Animorphs Reboot - #01: The Fallen
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Summary

This is a present-day reboot of Katherine Alice Applegate's "Animorphs" series. The series retains the original characters, premise, and many key events of the original series will be adapted in some capacity. However, this series is geared toward a different ending and has its own continuity. The Animorphs themselves are slightly older at 16, and this follows a more mature narrative.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
While I know AO3 offers an EPUB conversion button, I am not a fan of the automatic formatting.

So I took the liberty of creating and hosting my own EPUB file, which can be downloaded here.
I personally use the Lithium EPUB Reader app on my phone and tablet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

My name is Jake. I'm just your average teenager. I have a part-time job, I procrastinate on my math homework, I like to play basketball in the driveway with my friends, or video games in my room. I used to be no one special.
I miss being ordinary.

I could tell you it's too dangerous to tell you who I am, or where I live, and I wouldn't be lying. It would be dangerous. We have enemies looking for us, powerful enemies. And trust me when I tell you that they're everywhere.

But there are things I'm going to tell you that are far worse than who I am. If I write down where I've been, what I've seen, the things we've done, then figuring out who I am wouldn't be much of a challenge, regardless of whether or not I come out and say it.

So the logical question you might be asking is probably something like this: if it's so dangerous, why am I writing this down?

That's a valid question.

It was Cassie's idea. She thought it would help us cope if we kept journals. I'm honestly not so sure, but Cassie tends to be right about stuff like that. Besides, it's not like we can really talk about stuff like this to anybody. Marco said it was stupid, but then again he said the journals would make the New York Times Best Sellers List in a heartbeat, assuming we live that long.

But I'm not writing this because Cassie told me I should, or because Marco thinks they'll make us rich and famous. I'm not even writing it for me.

I'm writing it for you.

If anyone else ever does read this, it either means we won, or we lost. If we lost, well... if we're captured, I guess it doesn't matter, but I'd rather be dead than captured.

And whether or not I'm alive when you read this, I want someone to know who we were, what we did. I want you to know that we screwed up, that we cried, that we weren't ready for this. That I definitely wasn't ready. But that hasn't stopped us from trying, from bleeding. We're going to fight, and we might not come out of this alive, any of us.

It's too late for any of us to be unscathed.

And also because I'm not the only one in danger. The ones after us, they're after you too. And if we ever go down, well, I guess it's better people know, even if that might make things worse.

You might not believe my story, and that's okay if you don't. I can't believe everything that's happened to me the last few days. I'd like to say that part of me still thinks it's a bad dream, but I don't. I don't want to delude myself about anything like that. I know it's real, and there have already been consequences. I can still hear the screams in my head. It's all true, all of it, whether you believe it or not.

And if this is just the beginning, if it's going to be a whole year or two before we get help, I know I'm not going to be the same person in a year.

Maybe I am writing this for me. Maybe I just want to be able, some day, to look back to when we were just five kids.

When I was still just a kid.

My name is Jacob Berenson, I live in Santa Cruz, California, and I was only sixteen when this started.
It was Friday night and Marco and I were working a shift. We work at the multiplex by Urban Outfitters. It’s a nine-screen chain theater. All in all, it’s not a bad job. Granted, I do come home every night smelling like buttered popcorn, but it was either this or fast food, and I’d much rather get free movies than flip burgers. Plus, I was working with Marco, which made it a little easier.

Marco and I have been friends forever. He's very visibly Hispanic, though I think he mentioned he has Native American ancestry somewhere. He's kind of a sarcastic goofball, but Marco is one of the smartest kids in our school. He doesn't really advertise that much - I guess he doesn't want to be labeled a nerd or something - but he's in all the advanced placement courses. I'm barely getting by in trig, and Marco is acing calculus.

Anyway, Friday nights are busy, as you’d probably guess. I think Saturdays are worse, but that night we had a pretty decent crowd. It was opening weekend for the new *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie and we had a larger-than-anticipated showing. But the crowd wasn't nearly as bad as *Guardians of the Galaxy, Volume 2* had been. I mean, I like Marvel movies as much as the next guy - Marco and I both love comics - but when you work there during the fanboy rush, they get a little less fun. By eleven, though, it wasn't so bad. Our last showing most nights is around ten, sometimes ten-thirty, so the snack rush was over.

Marco was flirting with the girl that had been working the ticket booth. He had better luck with girls than I did. I was wiping the glass counters of the concession stand. We had to keep it open till eleven-thirty for some reason, but other than the occasional refill on popcorn and sodas, no one really came out of the movie for snacks. Maybe candy or something, but the hot food - the hot dogs, pretzels, and chicken tenders - that stuff never sells after the movie starts. I’d already turned off the deep fryer.

I was getting ready to refill the Diet Coke syrup when Marco came back to the snack counter.

“So, got a date?”

“Nah, Jenny has a boyfriend.”

“Too bad.”

We’d been talking about girls all night. Well, Marco had been talking about girls. Plural. I’d only been talking about one girl.

Cassie.

“But see, that’s how it’s done. You just go up and ask.”
“God, you make it sound so easy.”

“Jake, it’s Cassie. I mean, what the hell, do you think she's going to say no?

That wasn't the problem at all. I sighed. “No, the problem is that you and I both know she'll say yes. I guess what's making me nervous is that I've known her forever. You've known her forever. How do you go up to a girl like that and tell her you wanna be more than just friends?”

Marco shook his head. “Yeah, okay, I can see how that’d get your panties in a wad. But if you don’t ask, someone’s going to.”

I gave him a hard look.

“Hey, dude, Cassie’s cute but she's not really my type. I’m just saying she’s probably someone’s type. Maybe ask her out before you get the same answer I just got from Jenny.”

“Yeah, you’re not wrong…”

Marco had a smug look on his face. God, he can be insufferable when he knows he’s right. And like I said, he’s smart as hell, so he actually makes that face a lot. Some days I just want to hit him, but there are more productive ways of spending that kind of energy.

“I'm going to go clean the bathrooms. Think you can refill the Diet Coke while I’m out?”

“Aye, cap’n,” he said in an exaggerated random pirate voice. I rolled my eyes and smiled. That was Marco.

I really didn't mind cleaning the bathrooms that much. I mean yes, the men's room can be gross and I have yet to have a shift where I hadn't found popcorn in the urinals or a hot dog in the toilet, but whatever. Mostly it was just mopping tile floors and how hard is that?

It took me less than half an hour to do both of the lobby bathrooms and when I got back to the concessions, Tobias and Marco were talking.

Tobias is a friend of ours that hangs out at the theater a lot. He never has money for movies. Mostly he just hangs out in the art supply store next door, and then loiters in the theater lobby playing the crane game. Sometimes I let him use my employee tickets. Tobias was always a bit distant, but I didn't mind hanging out with him and Marco and I definitely didn't mind that he was always willing to help us clean up.

I kept telling him to just put in an application, but for some reason he just never did.

“Hey, Tobias? Bad night?”

Tobias didn't talk about his homelife to anyone but me and Marco.

Years ago, we had all gone to school together, but when we were in third grade, Tobias’s mom vanished. I don't mean she ran out on him, though that theory has been put out there. I mean she just disappeared. It was a big local scandal at the time, police investigation and news crews, that whole mess. But eventually the case went cold. Tobias had never known anything about his biological father, and his mother's half-siblings were his closest living relatives. He ended up living with his aunt in Pittsburgh for a few years. But she apparently ran off to get married a few years ago and Tobias moved back to California.

It wasn't really much of a secret that his aunt never cared much for him, and he lives with his uncle
now, who has a drinking problem, so Tobias hung out at the theater anytime he wanted to not be home.

And he was there pretty often.

I think the only reason he didn’t talk to anyone about his homelife was simply that he didn't want to get bumped to foster care and if things with his uncle fell apart, that was his only other option.

So any time I asked if he was having a bad night, he knew that was my way of asking if he wanted to crash at my place.

“Yeah, bad night…” he said, running a hand through his shaggy dark blond hair. He always seemed so embarrassed about coming over. I tried not to make a thing out of it.

Marco handed him a Coke from the fountain machine and a plate of nachos. The cheese was still warm. “On the house, kid.”

“Thanks, man. So what's going on?”

“I'm trying to get Jake to put on his big boy pants and finally ask Cassie out.”

“Marco…” I really did not want to lose my job because I’d punched out a coworker.

Tobias smiled. He had kind of a sad smile, the kind that just never quite reached his eyes. “Bring her here. She likes movies, right? Didn't I see her going in with Rachel?”

Rachel was Cassie's best friend and also my cousin.

“Yeah…” I said, sheepishly.

“Casanova here bombed his first attempt.”

It was true. “I was going to ask her out then panicked and asked if she wanted my employee tickets. She immediately asked Rachel.”

“Well, at least she doesn't have a boyfriend,” Tobias said.

I put my head in my hand. “Jesus, did you two coordinate on this?”

Tobias laughed. “Jake, she’s waiting for you to ask her to the dance.”

“Oh, come on. I don't want to go to that lame-ass dance.”

“Yeah, you're way too white for that,” Marco said.

“You're going?”

“Hell, no, ese. I'm not white enough for school dances.”

“Dude, did you forget Cassie's black?”

We laughed at that.

“Jake, just tell her you have to work the night of the dance and ask her somewhere else.”

I looked at my phone. I just wanted to see how much time was left in our shift, but I saw there was a text from Tom, my older brother saying he was going to be out late and to cover with mom. Man,
that was getting to be a habit. Ever since he'd started dating Zoe...

“Oh, in case I didn't mention it earlier, I'm giving the girls a ride home.”

“Ugh, great.” We were all friends, but Rachel and Marco tended to… I don't know how to put it. They almost had like a sibling rivalry and it sometimes caused waves. Usually Cassie helped keep the peace.

We chatted for the rest of the movie. Once people started coming out of screen six we’d have work to do, but we still had time to kill till then. We talked about school, video games. Normal kid stuff. Looking back, it feels weird thinking about it. I was just your ordinary high school sophomore, trying to get through school and a part-time job, and maybe get a date. The weird part is, none of that really went away either. It's just different now. Like when you see yourself in an old photo or something I guess.

But eventually the movie ended and Marco and I had work to do.

I caught Rachel and Cassie in the hallway by the ladies’ room. Rachel and Cassie really do seem like a study in contrasts. Rachel is pale and blonde, with blue eyes, and always looks like she stepped out of a fashion magazine. She was wearing a blue floral dress and an off-white little jacket - bolero, I think they're called - and had her hair styled. Cassie is dark-skinned with shorter black hair. She is almost always wearing jeans. Tonight she was wearing cut-off denim shorts, a form-fitting white tee, and a flannel shirt tied around her waist. I felt my throat go dry.

“Hey, Jake.”

“Hey, Rache. Hey, Cassie. You enjoy the movie?”

I thought I saw Cassie blush, but with her darker complexion, it was hard to tell. “Yeah, thanks for letting us use your tickets.”

Rachel shot me a knowing glance. Dammit. Did everyone know? “Aww, Jake, I didn't know you gave Cassie your tickets. That's so sweet of you.”

I couldn't tell if she was making fun of me or trying to make me look thoughtful, but I felt red-faced.

“Oh, that was no trouble. Marco and I have to go help clean up number six and we’ll be ready to take you home.”

“Yeah, no problem. We'll just sit in the lobby.”

“Oh, that reminds me. Tobias is crashing at my place. He's probably out there waiting, too.”

I thought I saw an odd expression on Rachel’s face, but she just said, “Yeah, that’s cool,” and both girls headed out to the lobby.

Marco and I weren't the only employees working to closing that night - only the manager could lock up, for one thing - so it didn't take long to sweep up all the dropped popcorn or mop up all the spilled soda. There were a few misplaced items to take to lost and found and the normal miscellaneous trash. It was about a quarter till one before we had taken out all the trash and finally punched out. Marco and I waved to our coworkers as we headed out and the manager locked up behind us. I had parked in the garage across from the Mediterranean restaurant about two blocks down and it didn’t take us long to get there.
I hit the button on my key fob and the lights on my hand-me-down, grey 2007 Ford Expedition flashed on as the doors unlocked. It used to be my mom’s but she had just gotten a newer, more eco-friendly model. Tom, being the oldest, had gotten first crack at it, but he said he was saving for college and didn’t want to pay the insurance, so I was one of the only sophomores at our school with his own vehicle, which was cool.

Marco said we should take it out camping sometime and I was thinking about it.

We all shuffled in. Marco called shotgun and Tobias crawled into the back so the girls could have the center row. I turned the ignition and the engine roared to life. I plugged my phone into the cigarette adapter. The model year predated USB ports, auxiliary input, or Bluetooth, so I’d bought a cigarette lighter adapter for it. For being ten years old, it wasn’t a bad vehicle. The SUV did have GPS, though I was really tempted to install a new one, and it did have a DVD player, though I never used it unless my other cousins, Rachel’s younger sisters, were in the back. I think the only DVDs I had in the car were Disney movies.

“Cassie, you’re the furthest out, so I’m going to take you home first.”

I saw her nod in the rearview.

“How much sleep are you going to get tonight?”

“Mom’s off tomorrow, so she’s doing the morning rounds for me. I actually don't have to be up till eleven if you can believe that.”

Cassie lives on what used to be a dairy farm on the outskirts of town, right at the edge of the Moore Creek Preserve. Both her parents are vets, and her dad runs an animal hospital, the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, out of the old barn. They still have horses and one cow, but there’s always a menagerie of sick or wounded animals at her place. It’s like a petting zoo, if petting zoos had foxes and bobcats.

“That’s cool. Would you like a hand tomorrow?”

Cassie has the most chores of any girl I know. Her place is cool, but it is a ton of work.

“Yeah, that'd be cool.”

I saw her smile and it made my night.

It usually only takes about fifteen minutes to get to Cassie's place from the cinema. It was a quiet night. Marco leaned against the window. He knew it would be about half an hour before I dropped off Cassie and looped back around, so he just wanted to nap for a bit, and I couldn’t blame him. After a long day at school and work, I was beat, too. I think he was asleep before we were out of the parking lot. Rachel and Cassie spent the short drive talking about the movie, making plans for a shopping trip. Tobias was quiet, but I saw him staring at the window, just taking in the night.

I think back to that night and think of all the ways that things could’ve gone differently. There were any number of reasons why we shouldn’t have been there. If Marco and I hadn't been working, I wouldn't have been out at one in the morning. If I hadn’t given my tickets to Cassie, she and Rachel would have been home already.

And, perhaps most importantly, Tobias wouldn't have been riding in the back of my SUV, looking at the night sky.

“Hey, cool. A meteor shower.”
If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool *Megamorphs* adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
The way Cassie’s property is set up, you can only take a vehicle so far up. There’s a gate that blocks the rest of the road, and you have to walk a few hundred yards to get up to her house or the barn. Her dad had said that was so road noises didn’t scare the animals, but it also meant that when I stopped at the gate, Cassie’s parents had no idea she was home till she physically walked in the door. I shifted into park and shook Marco awake.

He cursed me out a bit as he snapped awake, but I ignored him and just got out of the SUV and looked up at the sky. He turned to look out the passenger window and his mouth dropped.

For several minutes, we watched the falling stars. They rained down like embers cascading off a sparkler, more or less the same color. Predominantly white-yellow, here and there, there were sparks of red. I had never seen a meteor shower in person before, and the intensity of it dwarfed anything I had seen online.

I was vaguely aware that my friends had gotten out of the SUV. Marco was next to me, Tobias and the girls behind me. I felt Cassie's fingers on mine, and I reflexively opened my hand so I could hold hers. Rachel was recording it on her phone, but I'd left mine in the center console. Marco had forgotten his at home.

“Whoa…” Tobias said in a hushed tone.

The meteor shower faded as abruptly as it had started, save for one last glowing spark.

The last meteor was far off, but not like any other shooting star I had ever seen. It was different than every other streak that night, and it looked different than anything I'd ever seen online. All the others had just zipped by in rapid, blink-and-you’ll-miss-it streaks, but this one wasn't fleeting. It was a brilliant blue spark, carving a luminescent line down, almost perpendicular to the horizon.

Putting it like that, it doesn't really have any magnitude. I know it sounds like I was just standing in the street, watching a light in the sky. But there's something intangible about that moment I just can't put into words. I know that's kind of a cop out, but the only thing I can say is that it was like watching a miracle in slow motion. I mean, people see shooting stars all the time, but when do they ever just zoom over your town? It was one of those moments where time seems to slow down. I know we were only standing there for a few minutes, probably less than five, even. It felt like we'd been watching that one falling star all night.

It was Marco who broke the reverie.
“Um, guys…? You realize that's not a meteor, right?”

“Ha ha, nice pun,” Rachel said with a touch of acid. “Seriously, can you not just enjoy the moment?”

But I was looking at his face now, and I knew when he was being serious. I think Rachel did too because she pressed him. “Okay, what do you mean, it isn't a meteor?”

He hesitated, like if he just came out and said it that he knew we wouldn't listen. He had put two and two together already. That was what Marco did. And he was trying to find a way to tell us that we had all gotten six instead of four.

“Whatever that is, it isn't moving fast enough to be a meteor.”

“Looks pretty fast to me.”

“Rachel, meteorites hit at thousands of miles an hour. More than fifty times the speed of sound. Sometimes closer to eighty or more. If that was a meteor, we'd have all heard the loudest sound in the history of California before Tobias even told us to look up.”

Tobias got it before I did. “Are you saying that's an aircraft?”

Marco shook his head again.

“No. When Jake stopped the car, it was definitely too high to be anything else. But it hasn't hit the ground yet, which means it is actively fighting the force of gravity. It definitely came from space, but… someone is hitting the brakes.”

“A UFO?” Cassie asked.

Marco just nodded. He knew he was right, but still couldn't say those words out loud.

Rachel had a look on her face that I swear had to be a reflection of my own. What Cassie said - or rather, what Marco had walked her into saying - was totally impossible. But he had very carefully let us work out the math ourselves. It had come from space. We had watched it streak down from the night sky from an infinitesimal speck of light to the electric blue spark that now hung over the Pacific, growing brighter with each passing second. Marco is big on physics and sci-fi, so if he said a meteor would be faster, I was sure he knew that as a fact.

But I just couldn't wrap my head around the fact that we were watching an alien spaceship. I mean, really, who the hell could?

As it turned out, Tobias could.

“Guys, the UFO is turning.” He said it casually, like he was telling us the time. There was no euphemism to it. He didn't say the object was turning, or that the anomaly was turning. He just accepted it for what it was. It's how Tobias is, I guess.

I saw it too. What had started as an almost vertical line of blue light was now arcing, course correcting, and leveling off. It was clearly not falling; it was flying. The light seemed like it was growing brighter and brighter. Like it was coming at us now. I mean, I wasn’t panicking that it was going to hit us, I just mean up to then, it looked like a meteor that would eventually hit the Pacific Ocean. Now it had pulled up, still losing altitude, but definitely going to make landfall.

That was the moment it clicked for all of us that this thing really was a piloted craft.
We were staring to the west, which is significant because there really isn’t much west of Cassie’s property. The Moore Creek hiking trails pick up directly from her street, and there isn’t much beyond that aside from a few tracts of farmland and state parks. All the lights from Santa Cruz were behind us, so we had a pretty good view of the stars at Cassie’s place.

I could see now that the light wasn’t a solid glow. It was flickering and intermittent, and as the light got closer, I had the sickening realization that I could make out parts of the ship. It was too far away to make out any real detail, but I mean it was like a car on the highway. You know, when at first all you can see is the glow of the headlights. Then eventually as you get closer, you can see that there are two headlights. And eventually you can make out the outline of the car itself, even if the lights still blind you to all the rest of the car.

In this case, I realized the blue light was the glow of what had to be unbelievably powerful engines.

It was about then that the panic that I’d pushed to the back of my mind started to crawl to the front. The ship was getting closer and closer, and I felt like maybe we should get in the SUV and take off.

But I didn’t say anything.

It wasn’t that I wasn’t afraid. I mean, part of me was more awestruck than terrified, but I was as scared as I’d ever been at the same time. I guess the fact that the ship wasn’t doing anything kinda influenced me a bit too. It didn’t descend and start firing lasers or anything. Actually as it got closer, I could see the blue lights of the engines falter more frequently. I could make out yellow sparks that I couldn’t have made out two minutes ago.

I could see smoke.

“It’s going to crash…” I said.

I said it before I was sure, but no sooner had the words left my mouth then the blue lights dimmed and the ship dipped sharply. It lurched sideways almost, like a car that had started to hydroplane, before the engines glowed bright again and the ship corrected. The craft was less straight now, shaking left and right, before dipping once more.

But right before I thought it would slam into the ground, the ship levelled off once more. The blue glow dimmed, and the ship slowed. I could feel an almost static charge, even though the ship had to be still a mile off. That should’ve worried me, but honestly what bothered me was the fact that I could feel the ship and yet still not really hear it. Not that the ship didn’t make a noise, but I had been waiting for the kind of whooshing sound you hear as jets pass overhead and that noise just never came. Instead there was an odd humming at the limit of my hearing, like the high-pitch whine an old TV makes as it warms up, a not-quite audible noise.

The ship was close enough now that I could see more details of the ship. It seemed oddly tube-shaped, with wings shorter than I expected. It was made of a lustrous, dark substance. It could have been made of black glass, the way it caught the ambient starlight.

But it about half a mile away, hovering over the open clearing of the Moore Creek Preserve, when another burst of gold sparks exploded from the side of the ship. It lurched to left and dropped altitude once more. It didn't hit the ground, but it stopped moving. It just hovered there, half a mile from the barn, maybe twenty or thirty feet above the ground. The part of the Moore Creek Preserve that borders Cassie's property is predominantly open fields, but there are a few wooded creek beds, and it was over one of these little valleys that the ship came to a stop. Then the engines blinked
rapidly and finally gave out. The ship descended about halfway and then fell out of the air as though an invisible cable had snapped.

And just then, all the streetlights went out, and Rachel’s phone went black.

Yeah, that wasn’t ominous or foreboding. Not at all.

But before I could consciously decide to do anything, Tobias had started running. He bolted down the hiking trail that cut through the thick outcrop of trees at the edge of Cassie's property. The rest of us looked at each other and somehow we were following him. No words, no conscious decision, just feet running along the footpath in the dark.

The tree branches overhead were creepy. Silhouetted against the faintest blue-grey glow of the night sky, they looked like cruel hands, shaking menacingly in the heavy Pacific breeze. I could hear owls and insects in the night. Any other night, it would just be the sounds of an early summer night, but then it just seemed creepy. But more ominous by far was what waited for us when we emerged at the other side of the trees.

The ship was much smaller than I would have imagined. All told, it was maybe three or four times the size of my SUV, smaller than a school bus. It's design seemed to be vaguely segmented. The front end was a smooth, aerodynamic, oddly egg-shaped pod. The pod transitioned into a rather tubular structure around the middle, though flatter at the bottom. Marco said later that he thought it looked like a Twinkie, and I really have no better words for it. The tube tapered in the back, almost like a coach’s whistle. On either side of the tube were short, almost stubby wings. Flying through space, I learned later, doesn't require much in terms of aerodynamics. The limited surface area of the wings wasn't meant to fly but rather to steer like the rudder of a ship. It was meant to land, not to fly. An escape pod.

At the end of each wing was almost something like a pontoon. Each pontoon seemed split horizontally with a glowing blue stripe. The glow was all but faded now, but those pontoons seemed to be the engine. It reminded me somewhat of the starship Enterprise. White smoke or steam billowed out of both of them, as though the blue glow were cooking the air around it. This despite the fact that I could feel no ambient heat.

There were no windows or visible doors, and the whole ship appeared to be made out of a dark red obsidian material. I could see large parts of the ship that looked like they had been partially melted and scarred. Here and there, sparks burst from one of the pontoons. Finally the last of the blue light faded.

The last thing I noticed was the fin on the top. It was placed like the tail fin on an airplane, but rather than curve toward the back, this fin curved toward the front. Along that fin was what appeared to be a cannon of some type.

I stared at the weapon for a long moment, suddenly much more aware of the unknown risks we had all taken. I thought of every alien encounter I had ever seen in movies or comics and I wasn't reassured whatsoever. We looked at each other again and I could see the fear on everyone's faces.

Tobias looked at me. He seemed to be the only one of us able to find any voice, but he looked me dead in the eye as he asked, “Should we try to make contact with it?”

I could think of any number of reasons why that was a bad idea. Very much against my will, I thought of the xenomorph from the Alien franchise. I was aware suddenly that everyone else was looking at me, waiting to see what I did.
When did I become the go-to guy for crash-landed aliens? Wasn’t Tobias the one that had run over here at full-tilt?

My mouth didn't want to form words. I was terrified and my mind was moving too fast to form coherent thoughts. But at last, I got the words together. “H-h-hello? Are… Do you need help?”

“We come in peace,” Marco said softly.

Rachel elbowed him in the ribs. “We won't hurt you,” she said.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. But then invisible seams appeared in the hull of the ship and the front pod thing opened. The light from the interior of the ship was bright enough that at first all I could make out of the alien was a vague, black mass. But as he stepped out, I got the odd impression that the alien ship had been piloted by a deer.

The alien stood on four strong legs; legs that really did look very much like those of a deer until you looked closer. Then you could see the cloven hooves were different, that the fur wasn’t right. The neck was too long, too thick. It was almost like a second torso, and I could make out that the creature had what appeared to be not-quite human arms, tucked awkwardly in front of the other legs. The alien had a roughly human shaped head, though it had fox- or bat-like ears and bright-green eyes. It had what looked to be small horns or antennae on its head, but as they moved, I realized they were a second pair of eyes set on tubular stalks.

The alien had no mouth that I could see. The face was almost moth-like, with the large eyes, the antennae-like second eyes. Where the nose should have been were just three vertical slits, and were the mouth should have been was an odd, almost hollow looking gap. It reminded me, oddly, of the front of Darth Vader’s helmet.

The alien looked at us. Maybe it was as scared of us as we were of him. He didn't really look evil, though appearances aren't much to go by anyway. He looked honestly like some hybridization of a deer and a furry blue moth, like what a moth would look like if it had bones rather than an exoskeleton. Covered in blue fur, he had a whimsical, somewhat elvin appearance, and though the eyes were a bit creepy at first, they had a sense of calm wonder. He looked curious more than threatening. I think that was what kept us from panicking or bailing.

He took a few steps toward us, and the voice in my head - the voice that had been telling me non-stop to turn and run for the last who knows how many minutes - was oddly silent. Fear was slowly ebbing away, replaced by a sense of unimaginable curiosity. There was a sense of caution to it, most assuredly. But whereas five minutes ago I was worried this unknown alien might eat all of us, now it was like having a new puppy and wondering where it's going to go next. If he had looked like a monster, we wouldn't have stayed. But he looked harmless enough, and we didn't run. I wonder sometimes how much different things would be now if we had.

Tobias put a hand out, slowly. Yeah, I know that sounds like a cliché E. T. moment, but I swear to god, Tobias reached for it.

The alien staggered forward two steps, clasped Tobias’s hand.

And then the alien collapsed.

Some people do really well in high-stress situations. There are the obvious examples, like firefighters and paramedics. They go through a lot of training to be able to handle extreme circumstances, but the bottom line is that it's something of a rare trait in general. You hear on the news about people that are in car accidents or house fires and just somehow instinctively just knew
what to do. They react, and somehow manage to make rational decisions faster than others.

Cassie is one of those people.

She immediately placed her arms on Tobias’s shoulders and moved him to the side. In less than two seconds, she not only knew what she had to do, but she had enough wherewithal in the situation to move Tobias, and to take a fraction of a heartbeat to do it gently. She could've pushed him out of the way and no one would've thought it rude given the circumstances, but that just wasn't Cassie.

She had untied the flannel shirt from her waist and was using it as a makeshift bandage, holding pressure to the wound we now saw in the alien’s side. I'm not sure what kind of internal organs he may have had, but if it had been a deer, it would have been a gash from the last ribs to about the hip bone, and it was oozing an almost-black purple liquid. His blood looked like ink, and Cassie had it all over her hands.

She was that kind of person.

She wasn't squeamish, didn't hesitate. She knew she could help - or at least she knew she could help better than anyone else in the moment - and so she did.

“Jake, help me hold pressure here.”

And I did. I'm not sure what the others were thinking then. Marco looked stunned, like the reality that a bleeding alien had landed in a small valley of the Moore Creek Preserve hadn't sunk in yet. Tobias had tears in his eyes. Rachel had a hand on his shoulder.

I held the pressure as Cassie had instructed. It was right then, crouched by the alien’s hind legs, that I noticed the tail. It was surprisingly long, thick and muscular at the base, before tapering sharply about a third of the way down into a much thinner, more whip-like tail. At the end, there was a ten-inch blade, shaped like a scythe.

“Aww, shit,” Marco sighed.

Up till then, I had thought of the alien as helpless. But I realized suddenly how dangerous things could turn. I put the thought out of my head. It wasn't willful ignorance. I wasn't trying to convince myself there was no danger. It simply didn't change anything. He needed help, tail blade or no tail blade.

“What do we do?” I asked.

Cassie now looked scared. Rushing to the alien had been a reflex. She was the daughter of vets. But, and I cannot stress this enough, Cassie was not herself a vet. She could change a bandage on a deer, she could hide a med in a piece of chicken to dose a fox, but she couldn't perform emergency veterinary surgery. All she knew to do was to stop the bleeding and she had as much guess as far as step two as any of us… “I- I don't know. He's really bleeding, Jake. I'm not sure what to do.”

“Should we get your parents?”

“I'm not sure they could help him, Jake. This wound is deep and who the hell could possibly understand his anatomy?”

“Do we have any better options?” I didn't snap, it was just a question.

Cassie shook her head. “No, you're right. My mom could probably get every emergency vet in
California out here with a few phone calls.”

“Cassie, there's no power and no cell service,” Rachel said. “I rebooted my phone, but it's not finding the network. Not even 911 works. I can't imagine your mom’s landline would have any better luck.”

“Must be some kind of EMP.” Marco added. I don’t think he was trying to be helpful so much as just thinking aloud, but an electromagnetic pulse definitely fit the bill for the blackout.

“Cassie, your dad has an diesel generator in the barn, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, why?”

“If Rachel can reboot her phone, then the generator should be able to turn on the lights in the barn. Your mom can operate, can't she?”

Cassie nodded nervously. “Yeah, on Earth animals. Her specialty is big cats, Jake. I don't know what she can do for him.”

“Let's go wake up your mom and find out. Can we move him or do you have gurneys or skiffs in the barn?”

“We should go.”

We all turned to Marco.

“We can't just let him die, Marco.” I said it with a finality I hadn't known I had. I realized abruptly that I'd made a decision already, and I wasn't backing down from it.

“Guys, I'm sure people saw that meteor shower before the blackout. The power is still out, so I think that's the bigger priority for the first responders. But I'd bet money that, sooner or later, someone is going to find this. And when we get Cassie's mom so she can bring her vet friends over to play alien autopsy, we will probably be detained by some government acronym for weeks or months. It could be the FBI, the NSA, the CIA, DHS, it doesn’t really matter. We will probably be shuttled through all them one after another, over and over again. All while we spend who fucking knows how long in quarantine while the CDC runs every conceivable test on every bodily fluid and tissue they can put under a microscope. We do not want to be here when the fucking Men In Black show up.”

I stared at him for a long moment. None of us said anything. Marco had stood there this whole time, analyzing everything for likely outcomes, and what he said was probably all true. Part of my hesitation was because I wanted to tell him off. I wanted to tell him he was full of it, that he was wrong. But there were no holes in that argument. Someone was going to find this. Cassie and I were covered in alien blood. They would probably cordon off most of the county. The National Guard might be here tomorrow. Hell, they might be here in an hour for all I knew. Marco was absolutely sure that he was right, and I trusted his judgment. Our lives would be flushed down the toilet the second anyone found out we were here.

“No,” I said.

“Jake, come on you know I-”

“Marco, I know you're right. We probably will all regret this tomorrow. But I don’t give a shit right now. I'm not going to stand here and let him die just because it might be easier on me personally. You want to bail, go. None of us will judge. You know the way. Hell, I can give you the keys.
Take Tobias and Rachel with you. I don’t want to see any of you screwed over because of this.” I looked at Cassie and saw her resolve before I added, “Cass and I will stay.”

Marco stared at me, glanced at the keys hanging from my outstretched hand, then looked at the alien again. “Damn it. Cassie, where are the skiffs?”

“It doesn't matter. We're not going to be able to move him without help. I’m going to go get my mom.”

The second she stood up, an alien hand grabbed her by the wrist.

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
<Do not be afraid.>

All of us fell back about a foot. It was a distinct voice, but I didn't hear it in my ears. I heard it in my head. I read enough comics to know what telepathy was, but having someone use your frontal lobe as a radio receiver - unannounced, I should add - is the highest degree of startling.

“God, fuck me. Did everyone-?” Marco asked.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

<This may disturb you. I apologize, but I have little time for explanations. Know that I mean you no harm.>

“Wait, what?” Marco started to ask. “What the hell?”

The alien was shrinking before our eyes. The six legs of the alien shifted, changing distance. The hind legs seemed like they were getting closer to the middle, even as the middle continued to shrink. Then the limbs began to change shape, the hoof-like feet shifting, tapering. There were odd, disconcerting noises as the bones reformed. Like the wet sound of chicken bones being pulled apart. There was a visceral horror to it and Marco turned to throw up. Rachel looked like she wouldn't be far behind.

The newly distorted limbs started sprout odd feathers, more like the spines of a lionfish than the feathers of a bird. The alien’s blue fur seemingly melted into its skin as though each individual hair had been made of paraffin wax. The alien’s face tapered forward, the mouthless skull stretching into a terribly pointed serrated beak. The hind feet resembled the feet of some ancient bird, but different from any I’d ever seen. The hind legs were feathered too, like those images of microraptor I’d seen on the internet.

It looked like a raptor dinosaur crossed with some deep-sea fish, and then exposed to radiation.

And just as soon as he had become the strange alien bird, the process reversed. Feathery fins slurped back into the flesh, wingtips reverted to hooves.

It looked like something out of a high-rent Cronenberg movie.

<My apologies. I know the morphing process can be very unsettling, but my injuries left me no alternative.>
“You can understand us?”

The alien looked at Marco and nodded. An oddly human expression. <Yes, I can understand you.>

“How? Are you reading our thoughts?”

The alien seemed to smile through his eyes, amused. <My species can communicate telepathically, but we cannot read minds in the way you suggest.>

Marco was about to ask something else, but the alien cut him off. <I am sure you have questions, all of you. And I promise I will try to answer them as I can. But right now, we are in danger and we must flee from here. Will one of you help me?>

Tobias and I both stepped forward.

“What kind of danger are we in?” I asked.

“He's telling us that whoever, whatever, shot him out of the sky is going to come looking to see if they succeeded.”

I winced. The idea had occurred to me. I'd seen the damage. I think all of us already knew that the 'meteors shower' we’d seen were the rest of his ship. The streaks of matter burning in the atmosphere, a spaceship that seemed more like an escape pod than an actual ship, the blistered edges to its hull, all of these pointed to something bad happening in the minutes before we’d found him.

The alien slumped forward, his posture like a visible sigh. <He is correct. We have precious little time, and the contents of my ship must not fall into enemy hands. If I must die here, so be it, but my intelligence reports, my mission briefings, not least of which the Escafil device, none can be taken by the Controllers.>

The alien led Tobias and I to his wrecked ship. The interior of the ship was brightly lit, and I can't really describe it because it was just too separated from any frame of reference. Whereas we humans design desks and screens at right angles, favoring boxes, squares, and rectangles, the interior seemed to favor highly organic shapes and curves. There was a sense of overlapping contours in the control consoles, though I didn't see very much in the way of buttons or dials.

I wondered if maybe the alien controlled the ship with his mind, but before I could ask, he handed me a deceptively heavy steel cylinder. Tobias seemed kinda hurt, like he was disappointed that he didn't get to carry the way-too heavy, probably radioactive canister. The alien did hand a few odd devices to Tobias, though, and he grabbed what almost looked like a horse’s saddle crossed with a hiking pack and fitted it over his back.

I realized that he was alone, that he was taking whatever he could carry, and that he was stranded on this planet. There was a hologram on the console, small, less than a foot tall, of other aliens like him.

“Your family?” I asked, stupidly.

The alien did not turn - I realized his neck couldn’t bend that way - but instead turned one of his stalk eyes toward me. <Yes, my parents and my brother.>

“Can we take this?”

The stalk eye looked both happy and sad at the same time. <The hologram is simply a file within
As we stepped out, we saw Marco, Rachel, and Cassie just staring off into space. I turned and saw red lights, bright as fireworks, move silently but steadily across the horizon.

<We must hurry.>

No one said anything, but we ran to the barn as fast as we could. I’m sure the alien was faster on its four legs than we were, but of course he didn’t know where we were going and he was carrying extra weight. I wondered about the stuff we’d just salvaged from the alien vessel. Part of me actually was legit worried it was going to give me cancer, but curiosity was still winning the battle over terror. Terror wasn’t liking that at all.

It took us less than ten minutes to reach the SUV.

“Should we run?” I asked.

The alien seemed to consider it and I was reasonably sure he’d fit in the SUV. There's a mental image for you: five teenagers and an alien, driving around in an outdated SUV.

Marco shook his head. “It’s dark, Jake. We get on the road, with the lights on, that car is going to become a very visible target very quickly. We need to hide.”

I nodded, but I took the time to open the door grabbed my phone out the front seat and turned it on. My phone takes a while to boot, so I just slipped it into my pocket and we made our way up to the barn as fast as possible.

The barn was dark, and a barn full of caged, injured animals is not terribly comfortable, not for the animals, and definitely not for five teenagers trying to shelter an alien.

Rachel turned on her phone’s flashlight. “Can we get the generator on?” she asked.

I was already moving, but Marco again shook his head. “No lights. Those ships are going to find his ship, and when they find it’s empty, the first place they’ll look is at the barn half a mile away with the fucking lights on.”

“God, Marco, why are you getting so testy? Who the hell put you in charge, anyway?”

“Rachel,” I said firmly, before Marco could answer, “please, stop. He’s right. I know he’s getting pissy, but that’s how Marco is when he’s stressed. Dude, we’re all stressed. Can you try to dial up the chill?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry, Rachel.”

“Me too. Jake, how are you so calm?”

I felt very surprised by that question. I was beyond terrified. I had never been so scared, and I was very aware that my benchmark for most-terrified kept getting moved. We had seen a meteorite, a spaceship, an alien that turned into a mutant raptor bird, and now that we were standing in the barn I replayed the last half hour in my head. When you start trying to figure out how much terror your mind can process, you know you’re having a bad night. Maybe it really was that it was too much too fast. I think if I could’ve processed each event a little more, things would’ve been different. But by the time I could process the ship, there’d been a bleeding alien. By the time I could process the mutant bird thing, I was carrying a cancer tube. Each new thing kept the last from sinking in. But now we were sitting in the dark, and there weren’t any new things to distract me. The curiosity part
decided fear could take this round.

“Rachel, I’ve never been so scared.” I looked around everyone in the dim glow of Rachel’s phone. “Cassie, are you okay?”

She hadn’t said anything since the alien had grabbed her arm.

“I’m… I have no clue, Jake. Do we have time for answers now?”

The alien nodded again. Such a very human thing to do. <Yes, I think that would be the best use of this time.> He paused, like he was taking a breath. <My name is Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul. I am an Andalite. My planet is part of this galaxy approximately eighty-two light-years from here.>

“I’m sorry to interrupt here, but I’m still really freaked out. How did you do that? What was that bird thing?”

The alien almost laughed. His eyes did that smile thing again. <My apologies. I forgot you are unaware of the morphing technology. It is something for which my people are well known across many planets.>

“Morphing?”

<The technology is very complex, but in simplest terms, anything I touch I can then become. The creature I became is called a kafit, a creature from my home planet. It is one of the morphs Andalites acquire as part of our training. It has been a long time since I have had to morph. It is usually reserved for intelligence missions, but it allowed me to heal my injuries.>


<War.>

“What, seriously?” I asked. To that point, I hadn’t really been very wary of the alien. He just didn’t seem dangerous. He still didn’t, but even so, somehow all of us found a little more distance between the Andalite. For all I knew just then, we had been trying to save an alien that meant to kill us. I think our reaction was telling.

<Yes, war. You must understand, I mean you no harm. But I am not the first so-called alien to visit this planet. There are so many others. And they do mean you harm. Your planet is being invaded.>

“I find it hard to believe Earth is involved in an alien war and no one has noticed,” Rachel said. “Are the motherships invisible or something?”

<You jest, but you’re very close to the truth. Your species has been discovered by the Yeerks. Give me a moment. I can explain this easier.>

The Andalite, Elfangor, opened one of the steel canister things he’d had Tobias carry. It was smaller than the one I had carried, a little larger than a beer can. He did something to the tube and suddenly the barn was gone.

Instead we were standing on an alien planet. The sky was a dull green-grey, and I swear I could smell the electricity in the air, the smell of ozone you pick up right before a bad thunderstorm. The planet was mostly flat, and for the most part, all I could see for miles were dark rocks, sludge pools, and strange grey moss. Instead of trees, there appeared to be giant mushrooms growing in scattered clusters. Off in the distance I could see odd little alien creatures, almost like apes,
scampering off.

“Are those Yeerks?” Cassie asked.

<No, those are the Yeerks.> the Andalite said, gesturing to the pool closest to us.

We gathered round and looked into the sludge pool. The liquid wasn’t water. It looked like mercury or molten lead, and it smelled toxic. But in the pool, writhing by the hundreds, were small slimy slugs.

They didn’t look like much. They didn’t seem to have eyes, they were just little globs of slime.

<In their natural state,> Elfangor said, <Yeerks are nearly helpless. They are blind, essentially deaf, and cannot survive long outside of their liquid environment.>

But then the virtual world changed. We were next to one of the strange little ape creatures as it fell into one of the pools. The slugs surged as though the pool had started to boil, and as the alien creature stood up, I could see for the briefest of moments, one of the slugs slithering into the alien’s ear canal.

“Holy god…” Rachel said.

The hologram or whatever you want to call it was gone. We were back in the dark barn, lit only by the flashlight of Rachel’s phone. I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the darkness.

<The Yeerks can enter through various passages and enter the brain. From there, the creature becomes what we call a Controller, a stolen body slave to the parasitic Yeerk. They have enslaved many races in the galaxy. From the primitive Gedd of their own planet, to the Taxxons, the Hork-Bajir, they have now come to Earth. They have come to enslave your species.>

“You’re telling us these alien slugs are crawling into people’s brains?” Cassie asked.

<Yes. There are no outward signs that a species has become a Controller. They can inhabit most higher forms of life and their operation on Earth is larger than our Andalite military had known.>

“So you’re saying anyone we know, anyone we meet, could have an alien slug in their brain and we’d have no way of knowing?” Tobias asked.

<Precisely. It is what makes them so difficult to fight.>

“How did you know we weren’t Yeerks?” Marco asked.

<Because you did not kill me.> He said it as though it should have been obvious. I could feel his sense of...finality? It was a sad kind of certainty.

“Um...yeah,” I said. "So what happens now? I mean are there other ships that can come get you?”

<1- I do not know. The rest of the Andalite forces were under fire when my ship was hit. I do not know if there are any survivors. For all I know, I am the last Andalite on Earth.>

“Can you contact anyone?” I asked. Yeah, like he was going to whip out a cell phone.

<I salvaged parts from the escape pod. It would take me time to assemble a communications relay, but yes, I will call for help when I can do so. That, however, is not my most pressing concern.>

I knew what he meant. He had to live through the night first. “Cassie, is he good to stay here for
now?"

She nodded. “My mom will be here in the morning, though. We can’t have her find you…”

<I understand.>

“Guys, what are we doing here?” Marco asked.

“Marco, I thought you were the smart one,” Rachel said. “We’re hiding an alien in Cassie’s barn. Try to keep up.”

I stared at my cousin, shock on my face. We all actually laughed, even Marco. It wasn’t a riotous bout of laughter; we were all too scared and freaked for that. But it wasn’t forced or mirthless, either.

“Marco, I know you’re freaked. We’re all freaked, right guys?” We all mumbled in assent before she continued. “It’s not that we don’t know this is a clusterfuck. I know it is. But what else do you suppose we do?”

“I- I got nothing.” Marco was torn between his rationality and his morality. The smart thing was to run, and leave the alien to its own devices. But he knew the right thing to do was help, and so he did. But doing the right thing over the smart thing seemed to piss him off something fierce.

“Tobias,” I said, my throat already tightening with the anticipation of how he’d answer me, “can you see the red lights from there?”

He was closest to the window. He seemed to like windows, I noticed. Even at the movies, he liked hanging out by the glass doors. I’d alway thought it was so he could look like he was waiting on someone rather than that he had nowhere to go, but now I wondered if maybe Tobias went through life trying to stay close to the light.

He nodded. “They’re almost to his ship.”

We all gathered to the barn window as much as we could. I’d accidentally kicked a cage with a wounded deer and Cassie punched me full in the shoulder. Like I’d done it on purpose.

“Watch it!”

“Sorry, it’s dark.”

“Hey, why are the lights still out?” Rachel asked?

<When my ship gave out, the engines detonated an electromagnetic pulse. It was not intentional.>

“Yeah, but why is the power still out? Shouldn't it have come back on by now?”

<I suspect the human-Controllers are actively maintaining the power outage. The cover of darkness likely aids their attempts to locate my ship.>

That was… very unsettling. I wondered how far the alien conspiracy actually reached.

My friends all rushed to the window on the further side of the barn. It was the only window that offered any decent view of the crash site, but it wasn't big enough for five. It was barely big enough for four.

The alien, Elfangor, stood still. With the window crowded, and me not wanting to try to navigate
the animal cages in the dark, I stayed with him while the others went to watch his ship and the approaching red lights.

“What do we need to do?”

<Your friend is wise. We are better to hide than to run.>

“Yeah, but when they find you missing, they’re going to look for you.”

<Waiting is often deceptively difficult. You are afraid, and your natural instinct is to run. You know in your mind that is a poor decision, but the instinct remains, and it gnaws at your resolve.>

I nodded.

<You are very brave.>

“I’m terrified.”

<Bravery is not an absence of fear. The absence of fear is recklessness. Fear is cautious, it means to keep you safe. It is wise to be frightened. But fear can be irrational. Bravery is knowing the fear, but not allowing it to rule your decisions. Even afraid, you listen to your friends.>

“Yes, Marco’s smart.”

<Yes. And the female,> he said, gesturing to Cassie, <she shows compassion despite the fear.>

“Yeah, that’s Cassie. She’s like that.”

<It is an admirable trait.>

It felt weird. I think I could feel what he felt. Whatever allowed him to communicate telepathically I think also broadcast - to some extent - his emotions. I really think he was actively trying to keep us calm, keep us from freaking out more than we were. But when he looked at Cassie, I felt something sad. Like a distant despair, a sense of longing. I realized Cassie must have reminded him of someone he knew, someone he missed. Someone he may never see again.

I was about to say something, to say sorry maybe, but he held up a many-fingered hand. <They are here.>

I used the flashlight on my phone - there was still no network signal - to make it to the window without bumping another cage. Tobias moved a little to let me see and I watched as the red lights descended over the small creek valley toward Elfangor’s wrecked ship. These ships seemed like giant cockroaches with large bent segmented shells and serrated antennae. They were about twice the size of the Andalite’s escape pod. These ships looked more… spaceshipish? I don’t know if there’s a word for it, but they looked more like how I’d have imagined a space ship looked. At any rate, they seemed much more adept at flying than Elfangor’s busted escape pod.

“What are those? Bug Fighters?”

<That would be an accurate name for them.>

The ships landed, silently. We waited. We were too far to hear anything, but none of us dared to look away from the window. Suddenly, there was a blinding flash, and I felt a vibration in my toes. “Shit, what was that?”

<The Yeerk ships have destroyed my escape pod.>
“How can they do that?” Cassie asked.

<Dracon beams. The Yeerks use an energy weapon similar to the ones used by Andalites. Only a few trace molecules will remain of my ship.>

The red lights of the Bug Fighters rose into the air once more, and began flying in opposite directions. They were in an obvious search pattern, but it didn't look like they were looking very hard. The lights receded into the distance, and I couldn't tell if they were gone or not, only that we could no longer see them from the window.

“Wow, they gave up quickly,” Marco said.

“Yeah, I thought for sure they would check out the barn.”

<For a human fugitive, that may be a logical course. But Yeerks are aware of Andalite morphing technology. They know I could be in morph, so there is almost no point in looking for Andalite survivors.>

I looked at my phone. It was nearly three in the morning.

“Guys, I know this is going to seem small by comparison, but it is really getting late, and we can't stay in Cassie's barn all night. We need a plan.”

Cassie nodded. “There’s room in the hay loft, assuming you can use a ladder.”

<I can fly, if the situation calls for it.>

“I'll stay with him.” I looked at Tobias, maybe a little surprised. He must've read my expression because he went on. “No one will care if I stay here all night. I was going to crash at your place anyway, and Cassie has to be in her room before her mom wakes up in the morning. This will work.”

<I would not mind the company.>

“That means you need to take me and Marco home.”

“Mom won't care if I bring both of you home. You're my cousin, and Marco is over often enough. If she asks, we'll just tell her we got stuck with the blackout at Cassie's and with no streetlights or traffic lights, she wouldn't want me driving more than necessary anyway. That's all true enough.”

Everyone seemed to agree with the plan. I got Tobias’s backpack from my SUV as Rachel and Marco got back into their seats. I went back to the barn and handed Tobias his bag. I helped Cassie start the generator. Our cover was that we had helped Cassie with the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center during the blackout, and she said the generator would run at least three or four hours and that her mom would turn it off in the morning. We did check on the animals, though none of them were really disturbed by the two-hour blackout. Some of the animals seemed pretty indifferent to the lights, but Cassie said some of them needed to stay warm. May can be brisk off the coast. It dawned on me that none of the animals had seemed particularly bothered by the scent of Andalite in the barn. I guess there was nothing about the smell of an alien they'd associate with danger. We said goodnight to Tobias and left a note for her mom and she locked up the WRC.

I walked Cassie up to her front porch. It wasn't a long walk, but I was beyond tired by that point. I'd been up for twenty-one hours, I was mentally and emotionally taxed, and I was wearing restaurant
shoes. My feet were killing me. But I walked her up to the porch all the same.

She leaned her head on my shoulder as we walked. She was at least as worn as I was, if not more so. I didn’t mind. The warmth on my shoulder, the smell of her hair, it seemed much more important now. All my idle fears just seemed so trivial.

“You wanna go out sometime?”

She hit me. Her fist caught the meat of my shoulder in a jab I never saw coming. “Are you kidding me, Jake? You're going to ask that now?”

“I've wanted to ask you since April,” I said. “I was going to ask you the other day, but I couldn't find the words.”

“So you just asked if I wanted your employee tickets?” Her tone told me she already knew all that. Damn you, Rachel. “So why now?”

“Bravery is not the absence of fear.”

And then she kissed me.

I remember almost every detail of that night. I remember the way the moonlight seemed brighter in the blackout, I will remember the smell of Andalite blood for the rest of my life, the billowing cobwebs in the rafters of the barn, and the taste of my first kiss with Cassie.

And I remember Marco flashing the headlights of the SUV, in a perfectly timed action to ruin the moment.

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
I live a few miles from Cassie’s place. Actually Rachel, Marco, and I all live within a few blocks of each other, so the original plan from the evening had made sense. But now I just drove to my place. Rachel and Marco were likely going to go back to Cassie’s with me in the morning.

How could they not?

“The shit is going to hit the fan in the morning.”

“Yeah, dude, I know.”

We passed a few cop cars on the way, which may have been normal enough for a downed power grid, but after what Elfangor had told us about Yeerks, everything took on a much more sinister vibe.

I got stopped about half a dozen blocks from the house.

The red and blue lights flashed on as we came to a stop sign, and my heart started pounding in my chest. I got my registration out of the glove box and my wallet from the center console. I never take my wallet with me to work.

“Fuck. Do you think he knows where we’ve been?”

I didn’t answer. It wasn’t like I didn’t have a good reason to have been at Cassie’s and it wasn’t like I could come up with a better alibi in the next minute or two. Besides, if I’m being honest, I’m not that good a liar. I tried to calm myself, to slow my breathing. I’m not sure that it helped much. When the cop tapped on the window, I nearly jumped in the seat.

The cop looked normal enough. He was just your average middle-aged white guy. He may have been a few inches taller than my dad and a few years younger, but there was nothing about him that screamed out that he was host to an alien brain slug. He asked for the usual, license and registration.

“What’s on your hand, kid?”

I blinked. Through everything, else, I’d forgotten I had dried alien blood on my hands. My fingers were black in the light from the police flashlight. I stammered for a second. “Sorry, I helped my girlfriend start the generator. I didn’t realize I got that messy.”

He nodded, seemingly satisfied. Then he asked the obvious question. “What are you kids doing out
I told him I'd gotten off work at the multiplex around one, took my girlfriend home, and we watched the meteor shower, but then we kinda got stuck in the blackout. I told him I was worried about driving while the power was out and asked if he knew when they'd have the lights back on.

His expression softened. Did that mean he wasn't a Controller? Or did it mean he just decided I wasn't a threat? “It sucks working nights, doesn't it, kid?”

I shrugged. “Meh, work is work. Rather get free movies than flip burgers.”

The cop laughed, and he handed me back my stuff. “Get on home, kid. Be mindful of intersections. They're working on the power, should be on in the morning.”

And that was it. Nothing else happened. I didn't even get a ticket. I had no idea if he was a Controller or not, but either way, he had my information. I wasn’t sure that was a good thing, but I figured I couldn’t have been the only person driving in the blackout.

“Nicely handled, cuz.”

“Yes, thanks.”

“No, I mean it. Nothing he can’t verify tomorrow, and nothing suspicious.”

“Well, at least he didn’t ask where Cassie lived.” Marco was right about that. We had a good reason to be there, but I had to guess admitting to being less than a mile from an alien crash site wouldn’t have gone well.

“So, you said you were coming from your girlfriend’s place…?”

“Shut up, Rachel.”

“’Bout fucking time, Jake.”

“Alien invasion, and you two are still giving me shit about Cassie.”

“Hey, gotta keep up the façade of normality, don’t we?” Marco asked. I couldn’t help but smile. It made me feel better that he was still being himself.

Sure enough, it looked like the cops had their hands full that night. I saw more red-and-blue lights on the way home. Maybe they were looking for Elfangor, but I think the power outage was a legitimate problem.

We pulled into the driveway about quarter till four. I was exhausted, I knew the others had to be as well, but there was no time for sleep yet. I had to get Marco set in my room, and I had to get Rachel set up in the guest bedroom. And with the lights still out, it was going to be a bit of a hassle.

“Marco, is there a specific reason, tonight of all nights, you left your phone at home?”

He shrugged. “I had school and work and it's not like I'm glued to Facebook.” Marco was not big on social media.

“Well stay close behind till I get some candles lit.”

The three of us went in quietly. My parents were used to me coming in late on Fridays, and as long as we were quiet, they shouldn't wake up.
I got the candles we kept in the kitchen for just this type of situation and handed one to each of them. Marco went straight to my room. He had clothes in my closet, and he made no attempt to hide the fatigue that dripped from his joints. I was less sure about accommodating Rachel. I don't have any sisters after all.

“Do you know if your mom still keeps that emergency bag in the guest room?” she asked.

“Honestly, you'd know better than I would.”

My Aunt Nicole and Uncle Dan sometimes have to travel for work, and on the rare occasions that both of them have to be out of town, my three female cousins take up the guest room. Other than the few times my grandparents come to visit, the only other person to use the guest bedroom is my dad when he and my mom are arguing.

I took Rachel to the guest room closet and held her candle while she rummaged through a canvas duffel bag. She found a nightshirt she'd apparently left over Christmas break and said she was good. I set her candle down on the nightstand and asked if she wanted the shower.

“Too tired. Marco and I will fight over it in the morning. Or I'll ask Aunt Jeanette if I can use hers.”

I nodded. Marco was asleep in the old armchair I keep in the corner for my Xbox. My mom refuses to allow game consoles in the living room. I tossed a blanket at him and got clothes out of my drawer. I had no clue what was keeping me up, but between the distant smell of popcorn, the twigs and leaves from the footpath, the various smells of Cassie's barn, and let's not forget the purple-black of the Andalite’s blood, I just couldn't go to sleep without a quick shower.

It only took seven or eight minutes, and it was weird taking a shower by candlelight. I wondered how Tobias was doing in the barn, sleeping in a hay loft with an actual alien. I wondered how Elfangor was holding up. I couldn't imagine what he was going through. He'd been shot out of the sky trying to defend a planet that wasn't his, and now he was stranded alone on a distant planet, surrounded by strange people and an invisible enemy.

It made me uncomfortable to think about it. I didn't want to fall asleep thinking about alien brain slugs, but of course I did. Too tired, too drained, I had no mental will to keep the thought out of my mind.

The last conscious thought I remember having was that we could never trust anyone ever again.

I woke unwillingly to the smell of bacon. I looked at the clock on my dresser. It was 10:43. I'd gotten almost six and a half hours of sleep, I think. Tossing and turning most of the night, I'm not sure it counted as sleep, but considering Marco had slept on the chair…

Where was Marco, anyway?

I heard voices and headed downstairs. Marco was cooking bacon and eggs, apparently. Rachel was sitting next to my dad at the kitchen table, both of them already eating. My dad and Marco were apparently having a heated conversation regarding the Warriors’ chances in the NBA playoffs while Rachel rolled her eyes and just took a sip of her coffee.

Oh, please God, let there be coffee.
“Hey, there he is!” my dad said as he noticed me.

“Nice shorts.”

I looked down. Apparently I’d ended up grabbing *Scooby Doo* boxers when I got my shower last night. I stared daggers at Rachel but couldn't keep it up without cracking up.

“So Marco and Rachel tell me you're starting a bed and breakfast.”

I rubbed the back of my neck awkwardly. Partially out of embarrassment but also because my back was surprisingly sore. “Yeah, sorry. With the blackout…”

“Oh, no apologies. If Marco’s going to make brunch, he's welcome anytime. But seriously, I'm proud of you.”

“Oh?”

“Rachel said you helped Cassie with her chores out at the barn during the blackout last night.”

“We all did.”

“And you apparently have a girlfriend now.”

I closed my eyes and put my head in my hands. “I hate both of you. I don't care which one told, I want you to know I don't pick favorites. I hate both of you equally.”

My dad laughed. “You're sixteen, son, it's part of life. Besides, they're only razzing you because they're still single.”

That idea had not occurred to me yet.

“And if I want to keep enjoying married life, I have to get those gutters cleaned today. There’s fresh coffee and looks like Marco’s done with your plate. See you later, kids.”

Oh, Marco. Sweet, perfect, magnificent Marco. I put bacon in my mouth and almost cried. “I'm still mad at the two of you…,” I said, “but bacon helps.”

Rachel smiled. “I didn't know Marco could cook.”

Marco looked embarrassed.

“What?”

“Nothing, he just doesn't want you calling him Suzie Homemaker because he mastered the fried egg.”

That was a lie, though.

The truth was that Marco cooked all his meals. Two years ago, Marco’s mom died in a boating accident in Monterey Bay. Rachel knew that part. What she didn't know was that his dad was never the same afterward. His dad was an engineer, or used to be, anyway. But after the funeral, he'd just stopped going to work, stopped going outside. He just slept a lot, for a few weeks. He got fired, which is what happens when you don't go to work, and he ended up getting a job as a mechanic or welder or something. I didn't know and I didn't ask. But Marco was the one that did the grocery shopping, made sure the bills got paid, and cooked all the meals. His fridge was full of labeled Tupperware containers so his dad had work lunches.
And Marco would kill me if I ever told anyone.

“Quit being so macho. Guys should know how to cook, too.”

“Rachel,” I said between a bite of eggs, “What do you mean ‘too’? You don't know how to cook.”

Now she was the one to look embarrassed. She took another sip of her coffee. Marco sat down to eat his breakfast.

“Rachel, cousin dearest, would it be misogynistic of me if I asked for a cup of coffee?”

“Jerk. No, I'm getting another cup anyway. Milk and sugar?”

“Yeah, if you wouldn't mind. I didn't know you drank coffee.”

“I don't usually, but if we're going to Cassie's after breakfast, I needed the caffeine.”

Fair enough.

“Marco, any thoughts since last night?”

Marco didn’t say anything; he had a bite of eggs in his mouth. He just slid me my own phone. Bastard.

The top banner from the KION website showed links to President Trump’s latest idiocy, a surgeon accused of molesting patients, and the 12th Annual Vive Oaxaca Guelaguetza. But I skipped all that to read the article he had open:

"...Representatives from PG&E attributed the power outage to freak magnetic interference in the ionosphere caused by a small meteor shower in the early morning hours. Acting District Director Larry Crider of the San Francisco branch of the US Departments of Homeland Security assured that this was not an act of terrorism..."

The article droned on for awhile, apparently there was some minor looting and a few fender benders, but I skimmed through a little further down, and one of the last lines really caught my nerves.

"...believe an out-of-service satellite in decaying orbit was destroyed in the event. Some debris has been recovered from the Moore Creek Preserve and anyone with information regarding the debris should contact the number below..."

“They’re looking for witnesses.”

He nodded. “I was worried about the Men In Black when I thought he was going to die. Alive, this is much worse. If there’s any truth to that brain-slug conspiracy, there’s going to be a massive manhunt for him. And they've started it in the most subtle way imaginable, which is scarier.”

I nodded. I knew what he meant. If we'd woken up to the sound of Black Hawk helicopters, that
would've been bad. But they used the news as a craigslist ad for witnesses and that kind of calculated restraint was unnerving. It implied an Andalite survivor might be nothing more than an annoying eventuality. Not even a real threat.

We needed to get back to the WRC as soon as possible. “Any word from Cassie?”

Rachel handed me coffee. “She called to say her mom thanked her for turning on the generator last night but she didn't say anything about our, and I’m quoting here, ‘friend from out of town.’”

“Smart. Keeping things off the phone.”

I knew what he meant. By simply not mentioning Elfangor or Tobias, she'd told us everything was fine. Speaking of messages, I remembered the text from last night, before we'd left the theater.

“How Tom been down?”

“No, we haven't seen him.”

“Weird. Probably used the blackout to spend the night at his girlfriend’s.” My parents are fairly progressive about that kind of stuff, but still I knew my mom. Tom was eighteen, but my mom seemed rather oblivious to that fact. I just knew there were going to be safe sex pamphlets scattered ever so casually left around the house.

We finished our brunch, and I took Rachel home. While we were eating, she’d gotten a text that she needed to watch her sisters for the afternoon, which meant she wasn’t going to be joining us at the WRC.

“We’ll miss you, Rach,” I shouted as we dropped her off.

She shot me the finger.

“And that, Jake, is why looks aren’t everything.”

“I heard that, Marco!”

“Oh, shit. Drive, drive!”

It was kinda weird, driving back to Cassie’s during the day. And it was weird because it was totally normal. Last night I had alien blood on my hands, driving through the city in pitch black punctuated only by the red and blue lights of cop cars. There had been a sense of dread, of urgency. We’d been exhausted, overstimulated, and harried.

But now, in the daylight of a typical late-spring Saturday, everything seemed so normal.

Kids were playing outside, people were mowing their lawns, I could smell charcoal from Saturday cookouts. And the whispering doubt that crept silently in my mind was whether any of it was real. Were these people Controllers? How many alien slugs was I looking at as I drove through the intersections of town?

My phone rang and I recognized Cassie’s ringtone.

“Hey, Cassie, what’s up?”

But it was Tobias’ voice on the phone. “He’s gone!”

“What?”
“Jake, El… Al is gone.”

I looked at Marco. He’d heard it.

“We’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
Chapter 5

I pulled up into Cassie’s driveway for the second time in twelve hours. I should probably mention that this wasn’t an unusual thing for us. I’d been on Cassie’s property quite often in the last few years. She was Rachel’s best friend, and my interest in dating Cassie didn’t happen out of nowhere. I’d been hanging out with her for years.

So it was no surprise that her dad waved to me as Marco and I jogged up the path. But it still seemed so weird to me. For one, I had come here to check on a stranded Andalite warrior. I would’ve honestly been less paranoid right then if Cassie and I had been running a meth lab in the hay loft.

But that actually wasn’t my first thought right then. The thing that really unsettled me was that my relationship with his daughter had changed last night. Yeah, maybe it was only a kiss, and I knew whatever we were doing was very new and maybe I was making it too much of a thing too soon. But it meant a lot to me. It was a subtle change, but it was also a profound change, and I hadn’t really processed the fact that my dynamic with her dad was going to change dramatically as well. Cassie’s dad is 6’6” and he’s not really that big on his baby girl dating. Right now, making my way up to the barn, looking at the sign for the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, I was just a kid that went to school with his daughter and hung out in the barn to check out the cool animals. One he found out Cassie and I were an item, I’d just be another hormonal teenager trying to get in his daughter’s pants. And I wasn’t ready for that particular problem right then. But at any rate, I was reasonably sure Cassie hadn’t told him about the kiss last night.

The second reason I was nervous was because of the Yeerks.

At first, it seemed easy enough to dismiss the idea that so many people could be infested. I mean, it’s far-fetched to start with, and I had no real first-person experience with the idea outside of Elfangor’s bizarre holographic show-and-tell. But the idea of it crept in slowly, and I couldn’t stand the foul taste it put in my mouth. I found myself stealing glances at my dad at the kitchen table that morning, wondering, suspecting. It made me nauseous. Not only could my dad have been infested, not that that wouldn’t have been bad enough, but worse still, if he had, the alien slug was going through all the motions with perfection. The talk with Marco about the Warriors, idly wondering if Zaza Pachulia’s foot injury would make an impact in the NBA finals, telling us he had to clean the gutters… all of it was spot-on. And it tainted my entire perception.

And as I waived at Cassie’s dad, I felt the black touch of doubt gnaw at my stomach, wondering if I was waving to a Yeerk as it made the mouth of its stolen human host curl into a genuine smile.
I hope I only imagined the shudder running through me.

“Hey, Doc,” I said as casually as I could muster, “Is Cassie around?”

