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Featuring:

Natural Selection by Mike Simon
Honorable Mention, 2006 Fiction Contest

Natural Selection

Mike Simon

Mars exploded at exactly 11:16 AM, Eastern Standard Time.

In Houston it was hot and humid, but that was nothing compared to the steamy conditions in Mission Control when the initial readings were confirmed. Within hours, headlines heralding the approach of the Apocalypse raced around the globe, inciting hysteria and mass panic.

From our position onboard Freedom, we had a fantastic view of the entire process... All five-point-four seconds of it. In that moment of time, a miniature version of the sun abruptly appeared in the vacuum of deep space. Of course no sound was recorded but the video was enough to shock our entire world.

That was over four years ago.



I clipped the last red wire and twisted it around the black one...or tried to. With wires snaking in every direction, completing even a small job inside the fuse box was like wrestling with an octopus. Once finished, there was no thought of closing the panel, rather the idea was simply to get it as tight as possible and then secure it with a ripped piece of cloth. That way it couldn't swing about in a sudden gravity well and sever what few circuits remained operational.

I wiped the sweat from my brow and punched the intercom.

"Bypass is completed, guys. Switch the relay and see if it holds."

The female voice came back immediately. "Bout time, Ash. We thought you had drifted out of an airlock or something."

I was too tired to reply. It had been a tedious three hour job and all I wanted to do was sleep. The light on one of the external sensors shifted from red to green as the circuit closed. I unconsciously held my breath until the first thirty seconds passed uneventfully. No sparks erupted nor could I detect the smell of burning insulation. I replaced the fire extinguisher and mouthed a silent thank you.

"Nav is back on line, Ash." This time the voice coming out of the wall was pure professional. "Good work."

I snapped off the intercom and floated towards the door. As I passed the port side window, I had a great view of the Earth floating two hundred miles below.

And all I could see was a solid brown smudge.



It was sheer luck that saved us during those first, fateful days. The explosion of an entire world produced billions of flying projectiles that raced inward, heading for the inner three planets. Picture a hail storm with every icy pellet as large as a 747. Some twist of fate had placed good old Mother Earth almost opposite Mars. We swung around the far side of the star just as those massive hailstones arrived. I was reminded of an old B-grade movie with the hero ducking around the corner just as the bullets tore into the side of the building.

The scientists had plugged the numbers in and concluded that the fourth planet from the sun had been impacted by a massive object, many times larger than Earth. The combined energies had produced the largest known explosion since the formation of the solar system. By the time we emerged on the other side, Pluto was nowhere to be found.

And then came the bad news.



At a stocky five-foot-nine, Jenny was only two inches shorter and a few pounds lighter than me. However, the weight of command had, over the years, given her a stooped appearance. I relaxed on the bed as she uttered a small sigh and snuggled into my shoulder.

I smiled. "Can't sleep either?"

"I'm surprised any of us can after the day we had," she murmured. "I don't want to go through that again."

"You're not the only one," I grunted. "Remember which one of us almost lost the tether on his EV suit." I shivered involuntarily. "I figure my O2 would be running out right about now..."

She pulled me closer. "Good job today, Ash. If you hadn't been able to tie down that loose cable, it would have eventually sliced through the solar panel."

We lay quiet for a few minutes before Jenny let a giggle slip out.

"Mel says that with all the patches sewn onto your suit, you look like Li'l Abner from Dogpatch."

I felt my ire rise immediately. "Yeah, well maybe Mel should volunteer for the next emergency spacewalk. I'm just happy the damn suit is still functional. It's well past its predicted lifespan."

She elbowed me in the ribs. "Relax. It's just a joke. What else can the two of us do while you're out there, trying to prolong our miserable existence? You're just ticked because you're the only one who can do it."

I grimaced. "Thanks, Dr. Freud."

She tilted her head back. "Speaking of which, I've noticed you've been rather hard on Mel lately. Why don't you stop acting like an old codger and cut her some slack, especially when she reports the atmospheric counts?"

It took an effort to meet her gaze. "I'm an engineer, Jenny. I deal in facts and figures. The numbers are...difficult... It's like she's rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic..."

"So let her." She elbowed me again. "What else can she do? We're payload specialists, Ash. We were supposed to perform experiments remember?"

I sighed. "I know. It's been a long time..."

