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Day 1

The man inside the escape pod said nothing, almost thought nothing, as he felt the gentle bump that announced his arrival on the asteroid. However, just for an instant, he felt a pang of admiration for the sophistication of the vehicle that contained him, able to transport the Space traveller so safely, so comfortably on their chosen journey; able to save them from harm when danger threatened. And this man knew that this was precisely the purpose for which this vehicle had been designed.

Unfortunately, this particular journey had not been to rescue, nor even to transport pleasantly and conveniently. This journey was different, exceptional in so many ways. It had not taken long, no more than half a day, so vast distances of Space had not been traversed. Nevertheless, the man inside recognised he had been cut off from his previous life. Effectively excised from it, in fact.

It had all started so casually. Part of an ordinary day. Admittedly, he had thought it was an unusual request. It had been many years since he was asked to investigate a problem in a GTN67UV Escape Pod. This vehicle was standard equipment on the large Space Survey Platform (SSP) Yggdrasil, his home for the last five years. The Platform had a great many of this type of escape pod, each one primed for any emergency;

indeed, all large Space vehicles in the Command were similarly equipped so the routine service technicians were well used to dealing with these small but essential vehicles. On the other hand, the man had told himself, it must be a very unusual problem – so unusual that the technicians were seeking advice from the very designer of the vehicle himself. He remembered smiling: ‘That’s the trouble with calling it a GTN – it reminds people that it’s Gorton-designed!’

In fact, Scientist-Commander Dr Maynard Gorton (Mayn to his friends) had been very much in the forefront of Space vehicle design for more than a decade. In his early twenties, his all-round brilliance had been recognised by Command and very soon he had held an important research and design position. In subsequent years, he had been personally responsible for the conception and design of many of the Space vehicles that were used routinely across all Regions. Because of this, he was very well known across the whole Command; famous, in fact. On SSP Yggdrasil, the largest and most complex of the Space Survey Platforms, he was now the highest ranking Space research and design engineer on board despite his young age, just in his early thirties. Invariably, his expertise was sought when intractable problems baffled the scientific and technical teams.

In addition to these extremely important scientific and technical qualities, Maynard Gorton was recognised to be a wonderful influence on the Platform. Everyone from the Chief Commanding Officer (CCO1) downwards consulted him when serious difficulties developed in any aspect of the Platform’s operations. Although many of these problems were apparently not within Mayn’s area of expertise, somehow he was always able to help. Almost mysteriously, he brought peace to situations of tension or conflict, resolution to human or organisational disharmony and perfect solutions to apparently insoluble problems.

People would shake their heads in admiration and speak in tones of wonder. ‘I really don’t know how he does it! He makes it look so simple. Time and again we have a situation that cannot be solved, a situation that’s getting worse and worse and then – we take it to him and he makes everything

OK. He comes up with the perfect solution. And we scratch our heads and say: “Why didn’t we think of that!” Why, I’ve even seen him sort people out after the Meds have given up on them! Not the physical stuff – they have machines to sort that out – I’m talking about the really difficult cases, the psychological breakdowns and the like. He can sort those out. Can you believe that? Maynard Gorton is a wonderful guy. We’re so very lucky to have him on the Platform.’

Because of all these amazing feats, Mayn had acquired a nickname that was well-known throughout the Platform. In recent years, he had become “The Yggdrasil Healer”, a name invariably spoken with awe and respect. If Mayn knew about his nickname, he never gave any sign.

Consulting the brief message for assistance on his communicator, Mayn now climbed aboard his personal transporter buggy and gave the location of the GTN pod to the vehicle’s control system. Because the pod was located in a very remote part of the Platform, at the farthest end of one of the huge trailing arms, it was almost half an hour before he arrived at the spacious docking area, after travelling along several kilometres of deserted metal corridors. Parking the buggy by the side of the docking area, he crossed the decking and approached the familiar shape of the escape pod, held securely in its launch mountings.

Through the open hatch of the pod, he could see bright engineering lights burning inside. ‘Let’s hope whoever is in there can explain to me exactly what the problem is,’ he thought, ‘I have a meeting at 1400 and I don’t want to be late.’ He climbed the steps to the open hatch and stuck his head inside, calling out:

‘Hello! Commander Gorton responding to your call. Technical Team, respond, where are you?’

Silence, apart from the low hum of powered-up equipment. ‘Perhaps they’re in the engineering area of the dock,’ he thought, ‘I’ll go and check there.’

