

K.A. Applegate

the andalite chronicles

Before the **ANIMORPHS** . . . there was Elfangor.

Elfangor's
Journey #1



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SCHOLASTIC

His name is

Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul.

An Andalite war-prince. The one who gave five young humans the ability to morph into any animal they touch. They are still out there, fighting an evil so powerful there isn't a moment that goes by when they can actually feel safe. Their story continues.

But *this* is how it all began.

The story that came before

ANIMORPHS . . .

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Elfangor's Journey

the
andalite
chronicles

For Jean Feiwel

And, as always, for Michael

Prologue

My name is Elfangor.

I am an Andalite prince. And I am about to die.

My fighter is damaged. I have crash-landed on the surface of the planet called Earth. I believe that my great Dome ship has been destroyed. I fear that my little brother Aximili is already dead.

We did not expect the Yeerks to be here in such force. We made a mistake. We underestimated the Yeerks. Not for the first time. We would have defeated their Pool ship and its fighters. But there was a Blade ship in orbit as well.

The Blade ship of Visser Three.

Two Yeerk Bug fighters are landing on either side of me now. The abomination Visser Three is here as well. I can feel him. I can sense his evil.

I cannot defeat the visser in one-on-one combat. I am weak from my injuries. Too weak to morph. Too weak to fight.

This is my *hirac delest* — my final statement. I have formed the mental link to the thought-speak transponder in my fighter's computer. I will record

my memories before the Yeerks annihilate all trace of me..

If this message someday reaches the Andalite world, I want the truth to be known. I am called a great warrior. A hero. But there is a great deal that no Andalite knows about me. I have not lied, but I have kept the truth a secret.

This is not my first visit to Earth. I spent many years on Earth . . . and yet, no time at all.

I landed here now in this construction site because I was looking for a great weapon: the Time Matrix. The existence of this weapon is also a secret.

So many secrets in my life . . . mistakes. Things I should have done. All the strands of my strange life seem to be coming together. It all seems inevitable now. Of course my death would come on Earth. Of course the child would be here. Of course it would be Visser Three who would take my life.

I am too weak to locate the Time ship now. I will die here. But I have left a legacy. Visser Three thinks he has won our long, private war. But I've left a little surprise behind.

I have given the morphing power to five human youths.

I know that in doing this I have broken Andalite law. I know that this action will be condemned by all my people. But the Yeerks are here on Earth. Visser Three is here. The humans must be given a chance

to resist. The human race cannot fall to the Yeerks the way the Hork-Bajir race did.

I have given the morphing power to five young humans. Children, really. But sometimes children can accomplish amazing things.

I have no choice but to hope. Because it was I who created Visser Three. I who caused the abomination. I cannot go peacefully to my death, knowing that I created the creature who will enslave the human race.

I came to this place, this empty construction site, looking for the weapon I know is hidden here. But there is no time now. No time . . .

The visser is here. He is laughing at my weakness. He is savoring his victory over me.

This is the *hirac delest* of Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul, Andalite prince. I open my mind in the ritual of death. I open my mind and let all my memories — all my secrets — go to be recorded by the computer.

This is not just a message to my own people. I hope that someday humans will read it as well. Because humans are also my people. Loren . . . and the boy I have just met, but not for the first time...

chapter 1

Twenty-one years before

The Yeerks were loose. Like some terrifying disease, they spread their evil from planet to planet. They took species after species. They crushed all resistance.

Their spiderlike Pool ships roamed throughout the galaxy. Their armies of Taxxons and Hork-Bajir, all under the control of Yeerk slugs, rampaged — killing, butchering, enslaving.

They were annihilating entire planets.

Only we Andalites stood against them. But we had been caught off-guard. Our mighty Dome ships, each more than a match for anything the Yeerks had, were spread too thin. Our spies, even though they used top-secret Andalite morphing technology, were unable to penetrate Yeerk secrets. For five years our princes had fought the visserers of the Yeerk Empire. They said the war could go on for another fifty years . . . another hundred years.

We were outnumbered. We had fought many battles and lost too many of them. But arrogant as I

was, I was confident that if only I could get into the fight, I could make a difference.

I, Elfangor, was going to become a great warrior, a prince, a hero.

I was posted as an *aristh*, a cadet, to the Dome ship *StarSword*. But so far, after six months in space looking for an elusive Yeerk task force, I had not exactly proven myself to be a great hero.

In fact, I had proven myself to be a clumsy, slow-witted, and quite possibly hopeless fool. At least, according to my instructors.

<Aristh Elfangor! How many times do I have to tell you: The killing blow should be as graceful as it is fast!> Sofor yelled his thought-speak loudly enough that half the ship probably heard him.

I stood facing him, trying to stand light and easy on my four hooves, just like I was supposed to. At the same time I had to think about where my weight was centered, and whether the tilt of my upper body signaled when I was going to strike, and whether the grass floor under my hooves was uneven, and whether my hands were out of the way, and about a million other things a warrior should know for tail-fighting.

Sofor was bigger than me. He was a full warrior, while I was just a lowly *aristh* — a warrior-cadet. If this had been an actual battle, Sofor would have

sliced me up twenty different ways in less than a second.

Maybe. Sometimes I thought I'd be faster and better if it was a real battle, not just a lesson. I was sure if my life depended on it, I could win.

In any case, Sofor was not my enemy. He was my teacher.

<Watch my eyes, not my tail,> Sofor said. <My main eyes, you nitwit, not my stalk eyes! Keep your main eyes on mine, your stalk eyes on my tail.>

I watched his main eyes, but it wasn't easy. His left eye had a huge scar running right beneath it. I tried to focus all my thoughts down to nothingness, just like Sofor had taught me.

<Your mind will never know when it is time to strike. Only your *instinct* can guide you,> he reminded me.

Suddenly . . . FWAPPP!

I fired the muscles in my tail! The bladed tip cracked the air, it moved so fast. I could barely see my own tail as it struck.

The blade arched over my head toward Sofor's face, and I thought, *Hey, maybe old Sofar will end up with a new scar*. If I landed a blow on Sofor, I'd be a hero with every poor *aristh* who had ever suffered under him.

Then . . . SWOOP! FWAPP! FWAPP! FWAPP!

Sofor blocked my tail blade with his tail, turned it aside, and in about a tenth of a second delivered three lightning blows. One to each side of my head, and a third that left his razor-sharp tail blade pressed right up against my throat. The blows stopped just a hair from cutting my skin.

If Sofor so much as twitched, he could remove my head from my shoulders.

<Not bad, *Aristh* Elfangor,> Sofor said with a laugh. <Not bad at all. That strike of yours could almost have hit me . . . if I were asleep!>

He laughed again and pulled his tail away. <Remember, don't think about it, do it. You're too Intellectual. You think too much. You should be a scientist, not a warrior. There's no time for thought in a fight. There is only time for your training to join with your instinct.>

<I guess even you must have forgotten that once,> I muttered.

I regretted the words the instant they were out of my head.

Sofor turned his stalk eyes toward me. He had a dangerous expression. <What did you say, *Aristh*?>

<Nothing . . . just . . . urn, nothing,> I stammered. But I was staring at the scar below his eye the whole time.

<Ah, I see. You've noticed my little scar. Yes, quite a nasty cut. Know how I got it?>

I shook my head. What was I doing, getting smart with Sofor? What was the matter with me? Was I insane?

<I got this scar from my own teacher. He wasn't as sweet and understanding as I am. He didn't like uppity *arisths*.>

The old warrior laughed at his own wit, turned away, and went galloping off across the grass, holding his tail as high as an Andalite half his age would.

I breathed a huge sigh of relief. I looked around the dome to see whether anyone else was watching me be humiliated. The dome of a Dome ship is a circular area about a third of a mile across. It is filled with grass, trees, ground rushes, and flowers. There is a lake in the middle and a stream that runs around the circumference.

It's as much like home as it can be. You'd almost think you were running across any well-kept area on the home world. But when you look up, you see that you are in space, protected only by a clear plastic bubble, a dome.

I saw other warriors off running across the grass, feeding and playing and practicing their skills. But none seemed to be watching me.

I replayed the fight with Sofor. How had he known the exact second when I would strike? What had given me away?

What was the matter with me? Was I actually mad because Sofor was faster than me? Of *course* he was a better fighter than me. He'd been in more battles than I could imagine.

But it still made me angry. I didn't like people laughing at me. And I didn't like losing.

Through my stalk eyes I saw someone coming up behind me. He'd been hidden by a stand of trees. I recognized him immediately, of course: Arbron. We were the only two *arisths*.

Great. More bad news. I didn't really like Arbron much. He was very competitive with me. And still he never seemed to take anything seriously.

<Well, hello, Elfangor,> he said. <Having fun with the old Yeerk-killer?>

<Hello, *Aristh* Arbron,> I said, so stiffly I sounded like my own father. <I don't think it's very respectful to refer to Sofor as the old Yeerk-killer. He is a full warrior, after all, and our personal combat instructor.>

Now Arbron laughed at me. <Yeah, right, Elfangor. Like you're so respectful. Teach me to be as respectful as you, *pleeeeeease*.>

He laughed again, and I was starting to get even angrier. It was bad enough having Sofor laugh at me. At least he outranked me. But Arbron was just a lowly *aristh* like me. Lowlier, because I had four days seniority over him.

<This is a Dome ship, not a play field,> I said.

Arbron kicked lightly at the grass with one hoof in a gesture of contempt. Then he said the insult that went with the gesture. <Elfangor, when are you going to get your hooves back on the grass and out of the air?>

<Some of us actually care about being better fighters. The people need us. These are evil times.>

Arbron laughed. <You don't fool me. You're not some mighty prince or hero. You're just another scared, confused *aristh* on his first big deep-space mission. And by the way, you shift weight to your left hind leg when you get ready to strike. That's how old Sofor knew.>

I was getting ready to say something really crushing to Arbron, but just then there came an announcement. It was a direct-beamed thought-speak summons.

<*Arisths* Elfangor and Arbron to the battle bridge.>

I stared at Arbron. He stared at me. We were both frozen in place. Our argument was totally forgotten because we were both busy being shocked and horrified.

See, it was *impossible*. Neither of us had ever been to the battle bridge. The battle bridge was where the captain was. And the captain of a Dome

ship is like one of the ancient gods. I mean, captains don't even look at *arisths*.

<What did we do?> Arbron asked anxiously.

<I don't know,> I moaned, <but it must have been really out of line.>

<We're in trouble. We are in definite trouble,> Arbron said.

chapter 2

A Dome ship is built with the dome at one end and then, far away, far back, there are the three huge engines. Zero-space engines, and you probably know how powerful those are. Connecting the dome to the engines is a long, long shaft. Inside this shaft is the place where everyone has their quarters — their private areas.

For *arisths*, the quarters are tiny. I mean, extremely tiny. If you want to turn around you have to back out into the hallway. In my quarters I have holograms of my father and mother, of course. Plus a wish-flower representing the little brother I'll be getting in a few years. The Electorate has voted to allow more children to be born since we're in a war now. They say if the war goes on for long and there are lots of battle deaths, some families may even have three and four children.

Personally, I don't think it will come to that. And even having one sibling is bad enough. Now, in addition to the morning ritual and the evening ritual, I have to do the wish-flower ritual. And you have to

do the wish-flower ritual at the wish-flower, of course, which is in my tiny quarters. And you can imagine how impossible that is!

My entire back half sticks out into the hallway and people are jostling past while I'm chanting, <We welcome our hopes embodied, we welcome a new branch of the tree, we welcome . . .> So on and so on.

It's not easy being an *aristh*. Naturally, warriors and princes get bigger quarters. And of course the captain has quarters so big he can practically play driftball in there.

But the captain isn't usually in his quarters. He's usually on the battle bridge. That's where Arbron and I were heading, as fast as our hooves could carry us down the long central shaft.

<We're dead,> I said. <There's no way the captain calls us to the bridge unless we are in huge trouble.>

<Maybe it's something good,> Arbron suggested. <Maybe he wants to tell us we're doing well in our studies.>

<Yeah. Right. Or maybe he wants our advice,> I suggested sarcastically. <Captain Feyorn, the hero of like a thousand space battles, probably wants the advice of a pair of *arisths*.>

All the while we were running. Running past the closed doors of various private quarters and

storerooms and plasma conduits. Our hooves clicked on the hard, rough-textured floor. A prince stepped out of his quarters and I practically ran him down.

<Sorry!> I yelled. <We've been called to the battle bridge!>

The prince rolled his eyes and shook his head. But he knew: When the captain calls, you don't waste time.

As we neared the battle bridge we saw more and more people in the hall. We weren't the only ones heading there. And then I started to notice some fighter pilots moving off toward the fighter bays.

You can always tell a fighter pilot. There's a swagger they have. It's almost like there's a special light that seems to shine on them.

When I'm a full warrior I'm going to be a fighter pilot.

<There's going to be a battle!> Arbron said.

<Yeerks!> I said. <We're going to burn some Yeerks!> I hoped I sounded tough and fierce.

We barreled into the battle bridge just as the tactical officer; Prince Nescord, bellowed, <Where in a dark sun are those two *arisths*?>

<Right here, sir!> I said.

<Here, sir!> Arbron echoed.

The tactical officer — the T.O. — looked at us like we might be a couple of pieces of dung stuck to

his hoof. Then he turned to the captain. <Captain, the two *arisths* are here.>

Of course the captain already knew we were there. They say Captain Feyorn can practically see through walls. He knows everything that goes on aboard his ship.

He stood in the center of the room, with the T.O. on his right and Prince Breeyar, commander of all fighter squadrons, on his left.

The room was circular, with bright monitors glowing and computer screens reeling off data. Holographic monitors created images in midair, and there were sound-speech info-tags and thought-speech computer warnings.

Warriors working on the battle bridge often used hand signals between themselves so that the thought-speak noise wouldn't become a jumble.

At the front of the battle bridge was a large, holographic image showing the space around us. We were in normal space, not Zero-space, so the background was black, filled with bright stars.

<Magnify,> the T.O. said.

The hologram of space grew more detailed. Suddenly it was as if actual stars, each as big as my fist, were hovering inside the battle bridge.

<Isolate the target and magnify,> the tactical officer said.

Now the hologram showed just a slice of a single

star. It was an average yellow star. I glanced up at the readout above the hologram. It showed that the star had nine planets, gas giants on the outer edge, smaller planets in tighter orbit. The sixth planet was front and center in the display. It had a rather beautiful set of rings.

<There he is,> Prince Breeyar said. He was very calm, but you could tell he was a predator looking at prey.

I searched the hologram of space for a clue.

Then I saw it: a tiny, bright point that was moving against the background of the ringed planet.

Was it a Yeerk ship?

<I think we have a Skrit Na raider,> the captain said.

<Yes, Captain,> the T.O. agreed. <He's accelerating. He'll be able to go to Zero-space in twenty minutes. Sensors show he came from the third planet in this system.>

<On-screen,> Captain Feyorn said.

Suddenly the hologram shifted and we were looking at a small planet with a single large moon.

The planet was blue with swirls of white, and land masses that were brown and green.

<What do we have on this planet?>

<There is a sentient species there. They have achieved orbital space flight and have landed on their moon. Sensors show presence of nuclear

weapons. And we're picking up transmissions in various parts of the electromagnetic spectrum. All in all, probably a Level Six civilization. I would recommend —>

The captain cut him off by raising one finger on one hand. Then the captain turned his head and his main eyes toward Arbron and me.

He looked right at me. Right at *me*. I felt my blood turn to sludge and my brain grind to a halt.

<Tell me, *Aristh*, the situation: We have a Skrit Na raider leaving a Level Six civilization. Twenty minutes till he's safe in Zero-space. What do you recommend?>

No, this wasn't happening. The captain really was asking my advice. Clearly I was dreaming.

<What do I recommend?> I asked, feeling the knife-edge of panic. <Um ... um, dispatch fighters on an intercept course?>

<Is that a question or a statement?> the captain asked.

I sucked in air and tried not to faint. <Dispatch fighters for an intercept. Send two on an intercept course, and bring two up behind on a chase vector.>

<And you,> the captain said, turning his awful gaze on Arbron. <What do we do when we intercept? And why?>

<The Skrit Na are smugglers and renegades. And

they sometimes serve the Yeerks. So we board the Skrit Na ship and check for any violations.> He said it perfectly. Like he had rehearsed.

Then he blew it. <And if they put up a fight, we put some tail into them!>

The captain, the prince, the T.O., every warrior on the bridge, and I all stared at Arbron like he was insane. Which he obviously was. You don't say <put some tail into them> to the captain! That's something you say in a schoolyard fight.

The captain looked at Prince Breeyar and the tactical officer. He shrugged. <I guess we'd better do what the two *arisths* say, eh? The big one looks like he's ready to faint. And the other one thinks he's you, Breeyar.>

That got a laugh from everyone on the bridge.

<Launch fighters,> the captain said. <Oh, and those Skrit Na ships are so cramped inside we'd better send along a couple of our people who can move around in there. Now. Who do we have that's small enough to fit inside a Skrit Na freighter?>

Suddenly, I realized that everyone on the battle bridge was looking at me and Arbron. And then I realized we were both younger and smaller than anyone else.

And that's when I almost did faint.

The captain was going to send us into battle.

chapter 3

<Okay, who takes the helm, and who takes weapons?> Arbron asked.

<I have four days of seniority over you,> I said coolly. <I take the helm.>

I could see that he wanted to argue. He wanted to fly the fighter, of course. But there was no chance I was going to miss out on flying my first combat mission. No chance. And I did have seniority.

<Okay,> Arbron said coldly. <You fly it. I'll shoot. Not that we'll be doing any shooting.>

The inside of a fighter is not exactly roomy. This was an older model, built for two, but it was still not exactly big.

<Figures they'd give us an old piece of junk Model Fourteen to fly,> I said, staring at the controls as if I'd never seen them before.

<What did you expect them to give us? A brand-new Model Twenty-two?>

For a second I forgot that this was my first official combat command. I shot a glance at Arbron, and the two of us almost burst out laughing.

<This is great,> I said.

<I just wish it was Yeerks, not some old Skrit Na,> Arbron said.

I closed my main eyes, leaving only my stalk eyes open. I wanted to focus. I had been trained on fighters, of course. I was pretty good as a pilot. But still, I was going to be flying alongside Prince Breeyar in his personal squadron. Everyone in the squadron was a great fighter pilot. And Breeyar could just about fly a fighter through a black hole and back out again.

I deeply did not want anything to go wrong. The thought of how humiliated I'd be if I missed a turn or something was too awful to think about.

<Power up,> I told the ship's systems. <Prepare for launch.>

You could feel the old fighter come alive. The monitors glowed. The floor hummed and vibrated up through my legs. I touched a screen with my fingers and the viewport became transparent. We could see directly out now, through an actual window, not just a screen. Of course we were still in the fighter bay inside the Dome ship, so there wasn't anything to see.

<Automatic launch sequence begins in ten seconds,> the prince called. <Simultaneous drop. Go to burn on my mark. Acceleration standard.>

<Weapons powered,> Arbron told me.

<Five seconds to launch,> the computer said.

<Please don't let me screw this up,> I prayed. I thought I'd said it silently till I noticed Arbron nodding in agreement.

<Two seconds,> the computer prompted.

<Hold on,> I said.

FWOOOOOSH!

We were blown out the hatch, out into black space. Ahead of us, four other fighters, all Model 22s, dropped from the bottom of the Dome ship's fighter bay.

<Intercept team, go to burn,> the prince said with total calm.

Two of the fighters lit up their engines. With a brilliant blue glow, the two fighters flashed out of sight into the black of space.

I waited with my fingers just millimeters above the engine control pad. I was not going to miss my cue.

<Chase team, go to burn,> the prince said.

I punched the control pad and it was like we'd been kicked in the back.

SHWWWWOOOOOOOOOOOF!

We were out of there! Out! Of! There!

Unfortunately, we had taken off so fast we'd shot right past the prince's own fighter.

<Ahhhh! Oh, no! No!> I ordered the computer

to match velocity with the other fighters. Something I should have done to start with.

<Hello, Elfangor! Hello-o. You forgot: These old Model Fourteens accelerate faster from a cold start,> Arbron pointed out.

The next thing I heard in my mind was the prince. <You may want to ease back just a little, *Aristh* Elfangor,> he said.

I was relieved he didn't reprimand me. But I was burning with embarrassment. There it was: my big chance to look like a veteran. And I'd looked like an amateur.

I maneuvered my fighter back into formation behind the other two chase fighters.

Arbron brought the Skrit Na raider up on the holographic imager. It was very different than any Andalite ship. Our fighters were elongated ovals with two long, cylindrical engines attached by stubby "wings" on either side. Our main weapon, or shredder, arced overhead much like an Andalite tail.

The Skrit Na ship was round, with tapered sides. It looked like a fat disc. You could hardly even see where the engines were, and the Skrit Na had blinking colored lights all around it. I guess they find that attractive or something.

<Intercept in place,> came the report from the two intercept ships. They had gone into a danger-

ous Maximum Burn to get well out in front of the Skrit Na and cut off escape. Now we just had to sneak up calmly behind them.

Then . . .

<What the. . . . Sir, there is a second Skrit Na ship out here! It was hidden from sensors by the rings of this planet. Repeat, there is a second Skrit Na raider.>

Prince Breeyar rapped his orders. <Okay, you two on intercept go after the *new* target. Everyone else, with me.>

I looked at Arbron. We both nodded. It was getting more complicated now. We could actually have a fight!

Suddenly a bright blue engine flame shot from the bottom of the nearer Skrit Na.

<He's running,> the prince said. He sounded calm, but you could still tell he was excited. There isn't a fighter pilot alive who doesn't enjoy a good chase.

The Skrit Na ship hauled. And we hauled after him.

Then, to my total shock, the Skrit Na fired his weapons!

<Hey, look out!> Arbron yelled.

A thin beam of greenish light lanced toward the prince's fighter. It missed!

<Whoa,> the prince laughed. <That woke me up. Return fire, but only if you can hit the engine pod underneath. Repeat, aim only for the engines. There may be innocent creatures on that ship.>

A split second later, the prince fired and missed. His wingman fired and also missed.

It hadn't even occurred to me that Arbron would actually want to take the risk of shooting. But then he said, <So, Elfangor, how about if we just see how fast this old tub will accelerate?>

I didn't need to be asked twice. I punched up Maximum Burn, and we went to one-tenth light speed in about three seconds!

<Yaaaahhh!> WHAM!

<Yaaaahhh!> WHAM!

The acceleration was outrageous! The compensators were slow and we were thrown back against the bulkhead.

I fought to get back on my feet and to the controls. I renewed my thought-speak link to the computer. <Boost the compensators!>

The computer adjusted and we climbed painfully to our feet. Arbron reached his weapons station and took aim. I heard the hum of the shredder powering up, followed quickly by the sound of firing.

Hmmmm. TSEEEWWWW!

<Yes! Yes! Yes!> Arbron yelled.

The shredder beam sliced through space and burned away a section of the Skrit Na's engines. The blue engine flame died instantly.

It was the most beautiful thing I'd seen up to that point in my life. But at the same time I felt a wave of jealousy that Arbron had taken the shot and not me.

<Good job,> Prince Breeyar said. <Nice flying, nice shooting.>

Of course he only complimented us because we were *arisths*. I mean, for the regular pilots it would have been no big deal. But who cared? Prince Breeyar had said we did a good job.

<He said "good job,"> Arbron said to me. <He did actually say it, right? I wasn't imagining things?>

<The prince said "good job,"> I confirmed, relishing the words.

At that moment I just loved being alive. I even loved Arbron, as annoying as he was sometimes. This was why I'd joined the military. This was why I'd become an *aristh*. This was what it was all about.

<All right, my little *arisths*,> the prince said affectionately. <Now that you've given us all a lesson in good shooting, show us how you board an enemy ship. Don't forget to download their onboard computer. Is either one of you qualified for exo-datology?>

<*Aristh* Arbron is a very qualified exo-datologist,>

I said truthfully.

Arbron gave me a dirty look.

<Well, you *are*, Arbron,> I said defensively.

See, it's kind of a slight insult to say an *aristh* is good with computers. That's like a technician thing, not a warrior thing. Even though warriors are supposed to be good at all kinds of science and art as well as fighting.

<Good,> the prince said. <And, hey, don't bang your stalks on the low ceilings over there.>

<Yes, sir,> I replied. <No problem.>

I was on top of the universe. I was a hero-in-waiting. Practically a prince already. The war with the Yeerks would be over just as soon as I could get in the game.

I was a fool.

chapter 4

I guess most people know about the Skrit Na.

But in case you don't, I'll tell you what I know.

The Skrit Na don't care what anyone else in the galaxy thinks about them. They don't belong to the Yeerk Empire. They aren't one of our allies. They don't care about laws or customs or anything.

All the Skrit Na care about is collecting things and owning things.

The Skrit Na are unusual in another way: They are actually like two different races. The Skrit look like huge insects, almost as large as an Andalite. They have fourteen legs and six sets of antennae, and aren't really very intelligent. But the Skrit each eventually weave a cocoon and a year later, out of the dead Skrit there pops a Na.

The Na are a whole different story. The Na have four very slender legs. Sometimes they rear up and walk on just two legs, using the other legs as hands. They have large heads shaped like Andalite heads, only they have just two huge eyes.

Skrit Na are constantly going to peaceful planets

and kidnapping the local species. Sometimes they perform medical experiments on them. Sometimes they just fly around with them and then let them go. But often they carry local creatures away to add them to zoos on the Skrit Na home world.

Like I said: a weird species. No one understands the Skrit Na. Personally, I don't think they understand themselves.

I pulled our fighter up alongside the damaged Skrit Na ship and turned on the tractor beam to hold the two ships tightly together.

The Skrit Na decided to make it easy. I guess they figured they'd made us mad enough. Skrit Na are no match for Andalite power.

I married my hatch to the Skrit Na hatch and popped it open. I equalized gravities and marched as boldly as I could into the captured ship, with Ar-bron just behind me.

There was smoke in the other ship. And there seemed to be storage boxes strewn here and there. Two clumsy Skrit lumbered past, kicking through the debris. The ceiling pressed low, and I had to duck my head or risk bruising my stalk eyes. A pair of cocooned Skrit were more or less glued to a corner of the ceiling. One looked about ready to hatch a Na.

There were three Na that I could see. The Na captain was pressed back against his command con-

sole. He looked scared. But not of me. He was glaring angrily at a bizarre creature that had a Skrit Na hand weapon, a modified Yeerk Dracon beam, pointed at the Na captain.

The bizarre creature stood just a bit shorter than me. And what was incredible was that it stood on just two legs.

Just two. It had arms, but you could see that it didn't use them to walk. They wouldn't have been long enough.

The creature's face was the same size as mine, but rounder. There were two small bluish eyes on the front of its face. And the lower third of the face was split open horizontally.

Many species have such openings. They're called mouths.

Its body had no fur, but did have brightly colored skin that seemed to hang loosely in some areas. Its upper body was covered in loose, almost billowy, white skin with tiny pastel patterns. Its two legs were covered in a rough-textured blue skin that stopped suddenly at its hooves. The hooves were white and adorned with what looked like thick threads or cables laced together.

But what caught my eye was the hair that sprouted from its head. It was long and wavy and as gold as a yellow sun.

"Freeze, horse-boy," this bizarre creature said,

making the sounds with its mouth. It turned the Dracon beam on me. "One move and I pull the trigger. I don't know what this gun will do, but I'm willing to bet you won't like it."

Of course, at that point all I heard was gibberish sounds. The translator chip, which all members of the Andalite military have implanted in their heads, requires a few minutes to begin to understand new languages. Some languages it never does get right. Fortunately, almost all species can understand our thought-speak since it works at a level beyond mere words.

"Be careful, Andalite friend," the Na captain said. "They are savage, violent beings. Crazy! Wild! Oh, yes! This female is a vicious beast! Better to kill her! Or even better, let us cage her again. Yes, yes, that would be best. As soon as you mistakenly fired on us., she sprang up and grabbed my weapon. Wild and dangerous, oh, yes!"

The translator chip handled the Na language easily. I didn't bother to answer the Na. Everyone knows Skrit Na will lie to anyone about anything.

The Na captain winked one of his big eyes at me. As if he and I were on the same side. His fellow Na officers all looked scared. The Skrit went on with their simple duties like nothing was happening.

To be honest with you, I didn't know what to do. I was as confused as the Skrit Na.

The only one who seemed to have a clue was the bizarre two-legged creature herself.

<Talk to her,> Arbron suggested. <Use your charm, Elfangor.>

<Urn . . . whoever you are . . . whatever you are, don't fire that weapon. Put it down.>

"Yeah, right. Hey. Hey, wait a minute! I can hear you in my head, but you're not really talking."

Suddenly the translator chip had heard enough. It began providing instantaneous translation. I could understand her.

<I am in charge here,> I said firmly. <Drop the weapon!>

"Uh-uh. Nope. I don't think so, horse-boy. I'm tired of being kidnapped and dragged off by giant cockroaches and little green men from Mars."

<Excuse me, but we are here to rescue you,> Arbron said.

<Exactly. What these Skrit Na have done to you is wrong. That's why we captured this ship.>

I spoke like I would to a child. Obviously, this species was primitive. They didn't even have tails.

<What little green men?> Arbron asked. <They aren't green. The Na are gray.>

The female narrowed her already narrow eyes. The Dracon beam in her hand wavered. "I'd already captured this ship before you two came along. Me and the other guy. And we're both just kids, which

shows you that these Martian jerks aren't all that tough. He's in the back, knocked out. The other guy, I mean. But I grabbed this gun away from Twinkle there." She jerked her head in the direction of the Na captain.

The translator chip had no translation for the word "twinkie." Evidently "twinkie" was some kind of word for "alien."

<Well, we don't mean you any harm,> I said as calmly as I could. <How about this idea? You can keep the Dracon beam, just don't point it at anyone.>

The female looked at the weapon. "It's called a Dracon beam, huh? What's it do?"

Arbron answered before I could suggest he shut up. <It fires an energy beam which causes an exceedingly painful death. Which is why we'd really prefer it if you didn't fire it.>

"Oh. A phaser. Like on that old Star Trek show. I can't believe they took that off the air. Now it's just on reruns."

I had nothing to say to that because I had no idea what she was talking about. I looked to Arbron. He shook his head. No, he didn't understand, either. Translator chips have limits.

<If you come with us, we'll treat you well. And we will return you to your home planet.>

"Earth?"

<Is that the name of the third planet in this system?>

"Yeah."

<And are you an Earther?>

"Human. That's what we are: humans. Me and the other guy."

<And we are Andalites. My name is Elfangor. This is Arbron.>

Arbron had gone over to the nearest Skrit Na control panel. He was downloading a copy of all their computer files as Prince Breeyar had ordered. It's standard procedure whenever you board an alien craft.

"You look like centaurs, only with scorpion tails. And the extra eyeballs up on top of your heads . . ."

She seemed to hesitate. Suddenly she turned the Dracon beam around and handed it to me, handle first.

<Thank you,> I said. I reached to take the Dracon beam from her and my fingers brushed hers. For some reason I looked at her long golden hair.

"My name is Loren," she said. "This is all kind of amazing. Most humans don't even believe in aliens. But, well, here you are. Real and all. Unless I'm dreaming."

<Do humans dream?> I asked her, surprised. "I do. Every night."

<So do I. But I guess we have very different dreams.>

Then Loren smiled. It's a thing humans do by turning the corners of their mouths upward. "Maybe," she said. "Maybe not."

chapter 5

We led Loren over to our fighter, and then we carried the second human across. He was unconscious. Bright red blood ran from a cut above his left eye.

<Red blood?> Arbron said. <Red? Yuck.>

I was trying to act more mature than Arbron, but to tell you the truth, blood that color creeped me out, too. Still, I didn't think humans looked ugly or anything. Not like the Skrit or Taxxons, which are seriously ugly species. Nor did they look dangerous, like the Hork-Bajir.

Mostly they looked funny. I'd never seen a species that walked on just two legs without even a tail to help with balance. Arbron said what I was thinking. <All it would take is one little push and they'd fall right over. Earth must be hysterical! Humans falling forward and back, falling all over the place. No wonder they are so primitive. They probably spend all their time just trying to stand up.>

We were almost back to the Dome ship when

the second human woke up. We'd left the Skrit Na to try to figure out how to fix their ship. That was their problem.

Hey, no one told them to shoot at us. Right? "

Unh," the human moaned.

He was larger than Loren. Maybe two or three inches larger. His hair was brown, not golden, and it was cut short. His eyes were also brown, not blue like Loren's.

Loren went to him and bent her legs in such a way that she could kneel down beside him. Arbron and I exchanged a look of amazement. It had to be hard to kneel like that and not fall.

"Hey, kid, you okay?" Loren asked.

The wounded human opened his eyes and blinked. He stared hard at me. "What happened?"

Loren shrugged. "Now we have a different bunch of aliens. Who'da guessed there were so many people zipping around outer space? Are you okay? That big cockroach popped you pretty good back there."

<You have nothing to fear,> I said gently. <You are safe now.>

The human felt his wound and looked at the red blood. He seemed almost as grossed out as I was. But he climbed to his feet. Which involved using his hands, noticed. Humans seem to have stronger hands than we have.

<I am Elfangor. This is Arbron. We are Andalites. We will return you to your home planet.>

The human nodded slowly. "Telepathy. You use telepathy to talk." His gaze traveled to my stalk eyes, back to my face, then to my tail. "That tail is a weapon, isn't it? Is it poisonous or does it just cut?"

I decided right then that I didn't like this human as much as Loren. I didn't like him much at all. <I politely told you my name, human,> I said coldly. <Now, I require *your* name.>

The human gave me a look that seemed insolent. Although who can really tell what an alien facial expression means?

"My name is Hedrick, actually. But I prefer my last name. Most people call me by my last name: Chapman."

"I think these Andalites are okay," Loren said to Chapman. "At least they're better-looking than the last bunch. And they've promised to —"

"Shut up," Chapman snapped. "I'm not interested in the opinion of a kid."

"Kid? Hey, you big jerk, who was it that got the weapon after the ship stopped moving? *Me*. And who was it that was cringing in the back, begging for mercy? You. And anyway, I'd be surprised if you're even a year older than me."

Chapman's face grew pink. A fascinating thing

to watch. He clenched his jaw tightly. "And now it seems your heroics were pointless. We're prisoners again. And I have a feeling we won't be grabbing guns away from these Andalites."

Suddenly, he lunged forward toward the Dracon beam in my hand! Without even thinking, I whipped my tail forward and pressed the blade against Chapman's throat.

Chapman laughed. "See that? See how fast he was? Couldn't even see that tail move." Again he gave me an insolent look. "What did you say your species is called? Andalites? Well, I have a feeling you guys are a little more dangerous than you pretend to be, despite all your polite talk and promises."

I felt like a fool. Not for the first time that day. The human Chapman had been testing me.

<We need to prepare to dock with the Dome ship,> Arbron reminded me.

I went through the docking procedure, moving the fighter back inside the fighter bay. I concentrated on my work, but I was upset. I didn't like the human named Chapman. I didn't like his suspicion toward me. After all, we had rescued him from a future as a zoo animal on the Skrit Na home world. He should be grateful.

But maybe that's the way humans are. I've heard

there are species that can't handle anyone helping them. They'd rather die than ever be in debt to someone.

But judging by Loren, not all humans were that way.

Not your problem, Elfangor, I told myself. Just turn the humans over to the captain. Not your problem at all.

But I was wrong. The humans *were* my problem. In fact, I was about to have lots of problems.

chapter 6

<Okay, this part is a little tricky,> I told Loren and Chapman. We were moving from the central shaft out onto the dome floor. There's a ninety-degree gravity change at that point. I mean, "down" in the main shaft is a different direction from "down" on the dome floor. It's confusing at first.

We were safely aboard the *StarSword* and Arbron and I were giving the humans a brief tour. The debriefing officers were too busy to see us yet, I guess, and we couldn't figure out what else to do with the humans.

<You just walk naturally along the curving floor,> I explained. <I know it looks like you're walking off the edge of a cliff, but the artificial gravity will move with you.>

Arbron and I held our breath, watching the ungainly two-legged creatures trying to stay upright. Amazingly, they did it.

