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For Michael

1:22 P.m.

My name is Jake.

I can't tell you my last name, or where I'm from. That would just help the Yeerks. They'd love to find me and my friends. They'd love to know who we are, even what we are.

Knowing my last name isn't important for you. What you need to know is that everything I'll tell you here is true. It's real. It's actually happening. Right now.

The Yeerks are among us.

The Yeerks

are

us.

They're a parasitic species. They live inside the bodies of other beings. They take over your mind and body.

Controllers. That's what you call a creature that is ruled by a Yeerk. A Controller. Something that looks human, acts human, sounds human, but whose mind is Yeerk.

They are everywhere. They can be anyone.
Think of the one person in the whole world that you trust the
most. Think of that one special per
son. And now realize,
believe,
accept the fact that they might not be the person
you think they are. Deal with the reality that behind those
friendly, loving eyes lives a gray slug.
That's what a Yeerk looks like in its natural
state. Just a gray slug. They enter your head,
squeezing through the ear canal, and flatten themselves out
to envelop your brain.
You know all those nooks and crannies in
brains? You've probably seen pictures in
school. Well, the Yeerk forms itself into those nooks
and
crannies and it ties into your mind.
You wake up and you want to scream, but you
can't. You can't scream. You can't move your
eyes or raise your finger or make yourself walk.
The Yeerk controls you.
You're still alive. You can still see what's happening.
Your eyes move and focus, but you're not moving them.
You can still hear your own mouth
speaking and using your voice. You can feel it when the
Yeerk opens up your memories and looks through them.
You can hear the Yeerk laughing at you as it pries
into your every secret.
I know. Been there. For a few days, I
was

Controller.

The Yeerks are here, all right. Their mother ship is
parked in high orbit right now. It's hidden
from human radar, but it's there.
And the Yeerk super-evil leader, Visser Three,
is there, too.
We are being invaded. We are being enslaved. We
are losing our own planet. And we don't even
know it.
My friends and I fight the Yeerks. But we're just
five kids. Well, five kids and one
Andalite.
Yes, we have some amazing powers, but we're
still desperately weak and outnumbered com
pared to the force of the Yeerk invasion.
We are the only humans resisting the Yeerks.
We may be the only hope that Earth has.
We have a lot on our shoulders.
Which is why I really, really,
really
did
not see why I had to have more suffering piled on.
Wasn't I under enough stress? Life wasn't bad
enough? We had to have . . . square dancing?
Square dancing! The horror!
The CD player was blasting out screaming-cat
fiddle music. Which, in my opinion, is
possibly the worst music ever created.
The lights in the classroom seemed blazingly

bright compared to the dark gray clouds outside. The teacher was standing off to the side. She was wearing that smug, satisfied look teachers sometimes get when they know they are grinding the students' last nerves.

"Now promenade left! Bow to your partner, do-si-do!" the stereo drill-instructor yelled.

I promenaded, which consists of walking like a BIG HONKING GOOBER around in a circle.

And then I bowed. A strange, jerky sort of movement.

And finally, my least favorite thing: I did a do-si-do. Or as the shrieking, yammering voice on the CD said, do-si-Doooo!

"You call that do-si-do?" Rachel sneered as I high-stepped backward around her.

"Don't mess with me, Rachel," I warned.

"Smile, Jake. Big smile!" Rachel said. "We are happy while dancing. Happy!" She was so totally enjoying torturing me.

Rachel is my cousin. She's an Animorph, too.

"Now swing your partner back to the left and promenade!"

"Promenade this," I muttered darkly.

I grabbed Rachel to swing her. I was considering swinging her into the nearest wall. But although Rachel may look like some dippy Clueless

type, she's a lot closer to being

Xena: Warrior

Princess.

In other words, I'm just a little scared of

Rachel. I've seen her in lots of battles.

You just really don't want to make her too mad.

You really,

really

don't.

"Excellent swing," Rachel mocked me. "Now you're getting into it. I can just picture you in a string tie, cowboy boots, maybe a bright red-checked western shirt

-

his

"Don't push it, Rachel," I warned again.

Then the worst possible thing happened. As I

was "promenading" yet again, I heard

Rachel

yell.

"Hey, Cassie! Come by to watch?!"

My heart sank. Cassie is another member of our team. She's also someone I really kind of like. If you know what I mean. And I really didn't want her watching me as I stomped clumsily around the circle.

The sight of me, big old Jake, galumphing around in time to fiddle music was guaranteed to destroy any affection Cassie had for me. I mean,

I was making

myself

sick. I could just imagine
how I looked to Cassie.

I met Cassie's gaze. She was standing in the
doorway of the classroom. And she was laughing. She
was laughing with her entire body. She was in
convulsions.

I was so relieved. See, I was afraid I'd
get a pity look.

Instead, she was cracking up. Tears were rolling
down her cheeks as I "do-si-doed" right in front
of her.

"You find this funny? Me, trying to dance?"

Cassie couldn't talk. She was laughing too
hard. She just nodded.

What could I do? I started laughing, too. There
wasn't anything else
to
do.

Oh, maybe one other thing. I grabbed
Cassie's hands and pulled her into the circle.
Rachel backed away, letting Cassie take her
place in the pattern.

Cassie stopped laughing.

"No way!" she said, alarmed.

"Let's see you do-si-do," I said.

I grabbed her and swung her, and in a breathless
voice she whispered, "I just came by to tell you
something. Tobias wants us. Right after school lets
out. It's something big."

I took a deep breath. Suddenly, I
wasn't in the mood to laugh anymore. Tobias
wouldn't say "something big" unless it was something big.

And "something big" meant something bad these days.

Cassie and I had to obey the music and sepa
rate then, but a few seconds later, we rejoined
in the pattern, bowing to each other.

"I guess square dancing doesn't seem so bad
now, huh?" Cassie asked me.

"Yeah, right. It would take more than the dan
ger of sudden death to make square dancing
okay," I said. "A lot more."

I did some more promenading. I did some
more bowing. I did some more do-si-doing.

But my thoughts were already running ahead, wondering what
Tobias had seen. And just how
much of a mess it would end up being.

Then . . .

FLASH!

I fell!

I fell down and down through the green, green trees!
A branch. I snatched at it with my hand and swung
and released, then flew through the air and caught another
branch. I wrapped my tail
around the branch and turned to look back. Monkeys
were swinging toward me through the high
treetops of the jungle.

I was giddy.

It was a rush!

It was . . .

FLASH!

Cassie was smiling, and looking a little strangely at me. The music was done. The class was breaking up.

"Are you okay?" Cassie asked me.

"Yeah. Yeah," I said, shaking off the weird vision.

"Daydreaming?" Cassie asked me.

"I guess so," I said.

"I wonder what Tobias wants. Do you have any idea?"

I was too weirded out to really respond. One second I'd been square dancing. The next second I'd been swinging through the trees. And both moments had been real.

3:08 P.m.

What do you think?" Marco asked me.

"Personally, I figure Tobias found some really good roadkill, and he wants us to share."

"Yeah, that's probably it," I said tolerantly. Marco's approach to everything is to joke about it. Especially when he's worried.

After school we all went our separate ways. Cassie to her home, Rachel to hers. We all knew Tobias had some serious reason to talk to us. We were all afraid it was trouble of some kind.

But I had something extra to worry about. The hallucination, or vision, or whatever it was I'd had was too real to just forget. Everyone daydreams. This was no daydream. I was in the jungle. Period. It was for just a few seconds, but it was definitely real.

But like I said, priority number one was figuring out what was bugging Tobias. So Marco and I walked home together because that's what we usually did. And it is very important for us to act normal. We don't want to draw attention. So we

try and be like we always were. Like we were before the night that changed our lives forever. We'd been walking home from the mall at night. We took a shortcut through an abandoned construction site. A really stupid, irresponsible thing to do. But it turned out it wasn't ax murderers or kidnappers we had to worry about. Before that night we'd all known each other, but we weren't a group. We had just happened to hook up at the mall. It was an accident or fate or something. Take your pick.

Anyway, the five of us ended up walking together as we were leaving the mall. And in a dark, spooky construction site, with empty, half-finished buildings all around us, we saw the spaceship land.

It was an Andalite fighter. It was badly damaged. Up in orbit, the Andalites had come out on

the wrong end of a fight with the Yeerks.

The Andalite pilot of the fighter was named

Elfangor. Prince Elfangor. He was dying.
He was the one who told us about the Yeerks.
Life changed that night. Life went from being just the
daily stuff any normal kid has to deal with,
to knowing a secret that made you want to
sit down and cry.

It was Prince Elfangor who gave us the power
to morph. It was all he could do to help us. It was
the only weapon he could give us.

The power to morph. To
become

any animal

we could touch and "acquire."

A great and awful power. A power that has
given me some serious nightmares.

I've seen things since that night at the con
struction site. Things I wish I'd never seen.

And

I've done things I wish I couldn't remember.

"Hey," Marco said, interrupting my thoughts.

"Speaking of Bird-boy. Up there. Is that anyone
we know?"

I followed the direction he was looking. It was a
dark afternoon and the sky just kept getting darker. It was
filling up with rain clouds the color of steel
wool. And there, silhouetted against the clouds, was a
large bird.

Even from a distance you could tell it was a bird of
prey.

"Could be. I can't tell," I said. "If it's
Tobias he'll spot us."

Tobias is in hawk morph. Permanently.

See, there's a nasty little hook buried inside the
morphing power: Stay in morph for more than two
hours, and you stay in morph forever.

Tobias has the soul and mind of a human. But his
body is the body of a red-tailed hawk.

"He's coming closer," Marco said.

"Yeah." I had mixed feelings. Tobias is
one of us. A friend. More than a friend. He's risked
his life for me many times. But I sensed he
was bringing bad news. And I really didn't want
to hear bad news.

I heard his thought-speak voice in my head.

less-than Jake. Marco. greater-than

"See? Figured it was him," Marco said.

We couldn't answer Tobias. He was still too
high up to hear us speak, even with his excellent
hawk hearing. And you can only make thought-speak when
you're in morph. Or if you happen to be an
Andalite.

less-than You guys need to haul it a little
fastereagreater-than Tobias said. He sounded tense,
impatient, excited. Not that he really "sounded" at
all. But his thought-speak in my head carried tension.
less-than Morph as soon as you get a chance,
okay8greater-than

I looked at Marco. He sighed.

"My dad should still be at work. We can use my
house," he said. "We're almost there."

We headed straight for Marco's house. We live in the same subdivision, just a couple of blocks away from each other. Most of the kids in our school live there, including Rachel. Cassie lives out on her farm a little ways down the road. less-than I'll round up the otherseagreater-than Tobias said. less-than We'll

meet up with Ax later. I'll catch up with you once you get airborne. greater-than

"This has "big trouble" written all over it,"

I

muttered.

"In huge red neon letters," Marco agreed.

We reached Marco's house and went in. Marco checked to make sure we were alone.

"Dad! Dad, you home? Anyone home? Hey,

Dad, I'm going to change all the settings on your stereo!" Marco winked at me. "If he's home, that'll make him come running."

There was no reply. Just a quiet house.

We ran up the carpeted stairs to Marco's room.

We ran past framed pictures of Marco and his dad and his mother, who everyone thought was dead.

Marco opened his bedroom window as wide as it would go. The breeze was cool and damp. It was going to rain. And I hate rain.

"Let's get this over with," I said. I kicked off my shoes and removed everything but my morphing suit. Marco did the same.

I focused my mind on a bird. It was a peregrine falcon. The DNA of that falcon was part of me. And, thanks to the Andalite morphing technology, I could trade that DNA for my own.

I focused my mind and the change began.

Feather patterns appeared on my skin as if some invisible person had drawn them there.

The not-terribly-clean floor of Marco's room came rushing up at me as I shrank, dwindling down like a fast-burning candle. It was like falling and falling without ever quite hitting the ground.

Or in this case, hitting a dirty white sock.

"Oh, man," I said. "Marco, you could at least not leave dirty gym socks around."

"Hey, I've seen your room," Marco said.

"You still have some of your old baby diapers lying around."

He started to say more, but that's when his human tongue shriveled down to become a tiny bird tongue. So all he said was "Craww hee hrrar."

Whatever that meant.

The dirty gym sock went from being the size of a sock to being the size of a blanket. The only good thing was that falcons don't have much of a sense of smell. I was grateful for that.

My lips became hard as fingernails and began to press outward, forming a sharp, down-curved beak. It was weird and disturbing because I could actually see the beak grow, like some hu-mongous nose.

My feet were gone, replaced by talons that could open up a prey animal like a can opener on a can of cat food.

My bones made grinding, squishy noises as my skull shrank. My arm bones became hollow and other bones disappeared altogether.

Then the patterns of feathers on my skin grew three-dimensional. It was eerie to watch -- like my skin was chapping really badly. Like skin was peeling up at an incredible rate, and each peel of skin formed a feather.

Gray feathers, mostly.

I glared at Marco with my incredible Force-10 falcon vision.

He glared back with the eyes of an osprey.

less-than Let's catch some aireagreater-than I said.

I flapped my wings twice and hopped up to the windowsill.

less-than Last time I was in osprey morph some peregrine took a shot at meeagreater-than Marco said. He sounded a little resentful. Like it was my fault. He hopped up to the sill beside me.

less-than Don't worry, Marco. I'll protect you. greater-than I said it knowing it would make him mad.

less-than Protect me? Right. Come on, big guy, let's fly. See if you can keep up with me first. Then see

if you can "protect" me. Hahffgreater-than I opened my wings wide, kicked off from the windowsill, and dropped straight for the grass in Marco's backyard.

This is always terrifying. See, you know you're

a bird and all, but in your mind you're still a human. And jumping out of windows scares humans. I was ten, twelve feet off the ground, with nothing but lawn to catch me if for some reason my wings didn't work.

But then my wings caught the air. I felt the pressure of the air pushing up beneath me. I flapped hard, one, two, three, four, and shot forward. Forward and upward.

I flapped and flapped, working hard to get altitude in the cool air. Flapping is hard. Just be

cause you're a bird doesn't mean flapping is easy.

Marco and I had just managed to climb maybe fifty feet when Tobias came zooming up alongside us, zipping around like he'd been born a bird.

less-than Follow meeagreater-than he said.

less-than Follow you where8greater-than I asked, maybe a little too grouchily.

Tobias laughed. less-than We're going to the grocery

storeeagreater-than he said. less-than We're going
to the Safeway. greater-than
less-than Tobias, are you nuts? greater-than
Marco demanded. less-than The grocery store?
What, is there a sale on
gourmet birdseed? greater-than
less-than Funny, Marcoeagreater-than Tobias
said. less-than But it's not
about birdseed. This grocery store seems to be
having a sale on high-ranking Controllers.
greater-than
It's hard to be worried when you're flying.
You feel so powerful, floating high above the heads of
all the little people below you. People are so slow. They walk in
little lines along side
walks, always stuck moving in two dimensions:
left-right, forward-back.
A bird moves in three dimensions and has a
lot more going on when he's flying. There's the air
temperature, the speed of wind gusts, the steady
ness of the breeze

-

crosswinds and thermals
and humidity.
Your wings and tail are constantly adjust-
ing -- extending your wingtips, spreading or narrowing
your tail, altering the angle of attack.

Fortunately, the falcon's brain handles all
of that. Because let's face it, as a human, I know
basically nothing about flying.

All I know is it's the coolest thing in the
entire world.

Marco and I flew along with Tobias till we
spotted two other big birds of prey rising up
toward us: Rachel and Cassie.

less-than Break it up a
litleagreater-than Tobias advised. less-than
We're going to draw every bird-watcher within a
hundred miles. Spread out. Stop thinking like
humans -- we don't have to be bunched together to see
the same things. greater-than

He was right. Falcons, hawks, and eagles
don't exactly fly in flocks together. Andwiththe
intense vision of our bird morphs, we could see
whatever we were supposed to see from a quarter of a
mile away.

I wanted to get altitude because I was struggling
with the dead air around me. I had the narrowest wings of the
group. I was brutally fast in a killing dive, much
faster than the others. But at the business of endlessly
riding wisps of breeze I was weak.

I split off from Marco, circled to the right, and
kept my laser-focus eyes on Tobias,
careful to stay within thought-speak range.
less-than Okay, this is xea greater-than Tobias
said. less-than See the big
car lot down there? Track left a block.
greater-than

I was catching my first decent breeze, so I
soared upward as I searched the ground below.

Then I saw it.
less-than Left of the car lot
...
that's a grocery store,
right8greater-than I asked. I was puzzled. From the
air, almost every building just looks like a big rectan
gle. less-than It looks like they had some kind of
fire. greater-than
less-than Yep. Now, look closereagreater-than
Tobias advised. less-than See the plastic
sheet across the left side of the
store? Look how the breeze blows it in.
See8greater-than
less-than It looks like the entire left wall was
knocked in or somethingeagreater-than Rachel said. She
was a bald eagle, riding high above me and further
west.
less-than Exactlyeagreater-than Tobias said.
less-than Now, see the parking
lot on that side? See the marks8greater-than
I did. There were several long gouges torn in
the blacktop. Long, straight gouges, in perfect
alignment, pointing right toward the busted wall
of the grocery store. A couple dozen workmen seemed
to be on the ground, rushing around to erect a plywood
wall to conceal the hole.
Suddenly, I realized. I guess Marco did,
too.
less-than Oh, maneagreater-than Marco said.
less-than Oh, man. greater-than
less-than You'd never notice it from ground
leveleagreater-than To
bias said smugly. less-than But from the
bird's-eye view,
it's pretty obvious. greater-than
less-than Something hit the ground. It was moving
fast. It skidded across the grocery store parking
lot, hit the wall, plowed inside, and started a
fireeagreater-than I said.
less-than Exactamundoeagreater-than Tobias
said.
less-than It must have happened late at
nighteagreater-than
Cassie pointed out. less-than Otherwise there would
have been cars in the parking lot. greater-than
less-than You still haven't seen the best thing
yeteagreater-than
Tobias said. less-than Take a run, one at
a time, over the site. Check out who's in charge of the
cleanup
crew. greater-than
I flapped hard, turned, flapped harder, and
shot over the smoke-scarred grocery store.
I only caught a glimpse of the man who was
directing the work crew. I couldn't quite believe
what I saw.
less-than Chapman8greater-than I asked.
less-than Chapmaneagreater-than Tobias
confirmed. less-than He's been
here all day. greater-than

Chapman is the assistant principal at our school. He's also a high-ranking Controller

-

a

very important part of the Yeerk invasion. less-than Why is the assistant principal from our school suddenly working construction? greater-than Cassie

asked, adding, less-than As if I couldn't guess. greater-than

less-than Whatever this is, it must be importanteagreater-than

Rachel said. less-than They're working fast. And look!

That guy there with the long coat? Up on the roof? I just caught a flash of a machine gun under his coat. greater-than

There were six or seven men and women on the roof of the store. They were looking around with the kind of steely, paranoid gaze you see on the faces of the President's Secret Service guys.

less-than They're nervousagreater-than Cassie agreed. less-than Scared, even. You less-than care not see from the way they move. The way they act. Someone screwed something up big time, and everyone down there is very afraid. greater-than

less-than So? What do we do, oh fearless leader? greater-than Marco asked.

