

Imagine Elfangor turning into a platypus, with Tobias sort of superimposed in the background. Yeah, that's a bit of a complicated one.

70: THE MEMORIES

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Nothing really special to say at the beginning of this one. But I suppose I should give you one warning: make sure you're seated for this. It's pretty trippy.

Enjoy or go to hell.

CHAPTER 1

My name is Tobias. War-Prince Tobias. Commander Tobias. Tobias: the Devil Prince. Those are my names now. There was a time when I had a normal name. I didn't have any sort of title. I even had a last name. There was a time when I was just a normal human kid. But that time's long dead. And so is the kid with those names.

I'm a warrior now. A friend to some. A comrade in arms. I'm a leader to others. I'm a brother and a son. I'm even a lover and, in a few months, I'll be a father and probably a husband. There's one other thing I am: on the bad side of a very powerful Andalite.

Counselor Lirem-Arrepoth-Terrouss, head of the Electorate, glared at me through holographic eyes. I was in the Reliquary, where we could talk in private. The Electorate had let me return to earth, but they weren't happy about it. Not long ago, I had helped to defend a planet from a Yeerk invasion. Now, they wanted me to do more.

<War-Prince Tobias,> Lirem said, <The Electorate requests that you return to the service. We know that the Yeerk Order is preparing to invade Hork-bajir again. Captain-Prince Glorfindel is being prepared to launch a preemptive strike against the Taxxon world, the staging area for the invasion. He requests your services.>

If it had been up to me, I would have gone. But I was needed more here. This invasion was the one that really mattered. If the Yeerks won here, the universe would be effected in ways I couldn't possibly understand. If they won on Hork-bajir, it would be bad but not nearly as bad as it would be if the One were to take Earth.

"I'm sorry, Counselor, but I can't leave Earth," I told him. Of course, he would want a reason. So I gave him one that was part of the truth. "I'm going to be a father soon. I can't leave before my kid's even born."

<You father did not feel the same. Perhaps you could learn something from his example,> Lirem said. If he had lips, they would probably have been drawn pretty tight.

"With all due respect to him," I replied, "fatherhood wasn't his strong suit. My father was a great man, and good at many things. That wasn't one of them."

<Perhaps you do not understand the nature of this request,> Lirem began. <A request from the Electorate to a soldier is not like a request among equals. Refusal is not an option for you.>

"What will you do?" I asked carefully. "Come to take me off to war?"

<No, War-Prince Tobias. I am well aware of how that would end. Likely, you would lead us on a ridiculous chase. And once we finally located you, you would refuse to be of any use to us. We have dealt with...difficult...soldiers before. It is hard to find one who possesses the morphing power and does not want to be found.>

"So what, then?" I asked.

<There are other ways to compel your service. While there is likely very little we could do to you, your family and friends are another matter entirely.>

"You wouldn't dare hurt them," I said coldly.

<Not physically, no. But we can make life very difficult for them. I wonder what your government would think about

David's history. He betrayed you, after all. I imagine they would frown upon that. Am I wrong?

<Or perhaps your people would like to be alerted to Marco's memory loss. I am sure you would all enjoy that experience. I understand your human media can be quite cruel in such matters.>

"No one would believe David's story," I told him. "We'd all deny it and the problem goes away. And Marco's learned to live with his memory problems. That's no real threat."

<Perhaps not. But what of Cassie's little ecological projects? One word from us and your human governments can put a stop to them and any future plans. I am sure she would find that to be most unpleasant.>

I shrugged. "Maybe. But something tells me she's got bigger things on her mind nowadays. What, with Rodger and all. Her family's kind of a big thing with her."

<Ah, yes. That reminds me. I wonder what would happen if we returned young *Aristh* Alloran to his mother's custody. His skills would certainly be useful, especially now that we have new Pythagi technology to compete with. And I am sure his mother would be more than happy to have him home and safe.>

That stopped me. I couldn't let them take Al. He was a part of my family. I couldn't let that happen. "Why do all this?" I demanded. "Why am I so damned important to you!?"

<It is not you who are important, Commander. It is what you represent. If you are allowed to refuse a request from the Electorate, what message does that send to the rest of our people? There can be no army without authority, no authority without obedience, and no obedience without punishment for

those who do not obey. I do not relish the thought of making your life difficult, War-Prince. I respect you for your past and present services rendered. I want only for you to fight for us against our mutual enemies.

<I understand why you refuse. I have children of my own. Leaving them to fight the Yeerks was not a decision I enjoyed., and not one that I wish to ask you to make. But I have no choice. We need your help, Tobias. But if you refuse us, we must take action to prevent others from doing so as well. It is easy for a soldier to think of reasons not to go to war. Ours is the difficult task of giving him better reasons to fight. So I will ask you again: will you honor our request?>

I understood where he was coming from. And I wanted nothing more than to tell him I'd go. But I didn't have a choice, and the terms of the war wouldn't allow me to explain it to him. I knew he would decide he could handle it better than I could. He'd start to take charge and hold council sessions over it. The word would spread, and then the secret would be out. And if that happened, it was all over.

So I didn't have any real choice. "I am sorry, Counselor Lirem. But we all must learn from the mistakes of our past. The Andalites have learned from Seerow's mistake. Now, I must learn from Elfangor's. I have to stay on Earth."

Lirem sighed. <Then you leave me no choice. Commander, as of this moment, and until further notice, you are suspended without pay. You will retain all rankings and possession of your ship, but all of your liquid assets are frozen until such a time as we agree to return them.>

Suspended without pay. It didn't sound too bad. But there was a problem. I needed the Electorate's money. I was about to leave for Alpha front, and I had a family to feed. And I was unable to access any of the money I had saved because they froze it all.

But I didn't forget that Lirem had been merciful. He could have stripped me of my titles and discharged me from the service. He could have taken Al and Ax. He could have done so many things worse. Instead, he had left me with a choice. This could all go away, just as soon as I gave in.

The Electorate still has a lot to learn about humans.

CHAPTER 2

I went into the house after that. I doubted I'd be back in here any time soon. In some ways, it made me a little sad. I had come to like the place. But there were plenty of things I hated about it. The biggest thing being Naomi. I don't know if you've ever seriously considered murdering someone in cold blood, but if you haven't, have a conversation with Naomi and you'll know how it feels.

Everyone was there. Naomi, Jacques, Jordan, and Sara. Robby and Cassie. Menderash, too. This was the last time I'd see him for a while. He was heading back to the homeworld. The Electorate had sent him here a couple of months ago to find out what I was doing on Earth. Now, they didn't care what I did on Earth; they just wanted me off of it.

The Omegamorphs were there. That's the name we gave to Jake's team. He, Marco, Ax, Jeanne, and Melissa were lounging around. They wouldn't be going anywhere. Loren, my mother, and Dan, Rachel's father, were standing with packed bags. They would be coming with us. Dan lived about an hour's drive away from Alpha front, and he decided he wanted to catch a ride with us. Loren was coming with us all the way.

Naomi was clearly torn. She wanted Rachel to stay as much as she wanted me to go. But where one of us went, the other followed. I'd be glad to get away from her for a while. She was as bad as my other relatives. I said my goodbyes to her first. "See you in Hell, Naomi."

"I can't imagine a worse punishment."

I nodded to Jordan and Sara. Jordan doesn't like me very much, I don't think. She's a lot like her mother. And I think she blames me for taking James off to Alpha front. The two of

them have a thing going and she wasn't happy that I was taking James away from her.

"Can I come visit you guys sometime?" Sara asked. She liked me more than most of her family; probably because she's so much like Rachel. And she seemed to be pretty good friends with Al. And, as weird as it sounds, I get the impression she has a thing for David. I try not to think about that one.

"No," Naomi said instantly.

"Any time you want," I told her. I turned to Jacques. I guess it's kind of weird, but he and I don't have any sort of relationship. He's Rachel's step-father, but neither could ever come to think of the other in terms of father and daughter. He respected her too much, and she already had a father. Technically, if and when Rachel and I get married, he'll be my father-in-law. But we all know my track record with fathers. I didn't get attached to him. He was just...some French guy who we lived with for a little bit.

"Keep an eye on them," I told him, nodding to the Omegamorphs. "Especially Marco."

"It is Jeane who needs watching," he replied. "Take care of your family, Tobias."

"Back at you," I responded. Then I turned to Ax. "Ax..."

<I deeply regret that I am not going with you, Tobias,> he said after I trailed off. <I long for the day when we will fight side-by-side once again.>

"Don't worry. We will," I assured him. "Cao Cao wouldn't have gotten very far without his Xiahou Dun." I knew he wouldn't understand that little joke. And I didn't have the heart to tell him the Xiahou Dun was Cao Cao's most trusted general, even

after he lost an eye in battle. A man named Cao Xing shot it out with an arrow. According to legend, Xiahou Dun pulled out his eye and ate it; he said he couldn't throw it away because his mother gave it to him. And yeah; he was nuts.

I turned to Marco. He wasn't one for nice goodbye speeches, and I...well, I've never been much for talk. So I told him something I thought he'd appreciate. "I'd give you a nice long goodbye speech, but you'd forget it."

He nodded. "Good point. Do I get a hug at least?"

"Not from me."

"Rachel?"

Rachel gave him a look. Then she shrugged. "What the hell? You won't remember it."

After she hugged him and he stopped celebrating exaggeratedly, I turned to Jeanne. "Keep him on a leash." Then I thought about that statement. "Never mind, he'd probably enjoy it."

Melissa looked from me to Rachel. "What exactly is it that you two do to each other?"

I turned to her. Melissa was our newest Animorph; and I still wasn't happy about it. It was far too late in the game to start tossing in rookies. Worse, I'm afraid she might be suicidal. I think she might be in this just to find a way to get herself killed. But I had been outvoted on this one. "Take care of yourself. Melissa," I told her. "Or let Jake do it for you."

I wasn't sure what to say to Jake. He was my fellow general, the other leader. He may say I'm in charge, but as far as I'm concerned, he's at least an equal. I decided to say the only

thing one general could really say to another when one marched out to war and the other stayed behind. I looked around the house and told him, "Good luck."

"It'll all be here when you get back," he promised. "Watch yourself out there, Tobias."

I nodded. "Guraff's dangerous, but he's not anything I can't handle. And I don't think Kalroth will be much of a threat. It's Salheer who worries me. You sure you can handle him?"

"No. And I'm not sure I can take the Visser, either. But we don't have a choice, do we?"

"There's always a choice, Jake. But we made ours."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess we did. Good luck, Tobias."

CHAPTER 3

It felt great to be back on the Reliquary, in the air. Rachel was happy to be heading off to battle again. David and James seemed a little nervous. That was probably because James had never been to this front of the war before and David, being a rat, always looked nervous.

Cassie and Ronnie were taking other transportation. They had decided to make the move to Alpha front official, so they had a lot of stuff to bring from their homes.

It occurred to me that, sooner or later, Rachel would have to find out that I'm not getting paid anymore. And I'm not an idiot; I know that trying to hide it from her would only end up making things worse. So I called everyone together; not a difficult task, considering where we were.

"There's a few things I need to tell all of you," I began. "First, I've made some decisions. This war....it's consuming us. Look at where we live, what we do all day. There's nothing else in our lives right now. And as noble as that may seem, I can't let it go on. You all need lives outside of the war. So Al and David are going to start going to school."

<But I don't wanna,> David whined. In a more controlled tone, he continued, <The war already takes so much time. How do you expect us to keep up school lives, too? Our grades will suck, I doubt we'll ever find time for homework or anything...>

"Hey, I managed to keep up straight A's, so pipe down," Rachel said to him. "It wasn't a picnic, though," she muttered.

<Prince Tobias, with all due respect, what could possibly learn from humans? My grasp of science far exceeds that of even

the most advanced human; and even that of most Andalites. As is my understanding of the English language and mathematics. What could I learn from a school?>

"History, for one thing," I told him. "History has a habit of repeating itself. We must learn from the mistakes of the past, and we can't do that if we don't know them. And besides, making some friends your own age won't hurt you, either. And you, David, had to drop out of school around his age. We took that from you. And now, I'm giving it back."

<Thanks, but I really don't want to->

"This isn't about what you want," I interrupted. "No one *wants* to go to school. But it's a normal thing. Something not war-related. And if we don't have those sorts of things, we'll all go crazier. I'm enrolling both of you as soon as we get to Alpha front."

James raised a hand. "Do I have to go, too?"

I shook my head. "No; you're an adult. You can do whatever you want. Maybe go to college or find a job... I especially encourage that second one."

"Why?" James asked.

<'Cause he doesn't want us freeloading off of him all the time,> David answered.

I shook my head. "No, I'm fine with that. It's because we aren't going to be living in the Reliquary. I love it here, but how can you have any sort of normal life living on a warship all the time? You should have a place where you can bring friends, a home you don't have to hide."

"What's with all the sudden changes?" Rachel asked him. "You never cared about any of this before."

"That's because, before, I was never thinking about what would happen to us after this war. That's something I need to consider. And the way things were going, there wouldn't be anything left of us after this all ended. It's time we all started building lives outside of this fight, whenever possible. Now, I don't mean to let any of this interfere with the fight. If I need you, I'll pull you out of school for a mission. But we have to be able to grab onto any sort of normalcy we can. I know what it's like when every moment of your life is completely off the wall, when even everyday things are odd. And that's not a life I'm going to force on any of you."

<If we are not going to be here on the Reliquary, where shall we live?> Al asked me.

"We'll get a place in town," I told him. "Somewhere you can bring company." I sighed. This next part wasn't going to be fun to explain to Rachel and the others. "Also... The Electorate has requested that I return to Hork-bajir and fight in an attack against the Taxxon world. Since I can't afford to leave Earth, I refused. But they weren't happy about that."

<What did they do?> Al asked.

"They froze my assets," I answered. "We've got no money. Nothing new coming in, and everything I've saved I can't touch."

"No problem," Rachel said. "I've got a rich step-father, remember? No offense, daddy," she added to Dan.

"None taken; Jacques is loaded. And to be honest, I'm not too badly off myself."

"Yeah, and you know Marco owes us," James added.

<At the very least, I am confident in my ability to gather funds...questionably,> Al told me.

I nodded. "Yeah, we've got those options. This shouldn't be too difficult."

<I don't know...> David began. <Somehow, I can't see a bunch of self-righteous Andalites just letting Jacques and Marco bail you out. I mean, I'm just thinking about what I would do if I was them. And if I was them, I'd make sure no one helps you out.>

"Not everyone's like you, David," Rachel muttered.

<Wasn't Lirem the guy who wanted to 'quarantine' Earth at the end of the First War? Maybe not everyone's like me, Rachel, but this guy is definitely pretty close; if not worse. I think we're probably going to be on our own here.>

"What else is new?" I muttered.

CHAPTER 4

I woke up to someone shaking me by the shoulder in the middle of the night. Instinctively, I shot out an arm to grab the throat of whoever it was. Then I remembered where I was; who I was. I had been having a dream. Sort of. I was reliving one of the memories from my Howler morph.

"What is it?" I asked quietly. Loren was standing there. She nodded over towards the other end of the ship. I nodded back, rolled out of bed and followed her. Thank Crayak Rachel's a heavy sleeper as of late. When we were far enough away from everyone else, I whispered again. "What is it?"

"This seems to be the day for getting bad news out in the open," she whispered back. "So I guess I should tell you know. While you were off fighting for Hork-bajir... I got the call."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. I knew what call she was talking about, but I had hoped it would be longer. "How long?"

"According to the Andalites? I've got about a week."

I cursed under my breath. "Is there anything-"

"Nothing," she interrupted. "If the Andalities can't think of anything to do about it, you know humans definitely didn't find anything."

