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The Warning

K. A. Applegate

SCHOLASTIC

The Warning

Animorphs #16

K.A. Applegate

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Chapter 1

I typed "Bball24."

Then I typed in my code word, which is a series of letters and numbers.

I moved the mouse and placed the arrow on "Sign On." I clicked the mouse. And I waited while the modem dialed.

My name is Jake.

Just Jake. I can't tell you my last name.

My name online is Bball24. At least, that's close to being my real online name. I have to be careful, even about that. See, nothing is safe from the Yeerks. I could give you my actual screen name and they could find me.

That would be the end of Jake and Bball24. All my friends. And, just maybe, the entire human race.

You want to know what my screen name means? Well, I used to be really into basketball. I tried out for our team but didn't make the cut. But my best game ever I scored twenty-four points. So that's what Bball24 is about: basketball, twenty-four points.

Kind of dumb now, I guess. Basketball isn't all that important to me anymore. And not just because I didn't make the team. It's just that I'm playing a much more intense game now.

I'm an Animorph. It's a made-up word. You won't find it in any dictionary. My best friend Marco came up with it. It's short for "Animal Morpher."

It's what we are, thanks to an alien who died trying to save the people of Earth. He gave us the power to morph. To become any animal whose DNA we could absorb through touch. We use this power to fight the Yeerk invasion of Earth.

That's another word you won't find in the dictionary: Yeerk. But the word has a terribly real meaning. The Yeerks are a species of parasitic slug. Yeerks live in the brains of other species. They live inside Taxxons, inside Hork-Bajir, inside Gedds, and I guess inside a few Leerans. And, unfortunately for all the free races of the universe, they live inside the brain of one Andalite.

They live in the brains of humans, too. Human-Controllers. That's a human who isn't exactly human anymore. A human-Controller is a slave to the Yeerk in its head.

How many humans have the Yeerks infested? We don't know. Too many. My brother Tom is one of them. Marco's mother is one. Our assistant principal at school is one. We've seen human-Controller cops, human-Controller teachers, and even a TV star who wanted to become a human-Controller - weird as that may seem.

They are everywhere. They can be anyone.

And that's why we fight. That's why we undergo the nightmarish transformations into animal form again and again. Because our only weapons are the animals we become.

I connected at 38,400 bps. I wish I had a faster modem, but at least this one is better than my old 14,400.

Some offers popped up on the screen. Would I like to apply for a Web Access America Visa card? No. Would I like to buy a new antivirus program? No.

"You've got mail," the computer said with a sort of mechanical excitement. Like

it cared that I had E-mail.

I clicked on the mail icon. Three E-mails. One was a chain letter. I dumped it. One was from some guy who must have thought I cared about politics. It was some stupid conspiracy theory. I dumped it, too.

The third was from "Cassie98." I opened it and read it.

"Jake, oooh baby, you are the man for me. I love your big manly shoulders. I love your piercing brown eyes. (They are brown, right?) But most of all, I love the macho, manly way you boss us all around, snapping out orders left and right. I think of you as the new Clint Eastwood. I must have you all to myself. Signed, Cassie. XXX."

I sighed. Marco, of course. Cassie seldom goes online, and never sends E-mail, and would certainly never send me such a stupid E-mail. Kind of a shame, actually. But this was definitely the work of Marco, using one of his many fake screen names.

I clicked on the "Create Mail" command. I thought for a moment, then typed.

"Cassie, you know I like you, too. But I have vowed not to get involved with any girl until my best friend, Marco, gets at least one girl to like him. And since we know that's never going to happen, I guess we'll never get together. Signed, Jake."

I sent the E-mail, feeling pretty pleased with myself. Marco would get a laugh out of it. Marco always looks for the humor in any situation and he doesn't mind if the joke is on him. As long as it's funny.

I was going to sign off because, as usual, I couldn't really think of much to do online. But then I had this weird urge. I don't know why. I clicked on the Internet icon and brought up the Web browser.

In the search space I typed the word "Yeerk."

I clicked on "Search Now."

It took a few seconds to get the answer back. I expected to get nothing. There was no reason for there to be a Web site using the keyword "Yeerk." Like I said, it's not a word in any dictionary.

But then, to my utter amazement, up popped the list of hits.

There was exactly one.

I clicked on the blue hypertext link.

And suddenly I realized we Animorphs were not as alone as we'd thought.

Chapter 2

"There's a Yeerk home page?" Marco asked incredulously. "What do they have there? JPEGs of Yeerk slugs? Links to other alien invaders' Web sites? Ads for Yahoo's alien parasites selection?"

I'd gotten everyone together. Not in any of our usual places, like Cassie's barn or the edge of the woods. I needed access to a computer. And Marco's was better than mine, so we all went over to his house.

Marco's dad works with computers, so Marco has all the latest, coolest stuff. At least by human standards. Ax was with us, in his disturbingly attractive human morph. Ax's real name is Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill. He's an Andalite, which means that his own body is a mix of deer, human, and scorpion, with blue fur and a pair of extra eyes mounted on stalks.

