

“The Airport Bugs Fight On ”

Text by [Kairi Look](#)

Illustrated by Kaspar Jancis

Tänapäev 2014, 2017, 208 pp

ISBN 9789949276141

Storybook, fiction

Age: 8+

Rights sold: Finnish, French, Latvian, Russian

The Airport Bugs Fight On is an uplifting children’s book that will put a smile on even very grown-up grownups’ faces. Ludvig the bedbug leads a fun, laid-back life with his family at the airport. One day, a cleanliness inspector arrives and threatens to shut the whole place down. Giving up is not the bedbugs’ style, of course – now is the time to be clever and take action! Allied with the airport beetles, the characters embark on an adventure to save their home. It is a story about bravery and the power of working together that is also chock full of laughs, surprises, and jelly donuts!

Awards:

2014 Nominee of the Annual Children’s Literature

Award of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia

2014 Good Children’s Book

2014 Children’s Story Competition “My First Book”,

1st place

Reading sample

[pp 14–31]

PART I

II

Citizenship: Bedbug

I became a full-fledged, passport-holding bedbug right after hatching. The very next morning, Uncle Anton arrived with his friend Vello and announced that it was the last chance to make me into a proper bedbug-boy.

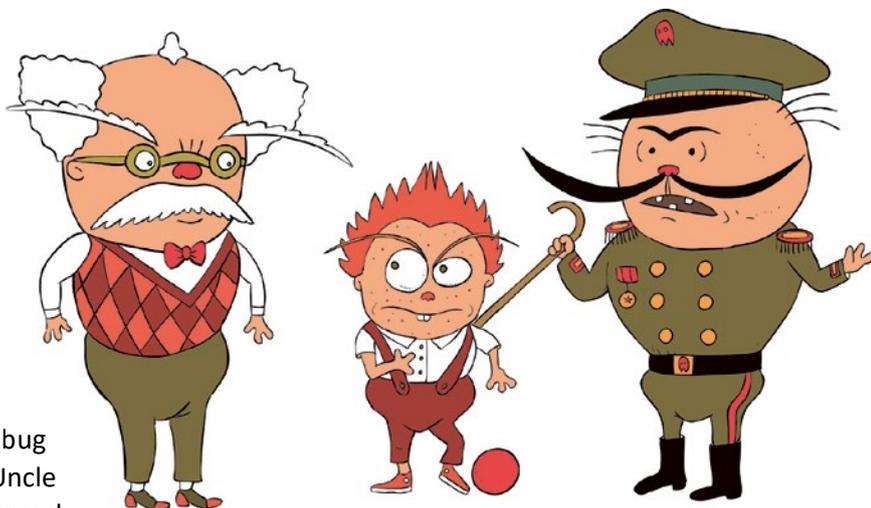
“If you were just any ordinary house-bedbug, then, well. . . But we have order in the airport. All of our residents are numbered and no one is any exception.”

It was still early in the morning. The rising sun sketched soft, cozy shadows across the baggage room floor. I hadn’t the least desire to go anywhere with Anton and be numbered. On top of that, I had just been born yesterday. I yawned, stretched my legs, and pretended not to hear my uncle.

“Munchkin!” Vello thundered. “Off the ground and to the border patrol with you! There’s enough time for lying around later.”

I looked up and inspected my taskmasters. Although both of them were bedbugs, Vello and Anton were as unlike as a pig and a cuckoo. Uncle Anton was a culture-loving bedbug who went to read the papers at the newspaper stand every morning. Uncle’s favorites were the black-and-white cultural papers that printed art critiques with especially long words. Uncle Anton didn’t read the colorful magazines that showed smooching celebrities – he only stuck them under his fanny for padding. Sometimes when it was chillier out, we would stick them in cracks around the baggage room windows.

Vello, on the other hand, was a former general. Way back when, he had run his own Bedbug Scouts troop, and it was rumored that our safe lives in the baggage room was greatly Vello’s doing. Sure enough, it was the only place in the airport where the cleaners never stepped foot. Only an old jan-



itor would enter from time to time, but he never bothered us. Vello lived in the glow of glorious long-ago battles, washed his own back in spite of his stiff limbs, and saw training young bedbugs as his solemn duty. And today, Vello’s eyes had fallen upon me. I had no choice.