She smiled in silent understanding. "I don't mind the occasional naysayer lurking about my space station. Just don't steal Mel's optimism. All things considered, it's one of the few bright spots we've got left."



Jenny passed me the vacuum-sealed, hydrogenised organic meal that passed as potato scallop. The concoction of carbs and protein tasted more like warm dishwater, which is exactly the reason none of us looked forward to a meal anymore. Personally, I would kill for the opportunity to sink my teeth into a juicy steak. Instead, I sucked on the straw and drifted into the nearest chair.

"Where's Mel?" I asked.

The blonde jerked a finger aft. "Working on the IR sensor. She said there was a strong depression moving across the Rockies and..."

"Let me guess," I interrupted, not quite hiding the sarcasm. "She's hoping it'll act like Moses parting the Red Sea and we'll actually be able to see a land mass."

Jenny's pretty face folded into a frown. "Have you forgotten what we discussed the other day? Besides, she's not giving up if that's what you mean."

I threw up my hands. "Hey, nobody's giving up... But it's still an exercise in frustration. The weather patterns are too dense. The only form of energy capable of penetrating those cloudbanks is electronic, and you know it."

She seemed to shrivel into her seat, and I felt a twinge of guilt. After all, she was still in charge, and one of a commander's jobs was to keep hope alive.

She brushed back her blonde bangs with a free hand and changed topics. "I see you got the Nav fuses back online. I was getting nervous."

"I had to cannibalize the backup oxygen sensor to get the right parts."

She frowned. "That doesn't sound good."

I shrugged. "That unit won't do us much good without a functioning Nav computer."

Both Jenny and Mel, although only payload specialists, were technically my superiors, however, I alone understood the inner workings of the space station. Since the disaster, I was the only one capable of keeping this hunk of junk flying.

"Hey," I suddenly remembered. "I was able to use the rest of that sensor unit to partially outfit one of the escape pods."

Jenny finally smiled and, in the tight confines of the cabin, it was like the sun breaking through the clouds. Her pigtailed bounced as she laughed.

"Now who's the optimist here?" she asked.



We lost half the satellites in the first week alone. Still, with the data they managed to obtain, NASA was able to piece together the essential facts. Our Solar System was passing through the orbit of an immense cloud

of debris. The press labeled them killer asteroids, monster meteors and, more to the point, the biggest threat to humanity since the cold war.

The sheer volume of the approaching rock was enough to convince even the staunchest skeptic that it must, at one point in the distant past, have existed as a complete Solar System unto itself. Until some catastrophic event decimated the star and surrounding planets, ejecting the entire lot into deep space. Now the frozen hunks of densely packed matter followed an elliptical orbit that sporadically crossed paths with our own Solar System. The last such crossing occurred approximately 65 million years ago.



I shook my head for the tenth time in as many minutes.

"Okay, let's finish this." I pointed a finger at my closest naysayer. "I'll wager a million dollars, one hot shower, and all the chocolate left in New York that it will be the insects."

Mel arched an eyebrow, her subtle way of commenting negatively on my mental state. "You're nuts. The amphibians have a selective advantage—they utilize water as a protective barrier. They're the only group that's going to emerge unscathed."

The third member at the table openly sneered. "That's how much you two understand about nature." Jenny took another sip of her vegetable broth. "First of all, the insects are too far down the evolutionary ladder to amount to anything resembling a dominant species. Second, the amphibians can barely survive a sneeze. Just look at the frogs for Pete's sake, every time there's a little old mercury spill, they lose half their females."

I chortled and Mel flashed me a dirty look.

"Well, I am the biologist in the group, and I didn't want to point out the obvious," The redhead flashed a set of pearly whites. "But that is natural selection at work. When the air clears, amphibians will rule the roost..."

I cleared my throat, knowing it would cut through the petty debate.

"I was wondering how the numbers came out today," I asked.

The girls exchanged a look, and I realized they had purposely kept the report to themselves. It could only mean one thing.

"A little better," Mel tried to sound optimistic. "The concentration over the poles is down significantly and the oceans..."

"Spare me..." I interjected. "Tell me about the atmosphere above the continents?"

The biologist from England hesitated just long enough to flash me a cool look. "No change from last month."

I grimaced. "That's the third month in a row. It means..."

"It means nothing," Jenny snapped. She had been a rising star in the all-male field of theoretical physics before making the jump to NASA. Unlike Mel, she could handle my caustic comments.

