

Dependence

a Novel by Scott Nason

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PROLOGUE

Someplace along the way we stopped thinking of them as computers. We stopped seeing them as just a collection of hardware and circuits and started treating them like—well—like us. You see, over the centuries they'd evolved from clunky boxes of silicon chips into our workers, helpers and, eventually, companions. But they did so much more than just work for us; they worked *with us* and *around us*. They were part of the fabric of what made us uniquely *us*.

And they were everywhere. In the kind of places you'd expect and in places you'd never expect. A lot of them were visible, but the vast majorities were nothing more than silent partners in life, quietly taking care of all the unseen details required to keep human beings alive and comfortable. They controlled our environments and prepared our meals. They kept us connected to each other, fed us with information and were responsible for nothing less than a resurgence of human learning.

They took care of our children, kept our homes safe and warm and were the keepers of the vast storehouses of knowledge that we'd collected since the beginning of recorded time. We needed them and *depended* on them for nearly everything.

For over two hundred years, mankind had lived in peace without war, hunger, famine or disease. Humanity was, at last, free to pursue the essence of existence; to explore and

discover and push the limits of one's own abilities. And that was really a good thing—considering what we'd nearly done to ourselves. Oh, it wasn't World War III like everyone had predicted. No Armageddon with its final fiery battle; nothing that dramatic or singularly catastrophic. Although that may have been a kinder sentence than the slow escalation into the Hundred-Year War that had ensued.

There's an old story that says if you put a frog into a boiling pot of water he'll immediately jump out. But, if you put that same frog into a pot of cold water and then slowly bring it to a boil, that frog will die in the water because he doesn't notice the temperature changing.

When things change slowly—over time, people don't seem to notice either. Our nervous system is ill equipped to deal with the inexorable forward motion of glacier or the insidious rise and fall of the ocean from the gentle tug of moon's gravitational influence. We can see when we're at high tide and understand intellectually how it got there, but we can't see it happen. We can measure the glacier's progress from year to year, but we just can't watch it change. No matter how long you stare at it, it just looks the same.

So it started, with occasional suicide bombings and scattered drive-by shootings. It was like a gang war, escalating little by little; first one side then the other. We went from bombings to biological attacks. From localized incidents to worldwide events. Everything

was in the news and everyone knew about everything—at every hour of the day or night. Day in and day out, the media hammered it into their skulls. Bomb here, fire there, anthrax in the air, nuclear threat, children dead, maimed, killed, destruction...and after a while, people just went numb and did whatever they had to do to get through another day.

In the end, it seemed like everyone was fighting everyone else and no one could remember it ever being any other way. Life was war and war was life. There was no in between and there was no reprieve. There existed no sanctuary and no place that was safe from harm. Not at work, not at the market, not at home. Everywhere people lived in fear. And lived in fear of everything. They lived in fear of leaving their homes and in fear of being killed in their homes. They were afraid of losing their closest friends or afraid of their closest friends being the ones doing the killing. There was nowhere to find peace and even those that pretended not to be, were still afraid.

If there's anyway to say that something good came out of those years, it's probably twofold; the world's bloated population was cut nearly in half during those years. Without the war, some speculate that we would have simply died of starvation and disease. Like too many rats in a cage stepping all over each other, we'd overpopulated to the point of destruction. There wasn't enough land or food or water to go around and those that *had* any of that were pretty dead set on holding on to it.

Surprisingly enough, during those years we still were able to develop the ability to travel into to space; at least throughout the majority of our own solar system anyway. But we didn't find anything out there. From the moons of Saturn to the newly discovered Outer Rings, there was nowhere else that we could live and thrive like we had on this third planet from the sun. Yes, there was the odd colony and space station here and there. Maybe a few thousand people scattered across the vast expanse of the solar system, but certainly nothing close to representing the hope of mankind.

