

Everything went well during my survey mission, so well, in fact, that I had logged several habitable worlds and had hoped to finish sooner than anticipated. At this point my civilization's exploratory missions were always the same: find livable worlds. Compared to our reproduction rate, we weren't spreading out fast enough, and as a result, starvation ravaged our home worlds. As advanced as we were, we still couldn't control our environment and agricultural output, and when bad weather or poor political decisions transpired, the masses paid for it.

I considered myself one of the lucky ones. My intelligence got me into the space program along with the accompanying government perks of providing for my family, but even so, being cooped up in a spaceship for months at a time hardly seemed lucky. At least this mission progressed faster than anticipated. I would see my family in another month, or so I thought.

My wife called me on the quantum entangled communicator; the only form of communication that enabled live conversations over such vast distances. Unfortunately, they didn't gear my ship for anything more advanced than audio communications—administrative cut backs always sucked, and this call certainly fell into that category.

"When are you coming home?" I could tell she had been crying with the crackle in her voice.

I shrugged. "Another month or so. There's some fascinating worlds out here. I've never seen such geological formations on an outworld before." I paused. "Are you okay?" I kicked myself for not asking that question first. *Why do I always think of myself first?*

"No, no I'm not. There's been a political uprising due to another famine. Things will be different when you get back." A long silence followed before she sighed. "I can't do this over this thing. When you return, we need to talk."

"We'll have all the time in the world after my mission. With the earned space credits, I promise I won't take any more survey assignments. We'll finally be together. By the way, how's Zack's geological collection coming along, and how's my little princess doing?" Several unique geological specimens lined my console. I couldn't wait to share them with my son. I knew that he would be interested by them.

"Why don't you ever listen to me? Zack's moved on to engineering projects and girls. Kira has transferred to an off-world school on Tiquet. They hardly know. . ."

Violent vibrations suddenly shook my spaceship, looking out the window, I saw the craft's tail servo broke loose. "Shit!" As I reached for the helm, the manual guidance system shook intensely in my hands as something slammed into the side of my ship. My ship jerked out of control, turning somersaults that tempted me to hurl into my helmet. I swallowed resisting the temptation before clicking on the stabilizers, but they didn't respond. Yellow and red warning signals filled my console. Alarms reverberated all around me. I gulped. My breath grew short. My muscles tightened as the helm tried to break free and slammed me about in my safety strapped chair. Fear entered my mind as perspiration covered me. *Is this it?* In the distance an ocean world came into view.

I turned the dial on my communicator. "HQ . . .HQ. . . I'm hurtling out of control. Navigation, propulsion out. I'll plummeting toward Ocean World M13798. Send help. Over."

"Waat ws zat? Kommunikator mlfuntioning. 'Ver"

“Damn.”

I didn’t know whether my message got through. I prayed that my next message would. Even if it did, it would take years to find me, if I survived, if they bothered sending anyone to search for me.

I turned the dial back to my wife’s channel. “The ship’s out of control. If I don’t make it, I want you to know that I love you with all of my heart.” I reached out to touch the communicator because it was as close as I could be with her. The family photo glued to my console shook free and flew into the cabin as my rock collection scattered across the cabin. I hoped that the new government would take care of my family like the old one promised to do.

“Click. . .Love. . .Click”

I braced myself. Environmental readouts indicated environmentally friendly conditions. Luckily, I was already wearing my spacesuit. I checked my restraints and tightened them so hard that they nearly stopped my blood circulation as my ship accelerated. The blue ocean world came closer. I wrapped my arms around the helm and held on with all my might. My spherical ship sped and heated up. I hit the emergency environmental control. Nothing. Maybe some temperature reductions. My heart raced. I had nothing to lose. I punched the parachute and decelerator, but my ship still came in too hot.

“Aah. . .”

I pulled up at the last moment as my ship skipped across the ocean. Land appeared to the left, and I made a desperate attempt to steer toward it. The ship braked so hard when it came ashore that my head slammed into the console. Everything went dark. . .

###

I don’t know how long I was out. Maybe it was the heat that woke me. What I do know is that I came to with a mind splitting headache. My domed helmet contained a huge crack in it, and I had already breathed alien air. I felt dizzy and my reactions were uncoordinated. When I turned, a small fire in the back cabin came into view. A warped reflection in a broken mirror displayed a huge gash in my forehead.

