

The Life Boat
by Pete Torgerson

Barry lingered by the viewing port overlooking the Indian ocean. His eyes followed the edges of the clouds, trying to get a glimpse of the land below. He thought about how close that land was, and how far away it seemed to be. It was right there, blanketed by the atmosphere that insulated from the eternal void right outside the window.

His focus turned to the 2 inch thick sheet of polycarbonate that formed the pane of the viewing port. It didn't seem like it should be strong enough to keep his little life-bubble from gushing into the vacuum outside.

"See anything interesting out there?" Asked Dmitry, startling him a bit.

"Not much. Plenty of clouds over India today."

"What I wouldn't give for a cloudy day, eh?" smiled Dmitry. "Say, can you give me a hand down in the science lab? One of the growth units is malfunctioning."

"Sure," said Barry, "I'll be right there."

Dmitry turned and pulled himself down the tube toward the science section.

Barry took one last look out the port at the earth, let out a sigh, then turned away.

It had been nearly a year since either had set foot on Earth. They were supposed to fly a three month mission but due to political issues their tour had been extended a month. Then it was extended another month. Then it was extended "indefinitely" and that they would be retrieved "as soon as possible."

They did have access to what they called a life boat. It was intended for emergencies and was available for them to use if things became critical. It was an old capsule of Russian design, and had been docked there for many, many years, standing at the ready.

Every month they received a shipment of supplies: food, water, clothing, spare parts; everything needed to keep the station operating normally. However, the last had come more than a month ago, and future ones stood as delayed. With every passing day the situation seemed more grim, but the two astronauts made the best of it.

"What is it this time, lights or temperature controls?" Barry asked as he glided into the Plant Sciences Laboratory module.

"Irrigation."

"Really? That has been bulletproof. Is the pump not working?" he asked as they set about troubleshooting the equipment.

Failures had become rather commonplace. The station was a massive structure that had been constructed module by module over the past 35 years. The oldest parts, as you might expect, were the most unreliable. Many of them had to be powered down and sealed off as it was not feasible to keep all systems functioning, especially with their skeleton crew. A couple of the oldest sections had even been jettisoned as they had become something of a lost cause. Failing systems were repaired in order of importance at this point.

"Is the power unit functioning?"

"Yes, we still have power to the temperature controls, and they run off the same circuit."

"Lets check the regulator board for this subunit then, we may have burned something out there."

The Plant Sciences Lab was one of the largest sections of the station. It had been built to continue experiments on the effects of zero gravity on the growth of food crops. Earlier, smaller experiments had been promising. This was the next step in a series of tests that would ultimately prove feasibility of large-scale farming operations in orbital facilities.

Pollution, overpopulation, conversion of food crops to

energy crops; all of these contributed to a number of world-wide food shortages in the previous century. A remedy was needed.

"I see a scorch mark here. I think I can bypass it with a bit of wire. Can you grab me the soldering kit?"

"Yes."

The lab was a fortunate asset for Dmitry and Barry, as they now had an alternate source of food. Strictly speaking the vegetables had been intended only for scientific use, but it had become an appealing option. The rations that came with monthly supplies left plenty to be desired, and since those shipments were becoming less and less reliable, growing their own food seemed a viable option.

"Okay, switch it back on."

"Switching it on."

"Power is up. Checking the voltages... Everything looks good."

"Excellent. That squash is looking great."

"Yeah, it shouldn't be too much longer now. We're about ready to plant some more tomatoes, aren't we?"

"Yes, I was thinking Monday would be the day."

"Sounds good," Barry said with a smile. He could hardly wait for fresh food.

Barry had grown up on a fair bit of land in Wisconsin. It had been a successful farming operation for several generations, but when Barry grew up there it only functioned as a small hobby farm. His mother and father worked regular jobs in the city, commuting from their home each day. As such they kept only about an acre that they kept as gardens, and leased the rest to a larger farming operation.

The station he now called home reminded him of living on that farm in many ways: the spatial isolation; the deteriorating structures from so many years of use; the haphazard repairs and "improvements" to keep things going; and now a small parallel with the gardens. He only wished he could commute back to earth more often.

"It is almost lunch time," Said Dmitry. "Food is always best after finishing a hard job. I am looking forward to the beef stew," he said with a grin. "Oh, by the way, how is our water supply doing?"

"I checked it three days ago, it looked good then. We should check it again, though," said Barry.

They made their way to the canteen. Under normal circumstance it would have been a short trip, only four modules away. However, a secondary docking port had developed an air leak in one of its seals. As such, the hatches to the unit were

always closed and it was allowed to vent its atmosphere over time. It wasn't really feasible or sensible to pressurize it every time they wanted to go through so they just left it that way. The alternate route was a fair bit longer, passing through a total of 18 units.

Barry entered the canteen and approached the ration dispenser. It was a large, beige vending machine with a color touchscreen on the front. The screen was used to navigate through menus of meals and food types. If you selected one, it would display the item's nutritional information and how many units were left. All of them lacked any appeal at this point, but the split-pea soup Barry found to be the most tolerable.

He tapped his selection into the screen and several whirs and clunks ensued. A rectangular door the size of a small ruler retracted, and a slightly smaller silver packet popped out. Barry took it from the machine, ripped off the corner, and began squeezing the soup into his mouth. Normally it would have emerged hot, but in the interest of preserving energy, the two had decided to eat their foods cold. This did not help with the appeal of the food, but it did not really hurt it that much, either.

Barry approached a computer terminal and spun the trackball to wake it from its slumber. There were three new messages waiting for him. One was from his younger brother, Ted. Another was from the International Space Consortium, the group that built and operated the station they were on. The third was from his wife, Mary.

He read the message from the Consortium first, although he knew what it was going to say. The next shipment is delayed. We are keeping tabs on the supply inventory, the station is in good shape, just hold on. It was pretty standard fare. He thought it was pretty easy for them to say he was in good shape. Although considering the current political climate on Earth, maybe he was.

He opened the letter from Mary. She had been busy over the weekend, her cousin had come in from the European States with her two children. Her Husband, Vlad, was staying on in Brussels for a few more weeks to tie up some loose ends. Barry was surprised they were allowed to travel at all. A family vacation to Wisconsin was hardly a legitimate reason to travel internationally anymore. Vlad held a minor political post and must have been able to pull some strings.

Mary gave him the highlights of national and world news. The war in the Middle East continued to expand. Leaders of the nuclear nations continued to shake their fists and threaten war.

It had been quite frightening when the Middle-Eastern war broke out and tensions escalated. But now, three years later, the war seemed far away, and politicians were full of hot air.

Nikki, his eldest daughter, had won a science award at school for a paper she had written. She was very fond of the sciences, most notably Physics, which no doubt had been influenced by her father's career. She continued to spend a lot of time to herself, studying, reading. It concerned him a bit as he wished she could be a bit more social. He had been the same way when he grew up, and he turned out okay, he thought. She probably would too.

"Things are really getting bad down there." Said Dmitry, across the room. "It would be a shame if I had to kill you. I would get very lonely up here," he said with a grin.

Barry knew he was joking. It was Dmitry's kind of humor, and his way of displaying his bitterness towards the situation. There was a real chance that their respective nations could go to war with each other, making them theoretical enemies. Whether or not they lived to tell about it rested less in each other's hands, and more on the fact that resupply would undoubtedly cease at the beginning of hostilities.

Mary finished with the usual I miss you and I hope they bring you home soon. But then she added something new. If I were you I would just hop in that life raft and come home. He was a bit surprised by this; less because she thought it or said it, but more because it hadn't been censored. Either someone missed it, which never happened, or the Consortium was really getting short on manpower. Either way, it did not bode well.

He sighed and turned to look out the window again. He knew Mary was scared, and he wanted nothing more than to be with her. He should have been, some eight months ago. He was afraid, too, although he reassured himself and everyone regularly that it will all work out, it always does.

But they could, he thought. It would be easy. All they would have to do is put on their environmental suits, get into the capsule, close the hatch, push a few buttons, and in an hour they'd be back on earth. It would be that easy.

"My brother says there are rumors that Chinese troops are moving into Russia and India," Dmitry interjected again. "You know those rumors though."

"Yeah it's hard to know what to believe anymore," Barry said sadly, "with or without state-run media."

He continued with the letter from his brother. His sister-in-law was pregnant, it would be their first. Ted confided his nervousness about becoming a father. He said having spent so

much time with Barry's kids gave him at least a little confidence. Barry was glad for that.

"Well that was good," Dmitry said, patting his belly and smiling over his empty silver packet. "Or least I will pretend it was," he said with a guffaw. "How is the family?"

"Good. I'm going to be an Uncle."

"Great! I am told it is in many ways better than being a father," he said, "Although I am not either a father or an uncle, so it is hard for me to say. Will it be a boy or a girl?"

"They decided not to find out until it is born."

