

# Live Hot Bugs

by Lily Reeves

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ...Saenz?”

“Yes, Doctor?”

“Would you fuck this mosquito?”

“Well, no, but admittedly I can’t see myself fucking any mosquito, or any other insect for that matter, so maybe I’m not the best person to-“

“Saenz.”

“Doctor.”

“I am asking, as I am sure you are aware, that from a mosquito’s point of view - as in, if you were a mosquito, who was generally predisposed to fucking other mosquitoes: Would You Fuck This One?”

“ ...No, Doctor, this mosquito is categorically unfuckable.”

“Unfortunately, I believe you’re right.” Dr. Q.C. Monnaham sighed, and picked up her clipboard, and checked another sad box on the chart. Each check on the page was more faded than the last; they’d been at this all day, and her pen was giving up the ghost.

Saenz, her assistant, took a sip from his sixth cup of coffee, and unceremoniously smushed the ugly bug with his palm. It was against protocol to touch an experimentally bioengineered subject without gloves, but they’d run out of gloves, and neither of them were up to walking to the corner store to buy more at this juncture. Q.C. wasn’t in any kind of mental state to lecture him about procedure. Besides, with their quest to eradicate *Anopheles proxima* from the face of the planet failing so spectacularly, she couldn’t deny him the satisfaction of squishing just one.

---

Q.C. had never been to Earth, but she was fascinated by its scientific history; the technological developments that led humanity to expand to Proxima Centauri b. During undergrad, she'd spend her free time reading antique .pdf essays on lemur mating habits, or newly discovered spores, (for which her friends relentlessly mocked her.) Old-timey inaccuracy aside, the old Earth researchers had had a sort of gusto for their work that she didn't see much in modern Proximan biology. It was through this hobby that she came to her Idea.

On Earth, mosquitoes were a useless pest, and a vector for disease. Today's Earth was free of malaria and West Nile virus, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century they were still at large. Some fringe scientists had figured, since they couldn't cure every major mosquito borne illness, why not just kill every mosquito?

They tried to engineer male mosquitoes that would produce mostly male offspring, thus decreasing the amount of bloodsucking females in the short term, and in the long term, completely annihilating them. It was a nice idea, but they never managed to get concrete results. Interest dwindled as viable treatments for their diseases were found, and concerns were raised about upsetting the ecosystem. Decades became centuries, and the research faded into obscurity, lost to all but dedicated hobbyists like Q.C.

Despite everyone's best efforts, mosquitoes eventually found their way to Proxima b. They evolved and thrived and became just as annoying as their Terran ancestors. Unfortunately, they were also excellent carriers for Adibe's disease – a deadly virus that even today's advanced medicine could not cure. Q.C. spent the remaining years of her education studying mosquitoes. She wrote her graduate thesis on her plan to follow in her predecessors' footsteps and eradicate Proximan mosquitoes once and for all. It took her six years to get a grant.

And now here she was, with a reasonably cramped facility in a backwoods suburb, two lab assistants, and a colony of test subjects ripe for destruction. It was almost perfect. She had successfully introduced a gene that destroyed X chromosomes into dozens upon dozens of male mosquito larvae. These males were robust, long lived, and virile, and the gene passed down to their offspring. With these insectoid sleeper agents introduced to the gene pool, Proxima's salvation was close at hand.

Q.C.'s only problem was this: No one would fuck her mosquitoes.

---

She sipped from her ninth cup of coffee. Months ago, when they had begun this trial, they had implemented a rigorous series of tests on each mosquito. They would jot down all their physical traits and take scans from every angle. They exposed each male to several females, all of which would lose interest immediately. Hundreds of test subjects in, they could tell with a glance how fuckable any given mosquito was. They just Knew.

Saenz came back from his break, reeking of cherry vape emissions, but marginally less sweaty and pinched in the face, so Q.C. let it slide.

"Alright Doctor, ready for Subject 873?"

Q.C. stared.

"Saenz, you just squished 876 with your hand ten minutes ago."

"Ooooh, look out, Dr. Monnaham's got jokes."

"...I'm not joking?"

He waved her off. "Yeah yeah, I know, you're a hip, funny biologist, not like the other biologists."

"What the fuck are you talking about! Look at the chart!"

He did so and froze.

"I...What?"

They were both silent for a beat.

"...You okay there, buddy?"

Saenz managed to eke out a confused “gnnkneh” noise, but otherwise said nothing.

“Okay, listen: It’s fine. It’s been a stressful few days. Things aren’t going anywhere, Yamada calls in sick every day like we can’t see her “YOLO 420,” Spacebook statuses every day, we ran out of the good granola bars; I get it-“

“But-“

“No. It’s cool. Let’s just...take the rest of the day off. We could both use some time to relax, and not think about any of this.”

Saenz looked guilty. “Are you sure it’s okay?”

“Yeah man, it’s fine. Just go home, plug in the old VR, play some Queendom <3s 5.3, and don’t think about anything with more than five legs.”

“5.3 has a level where you fight a giant spid-“

“Saenz, please don’t make me fire you.”

“Okay, okay.” He held up his hands in surrender, before getting up and gathering his things. “Thanks boss, I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yes, unfortunately you will.”

Q.C. sighed, turned off the light, and followed him out the door.

---

“This bites,” said Saenz the next day, gloomily staring at their latest failure.

Q.C. reached for the chart. “Of course it does, it’s a mosquito.”

“I Fucking despise you.”

