

Lazing on a Sunday Afternoon

Tipping back the glass, he let the cool wine flow down his tongue to the back of his throat, thoroughly enjoying the flavor and tingling sensation it created as it traveled. He smiled through the raised glass and lovingly gazed upon the world that he'd created and declared it good. Laughing in simple joy at a job well-done he turned his heavy-lidded eyes upon the scene before him.

He sat upon a beach of pinkish sand that stretched to his left and his right as far as the eye could see. About a hundred yards behind him stood a pristine tropical forest; lush and verdant with explosions of color and sound that delighted the eye and instilled wonder in the observer. The entire landscape sported an ecosystem precisely designed for its long-term sustainability as well as its aesthetic beauty. Other than himself, no human being had experienced its full grandeur and its natural-yet-manufactured perfection. Looking toward the distant horizon he watched the blue-green sea as it lapped the sandy beach with warm clean water. Beneath its depths a collection of the most diverse and beautiful sea life ever assembled explored vast multi-colored reefs and exquisite formations of algae-covered phosphorescent rocks. Each life-form, down to the bacterium, had been hand-selected to serve his grand purpose.

It had taken nearly a century to execute his scheme. He had always had talents for finance and for gathering talented people. While still a young man he learned to play the markets to perfection, amassing unprecedented wealth and influence. He manipulated governments and industries to gain the necessary materials and protections to keep his dream alive. He recruited the finest minds in bio-chemistry, genetics, terraformation, and ecological biology. These scientists developed diverse new technologies that further buttressed his power base while also hurtling him closer to his final goal. He became one of the most powerful men in the System, a key player in science, government, and finance. His whims could change the courses of millions of lives. Still, many dismissed him as an eccentric, a rich youth with too much money to spend and talent enough to squander on vain pursuits. The diversity of these pursuits cloaked his true interest perfectly.

Hermes Beta was a smallish world in orbit of a large red star in the outer reaches of System-controlled space. Others saw a lifeless rock circling a dying sun; in it he saw raw potential and the path to the realization of his dream. While it toured a large cooling star, its orbit was such that it would receive the proper amounts of light and radiation that could be manipulated to support terraforming and, eventually, life. This obscure body on the outer reaches of known space would become the womb for his great creation.

News of this world first appeared in an obscure astronomical magazine that was read by very few on the Aether. As usual, he let nothing stand in the way of the execution of his purpose. He moved quickly, contacting the team that had made the discovery and provided them with modest grants to fund further explorations. In short order he had insinuated himself irretrievably into their operations and took over the project. Hermes Beta would become a paradise of his own design and exist only for his own purposes. From nothing he would create a world, a new Garden of Eden in which human knowledge would open the gates instead of close them.

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With his dream's fruition within his grasp, his work accelerated. While the System flourished with the by-products of his labors, he pushed his various teams harder to produce the results he desperately wanted, that humanity (in his eyes) so desperately needed. He became obsessed, driven to see the outcome of his long years of planning; the final result of his lifelong quest. It was no longer sufficient to know that his endeavors would yield greatness for his progeny. Why pour one's life into the achievement of godhood if he could not gaze upon the world he created?

Inevitably, age began to close the gap between his life and his ambition. Before infirmity claimed him, he put his affairs in order and secured the progress of his plan. Over the course of his lifetime he had ensured that each aspect of his endeavor worked independently and without knowledge of the others. His elaborate system of safeguards would ensure that while the project proceeded no one would be able to usurp it from him, or attempt to halt its progress, even in the event of his absence. The final phase of the plan was the most dangerous; he entwined his life-force with the matrix of Hermes' re-creation, tying his awakening with the rebirth of his world. When the conditions were right, he would rise again, basking in the glow of the red sun, and reclaim the world, *his* world, and tread upon the ground of a newborn Earth.

Today that day had come. He sat alone on his beach, laughing as the moist sea-borne winds brought goose-bumps to his naked body. He reveled in the sensation of the soft sand brushing his warmed skin. The old man, far older than even his wrinkles indicated, laughed and rolled on the beach like a toddler on his first holiday. He splashed in the warm tropical waters and lazed on the vast beach, basking in the soft pink sunlight that poured from the clear purplish sky. He listened to the chirping of birds and the call of animals from the nearby forest, content to imagine the struggles that would sustain and ultimately improve the life he had implanted there. He studied the world around and quietly contemplated the path that brought him here, remembering the men and women for whom his endeavors brought great wealth and influence; as well as those who lost both and more as a result of his scheming. He ate the robust fruits of the forest and drank sweet clear spring water. Finally, as the great red sun began to descend upon the horizon, he napped contently and without care.

He was awakened by water lapping against his bare feet. The sun had sunk lower into the ocean and the tide had crept up along the beach. He could hear the distant call of night birds awakening in the forest behind him. Nodding to himself as if acknowledging a timely reminder, he removed the aged wine that he had saved for this occasion from a preservation pack that had been jettisoned from the orbital monitoring station high above the beach. Removing the old-fashioned cork, he poured the Terran vintage into a crystal goblet and toasted himself and the life he had created. Settling on the beach, he watched the sun diffuse through the wine and the crystal as it shrank to a sliver of red on the distant horizon. After he finished the wine, he returned the empty bottle to the packet. From another compartment he retrieved a small silver box. Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, he pressed the single button on the face of the device.

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It started with distant lightning. As the sun faded, jagged flashes of green, blue, and red lightning tore across the indigo sky. Soon a rolling red cloud gathered and began churning toward the beach. Lightning played across its face and lit it from within, creating a multihued strobe that grew larger as it approached. He rose as the warm tropical breeze became strong choppy winds. Hints of sulfur in the air burned his nose as volcanic ash began to blow into his eyes. The waves climbed higher, drenching him as he stared resolutely at the coming storm. His skin began to redden and burn between the scalding sea water and the furnace-hot air that blew out from the cloud. As the sea boiled about his legs and gale-force winds whipped burning flesh from his frame, he cried out, the words lost on the howling winds and the last gasps of his failing body. He collapsed and dissolved, merging into the viscera of the old world and the primordial substance of the new.

It was the perfect end of to a perfect day.