"Why is it working so slowly? Lee. Sloooooow-lee?" Ax asked.

I forgot to mention that in his own body Ax has no mouth. When he's in a human morph with a human mouth he finds it very entertaining to play with sounds. The rest of us find it very annoying, but hey, we each have our faults.

"Look, Space-boy, this is the fastest modem around, okay?" Marco said defensively. "Fifty-six thousand bits per second."

"Fifty-six *thousand*? Not millions, at least? Mill-yuns. Millie-yuns." He laughed. "I like that word. It makes nice sounds in my human mouth."

Rachel rolled her eyes. "Yeah. It's a swell sound. Sometimes I just lie in bed for six or seven hours doing nothing but saying 'million.'"

Ax was totally unfazed. "That is a sarcasm sound, right?"

"Sarcasm. Asm. Casm. Yeah, that was sarcasm, Ax," Rachel said. But she laughed in a nonsarcastic way and shook her head, causing her volumes of blond hair to shake silkily.

Rachel is my cousin, so I don't think of her as beautiful; but every other person does. She's not just beautiful; she's one of those people who always seems to have a special spotlight on them wherever they go.

But Rachel isn't about looks. I know this sounds corny, like something from a sword-and-sorcery game, but Rachel is a warrior. I don't know what she'd have become in her life if this war with the Yeerks hadn't happened. But once it did happen, it was like Rachel had found her place in the universe, you know? Like it was all some inevitable part of her destiny.

Personally, I don't feel that way. I'd be happy to go back to being a normal guy. But I don't know about Rachel. There's something fierce inside her.

"So, let's see this famous Web page," Tobias said. "I have to get home. There's some guy trying to move in on my meadow. I have to be there to keep up my claim."

"Another red-tail?" Cassie asked him.

Tobias jerked his head toward her. It was a very birdlike movement. "Yes. And he's tough."

The Tobias I was looking at was the same Tobias I'd first met with his head in a toilet and two bullies holding him upside down. But that was an illusion. Tobias had broken rule number one of morphing: Never stay more than two hours in a morph or

you stay permanently.

Tobias is now a red-tailed hawk. He lives as a hawk, hunts as a hawk, and eats as a hawk. But he was able to recover his power to morph. He is still a hawk. But he can morph into his old human body for two hours at a time.

If he stays longer, he's back to being human. But he'd lose his morphing powers forever. And he wants to stay in the fight.

Tobias has been changed more than any of us by all this. Not just physically. He's lost more. Given up more.

"Okay, here it is," I said as the Web page filled the monitor screen.

Cassie leaned over me to see better. She pressed her hand on my shoulder to support herself.

"This page is devoted to letting the world know about the Yeerk threat! This is not a joke. This is not the usual Internet nonsense. This is serious. This is deadly serious."

I looked over my shoulder at Cassie. "See? Yeerks. A Web page about Yeerks. Do you believe this?"

She shook her head. "No. It's bizarre."

The page had four icons. "Facts about Yeerks," "Suspected Human-Yeerks," "Types of Yeerks," and "Chat About Yeerks."

"Have you already checked all these out?" Tobias asked.

Before I could answer, Marco grabbed my shoulder. "You disabled your cookies, right?"

"His cookies?" Cassie asked. "Disabled cookies? Excuse me?"

Marco rolled his eyes. "You really need to think about joining up with *this* century, Cassie. A cookie is a Web browser tag that can give a Web site some information about you. Not *you*, you. But your screen name."

"I disabled it," I said, with a wink for Cassie.

"Disabled cookies," she said with a derisive snort. "Computer nerds have this ridiculous need to make up stupid terms for everything. All they want to do is make normal people feel . . ."

She went on about it for a while. Cassie believes in real things like people and animals. She's not exactly a big fan of technology.

"So. What did you look at, Jake?" Marco asked me, giving Cassie a disdainful, pitying look, which she ignored.

"Well, I looked at Types of Yeerks.' There's a drawing of something that looks kind of like a Hork-Bajir. But there are two other drawings that don't look like anything we've seen."

I clicked to that page. Up came the drawing of the Hork-Bajir.

"Not bad," Rachel said.

"Obviously, whoever drew that had a pretty good idea what a Hork-Bajir looked like," Marco said.

The other drawings appeared jerkily on the screen. One looked like a standard, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* type of alien. The other two looked like a Cardassian from *Deep Space Nine* and a Narn from *Babylon Five*.

"Someone's been watching too much TV," Marco said with a derisive laugh. "Ax, have you ever seen any real aliens that look like those?"

"Like that one, yes." He pointed at the fetal-looking *Close Encounters* alien. "It is similar to the mature phase of a species called Skrit Na. The Skrit, the immature phase, is like a giant cockroach. This could be a Na. Only Na usually walk on all fours like sensible creatures. Rea-tures. Cuh-reee-chers. My brother, Elfangor, once had some big adventure involving Skrit Na. But he never told me much about it. The other species are all unknown to me."

