

Anton was late. As he burst through the door, a wall of warmth hit him, welcome relief from the frigid weather outside. He paused momentarily, steeling himself to brave the crush.

The crowd bubbled with good humour, their conversations blending into a continuous hum, punctuated by bursts of laughter. The Cave was heaving – a school had hired the venue for their annual rock concert, so the prittle-prattle of students droned around the room, competing with the DJ's bass-heavy beats.

Standing on tiptoes, Anton strained over a sea of heads that wore an exotic assortment of haircuts. Some were reduced to bristle, others dyed bright, a few carefully trained to stand tall. The school punk band was playing, so quite a few intimidating characters were hanging around, but behind all the piercings and body paint, Anton knew there were young hearts of gold.

Thanks to his false ID, he'd been to The Cave before and liked it. The style. The authenticity. Multi-species. While other venues had surrendered to modernisation, virtual reality pods and holographics, this place still had soul. Memories hung from its walls, vintage artefacts gathering dust on busy shelves. A few living relics clothed in various fades of black sat on stools, doggedly unmoved by the kids zipping excitedly around them.

There were two routes to the back room, and he needed to get there quickly – preferably unnoticed, because he knew how easily he could be distracted. Anton chose the less crowded route and pressed on, head down, irrationally hoping if he didn't see them, they wouldn't see him. He felt a few eyes looking and noticed a few pointing him out.

He pulled his phone from his back pocket and shook his head. Still late.

He pushed on, squeezing through gaps in the crowd that weren't really there. Insects turned, frowned, put out. *Too bad*. He needed to get there. They'd be angry and he'd apologise. He was used to apologising, and they were used to forgiving. That's how it worked in his life. He was late again; he said he was sorry again; they'd forgive him again.

It wasn't that he meant to be late. But the truth was, he was pretty disorganised, so if he actually remembered to add events and reminders to his phone, he'd more likely forget to charge it. Or it wouldn't have credit. He also found it hard to say he had to go. Never wanted to let anyone down. Maybe some supernatural force would whisk him through space and time, land him early for a meeting or catch-up or whatever he was inevitably late for.

He managed to push through the front room and found a bit of space under the arch. Beyond was the band room. No fancy décor. No umbrellas hanging from the ceiling. No seats. It was just a box – resplendent with walls of colourful, mostly illegible graffiti – with a stage at the end. Stretching up high, he scanned the crowd, looking for anyone he knew and the best route to avoid them. He wiped his brow with the back of his sleeve. *Nearly there*. He set off on the final push.

"Hiya."

He recognised the voice immediately. If he had a league table of the arthros he most wanted to avoid, she'd be at the top. But he knew he couldn't ignore her.

"Hey, Ems! How are you?" She was in her usual black. Lots of silky lace, stilettos; more holes than material in her tights. She wore a strip of black mascara above and below her piercing, unusually large green eyes. With closely cropped peroxide hair, pierced nose, ears and lips, she always stood out in a crowd.

"You look well," he said, nervously glancing at his phone again.

He and Ems had had a relationship. He thought she hoped they still might. He had treated her badly. Hadn't always been on time, had occasionally even forgotten to turn up at all. She couldn't understand why he hadn't called, and he couldn't understand why she'd made such a fuss. Anton had a way with girls. They liked his

scruffy good looks, his defiant outlook on life. His I-don't-have-a-style style. Band tee-shirt, ubiquitous leather jacket.

Ems' friends thought him arrogant. She would remind him of the time they'd been discussing hooking up with other species. Anton said he had no problem going with a spider or a caterpillar or whatever, but described a body type he wasn't attracted to. Her friend had said he was describing her body type. "That's why I'm not attracted to you," Anton had said, immediately regretting it.

"I'm great, thanks," Ems said assuredly. "Looking forward to tonight?" But before he had time to answer, she was waving to someone else. "Great! I'll catch you later," and she was gone, disappearing into the throng. Had she given him a signal? Maybe they'd hook up later.

He turned his attention back to the room. He could see the others. *Come on. Quickly!*

The room was packed shoulder to shoulder, a steady hum of patient anticipation filling the air. Unusually for a school concert, though, it wasn't only students waiting for the main act. There were older brothers and sisters and friends; some with no link to the school at all. They hadn't come for the student band but the main act – a young local outfit that was causing a stir around town. They hadn't been together long, but their reputation was growing. Grungy garage guitar fused with unexpectedly great melodies, said one review. The buzz in the room sharpened as the *crack* of the snare drum snapped against the *dum, dum, dum* of the bass guitar. Two musicians were in place, poised and ready, but the space for the third, centre stage, remained empty.

That space was for him.