I heard something, a little girl crying out in the distance. It sounded like my Kira to me. I unbuckled myself, tapped out the small fire with my gloved hands, and disembarked. There was no reason to wear the spacesuit anymore. I had already breathed in the atmosphere, and whatever could infect me had. I carefully removed my gloves, helmet, undid the torso layers of my space suit, and took in several deep breaths to compensate for my dizziness. Knowing how long it would take for help to arrive, sooner or later I would have to abandon my spacesuit and chance this world’s environment.

“Help me.”

There was that girl’s voice again, coming in clearer now. As difficult as it was, with my concussion, I sprinted as fast as my suit allowed, racing to where the sound emanated. Each time I drew nearer, the sound grew fainter. Gray sand beneath my feet gave way to reddish rocks as I ventured inland. I stopped and leaned against a soft tree to balance myself as I stumbled forward toward an opening.

“Help me. Something’s chasing me.”

A blue inland pond came into view, and I stopped to regain my breath. *Was I chasing this being, whatever it was?* I removed the rest of the spacesuit, detaching one clasp after another until I fell to the ground to extricate my legs from the bottom of my suit. Maybe I would look more normal to whatever it was. I sat by a red-purple barked tree, waited, and wondered what would happen next. *Would the calls begin again?* As I pondered, I noticed a long leaf that could be used as a temporary bandage. I slashed it from the tree and wrapped it around my forehead. I tested the water in the pond and found it to be potable.

“This way, stranger.”

“Who are you?” I called back. “Please answer me.”

It didn’t respond, and the voice had turned back in the direction of my damaged craft. Other creatures started to stir. Alien birds squawked and chirped; animals chattered and growled. It seemed that I didn’t frighten them now that my spacesuit was removed. *Was something testing me? Watching me?* I felt that I wasn’t alone.

When I had neared my craft’s location, I squinted. *What the...?* I raced toward a metallic cube, which stood in place of my damaged craft, shouting, “No. No. No. No!” and pounded my hands upon it. What was left of my spaceship had been transformed into a futuristic cube, a machine designed for what intensions I didn’t know. Gizmos and sensors came out of well-defined holes. If I understood the inhabitants’ intensions beforehand, I would have grabbed the image of my wife and kids, but by now the fire had burned that picture into cinders. Out of desperation, I slammed my fists into the side of the cubic structure. Tears streamed from my eyes. My only possessions had been taken from me.

Disturbed, the machine vibrated and shocked me, and I fell to the ground.

It responded, “I am the crystal viewing portal. How may I serve you?”

It was the same girl’s voice that I had heard earlier, only now it emanated from my craft. I overcame the electric shock and glanced up at it from the gray sand, “Who else is here?”

“I am the crystal viewing portal. It is not within my capacity to know such things.”

I returned to my feet, knocked the sand off of myself, and continued to ask questions. “Do you know anything about this world. Can I survive here? Would you contact other space explorers and ask for help?”

“I am the crystal viewing portal. That is not my purpose.”

I looked down to the ground and kicked sand at the portal. “Figures.”

###

Survival was rough at first. Sure, the land grew plush with vegetation. To avoid sunburn, I often remained under the enormous leaves of the various trees and tall shrubs. They all had their own unique scent, some agreeable, some not so agreeable. Alien vegetation needed vetting, and on several occasions my stomach

emptied out after eating the wrong thing. I became more conservative in my plant Q&A approach by touching each new plant, placing it to my lips and tongue, and then swishing it around in my mouth before spitting it out. If all of that worked, I nibbled a small portion and followed that with a huge water chaser. I thought an ugly purple wilted leaf would be horrible, but it turned out to be one of the tastiest treats around.

Fortunately, there was plenty of wild game which I caught with snares, fishing rods, and a make shift bow and arrow. I had not encountered an animal that I could not consume, but there were some animals, like the Rockgut—at least that's what I called it—that tasted so foul that I didn't want to consume it anyway. Slow Rockguts survived mostly because they tasted so rancid that nothing bothered them and because they were ugly as hell. I never saw an animal with so many horns on it, including its butt. I'll bet mating was a precarious ritual for this species. I later learned that they had the capacity to gore predators if they threatened their young. One time I remembered running into the ocean with a male Rockgut pursuing my ass the whole way—it wasn't my fault, young Rockguts don't resemble their parents. Generally, Rockguts had a "let it be" kind of attitude and avoided conflict.