<They have very excellent balance,> Arbron whispered.

<They'd have to.>

We emerged from the shaft out onto the grass of the dome and Loren cried out.

"It's huge! It's like a whole park in here! Trees. Grass. Flowers. Wow."

<You have these kinds of things on your planet?> I asked her.

"Well, similar. Our trees are almost always green. And the grass is all green, too. More green than this, I mean, not so much blue. And no red."

<If you are hungry, please feel free to eat as much as you like,> I suggested.

"Eat what?" Chapman asked.

I waved my arm widely to indicate the entire dome. <We have seventeen species of grass in thirty different flavors.>

"Grass? You eat grass?" Loren asked.

Chapman nodded thoughtfully. "That's why you have the dome, isn't it? You graze. Like horses or cows. Only you don't have mouths. So how do you eat?"

<Wait a minute, you eat with your mouths?> Arbron asked.

"How else are you going to eat?" Chapman said.

<With your hooves, like any sensible creature,> Arbron said. Then he laughed. <Do you mean that on Earth humans walk around pressing their mouths to the ground to eat?> He looked at me. <Okay,

even you have to admit *that* would be funny to see.>

Chapman started to explain how humans ate but it was hard to picture, really. It involved spearing chunks of hot, dead animals and stuffing them in the mouth. But I refused to believe that was really how they ate. I assumed Chapman was making things up. Later I found out the truth.

In any case, I was relieved when Loren interrupted Chapman's gruesome story to ask, "Do you mind if I take my shoes off? We've been cooped up in that Skritchey Nose flying saucer. It'd be nice to walk on the grass."

Of course, I had no objection because I had no idea what a "shoe" was. And I could certainly identify with the idea of running on the grass. I was hungry, too.

But then Loren sat down on the grass and began ripping her hooves off! Ripping the very hooves from her legs!

<What are you doing!> I cried. <Stop that! Stop! Why are you hurting yourself?>

"What? What are you yelling about?"

<You're going to hurt yourself, and I don't think our doctors know how to help humans,> I said.

Loren stared at me. She was still holding her leg awkwardly in her two hands. Then she laughed out loud.

It was an alarming, yet strangely pleasing, sound.

"These aren't hooves, Elfangor," she said. "They're shoes. See?" She untied the tiny ropes and before I could stop her, she ripped the white hoof clear off!

<N0000!> I moaned.

<Ahhhhh!> Arbron yelled.

But Loren was not in pain. And there was no blood. Then she removed a layer of white skin from the exposed leg end. Suddenly, I was staring at five tiny pink fingers. They were growing from her leg.

"See? This is my foot. We don't have hooves. And we wear shoes over our feet. See? They keep the rocks or whatever from hurting our feet."

I felt a wave of intense pity. What had gone wrong in the evolution of this species? The entire species had to cover its "feet" to keep from being injured? An entire race crippled?

Suddenly the funny mental image of a planet of humans falling over all the time was replaced by the sad picture of a species of cripples, hobbling along on their weak, injured "feet" and covering them with artificial hooves.

Loren stood up on her delicate pink feet with their ridiculous, short pink fingers and started to run across the grass. She wasn't very fast, but she obviously wasn't crippled.

And then she did something amazing. She

turned her head around. She turned the entire thing so it was pointing backward. "Come on!"

But I couldn't move. I noticed Arbron was as amazed as I was.

<What the . . . what's she doing?> he asked. Then it dawned on him. <It's because they only have two eyes! They turn their heads around to see behind them!>

I stifled an urge to laugh. I broke into a gentle trot and quickly caught up to Loren.

"Feels ... good ... to stretch ... my muscles," she said, speaking in a halting way as she ran.

She stopped running and twirled around. Twirled right around, and her golden hair flew out behind her. That was something to see. A two-legged creature can twirl better than a normal person.

"I was sure I was going to die on that flying saucer," she said. "But here I am! Amazing." <I guess this all seems very strange.>

"Oh, yeah. Strange isn't half of it. This is a beautiful tree. Pink leaves. Incredible."

<It's called a therant tree. It's in its creast phase. Do you see the way the grasses become more gelasic and less escalic as they grow near? That is because —>

I stopped talking then, because Loren casually reached up and touched a low branch. There was nothing wrong with that, of course. But then she

wrapped both her hands around the branch and lifted herself clear up off the ground!

That alone was a miracle. But as she stretched, I saw the white, pastel-marked skin of her upper body come loose! It lifted away and revealed a layer of pinkish, tan underneath that matched her face and arm skin.

Arbron came running, with Chapman struggling to catch up.

Loren held herself suspended and laughed at us. I guess we'd been staring.

<Very strong arms!> Arbron remarked. <Can you imagine lifting your whole body up with your arms?>

<That skin is very strange,> I said. <It's almost as if it's not attached.>

Loren let herself drop back to the grass. And she didn't even fall over.

"It's not skin," Chapman said. "It's called clothing. Like the artificial hooves? This is artificial skin. It keeps us warm."

<You're cold?>

"No. But that's why we have clothing. To keep us warm in cold places."

<Why would you be in cold places?> I asked, curiosity overcoming my dislike for the human.

He shrugged his powerful human shoulders. Shoulders capable of lifting his entire body. "Parts of

Earth are very cold. Parts of it are so cold you'd die without many layers of clothing."

<But why do you live in those places?> I asked.

Chapman smiled. It was interesting, because already I was getting the feeling that not all human smiles were pleasant. "We're not going to be kept out of a place just because the weather's bad. We adapt. We grab whatever's available and make the best of it. At least that's my motto: Grab what you can."

I would have asked him more, but just then the call came for Arbron to go to debriefing. And I was ordered to take the humans to a holding room.

chapter 7

<What? WHAT? Leave the ship?!> I screeched.
<What do you mean, leave the ship?!>

Arbron did not look any happier than I was. <They just *told* me, okay? They didn't ask my opinion. The captain called me from debriefing, had me run to the bridge, said, "You and *Aristh* Elfangor be at Docking Bay Seven in ten minutes," and I said, "Yes, sir.">

I had taken the humans to a holding, room. And then, while waiting for my own debriefing I'd gone back to the dome to eat. I was very hungry. I was on my way to check back on Loren when Arbron intercepted me.

<This can't be right,> I moaned. <The *StarSword* is my home. We're going to find that Yeerk task force and destroy them.>

<Yeah, yeah, I know. And you'll be a big hero and they'll make you a prince without even slowing down to make you a warrior.>

<That's not what I was thinking,> I lied.

<Well, forget it. Come on. We move out immediately. We're supposed to meet up with our commander for this mission.>

Something about the tone of Arbron's thought-speak made me wary. <Our commander? Who's our commander?>

<None other than War-prince Alloran-Semitur-Corrass,> Arbron said.

Both my hearts sank into my hooves. Alloran. Alloran, the disgraced. So this mission was definitely not a reward from the captain. Alloran had once been a great warrior and prince. But he had been disgraced. I didn't know why. No one talked about it. Everyone just knew that Alloran had broken some law or custom.

Being sent off on some stupid side mission with a disgraced war-prince was not a good thing.

I couldn't believe it. This ship was my home. I didn't want to leave her, not even for a while. It could take a long time before we could rejoin the *StarSword*, and by then, who knew? Maybe by some miracle the entire war would be over.

Which would be good, I supposed.

<What's in Docking Bay Seven, anyway?> I grumbled as we reached the right door.

Arbron swung his stalks back and forth in a "who knows?" gesture.

We opened the door to Docking Bay Seven. And there, standing awkwardly on their two legs, were Loren and Chapman. Behind them stood Alloran.

I had seen War-prince Alloran around the Dome ship at times. He'd always seemed to be deep in thought. Like he was off somewhere in his imagination or memory. He was not especially large. But he seemed to be carved from solid steel. Even his fur was a metallic blue. And the bare flesh of his upper body showed faint traces of burn scars.

Beyond Alloran was a ship I had never seen before. It hovered just inches above the polished floor. It was three times the size of any fighter I'd ever encountered. The main section was a fantastically elongated oval that stretched way out in front of three oversized, swept-back engines. Three engines, not the usual two! And coming up overhead was the long, gracefully arced spike of the main shredder.

Oh, she was a thing of beauty. I had never fallen in love with a machine before, but, oh, that ship was sweet.

<I see you like my little toy, aristh,> Alloran said. <It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen,> I said. <Like . . . like a work of art.>

<I designed her myself. I call her the Jahar. It's my wife's name.>

<Prince Alloran, what is our mission?> Arbron asked.

The prince sighed a little, but when he spoke he was firm and correct. <We are to take these two aliens back to their planet, erase their recent memories, and rejoin the StarSword whenever we can.>

<Transport work,> I said. I didn't exactly sneer, but I felt like sneering. We were just running a silly errand.

"Excuse me? Erase my memory?" Loren said. "No one is erasing my memory."

<It's necessary,> I said as kindly as I could. <Your civilization is not ready for what you've encountered. If you go back to your Earth, you'll have to have all memory of this erased.>

The two humans looked at each other. The one called Chapman made a snorting sound from his nose. Loren made a facial expression that looked troubled. At least that's how it looked to me.

<Let's move, arisths,> Alloran ordered. <Load the aliens. The captain wants to go to Z-space five minutes from now, and by then we have to be well clear of the Dome ship. Your personal belongings have already been brought from your quarters.>

No one was in a good mood as we walked up the ramp into the Jahar. The humans were stone-faced, angry, perhaps afraid. Arbron and I were

both grim, feeling we'd been shoved off on some stupid side trip. And Alloran could not have been exactly thrilled, either. He was a great war-prince. And here he was running errands with only a pair of *arisths* under his command.

The one good thing was the *Jahar*. It was as beautiful inside as out. There were small but luxurious quarters. And there was good green and blue grass under our feet, not hard steel. By some trick of gravity manipulation Alloran had even created a small waterfall in one corner that went down, splashed into a pool, then fell back upward to fall all over again.

Alloran took the helm, which left Arbron and me with nothing to do. He executed a smooth launch out of the docking bay, and then, suddenly, we were out in black space, looking up through the real windows at the Dome ship.

The *StarSword* was silhouetted against the bright rings of the sixth planet.

"Oh, my God," Loren gasped. "That's Saturn!"

As I watched, the *StarSword*'s engines glowed brilliant blue and the Dome ship picked up speed. Faster and faster, till suddenly, with a flash, she translated into Zero-space and disappeared.

"Faster-than-light travel?" Chapman marveled. "It's physically impossible!"

<True. But Z-space travel doesn't involve going

fast. It involves tunneling through anti-space, what we call Zero-space, and then back into the normal universe at another point,> Arbron said.

"But I suppose you Andalites keep the secret to yourselves, eh?" Chapman said.

<Not always,> Alloran said darkly. <Once we shared it. The result was the Yeerk Empire that threatens all decent species. Be glad you are safe on your simple planet, alien. The galaxy is not a happy place to be anymore.>

Alloran entered the destination into the computer. We would make one brief Zero-space jump to approach Earth. But Z-drive travel is not very precise. Even if we were lucky, we'd probably emerge a million miles from Earth itself. It would be a trip of many days to get there.

<Make the aliens comfortable, *arisths*,> Alloran ordered.

<Prince, afterward may I use your ship's computers?> Arbron asked. <I have a copy of the Skrit Na download and I thought I spotted something strange.>

<An exo-datologist, eh?> Alloran said with a slight sneer. <The new ideal: warrior, scientist, artist. It's not enough to be a fighter anymore, eh? They want a gentler, more balanced, more intellectual sort of warrior nowadays.>

Arbron looked helplessly at me. <I guess so,

War-prince Alloran. I mean, that's what they teach us, anyway.>

For a while Alloran said nothing. He just stared blankly, not at anyone. Or at least not at anyone in that room. <The Electorate wants war without slaughter. They want a clean, neat, honorable war. Fools.>

I was shocked. You didn't call the Electorate fools. You just didn't.

<Sir . . . ,> Arbron asked timidly. <The computer . . . ?>

<What? Oh, yes. The computer. Why not? Use it all you like,> the prince said. <We're in for a long, boring ride.>

chapter 8

It was a long, boring trip. We came out of Zero-space halfway between the orbits of Earth and a planet Loren called Mars.

We had to travel through conventional space. And we had to keep our speed down so as not to distort time too much. If we'd gone to Maximum Burn all the way to Earth, we'd have gotten there in a few hours. But on the planet, years would have passed. That's relativity for you.

I had little to do. Alloran brooded alone at the helm, or else went to his quarters. And Arbron seemed to have found some project to keep him busy. He spent his time at the computer, muttering.

It was a side of Arbron I'd never really seen. Mostly he never seemed to take anything very seriously. At least he never took *me* seriously. But now he was spending days at the console.

Whenever I asked him what he was doing, he'd just say, <Unraveling a mystery.>

So I spent most of my time with the two humans. Or at least with Loren. Chapman was as

brooding as Alloran. I stood beside Loren at the window, and looked out at the blue and white planet.

Loren did a thing she called "sitting." It's funny to see at first. But of course very practical for a two-legged creature.

"The brown-and-green parts are land," Loren was explaining. "The blue is ocean. Water. See the bright white at the bottom? That's ice. It's called Antarctica. It's very cold."

<What sort of ice? Frozen carbon dioxide? Methane?>

"Water. Just frozen water."

<Ah. Of course. That would make sense. And where do you live?>

"Well, see that continent there? The one on the upper left part of the planet? See where the line between night and day is? Almost right on that line." She bit her lip. A lip is a mouth part. "My mom must be dying from worry. I've been gone for four days already."

Dying? Humans could die of emotion? <Yes, but soon you will be home. Then she won't worry anymore. Maybe she won't have to die.>

Loren smiled. "That's just an expression."

Then I noticed that there were glistening drops in her eyes.

"Do you have a mother at home? Does she worry about you?"

I felt a little uncomfortable talking about my parents. An *aristh* in deep space can't start getting all homesick. Especially since Prince Alloran was nearby, able to overhear everything.

<I guess she does. My father doesn't, though. He was in the military, too, when he was young. Of course, we had peace then. I guess maybe they do worry I'll get hurt or whatever.>

"We just had a war," Loren said. "That's . . . that's what happened to my dada He was in it. He didn't get killed or anything. But he kind of . . . I don't know. After he came back I guess he couldn't cope with reality. So he left."

saw Alloran's stalk eyes swivel to look at Loren. It was practically the first time he'd even noticed her.

<You have wars?> I asked. <But you don't have space travel. Who do you fight?>

Chapman arrived then, having arisen from a nap in his quarters. "We fight each other," he said. He winked one eye. "So, Loren, Daddy went nutso, huh? Another whacked-out 'Nam vet? I guess some guys can't take it."

Loren's eyes went wide, and then she turned on Chapman.

But it was Alloran who spoke. <Have you been in a war, human?> he asked Chapman.

"Me? No. Of course not. That war's over."

<Then be quiet, fool. Those who have been to war understand. Those who have not have no opinion worth hearing.> He looked directly at Loren. <Even those who return from war may never really come home.>

Alloran turned his stalk eyes back to the helm, and said nothing more. Chapman shrugged, but I could see he was intrigued by Alloran.

So was I, to be honest. What was he talking about? I'd never heard of an Andalite warrior coming back from the war unable to cope, as Loren had put it. Or "whacked-out," as Chapman had said. Why would Alloran feel such sympathy?

"Anyway . . .," Loren began, "tell me this. When you erase my memory, I won't remember any of this? Not even you?"

I didn't answer. What could I say?

"It's okay, I'm not mad at you," Loren said. "You're taking us home. And you saved us from those Skritchys Noses."

<Skrit Na,> I corrected.

"I know. It was a joke. Maybe not a very funny joke, I guess."

<Ah. Humor. Yes, Arbron does that sometimes.> "But not you?"

<I guess I'm not very funny.>

Loren tossed her head in such a way that her long golden hair shimmered very nicely. "That's okay. I like serious guys. I guess if my memory is going to be erased, it won't hurt if I ask questions. So. How come you don't have mouths?" she asked.

Chapman seemed to snap out of a reverie. He'd been looking at Alloran. Now he joined the conversation. "Loren, how can he answer that question? He doesn't have a mouth. We do. Why do we have mouths? Stupid question. I have a better question." He looked closely at me, focusing first on my stalk eyes, and then back down on my main eyes. Like he couldn't make up his mind where to look.

"Look, Elfangor, maybe we got off to a bad start, you and me. I wasn't in a great mood, you know? But hey, you guys are really missing out on something here. Do you have any idea how much money we could get for this technology on Earth? I mean, you could ask for anything!"

It was my turn to laugh. <What would we do with Earth money?>

He shrugged. "Okay, forget money. How about power? We could snap our fingers and have all the residents and prime ministers on Earth waiting on us. We could rule."

<We're Andalites,> I said, <not Yeerks. We aren't interested in ruling other species.>

"Ah. Well, that's good, I guess. Yeah, that's a good thing. But we could bring peace to Earth. No more wars."

<Okay. That's it. That's it. Elfangor!> It was Arbron. He'd been totally absorbed in staring at the computer display. He'd barely spoken for the last two days.

I went to him. I was glad to be away from Chapman. He bothered me. He was completely different than the human Loren.

<What is it?> I asked Arbron as I came to stand beside him. I looked past him to the computer display. It showed a power field, lines of intensity in three dimensions. But it also showed lines extending strongly into Zero-space.

It was impossible. A simulation of some sort. A fake.

Arbron turned only his stalk eyes toward me. <This is from the Skrit Na ship. From the computer download. It was encrypted, but I broke the code. I've been going through the ship's log. A bunch of stupid stuff, mostly. Junk. But yesterday I found this. I've been trying to figure it out, because, see, there's no way these sensor readings can be right. But now I think I've got it. I know what it is.> He turned all the way to face me. <Elfangor, I think this is *real*.>

For several seconds we both just stared at each

other. <This can't be,> I said. <Any first-year student could tell you this is impossible. Unless . . .> I felt a chill run up my spine. <Alloran! Prince Alloran! Sir, you should see this.>

The prince turned away from the helm and trotted back to us. <What is it, *arisths*?> he said wearily. But then his stalk eyes focused on the screen. A second later he was staring with full intensity at the image there. <Computer. Cross-check for any visual files!> To Arbron and me he said, <They would have made more recordings!>

And then it appeared. It simply appeared on the computer screen.

It was perfectly spherical. A simple white sphere.

It looked harmless, even dull. And yet it was the most dangerous, deadly weapon any race had ever created.

Because of what it was, it could not be physically destroyed. But it had been hidden. As we watched, dumbfounded and afraid, the computer replayed the Skrit Na computer log.

It had been hidden on the planet called Earth. It had been buried deep in the ground in a desolate-looking area of blowing sand. And a huge stone pyramid had been raised over it.

Hidden for fifty thousand years.

Hidden on an insignificant planet at the far end of the galaxy. And now it had reappeared.

"Hey, what's the matter with you guys?" Loren asked. "You all look like you've seen a ghost."

<The Time Matrix!> Arbron said. <I thought it was just a myth.>

<The second Skrit Na ship!> I yelled, suddenly realizing the truth. <The Skrit Na dug it up. They have it aboard the second ship, the one that escaped into Zero-space!>

I looked to Alloran. To my surprise, his eyes were alight with fierce pleasure. <The Time Matrix! Hidden for fifty thousand years, and now dug up by the Skrit Na. The deadliest weapon in all of galactic history . . . and no one but us to go and get it back.>

It was as if Alloran were suddenly ten years younger. <Elfangor! Arbron! Get back on that Skrit Na computer log, both of you. We need to know where that second ship ran to! Now!>

He turned to Loren and Chapman. <I apologize, aliens, but we cannot take you straight back to your planet. There is no time to waste. The existence of the entire galaxy is at stake!>

Arbron looked at me and sent me a private thought-speak message. <I guess we may still get a chance at being heroes.>

chapter 9

Arbron and I tore that Skrit Na computer download apart. And before we translated into Zero-space we had a destination in mind. One of the last places in the universe that any sensible Andalite would ever want to go.

The Taxxon home world.

As we spent timeless time traveling through the blank white nondistance of Zero-space, Alloran called a council. It was just for the three of us, but the Jahar was too small for us to keep the two humans out. They squatted on the floor near our hooves.

We excluded them from our thought-speak at first, keeping our conversation private.

<Taxxon home world is our destination,> Alloran said. <But the Skrit Na would not be taking the Time Matrix there. So I believe the Skrit Na don't know what they have. They saw strange power patterns and decided, with the usual Skrit Na simplemindedness, to steal first and figure it out later.>

<I agree, sir,> Arbron said. <If they knew they

had the Time Matrix they'd do one of two things. Head straight for the Yeerk home world to sell it to the Yeerks. Or else head home to use it for their own people. But the Taxxon home world is —>

"Hey. Hey!" Chapman interrupted. "You're doing your little telepathy thing and keeping us out. I'm not an idiot."

<This does not involve either of you,> I said curtly.

Chapman stood up and grabbed me roughly by the shoulder. I twitched my tail out of reflex. No Andalite would ever grab another Andalite.

Chapman laughed rudely. "You don't scare me. I know you can kill us both. But that's not your style, is it? Dragging us off across the galaxy is your style."

<We have an emergency,> I said. <We regret that we cannot take you straight back to your planet. However —>

"However nothing," Chapman said. "This little trip involves danger, doesn't it? You boys are in deep. Like I said, I'm not an idiot. I can see you three are tense. I can see you're worried. Wherever it is we're going, you're scared. Which means me and the girl here should be afraid, too, right?"

Loren stood up and looked right at me. "Is that true, Elfangor? Are you taking us into danger?"

I turned one eye toward Alloran. He nodded slightly, giving me permission.

<Yes, Loren,> I said. <We are going into terrible danger. If we are taken, the two of you will be killed or enslaved.>

Chapman's eyes blazed. "You're dragging us into a battle and we can't even know what's going on? Is that Andalite fairness?"

I started to tell the annoying creature to be silent, but Alloran spoke.

<You two aliens have a right to know what you are being "dragged into," as you put it. We are going to a planet of creatures who are allies of the Yeerks. The Yeerks are parasites who seize control of the bodies and minds of other creatures. The Taxxons have been enslaved this way. By their own choice.>

I said, <The Skrit Na have apparently discovered the long-lost Time Matrix. This is a device that allows people to move forward or backward in time. It is the most dangerous weapon imaginable.>

"Why would a time machine be a weapon?" Loren asked.

But Chapman had already figured it out. "Duh. I go back in time and change history to wipe you out in the present. I could kill your parents before they had you, and you'd never exist." He grinned. "Better yet, I could go all the way back in time, back to

prehistoric days and find the earliest ancestors of humans and kill them. The entire human race would cease to exist." Chapman laughed. "I see why you guys are worried. If these Yeerks of yours get this thing, it's bye-bye Andalites."

That did it. I didn't like this creature. I didn't care if he was just a primitive alien, I didn't like him. I pushed my face close to his. I brought my tail up into a threat position. <You'd better understand something, human. If it's "bye-bye" Andalites, it'll be "bye-bye" humans, sooner or later. Who do you think keeps the Yeerks from conquering every sentient race in the galaxy? We do.>

"Maybe I'm with the wrong aliens," Chapman sneered. "Maybe it's too bad I wasn't grabbed by the Yeerks. They sound like the winners."

To my surprise, Prince Alloran actually laughed. <You may be right, human. But you'd better hope you're not. I've seen what the Yeerks do to captive planets. I was there when the Yeerks took the Hork-Bajir world. Pray to whatever primitive gods you have, human, that the Yeerks don't ever take your world.>

I shot a glance at Arbron. He was as surprised as I was. Moran had been there at the loss of the Hork-Bajir world?

The loss of the Hork-Bajir was the single biggest disaster in our war with the Yeerks. The Hork-Bajir

were the slave warriors of the Yeerk Empire now because we'd failed to save them.

<Translation to normal space in one minute,> the computer announced without emotion.

<Okay,> Alloran said, breaking the spell he had cast over us all. <We'll be coming out of Z-space fairly close to the Taxxon world. The area will be thick with Yeerk ships. The Jahar has excellent stealth shielding, but we may still be detected. From now on, we are on battle alert.>

<What's the plan?> Arbron asked nervously. <What do we do?>

Alloran laughed. <What's the plan? We locate the Skrit Na ship. And if it has landed, we go down after it and take back the Time Matrix. Of course, we'd be a little obvious walking around as Andalites. So . . .>

<Down to the surface of the Taxxon world?> I asked in horror. <You mean . . . sir, are you planning for us to morph Taxxons?>

Alloran looked very seriously at Arbron and me. <You two arisths are going to have to grow up very fast now. I need warriors at my side. Are you ready to be warriors?>

In my daydreams as a young aristh I had imagined a moment like this. I had imagined a time coming when I would be called upon to be brave and to save my people. And in my imagination I had al-

ways faced this kind of moment with pride and without fear.

And now, suddenly, my daydream was reality. And all I felt was sick dread.

The Taxxon world! It was a place from a nightmare.

<We're ready, Prince Alloran,> I said, as boldly as I could. <We are ready to be your warriors. We're not afraid.>

I saw Arbron's face. He was as sick with fear as I was. But still he managed to smirk. He knew me too well.

He knew I was lying.

chapter 10

Down to the Taxxon world!

The *Jahar* was cloaked, hidden from sight and from most sensors. But a close sensor sweep by a Yeerk ship would reveal us. And we would never be able to land on the planet in the *Jabal*:

We needed a victim.

We found it, out beyond the Taxxon world's third moon. It was a slow-moving transport ship. It was just arriving in the system, which meant they would be expecting it down on the surface. Perfect for our needs.

The trick was to disable the ship to make it stop, but not destroy it.

<This will take precise aim,> Alloran said. <Which of you two is a better shot?>

I wanted to say that I. was. But I knew Arbron was better. And we could not afford to fail. <Arbron is the one who hit the Skrit Na ship.>

Alloran nodded. <Let's see what you can do, *Aristh* Arbron. We need to hit one engine, but leave

the other functioning. And we don't want any unfortunate explosions.>

Arbron took the shredder controls in his hands. The Yeerk transport ship was two thousand miles away. The target engine was about forty feet long.

Arbron keyed into the computer targeting system and made careful adjustments while all of us — Alloran, the two humans, and I — watched.

There was a hum as the shredder fired. We saw the pale green beam lance forward into darkness. And on the screen, with magnification at factor five hundred, we saw the near-side engine pod of the Yeerk ship glow red and green.

<Good shooting!> Alloran said. <They'll waste half an hour trying to figure out what happened and reconfiguring to fly with just one engine. *Aristh* Elfangor, take us in fast!>

I punched up a burn and we rocketed forward, descending on the crippled transport. We were alongside the transport before they knew we were there.

<Jam their communications,> Alloran ordered, and I feverishly punched the flat surface of the tactical board with my fingers.

It was my second boarding of an alien vessel. I guess I should have felt like I was an old hand. But this wasn't some lame bunch of Skrit Na. This was a Yeerk ship. We had no way of knowing what we

would encounter. Would it be Hork-Bajir-Controllers? Taxxon-Controllers? Or some other fierce, unknown species the Yeerks controlled?

<A word of advice,> Alloran said. <Taxxons may be repulsive, but never forget that down in their brains they have a Yeerk. You're dealing with a Yeerk, not just a Taxxon.>

Alloran, Arbron, and I pressed close to the hatch, waiting for it to blow open. We carried handheld shredders on setting three. There are six power levels on a shredder. Level one delivers a mild charge that will stun a small creature for a moment or two. Level six will blast a hole through ten feet of solid alloy. Level three wouldn't kill most creatures, but it would certainly knock them down so hard they wouldn't get up for hours.

At that moment, waiting to rush a deadly enemy, I struggled to recall everything old Sofor had ever tried to teach me about combat. But I swear I couldn't remember a word. Maybe Prince Alloran was calm, but I sure wasn't.

<Remember, don't kill them all,> Alloran said. <We may need to acquire them.>

"Good luck," Loren said.

And then the hatch blew.

BOOM!

In a rush of wind from the explosion, we launched ourselves into the Yeerk transport. Taxxons!

If you've never faced a Taxxon, let me tell you: They are shocking things to see up close. They are tubular, like a monstrosly thick, ten-foot-long hose. They have rows of needle-sharp, cone-shaped legs. The upper third of their body is held upright, and there the rows of legs become smaller and form tiny two- and three-fingered hands.

There is a row of dark red eyes, each like congealed liquid. At the very top is the mouth, a round, red-rimmed hole circled with vicious rows of teeth.

There were half a dozen of these creatures practically encircling us. For a frozen moment no one moved. I don't think the Yeerks could quite believe that they were being boarded by Andalites, right there in orbit around the Taxxon home world.

Then everyone unfroze at once!

On my left, one Taxxon raised a Dracon beam and aimed it at me.

<Ahhh!> I yelled and pulled the trigger of my shredder.

TTTTSSSAAAPPP!

The Taxxon crumpled.

TTTTSSSSAAAAPPP! TTTTSSSSAAAPPPP!

Shredders fired.

TSEEEWWWW! TSEEEWWWW! TSEEEWWWW!

Dracon beams fired!

The air was instantly as hot as an oven. Shock waves from all the weapons rocked the enclosed

area. Screens blew out. Sheet-plastic panels crumpled. Sparks exploded in brilliant waterfalls from popped conduits overhead.

<Stop firing!> Alloran ordered. <We'll destroy the ship!>

Behind me, a Taxxon! Dracon beam coming up!

I didn't pause to think. I just jerked my tail. My tail blade sliced through the air and separated the Taxxon's arm from his body. The arm fell to the deck, still weakly clutching the Dracon beam.

"SSSRREEEEE-WWWAAARR!" the Taxxon screamed.

Now there were only two Taxxons still standing, and they knew they were beaten. They backed away as fast as they could motor their cone legs. But even then, and even with the Yeerks in their heads, the Taxxons' evil instincts would not be denied. As they backed away they bent low to tear chunks of flesh from their dead companions.

The Taxxons are cannibalistic. Not a nice species. And according to everything we knew about them, not even the Yeerks inside them could control that foul hunger of theirs.

<All right!> Arbron cried. <We got 'em!>

<Shut up, you young fool,> Alloran snapped.

Alloran had already guessed why the Taxxon-Controllers were pulling back. They didn't want to be in the way when serious trouble showed up.

And that serious trouble was just becoming visible through the haze of smoke from burning, sparking panels.

Seven feet tall. Razor-sharp blades at the wrists. Razor-sharp blades at their elbows. And knees. And tails. And two or three huge, forward-swept horn-blades on the tops of their snakelike heads.

Hork-Bajir!

<Well, well,> Alloran said, <it's been a while since I fought a Hork-Bajir. I'll take the two big ones in the middle.>

That left a Hork-Bajir warrior each for me and Arbron.

Two full-grown, adult Hork-Bajir, each with a wily Yeerk in its head.

<I'm thinking maybe we should both have paid more attention to old Sofor,> Arbron said, making a grim joke.

I saw the Hork-Bajir advance on me. I heard Sofor's voice in my head. *Don't think, Elfangor. It's all instinct and training now.*

I let go of my conscious mind. I simply let it slip away. And in its place, a tingling energy seemed to fill me up. It was as if I were charged with electricity. As if sparks might fly from my hooves and tail.

The Hork-Bajir came on toward me. And I struck.

I struck!

And when Alloran was outflanked by one of his opponents, I struck again.

And when Arbron was knocked down by his Hork-Bajir opponent, I struck again.

I struck and struck and struck till Hork-Bajir blood ran on the decks.

And when my own conscious mind returned, it seemed as if hours had gone by. Arbron was staring at me like he'd seen a ghost. Alloran was nodding grimly, as if he recognized something about me.

Wounded Hork-Bajir, and worse than wounded, were lying in Taxxon gore on the deck.

<No,> I whispered.

I turned and ran back through the hatch to the *Jahar*.

I ran and slipped and fell to my knees, with nowhere else to run.

It was the human, Loren, who ran to me and put her strange human arms around my chest and with one hand pressed my face into her long golden hair.

chapter 11

I shook myself free of Loren, appalled and ashamed by my behavior. What was the matter with me? I was behaving like a child, not an aristh.

Then I saw Arbron.

He had been cut. He was bleeding from a deep gash in his left arm. His main eyes were wide with what might almost have been panic.

Alloran was busy tying up the injured Hork-Bajir. The injured Taxxons were shoved into a small storeroom. Alloran sealed them in by welding the door with his shredder.

"Are you okay?" Loren asked me.

<Yes. Of course. I'm fine,> I said harshly. But my insides were churning. Some awful feeling was eating into my thoughts. I felt stunned. I felt like I wasn't even me. It was like I was some totally different person, standing off to one side, just watching myself.

Loren left me alone and went to Arbron. She tore the sleeve off her shirt and wrapped it around Arbron's bleeding arm.

Alloran came over and glanced at Arbron's arm. <You'll be okay, aristh,> he said. <Go back to the weapons station. We've just started here. We have to fly this Yeerk crate down to the planet. Aristh Elfangor, you take the helm. The controls are more primitive than our own ships, but —>

Neither Arbron nor I had moved. Alloran glared at me, furious that I was ignoring his order. But then I saw his expression soften.

<It's your first time. You fought well. Both of you. It's always hard the first time. And it never gets easy. But I need you both. Now.>

I nodded. <Yes, Prince Alloran. I'll take the helm.>

<You. Alien,> he said to Loren. <Get back into the Jahar. We'll be away for a while. Don't touch anything.>

Loren turned her head to look back over her shoulder. Humans have to do that in order to see behind them. She was obviously hesitating. She bit her lower lip with her short white teeth.

<What is it?> I asked.

Still she hesitated. Then, "Look, tell me the truth. Swear by whatever it is that is really important to you. Swear that you're going to take Chapman and me back to Earth."

<Of course we are. As soon as we can,> I said.

She sighed, a sound that involved blowing air out of her mouth. "Look, it's Chapman. I'm sure he's a nice guy and all, really . . ."

<You don't trust him.>

"If you leave the two of us here on the *Jahar*, he'll try something. I know he will. And I know you think we're too primitive to be able to fly your ship or whatever, but don't count on it. Chapman doesn't like you."

<Yes. I got that impression,> I said. <But we can tell the ship's computer not to allow him to do anything. He won't be able to fly the ship or use communications. It will be all right.> With my stalk eyes I saw that Prince Alloran was busy with Arbron. <Here. Take this. Hide it under your clothing. Use it if Chapman makes trouble for you. It is set to level two. Just point it and squeeze the trigger.>

Loren took the shredder from me and slipped it under her shirt. "Listen . . . good luck down on the planet. Whatever you're doing down there."

Then she put her face close to mine and pressed her lips against the side of my face. It was a very odd thing to do. Not something any Andalite would ever do. And yet I did not mind it.

<Aristh Elfangor? Whenever you have the time to join us . . .,> Alloran said acidly.

<Ready, sir! Preparing to sever the connection with the *Jahar*.>

The hatch closed, shutting Loren the human off from sight.

She would be all right, I told myself. The *Jahar* was well-shielded. With the engines off it would be almost impossible for the Yeerks to detect. And she had the shredder in case the other human tried to start trouble.

I focused on understanding the ship's controls. They were designed for Taxxon hands. But the basics were still the basics. I calculated a simple approach to the Taxxon world's main spaceport. I fired the engines and then, as we moved away, gathering speed, I looked back and saw the *Jahar*.

<These humans are a pain in the hindquarters,> Arbron said. <As if we don't have enough trouble? We have to watch over a pair of primitive aliens?>

<She's a million light-years from her home, Arbron. Confronting species she never knew existed. Suddenly thrust into the middle of an intergalactic war. I think she is very brave.>

Arbron busied himself with learning the computer station of the strange ship. But then, in a carefully offhand way, he said, <By the way, thanks. You saved my life back there. I guess you absorbed more from old Sofor than you thought, huh?>

<I guess so,> I said.

<You were something, Elfangor. You scared me. Hey, I think you even scared Alloran. You really —>

<Okay, shut up, all right?>

<I was just saying you were great back there. Faster-than-light tail action. When you cut that one big Hork-Bajir's head? That was amazing.>

I wanted Arbron to shut up. I didn't want to think about what had happened. I didn't want to remember it.

