefir's nickname was and why they called him that?"

Without thinking, I answered, "They called him 'Old Hoof and Tail' because his tail was eight inches longer than that of the average Andalite and his left hoof was replaced with a steel prosthetic due to an injury he sustained before the invention of morphing technology." It was common knowledge on the Homeworld.

A few people turned to stare at me. The teacher nodded. "Correct, Alan. But next time, try to raise your hand first." I answered a few more childish easy questions during the class. Then it was dismissed. Since we had been in morph for a bit, David and I were headed towards the bathroom to demorph. It was perhaps a little dangerous, but if we were caught, we had had a story prepared. We would simply say that we were Andalites but were posing as humans because we feared the reaction of our peers if they learned the truth.

"Hey, Al," David began, "I know you're a genius and all, but you're going to need to keep it down. We don't want to attract attention. So try not to answer too many questions; especially not in science."

"That sounds logical."

"And please, oh please, don't start correcting teachers."

"If you insist."

We went through a few more classes. I was, predictably, extremely bored. Science was a waste of my time, as were human mathematics. One class did seem to be extremely useful for me, however: physical education.

If there was one thing humans could teach me, it was how to use their bodies more effectively. Although I was somewhat clumsy with my human body, I managed to make it through physical education class without making a complete fool of myself. I was fairly certain that, in a few weeks, I would learn a great deal there.

After that, it was time for perhaps the best moment of the day: it was time for lunch.

CHAPTER 5

I got to the cafeteria before David did. We did not have mathematics and physical education together, so I had lost track of him earlier in the day. Also, I knew that he had to stop and demorph after whatever class he had. After our first class, we had gotten onto different morphing schedules so that we were not repeatedly going to the bathroom together.

Because of this, I was alone when I entered the cafeteria. Rachel had explained the lunch procedure to me, so I knew more or less what to do. I managed to obtain my rations without any sort of difficulty. Certainly not the sort of scene I was told my uncle Aximili would have made.

I stood alone for a few moments, gazing around the cafeteria and looking for a place to sit. I was unsure what to do. Should I attempt to locate some place that was

currently unoccupied or try to insert myself into a preexisting grouping of humans? It was a conundrum.

Then a human male met my eyes and waved at me. "Over here, Jim."

Although I had never been introduced to someone as 'Jim', the eye contact made me reasonably certain that the individual meant me. I quickly searched my memory for this boy's face. He had been in my physical education class. Raphael was his name. I sat down next to him. "Hello." I was not sure what to say next. So I asked, "Why did you call me 'Jim'?"

"Short for Jim Morrison. Because you're so trippy," Raphael answered. Then he turned back to his friends and jerked his thumb at me. "He fell over seven times today during gym."

They all laughed a little. I was not sure if they were laughing with me or at me. I responded, "It is physical education, after all. If I had already mastered the physics of the human body, attending the class would be redundant."

There was a moment of silence. Then a few of them laughed. "Funny guy," one I did not recognize said of me. Apparently, he thought I was joking. I was content to allow him to believe that. "I'm Tim."

"Al," I introduced myself. We all spoke for a bit, mostly about me. I stuck to the story we we Animorphs had agreed upon earlier and kept the details as vague as possible. They seemed more or less content to accept that.

After twenty minutes, though, I was beginning to get concerned. David was nowhere in sight. Had something happened to him? It was possible; perhaps someone had caught him morphing. That would be a serious problem; especially if that person was a Controller.

I excused myself to search for David and began wandering the hallways, searching for him. The hallways seemed oddly deserted; perhaps the teachers were eating lunch as well. "Hey!" someone called from behind me.

I turned around to see three large human males approaching. They appeared to be two or three Earth years older than my own morph. "You're that new kid, Al, aren't you?"

"I am he," I told them. I recognized the one who seemed to be their leader. He was in the same mathematics class that I attended. Troy was his name, if I was not mistaken. I am not sure why someone several years older than I am was in the same class.

"Great! We've been looking for you." In an odd gesture of companionship, he put his arm over my shoulders and began steering me down the hallway.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. See, I was kinda hoping you could do us a little favor."

"What favor?" I asked, surprised. What could they want from me?

"My friend Brad here gets a little forgetful sometimes." He jerked one thumb at one of the two males following us.

"Seems like he forgot his lunch money back home, and he gets real hungry, see?"

"That sounds like quite the predicament."

"You getting' wise with me?"

I turned to him, not understanding. "I was not aware that we were acquiring wisdom together."

"You think you're funny?"

I thought about it. Raphael, Tim, and the others seemed amused by me. I supposed that qualified as me being funny, though it was unintentional. "Yes, I believe so."

"Hear that, guys? The wise guy here thinks he's funny," Troy said to Brad and the as-yet-unnamed other one. Why was he repeating what we had just established? Surely his friends had heard our conversation.

"You mentioned a favor?" I prompted, hoping to spare Troy further embarrassment lest he repeat something else needlessly.

"Oh, so now you want to talk favors?"

"You were the one who mentioned it," I reminded him. He gave me a look that struck me as oddly similar to the one Rachel had been wearing this morning.

"Yeah, see, Brad needs money for lunch."

He seemed to have a habit of repeating what was already common knowledge. He must have been remedial; that would explain why he was in the same class as me.

"Yes, we have established that," I responded. I was growing slightly annoyed.

"Well, we were thinking he could have yours."

That surprised me. What an unusual request to make of a stranger! I was aware of how much humans prized their money. Prince Tobias had certainly spent enough time worrying about it. "While I would like to be so altruistic as to aid you, I fear I have already spent mine and consumed the meal that I purchased therewith."

"Oh, that's no problem," Troy said quietly. "You just bring us the money tomorrow and there won't be any problems."

"Why would you need it tomorrow? Surely Brad will be able to remember to bring the requisite funds then."

The three of them stared at me for a moment. Then Troy said, in a soft voice, "Maybe you're not getting how this works. You're going to give Brad that money tomorrow before lunch, got it?"

"Why should I?" I asked. Troy's reaction to my honest question caught me off guard because it was so unexpected. He struck me in the face with his fist. I have been wounded many times before, in battle with monsters that Troy could not conceive of in his darkest nightmares. But this still hurt. I could taste my own blood.

I stumbled back and before I had time to recover, Brad kicked my legs out from under me. That was rather unnecessary, of course; the way my balance was, a slight shove would have been sufficient to knock me over. The third male kicked me hard in the ribs. I lay there, gasping for air and tasting my own blood.

Troy stood over me and shook his head. "I didn't want to have to do that. But I've got to make sure Brad gets fed. He gets violent when he's hungry. So unless you want this to be a daily thing, you'd be best off making sure Brad doesn't get hungry again any time soon."

I rolled onto my stomach and then lurched to my feet. By the time I was erect, they were gone. I leaned against the wall and looked around. There were too many emotions to sort through in my mind. Surprise was a large quantity of it. But mostly, it was shame. I was an *aristh*! A warrior! I have held my own against Kelbrid! But I was no match for three large humans; not in this body, at least. This sort of thing would never have happened to Prince Tobias; I could not imagine it. I was a complete failure as a warrior.

That was why I was crying. It was not the pain; I have grown accustomed to that. It was the knowledge that I had been soundly defeated by perhaps the three weakest enemies I have ever fought.

"Hey, are you alright?" a feminine voice asked. I looked up and my heart stopped.

CHAPTER 6

She was beautiful. No, no, that word does not describe it accurately. I think, if given the choice between gazing at her face and cutting out the Visser's throat with a rusty chainsaw, I would not have been able to decide. I had wondered for many, many years how my father could have fallen for a female who was not of his race. Now, I understood.

She was a few years older than I was; maybe as old as Rachel's sister, Jordan. Her red-blond hair was braided and reached nearly to her waist. There was concern in her green eyes. I could not look away from those eyes. It was not even an option.

"Are you alright?" she repeated.

I continued to stare.

"I think you might have a concussion... Can you blink? Maybe I should go fin-"

The thought of her going anywhere shook me out of my daze. "No, I am fine," I said quickly, remembering to blink. I could not look away from her, though... "I am just...rather shaken up."

"Yeah, I guess I'd be, too. It's not very often you get into a fight, is it?"

"You might be surprised," I said, attempting to give her a small smile. It ended up being a very large smile instead.

"Do you want to sit down somewhere? You look a little unsteady..." she prompted.

"I am fine," I assured her. "Just a bit disoriented. I do not understand why they did that."

The girl shrugged. "You probably told them something they didn't want to hear. That sort of behavior confuses them, and when big guys get confused, they get violent."

"I have noticed that," I admitted. Perhaps that was why the Visser was such a violent individual...

"Are you sure you'll be alright? I don't like the look of that lump on your head."

"It will heal," I promised. Faster than she thought. I would need to demorph in about a bit and when I remorphed, my injuries would be gone.

"Sure, eventually. You should probably tell a teacher what happened," she suggested. "You're *sure* you don't need any help?"

"I am positive."

"If you're sure..." Then she started to walk away. I had to stop her! I could not just let her get away!

"Wait!" I called.

"Yes?"

"What is your name?" I asked quickly.

"Kristina." And then she was gone, vanished around a corner. I could have gone after her, but I decided it was probably more important to find David. It was easier to ignore her spell when I was not looking right at her.

I spent the next ten minutes and forty seven seconds searching for David without result. I demorphed and remorphed in the bathroom, and then I went to my next class. I was relieved to see David calmly seated in a desk there. I sat down next to him. "Where have you been?"

David shrugged. "I've gone through this sort of thing before, Al. We're new here. And I've got the feeling that we won't be here too long. Sooner or later, something big's going to happen and the Bossman isn't going to care very much about school anymore. No need to put down any roots. So I ate lunch outside."

"Where did you get food?" I asked, curious.

"I'm a rat," he whispered. "I'll eat just about anything, given half the chance."

I was paying even less attention than usual in that class. There were a lot of things on my mind. Whether or not I would have to endure additional abuses from Troy and his allies. What did David eat? How would Rachel decide to kill Sergio? Mostly, though, I was thinking about Kristina. Thankfully, this particular instructor decided it was nicer not to demand answers from new students, so I was free to allow my mind to wander.

The rest of the day passed in a blur similar to that class. Although I would think about a few other things, my mind would always meander back to thoughts of Kristina. Had it not been for David's helpful reminder, I may have gotten

myself stuck in human morph. That is how distracted I was.

Ronnie picked us up after school. I was not entirely certain why it was he who did the task instead of Cassie. I was not wondering about that, of course; my mind was still on the girl I had met earlier. I was distracted enough that I did not realize that we were in an area of town that I did not recognize until several minutes into the car ride. <Ronnie, where are we going?> I asked. Since I was no longer in public, I deemed it safe to switch to thought-speech.

"I just explained it," he said, a trace of exasperation in his voice. "Weren't you listening?"

<I was thinking about something.>

He gave a little sigh. "Well, James is at work. And Cassie and I were talking and we figured it would be nice of us to give Tobias and Rachel some alone time, so we're going back to my place for a bit. Cassie wanted to talk to the two of you anyway."

"What about?" David asked.

Ronnie shrugged. "Nothing in particular, I guess. She just felt like seeing you."

<I look forward to it.>

CHAPTER 7

David, Cassie, and I have a peculiar attachment to one another. Some months ago, the three of us were involved in an incident involving the Anati, Helmacrons, and Garatrons. Cassie, David, and I had gone to speak with the Anati and in the process ended up morphing one.

Anati are symbiotic beings made up of three different parts. Each of us morphed one part of the Anati and what we felt when we were combined is something that I know I can never hope to describe. I am a scientist, not a poet or clergyman, and one would need to be both to adequately convey what we felt.

It was so powerful that I believe the experience, more than anything, is what brought David back to us. It seems odd to me to think that he was once an enemy. In that brief period of time when we were connected, David and I became closer than I have ever been to anyone. Perhaps the only one to whom I feel more connected is Prince Tobias.

Cassie was also a part of that experience, so David and I both care for her in a unique way. We love her, and I do not think anything could change that. Even when she abandoned the Animorphs for a life with Ronnie, we loved her.

She and Ronnie had purchased a small, ranch-style house a mile or so outside of town. Much like Cassie's old house, this one was at the edge of the woods, though it lacked a barn. It was only a single story high, though it had a subterranean level that was as large as the rest of the structure. There was a large field out front, and behind it

were the woods in which we had lived during our first stay here at Alpha Front. All things considered, I rather liked the place.

Cassie was waiting in the driveway for us. That should not have surprised me. She, David, and I had not seen much of each other lately. Outside of the few meetings we have had, she and Ronnie had been too busy to simply stop by the apartment. There was apparently a great deal to do when obtaining a new habitation. Unlike most Andalites, I do not automatically assume that every aspect of Human culture is inferior to Andalite, but when it comes to living arrangements, I believe my own race's are much more practical.

"You three have fun," Ronnie said as we got out of the vehicle. "I need to go back into town and grab some of that furniture we bought. I'll see you in a few hours, Cass."

Cassie nodded. "Have fun." Then she turned to the two of us. "Well, come on in. You're both probably dying to demorph anyway. Although don't get too comfortable in your normal bodies because I've taken up baking when I can."

Cassie is not an especially talented baker, but compared to Rachel she is a master, or mistress, of the art. I must admit that David and I shamelessly gorged ourselves on anything she was brave enough to set in front of us. We had reverted to our normal human morphs and I must admit that I was very comfortable at the moment.

The three of us sat at the table in her kitchen. Unpacked boxes were stacked neatly in one corner. The three of us were enjoying some seemingly-delicious edibles when

Cassie decided it was time for me to choke. "So, Al, what's her name?"

That was when the aforementioned choking commenced. David smacked me on the back a few times, which was of no aid whatsoever. I eventually dislodged the food myself. Cassie simply sat there with an amused expression on her face, though there was a tinge of worry to it as well. When I had finally composed myself, I responded, "Who?"

Cassie smiled at me. "Oh, come on, Al. I know you better than that. You've got 'the look.'"

"What look?"

"*The* look, Al."

"I do not know about what you are talking."

David looked from me to Cassie. "Now that you mention it, he kinda *does* have a look... I'm not sure what look it is, though."

"Oh, I know," she answered, still smiling. I was beginning to become somewhat concerned. "I'm usually very good at spotting it."

"What look is it of which you speak?"