Returning to deck level, he made his way to the inner part of the docking area where there were work benches and a large range of electronic and mechanical equipment,

everything brightly lit and powered-up. However, there was still no sign of any technicians.

‘Hello,’ he called again, ‘anyone here?’ Silence. No movement. No response. Just winking equipment lights. ‘This is becoming a bit of a mystery,’ he told himself, ‘I’ll have one last check in the pod and, if I can’t find anyone, I’ll just instigate a broadcast query and return to my office.’

This time, Mayn climbed through the hatch into the interior of the GTN67UV. He smiled as he looked around, remembering how he had worked for many months on the design of the vehicle, working out with precision where all the equipment should be fitted and building an inspired ergonomic control system for those who would travel in it.

‘Hello!’ He shouted this loudly in case the technicians were unable to hear his normal voice level over the noise of the whirring systems. ‘It’s Commander Gorton. You called for my help!’ Still no response. He swept his eyes around the Control Cabin, noting that some of the equipment casings were unlocked and propped open. ‘Looks like problems with the control systems,’ he murmured, ‘I wonder what it is?’

Mayn swung himself into the seat at Control Position P1 and scanned the dials and screens for clues. As he did so, he heard a familiar sound – the unmistakable “swoosh” of the hatch closing. As he looked around, he could see the inner handle rotating to “Full Lock”. ‘That’s funny,’ he thought, ‘I certainly didn’t do that, because the hatch controls are operated from Control P2.’ He slid across to Control P2 and reviewed the switch settings there. Sure enough, the hatch control was switched to “Close” and “Full Lock”.

‘Maybe this is the fault they were calling me about,’ he mused. ‘I’ve certainly never heard about any problem with this part of the system. It’s perfectly straightforward and normally gives no trouble. It’s very much a standard vehicle fitment.’ As he thought these words, he clicked the switches to “Unlock” and “Open”. Nothing happened. He clicked the switches back and forward several times to no avail. Puzzled, he released the catches on the panel and lifted it up on its hinges to study the connections below. ‘Nothing abnormal here,’ he commented under his breath.

Rising to his feet, he walked to a small storage recess nearby and collected an Engineer's Kit. Returning to position P2, he lifted the panel again and checked the connections with a sensitive meter, noting that the various readings were precisely as expected.

'Vehicle on standard countdown for transit. Minutes ten and counting.' The voice was loud and strident. This was a deliberate design feature to guarantee that everyone on board was aware of the impending departure. Mayn sighed and sat down at Control P1, clicking a switch to transmit.

'Register command: Origin Commander Maynard Gorton aboard GTN67UV Serial GTN36716XT: Abort countdown immediately. Acknowledge.'

{The response was immediate}

"Command not accepted. Vehicle under special control. Minutes nine and counting."

'Repeat register command: Origin Commander Maynard Gorton aboard GTN67UV Serial GTN36716XT: Abort countdown immediately. Acknowledge.'

"Repeat command not accepted. Vehicle under special control. Minutes eight and counting."

With a tongue click of annoyance, the man clicked the transmit switch to open once more.

'Register Condition Red Command. I repeat Condition Red Command. Disconnect all external control this vehicle. Return control to internal. This is a Condition Red Command. Acknowledge.'

There was a full minute of silence. Then the voice blared out:

"Condition Red command rejected. Special situation obtains. Minutes six and counting."

For the first time, Mayn felt that solid, heavy pang of fear low in his stomach. His mind whirled. What was happening here? How could Central Control ignore a Condition Red Command? This was totally illogical, impossible, even. Condition Red Commands were an early safeguard introduced when Space travel first became widespread. It was the ultimate guarantee that the human controller could always take over any situation. Mayn's head started to pulse with tension. He racked his brains. Surely he could do something? Surely this couldn't possibly happen?

“Vehicle on standard countdown for flight.”

The emotionless mechanical voice was harsh and strident.

“Four minutes and counting. All personnel secure themselves for departure.”

Mayn rose to his feet and strode to the closed hatch. He would unlock the hatch manually and he knew that this would shut the departure sequence down. He seized the handle and tried to turn it to the “Unlock” position. The handle would not move. He applied all his strength to no avail.

Mayn now returned to Control P1. He had just remembered the Emergency Power Down Control, fitted to every vehicle. This was a “Fail Safe” control designed for dire emergencies. He would operate this and all would be well! The large red knob was located on a separate control panel with a stout hinged cover protecting it from inadvertent operation. Mayn flipped back the cover and punched the knob, knowing that he would immediately hear the distinctive clicking of many electrical relays as their electrical contacts were broken followed by a strange wailing harmony of descending tones as all the pumps, generators and electric motors powered down. Of course, he also knew that all the lights in the vehicle would be extinguished at the same time. ‘Good test for the backup illumination,’ he muttered.