"Atmospheric density has been decreasing for the past year." She held up a hand before I could interrupt. "You're right, plant and animal life on the continents is still struggling because the sun's heat can't get through. But the computer based simulations now show clearly that the prevailing weather patterns will eventually drag the dust and debris out to sea."

"It's not happening fast enough for those still alive," I muttered. "And anybody still breathing has got to be starving by now..."

"Thank you for reminding us of that little fact." Jenny's eyes flashed and it was only then I noticed Mel had let her head fall into her hands. Her shoulders trembled softly, and I suddenly felt like an idiot.



Freedom's Commander took his own life exactly one week after the first big one hit Moscow, killing his wife and three kids, along with five million of his closest Russian friends. They had less than two minutes warning. The explosion and subsequent firestorm left everything within a thirty-mile radius little more than charred ruins and cinders.

Most of the other cities, including the big ones, followed in short order. London, Paris, New York, Beijing... The bombardment was so intense that no human settlement emerged unscathed. Some impacts were huge, some small, but everyone suffered. Still, mankind sucked it up. People, survivors, went to ground, grit their teeth, and held on.

The military had some initial success with the lasers and warheads, blowing apart dozens of the cursed rocks. But compared to the sheer number raining down, it was a drop in the bucket.

Before global communication was lost, scientists predicted the worst would last less than two weeks. Over the millennium, the minute gravitational forces had slowly reined in the debris, resulting in a highly concentrated yet extremely narrow band of rock. With our existing technology, it had been impossible to detect. However, people were reassured; the bombardment would be intense but short lived.

Of course, that was before Black Beauty arrived.

By day thirteen, the only early warning system still functioning was to be found on Freedom, the Space Station itself was now held together by strategically placed duct tape and bailing wire. We still had intermittent communication with Houston and did our best to give them regular updates.

Two miles wide and composed of solid iron, she was detected only six hours out. We dutifully reported the sighting to Houston, for all the good it

would do. They didn't bother to broadcast it over the shortwave or on what landlines still existed. Who could blame them? It was an extinction level event.

The impact was something out of the movies. The volume of dust and dirt thrown up filled the atmosphere within a few short days. In less than a week, none of our instruments, save those electronic in nature could penetrate the dense clouds. Ten days after Black Beauty slammed in the Ural Mountains, all contact with our home world was lost.



I was asleep when Mel slipped into my cabin. I felt the minute weight change on my bed and immediately woke up. In space, one becomes extremely sensitive to the subtlest changes.

She was sitting on the foot of the bed, staring out my small window. In the faint light, I could see the streaks of dried tears.

"We're not going to make it are we?" she asked quietly. "Mankind, I mean. Most have died already... The rest are slowly starving..." She turned suddenly to stare at me. "That's billions of people, Ash... I can't imagine..." Her shoulders started to shake.

I sat up and put my arm around her. Unlike Jenny, she was tiny, built more like a gymnast. "There's always hope," I said. "We've survived wars, plagues, other catastrophes..."

She shook her head. "Not like this. Those rocks destroyed the dinosaurs, and now they want to do the same to us." Another tear wound its way down her cheek.

I stroked her red hair and briefly wondered what existed sixty-five million years before the dinosaurs. Could another dominant species have flourished only to suffer a similar fate?

"One step at a time," I murmured. "Tomorrow, you can help me recalibrate the CO2 scrubbers, and then we'll tackle the aft stabilizer..."

"Jenny told me you're making some progress with the escape pods."

"A little," I admitted. "I'm picking up pieces as they become available. I figure that by the end of the decade, I'll have them both ready to fly."

She chuckled at that. We both knew the lifespan of Freedom was probably measured in months, if she held together that long.

"But you're working on only two?"

I nodded, forgetting for the moment she couldn't see me in the shadows. "When the compartment took that direct hit, it started a fire that flared for just a second before the oxygen was sucked into space. However, the temperature was so extreme, it fused the metal casing of the escape pods to their ejection shaft. I've only got two functional shafts left."

"Oh."

I knew she didn't completely understand. However, it was enough for her to know I had legitimate reasons for the work I was doing. I could feel the tenseness slowly dissipate, and soon after we stopped staring at the brown planet floating outside the window.



