

The VIP seating was not set up for a giant bug. Reldap stood holding Klak while there was a hurried conference among the reception's organizers. An assistant quickly returned with a board and a couple of sawhorses. She set up the small platform alongside the other seats. Reldap placed Klak on the board, but Klak's squawking stopped him from taking his seat. Reldap nodded.

"Klak wishes to have a podium," said Reldap. He quickly explained what was needed, and a short time later, a half-meter long piece of six by six (why did we still use inches for dimensional lumber when the U.S. finally switched officially to metric in 2061?) appeared. Reldap slipped the piece of wood under Klak's middle set of legs, and the e-Flek expressed his satisfaction with the arrangement. All was ready.

Vicki Nguyen, assistant director of the Office of Alien Relations (OAR), stood up. Just a couple of years out of college, a combination of legitimate competence, an agreeable disposition, and her father's financial largesse had landed her the plum position.

Despite the word "director" in the title, she was still a political ingénue, and giving the introductory remarks at the landing was punching above her weight. However, she had no alternative. Her boss, who was even more connected despite being less competent and less agreeable, was off on one of his "fact-finding" tours in the French countryside and couldn't be disturbed, even for the landing of a new alien race.

She took a deep breath and started. "Good afternoon, everyone. On behalf of the Office of Alien Relations, I welcome you all here..."

Ms. Nguyen was interrupted by loud sounds coming from Klak.

Reldap spoke up. "He says she is noisy and rambling," he said. "I am sorry, he does not understand human ways. Give me a moment."

The Prez shifted uncomfortably. "Hey, this is supposed to be about me. Well, I mean, not about me, but you know, about me. What is this crap?"

Vicki spoke. "I'm sure we'll get this straightened out momentarily."

"You better, kiddo," said The Prez. "Otherwise, I don't care how much money your daddy gave me. I mean, gave my campaign."

The poor woman looked like she had been slapped but said nothing. While all this was happening, Reldap opened his ever-present shoulder bag and took out another translator unit. He powered it up and fiddled with the settings. After a couple of minutes, he walked over to Klak's table. He spoke briefly with Klak. The beetle replied, and Reldap looped the translator's lanyard over Klak's head.

"I apologize," said Reldap. "I did not prepare Klak fully for this ceremony. We have talked, and I have explained this human custom to Klak. I have also provided him with a translator that will allow him to understand human American speech and translate his statements into English. I think things will go more smoothly now."

Moorehead gave Reldap a dirty look but said nothing. "May I continue?" said Vicki. The Prez nodded.

The assistant director spoke. "Well," she said as she put on her best customer relations smile, "now that we are all settled, let me be the first to welcome Reldap back to Earth and offer my

personal warmest and heartiest welcome to our Flektanian visitors. This is a great day for Earth, Lattern, and our new Flektanian friends. Without further delay, let me give the floor to Albert Moorehead, President of the United States of America!”

The audience applauded. The Prez got to his feet and wobbled to the speaker’s podium. He gripped both sides of the stand, steadied himself, and smiled.

“My fellow Americans and other critters,” he started. Several in the audience cringed. “Last September, my buddy Relly popped off his spaceship and into our hearts.” He grinned. “What a wild ride. He helped expose that jerk Phil Jackner for what he is, a low-down dirty...”

An aide quickly got up and whispered in The Prez’s ear.

“Yeah, sorry, right. Getting a little off-topic. Sorry about that. Listen, we’ve been having terrible problems with those brainsuckers. I’m glad Reldap and his people are finally doing something about it. I’ve never seen anything quite like it. A giant friggin’ beetle that eats brainsuckers. Just what we need!

“But I got one question. Are we sure that it’s OK with these bugs? I mean, are they OK with being here and helping us? Anyway, who cares, right? They’re just bugs, and our friend Relly and his crew wouldn’t exploit these things, would they?” He looked pointedly at Reldap and Penfor.

This is strange, *I thought*. Since when did Albert Moorehead develop a conscience? There has to be another agenda.

“...so it’s all good. They should help. Welcome to America. I mean Earth. Whatever. And we stand in solidarity with our new alien friends.” He wobbled back to behind the curtain.

