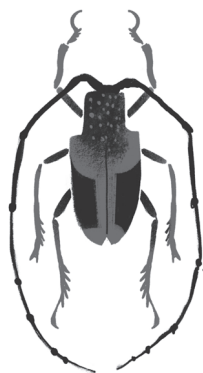


CHAPTER ONE
Snow White



There was a gentle tap on the door.
‘Madame?’

Lucretia Cutter turned her head, her lidless eyes glistening like two inky cysts. Her four black chitinous legs clung effortlessly to the white ceiling, the fabric of her purple skirt tumbling towards the floor. ‘Yes, Gerard?’ she replied.

‘The American actress, Ruby Hisolo Junior, has arrived for her dress fitting,’ the French butler said through the door. He was forbidden from entering the White Room unless invited.

‘You can bring her down.’

‘As you wish, Madame.’

She listened as the discreet footsteps of the butler retreated up the hallway. It was thrilling to be able to detect the slightest movement in the space around her. Her new body and heightened senses made her powerful. She hungered for the moment when she could show the world who she really was. And it was coming. Soon.

She reached out with her human forearms and crawled to the wall beside the door, descending at alarming speed, reaching the floor and flipping up on to her hind legs. She folded her middle legs into special pockets in the lining of her skirt as she walked across the room, zipping up the split and hiding away her beetle-body. She picked up the black wig that lay lifeless on her glass desk and pulled it on, then lifted her white lab coat from the back of the Perspex chair. Sliding her hands into the sleeves, she shrugged it on to her shoulders, whipped out a pair of oversized sunglasses from a pocket and pushed them on to her nose, covering her compound eyes.

She pivoted to check herself in the mirror, grabbing the ebony walking stick that was propped up against the desk. She didn’t need the stick, but it encouraged people to believe that she’d had a car accident, and the accident had provided a plausible cover story whilst she’d metamorphosized within her pupation chamber.

Her senses twitched. She felt vibrations from silent footsteps, those belonging to her personal bodyguard.

Ling Ling was a Kunoichi, a female ninja, trained by Toshitsugu Takamatsu, the bodyguard of Pu Yi, the last Chinese emperor. She had been the youngest principal dancer in the New York Ballet, but her career ended during a performance of *Swan Lake*, when her ankle had shattered as she executed the Black Swan's legendary thirty-two fouettes at a record-breaking speed. Ling Ling had hung up her pointe shoes to take up the ninjato sword, and she was deadly.

Lucretia Cutter opened the door. Ling Ling was waiting outside, dressed in her customary black suit.

'Any sign of those wretched beetles?'

Ling Ling shook her head. 'Craven and Dankish are still looking.'

'Imbeciles,' Lucretia Cutter muttered. 'Send out the yellow ladybirds. I need eyes all over the city. Those blasted beetles could ruin everything for me. I want them found, and I want them destroyed.'

Ling Ling gave a curt nod.

The battle with the Emporium beetles had been unexpected, and Lucretia Cutter wasn't in the habit of losing a fight. She wanted the beetles obliterated, not only because they were evidence of her secret work farming transgenic insects, but because they had publicly humiliated her. She'd had to bribe a lot of people to stay out of prison and keep the images of her new eyes off the front pages of the newspapers. Those beetles had cost her time and money, and she wouldn't be happy until

they were ground into dust.

‘And, Ling Ling, to accompany our spies, send out the venomous *Coccinellidae* – the eleven-spotted yellow ladybirds. If there’s anybody else out there poking their nose into my business, I want them eliminated.’ She raised her index finger. ‘Although they’re not to touch Bartholomew Cuttle. Understood? He’s mine.’

Ling Ling bowed and padded away.

Lucretia Cutter closed the door. Bartholomew’s escape had upset her, but he’d be back. He wouldn’t be able to help himself. Tapping her forefinger against her top lip, she contemplated the renegade beetles. Really, she should be commending herself on their abilities – they’d come from *her* laboratories, after all.

She smiled. Who’d have thought splicing Bartholomew Cuttle’s DNA with beetle DNA would have had such impressive results? Coleoptera that thought for themselves and demonstrated free will? That was new. She’d never seen a mix of beetle species cooperating to fight an enemy. It was exciting – although, she’d noticed, they lacked a killer instinct. She sneered. They probably inherited Bartholomew’s soft heart. Her new beetles were part Alsatian: trainable, able to fight and carry out orders. She’d bred an army of obedient slaves, and right now, that was all she needed.

