

Greenwire II

By

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I wasn't sure where else to look. So I let the grill-smoke sting my eyes for a minute or so. The whole time, worry broiled in the back of my head. This wasn't going well. This couldn't possibly work out. I wasn't ready. I couldn't be- but this was the situation I put myself in, and this was my punishment. The whole time, juicy burger-flesh sizzled and popped, ten, then forty, then every pore was pushing out smoke faster than my eyes could follow, beautiful thick disks of dinner shrinking and warping before eyes that weren't really paying attention. I could've been standing there for hours, just...waiting them out. Fearing the rest of the evening. But the sharp poke of chitin behind one shoulder knocked me out of it.

"Kckkt-tchh-kk?"

Well, I'll fess up- I'm a jumpy guy, so I practically fell backward into my Guest: and, it's something I never thought about, but they're even worse when you look at them from upside down. It's like how you see a stick bug in a box in a zoo, and you laugh and think, 'how does that innocent little guy hide from anything', but in the woods, you come across one on the underside of the flimsy branch you pretend is a walking stick, and the disorientation makes it look more like something out of a horror movie.

Anyway. That was pretty much my reaction when the barbs of sage arms clung into the back of my shirt and those jagged mandibles loomed over me for a solid four or five seconds. Obviously, it was just doing me a favor catching me, and I appreciated it, but, damn- I don't think all the showers in the world could've kept me from fidgeting like I'd fallen into a bramble patch when the awkwardness of that moment passed, and Maxine refilled my champagne while I tried to calm down in our shitty patio chair, under the ever-present leer of the New Mexico sun overhead. The whole time, I couldn't keep from staring at her apologize to our Guests.

“Tchaaa-kkn. Khhtt-chccck-kkkk.”

You don't know your wife until you hear the halting, clicking warble of our Guests come out of her mouth. Or, rather, until you see it- I didn't imagine the human vocal chords were capable of producing such sounds until she fell into introductions like it was a second language. She'd been enrolled in classes for a year now, something about cultural exchange that I hadn't really grasped the usefulness of until this very moment. This was my first time meeting Guests in any personal setting. She'd mentioned telling them my name. I was still trying to pick out which collection of chirps comprised the oh-so-mundane 'Russel Wilkes'.

“Khhhaaa-chik! Ttchh hmkaaa.”

One of our three Guests extended its forearm towards the burned, rock-like burgers I'd pulled off the grill after the incident. Maxine hesitated- then nodded. And, Christ, they dug into those pucks of black like a pile of prime rib. Those mandibles can clamp down on something harder than a snapping turtle, they were biting the damn things in half. I was glad I took Max's advice regarding quantity, too, I pushed the limits of how many burgers I could fit on a grill, and watching them rip away...I get why.

After a bit, she came and sat down beside me. Instantly, I was flashing her a look of what I can only assume comes off like...awkward terror. Maxine only let out one of those little, faux-exasperated sighs, flattening her summer dress against her legs.

“Russ, I know it's a little bit weird.”

“What- the twelve-foot arthropods eating the burgers I fucked up? I wasn't even thinking about it.”

“They don’t seem picky. Maybe that’s something you could learn from ‘em.”

Her tone was as serious as ever (which is to say, not particularly), but the smile was all teasing, and she knew I knew it. I couldn’t help but let out what sounded like the weakest chuckle I could muster as I pulled a cigarette off the table.

“I don’t know even know I worked up the will to ask it out here.”

My eyes fell on the smallest of the bunch. To my credit, I did my best to try and tell them apart, even if they didn’t really have names. It was a bit more of an ochre color than the others, it had the longest legs. And there was kind of a...trapezoidal shape to its mandibles. It was also the one I’d met first, at Greenwire’s most reliable Guest affiliate facility. Guest affiliates, if you don’t know, are the factories they build to crank out that sleek technology of theirs. Usually, they’re strangely happy to be assimilated into the private corporations that offer them the best benefits. So companies like Greenwire, that own a lot of Guest affiliates, have the easiest access to their tech. They’re why our grill is sitting on a plasma vent instead of a bed of charcoal.