“Well, let’s get going, then,” I said, pushing myself up to my feet. Vello stood behind us and counted off: “One, two, a hundred – forward march!”

We set off. Soon, we reached the passport-check booth, at the very base of which was a shiny little yellow hatch that read:

“Passport and ID Registration. Special Bedbug Department”

Vello kicked the door open, and we walked in. Sitting in the small, dim room was a lethargic-looking bedbug wearing a pale-yellow bow tie. He was munching on a cookie. “We need documents for a brand-new bedbug,” Vello grunted, and thrust me into the chair in front of the desk. “He’s this year’s edition, fresh and unspoiled.”

“Born just yesterday,” he added in a slightly nicer tone, and patted my head. “How long’ll it take?”

The bedbug official placed the cookie on a saucer with incredible slowness, and folded his arms. Never before had I seen such a slow-moving bedbug.

“Hhmmmmmmmm. . .” the official hummed as long and as drawn-out as possible, and reached his hand toward a drawer. This took even longer than it had to put the cookie down, but finally, the drawer was open.

The bedbug placed an inkwell, a pair of scissors, and a large roll of paper on the desk. The paper rustled and started to unroll oh-so-slowly. The official stared at the desk and yawned. The clock on the wall ticked exceptionally slowly. Tiiiiiiiick. . . Silence. Toooooooooock. . .

I was awfully bored. I glanced back, where Vello was fidgeting in irritation. "How long'll it take?" he hissed again, slapping his hands down on the desk.

The official didn't let the sudden movement bother him, merely rocking back on his chair. "A day or so. . . one or two," he said, yawned, and edged his hand toward the inkwell. Bit by bit, it came closer and closer to the ink.

Vello shot Uncle Anton an angry glare. "I've had enough," he announced. "I've got much better things to do than to stand around in this dump. On top of that, he's not my bedbug. Will you take care of this?"

Uncle Anton nodded. "Sure, go ahead." He pulled a greasy newspaper and half of a buttery cookie out of his pocket. "I'm in no hurry."

A moment later, and Vello was gone. My passport was finished by the end of the day. The official crafted it together piece by piece using other lost passports, which are always easy to find in airports. One word from here, another from there, and the picture of a German kid with an unusually bedbug-like face for my photograph. The official used the roll of paper to cut out nice passport covers.

And that was it. I became the German-faced Ludvig: a passport-holding bedbug.

III

Life in the Baggage Room

Now, I should probably explain why I'm an airport bedbug. I suppose I do live in an airport and that's what my passport says, but only because that's what Uncle Anton ordered the official to write.

"Write down: Airport Bedbug," he dictated. "A-i-r-p-o-r-t." Uncle Anton can't stand misspelled words.

But actually, I was an airport bedbug as soon as I was born. Here's why.

I'm an airport bedbug because my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents lived in the airport as well. They were the very same as me, just not as quick-witted. On the other hand, those old bedbugs scuttled around with open eyes and committed everything to memory exactly as it was. They knew their smells and nature better than we do; knew how to predict the weather and fertilize tomatoes. Their reading and arithmetic was only just a tad sub-par...

Luckily, in every generation, you could find a bedbug who knew how to add and subtract or even spoke French, too. Those bedbugs were immediately pulled aside and asked to speedily make more bedbugs. And those bedbugs' eggs contained kids, who were already able to both do mathematics and speak French, and who played the violin just wonderfully to boot. And their kids were able to do even more. This is called "selective breeding", and my breed is already quite a good one. And that is exactly how Uncle Anton knew I was talented right when he first saw me.

"We've got this breeding thing down to a T," Uncle Anton explained to me. "First of all, we teach you, and later, you work things out for yourself. It always pays to listen to your elders." Uncle scratched the back of his neck. "Almost always," he added. "Don't take Grandpa Johannes very seriously. You won't get scabies from drafts, and Thor doesn't live in the airport café. The cockroaches live there, and we treat them with respect, though we stay on our guard." That was the first of Uncle Anton's many lessons.



“You’ve no doubt wondered who laid your egg,” he chuckled another time. “You know, Ludvig, we don’t keep track very closely here. You’re the son of all of us, so go ahead and call all of us aunts and uncles. The older bedbugs are grandmas and grandpas. Here, everything is communal!” Uncle Anton patted my head and nodded in satisfaction.

