

ANIMORPHS

There's nothing to fear
but the Yeerks themselves.



The Underground

K. A. Applegate

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Animorphs #17

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Chapter 1

My name is Rachel.

You want to know my last name? Too bad. I don't give out my last name. No offense. I'm not trying to be difficult or "too cool." I'm just being careful.

Here's the situation. Earth, our little blue and green planet, the one with the fluffy white clouds and all, is under attack.

It's not under attack like in some World War II documentary or something. Or like in *Star Wars*. It's more subtle than that. Not a lot of explosions and ray guns or whatever. In most wars, I guess what people are after is control of land or territory. Or at least they want to ram some idea down some other person's throat.

In this war, our enemies don't care about land. They don't care about ideology. They don't want to take over our capital city and raise some flag or whatever. They want us. They want our physical bodies.

They are called Yeerks. They are a race of parasitic slugs. Like tapeworms or something. They need to live in the bodies of other creatures. Otherwise they're just these gray slugs who slosh around helplessly in a Yeerk pool.

But unlike a tapeworm or something, Yeerks don't live in your intestines. They don't infest your stomach. It's your brain they infest.

They enter through your ear. They can squeeze and flatten themselves out to fit into very small spaces. They enter your ear and then your brain. They squeeze and ooze down into all the little gullies and ridges and folds of your brain. And then they interface with your brain. They control you. Totally, absolutely.

They can open your memories anytime they want. You have no privacy. None. No secrets. None. No escape. None. They are inside your dreams and thoughts and whims and wishes and desires.

Your brain becomes theirs. They own it. They lift your arms and bend your waist. They aim your eyes and focus on what they want to see. They eat for you. They go to the bathroom for you.

And because they have total access to your every single thought, they can pass for you. Flawlessly. They can be you, while always remaining themselves. Your friends will never know. Your mother and father will never know. You will be alone, trapped, helpless, paralyzed in your own body. Unable to make the simplest decision for yourself. Unable to stop yourself when you betray the ones you love. Unable to warn those whom the Yeerks target next.

A Controller. That's what we call a person who has been taken over by a Yeerk. A human-Controller. Although other species around the galaxy have

already fallen to the Yeerks.

The Hork-Bajir are enslaved. The Gedds. The Taxxons, although those vile, evil worms did it voluntarily. And we've learned the Yeerks are moving against a race called the Leerans.

And they are moving against Earth, where people live their normal lives never knowing. I guess it's like having cancer or something. You never know the tumor is growing inside you till it's too late.

So now you know why I'm cautious. Why we hide our true identities.

And who are *we*? We are Animorphs. Five kids given the power to morph into any animal we can touch. Five kids who just had the bad luck to be there when the Andalite prince Elfangor landed his damaged ship. Five of us and Elfangor's little brother, the Andalite Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill.

We call him Ax.

<Who is this Schwarzenegger?> Ax demanded. <I have heard Marco use his name before.>

"Ah-nuld?" Marco demanded. "Who iss Ah-nuld? Ah-nuld iss der man, zat's who Ah-nuld iss."

<What man?>

"*The man*," Marco explained, explaining nothing.

We were walking through the woods. It was a nice afternoon and school was out for the day. We'd had a half day due to some teacher conference. I don't know what the teachers were conferring about, but it was fine by me. The sun was out. The clouds were fluffy and light, with big sweeps of blue in between. The breeze was warm but not hot. Sitting in school on a day like that would have been a crime.

And since we didn't have anything important to deal with, we were conspiring together to do the thing we were never supposed to do: use our powers for personal, selfish reasons.

But it was tricky, see, because we knew Jake, my cousin and our sort-of leader, might get all tense and righteous on us. Not that he's that way at all. He isn't. But he's very responsible. Someone has to be, and it sure isn't me.

Still, if he decided to go along with this basically silly idea, we'd do it. If he decided to be against it, we might not do it. Or else Marco and I would do it and not tell Jake.

The trick was to present it the right way.

"See, Jake?" Marco said. "You see how totally, pathetically ignorant Ax is when it comes to really important human cultural stuff? Good grief! It makes you want to cry! He knows nothing. Nothing! He's been on Earth for months and yet, has he experienced any really important human culture? No. And it's a travesty. A crime. A pity. A shame. It's a -"

"Oh, shu-u-ut up already," Jake interrupted in exasperation. "Let me get this straight. There's a new Planet Hollywood opening in town. And you and

Rachel have decided you want to go, but you can't get tickets. So you want to fly there in morph. You want to use our powers for a totally selfish purpose. Is that it, basically?"

I shook my head. "No. Absolutely not. We want to do this for Ax. He needs to be exposed to culture. Me, I don't care." I grinned, unable to lie all that well.

"It's an entertainment event!" Marco cried. "A major, major event. Stars! Famous people! Millionaires! Babes! A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the Ax-man to see Bruce and Demi."

