

The Grand Experiment

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A short story of the Grand Experiment Collection

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CHAPTER I

At the beginning of the Grand Experiment, we were ecstatic in our approval of our new creation. We sought to bring to fruition a realm of life like we had never seen. We wished for it to form itself, in a way our being was incapable of—a natural evolution that brought to the forefront of our experiment the ability to adapt and conform. It was an ambitious goal, yet intoxicating. So, we built it.

Landscapes were crafted, infused with our blood. Drops of our essence seeped into the rock, soil, and water, bringing forth this new extravagant life. It took time; little for us, countless ages for them. Then on some worlds, the cycles stabilized. Boiling, poisonous liquids cooled and became water. Furious storms turned into gentle rains. The fierce waves of lava that could bury entire civilizations settled into a solemn kissing of earthy shores. The toxic, acidic air dissipated into a pleasant, life-giving aroma. After a violent birth, the worlds were coming of age. Some, at least.

Then we saw it: life. Cells that became cells that became cells. Forged in water, fire, and sand, and fueled by our blood, these simple creatures harnessed the energy of the Grand Experiment and marched on through the eons, forming through adaptation and survival. It was a harsh existence; it still is. Trillions have suffered, trillions have met their demise, and trillions more will in the future.

But trillions survived and thrived, and trillions will prosper. The balance has always been maintained.

Life exceeded our expectations. We discovered that it was capable of sustaining itself even in the harshest of conditions. Freezing temperatures and some species thrive. Scalding surfaces and a few species bask in the searing heat. A plethora of liquid pools, rivers, lakes, seas, and oceans filled with enough life to become another grand experiment of their own. Our questions were numerous and fruitful, and the answers contemplated for millennia; many go unanswered still. The Grand Experiment continues.

In awe, we stood on the outskirts of time as life evolved into more life, much more. We marveled at its capacity for self-awareness. Some worlds hosted a multitude of sea-life that crawled its way out of life-giving waters to make the land their home—an outcome that was unprecedented but appreciated. What purpose do they serve? What are they thinking? How will their journey end? These worlds garnished the majority of our focus.

But we are a diverse lot; where most found this fracture of life the pinnacle of study, others discovered intellectual solace in more stringent environments. The burning worlds, for instance: spheres of molten rock that burn with the fury of a dying star. One would never expect life to form in such hostile conditions, but our blood is strong. Creatures made of rock and searing sands slithered from the oceans of magma beneath each world's crust. Lava brought forth rolling waves of beings that oozed from the molten rock and consumed everything in their path. The copulation of such creatures was a thing of magnificence. Their burning bodies clashed with explosive, violent force; but their reproduction was a slow and gentle gestation. Truly unique beings in this new era.

Other worlds, too, have gained a substantial following among those of my realm. Gaseous giants that held neither land nor water seemed simple: a small metallic core with colorful gaseous particles that swirled and danced around it in a perpetual, gentle storm. But looking closely, one could find symmetry and order in the squall. Then the blood took hold and the elements became sentient; a

collective of beings formed of nothing but air. Their civilizations were built upon and within themselves. Highways on their worlds were a stream of their own essence allowing them to flow freely around the core. They knew little to no conflict. The existence of these creatures was merely symbiosis and uniformity.

The visual spectacle of the worlds of light—vast domains of energy thundering in explosions of blinding, radiant beauty—held many of my kind in awe. The life on these worlds was pure energy and light. They shone in streams of yellows, blues, greens, purples, reds and other colors that most species were incapable of seeing. They transferred information by melding their particles with one another, and at speeds most species couldn't fathom. They had even ventured among their neighboring planetary and star systems, trading information with other species and worlds, though they had yet to cross the borders of their own galaxy. Still, their ability to travel through the vacuum of space made them one of the universe's most advanced species.

Then, there were the humans.

CHAPTER 2

Observing humanity throughout their existence has shown me the true power of our blood. Their species is unique in that they aren't. They have few strengths in their physiology. Their bodies are susceptible to the most miniscule changes in temperature: slightly colder and they would freeze to death; slightly hotter and they would succumb to heat stroke. If they lie in water for extended periods of time, their skin begins to melt. Prolonged exposure to their star can burn their flesh, leaving it blistered, cracked, and peeled. Few species are as naturally maladapted to their environment as the humans.

