

# An Alien Through Alien Eyes

I was sitting atop her head, an arrangement she tolerated as it was the only way I could get a good look at what she was doing without risking getting under paw. In her rear paws she was holding two strands of wire insulated with some sort of tree gum, each strand half as thick around as my thorax. In one forepaw was another length of wire, softer and uncovered, and in the other she wielded a great iron rod fiercely radiating heat. at least it seemed great to me. She likely found its size quite unremarkable. A cable, even more thickly insulated, connected the iron to a large structure--she would have called it a mere box--that I guessed provided the iron's heat.

"What are you doing, great one?" I asked.

"I have a name, remember?" she said, her voice a low rumor like distant thunder. "It's Sunbeam."

A pretty name, but one that hardly matched her appearance. "What are you doing, Sunbeam?" I repeated.

"My job," she rumbled. "I'm building an electric light tower to put at the center of town. Well, I'm assuming it's a tower from your perspective. It's just a wooden dowel not even half the length of my tail, and I'm sticking that little LED array on top." She gestured with her tail toward a flat contrivance covered in intricate little studs--the LEDs she mentioned, as I would find out later.

"Your job?" I asked.

As she spoke, she touched the exposed ends of the insulated wires and twisted them into a single braid, then touched the hot iron to the area where they met. "I'm a hearthkeeper," she said, bringing the end of the softer wire in contact with the exposed copper. "I bring light and warmth, physical and spiritual, to those around me." The soft wire liquified, coating the exposed ends of the other two wires and releasing smoke that smelled like burning tree sap.

"Yes," I said half to myself. "You did say you're a missionary. Why don't you preach, then? You don't think your faith can stand up to scrutiny?"

"I wouldn't have spent hundreds of years travelling the stars to get here if I didn't have the courage of my convictions," she said. "But, well, look at me."

"It's hard to see a building when your standing on top of it," I said.

"Exactly. When we discovered your world we had no idea how... small you were. I'm not even that big, a runt in fact, but to you I'm a giant, a disgusting inside-out giant, if I recall what you said when we first met."

I looked behind me. From four stories up, I could see the moss farm just outside of town. The field still bore a faint indentation in the shape of one of her paws. She had trampled over half the crop in a single step. This was on her first visit to town the day after her skyship landed, before we knew what she was, before she knew what we were.

I had awoke to rumors spread by the town drunk that a star had fallen to the east, half a day's journey from town. I had dismissed them at first until a friend of mine, a fellow merchant who was up late taking inventory in his shop, confirmed that he saw it, too, a star, glowing violet, had fallen to earth. "Didn't make a sound," he had said. "You'd think something that big would make some noise when it landed."

The day went on as normal, other than a few lads trying to drum up a party of adventurers to investigate the fallen star, nobody seemed too bothered. "A great beast has returned!" one of them had said to me as he left my shop. He had purchased a water bladder, "For the adventure," he had told me. "I'm tellin' ya, there's riches beyond your wildest dreams. We just gotta slay the beast and its horde will be ours."

I clicked my mandibles dismissively. "You're chasing fairy tails. There haven't been any great beasts in centuries. We exterminated them all as soon as we figured out how to fire a cannon."

"Where's your sense of wonder?" the lad said as he walked out the door.

I had closed my shop for the afternoon and was chatting with some friends at the inn on the east edge of town, sipping a bead of honeydew. That's when we heard it, a dull, rhythmic tremor sent ripples through the drink on the table.

THUMP

We put our drinks down and looked through the open door to the street outside.

THUMP

I and a few others ventured outside to find the source of the noise.

THUMP

A crowd was gathered near the edge of town.

THUMP

We stared past the moss farm at the crest of the hill behind. That's when we saw her. She bounded over the hill, crushing the moss crop under paw along with the decoy the farmer had placed in the middle of the field to scare away the crow-flies. She turned her head down to look at us all gathered at the edge of town. Her eyes widened and she checked her momentum just before plowing through the city. She dug her iron-red claws into the dirt leaving furrows in their wake.

For a moment we stood there, this great beast and us terrified bugs, staring up at what, to us at least, was every bit the giant horror from the sky described in the old stories. It's hard for me to put into words exactly what I thought I was seeing. Some people say that you don't know what you're looking at until you know what you're looking at. I had always thought that an odd notion until I was staring up at this giant... thing. I didn't know what was paw tail or leg or snout or fang or fur, all things I would only learn much later, so it should be kept in mind that the description that follows is only possible with the benefit of quite a bit of hindsight.

She towered over us, even while sitting with her back end on the ground and all four paws resting flat. I suppose the first thing I noticed was the heat, this calid humidity that seemed to envelope her. I'm not sure what compelled me to do this, maybe it was that same heat. She had this long thick round structure, as long again as the rest of her body, protruding from her back end, a "tail" I would later learn. She had it wrapped around her forefeet. I reached out and touched it, my hand plunging through stiff guard hairs then downy undercoat before it was stopped by a pliable, oily surface, her "skin". It was not just warm, it was hot. Not painfully so. I'd compare it to a balmy summer day. Shocked, I drew my hand away.