“Call the union if you have a complaint.” She flipped it open to the current page, and paused.

“What number was that?” she whispered.

“Look, you don’t have to test me; yesterday was weird, but I’m fine now-“

“No, no ,no, I Need you to tell me what number that was.”

“...894?”

Jesus Christ. “Well, according to the chart, you are correct-“

“See! I told you!”

“-however, I was under the impression that it was number 891.”

Saenz sat up straighter. “Doc, what...”

“Your incident yesterday got me thinking... We both know Yamada is careless at best, and a directionless loser slob at worst-“

“Harsh.”

“-but what if the rise in frequency of her mix-ups as the trials went on weren’t just caused by her loss of commitment, but by something else?”

“Something like what?”

Q.C. tapped her foot on the linoleum, and then started for the cages. Saenz yelped as she grabbed an armful of individually housed female containers and dropped them on the table.

“Saenz, put five males in each of those cages.”

“But-!”

“No buts! This might go nowhere, but we are elbow deep in mosquitoes; a few wasted ones won’t kill us. But if I’m right...” She exhaled sharply. “Just do it.”

He did it.

---

“I was right.”

“You were right?”

“I was.”

“Doctor, we’ve been staring at them for fifteen minutes, PLEASE explain what you mean.”

Q.C. grinned. “Look in cage 4.”

“Look at WHAT?”

“The female is showing obvious interest in one of the males, but – look! As soon as he exits her periphery, she stops moving, pauses, and goes about like she never saw him.”

Saenz took a sip of coffee. “So she’s forgetting him.”

“She’s forgetting him!”

“Like we forgot them.”

“Like we forgot them!!!”

He took another longer sip. “So what do we do?”

She paused, took a swig as well, and then slammed down her mug decisively.

“We call Yamada!”

---

“Nyello?”

“Yamada!”

“O-oh, hey Dr. M,” Yamada forced out a cough. “How’s it going?”

“Great, listen, I need you to do something for me....”

“Oh man, geez. You know, I would, but this fever is Killing me, I can’t even move my arms –”

“Yamada, cut the shit. Saenz is friends with you on Mist, and we can see you’re in-game right now.” Q.C. winked at Saenz as he spluttered, definitely not online.

“Fuck. Okay, what do you need?”

“Nothing too strenuous, god forbid, but you’re gonna have to earn this month’s paycheck, so listen closely...”

---

The next day, Saenz opened the door to the lab. Q.C. had told him to go home in the middle of cajoling Yamada into doing... something, over her phone the night before, though she had shown no intent of leaving any time soon.

“Hello?” he said tentatively from the doorway.

“*Ophrys proxima!*” came a frenzied shout from behind a mountain of boxes. He walked in and took in the mess. Piles of cold storage and old equipment containers were covering most of the floor. When he walked behind them, he saw Q.C., and considered walking right back out.

"*Ophrys proxima*, Saenz!" Her glasses were crooked, and one of her cornrows had somehow come completely undone. Her lab coat was wadded in a ball on the floor with what looked like a head indent on it. She wore a look of extreme anguish.

"That's, uh, that's great. Listen, are those the same clothes as yesterday? Did you leave yesterday?"

"No, no, of course not. That's not important."

"Right."

"It's not important because I have. Had. A breakthrough!" She threw her arms up.

He cautiously put down his bag and sat on a foldout chair. "Well that's good news!"

"No!" She threw them back down.

"Oh."

"No, no, no, listen. See... listen."

"I'm listening."

"Okay, so, Yamada, right? She specializes in data entry and searching, which is the only reason I hired her lazy ass in the first place, goddamn her and her –"

"Focus."

"Right. Anyway. I had her go through the logs of every piece of genetic information we put into our bugs, looking for anything that seemed relevant. Specifically stuff about pheromones. And guess what? We found some fucking pheromones."

"*Ophrys proxima*?" Saenz guessed.

"Exactly. *Ophrys proxima*. Proximan orchids. The first strain of orchid developed off of Earth. Beautiful plant. Also its flower looks like a wasp, and it releases pheromones that make male wasps want to fuck it so it can pollinate."

"Oh yeah!"

"Right, so you can see the relevance. Except this strain doesn't just excel in chemical mimicry, but also chemical camouflage. Any bugs that aren't male wasps are almost certainly not gonna notice it."

“So like. The genes you spliced from the orchid, to make the mosquitoes sexy....”

“Uh huh.”

“...also, through some genetic twist, make them extremely forgettable.”

“Yep.”

“Just like my ex said about me...” he muttered, and then said out loud, “...and we can’t replace that gene with anything else?”

Q.C. shook her head.

“Damn...Wait, why are we forgetting them though? We weren’t exposed to them, it shouldn’t have affected – oh my god, the gloves.”

Q.C. cracked a pained smile that said he was right but also she maybe wanted to die. “Yamada forgot them before either of us, because she was too lazy to use gloves when handling them from the get-go. We must have all ingested it through skin contact.”

“Jesus.” He stood up, and got two cups of coffee from the machine, and handed one to her. Her tank top was coffee stained, and she had obviously been up for 48 hours, but she probably needed caffeine more than her health right now.

He sat down in his chair, she sat down on the floor, and they drank in silence. Eventually, he snorted.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“Nothing, nothing, it’s just,” he half-giggled, “What if we put rave blinkers or something on them? So the females couldn’t look away?”

Q.C. stared at him.

---

Five months later, a new breed of sexy, virile, and bioluminescent mosquito was released into the Proximan wild.