Doctor Walter Geroux was head of the veterinary program at the University of California Santa Cruz campus, and the WRC was technically funded through UCSC. My brother Tom had already been accepted there on a basketball scholarship, though he hadn’t declared a major yet. Dr. Geroux, or Doc G, as his undergrads called him, was very well-respected in the area, both for his academic career at the college, and for his ongoing work with wildlife sanctuary programs. There was a framed award from the governor’s office hanging on a wall in the WRC. And I really hoped that he wasn’t a Controller. But the creepy black thoughts reminded me too clearly that there was absolutely no way to tell for sure.

“Yeah, she said you’d be coming by to give her a hand today. I want you to know I really appreciate you helping her with the generator last night.”

I shrugged. “That wasn’t a big deal. Did you see the meteor shower?”

He laughed. “I had a faculty meeting last night. I was asleep half an hour after I got home. I saw some footage of it on the news, though.”

“We’d never seen one before.”

“I think the astronomy program has an annual camp-out near the Lick Observatory every August to watch the Perseid meteor showers.”

“Cool. Marco and I were thinking of going camping sometime this summer.”

“You do that, kids. It’s important for you kids to get out there, not be cooped up in your rooms playing video games all summer.”

I was used to adults treating us as irresponsible. It didn’t usually faze me. I mean last summer, I did play Xbox a lot, but I’d had a job since January and I was going to be working full-time over the summer. I found it a little annoying that, at sixteen, adults still seemed to think of us as shiftless, spoiled kids.

“Anyway, Cassie’s in the barn. Don’t get bit, and mind the rules.”

We’d first come to the WRC in sixth-grade and we hadn’t realized then that we weren’t supposed to be in the barn. I mean in retrospect, it’s an animal hospital, and it’s kind of off-limits. But we didn’t see it that way when we were twelve. We just went where Cassie went, and Cassie showed us how she did her chores. By the time either of her parents had found out, we’d been in there for over two hours and had actually done half of Cassie’s chores for the day. In our twelve-year-old logic, we’d just wanted Cassie to be done so we could all go to the beach. So her parents set up ground rules, and we’d been allowed in the barn ever since. Cassie definitely appreciated the help off her chore load, and her parents thought it was part of their mission to foster our love of wildlife. Though I gotta be honest: after you muck out a stall a few times, the majesty of nature really starts to fade. And that’s just the horses.

Marco and I finally stepped into the barn after what felt like an hour of small talk with Cassie’s dad.

Cassie looked at us with barely restrained fear. “What took you guys?”

“Ran into your dad. Had to make small talk. So what happened?”
Cassie turned to Tobias.

“When I woke up, he was gone,” he said.

“What are we supposed to do now?” Cassie asked.

“Cassie, I’m not sure we need to do anything,” Marco said. “This is his war, and I think he knew he was putting us in danger last night. Leaving, keeping us out of it, I think that might be his way of saying thank you.”

That had a ring of truth to it. And in some ways I was a little glad. Don’t get me wrong, I had nothing against Elfangor. And a huge part of me was devastated that he was gone. But he wasn’t a pet, he was a soldier. And everything Marco had said about shady government agents locking us up in endless interrogation was probably true. And even if it wasn’t, even if the US government didn’t have some agency to handle an alien invasion, there were the Yeerks. And if we got caught with an Andalite combatant in Cassie’s barn… well, we’d seen what’d happened to his ship.

His ship…

“Tobias, did he take all those things from the ship with him?”

“I… I don’t know. I didn’t see them.”

We spent a few minutes retracing our steps in the barn. There was some screeching from a red-tailed hawk in one of the cages and a red fox kept staring at me as we made a quick search of the barn, but nowhere did we see any Andalite canisters.

“He needed me and Tobias to carry all that stuff. Wouldn’t he have needed to make more than one trip with it?”

“Jake, I have no clue. He morphed into the weirdest bird I’ve ever fucking seen. You don’t think he couldn’t turn into something with a little more cargo space?”

I tried not to laugh at that mental image. But Marco had a point. We knew shockingly little about him or his abilities, and as we checked all the nooks and crannies in the barn, I realized I had no idea the functions of any of the devices we were looking for. For all I knew, he had a stockpile of weapons and grenades and we’d given him some cover till the heat died down, and that was all he’d needed.

But that didn’t seem right either.

I didn’t know Elfangor well at all. But the things he’d said, the things he’d told us, none of it made sense if he just planned to leave. He brought us up to speed - well that’s being too generous - but he at least told us about the Yeerk invasion. And I couldn’t wrap my head around any scenario where the five of us knowing about it helped anyone. He had to have told us for a reason.

I sat down on a hay bale, and realized it had been the one I’d sat on last night when he’d played the hologram of the Yeerk home planet. He’d done something to the canister, and then we’d all seen the hologram.

I’d seen another hologram last night, though, hadn’t I? I remembered the photo of his family on the console of his ship.

“Come on, let’s go.”
The three of them looked at me. “We’re giving up?” Tobias asked.

“No,” I said. “I think I know where he might be.”

The four of us made our way down the footpath once more, and once again, this time under the midday sun, we crossed the Moore Creek Preserve.

“You really think he went back to his crash site?” Cassie asked.

“Honestly, I have no clue. But I have no better ideas.”

It turns out that, sometimes, I have good instincts.

We were about a hundred feet from the spot where his ship had crashed when we heard his soundless voice again.

<I thought you might find me here.>

I looked through the vegetation. It’s not really easy to determine the directionality of telepathy. But there, somewhat hidden behind a cluster of trees, was the unmistakable blue fur of an Andalite.

“What did you come back here?” Tobias asked “You said there’d be nothing but a few atoms of your ship after the Dracon beam.”

<That is precisely the reason I am here,> he said as he stepped into the clearing. The Preserve was remote, and while we did get some hikers out here every now and again, we were well of the trails, so we weren’t that worried of being spotted.

“Okay,” Marco said, “could you elaborate on that?”

<The items I salvaged emit a very faint energy signature. This could allow the Yeerks to track my location, or at the very least, the location of mission-critical technology and information.>

“And by burying it here, those trace atoms from your ship mask that signal?”

<Precisely. You are quite clever, Marco. You would have made an excellent cadet.>

That was weird. It was the first time Elfangor had called any of us by our given names. He’d called Cassie simply “the female” or referred to Marco only as “your friend” when I had spoken to him in the barn last night.

Marco had definitely noticed too. “You said my name.”

<Yes. Tobias has told me much about all of you.>

“I told him our names, that we go to school together, and a few other details.”

<I apologize if my absence caused you distress. I had much to do before dawn.>

“Wait, have you not slept yet?” Tobias asked.

Elfangor slouched visibly. His alien anatomy was kind of weird, but weirder still was how sometimes his gestures seemed very human. <Yes, and I am very tired. But I needed to graze, and I felt that assembling the communications array was paramount to my survival.>

“So you were out here all night building a communications array? How’d that go?” Marco asked.
“How do you eat without a mouth?” Cassie blurted.

All of us turned to look at her. Even Elfangor turned all four eyes to her. And the peal of telepathic laughter was electric. I’d already guessed that somehow this form of telepathy could carry his emotions as well as thoughts, but when he laughed, I could feel his joy. It felt like sunlight.

<There is much I could tell you about Andalite physiology had I the time. Life on my planet evolved differently than life on other planets. We absorb nutrients through our hooves.>

“So you eat through your feet?” I asked.

Cassie shrugged. “I know butterflies can taste with their feet. I guess it’s not that weird.”

“Moving on,” Marco said with impatience, “any luck contacting other Andalites?”

<Yes and no. I made contact with my Dome Ship shortly before you arrived. It suffered superficial damage and was forced to make an oceanic landing, and the ship is otherwise intact, but without substantial repairs, raising the ship is impractical. My brother, at least, has survived.>

“You brother was on the Dome Ship?” I asked. As if I knew what a Dome Ship was.

<Yes. He is only a cadet. I had ordered him to the Dome for his own safety… How foolish I was…>

“It’s not your fault…” Cassie started, but Elfangor held up his hand. He closed his main eyes while his stalk eyes turned away from us.

<I appreciate that you wish to comfort me, Cassie. But I was in command. This situation is of my own making.>

I didn’t know what to say to that. There was a lot I didn’t know, and I think that had to change. “Elfangor, what exactly happened before we found you last night?”

<The Yeerks have been on your planet for years. Their operation here far exceeded what we had known about in our intelligence reports. This planet is far from our homeworld, and as the Yeerk Empire has moved into deeper space, it has spread our military forces thin. I was in command of the Dome Ship sent to your planet. But we were ambushed in orbit. A Yeerk Blade Ship had been hidden from our sensors in a crater of your moon. By the time we able to mobilize the fleet… My friends, my brave soldiers…>

I could feel his loss, his pain. It had been his responsibility, his duty. And he had failed. He was crushing under the weight of that failure.

“Cassie’s right, Elfangor,” I said. “It wasn’t your fault. You were outgunned, caught off-guard. What could you have possibly done differently?”

The sense of regret didn’t fade. I didn’t expect it would. But I could feel his resolve growing. He turned his stalk eyes to me, and I couldn’t make out their expression, but I held eye contact with him.

<Well said, Jake. I can indulge in self-pity later, but now, now I am on my own, and I have much more to do.>

“Okay,” Tobias said, “what’s the plan?”
I have successfully made contact with my ship. It is still unknown if there may be other survivors, but I will leave that to Aximili for now. He is safe in the dome for now, and he has better communications capabilities there to deal with such concerns. I am on my own, deep in enemy territory.

“You’re not alone,” I said. “What can we do to help?”

“I cannot ask…”

“Oh, just shut it,” Marco snapped. “We’re in this, okay? You’re a blue furry alien, or have you forgotten? It’s not like you’re going to be able to get around town without us, is it?”

“You are not incorrect.”

“So what are the usual tactics for a Yeerk invasion?” I asked.

The Andalite shook his head. “Andalite tactics typically assume a position of military superiority. The Dome Ship would have been more than a match for the Yeerk Pool Ship. And without the orbital support of the Pool Ship, the Yeerk effort on your planet would have collapsed.”

“And now you’re reduced to a ground campaign with no resources other than those canisters from your ship,” Marco stated. It wasn’t really a question. And Marco's tone was biting.

“Correct. And I am embarrassed to admit it, but I have little training with surface tactics.”

Marco rolled his eyes. “Well, that’s just peachy.”

But Tobias seemed less fazed. “Marco, we were kinda screwed either way. Elfangor, the Yeerks? They have to have bases, weaknesses. What can you tell us?”

“They have bases. And they do have a critical weakness. Yeerks can only survive outside of their pools for approximately three days. They are not capable of absorbing Kandrona while they’re bonded to a host, so they must return to the pool regularly.”

“And where would we find a Yeerk pool?” Tobias asked.

“The location would be hidden, secured, and heavily guarded. But I believe if we found the pool, I could improvise an adequate explosive.”

Marco looked green. “It's bad enough we're hiding an alien. Now we're apparently helping an alien build an IED. This day is just getting better and better.”

“Um, how do we find the Yeerk pool?” Cassie asked.

“I do not know. Yeerks employ different tactics on each planet they encounter. The Hork-Bajir conflict was much different than their invasion forces on Earth.”

“You said they’ve been on Earth for years?” Marco asked. “How long, exactly?”

“The first contact with your planet was roughly twenty years ago.”

“Holy shit.”

“That was only first contact. Yeerks send scouting parties to various planets and then assimilate into the native cultures. They use that information to determine the viability of further conquest.”
“Viability?” Tobias asked.

<There are species in the galaxy that cannot be infested, others where native military forces make infestation too dangerous. The Yeerks have never before found a species like humans.>

“How do you mean?” Cassie asked.

<You are intelligent, you are dextrous, adaptable, you have limited technology, perhaps, compared to other species, but you are an industrial society. You have the ability to mine metals, to refine them. And you exist in tremendous numbers.>

There are seven and a half billion human beings on this planet. It is not possible to put a face to that. I know there are hundreds of languages, a multiplicity of languages, religions, and cultures. But there was a sickening realization just then that for all the grand achievements of the human race, the music, the art, the thousands of years of development from hunter-gatherers to the modern age, that the Yeerks saw the entirety of the human race as nothing more than a resource. That we were nothing more than apples on a tree, waiting to be cultivated, harvested, and inevitably cut up and made into pie.

Okay, that last part might be stretching the metaphor, but my point is that the Yeerks didn't see us for what we were; they saw only what they could make of us. And while apples are fine as they are, as far as the baker is concerned, they're only another ingredient in the pantry.

I can't put into words how that made me feel.

But then I heard something oddly familiar and all the same terrifying.

The sound of helicopters.

All of us turned to look at the clearing. I'll be honest, it's weird to have helicopters sneak up on you. They're not exactly quiet. But in my defense, you do hear helicopters every now and again, and I didn't recognize it as anything ominous until I realized I was hearing more than one.

There were three of them, but I couldn’t tell you what kind they were. I’m not the kind of kid that knows about that stuff; the entirety of my knowledge of avionics comes solely from Black Ops and other games. All I could tell is that they were black, though they didn't appear to be military, and they were spread apart by a decent margin. I'd guess there was maybe a mile or more between them. One, the helicopter in the middle, was tracing almost perfectly the path of Elfangor’s ship from the night before.

Just great.

“Elfangor?” Cassie said. She was worried. “I thought you said they weren't going to find you if you stayed here?”

<They won't. They are only tracing the ion trail of my ship. I believe they are not searching for me as much as they are confirming that there are no other ships in the area.>

“So you really are alone, huh?” Marco said.

Cassie punched him the shoulder.

Elfangor shook his head. <As you said, Marco, I am not alone.> Marco looked away, embarrassed.

“Between the blackout, the news coverage, and now aerial support, these Yeerks are deep in the
infrastructure,” Marco said. “Like League of Shadows deep.”

“Is that a video game?” Cassie asked.

“No, it’s a Batman Begins reference,” Tobias said. “Evil ninja cult embedded at every level of Gotham City, from the utilities crews to the prison guards.”

I wondered what Elfangor thought of that, a group of kids idly talking about fictional characters. I wondered how much of what we said made any sense to him. Did Andalites even have fictional characters?

But Marco was right. We only had Elfangor’s guess that the Yeerks had been extending the blackout, and I couldn't ever know for sure if that cop had been a Controller. But the news article, the helicopters, it was becoming very clear that this alien conspiracy was connected.

The news article…

“If we could find someone we absolutely knew to be a Controller, could we follow them back to the Yeerk pool?” I asked.

<In theory, yes. It could potentially take three days before the Controller went to the Pool, and the individual would need to be under near-constant surveillance, but that may be our best opportunity.>

“Yeah, but how exactly are we going to find someone that’s definitely for-sure a Controller?” Tobias asked.

“Oh, that should be easy,” I said, aware I was smiling. “We’re going to call the number they put in the news.”

Chapter End Notes

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“This is insane!” Marco said, for what seemed to be the thousandth time.

“Marco, that’s wearing thin,” I said, “I mean, seriously, is that going to be your catchphrase? You’re just going to go around challenging everyone’s mental health, now? Dude, stop it with your micro-aggressions and give me my safe space.”

Marco stared at me, his mouth agape and his eyes unfocused. Then he let out a laugh like he’d been holding it in for hours. “I fucking hate you, Jake.”

“Dude, remember to breathe.”

“I can’t!” he said amid his giggle fit.

“Marco, girls are watching.”

And as though I’d flipped a switch, Marco reigned in the laughter. He was still laughing, but he was quieter, and he regained his composure.

We were downtown, at the main gate for the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. The Boardwalk is a small amusement park built right on the beach. It’s about half a mile of various rides, roller coasters, arcade games, and there’s a laser tag place Marco and I go to once in a while. It’s a great place to spend a day, really. It didn’t look at all weird for a group of teenagers to be hanging out here on a Saturday in late May, and honestly we might have been here today had we not ended up on alien business.

But the real reason we were here was because of the payphone.

The cell phone industry had inexorably whittled away at payphones, and they were becoming rarer each passing year. But there was one by Gate 3, right outside the Looff Carousel.

The plan was pretty straightforward, but now that I was here, I felt my heart racing.

I looked across the street to the surf shop on the corner - screw Huntington Beach, Santa Cruz is always going to be Surf City - and saw Tobias and Cassie hanging out, pretending to look at swimsuits and surfwear. Marco was the only one of us that was seriously into surfing, but after his mom had drowned, he was understandably a little hesitant about the water.

Lastly, I looked at the osprey circling overhead. We couldn’t very well bring Elfangor with us as an Andalite, and the only animal in Cassie’s barn that wouldn’t look out of place at the beach had
been an osprey. Getting Elfangor to the barn had been a bit of a challenge, and we’d driven the few miles to the beach with Cassie holding Elfangor on a towel in her lap, which I think was awkward for all involved. The morphing thing was still weird to me, and watching an alien centaur turn into a bird was nearly sickening. Still, as I watched him on the wing, I couldn’t help but wonder what it felt like to fly.

Elfangor explained that he could only stay in morph for two hours, and it had taken about twenty minutes to get here.

I hoped this would go quickly.

I made a mental note of how weird it was to be holding my cell phone in one hand while putting quarters in the pay phone. The phone rang about four or five times before someone picked up. It was a woman’s voice. “Hello, how can I help you?”

Moment of truth. “Hey, my friend said you guys wanted any information about the satellite that crashed.”

“Yes, that’s right. Our science department is trying to gather as much debris as possible for testing.”

“Well, I was out near the Moore Creek Preserve last night, and that didn’t look like a satellite to me.”

My heart was pounding over the stunned silence on the other end of the line.

“Yes, um, let me transfer you to our other line. May I have your name, please, sir?”

And that’s when I hung up.

“So now we wait, huh?” Marco asked.

“That’s pretty much it, yeah,” I said, trying to sound as nonchalant as I could.

The plan had simply been to call in, say something incriminating, and then hang up. As Marco was all too quick to point out, they’d trace the call immediately. Which was why I’d chosen to use the payphone on the Boardwalk. It meant that they’d have to physically send someone here to look for us.

It wasn’t a great plan. In retrospect, there were way too many holes in the plan. But if the Yeerks were as deep into the infrastructure as we thought they were, I was confident they’d send someone to check out the tip pretty quickly.

I checked my phone again. I decided to call Rachel and tell her what was going on. I was too paranoid to really talk about the alien invasion over the phone, but I’d told her we were at the Boardwalk trying to help Al. She cursed me out a bit that she was missing it, but I told her all we were doing is making a call and waiting to hear back from some people. The wait and see approach didn’t seem to appeal to her as much, though she still wanted to be with us.

“Maybe I’ll convince mom to take us down there when she gets back,” she said.

“No clue how long we're going to be here,” I reminded.

“Fine,” she said and hung up. I'd be mad too if I was missing out on alien bonding time.
Though to be fair, though, we weren’t really connecting to Elfangor on any kind of personal level. We knew very little about him, honestly. I looked up at the osprey again, only to see that Elfangor had apparently given up on circling in favor of perching on the roof of the surf shop. I think we were the only ones that had even noticed him, really. His eyes were focused on the pay phone.

I texted Cassie that I’d made the call. In a few more minutes, Tobias and Cassie were there with us, idly standing next to the gate of the Boardwalk. Cassies was holding a little shopping bag from the surf shop.

“So what do we do now?” Cassie asked.

I wasn’t sure of that myself. The biggest glitch here was that there wasn’t really any good place to just sit and wait. We didn’t want to be seen by the Controllers if or when they showed up. I didn’t want to hang out in the surf shop, so that meant we were going to stay in the Boardwalk. The Boardwalk itself is admission-free, and we weren’t there to hit any rides. Marco and I already had season passes, so did Rachel for that matter. Maybe I’d treat Cassie and Tobias to passes for the summer. I had a hunch it would be a good place to bring Cassie for a date, and I figured Tobias might like having somewhere to go besides the movie theatre.

“We stay here. We can hang out here at the carousel. You guys feel like ice cream?”

The ice cream booth at the corner still allowed a good line of sight to the payphone, and I was halfway through a chocolate cone when I saw someone walk up to the payphone.

“Guys, someone’s here.”

Marco almost dropped his ice cream, but he turned and looked. “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

I had about the same reaction. I recognized the man standing there, scanning the crowd. He was tall, slender, and balding. He wore wireframe glasses, and he looked out of place without his suit and tie, but all of recognized Vice Principal Hendrick Chapman.

“Are we sure he’s here because of the phone call?” Cassie asked.

I was. He looked around the carousel area and didn’t leave the payphone more than a few feet. It was very obvious he was looking for someone. “It really looks that way,” I said.

“Huh,” Tobias said. “So we were right, our principal is an alien.”

“Not the time for jokes, T,” I said. “Come on, we don’t want him to find us.”

“What about Elfangor?” Marco asked.

“He’s a bird,” Cassie said. “Trust me, he can keep track of Chapman from the air, and he knows where Jake parked.”

We made our way toward Gate 2, the cable cars of the Sky Glider overhead to the left, past the Pizza Hut on our right, past Fright Walk and the Pirate Ship to the multi-colored #2 sign by Sun Shops.

All in all, it looked like our plan had worked better than expected. I saw Elfangor on the wing again, flying around the Boardwalk. My friends and I headed back to the parking lot to the SUV. I wished there was a way to signal Elfangor. All I could do was wave and hope he figured out I wanted him to follow us.
He apparently understood, because by the time we got back to the SUV in the parking lot, there was an osprey on the luggage rack.

<Are we not supposed to follow the Controller?> he asked.

I shook my head. “No need. We know that guy, he works at our school. We already know where he lives, so there’s no need to follow him.”

<I understand. I am sorry. It is difficult to discover people you know are slaves to the Yeerks.>

“It’s been almost an hour since you morphed. We should get you back to the barn, maybe stop and see if we can pick up Rachel.”

“Yeah, but now what?” Tobias asked. “We know Chapman’s a Controller, but how are we supposed to spy on him?”

I shrugged. “I don’t have a clue, guys. I’m making this up as we go.”

“The payphone was a good plan, Jake,” Marco said. It was a little surprising, really. He was so dead-set against us getting involved, but for all his blustering about how terrible this was, he hadn’t backed out yet. Still, it made me smile.

“Thanks, man. Your turn, what now?”

He shook his head. “Cassie, will we be intruding if we go back to your place? Is your dad going to get weird if we’re hanging out there?”

“He shouldn’t.” Then she laughed to herself, and idea occurring to her. “Tell him you get detention and need twenty hours of community service.”

“Cassie, you salty minx.”

“Alright, jerks and Cassie. Everyone in the death trap. We have to go get Rachel, come up with a plan, and Marco and I have to go to work at four, so we have to keep this moving.”

I was on the way to Cassie’s barn yet again when Elfangor spoke.

<It is good to have friends..>

I sighed. It was still heavy, realizing how much Elfangor had lost when he met us. I had gone through a little bit of real-world training in grief when Marco’s mom died. Two years later, and he was still dealing with it. He always would be dealing with it. I dared to ask, “Do you want to tell us about them?”

<My friends?>

“Yeah, what were their names?”

<Marco reminds me of my friend Arbron. We were friends since our days at the academy.>

“Was Arbron on the ship, too?” Tobias asked.

The osprey turned to look at him. <No, Arbron… Arbron was lost in battle years ago.>

“I’m sorry,” I said. I could feel the heat of the tears standing in my eyes.
“Well, when we get you back to Cassie’s place, you can call your brother. See if there are any new developments with the Dome Ship, maybe he contacted other survivors.”

“Well, optimism is all I have right now,” I said. “We’ll help you as much as we can, Elfangor. But we’re new to the whole alien war thing. I still don’t know how we’re going to spy on Chapman for seventy-two hours. It’s not like we can turn into animals.”

“No, no you can’t…,” he said. He sounded strange just then, like I’d said something that upset him.

“We’re here. You guys wait here, I’ll see if Rachel’s free.”

“Why didn’t you call first?” Cassie asked.

“Honestly, Cass, Aunt Nicole is a lot less likely to say no to my face.”

She laughed. “Then shouldn’t I come in, too, shouldn’t I?”

“Yes, come on. Let’s do this. Elfangor, try to watch the talons on the car seat.”

“I will try, but I make no promises.” Maybe it was my imagination, but I had the distinct impression that Elfangor was becoming a wiseass on us. I chose to blame Marco.

I knocked on Rachel’s front door. Aunt Nicole opened the door and gave me a hug.

“Jake, good to see you. Cassie, how are you? Rachel tells me you two finally pulled the trigger.”

I saw Cassie blush. I was actually glad she was there though. It was refreshing to have company in the humiliation. Aunt Nicole looks like an older version of Rachel, same blonde hair, same blue eyes, same features.

“Alright, I’ll stop. So what brings you guys over?”

“I wanted to see if Rachel wanted to go over to Cassie’s. Her dad doesn’t know about us yet, so if Rachel comes…”

“Oh, I understand. You should’ve seen your grandfather when he found out I was dating your Uncle Dan. Fathers always seem to forget how they were at that age. Cassie, go talk to your mom. I’m sure she can tell you stories. Anyway, I’ll go grab Rachel.”

About ten minutes later, we were all getting out of the SUV and walking up the path to the crash site. Rachel was not in a good mood. For one, she was not happy that she kept getting saddled with her younger siblings. Jordan and Sara could be a bit of a handful, I knew. Second, she was mad that we all went to the Boardwalk without her. Not that we did anything there, but she wasn’t at all okay being left out. And third, she was livid that Chapman was a Controller. It hit her more than anyone else, because aside from Cassie, Rachel’s best friend was Chapman’s daughter, Melissa.

Elfangor had already demorphed from his osprey form and was once again in his normal Andalite body. I wasn’t sure I’d ever get used to hanging out with an alien.

“So how long does it take you to contact your brother?” Tobias asked.
“The communications array takes some time,” Elfangor admitted, “But I think I may have a more pressing matter for you to consider.”

“Oh?”

Elfangor held up the canister I had carried the other night, the heavy one I thought would give me cancer. I had no clue how he opened it. There were no seams on the canister that I had seen, but it was alien technology, so what did I know? As it opened, we were all bathed in bright blue light.

Inside was a glowing blue cube.

“This is the Escafil Device,” he said. “It is the device that imparts the morphing ability to Andalites. I know that you are young. I know that we are few. And I know that you have no power with which to resist the Controllers. So, if you wish, I can give you the power to morph.”

“W-Wait,” Marco said, “you mean morph, like you do? Turn into animals?”

“Yes. Anything you touch, you could then become. It requires concentration and determination, but, if you are strong, you can do it. There are limitations. Problems. Dangers, even. But first, you must decide whether or not to receive this power.”

Rachel nodded. “Let’s do it!”

“Whoa, wait,” Marco said. “Aren’t you being a little rash? What kind of dangers?”

“Yes. Anything you touch, you could then become. It requires concentration and determination, but, if you are strong, you can do it. There are limitations. Problems. Dangers, even. But first, you must decide whether or not to receive this power.”

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Rachel nodded. “Let’s do it!”

“I’m in,” Cassie said firmly. “This is our planet, these are our people, and if we can help Elfangor fight the Yeerks, then I think we have no choice.”

“I’m in, too,” Tobias said.

“Jake?” Marco asked. “What do you think?”

“I can’t decide for you, Marco.”

“Don’t deflect, Jake. I didn’t ask you to decide for me. If you’re going to do this, I want to know why. Give me a reason. Make it a good one.”

I sighed. I wasn’t sure why they kept looking to me. “Marco, I’m not sure why I want to do this. I’m not special. I’m not trying to save the world like Cassie. I’m not politically active, I don’t give a shit about all that much. I’m not smart like you, Marco. I’m not gifted, or artistic like Tobias. I’m never going to play varsity like Tom. I go to school, I go to work, and I do what I have to do. And no, I don’t want to do this, but I think we have to do this. Like Cassie said, this is our planet. If not us, then who else?”
I felt heat on my face. I looked at Cassie, and she smiled at me like she was proud.

“And so I guess this is it, then. An alien and five idiot teenagers with a death wish.”

Chapter End Notes

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“How does this work?” I asked Elfangor.

<The activation process is simple enough. Simply place a hand upon a face of the cube.>

I’ll be honest, I wasn’t thrilled with that idea, simple as it sounded. I had been a little wary of carrying the cylinder, and this cube was definitely putting out some kind of energy. I could feel it. You know how people say they can feel the electricity in the air before a thunderstorm? It was like that, but so much more concentrated. Maybe I was imagining it, but I could swear I felt a deep hum through all the tissues of my body.

But I held out a hand. The others joined me. It was a little reassuring that all of them had the same trepidations that I had. It made me feel a little better that I wasn’t the only one afraid to touch the cube.

I cannot begin to describe the experience accurately. It was as if every cell in my body was being electrocuted and deep-tissue massaged all at one. The power surged through me, I could feel it in my eyes, in my toes, in my freaking teeth.

All of us fell backwards.

“Fuck me sideways!” Marco blurted, eloquently.

“Cockass sons of bitches!” Rachel exclaimed. I didn’t know her to be so heavy on the profanity, but I was beyond curse words myself.

“Hot dildo monkeys!” Now that one shocked me almost as much as the cube. I have never, ever in my life known Cassie to curse.

The part that’s really hard to put into words is that it hurt every bit as much as it felt like pure bliss. It’s like getting soaking in ice water and being burned alive at the same time. It was hot and cold, literally anything my nerves were capable of experiencing, they experienced.

It hurt more than anything ever had, and I immediately wanted to touch it again.

<Apologies. I should have warned you there would be some neurosynaptic feedback. It passes in a few moments.>

“Jesus Christ,” Cassie breathed. “That’s… that’s not right, Elfangor.”
“Why did you not get shocked?” Tobias asked. He and I were the only ones to get through the process without swearing.

<I’ve already been exposed to the Escafil technology. It is something that only happens the first time.>

“So now what? We just touch an animal and we can turn into it?”

<Essentially. You have to concentrate on the creature you are acquiring, and you must visualize the process mentally. It takes a fair degree concentration, both to initiate the morphing process, and to control it.>

“Control it?” I asked.

<While in morph, you would have all the natural instincts of the creature. Sometimes this is beneficial, others not as much. For example, the natural abilities of the - you said it is called an osprey, yes? - enabled me to fly. It is certainly not a skill I have as an Andalite. But conversely, its natural instincts made it uncomfortable to travel in your human vehicle.>

“How does this work, anyway?” Marco asked.

“Yeah, I’m not really a science buff, but I’m kinda curious about that, too,” Rachel said.

<There are actually laws among my people that make it illegal to offer this technology, but the punishments for explaining it would be far worse.>

“You broke the law to give us this?”

Elfangor looked at me with those bright green eyes. In many ways, talking to him was something like talking to an android. He actually reminded me a little of Data from the Star Trek: Next Generation reruns I used to watch with my dad. But he had this way of quirking his head, of moving his eyes. It really looked like he was smiling through his eyes.

<If I die on this planet,> he said in a surprisingly upbeat tone, <then my government cannot punish me.>

Tobias laughed. “It’s not illegal if you don’t get caught, huh? Does anyone else think it’s weird that we got alien technology with a shoplifter’s mentality?”

“Seconded,” Marco said. “But does that mean you won’t tell us how it works?”

<The rules of my people have little bearing. In truth, the underlying principles of the technology are orders of magnitude beyond human comprehension of quantum mechanics.>

“So we’re not smart enough to understand it? That it?” Rachel said with her arms crossed.

Elfangor seemed to parse that for a long moment. <Today, when we went to the beach, we traveled in Jake’s vehicle. This technology is familiar to you, yes?>

“Duh, I’m not stupid.”

<Explain to me the technology underlying human transportation.>

Rachel blanked. “What?”

<I wish to illustrate a point. Please, could you explain how Jake’s vehicle works.>
“Whuh, I… Seriously? Fine. The engine runs on gasoline. It’s mixed with oxygen and ignited inside compression chambers, and the expanding gases move pistons to move a crankshaft.”

Tobias looked surprised, but Marco, Cassie, and I knew better. Rachel is not a dumb, frilly blonde. She is way more into cars than I am, really.

<Do you know the chemical composition of gasoline? Do you know the processes involved in combustion? Do you know the metallurgical specifications of the internal components?>

“Uh, no, should I? I mean it does what I need it to do, and I get the gist of it.”

<This is the way I understand the morphing technology. It took Escafil a lifetime to develop this technology, and I only understand some of the principles, but much of it is beyond my understanding, and the extent to which I do understand is still likely more than you would comprehend.>

“Well can you give us anything? What’s the simplest you could make it?” Marco asked.

<The device imparts to the user something you would most closely equate to nanotechnology.>

“We have nanites in our systems? Cool.” I was astounded with Tobias’s ability to roll with things. He just made peace with everything as it came.

<The technology is powered through zero-space resonance fields. Essentially you create a clone of the source creature, and any difference in mass is compensated through z-space extrusion.>

“Z-space extrusion?” I asked.

<Z-space is a source of limitless energy. Energy can be condensed into mass.>

“E=mc2, huh?” Marco scoffed.

<Between the z-space fields, the genetic analysis, and the biological cellular acceleration, this is by far the most complex technology my people have ever developed.>

I didn't know what to say to that. But I had to say something. We were given access to what Elfangor had said could perhaps be the greatest accomplishment of his people. “We’re honored that you would share this with us.”

Elfangor did the smiling eyes thing again. <You are most welcome.>

“I hate to cut this short, but we have work tonight.”

Marco was right. We had a shift from five to one. “So, we know Chapman is a Controller. We need to keep tabs on him for the next seventy-two hours, right?”

<Yes. The Yeerk must return to the pool within that timeframe.>

“Well today is Saturday. We’re probably going to be okay for the weekend, but what are we going to do for Monday?” Tobias asked.

I looked at Elfangor. How were we going to get an alien to school? “Monday is a problem for later. For all we know, Chapman is at the pool now. Three days could potentially be Tuesday. The sooner we have him on surveillance, the better.” But as I said that, I had a thought. “Elfangor, how long can your brother stay in the Dome Ship?”
The ship is very well supplied. Even assuming the atmospherics have been compromised, he would have enough food, water, and oxygen for a month, if not longer.

“But we can't leave him alone at the bottom of the ocean. We do have to get him, don't we?”

Elfangor nodded. "His location is known, and he is a considerable distance offshore. It will be challenging to reach him."

“So for now, we focus on Chapman. Ideas?"

“I can call Melissa, see if she's okay with me staying over.”

The idea of Rachel spending all night in the home of a known alien parasite didn't sit well with me at all. “Are you sure? You know if Chapman's one of them, then Melissa could be one, too.”

She nodded, her face resolute. “That's why I want to go.”

“I don't like the thought of you going alone.”

“She won't be alone.”

We all looked at Tobias. He was usually so quiet, so reserved. But ever since Elfangor, he had been stepping up when the moment called.

Rachel shook her head. “Melissa isn't going to just have boys over.”

Tobias looked at a red-tailed hawk sitting in a cage beside him. “I wasn't planning on showing up at the front door.”

That got a round of bare silence. “Dude, you're sure about this?”

“Look, someone's going to have to go first, Jake. The sooner we try this out the sooner we can get used to it.”

His words hit me harder than I would've thought possible. Not because they were profound but because he tore down the thoughts within my own head. I hadn't formed the idea into words yet, but hearing Tobias speak, I realized I had been afraid. I was worried if we did this, if we morphed, even just once, that we were signing up for the Andalite's war. I knew we were talking about spying on our vice principal, I knew we were already involved. But I hadn't had enough time from the cube to now to put it together just how deep we were getting. This wasn't just helping Elfangor. This was joining him.

But Tobias was not wrong. We were going to have to get used to this.

“Okay. Rachel, you okay with some aerial back-up?”

She shrugged. “I guess.”

Tobias placed his head gingerly into the cage. The hawk didn't move, but Tobias was very much aware of that razor sharp beak.

<Concentrate on the animal. The technology will do the rest.>

His fingers touched the hawk, and the hawk seemed to deflate somewhat. Cassie started moving immediately.
<Do not worry. The animal is fine. There is a cataleptic effect to the acquisition process. Tobias, do you feel the animal?>

He nodded. “That was kind of a rush. I felt like a pulse of energy.”

“Like the cube?” Cassie asked.

I was curious about that myself.

“No, not like the cube. This was… I can't explain it. Like a vibration, maybe? It didn't shock me or anything.”

<Are you ready to try morphing?>

“Ready as I'll ever be.”

<Concentrate on the change, and it will happen.>

Tobias closed his eyes and for a second, nothing happened. But then we saw the hairs of his arms dissolve away. His skin goosebumps, and from the follicles, little plastic-like translucent quills poked through. He looked like a cactus. The quills on his forearms expanded faster, longer. It was almost like he had pencils jutting out from the skin, and the quills extended further still.

His hands melted into almost fetal stumps as the bones in his fingers fused. The bones in his forearm arched, bowing. The sound of it was sickening.

“Tobias, you doing okay?”

But he didn't answer me. He couldn't.

His face extruded outward and his nose and upper lip merged. The skin became glossy and hardened, like it had become plastic as well. His eyes turned gold, his neck lengthened.

And as his chest bones bulged to become a wishbone, he started to shrink.

He disappeared into his t-shirt, and I bent down to pick it up. I'm not sure why. I could say it was so we didn't have a hawk panicking as it was trapped in clothes, but honestly I wasn't thinking that far ahead.

The small chicken boy under the shirt was a horror.

But the quills had become fuzzier as the games of the feathers finally exploded outward. The colors of the feathers deepened, going from a translucent waxy color to whites, browns, and reds.

The hawk screamed, and then beat its wings and flew up into the rafters.

“Tobias!”

I felt Elfangor's hand on my shoulder. <The first time in a morph is always the most extreme. Give him a few minutes. Tobias, you know us. Concentrate.>

The hawk turned its head about thirty degrees one way then the other. Birds have more bones in their neck I was to find out later, so that they could twist in ways human necks simply couldn't. The hawk beat its wings again, then settled.

<Holy shit. Holy shit, I'm a hawk. Guys, I'm a hawk!>
“You're doing the telepathy thing that Elfangor does,” Marco noted.

<I am?>

<The technology preserves our thought speech.>

“But how can Tobias do it? He's not an Andalite.”

<All communication originates in the brain. Whether a species communicates vocally, chemically, or through other means, the ideas originate in the brain. Your species is not able to link mind to mind in the sense that my species does, but the mechanics of thought speech is nearly universal. As you speak, the speech centers of your brain activate. My species is simply able to perceive that phenomena.>

“So, can you read my thoughts?”

<Only if you wish me to hear them. It is how I can understand your language.>

“So when we're in morph… Can Tobias hear my thoughts?”

<Yeah, dude. I can, and I don’t appreciate you perving. I don't need you looking up my tailfeathers.>

“Shut it, Ten-Piece!” I called, stifling laughter.

<No, only if the creature is natively capable of thought speech.> Elfangor said, seemingly amused.

“Other aliens can thought speak?” Cassie asked.

<It is not unique to Andalites, but only a handful of other species communicate in this fashion. Verbal communication is far more common. Other species communicate chemically, and some even through electromagnetic fields.>

I looked at Tobias, perched menacingly in the rafters. “Are you going to be okay in morph?”

<The hawk instincts were a bit disorienting, but I think I got this.>

<Remember, you can only stay in morph for two hours.>

<I got it, I got it. Two hours. Rachel, would you mind setting an alarm on your phone? An hour forty, please?>

“As you wish, hawk boy.”

“Has Melissa answered your text?” I asked. “Is your mom cool with it?”

“Yeah, Melissa actually seems kinda excited. And mom's cool with it. Cassie, you wanna come?”

“I might come over later, but I have chores to finish here and church in the morning so I can't spend the night.”

“Jake, we have to get going,” Marco said. “It's after three.”

I nodded. We both needed to go home and change for work, not to mention drop Rachel off at Chapman's before our shift. “Tobias, you may as well demorph. No sense eating up your time limit till Rachel gets over there.”
<I can fly off ahead of you guys. If you want.>

I thought about it. I’d already said the sooner we had eyes on Chapman, the better. Still, I was worried about Tobias going out on his first morph alone. Maybe I was paranoid, maybe I was just cynical, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that something bad was going to happen.

I looked at the pile of clothes on the barn floor. “Tobias, you realize you're going to be naked when you demorph, right.”

Tobias turned his hawk head to his clothes. <Fuck. I had not thought of that.>

<The z-space field is mutable. With practice, you should be able to extend the field enough to morph clothing.>

“Tobias, fine, just go. I’ll grab your clothes. Marco, Rachel, go wait in the car. Elfangor, you need to call your brother and get some sleep. You're gonna have to let us take this one, tonight,” I said.

<Yes. Let us hope that Aximili has good news.>

Rachel and Marco headed out to the SUV and I started picking up Tobias’s clothes. Elfangor began morphing. His blue fur turned tan, his human arms were absorbed into his chest. His face elongated, and his stalk eyes went rigid, extending and branching. In about a few minutes, he had become a black-tailed deer, a buck. The osprey hadn't been the only animal he'd acquired this morning. We figured if we were going to have bring an alien in and out of the barn on a quasi-regular basis, he needed to be able to blend in a little better.

And just like that, he was gone. Deer are amazingly agile, and it took but a few bounds for him to disappear out if the barn and into the wooded creek bed beyond.

And Cassie and I were alone for the first time since last night.

“So…,” I said awkwardly.

“Yeah. So.”

“Is this as weird for you as it is for me?” I asked.

She laughed. “Which part? The shape-shifting alien part, that our principal is an alien, or the dating thing?”

“The alien stuff is easier.”

She arched an eyebrow. God, she was cute. “Aliens are easier than dating?”

I shrugged. “I don't know. Maybe the reality of it hasn't set in yet. Elfangor needed help, and we helped him. We needed information, and we figured out a way to get it. There's a next step, you know? Like I could tell what was supposed to come next. But this, us, I… I really like you and I don't want to screw this up.”

She kissed me on the cheek. “You were my first kiss, Jake. Did you know that?”

I felt her arms around my shoulders as she let me hold her. “You were mine.”

“My dad is a little overprotective. I don't know how to talk to him about us.”

“I'm not going to push,” I said.
She put her hand on my chest. I was sure she could feel my heart pounding. “But what if I want you to push?”

“Oh, you’re bad, Cassandra.”

“Go to work, fearless leader. I have chores. I'll text you.”

I kissed her once more, savoring the taste of her on my lips.

“I'll miss you,” I said.

“Oh, look who's suddenly just a puppy. Go to work, before we get caught.”

I gave my mom a hug as I came in. I had dropped off Rachel and Marco so they could both get ready. I’d be picking both of them up again in about an hour or so.

“Hey, Jake, haven’t seen you yet today,” Mom said.

“Yeah, went to the Boardwalk with my friends for a bit. Wanted to hang out with Cassie.”

“Oh, so your father wasn’t lying, huh? You do have a girlfriend.”

“I… Mom, I’m not sure. I really like Cassie. But we’ve been friends forever. I spent so much time trying to figure out how to get out of the friend zone, I don’t think I really thought about what’d come next.”

She laughed. “Ah, the drama of young love. Everything is always such a crisis in your first relationship.” My mom is a couples therapist. That’s probably relevant. “You’re learning. And I’m glad you feel you can talk to me about it. I couldn’t talk to my parents about dating till I was in college. The only thing I’m going to say for now is go slow. I know all the lovey-dovey-touchy stuff is new to you - it had better be new to you, young man - but don’t forget she’s still your friend.”

“She’s still my friend, mom. I still want to hang out with her with Marco, Rachel, and Tobias.”

“Tobias.” Mom made a face.

Mom liked Tobias. She actually really liked Tobias. And that was the problem. Before his mom had vanished, our moms had been best friends. She’d gone baby shopping with her, taken the two of us to the zoo together, and so on. She and Loren had been nearly inseparable the way I’d heard it. And I don’t think anyone besides Tobias missed her more than my mom. In a way, I wonder if my mom didn’t miss her more. Tobias had only been eight years old when she vanished, and my mom had known her for a long time by then.

“Mom, you okay?”

“I’m okay,” she said, wistfully. “I’m okay.”

“Mom?” I asked. “Do you…,” I sighed and just went for it. “Do you still have your old photo
albums? The ones with Tobias’s mom?”

I could see the emotions etch across her face. If I’d slapped her, I don’t think she’d have been any more stunned. “I...I still have them. Why?”

“Tobias. It’s been a long time, mom. I know you miss your friend. But I honestly don’t think Tobias has seen his mom’s face in years. I was wondering—”

She pulled me close and held me like I was a little boy. She kissed the top of my head like she used to do when I was little. “You’re a good kid, Jake.” She wiped tears from her eyes. “You’re off next weekend, right? Invite Tobias over. I think it’s overdue we had a talk.”

I went upstairs and grabbed my work clothes. I was headed to the shower when I ran into Tom in the hallway.

“Hey, squirt,” he said.

“So, you had a late night, too, huh?” I asked. I had yet to get any kind of explanation for his late night weekends.

“Yeah, I’ve been volunteering at The Sharing on weekends. Dad didn’t tell you?”

I shook my head. The Sharing is on par with The Boys & Girls Club. It’s a community outreach program and there’s a few chapters in the Greater Bay Area. “What got you involved in The Sharing?”

“What else? Girls.”

I rolled my eyes. I had nothing to say to that, really. I couldn’t blame him or anything. “So why were you out so late?”

“Checking up on me, squirt?”

“No, but you said to cover for you, and I don’t think Mom would need excuses if you were volunteering.”

He shrugged. “We were working till about ten or so, and then decided to hit the beach for a bit of senior time. A lot of my friends are leaving soon.”

That made sense. My last day was Thursday, the Eighth of June. But Tom’s graduation ceremony was next weekend. That’s why I had off. But I hadn’t given much thought to how life was changing for Tom after high school. I didn’t know what to say to him.

“I gotta get a shower before work and I have to pick up Marco and drop Rachel off at Melissa’s before we go in.”

“Now you see why I didn’t want the car?” Tom said. Tom either took the bus, rode his bike, or got someone to pick him up. And that someone, often as not, was me.

It was maybe forty-five minutes later that I was once again in my SUV, Marco riding shotgun, and Rachel in the center row, holding her backpack. The Chapman house was only a few blocks from the movie theater and fortunately for what we were doing, there was a small grove of trees adjoining his property. The plan was that we would stop a little short of Chapman’s house and hide Tobias’s stuff in the underbrush. That part was going to hinge on Rachel being able to find Tobias and get his attention.
That turned out to be a non-issue though. Within a minute of letting Rachel out, a hawk had swooped out of the trees on the other side of Chapman’s house. Hawks see very well, and they don’t miss much. Tobias had seen us coming the second I had turned the corner.

We waved to Rachel as we headed to work. We parked in the same garage as yesterday, and we walked the same few blocks as always. We were actually just a few minutes early.

The beginning part of the shift is always the most intense. We were about an hour before the next showing, and the last of the matinee tickets had been sold.

We spent the next few hours shilling popcorn, nachos, and fountain drinks. I cleaned the bathrooms while Marco swept the lobby and hallways.

We made some small talk with our coworkers. We joked that Craig had come to work stoned again. The shift wore on, and I felt normal. It was easy enough to forget about alien invasions and Elfangor alone in the woods when the real world was keeping you busy. It was easy because those things still seemed unreal.

It was hard to include Elfangor in the same reality as popcorn and ticket prices. I looked at the movie posters along the walls, the bright marquis lights in the lobby, the smells and sounds of a normal everyday cinema.

This was the world I knew. It was the reality I accepted without questioning it.

But Elfangor was real too.

I couldn't just forget about him when the moment changed. This was my life as I knew it, and I knew some part of my brain was trying to forget the unspoken dangers of what we had gotten into in the last twenty-four hours.

God, what had I gotten into?

Chapter End Notes
Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
“Jake? Hey, Jake, you here, man?”

I jerked and looked up from the snack counter. “Yeah, sorry. Spacing out.”

Craig smiled. “And they rip on me for toking.”

“Eat it, Craig,” I said with a smile. I yawned and stretched. Normally six hours of sleep would’ve been enough, but my school-to-work combo took it out of me even before we had to save an alien. Plus I hadn’t eaten anything since Marco had made brunch that morning. “I’m just tired. Long shift after school yesterday.”

“Yeah, I hear ya. I’m heading out, man. Catch you later.”

I looked at the time. I’d been at work more than five hours already. I was tired, I was hungry, and I was worried to the point of distraction.

“Marco, did I take my break yet?” I honestly couldn’t remember if I had or hadn’t.

“No yet, Jake. Get something to eat, have some caffeine, clear your head.”

We get one free meal per shift, and I grabbed a handful of chicken tenders, some fries, and smothered the plate in nacho cheese. Don’t judge me. I got a Coke from the machine and took a seat in the break room. It was quiet already, and I was glad. I’d been on autopilot for hours and if you’ve never hit full auto, it’s a little jarring when you wake up and realize you haven’t actually been asleep.

I had a few missed texts. I checked Cassie’s first. She had sent a few asking how work was going, and said she was headed to Melissa’s. I texted her back that work was going okay, that I had spaced out half my shift, and that I was worried about Rachel. She sent me a heart emoji and I sent her one back.

“I miss you,” I texted.

She sent the kiss emoji, and I sent it back. “I have to check on Rachel. BRB.”

Rachel had texted a bit, but not much. Apparently Melissa was a bit depressed lately. She said her parents were noticeably distant, wink-wink. It sounded like she had noticed the change in not only her father, but her mother as well. That didn’t bode well. Chapman being a Controller had far-reaching implications. We’d seen that they had at least some pull in local news, in the astronomy
department at UCSC, and if Chapman was one of them, I couldn’t escape asking how many teachers could be Controllers? How many parents at our school?

But it seemed - from what Rachel texted, at least - like Melissa was not a Controller.

Not yet, at least. Oh, good, Mister Positive, aren’t we, Jake?

She said she had seen Tobias twice and they apparently had developed a system of her signaling his time limit through Melissa's bedroom window. The girls - Cassie was there for now - were apparently watching some gushy romance movie.

There wasn't much I could do from work, and I didn't really need the play-by-play of a rom-com. I told Cassie to text me when she got home.

I finished eating and took my cup with me back to the snack counter. “Marco, you eat yet?”

“I'm good for now, grab a hot dog and a pretzel later. How are you doing? I haven’t seen you this zoned out in a while.”

I shrugged. “I'm not sure. There was a coolness factor at first. I mean, we met a freaking alien. How cool is that? But…”

“But now it's responsibility and secrets,” he said.

“Yeah. And waiting. I'm here while Tobias and the girls are out there playing Operation: Sleepover.”

It's easy enough to make decisions if they're only going to come back on you personally. If you fuck up and you get hurt, you live, you learn, and you grow, and maybe you have to eat it a bit. But it's different when those decisions impact others. And Elfangor, the beach, the cube, that wasn't just me involved. It involved all of us. It didn't really matter that I was scared when I'd done it, I had still been the first to touch the cube. Marco had followed my lead, everyone had.

And that made me responsible.

“You're pissed I touched the cube, aren’t you?”

He sighed. “I’m not. Really. I want to be pissed at you, but you weren’t wrong. This is going to blow up in our faces, I’m sure of it, but there’s no one else that can do this for us. Not unless there are other Andalite survivors anyway.”

“If it matters, Marco, I’m scared.”

“Jake, you really look like you’re keeping it together.”

“Rachel said the same thing the other night. It’s... It’s like here, with the bathrooms. I clean the bathrooms because you hate doing it, y’know? It’s not that I enjoy cleaning the mens’ room, it’s just that it needs to be done. And when we found Elfangor, he was hurt - so we helped him. And then he was stranded, and we helped him some more.”

“This isn’t like E. T. or Paul, the alien leaves and the innocent bystanders live happily ever after. That’s not going to happen here, Jake. He’s not going to phone home and call a ride. He’s here to fight a war, and I feel like we were all just drafted into doing God knows what.”

“That’s the part that scares me. When Tobias turned into a hawk, that creeped me out. That
morphing tech is the grossest shit I’ve ever seen, and it scares me that I might have to do it. But the weirder part is I saw Tobias flying, and my first thought was: ‘I gotta try that.’

Marco laughed. “When you called him Ten-Piece, I almost lost it. Is it weird how quickly we’re just rolling with this?”

“How the hell should I know what’s weird anymore?” But I thought about it for a second. “Maybe it’s the bullet points. Spaceship, boom. Alien, boom. Brain slugs, boom. One thing to the next.”

“And now here we are, and reality is catching up to us?”

“I have to imagine this is what it felt like for Rachel babysitting while we were at the Boardwalk.”

“Rachel can handle herself. Tobias is one tough son of a bitch when it comes down to it. And Cassie is kind of the quiet Zen type, but I wouldn’t want to get on her bad side. They can handle a fucking sleepover.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I gotta relax.”

We went about our shift for awhile. One of us would stay at the snack counter while the other did something else, cleaning mostly. I refilled popcorn and sodas here and there. We made sure the other screens were clean, took out trash, and eventually after Marco took his break, we started packing up the concession stand.

I texted Cassie every second I could spare on my phone. For everything else that had happened, I was glad we were doing this. She made me happy. I thought about taking her to the end-of-year dance, but I figured that should be a face-to-face thing.

Marco and I talked about movies, like the new Spider-Man coming out in July, and video games. We'd been really enjoying *Horizon: Zero Dawn* and *Final Fantasy XV*, not to mention I'd just bought *Farpoint* earlier that month. We were both waiting for *Destiny 2* and *Resident Evil 7*. Before I'd started working weekends, I used to play a lot more often. Lately I'd just play an hour or two after school while I ran my laundry before hammering out my homework. I'd honestly become pretty boring lately.

It was midnight when the last showing ended, and we had our last mess of the night to clean up. It was the same as last night, really. Except Tobias wasn’t waiting in the lobby, I didn’t have to drive Rachel home, and my heart wasn’t racing in anticipation of talking to Cassie. We talked to a few of our other co-workers, Marco talked to the manager about his schedule, normal stuff.

I was relieved when we finally got out of the movie theater. The night air felt good, and the way you could always smell the salt of the Pacific on the air was very calming to me.

The town was as sparse as it usually is that late. There were a few bars and clubs open, Blue Lagoo, Motiv, The Catalyst, but it’s not like the downtown area is bristling with activity after midnight. The shops were closed but honestly I was still hungry.

“You want anything from Taco Bell?” I asked as we got in the car. I could’ve gone home and browsed the fridge, but I just really wanted a stuffed burrito for some reason. It was late, and I should be going home and getting some sleep, but I just wasn’t there yet.

“I could go for a burrito and a Baja,” Marco said.

“You crashing at my place or you going home?”
He shrugged. “I don’t know, let’s get some food first. Rachel still up?”

“No new texts. She and Melissa may be up all night as far as I know. From what Rachel has texted, I think Melissa’s been kinda lonely at home.”

“I know what that’s like,” Marco muttered.

We swung through the Taco Bell off the Cabrillo Highway, and Marco decided against going home. I didn’t really blame him. It was late, and I think we both wanted to just chill.

We went up to my room and Marco collapsed into the game chair he’d slept in last night. I put on the TV, and flipped through channels for a bit. I landed on South Park reruns.

We were just chilling for a bit, eating burritos, when I broke the silence. “You know what's weird?”

“Shoot.”

“I was talking to Tom a bit today when I was getting ready, and I swear, this is the first it's clicked that he's going to be done with high school. He was telling me about how some of his friends are moving away over the summer for college already.”

Marco shrugged. “Life changes, Jake. I think last night proved that beyond a shadow of a doubt. Then dug a shallow grave and buried the doubt in it.”

I laughed. He was not wrong. “I guess it was just an abstract idea till now, y’know.”

“Yeah, that's the fucking problem with later, dude. Eventually, later becomes now.”

“I know, I just can't believe he's going to college in a few months.”

“He's going to UCSC, man. He's not staying home?”

“I think he's getting an apartment with roommates, trying to move out, try the adult thing.”

“Adulthood is really fucking overrated, Jake.” The acid in those words could have melted the snack counter.

“What were your summer plans?”

“You mean before you signed us up for alien military camp?”

“Yeah, before that?”

He sighed. “Honestly Jake, all I wanted was to, hit the beach, go camping, maybe get a girlfriend.”

“When we were at the Boardwalk early,” I said, “I thought about buying passes for Cassie and Tobias.”

Marco nodded. “That’s not a bad idea. It’d give Tobias a place to go other than school.”

School was not an easy place for Tobias. He was the weird kid, the poor kid, and I honestly have no clue how he put up with it. I got two days suspension for knocking out Braden Stewart earlier this year. He'd been messing with Tobias for weeks, and finally I snapped. My parents were pissed at first, but when Marco told them what happened, my mom gave me twenty bucks. But it hadn’t really changed anything for Tobias, except of course for my mom going rounds with the school.
board over their bullying policy. I have no idea if that made any difference honestly.

The messed up thing is that as much as Tobias hated school, he hated being home more. I really had the impression that the cafeteria lunches were the only hot meals Tobias ever got. I didn’t think his uncle did much as far as taking care of him.

“I talked to my mom about Loren,” I said, maybe blurted. It just came out.

“Tobias’s mom?” he asked, “What brought that up?”

“Honestly, I think it was watching Tobias fly away. He took wing, and when he was gone, it just clicked to me how little he has in life. He doesn't really have much, y’know?”

Marco sighed. “I know more than I want to, Jake.”

I winced. “How's your dad?”

Marco turned up his hands as he shrugged. “I don't know what to tell you, holmes. He's the same as yesterday and the day before that.”

There was an anger to his voice. He was mad at his father. And he was mad at himself because of it.

“It's getting harder, Jake. Like you don’t even know, man.”

“Tell me.” He glared at me, a look that could bring iron to a boil. “Marco, it's me, okay? If you can't talk to me, who can you talk to?”

He turned away from me. For a few minutes he just watched TV and drank his Baja Blast. “It was cool for a while, y’know,” he said finally. “I mean my dad was home with me at first, and we were both just hot messes. When my abuela died, that was easier. She was old, she was sick, we saw it coming. And I was still upset when she was gone. We cried, we mourned, and we got through it. And Mom helped us through that.

“But with Mom,” he said, swallowing. “With Mom, we didn't see it coming. She was just gone. And I missed school for a while, till I couldn't take being in my house anymore. It still smelled like her, Jake. I was out of school for almost two weeks, and I could still smell her.

“But when I came back, when I started doing homework, when you started dragging me places to get me out of the house, I started to make some peace with it. But my dad is still right there, he’s still right where I left him.”

I didn't say anything. Marco didn't need me to say anything, he just wanted someone to know, to understand. He’d needed to vent for a long time, and he was finally letting it out. And so I listened. I nodded.

“I have to take care of him, Jake. I do the laundry, I fucking pay the bills. I mean he puts the money in the accounts, of course. But I'm the one that has to make sure the checks go out. If I'm home, I'm either cleaning, cooking, or doing homework. And if he doesn't have work, if he doesn't have to get up, he just sleeps all day. There are days I have to make sure he showers, Jake. Do you know how fucked up that is?”

He was crying. But he wasn’t alone. I felt the tears come and I didn’t fight it. Marco's mom was a good person. She was funny, she was spontaneous. She gave us surfing lessons. She was there for me every bit as much as my mom had been there for Marco. I missed her, too. And there was a
time when Marco’s dad had been the guy that took us to basketball games, that took us to the go-kart track or laser tag at the Boardwalk. He had been one of the funniest guys I’d known. He and my dad used to have cookouts down on the beach. I missed those days. But he just didn't have it in him to be that guy any more.

Marco went on. “Sometimes I find him watching Simpsons reruns, and those are the good days, because he's at least trying the slightest bit to find something to make him happy. Just for a second, he finds something that makes him smile.”

I caught that inflection. Something that made him smile… It just wasn’t Marco.

“He loves you, Marco.”

The expression that twisted Marco’s face was terrifying. Like he’d tasted bleach. “I know, Jake. I know in the worst way fucking possible. All he wants in the whole goddamned world is… is to be with my mom.”

He swallowed again, wiped his eyes, and exhaled. “I'm the only thing keeping him here, Jake. Do you get that? Do you really understand what that means? I can't ask him to do anything more because he's putting everything he has left into not checking the fuck out.”

I put my hand on his shoulder. Marco was never the hugging type, but he turned and rested his head on my shoulder.

“Hermano, what am I supposed to do?”

“Have you talked to the guidance counselor?”

Marco shrugged. “I saw him a few times when it happened. I haven't been in,what, more than a year now.”

“Have you been to mass?”

He raised an eyebrow. Marco was an atheist. He was raised Catholic, but he didn't believe in God any more. I wasn't sure I ever did, honestly. My family was technically Jewish, but we weren't observant at all.

“I haven't been to mass since the funeral.”

I wasn't surprised. Marco’s parents were the only reason he'd gone, and it was one obligation Marco didn't really keep. “You liked your priest, didn't you?”

“As far as priests go, yeah.”

“Would your dad trust him?”

“You're fucking evil, dude,” he said as he blew his nose into a napkin. He was quiet for a long time. We just watched TV for awhile.

I checked my phone a few times to see if there had been any developments at Melissa's. But the only new text was Cassie saying she was going home to bed.

“Jake?”

“Yeah, dude?”
He didn't make eye contact as he spoke, but I didn't need him to. “Thanks.”

“No problem, hermano.”

Marco threw a burrito wrapper at me. He always ragged on me anytime I spoke Spanish. It was part of our dynamic for some reason. That was us in a nutshell, really. Rachel and Cassie joked that Marco and I were like a married couple, and nights like these, it was hard to argue against that description. He was always there for me. And I would always be there for him when he needed me.

“Wanna hear something fucked up?” he asked.

“This is gonna be bad, isn’t it?”

“God, isn’t everything when it comes to me?” I shot him a look.

“I worry sometimes, about me moving on. I worry that maybe the reason I’m getting better and he isn’t is just ‘cause she didn't mean as much to me as she meant to him.”

“You know that’s bullshit, right?”

He shrugged. “There are days I wake up and for no reason I feel like she's home. There are days at the beach when the surf comes in and I just watch the boarders, like somehow I'm going to see her out there again. I watch the waves and know that’s where she’d want to be. And I hate those days. Not because I miss her, but because those days make me wonder the last time she crossed my mind and I feel like an asshole.”

“Marco, let me ask you something. If your mom were here, what would she tell you?”

He sighed. “Mom would tell me that any day the sun comes out is a good day. She used to say that all the time.” There was a wistfulness to his voice, the tragically optimistic beat of memories you know you're not going to keep. I could hear the longing.

“I remember. She saw life on the brightside, Marco. That was just who she was. And I’m not one for philosophy, man. You know I’m not. But your mom would want you to live for yourself. If Eva were here, she’d tell your dad to pull his head out and she’d bitch you out up and down that you don’t surf anymore.”

“I can’t, Jake.”

I shrugged. “And if you’re not ready, you’re not ready. I don’t think there are wrong answers here, man. But if you see your mom out on the water, maybe that’s where you need to be.”

“I don’t know. Half of my summer plans involved just not being home, y’know? I got a job, I got my fucking responsibilities, and I just wanted to be out there. Part of it was for me. I can’t keep doing this with my dad. I just don’t have much more left in me. I think… I think I wanted to show my dad that I was going to be okay. I’m sixteen, and I’m an adult in two years anyway. If he needs to… if he needs to be with Mom… He needs to know I’m going to be okay.”

I hadn’t realized quite how strong Marco was till then.

Or how fucking ruthless he could be. He’d already seen the writing on the wall, he’d seen enough signs that one day he was going to come home and his dad… wasn’t going to be there anymore. And he’d just cut out the emotional attachments to his last living parent. He got up everyday and said goodbye to his dad like he thought it would be the last time he saw him.
It’s very humbling to know that the entirety of your stress and drama is but an annoyance to someone with real problems. My parents didn’t fight as much as Rachel’s parents, I wasn’t buried in responsibility like Cassie, and I hadn’t suffered losses like Marco and Tobias.

“Marco, I don’t have answers. Honestly, I usually look to you for answers; you’re fucking smarter than I am, and damn if you don’t know it. I don’t know that I’ve ever really believed in God. And I can’t tell you what to do about your dad. I’m not qualified for that. I know my mom or the school could find you a grief counselor. But I can tell you this: I’m always going to be there for you.”

“Man, I hope so, dude. I’ll tell you what, man, if this alien gets us all killed, I’m going to fucking kick your ass.”

“I don’t know how we got into this.”

Marco laughed. “Yeah, that’s how it always starts, isn't it?”

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
I woke up earlier than I would've expected. Marco was gone. Again. This time, however, he wasn't downstairs making breakfast. Instead there was a text telling me he wanted to try to spend some time with his dad today. I smiled. After our late night talk, I couldn't blame him.

My parents were already up. We're not much on breakfast, really. Both of my parents are too busy to cook anything in the morning and Tom and I are old enough to take care of ourselves. My mom usually spends her Sundays in the garden before she heads off to see friends or hang out with her sister, my aunt Nicole. My dad likes to make coffee, maybe sit with the paper or a book, and relax. Saturdays are usually spent on housework and he goes jogging or biking in his attempt to stay heart-healthy. So Sundays are his quiet days. Which actually means Sundays are my busy days.

I had to finish my English paper - my last major homework assignment for the year - before I went to school tomorrow. On top of that, I had to mow the lawn and this was my preferred laundry day. Ugh, how I hated laundry.

I sat down at the kitchen table, made myself a cup of coffee and grabbed a banana. I checked my messages and tried to make sense of my day.

Rachel was going to be spending more time with Melissa. Apparently the sleepover had gone better than expected, at least from the social angle. From what Rachel had seen of things, neither of Melissa’s parents had left the house, though our vice principal was spending a lot of time in the basement. Melissa said they were renovating their rec room or something, but Rachel thought it worth noting.

I asked about Tobias. I didn’t like her response.

Tobias was missing in action. First Elfangor and now Tobias.

Unlike yesterday, I wasn’t in a position to drop everything and run off. For one, I had my other responsibilities. I was going to arouse suspicion if I kept running off. I had to maintain normalcy. And Elfangor had gone missing from Cassie’s barn, so I’d had someplace to start from. Rachel last saw Tobias in a tree outside the Chapman’s backyard. I couldn’t think of a way to show up to a random stand of trees and not look out of place.

There wasn’t a whole lot I could do besides wait and try to take care of the tasks at hand. I couldn’t really go find Elfangor till Cassie got home. And Tobias could be anywhere. Most likely, he’d gone home and was sleeping. According to Rachel, he’d morphed and demorphed over and over last night, at least five times, so I had to imagine that’d wipe a guy out. I’d only seen Elfangor
I thought about my dog, my golden retriever Homer. 