"So. What does this tell us?" I asked.

"The accurate Hork-Bajir picture could be a coincidence," Marco said, "or maybe it's a mix of real information and bogus information. Or maybe someone out there knows more about Yeerks and the various species they've conquered than Ax knows."

Cassie nodded her agreement. "A mix of truth and lies, or else a coincidence."

"A 'mix of truth and lies' is like the definition of the Internet," Rachel said. "Equal parts reality and delusion."

"It's the same thing in the 'Facts about Yeerks' and the section about human-Controllers. Not that they use the term 'Controllers,'" I said. "Some of it may be true. But most of it is bull. I mean, it's like supposedly every politician in the country is a Controller. If that were true, the Yeerks would have already won."

I clicked on the list anyway and the others all crowded in close to look over my shoulder.

"The President," Cassie read. "Yeah, right. And the Vice President. Speaker of the House. Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Good grief."

"Hey, wait," Marco said. "John Tesh is listed. That I can believe. Snoop Dogg? I don't think so. The Spice Girls? They suck, but I don't know if they're Controllers."

"This is ridiculous," Rachel said. "This is a waste of time. Some typical Internet wacko picked the word 'Yeerk' out of thin air and decided to make a Web page. It doesn't mean anything."

"That was my reaction, too," I said. "Then I saw this name." I used the mouse to point.

"Chapman!" Rachel said. "Huh."

Chapman is our assistant principal. He's also a high-ranking Yeerk and a major supervisor of The Sharing. The Sharing is a front organization. They pretend to be a sort of coed Boy Scouts or whatever, but they are a Yeerk organization.

Which made me wonder. "So if whoever put this page together really knows anything about Yeerks, why isn't there anything about The Sharing?"

Cassie nodded. "Good question. Maybe they don't know about The Sharing."

"Or maybe this whole thing is nothing but a Yeerk trap," Tobias said.

"Exactly," Rachel agreed. "Then they wouldn't want anyone knowing what The Sharing really is, would they?"

"So why mention Chapman?"

"It's a pretty common name," Marco pointed out. "Could be random. Could be coincidence."

I pushed back from the computer and looked at my friends. "If this thing is real, then maybe we have allies out there who could help us."

"But if it's just a Yeerk trap then we could be the mice, and this stupid Web page could be the cheese," Rachel said.

We all just kind of looked at each other for a while, shrugging.

Then Cassie said, "What about the chat room?"

"There's supposedly a scheduled chat starting right about now," I said. "But I wasn't sure if it was safe for one of us to go there. A chat room goes beyond just disabling cookies. How secure are screen names?"

Marco grinned. "A lot more secure after I get done. See, I have the access codes for the system at my dad's work. So I can hack in through -"

"Excuse me, Prince Jake," Ax interrupted, "but if you would like I can encode Marco's software in a way that will make it impossible for anyone to trace you. Why is it called software?"

I glanced at Marco. He's proud of his skills. But the truth is, Ax is about three centuries ahead of us in computers.

Marco threw up his hands. "Fine. Go for it."

"There is only so much I can do with this very primitive system," Ax said. "Two-dimensional screen, an actual keyboard instead of a decent psychic link, rigid codes . . . I'm not an archaeologist. I don't know much about ancient types of computers."

Just the same, he sat down and in three minutes had typed in a code that made Marco's system hack-proof.

"Okay. So. Do we chat about Yeerks?" Cassie asked.

"Yep. We chat about Yeerks."

Chapter 3

If you've never seen a computer chat room before, it's kind of confusing. It's like a conversation between people who aren't really listening to each other.

Plus everyone can only type about ten words at a time, so it gets pretty confusing. But you get used to making sense of it after a while.

The six of us watched, fascinated, as the conversation went scrolling down the screen. A conversation about things we thought only we knew about.

YeerKiller9: there's no way!
GoVikes: You have to chop them up to be sure they're really
Chazz: Why don't we get serious here? The Yeerks are
GoVikes: dead.
YeerKiller9: Listen to me, I was infested by a Yeerk. It
Chazz: Only getting stronger. And instead of using this Chat
to plan
YrkH8er: Kill all Yeerks!
Gump8293: I think my dad is one. What can I do?
Chazz: some action, we end up doing nothing.
YeerKiller9: was only by a miracle that I escaped.
Gump8293: I mean it's weird because my dad actually seems in
some ways. But
GoVikes: Yeerks are like worms. If you just cut them in
CKDsweet: can anyone help me? There's this organization
called
GoVikes: half they just grow again.
Gump8293: he is too nice. He's got all these new friends
suddenly and
YrkH8er: Kill all Yeerks!
CKDsweet: the sharing, and I think they are all Yeerks

I looked at Marco. He nodded.