He was asking me. The others like to act as if I'm in charge. I don't think of myself that way, not really. But you know, whatever. If it makes them feel better to think I'm the leader, fine.

It's just that when people treat you like a leader, you start acting like a leader. And like I said, that means making decisions. Even when you're just guessing.

less-than Yeah, what's the plan? greater-than Rachel asked.

FLASH!

Right in my face!

Big, glittering eyes, the only things shining in the darkness.

A muzzle open just enough to show long, curved fangs.

The face of an extremely big cat. Mountain lion? Leopard?

In a second it would lunge, open its jaws wide and -

FLASH!

less-than Whoa! greater-than I yelled.

less-than What's the matter? Do you see something? greater-than Tobias asked.

less-than Jake? I asked you, what's the plan? greater-than Rachel said, sounding annoyed.

I was back in the air. I was flying. I was in falcon morph. Below me I saw the grocery store.

But I was totally confused. My mind wouldn't focus on reality. It was still in some jungle I'd never seen, staring into the eyes of a beautiful, deadly predator. What was happening to me? Was I going

crazy?

less-than Um . . . um, I . . . I guess
we better take a closer look, huh8greater-than
I managed to say.

less-than Definitely. Let's work up a
plan. Let's do xeagreater-than Rachel
said with her usual enthusiasm.

less-than Rachel, why is it whenever I hear you
say "let's do it" my blood runs
cold8greater-than Marco asked.

less-than Let's see. Because you're a
weenie8greater-than Rachel speculated.

less-than Whatever this is, they're trying to clean
it up fast. We have no timeeagreater-than I said.

less-than Better do this tonight. greater-than

less-than Oheagreater-than Rachel said.

less-than Tonight? As in . . .

tonight

greater-than

She didn't sound so enthusiastic anymore.

less-than Oh, goodeagreater-than Marco said
sarcastically. less-than An-other rushed,
unplanned, last-minute mission. Those always turn
out so well. greater-than

Marco,

I thought,

you don't know the half of

it. Because in addition to all the other ways this
could go bad, your "fearless leader" is losing his
mind.

Of course, I didn't say that. See,
when you're the leader, you're not allowed to be crazy.

less-than

his

L

hate this kind of stuffeagreater-than Marco said.

less-than like

hate rushing into things. greater-than

We had landed in the woods. Landing, by the way, is the
hardest part of flying. Taking off is

scary, but landing is terrifying. See, the differ

ence between landing and crashing is about two inches and two
miles per hour.

We landed more or less gracefully on the pine
needle floor of the forest. Tobias flew off

to look

for Ax. The rest of us demorphed.

less-than like seem to remember that the last time we
rushed into something we managed to screw up

the planeagreater-than Cassie said. less-than

On the other hand, we did survive. greater-than

"Barely," Marco said, as he made the transi
tion from mostly osprey to mostly human.

"It's just a grocery store," Rachel said with a
shrug of shoulders that were just emerging.

"Come on, how hard can it be?"

"How should we go in?" Marco wondered, looking at
me.

I looked at Cassie. "Any suggestions?"

"We have a couple of morphs available for

this job," she said. "Like Rachel said, it's a grocery store. A burned-out grocery store, but a grocery store just the same. You'd expect there to be cockroaches, rats, flies ..."

Suddenly, there came a rush of pounding hooves and a crash of underbrush. Ax raced up to us, graceful and bizarre all at once.

He plowed straight toward us, moving as fast as a panicked horse. Just when I was sure he'd run us down, he kicked his hind legs and sailed easily over our heads.

He landed almost daintily, and turned back to face us.

Ax is Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill. He's the

younger brother of Prince Elfangor. As far as we know, Ax is the only Andalite to survive the destruction of their Dome ship.

Andalites have certain things in common with Earth animals. But you'd know right off that he's from a long, long way away.

His body is like a sort of strong pale-blue-and-tan deer. But where the deer would have a neck, Ax has a somewhat human upper body.

It looks like the chest and shoulders of a boy. He has two weak-looking arms and a few too many fingers.

His head is where you'd expect to find it, but it is missing one very major ingredient: a mouth. Andalites eat by absorbing plants through their hollow hooves. And they communicate through thought-speak.

Ax has three small slits for a nose and two big, almond-shaped eyes. He also has two other eyes. These are mounted on top of his head on short stalks. These two eyes can move separately in any direction. It's distracting till you get used to it. Ax may look at you with his two main eyes, or he may look at you with both stalk eyes, or one stalk eye, or a combination of his two main eyes and one stalk eye.

To summarize: It's very strange making eye contact with an Andalite.

And last, but definitely not least, there's the tail. It's like a scorpion's tail, cocked up so that the deadly sharp blade on the end sort of hovers above Ax's shoulder.

The tail is fast. Very fast. As in, you're bleeding and wondering why you can only count to four on your fingers, before you even see it move. Fast, accurate, and very good to have on your side of a fight.

less-than Hello, everyoneeagreater-than Ax said.

less-than Tobias told me

to hurry. greater-than

Just then, Tobias swooped low overhead and landed with utter confidence on a branch. He dug his talons into the bark and began to calmly preen his wing feathers.

"Hi, Ax," I said. "What has Tobias

told you?"
less-than Everything. I guess we are going in
to take a
closer look8greater-than
"You guess right, Ax-man," Marco said. "You have
a preference for fly or cockroach morph?"
less-than like will do whatever Prince Jake orders.
greater-than
"Ax, don't call me Prince Jake," I said
auto
matically for about the thousandth time.
less-than Yes, Prince Jakeeagreater-than he
said.
Sometimes I wonder if maybe Ax has a sense
of humor. We'd never noticed one, but who
knows?
"We have to get inside that Safeway," I said.
"The closest place to morph is a long way
away.
Clear across the street, behind that boarded-up motel.
No one will see us there, but then we have to get to the
store. Across four lanes of traffic."
"Ouch," Marco said. "I hadn't really thought
about that. Is it too late for me to change my
vote?"
"We didn't vote," Rachel said. "But if we
had, you'd have voted yes."
"How do you know how I'd have voted?" Marco
demanded.
Rachel smiled. "Because I'd have voted yes. And
you'd never let yourself look like a total wuss in
front of girls."
"You think you know me," Marco said.
"Unfortunately, you're right."
"Neither the roach nor the fly has very good vision,"
Rachel pointed out. "I mean, we want
to be able to see whatever is in that store, right?"
"Yeah, but we also have to get across four lanes of
traffic. I don't know about you, but I'd rather fly
over the cars than try to walk in front of them,"
Cassie said.
"Can flies even find their way that far?" I
wondered out loud.
"Remember when we used to have normal, sane
conversations?" Marco said. "You know, we'd talk about
baseball or who had a crush on who?"
Cassie gave him a wink. Then, she was back
to business. "That grocery store must still be full of
food, right? Rotting food, since I doubt the
freezers are working in there. What's better at
finding rotting food than a fly?"
less-than like can help guide you,
maybeagreater-than Tobias said.
"You don't see that much better than humans
do in the dark," I pointed out. "It'll be dark by
the time we get in position."
less-than Car lights . . . streetlights .
. . I'm just saying maybe I can help a little,
all right8greater-than
Tobias sometimes becomes frustrated because he

can't go on all the missions. I understand. I feel sorry for him. But that's the way it is. I was about to tell him that when Cassie jumped in.

"Tobias, the only reason we even know

about this is you," Cassie pointed out. "You discovered it. You showed it to us. The least we can do is take the next step."

Cassie is so good at fixing hurt feelings. Better than me, that's for sure. But Tobias was still grumpy. less-than I'm still going alongeagreater-than he said.

"Okay," I said, clapping my hands together and trying to sound cheerful and optimistic. "Flies it is. Everyone go home. We meet behind the motel in ..." I checked my watch, "in approximately three hours. Around seven forty-five or so. We do a quick morph, we're in and out of that Safeway in ten minutes and back home again."

"Oh, man," Marco groaned. "I hate it when you try to sound peppy, Jake. It always means you're worried. Next you'll flash that big "no-sweat" grin. I know you."

"Three hours to fly time," I said, forcing up a big, confident grin.

"We're dead meat," Marco said.

H

i, Dad, what's up?" I asked when I got home. My father was in his La-Z-Boy, remote control in hand.

"What do you mean, "what's up"?" he asked, genuinely surprised. "The fight's on tonight.

Forty dollars on Pay-Per-View. Corn chips, bean

dip, loud grunting male noises, beer

-

for me

-

soda for you and Tom."

I practically slapped my forehead. The fight! I'd totally forgotten. It was a big thing. Not because I'm a boxing fanatic. I'm not. But it was a big thing for my dad to actually spend forty dollars on Pay-Per-View. He was doing it as a male-

bonding, father-son thing. Me and him and Tom, and probably one or two of my dad's friends from work.

"That's tonight?"

I asked. "What time?"

"Starts at seven o'clock. Do your homework, eat something containing vegetables to make your mom happy, and then grab some couch."

I did a quick mental calculation. The fight started in a little over an hour. The last championship fight had lasted only three rounds.

That

would leave me maybe thirty minutes to morph and fly to the motel.

Should I come up with some excuse for bailing out? No. No, there was no way my dad would buy it.

"Excellent," I said to my dad. "I'll be here. Don't eat all the bean dip. You know what happens when you eat bean dip."

My mother came into the living room. "Am I even allowed in here?" she asked mockingly.

"When does this room become the temple of male aggression?"

"Not till seven," my dad said. "Until then we will allow females. Especially if the females remembered to pick up chips on their way home from work."

"Chips? Wouldn't you rather enjoy some nice carrot sticks and hummus dip?"

My dad and I just stared at her.

"Kidding," she said. "Just kidding. I have chips. Are Pete and Dominick coming over?"

"Yeah, but you don't have to feed them," my dad joked. "Those guys are lucky I don't charge them admission."

I raced through my homework and hoped the fight would be the usual two-or-three-round easy knockout. The one good thing about rushing was that it didn't leave me too much time to think. Thinking meant worry, and worry gets in the way of getting things done.

It was a tense family

gathering at seven o'clock. Tom seemed as anxious as I was to get

away. I could guess why.

You see, Tom is one of them.

He's a human-Controller.

He had to keep up appearances of normalcy, same as me. But I guess he was trying to get away to go to the grocery store site, too. Same

me, again.

Tom and I fought in the same war. On different sides.

It was strange thinking of Tom, still alive deep down inside his own head. Trapped. Powerless. But able to see and hear and think.

Did he enjoy watching the fight through eyes he no longer controlled? Was there anything, anything at all, he could enjoy?

It didn't help, having thoughts like that.

When I started thinking that way the rage would just build up inside me till I felt like I'd go nuclear. I told myself, for probably the millionth

time, that I was doing all I could to help Tom.

All

I could.

All

I could.

Fortunately, my dad and his work friends made plenty of noise, so no one noticed Tom checking his watch. Or the fact that I kept glancing toward the kitchen, where I could see the wall clock.

By round six, I knew I was in trouble. In round seven neither fighter even looked tired. I decided if it went past round eight I'd have to make some excuse, no matter how lame.

In round eight, a lucky uppercut connected.

"Oh, that had to hurt!" my dad said.

"Five bucks says he goes down!" my dad's friend Dominick said quickly.

He was right. The challenger staggered, wobbled around on rubber legs for a few seconds, then toppled over. Boom! The fight was over.

It was now seven forty-five. I was already late.

I snatched the videotape out of the VCR. "Dad, can I take this over to Marco's and play it for him?"

"It's almost eight. It's dark out," my father objected.

"Yeah," Tom said. "You might get lost and never come back. And that would be such a pity. I'd have to use your room for my weights and stuff."

It was exactly the kind of dumb big-brother joke Tom would have made. But of course it was just something pulled up from Tom's brain by the Yeerk in his head.

For just a second it occurred to me to ask him: "Hey, Tom, what's the big secret with the grocery store? Just tell me, and I can stay home tonight."

I smiled at the thought. Then . . .

FLASH!

Green. Green. Everything was green. It was the greenest place on Earth: trees, moss, vines, ferns. Green everywhere.

Marco was there. And the others. They were all there.

Marco was talking. "dis . . . in a jungle fighting brain-stealing aliens and ten thousand annoying species of bugs, and our resident space cadet is a hot-looking monkey. Somebody wake me up when we get back to reality."

FLASH!

I was back. Back listening to Tom tease me like he was actually Tom. Back to hearing my dad say, "Walk, don't ride your bike. Not at night. Especially not when it's about to rain."

The vision was so powerful. So real. Not like a dream at all. But like I was actually there in a jungle, listening to Marco complain.

I felt my heart pounding. I felt sweat forming on my forehead.

What in the heck was going on? What was happening to me?

I noticed Tom back out of the room, sliding away like he was going to the kitchen. That brought me

back to reality.

I grabbed the videotape and took off, still reeling from the insane feeling of being yanked back and forth from one reality to another.

I could hear my dad and his friends rehashing the fight round by round as I went up to my room and opened my window as wide as it would go.

It took me twenty-five minutes to morph and fly to the empty motel.

less-than like know, I know, I'm lateeagreater-than I apologized as I came in for a landing.

I misjudged the distance to the ground, hit it too hard, and rolled over, a tangle of wings and talons.

less-than Nice landingeagreater-than Tobias said with a laugh.

"Are you okay?" Cassie asked me. She rushed over and picked me up. Then she set me back down because I was starting to demorph. And I was getting heavier pretty quickly.

"I'm fine," I said, as soon as I could speak. "Embarrassed, but fine."

It was a shabby little hiding place. The back windows of the motel were covered in plywood. The plywood was covered with graffiti. There were overgrown weeds and broken bottles and, for some reason, an old washing machine.

"We get to visit all the best places, don't we?"

I said dryly.

Ax was hugging the darkness against the wall. He feels a little obvious out of the woods. With good reason. Anyone who saw him would run away, screaming like a little kid. Unless, of course, they were a Controller. A Controller would know exactly what he was.

"Well?" Rachel asked, looking at me.

She was waiting for me to say, "Let's go."

But for some reason, I felt a strange reluctance. I felt

...

I don't even know what I felt.

Just that that moment, that very moment, was terribly important.

The others all stared at me, waiting.

All

I had to say was, "Let's go." Instead,

I looked at my watch. Eight-nineteen.

Eight-nineteen. Like it meant something. Like . . .

Oh, man, I was going nuts! I was losing it.

What was the matter with me?

"Should we do this?" I wondered. I was surprised to realize I'd spoken out loud. I'd been talking to myself.

"Why not? I say we do it," Rachel said.

"There's a huge shock," Marco muttered.

"Everyone who is surprised Rachel wants to go for

it, raise your hand."

"Yeah," I said, shaking off my doubts as well as I could. "Yeah, let's go."

I was pretty sure it was the right thing to do, but the responsibility was on me. I could have stopped it.

I could have talked them all out of it.

I could have done something different.

But I didn't.

At least not then . . .

"Let's morph," I said.

Let's hope no one has a can of Raid," Marco said.

I tried to laugh. But I hate morphing bugs.

Back when we started morphing, I figured we'd morph things like lions and bears and eagles. And we do. But we also morph things a lot smaller. The insect world is very useful. Sometimes smaller is better.

That never exactly makes it fun, though. There is no nightmare, no horror movie, no weird psycho vision as scary as actually turning into a cockroach or a spider or a flea or a fly.

When you morph a tiger, you still have four limbs. You have two eyes. You have a mouth. You have bones and a stomach and lungs and teeth. Maybe they're all different, but they're all still there.

The change to a fly is nothing like becoming a tiger. Nothing is where it should be. Nothing stays the same.

The problem with morphs is that they are never exactly the same twice in a row. And the changes happen in bizarre, unpredictable ways. It's not smooth. It's not logical. It's not gradual.

I started to shrink, but when I was still almost entirely human, still probably three feet tall, I felt my skin harden.

See, flies don't have bones. They have an exoskeleton. Their outer shell is what holds them together in one piece. And my exoskeleton was growing. My soft, human skin was being replaced by something dark, something hard as plastic.

My body was squeezed into segments. Insect segments: a head, a thorax, an abdomen.

And when I was still at least two feet tall, way too tall to be anything like a fly, the extra legs came bursting, squishing, slurping out of what had been my chest.

My own true legs collapsed as they shriveled down to match my new fly legs. I fell forward into the dirt. Facedown. Not that I had much of a face anymore.

My proboscis had already begun to form from my melting mouth and lips and nose and tongue. The proboscis was as big as my fly legs

-
a long, retractable, hollow tube. Flies eat with the proboscis. They spit saliva all over the food, wait till

it gets mushy, then suck it up.
It isn't pretty.
But that wasn't the worst of it. The worst was the
eyes. I still had
semi human
vision when I saw Cassie, lying in the dirt beside
me, suddenly
grow fly eyes.
They popped out of her human eyes. Popped
out, huge and devoid of soul. Big, black
balloons that sort of inflated out of her own eye
sockets.
That's a sight that will make you heave up
your lunch.
My own vision went dark then. I was blind for a couple
of seconds, then yow! The fly eyes
turned on, and the whole world was different.
How can I explain what it's like to look
through compound eyes? It's like you're watching a thousand
tiny TV sets all at once. A thousand tiny
TV sets, all clustered together. And each set
has really weird color. Like someone twisted all
the color knobs. Yellow is purple, green is
red,
blue is black. It's insane. Like some disturbed
kid got loose with a Crayola box and
colored in
everything with different colors.
But what's awful is the way the eyes look in
all directions at once. I could see the tube,
that was now my mouth, sticking out in front of me. I
could see my own twig legs. I could see the stiff
hairs poking out of my armored body.
Still, there is one good thing about being a fly -- if you
can get past the screaming horror of it. Part of what
I could see was the pair of gossamer wings that
sprouted from what should have been my back.
Flies can fly.
Man, can they fly.
less-than Everyone okay8greater-than I asked.
less-than Aside from the fact I make myself
sick? Yeseagreater-than Marco said.
Then . . . PAH-LOOOSH!
An explosion on the ground ahead of me. The
dirt just seemed to blow up. Like a mortar
explosion.
less-than What the . . . disgreater-than Rachel
yelped.
PAH-LOOOSH!
less-than It's starting to rain, guyseagreater-than
Tobias informed us calmly.
The explosions of mortar shells were just big, fat
raindrops hitting the dirt.
less-than Jeez! I thought someone was trying
to kill ueagreater-than Cassie said.
less-than Let's get on with theagreater-than I
said.
I fired the springs in my legs and turned on
my wings. I was airborne instantly. It's not like
being a bird. A bird has to really work at flying.