"A good plan, I think. I had a friend who was expecting a baby, a boy. They bought clothes and toys and painted the room blue, only to find when she gave birth that they had a girl. Even doctors, sometimes they don't know."

Barry smiled but did not respond.

"Are you okay?" asked Dmitry.

"I don't know," he said, and looked at Dmitry. Then he saw the concern on the Russian's face. He snapped out of his pensive daze. "Yeah, I'm okay," he said with a reassuring smile.

"Good," said Dmitry. "I am going down to take a look at the CO2 scrubbers. Number two has been displaying an intermittent fault since yesterday."

"Okay. I'll check the water supply, then I'm going to go work on the remote sensing array again for a while," replied Barry, putting his empty silver soup packet in the reprocessor.

Dmitry began to glide out of the canteen then stopped.

"Barry," he said, turning.

"Yeah?"

"It is going to be all right, you know."

"I know," Barry said, smiling unconvincingly.

Dmitry paused as if to say something else, then turned and proceeded down the tube.

Barry exhaled, relieved to be alone now in the canteen. He had felt tension in the conversation, although the Russian would no doubt have disputed that. Barry felt like he had something to go home to, while the Russian did not. He resented Dmitry's apparent contentment with the way things were. Dmitry was not married, had no children, no nephews, no nieces. Essentially all he had that meant anything to him was his job. He did have a brother, but they rarely communicated, save a birthday card each year.

He rubbed his eyes, sipped some water from the drinking outlet, then headed once again down the access tube.

The main water supply was located in a module adjacent to the plant sciences laboratory. Its primary function, apart from

providing drinking water, was to support the hydroponic growing operation. It held 800 gallons of fresh water and was linked directly to the primary systems in the station. Via the environmental controls, it provided precise humidity to all sections of the station. Waste from the latrine was processed, purified, and returned to the supply. Plant material left over at the end of growing cycles were also processed this way. This kept the station almost completely water-independent.

Barry switched on the water supply's computer system and checked the log. As waste was processed and purified, and water cycled, a log entry was automatically added, reporting on the purity of the final product. It also autonomously tested the quality of the water several times each day.

As far as Barry could tell, everything appeared to be in good shape. The water supply was one of the few systems on the ship that seemed to work consistently well.

"Good, good," Barry said to himself out loud. He gave the tank an affectionate pat and headed out of the module.

The Remote Sensing Laboratory was something of a pet project for Barry. He'd had a deep fascination with the stars since elementary school, and had gotten his first telescope when he was nine. Night after night he had spent gazing at the moon and stars and planets. He dreamed of visiting them one day, but had only gotten as far as the space station. That was, he conceded, much farther than most would ever get. It was still not far enough.

He arrived at the Remote Sensing module and focused his troubleshooting skills on the dormant equipment. A month and a half prior, an unusually strong solar flare hit the station, wreaking havoc on many systems. It had caused a power surge and then a series of cascading failures. It had taken him and Dmitry nearly four days just to get all of the primary systems back on line. Since then they had been slowly repairing systems on a priority basis.

The module was still of a low priority as station-wide systems go, but it was of a high personal priority for Barry. It had originally been intended for observing the earth in detail in all bands of the electromagnetic spectrum. During its operational lifetime, it had provided useful atmospheric, geological, and oceanographic data. In the past few months, however, it had served mainly as a sight-seeing device. As the number of scientific tasks assigned to the station dwindled, Barry found himself using it in a recreational capacity to observe the earth's surface. He was mainly interested in landmarks, particularly places he had been before. He often

captured images of his home, hoping to catch a glimpse of his wife or children coming and going.

The current dysfunction of the equipment served to further accentuate Barry's homesickness. He found himself using every moment of his spare time trying to get it back in working order.

He removed about a dozen screws and pulled back the cover of the main control panel. He unplugged the wire connections to each switch and knob on the front, mentally noting which one went where. He then examined the various circuit boards, again looking for any indication that part of a circuit may have failed. He could smell very faintly an acrid odor, a telltale indication that he was looking in the right place. Sure enough, there in the mix was a board badly scorched in several places. He disconnected it from the motherboard to examine it in greater detail. It would be a difficult fix, he thought as he turned it over, if he could fix it at all.

"Barry," Dmitry's voice emerged from the radio on his shoulder, accompanied by much hissing and crackling.

He touched the transmit button pinned to the collar of his shirt. "Go ahead."

"This thing has many problems. I need you to help me remove it."

Barry sighed and looked at the circuit board and panel indecisively.

"Barry?"

Barry pressed the charred circuit board back into its slot then squeezed the button on his collar again. "I'll be right there."

He thought about his stoic Russian friend and coworker, and reflected on their initial training in Moscow. Barry first thought Dmitry was cocky and arrogant, and had wondered to himself whether or not they could really function together as a team. Barry was very calm and collected, confident, but also patient and approachable. Dmitry on the other hand seemed to operate on instinct and gut feeling instead of approaching problems logically. Maybe, he thought, this was why they actually worked so well together.

Early on they had gone to a couple of bars in Moscow, but Barry found these excursions a little uncomfortable. Dmitry's abrasive personality was only amplified when he drank alcohol, and he could get a bit forward with the women. Barry was a quiet, contentedly married man, and found this behavior to be a bit outside his comfort zone. So, for the greater part of their training, he would instead relax at home with a glass of whiskey and a good book of historical fiction.

"What took you so long? Did you get lost along the way?" asked Dmitry as Barry poked his head through the hatch.

"Just about. It's like going through a maze to get here. If I didn't know where all the closed sections were I might never find my way here," he said with a chuckle.

"We should maybe keep you on a tether," said Dmitry with a smile. "I have these bolts loosened up but I can not get the last one without some help. The other end of it turns inside when I turn it here," said Dmitry, pointing. Little domes of sweat formed and merged on his forehead.

"I'm on it." Barry held his wrench steady as Dmitry cranked away.

He didn't really understand the Russian's focus and drive. He had been beginning to find it more and more easy to be distracted from tasks at hand, while his friend seemed to be drawn in by them. Perhaps, he thought, they were really doing the same thing. He would distract himself from the agony of mundane tasks by thinking about his family and his home. Perhaps Dmitry was distracting himself from the lack of direction, and the lack of close personal relationships in his life, by focusing on his work.

"How bad do you think it's going to get?" asked Barry.

"The carbon dioxide? We should do fine on one unit..." he began but Barry interrupted.

"No, I mean back home. Do you think it will come to war?"

"Oh. I don't know," he said and continued to ratchet.

They worked quietly for several minutes, and got the scrubber unfastened and disconnected from the environmental system.

"Lets take this down to the canteen with us," said the Russian, "I can work on it while we're eating."

Barry looked at his watch and was surprised that the whole afternoon was already gone. They had even worked beyond their normal dinner time.

"Beef stew sounds good, don't you think?" queried Dmitry again with a smile.

"Soon you'll be out of those, then what will you do?" Barry asked.

"I will just have to start ordering pizza's and charging them to the Consortium" he replied. Barry chuckled.

Their dinner routine was similar to lunch. They went to their own corners of the module with their meals and floated in front of their computer terminals. Barry had no new messages, so he took the time to peck out a couple of replies.

In the first, he teased his brother some more about becoming

a father. It was customary, he thought, to make fatherhood sound incredibly frightening to expecting fathers. So he told him a few brief horror stories of sleepless nights and terrible diapers, and public humiliation. He told Ted he hoped he had banked up some sleep time as he would not be getting much in the near future.

He wrote a long letter to Mary. He mentioned nothing about the current world events, hoping his disinterest in it might cause her to slacken her own concern. He could have told her about wrenching on this, or adjusting that, or checking the readout on the other thing. She would have appreciated it, because he knew she would like to hear anything from him, regardless of content. This gave him a fair bit of leeway in the artistic license department, so he would often run with it.

That day he chose to tell a tale of the stressful occurrences of the last 24 hours. He said that a supply capsule had finally docked, and that it was supposed to contain the much needed combo of toilet paper and beef stew. However, as they opened the hatch, much to their surprise they discovered the whole of the Bulgarian national bikini team, all unconscious due to a heavy dose of Dramamine. According to him, there had been some sort of mix-up and their capsule had been confused with one that was on a morale-boosting mission to the moon military complex.

Naturally, he said, they found it difficult to contain their disappointment with the situation. Bikini teams, he explained, or any group with such a keen interest in promoting happiness, are very dependent on positive feedback. In fact was the one thing that kept them going. As you might imagine, he continued, they were crushed, cast into a void of endless despair, searching for just one reason to go on living.

Sensing a crisis imminently looming, the two threw themselves heart and soul into the task of restoring the faith of these poor girls, reassuring them that they did indeed have what it took to continue this invaluable work for mankind. It was, he wrote, an emotionally exhausting session of hugs and pats and "there, theres," and so, so many sobs and sniffles. But in the end they prevailed, and a newly reinvigorated bikini team blew kisses and waved emphatically as their hatch door closed, and their capsule departed the station. Good work had been done that day, he said. Good work had been done.