Nothing happened. No clicks. No wails. No darkness. Astonished, he punched the red emergency knob again and again. No response.

“Two minutes and counting.”

The voice blared through speakers in all parts of the vehicle, causing him to start.

“All personnel secure themselves for departure.”

Suddenly, a revelation! His PAC (Personal Advisor Communicator)! How could he have forgotten that? He could initiate a Platform-wide emergency call from that. Yes, he accepted it was probably too late to prevent the vehicle from undocking but the Duty Central Controller would soon take over manual control of the vehicle and turn it around to execute a re-dock back at the Platform. As he took out his PAC from a pocket, he thought: ‘This malfunction will certainly be an interesting one to sort out! I look forward to that!’ (This surprising thought flitted through the consciousness of his fright.) PAC in hand, he activated its emergency control. Nothing happened. He looked at the device with surprise, seeing immediately that the power indicator showed “Zero”. ‘How can it be discharged? These are always on auto power charge!’ He was dumbfounded as these instant thoughts flashed through his mind.

Then he felt it. A vibration spreading through the vehicle. Mayn knew exactly what this was. The engines were powering up. The departure sequence was underway. He heard the rumble of releasing external clamps and knew the vehicle was now free to leave the dock. As the designer of this vehicle, he knew the exact sequence of everything that was about to happen.

“Twenty seconds and counting.”

The relentless metallic voice.

“All personnel make secure.”

The vibration increased. The roar of the engines could be heard.

“Vehicle departing. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, ZERO.”

The pressure of acceleration. The intense brightness outside. The vehicle efficiently stabilising itself, adjusting its course. The Platform diminishing in size on the screen. Mayn screaming, wrestling with flaccid, disconnected controls, his hands setting and resetting switches and control levers. Nothing worked. Internal control was totally inoperative. The small vehicle now set a purposeful course and its speed increased to a maximum. Soon, the Platform became a spot on the visual screen before it finally disappeared.

Mayn sat at Control P1, totally bewildered. How can this have happened to him? How could it happen to anyone? He shook his head and spoke out loud: ‘I conceived and designed this vehicle to be a saviour. Every system is carefully structured to look after those who travel in it. All the safety features are carefully thought out. Everything is ergonomic. And, above all, the crew are always in control, whatever happens. Yes, it is fitted with the most sophisticated auto-flight systems but these must be switched on and programmed by the crew. Of course it is possible for the vehicle to be controlled from the Platform – every Space vehicle can be flown remotely – but fundamental control is never taken away from the crew. It’s impossible. It just cannot happen.’ He looked around and then added, ‘but it just has happened.’

Suddenly, totally exhausted by fear and bewilderment, Mayn slumped back in his seat and entered a semi-dream world, a defence mechanism switched on by his body to allow him to recover to some degree. His dream state transferred him to the world of his earliest memories, the time he lived on Planet Earth. As a little child, he had been happy there. And happy memories were exactly what he needed at this moment to help to overcome the severe shocks he had just experienced.

Four years old. He remembered being four. Something unusual had happened when he was four, hadn't it? That's probably why he remembered it, he thought. He remembered the happy time, out with his father and mother in their little family transporter. He remembered the journey into the mountains, the fresh, cool air, the green of the trees and the soft grass under his feet. He remembered playing games with his father, games with a ball and a bat; thrilling chasing games, too. Running, being caught, being hugged. He remembered the lovely food and drinks that they had when they sat down beside a broad stream; the warm sunshine, glinting upon the sparkling water as it produced ever-changing, fascinating patterns of ripples as it flowed past. He remembered delight, pleasure and the happiness of love.

But then something was wrong. He felt it. The chill of it wrapped around him like a clammy blanket, changing the day from warm, comfortable, safe pleasure to a darkening feeling of worry and concern, a trembling feeling of fear, happiness cruelly banished. He looked around. Nothing had changed, had it? The sun still shone down, the stream flowed on as before; they were still there, the three of them, serene, comfortable and fulfilled, weren't they?

Then he looked at his parents and at that moment, he knew. There was no serenity there, no happiness, no reassuring smiles. They both looked lost and bewildered, grim and serious. For some reason, his father was standing in the river with his hand and arm deep in the water. His mother was crouching on the river bank, whispering to him. The young Mayn leapt to his feet, ran to his mother and, sobbing with fear, threw himself into her arms.

