

The Last Man in Space

by

Ben Slythe

Glen had been on ELOS for almost a week. The Earth Low Orbit Station had been built primarily with European money and Russian labour and looked like a giant oil drum. Asteroids had been mined for their metals and these had been processed in giant factories to produce curved sections of hull. In Earth orbit those sections were fixed together to produce giant rings. Each ring, known as a frame) was attached to other on each side slowly forming a huge tube. In the outer surface of each frame was an airlock and through these, the components needed for fitting out the station were loaded. The airlocks were now used for other functions, because after fitting out there had been spin imparted to the station in order to install gravity. Glen's favourite hangout, a fairly elegant bar, was in one of these disused airlocks. Everywhere in the station there were pictures of the men, women and children aboard when spin was imparted, the families of engineers and scientists. Though hundreds of Russians had been aboard then, few of them appeared in the pictures. Those same Russians now formed an underclass of citizens, not entirely respected by the wealthy. They worked for comparatively low pay, in conditions which were unpopular and cramped. They did the jobs that nobody else wanted, in the bar Glen now sat, there were no Russians. The staff were itinerant Americans, the clientele rich European tourists and engineers. Glen was European, in the American sense, an economic migrant, he worked for the Startech freight company and this was his first trip into space. It hadn't taken him long to get into the culture of the station, the professional atmosphere at work reminded him of home, the relaxed atmosphere at play reminded him of Scout camp. One thing was absolutely clear, Russians were not included. It occurred to Glen that for every joke there had to be a butt, on ELOS the butt was always a Russian. It was an enormous shock, therefore, when a small party of badly dressed Russian engineers entered and walked, a little uncertainly, to the bar.

Glen had never met the woman sitting to his right, but this was the perfect opportunity, suddenly they had something in common.

"This place just took a dive into ignominy," he said with a smile, indicating the Russians. She looked at him as though he was pond slime, picked up her drink and strode off without a glance back. The barman stepped up to him and asked if he was new on station. Glen answered that he was.

"Then I'll forgive your ignorant hide and not sling you onto the ring with a couple of broken ribs."

"I just don't get it, yesterday she'd have laughed."

"Yesterday wasn't Alexei day." The barman went to serve a customer, as he passed the gang of Russians he said quite clearly that the drinks were on the house.

Since he didn't want to appear a fool, Glen waited for the Barman to return before raising his eyebrows. The barman took the hint.

"Alexei is the last man in space." That seemed to be it, so Glen felt he had to raise the eyebrow once again.

"Buy me a drink and I'll tell you all about it." Glen nodded, the barman pulled up a stool and waved to the girl at the other end of the bar to cover his workload. It all started six years back, just before the spin, the first families were being shipped in and the French flight had just docked on frame three. The frame four airlock was faulty, a couple of engineers were working on it. Russian engineers. They'd just reached the outer door when the pressure seal blew. One of them was sent hurtling into Earth's atmosphere. The other managed to hang onto the outer door but the transfer tube into frame three was knocked off the airlock. The tube closed up as designed but a small girl right at the hull drifted clear, she slowly moved away from ELOS. The Russian engineer holding onto the hull was called Alexei, nobody seems to know his other name, he pushed off and caught the girl. They were slowly spinning round each other and when she was facing the station he pushed her, hard. It took a couple of minutes for her to reach safety, but there was no saving him. He died two hours later when his air ran out. His last words were 'Please remember me'" The barman looked almost stricken, he downed his drink in one.

"Why the last man in space?"

"He's still out there, his orbit is slightly off our plane but on this day he passes within a few kilometres. Some say they can see him go by, I can't. One day we'll all be dead. Maybe our species will come to an end, but he'll still be there orbit after orbit. One day he'll be the last man in space."

Glen went to the lounge on frame six at the appointed time. There was a hush in the room, at at some unknown signal all the uniformed people saluted, different salutes for each different uniform. For one minute they stayed quiet, a minute in which all the people in the lounge shared a moment. Glen looked out through the port just in case, he thought he could see something but he might have imagined it.

Remembrance is such a small thing really. As the lounge emptied and Glen was left alone he said out loud, "I will remember you, Alexei."

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