Barry smiled with satisfaction as he finished the letter. He enjoyed a good creative outburst from time to time, and he knew it would give her a chuckle and bring her spirits up a bit. He told her he loved her, typed his name, and clicked "send".

He turned around and noticed Dmitry had been quietly working on the CO2 scrubber for a while. He was examining a small O-ring or some such thing. A cloud of small parts floated around him.

"Any luck?" asked Barry.

"I think it is shot. It is just worn out. We need a replacement."

"I wouldn't hold your breath on that," Barry said.

"I might just have to hold my breath if the other one goes down, too."

"We should be fine," offered Barry. "The plants should make up some of the difference."

"I suppose they would." said Dmitry. He sighed then began to reassemble the parts.

Barry cleaned up the canteen for a few minutes. "Up for a game of chess this evening?"

The Russian was silent a moment as he focused on getting a screw threaded, his tongue sticking out the corner of his mouth. "Sure." he finally responded, turning the screw in. "You must really enjoy to lose."

Barry snorted. "I do, it keeps me humble. You should try it some time."

"Bah," Dmitry returned, "Humility is for those who do well but not well enough."

Again, he knew the Russian was jesting. It was true, Dmitry had beaten him on every occasion, but he had not once gloated. It was his way of nurturing Barry's competitive spirit.

"I will have this back together in few minutes," said Dmitry. "You can get the board set up."

Barry went to the storage hatch where the board was kept. Everything in the room was neatly stowed in cabinets on the walls, held back by the cargo net, or attached to the floor with Velcro. Barry always chuckled when he spotted the accordion on the floor. Dmitry had played it a lot when they first arrived, but had not picked it up for a couple of months.

He grabbed the chess board from the cupboard and went back to the canteen.

"I saw your accordion in there again," Barry said. "It has been a while since you played. Have you given up trying to impress me?"

"No, I knew I had already done that," he said with a laugh. "I could see by the twinkle in your eye when I played that you desired to learn. I will tell you now there is nothing worse than being trapped in a small space with someone who is trying to learn the accordion," he said, shaking his head. "I know

from experience." They both laughed contentedly.

Barry began to set up the board. It was a typical 2 foot by 2 foot board, made of wood. The playing surface was a thin sheet of metal glued to the top, with squares painted on. The pieces were made of a resin, and were ivory white and a translucent sort of brown. Each piece had a small magnet in its base to hold it on to the board.

Dmitry finished reassembling the scrubber. He turned it over in his hands, examining it.

"I wonder how long it will take," he ventured.

"How long what will take?" asked Barry, still setting pieces.

"How long will it take for this station to fall so far apart that we can not get it back together again? It would really be a shame if we had to abandon it. So many people's blood and passion went into it."

"Is that why you keep going?" asked Barry.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the station is falling down around us, they've cut off supplies, it looks less and less likely that they'll send a replacement team. We're just here waiting for the inevitable."

"What else can we do but keep going until the inevitable happens?"

Barry sighed and rubbed his eyes. He knew what he wanted to say but he didn't want to say it out loud.

Dmitry left the canteen, presumably to stow the scrubber. He returned with the accordion and a large grin.

"You asked for it," he said and started warming up on it.

Barry laughed and relaxed a little more, listening to the Russian play. He was quite good, and knew many songs. He had a very distinctive singing style that made Barry chuckle a little bit, but his voice was accurate and fit the music well.

He was reminded of a long weekend he and Mary had spent in Minneapolis. They had stayed with one of her old college roommates and her husband, who took them to a very nice Russian restaurant. The food was incredible but what really set it apart was the live entertainment. Some of it was good, some was a bit over the top. It was a very entertaining experience that he would never forget.

"okay, one more then we play," said Dmitry enthusiastically.

"This one is my favorite old folk song. My father taught it to me when I was a young boy."

Barry sensed a bit of sentimentality in Dmitry's words. He typically showed no emotion at all when he spoke of his family, as infrequent as that was. He rarely spoke of his father, and

when he did it was brief. It also was usually accompanied by "He was a good man."

Dmitry finished and Barry applauded him generously. They both smiled broadly.

"Okay, okay" said Dmitry, "Time for you to lose now," and he settled in next to the board.

Barry made his opening move. The Russian kept quiet, which was unusual. Typically he would make some noise to try to unnerve Barry.

"I think we should take the life boat," Barry said, staring at the board. His heart was beating fast in his chest.

Dmitry remained silent, stroking his beard, focusing his gaze on the pieces on the board. "It is not time yet." The Russian finally returned, making his move.

"When will it be time, Dmitry? What are we staying for? This is all futile."

"It is not yet. Things will calm down, the shipments will start coming again, our replacements will arrive."

"And what if it doesn't? What if they don't? What has to happen before you know it's time to go?"

"Only an emergency will force me out of this station." Said Dmitry.

Barry remained at the board despite his mounting anger and frustration. All he wanted was to get back to his family. He placed his next move with an aggressive thunk.

"I realize where you are coming from," said Dmitry. "You want to get home, as do I. You have more to go home to than I do so I see why the pull is stronger for you." He made a move then continued, "To me this station represents all of the efforts towards international peace of the last 50 years. It required trust and cooperation on a level that had not been seen before. And now that it is on the brink of failure, it represents to me what is happening back home."

"What do you mean?" asked Barry, taking Dmitry's Rook.

"All of the diplomatic work of the last 50 years is falling apart, and it hangs by a single thread now. We are like that single thread. If we cut ourselves loose, it is over. It all comes crashing down."

Barry pondered the Russian's words, and frankly was surprised he had such a strong opinion on the matter. He had always seemingly avoided thinking about and discussing these issues before.

"So we wait?" asked Barry, more calm now.

"We wait." Said the Russian.

The game continued in silence. Dmitry won, as usual, but as

they put the board away, neither spoke. There was little else to say, and much to think about.

Barry stowed the board back in the storage module and then pawed through the books in one of the lockers. He had only brought a couple of his own, but the common courtesy was to leave your book for future inhabitants if it had been a good read. Typically he preferred historical books, fact or fiction, often with a war element. He wanted to distract himself from the thought of war tonight however, so he moved those aside.

He snorted as he glimpsed the cover of a book in the back. Smiling, he retrieved the copy of "Robinson Crusoe." It was a book that he'd had a desire to read for a long time, but somehow had never picked it up.

He moved on to the crew quarters, zipped his lower half into his sleeping restraints, and began to read.

The crew quarters had been designed to accommodate up to a dozen astronauts. The original plan for the station had been quite ambitious; at its pinnacle it would have hosted 12 full-time astronauts. Now, all that was left were ten empty sleeping compartments.

He read for a couple of hours before finally relenting to his body's desire to sleep. He closed the book into a storage pouch, zipped his arms in, and drifted off to sleep.

Seemingly moments later, Barry was startled from his sleep by an alarm. It was not loud or piercing, he knew it was not something critical. It was the soft beep notifying them that a message of high importance had been received.

The Russian, who was now zipped into his sleep compartment as well, muttered under his breath in his native tongue.

Barry had little doubt they were harsh words. He looked at his watch and realized he had been asleep for nearly four hours, although he felt like it had been four minutes. He smacked his cheeks with his hand to help wake himself up then headed to the canteen.

The ship contained a command module where, in the beginning, all of the communication took place. This module still functioned, and had its place, but its distance from the crew compartment was much farther than the canteen. As such the astronauts used the computer terminals there rather than making the long trip.

Barry pressed a couple of keys on the keyboard to wake the computer from its slumber. He nearly dozed off again as he waited for the screen to come on. The bright light snapped him out of his daze.

"Hmmmh Consortium." he mumbled as he selected the message.

It was from Janice Bartel, one of the administrators of the project. Strange, he thought, normally messages came from a generic, unknown administrative assistant. And most often they were in the style of form letters: impersonal, shrink-wrapped, and ready for consumption.

Barry read through the letter, eyes widening, his brow furrowing in confusion. She was going home. Everyone was going home, they were all being evacuated. Then he read the next line.

"What?" He said aloud. He read it again, this time whispering the words out loud, "The president has given the order, we are going to war."

Barry winced as a bright light shone in his eyes from his right. Squinting against its brightness, he turned towards it and discovered it was coming from the window. It faded away and he moved for a better look. Suddenly, another blinding white pinpoint of light appeared and swelled from the darkened earth. Then another, and another.

"Dmitry!" he shouted.

"What, what?" mumbled Dmitry groggily as he entered the module. "Why the excitement, we finally getting that beef..." he paused at the next flash.

Barry looked back at him with wide eyes. He was white as a ghost.

"No..." whispered Dmitry under his breath. He joined Barry at the window. They watched in silent horror as the blinding flashes of light appeared and faded away.