The last two members of our team, a pair of French scientists, were actually in the compartment with the escape pods when the tiny asteroid punched a fist sized hole in the wall. It was left to me to clean up the remains once I repaired the damage and re-pressurized the compartment. Decompression may be a quick way to go but, by God, it's not a pleasant one.

It became apparent by the fourth week that our Solar System had survived yet another encounter with the interstellar equivalent of the

Mongolian Horde. Although we did emerge two planets lighter and with Earth's dominant species on life support. We argued about how many times this had happened in our four-and-a-half billion year history. Unfortunately, the debate was now purely academic, since the damage had been done.

While I battled daily to keep the station afloat, Mel and Jenny mapped out and analyzed any electronic source they could detect on the surface. They recalibrated most of the instruments and reoriented the rest. Instead of using the multi-trillion dollar instrument known as Freedom to explore deep space, we were using it solely to check for life on the surface of our home world. After four years we had a pretty good idea of what pockets of civilization still existed, although those numbers were dwindling fast. Month by month, the electronic signatures were dissolving into static which, ironically, paralleled our species descent into oblivion.



"How's Mel doing?" I asked Jenny as she floated into the seat next to me. She didn't make eye contact, but I could still sense her concern.

"I'm worried about her." The blonde played with a vacuum-sealed bag of breakfast, trying to summon an appetite.

I looked over and waited until she met my gaze.

"I've noticed," I said softly. "I've tried to talk to her, but there's no getting through."

"She depressed," Jenny stated the obvious, "And with Freedom breaking down every five minutes, who can blame her?"

When I didn't answer immediately, the tall girl swung my chair around.

"All right, Ash, give me your best case scenario. How long have we got?"

"Best case?" I leaned forward and took a moment to organize my thoughts. "Okay, best case is that the first thing to go will be one of the structural supports. They really took a pounding during that second week. But as soon as one strut gives up the ghost, the rotational thrusters will be forced to fire to prevent any rotational tilt. If the station drifts off even a few degrees, because of the damaged solar panels, we'll lose most of our energy from the sun and, with it, our power. Within hours, the jets will exhaust their meager fuel reserves and the station will begin to tumble on its axis. At that point, the orbit will start to decay. Eventually the structure will make contact with the atmosphere..."

Jenny shuddered. "That's the best case scenario?"

I shrugged. "Only because it means we'll probably last a few more months. But that's only if the hack job I did on the wiring holds, or if one of the seals doesn't leak, or..."

She threw up her hands. "I get it. Spare me the details."

I leaned back and grinned sardonically. "Sorry. But do you see why it's hard for me not to comment every time Mel starts talking about a difference of three-parts-per-million in the debris cloud? In the whole scheme of things, is it going to change anything? Our civilization is dying, and we're lucky enough to watch it all unfold in real time, all the while waiting for Damocles' Sword to fall."

Jenny looked crestfallen. I could tell she had made a point of focusing on the positives. Though, with the constant creaks and mechanical failures, it must have taken quite the effort.

"Humans hate to fail," she muttered. "That's why we survived this long."

"Survival instinct." I nodded. "Unfortunately, the genetic coding in our DNA didn't take into account a two-mile-wide asteroid or the lethal environment of space."

"Yeah," she glanced out the small window in the galley. The sun was just rising over the edge of the planet. "It is too bad."



The only reason Freedom survived at all was that we were able to use Earth as a shield during the worst of the asteroid storm. Even so, the solar panels and external structural supports suffered significant damage. Reserves were rerouted to maintain essential systems, but still most compartments on the station had to be powered down to conserve energy. At last count, I had sealed over a hundred hull punctures.

Most nights, I lay awake listening to the death groans of the station. The constant creaks and rattles sounded like a set of rusted swings twisting in the wind. However, despite the odds, Freedom continued to limp along...



Over the next few months, Mel grew increasingly despondent and Jenny, at times, seemed equally distraught. Imprisoned hundreds of miles from home, we were forced to watch the death of our species from the front row, all the while waiting for Freedom to tumble into the atmosphere. The stress was gradually taking its toll. Even highly motivated, superbly trained astronauts like ourselves, have a breaking point. I wasn't a physician, but I could read the signs. The girls were reaching the end of their tether. I figured everyone on Freedom had finally arrived at a similar conclusion. There was no white knight coming to save the day. Mankind was going the way of the dodo bird, and that included the three astronauts on Freedom.

