

“Tea with Mephisto”

by neoplatonic

Sit down. Sit down. The tavern is full and I don't mind sharing a table with you. Keep an old man company tonight, yes?

What's that? I don't hear so well anymore, you'll need to speak up a bit. No. No, I already have a room. This is no night to be caught outside. Fierce storm is coming. Where are you from? Entsteig? Yes, that is a beautiful country, right along the Gulf. I spent a summer there when I was young. Me? No. I'm from Lut Gholein. I just did a lot of traveling in my younger days. Guess I'm still traveling. I'm not quite done yet, it seems.

Let me buy you a drink. You have the look of one who needs a mug of ale in his hands tonight. It'll calm you down. I know. The jungle out there is no place for men anymore. You're a braver man than I, to strive against the evil that stalks the night. No, there's no need to say that. I'm old now. My courage left me a long time ago. My noble intentions are withered away.

I was never a fighter. I was a scholar, you see. Yes, a scholar. Don't look at me like that. After the fighting is done, who will lead the people back to enlightenment? Who will be the teachers and counselors? Yes, I see you understand. You can read, no? Who gave you that wonderful gift? It was someone like me. I fight the darkness, but in a different way, and a different darkness.

It's a losing battle, I'm sad to say. Every day, ignorance creeps up a little closer to us, and we're losing our greatest weapons against that tide. The great libraries of the rogues, of Lut Gholein, all gone. Burned or carried away to be used as refuse paper. You have no idea what's been lost. None of us know, actually. We'll never know. The only library left now is the one deep in the jungle we so fear now. Yes, in Kurast, where brave warriors like you are cut down by the dozens by the evil the dwells below the city.

A library? You've never seen one? You should, young man. You should. Let me see that parchment scroll you have. Imagine this, and then imagine ten of them, and then imagine ten thousand, a hundred thousand, all wrapped up and stored in vast rooms, and each one is inscribed with just a little bit of the sum of human knowledge. They're rooms of knowledge, young man. They hold the secrets and the wisdom and the stories of the ancients, and we're losing them all, one by one. It's like we're losing little parts of ourselves each time another of these is tossed into the fire. Pretty soon they'll be nothing left. We'll be empty inside.

I've been in the library of Kurast, you know. Once, when I was young. I was studying with my mentor, and he often exchanged letters with the great scholars of this city. He visited here, one fall, and let me come along. You don't know what this city was like then. Colorful, not drab like it is now, and everyone was alive. Even Ormus! This was the greatest city of the East, the most powerful, the most learned. And the Great Library, such an archive has never existed before, and will never exist again. Grand caverns as far as the eye could see, ceilings twenty feet high, and each wall lined with ten thousand scrolls, all wrapped in colored ribbons and carefully labeled. Scholars from all over the world could come and read the accumulated wisdom of untold generations. Right there, in our fingertips. It was all there for us.

You don't know where the library is? It's underground. It's part of that terrible dungeon where so many of you die these days. It's a sad place. It's so dark.

What? How do I know? I've been there, my son. I've been inside, just a few days ago. Why else do you think I would be here? I had to see for myself what's become of the place. I had to get inside, to weep over what's been lost.

No, the jungle isn't impossible to traverse. It's easy if you're an old man, and you have more fear than courage. The monsters are drawn to your bravery, but they won't notice an old man scurrying in the dark underbrush. But, still, there were times when I was sure that I wasn't going to make it, when the winding trails confused me, when the fetish almost saw me with his gleaming eyes. One of those scrolls like you hold now saved me then.

No, you can't go up the causeway to Kurast. That path is surely suicide. They are all insane along that way, and powerful. And the library can be entered by another route. Yes, there is a secret entrance, made in the case of war or troubles, so that the librarians can quickly leave with as many scrolls as they can carry. If they had a week, they could empty the entire place, but I guess they didn't have a week. The quick madness overtook many of them, too.

That's the entrance I used. Deep in the jungle, around the far side of the city. I had to crawl through mud and grime, up narrow passages overgrown with weeds, and then I was there. In the grand hallway, carved of purple marble that can no longer be quarried, but it was dark. The magical light globes were all broken, and the spells that kept away the heat and humidity, gone, too. Rats and roaches control the place now, and they even eat away at the scrolls. I tried to shoo them away, but there were too many. I'm only one old man.

