

Imagine a picture of Ax turning into a snake

72: The Price

Well, here we are at last: the long-awaited fic written by John3Sobieski. I'm extremely pleased with this, and I could not have done it better myself. Let's all have a big hand for John, and then sit back and enjoy the f'awesomeness that is his work.

Enjoy!

(I'm forgoing the go to hell part since I think John would much rather we all be Saved)

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

CHAPTER 1

My name is Prince Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthil. I am quite sure you have heard of me. I am famous for my exploits with the Animorphs, the resistance during the first Yeerk invasion of Earth. The war ended in a great victory, the Yeerks were expelled from the planet and the Empire was forced to capitulate, but that is a mere setback to a determined foe.

You see, the Yeerks are back, and the Abomination has returned. Believe me, I know. I was his unfortunate slave until my friends came and rescued me. Now, the shame falls to a competitor and traitor, Prince Imrahil.

We have been, as humans say, kicking ass on the new invasion, but things aren't going quite as well anymore. Mersa 528 was a Yeerk who led a rebellion against the Visser, but we were forced by the circumstances to kill Mersa and end the division in the Visser's ranks. We did this because we were able to have returned to us our fallen leader, . We were also forced to split our forces between two fronts, Alpha and Omega. Tobias had taken his team, Alloran, Rachel, Cassie David, and James, to Alpha front to disrupt enemy operations there.

Now, Prince Jake was holding a meeting in the living room of Rachel's home, trying to figure out how we Omegamorphs were going to disrupt the enemy here.

"We need leads," announced, rising from his spot on the couch, "The Community Center is practically on lock down because we've been using that so much. We can't get in there. . We don't know exactly where the enemy leaders are. And we have a powerful piece of technology that we need to track down. Anyone have any ideas?"

Marco was first up. He and Jeanne have been living together for some time now. Marco had a severe case of memory loss, and Jeanne was helping him to recover from it. Every morning, Marco would wake up not knowing where he was. But he would find a beautiful young woman at his side, explaining what had happened to him in the past seven years. At the moment, though, their relationship hasn't progressed to re-enacting Tobias' and Rachel's mistake. I hope it does not for some time. I would hate to lose another comrade to pregnancy.

"From what Jeanne tells me, Al is a computer genius. Don't we have a spy thing on them? If we do, we should just wait until we get some info from that. No need to get ourselves killed doing stuff the hard way. Come to think of it, no reason to ever do stuff the hard way."

Melissa sat listening. She had only recently joined our group. Both of her parents had been taken during the first war, and her father was taken again in this war. Her best friend, Rachel, had virtually abandoned her to wage war on the Yeerks. Now Melissa was here for revenge, to make them pay for her past pains.

Although I know little about Melissa, I approve of her motivations, if nothing else.

"What I think, Marco," she said, "if we just wait for something to pop up, we lose the initiative. We need to start attacking them, we need to start attacking them now. Gain momentum and move forward and crush them."

"That's easy to say," Marco retorted, "but it'll be different when we're running and screaming for our lives."

"It's part of the job."

"Don't tell me what the job is. I've forgotten more about fighting aliens than you'll ever know. But I remember that, oh yeah, just jumping onto...um..."

"Kelbrid?" Jeanne offered.

"Kelbrid," Marco continued, "is a real fast way to get ourselves killed."

"Guys, please," interrupted them, "We all know something needs to be done. We don't need to get ourselves killed, Melissa. But we should be proactive, Marco. The question was: anyone have any ideas to get leads on any enemy operations?"

((We could talk to Mister Chapman,)) I suggested, ((He had Mersa in his head. Now that the Rebellion has been integrated into the Visser's force, Chapman undoubtedly knows much about the Visser's assets in this area.))

"You're right, Ax, he does know a bit," agreed, "Last time we spoke, he said something about the old Yeerk Pool being rebuilt under the city. That could be something big right there."

"You mean that monument in the middle of the city?" Jeanne asked. After the war, the city couldn't just fill it back in and build new buildings on top. The shifting fill would destabilize them and they could easily fall over. Since it was just an open pit, they decided to fill in all the cracks and make monument to the war in the sight of one of our greatest victories. "It would be awfully hard to build facilities under that."

"We don't know what's going on there. That's why I'm going to check up on Mister Chapman and see what he knows. The rest of you are welcome to come along."

"Go visit my old principal? No thanks, Jake," Marco muttered. "You should take Ax with you, though. He used to be the Visser's host, right? It'd be like having the Visser and Mersa working for you for a change."

I nodded. ((That sounds sensible.))

That is how my most terrible sin began.

CHAPTER 2

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 eyeing 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?"

Chapter 3

That was kind of a shock. I knew that there would have to be some sort of an official investigation, though all of the results would probably end up being highly classified. But how had the Tri-I ended up on the same trail as we Omegamorphs? This changed matters greatly. We were still bound by the rules of the game between the Crayak and The One to not let anyone else know. Now, the Earth's internal protection forces had gotten a whiff of the new threat, a whiff that could escalate into a full scale n-dimensional war if they figured it out. We would have to avoid the investigators at all costs.

While I was thinking of the implications, I missed Mr. Chapman's answer. I believe it was a truthful "No."

"Being a principle at the local school, you are in contact with a lot of young people, who are often targets for terrorist recruiting. Have you seen any suspicious activities amongst the youth?"

"Kids are always acting suspiciously, but nothing that would constitute possible terrorist activity. At least, nothing politically motivated. A few of them threw eggs at my house last week, but the security system took care of them. Just be glad I remembered to buy auto-Shredders that only go up to stun or we'd be having this conversation through bars right now."

"Records show that you are heading up the new Sharing for helping former hosts get past their experiences, do you think that maybe an organization of former voluntary hosts are infiltrating it?"

"Your records are outdated. I retired my position because it was beginning to conflict too much with my duties at school. I don't know who is running it now. But no, I haven't noticed any conspiracy among the former hosts."

"Operative," Chapman began, "I'm curious. Why all the questions about Yeerks? I've heard about the assault on the local branch, but I heard it was terrorists."

"That is true. However, the terrorists had Yeerk weaponry. While any sizable Yeerk presence on Earth would have already been noted, in the light of the current war, it is possible a few of them

have managed to infiltrate the planet. They would likely be the ones behind such an attack, and if so, they are most likely preparing for another attack here on Earth. It is our job to put a stop to that before it can happen."

"I don't know why you'd ask me. I haven't had anything to do with Yeerks for a few years now. I had my fill last time."

"You are the highest-ranking former Controller we can get access to," the operative answered. "And you are listed as a Voluntary Controller."

"That was-"

"I know. For your daughter. That is why you have not been prosecuted for your involvement in the Invasion. However, if one is looking for Yeerks, I would think you would be a good place to start."

"You might think so, but you'd be wrong," Chapman answered.

"That's good to hear, sir. Thanks for your time." At that, the operative did an about-face and walked out the door. This operative was dangerously close to the truth. He had even even asked about the Yeerk's new front organization in town, the new Sharing. I thanked the Ellimist right then that Mr. Chapman was on our side. Because of his time with the Visser's forces, he knew the rules of the game, and he would work to ensure that they wouldn't ever be violated. I slithered back out to the car where Prince Jake was waiting for me. I demorphed in the Andalite passenger area after I saw that the Tri-I operative's car was gone.

"So, what was he doing in there Ax?" Prince asked.

((That operative is investigating the recent attack on the Tri-I installation where the Visser stole the personal force field generator,)) I reported, ((They believe it was terrorists, not Yeerks. However, he is investigating the possibility that a small group of Yeerks on Earth was behind it, and preparing Earth for a new invasion. He believes there might be a possibility of the new Sharing being infiltrated by former voluntary hosts. Also, he wanted to know about any possible active entrances to the Yeerk pool.))

Prince Jake looked ahead and stared for a little bit. I believe he was "chewing it over," as humans say. He is a good commander, always thinking of the possibilities and implications. I realized again why I admired him.

"Let's take this to the guys and figure this out together." With that, we were driving again to Naomi's house.

Chapter 4

We all came together again at Naomi's house. Jacques and Naomi had a few friends over at the moment, so we moved the meeting to Rachel's bedroom upstairs. I was standing near the door,

trying to kill a fly that was buzzing around my head with my tail. Even with my speed, it was not an easy task; not without harming myself or someone else, at least. Prince Jake was leaning against the window, deep in thought as always when we had an impending mission. Marco was laying on the bed, legs crossed and hands under his head. Jeanne was sitting on the side of the bed, next to Marco, playing with his hair. Melissa was sitting on top of Rachel's desk, elbows on knees and chin in hands.

"Ax," Prince Jake was saying, "tell them what you told me."

I did so, and everyone was looking kind of thoughtful afterwards. From what I knew of human expressions, they did not look worried, as I knew I must have if they could read an Andalite face.

"If you guys want to know what I think," Melissa stared, "I think we should recruit this guy. He seems to have a good head on his shoulders, and being Tri-I, he's probably good with weapons.

He could be an awesome tool to use against the Yeerks. And then we wouldn't have to worry about him figuring out things he can't know."

"He may be useful," Marco admitted, "but we can't really have any new members. We would be adding a new unknown factor, which would be dangerous at this point. We don't know where his allegiance would lie if we revealed what was happening. He might make a big report to Tri-I, and then the universe would be in real hot water. As much as I would like to have another guy between me and the Kelbrid, it's not worth blowing up the universe over."

((We could send him on a wild kafit chase,)) I suggested, ((If we feed him misleading information, then he could end up irreversibly on the wrong path. Tri-I would trust us if we told them something was going on somewhere else and not here. Their Chee superiors could reinforce it.))

That one sounded like a winner to me. Not so much to Prince Jake, though. "Most of the members of Tri-I are either human or Andalite. We could put up a façade for a while, but not forever. And when it's been found out, we may lose trust with them that could come in handy in future operations."

There was an awkward silence as we milled through the possibilities by ourselves. Jeanne suggested the next course of action.

"We could put surveillance on him. Make sure he's not coming any closer to the truth of the situation. If he does, then we could...intervene."

Prince nodded at that, but there was a troubled look on his face. He was not pleased with what Marco meant by 'intervene', "I don't like the idea of that. We might not have a choice. I'd suggest calling up Tobias and getting his feedback on all of this, but I think he'd tell us to 'intervene' now... Nothing really needs to be done at the moment, and he most likely won't be able to find what he's looking for. The Yeerks are good enough at hiding from us, and we know where to look. I doubt he'll come up with anything.

"Since we have to see if there's anything in the Pool, I'll be leading the scouting. Ax will look into this Tri-I operative, try to spot him by hanging out around the local Tri-I facility and waiting for him to walk out.

"We don't have anything on the Pool right now, so I'm going to go to the Chee. They probably have maps of Pool that the military made while they were sorting through the place trying to get a hold of technologies. We can use that to try to find where there may still be active entrances. I'll be back in about an hour, and we can get started then. Ax," Prince looked over to me, "You can get started now."

((Yes, my Prince.))

"Don't call me Prince.

Chapter 5

I morphed in the bathroom and flew out the window as my Prince got in his car and drove away. A car, as I am certain you know, is much faster than a harrier. By the time I found a perch on a building three blocks away with a clear view of the Tri-I installation, Prince Jake had already driven back home.

I waited on top of the building. The time was dragging on as I registered all of the faces that went in and out. None of them matched the man who had been speaking to Chapman, but I had to keep trying anyway. We would never be able to keep surveillance on him if I couldn't find him, and this was the best place to do so.

I had to demorph and remorph twice. After the second time, I decided to get some air under my wings and enjoy some flying time while I was on duty. I could still see their faces while I flew, I decided it was a good way to break the monotony while continuing my mission.

I was paying attention to the people on the ground, not to other birds around me, which was why I did not notice another bird of prey paying a lot of attention to me from a higher up. A large red-tail hawk, female judging by its size, dove at me from above. She slammed into me, raking my back with her talons. ((AAAHHHHG!)) I fell out of control for a few seconds, but quickly regained my flight pattern.

She was coming at me again, this time from above and behind. I pulled up and flapped for all I was worth. If I could get above her position, then she couldn't use any downward momentum to strike. There wasn't any time though, she was on me quickly. Just as she was about to hit me again, I rolled over to my back and did a half-loop, coming out horizontal to the ground.

She wasn't going to be lost that easily, though. I saw her coming around to face me. Now that we were on the same horizontal plane, things would be a lot easier. We both tried to climb above each other. Tobias had told me so many times that height was everything. Neither one of us were gaining the advantage.

Then I heard a blessing from above and to my left. ((I got your back, Ax man!)) An Osprey came

from above to blind side her, sending her tumbling toward the ground. The hawk regained control and flew toward the Tri-I building. She would not be back, unless she got some help.

That's when I saw a flight of six more birds come from the top of the Tri-I building in a Delta formation.

((Marco! These are Tri-I operatives!))

((Then let's get out of here!))

We flew away at top speed, but the operatives were not going to give up the pursuit. They probably believed that an osprey coming to help a northern harrier meant that somebody must have been spying on their installation, and they were not going to let us go. A logical conclusion.

((Marco, we need to get away from these operatives.))

((Thank you, Prince Obv-))

((Let us do what I believe you humans call 'playing chicken,' dodge in and out of traffic.))

((Firstly: we humans? Do you Andalites call it something different? Oh, right; you probably call it *suicide*! Are you insane, Ax man? I don't want to get scraped up off the street by a guy with a shovel.))

((It is the only option that comes to mind.))

((How would that help? They could just follow us from the air. Stupid, insane risks is one thing, but stupid insane risks for no reason are quite another, Ax.))

((If we remain aloft, they will be upon us very shortly and we cannot fight them off. At least if we do this, they will not be able to attack us. And I am certain we will be able to think of some way to lose them shortly; we just need time to think.)) I spilled air from my wings and dove between the tall buildings and followed the main street in the direction that leads out of the city and toward the suburbs.

((Man, this is insane)) Marco moaned. Despite his memory loss, he still was the same man I've known for so long.

There was a truck coming my way. I waited for the last possible moment to pull to the side and almost scraped my belly on the side of the trailer! I just missed the side mirror of another car that was going by. Behind that, I almost crashed into the helmet of a guy on a motorcycle.

Marco must have been experiencing the same kind fright-filled flight for our lives. I decided it might be a good gesture to alleviate the panic he was probably feeling, ((To ease your fear, let's talk about Earth foods. I hear that can help calm people.))

((I'm kind of busy here, Ax-man...))

Still, I thought it might be worth it to raise his morale ((I'm thinking of pancakes-))

((DON'T SAY PANCAKE!)) Marco roared in my head so loud it almost hurt.

((Scrambled eggs?))

((NO!))

((Tossed salad?))

((STOP IT!))

((Ice cream?))

((AX! HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO - actually, that one's alright. Mmmmmm...ice cream.))

I saw out of the corner of my eye that Marco was having a better time of dodging than me. He had full use of every feather, while I had already been wounded by the encounter. I did not see any birds following him, but they might have been farther back. I couldn't look behind myself because I would end up on somebody's windshield, but I suspected that there were three more birds behind me as well.

We had to end this. I had perhaps an hour of morph time left, and Marco might have less. ((There's the mall, turn left!)) I weaved my way inside between the people and the doors. I could see a reflection in the glass. Six birds of prey descending from higher up. They had, as I predicted, followed us from the air. Now they were coming down after us.

Before, I had been winging it, but now I had a plan. ((Marco, head for the Krispie Kream drive through. We can lose them there.))

((I don't think that chucking a few donuts at them will be much of a deterrent.))

((That is not the plan. We can exit through the drive through window, and it is too cramped in there for all five of these birds to chase us through. Also, I doubt that they possess the necessary skill and experience with their morphs to make such a narrow exit.))

((Yeah; I've forgotten more about flying than they'll ever know.))

((I believe you made a similar statement earlier today.))

((Does that make it any less applicable?))

((I suppose not, no.))

((Then let's go!))

We flew through the crowds of spectators as we did our aerial stunts to lose our pursuers. The shoppers had no idea what was going on, and didn't interfere because they did not want to stand in the way of whatever was happening. Clearly, something was afoot, and the average citizen wanted nothing to do with any of it. We flew over the food court, where the Andalites were lined up for their Krispie Kream donuts. We flew over the counters into the kitchen itself. There were pans and utensils hanging from the ceiling. They were very hard to dodge. At least two birds ran into the equipment that was hanging from the ceiling; that meant that there were four left.

((Marco, you head out the window first.))

((I'll be happy to get out of this place.)) He flew through the window, over the head of a very short, startled woman. I followed close behind and circled around to watch. One bird slammed into the window, smearing it with blood and fell to the ground. I hoped he was not too badly injured to demorph. The other three birds did not attempt to follow.

((We used to do this on a regular basis, didn't we Ax?))

((Yes.))

((We must have been some real punks. Jake sent me to come and get you. That Tri-I operative is out scouting the area for possible Yeerk Pool entrances. Jake spotted him while we were scouting out the area ourselves. He thought that since we had an eye on him now, you ought to join us.))

((I will be right there as soon as I am able.))

Chapter 6

I made it to the center of town, where the cemented over sinkhole was. I was exhausted by this time, but my Prince wanted me to be there. He was in his falcon morph, and everyone else was in his or her respective bird morph as they loitered over the war monument.

The city officials had not known what to do with the sinkhole. It would be dangerous to fill in and build over top; everyone had learned that from San Francisco. But leaving it open would just show a massive scar in the ground. It would be an eyesore, and the human officials couldn't have that. That is why they appealed to and received money from the federal government. When they got the money, they made some supports that extended all the way down to the floor of the Pool complex. Then, they laid cement on top of that. Once that was done, they had laid down something they simply called the Triumph.

The Triumph is a golden celestial calendar that covers the whole of the sinkhole area. In golden engravings, it shows Earth, Hork-Bajir planet, and the Andalite Homeworld in each of their respective positions during important events in the war, beginning in Earth Year 1966 with Seerow's Kindness, and ending with the scattering of the Yeerk forces at the hands of the Animorphs and the Andalite and Anati Fleets. Throughout the monument, there were statues of important figures. Captain Nerefir and my brother, Elfangor in space, Force-Commander Galuit at Leera, and Prince Jake on Earth. It was quite a sight to behold.

