

Today is the day it will happen. As soon as you wake up, you head to the observatory and take your seat before the scanners.

Alma is already there. "Looking good so far," she says.

Your eyes scan the dashboard and you nod as you see that temperatures currently sit at 0.035% above pre-industrial levels. Yes, you tell yourself. Today's definitely the day: the grand-reopening of Planet Earth.

"Fire three more megatons into the atmosphere and see if we can't get that under 0.001%," you say.

"Aye-aye, captain."

Together you watch the payload exit the station and sail toward the Earth. Even from your vantage point up here, you can see the burst of reflective particles spread throughout the thermosphere. You can almost feel the heat of the sunlight these particles reflect back into space.

The scanner beeps and beeps again. It's now at 0.027%.

"I can't believe we've almost done it," Alma murmurs.

You remain silent, eyes fixed on the scanner. 0.023%.

"You were born there, right?" she says.

"That's right."

"Do you remember anything?"

You scratch your head. "Not really, no. I was eight years old when it all happened. Most of what I do remember took place in this very room."

0.017%.

"I can't imagine what it's like down there," Alma says.

You share the sentiment. Privately, you struggle to recall the sound of waves crashing against the shore. You yearn for the smell of a pine cone, the taste of a freshly picked apple on your lips. Are they forever lost? Here on this sterile space station, there is no way to tell for certain. But deep down, you know that the planet will never be the same as when you left. There are some things not even the greatest technology can reverse, from the rising water levels to extinction of entire species.

Another beep from the scanner stirs you from your thoughts. 0.009%.

"Are we all set?" you ask, mostly to break the silence and turn your attention to something more productive.

"Yes," Alma says as the scanner ticks down to 0.005%. "Most of the air's already de-carbonized, and once the surface is colonized it will stabilize itself. Other than that..."

The monitor beeps as the scanner hits 0%. Before either of you can react, the Overlord's slick, oily voice enters your mind.

"Are we done then?" it asks.

"Yes."

The doors hiss open and the Overlord steps in, accompanied by two cohorts. It walks over to the two of you and puts its slimy, three-fingered hand on your shoulder. It doesn't see your grimace as it inspects the scanners and telepathically exclaims "Splendid!" Turning to the others, it says, "Inform the congregation that the planet is officially fit for colonization."

The cohorts leave and the Overlord faces you again. "You seem disappointed," it says.

You don't bother answering, knowing it can read the thoughts going through your mind.

"Don't feel so defeated," it assures you. "In fact, you really ought to take pride in what you've accomplished here. Truly, you are a testament to your species."

You remain still in your seat as the Overlord walks out, closing the doors behind him.

"What is it?" Alma asks after several moments of silence. "Don't tell me you're envious of them. You said yourself you hardly remember Earth, so you don't even know what you're missing."

"I'm not envious," you say.

"So what is it?"

“Nothing,” you say as you stand up and walk back to your cabin. Until the day you die you will stay there, orbiting your old home and helplessly watching as its new caretakers shape it to their will.

The Overlord is right, you think. You *are* a testament to your species. After all, who but a human could trash the Earth so recklessly, yet only bother to clean it when alien invaders force you to at gunpoint?