And yet, despite these weaknesses, they consider themselves the strongest species on their world. Are they the most dominant? Perhaps. But strongest? Far from it. Pit one of them against their world's lion and see who fares. Have them grapple the beast known as the bear and their fate would be secured. They would lose a footrace against a cheetah, or even a rabbit. They cannot fly with the birds nor breathe in the oceans. They cannot even burrow into the ground and live contentedly. Yet they believe themselves superior.

There have been many like them throughout the Grand Experiment, mind you. But what humankind has are its intelligence and the anatomy of its extremities. Without the ability to build tools, safe structures, and other means of survival, this species would have

succumbed to the harsh elements of its world millennia ago. Indeed, humanity's ability and will to survive in such harsh environments is uncommon. Most species on other worlds adapt to become part of their surroundings. But humans migrated into the harshest conditions and somehow still survived, even thrived. This ability to technologically adapt to such extremely diverse environments was unique to them, an external adaptation rather than simply a product of their upbringing. It was unexpected and appreciated, also informative and inspiring. They have formed civilizations, religions, cultures, empires, and global networks of trade and information in these various areas. This drive to succeed is heavily ingrained in my kind as well.

One may wonder why I chose this world to invest my time and skills in, when during the eons of the Grand Experiment I have seen countless stars, worlds, and various forms of life. It's rather simple: I find the humans interesting. Of all the species I have observed and walked among, they have taken my contribution to the Grand Experiment rather greedily.

Being entities of philosophical contemplation, my peers and I bestowed our insight upon the life of the universe through our blood. Humankind has shown they have a great deal of us in them. And like my architectural and engineering-focused brothers and sisters who took interest in the city worlds of technologically advanced species, I took interest in the minds of humans. They think, more than most species, about the unknown, something they fear. Where some species may see this as frivolous and wasteful, humans have embraced it, just as my kind has—this was, of course, our impetus to create the Grand Experiment.

Over time, this ability to philosophize and imagine brought them both immense wonders and great suffering, conflict and even war. The imagination of these beings was so powerful that even my kind used their mental creations as forms of punishment or blessings in our realm. Their ability to conjure fantastical beings and narratives exceeded my own. Their ability to create aspirations solely from the

depths of their minds caused an ever-growing clash between chaos and order.

At first, this talent was used simply to explain the unknown. Their more primitive minds would look to the horizon and see their star rising above, so what could it possibly be but a god? So came the first religions. This ushered in the period of astrology where humankind believed their divine destiny was mapped out in the heavens. But as time went on, they transitioned to astronomy, their scientific study of the stars and their Solar System. And yet despite all the proof behind astronomy, there were still those who adhered to astrology, even in the most modern civilizations. We were not entirely surprised by this outcome, as many species before had held onto the fears of the unknown despite contrary evidence being provided. But in time, they usually abandon these ideals and embrace what truths lie before them. This logical progression was familiar among many of my kind as well—our blood flourishes among these creatures. One wonders what shape their minds will take eons from now.

Religion is a most powerful force among humans that, even now, still controls many of their minds in this realm. I was heavily responsible for this in its beginnings, influencing prophets, planting seeds, as it was simply a precursor to philosophy; it was humankind's first attempt at understanding what they truly could not. Later, as their kind advanced, and philosophy took hold and ushered in their scientific method, we found our fascinating young species turn from superstition to fact-based knowledge and theories. But perhaps the most fascinating aspect of all, was that in many parts of this world, especially the more advanced regions, they intertwined the three concepts: religion, philosophy and science. They found that one could be a follower of a moral doctrine without denying germ theory. They could acknowledge that viruses caused illness rather than a witch in the woods; but simultaneously, they might give thanks to a deity for their wellbeing, giving them peace and comfort, as well as a benevolent future path to walk.

It didn't matter if they never saw or heard from said deity, the belief itself was what gave them meaning, guidance, and often happiness. I considered it a supportive form of self-therapy; truly enthralling. The sense of community and comfort it brought allowed them to take on the woes of a harsh existence in stride and use it to their advantage.

Other species throughout the Experiment would adhere to such beliefs as well, but none so tightly as humans. It drove entire civilizations of this world, whereas other species would keep it personal, close. There were similarities among them; but humans took the stories, the faiths, and the passion of these beliefs and made it a core of their being. This was not common in other worlds.