"Maybe morphing-"

"Tried it," she interrupted again. "Tobias, how many times are we going to go over this? There's nothing to be done. Noting but to accept this with whatever grace I have left."

"So that' sit? Just...accept it?"

"Sometimes, Tobias, that's all there's left to do. Just sit back, get comfortable, and say, I'm going to die."

I should probably take a moment and explain this. If you haven't guessed it already, my mom is...well, she's dying. Slowly. Some sort of blood disease. I'm not sure what it is. The Andalites diagnosed her with it on the homeworld and she never bothered to get information from a human doctor about it, so I don't know what we call it here.

She knew she was dying when she came to Earth. She hoped she could see our kid before her time was up but...well, I guess that just wasn't how things were going to work out. They never do, do they?

If I don't seem too broken up about all this, there are a few reasons. The first is that I found out she was dying almost as soon as she got here. I more or less came to terms with it then; as much as anyone can get over this sort of thing. I had done everything I could think to do. Logically, there was nothing to do now but accept it. But I didn't want to be logical. My mother was dying! What kind of person just sits there and accepts that? Not me.

"There has to be something to do," I insisted. "Maybe... yeah. You could acquire someone healthy. Morph them, and then--"

"Tobias, I'm not going to steal someone else's life in order to prolong mine," she argued.

"You're not stealing anything," I insisted. "Just ask them. Who would refuse? That's basically murder if they say no."

She shook her head slowly. "Tobias...Tobias. All things have their time. How does that poem you like go? *'Though the tortoise blessed with magic powers lives long, its days have*

their allotted span. Though winged serpents ride high on the mist, they turn to dust and ashes at the last. "

I finished the poem for her. *"An old war-horse may be stabled, yet it still longs to gallop a thousand li. And a noble-hearted man though advanced in years never abandons his proud aspirations. Man's span of life, whether long or short, depends not on heaven alone. One who eats well and keeps cheerful can live to a great old age. And so, with joy in my heart, I hum this song."* I shook my head. "You should know better than to recite Cao Cao's poems to me, Loren. Especially for something like this. He wasn't one for ever giving up. He was one to fight until the last drop of blood left his body."

She nodded. "Yes, he was. And so are you. But very few people are that strong. And when the end comes, Tobias, and you don't have that strength, its a whole lot better to find a comfortable way to accept it than fight it.

"Think about those first two lines, Tobias. You know what they mean. Everything, no matter how great, has to die eventually. Nothing lasts forever. And I certainly don't get to break that rule. We all have our time to go, Tobias. Maybe I could scratch out a few more years here. But why? Maybe when I die isn't all up to God or whoever, but it's not really up to me, either. Whoever calls the shots knows a lot more about this than I do. If they say it's time for me to go, I trust them."

"Mom, please, think. Don't give up, Loren. Don't give in."

"Tobias...that's why you'll be the one to save us all. But that's you; not me." She shook he head. "Go back to sleep now, Tobias. You can tell Rachel in the morning." Just like that, she sent me to bed like I was a child. I probably wouldn't have obeyed, but no one had ever sent me off like that before. I was kind of in shock.

I didn't sleep at first, though. I lay there next to Rachel, asking myself how I could do this. Maybe Loren could accept it, but I couldn't. That's one of my greatest weaknesses, I guess. I can never let go. Even before I knew them, I never let go of my parents. Before I found out who Elfangor was, I couldn't let him go. And never, not once, did I ever even consider letting go of Rachel.

So how could I let go of Loren? I wished so badly right then that I could talk to my father. Either of them. Both of them had been able to do it. To walk away from her and abandon her to fate. Because they had no real choice. They had the strength. Why didn't I?

I felt something then, in the back of my mind. A place I had sworn I would never touch. A few years back, I had allowed myself to be captured by the Yeerks. One of them, a woman named Taylor, tortured me for a few hours. And at the end, I think I died for a bit. But Elfangor brought me back, and he gave me a little parting gift: his memories.

Utzum, Ax had called it. An ancient Andalite ritual, now supposed to be more myth and magic than reality. But it was real. I felt it then, and in that moment of desperation, I felt some of Elfangor's memories. But once I came back, once I had some choice, I shoved them away.

There were already too many of us in my head. The human, the hawk...the Andalite would have made far too many. I couldn't have handled it then; I doubted I could handle it now. I had no clue what would happen if I tapped into Elfangor's memories. How many would I get? All of them? And what then? I'd probably become more Elfangor than Tobias.

But would that be such a bad thing? Wasn't that who we needed? I know it was who I needed right then. I needed someone, anyone, who could show me how to let go. I just needed someone to show me the way.

So I guess what happened next wasn't fully by accident. I'm starting to think that nothing is ever fully by accident. But it wasn't really under my control either; again, I don't think anything ever is. Even if I had wanted to control it, I wouldn't have known how. All I know about it is that when I closed my eyes, I'd have told you that my name is Tobias. And when I opened them...

CHAPTER 5

My name is Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul. Prince Elfangor. They call me a hero, my people. The people of my parents, at least. I learned long ago what it meant to be a hero to your people: being a villain to the ones you love. It meant that your people, your duty, always had to come first. And everything else, everything that really mattered, had to fade into darkness. Well, not exactly everything. Not always.

I was on leave for a short while. As always, I spent the time at home with my family. Part of it, at least. The most important part was light-years away, and more than likely was completely unaware of my existence. I tried not to think about them, to concentrate on what I had instead of what I lost. That worked approximately as well as you might expect it to.

Six years. That was how long ago I had left Loren and my son, counting by Earth's time. I hoped; no, I demanded it of the Ellimist, that they were alright. That they were safe and happy. That Loren had found someone else. But if I know the Ellimist at all, he did not care what happened to them.

But I had a few good things here at 'home'. Aximili was one of them. I was not sure how to treat him, really. If there was any sort of 'elder brother' training that I was supposed to receive, I must have missed it somewhere along the line. So I treated Aximili like I would treat any other Andalite. I think he appreciated that.

We were outside of the Scoop when the news came. I was attempting to teach him how to fight. It was difficult to tell whether or not he had any real talent, being so young. But training was good at any age. I knew Aximili wanted to follow down my path, and there was likely nothing I could do to stop him. So instead, I trained him.

<Elfangor!> My father's voice broke my concentration. I turned all four eyes towards the Scoop. I also batted Aximili's tail away. He had been in mid-strike when I looked away and did not yet possess the necessary control to stop before he may have harmed me. <There is someone here to see you.>

<And I am certain you will want to see her,> my mother added from inside of the Scoop. <She seems *nice*.>

I heard the undertone in her voice. Nice; as in 'nicer' than the females I usually brought home when I was on leave.

<Who?> I asked. I did not keep many friends on the homeworld. Just the soldiers who served with me under the Captain.

My parents led a female out of the Scoop to where Aximili and I were standing. To be honest, I found her rather plain looking. Nothing to really stand out about her. A typical Andalite female, approximately my age. <Yes?> I inquired. *This had better be important*. <Who are you?>

<Enril-Natarran-Ithnils,> she answered. <I was told to meet with you here.>

<Told by whom?> I demanded.

<By me,> answered a new voice. A male one, and one that spoke with power you could feel. One I knew well. I bowed my torso and lowered my tailblade as low as it could go. A Kafir bird alighted on the ground before me. Slowly, it grew into an Andalite.

He was large, with the body of an athlete. A born warrior who had trained his whole life, even before we had a war. He had been fighting Yeerks since the beginning. And I could not

imagine him not being there at the very end. He was perhaps the greatest hero of our time. He was my hero, at least.

<Captain Nerefir,> I said quietly. Aximili, I noticed, was almost hiding behind me. My father was in the same position I was. Enril and my mother stood back at a respectful distance.

<Get up, Elfangor,> he said gruffly. <By the Ellimist, if this is how you act at home, having you on the ship is going to be like a trip to a Yeerk pool.>

<Sorry, sir,> I said quickly, rising. <What brings you here of all places? And who is Enril?>

<The Electorate recently managed to intercept a primitive radio transmission from Sector Seven. A race known as the Uthara is broadcasting their signals into space, wondering if there is anyone out there to hear.> I did not miss the trace of amusement in his voice. <Doctor Enril is the head of the team tasked with investigating the Uthara.>

<What does this have to do with us?> I asked.

The Captain sighed. <Use the muscle that matters, Elfangor. If the Uthara are broadcasting signals intentionally, it means that they are a sentient race. Now who, I wonder, would be interested in that?>

<Yeerks,> I hissed.

<Got it in one. The Electorate does not know anything about the Uthara, or if they would even be a possible race for the Yeerks to infest. So they commissioned Doctor Enril and her team to investigate. And in the event that the Uthara are a potential target, they decided to send me and a Dome ship of my best men just in case the Yeerks manage to find out about this.>

<Only one Dome ship?> I demanded. <That could not stand up to a Yeerk fleet.>

<We do not expect to encounter a fleet,> the Captain answered. <The Yeerks are very busy engaging us elsewhere. At most, we may encounter a single Blade ship, or perhaps a Pool ship. A Dome ship is more than enough for either one. And,> he added, <that is all the Electorate is willing to spare for a scientific inquiry, despite my demands to the contrary.>

I nodded. <When must we leave?>

<Enril's team is assembled. The other warriors are on their way to the Dome ship. All will be ready by noon tomorrow. You are to be there by the time I feed in the morning.>

Again I nodded. He turned to go, and Enril followed. <One more thing, Captain,> I began.

He turned one stalk eye to look at me. <Yes?>

<What is the name of the Dome ship?>

The eye turned away. <The *Alloran*.>

CHAPTER 6

I resolved to ask Captain Nerefir about the name of the ship when I had a chance. Right then, though, I was acquainting myself with the ship. My quarters were larger than those usually given to a Prince. I know it was because the Captain liked me.

It was not the typical Dome ship. Many of the crew quarters had been converted into laboratories. At least, that is what I assumed they were, as I did not recognize anything in them. The scientists were content to sleep in the dome or with their equipment.

I, like most of the other soldiers, was not happy that we had to deal with so many of them. They would be virtually useless in a fight and understood nothing about warfare. Just because all Andalties have tailblades does not mean all are able to use them. In an emergency, the scientists would hold us back and probably die.

((Fools,)) I muttered as I walked onto the command bridge where Captain Nerefir was assembling us. A few other Princes heard me and nodded their agreement. Enril, also on the bridge, must have heard me because she turned away and focused all four eyes on the ground.

((I've invited Doctor Enril to share with us what she knows of the planet before we arrive,)) the Captain informed us.
((Enril?))

She nodded but still did not look at us. ((We know very little.))

((She says that like it's a surprise,)) I muttered to no one in particular. The Warrior next to me chuckled slightly. He must

have been one of those odd Andalites who did 'humor.' Even after my time on Earth, I still do not quite grasp it.

((We know nothing about the planet's geography. It is possible that our people would not be able to survive on it.))

((Maybe not *your* people,)) I mumbled.

((We know nothing about the dominant life forms other than that they are sentient and are intentionally broadcasting primitive radio signals in hopes of contacting life forms from other worlds.))

((How considerate of us to oblige them.))

((It is also possible,)) Captain Nerefir began, ((that the Yeerks intercepted these same transmissions. If it is possible for them to infest this race, there is a good chance that they will attempt it. That is why you warriors have come along. We will not be able to fight off a large Yeerk presence, so our initial actions will be scouting. Prince Elfangor will go down to the planet with Doctor Enril, assess the situation, and report back. Is that clear?))

I nodded. ((Yes, Captain. How many Warriors am I to take with me?))

((None.))

That surprised me. ((None, Captain?))

((Prince Elfangor,)) he sighed, ((imagine for a moment that you are living peacefully on your world. And then an army of aliens drops out of the sky. That does not go over well. A bad first impression is difficult to get over. You will infiltrate the planet by stealth, assuming the form of the native creatures.))

((I understand,)) I nodded. ((When am I to report back?))

((As soon as possible. If you do not return within three days, we will assume that you have met with harm, either at the hands of the Yeerks or the natives. We will take...appropriate...actions.))

((As you command.))

((Then you are dismissed, Elfangor. Go and rest; we will arrive within a few hours.))

I returned to my quarters. There was very little in them. We Andalites are not big on furniture, after all. All there was was a small hologram of my family. And beneath that, the only thing the Ellimist had let me take from Earth. A picture of Loren.

I could not look at either. When I was on a mission, I could never look at the image of my family. It only reminded me that odds were great that I would never see them again. And I could never look at Loren's picture. I could not bear it. Merely possessing it was enough.

((Prince Elfangor?)) I turned one stalk eye behind me to see Enril standing in the doorway.

((What?)) I snapped. I really did not want to be bothered with this scientist. And the thought of being trapped on this world with her was unbearable.

She did not seem to notice my irritation. Or else she ignored it. ((I thought that perhaps I should speak to you. If I am to be trusting in you to ensure my survival, I should know more about you.))

((There is nothing you need to know,)) I said.

((But I have heard so much about you,)) she insisted. ((Is it true you knew Alloran-Semitur-Corass?))

I spun around to face her. My tail twitched. ((I will not speak of Alloran to anyone. Is that clear, scientist?)) I hissed.

She took a few steps back, frightened. Good. ((I merely thought that-))

((Yes, that is exactly right. You merely think. That is all you do. That is all you are good for.))

She looked at the ground again, submissive. Pathetic. Loren would never, ever, have put up with such words from me. If I had said something like this to her, I would be bleeding right now.

I turned my back on Enril. ((Leave me now. I will find you when the time comes. Until then, I want nothing to do with you.))

CHAPTER 7

I closed the door as soon as she left, and then I turned to the only piece of furniture in my quarters. It had not been easy to acquire. I had to deal with several Skrit Na to get it. It was a human record player. And, of course, I had a few records. I shut myself off from the outside world for the next few hours, concentrating only on the music.

It did not help. I was less angry now, less irritated, but far more depressed. I could not stop thinking about what I had left behind. Neither could I figure out why I was dwelling so much on my past this time. I have gone on plenty of missions to foreign worlds. Why was I thinking about these things now? I never figured out the answer to that. I just passed the hours surrounded by the voices of men light-years away.

Someone pounding on my door snapped me out of it. ((Elfangor, open the door,)) the Captain demanded. I complied instantly.

((My apologies, Captain. What is-))

I cut off when he did something that surprised me. He smacked me across the face with the flat of his tailblade. I stumbled back, my tail instinctively in the position for a fight. He lowered his, though. ((Why did you do that?)) I demanded.

((Because that is all you are good for.))

I was silent for a few moments. I knew I was in trouble. ((You have spoken to Enril.))

((Yes, I have,)) he said. I could hear the anger in his voice. ((She came into my quarters demanding that I send someone else with her. Specifically anyone but you.)) I looked away

from him the way Enril commonly did. ((Is there any particular reason you have decided that the basic rules of courtesy no longer apply to you, Prince Elfangor?))

((It is just that...I find the presence of these scientists so annoying,)) I answered. ((They are useless!))

Nerefir snorted. ((In many ways, yes. But really, Elfangor, of what use are *you*? When you aren't killing Yeerks, what productive purpose do you serve? Nothing. One day, we will win this war. And then, you will contribute far less than these scientists.))

((That may very well be, Captain, but that day is not today. The scientists have been virtually useless in this war and they are just the same now. Perhaps if they were designing weapons or something... But these are biologists!))

The Captain muttered something I could not quite hear. Then he said, ((You need to learn to live for the future, Elfangor, instead of remaining fixated on the past and despising the present. What is done is done. And now that we have learned what we can, we move on.))

((There are some things I do not wish to move beyond,)) I argued. I should never forget my family, the ones I left behind.

((Those are the very things that we must get past. You must learn to let go, Elfangor.))

