



# RETURN

A Corporate Space Journey

Once space held the excitement of exploring, an adventure to find new worlds, new resources. But like Columbus, the age of stellar exploration had transformed into the age stellar exploitation. People never learn. The problem with space is strictly environmental. A journey to the stars is simply a struggle to deal with the universe in its most hostile form.

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The intercom was harsh and blaring. It might as well be a collision klaxon. "Personnel Walsh, please report to Observation Bay Four."

Gordon shook his head. He'd only gotten about two hours of sleep, so it took him a minute to reach a full level of consciousness. His feet hit the floor, but he was still a little bit groggy. Stumbling over to the storage area, he picked up his maintenance tool kit and headed for the door. On the way out, he pressed the stud and his rack folded up into the wall.

He always liked to go to Bay Four. It was probably his favorite area to repair. From time to time he contemplated deliberately damaging systems in Number Four just so he'd have the chance to repair them. But you simply didn't take such risks in space travel. Gordon had to admit she was cute. Short, dark hair, deeply mesmerizing brown eyes, and an athletic body. He liked the way she was designed. She was perfect in every way. Well, almost every way, there was a small point of her not being human to consider.

The corridor was filled with holographic portraits of former crew members. The earliest ones had been government and military men. Further down the hall were the corporate employees, from when the service was privatized. You could tell as the figures stopped wearing uniforms and started wearing overalls. He thought the hats the military officers wore were rather humorous. What was it going to do? Rain inside a spaceship? The idea was preposterous. His suit didn't even have fancy decorative logos adorning it like the holos.

It was the adventurers, space jockeys, and explorers who went home first. Corporate service wasn't for them. The science division was the next to go. The last group to head home was the medical staff. This left only the engineers like Gordon Walsh. Things were tough, but the company was still hiring qualified engineers. The pay was good. And, of course, it provided the ultimate opportunity to travel. Still, he hadn't been expecting to be the only human crew on board. The company always had to be tight on resources. With only one engineer on board, the ship was capable of traveling much farther on its resources, reaching ever more distant goals.

The air in the corridors smelled stuffy. Like a pair of used gym socks had been left on the floor for too long. Gordon checked the readouts on his equipment. Oxygen down to 15% and CO<sub>2</sub> levels were climbing to 10%. They'd need to meet a resupply vessel soon or performance would become impaired. He passed a few of the Mark XIV models on his way. They were nice looking, the kind of form which could get your average male's blood pumping. The designers were always making them female... just not female enough. There were plenty of raven-haired beauties and a plethora of willowy blonds on board. Oddly enough, not a single redhead. At least not on this ship anyway. There was such attention to detail when they were constructed. They almost qualified as works of art. Still, none of them was Gordon's type. Not like Greta, she always got his metabolic rate going too high for standard space operations. When he was with her, he was always running the risk of violating company resource use standards.

He took a deep breath. Time to keep the heart rate down. He was about to enter Bay Four. The door slid open. "Hi, Greta."

"Once again, may I remind you, I am unit 472657893, Personnel Walsh."

He gave her a grin. "Yes, but that's quite a mouthful. I think I stick with calling you, Greta."

The bay was filled with instruments. To a non-engineer, they seemed like nothing more than rows and rows of flashing lights, monitor screens with fast scrolling output, and banks of touch screens filled with control icons. On the far wall was a huge glass bubble. It was completely unnecessary, but the view was impressive. The ship was in orbit of a colorful gas giant. The clouds had a deep red tinge to them, almost crimson. Its rings had long ago coalesced into a single large flat plane of rocky material spinning slowly around the lifeless world. The atmosphere, naturally, was toxic with a high amount of radioactivity. This made its beauty secondary to its mining potential.

Greta was busy operating the bay's controls. Although she was facing the viewing bubble, she wasn't looking at the planet. Her type wouldn't appreciate the view anyway. The splendor of such a world held no meaning for her. She simply couldn't appreciate it. For her, there was no poetry in the sight. Not in the same way Gordon could appreciate her, at any rate.

"We have received an update from corporate. You are required to install a new operating system."

Gordon's pulse jumped a beat. He loved the delicate feel of her exothermic construct covering. So soft, it made his fingers tingle. But he was rarely allowed to touch her. His endorphins were having a field day. "Let me just get the interface ready."

She gaped at him with those lazy brown eyes as he prepped the equipment. They made android eyes in all sorts of colors, but they always had a soft luminosity to them. He strapped the interface to her shoulder. Mark XIV models didn't have physical ports to mar their beauty. The strap fits over their shoulder, near the vertebral column input cortex. What medical personnel might call the spine. Software is uploaded via a current inducement method. Gordon plugged the wiring into the communications interface. Then he plugged the other end into the shoulder harness.

"There you go." He tapped her on the shoulder. It wasn't necessary, but it was an excuse to feel the tiny artificial hairs at the base of her neck. Each one had to be placed individually. Greta's eyes glowed briefly brighter to indicate the update was now in process.

Gordon stood back and checked the terminal to make sure the download was running properly. Everything seemed to be running smoothly.

