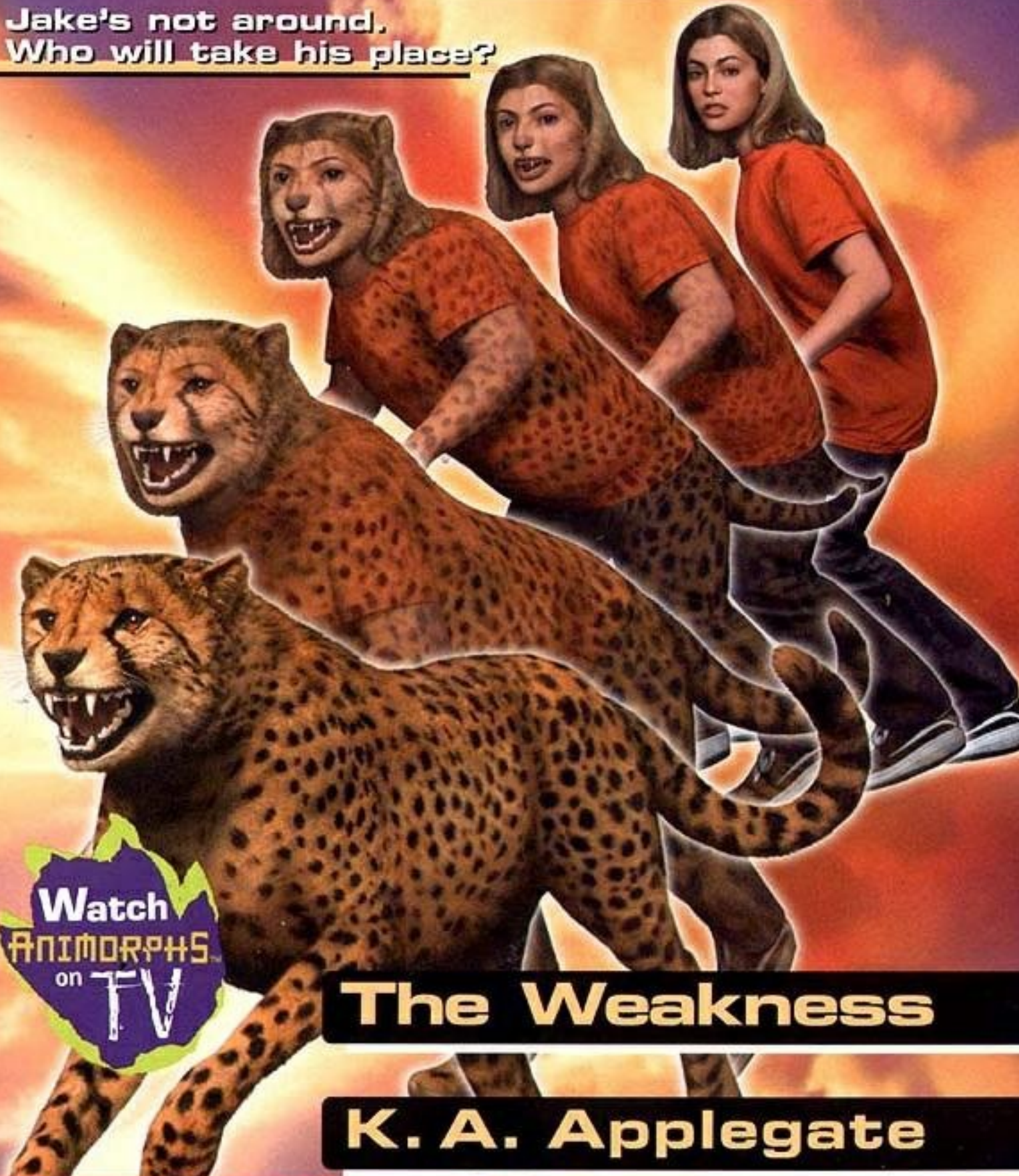


# ANIMORPHS

Jake's not around.  
Who will take his place?



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**The Weakness**

**K. A. Applegate**

# The Weakness

Animorphs #37

K.A. Applegate

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# Chapter 1

My name is Rachel.

There's a person in the Bible named Rachel. I don't know if my being called Rachel has anything to do with her. I doubt it. I've never seen my parents reading the Bible.

There's a Rachel on *Friends*. What's up with this season's stringy hair? Weird.

And there are, at any given time, approximately five Rachels in my school. At least two of whom are failing phys ed.

Maybe your name is Rachel, too.

It's a popular name. Lots of girls have it. Even girls who can manage to throw a basketball through a hoop from the foul line.