Where we live is communal, too. Even Grandpa Johannes doesn’t remember when we moved into the airport. But as the old bedbug saying goes: where there is one, more will come. And we most certainly came! Now, we live together in friendship and don’t pick on one another. When someone is in a bad mood or their belly hurts, we gather around and give him or her a hug. A hug is the best medicine. You can give a very good friend a kiss as well.

I should add—we’re extremely proud of where we live, because it isn’t just any ordinary house. Our airport is old and dignified. They say it stood here even before bedbugs were around, which is absolutely impossible, of course—but that’s what they say.

“It’s a priceless piece of cultural heritage and an old architectural pearl,” Uncle Anton says.

“It’s a shack full of holes! That dog-gone draft makes my bones ache,” Grandpa Johannes complains.

“It sure is old, but there is order here,” Vello says.

All of them are right, because that’s also what the sign above the entrance says: Old Airport.

Well, I don’t mind—I like it. Life is beautiful!

IV

A Mysterious Crate Arrives

People think that airports are soulless places, but we have quite a nice life going for ourselves in the baggage room. In the mornings, we usually laze around. Occasionally, Grandpa Johannes tells us bedbug fairy tales; other times, Vello teaches us how to sword-fight with pine branches.

The best time of all starts every evening when fresh

suitcases are brought in. People officially call them “lost luggage”. We think that’s very odd, because the people themselves are the ones who brought them to us. We’ve chatted many a time about how people could come and ask us if they lose track of the bags. Every bedbug knows where the lost luggage is: in the baggage room, of course!

The opening ceremony starts at eight o’clock at night, and so it was today as well. We climbed onto the wall and began our bedbug prayer.

“Our Father Bedbug, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. . .” Well, and so on and so forth to the end, praying that our good luggage harvests and nice little bedbug lives keep on going. Sometimes we sing a hymn together, too. Grandpa Johannes’ favorite is about how Holy Father Bedbug comes down from the heavens and brings everyone fascinating suitcases. We can hold a tune very well.

After the hymn, that day’s head bedbug climbs up onto the ceiling to count the suitcases. Today, that job belonged to my friend Loore, who is a whiz at addition. Loore marked the numbers down in the bedbugs’ logbook, which we’ve kept with pride for decades. If you’re interested in how many suitcases arrived at the airport on August 21, 1939, and whether Mr. Von Ribbentrop was bringing striped boxers along on his flight to Moscow, we could look it up in a jiffy. Although people claim the opposite, we bedbugs dearly love keeping things orderly. A little bit of mold and a rotten apple core in the corner isn’t lawlessness, of course. Sloppy bookkeeping is something to be ashamed of, however! Bedbugs never have that sort of problem—our home is always shipshape.

“All counted, my friends! Have at it!” Loore called down. We descended onto the suitcases. “You really have been lucky, you whippersnappers,” Grandpa Johannes chuckled. “My great-great-grandfather could still remember a time when people traveled with slippery leather suitcases. Not a single hole in them! Climbing into those was a downright nuisance, I tell you,” Johannes rambled. “But bags these days—even an infant could handle them.” Grandpa sighed one more time, and then squirmed headfirst into a fabric suitcase. We followed him in a polite line.

Our haul was especially plentiful that day. Someone had made a mistake at London's Heathrow Airport, and we were sent an entire shipment of baggage meant for somewhere else. Loore and I had just climbed into a yellow bag when all of a sudden, she froze in place.

"Ludvig," Loore whispered and peered around us. "Do you hear that?"

I didn't. I looked over my shoulder and cocked my little bedbug ears, but I couldn't hear a thing. Loore's eyes flicked to a crate placed next to the wall, and coughed as a signal. I listened again.

This time, I heard it, too. There was growling coming from the crate!

"You're right," I whispered, and grabbed my friend's hand. We crept towards the mysterious crate to get a closer look. We were terrified, but excited, too. Every bedbug knows that packages make noises sometimes. A suitcase owned by a candy-wrapper collector will crinkle and a watchmaker's will tick, but a growling crate was something completely new.

"What do you think? Who's growling in there?" Loore asked in a hushed voice, her eyes gleaming.

"We could ask, couldn't we?!" I reckoned. "If it growls, then maybe it can talk to us, too."

"Good idea" Loore said. "Let's ask!"