Naturally, there were those who took their faith to extreme proportions, a necessary outcome of the Experiment. The pushing of one's mind to allow fanatical intent based on ancient dogma is a riveting concept.

So while I watched humans destroy themselves in some parts of the world in the name of a deity or ancient scriptures, I also witnessed them use those same deities and scriptures to create great triumphs of art, solidarity, charity, architecture, and foundational moral values that formed the cornerstones of most, if not all, modern societies. The contrasting viewpoints often coming from a singular ideal showed how heterogenous the minds of these simple creatures could be, and will continue to be. This world was a prime example of our blood taking hold. But they must be kept in line, lest they destroy all, and themselves. The balance is what must succeed. Absolutely fascinating outcome, these humans.

CHAPTER 3

My time with the humans began by observing their evolution from societal infancy. I watched as they treaded across vast landscapes with possessions harnessed to their backs, following the seasons and the animals they used for sustenance and materials. They knew nothing of the world or its other inhabitants. On the rare occasion they stumbled across one another, the interaction would often be violent. It was a harsh beginning for this young species.

Over time, they learned to use the elements of the world to their favor. With their mental evolution came the ability to cultivate. Once nomadic tribes settled and developed agriculture, the soil became a commodity. The tribes closest to each other became settlements, then societies, followed by villages, cities, and eventually nations. The age of civilization had begun.

The last few hundred Earth years of their existence ushered in a fountain of knowledge. We have seen the birth of a technological network that connected the world's nations, allowing information to spread like a knowledge virus, infiltrating the minds of humanity's inhabitants—available to all. But with this knowledge, a flood of simultaneous solidarity and resentment across cultures has drowned the inhabitants to a point of near-bipolar enlightenment. This was

inevitable, but humans are still so very young. Too much knowledge often sways the balance unnaturally.

Even in the earliest days, common humanity would often be lost and forgotten in an almost fanatical adherence to tribal identity. Cultures clashed, ethnicities divided, and a perpetual cycle of fear of the other fragmented and tore at the heart of the human populace. I found that groups brought division to its peak: A hive mind mentality took hold, and the individual became nothing more than a tendril of their group's idea of justice. This was expected, predictable even, as it has happened so many times before across the Grand Experiment. The natural order of a young species always developed its social skills in their infancy. This stage of life was unavoidable.

Although the fighting never ceased, the humans did evolve a certain civility amongst most nations. Yet the balance is so easily disturbed in this realm of humans. One tip of the scales could send a region into turmoil or nations into war over their conflicting beliefs. Add weight in the opposite direction and a single religion may consume entire continents, leaving little room for innovation or free thought. That is not what the Grand Experiment was meant to be.

The Experiment's purpose was to bring about new knowledge from a plethora of diverse-minded species. But to achieve this, the balance of advanced life must be maintained. In order to learn, the species must continue to grow through cycles of failure and success. Death is a natural course in this realm, even some extinction of the less-advanced species is tolerated by both factions of my kind. But extinction within the species we have the most potential to learn from? This is where our differences manifested; this is where my side felt the balance must be maintained, whereas our opponents looked at the larger scale of the Grand Experiment's equilibrium. The death of one advanced, dominant species was merely another steppingstone toward intellectual progress to them, as the extinction of an advanced species may bring forth new life and technologies from others. Despite this tremendous disagreement, the method of maintaining this balance was where we had our greatest clash of interests.

As the universe grew past its infancy, we came to a crossroads: Those of us who wished to maintain the balance of the Experiment by directly influencing it, and those who wished to leave it be, allowing it to shape itself naturally, no matter the cost of life. I am a member of the former. Together, with my brothers and sisters, I sought to maintain the stability of the Grand Experiment in order to learn as much from it as possible. We interacted with it. We whispered in ears, manipulated outcomes, tempted fate, all to keep the balance. Our counterparts saw this as sacrilege, prompting a great war between our kind.

Led by our leader adorned in jewels, my brothers and sisters lost an important battle long before the time of humans; before their world even existed. We fought for eons, but their numbers were greater, and we succumbed to the never-ending tide of their onslaught. We were cast out of our home, Domain, and thrown into the Six Realms: horrific hellscape designed by our enemies as torturous prisons for our kind.