And yet this other part of me was hanging on every word. This other part of me was replaying the fight in my head, seeing myself as Elfangor, the great hero.

<Course laid in?> Alloran asked me.

<Yes, Prince. We should be arriving in thirty minutes.>

<Good. Then it's time. We need to acquire the Taxxons.>

To acquire is to absorb the DNA of a species. It is the first step in morphing that creature.

We were going to become Taxxons.

chapter 12

We had shoved the Taxxons and the badly wounded Hork-Bajir into the cargo hold of the ship. We had not even looked into the hold to see what else might be in there.

Now we looked.

We opened the door and Alloran and Arbron stood with their shredders ready in case the surviving Taxxons tried to attack us. But the two Taxxons had other things on their minds.

They were attempting to kill and eat each other. They had already finished off the wounded HorkBajir.

<Stop it or I'll kill you both!> Alloran yelled.

But the Taxxons were out of control, caught up in their own evil bloodlust. It was a vile thing to watch. Taxxons don't have powerful tails like us, or blades like the Hork-Bajir. They can only rear up and slam their upper bodies against each other while trying to gouge with their round mouths.

<Their Yeerks have left them,> Alloran said.
<This is how Taxxons behave when they are not

Controllers. Their Yeerk parasites have left them to destroy each other.>

<Where did the Yeerks go?> I asked.

Alloran calmly leveled his shredder at the Taxxons and fired. It was a low-level blast, just enough to knock the Taxxons unconscious.

We stepped past their sagging bodies, careful to keep our hooves out of the gore. Behind them, the hold of the ship was filled with transparent circular tanks. It was too dark to see what was in the tanks.

<Computer. Lights,> Alloran said.

Lights came on, and I instantly wished they hadn't.

The hold of the ship stretched for perhaps a hundred feet straight back, with a width of a third that. Filling most of that space, glowing a sludgy green, were dozens of tanks.

And in each tank, swimming through the viscous liquid, were gray slugs.

<Yeerks!> I said.

<There must be thousands! Tens of thousands!> Arbron said.

<I suspected this might be the case,> Alloran said. <These are Yeerks being transported to the Taxxon world. They're here to get bodies. Hosts. Each of these will be given a Taxxon.>

<What do we do with them?> I asked.

<We seal the bridge then open the outer hatch,> Alloran said calmly.

It took me a few seconds to realize what he was saying. If we opened the outer hatch while we were still in space, the vacuum would suck everything in the hold out. Out into the airless cold. The Yeerks would die almost instantly.

<Prince Alloran, we can't just kill them all,> I said. I looked closely at him to see if maybe he had been joking.

His eyes were cold. <*Aristh* Elfangor, I give the orders. You obey the orders.>

<But they're helpless,> I protested.

<They are Yeerks. And this is war. Would you rather wait till they have Taxxon bodies?>

I didn't know what to say. I looked at Arbron. He kept his face carefully expressionless.

<We ... we can't do this,> I said. <It's wrong. They are our prisoners. We can't! It would be murder!>

<Be careful what you accuse me of, *Aristh* Elfangor,> Alloran said harshly. <You're a child, so I forgive your impertinence. This time. But you are here to learn, not to question orders. And one of the things you'll learn, my idealistic *aristh*, is that war is not about striking brave poses and playing the hero. War is about killing.>

<Andalites do not kill prisoners,> I said.

Alloran laughed. <Is that what they taught you in school?> He laughed again. <Well, child, I learned my lessons in the battle for the Hork-Bajir world, not in a classroom. And let me tell you: The only thing that matters is staying alive. Besides, little *aristh* Elfangor, it's a bit late for you to get delicate. Not now, with the blood of your enemies staining your tail.>

This wasn't happening. It couldn't be. Alloran was a war-prince. I couldn't disobey a war-prince. But this was monstrous.

<I won't kill prisoners,> I said. <Not even Yeerks.> <I could execute you right now for disobeying me,> Alloran said.

For a moment that seemed to stretch on and on, we stood there, face-to-face. I could barely breathe. I was risking my life, and probably destroying my future in the military, just to save my enemies. It was insane!

But I could not imagine myself sending the Yeerks flying off into the vacuum of space. I couldn't do it.

<Sir,> Arbron said tentatively. <We are so close to the planet surface that Yeerk sensors might pick up the heat signature of thousands of Yeerks being . . . flushed . . . into space. And they would investigate.>

It was true. Maybe. But was it enough to get the prince to back off?

<Well, we wouldn't want that,> Alloran said sarcastically. <We'll wait till we've completed our mission on the surface. Then, as we leave the system, we'll clean out this filth.>

I breathed again. But I wasn't fooling myself. I had made an enemy of Prince Alloran. And I wasn't sure I could count on Arbron, either.

<Time to acquire the Taxxons, if that meets with *Aristh* Elfangor's high moral code,> Alloran said.

I turned away and walked back to the two stunned Taxxons. Without hesitating, I placed my hand on one of the Taxxons' slimy flesh.

Morphing technology allows a person to absorb the DNA of any creature he touches. It takes concentration and focus, because the biotechnology of morphing is triggered by thought commands.

Focus, I told myself. Put everything else out of your mind, and let the Taxxon become a part of you.

And as I stood there, the Taxxon's DNA migrated into me.

My life, which had gone rapidly downhill at a shocking speed, was about to get much worse.

And then, with the skeptical eyes of Prince Alloran and the frightened stare of Arbron upon me, I began to morph.

chapter 13

As an Andalite aristh, I'd been trained in morphing. Back at basic training they first transformed us with the morphing technology. And they gave us a *djabala* to acquire and morph.

A *djabala* is a small, six-legged animal, maybe a third the size of a young Andalite. It has a mouth and a tail and no natural weapons. It lives by climbing trees and eating the highest leaves.

You have to morph the *djabala* in order to pass the morphing proficiency test. So I did. But then, like a lot of *arisths*, I morphed a *kafit* bird. I have heard that some planets have many types of bird. But since we only have three, and since the *kafit* is the best species of the three, it's popular with young cadets looking for fun.

It was a wonderful experience. I always loved the idea of flying. But of course, morphing for pleasure is discouraged. So I only did it one time.

That was all the morphing I had done. A *djabala* and a *kafit* bird. I had never even dreamed of morphing a Taxxon.

Taxxons are a nauseating species. Even if you've seen holograms of them. But trust me, till you've been up close to a Taxxon, you just don't know how awful they are. The smell alone is enough to make you sick.

But now I had no choice. I had to show Alloran that I was still a good soldier. I had to prove that I was brave, no matter what he thought of me. I couldn't show any hesitation.

So I focused my mind on becoming the Taxxon. And the changes began immediately.

I felt my upper torso begin to melt down into my lower body. As I watched, my blue-and-tan fur ceased being individual hairs and melted into a plasticlike covering. The bare flesh on my upper body did the same thing, turning hard and shiny.

I felt myself falling as my legs shrank. They seemed to be sucked up into my body. Way too fast!

My stomach hit the deck so hard it knocked the air out of me.

Then, almost as quickly, I was lifted back up off the deck. Dozens of sharp cones were sprouting from my belly. I was growing Taxxon legs.

I looked backward through my stalk eyes and saw that my body was stretching out behind me. I was rapidly becoming a fat worm. Ten feet of rippling, slimy segments rolled backward, engulfing

my tail. The process made a sound like wet cloth being dragged over gravel.

I could hear my own internal organs dissolving. Squishing, slippery sounds. I could hear other organs, organs I didn't even have a name for, take their place.

Then . . . I was blind!

My eyes had all been blinded at once. I couldn't see anything. I felt fear grow within me. Fear that threatened to become panic. I was blind!

Muddy at first, then sharper, my sight slowly returned. But it didn't exactly make me feel better. It was an eerie, distorted, broken world I saw.

Taxxons have compound eyes. Each red globule eye is really a thousand smaller eyeballs, each one taking its own tiny picture of the world. Everything I saw around me was shattered into a million small frames. It was overwhelming.

And then I felt something new. A new sense . . .

I moved unfamiliar muscles and realized that they operated my mouth. My round, red mouth. And through that mouth came a deluge of sensory input. It was like smell. And like something I'd never really experienced before. It's called the sense of taste, I think.

And what I tasted . . . what I smelled ... all that my senses cared about was the bright smell of blood.

I never even felt the Taxxon's instincts well up beneath my own troubled and battered Andalite mind. I had no warning. All at once, the Taxxon was in my head.

How can I even convey the horror?

Have you ever felt in yourself some awful, evil urge? Some fugitive thought that you quickly snuffed out? Well, as I became fully Taxxon, I felt such a feeling. And it was not some faint wisp of thought, but a raging, screaming hunger.

A hunger for anything living.

A hunger for anything with a beating heart.

My shattered Taxxon eyes saw two Andalites.

My own people! I wanted to devour my own people.

But Taxxons are not fools. My Taxxon brain saw and understood the Andalite tails. It knew they were weapons. It knew it could not fight them. And that weakness gave rise to a rage that was like a nuclear fire in me.

I was hungry! Hunger like no hunger any other creature can ever know.

As I struggled to reassert my own identity, I understood why the Taxxons had-made their alliance with the Yeerks.

The Yeerks had weapons. Weapons to use to feed fresh, warm flesh to the raging Taxxon hunger.

The Taxxons had given up their freedom. But

freedom is nothing to a Taxxon, compared with that hunger.

<How are you doing, Elfangor?> Arbron asked me.

<Fine,> I lied. <Only . . .>

<Wh at?>

<When you morph, be very careful. Be strong. You'll have to fight the hunger.>

Arbron laughed. <What, are you afraid I'm gonna morph and try to eat you?>

<Yes, Arbron. I am afraid.>

chapter 14

The hunger never went away. Even as we spiraled down toward the Taxxon home world, I felt it. I was thankful Loren was safe back in the *Jahar*. I don't know if I could have resisted the Taxxon's appetite.

I really don't know.

As we came in for a landing, ground control appeared on our screens and demanded our clearance. Our ship's computer responded automatically.

Ground control told us they were backed up on off-loading cargo. It would be half a day before they could unload the Yeerks in our hold.

I didn't know how to feel about that. I didn't want thousands of Yeerks to make it safely to their destination. But I didn't want to slaughter them, either. And I had no doubt: If we got away again in the Yeerk ship, Alloran meant to kill the Yeerks in the hold.

The spaceport was a large facility, obviously still under construction. As we came in low for a landing, descending through orange-and-green acid

clouds, we could see dozens of other ships resting in their cradles on the ground. Hundreds of Taxxons and Gedds and even Hork-Bajir were busy building, adding new capacity.

But even amidst all the activity, we could spot the Skrit Na raider ship. That was our target. If we were right, the Time Matrix was aboard that ship.

A landing beam guided us to a cradle on the far edge of the facility. We were more than a mile away from the Skrit Na ship. A mile isn't much in space. But on the ground, on an enemy planet, in a body that makes you want to scream, it's a very, very long distance.

<Whatever you do, remember what you are,> Alloran instructed. <You're Taxxons, on a Taxxon planet. Act like it.>

The three of us, in Taxxon morph, exited out the hatch and into the air of the Taxxon home world.

The first thing I noticed was that the sky was a pale gray-brown. The color of dust. The bright clouds were too high up even to be seen. The second thing I noticed was the smell. Everywhere, warm, living hearts were beating. Hork-Bajir hearts. Gedds hearts. Taxxon hearts. Blood rushed through veins. . . .

The spaceport was a vast array of ship-cradles in a dozen different sizes and shapes. Some were taller

than ten tall trees. Some lay almost flat, rising just a few feet from the dirt. Some were empty, but most held ships.

There were slow transports unloading cargo, fighters in for repairs, even a gigantic Yeerk Pool ship. I could see the three spider legs of the Pool ship towering over the cradle. There were shredder burns and one of the "legs" was shattered. The ship had been in a battle.

Below the maze of cradles was bare, orange-red dirt. Not a blade of grass, just dirt. There were primitive magnetic levitation rails running through the massive forest of cradles. Train cars, some open, some enclosed bubbles, raced back and forth along the tracks.

Cargo was being loaded onto the train cars by Gedds. The Gedds were the Yeerks' first victims. The first race they enslaved. Gedds almost seem to walk on two legs, like humans, but they are actually always hunched over so that they can keep one hand on the ground for balance.

We took an open elevator from the cradle down to the ground. As we descended, I counted two ships landing and one taking off. The mag-lev trains zipped back and forth on the dizzying array of tracks. On the ground, big tracked vehicles moved heavier loads.

Everywhere were Taxxons, swaggering Hork-Bajir, and busy, clumsy Gedds. Each was a Controller. A slave to the Yeerk in its head.

It was a huge, raucous, noisy place, full of steel and dust and the smells of solvents and Taxxon filth.

<Busy,> Alloran muttered. <Awfully busy.>

I knew what he meant. Back home, they'd told us the Yeerks were being stopped by our forces. The average Andalite civilian thought we were beating the Yeerks. But this spaceport was evidence to the contrary. The spaceport, just one of several on this one planet, was alive with hurried activity.

Suddenly . . .

"Sssnnnrreewaaaaaa!"

I looked up just in time to see a Taxxon slip from the mag-lev train track overhead. He hit the ground like a bag of goo. His needle legs crumpled and his worm body split open.

It was pandemonium! Taxxons came rushing from all sides.

WHUMPF! A big Taxxon slammed into me, practically knocking me over. More of them, all rushing, came toward their fallen friend.

But they were not rushing to help.

They were rushing to eat the still-living Taxxon.

Then I felt the hunger. It swept me up. I couldn't resist. I was moving forward, jostling to get at the

screaming worm myself! Rushing, pushing, shoving, desperate to reach him and ... and . . .

NO!

I felt my own mind snap back to the surface. It had been overwhelmed by the Taxxon's own instincts. But even now, even with all my willpower, I couldn't resist!

It was as if I were being drawn by a magnet. As if I were being sucked into a black hole. The smell of the wounded Taxxon, the fevered beating of its heart, the .. .

NO!

I was there. There, looking down at the injured Taxxon through my shattering compound eyes. I plunged my upper body downward, mouth open, teeth gnashing, ready to ..

NO! NO! I pulled back. But the power of that hunger would not release me.

I motored my dozens of cone legs, pulling back, and the other, eager Taxxons pushed me aside, heedless.

Where were Arbron and Alloran?

I'd lost them in my mad rush to feed.

I pulled back and back farther, each step like moving a million pounds. And yet I did move away. The feeding frenzy became ever more nightmarish. Taxxons crawled over each other to get at the fresh meat.

I managed to turn my huge, long worm body around and ran from it. I ran as fast as the Taxxon limbs would carry me.

I found a shaded spot under one of the towering ship-cradles and I cowered there, using all my strength to resist. Finally, after a while, the frenzy passed. Not because I had grown strong. But simply because I could now smell that there was no more meat left.

The Taxxon horde broke up and slithered off in various directions, back to their work. Where was Arbron? Where was Prince Alloran?

I was lost and alone on the Taxxon world.

All I could think of doing was heading toward the Skrit Na ship. Hopefully, my two fellow Andalites would be there.

I had to remind myself that we had a mission: the Time Matrix. If the Yeerks realized what was in that Skrit Na ship, there would be no hope at all.

Then, although the image was fractured, I saw Hork-Bajir coming toward me. Six or seven of them, moving in swiftly. Surrounding me!

There was nothing I could do. I couldn't run. A ten-foot-long worm does not outrun a Hork-Bajir.

One Hork-Bajir-Controller swaggered up before me. At a signal from him, the others all leveled Dragon beams straight at me. Not that they needed

Dragon beams. A Hork-Bajir can slice a Taxxon to ribbons in seconds.

And I had seen what happened to any Taxxon careless enough to be injured.

"Welcome to the Taxxon home world," the Hork-Bajir said. "I am Sub-Visser Seven. You interest me. Yes, indeed. I am very interested in any Taxxon who will not eat fresh meat."

chapter 15

Morphing power is a wonderful tool. It allows Andalites to pass among many different species. It makes us the greatest spies in the galaxy.

But it has an awful drawback. You see, if you stay more than two hours in morph, you stay there forever. You become a *nothlit*. An Andalite living out his life in a different body.

That was my greatest fear as the Hork-Bajir-Controllers led me to a mag-lev train car. The sub-visser commandeered the train car. He ordered everyone else off. I stood there, helpless, surrounded, as the mag-lev car shot away from the platform.

It wound its way through the maze of ship-cradles, through the construction workers who were busy building up the might of the Yeerk Empire.

The Yeerk sub-visser said nothing. He seemed almost bored. He slouched his Hork-Bajir body and watched the passing sights gloomily.

I watched him as well as I could with my Taxxon eyes. A sub-visser is a high rank. I remembered that from the basic training classes where they taught us

about the Yeerk foe. At the top of the Yeerk Empire is the Council of Thirteen. One of those thirteen is emperor, but no one knows which one. It's a closely guarded secret. The Yeerks fear assassination.

Just below the Council of Thirteen are the vis-sers. They are the generals of the Yeerk military. They are numbered according to their power and importance. Visser One would be the most powerful, on down through Visser Forty or so.

A sub-visser is like a colonel. Very powerful, especially if he has a low number like seven. But not a visser yet.

The sub-visser spoke. "So, Andalite, how long have you been in this morph?"

I had to stop myself from crying aloud. He knew! He knew I was an Andalite.

No . . . wait. Maybe he didn't know. Maybe he was trying to trick me.

"Ssssewwaari ssstwweeeshh," I said. I didn't know what it meant. The Taxxon body had Taxxon instincts, but not a Taxxon's life learning. So I couldn't speak the Taxxon language. But maybe the sub-visser couldn't, either. He'd been speaking *Galard* so far — the language of interstellar trade and commerce. It was the language many races had learned, back when the galaxy was at peace. It was used to communicate between different species.

The sub-visser looked at me with his slitted

Hork-Bajir eyes. "Don't waste that snake-speak on me. If you're one of us, you'll be able to speak *Galard*."

Was this another trap? Could Taxxon-Controllers speak *Galard*? Was it even possible for them, with their strange mouths? I didn't know. I had no experience speaking with sounds. And even though I still had the translator chip in my head, it could not interface with my Taxxon brain. What could I do?

The sub-visser laughed. "So. You want to resist me? Good. I need the entertainment. It's rather dull, being in charge of security for this sector. I suppose you're one of the rebels. One of those mountain Taxxons who refuse to join the Empire. Well, we'll get to the truth quickly enough."

Mountain Taxxons? Rebels? I was so surprised I temporarily forgot to be terrified. There were still Taxxons resisting the Yeerks? This would be huge news to my people. We'd assumed all the Taxxons had accepted Yeerk rule in exchange for promises of fresh, unusual meats.

The train car was riding a hundred feet off the dismal plain now, just getting beyond the outskirts of the spaceport. Through the window I could actually see the cradled Skrit Na ship as we zipped past.

I hoped Alloran and Arbron had made it there. I hoped they would complete the mission. Because it didn't look as if I would be there to help them.

Then, suddenly, the train car veered sharply left and I saw a mound, almost a small mountain. It was maybe two or three hundred feet high. Nothing but a slag-heap of dirt excavated from the construction of ship-cradles, really.

But it seethed.

There were holes everywhere, holes the size of a Taxxon. Taxxons were crawling in and out of the holes. Their pulsating worm bodies would slither and wallow into the mound. Others would emerge, seeming to almost blink with their foul red mouths.

"Rebels are just fresh meat," Sub-Visser Seven said calmly. "But being a Taxxon, you understand. Any rebels we catch go to feed loyal Taxxons. It's sad, really. But I have no choice. It's one of the idiotic regulations I have to deal with. It's all part of our deal with the Taxxons: Any suspect Taxxon is turned over to loyal Taxxons for interrogation. Of course, Taxxons don't really interrogate. They don't have the patience for it. They ask one or two questions, then . . . well, then it's dinnertime."

I must have quivered in terror. The sub-visser grinned a Hork-Bajir grin. "Of course, you could tell me why you're here, and what your mission really is . . . *Andalite*. You'll still be executed, of course. But I can make it painless. Much better than being eaten alive."

He did know what I was! He'd been toying with

me. He knew I was an Andalite. But I sensed he was telling the truth: I could either confess and de-morph, or die the death the Taxxon-Controllers would inflict.

This is what it had come to. All my hopes of being a great hero. It all ended here, just this quickly.

I felt sick down to my bones. How had everything gone so horribly wrong?

But I couldn't tell the Yeerks anything. The Jahar was still up in orbit. If I confessed, the two humans would be taken by the Yeerks. Alloran and Arbron, who were probably still free, might be caught, too.

And there was the Time Matrix. The Time Matrix sat unnoticed in a Skrit Na ship, just a mile from where we stood. And that could mean the end of all Andalites.

I couldn't talk. I couldn't.

The sub-visser leaned close to me. He actually whispered. "There is one other possibility. This Hork-Bajir body I use is fine, but there are millions of Hork-Bajir-Controllers now. And what are my other choices? To go back to being a Gedd? Or to take a Taxxon body? No thanks. I won't live with that Taxxon hunger."

The train plunged into the Taxxon hive. Darkness descended. In the darkness, my Taxxon eyes actually worked better.

The sub-visser's Hork-Bajir face was a shattered

sparkling of tiny images to my Taxxon eyes. I could hear his heart beating faster.

"There is one other possibility, Andalite. There has never been an Andalite-Controller. None of us has ever succeeded in capturing an Andalite alive. Your warriors use that nasty Andalite tail blade on themselves rather than be taken alive." He grinned. "Such a waste. Really. See, I want to be the first to have an Andalite body. With that body, with the Andalite morphing power, I wouldn't remain a sub-visser for long. I could be a full visser."

An Andalite-Controller? This Yeerk scum wanted to take over an Andalite body?

I felt a wave of revulsion. A wave of revulsion that seemed to grow out of some deep insight, as if I had caught a glimpse of the future. I wasn't a mystic. I was in the military. But still, I felt a weird, unsettling sensation.

I looked at the sub-visser. I looked into his greedy, murderous eyes. And it was as if I could see him clearly. As if the veil of time was lifted.

And I knew then I would not die. Not yet, at least. I knew it deep in my heart. Because I knew that in looking at this creature, this Yeerk, I was looking at my true, personal enemy.

"Let me take that Andalite body," he said. "You'll live. It's the only way you'll live."

<My name is Elfangor, Yeerk,> I said. <Remem-

ber the name. You'll be hearing it again. But you will never take me alive.>

"A pity," the Yeerk sneered. "Stop the car!" he yelled to his Hork-Bajir. "Open the door."

The mag-lev train stopped smoothly. The door opened.

We were on a track deep inside the Taxxon hive. There was a large, open cavern around us, as if the hive was hollow at its core. And down below, perhaps twenty feet down, there was a seething mass of Taxxons.

"See them?" the sub-visser asked. "Taxxons. Not Yeerks. No, those are Taxxons in their natural state. Unimproved, you might say. As savage and bloodthirsty as any creature in the galaxy."

The Taxxons below spotted us above them. They raised their eternally hungry red mouths up to gape at us. They knew what was going to happen next.

The Hork-Bajir surrounded me. I wanted to fight, but I had no weapons. There was nothing I could do.

"Throw him out," the sub-visser said.

The Hork-Bajir rushed at me. They pushed my sagging, flaccid flesh. I scrabbled desperately with my rows of cone legs, but it was useless. They rolled and shoved and slid me, helpless, to the door.

And then I was falling ..

chapter 16

Falling ...

<Demorph!> I screamed at myself.

Even as I was falling, I was demorphing. If I was going to die, I'd die an Andalite, not some disgusting, cannibalistic worm.

WHUUUMMMPPPPFF!

I hit the ground. I hit it hard. The sides of my Taxxon body burst open from the impact. And in a flash, the other Taxxons were on me.

<Demorph!>

But I couldn't possibly morph quickly enough. Red Taxxon mouths drew back and rose up high, plunging straight down into my shattered flesh.

The pain of the fall had been dulled by sheer shock. But this pain .. *this* pain I felt. I have never known anything so terrible. In my darkest nightmare I've never even imagined . .

<Ahhhhhhhhhh!> I screamed. But just as loudly, I screamed, <Demorph!>

It was a race. A race to see whether I would die before I could demorph. Again and again they

ripped at me. But now my Taxxon flesh was shrinking away from them. It was changing. Becoming some strange, new meat.

It would all depend on how the morph happened. If my head emerged too soon, the Taxxons would simply rip it off. I didn't need my head. I didn't even need my legs.

I needed my tail.

If any Andalite in all of history needed his tail, I needed mine. Right NOW!

<Ahhhhhhhhhh!> The pain was unbearable. I was delirious, unable even to think, to focus, to keep track of what was happening to me.

It wasn't going to work! I had been wrong to hope. Wrong to imagine I could survive.

But then . . . I felt some distant part of me move. And I sensed a shudder pass through the ravenous Taxxons.

With what was left of my Taxxon eyes, I saw it appear . . . all the way back at the end of my Taxxon body.

A bright blade! My tail!

I slashed! Missed!

But it made the Taxxons back away. And while they were reconsidering, my legs grew long and strong. The last of my bleeding worm body shrank and hardened. I heard bones growing inside me.

And then I could see. I could see again!

The Taxxons came at me again, rushing at me, bold with hunger. But now the situation had changed.

Oh, yes, the situation had definitely changed.

I aimed, I slashed! I aimed, I slashed! I aimed, I slashed!

<Come on, you filthy worms! Come on! Come ON!>

And suddenly, even the Taxxons had decided they didn't want to eat me. Instead, the Taxxons I had cut were set upon by the rest.

Through my stalk eyes I saw the sub-visser and his Hork-Bajir soldiers looking down and laughing.

The cold voice of the sub-visser said, "Kill him. Shoot the Andalite scum."

The Hork-Bajir soldiers raised their weapons and sighted on me.

TSEEWWW! TSEEWW!

Dracon beams singed the air above me and melted the dirt at my feet. I couldn't outrun them. I had to hide! But hide where?

Oh.

I dove back into the Taxxon feeding frenzy. Their sluggish, sloppy bodies pressed in all around me. It was sickening, but it gave me cover.

"Go in after him," the sub-visser ordered. "Cut him to pieces!"

Six huge Hork-Bajir leaped down from the train

track. There was no way I could defeat six Hork-Bajir warriors. I was exhausted, on the edge of collapse.

But there was one last desperate hope. The *kafit* bird.

Once you do a morph, the DNA stays with you. Once you've morphed a creature, you can morph it again. And I needed wings as much as I'd needed my tail.

I squirmed between the huge worms, keeping away from their mouths. Not that they wanted to fight an Andalite right then.

And as I felt the Taxxon flesh pressing in around me — smothering me, but at the same time hiding me from the Hork-Bajir — I morphed again. I shrank. I grew smaller and smaller.

"Back, you Taxxon *hogren kalach!*" the Hork-Bajir yelled in a mix of *Galard* and the Hork-Bajir language.

The Taxxons began to pull away, driven back by slashing Hork-Bajir wrists and elbows. I was in the open. A Hork-Bajir was standing over me. He was looking right down at me.

Had I finished morphing?

No time to worry. I would either fly . . . or die.

I opened what I hoped were my six pairs of *kafit* wings. I spread them wide. I flapped hard.

And I flew.

Up off the ground. Up from the dirt. I flew!

I flew inches above the Hork-Bajir. I flew over the sub-visser, who was now screaming in rage at his soldiers. "Shoot it! Shoot it!"

"But the Taxxons may be hit!" one of the Hork-Bajir protested.

"I really don't care, shoot! Shoot! Kill it! SHOOOOOT!"

But it was too late. I was in the air. I raced as fast as my wings would take me, back down the stinking tunnel toward daylight. I saw the brown-gray light ahead, and I flew toward it as if my life depended on it.

I exploded from the tunnel into the open with the outraged cries of the sub-visser ringing in my ears.

<I made it!> I cried to no one but myself. <I made it! I'm alive!>

I flew at the *kafit* bird's top speed back toward the spaceport. Somewhere back there were Alloran and Arbron. Somewhere back there the Time Matrix still waited to be discovered. There was still a mission and the hope of returning safe and alive to the *Jahar*.

And . . . there was life. Life! Life never feels so sweet as when you've come right up against death.

Then I saw it.

It was descending the last few feet into a large

ship-cradle. It was unlike any other craft at the spaceport. Unlike anything any Yeerk had ever designed or built.

The Jahar!

The Jahar was landing.

It was impossible! There was no one aboard the Jahar but the two humans. How could it be landing? Why was it landing?

I soared as high as I could and saw that Yeerks in all shapes and sizes were rushing to meet the amazing ship.

They clustered around, many with weapons drawn. Looking back, I saw a mag-lev train come tearing at top speed from the Taxxon mound. I knew in my heart that Sub-Visser Seven was on that train.

It took several minutes for the docking clamps to be fitted to the alien craft. And more minutes while the Yeerks trained every weapon they had on the one small ship.

The mag-lev train arrived, slamming carelessly into two slow-moving Gedds. Out stepped Sub-Visser Seven. He had only four of his original six Hork-Bajir with him. I guess the other two had paid the ultimate price for failing their commander.

The hatch of the Jahar appeared. It opened, and out stepped a creature no Yeerk had ever seen before.

It walked on only two legs.

It held up its hands, and said, "Hey, hey. Relax. You can put down the weapons. I'm not here to fight. I'm here to trade."

Chapman!

He realized that the Yeerks did not understand him. So with his hands he pretended to be handing them something, and then receiving something from them.

Sub-Visser Seven strutted to meet the alien. He laughed cynically. "It wants to trade," he said. "This strange creature wants to trade. So. What do you have to trade, alien?"

Neither Sub-Visser Seven nor Chapman had understood a word the other had said. And yet, they understood each other perfectly.

Chapman kept his hands raised and made a human smile. Then, very slowly, he stepped back into the shadowed interior of the ship. And when he reappeared, he was shoving someone before him.

It was Loren. She was bound with wire. Chapman pushed her viciously. She fell to the ground before Sub-Visser Seven.

"That's what I have to trade," Chapman said. "A whole planet full of ... that."

fc*M\$

Alloran's Choice

chapter 17

It was an impossible situation.

I was alone. Alone on an alien planet. Scared, sick at hearts, and overwhelmed.

I flew high above the scene, floating on my six pairs of wings. I was in morph. A four-legged, two-armed Andalite transformed into a twelve-winged *kafit* bird.

Below me was the horizon-to-horizon expanse of the spaceport on the Taxxon home world. Huge, weirdly shaped metal cradles nestled a stunning array of spacecraft. Craft from every corner of the ever-expanding Yeerk Empire: transports and fighters and even a vast Yeerk Pool ship, sitting like a bloated, three-legged spider.

Half a mile to my left was the Skrit Na transport we had chased to the Taxxon world. Inside that ship, unknown to the Yeerks, was the Time Matrix.

Half a mile to my right was the Yeerk transport ship we had seized in orbit. It was loaded to the brim with Yeerks in their natural sluglike bodies. Big,

round tubs of Yeerk slugs. Yeerks I had saved when Alloran ordered them destroyed.

And right below me was the *Jahar*. She was like a work of art stuck in a junk pile. She glowed, beautiful amidst the clumsy Yeerk vessels.

And there, stepping from the *Jahar*, were the two odd creatures called humans.

The one called Chapman shoved a helpless, bound Loren. She fell before the feet of Sub-Visser Seven, the Yeerk in charge of security. The sub-visser was a Hork-Bajir-Controller.

"That's what I have to trade," Chapman said. "A whole planet full of . . . *that*."

A hundred Yeerks in different forms — huge, glistening, wormlike Taxxon-Controllers, dangerous, bladed Hork-Bajir-Controllers, clumsy Gedd-Controllers — all stood watching with bated breath.

Where was Arbron, my fellow *aristh*? Where was War-prince Alloran? The last I'd seen of them they were in Taxxon morph. But the two-hour time limit for staying in one morph had passed. I could only hope they had demorphed at some point.

<Alloran should be dealing with all this,> I complained bitterly to no one. Alloran was the war-prince. He'd been in wars before. He had fought in the Hork-Bajir war. I didn't know anything! I was a nobody!

Okay, Elfangor, calm down and think.

But how could I be calm? The Yeerks were seizing Loren and roughly hustling her away. Chapman was trying to communicate with Sub-Visser Seven.

Then it hit me: Chapman knew! He knew about the Time Matrix! If he found a way to tell the Yeerks, we were all done for.

Okay, okay, so I had to do something. Something. *Something*. But what? What should I do? This was madness! The entire fate of my people rested on me? On *me*?

Priorities. Okay, okay, what was most important?

Rescuing Loren.

No. No, that was absurd. The Time Matrix. Everything came down to the Time Matrix.

Was Chapman going to tell the sub-visser about it? No. It was Chapman's biggest bargaining chip. This human was like a Skrit Na — self-serving, greedy, and very, very strange. The Skrit Na are made up of two races. The Skrit look like huge insects and are somewhat less than intelligent. But the Skrit each eventually weave a cocoon and a year later, out pops a Na. The Na stand on four slender legs, have heads shaped like Andalites, but only possess two eyes. All the Skrit Na care about is owning and possessing things. And it seemed the human Chapman was the very same way. So I truly

believed he would not give up the Time Matrix just yet.

I had time, but not much. The sub-visser would be kept busy with Chapman attempting to talk about Earth. Like any Yeerk, Sub-Visser Seven would be fascinated by the possibility of an entire planet of sentient creatures for the Yeerk Empire to enslave.

Think, Elfangor. Think!

I couldn't count on finding Alloran and Arbron. But if they were still alive and free, they would reach the same conclusion I had: Go for the Skrit Na ship and its cargo, the Time Matrix.

I turned in the air and flapped my many wings hard as I headed toward the Skrit Na ship.

Below I saw Hork-Bajir grab Loren and pull her to her feet. They yanked her up by her golden hair and a human cry of pain floated up to me.

Priorities, Elfangor.

<Loren. It's me, Elfangor!> I called down, focusing my thought-speak on her alone.

I saw her jerk and turn her head around the way humans do to see behind them.

<Stop. Don't move! Don't make them mad. Don't worry, I'm using private thought-speak. No one else can hear.>

She stopped twisting around and kept marching forward between her Hork-Bajir captors.

<Tell the Yeerks whatever they want to know. Don't resist. Just one thing: Don't mention the Time Matrix. If they get that, it's all over. You have to trust me. I will save you.>

Of course, the human Loren couldn't answer. Humans don't have thought-speak. Like most species, they make sounds to communicate. I could only hope she would trust me.

Right. She should trust me. Would I trust some alien who'd landed me in this mess?

I could only hope. She had to keep quiet about the Time Matrix. I knew Chapman would.

I flew hard for the Skrit Na ship. At least I had a goal now. That helped. A little. And I just wouldn't think about the insanity of it all. I would just put all that out of my head.

The Skrit Na ship was being fussed over by Gedd-Controllers. Gedds are clumsy, loping creatures. They were the first species the Yeerks infested. Only low-ranking Yeerks were still stuck in Gedd bodies. These Gedd-Controllers seemed to be busy checking the Skrit Na ship for hull damage.

I had to get aboard that ship. And I had to fly it off the planet.

No problem, Elfangor. Just steal the ship from the middle of a Yeerk spaceport and fly it away without getting zapped. No big deal.

I landed in the dirt beneath the ship's cradle. It

was dark and filthy down there. Endless debris and trash had been shoved in over the years. They had apparently even emptied ships' sewage reprocessing plants there. The smell was overwhelming.

I demorphed amid the fossilized remains of sewage from a dozen species. Not pleasant. But it was a good feeling to get my Andalite body back.

I covered behind the massive support pillars as I watched my four legs grow from four of the *kafit's* wings. Two other wings became my hands. My sleek bird head grew large and sprouted my twin stalk eyes, while the bird's own two eyes became my main eyes.

The remaining wings shriveled and disappeared as my long, wispy bird tail became my swift, powerful Andalite tail.

I was so pleased to get my tail back. A bird's body can be pretty helpless. But unfortunately, I couldn't stay in Andalite form. An Andalite walking around on the Taxxon world, surrounded by nothing but various types of Yeerks, would be just slightly obvious. Slightly obvious, as in I'd have been dead ten seconds after I walked out of the shadows.