Where we suspected there to be suspicious activity was underneath. There, in the rubble of the landfill, may have been Yeerk activity, rebuilding some of what they had lost in the first war.

Prince Jake dipped his wings at me, the pilot's and bird's way of saying hello. ((Marco, you can join the girls. They have the map and are using a GPS to try to find where the Pool meets the surface, or at least places where it comes near the surface.))

((Am I getting paid for this?)) Marco asked.

((Marco, you know you don't need to be paid for anything. You're set for life.))

((I still should be compensated for the possibility of losing said life.))

((That's the tingly feeling you get in your gut when you do the right thing. Now get going.))
Prince said, growing impatient.

Marco turned to fly to where he saw Jeanne and Melissa, ((You know, that only makes me nauseous.)) Now, he was too far away to hear anymore.

((Man, sometimes he needs to grow up,)) Prince complained. I believed he was mostly joking. If Marco ever ceased complaining about something or other, I would begin to get very worried. Still, I decided to play along.

((He almost did, once, but now he has forgotten about that.))

Now Prince turned his attention to the business at hand, ((Ax, our man is down there dragging around a large suitcase thing over near the edge of the monument, and around the alleys and side streets surrounding it. Something tells me that it's not a suitcase. Any ideas?))

((I do not know what he may be doing right now. Most likely, it is some device that can detect objects and formations underground. If he believes that there are terrorists or Yeerks down there, then he should be scouting the situation, just the way we are.))

((That's just what I was thinking, Ax. That means that there could be useful data in there. Is there any way that you can steal it?))

((Getting our hands on that suitcase will not be a problem.)) I assured him.

((I know that, Ax-man. But Marco made a good point when we noticed the operative doing this earlier. If we steal his research, he is going to *know* he was headed in the right direction.))

((I see. What do you have in mind, then?))

((Is there any way you could access it remotely?))

((If it was just pre-war human technology, I could. But now it is probably a Human-Andalite technology hybrid, with security measures that are state-of-the-art for both our worlds. I could easily make a link between his device from a remote terminal, but I would need Alloran's help to do the hacking.))

((You can go get my iPhone,)) Prince Jake suggested. ((If an Internet connection is all you need, that should do it. If we catch AI online, he should be able to help us out. I'll keep an eye out up here.))

((That will work.))

I flew to an alley near where Prince Jake's car was parked, demorphed, and remorphed human. It was odd, considering that I didn't necessarily have to morph human anymore. Andalites are everywhere on Earth now. But being spotted by someone on the lookout for famous faces could jeopardize the mission.

I walked over to the car and pulled out Prince Jake's iPhone Holo. I thumbed the on switch and called Tobias. His face appeared before me. There was a slight, greenish tint to it, but aside from that the image was very clear.

"Hey Ax-man. Up to anything interesting?"

((Currently, I am sight-seeing at the Triumph. Unfortunately, my laptop at the nearby cafe locked me out with my own security measures. I need Alloran to help me break it open again.)) Tobias knew now that I was on a mission. Speaking in code is an old habit we kept from the first war. I knew Tobias didn't really know what was going on, since I could not really tell him in code. He knew two important things, though: I need Alloran for hacking and I don't own a laptop.

"Okay Ax, here he is," He got up and moved aside and was replaced by Alloran's face. He stroked a few keys on his own pad, ((The connection is now secure. we no longer require code.))

((Thank you Alloran. I need you to hack information from a computing device without leaving evidence that it's been stolen. The security measures are most likely an Andalite-Human hybrid,)) I stroked the holo of the keypad a few times, ((Here, I've made the connection between this phone and machine. You ought to be able to work through this terminal now.))

Of course, it was hooked up to the Operative's machine. ((I have your feed. Wait for a few minutes. Tri-I has some decent security measures.))

Exactly two minutes and eleven seconds later, Alloran informed me that he had all of the information already collected. ((It is still streaming new data, though. Do you want me to stay connected to it, or do you have all the information you need?))

((Continue with feeding the phone the streaming data. Thank you, Alloran. I will talk with you on a later date.))

Jake came and landed on a roof above me, ((Hey Ax? You done there?))

((Yes, my Prince. My business has been concluded.))

((Don't call me Prince. Anyway, we found an entrance. Also, the Operative was picked up by a van heading back to the Tri-I headquarters. I was thinking we could get together in rat morph and explore the entrance a bit before we figure out exactly what we're going to do next. Head to the west side of the Triumph. There you'll see the ruins of the Coney Island that they haven't been able to clear away yet. Morph rat, head down there, and I'll see you there.))

With the Operative headed back to base, I terminated the connection between the iPhone and the machine. I started off, taking the iPhone with me.

Chapter 7

It was cold and damp on the floor of the ruined building. There were fissures and cracks in the floor under my tiny little feet. The ruins were still here because the owners wanted to make money by feeding all of the tourists who came to see the war monument. Unfortunately for them, the building was never salvageable after the blast and bug fighter raids. The city and the owners were in a dispute for years over whether or not to remove it. As far as I know, no decision was ever reached.

I for one was glad it was still there. Being abandoned, we could gather there in secret without being seen. And we knew that there ought to be a way through to the old Yeerk Pool. After the destruction of the McDonalds, the Yeerks needed a new entrance way to get people to the Pool en masse. Another eating establishment would make sense because everybody has to eat.

The hole below us was the way down. It was deep, dark, and smelled of dankness. Initially, we could not see it, as debris covered it and filled in a few feet of it. However, a slight amount of digging dislodged the debris and revealed the opening. I could smell other vermin down there. I suspected the rat mind would be right at home.

((Well, Marco?)) Jeanne prompted.

((Well what?)) Marco asked, sounding confused.

((I believe this is the part where you make some comment about David's family or vacation home. Something in that vein, I'd imagine.))

((Why would I - Oh, right. He's a rat. Um...I sort of missed the boat on that joke, I guess.))

((We could wait for you to think up one,)) Melissa offered.

((No, no, it's fine. I'll just throw one out there when it feels right,)) Marco assured her.

((Ax?)) Prince Jake asked, deciding to ignore the others for the time being. ((Are you sure those Gleet Biofilters are offline? It would be bad if the batteries had the same kind of lifespan as the ship we salvaged for the clone rebels on Hork-Bajir.))

((Batteries?)) I laughed harder than I had in a week or so. And then I realized that he was serious. ((Surely, Prince Jake, you realize that not even Yeerks are so primitive as to rely-))

((I didn't mean literal batteries, Ax,)) Prince Jake interrupted. ((I meant, are the BioFilters working or not?))

((I could check,)) Melissa chimed in, ((Sticking my tail in the room with the filters should set them off, right?))

((I think Big Jake's got some other plans for your tail, Melissa,)) Marco chimed in.

((Marco?)) Prince Jake responded. ((Did I forget to mention that Rachel passed the responsibility of cutting you down to size off to Melissa? She decided it's too much effort to do it over the phone or holo.))

((Down to size?)) Melissa added. ((I guess Rachel didn't leave a lot of work for me to do.))

((Short jokes,)) Marco muttered. ((That's something I was happy enough to forget.))

((They must have been disabled,)) Jeanne said.

((What, the short jokes?))

Again, Jeanne sighed in our heads. ((No, Marco. The BioFilters. Otherwise, this tunnel would be lined with deceased rats, spiders, bugs, rodents, and such.))

((So they just...stopped working?)) Melissa asked.

((Considering all of the local wildlife they most likely destroyed while still functioning, the receptors most likely burnt out,)) Jeanne explained.

((That was my belief,)) I agreed. ((Due to the destruction process, the receptors of BioFilters must be replaced on a fairly regular basis. Without maintainence, they do not last for very long.))

((So the defenses are down?)) Prince Jake asked.

((Yes,)) I confirmed.

((Good, let's go.))

We scurried off down slope with the iPhone tied to my tail. I will admit that it was painful, but it was only minor pain compared to some of the trauma I have suffered. We were running over

small boulders of dirt everywhere. There were some parts of the ceiling caved in and debris was strewn everywhere. Marco was behind me to help out in case the iPhone got stuck on anything.

((You know, my dad always told me to not go into deep dark holes where I suspected there were killer monsters,)) he complained.

((Is that why you still have a hard time going into your walk-in closets with the bogey man and all?)) Melissa asked.

((He doesn't do that anymore,)) Prince Jake told Melissa, ((Just a few nights before we met Elfangor, we got bb guns and charged into the closet guns a' blazing to clear out whatever it was that was troubling Marco. We ended up ruining a big stuffed monkey named George he used to play with but forgot about. Problem solved.))

((But did he not get new closets when he bought his mansion?)) Jeanne asked.

((It's standard procedure now,)) Prince Jake assured her.

((How did Melissa know I used to be afraid to go in my closet?)) Marco demanded. ((Jake, you told! That was a secret. Only you, me, and my dad knew about that!))

((It's really not up to me, Marco. I *had* to tell her.))

Marco sighed. ((Yeah, I understand.))

I did not. ((Understand what?))

((It's a guy thing,)) Marco assured me.

((I am male.))

((Well...))

((Ax,)) Jeanne told me, ((it is something you will understand if you spend enough time with females.))

((I spent a great deal of time with Cassie and Rachel,)) I pointed out. I still did not understand. What were they even talking about?

((Ax?)) Prince Jake suggested. ((Let's just call it one of those human things that will never make sense to you.))

((I think that would be best.))

Everybody made small talk the whole way down. It was obvious to me that they were nervous. Frankly, I was as well. For most involved in the war, the Yeerk Pool was the nexus of all the

Yeerk evil. It was there that slaves were created. Free and happy individuals became helpless slaves to cruel masters.

I doubt that any of the other Animorphs can understand as I do just how horrible it truly is. Few of them have ever been Controllers. Jeanne was one briefly, and Prince Jake for an even shorter time. Melissa, I understand, was captured near the end of the war, but by that point she was so nihilistic that it did not even matter to her anymore.

But I...I was the Visser's host for months. I was not just a Controller, I was *the* Controller, the symbol of all evil and hate in the galaxy. I was the ultimate enemy. And I spent every waking moment raging helplessly against the Visser's control or attempting to escape. Both efforts were futile.

I was, as you know, rescued by my friends. Rachel even went so far as to risk her unborn child to liberate me, and it very nearly cost us Alloran as well. I am free, now, but I shall never forget the time when I was not. I knew, better than any of the other Animorphs, just what the Yeerk Pool was.

This particular pool was the site of a bloodbath we Animorphs caused when we blew it to pieces. True, we killed thousands of Yeerks, and the attack greatly aided us in our ultimate victory. But we also killed hundreds of innocent people who never had a chance to escape. While I do not regret what we did, I cannot set those lives aside lightly. This pool held those memories, and countless other torments.

And yet, in spite of the memories it would bring to mind, this trip would be pleasant by comparison. At least the hell we would face here would be only a memory. At least now, that part was over.

We arrived at the bottom after about an hour and twenty minutes. We didn't want to take the risk of being spotted, but we demorphed anyway. We were standing there, staring into the pitch-black depths of the destruction. I knew the others must have been remembering what happened. In the dark, I thought I heard Melissa say in a low growling tone, "They got what they deserved."

I grabbed the iPhone, set it to the lowest light setting, and looked at where we were. Even though I could not make the light any dimmer, it still seemed blinding.

"Where are we Ax?" Jake whispered. I do not know if he whispered to avoid being overheard by anyone who might be in the vicinity or if it was just because something about this place made one feel the need to speak in a whisper.

((We should be here,)) I answered, indicating a point on the map. It was a cross between Jake's military maps he retrieved earlier and the information stolen from the operative. ((The chasm in front of us was the main complex. As you know, it's filled in by debris. It shouldn't be navigable by any Yeerk host, so we can rule out enemy operations there.))

Marco made a coughing noise that sounded like the word "Taxxon."

"The Yeerks don't seem to be using those these days," Prince Jake assured him.

"No? Jeanne didn't mention that. What happened to them?"

((They were unnecessary,)) I answered. ((There were two main appeals to the Taxxon. They were numerous and capable of delicate tasks. But Kelbrid fingers are surprisingly delicate and capable of most fine work that needs done. While the Yeerks likely keep some Taxxons around, they are no longer widely used. Although since you mention Taxxons, the tunnel to our left is an old Taxxon tunnel. According to the Operative's new data, it is still in decent shape.))

"According to the maps, does it branch off into other fairly intact structures?"

I scrolled the map around the holo screen, ((Yes.))

"We can go that way then. Time to go rat." We morphed again and headed away.

After refreshing the morphing clock, we scurried down the Taxxon tunnel. Although complimenting a Taxxon disgusts me as much as the worms themselves, they are amazing tunnel builders. That is the only reason I thought of for the survival of the tunnel despite the incredible force of the blast and the erosion of time. We followed the tunnel and took a few turns until we came to a place where we thought it was intact enough to have a good possibility of current Yeerk activity. It was an old troop barracks.

We decided that natural rats do not in fact carry iPhones with them (although I recall Marco being rather vocal in the counterargument), so we set it aside. But we knew that we had to find it again or else we would be lost. How did we solve this dilemma? We utilized our sensitive rat's noses.

((Is this the best your American ingenuity has to offer?)) Jeanne asked.

((If it works, it works.)) Marco said. ((That's the American way. Well, you know, until the next election...))

((Well, this just proves that guys are disgusting,)) Melissa remarked.

((It is all we have to utilize,)) I reminded them as Marco, Prince Jake, and I deposited...shall we say various biological products?...by the phone. Hopefully the three piles combined would be strong enough to guide our noses back to it.

We went to explore the barracks. I couldn't see anything, even with my sensitive rat's eyes, but I could smell something was wrong. I could smell the vermin in the walls, the pile we left by the phone, there was the dank damp moisture of the ruins, but something was added to it all. What was it?

((I'm smelling something new...)) Jeanne trailed off.

((Same here,)) Prince Jake responded.

((It's not me,)) Marco joked, but I knew he could smell it as well.

((Let's get outside this room,)) Prince Jake commanded, ((I don't like the feel of this place.))

We had just exited the room when a bright light came on. The bare bulb scorched my eyes, but I saw the forms of Kelbrid, standing on all fours.

((Maybe if we all swarmed one, we could cut a vein or something before they eat us,)) Melissa suggested.

The Kelbrid did not move, though. After a moment, I realized why. ((They are in hibernation,)) I informed the others.

It was about a moment later that a human came entered. He was wearing the white lab coat so typical of scientists. I do not know why the Yeerks choose to outfit their scientists in human gear, but that is there prerogative.

He took a small, steel rod from within his jacket and began tapping the whiskers of one of the Kelbrid with it. The fur all over my body stood on end. ((It must be some sort of electrical probe,)) I decided. ((To restart the Kelbrid heart.))

((Why use it on the whiskers?)) Jeanne asked.

((I hope that's the only place he's going to probe them.)) That, of course, was Marco's contribution to the discussion.

((Kelbrid would not likely feel the probe in any other location; at least, not a probe that was not powerful enough to injure them. But the whiskers are a sensory organ. They will send the proper signals to revive the Kelbrid.)) I knew this from my time as the Visser's host. As much of a hell as it was, it was not without some uses.

Once the first Kelbrid began to stir, the man went on to a second one. Soon, three more scientists joined him. One said into a wrist-mounted communicator, "You may tell Salheer that twenty more Kelbrid have been awakened from hibernation for security detail."

"Yes sir," a second voice hissed over the communicator. How primitive...

The light was extinguished and the door was closed, leaving us in the dark again.

((Well, now we know they're here. We can mark this spot on the map as a storage room for hibernating Kelbrid and an entrance deeper into the installation. Let's get going before we push our luck too far.))

((Aww, but Jake! No one's tried to kill us yet,)) Marco complained.

((I'd think that would encourage you to leave faster,)) Jeanne answered. ((That was always your least favorite part of the day.))

((Yeah, but it's traditional! We can't leave the house without someone trying to bite, stab, cut, shoot, burn, squish, smash, or otherwise maim us,)) Marco answered.

((There is still time for that,)) Melissa reminded him. ((And the time's going to come sooner if you don't stop complaining for no reason.))

((It's Marco,)) Prince Jake reminded her. ((He complains best when there isn't a reason for it. Then, he can make up his own. He gets...creative.))

We collected the phone and went back to Naomi's house for a night's sleep after an exhausting day of morphing.

Chapter 8

I woke up early as always. It was about six o'clock Earth Time. I conducted the morning ritual as best as I could. Since there were no streams or rivers nearby, I was obliged to use the small pond Jacques had installed in the back yard. Prince Jake woke up sometime around eight. Melissa, Jeanne, and Marco arrived by noon for another war meeting. Not my favorite activity, but a necessary one.

I was struck by how empty the house suddenly seemed. It felt like just yesterday when there were so many Animorphs in one place that Jacques had actually felt it was necessary to buy the properties next to his own and expand his dwelling place. Now, Tobias, Rachel, Alloran, David, James, Cassie, and Ronnie were gone. Suddenly, the house had gone from completely full to being just Jacques, Naomi, Jordan, Sara, Prince Jake, and myself. And I suddenly realized just how out of place I would have felt had Prince Jake not been there with me.

Jacques is perhaps the only human I know who has more money than Marco. Humans seem to think that is important and find ways to display their excess of wealth. Jacques had chosen to do so by converting an entire wall of one of his sitting rooms into a television. While somewhat impractical, I did find the display quite awe inspiring.

With the new influx of technologies, any television could be used as a videophone as well. For the best results in operations, the Omegamorphs and Alphamorphs would be communicating on a regular basis; at least, as regular as was possible, all things considered. That meant informing Tobias of what had happened yesterday.

Prince Jake plugged in his iPhone and dialed a number on the videophone pad. Rachel answered, "Oh hey guys. I was just making breakfast. Do you need to talk with Tobias?"

"Yes please," Jake said, I thought I saw a grimace on his face. Eating a breakfast that Rachel made is not a thrilling prospect. Personally, I felt sorry for Tobias. She turned away to get him

and I saw a glimmer of gold on her left hand. I did not realize, at the time, that it held any significance, so I ignored it.

"Morning, Omega's," Tobias said as he appeared on screen. Although I am far from an expert on human facial expressions, and Tobias rarely makes any to begin with, he looked extremely tired.