But I'm different from every other Rachel you've ever met.

And it's not just because the dorkier kids in school think I have a seriously bad attitude. Which I do. So what?

My being different from every other kid named Rachel is not necessarily a good thing. Or a bad thing. It just . . . is.

Sometimes - very rarely - I wish I were just one of the thousands of Rachels out there living an average life. One of the mass of average kids in average middle schools in average, all-American towns.

Actually, I wish that very, very rarely. I'm not thrilled with average. I don't do average well.

It's only when I'm seriously exhausted that - for about half a second - I wish I were just an ordinary Rachel. Like when I've been going on no sleep for forty-eight hours. When I've been slashing and shredding the enemy and leaking blood from my own gaping wounds until I can hardly breathe without it hurting. When the very thought of sleep seems totally foreign.

Sleep? Huh? I don't wish it after a typical, everyday kind of mission. Just after the really annoying ones. The ones where we lose more than we gain. The ones where we fail to do any serious damage to the Yeerks.

Then, I wish - for about half a second - I were nobody special.

That I'd never stumbled onto the tragic sight of a dying alien warrior prince.

That he'd never told us about the Yeerk invasion of Earth. That he'd never chosen us - me, my cousin Jake, my best friend Cassie, Jake's best bud Marco, and this shy, compelling kid named Tobias - to adopt the noble Andalite mission.

That he'd never given us the gift and curse of Andalite morphing technology. The ability to touch an animal and absorb its DNA, all for the purpose of becoming that animal when necessary.

To fight off the invaders. To stave off the fate that has befallen so many other worlds through-out the universe.

A fate worse than death.

Total subservience to a mind-controlling master race.

You know what really infuriates me? This powerful enemy doesn't even stand on its own two feet.

The Yeerks are a race of parasitic slugs. No ears, eyes, mouths. No arms or legs. Just gray, viscous flesh. And the repulsive ability - need, really - to attach their otherwise helpless bodies to the brains of sentient creatures. To slither into the head through the ear canal. To flatten, lengthen, press themselves into every crevice and wrinkle of the brain. Like clay being pushed into a mold.

And once there, to possess the person like a demon. Read all memories. Know all secrets. Control all movements. Basically use that host body for its own evil purpose. To capture more and more host bodies for more and more Yeerk parasites.

Without us humans - and without the Gedds and Hork-Bajir and Taxxons - the Yeerks are nothing on this planet. Fat, wormlike creatures swimming dully in a Yeerk pool. Blind. Deaf. Circling endlessly.

Problem is, they have us. Some of us, anyway. Some humans. Most Hork-Bajir. All Taxxons. One Andalite.

<Rachel?>

Now was not one of those times when I wished I were just an average, ordinary Rachel. Now I was ticked. And being ticked is one of the stand-out things about being me.

I do anger well.

<Rachel, if I might express an opinion I suspect will deeply annoy you . . .>

"Spit it out, Ax."

Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill. Younger brother of Prince Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul, the guy who dragged us into this war. Andalite. Our friend, too.

<I would be happy to comply. However, I cannot perform the action humans call "spitting" for the simple fact that at the moment I do not have mouthparts . . .>

"What were you going to say, Ax?" Cassie, stepping in before I could do something stupid like pop him one. You don't want to get into an unnecessary fight with a guy who sports a big ole blade on the end of a very fast-moving tail.

And I've been known to get into fights some people would call unnecessary.

<Prince Jake left no specific instructions in his temporary absence. I am of the opinion he would prefer us not to act without his knowledge.>

Jake was away for a few days. Visiting some relative of his, not mine. Tom stayed at home so at least Jake didn't have to face that whole "do I kill my brother to save my father" thing again.

Tom is a Controller. Which means he has a Yeerk in his head.

I groaned. "Look, Ax. It's an opportunity. We need opportunities. We don't pick and choose them like they're - like they're blouses on a rack. We take the chance. Even if it's got a few loose threads. Or a hole."

What was the problem? Why couldn't they see . . .

<Rachel's right,> said Tobias, from his look-out perch in the rafters. We were in Cassie's barn. <We know Visser Three changes feeding places regularly. We have two, three days tops before we lose him again. It was luck I found his current site. I say we do it. Try to take him down.>

"Gotta agree with Bird-boy on this, Ax-man," Marco said. "You feel you can't act without a direct order, you can sit this one out."

<I will be there,> Ax said quickly.

"Cassie?"

"Honestly, I'd rather wait for Jake. But I'm in. And I know the perfect morph for the job. The Gardens just got three cheetahs as part of their new breeding program. You know, they're almost extinct."

