SECOND THOUGHTS

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*Science fiction is more than just supposition about future science, technology, and encounters with unknown life forms. It is also a metaphor for human nature and our success or failure in how cultures interact.*

**DAY ONE**  
Tuesday, June 15

     At high noon a large spaceship floated gently down out of a blue sky to land on the front lawn of the White House. It rested motionless for the next five hours while the White House hummed with activity. The President was evacuated and then the military moved in with troops, tanks and helicopters. Stealth fighters roared overhead. Both Congress and the United Nations called emergency sessions as a frightened world held its breath.

     At exactly 5:00 p.m. eastern time, a small door opened in the side of the craft and a human-like creature stepped out.

     As beings go, it wasn't that alarming. About three feet tall, it had a large head atop a small body with two spindly legs. And there were feather-like appendages growing from its head as well as from what could have been a tail if it were a bird. But it moved like a human and wore a one-piece uniform of a gold metallic material that sparkled in the sun. Walking to the nearest soldier, it stopped short, its two unnaturally large eyes blinking twice. Then in perfect English with a high-pitched voice, it said, "Take me to your esteemed leader."

     After much military and political consternation, the request was granted. Standing before the President of the United States, who was seated at his desk in the oval office surrounded by half a dozen secret agents, the little being bowed. "President and Chief Commander, I humbly come to you as ambassador facilitator for an ancient and distinguished race. Please realize that you're dealing with beings of such power that their purpose must be friendly or you'd have already been destroyed in my humble estimation."

     It paused to scratch the base of a head feather. "I myself am Mooba. My kind are respected throughout the universe as the finest of translators. I must tell you that the Xxlepis ship has been moored at the edge of your solar system for a year now while I've been studying your languages and customs on their behalf. I know all there is to know about all of you, in my humble opinion."

     The President smiled halfheartedly, "Should I find that comforting?"

     Mooba brightened, "Of course. Because I'm thorough I rarely make mistakes." He shrugged. "I'll admit to a few, but none that wasn't rectified. I'm sorry to inform you that yours is not the only species I considered for contact on this planet. There are some others more appealing, but yours is the most intelligent. And yours is also the only species believing themselves in charge."

     The President's eyebrows lifted at such a statement.

     Mooba continued, "For purposes of decorum, tomorrow I will teach you about the Xxlepis." His top feathers suddenly stiffened. "Be forewarned. Although highly evolved intellectually, the Xxlepis are emotionally fragile and quick to perceive imaginary insults if decorum isn't carefully followed. They're quirky that way--easily offended. And if you offend them you will not reap the benefits they can bestow."

     "Fair enough" the President agreed, but his expression was one of puzzlement.

     The conversation was over.

**DAY TWO**  
Wednesday, June 16

     The next day two soldiers were sent to escort Mooba back to the White House, but he wasn't on the spaceship. Instead, when the President with his staff and secret agents arrived at the meeting room, Mooba was already there. Without anyone noticing, he had left the spaceship, slipped through a ring of military, a mob of reporters and White House staff to find the secured meeting room no one had told him about the day before. It unnerved the President and particularly his secret agents.

     Standing at the back of the room Mooba waited for everyone to get settled. Then he abruptly began, "The first thing to do when introduced...is to bow. Some of your human cultures already practice that formality. And the second thing after bowing... is to do nothing." He paused for emphasis. "It's best, Sir President, to allow me to do all the talking, particularly in the beginning. The Xxlepis themselves rarely speak because words to them are sacred. They believe that by saying less, what is said increases in value. So speaking only at the end of a conversation is a sign of respect. Of course, in my humble opinion, that makes for very short conversations." It was hard to tell if Mooba was joking so no one laughed.

     The alien continued. "The Xxlepis find it difficult dealing with other cultures, so they take great care to insulate themselves. In addition to being their translator I serve as a filter to shield their refined sensibilities--but still I must be accurate and complete. Not an easy job, in my humble opinion. The Xxlepis are emotional, you see. Despite all their sophistication, they just want to be loved and they can't handle rejection. I think you humans can appreciate that." He watched as one of the staff arose and walked to a table at the side of the room pouring himself a cup of coffee.

     "What's that?"

     "The President smiled. "It's coffee, a common beverage. And there's also donuts. Would you like some?"

     Mooba's top feathers twitched excitedly. "Certainly." He stepped quickly across the room and to everyone's surprise gulped down a whole carafe of hot coffee. Then he grabbed several donuts. Returning to the front of the room, he noisily smacked his lips. Powdered sugar from the donuts had somehow ended up on his chin. It was a comical sight that everyone politely ignored.

     "That was tasty," he said, "in my humble opinion. Now, let me explain more about the Xxlepis. Having mastered the mysteries of science and technology, they have returned to the arts, particularly their poetry. They are on a quest for new forms of expression. For example, the 20 ways an elephant calls to its young or the 59 words the Eskimos use for snow. Whether or not a language is written or spoken is of secondary importance. The Xxlepis take pleasure in converting all manner of creature communication into just the right word with a precise meaning and contextual flavor to be used in their poetry. So they traverse the universe in search of communication to define new words because, to them, only words have true value. Personally, I think it's because words convey emotions."