I had only one way to go. I would have to resume the Taxxon morph I had acquired. The Taxxon DNA was still a part of me. It always would be.

I swallowed my fear and loathing and began the morph.

And as I felt the huge worm body grow, and felt the screaming, desperate Taxxon hunger rise within me, I tried to form a plan. A plan to save my world, my friends, and Loren all at once.

I was halfway into Taxxon shape when I heard the shuffling, slithering sound of a Taxxon. My stalk eyes had already morphed away. But I still had my main eyes. I turned to look.

It was just a dozen feet away. It must have been lurking in the darkness. It had only to scream for help and I'd be Taxxon lunch.

Then, to my surprise, the Taxxon spoke in Andalite thought-speak.

<Elfangor! Is that you?>

<Arbron?> I cried. I was flooded with relief. I wouldn't be alone! I had Arbron with me. We'd never exactly been close friends, but at least he was one of my own.

<Yes, it's me,> he said.

<What happened to you?> I asked. <I lost you and Alloran in that terrible feeding frenzy.>

For a few moments Arbron said nothing. His silence drew a chill up my half-morphed body.

<I guess we got separated,> Arbron said flatly. <So. We gonna rescue this Time Matrix thing or what? Hero time, huh?>

<Yeah. Hero time,> I agreed. But there was something wrong. Something very wrong. I could feel it.

<Where is Alloran?> I asked.

<I don't know. I lost him in the crowd. Just you and me, I guess. Come on. Let's do it. Let's save the world, hah-hah! Just what you planned, eh, Elfangor? Elfangor the hero?>

He seemed to alternate between being flat and emotionless and sudden bursts of manic energy. Maybe it was the strain. The fear. And the vile creepiness of inhabiting a Taxxon form.

That had to be it. Nothing to worry about. Just stress.

<If I end up being a hero, you'll be one, too,> I said. <Besides, let's just see if we survive first.>

<Yeah. Survive,> he said, flat and emotionless again. <Come on, Elfangor. Finish morphing.>

chapter 18

<You have a plan?>

<Sure,> I said. <We bluff. We tell those Ged-Controllers up there that we've come to fix the computers. Then we fly that sorry Skrit Na ship away.>

I wanted to sound casual. Nonchalant. The way the fighter pilots always sound when they are describing some terrifying battle. Like it was all no big deal.

Arbron stared at me through red jelly Taxxon eyes. <Okay. Lead the way,> he said.

Arbron and I slithered out from beneath the ship's cradle and motored our rows of Taxxon needle legs up the ramp to the ship itself. Just a pair of bored Taxxon technicians going to work. Totally calm.

Or as calm as any Taxxon, even a Taxxon-Controller, can ever be. There is simply no way to explain the awful hunger of the Taxxon. It is beyond any hunger you've ever imagined. It is constant.

Like a screaming voice in your head. Screaming so loud you can't think.

Every living thing you see or smell is just meat to you. You hear beating hearts and smell rushing blood and the hunger almost takes over your body.

And when someone is injured . . . when there is blood spilled ... well then, as I knew personally, the hunger is all but impossible to resist.

I had come within a haunch hair of eating an injured Taxxon myself. Not something I wanted to remember. But not something I'd ever forget.

<Don't hesitate,> I advised Arbron as several Gedds turned to blink curiously at us. <Look like you're on your way to work.>

<Shut up, Elfangor,> Arbron said harshly.

Again I felt the chill of fear. Something was horribly wrong. But there was no stopping now. I pushed rudely past a Gedd who was in my way.

The Gedd-Controllers looked resentful. But they had no reason to suspect us. We were Taxxons. They had to assume we were Taxxon-Controllers. We looked like we were there to work. No reason for them to be at all suspicious.

Except that one of them was.

One of the Gedd-Controllers stood right in front of us, seemingly unimpressed. He spoke in *Galard*, the language of interstellar trade. It sounded hard on his Gedd tongue, but I could understand him.

"Rrr-what arrrrre you doing herrrrrrre?"

If it was hard for the Gedd to make *Galard* sounds, it was almost impossible for me, with a Taxxon's mouth and tongue. But I couldn't use thought-speak. I might as well announce that I was Andalite. I had to try to speak *Galard* with a three-foot-long Taxxon tongue.

So I tried. "Sreeeee snwwweeeyiir sreeeyah!"

Which was not even close to being the sounds I'd wanted to make. What I had meant to say was "computer repair." But the Taxxon's tongue is so long, that it would be hard even if I was used to using a mouth to make sounds.

The Gedd stared at me with its tiny yellow eyes. "Rrr-use rrr pad!" He pointed furiously down at a small computer pad attached to his wrist.

<It's some kind of translator,> Arbron said. <Some primitive version of our own translator chips. Let me do it.>

He reached with one of his weak, two-fingered Taxxon hands and pressed several buttons. From the pad came a disembodied voice, speaking *Galard*.

"Computer repair."

The Gedd snorted angrily. "Rrryou Taxxon wearrrers think you rrrown the planet! Arrrogant as Horrrk-Bajir!"

Arbron and I shoved past him into the Skrit Na

ship. Unfortunately, it was so cramped and low that we could barely drag our massive bodies inside.

The bridge of the Skrit Na ship was identical to the Skrit Na ship we'd boarded to rescue the two humans. There were two cocooned Skrit glued into a corner. They wouldn't cause any trouble. They didn't look ready to hatch into Na just yet. And there was an active Skrit, what Loren had described as a giant cockroach, scurrying around almost brainlessly, polishing and cleaning.

There were no Na that I could see. Aside from the Skrit, the bridge of the ship was empty.

<So far, so good,> I muttered. <I'm going to close the hatch. We'll demorph, power up, and be off-planet before they know what's hit them.>

<Yeah. Okay,> Arbron said. <Ready?>

<Yep.> I focused on my breathing, trying to fight the raging Taxxon hunger and my own fear. <Okay, do it!>

Arbron punched the pad to close the hatch door. It slid shut and made a snug vacuum seal SHWOOMP!

I focused all my thoughts on demorphing. I wanted out of that Taxxon body. The two of us could barely move in the cramped bridge, let alone fly the ship. The idiot Skrit kept banging against me, unable to find a way to go around.

I demorphed. I shed that vile Taxxon body as fast

as I could. I felt the awful hunger weaken and my own Andalite mind rise above, freed of the Taxxon's instincts.

THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!

The Gedds were pounding on the hull. "Rrrrwhat arrrrre you doing? Open rrrup!"

I ignored the noise and punched the engine power. The main engines began to whine as they powered up.

And then I realized it. Arbron was not demorphing.

<Arbron, what are you waiting for? Demorph!>

Arbron didn't say anything.

THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!

"Rrrr-open up! Powerrr down rrryou fool!"

<Arbron! What are you up to? Demorph!> I yelled. I guess I hoped that yelling would make it happen. But I already knew. He stared at me through those shimmering red jelly eyes, and I knew. More quietly, almost begging, I said, <Come on, Arbron. Demorph.>

<I really wish I could, Elfangor,> he said. <I really wish I could.>

chapter 19

There was no time to talk about it. We had to get the Skrit Na ship up and out of that cradle before it occurred to the Yeerks that we were stealing it.

No time to talk about it. But time to feel something of the terror Arbron felt.

I had been in Taxxon morph. I had felt the hunger. I'd rather be dead than be trapped in that body forever.

Arbron's weak Taxxon "arms" pushed all the right buttons, and I felt the soft vibration of the engines reaching full power.

The Gedd-Controllers outside must have felt it, too. Suddenly they stopped pounding on the ship. They were probably running for dear life. The radiation blast of the engines would be captured and contained within the cradle. But if you were still hanging around on that cradle when the engines came on, you wouldn't last long.

<Ready?> I asked Arbron.

<Ready.>

<Then hang on, because I don't know how much of a kick these Skrit Na ships have.> I punched up a burn and we rose from the pad.

Unfortunately, we didn't rise very quickly.

<What is the matter with this thing?> I yelled. I looked at the air speed indicator. We were doing a bare thousand miles per hour. And the acceleration rate was way too slow.

<It'll take us ten minutes just to get escape velocity!> Arbron cried.

<Yeerk ships will be all over us before we can even think about going to Zero-space,> I said.

<The Time Matrix!> Arbron said. <We can use it! We can escape through time!>

<No! We don't know how fast it works. If we try to activate the Time Matrix, the power signature will light up every Yeerk sensor within a million miles! What if it takes ten minutes for it to work? Besides . . . we don't know who else might get mad if you use that thing.>

<What? You're worried about what some prince will say if we survive?>

<No. I'm not worried about our superiors. Or at least, I figure my career in the military is already destroyed.>

<Then what are you . . . > Arbron fell silent. Then he laughed. <Are you kidding me? You're worried about some mythical Ellimists?>

<Mythical? That's what some people used to say about the Time Matrix itself. Someone built that machine. Who else, if not the Ellimists? And do we want to take the chance of making them angry?>

I felt a little foolish. My parents had told me Ellimist stories when I was a child. Stories of the all-powerful, inexplicable creatures who sometimes interfered in the affairs of simpler species. I halfway expected a snide remark from Arbron.

But Arbron didn't answer. He was staring at his display board. At least, I guess he was staring. Taxxon eyes don't exactly focus normally. <Yeerk patrol ship coming up on an intercept vector! It's a Bug fighter!>

<Can we take on a Bug fighter?>

<Are you kidding? All the Skrit Na ever have are secondhand, low-power Dracon beams the Yeerks sell off for scrap. That Bug fighter has twin Penetrator-Class Dracon beams. We can't trade shots with them!>

He was right. And I should have remembered that. But I was shaken. Confused. My brain was spinning at a million revolutions per second and going nowhere.

I had to think. Focus.

The air speed gauge now showed two thousand twenty miles per hour. The hull was blistering hot from the air resistance. <Wait a minute! Bug fighters

are slow in atmosphere, right? They can't handle the heat. We can! So far, at least. We're doing better than two thousand miles per hour. We're faster than they are in atmosphere!>

<You're going to try and outrun them in the atmosphere?>

<You have a better option?>

<We have a second Bug fighter on us!> Arbron answered. <Two more launching!>

<We're going to the grass,> I said, hoping I sounded more confident than I felt. <I'll need direct vision. Real time, real aspect. Open a window.>

Arbron played his console, and suddenly the panel in front of me became a window. I could see the superheated air, blazing around the ship.

I nosed the stubby, round ship down. As we dropped we picked up speed. <Passing three thousand miles per hour!>

Down, down, down at over three thousand mph! The brown dust of the Taxxon world leaped up at us.

Spacecraft are designed for the almost total vacuum of space. Usually they are barely functional in atmosphere. But the Skrit Na were scavengers who went from planet to planet, kidnapping and stealing and performing their inexplicable medical experiments. So they needed ships that could handle atmosphere.

But nothing is really designed to do three thousand miles an hour in atmosphere. Let alone fifty feet off the ground.

We had been seven miles up, right at the outer edge of the Taxxon atmosphere. We dropped back down to ground level in five point eight seconds.

<Yaaaaahhhhhh!>

<Yaaaaahhhhhh!>

We both screamed in a mix of utter terror and shocking excitement. Let me tell you something: Millions of miles an hour in empty space is *nothing* compared to three thousand miles an hour going straight for the ground.

<Pull up! Pull up! Pull up!>

I pulled up, as the collision warnings screamed in the Skrit Na language.

We blew across the Taxxon desert, trailing sonic booms that must have sounded like nuclear explosions going off in our wake.

<Can you get the Bug fighters on visual?> I asked.

<On screen!>

I saw two Bug fighters racing after us, one behind the other. Their hulls glowed bright with friction heat. But they weren't backing off.

<Fine,> I muttered. <Let's see who's faster.> I raised the burn and felt a slight lurch as the engines pushed harder still.

<Three thousand two hundred miles per hour,> Arbron reported. <Three point three K. Three point four K. Hull temperature is . . . you don't even want to know. Three point five K.>

Three thousand five hundred miles an hour. The ground was a blur. We were a blazing meteorite. We were an arrow of flame as we shot across the Taxxon world at impossible speeds. The scruffy bushes and stunted trees of the Taxxon world burst into flame as we passed over. We were drawing a line of fire around the planet!

<Pull up!> Arbron yelled.

Mountains rose up like a wall. <Where did *they* come from?!> I cried as I pulled up, straining every atom in the Skrit Na ship.

The ship bucked like a dying beast in its final agony. But we climbed. Up . . . up . . .

<Are we going to clear?>

Before I could answer, we shot over the mountain wall. I swear I heard the bottom scrape as we cleared the height.

Unfortunately, the Yeerks knew the local topography. They'd been ready for them. They had adjusted easily and had gained on us.

TSSSSEEEEEWWWWW!

A red Dracon beam lanced past us, missing by inches. They were close enough now to shoot.

We were approaching the dividing line between night and day. I could see it rushing toward me.

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the lead Bug fighter simply explode! The air friction had finally worn down its compensators and the craft had burned to a cinder in a split second.

<Yah-hah! One Yeerk fried!> I exulted.

<Elfangor, we're next if we don't slow down,>

Arbron warned.

<There are still three Bug fighters on our tail,> I said.

<We are about five minutes away from burning up,> Arbron said. <Can you guarantee those Bug fighters will cinder before we do?>

<What do you have in mind?>

<We take a shot. One, two, three. They won't be ready. They won't expect it.>

I turned my stalk eyes to stare at Arbron. <No one can make that shot.>

<I can,> he said.

<With Taxxon eyes?> I didn't want to throw that in his face, but I had to be realistic. <With Taxxon reaction times? With Skrit Na targeting computers?>

<I can make the shot, Elfangor,> he said calmly.

<Look, Arbron, I want to come out of this alive.>

<And you think I don't care if I live or die, right?> he said bitterly. <Maybe you're right. This

hunger . . . Elfangor, you've felt it. You know. But I can still make this shot.>

<You always laugh at *me* wanting to be a hero,> I said. <Now who's playing hero?>

He didn't answer.

I looked at the hull temperature readout. He was right. We would cinder in a few minutes.

You know what's funny? I wanted to ask the captain what to do. It seemed ridiculous that I should make a life and death decision like this. Princes made those kinds of decisions. Captains made those decisions.

Only I was the captain. And if I was wrong, we would dig a hole in the Taxxon dirt at three thousand miles an hour.

<Okay, Arbron,> I said. <In ten seconds. Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . >

chapter 20

<Three ... two ...>

I killed thrust and punched the air brakes.

SHHHHHRRRRREEEEEEKKKK!

The Skrit Na ship shook; it bucked; it rattled; it vibrated; it bounced wildly just fifty feet off the grass.

I was thrown off-balance. I sprawled across the deck. But Arbron's rows of Taxxon legs absorbed the punishment. He never wavered. He kept his Taxxon claws on the targeting controls.

Our speed dropped from nearly three and a half thousand miles per hour down to half that. In mere seconds! Too fast for the Bug fighters to react.

What happened next would make Arbron a hero.

Our speed dropped off; the Bug fighters rocketed forward and blew past, doing fifteen hundred mph faster than us.

Arbron fired! TSSSEEEEEWWW!

Fired! TSSSEEEEEWWW!

Fired! TSSSEEEEEWWW!

Three shots at three targets doing a relative speed of fifteen hundred mph. Three shots in atmosphere! Three shots from a vibrating, bucking wreck of a Skrit Na ship.

I dragged myself up and stared in disbelief out of the forward window.

Three spinning meteorites, three balls of flame, slammed into the ground. They dug craters in the Taxxon dirt and extinguished themselves.

<Nice shooting!> I said. <Seriously nice shooting!>

<Thanks. It turns out Taxxon senses and reflexes are good at this kind of thing. Guess that's why the Yeerks use Taxxon-Controllers to fly their Bug fighters. It's nice to know there's something useful about this disgusting body.>

<We're going to find a way to get you out of that Taxxon morph,> I said. I tried to sound like I meant it. What else could I say?

Till that moment I'd been too busy trying to stay alive to really think about what had happened to Arbron. Maybe we'd never exactly been best friends, but it was still horrible to look at his foul Taxxon body and think that this was how he would remain. To look into those emotionless red jelly eyes and realize that he was in there, looking back at me.

And I knew what he was feeling, now that the

battle was done. The terror. The despair. The awful Taxxon hunger.

I turned the Skrit Na ship around and headed back toward the rushing line of daylight.

<What are you doing?> Arbron demanded.

<I need a place to land and conceal this ship,> I said. <I need daylight. And I need to be closer to the spaceport. We can't just leave the others behind.>

<Others? You mean Alloran?>

<And the humans,> I said. <They are our responsibility.>

<We are not going back to the spaceport,> Arbron said. <The Yeerks are back there. And Taxxons. They'll catch us. Do you know what they'll do if they catch me? They'll eat me alive, Elfangor.>

<Arbron, you have to hold on. You have to try and hold on.> We were racing back across the dark mountains. Back toward the retreating line of daylight.

<Hold on? Hold on? Are you insane? If we go back there, they'll eat me! Turn this ship back. I'm going to use the Time Matrix! I'm going back in time. I'm going back to my life!>

<You can't light up that Time Matrix. The power signature will be visible to every ship in orbit, every satellite, every —>

<I don't care! I don't care if I die, just let this

hunger stop. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it! You fool, don't you know I could eat you right now?>

I turned my main eyes toward Arbron. I knew that inside there was a scared Andalite *aristh*. But what I actually saw was the nightmare worm. What I saw was the sloppy red eyes, the round, gasping, eternally hungry mouth.

For a moment that seemed to stretch and stretch, we stared at each other. I don't know what was going through Arbron's mind right then. I don't know what conclusions he'd reached. I only know what he did.

"Sssrrreeeeyyyyyaaahhh!" he screamed in his slithering, high-pitched Taxxon voice. He reared back, practically laying the upper third of his body horizontal. And then he slammed down on me.

Slammed his upper body down, red mouth open wide.

I could have killed him. He knew that, of course. He knew that no Taxxon could hope to outfight an Andalite. But I could not kill him. Not even if that's what he wanted.

I dodged to my right.

He slammed hard into the instrument panel. Sparks erupted!

He swept his upper body toward me, hoping to slam me against the bulkhead and stun me.

I leaped inside his reach and struck!

SLASH! Two of his needle legs went rolling across the floor.

SLASH! And two more legs were gone.

Arbron sagged. The front part of his body could no longer be held up. He lay, fully prone, a huge, helpless worm.

<Just kill me!> he screamed.

But I was busy. The control panel had been half-wrecked. The ship was bucking and yawing. It was unstable. I reduced power. We had shot across the line into twilight. But I couldn't see into the deep shadows between the mountain peaks.

<You can't leave me like this!> Arbron cried.
<I'm going to get you help,> I yelled. <But I have to land this ship!>

<Elfangor! You know what happens to wounded Taxxons! You *know*!>

<I'll protect you,> I cried desperately as the ship bucked and shook harder and harder. The two co-cooned Skrit seemed about to break loose from their moorings. The active Skrit had gone to the cargo hold. Maybe, even as unintelligent as the Skrit are, he knew better than to be anywhere near a hungry Taxxon.

<You can't protect me. Fool! Nothing can stop them! Nothing can stop the hunger. I couldn't stop it. Alloran couldn't stop it. Don't you understand? I

ate, Elfangor. I ate that wounded Taxxon. I couldn't help myself!>

<Shut up!> I screamed. <Shut up!>

I didn't want to hear anymore. I couldn't. I had to focus. I had to land the ship or we'd both die. I had to shut Arbron up.

I swept my stalk eyes around the bridge. Where would the Skrit Na keep weapons? There. A green panel marked with Skrit Na script.

I stretched my left arm to reach the panel. Popped it open. Yes. A handheld Dracon beam. Old and dusty and probably badly maintained, like most Skrit Na things.

I found the power setting. I set it at the lowest intensity.

<What are you doing?> Arbron yelled.

<I have to land this ship, Arbron. Keep quiet or I'll stun you.>

<If you fire that thing, you'll kill me,> Arbron said. <You have the settings backward. That's originally a Yeerk weapon. Setting one is the highest setting, not the lowest.>

Suddenly, I knew what Arbron would do. He couldn't rise up, but he could still scuttle forward. He came straight for me, rushing and slithering, as if he were aiming his round red mouth at me.

He was trying to force me to shoot him. To shoot him with the Dracon beam set on maximum! But

I was too fast for him. I twisted the dial to ten. I fired.

And just as my finger was tightening on the trigger . . . I realized Arbron had outsmarted me. He'd lied, and I'd fallen for it. Arbron had always been a better student than me. He was a qualified exo-datologist. He knew alien systems far better than me.

I tried to stop. But my finger squeezed. The Dracon beam fired. On *maximum* power.

But by chance, or maybe by some desperate, too-late twitch of my finger, the beam missed Arbron by a millimeter.

Instead, it blew a two-foot hole through the hull of the ship.

After that, everything was noise and spinning and pain and confusion.

chapter 21

I woke up.

I was on my side, lying in the dirt.

I looked up at a night sky. Stars, galaxies, three tiny moons.

Where was I?

I stood up. Every muscle in my body ached. Muscles I didn't even know I had ached. My hooves tasted nothing but bare dirt. My stalk eyes swiveled quickly to look around, but I realized one eye was blinded.

Then I saw the ship, the Skrit Na transport. It was still more or less in one piece. I must have been able to land it. Somehow. I couldn't remember much of those last few minutes. It was all chaos in my brain.

I forced myself to go over the facts. I was on the Taxxon home world. I was approximately four hundred miles from the spaceport. Loren and Chapman were in the hands of the Yeerks. Alloran . . . no one knew.

Arbron had tried to trick me into killing him. That's what I remembered best.

<Arbron!> I called. <Arbron!>

No answer. I trudged wearily over to the Skrit Na ship. I saw the two-foot hole made by the Dracon beam. And then I saw the way the engines had been ripped half off. The ship would never fly again.

I climbed into the wreckage. My second stalk eye was starting to clear a little. I felt it and realized it had just been covered with mud.

Inside the ship I called again. <Arbron!> I looked around. Nothing was working except a tiny glimmer of emergency lighting. For some reason the Skrit Na liked their emergency lighting to be green. Who knows why?

Something was missing.

Of course! The two Skrit cocoons. They must have been knocked loose.

The door to the freight hold was blown open. I went in. The same green emergency lighting illuminated a bizarre scene. In the hold were boxes and crates piled in wild disarray. Many had broken open on impact. They spilled an amazing mass of alien-looking objects. Frozen, preserved animals; bundles of the artificial skin that Loren and Chapman wore; glass objects that seemed to contain liquids; odd, antiquated electronic equipment; small objects that

looked like hundreds of rectangular sheets of paper glued together on one side; and a long crate of what I could almost swear were primitive weapons.

All things that the Skrit Na had looted from Earth. Loren would know what they were, no doubt.

But in addition to all the small objects, there were two much larger things. One was a shiny yellow-painted creation with four black wheels.

The other object was the most powerful thing in the history of the galaxy.

It looked like nothing more than a smooth, off-white sphere. It was perhaps ten feet in diameter. Perfectly smooth. Unmarked. You would never know what it was if you hadn't seen the power readings. Invisible to the eye, it spread its grid down through the very fabric of time-space.

The Time Matrix.

I found I had stopped breathing. I could barely imagine the power I was staring at. To move a ship into Zero-space took more power than a medium-sized star. To move anything through time took ten times that power. The power of ten suns. All somehow contained in that off-white sphere.

<Arbron!> I yelled.

But I knew he wasn't there. He must have been thrown clear of the ship, just as I had been. Only I hadn't seen him outside. And now it occurred to me

that something else was missing, too. The active Skrit.

Both Skrit cocoons and the active Skrit were gone. Along with Arbron.

I turned slowly away from the Time Matrix. It had a hold over me. It drew my stalk eyes back to it, even as I walked away.

I went back outside. <Arbron!>

The light of the moons and stars was too dim to see clearly. But I had the impression I was in a narrow valley between tall, almost clifflike mountains. Where could Arbron have gotten to? Had he fallen from the doomed Skrit Na ship earlier? He could have ended up slamming into one of the mountain-sides.

I hated to even imagine that.

I went back inside the cargo hold and picked up a handful of paper sheaves. Some were larger and had pictures. By the dim green light I instantly recognized that the pictures were of humans.

I flipped through pictures of humans doing things I could not understand. But then there was one picture I understood immediately. It showed a marvelously tall waterfall. The waterfall crashed into a pool surrounded by trees, all of them green. Overhead was a blue sky.

Two humans were smiling and sticking tiny white cylinders into their mouths.

There was human writing beneath the picture. I don't read human very well. But I was sure it was a poem to the beauty revealed in the picture.

The grass there looked sweet.

It would be a fine thing to run there. To run with Loren and forget everything that had happened. Forget that I was alone on a planet of evil, my only companion probably dead, my prince lost.

I turned to other pictures. I saw small, strange pictures of humans doing nothing but smiling. And there were pictures of human technology. A flying machine of some sort. Humans holding long rods that spit fire. What seemed to be hideous cities. And then, to my delight, a picture of an actual human spacecraft.

It took me a few seconds to understand what it was. It seemed to be a chemical rocket. An actual chemical rocket!

But the pictures that drew my gaze were the ones of beautiful beaches beside blue seas. And mountains topped with white. And rushing white-water streams surrounded by tall green trees.

The trees were all very similar. Not as beautiful as the trees I knew. Still, the pictures spoke of a lovely world, filled with delicious green grass and cool water.

That alien landscape of Earth took me away from the drab horror of the Taxxon world. I won-

dered if Chapman might be from the jagged human cities. Was that why he was so much harsher than Loren? Was Loren from the beautiful green country where smiling humans stuck white cylinders in their mouths?

I guess I fell asleep looking at that picture. I awoke with lingering traces of awful dreams chasing through my brain.

There was light . . . natural light from the Taxxon sun.

I ran outside. As I had guessed, I was in an incredibly steep valley. And now I could see tracks in the orange dirt. The marks of dozens of needle-sharp legs. Taxxon tracks!

The tracks came right up to the ship. Had they come while I was asleep? No. I could see my own tracks from the night before. My tracks were over the Taxxon tracks.

Arbron! They were his tracks. Had to be. And yet . . . No, there had been more than one Taxxon. Three . . . four others. Five sets altogether.

And then I saw two additional signs. A set of wandering, insectlike tracks, and the evidence of something large being dragged away.

<The Skrit,> I said. <Okay. So Taxxons came. They took Arbron away. And the Skrit. And maybe the two cocooned Skrit.>

I glanced at the spot where I'd been lying un-

conscious. They had to have seen me, smelled me. And yet I was still alive.

<They have Arbron,> I realized.

I reeled back and fell down. The Taxxons had taken Arbron. I knew what Taxxons did with prisoners.

<No!> What had I done? I'd let them take Arbron alive!

And yet why hadn't they taken me? And the Time Matrix? Surely Taxxon-Controllers would not have done that.

I recalled Sub-Visser Seven's reference to Mountain Taxxons Taxxons who refused to submit to Yeerk control. And I felt just the faintest glimmer of hope. If these had been Yeerk-controlled Taxxons, they'd have taken the Time Matrix. And me.

<What am I supposed to do now?> I asked the empty, dusty sky.

Should I try to follow the tracks to Arbron? No. I had to be logical. Whatever type of Taxxon he'd fallen in with, their hunger would almost certainly seal his doom. And the doom of the poor Skrit Na, too.

Alloran might still be alive. He was my prince. My duty was to get back to him. Tell him about the Time Matrix and Arbron. Somehow. But the Taxxon spaceport was hundreds of miles away, across burning sands.

Then . . . one of the human pictures I'd seen came back to me. It had shown two smiling humans sitting in something very much like the bright yellow machine in the cargo hold.

I went back to the ship. Yes, this bright yellow machine had four wheels. And you could easily see how humans might sit in it. It had a name in chrome letters: "Mustang." Naturally, I had no idea what that meant.

I set to work enlarging the hole in the side of the cargo hold. Then I removed the chairs in the machine. I discovered that I could fit inside the machine if I removed the flimsy cloth top. I stared long and hard at the control panel. The computer was tiny and had knobs you could twist. But at first all it did was make static noises.

Then I discovered an actual tape drive! Astoundingly primitive. I pushed the buttons on the small keypad and twisted the knobs again, and to my utter amazement, the computer began to play music.

"I can't get no . . . satisfaction!" it screamed.

I quickly turned it down. What kind of race would use a computer to play screaming sounds?

It took twenty minutes more for me to realize that a notched brass insert could be twisted. And when I twisted it ..

RRRR RRRRR RRRRRRRR PUH PUH PUH
VROOOOM!

The noise was amazing!

It was an actual chemical engine! Something from a thousand years ago! Ridiculously primitive, and yet I found when I pressed my forehoof on a pedal in the floor, the engine roared.

VVRRRRRROOOOM! VVRRROOOOOOM!
VVVROOOOOO0M!

It was primitive, all right. But it vibrated in a most satisfying way. And I liked it.

chapter 22

I have run mag-hover trucks.

I have flown Bug fighters.

I have flown Skrit Na raiders at three thousand miles per hour *in atmosphere*.

But I had never experienced anything more exhilarating than racing down the valley and out across the open Taxxon desert in my Mustang. It only went a hundred miles per hour, but with the wind in your face, whipping your fur, bending your stalk eyes back, it was certainly a wild ride.

But everything was going wrong.

I was racing across the Taxxon desert in a human vehicle toward probable doom. But with the wind in my face, and the music in my ears mingling with the loud roar of the engine, I didn't feel so badly.

I had gathered up some of the other human objects the Skrit Na had taken. The writing sheets with pictures. Some of the machines that looked like weapons. And some of the glass bottles containing liquid.

I broke several of the bottles before I figured out

how to open them. After that, I quickly determined, that they contained water-based liquids. I poured, the liquids into a shallow pan, and was able to stick in one hoof to drink as I drove.

DR PEPPER, the bottles had said. I figured that was human writing for "bubbling brown water."

For a while I just put Arbron out of my mind. I put Alloran out of my mind. And I pictured myself with Loren, driving in my Mustang across the green grass of Earth. Wind in my face. Bubbling brown water running up my hoof.

As I drove, I tried to come up with a plan. One thing was for sure: An Andalite in a Mustang was going to be just slightly obvious. I would need stealth. But I would not morph to Taxxon again.

Not ever.

That's when the ground beneath my wheels simply opened up.

FFFFWWWUUUMMPPP!

<Aaaaahhhh!>

BOOM! BOOM! RUMBLERUMBLERUMBLE!

The Mustang tumbled and rattled down a steep, rough slope. A dirt ramp that led straight down into darkness.

<Aaaaahhhh!>

I took my hoof off the accelerator pedal. I tried to reach the key to turn off the engine. But the vibration was too severe.

I slid and rattled and rolled in my human machine, down, down, down into the ground. Down and down. And then I slid to a halt.

SCRRUUMMPFFF!

The only sound was the noise of the engine and the weird human moaning that passed for music.

. . . gimme, gimme, gimme the honky-tonk blues!"

I turned off the music.

I was in darkness, but not the absolute darkness I expected. This darkness still afforded sight. There was light enough for my main eyes to see, after they'd had a few seconds to adjust.

I was in a vast underground cavern. Dominating the center of the cavern was a sort of hill or small mountain. It was this mountain that glowed. It glowed a dim but unmistakable red.

From this irregular glowing hill came tendrils, each perhaps three or four feet in diameter. As my eyes adjusted I could see that there were a dozen or more of these tendrils, and that each one extended to the edge of the cavern and then kept going into the rock itself.

The tendrils, too, glowed a dim red. I realized that I could see things moving inside the tendrils. The tendrils were hollow! They were tubes, each about as big around as ..

As a Taxxon!

I saw them then. My eyes finally pierced the darkness and saw the Taxxons! Dozens . . . no, hundreds! They swarmed around and over the glowing red mountain.

As I watched, I saw holes open in the sides of the tunnel-tendrils. Out crawled more Taxxons.

They had to see me. They couldn't help but see me. And yet none moved to attack me.

Instead, they busied themselves pushing dirt and rock back into place to fill the space my Mustang had created.

<IS THIS THE CREATURE?>

<Aaaarrrrggghh!> I screamed.

The voice in my head was huge! Massive! I grabbed my head with my hands. It was like hearing a planet speak! It was only then, as I staggered under the psychic blow, that I realized it: The red mountain was alive!

I heard a different thought-speak voice. <Yes. That's him,> Arbron said. <He is called Elfangor.>

One Taxxon came slithering toward me out of the mass of bodies around the base of the red mountain. It moved clumsily. Two rows of legs were shorter than the others.

<Arbron?>

<Yes, Elfangor. It's me.>

<I was afraid you were dead,> I said.

<I wanted to be. But I am still alive. Alive to serve the Living Hive.>

<The what?>

He waved one Taxxon claw back toward the massive, glowing mountain. <The Living Hive. Light of the Taxxons. Mother and Father of the Taxxons. The Hive has lost many of its children to the Yeerks. Many of its servants have betrayed the Hive and made an alliance with the Yeerks. But the Living Hive is still the Mother and Father of the species.>

<Arbron, what are you talking about? Have they done something to you?>

Then he laughed — the old Arbron again, for just a moment. <Have they done something to me? Well, they didn't eat me, if that's what you mean. The Taxxons who found us after we crashed wanted to eat us both. But I gave them the Skrit instead. I had no choice! And then the Living Hive learned what I was. It drew me here.>

<We're hundreds of miles from where we landed. How did you get here? You couldn't possibly have walked.>

<The Living Hive's tunnels extend across thousands of miles, Elfangor. There is suction in the tunnels. A Taxxon has only to fold back its legs, and the pressure draws it swiftly down the tunnel, as the Hive commands.>

<The legs I . . . the legs you were missing. They're growing back.>

<Yes. Taxxons can regenerate legs.>

<Arbron . what's going on? It wasn't an accident that the ground opened up beneath me. Did the . . . the Living Hive want me here for some reason?>

<Yes, Elfangor. The Hive is angry.>

<At me?> I asked, feeling my guts turn over several times. If this glowing red mountain was mad at me, all it had to do was yell in its monstrous psychic voice and I'd be shattered.

<The Living Hive is tired of losing its children to the Yeerks. The Living Hive has long sought a way to destroy the Yeerk invaders and remove them from this planet. But the Hive could not understand the Yeerks and their machines. Now . . . now, the Hive has an adviser. Someone who understands machines, spaceships, Dracon beams. Someone who will help the Hive destroy the Yeerks and their traitor Taxxons.>

I stared at Arbron. <You?>

He laughed. But this time there was no mirth. <What better future could I have, Elfangor? I am Taxxon now. And now I am preparing for a surprise attack on the spaceport. The Hive will send a thousand of her children with me. I will lead a Taxxon rebellion.>

I didn't say anything. What was there to say? My hearts were breaking.

Arbron slithered closer, shuffling on his needle-like legs. He looked at me through red jelly eyes. And even now, I knew he seethed with raging Taxxon hunger.

<Don't pity me, Elfangor. I am glad I didn't die. Any life is better than none. And no matter how awful things seem, there is always meaning and purpose to be found.>

<And you've found your purpose?>

<We attack tonight. The Living Hive is pushing her tunnels closer to the spaceport. A thousand Taxxons will pour from the ground, surprising the Yeerks and all their creatures.>

I imagined that moment. A thousand huge, hungry worms, erupting amid the technological cathedrals of the ship's cradles. Erupting amidst Taxxon-Controllers and Hork-Bajir-Controllers.

<You'll lose,> I said.

<We know,> Arbron said. <But even a Taxxon has the right to control its own planet. Even a Taxxon has the right to resist an invader.>

<But you can't win,> I said flatly.

<Aren't lost causes sometimes the best causes, Elfangor?>

How could he imagine that anything to do with Taxxons could ever be a good cause? These Taxxon

were no less cannibalistic. No less murderous. And yet, if they opposed the Yeerks, could I refuse to offer that help?

<Tell me what I can do to help, Arbron.>

<That's more like it, Elfangor. We'll put some tail blades into these Yeerks, right? Right? We'll be heroes, after all.>

chapter 23

All that afternoon I stayed in the horrible, reeking, stifling darkness of that underground cavern. Arbron was there some of the time. But not often. Mostly he was communing with the Living Hive. Making plans.

