

## *Return to Genesis*

Beyond a city's lofty walls, past winding streets scarring tired fields, above calculated aerial highways, over the horizon and into the vast reality of space; here Mankind fulfills his destiny. He has turned his raw, young face towards the sunlight, extended his green tendrils, and ecstatically soared upwards as those below gasp in eager agitation. When the first dust-ridden primate had the intuition to pick up and use a tool, mere seconds ago in the mammoth clock of the universe, it raised its beastly head towards the heavens and exalted, "I can use this, I can grow, I can become more than what the Earth asks of me." And thus humanity was born. Our development of tools and superior intellect have allowed us to overcome the limitations of nature, to evolve beyond our primal animal fellows, to transcend the confines of our planet itself into the infinite reaches of space. Thousands of years after the first tentative step beyond Earth, a young student, far away from her ancestral home, gazed through a window into the starry expansion of blackness and light, and dreamed of greatness.

"A word, if you will. In my office." A gentle, wispy exhalation of sound, and the student was captivated, at the mercy of the stooped figure of her professor. She followed the shuffling footsteps, nervously wringing her fresh and ready hands. Through the window she saw the bright glinting of white stars amidst the black, the smooth silver of distant ships accelerating across the galaxy.

"Sit, please." With a quiet smile and a kind inclination, the student was forced onto the cold metal chair. She sat straight, but avoided the grey, knowing gaze. She observed her professor with a cool, careless air. Wrinkled, veiny hands clasped patiently on the desk. Titanium pauldrons encased the withered shoulders.

“I know you, Reia.” The student was unable to meet the eyes of her professor, and instead crossed her arms and stared coolly at the potted plants on the desk. Young, green, tender anomalies in the uniform grey of the room. A wrinkled hand reached out, caressed the downy leaves. “I know what it is you desire.” The wise, grey eyes gazed kindly, sadly, at the young sprout. “But I don’t believe you do yet. I would like you to listen to a story of mine.” Fresh green eyes then met weathered grey, and Reia had no choice but to listen.

“You look at me now and see a fragile old man wasting your precious time with foolish stories. But I was once very much like you. I was born into a poor mining family on an isolated moon, studied hard enough to be accepted into this school, graduated top of my class, and upon graduation immediately joined the exploration vessel *Veridium* that I’m sure you know of from your classes. You know the story that gave me fame, but this is the story they don’t teach.”

The professor, then a young man by the name of Jed, had served on the vessel for little over a week when disaster struck, a single malfunction leading to a blinding, white-hot inferno that destroyed half the ship and every crew member but Jed and another boy, Aaron. The mangled mass of twisted metal and crippled technology hurtled through space, a damaged husk the only thing protecting the two men from silent, black oblivion. But Jed was not entirely helpless. He had humanity’s greatest gift: his mind.

“Get up.” Jed prodded the weak, shuddering figure with his foot. Aaron was curled in fetal position on the cold, grey floor, shivering and pathetic. Jed had surveyed the situation, and while about half the ship had been destroyed and the engines and majority of the computer system were inoperative, the life-support system was functional. “By some miracle we are in no immediate danger and while I know this is a difficult situation to accept, self-pity will do you no

favors.” Aaron sobbed and covered his face in his pale hands, retreating into the welcoming security of the darkness. “However, if we don’t get the computer running and contact help, we will run out of food in about five days and life-support will fail in another fifteen, so I highly suggest you stand up and help me save our lives before we meet the same fate as the rest of this crew.” Jed was harsh, he was heartless, but kindness had no home in the cruel, silent reaches of space. Logic is what allowed for space travel, and logic was the only lifeward in their blind acceleration towards destruction. Aaron grieved for humanity, and Jed set to work.

Jed’s first task was to dispose of the corpses of his former crewmates. Some had perished of suffocation, and almost looked like their living selves, save for the wild, animal panic in their glassy eyes. Others, countless others, had been torn apart by shrapnel and debris and reduced to piles of raw, oozing meat on the steel floor. Males, females, old, young--all were indistinguishable in their deathly masks of blood and mutilated flesh. Jed looked upon this scene with the pale, dismal horror of one whose life will forever be changed. Death is immortal; he has wielded his steely scythe for as long as life existed, yet no logic can lessen the crushing torment of lost life.

But Jed restrained his grief, gathered it up inside and barricaded it in airtight steel walls, to be later retrieved and fully examined. Then he removed the mess, dragged limb after limb past Aaron’s shuddering figure, and concealed the horror behind metal doors. Wiping the blood off his hands, Jed moved on to his next task of surveying what was left of the engine room.

