

# NO!

by

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Variously entitled *No Buggers*, as well

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###

“NO!”

The kitten stops to look at you. The little thing doesn't look so cute right now. Having bored with your affections, it has wrapped its claws around your hand and its teeth are set against your skin.

Feel the pain. I know, I do.

But yet, the cat doesn't attack. The mood set, the danger confirmed, the metaphor refreshed, the scene changes.

The kitten becomes a baby dragon, just a dangerous, but oh so cute... and exotic.

Yet, even that is not right. It does not have the right feel. Let the dragon morph to an insect, a wasp woman, with tantalizing eyes, narrow waste, and a poisoned scent that beguiles your mind.

It's not bad. A little unhinged, a little off kilter, but the effects, the sensory surround. It'll work. Just have to do something about that pain in your hand...

And on cue, the bolts of searing, unearthly pain shoot through your entire body--every finger, every toe, every appendage...

Something is wrong with the pain circuits, and this isn't what I was working on. I need to backtrack.

The Garden of Eden.

It's hackneyed. It's predictable. It's actually quite boring, but I spend a fair bit of time here. I know the problem originates here, as perhaps do all problems...

"It's just a thought," I say quickly, no reason to get excited, but that doesn't stop the powers that be from lancing my hand with crippling pain. I nearly drop the apple I'm holding. Eve is prancing around naked. I've beaten her to it. She'll look better once she's had a bite, put on some clothes--maybe a g-string, or a bikini. It's warm here. No reason to go overboard. Just enough to accent her pleasant curves, but the pain in my hand reminds me I have other things on my mind... or at least, I am supposed to have other things on my mind.

I look at my hand. Skin turns to bone, but it was predictable, nothing you haven't seen a thousand times before, yet the apple. Have you ever had a bite? Taken a taste? Oddly, it's sour, rotted... infested.

A caterpillar crawls across the surface, and over your hand. It is a baby insect, and soon it grows, to a terrible monstrosity. How can one little thing cause so much pain? Teeth designed for rendering flesh, feet designed to hold on tight and never let go, and eyes... empty, cruel, and devoid of life.

Let the pain come. Try to ride it. Let it carry you through.

###

It's probably just a Server malfunction--a glitch in the dream. That's what you did, isn't it? You were a programmer? I mean, everyone was a programmer... on some level, but you. You were a programmer. You'd get your assignment, your discs, and you go to the park, a reserve, some little corner of nature like the Garden of Eden, and you'd plug in, work some code, work out the glitches...

That's it. A disc gone bad!

“EJECT!”

“STOP!”

“TERMINATE PROGRAM!”

But nothing happens. You know... Instinctually, you know, that you've tried this hundreds of times before.

There is nothing to do, but ride the pain.

Insects, wasps, hornets--where would this take you?

The answer is simple: to a hive.

###

Wake up in a dream booth, an egg, or a coffin. Call it what you will. The walls are reassuring. The soft lights. The blinking indicators.

Your hand still hurts. I mean, it still hurts. It's not an echo. You're not out. It's a dream in a dream, and you've only started, started to shake, to sweat.

With fear. Yes! With fear. Hold out your hand in front of you. The insect blinks at you. It's jaws set. Feeding.

Trace the lines it has sunk into your hand. Know that this is an illusion -- a drug feeding your head. As others appear. Tens, and twenties, and hundreds, and thousands.

You've seen this bit in dreams thousands of times, buried alive, eaten by maggots, swimming in a sea of ants, head crammed into a beehive or a hornets nest.

But this isn't a dream. OK. What you see is. Fair enough. But it is a dream of what was, what happened.

###

The Earth was attacked. Isn't it always attacked? How hackneyed? Only hackneyed or not, this time it was real. And you, a two-bit hack, a nobody encoder... You did something.

Remember.

You joined up? No.

You did some great bit of programming? No. How would that lead to here... a spaceship hurtling through time?

And then it comes back. A memory of a memory of a memory. Is it even real? But it is all that you have.

In space. A nothing. A nobody. You took your time in the gardens. The Gardens of Eden you called them... and one day you found it.

A cat? No. Not a cat, not a dragon. One of those things, a bug, a wasp, only you befriended it. Don't ask me how. I guess you were kind, and were never afraid.

Look around. In your tomb, the walls of the sleeper cell, covered in honeycomb, a swarming mass of insects doing your bidding. If you were capable of fear, you would have gone insane... long ago.

###

After you first met, you kept the creature a secret protected it. You had already been bit. It took you over, only it didn't. It's not like you killed the rest of the crew, they departed. You didn't steal the ship, it was given to you--outfitted, enhanced, armored, and equipped. They turned you around. Launched you in space--right back from where you and the critter had come... and thousands more like him.