"It's that look boys get when they meet pretty girls," Cassie answered. "It works both ways, but I'm more used to seeing it on boys your age. Spending a lot of time with Rachel guaranteed that I saw some new guy with that look at least five times a day."

"You met a hot chick?" David asked. <And didn't tell me!? Al, that goes against the code!> he added privately.

"You must be guessing," I said to her. <What code?> I demanded of David, also privately.

<The Guy Code,> David answered, as though it should have been obvious.

"Call it an educated guess, then," Cassie responded. "I think it's cute. So what's her name, Al?"

"Kristina." <There is no such code.>

<Is too!>

"Pretty name. What does she look like?"

<I have never heard of it,> I answered David. Then I began describing Kristina to Cassie. I decided not to go into every detail that I remembered. I have a very good memory and I did not want Cassie to think I had been observing Kristina more closely than propriety allowed.

<It's genetic, Al. You should just know it,> David began while I was describing Kristina. <There are certain rules that guys must follow when interacting with other guys. It's also known as Manlaw or 'the Brode', Brode being short for 'Bro Code'. It's sacred to us and is necessary for the continuing function of society.>

"And how did you meet her? Is she in one of your classes?" Cassie asked me.

<You must be exaggerating,> I admonished David. And then I decided to do something I rarely do of my own

volition. I lied. I did not want Cassie to know I had been assaulted at school and came out the worse for it. It was humiliating and shaming. So I told her, "She is in one of my classes, yes."

<I'm serious, Al. Men are aggressive, that's just a nearly universal fact. We compete with each other. And if there aren't rules for this sort of thing, every interaction between two men would end in a fight. And while that may sound like fun, One: I'm not very good in a fight unless I'm in my lion suit. And Two: we wouldn't get very much done if we were constantly fighting each other. So we have to follow the Brode. Society as we know it hinges upon it!>

Cassie gave me a teasing smile. "So, when do we get to meet her?"

<Why would you want to?> "Did you recently sustain a severe blow to the head?"

Cassie looked a little hurt. That was when I realized I had switched up the conversations. David started laughing in my head. <I knew that would work. David: one. Alloran: zero.>

CHAPTER 8

<You are making this up,> I insisted. Cassie, David, and I were walking up the stairs to the apartment. I was in human morph, and David was in his own body, perched on my shoulder. As you may have surmised, we were still arguing about this ridiculous notion of a 'Brode'.

<Am not. I need to talk to Tobias about this. He should have taught you about the Brode a long time ago. It's, like, his sacred duty or something.> David and I were keeping our conversation a secret from Cassie, since David assured me that she would never understand it. There are some things, I am told, that are the domain solely of males.

The door to the apartment was locked in multiple places. Thankfully, Prince Tobias had seen fit to entrust me with the keys. We entered and found him and Rachel seated on the couch. Sitting on the table in front of them was a small holographic communicator. Oddly, it displayed an image of Former-War-Prince Alloran-Semitur-Corass, my namesake.

(Wow...that's a lot of hyphens...)

Due to the limited capabilities of this particular device, his voice came out of a speaker rather than being broadcasted into our heads. "-extremely troubling. On the one hand, I am pleased that we do not have to fight them. But the fact that they seem to have disappeared completely is far more disturbing."

"That worries me too, Alloran," Prince Tobias nodded.
"You're *sure* no one knows where the Visser, Gurauff, and Salheer are, then?"

"I fear not, Commander. We had several sightings and received various reports that they were leading attacks, but we recently captured a high-ranking officer, the Sub-Visser in charge of resuming what Salheer started on Leera. We starved the slug out, and his host told us that the commanders we have been seeing are decoys. They get instructions from the real Visser on a regular basis, but no one seems to know where they actually are. An enemy you cannot see is far more fearsome than one in front of you."

"I'll always take an enemy in front of me," Rachel agreed. "What does the Electorate plan to do about this?"

"They have not seen fit to tell me," Alloran admitted. "I was instructed to contact you with this information, but that was all. Although I cannot help but wonder why they did not do it themselves..."

Prince Tobias shrugged. "Probably because I had AI block their communication's channel. I was getting tired of Lirem's calls. It's like he has no idea what time it is over here..."

"Should I relay that to him?" Alloran asked. He almost smiled with his eyes. But War-Prince Alloran forgot how to do that a long time ago.

"No, no. I think I'll just unblock them and let them deal with Rachel the next time they wake her up at three in the morning to demand I start leading armies for them."

"They will find a way to circumvent that block eventually, you know," Alloran reminded him.

Prince Tobias looked thoughtful for a moment. Then he nodded. "Tell the Electorate I have a deal for them. If they

find the Visser, I'll go off to fight him as soon as they can give me his location. He and I have a score to settle anyway."

"As you say, Commander. I think I might just join you in that little escapade."

"I thought you were retired, Alloran," my Prince responded, a hint of a smile in his voice.

"It would not be a business venture," Alloran replied, his 'voice' at once cold and slightly humorous. "You both have my best wishes. Alloran, out."

Prince Tobias severed the communication and then turned to us. "Looks like they finally found out that our old friends aren't exactly where they're supposed to be."

<They had to figure it out sooner or later,> David mused, making his way towards the kitchen. <I wondered what the Yeerks were up to. I mean, we knew the Visser and his friends were still here on Earth. I couldn't figure out who'd be leading their army.>

"With modern communications, it would be entirely possible to lead a fairly effective campaign from a remote location," I answered as I began to demorph.

Rachel shook her head. "Calling the shots from the war room is one thing, but everything changes in the field. Esplin and Guraff lose about half their power when they aren't in the thick of it all."

Prince Tobias nodded. "That's definitely a good thing. The Visser has never really struck me as a master strategist, so his effectiveness is pretty limited right now. Guraff's, too,

though he's still dangerous. Salheer's got me worried, though. I just hope Jake and the Omegamorphs can keep him distracted enough here that he isn't focused on the other war."

"All this talk of war..." Cassie trailed off. "Remember the days when we used to talk about stuff like clothes and super heroes before the meeting started? What happened to all that?"

"You know what happened," Prince Tobias answered calmly. "We grew up."

"Some of us," Rachel added. Then she turned to me. "Did you have fun at school, Al?"

<It was...eventful,> I answered.

"Oh? What happened."

I then realized that I could not tell Rachel and Prince Tobias that I had been assaulted. And for some reason, I did not want them to know about Kristina. <Nothing,> I replied.

"Hmm...Al seems to be turning into a normal teenager," Cassie mused. "How did that happen?"

CHAPTER 9

James emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, his hair dripping wet. Apparently, he had just gotten off of work. He leaned against the kitchen sink. "So, what do we have on our plates for tonight?"

<I do not think Rachel has started cooking yet,> I answered.

"Expression, Al. I mean what are we doing?"

<We are speaking.>

"I meant later tonight."

<How would I know the answer to that?>

"Because your brother's about to tell us."

"Exactly," Prince Tobias nodded. "It's time for us to get down to business here in Alpha Front."

<What have we *been* doing?> David posed.

"That was all fun and games," Rachel answered.

"And most of it was undone during the whole incident with Mersa," Prince Tobias added. "If Guraff keeps records of every Controller and host here, our spyware isn't turning it up, so I can't say exactly how heavily this place is infiltrated, but we do know that it was in very bad shape before Mersa. And I can't imagine it hasn't gone even more downhill while we were gone. This place is probably tightly in their grip, and I'm worried that pretty soon, Guraff will

be able to make a big move and seize this place completely."

"How could he do that without attracting attention?" Cassie asked. "Kelbrid in the streets would be more than a little noticeable."

"I don't know how he'd go about doing it," Tobias admitted. "But we need to be ready for it. It'd be nice to have a few people to call in if things get too hairy."

<What sort of allies could we call on in this area?> David asked. <Tri-I, maybe?>

Rachel shook her head. "The closest Tri-I office is a few towns over, where my dad lives. And I'm sure telling them what's going on is breaking the rules..."

"There's something," Cassie mused. "I wonder why we can't have an army."

"Because that'd break the rules," James answered. "It has to stay a secret."

"Esplin didn't keep it a secret from the Yeerks here," Cassie reminded him. "If he's allowed to tell all of them, why can't we call up Tri-I?"

We all chewed on that for a while. <She might be right,> David admitted. <Man...if we could get an army of our own...>

Prince Tobias shook his head, though. "Many of Esplin's soldiers knew about the invasion before Crayak and Azmaveth made that secrecy agreement. Not very many humans did. We've been very careful about that."

"What about the Kelbrid he's importing?" Cassie returned.

We all looked at each other, then. Slowly, our eyes fell on our Prince. We knew this would be his call. Rachel had a greedy look on her face. I was not surprised that the idea of an army appealed to her.

"Not yet," Prince Tobias decided after several minutes of silent debate. "You make a very good argument, Cassie, and I think you just might be right. If we could call up an army and still managed keep this war a secret... But I think we should keep that in our sleeve until we're out of other options. If it looks like we're going to be out of the running very soon, we'll go for it. But it might break those rules, so I can't condone it until we've got no other choice. Which brings me back to David's question: who can we trust?"

<No one,> David said flatly. <In a place this heavily infested, we can't know who is and who is not a Controller.>

"Sergio isn't," James answered confidently. "He tried to kill Kalroth. Nicolai, too. I know Yeerks don't hesitate to kill their commanders, but it seems to me that Guraff wouldn't let that go on under his reign."

<It could have been a ploy,> David countered. <If Sergio's a Yeerk, I think it's safe to say he knows who Tobias is, and probably you, too.>

Prince Tobias shook his head. "He's had way too many chances to kill me. No Yeerk would pass that up, even if he'd been given a direct order not to pull the trigger."

<Some of his men might be Controllars,> I reminded him as I realized a new danger. <Any one of them could begin shooting at you at any time.>

"It's possible. However, they might not know who I am."

"You work with these people every day," Cassie answered. "How could they not know who you are?"

Rachel sighed. "He and I have had this discussion on a daily basis, Cassie. He refuses to listen to reason."

"I'm actually fairly disguised," Prince Tobias explained. "Between the glasses and the coat, it's not all that easy to tell who I am, especially if you don't spend a lot of time with me. I try to avoid talking at work, and Sergio doesn't particularly like us socializing with each other anyway. None of us are exactly the 'making friends' type. The less everyone knows, the better. If there are any Yeerks working with us, they probably don't know who I am."

"You should still be careful," Rachel muttered. It sounded like something she had said many times before and was tired of repeating.

"This is coming from you, Rach?" Prince Tobias responded. Again, it felt like an automatic response, something he was accustomed to saying.

<Where does this leave us?> I asked.

My Prince shrugged. "We can probably trust Sergio in an emergency." Rachel snorted at that. "At the very least, he's got guns and ammo, and that never hurts. Some of his people might be Yeerks, but I doubt that the majority are. They're not the sort of people Yeerks would go out of their

way to infest. I'm doing everything I can to get close to Sergio so that, if and when the time comes, I can talk him into using his 'friends' as an army for us. Oh; and I'm trying to get him to tell me how he and Dan know each other."

<This is all contingent, though,> David reminded us all. <That doesn't solve the problem of what we're going to do now. Anyone got a master plan? This is your area, Tobias.>

"Rachel had a suggestion earlier. Rach?"

Rachel nodded. "Okay, we know where Kalroth's living. Maybe Sergio, Tobias, and Nicolai couldn't get in there, but we're Animorphs. I think we can manage it. So we attack the place, kill Sergio, and get out of there. That'll get the Yeerks more than a little bit afraid."

"And now for the part where we take Rachel's idea and change it until it sounds less like suicide," James whispered. I was fairly certain only I could hear him, and possibly David. Andalite ears are somewhat better than human ones, after all.

<Attacking would probably just get us killed,> David objected. <But maybe...>

"Go on," Prince Tobias promoted.

<Maybe we can sneak in there. And...well, Kalroth has to sleep some time. But there's no rule saying he has to wake up as well...> He left that hanging there.

<I must protest this,> I said quickly. <I understand that we must win, but this is highly dishonorable. I will, of course, obey my orders, but I feel that I must make my

objections known.> I was surprised with the heat with which I said that. I knew that Kalroth was a Yeerk, and that assassinating him would aid us. But there is a line where ruthlessness becomes dishonor. While I was not entirely convinced that this lay on the unacceptable side of that line, it was dangerously close.

Cassie put a hand on my shoulder. "I'm with Al. I'm not convinced Kalroth is even all that dangerous. It's Guraff who calls the shots anyway. I know we can't win by being the good guys, Tobias, so don't start in on me with that yet again. But I won't condone assassinating a man who we don't really need to kill."

<I'm sure you all know where I stand on this,> David said. <But I think I should just say one thing to you, Cassie. Kalroth might not be the one making the decisions, but he's a symbol. The Yeerks look to him. That's why he was given this job in the first place. If we can cut him down in the middle of his sanctuary, we'll hurt them more than you realize.>

James nodded. "I'm not a big fan of assassinations either, but I'll go where the rest of you go. If you want him killed, I'll help you do it. If you decide not to go for it, I'm just as glad not to."

<What about your idea last night?> I promised Prince Tobias. <About having Sergio or some other criminal kill him instead of it being us?>

"I'm sort of conflicted over that," he admitted. "I think that, in the end, it's better if we do it. One of a guerrilla force's strongest weapons is fear. And I think that showing them that we can just walk in and kill one of their top men

whenever we want to will definitely help us. But I think Sergio could still be of some use here..."

<How so?> David asked.

"I've seen the security outside of Kalroth's compound. It's tight, but it's also limited to stuff that wouldn't seem too outrageous. Armed guards, a Dracon turret, and a very thick wall. A little suspicious, but nothing that would scream Yeerk. I'm betting that the inside is a different matter, though. I'm sure there are going to be at least a few Kelbrid in there, and probably a bunch of morph-capable humans and Hork-bajir. It'd be nice if there was something important that called those guards away from their posts."

<Something like Sergio and his 'friends' trying to blow in the front door,> David finished.

Rachel nodded. "A drunk Russian with a fistful of grenades would probably be a little more than a distraction."

<It makes sense,> I agreed. <While there are undoubtedly some very sophisticated defenses within the compound, I am certain there is nothing I cannot handle. With the guards distracted, it should not be too difficult to infiltrate the compound and locate the Subvisser.>

"What if it's Pythagi tech?" James asked me. "I seem to recall that it gives you a little bit of trouble."