Cassie giggled out loud, then tried to look serious. Tobias, the remaining member of our group, was about a hundred feet above us, floating on a nice warm current of air. He was watching out for any intruders who might get close enough to notice that we were walking around with an Andalite.

In case you've never seen an Andalite, and of course you haven't, they look like a strong blue deer with a mouthless face, with two extra eyes mounted on stalks, weak, human-looking arms, and a vicious scorpionlike tail.

So you can see why we'd want Tobias aloft to keep an eye open. A hawk's eye, no less, which meant no one was going to be sneaking up on us.

Jake nodded at Marco, totally unimpressed. He cocked a skeptical eyebrow at me. "And you figure the human culture Ax needs to be exposed to is Bruce Willis playing a harmonica? Come on, spill it. Why are you into this, Rachel?"

"The whole cultural thing . . . Okay, look, as part of the deal they're having a fashion show. Ralph Lauren. You know how I feel about Ralph Lauren."

"Oh, man."

"Plus . . ." Marco said, letting the word hang in the air. "Plus what?" Jake demanded.

I sighed. "Okay, Lucy Lawless is going to be there, too. But that's not why I want to go."

Jake looked puzzled.

"Lucy Lawless," Marco said. "She's the actress who plays Xena: Warrior Princess. Rachel's role model."

Okay, Xena is *not* my role model. That's just some stupid thing Marco made up. He calls me "Xena" to grind my nerves. Marco is good at grinding people's nerves. It's his specialty. If you could get paid for being annoying, Marco would be a millionaire.

But this wasn't the time to slam Marco.

Jake kind of made a face.

"And oh, by the way," Marco said with silky significance, "not that you care, Jake, but a Mr. O'Neal is going to be there. A Mr. Shaquille O'Neal."

"Shaq?"

"Shaq."

"Well, then we're there," Jake said.

Chapter 2

We had what should have been the worst tickets at the whole event. We were at least a thousand feet from the main stage. A thousand feet, the length of three football fields plus a little more.

But we could see everything.

I could see flecks of spit when Bruce Willis played his harmonica. I could see Arnold's nose hair. I could see Shaq's shoelaces. I could see the individual buttons on the Ralph Lauren outfits. I could see Naomi Campbell's pores.

And yet she still looked great.

I had the eyes of a bald eagle. And to a bald eagle, a thousand feet is nothing.

I spread my wings six feet wide, stretched out my wing tips like feathered fingers, and felt the updraft of warm air lift me up and up.

In the air around me, at different altitudes, at various distances, there were a pair of ospreys, a peregrine falcon, a northern harrier, and a red-tailed hawk.

<We look like a raptor convention,> Tobias muttered. <I mean, why not throw in a golden eagle and a few kestrels? If there are any birdwatchers down there, they must be freaking.>

<No one is watching us,> I said. <They're watching Shaq jam with Bruce Willis and John Goodman.>

Tobias is trapped in red-tailed morph. He lives as a red-tail, hunting and killing like a hawk. He has regained his power to morph, even his power to morph into his old human body. But his human body is like any other morph: If he stays in it more than two hours, he'll be trapped in it forever. He'd no longer be able to morph.

The show below us was on a huge outdoor stage. A massive crowd pressed up against the stage, surging and seething and sweating. And not looking all that great, either. I mean, from the air, mostly what you see of humans is their heads. You see little ovals of hair. And let me tell you something: There are a lot of bad haircuts out there.

Planet Hollywood was on the waterfront where the river cuts through downtown. Tall buildings loomed over it. Skyscrapers fifty and sixty stories tall. I could look right in the windows and see that an awful lot of people had stayed late after work and were gazing down at the stage through binoculars and telescopes.

<There she is!> I yelled in sudden surprise. <I mean . . . oh, that's her. Lucy what's-her-name.>

<Xena! It's Xena!> Marco cried, delighted. <Okay, Rachel, the time has

come. Fly down there, morph back to human, and you and Xena have it out. See who can kick whose butt.>

<Marco, Marco, Marco,> I sighed. <You do like to cling to your pathetic little dreams, don't you?>

<Yes. I absolutely do. And Rachel? Don't forget the leather outfit.>

For a moment I considered teaching Marco a lesson. He was in osprey morph. Ospreys are big birds. But they might as well be chickens alongside a bald eagle. It would be so easy to go into a stoop, shoot past him, flare up beneath him, and make him tumble.

Nah. It wouldn't be right.

I wheeled around in a huge circle that carried me close to the Kenny Building. The Kenny Building is one of those glass towers, all smooth and imposing. It sits almost alongside the river, separated from the water by a four-lane road and a strip of grass. The glass is slightly mirrored so normal eyes can't see inside all that well. But bald-eagle eyes are adapted for hunting fish. They see through water very well, and glass is a lot like water.

I saw a man in an otherwise empty office on the next to highest floor. Sixty floors up. I don't know why he caught my eye, but he did. I banked to go back toward him.

And that's when he picked up the metal-framed chair and threw it into the window.

Crash! Glass exploded outward and fell spinning and sparkling to the ground. Big shards sliced through the tops of parked cars.