The library is huge, you see. Each wall is lined with niches where the thousands and thousands of scrolls are kept, as far as the eye can gaze. I made my way along the silent passages, to see if I could find any of the old scholars, maybe trapped somewhere, or trying to save some of the collection. You don't believe me. I can see it in your eyes. You think that I had to be searching for something

else. Why else would a man risk his soul to go to such a place? What would draw him, if not something of great power or wealth?

Here it is, then. Look! This is what I was after. No, it's not a scroll. This is a book. See? The pages are bound together along the side. Of course you can't read it. This is an ancient language; only a handful of people alive know it these days. This is what I was after. It's no spell book. It's no book of power. It's just a book. Just a book.

I knew precisely in the library where it was, from when I had been there as a young man. I had to go down many levels, into deeper and deeper black, so dark that the very air soaked up the light from my torch, and I could barely see a foot in front of me. I heard things down there, things that men shouldn't hear, and for a while I was sure that something was following me. Footsteps in the night. I was sure that I was dead, but then it left, and I was alone. I passed piles of scrolls tossed on the floor, and mildew was already eating at them, so that the words were gone and the parchment fell apart in my hands. I'm not afraid to admit, that I cried. I cried for the words that were slipping away between my fingers.

I finally reached the room I wanted, after an hour or more of walking. The library is that big, and this book here before us is so ancient and venerable that it was stored away in a special place. I had to pry open the door, but the locks were rusted and it was no great trouble, even for me. I took the book, put it in my pack, and headed for the surface. There was nothing more that I could do, no one that I could save.

But then I saw it. That thing maybe that had been following me, but now it was visible. It was a shimmering figure of light in the distance, directly down the hall where I had to walk, for there were no side passages in that area. It was coming right toward me, this figure, right toward me, and I was frozen in place. I've never felt such fear. Never. But more than that, I felt anger, and loathing, and hatred. Such hatred, and it wasn't that I felt hatred toward that thing coming at me. I felt its hatred for me. Its own emotion was being extended into me. It was a palpable thing, wrapping itself around me so that my chest was crushed and I could barely breathe. How can a being be filled with such animosity and still live? Still exist?

I can see it in your face. The way you grip your mug until your knuckles are white. You know what it was. Who it was.

The way men talk of the Lord of Hatred, you'd think he was fifty feet tall. A colossus. But that's not what I saw shuffling toward me. I saw a figure surrounded in a gray mist, and small, my height, and bent over like an old woman with bad rheumatism so that she can hardly stand up straight anymore. It was hard to see in the mist that kept moving and swirling, that came up and wrapped

itself around my legs, but when he reached me, when he was as far away from me as you are now, he looked at me, and all I saw was pale white skin, great gaping holes where his eyes should have been, and dreadlocks of hair that drifted about as if alive.

What did I do? I couldn't do anything. I'm no warrior. I'm no magician. And he knew it, knew that I was just a useless old man. I heard a chuckle, a massive gasping of air all around me, and he turned around and started to walk away, and I had to follow. My mind had failed me. I could not think. My feet, they moved on their own, following the evil as he dragged his legs along the stone floor.

Finally, after hours, it seemed, we turned off the main passage and entered a side room. It was actually a room I knew, where I had been long ago, a reading room for the scholars so that they could study in peace and comfort. He led me to the middle of the room, and then waved his hand. Chairs flew at us, and one pushed up behind me against my legs so that I fell down into it. My hands clamped down on the arms, and I stared as the Lord of Hatred sat down across from me in another chair. Then, a low table slid between us, and a tea service—I swear by the gods—a tea service came down from above to rest on that table.

The Lord of Hatred nodded his head in the mist, and the dread that had filled me broke, as if it were only a spell, but I still felt something at the core of my being. A fear, of something that mortal man is not supposed to behold or know, something outside. For that's what he is, an outside being that intrudes upon our world, something of shapes that shouldn't exist and can't be comprehended by our minds.