((Like we let go of the wrongs of the Yeerks?))

((No; those have not passed. They still exist. But once we right them, and once we learn from them, then we must move on. I do not know what you really have against these scientists and apparently against Enril personally, but you must get over

that. If you don't,)) he added with a sinister grin, ((your time on Utharon will be unbearable.))

((I am still to go with her?))

((Do you think I would change an order because I was asked to? Your orders remain unchanged. Now get to the hangar. The two of you are going down to the planet in your Moonraker. We will keep an eye on things from up here.))

((Any sign of Yeerks?))

((None, but they know how to hide. They could be here. Not in great force, though. No Pool ship. At most, they could be hiding a Blade ship somewhere, but I doubt that.))

I nodded and turned to leave. ((Elfangor,)) he added.

I looked back at him. ((Yes?))

((I know you. If you find Yeerks, do not try to defeat them all on your own.))

((Yes, Captain.))

((And if you meet Visser Three, you are not to engage him. I know that you will want to. I am one of the few who knows the history between the two of you. If by some chance you see him, you are not to fight him. You are to return call in reinforcements. Is. That. Clear?))

((Yes, Captain.)) His wishes were clear. His orders were clear. But what was unclear to me was whether or not I would obey them. He may have known our history but he did not understand. I still believed that there were some orders that could not be obeyed.

Then I remembered what I had wanted to ask him. ((Captain? Why is this ship called *Alloran*?))

((To remind us of something very important,)) Nerefir told me. ((We fight a Yeerk named Esplin Nine-Four-Double-Six. He is our enemy. No matter how long we fight the Abomination, it is the Yeerk who is our foe. Never the Andalite. Alloran will always be one of us.))

((Captain...do you think that some day he could be saved?))

Quietly, he said, ((No. Never. Perhaps some day, we will manage to get the slug out of his head. We could return control of his body to him. But the Yeerk will never really leave. For some, it is too late to ever come home from the battlefield. Alloran was lost to us long ago. No power of Andalite or Ellimist could ever bring him back.))

CHAPTER 8

Enril and I were silent on our way to the planet. I believed she was afraid to speak to me, and I had nothing to say to her. I piloted my ship without so much as a glance at her. Nerefir was right about at least one thing. I would be happy to move on from this experience.

I flew to the coordinates she had given me earlier. I do not know why she decided that it would be a good place to land and I did not particularly care. I just wanted to get this over with.

I took a good look at the land before I landed. Much of it looked rocky, with many small hills as well. There was little in the way of vegetation. Some small bushes, a few larger trees, and dry grass as far as I could see. The planet looked thoroughly inhospitable.

((Atmospheric readings normal,)) Enril told me. ((We should be able to breathe fine here.)) Judging by the layout of the land, I doubted that.

I said nothing. Instead, I stepped out of the ship and was immediately assaulted by a wave of heat. This planet was like an oven! Andalites rarely sweat, but I was doing so now; profusely. ((How pleasant.)) Sarcasm was something I learned during my time on Earth. It has served me well, though I fear it was lost on Enril. Then again, what *wasn't* lost on her?

I tasted the grass; it's the first thing any Andalite does on a new world. And when I tasted it, I couldn't help but yelp. ((Ow!)) It was like being bit or something. Eating it was possible but painful. ((A wonderful planet you've found us, doctor,)) I muttered. I swept my eyes around, looking for any sort of threat. We needed to acquire native creatures, but I saw none. Enril noticed something, though.

((What is that? Or, was?)) She pointed to a pile of bones lying in the grass.

I walked over and examined it. It was the skeleton of some small creature, with approximately twelve legs. ((How should I know? *You* are the scientist. We need to find the natives...))

"Hello?" a voice called. It was higher-pitched than the usual Andalite voice.. Then I saw something that I consider odd, even after everything I have seen. There was a creature clinging to one of the trees, its arms and legs wrapped around a branch.

The creature was small, and covered in greyish-white fur. It had large, tufted ears. It looked a bit like the stuffed bears I have seen human children hold. It looked at us with large eyes. I would go so far as to call it adorable. Although I would never mention that to anyone.

I fought down the urge to point my Shredder at the creature. ((Um...hello,)) I responded.

((The translator chips seem to be working fine,)) Enril commented to me privately. ((We got enough of a language sample from their initial broadcasts that we should be able to understand them without any difficulty.))

((Assuming that we do not come across a group that speaks a different language,)) I muttered. I doubted the scientists considered that.

We stared at each other for a few moments, unsure who should speak. I decided to. ((We came in response to the signals you sent to our homeworld,)) I informed him. ((We are-))

"Andalites. Yes, yes, I know, I know." The creature began to climb down from the tree.

((He is adorable,)) Enril muttered, probably not realizing that I could hear her.

((Remain focused on the job,)) I snapped. I kept my speech private from the alien. ((And we have no way of verifying its gender. You are making a baseless assumption.)) To the alien, I asked, ((How do you know the name of our race?))

"The other one told us of course," he answered.

((The other one?)) Enril asked. Already, though, I knew who it must have been. We were the first Andalites to reach this planet. But we were not the only Andalities in the galaxy. There was one other.

War-Prince Alloran-Semitur-Corass. Once my Prince. Now...now he is Visser Three, the Abomination, the slave of Esplin 9466. The one and only Andalite-Controller. All because of my foolishness. I allowed him to be enslaved. And now I feel that it is my duty to see him freed.

If he was here, it meant that the Yeerks would be as well. In that instant, this world changed for me. This small, innocent creature could be an enemy who would kill us if given half the chance. The planet itself went from an inhospitable world to a death trap.

((Yes, the others,)) I interrupted Enril. Clearly, she had not put this puzzle together yet. I was far from surprised. ((The ones we came here to meet.)) To the alien, I lied, ((Our ship was running low on power not far outside of your system. We contacted some of our people for aid. You must forgive Enril,)) I added. ((She is...forgetful.))

"I thought you said you were here because of the signals we sent out..."

((Yes, that is why we were near your system. But when we were low on power, we called for aid. I am glad to know they have already arrived.))

((Prince Elfangor, what are you talking about?)) Enril demanded privately. ((There cannot be any other Andalites here.))

((There is one,)) I told her so that the creature could not hear. ((Visser Three.)) To the alien, I said, ((Please, take me to them as soon as possible.))

((This is a bad idea. We should go get Captain Nerefir. If the Yeerks are here-))

((This is not about the Yeerks. This is about me and him.))

((But the Captain-))

((Will not have to know.))

CHAPTER 9

I will admit that, in my long history of doing stupid things, this was probably at the top of the list. What did I hope to accomplish once I found Visser Three? He'd certainly be guarded. And we would be led straight to him. There was no way this did not end in my death. So why was I doing it?

I let Enril speak to the creature as we walked. I was busy trying to think of a way to get myself out of the mess I had just jumped into. I would be able to justify it to the Captain easily enough. I would only need to tell him that I believed this was the only way I could locate the Yeerks. Even if he did not believe me, Nerefir would let that pass.

The true problem was dealing with Visser Three. Or, rather, not dealing with him. We would need to disappear once we located him. Except I did not think I would be able to walk away from him. When I stood face to face with him, would I be able to control myself. I doubted it.

Enril, of course, was clueless. That did not surprise me. She chatted happily with the native. I completely tuned them out. After several hours of walking, we wandered into a small village. It was an unusual mix of primitive and advanced technology. The buildings themselves were laughably primitive, made of pieces of wood lashed together with some sort of rope.

In sharp contrast were some devices that seemed to pull moisture out of the air. This planet was very dry, almost barren. Without these devices, it would be very difficult to live here. I did not see any water during the walk; all of it was collected here and funneled into a large cistern in the center of the village.

I knew I must be surrounded by Controllers. A few of them, at least, were watching me; I was sure of it. I did not know how long I had until Visser Three knew I was here, but it was not long. I needed to find him before he found me.

((The two of you must excuse me for a few moments,)) I told them.

((Where are you going?)) Enril asked.

I sighed. ((If you must know, I must find somewhere to relieve myself.)) As I expected, that caused her to turn away, embarrassed. I wandered out of the village, looking for a shady spot. I found some slight shelter in the shade of one of the few trees growing on top of a hill.

I concentrated on the DNA of one of the creatures within me. A Kafit bird, common to the Andalite homeworld. Six strong wings, a bill like a razor, keen eyesight and hearing... The sort of creature that might survive on this planet. There was a time when my own homeworld was a dangerous, wild place. The Kafit bird, apparently, never quite got out of that stage. I was grateful for that.

I was in the air almost as soon as I opened my wings. For once, the heat of this planet was coming in handy. It was creating wonderful updrafts. With no effort, I found myself higher than I had ever been before. And from there, I could see the Blade ship.

It was not far from the village, but hidden between some hills so that it would not be visible to anyone approaching from the ground. I could see a few of the natives moving towards it though. No doubt Controllers going to inform their Visser that Andalites had arrived.

I knew the steps I had to take now. First, I floated over the village. ((Enril,)) I called privately, ((do not react. Visser Three and the Blade ship are nearby, approximately one and one third of a mile south of the village. Controllers are going right now to inform the Visser of our presence. You must get away and morph to some flight-capable creature. We will be fine if we can reach my Moonraker and then the *Alloran*.)

((Prince Elfangor...I cannot morph.))

((WHAT!?!?!))

((They gave me the power when they asked me to come on this mission, but I have not yet had reason to acquire anything.))

((WHY THE **HELL** DID YOU NOT MENTION THIS EARLIER!?!?!))

I was...somewhat angered. I wished there was a wall I could have smashed my head against for a few minutes. If the Kafit bird had been capable of tearing its own eyes out, I might have done that.

I ran through my options in my head. I could fly to my ship, retrieve Enril, and then proceed to the Captain; or else do that the other way around. But if I left Enril here, there was a good chance she would be captured.

Although I did not care about her, she was a scientist and knew things that could be very dangerous if used against us. And morph-capable or not, I would not be responsible for a second Abomination. I would not. That was simply unacceptable. I could not allow it.

((They will soon realize that I am gone,)) I told her. ((When that happens, they will know what has happened. Run now,

Enril. Run back to the Moonraker. I will meet you as soon as I am able; most likely I will be there before you. Run. NOW!))

She did not obey until I yelled, but that got her. Without giving any warning to her guide, she turned back the way she had come and bolted. The locals could not have kept up with her if they had tried to do so. An Andalite was far too fast for them. ((And Enril?)) I added.

((Yes?))

((If it appears you are about to be captured, do try to do the galaxy the small favor of taking your own life.))

((Where are you going?))

((To finish some business.))

CHAPTER 10

I needed to know how Visser Three would react. Of course he would order us to be brought to him. But what would he do when he learned that we had run off? What steps would he take? Information is always important to have. And if he saw me, that might distract him from thinking of Enril. So I made my way to the Blade ship.

I saw him first. He was impossible to miss. An Andalite where no Andalite should be. Visser Three. I had to fight the urge to dive down and tear at his eyes. If I could have killed him in this morph, I might have tried it. There was no way I could get away with it, of course, but my life was a small price to pay for his.

But that wasn't an option; not in this body. So instead I watched. I saw a hologram of one of the natives appear before him. He nodded slowly and shut it off. A moment later, another native came running to him.

((What is this?)) Visser Three asked, seeming excited and pleased. ((Andalites have landed? How wonderful of you to tell me.)) Then his tail flashed. His tailblade was at the native's throat in an instant. ((FOOL! Why would you come to tell me in person rather than using a long-range communications system? I not only already know that Andalites have arrived, I know that they have disappeared as well.)) He twitched his tail and the alien fell to the ground, never to rise again.

((I despise it when my Yeerks become as foolish as the races we are conquering,)) he muttered. He turned to the ship and shouted a name I did not then recognize. It did not seem important. That was very foolish of me. ((Guraff!))

A Hork-bajir emerged from the ship, He was maybe a foot or so taller than the average Hork-bajir. "Yes, Esplin? What are your orders?"

((Andalites have arrived and are aware of our presence.))

"I shall eliminate them."

((Not quite yet,)) Visser Three corrected him quickly. ((So far, we know of only two Andalites. One of them is a female. She is inconsequential, though would be useful as a host. The other, however, is our old friend Prince Elfangor.))

The Hork-bajir smiled, "I have wanted to fight him for a long time."

((I know. I want him brought to me alive. If anyone can accomplish this task, it is you. Bring Prince Elfangor to me. Perhaps he shall become your new host.))

"You would trust another with an Andalite body, Esplin?"

((I trust you with my Blade ship and with my life, Guraff. I can think of no one better to have such a host.))

Guraff nodded, then started barking out orders. "I want Bug fighters in the sky. Watch the land for these two Andalites. Watch for any morphs that do not belong on this world. Be wary of other Andalites as well. We do not know how many there are, or where they are."

((The native informed me that they landed in a ship several miles north of here,)) Visser Three informed him.

"Then our first order of business is to destroy that ship. That is to be done before anything else."

((See to that personally.))

"As you command, my Visser." He disappeared into the Blade ship. This was not good. They would almost certainly see Enril. If she could get to the Moonraker, all would be fine. I could fly back to the Dome ship on my own. I had to distract them. And I could really think of only one thing.

I landed on the Blade ship. ((Hello, Visser Three.))

Every head turned to stare at me. Every weapon, too. Visser Three smiled. It's funny; there is really no difference between Visser Three's smile and that of his host. ((Prince Elfangor. So kind of you to save us the trouble of hunting you down.))

((If I didn't make it easy, you wouldn't be able to do it,)) I answered. ((And it just is not any fun to win all of the time.))

((Such arrogance from a bird!))

((Such arrogance from a slug.))

((I could have you killed right now. Perhaps you do not realize that. I understand that such things are typically beyond the comprehension of the Andalite mind. I suppose I should thank you for that bit of understanding. After all,)) he added, ((I would not be in this body without your help.))

((Why not come fight me yourself,)) I spat. My bill was tightly closed. If I had hooves, I would have been grinding them into the dirt. ((You have this morph. Why not see which of us is the stronger?))

((Because there is no question of that.)) Then, to his men, ((Shoot him. Be sure to use the low settings. I want him alive.))

That, of course, was my cue to take off. I suppose on another planet it would have been difficult. But the heat here made flying very, very easy. I was away almost before I realized it.

A Bug fighter shot past below me. More soon followed it. No matter the weather, my morph could never even come close to the speed of the Bug fighters. With any luck, Enril would be intelligent enough to hide. She could not possibly be foolish enough to remain in the open, could she?

I honestly was not sure. Nor did I have any idea where she could hide. There was little in the way of vegetation, or of cover. I had no idea how she could avoid being seen. ((Such a wonderful planet,)) I muttered again.

CHAPTER 11

"Tobias?"

I woke up covered in sweat. Rachel had set some sections of the ship to transparent, so the first few rays of the sun were peeking through. Rachel was looking at me, a worried expression on her face. "Um...morning," I said quietly. Everyone else seemed to be asleep.

"You must have been having some dream; you were tossing and turning all night."

"That's nothing new," I reminded her. None of us have slept well for the last seven years or so.

"You were talking a bit, too."

"Was I?" That was new.

"Who is Enril?"

I paused. I knew I had heard that name somewhere before, somewhere not in my dream. But where? "I don't really know," I admitted.

"Well what were you dreaming about?"

I looked at her for a moment. I wasn't in the habit of keeping secrets from Rachel; they always had a way of getting out. But there was really no reason to tell her about this. Dream or memory it wasn't all that important. "I don't remember," I told her. I'm a good liar.

"Tobias..." And yet, she always seems to know when I'm lying.
"You want to try telling me the truth?"

I shook my head. "It's not important."

