

ANIMORPHS™

THE
INVASION

K. A. APPLGATE

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For Michael

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40

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CHAPTER 1

My name is Jake. That's my first name, obviously. I can't tell you my last name. It would be too dangerous. The Controllers are everywhere. Everywhere. And if they knew my full name, they could find me and my friends, and then . . . well, let's just say I don't want them to find me. What they do to people who resist them is too horrible to think about.

I won't even tell you where I live. You'll just have to trust me that it is a real place, a real town. It may even be *your* town.

I'm writing this all down so that more people will learn the truth. Maybe then, somehow, the human

race can survive until the Andalites return and rescue us, as they promised they would.

Maybe.

My life used to be pretty normal. Normal, that is, until one Friday night at the mall. I was there with Marco, my best friend. We were playing video games and hanging out at this cool store that sells comic books and stuff. The usual.

Marco and I had run out of quarters for the games, right when he was ahead by a lot of points. Mostly, we're equally good at games. I have a system at home so I get lots of practice time in, but Marco has this amazing ability to analyze games and figure out all the little tricks. So sometimes he beats me.

Or maybe I just wasn't concentrating very well. I'd had kind of a bad day at school. I'd tried out for the basketball team and I didn't make the cut.

It was no big deal, really. Except that Tom—he's my big brother—he was this total legend on the junior high basketball team. Now he's the main scorer for the high school team. So everyone expected me to make the team, easy. Only I didn't.

Like I said, no big thing. But it was on my mind, just the same. Lately, Tom and I hadn't been hanging out as much. Not like we used to. So I figured, you know, if I got his old position on the team . . .

Well, anyway, we were out of money and getting ready to head home when we ran into Tobias. Tobias was . . . I mean, I guess he still *is* kind of a strange guy. He was new at school, and he wasn't the toughest kid around, so he got picked on a lot.

I actually met Tobias when he had his head in a toilet. There were these two big guys holding him down and laughing while they flushed, sending Tobias's straggly blond hair swirling around the bowl. I told the two creeps to back off, and ever since then, Tobias figured I was his friend.

"What's up?" Tobias asked.

I shrugged. "Not much. We're heading home."

"Out of quarters," Marco commented. "Certain people keep forgetting that the SleazeTroll shows up right after you cross the Nether Fjord. So certain people keep losing the game—and losing our quarters." Marco kept jerking his thumb at me, just in case Tobias couldn't figure out who he meant by "certain people."

"So, like, maybe I'll walk home with you guys," Tobias said.

I said sure. Why not?

We were heading for the exit when I spotted Rachel and Cassie. Rachel is kind of pretty, I guess. I mean, okay, she's very pretty, although, since she

is my cousin, I don't really think about her that way. She has blond hair and blue eyes and that kind of very clean, very wholesome look. She's one of those people who always know the right clothes to wear and how to look like they just walked out of one of those fashion magazines girls like. She's also very graceful because she takes gymnastics, even though she says she's too tall to ever be really good at it.

Cassie is sort of the opposite. For one thing, she's usually wearing jeans and a plaid shirt, or something else real casual. She's black and wears her hair very short most of the time. She had it longer for a while, but then she went back to short, which I like. Cassie is quieter than Rachel, more peaceful, like she always understands everything on some different, more mystical level.

I guess you could say I kind of *like* Cassie. Sometimes we sit together on the bus, even though I never know what to say to her.

"You guys going home?" I asked Rachel. "You shouldn't go through the construction site by yourselves. I mean, being girls and all."

That was a mistake. I should never have suggested to Rachel that she's weak or helpless. Rachel may *look* like Little Miss Teen Model or whatever, but she thinks she's Storm from the X-Men.

“Are you going to come and protect us, you big, strong m-a-a-a-n?” she said. “You think we’re helpless just because—”

“I’d appreciate it if they did walk with us,” Cassie interrupted. “I know *you’re* not afraid of anything, Rachel, but I guess I am.”

Rachel couldn’t say much about that. That’s the way Cassie is—she always has the right words to stop any argument without making anyone feel bad.

So, there we were. The five of us—Marco, Tobias, Rachel, Cassie, and me. Five normal mall rats heading home.

Sometimes I think about that one, last moment when we were still just normal kids. It’s like it was a million years ago, like it was some totally different group of kids. You know what I was afraid of right then? I was afraid of admitting to Tom that I hadn’t made the team. That was as scary as life got back then.

Five minutes later, life got a lot scarier.

To get home from the mall we could either go a long way around, which is the safe way, or we could cut through this abandoned construction site and hope there weren’t any ax murderers hanging around there. My mom and dad have sworn to ground me until I’m twenty if they ever find out I’ve cut through the construction site.

So anyway, we crossed the road and headed into the abandoned construction site. It was a big area, surrounded on two sides by trees, with the highway separating it from the mall. There's a broad, open field between the construction site and the nearest houses. It's a very isolated place.

Originally it was supposed to be this new shopping center. Now it was just all these half-finished buildings looking like a ghost town. There were huge piles of rusted steel beams; pyramids of giant concrete pipes; little mountains of dirt; deep pits that had filled up with black, muddy water; and a creaking, rusted construction crane that I had climbed once while Marco stayed below and told me I was being an idiot.

It was a totally deserted place, full of shadows and sounds that made the hair on the back of your neck stand up. When Marco and I went there during the day, we always found all these beer cans and liquor bottles. Sometimes we found the ashes of little campfires back in the hidden nooks and crannies of the buildings. So we knew that people came there at night. All that was on my mind as we crept through the site.

It was Tobias who saw it first. He had been walking along, gazing up at the sky. I guess he was looking at the stars or something. That's the way Tobias is sometimes—off in his own world.

Suddenly Tobias stopped. He was pointing. Pointing almost straight up. "Look," he said.

"What?" I didn't want to be distracted because I was pretty sure I'd heard the sound of a chain-saw killer creeping up behind us.

"Just look," Tobias said. His voice was strange. Amazed-sounding, but serious at the same time.

So I looked up. And there it was. A brilliant blue-white light that scooted across the sky, going fast at first, too fast for it to be an airplane, then slower and slower. "What is it?"

Tobias shook his head. "I don't know."

I looked at Tobias and he looked back at me. We both knew what we *thought* it was, but we didn't want to say it. Marco and Rachel would have laughed, we figured.

But Cassie just blurted it right out. "It's a flying saucer!"