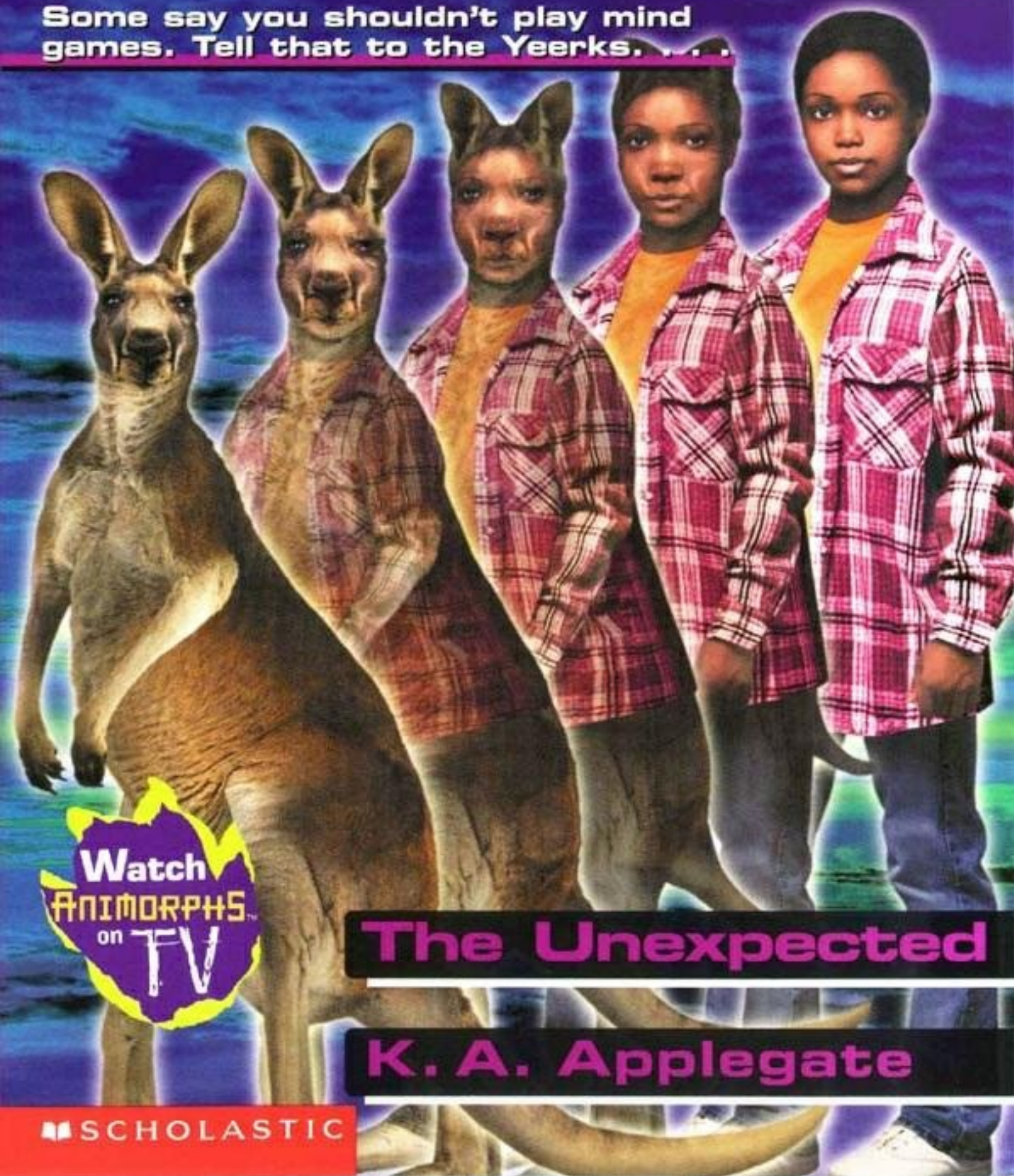


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Chapter 1

I swooped low.

This had to be it. Plane at the far gate. Two Marine guards, trying to look casual. Well, as casual as you can get wearing combat boots and a pistol strapped to your chest.

<Jake, I think I found it. Jake?> I circled, flapped my wings to gain altitude. <Rachel? Tobias? Anybody?>

An armored truck rumbled toward the plane. The driver stopped, showed one of the guards a clipboard, then backed up to the cargo hold. The rear of the truck opened. Two guys in hooded yellow coveralls climbed out. Pulled oxygen masks over their faces and unlatched the plane's cargo door.

Okay. These guys definitely weren't unloading souvenirs from Disneyland. If somebody was transporting a chunk of Bug fighter wreckage, it had to be on this plane.