She gave me the strangest look then. I had no clue what it meant. Then, she started laughing. "Oh my God. You were having dirty dreams about Andalite girls, weren't you!" She was laughing loud enough to wake everyone else up.

((What is number one on the list of phrases you don't expect to hear first thing in the morning,)) David said after a moment.

"Circle gets the square," James muttered. "I'd go back to sleep but I'm afraid that might be contagious..."

((I must say that I resent the insinuation that dreaming about my race is unpleasant,)) Al grumbled.

I just looked at Rachel. "You had to say that loudly, didn't you?"

"Hey, you find gold you let the neighbors know," she answered. "What do you want for breakfast."

I paused to think about it. "Poison."

"I'll just make you some pancakes."

I nodded. Then I whispered, "Just what I requested." I rolled out of bed, grabbed my morning shower, the usual. When I got out of the bathroom, breakfast was on the table. It was starting to look really crowded in this ship. But I didn't really mind it. Soon, the Reliquary would be basically deserted.

Giving David and Al a chance at a normal life wasn't the only reason I was going to be looking for somewhere else to stay. One very practical concern hit me as I was showering that morning. It would be basically impossible to make this thing childproof.

For once, they hadn't waited for me to start. Dan was already eating; the others were doing so with hesitation. Except for Loren. "Not eating?" I asked her, sitting down.

"I'm...just not feeling up to it today," she answered. Not a good sign. If she wasn't eating anymore... But then again, I can't imagine Rachel's cooking helping someone to live *longer*...

"Tobias, I hope you don't mind," Dan began. "I took the liberty of contacting Marco and Jacques. David was right. They tried to transfer you some money, but it was frozen en route and thrown back at them. Seems the Andalites don't want you getting any help."

I shrugged. "I'm not used to help anyway."

"Regardless, I figured I should help you out in any way I could," Dan continued. "I contacted a friend of a friend. It's best not to ask how I know these people, but I found someone who can probably give you and James some good paying work. At the very least, it should help you get by until you can think of something else."

I was surprised. "Why would you help us like this?"

"I'd think that would be obvious, don't you?" He looked over at Rachel. So did I. She was definitely showing now. I couldn't help but wonder briefly what effect her cooking was going to have on our unborn child, but that really wasn't the biggest thing to worry about.

"Yeah, I guess so," I admitted.

Dan went on. "His name is Sergio. You can meet him at his warehouse later today; you should be in town by then. He'll have a talk with you and if he likes you, he'll give you some work. He pays well, but the hours aren't all that great. And...well, he'll tell you the rest himself. Just be sure not to ask a lot of questions."

"How do you know this guy again?" I asked.

"I'm a reporter, remember? I've met some people who know some people. Sergio's a good enough guy if you know when to keep your lips closed. I'm sure you won't have any problems. You're really not a talkative bunch."

I nodded. "Yeah...talkative isn't an adjective usually applied to me."

((Stoic, quiet, just a little psychotic,)) David interjected. ((Not talkative.))

"David, do you even know what stoic means?" Rachel questioned. "That's just not a word people use."

"He probably looked it up to sound smarter," James muttered. "Who you trying to impress? Some hot little rat girl infesting the ship?"

((David,)) Al added, ((is this why you were asking me to supply you with words you did not previously know?))

((Can we just drop the subject?)) David pleaded. ((Um...Al... Dude, when was the last time you got a haircut?))

CHAPTER 12

We dropped Dan off where he needed to be and headed off to Alpha Front without any more delay. I think Dan approved of me, especially because Naomi didn't. I didn't exactly want to accept his help, but now I wasn't going to bite his hand.

The meeting with Sergio was scheduled for later that day, so James and I had very little time to prepare before we set out for it. I landed the ship in its old spot in the woods and the two of us walked the rest of the way. The warehouse was on the outskirts of town, so it wasn't too far from the woods. Still more walking than I was used to.

"Tobias...are you getting some seriously bad vibes from this place?" James asked me. I just nodded. There was something off about all this. The warehouse was in the middle of a bunch of similar places. It was visibly guarded. A few men in black trench coats and dark sunglasses were walking around the perimeter. I noticed a few people on the roof of the warehouse, too.

The whole place was blocked off by a 12 foot high chain-link fence topped with barbed-wire. There was only one gate that I saw; a big one that was letting a truck through. There was no insignia on the truck; the whole thing was just black. The windows were tinted. And as soon as it passed through the gate, a pair of men pulled it shut.

James and I stood on the other side of the fence. We were noticed pretty quickly. Four men came from around the other side of the warehouse; I guess there was another gate over there. "Just...act calm," I told James.

"Act being the key word," he muttered. But James had been rushed at by Kelbrid; a few humans in trench coats weren't

anything to really be afraid of. Although I was a little nervous about what they might have had under those coats.

The lead guy looked like he hadn't shaved in a few days. Maybe he'd get around to it, maybe he wouldn't "You two clowns here for a reason?" he demanded. "I don't come to your work and stare at you."

"We're supposed to meet with a man named Sergio," I told him. "We were sent by--"

He held up a hand, cutting me off. "Don't need to hear any more than that. Don't want to, either. Less I know the better. Come on; he doesn't like to be kept waiting." He and his friends led us around to the back of the warehouse, through another gate.

"You guys got names?" James asked them.

"Course we got names," our...let's call him a guide...muttered. "Doesn't mean you need to know them." James met my eyes. I nodded. Some seriously suspicious vibes. Getting worse by the minute.

We were led through the ware house. It was filled with identical, unmarked crates. Some were being loaded into the back of the truck we had seen pulling in. "What's--" James began.

I shook my head. "Best not to ask," I told him.

"At least one of you's getting it," our guide murmured. He led us up some stairs to an office. Two large men in black coats were flanking the door. I didn't have to wonder if they were hiding anything. I can't tell you what kind of rifles were in their hands, but they didn't look like the sorts of weapons most people were permitted to carry around.

They admitted us silently and our guide left us, presumably to go back to work. The office was sparsely furnished. A large desk with a comfortable chair were pretty much it. The windows were painted black, and the light hanging from above the desk didn't do much to illuminate the place.

There was a man sitting in the chair behind the desk, smoking a cigar. He looked like he was maybe ten or fifteen years older than I was. Blond hair, brown eyes, and unnaturally white teeth. "You are Dan's friends, *da?*" He also had a heavy Russian accent.

I couldn't help but notice the other man in the room. He was a few inches taller than me. Jet black hair. A neatly trimmed beard. I couldn't see his eyes thanks to his sunglasses. What I could see were the scars on his face; several of them, in no particular pattern. He carried the same weapon the guards outside of the door did.

I nodded. "Yeah. You must be Sergio."

Sergio nodded, then gestured to the space in front of the desk. "Have seat, have seat."

James and I looked at each other. Slowly, he said, "There are no chairs here..."

"You can't sit on floor?" Sergio smiled. I shrugged and did as Sergio requested. With a little more hesitation, James joined me. Then Sergio laughed, loudly. "Hey, alright! Look at that, Nicolai, they know tricks!"

Nicolai didn't laugh. That was pretty much what I expected. Then Sergio clapped. "Someone bring them some chairs now. I can't see their faces on the floor. I hate talking to man when I can't see his face." About half a second passed before Sergio changed his mind. "You know what? Forget it." He got up,

walked around the desk, and sat down on the floor with us.
"Your names?"

"My name is Tobias," I told him. "This is James." I realized that, almost out instinct, I forgot to mention our last names.
"Tobias Sa-

"No last names here," Sergio interrupted me. "The less you know, the better, *da?* If you don't know what is happening, you aren't responsible, see?"

I nodded. Slowly, James said, "Um...what, exactly, *is* going on?"

Sergio pointed at James with his cigar. "Exactly. You don't know what goes on here. Tobias doesn't know. Nicolai doesn't know. Hell, not even I know! Ignorance is no crime, am I right?"

Again, James met my eyes. And although I completely disagreed, I nodded. "Right."

"Good, good. So you want to work here? There are just few things you need to know. I don't ask much from you. Just that you be my friend, you see?"

"Um...no," James admitted.

Sergio sighed. "Is simple. Friend is someone who is there when you need him. At any time. Day or night. Someone who will help you when you ask it from him, no matter what. And above all," he blew out some smoke, "friend is someone who keeps your secrets. Someone you can trust."

James turned to me. "I'm really not sure we should get involved with...whatever's going on here..."

"What's going on here?" Sergio asked. "You don't know what's going on here, you see? I don't know either. Is simple. Truck comes in. We take crates off of truck and hold them here until they are needed. New truck comes, we load it up and send it out. Is simple business."

"And what's in these crates? And these trucks? Where do they go?" James asked.

I gave him the sort of look Rachel tends to give me. "Those aren't questions we need answered," I told him. "What we need to know," I continued, turning to Sergio, "is what we'll be asked to do."

CHAPTER 13

Sergio smiled. "Not much, not much. Is simple business, like I said. Truck comes in, you get crates off. New truck comes, you put new crates on. I don't know what is in crates. I don't know where trucks from or where they go. I don't give damn! I know they pay me, very well, in cash. Just like I pay you. Friends, we do favors for each other, *da*? You help me, I help you. Simple as that."

I nodded. I had my own suspicious about what was going on here and I didn't like it. A life in organized crime was definitely the last thing I wanted. But I assumed I could trust Dan. He wouldn't have sent us here if these people couldn't be trusted. That'd be a danger to Rachel and I knew he'd never do that.

I nodded. "We can do that," I agreed.

Sergio laughed. "Good, good. Joseph!" he called. "Take James here and show him around." And get him sized up for coat! We are professional here!" A new man, in the same coat as everyone else, came in to take James away. I stood up to go, too. "Not you, Tobias."

I paused, then sat back down. "Why not me?"

"I look in your eyes, Tobias, and do you know what I see?"

"What?"

"Nothing. They say eyes are window to soul. You have none. I have seen enough killers to know professional when I see one. You are killer, Tobias."

It wasn't a question, which was good, since I wasn't going to answer. Sergio continued. "You have killed before. Many times, I think. And it does not bother you."

"It still bothers me," in insisted.

"No...I know that look, too. What bothers you, I think, is that it doesn't bother you anymore. Not like it used to." Sergio nodded, talking mostly to himself now. "James is strong man. He will be good worker if he learns to keep mouth shut."

I nodded. "I'll keep him in line," I agreed.

"Oh, sure, sure. And hey, if you can't...you are not only killer here, right Nicolai?" Sergio laughed.

I glanced at Nicolai. Next to Guraff, he was absolutely nothing worth noting. "Let me make sure you understand this: if something happens to James, something will happen to you," I said coldly.

"You would kill for friend, Tobias?"

"Without hesitation," I confirmed.

Sergio laughed. "Alright! Good! Is hard to find men like you nowadays. You will keep eye on warehouse, see? Just take a walk around, make sure no one stares at it for too long. Me, I don't like strangers watching my business, you see? It makes me uncomfortable. You see someone you don't like, you scare them off. Simple, *da?*"

I nodded. It sounded simple. Dangerously so. "I can do that," I told him. As long as he didn't want me to do anything more than that, there wouldn't be a problem. Keep an eye out for strangers and drive them off. Not difficult. Not illegal.

"You watch like hawk. You like hawks, Tobias?"

I forced a small smile. "Very much so."

"Good, good. Me too. Hawk saved my life once," Sergio laughed. "Now what do you think of that?"

"I think you're a lucky man," I answered him.

Sergio nodded. "I think so, too." He stood up, but motioned for me to remain seated. He went behind his desk to get something. "Life...is very easy to lose," he told me. I nodded, completely agreeing. "You must hold on to every second you get." Then he stood up with a bottle of vodka and some more cigars. "You drink? Smoke?"

"Drink when I can," I admitted. "Never smoked."

"First time for everything," Sergio told me, sitting back down and practically shoving a cigar in my mouth. "Nicolai, light us!" Nicolai moved to obey, but apparently the second it took for him to do that was too long for Sergio. "Hell, I do it myself."

I started to choke and cough almost immediately. Sergio laughed. "Smoking is art like any other. You must practice it, Tobias. I want you to start smoking at home."

"And why's that?" I gasped out. This was probably deadlier than any fight I'd been in.

Sergio took a drink straight from the bottle. "Because I like you. You don't pretend. And you are quiet. Two important things in friend, I think. Only thing better than quiet friend, I think, is quiet woman."

"Good luck finding one of those," I muttered.

That just made him laugh all the more. "You have woman at home, Tobias?" he asked.

I hesitated. But if Dan trusted this guy... "Yeah."

"Ah, such nice description," Sergio joked. "So tell me about her! I always take interest in lives of friends." He leaned forward, and I almost got the impression that he really did care.

"Rachel, she's..." I paused, not even sure where to begin. "She's the reason I'm here. And I don't just mean why I'm willing to be in this room right now. If it wasn't for her... I'd have never made it to this room. I'd have been dead a long time ago."

Sergio nodded, his expression half serious. I got the impression that was as serious as he ever got. "And why are you here now, Tobias?" he asked quietly.

"Because... I've got no other options," I admitted. "I'm basically broke. I've got money but I can't get to it. My friends have money, but they can't get it to me and I wouldn't take it even if I could. Rachel...she's pregnant. And I've got to take care of my kid brother..."

"And James?"

"He's a friend of mine, willing to help out. Rachel's sister's boyfriend. I don't know; might end up being my brother someday. He's a good guy. Knows how to follow orders."

"Good, good," Sergio smiled. "You said you would kill for friend..." he began.

I nodded. "I would. And I'd die for them, too."

"I am looking for friends, Tobias. You stay long enough, you will call me friend, *da?*"

I nodded. "Maybe. Friendship isn't something I give out often. But you seem... Well, like the kind of man you don't meet very often."

Sergio laughed. "Same to you, Tobias." He grew semi-serious again. "But if you are my friend, someday I may ask you to do that for me."

"You...want me to kill someone for you?" I asked.

"Oh, no, no, no," he laughed. "Not yet, at least. Some day, I suppose. But until then, I just need friend I can trust to keep eye on things. Can I trust you, Tobias?"

"I trust you," I answered him. "If I didn't, I'd have already walked out of here. If I trust you, I'd like to think you can show the same towards me."

Sergio smiled. "Aright! Good! Nicolai? Get Tobias coat."

CHAPTER 14

It felt like a long walk back to the Reliquary. But at least our new coats kept James and me warm. Winter was starting to fall, and it got a lot colder here in...let's just call it Alpha Front...than it did back home. Neither of us spoke until we were at the edge of the woods. Then James turned to me.

"Tobias... I think we work for the mob."

"I...I think you're right," I admitted.

"Why the hell would Jordan's dad give us jobs with the mafia? I mean...how does he even know these people?"

I shrugged. "One of my best friends is trying to kill me and enslave humanity. My girlfriend spent a few years being dead. My father's an alien. Well, one of my fathers... I gave up wondering about these sorts of things a long time ago."

"Tobias, please, listen to me on this one. I know you're the boss. You're the leader, the general, the War-Prince. But we *have* to get out of this before we're in too deep. We can't need money this badly."

"This isn't just about money," I told him.

"Then what?"

"I don't know if you realize this, James, but this front is very heavily under Yeerk control. The day may come, and it may not be too far off, when they'll be able to move openly to seize complete control of it. With this as a secure foothold, they'll find it a lot easier to expand. If they move openly, we Alphamorphs just won't be nearly enough to stop them."

"What does that have to do with us becoming mobsters?"

"The thing about the mafia, James, is that they've got some resources. Money, guns, territory they're willing to kill to defend..." I trailed off, waiting for him to get it.

"Sounds like...like an army," he admitted.