     "Speaking of value..." Mooba stopped mid-thought. "Ah... could I have more coffee?"

     "Sir, there's no more coffee," said one of the agents addressing the President.

     The President waved his hand. "Well then, please get another carafe. It'll only take a minute."

     The agent left the room. Through the door, which had not fully closed, squeezed a short, rotund Basset Hound. It went immediately to the President wagging its tail while casting side-glances at Mooba.

     "Hi there, Sally," the President gently stroked the dog's back. "Mooba, this is my dog. She just had puppies four weeks ago. What do you think of her?"

     Mooba was quite interested, particularly when Sally left the President to approach him, her tail still wagging. He bent over so that his face was almost level with the dog's and she licked the sugar off his chin. His head feathers danced wildly. "I like her," he said and then made a noise somewhere between a bark and a whine. It startled everyone in the room, but Sally woofed in response.

     Suddenly, the agent with the coffee appeared. "Here's the coffee, Sir."

     At that point Sally was let out of the room. Mooba drank more coffee, after which he continued instructing the President.

     "As I was saying, concerning value it's things that have no price that are worth the most to the Xxlepis. Things such as honor or knowledge or joy. That's because emotions, or the intangible, offer infinite possibilities for new words of shading and intensity. When a thing has a price, its value is already set, defined and limited according to the Xxlepis. So instead of price, value for them is in how many words a thing inspires."

     "But as for emotions...the Xxlepis fell in love with the Drugans on the planet Phizell because they're always laughing. They have 32 words for 'giggle'. The Xxlepis were so thrilled with this that they made fools of themselves, showering them with half our gifts." He frowned. "I had an awful time convincing them to leave that planet."

     Rolling his eyes, the little alien continued.

     "Unfortunately, your culture values *things* more than words. That's what I learned from your television and radio signals. For example, when a commercial says a car has a soul, where does that leave a man? In order to add value to a thing, you've stolen a word meant only for living beings and devalued it. And in devaluing that word you've devalued yourselves. The Xxlepis would never understand and it's better that they not know about it. In my humble opinion."

     Mooba patted a tail feather. "On the other hand, your world's libraries are filled with books and are an endless resource for poetry and great writings. Human beings are capable of deep thought and intense emotions and some have a desire to define them. It is these writings that will appeal to the Xxlepis and they will reward you beyond imagination. As long as they remain on this planet they will bestow gifts, so it's to your benefit to please them. That's all I can say."

     He bowed and the meeting was abruptly over.

**DAY THREE**  
Thursday, June 17

     The introduction of the Xxlepis was set for noon. Although it was an unusually overcast day, that hadn't stopped a huge crowd from forming. At two minutes to 12:00 the President and four secret agents walked slowly up the red carpet and stopped 20 feet from the craft.

     With the opening of a large door, a strange green mist emanated from the craft. Then a long and gently sloped ramp slid out upon which Mooba exited. The murmuring crowd hushed as three figures emerged from behind him. The figures were nearly seven feet tall, rather thin, and covered entirely in grey-green flowing robes and hoods. More than anything they resembled Gregorian monks, but it was how they moved that was startling. Although there was not a breath of wind, their robes rippled fluidly and they appeared to pour across the 20 feet coming to rest alongside Mooba and in front of the President and the agents.

     Mooba's high voice spoke into the multitude of microphones set up by reporters and it sounded over the PA system. "Members of planet earth, I am pleased to introduce you to the Xxlepis. And, they in turn are very pleased to meet you." As he said this the three beings bowed deeply as did the President and his agents.

     Mooba continued, "Supreme Commander, President of the United States and all citizens of earth, I am pleased to inform you on behalf of the Xxlepis that today they would like you to accept this gift that they offer you without reservation." Withdrawing something from a hidden pocket, Mooba handed it to the President.

     Accepting the object, which fit into the palm of his hand, the President bowed again. "Thank you."

     Seeing the three Xxlepis nodding from beneath their hoods, Mooba added, "The Xxlepis thank you, too."

     The crowd roared their approval and the first meeting was over.

**DAYS FOUR - TWENTY**  
Friday-Sunday, June 18-July 4

     When the gift was examined, scientists were astounded. The President had been handed a container that turned out to hold bacteria from a distant planet. Because these bacteria could manufacture any mineral, the Xxlepis had cultivated and refined it for multiple purposes. Specifically in humans, once ingested the bacteria became symbiotic with living cells and went about curing deficiencies. The resulting good health was miraculous and the closest thing to a fountain-of-youth elixir that humanity had ever experienced. Furthermore, the bacteria were easily reproduced.

     The President wished to reciprocate with a gift of equal value and at Mooba's recommendation commissioned a compendium of sacred writings to be compiled in their original languages. Mooba assured him that as a gift, this would be a delightful surprise for the Xxlepis. It was an ambitious project requiring scholars of every religion and the United Nations was appointed to coordinate it. All nations agreed that no amount of money or effort should be spared to have the gift ready for the next meeting with the Xxlepis.