Bag slung over one shoulder, guitar case clutched to his chest, Anton made his final push towards the stage. And then a knee pressed into the back of his thigh. He stumbled, whipped around, ready to have a go – but in an instant, recognition melted his irritation. Smiling, they clasped hands and pressed shoulders.

"Hey, man!"

"You made it!" Anton replied, genuinely happy. "Did you see those Black Jackets?"

"Yeah. Who were those guys?"

Anton shook his head and shrugged. "Look, man, I've gotta go. Talk about it later, yeah? I'm so bloody late!"

He was in mid-seeyalater hug when a spider, exotic in tight black leather, enormous bubble sunglasses, and a shock of wild curly hair grabbed him by the collar. "What the hell! Where have you been? Like, we've been waiting for ages!"

"Whoa! You better go, man," the friend said, slapping Anton on his back. "I wouldn't mess with her."

The diminutive mass of crazy ringlets turned and looked him up and down, and then, with a voice full of sassy disdain, said: "Listen, idiot, why don't you just go and play with yourself, yeah? And it's not 'her', it's 'them'. Got it?"

As his friend held up his hands in submission, Anton stumbled onto the stage, shaking his head. "Sorry, guys. Got held up. You won't believe what happened to me," he said, frantically unpacking his bag as the ball of angry black leather climbed up behind their drum kit and took out their anger on the snare and kick drums.

"Glad you could make it," smiled the composed bee, a bass guitar slung around her thorax. There was just a hint of irony in her voice. She hovered calmly in front of her amplifier, a red tartan miniskirt and dark blue top set off with a white Peter Pan collar and cuffs. Dark hair, cut in a severe fringe, hung just above her eyes.

"Hey, Hon!" Stopping what he was doing for a moment, Anton smiled at the bee. "You look cool." He meant it. Friendship aside, he couldn't deny how striking she looked. Honey flashed him a demure smile.

Anton returned to his equipment. "I'm sorry, guys. It's been a hectic day. I lost all track of time. I'll tell you

about it later.” He plugged in. Amp to pedalboard, pedalboard to guitar. Head down, he kicked a few switches and started tuning.

He strummed. Nothing. Checked the volume. Fiddled with his leads. Hit a foot switch. Good.

Another strum. More silence. He scratched his head, confused.

“For God’s sake, man!” The drummer ripped off their sunglasses, fixing him with a glare. “This is exactly why we do soundchecks!”

“Hang on,” the bass player said calmly, reaching behind his amp. She flicked a switch. “Probably best if we turn it on.”

He strummed again. This time a loud *grrring* rang out from the speaker. An ironic cheer erupted in front of the stage. He smiled ruefully to his bandmates, the first eye contact of the night. They were ready.

Up until now, his back had been to the audience. But now he was forced to face them, and confront his biggest demon. Despite all the cool swagger, Anton got super-nervous before playing. It would start as a quiet tickle in his chest, then an ever-increasing tightness would build through the hours before, until he became a pit of heaving anxiety.

He fiddled needlessly with his tuning and adjusted the mic stand, all the time his heart pounding. He knew everyone was watching him. Later, he’d flirt with them, and they’d love him and the music. But for the moment, he just wanted them to disappear.

He turned to the drummer, who, anger now dissipated, gave him a reassuring raise of their eyebrows and a faint nod of approval. They knew about his anxiety. The bass player met his glance with a quiet, knowing smile. She mouthed, ‘okay?’ He ‘okayed’ back. He had this. He always did. He leaned forward into the mic.

“H-hello.” He turned away from the mic, coughed and swallowed, strummed a chord. He could feel the tightness in his chest disperse slightly. “Thanks for coming out tonight,” he said. The lights dropped. Another strum. A round of whoops and whistles. “We hope you enjoy the show.” A small cheer. Heartbeat normal, throat clear, brain in gear. From behind, four quick taps of the drumsticks. On what would have been the fifth tap, the band exploded into their opener, and the room went wild. High energy, impossible to stand still, any attempt at conversation futile. It was loud, raw and catchy, and the crowd was swept along on a wave of adrenaline that lasted the entire set.

Although they didn’t realise it, each of them exuded an effortless cool. Spyder, their head often turned to the side in concentration was in complete command. Four corkscrewing limbs beat out a dancing, driving rhythm that, from time to time, brought out the widest of grins – as if she was celebrating being possessed by some dark melodic presence. Honey stared out to no one and everyone, in control. And then, suddenly, one leg would plant in front of the other. She dipped and recoiled in emphasis to the music before returning upright, statuesque and detached. She wasn’t seeking to charm, but the audience was charmed anyway.

And then there was Anton. As the set went on, he played with ever more frantic energy – urgent and unfiltered, his right knee keeping the rhythm while he slammed his guitar, as if the music was trying to burst out of him. Anton wasn’t interested in polish. He snarled and shouted with fire, veins bulging, sweat flying, eyes burning with passion.

