

Zero Degrees

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The stars glowed, the earth spun, and Sam prepared to die.

It's funny what shapes a human mind can construct out of nothing, thought Sam staring dreamily into space. Look, see, it was shaped like a rabbit now, that was nice. What everyone forgets with those cards, you know, the ones with ink blots on them, is that they don't look like two men dancing, or a train or any manner of sexual act. They look like *ink* on a page.

From upside down it looked like dancer pirouetting in a rain of gold. The thing was though, what it *most* looked like, what it *really* resembled, was a space station, a space station which, if closely examined, would have a safety line broken at one end, just like the one on Sam's space suit. What a funny coincidence, he marvelled.

"It's cold out; make sure you wrap up warm young Samuel." His mother's voice rang out across his mind, as clearly as if she were actually there.

They never really trained you for this, they trained you plenty to make sure this didn't happen but they never told you what to do if it did, and so the scene played out in his head,

"If you ever find yourself alone and drifting in space, with no one to help you, you just get hysterical, IS THAT CLEAR? WHAT ... DO... YOU..... DO...?"

"SIR, get hysterical, SIR"

"THERE MIGHT BE SOME HOPE FOR YOU SONS 'ER BITCHES YET."

With this he smiled to himself. He had to find something to laugh about otherwise he might go crazy, and what would he do then? You had to look on the bright side after all. He was just having some quiet time to himself, maybe he'd have a whisky and soda later, to round off the evening as it were. As for the cold it was a whole 2.7K out there, a whopping 2.7K on zero degrees, right? And he had a nice comfy space suit, somewhere to pee and central heating, what more could a man ask for?

He thought again about the accident. It was amazing how your life can be changed; you're EVA, solid and sober in your work replacing a SJ-34 module because the computer reports a burn out, what did that do anyway? God, he had probably lost his life replacing the electric toothbrush holder. What about God? Well if he was ever going to think about him, now would seem to be the time, heck he might even run into him out here. He caught himself giggling to himself as he drifted in space...

He had already tried to think about how he could save himself, but there was nothing to push off, no thrusters or jet packs, all he had was his tool kit. He never should have gone EVA on his own, but space was different now, run by companies, not explorers, for money, not glory. Earth was now orbited by

dozens of relay stations beaming back via gamma lasers, terawatts of raw energy to fuel the population which gorged upon it.

He had joined up with the romantic idea of soaring like a bird, free and graceful over the earth, looking down at all of creation, and marvelling as he spun around the globe that everyone else was stuck to.

DAMN IT! It wasn't fair, he had known the risks just like every man who went up there, he had known that he might never be coming back, that he may never see again the people he had loved and woven into the fabric of his life. It was silly, but still painful to know he would never walk again or read a book. But he hadn't taken the danger seriously, you see it did not apply to him, it was just a statistic, he was never going to be the one in a 1000, *he* was always going to be one of 999. That's just how it was...

Suddenly Sam began to flail about, throwing his limbs in a desperate, yet pathetic attempt to do something, to be able to take control again. He *had* to do something; there was no other choice he had to do something; ANYTHING for god's sake. He went on, the suit tumbling with the impact of his limbs, and he was panicking, and crying, with every shred of his essence, he want to stay alive, but deep down somewhere already know we was dead, and he was in limbo....

BASTARDS! It was their fault! They should have given him better equipment; it was their fault that he was here, it should be one of those other lazy *cunts*. It felt a better for a moment to have someone to blame, but that didn't last. All the same, he would be waiting for them at the gates of hell, ready to guide them down to their proper place in the inferno.

The realisation that he was going to die in the cold depths of space hit home. His suits heating systems would give out long before he starved or died of thirst, if he was lucky he might asphyxiate first, but it would be a close run between them. He began to come to a realisation, he may be unable to get back or do anything, but at least he may be able to chose the manner of his death , he couldn't take off the helmet, the safes would not allow it. He could however puncture his oxygen tanks, he would not be able to control the thrust, but if he cut into the nozzle right he would just fall asleep as the air ran out.

It took a long time, even with these crappy suits, he used a carbon arc to burn though the layers of material, before he could reach the tanks themselves, breaking though them took even longer, the only tool suitable for the job was a micro-saw. At this rate the cold was going to get him first, he wanted to give up. But he had to keep going there was no way we was going to let go of control now, and this was the only thing he could control. It wasn't his death he worked for; no sane man could work this hard, for so long, just to die. Freedom, he was alone in dark empty reaches of space with no one, and nothing, and the only thing he craved was freedom.

Tears began to mist the inside of his helmet. Suddenly the tool was ripped from his hand by gas escaping from the tanks, too much, far too much. It didn't matter as Sam dropped into the atmosphere of Earth, and the freedom of death.

THE END

EPILOGUE

As the last bits of ash drifted and wandered through the air, it swirled through the clouds, bouncing about. It flew with the birds, free, and almost beautiful.

The ash meandered above a park where two children were playing, running around, jumping from the roundabout, sliding down poles. They were about seven or eight, and wrapped up snug in coats and hats by their parents before they had been let out to play. The ash danced and twirled about, forming complex rhythms and beautiful patterns as it descended.

“WOW! Look, the first snowflake, it's winter!”

One of the little girls exclaimed catching it on her tongue.