

# THE TABIT GENESIS

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# 1

## ANONYMOUS

20 January 2809

Dear Amaryllis,

I apologise for not writing sooner. It's been a difficult time.

I never had the chance to tell you about my parents. My life is so different now that I have trouble believing I was ever their son. They lived in Bangor, Maine, which was then the largest city on the Atlantic seaboard. Every day of their existence, their generation lived under the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Mom and Dad had come to terms with that fate. Decided they would rather die at home than struggle to survive in the wastelands beyond the city walls. Then one day everything within a ten-mile radius of Broadway Park vanished in a fireball as bright as the sun. The Fourth World War had begun, and I never heard from them again. When it happened, I was aboard an UNSEC shuttle on my way to Lunar Base Hadfield, staring at the orbital shipyards where the Genesis motherships were once built.

Most of us were too shocked to grieve. We had made our choice to leave, but it had been reassuring to know our families were still there. One flash of light changed everything. I remember thinking of you and the colonists who boarded those magnificent vessels years ago, lost in cryogenic dreams of wondrous new horizons, the dawn of alien worlds, and the faith that your loved ones were safe at home.

The *Tabit Genesis* and *Tau Genesis* were to be the interstellar seeds of mankind, the arks that flung us across the cosmos to pollinate new worlds. Wars bring sobering perspective to civilisation, at least for a while. For the first time in hundreds of years, the human race joined hands to build something that would take generations to complete. My parents spent their entire lives constructing the Genesis ships, as did their parents before them. And they did so knowing they would never be among the voyagers who would fly those ships to the stars. Their sacrifice was the epitome of selflessness: they built Genesis for us.

Before the wars choked the Earth's skies with ash, the stars *Tabit* and *Tau Ceti* had only ever been seen from the highest elevations, and then solely from the northern hemisphere. After a century's worth of observation, those two insignificant specks in the night sky were confirmed to harbour planets just as habitable as Earth, or as Earth used to be, before man ruined it.

My parents' generation was born in the devastation left by the Third World War. Apart from a notorious few, they all understood that Earth could never recover from the damage humans had caused. This realisation was the birth of Genesis. For a brief time, there was a golden age even for the damned. I remember endless conversations between my parents about the 'privilege' and 'honour' of enabling the first humans to set foot on an extrasolar world. Failure was not even a *thought*, let alone an option.

In fairness, there must remain the slightest sliver of hope that the *Tau* reached her brave new world, just the way my parents envisioned. But the more time passes, the less likely it is that we will ever know. I can only speak for the *Tabit*. The fate of that mothership would have broken their hearts.

What may well have become the *last* human beings in existence left a dying Earth, and travelled for decades only to arrive at another dead planet. Imagine being a passenger on the *Tabit* and discovering that the blue-green paradise of your dreams – the world they called Eileithyia – had been transformed into a furnace resembling Venus.

And while *Tabit* pressed on its voyage to nowhere, Earth continued to rot. Those lucky enough to survive the war retreated inland, away from the glowing embers of the coastlines. But anyone with the means

travelled north, to Greenland, where UNSEC stood victorious: the last viable geopolitical entity of civilisation, with the strongest military, in the most coveted land on Earth.

That was where the Raothri struck first.

It was just three years after the Genesis ships left Sol space. By now you've probably seen the footage of the Raothri landings at the Arctic Circle fortifications. There are worse. I have clips from the desert interior of Brazil, the shores of Niger, the Appalachian coastline, the European Isles, the Himalayan badlands, and every city left standing in between.

We had discovered our human brotherhood too late. Not that it would have mattered. The Raothri were superior – *are superior* – to humans in every way. After seven hundred years of wireless broadcasts, the last recorded human transmission from Earth was a dire warning to never return. Our world was irretrievably lost. Can you even imagine what horrors would convince you that *all* humanity was doomed? Every religion was wrong about the Apocalypse. Tribulation, Qiyamah, whatever the prophecy or creed, none could bring a worse fate than the one we suffered. The end of the world had come, and not even God could stop it.

Mercifully, my parents had already died. This may sound cruel, but I hope your parents also met their end without remorse or fear. *You* probably grew into someone they would have been proud of. My parents, I accept, would have been ashamed of me.

Why? Because I believe the Raothri may have unintentionally saved mankind. By taking Earth from us, they compelled the *Tabit* voyagers to find a way to survive.

Two hundred years have passed since the end of days. And still, somehow, the human race endures. When the people of Orionis Colony look towards Sol, they no longer see a home they can return to. Instead, they see a harbinger of what may come.

