

A Reason To Look Up

The clerk was not having a good morning, what with another six billion deaths to his name. He leaned and rubbed his forehead, then remembered that this might be adding to his hair loss. He leaned back and rubbed his eyes instead.

On his desk were written notes, which began on a tidy single sheet and had now multiplied with the continued iterations of his work; a megalithic pile surrounded by scattered pages, pulled out, crossed out, crumpled, highlighted. The clerk moved his hands to arrange everything together, then thought better of it and returned his fingertips to his eyes.

These last six billion deaths had, like most of the others, been seemingly self-inflicted. Not self-inflicted by the clerk you understand, although there were feelings of partial guilt. No; inflicted on the six billion by themselves. It was frustrating. One moment everything was going well and the next it was not, terminally.

With his eyelids closed he could still see only problems, the blue-green sphere floating before him, softly lit by its nondescript star, shifting in fluid motion as he ran each iteration forwards, all to the same extinct conclusion. Why?

The office door opened behind him with a soft whine but he did not turn immediately. There was only one person who would arrive unannounced. The clerk lowered his hands and attempted to assume a calm and balanced position, to erase any body language that expressed what he was really feeling. He swiveled in his chair aiming to project welcome openness at ease with hard work. If that were even possible.

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“Problems?” asked the administrator as he closed the door quietly but firmly.

The clerk tried to raise his eyebrows, but this happened more like an uncontrolled twitch.

The administrator stood in the office, hands clasped gently in front of his tailored jacket. After a moment he moved to sit in the chair, to the left of the door, specifically set there for visits like this. It was the same height as the clerk’s, possibly an inch or two higher, but did not swivel.

A single word came to mind when you looked at the administrator, and that word was: meticulous.

“I ...” began the clerk. He remembered the papers strewn across the desk behind him and wished that he had pushed them together. Not that this would have hidden anything. “I’m finding some challenges, sir.”

“Challenges!” the administrator proclaimed with enthusiasm. “As long as they aren’t too challenging, eh?” The man made a small laugh, a slight explosive sound that was all nasal but with a low note, like a church organ. Some others around here did passable impressions of the administrator. The clerk did not.

“Not too challenging sir, no,” said the clerk, and then, because there was some silence, he felt he had to go on speaking. “Just a little chaotic, is all.”

The administrator nodded. “Some might say that chaos is the business we’re in.” Again the small laugh came via his nose.

“Well, indeed, indeed,” agreed the clerk, listening hard for any nervousness in his own voice. It wasn’t that he was scared of the administrator, rather an anxiety about delivery, an

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incurable feeling that he would be found out as the impostor he often felt. Less when things were going well, more on days like today.

“Alright then,” said the administrator smoothly, slapping his hands gently onto his knees, rocking forward and pushing himself up. “I’ll leave you to it.”

He smiled, and the clerk tried to mirror this. The administrator opened the door and was gone as efficiently as he’d arrived.

The clerk let the smile fall from his face as he turned, rubbed his forehead one more time, and looked back at his notes. It was a few iterations before, a few sheets down the pile, that he’d had his greatest success, relatively speaking, so he shuffled his way through some pages until he found it.

He took a deep breath: the signal for a fresh start.

The initial setup followed protocols that had long been in place, and recently reviewed and tweaked for maximum efficacy. None of that presented any problem, and ensured a solid foundation of common building blocks. The clerk paid closer attention this time to resource distribution; always a point of contention in scenarios like this.

The region in which he was working was not overly congested. Some impacts were useful to kick-start certain processes, but you had to balance this with the need to avoid anything extinction-level. The only person to blame in that scenario would be the clerk himself. The standard trifecta was a thick enough atmosphere, a strong enough magnetic field, and a few satellites to skew-off anything too big. Burning rocks needed to be glorious light shows rather than sources of fear and superstition.

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It all went very well, but then it always did. Now the clerk worried that he'd tipped things too far the other way, made things a little too easy for the inhabitants or – worse still – left his imprint upon the process. Not too much, not too little. OK; he was well within parameters when he reviewed, and he scribbled down the latest numbers on the topmost sheet.

He ran things backwards and forwards and made minor alterations until he was satisfied. As a whole, not a great deal had changed since that first iteration at the bottom of the pile. The clerk frowned at that realization. It seemed like he was leaving things to chance, and chance was the last thing you should leave to chance, as the administrator was fond of saying.

It was as good as it would get, he decided, this time, at least. He checked the number of this attempt in the system. That was a little disheartening; he couldn't recall getting to anything this high before.