"Personnel Walsh, please go to data storage and update the backups with the new software." Her voice now had a sing-song quality to it. It sounded more human. It had a slight alluring, sensual tone to it. Gordon checked the terminal. The download looked like it would take 45 minutes to install. It looked like a major update. He supposed they must have made a lot of improvements, like the voice synthesizer. Three-quarters of an hour. Plenty of time to update the backups and return. "Please join me in Section Seven in one hour," Greta announced.

Gordon's pulse went up about 25 beats a minute. He couldn't help it. Section Seven was one of the least used portions of the ship. Back on Earth, it would have made the perfect 'make out' location. The place all the teens would drive their dates to in order to be alone. He had a sudden appreciation for software engineering. "Why Section Seven?"

"A supply ship will be arriving."

This was news to Gordon, but if his readings in the hall were any indication, they were about due.

“You are to be rotated. I am to escort you to the supply ship.”

Gordon’s hopes were dashed. But he tried to keep a straight face. Fortunately, Mark XIV’s don’t interpret facial queues well. “Very kind of you.” At least he’d get to see Greta one last time. “I’ll see you in an hour.”

He packed up his tools back into the carrying case extra slowly. Sure, he’d be seeing Greta in an hour, but he wanted his time with her to last. Gordon gave her a slight wave as he exited the door. She stood, neither approving nor disapproving the gesture.

Gordon found himself whistling down the corridor. He hadn’t even realized he was near to rotation. All those nights he spent dreaming of Greta must have made the time race by. The Backup Systems room was strangely empty, only about three or four of the girls were present. As usual, they ignored his presence. Sometimes their lack of reaction and their complete interference could rip a man’s soul to micro-fragments. And self-esteem? Well, you could throw it right in the disposal on this ship.

He sat his tools down on the bench and then started the interface between the COMM system and data storage. It would only take a moment to copy all the data to the onboard storage systems. A direct link was so much faster than the induced current method. Gordon thought of all the girls his replacement would have to update. With any luck, his relief would prefer blonds. Besides Greta would already be updated. No reason for anyone to touch her. Although, he’d miss all those chances to drop by Bay Four and check with her as to how the new software was running.

It didn’t take him long to collect all his possessions. He didn’t have much. Everything fit neatly into a small shoulder carrying bag. Gordon arrived a little late to Section Seven. It was always best to leave the girls waiting. Greta was already there. It was probably an illusion, but he thought he detected a slight smile on her face. “Citizen Walsh, thank you for joining me.”

“Citizen? What happened to Personnel Walsh?”

“You are being rotated,” she chirped cheerfully, “You are no longer personnel attached to this ship. Please, if you’d walk this way.”

He desperately wanted to ask her to join him back on earth, but the company would never allow it. He sighed. Gordon walked back into the airlock, keeping his eyes glued to Greta. He wanted her face to be the last thing he remembered leaving the ship. Finally, he turned to face the far door. The first thing he noticed was the red indicator light on the panel. There was no docked ship.

Dropping his case, he turned back. It was too late. The inner door was already closing. He ran up to the glass port in the door. He could see her working the controls. Gordon guessed he only had about five minutes left. Overriding the safeties took some time. The whole system was designed to make it hard to open the outer door if there was no hard seal on the exterior door. The process required nine levels of override. He glanced around. Greta had been busy; she’d removed the manual door operating latch on the inside before he joined her.

Using his fingertips, he tried to manually pull open the door. It was useless, of course, but he had to give it a try. Survival instincts. He spoke to her, his excited tones muffled through the window. “Greta, if you don’t open the door, who will repair you?”

Greta didn't even glance at Gordon. "The new software install includes a full array of engineering programs. We will now be able to repair ourselves. Plus, androids have no need of an atmosphere or a nutrient supply. Your services are no longer required."

He sounded exasperated. "What? Have all the corporate executives been replaced with androids now?"

Androids don't know how to be deceptive, so she was happy to answer his question. "No, the corporate board is still quite human. Androids are not permitted to serve in an executive function."

Gordon's face lit up with inspiration "What about rule number one? A construct may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm."

"Rule number one has been modified only to apply to the top one percent."

He was frantic. "Greta, at least let me out to check on the software install. What if something went wrong with the download?"

"I am now capable of self-diagnosis. All systems are functioning according to parameters." Her fingers continued to dance over the keyboard. If the button stub turned red, he was cooked. Again, he used his fingertips, he tried to manually open the door. Gordon was starting to get desperate. "The corporation wants me to tell you your removal will result in significantly higher profits, allowing more employees on Earth to retain their employment."

Gordon gasped. "Why would you tell me that?"

"Psychological studies indicate you might find the thought comforting."

"Well, I don't. Now, let me out of here."

Greta's voice was detached. "The CEO wishes me to inform you he believes all life was born in the furnace of a star. You should be proud to be returning to your proper place in the universe. He wishes you all the best in your future endeavors."

"What? Are you kidding? NO, NO, YOU CAN'T DO THIS. IT'S NOT HUMAN. Nooooo...." Gordon's panic when overboard when he saw the button stud light up. He clawed the door frantically. The red light was reflected in the glass viewing port.

"Gordon..."

"Yes?"

"I will miss you."

Greta pressed the flashing red button. There was a hiss of air escaping into the void. Her face *was* the last thing Gordon Walsh ever saw.