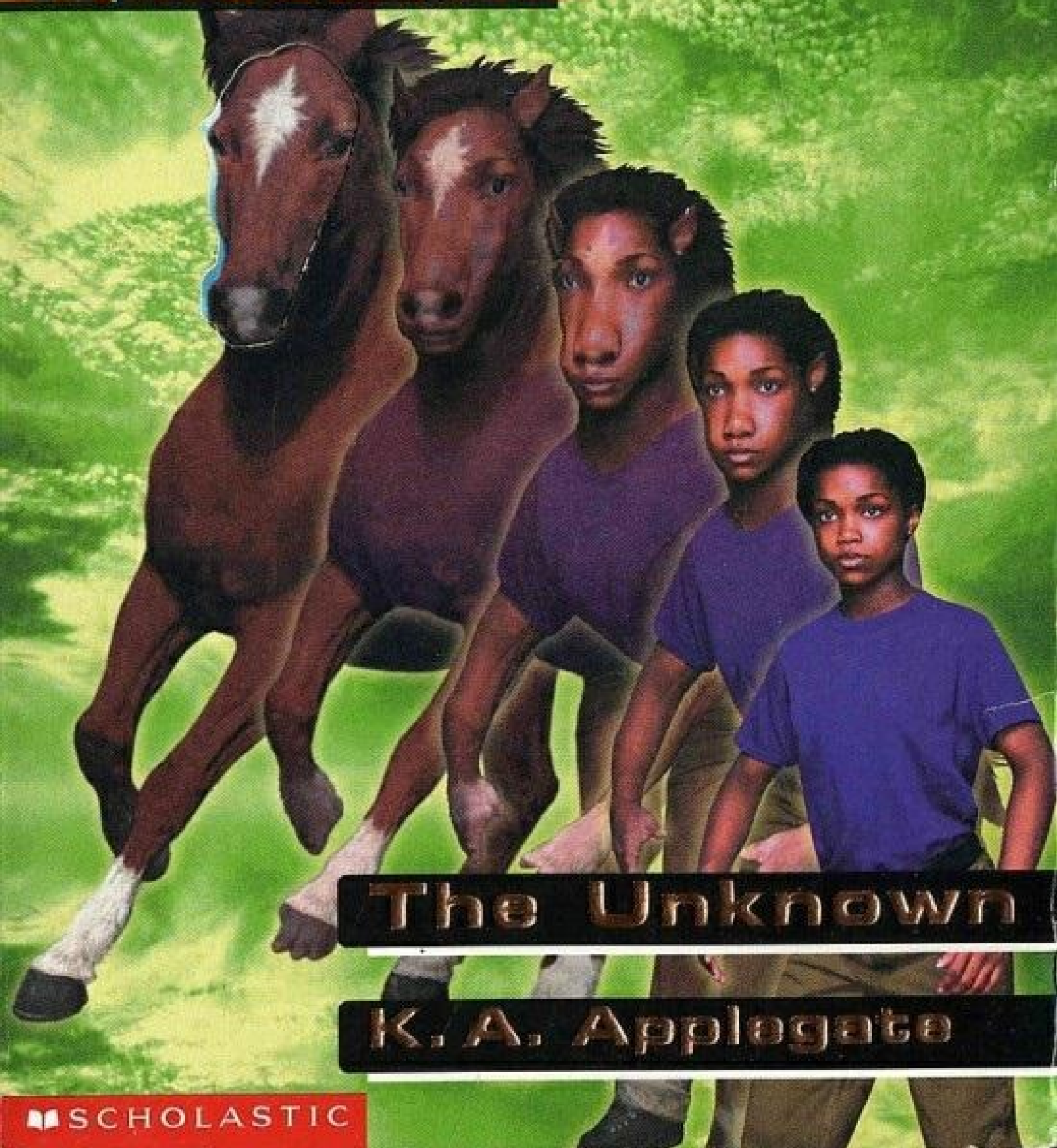


ANIMORPHS

*Never underestimate
the power of a morph.*



The Unknown

K.A. Applegate

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Animorphs #14

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Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

Chapter 1

My name is Cassie.