"The Sharing," he muttered. "Interesting. See if anyone stomps on that."
Sure enough, someone did. The supposedly enthusiastic Yeerk hater.

YrkH8er: The sharing is okay. I checked them out.
Chazz: Wrong. The sharing is a Yeerk front organization.
YrkH8er: No way. They're like Boy Scouts.

"Whoa," Rachel said.

"This Chazz guy seems fairly serious," Tobias offered.

"YrkH8er may be a Controller himself," I said.

"Or he may just be mistaken," Cassie pointed out.

Gump8293: he's with them all the time. The other day I
Carlito: I've discovered that Yeerks need to go someplace
secret and
Gump8293: heard my dad and these new friends whispering about

Carlito: feed or replenish. Every three days. I think they
Gump8293: someone called "Visher" or "Vister" or something.
Carlito: get out of their host body to do this
MegMom: Gump, I think it's "Visser." I think a Visser is like
a
GoVikes: they're like snails, only without a shell.
MegMom: general or something. I think Visser is a rank.
GoVikes: Rank. LOL. Totally rank.

"GoVikes is just your standard chat room moron," Marco said. "But Chazz and Meg and Carlito seem like they may know something."

"Gump is sad," Cassie said. "Worried about his dad."

"Yeah, well, it's a sad world all around," Marco said harshly.

I had known for a while that Marco's mother is a Controller. In fact, she's Visser One, a very high-ranking member of the Yeerk hierarchy. But the others had only learned recently. And Marco is allergic to pity so he has to act extra tough.

Gump8293: Isn't there any way for me to get my dad to stop being

YrkH8er: Kill all Yeerks!

Gump8293: a Yeerk?

YrkH8er: Talk to your dad. Tell him what you think.

Chazz: NO Gump. Say NOTHING to your father. If you say anything you'll be next.

MegMom: Gump, listen to Chazz. He's right. You can't do

Fitey777: Hi everyone.

MegMom: anything to save your father. All you can do is get hurt.

Fitey777: I have a name to add to the list of known Yeerks.

Gump8293: I have to DO something.

Fitey777: Charles J. Sofor. He's the deputy police chief in

YrkH8er: Kill all Yeerks!

Chazz: Hello Fitey.

MegMom: Good, Fitey's here.

Fitey777: the capital. I am close to getting the location

GoVikes: chop him up in little pieces.

Fitey777: of a Yeerk feeding area.

"So, what do we think?" I asked the group.

Rachel sighed. "Who can tell? Maybe some of these guys are for real. But maybe it's all a Yeerk scam to lure people in."

"Like Gump," Cassie said. "They may be trying to get his name and address so they can warn his father, the Controller."

"I suspect a Yeerk scam," Tobias said.

"I'd go that way, too," Rachel said.

Cassie shook her head. "I'm not so sure. There's something real and genuine about some of these people. Not all. YrkH8er is probably a Controller. But Gump is real. I'd bet on it."

I learned to trust Cassie's instincts about people long ago. "I get the same feeling," I said. "Ax?"

"Who can tell? This primitive means of communication makes it impossible to judge. Now that humans have the telephone, why do they still use this primitive system?"

"Actually, the phone was invented first," I said. "This is more modern."

Ax laughed. "Humans. You invent the book first, then the computer. Puter. Telephone before computer. Very backward."

"Marco? What do you think?"

Marco tilted his head back and forth in a "who knows?" gesture. "If I had to guess, I'd say a little of both. Maybe this Web page was created by Yeerks to help them locate any humans who know about them. But at the same time, maybe it got a little out of their control. I mean, maybe Chazz, Carlito, Fitey, and Meg are all for real."

I nodded. "We need to try and find out who these people are. Ax? Can you hack in and penetrate the protected screen name files?"

I stood up and Ax sat stiffly in the chair. He placed his unfamiliar human fingers on the keys. "What is 'Caps Lock'?"

"Forget 'Caps Lock.'"

"Yes, Prince Jake."

I sighed. "I'm not a prince," I said for probably the millionth time.

Ax entered the computer's software and began to write furiously. But after a few minutes he was obviously frustrated.

"What?" Marco mocked. "A superior Andalite can't hack into the Web Access America computer?"

"Can you?" Ax asked him.

"No."

"Ah." He went back to typing furiously. Then he pushed the keyboard away, almost angrily. "The most basic systems are not usable."

"In other words, you can't do it?" I said.

"No. This machine and the central computer are both too primitive. I tried to reconfigure the software, but it is not enough." He brightened. "However, I fixed it so Marco will now be able to win any online computer game he plays."

"I already win every game," Marco lied.

"Your win and lose ratio is stored in the computer, Marco," Ax pointed out. "You do not win every game. You win forty-two percent of the time. Ratio. Horatio. Ray. Shee. Oh."

"It would be nice to know if these guys are for real," Cassie said. "We may have allies out there. And there may be people like Gump who we could help."