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Barry thought about his wife and his children and wondered what had become of them. Their home was not near a strategic target that he knew of, so they should have been safe from the initial attack. There were a few nuclear shelters here and there, put up by the more paranoid of the populace. Few ever thought this could really happen. They, like he, expected the world would come to its senses and it would fizzle out like the Cold War of the 20th century.

"My brother lived in Moscow," said Dmitry. He turned, his eyes vacant and glossy with tears. "I have a bottle of Vodka," he said as he moved out of the module.

Barry remained at the window. The flashes were gone and it was all dark below them now. He could see the day/night terminator approaching but it would be a few minutes before he could catch a sunlit glimpse of the surface.

He thought about the Remote Sensing Lab, and how if it were repaired, he could get detailed images of the surface, day or night, clouds or sunshine. The thought terrified him, as he

could only imagine the worst. He expected nothing good to be seen on the surface.

No, he thought, he would wait. He would wait until he could bear to see it.

Dimitri shouted something in Russian as he floated into the module. "Those stupid....!" he growled. "Why?!" he begged, seemingly to himself. "Why?"

He rubbed his head, turning his combed hair into a fuzzy mess.

"I hope you do not mind drinking alcohol through a straw," he said as he pulled the cork. "A glass bottle does not dispense alcohol well in zero gravity." After taking a good sip he passed the bottle to the Barry.

"How did you smuggle this up here, anyway?" asked Barry as he slurped an alcoholic globule.

"One side of my accordion comes off," he said with a grin. They chuckled for a few moments before their seriousness returned.

"I don't care who launched first," Barry blurted after a few minutes of reflection. "They're all responsible. We're all responsible."

"It was a long time in the making," said Dmitry. "There were many chances to change the outcome. Pig-headed fools."

Barry sighed, took another sip and shoved the bottle back to Dmitry. It glided across the room and into the Russian's waiting hand.

"So what do we do now?" asked Barry.

The Russian stared silently for a moment before speaking. "We wait. We keep this thing together as long as we can then we go down in the life boat."

"God." said Barry. "I don't want radiation sickness. I don't much care to be cooped up in this hamster house, either," he said, gesturing to his surroundings. "What a stupid situation, a stupid unnecessary situation. Dammit I'm pissed."

"If we can wait another few months, the situation on the surface should be much better, as long as we avoid the explosion sites. Those will be radioactive for some time."

Barry motioned for the bottle back. Dmitry took another sip then floated it to him.

"Do you think they're alive?" Asked Barry, staring out the window.

"If they were not in a target area, yes."

"Do you think they'll die of radiation sickness?"

Dmitry did not respond. Barry looked at him. He was staring sadly at nothing in particular.

Barry took another swig. "Heads up" he said and floated it back. "You'll never guess the book I dug out of the locker today."

Dmitry raised his eyebrows inquisitively as he took another sip.

"Robinson Crusoe. A few hours ago I thought it slightly ironic. Now ... wow."

"I read that book years ago when I was sixteen or seventeen. It is good," said Dmitry.

They sat silently for a couple of minutes.

"So which one is who?" asked Dmitry.

"What?" asked Barry, puzzled. He had been engrossed in his thoughts and forgotten what they had been talking about.

"Which of us is Robin and which is Friday?" he asked with a smile.

"Oh," chuckled Barry. "I don't know. I'm not that far in the book yet." He took another nip off the bottle. "I'll let you know when I get there though," he said with a grin.

Between the lack of a good night's sleep, the alcohol, and the sadness that weighed upon him, Barry was beginning to feel very tired. He took several gulps from the water dispenser, then moved towards the entry.

"I'm going to bed," he said to Dmitry. "Maybe I will wake up tomorrow and this will just have been a nightmare."

"I hope so." Said Dmitry.

He made his way to the crew compartment and zipped himself into his sleep restraints. He fumbled a bit with the snaps and the zippers, but managed to get himself in. He closed his eyes and his head began to spin. Opening them again, the room settled. He repeated this activity until he managed to drift off to sleep.

When Barry first came to the station, he found waking up the hardest thing to grow accustomed to. Each morning he would wake with the disoriented feeling that he was some place other than where he should be. This was compounded by the weightlessness, which caused him to try to thrash out as he awoke because he had the distinct sensation that he was falling.

It had been many months since this had happened to him, but it occurred again that particular morning. He had been having something of a nightmare, not the terrifying kind, but the ones where you're trying to accomplish something but never quite manage to. In the end he had lost his balance and had fallen down the flight of stairs in his house.

"Mmmmmhghh." he mumbled and rubbed his eyes groggily. He stopped still in his morning waking ritual, and stared at the

entry hatch with eyes that weren't quite able to open wide. "The war," he whispered and hastily extracted himself from his sleeping gear.

He moved quickly to the canteen then nosed up close to the window. He sighed long and slow, disappointed. He had hoped it was a dream. Below, however, he could see Eastern Europe, dominated by giant plumes of smoke that rose up from massive unseen fires. A thin gray layer of haze was forming over most of the northern hemisphere, and creeping into the southern.

The Russian suddenly appeared at the hatch, his eyes wide and hopeful. Barry shook his head.

Dmitry cursed under his breath and pulled himself away again down the access tube.

Barry could see large areas of land that seemed generally unaffected. That is, he could see ground and vegetation. What he couldn't see was the radioactive fallout drifting to the ground like snow. However, the fact that the planet wasn't a giant fireball made him feel a little better, a little more optimistic. He grabbed a breakfast packet and made his way towards the Remote Sensing Lab.

He pulled the damaged circuit board again and turned it over in his hands. It was in pretty bad shape. There were four burned traces and some popped capacitors. He had a box with spare parts in it, none of which were a drop-in replacement. He thought he might be able to bridge connections with wire where the traces were burned, and maybe find replacement components on other boards.

First, he thought, he would find the replacement parts. If he couldn't find those, there was no sense in going forward. He made note of how each was marked and if he needed more than one of a kind.

As he rummaged through the box of parts, he felt a small pang of nostalgia for his teenage years. When he was fourteen his father had gotten him a circuit board kit that had a breadboard and a set of resistors, capacitors, and LEDs. Following simple instructions, he would put them together and lo and behold he would have a rudimentary electronic device. He had even built a simple radio once. It was an immense learning experience for him.

"Aha," he said, as he found a needed component.

His father had always been good about nurturing his curiosity in things. If it wasn't circuit boards it was robotic or mechanical kits. Scientific experiments were a plenty in Barry's childhood home.

One day his father had found him reading a science fiction

book, the title of which now Barry could no longer remember. He asked him what it was about, and Barry gave him a small recap of what he'd read to that point. His father smiled, he remembered, then suggested a book that 'had some really weird stuff in it.' It was Stephen Hawking's A Brief History of Time.

After reading it, he knew what direction his life would go. He would forever be stuck on the sciences, always searching for the answers to the mysteries of existence.

He thought maybe it was time to pass it on to Nikki, she was getting to be about the right age to be able to digest it.

"Oh, perfect!" Barry burred happily as he found the last component he needed. Soldering iron and forceps in hand, he carefully removed it and placed it in the mesh bag clipped to the frame.

As he began replacing the components on his board, his mind wandered to his brother and how different they were. Ted had nearly zero interest in science. He loved his shiny electronic toys but had no interest in how they functioned.

Ted was the athletic one. He had gone out for many sports in High School, while Barry stuck to the more nerdy clubs. While Ted was at games or practices in the evening or weekends, Barry was fiddling away in his lab in the garage.

As he thought about it, he wasn't sure if the different interests were a good thing or a bad thing. He wished, now, that they had done more things together, but perhaps if they had they would have been more competitive with each other. He wondered if that would have pushed them farther apart.

He pictured Ted standing in the driveway of his house in that quiet suburb of Minneapolis. In that memory, he had just pulled up, Mary next to him, the kids in the back seat, much smaller then. It was the fourth of July. Ted was washing his car.

He thought about Ted's wife Julie, and their coming child. He remembered how exciting, thrilling, terrifying, and exhausting having a baby was, especially the first one. He was glad for them, as Ted had confided they had been trying for some time. He was happy it finally happened.

Then he thought about what had happened the day before and a chill went through him, from his scalp to the bottom of his spine then down his right leg.

"Mmmh!" he grunted angrily. He wished he could think of something else. He had finished replacing the components and turned the card over, planning his fix for the burnt traces.

Barry and Ted both had an interest in cars, although for different reasons. Barry was interested the antique cars that

ran on gasoline. He was amazed that they functioned at all, and found the intricate inner workings of the engine fascinating. He had an old wreck of his own that he would take out from time to time. The fuel was of course very expensive, and he had to pay ridiculous licensing fees from the pollution it spewed, but to him it was worth it.

Ted on the other hand was interested in modern fast, muscular-looking cars. It was one of those situations where their interests were so close that they resented their differences in each other. Barry tried to get Ted to see the marvel of the gears and pistons and camshafts, while Ted argued for that his car was faster, quieter, thousands of times more efficient, and caused zero pollution at the same time.