I can't tell you my last name. The Yeerk danger is too great. There are days when it feels like a noose slowly tightening around my neck. There are days when I don't feel like I can trust anyone. But as long as they don't know for sure who I am, maybe my friends and I can stay alive. Maybe.

Kind of dramatic-sounding, right? I sound like maybe I'm paranoid or nuts, don't I? Well, trust me, I'm not being overdramatic. I'm probably the least dramatic person you'll ever meet. And I'm not one of those crazy conspiracy people or anything. Really.

I'm just an average girl. I'm not some supermodel or rock star or whatever. I'm short. Okay-looking, but definitely not beautiful. I'm more stocky and solid than tall and willowy. If you want tall and willowy, you'll have to meet my best friend, Rachel.

But that's not me. I'm a short girl with short black hair and no makeup and a wardrobe that runs the gamut from jeans all the way to overalls. I own two pairs of boots. Both are currently covered with mud and various kinds of animal poop. I also have a couple of nice pairs of rubber gloves. You don't even want to know what's all over them.

See, I work with animals a lot. I help my dad, who's a veterinarian. He runs the Wildlife Rehabilitation Clinic, which is actually just our barn. He takes in all kinds of injured wildlife and sets their broken legs, and heals their mange, and soothes their burns, and disinfects their bites.

I help him out after school and on weekends. Mostly I do things like give the animals their "meds" - that's medications. I wash the animals and their cages, and feed them, and change dressings, and help my dad out in surgery. He's teaching me how to suture. You know - how to make stitches after you perform surgery.

Cool, huh? At least, to me it is. But in any case, now you know why I own poopy boots and gross gloves and several pairs of torn, stained jeans.

What can I say? I will not be appearing on the cover of *Seventeen*.

On the other hand, Rachel is my best friend, and Rachel is without a doubt the coolest person I will ever know. And Jake likes me - as in *likes* - and he's the smartest, strongest, most balanced person I've ever met. Except maybe for my parents, who are cool but in a parental way.

So anyway, I guess the lack of a decent wardrobe hasn't set me back too much. One way you can judge a person is by looking at their friends . . . and their enemies. I have wonderful friends.

And terrible enemies.

I have the kind of enemies that no normal, short, fashion-impaired

animal nut should have.

Earth is being invaded. It is being invaded by a species of intelligent parasites called Yeerks. In their normal state they're just these grayish slugs. Like big fat snails without their shells. But the Yeerks have the ability to enter the brain of another animal, wrap themselves around the brain, sink into all the little cracks and crevices, and utterly take over.

The Yeerks have already enslaved the entire Hork-Bajir race. They've made allies of the vile Taxxons. And now they are after us.

They're here. They're all around you. You just don't know it. They can be anyone. You think you know your friends? Your teachers? Even your parents? Maybe you do. But maybe you don't. Because any of them might have a Yeerk living inside their head. Any one of them might be a Controller.

That's what we call a person who is enslaved by a Yeerk. A Controller. A human-Controller, which is a human who is completely enslaved by the Yeerk in his or her head.

I mentioned Jake earlier. His brother, Tom, is one of them. At school, our assistant principal, Chapman, is one of them.

And who is fighting to stop this invisible, secret Yeerk invasion? Just a bunch of kids. Jake, Rachel, Marco, Tobias, an alien kid named Ax, and yours truly.

Now you're worried. You're thinking, *Earth is being invaded by evil slugs from outer space and all we have on our side is a bunch of kids?*

Well, we're not exactly *just* a bunch of kids. We have certain abilities. See, we learned about the Yeerks from the dying Andalite prince, Elfangor. He gave us the Andalite morphing technology. It allows us to become any animal we can touch.

I've been a wolf and an osprey and a fly. I've been more than a dozen animals. I've been through terrible dangers, and awful, violent battles. But I'm still alive. Still just Cassie.