I caught a thermal and rose above the airport. A baggage cart trundled across the tarmac. A jet screamed in for a landing. Guys in jumpsuits and headsets scrambled around, trying to keep the 747's from mowing down the commuter planes.

And everywhere I looked - seagulls. On the roof, on the tarmac, against the fence. Seagulls are perfect cover. Part of the landscape, just like pigeons. Nobody even notices them. My own seagull morph blended right in.

Unfortunately, Jake, Rachel, Marco, and Ax blended right in, too.

I spotted a lone gull flitting back and forth beside a hangar at the far end of the runway. Beyond it, a red-tailed hawk sat perched on a chain-link fence.

<Tobias? Is that you?>

No answer. I didn't really expect one. Thought-speak is sort of like a radio signal, and the hawk was too far away to get decent reception.

I pulled my wings back and soared toward the hawk - then banked and wheeled around.

A long black car shot from the hangar and sped toward the guarded plan. It swung around the Marines and screeched to a sideways stop in front of the armored truck, blocking it in. The car doors opened, and four men in suits got out.

I circled, flying as low as I could without drawing attention to myself. Below me, the oxygen-masked guys were loading a crate from the cargo hold onto the armored truck.

The suits strode across the tarmac. The leader, a tall guy with a bald spot, headed directly for the crate, the other three suits close on his heels.

"Sir. Step away from the vehicle." The Marines weren't quite as casual now. They planted their feet wide apart and reached for their pistols.

Bald Spot ignored them and poked his head inside the back of the armored truck. Either the guy was too stupid to be afraid of weird alien diseases, or he already knew the wreckage wasn't dangerous. Which meant one thing.

He was a Controller.

"I repeat, step away from the vehicle." The Marines unsnapped their holsters.

"Relax, boys." Bald Spot left the truck and strolled toward the guards. Flashed a badge. "CIA. We'll take over from here."

The Marines didn't budge. "We're not leaving our post, sir. We have orders."

"Well, you have new orders now" - Bald Spot squinted at the two black stripes on the Marine's collar - "corporal."

"With all due respect," the corporal answered, sounding anything but respectful, "we don't take orders from . . . civilians."

The Controllers glanced at each other.

Bald Spot nodded. "Fine." He slid his badge into his pocket. "We'll have a Marine colonel here in a few minutes."

Yeah. They would. A Yeerk-infested colonel who would destroy the Bug fighter wreckage before NASA or the news media had a chance to get to it.

I needed a diversion. Had to buy some time. <Marines are wimps.>

The guards glanced sideways at one another.

"Did you say something, sir?" the corporal called out.

Bald Spot turned. "You talking to me?"

"Yes, I am. I believe you called us wimps, sir."

Bald Spot frowned and turned away again. "You're hearing things, son."

The Marines shook their heads.

<Gutless weasels,> I said. <They act tough standing around an airport, but they'd run at the first sign of trouble.>

The Marines rolled their eyes.

<If the Pentagon wanted real men, they'd have called the Air Force.>

That got them. I could see the muscles of their faces knotting up. The corporal clenched and unclenched his fists.

"Suits," he muttered. "Too bad I can't leave my post."

The other Marine, the one with only one stripe, shrugged. "Ignore them."

Great. Marines with self-control.

The CIA guys were huddled beside their car, talking in low voices. Bald Spot pulled a cell phone out of his jacket.

I had to do something! Fast. <Jake, can you hear me? It's starting to get ugly. I could use a little help.>

No answer. Where *were* they?

I scanned the scene. Below: two pumped-up Marines, four alien-infested

CIA guys, and at least six guns between them. Above: an unarmed seagull.

Well, maybe not *completely* unarmed.

I flapped my wings to gain altitude. Bald Spot flipped open his cell phone. I zeroed in on my target. He punched some numbers. I dove. He pushed SEND, and I dropped my bomb.

Bird poop splattered over the phone and down one side of Bald Spot's head.

"Aagghhhhhh!" He wiped at his face, then glared up into the sky. "Andalite!" he hissed as he hurled the phone to the pavement and pulled a pistol from his jacket.

Oooo-kaaay. Not exactly what I had in mind. I motored upward.

BAMBAMBAMBAM!

Bullets sailed past me. I searched for a place to hide. Something to shield me. Nothing. Empty tarmac and runway. I was a gleaming white target against clear blue sky.

BAMBAMBAMBAM!

I pumped my wings, darted up and back, trying to throw his aim off. It was all I could do. He wasn't going to stop shooting. Until he hit me.

BAM!

One last shot. Then the bullets stopped. Silence. I spilled air from my wings and dove toward the runway.

"Drop your weapon, sir."

