

ANIMORPHS™

THE
ALIEN

K. A. APPLGATE

SCHOLASTIC INC.

For Michael

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PROLOGUE

B*efore Earth . . .*

<Prepare for return to normal space,> Captain Nerefir said in thought-speak.

I was on the bridge of our Dome ship. It was an amazing moment. I had never been on the bridge before. I'd always been stuck in my quarters, or up in the dome. It was an honor to be on the battle bridge with the full warriors, the princes, and the captain himself.

It was because I was Elfangor's little brother. An *aristh* like me, a warrior-cadet, wouldn't have been on the bridge otherwise.

Especially not an *aristh* who had once run into

Captain Nerefir so hard he'd fallen over and ended up bruising one of his stalk eyes. It was an accident, but still, it's just not a good idea for lowly cadets to go plowing into great heroes.

But everyone loved Elfangor, so they had to tolerate me. That's the story of my life. If I live two hundred years, I'll probably still be known as Elfangor's little brother.

We came out of Z-Space, or zero space, a realm of white emptiness, back into normal space. Through the monitors I saw nothing but blackness dotted with stars. And there, just ahead of us, no more than a half million miles away, was a small, mostly blue planet.

<Is that Earth?> I asked Elfangor. <I didn't realize there was so much water. Can you get Old Hoof and Tail to let me go down to the planet with you?>

<Aximili, shut up!> Elfangor said quickly. He looked slightly sick and cast a dubious glance at Captain Nerefir.

I guess I had been thought-speaking a little loudly. Elfangor was worried that War-Prince Nerefir might have overheard. But I was sure I hadn't been that loud. I mean, I really didn't think that —

<Old Hoof and Tail, eh?> Captain Nerefir said. <Is that what they call me?>

Elfangor shot me a poisonous look. <I'm sure this *aristh* didn't mean any disrespect.>

I think my brother would have liked to throw me out of the nearest airlock right at that moment.

Slowly Nerefir turned his two main eyes toward me. He was a frightening old Andalite. A great warrior. A great hero. Elfangor's idol. <Ah, it's the ruffian. The wild brat who knocked me over.> He nodded. <Old Hoof and Tail, is it? Well. I kind of like the name.> He slowly winked one eye at Elfangor. <I suppose we'll have to let the ruffian live.>

Suddenly . . .

<Yeerks! We have a Yeerk mother ship in orbit over the planet!> the warrior at the sensor station cried.

<They're launching fighters! I count twelve Yeerk Bug fighters,> another warrior cried. <They're on an intercept course. They'll be in firing range in twelve Earth minutes.>

Captain Nerefir turned his face and his main eyes toward my brother, while his stalk eyes kept watch on the monitors. The humor was gone from his face. <Prince Elfangor? It is time. Launch all fighters.>

But Elfangor hadn't waited for orders. He was already halfway out the door. My tail banged into the doorway as I plowed after him.

<Get to the dome, Aximili,> Elfangor said.

<But I want to fight!> I said. <I can fly a fighter as well as —>

<Do not argue with me, Aximili. *Arisths* do not go into battle. You are not a full warrior yet. Go to the dome. You will be safer there.>

<I don't want to be *safe*,> I said. But a warrior, even a warrior-cadet, has to obey orders. Elfangor was my brother. He was also my prince.

I could hear the thought-speak announcements coming from the bridge:

<Yeerk Bug fighters closing fast.>

<We are entering the outer gravitational field of the planet.>

Elfangor and I came to a pair of dropshafts. Warriors were zooming down, heading for the fighter bays. I would have to go up to reach the dome. The upward dropshaft was empty.

It made me angry. Everyone was fighting but me. When it was all over, Elfangor would be an even bigger hero, and I would still be the little brother. The child.

Elfangor hesitated for just a moment before rushing on. He arched his tail forward. I reached forward with my own tail, arching it up over my back. We touched tail blades.

<You'll have your chance to fight, Aximili,> my brother said. <Very soon your fighter will fly side by side with mine. But not in *this* battle.>

<Yes, my prince,> I said, sounding very stiff and

formal. But as he turned to enter the dropshaft, I couldn't let him go thinking I was mad at him. I said, <Hey, Elfangor? Go burn some slugs.>

<That's the plan, little brother,> he said with a laugh. <That is the plan.>

It was the last I saw of him.

He disappeared down the dropshaft. I went upward to the great dome. The dome was the heart of our ship. It was a vast, round, open plain of grass and trees and running water from our home planet, all covered by a transparent dome.

I was alone there. The only nonwarrior on the great ship. The only one without a battle to fight.