<It can be tricky,> I admitted. <The Pythagi do not think as Andalites do, which is a problem. It makes it difficult to navigate their programs with any degree of certainty. I suspect that, had the Yeerks actually developed their own technologies, we Andalites would have found them far

more difficult to manipulate. I have devoted what time I am able to the study of Pythagi technology, so I believe that I will be able to overcome at least rudimentary security measures.>

"And if you can't?" Cassie asked.

I shrugged. <Then I believe we shall rely on the fact that very little stands in the way of our small army.>

CHAPTER 10

School the next day was almost entirely uneventful. I halfway dozed through my first few classes. Lunchtime made me just a bit wary. As I had halfway expected, Troy and his associates accosted me en route to the cafeteria.

"Hey, Al," Troy greeted me as though we were friends. Like the previous time, he put his arm around my shoulders. "Glad I managed to get a hold of you. See, were' in a bit of a jam. Brad forgot his money again and we were really hoping you could help us out."

I realized by now what he had in mind. "I am sorry, Brad, but I am unable to aid you in this. I myself require my money in order to eat."

Troy sighed. "We going to have to go through this again? Usually, kids like you learn quicker. Then again, you usually heal up slower, too. That must have something to do with it."

"There is no need to go through this deception again," I answered. "I cannot aid you. And should you attempt to force me to do so, you will find my retribution most unpleasant."

"What're you gunna do, gnome?" Troy asked, shoving me over. Brad and his other companion whose name I still did not know amused themselves by kicking at my ribs a few times. Considering some of the pain that I have endured, it was not very bad. Certainly preferable to having my tail burned off by Kelbrid blood.

They were satisfied and left after a few minutes; and after they searched my body and took my money anyway. Briefly, I wondered why no one saw them and stopped them, but then I decided to focus my thoughts on revenge. A simple solution came to mind. Since battle was out of the question, I would have to rely on my other skills. To that end, I went to the library.

It did not take long to carry out my plan. In approximately ten minutes and twenty-nine seconds, every electronic screen within one hundred yards of the school displayed the same image. Cellular phones, personal holographic emitters, televisions, et cetera, all bore an image I had just created on the computer using somewhat-manipulated images the school had stored on their computers. It was, quite naturally, an image of Troy and Brad sharing a rather...special...moment.

I was more or less content for the rest of the day. The only part that marred my happiness was the fact that I had not come across Kristina that day. Like the previous day, Ronnie drove David and myself to Cassie's house, where we ate food and helped her move in. After that, David and I spent a few hours hiding in various forms near Kalroth's compound, attempting to get an idea of the defenses.

It sat in the shadow of the mountains and reminded me of an ancient castle. The rear end of the estate was walled off by a mountain. Undoubtedly, Kalroth had direct access to the Yeerk pool. The other sides of the compound were defended by a thick, concrete wall that rose about ten feet high. The front of the compound was denoted by a sturdy gate between two fifteen-foot tall towers. The only way for a conventional vehicle to approach the compound was by a narrow, winding road that was interspersed with small guard booths.

Within the walls were several buildings, including a large mansion that was undoubtedly where Kalroth personally resided. Everything was routinely patrolled by armed guards. Most of them were humans, but a few were Hork-bajir.

<Surely anyone who sees this knows that something untoward is going on here,> I called to David, who was somewhere above me in a morph. I was hiding in some trees outside of the compound in squirrel morph.

<I doubt anyone ever has the chance to report back, Al,> my *shorm* replied grimly. <Besides, I'm starting to think Alpha Front isn't as normal as it appears on the surface. Tobias said Kalroth was taking money from the mafia, and he probably meant more than just Sergio. It occurs to me that we actually don't know much about this town. Maybe we should do some research when we get home and see what turns up.>

<That sounds advisable,> I agreed.

That trip was uneventful. We were not seen, but we learned nothing new. The true defenses would be inside of the compound, and we could not see those. The next day was almost as uneventful as the previous one. Troy and Brad did not bother me at school. Perhaps they learned their lesson.

I did, however, run into Kristina. She was walking to a class, I believe. "Hello!" I called to her, waving.

She looked at me with those beautiful eyes. Then, she said something that still echoes in my head. "Do I know you?"

I froze in mid wave. "It is I, Al," I reminded her. Had I used the wrong morph!? No, I was sure I did not. Why did she not recognize me?

"I'm sorry, I don't think we've met."

"We...we met two days ago, after lunch," I reminded her. Why did she not remember me?

"Sorry, kid, but I just don't remember you. What did you say your name was?"

"Al."

"Al. Right. See you around, Al." Then she left.

I am ashamed to admit that I wanted to weep. I managed to avoid doing so, even when I returned to Cassie's home. It was becoming a routine, now. Go to school. Go to Cassie's. Survey Kalorth's compound. Return home.

When I got to the return home part, I was pleased to find that no one was there. James, as I knew, was working. Prince Tobias left a note saying that he and Rachel were 'out' and would be back in a few hours. David was using the computer in James' room to research Alpha front. That left me alone in the living room.

I sat there in my human morph, staring at the television for a while, unsure what show was on. I sighed, resting my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands. "Why does she not remember me?" I asked myself.

And then I heard a chillingly familiar voice from the television. "Aaaaand we're back. Our next guest is little *aristh* Allie, who seems to be having a little trouble

with the ladies. How can I help, Allie?" I looked at the television. Whatever show was supposed to be on had been replaced by something else.

The set looked like that of the Late Late Show. However, everything was painted in sickening shades of green and yellow. And behind the desk was not Craig Ferguson. It was the Drode.

I suddenly found myself in the guest chair, next to the Drode's desk. Out in the studio, where there should have been an audience, there were just copies of the Drode wearing different clothing. I turned to the Drode at the desk. "Why have you brought me here?"

"Do I really need a reason, Allie?"

"I find it unlikely that you would act without one. Your reasoning is usually warped and twisted, but present."

"Fair enough." The Drode sighed. "I'm here to help you with this little bit of lady trouble you're having all of a sudden. Gotta say, I didn't think it would happen to you."

I shook my head. "You would not care about something like that. Why am I really here?"

"You don't understand, Allie," the Drode insisted. "It's a question of morale. Happier soldiers fight better, and that increases my odds of winning this thing. So I plan to do everything in my power to keep you Animorphs happy."

"I do not need your help," I insisted.

"Allie, if that was true, I wouldn't be here. It's not like I'm a big fan of yours. You're too...what's the word...good...for

me. With your skills you could set out on your own and make a killing. Imagine what the Pythagi would do if they could get your help! But I bet that never even crossed your mind."

"Not until this moment, and I disregarded it just as quickly," I admitted.

"Exactly. So you see, you're really not my favorite. And in case you were wondering, they are, in order of most favored to least: Rach, Toby, Dav-o, Marco, and Ax...then you, James, Melissa, and Jeanne are tied for apathy...then there's Cassie and Jakey, who I just can't stand. If I didn't think you needed help, I wouldn't even bother talking to you."

The entire situation was just wrong. I was sure of it. I knew that the Drode did not want to help, even for the reasons he said he did.

"Oh, come on Allie. I'm the good guy now," the Drode smiled.

"Drode...you *do* remember that I am precisely the opposite of stupid, do you not?"

"Fine, fine. But I *am* on your side in this one, kid. I keep my end of a deal. And if you don't believe that, ask yourself why Prince Toby isn't still all feathery. The last thing I can afford is you Animorphs turning against me. We're in too deep for that. I need your help, Allie, and you need mine. So just accept it so we can both go back to sleep."

"You sleep?"

"Me? Don't be ridiculous. I just like to watch other people do it. So whadda ya say?"

Deep in my soul, I knew it was stupid. But my mind could not find any real reason against it, other than the voice in my head that kept shouting DO NOT TRUST THE DRODE. I believe it is called common sense. But I am a scientist; common sense has little place in my thinking when it contradicts logic. As hard as I tried, I could not find a reason not to trust him other than the obvious.

So I made perhaps the biggest mistake of my life. I said, "Deal."

CHAPTER 11

I awoke to the sound of someone pounding on the door. It almost sounded as though they were attempting to break in. If they were, the seven locks Prince Tobias had installed on the door were doing their job. Although this visitor was apparently in some haste, there were steps that I needed to take before answering the door.

First, I picked the remote control off of the coffee table and lobbed it behind the couch. Then I walked around behind the couch and began to morph to human. If this visitor was someone who should avoid seeing an Andalite here, I would simply emerge from behind the couch announcing that I had located the remote control, thus removing suspicions as to why I might have been back there.

James opened his bedroom door a crack. There was a Shredder in his hand. David was no doubt morphing to human in James' room. I knew for a fact that both Prince Tobias and Rachel slept with Shredders under their pillows, so I had no doubts they were prepared. After I was almost completely morphed, Prince Tobias answered the door.

He was almost shoved over by our visitor as he entered. I recognized the man easily. Dan; Rachel's father. And he was not alone. To my shock, he dragged Kristina into the room and thrust her on the couch, slamming the door behind him.

I decided at that point to crawl out from behind the couch, holding the remote even though the deception was unnecessary with Dan. Prince Tobias looked calmly from Kristina to Dan, though to be fair he almost always looks

calm. "Is this an early wedding present? You really shouldn't have. I don't think Rach would approve."

"Since when are you the funny one?" Dan demanded. He was pale and sweating, though he was attempting to remain calm. "We've got a problem."

"Yeah; slavery's illegal," David joked, entering the room in his human morph. James and Rachel joined us a moment later. After Rachel hugged her father, he continued explaining.

"A few hours ago, Tri-I's tip hotline got a call. This girl here claimed to have heard her parents talking about someone named Kalroth Three-Three-Seven, and from what she heard, it had nothing to do with that nice big distracting war that's going on elsewhere. This conversation was about something going on in her own backyard. And she saw them concealing Dracon beams. Now, Tri-I gets a lot of tips that lead nowhere, but considering her location, I figured I should check it out."

"Maybe you're overreacting?" Rachel suggested.

<I guess that's where she inherited that from,> David muttered in my head.

Dan shook his head. "I checked it out first. Just as I was arriving, Guraff was leaving."

"Guraff?" Tobias asked. "In broad daylight?"

"He was morphed," Dan explained. "I recognized him from that little visit he paid before you all went off to assassinate Mersa. Not only is that pretty conclusive evidence that this

girl's parents are Controllers, they must be involved in something very important if Guraff's getting involved."

I was trying to focus on the issue at hand, but there was something that kept running through my brain. It was my fault. This was how the Drode would be sure we got to spend more time together. He caused this; and so did I. But I couldn't focus on that right now. I needed to focus on anything else.

"What do your parents do?" I asked her.

She seemed to notice me for the first time. "Why?"

"It's important," I said simply. Normally, I would have been very disappointed that she did not recognize me, but this time she had a very good reason. I was not in the morph I used for school.

"Oh. I...who are you people?"

Prince Tobias ignored her and instead spoke to Dan. "Can you convince the rest of Tri-I that this is another hoax?"

"Yeah; shouldn't be too hard. I'll just call in and tell them that I decided to spend time with my daughter while I was in town. That was the excuse I gave for investigating this anyway."

Prince Tobias nodded. "Good. But we probably can't send her home..."

"What are you thinking?" Rachel asked.

"We may need her to...disappear..."

"We are *not* killing her," David, James, Dan, and I all said at the same time.

"Killing me?" Kristina demanded. "Just what is going on here?"

"We'll explain in a minute," Rachel promised. "And I'm with them, Tobias. We aren't killing this girl just because she saw something she shouldn't have."

"Don't worry, I wasn't planning on killing her," Prince Tobias responded. "Well, not immediately...that's plan C or something."

"What's plan A?" James asked.

"I haven't figured that part out yet," he admitted.

"I've to one for you, then" David began. Things were moving quickly now. More rapidly than they usually did.

"Go," Prince Tobias said.

"Well, if Kristina-

"Who is Kristina?"

"She is," I informed my Prince, indicating the girl in question. Then David continued.

"If she actually thinks she heard Yeerks talking and stuff, she might be insane."

"I know what I heard. I am *not* crazy," Kristina insisted.

"Oh, we believe you," David said quickly. "But I'm just saying she *might* be crazy. And someone might be able to pull some strings and have her spend some time at an institution far, far away from here."

Prince Tobias saw it instantly. I caught on a few moments later. "She'll be safe there. She could tell everyone everything she knows and no one would believe her. I know that Guraff would leave her alone, and the Visser probably wouldn't go out of his way to do any harm to her there. That might be for the best."

"Someone tell me what's going on here!" Kristina shouted. "Who are you people? Why am I here? How could you send me off to some mental asylum?"

Prince Tobias met her eyes. Kristina flinched. Very slowly, he said, "Kristina, this will not be easy for you to hear. We're Animorphs. You already know this, but the Yeerks are back. They were quietly trying to invade Earth before the galactic war even began. And we have quietly been trying to stop them. You'll have to trust me that there are very good reasons why we have to keep this a secret."

Now Kristina was as pale as Dan was. Prince Tobias nodded. "I believe you understand." My Prince straightened up. "I need to talk with Dan for a bit. Rachel, try and find out what the Yeerks are up to. And David, get Cassie on the line. She should be aware of what's going on. James, you help Rachel. Al, get to work making sure no one can find out what we're talking about to Cassie." Then he and Dan went off into the room he and Rachel shared.

We all snapped into action. David was dialing up Cassie and Ronnie's house. I went to the computer and started performing my own task. Rachel took over with Kristina at

that point. She was gentle enough, but very, very direct. "Kristina, this morning a large, black man came to your house. His name is Guraff Four-Two-Seven and he is the second most powerful Yeerk on earth, the one in charge of the invasion in this town. If he was talking to your parents, it means that their Yeerks must be involved in something very, very important. We need to figure out what it is. So you're going to have to tell us who your parents are, what they do for a living, and what might have caused the Yeerks to infest them now."

Kristina looked like she was on the edge of tears. I could not really blame her. This was perhaps the very definition of traumatic.

A moment later, we were joined by images of Cassie and Ronnie. They were only a foot tall and had a faint greenish tinge to them, and they were standing on the coffee table. It was the best hologram we could manage with the equipment available. "What's going on?" Cassie asked.

"That's what we're about to find out," James answered.

CHAPTER 12

"They must want my father," Kristina answered. "My mother is not anyone important. She works for the Center for Disease Control. I can't imagine anyone would be after her..."