As my first weeks passed, I grew lonely, moaning over the inability to see my family. The only way to fend off my loneliness was through project work. By the end of a month, I constructed a mansion of a hut, erected a robust irrigation system, and cultivated the plants that I liked the most. I started talking out loud to myself. "No, that truss goes here. That irrigation path goes there." Soon my routines bored me; I rotated my hunting schedule to avoid repetition. There wasn't much else to do. Hunting was the only time that I didn't speak. Eventually I found my way back to the crystal viewing portal when curiosity drove me to it.

"Portal, what is your function?"

"I am the crystal viewing portal. Set a crystal into the slot and view its contents."

"Crystal? What's that?"

A propeller emerged from the portal and spun at high speeds. Upon the spinning propeller the portal projected the image of a clear crystal with sharp geometric edges. After the portal finished projecting its operational manual, the propeller slowed and returned to the inner cube confines. It was a far cry from rocket science. Just orient and slide a crystal into a slot. The portal did the rest.

"Where will I find these crystals?"

"They'll come."

Two months passed. Callouses littered my hands and feet, which stopped any further bleeding during my chores and hunting activities. Now that I had mastered survival, I decided it was time to explore the island in all directions. "Might as well see what else is here." The fresh water pond that I stumbled into during my first day was the most hospitable place on the island. In the distance, several cliffs jutted out. I climbed them and discovered a grassy plain on the top of the highest island point. Exotic birds made their presence felt by squabbling and squawking along cliff crevices. I mimicked a few of their cries, but they ignored me. Below me one could view the crashing waves slamming into the rough, rocky shore. Two convenient boulders perched near the edge of the cliff. It was as if they provided visitors a scenic view; only the only person who would enjoy the view was me. If I couldn't handle my isolation anymore, I knew where I'd

do it. "What a view." I paused and used my hands as a poor man's megaphone, "Hello out there. Anyone there?"

In another direction, vines and snakes ensnared one portion of my tropical island. It wasn't worth exploring any further unless I wanted to exercise my arms breaking the vines with sharpened rock tools. I did make headway, but there really wasn't that much out there that I didn't have already. I manufactured a poor excuse for an axe, but I saved it for when I really needed to repair or improve upon my hut. Besides, I hate snakes, and if one of them was poisonous, what would I do? That area became my exercise zone when I got frustrated and just had to break things, and when that happened, that zone served its initial purpose. It was also the perfect place to vent. "Fuck. Shit. Hell. Fart. Asshole! Ah, that fucking feels better." I decided that this place was not only my exercise zone, it became my fucking curse zone.

Clothes? I don't even want to talk about that. My space clothes had worn out, and I had no other choice but to wear the available leaves and animal hides. One time I discovered that Locktuss leaves, although soothing to the touch, broke me out into a horrible rash. It took days to heal, and I developed an ointment out of Leatherfish's guts, which did the trick. "Why the hell does this shit itch so much, and what's that stench?"

"One ugly cured another ugly, I guess." There was always a new odor in the air either from new vegetation springing forth or an animal that ventured onto my side of the island. The largest animal that I ever encountered announced its presence gruffly. When I rubbed its head, it turned to its side begging for more. I called it a Hossnuf. This dumb animal could have fed me for weeks, but it was so playful that I could not bring myself to harm it. I knew when it departed because its odor faded away. There may have been something out there, but it was too difficult for me to wander through the vined wasteland. This thing probably had a way of smashing through it. The vinelands repaired themselves so quickly that whatever passageway the Hossnuf created vanished soon after.

Over time, I classified my island into five zones. The first was the crash site and pond area, effectively my new home. The second was the agricultural zone where I grew crops. The third, my hunting grounds. Whatever grew in my hunting grounds was left alone, except for a few hammocks for comfort. I made sure not to overhunt the lands. The fourth zone was the rocky cliff zone, which contained the lovely view, and the last was the fucking vine ridden exercise and cuss zone. The rest of this world appeared to be covered by an immense ocean. Outside of my island sanctuary, there was no reason for me to explore this world. Who knew what kind of sea life existed or even if there was another land out there. What did it matter? In the end, I would still be alone.