I wondered if perhaps the war was not going well there, but I decided that if there was any problem, Tobias would have informed us. "Anything new going on over there?" The line had been secured by Alloran, so we didn't need to talk in code.

"Yes, actually," Prince Jake answered, "We've found that the Yeerks are making a new base out of the rubble of the Yeerk Pool. We don't know what all is going on down there, but we do know that there is at least one storage room for hibernating Kelbrid that they awaken once in a while for security details. There's got to be more. I was thinking that AI might have something on it by the spyware."

"As a matter of fact, he does. We intercepted some transmissions a day or so ago. They were extremely encrypted, and it actually took AI some effort to undo them. They were from Salheer to Guraff, saying that they've moved the personal force field generator down there for reverse engineering. Apparently, they don't trust the Pythagi with it. Probably a smart move. We even have the exact location and an accurate map of the new layout down there. I'm uploading it to the iPhone now."

"That will help. Now that we know what's going on, we're gonna plan a strike to take that thing out. The less time they have to work with it the better."

"Good luck with that Jake. I have full confidence in you, but make sure you look over the maps real well. With all the instability down there plus security, it's even more dangerous of a place than it was back during the first war."

"Will do Tobias, I'll see you around," Prince Jake moved to hang up.

"Hold up just a sec Jake. I thought you guys ought to know something,"

"What that?"

"Rachel and I are getting married."

"Congratulations! I'm happy for you both." We all said something similar. Although we were all sincerely pleased by the news, there are only so many ways to express congratulations.

((Do you have a date set yet?))

"No, but I'll tell you when we do. Or Rach will. Or maybe Sergio..."

"Sergio?" Melissa asked.

"Long story there. Anyway, you'll know when we know."

I decided to make another attempt at humor, ((I must inform you that according to Andalite custom, the shorm of the groom must make love to the bride the night before the wedding.))

Tobias and I shared a look. He did not smile, and there was no hint of his thoughts in his face or his eyes, but I knew that he understood. "Well, Rach, if it's their custom..."

"You can not be serious."

"Hey, I'm not going to spit on my ancestral heritage. So to speak... And besides, you could do worse than Ax."

((I assure you, Rachel, that it is a deeply rooted Andalite tradition. A test of loyalty, so to speak, for both parties.))

I was dimly aware of Marco muttering something about life being "so unfair." Mostly, I was concentrating on the shocked faces of my friends.

"Ax, I am going to make this very, very clear. I. Will. Never. Sleep. With. You. And same goes for Marco."

"What about James?" Marco asked.

"Maybe if Tobias died. Maybe..."

Marco turned to James, who was almost trying to hide in the background. "James, I'll make you a deal. One million dollars for Rachel if Guraff finally kills Tobias."

"You can't buy and sell me!"

This seemed to be going a bit farther than I had intended.

((Tobias, perhaps we should inform them that we are joking.)) I attempted to send private thought-speech over the communicator. Apparently, that was not possible, because Rachel glared at me and swatted Tobias on the arm. Then she stalked offscreen.

Marco was laughing maniacally, while Jake tried to hide a grin and the girls seemed to look repulsed. Tobias just chuckled, "That made my morning."

I heard Rachel in the background saying, "Tobias! The scrambled eggs are getting cold."

"Guraff isn't as dangerous as this," He muttered under his breath, "Well, gotta go guys. Have fun with the PFFG." The screen went blank.

"Okay ladies and gentlemen. It's time to figure out what to do," Prince Jake announced.

"It's obvious," Melissa said, "We hit them, and we hit them hard. Destroy whatever lab they're using to study the force field thingy and take out as many other resources as we can before they chase us out of the place. Any objections?" She sent a glance to Marco.

"That part of the script comes later," he assured her. "Jeanne coached me on the proper time to object and whine this morning."

"We were at it for two hours," Jeanne muttered. Then, businesslike as usual, she said, "We need to look at the map and figure out how the complex is laid out. Then we can plan action."

Jake keyed the iPhone. The map was very detailed now, all of the missing pieces were filled in. The different rooms were labeled. After observing the map, I decided that it must have been the original blueprints that the Yeerks used to plan out the new complex. And, thanks to them, we were able to make a plan of our own.

Chapter 9

I was in my Northern Harrier morph again, looking down upon the warehouse. It was about four stories tall by block long and a block wide. It was massive for a low earth building. To take care of the building itself and all of the materials inside, it would take at least thirty employees at any given time. It would be easy to pick five of them off when the shifts switched.

A whistle blew a second off, ((It is now four o'clock my Prince. The shifts should be changing now.))

((You guys know what to do,)) Jake told everybody, ((Pick one of them out and stalk them until they go somewhere where you can attack them without being noticed. Knock them out, relay your position to me, and I'll radio Jeanne to come by with Marco's authentic hippie van to pick them up.))

((I got the hot chick!)) Marco dove to buzz his future victim.

Melissa sighed in our heads. ((Marco, you already have Jeanne, somehow... What possible appeal could a second girl have?))

((I already have several million dollars. That doesn't stop me from wanting more,)) Marco answered.

The little debate ended when Melissa peeled off to chase her own warehouse employee. I saw two males go into a bar together. I was required to capture two, one for myself and one for Prince Jake because he was too busy coordinating between the pickup van and everybody else.

I followed a pair that went off together. They were two middle age males. One was taller and wrinkled, making him seem older. He was quite ugly. He even had two eyes that were different colors, the left was blue and the right was green. His hair was dyed blue and he had several piercings on his ears, nose, lips, chin, and I thought I saw one on his tongue. He looked thin to

the point of being sickly. The other man was shorter, and more normal looking. He had an unkempt beard and massive red sideburns. His eyes were green and his nose was bent as if it had been broken at some point. Despite being shorter, he possessed a massive frame. I imagined that he must have participated in the famous American sport of football at some point in his life.

I followed the two from up high in my Northern Harrier morph. I had no idea what their plans were, they might go out on the town for hours. They might go home and attend to hygiene at any time. One way or the other, I had to find some way to get them alone where they could be captured without alarming the general populace.

After an hour and three minutes of surveillance an opportunity arose. They went into a scuba shop and rented gear. They were most likely going to diving in a local lake or the ocean. I knew these were Yeerks I was dealing with, but it did make sense to me that they would do such thing to keep up a façade of normalcy.

I was right. A half-hour later they had manned a small boat, clothed themselves in gear, and jumped in the water. I went to locate Prince Jake and tell him the situation. He was flying in falcon morph over the city. The vista of the Triumph was beautiful from here, with the sun glittering on the gold. I flapped lazily by my Prince, who was admiring the monument as well. ((Prince Jake,)) I informed him, ((I am tracking two males who have gone scuba diving. I will morph shark shortly to apprehend them.))

Prince Jake shook himself out of a daze, ((Marco has one of his people and is working on the next, Melissa has hers, so I'll send her over to help you out. I'll have Jeanne be on standby for you. Where do you want the pickup to be?))

((There is an abandoned industrial complex equipped with a pier near where they are diving. I will drag them to that location after they are knocked unconscious.))

((Sounds like a plan, Ax man)) Prince Jake answered that, ((Do it.))

I flew back and landed near the abandoned industrial complex. It was fairly massive. It was seven stories tall and hundreds of feet long. I was too close to really grasp its size. I was saddened to think of how many jobs the town had lost when the plant shut down.

I demorphed right out in the open. There was no point in making an effort in hiding. The plant was fenced off and the location was isolated. Nobody would spot me. I looked around myself. There was filth, dirt, and litter everywhere. Most of the windows in the grey building were broken. Weeds were growing out of cracks in the pavement. This place had laid in waste for some time.

After waiting for seven minutes, Melissa arrived, misjudging her angle and landing in a heap of feathers. I picked her up and set her upright as she grew larger into a human girl. "Thanks Ax," she said as her human lips and tongue formed in her beak.

((No problem, you are new to flying.))

She grew to full size and morphed her leotard. She turned to face me, "So, where are the guys we have to take down?"

I pointed to the boat rolling on the waves, ((They should be diving under that small craft. The best plan would be that you distract them as a dolphin. They will probably appreciate your beauty while I will come from behind and attack.))

"We can do that. I'll go first."

We simply walked out to the abandoned pier as if I belonged there. I jumped into the water and started my Tiger Shark morph. Melissa splashed in a moment later and started her own morph, the Dolphin so often used by we Animorphs for operations at sea. I let Melissa take off and followed a few minutes later, swimming through the warm, polluted water at full speed, bumping into cans, Styrofoam, and other discarded objects on the way. Inside of five minutes I arrived at the dive site. I saw a small shipwreck beneath me through the water that had become clear and blue. Judging by its size and wooden construction, I would venture to guess it was some kind of a schooner. Don't quote me on that, though, I am no expert on Earth's history.

There was all kinds of marine life around the ship. It made a home for many of them. Blues, yellows, reds, and every other kind of color were flashing all around the ship, moving about in the great rhythm of pulsating life. Most of them meant food to my shark's senses, but they were not my quarry. It was always interesting to be a predator, especially one such as the shark. Its mentality is completely different from my own. I rarely ever think of killing unless I am in battle, and I never worry about food. But the shark thought of nothing but killing and eating. It was always hunting. Always. The first few times, the instincts were almost too much to handle. Now, though, I was able to force them down and ignore all the tasty little snacks swimming away.

Diving closer to the wreck, I caught sight of the warehouse employees. They were investigating the deck of the ship. I could see them running their hands over the barrel of a large deck gun. I turned away and swam for the rest of the marine life. It would be best to appear as being a part of the environment. One diver took a position at the Captain's wheel while the other tried to unlimber an underwater camera. Melissa gave a few friendly chirps as she came diving down from the barrier surface above. They suddenly looked up, and the camera man focused on her instead of his friend on the wheel. He also pulled a Dracon beam from his side. The Yeerks knew we tended to use dolphins, and apparently they were a little worried. Seeing that I was toward the bow, Melissa glided through the water to go around the stern. The diver's eyes followed her. It was time to strike.

I came up behind the man with the camera and rammed him at half speed. I didn't want to kill the man with my brute force, just knock him out with my momentum. He went limp and floated lazily, made neutrally buoyant by a belt he wore. Melissa turned sharply to the right and dove straight for the other man's face. He ducked and started swimming away from her. His eyes darted to where he thought he had last seen his friend. He saw me instead and screamed as I bared my massive serrated teeth.

The man knew it was time for fight or flight. He drew his own Dracon beam, fiddled with the settings to adjust for the atmosphere, and fired at me. The beam dissipated before it even got half way to me. Melissa hit the man in the back of the legs, sending him rolling off her back. He fought to stabilize himself, but I smacked him with my tail before he regained orientation.

((Good job Melissa,)) I congratulated, ((Jeanne should be waiting for our abductees at the pier. Grab one and let's finish up.))

((Okay.))

Pushing the hapless diver with my snout, I made sure to not draw blood on my victim. It would be awful if I accidentally engaged in a feeding frenzy on my abductee. Once we had made our way back to the pier, Prince Jake and Marco jumped in to retrieve the knocked out divers. Melissa demorphed and climbed up the ladder. I demorphed. Prince Jake, Marco, and Jeanne grabbed my arms and tail to hoist me up onto the pier. Being a quadruped, I can't climb ladders in my natural form.

Prince Jake looked at the unconscious bodies we recovered, "I wish I had thought about that," he cussed under his breath with a frustrated look on his face.

"What's wrong Jake?" Melissa asked, curious.

"Their boat and scuba equipment are expected to be returned to a certain place by a certain time, most likely today. Somebody is going to have to morph them and pass as them so that they aren't questioned by anybody. If any suspicion surrounds them when we try to get into the pool, these people would be worthless as morphs."

I looked at their still faces with my main eyes. Prince Jake was right. That added a new degree of complexity to the situation.

I saw his point, ((I will morph the one with the mutated eyes.))

"I got the chunky dude then," Prince Jake informed us all, "Marco, Jeanne, and Melissa can take the people back to that storage unit Marco rented and lock them up. Are you ready Ax?"

As an Andalite Warrior, we are taught always to be ready for anything. I thought I was. It is strange how wrong I was.

Chapter 10

Prince Jake and I morphed our respective disguises. Because morphs do not come with memories, we searched their pockets for identification. My disguise was named Gomer. Prince Jake's was named Sioux. Interestingly enough, they shared their birthday in common, September 14th. They shared the same address as well, most likely in order to cut the cost of living. They had carried all of this information in a waterproof bag.

After skimming the information off of their rudimentary identification systems, we donned our protective wet suits, checked to make sure that we could breathe through the scuba apparatus, and jumped in. Prince Jake and I were not experts at any of this, but apparently Marco had spent some time diving in the past and was able to help us without any major incidents.

We sank quickly to the bottom. The diver's belts had been set to a lower depth when we had taken them. This was not the best situation. If we took too long to figure out how to work the belts, we the result could be becoming susceptible to the 'bends' when we surfaced. Blood vessels' bursting due to being filled by nitrogen bubbles is not a pleasant form of death.

While attempting to work with the belt, I kicked my feet and moved for the boat. I skimmed the rocky ocean floor until the floor dropped below my set depth, about forty feet under the surface. Prince Jake had better luck with his belt than me. He was slowly ascending to the shimmering surface. He signaled me how to work it. I squeezed the bulb to empty the ballast water. I kicked for the surface and climbed up the swimming ladder into the small boat.

"Okay Ax, I'm going to drive this into port," Prince Jake decided, "You can get dressed in the normal human clothes. They are probably through there," He pointed to a doorway, through which I saw two beds.

"Have you ever piloted a surface craft before Prince Jake?" I asked.

"No," He gave off a reckless grin, "How hard can it be?"

A half-hour later, our beat up, hole-filled vessel made dock at the marina. I was slumped over the stern railing, giving my lunch to the sea. Prince Jake unclamped his hands from the steering wheel. It was sweaty and bent from the strain it had just endured.

"Wa, wa, well that wasn't t t too bad... was it?" Prince Jake stammered.

I reverted to thought speech, ((You pilot a boat worse than I heard Marco drove in the Valeek incident.))

"Fair enough. Let's go turn the scuba gear in." I week later we would learn that the boat sank at its moorings shortly after we disembarked.

We went to the store and gave back our gear. It was, unlike the boat, completely intact. We walked to where we believe the address of our bodies' homes was. Down the sidewalks of dirty, grimy streets. These people did not live in the good part of town. I saw several people sitting under boxes at the entrances of alleyways. A man walking the other way down the street stopped and looked us in the face. I looked him in the face.

It was the Tri-I Operative. And we only had twenty minutes left in morph.

"There you are," He said, "I've been looking all over the place for you. We need to have ourselves a talk."

Prince Jake looked at me, I looked at him. Tri-I Operative's tracking warehouse employees? Tri-I was way too close to the truth. And now the persons we had morphed for the sake of disguise may lose credibility with the Yeerk employers for associating with Tri-I.

Prince Jake decided he would do the talking. Due to past experience, we had determined that he was better than I at interacting with unsuspecting humans, "Who are you?"

"I am an Operative with the International Invasion Investigation Force. I have a few questions for you. Do you have a little time?"

The man must have known the answer would be yes. Saying 'no' would immediately put a person under suspicion and on a watch list, "Yes we do," Prince Jake answered, "But could we go somewhere else? This isn't the best spot for whatever your business is," Prince Jake eyed the filthy streets and the homeless bums.

"Sure, we can do that. Walk with me," That last statement was not a request, but a command. We were in too deep for comfort. He turned around and marched off with a steady gait to the house that we were supposed to own. If it happened to be locked, that would not be good for us. You can't morph keys with your clothing.

Prince Jake walked up and tried the knob of the front door. It wasn't the nicest house ever built, but it could support a small family. There was white paneling on the outside, grayed by the filth of the neighborhood. The place in front of the house where there should have been a shrubbery was empty, just bare dirt. There were windows and a door in the front, allowing a small view inside. From what I could see, there was sparse furniture and a wooden floor.

Prince Jake tried to turn the knob. It wouldn't move. He checked all his pockets for a key. Of course, he didn't find any. He turned to me, "Hey, do you have a key, Gomer?"

I went through the motions of checking my own pockets. Finding nothing, I shook my head slowly "No."

"Gomer, I told you to grab a key on the way out, now look what happens," Prince Jake sounded exasperated.

He was blaming me? He knew that we were just in disguise... oh. "I thought you had grabbed the keys Sioux, that is always your job."

"Not when I give it to you."

"I never heard-"

"Guys," The Operative butted in, "I don't care whose fault it is. We can talk about it out here just as easily as in there."

"What would you like to discuss?" I asked.

"I wish to know about your employment at the warehouse."

"Sure, Operative," if Prince Jake was surprised, he didn't show it, "we have nothing to hide."

I made a mental check. Prince Jake and I had only thirty minutes left to demorph.

"Have you ever discovered an underground tunnel running under the warehouse?"

"No Operative. Not while we've been working there, and not before as far as I am aware."

"Has any of the warehouse stores mysteriously disappeared?"

"Everything is signed out properly," I answered this question, "Nothing just disappears. We keep good records on everything that passes through the warehouse."

"Let me rephrase the question. Has any of the material been signed out without leaving the warehouse?"

It clicked. He believed that the warehouse may be supplying the new Pool complex through a tunnel he had detected. Though we Animorphs didn't know ourselves, it was more than likely. This man was getting far too close to the truth.

I did another mental check. Ten minutes left in morph. And we didn't know when the questions would end.

"Do any aliens work at the warehouse? In particular, I would like to know if you've ever seen any Pythagi."

"Pythagi?" Prince Jake asked, playing dumb.

"Yeah, they have four big fly wings and make me think of Ani's slave master in Star Wars. Only they are bigger and have insectoid legs and claws for gripping things."

"I haven't seen any of those, Operative. Nor any kind of aliens in there for that matter. How about you, Gomer?"

"I can't say I have," I hoped I sounded convincing. This was not good.

"Have you ever seen what's inside the storage compartments of the warehouse?"

"I've never really paid attention. It's our business. We just make sure that everything is stacked properly so it won't fall over."

I checked again. Five minutes left, ((Prince Jake, we must break free so that we can demorph. We have only less than ten minutes left.)) He responded with a grim smile.

