



Chapter 1

The Alarm

a protein source is near

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A shard of alarm penetrated Xavier's subconscious. He'd been in a deep, untroubled sleep for most of the night, oblivious to all things, when a splinter of doubt triggered some primeval instinct for survival. His waking self was dragged upwards through layers of sleep – like a deep-sea fighting fish being winched reluctantly to the surface. The uncomfortable feeling became a sound, a high-pitched whine, which grew louder and louder until, suddenly, it stopped. At that exact moment, Xavier's senses snapped into full focus. His eyes popped open and the young boy became starkly aware of his circumstances. That he was in bed. That it was still dark. And that he was not alone.

There was a Mosquito in the room.

And it was two metres long.

Xavier's mind raced. His first fleeting thought was how on earth his window had been left open. But his attention quickly turned to the huge Insect, which had settled upside-down – directly above him – on the bedroom ceiling. A faint wash of early dawn light from the heavily reinforced window partially illuminated the Sect. And, despite the imminent

danger, Xavier was struck by the appearance of the aerial intruder. The Mosquito's brownish, torpedo-shaped abdomen was the size of a Rottweiler dog. Large, dappled wings were folded, immobile, at its side and a splay of six iron-rod legs anchored it to the ceiling. Most mesmerising of all were the two large compound eyes that stared down at the 12-year-old in the early morning light.

The predator had been attracted to the invisible cloud of exhaled air that the boy had been breathing out while sleeping. The two hair-covered sensory palps at the base of its mouthparts quivered minutely as they absorbed the carbon dioxide. It was a female – it was always the females that hunted – hungry for a protein-packed blood meal to nourish the eggs that lay within her body. Her feathery antennae twitched as she gathered information on her victim's exact position.

Under the covers, Xavier still hadn't moved.

Need a distraction, he thought, and quick.

The Mosquito's long, serrated beak rotated downwards – like some macabre compass – finally ending up pointing at the only part of Xavier that wasn't hidden beneath the covers.

His face.

The Insect's hunting behaviour, though, had given Xavier an idea. *I'll give it another target...*

Ever so slowly, he pulled his covers up to expose one of his feet.

There's the hook...

The Mosquito didn't move.

Xavier wiggled his big toe.

And there's the worm...

The Mosquito's spear-like proboscis shifted, rotating slowly but surely until it was aimed precisely at the wriggling bait.

Yes, thought Xavier, then...

The giant Sect exploded downwards from the ceiling. It swivelled rapidly in the air, driving its stiletto mouthparts into the point where – only a fraction of a second earlier – Xavier's exposed foot had been.

The boy had pulled his leg away at the last split-second.

Now, as Xavier felt the weight of the bloodsucker crash onto the end of his bed, he instinctively drove the same leg back at the Insect – pumping his foot into the doughy abdomen. The contact sent the parasite sprawling beak-over-heels away from him and, at the same time, Xavier used the momentum to propel himself backwards and away from the predator. He darted underneath the heavy bedframe.

Once again, Xavier lay motionless – this time underneath his bed. His heart thundered in his chest. He held his breath and listened carefully to detect the whereabouts of the bloodsucker. A whirl of beating wings and the muffled thunk of iron-rod legs on the bedframe above him answered his question. From atop the bed, the giant Mosquito assumed a hunch-shouldered, head-lowered posture – like a road worker poised with a pneumatic drill.

protein source active...move faster

The creature drove its mouthparts down through the mattress. The spike punched through the wooden slats of the bed – Xavier felt it miss his cheek by centimetres. He got a too-close-for-comfort view of the deadly tip and watched in silent horror as the leathery outer sheath peeled back, exposing razor-sharp cutting blades and an eagerly twitching feeding tube.

A vile, living vacuum cleaner.

He felt wisps of his blonde hair being sucked towards the hose-like opening. He recoiled, his heart pumping even faster. The huge parasite seemed to sense the hot blood coursing through the boy's veins and arteries. Then, in a flash, the mouthparts withdrew.