Rachel nodded. "Not their style."

"My father, though...he's the chief of police."

James gave a low whistle. "That's a big one for them. With him under their thumb, the Yeerks would have almost free reign."

David nodded. "Yeah; and AI's spyware tells us that they have a few judges in their pocket as well. Pretty soon here, Guraff's going to be able to move around with impunity."

"I doubt Guraff has crime on his mind," I reminded them.

Rachel nodded. "I know what he's up to. Smuggling."

James and David laughed but stopped when they realized she was serious. "Smuggling? Guraff's getting into the organized crime game now?" James asked.

David shook his head. "He and Tobias already play together far too much as it is..."

"It isn't about crime," Rachel explained. "It's about weapons. I know Guraff about as well as anyone but Esplin and Tobias. He can only do this quiet invasion for so long. He's preparing for the day he can seize this town by force and when that happens, he's going to want all the resources he can get. With the cops and judges under his control, he can get all kinds of weapons in here without attracting attention."

"But how could he manage to put them to use without anyone figuring out what's going on?" Cassie asked.

"I've got no idea," Rachel admitted. "And I don't think he does, either. But when he does, he's going to be prepared."

"We have to free them," I said simply. There really wasn't any other option. This was my fault. The Drode was

responsible, but it was on my orders. I did not understand why, though. This gave our mutual enemies a large advantage. Why would the Drode do that?

"Not that simple, Al," James said gently.

Rachel nodded. "Once the Yeerks take someone, they do everything they can to make sure the host stays taken. We freed a few people during the First War, but there was always the huge problem of what to do with them."

"We could protect them," I insisted. I was sure of it. The Yeerks would not dare attack us here."

"No, they'd probably just blow it up and tell the press it was a gas leak or something," David said casually. "This place is a firetrap, you know."

"Maybe there's somewhere safe we could hide Kristina's family," Cassie suggested. "Has anyone heard anything from the Chee lately?"

Rachel shook her head. "They seem to have disappeared. We haven't even heard from Erek. I wonder why..."

"You think something happened to them?" James asked.

"What could happen, though?" Rachel responded. "They live forever and are basically indestructible. They can't fight back, but what could be a danger to one?"

"We could," Prince Tobias said as he exited his bedroom followed by Dan. "Rachel, remember how we sold our memories to the Iskoort?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Do you remember where the Kelbrid in our galaxy are from?"

I swear that stopped one of my hearts. Everyone else, with the exceptions of Kristina and Dan, appeared to be having a similar reaction. Prince Tobias nodded. "Even if the Kelbrid didn't find those memories, the Pythagi started moving in on there. It was part of the deal they cut with the Visser, remember? And who do you think would be the first to rush out and welcome them?"

"Iskoort," Rachel spat.

Even Cassie looked slightly pale, which is very difficult for her to do. "I guess it makes sense. The Pythagi are out to make a profit, and the Iskoort love to trade..."

"What if the Pythagi got a hold of our memories and started capturing and fiddling with the Chee?" Prince Tobias suggested quietly. "I don't know if they could actually turn them into war machines, but the thought that they might be trying..."

"The Chee wouldn't be captured," Cassie assured us all. "As soon as one was discovered, the others would know and go into hiding. Probably on the other side of the world. I don't think we need to worry too much about them fighting us. We just need to worry about ever seeing them again."

"That's a worry for another time," Prince Tobias decided. "Our problem now is with Kristina's father. I'd like to solve that problem without lopping his head off but at the moment, I don't have any ideas on it."

"We grab him, hold him for a few days, and keep him here?" Rachel suggested.

"I...don't think that would be a good idea, Rach. Especially since Al and I would probably be around him a lot."

"What do you mean"

Prince Tobias gave Kristina a look. "I guess you didn't tell them about your father's political aspirations, then?"

CHAPTER 13

"It didn't seem important," Kristina answered. "And it's embarrassing."

"I think it's best for them to hear it," Prince Tobias told her.

Kristina sighed. "Okay. My father's gotten it into his head that he should run for Governor."

"What's embarrassing about that?" Rachel asked.

"It's how he runs his campaign," Kristina explained. "One of his big points is that...well, he thinks that Earth was a lot better off before we started talking to aliens. He wants the to leave us alone forever. And he's even suggested fighting aliens who don't listen."

"He's an extreme xenophobe," Dan clarified. "He led a demonstration a few weeks before we came in, actually. It turned violent, and two Andalites and a Hork-bajir got killed."

"What!?" I shouted.

Prince Tobias rater wisely put a hand on my shoulder as Dan continued. "Trying to protect our visitors is one of the things Tri-I tries to do. We suspect that he's a member of the Isolationist Party, a radical political organization that wants to see the Andalites, Hork-bajir, and others gone from Earth's space as soon as possible and look forward to trying to motivate them to go away faster. Terrorists."

"My father is not a terrorist!"

"Maybe not," Dan agreed. "If we knew for sure, he'd be behind bars right now. Actually, it'd probably be a force field with a nice big Hork-bajir on the other side. In any case, he's got a strong following. While most of his supporters don't take their opinions as far as his go, they seem more or less willing to overlook that little problem."

"He's hugely anti-war," Prince Tobias continued. "So much so that the Andalites decided to keep an eye on him. Alloran kicks updates my way every now and then. He's got them just a tad bit worried."

"What do they have to worry about?" I asked.

It was David who answered me. "One racist police chief isn't a concern. But a vocal governor who wants Earth to go all turtle on the rest of the galaxy is another matter, especially now. If the Alliance loses Earth, they lose the Anati too and the Andalites can't afford that. It'd be the end of the war right there."

"One governor cannot have that much influence," I insisted. "He would be only one voice."

Cassie shook her head. "He's a loud voice, though, and he only needs to convince certain people. America's politicians more or less vote down party lines. If he gets just one party on his side, he could possibly convince the President to call off America's support of the Alliance. A large number of senators and congressmen were against it. And if America goes, a lot of Earth will follow. Not all of the planet, but a considerable chunk of it. The war would be effectively lost before the next major election."

"It's a slim chance," Prince Tobias assured me. "While I have little faith in the ability of politicians to do little things

like make sure their constituents aren't dying in the street, they do seem to be able to make smart choices when it really, really counts. And let's not forget, we've got some influence of our own. I'm betting if Jake stood before the senate and told them to keep up the fight, they'd do it. After all, he could talk Marco into taking a risk. Convincing the congress that-

"You have completely lost track of the problem at hand," Rachel interrupted. "What are we going to do? Kidnap him? Kill him?"

"And what about Kristina? And her mother?" I asked. "We cannot forget about them."

Prince Tobias nodded. "I'll tell you what, Al. You, Cassie, and James get to work on what to do with Kristina. Rach, David, Dan, and I will figure out what to do with her father.

"Um, actually, I need to get to work pretty soon here," James said slowly. "I can be a bit late, since Sergio doesn't exactly know how to read a clock, but if I show up a few hours late, things won't be all that much fun."

"Take Kristina with you," Dan suggested. "She'll be safe with Sergio, for the time being."

"You're joking, right?" Rachel asked.

Dan shook his head. "Sergio may be...off...but he protects his friends. Having her stay with Sergio for a little bit might not be such a bad idea."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this, Dad. How do you even know this guy?"

"You're going to have to trust me, hon. Until we can think of some place more permanent, Sergio's is probably the safest place for her."

"Safe!? She'd be safer with the Yeerks!"

"Trust me, Rach. Sergio's harmless."

"Harmless!? Just the other night, he and Tobias went out to assassinate someone who owed Sergio money!"

Dan raised an eyebrow and turned to Tobias. "He's got you killing people for him?"

"We...try not to use words that aren't ambiguous, but yeah, that's about the size of it. Although in my defense, the guy we were going to kill was Kalroth."

"He must really like you. Good job."

"I can't believe I'm actually hearing this," Rachel sputtered. "Have you both lost your minds."

"Um...yes?" Prince Tobias answered. "Luckily, now I have, like, six. But most of them are Howlers..."

"Your mother got mine in the divorce, hon."

"Hmm...maybe what they say about girls wanting to marry their fathers has some truth to it," James said quietly. Rachel decided to spin around and glare at him. "Aaaand that'd be our cue to run away. Come on, kids. Let's go see Uncle Sergio."

CHAPTER 14

"Kids?" Kristina demanded as we headed down the stairs. I had decided to demorph and remorph in James' room first. We decided it was best to try and conceal what I really was for the time being. I did not think Kristina shared her father's opinions, but it was best not to take chances. "You can't be much older than I am."

James shrugged. "How old are you, then?"

"Seventeen."

"Still a kid, then."

Kristina was silent for a few blocks. Since none of us had transportation aside from morphing, we were forced to walk. It was not too far, since Sergio's warehouse was on the outskirts of town and our apartment was in an only slightly better location. Eventually, though, Kristina spoke again. "Look...I've got, like, *a lot* of questions...I just don't know which ones to ask first."

"Start with what seems most important to you," I suggested.

"Okay... Back there in that apartment, you all kept telling that scary guy not to kill my dad..."

"That is not a question," I answered.

"Yeah, I know. It's just...is that card really on the table? I mean...would he do it?"

"If he can't figure out a better solution," James answered calmly. "He'd rather not resort to killing a semi-innocent person just for having the bad luck to be an important Controller, but that's not going to stop him if he thinks he's got no other choice."

"You need not worry," I assured her. "Prince Tobias, Rachel, and David are very intelligent. I am certain they will think of a more preferable solution."

"Prince Tobias?" she asked.

"Scary guy," James translated, giving her a slight smile. There was something about that smile that I didn't like.

"So...you're the Animorphs? Like, the ones from history class?" she asked us after another few blocks of silence.

"Not exactly," James answered. "Tobias, Rachel, and Cassie are. The other three originals, Jake, Marco, and Ax are back home, fighting other Yeerks. I was recruited near the end of the First War. David's story is more complicated, but I'm not going to be the one to tell it. Al is Tobias's brother. There are two other new recruits, but they live with the other Animorphs."

"But...that's impossible."

"What is?" I asked.

"I know Rachel's dead! I just read about it for homework last night."

"Yeah...that's....complicated," James answered. He and I shared a look. Silently, we both decided that Kristina was in no way prepared for stories about Crayak and Rachel

returning from the dead, or about some of the other details.

"She was not dead, though we believed she was for several years," I answered. "We thought James was dead as well."

"I'm all fine and dandy, though," he assured her. "Not in the least bit ghostly. You can feel for yourself if you'd like."

Kristina obliged him by putting a hand on his arm. "Nope; not a ghost. At least, if you are, you're probably the only ghost I've ever met who works out a lot."

"How many ghosts have you met?"

"Counting you? Three. But one of them was just some kid with a bed sheet over his head."

"And the other?"

"I don't know; he wasn't very talkative."

James led us along a high, chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. Men in dark coats that matched James' were watching us but they didn't make any moves to stop us. One of them opened a gate for James. I could not see his eyes through his sun glasses, but I did not think he approved of us. "The boss doesn't like visitors," he remarked.

"It's a special case," James assured him. "I'm sure he'll understand. Or, you know, have Nicolai shoot out my kneecaps like he did to Paul."

"Paul had it coming. He shouldn't have been trying to open that box. Although making him come back the next day to

get his own bloodstains off of the floor was probably a little excessive. Good luck, James."

"James...where are we?" Kristina whispered.

"Um...let's call it a friend's house." James led us through a warehouse where people were taking unlabeled crates and putting them into the back of a large truck.

"What's in those crates?" Kristina asked.

"Kid? For your own good, never ask that question again."

He led us up some stairs and to a door flanked by two large men holding rather dangerous looking weapons. "You tired of livin', James?" one of them asked in an accent I did not recognize.

"If you had to eat what I do for breakfast, you'd understand. I need to see Sergio."

"Alright, but don't take it personally if I don't to go your funeral. I try not to be seen with any of you people. Just a precaution, you know."

James nodded and the guard opened the door. Sergio was seated with his feet on his desk. An open bottle of clear liquid sat on one side of the desk. I could not see Sergio's face, as it was buried in a magazine that prominently displayed a nude human female. As always, Nicolai lurked silently in the corner.

"Sergio?" James began.

Sergio did not look away from his magazine. "James...you ever been with Andalite girl?"

"No.....have you?"

"Only once. That was all I needed to ask. You can go back to work now."

"Um...actually, you didn't call me in here."

"No? I was sure I did... what is it?"

"You...might have noticed I brought some guests."

"This isn't funeral, James. You can't bring date."

"She's not a date, Sergio... It's kind of complicated, and I can't really explain it all."

"Hey, you know I don't like explanation. Just make sure she doesn't see too much, *da*?"

"Um...Al, how do you think I should phrase this?"

Sergio dropped his magazine. "Allie? What are you doing here? Did she-bear kill Toby?"

Something about the fact that he called me Allie greatly disturbed me...

"No, Sir," I said quickly.

"You remember Rachel's father, Dan?" James asked.

"Dan? No, no. I'm Sergio!"

"No, I mean...Dan is her father."

"Oh! *Da, da*.. What about him?"

James pointed to Kristina. "He was kind of hoping you could watch this for us."

Sergio lowered his sunglasses. "Hey, you think I don't know who this is? What the hell did you get yourselves into, huh? If this is ransom deal, I want cut."

"No, it's not that, it's-" James cut off when we heard the sound of squealing tires and a noise I had grown to recognize all too easily: gunfire.

CHAPTER 15

Nicolai snapped into action faster than I expected. He unceremoniously shoved Sergio underneath his desk and then dashed out of the office door. Almost as soon as Nicolai was out of the door, though, Sergio crawled out from under his desk with a pistol in each hand.

"What the hell did you get into, James?" he asked. There was a massive smile on his face. He was enjoying this!

"Let's try and keep out of this," James suggested. But he walked over towards the office's only window. I joined him there and saw what was unfolding. Three large, black vans had pulled up outside of the warehouse, and there were five smaller cars with them. People were shooting out of the windows and doors of the vehicles.

Judging by the sounds, some of Sergio's security personnel were on the roof just above us, firing down at the vehicles. And I could hear Sergio's laughter echoing through the warehouse. "Al," James whispered, pointing at a car that seemed to be keeping clear of the gunfire. "I've got some suspicious as to who might be in that car. I'm going to try and get a look inside."