Human music was playing down the street. I looked over to a strange sight. A Hork-Bajir was walking down the street with a boom box on his shoulder next to his ear. It sounded like Bohemian Rhapsody. Two humans saw this. They were dirty, greasy females in tattered clothing. They looked like they had been living here in the ghetto for some time. I knew better. It was Melissa and Jeanne. The Hork-Bajir must have been Marco.

The girls walked up to the Hork-Bajir and started cursing at it. The Hork seemed to be startled as the girls started pushing it around, yelling strange things about how all their ills were the fault of all aliens on Earth.

Then Melissa pulled out a lead pipe and cracked Marco's beak with it.

"Excuse me," the Operative said looking at the scene, "I have to deal with this right here," in one fluid motion he pulled out a Thompson submachine gun out of his trench coat.

CHAPTER 11

"Freeze!"

Marco, Jeanne, and Melissa froze. The Operative approached them with the gun in the ready position.

"Let's find a place to demorph, now," Prince Jake told me. I concurred without reservation. Prince Jake ran around the corner of the house into the back yard. I heard a clunk, thud, and a metal object bouncing on concrete.

Playing the role of a dumb Hork-Bajir, I heard Marco say, "Human on TV say no play with guns. They kill people." Then there two thumps, clattering, and an awful screech. I had no idea what it was.

Prince Jake tried the door knob of the back door. This one finally came open. He dived on the ground and demorphed. Anybody watching wouldn't be able to really tell what was happening because he was on the floor and wouldn't see his face changing. I jumped down the stairway and started demorphing myself.

The noises continued to waft into my ears from the outside. One of the girls gasped, and I heard the Operative announce that the three of them were under arrest.

((Hey Jake,)) Marco told us in private thought-speak, ((Uh, this guy is swinging a sword around.)) Then he said, "Knives bad too." I heard clashing blades, another thud, and Jeanne scream.

With only three minutes left, I was in my normal Andalite form. I didn't see anything in the darkness of the basement, not that it mattered. I headed back up for the light at the top of the stairwell, morphing again as I went. This time, I would be a skunk. I needed a way to stop the Operative without killing him, or giving him the impression that I may be a Yeerk or a morph. I hopped up the last three steps as I finished morphing. Prince Jake headed for the door in Homer

morph, I believe so that he could pass as a stray. We had made him much more suspicious today, but we don't need to convince him totally that there is hostile activity on Earth.

((Prince Jake! Let me ride on your back so we can cut off the Operative and I can spray him!))

((Okay Ax, we can do that.)) I jumped on his back and grabbed the fur with my four paws. It would look weird to witnesses, but the only eyes that mattered would be the Operative's. I would dismount by then.

Prince Jake ran at full sprint, heading for the noises that we thought was Operative chasing Marco, Jeanne, and Melissa. We came around the house and saw the sidewalk where they were standing before. The Thompson was on the ground with its barrel bent like a U. The boom box had a face sized dent in one side. There were splashes of human blood on the pavement, along with Marco's blood, knee blade, and right hand. There were also a few human teeth. A trail of Hork-Bajir blood and a trail of human blood went into the alleyway together. Another trail of human blood ran off to the right.

((How in all the bloody tails of Crangar can a human draw blood on a Hork-Bajir hand-to-hand?)) I asked.

((How can a human chase off a Hork-Bajir?)) Prince Jake asked, ((Quick, let's go.)) He ran as fast as he could, following the intertwined blood trails. Just as they entered the alley, the human trail stopped. ((The scent changed,)) Prince Jake told me, ((He morphed a Hork!))

Prince Jake sprinted with renewed vigor. Marco could really be in danger. Again, the sounds of the battle found their way into my ears, much more sensitive now that I was a skunk. Through the darkness and the gloom, I saw two seven-foot-tall shadows dueling; neither of them paying attention to the animals that had just appeared on the scene. Marco blocked a blow from the blade and slashed with his left arm into the Operative's chest. The Operative grabbed the arm with both hands and used it as a lever to throw Marco face first on the ground. He straddled Marco's back and hit him in the back of the head with the sword handle.

I jumped off Prince Jake's back and ran for the fight. Just as the Operative was braking out his handcuffs, I turned around and sprayed him in the face with everything I had. He jumped up and fell over as if struck by a physical blow. He got back up and staggered around, disoriented. I gave him credit; he didn't just break and run as so many others would.

Marco got up off the ground and shook off some of his own disorientation. ((Oh come on! Did you really have to eat those eggs?)) He must have caught the scent. To make sure the Operative wouldn't follow us, he roundhouse kicked the Operative in the face. The Operative hit his head on a low fire escape ladder, fell to the ground, and lay still.

((Time to go Marco,)) Prince Jake said, ((Thanks for the backup.))

((You too. I was toast there man.)) We ran back out of the alleyway. The hippie van stopped right in front of us, the doors opened and we all jumped in. All of us started demorphing as soon as the doors were closed and we were rolling.

"Jake," Melissa said, "I think you trained those guys too well."

"He wasn't any of my students that I remember. I would have noticed a guy who had a thing for antiquated weapons. Ax? When we get back home, I need you to hack hotel records. Tomorrow, we'll put a phone call in to Tri-I saying that Gomer and Sioux were scared away and rented a room for a night."

((Yes, my Prince,)) I answered groggily, ((I will do so. But first, I will have a little rest.)) I never fell asleep in a moving land vehicle before. But I had been constantly morphing for about four hours. I had never done that either.

I felt the vehicle slowing down. My two eyes popped open. The deceleration nearly threw me forward. The hippie van was parked in Marco's garage for collectibles like itself. We piled out of the van. ((Marco? Where can I find a computer?))

"There should be a few laptops in the spa area," Marco pointed to his left, "Through the door there. Wifi covers the entire property, so it should be easy connecting to the internet. Speaking of spa, I could go for a dip in a hot tub after all of that."

Everybody thought it was a good idea. Unwinding a bit would be healthy. So much has been happening lately. Since everybody was already in their morphing outfits, they were already ready to get in. We went through the door. There was an Olympic sized swimming pool on one side, and an equally large hot tub on the other. There were small plateaus rising up from the bottom of the pool but not breaking the surface. I believed they were there for sitting on while relaxing. A massive wooden structure, a sauna I believe, took up the other third of the complex.

I almost slipped on the tile floor. Marco picked a laptop off the wall and frisbeed it into the hot tub. It floated there. Then he turned up the temperature for the tub. The rest of us made our way there. Jeanne and Melissa walked in first and took seats near the stairway. I followed and opened up the laptop. The water wasn't too warm, but it had been off for a while. I had a suspicion that it would warm right up. I listened in to the conversation as I went about finding a suitable motel for Gomer and Sioux to stay at.

Marco and Prince Jake were leaning back on the water while sitting on one of the plateaus. Melissa and Jeanne were sitting against the tub wall opposite of them. I sank to my knees in the water so it could come over my lower body while I worked the computer. I was off to the side of the conversation, but evenly between the guys and the girls.

"What are we supposed to do about this guy, Jake?" Melissa asked, "We've had to fight against this dude almost as much as we've had to fight Yeerks lately. That's not right."

"What can we do? He's fighting on our side," Prince Jake said, "and he still hasn't found positive evidence of an invasion. If he had, the Chee would have notified me."

"Besides, he had nothing today," Marco added, "We know that for a fact. He found some odd activities at the home of a warehouse worker. Two alien hating bums and a Hork that doesn't like

weapons does not constitute a Yeerk invasion force. Neither does a pair of humans that runs away when this kind of stuff happens on their doorstep."

"This guy is good at what he does," Jeanne said, "He's going to track down these guys at some point. Or he'll find a way to the Pool itself. Then he'll know. And what will we do about it then?"

"I don't know," Jake said, "We haven't played any role in his discoveries. If he discovers it through no fault of our own, and through no fault of the Yeerks, our obligations to the treaty between the Drode and the One might still be fulfilled. But since somebody found out, they might not be."

"We have to know what to do," Marco said grimly, "having no contingency for a possible universe-ending event would be a very bad thing."

"What are we going to do, then?" Jeanne asked, "Kidnap him and wipe his memory? Kill him? Keep him a prisoner until the war is over? One way or another, I can't see us owning the moral high ground."

((We are here to save lives and protect freedom,)) I put my two bits in the conversation, ((Eliminating this human would do the first, because it may save the lives of everybody that lives in this universe, and maybe in other universes.)) As I said this, the water finally came to be very warm. I found myself relaxing, despite the drastic measures I had just implied.

"Well Ax, I can't find myself condoning any of the options. If reports are made to Tri-I, I'll have the Chee lose the paperwork and wipe the data. We can deal with the humans and Andalites as we need to."

((Prince Jake, Sioux and Gomer now have a room reserved and occupied. It is at Aunt G's.)) He smiled, "That will do."

CHAPTER 12

That night, we all went about our normal pre-mission routine. I went about the rituals for Andalite warriors about to engage the enemy. Prince Jake sat around thinking of all the different possibilities and outcomes, trying to prepare himself mentally for the yoke of leadership that again would be thrust upon his shoulders. Melissa sat on the couch next to him and struck up a conversation. Naturally, it was about the impending battle. Melissa, being new to our ranks, wanted to soak up as much experience as she could from the veterans that surrounded her. Marco played the new Section 8 video game to relax before he went to bed. He knew he was going to be in danger, and wanted to keep his mind off the mission. Jeanne joined him, playing the game on the massive wall-screen. She would help him in any way she could.

Time passed, and we each went to bed in our own turn, but there was little sleeping for me. Andalites are naturally watchful, which does not help our sleeping habits. An Andalite with a lot on its mind definitely will not sleep very well. I wondered what would happen in the lab. Would be captured? Would we be killed? With how close we often came, I thought I had been desensitized to the possibility. It was always a risk. Worrying about it didn't help much.

So I tried to forget about it, and a new worry entered my mind. The Operative. What to do about him? He was wandering about, systematically uncovering real evidence of a new Yeerk invasion. Such knowledge certainly could not be allowed. But how could we neutralize the threat? Could I condone murder?

I shifted my hooves often, trying to get comfortable. Prince Jake would have to make a decision. I may be a Prince, but Prince Jake is a truly great leader. I had to hold my faith to him. He would not let the world, or the universe, down.

But... he had nearly let down the world once. Similar indecisiveness had nearly caused World War III. The Yeerks had planned to force an engagement between the great American and Chinese naval fleets. We intervened, but simply being there was not enough. It took a threat to beat the Yeerks. I kidnapped Visser 2, hijacked an F-14 jet loaded with a nuclear bomb, and then threatened to drop it on Earth's primary Pool complex if they did not comply with standing down their plan. If I had been force to carry through with my threat – a threat which I didn't know if I could have done anyway – thousands of innocent humans in the Animorph's home town would have died with the backbone of the Yeerk invasion force.

But I was acting my own prerogative. In fact, I had to knock out my Prince in order to hijack the plane and make the threat. He didn't have it in him to make the call. Could he do it now? Tobias would do it with hesitation, but he would do it. That was one of the reasons Prince Jake had chosen him to lead the Animorphs during this war. Prince Jake knew his own weaknesses. He hadn't made up his mind. He most likely never would until it was too late. I realized I had to be strong. I had to do what it took. Jake was a great man, but this one situation was his weakness. If the Operative found out, I would have to take appropriate measures, whatever those may be. And maybe I could later forgive myself.

Maybe.

It seemed like only a few seconds after I fell asleep, the alarm sounded to wake me up. It was time to begin the mission. We all had a quick breakfast, loaded into the van, and were on our way to work as warehouse employees. Jeanne and Marco had already been up for an hour or two, so that Jeanne could explain Marco's foggy memories of the past several years to him. She was still doing so on the ride there.

Halfway through the ride, we all donned the uniforms of the warehouse employees. We arrived at a strip mall near the warehouse and climbed out of the Volkswagen. "Okay guys, just act natural," Jake said.

"Then why aren't we going the other way?" Marco asked, "Last I checked, survival instincts are a natural thing."

"Because defeating an enemy is even more natural," Melissa said. "That's just what we do."

We walked through the door. We didn't know what to expect. It was a Yeerk operated facility on a human planet where they couldn't risk any exposure. I saw the inside and saw massive wooden crates piled high. I was reminded of a scene in a movie I once saw: Indiana Jones and the Raiders

of the Lost Ark. At the end, the Ark was hidden in a government warehouse. There was so much stuff in a dark and shadowy place. People in identical green uniforms milled about with crates on forklifts and dollies.

((There is a card puncher on the wall to our right,)) I observed, ((It would probably be a good idea to find the name of your morph and punch in.)) I searched the cards for one saying 'Gomer,' grabbed it, punched it, and returned it to its proper place. Everybody else did the same.

"Hey Gomer!" a man called to me, "Come over here and help me with this." He was off to my left and trying to stack crates on a dolly two high.

"Okay," I walked over to help him, ((Go ahead and find the tunnel to the Pool. I'll be with you shortly,)) I told my friends. I lifted up the second crate and put it on the first.

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

"No problem."

Prince Jake, or 'Sioux' as he is now, led the way down the little roadway that went through the warehouse. The realization came to me that the Yeerks would need a way to get the crates down the tunnel to the pool. They probably used their delivery trucks to do the work, and so there would be a road down connected to the road leading into the warehouse. Of course, Prince Jake and the others had realized this while I had been helping the man with the crate.

A voice came over an intercom, "All workers, please report to Gate B to unload a new arrival. Be extra careful. Spacecraft fuels are involved. Toxic Rating 5, monitor containment units at all times."

A large doorway opened for a truck to back up into the warehouse. There were four 6 X 6 X 30 metal crates on the back. We all made our way over. ((Prince Jake, once this shipment is in its place, we may be able to sabotage it in order to mask our entrance into the Pool,)) I suggested, ((Spacecraft fuels are highly toxic, and if containment is lost, the employees would have to evacuate by any means necessary.))

Prince Jake seemed to nod to himself. "Hey Sioux! Come over here. I need you to monitor the sensors in case of leaks." It was the same man I had to help before. I was beginning to think this man was the foreman. "The rest of you guys, help direct the truck and the forklifts in their movement.

"Yes, sir." We all went about our tasks. The foreman put in Jake's hands a scanning device that detected the containment fields in Prince Jake's hands. All he had to do was sound the alarm if the readings spiked above zero. The rest of us helped coordinate between the forklifts to make sure that none of the crates were dropped. Long story short, the crates were arranged on the ground near where the tunnel to the pool should be located.

I walked around where I knew the tunnel had to intersect the warehouse. I looked around. There was a small computer console sticking out of the ground right next to where the tunnel should be.

I scanned the area, making sure I wasn't being watched. Jeanne was in position, lounging next to the toxic crates. Prince Jake was maintaining his vigil. Marco and Melissa had been given another job to do. That really didn't matter.

I keyed the console. WAREHOUSE STORAGE LOGS it told me. I didn't quite believe it. I pressed the part of the screen that said BUILDING LAYOUT. A map of the warehouse appeared in the air before me. The different parts were labeled, offices, lunch room, forklift parking, truck parking, main floor, etc. There were no labels near where I was. I touched the holo where the tunnel should have been, right in the middle of the main storage floor. The holo disappeared. The controls returned to the screen. They read: POOL LAB & STORAGE FACILITY ENTRANCE CONTROLS. ENTER CODE TO ACCESS.

((Jeanne, you may do your duty,)) I informed her.

She went from crate to crate, applying a small amount of our extra C-4. It wouldn't be much, just enough to crack the seals and initiate evacuation protocols. In fact, it would only be as loud as a small balloon popping, not an earth shattering explosion. Fortunately, modern spacecraft fuels are the same in nature as nuclear bombs: they are highly powerful, and it is impossible to make them go off by accident.

The fuses were set for 15 seconds. Jeanne walked away. I started hacking the code. Between my experience in the first war, the lack of innovation of the Yeerks, and more technical training I had received since the end of the first war, I managed to breeze my way through the security measures in fourteen seconds.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! "Foreman! Foreman! The seals all broke!" Prince Jake cried.

"Everybody out! Move it! Move it!" Pandemonium broke out as everybody searched for the quickest route out of the warehouse. I simply ordered the tunnel to uncover itself and walked on down a few seconds later, joined by my fellow Omegamorphs.

Prince Jake nodded at Jeanne as we walked into the tunnel airlock. She took out more C-4 and applied it to the Gleet Biofilters. The charges were set for twenty minutes. They would blow as we made our way back out, ensuring that we would not need to dodge the filters and we could escape the same way we came in.

The airlocks opened.

CHAPTER 13

And we were in. It seemed so simple this time. No need to become spiders, rats, cockroaches, or any other kind of vermin that were often necessary to infiltrate such a well guarded place as this. We walked in as if we belonged. It was a welcome change to the normal tempo of our operations.

The tunnel that lay before us was straight at a twenty five degree grade that stretched for five hundred yards. It was really wide and really tall so that any form of freight could be moved through. It looked like it was four human semis wide and two tall. The road down was divided

into three sections divided by yellow lines, one for upward traffic, another for downward traffic, and a small section for pedestrian traffic. We stuck to the walkway. Fortunately, there was nothing going one way or the other.

By time we reached the first room in the honeycomb lab complex, twenty minutes had passed. I scanned the room with my two human eyes. The room was shaped as an octagon with whitewashed walls that were a hundred feet long. There was a lot of scientific equipment set up on tables, counters, and stands. I did not recognize much of it. I assumed that the majority of the equipment was of Pythagi origin, but there was some Yeerk equipment as well.

As we had suspected, the lab personnel had been evacuated in case the containment of materials in the warehouse failed. This was too easy.

"Man, I wish the circus was in town," Prince Jake announced. He said this because we were most likely on a security camera somewhere. In reality, he was saying that it might be a good idea to go to battle morphs.

I led the way to the next hallway we were to take. Being an Andalite, I possess a near eidetic memory, which allowed me to memorize the iPhone map prior to the mission. The hallway was made of more of the whitewashed walls.

"It would be entertaining. However, I do not believe anybody else would want to see it." I was attempting to express that morphs might not be necessary, as we may have been able to maintain stealth for the whole mission. That, I believe, would be a first.

"The ticket price is too high. I think most people would just watch with binoculars and then come at night when the prices drop." Marco believed that we were currently being watched and the Yeerks would probably attack soon.