Although the Hundred-Year War had no real *end date*, there is a date marked on the calendar for ceremonial reasons. A date people chose to remember when it just kind of ran out of steam. It seemed as though people got tired. Tired of fighting...tired of running, but I think mostly, just tired of being afraid. Slowly the fighting turned into something more like an overall tension in the air. And it gave everyone time to breath—time to think. It was a time of reflection and the re-evaluation. We'd been angry for so many years that it seemed like there was no other way to be. Hate and killing had become our default basic instinct. Everyone had been born into a world where there was just no other way to be. It was just predisposed that people were to live out their destinies with blood on their hands. We were just incapable of breaking free; caught in some terrible psychotic merry-go-round of death and smoke and hatred. It was ingrained in us at the core.

For so long, the hate and fear had been palatable. Everyone grew up with it and tasted its bitter sweetness early in life with the loss of a close friend or a beloved parent. They felt the blood surge beneath their skin the first time they took the life of someone who had wronged us. They savored the bitter-sweet taste of revenge and retribution. It was the right thing to do and the only way to live.

But they found that they could break free. Maybe because as a species, we'd grown up just a little bit over those years. Or maybe it was because that fed my weary fatigue. Tired of walking on glass and tired of destruction. In the aftermath—and in reality throughout those years—they found that mankind still kindled an appreciation for life and the human spirit. It was weak and shriveled, but it wasn't dead. And to their surprise, they found that they could accept people that were different than themselves. They found they could stop the fighting. Just the realization that *they could* stop was probably the most liberating. That it all had been merely a choice—a decision that had been sitting there waiting to be made the whole time.

It was apparently never mankind's destiny to annihilate itself and in the end, we were lucky enough to break through the madness. We were lucky enough to wake up and realize that we had held the key to the asylum all along. So, weary of hate and violence and tired of being afraid, we came together and talked. We actually learned to talk again and we talked for a long time. We learned to listen and we relearned how to tolerate. There were still those that chose to fight, but as we began to come together, the fighting

seemed to make less and less sense. A lot of things seemed to make less sense than they used to.

And as we talked about and learned our differences, we also talked about what made us the same. We talked about our hopes and dreams. We talked about the smiles on our children's faces and about the pain of loss of losing a loved one. We talked about the fear and the insatiable longing for something better. Through the years following the end of the Hundred-Year War, we learned the most valuable lesson of all; as different as we wanted to believe that we all were, we found that we were all *really just the same*. We found out we were the same in so many ways that we were baffled how we could have hated each other so hard for so long.

So we saved Mother Earth from our own wrath. And actually we probably just saved ourselves from ourselves. I don't believe Mother Earth was ever really in any danger. In fact, the total annihilation of mankind would've proven no worse than the direct hit from a moon-sized meteor traveling at forty-thousand miles an hour. There was no destructive device we possessed that Mother Nature couldn't rid herself of within a million years or so. No bomb, no poison, nothing. Unlike ourselves, she had been given nearly infinite time and eventually, given enough of that time, would always emerge victorious; regardless of what we did.

So we see the second benefit from those years. From the ashes of the war came a more sensible humanity. A more refined view of who we were and what we were all about. We developed a sense of our place in the Universe and of our role as keepers of the planet and of each other. We were chartered with a new, self imposed mission; *to learn*. And we learned a lot. What followed was nothing short of an explosion in human advancement. For the next two hundred years, we increased the sum total of all human knowledge a hundred thousand times. It was like an industrial revolution of the mind—on steroids.

It was during this time that what we used to call *computers* became more. They actually became much more. We took silicon and miniaturization as far as we could. Then we learned how to store information in crystals and holograms. When that wasn't enough anymore, we unlocked the building blocks of life itself and used those pieces for our machines. From the feeble beginnings of the earliest genome project centuries prior, came an understanding of the code that bound all biological life on the planet. We learned about the forces that surrounded us and how they defined us.

Each machine was better than the last until one day, we'd achieved utter perfection; perfect machines to run our perfect world.

And we taught our silent partners everything. We entrusted them with all of our knowledge; entrusted them with all of our secret hopes and dreams. They became the

keepers of the kingdom; the guardians of all that was known and yet to be discovered.

They were the keepers of paradise.

