

ANIMORPHS™

THE
VISITOR

K. A. APPLGATE

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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For Michael

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CHAPTER 1

My name is Rachel. I won't tell you my last name. None of us will ever tell you our last names. Whenever I do use a last name, it's a fake. Sorry, but that's the way it has to be. And we won't tell you the name of our town, or our school, or even what state we are in. If I told you my last name, the Yeerks would be able to find my friends and me. And if they ever find us, it will be the end.

They might kill us. Or worse.

Yes, there really is something worse than death. I've seen it. I've heard the cries of despair from those doomed to be slaves of the Yeerks. I've watched as the evil gray slugs writhe and squeeze in through

the ear and take over what was a free human being.

There are five of us. Just five: Jake, Cassie, Marco, Tobias, and me. Marco came up with a name for us, for what we are now. He called us *Animorphs*. I guess that's as good a name as any for what we are. Mostly, I still just feel like a normal kid, you know? But I guess normal kids don't turn into elephants or bald eagles. And normal kids don't spend their free time fighting to save the world from the nightmares called Yeerks.

That day, the sun was bright. It warmed the earth below us. Warm air rose in an invisible bubble, a thermal. The thermal pushed up beneath our wings and we circled higher and higher and higher, till it almost seemed we could touch space.

Somewhere up there in cold space, up in orbit, was the Yeerk mother ship. Perhaps right over our heads.

The Yeerks are parasites. In their natural state they are just big slugs who live in a sludgy pond called a Yeerk pool. But the Yeerks have the power to take over other bodies. They have enslaved many races throughout the galaxy—the Taxxons, the Hork-Bajir, and others. And now they had come to Earth, looking for more bodies to control.

Who was there to try and stop them? Well, off in space, there were the Andalites. But the Andalites

were far away, and it would take them a long time to come to rescue the people of Earth.

On Earth, no one knew of the Yeerks. No one but five kids who were having fun being birds and riding the thermals.

I looked over at my friends. Some were a little way below, some were higher up. Jake was flapping his wings a little more than the rest of us. He had adopted a falcon morph. Falcons don't soar quite as well as hawks or eagles.

Tobias was the smoothest flyer. That was partly because red-tailed hawks are natural acrobats. Partly it was because Tobias had much more practice flying than the rest of us.

Too much practice.

<Okay, Tobias, you were right. This is the coolest thing in the world,> I said.

<Want to try a dive? It's amazing,> he said.

I wasn't exactly sure that I wanted to dive, but what could I say? I don't usually turn down a challenge. So I said, <Sure.>

<Follow me.>

Tobias bent his wings back and plummeted toward the ground like a bullet.

I tucked my wings back and went after him.

The ground came rushing up at me.

I was falling! Falling, with nothing at all to stop me from splatting right into the ground!

It was like a nightmare.

We were going like sixty miles an hour, as fast as a speeding car. Sixty miles an hour, aiming right for the ground.

But even though it was scary, it was also way cool.

Forget surfing. Forget skateboarding. Forget snowboarding. You haven't had a thrill till you've ridden the thermals a mile into the air and then gone hurtling straight down at maximum speed.

Air streamed past, just like when you open the car window and you're going really fast. It was like being in the middle of a hurricane. The leading edge of my wings was battered and vibrating. I felt my tail making dozens of tiny adjustments, moving a single feather one way or the other to keep me pointed straight. But one wrong move and I could have tumbled end over end. At this speed, if I suddenly tumbled I feared I could break a wing. A broken wing this high up was a death sentence.

<Tobias! I just realized something.>

<What?>

<This isn't like being an elephant. If I got in trouble as an elephant I could morph back to my human body. But I'm a long way up. If I morphed back to my human body . . .> I didn't finish the sentence. But I

suddenly had this vision of me, the *real* me, Rachel, dropping like a stone toward the hard ground below.

I guess Tobias could sense the fear that was building in me.

<Let the eagle do the flying,> Tobias advised. <Relax and let the eagle's mind do the thinking. She knows what she's doing.>

<I'm glad one of us does,> I said nervously. It's strange when you're in a morph. You have the animal's brain in with your own. Usually you can control that animal intelligence. But not always. And sometimes you have to learn to let go, to let the animal take charge.