"Personally, I'd like to get myself one of those crystal balls that the circus 'mystics' have. We could put it to use just easily as they could. If I had one, it really wouldn't matter to me how many people showed up to the circus." Jeanne presented an interesting possibility. If we captured the one of the force field generators, then we could use it to aid our escape once we did morph.

"You know what? That works for me," Prince Jake approved of Jeanne's plan of action.

"I just hope we don't have to deal with any clowns our friends saw at the last circus," Marco continued.

"Those guys are scary." I believe he was referring to the Apostates Tobias mentioned in his last communication.

"I don't know," Melissa replied. "I think I kind of like clowns. Maybe one can make me laugh."

We had walked through two more whitewashed rooms and hallways and entered the last one where the force field generator was supposed to be stored. Prince Jake, Marco, Jeanne, and Melissa all demorphed and remorphed for battle. I demorphed and stood guard as they all

morphed. Prince Jake was in tiger morph, Melissa was a panther, and they covered the left side hallway. Jeanne and Marco positioned themselves to cover both the center and right hallways with their speedy Garatron morphs. Although Prince Jake objected to the morphing of sentient creatures, this was one of the cases in which he made an exception to that rule.

I walked up to the vault holding the generator and typed the stolen code into the keypad. The vault opened, revealing... nothing. It was empty.

Then the lights went out.

((Idobelieve 'Itoldyouso's' arenowinorder,)) Marco growled. As much as a Garatron is capable of growling, at any rate.

A voice came over the intercom, "Ah, yes, the Animorphs. I thought I would be seeing you today. Now, according to my schedule, it is time for you to surrender. And I tend to get very upset when I am forced to deviate from my schedule" The voice belonged to the Visser's underling, Salheer 671, the onetime Emperor of the Yeerk Empire.

((As if!)) Melissa snorted. She sounded honestly offended by the suggestion of surrender.. ((Come and get me! I'll tear all of your heads off!))

((Ax!)) Prince Jake demanded, ((What's the best way out of here?))

((Assuming the blueprints of the rooms are accurate for the layout, then going up the tunnel in a truck would be best. The Pool is too heavily guarded, and the warehouse will be too. The only chance is to hope that a powerful truck can ram us through.))

((Go to the hallway on the right,)) Jake ordered everybody. I saw no troops in that hallway. Hopefully, the enemy had left it open. But that was not likely. Salheer was too intelligent for that. My gut screamed at me that the Yeerks could not have made such a mistake, but I was more focused on escaping than on listening to gut feelings.

We ran through the fake laboratory and found ourselves in the largest chamber of the honeycomb complex. This one was not whitewashed, but was instead bare rock and construction debris. There was no way out except for two hallways, both of which were crawling with Kelbrid. The situation was bleak.

((Do you have a plan, Jake?)) Jeanne prodded. I could hear some despair in her voice.

Prince Jake hung his head as the realization hit him of what he must do. ((Ax and I will hold them off for as long as possible while you three morph to cockroach and escape through the construction debris. There must be a way through to the surface.))

((It would take too long,)) Marco pointed out, ((We'd be trapped in morph.))

The Kelbrid were advancing on us step by step, but they weren't outright attacking. We backed up to the wall step by step, surrounded. It was very un-Kelbrid-like behavior, and that only made me more worried.

((You guys can retreat if you want too, I'm making my stand,)) Melissa said, determined.

((I think we would all rather die than be roach nothlits,)) Jeanne agreed grimly.

((Salheer! You will stand down now,)) a malicious voice called from the back of the crowd. It was a voice I knew all too well, one that often lurked in the shadows of my sleep. ((Kelbrid, return to your posts. I have a new toy for my old friends to play with.)) Everybody stopped. The Visser had arrived. The crowd of Kelbrid parted and fell back, most returning to whatever posts they had been guarding. A few remained in the hallways, though, to make sure we did not attempt to flee.

Next to the Visser was a much larger figure. A Hork-bajir who should not have been that tall. And one who should not have been on this side of the country. Guraff 427. I had fought him, once. It was a very short battle, and one that ended poorly for me. It was not an experience I intended to repeat, though there was little choice in the matter.

With the Visser and Guraff there were two other hosts which I did not recognize, walking on the ceiling above them. Whatever they were, they weren't there as decorations. Their 'head,' was actually a foot long triangular blade like the ones that human hunters use. On each blade was a black, soulless eye. I had no doubt that they had mouths somewhere on their bodies, but I could not see from my vantage point. Moving gravitationally up, it had a foot of slender neck covered in golden scales. The scales gave way to blue and black quills. After several more feet of neck came the muscular shoulders and arms of the creature. The arms ended in vicious four fingered claws, one of which was particularly long and covered by small hooks, a very deadly weapon. As with their necks, the final foot of their arms were golden-scaled rather than quilled. They had golden lines running all along their body, as if they may have been tattooed. They stood on two strong legs, bent at the knee, with each with a dome shaped foot at the end. The feet must have had some kind of suction cup that allowed them to stick to the ceiling the way they were.

These must have been the Apostates Tobias had mentioned. Silently, I hoped that his description of their abilities was exaggerated.

((My friend Aximili, it is good to see you,)) the Visser was mocking me, ((Imrahil has such fascinating tales of your time at the Academy together. Like the time the two of you were intoxicated on Illsifar root and harassed the headmaster's daughter. You said that the only possible career path would be that of selling her services as an exotic dancer. Of course, you made Imrahil take the fall for that one, didn't you my honorable Prince?))

I stared at him in stony cold silence, ((Still no plan my Prince?)) I thought privately.

((Nothing except for a last stand. We'll try to wedge our way through these people and at least try to take out the Visser before we go down. Melissa, if it's at all possible, I want you to escape.

Someone needs to tell Tobias and the others what happened down here.)) Choosing Melissa as the messenger was perhaps a selfish choice on Prince Jake's part, but it was not one that any of us would hold against him.

The Visser started to monologue again. He is rather fond of that, a fact that drove me nearly insane when I was his host. ((These are the Ssri'Kai, one of only three races that managed to fend off a Kelbrid invasion when they ruled their sector of the galaxy. Now they have been trained to be my most fearsome weapon: the Apostates. They are personally trained by Guraff to be the finest warriors. They are taught by Salheer to be the most intelligent of my servants. They are indoctrinated by Kalroth and are utterly loyal to me. They fight only to the death, no matter the odds.

"Even without this training, they would be nearly unbeatable opponents. You see, their organs are made to shift when impacted. They cannot be traumatized into submission. When you have one on you, there is no escape. You cannot break its grip. Their heads, when propelled fast enough, can spear through layers of bone and remain intact. And their necks are more than capable of providing said propulsion. My Apostates are, in short, invincible. I do believe that these are your last moments in the universe, old friends. Any final words? And remember, screaming doesn't count.))

A bolt of defiance struck me. ((Just this.)) I placed my tailblade under my breathing slits. An upset human once extended his middle finger to me. I have been told this is very rude. What I did would be the Andalite equivalent.

CHAPTER 14

The Visser just laughed, ((Apostates: attack. Meet resistance with no quarter. Only take prisoners if the target has been neutralized as a threat.))

((Charge!)) Prince Jake's tiger leaped forward to attack the Visser, all of us just a few steps behind. Immediately one of the Ssri'Kai launched itself at Prince Jake. It missed spearing him by mere millimeters, its head sinking into the floor. Such power! It would not be finished so easily, though. The Apostate tore its head from the floor without difficulty and latched one suction-cup foot onto Prince Jake's hind leg. Prince Jake turned and sank his teeth into the Apostate's neck, but the monster did not even seem to feel it.

The Ssri'Kai struck at him with its claws, though Prince Jake managed to dodge the worst of it. Barbed hooks tore bloody gashes along his flanks, but none of them hit anything vital. Prince Jake threw his full seven-hundred pound weight at the Ssri'kai, but the Apostate wasn't even phased. It was a mistake, it seemed. Prince Jake suddenly found a great number of quills in his flesh.

((This is insane,)) Marco muttered as he, Jeanne, and Melissa flew to join their leader. Guraff was moving to intercept them, as was a second Ssri'Kai. I sped full gallop at the fight and remembered what our mission now was. I leapt over the entire pile and landed on the far side, face to face with the most accurate personification of evil the galaxy has ever known.

((I have the sneaking suspicion that Imrahil will enjoy this just as much as I will, Aximili,)) the Visser swiped at my face and I blocked, throwing his blade to the ground. He took a swipe at my front legs which I hopped over. I brought my blade down to split his stalk eyes, but he intercepted that as well. I turned a stalk eye back to see the other fight. There was no doubt about it, we were losing.

The Ssri'Kai were all over us, literally. Jake was down and unmoving. His eyes were still focusing, so he must have been conscious. But he was not demorphing. He would rather bleed to death than be taken prisoner. Marco was circling the Ssri'Kai he had been fighting, lashing occasionally with his tail. The Ssri'Kai was making no move to attack him. In fact, its eyes were not even open. Apparently, the Apostate realized that would be a weak point for Marco to strike. Rather shockingly, it seems its eyelids were also scaled, protecting it from attack. They were in something of a stalemate. Jeanne was circling a second Apostate, in the same predicament.

Melissa was far worse off. The Apostates were good; Guraff was even better. He had, apparently, eschewed his sword for this fight and was instead fighting her with his host's blades. However, Guraff did not seem to be taking the fight seriously. Had he been, Melissa would already have been dead. Instead, he was avoiding killing blows, seeking to bleed her out until she could be captured.

For her every move, Guraff matched and exceeded her. She lunged at him and he responded by slicing one of her legs with a knee blade. One of her paws as a bloody stump, and all of her legs were bleeding badly. There were numerous gashes on her face, and I believe I could see her skull through two separate wounds. I was watching as she leapt at him, hoping to at least get her jaws into his throat before she collapsed. But Guraff simply lowered his head and ran beneath her, his hornblades slicing her stomach.

I redoubled my efforts against the Visser. I had to kill him before the Apostates could aid him against me. I struck, and he deflected my tail into the bedrock wall. I yanked, and it would not come out.

((What is it that the humans say when they win that game of theirs? Oh, yes; checkmate, Aximili,)) He raised his tail and brought it down. I stepped back behind the blow. While the Visser gathered himself for another strike, I ran forward, lowered my upper body, and jumped with my hind legs to put a massive head-butt straight to the Visser's forehead. I believe I sprained both stalk eyes, but it was worth it; The Visser stumbled back, striking his head on some debris. He fell, sprawled out, onto the floor, unconscious.

I looked around. Melissa was now a bleeding heap on the floor and already Guraff was coming towards me. One of the apostates tore a handful of quills from his chest and tossed them into the air. Marco ran into them before he could help himself. Immediately, he started screaming in pain. Calmly, professionally even, the Ssri'Kai speared him with it's head. Marco's pain did not entirely blind him, and he managed to move just enough. The Apostate speared his rump instead.

The Ssri'Kai Jeanne was circling was standing calmly. It seemed to be waiting. And then, faster than even my eyes could follow, it lunged its head forwards. Perhaps it was luck or perhaps the Apostates truly are that skilled, but his head speared through Jeanne's torso. Even as she fell to

the ground, the Ssri'Kai sliced his hook into her and began dragging her towards the rest of my friends.

The battle had gone on for less than two minutes. They hadn't lost a single soldier, and I was not sure that any of them but the Visser were even wounded. Guraff was approaching me and my tail was still in the wall.

Guraff ordered the Ssri'Kai to halt, "I will take him prisoner. There is no need for further bloodshed. He is of more use as a host than as a corpse." With that, he drew his handheld Dracon, set it to stun, and aimed it at me.

That moment I knew would be my last memory as a free Andalite, most likely forever. Being scientists, we Andalites make use of a secular system of education and a secular lifestyle. Right then, I was no secularist of any form. I prayed. I prayed hard. I hoped the Ellimist could hear me. Or the Crayak. Or even God as the humans know.

RATATATATATATAT.

RATATATATATATATAT.

RATATATATATATATATAT.

A thundering noise echoed through the whole cavern. Bullets ripped through the Apostate ranks. Guraff grabbed the Visser and moved back into one of the fake laboratories, Kelbrid baring me from following. Not that I had any intention of doing that. The Apostates moved to follow. One of them made it into the tunnel. The other did Ssri'Kai slowed and then fell. It was bleeding from more places than I had the leisure to count and it was not moving at all. Whoever was doing the shooting did not stop until they were sure the Ssri'Kai was dead. Then they turned the gun on the Kelbrid.

Guraff reappeared in the hallway, taking cover behind a lab table he had thought to drag over. With the collected air of a veteran soldier, he began to fire at the source of the tracer rounds. Whatever it was either moved out of the way or had adequate cover because it kept shooting at Guraff.

I finally yanked my tail out of the wall, spraining it in the process. Behind Guraff, I could see Salhher and the remaining Apostate. The Ssri'Kai-Controller was cradling Imrahil, apparently prepared to carry him away. "Go," I heard Guraff call to Salheer. "The Kelbrid and I shall finish this. Esplin will be very upset if he loses Two apostates in one battle." Salheer gave no nod or response other than to turn and walk away calmly, the Ssri'Kai and unconscious Visser right behind him.

Then something odd happened. Again, I cannot say if it was extraordinary skill, blind luck, or some combination thereof, but one of the assailant's bullets struck Guraff's Dracon beam. The Hork-bajir-Controller looked at it for a moment. I could hear a high-pitched whine emanating from the weapon. "Unfortunate," Guraff muttered. Then he hurled the weapon at us. To my surprise, it exploded, collapsing the front of hallway in which Guraff had been sheltering.

The shooting stopped. I saw the assailant for the first time. It was a young Hork-Bajir with an American M240 medium machine gun, a Shredder strapped to one leg, a revolver of some sort strapped to the other, some sort of sword sheathed on his back, a small axe dangling from his belt, gear netting on his body, and infrared goggles over his eyes. I believe the expression is 'armed to the teeth'. If the logo on his goggles was at all valid, he was a Tri-I Operative. That meant his body was almost certainly a morph. He ran to the hallways. "You guys demorph, I'll cover the entrance.

Everybody but Melissa was demorphing. I did not see her chest rising and falling with breath. Rather rudely I'll admit, I snatched the Shredder from the stranger's leg. I set it to the desired setting and shot her. Due to the possibility of one's heart stopping, all Shredders were built with a setting very similar to that of a human defibrillator; it is usually sufficient.

Her body convulsed, but she did not start breathing. Prince Jake knelt down beside her, "C'mon pull through," I increased the power just slightly and shot again. She convulsed and rolled over.

((Demorph!)) I yelled.

((... uh, what?...))
((Demorph!))

"Demorph!" Everybody was yelling now.

((Oh yeah.... But... I was so close...))

Slowly her human form began to take shape. She sped up as she regained more and more of her body. Three minutes later, she was lying on the ground panting. Prince Jake picked her up off the ground and gave her a strong hug. She hugged him back. There were tears in both their eyes, "We thought we lost you. Thanks, Ax."

((I am always happy to help.))

"As touching as this is, sirs, we need to be going," the stranger called. All the while, he had been laying down suppressing fire to make sure the Kelbrid did not attack us. They were holding back, though. Most likely, Guraff had ordered them to wait. He would want to know who was responsible for this.

"Everybody remorph. We have to get out of here, sirs," the Operative insisted.

"I'm with psycho killer guy. There's little good we can do here," Marco said as he began to resume his Garatron shape. The rest of us also began returning to battle morphs, with the exception of myself. "We have no idea with what's going on here, and we don't know where our objectives are. Now all we can do is save ourselves."

((We can't retreat now,)) Prince Jake said as his body became more tiger than man. ((I know it's bad, but we need to find out where the force field generator is. Imagine if those Apostates were completely bullet proof too! We are here now. With the nature of war, there's no guarantee that

we'll ever be this close to Yeerk computers again. We're only here now because they let us get here. We need to get to them and find out where it is. Now's the time.))

((Jake's right,)) Melissa added, ((Initial surprise is lost, but we are alive when we shouldn't be. We can surprise them again and take what we need. Plus, we have a secret escape route. We can get out the way this guy got in.))

((Guraffwillreturnsoon,)) Jeanne said, (('sgreatestmilitaryelite. We needtoleave.))

((Ax, what do you have to say?)) My Prince asked of me.

((Operative, what kinds of shaped charges do you have on your person?))

((?)) Marco doubted. He did not see the possibilities that I saw. I am sure, though, that if he had his full memory, he would have understood what I had in mind.

"I have a few on me. I always have some just in case during a potential combat op. Standard equipment for something like this." the Operative told me.

((I memorized the maps that we stole from the Yeerks, the military, and the Operative. I know where the tunnels are that haven't been excavated yet. We can drop into one of these tunnels, seal the hole with a Dracon beam, blow a hole in the ceiling of the tunnel where it meets the most probable location of the Yeerk security center, and then I can hack the computers to get us the information we need.))

"That would work, sir. I can do that."

((,)) Marco admitted, ((,))

((Wecandothat,)) Jeanne said, ((Surpriseiskeyandwewillhaveit. . .))

((Then we must move quickly.)) Prince Jake said, ((Operative, take point,)).

"Yes sir."

((Why him?)) Melissa asked. She sounded slightly upset.

Prince Jake turned his tiger's eyes on her. ((Because he's the one with the gun.))

CHAPTER 15

((Ax? Lead the way,)) Prince Jake ordered, ((Operative? Please loan Ax your infrareds. He needs to see where we're going so we can put the explosives in the right place. Everyone hold on to the tail of the person in front of you.))

"Yes sir."

The operative handed me his goggles as we walked through the hallways of the 'labs' in darkness. If it weren't for the infrared goggles, nothing would be visible. ((Operative,)) I asked, ((What are you doing here?))

((And while we're at it, you got a name?)) Marco added.

The Operative switched to thought speak, probably to avoid being heard by enemy soldiers in the darkness. ((Operative Carl Yastrzemski. I'm investigating the attack on the local Tri-I station. We had a suspicion that there might be activity underground in the old Pool complex. We used ground penetrating radar to see what was underground, and then I was sent to investigate a part that was not filled in with rubble, and I found you here.))

((Turn right here everyone,)) I announced. We walked thirty more feet and I made an X with my tail where I wanted the explosives placed, ((Operative, you may place your explosives here.))