I dreaded my morning walk into the central hub. After four years, most of my engineering board was little more than a mass of red, pulsating buttons and warning lights. We were living on borrowed time.

The three of us needed some serious therapy, several strong medications and, above all, a miracle. Since none of that was going to happen, it was time for me to make a decision.



I was surprised when Jenny showed up one morning while I was working on the escape pods.

"To what do I owe this pleasure? I asked, getting up and wiping some grease into my pants. "When's the last time you ventured into the bowels of the station?"

She gave me a half smile. "It's been awhile. I like what you've done with the place."

I glanced at the exposed computer processors and kilometers of wiring strung across the ceiling like accidental clotheslines. It would warm the heart of any mad scientist.

"You've been spending a lot of time down here recently," she continued. "I was wondering if something was wrong."

I stretched out my arms to encompass the room. "Now why would you even think that something could possibly be wrong here?"

We both laughed.

"I noticed the navigation and thruster controls have gone offline," she said.

"Yeah, the relays burned out. We have to control it from here."

She wandered across the room, carefully avoiding the exposed terminals. "What are you working on?"

I squatted down and lifted a piece of jagged metal. "This is a section of one of the damaged escape pods. I'm trying to jury rig it so it meshes with a second unit."

She shook her head. "For a pessimist who continues to shoot down Mel's reports, you're spending a lot of time working on an exit strategy."

I sighed. "Yeah, just can't get rid of that human nature."



It was an anniversary of sorts when I called the meeting. It had been five years to the day since we arrived on Freedom as a replacement crew. Thank God the compliment of scientists and payload specialists were not scheduled to arrive until the next shuttle launch, or the food and supplies would not have lasted this long.

I cleared my throat, forcing both to turn away from the window.

"It's time," I announced.

"Time for what?" Jenny snapped. Of the two, she was the most irritable, Mel remained silently morose.

"Time to leave."

They both looked at me as if I had two heads.

"I didn't realize you had called a taxi," Jenny replied sarcastically. "I better get packed." She got up to leave.

I smiled in a fatherly way. "When you popped into engineering last week, you said I had been spending a lot of time there, but you didn't bother to ask exactly what I was doing."

Mel looked up. "I thought you were still tinkering with the escape pods."

"I was. Now I'm just working on one."

They both looked confused.

"What?"

"Ash, what the hell are you talking about?"

I spread both hands, palms down, on the table. "It occurred to me after a conversation we had a couple of weeks ago. We've been working like dogs trying to survive up here but, think about it, who do we really want to save, us or the human race?"

"How can we save...?" Mel started before I raised a finger.

"On the surface, people are dying because they're running out of resources. But why is that? We all know there are enough supplies for what's left of the population. The problem is that it's spread out, buried or hidden, just like the pockets of survivors themselves. Mel has been tracking not only the radio signals, but also the whereabouts of each group. We know the location of these survivors as well as what areas have escaped the worst damage and may contain those needed resources. What the people need is someone to act as a coordinator, to communicate with each group, bring them together and match them with supply caches, food, shelter... Whatever."

Jenny was shaking her head. "But we can't communicate with them. We've tried. The atmosphere is still too thick to confirm findings visually, and they obviously don't have any communication equipment."

"Or anyone who knows how to use it," Mel muttered.

I met the blonde's gaze evenly. "We need someone on the surface, Jen. Someone with all the facts, on the surface. Short wave will work down there, and that may be enough to bring the survivors together. All we need to do is reach a critical mass in order to pull our species back from the brink."

Mel still looked puzzled. "But you've been working on those escape pods every day since the initial collisions. You said we didn't have enough parts..."

"My mistake," I admitted. "I was trying to fix both remaining pods. Over the past few weeks, I used the parts from both to put together one functioning unit."

There was a moment of silence as the girls pondered the unavoidable question. Each pod was designed for one individual. I quickly continued before they could torture themselves any further.

"I modified the inside..."

Jenny tensed. "You did what?"

"I ripped out the seat and the console unit. It'll be tight but, if you don't mind extremely close quarters for a brief period, both of you should do okay."

"What about you...?"

I waved the thought away. "I'm too big. It's you two or just me. Therefore I stay. Besides, without the console unit on board, you'll need an engineer to monitor your trajectory, and I can only do that from Freedom."

Jenny looked unsure. "I don't know... I'll have to think..."