     Mooba hadn't anticipated the effect the Xxlepis would have on their hosts. Mankind became like children at Christmas. While the Xxlepis's gift of health was reproduced en mass, that was just the beginning.

     Everything had to be Xxlepis-related. To accommodate the demand, manufacturers broke all records (nearly those of physics) to get out a plethora of products. Overnight Gregorian monk's garb became the fashion craze, gray-green the most popular color until Monday when pastel-greens were introduced followed closely by polka dots. People were dressing their babies and pets in robes with cowls. Xxlepis gray-green began showing up on toys, dish ware, buildings. If imitation is the highest form of flattery then the Xxlepis should have been flattered indeed.

     Commercials advertising Xxlepis products had but one theme, life was better with Xxlepis whether you wore Xxlepis clothes or sat on Xxlepis furniture. The inference was, so long as you had Xxlepis you were a somebody with something. Unfortunately, the opposite inference was also true, for without Xxlepis you were considered a nobody with nothing.

     The irony was not lost on Mooba who watched commercialism turn the Xxlepis, a race of beings who loved the nonmaterial, into the biggest name brand of all time.

**DAY TWENTY-ONE**  
Monday, July 5

     When the President and his staff appeared at the spaceship on Monday noon it was before a vastly different-looking crowd. Although a hot July day, the majority was wearing hooded robes, waving signs and holding banners that said, "Xxlepis rocks!"

     This day, upon exiting the craft, the three Xxlepis did not immediately bow. Although their faces couldn't be seen, it appeared that from beneath the cowls they were turning their heads to examine the crowd. Watching them, Mooba's head feathers stiffened noticeably and he frowned.

     This time it was the President who came bearing a gift. The President proudly offered the huge book heavy with gold leafing that one of the Xxlepis gingerly accepted, grasping it with long fingers while the other two Xxlepis stretched forward for a closer look. Their grey-green robes cast a greenish hue over the book.

     "Please accept this gift from mankind," said the President, his voice trembling. "Over 300 of our finest scholars assembled it from our sacred writings."

     Translating, Mooba looked pleased.

     Caught up in the moment and almost as an afterthought, the President added, "Millions were spent. With its parchment and gold leafing, it's the most expensive book ever created."

     Mooba's head feathers quivered the moment the President said *the most expensive book ever created*. He didn't look pleased. He stopped translating and stared at the President. "Ah, Sir President, in my humble opinion..." he interrupted, but his warning went unheeded.

     "Go on. Tell them," the President urged and Mooba complied.

     The reaction was immediate. Shoving the book back at the President, which he almost dropped, the three Xxlepis, murmuring bubbling-clicking noises, whipped about and swept back up into the spaceship faster than anybody thought they could move. Mooba followed as closely behind as his spindly legs allowed. Pausing at the ship's doorway he turned and shrugged as though apologizing just before the metal door slammed shut with a thud.

     The President and crowd, indeed the whole nation and all of earth were stunned. They felt like children awakening Christmas morning to discover that their presents had been stolen.

     There was no further contact with the Xxlepis although vigorous attempts were made using a PA system as well as radio and television waves and banging on the spaceship doors. Now nobody anywhere talked about anything except the Xxlepis and why they had so abruptly left the gathering. Earth commiserated.

**DAY TWENTY-TWO**  
Tuesday, July 6

     Early Tuesday, without ado, the huge spacecraft gently lifted into the morning air and disappeared.

     It was then Mooba sought admittance to the White House, shocking everyone because they thought he had left along with his alien employers. Escorted to the President's oval office, Mooba's head feathers began to wave as he moaned sorrowfully. "In my humble opinion, my job is just too difficult."

     The President agreed without knowing why as Mooba sat down on a chair. A couple of agents approached to stand behind him. "It's my fault. I thought I'd made you understand, but I was wrong. You meant only to impress when you said the book cost millions to create. But as soon as you gave it a price, in the eyes of the Xxlepis you declared it useless. They were insulted and horrified. They couldn't leave fast enough."

     He hesitated and then glared at the President as if to suggest he did share responsibility. Then Mooba sighed. "It's my humble opinion that they'd never have understood your species anyway."

     "Well then why are you here?" the President was incredulous.

     Suddenly the little alien smiled. "Because unlike the Xxlepis, I don't care about words or meaning or money. Except in the performance of my job, of course. I'm due for a vacation and I'd like a little fun." Before agents could stop him he had jumped up and moved to the President's desk grabbing sour lemon candies from a dish. Popping them into his mouth he made slurping sounds.

     The statement was so ridiculous the President had to laugh. "You mean a permanent vacation? Apparently they're never coming back."

     Mooba grinned knowingly as his head feathers twitched. "On the contrary. I've been with the Xxlepis 120 years and don't you think that if anybody should know what they're doing and why they're doing it, it would be I? That's my humble opinion. As for selecting your species, I've had second thoughts. But don't worry, Sir President, the Xxlepis will be back. Before their ship left I put a puppy on board."

     He popped another sour lemon candy