One day when I was fishing, a shiny, clear object came ashore. I anchored my nets and poles, ran to investigate, and pounced on it, assuring that the waves wouldn't sweep the object away. *Had I found my first crystal?* When I held it to the sun in my outstretched arm, the light refracted in odd patterns, but as I squeezed it, a charge of electricity shocked me. "Ouch." I dropped the object and gingerly picked it up. Whatever it was, it possessed birefringence and piezoelectric properties and was clearly constructed from an advanced race. "Heh, I think I found one!"

Eager to see if it was a crystal, I dashed to the crystal viewing portal. I inserted it into the portal, and it easily slid in after properly orienting it. The propeller emerged again and spun as it projected an alien being begging on its knees. "Please, nourish my family. We're starving." Tears rolled down the bluish green humanoid's cheeks as it bent forward. The propeller slowed, stopped, and returned within the portal's confines.

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I felt bad for whatever it was, but what could I do in such a far-off land? I played it several times and wished that something would come along to help that poor soul. "Portal, is there any way to help that being?"

"It is not my purpose to intervene."

I looked to the sky and squinted when the mid-day, bright sun burned my eyes as I witnessed two birds duking it out in an aerial combat. "Why do I even bother?"

Dejected, I walked away. I needed time. The portal might be my only form of entertainment, but entertainment in the form of desperate beings asking for help is kind of like watching lost or maltreated animals and not being able to do anything about it. There was only one place where I could go to mull things over: the view. I climbed the treacherous path up the mountain side and gazed down. Waves crashed into rocks before leading into a lagoon surrounded by lush, tropical plants. Something soothed me in this place.

"What's the point of being here? By the time a rescue ship arrives, I'll be long gone; that is, if they even bother to send a rescue ship given the odds of finding me. No, they won't risk their resources. I'm alone." I walked to the cliff's edge and stared down to see one wave after another crashing into the rocks below. "Yeah, given enough time, I could do it." "Ehh, you don't have the guts." "Don't tempt me." "Don't push me!"

I sat back on the right boulder and just stared for how long I don't know. I cried out, "Great Caretaker, please give me some companionship. I can't stand it any longer. I beg of you." There was no response. I threw a rock into the distant and looked down as tears streamed from my eyes. I gazed up at the sky. "The hell with you if you don't hear my cries."

"Why am I putting this off?" "You're braver than I thought." I wandered to the cliff's edge and dared to look over it.

A voice interrupted me. "What are you doing?"

Startled, I opened my eyes.

A man of immense age and a long flowing white beard that could house bird nests sat across from me on the left boulder. His deep-set, piercing blue eyes looked straight through me.

"My space ship crashed, and I'm stranded here. Where did you come from?"

The old man with a beard from the millennia rocked back on his cane. "I see." He massaged his long, flowing beard and appeared to examine every aspect of my being. "Do you understand what has happened?"

That was a dumb question. I thought I had already answered it. "Like I said, my space ship crashed, and I awoke to find myself here." I paused as a light breeze passed. "How did you get here?"

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"I wander across my worlds and watch over my caretakers who look after their assignments." The old man used his cane to scribble something on the ground. Whatever he drew fascinated him.

I wasn't sure how to answer that statement and just looked at him as a soothing breeze caused my body to break out into light bumps.

The old man rocked back and forth on his boulder. It was as if he mulled over what to do or say next. "So, are you going to help that alien or not? Make up your mind. I'm needed elsewhere."

I shrugged. "I don't understand."

"Wish it. Part of you will be sacrificed in exchange for granting the wish. You'll have to decide when to grant a wish, and more importantly when not to. Understood?"

I nodded. I had plenty of questions, but I didn't want to seem stupid in our first encounter. Whatever this being was, He was a hell of a lot smarter than me.

"Good, it's settled them. You'll be one of my caretakers." The old man used his cane to rise from the rock. He winked and partially disappeared.

I raised my arm in the being's direction out of desperation. "Please don't go. You're the only person that I've spoken to in some time. What's your name?"

"Some call me Old Joe." The remainder of Old Joe vanished into a strong wind as quickly as he had come.

"Can you get me off this planet?"

There was no response, just the rattling of leaves in the wind.