I nodded. "We've even got uniforms," I joked, looking at our matching coats. "If and when this comes to open war over this town, I want lunatics with guns on my side; as many as I can get. And Sergio might be able to help us get access to that."

For a few moments, James didn't say anything. Then, "You're a scary dude sometimes, you know that?"

"Sergio seems to think that's a good thing."

"Yeah, maybe if you don't mind living with a potential serial killer. Seriously, sometimes you scare us, you know that?"

I shrugged. "I'll try to smile more," I joked.

James grabbed my shoulder. "I'm not joking, Tobias. Lately, you've started scaring everyone. David noticed it first, I think, but the rest of us are noticing it, too. And to be honest, we're all starting to get worried."

"No one needs to worry about me," I told him.

"You don't seem to be doing it, so the rest of us have to. Look, Tobias, I know you're the leader, alright? I know what that means. I've done this job, too. I know you're supposed to pretend you don't care. That all of it doesn't bother you. That you're not human. But we all know it's a lie."

"It's a necessary one," I answered. "One that we're all more than happy to believe."

"Yeah; that's the problem. That we're *all* willing to believe it. You included. The way I see it, the way all of us see it, is that it ends one of two ways. The first is the simple one. You lie to us, to yourself, for too long and then something happens. I don't know what. But whatever it is, the time'll come when you can't keep up the lie anymore. You'll snap; you'll lose it. And this whole act of not caring as long as you're victorious is going to fall apart."

James got quiet then. His voice was almost a whisper. "And then there's the other possibility. If you keep up this lie long enough, it might not be a lie anymore. If you pretend not to care long enough, maybe that's how it'll actually be. And to be honest, Tobias, that scares the hell out of me. Out of all of us."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why is that, James?"

"Because where does that lead? You don't care who you step on to get what you want. You don't care how many innocent people die. You don't even care about your friends' lives too much. Just you, your family, those really close to you... Everyone else can pretty much go to hell as long as you get what you want."

"That's not how it-"

"Yeah, Tobias, it is. I know it doesn't seem like it because what you want is the right thing. You want freedom, peace, justice, all that good stuff. And that's good. I want that too; we all do. But once we win this war, then what? I'll be the first to agree that in war, you've got to be willing to do whatever it takes. But after you hang up your guns, then what? If you're so lost in this lie that it's become truth, where do you go?"

"Where I'm needed," I answer. "James, what's the deal here? This isn't like you. Sounds more like Cassie."

"Yeah; she's in on this, too. We all are. I meant it when I said we're all worried. Rachel, Al, Cassie, David, me, the Omegamorphs...everyone, Tobias. Don't you see what you're becoming?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. I'm becoming *them*." He knew who I meant.

"Yeah; yeah you are. And the worst part is that it doesn't even seem to bother you. Look, I get it if you don't want to talk to me about stuff. We're not that close. Same with David. But after everything you've been through, you and Cassie should be like family. And Rach and Al...they *are* family. If you don't start letting the mask slip, Tobias, sooner or later it'll either fall right off or it won't be a mask anymore. If you won't tell anyone else, at least take it off when you're with those you love the most."

I looked at him for what felt like forever. I know it was Cassie behind this conversation. And I know why she chose James instead of Rach or Al. Hearing it from them would be expected. I was used to Rachel worrying about me. I know Al did, too, even if he didn't voice it. But coming from James, it seemed to mean a little more.

He might have been right about it. Maybe there was a problem. Sergio was definitely right. It did bother me that I was no longer bothered by my lack of emotion about what I do. In the beginning, I felt for every life I took. Now, I don't feel much at all.

Emotion feeds the soul. Deprive anything of food for long enough and it'll starve and die. Humans, animals, Yeerks, the soul...all of it. Maybe the pain I used to feel was the pain of my soul dying. And maybe the fact that I stopped feeling that now was a sign that it was finally done.

But James didn't understand. It didn't much matter what happened after this war, what I became once it was all done. The only thing that was important, the only thing I could allow myself to really worry about, was getting to that point, getting my family and the rest of the world there. I couldn't worry much about the end of this war until I ended it.

And he didn't get that his solution wouldn't work. The very people he thought I should speak to were the last ones I could. They were the reason I had to be strong. Rachel, Al, Ax, Jake, all the rest of them... They were the ones I couldn't allow to see me weak. They were the very reason this lie was necessary.

So I told him the only thing I could. "It may very well be that my soul will be the cost of victory," I answered. "But there can never be any sort of victory without giving something up. There is only one thing I will not sacrifice. My soul is not it." I went to sleep that night with my own words echoing in my head. Maybe some day, I'd come to regret them. Once all was said and done, if anything of me remained, I'd look back and think I was a fool. That was highly likely. Just another reason I can't allow myself to think too far ahead. If you think anything through well enough, everything always sounds like a bad idea.

CHAPTER 15

Apparently, it was easier for Enril to hide than I thought it was. I could not see any signs of her. The good news meant that the Bug fighters could not see her. The obvious downside to that was that I, also, could not find her, try as I might. I scanned the landscape with the eyes of a predator and I saw no Andalite. No female hiding under the shrubs and sparse trees that made up the landscape.

Of course, I reminded myself, She could be in a morph. Hopefully, she is intelligent enough to do that, at the very least. I was not fully confident that this was the case, but it was all I had to go on. Hopefully, even a scientist had at least that much common sense. Then again...

((Enril!)) I called as I flew. If she *was* morphed, I had no idea where or what she might have been. I had no choice but to act on the assumption that she was headed back towards the ship.

I flew for what felt like hours. My internal clock assured me that it was a little more than one half of an hour, but I was not entirely convinced. ((Enril!))

((Elfangor?)) Enril's voice. I began to circle the area.

((No. The other Andalite flying around this rock looking for you. Where are you?))

((The other....))

I sighed mentally. Perhaps sarcasm was not the best habit to adopt from humans. I should have taken up baking instead. ((It is I, Enril. Where are you?))

((I am hiding.))

If there had been a wall nearby, I would have smashed my head against it. ((Where!?!))

((Do you see a small, grey creature in one of the trees below you?))

I looked around and saw what she had described to me. The creature looked like a smaller version of the being who had greeted us and led us to the village, clinging to one of the branches of what passed for a tree on this planet.

((Demorph,)) I ordered her. ((The Bug fighters have passed, and you won't get far in that morph.))

((How long do you think it will take us to reach the Moonraker?)) She asked, climbing down from the tree.

I shook my head while I resumed my natural body. ((We are not returning to the Moonraker.))

((Why not?))

I snorted. The answer should have been obvious even to a scientist. ((Because by now, it will have been destroyed. They will be waiting for us. I'm not going to walk into their trap. We're going to make our way back to the *Alloran* on hoof. I hope, for your sake, you can walk for as long as you can babble.))

((You needn't be so harsh,)) she muttered, resuming her normal body. Well, as much as her body can be considered normal. I think she somehow managed to gain weight after I left her.

((I am attempting to be nice,)) I muttered back as I began to walk in the direction that I thought the *Alloran* would be.

((Wait! I am not yet finished demorphing!))

((Then I suppose you should learn to do that faster.)) I continued walking. I knew she would catch up. If I was not sure, I would not have walked away. The Yeerks could not be allowed to capture another Andalite. I would not allow it. One was several too many.

As I expected, she caught up several moments after I began walking away. ((Prince, I do not understand why yo-))

((If you are about to list all of the things you do not understand, Enril, I will do you the courtesy of warning you that I will be paying no attention whatsoever. I do not have the time to listen to such an exhaustive list.))

That had the desired effect of silencing her. We walked in silence for a little more than four hours. It was incredibly unpleasant. What little grass there was beneath my hooves was painful to step on. The heat was unbearable. I was sweating, and I know Enril was as well. Several times she asked me to stop so that she could take a rest. I ignored her each time. Rest was not an affordable luxury.

Night seemed to fall very suddenly. One minute, it was bright and blazingly hot. Then, in only a few minutes, it was impossible to see anything. I routinely stumbled into bushes and small trees.

((Please, Prince Elfangor. It's night. Can we not rest now?))

((Night, Doctor, is the best time to move without being seen. I would think that the logic of such a statement is obvious.))

((But I cannot go on any further!))

((I suppose this is goodbye, then.)) I continued walking.

((You will not leave me here.))

((You seem to have a remarkable talent for being incorrect, Doctor. If only that was in some way useful...))

((Prince Elfan-))

((Oh, I know! We could send you to the Electorate. As long as they do the opposite of what you suggest, I'm sure you will be a great asset.))

((...are you being serious?))

((What do you think?))

((I don't know! I don't know where we are, I don't know where the ship is, and I don't know why you're being such a-))

((Such a what, Doctor?)) I asked, still walking away.

((Such a...a....Taxxon!))

((If that's the best you can come up with-)) I cut off when I felt something. Razor sharp teeth in my flank.

CHAPTER 16

Instinct took over. My tail cut through the Taxxon. I could feel it go through one side and out the other. Instantly, the teeth loosened. Another lightning fast swipe of my tailblade removed it.

I couldn't see them in the darkness. But they seemed to know where I was. ((Elfangor, what's- AHH))

((Taxxon trackers,)) I surmised, swinging my blade wildly in the darkness. I felt it connect with something warm and wet. The texture alone would have been enough to tell me what it was, if the screeching of the Taxxon didn't do it.

I hurried over towards where Enril was. Normally, I would say that no amount of Taxxons could ever be a threat to an Andalite. But Enril was no warrior. And she was exhausted from the long walk. Not to mention it was nearly impossible to see anything.

Of course, I could find her by her screaming. A Taxxon squealed as I shoved my tailblade through it. I heard another one screech nearby. Perhaps Enril actually did something on her own. ((Enril, where is the nearest tree?))

((I do not know...))

((Think. Harder.)) I hissed. If I had teeth, I would have been gritting them. I couldn't stand here trying to defend her in the open space. But I was making a plan.

((Okay, I think it is-))

((Go to it. Now,)) I snapped. I kept one hand on her flank so I knew where she was. We moved, me slashing about almost randomly. Every three strokes or so, I felt Taxxon flesh.

((I am there. Now wha-))

((Morph to the creature you were earlier. It had large eyes. Perhaps it can be of use.))

((But the Taxxons-))

((I will handle them,)) I snapped. ((You have an order. Follow it, Doctor.))

((Very well, I-))

((Act, don't speak!))

"The Taxxons are taking too long. Sending them against Andalites is a waste of resources now that they have been located. I will deal with them myself." It was a voice I heard once before. The Hork-bajir from the Blade ship. Guraff, Visser Three had called him.

A light snapped on, blinding me. For a moment, I could only see white light. Then, my vision adjusted somewhat. I saw the silhouette of a Hork-bajir, larger than normal. The light was coming from directly behind him. "We have not yet been properly introduced. My name is Guraff Four-Two-Seven. I have heard many things about you, Prince Elfangor. It is past time I saw for myself how many of them are true."

The light moved then. It went from being directly behind him to the sky above us. Then I realized: it was the search light of a Bug fighter. I could see now. There were the remains of several dead Taxxons, already being eaten by their fellows.

"Four, Prince Elfangor," he told me. "You killed four of the trackers; your female killed one. But they have served their purpose already. The scent samples from your ship allowed them to lead us to you. It is lucky for you that the Visser wants you alive. Otherwise, I would have just had you shot from the Bug fighter and save us both this foolishness. But I think I prefer it more this way."

I raised my tail, focusing on the Hork-bajir. ((You think I fear you, Guraff? I-))

"Please, Prince Elfangor. We have wasted too much time on words. Words do little to tell the true nature of a man. But actions..." He charged at me, faster than I realized a Hork-bajir could move. One strike was all I needed. I waited until the last possible second. Then I snapped my tail forwards. One cut was all it would take to cut the Yeerk right out of this poor creature's head.

Guraff jerked his head to side. My tailblade glanced off of one of his horns. And then I realized my mistake. His shoulder hit me in the chest. I just barely missed getting hit by the blade. On Earth, I once saw a human be struck by an automobile. It must have been very similar to this.

I nearly fell over. My legs buckled and I almost tripped over my own hooves. I could feel that something broke in my chest. A few ribs. Before I could even fully realize how badly I was injured, I was on the defensive.

Andalites are faster than Hork-bajir. But Hork-bajir have more blades. And Guraff seemed to know how to use all of his. No sooner would I deflect a slash from a wristblade than I'd have to parry his knee and dodge an elbow. I was moving faster than I ever remembered doing before. But after just a few moments, I worried that it might not be enough.

I was wounded and tired. But I fear that even had I been in top shape, I would not have fared much better. Guraff drove me back. It was all I could do to avoid being sliced repeatedly by his blades. I could not even think about counterattacking.

((Prince Elfangor-))

((Not now Enril!))

((I can help you!))

((You choose now to get a sense of humor?)) I demanded as Guraff's closed fist struck me right on one of my hearts. I felt it stop for a moment. His elbowblade took a slice off the top of my ear; it was that close to cutting my head open. I am not ashamed to admit that I screamed in pain.

((Get him near the tree!))

((You had better have a plan...))

CHAPTER 17

I backed away, trying to parry Guraff's hammer-like blows. I managed to circle around to the tree where Enril was hiding, unknown to the Yeerks. I hoped her plan worked. I could not keep this up much longer, and I was too busy dodging blades to think of a plan of my own.

((A little closer... Get him under me.))

Then I understood. I backed under the branch, slowly. ((Now would be a good time, Enril,)) I muttered. I could not keep this up much longer.

The furry creature dropped from the tree, falling straight towards Guraff. He smacked her away while she was still in the air, knocking her to the side with a casual backhanded blow. But that was all I needed.

I struck while he was distracted. He reacted a split second later than normally. When one is fighting an Andalite, a split second is the difference between life and death. I grinned as I felt my tailblade bury itself in his chest, just above one of his hearts.

But Guraff once again surprised me. I expected him to pull away. But he didn't. Instead, he grabbed my tail and kept it buried in him. "Caught, Prince Elfangor."

I gaped at him. He must have been insane! ((My tail is in your chest...))

"I think we can both agree that such a position makes it impossible for you to flee."

((We'll see...)) I tried to pull away, but Guraff held on tight. I tried to struggle away, but he pulled on my tail, dragging me closer. I had never even heard of such behavior from Hork-bajir. What sort of lunatic was he?

Well, when brute force fails... I changed directions suddenly, charging at Guraff. I smashed right into him. And, despite his abnormal size, being struck by a full-grown Andalite was enough to knock him down.

But he kept his grip on my tail. *What is this Yeerk!?* Yeerks just did not act this way! I ground my forehoof into his throat. ((Let. Me. Go.))

He responded by swiping at me with a taloned foot. I did not even know Hork-bajir possessed that kind of flexibility. His claw tore a gash along my chest. I stumbled back, off of his throat. That was when he struck with his horns. The blades caught me in the thigh

I twisted my tailblade. Inside of his chest. He groaned in pain through a clenched jaw. That was the extent of his reacting. My tailblade was in his chest, and all he did was groan.

He started trying to pull the blade out. But I had other plans now. I pressed forwards, trying desperately to keep it inside of him. But he was stronger than I was. Slowly, he pulled my blade out of him.

((Enril...climb onto me. Now. We need to get out of here. This Hork-bajir...running is the best option here.)) She didn't respond, but I saw her start to crawl towards me. Once she was on me, I'd make my escape again.

But he still had my tail! Why wouldn't he let me go!? He was bleeding heavily from the wound in his chest. I think I punctured one of his hearts. But he was not going to back

down. He fully intended to fight to the death here. I supposed I had no choice but to oblige him.

He started pulling me again. *Not too bright, apparently*, I charged at him again. But apparently I called that one completely wrong. He braced himself this time. His shoulderblade impaled me in the chest. On top of everything else, I did not think I could take much more.