“I won’t bore you with details now, as you have learned all of this in your classes.” The old man sadly gazed at his hands as he spoke to his student. “They teach you of how the ship was ruined to ensure that your generation will never make the same mistakes. Remember this, Reia:

there is no room for human folly in space. A single miscalculation, a moment of inattentiveness, and *boom*. You are extinguished.” Reia crossed her arms and coolly accepted the challenge in his words.

For a while, perhaps the length of a day, Jed began the initial stages of repairing the ship while Aaron wallowed in grief. Eventually, it was not self-preservation that stirred Aaron from his anguished retreat, but rather a single budding sprout amidst the destroyed metal and decaying corpses on the vessel. In the greenhouse, the fatal loss of light and warmth had slaughtered all plant life. The fresh young saplings, the budding fruits, the sturdy, mature vines, had been wrested from their individual cauldrons, their fleshy green membranes lacerated by shrapnel and debris, and thrown into the stinking pile of death with their companions. All but a fragile shoot of sage, hidden in a safe crevice, insolent enough to defy the commanding, infinite darkness of space. Aaron found this plant, breathed its life-giving fragrance. It had called him to come and gaze on a mystery. So he saved it.

“You’re a fool.” Jed’s arms were crossed, nails biting into his grease-stained skin. “You’re really wasting our water supply to water a plant?” Jed was bitter, the crushing weight of probability sloping his shoulders and heightening his temper. The doors couldn’t quite mask the penetrating stench of rotting flesh. Aaron was seated on the ground by the clean window, the potted plant embraced in his white arms. It would seem a normal picture, if not for Aaron’s grey face and the constant, creaking roar of the broken ship hurtling through space.

“You told me yourself we’ll run out of oxygen before we run out of water. I don’t know how to help you fix the ship, so yes, I’m going to take care of the last living plant on this wreck.”

Jed scoffed in pity. But as Aaron's actions did not affect him, he ignored them and returned to work.

"I thought I was so clever," the old man recounted. "And indeed I was, clever enough to save myself, but I was blind as well."

And so, as Jed worked tirelessly and tested the limits of his mind, Aaron cared for a plant, abstaining from water to nourish the sapling and protecting it from harm. Every few hours, he cradled the sprout in his arms, fed it a few drops of water from the tap, and smiled down at it peacefully in a manner that greatly irritated Jed. Jed gritted his teeth and attempted to ignore the foolish actions. *It is idiots like these, Jed thought, that held back humanity's progression for so many centuries, when we could have advanced so much faster.*

Three days more, and hunger set in. It circled Jed in an unfamiliar, acrid cloud, jabbing at him at inopportune moments and constantly sounding its mocking grumble. Jed cursed his primitive needs for holding him back when he was so close to success.

"You know, for hurtling blindly through space to our deaths, the ride seems awfully smooth." Aaron sat gazing out the window, pale, starved legs pulled to his chest and healthy sage plant by his side. And indeed, despite the immense speed of their ride to death, space dwarfed the vessel, and from the inside they barely seemed to be moving.

"Yes, and you seem awfully useless." Jed was tense in front of the unresponsive hard drive, little food and less sleep rendering him gaunt and haggard. "That's one of the many things water is useful for--giving one energy to get up off the floor and try to save yourself from starvation." Aaron ignored the judgment and mildly withdrew into silence.

“Have you ever thought about why we’re here? Not why we crashed, or why we joined this ship in the first place. What are we doing here, in space, light years away from where we belong?” Such thoughts threatened Jed’s sense of purpose and identity. “Perhaps we’re meant to be flying towards our deaths.”

“Are you really so boneless as to simply give up and let yourself drift along wherever life takes you? You’re pathetic. I don’t know why you are here, but I’m here, and I don’t give up, because I still have great things to accomplish.”

“Great things? Like fixing the ship and returning a hero?” Aaron’s voice shook with agitation. “Is it really so great to explore the universe when you sacrifice beauty, love, basic human values in the process? Dragging all those bodies and hiding them away in a storage closet, I guess that was pretty *great*.” Jed stuttered indignantly, briefly letting his anger best him. But he just as quickly slid his cold mask of reason back on and returned to work. It was one of the earliest lessons he had been taught; in space, irrational emotions led to death.

Another day, and the remaining engine failed, the computer system now Jed’s last hope to save himself.

Another day, and food was gone.

Another day, and Jed gave up on trying to measure the days, as there was really no way to sense the passing of time in the constant darkness of space.