Maybe I should try a practice morph?

I went into the backyard and squeaked a tennis ball. Homer came running like he always did. I threw the ball and watched him run after it. I hadn’t been home much the last few days, so for about twenty minutes, I just played fetch with my dog. When I was tired of throwing the ball, I grabbed his favorite rope toy out of the old milk crate we kept out for dog toys. Homer loved a good game of tug o’ war, and as he tried to wrest the rope from me, I started petting him.

I concentrated. I could feel the thrum of energy that Tobias mentioned, and I felt Homer relax a little, like he’d just nodded off a bit. But just like that, the moment passed and Homer pulled the rope free of my hand. He shook it and ran off into the yard with it, content as though nothing strange had happened to him.

I closed my eyes. I didn’t really want to do this, and I suddenly felt nauseous for even thinking about it. But I focused on Homer in my mind. When I opened my eyes, the world was different. Colors were muted, the late-spring noises of birds and insects seemed louder, I could already tell my sense of smell was getting stronger. I felt an exuberance, an energy I’d forgotten I’d ever had, like being a toddler again. My eyes darted everywhere in the backyard.

But then I looked down to see gold-brown fur on the back of my hands.

I freaked out. I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t just become a dog. What the hell was wrong with me? Images of Tobias’s cactus feathers flooded my head, and I wanted to be sick.

Suddenly the colors became more vibrant, sounds muted, and the fur on my hand vanished.

I felt my heart pounding, I could hear the blood rushing in my ears. I felt dizzy for a minute and I went back into the kitchen. I poured another cup of coffee. I needed to settle my nerves.

I changed into my work clothes and got the lawnmower out of the garage. My dad wanted me to learn the value of hard work when he taught me how to mow the lawn. Well, that’s what he said, anyway. Part of it may well have been true. But I strongly suspect he just didn’t want to do it anymore and Tom and I were old enough to do it.

When Tom made the basketball team, I took on some of his chores. I couldn’t really complain about it, though at the time I wasn’t pleased. Tom mowed the yard every weekend for about three years before it had become my job. I never did go out for sports, though. I liked basketball, and I was good at it. My dad and Marco both told me I could probably make the varsity team. But I just didn’t care for it the way Tom did.

I played basketball because I enjoyed it. I think Tom saw it as his way out, and nothing else. He’d been approached to play college basketball for larger schools with larger sports programs, but Tom had turned those all down to go to the local college. I think mom and dad were shocked he wanted to go to UCSC, but he shrugged it off.

I made my way around mom’s flower beds, minding the woodchip mulch. I felt the vibration in my hands, the simple power of the mower. Thinking about Tom, mowing the yard, I wondered about grown-up life. Tom was going to be moving out in a few months. He had a part-time job during the off-season, and he was volunteering on weekends apparently. Something about looking good on the college transcripts, I guess. Honestly, I still had a sneaking suspicion he’d gone to one of the
senior parties to partake in some underage drinking, but that’s not to say he wasn’t doing both.

Maybe it sound like I’m being philosophical or something, but I was sixteen, and this was one of the first times I’d really contemplated adult life. And what bugged me was that I just couldn’t see it.

I couldn’t ever get the grades to become a doctor or a therapist like my parents. I’d never be a lawyer like my aunt, or a basketball phenom like Tom.

Part of me had always been worried that I was going to grow up to be no one special. I was a point guard when I played basketball, and I wasn’t bad, but I wasn’t the best at it. I would never be a center. When I played football, I was a cornerback. I would never be the quarterback or the wideout. I got decent enough grades. I’d get the occasional C- in math, but I was more or less a B+ kind of student. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that, but I’d learned back in fourth or fifth grade that I was never going to be the valedictorian. I wasn’t the most athletic, I wasn’t the smartest, and like I told Marco last night, I wasn’t artistic or creative like Tobias. I wasn’t politically-invested or socially responsible like Rachel.

There’s something a little humbling when you realize you’re just never going to be more than the middle of the deck. Marco told me I was a Hufflepuff. He said it was a good thing. There’s nothing wrong with being the hard-working, loyal-to-a-fault, reliable type. It was a good sentiment, I guess. It also made me feel like a pickup truck.

But it is what it is, I guess.

I put the mower back in the garage when I was done, and ran upstairs to grab a shower. I was happy to get the smell of grass, sweat, and gasoline off, but mostly I was just stalling.

There were no new texts from Rachel, Marco, or Cassie when I got out of the shower. I had really been hoping when I came back in that I’d have something, that someone would know where Tobias was. I couldn’t text anyone. Marco had gotten less sleep than I had, and if he was working on stuff with his dad, I couldn’t interfere with that. It was too early for Cassie to be home from church. Her parents sometimes took her out for donuts afterward, it was kind of their Sunday thing, I guess. Rachel was with Melissa, and I didn’t want to foul up our little surveillance operation.

Jesus, my life was so fucked up.

I rubbed at the bridge of my nose, applying pressure, trying to curb my oncoming headache. It wasn’t from mowing. Mom is very safety conscious and she’d throw a conniption fit if I mowed the lawn without hearing protection.

I already knew I couldn’t clear my head enough to think about the English paper. I knew I needed to write it, and I knew procrastinating now was going to bite me hard in the ass later tonight. I knew when I picked up my keys that I’d probably be up till midnight writing, but whatever. I had other things on my mind.

There wasn’t a lot for me to do, so I did one of the the things I could do. I’d already decided to get the Boardwalk passes, but I needed Cassie and Tobias to be there for the photo on the card. So that could wait.

But Tobias was the only one of us without a cell phone, and I couldn’t just let that go. It obviously didn’t solve the problem at hand, but if he’d had a phone, I wouldn’t be so worried right now. There was a Boost Mobile kiosk at Best Buy, and I decided I had to do it. Part of it was that he needed a phone. There was a pragmatism to it. But in a lot of ways, I always felt like Tobias was
family. Or at least, that he should’ve been. Before he had moved to Pennsylvania with his aunt, I
think mom and dad had seriously considered adopting him. They hadn’t, obviously. There were
some legal issues, my mom was still upset about Loren, and of course mom assumed Tobias would
be happier with his aunt.

I wondered if I should tell her about his uncle.

That’d be a conversation for later.

About twenty minutes later, I was coming out of Best Buy with a prepaid cell. It was a Samsung
Galaxy J3, with a prepaid card. It wasn’t the best phone in the store, but it was under fifty bucks
and it wasn’t bad for the price.

It was about noon. I texted to Cassie to let me know when I could come over. To my surprise, she
texted back in just a few minutes. She was on her way back from church already. She just needed
to change. I didn’t bother texting Marco. He’d text me when he was free.

I decided to cruise through Tobias’s neighborhood, but I didn’t see him. I wasn’t brave enough to
knock at his uncle’s apartment. I headed past the movie theatre again, hoping he’d be there, or
maybe at the art store next door. But no such luck. I really wanted to drive past the Chapman
residence. I wanted to see if I could spot his backpack from the street, but I didn’t want to take any
chances.

There was nothing else I could do to find him, not right now.

I stopped to put gas in the SUV, and I took a few minutes to set up Tobias’s new phone. I installed
Netflix and put in my password, made a new profile for him. I added our phone numbers to his
contacts, and added Tobias’s number to mine. It killed enough time for Cassie to give me the go-
ahead to come over.

I pulled up to her property yet again. I didn’t see her dad or her mom this time. I found Cassie in the
barn as usual.

I keep saying “the barn” but really the property had a few buildings. We just weren’t allowed in
any of the others. There were two separate buildings for the WRC, because some of the animals
had to be kept segregated or quarantined. And half of the other barn was set up for veterinary
surgery. There was the other barn that housed the horses, and only Cassie was allowed in there.
Cassie’s family owned two horses, but they just stabled up to twenty at any given time, and
Cassie’s parents had a deal with a nearby equestrian school that took care of all that stuff, so Cassie
wasn’t responsible for the other horses.

The only building we were actually allowed in was the main barn. There were often deer, hawks,
foxes, and bobcats in there, but a large part of the barn was hay, old farm equipment, and
veterinary supplies. These were animals on the mend. And these were usually the placid animals.
The wolves, coyotes, and anything of the biting, human-mauling kind had to be kept away from the
deer and such. Apparently, there was a pair of black bear cubs in there at the moment. And that
was the only reason the bobcat had been moved into the other barn.

Anyway, I caught up to Cassie. “Any new developments?”

She shrugged. “I haven’t heard from Rachel since this morning. No word on Tobias. Anything on
Marco?”

“Far as I know, he’s spending time with his dad this morning. Is Elfangor here?”
“Not that I know.”

There was an awkward few minutes of making sure none of the animals in the barn were actually an alien or a teenager in morph, and we checked the hayloft for Tobias. But he wasn’t there. And so it was that we ended up walking back through the Moore Creek trails.

We held hands, which I know doesn’t sound like much, but still seemed to matter so much. I had a girlfriend. I couldn’t recall for sure if I’d actually called her that, yet. But I enjoyed holding her hand. I liked feeling close to her.

We crossed the open area of the Preserve, but apparently when we approached the creek bed, Elfangor heard us coming.

<Jake, Cassie. I assume you are looking for Tobias.>

“Yeah, we are;” I called to the overgrowth. I still couldn’t see Elfangor from here. We kept walking.

<He is resting.>

“He’s there?” Cassie asked.

<He is.>

Cassie and I hurried down the steep banks into the wooded part of the creek valley. It was reasonably hidden from the trails on the open fields, but it was a pretty decent drop to get in here. It felt sheltered, though.

Tobias was asleep in a little grassy area, his worn hoodie draped over him like a blanket.

<He arrived shortly before dawn. He has been sleeping for a few hours now. Should I wake him?>

I shook my head. “No, there’s no need for that right now. Let him sleep. Rachel said he morphed and remorphed at least five times last night.”

Elfangor nodded. <Morphing can be a little taxing. Sequential morphs, even more so.>

“Rachel says Chapman hasn’t left the house all day. He’s apparently spending time in the basement, but as far as we know, he hasn’t been to the pool yet.”

“Any thoughts on what we’re going to do tomorrow?” Cassie asked.

Elfangor looked at us quizzically. “We have school five days a week. Saturdays and Sundays we’re off, but tomorrow we go back to school and we’re not going to be able to be here with you without people noticing that we missed school.”

Elfangor nodded again. <This Controller, Chapman, he is an instructor at your school?>

I shrugged. “He used to be a history teacher, I think. Right now he has more of an administrative position. He’s in charge of the teachers, or however that works out with the school board.”

<If you have to go to school tomorrow, then he does as well.>

“Yeah, that’s a fair point, but he works in the office. He’s not going to be in front of two dozen kids all day like the teachers; I’m not sure how we can keep tabs on him without missing classes.”
The simple solution would be for me to morph something inconspicuous and have you take me to your school.

"Are you sure?" Cassie asked, "We’re in school for like eight hours, and Chapman will be there earlier than we are and stay later. We’re looking at ten hours, and you can’t be seen demorphing."

You are correct. I will need assistance. Are there any areas of the school where I could demorph without being seen?

"Bathrooms might be an option. I think you’d fit in a handicap stall. There are a few places in the libraries where no one would see you."

"Don’t forget the roof. Or the janitorial closets. You’re going to have to morph something small, something innocuous… Is there a limit how small you can morph?"

I could not morph certain microscopic forms, like bacteria or protozoa. But most forms of multicellular life are morphable.

What do you have in mind?

She shrugged. "Not sure. A mouse might work, but if he’s seen, that’s going to go south fast. Maybe a fly or a spider?"

I thought for a minute. Something small, something that could keep an eye on Chapman for a while, but agile enough to get out if needed. "God, this would be so much easier if we could just break into his office and install a spy camera."

Cassie looked up at me.

So did Elfangor.

What exactly would that entail?

I put my hand on my face. Ugh, this wasn’t happening. "Seriously?" I asked.

Cassie smiled. "What, you’re expecting me to be the good girl all the time?"

"The thought had crossed my mind, babe."

"Oh, now it’s babe, huh?" she said with a smile. Our banter was getting fun, but I wasn’t sure I was on board with this.

Jake, please explain your comment. Why is that plan unfeasible?

I sighed. "Okay, we could possibly get a small wifi camera, break into the school, and install the camera in Chapman’s office. It’s crazy, though, because breaking into the school isn’t my first choice. We could get caught."

Forced entry to the building is a risk. I understand. And I do not wish you to break human laws. But does the one-time risk of entering the school tonight outweigh the multiple risks of exposure smuggling an Andalite into the building tomorrow?

I hesitated. I didn’t want to agree with him, I didn’t want to do this. But he was right. "I’ll be upfront with you, if we do this, we might very well have to steal the camera. That’s going to add to the plan."
“And unless Marco knows how to wire it... I mean, I know nothing about electronics.”

“What’s going on?”

We all turned to Tobias.

“Hey, you’re awake,” Cassie said. “You know, I think we have some camping equipment in storage. Set up a tent, sleeping bag, I think we even have an old air mattress.”

Tobias shrugged. “Might not be a bad idea.”

“Isn’t your uncle going to flip out? This is the second night in a row you haven’t gone home.”

Tobias shook his head. He didn’t blush or anything, but I could tell he was embarrassed.

“Honestly, Cassie, I doubt the fucker noticed.”

Cassie looked surprised. She looked to me, then back at Tobias. There was an uncomfortable silence for a few minutes.

“Oh, bud, I got something for you.”

I took the new phone out of my pocket and handed it to him.

He held it for a long moment, just looking at it. It was suddenly excruciatingly obvious that he wasn’t used to getting gifts. He ran his fingers over the screen, looked at the apps for a bit, and slid the phone into his pocket. “Thanks, Jake.”

“No problem, man. I was worried when we couldn’t find you, so I figured you needed one.” Tobias didn’t respond. He didn’t look like he could without crying. Cassie squeezed my hand, but she didn’t say anything. I don’t think she wanted to run the risk of embarrassing him. “I’ve got the charger and your user pamphlet in the car.”

He nodded, rubbed his eyes, and said thanks again. “So what were you guys planning?”

Cassie laughed. She answered before I could say anything. “We’re breaking into the school.”

Chapter End Notes
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Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
“Wait, what?” Tobias asked.

It only took a few minutes to bring him up to speed with the ad hoc plan to install a spy cam in Chapman's office. Putting it in simple terms, it was easy to see why this plan appealed to Elfangor. It was definitely easier than smuggling the Andalite into school and having him morph and demorph over and over.

Tobias readily agreed with that analysis. “Morphing is weird, guys. Like you don't even know how weird.”

I told Tobias and Cassie about my attempt at morphing my dog and felt embarrassed, but Tobias nodded.

“Straight up, if Rachel wasn't going to spend all night with potential Controllers, and if you guys hadn't been there watching, I probably would've scrubbed out, too.”

“Does it hurt?” Cassie asked.

“No really,” Tobias said. “I mean, I could feel bones changing shape and I could feel the feather shafts when they broke through the skin, but it's not painful. Hella unsettling, but not painful.”

<The technology suppresses some sensory feedback during morphing.>

That's helpful.

“So how was being a hawk?” Cassie asked. I have to admit, I was curious too.

“Once I got past the ick factor, being a hawk is amazing. The eyesight is off the walls. It took me a little while to adjust to the change in depth perception. But flying is literally the best thing ever. It took awhile to really get the hang of it, but once I did, it was amazing.”

<I also enjoy flying. Strictly speaking, Andalites are not permitted to morph for recreation.>

Cassie arched an eyebrow. “And not-so strictly speaking?”

<Nothing the council can prove.>

“Alright,” I said, “moving on, we have part of a plan - and I'm still not sold with the multiple felonies plan - and we still haven't heard from Rachel or Marco.”
“Yeah, where is Marco?” Tobias asked.

“Family stuff,” Cassie answered for me.

We went over the finer points of Rachel’s sleepover, which was mostly movies, gossip, and typical girl stuff. Tobias noted that all the basement windows were blacked out, which backed up Rachel’s comment that the rec room renovations were less than innocuous. But barring a secret tunnel in the basement, neither of Melissa’s parents left the house last night.

“Alright, so we’re all on the same page there. If we’re breaking into the school, one of us is going to have to keep tabs on Chapman again.”

“I can do it,” Tobias volunteered.

I shrugged. “Maybe we'll get lucky and Rachel learned something. In any case, where do we stand with your brother?”

<Aximili has spent time calculating the ion trails and signal data from the Dome Ship main computer.>

“And that means, what, exactly?”

Elfangor nodded. <The Dome Ship computer monitors all data from all fighters. It allows the command on the main bridge to assess formations and losses. With the exception of seventeen ships, my own included, all fighters were lost in space.>

I wasn’t sure if I should look happy or sad. I knew Elfangor was distraught over his fallen comrades. And I didn’t mean to minimize that. It seemed uncouth to ask how many had been lost. Elfangor seemed distant. Well he always seemed distant, but even more so now.

“Do you have locations on the other sixteen ships?” Cassie asked.

Elfangor shook his head again. <No. Of those remaining sixteen ships, twelve of them indicate freefall entry into your atmosphere. Most likely, the pilots were already lost or else suffered catastrophic system failure and became victims of gravity.>

Wow. That was not a pleasant picture. I tried to imagine driving my SUV as it spiraled out of control, all efforts to turn the wheel to no avail, as the car eventually became engulfed in the fires of reentry. To die in battle would’ve been one thing. Zap, boom, gone. And I guess it’s not the greatest exit imaginable, but I’d take quick and painless over the agonizingly impotent death of a dead-stick fireball landing. I snapped out of the reverie. “Don’t your ships have heat shielding? Yours made it through the atmosphere.”

<I was conscious, Jake. And not to boast, but I am an exceptionally capable pilot. Andalite fighters are built almost entirely for spaceflight, and their atmospheric profiles are less than ideal. The Dome Ships are equipped with other shuttles for planetary transport, but fighters are capable of making surface landings only in extreme emergencies.>

“Well what about the other four ships?” I asked.

<The Dome Ship loses the ability to communicate with fighter pods during planetary landings. Below a threshold altitude, the ships become indistinguishable from the background planetary magnetic fields, and the heat of the reentry ultimately becomes the only signal we are capable of accurately tracking. Aximili is working to extrapolate the trajectories from their known ion trails and angles of descent.>
“So still nothing definitive about survivors,” Tobias said sullenly.

“Four possibles is better than zero,” Cassie said.

“I’m not a big fan of false hope, Cassie,” Tobias answered. That quip seemed to take her by surprise. Her face scrunched in a weird way, like she was trying to decide if she should be offended or hurt. I think Tobias noticed. “But you’re right, four would be better than none. Assuming we don’t have to take a road trip to Nebraska to pick them up.”

Ugh. I didn’t want to think of the logistics of trying to find Andalite survivors. Don’t get me wrong, I was keeping my fingers crossed that Elfangor was going to get good news and we were going to have help. But Tobias wasn’t wrong. We had no idea where survivors might have landed and my SUV wasn’t built for fuel economy.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I was happy to see a text from Marco. His dad had just dropped him off. I told him where we were. “Marco’s on his way,” I said.

I was holding out a shred of hope that Marco would be the voice of reason here and give us a bulletproof reason why we shouldn’t go through with this plan. Honestly, it was more of an idea than a plan. I mean, plans have steps, sequences, contingencies. We didn’t have that yet. We had a vague concept of something we wanted to do, and that already had me nervous. When we actually got to a point where we were figuring out how to get into Best Buy or whatever electronics outlet had a good spy camera, I knew we were going to be deeper than I wanted to be.

Marco bitched the whole way down the small valley, lamenting the lack of stairs. “I fucking swear, the next alien that drops out of the sky can land in the mall parking lot. There’s room in the construction site, right?”

Cassie laughed. “Marco, I don’t think you need aliens landing in the middle of town. God, could you even imagine how many people would’ve seen him if he’d landed anywhere near Capitola?”

“Yeah, I can see it now. Hundreds, thousands of eyewitnesses, international headlines, vast eternal fame for some other poor schmucks that aren’t us. The Yeerk invasion could be a national priority. Then the Twitter firestorm when Trump manages to immediately fuck up First Contact by having Papa Smurf here detained at Area 51.”

“What happened to the Men In Black and the CDC quarantine?” I asked.

“Eh, blow me. I’m enjoying the fantasy that life would be better if this weren’t my problem.”

“Don’t be hitting on my man. Go find your own.” All eyes went to Cassie. She blushed, but she didn’t back down. “You heard me.” We shared a much needed laugh before she went on. “Besides, if this were someone else’s problem, you wouldn’t be making ground-zero policy decisions for First Contact, would you?”

Marco sighed. “Oh, what is that, a shameless appeal to my ego to make me feel important?”

Cassie shrugged. “Marco, we both know you are important. You were going to grow up and become some hotshot engineer for NASA anyway, just count this as skipping the middle steps.”

“See, Jake? I told you she was cute.”

“Really?”

“Moving on, children,” I said in my most teacher-esque tone, “we have to get to brass tacks. I still
haven’t written my English paper, Tobias is the only one that’s actually tried morphing and succeeded, Rachel’s on day two of Operation Sleepover, and apparently we have a B&E to plan.”

“Shit, I’m gone a few hours and you guys are all *Ocean’s Eleven* over here.”

We went over our options. Marco agreed with Tobias, Cassie, and Elfangor that smuggling an Andalite into the school was not the way to go. I wasn’t pleased about that. But silver linings where you find them, Marco did share my trepidation about the spy cam angle.

“It’s a major retailer, there’s cameras. How are we going to get anything out of there without being seen?” he asked.

Tobias shrugged. “The easiest way would be for someone to take out the transformer outside the building, one of us morph something and go in through the vents or something, grab a camera, and run back out.”

“Won’t that kick off another blackout?” Cassie asked. “Plus, how do we blow up a transformer without killing ourselves?”

I held my face in my hands. “Ugh, I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.”

“Jake?” Cassie asked.

“Yeah.”

“What about this is specifically stressing you out so much?”

“What do you mean? We’re casually discussing blowing part of the electrical grid, stealing high-end electronics, and then breaking into the school. How would I not be stressed?”

She smiled at me, and I found it relaxing. “Jake, smuggling Elfangor into the school tomorrow would be just as dangerous. We have how many kids at our school, how many teachers? Elfangor would have to demorph at least four times, you said so yourself. Look, I’m not condoning theft and vandalism, or any of this. If we could buy the camera, that’d be better, but we need this, right?”

I nodded, “Yeah, we need it. And you’re right, it’s not the plan that’s bugging me.”

“What then?”

I went for broke. “If we do this, we plan a mission, we all morph… Part of me is worried we’re going to be past the point of no return. And part of me is worried that we passed that already, when we touched the cube.”

“Jake, we were in this before Elfangor landed,” Tobias said. “Chapman didn’t become a Controller because we touched the cube, or because we stole a camera. The only difference is that you know what’s going on.”

Elfangor came over to me. It was still weird having an alien as a regular hang out buddy. Well, maybe buddy was going too far. But I was oddly comforted that he was here. Maybe it was that he put a face to this. Maybe it was that he was a soldier and he knew things. But I think it was something else. It was that we had helped him. He was here because we were there. He had survived because we found him in this same creek bed.

<I know what it is you’re feeling,> he said. <It is what makes the best leaders.>
I stared at him. “You’re kidding, right? Elfangor, I’m a mess. I’m going to get my friends arrested, or worse.”

Elfangor did that telepathic laughter thing again. <Jake, doubt is the soul of leadership. You are worried, and truthfully, I think your friends may be downplaying the dangers in this plan. But you are searching for better options, you are not running blindly down a path chosen rashly. Believe me, Jake, confidence is far more dangerous.>

Four possible survivors. He had all the military superiority he could’ve asked for. That’s what he told us. And he’d walked into a trap. I think he could’ve forgiven him that much. But he walked into a trap he knew he should’ve seen coming. That was the part that killed him inside. I could only feel a fraction of it, that terrible loss and a crushing sense of guilt. It was his fault. And he didn’t delude himself otherwise.

“Alright, yeah. I’m scared this is all going to go south. Elfangor, do you have any thoughts?”

<My understanding of humans is limited, but I suggest a more subtle approach to the surveillance issue.>

“We’re listening,” Tobias said.

<If there are security cameras in the building, the real problem is not the cameras, but rather someone viewing the footage.>

“Ah, of course! Why didn’t I think of that?” Marco said.

“Wait, what?” I asked.

Tobias got it. “Rather than blow up the transformer and take out power to the camera, we just distract whoever’s in the security room.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. I suddenly had the image of a red-tailed hawk bursting out of an air vent and some poor wage slave in the back room running his ass off as bedlam ensued.

“Alright, I think we need a road trip. If we’re doing this, I don’t think it would hurt to go have a look around Best Buy. Some inside perspective should help us nail this down. And hell, maybe we’ll get lucky and they’ll have something in my price range.”

Once again, I was in Best Buy. Marco had immediately gone off to look at XBox and PS4 games. I would’ve been more resentful, but he said it might not be a great idea for all three of us to be on camera if the stuff Cassie and I were looking at ended up missing later. I reminded him if he was the one bailing on being on camera, that he was the one that would have to actually grab the device. He seemed to accept that.

Tobias had flown off back to Chapman’s house. Since Tobias couldn’t exactly demorph bareass naked without the cover of darkness, and since Rachel was still there, Tobias was supposed to fly to the woods to demorph if needed. Apparently, red-tailed hawks can hit thirty miles an hour in level flight, and without having to follow roads, Tobias was fairly adept at getting around town.

Elfangor was actually on the roof right at that moment. He’d flown here, following my SUV, and
landed on top of the building. It occurred to me that he could probably demorph up there if he wanted and no one would see him. Not that it was a good idea, but seriously, how often does anyone see the roofs of buildings?

In any case, Cassie and I were looking at cameras. There was a wide variety of different cameras. Some of them were security cameras, some of them were baby monitors. Some of them were wifi, some were wired. Some were indoor-outdoor, and some had infrared. We needed wifi, definitely. The idea was that someone, most likely Elfangor actually, was going to have to spend all day watching Chapman’s office, and the five of us couldn’t exactly be on our phones spying on the principal during class. That was a scenario I’d rather not dwell on.

“So, um, what is your budget, exactly?” Cassie asked.

“Honestly?”

“What, since we made out yesterday, you’re going to start having secrets?”

“Hey, I thought us making out in the barn was the secret.”

“Maybe,” she said coyly. “But seriously, are any of these in your budget?”

I shrugged, and grabbed one off the shelf. It was wireless, it had infrared, an app for remote viewing, reportedly had a six-month battery life, so we wouldn’t have to try running cables through the air vents. “I can get this one.”

Cassie looked at the price sticker on the shelf. “A hundred forty? Seriously?”

“I’ve got about two grand in my checking account.”

“You have a checking account?”

“Yeah. I got one when I started working the cinema. I’ve been working there Fridays and Saturdays, every weekend, since January.”

Cassie looked embarrassed. “That’s, that’s impressive, Jake. I still get an allowance, if you can believe that.”

“Well, some of it goes to gassing up the SUV, I pay a little under three hundred a month to my parents.”

“You pay rent?”

“No, but I have to cover my end of the cell phone, kick in for car insurance, and about a third of the cable bill. My mom says Tom and I watch more TV than she and Dad.”

I flagged Marco and he came up to the counter with two games in hand. He got in line behind us.

Cassie and I headed back to the SUV ahead of Marco, and I watched as an osprey took off from the roof of the building.

“Can I ask you a question?” she asked as I started the car.

“Cass, you’re one of my best friends. Making out in the barn isn’t going to change that. Just ask; I’m not going to get offended.”

She blushed. “Look who’s suddenly all smooth and confident. Why do you have two thousand
dollars in your account?"

“I just told you.”

“No, I mean I get where you got it, I mean, why haven’t you spent it? What are you saving for?”

I shrugged. “Honestly, I have no clue. I decided to get the job when Tom got accepted to UCSC, and I never really called it a college fund, but I think that was there in my head when I signed up for direct deposit. Plus when I got the SUV, Marco and I thought about going camping. And it’s an older model, so I wanted to have some rainy-day money.”

“You didn’t spend any on yourself?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I bought a few games, fast food, nothing special. I wanted to have that money there for…” I trailed off.

She blushed again. “Were you saving up to have a girlfriend?”

“Wha- no. I- I mean, well, kinda.”

“There he is.”

“I think you like it when I’m flustered.”

She kissed me on the cheek. “I do. It’s an honest reaction, Jake. It means you’re not trying to impress me, you’re just being you.”

I sighed. Relax, Jake. Honest reactions. I can do that. “I wasn’t saving up to have a girlfriend. I mean, maybe I was, but I don’t like that phrasing. Like there’s a creepy girlfriend dealership, or brides-to-order. Ugh.”

“Okay, so how would you phrase it?”

“I don’t know, honestly. I obviously like having money. It came in handy today, getting Tobias that phone, having to get this camera so we could avoid extra felonies. But I don’t really put a whole lot of value in money or things, y’know? I like being able to be with my friends. If I want to take you out on a date, or buy you a Boardwalk pass, I want to be able to do that.”

She smiled at me. “So you’re saving up for experiences? I can see that.” She held my hand for a moment as we watched Marco come out of the store.

“So, you just bought the thing?” he asked as he hopped in the backseat.

“It was under two hundred, I didn’t want to buy it, but I didn’t want to add to our delinquency.”

“I’ll make sure the judge knows that at our sentencing hearing. If you could've bought it from the beginning, what got you so twisted?”

I shrugged. "Honestly I thought it'd be way more expensive, like six hundred or higher."

I started the SUV and pulled out of the parking lot. I didn’t see the osprey, and if he was even remotely close, he could see us. Elfangor only had so many places to go, so it was a safe bet he’d gone back to his spot in the clearing. But that wasn’t where I was heading. I went to the Boardwalk.

“What are we doing here?” Cassie asked.
“Well, first, I’m getting my girlfriend a ride pass. I wanted to do this for you anyway, but seriously, we keep going over to the WRC, your dad is going to get suspicious.”

“Aww, that’s sweet. I think. So if that’s first, what’s next?”

“Lunch. C’mon, let’s go.”

The three of us ended up grabbing some corn dogs and fries at the Surf City Grill. We were actually line of sight with the pay phone I’d used yesterday. Part of me was a little worried someone here was going to recognize me and call Chapman or something, but I dismissed it. This was the Santa Cruz Boardwalk. It got too many visitors for us to stand out. I was sipping on my Pepsi when my phone rang. I recognized the ringtone. Rachel.

“Hey, what’s up, cuz?”

“Just wanted to let you know Melissa and I are heading to the Boardwalk.”

“Oh, cool, we’re there already.”

“Well, that’s cool. Maybe we’ll run into you. Anyway, just wanted to let you know I’m leaving.”

God, I was thick. “Oh. Oh, right. Don’t worry. Ten Piece has you covered.”

“Don’t call him that.” And she hung up. She seemed a little defensive about me jabbing Tobias, which seemed a bit odd. Far as I knew, she didn’t know Tobias that well.

“Rachel’s coming.”

“Good, we need to fill her in,” Marco said.

“She’s coming with Melissa.”

“Less good,” Marco said.

We talked for a bit as we ate lunch. Just normal kid stuff. I talked about the English paper I was so not writing at the moment. Marco made obscene comments about our English teacher and Cassie laughed as she tossed a handful of fries at him and called him a pig.

“Hey, Marco,” Cassie said. “Did you mean that, earlier. Did you tell Jake I was cute?”

“Yeah, why? Did I offend you?”

“No, but I’m curious how that came up. You flirt with girls a lot, but you’ve never flirted with me.”

“Oh, I told Jake if he didn’t ask you out, someone would. What was it I said? ‘She’s cute, but not my type.’”

“Oh, thanks, I guess.” She looked down and started picking at her fries.

“You’re not my type, Cassie,” he said again. She looked up and met his eyes. “I don’t mean that as a bad thing, hon. I like hanging out with you. But,” his expression changed, “you read people too well. And I’m… I’m really messed up, Cass.”

“You ready to talk about it?” I asked.

“Talk about what?”
We spent the next fifteen minutes going through the bullet points of Marco’s relationship with his dad since the accident, how Marco had been coping with things. Cassie looked like she wanted to cry.

“You knew all of this?” she asked.

“It wasn’t my place to say anything,” I said. “Marco didn’t want anyone to know.”

“And that thing Tobias said about his uncle?”

Marco had a questioning look, but I cut him off. I didn’t want Marco saying anything more than Tobias wanted her to know. “Tobias has his situation. Marco and I know about it, but it embarrasses Tobias to talk about it. He’ll tell you more as he feels comfortable.”

“You’d make a good therapist,” Cassie said.

“Yes, right. Like I could get through a doctorate program. And what about you, Miss Positive Thinking?”

“I’ve considered it. Don’t get me wrong, I love animals. And I think it might kill my parents if I don’t become a vet, but I’ve been cleaning stalls since I was nine years old. I wouldn’t mind becoming a psychologist.”

I thought of something she said back at the store. She got an allowance. She seemed embarrassed about it, though, so I didn’t come outright and say it. “Do your parents pay you for the work at the WRC?”

She laughed. “No, I get an allowance. Like fifty bucks a week, plus they pay for my phone.”

I had thoughts on that, but I wasn’t going to say anything. Thankfully Marco isn’t known for keeping his mouth shut. “That’s fucked up, Cass. You work more hours than me or Jake. Will they let you get a part-time job? We’ve been trying to get Tobias to apply at the movie theater. The manager will hire anyone on Jake’s sayso. Trust me on that.”

“You got me that job, douche.” It was true. Marco had started working there about five months after his mother died. I wasn’t sure how much of that was financial necessity or how much was part of his grieving process or how much was avoiding being home, but for as much as Marco claimed to hate working there, he took the job more seriously than he liked to admit.

“Yeah, but I half-ass it. Trust me, management likes you.”

“Cassie?” I asked.

“I- I don’t know, tell you the truth. My mom and dad are so into the WRC, and I love the horses, and I love the deer, the hawks, foxes, all of it. I mean, I really do love it. But… but I couldn’t go out for soccer, because they needed me working. And I’m not really allowed to date. My dad hasn’t taught me how to drive yet. Even though I aced the verbal test months ago. It’s… it’s like as far as they’re concerned I’m still just a little girl.”

I put my hand on her shoulder. She rested her head on me. “Aren’t you the one always telling me to communicate my feelings?”

“Jerk,” she said.

“Seriously, if we tell your parents we’re dating, what’s going to happen?”
“I don’t know. My mom is softer on the no-dating thing than my dad, but I’m always going to be daddy’s little girl and I don’t know how to talk to him. You know what’s really messed up?” Marco and I both shrugged. “The funding for the Center comes from the veterinary program at UCSC and the state of California. If my dad wanted a staff, he wouldn’t have to pay out of pocket. He has undergrads that would do that work in a heartbeat if he asked them to. And they’d do it for college credit and certified hours. He doesn’t need me. He just doesn’t want me to grow up.”

We sat there, picking at our lunches for a long minute. “Do you want to talk to my mom?” I asked. Cassie knew what my mom did for a living.

“I don’t know, Jake. Do we really need couples’ counselling this early in our relationship?”

“Don’t be knocking Doctor Berenson,” Marco said, half-joking. “She helped me through a difficult time, Cassie. Besides, who better to tell you how to talk to the parents of a hormonal teenager than the parent of a hormonal teenager?”

“Eat me,” Cassie said, tossing another french fry at Marco’s face.

“I thought that was my job.” I froze. I couldn’t believe I had just said that out loud.

Marco looked like he was about to explode. He was putting everything into not laughing, like holding his breath was the only thing keeping life on Earth alive. Cassie blushed a shade I have never seen her turn before in my life.

“You pervert!” she said, laughing. “I can’t believe I ever liked you. Not dating two whole days and the sexual innuendo starts.”

I blushed. “Weren’t you the one that shouted ‘hot dildo monkeys’ back at the barn?”

Cassie went stoic. “Sir, I am a lady. I have no idea what kind of girl would ever say such a thing.”

“She says ‘starts’ like she just blocks out all memory of us having done exactly this for the last three, four years. Or that ‘blow me’ comment she nailed me for less than an hour ago.”

“Do you like getting hit with fries?”

“Um, yeah, free fries. Toss ‘em, Cass.”

It was at that moment that Rachel and Melissa walked through the door. Marco stood up and made room at the table.

“Ladies, welcome. What can I get you?”

“Cram it, Marco,” Rachel said tersely.

“Oh, Rachel, it’s fine. Let the boy hit on us. Let him buy us lunch.”

“I have my own money, Mel.”

“Yeah, but you can spend your money on shoes. Let Marco buy lunch.”

“For real, chicas be mean, man. Talking like I can’t hear you, gonna hurt my feelings. Melissa, you’re vegan, right?”

Rachel looked at him as though he’d started demorphing and turned out to be Elfangor this whole time. That’s right, Rachel. There never was a Marco. Just a shapeshifting blue alien. “How did you
know she’s vegan?”

“She’s in my math class, we talk. Fried mushrooms and garlic fries?”

I rolled my eyes and let it go. Let Marco be Marco. Cassie held my hand. I just sat there, enjoying the weight and warmth of her leaning into my chest. “So this is us, huh? Boyfriend and girlfriend.”

“Oh, we’re putting labels on the relationship already?” she asked.

“Well, if I introduce you to someone, do I say this is my friend or this is my girlfriend?”

“Definitely girlfriend. Labels are fine.”

“I should let you know right now, if we’re going to be dating, I do share custody of a sixteen-year-old Hispanic boy with impulse control issues.”

She laughed. “God, we’re totally the mom and dad in this group, aren’t we?”

There were five of us now, and as long as Melissa was here, we couldn’t plan the breaking and entering part of our plan. I’d already come to terms with the fact that it was going to happen. I’d saved us all from blowing up a Best Buy, so that was my gold star for the day. One hundred fifty-four dollars, and forty-three cents, after tax, for that gold star, but achievement unlocked. As much as I had been against this plan, I was suddenly really wondering about breaking into the school a second time to take the damn thing back for a refund. Then again, the spy camera might not be a bad thing to keep around, assuming I did go back for it.

We continued our normal teen conversations, trashing on teachers, discussing summer plans. I was wondering when I’d get time to fill in Rachel, but luckily for me, she had been thinking the same thing and had way better tact.

“Oh, Melissa, before I forget, I need to talk to Jake for a few minutes. We’re doing something for Tom’s graduation and I need to go over some stuff.”

“Yeah, no problem. Catching up with Cassie.”

Rachel and I went out into the walkway of the Boardwalk and I filled her in as much as I could in the few minutes we had.

“One fifty? Screw that. I would’ve boosted it.”

“Thanks, Rachel, appreciate it.”

“I’ll put in for half if you want.” Rachel gets paid to babysit her sisters. Not exactly minimum wage, but better than Cassie apparently.

“So what’s the plan other than break in?”

“We haven’t gotten that far. Tobias has eyes on Chapman, so far as we know anyway. And it being Sunday, you’re not staying the night again, so not sure where that leaves us.”

“About that.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, in case it’s relevant, Melissa has a cat.”
I didn’t like where this was going.

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
“You’re sneaking back to her place tonight? As a cat?”

Rachel shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe. Tobias can’t keep playing lookout like this, and Cassie and I know the inside of Melissa’s house.”

“And the fact that there would be two cats in the house?”

“Not a problem. Fluffer sleeps in a pet bed in her closet. I could get in, shut her door, and the original Fluffer wouldn’t be an issue.”

“She named her cat Fluffer? Of course she did.”

Melissa Chapman is good people. She’s pretty, has that all-American girl next door look, red hair, sea blue eyes, freckles, she gets boys’ attention. Admittedly, I thought she was cute. Not Cassie cute, but cute nonetheless. She was funny, spontaneous, and a little bit of a free spirit. She definitely put off a New Age hippie vibe, and she wasn’t at all embarrassed or inhibited by that. She was a firecracker if there ever was one, and she was totally the kind of person who would name her cat Fluffer.

As I watched my friends at the table, I noticed the osprey sitting on the Gate 3 archway. Ospreys aren’t terribly common here, but they’re not out of place either. Still, I was almost positive it was Elfangor. When we didn’t show up at the WRC, he’d come back to the only other place he knew to look for us. Or he noticed when I’d turned off the street and had followed us.

“Rachel, I don’t wanna be rude,” I started.

“But she needs to go,” she finished.

“Yeah.”

“I understand. Her mom dropped her off, I thought about walking her home, but you can give her a ride, right?”

“Ugh, don’t I always?” Tom might have a point about the SUV being more trouble than it was worth. But I still loved having it, so whatever.

We caught back up to Marco, Cassie, and Melissa, and Rachel told her that we had to do some graduation shopping for Tom.
“Oh, I understand. Well, I really don’t because I've never had to go graduation shopping. But, yeah, I've kept Rachel all to myself this weekend. Cassie, you should come next weekend if you're free, it's been too long. We need to have a girls night, order some pizza, Netflix marathon, whole nine yards.”

Did I mention the girl had energy?

We got her meal to go, and to my complete lack of surprise, the osprey followed us overhead.

When we got back to Melissa's place, the osprey landed on a branch of a tree. I saw Tobias, the familiar red-tail, perched a few branches below. Rachel ran in with her, and a few minutes later came back out with her overnight bag.

It was Tobias that followed us to the WRC, not Elfangor. That was good, we now had another pair of wings that knew where Chapman lived.

We found Tobias in the barn. He'd flown ahead of us, and was waiting patiently in the rafters. The hawk he had acquired, the one with the broken wing, watched him from its cage. I wondered what that felt like, to see your doppelganger staring down at you. I doubt the hawk put that much depth to it.

Tobias swooped down, landed on the hay-strewn floor of the barn, and began to demorph.

I'd seen this forward, but the reverse of it was somehow so much more disturbing. The feathers melted back to quills, which were absorbed into now oversized chicken wings. Those fucked up little wings turned into almost fetal arms and then continued to grow, the fingers emerging from the wingtips.

The talons rearranged the bone configuration of the toes, the scales receded into the skin like Silly Putty left in the hot sun. The black hooked claws turned translucent, and blunted before melting back into normal toenails. But his legs weren't back to normal yet, and he fell over and backward, laying on his side.

His naked chest bulged obscenely. Birds, it turns out, have a massive protrusion of the breastbone called a keel. It was a fin-shaped blade of bone that anchored the overdeveloped pectoral muscles needed for flapping, but right now, as Tobias asserted his human DNA, it looked like his chest was going to explode outward.

When he was about the size of a toddler, Rachel opened her bag and fished out his jeans and t-shirt. I wondered if we should turn around and give Tobias some privacy, but then I saw dark grey fabric emerge from his hips. As the human form emerged, I realized he was wearing boxer briefs.

He stood, a little wobbly at first, as it looked like he got his balance before all his human muscles had settled. Tobias is a little shorter than I am, but he's built kinda lanky. He was pale, and while I could see the muscles of his ribs and stomach, I saw him as also being a little frail, a little undernourished. I really wanted to take him out for a bacon cheeseburger.

“Damn,” Marco said. “You need to get some sun, gringo.”

Tobias laughed as he pulled on his jeans and shirt. “We can't all be swarthy like you, Banderas.”

“How did you morph shorts?” I asked.

Rachel kinda blushed, but Tobias didn't seem to notice. “Yeah, that. It took some practice, but with some extra concentration, I was able to keep the boxers. It only works on tight clothing, though. I
couldn't pull in the jeans or anything."


She shifted uncomfortably. “It's nothing, just need to ask Cassie a girl question.”

Marco rolled his eyes. “Oh, please. Who do you think fills the tampons in the ladies room at the movie theater?”

Rachel looked at him like she couldn't decide if she wanted to hit him or was impressed with his candor. She just rolled her eyes and sighed. “Fine. Cassie, do you think I can borrow one of your sports bras? I don't think I can morph underwire.”

“Yeah,” Marco said, “that's Victoria's secret, not Andalite compatible.”

We didn't exactly laugh, but there was a sudden relief to the group. Rachel suddenly looked less embarrassed. We were all in the same boat here, and at best, we were all going to see each other in our underwear. And Tobias said it took practice to get that far, so at worst, things could get really embarrassing really quickly.

“We seem to have just decided we're having morphing class in the barn, haven't we?” Marco asked.

“Looks that way,” I nodded. “But one, I think we need to plan out the B&E, and two, morphing practice should probably be in the creek bed.”

“B&E?” Rachel asked. “Exactly what the hell are you guys planning?”

I had only told her we needed the camera to spy on Chapman’s office. I hadn’t had time to go deeper at the Boardwalk, and so now she had to be brought to speed. She listened intently and then swore loudly. “Fuck, why am I missing this plan?”

“You were the one that wanted to spend the night in cat morph,” I reminded.

That got another round of questions, more exposition, as Rachel went over her experience over the sleepover. There was an emotional element in her telling that had been missing from Tobias’s more bullet point takeaway.

“She feels like her parents don't love her anymore,” Rachel said. “I mean, she's not coming to the alien brain slug conclusion or anything, but she's noticed a definite change. Her parents are always at work, and they're distant when they're home. Chapman seems obsessed with the ‘rec room renovations,’” she said with finger quotes. “They aren't taking any real interest in her like they used to.”

Cassie nodded. “The Yeerks have all the memories, all the abilities of their hosts, but they have no emotional connection. Makes sense for alien parasites.”

“I mean it's not a high sounding thing,” Rachel continued. “It's not like fate of the world or anything. But these slugs hurt my friend, and I'm pissed.”

She looked at Marco like she expected him to tease her or make a sarcastic comment. He didn't. He wouldn't. Marco knew too well how much a change in a parent could hurt, and he didn't even make eye contact with her.

“So you want to go cat and check out this mysterious basement project?” I asked.
She nodded. “Yeah. I mean if there's a pool in the basement, we've been wasting our time. Right?”

That was a possibility we hadn't considered. Marco seemed skeptical, though. “If there's a pool in the basement, that means Chapman isn’t infested while the slug is in the liquid thing, right?”

I shrugged. “We're talking alien technology, Marco. I don't know what kind of assumptions we can make. Rachel makes a good point.” I sighed. I didn't like the position I was in, but it was what it was. “Alright. We need to get this camera into the vent in Chapman's office.” I set the box on the bench in the barn. “How do we do it?”

Cassie went first. “Can we just unscrew the vent cover and place it?”

Tobias shook his head. “I've spent enough time in Chapman's office. The vent is painted over. There's no way to take off the vent cover without the possibility he'll notice it's been fucked with.”

“So we take it through the ductwork,” I said.

Everyone looked at me. Great.

“We morph something that can go through the vent. Follow the duct till we come out somewhere less obvious. Open that vent, put the camera in, and push the camera through the duct till it's in position.”

“Anything small enough to fit through the vent slits isn’t going to be able to move that box,” Marco noted.

“Yeah,” Cassie said, “But if we’re opening the vent, we can have a second morph that just needs to fit in the duct.”

“Plus we can’t have Jake pick us up in the SUV tonight,” Tobias said.

I nodded. “No driving privileges on school nights.”

Cassie seemed to be considering that. She was looking at the cages, assessing our options. “So we need something very small, something small-ish that can move a half-pound box, and something to cover the distance.”

“So we've gone from one of us with one morph, to all of us morphing multiple animals,” I said.

“We're animal morphers,” Marco said. “Personally I'd rather have the Kryptonian deluxe package of superpowers, but shapeshifting isn't terrible.”

“I'm sure you'd love to have Kal-El's deluxe package,” Rachel said.

Marco shrugged. “Who says I don't? I think I'd look okay in red bikini briefs.”


“I could be biased,” Tobias said, “but I recommend the hawk.”

Cassie chortled, or whatever the hell you call it. One of those little sarcastic laughs that’s nothing more than a punctuated exhale. You know what I mean. “Like we need a cloud of raptors descending on the school. There’s that raven that flew into a window.” She nodded to a cage near Rachel. "Common, intelligent, large enough as passerine birds go. Should be very workable for our needs.”
I looked at the cage she indicated. Everyone knows what a raven looks like, but looking at its quizzical ink-black gaze, I felt a chill. “They look a little…”

“Creepy,” Rachel said, agreeing.

Cassie shrugged. “They have a reputation. But they're one of the smartest animals in the world, and passerine birds can see ultraviolet, so that’s something.”

“So Poe here will get us there,” Marco said. “What about the vents?”

“Well, I have something here that's actually pretty adept at getting into hollow spaces.” Cassie went over a few cages, and pointed. In the cage was a raccoon. “They have incredible night vision and dexterous paws.”

I nodded. Two for three, we were set. That still left a third outstanding. “What about our third?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I have no clue,” she said. "We don't have anything smaller than a squirrel at the moment.”

“Oh, I got it,” Marco said. I looked at him, eyebrows raised. “It's gonna take a pit stop at PetSmart, though.”

My stomach turned. “If you say gerbil, I'm going to hit you.”

“Oh, no, it's much worse,” he said with a wicked smile. “You like green, right? What would you think about a lizard?”

“Not enthused,” I said honestly. “But I guess we don't have much choice, do we?” I took a breath. Okay, you can do this. “We need to acquire the raven and the raccoon, and head down to creek to practice morphing.”

Heading down to the creek took a little extra effort than normal. I was carrying a length of rope and an old tarp. Marco was carrying the tent and sleeping bag that Cassie had alluded to earlier. Tobias had taken off to head back to Chapman's so Elfangor could fly back and demorph. He was already pretty casual about morphing, or at the very least he was used to the hawk transition. He wasn't particularly thrilled about the raccoon thing, it didn't seem. Rachel and Cassie had gone up to the house to change into something they thought they could morph.

I tried not to picture Cassie changing. I swear, I really did. I didn't succeed at all, but I did try.

That was actually what the rope and tarp were for. While we were waiting for Elfangor and the girls, Marco and I each tied an end of the rope to a tree, and when the line was taut, we draped the tarp over it. It was a very makeshift privacy curtain, but it worked. We were going to morph raccoon first. We had all agreed that morphing another mammal would probably be easier than morphing a bird for our first run. Plus, no offense to Tobias, seeing the process of growing wings and feathers was a bit of a turn-off for bird morphing.

“So,” I said, hesitating. “You talk to your dad?”
“No,” he said, a little deflated. “But I talked to Father Donovan today.”

“Well that’s progress,” I said. I didn’t want to push it. And Marco didn’t really seem like he wanted to go further with it.

At any rate, the girls were here. Cassie was wearing a seafoam green one-piece swimsuit and her cut-off shorts. Rachel had the same clothes on as earlier. She was not happy. “I swear, Marco, you say one word, I’m killing you.”

Marco rolled his eyes. “Rachel, we live on a beach. How many times have I seen you in a bikini?”

That actually seemed to stump her for a second. She blushed and started laughing. “Marco, sometimes I’m sure you’re screwing with me. But thanks for being mature about this.”

“Rachel, I’m wearing Spider-Man boxers today. I’m not what you’d call a pillar of maturity. I’m just not in a position to be throwing shade or mouthing off.”

Deep breath. “Okay, we’ve got the privacy screen set up; I think we need to just dive in.”

I peeled my t-shirt off, and stepped out of my shoes. I was very aware that there’s no dignified way to take off socks. I tried not to stare at Cassie as she shimmed her hips out of her cut-offs. Rachel was down to black hiphugger boyshorts and a purple sports bra she apparently borrowed from Cassie. The words “Quit Staring” were written across her chest in pink, curly letters. And Marco, true to his word, had black boxers with a giant white spider emblem etched across the left thigh.

“That’s what you were worried about me commenting on?” he asked.

Rachel’s face turned pink. “Watch it, Venom.”

“No, I’m not teasing. I just can’t help but wonder if that bra doesn’t say more about Cassie owning it than you wearing it.”

“Hey!” Cassie said, suddenly very alert. “My lingerie is none of your business. And if you need the bra to tell you not to ogle, well, you’re a pig.”

“Alright, so we just concentrate on the raccoon, right?” I said. I was already distracted enough - Cassie has some nice curves, okay? I’m only human - and I didn’t want this getting out of hand.

“That’s what Elfangor said,” Marco replied. “So the rule is we keep morphing until we morph our clothes, right?”

“I don’t think any of us wants to be streaking through the school tonight,” Cassie said.

I closed my eyes and concentrated on the raccoon. I could see its chocolate brown eyes, the characteristic black mask, tawny grey fur. I suddenly felt like I was falling. I opened my eyes and saw the world in slightly muted colors. It seemed way brighter suddenly. I realized I was shrinking. My spine bent forward as my hind legs receded and I went to put my hands forward to break my fall only to see my hands were already halfway to paws. Black fur etched from my fingers up past my wrists, before becoming paler grey.

The process was going similarly for all my friends. I watched as Rachel’s face extended into a muzzle before her sapphire blue eyes turned brown. Marco had lost his balance and rolled over, and his tail suddenly shot out of his spine, then exploded striped fur. If you’d ever wondered what it would look like to give birth to a toilet brush: A) you’ve got serious problems, get help, and B) you really don’t want to see that.
Cassie was different. She had grown the grey fur all over her body, and she was standing on elongated feet ending in paws. And she had a mostly raccoon face. But she was almost entirely human besides. She looked like she was about ready to win first prize at a furry convention. But then the fur enveloped her swimsuit and she began shrinking with the rest of us.

Raccoons don’t see color the same as humans. Cassie explained later that as a general rule, anything that can see in the dark has trouble seeing color. Only so much room in the eye, so they add more rod cells at the expense of cone cells. My sense of smell was incredible. I could smell the animals in the barn from Rachel’s clothes. I rooted around the ground, trying to get a lock on smells. I didn’t like being out in the open like this. I needed to be somewhere a bit more secluded. I needed to find a good place to lay down and get some sleep.

<Woah, so this is how a filthy trash-eater sees the world, huh?> Marco said.

<Does anyone else feel paranoid?> Rachel asked. <I mean I really want to book into the trees.>

<Cassie?> I asked.

<Yeah? Sorry, I’m picking up a lot of smells over here. Something weird.>

<It’s Elfangor,> I said, noticing the smell. <The raccoon brain can’t make sense of the Andalite scent.>

<Oh, that makes sense. What’s up?>

<How did you do that? The swimsuit thing?>

<Yeah,> Rachel said, <That was cool.>

<She’s a morph-dancer,> a voice answered.

We all looked up, and all of us went running. Raccoons aren’t exactly fleet footed, but we all took off when we saw the osprey. The raccoon brain didn’t know that ospreys were fish eaters. And the raccoon brain wasn’t really scared. Actually a good part of it wanted to fight. Kick that bird’s feathered ass. But when it comes to birds of prey, best not to take chances. We had run about ten or fifteen feet into the underbrush before Cassie - I think it was Cassie - got enough sense to turn around and head back.

<Sorry,> she said, looking up at the osprey. <This animal isn’t fond of predatory birds.>

<I can imagine. At the beach yesterday, this form wanted very badly to observe the ocean much more than it wanted to observe your public communications console.>

<It’s called a pay phone, dude,> Marco said snappishly. <And could you warn us when you’re going to land like that?>

<My apologies.>

<So what’s a morph-dancer?> Cassie asked.

<Most Andalites that use this technology have little voluntarily control over the process. But there are some that are able to execute very fine control over the process. It is admittedly more common in females. Morph-dancing is a popular civilian use of the Escafil technology.>

<Andalite burlesque, huh,> Marco snarked. <Don’t think you’ll find that on PornHub.>
<And just how much time do you spend on PornHub?> Rachel sniped.

Elfangor took this exchange as an excuse to demorph and remorph. Watching the black and white feathers of an osprey become the blue fur of an Andalite was still shocking, even as often as I’d seen him do it at this point. I decided he was on point, though.

<Okay, so we seem to have a handle on Bandito, agree?> I asked.


<Ignoring that,> I said, <we’re all in control right now it seems. I think my shorts carried, and we all know Cassie managed to keep the swimsuit. How did you guys fare?>

There was a pause and then I watched as one of the raccoons scampered over and dragged a bra and underwear to the tarp. <When you’re done behind the curtain, I’m going to be right behind you,> Marco said.

<You keep your raccoon eyes on that side of the curtain, trashcan.>

Cassie and I opted to demorph. I was fully human just about the time Elfangor was back to osprey. I watched him go, off to let Tobias off surveillance duty at Chapman’s. I was trying to avoid looking at Cassie. She noticed.

“You know,” she said, perhaps a little demurely. “There’s nothing written on my swimsuit that says you can’t look.”

I laughed. “Don’t tempt me, Cass. You fill that suit out pretty well.”

She whispered into my ear. “Maybe that’s why I bought it.”

I swallowed. I looked at her seriously, than smiled when I couldn’t keep it going. “You’re a little flirtier than I would’ve expected.”

“And you’re exactly as uptight as I’d expect you to be,” she said, nudging me with an elbow. “Even in your underwear.”

“Don’t be ogling me.”

Rachel stepped out of the curtain and put a hand on her hip. “You guys do know raccoons have good hearing right?”

“Quit staring,” I said, not making eye contact.

“Ass.”

“Blonde.”

“See?” Cassie asked, “You’re relaxed with Rachel. It’s not a girl thing, because you didn’t treat me with kid gloves before we started dating.”

“Well, you’re one of my best friends. It’s been you, me, Marco, and Rachel since we were little. I’m worried I’m going to do something dumb and fuck this up before it really starts.”

She kissed me on the cheek. “Y’know, it’s cute that you worry about things, Jake. But why would you think you’d mess it up?”
I shrugged. “I’m a guy. And I know nothing about girls.”

“T’m a girl, and I know nothing about boys. Try to relax, okay?”

I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her in. I was suddenly very aware I was in nothing but my shorts.

Thankfully, with perfect timing, Marco came out from behind the curtain. “Okay, so I guess Rachel and I need to concentrate on the clothing part more for raven morphing.”

“Unless you want to morph raccoon again?” I said. “Since it’s something you two already know. I’m just saying, if we’re trying birds next, maybe wait for Tobias and see if he has any opinions.”

“Or at least so the hawk doesn’t scare the hell out of the ravens,” Cassie said.

The funny thing about morphing, is that once you do it, it’s a lot less scary. It’s like riding the monster roller coaster for the first time or bungee jumping or whatever. The process was still unsettling, but all of us had done it now. It wasn’t really a big thing for me now. I wasn’t exactly impatient to try the raven morph, and I saw what Tobias meant about morphing taking a bit out of you. I felt like I’d just run sprints.

Marco and Rachel opted to wait, and it wasn’t more than maybe ten minutes later that Tobias swooped through the trees. <Woah, did I miss out on the orgy?>

<Cram it, T-bird,> Marco said.

<Better than Ten Piece,> he said, coming down for a landing. <Elfangor said you guys were practicing morphing.>

Tobias demorphed, once again standing in his shorts, and he found a log to sit on. “Nothing new going on at Chapman’s,” he said. “What did I miss?”

“Jake and Cassie mastered clothes,” Rachel said. “Marco and I not so much. Hoping our bird morphs work better, otherwise I guess we have morphing homework.”

“Well,” I said, “I actually do have homework. I guess since the bird expert is back, we might as well try ravens and get this over with.”

“Bird expert, huh?” Tobias said. “Think I should try raccoon or no?”

I shrugged. “Four of us can do it, didn’t seem to be too hard to control. I don’t think we’re going to need five raccoons at any rate.”

“Alright, fledglings. Let’s earn your wings.”

Morphing ravens was a little different. We already knew the general anatomy stuff from watching Tobias. And to everyone’s relief, Rachel and Marco carried their clothes this time through. The way feathers grew out of the skin can only be described as very itchy. The fusing of my fingers had been incredibly unsettling, but like Tobias had said, the process didn’t hurt, even the parts that felt like they should.

And Cassie was right. The raven could see ultraviolet. I think all of us besides Tobias needed a few minutes to adjust to the change in color vision. It’s literally a color the human brain can’t imagine, so we had to rely on the raven mind to fill in gaps. Cassie was also right that ravens were very smart. The single most obvious instinct in the raven mind was curiosity. We spent a few minutes
staring at each other, trying to size each other up, we broke into a cawing match. Raven are vocal, and they’re communicative. I think because both the raccoons and the ravens were smart, getting a handle on them was easier. They kinda had like a bit of a foothold or base framework for human intelligence. They had behaviors and instincts that already included curiosity and memory.

I didn’t like where that put me for morphing the lizard.

As Cassie told me, reptiles aren’t exactly intellectual champions. They don’t think about anything, they only react. They run completely on instinct, so she told me to expect the lizard to be trickier.

It was time for us to split up. We were all going to meet on the school roof at eleven. And it was barely three thirty now. We all put our other clothes on, found our shoes, and got ready for the next phase of the plan. For Tobias, it was back to alternating surveillance with Elfangor. I had to get Rachel home before her parents flipped out, not to mention try out her cat morph. Cassie had her chores to do. Marco and I had to go to the pet store and acquire the lizard, which we’d each have to try on our own.

And I had perhaps the most difficult job of all, something I’d have less than seven hours to do.

I still had to write that fucking English paper.

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
Chapter 12

I was nervous. It was dark out, after ten, and the time had come for me to get ready to go. It might surprise you that I’ve never snuck out before. I mean, maybe not. I really am the overly responsible type. But I’m still sixteen. I torrent movies, I watch porn, I’ve shoplifted before. But I’ve never really needed to push boundaries or rebel.

Maybe I have exceptional parents, that gave me space when I needed it. I didn’t have much to rebel against. My mom and dad had always kinda balanced my responsibilities with my independence, and since I was thirteen, I was treated increasingly as a grown-up. I had the alcohol talks, the drug talks, and of course the sex talks. They were invested, they expected me to behave, but they didn’t rake me over the coals when I made mistakes.

And maybe I’d just adjusted to the shit that happened to my friends. When Loren disappeared, I remember having nightmares for months in third grade that my mom wasn’t going to be there when I woke up. It seems selfish, I know. I mean, I know it didn’t happen to me, but at eight years old, the fact that something bad even could happen to my parents was new. When you’re a little kid, your parents are these infallible characters, and seeing my mom fall apart, crying over her friend, I didn’t have the emotional framework for that at eight. I wasn’t supposed to, obviously, but it impacted me that something bad happened to my friend, that bad things could happen, and that my own parents couldn’t do anything to fix it.

And then six years later, I was at a funeral with my best friend crying beside me. Again, it wasn’t about me. But it still affected me. My relationship with Marco changed a lot in the last two years, and I think as Marco became increasingly independent out of sheer necessity, so did I. We were each the closest friend the other had.

I think that was where a lot of my straight-and-narrow personality comes from. I put a huge value on stability, I guess. I’m sure my mom’s psych books had tons to say about that. But I know how much a little stability mattered to Marco and Tobias.

At any rate, Marco’s mom was alive the last time I ever shoplifted. And I wasn’t an impulsive sixth or seventh grader anymore. So I was nervous about sneaking out, even if I wasn’t going to be human when I left. But being nervous wasn’t going to stop me. I wasn’t thrilled with it, but it was my responsibility.

The last few hours had been mostly uneventful. When we left Cassie’s and dropped Rachel off at her house, Marco and I had gone to PetSmart. Sure enough, they had a lizard that was perfect for our needs. The only real glitch to the plan is when I acquired the lizard and it went into the usual
torpor, well, the handler thought we’d hurt it. Which meant that Marco didn’t get a chance to acquire the lizard and that put vent duty entirely on me. I knew I should’ve made him go first.

Then I’d dropped him off and come home. I ran my laundry, and suddenly realized I’d let Elfangor’s blood soak into my Friday work uniform for almost thirty-six hours. But to my great relief, it turned out that Tide and a generous addition of Shout were sufficient to remove Andalite blood, so that was a minor crisis averted. I suppose if it had come to it, I could’ve just said I spilled grape soda or something, but I was happy I didn’t have to order a replacement uniform. I’d spent enough on the camera that I didn’t want to get my next check docked.

And I’d knocked out my English paper. I wasn’t really big on it, though getting it done was a load off. What was really funny about it - or ironic anyway - was that this morning I hadn’t been able to concentrate because of all the other questions in my head. But now that I knew I was breaking into the school, I was suddenly way more interested in the distraction of homework and laundry. Anything so I didn’t have to think about what I was doing that night.

From there it was the normal Sunday dinner with the family, watching some TV with Tom, though honestly he seemed rather bored through most of it. He spent most of the episode checking his phone and texting. He said it was volunteer stuff for The Sharing, which I actually took to mean he was texting a girl and didn’t want to talk about it.

But the hours ticked by, and I’d gone upstairs, got a shower, brushed my teeth, put my clothes in my dresser, put my homework in my backpack, and then shut my bedroom door.

It was just about time to go, and I wanted to test the lizard morph before I flew to the school.

I left my clothes folded on my bed, awkwardly standing in my boxers in my bedroom, and tried to clear my head. I didn’t bother to close my eyes this time. I just concentrated on the lizard. Morphing the raccoon had felt like falling. This felt like I was bulleting down to the floor. The lizard was so much smaller, and the shrinking effect was so much more intense. My skin hardened, the little hairs of my arms absorbed into the skin as it cracked into scales before turning green. My eyes bulged out as my skull changed shape, my jaw jutting forward and filling with so many more, small teeth. The tail was the last to form, shooting out from my spine as I fell forward on my lizard hands.

My room was huge. I couldn’t even really see the far wall from here, it was like the other side of my room was the opposite side of a football stadium. Much like the raven, the lizard was also able to see ultraviolet, and that was a very weird thing. There’s not exactly a lot of ultraviolet light at night, but it was still a plus to seeing in the dark. The biggest issue was at this scale, distance was harder to judge. I perceived a few yards like I’d normally perceive a mile, and it took me awhile to get a handle on the visual information.

For a second, I thought maybe Cassie had been wrong about the lizard brain, but I soon learned the only reason I had default control over the body was because there was nothing going on in my room. But when Tom walked by the door to his room, and the lizard felt the giant vibrations of his footsteps through the floor, it was on. I was under my bed before I’d realized I was running. Dark was good. Need to have cover. No open spaces, no open spaces.

It wasn’t much different from the raccoon’s instinct, really, but it was magnified like a thousand-fold. The raccoon brain hadn’t been afraid, it just was nocturnal. It wanted to find somewhere safe, and sleep out the daylight hours. But the lizard brain lived here. This was the default setting for the lizard. My tongue flicked out sporadically, tasting the air, trying to maybe get a beat on some bug or something. It’s brain was wired for nothing but survival, which was both simple and complicated.
The simple part was that the lizard had only a handful of thoughts in its whole repertoire. Cover from predators, food and water, find the warm, maybe a nice female lizard, and watch out for other dominant males. The complicated part was that those instincts were bolted in place. The lizard mind wasn’t designed to wonder. It wasn’t the kind of animal that asked questions or parsed its place in the universe. It just wanted a juicy cricket, a hot rock, and to bump cloacas if the opportunity presented itself, and to not get eaten between those three tasks. And anything that wasn’t one of those thoughts just didn’t matter.