((Enril...))

I felt her latch onto my leg. She started climbing up onto my back. ((We can go whenever you are prepared, Prince.))

But I was more focused on Guraff's voice. "It seems everything they've said about you is true. You are quite the beast, Elfangor." He paused, seemingly thoughtful. "Hmm...Beast Elfangor. I rather like the sound of that."

I couldn't help but grin. ((As do I.)) Guraff shoved me backwards, off of his shoulderblade. I stumbled and almost fell over. I would have fallen, had he not still been holding my tail. It seemed like he would never let go! There had to be some way to get away, though. Then it hit me.

Privately, I said two words. ((Enril...demorph.))

((What? But-))

((I am going to ask you to do something. You cannot hesitate to obey. We will have only one chance.))

((I...very well....)) Slowly, she started to shift into her natural form.

((Do you think you can handle two of us, Guraff?)) I questioned him.

"In all humility, yes, I believe I could. Not two of your caliber, but judging by the description I have been given of your female, I am confident that she shall be no threat." True to his word, Guraff watched her grow from the ground. "A mistake, Prince Elfangor. She is no warrior."

((She has her purpose,)) I lied. Well, not a complete lie. I hoped she was good for at least this one small thing. ((Enril,)) I ordered privately again, ((I need you to do this in one quick slice. That is the only chance you will have.))

((I cannot fight him, Prince Elfangor. I-))

((I know. I need you,)) I took a breath, ((to cut my tail off.))

((WHAT!? But-))

((He won't let go. So fine; let him keep it. Morphing will grow it back.))

((And if it doesn't?))

((It will.))

((I know more about morphing than you do, Prince Elfangor. There is the possibility that-))

((And if you don't do it, there is the certainty that we'll be infested. Do it.))

((I...as you command...))

I looked at Guraff with all four eyes. ((I have learned, Guraff, that one must make sacrifices in war.))

"I could not agree more. But I did not think you would so willingly toss a comrade into death."

((Who says I am sacrificing her?)) Then Enril struck. I screamed as I felt her tail cut through my own, just a few inches short of where Guraff held it. I could feel as the blade cut through muscle. But it didn't go all the way through!

"A bold move, Beast Elfangor. But not quite enough."

((Enough for me,)) I hissed. Then I pulled as hard as I could. My tail remained in his hands. Part of it, at least. But most of it came with me. I don't think I've ever been in more pain. But it was far, far better than getting infested.

((NOW, ENRIL! RUN!))

CHAPTER 18

For once, she managed to obey almost instantly. We sprinted off into the darkness. Andalites, thankfully, are faster than Hork-bajir. Guraff would have difficulty catching us if we just ran. But that was not exactly an option. He was wounded, but I was hurt just as badly, if not worse. I could not run for very long. Already I had lost far too much blood.

And there was the other danger. Guraff did not need to chase us on foot. The Bug fighter would pick him up and follow us from the air. He was likely in it already. I needed a plan; just running through the dark would not help. But I had no time to stop and think.

((Should we morph?)) Enril suggested.

((Unless you have some morph you have not decided to tell me about, your morphing would be useless. And I do not have time to stop and morph on my own.))

((Then what? You cannot keep on running much longer.))

((Do you think you are more aware of that than I am?))

((No-))

((Then why bother to point it out?))

((I find it difficult to believe that after all of that, you still have the energy to be such a Taxxon.))

((You'd be amazed what I can do.))

I was blinded as the Bug fighter's searchlight swept over me. For a moment, I expected them to shoot. But they didn't. They wanted us alive. They'd just follow until Enril and I collapsed and scoop us up. Unacceptable.

But the light illuminated, too. I could see trees up ahead, a mile or so in the distance. Real trees, almost. Taller than the usual ones, with leaves. If we made it there, we would have a chance. We could morph and hide or something... At least, I'd be able to get rid of my wounds. That was the most important thing at the moment.

I suppose Guraff figured it out, too. The Bug Fighter pulled ahead of us and hovered in the air. ((What are they doing, Elfangor?)) Enril asked, fear in her voice.

There wasn't time for me to answer. Three Hork-bajir dropped from the ship. Normal sized creatures. I guess Guraff decided it was best for him to remain inside. A logical decision. With his current wounds, it was possible that even Enril could finish him off.

Just like it was probable that, with my own wounds, these Hork-bajir would be enough to bring me down. Unless I stopped them first. Could I do it? Three of them and I had no tail blade. But a warrior, Captain Nerefir has always told me, is far more than his blade.

I charged at the lead Hork-bajir. He was surprised, and understandably so. After all, I was rushing straight at him, unarmed. It was insane; suicide. It was the sort of thing I'd be known for in later years.

I plowed into him, putting all my weight behind it. He sliced me up pretty badly, I'll be the first to admit. But he fell over, and that was the important thing. I slammed my hoof into his head, again and again. It takes a lot to break a Hork-bajir's

skull. I did not stop smashing his head until I tasted the Yeerk itself.

The other two Hork-bajir stood there, frozen. I wiped my bloody hoof on the body of their fallen comrade. ((You think I need a tailblade to kill you? Which one of you wants to be next?)) They looked at each other, unsure what to do. ((No one? Then run.))

They did. As they were fleeing, I added, ((And tell Guraff Beast Elfangor dares him to come himself.))

The Bug fighter landed. I could see Guraff framed in the light from inside of it. For a moment, I worried I took it too far. That he would indeed come himself. I couldn't stop him like I had the others. But the fleeing Hork-bajir grabbed him and started wrestling him into the fighter. For his own good, I'm sure they thought.

After a few moments, the Bug fighter lifted off again. It stayed in the air, following us. But they didn't land again. I walked the rest of the way to the forest. Partially because I wanted to show the Yeerks that I had nothing to fear. But mostly because had I tried to run, I would most likely have collapsed and died.

I morphed as soon as we reached the forest, under the cover of the trees. The first body that came to mind. Al Fangor; the human. The man I was back during the happiest time of my life.

((What are you morphing?)) Enril asked as she saw my stalk eyes disappear and my legs pull into my body. I did not bother to answer. I concentrated only on the morph. I felt my strength growing again as the seconds tipped by. My wounds closed up. And though I was completely exhausted, I was no longer bleeding to death.

"A memory," I answered her once I was done. "Let's go."

((We cannot rest here? The Bug fighter cannot see us.))

"All the more reason for us to move on. We must lose them while we can. They will bring more trackers to hunt us down soon. And more Hork-bajir. I want to be as far away as possible by then."

((But how?))

"I'll know it when I see it."

I demorphed after almost an hour of walking. I was faster in my Andalite body. And the human was tired. Not to mention defenseless. My natural body was far superior. The only thing it didn't have was the memories of joy. Those belonged only to Al Fangor. Still...having my tailblade again was almost as good.

I heard it about half an hour later. Waves. ((Water?)) Enril asked. ((Do we go towards it or away?))

I rolled all four eyes. ((Towards, Enril. I told you I'd know it when I saw it.)) And I did see it, a few minutes later. A small lake. And leading from the lake was a small river. Taxxon trackers could follow us across a lake; but not down a river like that. The rocks would tear them to pieces.

((What do we do?))

((Grab the first aquatic animal you see. We'll morph and swim down the river. That is our escape, for now at least.))

We searched for only a few minutes before I found it. The single strangest creature I have ever seen. A long bill...furry

body...webbed feet and a tail like that an Earth beaver. Enril stared at it. ((....what is *that*?))

((Whatever it is, it's warm and it's wet. And it's our way out.)) I focused on the creature and felt it become a part of me. A familiar feeling now. The...thing...went limp as I did so. I passed it to Enril.

She held it for a few moments. ((It is almost cute.))

I turned one stalk-eye towards her. ((That's...irrelevant. Just morph it.))

I almost cried when my tail changed. The blade flattened and morphed into the tail of this creature. It shrank, and for a moment I was an Andalite with a beaver tail. Apparently, Enril found this hilarious. I did not even know she knew how to laugh.

((This is a priceless image, Prince Elfangor.))

((Look at yourself,)) I muttered, chuckling. The creature's bill had sprouted out of the center of her face. It was probably a combination of exhaustion and relief, but I was suddenly in high spirits. And the image was hilarious.

Fully morphed, I dove into the water. As I hoped, it was indeed amphibious. Enril dove in behind me and I was shocked for a moment. The morph's bill could sense her. I could feel the muscles in her body moving. ((Incredible...)) she muttered. ((This planet has such unique creatures.))

I swam into the river. It had looked frightening when I was an Andalite. But now, it was a game. I was a buoyant little creature, and resilient. I rode the water like it was a highway, steering with my tail. Enril was right behind me, laughing.

After only a few moments, the water calmed down. Instead of semi-rapid waves, we were floating lazily down a stream. I put little effort into moving. Still steering with my tail, I paddled with two webbed feet for a bit, just to put as much distance between myself and the Yeerks as possible.

I waited until our two hours were almost completely up before I swam to the bank and climbed out of the water, demorphing once I was on dry land once again. Enril joined me a moment later. I turned to her, meeting all four eyes. ((Enril...we're alive.))

((I know...I thought...))

I looked at her, in a spot of moonlight filtering through the trees. Slowly, I reached out one hand and stroked her face with it. There are so many things I blame my actions on. I was exhausted and not thinking. I was relieved to still be alive. I was still excited and happy from the fun we had as those little creatures. We were all alone, being chased by some sort of insane Hork-bajir monster. In spite of, or perhaps because of, everything else, it seemed I still had enough energy left to make my biggest mistake since Alloran was captured.

CHAPTER 19

"Tobias..."

Loren's voice was weak. It had been fading for the last few days. I knew this was the last one. For the last three days, she had not been able to walk or even stand. All she could do was lay on the couch as the life slowly left her body.

I wanted to take her to a hospital. Somewhere comfortable. But she wanted to die where we would live. So instead of being where she should have been, where they could have made it more comfortable for her, we were in our apartment.

A tiny place, but all we could afford at the moment, even with both James and myself fronting the money for it. The pay working with Sergio was good but unreliable. We never knew when we'd be called into work. It might just be once a week. It might be in the absolute latest hour of the night. We never knew for how long, either. So we were careful with our cash.

Two bedrooms, the living room with a kitchen area, and a tiny bathroom. That was it. Rachel and I shared our room, of course. James had the other. Al would have to sleep in the living room, but he wouldn't mind. Andalites don't need a lot of privacy. Nor do rats.

James was thinking of moving in with Cassie and Richard, once they got set up. But for now, they were living in one the hotels Cassie had become used to during our first stay here at Alpha Front. They were looking for a place now. Once they had one, we'd probably get ourselves some more space. But until then, it was the six of us in this little place; soon to be five.

Loren held one of my hands. Her hand was so cold...so cold. Rachel had the other, her head on my shoulder. I knew she

wanted to cry; I also knew it was the last thing she wanted. And somehow, both thoughts made perfect sense to me. Rach and I squatted there, beside the couch.

Al was to my left, and James was behind me, with David on his shoulder. Cassie squatted next to Rachel, with Robby holding one of her hands. No one spoke. No one but Loren. "Tobias..."

"Mom," I whispered back. I was doing everything I could to keep the tears out of my eyes. And failing miserably. My voice was cracking and I knew it. I was losing it here, in front of my soldiers. I knew, intellectually, that it was unacceptable. Later, I was sure I'd hate myself for it even though everyone would say it was perfectly reasonable. But right now, I didn't care. There was only one thing I cared about.

"Tobias..." She whispered again.

I think her mind was already mostly gone from her body now. She was repeating my name for the last ten minutes or so. That was all she was saying. Just laying there, whispering her son's name over and over again.

Was she asking me to save her? I wanted so badly to do it. I would have given almost anything to stop this, to make it end. To see her smile and get up like nothing had ever happened. This was even worse than when Elfangor had died...even worse than it had been with Rachel. At least their deaths had been quick.

They hadn't had to waste away like this, slowly shutting down bit by bit. Death had come suddenly for them, like an assassin. He hadn't hung around, taking his time like a torturer. With them, it seemed like he was just doing his job. Now, he was sitting there in front of me, laughing at me.

"Tobias..."

She looked like she was already dead. Her skin was completely white. Her hair seemed dead, just sitting there on her head. She barely breathed. My name on her lips was the only sign of life left in her. Just that. My name, whispered softly, was all she had left.

There wasn't even anyone to blame for this. I couldn't pin this one on the Yeerks like I could with my fathers and with Rachel. I couldn't blame Azmaveth or Crayak or the Ellimist for just snatching her away. I couldn't hide behind anger this time. All I could do was sit and watch through eyes blurred with tears. And I could listen, trying to hear her over my own sobs.

"Tobias..."

"I'm here mom. I'm here," I sobbed. "I'm here."

I don't know what I wanted from her, realistically. In my imagination, I wanted her to smile and tell me this was all a big joke. That they had all got together to pull this stunt. But I knew there was no chance of that. I guess what I wanted was to hear her say something. Anything, just to know that her last thoughts weren't empty.

I wanted her to tell me that I was going to have a great life. That my child would be healthy and strong. Brave and beautiful, like his mother. I wanted her to tell me that it was okay that she was going away because I never had her to begin with. I didn't need her. And I had a new family now. One that loved me. My brother, my friends...Rachel.

I wanted her to tell me that she was proud of me. That my fathers would have been proud, both of them. That I was mankind's last hope. That her whole life was worth it, if only because it brought mine into this world. I wanted her to tell me she was proud she had the chance to know me, that everything, everything else was worth it, just for these few moments with her son.

I wanted her to say that she was going to be okay now. She was going to be with Elfangor now. And Santorelli. She was going to be whole again and remember everything. All the pain and sorrow of this world were going to melt away. It was all okay now. Everything was alright now.

I just wanted to know, know for sure, that she was going to be happy now. That was all I really wanted, more than anything else. She had lived so hard, lost so much. I just wanted to know that in the end, it was all okay now. She was getting what she deserved. Finally, after all these years, she was getting what belonged to her. A little slice of happiness.

But she didn't say anything like that. Because real life, my life at least, doesn't work that way. Dying people don't get to give those speeches and tell you those last comforting words. There was only one thing she could say.

"Tobias..."

Just that one word. That one empty word. My name is Tobias. But that's not who I am. Tobias is meaningless. Just six letters, side-by-side. That was all there was to it.

But...weren't we just six? Jake, Marco, Cassie, Ax, Rach, me...just six kids, side by side. And we *did* have meaning. We weren't empty. The Animorphs were just six. But that word...just another one of Marco's jokes at first, it meant so much now. It wasn't just letters. Not to me.

Just like my name wasn't just letters to her. So I guess her last thoughts weren't so meaningless after all. Her last thoughts were of me. And I hope, God I hope, that it meant something to her.

I don't know when she stopped saying my name. I completely lost track of time. I just know that, after a while, she stopped.

Everything stopped. I wasn't even sure when she slipped away at last.

David was the first to leave the room. Then James. Roger and Cassie went next. I didn't blame them. Loren wasn't their family. They could only stand there watching their leader cry for so long. Cassie would have stayed longer. After all we had been through, she would do that for me. But this was kinder for me. She knew that when something was truly, terribly wrong, she was not the one I wanted with me.

Rach and Al didn't move. Not until I let go of Rachel's hand. It was time for her to go. I needed to be alone with my mother, just this one last time. She understood what it meant when I released her. She took Al off into our room. I don't know what she said to him, or if she said anything at all. And I don't really care.

I looked at my mother... Just a corpse now. Just a shell. I've seen so many; *made* so many. They were a part of my life. And now, Loren, my mother, was just another one of them. Just like my fathers. Like so, so many others.