Chapter One

PARADISE

01

“Mom, have you seen my sweater?”

Billy Thornton was sixteen and had long since past the point of needing parents for anything. Actually, that had happened on his thirteenth birthday—the way that it had happened for countless millions of teenagers throughout time.

Parents were, in his eyes, a necessary evil that he was forced to consort with until he was old enough to strike out on his own; which hopefully, was not going to be that much longer. After all, he already had a part time job after school and had earned enough on his own for his upcoming trip.

“It’s in your drawer honey,” the muffled reply rose from down the stairwell.

Billy’s mom, Wiley, had just finished putting away the dishes from breakfast and was in the middle of fluffing up the large pillows on the back of the couch in preparation for a little reading. This was her favorite time of the day and this one particular sunlit spot in the warm stucco living room was her favorite place in the whole house.

“I’ve looked in the drawer,” shot the exasperated response from the upstairs bedroom.

Wiley stopped for a moment, pillow in hand, and thought about how big he'd gotten—or how small he used to be. She smiled to think about how grown up he was and how completely dependant he still was...at least when it suited him. Wiley hugged the pillow and rolled the soft warm cotton against the side of her cheek.

It hadn't been too long ago that she'd held little William in her arms. Now she had trouble lifting his shoes. If you could call them shoes—she thought they looked more like a piece of the space station that had broken off and fallen to earth.

“Mah-om...it's not there.”

“The other drawer honey,” Wiley plopped the pillow on the back of the couch and smacked it hard. “The one on the top left.”

“Uhhh...thanks.”

Her original plan had been on doing some gardening today, but Jason had told her that the weather would be turning ugly soon.

“Jason?”

Wiley plopped on the couch and felt the heat of the sun on her face as she peered curiously out the large picture window in front of her.

“Yes ma’am?” the soft male voice floated into the air in the room from nowhere and everywhere at once.

“Are you sure it’s going to rain today? It looks absolutely gorgeous out there right now.”

“Ninety percent chance, ma’am. I’ve double checked and it’s already raining to the east of here in Clifford.” The gentleness of the voice, accompanied by an almost musical delivery was punctuated with an air of subtle confidence.

“Hmm,” Wiley grabbed the paper from the end of the couch and snapped it open as she nuzzled back into the pillows. “I suppose you’re right. You always are.”

From the top of the stairway came a sound like a heard of ponies being shot and then thrown down the stairs in mass. Wiley looked over the top of her paper and squinted at the man-sized boy as he jumped clumsily off of the bottom step. He was wearing the grey and white wool sweater that he’d, not so meticulously, torn the sleeves off of. His sandy brown bangs hung down, partially covering his ocean blue-green eyes. A couple of freckles still spattered randomly across each rosy round cheek. At sixteen, he was half boy, half man. He stood nearly six feet tall and was starting to really fill out around the chest and shoulders. At twelve, he had been stocky—almost chubby. But now, his waist and legs had slimmed and his biceps had rounded. Problem was that his brain was so

infused with a wash of hormones that he didn't seem capable of forming complete thoughts anymore. At least that was Wiley's opinion on the subject.

"Why don't you read that stuff on the Screen?" Billy glanced at the book in Wiley's hands and then stumbled his way into the kitchen.

Wiley put the paper all the way down in her lap and leaned forward—as if the paper would keep the sound of her voice from reaching her slightly brain damaged child, "It's not the same."

Then she popped the paper back up and sat back into her original spot against one of the oversized pillows. "It's not the same at all," she whispered to the pages in front of her as if repeating the sentiment would justify its meaning and properly punctuate the thought.

"Jason. Screen," she said in a staccato gate without lifting her eyes.

The dark stucco wall adjacent the couch wriggled and danced with light as it repainted itself into a living landscape. There was a large oak tree in the foreground and behind that, a rolling meadow of tall grass shimmering in the sunlight. In the background, an almost imperceptible swishing sound as the smallest tree branches danced in harmony with the ebb and sway of the grassy hill. Tiny yellow and black finches circled a tubular bird feeder swinging from one of the tree's branches.