And I still don't care about clothes. Which just drives Rachel nuts, even after all these years.

Rachel was standing there in the barn, just staring at me.

"Cassie, I'm just saying, look, wear jeans if you want. Wear overalls. Wear crusty rubber boots. I can accept all that. But you could at least buy jeans that fit."

"These fit fine," I protested.

"Cassie, you know I love you. You know you're my best friend in the whole world. But those jeans are so short you could wade across the Mississippi and not get them wet. When did you buy them? When you were four?"

I looked down at my jeans. They did happen to end about an inch above the tops of my boots. I grinned at Rachel. She gets so distressed about things

like that. There was a look of actual pain on her face. Like the mere existence of jeans this short was agonizing. "You're saying these are too short?"

"Not if there's a flood coming," Rachel said. "If you're expecting a flood, those would be the exact jeans to wear. Just come with me. I'm going to . . . the place. They're having lots of sales. I want you to come with me."

I narrowed my eyes. I knew what "the place" was. "I'm not going to the mall with you," I said.

"Who's going to the mall?" a voice asked.

It was my dad. He'd just opened the side door of the barn.

"Rachel is going to the mall," I told him.

"Please make her go with me," Rachel begged my father.

He laughed. "Nope. Sorry, Rachel. I need Cassie. Crazy Helen called and we have a sick horse way out on the edge of the Dry Lands."

Rachel looked down at my father's own jeans. They ended about six inches above his shoes, revealing socks that didn't exactly match.

"Gee, I wonder where Cassie gets it from?" Rachel said dryly.

I made a helpless shrug for Rachel. "Darn. Now I can't drag behind you for three hours while you power-shop and guys drool all over you. Oh, what a pity. Oh, life is so cruel."

Rachel made a face at me, then laughed. "Hey, a sick horse is far more important than buying jeans that go all the way down."

"Come with us," I said to Rachel. I like my dad and all, I really do, but a two-hour drive with just him and his old Stevie Wonder CD's was not going to be fun.

"Yeah, right," Rachel said.

I said, "Come with us, and tomorrow I'll let you pick out a new pair of jeans for me."

"*Real* jeans? Not some pair of blue cardboard-looking bargain jeans?" Rachel bit her lip, and got a misty look in her eyes. "Of course, you'll need a nice top to go with them . . ."

And that's how we ended up discovering the evil horses that threatened all of humanity.

But I'd better not get ahead of myself. First we had to drive to the Dry Lands.

Chapter 2

It was dark by the time we got away from the city, away from the far edge of forest and out into the area we usually called the Dry Lands.

The Dry Lands aren't exactly desert. I mean, we're not talking cactuses and so on. But the area is a kind of wasteland of scruffy grass and lots of emptiness that seems to stretch on and on forever. Here and there you'll see a tree, or maybe a few trees, but mostly it's all just grass and wildflowers and scrub and piles of boulders that jut up out of the ground like they were piled there by some ancient giant.

Not that we saw much of the Dry Lands that night. It was highway all the way there. An hour of highway, with all three of us crammed in the front seat of the pickup. My dad won't let us ride in the back. It's not safe.

But of course Rachel and I couldn't really talk much, with my dad right there. It's not just that he's a parent. It's also that he doesn't know anything about our lives as Animorphs.

"So, who's Crazy Helen?" Rachel asked, desperate for anything to talk about.

"Probably shouldn't call her that," my dad said. "Even though that's what she calls herself. She's an old woman, maybe eighty years old. She has a trailer behind a souvenir shop she owns. I met her years back when there was trouble with the Dry Lands horse herds."

"There was a problem with intestinal parasites," I explained. "Worms."

"For who? The horses or Crazy Helen?" Rachel asked.

"There it is," my dad said, interrupting my search for a really funny comeback to Rachel.