"Mommy..." whispered... There was nothing left here. No heart beating. No brain thinking. No soul anymore, either. Her body was just like the clothes on them. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Don't wait for me. You've got a lot to do. You've got a lot to be. And maybe in the end, I'll see you there."

I heard her say that. Maybe it was just a hallucination. It must have been. Her voice, echoing in my head. I've experienced things before that people would call hallucinations. Lately, I've been reliving my dead father's memories when I went to sleep. I know about hallucinations. This was one of them. Just one last thing I wished she had said to me. Something my mind made up to comfort me. But I still heard her say it, even if it wasn't real. I heard her say it, and that was all that mattered.

I dried my tears on a sheet. I tucked one end beneath her feet and drew the other end over her face, my tears staining it. I turned away and looked the window over the kitchen sink. The sun was rising now. It hadn't even been setting the last time I had looked.

Maybe there was some sort of metaphor I was meant to see there. Maybe I'm supposed to tell you that that rising sun means something. But I don't care. I wasn't thinking about metaphors then. All I was thinking was that I was never going to speak to my mommy ever again.

CHAPTER 20

((Elfangor?))

I didn't look at Enril. I couldn't. Could barely speak to her. When I woke up the morning...after...I realized what a mistake I had made. Nothing had changed between us. She was still naive, annoying, foolish, and somewhat on the heavy side. It was a mistake, and a terrible one. Especially because, now, she thought my feelings towards her had changed.

We had been like this for the last two days. We had stuck to the forest so the Bug fighters could not see us from the air. The trick with the river seemed to have lost the Taxxons, at least for now. I had no idea what the Yeerks were up to now, and that really wasn't my concern anymore. What mattered at this point was getting back to the *Alloran*.

Something had been bothering me, though; aside from the obvious difficulties. Something in the back of my mind that I couldn't manage to name. ((Elfangor...))

((You will walk faster if we don't speak, Enril. And we need to be as fast as possible. We have already been gone for three days. That means Captain Nerefir will begin taking the appropriate actions.))

((What would those actions be?))

((Between our own natural abilities and the morphing technology, the only logical reason for us not to return within three days is malicious intervention. That means one of two things: hostile natives or Yeerks. If not both.))

((What actions would the Captain take?)) she repeated.

((If we have been attacked, it is an act of war against the Andalite people. Captain Nerefir will...persuade the natives that hostility is not the wisest course of action.))

((And how will he do that?))

I kept walking.

((How will he do that?)) she repeated.

((You already know,)) I answered. She was blissfully silent for the next few minutes. The simplest way would be to convince them that a war with us was not a war they would survive. A display of force would most likely be sufficient. Captain Nerefir would attempt to minimize casualties. Perhaps he would just content himself with vaporizing a mountain. Things of that nature tended to convince others that it was unwise to fight Andalites. Some casualties were, of course, possible, and wildlife would be devastated by such a display. But it was better than having another hostile planet.

((And if they think it was the Yeerks?))

((Then the wisest course of action is to assume we have been captured. We must be Controllers. They will treat us as such.))

Again Enril was silent. I would have to start informing her of the probability of death and dismemberment more often, if it consistently had this effect. Perhaps it would work with my mother, too!

I stopped suddenly. It hit me like Guraff; the thing that had been bothering me. ((It....it was a platypus...))

((What was a what?)) Enril asked absently.

((The...the creature we morphed two nights ago. It was a platypus,)) I repeated.

((I'm sure a more scientific classification will-))

((No, you don't understand,)) I insisted. ((Platypi are Earth animals. They shouldn't be here!))

((Earth...The name is familiar, but-))

((The Human world,)) I interrupted. ((You're a scientist You should know the name of it!))

((Yes, I remember now. I have never heard it called Earth.))

((That's what the humans call it,)) I answered.

She stared at me with all four eyes. ((How do you know that? You are no scholar, Prince Elfangor. How do you know what they call their world? And what they call their platypi?))

((That is not the issue here,)) I answered. ((The issue is why there are platypi on this planet! And...that creature you morphed. It was a koala bear. Another Earth animal... From the same place as the platypus. They should not be here.))

That seemed to get her attention. ((Perhaps someone brought them from the Human planet to here? Skrit Na, perhaps? I know they frequent that world.))

((If they frequented this one, we would know it,)) I answered. ((The military keeps tabs on the Skrit Na. If they visited this planet, we would have known it long ago.))

((The Pythagi?))

((Earth is in our jurisdiction. They would not have gone there.))

((Perhaps before the treaty?))

((No, no. There are not even rumors or stories of Pythagi-like beings on Earth.))

((Then perhaps the animals went to the Human world from here?))

((That is a possibility,)) I admitted. ((But how? Neither dominant race is capable of Z-space travel. And I know that they have been on Earth for a very long time. Hundreds of years, at least; thousands.))

((How do you know all th-)) She cut off.

((What is it?))

((...You have a human morph.))

Lying would have been pointless here. ((I do,)) I admitted.

((You've been to Human. That's how you know all of this. How long were you there, Prince Elfangor? And why?))

((Questions I cannot answer,)) I told her. ((We all have our secrets, Doctor. You would be best off not digging into mine.))

((I don't have secrets, Elfangor.))

((No?)) I prodded. ((There is nothing you would want to keep hidden? No dark shame of yours? Not what we did two nights ago? I could tell that was not the first time you have done

that. Is that how you got your position, in fact? How you got onto this mission? Maybe-))

I cut off when the flat of her tailblade smashed into the side of my head. Even I had to admit that I deserved that. I stood there, silently for a few minutes, collecting myself. She was quivering with rage. She wanted to strike me again but was terrified of what I would do in return.

What I chose to do must have taken her by surprise. ((I am sorry, Doctor. That was out of line.)) But at least it changed the subject.

((Yes, it very much was! And if you ever speak to me like that again...))

((If I ever speak to you like that again, what will you do?)) I asked. She didn't answer. ((Would you yell at me? Would you strike me again?))

((Yes. Both of them. And I don't think there is anyone among our people who would fault me for it. You may be a great warrior, Prince Elfangor, but that does not equate to being a great man.))

((No, I suppose it doesn't. It is not great men who win wars, after all.))

((No? Tell that to Captain Nerefir.))

I had no response to that. To a lot of things, really. It was a day without any answers for me. Hopefully, it was not a sign of things to come.

CHAPTER 21

Over the next day or so, Enril and I made an effort to acquire almost everything we came across. Everything that I thought should be on Earth and not here. I did not know why they were here, but it seemed important.

((This spider is not becoming still,)) Enril told me at one point. We were still in the forest. There were not nearly this many trees on the Homeworld. But at least there was grass in this forest. And it shielded us from view. ((I cannot acquire it.))

((Perhaps you already have it. We cannot keep track of how many bugs and spiders we have taken on this world.))

((Maybe *you* cannot. *I* am a scientist.))

((Get to the part where I should be impressed. Just acquire it and move on.))

((I am telling you, I cannot acquire it and it is not because I have done so already.))

((Of course. You cannot acquire a morph,)) came a voice.

I snapped to attention. ((Captain Nerefir!)) The spider jumped off of Enril's arm and slowly grew into the Captain. As he was morphing, I could not help but add, ((A rather harmless choice of morph, Captain.))

((That little creature had enough venom to kill all three of us, Prince Elfangor,)) the Captain answered. ((And it might surprise you to know that platypi are poisonous, too.))

((Platypi...you have been following us,)) I surmised.

((For exactly seventy-two hours,)) he confirmed. ((We picked up a native only a few hours after you left. He seemed a very personable critter at first. Until the Yeerk in his head started to starve.))

((He was a Controller?)) I demanded.

((They *all* are Controllers,)) Captain Nerefir answered. ((This whole planet has already fallen. Very simply, too. The Yeerks landed, Visser Three claimed to be a deity, and the primitives believed him. He stuck around for a few days constructing Yeerk pools. Then he invited them all to be 'anointed'. Almost all of these poor, primitive creatures walked right into his hands.))

That made my stomachs turn. The thought of an entire world being subjugated so easily. ((But that wasn't the end of it,)) Nerefir continued. ((Visser Three decided to add a nice little touch.))

I nodded. ((He sent us that signal to lure Andalites here. Only a small force....a few warriors and scientists. Easy enough to overwhelm. Suddenly, he has an entire planet under his control. And more importantly, a Dome ship and the Andalities that come with it.))

It was Captain Nerefir's turn to nod this time. ((And it was a close one. After we got the warning, we sent out some Moonrakers to find you and pulled the Dome ship into orbit. The Moonrakers ended up engaging a swarm of Bug fighters. The Blade ship was right along with them. They had planned to surprise the *Alloran* and take it. If we hadn't been warned that the planet had already been claimed, I cannot say what would have happened. As it was, we drove them off and continued looking for you.))

((And you had to wait to make sure we were not Controllers,)) I concluded.

((Don't flatter yourself, Prince Elfangor. We also did some work around here. Destroyed the Yeerk pools in a few villages. Left some advisors to train the villagers. Collected DNA samples from the local creatures for future analysis.))

((What do we do with this world, Captain?))

((I already contacted the Homeworld. They are sending a fleet to blockade this planet. Our guess is that the Yeerks will evacuate their forces as soon as they can. The hosts here are not too numerous; it is a hostile world and the only race with a brain large enough for a Yeerk is not a deadly one. Their population is less than a billion. I believe they will take what they can and flee before the fleet arrives. Cut off from the rest of the Empire, it is only a matter of time before the Kandrona generators here die out and the Yeerks all starve. However...))

I nodded. I knew the other possibility. And it was the option I feared the Yeerks would go with. ((We would do well to get back to the ship as soon as we can, then.))

((However what?)) Enril asked.

Captain Nerefir lowered his stalk eyes. ((The other possibility, Doctor Enril, is that the Yeerks will decide that this race is not worth keeping around if they cannot have it. The Dracon cannons from the Blade ship could be used to ignite the atmosphere, scouring all life from the planet.))

((But that's monstrous!))

((And Visser Three is a monster,)) I answered.

((But all of the creatures on this planet will be destroyed!))

((Perhaps not all,)) Captain Nerefir answered, leading us away from where we had already stood for far too long. ((We could

clone more from the DNA samples our men collected. From the DNA you two have acquired, even. A few tweaks and we can alter the sex of your morphs. The other scientists assure me that it is possible, theoretically at least, to regrow the animal population from the DNA we have.))

((But where could they live?)) Enril demanded. ((No where else do we know of a place quite like this one.))

Then it struck me. ((I know a place,)) I answered. ((A continent on the Human world. Australia. Creatures like these, identical to these, live there. I do not know how-))

((Someone brought them,)) Captain Nerefir answered.

((They have been there for thousands of years,)) I answered.

Captain Nerefir nodded. ((So you said yesterday. I was thinking on that little detail. And I think I have an idea.)) He turned to Enril. ((Doctor...what do you know about Sario Rips?))

CHAPTER 22

We waited in orbit for a few days while the scientists prepared everything. They assured me that they knew that they were doing. And while I did not believe them, Captain Nerefir did. Of course, he was probably the only Andalite crazy enough to believe that it was a good idea to trust these scientists to fiddle with time and space in order to spare the lives of a handful of animals that might not be exterminated anyways.

While some of the scientists worked on the rip, others, headed by Enril, went to work cloning the new animals. For once, I was grateful for the excessive scientific facilities. Apparently, when used in conjunction with DNA analysis units, the machine that synthesizes the grass for the Dome ship can be used to create animals. Do not ask me how.

I spent my time with the soldiers, relating my stories of what happened. None of them believed me about Guraff, even when Enril corroborated the story. But I had the sinking feeling they would not doubt me forever. Guraff and I would meet again; and with any luck, next time I would not be tired and wounded and alone.

Nerefir called me into his quarters after three days of work. ((It is almost time for you to take these critters of yours to Earth,)) he informed me. ((But there are two things we need to discuss first.))

((What are they?))

((The first, Prince Elfangor, is that you need to make peace with your past.))

((Captain?))

((I know all about Earth, Elfangor. Captain Feyorn was sure to tell me when you were transferred under my command. That is why I am sending you to Earth. Two hours after we open the Rip, it will expire. When it does, you and the ship will still be on Earth; in the present day. Perhaps then, you can make peace with what you left behind.))

I was speechless. ((Captain...))

((You are my best warrior, Elfangor. You are like the son I never killed. I will not have you consumed by arrogance and regret. It is unbecoming.))

I was unsure what to say. So I told him, ((I believe the expression is 'son I never had', sir.))

((Not in my case. It was early in the war, when we were still foolish. Alatar and I fought, side-by-side. Father and son standing for all that was good and just in the world. Until we were captured.)) He turned away from me, so I could not see the look on his face. But I could feel it in his voice.

((The Yeerks left us in a holding area, our tailblades sheathed, with our tails tied to our backs. They were waiting for their Visser to get there. No one else would risk stealing the honor by infesting us. Alatar would not allow himself to be the first Andalite-Controller. So I did him the only favor I could.))

((You killed him...))

Captain Nerefir nodded. ((He lay on the floor of the cave. I crushed his throat with my hoof. I could taste my son's blood...my own blood, in many ways. When the Yeerks realized what was going on, it was too late. They came in to try and stop me. But they could not stop the Taxxons.

((They came in like a flood, rushing past the Hork-bajir. I could see them. Their teeth tearing my son to pieces. My son. I-) He cut off and was silent for a few moments. When he resumed, his voice was once again the hard voice of the captain I knew. ((They lost track of me in the rush. I acquired a Taxxon and morphed one. I slipped out after that and escaped.))

((Captain...I had no idea... You killed your son to save him. And to save the galaxy from the abomination *I* created.))

((For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son...)) Nerefir trailed off.

((You just quoted... How...how do you...?))

((You think I never noticed that Bible you keep in your quarters, Elfangor? It was easy enough to learn Human so I could read it, and definitely worth it. I rather like that God character. He has his priorities straight. If there *is* some higher being out there, I very much hope it's him.))

I was silent for a few moments. ((I do, too.))

((And I would venture to say further, Elfangor, that I have seen and done too much not to believe there is a higher power out there. Life simply makes no sense without one.))

I nodded. ((I agree with that, too.)) We were silent for the next few minutes, caught in the revelation of shared belief. Then I remembered something else he had said. ((And the second thing, sir?))

He inhaled deeply. ((Your parents are dead. Aximili, too. A commando unit of Hork-bajir butchered them in their sleep. They found them two days ago. They found the heads a few hours after I found you.))

((WHAT! **NO!**))

((Did I say your family was dead? That was my mistake. I meant to say Enril is pregnant.))

((.....))

((You must admit, that news is much less terrifying coming off the end of that other statement.))

I slumped and scuffed my hoof. ((What...what do you suggest I do?))

((I suggest you talk to her about it, for one thing. I suggest you think of a good way to inform your relations; perhaps put in a call while you are on Earth. Several billion light-years is generally a fairly safe distance, though I would not underestimate Enril's father.))

I nodded. ((Anything else?))

He shook his head. ((Just move on, Elfangor. When you leave Earth this time, truly leave it. You're about to begin a new life, with a mate and a child. You cannot do right by them if you focus on the mate and child you had to leave behind. A group of very wise men once said, "*Don't hang on. Nothing lasts forever but the Earth and Sky.*")

((*"It slips away, and all your money won't another minute buy. Dust in the wind. All we are is dust in the wind."* You have been listening to my records, too, haven't you Captain?))

((What can I say? You collect some very interesting frivolities, Elfangor.))

CHAPTER 23

The Rip was ready later that day. I was to take the animals through with Enril. I was sure Captain Nerefir sent us together just so that we would be forced to talk. We were alone in the ship; the animals were frozen in stasis. Seven pairs of each type. It was crowded in the *Arc*.

