

**BUZZBOMB**  
THE JAWS OF KRASHKA

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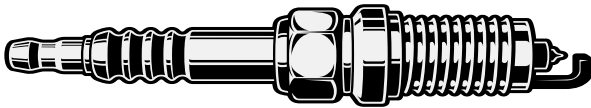
**ART BY MATT BAKER**

# CHAPTER 1:

## GORG AND THE ELECTRIC CATERPILLARS

# I

The mid-afternoon sky was tinted crimson. A row of tightly packed Pinisi sailing ships bobbed like playful piano keys inside the little wooden harbour at the mouth of the ancient port city of Makassar. North of the harbour, a lone cargo ship, the Abian, waited patiently for its captain's return. The first mate, a frog fish named Mr Henry, climbed the crow's nest and extended his brass spyglass.



'I hope you know what you're doing, Captain Gorg,' he whispered. 'Now – where are you?'

The frog fish cast his glance over the King Talons Cemetery, following the green mountainous coastline south, past the bustling patchwork of Makassar and over the giant red gates to the most heavily guarded building in all of Eastern Indonesia... Fort Rotterdam.

On the side of the fort's tallest tower, Stench, a floppy blue sea slug, climbed a rusty ladder. He was right behind Barakoni, a heavily scarred fighting fish, whose face was always masked by a permanent scowl. Captain Gorg, a mangrove mudskipper, was already at the top and tying a rope about himself next to a large open hole in the tower's red clay roof.

‘What are you up to?’ Mr Henry felt his belly drop and spied the rest of the fort. Battalions of tubular-eyed electric caterpillars had taken siege to the fortress and had armed themselves with Gatling guns and canons. Mr Henry turned his gaze back to the tower — his captain had disappeared through the hole in the roof. The captain’s rope, now taut, was lowered through the hole by Stench and Barakoni from the rusty ladder.

Inside the tower, the mudskipper, Captain Gorg, dangled high above a floor filled with giant metal boxes sparking and whirring as their spinning armatures hissed with electricity.

His eyes widened. His jaw fell loose. The machine, the machination that turned the tide on the caterpillars’ gruesome takeover of the fort, sat shaking in a cobwebbed corner like a nervous earwig, just like they had said.

‘Lower me down some more, quick,’ Captain Gorg whispered.

The mudskipper landed gently. The taught rope about his belly slackened and coiled loosely on the smooth concrete.

Circling the makeshift generator, he stopped at the long bank of spark plugs tied to the edge of a rusty piston.

‘Come here you little beauty.’ He smiled, scratching his double chin. Spitting on his flippers, the captain then rubbed them together and, with all of his might, twisted a spark plug from its bed and strapped it to his back.

‘Okay, lift me up.’ He tugged on the rope.

‘Help me, Stench,’ Barakoni’s shrill voice pleaded high above.

‘I am helping. You’re hogging the ladder. Now, move over some.’ Stench groaned.

‘What’s goin’ on up there?’ the captain called as his feet left the floor and he spun toward the high ceiling.

He was barely two feet in the air when suddenly, the rope stopped.

# II

With a crash, the door behind him slammed open! Captain Gorg spun himself around as a cockroach slid to a halt before him.

‘Pull me up, you buffoons! Me underpants are cutting me in half!’

Stench had his hands about Barakoni’s throat and was too busy cursing the fighting fish to take any notice of the mudskipper spinning about at the end of the rope like a bauble on a Christmas tree. He spun toward the eastern window, the wall, then the generator and, mumbling curses at his crew up top, he crossed his arms and glared at the panting cockroach before slowly pinwheeling away. This time, a dead fly stuck against the skylit window. He spied the cracks in the curved wall and the torn calendar left of the generator with a curled photo of a caterpillar wearing a bikini. As he spun further, he noted the cockroach’s dusty trench coat, but mostly the dizzy captain was anxious about the gun the cockroach was loading.

‘Woah, oops. Another dead end. Oh – um, hi?’ the cockroach said, looking up at the hole in the roof. ‘You might want to hurry. I sort of tripped an alarm.’

The rope kept spinning and Gorg looked up at Barakoni with a sigh, as the fighting fish poked the sea slug in both his eyes and pushed him toward the ladder. The rope creaked and came around again as the mudskipper heard an excited whispering coming from the trench coat. The noise was prickly to Gorg’s ears, like iron

scraping iron. With the next sluggish spin, he caught a glimpse at a group of borer bug children peering up from behind the roach's legs.

'What are you doing with those things?' he grumped and continued spinning.

'It's a rescue.' The cockroach began to check the room for an escape; the borer bug children followed closely, chirping like boxes of popping corn.