"There," he said satisfactorily. "That should about do it." He turned the card over in his hands examining his work, making sure he had not gotten solder in the wrong place, or connected the wrong pins with wire.

Satisfied it was as good as it could be, he set about replacing it back into the motherboard.

"How is it going?" asked Dmitry, who had stealthily appeared in the hatchway. Barry jolted in surprise.

"You scared the bejeebers out of me!" said Barry, his heart rate slightly elevated.

"Sorry," said Dmitry, "I guess I am not in the mood for whistling." He had taken to whistling as he traveled around the station to lower the frequency of surprise entrances. One does not make much sound while floating though padded access tubes.

Barry took a moment to regain his composure. "It is going pretty well," he said. "I've just about got it all back together again."

"Did you fix it?"

"I hope so. It's not pretty but I think it will do the job." He snapped the last of the connectors to the back of a switch on the control panel. Dmitry handed him the screwdriver.

"I don't know what to do," said Dmitry.

"About what?"

"I want to be busy to keep my mind off of things, but I do not know what to do."

"Hmm." Barry pondered. "You could go check the vegetables, see how they're doing. We could just as well plant something else today, too."

"Yes," said Dmitry unenthusiastically. "Perhaps I will stay here and make sure you do not catch something on fire."

Barry chuckled. "I'm almost ready to try it. This is the last screw." Barry turned it in then looked the panel over,

wondering to himself if he hooked everything up properly. "I think that's it."

"Do we need a drum roll?" asked Dmitry with a smile.

"Nope," said Barry, as he flipped on the power switch. A series of lights lit on the board as various systems came on line. His repair had worked.

"Are you going to use it?" asked Dmitry.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I?"

"I don't know. I don't think I'm ready to see yet. I haven't even looked out the window since yesterday" said the Russian somberly.

Barry turned on the computer terminal attached to the equipment. He smiled with relief as he looked at the instrument selection screen.

"We'll have to wait about a half an hour for the heaters to get the equipment back to operating temperature. How about we go down and take a look at the plants?" Asked Barry.

"Sure, why not."

The plants looked pretty good, Barry thought, as they came into the Plant Sciences lab. They were nice and green and lush. A bit strange looking compared to their terrestrial counterparts, but they still grew towards the light.

Barry flipped a switch and the growing lamps slowly warmed up to full-power. The growing importance of this food source spurred him to make sure the growing systems were all functioning properly.

During the times that the station was in direct sunlight, a tracking mirror on the outside of the station would focus and reflect the light into a "light pipe." The pipe had its outlet in the growing room, above the plants. A diffusing panel softened the light to prevent it from burning the plants. When the station was in the shade, grow lamps made up the difference.

"Now I am more glad than ever that we have this." said Dmitry, his arms crossed, hands in his armpits.

"Yeah. It's too bad we don't have a cow, we could make our own beef stew." Barry replied with a grin. The Russian smiled back.

"I could just cut some meat shapes out of cardboard," mused Dmitry. "It would taste about the same."

Suddenly a loud clunk was heard down one of the tubes, and a shudder went through the station. The two looked at each other with concern.

"That almost sounded like a capsule docking," said Barry.

"Couldn't be," said Dmitry. "Who?"

They were already both on the move, making their way to the

docking port.

"The Chinese?" asked Barry, "You think they may have had a capsule up?"

"Hard to say, so much secrecy in their program."

"Well we should be careful, anyway."

As they approached the port, they could see through the side windows that there was indeed a capsule docked.

"It looks like a variation of an American design," said Dmitry. "I have never seen one like that before."

They tested the airlock for leaks, the seal appeared good. After pressurizing it they opened their end of the hatch. Dmitry tapped on the hatch of the capsule with his screwdriver, a signal to whomever was inside.

"Maybe you should be behind me," said Barry.

Dmitry seemed confused for a moment, his eyes brightened in realization. "Ah, right, we are bitter enemies," he said with a smile. "Good idea." He moved closer to the access tube.

They could hear the click of the locking mechanism being released and the hiss of the air pressure equalizing between the station and the capsule.

As the door opened, they could see a man in a silver pressure suit, helmet off, pushing it. When the hatch clunked to the full-open position he looked at them.

"Move away from the hatch," he said firmly.

Dmitry and Barry looked at each other then back at the man.

"I said move away from the hatch." He was almost shouting.

"Listen," Dmitry said, "we are not a threat to you."

"Mendeleev, move away!" he shouted and produced a pistol, which he pointed in their direction.

"Whoah, okay now," said Barry, "Take it easy now. You shoot that thing and we're all dead."

"Jackson," a voice in the hatch said. "Take it easy."

Jackson grudgingly holstered his pistol. He then emerged from the hatch and approached the two, eyeing them suspiciously. "It appears to be safe." He said loudly, not removing his gaze from Dmitry.

"Oh!" the voice in the hatch said, "What a cramped bit of space!"

As he emerged Barry could see a balding, graying head of hair. The man looked up to see where he was going and Barry caught a glimpse of his face. He squinted and his brow furrowed as the man seemed familiar.

"Much obliged, gentlemen!" the man said cheerily. He was into the airlock now, and righted himself, facing the men.

A jolt went through Barry as he stared into the man's

smiling face. He felt the blood rush out of his head, his stomach burned, and his fists clenched. Floating two meters from him was U.S. President Franklin Howard.

"You son of a bitch!" Barry shouted, visibly surprising Dmitry. "You're supposed to be dead!" he screamed and lunged at the man. Jackson reproduced his sidearm and bludgeoned Barry in the head in one swift movement. Barry collided with the wall then became motionless.

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Barry felt pounding in his head as he regained consciousness. Dazed, he glanced at his surroundings. He appeared to be in the canteen. Dmitry was there, holding a wet cloth with a big red spot on it.

"How do you feel, superman?" Asked Dmitry with a smile.

"Like I got hit in the head with the butt of a pistol. Ohhh," he groaned as he put his hand on his head. "Where are our 'guests'?"

"Stowing their things in the crew compartment. The cowboy wanted to tie you up but I told them I would get you calmed down. You are not going to make me a liar, are you?"

Barry groaned with disgust. "I don't want that bastard here. I don't want him in our station."

"I do not either," said Dmitry, "But what can we do?"

Barry winced as the Russian applied pressure to his head wound.

Jackson appeared at the door. He gave Barry an I'm watching you type glare as he floated in. "I'm hungry," he said. "Have you got anything to eat around here?"

"Here," said Dmitry. "Look through the menu, select what you want. It comes out here," he said, pointing to a slot in the machine.

Jackson began touching though the menus. Barry watched with mild satisfaction as he clicked through the most desirable items which were, of course, already gone.

"You don't have much to choose from here," Jackson said, sounding disappointed.

"The chef says we should have Lobster Thermadore by the end of the week," said Barry sarcastically. Jackson ignored him.

"Quite the operation you have here." Said the President, entering.

"Food, sir?" Jackson asked him, holding up a silver packet.

"Yes, yes, in a moment," he replied. "I'd like to meet our hosts first, properly."

"Why are you here?" Asked Barry.

"We, uh. We had nowhere else to go," said the President.

"There was a small orbital station that had been set up for me to take command from but it was destroyed."

"What about the moon base?" Dmitry asked.

"Destroyed as well. I don't know why you were spared," said the President. "You two are very fortunate."

"It has stopped bleeding," Dmitry said to Barry. "If we had any ice I'd say put some on it."

"Thanks," said Barry. "I'll be fine."

"I'm sorry about that, Major Andrews," said the President, gesturing at Barry's wound. "I can understand your anger."

"Can you?" asked Barry. "You seem awfully calm to me."

"You do seem calm," agreed Dmitry.

"I stand by what I've done," said the President. "If you had been in my shoes I would hope you would have done the same."

"I wouldn't have," said Barry. "And if I had I certainly would have been man enough to go down with the ship. You're the worst kind of coward, Frank." He emphasized the name as if it were a dirty word.

"Show a little respect, Andrews" said Jackson from across the room. "He's still our President."

"Go to hell," said Barry, frankly.

Jackson merely snorted and continued to eat. Frank fidgeted uncomfortably.

Barry grunted in disgust and left the module. He thought about his wife and children and his brother, dead or dying, and how the President's family and friends were probably safely tucked away in some underground bunker.

"Coward," he muttered under his breath.

He glided into the Remote Sensing Lab and spun the computer's trackball to wake the machine up.

"Hmh." He was somewhat surprised that everything seemed to be functioning properly. He examined their present position and projected orbital course, then began programming in targets to image. It would take some time to get images of the places he was particularly interested in, as the sensors could not image them until they were passing over.

"Eighteen hours," Barry said out loud. "Not too bad." He thought about what he might see, and felt a butterfly-like sensation in his stomach.

"What's this?" asked a voice behind him. It was Jackson, apparently patrolling the structure. Dmitry was with him, no doubt to keep him out of trouble.