She pulled her tail away from me and I got a good look at her paws. She had six digits to our three, dug into the earth like tree roots. Each digit was tipped with a sharp iron-red claw. The ends of her digits were furless, the "skin" grayish black. I saw something pulling taught and relaxing at intervals under the bare skin of her paws, tendons and muscles making minute adjustments to maintain her balance. Once again I reached out and touched the exposed skin. It yielded under my hand as I pressed down until I felt something hard underneath, "bone". It was bone that gave structure to her body, and the skin kept her soft viscera from spilling out. Something clicked in my brain and I staggered backward. "It's inside-out," I gasped. "soft on the outside and hard on the inside." I fought the urge to vomit.

Meanwhile, she had shrank back from my touch. When she shifted her paws back I caught a glimpse of their undersides. There were thick soft pads on each digit, with more pads arranged on her palms in the same pattern I saw pressed into the moss field. So ponderously massive was she that she needed cushions to soften the impact of her footfalls. I felt more heat, this time pulsing over me in rhythmic waves. I looked up following her forelegs covered in the same white pelage as her tail, up to her thorax, or what she would later tell me was called her "chest". It was expanding and contracting in time with the waves of humid warmth washing over me. Still further up I saw her mandibles, well, "mandible", singular. Rather than two mobile mouth parts it was fused to form a single structure that could only move up and down. It was hanging lax, revealing the red inside of her great maw. A disgusting red growth, glistening wet and twitching in time with those same heat waves, flopped out of her mouth to one side. This I would come to know was called a "tongue".

The mouth, I discovered, was the source of the hot wet gusts I was feeling. Once again only much later I learned why this was so. Just like us bugs, her body required air to live. We bugs simply took in air passively through spiracles dotted across our carapace. Because of her massive size she required organs dedicated to the purpose. These "lungs" were constantly inflating, drawing in fresh air, and deflating, exhausting spent air. This was why her chest was heaving.

Pointed white protrusions lined both sides of her mouth, "teeth" they were called. Four of these, two below and two above, were larger than the rest, erupting like stalagmites and stalactites in a cave. These were "fangs". Above the mouth were two large spiracles, the only I could detect on her body, unless, I thought at the time, more were hidden under her fur, not the case, as she would explain later. These "nostrils" were surrounded by rugose black skin covered in more clear liquid. The liquid coating the end of her snout was "mucus", that in her mouth and on her tongue "saliva".

Framing the wet tip of her nose were clusters of stiff hairs, much longer than the surrounding fur, "whiskers", tactile sense organs not unlike our antennae, though lacking the faculty of smell. That sense was furnished through the nostrils.

Then came her eyes. Those were the only things about her that didn't make me nauseous to look at. Simple, deep, black. Soulful, I'd come to say with time.

Lastly were her "ears", triangular flaps of skin jutting out from the top of her head. They had been erect when she first crested the hill, but presently were pinned against her head. They were covered in fur, black unlike the snowy pelage across the rest of her body, though she would loudly insist to anyone and everyone they were dark gray.

I must reiterate that none of these details were evident to me at the time. All I knew was horror at this thing, this star beast, mountain-high and radiating uncanny warmth, and the only thing escaping my mandibles was endless gibbering "It's inside-out, gods below it's inside out."

The last thing I saw before I regained sense enough to flee into the nearest building was her mouth, now dripping crimson fluid that dribbled down her jaw and painting her chest, still heaving like bellows with her breathing.

What I say next is still a mystery to me. Sunbeam has explained it to me a hundred times, but I still can't grasp it. I said before we were terrified, and justly so, of this giant monster looming over our town. But, and I can't believe I'm saying this, she was just as terrified of us. We little bugs that she could trample to death in an instant with barely a thought, filled her with a sharp visceral fear digging into her gut and made her want to flee. That's why she retreated from my touch. That's why she merely tolerates my sitting between her ears. "It's how you move," she would say when asked. "The way you skitter around, the way your legs move."

That red fluid dripping from her mouth, it was tears caused by fear.

"You are... quite singular," I said after my long reflection.

"Which is exactly why I have to watch what I say and exactly how I say it." She had slid a black sleeve over the two spliced wires and was applying blistering hot air from another of her seemingly endless array of cunning artifices. "A gentle exhortation could be interpreted as the command of a goddess, a warning given out of love as a threat of divine retribution. That's why I'm hesitant to preach. I'm not afraid I won't be compelling, I'm afraid I'll be too compelling. Error barks, the Truth whispers, but how can I whisper when every syllable I utter is a thunderclap? I want you to worship with me, not worship me."

The black sleeve had shrunk tight around the wires, joining them as one. Dazzling white light burst from the LED array, turning the fading evening twilight to mid-day. "You're lucky," she said, pushing the wooden pole into the earth. "Just a little light for little eyes." She tilted her muzzle skyward. I had to grab hold of her ear to keep from losing my balance. "You can still see the stars."

She rumbled a prayer under her breath. "O icons of the Light, shine upon us little ones."

"US little ones?" I asked. "You call yourself little?"

"We're all little measured against the vastness of Creation," she said. "You may be smaller than my thumb and I may be four stories tall, but we're both not even rounding errors in the grand scheme of things."

"Infinitesimal," I said.

"Yes, infinitesimal in scale, but infinitely loved." She seemed to be gazing in adoration at something beyond even the black behind the stars, and just for an instant I thought I felt someone gaze back.

category:stories

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Revision #1

Created 2026-06-01 20:48:49 UTC by Lurker

Updated 2026-06-01 20:48:49 UTC by Lurker