For a fly, it's automatic. Instantaneous. You think
let's fly
and a split second later you're zooming crazily
through the air.
Across the weird mass of tiny TV sets I could
see the others rise up from the ground. They flew
like pigs. Like big fat balls with these tiny little wings
that looked like they couldn't lift a speck
of dust.
But, like I said before, flies can fly.
I zoomed
wildly
upward. Like a wallowing rocket!
less-than Hah-Hah! Oh, manffgreater-than
Rachel exulted. less-than I'd
forgotten how great this wasffgreater-than
less-than Disgusting, but oh yeah, these things can
hauleagreater-than Marco agreed. less-than
Tobias, you only
think you
can fly. You haven't flown till you've flown
Maggot
Airways. greater-than
less-than Maybe seagreater-than Tobias said
calmly. less-than And, not to
burst your balloon, but you guys are all heading
the wrong way. greater-than
less-than We are8greater-than
less-than Yes. You're heading toward a
Dumpstereagreater-than Tobias said with a laugh.
less-than Turn left. Turn left and get some
altitude. Then you should be able to see the car lights
on the road. greater-than
I would have smiled if I'd had a mouth. The
fly brain had been easy to control because we'd
already done this morph before. But the fly's in-
stincts still had some input. See, the fly smelled
rotting food in the Dumpster and it knew right
where it wanted to go.
We followed Tobias's directions. I
rocketed
higher, and then . . .
less-than Whoa! Whoa! What is that? Are those
cars8greater-than
Cassie demanded.
less-than These eyes are seeing ultraviolet
lighteagreater-than Ax
commented.
less-than They're seeing something, that's for
sureeagreater-than I
agreed.
The cars racing past were not cars so much as
they were glowing, red-and-purple meteors. The
road was a blur of movement, all of it strange and
disturbing to the fly brain.
less-than Stay above the carseagreater-than Tobias
warned.
less-than Why8greater-than Ax asked.
less-than A little something we call

windshieldseagreater-than To
bias said dryly. less-than A windshield moving
sixty miles an hour is death to bugs.
greater-than
less-than Good pointeagreater-than I agreed.
less-than Going higher. greater-than
I powered my wings and bobbed and weaved
and rolled higher and higher.
But the fly inside my head didn't like it. He
lived close to the ground. The ground was where you found
food. And food was all the fly brain
cared about.
less-than It's starting to rain hardereagreater-than
Tobias said.
I began to notice more drops. They were
sparkling meteorites, each three times my own
size. They plummeted around me. But in my fly
scale of things they were fairly far apart.
Then . . . more rain.
Closer together. Falling thick and fast all
around me.
WHAM!
less-than Ahhhhhffgreater-than
I was slammed.
I tumbled through the air, covered in something like heavy
glue.
Water! Just water, but sticky as glue to my fly
body.
My wings shook off the water and I found myself flying
upside down. I spun around and ad
vanced again.
less-than Oh, maneagreater-than I complained.
less-than This is a whole
new reason not to like rainffgreater-than
less-than I'm going aheadagreater-than Tobias
said tensely.
less-than
Raining too
hard. I gotta land. greater-than
WHAM!
A glancing blow from a raindrop the size of a
truck. It spun me around in the air.
less-than Ahhhhhhhh! Manffgreater-than
less-than Jake! Are you okay8ffgreater-than
Cassie cried.
Once again, those amazing fly wings turned me around
and kept me in the air. But suddenly I realized
I was in a sea of brilliant lights.
Purple! Red! Green!
Green?
Motion! Every hair on my nasty fly body felt
it.
Every screen in my fly eyes sensed it.
Something moving. Fast! Big!
A monstrous wall came at me with impossible
speed! It was a mountain! Huge. Tall.
Sloped. A mountain moving sixty miles an hour
right at me, glowing in a rainbow of eerie colors!
A windshield!
less-than Uh-oheagreater-than I said.

less-than TAAAAAHHHHFFGREATER-THAN I screamed
in thought-
speak as the deadly windshield blew toward me.
FLASH!
The jungle! Sudden movement in the deep
bush.
A cocked arm.
A
human
arm belonging to a kid!
A spear flew!
I saw it coming for me. Saw the bamboo
point, blackened with deadly poison.
One scratch and I was dead. I .
FLASH!
Spear! No,
windshield

.
My wings beat the air at hundreds of strokes per
second. I was fast, but not fast enough.
A downdraft! A vicious wind that sucked me
toward the windshield. I fought it, then
...
in a split second, the wind became a magic
carpet.
The power of my wings, the slipstream of wind
...
I missed the top of the windshield by a
millimeter!
I could actually see color-distorted human
faces inside the car.
I saw their glowing eyes as I flew past and
over and seriously hauled my little fly butt up and
up and up.
less-than Jake? You still with us, Jake8greater-than
Rachel
asked.
less-than Oh, yeaheagreater-than I said.
less-than Barely. But I'm here.
You know, they really need to lower the speed
limit. Cars shouldn't go more than maybe ten miles
per hour. greater-than
We passed the road and left the eerie stream
of fast lights behind us. We all got slammed by more
raindrops, but personally, I was past caring
about that.
Then, even through the cleansing rain, I be
gan to smell the grocery store.
The fly sensed food.
We didn't need Tobias to guide us the rest of
the way. Our fly bodies were eager to head for the
smell of rotting garbage.
I was still reeling from the twin sensations of
being attacked by a windshield and a spear. The
jungle visions were so real. They were so ab
solutely real. I mean, I felt every single thing
while I was in them. I felt heat and humidity on
my skin, I felt bugs buzzing my face, I
felt . . .

But I didn't have time for that now.
The Safeway was beyond our ability to see. I mean,
it was just so big it had no meaning to our fly eyes.
What had meaning to the fly was that there was food up
ahead.

We zipped in under the plastic sheeting that
covered the damaged wall. Once inside the store,
everything was very bright. I saw brilliant lights
that seemed to be spewing a whole rainbow of
unusual colors.

There were people walking around below us. There was
machinery moving. And there was a mound, a mountain of
food all shoveled into one
corner.

The Controllers had simply used earthmovers
to shove all the shelves, the freezers, the
refrigerators, the loose cans, the glass meat
display' case, the donuts and cupcakes from the
bakery area, the flowers, the cooked chicken and beans
. . . everything that had been in the store, all into one
corner.

less-than You knoweagreater-than Marco said,
less-than if you threw in some dog poop, this would be
fly heaven. greater-than

less-than We are not aloneeagreater-than Ax
pointed out. less-than There seem to be many others
of this species here.greater-than

He was right. We had chosen the right morph. There had
to be ten thousand flies in that store. I
could hear them and smell them and even see
them as they flew past.

less-than Well, no one is going to notice us,
that's for sureeagreater-than Cassie said. less-than
We could dive right in. greater-than

less-than Excuse me? Hello? We're not here
to eat garbage and make maggotseagreater-than
I said. less-than We are in

and out, so let's pay attention. What's going on
here8greater-than

less-than Well . . . there's that big thing in the
middle of the roomeagreater-than Cassie said.

less-than That's what all the
Controllers are clustered around. greater-than

less-than Let's get closereagreater-than I
suggested.

We zipped in our crazy fly way toward the
middle of the store. There was a huge object there.

As big as a small house, I would have
guessed. But it's hard to tell how big something is
when you're less than a quarter-inch long.

less-than Wait

...

I think I hear Chapman's voiceeagreater-than
Cassie said.

less-than like don't know how you can make sense out of
all this noiseeagreater-than Rachel grumbled.

less-than I've done the fly morph more than you
heagreater-than Cassie said. less-than

Remember, I was in fly

morph when I spied on Chapman at the mall.

There he is! I'm going closer.

greater-than

I couldn't see where Cassie was going or where she landed. One fly looks pretty much like the next. And the store was like a fly airport. Flies were zipping all around.

less-than Cassie? Where are y8greater-than

less-than I'm close to Chapmanegreater-than she said. less-than On his head, actually. On the bald spot. greater-than

less-than Get off of there! He could swat yffgreater-than

less-than Wait... I'm listening . . . disgreater-than

I buzzed around aimlessly, afraid for Cassie, and trying to figure out what on Earth the big ... thing. . . was.

less-than Whoaffgreater-than Cassie said.

less-than Whoa! Whoaffgreater-than

less-than What? What? What8greater-than I asked.

less-than Whoaffgreater-than

less-than What whoa8ffgreater-than I practically yelled in frustration.

less-than What's going on8ffgreater-than

less-than It's a Bug fightereagreater-than Cassie said. less-than It's something new. An experimental Bug fighter. Faster, more weapons ... a new, prototype Bug fighter. greater-than

Bug fighters are the small, basic Yeerk spacecraft. They look like a streamlined cockroach with two long, serrated spears pointing forward. Those are the Dracon beams.

less-than What's it doing here?

In a Safeway8greater-than Marco asked.

less-than It crashed. Duheagreater-than Rachel said.

less-than like don't knoweagreater-than Cassie said.

less-than Chapman isn't talking about how it got here. He's just telling

this other Controller it has to be out of here in three hours or Visser Three is going to be madder than he already is. The guy says it's almost ready to go, he just needs to run some tests. Three hours will be no problem. Chapman says, "Good, because if it's three hours and one minute, I'll personally feed you to Visser Three for a snack."greater-than

less-than Three hours8greater-than Tobias said.

I was surprised to hear his thought-speak voice.

less-than Tobias! I thought you went for cover. greater-than

less-than The rain stoppedeagreater-than he said.

less-than And I can see down into the store.

They've knocked a hole in the roof so the security guys up on the roof can get down into the store

quickly. There's a ladder.
I'm flying over. greater-than
less-than What do you see up there? greater-than
less-than A bunch of nervous human-Controllers
with machine guns. greater-than
less-than What should we do? greater-than Rachel
wondered. less-than In
three hours they could fly this thing out of here. greater-than
less-than If only we could get some TV
newspeople here. greater-than Cassie mused.
less-than If people could see this thing, and have proof. .
disgreater-than
less-than The Yeerks have too many people at the lo
cal TV stations and newspaperseagreater-than I
pointed out.
less-than You know what we
could
do, though? greater-than Rachel began.
less-than Uh-oh, a suggestion from
Racheleagreater-than Marco groaned.
less-than What we could do is steal this thing.
greater-than
less-than Steal it and do what with it? greater-than
Tobias wondered.
I laughed. less-than We could always steal it and
fly it to Washington and land it on the White House
lawn. Let the Yeerks try and cover
that
up. greater-than
I meant it as a joke.
Really. A joke.
less-than Heyeagreater-than Rachel said.
less-than That could work. greater-than
less-than Ax? Can you fly that thing? greater-than
Tobias asked.
less-than Like am I an Andalite? greater-than Ax
said. less-than That's just a Yeerk fighter, even
if it is experimental. No second-rate Yeerk
technology is too sophisticated for me.
greater-than
less-than But. . . we'd have to do this like
right now. greater-than Cassie pointed out.
less-than Yeepeagreater-than Rachel said.
less-than Right now. Jake? greater-than
less-than There can't be many people
inside
the Bug fighter. greater-than Ax pointed out.
less-than They usually only have a crew of two.
At most there would be four or five technicians
inside, Prince Jake. greater-than
less-than Yeah, well, four or five people
versus five houseflies is not good odds for us. greater-than
I said. It was moments like this that I
resented. Moments
when I tended to make the decisions. And when I
would carry the responsibility. less-than Still
. . . disgreater-than
less-than Like hear the gears in Jake's little brain
grinding
away. greater-than Marco joked.

less-than Stilleagreater-than I said. less-than
There may be a way. greater-than
less-than O
kay, fellow flies, into the Bug fighter.
greater-than
We zoomed crazily around the outside of
the huge-seeming Bug fighter till we spotted a
door. Inside we saw the blurry, strangely
colored
shapes of humans. Actually,
human-Controllers.
We buzzed right on inside.
less-than like count five peagreater-than Rachel
said.
less-than Just what we expectedeagreater-than I
said. I was trying
to sound confident, to help everyone else stay calm.
But I was tense. I was on edge. This was a
spur-of-the-moment plan thought up by a guy
who was having jungle hallucinations. It was a
desperate, possibly stupid plan. I didn't
know for
sure. It could easily end with Tobias dead.
Maybe the rest of us as well.

But Tobias was thrilled to be playing a major
role.

less-than Tobias? You ready8greater-than
less-than Anytime you say, Jake. greater-than
less-than Once around the room, that's
xeagreater-than I warned him.

less-than You're the bosseagreater-than
Tobias said.

less-than Okay. Nowffgreater-than
Outside, above the grocery store, Tobias had
been gaining altitude. Which was extremely
difficult in the cool night air. Hawks are not
night birds. But Tobias flapped his way up and
up, always keeping sight of the bright hole in the
grocery store roof.

less-than Here I comeffgreater-than Tobias
yelled.

He plunged at maximum speed, straight for the
hole in the roof. less-than I'm
insideffgreater-than

I could tell, because right away there was shouting.
Yelling. Orders being barked out.

Then . . .

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

Gunfire! They were shooting at him!

less-than These guys couldn't hit... yikes!
That was closeffgreater-than

The plan called for Tobias to provide a
distraction. The Yeerks knew we used bird
morphs. And they would know that a hawk did not belong
flying around inside a store. They would put two
and two together. They would know Tobias was not a
real hawk.

BLAM! BLAM! B LA MB LA
MB LA MB LAM!

Someone was firing a machine gun. Even with my

vague fly hearing I could hear the air shaking with the noise. Hundreds of rounds were being fired inside that store!

A human voice yelled something like, "Get out here and help! It's an Andalite bandit in morph!"

That's what the Yeerks think we are: Andalites.

The technicians inside the Bug fighter went piling out the exit, glad of the chance to take shots at an Andalite "bandit."

less-than That's enough, Tobias! Bail out!

Bail out of hereffgreater-than I yelled. less-than Ax! Morph! Everyone morph!

Now! Now! Nowffgreater-than

BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM!

less-than Can't get ouffgreater-than Tobias cried. less-than The guys on the roof are shooting down through the holeffgreater-than

Of course! Why hadn't I realized that? Of

course they would block Tobias's

escape.

I was still mostly fly, but morph ing as fast as I could. I could feel myself getting bigger. I could see my fly wings shriveling away.

Tobias couldn't escape. They'd get him.

Sooner or later, no matter how fast he flew,

they'd get him. An answer... an answer...

I needed an answer. I needed to -

less-than Tobias! Tobias! This wayeagreater-than I yelled. less-than Inside the Bugfighterfffgreater-than

less-than No, that will draw them after -- YAH!

Whoa! That one clipped my tail

feathersfffgreater-than

less-than Come insideffgreater-than I yelled.

less-than Whatever you saygggreater-than Tobias said.

My human eyes were just reemerging as Tobias blew in through the door of the Bug fighter. I looked left. A horrifying creature with a small scorpion tail and fly legs and a semi humanoid face with a gigantic proboscis was trying to work the controls of the ship with clumsy fly stick legs. It was Ax, halfway through morphing.

Suddenly, the door shut. Or in this case, the bulkhead simply dimpled and closed up again, eliminating the door.

"They're in the Bug fighter!" I heard Chapman howl in rage. "They're in the Bug fighter! Get them!"

I was mostly human now, but still at that stage where I wouldn't have wanted to see myself in a mirror. The rest were coming out of morph, too. Cassie was fastest, as usual. She was already checking Tobias for wounds.

Ax was almost fully Andalite once more.

"Ax, get us outta here!" I said, as my

human mouth returned.
less-than Yes, Prince Jake. greater-than
I didn't waste time telling him not to call me
"Prince."
less-than These are unusual controlseagreater-than
Ax admitted.
BAPFFBAPFFBAPFFBAPFFBAP!
Bullets rattled against the Bug fighter's outer
skin.
Then I heard the grinding sounds of the engine. Through the
cockpit window, I saw the Con
trollers turning big earthmovers toward us.
"They're going to ram us!" Marco warned.
"Ax?" I asked tersely.
less-than like think I

...

I don't know. Prince Jake, I can try but it
may not work. greater-than
"Just do it!" I yelled.
There was a whirring noise. Lights came on all
over the cockpit. A sound like a low siren.
less-than like found the "on" switchegreater-than Ax
said.
"Great," Marco said. "Now find the get-us-
the-heck-outta-here switch!"
I felt the ship lift up off the Safeway
floor. It
rose just a foot and sort of wallowed slightly,
side to side. The heavy equipment was still coming
for us.
Ax turned the fighter, pointing it toward the
missing wall.
less-than ls that plastic sheeting very
strong8greater-than Ax
asked.
"Let's find out," I said.
Then . . . WHOOOOOOSH!

It was like getting kicked in the chest. We all
tumbled backward -- all but Ax, who has four
legs. The acceleration was incredible. The Bug fighter
rocketed forward. We blew through the plastic
sheeting.

We blew across the parking lot.

We arched up toward the dark night sky.

"We did it!" Rachel yelled.

less-than Sorry about the acceleration caret Ax
said. less-than like forget that humans fall over
easily. greater-than

"Just get us out of here, Ax," Marco said.

"We're going to Washington, D.c., to meet the
President."

It was crowded inside the Bug fighter.
Especially because Ax takes up a lot of room.

But we huddled together and looked over Ax's
shoulders as he worked the controls. And we looked
past Ax, out through the transparent panels at the
front of the Bug fighter.

less-than This ship is very difficult
to handleeagreater-than Ax said. less-than The
design is strange. Some controls are

psychotronic. But others require physical handling. Unfortunately, those controls are designed for Taxxons. They have more hands than like. greater-than

"Can we do anything to help?" I asked.

less-than Someone should take weapons

stationeagreater-than Ax

said.

"Cool," Marco said. He leaped forward, but I

was closer.

I slipped into the area beside Ax. Ax's pilot

"seat" wasn't a seat at all, of course.

Taxxons are

like huge centipedes, so they can't really sit. Which was

good, because Ax doesn't sit, either.

But the weapons station was built for Hork-Bajir.

Hork-Bajir are seven feet tall and have

thick, spiky tails, but they do sit.

"No

way

you should handle the weapons,"

Marco said, leaning over my shoulder. "I kick your

butt in video games."

"Yeah, right," I said. "In some alternate uni

verse, maybe."

"Grab the joystick," Marco suggested.

As strange as it seems, there actually was a

joystick. It was for much bigger hands than mine, and the

two buttons on it were clumsy to reach. But it was a

joystick.

"Maybe I should test the weapons," I said

to Ax.

less-than Yeseagreater-than he said tersely,

distracted.

We were rising up through the atmosphere.

We were above the clouds already. I could see

brief flashes of the lights of the city down below, but

mostly it was clouds and more clouds.

But we weren't rising as fast as I would have

expected. Ax was definitely working to control the

ship.

I looked ahead, saw nothing in the way, and

pressed one of the buttons on the joystick.

Nothing.

Ax glanced over. less-than That was the

safety. The Dracon beam should be armed now. See

the screen before you? The red circle is how you aim.

Use a combination of moving the joystick, but also use

your mind. greater-than

Marco put his hand on my shoulder. "Phasers

on full power!" he said in a Captain

Picard English accent. "Arm photon

torpedoes! If the Borg want a fight, we'll

give them one! Make it so!"

I moved the joystick and watched the target

circle track across the screen. It still showed nothing

but starry sky. That should be safe enough.

I squeezed the second button.

TSEWWWW! TSEWWWW!

Twin red beams of light fired forward, converging

too far away for me to see.

"Yes! Most splendid!" Marco yelled.

"Okay, that
was
cool,"

I admitted, trying not to cackle like an idiot with
his first video game.