It took some mental effort to get the lizard body to move. The lizard didn’t want to move. It was all about conserving energy. And it wasn’t that warm in my room with the window open to the May breeze. Moving wasn’t useful, and the lizard wanted to sit still, maybe follow the smell of spider. But moving for the sake of moving was just irrational.

Bit by bit, though, I got the hang of it. I was basically constantly telling the lizard brain that there might be food this way, and the body reluctantly went along with it. Reptiles aren’t known for their metabolic prowess, and while the lizard could be quick as hell if the need arose, it preferred a much mode lackadaisical speed.

I demorphed to human and morphed to raven again.

We’d done a bit of wing flapping and hopping earlier, but it occurred to me suddenly that we should have done more in the way of flight practice. I hopped to my open window and looked out into the backyard. I was on the second floor, and twelve or fifteen feet to the ground looked a lot higher when you’re less than two feet tall. The raven’s first instinct was to judge distance, and I had no problem with that. Birds have very good eyesight, but the eyes can’t move in their sockets, so I found myself bobbing my raven head up and down, turning and twisting. I didn’t know how to fly. But I was reasonably sure the raven instincts did.

I flapped my wings hard and pushed off the windowsill. Once I was airborne, the raven took over, and I was on the wing.

The raven’s mind made dozens of minute adjustments to my wings, my tail feathers, scanning, and for a few minutes, I made no effort whatsoever to direct the body. I let the raven teach me how to fly first. When I was reasonably sure I wasn’t going to hit the ground, I took over and was surprised by the autonomy. I guess it made sense when I thought about it. I mean, I didn’t exactly throw a ton of brain power at walking. The body just does it. It took me awhile to get my bearings, but I soon made out Walnut Street below and followed it south to the high school.

Our school is actually a collection of buildings, but the main school is a three-storey rectangular, museum-like building. It’s oriented in a northwest-southeast direction, with a quad to the south, separate buildings for the cafeteria and the math and science departments. As I got closer, I saw two other ravens and a red-tailed hawk waiting on the roof in the rear corner of the main building, behind the solar panels by the vents. I was the last one here apparently. The raven instincts were not pleased about approaching the hawk, but I suppressed the urge to veer away. I fought the temptation to scream “Nevermore!” in thought-speak as I landed. It seemed crass, and besides, I was like ninety-nine percent sure that Marco had already done it.

<See?> Cassie said, <Jake didn’t say it.>

<Yeah, but he thought about saying it. And the only reason you didn’t say it was because you got here first.>

<Alright, I’ll give you that,> she said.
I ignored them. <Tobias, you got the bag?> I asked.

<Yeah, I got it.> he said. <It was a bitch to fly here with it, though.>

Tobias had a small leather pouch, containing the camera, my cell phone, and a few other implements. We knew that a red-tail hawk could carry a rabbit, so the logic was anything under the average weight of a rabbit, about three pounds, should be hawk-ready. And the bag had been under three pounds. Cassie had weighed it.

<It was too heavy?> I asked.

<Not as such, just the hawk didn’t want to carry it. At least with a rabbit, you can eat it. This was just work for the sake of work, and every hawk instinct was to just let it go.>

<Well, I appreciate you keeping the payload safe. I hope you were waiting long enough to get a break, ’cause we’re going to need you to carry it in.>

<Yeah, I figured. Cassie got here right before me, about fifteen minutes ago. Marco got here just before you did.>

<Okay, Marco. Is the window open like you thought it’d be?>

<Yeah, Tidwell always leaves the window open.>

Mister Tidwell was perhaps the oldest teacher at our school. He was actually kinda funny, and he taught American history and civics out of a third-floor classroom in the southernmost corner. The window overlooked the science building.

<One of you guys is going to have to open the window wider,> Tobias said. <I’m not going to fit through that gap.>

Marco, Cassie, and I all took off and circled the building. It didn’t take long to see what Tobias meant about the window. Our raven morph had a wingspan of about three feet, maybe a little larger, and Tobias was easily wider in the wings by about a foot. But as it turns out, when all is said and done, we weren’t that much smaller in raven morph than he was in hawk morph. Luckily these were the kind of windows that opened outward, so Cassie simply perched on the top edge of the window before ducking into the classroom. Marco followed, and I was last. The raven instincts didn’t really like this maneuver - birds in general seem to be a bit on the claustrophobic side - but I got in without much trouble.

The three of us all crowded under Tidwell’s desk. There was only enough room under here for one of us to demorph at a time, and Marco had the first leg of this mission. He began to grow quickly, the black feathers giving way to his bronze complexion. I saw the same white spider on his shorts as before, and then almost as soon as he was human, he began shrinking again, the grey fur taking over his body. It didn’t take more than a few minutes for him to cycle from raven, to human, to raccoon.

<Tobias?> Marco called. <Can you still hear us?>

<Yeah, little fuzzy, but I can hear you.>

We had learned from Elfangor too late in our plan that thought-speech has similar range to actual audible conversations. We weren’t that far from Tobias in Tidwell’s classroom, but the ceiling above us seemed to be playing a factor.
I'm headed to security. Going to be a few minutes, so hold tight.

Our school had security cameras in the hallways and classrooms, so we had to stay under the desk till Marco went down to the security office downstairs and disabled the cameras. They were on a simple closed-circuit TV system, and they were mostly to record students during school hours than they were to deter break-ins or vandalism, but we couldn't exactly leave them on for this.

Unlike the aborted Best Buy plan, this was easy. The security room was on the first floor, near the utility room, and Marco just needed to flip a few switches.

It left me and Cassie alone together under the desk while we waited. So, I said awkwardly, did you maybe want to go to the dance?

Her thought-speech giggle was adorable. Our first real date, and you're gonna ask while we're hiding as birds? And I thought Rachel said you can't dance.

I can't, I said. But do you want to go?

She seemed to think that over for a few minutes. Finally she had an answer. No, I don't want to go to the dance.

Really? I asked.

Yeah. I mean I did a week ago, but after that kiss in the barn, I realized something.

Oh? I was trying not to sound apprehensive, but I was terrified she was going say something bad.

I don't need to go to the dance to be happy. I just want to be with you.

That floored me. I would have kissed her if I could.

I'd much rather go to the movies with you or the Boardwalk and just hang out than go through all the awkward drama of having to get a dress, listen to soft rock hits from the Nineties, and have our teachers yell at us if we dance too closely.

I could respect that, and it made me feel a lot better. But a thought hit me. You're not just saying that because you know the dance makes me uncomfortable, are you?

Maybe. But I'm not lying, either. I do like hanging out with you.

I laughed. I appreciate that. But if you want to go to the dance, I can be uncomfortable for a few hours if it makes you happy. I'll even buy the dress.

You really are such a thoughtful goober, Jake, she said. I think it's what I like best about you.

Guys, Marco said softly, I don't mean to ruin your bonding time, but the cameras are off.

Embarrassed, Cassie and I demorphed rapidly. I was wearing plain black bike shorts after my shower. Cassie was wearing the one-piece swimsuit from earlier. While we were mid-morph, Marco opened the window all the way and Tobias swooped through, setting the pouch on a desk, where Marco picked it up while Tobias demorphed.

We all went downstairs quickly. Like I said, the building has something of a museum-like design. The street-side face of the building has Corinthian columns and a sprawling multi-level staircase. Because of the stairs, the main entrance and the administrative offices of the school were all on the second floor, with the first floor being a level down from the entrance. It was the second floor we
needed to access.

We found Chapman's office easily enough, but of course it was locked. That would've been more of a problem if I didn't have the super handy lizard morph. I sighed, morphed, and slid under the door, then immediately demorphed again and unlocked the door. My friends followed me and Marco opened the pouch. He set the camera and my phone on Chapman's desk. Then came the screwdriver we figured we'd need to open the other vent. And then he took out the last item: a spool of kite string.

While I morphed back to lizard, Marco tied a small loop in the end of the string. The lizard brain was comfortable enough in the dark, but wasn't so thrilled about all the giant legs in the room. I took about a minute or two to figure out my bearings then skittered across the floor of Chapman's office. I reached the wall and suddenly the horizon rotated upward a hundred eighty degrees as I went from the flat floor to the vertical wall. The weirdest thing about running up a wall was how little that distinction mattered to the lizard brain.

I stopped at the vent. <Alright, Marco, let me have it.>

He held out the little loop of kite string and I gingerly put my left arm or leg or whatever through it. And then I steeled my nerves to the best of my ability and slipped through the slats in the vent, dragging the string along.

The string was meant to serve two functions. First, it was incredibly dark in the vent and while the lizard wasn't terribly concerned about the lack of light, we had some real concerns about getting lost in the vent. If I got lost or disoriented in here, I could always follow the line back and try again. And second, once I came out somewhere else, Cassie or Marco could follow the line to the end of the vent and place the camera.

But right now, I was in a pitch dark aluminum corridor and all I could do was walk forward. Surprisingly, the lizard morph didn't fight this proposal. Dark was good. Darkness meant shelter. I should note that no matter how well the lizard could see in the dark, there was no light in here whatsoever, but that was fine, because my flickering tongue was picking up the airborne scent markers that said there were spiders in this place. And as long as there could be food, the lizard was fine to wander the darkness.

My biggest concerns right now stemmed from the fact that I couldn't perceive distance very well, and therefore had no real concept of how far I was going. Like I said, I couldn't see anything. But I could feel the metal along my clawed limbs and my tail, I could feel the air currents moving over me. And here and there I felt the seams in the aluminum ducts. I counted those as I went through.

I suddenly felt the air currents shift and I realized the vent had come to a vertical intersection. I could either go up or down, and I chose up for no particular reason. My lizard feet were able to grip the metal easily and soon I felt the vent level out again. I had to be on the third floor by now, so this was going well so far.

But then it happened.

My tongue caught more scent, and I could feel the motion more than I could hear it. The lizard brain turned and bolted, like it had thrown a switch. I felt my jaws open and snap shut. I felt the mass in my mouth, heavy, moving. There was a sickening wet crunch as my jaws autonomously worked open and shut, forcing the spider down my throat as it valiantly, violently, and futilely fought to escape.

By the time my human mind had caught up to the reality of the situation, there was nothing I
could do. The lizard didn't have a gag reflex and there was no way to spit it out. It was like swallowing an entire plate of crab legs raw, shells and all, while being hit in the face. And worse, I could still feel it moving and fighting as it slid down my throat.

I blanked for a few minutes. The lizard wanted to be still so it could digest its prey. And I wanted a minute to try to process what had just happened. Simply put, the lizard had certain instincts that just weren't going to be capped just because I was exerting human intelligence. It was a reflex. I couldn't have stopped myself from eating that spider anymore than I could stop a sneeze as a human. Rationally, that made sense. But it wasn't a whole lot of comfort and I was very eager to get the holy hell out of lizard morph.

It took me about another fifteen minutes, give or take, to find another vent cover. I slithered out easily enough, emerging into a classroom. It was dark, but the light coming through the window was exponentially brighter than the vent had been. It was difficult to tell where I was and I just made my way to the floor as quickly as possible. The sooner I was out of lizard form, the better. The duct ran along the wall, right below the ceiling. There was probably a name for it or something but I'm not an HVAC expert. All I know is it was a little bit of a hike to the floor.

Once I was finally on a level plane, I backed out of the kite string loop and demorphed. When I was human, I had new problems. The nausea I couldn't experience as a lizard hit me abruptly and I had to breathe slowly to let it pass. I didn't want to throw up. Partly because I didn't want to admit how much the spider snack had disturbed me, and I wasn't above a little masculine stubbornness. But mostly it was the pragmatism that I just didn't want to have to run down to the janitor closet to scrub up my own vomit.

When the feeling passed, or at least lessened, I went downstairs. I had recognized the classroom as Missus Zeuhlke’s English class. She was my English teacher last year, so I knew my way around from here. I was hoping we'd get this over with quickly.

I think I gave all my friends a minor coronary when I came back through Chapman's office door. “Jake, damn, don't sneak up on a girl,” Cassie said breathlessly. “Sorry. The line is set, goes from Zeuhlke’s room on third down a drop and back out. The lizard didn't have a problem with the vents, let's hope the raccoon goes as smoothly.”

“You okay, man?” Tobias asked. “You look a little...off.”

I sighed. “The lizard found a spider in the vent. Reflex.”

“Eww. You okay?” Cassie asked.

I shrugged. “I'll be fine if we never bring it up again. C’mon, let's get this set.”

Tobias grabbed my phone and the screwdriver and the four of us went back up the stairs.

It was Cassie that volunteered for the next part, since Tobias had carried the bag, Marco had hit the cameras, and I'd run the guide wire.

Marco and Tobias carefully moved a desk under the duct and Tobias hopped up and unscrewed the vent while Cassie morphed. She shrunk down to raccoon in just a few minutes, and in the dim light of the windows, the transformation was creepier because I could really only make out her silhouette.

Cassie let me pick her up and I tied the end of the kite string around her paw.
<Are you petting me?> she asked.

I looked down. I was. I had just started petting her like she was a dog or a cat. “Sorry, I guess nervous energy.”

<Home stretch. We should be out of here before you know it.>

We checked the camera, made sure it was on, made sure it had a good connection to the school’s wireless network, and made sure that my phone was receiving the signal. We set the camera back in the pouch and set it in the vent, and then I carefully lifted Cassie up so she could reach.

She wiggled around a bit getting a handle on the pouch. “Please be careful, Cass,” I told her. “Watch the drop; I don't want you getting hurt.”

<Got it.>

And then she vanished into the vent, following the kite string. I saw the flash of her striped tail, then only black.

We watched the feed on the phone. It was only darkness at the moment, but we could hear intermittent noises, the little pops and bangs as the weight of the raccoon ran along the metal. We could hear her claws clicking around the ducts. There was suddenly a change in the metal noises, and a slight bang, and then the noises continued. She'd already gone past the drop.

In a few minutes there were other rustling noises and suddenly the image on my phone went bright and we could see the slits of the vent from Chapman's office.

It occurred to me that we needed to be able to talk to her so I went back to the principal's office. I was thankful we hadn't locked it yet. I really didn't want to go back to lizard morph again if I could help it.

“Cassie?” I asked the darkness. “Can you hear me?”

<Yeah, Jake. How's the picture look?>

I sat down in Chapman's leather office chair. It felt comfy. I looked at the phone and looked to see where I was in the shot. I waved my arm and realized suddenly that we weren't going to be able to get a really great angle of the desk. “Try a little to your left. Okay, stop there. Can you twist the camera just a bit back the other way?” I could see just the top of my head and about a third of the desk. But I had a really good view of the door. We weren't going to have a great view of what he was up to, but we were at least going to know if he left the office. I turned in the volume and checked out the volume. “Testing, testing.”

<Look at you, sound tech engineer.>

“It's not perfect, but it's the best we can do,” I said. I cut the kite string with my teeth and told Cassie to head on back. I grabbed the spool off the desk and made sure we didn't leave anything behind. I locked the door and pulled it closed behind me. I got upstairs just in time to see Marco gently pull Cassie out of the duct.

I used my phone's light to help Tobias screw the vent cover back into place. We pulled the length of string and rolled it up. I dropped the string in the pouch, and then my phone and handed it to Tobias.

Marco told us to get out of here while he went back to turn the CCTV system back on. Tobias went
first, since he needed the window open the furthest. I pulled the window back to where I thought Tidwell had had it and Cassie and I went back to ravens.

It was just shy of twelve thirty, and I was bushed. But I perched on the roof and Cassie waited with me. <You wanna make sure Marco's out before you go home, don't you?>

<Yeah, I want to make sure everything's okay before I go home.>

<Y'know,> Cassie said, <It occurred to me that raven morphing is like the ultimate morph for breaking curfew.>

<I think the Andalite technology has corrupted you,> I said. <I don't recall you being this bent on trouble a week ago.>

<Honestly, I'm kidding. I'm half-worried Mom decided to check on me and noticed I'm gone. I've, uh, never snuck out before.>

<Me neither,> I said. <Fly you home?>

<Aww, that's sweet.>

We watched as Marco burst out of Tidwell’s window and flew off. If he noticed us on the roof, he didn't say anything. He just wanted to get home and get what sleep he could before we had to get to school in the morning.

I flew into the night sky with Cassie right behind me. Ravens are pretty swift flyers, and bird morph was definitely way more efficient than driving. Granted, showing up in nothing but bike shorts kinda killed the practicality, but flying was still cool.

We didn't head straight to Cassie's place. First we swung by Chapman's. We landed in the tree Tobias had used as cover the last two days, but we didn't see Elfangor.

<It seems I have visitors,> his voice said.

We both hopped down a few branches and saw him sitting in the underbrush. He was unmorphed, resting in his natural Andalite form. It was dark enough that he didn't need to hide behind an Earth species or risk getting trapped in one.

<Yeah, it's Jake and Cassie,> I said.

<Your plan has gone as expected?>

<Well as we could've hoped,> I said, trying not to sound pessimistic.

<You've done well,> he said. <I cannot begin to express my gratitude for all you have done. I could not have asked for better human allies.>

I didn't know what to say to that. Cassie had a bit more grace. <We're honored, Elfangor.>

<Tobias should have left my phone on the roof of the school, next to the vent,> I said. We weren't totally sure the range on this. In theory, I think it was the kind of camera that as long as it was on, you could check from your phone, like if you wanted to check on your nanny while you were at work, or whatever. And I told Elfangor he could move if he wanted to, but I wasn't sure the raven morph could carry it, and Tobias had done enough. <You should be secluded enough on the roof to be able to demorph if you need to, but…>
He got the point. <I will stay in the osprey form as long as possible.>

<There's a clock on my phone.,> I said lamely. <Assuming you can read Earth time.>

<I appreciate the concern, but the morphing technology is not as dangerous for me as it is for you.>

<Oh?> Cassie asked. <How so?>

<Andalites have an inherent sense of time. We do not require timekeeping devices as you do.>

Well, that would have been handy. But all I said was, <Oh.> Then another thought hit me. <You'll have audio tomorrow, too,> I said. <We can see part of his desk but the surveillance angle isn't great. Still, you can see the door so you know when he leaves the office.>

<I am afraid.> Elfangor said, <that auditory information will be of little value to me.>

That puzzled me. <Why do you say that?>

<I do not understand your human language, Jake. I only understand you when you are physically with me and I am able to perceive your brain functions as you speak. I will not discern meaning from sound alone.>

<Well, that blows,> I said.

<Indeed.>


<No.> Elfangor answered. <She was here for approximately one hour, but left shortly before you two arrived.>

<Did she see anything?> I asked. I was curious about the basement as well.

<She said only that she was unable to reach the sublevel as she had intended.>

<I see,> I said. <Well, I wish we could talk more but we have to get some sleep before school.>

<You're not going to get any sleep at all, are you?> Cassie asked him. I immediately felt foolish for bringing it up. Elfangor was going to watch Chapman's every move from now till tomorrow afternoon when we got out of school, at least another fourteen hours.

<Do not fret, Cassie. I am a soldier and I have endured worse. And truth be told, the day is longer on my home planet, approximately forty-three hours. I am having more issue adjusting to your planetary cycles than I am with sleep deprivation.>

<Well, I now feel a hell of a lot less guilty telling you that I am exhausted.>

Elfangor laughed and we said our goodbyes. We had done all we could for now, and tomorrow was out of our hands until school was out. I flew Cassie home as I'd promised. We didn't talk much; we were both too tired. To her relief, there were no cop cars outside her house. She flew into her window, and we exchanged our own good-byes.

I flew in my bedroom window and demorphed. I shut my window and went to the bathroom.

I threw up.
There was no build-up or prelude to it. It wasn't sudden either. I just walked into the bathroom and saw the toilet and almost consciously decided to wretch. It was as if I'd put all my physical revulsion on pause and had just clicked play.

I brushed my teeth again, took two shots of Listerine, drank a glass of water, and went back to my room to collapse into oblivion.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 13

I woke to the hellish cacophony of my nightstand alarm clock. I sat upright in a fit, suddenly panicked that I'd overslept. I hadn't, but with the thinnest five hours of sleep I really wanted to lay back down and take a sick day. But as I wiped the cold sweat from my face, I remembered the bizarre nightmares, and sleep lost its appeal very quickly.

I'd dreamt that I had been bolted to a cold metal table, with my mouth wired open. One after another, spiders the size of tabby cats crawled over me and forced their way into my open mouth.

This had been our first mission. I'd crawled through a vent. I didn't even place the camera, just mapped the path with kite string. And one small glitch was giving me severe mental and physical backlash.

Elfangor had said if we found the Yeerk pool, he could make an adequate explosive. If this was where I was after the first baby steps of the human resistance, I wasn't sure how well I'd take to explosions.

It was Monday. We'd had eyes on Chapman most of Saturday, all of Sunday, and now with the camera in place, we knew it was probably going to be time. He was going to go to the pool today. And if not today or in the middle of the night, then Tuesday morning would be the last possible option.

Unless we were wrong. Maybe Chapman wasn't a Controller. What would we do then? We'd be back to square one, with no leads and no options. And how would we help Elfangor then?

But no. I was sure he was one of them. He'd shown up minutes after that call from the pay phone. He'd been looking around. Melissa noticed he was different. He had blacked out the basement windows and not even the fucking cat could get down there. I knew he was a slave to the Yeerks. I just didn't want it to be true.

I went to the hall bathroom, splashed water on my face. I debated getting another shower, but I opted against it. I'd had one last night, and I worried if I got in the spray, I'd just stay there till we were out of hot water. I took off my shirt and wiped myself off with a washcloth and got dressed.

I went downstairs for my usual minimalist breakfast, cup of coffee and a banana, and found Tom pouring himself a cup. Both of us actually get up for school before our parents leave for work, and the great advantage of having an older brother is that I seldom have to make my own coffee in the morning.
“Hey, bro,” he said. “You alright? Thought I heard you in the bathroom last night praying to the porcelain god.”

“I think the fried mushrooms at the Boardwalk disagreed with me,” I lied. “What were you doing up that late?”

“Texting Zoe,” he said with a yawn.

“Things going okay with you two?” I hadn't ever really taken much interest in Tom's girlfriend. She was nice enough, I guess. She seemed a bit distant, though I couldn't really tell you why. She was the socially responsible type, homes for the homeless, soup kitchens, that kind of stuff, and she was cute enough that I could definitely see where Tom got into The Sharing. But Zoe had a something of a joyless personality, and hanging out with her felt tedious, even if she wasn't particularly abrasive or anything. Like the stuff I found interesting seemed boring to her and vice versa. Her boyfriend had a basketball scholarship and she didn't even seem that into sports, which I guess isn't all that weird, but whatever. Suffice to say we didn't dislike each other or anything, just never clicked on a personal level.

“Things are going well. We're planning a volunteer outreach for The Sharing for early June. Wanna come?”

I shrugged. “Do I have to do anything?”

Tom laughed. “Dude, it’s a beach cookout. Barbecue and volleyball. Maybe a few local bands if we get the permits. Trying to get new volunteers.”

I yawned, trying to shake the last remnants of post-lizard spider dreams out of my head. “I’ll go for the free food, but I got a job and this is my first summer with a girlfriend with an actual barn-load of chores. No promises on volunteering.”

“Yeah, man, I know how that goes. Enjoy the summers while you can, bro. College will sneak up on you.” He actually tousled my hair like I was a little kid and he wasn’t barely two years older than me.

We grabbed our backpacks, I made sure I had my wallet before tossing Tom the keys. He'd either take the bus home or get a ride from Zoe or one of his other friends. He had his own plans after school anyway.

Tom parked in the side lot and tossed me the keys. I looked up at the roof. I of course didn't see an osprey looking down, and I didn't really expect that I would. I don't know why I looked up, really. One last breath before I took the plunge.

The walk up the stairs seemed weird, and the hustle of so many other people made me nervous. I was back to my Yeerk paranoia, wondering how many of my friends were infested, how many of my teachers? I also had the slow dread that at any minute cops were going to show up and call all our names down to the office, that somehow the camera had been discovered and we were all caught on tape morphing throughout the school.

Don't sweat, deep breaths, act casual.

Easier said than done.

I went to the computer lab and tried to clear my head. I had stuff to do in here anyway. In my two trips to Best Buy yesterday, I’d still forgotten to buy ink cartridges. I wished my English teacher would have just taken emails, but she didn’t, so I logged into my Google Drive and printed off my
paper and then went to my homeroom.

None of my morph-capable friends were in my homeroom. I would see Tobias in English and trig, and I’d see Rachel and Cassie at chemistry, and Marco and I had gym together. But the only time it’d be the five of us together was at lunch.

As I sat at my desk, I got drawn into a conversation with my friends Matt and Drew about the new Spider-Man movie and whether having Spidey in the Avengers continuity would be any different from the last Sony incarnation with Andrew Garfield.

It seemed so fake, so hollow. I laughed, I added to the conversation, put in my two cents about the Vulture and how every reboot was too scared to rehash the villains of the last continuity. “I mean they really shoe-horned the Green Goblin plot in Amazing 2,” I heard myself saying, “but I would have loved to see their take on Doc Oc or something. Hell, even Mysterio would have been better than that Goblin trainwreck.”

It was my voice, my friends, things I used to talk about. And in less than three days, I’d become so distant to this shit. One weekend with Elfangor and it just didn’t matter anymore. I had Cassie, I had Marco, Tobias, my cousin Rachel, and the stranded alien soldier presumably sitting on the roof of this building. I didn’t care so much about watching TV with Tom, or discussing comics with Matt and Drew, or anything, really.

But I still went through the motions. I held up the veneer of Jake Berenson. Like I was playing myself in a movie.

School droned on. Part of me was actually glad for it. I mean, I wasn’t in the right headspace for trigonometry, even on the best day. But listening to my teacher go on about secants and cotangents gave me something to focus on that wasn’t Elfangor or the camera hidden in Chapman’s office. Tobias and I traded glances, but we both knew we couldn’t really talk in class. It was the end of May, and that meant we were all gearing up for finals. Nearly all my classes were just review, and while I wasn’t going to ever be the valedictorian, I did hit my B- average pretty consistently. I’d actually gotten better with trigonometry as the year had gone on, and I was doing about ten percent better on quizzes than I was at the beginning of the year. But trig made as much sense to me right then as it ever would, and I don’t think any amount of studying would really change my grade much. I could probably take the final now and still get at least a C- or better, so it did feel like all this review was wasted effort.

But it did kill time.

Classes went on. Tobias and I walked together to English, but we didn’t say anything. I turned in my paper, and listened through the lecture of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. I went to my chemistry class and went over covalent bonds and stoichiometry, exothermic reactions versus endothermic reactions. Review after review.

Finally, it was lunchtime, and I grabbed a tray and found my friends.

We weren’t usually together at lunch. I usually sat with Marco, sometimes Tobias. And Rachel and Cassie usually sat together, but right now, we were a group of five, and I was worried things might look weird.

The level of paranoia is hard to overstate. Yes, I know, I’m sitting at a fucking cafeteria table, get a grip, not that big a deal. And any other day, I would’ve agreed with that sentiment. But right then, in a cafeteria full of students, teachers, cafeteria workers, I couldn’t fight the image of brain slugs sitting in all of their heads. Any of them could be one of the Yeerks. I’d had this same moment of
dread and unease Saturday morning when we’d gone to Cassie’s after we’d heard Elfangor had gone missing. But what made this moment a little different was that this was the first time I remember concretely seeing the Yeerks as enemies.

I guess that’s weird, maybe. I’d seen them as a threat at first. They were like the flu or herpes or something, an outside risk that could strike anyone, and that posed a danger. But shy of a few rogue pathologists out there, I don’t think anyone really saw diseases as an adversary. Maybe an adversity or a challenge, but a faceless happenstance, nothing with a face.

But placing the camera in the vent, seeing Melissa yesterday with her bubbling energy, I thought about Chapman.

I’m not the kind of kid that spends a ton of time in the principal’s office, but I have here and there. Marco and I have pulled a few pranks, that fight I got into with Braden, and that time I’d come in late because I had lost my SUV keys in the laundry. But even without a whole lot of personal experience, like most teenagers, I didn’t have a particularly positive opinion of the school administrators. I’d thought of Chapman in some pretty unflattering terms, honestly. To be a high school principal, you have to be better at grading papers than you are at actually teaching. That’s what I’d always thought. Someone that can take the constant bullshit of administrative paperwork and budget constraints and somehow see that as a step up from teaching. I’d seen him as a relatively boring, studious, cog in the machine that was public school.

And now, as I walked across the cafeteria to sit with my friends, I saw him as a person for probably the first time. He was Melissa’s dad. He had a wife, hobbies, likes and dislikes. I judged him entirely on my own perspective as a student, but I suddenly wondered what he was like in person. Maybe he went fishing on weekends. Maybe he got up early on Saturdays and drove the carpool for the girls lacrosse team. I should ask Rachel later.

But my point, is that as soon as I saw Chapman as a victim, I saw the Yeerks in the adversary column. They ceased being an abstract problem, and I felt the anger course through me. If there had been an old man in a black cloak trying to turn me to the Dark Side at that moment, I probably wouldn’t have offered much resistance.

I’d gone from puking in my bathroom and spider nightmares to Dark Side in less than twelve hours, and this kind of mood swing wasn’t good. I’m sure one of mom’s psych books would tell me my anger was an emotional manifestation of my sense of useless futility and whatever. It probably was true, but I took a breath, exhaled, and sat down with my friends.

“Hey, Jake, you alright?” Tobias asked.

“Tired and a little moody, honestly,” I said.

“Any word from our friend upstairs?” Rachel asked between bites of salad. She was not vegan, there was an obscene amount of bacon bits in her chicken strip salad.

I shook my head. “No, and I’ll doubt we’re going to get any other updates for awhile. He doesn’t know the floorplan or our schedules, and even if he’s for some reason randomly trying to thought-speak to Tidwell’s class, he knows we can’t answer him.”

“You know we’re going to have to make our move tonight,” Marco said.

“Yeah, I know.”

“I honestly think we have time,” Tobias said.
We all looked at him.

“Okay, yeah, I mean he’s the vice principal. And I’m sure he could make up a meeting or have to go out to lunch or whatever, so the camera had to go in. But when he leaves here, he has a daughter, right? Wouldn’t it make more sense for him to go to the pool at like midnight or something?”

“No,” Marco said. “I think that would be more suspicious. Melissa already knows he’s working on rec room renovations and he could just say he has a parent meeting or some shit with the PTA. I think immediately after school, that’s our likeliest window.”

“Look, taking bets on when this is going to happen isn’t going to help us,” Cassie said. When the bell rings and we all get out of here, we have to meet on the roof, agreed?”

I nodded. “We’ll all go to the Boardwalk after school, okay. Park the SUV where it won’t look out of place, the SUV has tinted windows in the back, we can do what we need to do from there. Shh.”

I shushed, because right then, Melissa Chapman sat down next to Rachel. “Hey, so I guess now that Jake and Cassie are dating, we’re all going to be eating over here, huh?”

I blushed, and I’m pretty sure Cassie did too. But honestly I was relieved. In all my paranoia about Yeerks, I’d forgotten the obvious explanation and how teen gossip works. Of course the whole school knew Cassie and I were together now. She set her hand across the table and we held hands for a minute.

“So what’s up? You say you’re going to the Boardwalk?”

“Yeah,” I said, trying not to panic that we’d been overheard. “I’m not sure if we’re staying, though. I just told Tobias I’d get him a ride pass and we just never got around to it yesterday.”

“Oh,” she said. “That’s cool. I’m not sure what I’m doing this summer.”

“I think Jenny’s quitting,” Marco said. “Something about wanting to spend time with her boyfriend over the summer. Feel like a job at the movie theater?”

“Oh!” Melissa squealed. “That’s such a good idea! I should get a summer job. Rachel, are you getting a job?”

Rachel laughed. “I’m a full-time babysitter over the summer. We’re going to spend almost everyday at the Boardwalk and the library, maybe the zoo and the aquarium.”

“You’re getting the car?” I asked.

Rachel shrugged. “No clue. I’m hoping, but they haven’t said anything.”

Rachel's parents were more or less in the same income bracket as my parents. Her mom was a big deal attorney and her dad worked in advertising. And like my family, they were better off than most, but with the Great Recession and such, it seemed like any extra income was always put into savings and rainy day accounts. So it wasn't as if she'd be getting a brand new car from the dealership, but a used car was still likely to be newer and more eco-friendly than my SUV.

“Well, the SUV fits all of us. Eight is tight, but you'll fit,” I said.

“Eight?” Melissa asked. “So you're including me in this little group, huh?”
I shrugged. “I shuttle Marco to work as it is. And these guys,” I said gesturing to Rachel, Cassie, and Tobias, “tend to use up our employee tickets.”

“I gots kids,” Rachel said with a smile. “Jordan and Sara can’t wait for the new *Despicable Me* movie.”

We finished our lunches and I tried to ignore the wet crunch of the lettuce. I was not going to let one bad morphing experience ruin sandwiches, dammit.

The rest of the day dragged on, though I found gym class to a welcome break. I’ve said I’m not a bad athlete, but not a great athlete. Right then, though, I felt like one. Maybe it was nervous energy, maybe I was happy I didn’t have to sit through another review lecture, or maybe it was just a physical distraction from the Chapman situation. I don’t know, probably a bit of everything, but running made sense to me in a way it rarely ever does.

Marco, even though he didn't surf anymore, still had that endurance. And I was able to keep pace with him, for awhile. But he eventually outpaced me like I knew he would and settled into a good rhythm. Maybe I'd try jogging with my dad once in awhile.

Gym was my last class of the day and a lot of that nervousness came flooding back when we got the call to hit the showers. It was almost showtime, I thought to myself as I got dressed. Marco and I split up as we each sought out our lockers.

I was the second one to reach the SUV, Rachel leaning against the vehicle lazily. She was wearing a white skirt and her red lacrosse jersey, somehow doing the typical Rachel thing of reminding everyone that saw her that badass and feminine went hand-in-hand.

Her season had just ended a few weeks ago, which was good because with her having practice two nights a week and games Saturday mornings, I'd not only played chauffeur more than I liked, I'd also done a fair amount of cousin-sitting.

That made me wonder something.

“So who exactly is watching your sisters today?” I asked.

“Melissa,” she answered, as though that should’ve been patently obvious. “I need a break every once in awhile, y’know.”

“Your sisters are fun,” I said, half-sarcastically. They really were. But at eleven and nine, they were getting to the fun stage of being too little for big kid stuff and too big for the usual kid fare. I made a mental note to get more DVDs for the SUV. I wondered if my player would take burned discs.

“Says their favorite cousin that takes them to movies and ice cream,” she snarled. “I tell you, I'm done with this teen mom shit.”

“Oh, c’mon, is it that bad?”

Rachel shrugged and she suddenly looked uncomfortable. I could get Marco to open up if I pushed. Tobias was shy, and he got uncomfortable, but honestly I think he just wasn’t used to people taking a genuine interest, but if I pressed, he’d answer. Cassie took no prodding. She was very aware of her emotions and if you asked a question, she’d answer. None of that was true for Rachel. She was one of the most fiercely guarded people I knew, if she didn’t want to tell me something that was bothering her, then I was up shit creek. All I could do was sigh, wave to Cassie and Marco, and wait for Tobias.
Tobias was the last one out, and I had the distinct impression that he’d had a rough day. I didn’t want to embarrass him in front of the girls, so I didn’t ask. Besides, Tobias knew all he had to do was give me or Marco a name. Marco was smart, cool, and patiently calculating. He didn’t hit Braden Stewart like I had. He’d simply let it out that Braden was cheating on his girlfriend, who had then screamed to the whole of the cafeteria that he has a small penis and had given her chlamydia. Of course, like most high school rumors, I knew it probably wasn’t true, probably, but it had put the school in the position of putting up chlamydia awareness flyers to cover their bases and thus effectively ruined his life for the rest of high school. I’d given Braden a black eye and two stitches. Marco had given him the nickname Clapper, which was way more damaging. Marco didn’t see the return on violence, and there was almost a mob boss mentality to the way he did things without getting his hands dirty.

But Tobias didn’t say anything, he just got in the car. If the girls noticed anything, they didn’t mention it.

The Boardwalk is never that busy on weekdays. It’s busier in the summer, of course, and on a late May afternoon with school out it had some destination value with the local teens, ourselves included. But the real crowds would come with the weekends when school was out in two weeks. I’ve mentioned this is a surf Mecca, and there’s a reason every sixth business in this town is a damned surf shop.

It didn’t take much time to switch to raven. Tobias wanted to go hawk, but we told him that was probably going to attract more attention than necessary. The SUV was a fair enough venue for morphing, for those of us in the rear seats. The windows in the front seat were not tinted, so Cassie and I needed to keep looking around before we changed. One by one, five ravens flew out of the open window of my Ford Expedition. I’d hidden the keys under the seat and I had to hope nothing bad happened to my vehicle while we were out.

It occurred to me if anyone found the SUV like that, with all our clothes haphazardly laid out on the seats, backpacks left behind, key under the floor mat, that it would probably go down as one of the strangest missing persons reports in our town history.

We landed on the roof and found no trace of Elfangor except the leather pouch and my cell phone.

There was a brief moment of dread shoot through my every fiber. I think all of us expected the school administrators to stay at the school for a few more hours. It was stupid to think Chapman would be stuck all day here and Elfangor had no way to call or text. The phone wouldn’t pick up thought-speech and Elfangor didn’t know English let alone how to use the other features of the phone.

I really wished I’d had the foresight to put a pre-typed text message and show him how to send it like we’d shown him the camera app.

<Shit!> Marco yelled. <What do we do now?>

I looked around, but I didn’t see anything, and with raven eyes, if you can’t see it, it’s not there. This wasn’t good, and it should’ve been anticipated, but whatever.

<Rachel, what kind of car does he have?>

<Um, a red Toyota Camry. We’re going to go look for his car across the city?>

<If it comes to that,> I answered dejectedly. Oh, please, don’t let it come to that. <Right now, let’s swing past his place.>
<Oh, yeah, good thinking,> Cassie said.

<Wait, nevermind,> Rachel said. <Follow me.> It was hard to tell which raven was who, and the fact that thought-speech isn't exactly directional didn't help put a name to the identical wings around me. But one of the ravens banked hard to the left and the rest of us turned to follow Rachel.

<Um, what's up?> Tobias asked.

<I'm a fucking idiot, that's what's up.>

I got her meaning. She said Melissa was baby-sitting. <Ugh, we just went over this before we left the school and neither of us put it together,> I said embarrassed.

<Wait, what's going on?> Marco asked.

<I asked Melissa if she'd watch my sisters after school,> Rachel explained. <Who do you think is driving her to my house?>

<Don't stress,> Cassie said. <We're a little overwhelmed; it happens.>

She wasn't wrong. At any rate, I didn't say anything. But I was hoping we were still up for this. What else could we have missed?

But we soon saw the red car on Rachel's street, and more importantly, we saw the dark grey and white feathers of an osprey following the red car.

<Elfangor!> I called. <Can you hear us?>

<Barely,> came a muted answer.

He seemed to slow, though I don't think he could see us directly behind him. Birds have good vision but could really use some rearview mirrors. It only took a minute to close the distance between us. I seriously hoped the Santa Cruz area didn't boast an avid birdwatchers’ club. We should've had Elfangor acquire a raven too. I don't know why that hadn't occurred to any of us yesterday.

<I was hopeful you would know where he was going,> Elfangor said.

<Of course we did,> Rachel fibbed.

<You weren't worried you'd be going in alone?> Cassie asked.

<I am a soldier,> he said, <and this mission is rather straightforward. I have no intention of engaging the enemy; I am only scouting the location of the Yeerk pool.>

<That's comforting,> Marco said dryly.

Elfangor seemed amused. <The prospect is not particularly appealing to me, either. And I must admit, Cassie, that I am glad I am not alone.>

<You know,> Marco said, <the fact that five kids with no clue what we're doing makes a significant impact on your morale really isn't much in the way of reassurance.>

The car had already left Rachel's house, and we must have just missed Melissa being dropped off. The high school got out earlier than the middle school or elementary. <Melissa has a key?> I asked.
<Yeah, I gave her my key and forty bucks. By the way, if anyone asks, I'm at the library studying for my finals.>

It became readily apparent that Chapman wasn't going back to the school. That much wasn't really that surprising. But I had a sickening thought as we followed the red car along Highway 1 over the San Lorenzo River and past the cemetery. And that worry was only intensified when we watched Chapman take the exit onto Highway 17.

<Oh, hell no,> Marco said.

I would've sighed if I could have.

We were heading toward San Jose.

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
<Shit,> Marco said again.

<Is he going where I think he's going?> Rachel asked.

<Looks that way,> I said, deflated.

<I am confused,> Elfangor said. <What about this route is so ominous?>

<This road goes to a much larger city,> Cassie answered.

<I see,> Elfangor said.

I don't know why we hadn't considered this. I mean Santa Cruz isn't exactly the first city on the anyone's list of alien invasion locations. Come to think of it, I had to wonder how dumb we were not to think of that earlier.

Santa Cruz and the other cities that line the Monterey Bay are more or less all exurbs of the Greater San Francisco Bay Area. That statement may or may not be debatable, depending on who you ask. We live less than an hour south of the 49ers’ Levi’s Stadium and it may come to a surprise to some that San Jose is actually the more populous of the major cities in the Bay metro, about thirty percent more populous than San Francisco and more than twice the population of Oakland. As the property values and development have reached limits in the San Francisco peninsula, the city of San Jose has absorbed a lot of that overflow. Actually, that is precisely how the 49ers ended up moving forty miles southwest to their new home in Santa Clara County a few years ago. Not that rent is any cheaper, though.

We're talking about living south of the sixth largest metropolis in the country (after New York, LA, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Dallas) and still somehow expecting the alien invasion to be a local affair. Putting it like that, I felt really stupid.

We kept pace with Chapman's car fairly easily. Ravens can hit fifty miles per hour in level flight, and since we had the bird vision at our disposal and weren't bound by the curvature of the road, keeping him in sight was easy.

In fact, floating on the thermals, the rising warm air currents, sustained flight was pretty easy. It's like riding a bike downhill, just relax and let the air currents do their thing. We still had to flap here and there as we made course corrections, and as we moved through various wind conditions, but as experiences go, flying free on the wing isn't anything you can equate to as a human - unless you
happen to have experience hang-gliding. I mean, the closest I could describe it is like the weightless feeling you get on a rollercoaster, but when you're a bird, you are the rollercoaster.

At first, when Chapman had stopped in Scotts Valley, we thought maybe he wasn't going all the way to the Bay. But all he had done was stop for gas, and get back on the road. We were past Bethany Park before we knew it, and from there on, the highway was mostly through forest and sparse rural areas until we made the San Jose outskirts. As the raven flies, the distance is fairly traversable.

For the better part of half an hour, we were just flying, making idle conservation. Okay, yes, we had turned into birds using alien technology and we were still stalking our high school principal, but all in all, it felt like a normal road trip.

That’s probably actually weirder, huh?

<You guys realize we could use the morphing tech to watch football games?> Marco said conversationally.

<Yeah, birds don't need tickets, demorph at halftime, pick any spot you want, sounds like a plan.> Tobias said. <Only problem is the Steelers don't play the 49ers this year.>

<Ugh, Pittsburgh has corrupted you. Jake, wanna catch a game?>

<Yeah, Marco. If we survive the Yeerk pool, I'll go to a game with you.>

<What about concerts?> Rachel asked. <Same principle, right?>

<I don't know.> Cassie said. <Is it wrong for us to abuse the morphing technology?>

<Cassie,> Elfangor said. <The technology comes with some responsibility, which all of you have exercised admirably. But the technology is also permanent, and should we destroy the Yeerk pool, how you use the technology is up to you.>

I hadn't really given much thought to morphing for fun. I hadn't even actually morphed my own dog yet, and while flying had obvious advantages, I had no real desire to go back to raccoon mode and I was actively resisting any thoughts about the lizard.

As we passed the Lexington Reservoir and the exit for the Lexington Zoological Gardens where Cassie’s mom worked, we flew lower. It wasn't much further from here to the city outskirts, and the neighborhood of Los Gatos came up quickly enough.

Ironically, for all our efforts to keep up with Chapman's car, we soon realized we had a tremendous advantage when it came to residential streets. Birds don't have to wait on things like traffic or red lights, so as he got backed up, I began to realize how much the human thought processes were in some ways a handicap when it came to morphing. The things that were easy for a human, like using a cell phone or opening a door, were hard for a bird. But obviously birds were much better at getting around from Point A to Point B.

I mean, it sounds obvious. But it's really not. Everything I knew about getting around was counterintuitive for the bird mind. We think about the time it takes to drive places based on the distance of preset paths. Streets are an obvious example, but even walking from one room to another, walking down the hall at school, going around a puddle, all this path shit was just wasted effort to the raven. The bird saw the world in straight line distances, because when you can fly, you go through life with cheat codes enabled.
So we spent a decent amount of time waiting for Chapman to negotiate traffic and lights. And as we waited for Chapman, I had thoughts.

<Elfangor?>

<Yes, Jake.>

<Exactly what are we looking for here?>

<Honestly, Jake, you have as good a guess as I do.>

<What, seriously?> Marco asked.

<I told you, I have little experience with surface tactics, and none applicable for your planet.>

<What does that mean?> Rachel asked as we took off from a rampart and flew down to the next intersection to wait for the green light.

<On most other planets taken by the Yeerks, I could morph the native species, such as the Hork-Bajir and Taxxons, and infiltrate the Yeerk facilities. I cannot do that here.>

<Why not?> Rachel asked.

<You humans are too complex.>

<You can't morph humans?> Tobias asked.

<I can,> Elfangor said. <But your culture is too complex. In the three days we have spent following this Controller, could you have taught me to pass for human?>

<I see your point,> Cassie said, taking wing again.

<But back to Jake's question,> Marco said. <You mean to say you have no idea roughly where he's headed? Like what kind of building he would be headed to or anything?>

Elfangor seemed to take a long moment to think. <The Yeerk pool is generally a massive facility. And yet our scans from orbit found Kandrona radiation signatures with no apparent surface pools.>

Well, I guess that made sense. I didn't know what Kandrona meant, but I'd heard Elfangor mention it before in relation to the pool. But the idea of having a large vat of alien slugs and a line of people going to and from, that had to be hard to hide.

<Surface pools,> Marco said. <You mean you think the Yeerk pool might be underground?> There was a level of heat to his tone. <You didn't think to mention that?>

Elfangor didn't seem bothered that Marco was upset. <It could be as likely that the Yeerks have constructed multiple smaller pools, more easily concealed among the buildings of your cities.>

<I'm not sure that's any better,> Cassie said. <What, would we have to do this over and over again, mapping pool after pool?>

That thought was outright terrifying. Not only did I never want to do this again, even I knew that the Yeerks would eventually catch on. Each pool we destroyed, assuming we had any success at all in that category, would obligate new security measures at every other facility.

We kept leapfrogging intersections, keeping Chapman's car in view as he made his way through
the city. Tobias was the first to notice it.

<Isn't the airport this way?>

<Shit,> Marco said again.

<I've gotta agree with Marco on that one. If Chapman gets on a plane, we're porked.> Rachel said.

I remembered just a little earlier, when Rachel had mentioned Melissa babysitting and yet both of us missing how that would impact Chapman. I had thought then just how unprepared for this we were, how much else we could have forgotten. It had been an unpleasant thought, to say the least, but Rachel's comment raised an odd point.

<Um, guys? I really hate to bring this up, but if Chapman gets out of his car and goes into the airport, exactly how are we going to follow him as birds?>

Silence.

<Fuck,> Tobias said. <I can only morph two birds or a raccoon.>

<And it's not like any of us can go in as a human,> Cassie said. <Aside from the fact none of us would be dressed, Chapman would recognize any of us.>

<Well,> Marco said, <What could follow Chapman into a building and not be noticed? I'm thinking a raven would be introduced to a broom pretty damn quick. And the raccoon would get San Jose Animal Control here in a heartbeat.>

<We'd need something smaller,> Cassie said. <Like a fly or a spider.>

I hated my life. <Or a lizard.>

<Yeah, that'd work,> Rachel said. She hadn't been there; she didn't know.

<You sure?> Cassie asked. <After last time…>

<What happened last time?> Rachel asked.

<I ate a spider.>

<Oh. Yuck. But seriously, that's it?>

<Rachel, if I'd taken a bite of a sandwich and accidentally swallowed a spider, that would be gross, but not a big deal. But when you shove something in your mouth the size of your own head and feel it trying to fight its way back out as you're swallowing it, it's a bit more than just the ick factor.>

<Oh. Sorry. So lizard’s out?>

I mean I really hated my life. We flew down again, keeping the red car in sight. <No, lizard mode is all we have.>

As we approached the exit loop to turn off from Highway 17 to Airport Boulevard - one of the most spectacularly unoriginal, blatantly overt street names - we thought this was it. But Chapman didn't take Airport Boulevard. He took the right ramp onto Coleman Avenue as expected, but rather than take the next right onto Airport Boulevard, he stayed on Coleman.
Okay, Rachel said, Now where’s he going?

To the left was a parking lot, with a Starbucks and an In-N-Out Burger. But to the immediate right was the southernmost tip of the airport runways. Then we passed Avaya Stadium, home of the San Jose Earthquakes. After that it seemed to be just a few nondescript buildings, which I quickly realized to be small aircraft hangars. We heard jets taking off and landing as he continued on.

Chapman made a right turn on Brockway, past a collision repair shop, and then continuing on past a small building with a sign for Richmar Associates, which I took to be a small legal office, and finally onto Martin Avenue. There was a large parking lot, then four long pale-grey buildings, each maybe five hundred feet long and a hundred feet wide.

These were larger hangars, for larger aircraft, the passenger jets rather than the smaller commuter flights or courier lines. The last of the hangars wasn't as long and was built a little wider with no parking lot. Chapman turned in between the third and fourth buildings, and while he was parking, all of us sat down on the roof. We weren't sure which building he was heading into at first, and I couldn't demorph till I was sure this was the right roof.

Sure enough, a minute later, Chapman walked over to the fourth building and I flew across the gap to land on the other roof and hurriedly demorphed. It felt good to be human again, even if crouching on a hangar roof was awkward. But I didn't have time to linger and I had barely regained my human fingertips before I felt them turn into reptilian claws.


I skittered over the edge of the building at breakneck speed. Lizards may like to conserve energy but they can haul ass when they want to, or in the case of a pissed off human brain forcing them to.

And I was pissed. I hated going lizard again, which I realize isn't really the lizard’s fault so much as me just not wanting another night of fucked up spider dreams. But that anger was useful for keeping the lizard brain on task, so I tried to hold on to it.

We’ll try to come in behind you, I heard Cassie call after me.

I was ten feet down the side of the building when I saw Chapman turn a corner toward a door and I powered my little lizard body after him. I missed the open door but was small enough to squeeze under it, though the lizard brain hated it.

I saw the black leather of Chapman's shoes and booked it to him. Part of it was that I didn't want to lose him, and part of it was the closer I stayed to Chapman, the less likely was to be stepped on.

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Chapman showed a badge or some kind of ID card to a stern-looking middle-aged woman sitting at a desk and she buzzed him into a door behind her. I followed as he stepped in and was surprised to find nothing more than simply a small hallway and a normal elevator door. Chapman pushed his ID card into a reader - the kind they use on hotel doors - and when the light came on, punched a code into what looked like an ATM keypad.

Okay, so maybe not a normal elevator.

Right then, I knew I was on my own. Even if they found something they could morph, like a small swarm of flies suddenly blowing in the front door, they would have no way of knowing where I had gone.

The elevator doors opened, and I stayed close to Chapman as much as I could without risking an
errant foot. I skittered up the wall and up to the edge of the ceiling. The elevator was moving down, and it was harder for the lizard to experience the kind of acceleration-induced weightlessness you feel in elevators. I mean, the acceleration on a human body would be measured in pounds. For the lizard body, it was measured in fractions of an ounce. All the same, I still had the impression this was faster than your average elevator.

We were in the elevator for an unsettling length of time. Marco had taken Elfangor's statement as evidence the pool was subterranean, and I knew even before the elevator doors opened that we were definitely underground. The elevator took way too long for that to not be certain.

Chapman started walking as soon as the elevator doors opened and I instinctively crawled across the ceiling and out of the elevator. I probably should have been more cautious but I really didn't want to lose Chapman. Or get stuck in the elevator.

But now that I was out, I wasn't sure I really wanted to follow Chapman in here. I was scared. The lizard had a visual range of maybe twenty or thirty feet before things got blurry and technically I had already completed the mission. I knew the entrance to the Yeerk pool was an aircraft hangar on Martin Avenue by the San Jose international airport. That was all I strictly needed to know.

But where I was scared, the lizard brain just straight up didn't care. And as much as I was scared I was equally curious.

As I scurried down the wall, I realized I was crawling over rough-cut stone, and the wall felt almost like the wall of a cave or something. But then I reached the smooth concrete floor and it felt like I was in a Sam’s Club or a CostCo more than an alien underground lair.

I really couldn't see much as a lizard on the floor and following Chapman's shoes took a lot of mental effort. The lizard didn't really see a point to running.

Chapman's shoes were soon joined by other shoes, and then by more shoes. I'm honestly not sure where the other people were coming from, but it became increasingly crowded in the hallway. I moved to the left, narrowly avoiding a pair of red stiletto heels, and hugged the corner of the wall.

This wall wasn't like a cave wall. This one was cinder block, painted, and every so many feet I had to crawl through the triangular trusses of a steel support, the kind you see on stadium roofs. I wished I could see more of the structure, but the only way to get a better look around was to demorph, so lizard vision was the best I was going to have for now.

The wall I was following suddenly turned ninety degrees and I realized we had come to some kind of opening. About twenty feet wide of open concrete, lined with stripes of various colors, like the kinds of color-coded path systems you sometimes see in hospitals. The group of people I was following stopped to allow a forklift to pass, carrying what appeared to be a pallet of oxygen tanks or something.

On the other side of the wide gap, I could see a yellow safety railing set into a small concrete half-wall. This part was less sublevel mall garage corridor and more military missile base or something. I watched as the crowd moved again, some people turning left or right, and some going straight. I found Chapman amidst the other walking legs, recognizing his shoes once more, and skittered across the open space. This was a long concourse, set perpendicular to the corridor I’d just come through, and along the other wall I could see almost vault-like doors, wall-mounted cables and ductwork. The ceiling was too high for my lizard eyes to see, and I was starting to get a sense for how large this facility was. Definitely way too big to fit under the hangar upstairs. I did some mental math, which wasn’t my strong suit. I knew where the door upstairs had been, and if I was at all confident with my directional orientation, I was pretty sure that I was deep beneath the runways.
I could only guess how deep we were, but blowing up the Yeerk pool would now necessarily involve smuggling explosives beneath a major US airport, and that idea was not something I could process right then. I didn’t think Homeland Security would buy “saving the world” as a legit defense against our pending domestic terrorism charges.

I bolted down the wall and then across the floor, trying to keep those black leather shoes in sight. I reached the half wall, and went up and over, slithering across the yellow railing. I realized Chapman was heading down stairs, and I followed as best I could, clinging to the rail like my life depended on it because I was sure it actually did.

The steps were metal grating, and we got down about another twenty feet before I was once again on smooth concrete flooring. But offset from the landing of the steps, I realized we were now passing what could only be described as cubicles. There were steel support columns interspersed into the cubicles, and hanging wires stretched between them. There had to be at least a hundred people in those cubicles, and as I glanced left and right, I saw doors, offices, it seemed oddly sterile. I don't know what I had expected coming down here into the alien lair, but it hadn’t been light clerical. I guess aliens need middle management, too, though.

Chapman went through a series of turns, other corridors, past an actual fucking McDonald’s in the middle of a subterranean bunker, and past what looked like bunks or barracks or whatever the hell you want to call them. People were living here. These were body-snatching alien parasites, and I realized that whereas Chapman had a job, a wife, a daughter, coworkers, and generally people that would miss him, how many human bodies could these slugs take with no one to notice them missing.

The South Bay, despite - or probably more likely, because of - its high standard of living and level of affluence, boasted some of the highest rates of homelessness in the country. Thousands of people lived on the streets above, and I was sickened to think how many ended up down here for nothing more than a free cheeseburger.

Chapman stopped at another security door, slid his card through the reader, and stepped out into a brightly-lit space.

I didn’t hear screaming. I didn’t see a prison.

The room was almost like a floor at the emergency room, and Chapman waved to a handful of people in white uniforms and they led him to a stretcher. Chapman took off his suit jacket and undid his tie, laid down on the stretcher, and immediately fell asleep. They didn’t need guards, I realized. If you can just drop your host body into a temporary coma, why would you need them?

I crawled under the stretcher, scurrying up and underneath so I wasn't seen. So far, no one had noticed me. But the sterility of this place was almost tangible. The humidity and temperature seemed perfectly maintained and my flicking lizard tongue hadn't even picked up the smell of any insects or spiders.

How much maintenance goes into keeping spiders out of an underground facility?

I felt the gurney or stretcher or whatever start moving as the medical Controllers pushed us through yet another set of doors, another elevator, and down to another slightly lower sublevel.

How deep did this place go?

When the door opened, I knew there could be no question. This was the Yeerk pool.
If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

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Chapter Fifteen

The actual Yeerk pool was not a pool at all.

We were in a large open space, at least a hundred feet wide, well beyond my visual acuity. As they wheeled Chapman through, I took mental notes of the smooth polished concrete floor, with the lime green hazard tape lines. Across the length of the floor, bisecting the room, were lines of colored safety tape. Orange, purple, blue, and yellow, each with black chevrons indicating a direction, all vanishing into obscurity beyond the limits of my lizard eyes. As the Controller staff pushed the stretcher along the width of the floor, I could make out more details. The concrete walls were lined with an elaborate network of pipes, ducts, and braided cables of various thicknesses. The walls and ceiling were again segmented by steel trusses and concrete buttresses. The whole floor had something of a particle accelerator vibe to it. Pale green lights were set into steel rigging that bridged the space from wall to wall, supported by the type of giant columns you see in parking garages, and the soft green glow made the room even more eerie than I already found it.

But the part that really got my attention were the tanks.

Along both walls in rows were huge clear acrylic tubes, each centered in the space between buttresses. They looked like massive cylindrical aquarium tanks. Each tube had to be twelve feet in diameter, with about twenty feet of clear plastic above a ten-foot tall steel base. The tubes were full of a milky grey liquid obviously not normal water, tinted by blue lights embedded within the tubes. I could just barely make out a dark center tube. Like a black pole running the vertical axis of the tube.

Running from the walls down to the metal bases were heavy industrial electrical cables, color-coded pipes, and various hoses. Some were routed to massive canisters, like oversized scuba tanks or milk cans, before then being fed into the bases. And set into those steel bases were workstations with computer monitors, display screens, and various blinking lights. Here and there, I saw technicians in green jumpsuits making adjustments to the panels.

They were definitely alien, or at the very least, they conformed to some alien stereotypes. I felt like I'd walked into a video game.

And each tube was a perfectly maintained habitat for Yeerks.

I could see thousands of tiny black shapes swimming within the nearest tank, and I felt a surge of terror and dread. I couldn't make out any real details through the murky liquid, but they couldn't have been larger than goldfish or tadpoles, maybe the size of my thumb.
It felt weird to think something I'd probably squish underfoot on the sidewalk could be so dangerous. They needed human bodies to do this, and who knows how many machines or whatever technology they had used to excavate this facility, but all of it was for the benefit and agendas of these slugs.

And it got worse.

In the wide space between the rows of tanks were what had to be hundreds of transport gurneys and the floor was lined with smaller diameter acrylic tubes leading to odd little medical stations. This was a facility that could take at least a hundred people an hour without overflow.

The gurney was wheeled into one of the docking stations and I scurried to the foot of the stretcher. I didn't think I'd necessarily be noticed at Chapman's feet and I wanted to see what they were doing to him. I wanted to know how they operated.

I was surprised by what I saw.

For as much as I'd just been blown away by the Yeerk containment vats, the docking stations were almost ludicrous. They looked like hairdressing sinks. I mean, obviously they were custom-designed and still had a weird medical-alien aesthetic, but the Controllers gently lifted Chapman, put something like a simple rain poncho over his head and shoulders, and fitted him with a type of full-face oxygen mask. They then opened the other end of the stretcher so that it now resembled a massage table, with the padded donut headrest, laid Chapman back down, and pressed a button. The stretcher then reclined so that Chapman's head was resting in the basin, and then it filled steadily with liquid from the Yeerk vat.

I didn't see the Yeerk leave Chapman's head - I couldn't see through the nearly opaque liquid - but the basin drained, and the stretcher raised. One of the Controllers took a quick second to wash Chapman's face with a cloth, set a fresh towel under his head, and pressed a button that triggered a slow pulsing blue light on the docking station. The two Controllers just left him there, no concern, as they went to another incoming stretcher.

I sat with Chapman for a minute. I just… He was a human being, stuck in this horrible place, and I just didn't want to leave him. I don't know why, really. It’s not like he knew I was there, and not like he’d take a small lizard as any kind of comfort. He was no longer infested, he should've been free right now, but he wasn't. He didn't even have this brief time to scream at them, curse them, to cry piteously or anything. Even while the slug was gone to its precious home, Chapman still belonged to it.

There were people living in this place because it needed round-the-clock staff. I tried to wrap my head around that, the implications. I looked at the other gurneys, at how many I could see and how many more I just couldn't see in lizard morph. Thousands of people were here, probably.

In retrospect, I don't know what exactly I was thinking this would be. I had an image of a concentration camp combined with a public pool. Like Controllers would march down a pier, dip their heads in the water, and then armed guards would drag the now uninfested host to a cell to wait and cry.

But that was a human view of captivity. I was thinking in terms of a prison, but that was stupid. They weren't keeping humans as prisoners, they were keeping them as livestock. This wasn't a prison; it was a stockyard.

I didn’t know what to do here.
I'd probably been in lizard morph less than half an hour, maybe twenty minutes guessing from the crawl from the roof, the elevator, the outside corridors, to here. I wasn’t sure exactly how long Chapman’s Yeerk would be in the tank, but I was worried that the hour and a half I had left might not be well-spent waiting around. Then again, leaving had risks too. I’d gone through at least two card-controlled security doors to get here, so I wasn’t sure I could get back out on my own anyway. But waiting here in the blue glow of the Yeerk vat was seriously damaging my calm, and I just couldn’t sit on Chapman for an hour without going crazy. I couldn’t sit in a roomful of human livestock and do nothing but watch. I just didn’t have the ability to turn that off.

Elfangor had told me before, waiting for those Bug Fighter ships, that patience could be difficult. He had said fear could lead to poor decisions, and I knew full well that running out of the barn that night would have ended in disaster. But he wasn’t there to tell me to chill this time. And the lizard brain didn’t really care one way or the other, but the lizard also had a much stronger scatter instinct.

I followed the stripes deeper into the room. I could have gone back the way I’d come in. I probably should have. But I wanted to know more about this place, I wanted to know what we were up against. Plus, when I had skittered off Chapman's stretcher, a Controller had nearly stepped on me, so I was already twenty feet down before I got back in control of the lizard mind.

I passed three sets of tanks before I came to an intersection I hadn't been able to make out from the other end of the infestation room. The orange and yellow lines turned to the left, the blue line turned to the right, and the purple line came in and kept going straight down the hall. I couldn’t see Chapman from here, and I really wasn’t sure how long before they put the Yeerk back in his head. Then again, if the Yeerks went seventy-two hours between tank appointments I’d be shocked if this didn’t take awhile.

I wondered if somewhere was a giant map on the wall with a “You Are Here* marker. I hadn’t paid enough attention to the color lines on the way down here. I chose to go left just because I thought I remembered passing a yellow line earlier, but I couldn’t be sure.

The lizard body was tiring, and it wasn't pleased with this constant scurry mode. The body was built for quick bursts and I'd essentially been making it keep a human pace, which was doable but very taxing. I took a slower approach as I came to the door.

Lacking a security card, the only way through the door that I could see was a vent above the air-lock style sliding door. And even knowing the vent couldn't be more than than the thickness of the concrete wall, I still wasn’t happy about vents.

But I did it, and that's the important thing. Being this small, fitting through the spaces as I did, I got some perspective of how powerful this technology could be. I mean, Ant Man did fine, right?

The other side of the door was the bottom landing of a staircase, the stripes running up the steps. There was a new line here, green, with the chevrons running opposite to the orange and yellow. I slithered down the door and up the yellow safety railing. At the top of the stairs, I was at another large intersection, and it looked similar to the crossways where I had seen the forklift earlier. Actually, taking a longer look now that I wasn't pressed to keep pace with a walking Chapman, I realized this was the same corridor. The curvature was almost imperceptible to the lizard eyes, but this concourse was definitely not a straight line. The yellow line turned to the left and the orange stripe went straight, across the main concourse to another air-lock door set right into the massive concrete wall.

There were dozens of people walking in either direction, some in jumpsuits, some in normal businesswear, others in more casual clothing. It wasn’t a constant stream of people, though. Some
went to the left, some went to the right, and a small group went past me down the steps to the infestation area. It wasn’t five minutes sitting on this railing that I noticed the concourse was clear.

If I had my bearings, I was pretty sure if I followed the yellow line left again I would loop back to the hallway to the main elevator. Then again, I could’ve gotten turned around where Chapman had gone past that office area. I wondered why he’d gone that way if this concourse would have brought him to the infestation area. I know he didn't stop anywhere but now I wondered more about the people he had passed as he'd gone through, making all those twists and turns through the office area. I wondered if maybe he’d needed to see someone specifically.

I chose to follow the orange line. I knew how to get back to Chapman, and I was reasonably sure how to make it back to the other hallway to the elevator at this point. So might as well look around. Maybe there’d be a place I could demorph or something. Also, the lizard didn’t want to do too much more of the running, so I took the shorter distance.

And so once again I went through the vent above the airlock door. I should’ve followed the purple line instead.

My flickering lizard tongue and it's bizarre form of olfactory reception was overwhelmed by the stench. The smell hit like a freight train and it took a minute before I could get my bearings.