I could see the blue planet above me, hanging in a black sky. It had a moon, just a dead ball of dust. But the planet looked alive. I could see white clouds swirling. Its yellow sun's light sparkled off the vast oceans.

This planet was known to be inhabited by a reasonably intelligent species. We had learned a little about them in school.

My main eyes were drawn to the brilliant flares of engine exhaust as our fighters lanced toward the onrushing Yeerks.

I was far from the battle bridge now, beyond the range of their thought-speak. I heard nothing in my head. And my ears heard only the sound of a gentle, artificial breeze ruffling the leaves of the trees. I stood

on blue-green grass and watched tiny pinpoints of light as the battle was joined in orbit above the blue planet.

And then . . . I felt it. A tremor that rolled through my mind. A wave of coldness . . . a premonition. Like a waking nightmare.

I turned my stalk eyes away from battle, toward the dead moon of the blue planet. And there I saw it. A black shape against the gray-white light of the moon. A shape like some twisted battle-ax.

<Blade ship . . .> I whispered. <A visser's Blade ship!>

Our fighters were all away. Our Dome ship had massive weapons, but the Blade ship was fast and maneuverable. Too fast!

The warriors on the battle bridge had no choice. They had to separate the dome in order to be able to fight. I felt a grinding, crunching sensation as the dome was released to drift free of the main line of the ship.

Then . . . silence as the dome floated free.

Slowly, the rest of my ship rotated into sight. Without the dome it looked like a long stick, with the huge bulge of engines on the far end, and the smaller bulge of the battle bridge in the middle. They were trying to turn to meet the Blade ship.

Too slow.

The Blade ship fired!

<NO!>

Dracon beams, bright as a sun, lanced through space.

The ship fired again. Again. Again.

An explosion of light! A silent explosion like a small sun going nova.

The ship . . . my ship . . . blew up into its separate atoms. One huge flash of light, and a hundred Andalite warriors died.

WHUMMPPPFF!

The shock wave hit the dome. It was translated into sound. The grass beneath my hooves slammed up at me. A terrible rattling, shaking, heaving.

<Ahhhh!>

My knees buckled and I fell to the grass. Everything was spinning! Wildly, out of control! I could feel the artificial gravity weaken. The stabilizers had failed.

The dome was falling. Falling out of orbit.

The dome slid down the gravity well. Down toward the blue planet. Red-hot glowing atmosphere turned the sky above me to fire. Emergency engines kicked in with a loud WHOOSH!, but they could only slow the descent, not stop it.

The dome hurtled at shocking speed down and down and down through the atmosphere. Down toward the sparkling sea.

Crrr-UUUUUSSSSHHH!

The dome hit water! Boiling, steaming water rushed over the dome. I was sinking! Sinking beneath the ocean of the blue planet. I was powerless. Terrified.

Alone.

After an eternity, the dome crunched heavily onto the ocean floor. Looking up, I could barely see the surface of the water a hundred feet or more over the top of the dome.

I climbed shakily to my four hooves. I was standing on a vast, open plain that was a piece of my own planet. A blue-green park, hidden deep beneath an alien sea.

And there I waited for weeks. I sent out thought-speak cries to my brother. I knew he would save me . . . if he still lived.

But in the end, it was not Elfangor who found me. It was five creatures from the planet. Five "humans," as they call themselves.

They were the ones who told me of Elfangor's last minutes of life. He had broken Andalite law and custom by giving these humans the power to morph. I was shocked, but tried to hide it.

And they had witnessed Elfangor's death. His cold-blooded murder, by the Yeerk overlord: Visser Three.

Visser Three, who slaughtered my helpless, wounded brother.

Visser Three, the only Yeerk ever to infest and control an Andalite body.

Visser Three, known to all Andalites as the Abomination. The only Andalite-Controller.

He had killed Elfangor, and I had inherited a terrible burden. By Andalite custom, I would be required to avenge my brother's death.

Someday I would have to kill Visser Three.

CHAPTER 1

Earth . . .

The first thing an Andalite may notice about humans is that they walk around on only two legs. It is very strange to see so many creatures balancing that way. But, despite this, they seldom fall over.

— From the Earth Diary of Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill

My full name is Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill.

My human friends call me Ax. I am a young Andalite. I have four legs. I also have two arms. And I have a tail.

I am told that I look like a cross between a deer, a scorpion, and a human. I've seen deer in the woods,

and I don't agree. For one thing, they have mouths and I don't. And they have only two eyes, while I have four.