The Marines! I thrust my wings forward and spiraled around. They were standing with legs outspread, gripping their pistols with both hands. The oxygen-masked guys dove inside the armored truck. Smart.

"Drop your weapon, sir," the corporal repeated.

Bald Spot turned. "I don't think so." He extended his arm. "Here are your new orders, boys."

Oh, God. <JAKE?!>

Ka-CHIK.

He cocked his pistol.

Ka-CHIK. Ka-CHIK. Ka-CHIK.

The other Controllers cocked their pistols.

For half a second Marines and Controllers stood frozen. Then -

BAM!

BAM! BAM!

Bullets flew. The Marines dove behind the plane's landing gear. The Controllers dropped back behind their car.

Okay. Okay. Think, Cassie. You have to get them to stop shooting. You've got to keep them from killing each other. <JAKE, WHERE ARE YOU? RACHEL? I CAN'T DO THIS BY MYSELF!>

BAM! BAM! BAM! Chooong. Kachooooong.

Bullets sprayed off metal. I swung around the tail of the plane, looking for cover. An engine roared to life at the next gate. A baggage cart, lurching toward the plane!

The cart kept coming, full speed. It careened past a food service truck and ricocheted off a cargo bin. Fishtailed around the nose of the plane. Skidded to a stop between the Marines and the Controllers.

BAM! BAM! Kachooooong.

The baggage cart quaked. Suitcases erupted.

"Rrrrroooooowwwrrr!"

And a thousand pounds of grizzly bear exploded from the rubble.

Chapter 2

"HhhhoorRRRAAWRR!"

The bear bounded from the cart.

"Hhhrrroooowwrrr!"

Two streaks of orange and black shot past her - a tiger and a cheetah leaped over the CIA car and tackled two of the Controllers. The maniac baggage cart driver - a gorilla - swung down from the cab. A red-tailed hawk, swooped in from the top of the terminal.

Bet you're completely confused now? Bet you're thinking, *This girl is completely nuts. The lights are on, but no one's home.* Don't worry. I promise you'll understand in a little while. Promise.

<Move over, Marines,> he said. <The zoo has landed.>

<We thought maybe - just maybe - you could use a little help,> Marco called, knuckle-walking across the tarmac.

<And the rest of us were looking like roadkill.> Rachel. Squinting her nearsighted grizzly eyes and bounding after Bald Spot. <We took a vote. We're pooling our money and enrolling Marco in driver's ed.>

Bald Spot turned. Levelled his pistol.

<Rachel! The gun!> I screamed.

She reared up on her hind legs. Pinned Bald Spot to the pavement with one swipe of her massive paw. Clamped her teeth around his gun and ripped it from his hand.

"You can't win!" Bald Spot screamed. "We'll destroy you!"

And then he was out cold. Courtesy of Rachel.

BAM! Kachooooong.

<Hey! Somebody tell the Marines to stop shooting. We're on their side.>

Marco hit the ground. Tobias dove for cover.

Ax was locked in a deadly embrace with one of the Controllers. They rolled across the tarmac, human desperation pitted against sheer feline strength.

I skimmed low toward the car.

<Cassie! Look out!>

BAM!

Jake leaped past me. Claws. Teeth. Gun metal. Blood.

I wheeled, looking for a place to land. I'd started this little fight, and now my friend were battling for their lives while I flitted about like some weird war-zone cheerleader.

I had to find a place to demorph. A place hidden from Controllers. I couldn't let them see I was human.

Because yes, I am human.

My name is Cassie.

But you probably already figured that out.

You probably also noticed my life is a little abnormal. You know, the thought-speak. The alien spacecraft wreckage. The psychotic men-in-black gunning down my *Animal Planet* buddies at the airport.

My friends and I are Animorphs. Animal morphers. We can acquire the DNA of another animal, then become that animal. It's the only weapon we have in our war to help save humanity.

And it's a powerful one, but it has limitations. Ask Tobias. He's a walking, talking owner's manual for one of the major limitations. He stayed in his red-tailed hawk morph longer than the two-hour maximum, and now he's what the Andalites call a *nothlit*. He doesn't have to morph a hawk. He *is* a hawk.

We also can't morph directly from one animal to another. Which is why I couldn't just go from seagull to wolf, my usual battle morph, right there on the tarmac. I had to become Cassie first, regular, human Cassie, and I couldn't risk it.

Because morphing is not human technology. It's Andalite technology, given to us by a dying alien, an Andalite war prince named Elfangor. The Yeerks think we Animorphs are all Andalites, and we'd like to keep it that way. If they knew we were human, they'd find us. They'd find us and our families and kill us.

Or worse.

They'd slide Yeerks into our heads. They'd turn us and everyone we love into Controllers. We'd be entombed in our own bodies. We'd watch our hands destroy the planet. We'd hear our voices spew evil and hatred. And we'd be helpless to stop it.