"It's a remote sensing unit," said Dmitry. "It was installed for doing different kinds of sensor observation of the earth."

"Huh. Can we look at the ground? Can we see if our cities are still standing?"

"No," Barry said abruptly, before Dmitry could speak. "It doesn't work. It was damaged in a solar flare a couple of months ago. I'm still trying to fix it."

"It looks like its working." Said Jackson suspiciously.

"The computer comes on but it won't take pictures." said Barry.

"Is this true?" Jackson asked Dmitry.

"Yes, it is true," the Russian replied, nodding.

"Very well," said Jackson. "Carry on," he said as he moved up the next access tube.

Dmitry glided in close to Barry. "It does not work?" he whispered.

"No, it works fine," said Barry.

"Why do you lie?" asked Dmitry.

"Because, screw them," Barry whispered bitterly.

Dmitry watched his friend work for a moment then patted him on the back. He headed up the tube in the direction of Jackson.

Barry let out a sigh and shook his head as he continued to program the computer. He set up a sweep to go over his home, as well as one over Minneapolis, and another over Moscow. He really did not want to see the Capitol or any of the other large cities as he knew what he would find. He knew what to expect from Moscow but thought he would shoot it in case Dmitry wanted to see. He set it up so that it would image them every time they passed over for the next three weeks. He hoped he would spot people moving around, particularly at his home.

He clicked off the monitor and began to move out of the module. Then he thought maybe he should log out of the system. The imaging would still occur, but it would be impossible for Jackson to tinker with the machine if he came back around. He typed "exit" into the console, flipped the monitor off again, and moved down the corridor.

The prospect of simply waiting for 18 hours agitated Barry. He was usually a very patient man but found himself incredibly anxious about the scan results. He could think of almost nothing else. He tried to distract himself by checking the station over from top to bottom. He changed filters, replaced faulty lights, he even spent a little extra time cleaning the latrine.

Avoiding their new guests also provided a bit of diversion. When he ran into one or the other of them he would either find another route to where he was going, or find something else to do if they were occupying the space where he had planned to go.

His anger provided a further distraction. For at least 20 minutes after each encounter he would have imaginary arguments with them in his head, really giving them a piece of his mind.

"How's the book?" Dmitry asked, startling Barry again.

He had been discovered in a new hiding place, an old laboratory module that had been used many years ago for some sort of animal experiments.

"Good," responded Barry. "What's up?" he asked, closing the book on his finger.

"I brought you some split pea soup," said Dmitry as he tossed the silver packet across the room. "You're lucky you're the only one who likes that stuff," he said with a half-smile. "It has been a constant battle with the rest of us over the beef stew."

Barry smiled and opened his soup packet.

"I wouldn't mind avoiding them more as well," Dmitry continued, "but I'm afraid of the trouble they would get in on their own. They don't know to leave switches alone. That Jackson fiddles with everything."

Barry continued to eat without responding.

The Russian looked down the tube to see if anyone was coming, then moved in closer and whispered, "When will you have images?"

"Just over an hour."

"Your home?" asked Dmitry.

"My brother's first, my home a little later. And Moscow some time after that, if you're interested."

Dmitry backed away, contemplating. "I don't know," he finally responded. "I will think about it. Maybe when you tell me what you find first."

"Ok." Said Barry. He continued to eat his soup while the Russian floated nearby, staring blankly in deep contemplation.

"What are they up to?" Barry asked between slurps.

"They spend a lot of time with the radio, listening for any sort of transmission."

"Anything yet?"

"They have picked up some radio chatter, nothing significant. Mainly people trying to get reports on other parts of their country."

"And?"

"Nothing from the larger cities yet."

"Well it's good that there's some communication. It should increase in the next couple of weeks as the radiation subsides and people start to come out again."

"Yes," said Dmitry, somberly.

"You know," said Barry, "It isn't completely unlikely that your brother may have survived."

"I know," said Dmitry. "But it is not very likely, either."

Sensing he couldn't fortify Dmitry's hope, he changed the subject. "Did you ever do much fishing back in Russia?"

Dmitry appeared confused by the question. "Yes--why?"

"I used to fish a lot," said Barry, wistfully looking into the distance. "I'd go out early in the morning while there was still dew on everything, and head out to whatever fishing spot had been good lately. I especially miss the early fall mornings when it was so cool I had to have a coat on."

Dmitry grunted and nodded. "I know what you mean. I would fish on a river, a little bit different but much the same. Quiet and cool and relaxing. Oh, I miss the fresh air."

"Fresh air, what's that?" asked Barry with a laugh. "I can't wait to smell it again."

They both floated there, staring at nothing, faint smiles on their faces.

"Hello?" The voice was barely audible, obviously a few modules and access tubes away. "Hello?!" it persisted.

"It is your President," said Dmitry grimly.

"Don't call him that," sighed Barry.

"What do you want me to call him?"

"I can think of a few--"

Dmitry interrupted before Barry could get too colorful, "How about Frank?"

Barry nodded.

"I'll go meet him so he doesn't find your quiet spot."

"Thanks Dmitry," Barry said with a smile. "I appreciate it."

Dmitry moved off down the passage. After a few moments Barry could hear muffled conversation.

He was surprised that the Russian was not more angry with Frank. After all, it would have been Frank's finger that had pushed the button that had destroyed Moscow, potentially killing his brother.

Barry considered the reverse of the situation. What if it had been the Russian president who was aboard instead of the American? He thought he might be less angry with him. That's a strange reaction, he thought. Why should he be less angry? He supposed that perhaps he had put his faith in his President that the situation would be diffused. He always believed diplomacy would be able to avert such a thing. He thought he must be so angry because the President did not stop it, when he should have done everything in his power to.

"Barry," said Dmitry further down the tube.

"Yeah?" Asked Barry, nearly shouting.

Dmitry's head poked around the corner. "Sorry, I did not want to startle you. Your Pres - er - Frank is here, he wants to talk to you."

"You can tell him to-"

"Mr. Andrews, please." pipped Frank's voice in the tube.

Barry huffed disgustedly, then nodded to Dmitry. Frank poked his head around the corner.

"Mr. Andrews, I have had some time to think about all of this and I think you're right. I am a coward."

Barry folded his arms across his chest and raised an eyebrow, listening more intently.

"It is ... different..." Frank struggled with his words. "As the President I had a much different perspective on things than you did as a civilian. As the situation was degrading, I mean."

Barry was somewhat perplexed by Frank's difficulty stringing sentences together. He had seen him give many speeches before, and he always spoke eloquently, confidently, and coherently. Barry thought he must have had a good writer on his staff.

"It gets to be something of a game. You don't see the human elements or the guns and tanks and missiles and ships, you just have a big war board with tokens on it like game pieces. I didn't fully comprehend the repercussions of my actions, and I should have, it was my responsibility. I failed you, I failed everyone." He was getting a little emotional.

Barry stretched uncomfortably.

"It is more difficult with advisors," he continued. "You would think it would be easier, but it is like having a little devil on one shoulder and a little angel on the other, whispering into your ear. Except it is many devils and many angels." He had been gazing vacantly at the floor, but now looked at Barry.

Barry's glare was still harsh, unyielding. Frank stiffened up.

"So what I wanted to say is that Major Jackson and I will be returning to earth. We will leave as soon as it is convenient."

A look of surprise appeared on Dmitry's face. Barry seemed only puzzled.

"Thank you for your hospitality," Frank said, then moved down the tube.

They waited a few moments before speaking.

"Do you believe him?" asked Barry.

Dmitry shrugged. "I don't know. He sounded sincere to me."

"It's too early, you know. Depending on where he lands, the

radiation could kill him."

"Do you care?" asked Dmitry.

Barry was taken aback by the question at first. He thought about it then grunted in acknowledgment, "Hmh. I guess not."

"We should at least calculate a trajectory for them that would put them in the U.S." said Dmitry.

"Yeah, I suppose." said Barry. "He'll have to watch out for angry villagers when he gets there."

They made their way to the neglected command module to calculate the trajectory for Frank and Jackson. The computer in this section had the proper programs for doing this, as well as more powerful processors for analyzing the task.

As it completed, they were surprised to see that there was a window opening in the next two hours. If they hurried, they could just make it.

They entered the canteen to find Frank and Jackson having a heated discussion about the return trip. Apparently Frank had just delivered the news.

"But sir, it is too soon, the radiation is still too strong."

"I don't care," Frank said, sounding tired.

Jackson turned to Barry, "Do you have a transponder here we can take with us?"

"We don't need a transponder," interjected Frank.

"Sir, if we don't have a transponder they won't know where to look for us."

"They don't need to look for us, Jackson. We don't need to be found."

"Sir?" chirped Jackson, perplexed.

"I'm giving up my office, son." He put his hand on Jackson's shoulder in a fatherly gesture. "When we land I'll walk to the nearest town or village and do what I can to help with the sick and wounded. And if they stone me to death or string me up or burn me at the stake, so be it."