As for scorpions, I've only seen pictures. There is some resemblance, when it comes to the tail. An Andalite tail is also curved upward and tipped by a very sharp blade.

As an Andalite, I have the power to morph. It's not something we're born with—it's a technology. But we invented it, and we are the only race in the galaxy that has it.

Except for my human friends, that is.

They can morph, too. But it's thanks to Andalite science. And thanks to the fact that my brother broke our own laws to give them this power.

The one great problem with morphing is the time limit: two Earth hours.

That time limit was the problem as my human friends and I set about on a particular mission. It was a mission that required careful planning and careful timing. It was a mission full of risks.

We were going to a movie.

"So, here's the deal, Ax," Marco explained. "You can watch the first hour of the movie. But that's it. We can get you to the mall theater, and you watch for an hour. Then we have to get you back to the woods to demorph."

A *movie*. Movies are an important part of human culture. I had decided, if I was stuck on Earth among these aliens, that I should at least learn about them. Maybe I would never be the big hero Elfangor was, but I could surely become the biggest expert on humans.

Of course, I would have to attend the movie in a morph. I couldn't go around in public in my own Andalite form. Humans would have been terrified. And the Controllers—those humans who are infested by the Yeerk parasites—would have tried to kill me.

Which would have ruined the entire movie experience.

I would have to morph. To take on a different body. But this particular morph was one I had done several times before. I didn't expect there to be any problems.

We were standing together under the camouflage of the forest where I now live. Prince Jake, Marco, Cassie, Rachel, and Tobias were all there. Although Tobias was some distance away.

"Okay, let's do this," Jake said, making sounds with his mouth to form words. He glanced at his watch. "Rachel? You have the backup plan ready? Where does Ax go if he needs an emergency demorph?"

"The dressing rooms at Nordstrom. They're big and private. Best dressing rooms in the mall. Cassie and I will be posted outside the theater, ready to rush him there if an emergency situation develops."

"And Rachel promises not to stop and shop in the junior's department on the way," Cassie said, grinning.

Jake glanced up to the sky. Up above the tree-tops, a red-tailed hawk floated on a warm breeze. "Tobias!" Jake yelled.

<All clear,> Tobias called down in thought-speak. <I don't see anyone.>

Tobias is a *nothlit*, a person trapped in a morph. It is what happens if you stay beyond the two-hour limit. Tobias is a human, but his body is that of a hawk. He has adjusted well to this bizarre new life. He lives in the forest with me.

For a long time I expected Tobias to ask me the question that must have haunted him day and night: whether it would ever be possible for him to escape his hawk body. But he never did. I guess he was afraid of the answer. So, I didn't volunteer one.

"Okay," Jake said. "Let's do it."

I began to morph. The first thing I felt was a slipping, melting, almost sickening feeling as my internal organs began to shift around. There was a scary little

jolt as my second and third hearts stopped beating. I heard a grinding sound from inside my body as my spine began to shorten.

Soon I was in danger of falling on my face as my front legs shriveled. My arms grew thicker and stronger, but two fingers on each hand melted away to leave me with five-fingered hands.

My shoulders grew wider to support my large arms. And my hind legs grew sturdier as more of my weight was shifted onto them.

The stalks on my head began to retract, and as they did, my stalk eyes grew dimmer and dimmer, like someone turning off the light. Suddenly they were gone and I only had two eyes.

I dislike that. Having just two eyes is so limiting. You can only look in one direction at a time. You can't even look behind you.

My spine continued to shorten. In fact, it sucked completely out of my tail, which left my tail as limp as a rope. Then the weak remnants of my tail simply withered away.

"Grab him, he's going to fall over," Prince Jake said.

He and Marco each took hold of me to keep me upright, as my front legs disappeared altogether.

"Hey, hey, clothing!" Rachel said, making a face. "Clothing. Don't forget the morphing suit, Ax."

As my body continued to change, my skintight

morphing suit also appeared. It is a very difficult trick to be able to morph clothing. And all you can manage is something extremely tight.

“Are you done?” Prince Jake asked me.

I considered. I was standing precariously on two legs. I possessed two strong arms and ten strong fingers. I was mostly without fur. My eyes were weak and totally unable to see anything except what was in front of me. My hearing was good. My mind was functioning normally.

And I had a mouth.

“Yes,” I said, using my mouth. “Yessss. Ssssss. Yes-suh. I am in human morph.”

I had morphed into a human. The DNA came from samples I had long since acquired from Jake, Cassie, Rachel, and Marco. I would have liked to have Tobias’s DNA, but that was not possible since he is a *nothlit*.