No matter. With everything in place, he began.

The clerk skipped over the first section, as usual. He had no appetite for geological violence and at the beginning it was all broad strokes anyway. He paused where the lowest forms began – all looked good – and skipped again to check that the necessary complexities had exerted themselves. They had. He watched at a steady rate, and his heart sank at a couple of eye-watering collisions, but after another gap things settled to precisely where he wanted them (but then they always did). Higher forms would require more time yet. He jumped forward to the appropriate point, only to clench in his seat and again rub his suffering hairline.

It was worse than usual this time, a soupy mess of browns, greens and blacks. What had happened? He ran back and paused. Yes, higher forms had evolved, just as they should, but then

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what? He returned to the soup. There was nothing. Well, some incredibly simple assemblies. Had he missed some vital detail? Some inherent instability in his structure?

The atmosphere was a mix of charred compounds and radioactive isotopes, so toxic that anything more complex than lichen failed to exist. It was undoubtedly a self-inflicted event, just as the others had been. The clerk ran a thumb up the side of his ever-increasing pile of notes. He stared at the graph of higher forms, how it climbed steadily in a short percentage of time before dropping over a cliff. Seven billion deaths this time. He looked at the clock. What a waste of an afternoon.

He was unsurprised to hear the door squeak subtly. This time he did not attempt a smile as he turned.

“Problems?” asked the administrator again. It was not really a question.

The clerk nodded, but the administrator’s face was humanitarian.

“How can I help?” he said. His tone still had the expectation of excellence in it. He sat, his suit folding in the right places, and touched his fingers together in a gesture of confidence.

The clerk was about to rub his temple but managed to stop himself.

“Things seem ... ” began the clerk. “There’s nothing extraordinary,” he began again. “Except the results. I don’t think I’m expecting too much. But with the initial standards in place, I expect something more. Or at least something.”

The administrator pursed his lips and shook his head, which seemed to be signaling agreement. He waved a hand towards the notes on the desk. He probably knew everything already, but questions were the way he preferred to do things.

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“You’ve set everything up within parameters?” he asked.

“Yes. Incorporating the latest revisions.”

“And the area isn’t known for congestion?”

“Perhaps slightly more debris than average, but nothing that disqualifies it.”

“And your choice is oxygen, yes?”

The clerk paused before answering.

“Yes it is,” he said slowly. “I think the higher energy it stimulates is ... useful.”

“Indeed,” said the administrator, leaning back a little in the chair. “I am slightly more of a traditionalist, you might say. A corrosive gas can often lead to a corrosive temperament, no?” He did his nasal laugh, and the clerk smiled politely. “But I know your colleague down the hall has been a great advocate for it. She has seen some tremendous results.”

The clerk bristled at this but tried to bite down any outward sign. Of course he didn’t like being compared to any of his fellows. But it was true; his colleague had experienced plenty of success with her slightly unorthodox approaches and – if he were being entirely honest – he was chasing some of her glory by copying.

“It is what it is,” the administrator continued with a miniscule shrug. “And one must move with the times I suppose. How – ” he paused to clear his throat, “ – is your resource distribution?”

Again the clerk’s first reaction was agitation at the query, distribution being one of the most fundamental aspects of his work. He reminded himself of the administrator’s *modus*, but it didn’t help his mood.

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“Standard,” he said. Then he decided to add something so as not to seem rude. “I went for a tectonic layout to ensure evenness over time.”

“Excellent,” said the administrator, perhaps to placate him a little. “I see you’ve dialed hydrocarbons up a fair amount.”

“I feel that ...” the clerk slowed to choose his words. “I feel that abundance can inhibit conflict.”

“Would that were the case,” said the administrator, his tone wistful. “But compassion is a very noble sentiment.”

The clerk looked away in slight embarrassment.

“Unfortunately,” the administrator continued, “it does not seem to be reflected in interactions on the ground, as it were.”

“Er ... no,” the clerk agreed.

“Perhaps we should be looking higher up then. Have you dangled the carrot of expansion?”

“I have,” the clerk assured him, and indicated a small red-orange orb slightly further away. “Just outside habitability,” he explained, “but certainly with enough resources to make it an utterly intriguing prospect.”

“An orange carrot!” exclaimed the administrator, and actually chuckled. “Very droll, very droll.”

The clerk hadn’t thought about it this way at all. He stayed silent, redirecting his gaze to where the wall met the floor.