Walking over to the two-way mirror behind her desk, she pulled a lipstick from her lab-coat pocket, applying the shimmering gold paint and smacking her lips

together. She could throttle that Crips boy for freeing the Cuttle beetles. He'd set her work back years.

A knock on the door and the sound of a well-known husky giggle made her turn around.

'Come in.' She fixed a polite smile on her face.

Gerard opened the door and a sultry blonde girl in a pink sweater and white pleated skirt tottered in.

'Ruby, darling, so good to see you,' Lucretia said, crossing the room.

Ruby Hisolo Jnr flicked her blonde curls over her shoulder and looked critically around the sparsely decorated room.

'Wow! Who's your interior designer?' She lifted her hand. 'No. Don't say. Whoever it is, fire them. It's like some kinda science lab in here.' She grimaced. 'It's creepy.' She jabbed a perfectly manicured finger at Lucretia Cutter. 'You're taking the pharmacy-chic thing way too far. What this room needs is a splash of colour' – she flicked her finger at random areas of the room – 'apricot or peach. And cushions. Everybody loves cushions. I know a great guy if you need help,' she giggled, 'which I think we both know you do.'

Lucretia Cutter didn't reply, her expression remaining a polite smile throughout the awkward silence that followed.

'Just tryin' to help,' Ruby sighed, unconcerned. She fluttered her eyelashes at Gerard. 'I'm thirsty. Got any bubbles?'

The butler went to a fridge under the lab bench,

taking out a frosted glass and a dark green bottle. He opened the bottle, filled the champagne flute, and handed the glass to the waiting actress.

Lucretia Cutter clapped her hands together. 'So, are we going to steal the hearts of the world at the Film Awards?'

'Of course I am.' Ruby emptied her glass in one gulp, handed it back to the butler and wiped her mouth on her sleeve. 'Why else would I be here?'

'Good.' Lucretia Cutter smiled through gritted teeth and reminded herself that this fitting was important. 'Gerard, bring in *Snow White*.'

'Snow White? Who's Snow White?' Ruby frowned. 'I thought this was *my* fitting? I told your people on the phone. I'm a big star now, and I ain't gonna . . .'

Gerard wheeled in a dark slender trunk that was as tall as he was.

'I call my creation *Snow White* because it is made from the purest white substance to be found in the natural world,' said Lucretia Cutter.

Gerard flicked the catches and the door of the trunk swung open. The inside of the box glowed with light radiating from a delicate dress that hung on a gold hanger.

'Oh my!' Ruby's manicured fingertips brushed against her red lips as she gasped in awe. 'It's a dress made of fairy dust!' She stepped towards the trunk, stretching out her hand to touch it.

'Actually, it's made of beetles.'

‘It’s *what?*’ Ruby snatched back her hand.

‘The *Cyphochilus* beetle, to be precise,’ Lucretia continued, ‘an Asian beetle. The extreme whiteness comes from a thin layer of reflective photonic solid on its scales. These scales are whiter than any paper or material mankind has produced. There is a complex molecular geometry to their scales, which are able to scatter light with supreme efficiency.’

Ruby was peering at the dress with horror. ‘You’re telling me that dress is made from bugs? They’re dead, right?’

‘To produce such perfect white scales, *Cyphochilus* beetles must deflect all colours with equal strength,’ Lucretia Cutter continued. ‘This is a miracle rarely found in nature. But to use these perfect white scales in a garment designed for a ceremony filled with light, cameras with flashbulbs, spotlights – well, that has *never* been done.’ She looked Ruby Hisolo Jnr in the eye. ‘The wearer of this dress will dazzle everyone who looks upon her. She will truly *be* a star.’

Ruby’s eyes flickered back to the dress in the box.

‘Would you like to try it on?’ Lucretia Cutter whispered, coming closer to the actress. ‘I’ve tailored it perfectly for your figure.’

Ruby nodded her head slowly. ‘Mmmm-hum. OK.’