I held out my hands. "So? How do we get the real names behind the screen names?"

"If we busted into WAA's main office . . ." Marco began.

"Invade Web Access America?" Rachel said, grinning.

"Yeah," Marco said. "Invade Web Access America. Bust into their main computers. Get the screen names. And while we're at it, turn off that stupid program that keeps offering you a Web Access America Visa card."

Chapter 4

The Animorphs are like the world's greatest burglars. I mean, we don't steal stuff, of course. But when you can become any kind of animal, it's usually fairly easy to get into places.

Just one problem. Web Access America was not in our town. The headquarters of Web Access America was a couple of hundred miles away. Too far for us to get to. Even if we morphed into birds, we couldn't cover that much distance in the two-hour morph time. And if we stopped and demorphed and remorphed, we'd still never make it there and back in a day.

So we needed some other means of transportation. And that's why we were at the airport in the terminal that Saturday morning, watching through the floor-to-ceiling windows as flights took off.

"It's a one-hour-and-thirty-minute flight," Marco said. "Plenty of time."

"Right."

"All we have to do is morph, fly aboard the plane, try not to get swatted, and demorph when we get there," he said. "We can take United or Northwest."

It was just me and Marco at the window. The others were spread around the terminal. We try not to congregate together. We don't want to look like a group. Yeerk eyes are everywhere. They think we're a bunch of Andalites, not humans, but we have to be careful all the time.

"United or Northwest?" Marco asked.

I shrugged. "Flip a coin. Who cares? The problem I have is with the idea of being a fly on a plane. Lots of people looking to swat. And if anything goes wrong, how do we demorph on a plane?"

"You want to cancel out?"

I thought about it for a minute. Out on the runway, a 747 was rumbling down the tarmac, picking up speed for a takeoff. "Nah. I guess it'll be okay. It's a risk, but it's worth it."

Marco smiled. An actual, nonmocking smile, which is rare for him. "I remember back when you didn't want to have to make all the big decisions."

"I still don't want to make them," I said. "But someone has to, right?"

"Yep." He nodded.

"I just want to get back to a life someday where I don't have to make decisions that might get people killed."

"Do you?" Now Marco's smile was definitely of the mocking variety. "You really think someday we can all go back to being regular kids? You think after being the leader of the Animorphs you can go back to being Joe Average Student?"

"Yes, I do." I said it forcefully. I meant it.

"Uh-huh," Marco said dryly. "Come on, let's round up the others." He squinted to see the board announcing flight departures. "Let's catch the United flight. It leaves soonest. We have fifteen minutes. Gate nineteen."

"Is there a movie on the flight?" I asked, trying to catch Marco's casual tone.

"On a one-hour-and-thirty-minute flight? More like an in-flight cartoon."

We found the others, drifting from Cassie and Rachel to Tobias and Ax. We

explained the plan. It was Tobias who asked the question I had overlooked.

"How are we going to find gate nineteen when we're in fly morph? How good are fly eyes?"

Tobias had never morphed a fly before. He'd just acquired the DNA earlier that morning.

"Pretty bad, actually," I admitted. "Compound eyes."

"The sense of smell is good, though," Marco said. "I mean, flies can sense poop or garbage from a long way off."

I looked at Marco. He looked at me.

"Oh, puh-leeze," Marco said. "Where would we find it? And what would we do with it? Hand it to the flight attendant at the gate? Tell him, 'Hang onto this for us. We'll be right back as flies'?"

A plane was disgorging passengers from a nearby gate. The people all looked tired and annoyed. Some smiled for the relatives and friends who were picking them up. But I guess it must have been a long flight, because some of the people had pressure marks on the sides of their faces. You know, like they'd been sleeping with their heads leaned against the windows of the plane.

Then there was the mother and father with their baby. The baby was squalling and squirming in its mother's arms.

They stopped just a few feet away.

"He needs to be changed," the mother said.

"Whose turn is it?" the father asked.

The mother handed the baby to him and he groaned. "Please let it just be number one."

"I don't think so," the mother said. "I think you're getting a full load."

I turned to Marco, Tobias, and Ax. "Okay, we need a volunteer for a very hazardous and disgusting mission. Someone has to get that diaper."

It turned out the volunteer was me. Ax couldn't even understand the basic concept. Which left three of us. We did rock, paper, scissors. Whoever didn't match the others was the volunteer.

Tobias and Marco took paper. I did rock.

I swear somehow or other they cheated.

Two minutes later I had an absolutely vile Huggies wrapped in a couple of paper towels.

"I don't suppose you want this," I said, offering it to Marco.

"What is it?" Ax wondered.

"A diaper," I said. "Baby poop."

"Diaper gravy," Marco said. "We're going to use the diaper gravy to guide our flight as flies."

"I don't understand."