A Yeerk. It doesn't look like much. Small, gray, slimy. An overgrown slug. Blind, nearly deaf, no arms or legs. Like a brain without a body.

Which is why it needs your body. It squeezes through your ear canal and flattens out over the surface of your brain, burying its slimy self in every crevice, locking itself onto your memories, your knowledge, your emotions.

It takes over. You can't run. You can't scream. You can't tell anyone what's happening to you. And you can't escape. You can't even make plans to escape because the slug knows your thoughts as soon as you think them.

The Yeerks have already conquered the Gedds, the Taxxons, and the Hork-Bajir. Now they're taking us. Humans.

And we're trying to stop them: me, my best friend Rachel, Rachel's cousin Jake, Jake's best friend Marco, Tobias, and Ax, and Andalite, Elfangor's little brother.

That's it. Team Earth: a bird, an alien, and four kids. The only thing standing between you and total enslavement.

We do get help from the Chee, a race of androids hardwired for nonviolence. They've infiltrated the Yeerk organization, The Sharing, and feed us information when they can. But as far as physical battle goes, it's just the six of us.

And at the moment it was only five.

I soared low, looking for a place to demorph.

BAM! Ka-chooong.

"Stay away!" A Controller backed toward the CIA car, holding his gun in front of him, waving it wildly at Tobias, at the Marines, at Marco.

Ka-CHIK.

Marco lunged.

BAM!

<Aaaaaahhhh!>

Blood oozed up through the coarse black hair on Marco's arm. He charged anyway. Crushed the Controller against the car. Whammed him with one sledgehammer swing of his fist.

<Just for the record,> he panted, <I don't like this guy.>

The Controller dropped to the pavement, unconscious.

Jake stood on another Controller's chest.

Ax cornered a third Controller between two cargo bins.

Whipped his tail. Flicked air. Let out a sound that wasn't even close to "meow."

<This appendage works well to balance the cheetah when it runs, but it is useless as a weapon.>

<You'll have to settle for teeth and claws, Ax-man,> Jake called. <Too many people. We don't need your blue-furred, four-eyed self on the cover of the *National Enquirer*.>

Ax responded by knocking out the Controller with a lightning-quick and very large paw.

Rachel ripped open the lid of a cargo bin. One by one, Marco dumped the Controllers inside, then flipped the bin over so the lid was against the ground.

The Marines were crouched behind the plane's landing gear, watching, pistols ready but silent.

<That was almost easy,> said Rachel.

<Almost too easy,> Marco added.

Tobias and I circled overhead and dropped. <We got company.>

BAM! BAM! BAMBAMBAMBAMBAM!

A line of men in black with automatic rifles began shooting from the terminal roof.

Chapter 3

BAMBAMBAMBAMBAMBAMBAM!

We dove between the cargo bins.

BAM! BAM!

The Marines fired back.

<Oh, this is good,> Marco said. <We're getting it from both sides again.>
Sirens. Shouts.

Police cars screeched onto the tarmac, lights flashing, bullhorns blaring.
Airport security guards streamed from the terminal.

<Jake,> I said. <They're headed right into the line of fire.>

<Let them go. Visser Three won't want that many witnesses. The
Controllers will have to back off.>

Back off. Yeah. Except they weren't doing that. Bald Spot and his
buddies were rocking the cargo bin, trying to turn it over.

<Uh, Jake?>

<Yeah. I know.>

They weren't going to back off. The police were Controllers. So were the
security guards.

It was an entire Yeerk army.

BAM! Chooooong.

A bullet ricocheted off one of the cargo bins.

<What's the plan?>

Jake crouched, his tail whipping. <A battalion of Yeerks against the six
of us. Not good.>

<Plus the two Marines,> I said. <And the guys in the armored truck.>

<Yeah, don't forget them.> Marco grunted. <They've been such a big
help already.>

<But we can't just leave them.>

<And we can't leave without that chunk of Bug fighter,> Rachel pointed
out. <That's why we came. We have to get it out of here before the Yeerks
destroy it.>

<No,> Jake said. <We can't risk it. There's no way we can get it without
getting ourselves killed.>

<There is a maintenance ramp past the next gate, Prince Jake,> said Ax.

<Good. We can demorph inside. Okay, guys, mission aborted. Let's go.
Stay close to the building. Go, go, go. And Ax? Don't call me - oh, forget it.>

Jake leaped between the bins and streaked toward the ramp. Marco and
Ax bounded after him.

"GGGRRRRRRRROOOOOOOOOOOOAAAWWWWWW!"

Rachel thumped the cargo bin one last time, then barreled toward the