'Borers are a dime a dozen.' The captain snorted, spinning past him again.

'Well, I'm sure they think the same about Mudskippers.'

A loud siren howled to life filling the fort with frenzy and the captain scowled at the cockroach, who sheepishly replied, 'Yeah, that's the alarm I told you about.'

There was a violent squelchy noise and the cockroach ran to the window and froze. 'We gotta move.'

The cockroach cut the rope and led the captain out toward the walkway.

'Just a second.' The captain reefed at his underpants. 'That's better.'

Waddling toward the door, the mudskipper shook his fist at Stench and Barakoni, 'You two good-for-nothings, get back to the ship!'

But with a jarring crunch, he was stuck in the door frame.

'That's, ah, that's not going to fit.' The cockroach pointed at the spark plug strapped to the captain's back. The mudskipper grumbled under his breath and shimmied sideways but the spark plug caught on the door frame again.

'Told you!' the cockroach said and cut the spark plug loose.

The captain huffed but the cockroach just grabbed him and dragged him out onto the walkway.

Still fighting at the top of the tower, Stench grabbed Barakoni's shoulders and shook him. 'That alarm ain't stopping. The captain told you to fire the flare if things went south! Mr Henry needs to start the engines!'

The fighting fish shoved Stench's hands away. 'Okay, okay.' He puffed. 'Which flare?'

'What?' Stench asked.

'Which flare was for emergencies – which colour, the blue, red or green?'

'Just fire them all,' Stench shouted. 'Fire them all, you stupid fish!'

Far below, a gurgling scream echoed through the fort. 'The borers are gone!'

Three coloured flares shot into the sky and burst.

Dozens of electric caterpillars fanned out across the turrets, the walls and the buildings, their buzzing bodies pulsing angrily.

'Not here,' a caterpillar yelled from the back of a turret.

'Empty – move on,' called another from the armoury.

The cockroach and the captain were almost at the bottom of the tower when the captain grabbed the cockroach's coat. 'If those caterpillars get to me crew up there, we ain't leavin'.' He pointed at the electric caterpillars scaling the tower.

The cockroach nodded and aimed his pistol. 'This... should... do.'

Near the giant red gates of the walled Fort Rotterdam, four wood borer bugs clothed in rodent fur and clutching their rifles were hiding under the thick red spotted leaves of a stinking corpse lily flower.

'It's been too long,' whispered the shortest bug.

'No, no he'll make it, he's good,' the tallest answered.

'Nah, listen. The alarm's been raised, they've got him. That stinkin' roach is dead meat.'

'He knocked you out cold, didn't he?' the tallest snapped.

The one with glasses chuckled and then got a harsh shove from the shortest who grumped, 'Hmph, I still think we should've eaten him.'

At the stairs, the cockroach pulled the trigger.

The gunshot rang above the wailing siren firing a single bullet toward a fuel depot. A series of booming bursts of flame flashed across

the depot like wild fiery dominoes right to the foot of the tallest tower which collapsed in a giant ball of black smoke, the rusty ladder crumpling like paper.

‘Me crew!’ The mudskipper gasped.

‘Oh, gronk, that escalated quick – we’re on the move, Captain!’ The cockroach leapt from the crumbling stairs and made for the back of a nearby shed. By the time Captain Gorg had caught up, the borer children were packed tightly in two leather saddlebags, whilst the rest hid in the cockroach’s deep coat pockets.

‘What is that?’ Captain Gorg gaped at the two-wheeled machine that the cockroach started with the press of a button. The engine ignited and growled like a walrus.

‘A Cavity Hopper.’ The cockroach flicked another switch and the vents under the front fairing wound open. The mudskipper eyed the hefty engine, its pistons chugging in perfect symmetry, and his mouth watered.

An angry blistering screech interrupted the captain as the wall behind them was hit by a spray of white hot bullets. The mudskipper jumped on the back and grabbed hold of the cockroach as if he were a mast in a storm. The wheels spun and the machine rattled and took off.

The Cavity Hopper zipped past the dungeon, shooting through a tiny shortcut, leaping like lightning through the corridors of the electric caterpillars’ barracks.

But Captain Gorg was smitten. He couldn’t stop marvelling at the machine that shook and roared beneath his seat.

‘Tell me, er... friend. Does it have sparkplugs?’ The cockroach turned the throttle all the way round and the Cavity Hopper launched into the air over the caterpillar guards and toward the gardens.

‘It has a twin spark engine. I upped the airflow by building a bigger compressor and, well’—the cockroach pointed toward the back of the fuel tank near the master cylinder—‘basically, it’s got a supercharger.’