We scuttled over to the crate and knocked on it. The growling stopped. Loore winked at me encouragingly. I cleared my throat and called out: "Hello! I'm Ludvig and this is Loore, we're airport bedbugs. Your crate just arrived here in our home. Who are you, if you don't mind us asking?"

No one replied. We waited and knocked again. At long last, a scratching sound came from the crate. And then someone said very softly, very shyly: "No one's here."

"How can that be?" Loore whispered to me. "Someone's talking in the crate!"

"How can that be?" I repeated loudly. "You're growling!"

"No I'm not," the crate replied stubbornly. "I was only grumbling a little. It's awfully cramped in here."

"But if there's no one in the crate, then who is grumbling in there?" Loore insisted.

The voice fell silent. Finally, it replied with a sigh: "There might just be Robby the dachshund here. Would you let me out, please?"

Loore smiled triumphantly. A living, grumbling dog! There'd never been a sight like that in the airport baggage room before. We hurried to open the crate.

V

New Friends

There was a tiny hole in the corner of the crate. We tugged to make it as wide as we could while Robby scratched away from inside. Soon, his long, moist muzzle appeared in the opening. Next came his paws, and finally, he wriggled his way free.

Robby was quite the sight! He was a well-groomed, silky smooth pup with neatly-trimmed claws and big, sparkling eyes.

"Hi," Loore whispered, her eyes wide. "How big you are... and how many teeth you have!" Robby had seemed so safe on the other side of the crate—a tiny, soft, toothless animal...

Robby nodded, and looked flattered. "I've had them since I was born. They're sharp and white," he said proudly, smiling as wide as he could. "I got them from my famous ancestors, just like my name!"

Sure enough, there was something engraved on Robby's sparkling collar. I scuttled a couple steps closer and read aloud: "ROBERT EDUARD VON DACHSMETER III (If lost, please call 5967 7788)."

Loore's mouth hung open. Robby nodded in satisfaction.

"You said it! Robert Eduard von Dachsmeter. From the famous dachshund clan! I'm the smartest pup of my litter. Still, all my friends call me Robby, and you can, too. Just please don't whistle when you do, or else instinct will take over."

Loore cocked her head at Robby and smiled mischievously. "Ffiuuu!" a high-pitched whistle echoed through the baggage room. "Robby! Ffiuuu, ffiuuu!"

Robby stared at her, alert. Suddenly, his ears twitched. He leapt to his paws, nose pointed upward, and sniffed the air. The pup's tail stuck out as straight as a match and was waving back and forth. Loore plopped onto her bottom and giggled.

Robby shook himself and sat back down. "I told you not to whistle," he snapped. "I just can't help it. It's instinct. When someone whistles, then I've got to go!"

"Go where?" Loore asked.

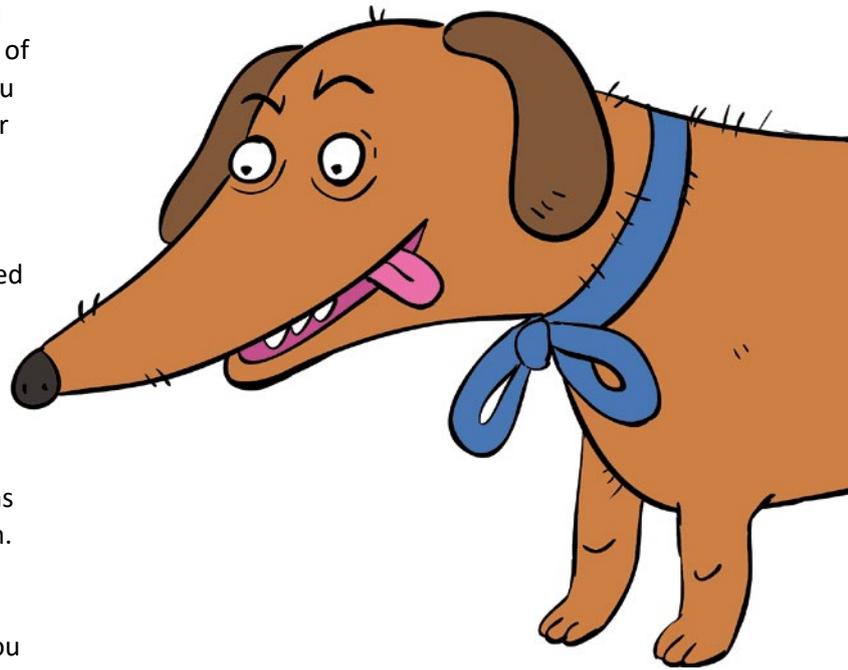
"Wherever I must," Robby answered, sticking his muzzle up. "I'm not your ordinary dachshund, you see, but one bred for royal badger hunts! I've got badgers in my blood! I've never caught one before... but I know how. That's what instinct is—when you know just what to do without anyone teaching you."