I nodded. "You suspect Yeerks?"

"Tobias and Sergio tried to kill Kalroth not too long ago. This is probably Kalroth's response."

"Would he come himself?"

"That's what I plan to find out. Kristina? This will probably be really disturbing. It's...one of those Animorph things. Just stay under the desk."

"Wait, James. Your bird morph is a red-tailed hawk."

"So?"

"The Yeerks will assume you are Tobias. Every Controller out there will turn their guns on you. If they are Yeerks, that is. My bird morph is a falcon. They are not quite as hated, and they are smaller and faster. I would be a better choice."

James took a moment to consider that, then he nodded. "Alright. I'll stay here with Kristina. Try not to get yourself killed, Al. If something happens to you, Rachel and Tobias will do things to me that are so horrible I can't even think of what they might be."

I nodded and then began to demorph. I heard Kristina gasp the word "Andalite" but I did what I could to ignore her. The transition to Andalite did not cause me any problems, so I moved on to the falcon morph. I had had this morph more or less assigned to me during my first days as an Animorph. The idea was to conceal Jake's death from the Yeerks. That plan ultimately failed, but I did not mind the morph.

When I was a falcon, I flew out of the office door, since the window did not open. I flew through the seemingly deserted warehouse and out into the sun. A few of the gunmen in the vans turned their guns on me, but their aim was not very good.

I caught a thermal and gained some altitude. From there, I could see things better. A group of Sergio's men were on the roof of the warehouse. Nicolai was amongst them, but I didn't see Sergio. Not at first, anyhow. Nicolai and his men were keeping the vehicles pinned down with bursts of gunfire. The men in the vehicles were responding in kind.

I circled around until I could see the car that was keeping clear. I looked in the windows but did not see anyone that I recognized. <James? I do not know if you can hear me, but I do not recognize any of these individualizes as Controllers.>

Then I saw something else. Sergio and some men were making their way around behind the vehicles, sneaking through alleys so as though not to be seen. In a minute or so, he and Nicolai would have their attackers pinned between the two of them. Things would end shortly after that.

<This will be over soon,> I informed James. My prediction held true. In approximately one minute, Sergio and his men emerged from an an alley between two buildings behind the vehicles. Sergio shouted a string of words I have been instructed not to repeat. Then he opened fire.

Not with a normal human gun, though. I believe it is called a rocket-propelled grenade. The projectile struck one of the vans and the vehicle exploded. One of the men with Nicolai handed him an identical weapon, and he fired on a second van with the same result.

That was when I saw something that confirmed our suspicious. The man in the passenger seat of the car that was staying away from the fight appeared to be shouting into a device mounted on the dashboard of the vehicle. A

faintly green image of Kalroth's head appeared. I could not hear the conversation that took place, but I could guess what Kalroth's resulting orders were.

The remaining vehicles, which now consisted of three cars and a van, took off as fast as they could, speeding away from the scene of the attack. I flew back into the warehouse, demorphed and remorphed as fast as I could. I finished pulling on my clothes just as Sergio and Nicolai walked in. Nicolai's face was as impassive as Prince Tobias's always was, but Sergio's smile was wider than any I have ever seen.

"This is best night in long time!"

"Sergio...it's not even noon yet," James said hesitantly.

Sergio breathed in hard through his nose. "Hey, I know! But we are going to have fun tonight!"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Sergio flopped down in his chair, apparently either not knowing or caring that Kristina was under his desk. He put his feet on it and picked up his magazine again. "I know who did this. I only know one man stupid enough to try."

"Who?" James asked.

"Same man stupid enough to keep my money. Nicolai and I are going to pay him visit tonight. Maybe we invite all of our friends, make party! Friends like Toby, you see?"

James nodded, but I didn't understand. I knew better than to ask, though. "I think I need to go home and talk to Tobias about that. Is that alright?"

"Oh, sure, sure! Just make sure he's here when sun goes down, *da*?"

"You're the boss."

CHAPTER 16

Cassie and Ronnie arrived by the time we made our way back to the apartment. All things considered, it was very crowded in there. Prince Tobias did not look surprised when we returned, but I could hear it in his voice. "You're back early."

"Yeah...um..." James trailed off.

"Kalroth attempted to have Sergio killed," I explained. "Several vehicles full of gunmen began attacking the warehouse. It was, apparently, not anything Sergio's security personnel could not handle."

"Doesn't surprise me," Prince Tobias answered. "A lot of those guys seem to be ex-military, and I think one or two of them might have been Yeerk-trained. We don't talk much, but I can tell you for sure that they aren't just random thugs and hired muscle. They're professionals, even if they don't look or act like it."

James took over the story from there. "After Sergio and his friends fought off the attackers, our boss got one of his ideas. He's decided he's had enough of Kalroth and is going to round up everyone he can to attack Kalroth's estate and kill him. And probably burn the place to the ground and steal some stuff, too. You know he is."

"I take it he wants me there?" Tob - Prince Tobias finished. One must always address one's superiors properly, even in one's own head.

James nodded. "You've got that look..."

"Yeah; we've been doing some planning while you were out. I think some of our problems have just solved themselves for us. First, let's talk about what we're going to do about Sergio."

Rachel raised her hand. "Ooh! I know. Can I tell them?"

Prince Tobias sighed. "If it makes you happy."

It did indeed seem to make her happy. "When that idiot starts shooting up the place, it's going to really, really distract Kalroths' guards. I can't really think of a better time for you to sneak in there and do some work of your own. If Kalroth goes into hiding and you don't have the chance to kill him, you can probably find some useful information there."

"That makes sense," I agreed.

"And that brings us around to our solution to our problem with Kristina," David said, continuing from where Rachel left off. "The problem with her father is that he's got a lot of power. So we don't need to kill him; we just need to take away his power."

"That shouldn't be too hard to do," Prince Tobias finished. "Considering that Kalroth's dealing with people like Sergio, I'm sure there's plenty of evidence floating around. Just grab some of that while you're in there and we should be able to get Kristina's father demoted or fired."

"He will still be a Controller," I pointed out.

"Not an important one."

"But we have to free him!"

Prince Tobias shook his head. "Sorry, Al, but we've got no place to keep him. I'm not even sure what we'll do with Kristina. I have no clue what we'd do with her parents."

"We cannot leave her parents as slaves!" I insisted.

Naturally, it was Cassie who gave me a level look and asked, "Al, is there something you aren't telling us?"

I couldn't bring myself to say it in front of Kristina. I shook my head but said "Yes. However it is not something important to the mission. I have...personal reasons, which I will disclose at a later date if I may. I assure you, my Prince, that although I am keeping a secret, it is not one that will effect the mission. I will tell you if you order it of me, but I ask you not to do so. At least, not now. "

He closed his eyes and thought for a few moments. Then he nodded. "Alright; if it won't hurt the mission. But after this, you're going to have to tell me."

"As you command, my Prince."

"How are we going to get inside?" James asked.

"You're going to go through the front door," Prince Tobias replied. "Sergio's crazy, but he's not stupid enough to march up that way. He'll come down out of the mountains or out of the woods. The guards will go that direction, so you'll have a clearish shot at the front. With the guards engaged in battle, you'll encounter mostly passive defenses, which I am sure Al can neutralize."

"You're talking like you won't be going with us," David pointed out.

"Not at first," Prince Tobias explained. "Sergio's going to want me in the attack and I can't just say no to him. I'll be in the fighting a little bit, then slip away, morph, and join you inside. I'll probably have to bring Sergio someone's head as a trophy, though..."

Rachel pouted. "I wish I could come with you. Gunfights, break ins, decapitation... Tobias, remember when we had all the fun?"

"It won't be too long now," Prince Tobias promised. "Just a few months and you'll be back in action."

"It's just so boring sitting around here while you're out fighting Yeerks..."

"Rachel?" Cassie said. "I know this will sound odd to you, but not spending your days almost getting killed is a good thing. I promise."

"Moving on," Prince Tobias continued, "I'll join up with you as soon as I can. It shouldn't take me too long. Not much slows down a Howler. I'll leave the rest of you to look over what data we have about Kalroth's estate, since you're going to be the ones doing the deed. I'm sure I'll be able to find my own way in." He flashed us a smile that made me just a little uneasy.

"Where are you going?" James asked.

"Dan, Rachel, and I are headed out to lunch. We've got to discuss some things that are wonderfully non-Animorph related. We'll be back in two hours or so and then we can make final preparations. Oh, and one more thing."

"Yeah?" David asked.

“Until I get there, James is in charge. Just so we know.”

CHAPTER 17

We had elected to take a novel approach in invading Kalroth's estate. James and I hovered in the air above the estate in Pythag morph. David, in his rat form, was in one of my talons and Cassie, in a squirrel morph, was in the other. James was carrying a Shredder and a small explosive device I had made. Once Kalroth's men were distracted, we would begin.

I could see things quite clearly from where I was in the air. Several large vans, almost exact duplicates of the ones that had attacked us earlier, were making their way up the long, winding road to the estate. The guard outposts were doing little to stop them.

They were a diversion, of course. Prince Tobias would never have allowed Sergio to mount a direct attack like that. The real attack force had been moving through the woods and mountains since shortly after Sergio's warehouse was attacked. Nicolai and most of Sergio's men, including Prince Tobias, were almost in position for their own attack. Sergio's men had been joined by some others, presumably men who were in the same line of business as Sergio and did not like the fact that Kalroth had attacked one of their own.

Kalroth's guards were taking up positions along the front wall of the compound. Just as planned. They were not aware of Nicolai and Prince Tobias. At least, not until a small explosion tore a hole in eastern wall. Then Nicolai's team came through, firing everywhere with a variety of weapons. There was a lot of gunfire, but a few wielded Dracon beams, Shredders, and I even saw one man with a Pythagi Oda cannon. The guards realized their mistake very

quickly and were already breaking up to go deal with this second attack.

<Now we go,> James said, descending. I was right behind him. We landed and Cassie and I began demorphing. David immediately started morphing to lion. James waited so that we would not be completely exposed. Even before I was fully demorphed, Cassie was halfway into a wolf morph. <I win,> I said privately to David when I finished demorphing. He was still growing his mane and was missing claws.

He muttered something in my head that I couldn't quite hear and then finished morphing. I went to work with the explosive device. It was nothing elaborate, really, just a small device made from a few household supplies. One would have to be very close to the blast to be injured at all by it. I set the timer and then told the others, <We have fifteen seconds to move a safe distance away. I suggest we begin doing so now.>

Fifteen seconds later, a flash of light nearly blinded my stalk eyes. <And now we have an entrance,> David said smugly, looking at the five-foot hole in the roof.

<You mean *I* have an entrance,> James corrected, leaping into the hole. He buzzed his wings for a bit and managed to avoid injuring himself when he landed. The room into which he dropped was large, with a high ceiling.

<Okay guys, just a moment here,> he assured us. Approximately forty seconds later, he shoved a couch beneath the hole. <Just try to land on that.>

David went first and landed with appropriate grace on the couch. He immediately bounded off. Cassie was next, also graceful. I jumped down last, with far less grace. The fall

hurt my legs and stomach, but I was more or less unharmed. While we were jumping, James had demorphed. He was now partway into lion.

I took a moment to survey the room. It was large and held a good deal of comfortable looking furniture. I was not entirely sure what it's purpose was. Perhaps it did not have one and was simply another quirk of human architecture. Although to be honest, I find all architecture a bit quirky. Why not simply live under the sky like other beings? Bad weather, after all, is just a passing thing.

In addition to the furniture, there were two sets of double-doors, made of some sort of wood. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, affixed not far from where we had made our entrance. The room was dark, and I had just a bit of trouble seeing. Thankfully, Andalites have keen eyes so the moonlight coming in through our entrance was enough for me. I could not see nearly as well as Cassie, David, and James, but it would most likely be enough.

James was about halfway morphed when Cassie and David both said approximately the same thing. <Someone is coming.> They took up positions on opposite sides of one of the sets of doors. I ducked behind the couch, peeking over the top with one stalk eye while I checked to ensure that my Shredder was on the proper setting. James joined me a moment later, moving as fast as he could on mutating legs.

The doors swung open and five men stormed through. They did not look like they were moving to attack anything, though. They were walking as though they were in a hurry. Their weapons were down at their sides. That was a fatal mistake. Once they were all five through the door, Cassie and David struck.

Neither of my friends howled or roared as many might have. They were as quiet as possible. David dove with his paws outstretched, landing on the backs to two different men. His teeth made short work of them after that. Cassie lunged forward in tandem with David, her teeth tearing into the leg of a third guard. She brought him down easily and began making sure he would be no threat to anyone in the future.

The remaining two guards turned and began to raise their weapons, but they were too late. I rose from my hiding place and fired off a few bursts from my Shredder. I am no expert with that weapon, but I have had enough training to use one. Both of the remaining guards fell. Even as they did, though, James dove over the couch, racing towards them.

When he realize that the battle was already over, he turned his head to look at me. <That's cheating, Al. Those two do not count.>

<Aww, let him go, James,> David said.

<Thank you, David,> I began.

Then my *shorm* added, <He needs the points.>

<Why do you three insist on pretending this is a game?> Cassie demanded.

<Because it helps us forget we're murdering people,> James answered simply. David and I nodded. Cassie did not respond after that. I did not think she was expecting an honest answer, much less a very good one.

<Which way do we go now?> James asked.

David pointed towards the unopened doors with a paw.
<Unless this place is a maze, that way leads deeper into
the building.>

<Where is Prince Tobias?> I wondered.

James perked up an ear. <You hear that?> he asked.

I listened carefully. Just barely, I heard some people
screaming. Perhaps in pain, perhaps in fear. I was not
sure. <I hear screaming,> I told him.

<Then I'd imagine he's in that general vicinity. Don't
worry, Al, he'll catch up with us soon. Knowing him, he'll be
waiting in Kalroth's office for us.>

I nodded. Then, we headed deeper into the building.

CHAPTER 18

The doors led to a hallway lined with more doors. I cannot speak for my comrades, but I will say that the very sight of all those doors set off every mental alarm in my head. Anything could be behind any one of them. We advanced warily, trusting our senses to warn us of anything up ahead.

