

A Happy Thousand-Turns (By Robert Bee)

It was a fine day for an adventure. The yellow sky pressed in comfortably from horizon to horizon while the soothing drizzling rain promised more of the good weather Vaaz had experienced since his hatching day a thousand turns ago.

In the distance his totem mountain, Mount Vazzuum, majestically belched its yellow stomach contents into the sky and sent red glowing rivers down its slopes to add to the creeping lava lake at its feet before cascading in fiery falls down the deep ravine.

Vaaz double checked the ties holding his raft to its skid carrier. Yes, all was correct. He turned, waved a tentacle to his proud birth-seniors watching from the arch of their humble cave, turned his trunk towards Mount Vazzuum and began his trundle to adventure and thousand-turn-hood.

Although his vision stalks could not pierce the dense ochre sky, he sensed the heat giving orb above it. Vola, the giver of all life, who makes the rocks flow as sources of nourishment, who warms the days and nights alike, who keeps the sustaining acid clouds in the sky.

Vaaz felt exhilarated, his multiple legs rotating with youthful ease, the flat pads of each foot touching briefly on the viscous rock surface. As he rolled forward his long trunk harvested the nutrients from the falling rain, and he occasionally stopped a moment to drive his tungsten tipped secondary proboscis into the ground-rock to extract mineral manna.

Yes, he decided, it was a fine day for adventure.

As Vaaz approached the glowing shore of Lake Vazzuum, he saw other thousand-dayers converging from adjacent hills, all hauling their lava rafts behind them. Some waved, which he returned with his spare tentacles, while others frolicked, throwing lava balls or shooting each other with trunks of acid rain.

“Vaaz, over here”, called Vuul, his best friend. Vuul had his raft already set up, ready to ride the lava rapids only two hundred pad-steps down lake. “What kept you”, Vuul teased, “too busy sky grazing? This is my third rapid ride already, and you’ve just got here.” He flapped his upper tentacles mockingly.

“You’re full of it Vuul”, Vaaz replied with a stiff vertical tentacle. “Let’s go.”

Pushing their rafts onto the lake’s surface, Vaaz and Vuul quickly trundled aboard, making the lava slop redly over the sides. Then with their hind-tentacles, they paddled towards the ravine where the lake languidly poured down to the next level. The danger was the unmelted rocks submerged beneath the flowing lava. One could easily break a tentacle or crack a cranium if they were tipped off the raft and sunk beneath the lava. But... you were only a thousand-turner once in your life.

It had been a good day, one which Vaaz and Vuul would never forget. But as Vaaz packed up his raft ready for sledding back to his home-cave, he had a disturbing thought. Is that it? Shouldn’t his One Thousand-turn Day be something special? Shouldn’t...

“Look-out Vaaz”, Vuul trumpeted.

Vaaz turned to Vuul to see his friend tentacling at the sky, his vision pods almost exploding in their stalks. Vaaz looked up at the billowing yellow sky to see a monstrous rock falling upon him, but slowly, at lava flow speed. It had four stiff legs spread beneath it and white flames belched from pods under its flat belly.

“Vola help me”, Vaaz yelped and trundled aside as fast as his hundred legs would let him.

The strange object missed Vaaz but, sadly, not Vaaz’s beautiful raft, a present from his birth-seniors. Vaaz stared, his eye stalks quivering, as the large rock settled onto the debris of his raft, the legs straddling it and the flames now gone. But it wasn’t a rock. Its shape was too... unround. Vaaz had never seen a shape like it.

Vaaz, Vuul and a number of other daring one-thousand-turners rolled closer to the strange object, their senses taut, wary of any dangerous movement. The object didn’t seem to be made of rock but a strange shiny material which was starting to glow a dull red colour as if to match the landscape.

They all rolled back hastily when the raft killer suddenly shed a part of its hide, revealing a round hole covered by a clear membrane. They took more pad-steps back when, out of the top of the object, a long stalk appeared with short stiff tentacles standing out from it. Then it just sat there, unmoving, glowing redly, atop Vaaz’s prize raft.

Vaaz had seen enough. He’d lost his thousand-turn gift from his birth-seniors to this intruder, this raft killer. If there was one thing his male-senior had taught him it was this: If some-Vrug tentacle-strikes you, you tentacle-strike him back – hard.

Vaaz sized the raft killer up and decided a tentacle wouldn’t hurt this thing. Then he knew what he must do.

There was a collective groan from the JPL control room. The Venus Pioneer 10 probe had seemed so promising. While the earlier probes had been destroyed mid-descent from the crushing 90 atmosphere pressure and the searing 470°C lead melting temperature, this one had been designed to withstand those conditions. It had a particularly strong casing, able to survive contact with the hardest rock and the crushing surface atmospheric pressure.

“I don’t believe it, that was a 200 million dollar probe we just lost. What the blazes happened to it?” the project director yelled over the hubbub.

“It was doing great, boss”, the probe integrity monitoring technician said. “It was sitting on the surface and all systems were in the green.”

“So, what went wrong?”

“It looks like it just got a hole punched in it”, the technician said.

“Bullshit”, the director snarled. “That probe had the strongest casing we could build. It would take a tungsten-tipped drill to get through it.”

Vaaz held his second proboscis in the raft killer's side where he had plunged it right up to his second joint. Nothing happened. Then he withdrew it and a stream of cool vapour blew from the hole, to instantly boil to nothing. A low grinding sound followed, and the strangely shaped object slowly buckled and bent in upon itself, growing more compact, the clear membrane shattering and black smoke curling out from its innards.

Vaaz stood staring at the deflated object. Then he turned to his Vrug friends and trumpeted victoriously. "Well, that was something special. Happy Thousand-Turns."

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