I had compared the infestation room behind me to a stockyard, but this, this was a slaughterhouse. I'm not being metaphorical, either, it was an actual slaughterhouse.

It was like a factory assembly line for dead animals, with skinned racks of ribs hanging on hooks. The hooks were part of some kind of hanging rail system, suspended from more of that steel stage rigging and offset steel support beams. Set into the floor was a more standard railing system, with what looked like mine cars, full of offal and meat scraps. The door I’d come through came out to an elbow section of the tracks. Both rail systems ran to my left, back into the far wall, to the giant metal doors of a freight elevator, before coming to an open space and then running away from me. If I’d kept my bearings, then these railings ran parallel to the long hallway space of the infestation area.

There was hissing as jets sprayed intermittent clouds over the incoming meat. I wasn’t sure if it was coolant or water or some kind of chemical additive, but by the smell, they didn’t care if this meat was rotting. There were workers down there in bright orange jumpsuits, wearing black rubber boots and gloves, and firefighter-type oxygen packs. Yeerks or not, I couldn’t blame them; I couldn’t stand the smell even as a lizard. Actually the lizard didn’t hate the smell, but seemed confused that the smell of rotting meat didn’t correlate to swarms of flies or maggots.

No, thanks, lizard. I’m good. Thanks for that mental image, though.

I noticed at least two people with hoses spraying the floors and each was followed by others with oversized floor squeegees, pushing the water toward drains set into the floor. I wasn’t about to try to get through the wet floor, so I crawled up above the vent and managed to find my way onto the overhead rigging. This was a pretty decent vantage point, actually, and I figured I’d probably be able to go anywhere I wanted through the overhead lighting rigs and vents.

Disgusting as this was, I wondered what in the hell brain slugs would need with this much raw meat. I seriously doubted this слough was fit for human consumption. So I followed the rail system down further, trying to figure out what the holy fuck was going on here. There had to be tons of cow and pork and I wouldn’t have been surprised if there was outright roadkill in some of those carts. And how were they transporting this much meat into this facility? We had to be hundreds of feet underground, and a major airport above.
I wondered if there was a slaughterhouse or meat packing plant near the airport. It’d make sense, I guess. Much like the hangar above had enough floor space for a security elevator, I could see a slaughterhouse with a secret elevator. That part was easy enough to imagine, though I tried not to dwell on it. Aliens in the police or military, that made sense. I knew that stuff from movies and comics. But I was paranoid enough about people being Controllers without trying to think of how connected they were in the infrastructure and somehow the thought of Yeerks in the cattle industry just seemed extra wrong.

As I got down a length of scaffolding, I saw that the meat was being divided and dropped down shafts in the wall. They were feeding something. That's what this was. The meat came in from somewhere above and came through this receiving area to be processed, divided, and portioned before dropping into feeding troughs below.

I don't know why I wanted to look. Even as I scurried across the scaffolding and down the steel support beam, I knew whatever was down there was going to be terrifying. I knew it was going to give me nightmares. But I wanted to know what we were up against.

I wasn't crazy enough to try to go through the drop shafts, though. Along the walls in this section on either side of the corridor, were thick acrylic observation windows, the kind I knew from the zoo. The windows were smeared clear slime, and splattered with what looked to be blood and shit, and for as fastidiously clean they were keeping this room despite the dripping meat, no one was making any attempt to clean the room below us.

I saw a fresh splash of red and slime hit the acrylic and I made my way across the wet floor to try to get a look.

It's kinda hard to go into things without pre-conceived notions and assumptions. Like I assumed aliens didn't actually exist until a few days ago, but even still, we all have the general idea of what they're supposed to look like: mostly humanoid body shape, huge black eyes, grey skin, giant bulbous heads. Where that image comes from, I don't know. I could ask Marco later, I supposed. But Elfangor didn't look anything like that. The reality didn't mesh with the expectation.

And that was true here as well. I was expecting to see space werewolves or giant reptiles or something. But the aliens in the feeding pen below were unlike anything I could have imagined.

They were monstrous, carnivorous worms.

They had to be twelve feet long, easily, and as thick as a sewer pipe. Like it would take two or three people to wrap their arms around it, though a garbage bag full of old diapers and used heroin needles would be a hundred times more huggable. The bulk of their weight seemed to be supported on five pairs of strong but stubby legs ending in massive spike-like claws, like the limbs of an armadillo or something. Claws that probably would make more sense on rock and dirt than they did on smooth cement. They had the type of segmented exoskeleton you’d expect on a potato bug, but out of their back grew segmented spines covered in bristles. Their underside looked soft and rubbery, translucent like the skin of some kind of giant morbidly obese subterranean salamander. They had a pale yellow color to the skin, with the exoskeleton the color and texture of a toenail fungus. Here and there were odd knobs embedded in the skin. Cassie told me later it sounded like osteoderms, but they looked like warts or giant zits.

The front third or so was bent upward, with three pairs of lobster-like appendages. One pair was larger than the other two, over-developed and seemed to be more to help support their front parts off the ground. The other two seemed vaguely more dexterous, grabbing parts of meat and pushing them back up to their terrifying mouth. They had a head that reminded me of the graboids from the old *Tremors* movie, though they had four globular red eyes. But they had the same weird kind of
bifurcated lower jaw that opened to reveal a squid-like conglomerate of barbed tongues, pulling into a massive lamprey-like mouth.

There were dozens of them. They were pushing and shoving each other, like elephant seals in a nature documentary. Even through the inches of plastic, I could hear the squishing noises, the odd bellowing belching sounds they made, like a language of nothing but intestinal distress noises.

Their feeding area was a good floor below this one, and however the monster worms were getting into the feeding pens - this was one of six that I could see - the entrances and exits had to be below me.

To say I was done would have been an understatement.

As much as I hated some aspects of lizard mode after that spider, the reptile’s mind was very apathetic to a lot of things. I wasn’t cold and nothing was trying to eat me, so other than a good cricket, the lizard brain was fine. It wasn’t impacted by the writhing horrors behind the safety glass. Honestly, lizard mode didn’t recognize things visually the way I was used to as a human. The way a dog can’t recognize a photograph, the lizard didn’t really understand the idea of things beyond the glass. I couldn’t hear it that well, couldn’t smell it, and it wasn’t a bird or a rat or something the lizard brain could understand. So it dialed the meh to eleven.

I wasn’t exactly thrilled by the apathy, but I was glad the reptile mind was there so I didn’t have to deal with that right now. Honestly, had I been human, I think I would’ve screamed loud enough for Elfangor and the others to hear me on the surface.

I should’ve tapped into that apathy more back at the stretcher. I wondered how much time I had been in lizard morph. It had probably been about another half an hour from the time I had left Chapman, and that point me at probably an hour of morph, probably a little more. I looked around, wondering where and if I could find a place to demorph.

There was nowhere I could pull that off in the meat room. It was too open, too many people, and if I’m being honest, you couldn’t pay me enough to breathe that smell as a human if I didn’t have to.

I knew the green stripe would take me back to Chapman, and there looked to be enough recesses and blind spots among the stretchers that I could probably demorph if I had to. I’d have to stay crouched behind one of the stretchers, hopefully hidden from the sparse staff in that section. Then again, I could just follow the yellow line and see if that didn’t take me back to the hallway like I thought it would.

I had at least thirty minutes left in this morph. I didn’t have a watch or anything, but I knew roughly how long it had taken to come down from the hangar above, and roughly how long it had taken to get to the meat room. Even if I was underestimating the time, I felt I should be good on time. But waiting for Chapman in the infestation room just wasn’t an option.

I either had to get out, or I had to find a place to demorph. I was sure all my friends above had demorphed and remorphed by now. Somehow the thought of a furry blue alien on the roof of an aircraft hangar made me feel a little better.

I came back out into the concourse easily enough, but following the yellow line was not going to be as easy as I thought just then.

There were two more forklifts carrying more oxygen tanks, and some kind of miniature truck moving three giant spools of cable and tubing. But it wasn’t the minor traffic on the path that caused me to stop.
There were other aliens in the concourse now.

Three of them were the worm things. They seemed less frenzied - and maybe a little less slimy and messy now that they weren’t actively fighting over the meat trough - but their calm, determined demeanor didn’t really detract from their horrific, nightmarish appearance. If anything, it made it worse. I’d already seen them as rampaging flesh monsters, and the Yeerks were able to reign them in.

The worms were wearing some kind of apparatus on their backs, something like a cross between a scuba tank and a Ghostbusters proton pack, with hoses running into openings in the worm’s upper portion. It occurred to me it was unrealistic to expect disparate alien races to be able to breathe our atmosphere. I wondered what kind of gas mixture they had to pump into those worms.

But behind the worms were something new.

There were six of them, and one of them would have been enough to make me shit myself if I’d not been in lizard mode. They were huge, hulking creatures. Whereas the worms had fat rolls and jiggled as they moved, these things were definitely muscle. They had a body type that’s hard to put into words. It was like somebody broke into Jurassic Park, put all the dinosaur DNA in a blender, and then mixed that with Bigfoot.

They really did look like a mix of various dinosaurs, and they had the skin of a snapping turtle, mottled brown and green. From hips to shoulders, they had the general body of a gorilla or an orangutan, with wide shoulders and collar bones. The chest muscles looked similar to human weightlifters. Their arms themselves were overly long, built heavier than a human, like a bear on steroids. They had the legs of a tyrannosaurus or some giant bird, three toes forward, one toe backward. They had the long, muscular tail you’d expect to see on a dinosaur. Their necks were elongated, snake-like, and a head like someone had stapled a falcon’s beak on a velociraptor’s face.

But that was nothing to the blades.

At the forearms, elbows, shoulders, and the ankle were sharp blades of bone or horn. They had curved spikes at their tail, blades running down their neck, and forward-raked horns at their jaws and forehead. Even their fingers were bladed, with claws growing out of each knuckle almost as long as my entire lizard body.

All in all, they had to stand seven to nine feet tall, and factoring in the length of their necks and tails, I had to wonder how these things managed to fit in the various sections of the facility. I had to assume each alien species had to have its own section that was designed around their anatomy. It seemed unrealistic for the worms to be able to operate human technology.

The reptile monsters walked at the worm’s pace, carrying what looked to be some kind of alien bazooka. The idea that giant lizard beasts would need firepower was just so weird, but I was too scared to appreciate the irony then.

And walking among them, the unmistakable sound of hooves on concrete echoing in the empty concourse, was an Andalite.
If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
Chapter 16

It was an Andalite. There was no mistaking that.

My first instinct was total panic. Okay, that was my second instinct. My first was awestruck stupidity. My brain was so fried by that point, I just had no ability to put new information into any kind of context. Hey, an Andalite… and nothing else. It took an embarrassingly long time before it clicked that this was a bad thing, but I put two and two together, that Andalite plus Yeerks equals clusterfuck.

I had a rush of emotions.

They had captured Elfangor. What were they going to do to him? Where were my friends? Were they dead?

Before I could reign in my emotions, I heard the thought-speech inside my mind.

<You believe the pilot is still at large?> the voice said.

I froze. This was not Elfangor. This was another Andalite.

One of the reptile monsters said something in its own native language. It was then that I realized how weird English must sound to Elfangor, because I knew what the alien was saying even though the actual vocalizations were nothing I could understand. It had a language a mix of bird sounds, toad croaks, and hisses. It was like a crocodile trying to mimic whale songs or something. But the thought-speech element of Andalite technology compensated immediately.

“No reason to think dead,” I understood, “Should look continue.”

I didn’t understand it perfectly, of course. But as the creature spoke, I at least understood its intentions and got the idea of what he was saying. There was no reason to think the pilot was dead. They should continue the search.

<It would be a waste of resources,> the Andalite said. <One lone survivor poses no appreciable risk at present.>

The creature seemed to disagree. “Security not prepared morph. Vulnerable. Filters now.”

The Andalite seemed to process that for a minute. <Tactically, I do not foresee any danger. But I see your point. Let engineering know the installation of bio-filters is now first priority. That will take weeks, if not months. In the interim, reset all the security codes. All zero-space
communications must be run through Level Nine encryption. Phase Six will be suspended until further notice.

“Yes, Visser.”

I didn’t know what visser meant, but it seemed like this Andalite was their direct superior. And that meant the Andalite I was watching had to be a Controller.

An Andalite-Controller…

The alien entourage continued down the concourse, and they either left my thought-speech range or I was too mentally fried to notice I was still hearing them. I felt sick in my soul. I couldn’t do this.

I didn’t consciously decide to leave because I needed to demorph or because I needed to report to Elfangor and the others. I ran because I was done. I’d hit a mental wall, and I was past my ability to handle this.

A week ago my biggest trials were cleaning public bathrooms at the movie theater or studying for trig tests. I had been scared to ask a beautiful girl out on a date. And yet I’d agreed to accept alien technology to run recon and infiltration missions for Elfangor. I don’t know what made me think I could handle this. I needed out, and I needed out now.

I tore down the concourse as fast as my lizard body could manage. There were more forklifts here, more pallets of scuba tanks. I had to assume they were for the worms and their breathing packs. They were sure as hell going through a ton of those tanks, and that hinted at a population of worms I didn’t want to think about. The less than twenty or so I’d seen had been enough to convince me there was no God, so imagining hundreds or thousands of them was more than I could process.

I found the hallway I’d come through with Chapman.

I wished I had been braver. I wished I had the time and mental fortitude to go back and check on Chapman. But I didn’t want to stay here anymore. And even as freaked out as I was, I was still sure Chapman was exactly where I left him. That was more sad than reassuring though. I imagined him just lying there, forgotten. He didn’t actively serve any purpose to the Yeerk invasion right now, and he meant nothing to them till the slug made its way back into his brain.

Scampering down the hallway was uneventful, but still creepy. There were people moving through the hallway, some coming from the elevator and some heading toward it. I wish I’d paid more attention to the unconscious bodies in those stretchers as I’d gone through earlier. I’d been trying to avoid thinking about it, at the time, but now I was wondering if these were the same people that had been here when I’d first gone through. Would that make me feel better or worse if they were?

I had gotten very used to keeping to the walls and overhead rigging rather than the floor, and with this many feet, I was glad I wasn’t down there. I slipped into the elevator easily enough, hiding on the ceiling.

I don’t remember leaving the elevator. I don’t remember going back out the hangar door. I don’t remember climbing the side of the building to the roof.

My next conscious memory was of the late afternoon sun, the warmth of the sun, the sounds of aircraft engines. I heard though-speak voices, but I didn’t hear the words. I didn’t answer their questions. I just let the sun soak into my lizard scales, glad to be warm, glad of the taste of the dust in the air.
I was only distantly aware of the fact that I was demorphing. I felt my body growing, felt the world rapidly come into focus as my visual acuity returned to normal, saw the colors shift as I lost the ultraviolet sensitivity of the lizard eyes. I was crouched in all black, bike shorts and a surf shirt a little too small for me. I kept my head down, and just sat there for a minute.

I was physically exhausted. I had been down there more than an hour and a half, I suspected, and I’d pushed the inches-long lizard body to cover a staggering relative distance in that time. Between the fifty-minute flight to get here, demorphing and remorphing to lizard mode, and now finally back to human, I’d given as much as I could. My bones were tired, my muscles felt like pudding, and all I wanted was to sleep, to forget.

I’d done it because it was my responsibility, because I was curious, because I was scared and angry and confused. But now none of those reasons made any fucking sense.

<Jake!> I heard suddenly. <Jake, are you okay, dude?>

Marco. Marco was calling me. I waved a hand and pitched over. I wasn’t capable of doing this. I couldn’t.

<Jake, man, I know you’re wiped, but you need to go back to bird, okay? We can’t stay on this roof. We have to go.>

Go. Yes, go. Go home, go to sleep. I staggered, wavered, and rolled again. I couldn’t get my muscles to work, I couldn’t concentrate enough to speak. I just… I had to get home. I don’t know how I found the energy to morph to raven, but I did. Maybe I was scared enough of this place that exhaustion just didn’t matter anymore. Maybe I was still in the autopilot mode that had brought me back to the roof. I don’t know, and I don’t really care.

I was flying south before my friends could say anything else.


Girlfriend. Somehow that word brought me back. Cassie was my girlfriend. Cassie, the girl I’d been scared to ask, who knew me as well as anyone. She was there and she was scared.

<I… I’m not okay,> I said.

<Yeah, Jake, we can see that much,> Rachel said. There was sarcasm there, but she’d used the kid-glove saccharine tone she usually reserved for talking to her younger sisters. She was trying to be normal and reassuring simultaneously. That was… actually it was very Rachel of her.

<I saw some shit, guys> I said, trying to keep it together. <I’m exhausted, I’m freaked, and I know I’m going to have to give all of you the play-by-play of what I saw. But… Let’s get to the beach, okay? I want as much distance between us and that place as we can get.>

Chili dogs are not a health food.

I know that, you know that, anyone that’s ever smelled one knows they’re unhealthy. I don’t care if you get tofu dogs on gluten-free buns with vegan chili sauce, somehow it’d still be unhealthy. Tofu is simply congealed sadness, gluten-free bread is also goes by the name polystyrene, and
vegan chili is... well, that’s still chili. It’s beans, tomato, and onion. It’s just chili without meat or beef stock.

But damn if they aren’t delicious.

We’d gotten them to go. I was still freaked out even after we’d gotten back to the Boardwalk, but I didn’t want to stall any longer than I had. I’d done the lizard thing, but all of us had still flown to San Jose and back, and they had all done three consecutive morphs, too. No one questioned that I was the most exhausted. And no one disagreed with the idea of food before home.

We had flown back in relative silence. There was no talk about sneaking in to football games or concerts. My friends had given me my space. Cassie had flown next to me, our flight feathers brushing briefly - the closest thing ravens could do to holding hands - but she didn’t say anything, didn’t push.

Elfangor was waiting in the SUV for us and if he had an opinion on chili dogs and fries, he said nothing.

We went to the Santa Cruz Public Library. It was actually only a few buildings down from the Regal 9 where I worked with Marco, and Cassie and Rachel were sharing their study alibi. The literal second Cassie got home, she’d have to do her afternoon chores, do the things she usually did, and then on top of that spend the night doing the homework she said she already got done. All of us were in similar situations.

Rachel ran into the library while Cassie distributed chili dogs to Marco, Tobias, and I. She came out two minutes later with two books, handing them one to Cassie while she took the offered chili dog.

I usually don’t have food in the SUV, but right then, I didn’t care.

Elfangor was sitting in a cardboard box, the same cardboard box Cassie had used to transport him the other day.

“Is morphing always this taxing?” I asked.

“Having morphed that hawk as many time in a row as I did,” Tobias said, “I’m inclined to say yes.”

<Like anything else, the skill improves with practice.>

“I think I’ve had enough practice for the time being,” I said.

“Seconded,” Marco added.

“Jake?” Cassie asked. She didn’t say anything else, just had a look in her eyes like she wanted to ask something but wasn’t sure how.

“I know. I’m sorry for stalling. I needed to clear my head and I was starving. But you’re right, I have to do this.”

I told them about the infestation room and the tanks, how they put his head in the liquid, the medical efficiency of the whole process. I told them there had to be hundreds of people just parked like cars in a garage.

“They’d have to have hospital staff to pull that off, right” Cassie asked.
“That’d make sense,” Marco said. “Who better to help build a human infestation area than the people that know the most about human biology.”

“So that means we can add nurses, doctors, and especially neurologists to the list of high-value Controllers, huh?” Tobias said.

“How did they build something like that, though?” Rachel asked. “I mean, the logistics of something like that would be mind-boggling.”

<For human construction, that is likely true. But Yeerks could use Dracon beams to excavate the space itself, and use human technology where applicable.>

“What about the energy grid?” Marco asked. “How are they getting electricity, water, whatever, down there with no one noticing?”

<Yeerk technology includes a design of z-space transducer that would allow them considerable power independent of your human electrical grid. Freshwater is likely produced through desalination of underground oceanic intake pipes. They most likely have surface ventilation points, but the majority of their oxygen could be obtained through electrolysis.>

“Electrolysis?” Tobias asked. “I thought that was hair removal.”

Rachel laughed. “No, he means running current through water to separate it into hydrogen and oxygen.”

“So they could be using the hydrogen as fuel or selling it to fund other facets of the facility,” I said.

Marco nodded. “Pound for pound, hydrogen has three times the energy potential as petroleum. Electrolysis isn’t generally cost effective given the electrical demands, but if the Yeerks have next-gen power potential, they’d definitely be able to turn water into money.”

The speculations of how the Yeerks operated went on for a little while, and then I told them about the giant worms, the meat coming in on rails, the spattering slime.

“Holy fuck, dude. What are those things?” Tobias asked.

<Taxxons.> All of us looked at the osprey sitting in the cardboard box. <Taxxons come from a very harsh world, with little vegetation. The autotrophs of their world are similar to the deep-world extremophile organisms found on your planet. They are moderately intelligent, sentient, and had a complex hive society before Yeerk conquest.>

“They look evil,” I said.

<Evil is a relative concept. They are a ravenous species, and even Yeerks are known to struggle to contain their baser instincts. But while ravenous, they are not necessarily wanton. They are simply always hungry.>

“Why would the Yeerks want something that hard to control?” Rachel asked.

<In truth, the Yeerks sought the mineral resources of their planet. Iron, neodymium, and heavier elements. The Taxxon world boasts one of the most ore-heavy crusts of all known planets.>

“And giant killer worms were just a bonus for them,” Marco said bitterly.

“What about the other ones?” I asked. I described the dinosaur monsters as best as I could.
“Hork-Bajir,” Elfangor said. “Despite their fearsome appearance, they are by nature gentle creatures.”

“Seriously?” I asked.

“The Yeerks make of them the monsters they appear. But they are herbivores from a heavily forested planet. They lived among the largest trees ever discovered. It was a beautiful planet.”

“Was?” Cassie asked.

“The Hork-Bajir Conflict was a major chapter in the ongoing Andalite-Yeerk war, but sadly much of the forest valley was destroyed. The Andalite military failed to save the Hork-Bajir. It was one of our greatest losses in recent memory.”

I wondered how to bring up the last part. I couldn’t find anyway to ask with tact, and I was too tired to care about being indelicate.

“I saw an Andalite-Controller.”

Everyone stopped. Chili dripped from Tobias’s hot dog into the paper basket. The frozen expressions seemed confused and stunned, just as I’d been when I’d seen it.

“That is not possible,” Elfangor said.

“There were a bunch of Taxxons and Hork-Bajir walking through a corridor. The Andalite was asking about any signs of the pilot. He told the Hork-Bajir to discontinue the search party for you. Something about installing bio-filters. They called him ‘Visser,’ but I’m not sure what that means.”

“Visser… It’s… It’s a word to describe their generals or chieftains. Vissers are generally numbered, and there are subvissers as well. You… Jake, you are sure you saw an Andalite-Controller?”

“Elfangor, I wouldn’t make something like that up. That’s what scared me so badly coming out. I thought they’d found one of your missing survivors and given him over to a high-ranking Yeerk.”

Elfangor became agitated, his feathers fluffed and hackled. I felt his anger burning in my own mind, the fear. He said nothing though.

“Elfangor,” I said. “I had a pretty strong denial reaction to the idea of human-Controllers. I didn’t want to believe it when you’d told us. But I’m not trying to upset you, here. I’m just telling you what I saw down there and we need you rational.”

The feathers relaxed, and Elfangor's osprey faced turned in several directions. It took a beat before he could make eye contact.

“You are right, Jake. I do need to be rational. And I am in denial, but not for the reasons you think.”

“Okay,” Cassie said. “So talk to us. What’s upsetting you?”

“Years ago, when the Andalite military first became aware of the Yeerk invasion of Earth, a scouting party was sent to assess the Yeerk operation. The mission was partially successful, enough to stagnate the Yeerk operations - or so we were told.”

“Yeah, the facility I saw doesn’t look very stagnated.”
“Actually, Jake, it does.”

“What do you mean?” Rachel snapped. “Jake said that place was huge.”

“Yes, but the concentration of resources, the level of development described, it sounds like the Yeerks have invested years of time and effort in that facility. The Yeerk invasion is larger that Andalite intelligence had known, but for now it seems that the Yeerk invasion has not expanded.”

“You don’t know that,” Marco said. “There could be another facility like that in New York, Beijing, Dubai. What makes you think that’s the only Yeerk pool on Earth?”

“No, I don’t. But the concentration of resources indicates that the Yeerk invasion has limitations. Neither in the Hork-Bajir campaign nor the Taxxon campaign did Yeerks create the elaborate facilities Jake described. Their usual tactics are to expand.”

“So they’re running a slower invasion,” Tobias said. “You cut off their supply routes or whatever the hell the Andalites did last time, and they went to great lengths to keep this invasion a secret so the Andalites didn’t send more military.”

“An astute observation.”

“But,” he continued, “what the hell does that have to do with the Andalite-Controller Jake saw down there?”

“The Andalite mission took casualties. We assumed he was killed in action, but the fallout of the scouting mission prevented any attempt to confirm. But if he survived, Prince Alloran has been on Earth for more than a decade. And that means the Yeerks have had an Andalite host with intricate knowledge of our military campaigns for years.”

Chapter End Notes

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“Prince Alloran?” Tobias asked. “They sent the king’s son to Earth and no one followed up on his disappearance?”

<My apologies. Your word prince is apparently not the correct cognate. It is a high military rank, rather than a designation of royalty. But in answer to your question, this planet is remote and the odds that Alloran had survived were incredibly slim. When he never contacted the homeworld, he was given a full memorial service and we believed the matter closed.>

“Exactly what happened with the last Andalite mission on Earth, anyway?” Rachel asked.

Elfangor didn’t answer at first, and there was something about his pause that just felt… off. <That is a long story, and I think it may prove tangential to our current situation.> The non-answer seemed blatant, and I made a mental note to ask him about it again later.

“Well,” Marco said, “I hate to be blunt, but now you know how your ship was brought down. They knew all your tactics.”

“Marco!” Rachel snapped.

<No, he is right. For one, knowing the nature of the ambush, admittedly I feel a little less responsible for the tragedy. But Alloran… he was my first commander. I trained under him; he taught me many things.>

“So you’re telling us the Andalite that taught you everything you know about military tactics essentially works for the bad guys?” Marco asked again.

<Regrettably, yes. I have learned from others, of course, and my own military career is admittedly rather notable. But Alloran was amongst the most-decorated officer in our history. At least, he was once.>

“Well,” I said, “I don’t want to cut you guys off or downplay the severity of these revelations. But it’s getting late and we all have other shit to do. I want to get a shower, knock out my homework, and get the fuck to sleep. Any objections to calling this a day?”

<No, I agree. You have all performed admirably, and I know all of you are exhausted. I must demorph and contact Aximili. I must contact the homeworld with this news, and I need to prepare the explosives.>
“Woah, woah,” I said. “I know the plan was to destroy the pool, but there are a lot of innocent people down there. Let’s not jump ahead, okay?”

Elfangor seemed to pause for a moment, and looked at me with his unblinking osprey eyes. Finally he answered. <As you wish, Jake.>

With that, he was gone, out the open window of the SUV and into the open blue sky for who knows how many times that night. He’d spent a large portion of the day watching my phone, which I now realized was still on the roof of the school - fuck me - and then locating the enemy base. And then he’d found out one of his military superiors had been captured years ago and he had no idea how many military secrets had been unknowingly leaked to the enemy. And now, to top off his evening, a sixteen-year-old human nobody was setting terms about his mission.

But fuck him if he thought he was taking a bomb down there right now.

I knew he wanted to hurt the enemy. I did too. I really hated those slugs, more than I’ve ever hated anything. But I wasn’t going to hurt the enemy at the expense of that many people. I just wasn’t.

We dropped off Rachel first, and then I had to take Melissa home. I took Marco to his place and apparently Tobias was crashing with him for the night. That left me alone in the car with Cassie, and that really made me feel better. Like I didn’t even know how terrible I was feeling till I felt Cassie’s hand in mine.

“You don’t want to blow it up, do you?” she asked. Cassie could read me like a book, I’ll tell you that.

“No, I don’t.”

“But that was the mission, wasn’t it?

“It was,” I said, emphasizing the past-tense. “But I’ve been down there, Cass. I hate the Yeerks as much as he does, I really do. But I don’t think the hundreds of human hosts can be chalked up to acceptable loss or collateral damage.”

“You think Elfangor is that callous?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure. But I’m not onboard with the bomb plan anymore.”

“I’m not sure what I thought would happen here,” she said, sounding as scared and unsure as I felt. “I thought we’d find that place, do the mission, and it would all be over. I’m getting the impression that ‘over’ is not on the table right now.”

I squeezed her hand. “I’m thinking before we go ahead with anything, explosions or otherwise, we should probably do another recon mission. We’re going to need to get all of us down there, Elfangor too, and see what the hell is going on. I think we need more answers before we just torch everything.”

“Jake, that sounds brave and all, but I’m pretty scared to go down there.”

I laughed. “Cassie, that place scares the hell out of me. I don’t want to go back down there. I really don’t. And if it makes you feel any better, I think you’re like the bravest girl I know. Well, probably the second after Rachel.”

“Yeah, Rachel’s like that,” she said with a small laugh. “But you really think you have to do this, don’t you?”
“You know me too well.”

She gave me a kiss as we pulled into her driveway. I watched her go, made sure she didn’t forget her library book. I really didn’t want her to go. But I smiled and I waved. I told her to text me.

I drove home in silence, the radio forgotten.

It was a little after six when I got home. I had homework to do, I had a cell phone to retrieve from the school roof, and all I wanted to do was shower and sleep. But first, I had to face my mom.

She gave me the eye that she does when she thinks I’m hiding things. “So,” she said with that suspicious mom tone, “the second you get a girlfriend you’re out after school for hours, huh?”

“No, it’s not like that. Honestly mom, we haven’t figured out how to tell her parents about us. We’re taking things slow, just like you told me.”

“Oh, don’t just echo what you think I want to hear. Seriously, where’ve you been all afternoon? I tried calling you.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Language, Jake.”

“I’m an idiot, mom. I left my phone at school. God, Cassie’s going to kill me.”

Mom actually laughed despite herself. “You’re just nailing this boyfriend stuff, honey. So, where were you?”

“Y’know, sneaking into an alien bunker, saving the world.”

“Ah, new arcade game at the Boardwalk, huh? Why do you spend so much on that XBox if you keep throwing money at the arcade games?”

I shrugged. “Tobias. He doesn’t get much in the way of pocket money, so he doesn’t get to play games unless he’s here or at Marco’s. We got him a Boardwalk pass today, y’know, since school’s almost out.”

Mom wanted to be mad at me. I could see that. But she had that “I’m proud of you” look too. Finally she just sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Fine, you’re off the hook, young man. But next time, don’t forget your phone, okay?”

“Got it, Mom.” I turned, about to head upstairs, but I stopped for a minute. I sighed again. “Hey, mom?”

“Yeah, Jake?”

“I’ve been wondering something, and I haven’t asked because I was never sure if it was my business, but lately it’s been bothering me.” Mom went from annoyed to concerned in a heartbeat, and it made me uncomfortable. I swallowed. “Were… were you and dad serious about adopting Tobias?”

If I’d morphed into a lizard right then, I’m not sure Mom would have been any more surprised.

“Jake, I- I’m not sure how to answer that. I mean, your father and I talked about it, and we were thinking about it, but before we knew it, he was off with family and we figured he was better off.
Why do you ask?"

Because he wasn't better off, mom. Because he's like my little brother and you let those people take him. Mom, did you know that up until two days ago, he used to meticulously cover the cigarette burns on his arms? Did you know what your indecisiveness cost him? I wanted to be mad. I wanted to yell, to be spiteful. But I couldn't.

“No reason, I guess,” the lie fell out of my mouth like a breath, weightless and undetected. “Just wondering what things would be like if he hadn't moved away for all those years.”

“You've taken some interest in Tobias lately, Jake. Are you sure there's nothing you want to tell me?”

“I'll let you know, mom.”

She held eye contact, the look of a mother trying to pry the secrets out of her kid. But like I said, I wasn't really the rebellious type. And she would never guess the real reasons I was off. At length she just changed the subject. “Well, I assume you ate at the Boardwalk, but your father brought home pizza. It's in the kitchen.”

I actually was still hungry, and I walked up the stairs with a slice. The warm, gooey cheese somehow made me feel better.

Tobias was in my room when I opened the door. He was in his hawk form again, and he didn't say anything, only dropped the little pouch containing my phone on the bed. I mouthed the words “thank you” in case Tom could hear us through our shared wall.

I gestured to the pizza, noiselessly asking if he wanted to demorph and have a slice.

<No, thanks. Marco ordered Chinese. We're going to watch the Family Guy Star Wars parodies with his dad.>

I smiled. “Yeah, those were funny,” I whispered.

<I've never seen them.> he said. <I'll see you later, Jake.>

He flew out the window and I closed it behind him. I watched as his dark brown shape vanished into the shadows outside.

I texted Cassie on and off as I did my homework. It was quiet, and it made me nervous for some reason. But I couldn't bring myself to turn on music or anything. I thought about putting on Netflix or something but I just didn't see the point.

I told Cassie I was going to get a shower and get some sleep. She said she's was going to do the same, and I tried to shake the idea of Cassie in the shower. I shook the normal teenage perversions from my head, got a fresh towel, and I don’t remember ever getting in the shower.

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I swear to God, my next conscious thought was the alarm going off. I smelled like I had showered, I was wearing the T-shirt and boxers I had gotten out of my drawer last night, and I saw my backpack ready to go at my bedroom door. My phone had even found its way to the nightstand
I didn’t remember actually getting the shower, or getting dressed, or getting into bed. I had a sneaking suspicion I’d gone into autopilot again and fallen into oblivion the second I got in bed. I read somewhere I think that when you’re really, really tired, your brain just stops making new memories. And for something as monotonous and repetitive as a simple evening shower, I couldn’t really fault my brain for the bad edit.

At least I didn’t dream.

The spider nightmare was terrible, and I was really concerned having seen the giant alien caterpillars and reptile monsters that I would have awful nightmares about becoming Taxxon chow or graphically disemboweled by Hork-Bajir blades. Sheer exhaustion had probably saved that for me, but that didn’t mean tonight wouldn’t be rife with malicious dreams.

Things to look forward to.

I ran into Tom in the kitchen again.

We exchanged our normal brother banter. Girls, games, sports, school. I don’t really know what I was saying. My mind was on other things, I guess. But there was coffee. I didn’t even bother with the banana. I just didn’t have the appetite.

Tom drove us to school, and tossed me the keys. I gave him our usual fist bump goodbye, told him I wasn’t sure what my plans were after school. He told me it was cool, that The Sharing had a meetings that afternoon.

School was boring. And for the next few hours, I just went through the motions.

It wasn’t as bad as yesterday, when I was constantly worried about the camera in Chapman’s office, which I suddenly remembered was still on and still recording. God, I needed to double check the cloud storage and see if I could watch that footage when I got home. Maybe he’d say something Yeerk-related, or maybe I’d find out that his secretary was a Controller too or something.

But that didn’t matter during class.

I was relieved at lunchtime that Melissa joined us again. It meant that we couldn’t really talk about the alien invasion, the Pool, Elfangor, or anything else.

Actually, as we went on talking, I felt better.

Yesterday, I’d been a bit distant with Matt and Drew, not that they seemed to notice. And for most of that morning, I’d been in the same mood. But I quickly realized how much I needed this. For the forty-five minutes we had for lunch, we were just normal teenagers again. We bitched about teachers, made wildly inappropriate jokes, Cassie and I got flack about our new relationship. Rachel and I talked about Tom’s graduation, made plans for me to take my cousins for a day or something.

For just that lunch period, I felt like the old Jake. I knew it wasn’t going to last. I knew I was never going to be the old Jake again, not for real. Even if this was the furthest I was going to go with Elfangor and his Andalite war, I think I’d seen enough that I’d never quite get back to my old normal.

But I was in a better mood for the rest of the school day.
When school finally got out, I found Cassie waiting by my SUV. That surprised me. Of all of us, Cassie had easily the most parental restrictions. Tobias could come and go as he liked. Marco was essentially in the same situation, if for different reasons. Rachel couldn’t make a habit of it, and she’d needed Melissa to cover. And I probably could get away with it for awhile, provided I had my phone to text my mom. I had gotten a little bit of flack from my mom, mostly just because of not checking in, but Cassie had a lot of stuff to do at the wildlife clinic.

“Hey, what’s up?” I asked.

“What? You’re not happy to see me?”

“I’m always happy to see you, Cassie. Just wasn’t sure what’s going on after yesterday.”

“Yeah, my dad wasn’t thrilled with me yesterday. Mom actually seemed proud of me for taking a me-day, though, so that was cool.”

I nodded. “So, you need a ride?”

She winked at me. “Well, yeah, pretty sure I missed my bus, Jake. Besides, it’s such a nice day, I thought you’d like to go for a hike.”

She was not wrong. I wasn’t sure I wanted to do this now, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to get into it without the others.

“Besides,” she added. “I could use a hand catching up on my chores. Things pile up on a farm pretty quickly.”

“Yeah, I understand. Just let me text my mom first. After yesterday, I don’t want to push it.”

It didn’t take more than a few minutes before Mom texted me back with the simple line “home by 5” and we were off.

“So,” I asked, “will your parents get weird with us sneaking off into the woods?”

“No, we should be fine. Dad’s teaching and Mom won’t get home for at least another hour. And since you graciously agreed to help me get my chores done, we have some time.”

I walked her up to the barn, hand in hand, and for almost an hour I was mucking stalls, helping Cassie feed animals. She took care of their meds and their charts, and I just kept mucking out the nasty hay. That was fine though. I liked helping her with chores. And hard work was one of the few things I just really excelled at. Like I said, I wasn’t that smart and I wasn’t that artistic. Cassie said I could be really deep on occasion, but I never really felt that. But when it came to doing things, that stuff really made sense to me. I’d help my dad put disc brakes on the van, built the outdoor playhouse for Jordan and Sara with my Uncle Dan, made birdhouses in shop class. Even working in the movie theater cleaning the bathrooms, getting things done was just something that I enjoyed.

Mom and Dad always said I was a blue-collar kid at heart, and I guess that made sense to me. A lot of parents tell their kids they need to study hard to get a good job or they’ll end up digging ditches. But my parents never told me that. In fact, my dad told me once that ditch diggers make good money. I know Marco wanted to be a computer programmer or game designer or something, Tobias… I guess he wanted to be an artist or something. I didn’t really know. Rachel was likely to end up a lawyer like her mom, probably work for an environmentalist firm before launching into politics. She always had causes to fight for. Me, I just never really wanted to do that much. My dream job would be to run a landscaping company, honestly.
“I really appreciate the help, Jake,” Cassie said as we finished scraping the nasty hay and moved on to spreading the fresh hay.

“I enjoy it, Cass. You don’t have to thank me.”

“Yeah, right,” she laughed. “Like you’d spend your afternoons shoveling dung if there wasn’t a girl involved.”

“Cassie, is this one of those girl traps?”

“Girl trap?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Well, if I say I’m only here because of the hot girl, I’m going to be in the dog house. But if I say looks don’t matter, it’s like a roundabout put down that you’re not pretty enough or something. All I can tell you is that you’re hot, and hot girls do make me more motivated. But, Cass, honey, you’re like family. If you ask, I’ll be here.”

“You’re sweet.”

I felt my ears burning.

Cassie seemed to notice me blushing. She smiled and shook her head. “C’mon,” she said. “Let’s go see Elfangor.”

Chapter End Notes

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We didn’t head straight to the woods.

Even if you’ve never worked a job where you can conceivably be covered in animal shit, you can probably guess that the next step is always clean-up. I keep a duffle bag of work clothes at Cassie’s place for exactly this reason, and I’d had the presence of mind to change into them when we’d started. I’m not sure if it was a boyfriend-girlfriend thing or if it was because of the morphing experiences, but Cassie had no qualms changing in front of me.

I mean, I’ve seen Cassie in swimsuits and sports bras, but I’ve actually never seen her in her underwear before. It’s not like she was wearing some kind of risqué *Victoria’s Secret* lace thong or anything, just a generic white bra from Target and black briefs. I’m not trying to be perverted or anything here. My point was that she was comfortable with me. She trusted I wouldn’t stare, and so I didn’t. I just got a glimpse as she changed from the coveralls and pulled up her shorts.

At any rate, she’d seen me in my boxers a few times by that point.

“Should we call the others?” I asked, as we were both washing our hands in the basin sink in the barn. I wasn’t sure exactly how this was going to go. Elfangor and I weren’t actively fighting or anything, but I could tell when he’d flown off last night that he wasn’t pleased that I was having reservations about our future missions. It made me nervous, honestly.

She shrugged. “Probably wouldn’t hurt.”

It took just a few seconds to send the group text to Rachel, Marco, and Tobias. I really hoped I was over-reacting, but it never hurts to have a little backup. Cassie grabbed her backpack and we headed down the now-familiar trail.

The walk to Elfangor’s little hideout was pleasant. Walking hand-in-hand with Cassie could never be anything less.

The small, sheltered valley of the creek bed offered adequate privacy for a hiding alien. He’d said he had chosen to stay here because of the trace radiation of his ship or whatever, but I had to wonder if he hadn’t chosen to “crash” at this particular spot on purpose. He definitely wasted no time moving in. Someone, maybe Tobias, but possibly Elfangor himself, had set up the old tent Cassie had offered. The outside of the tent was covered with sticks, branches, leaves, and such, so that anyone passing by - or flying overhead - would never notice it was there. In fact, it looked like whoever had set it up had gone to the trouble of digging down about a few feet into the earth so the tent would be recessed slightly, and then moving an old dead log next to it to brace the mess of
sticks and assorted camouflage.

Next to the tent, offset by a respectable distance, was a ring of stones, apparently gathered from the creek, placed around a shallow pit and full of charred wood. Someone had lit a fire.

“Someone’s been busy,” I said.

“Looks like it,” Cassie agreed.

<Your school session does take hours of the day,> the familiar thought-speech voice replied. <I felt I should make myself more comfortable.>

I think that was the first point that I realized Elfangor was homeless. I had just assumed from the fact that he looked like a deer that he lived outside naturally. It had never really clicked that he might require more shelter than any other woodland creature. It felt stupid in hindsight.

But at least he hadn’t been spending the day making explosives, so that was a plus.

Elfangor stepped out from the trees, one of the metallic cases from his ship held tight to his body.

“Would you like me to take that?” I asked.

<Yes, if you would not mind.>

I took the canister, and it was fairly heavy, but manageable. Elfangor’s arms seemed more like the forelimbs of a kangaroo, and each finger was more of a small tentacle than an articulated finger. Shaking hands with an Andalite, I thought, would be like being grabbed by a small, furry squid.

<Andalite arms are not designed the same as human arms,> he said, apparently noticing my gaze. <Your species evolved from tree-dwelling, brachiating ancestors, and you can support the entirety of your weight by only one hand. This is not true for Andalites.>

“Um, sorry.”

<Apologies are not necessary. It is merely an observation. And while our arms may not be as strong, our fingers are far more dexterous. We had an evolutionary impetus towards the use of tools much sooner in our history than in yours.>

“Well, that’s cool,” Cassie said.

<Jake,> I heard Marco’s voice in thought-speech. I looked up to see three ravens, sitting together in the tree above us.

“How long have you guys been there?” I asked.

<We came here straight from school. Cassie told us to,> Rachel said.

“They were here the whole time?!” I shouted. “That’s why you wanted help with chores, isn’t it? You were stalling so these guys could have time to morph and fly over.”

“Well, yeah,” she said. “But I did need the help anyway.”

<Don’t single out Cassie,> Tobias said, <We’re all just as curious about the next leg of this as you are.>

I glared at Cassie, but she just smiled at me. That smile took all the wind out of my sails, but I had
to say something. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t be mad at you,” I said in an obviously fake-mad tone.

“I’m cute?”

“Oh, we’re going there? That’s your defense?”

“Oh, please. Like you weren’t going to do this. You textoed all of them the second we were done in the barn, didn’t you?”

“Ugh, you got me there. I guess I can’t be mad then. You guys, down here and demorph. We’re kinda back to square one and we need to go over the next leg of this.”

Five minutes later, they were all in their morphing outfits. Marco and Tobias were in nothing but bike shorts. Rachel was wearing a sports bra and yoga shorts. Cassie opened her backpack, tossed both the boys their shirts, and handed out the three cell phones she’d been holding.

“Okay, so where are we starting with this little intervention?” I asked.

“I think,” Marco said, “that we should go over the first plan.”

“The first plan,” Rachel said heatedly, “was to bomb the hell out the place. We can’t do that if there are innocent people down there.”

“It’s not just people,” Cassie said. “Elfangor, you said yourself that the Hork-Bajir are peaceful. And I’m not thrilled about those worm-monster Taxxons, but if we’re going to try to save the hosts, I think it’s a bit weak to only save our own species and not the others.”

“Oh, come on,” Marco said. “Cassie, I give you props for open-mindedness, but let’s not over-complicate the issue at hand.”

“Well who made you boss?” Rachel asked.

“I gotta agree with Marco,” Tobias said. “If we save all these Hork-Bajir and Taxxons, what are we going to do with them?”

“Guys!” I roared. That got everyone’s attention. “We can roundtable this later. Elfangor, I think Marco’s original question deserves an answer. What exactly would your bomb plan entail?”

Elfangor looked at all of us, one by one. <Humans are very complicated creatures,> he said simply.

“Yeah, I can’t disagree with that, can I? But seriously, spill it. What was your original plan?”

Elfangor looked away suddenly. <I have enough components from my pod to create a primitive zero-space condenser. With the correct settings, I could create a feedback loop. The z-space field would collapse and release enough energy to destroy the base, or failing total destruction, at least significant damage.>

“Holy shit,” Rachel said.

“Elfangor,” Cassie said, “you do get that there are innocent people down there? Right?”

Elfangor slouched suddenly. <I am aware, Cassie. I truly am. I understand the cost. I am not unfeeling. I truly am not.>

I felt his conflict flow through me. He carried it well, I’ll give him that. I gasped as the emotion hit
me, felt the impotence of his choice, the weight of his regret pressing into my mind. I felt the back of my throat go tight, the tears standing in my eyes. It was enough to bring Cassie to her knees. Tobias shifted uncomfortably, I saw Rachel’s face contort like she’d bitten a lemon. And Marco just shook his head solemnly.

I sighed, took a breath, and asked the question I didn't want to ask. “You still want to blow up the Yeerk pool, don't you?”

Elfangor turned all four of his eyes to me, and that just didn’t seem fair. It’s really disturbing to have four eyes of the same face look at you, as you could imagine. But it also makes it really hard to make eye contact back. It’s just really distracting. He didn't answer for a long beat, like he was ashamed by his answer.

<It is not by preference. If I had other options, I would pursue them. But I do not. I am alone, I am lost, and this mission remains my best tactical option. It could potentially cripple the Yeerks long enough for help to arrive.>

“How can you be okay with killing all those people?” Rachel accused.

I felt Elfangor’s conflict turn to anger, all my thoughts suddenly became tinted red with the heat of it. The hatred echoed, it was so loud. He hated the Yeerks in a way that went lightyears beyond war. They were obscene to him, sickened him. The very name caused the anger to ripple. When we had first found him, I suspected he could broadcast his emotions. Now, there was no question. But as the emotion continued, I felt the complexity of it. He wasn’t just mourning the human hosts. He was mourning his comrades. For him, the two were linked.

“You’re doing this for them, aren’t you? This isn’t about the war, this is just personal, isn’t it?” I asked.

<What?>

“You heard me, Elfangor. This is revenge. This isn’t a mission at all. You just want to kill Yeerks for the sake of killing Yeerks.”

<Insolent human child...> he said. <You know nothing of war.>

I felt the disdain, the insult. But I didn’t care. “Look at me.”

He didn’t.

The anger continued roughshod through me, and for a minute I couldn’t tell if it was his anger or my own. I had helped Cassie hold pressure to his wounds. I told Marco off when he told us the smart thing was to bail. It had been my decision to touch the cube, to gain the morphing ability. I had been the one to go into the Yeerk facility at the airport.

And he was treating me like a child. Like I just didn’t understand why I couldn’t have ice cream for dinner. That I’d understand when I was older. I wanted to scream. If Cassie hadn't been there, I don't think I could've held myself in check. I felt my blood boiling. But I swallowed and pushed the anger to the side.

It wasn’t going to help. Exhale, let it go. Ebb away, try again.

Control.

“I am a human child, Elfangor. I’m sorry, I know it’s not the help you need. But that’s what you
got. And there are human children in that place. I saw them. I watched them. And I know, I know so goddamned vividly that you lost so much for this war. You carry every one of those Andalites in your head, don’t you? I bet you knew every name on that ship, didn’t you? And they’re gone now, and you feel it’s your fault.”

<One hundred thirty two confirmed deaths…> he whispered.

“It isn’t your fault, Elfangor. That’s their fault,” I said. “I know why you hate them. I hate them. And I’m not a hate kind of guy. And you’re right; I don’t know anything about war, I don’t. I’m not old enough to enlist and I never really considered joining military. But I do know about loss. It sucks, and it’s not something you ever get over.” I took a breath.

“This insolent human child helped dress your wounds. Cassie helped hide you in the barn. Tobias spent almost a whole day as a bird for you. Rachel used her friend to help spy on our principal. Marco told us we should have left you where we found you. That one way or another, this shit would haunt us forever.” I looked at Marco and he wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“And damn it if he wasn’t right. The five of us flushed our comfortable naïve existence for you. I can’t speak for them, but I don’t blame you for that, I really don’t. We didn’t know what we were getting into when we saved you, but it was the right thing to do. I wouldn’t wish knowing about these alien slugs on anyone, but at the same time, knowing about the Yeerks, I could never choose to forget the things you’ve showed us.

“But I’m not like you. I’m not a soldier. I’m not even a fucking Boy Scout. I have seen things you take for granted. You know what a Taxxon is, seeing them is normal to you. You probably learn about them in basic training, have whole files on them. Hell, you even seem a bit sympathetic to them. But on Earth, that is what a nightmare is made of. A grown man would cry at the sight of something like that. And I am willing to fight that… for you. Because I have to. Because no one else can.

“But if you try to take a bomb down there, if you kill a thousand human beings just to salve your own conscious, just for petty revenge, well that will be your fault.”

I was done. It took a minute to catch my breath, to feel my pulse return to normal, for the pounding of blood in my ears to go quiet. Elfangor said nothing. He stared at me for the longest moment, and then he simply collapsed. His knees folded like jack-knives and he fell to the dirt and cried.

I cannot put that into words.

It’s the kind of thing that sounds maybe darkly beautiful in poetry, to open your soul and let someone listen to the pulse that runs through it. But when you’re carrying the death of more than a hundred people, believing down to your very core that the blame is yours, that every subsequent decision you make could further your personal disaster, that sound is hideous. A cacophony that throws madness like paint splashing on the walls. He let loose a telepathic scream that deafened all thoughts to anything besides his loss. What I had felt in the barn, that was nothing but bubbles on the surface. He had been holding this in since we found him. He knew before he hit the ground that everyone was gone, knew it and knew it was on him.

And like fate was taunting him, like whatever Andalite gods existed had plucked him just to make him watch, he had survived. His brother was at the bottom of the ocean, stranded, his great military superiority evaporated, and his desperation lashed him to us five kids like an ox to the cart. He had swallowed it for days. Because he had to.

And I had pushed him to his breaking point on purpose.
I am not proud of that. Later that night, I fell asleep sobbing into a pillow in a way I hadn’t done since Marco’s mother died. Till that moment, I didn’t know I had that kind of resolve in me. I didn’t know I could plant myself like a tree, I didn’t know I could rip someone down like that so easily. And knowing I could do it was disturbing. If I thought Elfangor was callous, I knew then that I could be too.

But I wasn’t wrong, either.

<When my ship fell into this atmosphere,> Elfangor said, <I knew I was alone.>

The telepathic anguish was passing. It would always be a part of all of us. I doubted it would ever completely fade, but the moment was over. Only the vivid, excruciating memory of it remained. And that was enough. I would have traded the world right then to have spared the others of that. And Cassie… Cassie looked like she wanted to cry and I felt like a monster.

<And when I knew I was alone… I knew then that I was destined to die on this planet. That all of it had come full circle. But then I heard your voices. The two of you kept me from exsanguinating in this very field.>

He looked up, suddenly. Like this was the first time he was really seeing this little crease in the woods. He closed his eyes, and I thought he was just letting the sun was over his face for a moment, letting the wind touch the strange, soft blue fur of his face. Maybe he was just catching his breath.

<I thought nothing then but my retribution. If I was to die on this planet, if all else had fallen, then I should not let it be for naught. I would avenge the fallen. I would cripple the Yeerks on this planet. Maybe they would cut their losses, maybe they would linger, but to strike such a definitive blow that the others to come behind me could clean the mess I have made of your world.>

<But you> he looked at all of us, one after the other. <You would not let me take this personal crusade to its logical conclusion. You would not let me become that which I so detest.>

Cassie went over, knelt beside him, and hugged him. I’m not sure if hugging is something familiar to Andalites or not, but it was familiar enough to Cassie. She gently held the alien’s head to her breast, stroking the fur of his neck like she would a puppy.

“I can only imagine what you’re going through,” she said, as though she hadn’t just felt it nearly firsthand, “but we can’t do this without you. I know you’re mad, I know you’re hurting, but this isn’t revenge for us. This is our planet, these are our people. We need your help.”

He seemed to just sit there for a long moment, letting Cassie pet him like a giant, sentient cat. <I believe this may be undignified.> he said after a minute. <Though, admittedly, I do find the physical reassurance rather comforting.>

Rachel laughed and she and Tobias helped Cassie bring Elfangor to his feet.

<What am I to do without my vengeance, Jake? How would you have me spend my exile if not fighting the enemy?>

“At any point did I say you couldn’t hurt the enemy?” I asked. “I am not asking you to put your revenge on hold. Far from it, actually: I’m going to help you however I can. But we’re going to do it without sacrificing all those people.”

“Jake, that’s a great sentiment,” Marco said, “But exactly how do you suggest we do that?”
<To liberate thousands of hosts, through only surface tactics, would be a logistical labyrinth had I all the resources of my Dome Ship and all my fallen soldiers.>

“Look,” I said. “When I was driving Cassie home last night, I thought maybe the best option would be to do the run again. All of us get the lizard morph this time, and just do some more recon, get some more intelligence.”

“That sounds a lot like a lateral step than it does moving forward,” Tobias said.

I shrugged. “Maybe it is, but I thought maybe taking Elfangor down would lead to other options. Like ninety percent of the stuff I saw down there makes no sense to me.”

“Alright,” Marco said. “So your solution here is to go back to San Jose, all of us go in as lizards, and all of us see the hellhole you’ve described on the hope that something will just give Elfangor a better idea?”

“Well, when you put it like that…” I said. “Yes.”

“I’m in,” Rachel said.

<That will not be necessary.>

“Elfangor?” Tobias asked.

He kept his main eyes on me while his stalk eyes scanned the others. <By now, you realize that I am capable of projecting thoughts and emotions.>

“Yeah, I’d say we noticed,” Marco quipped. “What’s your point?”

<When I first met you, and you helped me to Cassie’s barn, I showed you the Yeerk homeworld.>

“That hologram thing?” Tobias asked.

<It was not a hologram. It is a memory recording.>

“You have the technology to save memories as computer files?” Marco asked.

<Yes. It would not take much for me to extract the memory from Jake’s mind so that we could all experience it.>

“Wait,” I said. “So instead of flying back there you’re going to use my brain to play it back like a movie?”

<I suppose that is an accurate assessment.>

Well, the plus side was that I had talked him out of the bombing mission. The downside was that I seemed to have gotten myself into a different kind of mess. “Okay, fine. I’ll do it. How do we do this?”

<The first step,> Elfangor said, <is that you will need to morph an Andalite.>

Chapter End Notes
If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
“Um, if I may be so bold,” I said, “why do I have to morph an Andalite?”

<In truth, it may be wise that all of you acquire my genetic pattern. I think the five of you may find having an Andalite morph to be prudent.>

Well, that did make some kind of sense, I guessed. Maybe. “Yes, okay, I’m not opposed to the morphing part of the equation. I mean what exactly are you going to do to me once I’m… you?”

< I will teach you to broadcast thoughts and emotions. It is… a complicated process. It will take practice and we may have to invest some time in developing the skill, but I am confident that I could help you extract and share your memories of the Yeerk facility.>

“This seems like a fun day,” Marco said sarcastically. “I could be at home studying for my calc final, but no, instead I’m going to watch live brain theatre.”

“Well,” Tobias said, “you gotta admit that life is much more interesting than it was a week ago.”

“God, you can say that again,” Cassie said.

“Okay,” I said, “but before we get to that I do want to bring up another point.”

“Sure you're not just stalling?” Rachel asked.

“Fifty-fifty,” I said honestly. “I’m not in a huge rush for the memory theatre, no. But I am curious what to do about Elfangor’s brother.”

Elfangor seemed surprised by this statement. <Aximili is safe for now.>

“Yeah,” I said, “so you’ve said. A few times, actually. But I am getting a little curious what the plan is for getting him. It’s not like the Pacific is going to be any less deep in a week.”

“That is a good point,” Cassie said. “I mean do we even know where the ship landed?”

Elfangor made an expression I didn’t understand. If I had to guess, I’d assume maybe annoyance. <In your units, Aximili is approximately four hundred fifty miles southwest of this location. The Dome Ship came to rest near a seamount, at a depth exceeding four hundred meters.>

None of us said a word. There was something hanging there in the silence, something not quite tangible. “You’re not sure you can help him, are you?” Tobias said.
The distance alone creates a significant challenge. Then there is the depth to consider.

“You don’t have any ideas?” I asked.

“In all truth, my only practical idea was to somehow obtain a Bug Fighter.”

“That doesn’t sound very practical,” Rachel said.

“No, admittedly, it does not. But it is the only option I haven’t completely dismissed out of hand.”

“Well that explains why you haven’t wanted to talk about it, I guess,” Marco said.

“We’ll try to help you with that later, but I guess I need to try this Andalite thing, don’t I?” I really wasn’t sure what this experience was going to entail. But the first part was to morph and stalling wasn’t going help any further.

“Yes, Jake, let us begin.”

The five of us gathered around him once again. It was weird seeing us doing this again. There had been that first meeting, when he had staggered out his wrecked pod. Then we’d done it again when he’d offered the cube. Just five kids crowded around an alien, something we had found so impossible days ago, and this was already the third time we’d done this.

If we felt awkward, then I’m certain Elfangor definitely was. Each of us placed a hand on him, and I cannot imagine how it must have felt for him as we acquired his DNA. He seemed to flutter a bit like we’d doped him up on animal tranquillizers. But he shook himself awake and seemed to recover quickly,

“Do we all need to morph to Andalite for this?” Cassie asked.

“Not strictly, no,” Elfangor said. “It may enhance the experience, but the rest of you can remain human.”

Well, I guess that was my cue. It stripped down to my boxers again, conscious that everyone was watching. I tossed my shirt, jeans, and shoes to Cassie, and she set them aside for me on the log where I’d been sitting earlier. I closed my eyes, took a breath, and let the change run through me.

It was actually a little easier to morph into Elfangor than I thought it would be. I guess because I was looking at him while I was doing it, so it was pretty easy to concentrate on the alien features. I felt my body elongate, my torso increasing in length. Then my neck followed, stretching to more than double its original size.

The morphing process on the outside was one thing, but the inside parts were incredibly weird. I felt the rush of blood in my ears as my heart increased in size, growing and swelling and finally dividing. I couldn’t actually feel the heart split, but I could suddenly hear two distinct rhythms in my ears. Elfangor told me later that Andalites actually have three hearts, so that’s weird. There was a strange pressure as my lungs shifted upward. I felt the bulge of tissue growing in my chest and then two new pairs of legs grew out just below my pectoral muscles. The ends of the almost fetal looking deer legs hardened as the hoof tips emerged, and they rapidly grew out.

My neck swelled like a balloon, accommodating the shift in my lung placement. For a second I couldn’t breathe, and there was a spark of panic as I realized I had no nose or mouth. My teeth melted. My goddamn teeth melted like candle wax, and I could feel the bones in my skull and jaw fusing and rearranging. A second later, I could breathe. Man, could I breathe. The weird face slits worked to pull in air like the intake of a fighter jet. Breathing became effortless, just a constant
availability of air.

My legs were finishing their transition into hindlimbs, my toes congealing into shiny black hooves. The front hooves met the ground and pushed me up so that I was in the same weird mantis shrimp centaur posture as Elfangor. I felt the bones in my hands dissolve, my fingers felt like liquid rubber. My arm muscles withered considerably. I probably couldn’t have won an arm wrestling contest with my ten-year-old cousin, Jordan, at that point.

I felt my ears extending, widening. I could definitely hear better than a human. Suddenly, I could sense a fuzzy glow in my forehead. Two dime-sized patches of skin were suddenly photosensitive. The skin bubbled and blistered, becoming the lenses of the stalk eyes before they grew out of my forehead. There was a bizarre tingling as the bone in the front of my face dissolved so the muscular tubes of the stalks could grow through.

I was almost entirely Andalite, save for a few last details. My skin tingled and itched and then the blue fur grew over my body in a ripple, starting at my hands and flowing up my arms, down my back, across my chest.

The last thing to come was the tail. My tailbone extended, and the tissue just extruded almost endlessly, extending to its full impressive length. And then the scythe blade emerged from the end, sharp and deadly.

I was an Andalite.

It was very disorienting to adjust to the new eyes. His hearing was appreciably better than a human, his color perception was a little different, and while my arms felt frail in comparison to a human being, the muscles in my body and tail were powerful.

“Jake?” Marco asked. “You okay, dude?”

<I'm okay.> I said. <Just adjusting. This tail has a lot of muscle control and I have extra legs.>

It's easy to take your legs for granted. We master walking at a fairly young age. Okay, maybe toddlers aren't masters, precisely, but my point is once we learn to do it, it becomes effortless and totally automatic. We spend no conscious thought on our mobility unless we're trying to do something specific or new. Like learning to swim, or dance, or running drills for the football team. This was similar. Until I got used to having a tail and four legs, I was very conscious of how weird it was just to walk.

I probably looked like a newborn giraffe taking my first few steps. It was a little distracting having the extra eyes, but it did make it easier to keep track of my surroundings. It must be nearly impossible to sneak up on an Andalite. I could taste the grass beneath me as the bizarre mouthparts housed within my hooves instinctively clipped the grass as I moved.

<Okay.> I said, trying to sound confident, <how does this memory projection work?>

<The principle is rather simple. Concentrate on an image and try to push it out in thought-speech. Once we all can see the picture, the link will be established, and from there you can revisit your memories.>

“That does sound simple,” Tobias said.

<It is and yet it can be difficult. It is easier to establish connections with familiar minds. The more you communicate through thought-speech, the easier it becomes.>
“So the limited telepathy we have in morph can send photo and video attachments?” Marco asked.

<I'm about to find out, I guess. Can I have some quiet for this, please.>

Marco made the zipper gesture across his mouth. I closed all four of my eyes, which actually took some mental gymnastics to figure out all the muscles and nerves in the stalk eyes.

The Andalite mind had the normal instincts that most animals have. Food, water, et cetera. But the Andalite instincts didn't like having all eyes shut at the same time. There was an almost compulsive urge to maintain a constant visual form. I snapped up a little startled.

Elfangor seemed amused. <Why did you close your eyes?>

<Umm… it helps me think.>

He cocked his head, puzzled. <Why?>

<I… I can't tell you why. Marco? Why do we humans close our eyes to concentrate?>

Marco shrugged. “If I had to guess, I'd say it's because humans are a very visual species. We get distracted easily by visual stimuli, so closing our eyes helps us hear our own thoughts a little easier.”

Elfangor seemed to consider that for a beat. <In an earlier stage of our evolution, we were a prey species. We instinctively fear darkness.>

<Yeah,> I said, <I kinda noticed.>

I tried again. I closed three eyes this time, turning one stalk eye on a tree branch above me. I needed to have a mental image to send anyway, so I concentrated on the way the light filtered green through the leaves, the way they shivered in the Pacific breeze.

Nothing happened.

I tried to visualize the ball of information, tried sending it out like Elfangor had said, but it was to no avail. Mentally, it was gruelling.

But to everyone else, it was boring as fuck.

They were just sitting there, patiently waiting for me to send this message. Or more likely they were all daydreaming. I wish I was sympathetic to their point of view, but I was doing the telepathic version of the shot put here and their boredom and imagined impatience wasn't helping my concentration. I tried to tune it out.

It took fifteen minutes, but then it happened.

“I see it!” Cassie said. “I can see the tree!”

Everyone looked around suddenly. I opened my other eyes but kept the stalk eye still, maintaining my view of the tree branch.

“Cassie, we're surrounded by trees,” Marco said.

“No, I mean I can see the one Jake is looking at.”

“I see it too!” Rachel said excitedly.
“Oh, wow,” Marco said. “This is trippy.”

Tobias was the last one of us to get it. In retrospect that made sense. Cassie and I had recently established an emotional connection, Rachel and I were related, and Marco and I were practically inseparable. But Tobias was always a little distant. Like he always felt he didn’t belong. He looked sad for a few minutes, but I suddenly flashed to the scene in my head from the other night. He was my little brother. That’s how I saw him. Okay, so he was only four months younger than me, and we’d always been in the same grade, but he was still one of my closest friends. Even if we weren’t as close now as we had been years ago, he was still Tobias, and he was my bud.

“Okay, I’m getting it,” he said finally.

<Elfangor?> I asked.

<I have been able to see it since the beginning, Jake.>

<You could have said something,> I said. <I thought I was doing it wrong.>

<Are you ready to revisit your memories?> he asked, apparently ignoring my complaint.

<Yeah, okay, here we go.>

Sending the memory via thought-speech was fairly simple. Like Elfangor had said, once all of us were connected, the challenge of it was over. The problem wasn’t in sending the message. The problem was that all of them successfully received the message.

“God fucking Christ!” Marco blurted. He bolted to his feet, hands clutching his head, and began pacing. Eventually he settled into a rocking motion with his head in his hands.

Tobias threw up. He was able to turn to the side, stagger into the weeds, and let loose. He just stayed like that for a minute, on all fours in the grass, panting

Cassie was crying. She sat silently on the log, hugging her knees, tears running down her face. The face she made broke my heart into pieces.

