

Deviation from a Theme

By

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Teacher Payeph wagged her wattles in exasperation as she surveyed the shambles I had made of my first continuum.

"How many times must I tell you?" she demanded. "The smaller, the better! Random factors produce effects which spread outward in waves in all directions! Subtlety, Ellease! Subtlety is called for in order to have a smoothly running continuum."

I bent a spine into the apologetic position and said, "I am abjectly sorry, Teacher."

"I'm certain the fact that you're sorry will console all the life-forms suffering in your continuum." She settled at my side and became solicitous, stroking my frill with her whiskers. That egg-gummer Myosa looked up from her continuum and snickered at my private frequency.

Payeph always feels warmth for the retards.

Expel it from your nether vents, I told Myosa and shut her off.

Payeph punched MAXIMUM REDUCTION on my console slate and picked up my continuum. It hung in her pincers like a punctured bagaloon. I colored and clamped the lids shut on my dorsal vents, lest my embarrassment offend.

"What is wrong?" Payeph asked as she returned my limp creation to its mount. "Are you having trouble with your vision? Do you perceive fine details? Or is it that you simply don't care?"

"Oh, no. It's just . . . I'm clumsy, Teacher. I try to work on a small scale, but every time I attempt to manipulate my life-forms, I accidentally gouge the side off a mountain or punch a hole clean through the planet. Once, I missed altogether and ruptured the sun."

Payeph looked sad. "I think you need more practice, Ellease, before I turn you loose on another continuum of your own. I'll turn this one over to mine."

I risked a glance at Myosa. She was smoking with envy. It was no secret that Payeph's continuum was the best in existence. Her decision to let me practice there was an undeniable show of favor. I rose and followed my teacher past Myosa, at which point I surreptitiously twitched a nipple.

When we came to her continuum, Payeph punched MINIMUM REDUCTION. Everything became gray shading into black and white.

"Of course," said Payeph, "I can't simply turn you loose on my pride and joy."

"Of course, Teacher." My hearts sank.

"But I am going to allot you control of a quasi-world."

I cocked a spine at her. "A quasi-world, Teacher?"

"A sort of alternate reality which the life-forms in this sector have erected and preserved on light-sensitive film. The absence of a