Jed was starving and couldn’t remember the last time he slept. And as nourishment and comfort cultivates advancement and scientific discovery, fatigue and starvation brings man back to his barbaric, petty origins. Aaron reached for the water tap to hydrate his plant, and Jed knocked his hand aside. A moment of shock, and then Aaron’s face set stonily, and reached for

the tap again. Jed again knocked away his hand. Aaron shoved him away, giving Jed the justification he craved, and Jed pushed him forcefully to the ground, punching, wrestling, screaming with burning frustration. Aaron stopped resisting, and still Jed beat him, blow after blow sending sharp, wanting pain up his arm. Eventually Jed realized the atrocity of his actions, and he staggered away in horror, gasping, falling to his knees. He stared at his bleeding knuckles, stared at Aaron's limp, brutalized body, and retched. The sage plant, vibrant in its moist soil, cheerfully waved its soft green petals in mockery of the monster before it. Jed gathered the tender plant in his arms, stared out into the black heavens, and despaired. He, the genius of his generation, the infallible paragon of intelligence, was no more than a caged animal, madly lashing out with teeth and claws at those trying to show it kindness. He curled up on the floor and let the shameful oblivion of darkness take over.

A thin hand on his shoulder awoke Jed from blissful unconsciousness. Aaron, unrecognizable under bruises and lacerations, weakly stirred him awake. They sat in the fresh young darkness close together.

"You should get up." Aaron's voice was thin and hoarse, the words struggling past cracked lips. "You're right, you know-I'm simply a fool, too far away from home. I never stood a chance out here." He gestured vaguely around him, a painfully bemused smile on his abused face. "But you're different, you can fix this bleeding ship, you can survive. I believe you can." His voice was barely more than a whisper. "I believe...and is that not what matters most?"

Guilt rushed through Jed as it never had before, burning, crippling. Perhaps Aaron was right, and they didn't belong in space, and Jed, being an animal, couldn't overcome the obstacle of broken technology. But Aaron's forgiveness, the rare, extraordinary power of it, moved Jed to

try once more. And try he did, Aaron's words giving him new vigor, a final fiery launch off the ground into the impossible.

A few days more, and Aaron slipped quietly into the ultimate darkness, the sage plant wilting in the absence of his breath. Jed laid him to rest in the greenhouse, amidst the scattered remains of parched plants. He staggered under the crippling loneliness of the universe on his shoulders. He had dreamed of independence, greatness, but nothing could compare to the overwhelming weight of solitude. Jed gazed despairingly into Aaron's blank eyes, which gazed serenely back. And then he came to a realization: *Aaron could never be dead until he himself had finished feeling and thinking.* So Jed opened his eyes to the starlight and unfurled delicate, unfamiliar tendrils of emotion. Only then did he achieve the impossible. With an open, blooming, grieving heart, he repaired the ship and sped home, but not before beholding what Aaron would have loved to see the most.

For the first time, Jed looked upon the Earth. All his life he had gazed upon blazing stars, colossal spacecrafts, remote planets. But Earth filled him with a curious, magnificent feeling of wonder. Chillingly enigmatic yet vibrant, distant yet he could taste its vitality, its warmth. All else seemed to quiver ecstatically in the face of its enormous green serenity. And Jed wept, for beauty, for death, for all that he hadn't known. What meaning had exploration when one lost sight of that which gave him life? What can grow and thrive without roots firmly planted in the soil? Without love, anger, connection to the world that created us, what does it mean to be human?

Reia was perched on the edge of her seat, brow furrowed and eyes wide as her professor's fragile voice trailed off.



“You know the rest of the story, I saved myself, returned a hero, fame and glory, et cetera--an old man’s trivial ramblings.” He gazed at his twiddling thumbs, a serene smile on his face.

“...I’m not quite sure I understand. Are you telling me not to explore? To return to Earth so I can, ah, plant my roots? Is this why your office is always filled with plants?”

“My dear girl, of course not, that’s far too metaphorical for a logical man like myself. Nature is magnificent, but so is the thirst for knowledge, the drive for advancement--science. Go forth and explore, and let nothing stand in your way. I only called you here because you needed to hear the full story. And contrary to whatever lessons you think you may have gleaned from this story I told, it is the act of storytelling itself that matters most.” He smiled kindly, grey eyes twinkling at the amused confusion in his student’s face. “As for my plants, I simply keep them as a memento of a good man, one I wished I could have called my friend.”

In a contemplative state, Reia walked down a glistening hallway. Thousands of people were being born, thousands were dying. They slept, they played, they wept and rejoiced. And with feet proudly planted on the floor and a heart open and vibrantly pulsing, a young, fervent human gazed out the window into the endless, tremendous realm of possibility.