((Okay sirs, step back.))

((Hey,)) Marco said privately, ((he's calling me Sir. Jake can we keep him?)) Naturally, we ignored that.

I handed Carl's infrared goggles back so that he could see what he was doing as he planted the explosives. I heard him place several objects on the ground. Then there was the muffled WHUMPF! of an explosion. ((It's safe to jump down, sir. I don't see any jagged points. You guys head down and I'll cover for you.))

We each jumped down the hole in turn, joined shortly by the Operative himself. He picked up a slab of rock and used his Shredder to weld it to the hole. ((We shouldn't be followed now, but I'll deploy a claymore just in case.)) We passed him as he placed the deadly mine on the ground. It believe the appropriate term to describe our situation would be spooky. If it weren't for his infrared goggles, we would have been totally lost.

((Operative,)) I informed him, ((Continue down this tunnel for fifty more yards and we will be directly under the room I believe to be the Command Center.))

Soon, we arrived at our destination. The Operative again placed several explosives on the ceiling and we all took several steps back.

((Operative, you're with me,)) Jake ordered, ((Jeanne and Marco are together as a team. Melissa, you cover Ax. Got it? Good. Blow the hatch, Operative.))

((Yes sir.)) The ceiling suddenly had a large hole and light streamed through. The Operative leapt through the hole with a battle cry, machine gun adding to the cacophony. Prince Jake leapt up right behind with a mighty tiger's roar. Marco and Jeanne went up, and then Melissa and I went over the top.

I leapt up through the hole where a scene of carnage greeted my eyes. Beings were slumped over consoles and lying wounded on the ground everywhere. One unfortunate soul had been standing directly above the hole we blasted and was now lying around it in three pieces.

I rushed to a console. Melissa grabbed the corpse of the human that was on it by the ankle and dragged it off so that the console could be used. I worked, looking at the console with my one main eye while my stalk eyes looked over the battle.

Salheer was running away from the Operative, a failing venture. The Operative grabbed Salheer by the arm and twisted it around until it broke twice. Salheer screamed in pain, but the Operative was relentless. He filleted off Salheer's calf muscle with his knee blades. Salheer fell over in agony. The Operative ran to engage the next threat, making sure to kick the Yeerk in the stomach first. There was a lot of blood pooling from the Subvisser's body, and he wasn't moving. A bit of some organ trialed from the Operative's talon. Carl may have managed to rid us of one of our greatest threats. Salheer appeared to be dead.

My fingers flew on the console controls, but the security measures were much better than they were during the First War. I was hitting dead end after dead end. I was growing frustrated, and the sounds of the battle were not helping any.

Fortunately, they were moving away. Marco and Jeanne were chasing the last of the humans out of the security center, whipping them with their Garatron tails. Jake was gnawing on the neck of a Kelbrid guard. The Operative had his tail in the heart of one Kelbrid and had shoved the barrel of his M240 through another. He yanked it out. For the sake of the younger generations what he said is edited as: ((What the flip mother trucker! It melted!)) He threw it on the ground, drawing his Japanese-looking sword and the largest revolver I have ever seen.

The fighting stopped. We were alone in the security center. ((Ax, how much longer?)) Prince Jake asked, ((We have to get out of here before Guraff counter attacks.))

((The security measures are much better than they were during the first war,)) I responded, ((I... I need Alloran's help again.)) I was almost ashamed of myself. These weren't Andalite codes I was attempting to crack, they were Yeerk with some Pythagi modifications. The Visser was no idiot. He was determined to not lose another war to us, and he was going to eliminate all of our previous advantages as best he could, including the hacking we had used against him.

((I'm going to hack into the communications systems only enough to send a transmission to Alloran. Once a connection is made, he should be able to gather the information himself.))

"Well, you best hurry up with that, Prince Aximili," the Operative pointed out, "If Guraff was that big Hork, then I see him approaching with ten hostiles. This really isn't going to be pretty."

My fingers flew on the console once more. As I had suspected, the codes for using the communications systems weren't hard at all to crack. They were not vital to security, so they were not as well protected. I called the apartment where Alloran resided. Rachel answered the phone, "Hey Ax, what's going on?"

((I need Alloran immediately. The situation is critical. Guraff is approaching our position with ten Kelbrid warriors.))

Her face went pale, "I'm sorry Ax, he's at school. It would take at least ten minutes to get him over here where he can help you out. What is Guraff doing there?"

((I am afraid I do not have the leisure to speculate.))

"You'll have to cut your way out of there while you can. Good luck. Say hi to Guraff for me if you have the chance."

I terminated the connection. There was no time to waste on formalities. What could I do? The information was critical. If we failed to gather it, the Yeerks would become nearly unstoppable. It would take me at least two hours to hack through the security measures, and by that time we would be cut to pieces.

Cut to pieces.

That was the answer!

I ran as fast as I could to the computer, ((Prince Jake! You must hold off the enemy. I will use my tail to cut the memory core out of the computer. Then we will escape with it.))

CHAPTER 16

The pistol fire was massively loud in the cavern of the security center. The Operative had emptied two cylinders already and was working on his third, ((Damn, those things are hard to kill, only four of them have gone down.))

The two lines made contact as I ran to the computer core of the base. The battle was raging on around me as I did my work to cut out the memory core. As my tailblade ran through plastic and metal, my stalk eyes swiveled around to see if there were any threats coming my way.

I caught sight of one Kelbrid running at me. I stabbed him in the snout with my tail blade and severed his sensory whiskers. Melissa bit out its throat to make sure it did not come after us again. Another came charging out of the crowd and I caught him in the leg with a backswing. Once it was down, I put my tail into the computer while Melissa clawed it to death.

I turned my eyes to the big fight going on at the entrance of the security room. Prince Jake was engaged with two Kelbrid, a particularly dangerous task to take. ((Melissa, I can defend myself. Prince Jake needs help.))

She did not bother to respond. She just rushed to help Prince Jake.

Marco and Jeanne were running around everywhere, whipping their tails into their two Kelbrid in a game of tag-and-get-killed, trying to whip the Kelbrid while at the same time evading the deadly stingers. But then my eye caught site of the Operative, and would not be drawn away.

The Operative, a human Soldier of Fortune, was fighting the Yeerks most lethal warrior, Guraff 427. For this close-quarters combat, the Operative had thrown down his revolver and replaced it with his sword and a throwing axe. Guraff was more than happy to meet this daring combatant with his own Kelbrid stinger and deadly blades.

They met each other. Guraff swung the stinger at the Operative's head. He ducked and caught the blade with his hornblades and twisted his head to make it stuck. He struck with his sword, but Guraff blocked that with his kneeblades. Guraff yanked out the stinger and stepped back a step. I was amazed. Usually Guraff would just run over somebody. He did that to me, once. Carl must have been one of Tri-I's best men, to stand up to him so.

They sized each other up for just a split second and charged each other again. The Operative threw his axe straight at Guraff's chest, but Guraff parried with his stinger. While Guraff parried, Carl brought in his sword straight for the gut. Guraff punched with his left fist, parrying the thrust. Guraff then brought up his kneeblades to gut Carl, but Carl kicked Guraff's leg aside, leaving him to prop himself up by his tail. Guraff slashed again with his stinger, but Carl parried with his sword. Carl stepped in, trying to land a punch to face, but Guraff jerked his head to the side. They were entangled with each other, now. If they hadn't been trying to kill each other, it might look as if they were hugging.

I thought perhaps I could distract Guraff and give Carl a bit of an edge. ((Guraff? Rachel sends her greetings.))

Guraff did not seem in the least bit distracted, though he replied. "That is courteous of her. Tell her and the Devil Prince that I am sorry to have missed our most recent engagement. And compliment him and Aristh Alloran on their victory over Kalroth's Apostates. It is no simple feat."

Then they both stopped. I could just barely hear them over the sounds of the fight. Guraff asked, "What is your name, my worthy adversary?"

"Operative Carl Yastrzemski. They call me the fighting Polack," was the Operative's response.

"Mine is Undervisser Guraff 427. I have been called the God General."

"Nice to make your acquaintance, God General."

And they continued with the contest. They disengaged again, and charged again. But instead of going straight in, Carl sidestepped a little and threw another ax, which buried itself in Guraff's head. Ever the professional soldier, Guraff just stepped back, pulled it out, and returned the favor. Carl pulled it out of his own head and held it in his hand as he charged.

I redirected my attention from the fighting to my work. By looking at the computer core, I could tell that it was out of date when the First War ended. I recognized the type because I had been trained in its use at the Academy, so I knew exactly what part I wanted. I suppose that the Yeerks had been using it because of a lack of supplies. Or perhaps this had been built by Mersa, or before the Yeerks had access to Pythagi technology. Pythagi communiqés would be easier to come by than materials that had to be physically moved from place to place, like software and intelligence.

Once I had removed the piece of the computer I wanted, I went one step further. I activated the code to initiate the computer's manual self-destruct. There was no magnificent explosion, just a sizzling sound as the computer destroyed all of its valuable and classified parts. As soon as the computer was fried, I ran back to help my friends. My eye watched as Guraff and Carl, both cut to pieces, disengaged for the last time.

Guraff saw that there were only two Kelbrid left fighting. He couldn't win this one. Not wounded as he was, at least. "Pull back, my soldiers. They have come and got what they wanted. To die now would be a waste." Then he turned to Carl and raised his sword, "I salute you Carl the Fighting Polack. You are one of the few who can be called my worthy foe."

Carl raised his own blade in salute, "I salute you Guraff the God General. You are one of the few targets of mine that survived my onslaught."

All forces had disengaged by now. It was time to get out. The Omegamorphs, Carl and I leapt into the hole and melted away into the darkness.

CHAPTER 17

Everyone demorphed to repair their wounds. Fortunately, because the others had been busy protecting me, I was not wounded. A rare occurrence in any Animorphs mission. We stumbled over the strewn rubble of the hallway with the Operative leading the way so he could defuse the claymore he had left.

We walked along silent in the darkness, ((Operative Yahtzee, where is the entrance that you made?))

The Tri-I Operative turned the Claymore around to point behind us in case we were followed, ((I made a tunnel through the main debris pit to get down here. It is located on the north side of the cavern where I found you but close to the wall where the hallways are, sir.))

((Prince Jake, with your permission, I will lead the group to a place where we can blast through again and escape through the Operative's tunnel.))

"Go for it Ax. You know the complex better than I do," he said to me. To the others he said, "When we get there, we'll morph to bat and go through the tunnel. That's the quickest way to the top."

"Jake?" Melissa spoke up, "I don't have a bat morph."

"Neither do I," Carl added. "Morph to panther and I'll morph to Hork. I'll cover you and carry the memory core."

I handed him the six by six cube and he stuck it in his web gear.

We reached the point where the tunnel went under the cavern where we had fought the Apostates. By this time we had the drill down pat. We all morphed as the Operative planted the last of his shaped charges. The blast blew a small hole in the ceiling and Marco, Prince Jake, Jeanne, and I flew through the dust cloud. We used our echolocation to locate the hole that the Operative had told us of and flew up.

The tunnel was pitch black, but that did not matter at all to us. We sailed through with no danger of colliding into the walls. Jagged cement was all around us. If we touched the walls, our fragile bat bodies would have been ripped to shreds. Prince Jake shot through the tunnel into the work area, then Marco, then Jeanne, and I came up last. We could see the underside of the Triumph. I shot another burst of echolocation, ((That is strange, there is nobody working the fill.))

There were many walkways above the rubble, all suspended by iron rods attached to the ceiling. They supported the cranes that worked moving the debris around ensuring that they would fit in as much as possible. There were some roadways of crushed concrete for the bulldozers and dump trucks that would deposit the debris in the hole. All of the roadways led to the large cargo shaft, where trucks from above would dump their debris to be picked up by the dozers and dump trucks. There were several escape ladders that led to surface. They were well placed, it was impossible to stand more than 100 meters from a stairway if one was on either a walkway or a road. None of the dozers were moving, nor any of the cranes, though I could hear their engines working.

((Yeah, did they take a coffee break or something?)) Marco asked.

((This is a twenty-four hour operation,)) Prince Jake pointed out, ((They would not have abandoned it unless there was an emergency.))

((I don't smell smoke or anything,)) Jeanne said worriedly.

((Ax? Would you like to volunteer to investigate?))

((Yes, my Prince,))

((Don't call me 'Prince,')

((Yes, my Prince,)) I flew off in the direction the cranes and bulldozers. I shot off bursts of echolocation, but I never did locate any humans. I shot a burst to the top of a ladder, and then to the top of three more ladders. The result was the same, all of the escape doors were open and I could hear faint noises from above them.

((Prince Jake,)) I yelled down, ((I believe that all of the humans have evacuated. All of the escape doors are open, and I have yet to detect a human.))

((Ax, head up the ladders. Go see what's topside.))

((Yes my Prince.))

I flew up to one of the doors. The noises were getting louder. There was a lot of banging, smacking, crushing, and yelling at the top. I was perplexed. I flew through the door into the daylight. I gazed at the scene in horror. There was a riot of people desecrating the Triumph! I watched as people with ropes tore down statues of Prince Elfangor, Captain Nerefir, Dak Hammee, and other non humans. Then I saw the banners they carried and understood; they were members of the Isolationist Party. Despite the blow that the Alphamorphs had recently dealt them, it was not a dead idea. Nothing is a dead idea when there are a few die-hard humans behind it.

I flew back down the hole and met with my Prince and the others who had demorphed on a walkway by this time, ((There is a violent human demonstration occurring above us at the moment. They are being led by the Isolationist Party. They are destroying all of statues of aliens that contributed to the defeat of the Yeerks.))

Prince Jake was just as confused as I was, "Why would they be doing that?" Nobody had any answers.

Operative Yahtzee and Melissa appeared at the entrance of their tunnel far below the walkway. They walked up one of the roads to the cargo shaft as they demorphed. The Operative demorphed into a set of Marine Corps Dress Blues. I demorphed flew over and demorphed while Prince Jake, Jeanne, and Marco walked to meet them.

"Where is everybody?" the Operative asked.

"Evacuated Mr. Yahtzee," Marco answered, "There's a riot going on above us up on the Triumph."

The Operative understood exactly what was going on, "I had a van up here waiting for me, sirs. The Yeerks must have something to do with this. They would not want a Tri-I Operative to report back to HQ after seeing what I've seen."

I realized now why Guraff had just let us go. It did not seem like him in the least. Even with all of us standing before him, and with his own wounds, he was not the type to simply walk away. He could have called for reinforcements or weapons. Now I understood why he did not fight to the death below. It was because he did not have to. Even if we fled, we were trapped.

"Then why don't they have people come down here and attack us?" Melissa pointed out, "They could do that easy while we were coming up. And they would have perfect cover to do it too, with a riot going on."

"They would send in only their own people, most likely," the Operative said, "Which might not be too good if the police make their sweep while the Controllers are busy down here trying to kill

us. They'd be trapped, arrested, and sent to jail where they do not serve Kandrona in the chow hall. They must have something waiting for us for when we come up. But first, they must have something to smoke us out to make sure the plan works. And if it doesn't, their new hosts will be following us up the tunnel before long."

Canisters suddenly tumbled through the doorways and the cargo shaft with echoing clanking. They were emitting a white smoke. Tear gas.

"There we go, the police are responding, so Yeerks pick up and throw the tear gas canisters down the holes," The Operative stopped for a few seconds to attach his gas mask, "The non Controllers see it and do the same, simple monkey-see monkey-do. Well, let's get going. For your own good, sir, I'll be the first to stick my head out."

I morphed human as we ran up the stairs. It would not be good for an Andalite to appear in the middle of an Isolationist riot. The gas swirled around my mutating feet, but some managed to enter my nose and newly formed mouth. I spun around and threw up over the railing so forcefully I nearly fell over the edge. Marco caught me just in time, "Thanks."

"No problem Ax. I just don't think it's a good idea to go base jumping without a parachute." It seemed like a long time with the gases making us all hack and cough, but we eventually made it to the top. True to his word, Operative Yahtzee stuck his head out first. He scanned the violence of the Triumph. Evidently, he did not detect any threats directed specifically at us. He pulled his head back in, "I don't see anything out of the ordinary for a riot. We're just going to have to make a break for it, I guess. Where do you want to go, sirs?"

((We operate from Rachel's mother's house,)) I informed him through thought speak because I couldn't talk with my mouth, ((That is where we intend to go.))

"Okay then sirs, we'll run out, I'll commandeer a vehicle and then we can all head to your base. I'm going first. Ready?"

I was choking on the tear gas fumes. I didn't know if I could even walk straight, but I was surely ready to leave.

Operative Yahtzee ran out the door into the riot, followed closely by the rest of us. We weren't bothered by the rioters, because we were humans. Then I heard the crack of high powered rifles. The yelling and jeering suddenly turned to screaming as the whole crowd ran for their lives through the maze of toppled statues and burning cars.

"Snipers on the rooftops!" the Operative yelled, "I see one." He took aim with his Shredder and fired at something in the distance. A body fell two stories off of a strip mall. Then Carl spun and hurled an ax through a doorway. I heard something fall on the other side.

The shooting didn't stop. Where were they? I ran as fast as I could. That happened to be very fast. When I did some research later, I learned that the human body can accelerate faster than a horse when in a survival situation.

A bullet ripped through my pelvis. I fell as if I never had legs to stand on. There was nothing I could do, "Help!" I called weakly. Strength had abandoned my voice. I heard another bullet ricochet off the pavement near my head.

"I got him!" the Operative came back, slung me over his shoulders, and carried me as if I did not exist. That is how much my weight affected him. Another bullet grazed his back just below my position on his shoulders. I saw the Operative's face grimace with pain, but he kept going.

"This van!" The Operative indicated a white business van with his head. It was the only vehicle that hadn't been torched by the rioters. He opened up the back door and threw me in. Everybody else jumped in the side doors. Jeanne found the keys were still in the ignition and hopped into the driver's seat. She didn't even wait for the doors to be completely closed, Jeanne floored the van and we were on our way home.

Prince Jake was bleeding profusely from an arm wound. I demorphed to heal my own. The shooting stopped. The snipers must have been making their escape before the police forces swept their positions.

I took the core out of the Operative's web gear and held it in front of my face, ((This had better be worth it.))