That's what sat across from me. That's what leaned over and took up a glass of steaming tea, which he held to his mouth to drink while I quivered with terror. He finished, and set down his cup, and then he said, in a hollow, deep voice, "Are you not thirsty?"

I don't rightly remember what I told him, but he urged, "Please, drink."

So I reached out and poured myself a cup of tea. What else could I do? I held it in my hands and smelled the vapors. I don't know what kind it was, something strange, from the very far east, probably, where few men go.

"Thank you," I said, because my parents and teachers had always told me to be polite to people who served you tea.

"This is my favorite tea," he said. Yes, he truly said that, and you would not have believed his voice. It was so ancient and dry, like parchment rubbing together. "One of your kind introduced me to its flavor a very long time ago, and I find that drinking it soothes my mind in times of trouble."

I didn't say anything in reply, and he must have seen the fear writ large across my brow. He told me, "Do not be afraid. I have no desire to harm you."

"You are the Lord of Hatred," I spat at him. "You live to do harm."

"Lies. All lies, spread by the angelic horde for their own purposes. I am a helper of mankind, the best friend of your race. You will see that."

What do you say to one such as him? How do you argue with him? All I did was drink my tea, and, yes, it was very good.

He made a motion with his hand, a dismissive motion, and then he asked, "Why are you in my library?"

"Truly, sir," I said, stupidly bold I suppose, "it is not your library."

"True enough," he responded, and I think he smiled, although in the mist that surrounded him I could not be sure. He continued, "Who can own knowledge? I am but a humble supplicant at wisdom's altar, like you. In fact, I have been helping the Librarian. He is a good friend of mine now. He is most appreciative for the assistance I give him."

"And what assistance is that?"

"There are corridors in the depths that even he does not know of. Hidden rooms and collections, sealed in time, that tell of the great secrets of your world. He is very grateful for the help I can offer him to uncover these mysteries."

I realized then, why the library was still more or less intact, why his minions didn't wander the halls. He wanted the secrets of the library, too. There are tomes there, tens of thousands of years old, about angels and demons, about the ancient gods that even he doesn't know. He wanted those treasures for himself, and he was searching for them that day when he found me.

He asked, "Do you know why some rooms are hidden to you?"

I shook my head.

"It's the doing of the angels. They hate you. It is true. They fear you. They fear what you all could become with just a mere fragment of the knowledge and power they command. They want to keep you all as children, and they work to perpetuate your ignorance and subservience to their wills."

"Is that so?" I asked.

“Why else would there be hidden rooms? Why else would they be filled with volumes on Heaven’s history and weaknesses? Think upon it! They long to keep you weak and blind. They don’t want you to know the truth.” He paused to serve himself more tea. “I really am your benefactor, your truest friend. I am only trying to lead your kind to the heights of glory that are rightfully yours.”

“Somehow, I doubt your good intentions,” I told him.

“Of course you do. I do not blame you for your skepticism. You all have been lied to for such long ages, but can you not see it? I am here to free you of your ignorance. I will break the angelic chains that fetter you and lead mankind out of darkness and into the light. I will be your teacher. Look.” He pointed to the wall, and I gaped as it split apart, to reveal one of the secret chambers that he had mentioned.

The room beyond was empty, save for one stand, and there was a book on it. “Go,” he said. “Examine it.”

I tried my feet, found that they were once again mine, and slowly stood up. I backed away from him, toward the sole book, never letting him out of my sight until I bumped against the stand. Only then did I turn around to face the volume. The cover was black leather, cracked, and written in gold, in ancient letters were the words, “A Secret History.” And it smelled, smelled of age and weight. That’s how I judge a book, you know, by the mustiness and the texture of its odor. Over the years, a book grows more magnificent by its scent, and this one was overpowering.

“What is it about?” I asked.

“Read for yourself,” he said to me, “and you will begin to realize how shallow your understanding of the world truly is.”

I will admit, young man, that I was tempted. I was sorely tempted. For the chance to know such things as are hidden, many a scholar would give his or her life. There are layers beneath the world, hidden from us, that we all struggle to uncover. And, here, before me, was a chance to have it all laid out. To have everything in my fingertips all at once. But I could not. I knew that I could not. To read those words, who knows what would have happened to me? Had the Librarian also read? Had that allowed the Lord of Hatred to enslave him? Was this the trap? No, there are some things best left unknown. The price for some knowledge is too high.