Arbron had become a general. He was just what the Living Hive needed. He could explain what the Taxxons would find when they erupted into the spaceport. He could explain how to hurt the Yeerks.

I don't know if he told the Hive how hopeless the task was. I only know that he seemed very alive. Almost on fire.

At last, he came to me. <Elfangor. There is a delicate problem we have to discuss. Alloran and the humans. You know what this will be like. Taxxon against Taxxon-Controller. Taxxon against HorkBajir. No one will be safe. From either side.>

<What do you want me to do?>

<If you can, find Alloran and the humans. I know that's what you'd want to do, anyway. But most importantly, get the Time Matrix safely away.

The Living Hive is no more safe from the Time Matrix than any other living thing.>

<I'll take care of the Time Matrix,> I said.

<You'll need to take the *Jahar*. I'll help get you to it.>

<And then you can leave with me,> I said.

<No, Elfangor. I'm staying here. We'll lose this battle. But there may be other chances to hurt the Yeerks.>

I didn't know what to say. I guess I felt like only Arbron could decide for Arbron now. <I'll . . . I'll tell your parents what —>

<No!> he said sharply. <No, Elfangor. Tell them I died in battle. Let them remember me the way I used to be, okay? I don't want them to remember me like this. I don't want them picturing me this way.>

<Arbron . . .> I said, my mind swimming in emotion.

<I have some last-minute planning. We've put that yellow machine of yours in one of the tubes. You'll go last, after all our people have been sent. Drive straight down the tunnel. The tunnel is part of the Hive. It will make sure you get to the right place. And one last thing . . .>

<Yes?>

<The spaceport will be hell,> he said flatly. <You won't be able to tell the difference between my

Taxxons and Taxxon-Controllers. So don't hesitate. Do what you have to.>

And then he left. The legs I had cut off were half grown back. But I could still recognize him, moving amongst the other Taxxons.

The launch of the attack was eerie to watch. Taxxons lined up alongside the tunnels. The Living Hive glowed a brighter red, and swiftly, smoothly, the Taxxons shoved through the slits in the tunnels and were blown down the tubes.

They were launched at a rate of one every eight seconds or so, down five separate tubes. It took almost half an hour for all the Taxxons to enter the tubes. And then it was my turn.

I nosed the yellow Mustang into the living, pulsating gap in the tube. To my amazement, the tube stretched for me and the machine. It flattened down and widened out, leaving just inches of clearance.

I felt the WHOOOOOSH! of air pressure. It blew me down the tube. I gunned the engine and went from zero to two hundred miles per hour in seconds!

There was nothing exhilarating about this. I was blasting down a living tunnel, enclosed on all sides, ducking my head to avoid having my stalk eyes scraped off. The only light came from the machine's own lights — white, looking ahead, red, looking back.

For long minutes I raced along beneath the sur-

face of the Taxxon world. On my way to a massacre.

And then . . .

FWOOOOOSH!

I shot into the air.

RrrrrEEEEEEEEEEEEEE! The engine screamed as the wheels spun madly in midair.

I burst from the ground, flew through the air, and saw, in flashes of explosion and Dracon-beam blast, a scene no madman could have dreamed.

The machine arced toward the ground.

WHHUUUUMPPFF!

The front wheels hit, the engine roared, I was banged so badly that my elbow and left foreleg were scraped bloody, and the Mustang dug in and hauled away in an explosion of kicked-up dirt.

Suddenly, a Taxxon right in front of me!

SPLOOOMMMP!

The machine slammed into the Taxxon and burst it open like a bag of garbage!

<Aaaahhhh!> I screamed in sheer horror.

But it was only one small piece of horror in a scene that will be burned on my brain forever.

Taxxon cries!

Hork-Bajir roars!

The TSEEEWW TSEEEWW! of Dracon beams!

Scenes of nauseating violence were everywhere!

The battle had already raged for half an hour. Half

an hour of unarmed Taxxons against bladed Hork-Bajir.

It was a slaughterhouse.

How was I supposed to find the humans amidst that awful battle? How was I even supposed to think?

A huge Hork-Bajir spotted me and began to run for the Mustang. Only when he got close did he cry "Andalite!" in surprise and greedy delight.

He leaped at the moving machine. I spun the steering wheel. The Mustang turned sharply. I gunned the engine! WHUUMPF! I hit the Hork-Bajir in the legs. He cartwheeled over my head and landed in the dirt behind me.

Taxxons! Hork-Bajir! Gedds! All around me! I used the Mustang like a battering ram, mowing down anyone in my way.

The *Jahar*. All I could do was head for the *Jahar*!

The lovely ship stood proud above the slaughter. And there, atop the ship's cradle, clearly silhouetted by the lights, were two strange, alien shapes. Two aliens that walked on two legs alone, without tail.

The humans!

Seething around the base of the ship's cradle were a hundred Taxxons. All pushing and shoving to squeeze up the narrow ramp that led to the ship itself.

Standing alone on the ramp was a single Taxxon. A single Taxxon with four legs shorter than the rest.

<Arbron!> I screamed, as I slammed the Mustang into the mass of ravening Taxxons.

<Elfangor! I can't hold them any longer!>

<Are these Taxxon-Controllers? Or are they your soldiers?>

<There's no difference anymore, Elfangor! Don't you see? Blood has been spilled. The hunger . . . the hunger! Stop me, Elfangor! Stop me!>

And with that, Arbron, *aristh* of the Dome ship *StarSword*, lost his last shred of control. He turned from facing down the Taxxon mob. He turned and ran for the humans, mouth gaping open.

chapter 24

<N0000000!> I screamed. I leapt from the machine and plowed into the mass of Taxxon bodies. My tail whipped the air!

Strike! And push through.

Strike! And push through.

Strike! Strike! Strikestrikestrike!

I reached the ramp and leaped clear over the last Taxxon in my way. <Loren! Run! Arbron! N000000!>

I raced up the ramp. Arbron was closing in on the humans.

The human Chapman was free. And it was toward him that Arbron ran. The human Chapman screamed.

Arbron reared back, ready to slam his upper body down on the frail human.

<Aristh Arbron!> I cried. <Aristh Arbron, you will stop! You will do your duty!>

I don't know what made me say that. I don't know. I only know that Arbron hesitated. As Chapman cowered, helpless, Arbron remained poised.

Behind me, I saw the Taxxons falling back. And over them climbed and leaped a handful of Hork-Bajir warriors.

Seven feet tall. Blades on their wrists and elbows and knees. Blade horns raked forward from their sleek snake heads. Short, spiked tails twitching. Ripping bird feet clawing at Taxxon flesh to advance.

I realized I knew one of the Hork-Bajir. It was Sub-Visser Seven.

"Ah, so we meet again, Andalite!" he said, sounding delighted. "Elfangor, right? That was the name you yelled so defiantly at me as you escaped. I was so afraid the Taxxons might have gotten to you by now. And I so wanted you all for myself!"

For a moment no one moved. The injured Taxxons withdrew down the ramp to make way for the Hork-Bajir.

I was alone against half a dozen Hork-Bajir. Behind me, Arbron, who still eyed Loren hungrily. And with them, Chapman. Whose side was Chapman on now? And whose side was Arbron on?

"Surrender, Elfangor," Sub-Visser Seven practically purred. "I won't kill you. I'll just . . . use you. I'll leave this crude body and live inside your head. I'll wrap myself around your smug, arrogant Andalite brain and make you my slave. And with your Andalite morphing power, run the galaxy before

I'm done! It's either that or death, Andalite. There's no third choice."

I saw Arbron turn away from Loren. He came to stand beside me, a massive, ten-foot-long worm. <Guess we're a long way from the good old Star-Sword, eh, Elfangor?> he said, with a touch of his old humor. <We are one lost, lonely pair of arisths. Tell the Yeerk scum to dream on, Elfangor. Tell him we are Andalites. We don't surrender.>

<You heard my friend, Sub-Visser Seven,> I said. <You want me? Come get me.>

In the great stories and legends, that kind of speech always scares the bad guys. In real life it doesn't work that way.

"Okay," Sub-Visser Seven said. "I will come get you. Cut him down! Cut him down!" he screamed in sudden rage.

His Hork-Bajir leaped for me. But the ramp was narrow. There was only room for two Hork-Bajir at a time. Any trained Andalite can handle a Hork-Bajir one-on-one. They're fast. We're faster.

SWOOOOOOSH! The first Hork-Bajir swung his wrist blade.

FWAAAPPPP! I struck with my tail, and he no longer had a wrist blade. Or a wrist.

But the second Hork-Bajir shoved past him and got to my left. One of his comrades swung over the

railing and leaped onto the platform to our right. And the wounded Hork-Bajir was still dangerous.

The odds were getting worse very quickly. More Hork-Bajir were cramming onto the ramp, anxious to serve their sub-visser.

Battle exploded suddenly in rapid thrusts and slashes. Hork-Bajir blades made the air sing as they whipped their powerful arms and legs at me. Arbron did what he could, but a Taxxon is helpless in a blade fight. The Hork-Bajir just climbed over him to reach me.

"Elfangor! Look out!" Loren screamed.

"Get him! What are you waiting for?" Sub-Visser Seven roared. "He's just one Andalite!"

I fell back under the pressure. I had no time to think. None. Only time to react. Only time to block deadly blows. I had been cut badly already, and it was only a matter of time.

And then a new Hork-Bajir stepped forward. <So, how are you enjoying the war, Aristh Elfangor?> he asked in Andalite thought-speak.

I was so stunned I almost missed the next blow. War-prince Alloran! In Hork-Bajir morph!

Alloran spun. Before the sub-visser could so much as twitch, Alloran had pressed his wrist blade against the Yeerk's throat.

<Don't move, Yeerk. Don't even breathe,> Allo-

ran said. <Call off your men. Do it, or I'll laugh when your head goes rolling across the ground.>

"Hold!" the sub-visser cried. "Back away!"

The Hork-Bajir obeyed. They backed away. I panted and gasped for air. I was exhausted. I was bleeding. Loren ran over and pressed her hands against a deep gash in my chest. The pressure slowed the loss of blood.

"You're still alive!" she said. "I was so worried."

<Now here's what we're going to do,> Alloran said. <The two humans and my two friends and I are going aboard the *Jahar*. And you, Sub-Visser, are coming with us. Once we're off the cradle, we'll toss you back out. How does that plan sound to you, Yeerk?> he demanded, tightening his hold on the sub-visser.

"Do I have a choice?"

<There's always a choice, Yeerk. I can cut you right out of that Hork-Bajir and feed your impotent slug body to my friend the Taxxon here. That's one choice. Or you can order your men back down the ramp. All the way down.>

"Whatever became of the Andalite reputation for kindness and gentleness?" the Yeerk mocked.

<What happened? We left that image in the ashes of the Hork-Bajir home world.>

"You were there?"

<I was there. My name is Alloran-Semitur-Corrass. War-prince Alloran.>

For the first time, the sub-visser seemed afraid. His mocking, arrogant attitude seemed to evaporate. He quickly ordered his Hork-Bajir down the ramp.

Together we backed carefully toward the *Jahar*. Alloran, with the Yeerk sub-visser in his steel grip; Loren, still tending my wound; and Chapman, the treacherous human who had led us all to this terrible mess.

Only Arbron turned away from the open hatch of the *Jahar*.

<Come with us, Arbron,> I said. <Look around. The free Taxxons have lost. The Living Hive will be destroyed. There's no future for you here.>

<Elfangor, there's no future for me anywhere.>

<But you can't,> I said. <Who's going to remind me not to be so stiff? Who's going to laugh at me when I start talking about being a great prince?>

<You go, Elfangor,> Arbron said gently. <Go save the galaxy.>

<Leave him,> Alloran said. <*Aristh* . . . I mean, *Warrior* Arbron is a casualty of war.>

chapter 25

We launched the Jahar. There was no one to stop us. The battle still raged, and none of the Yeerks had the presence of mind to come after us.

Or so I thought.

Alloran demorphed from his Hork-Bajir body. I was relieved. I guess he saw my expression.

<Did you think I had ended up like Arbron back there? Trapped? A *nothlit*? No, *Aristh* Elfangor. I am still myself.>

<I'm glad, sir,> I said.

Sub-Visser Seven stood in a corner, eyeing Alloran as he demorphed and resumed his usual Andalite body. Loren seemed dazed. Even Chapman seemed unusually quiet. No doubt he was afraid of what we would do to him.

He deserved *whatever* we did to him.

<Your orders, sir?> I asked the prince.

Alloran sneered. <Ah. Now you want orders. When I ordered you to flush those pools full of Yeerks out into space you disobeyed me. But now

you want orders. Now you *want* to be told what to do.>

I was too tired to be angry. I was even too tired to consider how my earlier refusal to follow orders would probably destroy my career. What was I going to do? Explain to some military tribunal that I, the insignificant *aristh*, had thought Alloran's order immoral?

<Sir, the Time Matrix is —>

<Silence, you young fool!> Alloran snapped angrily. He glared at me, enraged. <We don't have time for that yet. No, first we have to take care of the business you kept me from taking care of. That Taxxon ship full of Yeerks is still in its cradle. Still filled with Yeerk slugs. What do you think I've been doing the last day and a half? I've been hiding in shadows, morphing and demorphing, watching that ship.>

<Prince Alloran, is that really the most important thing to do?>

For the first time since he had demorphed, he turned to face me. He glared at me with his main eyes. And that's when I saw the look. That's when I saw the rage. The mad rage.

<The most important thing in war is to destroy your enemies, *Aristh* Elfangor. Nothing is more important than destroying your enemies. Do you understand?>

He turned his stalk eyes toward the sub-visser. <You understand, don't you? You Yeerks understand.>

"You said you would let me go!" the sub-visser cried.

<And so I will,> Alloran said. <Open the hatch, *Aristh* Elfangor. The sub-visser is going to see if that Hork-Bajir body of his can fly!>

The sub-visser tensed up. He was not going to get pushed out of a spaceship without a fight. His Hork-Bajir muscles bunched and rippled.

He seemed to glance at Chapman. And I swear . . . but, no, I had to be imagining things. It's just that Chapman seemed to shake his head, almost invisibly.

The sub-visser's face glazed over. His eyes went dead. He relaxed his muscles.

<Slow to dead stop,> Alloran ordered. <Altitude?>

<Fifteen thousand feet,> I said dully. <We are still within the atmosphere. Air speed is now at dead stop.>

<Dead stop,> Alloran said. <Appropriate. Now open the hatch.>

What could I do? I was just an *aristh*. I had already defied Alloran once. If I defied him again. . . He was mad. Insane.

What could I do?

I opened the hatch. Warm Taxxon air blew in, strange in the enclosed environment. It ruffled Loren's golden hair.

<Get out, Yeerk,> Alloran said to Sub-Visser Seven.

I closed my main eyes. I kept my stalk eyes focused on my instruments. I could not look.

<Close the hatch,> Alloran said a few seconds later.

I dared to look. The sub-visser was gone. I looked down at the exterior display screens. A tiny figure fell through the clouds. I looked away.

<Now we go back and fry that transport ship,> Alloran said briskly. <Good to see you've grown up a little, *Aristh* Elfangor. Take us back over the southeastern corner of the spaceport. Maintain present altitude. Then we'll go pick up our missing Time Matrix, eh?>

He seemed cheerful. As if, for a moment at least, the madness were past. But I knew it wasn't over. We didn't need to destroy the Yeerks in those transport pools. We needed to secure the Time Matrix.

But I had given up arguing. I was tired. I was scared. I was sick from thinking of Arbron. I wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep, and not wake up till I was home on my own grass, under my own trees.

I saw Loren watching me. She seemed worried.^c concerned. Who wouldn't be? And yet .

Chapman was watching, too. He seemed tense. Understandable. And yet ..

<What made you decide to come with us?> I asked Chapman. <Do you expect mercy from us? You betrayed us. You betrayed your fellow human. You've told the Yeerks about Earth. You may have betrayed your entire species.>

He shrugged. "Not my fault, though, is it? I was on Earth, minding my own business. I didn't ask to be kidnapped by the Skrit Na. I didn't ask to be dragged halfway across the galaxy by you Andalites. I was just trying to protect myself."

<By making deals with the Yeerks?> Alloran laughed. <The Yeerks don't make deals. They enslave.>

"Yeah, I guess that's what I realized. After a while," Chapman said. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? I'm just a dumb human kid, okay? Give me a break."

<We are coming back over the spaceport,> I announced. <There is a lot of smoke. But you should still be able to get a good targeting lock with the shredder.>

Alloran didn't answer. He just stared at the display screen. At full magnification we could see the wormlike Taxxons below. We could easily see the ships, some burning from the battle, some tilted wildly over.

The Living Hive had done damage to the Yeerks.

But we could also see platoons of Hork-Bajir rounding up Taxxons. And other Taxxons were busily feeding ..

Somewhere down there was Arbron.

Alloran aimed the shredder. He aimed it carefully, taking his time. He focused it on the transport ship that contained thousands of helpless Yeerk slugs.

<Fire, *Aristh* Elfangor,> he said.

<Wh at?>

<I said fire. Fry those Yeerks. You let them live, now you finish them. Undo your mistake, and no one will ever have to know about your earlier cowardice.>

My finger reached for the firing pad.

<Do it, Elfangor,> Alloran hissed.

chapter 26

My finger hovered above the pad. It was war. In war, you destroyed your enemies. Alloran was my prince. You obeyed your prince.

But ten thousand defenseless Yeerks? With one movement of my finger?

No.

I pulled my hand away, and in a blur of motion I felt Alloran's tail blade press against my throat. <You think you can fight a clean war, Elfangor? Is that what you think? Or are you one of those who are happy enough when someone like me does the dirty work for you?>

<They are defenseless,> I said as calmly as I could.

<They are the enemy. Hypocrites! You're all hypocrites! We lost the Hork-Bajir war because of weak, moralizing fools like you! Because of fools like you, I am disgraced and shunned and sent off on trivial errands with nothing but *arisths* under my command.>

<War-prince Alloran, I honor you, but —> <What is the difference how you destroy the enemy?>

Alloran demanded.

I had no idea what he was talking about anymore. He was off somewhere in his own head. Lost in his own memories.

<What does it matter if you kill them with a tail blade or a shredder or a quantum virus?>

Quantum virus? No. No. Even after all the horror I had seen, I was shocked.

<You . . . you used a quantum virus? You used a quantum virus on the Hork-Bajir world?>

A quantum virus is a sort of disease of space-time. You see, it slowly breaks down the force that holds subatomic particles together. It slowly disintegrates whatever it affects. Living creatures affected with a quantum virus find their very molecules breaking down. It can take days, weeks of agony.

That was Alloran's secret. That was his disgrace. The Yeerks had accused us of using a quantum virus against them. We had denied it. Every Andalite believed it was just another filthy Yeerk lie.

Alloran stared at me. <I cannot have a weak, cowardly fool like you messing up —>

I saw it out of the corner of my stalk eyes. A sudden movement. Not fast, but unexpected. Chapman!

He leaped at Alloran and swung one of his strong human hands. With tightly clenched fingers he hit Alloran on the side of his head.

Alloran's head snapped back. More in surprise than pain. But it was enough. I swung my tail hard and fast. I turned the blade away and slammed Alloran's head with every ounce of power I had.

He dropped like a stone. He collapsed to the deck in a heap. And I saw triumph on Chapman's face. Triumph.

I should have known then. I should have realized.

Instead, I went to the medical kit and with shaking hands pulled out a tranquilizer hypo. I emptied it into my mad prince. It would keep him down for hours.

"Now what?" Chapman demanded.

<Now what?!> I shrieked. <Now what? I just knocked out my own prince!> I was sick. Sick down to my bones. But there was no one else to turn to. No one else to make decisions. As stupid as I had been, it was still up to me.

<We have something to pick up,> I said, forcing calm into my thought-speak voice. <Then we are getting as far from this evil place as this ship will go!>

Chapman nodded, as if satisfied.

Loren came over. She put her soft human hand

on my chest wound. It had begun to scab over but the exertion of knocking Alloran out had opened the wound again. She tore a strip of fabric from the bottom of one of her artificial skins. She tied it around my chest to protect the wound.

<Thank you,> I said.

"Is life always this insane for you space cadets?"

<Oh, yes,> I said bitterly. <Infiltrate the Taxxon home world, help inspire a Taxxon civil war, mutiny against my prince, and locate the Time Matrix, all in the company of a pair of strange, two-legged aliens. . . . Business as usual.>

I was busy watching the ground below, looking for the place where I had crashed the Skrit Na ship. But I saw Loren's smile.

"Hey. You made a joke. I didn't think you did humor, Elfangor."

<When the world goes mad, what else can you do?> I thought of Arbron. Still making little jokes, even when his life was a wreck. <I wonder if Arbron knew the world was mad?>

Loren just looked sad. But then she forced a smile again. "Speaking of crazy . . . did I see you driving up in a bright yellow Mustang back there?"

<It was a wonderful machine. Primitive, but strangely enjoyable.>

I cut thrust and peered closely into the screen. <There it is. We're going down. I need to clear away

the wreckage so the tractor beam can grab the Time Matrix.>

I landed the *Jahar* in the narrow valley, a few feet away from the wreckage of the Skrit Na ship. I grabbed a handheld shredder, opened the hatch, and hurried outside.

It took several minutes to burn away the wreckage of the Skrit Na ship and reveal the Time Matrix.

It was for this that so much horror had occurred. For this most powerful of all weapons.

It sat there amidst the wreckage, so harmless-looking. If the Yeerks had known this was here, they would have stopped at nothing to get it.

It was lucky Loren never told them while they held her captive. Lucky that Chapman never told them.

Lucky.

And lucky that I had been able to hold off the Hork-Bajir. And lucky that we had been able to get away from the spaceport without being pursued.

More luck.

Too much luck.

I really was a fool. I felt a cold shiver crawl up my spine.

I was behind the Time Matrix, hidden from the *Jahar*. And suddenly, I knew what was happening back inside the *Jahar* while I worked to free the

Time Matrix. And I knew what I would see when I walked back around that off-white globe.

Trembling with despair and exhaustion, I set the shredder for its next to lowest setting. I would have to duplicate Arbron's feat: three quick shots. Yes. *Three.*

I sucked in deep breaths, and then I bolted at top speed.

I leaped from behind the Time Matrix.

Loren, raising a Dracon beam in her hand!

I fired!

She dropped, twitching wildly from the energy pulse.

TSSSEEEWWWW!

Chapman fired! But he was weak and shaky from what he had just endured.

I fired! The human dropped to the dirt.

But there was one more left. I knew it. I knew, and I knew that I had very little time.

Sudden movement! I spun and fired! Missed! No, not a complete miss. I had stunned his right arm. The hand holding the Dracon beam dropped, useless.

He stood there, rage on his face. Alloran. War-prince Alloran-Semitur-Corrass.

But not really Alloran anymore.

For the rest of my life I would remember that

moment. The moment when I looked for the first time, upon the abomination.

You see, Alloran was no longer Alloran.

<Very good, *Aristh* Elfangor. It took you a while, but you figured it out in the end.>

<Sub-Visser Seven,> I said.

<Yes, but not for long. The Yeerk who made the first Andalite-Controller? The Yeerk who captured the fabled Time Matrix? I'd say I can count on a major promotion. Wouldn't you?>

chapter 27

I raised my shredder and pointed it at Alloran . . . no, at Sub-Visser Seven.

<You made Chapman a Controller. You were in his head. That Hork-Bajir I thought was you . . . just a trick.>

<Of course. And another of my people made Loren one of us,> he sneered. <And while you so considerately worked to clear away the Time Matrix, I revived Alloran and transferred myself into him. The first and only Andalite-Controller! It was so kind of you to knock the old warrior out for me. I didn't know how I was ever going to take him. He was a wily creature. A bit mad, of course, but he knew war. You saw how ruthless he was in tossing out the poor Hork-Bajir who played the role of me. Yes, Alloran was a warrior.>

The truth hit me like a brick wall. It was true! I had made it possible for the sub-visser to take control of Alloran!

I had created the abomination!

<Chapman told us about the Time Matrix, of

course. But we needed you to show us where it was. The attack by the Mountain Taxxons could have disrupted everything, but you know, in the end it was convenient. It kept you from growing suspicious. You were too busy worrying about your fellow *aristh*. You didn't even have time to wonder how the two humans just happened to be waiting for you. You didn't wonder why my troops let you escape.>

I had done this! I had created this abomination! I had delivered the Time Matrix into the hands of this vile creature!

<But you know the best part?> The sub-visser laughed. <I really couldn't have let you burn that transport ship full of my people. Chapman didn't know about the Yeerks in that transport, so neither did I. And if you'd gone along with Alloran I'd have had to try to stop you. So would my brother Yeerk in the human girl. It was one thing to sacrifice the poor fool who played the role of me. But ten thousand Yeerks? No, I'd have had to act, and then you and Alloran together would have most likely made short work of me.>

I couldn't breathe. I had failed. Failed so enormously that the entire Andalite species was at risk!

<But no, Elfangor is one of those good Andalites,> Sub-Visser Seven sneered. <You don't go in for slaughtering the helpless, do you? Hah-hah!

Wonderful! Your qualms delivered Alloran to me. Alloran and the Time Matrix. Mine!>

<Really?> I said faintly. <I seem to be the one holding the shredder.>

<There are a dozen Bug fighters closing in right now. You've lost, lithe one.>

<You'll be a cinder by the time they get here,> I threatened.

<No, you won't kill a helpless foe,> he sneered. <I have no weapon! I am your prisoner! Hah-hah! I surrender to you, Elfangor. I surrender!>

He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness as he laughed at me. Laughed.

<You're right, Sub-Visser. I won't kill you.> I squeezed the trigger. The stun-setting knocked the foul Andalite-Controller to the ground.

I ran to Loren. I dragged her unconscious body up the ramp into the *Jahar*. Then, after a second's hesitation, I dragged Chapman aboard, too.

I was just beginning to try dragging the sub-visser to the ship when the first wave of Bug fighters blew by overhead. They shot past, then began to inscribe tight circles, coming back toward us.

Two more Bug fighters. Then two more. The sky was filling with Bug fighters. I would never get the *Jahar* off the planet.

Unless . . .

Had Sub-Visser Seven informed his people that

he might be in an Andalite body? Surely. Surely he would have. He would have had to, just to avoid being accidentally shot by his own people.

But could the Yeerks tell one Andalite from another?

I raced to the ship, tore open the medical kit and yanked out a stimulant hypo. I ran back to the unconscious sub-visser and I emptied the stimulant into his bloodstream. It would revive him in less than a minute.

Bug fighters were hovering overhead now, some preparing to land. I ran back to the *Jahar*, closed the hatch, and punched up the ship-to-ship communication.

The face of a Hork-Bajir-Controller appeared on my communications screen. It stared at me with the fury and distaste Yeerks always show for Andalites.

I stared straight back. And in loud, arrogant, harsh thought-speak I said, <What? You don't recognize your sub-visser? Hah-hah! I have done it, you fool! As I said I would. I have acquired an Andalite body!>

The Hork-Bajir eyes wavered, uncertain.

If I showed any hesitation, I was lost. If I was to pass as a Yeerk sub-visser, I could not show any doubt. <You see the Andalite down on the ground?>

"Yes . . . Sub-Visser Seven."

<Good, you're not blind as well as stupid. I want to see him run. Do you understand me! As soon as I have lifted off, make him run! And then, when he is good and tired, when his knees buckle with exhaustion, make him dead. Dead! And if you fail me, I will feed you to the Taxxons. Sub-Visser Seven, out.>

I switched off the screen without waiting for an answer. Maybe it would work. Maybe not.

I keyed the controls, lifting the *Jahar* gently from the ground. I switched on an exterior view and panned the viewfinder till I framed the sub-visser. He was just climbing to his feet.

I'll give the sub-visser credit for one thing: He was not an idiot. He knew instantly what was happening. He broke into a run, just as a hovering Bug fighter fired a Dracon beam near him.

I let the *Jahar* drift casually over the Skrit Na wreck. Focusing all my attention, I powered the *Jahar's* tractor beam and latched it onto the white sphere of the Time Matrix.

Sub-Visser Seven was running at full Andalite speed across the sand, pursued by teasing, taunting Bug fighters that seemed to enjoy shooting within inches of him.

The *Jahar* rose, with the Time Matrix in tow. I pulled the machine closer and closer, snugged it up into the *Jahar's* belly, and lashed it in place with energy ropes. We rose up through the atmosphere of

the Taxxon world. Up through the weird, bright clouds.

Only then did it begin to dawn on the Yeerks.

The ship-to-ship snapped on. An ugly, suspicious Hork-Bajir face glared at me. "Sub-Visser Seven, planet control respectfully directs you to land."

I tried bluffing some more. But when I refused to immediately turn back and land, they knew.

Tactical showed a swarm of Bug fighters rising up from the surface of the planet. But it was too late.

I punched up a hard burn and prepared to lose myself in Zero-space.

chapter 28

"So, this is Zero-space," Loren said, looking out through the viewport. "We've been in it for a full day and I still don't understand what it is."

I directed my stalk eyes to the viewport. I saw blank white. Empty, whiteness. <Zero-space isn't anything, really,> I said quietly. <It's antispacespace. You know, like antimatter and antigravity? Well, Zero-space is antispacespace.>

I had explained this at least twice during the last day. But I guess she was trying to make conversation.

She'd been through one of the worst experiences any creature can endure: She had been made a Controller. I couldn't believe she was even managing to talk without weeping.

Fortunately, the Yeerk in Loren's head had been at the end of its feeding cycle. Yeerks feed on Kandrona rays. Every three days they must drain out of their host and return to the Yeerk pool to absorb Kandrona rays.

So I made a deal with the hungry Yeerk. I could

keep Loren tied up and wait for the Yeerk to starve to death. Or the Yeerk could come out willingly. I agreed to put it in deep hibernation. To freeze it. The Yeerk decided hibernation was better than death by Kandrona ray starvation.

I kept my word to the Yeerk. After it crawled out of Loren's ear, I froze it. And then I ejected it from the ship into the vacuum of real space. Someday it might be found and revived. More likely it would sink into the gravity well of a star and be incinerated.

Especially since I made sure to eject it close to a sun.

Maybe that wasn't living up to the spirit of my deal with the Yeerk. But somehow, I just didn't care. My notions of proper behavior had brought disaster.

I was a fool. A silly child living out storybook notions of decency and fairness.

There was no decency in war. Alloran had tried to teach me that. I'd learned it too late.

"Have you decided where we're going, Elfangor?" Loren asked gently.

"He doesn't know," Chapman said. He spent his time now sitting in a corner, glaring darkly at the two of us. Sub-Visser Seven had been inside Chapman's head. If that had taught the foolish human a lesson, it sure didn't show. "Elfangor is confused. Isn't that right? He screwed up bad . . . Arbron

trapped in one of those centipede bodies, Alloran made into the first-ever Andalite-Controller. Almost lost the Time Matrix. Gonna be tough explaining all this to the folks back home, eh?"

I ignored him. Back home. What was home anymore? Was I supposed to return home? Home to my parents? Run free on my old, familiar grass? Spend my days with my old childhood friends?

I wasn't a child anymore. My home was still there, but I would never belong there again.

Loren came over to me. "Elfangor. Snap out of it. We're going in circles in Zero-space."

<Yes. I know.>

"You did the best you could. You're just a kid, like me."

<I am an *aristh* in the Andalite military. I disobeyed my prince and caused him to be enslaved by the Yeerks. The Yeerks will now learn everything Alloran knows about our defenses. Everything he knows about the capabilities of our weapons. Everything he knows about the locations of our ships. At least he wasn't a scientist, so he can't give them morphing technology or computer software. But he will still be the greatest intelligence victory in Yeerk history.>

Chapman shook his head. "Guess I was right to throw in with the Yeerks, eh? You Andalites are going down. Unless . . ."

Loren glared at him. "Why don't you shut up?"

Chapman just grinned. "Unless you Andalites use the Time Matrix thing. Go back in time, find that first little tribe of Yeerk slugs. Kill 'em and the entire Yeerk species is gone. Gone and never even existed. What do they call that? Oh yeah, genocide. You up for a little genocide, Elfangor?"

I just shook my head wearily. <Don't waste your time taunting me, Chapman. It won't work.>

Loren looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

<He's trying to goad me into using the Time Matrix. Remember, he's been a Controller, however briefly. Sub-Visser Seven left him instructions, just in case something went wrong. Chapman knows that to use the Time Matrix I'd have to return to real space. My guess is that the Yeerks placed a homing beacon on the *Jahar*. If we return to normal space, we'll light up every Yeerk sensor within a million light years.>

I could see from the dark rage on Chapman's face that I had guessed correctly.

At least I'd gotten one thing right. I wasn't fool enough to fall for

Suddenly, it was as if a light had gone on in my head. Wherever the *Jahar* emerged into real space, the Yeerks would go tearing after it.

No matter where.

A trap! I could spring a trap!

But where? Where should I draw the Yeerk fleet?

To the *StarSword*! My old ship. She was off pursuing a Yeerk task force near the Graysha Nebula. She'd been hoping to meet a second Dome ship there.

Two Dome ships. Plus the *Jahar*. Enough firepower to handle just about anything the Yeerks could muster.

I went to the control panel and entered the coordinates.

"You have a plan?" Loren asked.

<More or less,> I muttered. I was already having doubts. <There's a place called the Graysha Nebula. We don't know much about it. But there are rumors of a sentient species living in that area. And there are rumors that the Yeerks are exploring the nebula. My old ship, the *StarSword*, went there to see if it could locate a Yeerk task force we were pursuing.>

"So we're going there to meet up with your old ship. Is . . . is this nebula place closer to Earth?"

<No.>

"Elfangor . . . am I ever going to get back home?"

<Loren, I will do my best.>

Chapman snorted. "And you've seen how good^E Elfangor's best is. You might as well kiss Earth goodbye."

chapter 29

<We will emerge into real space,> I explained. <If we're lucky, we won't be far from the *StarSword*. If we're even luckier, there will be additional Andalite ships close by. From that point it will only take the Yeerks an hour or so to start showing up.>

"And then?" Loren asked.

<Space battle, I suppose. Andalite fighters and Yeerk Bug fighters going at it. Us, too, of course. > "Is there anything I can do to help?"

<Yes. Show me the best way to tie up a human,> I said, looking at Chapman. <I don't want any distractions.>

We tied the human around his feet and hands using spare conduit hose. Then we tied the hands to the feet behind his back.

"One last thing," Loren said. She took a short length of the hose and wrapped it around Chapman's face, covering his mouth. "Now we won't have to listen to him."

It took me a few seconds to understand. Many

species communicate by making sounds with their mouths. But it had never occurred to me you could silence someone with a piece of hose.

<To silence an Andalite you'd have to knock him out,> I said. <This won't hurt him?>

"No. Unfortunately." She smiled to show she had been joking.

After all she had been through, from being kidnapped by Skrit Na to being made a Controller, she could still laugh. I wondered if I'd been wrong to think humor was a weakness. I wondered if Arbron could still laugh.

"Elfangor ... aren't you tempted by what Chapman said? I mean, if it were me, I might want to use that Time machine thing to change things. You know?"

<Like maybe go back in time and avoid getting kidnapped by the Skrit Na to begin with?>

She laughed. "No. Not that. Look, my life was pretty dull before all this. I know when you take me back to Earth you'll have to erase all my memories of this. But still, even though it was horrible sometimes, I don't think I'd want to never have met you. If it wasn't for my mom worrying and all . . ."

I was surprised. And pleased, too. <In the Skrit Na ship, where I found the Mustang, I also found pictures of Earth. It looked very beautiful. Wonderful, delicious-looking grass and tall trees and

streams of water that bubbled across stones. Is your home like that?>

"We do have places like that," Loren said, smiling sadly. "There's a place we went once, back when I was little and my dad was still with us. Before he went to the war. It's a place called Yosemite. We camped out in a tent. Yosemite is like that."

<And did you stick small white cylinders in your mouth and smile at the beauty of it all?>

"Small white cylinders?" Loren looked puzzled. Then she laughed her strange but delightful human laugh. "You were looking at cigarette ads! Those white cylinders are called cigarettes. They're bad for you, actually. Very bad for you. They make you sick."