But beneath the anger was purpose. Anton’s songs were both poetic *and* political, and he wasn’t scared to share his views. Tonight, he told the audience of his experience at the march and the aggressive Black Jackets – his performance almost a rallying cry.

“Thank you! Thank you very much!” he shouted over the applause, out of breath and buzzing. “You’ve been an amazing audience, and this has been an amazing night.”

More cheering and clapping mixed with whooping and shouting rattled around the room. As the front of the stage chanted, 'we want more,' he couldn't help but beam. He glanced over at the rest of the band. They grinned back at him, a little overwhelmed by the fervour of the reception.

Turning back to the crowd, he raised his arms to quieten them. "Before we play our last song, I want to introduce the band," he announced. "First, on bass guitar, please put your hands and anything else you clap with together... for Honey Beeeel!"

The crowd cheered and clapped in time as they shouted, 'Hon-ey! Hon-ey!' In return, Honey B gripped her guitar to her chest, bowed slightly and flashed a bashful smile from beneath her fringe. No one would have guessed she felt out of place in a sweaty club packed with punk rockers.

When the cheering died down, Anton continued. "And on drums, please show your appreciation for..." But before he could finish the sentence, someone shouted, 'We love you Spyder', and that started a chorus of 'Spy-der! Spy-der!'

Spyder wasn't one for shy glances and modest curtsies. As the applause swelled, they leapt from their stool, punching the air in time with the chants. Unashamedly out there, they vaulted over the drumkit and grabbed the microphone.

"Thank you! Yeah! Hey, y'all." They slung an arm around Anton's shoulder. "Hey, you guys, what about putting your hands together for the guy who brought us all together? Give it up for Ant-awwwn!"

The impassioned applause told it all. They knew Anton had a rare talent – a voice full of storytelling, sometimes gritty and angry, other times soft and vulnerable. His guitar playing was raw and stripped of airs and graces – just perfect for the music he wrote.

"Thank you! Thanks again," Anton said, waving. "So, this is our last song of the evening." He chimed out a riff that the crowd immediately recognised. "Thanks for coming tonight. We are Them Creepy Crawlies," Anton shouted, his words punctuated by an increasingly loud staccato guitar: "And this is... Them. Creepy. Crawlies!"

The band launched into their eponymous track, and the crowd went wild.

Them Creepy Crawlies
Crawling through my hair
Their tickle-tickle
I find it hard to bear.

An arthro mosh pit is a terrifying place. Tightly packed legs, arms, pincers, wings, antennae and mandibles shook and pogoed, leapt and lurched. The ants and beetles at the front of the stage shouted the words back. Dressed in black or brown, they moshed with excited good humour. It wasn't for the fainthearted. You could get hurt if you didn't commit yourself. Crowd surfing, an ant was hoisted high, passed around, only to drop unceremoniously to the ground, capsized with legs and arms grasping helplessly.

Back from the chaos, a cross-section of more mature arthropods swayed and tapped, enjoying the music but taking a bit more care with their outfits. Ladybugs, dramatic in their red polka-dotted cloaks. Dragonflies, iridescent in blue, violet and purple. Earwigs with clippers securely bound. Caterpillars, outstanding in orange pants and yellow or rose jackets. They all stood tall on strong back legs, singing along with verve.

Further back, bumpy locusts and wide-eyed grasshoppers in green and tan jumpsuits bounced out of time like poorly coordinated trapeze artists.

And right at the back, butterflies and moths provided the most colourful of backdrops – a kaleidoscope of pink, crimson, gold and violet. Of course, everyone was there for the band, but everyone liked to see their

glamorous outfits.

Locked in the moment, the band played as if on autopilot. Unencumbered by their instruments, they were lost in the music. And Anton? Well, it was hard to look away. Eyes closed. A right leg rhythmically stomping. Infected, the arthropods gyrated, shook and sparkled under the spotlights, long ago having surrendered to his spell.

Back out in the front room, the rhythm pulled the grumpy regulars out of indifference and forced a twitch or a tap. Outside, even the cicadas couldn't help but scrape their wings in time.

And beyond the venue, where no one had heard of Them Creepy Crawlies, arthropods of all classes and species got on with life's ups and downs, all bound by something mysterious and arcane. This wasn't swarms of disorganised insects, myriapods, arachnids and crustaceans – small, insignificant or weak. This was life, most advanced. Organised and strong. Evolved and intelligent.

As the instrumental part of the song came to an end, Anton opened his eyes, smiled at the crowd, and prepared them to yell out the final chorus of their most popular song:

Creepy, creepy, creepy, creepy, crawlies

Creepy, creepy, creepy, creepy, crawlies

Creepy, creepy, creepy, creepy

CRAAWWWLIIIIIEEEES!