I left the book closed and returned to my seat. I will tell you, the Lord of Hatred was most unhappy. The mist that surrounded him turned black and whipped about furiously. The entire room seemed to shrink in on me. “Why do you not read the book, mortal man?”

"We are meant to strive for the truth," I said, repeating the words my first teacher had taught me, when I was very little. "Not to have it handed over to us."

"Stupid mortal," he hissed at me. "I would tell you everything. I would peel away the veil that covers your clouded eyes. You could become a secret chieftain of the world, with power. Real power. And you would turn it all away?"

"I would take nothing from you, demon."

He held out his hand. "What book do you steal from my library?"

I tried to resist him, but he be-spelled me again, and terror gripped my throat. I tore open my pack and held out the book that I had taken. It floated toward him, and his hand extended from the mist to accept it. He held the book in his palm, like this, and I saw he had long, long yellow fingernails, almost like claws, which he used to slowly turn the pages. All I could do was watch, and I was sure that at any moment he would strike me down, or add me to his collection of beasts. But my worst fear was that he would put me to work, reading the hidden tomes and prying out their secrets for him. That would have been the worst, to serve him like that in doing harm.

How long did he read? I don't know, truly. It could have been for days, but it may have just been for a minute or two, after which he simply closed the book and placed it on the table in front of him.

He asked me, "Why this book? What secrets does it hold?"

"None," I told honestly. "It is only a story."

"Then why have you risked everything to come snatch it from me?"

"I never finished reading it, sir."

He said nothing for a long time. A very long time. Then, guess what he did? He laughed. Yes, he laughed, a huge noise that shook the entire room, the very foundations of the library itself. It's true, what I said. I started to read this very book when I visited Kurast so long ago, but I had to leave before I could finish. This book, this book has haunted me for those many years. It was a work of amazing wonder. Knowing that it was in the hands of evil was agony. I had to do something, despite my age, despite my infirmities. Maybe there is a little courage in me yet, and that must have stayed the Lord of Hatred's ire.

He let me go. Yes, he did. The invisible bonds about my feet were broken, and he pointed toward the exit. "Leave," he said. "May your miserable foolishness afford you some slight peace before the end."

I held the book and ran out of the room. I swear, you could not have run faster than me, but his voice bellowed after me, throughout all the vast halls, "The lies in that book will not save you. They are the deceptions of the weak, and you will know this at the end." Oh, it took me forever to reach the exit, and he was still with me, still saying, "Lies. Lies. Lies." He's with me still, in the back of my head, holding on like one of the leeches that infest the waters here, but they're only words now, and I know that he's wrong. He's wrong. He's a lord of hatred, and the one thing he hates the most is the truth. The truth within these very pages.

The book? This book is nothing. It truly has no worth, save the power of the story inside. You know this story. It's the tale of Sammath and Are'a. See? You do remember it. You've heard it a thousand times. The greatest lovers of our world, from long ago, and this is the very first volume of their tale printed by the great emperors of the east. Look, here, this is about Sammath throwing down the Childflay to free Are'a from its foul grasp. This chapter, here, is about Are'a traveling to Hell to redeem Sammath's soul. And we both know how it ends, with their ascension into the heavens to be together forever.

This is about love, young man. This is about a love with the power to defeat hatred and lies and this darkness. That thing lurking in the library thinks this is a dream, a delusion, and he released me, to mock me, or perhaps because it amused him to do so, or perhaps thinking that I am just a foolish old man tormented by a fantasy that cannot stand against his evil. He is wrong, I say! I faced him, to find a damned book! For the love of a book! The very least of things. What could a true hero do? What did Sammath and Are'a sacrifice for each other, because of love?

To the demons, and even to the angels, it's just a story. Just a stupid story, and that will be the downfall of the lot of them. They know nothing of love, cannot feel it, but for you and me, for everyone, it's the only thing that matters. Love is the one thing that can save us all.