I sighed. "This would be one of those things I really don't want to explain, Ax," I said. I carried the diaper toward gate nineteen. I stuffed it into a large, standing ashtray and returned to the others. "That should do it. Let's get back with Cassie and Rachel."

"See, now this is why we aren't Batman or Spiderman," Marco complained. "Spiderman never has to follow the trail of baby poop."

"Who is this spider man?" Ax asked.

Chapter 5

We went to a men's room to morph. Cassie and Rachel went to a ladies' room. I guess there are times when we Animorphs just can't work as a team.

"We could all fit together in the handicapped stall," Marco suggested.

"You're not supposed to do that," I said. "Let's just each get our own stall."

But that was easier said than done. There were a lot of flights coming and going. The men's room was busy. The best we could do was get two stalls.

"Oh, this doesn't look too weird," Tobias muttered as he and I entered a stall together.

"Wait a few seconds. Things will be quite a bit weirder," I told him.

We closed and latched the door. We stripped off our outer clothing and shoes and stuffed it all into a backpack we'd brought along. We set the bag behind the toilet. You can't morph street clothes or shoes, just something form-fitting. Like the bike shorts and T-shirt I was wearing. If we were lucky we'd get our clothes back later at the lost and found. If not . . . well, we lose a lot of clothing.

"Fly morph, huh?" Tobias whispered.

"Yep."

"Is it as gross as I think it will be?"

"No. It's much, much grosser."

Tobias made a face. Then he started morphing. But not into a fly. See, when you morph you can only do it from your natural shape. Strange as it may seem, Tobias's natural shape is now that of a red-tailed hawk.

So as I waited nervously, Tobias grew feathers and wings and talons and a beak. And in the next stall Ax grew a scorpion tail, two stalk eyes, and four hooved legs.

"Ready?" I whispered to Marco.

"Yeah. Let's do it. It's crowded in here."

I looked at Tobias. Funny how even I was used to the idea that the real Tobias was the Tobias with the fierce gold-and-brown eyes and the beak designed to tear apart flesh.

"Ready?"

<Yeah. I'm as ready as I'll ever be.>

"You might like it," I said. "You should see how well flies fly."

<I fly better than anything else with wings already,> he said. <Okay. Let's get this over with.>

I closed my eyes and began to focus on the fly morph. The truth is, it made me feel better to have Tobias nervous. It distracted me from the fact that morphing a fly made me sick.

There may be something more disgusting than a fly, but I sure haven't become it yet.

The first change was that I began to shrink.

The steel walls of the bathroom stall seemed to rise up and up and up. They grew to be the size of skyscrapers. Graffiti that had been in inch-high letters was now big enough to fill a billboard.

When I looked down I got a real scare. It looked exactly as if I were falling into

the toilet bowl. That toilet bowl got bigger and bigger and seemed to be sprouting up from the floor like it was a big mouth trying to swallow me whole.

I saw the toilet paper dispenser go zipping by. One minute it was below waist level, the next minute it took off, straight up. It was an odd thing to see.

The linoleum squares grew vast. The scraps of tissue on the floor became bedsheets. A piece of chewed gum became a big, pink boulder.

But shrinking was the easy part. The other changes were infinitely worse. For one thing, there's the fact that your nose and mouth sort of melt together and grow into this insanely long, hairy, sticky, spit-dribbling thing the books call "mouth parts."

<AAAAAHHHH! Jeez!> Tobias yelled in thought-speak.

His own beak had just sprouted into the long, spring-loaded, utterly nasty-looking mouth parts. It was not a pretty thing to watch.

Sprooot! Two big legs sort of burst out of my chest. You know how in the movie *Alien* the alien baby exploded out of that guy's chest? It was a little like that. Only instead of some fake-looking puppet, these were two long, black, jointed legs, each bristling with daggerlike hairs.

Morphing is never totally logical. It isn't a smooth transition. It's not like each part of you gets gradually more flylike. Things happen suddenly, and in unexpected sequences. I was still about a foot tall when the legs pushed out through my ribs. I still had human eyes and a mostly human body. Aside from the monstrous mouth parts.

"Hey, anyone in there?"

I heard the voice. And I heard the way the door of the stall rattled. But I couldn't answer. I didn't have a mouth.

<Someone's trying to get in!> Tobias said.

<I know!>

<What do we do?>

<Keep morphing. It's too late to back out now.>

"Hey, is anyone in there? I gotta go bad."

My hands had become the appendages of a fly. There were two hooked, talonlike claws and small, hairy pads that oozed a kind of glue. I could hear my internal organs going soft and squishy as entire things like a liver and spleen and kidneys were reformed to make the infinitely more primitive guts of a fly.

My bones were weakening so that my still-mostly-human legs were getting wobbly, turning to overcooked spaghetti.

At this point I was about the size of a small dog. I had fly legs but no wings. I had human eyes and massive fly mouth parts. Tobias was a similar mess. And that's when the guy who had to go bad reached over the stall door and undid the lock.