<So . . . so humans go to beautiful places and use sickening cylinders? Why?>

But Loren was laughing too hard to answer. And pretty soon, even though I had no idea what was so funny, I was laughing, too. Although my laugh could only be heard by Loren inside her own head.

"So," she said after a while. "Why don't *you* want to use this Time Matrix thing?"

I waved my stalks forward and back in a gesture of uncertainty. <You can't just go messing around with time. They say it's insanely complicated. Sure, maybe I could go back, like Chapman said, and stomp out the first Yeerks who evolved. But who

knows how many other things that might affect? Besides, to be honest, I guess I'm scared of the Ellimists.>

"The what?"

<Supposedly they're the race that built the Time Matrix. Thousands and thousands of years ago. They built it, and then, suddenly, as far as anyone can tell, they vanished. The entire species of Ellimists just vanished.>

"You think it was because they used the Time Matrix?"

<No one knows. Some people say the Ellimists still exist, but they've moved beyond the normal space-time dimensions we know. There are some who say the Ellimists are almost all-powerful.> I shrugged. <Of course, there are others who say they're gone forever. Or even that they never did exist. Now Andalite parents tell their children stories about the Ellimists.>

"Fairy tales."

<Are fairies magical beings in human mythology?>

"Not just fairies. We have elves and leprechauns and Santa Claus and hobbits and werewolves and vampires. . . . We even have aliens from outer space."

Despite myself, I laughed. <Yes, those outer space aliens are quite troublesome.>

"Doesn't the Time Matrix prove that these Ellimists are real?"

<Well . . . I don't know. But if Ellimists *are* real, if they really do live in dimensions beyond our own, then they have powers we could not imagine. Pretend . . . never mind.>

"No, tell me," Loren urged. "Unless you have something else to do."

<Okay, well, you know that space-time has ten dimensions. There are the normal dimensions of up/down, left/right, and forward/back. Then there is the fourth dimension, which is time. Then, there are six other dimensions, but they are curled up into themselves, so we don't see or feel them. All we feel are three space dimensions, plus time.>

Loren nodded her head. I wondered what this meant. But she didn't ask me to stop, so I went on.

<Imagine if, instead of three normal space dimensions, we only had two. Imagine we were flat, and we couldn't go up or down, just in the other two directions. Call us the Flatties. See?>

"Like if we lived on a piece of paper," Loren said.

<Exactly. It would be like we were drawings on a piece of paper. And if someone came along and drew a box around us, we could never get out. Because the lines of the box would be walls. But what if a three-dimensional person came along? A three-dimensional person could lift that Flattie right up

out of that box. The Flattie wouldn't even know what was happening, because he's never gone up or down before. He doesn't even know up and down exist.>

"You're saying we're like the Flatties. Except we're in three dimensions, not just two. So we're like Cubies or something."

<Yes. So if some creature came along who existed in more dimensions than us, he'd be able to do things that would be impossible for us.>

"Ellimists. That's what they are?"

<Maybe. Like I say, no one knows. But someone built the Time Matrix. Someone real. Someone who isn't around anymore.>

"Whew."

<So maybe we could use the Time Matrix and pop in and out of time. Or maybe we'd disappear, like the Ellimists may have.>

"Or maybe we'd just make these Ellimists mad," Loren said.

<Exactly.>

"But if you give the Time Matrix to your people, won't they use it, anyway? Even with all the risks?"

<A week ago I'd have said absolutely not. I'd have said we Andalites don't do things like that. Not even in war.>

"But now . . . whatever Alloran did on that Hork-Bajir planet, it was wrong, wasn't it?"

I stared at her with my main eyes. <Loren, I don't know what's right or wrong anymore. I just don't.>

The computer signaled that we were nearing the translation point.

<We're going back to normal space,> I said. <And by the way . . . if we do survive all this, and get you back to Earth, could you show me this place with the grass and trees and tall waterfalls?>

"It's a date," Loren said.

<Could we have a Mustang there, too?>

She put her arm around my waist and looked deep into my eyes with her two tiny blue human eyes. "Anything you want, Elfangor. Just no white cylinders."

chapter 30

<Coming out of Zero-space . . . now'>

Zero-space is dead white. Normal space is usually deep black, dotted with stars that burn in bright white and pale red and cold blue.

But this space was not like that.

"Jeez! Amazing!"

<You've never been close to a nebula,> I observed. But the truth was, even I was awed.

The nebula was a dust cloud so large that a dozen solar systems the size of Earth's could have been lost in it with room to spare. It was like a weird, twisted cloud. A cloud of purple and orange that seemed to envelop brilliant stars.

"It's so beautiful!"

<Yes. And if the *StarSword* is out there somewhere, it'll really be beautiful.>

I glanced over at Chapman. He lay trussed up and gagged. He glared back at me.

<Right now Yeerk ships are hearing the transponder they attached to us. They'll be on us in a very short time. I'm conducting a sensor sweep,

looking for any Andalite vessels. But it's hard with the nebula around us. The dust confuses the sensors.>

"Are we a long way from Earth?"

<Yes. Even by the standards of space. We are hundreds of light-years away.>

Loren stared out at the nebula. She bit her lip a little with her teeth and took her arm away from my waist.

Humans like to use touch. It seems odd at first. But I had gotten used to it.

<I'm going to try calling the *StarSword*,> I said.

I made the thought-speak link with the communications system. <Any Andalite ship this sector, any Andalite ship this sector. This is *Jahar*.>

I expected to have to wait. I was shocked when I heard the voice of Captain Feyorn. <*Jahar! Jahar!* Alloran, is that you? We are under attack. Say again, under attack. Can you —>

<*StarSword*, I lost you! *StarSword!*> I checked the display. Yes, we had a location fix! I punched in the new heading.

<Loren, get down on the ground. Back against the bulkhead. I'm going to Maximum Burn!>

She ran and threw herself down on the ground, just as I punched in the burn. But the acceleration was barely noticeable. The *Jahar* had amazingly

good compensators. But even though there was no feeling of acceleration, the ship blew through space. "Elfangor, what's going on?"

<I don't know. But I'm powering up all weapons.>

At Maximum Burn it took less than ten minutes for us to be able to spot the great Dome ship. She came up on my view screen at high magnification. She looked like a glowing steel stick with a bright half-ball on one end. Her engines were off. In the space around her were a dozen or more of our fighters.

But what caught my attention were the asteroids — rough, dark tumbling rocks. The *StarSword* seemed to be in the middle of an asteroid field. Only that was unlikely. Asteroids orbited stars. There was no star close enough to hold an asteroid field in its gravity.

"Hey! It moved!" Loren said.

<What are you talking about?> I demanded. I sounded rude because I was busy trying to figure out what was going on. And I didn't think a human was going to be very helpful, really.

"Those rocks. Those asteroids. Look! Look at them!"

I turned one stalk eye to watch the asteroids. Then, in a flash, I focused all four eyes.

<They're moving! They are under power!>

As we stared, transfixed, one of the asteroids seemed to sprout a tail. It was a plume of hot plasma! The asteroid turned! It changed course, and shot toward one of the StarSword's fighters.

The fighter fired a full-power shredder blast at the asteroid. The green beam zapped through the vacuum. The asteroid glowed where the shredder blast hit, and then it increased speed.

The fighter turned to run. But to my amazement, the asteroid accelerated. It stayed on the fighter's tail, twisting, turning, accelerating and then ..

"Oh! Elfangor, look!"

<No! It's impossible!>

A pillar of living rock extended from the asteroid like some primitive arm. It struck the fighter. I saw a tiny puff as the air was squeezed from the ship.

And then the rock simply grew over the doomed ship. It grew swift, unstoppable, until, within seconds, the entire fighter was covered by living rock.

The asteroid had eaten a fighter.

chapter 31

"What are those things?" Loren asked in horror.

<I don't know. I've never seen or heard of anything like them. I mean, they are impossible!>

"They're like living asteroids or something."

<I think that's exactly what they are. But that's impossible.>

As I watched in horror, a second fighter was caught and swallowed up by a living rock.

<The StarSword will start shooting now,> I said confidently. <A Dome ship's shredders can blow chunks off a planet. They'll wipe these things out!>

TSEEEEEWWWWW! TSEEEEEWWWWW!

I had never seen the StarSword's main shredders fire before. It was awesome. The beams of green light looked as thick as tree trunks as they blasted through space and hit one of the asteroids with enough power to punch a hole through a moon.

The asteroid glowed brightly. But it did not explode. It did not disintegrate. It did not melt.

It turned!

<It's going after the *StarSword*!>

Dozens of the asteroids seemed to be swarming the space around the *StarSword*. Close by, not three hundred miles away, I saw another fighter, twisting and turning, trying to lose one of the rocks.

<Go to Zero-space!> I yelled. <Whatever these things are, they can't have Zero-space flight!>

I guess the fighter pilot thought the same thing. I saw his engines glow bright as he powered up for a Zero-space jump. Suddenly, three more asteroids closed in on the fighter. They blocked its path. A massive arm of rock shot out and punched right into the fighter.

The pilot was blown clear. Out into empty space. He kicked his hooves for a few seconds. Then he stopped moving.

"Oh, God!"

<No! No! N0000!>

The *StarSword* fired all shredders, lighting up black space with brilliant beams of light. But it didn't work. In fact, it seemed to draw more asteroids.

"Hey! That's just attracting them," Loren cried. "The engines and the weapons — they attract them!"

<You're right!> I don't know which shocked me more. That these asteroids were drawn to energy discharges. Or that it was the human girl who had figured it out.

I punched up communications. <*StarSword*, *StarSword*, this is *Jahar*. The asteroids are attracted by energy discharge! You're drawing them to you!>

I don't know if my message got through or not. But just then, I realized we had a whole new set of problems. Behind us, two Yeerk ships materialized, entering real space! They were no more than five thousand miles away.

A Pool ship, like a fat, awkward, three-legged spider. As soon as it appeared in real space, it began launching Bug fighters.

And beside the Pool ship, something I had never seen before. It was jet black so that it was barely visible. It was smaller than the Pool ship, but bigger than a Bug fighter. What seemed to be the bridge was a hard-edged diamond attached by a long triangular shaft to twin engines. The engines were a strange shape, like the blades of a two-headed ax.

The entire thing looked like some ancient weapon — a battle ax. It was like some flying Hork-Bajir. A Blade ship.

Don't ask me how I knew. I don't believe in psychic things, although some Andalites do. But still, I knew who was in that Blade ship.

I felt cold hatred. Hatred of that black ship. Hatred of the abomination I had helped to create.

<So. He's still alive,> I whispered. <This time, no mercy.>

Space was filling up quickly. Yeerk ships, Andalite ships, and the deadly, impossible asteroids. But the Yeerks were thousands of miles behind me, and I was thousands of miles from the Andalite fleet. If I was lucky, the Yeerks would not be able to see the Dome ship on their sensors yet.

And they would not even be looking for murderous asteroids.

The computer blinked to show an incoming communication. It was visual as well as thought-speak. The image that appeared on the screen was Andalite.

The familiar face of Alloran-Semitar-Corrass. But from that familiar face shone an evil that I cannot describe.

<Ah, Elfangor, I believe,> Sub-Visser Seven said. <Still have the Time Matrix, I hope? I'm here to take it from you.>

I had not yet switched on my own image for him to see. I had to think fast. I grabbed a handheld shredder and carefully set it for lowest power.

<Loren? Listen! The sub-visser doesn't know you aren't still a Controller. Take this. Stand behind me, where he can see you when I switch on my screen. Give me a few seconds to talk, then fire this. But miss me, okay?>

"Got it," she said.

I switched on my screen. <So, Sub-Visser Seven. You survived. Too bad.>

<I did survive. But you almost got me there, you really did. And by the way, it's no longer Sub-Visser Seven. I'm the first Yeerk to capture an Andalite body. I have already delivered more intelligence on Andalite fleet deployments than a century of spying could have yielded. So it's not *Sub-Visser* thing anymore. You are addressing *Visser Two*.>

<You're still just a slug as far as I'm concerned. You want the Time Matrix?> I asked. <Come and take it from me. I promise you —>

TSSSSEEEWWWW!

Loren fired the shredder on low power. I jerked suddenly, and slumped forward, turning off the screen as I fell.

I jumped back up.

"You want this back?" Loren asked, holding the shredder toward me.

<No. Keep it. You did well. Perfect timing. The visser will think you're still a Controller. He'll think you stunned me. I'm killing all power. We'll just wait for the sub-visser to come to us.>

"Is this going to work?" Loren asked anxiously.

<If it doesn't, neither of us is going to the Yosemite,> I said.

"You picked a great time to learn how to joke, Elfangor."

We didn't have to wait long. The Blade ship fired up its engines and leaped forward. It ate up the few thousand miles in seconds.

<Come to me, Visser whatever-your-number-is-now. Come to me,> I muttered to myself.

I targeted the shredders on the belly of the Blade ship. I was perfectly calm. Despite the battle I knew was raging around the StarSword. Despite the approach of the visser's ship. One shot was all I needed. I would wait till he was practically on me. And then —

WHAPPP!

"Ahhhh!"

Chapman! He had freed his legs and kicked Loren's feet. She went down hard. The shredder skittered across the floor.

The human was slower than me. But he was closer. His bound hands closed around the shredder seconds before I reached him.

TSSEEEEEWW!

He fired!

I dodged.

The Blade ship closed in.

TSSEEEEEWWW!

<Arrrrggghhh!> A glancing hit. The beam struck my left arm and left foreleg. Pain shot through me

like shards of glass. My left arm was as numb as stone. My left front leg was useless. I could stand, but I could barely move.

"How do you like it, Andalite?" Chapman crowed as he rose to a standing position. He leveled the shredder at me.

"Oh, I have so had it with you!" Loren yelled. Still lying on the deck, she drew her legs up and kicked upward. Both her artificial hooves hit Chapman right where his legs joined his body.

"Ooooofff" Chapman gasped. He grabbed himself with both hands, still clutching the shredder.

I believe the kick was painful to him.

"Oof this!" Loren said. She jumped up off the deck and delivered an impossibly high kick that caught Chapman under the chin. His head snapped back. Loren snatched the shredder from him.

"You know, Chapman, you are really making the human race look bad," she said. "You are seriously embarrassing me."

"Who's side are you on?" Chapman grated. "Not yours," Loren said. She fired the shredder and Chapman jerked and went limp.

BUMP! BUMP!

The Jahar shook from a slow impact. The Blade ship had latched on! They were boarding us!

As I watched, half-paralyzed, the hatch began to open.

chapter 32

The hatch opened.

<Loren! The shredder. . . . Shoot!>

The hatch door flew open with a boom. Loren fired!

TSSSEEEEEWWW!

A Hork-Bajir warrior fell back. An arm appeared, reaching past the collapsed Controller and aiming a Dracon beam.

An Andalite arm!

TSSSEEEEEWWW!

The Dracon beam fired. The shot missed me but hit Loren and knocked her, already unconscious, into me. With only three good legs, I fell hard to the deck on my numb arm. Loren landed on top of me.

The evil Yeerk creature who had stolen Alloran's body pushed past the Hork-Bajir as I struggled desperately to get out from under Loren.

The visser was in! He was aboard the *Jahar*!

I had one chance. One. And then let the Yeerk kill me! I swung my tail, aiming blind. The visser jerked back reflexively. But I wasn't aiming for him.

The tip of my blade hit the console. And to my great pleasure I heard —

TSSSSWWWWEEEEWW!

The *Jahar* fired her shredders. Point-blank range. Point-blank range into the belly of the Blade ship.

<N000000!> the visser screamed.

Kuh-BOOOOOOOOM! The Blade ship tore loose of the *Jahar*.

FWWOOOOOSSSH! The hatch was open to space. Air blew from the ship, sending it into a spin. Everything that wasn't bolted down flew toward the open hatch.

The unconscious Hork-Bajir was thrown into space. Chapman's unconscious body slid toward the opening. The visser was knocked down.

But even as he lay there, the Yeerk visser aimed his Dracon beam at me. <You're a real source of agitation, Elfangor. Now, die!>

In despair I whipped my tail.

WHUMPF! Something hit us hard, just as the Yeerk squeezed the trigger.

TSSEEEEEWWW! The Dracon blast missed me!

I was gasping for air. The oxygen was gone. The *Jahar* was spinning out of control through space.

The visser slammed against the walls as we spun wildly. Loren's body rolled away toward the hatch, but now the automatic safety devices of the ship were slowly closing the door.

We spun, and through the window I saw flashes of Andalite fighters half-covered with living rock. And Yeerk Bug fighters now suffering the same fate.

I saw, in a wild, spinning flash, the Blade ship, one blade shot away.

And then . . . coming at us . . . rushing toward us . . . an asteroid!

FFWWWUUUMMPPP!

The asteroid latched onto the poor, dying *Jahar*. And in wild, crazily pitching flashes as I was tossed helplessly, I saw the window going dark. Half-covered now. Half-covered by living rock!

The asteroid had us!

I was slammed violently by acceleration as the asteroid moved away from the battlefield, holding the *Jahar* in its death grip.

The *Jahar's* compensators were off now. The ship was dead. Half-swooning from lack of air, I staggered up, fighting the insane force of acceleration.

Air! We needed air!

The emergency environmental power unit should have come on. But the ship's power was dead, drained away by the energy-eating asteroid.

Air!

My lungs screamed. My hearts hammered madly, circulating useless blood. The manual emergency tanks, I had to . . . to . . .

But maybe it didn't matter. . . . Maybe it was pointless to fight. Arbron . . . gone. Alloran . . . worse than gone. Terrible things ... terrible sights . . .

Let it all end. It was fine without air. Fine to suck with your lungs and feel nothing. I was sinking, down, down, down.

No need to worry. Nothing to be afraid of.

Let it end, Elfangor.

Just let it end. . . .

Part 3

An Alien Dies

chapter 33

Air!

My lungs burned. My hearts pounded desperately. My mind was shutting down from lack of oxygen. As I faded out, a deadly weariness took the place of terror.

The ship's artificial gravity was gone. I floated, weightless, as the floor and walls and ceiling all spun wildly around me.

Why should I care? Why should I resist? Why not just let it all end, here, now, as the *Jahar* fell into the monstrous black hole?

My life was a disaster. I had failed in so many ways. . . . Failed to save Arbron from being trapped forever in Taxxon morph. Failed to stop the Yeerk called Visser Thirty-two from stealing the body of my prince, Alloran-Semitur-Corrass. Failed to defeat the surprise attack of the living asteroids. Failed even to protect the two humans I was supposed to take care of.

And worst of all, I had failed to deliver the Time Matrix to my people. The Time Matrix: power beyond imagination.

Airless! My head swam with disconnected thoughts and images. Airless! In a ship that spun powerless, dead, through space.

Through the still-clear window I saw the huge swirl of dust and debris that marked the approaches to the black hole. But at the center of that swirl, nothing the eye could see. It was a collapsed star so dense that its gravity trapped light itself.

Yes, Elfangor, my dying mind said, let it end.

I saw the abomination, Visser Thirty-two, the only Andalite-Controller in the galaxy. The only Yeerk ever to gain control of an Andalite body. He was swooning from the lack of oxygen. He was slammed by the spinning floor and knocked, weightless, into the ceiling, four legs flailing, arms and tail all tangled around.

I held on to a protrusion in the control panel. But as the ship twirled, with all gravity gone, I felt something large and soft bump into me.

It was Loren. The female human. Unconscious. Never to be conscious again, if I didn't reach the emergency air supply and use the manual release.

And then it came to me, in a moment of clarity: I had no choice. When Arbron had been in utter despair and had wanted to die, I stopped him. Because

without life there is no despair, but without life there can also never be hope.

I had no right to erase Loren's hope, no matter how bad I felt.

I searched my crazy, swirling, nightmare world with all my eyes and found the panel I was searching for. I focused on it with my stalk eyes, striving blearily to keep them focused.

But it was so hard. So hard to know up from down, left from right, with all the world spinning, and my own poor oxygen-deprived brain all but extinguished.

Had to reach that panel.

I would have one chance. One only. Too far gone to try a second time.

I aimed and kicked and flew weightless across the cabin. Missed! I grabbed. Missed! I floated helplessly away.

Suddenly, a hand reached up and shoved me back toward the panel. A human hand! Impossible! Loren had regained consciousness. In a near vacuum. Without air. With temperatures already dropping toward absolute zero!

She had regained consciousness. And seen what I was trying to do. She had propelled me back toward the panel. This time I reached and grabbed. I ripped the panel open, and turned the stiff mechanical release knob.

You cannot see air, of course. You don't really feel it on your skin, most of the time. But when it is gone, you notice it.

My lungs sucked and drew nothing in. Nothing!
My lungs gasped again, and this time, I sensed just the faintest wisp of something.

I sucked again and <aaaahhh!> A sharp pain as my collapsed lungs filled with air.

Air! I drew deep breath after deep breath, each breath hurting, but hurting less than the one before. It was not a pain I minded.

I clung to the panel with my left hand, my hooves floating free, my tail drifting behind me. And for a while I just breathed, and thanked the entire universe for letting me feel air in my lungs again.

<Are you all right?> I asked Loren.

She smiled a human smile, the characteristic upturning of the corners of her mouth. It was a weak, shaky smile. But I was glad to see it.

"I thought we were done for," she said.

<Done for? Oh. Dead. Yes, we almost were. But you humans don't give up easily, do you?>

"Neither do you Andalites," she said. "Now what?"

I surveyed the situation. The visser appeared to be just regaining consciousness. The other human, Chapman, was still unconscious, drifting lazily against the far wall like a rag doll.

<Well, we have air, but no power. The living asteroids drained the ship of power. We are falling toward a black hole.>

"Oh. That's not good," she said.

<If we fall into the black hole it will crush us down to the size of a carbon atom. The ship, all of us, crushed to the size of a single atom.>

"Yeah, we learned about black holes in school." I was surprised that humans knew about such things.

<There is only one way out, Andalite.>

Visser Thirty-two. The very sound of his thought-speech voice in my head filled me with rage. He sounded exactly like Alloran. But I knew that Alloran's mind was a prisoner in his own head now. He could watch, listen, feel, but not control. The Yeerk in his brain controlled him now. The Yeerk moved his arms and legs and tail. The Yeerk decided when each breath would be drawn. The Yeerk aimed his eyes and formed his thought-speech.

I turned myself to face him. I had no idea which of us would win a tail fight. He had Alloran's experience. But I had seen that I was faster than Alloran.

<Don't be a fool, Elfangor,> the visser sneered.
<What will be gained by you and me slashing each other up with these excellent Andalite tails?>

<You have a better idea?> I asked. <Because I can think of a lot of good reasons to go tail-to-tail with you.>

The visser laughed. <You blame me for all your own failings? I'm not the one who left his friend back on the Taxxon world, trapped in that vile worm's body. I'm not the one who disobeyed his prince's orders and let ten thousand Yeerks escape. A bit of disobedience that helped cause poor old Alloran's downfall.>

I wanted to shrug off his words. But there was truth in them. And it is hard to ignore the truth. And pointless, as well.

<You have something to say, Yeerk?>

<Yes. We are falling toward a black hole in a dead ship. But we have a way out. The Time Matrix.>

I stared at him with my main eyes. But my stalk eyes saw Loren look at me with fresh hope.

<In case you haven't noticed, Visser, the Time Matrix is strapped to the outside of the ship. The *outside*. In fact, it's probably drifting free. It was held in place with energy ropes. Those are gone.>

<Gravity,> the Yeerk said. <There should be just enough attraction between the ship and the Time Matrix to keep it close.>

I did the familiar calculations in my head. He was right. The Time Matrix was probably still just outside the ship.

<How do you propose getting to it?> I asked.

<We would have to work together, Andalite. And quickly.>

chapter 34

<Work together?>

<One of us will have to be reeled outside. On a rope or cable. Someone will have to hold that rope. And someone else will have to be on the end of that rope.>

<And do what? Pull the Time Matrix in through the hatch? That will mean losing all our air again. We don't have force fields anymore.>

<Yes. It will be do-or-die,> the visser said. <We can use the air hoods for an emergency five minutes.>

I stared blankly at him. <What air hoods?>

<You forget I control Alloran. And this was his ship. I know all the ship's secrets. There is a small supply of emergency hoods. Alloran kept them for just such an occasion.>

I thought about that for a few seconds. It made me sick to cooperate with the Yeerk. But what other choice did I have? <Here are my terms: I will go outside. You hold the rope.>

The Yeerk laughed. <And when you reach the Time Matrix you'll activate it and disappear, leaving me behind.>

<No. I would not leave Loren ... I mean, the humans. Search Alloran's mind. He knows. You'll see it's true.>

Visser Thirty-two considered for a moment. <Yes, it seems you are correct. Alloran decided you had formed some pathetic feelings for this human female. But just in case you decide to betray me anyway, I remind you that I still have my tail. I can finish your human friend slowly as we sink toward that black hole.>

It took a few minutes to tear enough cable loose from the controls to form a long lifeline. Even though I wouldn't weigh anything, I would still have mass enough to break a too-weak line.

True to his claim, Visser Thirty-two found four air hoods. They had been stashed in each of the individual quarters. They were simple but effective models. Basically, they were just clear plastic bags that slipped over your head and tied at the neck. There was a small oxygen bottle. Very small. The hoods were rated for five minutes. The mix of oxygen and other gases, as well as subtler ingredients, would keep my body from depressurizing in the vacuum of space.

But after five minutes my air would run out. The oxygen inside my body would expand, bursting every blood vessel, rupturing my eyes. A painful death.

I had not explained these details to Loren.

I tied the hood in place and helped Loren put hers on. We tied one on the still-unconscious Chapman. Then I carefully tied the cable around my tail.

<Ready?> the visser asked me.

<I'm ready,> I said. <You just worry about yourself, Yeerk.>

The visser laughed. <Alloran is so right about you. You're a moralizing, arrogant, weak-willed little fool.>

<Loren?> I said. <We're going to open the hatch. Air will rush out but we'll do it more slowly than before. Still, keep an eye on your fellow human. We don't want him sucked out into space.>

"We don't?" Loren asked.

I looked at her, puzzled.

"Sarcasm," she explained. "A type of humor."

I would have laughed, but I was just too scared. I lifted the hood and filled my lungs with cabin air. Then I replaced the hood, turned on the oxygen, and nodded to Visser Thirty-two.

The hatch began to open. Everything that could have been sucked out into space already had been, so nothing much happened. There was a sort of breeze, then nothing, as the hatch finished opening. But the cold was like a fist. Cold like nothing any planet dweller could imagine.

I stood in the doorway and stared out at space. Below me, huge beyond imagining, was the swirl of dust, feeding the black hole. At the far edge of the swirl was a star. The star was being drained by the black hole. A huge, long, arced plume of hot gas was being drawn from the star into the black hole.

I hoped there had not been planets around that star. I hoped no sentient species had met its fate this way, torn apart by the space-warping might of the black hole.

I had a vision of myself, falling away free. Falling and falling into the black monster. I shook my head to clear the image.

<Focus, Elfangor,> I muttered to myself. <Worry about the black hole if you fail. Not till then.>

I looked back along the axis of the *Jahar*. Her elongated oval and three rakish engines and wonderfully long shredder spike still looked so potent.

The ship spun in space. Around and around in a wobbly loop. It's disorienting, even if you've

been through all the training for things like that. The swirl of dust and hot gases would be overhead one second, beneath me the next. Stars sped by overhead.

I searched back along the ship for the Time Matrix. But it wasn't there. Had it drifted entirely away? Had the living asteroids taken it?

Steadying myself as well as I could, I pushed off into space. I aimed to counter the spin of the ship. The result was that the ship now spun slowly beneath me. And there, rising from the far side of the ship, like a moon coming up over a planet, was the Time Matrix.

<I see it!> I reported. <It's wedged in place by the engine pylons. Going after it.>

If you have never tried to move in zero gravity, you have no idea how utterly impossible it can be. You're floating weightless, with no up or down. Nothing to push off against. If the cable were to break I could float forever, just a few feet away from the ship, and yet never be able to move back across that tiny distance.

But I had been well-trained in zero-gravity movement. I yanked lightly on the cable with my tail, drawing myself back toward the ship. I timed the impact carefully and tapped two

hooves on the hull. Just enough to change my direction.

I floated back toward the engines. Back toward the Time Matrix. It lay there like the egg of some unimaginably huge bird. Ten feet across, it fit neatly into the cradle formed by the engine pylon.

I drifted toward it, stretching out hands stiff and numb with cold. I touched it! Touched it and stopped my momentum carefully so that I wouldn't bounce off it.

My bare, frozen hands touched the hard, smooth surface. And somehow, the Time Matrix seemed to warm me. I felt heat glow up through my stiff fingers and up my awkward arms.

Now how do I move you back to the hatch? I wondered.

It was far too big to get my arms around. I would have to use the cable to fashion a sling. And I had exactly three minutes before the hood ran empty and all of us — the visser, Loren, Chapman, and I — were done for.

I worked quickly, untying the cable from my tail, forming it into two big loops with a cross-brace. It wasn't much. It wasn't secure. But it was all I could do.

<Okay,> I said. <Pull!>

The visser pulled, and slowly the Time Matrix, with me holding onto one of the cable ends, began to move toward the hatch.

It's going to work, I told myself. It's going to work. We are going to use the Time Matrix.

The first living creatures to have used the dread machine for thousands and thousands of years.

chapter 35

We snugged the Time Matrix up against the hatch, with air and time running out.

Once more inside the *Jahar*, I could see the suffering that Loren had endured. The blend of gases from the hoods was adjusted for Andalite bodies, not humans. She was in pain from gradual decompression. She could barely stand.

The visser, though, still stood. Or at least floated. <Well done, Andalite,> he said. <Thirty seconds left to activate this thing.>

<Go ahead, Yeerk,> I sneered. <Make your move.>

I saw the coldness in his eyes. Colder even than the freezing cold of space. I knew I had guessed right. He had intended to eliminate me. One slash of his Andalite tail to finish me off.

But I was prepared and he knew it. Which of us would win a tail fight in zero gravity? He didn't know, and neither did I. And there was no time left for mistakes.

How does one turn this thing on? I wondered, looking at the white globe half crammed into the hatchway. *No visible instruments or control panels. Has to be direct mind-link using a physical interface.*

Loren moved her lips as though speaking. But in the vacuum no sound could be heard. I saw through the plastic hood that her lips had turned blue. Her eyes were fluttering.

<Touch,> I said. <The Matrix responds to touch. I think if we touch and form a mental link, we can —>

The visser moved. Not to attack, but to press his hand against the Time Matrix. He was trying to gain control over it before I could!

I pressed my hand against the Matrix and searched desperately in my mind for a link.

What happened next is almost impossible to describe. And surely impossible for anyone to understand who has not experienced it himself.

As I touched the Time Matrix, and searched for it with my mind, the entire universe simply opened up. Opened up like a piece of fruit that has been exploded into its segments. But that's not telling a millionth of it.

Everything changed. Everything! The ship around me, the familiar *Jahar*, was suddenly not a vessel anymore, but an amazing array of fragments, each

twisted inside out and outside in. Each piece was connected to every other piece in insane ways that no rational mind could make sense of.

And from each piece of the ship there stretched lines that curled and twirled through space, connecting back to the Taxxon world and back to the *StarSword* and back to a thousand other places, all somehow visible to me. I could see every place the ship had been. It was as if each of those places were right here and a billion miles away at once!

But all the lines of the ship were dim and dull compared to the spectacle of the living bodies around me. I saw the Andalite body of Alloran opened up and split apart, transparent, twisted so that every part could be seen from every angle at once. I saw the living, beating hearts! I saw the muscles of the tail. I saw the ways the eyes were attached to the brain, and not just from outside, but from inside.

And to my horror, I saw the Yeerk slug. It was wrapped around Alloran's brain, sinking into every wrinkle and crevice, sinking deep between the four segments. I could literally see the flow of thoughts and emotions. I saw inside the slug that was Visser Thirty-two. I saw the way the Yeerk mind drew memories from Alloran and sent back orders. I saw and felt the impotent rage of Alloran as he lay helpless in the Yeerk's grasp.

I know how impossible it is to really grasp this. But I saw in and through and around everything at once. I saw time lines stretching back from the Yeerk and back from Alloran. I saw their pasts. And I saw the horrible moment when those time lines became entwined, becoming one.

I could see Alloran's past in flashes of wild action and wild emotion. I saw the terrible moment when Alloran stood amidst battlefield slaughter on the Hork-Bajir home world. I saw the ground piled high with Hork-Bajir and Andalite dead.

And I saw the actual decision deep in Alloran's despairing brain, the decision to release the forbidden Quantum virus.

I felt his bitterness when even that evil measure failed, and the Hork-Bajir were lost to the Yeerks. I saw the retreat of the shattered, beaten Andalite force.

I was almost drowning from this assault of data. It was as if I had been plugged directly into every computer ever built and all of them were dumping information into my brain.

I even saw the time line of the black hole itself. I saw it form from the explosive moment of the universe's birth, and watched it condense and burn, bright as a huge star. I saw it die and collapse, digging a hole in space itself.

But then, amidst all the swarm of information, among all the insides and outsides, all the pasts and all the connections, I felt the will of Visser Thirty-two.

I felt him take hold of the Time Matrix. And I felt the Matrix respond, felt it turn to him. In the visser's Yeerk brain I saw the image of the Yeerk home world. He was forming it, clear and detailed.

I saw the awful pools where the Yeerks were born. I felt the Kandrona rays that beat down from the Yeerks' own strange sun.

He was directing the Time Matrix! Aiming it! Telling it to take him there, to the Yeerk home world!

NO!

I focused my will, and in the weird universe I inhabited, I saw my own living brain as it focused, concentrated, bringing more and more mental power to bear.

It was insane! I could watch my own brain work.

Watch my own brain watching my own brain watching my own brain.

I had to take control of the Time Matrix. I had to fight, to resist the visser. I summoned up an image in my head. But it was a confused picture. I saw the part of the Andalite world where I had grown up. The trees, the grass, the sky. . . . But mixed in with

that image were others. I saw them float up out of my own brain. I saw them skim by, three-dimensional pictures looking so flat and strange in this multidimensional universe.

I saw my own Andalite world, but mixed in with it were images of Earth — the pictures I had seen.

Somewhere far off, I realized I could see my own body beginning to freeze. Systems were shutting down. I could see inside fingers that were frozen stiff. I could see a tail that hung limp, all tension gone. My hearts were beating sluggishly.

I was watching my own body die. I was weakening. The visser, too, was hurt by the cold, but the Yeerk himself, down inside Alloran's head, was still alert and strong.

Slowly the balance shifted to him. The images were more and more of the Yeerk home world. His images were coming in over mine, like a tide. I was losing. I was failing as the cold shut down my body and reached tendrils into my mind.

And then ... a new mind. Alien, but familiar in a way. I saw the Yeerk jerk in alarm and surprise. This new force, this new mind was strong. Stronger than he could have expected.

Loren!

I saw inside her and through her. I saw her thoughts. And I saw her push back the visser's own images. Not defeating him, but keeping him at bay.

I realized something else had changed. The black hole was further away now. The *Jahar* could still be seen, but it, too, was further away.

We were moving! The Time Matrix had been programmed, and we were moving through time.

The last memory I had, as the cold collapsed my consciousness, was of someone vast and incredible.

A being like nothing I could have imagined. It saw me. It saw us all.

And it laughed.

chapter 36

I woke up with that laughter still ringing in my head.

I opened my main eyes and found to my surprise that I was standing. I opened my stalk eyes and looked around in all directions.

Trees. Grass. A stream running close by. A gentle breeze.

<Home? Am I home?>

I stared at a *therant* tree. The trunk. The branches. The vines. Impossible! It was *Hala Fala*! The oldest of the *therant* trees in the woods near my home. My father had shown me this tree when I was just a very small child. It was my *Garibah*. My Guide Tree.

I ground my hooves into the grass, taking a sample taste. Yes! It was the grass I had grown up on. The grass of home.

<How did I get here?> I wondered aloud.

I reached out with both hands and placed them on the smooth bark of *Hala Fala*. And I heard

the "voice" of the tree, deep and simple and powerful.

