

Outside – And a Long Way Down

Two hours after leaving South Dock, Oscar Steele thought he was dead.

He and Summer had been working their way toward Westport on one of the ZPD rockets. The huge rocket tube had handholds on the “top”—the side nearest the asteroid—and as long as they stayed on that side, they were working in what was, to them, positive gravity. It was a white, narrow, round walkway beneath their feet; the asteroid was the ceiling above them.

But it was taking forever. As they progressed along the asteroid, moving farther from South Dock, the ever-increasing g-force was trying to throw them off the rounded contour of the big rocket body and out into space.

Their only recourse was to ensure they had their lifelines clipped to something at all times. This slowed them down considerably; first, Steele would clip in and hold position while Summer went forward, crab-walking along the curved barrel of the booster rocket with the handholds. Then she would clip and hold, and he would move forward.

From their current perspective, the asteroid hung over them like an infinite roof stretching off in both directions. The booster rocket was a round barrel below, a curved tube of material between them and the abyss. Even the slightest miss-step and they would slide off their makeshift bridge, down the side, and away from the asteroid.

So far, neither of them had made such a miss-step to test their lifelines.

And then it happened. Reaching for the next handhold with his right hand, Steele's boot slid down and out, away from the curved surface. The jerk of losing his footing made him miss the handhold. He slid down hard against the side of the rocket, knocking the wind out of him. Somehow, his left hand just barely managed to retain a grip on his previous handhold.

Half-stunned, hanging off the side of the rocket tube with one hand, he scrabbled for his shortline with the other, got it in his hand.

Twisting, he tried to reach up with his right hand to clip it into the same handhold his left hand was holding—but the grav was too strong. He couldn't reach it.

His left hand was giving way. He couldn't hold on much longer. And if he fell, he'd be a 190-pound dead weight at the end of a twenty-meter safety line, jerking against a small metal clip. Even if it held, he doubted he'd be able to climb back up the lifeline to Summer. And she certainly wouldn't be able to pull him up, dead weight.

He yelled a warning to Summer.

"Hold on, I think I'm losing it!"

Returning to the fight, he twisted hard to the left, trying to bring his right hand back across his body to clip into the ring. Again, he missed.

His left hand was now pulling loose.

Steele knew he had only seconds. He couldn't avoid the thought that came into his mind.

So this is what it feels like to fall into nothingness—.

He twisted again, hard, slammed his right hand up against the ring, knocking the clip into it in desperation. His left hand gave way. He felt himself falling. Then, the clip sank into position on the ring. The safety catch closed. As he fell away from the rocket barrel, the shortline tightened. With a sharp twanging vibration, it reached the end of its travel. He came to a sudden and jarring stop, two meters from the top of the

rocket, hanging against the side of the tube, twisting on his harness.

“Fuck!” he heard from Summer over the comm.

“You got that right,” he growled. “Give me a minute here.”

Shaking his left hand, trying to restore feeling in it, he simply hung for a bit, letting the shortline twist back and forth, slowly damping out. His curiosity piqued, he looked down beneath his feet.

The asteroid rotated at 0.898 rpm: almost one round per minute. The stars beneath him moved rather quickly—faster than he expected. Suddenly, the Moon came into view. It got much brighter.

Steele realized he should probably act while he had better light. Refocusing, he looked up again.

Now, from this perspective, it appeared he was hanging down the side of a huge white pipe with a ceiling of rock above it. Crazily, it reminded him of the view doing the backstroke in his high school swimming pool. There, he had also seen large white pipes suspended beneath a rough ceiling.

But there, down had been down, and up had been up. Here, everything was crazily different.

Gripping the shortline, he twisted, putting his feet on the barrel of the rocket. Then, holding the shortline with both hands, he slowly walked himself up, hand over hand, until he was back on “top” of the rocket barrel, once again in line with the handholds. Going to his knees, he rested there for a second, breathing hard.

“You OK, Steele?”

He nodded. Then, realizing she couldn’t see inside his helmet from her perspective, he grunted a response.

“I’m OK. Good to go. But watch that first step off the rocket tube. It’s a lulu.”

He heard her tinkling laugh over the comm. “Got it. I’ll be careful.”

Resting for a bit longer, breathing hard, he heard his dead wife, Angie, again.

Kind of a close one there, Babe. How ‘bout you be a little more careful?

He nodded silently. Rising to his hands and knees, he resumed his slow travel toward Summer, this time being more precise where he placed his feet.