The door opened. There wasn't anything I could do.

"Oh. Ohhh. OOHHH! Oh, No! NOOOO! NOOOOOO! AAAAAHHHH!"

The man stood there and stared.

I waved one dagger-haired, clawed leg at him.

"AAAAHHHHH! Help! Help! Help!"

The door slammed shut again.

<Quick! We better be flies before he brings help!>

"Help me! Police! Someone!"

I continued shrinking, and now I noticed my gossamer fly wings coming in,

attached to big springlike muscles in my back.

"There are monsters in the toilets!"

<What's going on over there?> Marco demanded from the next stall over.

<We're busted,> I said. <Make it quick.>

My human eyes dimmed, then went dark. Seconds passed in total blindness as my compound fly eyes grew. Then, all at once, I saw a world of shattered images, like a thousand tiny television sets all tuned to a slightly different picture.

<By the way, Tobias, watch out for the fly instincts,> I warned.

In my weird field of vision I saw something black and blurry go zipping by. Another fly. Tobias?

<Tobias, is that you flying?>

Rumble, rumble, rumble, rumble, RUMBLE, RUMBLE.

Thunderous pounding vibrations distracted me. Many heavy feet were running toward me.

WHAM! The door of the stall opened. I felt the wind whoosh past overhead. It excited the hairs on my back. My antennae quivered madly.

Danger!

I pushed off with my six legs, turned on my fly wings, and blasted up off the dirty linoleum.

<We're airborne over here,> Marco reported.

"They were here, I'm telling you. Monsters! Like . . . like weird, mutated things!"

"Sir, just how many drinks did you have on your flight?"

<Tobias,> I called. <Are you okay? Tobias!>

There was no answer.

I zoomed crazily around, zipping past the Statue-of-Liberty-sized humans. My senses were picking up about a hundred interesting smells: rot, sweat, filth, garbage. All of which were fascinating to my fly brain.

But I still did not see Tobias.

Chapter 6

<Tobias! Where are you? The fly brain has you. Fight it!>

<Yo, Tobias,> Marco said. <Come on, get a grip. We don't have a lot of time.>

<Tobias! It's me, Aximili. Reassert your individual consciousness.>

<Say what?> Marco laughed. <Reassert his what?>

Then there came a shaky, uncertain thought-speak voice. <Uh, hello? It's me. I mean, it's me, Tobias.>

I was inscribing crazed fly circles around the bathroom. I did a quick somersault and landed upside down on the ceiling. My claws gripped tiny irregularities in the paint. And the sticky pads on my feet did the rest.

<Tobias? Where are you? Are you okay?>

<I guess I kind of lost it there for a minute.>

<Well, that happens sometimes with a new morph. You know, until you get used to the animal's instincts.>

<Yeah,> Marco said. <But then you can "reassert your individual consciousness.">

<Tobias, where are you?>

<Well . . . it's smooth. Um, it was different when I first landed here. It was smooth and white. Wet, though. There's dampness on the surface. And I think there's a big lake or something below me.>

<Are you right side up or what?>

<I'm sideways. I'm sideways on a smooth, damp surface I think was white. And there's a big lake below me.>

We all considered that description for a moment.

<Oh, man!> Marco yelled. <Tobias, you're in a toilet!>

<Tobias, get out of there before someone flushes,> I said, stifling the urge to laugh.

<I'm . . . remember how I said it was different when I first landed here? It was light. Now it's dark.>

We all considered this new information for a moment.

<Uh, guh-ROSS!> Marco said, half-laughing, half-scared.

<Tobias, I think the reason it got dark is that someone sat down.>

<Wait. You're saying I'm in a toilet bowl. And someone sat down. But then . . . oh, man.>

<Caution: falling objects,> Marco said.

<What does all this mean?> Ax wondered.

<Tobias, I think for the sake of safety, and also for the sake of avoiding something way too gross to even think about, you need to get out of there.>

<How? How? The exit is blocked, to say the least!>

<Try the space between the toilet seat and the porcelain.>

<Oh.>

<Look for the light. There will be some light shining through,> I said.

<Go into the light,> Marco said.

<Get out of there!>

<The space! I found the space!>
<I am completely confused,> Ax confessed.
<Okay, I'm out,> Tobias said. <This so totally sucks. I'm starting to wish the
Ellimist had never given me back my morphing powers.>
<It's the glamorous life of a superhero,> Marco said.
<Speaking of glamour, we need to find the gate and get on that plane,> I
reminded everyone. <Rachel and Cassie are probably already there.>
<I can find the door from the air currents,> Tobias said.
<Yeah. Fly against the influx of air. That should get us out into the terminal. Then
all we have to do is pick up the scent of that diaper and follow it to the gate.>
<Hey, Tobias can lead the way,> Marco said brightly. <He sort of has experience
at that kind of thing.>
<Oh, shut up,> Tobias grumbled.
<Will you explain what has been going on?> Ax asked.
<When you get older maybe,> Marco said.