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“Why are we here?” asked the administrator dramatically after some moments. “What is our goal?”

“To ... to educate and entertain,” replied the clerk by rote, looking back at the older man.

“To educate and entertain. And that,” the administrator went on, holding up a fastidiously relaxed finger, “is a sentiment that cuts both ways.”

The clerk nodded his head microscopically, and then shook it equally. He often found the administrator obtuse but seldom this opaque. It really was turning into an objectively bad day.

“Well,” concluded the administrator, clapping his hands on his knees and rising in the way he always did. “My only other question would be whether you’ve considered a satellite?”

“I ... um ... I have, sir,” the clerk assured him. It was an odd inquiry, with the orbiting bodies very obvious. “Following the standard steps.”

“I mean, rather,” replied the administrator, “have you considered a satellite? Singular.”

He gave a small smile, and left the room with extreme economy of movement.

The clerk was motionless for a moment, frowning, then spun back to his desk with something approaching new vigor. This disappeared as soon as he faced his myriad notes again. But the problem was still in front of him, and could not be smothered under any amount of paper.

He wrote this iteration’s number at the top of a new, fresh sheet. He did not need to consult his notes for the initial stages; misfortune had burned the details into his memory.

He scrolled backwards and forwards until an opportunity presented itself, and winced at the brutality of crashing two masses together. Still, there it was: a small globe to accompany the larger one.

But that was just the start. Having to work now with two bodies created exponentially more problems, and it was not long before the clerk reached for another blank sheet, and then a third. He chose to lock the whole thing, but worried that showing a constant face was a little too convenient, a little too obvious as a ‘come hither’. He would have to add similar nearby, to make it seem commonplace, to cover his tracks. All the torque and axis alignment took a great deal of effort, and he left his desk to pace around the small room on more than one occasion, searching for an elegant elliptical.

But soon it was done, and he was pleased with the number of side-benefits: a longer day; regular tides; eclipses; a subject to inspire poetry. It also became clear how much protection the new body offered. One couldn’t legislate for all collisions, of course, but the clerk soon became enamored of, somewhat sympathetic to, this shiny new piece of his puzzle. He imagined shapes in the haphazard scars of impact. That was bad; getting emotionally involved only led to favoritism and competition with colleagues, and disappointment.

Also, it was fundamentally just a big chunk of rock.

The clerk sat back. More was needed. He doubted that an inanimate object, no matter how pretty, could alone revolutionize previous catastrophic iterations. The paper cenotaph on his desk was testimony to that.

He tapped his fingers on his crumpled notes as the apparatus revolved, moving into and out of the light. He had eschewed continents and volcanoes on the new small body, and any kind of activity they would provide, pulling resources up from below, which also left it considerably ... boring. If nothing was delivered fresh then he needed somewhere to store things, long-term.

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Staring at the craters he saw the answer, and with the merest tilt he had what he wanted at the poles: valleys in constant shadow, peaks in light. There. Well, you can lead a horse, reflected the clerk, and left it at that.

It was probably time to run the iteration again. The clerk sighed but knew it was unavoidable.

He skipped quickly through all the beginning phases and only slowed as the higher forms began to chart. The geometry turned, the numbers ticked up. He slowed some more, then brought things to a halt. Seven-point-six billion. It was the highest number he had achieved. He stared, his finger nudging his hairline.

The door behind him opened methodically.

“Success?”

The clerk turned his head.

“I ... I think so, sir.” He sounded less convinced than he hoped.

The administrator’s shoes made crisp noises across the floor.

“Excellent,” the clerk heard him say. He sensed his superior surveying his work. “Mm. A singular satellite indeed.”

“I hope,” the clerk began, needing to explain. “I hope something obvious might give a little more impetus.”

“Indeed,” agreed the administrator. “Sometimes that extra little push is all that’s needed. A reason to look up, eh?”

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He stepped back towards the chair but did not sit. The clerk swiveled fully to look at him.

“So. Ready to inaugurate your handiwork?” asked the administrator.

“Close enough sir, I believe. Yes.”

“Excellent,” the administrator said again.

Standing and sitting, they regarded each other for a moment.

“I have not,” admitted the clerk, unable to disguise a slightly pained expression, “run this to its conclusion. To see if – ” Pick the right words, he thought nervously. “This single change might actually make the difference.”

The administrator grinned in a manner that could be mischievous if it hadn't been surrounded by such impeccable tailoring.

“Well, I suppose we'll just have to wait and see,” he said.

Then he turned, opened the door decisively, and was gone.