Six caterpillars reared up before the Hopper and began blasting them with giant machine guns. The borer children dug deeper into the saddlebags as the bullets pinged against the Cavity Hopper like hail stones. Ducking sideways, the cockroach pulled a pistol from a holster on the side of the Hopper and shot two electric caterpillars square in the face.

‘And the, er, spark plugs?’ The captain was transfixed.

‘Eh?’

‘How many has it got?’

‘Oh, custom jobs. Two glass-coated tungsten electrodes, real heavy duty too. They’re platinum-coated so they won’t break, last until I’m old and grey.’

# III

A caterpillar in a helmet furiously drove a six-wheeled rusty Crawler straight at the Hopper as its laughing gunner fired the Gatling. In a blur of pinging hot cylinders, the cockroach blew out the left front tyre forcing the Crawler to dig in and flip. The gunner was thrown and splat like a slimy water balloon against a tree as the crawler flipped, slamming into the armoury with a ferocious *BOOM!* Fort Rotterdam was burning. The cockroach slid his Cavity Hopper about the barrack's corner, sending gravel and sand spraying into the air.

The chirping borer buglets cheered.

'Look!' The tallest borer bug pointed from beneath the stinking lily.

The Cavity Hopper pulled to a stop near the giant red gates as the borer soldiers dropped their rifles and ran from their hiding place.

The tall one cried, throwing his arms about the little children, 'Oh, Buzzbomb, thank you. Since the beginning of the caterpillar's siege, our tears have been our only food day and night.'

'Thank you, Buzzbomb, we are forever indebted to you,' said the one with glasses, shaking the cockroach's hand gratefully.

The cockroach helped the last borer child out of his saddle. 'You need to get going, they're right behind us.'

'They have blocked all the roads. What will you do?'

'We will head south for the cemetery; my ship waits for me,' Captain Gorg interrupted as he tightly grabbed the cockroach about his belly.

A child borer passed the cockroach a long leather string with a dragonfly sculptured from polished bumblebee jasper.

The cockroach read the inscription. ‘After such knowledge, what forgiveness?’

He hung the dragonfly about his neck and thanked her with a smile.

The tallest borer nudged the child forward, who stood up straight, looked the cockroach in the eye and spoke in her best grown-up voice. ‘That means, at the end of ourselves, when we have no answers, our heart seeks out hope and forgiveness beckons us home.’ She looked back at the tallest borer who winked proudly.

‘Get going, will you?’ the cockroach said and pressed the button in the centre of the zero-drag handlebars. The Cavity Hopper rumbled to life and he fanged it toward the giant red gates.

‘Buzzbomb, eh?’ Captain Gorg smirked. ‘So what... you one of those bleedin’-heart types saving the world?’

The cockroach looked passed the gates at the caterpillar roadblock and scowled. ‘I just think the borers deserved a chance, that’s all.’ He slammed the brakes and headed west across the yard of perfect grass.

‘Chance, my bum,’ the captain scoffed. ‘Who gave me a chance? Nobody, that’s who. I was thrown out onto the sandbank the moment I hatched; me own brothers tried to eat me. Ah, but I showed them, pulled their legs off I did, fed ’em to the gulls and that’s when I knew – you can’t trust no one, especially family.’

‘I’ll try to remember that.’ The cockroach leant down across the tank and the Hopper lurched into top speed.

‘How ’bout you, cockroach, any brothers or sisters?’ Gorg smiled.

Buzzbomb ducked the Hopper beneath a bed of barren roses and the two riders squeezed themselves together in order to miss the razor-sharp thorns. ‘We’re here.’

He slowed the Hopper at the end of the rose bed and idled through a crack in the wall. Droplets of cold water fell from the wet mossy

ceiling onto the Hopper, hissing like breakfast eggs as they turned to steam against the hot exhaust.

Captain Gorg snickered. 'So they threw you out on the sand bank too, eh?

A quick flash, a flaming crown, appeared in Buzzbomb's mind. 'No – no they didn't. Can we change the subject, please?'

They reached the end of the crack. The Hopper slowed and Buzzbomb put his feet on the ground.

Gorg rubbed his spiky chin. 'Got the better of you – didn't they?' He nodded. 'Yeah, they did. You found out the truth. There are no blue skies, no happy endin's.'

Buzzbomb spied a squad of fizzing caterpillars further down the road as the captain patted his shoulder and whispered, 'It's all mud grey. Hope, love, charity, they're just words, rubbish made up by kings in gold bleedin' underpants.'

'What is it with you and underpants?' Buzz quizzed.