His mother's loving arms tightened around him. 'It's OK, Mayn. There's nothing for you to worry about. Don't cry. It's just that we have a bit of a problem. Not a big problem but it's going to be a bit awkward for us.' Mayn was only four but already he was a very bright little boy, well advanced for his years. 'What is the problem?' he asked through his tears.

'Well,' said his mother, trying to sound reassuring, 'your father was taking his coat off and his keycard case has fallen

into the river. That's why he has gone into the water. He's hoping he can find it.'

The man lifted dripping arms from the water and straightened up, his face dark with worry and concern. 'It's no use,' he said, 'I've searched the river bottom all around here and haven't found anything. The current is quite strong, so I think the keycard case has already been swept away. It could be anywhere downstream on the riverbed or it could still be floating towards the sea. Whichever, it's gone for good.' The man stepped back on to the river bank and sat down despondently, holding his head in his hands. 'I don't know what to do. It's a real disaster.'

Mayn knew this was serious. His parents had told him all about keycards and how important they were. He knew that all adults had special government-issued keycards to lock and unlock all the things they needed to keep secure. He knew also that it was against the Law to lose any cards and exceptionally difficult to replace them. This was a government security regulation and it was always strictly applied and invariably prosecuted.

'Don't you have your keycards with you?' Mayn asked his mother.

'I don't, Mayn. I didn't think I needed to bring them. They're back at the house. Anyway, most of my keycards are different from your father's.' She turned to address her husband. 'Listen, Darling, which keycards have you lost?'

He looked up, his expression horror-stricken. 'All of them. Every one. All the house cards. All the office cards, doors, desk, cabinets, safe. All the security and status cards. All the money cards.' Then his jaw dropped. 'Oh no,' he said, faintly.

'What is it?' A note of rising panic in his wife's voice.

'The transporter card is gone. How do we get home from here?' He looked wildly around at the deserted mountain and then at the sun sinking lower in the sky. At that moment, all three felt a sudden frightening chill in the air, the harbinger of a very cold night to come.

Strangely, the little boy had now stopped crying and he disengaged himself from his mother's arms. Going over to his

father, he put his arms around him and said: ‘Don’t worry, Daddy, I’ll help you.’ The man was overcome. ‘Thank you, Mayn, you’re a lovely, very clever boy but I’m afraid there’s nothing you can do about this. All my keycards are gone. It’s my fault. I was careless. But you don’t need to worry, because I’ll solve this somehow.’

As he said this, the man was overcome by the emptiness of deep despair. At that moment he couldn’t imagine how he was going to solve the immediate problem of getting his family home again, or indeed how they would be able to enter their house when they finally got there. He knew also that the authorities would be totally unsympathetic and unhelpful. Losing your keycards was a serious misdemeanour and the authorities would make your life extremely awkward for a considerable period. The family of the perpetrator of the “crime” would also suffer.

They all sat in a silence of bleak contemplation for a few moments. Then his father, haggard and drawn, said: ‘Mayn, could you just play by yourself for a few minutes while I speak to your mother.’ The man and the woman sat down beside each other on a grassy bank and began to speak to each other in low tones, their heads close together, trying desperately to work out a strategy to deal with this catastrophic situation. They were so deeply absorbed in this conversation that they did not see their little son go a few metres downstream and reach down to trail a small hand in the flowing water. Minutes passed. The man and woman were staring into the abyss of no progress.

‘Daddy...’

‘Not now, Mayn, Darling. I’m talking to Mummy.’

The little boy said nothing as he placed a dripping keycard case in his father’s hand. The man looked at the case in absolute disbelief. After a long pause he regained some semblance of speech.

‘Mayn! How did you... What... How...’ His voice faded as his mind blanked. He looked at this beautiful child with incredulous wonder and awe – his child, his flesh and blood – this child who had just produced the most wonderful, impossible solution to their insoluble problem.

The child was grave, looking steadily into the eyes of the man. He knew the question his father was trying to ask him. ‘I just knew where to find it, Daddy,’ he said quietly.

That was the first time.

Aboard the escape pod, Mayn surfaced through layers of unconsciousness and felt much calmer. ‘This whole scenario needs to be studied carefully,’ he told himself. ‘Obviously I don’t know where I’m going and how long I’m going to be in transit. Maybe I’m going nowhere. Maybe this vehicle is programmed to keep flying on a constant course until it runs out of energy.’