<I hate this,> David muttered as we crept slowly down the hallway. <I mean, under normal circumstances, this would be bad. But add in the raging battle and my rat paranoia and I'm really thinking of turning and climbing back out of that hole.>

<Don't get all 'Marcoy' on us,> Cassie chided. We both knew the galvanizing effect that would have on David. Although he and Marco had laid most of their animosity aside when David rejoined us, they were still not especially fond of each other. Though to their mutual credit, they had attempted to rectify that.

<David, just remember. At least *you* don't have to lead this little parade,> James said. <I really don't know what Tobias was thinking. Did he forget that the last time I lead a group of Animorphs, they all got killed?>

An idea suddenly struck me. <I believe I have a solution to your fears,> I informed them .

<And that is...?> David asked.

Calmly, I aimed my Shredder at the door next to me and fired several bursts through the door. Once the holes

stopped smoking, I could see that there had been nothing inside. <This room is clear.>

<That boy is spending entirely too much time with Tobias and Rachel,> Cassie muttered.

I decided it was best to ignore her. Then I realized a more efficient way of accomplishing my task. I stepped into the room I had just cleared, took aim at the wall, thumbed the Shredder to a higher setting, and fired.

A beam of green light flashed through the wall, through the room beyond it, and through two more rooms after that. It did not kill anyone or anything, but it did assure me that the rooms were empty.

<I am surprised that I must remind you, Cassie, that though Prince Tobias and Rachel are unorthodox, their methods are usually devastatingly effective.>

<Can't argue with that,> David agreed. <I've been on the receiving end of that... Not something I want to repeat. I consider myself lucky just to be small and furry.>

I fired into the door on the other side of the hall, entered, and did just as I had done in the previous room. In this way, we advanced down the hallway with impunity. Our actions were wasted, though. We encountered nothing. But, being Animorphs, that just made us more suspicious and paranoid.

<I really don't like this,> Cassie muttered as we advanced, never breaking from our procedure. There was not much hallway left. We were within twenty feet of a pair of double doors.

<I think we're probably the only people who would complain because no one is trying to kill us,> James said quietly. <Almost there. Al, you want to finish up here?>

I nodded, then fired into the door to my left. As all of the other rooms had been, it was empty. I unleashed a barrage of Shredder fire at the wall and, once again, wasted the effort. <It is clear,> I assured James.

He nodded and then rushed towards the doors. Nothing attacked him. David went next, then Cassie and I arrived together. <They probably heard the Shredder fire,> David remarked. <So either no one's in there or they're content to wait until we walk inside. In which case, I guarantee this is a trap of some kind.>

<You say that like it's unusual,> Cassie noted. <We always seem to be walking right into traps. But they haven't caught us very often.>

James turned to me. <You're the one with hands.>

<You and David weigh more,> I reminded him. <And if this door is unlocked, then I must vehemently protest our entrance.

<Fair enough.> James reared back on his hind legs, balancing himself against one door. David did the same to the other. A moment later, they gave a push and both doors fell in. I had no doubts as to where we found ourselves. Subvisser Kalroth's office.

It was a large room, though not as large as the one through which we had entered. The floor was made of some stone. I believe it is called marble. At the far end was a dais. There were several large chairs arranged in a half-

circle in front of it. On the dais was a large desk, behind which sat the Subvisser himself.

He had a human host, though he looked unlike any humans I had ever met. His eyes were slanted, his flesh was just a bit on the yellow side, and his long, black hair was completely unkempt and wild. He wore a suit, but it looked extremely out of place on him. He would have fit much better had he been garbed in Sergio's attire.

He appeared to be alone in the room, though that was not strictly true. A small, green cube on his desk was favoring us with an image that I am not afraid to admit chills my blood. It was a Hork-bajir nearly two feet taller than the average. There were a few scars on his body, testaments to mistakes he would not repeat. In one hand, he held a sword that I knew was once the stinger of a Kelbrid. Undervisser Guraff 427. Even as a hologram, he made me want to take a step back.

Guraff was not looking at us, though. He and Kalroth appeared to be arguing. "-made the mistake of involving yourself with this man," Guraff was saying. "The consequences are yours to deal with." I could hear a slight change in his voice as he added, "A few criminals should be no trouble for one who would serve the Visser."

"And them?" Kalroth asked, looking at us for the first time. Guraff's hologram turned. Although I am not good at reading Hork-bajir facial expressions, he looked disappointed. "Only four of you? Where is the Devil Prince?"

We all looked at each other, unsure what to say. Guraff scared all of us. We knew that, as a hologram, he was no

danger. But there was a power in his voice that made us all question that simple logic.

It was James who eventually answered. <He's making sure those 'few criminals' are more trouble than someone like Kalroth can handle.>

<You should probably say goodbye now, Guraff,> David added. <I don't think you'll be seeing Kalroth again.>

"Oh?" Kalroth asked. "I am disappointed, Animorph. You were supposed to be more observant than that."

"Stop playing games, Kalroth," Guraff said, irritated. "Summon them and have your fun. I suppose it is best that the Devil Prince is not here. I would not like it very much if someone other than I killed him."

"As you command, Undervisser. Never would I disobey the right hand of the Visser." Then, he shouted a word that I mistakenly thought must have been something in the Yeerk language. "Apostates!"

I heard a terrible noise from above me. I imagine it was somewhat similar to the noise a chunk of steel would make in a garbage disposal unit. I turned both stalk eyes towards it, keeping my main eyes on the Yeerk leaders. There were two of them, standing on the ceiling above us as though gravity was of no relevance.

The creatures stood on strong legs, bent at the knee. Their feet were an odd, dome shape. Something beneath that dome must have allowed them to affix themselves to the ceiling. Their arms were long and muscular and very nearly reached their feet. Both arms ended in claws. Each claw had four long, slender fingers. One of these was far longer

and thicker than the other and was hooked at the end. It was covered in small hooks. I had no doubts that this was a weapon. The creatures had short tails that ended in very long, thin spikes somewhat similar to my own tailblade.

While crouching as they did, their shoulders were about even with those of a human. But rising from their massive shoulders were long, strong necks that reminded me of my tail more than the creatures' own tails did. Their necks were at least as long as the rest of their bodies and ended in a foot-long triangular blade. On each side of the blade was a deep, black eye that did not seem to blink. One reared its head back and I could see that beneath the blade was a triangular mouth rimmed by sharp teeth.

Most of their bodies were covered in what appeared to be quills. The quills alternated between blue and black, giving the creature a dark appearance. Pencil-thin lines of gold seemed to be traced all across their bodies. I could not say if this was the result of some natural coloration or perhaps some ritual tattoo. Oddly, they had no quills between their claws and elbows, or on the last foot of their necks. Instead, they possessed golden scales.

<What...what the hell are those things?> James demanded.

"Those," Kalroth answered, "are the Ssri'Kai Apostates."

CHAPTER 19

<That doesn't exactly clear it up,> Cassie said quietly. The Ssri'Kai had not moved. They were apparently content to wait for an order. An order that Kalroth had decided to delay.

"The Apostates are the newest addition to the Yeerk military," Kalroth told us. Unfamiliar as I was with human vocal tones, even I could tell that he was overflowing with pride. He must have been heavily involved.

"They are, simply put, the best. Each one, host and Yeerk alike, was chosen by the Visser Himself for qualities that only He can perceive. Each Apostate has been indoctrinated by me personally in the Truth of the Visser. Their belief and devotion are nearly as strong as mine are. They will never surrender. Only death can stop them, and that is a task beyond any of you.

"They are the smartest warriors on the battlefield. Each one has been educated by Salheer Six-Seven-One, in whose wisdom even the Visser places trust. Your petty tricks will not work on them. And in combat, they are nearly unequaled. Each one, Yeerk and Host, was trained personally by the Undervisser. They would not be standing here right now if the mightiest warrior in the entire Yeerk Order did not believe they were prepared to stand against you."

David said a word I have been instructed not to repeat. James repeated it. As did Cassie. At that point, I could not help but say it myself.

"You will find the Ssri'Kai more than a match for your morphs," Guraff warned us, picking up where Kalroth had left off. "They are one of only three species known to have successfully defeated a full Kelbrid invasion. I myself cannot stand before more than three of their best."

That sent a chill down my spine. <Prince Tobias?> I called.

<I'm...way,> his voice called faintly. <...happening?>

<We have encountered some elite Yeerk warriors called Apostates. They are of a species called the Ssri'Kai, which we have never encountered before. I fear we may be in danger.> I had no way of knowing how much of my message got through.

<...Guraff...?>

I guessed his meaning. <Only as a hologram.>

<Just....hold...get there.>

All of the Animorphs had heard our exchange. We began to take up positions. James and Cassie stood side-by-side. David stood next to me. <Hey, Al? You *do* know the Brode says you can't let this thing claw me open, right?>

<I shall endeavor to remember that.> And then they attacked. One jumped off of the wall, angeling for James and Cassie. The other came for us. Its leg was extended and I could see dozens of small suction cups on the underside of the foot. I realized what the tactic was at once. It would try to immobilize me with the foot and then impale me with its claws. But an Andalite is faster than that.

I neatly stepped to the side as David circled around. The Ssri'Kai landed between us. A deadly mistake. I struck with my tailblade even as David leapt on the Controller's back. I felt my blade sink deep into it's flesh. I heard a scream of pain, but it was not from the Apostate. It was from David.

He rolled off of it's back, roaring. Hundreds of quills were stuck in his stomach and arms. <It burns!> he shouted. <I can't...can't see! Everything's red!>

"Did I forget to mention the poisoned quills?" Kalroth said, mockery clear in his voice. "Perhaps you should be more observant, Animorphs."

I kept three eyes on the Ssri'Kai I was fighting and one stalk eye on the second one. Cassie and James were not doing very well either. They hadn't made David's mistake, but they couldn't get close enough to try and find a weak point. Cassie made the logical guess and jumped for the Ssri'Kai's throat. Her teeth sank deep into the neck. But the Apostate didn't even flinch. Instead, it shoved a barbed claw into her side and pulled her off of it's body.

"Do be careful of those hooks," Kalroth warned her. "They hurt more going out than they do going in, you know." As though to demonstrate this, the Ssri'Kai pulled it's hook out of Cassie's body. I have not often seen that much blood come out of a single creature. I think there was some sort of organ in the Apostate's hand. She collapsed. Hopefully, she was only unconscious. Two of us down in less than a minute. This was going very, very poorly.

I kept striking my Ssri'Kai with my tail. It tried unsuccessfully to keep me away with it's hooked claws. Though it had greater reach than I did, I was faster and could manage to deflect each claw and sink my blade into

its flesh before it could attack me again. There were some quills in my tail, and I was beginning to feel the pain of the poison in the tip of my tail, but there was not yet enough in my system to be a real danger. Again and again I felt my blade sink deep inside of its body but it didn't seem to care!

"You are wasting your time, *Aristh Alloran*," Guraff's voice said. "Beneath their flesh is a gel, which contains their organs. Puncturing their flesh causes the organs to shift. They are beyond your reach. It is possible that the Ssri'Kai will eventually fall unconscious due to blood loss, but as you can see, they bleed little and I believe it will be able to fight long after you are too exhausted to continue."

His voice didn't have that tone of mockery as Kalroth's did. It was almost like he was trying to help... But no, Guraff would not do that. He was like...like a scientist showing off a new discovery. He wanted me to appreciate what he had done. I suppose that on some level I did. But mostly, I was just terrified.

It was not hopeless yet, though. I still had my Shredder. I had refrained from using it because I was quite close to the creature. Close enough that the flashback from the Shredder would harm me, too. And since it was considerably stronger than I was, I would have to shoot it on a high setting. And though the damage to me would only be about half as great as that which the Ssri'Kai suffered, it still might be enough to kill me. I would need some distance before I could shoot.

James was almost dancing, trying to avoid the Ssri'Kai's claws. <Any ideas, AI?> he asked. He might as well have been panting.

<Just this,> I responded. Then I thumbed my Shredder to its highest setting.

And aimed it at Kalroth. <Halt your attack or this is the end of your Subvisser.>

CHAPTER 20

The Ssri'Kai continued attacking. And Kalroth laughed at us. "Foolish Andalite. I told you their devotion rivaled my own. My life and death are irrelevant, as are theirs. The only deaths that matter are yours. Such are our orders."

I fired. The beam of green light streaked towards Kalroth. But then it appeared to slow, and then it stopped and fizzled out. "Andalites; quick to invent, slow to learn," Kalroth said. "Pythagi force field. I understand you fell for the same trick when that traitor and heretic Mersa fled to the Pythagi."

"Enough of this, Kalroth," Guraff said sharply. "Battle is not something with which to be toyed." His hologram turned towards us. "Finish it, Apostates."

They struck faster than I could believe. Faster even than my tail. It was not the hooks or the feet; it was their heads. Both of them shot their heads forward, their necks propelling them faster than even I could react. I stared in disbelief as the Ssri'Kai's arrow-shaped head pierced my chest. And then the pain hit. I screamed; not a warrior's cry of agony. This was a scream of pain and terror.

And then I screamed more when I felt it. The Ssri'Kai's teeth on my upper heart. A moment later, the Apostate pulled its head out of my chest, a bit of my heart still in its teeth. I dropped to my knees and then fell on the ground, trying uselessly to hold my chest closed. It..it ate my heart!

If Andalites did not possess two hearts, I would have already been dead. I could survive on my lower heart if need be, and morphing would restore my upper one. However, I had at best a few minutes before my body shut down due to massive blood loss. Enough time to demorph. But the Ssri'Kai would never allow that.

My vision was fading. I could see that James was in a similar predicament. He was just slightly luckier. He had already been moving when the Ssri'Kai struck, so its head had pierced his shoulder instead of his chest. He stood in front of Cassie on three legs, still trying to fight. It was a futile gesture. The Ssri'Kai struck with its head again. This time, though it did not pierce him. It simply swung its head like a battleaxe, chopping his remaining foreleg out from under him. James fell forward, completely defenseless.

The Ssri'Kai I had been fighting turned towards David, who was now stumbling and disoriented. I doubted he even knew what was going on. The Apostate reached forwards with one leg, its suction-cup foot attaching itself to David. It pulled my *shorm* closer, then threw him to the ground. I hadn't realized how powerful those legs were. The Ssri'Kai hooked a claw into David's collar bone and then pulled. I heard a sickening noise as his shoulder completely separated from the rest of his body.