"Boys with their toys," Cassie teased gently.

less-than Prince Jake8greater-than Ax said.

less-than like must apologizes
"Why?"

less-than like did not at first realize: This Bug
fighter's cloaking field is not working. greater-than

It took a few seconds for me to track on
that. "You mean . . . people can see us?"

less-than The clouds will hide us from people
on the groundagreater-than Ax said. less-than But
human radar will observe us. In fact, they have already
observed us. greater-than

"Uh-oh. Maybe we better get higher," I
suggested.

less-than Yes. But we are rising slowly. I
don't know why. And there are two objects
approaching us. greater-than

"Probably just airliners," Rachel said.

less-than The objects are moving at one and a
half times the speed of soundagreater-than Ax said.

"Okay, that's not a passenger plane," Marco
said.

I groaned. "Military jets. Oh, man,
it's the Air Force after us. They're "good
guys." They're on our side. We can't shoot
them down."

Suddenly . . .

SWOOOOOSH!

SWOOOOOSH!

Two pale gray jets blew past us. The
backwash rattled the Bug fighter.

less-than like can access their radio
signalseagreater-than Ax said. And a second later
we heard the voice of one of the pilots.

"Urn . . . Base Control, I ... urn ...
Bogie is of an unknown type. Say again,
unknown type."

"Definitely unknown," the other pilot said.

"Way unknown."

"We're coming around for another pass."

I looked at Ax. "We really don't want
to get shot down by a couple of F-sixteens."

less-than No, Prince Jake. That would be
embarrassing. I believe I now know how to increase
comgreater-than

FAH-WHOOOOOOOM!

Suddenly, we were outta there. Out of the clouds. Out
of the atmosphere.

"Yes! This thing can move!" Marco exulted.

"We need to buy this game."

We heard a fainter, crackling voice over the
radio. "Did you see that? Did you see that thing
move, Colonel? Did you see that? What the -"

Then we were out of range, still zooming straight up into black space. Below us I could see the curvature of the earth. It looked just like one of those pictures the shuttle astronauts take from up in orbit.

"That's so beautiful," Cassie said.

"Look at that! You can see daylight coming up over the Red Sea."

less-than Excuse meeagreater-than Tobias said, less-than but I don't think the Red Sea is exactly on the way to Washington, DC. greater-than

"Yeah, I guess not," I said. Although it was such a wonderful sight that I almost didn't want to worry about where we were going. "Ax, maybe we'd better slow down, get some idea of where Washington is and

-

his

less-than No! Noffgreater-than Ax snapped.

I was shocked. Ax is always polite.

less-than No, Prince Jakeeagreater-than he said, a little more

calmly. less-than We cannot slow down.

greater-than

"What's the matter?" Cassie asked him.

Ax pointed at one of the view screens before him.

On the screen I saw stars. Then the moon

came into view, a vast gray-and-white lightbulb.

And silhouetted against the glowing moon was a shape.

It was like some medieval battle-ax.

The rear half was a two-headed blade. From the

middle, like an ax handle, extended a long shaft.

At the end of the shaft was a triangular head,

very much like an arrow's point.

It was black on black. And even if you had never

seen it before and had no idea what it was,

you'd know right away it was death.

I

had seen

it. I

knew what

it was.

"The Blade ship," I whispered.

The Blade ship of Visser Three.

8:54 P.m.

Visser

Three, leader of the Yeerk invasion of Earth.

Visser Three, the only Yeerk in all of

history to take control of an Andalite body.

Visser Three, the only Yeerk with the power to morph.

"Can we outrun him?" I asked Ax.

less-than No. greater-than

"Can we outfight him?" I asked. My voice was

a whisper. My mouth was too dry to work right.

Ax turned his stalk eyes to look at me.

less-than No, Prince Jake. We might get

in a lucky shot. But
the Blade ship is very powerful. This is the Blade
ship that destroyed our great Dome ship. greater-than

"Here he comes!" Rachel yelled in warning.

A red glow illuminated the Blade ship as the
Visser fired his engines and came for us.

less-than We can try and run. Or we can
take a chance on a lucky shoteagreater-than Ax
said.

He was looking at me. They were all looking at
me. I grabbed the joystick. My hand was
trembling.

"I feel lucky," I said. It was an
absolute lie, of course. I didn't even
feel

slightly
lucky. But it sounded good.

I caught Marco giving me a sardonic
smile. He knew I was faking it.

I felt Cassie's hand touch my shoulder for
encouragement.

less-than Hold on. You may be unsteady on
your human legseagreater-than Ax warned.

He threw the Bug fighter into a quick, tight
turn. Ax was right. I almost fell over before the
Bug fighter's systems compensated for inertia.

Then Ax really lit up the engines and we leaped
forward, straight for the Blade ship.

less-than Ready to fireffgreater-than Ax said.

It wasn't a question. less-than Not yet. Not
yet. Not yet. Not yet. Wait until . . .

NOWFFGREATER-THAN

I swept the red target circle toward the
black-diamond head of the Blade ship. I
squeezed the trigger. And I kept squeezing.
Brilliant Dracon beams stabbed toward the
Blade ship.

But at the same instant, the Visser fired!

Dracon beam hit Dracon beam.

ZZZZZOOOOOOWWWW!

An explosion of light so intense I could
actually see
through

my own hand. I could see Cassie's teeth inside
her head!

WHAAAMMMPPPH!

I was thrown against the ceiling.

I fell to the floor and rolled, out of control.

Rachel landed on top of me, knocking the wind out
of me.

The Bug fighter was spinning. My eyes were
filled with balls of light, like suns inside my own
head.

Spinning . . . spinning . . . spinning . . .

And with each turn I was thrown hard. Into Ax.
Into Marco. Tobias batted his wings wildly,
trying to get some control. It was like we had all been
tossed into a washer on spin cycle.

Then, with a sickening lurch, the Bug fighter came
upright. There was a floor again. And a ceiling.

And through the window, there was a planet.
Earth.
Big, blue, and getting closer very, very fast.
"We're going down!" Rachel yelled. "Ax!
Ax! We're going down!"
Ax scrambled to his hooves and made his way
back to the controls. less-than Too
fastffgreater-than he said. less-than We're going
down too fastffgreater-than
less-than Lookffgreater-than Tobias cried.
less-than Over there. To the left.
We're not alone. greater-than
Tumbling down alongside us, just a mile away,
was the Blade ship. It was twisting and twirling and
falling, just like us.
"Wait . . ." Cassie said, sounding more confused
than terrified. "It's daylight in the western
hemisphere."
"Do I care?!" Marco yelled. "We're going
down!"
"It was dawn in the Middle East," Cassie
insisted. "Now it's daylight in the western
hemisphere."
Suddenly, friction flames began glowing from the
nose of the Bug fighter. We were going back into the
atmosphere.
"Ax, can you pull us out of this?" I demanded.
less-than like am slowing our descenteagreater-than
he said. less-than We are slowing down. B. . .
but I don't think it will be enough. greater-than
"Great," Marco moaned.
"At least the Blade ship will go down with us,"
Rachel said.
"Does that make you feel better, Xena?"
Marco grated.
Rachel actually smiled. It was a sad,
brief
smile. "Not much better," she admitted.
less-than Ten seconds to impactffgreater-than
Ax said. less-than Ten . . .
nine . . . eight. . disgreater-than
FLASH!
I was no longer in the Bug fighter.
I was square dancing.
I was giving Rachel a resentful look as I
bowed to her in time with the music.
What the
...
FLASH!
less-than Four. . . three . . . hold
onffgreater-than
I saw green. Green on green, rushing up at
me.
And then we hit.
And for a while, I didn't see anything at all.
Time Unknown.
00! HOO! HOO! HOO!
HOHOHOHO-HOHO! HAH! HAH!
KEEYAAA! KEEYAAA! KEEYAAA!
I woke up.

I woke up very suddenly.

KEEYAAA! KEEYAAA! KEEYAAA!

YAHA-

HAHAHA!

My head hurt, and the screaming noises didn't help. My back hurt, too.

I was lying on the ground. On mildewed, rotting leaves. Trees towered over me. Insanely tall trees. Ferns dipped down to tickle

my face. There

was a root or something under my back, which explained the back pain.

But I was alive.

KeRAW! KeRAW! KeRAW!

VrrEEET! VrrEEET! VrrEEET!

I sat up quickly. But that sent a spear of pain through my head. "Oh, man," I groaned.

Then I saw the bug. The bug on my lap. The big, giant, MONSTER bug. I guess it was some kind of beetle. It had yellow and black stripes and something that looked almost like curved antlers. I swear it was six inches long. Or at least three inches. It would have been beautiful, if it hadn't been on me.

"AAAAAHHH!" I yelled and brushed the beetle away.

Then, I felt the itchy, crawling feeling on my leg. Ants! There were a dozen ants climbing up my right shin.

I have been an ant. So you'd think maybe I have some sympathy for them. Wrong. I slapped at my leg till I was sure they were gone.

I climbed to my feet. I felt woozy and confused. Where was I? Where were the others?

I looked around. Green. Green everywhere. I mean, every where.

"The visions," I said to no one.

I was in a jungle. I knew that for sure.

I'd

never been in a jungle before, but there was no doubt in my mind. Maybe it was the monkeys and birds screeching at an insane volume all around me in the trees that gave it away. Maybe it was the creepers and vines. Maybe it was a flash of an amazing red-and-blue bird flitting through the branches. Maybe it was the fact that beetles really shouldn't be as big as that beetle had been.

It was jungle, all right.

Just like it had been in the weird flashes I'd been experiencing since that afternoon while square dancing.

"That's what did it," I muttered. "It was the square dancing that drove me crazy." I decided to yell for the others. "Hey! Hey! Cassie!

Marco!"

It was like my voice had no power. The sound was just swallowed by the trees and ferns and bushes.

"Okay, get a grip, Jake. Try to remember. You were coming down in the Bug fighter. Obviously you crashed. Duh. So look for the Bug fighter. It can't be far away."

I glanced around me at the solid wall of green in every direction. The air was steaming with humidity. And the smells of overly sweet flowers and tropical rot made me feel like I was walking past some department store perfume counter. Then I spotted a tree where the top half had been snapped off. I started walking, trying to get a better angle on the broken tree. I saw a second tree, splintered. I began to notice what looked like a tunnel plowed through the dense foliage. A tunnel plowed through the trees and foliage should lead to the Bug fighter.

"Or the Blade ship," I reminded myself.

HOO! HOO! HOO! HOOHOOHOOHOO!

HAH!

HAH! HAH!

The jungle was quieting down a little, but there was still some fairly crazy screeching from up in the tall trees. The jungle animals sounded annoyed. Probably they didn't appreciate someone crashing a Bug fighter into their home. And they didn't like my looks, either.

The jungle floor was surprisingly clear. Down at foot level there wasn't much growing, just dead leaves. But at face level there were vines and bushes and ferns, all slapping me in the face as I pressed on.

Suddenly I came to a clearing. A hole in the canopy where a tree had fallen. Bright sunlight shone down through the gap. And it was as if every species of plant life you could imagine was crowding into that sunny spot. I found myself facing an incredible wall of vegetation: a dozen types of brilliant flowers, mosses so green they didn't seem real, small vines wrapped around bigger vines wrapped around tree trunks.

It was the greenest place on Earth. There were even plants growing out of the smooth trunks of tall trees.

I trudged on, back into the shadows of the forest, and when I looked up, I could no longer see the tunnel through the foliage.

That's when I started to get really scared.

I was in a jungle. And jungle isn't like forest, where you can usually see for hundreds of feet in any direction. Jungle presses in close around. It's like being buried in green.

Ger-Ak! Ger-Ak! AKAKAKAK!

"Marco! Cassie! Rachel!" I yelled,

feeling the
edge of panic.
less-than How about Tobias8greater-than a voice
said in my
head.

I looked up and saw nothing. Then I
noticed him swooping down toward me from the high
branches of a tree.

"Tobias!" I yelled. I waved. Of course,
he'd al
ready seen me, obviously. But I was massively
re

lieved. So I waved again.
The red-tailed hawk body seemed almost
bland, boring in the context of this jungle. He
landed on a rotting, moss-encrusted log.

"Tobias! The others?"
less-than Everyone is aliveeagreater-than he said.
less-than It took a while to find everyone, though.
I think the Bug fighter
must have spun around a few times tearing
through the trees. Cassie ended up practically on
top of this snake. This extremely large snake.
greater-than

"Where are we?"

less-than like don't knoweagreater-than Tobias
said. less-than But I'm pretty sure this
ain't home. Come on, follow me. It's not far.
greater-than

I followed Tobias, pushing and shoving and fighting
my way through forest that seemed determined to stop
me. I was dripping with sweat and gasping in the thick
air.

Then, a clearing. Not a natural clearing, but one
created by the crashed Bug fighter.

"Jake!" Cassie yelled and ran over to give
me a hug. She had a nasty cut on one hand, which
she'd bandaged with strips torn from her T-shirt.

"You're alive," Marco observed. "For now,"
he added darkly.

"I told you he'd be okay," Rachel said.

The Bug fighter was upright, but one whole side
looked as if it had been peeled back. You could
see right to the inside. The left engine pod was
cranked out at a sharp angle.

Ax was inside the fighter. He lowered his head
to peer at me through the hole in the fighter's side.
less-than Prince Jake. I'm glad you're
all right. greater-than

"I'm glad I'm all right, too," I said.

"Now . . . where are we?"

"Where
is easy," Cassie said. "Rain forest.
Not Africa, because I've seen monkeys with
prehensile tails. You know, tails they can swing
by. Most likely, we're in Central
or South America. Either the Costa Rican rain
forest, or the Amazon rain forest."

"I'm betting Amazon," Marco said brightly.

"I'm also taking bets on whether we live long enough

for me to collect on bets."

I laughed. "You're always such an optimist, Marco."

I turned back to Cassie. "S. Amazon rain forest, huh?"

"Like I said, the question of where we are is fairly easy."

"Cassie, why do I have the feeling there's something you're not telling me?" I asked her.

"Remember when we were in orbit? Remember how it was night in North America, but the sun was just coming up over the Red Sea?"

I shrugged. "I guess so."

"Well, after we fired at the Blade ship, as we were going down it was daylight here. Over South America."

It took me a few seconds to realize what she was talking about.

Ax came trotting out of the Bug fighter. He wiped his hands on a rag. less-than Thanks to Cassie's observation, it seems pretty clear that when we and the Blade ship fired simultaneously and the Dracon beams intersected, we created what we call a

Sario Rip. greater-than

"A what? A Sario Rip? What's that?"

less-than We blew a small hole in space-time. And were drawn in through that hole. greater-than

"English, please," I warned. "Plain English, please."

"We were blown through time, Jake," Cassie said. "We aren't

where we want to be. And we aren't when we want to be."

I stared at her. "Did we go forward or back? Are we in the past or the future?"

less-than Yesea greater-than Ax said. less-than It's definitely one of those two choices. greater-than

1:22

p.m.

Again.

So let me just summarize here. We are probably in the Amazon rain forest. And we are either in our own past, or in our own future. We have no way to fly this Bug fighter out of here. We have no way of knowing if there's a city or town or even a road near here." I looked around at my friends. "Anyone have anything to add?"

less-than like know that it is one twenty-two p.m.ea greater-than Ax said. less-than like just don't know what day or year it is. greater-than

Andalites have the ability to keep track of time

naturally. Like some kind of internal clock. It's useful. Of course, it's more useful if you know what century you're in.

Cassie held up her hand, like she was in school.

"The rain forest is full of poisonous snakes, poisonous insects, poisonous plants, and poisonous frogs."

"Excuse me?" Marco said. "Poisonous frogs? Did you say poisonous frogs?"

"Plus, there is at least one large predator-, the jaguar."

"Love their cars," Marco said.

"Right now we have no food and no water," Rachel added helpfully. "Also, no weapons."

less-than Why do we need weapons8greater-than Tobias asked. less-than Morph into birds and we'll just fly out of here.greater-than

"None of us can stay in morph for more than two hours," Cassie pointed out. "Realistically, we can't fly more than twenty or thirty miles an hour at best. That's maybe sixty miles per morph. And we could be a thousand miles from nowhere."

"Besides," Marco said glumly. "What are we supposed to do? Find a town, make a collect call to our families and tell them we're in South America? "Hey, Dad, guess what? I'm in Brazil. Or maybe Costa Rica. Could you come pick me up?'"

"If there even is

a town," Rachel said. "If there even are

phones. If our parents have been born yet, or are still alive. You're kind of missing something -- we may be in the year two thousand b.c. Or

...

we might be in the year ten thousand a.d."

"Ax, what's the deal with this Sario Rip?"

I

asked the Andalite. "I mean, is there some way to undo it?"

Ax didn't answer. Instead, I noticed his stalk

eyes turning slowly to his right. less-than We are not

aloneeagreater-than Ax said.

I shot a glance in the direction Ax was looking. Something moved! I had a fleeting impression of a shoulder, arm, and head.

less-than Humanoideagreater-than Ax said.

less-than like didn't see it very

well. But it was watching us. greater-than

"Swell," I said. "Tobias?"

less-than I'm on xeagreater-than he said, opening his wings and

flapping away through the trees.

less-than As for the

Sario Rip,

I

...

all I know is what

it is. It's a rip in space-time. greater-than

"Yeah, you told us that," Marco said.

less-than like think . . . disgreater-than Ax hung his

head. less-than Prince Jake, we studied the

Sario Rip

effect in school.

But there was a game later that day. And I was

thinking more about the game than class. Also, there was this

female who distracted me. greater-than

Marco laughed. "Ax, are you telling us you were too

busy flirting with some girl to pay attention to the

lesson?"

Ax didn't answer. He just said, less-than like

don't ex-

actly know whether you can reverse a

Sario Rip.

I

remember some things, but not everything. greater-than

"I'm thirsty," Rachel said. "Whatever else

we're going to do, we have to find water. And

food. Ax, can we fix the Bug fighter?"

less-than We can fly with just one

engineeagreater-than Ax said. less-than The ripped

skin of the craft is irrelevant as long

as we stay in the atmosphere and fly slow. But the

effects of the

Sario Rip

have wiped out the

ship's software. It's been erased.

greater-than .

"Can you rewrite the software?" Rachel

asked.

less-than Yes. But it would take me twenty

years, at

I east. greater-than

"Better and better," I said. "Hey. Wait.

What

happened to the Blade ship?"

Ax looked blank.

"I saw it going down along with us," Cassie

said. "But I didn't see it crash."

"So maybe, in addition to everything else, we

have Visser Three and a shipload of Hork-Bajir

warriors to worry about," I said. "Someone

please give me some

good

news."

"Well, it's still daylight," Marco said, putting

on a big phony grin. "When night falls, then

we'll

be

-

his

less-than Jake! Duckffgreater-than Tobias

yelled.

For once in my life, I didn't stop to think

about it. I ducked. And even as I ducked, I saw the face. I saw the arm. I saw the spear.

It was coming straight at me.

Right for my face.

The vision! It was the hallucination!

I ducked. The spear went over my head and flew on harmlessly into the bush.

Tobias flapped wildly into the air.

less-than like shouldn't have been restingeagreater-than he berated himself. less-than like should have been in the air. greater-than

I was too weirded out to worry about Tobias.

"I knew that was going to happen," I said. "That spear. The kid who threw it. I knew!"

Cassie looked strangely at me. "Jake, what are you -"

less-than Three peagreater-than Tobias interrupted. less-than They almost look like they might be kids. They're hauling butt out of here. Which is what we better think about doing, too. greater-than

"Why?" Rachel demanded indignantly. "We can handle some kids with spears."

less-than Forget the kids. I see a group of twenty . . . maybe thirty Hork-Bajir.

