

Texas Chainsaw Mantis

by

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Excerpt 2

Darkness. Warmth. Safety.

Matthew dreamed he was back inside his ootheca. His birth sac.

Instinct and genetic memory urged his dream self forward, just a slimy worm pushing through the soft walls of the sac, groping for fresh air. His only thought at that primitive stage of development:

Hungry.

Like a comical slow motion sack race, dozens of his brothers and sisters flopped out of the ootheca around him, each dangling precariously off of a single thin line connected to the outer membrane that they each struggled to escape from.

Instinctively, each mantis knew that this race was for more than freedom from the egg sac. It was a fight for life as the first free from their membrane were free to feast on the slower nymphs.

Matthew was not among the first wave.

He struggled to free his head from the thin membrane covering his entire body, the screams of his siblings accentuating the urgency of the newborn mantis's escape.

Just as his mandibles opened and closed for the first time, he felt a tug on his sack string. Panicking, he thrashed back and forth, sensing eminent danger, trying to free his foreclaws and legs, but it was no use. The membrane was still sticky and wet. He was food for his dry brothers and sisters. His sustenance would give them the energy to hop off the sac and face the dangers of the world.

Finally his head swiveled around and he was able to see his surroundings.

His sac was only one of many hung from a ceiling inside a white room. It was a human hospital converted into a mantis birthing chamber, but of course Matthew didn't know that yet.

Suddenly the nymph next to him was yanked up. It let out a frightened scream. It had been able pull one foreclaw free, which was further than Matthew had managed to get. But that didn't matter. The mantis hauling the nymph up was completely dry, completely free of its membrane. It didn't waste a second, digging its mandibles directly into the eye of the nymph, ending its life before its life had even started. The baby mantis worked on the nymph for several minutes before dropping it to the floor.

Matthew did his best to remain still so as not to attract the attention of his hungry brother. But as he glanced down to the floor, he saw the eaten out husks of dozens of nymphs. Maybe hundreds.

He was unable to suppress a startled cry.

The hungry mantis above him froze.

Matthew closed his eyes, willing his membrane cocoon to dry and set him free so he could at least defend himself before he died.

His brother climbed down onto Matthew's sac string and waited for Matthew to make a single move. They hung there, swaying back and forth for a moment, locked in the predator and prey dance of wills.

And then an even bigger brother snatched the hungry mantis from behind and chewed his head off before moving on to bigger prey. The dead brother's body knocked into Matthew's cocoon as it fell to the corpse strewn floor.

Matthew let out a sigh of relief, but remained tense and scared out of his wits. If he didn't get off his sac string soon, there would be nothing to save him, not even luck.

All of the jostling about seemed to have helped the membrane dry, as he soon found his foreclaws free, while the nymphs to his right and left who had come out of the sac at the same time were still struggling to free a single limb.

A minute later and his legs were free. He disengaged from the sac string and cautiously

scampered up to the base of his sac on the ceiling. After assessing the nearby sacs and deciding the threat level was minor, he set to work on his first goal as a newborn mantis.

It was his turn to eat.

After his ordeal, he decided it wouldn't be right to eat nymphs struggling to escape their cocoons, so he only targeted those who had yet to emerge from their membranes at all. He still heard them scream inside their protective shells. He still felt terrible doing it, but he had to eat. Instinct told him: *This is our way.*

He dropped husk after husk to the growing pile, feeling sustained after four or five nymphs had been consumed. He'd decided to eat one more before leaving the nesting area and venturing out into the light far across the room where his brothers and sisters who were lucky enough to live were scampering.

That's when he saw her.

Struggling to get her hind legs and abdomen free of their sticky coating.

“Help. Somebody please help. I-I can't get out.”

Matthew froze. He didn't plan to eat her. He wasn't hungry anymore. Even if he had been, there was no way he could harm her. She was beautiful.

Even in distress, the way her long, sleek triangular head met her huge, round eyes made his heart flutter. Her voice was high and whimsical. Her neck was long. That was his favorite part, he decided, hanging there, upside down, motionless, staring at her.

Finally she looked up and caught him leering. She stopped moving.

“Are you going to eat me or help me?” she asked, defiant, crossing her foreclaws.

It truly was love at first sight. Matthew couldn't take his eyes off her. He smiled and stuttered out his very first words. “Sorry! I'll get you free. Just a sec—”

He was bowled over by two much larger mantises. The first stopped just long enough to take a bite out of Matthew's abdomen before hopping off the sac he'd been standing on, over to the struggling

girl's.

“Look at this little one,” The bigger of the two full grown mantises said. “I can't decide whether to eat her or take her home and make her my wife!”

“Hurry up!” the one who'd taken a bit out of Matthew said as he scooped up claws full of nymphs. “You know we're not allowed in here. Grab as many as you can and go!”

The big mantis snatched up all the nymphs around the pretty girl, smashing her into his foreclaws to make room for more. She screamed as her abdomen was crushed.

Matthew stayed still, holding his own wound closed so he didn't bleed out or attract more predatory mantises.

“YOU TWO! OUT! You know better! This birthing facility is OFF LIMITS!”

Another pair of full grown mantises, this time female and twice the size of the two looters stepped through the light and into the room full of egg sacs.

The nymph robbers dropped their loot and dashed across the eggs, ripping some of them free from the ceiling as a distraction, causing the nymphs struggling outside them to smash on the ground.

The females pursued, rushing to cut the robbers off from a back exit through which they'd sneaked. The females opened their wings and dashed forward in flight, knocking the robber mantises into the wall. They wasted no time eating their heads off before dragging their bodies toward the light at the front of the room.

“Wait! Please!” Matthew said, hopping to the ground in spite of his injury. He scampered to where the young female had fallen. She was still alive. “Help her! She's badly hurt!”

The females stopped and turned around. “We cannot interfere with the birth ritual. You must walk into the light of your own volition. This is our way. It is our right.”

The young mantis girl coughed up bright green blood. Matthew took her in his claws.

“I'll take you out. They'll have to help you once we cross into the light, won't they?”

“T-thank you...” she whimpered. “What's your name?”

Matthew cocked his head. "I don't have one."

"Me either..."

Matthew wiped blood off her mandibles. "Can I name you?"

It was the girl's turn to smile, even through tremendous pain. "Sure."

"I'll call you angel. Because you look like an angel from heaven."

Matthew didn't know what that meant, he was just speaking from instinct, from the memory of the speakers that pumped music into the birthing room throughout the duration of the egg sacs' gestation through the winter months.

"I like it. My turn," the young female said. "Come close."

Matthew smiled and leaned his head close to hers.

In a flash she grabbed his head in her foreclaws and tried to bite his face off. She thrashed and snapped her mandibles inches from his eyes, but she was too weak to pull him all the way down to her mouth. "Stop! Stop!" Matthew screamed, pulling away, horrified.

Angel crawled out from under the bodies covering her hind segment. It was totally crushed. Her legs were all mangled. She snapped at Matthew again and again, crazed with hunger and pain.

"I-I'm trying to help you!" Matthew said, unable to process the wounded mantis's actions.

She lunged at him again, grabbing his foreclaw, trying to bite into it. Matthew pulled away.

Three more nymphs dropped to the ground next to Angel. They wasted no time devouring her in right in front of Matthew before turning on him, bits of Angel still twitching between their mandibles.

He ran as fast as he could toward the light, screaming all the way.

Screaming in fear of his life.

Screaming at what he'd seen.

Screaming himself awake.