"There's no decision to make here, Commander," I interjected, my tone suddenly unforgiving. "The two of you have a chance to get off this sinking ship and change the natural course of history. We've talked about it enough. Mankind is dying, just like the dinosaurs did sixty-five million years ago. Now, I'm offering you a chance to actually do something beyond the talking."

I took a breath and wiped my forehead. I didn't realize I was sweating.

"However, I wouldn't feel too optimistic about the whole thing. With most of the Nav functions now defaulted to manual, instead of the continental US, I'm just as apt to land you somewhere in the Arctic Ocean."

It was meant as a joke but neither of them cracked a smile.



In the best-case scenario, escape pods have something like a fifty per cent chance of success. Taking a live human being through the atmosphere and depositing him or her on the surface is a risky endeavor. At least, that's what all the computer models predicted, since it had never been actually tested in real life.

There were a thousand things that could go askew, everything from the wrong angle of entry (and bouncing off into space) to a malfunctioning chute. At best, it would be a hot, claustrophobic ride, with oxygen masks strapped to their faces and a dozen safety harnesses bolting them to a rough, metal shell. If the attempt failed, there existed but a small silver lining, the end would be swift and merciful.



"First thing I want is a steak," Mel proclaimed over a packaged breakfast. "Smothered in onions..."

I chuckled. "You always want onions. Whenever I mention a steak, you demand onions. I'm even having dreams about your damn onions." I hesitated momentarily before a smile escaped. "Maybe we should call ahead for reservations. I, for one, would hate to have the local restaurant all booked up when you arrive."

She ignored me. "And then I want to sleep in a real bed, with blankets and a pillow..."

Jenny floated over to our table. She carried the readouts from Medlab.

"What's the verdict?" I asked.

"Best guess is that our bones are eighty per cent normal," she answered grimly. "Muscle mass is comparably low as well."

"Oh great." Mel stopped daydreaming and took the sheets from Jenny's hand. "We're going to be as weak as kittens on the surface, if we don't snap a dozen bones on landing."

I glanced at the blonde. "What do you expect after five years in zero-g?"

Jenny eyed me critically. "We don't have to like it, Ash."

I shrugged.

Mel took a moment to go over the figures before putting them down. "I've packed a printout of the latest information we have on everything from survival camps to probable food storage sites and undamaged power plants."

I leaned back and stretched my neck. The long hours keeping the station afloat were wearing me down.

Jenny took my hand in hers. "Ash, I don't know how to say this but..."

"Don't worry about it," I said a little too quickly. "I've got to finish programming the coordinates..." I got up before my emotions got the better of me.

"Ash, wait." Mel was on her feet. "I, uh, set the receivers to accept the common frequencies... If we can get a signal through..."

"Ah, sure... I'll keep listening."

Unprompted, they both rushed forward to give me a big hug.

"Thank you," they whispered. "Thank you for giving us a chance."

I staggered out of the room before my tears matched theirs. Even in space, men weren't supposed to cry.



Our final goodbyes were brief and perfunctory. A quick hug, some whispered promises, and the two squeezed into the coffin-sized pod. With the foam padding and seat ripped out, it was going to be one rough ride.

I hit the eject button and felt a subtle vibration pass underfoot. It took two minutes to get back to the hub and, after a quick check of the trajectory; I let out my breath. They were on target. The escape pod lit a serpentine trail of golden sparks as it entered the atmosphere. A few moments later, all signs of their passage had disappeared. I said a silent prayer, leaned back in my seat and tried to count the stars.

I wondered if they would name a school after me...



Over the course of the following week, I was forced to seal off the hub from the rest of the station. The numerous "temporary" seals I had installed over the past few years were finally starting to leak, and the station didn't have the power to fight another losing battle. In addition, the solar panels were developing an attitude, forcing me to conserve every watt.

I had given up on my daily repair schedule. Sure, I could affect some minor repairs in an EV suit but it had all the effect of spitting into a hurricane. I used the last of the thruster fuel to push Freedom into a higher orbit, foolishly thinking that somehow it might make a difference. I spent most of my days staring out the window, but occasionally got up the energy to tinker with the remaining escape pod. In my wildest dreams, I still thought there was a hope I could cobble something together that would survive a descent through Earth's atmosphere. However, visions of the old shuttle disaster usually woke me in a cold sweat and cured me of any optimistic thoughts.