I don't know when I'll write next. But I hope it's soon.

Love,

- A

## 2

# ADAM

Pulling himself through the cockpit hatch, Adam twisted in the micro-gravity to orient himself with the seat above. Today he felt neither fear nor apprehension, having lost count of his descents into Zeus. Even though he was just eleven years of age, the experience of falling through the atmosphere of a gas giant had become routine.

Settling into position, Adam scanned the controls before him, cycling through his pre-flight checks. Most days he was excited to pilot the old Pegasus M2 mining mech. Not that he was naïve to the dangers – he just preferred the freedom of roaming on the rig’s sprawling platform to the cramped metal tubes of the trawler.

But today his heart was heavy with sadness. For the longest time, Adam had believed his father would recover from the ‘accident’ that had left him maimed. Now he had finally accepted that would never be.

The old depressurisation mechanism sighed a weary *hiss* as the young pilot sealed the hatch. Clad in a loose-fitting flight suit, he lifted his knees to fit custom metal scraps over his boots. Without them, his feet couldn’t reach the mech’s actuator controls below.

Dad’s voice scratched through his helmet.

‘Mining’s all about understanding pressure,’ he said. The only thing Adam’s dad loved more than troubleshooting atmosphere harvesters was teaching everything he knew about them to Adam. ‘Start with the intake gauges and work your way towards the scrubbers ...’

Ever since the accident, Dad had been prone to repeating things. The monitoring systems on the rig platform had been inoperable for

two years, yet Adam was still making several trips down per week. He knew its machinery as well as any prospector in the Belt.

As Dad continued explaining what needed to be done, the mech began powering up. Volumetric displays flickered on, greeting Adam with pixelated warnings of malfunctioning subsystems and neglected repairs. There wasn't much more that could break on the old machine.

Another voice cut through: his sister, Abby.

'Alright Brat Face, radio check,' she muttered.

'Brat Face copies all,' Adam answered. Abigail, five years his senior, tormented him with all the ferocity of a rival sibling, frequently with alarming hostility. She was fiercely competitive and bright, especially skilled at mathematics. Sadly, she still aspired to an Inner Belt corporate career. But Adam knew that could never be. Whatever her qualifications, she was no firstborn, and only they qualified for those opportunities. As the offspring of parents who were born through amniosynthesis, Adam and Abby were both 'ghosts'; unrecognised and thus unentitled to any of the benefits afforded to firstborn citizens of Orionis that would, among other things, keep them alive past the age of twenty.

But Dad's accident had changed Adam's role in the family from dependant to provider. Abby, however grudgingly, had conceded respect for him, acknowledging that his natural-born skill at mech piloting was now more essential to their survival than being able to reconcile an inventory ledger.

'Winds are 130 at the tropopause,' she said. 'Mining depth is sixty knots and steady.'

Adam smiled. It was a nice day on Zeus.

'How's Mom?' he asked.

Mother was always distraught when he visited the rig, unable to bring herself even to speak with him during sorties. But their family owed steep debts to bad people, and this was the only way to repay them.

'She's freaking out,' Abby replied. 'There have been Arkady sightings.'

Adam saw these elusive, deadly creatures all the time. Officially called 'zenomorphs', he never reported them unless other miners were nearby. There were hundreds of trawlers prospecting on Zeus, all engaged in cut-throat competition to set the market price with their

bounty of noble gases. Miners only shared information that might save lives, and even then, would treat the warnings with scepticism.

But the nearest trawler was tens of thousands of kilometres away. His mother had probably heard about a random Arkady sighting on the mining net, which could have happened days earlier and been anywhere. If she knew how often Adam really saw them, she would never have let him leave the trawler again, even at the cost of the business, and perhaps even their lives.

‘How many?’ he asked.

‘Not enough to kill this drop,’ his sister answered. ‘I’m opening the doors.’

Across the hangar from where Adam was seated, the orbiter’s outer bay doors pulled away from each other, and the swirling reddish-grey cloud bands of Zeus greeted him from six thousand kilometres away.

‘The tanks should be full by now,’ Abby said. ‘We need this. Hurry!’

Adam adjusted the exterior cameras to view the mech’s rear, visually inspecting the clamps locking its chassis to the drop sled. In just a few moments it would propel him down one of the trawler’s four carbon nanotube fibre cables to the mining rig below.

‘I’ll be fast,’ he promised.

‘You’ll be *careful*,’ Abby said. ‘Would hate to lose that *Three*.’