As the designer, Mayn knew that this would take a long time, years, in fact. The vehicle made its own energy from electromagnetic radiations in Space, using radiation sources from the millions of stars in the universes. However, knowing the design of the vehicle, he did not think it likely that it would have been programmed in that way because this would be a violation of the vehicle’s own protection systems. ‘It’s much more likely to have a programmed destination,’ he concluded. Then he added, ‘not a destination that is populated – because I would then be able to report to Command what had happened to me on Yggdrasil. It’s likely to be a small uninhabited body; a small planet or an asteroid.’

Satisfied that he had taken the logic of his flight circumstances as far as it could go, he now turned his attention to the question of taking control of the vehicle. ‘I’ll need to start right away and discover why I could not assume local control. Also why the emergency command systems did not work. With my detailed knowledge of this vehicle, hopefully, I can restore control. When I’ve discovered these things, I’ll have to work out where I should go; not back to Yggdrasil, that’s for sure! I should go to a medium or large-sized facility where I can make a full report to Command. Once I’ve set a course to that sort of facility, I can start to work out who might have done this to me and why. If I ever get out of this situation, I will report everything comprehensively to Command. They will investigate and act against the perpetrators of this crime. I would imagine they would send an investigation

team.’ He thought for a moment. ‘I seem to remember that the Intergalactic Rescue and Salvage organisation (IRS) has a responsibility to do that sort of thing. One of their teams would probably be despatched to Yggdrasil to get to the bottom of it.’ He rose to his feet. ‘Now, time to get to work and find out why I have no control over this vehicle.’ He said this out loud in a strong, determined tone.

Taking an engineering kit in hand, Mayn now began to work on the control system of the vehicle, checking inside the many control panels and system cabinets. Working quickly and methodically, he soon established why he was unable to restore local control. Virtually all of the local control modules had not only been disconnected but removed totally from the vehicle! This also applied to most of the communications systems and also to the emergency alert system as well.

Now he understood why the Automatic Central Control system on Yggdrasil acted as it did. It would have attempted to carry out his commands to switch to local control but found that it could not do so. In these circumstances, the Platform’s system is programmed to seek the reason for its failure to comply; however, because the escape pod had been disabled in so many ways, its investigation would fail and terminate. As a result, it would revert to a refusal and resume the sequence of commands which locked him in the vehicle and sent him off on this journey.

Mayn sat down to assess the full implication of the missing equipment. Although it should be possible to disengage the central command control of the escape pod (he thought he could do that), he knew that action would send his vehicle out of control, tumbling violently in Space. This would happen because he had no facilities to take control. Wisely, he judged that this would be a catastrophic move.

His lack of communication facilities was equally serious because this included all the distress channels. The removal of the Distress Signalling system meant that he could not switch on the powerful signal that would have alerted every vehicle nearby of his emergency situation. In addition, all IRS rescue vehicles anywhere in the Region would have received the signals and the nearest would head towards him immediately.

He looked around the cabin at all the empty racks and cabinets. ‘A clean sweep! I’ll obviously check the backup spares situation but I have a feeling that all the spares for these systems will have disappeared. I had better carry out that search right away.’

Mayn now made his way to the storage areas of the vehicle and began to examine the spares situation. While most of the routine spares packs were still racked in their appointed places, the bays in which all the spares relating to the control systems, the communication systems and the Distress Signal equipment were empty. Noting all he had seen, he returned to a seat in the Control Cabin, saying to himself: ‘Whoever did all this had a very high degree of skill and knowledge. I reckon that narrows it down a bit. I’ll need to think about this later. First I need to see whether there’s anything I can construct to replace any part of these missing systems. This will certainly be a real challenge.’

As he thought this, he recognised that the vehicle had begun to decelerate. He looked at the forward visual screen and saw that the vehicle was heading for a large asteroid, tumbling languidly in Space. The screen identified the asteroid as AT56G7/89. About thirty minutes later, the escape pod approached the asteroid and hovered above it until it had measured the spin and tumble below.

‘All personnel secure themselves for landing,’ the loud metallic voice commanded and Mayn strapped himself securely into the seat at Control P1. The vehicle then sank down very slowly towards the rocky surface of the asteroid, choosing the smoothest surface it could find. This proved to be in a shallow fissure in the surface. It was not long before the escape pod touched down gently and automatically stabilised itself before hooking on to the rocky surface to guarantee that the vehicle would not drift in the weak gravity field of the asteroid. Then, with a clear sense of finality, the engines powered down and all became silent apart from the humming and whine of the cabin life systems.