Xavier was already rolling to one side as the beak came thrusting back through the wooden slats at the exact spot his head had been an instant earlier. The beak disappeared. He rolled in the other direction – again, death stabbed downwards and missed him by a whisker. The living blade withdrew and immediately stabbed again.

But this time, Xavier was ready for it.

As the beak plunged down, just missing his shoulder, Xavier grabbed the opportunity – and the proboscis – with both hands. He held on tightly and waited for the Mosquito's reaction. He didn't have to wait long. The bloodsucker tried to extract its mouthparts. It couldn't. The Sect pulled harder, flexing the hunched shoulder muscles. The creature's strength alarmed Xavier. And there was something else he was unprepared for – new reserves of strength within his own body. He was both reassured and confused in equal measure. Now, more than ever, he needed to be in total control. He braced himself against the pulling power of the Sect.

'You're...not...going...anywhere...big...nose,' grunted Xavier, through gritted teeth.

The Mosquito, though, had other ideas.

Still maintaining the force of its pull, the creature removed its six iron-rod legs from the bed and anchored them in two tripod-like formations on either side of the bed frame. Then, like some grotesque forklift truck, it began to lever the bed, the mattress – and Xavier – upwards. The Mosquito's gangly build belied its phenomenal strength, and the boy was

powerless to prevent himself from being slowly winkled out of his hiding place. He had to make a swift decision. Hold on or let go? Should he release the deadly proboscis and get some distance between himself and the Sect? Or hold on for grim life, and so keep the bed between himself and the bloodsucker? Stick or twist?

He decided to stick.

Mistake.

The Insect's bunched muscles kicked into life. Without warning, the bed – with the stubborn schoolboy in tow – was suddenly airborne. The Mosquito thrashed Xavier around the bedroom in a series of short, violent bursts. He was bludgeoned repeatedly against the wall–ceiling–wall–ceiling–wall, then smashed back down onto the floor again. Once more, the predator tried to disengage its beak.

No joy.

Xavier held on.

How he did it, he didn't know. His vision was swimming, and he was battered and hurting over every inch of his body. The parasite readied itself for another attempt to flush its prey into the open. The Mosquito paused to calculate its next move. Xavier had to escape the deadly predator. He needed a distraction—

RAP–RAP–RAP.

There was a hammering on his bedroom door. His mother usually worked nights in one of the food-generating rooftop greenhouses. There were hundreds of vital siege-proof hothouses scattered across the reinforced heights of the city. Tended by thousands of non-Hybrid workers. Flooded with light through bulletproof skylights. Arial allotments.

Penthouse produce. High-rise wheat fields. The daily bread, nurtured by night. Lovingly serviced, like worker termites in soaring termite mounds. Productive. Protected. Punctual. His mother never missed a shift, which meant it could only be one person.

‘SHUT THAT RACKET UP, XAVVY!’

His little sister.

‘Jess, there’s a Mosquito in here!’ Xavier cried, ‘Stay outside!’

‘How did it get in there? You idiot, you must’ve left the window open.’

‘Wha—? I didn’t. Just don’t come in!’

‘Do you need help?’ she shouted.

‘Don’t worry,’ yelled Xavier, ‘I’ve got the situation...’ he looked at the leathery beak that was once again struggling and straining between his fingers, ‘...in hand.’

‘If it’s a Mozzie, you need to swat it,’ she piped up helpfully.

‘It’s too big to swat.’

‘Then, stupid,’ she replied, ‘find something big enough to swat it with.’

Xavier hated to admit it, but she had a point.

He glanced around the room and something caught his eye. He made a mental note and was jerked back to the immediate situation by a slicing pain in his hands. The beak’s serrated edges had cut into his fingers. The blood smeared over his palms. A drop or two trickled over the Insect’s quivering mouthparts. The Mosquito involuntarily released a jet of saliva, narrowly missing the boy’s open gasping mouth. The saliva contained anticoagulants whose purpose was to keep blood flowing freely. It also contained a powerful local anaesthetic – and Xavier knew exactly why. It was designed

to numb the victim's body to the sharpened tip's entry.

