

Insectland

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Chapter 1

Dan Larson peeled back the curtains and opened his bedroom window to a warm summer night. Stamped among the grove of shimmering stars the full moon glowed as if ignited from within. Ghostly radiance filtered through saplings sprawled along the edge of the forest and cast slender shadows that pierced the silvered landscape. It was 12:30 a.m.

Normally, the woods behind his house were a chorus of insect chatter and frog-song. Tonight, for reasons he didn't understand, the silence was total.

He closed the curtains, pulled his T-shirt over his head, stepped out of his jeans, and dabbed some acne medicine on the enormous pimple beside his left nostril. He slipped beneath the sheets, and sighed. It was Friday night, he could sleep late in the morning; Whitmore Middle School was closed.

A fly buzzed his head and landed on the pillow. Dan leaned over, grabbed his *Car and Driver Magazine*, raised his hand, and heard what sounded like a tiny scream as the magazine made contact.

Tiny feet scuttled across his arm and onto the bed. A thumb-size Grasshopper stood beside his pillow. Dan froze with disbelief. The Grasshopper's legs weren't legs at all, but a series of tiny pistons and mechanical joints. Its belly was a smooth piece of metal; its antennae, tiny wires.

"What have you done?" the Grasshopper scolded, in a firm, female voice. "We are here to help! If you harm me our chances of victory will be slim."

"You're..." He could barely catch his breath. "You're a machine!"

The stare of the Grasshopper's unblinking, multi-faceted eyes unnerved him.

"A Defender," the Grasshopper corrected. "Designed by the Creators to protect and defend cultures from war-driven advances of aggressive, non-native species."

Dan's heart galloped. "This is crazy!"

"Suspend disbelief. If you do not the consequences to your planet will be severe."

The Grasshopper jumped onto the windowsill, opened a small slit in the screen, and wiggled through.

"Your home is ground zero for the Cyderion infestation," the Grasshopper said. "Come outside. We have much to accomplish tonight."

Dan shook his head. "I can't believe I'm talking to a robot insect!"

"The situation exists!" the Grasshopper affirmed. "The threat is real! In one hour your yard will be the staging ground for a major assault on your planet. If we fail to prevent it, your way of life will be forever altered to serve the Dirus. It is your choice whether you wish to help."

The Grasshopper jumped into the night.

Dan shuffled from the bed.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," he muttered, and pulled on his clothes from the day before. "Robot Grasshoppers? Alien invaders? I'm even talking to myself. I *am* going nuts."

He opened his bedroom door and tiptoed down the hallway so his feet would hardly make a sound. He didn't want to wake his mom. Since his Dad's passing, his mom had to work two waitress jobs to pay the bills, and she usually came home late and exhausted. Tonight was no exception.

At the top of the stairs, he almost turned back, but then, figuring he'd already dressed; he descended, crept through the living room, and then carefully unlocked and slipped out the back door.

The evening air held a humid, watery quality. Moonlight draped the landscape in whitish-blue gloom. It was quiet... eerily quiet. His sight unraveled strange, featureless shapes as it adjusted to the dim light. He looked to the sky. Sequins of stars glittered faintly above the afterglow of the town.

The Grasshopper landed on his shoulder. Dan flinched, but refrained the urge to swat it.

"We traced a regiment of Cyderion to this area," the Grasshopper said. "Cyderion serve as the Dirus military. It is imperative that we exterminate them before they establish a fortified bunker and send out a homing beacon. I will direct you to the Defender lair where we will formulate a plan based on your knowledge of these surroundings to keep them contained."

He shook his head in dismay. "You want me to go where?"

"Into the forest. I will direct you to the Defender lair."

Dan glanced up at his mom's bedroom window. "And if I refuse?"

"Defenders will do our best to stop the infestation without your help."

"And if you fail?"

"Then all of Earth will serve the Dirus."