Lucretia Cutter signalled for Gerard to take the dress out of the trunk and hang it on the white modesty screen standing on the other side of the room. ‘Go behind the

screen and slip it on. Gerard will get out the mirror for you.'

Ruby eyed the dress cautiously. 'They're just bugs, right?'

'Precisely,' Lucretia Cutter nodded, her smile fixed firmly on her face as she watched the actress walk hesitantly across the room and go behind the screen. 'Just bugs.'

'Aww man,' Ruby sighed, as she slid the dress over her head, 'this dress feels unbelievable.'

The American actress came out, barefoot, wearing *Snow White*, and the polite smile on Lucretia Cutter's face relaxed into a real one. The dress was dazzling, cut like a 1920s flapper dress, but instead of sequins or beads, it was covered in tiny white beetle elytra, shimmering and reflecting light with every movement of the actress's body.

Gerard folded out the lid and sides of the trunk to reveal three full-length mirrors that allowed Ruby to see herself from all angles. She turned her back to the mirrors and looked over her shoulder, pouting at herself.

'Oh, YES!' She jumped up and down in excitement. 'I look out of this world!'

'As radiant as a goddess.' Lucretia Cutter nodded.

'Yeah. Look at me. I'm a total goddess.' She put her hands on her hips and leant into the mirror, showing off her ample bosom. 'I gotta have this dress.' She shimmied, and the beetles gave a satisfying rattle. 'No other girl at

the Film Awards is gonna have a dress like this.'

'Other dresses will look like dirty rags next to this one,' Lucretia Cutter said. 'And when the flashbulbs pop, as you glide down that red carpet, every one of these beetle-scales will reflect the light perfectly, giving you the aura of an angel.'

'As long as I look better than Stella Manning.' She paraded towards the mirror and then away again. 'That old witch is yesterday's news. This year, I want all eyes on me. It's gonna be me giving the tearful speeches and getting the Film Award.'

'I can promise, no one will be able to take their eyes off you. This dress will go down in history. It will never be forgotten.'

'Who knew beetles could be pretty?' Ruby threw up her hands dramatically. 'I'll just die if anyone else wears it!'

'I'm honoured that an actress of your calibre will be wearing my creation to the Film Awards.'

'My stylist said you were a genius, Letitia—'

'—Lucretia—'

'—mm-hmm, Letitia, whatever,' Ruby said, still marvelling at her own reflection, 'and I didn't believe her. But how wrong was I?'

'You're too kind.' Lucretia Cutter's patience was wearing thin. 'However, I must tell you that if you want to wear this dress to the Film Awards, there are some rules that you must agree to.'

‘Rules?’ Ruby frowned. ‘What kinda rules?’

‘You will not see the dress again until the morning of the ceremony, when a member of my staff will come and do the fitting, then drive you to the awards in one of my cars. You are allowed to tell the press that you are wearing a Cutter Couture creation, but you must not describe the dress to anyone. It is to be a secret.’

‘A secret?’ Ruby arched an eyebrow. ‘I *love* that!’ She clapped. ‘I’ll surprise the world when I step out of the limo on to the red carpet. Yes!’ She held out her hand to Lucretia Cutter. ‘Lulu, you got a deal.’

‘Then the dress is yours,’ Lucretia Cutter said, ignoring the actress’s outstretched hand.

‘Sweet.’ Ruby shrugged, taking one last look at herself in the mirror before skipping behind the screen and, a second later, handing the dress to Gerard. She came out, pulling her pink sweater over her blonde curls and slipping her white stilettos back on. ‘It’s been a pleasure doing business with you, Lulu.’ Ruby stopped to check her make-up in the mirror.

‘Oh no,’ Lucretia Cutter replied, ‘the pleasure will be entirely mine.’ She gestured to the door. ‘Gerard will show you out.’

After the door had closed behind them, Lucretia Cutter turned to *Snow White*, admiring her creation. She tilted her head back, and from deep within her throat she made a ghastly clicking sound.

The dress, hanging in the open trunk, shimmered and

vibrated like it was coming apart, suddenly exploding into a whirlwind of movement as thousands of specially bred *Cyphochilus* beetles flew out of their fastenings and swarmed around Lucretia Cutter's head like a sparkling tornado.

Lucretia laughed. This was going to be so easy.