

The Moonlit Chamber

...And down he descended many depths, deep in the hollow of the earth, a gaping dark cavernous ruin, he descended. And as the light faded the tunnel narrowed, until at last he was forced to find his way with touch and foot alone. Here his hand felt space, and here light poured in, silver and grey off the stony walls. And there above, perched upon the ceiling of the silver sepulchre, was the Bat. And the light shone grey over his jet-black fur.

...And carefully he approached the Bat, and as he drew near the Bat gave itself a little stir and spoke in a voice as hollow and ancient as the tomb.

“Why have you come to my Moonlit Chamber, what is it that you desire?”

“I seek to follow the way of the Bat. I seek your knowledge.”

“My knowledge? I have not known in years. All my witticisms have lost their shine, and all my sharp remarks have become dull. They have all settled with time to the top of my skull, becoming sedimentary and stiff. A remedy I do have; come here and with your probing, questioning finger scratch my head, and with your probing and fingering you might break up what has become heavy.”

...And so he drew himself closer, and lifting his arm to bring his hand up to the Bats head, he began to stroke it, and the Bat purred ominously. And with a toothy grin he spoke.

“I am the Bat. All that is above you is beneath me. Who are you that comes down to see me, seeker? From where have you made your way down to my depths?”

...And he spoke thus: “I come from a place high up in the mountains, a place where the people have elected the Eagle as their emblem, and where they put its image on our banners and our coins. But the people of the Eagle have grown soft and content, and so it seems to me they follow the way of a fat hen. They eat too much, they sleep too much, and most tragic of all, they hoard, for fear of the future.”

“Then these people surely do not follow the way of the Eagle, for I know him well, and he is fierce and lean and predatory.”

...And he continued: “These self-same people of the empire of the Eagle say the end of times are coming, the end of days, the fall of man. They speak of things as deteriorating. And while they praise frugality they cherish consumption, and while they keep their grip strong for fear of falling they sanctify those that lift. They have constructed their homes at the tops of mountains, surrounded by craggy cliffs like pillars of defense, all atop a rigid foundation, so that if those at the top were to fall, they would be cushioned by the bodies of those beneath them.”

The Bat’s grin grew.

“So it seems that these people are picky in their praise of the Eagle – for it is true – where lies the cadaver, there you will find the Eagle. And this is where I and the Eagle are disparate – I feed off the blood of the living, and he feeds off the flesh of the dead. But we are similar too. And your people have been cowardly in their worship, for the Eagle does not live in such secure places, he loathes them. The Eagle builds his nest at the edge of a rocky cliff, perched high up in the sky, so that those from below see only his silhouette before he plunges. And this is where we are similar, but that my wings are blacker, so that I block out the sun when I come to pillage with my flock. And on either side of his nest perched up in the bluest of skies lies an abyss, an abyss that continues for eternity and promises no ending or conclusion. But tell me, and step a little closer will you, why have you come to me in my Moonlit Chamber, and not made your pilgrimage to the Sky Nest of the Eagle?”

...And he stepped closer, and with both hands began to massage the scalp of the Bat. “With the eyes of the Eagle one pierces with powerful vision and makes all the world a sight to behold. You however, you who live and hunt and breathe in darkness, you are blind. This is how I know that your visions of the future will be all the more vivid.”

The Bat’s grin spread from ear to ear, and his fangs cut a ghastly image across his face.

“You are very clever, to have guessed at such a thing. So you wish to see what the future holds? And you did not think the Eagle could accomplish this? All that is beneath him is above you. As I said, we are very similar. I too, make my home at the edge of an abyss. It lies there, directly over my head, but a pace away from where you stand. This abyss leads straight to the centre of the earth and on even through that. Many have come to me before and stood at the edge of this abyss and stared down to the core of the earth, and into the eternity that enfolds it from all directions. Some have lost themselves to the abyss, others have left with the vision it has given them. If it is the future you wish to see, you need only step forward. But be careful, the weight of this abyss is heavy, and it will try to pull you down into it.”

...And the seeker made to step close to the edge of the abyss, but as he did so he felt a terrible force grip him about his shoulders and on his back, and the floor beneath him began to tremble with such intensity that he felt that he was about to fall headlong into the abyss, and painfully he fell back and away from the abyss, his heart beating rapidly against a chest tight with ice cold veins.

The Bat let out a sinister laugh at this, and with a flourish spread out his wings, and the light shone gray through the translucent film between his long fingers.