"But sir.." whined Jackson helplessly.

"But nothing. Once we've landed, I'd suggest you go your own way. It will be safer for you if you don't associate with me," he said.

Jackson was reduced to nodding dejectedly.

Barry thought Frank was back in his element, playing the noble, the pious. He could still barely look at the man, but his hatred had eased somewhat. "You don't have to do this," he said, surprising himself.

"I know," Frank said with a smile.

"If you are going to go we must hurry," urged Dmitry. "we

have about 35 minutes to get you off the station."

They hurriedly got the two men back into their space suits, and attached their helmets. Dmitry uploaded the telemetry into their capsule's computer. They were belted in and ready to go with 5 minutes to spare.

"Thank you," said Frank, shaking Dmitry's hand.

"Good luck," said Barry, lingering away from the capsule.

Frank craned his head so he could see him. "Good luck to you as well," he said.

Jackson was too busy turning knobs and adjusting harnesses to speak or gesture.

Dmitry closed the hatch and moved back. They could hear the locking mechanism click as the men inside secured it. They moved out of the airlock, closed the door, and started the depressurization sequence.

With a whoosh, a clunk, and the sound of the door being sandblasted, the module was launched. Dmitry and Barry watched through a nearby window as the capsule glided away.

"Do you think they will be okay?" asked Dmitry.

"I don't know," said Barry. "They'll land somewhere in the Midwest. How much radiation they run into depends on how many warheads were targeting the missile silos there. It's hard to say."

They watched silently until the capsule was out of sight.

"Ooh," he exclaimed. "The first scan should be done!" He moved quickly down the tube.

He went to the command module again to use the computer station there. All of the data from every sensor on the outpost was dumped into a central storage system, and was accessible from any terminal. He chose this one for its computing power. Manipulating the very large image files was time consuming, even on this fastest computer.

"God this thing is slow," he muttered to himself. He looked up and shook his head at Dmitry who lingered near the entrance.

"Do you want to see?" he asked.

"Not yet," said the Russian.

Barry looked back at the monitor. The image was slowly being rendered from top to bottom.

"What was imaged first?" Dmitry asked.

"Minneapolis."

"Ah, right," said Dmitry.

"Unfortunately I'll have to wait for our next orbit to see my home. Moscow will be a little while after that, again."

"Just as well," said the Russian soberly.

Barry examined the picture that was displaying before him.

His hands shook as he manipulated the trackball. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, and hear it in his ears.

"What do you see?" asked Dmitry.

"It's a mess. The farms on the outskirts seem fine. The closer you get, the more smoke from fires. Closer in it is smoldering rubble. It's not pretty."

"Your brother's house?"

"A little bit to go yet," he said, watching the picture render. "There's his neighborhood. Doesn't look too bad. Damaged structures, some buildings burned down. I think his is still standing though. Yes, its still standing."

"Good, I am glad to hear."

"Yeah. A few more hours and I'll be able to see my home. If this is any indication, they should have been fine."

Dmitry sighed. "Do you want to play another game of chess?" Barry sensed agitation in Dmitry, but he didn't think it was jealousy. Maybe the possibility that his brother had survived was beginning to creep into Dmitry's head. That would put him into the position of having to worry, instead of simply dealing with his death.

"Sure," Barry said. "We can do that. Let me just shut this stuff down."

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Barry munched on the corner of the cracker peeking from the silver packet in his hand. He and Dmitry stared at the board in great contemplation. The Russian put his hand over a piece, held it there in indecision, then moved his hand back to his chin.

"What are you going to do after we get back?" asked Barry.

"You mean after I find woman and a bottle of Vodka?" asked Dmitry with a grin.

"Yes," Barry chuckled, shaking his head. "After you've made up for lost time."

"I don't know. Maybe I will help put things back together. It will be just like being here."

"In Russia?"

"I think so. Although we'll be together, one place or the other. Maybe America would be better, as you could not be bothered to learn Russian," said Dmitry. "Besides I think you would probably leave me here before you would let me keep you from your family any longer."

"I'm thinking of leaving you here, anyway," Barry said with a smile.

The Russian laughed. "You couldn't do that, you would miss my singing to much."

They sat silently for a while.

"What about you?" asked Dmitry. "You could probably make a killing at fixing TV sets."

"Yeah, I don't know. I could fix electronics, if there's a need. I just really want to help get the world back on its feet, however I can do that." After a few moments, he continued, "I wonder if the ground war will continue. This may not be over in Russia and China and India. And who knows, maybe someone will invade the U.S."

"That is a possibility," Dmitry agreed. "I hadn't thought of that."

"What a mess," said Barry, shaking his head.

"Yes," replied the Russian.

They finished out the rest of the game in silence.

Barry wondered to himself about the war, and whether or not it would continue, even after their cities and their capitols and their strategic installations were destroyed. What would be left to conquer? As time went on, he thought, they would pick up radio transmissions that would answer these questions, but he was still troubled.

And were the enemy's troops their biggest concern? Would lawlessness ensue now that there were no tangible signs of government? His mind struggled to comprehend the extend to which the chaos could spread below. He had always imagined a nuclear attack being the worst thing that could happen, but now he realized it was surviving one.

"Ohh," said Dmitry, stretching. "You put up a good fight this time. You are getting better."

"Thanks." said Barry, putting the pieces away.

"I must go to bed now," said Dmitry as he floated past his friend. "Thank you for the game."

"You're welcome," said Barry. "Sleep well."

He returned once again to the Remote Sensing Lab and turned on the computer. Much to his surprise there was another image ready. The chess game had apparently gone on far longer than he thought. He opened the file and waited. It would take even longer to render on that computer.

He could not bear to sit and watch it unfold so painfully slow. He decided to take himself on a circuitous route through the station.

He thought about time, and how long a month seemed to be. It was interesting, a month into the future seemed like a really long time, yet the last few months seemed to have been something of a blur. He was certain that after the next month came to a close, he would look back and think the same thing.

He passed through the plant sciences module. It always smelled really good in there, very earthy. There really is nothing like having fresh plants around, he thought. The smell reminded him of his gardens at home, all those wonderful fresh vegetables. He realized that about the time he got home, it would be the season for making fresh salsa.

"Mmmm," he moaned out loud. He could almost taste it. And the squash, with brown sugar. His stomach growled. He chuckled to himself and decided he should probably think of something else.

It would be hard for him to get back to the kids. He knew they would be happy and relieved to see him, but they would have grown accustomed to not having him around. They wouldn't 'need' him, they would rely solely on their mother now. When they would have problems, they would seek her out, even when he offered to help. He would feel like a stranger in the house.

That would change over time, of course. He would always be home now, the space program was finished. That thought made him smile. He would be home now, all of the time. It was a strange feeling, his career had always been the driving force in his life. Now all that mattered to him was his family.

He passed the crew quarters. He poked his head in to see Dmitry, zipped into his gear, sound asleep.

He wondered how he would sleep that night, he felt so wound up. He wondered how he could sleep at all until the day they would go home. Maybe, he thought, if he were lucky, he would close his eyes that night, and awake to find it was the day they were ready to leave.

He returned now to the Remote Sensing module. The activity light on the terminal was blank, indicating that it had finished rendering. He took a deep breath then woke up the computer.

There it was before him, the full image, covering hundreds of square miles. Everything looked surprisingly normal. He hurriedly clicked here and there, expanding the image, down, down until there, his farm. It looked like a normal overhead picture, the house, the gardens, the barn. The horses were not in the pasture, perhaps Mary had moved them inside.

Barry groaned. The thought of being home was more inviting than butternut squash. How was he ever going to make it the next few weeks? He wondered if there were any way he could convince Dmitry to leave sooner, but he knew what the Russian would say. And he had a point, with the radiation the way it was, the chances of them surviving from their landing site to his home was very low. Somehow he would just have to figure out how to be patient.

He was not feeling terribly sleepy, but figured he should get to bed. After all, the more he slept the less he would have to wait.

Dmitry was still sleeping soundly when he returned to the crew compartment, despite the fact that the lights were on full-brightness. The Russian was a surprisingly heavy sleeper, he could sleep through just about anything.

Comfortably zipped into his sleeping gear, Barry thought about his farm as he dozed off.

He walked up his driveway from the highway. He was aware of the sensation and smell of humidity in the air, the sound of the grasshoppers, the crunching of the gravel under his boots. He looked at the neatly trimmed grass on either side of the road, the aged wooden fence isolating the old pasture.

He could see that Mary had hung the sheets to dry on the clothesline. It was a stubbornness in her that he loved very much. There's nothing quite like sleeping on sheets that have been dried in fresh air, she would coo. He loved to tease her about it, but she was right.

As he walked up on the porch, he peeked in the windows for signs of life. A creak nearby startled him; it was just the old porch swing shifting in the breeze. He looked in the window next to the door then put his hand on the knob.