Two Moonrakers flew from the *Alloran* and went what Enril assured me was a safe distance away. I was not convinced. They aimed at each other and fired. According to the scientists, the power settings on their weapons, with a few modifications that had been made, would theoretically create a stable Sario Rip, allowing us to deposit the animals in Earth's past with no negative consequences.

Theoretically.

They fired and a dazzlingly bright ring of Shredder-colored light appeared between them. I took a deep breath and launched the *Arc*. I paused for a moment, hovering in front of the ring. ((One of Captain Nerefir's sayings comes to mind...)) I muttered.

((What is it?)) Enril demanded.

In response, I gunned the engine. It was not something I could repeat in front of a female.

The green light blinded me for a moment. When my vision cleared, I was hovering above an all-too-familiar landscape. ((We're there,)) I assured her.

((Of course we are. *I* supervised the project.))

We flew around Australia for the next two hours, depositing animals where they would not immediately consume each other. We saved the platypi for last. Mostly because I was not sure where to put them. Or if it even mattered.

((Some day, little friends, you will be the masters of the galaxy,)) I joked as I turned them loose. I half expected them to fly away, but that is pretty much the one thing platypi *can't* do.

It was disorienting when time shifted back to the present day. I felt some sort of ripple, and then the world was different. There were houses, more animals...humans. We hovered there, cloaked and invisible, looking on. ((Looks like it worked,)) Enril said quietly.

I nodded and began to fly east. There was something I had to do, before I could move on. Someone I had to see. Two people. Like Captain Nerefir said, I could not enter my new life if I still chained myself to my old one.

I did not plan to make Enril my lifemate, my wife. I still disliked her. I could not imagine a life with her. But our child was a different matter. Before I could be a proper father to the son I had, I had to make peace with the one I lost.

I knew exactly where the house was. The home Loren and I had lived in. The one where she would be raising our child. I do not know what I expected. In my imagination, I would walk inside and she would recognize me. She would jump into my arms. And then make some snarky crack about me looking better with a tail.

And our son would be there. Somehow...somehow, he would know who I was. That was what I imagined. I knew, though, that it would not be that way. The Ellimist would have removed Loren's memory like Alloran had planned to, so long

ago. And my son would not know me. Maybe he would call another man father. Maybe Loren loved someone else now.

But nothing, imagined or real, prepared me for what I found. I left Enril in the ship; she had no human morph and there was no time to get her one. More than that, though, I wanted to do this alone. I walked there from our hiding spot a few blocks away, in the guise of Al Fangor.

I saw our house; my house. My home. I recognized it instantly, even after these years. It felt odd to knock on the door, but I knew I had to.

A man answered the door. No one I recognized; no one who recognized me. "Hello? Can I help you?"

"Yes. Yes, I hope so. My name is El...Al Fangor. This may sound like an odd question, but...is your wife home?"

"She is...wait here..." I could tell he did not trust me. I could not blame him. The man turned and went deeper into the house. I stood there on the front steps, feeling at once out of place and right at home.

A child came out of a hallway. About six years old. Hair the same color as Loren's. This was him...this was my son! I squatted down and looked him in the eyes. "Hello, child. My name is Elfangor. I...what's your name?" I asked, smiling.

"My name is Ty."

"Ty." Not the name I would have given my son. But not a bad name. Not bad at all.

"Ty, don't stand too close to strangers" came a woman's voice.

"Okay mom." Only when Ty turned away did I look up. My heart stopped. Brown hair and eyes...short...a little on the large side... She could not have been farther from Loren.

"You....I'm sorry I....I must have the wrong house, I..."

Ty went back to his mother's side. "Oh? What house were you looking for?" she asked.

"I'm looking for a woman named Loren. She used to-"

"Oh....such a sad story that."

"A...sad story? What...where is she?"

"I'm afraid she's gone. Moved on."

"What? No, that's..."

"I'm afraid so. It was about three years ago. She and her husband went out one night."

"Her husband?"

"A nice man. Good with children. Very close to their son, as I recall. One night, he and Loren went out. There was an accident...he lost control of the car or something. He was killed on impact."

"And...and Loren?"

"Blinded. And scarred horribly. But worst of all, she couldn't remember anything at all. She was like a newborn."

"Nothing?"

"She couldn't even remember her son," the woman said sadly.
"I don't know what ever became of her."

"And her son?"

"Not sure what happened to him, either. Probably with some relative of theirs or some other. We bought this house soon after the accident. Quite the steal, really."

I did not know what to say. I wanted to cry. I wanted to break down and cry right here. But I knew I could not. Not here. I wanted to say it was a lie. It wasn't true. It couldn't be. But I knew that it was.

"You said your name was Al Fangor, right?" came the man's voice as he returned.

"I...yes, that is it."

"Damnedest thing...I've got a letter addressed to you."

"What? That's impossible."

"It was here when we moved in. I have no idea...we kept it around, just for the heck of it..." Sure enough, he passed me a yellowed envelope.

"It's still sealed."

He smiled. "I'm not in the habit of reading other peoples' mail."

"Thank you."

CHAPTER 24

I read the envelope when I was back in the ship with Enril. I don't know why. I didn't want her with me. But I needed someone. So I tolerated her as I read.

"Prince Elfangor,"

That stopped me cold. What was this?

"Prince Elfangor,

I don't know if you'll ever get this or not. But I hope you do. I'm not the sort of man who writes letters just for the hell of it. I think it's best that I start by getting some of the important facts out of the way. If you're reading this, I'm dead.

I was the one the Ellimist chose to take your place in your son's life. Tobias needed a father, someone to teach him things. And take it from someone who knows for a fact how he'll turn out ten years from now: you and I did a pretty damned good job of it.

I can't tell you the future, even though I know it. If anything I've ever heard about you is true, you don't need me to waste paper and ink explaining why. But I can tell you some things.

Your sons are going to be alright. Both of them. Tobias is going to grow up to be a great hero; just like his real father. Strong, brave, important...I've raised him for three years. All the records will say he's my kid. But ten years from now, fifteen, everyone will know who his real father is.

He'll make you proud; make us both proud. That's all I ever tried to do for my father. I think it's the only thing a son can

really do. The most important thing, at least. And he'll more than succeed. He usually does.

He'll be happy. He'll meet a beautiful girl and fall in love. And not one of those soft, delicate types. This is the sort of girl Loren would want him to have. The sort of girl it would take to keep your kid in line.

Tobias's life ain't going to be all peaches and cream. But he'll live a happy man, and a good man. I can't offer you much else than that. But speaking as one father to another, I know you wouldn't ask for more.

Just make sure you do one little thing. Write down the truth for him. Write him a letter like the one I'm writing you. Tell him what you want him to hear from you. And leave it with a lawyer in town named DeGroot. Tobias will get it when the time comes.

Loren's going to be alright, too. She'll never remember everything. She'll never remember you. And believe me, I know how that cuts, because she won't remember me, either. She'll never get to know us or how much we loved her. How much we still do.

I don't know what you know about her right now. If you haven't been told, you should hear it eventually. She's blind, right now. And pretty messed up in a lot of ways. But she'll come through it all just fine. She'll get her sight back a few years down the road. She'll be whole and beautiful again. I guess it's kind of ironic. She's lost right now because of what I did; or what I'm going to do, considering when I'm writing this. But she'll be just fine, thanks to what you did; or, will do.

Believe me, I know that for a fact. The accident that's going to hurt her is the very same one that's going to kill me. I'm walking into it on purpose, knowing what'll happen. Believe me when I say that their lives, both of them, mean a hell of a lot

more to me than my own. I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't know beyond any doubt that they'll be better off for it. So no need to worry about your Loren and Tobias. They're going to be just fine.

And you don't need to worry about your other son, either."

I dropped the letter. ((What is it?)) Enril asked.

((It's...nothing...)) I picked it up and found my place again.

"I only met him once, so I can't say much else other than that. Just know that hiding him was the right choice. He'll live, and he'll be happy. And one day, he'll meet his older brother. And trust me when I say I don't want to be on the pointy end of whatever those two cook up.

That's about all I can offer you, I guess. Just one bit of knowledge. Your wife and your kids are going to be okay. If nothing else, we did that right.

- Santorelli"

Santorelli. Not a name I had ever heard. Who was this man? And how did he know what I had only been thinking of in the back of my mind? How did he know what I was thinking of for my son?

((Enril...we need to talk.))

((Yes, I believe we do. Captain Nerefir told you?))

I nodded. ((He told me... Enril...I do not want you for my mate. I feel I should make that very clear right now.))

((You expect me to raise this child alone?))

((No. I have been thinking... I have enemies, Enril. Terrible enemies. Visser Three would do absolutely anything to destroy me. Or just to hurt me. If he knew I had a son...))

((How do you know it will- What are you saying?))

((I am saying that this child must be a secret. No one can know. There are ways to cover it up. Captain Nerefir has the power to ensure that no one but the three of us know.))

((And how shall he be cared for? Raised with another family, or by-))

((No one can know, Enril. No Andalite. No one but me. And Captain Nerefir.))

((And me.))

I did not say anything.

((You expect me to accept you taking my child away from me, hiding him, and not telling me where he lives?))

((I do not expect you to accept it. But I do not expect that you will be able to stop it. You would be amazed what the Electorate can order. Just one word from Captain Nerefir is all it will take.))

((You...you would really do this...))

((It is for the best, Enril. For his own safety. I can guarantee you that if we do this, he will survive. He will be healthy and strong and he will be happy. This much, I know for sure. But otherwise.... This guarantees my son's life and happiness. I will do it, regardless of what you desire.))

((I cannot stop this, can I?))

((I'm afraid not, no.))

((Can...can I at least visit him?))

I nodded. ((I will be sure to arrange it.)) A lie. But one I had no choice but to give.

((I...I need time to think. Can we discuss it more later?))

((Of course.)) It would be a long and pointless discussion. So be it. ((I will return within two hours.))

((Where are you going?))

((To do one last thing. I must visit a lawyer. And then it's time to move on.))

CHAPTER 25

"Hey, Rach?" I asked, sitting up. We were lying in our bed, the one we brought in from the Reliquary. It was around midnight, I think. We didn't have a clock in the room yet. "I've been thinking."

"Had to happen eve-"

I put a finger over her lips. "Don't start that again."

She pouted, which made me smile in spite of myself. "Fine," she said around my finger. "What is it? And why does your finger taste like salt?"

"I was eating the potato chips I stashed under the bed in case you get one of those random cravings again. But that's not important. I had an idea earlier today...a few days ago, actually." I had been thinking a lot about my father's memories, though I wasn't going to tell her that. She worried enough already. She didn't need to know that I was getting Elfangor's life story. It stopped a few days ago anyways. I guess I got what he felt I needed from it.

I had been thinking a lot about moving on, like he said. Like Captain Nerefir said. My old life was over now. My life as Tobias the boy had passed on long ago, long before my mother had. I was just clinging to it the way Elfangor had. The way I wanted to hang onto Loren. But it was time to let go of that now. Time to move on.

"I was thinking I had the craziest idea ever the other day. This one tops all of our other crazy plans."

"Crazier than the time you talked me into stomping a used car lot so you could rescue that bird you had a crush on?" she teased.

"Crazier than that."

"Crazier than the time you said, 'Hey, you wanna morph sperm whales and go hunt giant squids?'"

"Yeah; even better than that."

"Is this more insane than when we freed Jara and Ket? Or tried to drop oatmeal in the Yeerk pool? Or go inside of Marco's body to fight Helmacrons? Or breaking into the Blade ship and freeing Ax? Not to mention stealing the damned thing afterwards..."

"This tops those," I assured her.

"Even crazier than the time we hitched a ride on that moving police car only so that you could jump off of that and snag onto a moving helicopter? Which, despite being completely unnecessary, was still really hot?"

"Well, maybe not – Yeah; even crazier than that."

She smiled and sat up. "Okay. This I gotta hear."

"What do you say you marry me?" I asked, pulling the ring out from its hiding place under the bed.

"No."

I swear to God my heart stopped. It's happened to me before. Usually it was due to someone trying to kill me with something

sharp and pointy. I know what my heart stopping feels like. It stopped. "...No...?"

"Not when you ask like that! 'Hey, you wanna marry me?'" She said in a terrible imitation of my voice. "You're not even on one knee!"

I sighed and rolled off of the bed, landing on one knee. I held the ring box out to her. "Rachel, will you marry me?" I repeated.

"That's it?"

"What do you mean, 'that's it'?"

"You're just keeling there. You're not going to make more of a show than that?"

I sighed again. "I knew you'd do this." I got up and pulled her off of the bed.

"Where are we going?"

I didn't answer her until we got to the window. It was a nice, clear night. Quiet, too. "**BOLTS!**" I shouted.

((Right-o, bossman,)) I heard David say in my head. Then the night lit up. Fireworks shot off from the alley a block away. Far too close to the apartment buildings to be legal. But if it was all strictly legal, it wouldn't have been much fun.

I could hear David cheering, loving the explosions. "Now will you marry me?"

She pretended to think about it. Then, "Only fireworks? That's it, huh? Is that as good as it gets?"

I slammed my forehead against the window. Not hard, just enough to make a noise. "I was really hoping it wouldn't come to this..." I pulled the window open. I swung one leg out of it.

"What are you doing?"

"Well, If you won't marry me..." I dropped-

"TOBIAS!"

- and landed on the Reliquary's wing. "Ah...the magic of cloaking. You coming, Rach?" She couldn't climb out the window, not in her state, but she came out of the front door. We rode through the night air on the Reliquary's wing, enjoying the view. It was almost like flying as hawks again. We'd be able to do that again soon in a few months. In the mean time, we just enjoyed the ride James and Al were giving us. In the back of my mind, I hoped the police wouldn't find a rat with a suspicious amount of fireworks outside of our apartment.

Rachel sat next to me, her head on my shoulders. We could see everything below us, like there was no ship between us. Only the feel of cold steel reminded us we weren't just overing in air.

"Now, Al," I said quietly.

All the lights in town went out. Completely black. Then they lit up again, in a discernible pattern. Three words, illuminating the night. Not the three words you were thinking, though...

GOOD ENOUGH NOW?

Rachel turned to me. "I had Al hack into the town's power grid," I explained. "Here's hoping no one catches us. So...what do you say now, Rachel?"

She kissed my lips softly. "Yes."

And now for some words of wisdom from Streetlight Manifesto:

*“Lost her strength on a Saturday,
Spent the day in bed.
“Yeah, I’m fine; it’s just the flu,” she said, with a smile,
But when they turned their backs,
The tears would flow.
She knew she only had a while, to live,
To breathe, to be, to see, to bleed,
To stand on her own two weakened feet,
“And so I pray everyday: don’t take my mother away”*

*Every night for three long weeks,
She’d roam the hallways half asleep,
And as the footsteps fade away,
In my mind, I could swear, I could swear, I heard her say:
Don’t wait for me, you’ve got a lot to do, you’ve got a lot to
be,
And in the end maybe, I’ll see you there.”*

-As the Footsteps Die Out Forever

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

71: THE PRICE

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 a brick-looking 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 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 such 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 the sinkhole you made 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.”

The smell was just so overwhelming! Any Andalite reading this will understand that I just could not resist any longer. Waiting as long as I had had taken an effort the likes of which I did not exert outside of battle for my life. 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 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, doggone it. All these Andalites running around made the Feds decide that all ice cream trucks needed to have padding on the outside so they aren't seriously injured if and when they get hit. 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. I just wish I could have been of more help."

We walked to the car. I got in the Andalite passenger space and Prince Jake got in the driver's seat. Just as Prince Jake was about to key the engine, a man in a Tri-I uniform pulled up, 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 a 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?