Ochre broke off from the group when I was about half done with my cigarette. Skittered over here faster than I could blink- I mean, maybe that’s not the right term for it, but their bottom half is somewhere between a spider and an ornate dining chair, so it feels wrong to call it walking. And, like every time one clearly had the intent on addressing me directly, I did my best to look it in as many eyes as I could manage. It might’ve only had six, but they were spread so far apart it was like looking at a hammerhead shark.

“Chaaakaaaaa. Thhhraaaak-ccckkk.”

It held its syllables a lot more compared to how they usually spoke. I didn’t know what to make of that until Maxine laid her hand on mine, grinning with delight.

“It liked your food, hon.”

It wasn't something I was used to hearing. Not even from her, my cooking was generally regarded as being pretty shit. And she loves me to death. So, I maybe sat there for a bit longer than was polite, basking in that little bit of twisted pleasure from burning the burgers to their satisfaction.

“Tell it...um, that I appreciate it.”

And Max went and made the noise that meant that, I suppose. Ochre kind of stood there for a bit, and I noticed that it was taking a second to grind the barbs on its forearms together. Like dusting its hands off, at least, that's the comparison I made. Maxine told me before we agreed to start all this that I shouldn't be doing that, that it was disingenuous to see any of their behavior as analogues to human interaction. That they were different, and it was important to realize that. Which...I do, but sitting there in my backyard in the middle of August with three Guests mandible-first in a pile of charred meat, I don't know. I'm looking for anything to make them seem a little less scary.

After dinner we went inside to watch *Lucy*, which Maxine insisted on. Maybe just trying to show them what an ordinary human family looked like. I don't think I've ever seen anything pay such close attention to a television set. They kind of curl up on themselves- since they don't fit on our couch, obviously- and then it's total silence for the next half an hour. Funny thing, though, I watched them for a bit when I came back from the restroom, and I swear their antennae were twitching a little whenever there was laughing. So, for a while, here are me and Max, sitting in the middle of our couch, with these giant, twitching roly-pollies scattered around in our living room, and I'll be the first to admit it, it didn't seem so damn weird for a while. About

an hour later, we were wrapping up dessert. Up-close at the end of the table, I could see the fluorescent green specks of gelation fly out of their eviscerating grasp, involuntarily and gradually turning our refrigerator an even uglier shade of taupe green. Each jiggly little dot of it a pretty stark reminder that these were, again, Guests.

The sun was long gone by the time we walked them out to the driveway. The heat had subsided enough to where the biggest worry were gnats, which I slapped at uselessly as we stepped outside, best summer shoes clicking against our driveway like it was ushering them back home. They didn't drive, of course, but we didn't know that, so our car sat parked pathetically at the street by the end of our manicured lawn, the driveway empty save for the three enormous, chitinous shapes skittering outdoors. They seemed even more excitable than when we'd been in the backyard with the sun up- I'd been told they weren't nocturnal. It felt like it.

"Tchka-mmm."

I looked up at Olive, who I kept wanting to take as the leader of the trio, but maybe that's because it was the biggest, most imposing of the group, with a far more curved mandible than Ochre. And for some reason, the weight that I had to personify these creatures based on measuring their appearance seemed heavier than it had before. The reason for this little dinner party came back to the forefront, and I swear, it took all I had to keep from laughing out loud at the absurdity of it. I was supposed to cozy up to our Guests and try and get some sort of trade secrets. These giant acquaintances of ours, with their penchant for burned food and apparently exceedingly polite chirping I couldn't make heads of tails of. I named them after colors, and I get discomfited at the sight of them, we can't talk, I can't read their expression, and-

And I don't think I could've stopped the choked, stupid giggle at myself even if I had the time. This was my job! There was no processing the confused embarrassment on Maxine's face before I was laughing so hard I doubled over against our car, practically wheezing for breath. This madman, laughing his head off in the driveway, this was the guy they were banking on! Oh, God, it went on- there were tears in my eyes, I could feel them, my hands were on my knees, I was halfway to falling over- and before I knew it, there was the strange weight of those barbs on one shoulder, I could barely see Ochre through the tears, head bowed, antennae twitching along furiously. Even blurrier were the shapes of Max, Sage, and Olive, standing by our mailbox, looking for all the world like I'd gone completely mad, me and this Guest of ours.

Maxine keeps telling me that their language is less about how you speak and more about how you hear. I'd swear I heard it laughing, too.