They were causing quite the stir.

The First Bugger War.

Isn't that what it's always called?

###

No FTL. Nothing but time. You are their mother, their father, their mind. One becomes two, becomes hundreds of thousands, and you make the journey home. Only you don't. The first time you awoke, you were in the hive. Walking around the

ship. Nothing was as it was. Man size insects working the controls.

They're too big. It's a waste of resources.

And so it was.

But, they showed you things too. How eyes could be more. Lie back. Remember. Let the butterfly, the dragonfly, the spurious creature, descend on your eye and drop into the socket where your eyeballs once were. When it docks. See the world as it was. See what it has seen. Get reports from Earth. Talk to your family. Watch a movie, take in a show, and memorize a new girl. The desire--it's what pushes you on. Even when it truly is impossible.

They want you to attack, but one ship against--million, billions, trillions. You send your eyes back, you minions, your butterflies, your remotes eyes and ears. So send them forward.

They are waiting.

###

Oh, it's good. Fly through spaces as a dragonfly. It's everything you could hope for in a flight simulator and more. If you thought you were crazy, if you thought it was a dream booth malfunction, well, this puts that to rest.

Soaring through the cosmos, feeling the solar wind on your wings, the light from the approaching star on your face and the... size and immensity. They have turned their solar system--all of it--into their hive. They catch you in a gigantic web.

Feel the embrace of the silk as it catches you, embraces you, and sucks all of the information that you--an envoy--carry with you: time, place, trajectory, and mission. And then like a slingshot, they shoot you back from whence you came, with a simple message, "This is ours."

Attack that?

With one ship?

They're crazy.

Alter course, and hit a planet in a distant system until it equals theirs.

###

How many years? How many eons did that take?  
You don't want to think about it. Rather than existing in a hive, you became the hive. Even now as you play the memory. You can feel the insects eat away at your skin, exposing your neurons, your brain. Feeding it, nurturing it, worshipping it.

You are mom. You are dad.

You are the queen. To be obeyed with undying fanatically loyalty--even if you should go insane. Especially if you should go insane. How else to measure loyalty?

But no?

Insanity takes a reality... and they have none. Only what you give them.

Set up your system, create your world. Whole planets turned to hives. Send off you envoys, your detachable eyes towards Earth, towards the Swarm, ever and outward. Countless in all directions, and spend your time in dreams--dreaming of girls, and the stories they tell you from home, as you drift through the countless eons.

###

And then comes the pain. It is clear. It is insistent. It is now. You are the hive, you are in pain. You could turn in if off. It's a simple switch, a simple decision.

Off. And it will be so, but you know that you will never awaken again.

On. It is not a decision.

###

Your empire has grown. You and the Swarm--being one and the same, or, at least, being of kindred spirits--have split up the realms. This star is mine. This star is yours. That cluster is mine. That cluster is yours. That way is mine... and that way, till the end of time, is yours.

It seemed to work. It was a workable solution. And Earth? Earth was yours. Your toy, your plaything, you dependent state surround by a malevolent universe of whose scope the humans could not hope to comprehend.

Still, you send your envoys to... a dying race. But you need the stories, you need the women. What good is a fantasy without the female lead. You can dream, but after a hundred thousand thousand years, the memories grow old. The one thing you look forward to--even if you do not know that you do--is the introduction of the new female lead.

And then it is gone. It is over. The end has come. Your dependent state is no more.

An adversary has seen the weakness, received no response to its probes, the details do not matter. Earth is gone. In a blink of an eye--or in the last million years since you have opened your eyes--the humans have vanished.

What now will become of your dreams?

And in its place, in place of a woman, your envoys send you news of a wasp. Slender of waist, beguiling eyes, and a scent... a scent to die for.

###

Shall we accept this offering? This gift? This mating pair?

Sure. Why not?

I'll stand regale and tall--I'll have to put on a new skin, maybe something in a ten foot tall preying mantis decked out in purple and gold, and my bride to be... So young. So beautiful. So willing, submissive, and pure.

I could stare into her eyes forever as they sparkle and reflect the heavens. And as she kneels before me, takes my claw in her hand and kisses...

My heart tells me that I have been this way countless times before.

And my hand, the burning, excruciating, insufferable pain. It tells me, it warns me, it pleads that this is not the right decision. How can I do this? Turn my back on my race... as her poison seeps through me--the betrayal, the backstabbing, the pain.

I wonder if the buggers know how much like humans they really are. I wonder if they know, that for some of us, the war never ended... or maybe I should say, that finally it has.

###

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