My human friends have some differences, but each has only two legs, two arms, and two eyes. They each have one mouth.

Prince Jake is large and pale in color, with brown hair. Cassie is shorter and darker in color, with darker brown hair. Marco is also shorter and medium color, with brown hair. Rachel is taller and pale, and has yellow hair.

None of them has any sort of tail.

“This always makes my skin crawl,” Marco said,

staring at me in a sideways fashion. "It's like the four of us were run through a blender. I swear he has my eyes."

"What's gross is I'll look at him and think, 'Wow, is that guy cute,'" Rachel said. "Then I'll see something that looks like Cassie. Or worse, like me!"

"What? Rachel in love with her own looks?" Marco said, using an inflection of his mouth-sounds that humans call "sarcasm." Then he looked troubled. "I'm still not sure this is a good idea. The Controllers could—"

"Uh-uh," Prince Jake interrupted. "We're not talking about Controllers, Yeerks, or Visser Three. We are taking a break. We've fought one battle after another. We destroyed the Kandrona. We beat that *Ve/leek* monster of theirs. And now we are taking some well-deserved vacation time. Ax wants to learn more about humans, so that's what we're doing."

I was never exactly a great student, but I could just imagine how my fellow Andalites would act when they finally rescued me. They'd ask, <So, Aximili, what did you learn about Earth?> And I'd have to say, <Um, well, not much.>

The trick would be to learn about the humans without letting them learn too much about Andalites. There were things I could never tell the humans. Things that might make them turn against me.

"We should hit the Yeerks again while they're weak," Rachel growled. "We know the Yeerks won't get a new ground-based Kandrona for another week. They must still be starving for lack of Kandrona rays. We should hit them!"

Yeerks are a race of parasitic slugs. They live inside the brains of other species. They completely dominate the host body, making it a "Controller." There are Hork-Bajir-Controllers, Taxxon-Controllers, and more and more Human-Controllers. Any human you know might be a Controller. There is no way to tell—unless you are an Andalite.

I sympathized with Rachel. But I also understood Prince Jake's caution. No warrior can fight all the time.

"Look, you guys," Prince Jake said. "We hurt the Yeerks. It was a good job. But we also know that they have a replacement Kandrona being set up, so don't assume they're weak. Besides, if they are weak, they sure haven't shown it. I expected to see Yeerks dying left and right, and former Controllers walking free again. Hasn't happened. Somehow they've maintained."

"We can't know what is going on with the Yeerks," Cassie pointed out. "Just because we haven't seen them suffer doesn't mean they haven't."

"Okay, look, here we are again, talking about Yeerks," Jake said impatiently. "We have just come

from a very, very unpleasant battle. And we came very close to ending up dead. And it's not the first time. So we are *going* to relax and be normal. We are *going* to the movie. And we are *going* to have fun. And no one . . . *Rachel* . . . is going to look for a fight."

"Don't you love it when he gets all forceful like that?" Marco said to Cassie. "He's just so macho sometimes."

"Okay, Ax," Jake said. "Time to get dressed."

"Prince Jake, I am already wearing this garment," I said, pointing to the thing that covered my body. "Wearing. Ing. Ing-uh."

It is an amazing sensation, making sounds with your mouth. Actual words are formed by vibrating your throat and positioning your tongue. But some sounds are better than others. "Ing" is a wonderful sound to make.

"Don't call me 'Prince,'" Prince Jake said.

"Ax, you're dressed like an escapee from the Winter Olympics," Marco said.

"You can't go out in public wearing tights and a spandex top," Rachel said. "It's a major fashion 'don't.' Here."

She handed me a bag. In the bag were items of clothing. It took several minutes for me to dress successfully. There is a lot to remember, and every bit of

clothing can only go on one way. Socks go on the feet and not on the hands, for example.

When I was done, they all stared at me. Even Tobias flew down to stare.

"Rachel, he looks like he's going to the country club to play polo," Marco said. "I knew we shouldn't let you pick the clothes. He's like a bully magnet. Even I want to beat him up."

"It's a classic look," Rachel said angrily. "Like *you're* Mister Fashion? A person who dresses like Shaggy from Scooby-Doo?"

"I think he looks cute," Cassie said.

<Well, that's the kiss of death,> Tobias remarked from his perch in the tree above.

"It is?" I asked.

<Just an expression, Ax-man,> Tobias said. <You'll have fun.>

Ax-man. That's what Tobias calls me sometimes.

"Come on, Ax," Prince Jake said, smiling. "Let's do this. If anyone tries to beat you up, we'll protect you."