<What the . . .> I said. <Hey! Guys! Back here! Back here! To the Kenny Building, fast!>

<Is it Arnold?> Marco asked, like that was the only possible reason I could demand his attention.

But Cassie had spotted the crash of the window, too. <Oh, man! That guy is going to jump!>

<I believe he would be injured if he jumped,> Ax observed. <So I doubt he would - Ahh!>

The man had backed up and was running straight for the shattered window.

<There's six of us,> I yelled. <Come on!>

<Not enough,> Tobias said. <But maybe we could make the river.>

I raced for the window. The others came flapping up from below, or plunging from above, or wheeling around from the same altitude.

The man ran. He stuck his hands out to push away the last shards of glass. Then he launched himself, feet first, into space.

Chapter 3

The wind ripped across my face. I used every last ounce of the eagle's flying instincts to gain speed. Was it enough?

I was practically face-to-face with the man as he cleared the building. There was a frozen sort of Road Runner-Wile E. Coyote moment when he seemed to hang suspended in air. Then, he plummeted.

I opened my talons, stretched them forward, and caught a shred of collar as he dropped. Instantly his speed dragged me down and I sank a second talon in. Right around his collarbone. I think I managed to nick him pretty good, but that was the least of this guy's problems.

I opened my wings, but I might as well have been opening an umbrella. Maybe I shaved one mile an hour off his speed. Not much.

Then Tobias swept in like a guided missile. He grabbed the man's left arm. Jake was next, in his insanely fast peregrine falcon morph. He snagged the back of the man's collar.

He was slowing. But not nearly enough.

<Glide toward the water!> Tobias yelled. <No, don't flap, you idiots, glide!>

I forgave Tobias for calling us idiots. When it comes to flying, he is the expert. And it was a slightly tense situation.

"Aaaaahhhhhh!" the man screamed so suddenly I nearly lost my grip. He was staring right at me, his left eye maybe an inch from my right eye. He seemed like a normal-looking, middle-aged guy. Aside from the fact that he was screaming in terror.

Cassie and Ax arrived. Both grabbed talon-holds. Marco was last and he went for all that was left, grabbing the back of the man's suit jacket.

<Line up your wings on my angle,> Tobias yelled. <Like you're aiming for a level glide, but stay focused on the river!>

Six birds of prey clutched that man. He screamed. But he was falling slower. He was definitely falling slower. Still too fast to survive a concrete landing. But slower.

And he was moving forward. Foot by foot, he was moving toward the water's edge.

Down we dropped.

Forward we edged.

I wanted to giggle. It was like some bizarre geometry problem. The sum of the squares of the angles . . . would we make it?

The ground rushed up at us. Cars zipped by at sixty miles an hour below. Then a strip of grass. Way too close! We were no more than fifty feet up.

Water's edge!

<Release!> Tobias cried. <Release, but watch out for the snapback!> We released. The man dropped. Freed of the weight, I went tumbling, wildly out of control, through the air. I flapped, I spun, I flapped some more, and by a miracle, I righted myself.

Oh. *That's* what Tobias had meant by "snap-back."

ZOOOOOM! I blew across the surface of the water, so low my breastbone surfed the tops of the swells.

Wings full again, I caught enough headwind to soar up. <Ah-HAH! Yow! Oh, that was SO cool!> I exulted. Then I felt guilty. <Everyone okay?>

I wheeled around and looked for the man. He was not on the surface of the water. I peered down through the murky, salty river water.

The man was ten feet down, waving his arms madly, thrashing and blowing bubbles and looking terrified.

<You have GOT to be kidding,> I moaned. <He's stuck in the mud on the river bottom! Cassie and Marco! Come on, we're supposed to be waterbirds, right?>

I dove straight down into the water.

What a cool feeling. One minute warm air, the next second, cold water. Then not so cool. The water didn't soak into my feathers, but it did make it impossible to flap my wings. I guess I'd assumed I would sort of fly underwater. Wrong. Eagles may dive and snag fish swimming near the surface, but that does not make them ducks.

<Cassie! Marco! Don't do it!> I yelled in thought-speak.

<No duh,> Marco said. <Just because *you're* a lunatic, doesn't mean we are.>

<Rachel! You have to morph!> Cassie said. <He's struggling!>

I was already changing. Any time you morph, you have to pass through your true body on the way to another form. So there I was, a very wet bird, already feeling my lungs burn, underwater and being swept away by the current.

I morphed as fast as I could. Being terrified always helps.

As soon as I felt my human arms and legs beginning to appear, I fought my way toward the surface. I saw that shimmering, silvery barrier between air and water above me and I used my mutating limbs - feathery, half-bird, half-human stumps - to swim up and up toward air.

I stuck my face up out of the water.

"Aaarrgghh!!" someone screamed.

"Oh, my lord, what is it?"

Some people in a little motorboat. I guess they'd been listening to the music from the Planet Hollywood.

I sucked air and went down again.

"I think it was a dead body!"