He pulled the truck up to a souvenir stand topped by a gigantic billboard that read LAST CHANCE SOUVENIRS. The billboard was bigger than the actual store. The store was closed and looked like it had been for years.

Behind the store was a trailer. It was an Airstream. You know, one of those silver, bullet-shaped trailers? There was an awning out front trimmed in bright Christmas lights. Even though it was nowhere near Christmas.

Crazy Helen came out when she saw us pull up. She had stringy gray hair and was wearing a faded flowery blouse over patched jeans and cowboy boots.

"Hey," Rachel said. "It's *you*, Cassie. In sixty or seventy years."

I "accidentally" dug my elbow into Rachel's side, and we both laughed.

"Actually, Cassie, you'll end up running some big volunteer organization that saves unhappy chickens and whales or whatever," Rachel said, softening her sarcasm.

I kind of liked that picture of my future. Although I wasn't sure how I

was going to work with chickens and whales at the same time.

"She's over there. Over *there*," Crazy Helen yelled as soon as we piled out of the truck. "It's a big roan mare. She's acting all funny. Like maybe she's been eating the loco weed."

"Loco weed?" Rachel asked me.

I shrugged.

"Hi, Helen," my dad said calmly. "We'll go take a look, see what we have. How have you been?"

"Those darn aliens still won't let me sleep," she said.

I saw Rachel stiffen. I gave her a wink. In a low whisper I said, "Different aliens."

"They keep sending me the messages through my teeth," Helen said. "They keep on telling me they're gonna land, right out here. But I haven't seen a Martian land in forty years. Very untrustworthy. Very, very sneaky, untrustworthy folks."

"Who?" my father asked.

"The Martians, that's who." Crazy Helen laughed. It wasn't an insane laugh. More of a gentle, knowing sound. I wondered sometimes if Crazy Helen was really crazy, or just playing a game.

"Well, we'll go look at this horse," my dad said.

Rachel and I shone flashlights into the dark. The moon was up, but it was just a sliver and didn't cast much light. And soon we were beyond the pool of light from the trailer and the billboard. Out in the absolute blackness you get when you're far from the city.

The flashlight picked out stumpy trees and bushes and rocks. The only sound was the rustling of the tall grass as we walked.

My father and I peered deep into the gloom, looking for a horse. Rachel, on the other hand, turned to look back toward the highway.

"Hey. Is that the horse you're looking for?" Rachel asked.

"Where?"

"There. Back by the road. Back by that pay phone."

My dad and I turned back to look. A scruffy roan horse was swaying from side to side as it walked. Swaying like a drunk.

As we watched, the horse seemed to be attracted to the telephone. It picked up the receiver with its mouth and let it hang off the hook.

And that's when things got strange. The horse lowered its head to the ground, picked up a twig in its lips, and seemed to be poking the telephone keyboard.

"Am I crazy, or is that horse trying to make a phone call?" Rachel said.

My dad shrugged. "Must be disoriented. Doesn't know what it's doing. Come on, let's get over there."

I dropped behind a few steps to fall in with Rachel.

"That horse is dialing the phone," Rachel said in a whisper.

"Sure looks like it," I agreed.

"Ordering a pizza?" Rachel suggested.

"Hay, alfalfa, and extra cheese?"

My dad was getting close to the horse. The horse spotted him, and hesitated. Like it wanted to complete its phone call. But also wanted to run away. It decided to run. Only it wasn't really up for running. The best it could do was wobble off into the darkness, practically falling over as it went.

"Whoa, girl, whoa," my dad said in his calming-the-animals voice. "Whoa. I'm just trying to help you."

But the horse wasn't interested. It swayed and wobbled and drifted away as fast as it could. I lost it in the darkness, but then we heard a WHUMPF sound.

I broke into a run and soon caught up to my father. He was kneeling over the fallen horse. The horse was still trying to stand up, but it was out of it.

"What do you think it is?" I asked my dad anxiously. The horse was sweating profusely. It glared at us with huge brown eyes.