I tried to shoot, but I couldn't feel my arm. I wasn't even sure where it was. All my world was darkness and pain. And then I heard a voice in my head. A familiar one; one I had grown to love. It spoke only one word. <Demorph.>

Then I heard Guraff's voice. "He has come. Apostates, show the Devil Prince your training."

I opened one stalk eye and turned it. Prince Tobias was standing in the doorway, in Howler morph. He was still wearing the same clothing he had been wearing earlier. Black jeans, black shirt, and trench coat. His sunglasses were gone, as were any weapons he might have been carrying. It was a good thing Prince Tobias was already near Howler size when he was not morphed.

"New toys, Guraff?" Prince Tobias questioned. "I didn't think you were one for games."

"They are Esplin's toys," Guraff answered. "However, I cannot deny their effectiveness. They defeated your soldiers in less than two minutes." There was a challenge in his voice. One that I knew Prince Tobias would accept.

"Then I suppose I'll have to kill both of them in one."

All the while, I struggled to demorph. To focus on some image long enough to become it. But I couldn't. Too many visions flashed through my mind. Various morphs. Friends from school. Kristina. My father, the few times I saw him. My mother, and my other family members. The automatons who raised and taught me. Craig Ferguson. Too many. I could not concentrate on any one thing.

Darkness was coming. There was nothing left to hold on to. Soon, it would all be over. The pain would be gone. And though I would leave Prince Tobias, Prince Aximili, my mother, and Rachel, I would have my father. I could finally get to know the man who was a hero to so many. Maybe it would not be so bad. Maybe...

I was rudely shaken back to my senses by a sound that was literally ear-splitting. Prince Tobias threw his head back and howled at the top of his lungs. I do not know if it

could literally wake the dead, but it came very close. It woke me up, at least.

All of the glass in the room shattered. The hologram of Guraff disappeared as well. The howl must have shattered the lens. Kalroth fell to the ground, clutching his ears. The Ssri'Kai threw their heads back and screamed as well, but I believe it was a scream of pain. Then they struck.

One rushed towards Prince Tobias and thrust its head at him. Again, I could not see the head move. One moment, it was above the Ssri'Kai's body. The next instant, it was inside of Prince Tobias's chest. My Prince gave a shout of pain, but that was it. Then he struck back. The eyes of the Ssri'Kai were still exposed. That was enough for Prince Tobias.

He drove one steel claw into each eye. The Apostate's screams of pain were muffled by Prince Tobias's body. It twisted and writhed as Prince Tobias drove his claws in deeper and deeper until his fists were almost inside of the Apostate's head. The Ssri'Kai flailed at him with its hooks, tearing chunks out of his chest and his arms, but those wounds healed very quickly. The result seemed inevitable. The Apostate twitched and convulsed for a few moments. And then it was silent.

Prince Tobias pulled its head out of his chest, dropping it to the ground. Its eyes were completely destroyed. And presumably, its brain was also obliterated. Prince Tobias stood there for a moment. He was bleeding badly but the wound in his chest was already healing up. The second Ssri'Kai was staring at him with what I believe was either shock or terror. It is impossible to read a Ssri'Kai face, but I cannot imagine any other emotion it could have been feeling.

All the while, we were demorphing; or, in my case, morphing. My vision was getting clearer, and a human heart was replacing the hole where my own used to be. James and Cassie were slowly resuming human shapes. David was shrinking, becoming his usual rat self.

The other Apostate made it's decision. It attacked Prince Tobias. It did not repeat the mistakes of the previous Ssri'Kai, though. It swung its head towards Prince Tobias's neck like a battleaxe, presumably planning to decapitate him. Prince Tobias linked his claws and caught the Ssri'Kai's head between them, holding it in place with both arms.

Then he started kicking it. Lightning fast kicks aimed at its body and neck. His legs soon began to pick up quills, but he did not seem to care too much. The Ssri'Kai hooked one claw behind his leg, dug the barbed hook into the muscle, and pulled. Half of Prince Tobias's thigh came off of his leg and he fell to the ground.

The Apostate stood over Prince Tobias, one claw and its head raised for what might have turned out to be a killing strike. I am not sure if a Howler can survive a simultaneous decapitation and having its heart torn out. And I was not in the mood to find out. I raised my Shredder and fired. There was a flash of green light. And then there was no Apostate.

Prince Tobias climbed to his feet, looking at the pile of ashes in front of him. That was all that remained of the Ssri'Kai. "Al," he said slowly, "isn't that cheating?"

CHAPTER 21

I was in my human morph. Cassie, David, and James were all demorphed. I believe we were all too tired to remorph, though I knew we should have done it. Together, we walked towards Kalroth's desk. I felt myself slowing down until I could no longer move. We had reached the force field.

I could see behind the desk, though. Where Kalroth's chair had been, there was now a perfectly circular tunnel. No doubt it led back into the mountains, to the Yeerk pool. "Do we follow?" James asked wearily.

Prince Tobias shook his head. "You're in no shape to raid the Yeerk pool. And I've got a feeling that they'll have more of those Apostates down there, not to mention Guraff. Right now, we wouldn't stand a chance."

Then I heard a loud explosion. It shook the entire building. I stumbled forwards. Forwards... "I believe the force field has been disabled," I announced as we all walked towards the desk.

<Do all Andalites state the obvious like that or is it just a family trait?> David asked me. He started morphing to human as I began demorphing.

"I guess Sergio and Nicolai finally got to the generator room," Prince Tobias muttered as he began to demorph. "If Kalroth's retreated and Sergio's penetrated that far, this shouldn't last much longer. We should get what we can now and then the rest of you should get out of here."

"Get what?" Cassie asked.

Prince Tobias nodded towards the desk. "Documents. There might be something in there that we can use to incriminate and thus demote Kristina's father. I'd much rather demote him than kill him."

We decided upon a simple solution. I shot a large hole in the roof. Then, James and I morphed to Pythagi and simply carried the desk away, with Cassie and David riding on us in morphs. If any of Sergio's men saw two Pythagi stealing a desk, none of them mentioned it.

Ronnie was at the apartment when we got home. Dan, apparently, had left. Ronnie and Kristina had convinced Rachel to take the night off and had cooked us a meal that was, at the very least, adequate. Not that any of us would be foolish enough to say how superior it was to our usual fare in front of Rachel.

I would like to only have my heart eaten once per day.

Prince Tobias arrived three hours later. And he was not alone. Even before he entered the building, we could hear Sergio singing in what must have been his native language. The sound only got louder as he and Prince Tobias got closer. Presumably, Nicolai was with them as well. Rachel turned and walked into her bedroom. When she returned, she was cradling the M-16 Marco had given her months ago.

Prince Tobias unlocked the door and half-stumbled in. Rachel ignored him for the moment, though. Instead, she leveled the weapon at Sergio. "Are you coming in, Sergio?" she asked in a sweet voice.

"Eh...*neit, neit*," he said after a pause. Sergio looked from the gun to Rachel and back again a few times. He looked thoughtful for a moment. It was...disorienting. He smiled at her and announced, "You are good woman for Toby." Then all pretense of thoughtfulness faded from his face. "You would be better woman for me!" Then he turned and fled. Prince Tobias and James managed to wrest the gun away from Rachel before she could go after him.

"Are you going to let him talk to me that way?" she demanded of Prince Tobias.

In response, Prince Tobias pulled a large wad of cash out of his coat and tossed it onto the table. "With what he paid me tonight, I'd probably have let him kiss you."

"You'd what!?"

"Joking, Rach. But the way I see it, this is kind of like pay back," my Prince assured her.

"How so?"

Prince Tobias gave her one of those rare smiles that seems to be subconscious. "He's your Naomi."

We lapsed into a period of silence after that. We all wanted to sleep, but there was still some work to be done. The documents could wait for a little bit, but there were decisions that needed to be made. After a few minutes, Kristina asked, "What happens now?"

"We might find something we can use to neutralize your father," Prince Tobias answered. "I hope so."

"I'd hate for this night to have been a waste," James agreed, touching his arm where the Ssri'Kai had impaled him.

Prince Tobias shook his head. "Not a waste. Kalroth may have gotten away, and we might not have found something. But the Yeerks are definitely even more scared than before. After you left, we completely destroyed that building. Burnt it to the ground and set off some small explosions in the foundations. And we killed two of those Apostates. That'll scare them, if nothing else does."

"Can we not talk about the Apostates?" Cassie suggested.

Prince Tobias nodded. "As for you, Kristina... We don't have enough room for you to stay with us, and even if we did I don't think it would be a good idea." For some reason, he shot James a look. James cringed. Was I missing something?

Cassie looked at Ronnie. Reluctantly and slowly, he nodded. "We could take her," Cassie suggested.

Again, Prince Tobias shook his head. "Not a good idea. People are going to come looking for her soon. You'd definitely be incriminated, and I don't want that happening. Not many prisons can hold an Animorph, but it'd be a lot easier if you're not a fugitive."

"Then what am I supposed to do?" Kristina demanded.

"You're going to go live with Sergio for a little bit."

"Like hell she is," Rachel said quickly, putting a protective arm over Kristina's shoulders.

"It's the safest place I can think of," Prince Tobias argued. "The Yeerks aren't going to attack Sergio again any time soon. And although the police are going to be looking for her, Kristina will be far from the most illegal thing in Sergio's possession. She'll be safe there. She might even enjoy it."

"You can't trust those people," Rachel insisted.

"I watched some of those people die tonight, Rachel," Prince Tobias answered quietly. "I watched them fight and die beside me like true soldiers. I trust them as much as I trusted that army that fought under us on Hork-bajir. They're odd men, and not necessarily good men, but they're trustworthy. None of them would betray us."

"Unless they're Yeerks," David interrupted quietly.

"If they were Yeerks, they wouldn't have been fighting with us tonight," Prince Tobias answered. "Three men did turn on us during the battle, but we cut them down without trouble. One more person refused to come, and Nicolai has already...spoke...to him. I doubt there are any more Yeerks in Sergio's organization. They've probably all fled already."

"I'm more worried about some...other things," Cassie said delicately. "Will that be a problem?"

"No," Prince Tobias assured her. "I've already spoken to Sergio about it. He doesn't know what's going on and he doesn't want to know. But not many people at the warehouse will know that she's with him, and none of them would dare lay a finger on her."

I believe Kristina still looked uncertain. "It's only temporary," Prince Tobias assured her. "Just until we find a better solution."

"Do I really have a choice?" she asked.

Prince Tobias nodded. "There's always a choice. You could choose to run away right now. You could choose to betray us. You could choose any number of things. But all choices have consequences. And doing as I say is usually the one with the most desirable consequences. It's all up to you, though."

Kristina sighed. "I guess it won't be so bad... Sergio seemed like a happy person."

Rachel put her face in her palm. "It's courageous, isn't it?"

CHAPTER 22

What happened to me that night could not exactly be called a dream. I closed my eyes, sleep coming easily to me for once. But this was not precisely sleep. I opened my eyes and I was once more on the set of the Late Late Show. As before, the Drode was sitting behind the desk.

This time, though, he was playing with puppets. One looked like a smaller version of myself. Somehow, the Drode was able to manipulate all four legs, both arms, tail, head, and stalk-eyes with just one hand. I am certain he cheated. The other puppet looked remarkably like Kristina.

I was in my natural body, standing where the guest chair should have been. <Why?> I demanded.

"I like puppets," the Drode answered.

<Not that. Why make Kristina's parents Controllers? It hurts us! You helped your enemy!>

"Calm down, Allie. I know what I'm doing."

<I highly doubt that.>

"There's a balance in this game," the Drode explained. "Azmaveth and Crayak are allowed to use any power they wish. But...what's that saying you scientisty types are so fond of? Oh, right. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. In the real world, that's completely untrue, but you Andalites haven't discovered that yet. I'm sure you'll get there in a thousand years or so. But it is true in this case. For every action Crayak or Azmaveth

takes directly, the other is allowed to take an action of equal power.

"For example, Crayak could just will the entire Kelbrid race out of existence. But then Azmaveth would be allowed to destroy any race *he* chose. Crayak could strike the Visser dead. But then Azmaveth could kill any Animorph he wanted. That, though, presents a problem that has been troubling Crayak for a while now."

<What problem?> I asked.

The Drode shook his head. "Sorry, Allie. It's a secret. You don't get to find out until it's too late. But more to the point, there is a reason why I let Azmaveth take Kristina's parents. He had been trying to get them infested for a while. But Kristina's father was proving to be very slippery. He's extremely paranoid. Thinks the Andalite government wants to assassinate him. And to be honest, he's not too far off. H ewas hard to get a hold of, and Azmaveth wanted him. I let Azmaveth infest someone he wanted. So, little scientist, what would be an equal and opposite reaction to that?"

It was not difficult to figure out. <The liberation of a host you want,> I answered.

"Good! You're still hopeless as an individual, but at least that little brain of yours can do the basic stuff. That's more than I can say for some of your friends."

<So which host are you going to free?>

"None of the four you're thinking of," he answered.

That surprised me. <Why not? Surely it would->

"Be absolutely useless," he interrupted. "Seer is totally loyal to Guraff. If I freed him, he'd just go right back home. Imrahil wouldn't be of much use to you. He's pretty docile now. He just wants to go home, curl up with a good book, and drink until he forgets this past year or so. Kalroth's host is crazy now. You can only put up with an insane Yeerk ranting inside of your brain for so long before you snap. And Salheer's host is in pretty much the same situation. He was a really nice guy before he got Yeerked. He just can't stand up to the stuff Salheer's putting his brain through. He's basically just an empty shell of a man now. A vegetable. Except he's not good for you."

<So who is going to be freed?>

"At the moment, no one. I'm saving this for a rainy day. Now, does that clear everything up for you, Allie?"

<Why did you trick me? Why not just do it?>

"Another one of those pesky rules," the Drode sighed. "When we do stuff like that, we have to get the approval of one of the people who do our bidding in this war. Azmaveth can't pimpsmack the entire Andalite race without the Visser or someone approving. And I couldn't throw some innocent human under the bus without an Animorphs's permission. And you gave it to me."

<I did not!>

"Sure you did. You just didn't know it. You gave me permission to use my power to get you and Kristina together. I'm clever that way. Now, anything else? I've got places to be."

<Just one more question. Why did Kristina not remember me?> I asked. I had to know.