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I don't know how much time has passed. It's been several millennia of that I'm sure. Time clicked forward. It neither stopped nor negotiated with anyone. My survival instinct diminished. If it were someone else, they might view my world as a paradise: red and purple leafy trees, fresh vegetation, clear running water that fed a pond in the middle of my island, plenty of edible seafood and game. The calmness of the breaking waves and sand between my worn toes felt soothing at times, but even paradises could turn ugly and routine. Life became mundane. Even though I hunted, gathered, farmed, and fished every single day, I became so accustomed to it that time stood still. A broken mirror revealed that my beard never grayed, never wavered. My wounds healed quickly. I never ailed nor wanted for anything. Time went on no matter how desperately I wished it to cease. Every morning my eyes opened, and I wished for an escape. Every evening, I wished for my eyes to close a final time. A heaviness clung to my heart.

My fears left me long ago. The only feelings that lingered were those of loneliness and longing for someone. I knew I was part of a family once. Long ago, I could picture my beautiful wife and kids. Attempting to recall their memories, I carved their images into a Palmalus tree, only I'm a terrible artist. With time, the carvings and their images slowly vanished from my mind like the sands of time running through my fingers. Even the tree containing my carvings had repaired itself. Hell, I can't even remember which tree it was. They all looked the same now. I did what I could to ebb my memory loss, but my

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family's appearance parted from me. The only thing that remained of them was the feeling of love. At least I hadn't lost that, yet.

Even so, I realized that even when I was with my family, I wasn't. My mind wandered to my missions and technological discoveries. Looking back, I was a terrible father and husband. What did I know? Simply collecting emails as a reminder of what my loved ones craved and referring to source material didn't do it. I was so driven to succeed that I sacrificed everything else. My wife probably wanted to divorce me, but she couldn't bring herself to say it over a communicator. I was unworthy of them, and by now, they had long since passed. They probably forgot all about me, just a crazy astronaut that was called father and husband in name alone.

I remembered when I begged, pleaded, and cried out for the mighty Caretaker to send someone to me. Old Joe must have been the Caretaker's answer, but our encounters were always brief. Even before Joe came along, I drew closer to insanity, closer to seeing people who weren't there. If I couldn't have a live conversation, my mind created one.

After another long and fluid conversation with myself again, a voice called to me from the highest point on the island. I climbed up to the mountainous view, looked out onto the ocean, and sat upon a large boulder to the right. Old Joe materialized again. He made it a custom to bring various seeds during His visits. I planted his gifts, and they grew strong. Sure, the plants nourished my body, but my soul dwindled.

Time moved on. The sea dragged all sorts of objects to my shore. Some were welcomed surprises: a pair of reading glasses, clothing, tools, crystals. Each gift was well received.

What haunted me were the crystals. After viewing the aliens' wants and desires, I had to decide whether to get involved. There were consequences. Old Joe had warned me that if I helped, it came with a sacrifice. As far as I could tell, Old Joe never lied to me, but he was never positive either, always warning me that if I used my body to influence others, I would wither away to nothing. It was true. Every time I interjected, I lost part of myself. It started with small stuff. Fingernails, toenails, hair, skin patches here and there. I didn't know whether to feel sad or glad over the consequences it wrought. The crystals were really the only form of entertainment on my forsaken island. The problem with viewing the wishes contained therein was whether I would act upon them or not. Hell, I hadn't had sex in forever, and the only images of the opposite sex, even in the form of an alien humanoid, resided in those crystals. With time, I became detached, clinical, cold.

A common theme came across my crystals: they wanted a savior. I ignored the first ten, but by the first thousand, I could no longer bear it. I decided to consult with Old Joe. He seemed to only visit me when I had questions, which annoyed the hell out of me, especially when I longed for companionship. To summon him I sat on the right boulder at my view. He appeared and sat on the adjacent rock. Sometimes he would appear out of the blue, but mostly he materialized when summoned.

"They need someone to show them the way. I know I can help them, but should I?" I looked down to the ground, considering my options.

Old Joe shook his head. "It will cost you dearly this time. Are you sure about this?"

"What if I don't?" I shrugged.

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“They’ll manage. Maybe they’ll learn to fend for themselves.” Joe looked down and sighed. “You’re doing it, aren’t you?” Old Joe leaned forward on his cane. His hair had vanished long ago, but his cold shimmering blue eyes and beard remained intact.

I looked down and swatted an insect nibbling on my left arm. “I don’t feel that I’ve got a choice. If it improves their perspective, it’s worth it. No one did that for my kind, and it left us emptier.” A cool breeze ran across us as the sun rose. I had made my decision. Screw the consequences.