It was on the thirty-first day of my self-imposed isolation that I first heard the faint tapping. It faded out a dozen times before holding a pattern. Finally, after twenty incredulous minutes, I realized it was coming from the radio.

Amazed, I walked over and listened to the collections of chirps and squawks. Another minute went by before my mind picked up on it. Only then did I smile.

It had been years, but I still remembered the ancient Morse code. With paper and pencil in hand, I painstakingly jotted down each letter. The sequence was repeated over and over.

Staring down at the paper, I began to laugh outrageously.

By the time I hit the sack, hours later, I was still chuckling. As I fell asleep, I thought of the paper near the radio. Printed in bold letters and underlined twice was the sentence, "Steak is a little bland... Needs onions."



Because of the station's position over the continental US, we were able to exchange messages on a regular basis. The girls had landed safely outside Atlanta; safely if you didn't count Mel's fractured arm, some heat burns and a couple of bloody noses. Despite the severe weather on the surface, they had made their way to a nearby military base and managed to contact several pockets of survivors using some undamaged communications gear. The groups were already converging on a prearranged point outside the city. Jenny said they had found more than enough rations and medical supplies.

Temperatures ranged from zero to minus twenty and were even colder in the northern latitudes. Fortunately, snow accumulation was less than expected and most of the main highways were still passable, if you could

find a way past the frozen bodies and ruined vehicles. There wasn't much in the way of plant or animal life, which is why the survivors would have eventually succumbed to starvation. Without Freedom's data, the girls would have quickly followed suit.

I kept them abreast of the latest information on potential survivors and, at Mel's insistence, the atmospheric readings. They seemed elated when I informed them counts over the continents were down a few percentage points.

It was still going to take years before anyone could even think about putting a crop in.



One week later outside Atlanta...

Mel was still awake when Jenny tapped on the door.

"What is it?"

Jenny hesitated as she lit a candle. As the small flame danced in the room, the girls could see their breath coming out in puffs of white vapor.

She gave Mel a look. "What are you still doing up? Aren't you supposed to go with the engineering group at first light?"

Mel just shrugged. She had wanted to supervise the work on the diesel generator...

"My arm is still throbbing," she admitted.

"Well then, take something. Doc says we got lots in the supply cabinets."

"I know..." She recognized the look on Jenny's face. "What's wrong?"

Jenny pulled out a sheet of paper. "Radio room just got a message from Ash." She sat down on the side of the bed and took a breath. "The

sergeant said Ash reported some sort of problem, something about decreasing hull pressure..."

"And?"

"And Ash said the station was starting to tumble on its axis."

Mel's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh my God, Jenny! He's out of fuel, he can't correct it!"

Jenny took a breath. "I know. Freedom's going to hit the atmosphere sometime in the next few hours."

"But... but, we have to try and get a message..."

The blonde shook her head. "The sergeant lost contact almost immediately. I think the station's antenna was thrown out of line."

"Ash didn't say anything else?"

Jenny glanced down at the paper. "He did get a few words out before communication was lost. The sergeant didn't understand so he scribbled it down."

Mel grabbed the paper. She quickly scanned the sheet and the confusion on her face slowly melted away.

She glanced up into the smiling, teary-eyed face of her friend.

"Just like him..." she whispered and then read aloud the words.

"Freedom's dying...don't worry...am bringing the onions..."



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The author is a hockey and rugby player who resides on the east coast of Canada and manages to practice medicine in his spare time. He enjoys writing hard science fiction but can often be found writing in other genres as well. Recent published words include "Layers" in *Apex: Science Fiction and Horror (Best of 2005)*, "Star in the East" in *The Sword Review* and "The Answer" in *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*. He has contributed to several anthologies including *Travel a Time Historic, Tall Tales and Short Stories*, and *The Unknown*. Non-fiction articles have appeared in *Stitches Magazine, Doctor's Review* and *The Physician's Chronicle*.



Cover: "Black Pegasus"

Original Art - 12" x 9" colored pencil illustration on Strathmore Artagain fiber-enhanced paper.

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Specializing in colored pencil works on fiber-enhanced paper, more of the work of Michelle J.A. McIntyre can be found on her Webpage, < www.fantasyrealmcreations.com >. She creates a variety of fantasy art subject matter including dragons, unicorns, gryphons, fairies, and centaurs.



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