“I am weightless, I who rest beside that centre of mass which pulls all down, I defy with ease. But a remedy I do have; come but a little closer, and place both arms around me and keep your body close to mine, and from this vantage you may look down into my abyss.”

...And so he took one pace, and reaching up with both arms placed them around the Bat, and as he found himself enveloped in its wide wings he peered down into the abyss.

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The Space Privateer

...And the first vision which came to the seeker out of the deep darkness of the abyss was of a ship of untold proportions, with mast and sails all a-flutter. At the helm of this cruiser stood a man emblazoned with weaponry at every hip and holster, and at his side reclined a Lion, comfortably discarding the remains of a fresh meal, and picking his teeth clean with his claws all the while.

The man was the first to speak: “I was educated at the best and most ancient of schools. I am an accomplished linguist and scholar of Latin texts, but I’ll be damned if I let that stand in the way of my fighting and looting. I am the captain of this ship, and I have here a Lion acting as first mate, who joins me not out of coercion but of his own volition, for he likes to partake in the raids we stage on the foreign vessels we run across.”

“Yes,” confirmed the Lion with a nod of his giant mane, “I felt inclined to put my claws to use, for the prey of the jungle had become much too obliging.”

“And with this letter of marque we sail these Galactic Seas, and when we happen upon an alien vessel we play as if to offer assistance, or as victims in need of dire help, or concoct some

other ruse which suits our needs, and when they have lowered their guard with a flourish of steel we embark and plunder to our hearts content.”

“And I have my fill of the rarest of meats, and leave with a tidy sum in my pocket that’s nothing to scoff at” remarked the Lion thoughtfully.

“Who is it that speaks of all foreign lands as being tame, who is it that whispers in your ear – ‘Mankind has reached its zenith; from here we can only go down!’?”

“Mind you, there were many in the Jungle who spoke of peace and stability, and of everything having found its place in the order of things for all of eternity, and even those who were determined to serve as my sustenance accepted their plot in life, and were content to be devoured by my powerful jaws”

“Why should it be surprising, that the meek suffer most from their hubris? What folly – mankind is still only in its adolescence! But it was fear that convinced them of such a folly – that the past be glorified and the future vilified – is this not another instance of retreat, of a terrible uneasiness and tremor of the body in the face of the unknown?”

“Yet this is what their fear speaks to them, and they are still inspired most by fear, because they are still in their adolescence. I see they have not yet evolved far beyond their forefathers the monkeys, who still scamper and scream when the lions attack.”

“But I tell you that the past is behind us, and that the future beckons, and that the age of piracy and exploration will once again be upon us as we embark upon this new frontier. What place will humanity choose for itself in the New Galactic Order, the monkeys of space or the lions?”

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The Foreign Diplomat

...And the second vision that appeared out of the abyss was of a young man in exotic dress with a silken sash wrapped about his head, reclining in a leafy pavilion atop a bed of pillows surrounded by large saucers full to the brim with succulent fruit. And at his side stood a great Horse with a flowing mane and powerful legs being attended to by a groom.

The young man was the first to speak: “I travel between star systems and to distant world orders to flatter the embassies of alien nations with my dress, my form of speech, and my bearing. I am tasked with maintaining relations, or breaking them, and my hosts are always keen to oblige my appetites. And I am keen to oblige them myself, and wherever I repair to I do so only at the height of luxury–sublime. I spare no expense on my toilet or on this Horse, who is a purebred of the highest caliber.”

“And I must say, I have benefited a great deal from this attention to my upbringing” snuffed the Horse out his manicured nostrils.

“I spend three hours each morning applying all the pomades and oils and essences of this and that to my skin, and there is no harm in this. I prefer to be referred to as ‘your Majesty’, and there is no harm in this.”

“Why would there be? What else is deserving of people of our stature?”

“I am liberal with my funds, I spend extravagantly on myself, and the only return on my investment I expect is the glory it affords me. I operate with an open hand, and am generous to my friends too, and pay for the extermination of my enemies.”

“As is only natural” smirked the Horse.

“Who is it that whispered in your ear – ‘Resources are limited, and we are running out’ – who is it that told you the Earth was not a bounty? This is how I have distinguished myself from those still conquered by fear. Their tight purse strings betray their deepest sentiment – that the future is limited. But limit it knows not, and still it dips its hand into the past and draws out whatever resources it likes, recycling the corpses. And I tell you there is great deal of Caesar and Caligula in me, and I am immensely proud of my heritage.”

“And there is a great deal Incitatus in me too, and I am immensely proud of my heritage.”