They're tearing up the forest and coming this wayffgreater-than

"We can't leave the Bug fighter!" Rachel protested. "How else are we going to get out of here?"

"We can't stand and fight twenty Hork-Bajir warriors, either," I said. "We have to pull back."

I glanced over and saw Cassie. She had retrieved the spear from the bushes. It was a long, thin stick. There was no spearhead on it. It was just a sharp stick with the sharp end blackened.

"That doesn't look too deadly," I said.

Cassie shook her head. "No. You probably couldn't kill much with this stick. Unless the tip was dipped in poison. And we are in the home office of natural poisons."

"The local people . . . I guess they wouldn't waste their time using a weapon that didn't work, would they?" I said.

"No," Cassie said flatly. "The chances are pretty good that this spear is poison-tipped. There are poisonous frogs and plants down here that are used for arrow and spear poison. Very deadly. Very, very

deadly. The Hork-Bajir are definitely not our only problem."

less-than Jake, you guys need to move oueagreater-than Tobias warned. He was overhead again. I couldn't see him, but I knew he was up above the jungle canopy. less-than like can't see well enough through all this foliage. But I think a group of Hork-Bajir is getting close to you. greater-than

Decision time. Stay and fight? We'd lose. Run away? We'd be giving up the Bug fighter, our only way home.

"Ax? Is there something . . . anything. . . you can take out of the Bug fighter that would make it impossible for the Yeerks to fly it?"

Ax stared at me with his main eyes, even as his stalk eyes swept the forest around us. less-than Yes. Yes, I can think of something. greater-than

"Then get it," I said.

less-than Jake! There's no timeeagreater-than Tobias called down. He must have been close enough to hear me. But the foliage was so dense I had no clear idea where he was.

Ax hesitated, not sure what to do.

The others all looked at me.

"Do it, Ax," I said. He raced for the Bug fighter. "Everyone else, get out of here."

"I'm staying with you," Rachel protested.

"I'm not staying. Minimum risk," I snapped. "We only need Ax to handle this. No point risking anyone else."

I plunged into the green. I grabbed Rachel's arm and pulled her along. Cassie and Marco followed me.

less-than Jakeeagreater-than Tobias called down. less-than lf Ax isn't out of there in under two minutes, he's not going to get out of there. greater-than

I didn't answer.

It's the worst thing about being a so-called leader -- the times when you take a risk with someone else's life. If Ax ended up dead, it was going to be very hard to explain to my friends.

And to myself.

1:48 P.m.

I can't begin to explain what the rain forest is like. To explain it, you'd have to be a poet and a scientist and a horror writer.

All I can say is how it makes you feel. You feel small. Tiny. Alone. Hopelessly weak. Afraid.

You feel heat and suffocating humidity. It's like there's not enough air. Every breath is like sucking air through a straw. You're breathing steam and perfume and the stink of dying, rotting things.

The jungle is all around you. It presses against you on all sides. Wet leaves in your face; creepers that seem to reach up to trip you; sharp-edged stalks that cut you.

And then there are the twin horrors: bugs and thirst.

Mosquitoes, gnats, big flies, and other flying insects I didn't even have names for followed us in swirling clouds. They'd descend and attack, then disappear for no reason, only to attack again later. If you stopped, even for a few seconds, you could find your foot covered with ants or centipedes or beetles or bugs that defied description.

And it didn't help that we were shoeless.

The heat sucked every ounce of moisture out of us. It was as bad as any desert. You'd think with all the greenery there would be water everywhere. But no. The actual ground under our feet was dry. All the water is captured in the plants.

All the while, as we fought our way through the thickets of vines and ferns and bushes and gnats and flies and mosquitoes, we were followed by a serenade of cackles, groans, screams, yelps, insane animal giggles, clicking, scratching, and the occasional coughing roar as each new species comments on the idiocy of a bunch of suburban kids wandering around the rain forest. For all we knew, they were taking bets on how long the dumb humans would survive.

We had pushed two hundred yards deeper into the rain forest from the Bug fighter when we heard an uproar behind us.

"Andalite!" a Hork-Bajir voice bellowed.

"Andalite!"

less-than They're after hmffgreater-than Tobias called down from above. less-than Ax has six Hork-Bajir on his tail! You happy now, Jake? Ax-man! Look out! Behind yffgreater-than

I bit my lip till I tasted my own blood.

"We have to morph and go back for him," Rachel said. Her eyes were blazing.

I could have said no. I had reasons to say no. We were in an unknown place, facing lousy odds. Besides, of us all, Ax was the fastest and best able to escape. But Rachel would have just gone anyway.

"Just two of us go," I snapped. "Me and you, Rachel. Marco and Cassie, stay back."

"Why are we staying back?" Marco asked, outraged.

"Because we need backup, Marco," I said tersely.

I don't know if he understood this or not.

Rachel did. She started to morph.

I was morph ing into my tiger morph as fast as I could. Rachel was already well into her grizzly bear morph

-

massive shoulders and shaggy brown fur and long, curved claws.

TSEEEWWW! TSEEEWWW!

The sound of Dracon beams reached us. The jungle animals up in the trees exploded in a fury of commentary.

Ke-Rrrraaaaawww!

HOO! HOOHOOHOOHOO!

I could hear something large crashing around the brush, but I couldn't see anything. In the rain forest you're lucky if you can see five feet in any direction.

less-than I'm readyeagreater-than Rachel said.

less-than Wait for meeagreater-than I told her.

less-than Catch up when you ceagreater-than Rachel snapped. She lumbered away, back toward the Bug fighter, a huge, rolling mass of heavy fur and muscle. I cursed her silently.

My body was already covered with orange-and-black-striped fur. I was on all fours. Long, yellow fangs grew in my mouth. Long, wicked claws grew where my fingernails had been.

I felt the tiger's mind.

I saw through the tiger's eyes.

I felt the surge of power, the rush of the tiger's might. He was at home in a tropical forest. This was the kind of place he belonged. The tiger was lord of his own native turf.

But of course in the tiger's native jungles, there aren't Hork-Bajir. And there's no Visser Three.

I leaped forward, following the path Rachel had plowed through the bushes. I caught up to her easily. I belonged in the jungle. The grizzly did not. Rachel was breathing hard.

less-than like can't see

...

can't find them . . . keep hearing noises, but they keep moving. greater-than I listened with my tiger's ears. I receded just a bit within the tiger mind and let the animal instincts guide me. The tiger knew how to follow sounds in the rain forest. less-than Come on, Racheleagreater-than I said. I plunged forward, toward where I heard the loudest sounds crashing through the forest. But I soon realized Rachel couldn't keep up.

I was really ticked off right then. At Rachel,

for being so impulsive. At Tobias for acting like I wanted

to put Ax in danger. At the Yeerks for causing all this. At the jungle itself. And worst of all, at me.

I'd made mistakes. Too many mistakes.

Now I had to choose. Stay with Rachel, or rush ahead

and try to find Ax.

Help came from the sky. less-than Left about fifty feet, Jakeeagreater-than Tobias called down to me.

I was mad at Tobias. But not so mad I would ignore him. I charged left, slinking swiftly through the brush.

less-than Jake! Look out! There's one right

-

greater-than

"Haarrgghh!" the Hork-Bajir yelled triumphantly. He swung a bladed arm at me and sliced

through the ferns and bushes like a lawn mower going through

grass.

His elbow disblade missed me by inches. I felt the breeze from it.

to knew what to do next. I fired the coiled muscles in my hind legs and I flew. In midair I extended my paws, each as wide as a frying pan. Out came my claws.

And I roared. HRRROOOOOWWWRRRRR!

I swear, that sound actually silenced the monkeys and birds.

I hit the Hork-Bajir. He went down, swinging fast, but too slow. Hork-Bajir are fast. But when it comes to close-in work, slashing and parrying and applying the teeth, the tiger is faster and nastier.

He slashed. I felt pain sear my right shoulder.

I slashed and heard the Hork-Bajir cry out.

His snake-head jerked fast, aiming his forehead blades for my face.

I ducked and dove in, sinking my teeth into his neck.

From somewhere I heard the sound of a bear's pained roar. I heard crashing, thudding sounds.

I pulled back, leaving the deadly, bladed, seven-foot-tall Hork-Bajir lying on the jungle floor, moaning in pain.

I actually felt a moment of pity. The Hork-Bajir race has been enslaved by the Yeerks. This

Hork-Bajir warrior didn't ask to be here, bleeding from a dozen wounds in an alien jungle a billion miles from his home.

But then, I didn't ask to be here, either.

I listened for sounds of Ax. Nothing.

I listened for Hork-Bajir. Nothing.

I listened for Rachel. Nothing.

It was like they'd all just disappeared in the green. Green, everywhere I looked.

Then . . .

A sharp pain in my left paw. I looked at the Hork-Bajir, but no, he hadn't moved.

I realized I was falling over.

Simply falling over.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the snake slithering off. It was bright yellow.

less-than Demorphffgreater-than I told myself. less-than Demorphffgreater-than

But my head was swimming. And the green was closing in around me. Burying me in green.

A bird landed beside me. I could see that.

less-than Jake! Morph back, man!

Morph backffgreater-than

I was trying. I was trying to remember what it was I was supposed to become. Then . . .

FLASH!

I was walking home from school. Me and Marco.

We were talking, wondering what Tobias wanted.

Tobias's thought-speak voice was in our heads saying -

FLASH!

Tobias's voice saying, less-than That's
it, Jake. Come on, man. Keep at it.
greater-than

I could see again! I could see my hands stretched
out in front of me on the ground. They were
half-human, half-tiger.
Could I morph away from poison? Would
morphing get it out of my system? Should have
asked Ax,
I berated myself.

But I was already learning the answer. As I became
more human, I felt the poison weaken.

less-than Come on, Jake, come oneagreater-than
Tobias said. less-than There's no
timeffgreater-than

"What. . . what is it? More Hork-Bajir?"
I asked him when I had a mouth again.

less-than No. It's Rachel. greater-than
I felt my heart miss several beats. I
climbed up, rickety from the quick change. I felt
like throwing up. Maybe it was the poison. Maybe it
was just too much happening at once. "Where is she?"
I asked.

less-than Straight behind you. Maybe a hundred
feet. Hurry! I'll go up and see what's
happening. greater-than

He flapped away, leaving me alone and
barefoot and vulnerable in the rain forest.

I found Rachel by following the damage she
had done: three Hork-Bajir lying unconscious
or worse. I didn't have time to worry about them.

Because that's when I saw Rachel.

She was out cold, still in grizzly morph. She'd
been cut up badly by Hork-Bajir blades.

She was lying there on her side, bleeding. But that's
not what made me want to scream.

Her fur was alive.

Alive with a million ants that were already ripping
away a million tiny bites from her wounded flesh.

95

2:30 P.m.

Rachel!" I yelled. "Wake up!"

less-than Jake! Stop shoutingeagreater-than
Tobias warned from up above me. less-than
Hork-Bajir could still be all around here! I can't
see through all this undergrowth caret

I threw myself down next to Rachel and started
swatting at the ants. But instead of getting rid of
them, the ants just swarmed across my hands.

There had to be ten thousand ants. Rachel had
fallen almost on top of their mound. I could see
ants carrying away tiny pieces of bloody bear
flesh.

"Do you know if there is any water near here?" I
asked Tobias.

less-than There's a stream. But it's too far,
Jake, she weighs hundreds of pounds. What are
you going to do, carry her to the water8greater-than

I could see Rachel's bear chest rising and

falling. She was breathing. Still alive. I kicked her. I kicked her hard. "Wake up!" I hissed. "'Come on, Rachel, wake up!"

The ants were getting at her ears now. They swarmed across her closed eyes. I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry.

I don't think I've ever felt so totally helpless.

Rachel was out cold. The thousands of swarming ants would make sure she never woke up. They would kill the bear before Rachel could morph out. They would eat out her eyes and crawl into her head, and there was nothing I could do.

"Tobias! More ants! Find more ants!"

less-than Are you nuts8greater-than

"Do it!" I yelled, not even caring if someone heard me. "I need another colony of ants!"

Tobias clicked. I could see his fierce eyes grow wider. He flapped away, staying as low to the ground as he could. He circled tightly, and then flared to kill his speed.

less-than Here! Hereffgreater-than he yelled.

At that moment I heard movement in the bushes. I looked and saw two wolves. Two very out-of-place wolves. Their intelligent faces were sticking out of the brush.

"Cassie! Marco! That is you two, right?"

Looking closer, I could see that they had been in a fight. There were cuts. There was blood. They began to demorph.

less-than Oh, my Godeagreater-than

Cassie moaned as she saw Rachel and realized what was happening.

I didn't have time to explain. I bent down and began yanking out tufts of bloody grizzly bear fur.

less-than What are you doing? Leave her aloneffgreater-than

Marco yelled.

I yanked several handfuls of bloody fur. Then I raced toward the spot where Tobias waited. He was resting on a strong fern, looking down at a swarming mound of ants.

I took a small sample of the grizzly fur and laid it right beside the mouth of the ant mound. The reaction was instantaneous. Hundreds of ants swarmed across the bloody fur.

I used another tuft of fur to lift a handful of ants, then I walked a few feet toward Rachel and

dropped the tuft. I repeated the process, getting

closer and closer to Rachel. I was worried the ants might lose the scent. But they were keeping up with me, and even racing ahead.

Slowly, surely, I led the ants to Rachel.

Cassie and Marco were human once more.

They looked like I probably looked: scared, horri

fied, vulnerable.

"We have to get them off her!" Cassie cried when she saw me. "They're inside her ears!

They're in her mouth! They'll kill her!"

"I know." I dropped my last blood-soaked tuft

of fur. If this didn't work, Rachel was finished.

I stepped aside and put my arm around Cassie.

The new colony of ants followed the trail I'd left them. There was a moment's hesitation, almost as if the whole rampaging colony paused upon seeing the bear.

But then, like the well-trained army they were, they attacked. Ten thousand new ants swarmed onto Rachel's unconscious body. They slammed into a wall of ants from the first colony. I've been an ant. I've seen how different colonies of ants get along. I hoped they would act

the same way here.

They did. It was like some old Civil War battle. The two armies charged at each other. Perfect, obedient automatons responding only to smell and instinct.

They attacked each other. The ants swarmed back out of Rachel's ears and mouth, ready for the battle.

"That was good thinking, Jake," Cassie said. "But sooner or later, one colony will win."

"We have to hope Rachel regains consciousness before then," I said.

The enemy armies of ants battled ferociously. It wouldn't look like much to most people. But having been an ant, I had some idea of the awesome slaughter that was going on in the fur of the grizzly.

Down there, ants were being torn apart by other ants. Literally torn apart. Legs ripped out. Heads bitten off. Stinging poisons being sprayed.

The battle was turning. The challengers' mound was too far away. They weren't able to call up enough reinforcements. In a few minutes the desperate ant war would be over.

But while they fought, they did not tear into Rachel's flesh. And then . . .

less-than Unh . . . wha . . . oh! Oh! Oh! I'm covered in antsfgreater-than

"Rachel! Rachel! It's me, Jake. Morph out. Morph out and be ready to run!"

Rachel didn't have to be told twice. She started demorphing. She shrank. Pink flesh re-placed fur. Massive shoulders and huge paws became smaller, human features.

"Oh!" Rachel cried as soon as she had a human mouth. "Arrrrggghhi"

"Rachel, get up! Follow me!" I said to her. "Tobias? Where's that stream?" Tobias rose up and flew swiftly through the

trees. I followed, crashing through the bushes, my bare feet torn, tripping. It was no more than a hundred feet. It felt like a mile.

Rachel was screaming now. Rachel is the bravest person I know. But the thousands of vicious ants were beginning to attack her, now that they were done attacking each other. No one can stand that.

No one can stand that.

"Get off me! Oh, no! Oh! They're in my
_"

Suddenly there was no more green. A muddy stream ... I leaped for the water. Pah-Loosh!

I heard Rachel hit the water beside me. Pah-Loosh!

I swam toward her. She was still underwater. The water was too murky for me to be able to see her well. All I saw was flailing limbs.

Ants were floating to the surface of the water and being carried away by the current.

Then . . .

SPLOOSH!

Rachel came up, gasping for air.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

She looked around, confused for a moment. Then she recognized me. And she spotted Marco and Cassie on the bank of the stream.

"Get out of the water!" Cassie screamed.

I grabbed Rachel's arm and dragged her toward the bank. I pushed her ahead of me, slipping and sliding up through the muddy grass. I was just pulling my feet up out of the water when I saw the churning, frothing commotion Cassie had seen first.

I yanked my feet away, inches ahead of a school of flesh-eating piranha.

"This is the rain forest?" Rachel demanded angrily, spitting water and combing through her hair for any remaining ants.

"This

is the rain forest everyone wants to save? Ants and piranha and snakes and bugs the size of rats? Well, as far as I'm concerned they can burn it down, pave it over, and put up malls and convenience stores!"

I sat staring at the piranha. They say a school of piranha can strip a cow down to nothing but bones in a few minutes.

Right then, thinking about what almost happened, shaking and panting and wanting to cry, I agreed with Rachel.

3:09 P.m.

Now we need to find Ax," I said. "But we need to be careful. This jungle alone is enough to mess us up bad. And we have the Yeerks to deal with as well."

less-than like am not lost, Prince Jakeeagreater-than a thought-speak voice said.

"Ax!" I cried.

less-than Yes, it's meeagreater-than Ax said.
less-than But I am in a morph. Don't be startled. greater-than With that, he dropped from the tree

above us and landed on the ground.

"Well," Marco commented with great satisfaction.

"Someone finally made a monkey out of Ax."

He was small, covered in brown fur, and definitely a monkey. But he was alive.

I don't think I've ever felt so relieved in my life. I had been screwing up plenty. First by deciding to go into the stupid Safeway to begin with, then by endangering Tobias, then by endangering Ax, then by leaving Rachel alone to almost get killed. But at least no one had gotten killed.

Yet.

"I'm thinking spider monkey," Cassie said, frowning. "But I'm not sure. I'm not all that strong on rain forest animals."

The monkey -- Ax -- was holding something in his paw. It was bright yellow and about the size of a computer diskette, only round and a little thicker.

"What is that?" I asked.

less-than like did what you told me to deagreater-than Ax said. less-than This is a vital part of the Bug fighter -- the computer core. No one can fly the Bug fighter without it. greater-than

less-than That thing is the computer8greater-than Tobias asked.

less-than Yes, the Yeerks are still somewhat primitive. An Andalite version would be a third this size. greater-than

"Well, I'm relieved you're okay, Ax,"

I said. "We haven't been doing very well."

less-than like barely made xeagreater-than Ax said simply. less-than There are several dozen Hork-Bajir out combing the forest, looking for us. I think they are divided now into platoons of five, each accompanied by a human-Controller, I haven't seen the Visser, but he will be around as well. And as you know, Visser Three can morph, so he could be any of the animals we see. greater-than

"That's a good point," Rachel said. "We have to be on the lookout for animals as well as Hork-Bajir and the natives."