"Why cheetahs?" I asked.

"Speed. You want to grab the visser quickly, before his guards can react," Cassie explained. "You want to outrun him in an open space. And pretty much nothing outruns a cheetah."

I grinned. This was cool.

The bad missions, I hate. But I'm never happier than when starting out on an important mission - especially one that was going to be so easy.

## Chapter 2

Tobias led us to the visser's new temporary feeding pasture. The five of us flew out, careful to keep the red-tailed hawk in sight and careful to stay enough apart not to arouse suspicion.

Me in bald eagle morph. Cassie and Marco as osprey. Ax as northern harrier. In nature, these birds don't make a habit of hanging together.

The pasture was really a small valley, tucked away in the foothills of the mountains. Charming. Lush green grass. Bright yellow wildflowers. Soft breezes.

The perfect place for the most evil being in this or any galaxy to claim as his own.

That was supposed to be funny or ironic or something.

As planned, we landed at various points on the perimeter of the valley. Four of us would morph to cheetah.

Tobias would stay hawk and act as lookout and guide, directing our assault.

<There it is,> Tobias said. <Right on schedule. At the far end of the valley. See how the air shimmers?>

Through the eagle's incredibly keen eyes I saw the visser's Blade ship. The cloaking device that had kept it hidden on its journey to the valley was lifting, revealing the grim, battle-ax-shaped vehicle, its two huge scimitar like wings flared out behind the main body.

The ship fairly oozed a sense of dark and evil.

<I'm going on record that I so do not like this,> Marco said from across the valley.

<Tough. Everybody, demorph!> I demanded. <We are going to take him down.>

I concentrated and felt the changes begin.

ZWOOOP!

I shot up from the ground, a sudden, bizarrely tall eagle.

Brown wings with a combined extension of six feet became my shorter human arms.

Deadly talons became harmless five-toed feet.

The eagle's white feathered head grew and sprouted long blond hair. Eyes widened and vision blurred.

When I was done, I took a deep breath and thought: *cheetah*. Quite possibly the most gorgeous wild cat ever to roam the savannah.

Like time-release photography. The tawny, black-spotted fur of the cheetah shot out of my fingertips and crawled its way up my fingers, across my hands, up my arms.

Beautiful!

Thickening. Now down my legs. And across my broad feline chest, whiter fur with fewer spots.

I looked at Cassie, closest to me, and watched as black tear-tracks drew themselves from the inner corners of her golden cheetah eyes to the bottom of her top jaw.

Like a thick black Magic Marker being swept down a page.

Like a bandit's mask.

A tickling - and I could feel similar marks being drawn on my own feline face. Down from eyes that saw in a wide-angle view.

I dropped to my knees, ready.

BOOIIINNGGG!

My spine elongated. Became amazingly flexible. A spine that acted like a spring.

Coil. Stretch! Coil. Stretch! Allowing my back legs to push harder against the grass. My long, slender front legs to extend way out. To reach for my prey.

So that I could knock it down before strangling it.

POOOOF!

My lungs, huge and powerful, inflated like a balloon.

Air!

Breathing had never been so . . . easy. So satisfying. I drew enormous amounts of air into my lungs. Effortless. My huge heart pumped oxygen to every muscle in my body.

POP! POP!

The dewclaw. One on each front paw, but off the ground. Sharp. Useful for smacking down fleet-of-foot gazelles and other four-legged prey.

POPPOPPOPPOPPOP!

Other claws - blunt, hard, and non retractable - gripped the dirt. Nails like a dog's. Hard, sharp toe pads - natural cleats - pushed out from the bottom of my four paws.

Surefooted. This was traction Jeff Gordon would envy. I could turn, forty-five degrees, at full speed, fifty, sixty miles an hour, and not slide.

I was the professional athlete of felines.

One hundred and forty pounds of muscle and grace.

WHOOOSSSHHH!

My tail!

Long, half the length of my body, and muscular. Thick. Spots fading into stripes at the white tip. Unique markings, distinguishing me from every other cheetah.

My tail, an amazing stabilizer, helping my four-and-a-half-foot-long body maneuver during the crucial twenty-second chase.

Cut right. Cut left. Twist. Turn. All without slowing or falling.  
I was built for speed. Not endurance, maybe. But oh, yes. Definitely speed.

Stunning speed.

Zero to forty-five miles per hour in two point five seconds.

From a point of rest. From sitting perfectly still.

Do you understand that kind of acceleration? I mean, can you even really imagine it?

And once the cheetah got going - top speed, between sixty and seventy miles per hour - it could cover almost one hundred feet per second.

