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*For Sebastian, Arthur and Sam
Matilda and Caspian
Claire Rakich and Dr Sarah Beynon*





No one will protect what they don't care about, and no one will care about what they have never experienced.



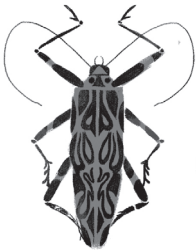
David Attenborough

Children start off reading in books about lions and giraffes and so on, but they also . . . are able to go into a garden and turn over stone and see a worm and see a slug and see an ant.

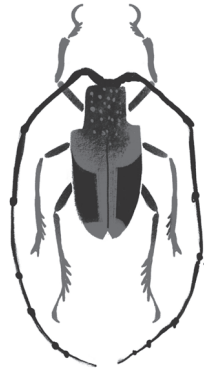
David Attenborough

From the small size of insects, we are apt to undervalue their appearance. If we could imagine a male *Chalcosoma* with its polished, bronzed coat of mail, and vast complex horns, magnified to the size of a horse or even of a dog, it would be one of the most imposing animals in the world.

Charles Darwin, The Descent of Man



CHAPTER ONE
The Beetle Plague



've got the Sunday papers,' Bertolt said, pushing Uncle Max's door open with his shoulder and shuffling into the living room backwards with his arms full. Newton, a large copper-coloured firefly and Bertolt's closest friend, darted about above his cloud of white curly hair.

Darkus and Virginia both looked up. They were sitting cross-legged either side of an aqua-blue paddling pool, Darkus wearing jeans and his dad's old green jumper, Virginia in a red tracksuit.

'We're feeding the beetles,' Darkus said, placing a tiny



Ceratophyus martinezi



pot of strawberry jelly into a niche in the teacups, piled on the oak mulch in the paddling pool. This was where the surviving beetles from Beetle Mountain lived now, and this room housed what was left of Base Camp, their den. It was now their headquarters and the place where they met to prepare for their mission to stop Lucretia Cutter's tyrannical bid to rule the world.

Baxter, the glossy black rhinoceros beetle who understood Darkus better than anyone in the world, was supervising the distribution of jelly from Darkus's shoulder, wagging his spikey forelegs to show where pots should be put.

Virginia was holding an old brass plant mister over the paddling pool and furiously pumping a fine spray of water over the oak mulch, to prevent it from drying out. Marvin, the cherry-red frog-legged leaf beetle who refused to be parted from her, was hanging upside down from one of Virginia's many braids by his bulging back legs, munching on a blob of banana jelly.

Dusting the soil from his hands, Darkus got to his feet and came over to the coffee table where Bertolt was neatly laying out the newspapers. Virginia put the mister down and joined them.

'There are more stories about crops being attacked by beetles, look there's one here about the Colorado potato beetle destroying harvests here and in Russia. People are beginning to believe what Lucretia Cutter said at the Film Awards and they're panicking.' Bertolt pushed his

glasses up his nose and looked nervously at Darkus. ‘There are reports of spoiled wheat crops in America and Germany now too, and three outbreaks of disease caused by a build-up of animal manure. The government is finally admitting that these are controlled and targeted attacks.’

Darkus moved to look at the papers, but Bertolt side-stepped, standing between him and the table.

‘And, um, Darkus, there’s something else . . .’

Virginia lifted a tabloid and read out the headline. ‘BEETLE PLAGUE! FOOD RATIONED!’ She flicked over a few pages, her brown eyes scanning the words. ‘What?! The papers think that Lucretia Cutter’s threat is real, but they don’t believe she’s capable of creating the beetles because she makes dresses for a living!’

‘People are frightened of insects,’ Darkus replied. ‘Perhaps they don’t want to believe she’s found a way to control them.’

‘It’s not that,’ Virginia snorted. ‘It’s because she’s a *woman*.’

‘Virginia . . .’ Bertolt tried to speak.

‘People always think the best scientists are male,’ Virginia carried on, slapping the paper with the back of her hand in outrage. ‘Listen to this.’ She read: “. . . *it is thought that the troubled coleopterist Dr Bartholomew Cuttle, Director of Science at the Natural History Museum and one-time fiancé of Lucretia Cutter, is heading up a team of geneticists and entomologists, men who’ve all strangely vanished from their lives and*

jobs in museums and universities in the past year. This mysterious team is behind the mad fashionista's beetle army, and using Lucretia Cutter's theatrical image to front their attack on the world."

'WHAT?' Darkus grabbed the newspaper from Virginia's hands. 'But that's a lie!' He scanned the article. 'Why are they're saying that about Dad?'

'Because he's a man,' Virginia said, triumphantly.

Bertolt sighed and shook his head, glaring at Virginia.

'They are blaming him for the beetles! All of them!'

Darkus said, reading the article at speed. 'This is wrong. We have to tell them. Dad's trying to stop her.'

'Darkus,' Bertolt said softly, 'it's probably because he was Lucretia Cutter's guest at the Film Awards.' He picked up a different paper. 'Look, the *Daily Messenger* says as much: *Dr Bartholomew Cuttle, seen on Lucretia Cutter's arm at the Film Awards, is thought to be the mastermind behind the plague of deadly beetles.*'

'That's totally unfair!' Darkus felt his face getting hot. 'It's all lies! My dad would never hurt anyone.'

'It's disgusting,' Virginia nodded, 'and they're attributing Lucretia Cutter's genius to a team of men.'