"Why?" The Drode laughed. "You kill me, Allie, you really do. It's because she's a beautiful, seventeen year-old-girl and you're some weird little kid who, the first time she saw you, just got the hell beat out of him. It's because you were beneath her notice. Oh, sure, she spoke to you at first. She's a disgustingly nice person sometimes. But in her mind, you were just some kid who needed a kind word. Nothing more. And once you were gone, she forgot all about you. She's got more important things on her mind. Like her fingernails and what color she would like them to be next."

<That...that can't->

"Look, I'll cut you some slack since you grew up with robots. But that's how the world works, Al. The beautiful queen of the school doesn't care about some weird kid with tears on his face and blood on his shirt. Unless, you know, they both happen to be fighting brain-stealing aliens. Then the weird kid becomes a whole lot more interesting."

<You must be->

"I mustn't be anything I don't want to be, Allie. But *you* must be getting to sleep. You've got school tomorrow." And with that, everything faded away.

CHAPTER 23

James walked David and myself to school the next morning. Most of the day passed in a haze until I found Troy, Brad, and that third one whose name I still did not know waiting for me on my way to lunch. Troy did not bother with his usual false friendship. He just grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and shoved me against some lockers.

"You think you're funny?" he demanded.

"I believe we already had this discussion."

He slammed me against the lockers. "That picture is all over the Internet. We spent a few days trying to think of something really good to do to get back at you for that," he hissed. "But then we decided it was just easier to beat you until you're sorry you ever touched a computer."

I was looking at Troy, so I did not see the two men approaching from behind him. Suddenly, though, there was a hand on Troy's shoulder. He turned around and I looked up. I found myself staring into Sergio's sunglasses. Nicolai, of course, was with him, one hand on the shoulder of each of Troy's friends.

"Hey, Nicolai, what do we have here? Looks like protection racket! Me, I used to have protection racket when I was in school. But you know what happened to me?" Sergio lowered his glasses and brought his face close to Troy's. "Bigger kid muscle me out. He break both my legs and leave me in alley. That's what happens in business, you know."

He shoved Troy at Nicolai, who grabbed Troy's arm. In his other hand, he grabbed both of the other boys. They were large, but Nicolai was enormous. "Nicolai," Sergio said, "why don't you go...have talk...with these, huh? Maybe they learn what happens when you try to racket in my school, *da?*"

Nicolai nodded, dragging the three towards the door. They were shouting, but no one seemed to care.

"Why does no one ever see these things?" I wondered out loud. Should someone not be monitoring the hallways?

"Why?" Sergio asked. "Because it is *my* school. I donated all money to build it! I told some people to take some time off. I promised they would see those kids again, and that is all that matters, *da?*"

"You built a school?" And then I remembered that Sergio should not know who I was. I could not act as though I knew him at all.

"Sure, sure! Smart kids make more money, you see? And more money for them is more money for me! Imagine if one ends up in senate or president!" There was logic in that...of sorts.

"Why are you helping me?" I asked.

Sergio shrugged. "I don't know. Friend ask me to help, so I did. I do not ask why. Some men like why. Me, I like when and where. And who usually helps. Why is something for philosopher." Then he turned and left.

I had my suspicions. I walked out of the school's front doors a few minutes later. There was a dark figure in the

alley between two buildings across the street. I crossed over into the alley. As I expected, it was Prince Tobias, wearing what had become his usual uniform. "You asked Sergio to take care of them," I said. It was not exactly an accusation.

He nodded. "You might find this hard to believe, Al, but when I was in school, I got beat up almost every day."

"Impossible."

"I'm a far different man now. But when I was your age, it was like there was a big sign on me demanding that people hit me. A lot of people were happy to oblige. But people change. I bet if I even looked funny at some of the guys who used to beat on me, they'd start to cry."

"How did you know?" I asked.

"The Drode told Rachel about it last night. He was pretty sure he could get her to just come here and kill them. But I decided it was probably better if I handled things."

"What will Sergio do to them?" I did not want them to die or suffer permanent injury. It was not worth killing them over or I would have done it myself.

"Oh, he'll just have a little fun. Blindfold them, tie them up in a van, drive them around for a little bit, and then leave them somewhere outside of town. Brad's father works with James, so he'll go and pick them up when Sergio's done playing. After that, it's in their parents' hands."

He looked at me for a few minutes. "Something's still bothering you."

I decided it was probably best to tell him now. "It's Kristina. I..." I trailed off.

"I understand," Prince Tobias said, sparing me from embarrassment. "I know what it's like, Al. Believe me, I know."

"But she has no interest in me, does she?"

"Probably not," my Prince admitted.

"She did not even remember who I was."

He nodded. "I introduced myself to Rachel at least five different times before she finally remembered me," he assured me. "Girls like them...we're just beneath their notice. At least, unless something extraordinary happens. It did for me. Maybe it'll happen for you, too."

"You do not sound very hopeful."

"I try not to put much faith in the extraordinary. I know it happens; it's happened to me more times than I can count. But I feel a lot safer trusting in what I can accomplish on my own. Or with the help of people who I *know* will be there. I'd suggest that you forget about her, but I know how this works. You won't get over your feelings for a little while. But trust me, you'll get over it."

I smirked. I had been practicing that facial expression. "You never did."

"I don't live by the rules of ordinary men," he answered, also smirking. Then he swept his coat around like a cape. "After all, I am the mighty Devil Prince. Slayer of the Apostates. Defender of Earth. The--"

"Rachel has housework for you to do, doesn't she?" I interrupted. That had to be why he was speaking so much.

He nodded. "I'm trying to eat up as much time here as I can." We lapsed into silence for a few moments. Then, he asked, "Is there anything else you want to tell me? Like that secret you said wouldn't effect the mission?"

"It is my fault Kristina's father and mother were infested," I answered. I told him about my conversation with the Drode the night before. "Are you upset?"

He shook his head. "Love is blinding, Al. And the Drode is tricky. In the end, this might be for the best. I don't know how Crayak is going to use this little bonus of his, but I'm sure it'll come in handy. So, Al, what did you learn from all of this?"

I thought about it. There were a lot of things I learned. There were other dangers than the Yeerks in the world. Sergio, at least, could more dangerous than Kalroth appeared to be. I also learned not to assume that someone is bad because they do bad things. Sergio's men were killers, murderers even. They were all criminals. But they had their own sense of nobility and loyalty that I could not deny. They were willing to fight and die, just as we were.

I also reminded that you cannot have everything you want, a lesson that many sometimes forget. Some things just were not meant to be. And I was reminded that not all battles can be fought with the body, nor can all be fought by the mind. Sometimes, they must be fought by something else entirely: friends, or at least allies.

One lesson, though, echoed through my mind louder than anything else. Something I should have learned long ago. "Never trust the Drode."

*And now for some words of wisdom from Streetlight
Manifesto:*

*Not long ago in my high school days,
I watched a girl from so far away,
But every time she passed me by,
I turned my head away and quietly sighed.
And when she walked by her hair would dance,
A secret tango that only I could understand,
And when she'd ask me for the time of day,
I'd look her in the eyes and quietly say.*

*Oh Kristina, Kristina, do you have any clue who I am?
(HELL NO!)
So listen up cause I'll tell ya once*

*and I'll explain myself the best that I can,
Kristina, Kristina, you don't know me so ill have to persist,
I'm kinda shy so no wonder why,
Kristina she don't know I exist.*

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

72: THE PRICE

(No, seriously this time.)

Melisa, my Prince, and I went to Mr. Chapman's house. It was new and refurbished. His previous house had been the site of several Animorph raids. To add to it, Marco and Tobias had finally demolished it with an Abrams tank near the end of the war. It was now a brick building, with two stories and an attic. There was a very neat lawn, and a cement walkway with a porch and a step to the front door. Prince Jake walked up and knocked.

We heard the sound of shuffling feet and the door was answered by Mr. Chapman. "Oh, hello Jake. good to see you. Come on in. You too, Prince Aximili, come in." He smiled at his daughter. "Glad you came over, too. Your mom just made some cookies. Care for a few?"

<I would love some, Mister Chapman. A dozen, if you please.> I began to morph to human as I walked through the doorway. Oooohhhh the deliciousness of the cookie was the most beautiful thing on this world, next to the cinnamon bun.

"Better get a vacuum cleaner ready, Mr. Chapman," I heard Prince Jake mutter under his breath. I shot him an indignant look.

"Have a seat. We can talk and eat."

"I thought you were trying to watch your weight, dad," Melissa said. I believe her tone was half-accusing, half-joking.

"It's been a stressful couple of months."

We walked in and saw the living room. It had a Lay-Z-Boy chair and a small couch that appeared to be large enough for only two people, along with some paintings and a large television. I forgot all of these things as soon as the smell of cookies wafted into my now human nose. My time on Earth had taught me to keep composure as I ate and approached food. Despite the lessons my friends had given me, it was still so tempting to dive into the cookies on the table and gobble up everything in site.

We made our way to the kitchen and sat down at the round table. "So," Mr. Chapman began, "what brings you here today?"

"The remnants of Mersa's rebel forces have been fully integrated into the Visser's army," Prince Jake explained, "We need information so we know what the Yeerks are doing. We figure you might know. In particular, we would like to know about possible operations in the old Yeerk Pool."

I was eying a beautiful cookie. It was chocolate chip. Such mouthwatering beauty. Despite the distraction, I could still here Chapman saying, "Mersa hadn't started operations down there yet, but he was planning on it. I don't know if the Visser or Salheer has carried through on them, but some other former hosts and I are checking on it. That's why we are checking out the possible entrance in the school. We'll keep it quiet, of course. They know to tell me and only me about anything they find. I know this has to stay a secret, Jake. If I find anything, you'll be the first and only one to know."

"What was Mersa planning?" I asked, I figured I had to distract myself from the temptation somehow. It seemed logical to hold a conversation.

"He knew that the Community Center is too public of a place. People might be snooping around. So he planned to move most major operations back into the facilities of the Yeerk Pool. Nobody checks up on that place anymore. It would be a good place to keep weapons, unhosted Yeerks, and other things that no one ought to see."

"Have you found anything?" Melissa asked.

"No, we don't have anything. We thought we had a lead, but the janitor's closet entrance was sealed halfway down like so many others when they made that sinkhole of yours into a landfill for construction debris. I'm afraid that you'll be on your own when searching for more entrances. Sorry I can't help."

"I...I need some of this!" The smell was just so overwhelming! I reached out and grabbed three cookies in my right hand, and snatched two more in my left. I shoved all five into my mouth at once, and crumbs went flying every which way.

"Ax, get a hold of yourself," Prince Jake yelled, he walked around my back and grabbed my arms in an attempt to restrain me. I stood up from my chair and continued to grab for the cookies.

I attempted to explain to Prince Jake that if Mrs. Chapman did not wish for us to eat the cookies, she would not have made them. But I paused as music caressed my ears. Tobias once told me about ancient, mythical beings called Sirens. They would stand on rocks in the ocean and sing beautifully, luring sailors to their doom. I know how the sailors must have felt. I have heard that sound before; and I heard it again now. There was an ice cream truck coming down the road!

I ran to the front door and out of the house. Prince Jake and Mr. Chapman followed me as I went on my way for chocolate chip ice cream.

That was strange. I did not see it anywhere. But it must be there! The music kept coming into my ears. I ran to the intersection, maybe it was on another road. I ran out to the intersection, with Prince Jake and Mr. Chapman in pursuit, and turned to my left where the music was coming from.

I heard the screech of the tires and saw the not-so-surprised look of the driver.

WHOOOMPF

The truck struck me and I flopped onto the hood. Something sticky held me there, and my knee caps blew out as my legs were dragged under the vehicle.

The truck came to a sudden halt and the driver ran to my side, "Come on, demorph."

I moaned in response. I concentrated on my Andalite self. Soon, I was a three-eyed Andalite standing in the middle of the street.

"Are you okay, Ax?" Prince Jake had ran to my side.

It was the driver who responded, "Yeah, he'll be alright. That's the third time this week. All these Andalites running around made the Feds to require all ice cream trucks to have sticky padding on the outside so they aren't seriously injured by the impact or a fall. Good thing it doesn't stick to Andalite fur, or I'd have the galaxy's strangest hood ornament."

"Get going, Fred, he's okay," Mr. Chapman ordered. To Prince Jake, he muttered, "See what you do for a living when you drop out of school?"

"Come on Ax, we're done here," Prince Jake was saying, "Let's go home. See you later, Mr. Chapman. Thanks for the help."

"Anytime. Maybe next time, I'll be of more use."

We walked to the car. I got in the Andalite passenger space and Prince Jake got in the driver's seat, with Melissa behind him. Just as Prince Jake was about to key the engine, a grey van pulled up. A man in a Tri-I uniform got out and walked to Mr. Chapman's front door. <Odd. What would Tri-I want to talk with Mister Chapman for?> I asked my Prince.

"Don't know, but we should make sure that they're not here to hurt him. Not even Tri-I is above suspicion anymore. Morph. I'm thinking snake. You can get in there and listen in while staying hidden. If you think Mister Chapman is in danger, you can strike and protect him."

<Yes, my Prince,> I felt the changes begin immediately. It was not a morph I used often, but was still quite useful. Prince Jake opened up the door of the car and I slithered through the grass toward Mr. Chapman's house. I found a crack in the siding and moved through. The home wasn't a natural environment for a snake, but it was navigable. I made my way through the nooks and crannies of the house, eventually making it under the kitchen cupboards.

"Mister Chapman," the stranger was saying, "A Tri-I building was struck by a terrorist force and its occupants

taken hostage. I am here to investigate who's behind it. This meeting never took place. Do you understand?"

"Yes, operative," was Chapman's response. Most would likely have been nervous about dealings like this. But after all his time amongst Yeerks and Animorphs, very little phased Mr. Chapman anymore. I tasted no fear from him. Nor from the operative.

"First question. Do you know of any active entrances to the old Yeerk Pool?"

Preview Summary

Half the team is gone, off to Alpha Front. Ax, Jake, Marco, Jeanne, and Melissa have remained behind to defend their home from the Yeerks. They will have a difficult time ahead of them, resisting the power of the Visser and his advisor, Salheer. But the Yeerks are not the only threat.

The Animorphs have attracted too much attention. Someone has noticed the suspicious goings on as of late: Tri-I. Now, not only do Ax and the Omegamorphs have to deal with the usual Yeerk threat, they have to handle a bold young Tri-I operative on their trail. How far will they go to protect themselves? What will be the cost of secrecy?