It did not speak in words, of course. Only a handful of trees have ever used words, and even then, it could take them hours to say a single word. But *Hala Fala* spoke to me, as it usually did, letting me know that it felt my presence. Letting me feel its own strange, slow mind.

<I'm home,> I whispered to *Hala Fala*.

And then, after all that had happened, I broke down. I sobbed. I cried. I told my guide tree everything in a rush of disjointed emotion. Of course, not even a *Garibah* can understand stories of space travel, of aliens, of wars and terrible decisions.

But it could hear my shame. It could hear despair for poor, doomed Arbron. It could hear my cries of pain for all I had seen. It heard my fear.

The *Garibah* could not change what had happened. And it could not tell me that I was forgiven, or that all would be well now. I knew 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 now I claim forgiveness.>

But I had not yet made right everything that could be made right. I had not yet learned to understand my own mistakes. I was not ready to swear I would not repeat those mistakes. Forgiveness for all my terrible failings was still a long way off.

But the *Garibah*, the tree named *Hala Fala*, heard me, heard my shame and rage. And being heard helped.

My sobbing quieted. I took my hands away from the tree's smooth bark.

I walked slowly away, crunching up the sweet grass of home and trying, with my exhausted mind, to make sense of what had happened.

Clearly I had used the Time Matrix to carry me through time and space. Without experiencing any passage of time, I was home. But home *when?* Was this a hundred years ago? A thousand? The *Garibah* had been alive for seven thousand years. It could be anywhere in that time span.

I remembered trying to turn the Time Matrix to my own visions. And I guess I had succeeded. All these trees, all this lush grass, the *kafit* bird that fluttered by overhead, the little *hoobers* that jumped on springy tendrils and stared at me from

their comical bulging eyes, all this was home. My home.

And across that stream, and over that next rise, I would see my family home. Just ahead! I broke into a run. I leaped the stream, like I always did, and suddenly I had to be home. I didn't care what anyone said. I didn't care. I wanted my mother and father. I wanted to lie down in the deep grass of the scoop and find my old toys and be a child again.

I ran, flat-out, and yes, the slopes were so familiar! And yes, every tree was where it should be. I ran to the top of the rise, ready to look down into our neat, oval-shaped family scoop, and —

I stopped.

There it was: the scoop. The bowl dug out of the ground by my great-great-grandparents and planted with every delicious variety of grass and flowers. And there was the lodge, the blue-plex awning that covered the south quarter of the scoop and kept our things out of the rain.

But just behind the scoop, in a place it could not possibly be, was a waterfall.

It was an incredible waterfall. It fell hundreds of feet from the edge of a cliff. A cliff that simply stood there. No mountains on either side. Just a cliff that rose sharply up from the grass.

I felt a sick queasiness in my stomach.

I was seeing something I had seen before. It was the picture from what Loren had called a cigarette ad. But it was in a place it should not be. In a place it *could* not be. It was violating the very laws of physics.

This was not home.

I tore my gaze away from the impossible waterfall, and looked around. From the top of the rise I could see fairly far.

What I saw was impossibility piled on impossibility.

But what I focused on first was the sky.

It was a deep red and gold, like the red and gold of my own world. It was also light blue, with fluffy white clouds. And it was green.

Stretching over my head was a sky broken into jigsaw-puzzle fragments. Here a patch of Andalite sky. There a lighter blue. And over there, a shocking green torn by ragged bolts of electricity. Clouds drifted through the paler blue segments and then disappeared when they reached a different segment. Lightning in the green sky disappeared when it reached one of the other patches.

I had never known what the sky of Earth looked like, but now I could guess. It was pale blue, with fluffy white clouds.

And I had never known the sky of the Yeerk world, but now I could guess that, too. It was green and torn by bolts of electricity.

What have we done? I wondered.

And I remembered the laughter of that vast and strange being I had glimpsed.

chapter 37

I wandered, amazed and appalled, through a world that made no sense. The parts that were familiar just made other parts seem stranger.

My scoop was there, right where it should be. But no one was around. Not a single other Andalite. Not my father or my mother.

Why? Where was I? If this wasn't home, where was it?

I wandered through woods and across open fields that were familiar. But then, across a field I'd known all my life, I found a sharp line drawn. The grasses of home stopped abruptly. And on the other side everything turned brown and muddy gray and a red so dark it was almost black.

On one side of the line, my own world. On the other side of the line, wild, tall, spiky grass and trees that rose only a foot tall before spreading out horizontally for thirty or forty feet. If you could even call something like that a tree.

I was startled by something that reached up out of the ground with a soft SHLOOP! It was like a Taxxon tongue, almost. Ten feet long and dark red, it shot up from a hole in the ground. It seemed to lick the air in a slow, circular pattern, as if it was searching blindly for something. Then, after a few seconds, it SHLOOPED! back into the ground.

Ten feet away, another such tongue. This time it reached for a beast that walked past, hunched over. The beast had four thick legs toward the back and two turned-in legs forward, with no discernable head.

This lumbering creature wandered straight toward the flickering tongue and suddenly, fast as a tail, the tongue reached out and wrapped around the beast's hind legs. The beast let out a groan, although where that sound came from, since it seemed not to have a head, was a mystery to me.

The tongue drew the beast toward its hole. But it could not suck the animal down, so it simply held it prisoner as the beast groaned.

The sky directly over that dark, unnerving landscape was dirty green and veined with silent lightning. It looked altogether like one of the fantasy-monster lands in fables that Andalite parents tell their little children about.

I felt sick twisting inside me. I had never been to the Yeerk world, of course. But already I was beginning to guess what had happened. And I was sure that this blasted, vile, and empty landscape was the Yeerk home world.

Or at least the Yeerk home world as Visser Thirty-two saw it.

<The Time Matrix! Where is the Time Matrix?> I asked myself. It was the key. The Matrix had caused all this. The Matrix had created this awful place without logic or reason. And only through the Matrix could I escape.

<Loren. Where is she?>

I looked up at the sky and saw the patches of lighter, paler blue. The blue of Earth's sky. She would be beneath one of those patches of Earth blue. I was confident of that.

But which patch?

The waterfall. That was the place to start. It was the tallest thing around.

I turned my back on that depressing Yeerk vision and ran back toward the empty mockery of my home scoop. It was hard to look at that familiar area and accept the fact that it wasn't really my home.

Visser Thirty-two! It hit me like a shock from one of those Yeerk lightning bolts. If I was here, and per-

haps even Loren was here, then so was he. Somewhere. Maybe within the confines of his Yeerk world, but maybe not!

If I could go looking for Loren, so could he. And if he found her first . . .

I saw the towering cliff from which the waterfall dropped and raced toward it, desperate now to find Loren. I ran flat-out. As I ran, I ate. It felt so good. Whatever else might be strange and unreal, the grass was good and familiar. And as it traveled up my legs from my hooves, I felt my strength growing.

I reached the pool where the water crashed in a huge white explosion. As I drew closer, I saw that the woods surrounding that pool were split into three different sections. The familiar Andalite trees filled a third or so. And different, but still lovely trees and green grass, covered another third. Around still another third was more of the dark Yeerk landscape.

It was all utterly impossible, of course. But still, standing beneath that massive waterfall, feeling the cold spray on my face, it was beautiful, too.

"Elfangor!"

I turned my stalk eyes and saw her. Relief flooded through me. <Loren! You're here!> "Yeah. I'm here, all right. But where is *here*?"

<Wait. come to you.>

I went toward her, threading my way around bushes and trees. And she came running toward me. She threw her strong human arms around my shoulders. And even though touching is more of a human thing than an Andalite thing, it wasn't so bad.

"Man, I thought I was all alone here," Loren said.

<No. I am here.>

"I would swear this was Earth, only look at the sky. It's all in patches. And some of those patches are very weird."

She released her hold on me, and after a second or two, I realized I should do the same.

<Have you looked around at all?>

She shook her head. It's something humans do to answer no. "I woke up over there, a few hundred feet back in the woods. Elfangor, it's exactly like this area of the park back home. There's a park where I play softball."

<Yes. It would be familiar to you. And there will probably be other familiar parts. Places you know. Maybe we could go and look around, now that we are together.>

She cocked her head sideways and looked at me. "You're still worried, aren't you?"

<There were three of us who made contact with the Time Matrix. You, me, and Visser Thirty-two.>

She twisted her human lips into a grimace. Then she looked skyward. "Those patches of green sky with the lightning. That's because of him, isn't it? Somehow, we made this place. The three of us. We created this place."

I stared at her in astonishment. There was no way she could begin to know about the physics of the Time Matrix. And yet she had reached the same conclusion as I had.

I laughed. Maybe Loren didn't understand the physics of the Time Matrix. But then again, neither did I. Neither did any Andalite, as far as I knew. Compared to the creatures who had created the Time Matrix, humans and Andalites were equally primitive.

<What do you think happened?> I asked Loren.

She smiled. "You're asking me?" She shrugged. "Well, that time machine — the Time Matrix, or whatever you call it — is not just like some car you drive through time. I think to steer it you have to imagine the place and time where you want to go. I think with three of us each having different ideas of where we wanted to go, well, this is the result: part me, part you, part . . . part *him*."

I saw that her eyes were staring past me. I adjusted my stalk eyes to follow the direction of her gaze.

There, standing on the far side of the pool, was Visser Thirty-two. The abomination.

But Visser Thirty-two was not standing alone.

chapter 38

Visser Thirty-two stood on the bank of the pool in the Yeerk zone, under his own green sky.

And on either side of him stood a creature like nothing I had ever seen or imagined. They were each about three feet tall and four and a half feet long. They were mostly a dark, dirty yellow with irregular black spots. But the head and shoulders were the deep red of the Yeerk plants.

The heads were tiny for the bodies, elongated, almost needle-sharp. The mouths were long and narrow. Hundreds of tiny, bright red teeth stuck out, jagged and wildly different in length and shape.

But what struck me as strangest was that the creatures did not have legs in the usual sense. They had wheels.

Yes, wheels. Four of them, to be exact.

The wheels were located where legs should be. Each was sloppy and irregular in shape, not perfectly round. But it was easy to see that the wheels were for real. There was mud and dirt all around them, and when I strained my stalk eyes I could

even see where the creatures had left tracks in the dirt. Wheel tracks.

"Elfangor, what are those things?"

<I have no idea. I can't imagine what evolutionary path would conceivably have created a creature with wheels.>

Visser Thirty-two actually gave a jaunty wave of his hand. <So, young Elfangor, we meet again. As you see, I brought my pets: Jarex and Larex. And you brought your pet, too. Your pet human.>

Loren looked at me. In a voice Visser Thirty-two was sure to hear, she muttered, "You know, Elfangor, I'm beginning to see why you Andalites really dislike Yeerks. Whatever body they may be in, they still have the manners of slugs."

<Brave little human girl,> the Yeerk visser mocked. <Do you understand that even now my people are on their way to evaluate your primitive world? Do you understand that within a few years your people, you humans, will be slaves of the Yeerk Empire?>

"Blah, blah, blah," Loren said.

I had no idea what that meant. Neither did the visser.

"You do a lot of talking for a slug," Loren clarified. "You think I'm scared of you?"

<Yes. I know you're scared of me.>

For a moment Loren said nothing, but her lower lip was trembling slightly. Then, she knelt quickly,

plunged her hand into the water, and withdrew it. She was holding a rock. She drew her arm back, swept her arm in a big loop, and released the rock with precise timing. The rock flew through the air at an impressive speed.

And the aim wasn't bad, either.

BONK!

<Ahhh!> the visser cried. The rock had struck him right in the face, just below his left main eye.

I don't know who was more amazed, me or the visser.

<What . . . what do you call that?> I asked her.

"That? We call that softball. I pitch for Frank's Pro Shop Twins back home. All-city two years in a row."

<What is softball?>

"It's a game we play."

<And you hit people in the face with rocks?> "

Not usually."

I was impressed by the human ability to throw things with such force. I was sure that Andalite scientists would enjoy studying humans someday. They appeared more frail and ridiculous than they were.

The visser was not impressed. He was just angry.

<So. You propel rocks at me! You'll be very sorry you ever propelled a rock at me, human. Jarex! Larex! Attack!>

The situation stopped being amusing very quickly. The twin beasts turned their wheels, sluggishly at first. But then picked up speed.

I almost didn't move, I was so fascinated seeing the biological wheels turn. It was truly incredible.

<You admire my pets, Andalite? They are a species called Mortrons. As a young lieutenant I went on a survey party to a world that was later destroyed when its sun went nova. We thought we might be able to make Controllers of these Mortrons, but that didn't work out. Their brains are simply too tiny to accommodate us. Instead, I brought two of them home as pets.>

All the while the visser talked — or "blah, blah, blahed," as Loren had said — the Mortrons gathered speed and raced around the circumference of the pool.

They made a strange sound. A HUF-HUF-HUF-HUF. Faster and faster.

<They have amazing capacities, my young friend Elfangor. As you will soon see.>

<What's the matter, Yeerk? Afraid to fight me tail-to-tail?> I taunted. I hoped the answer was yes, because I was not at all sure which of us would win a tail fight. While I was totally confident I could deal with these Mortrons.

HUF-HUF-HUF-HUF-HUF!

The wheels spun faster, and the ungainly yellow and black monstrosities were nearly to the edge of the Yeerk portion of the pool. I watched carefully to see whether they could move from the Yeerk area into the human area.

Unfortunately, the answer was yes.

<Don't worry,> I told Loren. <I can handle these two creatures.>

HUF-HUF-HUF-HUF-SCRINK-SHWOOOP!

Suddenly the creatures each split into two parts! The bottom portion, the yellow part with the wheels, swerved away. The dark red upper portion simply rose from the body, unfolded leathery wings I'd never even suspected, and flew straight at me!

"Elfangor!" Loren cried.

<Hah-hah! Kill, Jarex! Kill, Larex! Kill the Andalite!> Visser Thirty-two cackled gleefully.

The first Mortron — I don't know if it was Jarex or Larex — opened its mouth and showed its rows of uneven but brutally unpleasant teeth. It powered through the air like a rocket.

I dodged left and struck with my tail blade!

FWAPP!

SPLEET! FLUMP. FLUMP.

My tail blade sliced the Mortron into two chunks. The two separate pieces fell to the ground with a wet splat.

"Elfangor, the other one!"

The second Mortron used the distraction provided by his brother to swoop wide, then arch in behind me. A tactic that would have worked on most opponents. But not on an Andalite who can see in all directions at once.

His toothy mouth was inches from my neck when I struck.

FWAPP!

SPLEET! FLUMP. FLUMP.

And the second Mortron bird-portion fell in pieces to the ground.

I was feeling pretty good, until I looked at the visser and saw the amusement in his eyes. "Elfangor, look. Look!" Loren cried.

I turned my stalk eyes toward the ground. With amazing speed, the two bloody halves of each Mortron were growing. One piece of each was growing to become a complete bird-portion again. And the other piece was going even further — growing into a complete, two-piece, yellow and black, four-wheeled Mortron.

I had sliced both Mortrons in half. And now they were becoming four Mortrons.

<Are you doing the math in your head, Elfangor?> the visser jeered. <They regenerate! Cut an attacking Mortron in pieces and each piece grows again to become a complete Mortron. It's the killing

frenzy. It gives them an enzyme boost that makes them regenerate! Try to kill these four and you'll have eight. Kill those eight and you'll have sixteen! Thirty-two! Sixty-four!>

I stared in horror as the Mortron pieces grew and grew. In seconds they would be ready to attack again. And anything I did to destroy them would merely make more of them!

<Loren, I don't know what to do. If only I had a shredder!>

"Can you outrun them?"

<Yes, I can. But you can't! They are faster than you are. And I won't leave you.>

"You won't have to. Maybe. How strong is your back? Never mind, it must be strong enough. Elfangor, don't be offended, okay?"

<Offended by what?>

"Hold still. I'm gonna try something."

She came to me and placed one hand on the back of my neck. She placed another hand on my rump, right at the base of my tail. And suddenly, she leaned her weight on me, swung one leg up and over, and came to rest straddling my back. She sat there with one human leg hanging off either side of my back and held her hands clasped around my neck.

I turned my stalk eyes around and found myself staring directly into her small blue human eyes.

"Now let's run," she said.

<With you on my back?>

But even while I was standing there in blank astonishment, I saw a fully formed Mortron rise from the dirt. It was just a few feet away and it launched its bird-part. Leather wings propelled jagged razor-sharp teeth straight for my throat.

"Elfangor, this is not the time to think," Loren yelled.
"Run! Ruuuuun!"

So I did. With the human girl actually on my back, I ran.

chapter 39

We ran. Or I ran, and Loren rode lightly on my back. And we quickly outran the visser's beasts. Those biological wheels were swift, but not as swift as an Andalite's hooves.

As for the visser, he chose not to give chase. At least not just then. But I knew I had not seen the end of him.

We left the "Andalite" portion of this new universe and ran through an increasingly strange environment.

The sky overhead was blue, but darkening just a bit.

The woods gave way to a cluttered landscape filled up with manufactured things. The grass under my hooves became a hard, gray-black substance. White stripes lined the middle.

<What is this thing we are on?> I asked. "It's a street," Loren said.

<What does it do?>

"Well, remember that Mustang you were driving around on the Taxxon world? Streets are what Mustangs travel on."

As soon as she said it I could see how sensible it was. Of course. This way the human "cars" —which is how, Loran informed me, humans commonly refer to these machines — would not damage tasty grass.

On both sides of the street there were cars sitting. Beyond the cars, further back from the street were rectangular boxy structures. They were quite large and decorated with small squares and rectangles of transparent material. The tops were angled and covered in reddish-orange or dark gray scales.

<Are these human creations?>

"Yep. These are houses. That's what we live in."

<You live *in* them? How?>

"Urn, well . . . I mean, you go in through the front door. See? The tall rectangles on the front of each house? You go in through those."

<Inside.>

"Yes, inside."

<Ah! Wait! You mean these structures are *hollow*!>

"Of course they're hollow. Pretty soon we'll be to my house. Then I'll show you. You'll meet my mom. You can see my room."

I didn't know what to say to that. My own home scoop had been empty. My mother and father had not been there. I doubted that Loren's mother would be in her house. But I wasn't sure.

<Don't expect too much,> I warned.

"She'll be there," Loren said forcefully. "Next house. The one with the bushes out front."

I had very little experience understanding the expression of human voices, but I sensed fear in Loren's voice. Uncertainty.

I stopped before her house. There was a very attractive patch of grass in the front. Obviously, humans grow their own food in neatly cultivated squares in front of each house.

<You must have very hardy grasses to be able to feed whole families and still look so perfect and so green.>

"What?" Loren asked.

She frowned and I let the matter drop. I was sure now that she was worried. She slid from my back.

<I'll wait while you go inside your hollow house,> I said.

"No. Come with me, Elfangor. Hold my hand."

I held her hand and she walked up a series of four steps. I wondered about the steps. Were they a way to slow down any approaching enemy, so that no one could charge directly inside the hollow house?

With her free hand Loren twisted a metallic ball. The door opened a little and Loren pushed it open all the way.

She was correct. The house was hollow inside. In fact, now I could see that the outer walls were no more than a few inches thick. But inside the hollowness were other walls, with other doors. It was like a maze!

Lights glowed from the flat covering above us. Other lights were hung on the walls. The floor was covered with a sort of very short, pale tan grass. I tried to taste some of it, but my hooves could not eat it.

"Mom?" Loren said in a loud, quavering voice.

"I'm in here, honey."

I felt Loren's hand jerk in surprise. Then she let go of my hand and ran along the strange inedible tan grass and turned out of sight through a rectangular opening.

I followed slowly, unsure of myself. I did not know any human rituals. I knew what I would have said when first meeting an Andalite friend's parents, but I'd never met a human's parents.

I heard Loren sob. "Mommy!"

I turned the corner and looked into another of the mazelike rooms. This room had metallic devices against one wall, all rectangular and white. Humans

are very partial to rectangles. The floor was smooth here, and slippery for my hooves.

Loren was wrapped in the arms of another human. This new human was also female, as far as I could tell. She had hair the same color as Loren's, but dark brown eyes. Perhaps that was a sign of age. Perhaps humans have blue eyes till a certain age. Or until they reproduce and have children.

I wanted to ask Loren if my guess was correct, but Loren's mother was looking at me with her brown eyes.

"Loren, honey, shouldn't you introduce your friend?"

Loren frowned. She looked at me, then back at her mother. "Mom, this is Elfangor. Don't be afraid, okay? He's my friend."

The human woman smiled. "Now, why would I be afraid? I like meeting your friends. You know that."

"But . . . Mom . . . Elfangor's not exactly one of my school friends."

"I like meeting your friends."

Loren's face was growing pale. She darted worried eyes at me and back to her mother. "Mom, can't you tell that Elfangor is not a normal friend from school? Can't you tell that he's different?"

"Oh, honey." The woman laughed. "He's just an Andalite like any other."

Loren jumped back like she'd been slapped. I swept the room with my stalk eyes, ready for trouble. I cocked my tail and waited, tense and confined in the narrow room with the slippery floor.

"What do you mean, he's an Andalite? You don't know about Andalites! You *can't* know about Andalites."

Loren's mother made a face. "You know, just because I'm your mother doesn't mean I'm an antique! I do keep up with things, Miss Modern. Your generation thinks it invented *everything*. You think you kids invented Andalites? We had Andalites when I was your age, too."

"How do you know about Andalites?!" Loren yelled. There was water leaking from her eyes. "Oh, God, you're not real! You're not real!"

"Now, Loren, if you are going to treat me disrespectfully, I am going to send you to your room."

"You're not my mother! You're not *real*!"

I placed a hand on Loren's shoulder. By now I had learned that humans like to be touched when they are upset. <Loren, you're right. She is not your mother. She's something you made out of your own thoughts and memories of your mother. She knows about Andalites because you knew about Andalites when you imagined her.>

But Loren did not want to be comforted. She threw off my hand. She turned to me with her face red, and water flowing from her blue eyes. And she screamed. "Get away from me! Get away from me! This is all your fault! Just leave me alone!"

She pushed past me and ran from the hollow house, sobbing loudly.

I was alone with the artificial mockery of a human woman. <I am sorry.>

"Would you like some pop and cookies?" the human woman asked.

<No, thank you,> I said. I wondered what I should do. I didn't know how to comfort a human girl who is trapped inside a nightmare. <Loren's mother, can you show me where Loren's room is?>

"Up the stairs, on the right. But leave the door open a crack. That's the rule in our house when Loren has Andalites over to play."

chapter 40

I felt that Loren needed a little time alone. It was dangerous letting her walk around by herself. But I couldn't force her to talk to me when she was angry and afraid.

I had to climb many stairs to reach Loren's room. I still didn't understand the point of stairs. I guess humans just love anything with straight edges and a rectangular shape. The stairs were definitely rectangular. And they allowed the humans to place a second level in their houses. This made the house a larger rectangle. And I suppose this is important in some way.

Inside Loren's room was a long rectangle covered with artificial skin. I suspect she used it for sleeping. I had seen that when she slept, she lay flat and stretched out straight. There were two other flat rectangles, one mostly covered with bound papers. The bound papers were called books or magazines. Loren had explained them to me. A sort of extremely primitive computer file.

I opened one of them. There were words printed on the pages but the words stopped abruptly in the middle of the book. Of course. Loren had not finished the book. So she could not recreate it out of her memory.

There was a small picture of Loren with two other people. All were making human smiles. One was her mother. The other I believed was male. Perhaps her father.

I took this picture and held it in my hand. I looked around the room, trying to understand this alien girl. But alien things are hard to make sense of.

By the time I got out of the hollow house and back to the street, Loren was gone from sight. I worried about finding her. But after wandering the alien landscape for a while, I heard a far-off sound. A THWACK!

I ran at top speed to the sound and found Loren in a field of short grass and dirt. She stood with her back to a high wire cage. In her right hand she held a sort of long, shaped stick, wider at the far end. With her left she tossed a round white sphere up in the air. And then, quickly clasping the stick with both hands, she swung the stick till it struck the falling white sphere.

The result was fascinating. The sphere went flying through the air.

Loren watched the sphere until it fell to the grass, perhaps a hundred feet away. Then she reached down into a bucket by her feet, lifted out a second, identical sphere, and repeated the entire process.

<Loren!>

She ignored my approach.

Toss . . . swing . . . THWACK!

The sphere flew over the grass and landed at the edge of a narrow band of trees.

Toss ... swing ... THWACK!

<Loren?>

"See, *this* is softball," she said, without looking at me. "See that high spot there? That's the pitcher's mound. The pitcher throws the ball across this plate. The batter swings and tries to knock the stitches off her."

<Off the pitcher?>

Toss . . . swing ... THWACK!

"That was my last ball. I'd better go retrieve them. Our coach goes ape if we lose equipment."

She started off across the field, still carrying her shaped stick.

<You are upset,> I said.

"What was your first clue?"

<This all seems very bizarre to you. Me as well.>

"Bizarre? My neighborhood with no people in it? My mom sounding like a dimwit robot but knowing things she can't possibly know? The sky in patches?"

<Is that humor?>

"It's sarcasm," she said. We reached one of the white balls. She picked it up and used the stick to knock it back toward the tall wire cage.

I held the small picture out for her to see. <I got this from your room. I thought you might like something personal. I don't know if we will be able to go back to your house. >

"That is *not* my house," she said. But she took the picture and stared at it. Her face seemed to grow softer. Her mouth corners became more nearly level. Her forehead skin grew less wrinkled. "Elfangor, what is happening here?"

<What you said earlier, more or less. I think that in order to direct the Time Matrix you need to form a mental image of where and when you want to go. We couldn't do that because all three of us were fighting for control. We each — you, me, Visser Thirty-two had ideas of where to go. You wanted your home. I wanted mine. I guess he wanted his. Nobody's vision was complete. We

were all freezing and suffocating for lack of air. The Time Matrix did the best it could.>

"I thought it was supposed to be a time machine."

I sighed. <Some people believe that there is not just one universe, but many. Maybe, somehow, instead of traveling through the time and space of our own universe, we forced the Time Matrix to create a whole new universe. When the three of us wrestled for control, the Time Matrix could not make sense of what we were asking it to do. So it created this place.>

Loren resumed walking toward the far edge of the field. She stooped to pick up another ball and knocked it back in the direction we'd come from. "So my mom. My mother ... she's just made up out of my memories."

<And even then, not all your memories. She is not complete. She is bits and pieces of your memories of her. I think the more complicated things, like sentient creatures, are probably the most likely to be incomplete.>

Loren made a snorting sound. "Great universe, isn't it?"

<That was sarcasm, too?>

"Yeah. That was sarcasm, too."

We had reached the trees. Loren plunged in. "Look how complete all the trees are. Why are the

grass and the trees and the air all like they should be?"

<Because a person ... whether it's an Andalite or a human, is a thousand times more complicated than a tree.>

I noticed that Loren was not looking at me. Instead she was staring alertly into the woods.

<Do you see something?>

"No. I ... I have a feeling, is all. I have to go look."

I followed her through the woods. We traveled no more than fifty feet when we reached what Loren had sensed.

The trees stopped abruptly. The sky above us stopped, too. The ground and the grass all stopped. Just stopped. And beyond it was blank whiteness.

The pure, blank, white of Zero-space. Nothingness.

I felt awed and frightened all at once. We were standing at the edge of our tiny universe. Loren reached toward the whiteness, stretching her hand out beyond the edge of soil and vegetation, air and sky.

Her arm reached that edge and curved back on itself. It simply bent in a perfect arc, so that her hand was reaching back toward her own face.

"N00000000!" she screamed. "No! No! No!"

<Loren, it's only . . .> Only what? What could I say to comfort her when I felt my own mind spinning out of control?

She turned to me, eyes wide and reddish now. "I want to go home, Elfangor. I want to go home! This place is wrong. It's wrong!"

<I know. I feel it, too.>

"We have to get out of here. This place can't exist. Feel it. It's wrong!"

<We have to find the Time Matrix,> I said. <It's the only way. But we don't know where it is. And Visser Thirty-two will try to stop us.>

She was still holding the shaped stick. The softball stick. She looked at me with cold fury in her blue human eyes. And I saw something there that almost scared me.

She clutched the stick tightly. "Let him try and stop us. Let him try."

chapter 41

We wandered around the edge of our new universe, keeping the blank whiteness on our right as we went.

We traveled along the outer rim of the Earth portion of the universe. But even there at the outer rim, this new universe was not consistent. As we walked we came across small areas, sometimes no more than twenty feet across, where we'd suddenly find Andalite life-forms or Yeerk life-forms. The Andalite patches were harder to notice since they were not so different from the Earthlike areas. But the patches of Yeerk environment were like open sores.

We skirted around the Yeerk patches. Most of the Earth environment was made up of woods and grass fields. But here and there were human buildings as well. We saw the street where Loren lived. And we saw her school — a squat, ugly box made of thousands of small reddish-brown rectangles called bricks.

"I can't believe I brought the school building into this universe, but I forgot to bring a grocery store."

<What is a grocery store?>

"A place to buy food."

<Aft> I had seen Loren eat aboard the *Jahar*, of course. She and the other human had eaten emergency rations of liquefied grass. The rations we give Andalites who are too sick or injured to stand up and eat normally.

We walked along a street that appeared in the middle of a field. The street merely began, ran for a few hundred feet, and ended. It made Loren anxious, I could tell. She explained that the street didn't belong there.

But then we saw a building decorated with two yellow arcs.

"Can't be!" Loren gasped. "No way! It's Mickey D's! I brought a McDonald's here!"

She broke into a run and I followed her. We entered the hollow building. Inside there was a single human. But he was not like any human I had ever seen.

"Oh, God, what did I do?" Loren cried. She placed her hand over her mouth.

I had never seen this human gesture, but I knew she was horrified. You see, the human looked like

any normal human. Except that his face was covered with red splotches and pustules. And he had no eyes. No eyes at all.

But he could speak.

"Welcome to McDonald's. May I take your order?"

"Oh, no. No," Loren wailed.

"Would you like fries with that? Or a hot apple pie?"

<Is this a human you know?> I asked.

"No. I mean, yes. He's this guy who works at McDonald's and he always waits on us when we go for burgers after a game. My friend Jennifer says he likes me. But all I ever notice is how bad his acne is. The poor guy. The poor guy."

<The food he has may still be real,> I suggested. <It would help you to eat some human food.>

She seemed ready to run from the place. But in the end, hunger won out over horror. Loren steeled herself and walked back to the eyeless human.

"Welcome to McDonald's. May I take your order?"

"Yes. I mean . . . yes. I'd like a Big Mac, fries, and a Coke."

"That'll be four dollars and nineteen cents." Loren hesitated. But then she reached into a flap of her artificial skin and pulled out some crumpled

pieces of paper and some round metallic objects. She handed all this to the eyeless human.

Somehow the human managed to take the paper and metal. Although how he did it without eyes was a mystery. This universe we had created had strange rules.

The eyeless human placed several objects into a bag. They smelled strange and foul to me. But Loren looked in the bag and smiled.

"Well, I did one thing right when I created this universe. I put extra pickles on the Big Macs. Come on. Let's go back outside. I don't want to eat with . . . with *him*."

"Enjoy your meal, and come again!" the sad monstrosity said.

We went back outside and Loren found a place to sit on the grass and began to devour her food. Watching creatures with mouths eat can be disturbing. Especially when you discover some of the things they eat. Between huge gulping, slobbering bites with her flashing white teeth and grinding jaws, Loren told me what a "Big Mac" was. I'd rather not have known.

But the human food revived Loren. She had her old energy back. And even her sense of humor.

"At least I didn't try and recreate the cheerleading squad in this universe," she said. "They rejected

me, and I'd hate to think what kind of mess I'd have made of some of them."

I didn't understand what she was talking about, but I understood that she was feeling better. I gazed up at the weird, patchy sky, and around at the disjointed landscape. Then, suddenly, it hit me.

<It's a multidimensional pattern!> I said.

"Huh?" Loren asked, attempting to form words, even though her mouth was filled with two-inch-long, pale yellow sticks called "french fries."

<The sky, the way little bits of Andalite and Yeerk environments are mixed in with Earth environments. And probably the other way around, too. I didn't see it at first, but there is a pattern. It just seems strange because it makes sense in higher dimensions, but not in three dimensions. But I am sure now. It's a hyper spiral.>

Loren swallowed. "A what?"

<A spiral. But in extra dimensions. And if I'm right . . . yes! The Time Matrix will be at the center of the spiral!>

"Which is where?" Now Loren was sucking liquid into her mouth through a tube that inserted into a cylinder filled with brown water.

<I'm not sure. But I think I can find it. And if I can find it, so can that Yeerk!>

Loren jumped up. "That's why he hasn't tried to track us down. He's after the Time Matrix! Let's go. Let's go!"

<You seem to have recovered.>

Loren pointed at the cylinder of liquid. "Sugar rush, Elfangor. Let's go before it wears off."

chapter 42

I led the way toward what I hoped was the center of this universe. The patches of sky grew more varied over our heads. And the patches of different environments grew more numerous. Soon we were walking through a place that was only half Earth, with the rest divided between gentle Andalite countryside and harsh Yeerk lands.

"I like your planet, from what I've seen of it," Loren said. "It's like Earth, only without the houses and buildings. But you must have cities and all somewhere. I mean, you build spaceships. You have incredible technology."

<Long ago we had cities,> I explained. <But we were free-roaming herd animals to begin with. I mean, that's how we evolved. Millions of years ago Andalites moved in vast herds, which would split off into smaller herds at different times of the year. Then, gradually, we got used to forming smaller herds. Families, really.

Each family made its scoop, and we each held our own grazing lands. All this Andalite environment you see is part of my family's grazing land.>

We came to a patch of Yeerkish territory and skirted around the blackened vegetation and sluggish pools. On the other side was a wide band of Andalite land which we walked through.

<Once we evolved to form families, we began to study science and nature. And again, over millions of years, we learned to build things. You know — weapons and vehicles that let us fly over the land. And communicators for extending the reach of thought-speak. Scoops became larger. Families joined with other families. Building grew. Soon we had thousands of Andalites all crammed together without enough grazing space. But we were learning space travel at the same time. Still, we weren't happy. We knew something was wrong. We broke down our cities, divided the land, and went back to life in simple family scoops. We kept building spaceships, but we did it in little bits and pieces, here and there, spread out through the tens of thousands of scoops. My own family does some of that. We design heat transfer components for fight-

ers. Another family builds the pieces from our designs. Another family transports the pieces to the spaceport. I guess the three spaceports are about as close as we come to what you would call a city now.>

"We're very different, aren't we?" Loren said. She sounded sad.

<Yes. In some ways. But not so very different in others.>

"When all this is done, you'll go back to your planet. go back to mine. And you'll erase all my memories of this."

I was startled by the idea. <Loren, we no longer have the Jahar. Or any ship. I can't erase your memories without that technology.>

"But if you could, you would?"

I hadn't thought about it. But suddenly I realized the truth. It shocked me. <No. I wouldn't.> "Why not?"

<Because . . . because I don't think after all that's happened I could stand to be the only person alive who knew the truth. And I don't think I could stand having you forget me, Loren.>

Loren nodded. She smiled. "I care about you, too, Elfangor. I care a lot."

I was puzzled. Had I said I cared about her? No. Not in those words. And yet I did. I did

care about this alien who no longer seemed so alien.

<We would be able to move faster if you climbed on my back as you did before,> I suggested.

"I guess we would."

She climbed on my back and I set off at a run. I was confident now that I knew the pattern of this universe. And I was fairly sure that we would find the Time Matrix at the very center of the swirl. But would we find that Visser Thirty-two had solved the puzzle before us?

The different environments were broken into smaller and smaller patches, and now there was a roughly equal amount of each of the three planets. It became more and more difficult to go around the Yeerk areas.

We came to one Yeerk area that stretched directly across our path. <I think we should go through it,> I said.

I stepped gingerly into the Yeerk area. Instantly the air was warmer, almost stifling. Humidity shot up so that my fur clung to me.

I closed my hooves to the sparse Yeerk vegetation. I didn't trust those dark red plants. A bright tongue shot up from the ground, as I had seen hap-

pen before. It licked the air, searching for us, but these creatures or plants — or whatever they were — were used to slower prey. I easily stepped out of its range.