I relaxed. Instantly the vibration lessened. I felt more stable. The eagle was in charge and Tobias was right: The eagle knew how to fly.

Then, to my amazement, I saw something go zip-ping right past us, faster than either me or Tobias. It was Jake. His peregrine falcon's smaller wings made it harder for him to float on the thermals. But those same wings made him unbelievably fast in diving. It was almost like Tobias and I were standing still.

<Yaaaaahaha!> Jake yelled in our heads.

I would have smiled, if I'd had a mouth. Jake is like me. He loves excitement and adventure and being a little crazy. Maybe we're so alike because we're cousins.

Also, we're both a little competitive, I guess. It bothered me that he was a faster diver than I was. Just like it bothered him that I could soar better. I guess that sounds ridiculous, huh?

Zzzziinnnnngggg!

Something went right by my head.

<You hear that?> Tobias asked.

<Yeah, I sure did,> I said. <What was it?>

<I don't know.>

Instinctively, I pulled up out of the dive, straining every muscle in my wings as I opened them, and felt the shock of wind resistance. It was like opening a parachute.

The rest followed my lead. We were still a few thousand feet up, but much closer to the ground than we had been.

Zziinnnnngggg!

I felt something go right through my tail feathers.

<Hey, someone down there is shooting at us!> I said.

<I can see them,> Cassie said. She and Marco had joined up with us. They had both morphed the same osprey. It was hard to tell them apart because you can't really tell *where* thought-speech comes from.

<Two guys, over in the woods. They have a rifle.>

<I can't believe this!> I was really mad. <I'm a national symbol. I'm a bald eagle! What's the matter with those creeps?>

<He's getting ready to shoot again,> Marco reported. <I can see him taking aim.>

<As soon as you see the flash of the rifle, dodge hard right!> I yelled.

A normal eagle or hawk or falcon would not have been able to figure that out. But we weren't just raptors. We still had our human intelligence. There are times to let the animal take over. There are other times when that superior human intelligence comes in handy.

<There! They fired!> Jake yelled.

Instantly I turned a sharp right. The bullet went whizzing by harmlessly.

<You know what? I don't think I like those guys,> Tobias said.

Tobias has special reasons for disliking anyone who would shoot at a bird.

<Me neither,> I agreed. <I have an idea.>

I explained what I wanted to do and the five of us flew off, out of range of the shooters. When we were far enough away, we went into a steep dive, down, down, faster and faster toward the trees.

I thought I was scared diving from high up. Now I was diving at lower altitude, aiming directly at the trees. This was a whole new level of terror. With my eagle's eyes I could see the bark on the trees. I could

see *ants* on the bark of the trees. It was like those trees were right in front of us.

I hoped the eagle knew when to pull out of the dive. If I slammed into one of those trees at sixty miles an hour, I was Spam.

Then, at just the right split second, like a perfectly trained squadron of fighter jets, we opened our wings and swooshed into the trees.

Unbelievable!

<Ah haaaah!> I heard Marco yell. <I don't know if that was fun or just insane!>

It was like some video-game nightmare. We kept most of the speed from the dive and now we were zooming through the trees so fast that tree trunks were just a brown blur all around us.

Tree! Bank left.

Tree! Bank right.

Tree! Dozens of feathers made the slightest individual adjustments. Muscles in my wings trimmed the angle of attack a millimeter one way, a millimeter back.

Tree! Tree! Treetreetreetree!

<Yaaaaaaaaah!> I yelled, half from terror and half from the total, out-of-control thrill of it.

In and out. Around and through. Zoom. *ZOOM!*

Suddenly there they were, just ahead in a clearing. Two teenage creeps sitting in the back of a

pickup truck. One guy had a blond ponytail. The other one wore a baseball cap. They were a hundred yards away, like being all the way down a football field, but my eagle eyes were so good I could count their eyelashes.

The guy with the ponytail had the rifle. The other guy was drinking a beer. They were still scanning the skies, looking for us.

Guess what, morons? I thought as we raced at them. We're not up *there* anymore. We're right here . . .

In . . .

Your . . .

FACE!