

ANIMORPHS™

THE
STRANGER

K. A. APPLGATE

SCHOLASTIC INC.

NEW YORK TORONTO LONDON AUCKLAND
SYDNEY MEXICO CITY NEW DELHI HONG KONG

For Michael

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

ISBN 978-0-545-42414-1

Copyright © 1997 by Katherine Applegate

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc. SCHOLASTIC, ANIMORPHS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 12 13 14 15 16 17/0

Printed in the U.S.A.

40

This edition first printing, June 2012

CHAPTER 1

My name is Rachel.

And you know the drill. I'm not going to tell you my last name. I'm not going to tell you where I live. I'll tell you all I can, because you need to know what's going on. You need to know what's happening.

But I need to stay alive. And if the Yeerks knew who I was, I would be dead.

Or worse.

The Yeerks are here. That's what you need to know.

People look up at the stars at night and wonder what it would be like if creatures from another planet ever landed on Earth.

Well, you can stop wondering. It's happened.

The Yeerks are parasites. They live in the brains of other species—humans, for example. They turn human beings into mindless slaves—Human-Controllers.

So when I say that the aliens are here, don't go looking around for some cute little thing like E.T. You won't see the Yeerks. They are parasitic worms, evil gray slugs that live in the heads of humans.

They can be in anyone. Your best friend. Your favorite teacher. The mayor of your town. Your brother. Sister. Mother. Father.

Anyone might be a Controller. You might be a Controller.

So I won't tell you my last name. Or where I live. But I will tell you the truth. The truth that only the Animorphs know.

Animorph. Animal morpher. A human capable of becoming any animal. It's our one weapon against the Yeerks. Our only power. Without it, we're just five regular kids.

But with that power comes certain extra responsibilities . . . as I was trying to explain to my best friend, Cassie.

It was a Sunday night. It was late. The circus had finished its last show. Their trailers and tents were clustered around the back side of the big City Arena.

The Arena is a place where they hold rock concerts and ice shows and play basketball games. And where they have circuses.

“Look, we both saw what we saw,” I told Cassie. “Are you telling me it doesn’t make you mad? That jerk using a cattle prod on an elephant doesn’t make you mad?”

“Of course it does, Rachel,” Cassie said. “I don’t even like circuses.”

“I don’t, either. But my dad had tickets, and it was our big once-every-other-week, father-and-daughters thing. I had to come.”

My dad had taken my sisters and me to see the circus earlier in the evening. See, my mom and dad are divorced, so my dad does these little outings where we all get together every second weekend. Sometimes it’s just me and my dad. Like when we go hiking together, or go to ball games, or gymnastics events. Those are all things my dad and I like, but Jordan and Sara, my sisters, don’t.

My little sisters loved the circus, but it’s not my kind of thing. I guess I’m too old. That’s why I dragged Cassie along. So I’d have someone to talk to when my sisters were getting all excited over the clowns and stuff.

Still, it was an opportunity to spend time with my

dad, which I enjoy. I don't get to see him as much as I wish I could. Everyone always says how much I'm like him. How he's kind of reckless, and so am I. He always seems so sure of himself, and I guess people think I'm that way, too. We're even both into gymnastics. My dad almost made the U.S. Olympic team when he was younger.

Of course, I've never told my father about my other life. I couldn't. But I wish I could. He would worry about me and all, but he would also think it was cool. My dad is very big on standing up for what's right. I think he would admire what I do. That would be nice, feeling like my dad admired me.

There wasn't much activity in the little tent-and-trailer city outside the Arena. I could hear dogs barking. I could hear raucous laughter coming from a brightly painted trailer. I could smell the usual circus smells—manure, hay, beer, cotton candy.

There were security guards around the perimeter of the area, but I wasn't worried about them. I've gone one-on-one with Hork-Bajir warriors. After you've fought one of those seven-foot-tall walking razor blades, regular old humans don't scare you much.

Cassie and I walked silently past the tiger cage. The three big cats just stared blankly. It was night. They wanted to be in the jungle. Instead they were

in a too-small cage, trapped in a nightmare invented by humans.

Then I saw the elephant pen. There was a sturdy fence around four big Asian elephants. They were a little different from the African elephant I knew so well. But they were elephants, just the same.

I have sort of a special relationship with elephants.

Cassie and I had come to the elephant pen before the circus and seen the way their trainer treated them. He had used a cattle prod on them. It's a stick with a massive electrical shock. He used it to control the animals.

Later, during the show, he'd put on a big act of loving his elephants. But I'd seen the cattle prod. I just sat there, doing a slow boil all through the show. I knew I was going to have to take some action.

The elephant trainer's name was Josep something. Something hard to pronounce.

Well. He didn't know it yet, but Mr. Josep Something was about to have an eye-opening experience.

"See anyone around?" I asked Cassie.

"You know, Jake is going to read you the riot act over this," Cassie warned.

I laughed. "'Read the riot act?' That's like something my mother would say. What does it even mean?"

Cassie shrugged and smiled her shy smile. "I don't know. My dad says it all the time. I was trying to sound responsible and mature and parental."

"Look, I am *going* to do this," I said.

Cassie sighed. "Why did I let you talk me into *this*?"

"Because you know I'm right."

Cassie rolled her eyes. "Just don't hurt the guy, okay?"

"Me? Ms. Peace, Love, and Understanding? He'd just better not show up carrying that cattle prod, or I swear, I'll—"

I noticed Cassie had stopped walking. She was giving me her sorrowful look. Like she was ashamed of me.

I cringed. "Okay, okay. I'll just *talk* to the guy. Turn off the look. I hate that look. You're going to be a really good mother someday, with a look like that."

I found the gate in the elephant pen and opened it. I slipped inside while Cassie retreated into the shadows to watch my back. I moved slowly, not making any threatening moves that might alarm the elephants.

Elephants may be gentle, but they *are* big.

You don't want to be in the middle of four upset elephants.

I went to a far, dark corner of the pen and began the familiar ritual of focusing my mind. I concentrated on the elephant. *My* elephant. The elephant whose DNA was a part of me.

And then I began to change.