‘Thanks, I’ll be fine,’ Adam said.

‘Whatever,’ she said. ‘You’re good to go.’

With an abrupt jolt, the drop sled pushed through the bay doors. Adam looked up through the mech’s canopy at the underside of the orbiter looming overhead. From this vantage, he could barely see where the ship ended and space began.

‘Adam, did I ever show you how to replace a faulty check valve?’ his father asked.

Adam sighed, switching on the music player. For this trip he had picked out a mix of seventeenth century classical music, along with some twenty-second century electronica.

‘Can’t hurt going over it again,’ he answered, pressing the release button.

When the *Tabit Genesis* arrived in 2638, the first order of business for the colonists was to survey their new neighbourhood for resources.

The nearby Eileithyian moons Amnisos and Lucina provided ample sources of water ice and raw ores. Helium-3 was also present, mixed into the upper layer of regolith on both lunar surfaces. The mothership had come prepared to harvest those sources immediately, bringing with them spooled space elevator cables to expedite the transfer of materials to orbit. But mining the precious gas was time-consuming and costly.

The sixth and largest planet of the system, officially designated Pi<sup>3</sup> Orionis-f by UNSEC, was thus targeted due to the favourable composition of its upper atmosphere – primarily hydrogen and helium, the essential fuels for the fusion technology of the era. Beneath that layer, swirling in an organic soup of methane, water vapour, ammonia, carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, sulphur, and phosphine, were abundant concentrations of Helium-3, or just *Three* as it had been known on Earth. Then and now, it was the critical isotope that made spaceflight possible.

Gathering enough of it from the Sol system to launch the Genesis motherships had required the colonisation of the moon, the asteroids Vesta and Ceres, Mars, and a tenuous alliance of superpowers to protect the corporations capable of harvesting it. Helium-3 remained a precious commodity, though its abundance at Pi<sup>3</sup> Orionis-f was the only reason why any colonists bothered settling beyond the Great Belt at all.

Prospectors took to calling the planet Zeus, after their beloved Jupiter back home. The gas giant was smaller than its Sol namesake, and lacked a defining iconic characteristic like the Great Red Spot. But its cloud bands were thicker and darker, containing far more water vapour and thicker concentrations of organic compounds. Of the Tabit system's fifteen planets, none was more menacing, or majestic, than Zeus.

Adam was immersed in his music, almost in a meditative state, as the sled plummeted through the atmosphere. At this stage of entry even the most hardened miners would be nervous, if not outright sick. Metal groaned and the cockpit shook as hurricane-force winds slammed the mech in its harness. But Adam *knew* that nothing bad was going to happen – an instinct that always kept him tranquil during these descents. He had skirted danger before it could happen hundreds of times, and was well past the survival odds for a trawler miner with his level of experience.

He didn't think anything of it, believing that all people shared his prescience. And so onwards he plunged, deeper and deeper into the roiling bowels of Zeus, strumming his fingers to Bach as the mech dived through the rattling pelt of an ammonia crystal downpour.

The oldest orbital trawlers ran a minimum of four cables to the platform rig dangling below. The newest corporation models dropped eight times as many. In theory there was no limit to the number, as long as the orbiter thrusters could compensate for the atmospheric drag of the platform. The rig could rotate its horizontal orientation so that it always faced the prevailing winds, and sat upon enormous helium bladders to maintain buoyancy. Arrays of intakes and scrubbers isolated the bounty from Zeus air into tanks that, once filled, ascended the cables to be consumed by the orbiter or transported away for sale.

By the time the ammonia showers ceased, yellow-orange skies were visible between breaks in the clouds. The altimeter was broken, but Adam could tell that he was about a thousand kilometres away from his target.

Adam switched off his music player and keyed the radio.

'Orbiter, Brat Face,' he said. 'Touchdown in two mikes.'

'Yeah, yeah,' Abby huffed. 'Just get on with it.'

As the roiling clouds rushed towards his feet, the sled's thrusters fired, slowing his descent. The rig grew until his downward view was overwhelmed by its rust-coloured features. Hovering for just a moment above the landing gantry, the sled slammed into position.

'I'm in,' Adam said, checking his displays. Everything that absolutely needed to be working was online. 'Radio checks at five-minute intervals.'

'Hello, Adam, it's Dad.'

Adam cringed at the sound of his voice.

'Make sure you hook up the refuelling hoses for the sled or else it'll take forever to get back topside.'

'Okay,' he said, as the mech detached from the harness. With a subtle leg movement, he stepped the machine onto the platform. The rig itself was several football fields in length and nearly as wide. It was windy, just like Abby had warned, but still not dangerous for a mech that weighed six tons.