A tingling sensation filled my left arm as the breeze picked up. I wiggled my fingers in the wind, but when I looked down, I realized that it was a false nerve impulse. My left arm had vanished, and I now bore that consequence. As brave as I thought I was, I was never ready to lose my arm. I gulped and nearly threw up before steadying myself. Humbled by the experience, I decided to create a prosthetic arm mostly for balance sake. It took forever to use my legs, feet, and one working hand to build a working bench and then hollow out a limb as my new arm.

Fortunately, my sacrifice worked for a while. My faithful aliens had purpose now. They rallied behind their new faith, whatever it was, but it only worked for a while. In subsequent generations they lost their way, wanting, desiring, praying for more. They needed another leader to show them a way, to set their laws, to serve as a moral compass. It was amazing how quickly the next generations forgot the lessons from the past. Their history should have spoken volumes to them, but fewer and fewer observed their written customs.

Once more, I took my position on the right rock and asked for Old Joe’s advice. “Should I intervene again?”

Old Joe materialized. He shook his head knowing the possibilities of all outcomes. “You’ll be hopping around on one leg if you go through with it this time. Isn’t this place enough for you? Many would kill for this peaceful existence. Look around you before you commit to this.”

I sighed. “I have to do this.”

Old Joe was right again. As before, I felt another tingling sensation, only this time itchy toes were the last nerve impulse that I experienced. My right leg had vanished leaving me only my right arm and left leg. It wasn’t easy to get around. After hopping a few steps, I fell over and grabbed a few broken limbs as crutches. I stumbled my way my home and set to manufacturing a prosthetic limb by hollowing out a thick tree limb, inserting a wooden joint, and using a lighter weight flexible limb for my lower leg and foot. It was agonizing work often leading to cussing in the wrong zone, but I finished it. It took forever to hollow out a small tree trunk and balance it correctly, but time was on my side.

For a while, things improved on the aliens’ little world. The crystals rang out with their thanks, praise, and gratitude to their benefactor. It felt great. It proved that I had made the right decision, and I delighted in the outcome. But then when enough time passed, the species gradually returned to their earlier ways. It disheartened me to see the change. With the passage of time, they forgot their past and imparted wisdom. They had grown arrogant with their technological advances. It was hard to say whether technology was a blessing or a curse.

I felt awful. My stomach rolled over as I watched horrible wars rip their world apart, pushing the species to the brink of extinction. Desperation set in. I couldn’t keep up with the incoming crystals. A multitude littered my shores. Depression and despair had become a companion on my journey.

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I climbed the cliff to seek Old Joe's guidance one last time. It was an arduous effort with only one leg and one working hand, but I managed. To my surprise, Old Joe already stood there with his hands held behind his back, waiting for me.

Old Joe sighed and turned toward me. "What's your decision?" A loud bird cried out in the distance causing him to momentarily divert his attention as he squinted and focused on the beauty of my world.

I gulped. For the first time in an eternity, fear crept into me as a shiver ran down my spine. I had no idea what would happen to me, but I knew that this time, they would take what was left of me. I would vanish from this world, reality, hell, heaven, whatever the it was, but the loss of one being to benefit a multitude of others, even if they were unaware of my sacrifice, was worth it.

"Take what's left of me."

Old Joe nodded and smiled.

As I felt myself ebbing away, I smiled. My inner soul glanced down the cliff and saw a skeletal remains on the rocks below that had been eaten away from wildlife and time. *Was that me?* I vanished into a bright white light. I had no idea what this new reality held until I saw an ancient being sitting on a throne with cold blue eyes.

The ancient Caretaker looked an awful lot like Old Joe, but I couldn't be sure because His shape kept shifting.

A low, thunderous voice proclaimed, "You passed the test."

"Test? What test?"

"The Universe doesn't run by itself. I need others to watch over my creations that have the wisdom to know when to respond and when to let nature take its course. Are you ready to do this for real? You'll no longer sacrifice portions of yourself, but I expect you to exercise the same wisdom that you did during your test."

"I thought the great Caretaker had forsaken me." I glanced down.

The ancient One rose and placed his hand on my shoulder. "No, my son, I only subject those that are worthy. I've got a species that has a lot of potential if they can be properly nurtured."

"Are you. . .?" I got down on my knees and shivered. I was unworthy. I had killed myself long ago, not even tough enough to last a few years in solitude.

The ancient Caretaker knelt beside me and wrapped his arm around my body. "Please rise. There's no need for that. I want you to watch over one of my most interesting creations. They call themselves humans."