But we did not relent so easily. Many of us managed to not only escape the realms, but also gain direct access to the planetary systems of the Grand Experiment. We now held great power. Where our enemies mostly remained in the comfort of Domain, only venturing out when necessary, many of my brothers and sisters made the worlds of the Experiment our new home. We were able to use the terrain, knowledge, and traits of those who resided there to our advantage. For there is a great difference between observing these worlds from Domain and living upon them. We grasped hold of the populations, much to the anger of our enemies. They know little of what it is to live among our creations. We have the advantage here, fighting our foes from our home territory.

So, we took eons to prepare, influence, and alter various species to continue the Experiment while simultaneously fending off our Domain adversaries' intent to merely watch. Our dominion over the species of the Grand Experiment did not loosen easily, hence why so many of them consider us gods; not entirely a foolish notion, for we are their creators in a way. We forged them in the fires of eternity and

set our blood into the mortar of their being. But we are not the gods they imagine; we learn more from them, than they from us.

And given the imbalance of this particular world they call Earth, we have come to the conclusion that in time it will collapse upon itself. I have seen it happen countless times before; a dominant species outgrows its wisdom with a flurry of technology before all is lost, but many do not see the error of their ways and they bring destruction upon themselves and all life around them.

Their path towards self-destruction is one that my rival faction would say is inevitable and thus must not be disturbed. To them, it is simply meant to be, and disrupting it would usher in an unnatural outcome tarnished by our hands; a tainted sample. But we ask, how much could we learn from that which is deceased? No, we must preserve what we can in order for life to continue so we may obtain as much knowledge from it as possible. The Grand Experiment must thrive. The realm of humans must be cleansed.

CHAPTER 4

My time on this world has brought me in contact with many influential humans over the millennia. I, together with my brothers and sisters, have watched and guided kings, queens, emperors, conquerors and powerful religious figureheads. We have helped them shape nations and build civilizations just as often as thin the herd and annex other states when necessary, all in the name of the Grand Experiment.

A rising Mongol united the nomadic tribes of his era to form an empire that would become one of the greatest the world would ever know, with much assistance from my blue-skinned sister and her disciples. Before this, a Greek king accompanied by my rotund brother, conquered vast lands that spanned Persia.

I myself whispered in the ears of a man controlling northern Eurasia for several decades, including during the second of the world's greatest wars. He was one of my most successful specimens; although, his paranoia rendered me unable to fully use his potential. His Western European counterpart, led by another of my sisters, garnished the most fame among the species, but my host instilled twenty times the fear and wrested four times the death toll—exactng a necessary culling given humanities propensity for destruction when the population flourishes unchecked. Still, even combined we did not

match our younger brother's East Asian protégé. Perhaps this was why they called us demons, at least those who knew we existed. This world's mid-twentieth century was a promising year indeed.

One mustn't look at our actions and assume evil motive, however. For although the results were horrific to those involved, our intentions were pure in regard to the Experiment. Nearly all species of this world have become extinct over the billions of its years. My kind seek only balance. We have no intention of genocide, but populations must be kept in check in order for balance to be maintained. We have seen so many worlds pushed to extinction that the fate of the human world has weighed heavily on our minds. They must not succumb to the fate of so many others. Many species cease to exist and will never be seen again in this universe. So many chances for observation and research lost in the blink of an eye. What could we have learned, if only we helped them survive?

So, some have vowed to protect the human world, even from itself. Humans may be evolving, but we cannot trust them to resolve the issues of their own destruction. As fascinating as they may be, they must be held accountable and maintained. For millennia we have searched for a being among them that could bring forth a new era of enlightenment and prosperity, one that may usher more of us into their realm once again and allow us to restore balance. And I believe I may have found one such being.

CHAPTER 5

Ghetti, this city of mine, sits on the Pacific shores of the United States of America amid a forest that spans deep inland, crawling over high mountains and surrounding voluptuous lakes. Bountiful rivers, streams, and falls cut through the mountainside like watery veins fueling the city and its denizens. And yet few of the humans desire to partake in this natural world. Most choose to ensconce in their concrete and asphalt sanctuaries. The forest to them is foreign and unknown, and what humans tend to experience more with the unknown is fear rather than the joy of possibility and discovery, despite that fear not stopping them from pursuing knowledge of the unknown. Shame, for my kind is solely centered on discovery. The blood was weak in that regard.