"Well, it could be a lot of things," he answered. "But I'd put my money on snake bite. Try and keep her calm. I have to get some things from the truck. I'll be right back."

"Snakes?" Rachel said.

"Sure. There are lots of snakes out here," I said. I patted the horse's flank and made soothing noises.

"Not at night, though, right? I mean, snakes are probably a daytime thing . . . right?"

"Not always."

"Great. This is much better than the mall. Poison snakes and phone-calling horses."

Suddenly I noticed something happening to the horse's head. "Look!" I cried.

There, crawling its way out of the horse's left ear, was a slug. A large gray slug.

"Is that what I think it is?" Rachel whispered.

"Yeah. I think so."

The gray slug wormed its way out of the horse's head. It plopped heavily on the gravel and grass beneath it. And then it started to writhe away.

I'd seen those slugs before. We both had.

"Yeerk," I whispered. "There was a Yeerk in this horse."

The Yeerk crawled into the darkness. I glanced back and saw my dad still digging through his medical supplies at the truck. And that's when the pale stallion appeared.

He was not a terribly large horse. But you knew right away, from the first

glance, that this was a powerful animal. He stepped calmly toward us, head held high. He looked down at the snake-bit horse. And then he looked at the crawling Yeerk.

It was hard to see clearly in the dark, but I think the Yeerk tried to raise itself up to the horse. Like it was trying to reach it. Then the stallion turned and began to run away.

"Rachel?"

"Yeah."

"We have to get out of here."

"What do you mean? Why?"

I didn't know why. It was a feeling. An instinct. But it was really strong. "Just do it. Run! RUN!"

I grabbed Rachel's arm and yanked her along with me. We took about eight steps, then . . .

TSSEEEEEWWW! TSSEEEEEWWW!

A blinding light! Brilliant and intense as a flashbulb-in-your-face light! The light was coming from above. From the sky.

The very rocks split open. The ground itself seeming to explode!

My face hit the dirt before I even knew I was falling.

Chapter 3

I was on my back. I was indoors. I opened my eyes. Staring down at me was an alien. A pale, ghostly oval face with two enormous eyes. It looked like a little kid, with weak arms and legs.

It looked like one of the aliens from that old movie, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. In fact, it looked exactly like one of them.

I blinked and looked again. It was a life-size cardboard cutout. Standing just behind the alien was Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

I sat up. All around me were shelves piled with *Star Wars* masks - Wookiees and Darth Vader and Imperial stormtroopers, along with *Star Trek* handheld phasers and Spock ears. There were posters everywhere - Mulder and Scully from *X-Files*, Mike, Crow, Servo, and Gypsy from *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, Jane Fonda as Barbarella, and movie posters from *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and, of course, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

But mostly there were posters, mugs, ashtrays, pencils, and T-shirts, all emblazoned with a red-and-white logo dominated by the stencil letters spelling "Zone: 91."

"She's awake," Rachel said. She sauntered over, carrying a short stick in one hand.

"What's going on?" I asked her.

"You were knocked out. You know, when that totally unexplainable explosion happened." She arched one brow and gave me a meaningful look.

I understood. Rachel was reminding me that we had not seen what we had seen - there had been no Yeerk crawling from a horse's ear. There had been no Dracon beam.

My father came rushing over, followed by Crazy Helen. He knelt and began feeling my head.

"Ow!"

"Looks okay," he muttered. "Superficial cut. Serious bruise, but I doubt there's a concussion. Still, I'll take you by the hospital emergency room on the way home. Have the doctors there check you out."

Rachel winked. "Doctor Carter may be there. Noah Wyle. Oh, *yeah*."

"What happened?" I asked my dad.

"Well, honey-"

"It was the aliens," Crazy Helen interrupted. "They have these exploding rocks they spread around out there. BOOM!"

My father rolled his eyes. "We're on the edge of an Air Force facility. They have a base way back in the Dry Lands. You see the jets flying over all the time. I suspect they may have lost a bomb or a missile or something. That