Barry was jarred from his dream by a heavy shudder that vibrated through the structure. Had he not been fastened to the structure, he may not have felt a thing. Alarms screamed, echoing throughout the station, and an orange rotating light in the crew compartment pulsed brightly. He was still fighting off the grogginess, not quite able yet to address the situation. Then his ears popped. Instantly he was wide awake and aware that the station was venting its atmosphere into space at a dangerous rate.

"Dmitry!" he shouted as he fought his way out of his bindings, "Dmitry! We're venting atmosphere!" He looked up to see the Russian thrashing at his restraints as well.

"Where is it?" shouted Dmitry over the alarms.

"I don't know but it is fast, we will have to get our suits."

"The plants!" shouted the Russian, who had paused. "We have to seal off the plants or they will die!"

"There's no time, if you go now you'll suffocate."

Dmitry cursed in frustration. The two headed for the airlock where their suits were kept.

As Barry pulled on his suit, he could feel the effects of the dwindling atmosphere. He found himself breathing unusually

hard for the amount of work he was doing. Then he felt something wet on his lip. Brushing it with his hand revealed that he had a nosebleed.

They wrestled with the suits as fast as they could. The Russian had the body of his on first, and immediately began helping Barry. With the lower halves on and zipped up, it was just a matter of putting on the helmets and turning on the oxygen flow.

"Your nose..." said Dmitry, huffing.

"I know, quickly."

Barry's helmet was on first, and he felt a sharp pain in his eyes and ears as the oxygen flow began and it pressurized. He rushed to help Dmitry with his.

The Russian was fading fast. He was losing coordination with his hands and was becoming obviously confused. Barry quickly put the helmet on, clamped it down, checked the seal, then turned the valve to start the oxygen. At this point Dmitry was virtually motionless and bleeding from his nose and ears. Barry could see his eyes were beginning to roll up in his head and his eyelids were fluttering.

"Dmitry!" Barry shouted. It was very loud inside his helmet and he realized that the Russian could not have heard him. He switched on the radios on their suits. "Dmitry," he said. He waited a moment. "Dmitry. Wake up."

The Russian groaned.

"You okay?" Barry asked.

Dmitry groaned again, then moved his hand and touched his helmet. He opened his eyes and looked at his hand, obviously confused as to why it wasn't touching his head. He groaned a third time, then said, "Ooh my head. I feel like I drank a whole bottle last night."

"You need a couple of minutes?" Barry asked.

"No, no." Dmitry said. He seemed more aware of his surroundings. "I think I am okay"

"Okay, lets see if we can figure out where this leak is."

"It should not be hard to find," said Dmitry.

"Yeah. Boy, were we lucky to get our suits on in time. Come on." said Barry, helping Dmitry start down the tube.

They split up, looking at all joints between modules as they went along. Barry passed through the plant sciences lab and moaned sadly. The plants were distorted and wrinkled, dry and brittle. So much for the food source.

"I have found it," said Dmitry over the radio. "Come to the docking port."

As Barry quickly made his way, he wondered how bad it was,

but knew it didn't really matter. The station was completely depressurized. There was not enough oxygen left in the tanks to refill the station. Even if there had been, there still would not have been enough left for them to survive more than a day or two.

He turned the corner to find Dmitry, hovering in the tube, his arms and feet crossed. He had clipped himself on a tether to the side. "My God," Barry said as he approached the Russian.

"Yes, it is bad," said Dmitry. They both looked upon a giant tear, three meters long, 30 centimeters wide at its widest point. "There is no way we can fix this."

"What happened?" asked Barry.

"I don't know, something hit us."

"Do you think someone was trying to dock?"

"Could be," said Dmitry. "Or it could have been space junk. Could have been anything."

Barry sighed. "Well I guess this leaves us little choice," he said, almost feeling relieved. "We don't have a lot of time with the air in our suits."

"Dammit!" Dmitry cursed to himself and banged his fist against the wall. It was as loud as ever through Barry's headset.

"I'll go calculate a re-entry trajectory," Barry said, leaving the Russian there, staring at the rupture.

He fired up the computer in the command module, which worked, but was functioning very slowly due to the cold that was creeping into the station.

"Come on baby, you can do it," he said encouragingly. The process was excruciatingly slow.

The thought that now occurred to him was that he did not know which part of the earth they were over. Where they were now would dictate where their touchdown point would be. It could be anywhere.

Barry tapped the side of the machine in 4/4 time, attempting to be patient. Dmitry came gliding into the room.

"I am going to get the capsule ready. Anything in particular you want to bring home?" he asked.

"I can't think of anything right now," Barry said. "Just the necessities."

It was interesting to him that the Russian came this far out of his way, just to ask this question. They could only hear each other over the radio at this point, he could have broadcast from anywhere inside the station.

"Roger," said Dmitry as he left the room.

The computer finally displayed their coordinates. The

station was currently off the northeastern coast of Brazil. This meant that they were going to have to touchdown in the southern hemisphere, as they did not have enough oxygen to make the trip around to land in North America. The lack of land on the bottom half of the Earth made this prospect a bit more concerning.

Barry made a few clicks and the computer displayed the reentry windows for the next four hours.

"Australia," he said to himself.

"What?" asked Dmitry. Barry had forgotten that his radio was still on.

"Uh, Australia," he said. "That's the best we can do."

"It works." Dmitry replied.

"I'll get the telemetry transferred, then I'll be down to help." Barry said.

He was somewhat disappointed. Had they actually been able to plan for a landing, he could easily have put them within a few hundred miles of his home.

Australia, however, was not the worst place they could land. It certainly would have lower radiation levels. And although its interior is not the most hospitable, they would fare far better there than in the middle of South America.

Things could be worse, he thought, but it guaranteed that it would be some time before he could get home.

After what seemed to Barry to be an eternity, the computer finally finished calculating the telemetry. He quickly uploaded it to the capsule's computer. The moment it finished the transfer, he switched the computer off and headed to help Dmitry.

He arrived at the airlock to find many objects floating around. It became very apparent to him that Dmitry had some strange, deep attachment to that accordion. He was in the process of trying to find a place to stow it in the capsule.

"Only the bare necessities, I see," said Barry.

"The Russian stopped and craned to see Barry out the corner of his helmet. "She has been good to me," said Dmitry. "I can not leave her behind."

"You're lucky I don't have one of my own!" Barry said with a chuckle.

The two worked quickly together and in thirty minutes they had everything stowed and secured.

"Is that it?" asked Barry.

"I think so," said Dmitry. "I brought enough food rations for each of us for a week, I hope that is enough."

"It's all we can fit, it will have to be," said Barry.

They climbed aboard the capsule and began running down their

preflight checklist, which consisted of just over 100 items. This took them another 20 minutes, and as they finished, the capsule was powered up and ready to disengage the station.

"Any last words?" Barry asked his cohort.

"God help us." said Dmitry.

With that, Barry flipped a switch and a loud clunk indicated the docking clamps had released.

Dmitry slowly backed the capsule away with a burst from the maneuvering thrusters. As they gained some distance from the station, Dmitry gave them another bump.

Both their gazes were fixed on the station. It was a bit sad for both of them, as it had been their home for so many months, and they knew they would never return.

Soon they could see the entire sprawling structure before them.

"I wonder what it was that hit her," Barry said as he looked at the damaged part of the structure. It was dented and bent at an unusual angle, as if something large and heavy had struck it.

Dmitry fought against his restraints to get a better view. "There!" he said, pointing awkwardly

Barry leaned forward, fighting his suit to see. Floating 100 meters off the station was the mangled wreckage of a large communications satellite. A cloud of bits of debris trailed behind it.

"Where the hell did that come from?" asked Barry.

"It is pretty beat up, more damage than if it had just hit the station," said Dmitry. "I would guess it was a target of a missile, and the explosion threw it into our orbit." He watched it for a few moments as they drifted away. "Another stupid, unnecessary thing," he said, angrily. "Must they destroy everything?"

"Oh, I don't think she's done yet," Barry said cheerily. "It will be a few years before her orbit degrades enough to turn critical. You never know."

"Even if so, you or I will never be aboard her again," he said, now sounding more melancholy.

Barry did not respond.

"Switching to reentry computer," barked Dmitry. He turned a couple more switches then the thrusters fired again, rotating them so they could no longer see the station. One more burst fired and they began their descent.

They sat in reflective silence as the capsule began to skip along the atmosphere. Barry thought about that first deep breath of fresh air he would take when they opened the hatch,

and what it would feel like.

He closed his eyes and imagined walking up his driveway again.

He could see Mary up on the hill near the house. She stood tall and straight, a clothes pin held in her teeth. She stretched and fastened a sheet to the line. It billowed up and clung to her body in the breeze, its shape conforming to hers.

An excited shriek filled the air as Lizzie, his youngest, spotted him. She was already in a full gallop, running as fast as she could to meet him. A dozen emotions contorted her face.

Mary turned her head to look in his direction.

Barry smiled.