"The human-Controllers," Marco said thoughtfully. "I think I know why they're traveling with the Hork-Bajir. See, the human-Controllers would know which animals belong here in the rain forest, and which don't. If they see a grizzly bear or a tiger or a wolf, they'll know that it doesn't belong. They'll know it's us."

"Good thinking, Marco. We need local morphs," I said.

less-than like can take you to the monkeyseagreater-than Ax suggested. less-than to believe they are close relatives of yours. greater-than

"Marco is second cousin to a monkey," Rachel said.

I was glad to see she was teasing Marco again. It meant she was back. Still, there was a darkness in her

eyes. Not even Rachel could just shake off what she'd been through. And knowing Rachel, she would react by being more aggressive. Maybe too aggressive.

"Monkeys would be good," Cassie said. "It would get us up off the ground and into the trees."

"Okay, Ax, lead on. Tobias? I hate to ask, but we could use some air cover." less-than No problem greater-than Tobias said. He flew up into the trees. I knew he was tired.

And I knew he was hungry. Flying is hard work, and a bird's metabolism is fast. They can't endure long periods of hunger as well as a human. But what else could I do?

Ax did not lead us very far. Within ten minutes we were standing beneath a group of monkeys chattering and yipping in the trees high above us.

It isn't possible to acquire a morph from a person who's morphed. In other words, we couldn't just copy Ax's monkey morph. We had to go to an actual monkey.

less-than like believe I can get one of them to come down greater-than Ax said.

"How?" Marco asked.

Ax hesitated. It's hard to tell if a monkey is embarrassed, let alone a monkey with an Andalite mind. But I could have sworn Ax was em

barrassed.

less-than to ...! believe that I am

-

that is to say my morph is

-

an attractive female. One of the males seemed interested earlier. greater-than

"Well, that does it," Marco said flatly. "We have moved permanently to bizarre-o world. We've traveled in time, we're in a jungle fighting

brain-stealing aliens and ten thousand annoying species of bugs, and our resident space cadet is a hot-looking monkey. Somebody

-

his his

-

wake me up when we get back to reality." his

-

wake me up when we get back to reality."

Marco and I said it at the same moment. He stared at me. I stared at him. Everyone else stared at us.

I sighed. "I guess I have something to tell you guys. I should have said something earlier, probably. But I thought I was just going nuts or something. See,

I've been having these flashes. Really intense. It's like, I'd be in school and then suddenly I was here. And since we got here, I've been having flashes that I'm back home." Rachel rolled her eyes as if to say, "What next?" Cassie looked concerned. Marco looked like he was trying to find a joke in the situation, but was too tired to come up with anything.

"I knew what Marco was going to say just now because that was one of the flashes," I said. Ax stared at me with large monkey eyes. less-than Prince Jake, how long ago did you start having these flashbacks8greater-than I shrugged. "It was just this afternoon. Yesterday, or today, whatever you'd call it. I was square dancing when the first one happened. Why?"

"You were square dancing?" Marco said. "I'd have paid to see that."

Ax scratched his neck vigorously, then looked intently at what he'd scratched up. He popped whatever it was into his mouth. Obviously, he was letting the monkey mind have some control. less-than Prince Jake, as I said, I'm not an expert on

Sario Rips. But I think what's happening is that the flashbacks are fluctuations where two simultaneous identical states of consciousness intersect outside of space-time."

"That would have been my guess," Marco said. "Simultaneous . . . whatever." less-than like have a theory . . . disgreater-than Ax began.

"A theory is more than I have. What is it?" less-than like suspect we have moved backward in time. But not far. We are existing simultaneously both here and back home. There are now two Marcos, two Cassies, two of each of us. One here, one there. At the same time. The flashbacks only started today. So I suspect we have gone back one day in time, a little less. greater-than

"That's good," Marco said. less-than Noeagreater-than Ax said solemnly. less-than It's

not good. We are in two places at the same time. That is impossible. It's a time-space anomaly. It's an unstable conditions

"Meaning . . . ?" I pressed. less-than like think it means that the two groups, the two Marcos, Rachels, and so ons, will annihilate each other. Like matter and antimatter, it is not possible for there to be two of us in the same time. greater-than

"So why haven't we annihilated ourselves yet?" Rachel asked.

less-than We are still within the Sario Rip

effecteagreater-than Ax said. less-than like think.
So ... so I think we're okay till we get
back to the time when the rip occurred. At that time, the
rip will end, and we'll have an impossible situation:
two identical groups of people existing in two
places at one time. I think my teacher said it would
cause a mutual annihilation. We'd cease
to exist. Both groups. Here and back home. The
time when the
Sario Rip
occurred was eight fifty-four, exactly.
greater-than

"In other words, if we're getting back to our
own time, we have to do it before the
Sario Rip
occurs at eight fifty-four," I said.

less-than Yes. We'd have to go back and change
the time line. So that none of this would happen. We have
less than six hours. greater-than

"How do we do that?"

less-than I'm not sure. greater-than

I nodded. "Well, if we're trapped, so is
Visser Three, right? He must know about
Sario Rips,
too. If he's going back, we can go back with
him.

All we have to do is get to the Blade ship, hide
out on board, and let Visser Three take us
home. I mean, that's the only way, right?"

less-than There could be comgreater-than Ax started
to say. Then he stopped.

"What?" I asked him. "Is there some other way
to get back?"

Ax gave me a long look. Like he wasn't quite
sure what to say. Or whether to say anything at
all. He was in monkey morph, so I couldn't
read his expression.

less-than As I said, Prince Jake, I
wasn't paying attention the day they taught this in
school. greater-than

I knew he was hiding something. I should have pressed
him. But I didn't.

Just one more mistake from the "fearless leader" of the
Animorphs.

It was easy to "acquire" the monkeys.
Several of them swung down from the tree
to sniff at Ax. And they didn't seem terribly
frightened by any of us, since we were all standing very still and
quiet.

I reached very slowly, very gently for one particular
monkey. He looked at my hand, considering it.
Then he turned his back, as if asking me
to scratch it.

"Okay," I said. "I'd be glad to."

I scratched the little monkey's back. And as I
did, I closed my eyes and focused my thoughts
on the monkey. He became quiet, like he was in a
trance. That's how animals usually are when they're
being acquired.

I absorbed the monkey DNA into me.

"This should be especially easy," Cassie commented as she finished acquiring a different monkey. "These monkeys aren't direct relatives of Homo sapiens, but still, most of our DNA will be identical. After all, a chimpanzee's DNA is like ninety-seven percent identical to human DNA."

"Or in Marco's case, ninety-nine point nine percent," Rachel interjected.

"Yes, it's like the fact that Rachel's DNA is actually ninety-nine percent identical to Malibu Barbie," Marco shot back.

"Could we concentrate here?" I said gruffly. Actually, I was relieved to see everyone behaving normally. It's when Cassie isn't talking about animals and Marco and Rachel aren't teasing each other that you have to worry.

"Ax? Did you have any problems with the monkey's mind when you morphed?" Cassie asked.

less-than No. Except . . . well, they are similar to morphing a human, but much more excitable. Also, they don't fall over as easily as humans do. greater-than

Ax is constantly amazed that humans walk around on just two legs, without even a tail to hold us up,

"Okay, let's do it," I said. "We're short on time, and we are exposed, sitting out here looking like dumb, barefoot kids from the suburbs. Tobias? Ax? Both of you keep an eye out for any trouble."

less-than This whole rain forest is nothing but trouble caret Tobias said darkly. less-than Especially when you're a red-tailed hawk and you stick out like a sore thumb. greater-than

He was right, but I had to worry about one thing at a time. And I knew from my "visions" that we could successfully morph into monkeys. Unfortunately, the visions didn't tell me whether we'd succeed or fail, end up alive ... or not.

I concentrated on a mental image of the monkey. And very, very quickly, I began to feel the changes.

The real monkeys began to see the changes, too.

SQUEEE to
SQUEEE! SQUEEE!

The real monkeys leaped onto the tree trunk and scampered up toward the high branches.

I shrank. That was to be expected. But the more I shrank, the more vulnerable I felt. Brown fur sprouted from my arms and legs. My face remained furless, and my lips puffed out to form a rubbery muzzle.

The largest single change was the tail. I felt it come shooting out from the base of my spine. But I'd had a tail before, so I didn't think much about it.

Then I realized something. The tail moved. Not just back and forth, like a dog's tail. It moved like a fifth arm.

less-than Hey, the tail is neateagreater-than Cassie said. less-than Try moving it. You can feel that there's a part of your brain that controls it. Just like an extra hand. greater-than

She was right. And Ax was right, too. There was very little that was new or strange inside the monkey's mind. Like a human, it had only a few basic instincts. Like a human, it depended on learning to guide its actions.

The eyes were similar to human eyes. The ears no better than our own. The sense of smell was a bit improved, though.

less-than That was an easy morpheagreater-than Rachel said. less-than So. What can this monkey d8greater-than

I shrugged my narrow monkey shoulders. less-than like guess it climbs trees. greater-than

I turned to the tree trunk. Like almost all the rain forest trees, it was shockingly tall. And there were no low branches. But there were strangling vines wrapped all around the trunk, like a nest of snakes.

less-than Let's try it oueagreater-than I said. I reached for a vine and held it tentatively. I positioned one foot. Then I carefully reached for another handhold.

less-than Prince Jakeeagreater-than Ax said. less-than Let the creature do the climbing. It knows how. Like this. greater-than

He put the Bug fighter's computer in his mouth and leaped right through the air, snatched a handhold, and was fifty feet up the tree before I could blink three times.

I took a deep breath and relaxed my control. I allowed the monkey mind to come forward and just said, less-than Climb. greater-than

Ax was right. The monkey knew how to climb. You know the way Michael Jordan knows his way around a basketball court? Or the way Kristi Ya-maguchi knows her way around the ice rink? That's how the monkey knew the trees. It knew

the trees. It understood the trees. It was born to be in the trees.

Hands, toes, hands, toes, it found every little handhold, every foothold, never a hesitation, never a doubt, never a question. That monkey knew exactly, precisely what to do.

I felt like I had swallowed ten Mountain Dew's and a box of Ring-Dings. I was tiny, but man, I had energy. I flew up that tree.

I met Cassie up in the high canopy. less-than Yow! Ax was right. This monkey can climb treesfffgreater-than

less-than That's not all it can deagreater-than she said. The others were just catching up to us. less-than

Watch this. greater-than

She launched herself out into the air.

We were fifty feet up, easy, as high as a five-story building, and Cassie just fired her hind legs and flew through the air.

She snatched a hanging vine with one hand, but never stopped swinging forward.

That was all I needed to see. It was a game of chase through the treetops. The monkey wanted to play, and so did I. I needed some fun. to needed some fun in the worst way.

I leaped. For about two seconds that felt like ten minutes, I hung in the air. Then, my left hand simply reached out, found a branch, swung me forward, launched me once again through the air, reached out again . . .

Swing and fly and grab and swing and fly and grab!

less-than Oh, yes! Oh,

definitelyffgreater-than Marco exulted as he followed Cassie and me through the trees.

Swing! Flyyyyyy! Catch! Swing! Flyyyyyy!

Catch!

The little monkey brain processed every move, prepared every action and reaction. The entire world was branches and vines to the monkey.

Swing! Fly through the air with the ground a deadly fifty feet down! Catch at the last possible second! Swing again, out into the void, catch just in time to save your life!

it was the scene from my flash. Me, zipping through the trees.

Ax paused to let us all catch up. He wrapped his tail around a branch and hung there, panting. I wrapped my own tail around the branch and let go with my hands and feet. I hung there, high above the forest floor, by my tail. I swayed gently in the breeze.

less-than This sounds weird, but there's something . . . familiar about theagreater-than I said to Cassie when she caught up to us. less-than like mean, not to the monkey, but to me. To me, the human. greater-than

less-than It's called brachiating, I thinkagreater-than Cassie said. less-than Swinging through the trees. It's what our distant ancestors did, millions of years ago. Maybe little bits of that memory are still stuck in the back of our human brains. Maybe all the stages of evolution are still a part of us. greater-than

less-than Or maybe it just reminds me of playing on jungle gyms when I was a little kid. greater-than

less-than Oh, sure, if you want the boring, obvious explanation caret Cassie said with a laugh.

less-than It's like gymnasticseagreater-than Rachel said. less-than Only this monkey could totally destroy any human on the uneven parallel bars. If the monkey team could be in the Olympics, they'd win every medal. greater-than

less-than Can I ask a question8greater-than Ax interrupted. less-than Where are we going8greater-than

We all stared at him. Then we burst out laughing. The monkey bodies laughed, too, a wild, chattering sound. That just made us laugh all the more.

less-than like guess we did get kind of carried awayeagreater-than I said to Ax. less-than Now get serious. We have stuff to do. We have to find the Blade ship. And we have to get back to our own time before eight fifty-four. greater-than

less-than Can we play chase some more first8greater-than Marco asked.

And I would have said yes, because I was as caught up as he was in the idiot joy of being a monkey.

But right then, I saw down below us a troop of Hork-Bajir. Five of them, slashing their way through the undergrowth with a human-Controller following along behind.

less-than Let's follow themeagreater-than I said. less-than Sooner or later they'll head back for the Blade ship, right8greater-than

I don't think I ever realized how strong Hork-Bajir are till we followed them as they rampaged through the rain forest.

They used their arm blades to slash at the vegetation, leaving a path of destruction in their wake. They slashed and slashed and never seemed to tire.

There was a human-Controller with them. A guy who looked like he might be nineteen or twenty. He was in good shape, but he was gasping and sweating and struggling to keep up with the powerful, tireless Hork-Bajir.

Far above them we swung and flew and caught and swung again.

less-than Are these guys going somewhere, or just wandering around8greater-than Rachel grumbled.

less-than Tick-tock, ticktock. We're running out of time. greater-than

"There! There!" the human-Controller rasped weakly, pointing in the direction of the base of the tree we were in. "That animal! That piglike thing, I don't think it belongs here."

I think the guy was just tired. Looking for an excuse to sit down and rest. But without pausing even to consider, the lead Hork-Bajir drew his Dracon beam and fired.

TSEEEWWW!

The wild pig, or whatever it was, sizzled and disappeared. The Dracon beam kept traveling. It hit and sliced through the trunk of our tree.

less-than Moveffgreater-than I yelled as the tree began to shudder and sway.

We leaped wildly for the next tree.

I fired myself out into the air. The tree was falling too fast. No time to plan a landing!

I flew through the air for a very, very long two seconds. I dropped. The ground came rushing

up. I could see the face of the human-Controller staring up at me, wondering . . .

A branch! I reached. Missed!

No, wait! Suddenly I was stopping, swinging in a crazy circle. I almost laughed when I realized

what had happened. My tail had grabbed the branch my hand had missed.

"I don't like that monkey," the human-Controller said.

The Hork-Bajir leader once again drew his Dracon beam and aimed for me.

But I was out of there. I raced back along the branch, holding on with my toes. And I swung around the back of the trunk a split second ahead of...

TSEEEWWW!

ZZZZAAAPPP! The tree trunk exploded right in front of me as the Dracon beam turned its sap to steam. Heat scorched my face. I lost my hold and began to fail.

Then ... a hand grabbed me.

less-than Hold onffgreater-than Rachel said as she swung me toward a new branch.

"That does it! That's no real monkey," the human-Controller yelled. "The monkeys! Kill all the monkeys! Kill every monkey you see!"

Five Hork-Bajir drew their weapons.

less-than Noffgreater-than Cassie cried.

less-than Jake! We have to stop themffgreater-than less-than Cassie, get out of here!

Gffgreater-than I yelled.

TSEEEWWW! TSEEEWWW! TSEEEWWW!

Dracon beams fired their killing light. Tree branches fell away like someone was trimming a rosebush. And one of the beams hit a monkey.

less-than Cassie! Marco! Axffgreater-than I yelled.

less-than It wasn't one of ueagreater-than Marco answered.

Monkeys were destroyed. Birds in the trees were destroyed. A sloth and its baby, hanging from a branch, were destroyed. The Hork-Bajir were on a rampage. They were past just shooting at monkeys. They were shooting at anything that moved in the high branches.

less-than They're killing everythingffgreater-than Cassie cried,

outraged. less-than We have to stop themffgreater-than less-than This isn't time to play

save-the-rain-forest,

Cassieeagreater-than Marco snapped. less-than

This is time to play save your own

buttffgreater-than

less-than Jakeffgreater-than Tobias yelled

down from above. less-than like

see Dracon beams being firedffgreater-than

less-than Yeah, we kind of noticedeagreater-than

Rachel an

swered.

We had swung away from most of the slaughter. But we were still near enough to hear the wild, huffing laughter of the Hork-Bajir and the giddy, insane cries from the human-Controller. I know there is a difference between human life and the lives of other animals. I mean, I guess there is. And I definitely know there is a difference between human life and the lives of trees. But still, that mindless, pointless massacre of trees and the animals in them made me sick.

The Hork-Bajir were just cutting everything down. Smoldering stumps stood where trees had been sliced up. The forest was screaming in anger and confusion.

HOO! HOOO! HOOHOOHOO!

Ke-Raw! Ke-Raw! Ke-Raw!

Then something strange happened.

As the Hork-Bajir stomped on through the rain forest, something fell from a tree. It was very long, and it wrapped itself around the lead Hork-Bajir.

less-than A snakeffgreater-than Rachel yelled.

less-than Man, I didn't know snakes came that bigffgreater-than Marco said.

The snake swiftly coiled around the Hork-Bajir and squeezed. The other Hork-Bajir began to slash at it. Then . . .

less-than Get back, fools, and be glad I don't kill you alleagreater-than a sneering, thought-speak voice said.

The Hork-Bajir stopped trying to free their trapped friend very suddenly. They stepped back. And just watched the struggling Hork-Bajir.

I knew that thought-speak voice. We all did. Somehow the sound of it in your brain made you feel afraid.

Once the Hork-Bajir stopped struggling, the snake began to change. From the impossibly long snake body, an Andalite grew.

An Andalite body, at least. But not a true Andalite. Because in that Andalite head lived the Yeerk slug who held the rank of Visser Three.

It's strange, how two almost identical things can be so totally different. See, Visser Three looked almost exactly like Ax, or any other Andalite. And yet, there was never a moment of doubt when you saw him that this was an evil creature.

The four remaining Hork-Bajir and the human-Controller were shaking with terror before the Visser.

less-than What are you fools doing8greater-than the Visser asked in deceptively calm tones. He looked at the human-Controller.

Visser Three is never very careful about his thought-speak. Thought-speak is like E-mail: You can decide who it goes to. Or you can just blast it out

for all to hear. I guess if you're as powerful as Visser Three, you just shout away.

The human-Controller turned several shades lighter than his natural color. "We ... we ... we we we were following your orders, Visser. To destroy any animals that don't belong here because they could be the Andalite bandits."

less-than And you thought perhaps the trees were An-dalites, as well8greater-than

"No ... it was . . . urn . . ."

The Visser raked his Andalite tail forward and pressed the blade against the man's throat. less-than Did it occur to you that the Bug fighter is less than a hundred yards from here? Did it occur to you that Dracon beams travel a long way? Did it occur to you that we cannot get back to our own time without that Bug fighter? And did it occur to you that I MIGHT BE IN MORPH and that you might end up shooting me8greater-than

The human-Controller sank to his knees. "I didn't... we never... it... it... was them!" He pointed a finger of blame at the Hork-Bajir.