Rachel was shaking, but she wasn’t crying, didn’t make a sound. She was the first one to find words after Marco’s outburst. “So that’s a Taxxon…” she said softly, her voice wavering.

<Yeah,> I said lamely, unsure what to do. <That’s a Taxxon.>


<It helped that I was a lizard at the time,> I said. God, I should’ve seen this coming. I knew I would have had a far more violently visceral reaction to the Taxxons as a human, but I guess I just assumed the emotional detachment would just carry over. That the reptile indifference would blunt the horror of the experience.

I was wrong.

None of them wanted to talk, and the silence made me claustrophobic. I was overwhelmed with the desire to demorph back to human. I have no idea why I thought it would help, but I was desperate
for my own skin right then and I didn’t see any percentage in staying in the Andalite morph more than I needed to.

The silence was unbroken as the blue fur faded. I think I was more than halfway back to human before anyone even noticed I was coming out of the morph, the extra Andalite legs almost completely reabsorbed into my torso. The muscles of my arms and chest swelled back to their previous definitions, and for just a second I felt like a bodybuilder. I rolled my shoulders a few times, savoring the muscle movement in my back and shoulders.

I didn’t even bother to get my shirt first. I just wrapped my arms around Cassie. I felt her fingers dig into my back, like she was trying to make sure I was real as she hugged me back.

The wave of reassurance that flowed through us was like fresh air and sunlight. Elfangor seemed to realize we needed a little hand-holding. At first, I was pissed. He could have done that minutes ago rather than let them all shake in their terror. But when I looked at him, I lost the venom.

His eyes met mine only briefly, then he seemed to whisper. <Alloran, what have they made of you? >

He was just as struck by this as they were, he’d just been focused on a different horror. We saw the Taxxons and the Hork-Bajir and we saw only monsters. But he saw that Andalite and he didn’t see an alien. He didn’t even see him as one of the myriad faces in the crowd like I had seen the innumerable human-Controllers. He saw his captain, someone he knew, and someone he had once respected.

Someone he had mourned already.

One by one, my friends recovered. It turned out it wasn’t entirely just the visions of monsters that had freaked them out, though that had been a big part of it. It was just the way the human mind integrated the implanted memory. It took each of them a little time for my experiences to scion to their own memories, and while humans can receive thought-speech, memory transference is apparently a little more than our brains evolved to handle. Elfangor reassured me that they’d be fine soon, and all we could do was wait.

When the four of them were collected a little, Elfangor seemed to cast just a little touch of pride on all of us. <What Jake said before was true. I am used to the Taxxons. My first real mission in the military was on their planet. But I had forgotten what it was like to see them with fresh eyes. As cadets, many Andalites are often incapacitated by the revolting terror of the Taxxons. We are forced to face that fear so that we can know it, understand it, and overcome it. As you all have done now.>

“How could you ever feel sorry for something like that?” Rachel asked, her tone nearly accusing.

<Taxxons could be so much more in the galaxy could they ever contain their constant hunger. Instead of a race of metallurgists and engineers, they are all of them no more than butchers, not because they choose to be, but because evolution allows them no other recourse.>

“Christ, what kind of planet do you have to evolve on for that to happen?” Marco asked.

<A harsh one.>

Yeah, no shit, Elfangor.

“What’s in those tanks they wear?” Tobias asked.
“You said those lizard monsters are friendly?” Cassie asked.

“They once were. To the best of our knowledge, not a single Hork-Bajir escaped the Yeerk conquest. We believe some forty thousand were infested and the rest of the species died in the aftermath of the war.”

“Forty thousand?” I asked.

“Many of the Hork-Bajir are stationed on other planets. Andalites often encounter them in battle across the galaxy. Current estimates indicate that no one planet has more than three thousand Hork-Bajir.”

“I’m going to assume you mean that as a good thing,” Marco said. “Are the Taxxons an endangered species too?”

“The Yeerk Empire possesses in excess of three hundred thousand Taxxons at last estimate.”

“Peachy,” he sighed.

My mind went straight to the pallets of scuba tanks I had seen the forklifts moving. Even if half of them had been empties on their way to some kind of recharging station, that still hinted at hundreds of Taxxons just in that section of the Pool facility. I shuddered to think how many of those worms were living on Earth. I didn’t want to dwell on it.

“Look,” I said, “this little Q&A session is educational, but what was your takeaway, here, Elfangor? Did you see any tactical options?”

“Actually, I have seen several. The Yeerks are making use of a considerably more efficient infestation method on this planet, and the tanks themselves may be more vulnerable to a series of smaller explosions rather than the larger device I had originally conceived.”

“You can do that without harming the human hosts?” I asked.

“Yes. We would not necessarily liberate any hosts, but we could harm the Yeerks without harming any humans.”

I looked at my friends. After absorbing an Andalite email attachment, I wasn't sure if they were going to be open to the idea of helping Elfangor smuggle explosives into an alien stronghold.

But before I could say anything, Rachel spoke.

“Let’s do it.”
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Chapter 20

We spent the rest of our impromptu meeting going over a few logistics. Ignoring the little training-wheeled mission that had been the camera in Chapman’s office - God, fuck me, I still had yet to check that footage - our first mission had been a disaster. Between us immediately losing Chapman while we were morphing in my vehicle and everyone but me having been stranded on the roof due to stupid oversight, we wanted to go over the plan in more detail.

“You’re sure the explosives are the best way to go?” Marco asked.

“Yeah,” Rachel said. “Can’t we just pump a gallon of bleach into the system?”

<Sodium hypochlorite would be more than adequately toxic, but the tanks are heavily monitored for optimum conditions. Any substance that impacts the habitability of the Yeerk pool will be rapidly detected. And each tank would have to be individually contaminated. The Kandrona is easily the most vulnerable.>

“Okay,” I said. “What exactly is this Kandrona you keep talking about?”

<You understand that your plants are photosynthetic, and in some biomes, this planet has organisms that are chemosynthetic, correct?>

“Yes,” Cassie said. “There are whole ecosystems in the deep sea that derive all their energy from volcanic activity rather than the sun. We didn’t even know those species existed till a few decades ago.”

Elfangor nodded. <Yeerks are radiosynthetic. They derive all their biological energy from neutron emissions from their unusual sun.>

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Marco, you’re the science buff. Do you know what he means?”

“I’m not sure. You mean Yeerks essentially eat radiation?”

<That is an oversimplification, but not inaccurate. We had assumed for a long time that the Yeerk homeworld was uninhabitable. But the biomass of their planet had apparently evolved to use the energy of neutron emissions. The Kandrona is a device that mimics the radiation of their home sun. Without it, Yeerks could not survive offworld.>

“Okay, so that means they’re irradiating the tanks, right?” Rachel asked.

<Correct.>
“So you’re not even aiming for the Yeerks with this bomb, are you?” Cassie asked. “You’re just aiming for the power station.”

“No, the Kandrona device itself must necessarily be contained, as prolonged exposure to humans or other hosts would eventually be fatal. Determining the location of the Kandrona itself would be another mission. But disrupting the feed lines to the tanks would still be disruptive to the Yeerks.”

Great, so on top of the brain-stealing, the alien slugs and their armies of alien monsters, there was a radioactive hazard under San Jose. That was very disconcerting.

“Well how big a bomb are we talking about?” Tobias asked.

Elfangor picked up a small stone from the ground. It was about the size of my key fob. “At this approximate size, with the materials I have at my disposal, I could make between twelve and sixteen explosives. Placed correctly, each device could incapacitate several tanks.”

“You mean we can’t take out all the tanks?” Rachel asked.

“No, and even if I prepared the largest explosive possible, I doubt we would achieve the damage I had first assumed. The base is simply larger and more sectional in design than I had anticipated.”

“Okay,” I said, “how do we get the explosives into the base? That lizard morph is good at getting in, but it would struggle to carry a bomb even that size.”

It was Rachel that had the answer for that one. “Why not just morph Chapman and walk in?”

We all stared at her for a long minute.

“I don’t know,” Cassie said. “Morphing another person seems like it might be a little...wrong?”

“How do figure?” Tobias asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, I guess it’s the ultimate form of identity theft, isn’t it? It just seems a bit… dubious to me.”

“Oh, you’ve gotta be kidding me, Cass,” Marco started. But I cut him off.

“Oh, I can respect that, Cassie. But I think without another alternative, this is what we have to work with.”

She didn’t seem to like that answer, but she nodded.

“We’re going to have to steal that security card,” Marco noted.

“Yeah, but if he realizes it’s gone, isn’t he going to call someone?” Tobias pointed out.

“What if we grab it when he gets back from the pool Thursday?” Rachel proposed.

Thursday? Yeah, that’s right. He went to the pool on Monday, so Tuesday and Wednesday he’d be home, and back to the pool again Thursday. I realized how much of a pain in the ass it must be for the Yeerk in Chapman’s head to have to commute so often. It occurred to me that for most of Chapman’s day, the Yeerk had to keep up pretenses. Chapman was a pretty important person in certain circles, what with his job at the school for at least eight hours a day, not to mention the normal banalities of existence. Even Yeerks have to go grocery shopping, do laundry, mow the yard. But then again, I had to assume that the Yeerk probably had little interest in watching TV or shit like that. All the slug’s free time would have to be spent on its invasion plan. For all the
seventy-two hours the slug had Chapman, between work, sleep, and other engagements, I wondered if the Yeerk got more than twelve or fifteen hours of work out of him.

That's not really high efficiency. Suddenly all those office types in the pool made more sense. I wondered if --

“Jake!” Rachel snapped.

“Yeah, sorry, lost in thought for a moment.”

“I said I can probably set up a study night with Melissa for Thursday. I need the math tutoring anyway and I could get the card when Chapman gets home.”

“Okay, so what was your question?”

She rolled her eyes. “If you swing by to pick me up, maybe you could shake his hand or something?”

I blinked at her. “What, why? Why do I have to do all the morphing here? I just turned into Elfangor like a second ago. Can't you do it?”

She stared at me with level eyes. “As a girl, I have some serious qualms with morphing a middle-aged man.”

I tried not to laugh. She just didn't want to go through the gender swap. Not that I could blame her. I wouldn't be keen on that either.

“Fine, but two conditions. One, I want Marco and Tobias with me when we swing by to get you. Increase our odds that one of us boys is able to acquire him.”

She nodded. “And the second?”

“I want you to try to acquire Mrs. Chapman.”

“What, why?”

“Think about it. You said Melissa felt both parents were acting weird. So if her mom is a Controller too, having her as a morph wouldn't hurt.”

“Oh, but I'm going to need you for something else, too.”

I nodded. “I can take Jordan and Sara. Cassie, do you think you should be in on the study date?”

“I suppose I could, unless you want me to hang out with you and your cousins.”

“Probably the Boardwalk if you're okay babysitting for free.”

“I don’t think I’d mind helping you babysit. Ice cream, funnel cake, some rides. Sounds like fun.”

I laughed. “It’ll probably be up to Jordan and Sara. Okay, so if I’m Chapman, and assuming I remember the code as well as I think I do, once I have the card, I should be good to get all of you in the facility. Elfangor, do you know enough about Yeerk protocols and whatnot for me to fudge our way in on a night Chapman’s not supposed to be there?”

<I think I can turn my communications array to pick up Yeerk transmissions. I should be able to glean enough to make a plausible excuse.>
“Right, but once we actually get into the tank room, we’re going to have to demorph to plant the bombs,” I said.

“You said there’s minimal staff, right?” Marco asked. “We’re going to have to take them out.”

“There were only two or three people doing the intake,” I said, “but there were more working the tank systems.”

“We’re going to have a fight on our hands, aren’t we?” Tobias asked.

We all went silent. I think all of us were hoping Elfangor could plan this in such a way that we didn’t come to that.

“Is it weird that we were all fine turning into birds but I’m having serious concerns about maybe having to steal my uncle’s gun?” Tobias asked.

“Your uncle has a gun?” Rachel asked.

Tobias just shrugged. “I don’t live in a great part of town.”

Everyone was quiet for a minute. Tobias was right, we were comfortable morphing birds. Okay, comfortable would be a stretch, but we were willing and able to do it. But guns were still a huge leap and it just felt like a shock that Tobias would bring that up. Or that it would feel so organically relevant. Up to this point, we hadn’t needed to hurt anyone. I’d butted heads with Elfangor over human casualties, but now I saw what he meant. We might have to kill everyone in that room to save the other hosts. Ideally, I would rather not have to do that, obviously. But we didn’t have any real weapons here. None except...

“What about the zoo?” I asked.

“The zoo?” Rachel said. “You mean to acquire…battle morphs?”

Marco nodded appreciatively. “Better than one gun I guess. Besides, I can’t really picture T here with teardrop tattoos.”

“We’re going to have to bring Jordan and Sara, then,” Rachel said.

I nodded. “That’s fine. We’ll just have to split up. Everyone okay with another trip north tomorrow?”

We seemed to agree on that and a little back and forth later, finally our little meeting came to a close. We somehow managed to get back to Cassie’s barn before either of her parents got home, and Tobias, Marco, and Rachel all piled into my SUV.

“Seriously, your uncle has a gun?” Rachel asked again.

“Yeah, Rachel,” he said, sounding tired. “My uncle isn’t a nice person.”

I saw her face in the rearview mirror. Rachel is a very tough person. She played a full game of lacrosse on a broken toe, which is both badass and ludicrously stupid. To the tune of her coach benched her for a game when she’d found out about it after. But Rachel was the kind of person that lived life to the bone, as our grandfather would say. I don’t think I’d ever seen her make that kind of face before, though. I suddenly very much wanted to shove Tobias’s uncle out of his third-storey apartment window, and Rachel’s reaction told me I wasn’t alone there.
I dropped my friends off at their various places. I got home, said hi to my parents. My dad asked how Cassie was, told me to get on my homework. Tom was working on some kind of project in his room. He’d been getting into computer programming the last few years, and apparently he was trying out some coding or whatever. I didn’t really have the head for that kind of stuff, though Marco and Tom occasionally shared their tech notes.

I just sat in my room, sunk into my chair, and spaced the fuck out.

When I’d hit Braden, I hadn’t been really trying to hurt him, if that makes any sense. I totally meant to hit him. But I wanted him to leave Tobias alone. I didn’t want to hit him for the sake of hurting him. I didn’t spend my free time wishing I could hit people. It occurred to me that Tobias probably did. He had a different relationship with violence than I did.

This was easily the weirdest part about my life after meeting Elfangor. There was Andalite time and there was human time. We’d spend hours talking about these little alien assault missions, talking to the stranded Andalite soldier like it was no big thing, only to break up, go home, do homework, and deal with our separate family shit.

I heard my mom call us down for dinner and quickly glanced at the clock on the nightstand. I’d sat in that haze for more than half an hour. I’d still have homework to do after dinner, and I didn’t really want to do anything. I wasn’t even really that hungry. But I got up and headed downstairs anyway.

“You okay, Jake?” my mom asked. The downside of having a therapist for a mother is that she’s really good at noticing changes in my mood, and that wasn’t going to be good in the long run. But this time, it worked in my favor.

“I don’t know, I think I’m just stressed. Finals are coming up, and if I’m being honest, I think the reality of Tom graduation is finally dawning on me.”

Tom looked up from his plate and laughed. “You need some big brother time before I head off to campus, huh?”

I smiled. “That’s not a bad idea. But more like it just clicked to me that I only have two years left before I’m going to college too and I just… I don’t know.”

Mom laughed. “Yeah, life sneaks up at you. First job, first girlfriend, last two years of high school. God, your father and I will have the house to ourselves for the first time in twenty years.”

My dad looked up suddenly. “Say what now?”

“I said when Jake goes to college, we’ll have the house to ourselves.”

“Cool, I’ll text the swingers’ club.”

“Stephen!” mom yelled indignantly.

“At any rate,” I said, trying to segue out of this thread, “I think I’m going to take Rachel and the brats out for some cousin time.”
The Lexington Zoological Gardens, or simply The Gardens as most of us in the area called it, was a very new zoo. California has some pretty awesome zoos. San Diego is far and away the most impressive, and I'd been there once to see the pandas.

There was the zoo in San Francisco and the Oakland Zoo wasn't bad, but San Jose didn't have it's own real zoo till a few years ago. The only zoo in San Jose had been Happy Hollow Park, and it wasn't really the same thing. It was only a very small zoo, and they didn’t have elephants or lions or other large animals. They did have a number of unusual animals, like the Madagascan fossa, the red panda, a giant anteater, not to mention the reptiles and birds, but it wasn’t the kind of zoo that expected thousands of visitors per day. For a city the size of San Jose, it really made it feel smaller than it was.

So it was that the Lexington Zoological Gardens came to be.

The Lexington Reservoir was an artificial lake that formed due to the two-hundred foot dam built on Los Gatos Creek, and the area surrounding the lake was all part of the Lexington Reservoir County Park. Add in a few motivated millionaires from Silicon Valley, some state funds, and some help from the Association of Zoos & Aquariums, and you end up with the Gardens.

It was a very unique zoo. For one thing, it had some parts set up like a county fair. It's not like it had a roller coaster, though I’ve heard that might be in the works. It had something of a carnival thoroughfare on one end, with bumper cars, a Ferris wheel, a version of a teacup ride, the petting zoo with goats and llamas, face painting booth, and so on, before you got to the actual zoo part. The zoo was segmented into regions. The North America area had wolves, bison, pronghorn, foxes, grizzlies, and polar bears, and a wetland exhibit. The South America area held the jaguars, monkey house, anaconda and reptile exhibits, and a giant anteater. The Asia area had the tigers, a snow leopard, tapirs, another monkey house, and the saltwater crocodile.

Then, of course, was the African area. This was the largest area of the zoo, and it held the lions, the hyenas, elephants, giraffes, zebra, rhinos, ostriches, and hippos. And there was an indoor-outdoor facility for the gorillas and other primates.

We’d gone from not having a zoo in the immediate area to having one of the largest zoos in the country in just a few years.

And Jordan and Sara loved it.

“Is the meerkat exhibit open yet?” Jordan asked. My cousins were very obviously siblings, and both shared the same blonde hair and blue eyes. Jordan and Sara were both a darker blonde than Rachel, closer to Tobias's hair color, taking more after my Uncle Dan than my Aunt Nicole. Jordan was ten, and was about to finish fourth grade, and Sara, at seven, was about to wrap up first.

“I’m not sure, Jordie,” I said, using my nickname for her. “I didn't think to check. We’ll find out in a few minutes.”

One of the odd glitches to the Gardens’ rapid implementation was that parts of it were still under construction. The zoo had considerable land available for expansion, either for new rides or new animal enclosures, and apparently meerkats were being added to the African area. There had been rumors since the zoo opened that eventually they were going to add kangaroos and koalas to a future Australia section. I had no idea if that was true or not, but of all things I really hoped they added a platypus exhibit.

I just think they're cool, okay.
There were seven of us in my SUV when I parked. The five of us plus Jordan and Sara. The plan was honestly not that good. We couldn’t very well acquire any of the animals while the zoo was open to the public, and the zoo didn’t close till six. We were actually here to animal shop. We were going to look at everything we could, figure out what would be the best options, and then go home like everything was fine. Then later tonight, morph ravens, fly back, and acquire all the animals we could.

It was not our favorite option, but even if we had pushed back the plan and skipped Thursday in favor of Sunday, there was no way we were going to be able to acquire exotic animals without breaking in after hours.

School had been a pain as always, and all of us had actually piled into my SUV to do homework as we waited in front of the middle school to pick up Jordan and then to the elementary school to get Sara. Rachel had thought it would be extra super fun for everyone to surprise her sisters with the zoo trip. She mitigated their excitement by making them do homework in the backseat, all three sisters together in the third row, during the half-hour drive up Highway 17.

But anyway, there we were. Cassie had a family membership for the zoo, so it was free for us to get in. The rides don’t count for the membership, though, and I had to promise Jordan and Sara we’d come back another time for the thoroughfare. It took cotton candy to sell them on it, though.

The Andalite mission ended up taking a backseat, honestly.

We ended up just being a bunch of unsupervised teenagers at the zoo, and apparently the made up excuse I’d given to my mom last night had been a bit more prophetic than I’d anticipated. Or more likely I’m a really shitty liar and subconsciously knew I needed to unwind.

We hit the North American section first for no particular reason. We made our way past the Great Plains exhibit - an open space enclosure that housed the bison, elk, and pronghorn. This was one of the largest enclosures in the zoo, rivaled only by the African Savannah enclosure that housed the zebras, ostriches, rhinos, and wildebeest.

Jordan and Sara were just blown away by the fact that Cassie and I were dating, and they asked us non-stop questions about whether we were getting married after high school, if Cassie and I were “doing it” already, and how many kids we were going to have.

“This is why I can’t have a boyfriend,” Rachel said.

I was about to feed them to the grizzly bears. I was already doing the math, judging the distance I’d need to clear from the barrier versus Jordan’s estimated weight... It’d be tough, but I was pretty sure I could throw her over the edge. But Cassie saved them.

“Girls, we’ve only been dating a few days, and this is actually one of our first times out together. Think you can reign in the questions and behave?”

It worked.

“Your ability to manipulate small children never ceases to amaze me, Cass,” Marco said.

“It works on bigger kids, too,” she said with a knowing smile.

“Hey!”

“I’m so glad you and my foster son are bonding,” I said. She winked at me.
We ended up marking down two animals from the North American area. Rachel took a shine to the grizzly bear, and Cassie ended up being rather enamored of the wolves.

“We have a wolf back home,” she said. “When Dad brought her in, we didn’t think she’d make it. But wolves are tenacious. They’re fighters, through and through.”

“I didn’t think you were a huge fan of fighting.” I watched Jordan and Sara chase after Marco and Tobias while Rachel recorded them on her phone.

She gave me a sad smile. “I’m not. I don’t like violence. But I believe somethings are worth fighting for. And I believe in this.”

“I’m… I’m sorry I dragged you into this.”

“I thought I dragged you into this. I recall saving an alien in a field over the weekend.”

“True, true. I wasn’t trying to discount that. I meant about the mission. When he fell out of the ship, I wanted to help him because he was dying. I didn’t put any more thought to it than that. But this…”

“This is deliberate. I know.”

“Do you think the others would have touched the cube if I hadn’t done it first?”

“I can’t speak for everyone. Hell, I can’t even speak for myself when it comes to hypotheticals. I mean, who knows, right? But you going first, that helped me be less afraid.”

I bent down and kissed her on the cheek.

The South America section didn't really offer much. The jaguar was hiding, as per usual, the anteater would be useless in combat, and the anaconda could be deadly in the right circumstances but the giant constrictor wasn't built for speed. Neither was the caiman. But Jordan and Sara absolutely loved the Amazon river otters.

I looked at Rachel and my cousins as she made funny faces with them, as they followed her lead. Her sisters loved her. There was a fun silliness to Rachel she just never let out, for some reason. I smiled despite myself.

Yeah, alien mission or not we needed this. I knew deep down on a level I was afraid to say out loud that I was probably going to die tomorrow. At sixteen, I’d never thought of my own mortality before. I wear my seatbelt, stuff like that, but being young, you're always in an oblivious bubble of how things really are or how things really work.

I turned on the radio. Of all things, it was Fall Out Boy’s *Sugar We're Going Down*. I always liked that song. It was a little ahead of my time, I guess. I'd been maybe eight years old or so, I don't remember exactly, the first time I'd heard it. What I do remember was my dad liking the song when it came on the radio. My dad don’t have a huge intersection of shared interests, and he and I liking the same song was something that just stuck with me. He seemed amused that I liked it. At the time, I just found the music pleasant, and my dad knew I didn't have the real capacity to explain why I liked it. So I asked him why he liked it. He told me the reasons he liked it wouldn't make sense to me then, and the moment was lost.

But then awhile ago, maybe two or three weeks before we had met Elfangor, I was watching a YouTube video that happened to be set to that song. And I remembered that moment from years ago, so I found my dad and asked him again.
He said the song was deliciously bittersweet in a way that most poetry only wishes it could be. The song, on face value, was about a boy that liked a girl who ultimately ends up with some other guy. But that wasn't what the song was really about at all. The song is a celebration of all the moments where life just doesn't work out the way you expect it to. Down, down, in an earlier round… At some point, everyone takes a metaphorical right hook to the jaw that we never see coming. And the part that my dad loved about that song was that the band treated that realization like it was the best part of life.

And when I looked at Marco and Tobias, hanging out, being buds, showing off for Rachel and her sisters, my three cousins tasting a good day in all it could be, and Cassie's awkwardly amused smile as I squeezed her hand, I understood what my dad heard when he listened to that song.

I knew we were probably having our last real day. I knew this might be the last time Jordan and Sara saw their sister.

Down, down, in an earlier round…

But just because life is going to punch you in the face doesn't mean you give up. And the smiles I saw on my friends’ and cousins’ faces were definitely worth a hit to the face.

I was still scared.

But I was going down swinging.

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
It didn't take long for the innocent part of the trip to come to a close. The zoo ended up being a lot of fun, don't get me wrong. Sara got her face painted like a jaguar, though Jordan said she was too old for it. But the meerkat exhibit was open to the public after all, and Jordan was beyond thrilled.

It wasn't an outing completely devoid of responsibility. Rachel said she was responsible for feeding her sisters for the night - her mom usually had leftovers in the fridge or money for delivery - and I had to be home by seven, as per the standing agreement with my parents concerning driving privileges on school nights. Pretzel dogs and Dairy Queen Blizzards at the zoo makes for a pretty damn good evening, honestly.

We all got some good morph ideas, though the pragmatics of watching a zoo animal during the day versus actually being able to touch it at night weren't getting any clearer, and knowing we were going to have to wing it wasn't doing anything for my nerves. The realization we were going to have to split up during a night mission crept into my thoughts as we headed back to my SUV.

The drive back was okay, but all of us were subdued in some kind of unspoken way. I wondered if Jordan and Sara picked up on any of it. They didn't seem to notice that Rachel was being quieter than usual, or that she was taking her time looking at them while they worked on the rest of their homework. She was their big sister, and she tried to protect them from shit. She was protecting them now. From an alien invasion, no less. We knew we couldn't stop it, not really. And she couldn't tell them anything.

She couldn't even tell them good-bye.

Cassie sat next to me in the passenger seat, Marco sitting in the center row with Tobias. She was looking out the window, watching the trees go by, the sun low in the wooded hills. “It's beautiful,” she said.

I could only nod.

I didn't know what to feel. I never gave much thought to how I would die. But looking at Cassie, Marco, Tobias, and my three cousins… I didn't feel scared. Sad, yes. Nervous, oh hell yes. But I felt a peace, too. If we were all going down, we were all going out together. And really, when you think about it, what else can you ask for on your way out?

We'd had fun, all of us. But that was over in a heartbeat, it seemed.

It was a quiet evening at home after I dropped everyone off. I played Xbox with Tom, nothing
really significant, but it was cool all the same. I missed hanging out with my brother and if this was
going to be my last night home, I was glad we had that. Mom and Dad had gone out with friends
for their cards night or whatever the hell adults did without kids. I had a hard time picturing my
mom throwing back drinks at the club or anything, but I was glad they weren’t home. I don’t think
I could’ve dealt with seeing my parents.

Tomorrow was going to be the real end game. Once Rachel had Chapman’s key card and I shook
Chapman’s hand, we would be on our last mission. It would either work or it wouldn’t, and there
was no guarantee any of us would come back.

But the trip back to The Gardens wasn't insignificant.

It was just after ten when I opened my window and flew out into the night. It wasn't long before I
found other ravens heading north. There was a little glitch when I realized there were only three of
us, and for a second I was worried - or maybe even optimistic - that one of us had bailed. But it
turned out that Tobias had simply left earlier than the rest of us.

Made sense, I guess. He was the only one of us that didn’t have someone waiting on him at home.
Marco might not have had the best home life after his mother’s passing, but he did still have his
dad, in whatever capacity.

It was only a twenty-minute flight to The Gardens as the raven flies. And sure enough, Tobias was
waiting for us, perched atop the main entrance gate.

<How long have you been waiting?> I asked.

<Not long. Maybe ten minutes.>

<Well might as well get to it. We’re going to have to split up. Marco and I will head down to the
African and Asian sections. Tobias, you stay with Rachel and Cassie. We’ll meet back at the Dairy
Queen by the giraffes.>

I had no idea what Tobias was going to pick. I knew Rachel wanted the grizzly, Cassie wanted the
wolf, Marco had settled on the silverback gorilla, and I had chosen the tiger. That was the shopping
list. Actually getting through here and checking out, that was going to be the real challenge.

We stayed in our raven morphs, and not for the first time, I wished we had acquired an owl for
night flying. We really did suck at the planning stages. But while I couldn't speak for the others, I
had no intention of demorphing if I I could avoid it. Walking around the zoo at night, in gym
clothes, after hours, was not my idea of a good time.

I could hear the lions actually. Not surprising, I guess. Half the zoo was nocturnal. But if you've
never heard lions in the distance in the dark, it's not what I’d count as a positive omen.

It was quiet, and it was dark, but there were some dim floodlights on the footpaths below. The
towers of the sky tram stood to my immediate left like silent sentinels, the shadows of the hanging
tram cars waved an undulating darkness as they swayed in the night breeze. It just felt creepy. But
Cassie had told all of us that there most definitely was staff here and night security. Like I said, a
lot of the animals were nocturnal, and the zoo had a solid night shift to handle the animal care that
can’t go on during operating hours.

There were people cutting up fruits, vegetables, fish, and assorted animal caracasses. Feeding lions,
hyenas, bears, tigers, leopards, and so on involved a lot of meat, and it was a horror show behind
the curtain. The herbivores weren’t any easier. It takes an astonishing amount of fresh fruit and
greens to take care of two monkey houses, add in literal tons of hay for the rhinos, hippos, bison, and elephants, and the grocery bill for any large zoo is ridiculous. Cassie said this place wouldn’t be too busy till about four in the morning when they had to be ready to receive deliveries, but obviously we weren’t planning to stay that late. Nonetheless, the zoo was apparently never completely empty. Some of the enclosures were cleaned overnight, too, so she told us to be aware that enclosure lights could come on at any time.

<You as creeped out by this place at night as I am?> Marco asked.

<Oh, hell yes,> I said.

<Well, let’s hurry up and get to the primate house.>

The zoo had mandrills, chimpanzees, and mountain gorillas. Each had a separate outdoor enclosure during the day, but each enclosure led into a different floor of the primate building, where they could be kept indoors at night or whenever the weather wasn’t suitable.

The gorillas were conveniently located on the third floor.

We saw the illuminated cones of flashlights below, and I had to take the mental equivalent of a deep breath.

<Well,> Marco said,<there's some of that night security Cassie mentioned.>

<Yeah,> I said stoically. Thanks for that, bro. Really helps. The primate house was on view now, so I opted to change the subject. <How do you want to get in here?> I asked.

<You're asking me?>

<I value your opinion,> I said, patronizing.

<We could see if any of the windows are open,> he said after a minute. <Maybe try raccoon mode and try the vents if windows are a bust?>

He didn't have to say the last part. If we couldn't fly through a window or crawl through a vent, that left only the staff entrance. My lizard was small enough to get through a locked door if it came to that, but I was really hoping it didn't.

Of course it did, though.

None of the windows were open, which wasn't a surprise. And the ventilation on the roof turned out to be inaccessible. We demorphed on the roof and gave it our all, but without tools, there was no getting in.

“Jake?”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm on it. Go to raccoon and follow me down. Give me a wide berth, though. I don't want the lizard instincts going through the roof.”

I felt the ground rush up at me as I shrank, the bizarre itching cascade sensation as my skin transitioned into pebbled scales, and the uncomfortable sensation of my tail shooting out behind me. My limbs shriveled and suddenly the night became a little clearer as my lizard vision replaced human eyesight. Depth perception was still a bit wonky in lizard mode, but the reptile eye was better in the dark than the raven had been.
Marco was finishing the last changes to raccoon and I moved my lizard butt into gear and down over the side wall. As I expected, the lizard brain wasn’t happy about the raccoon behind me. I stopped at the nearest window to see if I could squeeze in at all, but no luck. No surprise really. What was surprising, though, was that I quickly find out that the staff door was actually too snug-fitting to its frame for my lizard body to squeeze through.

<Now what?> Marco asked.

I cursed inwardly. <Let me think,> I said. <I guess back up to the roof and lizard my way through the vent we can’t open.>

Marco didn’t answer. His adorable raccoon face was looking at the side wall around the corner. <I think there’s a vent over there,> he said. <Wanna give it a shot?>

<Why not?>

I went up the wall and across the brick façade while Marco stayed on the ground in the bushes. How did I end up here again? I really was hoping there were no spiders in this vent. The vent was dark, slightly warm, and offered adequate protection from the raccoon, all of which the lizard liked. I was less thrilled by far, but at least there were no bugs. Actually, the vent seemed to be rather dusty or something. There was an oddly familiar taste to the air, something I could probably have figured out if I had been human, but that only registered as the unhelpful ‘not food’ to the lizard instincts.

Suddenly, I was falling. The floor had given out below me and I tumbled end over end for what felt like forever. It must have only been a few feet at most, but to my relative size, that was impressive. The vent had transitioned to a vertical cylindrical section, and I wasn’t able to go up easily. I ended up moving through an elbow joint and then found some kind of steel mesh barrier. It felt fuzzy and weird, and I realized I was trapped.

I panicked.

My lizard body thrashed against the mesh, and I felt the screen brush against my scales. The screen moved. It wasn’t a very strong screen, whatever it was, and it seemed to move easily. I asserted my human mind over the panicking lizard instincts and pushed against the screen. It took some effort and a few minutes, but I got the screen to move till finally I found a gap I could get through.

The second I pushed past the screen, I immediately fell again. This time, I landed on something soft. I crawled through what seemed to be a deflated tent. What in the hell kind of vent was this? I moved through the fabric nightmare, and found a plastic wall blocking my path.

I would have laughed if I could.

It dawned on me immediately that I had just crawled through the dryer exhaust vent of a staff laundry room. I was in a goddamned dryer. The smell in the ductwork had been fabric softener or dryer sheets, and the flimsy steel screen had been a lint trap. And to add to my humiliating trials, I discovered that my tiny little lizard body wasn’t strong enough or heavy enough to open the dryer door.

I doubted the dryer was big enough for my human form. It might have been. It was the larger type of industrial machine they use in hospitals, I think. But I had no real choice in the matter. I was fairly confident that my expanding human mass would be enough to push the dryer door open.

The drum of the dryer seemed to get smaller and smaller as I grew increasingly larger. I felt my
shoulder press against the round plastic door of the dryer. I was maybe half-way between human
and lizard. My skin was lightly pebbled, but in between the scales, my normal human hairs had
grown through. I was maybe forty pounds, toddler sized. But the door didn’t open. I wondered how
long I could stay between morphs. Half human and half reptile, I had no idea how the Andalite
technology kept me alive with internal organs that couldn’t possibly be at all viable. I focused on
human and kept growing.

Finally, about three-quarters to human, the dryer door popped open. I moved indelicately and
awkwardly through the round door and stood on completely human legs. I felt the last few changes
as the last remnants of reptile DNA cleared my system, and I took a deep breath.

I doubted the whole thing took more than ten minutes, but it felt like hours.

The laundry room was dark, and it took a minute to find the door. I opened it slightly and looked
out into the hallway. There were dim amber safety lights spaced along the wall, but the fluorescent
overhead lights were off. It was a little reassuring that there were no obvious signs of zoo staff as I
stepped out into the corridor.

Before I did anything else, I had to let Marco in, so I went down to my left and opened the door.
Marco must have thought I was zoo staff, because I didn’t see him anywhere. “Marco!” I
whispered, loud as I dare.

For a minute, nothing happened. Then, comically, like I was letting the cat in or something, the
raccoon waddled into the hallway.

A few minutes later, he was back to human. I really hoped the zoo didn’t have security cameras.

“Sooner you get this over with, the better,” I said.

“Like I want to hang around longer than I have to.”

I don’t know what I expected the back rooms of a zoo. Maybe I thought there would be all kinds of
monkey noises or something. The design of the building was more aesthetically pleasing on the
exterior, but the interior was very utilitarian. The bare cinder block walls had been painted a light
cream yellow, there were exposed pipes and ductwork along the wall and ceiling. Really, it just felt
like the school basement. The staff room had a little break area with a coffee machine, we walked
passed a kitchen area with no fewer than three refrigerators and a food prep table. There were staff
lockers, towel racks, a row of boots, white boards with all kinds of animal notes and schedules. I
had to wonder what a day working at the primate house would be like.

At the far end of the corridor, we came to a landing. We could either go to the mandrill area or up
the stairs to the other primates. And we weren’t there for the mandrills.

I was a few stairs up when I realized Marco wasn’t behind me.

“Marco?” I whispered, still worried someone was going to hear us.

“One sec,” he said, and went back down the hall.

“What the hell, man?”

He was back less than a minute later holding an apple.

“You went back for a snack?” I asked.
“Yep.”

I rolled my eyes and we rounded the stairs as fast as we dared. I took a second to catch my breath as we came to the door for the gorillas’ indoor enclosure. This was it. This zoo had six eastern lowland gorillas, a male and five females. Each of them was strong enough to kill a human before you could say Harambe. But a silverback eastern lowland gorilla is the largest gorilla - the largest living primate - in the world.

When we had been here earlier with Jordan and Sara, I read the placard on the other side of the glass. Their resident silverback, which they had named Big Jim, was over five hundred pounds. They could get up to six hundred. The placard also mentioned that gorillas are proportionately six times stronger than a human and have a bite force stronger than a great white shark.

This could go bad so easily.

“Ready?”

“Ready as I’m gonna be.”

Red light spilled out as we opened the door. It was like stepping into a dark room, really. We could smell the gorillas the second the door opened, the smell of hay and fruit. I heard a low grunt as we stepped inside.

The nighttime enclosure was essentially a very large series of concrete rooms with plexiglass windows. The first area we came to was something of a training area. It looked like the visitor center of a prison. A bunch of booths with a metal screens. Cassie told us later that they use that area for something called target training. They teach the gorillas to show ears, noses, mouths, hands, or whatever, to the staff so they can be checked for injuries or parasites, or give them medication if needed.

We came to the next area and found where they kept the gorillas overnight. It wasn't as habitat authentic as their other areas. On the other side of this wall, they had a lovely slice of climate-controlled African rainforest and outside they had a large expanse of trees, tire swings, and other toys.

This wasn't much more than a concrete room, about double the size of my living room, filled with hay and banana leaves to make something of a soft bedding area. There were a few rope hammocks hanging from a steel girder in the ceiling, a few trees or ferns in planters set in the corner, but otherwise it was just a room with concrete walls and a sliding steel door.

And all of them were asleep. I could see okay in the red light, but the pile of sleeping gorillas looked like just a huge mass of black fur. It was hard to determine a single animal, save for one sleeping in one of the hanging hammocks.

There's an old adage for situations like this: *Let lie sleeping giants.*

Equally relevant, if nowhere near as poetic: *Please, do not tap on glass.*

Marco violated both.

Big Jim sat up.

My heart stopped.

“Marco, what the hell?”
Marco pointed to something like a mail slot to his left and then gestured for me to keep quiet. I wanted to scream.

In the wild, dominant males protect their harems. And Big Jim was the first gorilla to move, though not the only one to wake up. He didn't charge the glass or anything like I was worried he might do. I should've realized he was pretty used to people, even if he wasn't particularly used to people coming in at night. Gorillas are obviously incredibly smart, and Big Jim was more curious about our presence than he was threatened.

Or so I hoped.

He approached the glass slowly but surely and then sat down right at the wall.

“Here goes nothing.” I could hear the waver in Marco's voice. But he held up the apple and Big Jim suddenly was very keen on Marco. Marco very slowly opened the metal slot window and held the apple out for the gorilla.

A large, black-furred hand the size of a car battery appeared in the slot. Marco, very tentatively, touched the gorilla as he handed him the apple.

Big Jim sagged a bit on the plexiglass wall as Marco acquired his DNA, but the trance lasted no more than a few seconds. The giant hand retreated back into the slot and before he went back to his harem, I got to see those giant gorilla canines bite into that apple.

“Holy shit,” I breathed.

Marco turned slowly, and somehow managed to look incredibly pale in the red light. “Okay, let's get the fuck outta here.”

I nodded. I didn’t want to linger either. And as brave as Marco had just been touching the giant silverback, this had been the easy part.

I doubted the tiger would be as docile.

Chapter End Notes
Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
If the zoo had security cameras, we didn't see them. That said, our surveillance system on Chapman wasn't meant to be seen, either. Maybe I was being paranoid. I'm not an expert on security cameras, but unless the zoo had sprung for a really good, low-light system, I couldn't imagine two kids in black fitness apparel at night were going to be easily identifiable. Then again, I had nothing to base that on besides convenience store footage on the news and my own silent prayers that we wouldn't get arrested. These were incredibly rare apes, after all, so if the zoo wanted overnight footage, I'm sure they could find a way to put it in their budget.

In any case, Marco didn't argue with me when I told him to go back to raccoon mode.

The zoo was designed so that right after the African primates, you came to Asian primates. That’s where the orangutans, langurs, and the Japanese snow monkeys were kept. The two buildings were attached by an elevated walkway off the chimpanzee deck, so we went that way rather than out the way we'd come in. The less time we had to spend on the walkway, the less chance we'd encounter security guards.

As Marco and I navigated the next primate building and finally came out the exit, the full weight of what I was doing hit me.

I was here to touch a tiger.

This was arguably the closest living relative to a goddamned saber-tooth, and I was here to pet it.

And to any wise-ass that has the brilliant thought that this is a zoo tiger raised in captivity, I want to tell you to go fuck yourself.

I want to, but that would be hypocritical.

A quick Google search disproved this point very quickly. I read way too many stories of tigers killing zookeepers, not to mention the infamous Siegfried and Roy incident that I was too young to remember from the headlines.

There is no such thing as a tame tiger.

Tigers are one of only a handful of animals that still routinely eat people. It's easy enough for a spoiled American teenager like me to want to save them, but in the remote parts of the world where tigers live, it's way too easy to vilify them as little more than death machines. It has to be hard to wave the IUCN Red List in front of a rural population that lives in fear. There are villages in India
where people have to wear masks on the backs of the heads to deter tigers, and Bengal tigers aren’t as large as their Siberian cousins.

So those were the thoughts swirling through my brain as we scurried our little raccoon bodies further into the Asian section. We managed a pretty decent pace, too. We weren’t that much larger than a house cat but we moved fairly close to a human walking speed, and if it came to it, we could be much faster.

Raccoons do have good night vision, but not great distance vision, so in some ways, it was like having a built-in flashlight. Anything beyond my immediate area was still very dark and fuzzy, but I had better eyesight as a raccoon than I did as a lizard, so I wasn’t going to complain.

Vision wasn’t the problem. Perspective was. We were less than two feet tall, so we couldn’t see over the enclosure walls, which took away most of our mental landmarks.

<Are we past the tapirs yet?> I asked. Past the Malayan tapir, and across from the snow leopard, that’s where we needed to be.

<Far as I can tell, we’re on the same path we were on,> Marco said. <Follow the smell of popcorn.>

Ah, right, the popcorn stand outside the leopard enclosure.

Much like the gorillas, getting to the enclosure was the easy part. And much like the gorillas, the tigers were kept inside overnight. And once again, I had to switch to my lizard morph to get into the building. And as I demorphed, I noticed that, like the gorillas’ overnight enclosure, this one had the same red darkroom lights.

That was pretty much where the similarities end.

There was less concern here over habitat authenticity than there’d been at the gorillas. Just cinder block walls, straw bedding, and chainlink fencing reinforced by steel bars. Overall, it reminded me of the pen setup at Cassie’s. The zoo had four tigers, and each slept in something like a small stall. Well, smallish. Each stall was about the size of my bedroom. But for a tiger over ten feet long, it seemed on the small side. This was a place to sleep and not much else.

As I moved to open the door and let Marco in behind me, I heard it: the low, unmistakably predatory growl of one of the most dangerous animals on the planet. They knew I was there, and they weren’t happy about it. At least one of them was awake, looking at me. The glow of its eyes bored straight through me.

I could say something terribly cliché, that my blood ran cold or something, and it would be true, but it wouldn’t carry anything close to how I felt. I doubt anyone reading this will have any similar experiences with a captive Siberian tiger, but maybe you got bit by a stray dog on a paper route as a kid, maybe you ran into a bear while camping. And maybe not. I guess my point is that there’s something very primal in the back of your brain, something long forgotten by most, and something only a handful of people in the developed world ever experience: the human prey response.

I hadn’t opened the door to let Marco in yet. Rationally, I knew I needed him, knew I couldn’t do this without backup. Marco who could now become a massive gorilla if the need should arise. I tried not to think about the fact that the tiger here was at least that size, if not bigger. Or that in the wild, these tigers could kill bears bigger than any gorilla.

The gorillas had been curious that someone new was there to see them. And yeah, they could’ve
easily turned aggressive, but they didn’t start there.

The tigers did. Once the first one had seen me and started growling, the others were instantly irritated. I could hear them moving in their stalls.

I stared into those glowing eyes, petrified. Literally too scared to move.

I knew I should let Marco in.

But something more than simple fear was keeping me there. I watched the tiger as its face creased into a terrifying snarl. It growled at me again, showing teeth the size of my thumbs in the dim red light.

I was still afraid of the tiger. I would be stupid not to be. But as my adrenaline pumped, and I sat marinating in my own fight or flight instinct, the fear began to ebb. It didn’t go away, it just moved to the side. I wasn’t going to run. I couldn’t leave here until I did this. And if flight wasn’t an option, then that just left one thing.

Primitive humans killed these things. We humans are relatively frail, biologically speaking. I’m maybe a quarter of the size of a tiger. I couldn’t run fast enough to make the football team, let alone outrun a ten-foot cat. I tasted, however little or however briefly, that buried predatory instinct deep in my Neanderthal brain. That instinct that said I could kill the thing that wanted to kill me. That I shouldn’t be afraid of the tiger… the tiger should be afraid of me.

And for a second, if even that long, I knew I could do this.

Finally, I opened the door and let Marco in.

“Dude, what the hell took you-- oh, shit.”

“That’s one of the females,” I said, trying to keep my voice low and even. The second Marco was in, I’d turned back on the tiger, trying to return the stare it leveled at me. In retrospect, I have no idea if it was working, but it gave me confidence at any rate. And honestly, I think the cat lost interest when it couldn’t scare me.

That was only one of them though, and so we inched our way to the far end, past the other two females, to the last stall.

The male was pacing back and forth, snarling and growling.

The good news was that there was no way the tiger could pull me into the cage and rip my face off. But the bad news was that there was no way for me to acquire the tiger without putting my hand in through the bars. So the possibility of the tiger ripping my arm off, leaving me to die of massive blood loss was still a distinct possibility.

And, yes, before you ask, yes. I knew that I could morph away injuries. It was the first thing we’d ever seen Elfangor do with the technology. But that over looks a few key points.

One, that assumption implies morphing is easy. Well, it is and it isn’t, and while we were kinda getting the hang of it, I’d never tried it while in severe shock.

Two, whether or not I was able to regenerate a new arm or not, I think someone might notice the giant splash of human blood and whatever remains of my arm in the morning. It’s probably best for the ongoing human resistance against the Yeerk Empire that I don’t leave too much of my very identifiable human DNA around.
Three, and I don’t think it’s remotely possible to overemphasize this; I didn’t want my fucking arm ripped off by a fucking tiger.

That said, I could do fuck all to change that possibility.

I suddenly had a mental flash to me running the fire hose, desperately trying to wash the blood out of this stall while Marco, in five hundred pound gorilla morph, held this cat down for all he was worth. Despite everything, I fought back a laugh. I could feel my face pulling into a stupid smile. Goddamn it.

I put my hand through the bars. I could barely get my hand through the chain link fencing. Getting more than my wrist through was out of the question.

The tiger’s reaction was instantaneous and absolutely predictable.

It was like a car accident. Hundreds of pounds of pissed off tiger slammed into the chain link, the rattling sound surprisingly loud in the concrete room.

I bit down on the scream as the teeth penetrated my hand. My wrist was pulled through the chain link fencing in an instant, the heavy-gauge wire stripping my skin as I was pulled off balance.

The pain was excruciating, and it took every shred of self-control I had not to bellow like an elk. I could feel the powerful jaws clenching down on the bones. When my ulna snapped like a twig, I nearly fainted. I saw nothing but stars for a second. The tiger was trying to pull my arm through the fence.

Screaming was no longer my instinct. I felt the blood drain from my face, the whole zoo spun around like a carousel, and I was vaguely aware that I was leaning on the bars of the cage.

As painful as this was, the tiger was essentially just playing with me. If the tiger had wanted to rip my arm off, trust me, it would have. I was essentially crucified, one of the tiger's huge canines was pierced straight through my hand, wedged between the metacarpals. I could feel that tooth as it rubbed against the bones. I could feel the air flowing through the hole in my hand as the tiger exhaled. The oozing blood felt scalding on my freezing cold hand.

I was crying. Hot, wet tears poured down my face, my breathing tightened and I couldn't scream. I felt like I was choking. A piteous squeaking sound escaped my throat and nothing more.

All this had taken a mere ten seconds.

I looked at Marco, only distantly aware that he was there. Marco was already morphing to gorilla, the coarse black fur spreading quickly across his skin.

I exhaled, slowly, and the tiger growled.

I closed my eyes, trying to mentally divorce myself from the reality of my situation.

“Mar…” I coughed. “Marco, don’t.”

His half-gorilla face looked confused, but he backed off the morph.

Slowly, I shifted my weight against the bars, trying to get better leverage. The tiger pulled my hand just a little harder, and what flesh remained between my ring finger and pinkie separated.

My finger didn't fall off, but it hung down in a weird way.
I think I whimpered. I don't know.

I got to a point where I could put my other hand through the bars. Gingerly, and ignoring the deep growl of the tiger, a growl I could feel in the bones of my ruined hand, I touched the tiger's nose.

In retrospect, I'm reasonably sure I could've acquired the animal with my injured hand through its mouth. But I didn't have that kind of clarity then. Mentally, I just associated touching it as feeling the fur.

And as my shock-numbed fingers brushed the bristled fur of its snout, the wet nose, the cataleptic effect kicked in.

It wasn't enough for me to get my hand free of its mouth, though. There was nearly two inches of tooth through my hand, and I would've needed to physically pry the cat's jaws open to get myself free.

Luckily, while the catalepsis wasn't enough to get the tiger to drop my hand, it was more than enough to suck all the fun out of biting the human. The tiger didn't know I'd just absorbed its DNA, it just didn't want to be stunned again. So it let me go.

Relief flooded through me. I gasped in pain, and I had no sensation at all in my left hand. But it was over. I'd acquired the tiger.

I had to morph. I needed to heal, and I needed to get the fuck out of here.

I was hyperventilating against the tiger cage, waiting for the adrenaline to wear off when I heard footsteps. I whipped my head around to Marco. He heard it too. Humanity’s last defense against the alien invasion, and we were about to be taken down by the goddamn nightguard at zoo. I could feel my heartbeat in my ears.

“Raccoon.”

“What?” Marco asked.

I didn’t answer; I was already morphing.

My injured hand just slurped through the metal fencing like wet pasta as I shrunk. The brown-grey fur spread out over me, and while the red light turned grey, it was suddenly much brighter in the tiger enclosure. Marco was right behind me, finishing his morph just as the door to the tiger enclosure opened. I could smell the meat as the two overnight keepers came in.

The lights came on and I was temporarily blinded. All I could see was white, and my raccoon brain panicked. I was too wiped from my ordeal, I hadn’t put the mental effort into locking the morph’s native instincts.

“Holy shit,” I heard the one keeper, a woman, say suddenly. “Raccoons got in.” She said it like it was no big deal. Like she was complaining someone had parked in her space, or eaten her lunch out of the office fridge. Maybe this wasn’t the first time she’d caught raccoons in a zoo enclosure. Or maybe, being the keeper that fed the murder beasts, raccoons weren’t anything for her to get in a fuss over.

“I’ll get the stick, go hold the door open,” said the other keeper. It was a man, sounded older.

“Ah, damn it all, we got some blood over in the back. Put in a note for a rabies vax, will ya?”
And just like that, we were shooed out of the tiger enclosure. Getting out was the easiest part of the night. I bounded off into the dark and Marco followed.

<Let’s switch to raven and see if we can’t find the others,> I said.

We switched morphs in the bushes off the path, and once again, we were flying along the guide-wires of the sky tram. It was hard to imagine that we’d been at the zoo less than an hour. It felt like I’d lived my last two days in this place.

It took us ten minutes to find Tobias and the girls. All of them were in bird morph again, perched on the entrance arch we’d come in through at the beginning.

They’d had no problems at all, if you can believe it. Cassie, it turned out, had acquired one of the wolves in her barn, so she didn’t need to go anywhere. And Cassie knew where they kept the fish, so getting the grizzly had been easy as pie. Tobias had acquired an elephant, and much like Marco and the gorilla, it hadn’t really been concerned with their presence that much.

<So, tell us,> Rachel asked, <did you have any problems acquiring the tiger?>

The flight back home was a bit awkward, to say the least.

<Jesus, clean through his hand?> Tobias asked.

<Swear to God, man. And what does Jake do? He just winces, catches his breath, and pets the thing on the nose.>

<Marco, it’s not exactly something I’d like on my highlight reel. Could we not?>

<Jake, that sounds bad-ass,> Rachel said.

<It kinda hurt, cuz, and I’d like to not dwell on it, if you guys don’t mind.>

<Alright, brave leader,> she quipped, <what would you like to talk about?>

Okay, that was a good question. We’d had two minor-ish missions. The security camera had been easy. And while I was likely to have nightmares about being eaten alive, the zoo had at the very least been a quick thing, moreorless.

<As far as I know,> I said, <that spy camera in Chapman’s office has been recording to a cloud drive. We’ve been so busy that I haven’t had time to watch it yet. I think maybe we should go through Chapman’s footage and see if it gives us any clues.>

There was a beat of silence as they thought about that. <Okay, but what kinda clues?> Tobias asked. <We already know where the pool is.>

<I don’t know, man. Maybe we can identify other Controllers? Maybe we can figure out what the hell the aliens are doing with all these stolen bodies? There were a lot of people and aliens at the pool, and for a big as that facility was, I have to think they’re doing more than just dropping slugs into people’s heads.>

<Isn’t that bad enough?> Cassie asked.
<It’s plenty bad,> Marco answered. <But Jake makes a good point. Elfangor said they’d been on Earth for a long time by now, and I’m curious what the Yeerks are trying to do that they need so many people.>

<Look, guys,> Rachel said, <We’re trashing the pool tomorrow, so I don’t think it really matters what those brain slugs have been up to. Let’s get home, get some sleep, and we’ll have all of this behind us before we know it.>

All of this behind us...

<Don’t forget, Rachel,> Cassie said, <Elfangor said we’re probably not taking out the whole pool. Some of the Yeerks are still going to be here.>

<Am I the only one that remembers Elfangor talking about a giant pool ship?> Marco asked. <There are more of these Yeerks up there in orbit right now, guys.>

<Yeah, true. There’s that,> Rachel said.

<If we’re lucky, the ones that survive will be too busy with damage repair for a long time coming.> I said. <After we blow up the pool, though, we have to then figure out our deep sea rescue mission to get Elfangor’s brother.>

<And there could be other survivors we don’t know about,> Tobias added.

<Um, hey,> Marco said. <Just a random thought I should have had awhile ago: if we destroy the pool tomorrow, what happens to Elfangor? Does he have a way to phone home, or does Uber offer new services I’m not aware of?>

<We can ask those kind of questions all night,> Tobias said. <It’s not gonna get us anywhere.>

<He’s right,> I said. <Look, we all brought up some good points, but I think Rachel’s the closest to the mark right now. We all need to get home and sleep. I think I can watch some of that security footage after school before I pick Rachel up from Melissa’s. And it might not be a terrible idea for us to go to the woods tomorrow after school and practice a bit with these battle morphs.>

<Oh, who could pass up morph training in the woods?> Marco asked. <I gotta tell you, I’m a bit eager to try out the Kong morph.>


<Yeah, yeah. Sue me, I can’t help it.>

<Speaking of,> Cassie said, <did you ever come up with a better team name than Animal Morphers?>

<Oh, Cassie, not you too.>

<Meh, not really. The only other name I had was just a portmanteau.>

<A what?> I asked.

<He means he blended the two words,> Tobias said. <Like how Pokémon is a portmanteau of Pocket Monsters.>

<I did not know that, cool.>
“Okay,” Rachel said, “So now that you got us all curious, what was your name?”

“Honestly, I don’t know if it’s better or not. What do you guys think of Animorphs?”

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
I woke up reluctantly. Somehow I got myself into the shower, and the cold water helped wake me up. For a few minutes, I could afford the mental break.

Unsurprisingly, I'd had nightmares again. Horrible dreams about being eaten alive, of waking up with no left hand, and somehow telling my parents I had lost it, as though my hand were no more than a set of car keys. But as much as the nightmares sucked, as much as I hated waking to cold sweat, they were better than the reality.

Because in reality, last night had actually happened. In reality, I had to go to the pool today. Such a simple euphemism. Going to the pool. Without any context, it sounded innocent and fun. Who didn't like going to the pool? But this was the nexus of insidious aliens, parasitic brain slugs. This wasn't summer fun, this could easily be the day I died, or the day my friends died. I knew I would remember this day for years, probably the rest of my life.

Assuming I survived.

I moved thoughts of my impending death to the back of my mind. And with great mental effort, I stopped staring at my left hand. How I did it, I have no idea, but I did it. What was weird was that the scar I had from falling off my bike in fifth grade was still there behind the knuckle of my middle finger, the familiar gossamer white half-moon scar. It had come back like nothing had happened at all. I knew the Escafil technology could repair injuries - there was not any indication whatsoever that a two- or three-inch fang had pierced through the bones of my hand last night - but it didn't fix that old scar. Hmm, questions for Elfangor I guess.

I got dressed, brushed my teeth, and found Tom in the kitchen making coffee.

“Y’know, squirt, when I move out, you're gonna have to make your own coffee.”

“You mean I can finally switch to French roast?”

He scoffed. “My dark roast too strong for ittle Jakey?”

I rolled my eyes. “You know the darker the roast, the less caffeine, right?”

He apparently didn't know that. “No way, stronger coffee, more caffeine.”

“Wrong. The roasting process breaks down the caffeine somehow. The dark roast tastes better, but you should really switch to a lighter roast for morning java.”
“Thanks, squirt, I'll keep that in mind.”

Tom drove us to school like always and tossed me the keys, just like the last however many days we'd done this. Tom, the basketball star of our school, the volunteer, my brother. I hoped he had a good life. He smiled at me as he left to catch up with his friends and I went to find mine.

I wondered again if that wasn't the last time I would ever see him.

And yes, smart-asses, I am alive to be writing this. It's not some kind of plot device like *American Beauty* or some shit. But I didn't know then that I would survive the next twenty-four hours.

If you've never had a brush with death, you can't possibly understand how it felt. And if you've survived an accident, maybe, like falling off a ladder while cleaning the gutters as a punishment for missing curfew (as a general, nonspecific example, not at all a personal experience...), then you know that momentary phase where you know you could have died. The second as you fall from that ladder, as you see the ground rush up at you, wondering if you haven't just made the worst, dumbest decision of your life. And you're happy you only came up with a wrist fracture because you know you were an inch from hitting your head on a rock.

My whole day was falling off that ladder, wondering if the impact would kill me. And we would come up worse than just a wrist fracture.

Somehow, what with the lingering uncertain spectre of death following me around school, I had trouble concentrating on school.

Lunch was easier. I found my friends at the same table as yesterday.

“How are you guys holding up?” I asked, stupidly.

“Surprisingly well, actually,” Marco said.

“Oh?”

“We're taking bets,” Tobias said.

“Oh, Christ, this should be good.” Meh, maybe it would be. Distraction, I sorely needed.

“After the bombs go off, will they report it as an earthquake or an act terrorism?” Marco asked.

I rolled my eyes but smiled all the same. “Is this a real-money bet or idle bullshit?”

“Definitely bullshit,” Rachel said. “You and Marco are the only ones that even have real money.”

“Fine, I said, taking a bite of cafeteria pizza. “I think it will be an earthquake, probably.”

Marco looked surprised. “I was thinking terrorism. They'd want security footage, witnesses, new security at the airport, that whole shebang.”

I nodded. “Good points. But it misses the mark.”

“Okay, how so?” Tobias asked.

I looked around. “Is Melissa joining us today?”

Rachel shook her head. “No, she’s over there with her eco-teen club friends. We’re free to talk.”
“It misses the mark because you’re assuming they’re going to look for perpetrators. Like Elfangor said, we can’t look at it from a human perspective. They won’t care about suspicious characters because they’ll just assume it was Andalites in human morphs. Their primary concern would be maintaining anonymity, right? Think about it. How many Controllers will be at the airport? How many that are there when they said they were somewhere else? Terrorism brings in national news, Homeland Security, and all the fine-toothed combs the government can send. The Yeerks don't want any of that. They don't want military explosive analysts discovering existence of a massive underground facility, right?”

“Okay, I'm convinced.”

“Plus,” I added, “hiring on a giant construction crew to install earthquake countermeasures would allow them a decent backdoor, don't you think? Hundreds of people coming and going from the airport foundations?”

Marco nodded. “Makes sense. I wonder, with that giant facility down there unnoticed, if they don't have Yeerks in every geologist or seismologist in the state.”

“Probably,” Rachel said. “They have ships in orbit that aren't being spotted on radar. I have to guess NASA and the Air Force are compromised.”

“Unless, of course,” Marco said, “their ships just have that kind of stealth tech.”

Cassie shrugged. “Some scientist comes on talking about space debris or some radar technician logging a glitch and no one would question it. Human nature to assume simpler explanations, as long as they look legitimate and can be voices of authority in the right areas.”

We all nodded. The logic was sound and the depressing truth of the matter was that it would be almost impossible to convince anyone about a legitimate extraterrestrial threat, a challenge exacerbated by the fact that anyone in a likely position to verify the threat was likely already compromised. We would all sound tinfoil crazy if we tried to get any of this information out, that was for damn sure.

“So,” Tobias said, thankfully moving the conversation in a new direction, “have you been able to check any of that footage yet?”

I shrugged. “Some. I didn’t go straight to sleep last night, but the little bit of footage I was able to check wasn’t anything useful. Only thing I could guess is that his secretary might be a Controller, too, but honestly I’d pretty much assumed that anyway.”

“Makes sense,” Marco said. “So, morphing practice behind Cassie’s this afternoon, right?”

“Right.”

The plan was a little convoluted. Phase One, Cassie and I would take Jordan and Sara out to the Boardwalk while Rachel was at Melissa’s. Marco and Tobias were going to go out to Elfangor’s spot in the woods and practice their respective morphs. I actually really wanted all of us to do our morph practice together, but the timing of it wasn’t great. Not to mention we had kind of a disparate mix of species and it was probably smarter to go one at a time than all five of us at once.

Phase Two, I would drop Cassie off at her place, pick up the boys, go get Rachel and acquire Chapman. I had a duffle bag in my SUV of my dad’s clothes. My dad and Chapman were more or less the same size, at least I hoped they were. I supposed if we had to do it, I could make a quick stop at Target or something. Rachel had the more dangerous task of getting the key card, and if she
hit any snags in the plan, she would text. Cassie had acquired Melissa’s cat just in case.

Then, Phase Three, all of us would meet at Elfangor’s again at night, where Rachel, Cassie, and I would finally get to practice our own morphs before flying to San Jose with Elfangor. This time, we were also going to go as owls. I’d had enough of this flying in the dark shit and no one disagreed with me on that point. The biggest variable to that stage of the plan was that none of us had been in contact with Elfangor in nearly forty-eight hours, and we were kinda relying on blind faith that he’d have an excuse that would satisfy the Yeerk security for Chapman showing up off-schedule.

After lunch, I was in a slightly better mood. I was still mentally wrapped, but I was focused more on the mission now, and less on my own impending death. Plus, as much as I’d like to put all images and thoughts of my feline crucifixion out of my mind, I had chosen the tiger for a reason. And nightmare-inducing injury notwithstanding, I was admittedly eager to try out that kind of raw power.

Plus, if I was going to have my last night on Earth, then at least I would be spending it with Cassie.

It didn’t take long to drive Marco and Tobias to Cassie’s place, and Rachel and Melissa had gone with Chapman after school. So far, everything was going to plan. Marco and Tobias left their bags in the SUV and they walked up to Cassie’s place. Cassie gave me a kiss on the cheek before getting out herself and following the boys. Her mom was at the zoo, and technically her dad was supposed to be at the university, but since the WRC was funded out of the UCSC veterinary program, it wasn’t unusual for Dr. Geroux to have classes in the barn. Marco and Tobias couldn’t very well risk running into Cassie’s dad without her, and the time I had to go waste waiting on my cousins at the middle school was time she and the boys could use to get her chores done.

I don’t know if there’s a rulebook for alien guerilla tactics, and if there is, send me a copy. But I got the impression these kind of conflicts were won and lost by time management. That’s not a comforting thought for someone that struggles to get math homework done on time. But we had only the six of us, and there are only so many hours in a day, so multitasking was inevitable.

Soon enough, I had Jordan and Sara in the backseat, frantically trying to get their homework done so that they could go to the Boardwalk.

Cassie texted me she’d be ready in a few minutes, so I put the SUV in drive and headed over.

It wasn’t long before we were in line for the rollercoaster. Undertow was built about three years ago or so - I think I was Jordan's age when it opened - and it honestly wasn't my favorite ride. It's a rollercoaster with rotating cars, like someone took tilt-a-whirl cars and put them on a coaster track. I like rollercoasters as a rule. I just didn't really like this one that much. Maybe it was too gimmicky for my tastes, I don't know. Definitely worth a ride, it's a unique experience and I don't hate it, but it wasn't my favorite. Truth be told, I couldn't say for sure if I had ridden it after the first year it came out.

But Sara had never ridden it before, so it became the first ride she picked.

Technically, she had been big enough to ride it for a year or two, but at seven years old, Sara wasn't the bravest kid. Rachel said it was because being the youngest - and Aunt Nicole not wanting anymore kids after three girls - that Sara had been babied a little longer than she probably should've been.