"Where do you catch badgers?" I asked excitedly.

"Where the badgers live, of course," Robby declared. "I'll give you more details after I catch my first." He stroked his tail, lost in thought.

I looked Robby up and down respectfully. "You know, you're the first dog I've ever seen so close-up!" The café owner's chihuahua, whom Charles the cockroach rode on Sundays, galloping through the terminal at a blood-curdling speed, didn't count. Dogs were something entirely different, in my mind.

"Well, then you got lucky," Robby said. "The first and one of such high class, right off the bat! You were fortunate that my owner sent me here to your



airport." The pup sniffed at the air. "Have you seen him already?"

I shook my head. "Only the janitor comes to the baggage room. There's no one here apart from the dust, suitcases, and bedbugs."

"I can't believe my ears!" Robby barked irritably. "My owner said we were only going to be taking a short flight. Well, and then I fell asleep and I was there in that crate... And now I'm here, but he's nowhere to be seen! What's more, I've been lost!" Robby's ears drooped. "My tummy's awfully empty. I'm still growing and need to eat gourmet beef several times a day! You don't happen to have any here, do you?"

Loore shook her head. "There was some blood sausage left in a suitcase last week, though. We put it aside for Christmas. Would you like to have that?"

"Sausage will do!" Robby yipped. "I'll eat anything, it's just that beef's my favorite. On Sunday mornings, my owner and I always eat meat and jelly donuts. I get the first choice, and always get what I want." Robby licked his lips. "But I guess blood sausage will do in a pinch. Bring it on out!" Loore nodded and skittered around a corner.

“What about you guys?” Robby asked. “What do you eat here at the airport?”

I felt a trickle of sweat roll down my back. “It depends,” I said softly. “Mostly whatever we come across. An international airport has options for every taste...” We bedbugs ordinarily avoid talking about food. What can you do—we eat to survive!

Robby nodded. “I’m not a fussy eater either, you know. But I can’t help it if I like the taste of meat! Life is a whole lot better when you get beef to munch on. But right now, my tummy is so empty that I could even eat grass... Where can my owner be?” Robby moaned. He felt like he could pass out from hunger.

“Here you go, have a taste!” Loore said, rolling a blood sausage up to the pup’s paws. “If you want, then we can take a tour of the airport once you’ve finished. Maybe your owner is still here, looking for you.”

Robby nodded. “I can pick up my owner’s scent in my sleep. I’ll track him in a jiffy.” He chomped on the blood sausage and sighed. The sausage smelled strange and didn’t taste like meat at all.

We climbed onto Robby’s back. The pup swept the sausage away with his paw, stood up, and we set off.

[pp 45–50]

IX

A Meeting with the Director

Up close, the entrance looked even filthier. A dusty sign swaying and softly scraping against the cobweb-covered door read:

AIRPORT DIRECTOR
UNINVITED ENTRY PROHIBITED (just kidding!)
ENTER IF YOU DARE

The stench of vinegar and stale coffee seeped through the doorway. Robby reached out his paw and knocked. We waited with bated breath. The pup knocked again.



Perhaps it was Robby’s touch, and perhaps not, but the door moved and slowly swung open. Voices echoed from inside.

“The cleanliness check will last for twelve hours and twenty minutes; which makes seven hundred and forty minutes, total; which is forty-four thousand and forty seconds,” someone said. “I’ve got everything planned out to a T. The action-plan is ready and has been approved by the ministry. I’ll start as soon as I can.”

“That’s my owner’s voice!” Robby barked excitedly. He poked his muzzle through the doorway and padded into the office, keeping close to the wall.

“Fantastic, just fantastic,” said another man’s nasally, nervous voice. “Mr. Tangens, you are most welcome here and can stay in our hotel for as long as you please. Breakfast and dinner and a room... it’s all on us. I hope you feel at home here!” The nasally voice whinnied in laughter, which turned into coughing. “I can assure you’ll find everything to be in tip-top shape. My whole building is in perfect condition. You won’t need to worry about a thing.” There was a threatening note hidden in his tone.