I whispered to Ax. less-than What's that about needing the Bug fighter to get back to his own time8greater-than

Ax shrugged his monkey shoulders. less-than like don't know. I think . . . maybe we need to exactly recreate the intersection of the two Dracon beams to undo the Sario Rip.

I remember something like that from school. greater-than He held up the little disk from the Bug fighter's computer. less-than But they can't fly the Bug fighter without this. greater-than

It came to me then, in a flash of insight: I had made a terrible mistake. I had risked Ax's life to get the computer, to make it impossible for the Yeerks to fly the Bug fighter. But now, we knew they'd have to fly the Bug fighter to get us home.

You could say we had a bargaining chip. You'd think maybe we could trade Visser Three the computer for a ride home. But I knew better. Once he had the computer, the Visser would just kill us. We were trapped. Trapped, because of my own mistake.

We had been in monkey morph for almost the two-hour limit. It was time to change and regroup, and hopefully figure out what to do next.

We swung away through the trees, far from Visser Three. We scampered down to the ground and began to demorph.

Tobias flew up and landed on a fallen tree beside us, since there were no low branches. There was a black, singed area on his tail.

"Tobias!" Cassie cried. She rushed over to him as soon as she was human again.

less-than I'm fineeagreater-than Tobias said, as Cassie lifted his tail to check for damage.

less-than But someone took a shot at me and almost hit me. I guess one of the human-Controllers must have been a birdwatcher. He knew red-tails don't fly in the Amazon. But before they chased me off, I saw them working on our crashed Bug fighter. Three Taxxons crawling all over it, repairing it. And a bunch of Hork-Bajir shooting anything they didn't like. greater-than

I told Tobias what we'd overheard Visser Three saying. "They need the Bug fighter to get back to the right time. I don't know why, and Ax doesn't know why."

Ax was fully Andalite again. He held up the yellow disk. less-than They cannot fly that Bug fighter without this. I guarantee it. greater-than

He was still focusing on that. Not thinking ahead to the fact that we needed the Yeerks to have the stupid computer now. I know it sounds weird, but I was actually mad at Ax for not seeing what an idiot I'd been. I wanted someone just to say, "Jake, you've blown it, man. You're not the leader anymore."

It would have been a relief.

"Jake!" Rachel hissed.

"What?"

"Don't move. Don't anyone move a muscle," Rachel said.

I moved nothing but my eyes. From the bushes around us, utterly silent, the heads began to rise. Beside each head, a spear, cocked and ready to fly.

"I think the local guys have the drop on us," Marco said nervously.

I was amazed. It is impossible to sneak up on an Andalite. It is even more impossible to sneak up on a red-tailed hawk. And yet about twelve guys, some older, some younger, all with intense, jet-black eyes and black hair, had done just that.

There was no doubt in my mind that if we even twitched, let alone attacked, twelve poison-tipped spears would fly, and the six of us would go down permanently.

"Uh . . . Cassie?" Marco whispered.

"You're the tree-hugging, save-the-rain-forest, love-the-planet person here. Who are these guys?"

"Humans," Cassie said.

"Noduh," Marco said.

"That's all I know. Humans. Some bunch of people who live here. What am I, an encyclopedia or something?"

"I don't think they like us," Rachel said. "But they don't look like they want to kill us."

I recognized one of the faces. It was the kid who'd thrown a spear at me before. His alert, black eyes watched me. Rachel was right: They didn't like us.

"I wonder if they saw us morph?" I decided to try raising my hands in a gesture of peace. Slowly, slowly, I raised my hands, palm out.

No one stabbed a spear in me. That was a good sign. I took a deep breath. Until that moment, I'd forgotten to breathe.

"Hello. We ... um, we don't want any trouble," I said.

"You got that right," Marco whispered.

One of them stepped forward and came right up to face me. He may have been thirty or forty or eighty. I couldn't be sure. But he was definitely the leader of the group. You could tell.

He was wearing extremely little. So little I think Rachel and Cassie would have been embarrassed, if they weren't busy being terrified.

The man lowered his spear and peered intently into my face. He spoke. But it was no language I knew.

"Sorry, I don't speak, um, whatever."

The man thought that over for a moment. Then, he pointed a finger at me and said,

"Macaco."

I guess when I didn't understand that, either, he decided I was an idiot. He launched into an amazingly good pantomime of a monkey.

"Oh,

monkey?

Monkey is

macaco?"

The man nodded and smiled. Then the smile was gone. He jabbed a finger right in my chest.

"Macaco. Tu. Espirito macaco."

"Whoa!" Marco said. "Tint's Spanish.

Es-

pfritu

means spirit or soul."

"Maybe it's Portuguese," Cassie said.

"They speak Portuguese in Brazil. This man is probably the headman of his village. He probably has some dealings with the Brazilians. He must have learned some Portuguese."

"Portuguese, Spanish, they're sorta alike," Marco said. "Spanish is all my grandmother speaks. And my mother grew up speaking Spanish."

"So you can translate?" Rachel asked.

"Well, no. I mean, I know maybe fifty words. But it's easy to figure what he's saying. He's saying Jake is a monkey spirit. Espirito macaco."

"So they did see us morph," I said. I nodded at the man. "Yes.

Espirito macaco."

Yes, I was a monkey spirit.

He looked hard at Ax. At his extra stalk eyes and his wicked tail.

"Mat. Diabo."

"I'm guessing he's calling Ax a devil," Marco said.

I shook my head firmly. "No mat.

No
diabo."

The man glared at Ax. Then he took the butt of his short spear and began to draw something in the dirt. It took a few seconds for me to recognize it. It was a creature with two arms, two legs, and a tail. It had blades on its elbows, knees, and head. The man pointed at the drawing. "Diabo. Monstro."

I swear I almost started laughing in sheer relief. The man had drawn a Hork-Bajir.

"Yes, definitely.

Mat. Diabo. Monstro

and any other bad word you can think of."

I took my bare foot and rubbed out the drawing.

"He liked that," Rachel said.

The guy grinned and slapped his chest. "Polo."

"That's either his name or his favorite brand of shirt," Marcosd.

I pointed at myself and said, "Jake."

The man nodded. Then he rubbed out what was left of the Hork-Bajir picture. He grinned a huge grin. He laughed out loud, and all his men and boys laughed with him. Even the kid who'd tried to shish kebab me.

"You know, I think I like these guys," Rachel said.

Suddenly, the skies opened up, and rain came pouring down on us. Pouring down like we were standing under Niagara Falls.

Polo grabbed my hand and forearm in a strong grip. We were sealing a deal.

"Diabos. Matar diabos."

"I think he said hunt. . . kill the devils," Marco said.

I looked into Polo's eyes. I had no doubts. "That is exactly what he said."

Polo and his people stepped back into the bushes, and in an instant they were invisible in the pouring rain.

"Those little guys up against Hork-Bajir warriors?" Rachel shook her head skeptically.

"I have a feeling about those "little guys,"" Cassie said. "I think maybe this forest is theirs, and they don't like a bunch of alien diabos

stomping around killing everything in sight."

"Better to have them on our side than against us, that's for sure," I said.

Suddenly I felt really tired. Too many dangers. Too much adrenaline. And even though it was just late afternoon here, in Brazil, in this time, my own body had been awake and fighting and morphing for almost twenty-four hours.

The rain was just absolutely pouring down from the sky. Tobias couldn't even think about flying. I could see I wasn't the only one exhausted.

"So this would be the "rain" part of rain forest," Marco said. "They don't do anything halfway around here, do they?"

We trudged through the downpour, drinking our fill from

the water that drained down off the leaves.

But finally, I could see that no one could go any farther. At least I couldn't. Time was running out -- we had just about three hours. We had no solid plan. It was the worst possible time for a rest. But there was no going on. Not yet.

"Let's take a break," I said.

"Where?" Marco asked.

I flopped down in the mud and rested my back against a tree. "Right here, man. Right here."

Cassie came and sat beside me. The noise of the falling rain made our conversation private.

"How are you doing?" Cassie asked me.

I shrugged. "I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

She looked at me skeptically. "Jake, I know you. I can see it on your face. You're worried. And you're mad. Since I don't think you're mad at any of us, I'm guessing you're mad at yourself."

I looked away. "Everything will work out," I lied dully.

"You know, it was kind of funny seeing you and Polo together."

"Yeah? Why?" I didn't really care. I was too tired to care. But Cassie was being kind, and I needed some kindness.

"Because you're the same, you and Polo. He's you, and you're him. The leaders. You know, he took a risk putting down his spear. We might have killed him and his people. There was no way he could know if it was the right thing to do. He just made the best decision he could. That's all anyone can ask from any leader."

I felt for Cassie's hand in the rain. It was too dim and gray to see her face well.

"I'm so tired," I said.

Cassie laid her head on my shoulder. "I know, Jake. Rest. Just rest."

6:49 P.m.

J. woke up suddenly, with the feeling that I had slept too long.

I opened my eyes.

Black night. Night so black it was like being smothered in black felt.

But not everything was dark.

Six inches away from my face, two eyes glowed green and gold. I could smell foul breath.

I could

feel

its breath on my face.

Jaguar!

The big cat stuck its nose closer to me, trying to decide who I was, and what I was doing in its forest.

I might have wet my pants right then from sheer terror. I don't know, because I was soaked to the bone from the rain, which had finally ended. I was sitting in mud, feeling the adrenaline pump into my veins.

Feeling fear again.

I was going to live or die depending on what the jaguar decided. Was I food? Or was I not? If the cat was hungry, and if I smelled like prey, it would sink its massive yellow fangs into my neck and it would all be over in a second.

I wouldn't even get the chance to scream.

Then, a faint memory of hope! There was one thing I could do. No time to morph, but . . .

As slowly as I could, I raised a trembling hand to touch the jaguar's spotted fur. I focused my mind. I concentrated fervently on acquiring the jaguar. And I prayed the jaguar would act like most animals act when they are acquired. I hoped it would go into a trance.

When I opened my eyes, the jaguar closed his.

"Marco!" I hissed. "Cassie! Rachel! Ax! Tobias! Somebody!"

"Wha? Huh?" Marco said groggily. Then, "Whoa! Whoa! Wake up, you guys! Jeez, Jake, what are you doing? That jaguar could chomp you."

"Really? I hadn't thought about that, Marco. Thanks for pointing that out to me. Now, look, I'm acquiring him to keep him calm. Here's what we do. One after another, we acquire him, then we move off. Ax?"

less-than Yes, Prince Jakeeagreater-than Ax said.

"You think you can outrun this big kitty?"

less-than Yes. greater-than

"Okay, then Ax, you acquire him last, and run for it. Just in case he's in a bad mood."

Five minutes later, we were all a safe distance away.

"You know, you were probably fairly safe, Jake," Cassie said. "I doubt jaguars eat prey your size."

less-than I'll bet they eat prey my

sizeeagreater-than Tobias muttered.

"What's cool is we all have a jaguar morph now. Perfect for traveling the rain forest at night," Cassie pointed out.

"Speaking of which, it's late," Rachel said. "Ticktock."

less-than We have two of your hours lefteagreater-than Ax said.

"Two hours to find the Blade ship, smuggle aboard, and hope Visser Three knows how to get us all back to our normal time," Rachel said. "Wonderful."

"The jaguars are predators," Cassie pointed out. "That means senses adapted for hunting in the rain forest. They would be able to find the Yeerks, if any animal could."

Marco laughed. "Cassie, you're just looking for an excuse to morph something new."

"Cassie's right," I said. "Look how dark it

is. I can't even see you guys. No streetlights, no house lights, no car lights, even moonlight and starlight can't penetrate the trees. We're helpless in this dark. Barefoot, lost, and blind. We need eyes. We can morph owls, but we don't know what dangers the rain forest might hold for a plain old horned owl. Jaguars, on the other hand, look like they can take care of themselves."

"Let's do it," Rachel said. "We're totally helpless in this darkness."

"We need a way to carry the Bug fighter's computer with us," Cassie pointed out. She tore a strip of cloth from her shirttail, twisted it, and threaded it through a small hole in the computer core.

"I'll take it," I said. The computer was my stupid mistake. I should carry it. Cassie slipped it over my head. It hung like a big, dorky medallion.

I took a deep breath. "Okay, boys and girls and Andalites. Let's morph."

less-than Jake, I have to try to fly up above the trees, try to get some moonlighteagreater-than Tobias said. less-than I'm as blind as you guys are down here.greater-than

The jaguar was a strange morph for one reason: because it wasn't strange at all. It was just like morphing the tiger. The jaguar is smaller and stockier than a tiger. But it is still one of the big cats.

But for the others, it was their first experience with a big cat. As my jaguar eyes came on and the darkness grew much lighter, I could see the final transformations.

I saw the long, yellowed teeth grow in Cassie's mouth. I saw the pattern of large, hollow spots spread across Rachel's skin. I saw the claws sprout from Ax's weak Andalite hands. I saw the way Marco fell forward to land on all fours as his tail extended like a snake behind him.

less-than Oh, this is beautifuleagreater-than Marco said. less-than Oh, man! Oh, man! Feel the rushfffgreater-than

less-than Hah-hahfffgreater-than Rachel crowed. less-than This is like, so alive! It's so not afraidfffgreater-than

I knew the feeling. It's different being an animal at the top of the food chain. An animal that doesn't worry much about being killed. It's not arrogance, really. It's an absence of fear. Just like a tiger, a jaguar may be startled, surprised, alarmed, but never afraid. It may run away in the face of humans or loud machinery, for example, but somehow it isn't afraid when it does that.

I saw Rachel take a swipe at the air, testing the speed of her paws. less-than Not as powerful as a grizzly bear, but awfully fast.greater-than

less-than Excellent sensesegreater-than

Cassie said. less-than like smell . . . wow.
I smell about a million things. greater-than
less-than I'm having a strange desire to eat
a monkey caret Marco said. less-than And yet,
I

a monkey a few hours ago. We're all going
to end up in the nuthouse someday. You realize that,
right8greater-than

less-than Tobias? Can you hear me8greater-than
I called in thought-speak.

less-than Yeah, I hear you. It's much better
up here. There's a three-quarter moon and a
million stars! I can see well enough to fly, but
I'd break my neck if I tried to land.
greater-than

less-than There are far more than a million
starseagreater-than Ax commented.

less-than like know, Ax-maneagreater-than
Tobias said with a laugh. less-than Hey! Hey!
There's a glow. Like a town, maybe. Lots of
lights. greater-than

less-than If they're still working on the Blade
ship, they'd have lights, right8greater-than Cassie
pointed out.

less-than It's the only clue we have, and we
are running out of timeeagreater-than I said. less-than
Let's go. greater-than

less-than Go into the lighteagreater-than Marco
said.

less-than What8greater-than
less-than Poltergeist.

That old movie. Don't you remember? The little
munchkin lady saying, "Go into the light, go into the
light"8greater-than

less-than What was this light8greater-than Ax
asked, completely mystified.

less-than like think it was like . . . death, or
somethingeagreater-than Marco said. less-than But,
hey, I could be wrong. Maybe it was just a big,
bright, afterlife McDonald's. greater-than

less-than Shut up, Marcoeagreater-than
Rachel said.

We had two hours left. Then, if Ax was
right, the
Sario Rip

would end, and the universe would have two Jakes and two
Cassies, and would eliminate them both.

Go to the Blade ship. Get aboard. Hope
Visser Three could get us back. Somehow. Even
without the Bug fighter's computer.

Not much of a plan. But I was the leader, and a leader
has to give people hope. Even when he doesn't have
much himself.

less-than Let's go see what this light
iseagreater-than I said.

Liven through the eyes of the jaguar, the rain forest was
dark.

But, oh, the things I saw, gliding like a ghost
along the jungle floor.

It was like some incredible theme park ride. Like one of those haunted houses, where each turn of the little car you're in brings you face-to-face with a new goblin or ghoul or skeleton.

But it wasn't dead spirits that I saw in my trip through the rain forest. It was life. Life in more shapes and types than you can imagine.

Huge snakes, twenty feet long and as big around as the branches they hung from. And snakes so tiny they could almost have been worms.

Monstrous insects, beetles the size of your fist, and centipedes as big as rats. And rats as big as poodles. At least, they looked like rats. And frogs in bright, warning, touch-me-and-die colors.

And ants everywhere, some marching along in columns, with each ant carrying a piece of leaf ten times its own size. Lizards that shot past, flashes of green. And what I assume were salamanders, like lizards but in brilliant, slimy colors. And overhead, birds and monkeys and more birds.

We had been blind as bats, stomping through the rain forest in our human bodies. We had seen nothing. But the jaguar saw and smelled and heard everything.

A million species of life filled the forest around us. Forms of life stranger than anything that had come from outer space. Incredible, insane, brilliant life, all fighting to stay alive, all working to grab one little piece of the rain forest.

It was overwhelming. For a long time, none of us said anything. We were discovering a world we had never even guessed at. It was as if Polo and his people had been transported to a shopping mall at Christmastime. They would have been amazed and stunned at all the things man creates.

Now, the reverse was happening. This was the world the jaguar knew. And it was the world that Polo and his people knew. Their shopping mall at Christmastime, filled, not with all the things man makes, but with all the wild, amazing, insane, extreme, shocking creativity of nature.

And every time I thought,
Well, I've seen it all,
the rain forest would answer, Kid, you haven't seen anything. Take a look at
this

bird! Take a look at
that
flower! Get a load of
this
creature! Little human boy, I have more to show you than you could see in ten lifetimes.

less-than Okayeagreater-than Rachel said,
breaking the silence at last. less-than like take it back. I don't want to pave over the rain forest. I don't care if it is dangerous and deadly and it's trying to kill us. greater-than

less-than You have an amazing
planeteagreater-than Ax said. less-than Amazing.

greater-than

Surprisingly, it was Cassie who reminded us of our mission. less-than We have very little time left. We have to get to the Blade ship. greater-than

less-than You're right, Cassie, but I thought you'd be enjoying theagreater-than I said. less-than This is the ultimate nature walk. greater-than

less-than Yes, it iseagreater-than she said softly. less-than And the Yeerks want to destroy it, and anything else they can't use on this planet. I'm not going to let that happen. So let's haul butt, find the Blade ship, get back where we should be, stay alive to keep fighting, because

no one,

man or alien, is messing this place up while I'm around to stop them. greater-than

less-than Yes, ma'ameagreater-than I said.

less-than like see lights up aheadagreater-than Marco said.

From high above us: less-than I'm over the lights now. It's not a village. It's the Blade ship. And guess what? They dragged the Bug fighter here, too. greater-than

Something about that fact . . . that the Bug fighter was with the Blade ship, made me uneasy.

There was no reason for Visser Three to have his people drag the two ships together. There was something wrong there. Something I should see. Something I should realize.

But I shook it off. My problem was that I needed a plan. It was time to think, not time to worry about things that made no sense.

P.m.

We crept, silent as a dream, through the bush. One foot in front of the other, sliding through leaves, our jaguar spots confusing to the eye, invisible.

The Hork-Bajir had chopped down a clearing around the Blade ship. There were Taxxons crawling over and around the ship, working feverishly. The Taxxons appeared to have finished work on the Bug fighter. Taxxons are like gigantic centipedes with raw, red circular mouths at one end, and a ring of eyes like red Jell-0.

less-than They fit right ineagreater-than Marco said.