The fuel hoses were right where he had left them, attached to tanks with compressed hydrogen inside. Using the mech's arms and tri-pad

'hands', he expertly attached them to the sled, making sure the transfer was under way. If necessary, he could gently grasp an egg or hoist a crate of tungsten I-beams. The Pegasus was old, but in the hands of a skilled pilot, it was still a capable machine.

As Adam turned to make his way towards the scrubbers, a sudden wave of premonition froze him in his tracks.

There was danger ahead, but not enough to make him turn back. The subliminal warnings were abstract, never betraying details. The only clarity they offered was in their urgency, informing whether he should flee or be extra vigilant.

He needed a moment to catch his breath.

'Time's wasting,' Abby warned. 'Come on, Adam.'

'Okay,' he said, trekking towards the large air intakes at the leading edge of the rig. There were eight of them, each with their own scrubbers plus a myriad of pipes, regulators, distilling tanks and machinery in between. Finding the problem could take minutes or days.

So with one heavy metal step after the next, Adam stomped on, relishing the view. Two of Zeus's ninety-one moons were visible through a clearing in the skies overhead; soft rays of white sunlight fell like marble columns upon mountains of amber clouds that stretched beyond the horizon. Dad had once said that his ancestors would have given anything to see this just once in their lifetimes.

It distressed Adam to remember how his father had once been. Though his mother had explained what happened, he knew she was concealing the truth. The Ceti bastards who owned the rig were aboard when it happened. Adam was certain they had played a role in the 'accident'.

By the time he reached the first intake, Adam had become unfocused by anger.

Then suddenly, the events of his premonition began to unfold.

A pack of Arkady sturgeons darted over the windward side of the rig; then an entire school of them followed. Adam stepped back in awe as thousands of translucent, flattened creatures accented with black streaks soared by. Each was more than five metres in length and awash in countless bursts of bluish-green light. Numerous gill slits along their bodies regulated the airflow coursing around and through them, allowing them to cut through the wind's currents with a preternatural ease.

Adam was thankful the rig's radars were broken. Abby would not keep this a secret, his mother would panic and, one way or the other, they would find some way to hurt these magnificent creatures.

Watching the zenomorphs made Adam forget his anger. He studied the swarm until they vanished back into the clouds, then, feeling invigorated, he returned to the task at hand, bending the mech forward to check the intake's gauges. Squinting at the numbers, he didn't see the great shadow descending on him until it was too late.

With a terrifying bang, the Pegasus was knocked onto its back. Adam's helmet slammed into the head guard, disorienting him. He reflexively threw his hands up in a guard position, preparing to fend off more blows from whatever it was that had struck him.

The actuators reacted just in time; a loud *snap* brought Adam out of his stupor. His face was just centimetres from the severed tentacle of an Arkady hunter, its serrated hooks dangling off the mech's tripads. The rest of the animal was partially trapped in the maws of Intake One amidst a stream of smoke, flailing wildly.

Adam realized that the animal's severed limb was wrapped tightly around the Pegasus. Had he been standing a metre to his right, the creature would have pulled him over the side.

'You're a minute past your checkpoint, Brat Face,' Abby complained.

Adam nearly overloaded the mech's power core trying to get the machine back onto its feet.

'Sorry,' he said, backing away from the frenzied creature. 'I'm concentrating.'

'Whatever, just hurry up.'

Adam was mesmerised by the hunter's struggle. The only sounds he could hear were the howling wind, his own shallow breathing, and the muted strikes of cartilaginous flesh on metal. But the creature was no longer lashing at him with its deadly limbs. From ruthless killer the Arkady hunter had become desperate victim; just another living thing fighting for its very life.

Adam was trapped between compassion and caution, though only for a moment.

Moving beyond the reach of its flailing tentacles, he clamped the mech's tri-pads onto the regulator that would shut the damaged intake

down. As the turbines ground to a halt, the shape-shifting beast writhed in pain, unable to free its limbs from the machine.

Dad's voice cut through the radio.

'Gas mining is tedious, but it's dangerous work,' he informed. 'But there's always a buyer for your harvest. That makes it all worthwhile.'

Adam took a step towards the hunter, willing himself to ignore the radio completely.

'Did you know that every Orionis citizen will use several *million* cubic litres of compressed hydrogen fuel over the course of his lifetime?' his dad informed.

The desperate hunter, its strength depleted, was fading away. Taking a deep breath, Adam marched directly towards it.