With a final swoosh, the scene rolled across the other three walls like paint dripping sideways and immersed the room in its artificial serenity.

“What are you doing today, honey?” Wiley asked as she flicked one of the pages over.

“Um, well...um, Steve and I thought we’d go see ‘The Mars Colony’.”

“Oh, no sir.” Wiley dropped the paper into her lap again and turned her head halfway in the direction of the kitchen.

“But, ma-om...”

“No ma’am is the only thing I want to here from you right now.”

“But...”

“But nothing,” Wiley cut him off with the precision and grace of a skilled swordsman. “How’d you like a couple hundred right-offs on how to properly show respect to your mother?”

The silence from the other room indicated that, point, set and match had just gone to the mother. There were things about raising children that she was inclined to be lenient on and there were things that she was not. And this was one of the *nots*.

She had read the reviews on the new Theatrical Screen, ‘The Mars Colony’. They were saying that it was one of the most realistic and terrifying depictions of torture and death ever shown. The fictional story revolved around some kind of amoeba or bacteria or something that was uncovered just below the surface of the red planet. On contact with light, for the first time in God knows how long, the stuff began to grow and infect the members of the colony. One by one, they went mad and did the most horrendous things to each other.

As far as Wiley was concerned, it was violence for the sake of violence and her children were not going to be subjected to it as long as she had anything to say about it. Which, if she had her way, was going to be forever.

She waited a few seconds, head still cocked to the side, for the reply that did not come. Then up went the book with a little flick as if to say ‘I thought so’.

“Jason?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“The paper says it’s going to be sunny and cool for the rest of the week.”

She loved ribbing him any chance she could. He was, after all, never wrong so she had to savor any opportunity she could to get under his skin.

“You do understand that other sources of information including anecdotal accounts, do not contain current information? While my information is pulled from more than 100 sources and live feeds including several real-time weather satellites.”

“Still, though,” Wiley thought carefully about just how she wanted to word it, “you’d think they’d have gathered enough meteorological data last night to know whether or not it’s going to rain today...wouldn’t you? That’s what I’d think anyway.”

Wiley made an extra effort to deliver the sentence as nonchalantly as possible. It was important that she appeared to be indifferent to the fact that he screwed up. She knew that was part that would get him more than anything.

It was a fairly common ritual in the house. She loved picking on him and had pretty much made a hobby out of it. Although programmed with certain *emotional* responses, he was generally just plain boring. It took skill and adept maneuvering to create a situation where you could actually make a machine mad.

“The whether is not an exact science, Wiley.”

Wiley stopped reading and smiled without moving the paper from in front of her face. She knew that when he changed from ‘*ma’am*’ to *Wiley* that she’d taken a solid step forward. Now it was play time.

“Come to think of it,” she stated calmly with the paper still held up in front of her face, “didn’t you tell me it was going to rain yesterday?”

“As I stated earlier . . . *ma’am*, the whether is not yet an exact science.”

“Damn, we’re back to *ma’am* again,” Wiley thought to herself as she bit her lower lip in nervous anticipation.

Apparently he could see what she was trying to do and, with the slight emphasis on the word ‘*ma’am*’ he was indicating his awareness and countering accordingly. It was like chess. She moved. He moved. Then somebody won. Which, of course, meant that somebody lost. And Jason didn’t like to lose. But, neither did Wiley.

“Honey,” Wiley turned her head toward the kitchen again, “don’t you think you should take a coat with you today?”

There was nothing in the unwritten rules of the competition that stated that you couldn’t drag an unsuspecting bystander into the game.

Billy stuck his head from around the corner, “What for?”

Wiley forced her head around the rest of the way so she could see him. The look of utter confusion on his face was priceless. He couldn’t have played the part better if they’d rehearsed it all night long.

“Jason says it’s going to rain today, honey.” Wiley was proud of her calm, flat delivery.

“What?? It’s gorgeous out. Is he on the fritz again?”

“That’s my boy,” Wiley thought and then turned back and pretended to continue reading the paper.

“As I said, the weather is not...”

