

A Caretaker Planet

By Scott Little

Veecher looked out at the setting sun red giant Rigel 7. There was a gravity wave moving through the atmosphere, forming ripples in her field of vision. She adjusted her infrared visor to see a little farther, but there was still too much interference. It was becoming hard to see anywhere for much more than 4 or 5 miles, even with enhanced vision. Between the gravity waves and the dust storms of red ocher, there was no real way.

However, this was the plight of all who decided to stay here and not leave. The more technologically advanced had already left and would probably never return, riding away from the light bending pull of the colliding black holes. They had mastered the art of wormhole surfing, and could pop from one space-time brane to another while holding together their molecular structure. Veecher knew to do this required a GravSim Frame Grabber, a device that was way out of her price range, and one that she could not build with her limited nanotech skills.

So, there she sat, looking for reflections along the dwindling rusty horizon. Those reflections meant one of two things, either food in the form of cyborgic rodents or a temporary shelter that was used by the previous inhabitants of this area. Either way, she could take a break and rest from all the hiking.

Being a ranger on this forlorn dust ball was her choice, but it was not her choice to get caught on the planet when there was a black hole collision within two parsecs. She wished that the National Alliance Park Service would have warned her in advance, but by the time their LIGAR picked up the readings, it was too late. Veecher was stuck, and could not leave until her service had been fulfilled.

Veecher knew that if it became too dangerous, she could transmit a beacon signal and they would send an emergency vessel, but if she did this her tour would not be complete and she would not get paid. The ones who left before did so as a matter of convenience, not because of imminent danger. So, she had decided to stick it out as long as possible and learn to survive off the limited resources she had found.

So far, things had not been that bad. There was a regular food supply with all the small half-mechanized animals she had found, products of the previous tenant's efforts to spread biological diversity. If they ran out, which would never happen because they always self-generated, she could go to the supply module and there was enough food there to last through the entire tour.

Veecher wanted to avoid doing that, because out in the wilds was the only real way to learn about the environment that she was getting paid to protect. It had struck her as kind of amusing that an advanced race had decided to settle a basically uninhabited planet, create their own biota, live there for a period, and then leave all of it behind due to some astronomical disturbance.

There was still a good chance that the gravity waves would subside and even die out completely, and the planet would return to its normal dusty self. After all, it was almost impossible for her to tell the difference between a regular dust storm and one created by a curvature in space-time.

Another thing that struck Veecher, mostly as she lay in her sleep pod and gazed at the twirling nebulas, is how these creatures might view their creators. Did they look at them as God, omnipresent? Did they recognize some of their own characteristics in them? She was not even sure that these creatures had the intelligence to comprehend a creator being. Initially, she had felt pangs of guilt every time she had killed one of them, if killed is the correct term.

However, it did not take long for her to see that out of the scraps of metal and bone she left behind after her meal rose a completely new cyborg rodent. It appeared that they were able to regenerate using the minerals in the dust and the microscopic single celled plants that grew under the rocks. Their nano-sensors would seek out the necessary ingredients and finish re-building in a matter of seconds. Even a molecule of material was enough for them to work their magic, but Veecher always left a little extra just to be safe.

The thing she found interesting was that the number of creatures seemed to stay constant. If one died another would regenerate, but the total population would never increase. It also interesting to her how any form of waste that came from the creatures were the natural products such as the dust or micro plants that the nano sensors had used in the first place. It was the exact same elements being returned to their original form and in the same amounts, no more, no less. A perfect cycle of life, she thought.

Veecher knew that the designers had worked this into the system on purpose, that they were experts at conserving whatever resources were available. Their ancestors had been the first to leave the First Planet before it was swallowed by its own corruption and filth and had moved to the outer galaxies where they had perfected their arts and science.

They had been able to utilize virtually every natural resource on any planet that they settled, and they were able to do it without destroying what was there before they showed up. Now, on this dusty red rock being belted with gravitational anomalies, they were able to create a new race that could live in this unforgiving environment. Where there was nothing, they created something. They gave back instead of taking, having learned from the mistakes of their forefathers.

Veecher discovered the shiny object was a small dwelling complete with solar deflector shields. She walked through the dust to the front door and let herself in. She was always impressed by the fact that even though the previous inhabitants were very advanced and could have used this planet for their own selfish greed and built grand palaces, they always seemed to live simply and sufficiently. She laid down on one of the hover beds in the corner and decide to take short nap before venturing back out into the dust.

When she awoke, a small light grew and burned in her brain. What did the Alliance tell her when she agreed to take this job? She would be replacing a previous ranger, and when her tour was up another would replace her. There would always be someone watching over this planet. She had also remembered that her director told her the previous inhabitants wanted to make sure that someone would always be here, protecting this planet.

“Maybe”, she thought to herself, “They did not leave because of the gravity waves but they left to go start life on another planet, and I am the one left to watch over this one, for the time being? I can use what is here, but only as much as I need, and must always remember to give something back.”

Another thought just occurred. Veecher had remembering reading in a science journal about a time physicist that had discovered that small doses of gravity waves can help to protect a planet’s biosphere and that these small doses can even help to generate new life. She closed her eyes and said out loud “I am the steward of this place, and I will take good care of it’s creatures.” She smiled, and looked up through the nitrogen vent over her bed at the dusty sky. The dust was beginning to settle back and expose the clear vermilion sky. Veecher drifted back into a peaceful sleep.