'What are you doing down there?' Abby demanded. 'You missed another checkpoint!'

Adam was within ten metres when the hunter lashed out at him; its tentacles, now coruscating in angry bursts of yellow and green, made a futile attempt to latch onto the mech. Instead the limbs collapsed onto the rig, splayed out like strands of discarded cable. Gill slits along its body began twitching. Adam sensed it was dying. Time was running out.

He climbed deftly on top of the intake. The exhausted creature was heaving besides him, close enough to touch. Securing the mech's footing as best he could, Adam set to work removing the intake's cowling to examine the inside.

'Radio check,' he mumbled.

'Did you find the problem?' Abby demanded.

'You could say that,' he answered. As the cowling came loose, he carefully set the metal sheet down and peered inside. Two of the creature's limbs were badly mauled and tangled in the turbine fans. The Pegasus was strong enough to pull them apart, but he would have to step up and over the leading edge of the platform to reach.

So that's what he did, trying not to think about what would happen if he slipped.

'Well, how long will it take to fix?' Abby asked. 'The offloaders are en route.'

‘Intake One can’t be fixed,’ Adam said, plunging his tri-pads into the ruined machine. ‘It has to be replaced.’

He clamped on tightly, transferred as much power into the arms as he could, and began pulling.

‘Are you serious?’ Abby asked.

With an abrupt, sickening *snap*, the fans came apart unexpectedly, and the sudden surplus of momentum carried the mech off the edge.

‘No!’ Adam shouted.

He thrashed out with both arms to grab onto something, anything. The first arm grabbed nothing but Zeus air; the second found the edge of a flotation bladder. Adam transferred all the power to the grip, dangling over oblivion as he brought his second arm up.

‘Really?’ Abby fumed. ‘What’s your problem?’

Adam thought of some choice words, but instead:

‘No, I mean, yes, the intake is ruined,’ he said, plotting a vertical path to reach the platform rail.

‘What the hell can ruin a turbine intake?’ Abby demanded.

‘Did I ever tell you the story about how I got this rig?’ his father asked.

‘I didn’t think you ever wanted us to know that,’ Adam muttered, thankful for the interruption. The Arkady hunter was gone. He hadn’t seen what had happened to it. Given his efforts, he hoped it had flown away instead of falling to its death.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ his dad said. ‘It’s probably best you don’t.’

With full power diverted to a limb, the Pegasus was capable of pulling several times its own mass. But he would have to overload the reactor’s output in short bursts, timing each one with the grips he needed to reach safety.

In the hands of a lesser pilot, it would have been impossible. By the time Adam stepped over the rail, the reactor was overheating and doing permanent damage to the mech. Grateful to be alive, he limped back towards the drop sled, covered in Arkady remains.

Abby was relentless the entire time.

‘So not only did we miss the cut-off, now we produce less than every other rig. Wonderful.’

‘I’m finished down here,’ Adam said, unlatching the fuel hoses. ‘The *Three* tanks are full and ready to go on Cable Four. Cables Two

and Three are on schedule for H and O deliveries. I'm coming up on One. Lift off in ten.'

'Fine,' Abby grumbled.

Exhausted, Adam very much wanted to get back into orbit. He just didn't have the energy to explain that the Pegasus was likely ruined as well. Yet much as he wanted to avoid her, Abby had every right to be upset: the load coming up now wouldn't reach the market before the other trawlers sold off their inventories. The cost of these equipment failures would far exceed whatever pittance they received for the harvest, and they would fall deeper into debt.

Their Ceti overlords were tiring of excuses. The last visit had made that clear.

Adam stowed the fuel hoses away and backed the ailing mech into the sled cage. When the harness locked into place, he keyed in the launch sequence.

As the countdown commenced, he gazed down the length of the rig. Somehow it seemed much longer than usual.

Adam's heart stopped as *it* began to move, undulating in the wind currents, rising above the rest of the platform.

A colossal zenomorph, wider than the entire platform, was gliding towards him. He had never seen an Arkady like this before. Its skin was pitch-black, its winged shape masterfully controlling its position in the gale.

The sled began ascending, all too slowly. Closer and closer the beast approached, unfurling tentacles many times longer than the hunter's, all within easy striking range.

It would be no effort for the creature to kill him. But instead, as the sled ascended, a pattern of blue flashes danced across the Arkady's ebony, liquescent skin. Symmetrical and deliberate, unlike the chaotic life energy that radiated from schools or hunters.

Adam sensed the signs were intended just for him.