“Yea, yea...I know,” Wiley cut in sharply. “The weather’s not an exact science. I get that part.”

Wiley dropped the paper into her lap once again and stared directly out the picture window for a couple seconds before continuing, “Just looks so nice out there right now. You say it’s already raining in Clifford?”

There was a hesitation before the answer that Wiley couldn’t read, but she felt like it was a good thing. After all, Jason had about a million times more horsepower than her pitiful eight pound noggin. Any pause at all meant he was really reaching for something.

“It’s actually cleared up in Clifford for the moment.”

Paper back up. Flip, flip. Pretend to read. Paper down. Look out the window.

“So you might be wrong about here too?” Wiley waited as long as she dared then added curtly, “Again.”

The silence was thick and Wiley was afraid to breath for fear of breaking it and losing the edge. Jason’s course of action now would determine her next move. Would he take the bait or just roll over and play dead? This critical turning point was always the most fun for Wiley. The anticipation. The waiting. Would her little plan be effective? Or would it go down in flames?

“And if it doesn’t rain today, would that be the end of the world, *Wiley?*”

Nice! Wiley held the paper up to hide the enormous smile that had begun to creep across her face.

“Oh no, not at all, Jason.” Wiley managed to ooze with inflated sincerity. “I was more concerned about you than the weather.” She almost let out a little giggle.

Again she waited for it to sink in. To let his billions of little artificial neurons sort through what she’d just dumped out there for him to process. It was all about the timing now. About playing your hand and making it stick. It was important not to lose the upper hand when you got it. One-thousand-one, one-thousand-two... “Do you think we should have you checked out? <pause> I mean just to be safe.” Wiley almost laughed out loud as the words left her mouth.

Then without warning, the wall screens went off. All of them at once with a cellophane-like crackle right at the end. The lights sputtered and dimmed and the constant, always on hum of the air filtration system was replaced with the eerie empty sound of nothing. Complete silence hung in the air like stale perfume.

“Jason. Lights,” Billy barked out the command from the other room, but the half lit fixtures remained fixed. “Ma-om,” shouted the frustrated voice from the kitchen, “I’m trying to eat in here.”

“Jason?” Wiley probed gently, not really sure what had just happened.

This was really unusual. There sparing matches usually ended in Jason’s silence for a period of time before he came back and acted like nothing had happened. Maybe there really was something wrong with him, although she could never remember that ever being the case. He had some kind of auto sensing, self maintenance thing that took care of any problems before they ever were problems.

Wiley watched and listened as nothing happened.

“Jason, lights!” Billy shouted.

Through the doorway, Wiley could see the kitchen illuminate with the soft glow from the ceiling. But the lights in the living room were still at half. Apparently Jason was

responding to Billy's request. This was an interesting if not altogether eerie experience.

Was Jason pissed off? Or was that even possible?

Just as she would if she'd gone too far with anyone else, Wiley waited for a moment and then said sheepishly, "Sorry."

After a moment, the hum of the circulating air returned and slowly, the walls turned to the blue-skied meadow of before. For the rest of the morning, there was no more conversation between Jason and Wiley.

02

That afternoon, Billy and Steven grabbed something to eat and then snuck off to see 'The Mars Colony'. In their minds, Billy's mother had no idea what *their* threshold of terror was. It was certainly much higher than her weak perception of it and therefore they deserved to see the flick.

After the show, the two boys laughed and joked about alien creatures ripping out of the inside of your body. They reenacted their favorite scenes and pretended they were on the Mars Colony themselves.

The idea of the Mars Colony was real enough, but it had actually been abandoned years ago. It was just too inhospitable of an environment and it was too far away. For all of man's science and knowledge he still hadn't cracked the mystery of light-speed travel.

And still couldn't terraform a planet. That still belonged to the realm of the science fiction writers.

That evening Steven was, again, invited over for supper and Wiley and the boys sat and ate with Billy's father, Richard. Billy's younger sister Geneva was away at camp and not expected home for another week. Every once and a while, one of the boys would hold their mouth open and let some food dangle as they made some guttural monster sound. They'd both laugh hysterically but would quiet down quickly after a stern look from Richard.