Like I said, I never gave a whole lot of thought to the future. Nothing that tangible, anyway. But standing in line, holding hands with Cassie, with Sara leaning back so her head rested on my chest
and Jordan impatiently leaning on the railing waiting for the line to move, in that moment, I wondered if I'd ever have a family of my own.

We finally got on the ride, and it remained as meh as I remembered it. Rollercoaster good, tilt-a-whirl good. Rollercoaster plus tilt-a-whirl, not great. It's not quite a full blast of nausea, but the rotating cars are intense, and whereas other rides have that great adrenaline rush that make you want to get right back in line to do it again, this one was the type where I preferred to sit down afterward.

“OMG!” Sara squealed as we got off the ride, “That's like the best ride ever! Jake, we have to get back in line!”

I looked at Cassie and she was very visibly not okay. She didn’t have to throw up, but I could tell she didn’t want to get back on. “Tell you what,” I said, before Cassie could say anything, “why don’t you and Jordan get back in line and I’ll get us some drinks?”

The girls loved that idea and I held Cassie’s hand again as we headed over to the Surf City Grill. It felt like ages ago that we’d been here with the others and Melissa. What had it been? Sunday? Yeah, Sunday. It had not even been six days since we had found Elfangor. Less than a week, and our reality was irrevocably altered. Four days ago, we’d been weighing the pros and cons of stealing a camera. Tonight, we were setting off bombs.

We ordered some Dr Peppers and found a bench where we could keep a line of sight to the rollercoaster.

“Do you want kids?” I asked, seemingly out of the blue.

“Woah, woah, pump the brakes there, stud.”

I couldn't help the embarrassed laughter. “No, no, not now, obviously, I just meant-”

“I know what you meant. May I ask why you're asking?”

I shrugged. “If you asked me what I want to do after high school, I couldn’t give you an answer. Not really. But somehow, I always thought someday I’d be here with a wife and kids. And watching Jordan and Sara…” I let it hang. She didn’t need me to finish. This one day, my girlfriend and my cousins, might easily be the closest I’d ever come to that idea.

“Honestly, I don’t know if I ever saw myself as the mommy type. I’ve spent so much mental effort wondering what I’d do if I didn’t have to take care of the farm stuff, I can’t see trading all that for kids. Not right away, at any rate. I wanted to travel, maybe. I’ve never been anywhere that wasn’t for school or the WRC.”

I nodded. “Marco and I were thinking of taking a camping trip this summer. Maybe you could join us?”

She laughed. “Oh, please, like my dad would let me go unsupervised into the wilderness with boys.”

I shrugged. “Maybe bring Rachel and Tobias. Do it as a group trip. Your dad was the one that encouraged us to get outdoors.”

“Yeah,” she scoffed, “that’s because you’re boys and boys can go out in the woods if they want but girls aren’t allowed to leave the house… because there could be boys out there.”
We laughed. I needed it. I needed to think there was something on the horizon beyond just this one final night. And it worked for awhile. For the next few hours, we were just kids being kids. Just like at the zoo, it was easy for real life to overtake our secret life and our alien missions. Maybe we were good at compartmentalization. Personally, I think we were just in a giant shadow of denial. At sixteen, I had no sense of mortality. I had never made a mistake that couldn’t be rectified or retributed. I’d never been in a life-or-death situation other than Elfangor bleeding in the field.

It was easy to see it as not being real.

The fact that it was real seemed hollow or ethereal. I mean, I knew I was going to graduate high school, even if I didn’t really have a framework for that. I had a job, I was new to dating and so far Cassie and I hadn’t done anything beyond some kisses and flirting, but I had a girlfriend. I knew intellectually that things would be different in two years when we were adults, but even knowing that didn’t make it real. Without the intervening two years of experiences, knowing I’d be eighteen some day didn’t mean anything. It was true, but that didn’t make it matter, not that much, and it was easy to be sixteen today.

And so it was that it was easier to be an older cousin and a boyfriend at the Boardwalk than it was to obsess over our pending deaths in the alien battle we had planned for later.

Yes, I know how weird that sounds. If we had kept ledgers or planners or something, I’m sure it would have looked like a rejected concept for an episode of *Rick & Morty* or something. Twelve o’clock, lunch with friends. Four o’clock, amusement park with girlfriend and cousins. Eleven thirty, plant explosives at an underground alien facility.

It sounds like a punchline even now, and it definitely seems like the kind of random toss-away joke for a supervillain’s checklist. But the reality of it is that it is weirdly accurate.

We, the audience, know that Lex Luthor is evil. Superman knows it, Batman knows it, and any number of particular individuals within the story know that he is the villain. They say that on some level, everyone believes they’re the hero of their own story. Magneto honestly believes he is protecting mutants from human persecution. J. Jonah Jameson thinks he’s protecting the public from a dangerous masked menace. Lex Luthor is an exception, a character that knows fundamentally that he is the villain.

But my point here is that the public doesn't know he's a villain. If you looked at the personal schedule for Lex Luthor, he would have charity events, legitimate business meetings with non-villain business partners, real estate bullshit for acquisitions or however large corporations expand their corporate stuff. About five days a week, Lex Luthor has to do all the minutia of a regular CEO. In the comics, to my understanding, Bruce Wayne is the only reason Gotham doesn't have a branch of LexCorp, and on paper, he has to sell that as being a good thing. We might know it as being evil, but the people of Gotham don't know that. In fact, I have to imagine Bruce Wayne takes some shit from the public over something that keeps out new jobs.

And yes, I just compared myself and my friends to both Lex Luthor and Batman.

But that’s what we were doing. We had to keep the girls busy until five or so, maybe till six, and the fucked up thing was that three hours at the Boardwalk was actually part of the same alien war plan.

Life is weird sometimes.

But Phase One wrapped up neatly. I got a text from my aunt that it was time for Rachel and her sisters to go back home. I winced inwardly. I hadn't heard anything from Rachel, but it was about
six, so all I could do that her end went to plan and she'd forgotten to text.

I took Cassie home first. Tobias and Marco were either still practicing their respective morphs or else they'd flown home to do their own thing for now. I had my own trepidation about my last night of being alive, and how they spent this part of their time was up to them. Marco would probably spend this time with his dad somehow. Or maybe he'd spend it avoiding him, I don't know. Tobias... who knows how he would spend his last night. Maybe flying again? Maybe working feverishly in his sketchbook or something. I didn't have anything like that. Tobias was a really amazing artist, and some of his stuff just blows me away. I liked to think he was sketching and not sitting at his apartment with his uncle.

I walked Cassie up her driveway, holding her hand yet again. I tried to memorize the details of her hand, the size and curve of her fingers, the warmth and texture of her skin, just in case this was the last time I got to hold that hand.

She hugged me when we got to her door, and she gave me a kiss on the cheek. I could see tears standing in her eyes. She wasn't crying but she was on the verge. She squeezed my hand and trembling she told me, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I walked back to the SUV with my throat tight, praying that there actually would be a tomorrow. I blinked the tears from my eyes, suddenly desperate that I'd get to see Cassie's face one more time before we left as owls.

Sara and Jordan were seemingly oblivious to my emotional state when I got back in the SUV. All they knew was that it was time to get their sister from her friend's place and go home to their house.

But I knew that I had moved onto Phase Two. It was time to see Chapman.

“Come on, girls,” I said casually, hoping I kept the wavering thread of fear from my voice. “Let's go pick up your sister.”

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.
Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
“Hey, isn’t that Marco and that other boy?” Sara asked.

“His name is Tobias, silly,” Jordan answered.

I tried not to laugh. I couldn’t afford to. But damn it all if Marco and Tobias didn’t have their part down to a T. We thought it might look weird for me to be picking up Tobias and Marco from Cassie’s place. I seriously doubted either of my cousins were Controllers, but we knew explicitly that both Mr. and Mrs. Chapman were, and I didn’t want the innocent little kids to accidentally say something that would possibly tip our hand. So I told them to just find somewhere to be between Cassie’s place and Chapman’s and that we’d make it look like I just randomly happened upon them.

One of them - no, who am I kidding, it was definitely Marco - had decided to take this to an extreme. Both of them were standing on the sidewalk of Highway 1, in the shared parking lot between McDonald’s and Taco Bell, and each of them was holding up a large cardboard sign.

At first, I thought they were going to be pretending to need a lift, or feign like they’d spent the day panhandling. But no. I read Marco’s sign first. In giant red Sharpie lettering, it read: “Will Drop Pants 4 New X-Box One.”

Tobias was right behind him, holding up a crudely-made highway ad: “Boy For Sale, Latino, Sold As-Is.”

I sighed. Partially to keep from laughing, but also because it sunk in that these were my friends and for better or worse, I was probably going to have to take care of both of them for the rest of my life. It was clear to me know that Marco was incapable of taking care of himself, whatsoever, in any capacity, and he was obviously a terrible influence on dear sweet Tobias.

I threw on my turn signal and pulled into the parking lot. Rolling down the passenger-side window, I reluctantly brought myself to ask, “Okay, how in the flying hell did this happen?”

“Dude,” Tobias said without missing a beat, “make me an offer or keep driving. I have inventory to unload.”

That did it. I couldn’t hold it anymore. I lost it. For a solid minute that felt like it might kill me, I just laughed as hard as I ever had. Marco did too. The fact that Tobias kept in character just oversold the whole bit. Marco hopped in the front seat, still laughing, and Tobias got in the center row.
I managed to stop laughing and put on my serious face again. “Jordan, Sara, I have to pick up Marco and Tobias before they get arrested.”

Jordan made a face. “Jake, are all boys this stupid?”

I nodded. “Yes, Jordan, all boys.”

“Even you, Jake?” Sara asked.

I shrugged. What could I say to that. “Sara, these are my friends. Does that seem smart to you?”

The seven-year-old looked at Marco and Tobias and then shook her head.

“Alright,” I said, trying desperately to rebuild my hollow façade of composure. “Let me ask this again: how the hell did this happen?”

Marco fought the rising laughter as he tried to explain. “Okay, okay. So I took Tobias here over to Mickey D’s to get some after school burgers. I recognized your SUV when you went by and, well, we decided it would be fun to screw with you on the way back.”

“But why the signs?” I asked.

“Oh, that,” Tobias said. “While we were in line, some homeless guy wandered by with a sign that made us laugh.”

“You shouldn't make fun of homeless people,” Jordan chided.

Tobias nodded. “I know, Jordan, and we weren't trying to tease him or anything.”

“Well, what did his sign say?” I asked.

“Oh, it said, ‘Beware the oatmeal,’” Tobias said.

“Beware the oatmeal?” Sara asked. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“No idea,” Marco said.

“ Weird,” I said, trying to segue out of this bullshit. “I have to swing by Chapman’s place to pick up Rachel.” Of course, they already knew that, but I had to keep up appearances for my cousins’ sake.

“That's cool,” Marco said. “Maybe I'll ask Melissa if she has weekend plans.”

“Melissa, huh?” I asked. My inflection was telling.

“What, I can't have a thing for redheads?”

“I don't recall Jenny being a redhead,” I teased.

Marco shrugged. If I was getting to him, it didn't show.

It took just a few minutes to get to Chapman's house and while I wanted this to be as quick a thing as possible, I was in no hurry to actually do it. The last two blocks driving, I found that my palms were sweaty on the steering wheel.

Like all plans for the future, this one was ruined by children.

The second I was in park, the girls ran out of the SUV to find their sister and Melissa. That was not
in the original plan, though obviously it should've been. For whatever reason I expected them to wait in the car. But the girls weren't time crunched. They didn't have morphing practice in the Moore Creek Preserve and I'd given them no indication that we were in a rush. And Jordan and Sara treated Melissa like family. So I was already rolling my eyes and wondering how long it was going to take us to get back in the car before I even had my seatbelt off.

I got to the door just behind Sara and Jordan. They'd already rung the doorbell but no one had come to the door yet. As I waited for Marco and Tobias to catch up, I felt lightheaded.

Get it together, Jake. It's just a handshake. Yes, just a handshake and a cataleptic effect. Maybe Chapman would brush it off as being tired after work. Most people probably would. But Chapman wasn't really Chapman. He was just the human puppet for the slug inside. And the million-dollar question tonight was whether or not a Yeerk would recognize that brief torpor as the effect of Andalite technology.

Elfangor wasn't sure.

Finally, the door opened and we were met by Melissa. Jordan and Sara rushed her. I remembered to breathe. “Hey, Mel, Rachel about ready?”

Melissa laughed. “Eager to get rid of your cousins, Jake?”

“Naw, I don't mind the little brats,” I said, tousling Sara’s gold-blonde hair.

“Hey, don’t call us brats,” Sara said.

“Yes, pumpkin, you're not really a brat, I’m just teasing you.”

Melissa smiled. “Rachel’s just freshening up,” she said. “Should be down in a few minutes.”

“Freshening up?” Sara asked.

“She means Rachel’s in the bathroom,” Jordan said.

“Oh. Why didn’t you just say that, then?” Sara asked of Melissa.

Melissa smiled and shook her head. “It’s a girl thing, sweetie. You’ll get it when you’re older.”

I mentally crossed my fingers that Rachel had managed to get the key card. If she hadn’t, this night was going to go in a much different direction. Actually, that was the first point where I realized how much of this plan hinged on Rachel getting the card. I supposed that she could always morph into Melissa's cat again if it came to that.

“Ah, I see we have company,” a warm, matronly voice announced. I turned and saw Missus Chapman in the doorway to the dining room, a dish towel draped over her shoulder. “Jake, honey, how are you?”

I felt a sick knot in my stomach thinking about the alien slug calling me honey. But I pushed it aside and put on my best fake smile.

“Hello, Mrs. Chapman. I’m good.”

“Looking forward to summer break?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Honestly, not that much. During the summer, I move to full-time at the cinema.”
She nodded. “Ah, I remember summer jobs. You know, I think Melissa has been talking about a summer job.”

“I’m right here, Mom,” Melissa said. “We talked about it at lunch the other day. I think Marco said Jenny was quitting, so I think I’ll put in an application this weekend. Jake, do you mind if I use you as a reference?”

I nodded. “Go for it.”

“We’ll talk about it after your father gets home, dear,” Mrs. Chapman said.

My heart stopped. Chapman wasn’t back from the pool yet. That meant the card wasn’t here and I wasn’t able to acquire him.

God, how stupid were we? School let out at three-fifteen. The airport is a two-hour drive, roundtrip. It would be staggeringly unlikely that Chapman would be back before seven o’clock. And Aunt Nicole would have a conniption fit if the girls didn't get home before dinner. I felt dizzy, like the floor was turning to Jell-O, and I hoped I didn’t look as pale as I thought I did.

“Rachel!” Sara screamed.

“Hey, cupcake,” Rachel said. She gave her sister a hug. “Miss me?”

“Nope,” Jordan said, feigning indifference. “Jake and Cassie took us to the Boardwalk.”

Rachel stuck her tongue out at her sister, playing along with it. “Butt. Who told you to keep your Boardwalk pass in your purse this morning?”

“Not to cut this beautiful display of sibling affection short,” Marco said, “but I need to see my probation officer by six or I’m in violation of my parole.”

Mrs. Chapman turned a very motherly expression to Marco. “Oh, very funny, Mister Velasquez. Go on, get home. Melissa, dinner’s almost ready, anyway.”

It took a few minutes for Rachel and Melissa to say their goodbyes and for Rachel to gather up her stuff. Of course, in that time, Melissa was tackled by Jordan and Sara. Marco and Tobias were the first ones back in the SUV.

“No Chapman,” Tobias said simply.

“No security card,” Marco echoed.

“Is there a reason the two of you think I’m too dumb to notice those points on my own?”

“A reason?” Marco asked. “Fuck, Jake, do you want the list?”

“Asshole,” I said. “God, why are we friends?”

“Seriously, bro, what are we going to do about this?” Marco asked.

I watched as Rachel gave Melissa one last hug and she and her sisters crossed the lawn of the Chapmans’ home. “Honestly, I have no idea. Let’s see what Rachel has to say. She’s had enough time to think of something.”

They nodded, and soon we were back on the road. I pulled up to Rachel’s house and turned to the backseat. “Hey, Rach, mind if I talk to you for a minute?”
“No, that’s cool. There was something I wanted to ask you anyway. Girls, go bother Mom for a few minutes, okay?”

“We’re porked, aren’t we?” Tobias asked the second Jordan and Sara were through the front door.

Rachel shrugged. “I don’t think it’s that bad.”

Tobias and Marco both looked like they were about to say something, but I waved them off.

“Rachel?”

“Well, I can still morph Melissa’s cat. I can get back in the house.”

I nodded. “Yeah, okay. But I still need to acquire Chapman.”

She smiled at me. “Well, would you mind going back to get my purse. I can’t believe I left it in the bathroom.”

“That works,” I sighed. It wasn’t ideal, but it would work. “Did you acquire Mrs. Chapman?”

“Yes, Jake. That was my mission, wasn’t it?”

“Okay, jeez, sorry.”

She sighed. “Sorry, just a bit wrapped. I have some kinda weird skeevy feeling about morphing someone I know.”

“Hopefully, it won’t come to that. We’ll see you later tonight.”

It was more than an hour later when I rang the bell at the Chapmans’ house. Once again, I felt sick to my stomach. I watched the cat at my feet pace back and forth. “Easy, Fluffer.”

<Bite me, Jake.>

I bent down and scratched Rachel behind the ears. “Who’s a good kitty?” To my surprise, Rachel started to purr.

<I fucking hate you, cuz.>

I’d tasked Tobias with aerial surveillance since I’d dropped Rachel off at her house, waiting for the point that Chapman got back home. We were a bit worried that Aunt Nicole would be a bit miffed that I swung by to grab Rachel so soon after dropping her off, but we told her I needed help finding a graduation present for Tom, and at least it was after dinner. Still, we needed to get this part over with as soon as we could.

The door opened and to my great relief, Chapman answered the door. He looked different when he wasn’t wearing a suit and tie. Something about seeing your school principal in sweatpants just seems… off. But that meant he had already been to the Pool and come home and changed. So that meant he didn’t have his card on his person at the moment, so our biggest hurdle had been cleared.

“Um, yeah. Rachel called and said she left her purse earlier.”


“Yeah, dad?”

“Could you go grab Rachel’s purse, please?”

“Oh, sure. I thought she’d come back for that.”

That left me standing on the front porch with my alien-possessed principal, trying to make awkward small talk.

“Melissa says she may put in an application at the movie theater,” he said.

“Yeah, I overheard a bit of that conversation earlier. It’s not a bad job, really. Better than flipping burgers, I think. Still, I’m glad I have the break this weekend. That school-to-work schedule on Fridays really takes it out of me.”

A minute later, Melissa was back and I was holding Rachel’s purse and shaking Chapman’s hand. Chapman shook his head suddenly, the cataleptic effect hitting him. This was the moment of truth. He would either recognize it as a side effect of Andalite technology and kill me, or else he’d wave it off as sudden fatigue.

Thankfully, he yawned, then smiled. “Truth be told, Berenson, I think I could use a break myself, it seems.”

“You okay, daddy?” Melissa asked as Chapman rubbed the bridge of his nose, the effect rapidly wearing off.

“Oh, it’s fine, cupcake. Just a little tired. Your old man needs to have a rest.”

Melissa seemed to perk up at that. “Maybe we could have a movie night? Have some daddy-daughter time?”

Chapman nodded and seemed to agree to it. It was weird watching Melissa in that context. She seemed so happy just to spend time with her dad, it made me wonder how distant she found him lately. Then again, I felt like I had a pretty decent relationship with my parents even though I hadn’t really seen them much in the last three days. Hell, with Tom volunteering, my parent’s work schedules, not to mention my own shifts at the cinema, it was a rare day when all of us were home at the same time, let alone all of us doing something together.

I made a mental note that if I survived the night, that I should try to see if I could make a bit more time for family.

I took Rachel’s purse back to the SUV. I sighed, not liking the fact that I couldn’t wait for her. This night was already off track, and I had to get home. Besides, somewhere out there in the evening sky, Tobias was still keeping eyes out. Rachel got into the house as a cat, but cats aren’t great at going through pockets, wallets, or nightstand drawers, so she was going to have to demorph in the Chapman’s house to find the security card. And cats don’t generally have pockets, either, so getting the card out of the house was going to be a little tricky. I had my fingers crossed that she didn’t have any further problems, but I wasn’t able to help her myself.

I got home in just a few minutes and the evening went by in a blur. I did my homework, texted Cassie. Marco had sent me a few messages, too. His dad was working late tonight, so Marco was
free from here on out. I imagined that meant he would already be at Elfangor’s spot in the woods, probably trying out his gorilla morph while we still had daylight.

I felt very isolated from my friends right then. Cassie, Rachel, and I were all trying to wait out the last few hours before dark so we could finally sneak out and work on saving the world. I wondered if it was any easier for Marco or Tobias, to not have the kind of obligations to family that we did. Did being alone make you any braver?

I had my brother, my parents, my aunt and uncle, my cousins, but the people that mattered to me the most were going on this suicide mission with me.

I did the math for this endeavor. I doubted we’d all be together till ten or so, and depending on morph practice, we wouldn’t be on the wing till eleven. Hopefully not later than that. An hour to fly to the pool, and an hour to fly back, plus whatever length of time it took to actually place the explosives and then get the hell out before we detonated. It would be a miracle if we were home before two in the morning. Again, assuming any of us came back.

I spent a little time in my room writing out a letter to my parents. I don’t really remember what it was. Within moments of finishing the letter, I ripped it up. I had tears standing in my eyes, but I couldn’t do this. Even if we all died tonight, there was no guarantee we would be entirely successful. Maybe we’d all die minutes after we got in, accomplishing nothing. If we won tonight, maybe… maybe then I could tell my parents what we had been doing this last week.

Of course, even then, I probably wouldn’t. If the Yeerk invasion was over in the morning - and we already knew that our best-case scenario wasn’t going to achieve that kind of victory - we’d still have Elfangor, the alien we’d been sheltering, and all the same Men in Black bullshit that Marco had brought up minutes after we’d found him.

There was no iteration of reality, at least not one I could see, where I could ever tell anyone I had saved the world. Or died in a valiant display of youthful stupidity. In all likeliness, if we died tonight, we’d be five teens lost in an unexplained disappearance. The police would never find us. Only the police that happened to be Controllers would actually know, and I obviously didn’t count them as real police. I couldn’t imagine what that would do to my parents, or Rachel’s or Cassie’s. Marco had a pretty good idea what would happen to his dad if anything happened to him. And truth be told, Tobias’s uncle would probably go to jail following our disappearance.

That might sound prejudicial, but Tobias’s uncle is a real piece of work. There was a reason we were all a little put off that he had a gun. I’m not against gun ownership, not as a rule. Hell, I think Rachel’s dad has a handgun. I know my grandfather has rifles. But Tobias's uncle is the reason other people buy guns, if that paints a picture. And if we all vanished tonight… well, cops go to likely suspects, and of all of our legal guardians, he was the only one with a criminal record. If not for lack of evidence, he’d probably have a longer rap sheet than he did. I could see the bastard going away for a long time. Not for any of the shit he’d actually done to Tobias, but for this. How’d that be for irony?

Finally, it was time. Time to fly out the window, time to meet the others and Elfangor, time to meet whatever destiny awaited us.

I did all my normal nighttime routines. I got a shower, I brushed my teeth, I said goodnight to my brother and parents. I turned out my bedroom light, I plugged in my cell phone.

Goodnight, room.

I opened the window and concentrated. The morph to owl was remarkably similar to the morph to
raven, but there were differences. The biggest shock to morphing birds in general was that unless you happen to have some kind of background in ornithological anatomy, it is really easy to forget how much of a bird’s shape is due to its feathers. If you want to give yourself a good scare, go online and Google what an owl looks like without feathers.

I say this because the morphing process, so far as we had seen it or experienced it, started from the inside and worked outward. Which meant feathers were the last part of the change.

I felt my face widen as the first of the owl DNA asserted over my human genome. The bones in my skull extruded around my eyes and ears. Twin ridges formed in my forehead and suddenly my nose and jaws started to grow. And just like morphing Andalite or the raven, my teeth absorbed into the tissue of my jaw. There was an itching sensation as my human lips peeled back like old wallpaper and the hard, plasticlike tissue of the beak took their place. My eyes swelled in their sockets and pushed forward. The darkness of my room evaporated as the owl’s night vision emerged, similar to the raccoon, but the raccoon was near-sighted and the owl was a goddamned raptor. I could count the ants on the tree across my backyard from where I stood.

My neck and legs began to stretch. Birds have some really fucked up body proportions, a fact made worse by the fact that I hadn’t really started to shrink yet. My toes splayed out at odd angles as the bones in my foot shifted and elongated. Toenails turned black and erupted into curled talons. I lurched forward as my legs lengthened, my thighs came up to my torso, forcing my knees under my arms. The skin of my legs harden and cracked into scales. It was then that my finger bones began to fuse, turning into the weird fused end digit of my new bird wings.

While my collarbones were fusing with my sternum to become a wishbone, as my pectoral muscles shifted and expanded, that I finally began to shrink. Thick, plastic-like spines began to grow in a line down my arms, pushing out and bursting into primary flight feathers. That seemed to set of a chain reaction, and my skin grew feathers in ripples, up from my wings, down my back and chest, then up my neck. When I stopped shrinking, I was about a foot and a half tall, boasting a wingspan just under four feet.

It was a little tricky getting off the floor to the window. The dead air in the house wasn’t ideal for flight. But once I got to the window, the fifteen foot drop to the ground was more than enough to fill my wings with air, and I set off for the Moore Creek Preserve as fast as my owl wings could carry me.
If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
There were only only three of them waiting for me when I landed in Elfangor’s little nest. A
gorilla, a wolf, and an Andalite.

The wolf did not look happy with the other two. Not one fucking bit. It took a few minutes longer -
as an owl, I could see them from a long way out - before I was in thought-speak range.

<...finds out what the hell you three have been up to, he’s going to be pissed!> Cassie yelled.

As a general rule, Cassie is very chill. She has her bad days, and she has strong convictions when it
comes to conservation efforts and environmental causes, but it takes a lot for Cassie to cross the
line from annoyance to full-on fury. And by the looks of those bared fangs, she was past that point.

<What’s going on here?> I asked as I landed.

The gorilla looked up at me, its face able to make all the same expressions Marco usually made.
He was making a very acquiescent gesture with his hands, like he would do as a human in an
argument. It’s a very weird thing to see a six-hundred-pound gorilla plead, let alone plead with an
owl. <Jake, could you tell Cassie to back off, please?> Marco asked.

<No,> I said instantly. <One, I don’t tell Cassie what to do, period. And two, for all I know, she
has a right to be pissed. I want an explanation. Anyone want to tell me where Tobias and Rachel
are?>

<Elfangor and Marco sent Tobias on a secret mission.>

I was not prepared for that statement.

Elfangor did that thing where he seemed to smile with his eyes. <All is fine, Jake. You must calm
your mind. Focus.>

<I don’t think I can Zen my way out of this, Elfangor. I’m hoping the flight to the airport will help
me calm down.>

<We cannot fly to the Yeerk pool, Jake,> Elfangor said simply.

Oh, fuck. Christ on a stick, how could I be so stupid? My dad’s suit was still in the SUV, Elfangor
had spent all this time working on explosives, none of which could be carried by owls <Shit!> I
cursed.
<It’s cool, Jake.> Marco said. <Tobias has us covered.>

<Tobias?> I asked. <He doesn’t have a car. Does he even have a license?>

<Jake, trust, okay? We’re fixing a problem; don’t worry about it.>

Okay, I recognized that tone. That was Marco’s “I fucked up, but you’re not gonna be mad” tone. I turned my owl eyes to the wolf. <Cassie?>

<Marco, I swear to God, just tell him.>

I shook my head and demorphed. The process of going back to human wasn’t any more pleasant than it had been going to owl, but I had no real reason to stay in morph, and if I was going to be stressed out, I wanted to have my hands. I wanted to be able to scream and sigh, and any number of things I couldn’t do with limited telepathy, wings, and talons. It was a little brisk, though not terribly so. It was darker in the woods without the owl vision, and I felt goosebumps. But I had hands, and my fingers found the bridge of my nose.

“Why do I get the impression that whatever Tobias is doing, I’m going to be very unhappy?”

The gorilla gave me another of Marco’s classic looks. I swear he was messing with me. <Probably because you’re going to be incredibly pissed off when you find out what Tobias is up to. I know it’s going to be a shit fit when it happens. I was trying to get Cassie on board with not telling you, but you’re right. That’s stupid and selfish. And maybe it’s better that you’re mad now so hopefully you’re not so pissed when we meet Tobias.>

“Meet Tobias?” I asked.

<That’s the first thing I’m hearing about meeting Tobias,> Cassie said.

I sat on a log and put my head in my hands. “Can we take a minute here and just tell me what the hell is going on? Would anyone like to demorph? I feel like a mental patient talking to a wolf, an ape, and an alien.”

A few minutes later, not only were Marco and Cassie back to human, but they were dressed, too. There was a large duffle bag by the tent we’d set up, and someone had brought blankets out here. Marco tossed me a black hoodie and a pair of jeans I’d left at his place at some point.

“So,” I said. “Elfangor, would you like to tell me where Tobias is?”

<Tobias is acquiring a mode of transportation.>

“What?” I asked.

“They sent Tobias out to steal a car,” Cassie translated.

“You did what?!” I thundered.

Elfangor didn’t seem to understand the problem. <Tobias informed me that, as a subadult, you are not authorized to use your vehicle at night. That because you have school tomorrow, your parents believe you to be at home sleeping.>

I nodded, my blood surging through my veins. I kept clenching and unclenching my fist. “Yes, Elfangor. I’m not supposed to drive on school nights.”

“Dude,” Marco interjected. “I know your parents. Is there any chance in hell you could leave with
the van tonight and not have a problem?”

“No,” I said, somewhat grudgingly. They had a point. If I tried to drive on a school night, they’d need a reason. And if I told them it was an emergency, my dad would want to drive himself. If I took the car on my own… I have no idea, honestly. I was never very rebellious. I’m not sure how either of my parents would take me openly defying a hard rule. It was still technically my mom’s vehicle, registered in her name. There was no guarantee that they wouldn’t call the cops.

“That doesn’t make it right,” Cassie said. “And why send Tobias? Why not wait till we’re all here to work this out?” She was still very upset, but she didn’t seem as upset.

<Tobias volunteered,> Elfangor said. He was eerily calm, considering. Maybe it was because he was military. Maybe it was because he was an alien. Or maybe he just didn’t really care about a problem he found inconsequential, but his dismissive, matter-of-the-fact attitude was unnerving.

“Tobias?” I said. “Tobias volunteered… to steal a car?”

Marco made a face. To most people, it was just an uncomfortable expression. And truth be told, if I had to explain exactly what kind of face it was, I’m not sure I could. The human face is capable of so many different facial contortions, and I think there just aren’t enough words for all of them. If I said it was the kind of face someone would make if they suddenly really had to go to the bathroom, I think most of you would have a guess what I meant. This wasn’t quite that pronounced, but still that kind of gastric distress face. I knew Marco way too well. That was the face he made when he had something to say he didn’t want to actually say.

“Marco,” I said, flat and evenly. It was two syllables, but I said it like I was telling a dog to sit. Authoritative.

“He’s getting a car from his uncle,” Marco blurted.

“He’s stealing his uncle’s car?” Cassie asked.

“Yeah… kinda… ” Marco inflected upward and trailed off.

I just stared daggers at him.

“Okay, so his uncle may have… y’know… stolen it first.”

“Come again?” I said.

“Tobias’s uncle runs a chop shop,” Marco said flatly.

Cassie looked at me, then back to Marco. I was speechless.

“A chop shop?” she asked. “You mean one of those shady mechanic shops that deal in stolen cars, right?”

Marco nodded.

“Wha-” I stammered. “H- Did you know?”

Marco shook his head. “No, I found out this afternoon, after you dropped us off at Cassie’s.”

I steepled my fingers over my nose. “Cassie, you were right, I am pissed. I’m not sure who I’m mad at right now, and I think I may go over and beat the shit out of Tobias’s uncle if we get out of this alive.” I took a deep breath. “But we have bigger problems tonight. Does anyone have any idea
where Rachel is?"
Silence.

“Fucking perfect.”

“You sent Tobias to help her at Chapman’s right?” Cassie asked.

I nodded.

“Maybe Rachel’s with Tobias?” Cassie suggested.

I sighed. “Yeah, that sounds like Rachel. God, we haven’t even left yet and this night is off the rails.”

<Plans change. Not all challenges can be anticipated. As Marco told me, sometimes you humans must fly by the seat of your pants. Though, admittedly, Marco did not elaborate on the aerodynamic specifications of the pants.>

I stared at Elfangor hard. Cassie and Marco tried - and failed - to stifle laughter. I didn’t laugh. Not that it wasn’t funny. But I looked at Elfangor like something was off. Like somehow Elfangor knew what he said was funny. For the first time since we’d found him, I wondered if Elfangor was playing us.

Elfangor nodded to me, giving me an almost knowing look as he nodded slightly. <Come. We have to get moving.>

The Amur tiger - also called an Ural tiger or a Siberian tiger - is the largest living cat in the world. According to Wikipedia, Siberian tigers in the wild today aren’t that much bigger than the Bengal tigers in India, but the one I had acquired the other night was the fifth-largest tiger in the United States. At least, that’s what it had said on the placard at the zoo.

Nearly all of a tiger’s mass is muscle. Well, fine, that’s hyperbolic. I’m not an animal expert like Cassie. But when I morphed to tiger, I immediately felt two things. The first was an immense flood of power. The muscle mass was off the charts, and unless anyone out there hails from the planet Krypton or had a run-in with an irradiated arachnid, it’s not possible to put that into relatable terms. The second thing that hit me was a level of resolve that just… I got no words, man. It bordered on apathy, really. The tiger did not care about shit. The fun thing about being the biggest, strongest, most dangerous thing on the planet is that the tiger absolutely, unequivocally knows that it is the biggest, strongest, most dangerous thing on the planet.

Once I got the hang of it, the tiger was incredibly chill. The problem, of course, was that it took a few minutes to get control of the morph.

The tiger brain didn’t know what to make of an Andalite, and while tigers aren’t really capable of feeling fear, there’s something of a really big sense of personal space for tigers that humans in particular seem to set off. Tigers know humans in some pretty interesting terms.
To the tiger, Cassie and Marco were predators. I'd have assumed that the tiger would see humans as prey, or not being worth the effort. But that wasn't it. Humans were hunters too. Humans were competition.

Like I said before, primitive humans killed tigers. There were populations in parts of Africa where people still hunted lions with nothing more than spears and a determination I'd hitherto been unable to fathom. The saber-tooth cats were apparently unable to compete with humans. That's not to say humans weren't killed by saber-tooths - they were - but the tiger knew humans as something that were most assuredly not welcome. The tigers at the zoo hadn’t been afraid of me, not in the least. And they weren't hungry. They didn't want to eat me, per se. They wanted me to fuck off and die, and they would have no problem helping me with the latter.

But even still, I wasn't really threatening my friends as the tiger growled. Cassie made a placating gesture with her hands, like how she would calm a horse or dog, and Marco began morphing back to gorilla. But while it's easy to assume it's a threatening display, it's really not. I didn't want to hurt them and the tiger didn't want to hurt them. But the tiger most assuredly wanted to be left the holy hell alone. The tiger wanted them to know that if pushed, the tiger was going to win. Even when Marco glared at me with his dark gorilla eyes, and teeth that rivaled my own, the tiger just had this cocky sneer.

Try it, primate.

It was like the whole idea that the tiger might have to fight was a massive chore. Like the way I might roll my eyes when I have to do the dishes or take out the trash, the tiger just didn't want to be bothered.

But, eventually, some growling later, I had a full hold over the tiger instincts, and we got to work. Elfangor fitted himself with the backpack-saddle he'd used to salvage items from his ship that first night. Marco put one of his massive gorilla arms through the straps of the duffel bag as Cassie once again morphed to wolf.

We were walking through the woods, following the creek south. All told, it was maybe half a mile from Elfangor’s little scoop of woods to Highway 1. Cassie and I led the way. Gorillas don't have strong night vision, and while I knew Andalites had better-than-human vision in daylight, apparently it’s never as dark on their planet as night is on Earth. That happens when your planet has four moons.

<So how does Earth compare to your planet?> Marco asked.

<Your planet differs from Andal in many, many ways. Nowhere in the known galaxy is there another with such biodiversity.>

<How do you mean?> Cassie asked. <Is life rare on other planets?>

<Life is a broad spectrum. Single-cell organisms and primitive forms are fairly common. Many moons and planets are inhospitable to anything beyond very specific lifeforms. Higher orders of life are less common, and lifeforms capable of interstellar travel are comparatively very rare.>

<How rare?> Marco asked.

<In all your many species, over the eons of evolution, how many have developed the technology to leave the planet?>

<Ah, touché.>
<But more than that,> Elfangor continued, <is that there are no areas of your planet that life does not exist. For most planets, only particular regions have the necessary resources to support biological processes. On Andal, only a small section of the planet’s surface is habitable. Outside a specific region of crater lakes, grasslands, and subsurface geothermal activity, the planet is not readily hospitable for Andalites.>

Our lesson on all things Andal - which honestly, I think everyone found to be very interesting - came to an end when we stepped out of the trees to the road. First it was the dirt path access road, closed off by a swinging metal gate. Then we were at Highway 1.

A car was waiting for us.

It was a late 90s Honda Accord, some light metallic color. Tobias and Rachel both stepped out of the car. Thank God for that.

Rachel looked at all of us in our various morphs. She wasn't pleased. “So, everyone gets morph practice but me, huh?” she asked, standing with one fist on her hip.

<You wanna blow off grizzly practice for some GTA, don't whine about it after the fact,> I said.

She rolled her eyes and gave me the finger. But her smile told me she wasn't mad or upset. She was actually having fun. I would've been mad at her for not taking things seriously, but how she coped with danger was her business. I was doing all I could to not be scared. If focusing on the rush was easier for her, I wasn't going to throw stones. I think I may have been jealous, really.

Tobias popped the trunk and rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. Tobias never once seemed bothered by the weight of shit. We could all die tonight, and yet Tobias seemed way more concerned that I might be upset than anything else.

<Tobias,> I said flatly. <Good job.>

He looked at me embarrassed but nodded.

<Jake, you're okay with this?> Cassie asked.

<Not in the slightest, no. But what can we do about it now?>

We demorphed back to human and I was just about to put on the jeans and hoodie again when I noticed the other bag. My bag with my dad's suit - the one I had forgotten in my backseat - was sitting on top of a black leather briefcase.

<You guys went back to my SUV?> I asked.

Rachel nodded. As I took a few minutes to put on the button-down shirt and slacks, Rachel recounted her evening from the time I left her.

Getting the card had been easy enough. Chapman had left it in his wallet in his bedroom nightstand. Rachel ended up demorphing, opening a window, tossing the card into the bushes, then morphed raven and made off with it.

It was then that she realized Tobias wasn't headed back to Moore Creek. And when Tobias told her what he was doing, well, Rachel opted not to go into specifics.

I wasn't great with Windsor knots, but I pulled it off. I grabbed the overcoat and got in the backseat. For whatever reason, Rachel was driving, and Tobias rode shotgun. I was behind Rachel,
Cassie squeezed in the middle, and Marco was behind Tobias.

And with a look of great annoyance, Elfangor once again morphed to osprey. He hopped indignantly into a familiar towel-lined cardboard box. “Sorry about the cramped space, guys,” Tobias said. “This was the only car that hadn't been gutted, yet.”

“So your uncle is a car thief?” I asked.

“Not as such. He doesn't steal them himself… anymore. He just owns the shop, gets a cut off the top.”

I had no clue what to say to that. This was apparently Tobias’s reality. It was his normal, and it wasn’t something he had chosen for himself. I wanted to make an anonymous call to the police, have his uncle arrested, but I wasn't sure that the aftermath - which would almost certainly put him in the foster care system - would necessarily be an improvement for Tobias.

So instead I turned my attention to Elfangor. “So, Chapman is coming back to the pool just hours after leaving. Do we have an excuse for me showing up?”

<Yes, I’ve spent quite some time patching into Yeerk communications. The human known as Chapman is infested by Iniss 226, a Yeerk of some repute and rank.>

“Yeah, but what do I say to the Controller at the security desk?”

<Iniss 226 has Level Three security clearance. If you said the reason for the return was classified, I am confident you would not be questioned.>

“I don't know, man,” Marco said. “Sounds kinda flimsy.”

I had to agree. “We're betting an awful lot on this, Elfangor. That’s our best in?”

<Iniss 226 reports directly to Visser Three, the Andalite-Controller you witnessed before. Indicate that you need to make an Alpha-Nine request for Gleet bio-filter schematics. You are not authorized to disclose further details.>

“Okay, that works. You guys good on your end?”

When we had decided we needed the owl morphs for night flying - overlooking my obvious brain fart that we'd need a vehicle for this mission - the others had acquired the smallest animal in Cassie's barn, the injured squirrel.

All of them gave me a nod, even Elfangor. All of them, except Rachel.

“You didn't try out the squirrel?” Cassie asked.

“Hey, I have sisters and I spent all day at the Chapmans’,” Rachel defended.

“Except for the time you spent stealing this car,” I added.

“Hey, that was mostly me,” Tobias said.

“Which means Rachel could have gone for morphing practice instead of playing accomplice, doesn't it?” Marco pointed out.

“Oh, for the love of God, it takes three minutes to figure out a morph,” I said. “Rachel's going to have to wing it.”
The miles went on in reasonable quiet. No one seemed to have anything more to say, and when we were about a mile from the airport, we stopped in an empty parking lot. All the businesses were closed, and none of the lights were on in the lot. We had to assume there would be cameras in the area around the airport buildings, and not just because of the Yeerks. The Yeerks seeing us morph would be catastrophic, but getting caught on an ATM camera and by extension put on CNN, that was a close silver medal of bullshit none of us needed.

All of us got out and stretched our legs. It had been awhile since I'd had to ride in the backseat, and no offense to Honda, but when you're used to an SUV, sedans in general feel very, very cramped.

The first thing we did was to move the explosives from Elfangor's pack to the briefcase. And we had to do it quickly, because no one wanted to get spotted in the open, hidden only by cover of darkness, with the Yeerks' only known enemy.

I don't know briefcases. Like if they come in specific models or whatever. But my first mental image when I hear that is a hard, leather-bound box with latches. The kind you'd see in a ransom movie full of non-sequential bills. This was not that kind of briefcase. It was more like a satchel or something. It was still leather, obviously, but it was soft, with a flap and buckles. It was like a leather backpack meant to be worn on one shoulder.

Elfangor set the explosives in the zipper pocket of the outer flap. There were about a dozen or so, it seemed. Each one was a black metallic tube a little fatter and a little shorter than a Sharpie marker. A soft violet light flowed from the ends. My first impression was that they looked like a rejected concept for a Chitauri weapon pulled from an Avengers fan-art site.

I took the briefcase and set it on the asphalt. And if you're thinking a briefcase sounds a little excessive for a handful of marker-sized tubes, well, that wasn’t the only thing we needed the briefcase for.

Rachel tossed me the keys and she and the others began stripping off clothes, tossing them in the duffel bag in the trunk. The second Elfangor was done moving the explosives, he was morphing squirrel, too.

The change to become Chapman was subtle. Just a shift in height and weight, a bizarre sensation in my face and joints. I felt a little stiffer, a little less in shape, but it wasn't until I saw myself in the reflection in the car window that it clicked that I was really Chapman. I put on the pair of cheap drugstore reading glasses Rachel or Tobias had left in my coat pocket. I felt the security card in the same pocket. The glasses weren’t the right prescription, but I could see well enough to drive and I only needed to put up with them for so long and we only needed them as a prop more than anything.

The others were all finishing their morph to squirrel. Five adorable little squirrels, all identical little balls of tawny grey and white. When Cassie had said squirrel, I had assumed she meant a grey squirrel, or maybe a pine squirrel. No, these were flying squirrels. According to Cassie, one of her dad's friends, a mammologist from North Carolina, had actually just wrapped up research confirming that the flying squirrels in California and Oregon were actually a new species: Humboldt’s flying squirrel.

I grabbed the briefcase off the ground and held it open.

<Jake, dude, you have pockets, right?> Marco asked.

I stared at the squirrels, not sure which one was Marco. “In the damn bag.”
<Yeah, fine, in the bag with the alien bombs,> he complained.

“You’re not the one that has to carry the rodent-infested bomb pack through alien security, so chill your whiskers.”

One by one, each squirrel hopped into the briefcase. They were each smaller than a hotdog bun, and they looked so strange loaded into the leather bag. I set the bag carefully in the front seat, very conscious that my friends were very delicate in their current state.

Just a few minutes later, we would be in the facility.

And I learned very quickly that sometimes, most of the time, plans go to shit faster than you can imagine.

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
Chapter 26

It took only a few minutes to drive the last mile and park in the same lot we’d seen Chapman use Monday. Granted, I probably should’ve taken a bit more time to acclimate to wearing the glasses, and suffice it to say I heard a lot of car horns the first few blocks.

And carrying the briefcase full of Andalite explosives and flying squirrels - wait, seriously? You know, seeing that in print, it’s really clicking just how stupid this plan was from the get-go. But whatever, that’s how it happened. I carried a briefcase full of bombs and live squirrels into the front entrance of an alien stronghold.

And it worked, if you can fucking believe it.

From the time I’d met Elfangor, I’d swallowed a spider, been trapped in a lint trap, and bitten by a tiger, and yet, memorizing a four-digit PIN and having a key card was all I needed to get past the stern, secretary-looking woman at the desk. If she was suspicious that Chapman was back for a second time in the same night, it didn’t show.

Sometimes the things you think will be the hardest turn out to be some of the easiest.

<We're in?> Rachel asked.

<We're in,> I answered. Thankfully, even though I was still human, a morph is still a morph, and I was able to thought-speak to the bag of squirrels.

I made my way through the same paths that Chapman had made last time. Well, at least as well as I could. Perspective makes a huge difference in your visual landmarks, and I’d only been a few inches tall the last time I’d been through here. I think I got lost for a bit before I found the office area. The cubicles were still occupied, even at this hour, and I suddenly had a bad feeling about the next stage of this plan.

I needed to find a place for the others to demorph, and the first thought was that the Yeerk offices might be empty at night, but that wasn’t the case. Dozens of Controllers were diligently working in the cubicles. I wondered again exactly what the hell they were doing, but I didn’t have time to ponder such quandaries.

<What's going on out there?> Tobias asked.

<Night shift,> I answered.
<God, the Yeerks are worse to work for than Wal-Mart,> Rachel said. <So where can we demorph?>

<Working on it,> I said wearily.

I knew people were living down here so our best option at this stage was to find some kind of open barracks and demorph there.

I walked carefully but deliberately to the housing areas. I’m fairly certain that I took two or three wrong turns getting there, but in my defense, the sections of corridor looked very similar. But I did eventually come to the open rows of doors to the living quarters.

“Inspection, sir?” a Controller asked, as I looked into the room. She was middle-aged, a little older than my mom, probably, with Asian features. Filipino perhaps? She looked like she’d been homeless for years before she came down here.

“Iventory,” I answered quickly. I was trying to channel as much of my manager at the cinema as I could, but I wasn’t used to being in any position of authority.

She nodded and went about her business, no longer concerned for my - Chapman’s - presence. She laced up her boots and left, leaving me and my sack of squirrels alone in the barracks.

If it sounds like I was really, overly focused on the fact I was carrying all my friends in a bag, I was. Take morphing technology out of this equation. Go to a pet store, put a few hamsters in a backpack, and go on a job interview and see what that does for your concentration and nerves.

Once the Controller was gone, I shut and locked the door. I opened the briefcase on one of the bunks and one by one, squirrel after squirrel waddled out. While they were demorphing, I started rifling through the room. The row of lockers on the wall yielded a number of jumpsuits, complete with facemasks. I began checking sizes and tossed them on the other bunk.

I was shocked to see two Tobiases when I turned around. Apparently, with no call to pass for human beyond walking around, Elfangor had decided being an Andalite wasn't going to be particularly expedient at this stage.

“Oh, yeah,” one Tobias said, noticing my expression, “When I was practicing my elephant morph, Elfangor was practicing human.”

Cassie and Rachel looked up and seemed to mirror my own shock, but Marco, who had been with Tobias and Elfangor at the time, just shrugged like it was no big thing.

Four of them out of morph. Me and Elfangor in human morphs. “How long have I been in morph?” I asked.

Elfangor turned his head quizzically. <Oh, I have neglected to explain. The genetic similarities between humans is such that I do not believe the Escafil technology will discern individual genomes.>

“And that means… what, exactly?” I asked.

<While in human morph, you should not be constrained by the time limit or morph restrictions.>

It took a little bit for the implications to set in. I could - all of us could - be other people, and remain so as long as we wanted. I mean, I couldn't see how that could possibly help us in any tangible way in the moment, but it was like a discovering a new cheat code in a video game.
Human morphs were different. That had to matter somehow, even if it didn't make much difference to us right in the moment.

Though, it did suddenly dawn on me that I could morph to tiger or Andalite directly from my Chapman morph, which would probably be a plus.

I was thinking that the playback on security of me morphing into Elfangor would look the same as Elfangor demorphing, but it occurred to me that I hadn't seen, either as a human or a lizard, any security cameras once we passed the lobby.

Then again, I had spent a lot of time in the vents and lighting arrays, and this was an alien facility, so who was I to say they didn't have cameras I just hadn't noticed?

The Yeerk facility had been busier the last time I'd been here, and thankfully we didn’t see many other Controllers. I had the impression that we were somehow out of place - like the few Controllers we did pass seemed to look at us like we weren’t supposed to be there. Elfangor said Chapman had rank, though, and if we were out of place, no one questioned it.

We were less than a hundred feet from the tank room when we hit our first major snag.

“Hey!” a voice called. “Just where the hell do you think you guys are going?”

Behind us was another Controller in a grey jumpsuit. He was younger than Chapman, maybe in his late twenties or early thirties, with pale skin, freckles and bright red hair. Without even thinking about it, I named him Weasley in my head.

Weasley looked at us like something was wrong, but when he saw me, his expression shifted to confusion. I tried not to mirror that. Whoever this was, Weasley seemed to recognize Chapman.

“Sir?”

“Is there a problem?” I said, trying to sound annoyed more than worried.

“Sir, you are aware that the Taxxon feeding crew does not have clearance for the pool maintenance area.”

In our haste to get through the facility, I had forgotten about the color tape on the floor. Orange was the color for the Taxxon crew, and apparently the Yeerks took that color-coded staff zoning very seriously. All of the jumpsuits in the barracks were orange.

I didn't have time to stammer or we were dead, and like I've said, I'm really not a good liar.

Weasley didn’t see the right hook coming.

I said I knocked out Braden Stewart. What I may have omitted from that story is that Braden was captain of the wrestling team. I should probably mention that I am not a small kid. If you saw me, you wouldn’t take me for a basketball player, like my brother, you’d think I played football. And I did. I wasn't a star player or anything, but I played for the JV team, till I started working. Even in Chapman’s body, with his taller frame and middle-aged wear and tear, I knew how to throw a punch. And Chapman may have been in his forties, but he wasn't decrepit.

“Fuck, Jake, you knocked the shit out of this guy,” Marco said.

“Meh, who cares?” Rachel sniped. “It was either knock him out here or he was going to get mauled inside.”
"Guys, hurry up and morph. We’re probably going to be deep in shit about thirty seconds after I open this door."

There was no preamble for any of us about the clothing. I would have to buy my dad a new suit, but no one gave a flying fuck about the Yeerk jumpsuits, and if the pool did have cameras, no one wanted to take off their masks. All of them seemed to be about the same. Torn orange fabric ripping at the seams, exposing different colors of fur. The way the jumpsuit exploded as the Andalite body erupted within the fabric… some things you just can’t capture in words.

Only Tobias and I were abstaining from morphing.

Elfangor shook off the remnants of Yeerk jumpsuit that had followed him through morphing and I handed him the briefcase full of bombs. He was the only one that knew how to plant them, after all.

Tobias stayed close behind me, still in the only intact jumpsuit. There simply wasn’t enough room for him to morph to elephant in the corridor. A wolf, a bear, a gorilla, and an alien stood behind us.

I took a breath and pressed Chapman’s stolen card to the reader. The light turned green and the doors opened. The staff inside didn’t scream. That would have been a human reaction. The Controllers weren’t afraid. Oh, you bet your ass they were surprised, I mean, alien slugs or not, a bunch of large, exotic animals show up at your work, you’re going to be surprised. One of them hit a button on the console, and another picked up some kind of weapon, like a heat lamp mixed with a handgun.

A flash of green light blinded me for a moment and a perfect circle the size of a plum was burned through the Controller’s chest.

She was maybe twenty years old at best. Kind of pretty, actually. Black hair, soft features. She had something of a Snow White look. And I will never forget the face she made as the realization that she was no longer alive flashed across her face before dimming like a snuffed candle. She fell to the floor like someone had cut the strings on a marionette.

The other Controller froze. We all did.

I turned to see Elfangor holding a similar-looking weapon. It was sleeker in design, and you’d probably mistake it for a water gun if you didn’t know what it was. I still didn’t.

Elfangor covered the distance to the console in a heartbeat. Those powerful Andalite legs made him incredibly nimble, even more so than the deer he resembled. I couldn’t follow the sweep of his tail with my eyes. That bladed tail was apparently retractable to some degree. As he swung the appendage, the tissue seemed to stretch, almost like a chameleon’s tongue or something. In a split second, the blade swished through the air and the second Controller was down.

Questions raced through my mind. What are you doing? Where did you get that? I knew it wasn’t in the briefcase. But the one thought that echoed over and over like a bad clip show wasn’t a question. You killed her. You killed her.

You killed her!

But those weren’t the words to come out when I found my voice. “What the hell is that thing?” I asked.

<Answers later,> Elfangor said. <Morph, now. We have little time.>
Cassie sniffed at the second Controller. Another woman, about my mom’s age. <She’s breathing.> Cassie said.

<br/>&lt;Jake, morph,&gt; Elfangor said again.

Tobias and Rachel moved the unconscious Controller to the corner. Marco gingerly moved the dead woman. She had aimed a weapon. She meant to kill us. I had no delusions otherwise. But that was the Yeerk in her brain. She had been a human being, she probably had a family. Were they Controllers too? Would they ever know what happened to their daughter, their sister, their girlfriend?

Their mother?

As much as those thoughts intruded, what bothered me most is how quickly I tuned them out. She was dead. We were alive for the moment, but the alarm had been sounded, and the flashing lights did nothing for my already-shattered concentration.

I was distantly aware that I was morphing. Somehow I was able to initiate the morph subconsciously. I felt dizzy and I just wanted the room to stop spinning. But as I got further into the change, as the tiger instincts bubbled to the surface, I found a sense of calm.

Tobias hit the buttons on the console and the door for the second elevator opened.

It was only about fifteen feet down. I’m not sure what the point of having the intake room was, unless it was a security choke point or something. I suppose it made transporting the unconscious bodies easier or something.

It was a transport elevator, and it could handle a number of gurneys, as evidenced by the wheel locks set into the floor. But just me, Rachel, and Marco were about a ton, easily the weight of ten people.

Rachel took a direct approach to the problem.

I'm sure the Yeerks are trained for all kinds of eventualities. The two Controllers in the booth had barely hesitated before reaching for the alarm and a weapon. They seemed to expect that an Andalite attack was always an outside possibility. But there are some things no one can ever be prepared for.

Like a full-grown bull grizzly barreling through the safety glass of an elevator and charging through.

From what I could see, the fifteen foot drop to the floor didn't even faze her. She just charged the glass and was running into the tank facility. The Yeerk technicians in their oh-so-special green uniforms panicked. Rachel smacked one of them with a paw the size of a frying pan. He did not get back up. Rachel kept going and I lost track of the bear among the various gurneys.

A ray of light lanced through the open space, and a section of concrete wall simply evaporated. That was the weapon that had been aimed at us in the mezzanine control room. Some kind of disintegration weapon.

&lt;Dracon beams,&gt; Elfangor said as though swearing. &lt;I'd hoped they wouldn't have Dracon beams this close to the tanks.>

“So fucking shoot the tanks!” Tobias yelled.
Two flashes of light, and I heard screams over the blaring alarm.

I rushed through the broken glass. Marco picked up Cassie with one arm and jumped, following close behind. Elfangor leapt after us, seeming to land effortlessly. I hadn’t really seen him cut loose and run before. I’ve seen deer run, and while Elfangor may look like one in some ways, Andalites are far more agile. And he had a weapon. He was aiming at the tanks, as Tobias had suggested. He fired a few more times before a door I hadn’t noticed earlier opened and more human-Controllers entered the room. They wore black jumpsuits, what looked like motorcycle helmets, and they were all carrying more of those disintegrator guns.

The noise was unbelievable. The sound of broken glass and crushed metal was deafening. It was like a car crash right behind us. The Controllers froze in surprise, and I whirled around to see the elephant standing in what remained of the elevator. A male African bush elephant is six and a half tons. Twenty times bigger than a grizzly. And Tobias had overloaded the machinery of the elevator just by morphing.

Tobias was a juggernaut. It made sense, in retrospect. He was a bullied kid. Not just by kids at school, but tormented by his aunt for years and then neglected by his worthless uncle. He wanted to be the biggest and strongest in the room. He wanted to feel powerful, and an elephant is nothing if not powerful.

<Elevator’s broken,> he said casually.

He charged into the row of Controllers. Red light flashed, and I saw linear burn lines appear on Tobias’s thick, grey hide, but that didn’t stop him. They hadn’t gotten better than two glancing hit; the rest had missed. One swing of his trunk sent three Controllers flying. They had immediately scattered and broken rank.

The Controllers took cover behind the docking stations, some of which were occupied.

<Elfangor, place the bombs,> I roared. He nodded and galloped off. Andalites were nimble sons of bitches.

Marco, Cassie, and I went after the Controllers. Tobias offered Elfangor cover - and extra destruction - as they made their way to the row of tanks. Cassie caught a Controller by the ankle and dragged him to the floor. Marco ripped up one of the gurney docking stations and threw it into the nearest acrylic tank. The acrylic was strong enough that it didn’t break, but it did spider-web with stress fractures. Marco tapped the Controller that had been hiding behind it and the dude was down.

One of them leveled a Dracon beam at Cassie. I leapt. Being a tiger felt like I was made of molten steel, and the liquid strength flowed effortlessly as I sailed the ten feet over an empty gurney and into the Controller. The forearm that had been holding the weapon was now between my jaws. I felt the Controller’s heartbeat beneath my paws. I read somewhere that human bone is stronger than concrete. I snapped both bones of the Controller’s forearm like I was biting through a candy cane.

I felt a sudden sting across my flank.

I looked up and snarled. One of the Controllers had shot me. Not with a Dracon beam. They seemed to realize very quickly that their tank room wasn’t a great place for disintegration beams. No, I’d been shot by a handgun.

I said before that tigers are big into apathy. They conserve energy for when they need it, so they’re
just full to the brim of fuck it. Yeah, well, when a tiger is pissed, that changes.

I wasn’t trying to kill him. Or her. It wasn’t easy to tell in their uniforms. But I felt my claws catch flesh as I sliced across the Controller’s chest. I could smell blood, and tigers really like the smell of blood. I struggled to keep the tiger from eating the human host. I focused on moving to another target.

Cassie’s muzzle was stained dark with blood when I caught up with her. Marco was carrying an unconscious body and - I really wish I was exaggerating - using the limp body as a weapon. There’s something really demoralizing about being bitch slapped in general, and it’s an order of magnitude more degrading to be smacked in the face with the body of your fallen comrade. There was the unmistakable sound of two helmets colliding.

All of us were breathing hard. But none of us were really tired yet. Wolves are persistence hunters, they run their prey down. They’re built for endurance. I was built as a mix of speed and power. A tiger my size could bring down a one ton ox and drag it for a mile if need be. Marco seemed to be a bit more winded. Gorillas are incomprehensibly strong, but their explosive bursts of strength tend to be limited to dominance displays. They’re not predators. But Marco wasn’t out by any stretch.

He swung his ragdoll again, the legs of the unconscious Controller smacking another in the chest. He then threw his toy into another Controller. I roared, a sound louder than a thunderclap, and a noise that triggered a primordial fear in the human hosts rushing at us.

I felt another sting as I took another bullet. I moved between the gurneys to keep cover. I heard the gunfire as he popped off a few more shots, but I couldn’t tell if he actually was aiming for us or if he was just trying to pin us down.

Suddenly a giant paw, with claws bigger than my fingers, smacked the shooting Controller in the head. He flew across the room sideways. If not for the helmet, I think Rachel would have killed him instantly. As it was, I couldn’t swear she hadn’t. She was dotted with blood, and it was immediately apparent that they’d put a number of bullets into her. I could hear the non-stop destruction of the rampaging elephant behind me.

<Guys,> I said. <This way.>

<Why are we running?> Rachel asked. <We’re winning, aren’t we?>

She wasn’t wrong. <Yeah, we are,> I answered. <For now.>

But we were also bleeding, and there was going to be a limit to how long we could keep up this level of assault. Cassie had been hit at least once right behind her shoulder, Rachel was peppered with shots, I knew I’d taken two, and I couldn’t see the blood in Marco’s pitch black fur, but I could smell it on him. The longer we stayed and fought, the more fatigued we were going to be and the more humans we were going to have to hurt. That wasn’t the mission. The bombs were the mission. The tanks were the mission. <We’re not here to fight> I said. <Marco, focus on breaking everything you can break. Rachel, Cassie, with me. We need to keep Tobias and Elfangor covered.>

That’s when the Taxxons showed up.

Chapter End Notes
If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Taxxons writhed into the room like elephant seals, their grotesque bulk rippling with each lumbering step. Not that they were slow. Taxxons apparently can move faster than a human can run.

One of them turned immediately toward one of the injured humans. I could see the struggle as the body lunged after food but where the Yeerk within strained to reign in its host. The instinct to consume meat was too much for the Yeerk to overcome, and I watched in horror as the Taxxon began eating one of the downed Controllers.

The first Taxxon was joined by two others, the corpse ripped apart and divided between the three giant maggots. More of the monsters were coming in now, at least a dozen, possibly more. Each was fitted with their bizarre Ghostbusters pack, and they had Dracon beams, and they didn't seem to have any problem using them in the tank room.

We ran.

I already knew we needed to reach Elfangor. He had been planting the bombs and we needed to get out of this room before they went off. We'd already closed about a third of the distance before the Taxxons had shown up, but now we were hauling ass.

All six and a half tons of Tobias turned when he saw the Taxxons. He trumpeted loudly and started charging. I saw Dracon beams fire, a hole the size of a cantaloupe appeared in one of Tobias’s beach-blanket ears. But that didn't stop him. It didn’t even slow him down.

I wouldn't be surprised if the oversized caterpillars weighed more than a ton. But Tobias lowered his head, skewered one of the Taxxons with his tusks, and like a living forklift, he raised the writhing worm up and whipped his head sharply to the left. As the momentum threw the Taxxon sideways, the tusks tore it open. I could smell its innards from thirty feet away. Diapers left in the sun would smell like potpourri compared to Taxxon guts. It was still alive and wriggling despite the horror of its wounds, but its brethren were on it before it could get up.

I learned firsthand that Taxxons are cannibals.

Rachel joined in. She bellowed as a Dracon blast burned part of her back, but she rammed into the soft meat of a Taxxon hard. The Taxxon may have been heavier, but it shuddered with the impact, and Rachel grabbed one of its crab-like appendages in her jaws and crushed it. Her claws ripped at the apparatus strapped to it's back. I could hear the hiss of pressurized gas escaping.
Tobias, meanwhile, stomped one like a giant tube of toothpaste. He just lifted a foot and bore his weight down. The way the Taxxon ruptured… I still get nauseous thinking about it.

For a second, I thought we might actually be okay.

But then Rachel took another Dracon blast.

The bear collapsed roughly. She had been in a full gallop toward another Taxxon, and when she went down on the smooth floor, momentum caused her to slide another dozen or so feet. She was a massive mound of fur, and she wasn't moving.

But I was.

I could feel the heat and smell the strange ionization in the air as Dracon beams flashed around me. I was just as big as a grizzly, but I had a fluid agility no bear could ever match. I slashed at the sides of the nearest Taxxon. My claws didn't do much of anything to the potato bug sections of exoskeleton, but the sides of a Taxxon are surprisingly soft. And a tiger's claws are unimaginably sharp. I slashed at the hoses of its breathing pack, and I ran to the next.

Cassie was too small as a wolf to attack a Taxxon head-on, but she was faster and way more agile. She snapped her iron jaws onto the spidery armadillo legs and pulled. Foul-smelling ooze gushed from the hole where the leg had been attached. It wasn't enough to bring the oversized worm down, but it squelched out obscenely in pain, and Cassie grabbed onto another leg. She couldn't maul them like I could, but she could hobble them.

A Taxxon rushed at me, and I dodged effortlessly. I was about to leap into the Taxxon when it just burst like a water balloon.

Marco had found one of the Dracon beams, presumably pilfered from one of the downed Taxxons. And his gorilla fingers were more dextrous than Taxxon pincers. The image of a gorilla wielding a laser gun would have been comical if I wasn't so amped with murderous rage and panic. Marco took aim and fired.

The Taxxons backed up. Half of the Taxxons left alive were eating the ones we'd killed or injured, and I made a mental note very quickly that you didn't have to kill a Taxxon yourself. Not if there were more than one in a room.

Marco picked off two more Taxxons. <Get her out of here!> he thundered in thought-speak.

Rachel.

Tobias had picked her up so the downed bear was lying limply over his tusks.

<Rachel??> I called out.

<God, say my name so everyone can hear it.>

She was alive.

Rachel was alive.

I felt relief like Tobias had been standing on me and had just then lifted his pachyderm foot from my chest. She was alive.

<Still think we should stay?> I asked her, choking on my emotions.
<Quitter,> she said, her thought-speech a little muffled.

<Stay with us, girl,> Cassie said. <You need to demorph.>

<Yeah, Cass, I'll get right on that. Did you make sure to bring my headshots while we’re at it?>

The explosion shook me to the bone. Tigers have incredibly sensitive hearing, and big cats might not feel fear the way humans do, but my god do they not like loud noises. The lights in the facility went out immediately. The alarm that had still been going this whole time went quiet. It was only in the silence that I actually realized it had still been going off.

When it's too dark for a tiger to see, it's too damn dark.