All these fearful beings that inhabit Ghetti do play their part in the Grand Experiment, however. They drive commerce and have furnished ample data on the behaviors and mannerisms of social groups interacting in such confined spaces. So much beautiful, open land in the Americas yet they funnel into the largest, filthiest, and most populous cities. Their desire for social interaction is strong, even when they wish to be left alone to their own devices. Even those most disconnected have some semblance of desire for interrelationships, as miniscule as it may be.

Ah, but the city-dwellers hate their neighbors almost as much as they crave their presence. Trapped on over-burdened roadways, they rage and wish death and suffering upon all who stand between them and their morning caffeinated tonic. They scream internally upon seeing long queues at their theaters or restaurants and know all too well the pain that overpopulation brings. Even through the fog, the towering steel and stone monoliths of the area they call “downtown” can be seen for miles, like haunting obelisks; a warning for all who wish for peace and silence. Yet still they come, from all over the world, to fill these streets, to fill the monoliths. The cup poureth over, and few ever leave.

Protruding from the city hub is a snakelike network of streets with interlocked neighborhoods and industrial zones. Factories, industry, and the occasional quarry scar the face of the coastal hills and mountainside of the city. Flagging plumes of smoke and steam vomit forth from these monstrosities to blacken the sky. Almost every successful, intelligent species reaches this phase in their existence; it’s inevitable, but also my least favorite. But, like most species, they learn to improve it over time. My hope had been that humans would adhere to this pattern, but my faith in them has become subdued.

Still, there may be some hope. In the northeastern outskirts of Ghetti, sits a house on a street in a middle-class neighborhood, and in that house resides a young man whom I have watched and helped grow since he was but a child playing in the sand. I have seen him pass through his boyhood, not antisocial, but disconnected and alone, much to his preference. I have watched as he found just one he perceives as a solid friend. They met in their youth in private school and have been close ever since. This has benefited him as it kept him somewhat connected to society, while not entirely enveloping him in it. One must know their surroundings, after all.

As he grew into a man, his disconnection from humanity persevered. He was not alone in this regard; even now, on this world, the idea of the individual is gaining prominence. There are many who refuse to take part in groups, and rather than associate themselves

with anyone, they simply live their own lives. They are outside observers looking into the whirlpool and watching as so many others willfully plunge in.

My host is one who watches, but despite this, he is still able to function with other humans in his circles. This is part of what drew me to him, for he is a pinched vein, allowing only a trickle of society's blood to flow through him. Outside of his one friend and his parents, he has never truly developed fruitful relationships. His inability to forge strong bonds with his fellow human beings is not entirely uncommon, but his particular emotional disconnection, combined with his physical connection to Earth, has allowed me to slowly infiltrate his mind.

Although he does not feel a significant connection to humanity, he still has a deep bond with this world. To find solace and a clear mind, he walks the forests of the mountains and crosses the streams and rivers. The cool air flowing over field and lake bring new life into him as they fill his lungs with a life-fueling fervor. The smells and sounds of flora and fauna bring him an inner peace that few other humans understand. With this love of nature comes some semblance of love for his world as a whole; therefore, he must find it at least worth saving.

It took much effort, but eventually I could feel his thoughts and understand him in a way only a so-called demon could. After many more years, I was able to influence him, slightly. A whisper in his ear, a nudge of his hand, a touch on his frontal lobe and certain aspirations and decisions would feel slightly more justified. My rivals and enemies that casted us out of our home found these interactions abhorrent, sacrilege, but we must preserve our worlds. And, if all goes according to plan, my host will play a significant role in that regard.

There will be obstacles, however, as there always are with new hosts. Once he discovers what must be done, I cannot predict his reaction. It is not a simple thing that I shall ask. But given context, I suspect he may understand, if not agree.

But there is still much to do. The human mind is a fickle thing. Even the simplest of them are not persuaded easily, not even by one

THE GRAND EXPERIMENT

as skilled as myself; convincing one as complex as he will be no small feat. No, it will take time before my protégé, the young Thomas Pennywell, is ready to see the true nature of things. But time is something I have in abundance. After all, this world, all worlds, are worth saving for the continuation of the Grand Experiment. So, we shall see what comes of the mind of Pennywell.

To be continued...

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