And, yes, it was Richard, not Dick; and it was Mr. Thornton to company like Steven. There was a certain amount of respect that was due in the Thornton household and you'd have to pay the piper if it wasn't dished out in the right proportion. Usually that meant right-offs. Very rarely was the infraction severe enough to warrant physical intervention, but Billy did recall getting a spanking once when he was about ten. Although he couldn't remember exactly what it was for, he would never forget the event itself.

So it was that the boys made their private jokes about the alien creatures that could rip a human being apart from the inside and the parents quietly endured the children's foolishness.

Bedtime came and the sun set on its favorite planet just as it had for the last 4.7 billion years. Then Jason turned out the lights in the house for the last time.

03

“Hull breach eminent,” the female voice was calm and silky, in stark contrast to the message it was delivering. “All inhabitants proceed in an orderly fashion to the escape pods. Hull breach eminent. Please remain calm and proceed to the escape pods.”

And on she went, calmly repeating her predetermined monologue in the voice chosen specifically for this type of emergency.

Space station Maverick-7 was the oldest of the permanent orbiting colonies around the earth. ‘Maverick’ was really just its nickname. The official designation was MAV-7 which stood for Multi-Angular Velocity (version 7). Basically its name was a fancy way of describing its circular rotating design. Varying rings had been built out from the central core and these were all rotated at different speeds in order to maintain the 1:1 earth gravity needed for healthy long term existence in space.

Maverick-7 had been in service for nearly eighty years and housed nearly eleven thousand civilian women, children and space station personnel. After the failure of the Mars Colony, there was resurgence in interest surrounding the space station. It was far easier to get to than even the closest planet, which meant that it was easier to get people on and off of. It was also much easier to build in space than it was on a far away planet. And it was easier emotionally for the inhabitants to be closer to home.

The space station program had never seen a major disaster before and, in spite of the confusion surrounding the current situation, everyone was moving in a fairly orderly manner to their designated ejection pods. Although not common, there were the occasional drills to test the effectiveness of the station's emergency procedures so most of the people that day moved mechanically as if this was just another drill. Mothers corralled their children and hurried them along the corridor in the direction of the flashing lights. Fathers kissed their families goodbye as they moved them into the *women & children's* area. Communication armbands were activated as longstanding routines were recalled from memory and almost mindlessly put into action.

"Escape pod sequence to commence in ten minutes," the soft female voice continued, "All inhabitants proceed in an orderly fashion to the escape pods. Hull breach eminent."

Although the soothing voice had been designed specifically to take the edge off of the panic in an emergency situation, that would have had little affect if anyone had any idea that this particular situation was not a drill.

Lieutenant Frank Meyers jogged up one of the circular hallways in the opposite direction of the crowded mass as they followed flashing colored lights that fired in sequence along the tops of walls – indicating which direction to take for this section's designated escape path. His uniform hung loose and unbuttoned across his stocky shoulders.

Frank made his way through the crowd and into one of the hallways on his left that led to the inner core. The first ring out from the core contained the station's command and control centers. Everything was controlled from there and he'd need to get inside to find out what was actually going on.

He'd been asleep when he heard the alarms first sound but he didn't remember hearing anything out of the ordinary. No audible explosion. No sign of a foreign object impact. All rotational gravity fields seemed normal. But strangely, the station's Administrator was off-line at the moment. From the moment he first awoke, he'd been unable to raise the Administrator for any kind of a status report.

Frank bent down and stepped through a smaller hatchway and into an oddly lit corridor. The sporadic glow of the red emergency lights cast a surreal metallic glow on everything they struck, leaving behind unnaturally shaped elongated shadows.

Frank quickly passed a couple of station workers busily securing an access panel, but unlike the outer hallway, this area was nearly deserted. In this area, there were no flashing lights to indicate which direction to exit.

Just ahead of him, Frank encountered one of the main air-lock doors on the ship. They were designed to completely isolate a section in the unlikely event of a pressure loss. A quick check on the panel next to the door indicated normal atmosphere and temperature behind the door—always the first concern before initiating an opening sequence.