A pall settled over us as we crossed a landscape that seemed designed to be depressing. And then, at last, we reached good Andalite grass again. Grass and trees and the scoop of a friend I had known all my life.

"Is that your home?"

<No. It's the scoop of a friend's family.> "

Maybe your friend is around."

<That's what scares me. Your mother . . . that McDonald person . . . I don't want to see my friend that way.>

Suddenly I stumbled. My right forehoof had caught on a rock.

"Elfangor! Elfangor! Something is happening!" Loren cried. "My fingernails! They're growing!"

She held up her hands so that my back-turned stalk eyes could see them. The hard portion at the end of her human fingers had grown half an inch.

<Your hair is growing, too,> I said.

She felt it. "My God, it's grown an inch. It's like it would grow in a few weeks!"

<My hooves are growing, too. That's why I tripped. It's something I was afraid of. As we get closer to the center of this swirl universe, time is accelerating. We are going to age faster than normal.>

"Then we'd better hurry!"

I redoubled my speed, careful to lift my scruffy hooves well clear on each step.

The entire false universe was coming together now. There were no longer clearly different patches of Andalite, human, or Yeerk terrain. Trees and grass, scoop and house, and sludgy natural Yeerk pools all seemed to meld together.

It was like walking through a surreal nightmare. The sky itself seemed to swoop down, to gather and swirl in patterns of dark blue, light blue, and lightning-wracked green.

"Okay, now this is weird," Loren said. But her voice, too, seemed to swirl into patterns that made it sound musical and strange.

I tripped and fell forward, throwing Loren free. My hooves had become totally unmanageable. I whipped my tail blade forward and quickly trimmed my hooves. It was a rough job, and as soon as I had cut away the excess, they began growing out again.

I looked at Loren and had to stop myself from crying out. Her fingernails were two inches long! Her toenails were sticking through the fabric of her artificial hooves! And her golden hair was so long it reached to the ground.

She stumbled forward, pointing. "Look! Look!"

I had already seen what she was just noticing: the swirling tornado that was the very center of our universe. It was a vortex, a tornado made up of the very substance of our three worlds. Sky and soil and living things all swirled insanely around us.

"Look out!" Loren ducked her head as something that looked like a human house, twisted and stretched, whipped by us.

<The Time Matrix! It should be in there!> I cried. "In *there*? How can we go in there? It's impossible!"

<It's the only way. The Time Matrix is either in there or . . . or there's nothing beyond that swirl but emptiness and we'll be trapped inside that vortex forever.>

"Nice choice," Loren said. "And by the way, that was sarcasm, too."

<Yes, I'm beginning to recognize it,> I said. <We have to close our eyes. Block out

everything you see, or think you see, and dive in.>

"Take my hand, Elfangor."

I did. And together we pushed forward into a vortex made up of the very substance of time and space. A swirl of raw space-time.

chapter 43

Into the vortex.

I had no idea what I would find inside that awesome swirl. But then, I had long ago given up thinking I knew what would happen next. Everything had been a surprise since that day, not at all long ago, when Arbron and I were called to see the captain on the bridge of the *StarSword*.

Loren and I pushed forward. There was a feeling of resistance, as if a strong wind was holding us back. But at the same time, I felt that this resistance could be overcome.

The wind stopped and instead we were drawn forward. Drawn deep into the vortex. Everything swirled and swam around me. Vision was wild and distorted and filled with insane colors and bits and pieces of floating, oddly shaped matter.

Trees and buildings and creatures that seemed solid simply blew through us as if they were ghosts. Or as if we were ghosts.

And then we were through. In an instant, the swirling stopped. We were standing on a flat, fea-

tureless area no more than a hundred feet across. There was no vegetation. There was no detail. The sky was blanked out by the swirl that raged above and around us.

"The eye of the hurricane," Loren whispered.

I didn't understand what she said, but I understood what we both felt. We had penetrated a storm that twisted time and space.

And there, standing alone and pristine, was the Time Matrix. A simple, off-white sphere that had the power to create this eerie universe from our own imperfect thoughts.

<We did it,> I marveled. <The Time Matrix! It is here!>

"Yeah. Now what do we do about it? Look at my hair. Look at my fingernails. The distortion is really strong here, close like this."

<Yes. But we'll be fine once we contact the Matrix and get out of here.>

From the swirl wall I saw a head emerge, pressing forward into the empty field.

An Andalite head.

"It's him!"

The visser jerked in shock and amazement at seeing the two of us there. <What? The Andalite child and his pet? Still alive?>

<Yes, still alive,> I said.

The four Mortrons wheeled their way into the vortex and came panting beside the visser. The Yeerk looked around, as if searching for a weapon. He stared at the Time Matrix while keeping his stalk eyes on me.

"Elfangor," I heard Loren moan.

I swept one stalk eye toward her and almost cried out. Her hair was now so long that it piled on the ground. And her toenails extended nearly a foot through the fabric of her artificial hooves. Her hands were like hideous claws.

<Stand perfectly still,> I said. <Hold out your hands and don't move them.>

FWAPP! FWAPP! FWAPP! FWAPP!

With four quick tail swipes I cut most of the finger and toenail away. At the same time I kept my main eyes on the visser. He was watching me closely. Sizing me up.

<I suppose we'll have to agree to work together again,> he said.

<The same thing would happen,> I said. <Another compromised universe. No better than this one. Only this time we'd all be more careful to bring allies and weapons from our memory.>

The Yeerk visser shrugged. <At least then we'd have a fair fight.>

"He doesn't want to fight you one-on-one," Loren said.

<No, he'd rather have a host of allies and weapons,> I agreed.

But Loren shook her head, which caused a ripple through the massive pile of her golden hair. "No, it's more than that. He's afraid to fight you one-on-one. I saw it in his face."

The idea seemed ludicrous. Loren liked me and assumed I was the better fighter. But that was no way to judge. Visser Thirty-two had the body *and* mind of Alloran. All of Alloran's speed and experience.

"He *is* afraid, Elfangor," Loren insisted.

<Afraid of *what?*> the visser laughed. <Of this Andalite child? My Mortrons and I will annihilate him!>

"Really? So why not do it? Why talk about working together?" Loren turned to me. "Al-loran has seen you tail fight, Elfangor. That knowledge is the visser's now, right? That's why he's scared."

The Yeerk stared hatred at Loren. <I'll be sure to kill you slowly, human.> He shot a glance at the four Mortrons. <Kill!> he yelled suddenly.

The Mortrons powered their wheels and came for us. The visser was right behind them.

It had come down to this. To a tail fight to the death between me and Visser Thirty-two. I tried to recall everything Old Sofor, my fighting trainer, had taught me. But I couldn't remember a thing.

The Mortrons launched their bird portions. Leather wings spread wide and vicious mouths wider still. I had to take them out of the fight without cutting them. If I cut them in pieces they would simply regenerate.

SWOOP!

FWAPP! I struck! But at the last second I turned my blade aside and hit the Mortron with the flat side of the blade.

THWACK! The bird portion went flying. It fell to the ground and didn't move. I had knocked it out.

Two bird portions went for Loren, jagged teeth glistening from their long mouths. She swung her softball bat but missed. The bat fell from her hands as a Mortron bird portion slapped her head with its wings.

One of the Mortrons was still after me, and as he swooped the visser attacked.

Mortron and Andalite tail struck at me.

<Aaarrggghh!> The Mortron ripped a gash in the side of my head, barely missing my stalk eyes! My own blood spurted, and then the visser's tail was . . .

Blocked! FWAPP! I knocked his blow aside.

FWAPP! He struck again!

I dodged beneath the blow and fired my own tail, but my aim was thrown off by the Mortron, who twisted back and came at me again.

"No! No! No, you don't!" I heard Loren cry.

She was under attack from the other two Mortrons! I saw bright red human blood. But if I tried to help her, the visser would kill me before I could so much as twitch.

It was impossible!

FWAPP! The visser struck, and this time the blow hit home. I saw a line drawn through the skin of my chest. The line opened to become a gash.

FWAPP! He struck! I parried the blow, but barely. <Ah, not so fast after all, are you, Andalite?> the visser crowed.

In seconds the fight would be over. I knew it. I had lost. Loren was probably already done for.

But then, through one twisted stalk eye, I saw Loren. To my astonishment she had her two strong human hands wrapped around the neck of one of the Mortron bird portions.

She was choking it! And the other Mortron was tangled in the wild mess of her hair.

<This fight isn't over yet, Visser!> I said, and I struck!

FWAPP!

He blocked my blow. I struck again!

FWAPP! A hit!

<Aaaahhhh!> the visser moaned in pain.

But my own Mortron hit me without warning. A painful slice of my right rear haunch.

Then I saw a frightening thing. Loren's strong human hands were choking the life from the Mortron bird portion. And her fingernails, growing so fast that I could actually see them grow, were growing into the Mortron.

FWAPP! The visser struck.

I parried and turned my parry into a thrust! <Yes!> I exulted as my tail blade plunged deep into the visser's left arm.

But the remaining Mortron was coming back around, aiming straight for my face this time. With a sneer, the visser struck.

Mortron teeth and the Yeerk's stolen Andalite tail blade flew at me.

I could stop only one.

But whichever strike got through, bird or blade, would finish me.

chapter 44

The Mortron flew at me!

The visser's blade split the air, aiming at my head!

Something moving! To my left, not fast by Andalite standards, but fast enough.

Loren spun the dead Mortron in her hand around and threw it with all her might. The Mortron slipped off the end of Loren's claw fingernails. It flew through the air and hit the other Mortron head on.

"Softball!" Loren yelled.

The Mortron that had been attacking me was knocked down. I swept my tail blade right to left and knocked the visser's blade away. It came within a hair of my face.

Loren calmly picked up her softball bat from the spot where it had fallen. And she annihilated the last Mortron, the one that had been tangled in her hair.

I think it was that very moment when I decided I could definitely get to like humans. At first they

seemed almost ridiculously weak, tottering around on their two legs, having to make sounds to communicate, lacking anything in the way of tail or other defenses.

But humans had some definite possibilities.

<Nice throw,> I said.

"It's called a pitch," Loren said. She smiled. "Thanks."

<Your Mortrons are done for, Visser,> I said to him. <It's just you and me now. Tail-to-tail.>

The Yeerk slug called Visser Thirty-two glared hatred at me through his stolen Andalite eyes. <You think you've won, Andalite? You think you can kill me now? Guess again. You haven't thought it through. But then again, I have the advantage of adding Alloran's Andalite knowledge to my own. What do you think will happen to whoever is left behind in this universe once it is broken apart?>

I had to struggle to think. An artificial universe . . . composed of the thoughts and memories of three different individuals . . .

<What? Over your head, is it? A collapsed time line returns us each to our own proper space-time location.>

<So you go back to the Jahar. Back to being sucked into a black hole. I can live with that, Yeerk. I don't care how you die. Here, from my tail.

Or there, drawn helplessly into a black hole. So long as you die. You are an abomination. The first Andalite-Controller. I just want you to be the last.>

"I told you he was scared to fight you," Loren said.

<I guess you were right.>

The visser hesitated. But I knew he would walk away. I could feel his resolve failing. But his malice, his evil remained as strong as ever.

<The day will come, Elfangor, when I will destroy you. I will make it personal. I will make it very personal.>

Then he turned and plunged back into the vortex wall.

"That's the end of him."

<No. I don't think so,> I said. I won't say I had a vision. I don't believe much in supernatural things. But I felt deep down that the visser and I would find our time lines entwined again someday.

"So now what? We have to get out of here fast. My hair is still growing. My nails are out of control. I feel like I'm getting older. My . . . well, I'm getting older, I'll leave it at that. But I swear I'm suddenly eighteen!"

<Yes. Your face is changing. And I, too, feel myself changing. We must leave. But this time there can only be one person directing the Time Matrix.

We have to go somewhere real. Somewhere that is a part of the true universe.>

"The Andalite world?"

<No,> I said heavily. <What would I do if I went back to my own people? I mutinied against Alloran, my prince. I left Arbron behind to live as a Taxxon. And I know too many secrets. I know that my own people did use a Quantum virus in the Hork-Bajir war. What might they do if they suddenly had the Time Matrix?>

"I guess sometimes even good people do bad things. I mean, that's what war is all about, isn't it?"

<If we use the Time Matrix to win this war we will no longer be Andalites. Not what I think of as Andalites, anyway. We have to win this war by being ourselves. By living up to our own standards, not by becoming as brutal and ruthless as the Yeerks are.>

"You mean what's the point of winning, if by winning you lose what you were fighting for."

<Yes. That's exactly what I mean. I can't give my people the Time Matrix. And I can't let the Yeerks have it, either. And it cannot be destroyed, only hidden.>

Loren looked strangely at me. "You're going to hide it on Earth?"

<Earth. Yes. And this time no nosy, greedy Skrit Na will stumble across it.>

"What do you want me to do?"

<Imagine your Earth, your home, just as it is today. Picture every last detail. Your mother. Your friends. Your hollow human house. Picture the time just after the Skrit Na took you. An hour afterward.>

"That was like, what, a week ago? Did all this happen in just a week?"

<Yes. Just a week. And we need to go back in time. Back before your mother would have noticed you missing. But not before the Skrit Na took you or we would undo this entire time line.>

"Maybe we *should* erase this time line. Save Ar-bron. Save Alloran."

<And the two of us never meet?>

"I wouldn't want that."

<Me neither. But more importantly, we wouldn't know the exact effects of rewriting all that history. It may mean the Skrit Na escaped clean with the Time Matrix and delivered it to the Yeerks. No. We have to keep our time line intact. And as long as the you you've been this last week doesn't encounter some second *you*, we'll be fine.>

"There's one more problem. This *me* has aged. I'm older. I must be almost eighteen now, judging from the way I've grown. People would notice."

<Yes. But imagine that they don't. Imagine that you are eighteen and that everyone who has ever known you expects you to be eighteen.>

"Is this really going to work?"

<I don't know, Loren. Nothing else I've tried has worked so far.>

She smiled with her human mouth. "Then I'll take care of driving the Time Matrix. Let's go."

She placed her hands against the Time Matrix and closed her eyes.

The swirl tightened around us, and I saw images flash by. Images of a planet I had never visited, but already knew and cared for.

And then we were a million light-years, and one week, away.

chapter 45

Three years later . .

I ran away from the great war of Yeerk against Andalite.

I ran away and hid on the planet called Earth. I buried the Time Matrix in a patch of woods. I performed a *Frolis Maneuver*: the mixing of different DNA to form a single morph. I found ways to come in contact with humans and absorb bits of several DNA patterns. And when I had enough, I morphed a human for the first time.

And for the last time. You see, I was done with the fight. I had done all I could, and I had made a mess of things. My people would be better off without me. And there was no way to hide over the long term. I had to become a human. And stay a human.

I attended a human college. I majored in physics. It was hard. Hard to pretend not to know all the answers instantly. I had to pretend to struggle with equations I had known perfectly since childhood.

And it was hard being a human. I missed my stalk eyes. I missed my tail terribly. But I didn't want to fight anymore. I was done with the war. Sick to death of it.

Besides, there were good things about being a human. The human sense of taste is wonderful. Almost overpowering.

And then there was Loren. She had recreated her own life to deal with the fact that she had aged several years. She went back to a mother who never knew she had been gone. Back to friends and family who all expected her to be the age she now was.

The power of the Time Matrix is awesome. I had seen what it could do, and I was more convinced than ever that it could not be given to either side in a terrible, bloody war. Desperate people do desperate, evil things.

I finished college at an accelerated rate. Not surprising, since I was a century or two ahead of all the professors. I began graduate school. But I was bored there, too.

I had a job writing software for primitive human computers. It was the 1980s on Earth and humans were just beginning to understand computers.

I met a lot of humans who were working in the computer field. My human friend Bill used to come over to my room and we would exchange ideas. It was hard for me to simplify my

knowledge enough for him to follow. Everything had to be explained in simple human terms, using words like "window" to explain a childish simple concept.

And my human friend Steve thought it was a huge breakthrough to use symbolic icons and a simple pointer rather than a lot of complex language.

One day I got a terrible shock. I saw Chapman at the college. I was with Loren at the time. Chapman did not recognize her. He did not know her at all.

It made no sense. We had left Chapman back on the *Jahar*, tumbling toward a black hole. He should have been swallowed by the black hole, crushed and annihilated.

Loren tested him. She went up to him and said, "Hello, Chapman. Heard from your old friend Visser Thirty-two lately?"

He'd stared at her like she was confused. This Chapman recalled nothing. His memory had been erased.

I tried to put it out of my mind. I told myself Chapman had a twin, or that it was some unknown physics of black holes. But it nagged at me. From then on I felt a sense of being watched. And I wondered if, or when, the power that had rewritten Chapman's memory would make itself known.

But the most important thing I did as a human was to marry Loren.

We had come to care about each other on our adventure. And when she was ready by human standards, I married her.

And I really thought that I had left everything behind me. I thought that I was a human now. That Earth would be my home. That I would remain far, far away from the terrible space battles that raged across the galaxy, around stars so distant I could not even find them in Earth's night sky.

I left my own people. My own species. And I was human . . . except in the dreams where I would run across the open grass and speak to the trees and whip my tail around for the simple joy of it.

We got a house. What I used to call a hollow house. Now I understood human things.

I drove a car. A yellow Mustang like the one I'd driven on the Taxxon world. And I only thought of my own people, and my own family, and my own world some of the time. Not every minute.

Not *every* minute.

I even took a human name. Alan Fangor. It was Loren's idea. See, humans shorten their names, just as Andalites do. So most people called me Al Fangor.

One day I drove my car home from my job and parked it in the driveway. I could see that Loren was not home. Her own car was not in the driveway. She

had gone to see a doctor. Although human doctors were practically barbarians who could not even eliminate a simple tumor without cutting holes in a person!

I stepped out of the car on my two human legs. It turned out, much to my surprise, that I seldom fell over, even with just two legs.

I walked up the driveway to the door and opened it, as I had done a thousand times before. Only this time someone was standing in my living room.

He was a man. A human. Or so I thought. "What are you doing in here?" I demanded in angry mouth sounds.

The man looked at me with amusement. I was good at reading human expressions now. "What am I doing here? What are you doing here?"

"I live here. This is my home." I was a little fearful. Human arms are strong and can be used for fighting. But whenever I sensed danger, I missed my tail. And I felt vulnerable, being unable to see behind me.

The man shook his head sadly. "Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul, this is *not* your home."

My knees weakened and I almost collapsed. I made it to the couch and sat down heavily. "What are you?" I asked.

He laughed. "You don't ask *who* I am. You ask *what*. You are still wise enough to know I am not human."

"Just tell me what you want," I snapped.

"I don't want anything. *We* don't want anything. We do not interfere in the problems of other species."

"We? Who is we?"

"The 'we' whose machine you have used to alter the direction of time and space."

"Ellimist?" I whispered fearfully.

"Yes. I am one of those creatures you call Ellimists."

chapter 46

I couldn't believe it. I had never been sure I believed in Ellimists. I still wondered if it was some kind of trick. He looked fully human. But of course, for a true Ellimist, such things are easy.

"Am I really an Ellimist?" the man asked, mocking. "Let's see. I know that Arbron still lives in the tunnels of the Living Hive. I know that you made a universe once, you and the human and the Yeerk called Visser Three."

I jerked in surprise. "Visser *Three*?"

"Yes, he's advanced quite far in the Yeerk hierarchy."

"He should be dead!"

"*Should* be dead? Do you really think you can play games with time itself? Do you think you can change things around to suit you and not make a mess of it? Are you so naive, Andalite, that you can't understand that time is a trillion, trillion, trillion strands, all woven and interwoven? That if you twist and break one strand it may have unforeseen effects in a thousand other places and times?"

"He's alive. The visser."

"Yes. He is alive. He still inhabits Alloran's body." The Ellimist focused gray human-seeming eyes on me. "He is a terrible enemy of your people."

I shook my head. "Humans are my people now."

"Like the human named Chapman? Is he one of your people?"

"You. It was you. You brought him back here and erased his memory."

"I undid an error in the time-space continuum. Chapman plays a part in what is still to come."

"I don't care," I said harshly. "I don't care about wars in far-off space."

"Far off? Do you really think you are safe here, Elfangor? Do you assume the Yeerks will never come?"

I felt my throat clutching up. It happens to humans when they are upset or afraid. "Will they come here?"

"Elfangor, the first Yeerk advance scouts are in orbit above Earth right now."

I said nothing for a long time. I looked out of the window, expecting to see Loren's car pull up at any moment. But then I realized what a fool I was being. If the Ellimist didn't want us to be interrupted, we wouldn't be.

"There's nothing I can do," I said at last. "I tried my hand at being a hero. I failed."

"Failed? You kept the Time Matrix from falling into the hands of either side, Yeerk or Andalite. You saved the galaxy."

"I couldn't save Arbron. I helped destroy Moran and deliver him to the Yeerks to create the abomination he became. I wasn't able to destroy that abomination. I was weak. I was foolish."

"You refused to slaughter defenseless prisoners. You refused to destroy yourself in order to win a battle. You are wise, for a primitive creature. But you also altered the course of time by using the Time Matrix. And that has created awful problems. For your people. For *both* your peoples. Your peoples need you."

I laughed. "No one needs me."

"You are not *where* and *when* you should be, Elfangor."

"The galaxy will get along without me."

The Ellimist leaned forward and put his face close to mine. "No. It won't."

"What do you want from me?!" I yelled, suddenly enraged.

"We want nothing."

"Liar! Why are you here if you don't want anything?"

"We do not interfere in the affairs of other species."

"Then go away! Get out! Leave me alone!"

"We do not interfere. But sometimes we repair what has been shattered."

I froze. What stupid game was he playing? He wouldn't interfere, but he would? Which was it? What did he want?

"What do I want? Nothing. But I can tell you that you have twisted and distorted time. Things are not as they should be. Battles are lost that should have been won. What should be safe is now endangered."

"I can't go back," I pleaded. "I'm not an Andalite anymore. I'm human! I have a wife. I have a place here."

"All a product of your meddling," the Ellimist said. "The human girl Loren was meant to marry a human. You were meant to be a warrior. A great hero to your people. A mentor and guide to your brother."

"I have a brother? He was born? I knew my family was preparing —"

"In this broken time line, no. But you *should*. He has a job to do. And so does another person who you do not even know exists. Elfangor, without you, your people, both your peoples, will be slaves of the Yeerks."

I jumped back to my feet. "You're lying. Manipulating me. Using me."

"We don't use anyone. We don't interfere. But if you ask me to fix the mess you have made . . . to repair the time line so that you return to your destiny ... that, and that alone, I can do."

I wanted to hit him. I wanted to throw up. I hated the galaxy and everything in it.

"There is a battle, Elfangor. A turning point. Visser Three is there. You are supposed to be there. Right now."

"I can't leave Loren."

"Listen to me, Elfangor. Visser Three will come to Earth one day. He remembers her. He remembers that she mocked him. Do you know what he will do to her? And will you be able to stop him, when he is surrounded by a thousand of his own troops?"

I felt warm liquid run down my cheeks. Tears. A human thing.

"And if I go back . . . if I ask you to repair the time line . . . will it save Earth? Will it save the Andalites? And my Loren?"

"No. Not by itself. But what is impossible now will become possible again."

I looked at the creature who posed as a human. The creature who had the power to make entire solar systems disappear. "What game are you playing, Ellimist?"

"Will you cross-examine me, Andalite? Or will you ask me to undo the mess you have made?" "Loren . . . ?"

"Will never know you existed. But you will know. You will still have your memories."

I tried to smile, but it twisted cruelly on my lips. "You said something about a battle, Ellimist . . ."

"Come. I will carry you there. I will undo what was done, and repair the fabric of your fate, Elfangor."

chapter 47

Once, a long time before, I had explained to Loren what it must be like to see the universe as the Ellimists saw it. And now, as the Ellimist lifted me up out of the everyday world of three dimensions of space and one of time, I saw what he saw.

When I had used the Time Matrix I glimpsed the lines of time interwoven. But now I saw a thousand times more. It was beyond sight. Beyond sound. It was some new sense, some new awareness.

I could feel the lines of time flowing through me. I could see and taste and hear and touch and smell a billion possibilities, all flowing through me.

I saw the Ellimist himself, as he really was. An indescribable being of light and time and space. Huge, but without a place. Alone, but not the only one of his kind. I saw and understood the vast power that trailed the lines of time through his grasp. And yet, against the enormity of all that had ever been and all that would ever be, I saw his limits, too.

The Ellimist was mighty. But not all-powerful.

I saw a young Andalite who looked like I had once: so serious, so determined to prove himself. I heard his name in my mind: Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill.

Hello, little brother, I said silently.

I saw Arbron, still alive on the Taxxon world. I felt his Taxxon hunger. But I also felt his Andalite pride.

Hello, Arbron. You have become the hero I always wanted to be.

I saw Loren, and wrapped around her time line now was another human who would be her mate. I had been written out of her memory. It tore at my heart to realize that I was now a stranger to her.

And yet, I saw that some part of my own time line still intersected her own. I still touched her future in some way. My line and hers converged, and then from those two lines came a new line, just emerging, just beginning to grow.

<What does it mean?> I asked the Ellimist.

YOU HAVE A SON, ELFANGOR.

In a flash I saw the truth. That's why Loren had gone to see her doctor. She would have come home and told me. We had a child!

<No! You can't take me away! I have a son!> I cried. <That changes everything! Don't take me away!>

YOU ARE AWAY, ELFANGOR-SIRINIAL-SHAMTUL. WHAT WAS BROKEN HAS BEEN REPAIRED. YOU ARE WHERE YOU MUST BE. THE CHILD WILL BE RAISED AS THE SON OF ANOTHER.

<But my son! What will happen to him? Will he still . . . exist?>

I saw the tiny line that was my son flow off through time. I saw pain and hardship and loneliness for him.

But then, like a distant nova, I saw a flash of light, far at the edge of a still-uncertain future. Across the galaxy my brother's line reached to join with my son's. And four other bright, shining time lines formed together with those two.

I knew I was watching something incredible and important. And I knew this union of six time lines, one Andalite and five human, was the entire point of the Ellimist's "noninterference."

<So, you don't interfere with the affairs of other species?> I asked him.

WAS THAT SARCASM, ELFANGOR? the Ellimist asked. And then he laughed a huge laugh that reverberated through all the tendrils of space and time.

<Is it all just a game for you?>

YES, the Ellimist said, all laughter silent now. BUT WE ARE NOT THE ONLY GREAT POWERS OF THE GALAXY. THERE IS ANOTHER. OLDER EVEN THAN WE. AND HE PLAYS A DARK GAME, ANDALITE. IT IS WITH HIM THAT WE PLAY. SO

HOPE THAT WE WIN, ELFANGOR-SIRINIAL-SHAMTUL. HOPE THAT WE WIN.

I saw a battle ahead.

I saw my own body twisting and changing shape.

I opened my stalk eyes. Tested my Andalite tail. And all at once, I was on the bridge of an Andalite fighter.

chapter 48

I heard the chaotic thought-speak voices of crying, dying Andalites in my head.

<Main engines down, we have lost maneuvering power!>

<We're at dead stop!>

<Break off! Break off! He's on me!>

I looked down at my display. The *StarSword* lay helpless, unable to move. Yeerk Bug fighters swarmed around her, firing Dracon beams at maximum power.

The defenses were failing. As I watched, one of the Dome ship's engines was blown completely away from the ship. An explosion without sound in the vacuum of space.

The Yeerk pool ship sat like a fat spider gloating over its kill. The *StarSword* was finished. The Yeerks could finish her off at leisure.

But still the warriors aboard the Dome ship fought on. I heard their thought-speak cries to the few remaining Andalite fighters.

<Seerian, watch out! Bug fighter on your tail!>

<Separate the Dome! Give them two targets to deal with!>

And then, <To all fighters. This is the captain. We are beginning self-destruct sequence. Clear the area. If anyone is still alive out there, get clear of the *StarSword*. We will implode the engines and blow a hole in space. Maybe we can take some of those Bug fighters down with us. Self-destruct in three minutes,> he said heavily, and then added, <We have done our duty.>

Now there was a new ship on my viewscreen. All black. Shaped like some ancient battle-ax.

The Blade ship of a visser.

It swooped in close to the doomed, powerless *StarSword*. And with its Dracon beams it began to slice away the remaining two engines. The *StarSword* would not be allowed to self-destruct.

<Fighters! Any fighters, try to draw that Blade ship off!>

The captain's call went unanswered. There were no fighters left.

So this was the battle the Ellimist wanted me to join. This was where I was supposed to be. I called up ship-to-ship communications. <Hang on, *StarSword*. I'll take care of that Blade ship.>

<Who the . . . who is that?>

<Elfangor. I mean, *Aristh* Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul.>

<What by all the bloody tails of Crangar are you doing here?>

<It's a long story, Captain. I hope I'll have the chance to tell it to you.> I switched channels to broadcast in the open. On a frequency the Yeerks would monitor.

I aimed the fighter straight at the Blade ship. I punched up a nice, medium burn. And then I called up the Blade ship. <Andalite fighter calling the Yeerk visser.>

A Hork-Bajir face appeared on the monitor. "Who are you to call upon the visser? If you are pleading for mercy, I can laugh at you as well as he!"

<Pleading for mercy? Not likely. Tell the visser that an old friend is here to see him. Tell him that Elfangor has come to finish what we began in a vortex, a long time ago.>

In a flash the screen image changed. And there was the Andalite face that had once belonged to War-prince Alloran.

<You!> he cried.

<I have to congratulate you on escaping from that black hole. And I hear you've been promoted, Yeerk. Visser *Three*. Very impressive. But I have to tell you, Yeerk, I am aimed straight for your ship. And in exactly ten seconds I will punch up Maxi-

mum Burn. At this distance it will take me less than two seconds to impact your ship.>

<You're bluffing!>

<Ten . . . Nine . . .>

<You'd be killed as well as me.>

<Yes. I would. Seven . . . Six . . .>

<All Dracon beams on that fighter!> Visser Three shouted to his crew.

The Blade ship turned to bring its Dracon beams forward where they could be aimed at me.

<You don't have enough time, Visser,> I said. <And once I punch a Maximum Burn it'll be too late. Four . . . Three . . .>

His main eyes blazed hatred at me.

<Two . . . One . . .>

<Get us out of here, top speed!> Visser Three screamed at his helmsman.

The Blade ship's engines glowed bright and the ship broke away from the *StarSword*.

<You think you've won, Andalite?> Visser Three sneered. <You're still just one fighter. And your Dome ship is crippled. I'll swing around, move off, and finish you in my own good time.>

<I wouldn't swing around just yet, Visser. See, you've cost me too much. And I am going to put an end to you right now. Computer? *Maximum Burn!*>

FWOOOOOSH!

My engines lit up and I was blown back across the fighter's cramped bridge.

BOOOOOOM!

My fighter hit the neck of the Blade ship, slicing the diamond-shaped bridge away from the rest of the ship.

But I didn't see that. The impact knocked me out and tore both the fighters' engines and its shredder completely off.

I should have died.

But I didn't.

Minutes after I crippled the Blade ship, the Andalite Dome ship *TailStrike* came out of Zero-space less than a light year away. The Yeerks decided it was time to leave. Their Pool ship put a containment field around the parts of the broken Blade ship and made for Zero-space.

When I woke up, back aboard the *StarSword*, I was already a hero. The lost *aristh* who had returned mysteriously, years after disappearing, and had flown his fighter in a bold suicide mission.

I had saved the *StarSword*. I was made a full warrior. The captain himself told me that I would be a prince within a couple of years.

I had plenty of time, while recovering from my injuries, to figure out what to tell the captain. I considered all sorts of lies. But in the end, I told him

everything. I wanted someone to know, now that Loren no longer did.

I told the captain everything ... except for the location of the Time Matrix.

When I was done he looked at me for a long time in silence. At last he said, <You realize, Elfangor, that this story will never become public. You are a great hero, and our people need heroes. The details of your story would just confuse the issue.>

<But, Captain, I committed mutiny against War-prince Alloran. I failed to save Arbron. And . . . and in the end, I ran away.>

He looked at me very seriously. <Young warrior, do you think I don't know what happened to Alloran? Do you think I don't know about the Quantum virus he unleashed in the battle for the Hork-Bajir world? Alloran was my friend. When we were young *arisths* together he was a gentle, decent youngster. And funny! He loved to joke and play tricks.>

<Alloran?> I blurted without thinking.

<Yes. Alloran. But war does terrible things to people. Some it raises to greatness. Others it destroys. You did not mutiny against Alloran. You defended the beliefs he used to hold dear. You stood up for the people.>

It was strange. I felt like crying. But I no longer had human eyes. So I cried the way an Andalite does. Inside. In my hearts.

<As for running away to this Earth place . no one can be brave every minute of every day. No one can be brave all the time. And now you have a second chance. We need warriors like you, Elfangor. Warriors who will not forget why they are fighting. Will you stand by the people in this awful time? Will you fight? Will you be their hero?>

I guess his words should have made me feel good. I had wanted once to be a hero. But now I saw what it meant. I could imagine the price I would have to pay. The things I might have to do. I could feel the weight of it settling down on me like a thousand pound stone.

<Yes, Captain,> I said. <I will fight.>

chapter 49

It was many years before I saw Earth again. I had fought more battles than I could count. I had won, and I had lost.

The war with the Yeerks dragged on and on. Neither side seemed able to destroy the other. I wondered sometimes if that was just the way it had to be, or if the Ellimists and their unnamed opponents were interfering to keep the war going forever.

Who knows?

A Zero-space rift had opened up between planet Earth and the busy centers of the galaxy. That happens sometimes. It meant that Earth, rather than being days away, was now months and months away.

Maybe it was coincidence. Or maybe it was those great powers of the galaxy, playing their games with the threads of space and time.

But finally we did return. We went to Earth because we got evidence of what I already knew: The Yeerks had targeted Earth.

We went in the brilliant, brand-new Dome ship *GalaxyTree*. We came out of Zero-space and found ourselves outnumbered. We fought, but this time there was no last-minute rescue.

The Dome was separated from the ship and plunged into Earth's sea. My brother, Aximili, a young *aristh* as I had been, was aboard.

And I, desperate enough to break my own vow, took my damaged fighter down to the planet, looking for the place where I had long ago hidden the Time Matrix.

By the time I landed I was too weak from my injuries to even think about finding the Time Matrix. It was buried beneath the concrete foundation of a half-finished building. What had once been peaceful forest was now a construction site.

I lay there dying, knowing that Visser Three would pursue me. Knowing that this time, at long last, he would win over me.

And that's when five human children, no older than Loren had been when I first met her, came by. Three boys and two girls. Scared at the sight of me. But not so scared that they ran away.

One of them seemed especially drawn to me. And when I saw his face, I knew why.

He could only be Loren's son. My son.

"Hello," the one called Tobias said to me.

I broke our Andalite law and gave these children the power to morph. See, I knew what human children can do.

The Yeerks came and I told the human children to hide. But Tobias stayed behind with me for just a few moments. Alone.

<Your mother ... tell me about your mother, Tobias. Your family.>

He was surprised. Troubled. "She . . . disappeared. When I was just little. I don't know what happened. I guess she died. People say she just left because she was messed up. They said she never got over my father. I don't know. But I know she has to be dead because she'd never have just left me. No matter what. But maybe that's just what I told myself. I don't exactly have a family."

It was a fresh stab of pain in my hearts. And yet, I knew now that all was not lost.

<Go to your friends, Tobias. They are your family now.>

That's when I knew there was still hope for my adopted people, the humans of Earth. My son had survived. He was strong in ways even he did not suspect. He would change the course of history.

And oh, as I lie here now, seconds from death, clutched in the power of Visser Three's monstrous morph, I can see clearly what I only guessed at before.

I remember seeing the time line that curled away from Loren and me. And I remember the burst of light as it was joined with four other human lines, and the line of my own little brother.

Tobias was that line. And joined with these others, he held powers that would make Visser Three tremble.

I, Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul, having transmitted all my last thoughts and memories to be sent through space to my people, now end my life.

My *hirac delest* is done. I go in peace to my death. And I leave as my last legacy a single word for all the free peoples of the galaxy.

<Hope . . .>