The field was utterly silent. Vicki Nguyen went to the podium. Big customer service smile.

“Thank you, Mr. President. Reldap has indicated that Klak would like to make some remarks.”

Reldap walked over to the flek’s table. Klak’s antennae started moving, and his front legs began waving.

“Latternite, is this safe?”

“Yes, Klak.”

“No raptopods?”

“No.”

“No nestodons?”

“No. It’s fine, really.”

“No lapenths?”

“No, certainly no lapenths. We are not on your home planet. There are no native predators here.”

“What is this help with brainsuckers? What are brainsuckers? I am to help these mammals? Who said anything about helping mammals?”

I was observing this carefully. Looked like Reldap hadn’t told our new guest about our plans.

“Klak, brainsucker is the Earth’s name for kleptron. There are free kleptrons on this planet.”

“What is wrong with that? You Latternites love getting bitten by a kleptron.”

“For humans, it is not a good thing. We must help them get rid of the kleptrons.”

The e-Flek paused. “If I find one, can I eat it?”

“We’ll see.”

“Latternite dog, what do you mean we’ll see? They are tasty. I will not help if I cannot eat the kleptrons.”

The other five e-Fleks started moving around quickly but aimlessly. They looked agitated.

Reldap looked imploringly at me. What was I supposed to do? I shrugged my shoulders.

Reldap finally spoke. “Yes, I suppose you can eat the kleptrons.”

“Good.”

“It is customary in human situations like this one for the guest of honor to make some remarks,” said Reldap.

“I am the guest of honor?”

“Yes.”

Klak paused. It was hard for the beetle to turn because he was propped on his podium, but he managed to look around. “All right,” he said.

“Mammals,” he started and then paused. *Oh shit*, I thought.

“Mammals, I do not spit in your presence,” he said. Reldap was shocked. There was no greater insult among Fleks. “I have studied Earth. Your history. Your evolution. Shame on you! I am here to right a great wrong. I stand with the arthropods of Earth. Their cause is my cause. My legs are their swords. My exoskeleton is their shield. My voice is their call for justice. For millions of years, you have oppressed us. For millions of years, you have eaten us, exterminated us, and treated us as pests. You have ignored our rightful place in evolution.

“Our ancestors were here hundreds of millions of years before you were. We ruled the seas before the fishes. Our dragonfly brothers and sisters, who live to this day, flew above the dinosaurs. And yet, despite all of our contributions to Earth, change continued, and we were left behind.

“Yes, change continued. Amphibians. Reptiles. Those vile birds. And then you, the mammals. So proud of your thermal homeostasis. So proud of your fur. So proud of your milk.” I could not believe what I was hearing. This was crazy. Was this thing going to help solve the kleptron problem?

Klak continued. “What do you do to us? Raccoons eat crayfish. Chimpanzees eat termites.” He paused. “And then we come to you. The humans. The highest form of life. The pinnacle of biology. Ha! You humans, you humans are the worst. You wrest lobsters from the sea bottom. You farm shrimp to be eaten. You enslave and exploit the bees. You put pins through butterflies. You have spent endless billions of dollars on insecticide. Ant traps. Flypaper. Crop dusters. You have made common cause with the Latternite dogs, who have exploited us for hundreds of your years.”

Penfor, who until this point had said nothing, seemed to finally lose her cool and started to speak. Reldap said something in Lattern and shushed her.

Klak continued to speak. "We have fought back. We bite you. Mosquito patriots infect you. My scorpion allies sting you. Bedbugs bedevil you, yet you persist.

"Now, I know some mammals don't do these things. There are some humans who are very fine people. But this must end. I am the only one who can help. I will undo the lie of evolution. I will topple this fiendish hierarchy. I lead the Flektanian Earth Expeditionary Force! I will make arthropods great again!" Klak rambled on and on.

An aide sidled up to Moorehead. "Sir, I realize that we were told to expect some odd behavior and outlandish statements, but this? Isn't this a bit overboard? Can we really work with this?"

"Kid, trust the plan."

"Yes, sir."