CHAPTER 18

We were finally home. I knew that Alloran would need access to the computer core, so I hooked it up to the wall phone. When a connection was made to Tobias' home, Alloran would have free reign to hack it. I dialed Tobias' number. Alloran answered the videophone. ((Good to see you, Alloran.))

((Good to see you as well, Prince Aximili. Do you have something for me to work with?))

((Yes. I managed to steal the memory core of the Pool Complex computer. It is connected to the videophone, so you should be able to hack into it now.))

((I have it. Stand by.))

I could hear a conversation floating up the nearby stairway. Marco, Jeanne, Jake, Melissa, and Carl were all enjoying some beer at Jacques' basement bar. I am told that alcohol is a depressant that helps to take the edge off such stressful times. ((Alloran, when you have the information, you may terminate the connection. I will be socializing. Thank you for your assistance.))

((I am always happy to assist you in your endeavors, my Prince.)) The screen went blank. He didn't need a video feed in order to hack the memory core.

I walked over to the little Omegamorph gathering. They were at Jacque's basement bar. ((Where did Carl go?)) I asked.

"He went to pray in Jacque's garden. Something about the Prayer of St. Michael," Marco said, "Evidently, he's very religious."

"That's cool," Melissa said, "But we still have to do something about him." We all looked at Prince Jake.

((For now, I'll keep an eye on him. He should be kept from knowing any more to minimize the possible damage.)) I walked up the stairwell and out the door just to the right. From there, I could monitor Carl in the garden and listen to the conversation in the basement too. I heard him saying, "Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle..."

"He saved all our lives. Every one of us. Several times over. What can I do?" Prince Jake paused and considered, "The way I figure it, he found out all by himself. We gave him no hints. Neither did the Yeerks. The agreement was if one group or the other actively revealed what was happening. That didn't happen. The treaty is intact."

"Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the Devil. May God rebuke him we humbly pray..."

((Are you sure, Prince Jake?)) I asked.

"That works for me," Jeanne said, "Unless something proves Jake wrong, I couldn't lay my hand on that man in a million years."

"The universe spontaneously combusting might be your only warning," Melissa said, "But I can't touch him either. Cold blooded murder on a man that did so much for us. I don't know if I could live with it.

"And do Thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the Power of God ..."

"I don't remember enough to make a decision," Marco said, "I can't do anything to him either. I guess it's a risk we'll have to take."

((It is such a big gamble,)) I pointed out.

"It is," Prince Jake said heavily, "It is."

"cast into Hell Satan, and all the Evil spirits, that prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen"

Jacques came down the stairway to the bar, "Hey, you guys know who that is in my garden?"

"It's a Tri-I Operative named Carl Yastrzemski. Or Yahtzee as Marco likes to say," Jeanne answered.

"Really? Sergeant Carl? What's he doing here?"

"He bailed us out of the Yeerk Pool," Prince Jake informed him, "He managed to get us all out alive."

"That's not too surprising. He's one of the most dangerous men in Tri-I. He's a member of the EPIC, Elite Protection and Infiltration Commandos, and he has top scores for their ranks."

Carl came in and walked down the stairs. I followed him.

"Hey Jacques. What's going on?"

"Not much, Sergeant. Big business as usual. When Tri-I needs something, I help out. Mostly, I've been trying to recoup losses after the economic meltdown. How have you been, Sergeant?"

"I've had a little excitement. I've been investigating a terrorist attack at the local Tri-I installation. Ended up running into these guys down in the old Yeerk Pool and ran into the legendary Undervisser. He's a pretty cool dude. I didn't manage to kill him, which is saying something." The operative leaned on the bar counter, "Jacques? Would you happen to have any Sobieski wine?"

"Got it right here."

"Thanks."

Curiosity got the better of me, ((What was that ritual you performed in the garden?)) It was strange for me to ask. I had never had a particular curiosity about human religion. But religious leanings in a man such as Carl intrigued me.

"That was the Prayer to Saint Michael. He's the patron Saint of pretty much anyone who may go into danger on a regular basis. Soldiers, firemen, police, we pray to him so that he can pray to God for us. The Archangel's words carry more weight to the Lord than our own."

((We Andalites don't have a God as you humans know. We concentrate on taking care of nature, so that the grass can continue to grow and nurture us. And we live by something similar to the human golden rule, treat everybody as if they were a member of your own herd.))

Marco nodded, "From what I know, the interests of humanity pretty much hijacked my life. That's not a bad philosophy, Ax." Everybody nodded agreement.

"Yeah, that's good," Carl said, "Everybody ought to have a Golden Rule. Personally, I like a more thought out philosophy. Ever watch the movie Dragonheart?"

Jeanne rolled her eyes, "Only too many times when we went on our vacation together a few months back." I believe she was referring to when they were searching for me in Kelbrid space, but she didn't want to tell him exactly what they were doing.

"I love the movie, personally. The Old Code they talk about is really something to live by, despite how corny it sounds when quoted exactly. The simple truth is this: you got to fight the bad guys and help out the needy people, doing both with every resource you can muster. And you do that first by living a clean, virtuous life. That's part of why I'm so religious. It can't be done without grace from above."

"Sounds all good in little talks like these, but does it really work?" Melissa asked, "I mean, as far as I can see it just takes people being good to each other instead of being jerks. You don't really need prayer for that."

"It might seem that way, but there are always going to be people who insist on being jerks, or worse. It takes courage to confront them in regular life, and definitely to confront the worse ones on the battlefield. There's that, and then every time I go into a fight, I know it's somebody else pulling me through the other end. On one of the missions you never hear about, I went with some Green Berets into Iran to stop some of the gun trafficking into Iraq. Only five of us made it out. Me, Cottrell, Santorelli, Shepherd, and Dean. From what happened, I know absolutely none of us should have gotten out of that valley alive."

Everyone snapped to attention at that. My stalk eyes scanned the room. I judged from the mildly surprised looks on everybody's face that they had heard it too.

"How did you know Santorelli?" Jeanne asked, "He was a good friend of mine."

"Really? Small world. We kicked down doors together in Fallujah. For some reason, I was assigned to be an embedded journalist for the Marines with his unit. Don't know how that happened, but we ended up together for a year. We wanted to get into Tri-I together, but he got his slot in Jake's class while they told me to be his body guard. I fell out of touch with him recently, I'd like to talk with him again sometime."

The room fell silent. Nobody knew what to say. Mostly, they were interested in looking at their toes. Carl looked around at the tops of the heads that were revealed to him.

"If silence were golden, we'd be rich, wouldn't we?" Marco, with worse than bad timing. We all refrained from remind him that we *were* rich. At least, he and Jacques were.

The Operative got wise to what was happening and turned to Jeanne, "You said he was a good friend?"

"Yes. He was with us since this whole thing started a few months ago," Jeanne seemed to be close to tears, "Santorelli fought bravely as he's always done, and gave his life for humanity."

Carl soaked it in for a second. "I knew him well. I know he's in a better place."

Prince Jake looked Carl in the eye, "He is."

"I have to report back to Tri-I. They're going to be real interested in what's going on down there. Definite Yeerk activity," Carl put his wine glass down and started walking slowly toward the stairs, "I think I'm going to walk. I need to clear my head after all that." He disappeared into the stairwell.

Everyone was too tired to stay up any longer. They all headed in their separate directions to bed. I walked to my own quarters. Before long, I was in a deep nap.

CHAPTER 19

Everyone was too tired to stay up any longer. They all headed in their separate directions to bed. I walked to my own quarters. Before long, I was in a deep nap.

Something in my mind managed to stay awake. It wandered about my head freely without my noticing it. It was bothersome, like a bug buzzing in my ear. Nothing to worry about. I swatted at it with my dream-state tail. That ought to keep it away.

Of course, it wouldn't just stay away. It kept at it. It would not allow me to dismiss it, as it should have been.

I was on a planet I had never seen before. It seemed to be divided in half. One half of it, to my left, was frozen in ice. There were mountains of ice that were clear as glass. I could see a sea in the distance. It was frozen, too. The waves piled on top of each other almost artistically. The ice was by no means natural. What wasn't ice was covered in snow. It didn't seem to fall from the sky. Rather, it just swirled around by wind I couldn't feel.

To my right was a vast desert. There were no mountains, but there were high sand dunes. Instead of a sea or lake, there some massive sink holes in the ground, gaping pits down which white sand poured constantly. I also saw a volcano in the distance, spouting water that vaporized before it hit the ground. Like in the icy half, the sand swirled, stirred by some unfelt breeze.

Where I stood, dividing the two halves, was a band of green grass about five feet wide. The grass was the most delicious I have ever tasted. It was like candy, even to my dimmed Andalite sense of taste. Oddly enough, the snow and sand seemed to stop exactly where the grass began. There was no overlap where they joined.

Cautiously, I picked up a handful of sand and tried to drop it on the grass. It all ran between my fingers before I reached the grass. I tried several more times with the same result. Then I picked up a handful of snow. It melted, became water, then vaporized as soon as I tried to bring it across that unfelt boundary.

I could hear the n-dimensional powers talking. All three of them were having a meeting, apparently, and for some reason I had been chosen to witness it.

I did not know how I was alive to witness this event. One of the superbeings must have wanted me there. I looked to my right. There they were, sitting around a circular oak table sharing some hot tea. I walked toward them to overhear what they were saying. I saw the Drode representing the Crayak. Azmaveth was there to represent himself. He was dressed in his usual off-colored suite and off colored face. The Ellimist betrayed the appearance of his power by being a simple Ketran.

The table itself was odd. Azmaveth sat to one side. His half of the table was made of some sort of strong wood. It was polished and seemed to reflect the light of the unseen sun. He was sitting in the midst of the ice, seeming not to notice the cold. Opposite of him sat the Drode, whose side of the table was made of some kind of black stone. Though he was in the desert, the heat obviously did not bother him.

The middle of the table, a section exactly as wide as the grass, was made of some kind of azure crystal. The Ellimist sat on a perch extending from the side of it directly opposite from me. What was happening?

"The agreement is about to be broken," Azmaveth said, "That human knows about the new Yeerk invasion and is about to inform his superiors. That is unacceptable. My people have taken every step in their power to prevent this becoming common knowledge. Your people haven't done so. They could have told the human to go away. They could have wiped his memories. They could have done any number of things to prevent what's going on now. You are in contempt of the rules. Is he not, Ellimist?"

The Ellimist gave away no body language. Millennia of playing games with the Crayak had given him the ultimate poker face, "By the strictest of interpretations, you are right. The Animorphs could easily handle the small breach in security. They were in contact with the breach as allies. It is now their duty to contain it."

"I will not contain it," the Drode rebuked, "This breach of security was in no way caused by the Animorphs. They have no duty to contain it. Therefore they will not. Your people could have contained it too. You could have just killed him."

"Your people are in the perfect position to do so," the One argued. "And this game must continue according to the status quo. As per the rules, all out conflict on Earth will only break out once both sides consent that they are ready."

"You will have my consent-," the Drode began.

"But not mine. You know the Yeerks are not yet ready," Azmaveth interrupted, "where as regular Earth forces can step in at a moments notice. Either way, that is not the point. The breach must be stopped, and it is your duty to do so. Will you?"

"No," was the Drode's response, "There is no duty and you know it."

"So you still defy me despite the fact that the arbiter has taken my side. That means only one thing. Full scale war of our own style."

"Hey, I'm good at war. It's a fun game."

"You did not think so last time we played."

"I've come to realize we've played more times than you think," the Drode answered smugly. "Did you ever wonder why the Kelbrid could not defeat the Ssri'Kai?"

"Then you will meet the same fate you did the last time we fought."

Azmaveth and the Drode rose from their seats and left. There was nothing I could do. The whole universe was going to collapse, and there was nothing I could do. The Ellimist turned around in his seat to face me, "You know what you must do," was all he said. With the flick of his wrist, I

was sent flying backwards. I glided in the low gravity. I flew over a water volcano. The jet pushed me up. I flailed as the water collected on my fur. Gravity pulled me back down. The cold intruded on my flesh. The ice formed. It became thick. A half minute later I was completely frozen in a block of ice.

CHAPTER 20

I woke with a start from my dream. I stomped my hooves around, resisting the impulse to break out in a run. I looked about myself. There was no water volcano, or n-dimensional conference, or anything of the sort. Just my room in Jacque's and Naomi's house. A house that would likely cease to exist in just a little while. The war should be starting at any moment.

The only thing that could be done was to get rid of the Operative.

I walked downstairs. I did not want to alarm any of my friends if they saw or heard me bolting out the door. Nor did I want to alarm Jacques or Naomi. I walked across the lush green grass of the front yard to the garage. It strengthened me. I would need that strength.

Not too long ago, I had bought my own car with Jacque's money. He insisted that it would come in handy some time and that he had more than enough money to spare. So I had bought a fifteen passenger van. All that space would be able to hold my Andalite friends easily if they ever came to visit. Using my tail blade, I pried the license plate off. Identification of the vehicle would later be a liability.

I jumped into the driver's compartment and keyed the engine. The van rolled easily out of the driveway. I waited until it was out of earshot of the house, then I gunned it to being well above the speed limit. I had to catch up. The Operative had an hour and a half head start while I was sleeping. He should be near the Tri-I headquarters already. There would be no 'better late than never' scenario.

Sirens sounded and lights flashed behind me. The local police forces had seen that not only was I speeding, but I had no license plate. I could not allow myself to be caught. It wasn't about paying tickets, that would be easy. If I was stopped for any amount of time, the Operative would get away.

I weaved my large van in and out of traffic, almost playing chicken with opposing traffic on a four lane road. The vehicles blazed by behind me, almost a blur to my Andalite eyes. I came up on two double-trailer semi trucks. One was in each lane, blocking my way. I pulled out to pass, police ever on the pursuit. Another semi was coming the other way in the closer lane. I pulled out all the way to the furthest lane on the opposite side of the road, only to see a geo coming my way. I slammed on the breaks and swerved to the left even more. I very nearly came off the road altogether, and the paint on the right side of the van was scraped off by the passing geo. The geo slammed on its breaks and spun like a top.

I hit the gas again and zoomed past the two semis. I'm sure if they knew what was happening, they would understand. But they could never know until the war could be made public. And that

might be never.

The sirens fell back behind me, stuck in back of the semis. They couldn't risk going into opposing traffic on such a busy street.

The suburbs gave way to the city. I shot through the 45 zones doing 90. I caught sight of city police trying to set up spike strips in front of me. There was nothing but parking meters on the sidewalk. I took that path, snapping those meters as I went. I blew past the cops with their spikes, got back on the road, and kept going.

Almost there now. Only about a block to go. I kept racing. He should be there already. I hoped that I was not already too late.

The city police made a roadblock with their vehicles. There was no going around. Only through. My hands held the steering wheel in a death grip, my legs braced for the impact. I aimed the van to where two of the cars overlapped a little bit. That would be the easiest place to go through.

The metal screeched as the vehicles collided. The police cruisers pivoted out of the way on their wheels from the force of the motion, swinging like a gate and letting me pass. The van was in rough shape now. I had no idea how much farther it could be pushed. But it didn't matter. Either it would get me there, or it wouldn't.

I caught sight of the Operative. He was still walking on the sidewalk just a few yards from the gate of the installation.

With the pressure from the police, there was no other option. There could be no kidnapping. Blood would have to be the price of his knowledge.

I aimed the van. He tried to get out of the way, but it was too late. The left side of his torso was crushed between the van and the building he was walking past. I was sent flying into the vehicle airbags. My body was thrown back as the van bounced back from the wall.

I picked myself up heavily, the deed having been done. I opened the side door and walked out. I was greeted by the horrified looks of the bystanders. My stalk eyes looked at the Operative. He was slumped on top of himself in a pool of his own blood. The right side of his body looked as if it had been chewed on by one of the Visser's old morphs. My body shook with shame, guilt, and rage. No brave young man should have had to die in such a way. If there was any way to do so, I would exact a toll on the n-dimensional powers. All this suffering in the universe, it was all their fault.

I looked around again. The police and the Tri-I installation guards were closing in. I galloped away at full sprint. To prevent being identified, I put my hands over my face and navigated entirely by stalk eyes. The bipedal humans were left behind, but I knew that they would coordinate by radio. I had to get away clean.

I ran into the lobby of a skyscraper. I ran into the closest elevator I saw and scared everybody out of it by whipping my tail at them. I hit the button for the roof. It took twenty minutes to reach the

top. When I got there, there was no staying to morph. The police would certainly be coming up by another elevator. Only one choice.

I ran at full gallop for the edge of the building. Inside of eighty paces, I was flailing in empty space, morphing as I fell.

I was a fully formed seagull now. That would be best if I wanted to blend in with other birds to escape police binoculars. I scanned the ground rushing up below me. A part of me simply wanted to not open up my bird's wings. The grief had nearly paralyzed me, but it was the sense of duty that came to the rescue. I opened my wings and nearly scraped my belly on the pavement below.

I flew fast and hard, running away. Not from the cops. They couldn't identify me now. Not from Tri-I, as soon as I joined a flock of seagulls, they would be as lost as the police. No, I ran from myself. I ran from my own hearts, which were aching in the pain of guilt and shame.

CHAPTER 21

I flew around for almost my two hour limit. I had no idea how I could face Prince Jake. Or myself.

No matter how bad things get, life goes on. I had to go back to the house and get on with it. I flew back to the house and morphed in the garden. The Operative's words were still echoing in my head, "Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle..."

Strange noises came through the doorway. I walked through the door and to the living room. There was ping pong table sitting in the center of it. The Drode stood on one side. Casually, he smacked the ball, disappeared, reappeared on the other side, and hit the ball back to himself. He looked over to me, though he did not miss the ball, nor did he stop teleporting himself. "Hey look! It's the war hero!"

Confetti fell out of the air while balloons rose. From somewhere, the human music called, 'Hail to the Chief' was playing.

The others were sitting around the living room, dark expressions on their faces. Only Prince Jake seemed willing to look at me. Melissa was squeezing his hand. "The Drode told us..." he trailed off.

Marco shook his head, his eyes on the ground. Jeanne had one arm over his shoulder and she wouldn't look at me either. "He showed us on the TV as it was happening."

"How could you do that to him?" Melissa demanded. "He saved all of our lives. We'd have been dead without him."