'Genius?' Darkus shouted. 'She is *not* a genius.'

'Of course she's a genius!' Virginia replied. 'She's bred a huge army of beetles that are destroying human food supplies and taking control of the planet. That's incredible. No human has ever ruled the whole earth, and she's going for it, big time.' She shook her head and looked at

Darkus. ‘Don’t worry, they’re going to have to acknowledge it’s *her* genius eventually.’

‘She’s not a genius!’ Darkus shouted, jabbing a finger at Virginia. ‘She’s a monster! She wants to starve people, and blame it on my dad and . . . look what she’s done to Novak, and Spencer!’

‘Hey! Calm down.’ Virginia frowned as she lifted her hands. ‘I didn’t say I *agreed* with what she’s doing.’

‘Well, it sounded like it,’ Darkus said, through gritted teeth, scowling at Virginia.

Virginia thrust out her chin, about to protest.

‘Um, guys?’ Bertolt cleared his throat. ‘Let’s not fall out again.’ He gave each of them a pleading smile. ‘We are all on the same side, remember?’

Virginia sighed. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said to Darkus. ‘I should have said *evil* genius.’ She shrugged. ‘I’m just trying to point out that everyone is underestimating Lucretia Cutter.’ She pushed the papers around the table. ‘Blaming your dad is a false trail. It won’t help them find her or stop her.’

‘I’m not underestimating her,’ Darkus said, quietly. Eleven days had passed since they’d returned from the Film Awards, but to Darkus it felt like years. The image of his father limping away, following Lucretia Cutter up into the rafters of the Hollywood theatre was the last thing he thought about before he went to sleep at night and the first thing in his head when he woke up in the morning.

There was a loud *crack* and they all jumped.

‘What was that?’ Bertolt asked, looking faintly terrified.

Virginia pointed over his shoulder. There was a thin crack in the glass of the front room window.

Darkus cautiously knelt on the sofa, leaning over the back, to look down into the street. Standing on the other side of the road, outside the tattoo parlour, stood Robby, the red-haired bully from school, surrounded by a gang of boys they called the clones. He opened the window.

‘Hey, Beetle Boy!’ Robby shouted. ‘Tell your dad, if he doesn’t call off his killer bugs, his son’s going to get swatted.’

‘Yeah!’ The clones curled up their fists and punched their other hands, menacingly.

‘They’re not my dad’s beetles,’ Darkus shouted back. ‘He’s got nothing to do with it.’

‘Oh, yeah?’ Robby jeered. ‘That’s not what the papers say. Your dad’s a murderer. He’s going down.’ He drew a finger across his neck. ‘They’ll probably bring back the death penalty just for him.’

‘The papers are lying,’ Darkus shouted. ‘None of it is true.’

‘Yeah? Well, you would say that, wouldn’t you?’ Robby sneered, a flash of metal from his railway track braces. ‘But, I’ve seen you and your gross beetles. We all have.’ The clones’ heads bobbed about on the end of their necks. ‘And we told the police about how weird you lot are, talking to bugs. What the papers say is true. I

know it, and I ain't going to stand for it.' Quick as a flash, Robby drew back his hand and flung a stone he'd been hiding in his palm.

Darkus felt the flint strike his cheek a stinging blow. He covered it with his hand as he turned away from the window.

'Oh! Darkus, you're bleeding.' Bertolt gently pulled Darkus's hand away so he could see the cut.

'WE'RE GONNA GET YOU BEETLE BOY, AND YOUR DAD!' Came a shout from outside.

'Ignore them,' Virginia said, shutting the window as a barrage of stones hit the glass and closing the curtains.

'How can I ignore them?' Darkus brushed Bertolt's fussing hands away. 'They're just saying what everyone is thinking. People believe what's written in the papers. Everyone is going to think that Dad is guilty.'

There was an uncomfortable silence as Virginia and Bertolt looked at one another, and they heard the growing wail of sirens.

Bertolt peeped through the curtains. 'It's the police!' He gasped. 'There are two cars pulling up outside the health food shop. They're getting out. What shall we do?'

'We can't let them in here.' Darkus looked about him in panic. 'They mustn't see the beetles. They'll think it's evidence that Dad is guilty.'

'They can't come in unless they have a search warrant,' Virginia said. 'I've seen it on TV. Tell them your uncle is out and you're not allowed to open the door to strangers.'

‘OK,’ Darkus nodded, ‘but I’m not going to lie about Dad. People need to know that he’s trying to stop Lucretia Cutter. He’s one of the good guys.’

‘No, Darkus, you can’t say anything,’ Bertolt said. ‘Your dad needs Lucretia Cutter to believe he’s on her side, otherwise...’ He fell silent.

The buzzer sounded.

Darkus looked into the hall, half expecting to see the door being smashed open. ‘It’s not fair,’ he whispered.

‘I know.’ Virginia nodded, her dark eyes sincere. ‘But we all know the truth.’ She patted him gently on the back.

‘I’m going to find Dad,’ Darkus clenched his fists, feeling his nails cutting into his palms, ‘stop Lucretia Cutter, and force the newspapers to print an apology on the whole front page.’ On his shoulder, Baxter flicked his elytra open and closed, vibrating his soft wings in a thrum of agreement.

‘And we’ll be right beside you,’ Bertolt said.

‘Every step of the way,’ Virginia added.