And then the second bomb went off.

Then the third, the fourth. One after another. I lost count after the eighth. I think the tiger had gone deaf by then.

We were alone in the dark. I didn't know where Elfangor was, I was terrified to call out in thought-speak, and we had no way of keeping track of the Taxxons.

I hoped they were as blind as I was. Tigers have some of the best low-light vision around, and if I was blind…

I felt the Taxxon mouth on my lower back before I could finish my thought. I roared in pain.

Light flashed in the dark.

I saw strobe light flashes of an Andalite, blaster aimed at the ceiling, using his weapon flash as a flare. And just like that, the Taxxon that bit me was suddenly dead.

It was dark again, but from the flashes of Elfangor's weapon, I had seen a path. It wasn't wide, but I could make the straight away in the dark. <Tobias, Rachel, demorph, now.>

“Way ahead of you, cuz,” I heard Rachel whisper. Or maybe that's all I could hear after the explosions. There was a definite persistent ringing left.

I felt human hands grope for my fur, and I growled in the pitch black so the others could find me.

Humans aren't good at walking blindfolded, but apparently tigers aren't really bothered by it. I didn't have much of a scent trail, but I recognized Elfangor's scent from our raccoon practice in his valley, and I desperately clung in my mind's eye to the image of the narrow path.

The light slowly flickered back to life.

More than half of them didn't flicker at all, and half the ones that did immediately exploded in bursts of glass bulbs.

But I could see.

Elfangor was waiting for us just ahead, and I dared a glance behind. There were messes of dead Taxxons, a few crumpled heaps of unconscious human-Controllers that the Taxxons hadn't eaten, but I saw no more Taxxons alive. There were huge chunks of concrete that had been pitted by errant Dracon fire or Elfangor's flare burst. Water or pool fluid gushed like broken pipes from the areas where we had ripped up or otherwise destroyed docking stations. Gurneys littered the floors. At least a hundred human hosts had actually managed to sleep through the whole fucking thing.
Those were some deep comas.

And the tanks were boiling.

<We have to go,> Elfangor said.

<You could have warned us,> I said without malice. I was too tired and in way too much pain to be mad. I didn't have the energy to spare for that.

<Taxxons came in from the other entry point,> Elfangor said, clearly out of breath. His tail, I realized, was caked with Taxxon ooze. <The detonator was activated prematurely. Taxxons can see in total darkness. Infrared. I would never have left you in the dark intentionally.>

I remembered the intrinsic panic I had felt as an Andalite just from closing my eyes. I suddenly suspected Elfangor's burst of laser fire wasn't for our benefit.

<Talk later,> Marco said. <Skip to the part where we leave.>

<I am all for the leaving,> Cassie said.

<How do we get out of here?> I asked. There was no chance in hell that we could go out the way we came in. The Taxxon bite stung like acid, the bullet wounds throbbed distantly, and I’m pretty sure I was at least half-deaf and concussed from the explosions. I wasn’t to a point where I couldn’t fight, but I was getting to the point where fighting wasn’t my first choice. And all of us, myself included, did have that squirrel morph. <Do we go small and try to sneak out or do we stay big and fight it out?>

<That is about the breadth of our situation,> Elfangor said.

<Vote?> I asked.

<We must hurry,> Elfangor said. <If the Taxxons failed, they’ll send Hork-Bajir next.>

“I just hit the reset on my grizzly,” Rachel said. “I still got some fight left.”

<I’m too tired to fight,> Cassie said. <I vote run.>

<Second,> Marco said.

“I’m not getting out of here in elephant mode and the only other morphs I have aren’t any good for fighting.”

I was tired too, but I wasn't sure six squirrels could get out without incident. Elfangor had a weapon, Marco had a weapon, and Rachel was a weapon. If we all went small, we were going to lose those assets.

<Okay,> I said. <We split the difference. Cassie and Tobias, morph back to squirrel. Marco, I hate to ask, but you have the laser gun. Go with Rachel and Elfangor.>

Marco didn't like that idea at all. <So you three get to scurry out of here while we get buried in Hork-Bajir?>

Tobias had an answer for that. “Guys, we have no idea what's on the other side of that door. Three of us in squirrel gives us some recon. Squirrels scout out an exit path, heavy hitters in case we need it.”
<Fine, whatever, let's just go,> Marco said.

Rachel was already halfway to bear when Cassie and I started morphing human. It was darker in human morph, and colder. But I could hear the hissing of the tanks. I don't know how many Yeerks were in those tanks, or even how many tanks Elfangor had hit in that blast. I wondered idly how long they could survive, how many we had killed. I didn't have any remorse for it. Honestly what made me the most uncomfortable was the pervasive thought that for all this, we hadn't hurt them as much as I thought we would. For all I knew, this wasn't the only tank facility.

But I didn't have time for such thoughts. The second I was fully human, I had to push into the squirrel morph. This was actually my first time I had morphed the squirrel. I hadn't thought I'd need it, so I hadn't bothered practicing it. I was actually used to shrinking by this point. The only morph I had that didn't involve shrinking was the tiger. Well, and Chapman.

All in all, being a flying squirrel wasn't much different than being a raccoon, at least not in terms of instincts or sensory input. I had good hearing, I could see in the dark, find food, that sort of thing. I was just way smaller. I recognized the panic instinct of a prey species, but I was pretty primed on retreat as it was, so that wasn't really a drawback. Actually, I was just happy to have night vision again.

I was considerably less happy about being a few inches off the ground.

Cassie and Tobias were right beside me. The giant forms of a bear, a gorilla, and an Andalite loomed over us like skyscrapers. The panic instinct throbbed in my brain.

<Alright, let's get the fuck out of here,> I said.

<Alright,> Marco said, holding the Dracon beam tightly in his ham-sized fist. <Mind scoping out the hallway?>

Bastard.

I scampered up the concrete wall, the sharp, gripping claws of my fingers and toes making the vertical surface easily accessible. I was squeezing through the vent opening when Cassie and Tobias caught up to me.

<Some night, huh?> Cassie said.

<Yeah, some night,> I echoed.

The other side of the door was exactly what I expected.

We were all going to die.

There were ten Hork-Bajir on the other side of the door. At least twenty humans, all carrying Dracon beams.

A crew of what had to be technicians stood off to the left, no doubt to try to undo or otherwise repair the damage Elfangor had done to the tanks. They had forklifts loaded with hoses, tanks, and spools of cable. All of them had tools.

Even Yeerks have EMTs, I guess.

<We're porked,> I whispered.
<Thought-speech is only received by those you intend to hear it.,> Elfangor answered.

<That would have been good to know hours ago,> I hissed. <We have a fucking army outside this door. Humans and Hork-Bajir. All armed. Should we try back-tracking the way we came in?>

<No,> Elfangor said. <They'll likely have similar postings at all points of access. If we delay further, they'll just open the doors from their side.>

<How many shots does your gun have?> I asked. <Does it have ammo or some kind of charge?>

<Andalite shredders do not deplete,> he answered. <Neither, however, do Dracon beams.>

The corridor was maybe thirty feet wide, and the door was ten feet tall. It was built for the forklifts at the very least. But that meant the vent we'd come through was at least fifteen feet off the ground. None of the Controllers were looking up at the vent.

I had an idea. The kind of idea that you know is stupid the second you hear it in your own head, but it was the only idea on the table. I prayed it wouldn't get anyone killed.

<Tobias, Cassie, you're not going to like this, but follow my lead. Elfangor, Marco, when I give the word fire through the door. All of you stay clear of the door, hug tight to the wall. You're gonna have return fire immediately.>

Jake?> Cassie asked, <what are you thinking, babe?>

<Something crazy.>

I leapt off the wall. My legs pushed off the concrete wall like an Olympic swimmer. I launched like an arrow, up and outward, and the second I hit the peak of the jump, I was flying. Flying squirrels don't actually fly, of course, but gliding is still incredible. It's like being a really small version of Batman. The furry skin flap of my glide membrane opened not like a parachute but rather like a kite. My tail acted like a rudder, steering me through the air.

And I was on the far wall, behind the Controllers below.

And for the love of whatever gods exist in the universe, no one noticed. Cassie and Tobias followed.

<Okay, here's where this is going to get hairy.> I told them what I wanted to do.

<Jake, man,> Tobias said, <You must have giant balls, dude.>

<Have any better ideas?> I asked.

<Not really, no.>

<Cassie?> I asked.

<I trust you,> she said. That, more than anything, gave me confidence.

Tobias bolted to the left, and Cassie to the right, never leaving the wall. They both stopped at the last human-Controller on their respective side and took position. I had the harder, more stupidly insane part of the plan.

<Marco, Elfangor, be ready,> I said.
I dropped down and flew into the back of the center Hork-Bajir. My claws gripped into the thick, leather hide of the giant alien.

<Now!> I yelled.

So many things happened all at once. The first is that all the humans toward the middle of the group saw me glide past them. I saw heads turn as I sailed through the air. Next, the Hork-Bajir may have been huge, but it noticed me hit it in the back. And when something hits you in the back, you turn around.

By the time the Hork-Bajir was even halfway through turning, I was bolting down to the floor. I ran along the length of the alien’s spine, down the length of its tail.

Cassie and Tobias did the same thing on the outer flanks, gliding out into the nearest Hork-Bajir and then scampering down.

It sounds stupid, but I did have a method to my madness. See, when each human saw us, they inadvertently turned slightly. And when the three Hork-Bajir felt the impact of a tiny rodent and went to turn around to see what had bumped them, they turned significantly more.

The effect of this is that a significant number of enemy Dracon beams were not being aimed at the door.

So when Elfangor and Marco opened fire, instantly killing two Hork-Bajir and three humans, the errant blast of mis-aimed Dracon fire hit another Hork-Bajir.

Tobias had landed the closest to the forklift crew, and he bolted into the mass of Controllers before the engineers noticed him. He rocketed past me and I ran after him toward Cassie.

Marco and Elfangor fired again. One beam hit nothing except the wall, but the other sliced off a Hork-Bajir’s arm and hit another human. Panic fire went off again.

But the Yeerks reigned in surprisingly quickly. They took aim at the door and fired. I could smell hot metal as they essentially melted the door. One of the humans hit the button and forced what was left of the door open.

For a second there was nothing.

Slowly, cautiously, a Hork-Bajir took two steps into the dark room. Hork-Bajir apparently don't watch slasher movies. The second it was in the room, Elfangor's tail blade came down like a guillotine. The neck of a Hork-Bajir is at its thinnest right behind the skull, and apparently Elfangor knew that.

The head landed with a little splat, but the impact of the body was just like dropping a ton of bricks.

Another blast of Dracon fire lanced from the other edge of the door. I couldn't tell if it hit anything, because right then, Rachel exploded out through the ruined door.

She swung her massive paw into the chest of a Hork-Bajir and the sound of her claws penetrating alien turtle meat will stay with me forever. The Hork-Bajir screamed, and tried to slash at the bear with its tail, only for Elfangor to amputate it mid-swing. Rachel threw it to the side and mauled into another. Elfangor fired down the hall, vaporizing a forklift and sending the engineering crew into survival mode.
Marco followed behind, Dracon beam held in one hand as he ambled in a tripod gallop. He fired into one Hork-Bajir, and with his other hand, he grabbed a Hork-Bajir by its dinosaur neck. There was a gurgling sound and then the gorilla pulled. Hork-Bajir aren't as heavy as Taxxons, but I was willing to bet that nine feet of reptile monster outweighed the largest gorilla. That didn't stop Marco from throwing the Hork-Bajir, though.

Me and the other squirrels weren't just watching this melee, either. We were in it. Tobias was right about what he'd said earlier: Squirrels aren't good for fighting. But my damn if they aren't the best at causing unmitigated distraction and bedlam.

My gambit had paid off, and by breaking their line just enough, we were able to cut down on the Hork-Bajir and scatter their fire away from the door. Elfangor, Marco, and Rachel were our heavy hitters at the moment, and we let them deal with the Hork-Bajir.

But we still had a ton of armed human-Controllers to deal with.

I scampered up a leg and into a guy’s face. I felt him move to swat me away, and I pushed off and leapt onto the shoulder of the guy in front of him. Cassie and Tobias saw me and followed my lead. I got to tell you, playing tag with three flying squirrels is a game you can't win. Not as a human. What we lost in size and power, we made up for in agility. We couldn't fight the humans, but by zipping from one to the other, we kept them in a constant state of disarray.

One Controller finally lost his temper with the storm of squirrels and fired his Dracon beam. He missed Cassie by only half a second, but for as quick as we were, it might as well have been half an hour. And the Controller Cassie had been crawling on was burned through the chest.

<Oh, we pissed them off,> she said.

<Pretty sure,> I said, jumping again, <that they were pissed off to begin with.>

The heavy hitters had finished the Hork-Bajir, and Rachel was now bitch-slapping humans like she was swatting flies. A love tap from a grizzly could smash your skull, so I'm not sure how gentle she was being with them, and while I would have reservations about it later, I didn't care right then how many people we had to kill.

For all my posturing about casualties a few days ago, once the shit had hit the fan, all I wanted was to get out. And there was no way we were getting out without killing people. I knew I already had.

<Squirrel patrol,> Marco yelled, <find us an exit!>

<On it,> Tobias answered. I saw him bolt up to the same lighting rigs I had used as a lizard last time and take off down the corridor.

<Cassie, come on, after him.>

Tobias didn't overstate the value of having three squirrels as advance recon. Behind us, Rachel padded along beside Marco and Elfangor. Both of them kept their weapons ready. We could see more Controllers running up ahead. Across the dividing wall, I could see more forklifts moving.

<Okay, to the left, now!> Cassie shouted.

We turned through a door just seconds before another crew of human-Controllers ran past.

I saw humans running like military police, carrying more Dracon beams. Hork-Bajir followed.
And my heart sank as I saw the unmistakable blue fur of the Andalite that followed.

He had a dark aura about him. Elfangor could broadcast his emotions to some extent, and the lizard had either been too far away or just lacked the emotional framework to be affected by it. But this was a thrumming pulse of disdain that made even the squirrel instincts wary.

Visser Three was right behind us.

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
<Visser Three is here,> I said.

Elfangor stopped, his butterfly hooves skidding on the smooth concrete floor. <What?> I'm not sure what kind of reaction I thought Elfangor would have, but I was still shaken by his surprised reaction. I mean, he knew I had seen him last time. He had to know there was some possibility his former buddy Alloran could be here.

<I know he was important to you,> I said, trying to keep my own focus, <but that’s not Alloran. That’s a Yeerk. A very high-ranking, means-to-kill-us Yeerk. We have to go.>

No sooner had I said the words than Dracon fire shot through the door behind us. They had apparently learned from our last miraculous escape that we were using the heavy automatic doors as cover. The beam shot past Marco, barely missing Rachel, and burned into the other door ahead of us.

They really needed to figure out that Dracon beams weren’t really the best solution for this kind of problem. They’d done more damage to themselves and the facility than they had to us.

Gunfire exploded through the hole in the doors. I watched as blood exploded from Marco’s massive gorilla shoulder. Rachel hugged close to the wall and pulled the ape close to her. Elfangor was pinned in the corner a few feet down from them. I don’t know how many rounds they’d fired off, but in just two seconds, our little section of corridor became a bullet storm. That is until Marco and Elfangor returned fire.

The beams of light lanced in both directions. Marco led Rachel and Elfangor to the far door and away from Visser Three. Me and the rest of squirrel patrol followed along the rigging.

The rigging.

<Marco,> I called, <Aim high. Take out the lighting fixtures in the next room.>

The gorilla nodded and he took a second to visualize the angles. And to make sure he didn’t hit the three squirrels that were above him. He fired and I heard the crash as the rigging ahead of us collapsed. The lights in the corridors went out in a cascading failure as Cassie, Tobias, and I glided across the sudden gap to the next section of rigging.

<Oh, go fuck yourself, Jake,> Marco snapped. Of all of us, the gorilla had the worst low-light vision. The only light left was emergency track lighting at the edges of the the floor. It wasn’t
unlike the lights in the movie theater, and I knew it was dark, but flying squirrels being nocturnal, it didn’t faze us at all. Grizzlies also have decent night vision. It’s apparently a myth that bears are nearsighted. Elfangor wasn’t much better off, though, and I already knew dark and Andalites didn’t mix.

But apparently Hork-Bajir don’t see well in the dark either. The humans seemed to be slowly adjusting to the dim light, but the Hork-Bajir were still groping blindly.

<Marco, three o’clock,> Tobias called down. Marco turned and hit the Controller in front of him with a hammer blow. <Hang on, bud, I’m coming,> Tobias launched himself down and glided effortlessly to the hulking black shape of the gorilla. A few inches of white amidst the otherwise dark mass. Tobias was volunteering to be Marco’s eyes in the dark.

Eyes. Right, I was on lookout duty. <Rachel, the Hork-Bajir can’t see in the dark. Marco and Elfangor can handle the humans.>

<Gotcha,> she called.

Elfangor was hitting the human-Controllers with the flat of his tail blade. I could hear the air whooshing as his elastic ribbon-like tail sailed through the air. I could hear the crack as he flicked the muscles, firing his tail like a bullwhip. Even if he wasn’t using the sharp edge of his tail, the blunt side was striking harder than a golf club.

<Ah, aren’t you clever,> said a voice. I’d heard it once before, as he approved plans for Gleet biofilters. The only known Andalite-Controller, Visser Three.

I didn’t see him anywhere, but I could hear his thought-speech. Elfangor froze. <Alloran…>

<Can he hear us?> I asked.

<No,> Elfangor said. <Not unless you want him to. He’s taunting us. Trying to find us.>

<Hey, I draw the line at being taunted by telepathic shadows in the void,> Cassie said. <Back to the retreat, okay?>

Rachel voiced her agreement by slashing a Hork-Bajir through the stomach and shoving the wounded alien to the ground. Rachel took off. She may have been raring for a fight a few minutes ago, but she was all about damage on the go now. With the Hork-Bajir essentially declawed in the dark, she didn’t even have to engage them. Mostly, she was just shoving them out of the way. Hard.

Marco’s weapon flashed in the dark, hitting another Hork-Bajir at Tobias’s instruction. <Come on, Groot, keeping moving,> he said.

<Surrounded by assholes,> Marco grumbled, but I could hear the smile in his voice.

“Someone, anyone, get these lights back on!” a Controller thundered. It was weird, but it was one of the first times I’d heard one of them speak since the melee began.

Marco smacked him into the wall. <Guys, I’m beginning to think fighting is a zero-sum game. I mean, no matter how many of these guys we knock down, they’re going to keep sending more.>

He had a point. And at some point they were going to get the lights back on. Or the next crew would just show up with flashlights or night-vision goggles. I suddenly felt very fortunate that they hadn’t hit us with grenades. No, grenades would be too structurally damaging. Smoke bombs. Tear gas. That stuff would work. I prayed none of the Controllers thought of that.
Elfangor said calmly, "It may be time to join the others."

Yeah, Rachel said, barrelling past another group of Hork-Bajir. "That's a great idea, but we need better than cover of darkness to do a morph switch."

"Jake, which way?" Tobias called.

"You're asking me?"

"You've been here before."

Shit, he had me there. I had been here before. I wasn’t an expert, but I was more familiar with this place than they were. I’d been more or less trying to get us toward the elevator, but once I stopped to think about it, I knew we couldn’t get out that way. There was no way in hell we could get back there. There were just too many areas where we could get swarmed by more Hork-Bajir. And even if they didn’t have Dracon beams, we weren’t bulletproof.

The last time I’d come through, I’d followed other people in and out. And I hadn’t been noticed as a lizard. The elevator couldn’t possibly still be open. They had to be on lockdown by now. Plus, we’d have to go past the main concourse to get there. With as many Controllers as we were passing in this section, I didn’t want to go anywhere near that concourse. Even if we somehow got Rachel, Marco, and Elfangor into squirrel morph, and tried to sneak out, it wasn’t going to work.

I tried to focus, and when there’s a gorilla, a grizzly, and a furry blue alien rushing behind you, that’s something of a challenge. I knew only two ways into this place. And I’d made a pretty good argument against the first one.

The only other point of access in this whole facility that I knew had to go all the way to the surface was the Taxxon feeding room.

"Fuck, I got a way out, but it’s going to suck for all of us."

"You say suck like this is a fucking picnic," Marco quipped.

I did not, under any circumstances, want to crawl up a drop shaft of fetid meat. Want to was immediately trumped by have to. But the gross factor was minor compared to the other problem. If we had to go up that drop shaft, we were going the wrong way.

"Um, Jake?" Cassie called, "aren't we circling back?"

"Yeah, we are."

I was getting a crash course on battle decisions, and I was doing a shit job of it. But one of the first things I learned about being in a clusterfuck battle is that no matter how well you plan ahead, you end up making some decisions in the moment. Things can happen that you don't anticipate, and things happen that in retrospect you should’ve anticipated. This was the latter. We came in without an exit strategy.

The fucked up thing - like there’s a part that wasn’t - was that doubling back actually worked.

Apparently all the Yeerk forces were mobilizing in the direction they thought we were heading. Makes sense. So when we doubled back, heading in a direction the Yeerks though we’d already cleared, there weren't any real obstacles.

We ended up back in the tank facility.
<Jake, where the hell are we going?> Rachel asked.

I didn't want to answer. I didn't like keeping them in the dark, but under the circumstances, I didn't think telling them would necessarily help. Oh, I'm taking you to the rancid meat chute, follow me. I couldn't see how that would go well.

<We have Controllers ahead.> Cassie said, thankfully filling in the gap of my non-answer.

It was an engineering crew. They had set up portable lighting and were diligently working on one of the trashed tank units. I saw other lights and there had to be crews working on half a dozen units.

<They're trying to repair the damage.> Marco said. <Any chance they can fix it?>

<No.> Elfangor said. <At most, they could move the Yeerks to another tank facility, but with the life support systems offline, and the profound increase in temperature, only a fraction of Yeerks could be saved in the time they have.>

We could have stopped the crews. Marco and Elfangor had weapons, and it would have been so easy to destroy the rest of the tanks. But so far as I could tell, the engineering crews were armed only with the tools they'd brought. I didn't come here to shoot fish in a barrel. I had already killed enough people. It was something terrorists would do. To cause an incident and then take out the first responders. They were essentially paramedics, and Yeerks or not, it didn't sit right. They weren't a threat.

<Forget them.,> I said. <The only other way I know out is through there.> I took off past the open space of the tank room and to the door that had last time led me to the Taxxon area. I couldn't see color as a squirrel, but I knew there was orange tape on the floor below.

<Wait.> Rachel said. <I thought you only knew about the elevator. Where the hell - > she trailed off. She figured it out. <Oh, fuck no!>

<What?> Tobias asked.

<We're going to that Taxxon room,> she said.

<Why would we head there?> Cassie asked.

<Because Jake here is taking us up the meat chute, aren't you, Jake?>

I sighed inwardly. <Rache, I have to assume the elevators are on lockdown. Even if we got through all the Hork-Bajir to get there… It wasn't going to work.>

<Like I said,> Marco added, <assholes.>

<We don't have time to argue,> Cassie said. <It's a way out, and it looks unguarded. Let's go.>

The part that I had forgotten, though, is that even the Taxxon feeding pens had been across the main concourse.

And the lights were still on in this section.

We came in behind a crew of Hork-Bajir and human-Controllers. That was our first little advantage. For a second or two, they didn't notice us. And the second advantage is that this crew wasn't armed. I don't know if they were on their way to an armory of some kind of if they were a different group that randomly became an attack squad by default.
Rachel and Marco powered through the Hork-Bajir as much as possible. Without Dracon beams, they used their blades, and Hork-Bajir are more athletic than they look.

And they look powerful.

Marco was thrown backwards, even as he fired his Dracon beam into the Hork-Bajir that threw him. Marco remembered our ace in the hole from last time. The Dracon beam hit the lighting fixtures just behind me and Cassie, and the cascading failure was just what we needed.

But then a blade slashed downward, and Marco lost the hand that held his weapon. The gorilla howled and grabbed the attacking Hork-Bajir with his other hand. He broke the alien’s neck with a simple twist. He took a moment and pried the Dracon beam from his own severed hand and tried firing at the other Hork-Bajir, but the weapon had broken when it hit the floor. A weak flash and then smoke. Marco hurled the object into the Hork-Bajir’s face. It screamed, but didn't go down.

Rachel came to Marco’s rescue. She was stained dark with blood, but it wasn't all hers. She tore through a Hork-Bajir with her claws. Her muzzle was dripping blood and I saw one of the fallen aliens had its throat ripped out.

Elfangor was dealing with the human-Controllers. He'd lashed several of them with his tail, and in the dark without weapons, the Controllers fled back up the corridor and out the way we’d come in. At first, I figured they must’ve decided discretion was the better part of valor.

But that wasn’t it. They were getting out of the way. Backup had shown up.

I couldn’t see what was coming. Squirrels have really good night vision, but there are limits. I could only see in about a twenty- or thirty-foot radius. But I could hear it. Whatever was coming down the corridor was big. Bigger than Tobias’s elephant morph. It reeked like the dead, and I could feel the vibrations even in the lighting rig. It was like an earthquake trying to sneak up on us.

<What is this?> Cassie asked. She was terrified. She wasn’t the only one.

<I-I don’t know,> I said.

All I could sense was a gargantuan mass in the black ahead where the corridor turned.

<I applaud your efforts,> Visser Three said, suddenly. <At current estimates, some seventeen thousand Yeerks are projected to be lost in your assault.>

Elfangor wasn't doing well in the dark. The track lighting didn't do as much in this space as it had in the corridor. The concourse was just too big for the limited lighting. I could feel Elfangor's sense of dread.

<Hang in there, Elfangor,> I said, trying to send back as much calm as I could.

<Show yourself, coward!> Elfangor shouted.

<Coward, am I?> Visser Three snarked, maliciously amused. A shape moved in the dark, it was too vague and I couldn't make out any details. <You were the ones that attacked the tanks. What is a Yeerk without a host, Andalite? Blind, helpless, defenseless. Seventeen thousand, boiled alive, and you try to flee. No, you know which of us is the coward, don't you?> The Visser actually laughed. It was a sickening, dark mirth. <Oh, some things never change, do they, Elfangor?>

You could've cut the silence with a knife. Rage sizzled from Elfangor’s mind. Visser Three, in Alloran’s body, with all his memories, knew Elfangor. And he knew what buttons to push. He was
trying to needle him.

And it was working.

Visser Three could feel it too. <Oh, Elfangor. Did you ever think you'd be on this planet again? After all your many failures the last time you found this seemingly insignificant rock, so fitting that you should die here.>

My thoughts raced. Again? Elfangor had been on Earth before! It made so much sense. The way he nodded or slouched, gestures that seemed too familiar, too human, the way he evaded certain questions, all of it was because he had been part of that Andalite mission to Earth.

He had been the one that left Alloran behind.

Elfangor fired into the dark. And in the flash of his weapon, the aptly-named shredder, I saw Visser Three.

The shadows writhed like snakes, and while I could only see it for a second, it was enough to snuff the last shred of hope from my mind. Visser Three didn't just have access to Alloran’s Andalite codes and military tactics, but also the Andalite morphing technology. And Visser Three could morph more than that fucked-up fish bird.

All I could see of the creature was tentacles. Hundreds of them. Like a creature made out of squid. But these tentacles didn't have suckers and they weren't slimy. More like giant segmented rat tails, covered in thorn-like hooks.

Elfangor fired into the monster, and in each flash, all I could see was more tentacles. But then, in the last flash, I saw teeth. Giant teeth, longer than my arm, set in rows on a bizarre four-sectioned jaw.

<Run!> I screamed, throwing all my panic and desperation into the word. Rachel and Marco took off after me, Tobias guiding Marco in the dark.

But Elfangor wasn't following us. I saw the flashes, and that's when I realized. I stopped and dared to turn around.

Elfangor was wrapped in tentacles. He kicked his powerful legs, trying to break free, but the tentacles pulled him down. His tail sliced at the tendrils, but there were too many. Another flash, and then I heard his weapon hit the floor. I saw him dragged, kicking and bucking, into the darkness.

<Run.> he said. It was the last word he ever said to us. There was no fear in it, no heat or anger. Just… resolve. He knew this was the end for him. I think, maybe, looking back, that Elfangor never planned on coming back. Every thought he’d had, every action he’d taken since we’d found him was to come here and simply do as much damage as he could.

His mission was complete, and the only thought he had left was that we get out with our lives. He knew we couldn't save him. And he didn't want us to die trying.

I was running as fast as my squirrel body could run. The others followed along. No one said a word. No one had any words.

I heard the telepathic scream through every thread of my consciousness. My soul would forever after carry the stain he left on us. Anguish, fear, the cacophony of pain. But also his hope, his pride, and his unyielding sense of rebellion. His last conscious thought was of defiance.
And then there was only silence.

Elfangor was gone.

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

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There was an infinitesimal moment that seemed to last forever. The godawful silence when you realize you're alone. I remember that night at Cassie's, watching the falling star that turned out to be his ship. There had been such a rush of awe and wonder then. Time had seemed to stop then, too. So much of our lives the last few days had revolved entirely around him. And just as suddenly as he had come into our lives, he was taken from it.

I could hear Tobias scream in thought-speak, no words, just a black wave of raw emotion.

<He’s… he's gone…> Rachel stammered.

I didn't know what to do, what to say. Of all things, Visser Three helped us. From behind us came the monstrous bellow and the lumbering thunder of some kind of footfall. I didn't even know if that thing had feet, but it definitely sounded like it was moving.

And it was heading for us.

But we were already in the corridor to the Taxxon feeding area. And the monstrous form of Visser Three couldn't maneuver around the corner from the concourse. The giant mass of writhing tentacles I saw in the dim glow will probably haunt me for the rest of my days. Nothing but barbed tendrils and teeth, and I knew if not for his size and our head start, he’d have killed us already.

And then Elfangor gave us one final surprise. See, as it turns out, Elfangor hadn't planted all the bombs in the tank room.

The flash was blinding, overloading the squirrel's overly sensitive retinas. But the light was brief. The noise was tremendous. Almost equally loud was the sound Visser Three made. Huge chunks of concrete exploded from the wall, severed tentacles splattered everywhere. We were only a dozen yards at most, and wet globs of monster shot past us. The dust cloud filled the hallway, and I saw the cracks creeping out into the rock wall.

It didn't kill him outright. I guess that was just asking too much of the universe. But if the ethereal howls of pain and rage were any indication, he was seriously injured.

<Move!> I yelled.

The Taxxon feeding area was only a little further ahead, and when we came in, the orange jumpsuit crew stopped in their tracks.
Six human-Controllers armed with hoses and floor squeegees were nothing to the gorilla and grizzly. A one-armed gorilla is still more dangerous than you could imagine. Marco grabbed the nearest human, pulled him close, and roared. It was enough to send Tobias gliding off his shoulder and up to the rigging. The gorilla teeth, each the larger than a man's thumb, shined in the bright lights of the feeding area. Marco threw the Controller like a discus, pivoting on his feet and making an almost hundred-eighty degree turn. The Controller slid across the length of the room and into the wall. The message was clear. He knew Marco could have killed him effortlessly. Hell, Marco could have thrown a goddamned engine block if he wanted to.

<Get out.> It was all I could do not to scream. My mind was boiling. I felt like I was on fire. Nothing made sense, and I knew I was panicking. I made no effort whatsoever to calm myself. There was nothing in the world that would salve the loss of Elfangor, Visser Three was probably right behind us, and Rachel and Marco needed to demorph and fast-track to their own squirrel morphs to get out. Panicking was really the only sane choice, and I needed the adrenaline rush if I was to have any chance.

<Rachel,> I said, groping for ideas in the noise that was my brain, <see if you can break that panel by the door.>

There isn't much that a grizzly can't break. She shoved her claws through the panel like a toddler tearing into graham crackers. Sparks shot out from the hole where the panel used to be.

<I don't know if that's going to work or not, so let's go. Morph as fast as you can.>

Cassie had apparently noticed the meat chute while I was focused on Marco and Rachel demorphing below.

<This is our way out, huh?> She said it like we were about to swim through broken glass.

<It's either this or the tentacle monster,> Tobias said.

Marco and Rachel finished their squirrel morphs right when the first impact hit the door. Cracks appeared in the concrete around the door frame. Either Visser Three had demorphed and remorphed, or the son of a bitch hadn't been as injured in the bomb blast as I'd hoped. Marco and Rachel caught up to the rest of us in a heartbeat.

Another impact and dust puffed out around the door frame. A loud thud and suddenly a mass of tentacles punched through the ruined mess of the control panel.

<Andalites!> the Visser thundered at us.

<Quick,> I said, <Go, up and out.>

I was the last to go. I watched the four squirrels ahead of me bolt through the metal ductwork in the ceiling. The chute was smeared with blood and slime, and the smell of rotten meat was beyond my vocabulary. But the jet-black mass of tentacles was methodically ripping into the concrete. The third squirrel, I think it was Rachel, had just gone through the shaft when the Visser ripped the massive sliding door from the concrete wall. Tentacles by the hundred slithered into the gap like a plague of snakes. It wasn't enough for the rest of him to get in, but that was clearly irrelevant.

The tentacles groped in the space below us, and Cassie bolted up the shaft right ahead of me. No sooner had I entered the duct than tentacles swarmed over the lighting array below me. I heard the sound of crushing metal and exploding glass as they squeezed the lighting fixtures, ripping the steel cables that suspended them.
Visser Three bellowed below in frustrated rage.

Our only possible course was to climb, and what is better at running up a vertical surface than a squirrel?

We had only been in the chute for a minute, maybe two, when the section of duct below us was ripped down. But that was it. I kept expecting a tentacle to follow us up the shaft, but thankfully that didn't happen. For the moment, we were safe. But who knew for how long?

We climbed like the devil was behind us.

It was impossible to judge distances with any certainty in the total black of the meat duct. The stench was worse than you can imagine. Every so often - and again, I can't really guess how far apart they were spaced - was a series of wheels set into the duct. The duct was apparently mechanized, and when the system was on, the wheels would presumably keep meat from getting jammed in the chute. I prayed it didn't come on with us in it.

I kept time by counting how many wheeled sections we passed. Fifteen, sixteen. After twenty, I couldn't scurry any more. I felt like that scene in the original *Ghostbusters* movie when they have to take the stairs all the way up. But even slowing down, we kept going.

We climbed in silence.

No one wanted to talk, not yet.

I occasionally looked down, though I couldn't tell you why. I wasn't worried about tentacles anymore, and I really couldn't see anything at all. Maybe, on some level, I was looking back for Elfangor.

I wasn't delusional. I knew he was gone. I had felt it when it happened. And I wasn't looking back because I thought he'd be there behind us, somehow miraculously catching up to us unscathed. I was looking back, I think, because it was the only way I had to say goodbye.

The darkness below was all I had left of him. We were leaving, we were alive, because of him. He'd made the sacrifice play to make sure the rest of us reached the room below. And this place... he deserved better. He deserved better than us. Better than five kids that didn't know what they were doing. He deserved better than me. I had fucked up. If I had thought about this...

Tobias had stolen a car... because of me. I hadn't planned for the trip here. And Elfangor was dead because I made the call to backtrack. Because I hadn't thought of our exit like I should have.

I stared into the abyss below me because I couldn't bear to look up. Up above was our freedom, our survival. The way out was right here, and we were going to make it.

And he wasn't. Didn't.

He wasn't my friend, Elfangor. Not really. I had known him less than a week. Six days, I'd known him. Just six days, and he'd torn our whole world down to ribbons and we had made this our new reality. I didn't know him on a personal level. I didn't know his likes, dislikes. We never watched a football game, never talked about comics or hung out in any person-to-person kind of way. He wasn't my buddy or anything.

But somehow he was so much more than that.

I turned back up to my friends, up to the endless climb above, and I said my silent goodbye to the
one of us that wasn't coming.

After awhile, I started to get nervous about how long we had been in the chute. Without Elfangor, there was no way of telling for sure how long we had been in morph, and I had lost count of the wheeled sections somewhere in the forties.

The only vague clue we had about how long this shaft might be was the duration of the elevator ride down. I knew we were probably hundreds of feet below ground level, trapped in a metal tube, and I wasn't sure how fast we were climbing.

We were about a foot long, including the tail, and that put us at hundreds of body lengths to go. And my squirrel body was tired all the way through. We just weren't built for stamina.

<-We can't do this,-> I said. It was the first any of us had spoken since we evaded Visser Three.

<-Jake?> Cassie asked.

<-What's up?> Marco added.

<-Anyone have a guess how long we've been in morph?> I needed something. Problems can be useful for stress. Finding a solution is a good distraction to shit you don't want to think about.

<-I don't know,> Rachel said. <-Me and Marco maybe twenty minutes. You guys… what, like half an hour? Forty minutes, maybe?>

Twenty minutes.

From the time I switched from tiger to squirrel till we had made it to this fucking meat chute, had only been twenty minutes, give or take. It felt like days.

But that gave us a little more than an hour before we had to demorph and there weren't any other branching points in this shaft. I began to feel very claustrophobic in the confined dark.

<-We got an hour twenty at most before three of us are stuck as squirrels. We need to haul ass.>

<-There's gotta be some way out of here,> Rachel said, finally. <Any ideas?>

<-If there're wheels, there has to be some kind of drive chain or belt system, right?> Marco asked.

<-I thought of that,> I said. <-But any housings for cables or belts wouldn't be big enough for a demorph.>

<-Yeah,> Marco said, <-if it only needed to be big enough for cables, sure. But if any section breaks, someone has to be able to access it for repairs, right? I mean, belts and chains wear out. And they have to get bone fragments jammed in this shit every now and again, right?>

That made sense. And even for as horrific as the shaft smelled, they did have to clean it periodically or else the buildup of meat slime, bacteria, and fungus would be astronomical. Marco was right. They had to be able to get in here to some extent.

At the next section of wheels, we spent a few minutes feeling around for seams, hatches, screws, anything. In total darkness, it was a challenge. But we had sensitive paws, and we managed to find some kind of access panel. Getting it open was nothing short of a fucking miracle. I have no idea what we did to move it, but the important thing is that we did.

Five squirrels tumbled into a larger space. There were drive belts, I could smell engine grease, and
I'm pretty sure I fell into a series of gears along the way down. It was just as dark, but there was at least some room. The smell was a little better, but not by much.

<Not sure this will work for morphing,> Cassie said. <But I count it as a positive move.>

A few minutes of blind groping later, we came out into an engineering platform. Finally, we had a break from the god awful smell of rotten meat, but the real break was that we finally had some light. It wasn't a bright light, but our night vision didn't need much.

The room was tight, and in a lot of ways, it reminded me of a submarine. Everything was metal grating, iron railings, dials, gears, et cetera. It was tight, and I actually felt a little bad for whatever schmuck Controller was responsible for this kind of bullshit maintenance. For as high-tech as the Yeerks seemed to be, there was a staggering amount of low-skilled labor involved. I actually felt a lot better that my worst obligation in life had hitherto been cleaning the bathrooms at the movie theater.

Even going one at a time, it was cramped, but the important thing is that we all got a morph clock reset. It was easiest for Cassie. Cassie’s not short, really, but she was the shortest of our group. She was the one to check what we thought was the entrance to the maintenance crawlspace, or in our case, the exit from it, but no such luck. It was probably for the best, anyway. Who knows what would’ve been out there, right? Last thing any of us wanted was to get drawn into another conflict. At the very least, we found out that the maintenance shaft had a ladder, and that was good enough for me. I was impatient to be done with squirrel mode, but it was more efficient to climb, even as small as we were.

We finally reached the top of the shaft some time later and came out in a meatpacking plant, just like I had suspected. It was thankfully deserted. I’d spent the last part of our ascent wondering if Visser Three had figured out where we had gone. Maybe the seventeen thousand Yeerks we cooked, the more than half dozen tanks we’d fried, and the untold number of Taxxons, Hork-Bajir, and humans we’d killed or injured warranted more of his focus.

Once we were out in the night air of the parking lot, I felt a rush of relief. We found a spot to demorph a little further out, in a stand of trees behind a Jiffy Lube. Minutes later, we were all in our owl morphs, flying south.

<What now?> Cassie asked.

I had been dreading that question. We had one loose end to take care of before we went home. But the car Tobias had stolen was gone by the time we made it to the hangar buildings. I wasn’t sure what to make of that. <Controllers?>

<Maybe,> Tobias said. <Or the cops found it. It was a stolen vehicle after all.>

There wasn’t much else to do without the car except continue on home. We passed a bank, the kind with the big digital clock and temperature display. It was a little before two in the morning. If the wind was with us, we would be back in Santa Cruz by three.

Level flight was easy and all of us new the way home from here. We were quiet again; for better or worse, we were each alone with our own thoughts. My mind raced with everything that had happened. Not just losing Elfangor, but all of it. I thought of Snow White, the unnamed dark-haired Controller Elfangor had shot, the Controllers I had mauled as a tiger, some of which were later eaten alive by Taxxons. I thought about the fact that I was complicit in the death of seventeen thousand slugs, that we had done damage to the enemy.
But I already knew that meant nothing. The tank facility we had hit was in all likelihood only one of several throughout the complex. It was designed exclusively for humans, so right off the bat I knew there were other facilities for Hork-Bajir and Taxxons.

I wondered what would happen to the people on those gurneys, the unconscious hosts that slept through the whole melee. Probably they'd all just be infested again by new Yeerks. We probably accomplished nothing. That was a sobering thought as we soared silently through the night.

Elfangor died doing what he could, and I'm not sure how much impact we had on anything.

<I’m going to Elfangor’s,> Tobias said suddenly, shattering the silence.

<Tonight?> Rachel asked. <You sure?>

<I… I have to,> he said. <He… the other day, he showed me how the comm array works. I…>  

<We have to call Aximili.> Cassie said. Just like that, she had turned it into a group thing. All of us needed to be there. Only Tobias had actually ever seen or spoken to Aximili, a fact the rest of us had only just then learned, but all of us were part of it.

When we landed in the Moore Creek Preserve, it felt different. Without Elfangor, it was just a grove of trees in the dark. It seemed eerie how quickly I found it foreboding, how much the character of the place changed already. And when we demorphed and I lost the owl’s night vision, it became darker still. Tobias went to the comm array, working the Andalite technology the way Elfangor had taught him. Marco and Rachel set themselves to starting a fire. Cassie got blankets out of the tent in the meantime.

I, however, was transfixed on the ground. Amid the blades of grass, in a small bare patch of bare earth, was a single impression. A hoofprint that hadn’t been left by any deer. I was on my knees without even thinking. I remember lightly touching the cool, damp soil, feeling the impression he’d left behind. All that remained of Elfangor were the impressions he had left behind.

Whatever wall I had built in my mind to contain my emotions broke. I cried. Unabashed tears fell down my face. I felt the clenching pain in my throat as I sobbed like a child, the bitter tears stinging in my eyes. I don’t know how long I sat there crying over a footprint in the dirt. But I felt a hand on my shoulder and looked up to see Cassie crying too.

Somehow, I was holding Cassie. I don’t remember moving, but she was in my arms and we were hold each other, crying on each other, for a long moment before we regained any composure. When I looked at the others, they too were caught in the moment. At some point, Rachel and Marco had gotten the fire going. Marco sat on the ground by a fallen log, hugging his knees and hiding his face. Rachel stared into the fire, tears steaming her face. Tobias leaned against a tree, wiping the tears from his eyes with the back of his wrist.

A few minutes later, we heard a noise from the communications array. The array apparently worked similarly to the memory storage thing Elfangor had shown us in Cassie's barn. When I saw Aximili for the first time, he was standing in the clearing with us. It wasn't like a hologram at all, I felt like I could reach out and touch him. God, he looked so much like Elfangor. Smaller in his proportions, he was clearly younger, but the green eyes had the same brightness. Curiosity etched across his features as he scanned the unfamiliar faces.

<Yes?> he said. <Where is Elfangor?>

Tobias couldn't keep it together. Rachel held him close as he began crying again. Marco had never
found his feet. He sat, gently rocking himself as he stared into the fire. Cassie buried her face into my chest.

I swallowed the molten iron in my throat. “Ax... Aximili...” I choked. “We... we have some bad news about your brother...”

It went as well as it could have, I guess. Aximili had the same reaction I think anyone might have had.

>No. Not Elfangor...>

He was in denial for a few minutes, but as we explained what had happened, each of us adding little details, his expression blanked, and then darkened.

Aximili hung up on us.

He just gave us a foul look and then suddenly he vanished. I couldn't blame him. He needed to process, whatever that entailed, and if he wanted to be pissed at us, that was just going to be the nature of the beast. We'd deal with it later. I was too drained - physically, mentally, and emotionally - to take it personally. We were the only ones that could get him out of the ocean, so he couldn't ignore us forever.

Once she composed herself, Rachel started to morph back to owl. She had to get home. I know I did too. Tobias sat down next to Marco and I wondered if he wasn't going to stay in the tent tonight. I didn't think it my place to ask either of them their intentions. If it were up to me, I would probably have stayed too. But like Rachel, I had my own obligations.

I flew with Cassie to her bedroom window. We didn't chat, didn't flirt. Nothing. But after she demorphed, and I got ready to fly home, she called for me. “Jake?” I heard her whisper.

I turned, looking at her face. I remembered thinking earlier that night if I'd ever see her face again, and I was overwhelmed with too many emotions as I studied her expression. <Yes, Cassie?>

She shifted awkwardly, standing in her one-piece swimsuit. “Would you... stay? With me?”

<I...> I was already thinking how to get away with that. Spending the night with Cassie definitely trumped going home. And no, perverts, I wasn't thinking about that. But I couldn't not be home in the morning.

Cassie apparently knew what my hangup was. “Just till I fall asleep,” she said. “I... I don't want to be alone.”

I turned around as she changed out of the swimsuit and into a nightshirt. I sat on her nightstand, feeling the cool breeze. Cassie pulled up her blankets. <I love you, Cassie,> I said. It was the first time I'd said it to her.

“I love you, too,” she said, quietly. “Thank you, Jake. I needed this.”

She was asleep only a few minutes later. I felt creepy being in my girlfriend’s bedroom at night while she slept. But I spent a long moment just watching her breathe. She was alive. I was alive. We lost Elfangor, and that was a wound that wasn’t going away. But we were alive. That was the part I needed to focus on.

It was almost four when I got back to my room. I collapsed on my bed, thankful school was closed tomorrow for senior graduation. The ceremony wasn’t till the evening, but the school was closed
anyway.

I wanted to dissolve into oblivion, but sleep didn't come quickly. I'm not too proud to say I cried myself to sleep that night.

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
Chapter 30

Chapter Thirty

The next day was a mess.

I slept in, as you could probably guess. That wasn’t really out of character for me. I mean, I work nights at the cinema and my parents wouldn’t think anything of me being up late. My parents believed in natural consequences. If I wanted to be up till four watching Hulu or Netflix, then it was on me if I was tired the next day. So when I woke up at eleven, I wasn’t in any trouble.

That was not true for Cassie. I had a text letting me know she was grounded for the next two days. When Cassie is grounded, her parents let her send out texts to her friends, and she loses her phone. So that was the first problem.

The second issue was that it was Tom’s graduation day, and that meant I had any number of family obligations, so catching up to my friends was going to be difficult.

I got a shower. I needed it. The morphing process being what it was, we didn't bring any of the smell with us from being in the meat chute, but I needed the shower anyway. I let it run cold. The water was nearly Arctic against my skin, and I felt my teeth chattering before I was finished. But I just wanted to be numb for a little bit. It didn't work though. All it did was wake me up.

I got coffee in the kitchen. We were having a family lunch in about an hour. Uncle Dan was coming back from a trip to Seattle later that day, so he was going to miss lunch, but Aunt Nicole and my cousins were all going to be there. That's when another problem presented itself.

“So,” my mom said, as I poured myself a cup. “I hear you and Rachel put a lot of thought into Tom’s graduation present.”

Oh, shit. We’d used that as an excuse to get out and do stuff relevant to our Elfangor missions, but I had never actually followed through on it. I had a debit card, though, and I thought I could pull something out of my ass. At any rate, after the mayhem the night before, lying straightfaced to my mother was nothing at all. That should have bothered me. It was the kind of thing that normally would've bothered me. But it didn’t. Not even a little.

“I’m just hoping he likes it,” I said.

Mom gave me a hug. There were tears in her eyes. “You two grew up way too quick,” she said.

Oh, if she only knew.
“Where is Tom, anyway?” I asked.

“Out with your father. We'll meet them at the restaurant. I have to make a few work calls. I want you ready to leave at noon.”

She left me in the kitchen, and I found the solitude uncomfortable. I texted Marco after I finished stirring my coffee. I got an odd response.

This is an automated reply.

The individual you are trying to reach is taking a surf day.

If you don’t like it, eat a dick.

Marco was surfing. So far as I knew, it was the first time he’d done that since his mom died. Despite everything, I found myself smiling. I imagined Marco in the water, the way he used to be. It was hard to think about that and not smile.

The only other person I could call was Tobias. Thankfully, he answered. I told him what was going on with Marco and the girls, but after that, I wasn't sure what to say.

“So what are you going to do?” Tobias asked.

I sighed. “What are any of us gonna do?” I rebuked, more sarcastically than I’d meant.

But Tobias had that weird Zen that he always seemed to have. I don't know how he did it. Maybe it was something borne out of years of abuse, neglect, and more hard knocks than any kid should have. Maybe it was just the weird poetry he saw in the world. Fuck if I know. But I will remember what Tobias said forever.

“We pick up the pieces, Jake. Not much else you can do.”

I felt the too-familiar tightness in my throat. Tears stood scalding in my eyes. I didn't want to cry again. It wasn't a macho thing. I don't think I'm that kind of guy. I was just tired of needing to. I was sick of being so hurt, so overloaded, that tears were all I had. He hadn't been gone but half a day, and I was already tired of missing him.

A day ago, I couldn't imagine this. I had spent days making peace with the idea that I might not come back. And all I could think then was how fucking childishly naïve that had been. I had no idea what real loss felt like. How selfish it had been. What I felt in that moment, feeling the aftermath of losing Elfangor… If I had died in the Yeerk pool, my parents would be feeling what I felt. My brother, Cassie, all of them. I was not just a casualty to inevitability. And I knew then that I couldn't afford to be that cavalier with my own life, with my friends’ lives.

How did Marco do this for two years? God, how does anyone do this? How do you wake up knowing that that person - who means so much to you - isn't going to be there?

Pick up the pieces…

“It's my fault…” I said.

“No, it's not,” Tobias said. He said it calmly. Not patronizing, not placating. Just a fact.
I laughed on the line, certain he could hear me sniffling. “Oh, please. You had to steal a car last night because I thought we were going as owls. If I had thought about the Taxxon feeding pen earlier-”

He cut me off. “Jake, listen to yourself. Look, if we had brought up the transportation issue, the only thing that would've changed is that you'd have been involved in stealing the car.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“You were only mad because you didn't know about it. It was never just your job to plan shit out. You paid for the camera because you felt weird about stealing it, but if you didn't have the money, we were still going to get that camera, right?”

It was hard to argue against that point. “But the elevator,” I said. “I should've seen-”

He laughed at me. “Jake, why the hell do you think you should have seen something? We all saw your memories. We all knew about the meat chute. It didn't click as a way out for anyone else. And the only one of us that should have been able to predict Yeerk security was Elfangor.”

I felt the flash of anger. For a second, it felt like he was blaming Elfangor for his own death, but that wasn't it.

Tobias continued. “He was a soldier, Jake. He didn't come here for the beach. He came here to fight the enemy. He knew every step of the way that this was going to happen.”

“What?” I choked.

“Think about it, man. His first plan was the bomb. He never had anything to contribute when we talked about Aximili. He knew from the time you went into the pool that Visser Three was his buddy Alloran. He wanted to go down swinging.”

*Down, down, in an earlier round…*

I wiped the tears from my face. “So how do we pick up the pieces?” I asked.

“Step one, quit blaming yourself. We all miss him, Jake, but you know it wasn't your fault.”

Yeah, that wasn’t going to happen overnight. “And step two?”

“Oh, step two is easier. You stop crying, clean yourself up, and go to lunch. Marco is surfing, right? Let him do what he needs to do. Cassie's grounded, but she's half a mile away and who’s going to notice Cassie taking care of a bird?”

“Yeah, you're right. Thanks, T-Rex,” I said. It was an old joke. Before he moved with his bitch of an aunt, before his mom had disappeared, back when we were just silly third-graders, Tobias had been obsessed with dinosaurs. I hadn't called him that in eight years. I was about to ask him about coming over for the weekend, seeing that album like I'd asked my mom, but that wasn't what came out. “Wait, half a mile? You're still there?”

“Well, yeah, where else would I be?”

“You never went home?”

“I stole a car from a chop shop, Jake. I didn't want to be at the apartment when my uncle found out it was missing.”
Well, I couldn't blame him for that one. “What have you been doing?”

“Trying to get Aximili back on the line. He doesn't want to answer and I guess we just have to give him time. I've been… going through stuff. He, uh, he left a lot of things behind. I got some of his files open, but I can't read any of it. Andalitese or Andalish or whatever you want to call it.”

I nodded, even knowing he couldn't see me. I knew instantly that we needed to be there with him. Whatever Elfangor had left in his little scoop, we were going to need it to save Aximili. “Yeah, yeah. I'll try to catch up with you later.” A thought intruded. I remembered what Cassie had said last night. “Say hi to Cassie for me. I think she might like the company, actually.”

“Yeah, I think I'll do that,” he said.

We said our goodbyes and I got ready for the family lunch. I realized I'd been on the phone with Tobias longer than I had thought. I was driving my mom to the restaurant only a few minutes later.

Family functions vary by family, but having all of us together at a table was interesting. Tom had chosen a Chinese buffet restaurant, which was fine for all of us. They put two tables together for the eight of us.

Lunch went well, actually. Mom and dad told anecdotes about Tom from when we were younger. Aunt Nicole told us a rather colorful story about what mom did after her own graduation. I smiled to myself. I couldn't help it; I found it amusing. Mom and Dad chose to celebrate Tom's adulthood by treating him like a child. I guess because it was one of the last times they could.

We made a toast to Tom. It was… fun.

And that was weird. Rachel and I exchanged looks throughout the meal. For everything I was feeling, and everything she had to be feeling, we had to hide it. I can't really explain what Elfangor meant to me in those six days. But I hadn't even gotten to mourning yet. I had barely begun to process that he was gone, and here I was putting on a hollow smile and going through the motions about something else entirely. As though a single crack in the façade would send the Controllers rushing in.

I remembered to breathe. To not have a panic attack at the table.

We got to graduation gifts and I almost died. I had texted Rachel about the thing, but she had been uncharacteristically coy and dismissive about it. “I've got that covered,” she'd said. And when I pressed her, all the more I got had been, “you'll see.”

I shouldn't have doubted her. Rachel saved my ass. Tom opened the gift “Rachel and I” had picked out for him. You can't imagine my surprise when I saw the same leather briefcase that had carried my friends in their squirrel morphs. Or rather, one exactly like it. The other one had definitely been left behind.

Aunt Nicole squealed. “Is that a Pratt Leather briefcase?” she asked. Of course my lawyer aunt would be a briefcase aficionado. I would learn later that the briefcase in question was more than two hundred dollars.

Tom seemed tactfully pleased, but otherwise unsure how to take the gift. “Um, thanks.”

Rachel beamed at him. “We wanted you to look like a real college student,” she said. “But there's more. Open it up.”

Sure enough, stuffed inside the briefcase was a brand new Stephen Curry jersey. Tom looked at me
and smiled. “You're a good brother, Jake. And Rachel, come here.” He gave Rachel a massive hug.

“Hey, what about us?” Jordan asked.

“You want hugs, too? Well, get over here.”

Food was great, and I managed to text “thank you” to Rachel. To this day, I don't know where she got the money to pull that off. To be fair, I never asked. I mean, I have a really good hunch, but I don't actually know where she got the money and it's going to stay that way. Some questions are better left unanswered.

After the family lunch, we started to split up. Tom was going off to meet Zoe, who was of course having her own graduation stuff with her family. I gave my brother a hug and he thanked me again for the jersey.

In two weeks, he was moving out, and things would change. I smiled at him as he got in the car and drove off with our dad. Mom and I had come in my SUV, but she was leaving with Aunt Nicole, leaving Rachel and I to have the afternoon with her sisters. In a few hours, we would be at the high school, watching Tom get his diploma, but till then, we were cut loose.

I texted Tobias off and on. He was, for lack of anything better to do, basically just baby-sitting Elfangor's communications array. He was making periodic hops to Cassie’s, checking in and stuff. Marco’s phone kept redirecting to his surf day message, and I was starting to get worried.

We took Jordan and Sara to the Boardwalk again. Rachel and I were not in the mood for rides, but we couldn’t get to Cassie or Tobias without losing my other cousins, which wasn’t going to happen. And I couldn’t think of any other way to try to get in touch with Marco other than to go to the beach. And the only beach I could take Jordan and Sara to was the Boardwalk. I just prayed that’s where Marco was surfing. We didn’t get far into our search for Marco, though. If he was there, we didn’t see him. I felt like a wreck without my best friend, but if he needed space, I couldn’t rush it. And we only had so long till we had to be at the high school, so we just let Jordan and Sara hit the rides till it was time to go back and get changed.

Tom’s graduation went to plan. I had to dress up, which I hate doing, but it was what it was. Rachel and her sisters were dressed as triplets, something Aunt Nicole thought was adorable and something Rachel took as hard torture. Usually. I don't know if it was because it was Tom or because after everything else, wearing an identical dress didn't matter, but she wasn't complaining.

It took forever. The graduation process is one of those things I guess you're supposed to look forward to, but the speeches, the handshaking, the diplomas, all that talk about being an adult… They called it commencement. A beginning. Like the eighteen years it took to get there was just, what, insignificant? But I guess for what it was, it wasn’t bad. I probably wouldn’t have judged it that harshly if it hadn’t been that day.

After the ceremony, there were pictures, my mom couldn't stop crying and my dad and Uncle Dan kept giving Tom pats on the back.

Tom was spending the night with one of his basketball buddies. Ronnie was one of his friends that was going in on their apartment. I had to wonder if Zoe wasn’t one of the other names on the lease. I wondered how that would go over with Mom and Dad if they found out Tom was moving in with his girlfriend right out of high school. I could hear my dad’s tacit acceptance already. “No grandkids, no drugs.” That was pretty much it with my parents. Don’t make big, stupid mistakes. Anything else was live and learn. Anyway, with Tom out of the house, my parents had decided that they were doing some kind of grown-up night. That usually meant margaritas at Rachel’s house. So
Rachel and I were going to babysit her sisters at my place that night.

I swung by their place first so they could grab their overnight bags. As soon as we were at my place, everyone went to change out of their dress clothes. I ordered pizzas. My female cousins all ended up in their jammies, and all of us piled into the queen-sized bed in the guest room and watched Netflix movies.

A few hours later, we were tucking Jordan and Sara in. They’d passed out before midnight.

I’d waited all day to see the others, but I was tired. Marco had never texted me back all day. Tobias had no news about Aximili. And Cassie was cut off. I debated whether or not I should go to raven and see her, but I couldn’t conjure the will or the energy to do it.

The day after the worst day of my life, I had very little contact with the others, and that was just the way it went. I sent out a group message that we needed to meet tomorrow and I went to bed.

This time, I fell into the black like I was sinking in ink.

And dreamt of being swallowed by tentacles.

The next day, I dropped off Jordan and Sara. I think Aunt Nicole had a bit of a hangover, but she thanked me for taking care of the girls last night.

My first stop was to pick up Marco. He was waiting outside his apartment when Rachel and I rolled past. He knew we were coming, but he was clearly not ready to deal with people. He hesitated for a long minute, but he got in the SUV. Usually so sarcastically vocal, Marco was uncharacteristically quiet in the back.

Cassie wouldn’t be ungrounded till Sunday, but I didn’t want to wait that long to do this. So that meant we had to meet at Elfangor’s. That stung everyone, I think. I parked by the same access road Rachel and Tobias had picked us up from the other night, and that didn't help either. We walked to Elfangor’s scoop. No one wanted to morph again. Maybe that was for the best. It was the single greatest gift he could give us, but without him, what could we do with it? The idea of sneaking into football games and concerts seemed so crass now. And we had learned the other night that we weren't soldiers.

Tobias was still there when we reached the steep little valley. I wasn’t sure how long that could go on, or would go on. Cassie was there too. Grounded as she was, I don’t think her parents realized how much time she spent at the WRC alone. And her parents were unlikely to ever ground her from nature walks. That being said, I didn’t want to keep her there any longer than she needed to be.

“Hey, Cassie,” I said.

“Hey,” she said. She gave me a sad smile. She had something of a distance to her. Like she was on autopilot.

I wasn’t sure what else to say. “I’m… I’m sorry you got grounded,” I said, stupidly.

She smiled a little bit brighter. “It’s fine,” she said. “I knew I was going to get grounded when I left
that night. I think I needed a bit of teen rebellion.”

“So,” I said, “I guess we should get this over with.”

“Get what over with, exactly?” It was the first thing Marco had really said since we'd got there. And he was clearly pissed.

“I wanted to try to figure out what we're going to do next,” I said.

“Next? Next?!” he exploded. “Are you fucking kidding me, Jake? There is no next! We did what we said we'd do. We helped him set off bombs. Bombs, Jake! He died down there! We got shot at, Jake. I had my fucking arm cut off by a walking Cuisinart! I'm done. This is the end of the line for me. I can't…” He faltered then. I could feel the emotion in his voice, the tears he didn’t want to spill. His voice clenched. “I can't lose anyone else.”

There was a silence then that felt heavy. I saw the tears staining Cassie's face. Rachel refused to make eye contact with anyone. I didn't disagree with anything Marco said. He had told us from the start, minutes after Elfangor had collapsed in the dirt, that helping him would ruin our lives. And it really had. It was hard to say it hadn't. Rachel had almost died down there. Marco had been seriously injured. Tobias had stolen a car. And all of us had killed that night. All of that mattered. It paled in comparison to what happened to Elfangor, but all of us carried baggage from that night. And none of us had a clue how that baggage would come out in the future.

But while it mattered, it didn't change anything either. “We have to get Aximili,” I said.

Marco didn’t have anything to say to that.

There was no way we could get Aximili from the ocean floor without morphing. So, I knew then that we weren’t done. Not yet. I wasn't sure what was going to happen after that. Elfangor had been a fighter pilot, a military commander, and yet he ultimately seemed to have no idea how to fight on the ground. Aximili was only a cadet. He had even less training than his brother, no orders, and he, too, was stuck here.

Maybe that was our mission now. Save Aximili, keep him safe, teach him what we could. Elfangor said the Andalites would be here in a year or two, hadn't he? Could we hide an alien in the woods for that long?

Rachel was the first to find her voice. “Elfangor didn’t have any clue how to reach him,” she said. “How are we supposed to do it?”

“We can’t just let him die,” Tobias said. “We owe that much to Elfangor.”

“Elfangor seemed like he was stalling,” I said. “He didn’t have a way to reach the Dome ship, but he was working on it. Tobias, we’ll try Aximili again in a few days. I think he could use some space.”

“What do you propose we do till then?” Cassie said.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Maybe try going back to normal for a bit?”

“You mean forget this ever happened?” Rachel asked, hotly.

“No, not like that. I mean…” What did I mean? “We had Tom’s graduation. We have school on Monday. You have your sisters. I think… I think we need a little normal.”
Cassie nodded, that same sad smile on her lips. “Normal is good.”

“Depends on your normal,” Tobias said. “I’m going to hang out in the tent for awhile. See if Aximili calls back, maybe try my luck on those Andalite files.”

“Not a bad idea,” Rachel said. “I need to check on Melissa, actually.”

“Melissa?” I asked. “Why?”

“You’re an idiot, Jake,” she said. “You morphed her father and showed up with his security card. You think the Yeerks aren’t going to check up on Chapman?”

I felt like a heel. I’d forgotten entirely about how we had implicated Chapman.

“God, I’m sorry. Yes, check on Melissa.”

“Is that everything?” Marco asked impatiently. He didn’t want to be there. Oddly, I think Tobias was the only one of us that seemed comforted by being there.

Did we have anything else to do? Was there anything else we could do?

“Marco made some good points,” I said. “I’m not sure we can ever get back to normal. But I think we need some time. Last day of school is Thursday, right? Let’s meet up on Friday, see where we are then.”

Six days, we would come back to this. Tobias would check on the comm array here and there. Hell, maybe I would too. Six days doesn’t sound like a lot.

But a lot can change in six days.
Chapter End Notes
If you're enjoying my fiction, please do me a solid and check out this fic by my friend Vickie1 while you wait for me to post the next chapter. It's a really cool Megamorphs adventure with time travel paradoxes and I'm very much enjoying her story.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or friend me on Facebook.
I'm not dead, and neither is this. I just got into personal stuff, and from there, I didn't/don't have the financial stability to invest the number of hours to continue writing. I am in the process of re-writing Book 1. Not entirely, most of it will stand. But some of the Elfangor scenes are going to change, some here and there shit to make it flow a little better. Things like Jake knowing Rachel's parents are fighting. Things like Elfangor giving them a timeline for reinforcements. Tidbits. Taking out references to which movies are playing so it doesn't feel dated re-reading.

A big part of why I stopped writing is that I had no idea what to write for Book 3 or my version of The Andalite Chronicles. I've been doing notes here and there in my free time to clarify and streamline my chronology. Also, because this was my first foray into post-as-I-write publishing, I learned things along the way that should make this better and less glitchy going forward.

Now, I have some good and bad news. This project isn't dead, but I'm in the process of setting it up on another site. Don't worry, I'm not deleting anything. But new chapters will be exclusive to my other site for a few months before coming over here. I'll always set up the epub and mobi copies with the cover art. I appreciate everyone's patience and I really didn't mean to be gone for so long. Please be patient a little longer and read it when I post it here.

Also, my site (which is up, but not really running yet), will have my 3D models for the various aliens. In an attempt to stay with this project while doing something potentially more profitable, I've been working on Andalite anatomy. I would love to make an Animorphs alien artbook, but I need the legal rights for that. I put a lot of that art stuff on my Tumblr already. I'm going to have Andalite skeletons available for 3D printing soon, though that project also eats up a lot of my free time.

End Notes

I encourage suggestions and feedback. I do not expect everyone to love this story, but please keep criticism constructive.

https://animorphsfanfic.tumblr.com

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!