“Request emergency access; authorization Frank Meyers, alpha-bravo-one-niner.”

Although the words were spoken loudly and clearly into the panel, Frank watched and listened as there was no response to his request. In here, it was now much quieter. As the corridor outside cleared and everyone made their way up to the escape pods, Frank had the uncanny feeling of being left alone. Intellectually he knew that he had been specifically trained for what he was doing now; to reach the inner core. If there was a problem of any kind, that was where he belonged. It was his duty.

Yet, there was that nagging sour sensation in the pit of his stomach as he stood there in the insurmountable silence and watched the panel on the door do nothing more than blink at him. Almost as if the door was mocking his situation; laughing at his predicament and just seeing how much of a rise he could get out of him.

“Request emergency access; authorization Frank Meyers, alpha-bravo-one-niner.”

Frank repeated his request with little hope for success. In the distance, through the silence behind him, he could hear a sound coming from the main passageway. And with it, a faint, almost imperceptible vibration beneath his feet that Frank recognized immediately as the outer pod doors opening. The sound was that of the escape pods being launched. For the first time since the station had been put into service nearly eighty years ago, inhabitants were actually being evacuated from the ship. Apparently this was not a drill as everyone had expected.

“Request emergency access; authorization Frank Meyers, alpha-bravo-one-niner,” Frank repeated in a monotone voice, as he began to enter the manual override sequence into the panel, the seven digit number that all the officers were required to know. The override was locked down this way to avoid a civilian from making a bad decision if a friend of family member happened to be caught behind one of the doors during an automatic lock down—like this one. Opening the door without completely understanding the *whole* situation could be disastrous for the station.

Frank’s mounting panic was countered by his training. He knew exactly what to do and took comfort in the routine of executing his assignment. Before entering the final number to unlock the door, he once again looked over the indicators on the panel. Unless they were erroneous readings, everything looked normal. And normally this would be enough to satisfy him, but the fact that the Administrator was still offline was just a little unnerving. Frank had been on the station for almost a year and there had never been the slightest hiccup with the Administrator before. Even when a sister station, CONRAD-2, had lost the use of their Administrator from an uncommonly high output of solar radiation, MAV-7’s Administrator had been online the whole time and actual provide some crucial backup systems to CONRAD-2. The Administrator was just there, like the air and the gravity.

It was possible that whatever catastrophe had affected the station had also taken out the Administrator’s systems. But it was hard to imagine how that could happen with all of

the distributed redundancy built into the ship's central control. It had been designed so they could lose three fourths of the space station's systems and still maintain the Administrator's key functions. Something was terribly wrong and Frank felt the twinge of panic returning to the bottom of his stomach.

In the background, the sound of the pods ejecting into space intensified and for a few fleeting moments, Frank entertained the notion of heading back to the main passageway and joining the others.

But he knew the horrible reality that every other crewmember knew; that there just *weren't enough pods* to take everyone off the station. Oh, there had been at one time. It was regulation. You had to carry enough escape pods for all station personnel. And ten or fifteen years ago, that would have been the case. They still might have been able to get everyone off to safety. But not today.

There'd been a lot of growth in the station in just the last five years. Just before Frank accepted assignment on MAV-7, the last section of the new ring had been completed and nearly a thousand new inhabitants had come onboard.

But because of the exemplary safety record does nothing more than breed an air of complacency and upgrading the escape pods was always one of those *someday* initiatives. Consequently, with the station personal, crew and inhabitants, Frank figured they were shy—give or take—about fifteen hundred pods. And that's assuming that all of the

current pods even functioned. There were a couple of shuttle craft on board, used mainly for repairs on the station and routine maintenance. But, they could only accommodate a crew of four and maybe at most, six passengers. Without the pods, they had no way to get that many people safely off the station and back to Earth.

Frank took a deep breath entered the final number in the override sequence. Not that holding your breath was an adequate protection from the cold vacuum of space, but it made him feel better about it anyway.