“Our inspection will determine that,” Robby’s owner replied flatly. “Order, control, and Tangens—three things that go hand in hand! I inspect everything from above and below, left and right, criss- and crosswise. Tangens won’t miss a single hair.” A clump of mold broke off the ceiling and floated down onto the man’s knee. Tangens snatched a brilliant white handkerchief from his suit pocket with an expression of disgust. One quick movement, and the mold was gone.

“I’m going to record everything in extreme detail, point by point, line by line. The whole airport must meet cleanliness standards.” Tangens lifted his handkerchief to eye-level and wrinkled his nose. “I’ll be sending the results to the Aviation Board. They’ll have the final say.”

“Wonderful, wonderful,” the honey-sweet voice repeated. “The inspection naturally won’t be a waste of time. You see, our airport’s last hygiene check was done several years back. Experts like you don’t end up here very often.” The director winked at Tangens. “But no doubt we’ve proven ourselves, too. Long-time employees, friendly passenger service, a warm and cozy atmosphere—it’s all the result of a job done carefully and well. And tradition! You won’t find another airport with such a distinguished history. We’ve been set right here for decades! This place is my whole life.” The director coughed, and his friendly tone disappeared. “But that sparkling, new concrete monstrosity on the other side of town—well, you get my point! No traditions, no culture. It’s all been sacrificed in the name of speediness and efficiency. It’s a stain on the whole city.” The director extended his arms and smiled appealingly. “You do understand, don’t you?!”

Tangens flicked a dead fly off the desk and waved his fingertip through the air. A dust bunny was left clinging to it.

“As I said, the inspection will determine that. If necessary, the Aviation Board will also order a pest extermination, which I will likewise carry out. But first of all: the inspection itself!” Tangens stood up.

Robby had crept into the room and was nodding proudly. His owner always had the last word. A man like that deserved a badger-catcher.

“One more question,” Tangens said. “I flew here with a dog and haven’t had a chance to pick him up yet. Where is your animal holding room? I presume it’s properly sterilized and isolated, just as the rules stipulate.”

The director folded his arms and smiled nervously. “Um, our an-, our animal room...” he stuttered. “It’s, um, right, uh...”

Robby saved him. “Woof!” he barked. “Woof-woof, wo-wo-woof!”

Tangens turned his head and stared at the dog in astonishment. He breathed a sigh of relief, but a suspicion dawned upon him. “Do you have animals running loose here? There’s a thing or two that cleanliness- and safety regulations have to say about that,” he remarked flatly.

Soft stammering bubbled from across the desk again. “That dog... that dog’s...”

“That dog is my dachshund Robby,” Tangens informed him. “Brushed, crated, and flown here. At least he was when I checked him at my home airport. It’s absolutely unacceptable that he somehow got out of his travel crate and is walking around the terminal here. I won’t forget, I’m recording it!” he declared, and pulled a sharpened pencil from his pocket.

“You... you’ve got it all wrong,” the director said, jumping to his feet. “We brought your dog here ourselves... as a... surprise, of sorts. Surprise, surprise!”

Tangens eyed the director coldly. “Is that so... Fine, we’ll leave it at that for now. But I’ll have you know that according to the rules, unsupervised animals are strictly prohibited in the airport. If I see just one more, then it’s going straight into my report,” he announced, seizing Robby by the collar. “And now, I must go to the hotel to unpack.”

“Wonderful, wonderful,” the director said, bowing to Tangens in the doorway and pulling a big, wrinkled handkerchief from his pocket. His forehead glistened with sweat. What a close call!

[pp 63–65]

PART II

I

Things Go Sour

“Bad news!” Robby announced, panting. “I hope we’re not too late.”

“What happened?” I asked, my stomach churning.

“The Aviation Board ordered a full inspection!” Robby whined. “My owner just said on the phone that when it’s finished, the airport could be closed in a couple of months!”

“What’re you talkin’ about?!” Vello yelled, hopping down to the floor. “Who’s going to close the airport?!”

“The A-vi-a-tion Board,” Robby repeated. “As soon as my owner sends the inspection results. He’s an inspector, and it’s his job to check cleanliness. And he said it’ll go fast here because everything is old and rickety, apparently. All filth and disorder, dust and litter.”