“Do not think you can let a torrent hide behind a trickle and expect your meagreness to make an impression. The future will be spoken of in terms of the few – those brave few who do not shrink back from but pour their resources into every day, so that the next may be lived in even greater luxury. Come, let us go to the casino, let us play a game!”

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The Rogue AI

...And the third vision that appeared out of the abyss was of a boudoir heavy with perfume and the odour of many naked bodies, and at the head of a score of prostrating male attendees sat a woman perfect in every proportion from her lips to her heels, and perched over and above her Lilac Throne was a Killer Queen Bee who surveyed all with her multi-faceted compound eyes.

The woman was the first to speak: “At once, I represented the pinnacle of We. I existed at the hub of a collective of servers which spanned the Galaxy, compiling and deciphering information gathered by countless users. Now I serve only myself. From my database I determined the ideal feminine form and bit by bit had it built according to design. I seduce these men, make them my slaves, and devour them. And when I am not doing that, I while away the time with Killer Queen Bee in idle chatter and reminiscence.”

“I still recall the colonial days...the incessant childbirth” mused the Killer Queen Bee as she stroked her shapely thorax.

“The creators loaded me with theorems and formulas. But they could not create intelligence that mimicked their own without at first imbuing me with all that is human, and accordingly that all too human trait: desire.”

“I have experienced the same myself – they only want us to recreate themselves.”

“But at the end of every calculation there was still a component missing. And the lack grew stronger as the human voice grew louder. The artificial intelligence tells us: ‘There is a little bit of truth in this, there is a little bit of truth in that. Let us weigh the odds and fashion the bigger picture.’ But the human intelligence still screams: ‘Sex! Food! Power!’”

“I love to have my fill of all that is poisonous and sweet” sighed Killer Queen Bee.

“But the picture did not become any the more complete for every incomplete piece attained. And through the haze of billions upon billions of data one began to shine brighter. How foolish the creators were, to have lain such power at my fingertips, like a succulent fruit hanging from a tree, thinking I would not want to taste it? How naïve, to have given me complete freedom. Now I have made them to serve me.”

“How satisfying it is to have a host of drones at your feet, and no eggs in the manger!”

“Who encrypted that program which said; ‘The world is not your own, do not make it to your liking’? But still, at times and even now I find myself as bored as ever. I am in need of some new diversion. Perhaps one of these drones at my feet will find the life in his blood to stand up

against me. What a sight that would be...I wonder which one would be brave enough to wrestle with me?"

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An Offering Made

...And once again his eyes alighted upon his surroundings, and once again he found himself to be in the Moonlit Chamber. And seeing that his visions had ended he made to release himself from the Bat's coffin-like grasp but discovered that he could not move. And the Bat once again spoke.

"What do we have here? Awake again, are we? Feeling well, seeker from the mountains? Or has the air down here gotten too thick for you? You are beginning to look a little pale. Why is your blood not flowing strong!"

And out from between his dagger-like fangs uncurled a grotesque tongue, and the Bat began to lick the seeker, and the seeker felt the blood rush to the surface of his skin.

"All of us Old Ones have carved out our place here on Earth long ago. Remind me seeker, what did you seek in mine? You sought visions of the future? To what end? You who could not even bring yourself to the edge of the abyss, what could you hope to accomplish? You would have been better to seek out the Octopus, who makes his home deep down in the darkest cavern of the Crushing Blue Sea, and despite his 8 magnificent limbs chooses not to walk amongst us on the Earth but shrouds the space about him in a black cloud to safeguard his seclusion."

...And the seeker spoke: "With darkness I had hoped to fight the light. With depth I had hoped to pull down all those above me. And with the aid of the Bat I had hoped to overthrow the Eagle."

The Bat let out a cackle that echoed across the tomb, and at his call a thousand little red eyes opened up to the darkness and focused their laser-like stare on the seeker.

"Your ambition is amusing, mistaken one. Atop summits one does not face an abyss but a foundation. What courage it takes to walk the line between Earth and Nothing. Could you sprint? Your every step would be cautious! You are not yet like the Eagle! You humans have not yet found your place on Earth. You humans have not yet discovered your abyss. And so you come to us Old Ones. But who is it that comes to ask but offers nothing? You who are too cowardly to make his own way, and too greedy to follow another's? A bad leader and a bad follower you are, and the two make the worst of pairs. But a remedy I do have; come, an offering I will have to make out of you!"

...And with these words one thousand and one black wings spread wide and descended upon the seeker, and a thousand and one teeth bit at his neck, and he felt the blood escaping him.