Chapter 7

I wasn't lying when I'd told Tobias that flying as a fly is cool. I mean, in some ways it's bad because you can't see very well, so you don't get to look around while you're flying.

But nothing flies like a fly. Compared to a fly, any bird is a big, lumbering, clumsy whale. Flies can fly straight up. Straight down. They can turn in less than the blink of an eye. And I'm talking a full, one-hundred-eighty-degree turn in midair, no problem. They can fly on their sides and upside down. They can do loops and figure eights. They can fly figure eights inside a small juice glass.

And unlike birds, flies can land on anything. Anything. Horizontal, vertical, rough, smooth, wet, dry, still or moving, living or not.

They are very amazing insects. Very gross, very amazing insects.

<Okay, this is cool,> Tobias said. <Once you get past the fact that your own body makes you want to throw up.>

<Marco feels that way in his human body,> Rachel said gleefully.

We had located Cassie and Rachel in the air near the dirty diaper.

<Oooh. Don't hurt me with the chakram of your wit, Xena,> Marco said.

<Huh?>

<Chakram,> Marco said, like any idiot should know the word. <It's the metal Frisbee thing Xena throws. What, are you people cultural morons?>

Marco loves to tease Rachel by calling her Xena: Warrior Princess. Which isn't a bad comparison, aside from the fact that Rachel doesn't wear a leather skirt.

Marco and Rachel have a strange sort of relationship. I haven't figured out whether they pretend they can't stand each other but secretly like and admire each other, or if they really just can't stand each other. I'm not good at understanding subtle human behavior. I kind of rely on Cassie for that.

<So what now?> Tobias asked.

<Now we get on the plane,> I said. <But look. Everyone be very careful. Use those fly instincts: Something moves toward you, get out of the way.>

<I can more or less see the gate,> Cassie said. <No, wait, I think it may be the window. That's the problem: The gate doesn't have enough contrast between light and dark for us to see it clearly.>

<Get close to a person. Stay with that person till you're in the walkway. We can figure it out from there.>

I saw a human head below me. Zoomed down toward it. No! I pulled back. The guy was bald. He'd probably have felt me land. There! A woman with big hair. Excellent. I landed on hairs like starched anchor cables. I could feel the breeze blowing past as we moved slowly forward.

The quality of the light changed and the sounds I heard seemed to echo. We were in the access tunnel. Then, a voice saying, "Hello, welcome aboard!"

I was aboard the jet. <Everyone here?> I asked. They were. I breathed a sigh of relief. Actually, that's just an expression. I had no lungs.

I landed on the overhead. It was perforated plastic. Lots of holes in what looked like a circular pattern. I straddled one of the holes and looked down at the people

getting into their seats.

<Ax, keep track of the time, okay?>

<Yes, Prince Jake.>

<You know I don't want you to call me Prince Jake. I am not a prince.>

<Yes, Prince Jake, I know.>

<Good, as long as we're clear on that.>

We waited. And we waited. And Ax counted off the minutes. Andalites have a natural ability to keep track of time. It had been fifteen minutes since we'd morphed in the men's room.

Finally, I felt the deep, disturbing vibrations from the engines go higher and higher. I realized I was resting on the cover for a speaker when the flight attendant announced everyone should put on seat belts. The sound nearly blew me off my perch.

I zipped around aimlessly for a minute before coming to rest on the latch of an overhead luggage rack.

<How's everyone doing?> I asked.

<Twenty minutes have elapsed,> Ax said.

<And how long is this flight, Marco?>

<An hour and thirty minutes. That leaves us fifteen minutes to get off the plane at the other end and demorph.>

<That's a bit tight,> Rachel observed.

<Yeah.>

There wasn't a lot to do as the plane rumbled down the runway and rose into the air. The flight was basically boring. Until they served the meal.

Oh, man, you have no idea how much my fly body wanted to go down and land on that Salisbury steak and splash around in the gravy.

But that would have been suicidal.

<You know, airline food tastes much better this way,> Marco said.

<WHAT?>

<Relax, it's a meal some guy already ate. I'm in the leftovers.>

<WHAT?>

"Excuse me, miss, but there seem to be a lot of flies on this plane."

I heard the voice and it was like the announcement that calls you to the principal's office. It scared me.

<Did everyone hear that?>

<Hear what?> Tobias asked. <Everyone's talking. The whole plane is ->

<Someone just complained about the flies. About *us*.>

"I'll see what I can do, sir," a second voice answered.

<They're going to see what they can do!>

"I'd appreciate that. See, I am on the board of directors of this airline, and I just saw a fly land in my Salisbury steak."

<Marco!>

"Yes, sir! I'll take care of it!"

<Ax! How much time till we land?>

<Ten Minutes.>

<Okay. Everyone toward the back of the plane! Get out of first class!>

We took off, six suddenly active flies. We zoomed toward the back. We zoomed