"We had decided to let him to," Jeanne added. "There was no need to kill him."

((There was,)) I argued. ((I heard Azmaveth, the Drode, and the Ellimist talking.))

"No, actually, you didn't," the Drode answered.

That gave me pause. ((What?))

"I know what you saw. The Ellimist showed me. He figured it was the sort of thing I should know. And what you saw was what Azmaveth wanted you to see. A trick to make you do exactly what you did: kill Carly boy and stop the rest of Earth from finding out."

((But if Carl told his superiors, the treaty would have been broken,)) I argued.

"No, it wouldn't" the Drode answered.

((How is that possible?)) I demanded.

"Remember the Ellimist's ruling about the Pythagi? The treaty was still intact because the Pythagi found out all on their own. It's the same deal here. Mankind could have entered the war against the Yeerks, and the treaty would still be intact."

((Then...))

"Yes, Axy, you didn't just murder him for no reason. You actually removed a chance to get some real help in this war. I think the term humans use is 'screwing the pooch'."

That took a few moments to sink in. ((Is there anything that-))

"Not about this one," the Drode answered. "And don't bother getting excited about any repeats of this. Azmaveth and I made sure to do a little clarification in the rules. We wrote in a little clause about inaction. Now, both parties are required to actively prevent third parties from finding out what's going on."

That made me even more depressed about all of this. Tri-I would no doubt investigate Carl's death. And now, we could not allow them to discover what Carl had. If it looked like they were in danger of figuring things out, we would be obligated to stop them. Or at least, to let the Yeerks do it.

The Drode clapped his hands together. "Well, it's been fun as always, Anis. Good luck cleaning up this little mess you all made. And have fun telling Toby what you did here. I'm sure he'll just love it." The Drode disappeared, leaving me even more ashamed of myself. I didn't even know that was possible at the moment.

Prince Jake looked up from the floor again, staring at me. ((Yes my Prince?))

"You know what you've done. As long as you still have a conscience, there is nothing I can add to the feelings you ought to have inside."

I couldn't even speak. What could I say?

Prince Jake sensed this, "I guess the question from onboard the Washington has finally been answered."

I found my voice again, ((I will understand completely if I am to be discharged from your command, or proscribed an appropriate punishment.))

"No Ax. We have too few people for such things. I'll have to be content with the punishments you give yourself."

We looked at each other in silence for several more seconds. There was nothing more to say. Prince Jake walked out the door.

CHAPTER 22

A few days later, Jacques was invited to a funeral. We all knew why. He extended the invitation to us Omegamorphs as well, knowing that they might want to pay the young Operative respects for his life of service. They all accepted.

I did not.

No, it was not because I disliked him or belittled his sacrifice. I wanted to do something special. Something in private.

The day after the funeral, I walked up the main roadway of the cemetery to the freshly dug grave. The tombstone was typical, no frills. What made it stand apart was the White Eagle and the Eagle Globe and Anchor flanking the name SERGEANT CARL YASTZREMSKI.

Three youths were there, putting flowers on the grave. They rose, paused, and walked away. When I was sure I was not being watched, I approached. My hand alighted on the stone and my head bowed as I recited the ritual of forgiveness.

((I have made right everything that can be made right, I have learned everything that can be learned, I have sworn not to repeat my error, and I now claim forgiveness.)) I don't know how I managed to get it all out. There was a 'lump in my throat,' as humans like to say. I wanted to be forgiven so badly you cannot know, but I hadn't yet forgiven myself.

Buried here was a fighter, deserving of my greatest weapon. I had removed most of my tailblade by a laser cutting tool in Jacques' hangar where we used to park the Reliquary. There was a fastening gel on one side. Once it attached to something, it would turn into something like cement. I placed the blade on the face of the stone, above the name. It seemed to draw a bridge between the symbols of Poland and the Marine Corps.

I drew back to the road, almost backing into a large black man who was standing in front of the grave as well. I turned to him.

"Ah, hello Prince Aximili. It's good to see you've come to pay your respects as well."

I was startled by his presence. I recognized him, of course. We had met only once before, but such a man was impossible to forget. He stood as tall as a Hork-bajir and he looked to be about as solid. ((Good to see you too. Excuse me, but... what is your name? I'm afraid I cannot remember.))

"My apologies, Prince," the man answered. "My name is Adrian Rook. I knew Carl since he joined. He showed such promise. I was his superior officer."

((Jacques told me Carl was one of the EPICs. You are as well?))

Rook gave me a grin that seemed nearly feral. "I'm their leader. It's such a tragedy to see him cut down like this. He was one of my best men, and in more than just battle and intelligence gathering skills. He always carried an extra canteen of water on him in case one of his peers or subordinates were hit and didn't look like they'd pull through, he would take out his canteen and baptize them, to be sure they'd go to Heaven. A good man indeed." Rook paused, reflecting I suppose. "Funny...on our third EPICs mission, one of our comrades, man called Paulson, was shot in the chest. Carl was trying to baptize him and Paulson kept trying to make him stop. I had to hold Paulson down while Carl did his work."

((Why did you do that?)) I asked.

"Well, that's the funny thing about Carl. He was more worried about Paulson's soul than Paulson was. Paulson might not have needed it, but Carl sure as hell did. That's just the way he's built. I worry about our bodies, Doctor Yao worries about our minds, and Carl worried about our souls. He's going to be a hard man to replace. How did you come to know him?"

His words tore through me. I had no defense against them. I wish I could have told him what had really happened, but the treaty was still in place, ((Before returning to Earth, I ran through many Tri-I reports in case I might be needed to assist in some situation. His name was on quite a few and perked my curiosity. A little deeper research showed me what a man he was. I found it appropriate to come and pay my respects.))

Rook seemed to buy this reasoning, "I think you ought to know that he looked up to you Animorphs very much. He had all of Jake's and Marco's books. He always wanted to get one that you wrote, but you were probably too busy with assignments to write one."

I couldn't take it anymore. It was that simple. I just couldn't. I knew it would be extremely rude, but I walked away. I felt his eyes on my back. I paused, ((He reminded me of my brother.)) I hoped he would understand, but probably not. I continued walking.

I was just out of the grave site when my iHolo informed me of an incoming call from Tobias. Naturally, I answered it. ((Tobias.))

"Glad I could catch you, Ax. There are a couple of things you need to know," Tobias told me.

I nodded. ((Go on.))

"Al's finished investigating the memory core. There's no record of the PFFG in it."

((Nothing?))

"It gets worse. Salheer, figured out that we were spying on them through their computers. He used that to feed us false information and lead you into that trap."

((Are you sure?))

Tobias nodded. "There was a message from the Visser in the memory core telling us that. He seemed...inordinately pleased with himself. We can't trust any of the information we get from the computers anymore. Not unless we have it confirmed in some way. Maybe there's some way we can turn this against them, but I can't think of it right now."

((What else?)) I asked.

"It wasn't your fault, what happened with Carl. You were tricked, Ax. It happens. Azmaveth even managed to trick Crayak a few times. Against someone like that, you didn't have a chance."

((But I should have realized it was a trick. Why else would I have been allowed to witness that conference? Why else would-))

"Everything's clearer once the smoke's gone, Ax," Tobias interrupted me. "We've all been played for fools by these powers before. This wasn't the first time, and it probably won't be the last."

((That is not very comforting, Tobias,)) I muttered.

"Truth is usually a small comfort at best. But I've found that sometimes it's all we have. I take whatever small comfort I can get." He had me there. "One more thing, Ax. And this, I hope, is more of a comfort."

((What is it?))

"I'd have done the same thing. If had been there, I'd have ordered Carl killed. More likely, I'd have done it myself. Even without being tricked by Azmaveth, I'd have done it. Letting Carl go was a gamble and I'd never bet the fate of the world on a hunch."

((But it would have paid off,)) I insisted.

"Yeah, it would have. But we could have never known that. Maybe we'd have guessed, but even then it's a gamble because our guess could have been wrong. No matter how things played out, Ax, if I had been there Carl would have been dead as soon as we were out of those tunnels."

I was silent for a few moments. Then, I said, ((If we win this war, we will be called heroes once more. How can we accept that, knowing what we did?))

"There are different kinds of heroes, Ax. Jake's one kind. He'll always do the moral thing. The few times when he didn't, it nearly destroyed him. He was depressed for more than a year because he killed a bunch of Yeerks. He won't make that sort of decision again. He's the sort of people everyone can look up to, the kind kids want to grow up to be. He's the one who gets the statues and the glory, the one we remember as the best a man can be.

"And you, you're a different kind. You're a scholar's hero. You're a good man, like Jake, but you don't let that stop you when you need to get something done. You're a soldier to your very soul, Prince Aximili." That made me pause. I think it was the first time he ever used my rank. "You're the sort of hero Andalite leaders will look up to for a hundred generations. You can do what needs to be done, the cold, calculated, logical thing. And you can still manage to keep your soul in the process. Those who look at war as more than history, those who have a reason to look past right and wrong, will revere you even more than Jake."

He was silent for a few moments, so I asked him, ((And what kind of hero are you?))

"Me...I'm not a hero. I'm the kind of man history tries to forget. The right thing, the moral thing, has no place in the way I make war. I'm a predator, and my enemies are my prey. And a predator will do whatever it takes to get his prey. I do what I do so that people like you and Jake can afford to be moral and good."

((You are more than that, Prince Tobias,)) I answered.

He shook his head. "I know what I am, Ax. I came to grips with it long ago. Just look at what happened with Mersa. I saved his life. I made deals with him. I allowed him to infest people in my home town unchecked because as long as he was alive, he was useful to me. And when he was no longer useful, I had no problem killing him. That doesn't sound like a Prince. That sounds like a Visser."

I did not have much to say that. I could not deny his logic, but I could not accept it either. I knew in my soul that he was nothing like the Vissers we knew far too well. But one cannot argue the feelings of the hearts.

"History will try to forget me because I scare them. Jake is the best a man can be. And I'm the worst. They'll be right to forget me. I hope they succeed, because I don't want people idolizing me the way they do Jake. I don't want anyone to grow up to be like me. And maybe...maybe that's the test."

((The test?))

"Aznaveth is testing us, Ax. For a long time, I thought he was testing to see how far we would go to survive. But now...now I think I might be wrong. Maybe he's not trying to find out how far we'll go. Maybe he's trying to see just where we draw the line. And if that's the case, I'm worried that I'm the very reason we'll all be annihilated."

((If you did not do the things you do, humans would be enslaved by the Yeerks and annihilated anyway,)) I pointed out.

"That's exactly what I was thinking, Ax. So we keep on doing what we're doing. Sometimes, we don't know if what we do is right or wrong until it's all over. I can't know if what I do is what mankind needs or if it's what's going to destroy us. And you couldn't know if killing Carl was going to save or damn us. You don't know if the answer you gave was right or wrong until the results come back. That's how tests work."

((So how can we keep from giving the wrong answers?))

"We study, Ax, and we learn from our mistakes so that things like this never happen again."

((And if we don't learn enough? If we still fail?))

"Then we deal with the consequences as best we can." His eyes hardened suddenly. "But we don't have to worry about that, Ax. We're going to pass this test. We're Earth's best students; and foreign-exchange students. We're here because Azmaveth chose us. Because he wants us to pass. And he chose rightly. This, I now for sure. By this time next year, we'll be standing side by side in the new world that's going to come."

I knew what had happened. Before, he had been speaking to me as Tobias, my friend, my *shorm*. He could show doubt, uncertainty, insecurity. But now, he was speaking as my leader. Now, he was War-Prince Tobias, son of Prince Elfangor and the defeneder of Earth. And when he spoke as that, I just could not help but believe it was true. Despite lies, manipulation, and the might of the Kelbrid, the Visser, and the God General, we would succeed. We were the Animorphs, and nothing could stop us.

And now for some words of wisdom from Streetlight Manifesto:

*Last night I woke alone with a whisper in my ear ,
Recanting all my aspirations and my fears.
And when the sun came up that voice had disappeared,
But it would linger on for years.*

*It said, "We can't just blame it on our mothers,
Claim everything they did was always wrong."
And there ain't no turning back when our train is off its track,
And there's nothing we can do but watch it crash (watch it crash).
And there ain't no right and wrong when we know it won't be long
And there's nothing we can do but watch it crash.*

*So mercy, mercy, mercy me!
Praying for the death of a man I'll never meet.
Though everyone will know the truth they'll still just make believe.
Mercy, mercy me!*

*That's all they came for, that's all they took.
That's all we had to offer, only dirty looks.
And when they realized we'd given all we could, that's when they finally understood.*

*Mercy, mercy, mercy me!
Haunted by the memories of things we'll never see.
Guilty for the statements that we'll never get to speak.
Mercy, mercy me!*

*We quite blame it on our mothers,
Claim everything they did was always wrong.
And there ain't no turning back when our train is off its track,
And there's nothing we can do but watch it crash.
And there ain't no right and wrong when we know it won't be long,
And there's nothing we can do but watch it crash (watch it crash).
And there's nothing we can do but watch it crash.
-Watch it Crash*

And don't miss the next installment of the Animorphs series:

73: The Defender

Tobias set the emitter on the table. It was vaguely egg-shaped, like a lot of Andalite tech. It was a pale orange, with a red circle at the thinner end and a green lens at the wider part. Down the center was a yellow strip. Tobias put two fingers to the red pad and a faintly-green image appeared above the lens.

Alloran-Semitar-Corrass. I recognized him instantly. He nodded. "Commander-Prince," he greeted Tobias. A voice came out of the yellow part of the device, since this one wasn't capable of transmitting thought speak like a proper one would be. "We just received a very...unusual....transmission from the Yeerks."

"You intercepted a transmission?" Tobias asked.

Alloran shook his head. "No, we didn't. It was sent to us intentionally, which is part of why it is so strange."

"What did they want?" I asked.

"It was from their Undersisser, Guraff Four-Two-Seven." Alloran turned his main eyes to Tobias. "You fought him in the battle above Hork-bajir. I am not sure if you remember who he is."

Tobias managed not to smile. Then again, even when he intends to smile, he usually managed not to. "I've heard of him. What did he want?"

"You."

"What?"

"He wants you to contact him. He left us a communications channel for you to do so. Do you have any idea why he might be doing this?"

"No clue," Tobias answered. "I guess I should call him, though. It's only polite."

Alloran nodded. "Be very, very careful, Commander. Guraff was Esplin's top man and I can assure you from far too much experience that he is perhaps the most dangerous Yeerk in the galaxy. Be very, very careful."

"I think I can handle it," Tobias assured him.

"The electorate will, of course, want to hear the details of your conversation."

"Of course. Is that all?"

"Yes. Alloran out."

Tobias dialed up Guraff's channel. Guraff himself answered. His holographic image was only about a foot high, but there was still an imposing air about him. Not that aura of evil like the Visser or Salheer had. This was an aura of...steel, or iron.

"That was prompt, Devil Prince."

"Well, this is sort of important," Tobias answered.

"Indeed. I hope you do not mind the convoluted method I was forced to use. You have done a very good job of hiding yourself. You know why I called?"

"Of course, though I'm surprised that you did."

"What are you two talking about?" I interrupted. How could Tobias already know what this was about?

Tobias turned to me. "If Tri-I finds out that the Chief is a Controller, we all die. So we have to stop Tri-I from getting him from the F.B.I. Guraff knows this as well as we do."

Guraff nodded. "The Devil Prince knows me well. I have the resources to obtain the chief, and a viable plan as well. Unfortunately, we do not possess the necessary knowledge to bring it to fruition."

"What's the plan?" Tobias asked.

"Something we shall discuss in due time, I think. Before we speak of it, we need information. We need to know when and how Tri-I and the F.B.I. are making the transfer. I am confident that you will be able to discover that. Contact me again once you have, and we will discuss the plan."

"What's in it for us?" Tobias asked. "Why help you instead of doing it ourselves?"

"If you aid us, you will have my resources at your disposal. And I will allow you to keep the Chief. He is of no use to me anymore. Think on this offer and contact me soon. For now, we must both prepare."

"For what?" I asked.

"For Mister Putin's arrival, of course." He cut the transmission and his hologram disappeared.

Rachel came back into the room. "I got James for about two seconds. He said hello, and then I heard a smashing sound and the phone stopped working."

"I was afraid of that," Tobias muttered. "Sergio's got a very strict no-phones policy. It's either because he doesn't want to take the chance of a call to the warehouse getting triangulated by police, or because he's completely insane. Maybe both."

"So how do we contact James?" I asked.

"Call Sergio's office. He'll pass on a message from me to James. Let's go. Ronnie can give us a lift back to the apartment. We've got a lot of work to do. We've got to save a police chief from Tri-I and a world leader from the Yeerks, and God knows how much time we have." He paused. Then he shook his head. "Maybe after this, I'll figure out some way to get my hand son the Time Matrix again and take an ice relaxing vacation somewhere before this all happened."

Preview Summary

The war on Earth isn't the only battle the Animorphs can't afford to lose. Earth stands on the edge, ready to plunge into the raging war between Yeerks, Pythagi, Andalite, and Anati. But when Earth's most powerful pro-war advocate comes to Alpha front, he'll become a target the Yeerks just can't resist.

But, as always, there is a complication. A high-ranking Controller has been arrested and is about to be turned over to Tri-I. When that happens, Tri-I will know everything and the superpowers that be will go to war on their own scale. In order to prevent this, Cassie, Tobias, David, James, and Al will have to stand side-by-side with the Yeerks once more...

AFTERWORD

I, capnnerfir, would like to take this moment at the end to say a few words about this. As you know (but may have forgotten), this was written almost entirely by my friend and fellow

John3Sobieski, who my readers such as yourselves have most likely not had the pleasure to meet. John is going off to bootcamp in a few days (again, provided you're reading this in September of '09. If not, he's probably either already there, back, on active duty, or retired), where he will be training as a marine. He intends to go into war journalism and, I believe, has already secured a position with the marines as such. When he comes back from bootcamp, and before he gets shipped out, he'll be publishing some of his own work (with only very, very little input from me), and I'd encourage you all to read it. It all sounds like some great stuff and I for one can't wait.

As always, thanks for reading. It was great watching John play in my world. I'll be back at the wheel next fic, and I hope to see you there.