The thought of the anaesthetic galvanised him – he'd never felt so awake. The spilt blood from his wounded hands was beginning to drive the parasite into a feeding frenzy, adding renewed strength to her efforts to free her beak. Xavier's hands were tiring. If he didn't move soon, he'd be at the Sect's mercy. And he knew one thing for certain.

Sectz don't do mercy.

During the whole attack the predator had been on the front foot. Somehow, Xavier needed to turn the tables on the bloodsucker. He thought for a moment.

No, not the table...

Still holding the proboscis, Xavier struggled to his feet. Gathering all his strength he released the beak in a violent upward-thrusting motion, pushing the Sect away from himself with enough force to flip the bed upside-down. *Wow, what an adrenaline surge*, he thought. In the same movement, he used his inertia to leap forward onto the wooden slats, adding his own weight to that of the iron bedframe in an effort to pin down the surprised parasite.

Now the roles were reversed.

Xavier stared down at the Mosquito through the slats. This close, he now recognised it from his lessons on 'Bloodsuckers'. He was nose-to-proboscis with *Culex Pipiens* – the most widely distributed Mosquito in the world. This genetically modified form, though, had been renamed due to its size. Now it was *Culex Giganticus*.

'You're a lot uglier in real life,' he whispered, grimly.

Humourless compound eyes gazed back at him, their only trace of humanity being the hundreds of tiny reflections of Xavier's own face staring back at him across the orb-shaped mosaic of tiny lenses. The grotesque head cocked to one side,

its antennae shivering as they gathered yet more information. Then the stabbing mouthparts made a subtle change of direction towards Xavier – like a surgeon’s scalpel angling for a first decisive incision.

It’s been too hasty, thought Xavier. Now it’s calculating exactly...how...to...nail...me.

protein source within range...slow down...aim with precision

From this position, the Mosquito could now get a bead on the schoolboy. It was taking the time to target him properly. *Have to get off the bed, thought Xavier, have to buy some time.*

He didn’t even look up.

As quickly as he’d thought it, he now found himself on top of the heavy wardrobe on the far side of the room. He gazed down with a slight sense of disbelief. *How on earth did I get up here? I can’t jump like that – can I? Maybe another surge of adrenaline? But over that distance?* He felt he was losing control of himself just when he needed it most.

His thoughts were cut short as, from under the bed, there arose a whirring of wings. Xavier watched in shock as the iron bedframe was suddenly catapulted into the air and clanged violently against the far wall.

Then silence.

Deafening.

Now, the Mosquito stood there in all its cold-blooded glory. Bathed in the first slanting rays of dawn, the creature was dazzling. Gone were the dour, brownish colours of night. Its scales refracted the early morning light, causing it to sparkle in tiny starbursts of every imaginable hue and colour.

Xavier gasped. Death had never looked more beautiful.

The Mosquito remained motionless. The only discernible movement Xavier could detect was from its vibrating antennae as it reassessed the schoolboy's position. In turn, Xavvy seized this chance to quickly scan the Insect's head, thorax and abdomen.

Something caught his eye.

Its belly's swollen.

The soft membrane between the banded segments of the exoskeleton had stretched to allow its stomach to expand. Xavier scrutinised the Sect's abdomen. The membrane was pulled so taut he could actually make out the colour of the stomach contents. It was a dull, but distinct hue.

Red.

She's already drained something, Xavier realised.

A darker thought.

Or someone.

Cold, calculating eyes stared up at him, devoid of emotion.

From his perch atop the heavy, wooden wardrobe, Xavier watched as the bloodsucker began crawling towards him. He knew the parasite had already had its starter. Now it was coming for its main course.

Me.

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