Per second!

Okay, try this. Just put one foot in front of the other and walk off one hundred feet. It won't be exact but it'll be close enough.

While you're walking off those hundred steps, keep track of how long it takes you.

Probably about a minute, give or take.

Now, when you've walked off those hundred feet, turn and look back to where you started.

A cheetah would have covered that same distance in one second.

Almost like magic.

I'm here.

One second.

I'm there!

I survey my domain. I spot my prey.

I stalk.

I dash!

Like lightning!

I smack down my victim. I bite out its throat.

Visser Three didn't stand a chance.

This mission would count. This mission would matter. This time, *they* would bleed.

## Chapter 3

<Here he comes,> Tobias warned. <Everybody in place. He's moving toward the door of the ship. Almost . . . almost there . . .>

Visser Three, in his stolen Andalite body, the only Yeerk ever to have forced an Andalite to be his host, stepped through the doorway of the ship. He surveyed the valley. Then he nodded to the four Hork-Bajir who flanked the ramp and descended.

<Wait until he's, like, ten, fifteen yards away from the ship,> I said. <Then we hit. One right after the other. First me. Then Ax. Then Marco. Then Cassie.>

<Okay, Xena,> Marco said. <You want to run this show, fine.>

<This morph wants to break out,> Cassie said. <I'm ready.>

The four of us surrounded the visser. Crouched low in the gently bending grasses and wildflowers of the valley.

The plan was to take him down. To attack with deadly speed and accuracy. Four lean, powerfully muscled Earth hunters against one alien prey. Ha! By the time the Hork-Bajir guards could take ten steps from the ship, Dracon beams leveled, the visser would be dead.

Closer. Head held high, Visser Three stepped off the ramp and onto the grass. Testing its flavor through his Andalite hooves. Finding it good.

Nodding and walking more boldly onto the field. Until . . .

<Now!> Tobias cried.

I sprang.

Up and out of the protective covering of the long grass. Zero to forty-five mph. Two point five seconds.

It was true. Every unbelievable fact I knew about this cat was true!

I shot toward the visser. His four eyes faced forward, but not for long. He saw me coming, on his left. At least, he saw something. A blur.

He stopped. Began to turn sharply right and -

WHACK!

I hit his rear left leg with my right front paw! He stumbled. I ducked away from his bladed tail and reached out again.

WHACK!

He was down! On his knees!

Good. I was already tiring. Just slightly.

The visser stumbled to his feet! Okay, he was tougher than a gazelle. No problem because . . .

Ax!

Unreal! My wide-angle vision caught a golden blur on my left - and then another on the right. And another.

I raced again after the visser.

We circled him. Four powerful, swift cheetahs running dizzying circles around one scrambling Andalite, frantically kicking up clods of grass and soil, his tail blade thwacking only air.

We were going to do it!

We were going to take him down!

One of us - just one of us - had to slip in under that Andalite tail, smack him down, go for the throat . . .

<Hork-Bajir!> Tobias called.

TSEEEW! TSEEEW!

Dracon beams whizzed past us. We dodged them without really trying.

<We're too fast for their weapons!> I crowed.

<But once we slow or stop, we are vulnerable,> Ax said, slinking closer toward the visser, causing him to slide and stumble.

<And the cheetah's tiring,> Cassie said.

I felt it, too. The cat was almost ready to collapse. Its endurance was almost gone.

<Only the four Hork-Bajir,> Tobias called.

<Then we take our chances, now!> I commanded. <On the count of three we dive for the visser and . . .>

<AAAHHHH!>

One of us had been hit! Slashed by a bold Hork-Bajir guard who'd rushed us, too suddenly for Tobias to have anticipated. Blood poured from a nasty wound on the cheetah's back.

<I'm hit!> Marco.

SLASH! Another Hork-Bajir, dropping his Dracon beam, throwing himself into the fight. We would be fatally lacerated in moments! No way could blunt nails and a dewclaw do real damage to the tough, leathery skin of the Yeerk shock troops. Before our teeth could reach their throats we'd be sliced luncheon meat.

<Finally! You imbeciles!> the visser screamed.

No choice. I batted a Hork-Bajir. Missed. Tried to strike again. My lungs felt as if they were about to collapse.

SLASH! SLASH!

<RACHEL!> Tobias cried.

I slunk rapidly away from my attacker, blood streaming into my eyes. Saw Marco and Ax and Cassie valiantly defending our prey - the visser - and failing. Panting, practically dragging themselves along the torn-up ground to avoid another Hork-Bajir swipe.

We were losing!

No.

<Once more!> I shouted. <Grab . . .>