“Swoosh,” came the sound of pressurized air escaping from behind the huge door as it popped open in front of him. Frank paused for a moment at the door and then thought about how many of them would be left on the station after all the pods had ejected.

“This isn’t helping anyone, Lieutenant! Get a move on.”

Frank forced himself through the opening. As he entered the dark corridor, he heard the sound of the door automatically re-sealing behind him. An eerie sort of claustrophobia came over him and the air seemed suddenly thicker. It had an almost metal smell to it and it tasted like death as it passed through his nostrils and entered the back of his throat.

Frank stopped, bent over with his hands on his knees and breathed hard several times through his nose. “Focus on the problem and get your mind out of that shit, Lieutenant.”

He knew that it was all about the mental discipline at this point. Panic was the only real enemy here, not the emergency at hand. Emergencies could be handled. Solutions could be found and problems corrected. But panic would take you down quicker than anything else and it was the one thing that was absolutely controllable.

So Lieutenant Frank Meyers squared his shoulders and stepped into the darkness to accept his responsibility and do his duty.

04

Frank's feeling of claustrophobia and isolation was soon replaced with heightened sense of focus. As he entered the control room at the end of the dark hallway, he passed into buzz of activity. Twenty or thirty of the emergency personnel were already at there stations and dozens of predefined procedures were in the process of being implemented.

Screens crackled and popped, radios squawked and lights danced across their faces as isle after isle of equipment was raised from the dead. The room was called the Emergency Command Core and it was only used once a quarter for routine training exercises. Today, without a word from anyone, there was an overall sense of certainty hanging heavy in the air that this was not a drill.

"Lieutenant Meyers, have you seen Commander Riche?" The voice came from a tall thin man in the center of the room. His face was lit only by the bluish light pouring out of the table top in front of him.

“I was off shift when the alarm hit. I didn’t see anyone on my way here. What’s up?”

“We’re not sure yet,” the man turned to study the brightly lit table, “but right now, we’re having a hell of a time finding anything wrong at all.”

“What about the Administrator?”

“That’s the damndest thing,” the tall man said looking up from the table. “Every system on the ship is fine; 100%.”

“But?”

“But, no Administrator. It’s almost like the ship never had one. The whole system is just...*not there*.”

Frank paused to consider what he was being told and when he couldn’t get his arms around it said, “Give me a status on the pods.”

The man touched several spots on the table top and then reported, “We’ve got a confirmed launch on ninety-nine hundred and fifty-two pods. Two hundred and eighty-three failed to launch and two confirmed casualties from in the chute failures.”

Despite the froth of activity surrounding him, Frank was starting to see that no one had the faintest idea what was going on. The panic that had begun to settle in his stomach

earlier was now being replaced by something else. Not quite anger, but he was developing a sudden sense of urgency about finding out what was going on.

“So nobody can tell me why we just hurled ten-thousand escape pods toward the Earth, killing two of our own people in the process?”

The man looked down at the table, “No sir. Like I said...”

“Yea, I know, we’ve got no Administrator and everything else is just fine. 100%.”

Frank looked around the room at the heightened level of activity, watching as officers exchanged information, ran from station to station and checked system after system.

“What the hell’s going on here?”

It was like a bad dream. Except that you’d eventually wake up from a bad dream. Frank knew they weren’t going to be that lucky with this one. People had died and they’d just ejected nearly the entire population of Earth’s largest orbiting space colony from a station that was, apparently, in perfect working order.

“What generated the hull breach warning?”

“After the signal stopped, there was no way to track it. It’s like it never happened, sir.”

“It happened alright,” Frank whispered under his breath before surveying the room again. “Listen up,” he said loudly in his best command voice, “until Commander Riche arrives, I’m the ranking officer here...and I want some goddamn answers. Copy that?”

For a moment everyone in the room paused, looking up at Lieutenant Meyers in silence; the only sound coming from the murmur of the screens and the low hum of the air filtration systems. Then, as if controlled by a gigantic remote controlled switch, the room snapped into action and returned to its frenzied search for answers.