North of Fort Rotterdam, a blockade of heavily armed electric caterpillars rolled their Crawlers into place across the quiet road. The sergeant, a greying caterpillar with a metal plate bolted to his head, sat on the hood of his tank and rolled a toothpick about his purple jelly lips. 'Now, we wait.'

*SMASH!* At the edge of the road, the Cavity Hopper leapt from the bushes, bounced over the surprised sergeant and disappeared down the hill. The caterpillars blasted their Gatling guns into the air and decapitated the tree line but it was too late. The sergeant's toothpick had fallen on the ground.

'Get those snotballs.' He screamed, his face red and swollen.

Buzzbomb rode down the steep hill. Blasting his pistol, he hit three caterpillars and four Crawler tyres before snaking through a barbed wire blockade. A Crawler gunner fired and three bullets bit the Hopper's right wheel sending the Hopper skyward.

‘Hang on!’ Buzzbomb called to the mudskipper captain, who shut his eyes tighter.

The sky about exploded! Buzzbomb stood up on the pegs, landing the Hopper and swerving between the rusty Crawlers like a cake of slippery soap. A caterpillar jumped from the bushes and swung his empty gun like a club but Buzzbomb ducked low, turned back and shot the caterpillar causing its guts to spill across the dirt. Buzzbomb dodged another and ran headlong over a third but the relentless sergeant was closing in.

Throwing the Hopper over the hill, Buzzbomb fell forward into the heavy undergrowth. With a clunk, the machine landed in a clearing, wobbled, then steadied and slid to a halt in the middle of a crossroads.

The shaking captain and the cockroach were covered in smelly caterpillar slop.

‘Which way?’

The captain opened one eye and pointed his shaking gunk-covered finger. ‘Past that last tombstone, south end of the harbour.’

# IV

Soon, the Cavity Hopper slowed along the harbour and rolled to an idle. Further down, Stench and Barakoni were tying bundles of dynamite sticks to an arching concrete bridge.

‘Good job, boyos!’ Captain Gorg shouted.

‘Captain Gorg, sir, you’re alive,’ yelled Mr Henry, waving from the ship’s wheelhouse.

The yellow frog fish had already turned the old cargo ship toward the sea.

‘This, Buzzbomb, is *my* ship – the Abian. Isn’t she a beauty?’ The mudskipper smiled and nudged the cockroach.

Nearby, the scarred fighting fish was tying the final sticks to a wide cement column.

Suddenly, a crazy line of bullets dotted the bridge.

The captain turned and screamed ‘light the fuse, light the ruddy fuse!’ as three Crawlers rumbled down the hill toward them.

A gurgling moan spewed from the bushes nearby. Barakoni looked up in time to see a lone caterpillar grab him and shove him into its elastic mouth.

‘Barakoni! No!’ Captain Gorg cried.

Stench tied the last of the dynamite and pulled the wax matches from his vest as the fighting fish took a final swing at the caterpillar before being swallowed.

The Crawlers hit the bridge and sped toward the Abian. Mr Henry stoked the engines, churning the ocean into white foaming soup. Stench scrambled for the match and lit the fuse and frantically flopped toward the cargo ship.

Buzzbomb rushed towards the sea slug as the ground about the Cavity Hopper was smashed by a hail of whistling missiles.

‘Take me flipper, boyo,’ Captain Gorg hollered, grabbing the blue sea slug and throwing him behind, onto the saddle.

The arched bridge exploded, sending the speeding Crawlers into the sea.

The Cavity Hopper trundled up the long plank, shuddering to a halt and the three escapees fell onto the deck as the cargo ship left the harbour.

‘That was close.’ The captain laughed.

‘Here, drink this,’ Mr Henry said to Stench as he offered him a full wineskin.

‘So, this is your ship, eh?’ Buzz leant against the rusty stern’s bulwark next to a wooden box, labelled ‘CAUTION – EELS’.

Two soldier crabs were arguing over by the cargo ship’s rusted crane.

‘No, no, no, red sky at night, sailor’s fright!’

‘I’m tellin’ you, it’s delight, not fright ya bilge-sucking, bottom-feeding—’

‘Listen ’ere, you one-eyed picaroon. It’s fright, I tells ya!’

‘Delight!’ The one-eyed soldier crab punched the other and the two rolled across the deck in a drunken scuffle.

‘Welcome aboard.’ The captain rubbed his stubbled chin and shook his head at the soldier crabs. ‘You better get some rest, Buzzbomb, it’s, er... it’s plain sailin’ from here.’

The mudskipper’s eyes wandered over the Hopper and its hot ping-pong engine, and he left the cockroach to sleep. ‘Mr Henry, set a course for the Coral Sea.’