“Disorder? Balderdash!” Vello roared. “All humans do is make messes here, and we’ve got to slave away day after day just to keep things in order. Not long ago, the fleas hauled thirty tins of stinking rotten fish off a plane from Stockholm, and buried it underground with the termites. The stench had already spread, though—the whole plane had to be renovated from floor to ceiling afterward. Even the seats had to be replaced.”

“It’s too clean here, in my opinion!” Loore said crossly. “They even banned selling gum because the cleaners were complaining! My gum stocks have completely dried up... A couple of weeks back, I saw an old man stick his chewing gum under a table when no one was looking, but by the time I got there, the fleas had long since divvied it up. Competition is awfully stiff! What’s this trash your owner is talking about? We clean up so fast everywhere...”

Uncle Anton scratched the back of his neck. “Loore’s got a point—let’s check with the fleas! Fleas never overlook anything. Like they say: anything unwatched is as good as gone. As soon as there’s trash lying around, the fleas are sure to notice.”

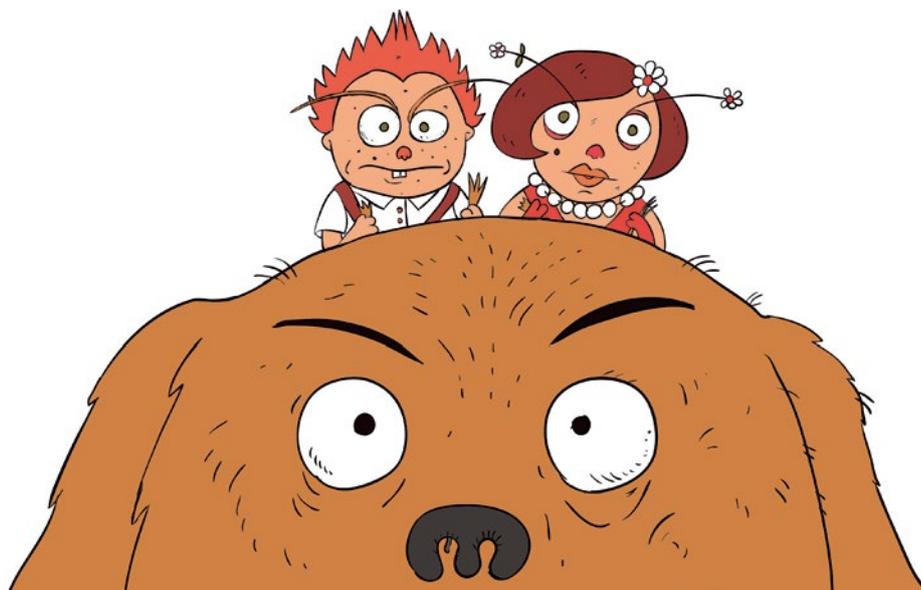
Vello slapped his thighs in satisfaction. “Then it’s decided! Begin operation “FLEAS”!” He stuck a toothpick under his belt. “We need to get right down to it.”

“Right down to what?” I asked.

“First, we’ll get in contact with the fleas,” Vello announced. “If they confirm the danger, then, well, we’ll have to deal with it. Closing the airport is out of the question. I won’t give up my territory!” Vello brandished the toothpick menacingly.

“The inspector could be right,” Uncle Anton reckoned. “There used to be far more cleaners, and I suppose we helped out, too. But now... the fireflies are in exile, the dragonflies are planning on moving out... Of course litter is piling up,” he sighed.

“No more sighing!” Vello roared. “Facts, first of all! We’ll chat with the fleas and then decide whether or not we’ll call on the men.”



“What men?” Loore asked.

“The Council,” Uncle Anton replied. “This feels like a job for the Council.”

“Forward, MARCH to the fleas!” Vello interrupted. “I believe they’re holding their weekly flea market today.”

“Who are these men and what’s this Council you’re talking about?” Loore asked when we climbed on Robby’s back.

“It’s a joint meeting of the beetles,” Uncle Anton replied, scratching the back of his head. “As far as I can remember, we haven’t needed one in ages. But if the situation is this dire... Big decisions aren’t made alone at our airport.”

“The Men’s Council,” Loore repeated slowly, crossing her legs. “Sure is a nice name!”

We sped off on our way. The fleas were waiting.

Translated by Adam Cullen