I was thinking the same thing. The Taxxons could be rain forest natives. Although, even by rain forest standards, they would have been huge.

less-than Not enough Hork-Bajireagreater-than Ax said. less-than There

should be more. Many more. They should be ringing the perimeter. greater-than

less-than like count just five

Hork-Bajireagreater-than Rachel said.

less-than Wait! Look! Inside the Blade ship. Through that

window. Visser Three. greater-than

I stared hard and saw the outline of an An-dalite

head. less-than Yeah. Good. At least
we know
where he is. greater-than
less-than What do we d8greater-than Rachel
asked.
She was asking me. And I didn't happen to have any
brilliant answers.
less-than Okay, we know Visser Three needs
the Bug
fighter to get back to our time, right? And we have the
computer core, so he can't use the Bug
fighter without us. So

...

we could bargain with
him, but he can't be trusted. Or we could sneak
aboard the Blade ship and just leave the com
puter core where he can find it greater-than
less-than lf he just happens to find the computer
core
lying around, he's going to know how it got there. And
he's going to know what we're up toeagreater-than
Marco
said.
less-than Time is running oueagreater-than Ax said.
less-than lf
we stow away on the Blade ship but
don't give Visser Three the computer core,
we're
trapped here, along with hmeagreater-than Cassie
pointed out.

I felt like my head was swimming. Somehow I'd
just hoped there would be an answer at the end. But there
wasn't.

less-than Look, I don't know, all
right8ffgreater-than I yelled. less-than like don't
know. I don't know what to do. I don't have any
magic answer. greater-than

less-than Jake, you're supposed to be our
fearless leadereagreater-than Marco said.

I swear, I almost lost it right then. If we'd
both been in human form, I might have punched
Marco.

less-than like never said I was anyone's leader!
I never asked to lead anything. Why do I have to know the
answers? You don't, Marco. You don't,
Rachel. greater-than

less-than Oh, maneagreater-than Marco
groaned. less-than Jake, you can't lose it,
man. We need you. greater-than

I was about to say something very rude when Cassie
interrupted. less-than Something has been
bothering me. Why is Jake the only one who had
those flashes? We all exist in both places at
once, right? So why is he the only one who had
jungle hallucinations8greater-than

The question hit me like a sledgehammer. Of course.
It made no sense. I should have seen it. Should have,
should have, should have! There were too many should haves!
Ax! I remembered asking him if there was some other
way to get back. I remembered the way he

avoided answering. less-than Ax? What do you know
that you're not saying8greater-than
less-than What do I
know to
greater-than
he answered evasively.
less-than What do you know ... or
guess8greater-than
less-than Prince Jake, as I said, I know
very little about
Sario Rips.
I was preoccupied by comgreater-than
less-than Ax. You call me your prince.
Fine, I'm your prince. So answer my questions
less-than Prince Jake . . . it's possible
that you are ... I mean, it's possible that you
are the only real person here. The rest of us may
only be memory. greater-than
I felt a chill. less-than What are you
talking ab8greater-than
less-than We may not actually be here. Not
really. I mean, yes, we were here in one time line,
but that time line was later erased. greater-than
less-than Erased? Who erased this time
line8greater-than
less-than You, Prince Jake. It is
possible that only you will escape from this time line. You
may go back, alone, and alter everything, so that none
of this ever really happens. greater-than
less-than Is it just me, or is this truly
insane8greater-than Marco asked.
less-than Ax, how would I be the only one
to escape this time line? We think the way to get
back to our own time involves repeating the Dracon
beam accident that caused the
Sario Rip.
Right8greater-than
less-than Maybe . . . Prince Jake, that
may not be the
only wayeagreater-than Ax said. less-than There
may be
another way
. . .
I
didn't want to say anything because I wasn't
sure. And
-
greater-than
less-than Heyffgreater-than Tobias interrupted
sharply. less-than Visser
Three in the window over there? I just saw him
wobble. Like a TV picture with interference. It's
not him! It's a projection caret
less-than A decoyffgreater-than Rachel said.
Suddenly, I saw my terrible mistake. Visser
Three knew that eight fifty-four was the cutoff.
He knew. And he figured we knew, too.
So he knew that we'd show up, either at the Bug
fighter or the Blade ship, trying to beat that
deadline. He knew we'd try to hide out aboard

one of the two ships. That's why he had his creatures
drag the Bug fighter through the forest to
be alongside the Blade ship.

So we'd have only one place to go.

So he'd know exactly where we'd be before
eight fifty-four.

less-than It's a trap! I yelled.

less-than It's a trap! He's ex

pecting!

And at that very moment, we heard his voice in our
heads.

less-than Five cats and a bird.

Hah-hah-hah. This will

be too easy.

less-than That's un! It's a
trap!

I bolted. But a vine reached up and snagged my
front paws. I tumbled, head over heel.

Instantly the jaguar was up, but again a vine grabbed
me, wrapping around my neck.

The vines were alive!

Like a snake, it wrapped around my jaguar
throat and tightened. I couldn't breathe! I writhed
with all the jaguar's strength and broke free.

I ran, then ... it hit me! I'd been wearing
the Bug fighter's computer around my neck. It was
gone!

less-than It's a

Lerdethak to

greater-than

Ax yelled. less-than The vines! It's

Visser Three in a morph. It's a creature from

the Hork-Bajir home world: a

Lerdethak.

It's com-

Suddenly Ax was silent.

The darkness was erupting around me in a tangle of
vines. It was like being in a storm of snakes. The
vines shot through the air, reaching, grabbing, wrapping
themselves around me.

I saw a flash of a jaguar -- maybe Ax,
I couldn't be sure -- being lifted in the air by one
of the living vines. Lifted by his neck, with three more
vines wrapping around his legs and body.

I wanted to help, but the snakelike things were
everywhere! If I hesitated even a second, they
would have me.

less-than Jake! I heard
Marco yell. less-than It's got me!

Cassie's thought-speak voice just screamed.

less-than Aaaaahhhhh!

less-than Cassie! I yelled.

less-than Marco!

less-than Jake! It's huge!

Tobias yelled down from above. less-than Can't
see well, but like a ... like an octopus

but with a thousand tentacles!

A slither of tentacles slapped against me,
wrapping around my legs. I leaped ... a split
second away from being caught.

I ran. What else could I do? I ran!
less-than It's swallowing themffgreater-than
Tobias cried. less-than Oh, no! NO!
It has a mouth. Huge! Help themffgreater-than
less-than like can't! I c'tffgreater-than I
cried.
The vine-tentacles were less numerous now,
smaller, weaker.
less-than I'm inside somethingffgreater-than
Rachel said. less-than Smotheringffgreater-than
less-than Prince Jake, we've been
swallowed by the
Lerdethak backslash greater-than
less-than backslash
can't get to yffgreater-than I yelled. less-than like
can't even see you! Claw your way ouffgreater-than
less-than Can't . . . can't move . .
disgreater-than Cassie moaned.
less-than like can't just watch thffgreater-than
Tobias yelled. less-than I'm going
downffgreater-than
I was reeling from sheer shock and horror. I was
running in panic, running flat out. The tentacles
no longer surrounded me. But when I paused,
panting, to look back, I saw it.
It was like some gnarled old tree come to life. Like
Medusa's head, alive with snakes. I saw it
outlined against the bright lights around the Blade ship.
It was rising from the ground, growing taller and taller.
Tentacles like bullwhips! A maze of
snakelike arms, all surrounding a dark core.
Through the tentacles I could see a wide, drooping,
blue-outlined mouth.
As I watched, a struggling jaguar was tossed
inside.
And one thin tentacle reached, whipped, and wrapped
around a bird that was diving toward it.
less-than Hmmmmeagreater-than Visser Three
said. less-than Just five little
Andalites inside my craw. That leaves one still
free. But don't worry. Plenty of time to find
you. greater-than
He had them all. He had them all but me.
less-than Settle down, my Andalite friends.
Relax. I won't kill you, yet. But you won't
morph your way out of this. My
Lerdethak
morph will hold you tight till I decide your
fates. greater-than
He had them. Visser Three had won. I was the
only one left. I was their only hope.
Some
hope,
I told myself bitterly. I was the one in charge.
And I had walked them into Visser Three's trap.
Don't feel sorry for yourself, Jake.
Find a way out!
The huge, thousand-tentacled creature moved
easily and swiftly through the rain forest. And now, on
both sides of it, I saw the Hork-Bajir

warriors.

Behind me! All around me! A ring of
Hork-Bajir penning me in as Visser Three
slithered toward me.

Then . . .

FLIT!

Even my jaguar eyes couldn't see the spear
fly. I could only see it when it stuck into the back
of a Hork-Bajir.

FLIT! FLIT! FLIT!

Spears appeared from nowhere.
Hork-Bajir began dropping!

Polo stepped into view. He looked past me
and launched his spear at the
Lerdethak.

Launched it at Visser Three.

But the Visser's morph was far too quick. One
vine reached out, snatched the spear from the air, and
contemptuously tossed it back. It stuck in the
ground where Polo grabbed it.

There was no way to stop the
Lerdethak.

It was safe, surrounded by its vine-tentacles. The
only vulnerable part was the head, and it was surrounded
by a forest of the -

Wait a minute!

Not like vines! Not like tentacles!

Wrong

way to think, Jake,

I realized.

Branches. Like

branches!

I dove into darkness and even as I ran, I
began to demorph. I heard the flit of spears
flying and the cries of Hork-Bajir. But nothing was
stopping the
Lerdethak.

The Visser kept coming.

I was human now, blundering blindly through slapping
leaves, my bare feet cut and bruised. But at
least I had a plan. I ran and focused on a
quick morph. I ran and shrank, but still I ran,
even as my legs became bowed and I bent forward
to use my knuckles like extra feet.

And when I was fully monkey ... I turned.

The

Lerdethak

loomed huge above me. Its thousand bullwhip
tentacles slashed the air.

less-than 1s that you, my last
Andalite8greater-than Visser Three
crowed. less-than 1s that little creature your final
morph? Pathetic. greater-than

Maybe so,

I thought.

But as far as I'm con

cerned, you're just one big jungle gym.

I leaped through the air.

Leaped for the nearest tentacle.

I grabbed it, swung, and flew!

No other animal could have penetrated that maze of swinging, snapping, slithering tentacles. But to the monkey, it was all vines and branches.

Swing! Fly! Catch! Swing! Fly! Catch!

All at hyperspeed! All at warp factor ten! But the monkey could do it!

I grabbed one especially big tentacle. It swung me far up in the air, trying to snap me loose. But I held on. And now, down below, I could see the

Lerdethak's

head. I could see the drooping blue mouth that had just swallowed the others.

I glanced aside. Polo! Yes, he was standing with his spear in his hand.

less-than Your spearffgreater-than I cried in thought-speak. less-than Your spearffgreater-than

In a flash, Polo understood. He threw with all his might.

The spear flew straight and true.

And from high in the air, holding to the whipping tentacle with my tail alone, I reached with both hands and snatched the spear out of the air.

Did you know that one of the reasons humans can throw is because we once swung through the trees? Yep. The shoulder design that makes it possible to swing from branch to branch makes it possible to throw a spear.

Very possible.

I threw.

The spear hit home! It sank into the flesh of the Lerdethak, delivering the poisons of the rain forest into the deadly alien creature.

But I had used up all my luck.

A tentacle whipped toward me. Like a snapped high-tension wire, it wrapped itself around my neck, and -

8:19 P.m.

-

J. misjudged the distance to the ground, hit it too hard, and rolled over, a tangle of wings and talons.

less-than Nice landingeagreater-than Tobias said with a laugh.

"Are you okay?" Cassie asked me. She rushed over and picked me up. Then she set me back down because I was starting to demorph. And I was getting heavier pretty quickly.

"What the ..." I demanded. I almost had a heart attack. I was back! Back, behind the motel. Back, getting ready to go to the Safeway.

Was it a flashback? One of the visions?

No, it was lasting too long. This was real. I was behind the motel. Getting ready to morph and go check out the Safeway.

I looked at my watch. Could it be? "What time is it?" I asked Ax.

less-than Eight-nineteeneagreater-than he said.

Eight-nineteen. Of course. I knew the time.
At eight-nineteen, I had felt strange --
uneasy about making the decision to go into the grocery
store. But I had made the decision to go ahead. And
from that decision, everything else had followed. The
Sario Rip.

The disaster in the rain forest.

"Cassie? Have you ever been to the Amazon?" I
asked.

"What? No. Of course not," she said.

It hadn't happened. At least not to this Cassie.
It was still something that was going to happen. Unless I
changed the time line.

"Are we doing this or what?" Rachel demanded
impatiently. "Come on, Jake, are we doing this
or what?"

I grinned. I laughed. I'm afraid I
flat out giggled. "Or what, Rachel.
Definitely "or what." We are out of here!"

It was a day later before I finally got a chance
to talk to Ax alone. I told him everything. He
thought I was nuts until I said the words
Sario Rip.

Then he knew.

less-than This is all very amazingeagreater-than he
said as we walked through the woods. The good old,
familiar woods. The woods without killer ants and
piranhas and jaguars and snakes and natives with
poison spears. less-than like have no memory of
any of this. greater-than

"Yeah, it was pretty amazing," I said. "I
made so many wrong moves, I screwed everything
up. The computer. . . letting us walk into a trap.
. . . I mean, we were pretty much doomed. Then
it was like I got a second chance to keep it from
happening. But I don't even know how. You ... I
mean, that other you, or however you want to say it, thought
we had to recreate the
Sario Rip
in order to undo it."

Ax nodded. less-than Yes, I
suppose that would have worked. And there was only one other
way. greater-than

I stopped him. "You never told me about any
other way."

less-than No, I wouldn't heagreater-than Ax
said. less-than like don't know it for sure ... but
there is a theory. greater-than

"I thought there might be," I said dryly.

less-than It is impossible for one person to be
in two places at once. In theory. So if you .
. . eliminate . . . one of the two, well, the
consciousness snaps back together. I think what
happened, Prince Jake, is that you died.
greater-than

I felt a chill run up my spine.

less-than But even as you died in the rain forest,
you
were still alive here. So your mind snapped back. Then
you undid the time line, so none of it ever really

happened. You would find you cannot morph the jaguar or the monkey, because you never really acquired those animals. greater-than

He made an Andalite smile, which just involves the eyes, since they have no mouths.

"They teach this stuff in your schools, huh?"

less-than Yes. greater-than

"And you didn't pay much attention to this lesson, huh?"

less-than True. greater-than

"I can see why," I said. "This time travel stuff will make your head explode."

less-than Exactlyeagreater-than Ax agreed.

less-than And on that day, there was this game . . . and this female . . . disgreater-than

We walked a while farther. "It was a disaster down there, Ax. I blew it. The only reason we're all still alive is that in the end, I got lucky."

less-than Maybe that is true, Prince Jake. But my brother Elfangor once told me, "It's a leader's job to be lucky." Sometimes, success is just luck. greater-than

I nodded. It didn't make me feel any better. "Elfangor's luck ran out."

less-than Yes. We must hope yours does not, Prince Jake. greater-than

I laughed. "Don't call me Prince."

less-than Yes, Prince Jake. greater-than
Don't miss

I held up my left hand. It was green, too. Getting greener as I watched. Getting rougher. Changing. Morphing!

There were scales forming on my skin. Crawling up my arms.

I bolted from the chair and raced for my full-length mirror.

My face was just beginning to bulge out. A huge, long black-green snout.

This is something you never want to actually see.

"Yahhhh!" I yelped.

The swelling bulge split open to reveal a row of long, yellowed teeth.

"Crckkk!" I started to say, but my mouth was no longer human enough to make human sounds.

My legs shriveled as I watched helplessly. I fell forward onto the floor. The huge tail was surg

ing behind me. I felt my spine stretching.

No! No! I hadn't decided to morph!

And yet I was morph ing. At warp speed! I was on the floor of my bedroom, turning into a murderous, twenty-foot-long crocodile.

Morph out!

I ordered myself.

Morph out!

But the transformation continued. I was too big for the room! My snout was pushed into one

corner, while my tail stretched out under the bed and curled in the far corner.

What was happening to me?

If Jordan or Sara or my mother walked into the room, my secret would be out. Worse yet, I wasn't sure I could control the crocodile.

It was hungry.

Focus, Rachel! Focus! Morph out! Go human!

But I wasn't morphing out. At least, not back to human.

Instead I began to notice a completely different kind of change. My body was narrowing in two places. I was cinching up. Forming three different body sections: head, abdomen, and thorax.

I was becoming an insect!

And that's when I became afraid. See, it's impossible to morph straight from one animal to another. Or at least it's supposed to

be impossible. But I was definitely morphing. And I was not morphing to human.

I was still a huge crocodile, but my massive crocodile head was connected to my body by a tiny, narrow neck. And the area connecting my squat crocodile body to my fat crocodile tail had narrowed so much it was the size of a human wrist.

less-than This can't be happeningffgreater-than I cried to no one. less-than This has to be a dream. greater-than

But I'd had dozens, maybe hundreds of awful morphing dreams. And they'd never been like this.

I could hear my bones squishing as they turned to water and disappeared. I could see the black-green crocodile scales turn dark brown, almost black, as an insect's exoskeleton grew over me like armor.

Huge spiky hairs shot like daggers from my back. My big teeth melted together, solidified, blackened, and reformed to become a long, vile-looking tube. Two new legs sputtered from my sides. Two spiky, multi-jointed legs.

I knew all these changes. This was a morph I had done before. But never like this!

I was on my way to becoming a fly. But be-

cause morphing is never logical, I was a gigantic fly. I was becoming a fly before I'd had a chance to shrink.

Then the shrinkage kicked in and I was spiral-+ wildly downward. I was going from twenty-five feet in length to less than a quarter of an inch!

I wanted to scream for help. But who could help me? No one. No one!

Suddenly my reptile eyes bulged and popped out like balloons. The world around me was shattered into a thousand tiny pictures. I had the compound eyes of a fly!

My mind was reeling. It had to be a nightmare.

This wasn't possible. It had to be some awful dream!

I was shrinking so fast that the corners of the room seemed to be racing away from me. The wood grain grew large and dark and clear. The cracks between boards were growing as wide as ditches.

And then, with a sickening lurch, I realized I had stopped shrinking. I was growing again.

The wood grain grew smaller. The cracks shrank. And I grew. And grew. And grew!

My extra legs were gone. I had just four now. Four legs growing thicker and taller and thicker and taller!

less-than Oh, please! Someone help meffgreater-than

SPROING! SPROING! The springs in my mattress popped as my bulk crushed them. I was too big for the room. Bigger even than the crocodile. My bookshelves fell over. My desk slammed against the wall. Sparks shot from my computer and the screen went blank.

Too big for the room! I was big enough to be weighed in tons, not pounds. I was morphing a full-grown African elephant. In my small bedroom.

C-r-r-r-r-r-e-e-e-e-k!

less-than Oh, noeagreater-than I whispered. I could literally feel the floor sinking under my impossible weight. My head was shoved up against the ceiling.

C-r-r-r-Unch!

With a scream of twisting wood, the floor gave way. . . .