

DARKER HORIZONS

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Darkness blooms across the subtle curvature we call the horizon. There is no day here. There won't be for several weeks.

Direction has little basis in geography here, with so few landmarks to distinguish one rolling lunar vista from another. Without my helmet's nav systems, I'd probably lose my orientation altogether. We have a "north" here, in spite of the fact that the moon's magnetic field is negligible, and I try to always keep it there in the back of my mind. Sometimes... sometimes, I lose it, and the featureless landscape gets the better of me.

I'm always surprised I had the guts to come out here. Back on Earth I had no inkling how important space and scale were to a body's sanity. Maybe if I'd known, I would have known how lonely it gets, even with your crew all around, even with the faint shapes of the craters. Craters! And they say those are enough for a familiar landscape. Sure, we got craters -- Tsiolkovskiy, and Pavlov, and Bolyai -- but they don't compare to a nice green valley or a white-capped mountain.

And they're all friggin' Russian.

I scan the horizon.

Craters... there's one. Which...? Shit.

Stabbed with the familiar doubt, I whirl around as quickly as possible in the clunky suit I have to wear.

Good. The station is still there.

Where would it have gone? It's a stupid question, but one I ask regularly. The terror of abandonment was real to me as soon as I set foot on this God-forsaken rock. Two hundred and forty miles from the rest of humanity, it seems so easy for it to all slip away.

It's a nightmare in grayscale.

Searing heat, flashes of light.

Focus.

In the distance, the dimly lit corridors of the base contrast sharply with the brief bright flares of light originating from the reactor core.

Nuclear powered is what I was told. Found a deposit of Uranium on the dark side of the moon, enough to last a hundred lifetimes. So the colony went up. And it was all nuclear powered.

That's what I was told.

I begin the slow, bouncing walk back to the station. Moon walking can be therapeutic, if you let it. It was fun at first. More often, it's a reminder of the strangeness of this world.

Still, between the openness of the outdoors and the claustrophobia of the mining station, I'd choose the mind-numbing landscape any day.

And that's why I'm here.

I reach the airlock rather quickly. I punch in the code, and although I can hear nothing but my own breathing through my space suit, I can imagine the loud hiss made by the airlock as it depressurizes to allow entry.

Turning the wheel is still surreal. Everything else here moves so easily. But friction is still friction. Low gravity doesn't change that.

The wheel turns. The door opens. I step inside.

Why do I feel safer in the airlock? An accident in here would be no better than an accident out there.

The airlock finishes repressurizing, punctuated by a reassuring little light blinking green above my head.

The second door only requires a keypad to get in. I can't figure why they wouldn't do that for both doors.

I walk briskly through the corridors, holding onto the rails to keep from bouncing too high. Lights flicker and intensify as I pass them, until I stop at a door. The faded sign next to it is all but indistinguishable by now, but I know its location by heart.

This door. One of them was here. Longest trip I had to make.

I take a seat on one of the long metal benches and begin methodically removing my space suit. Piece by piece. Zippers and Velcro and screw-on airtight components. But they sure love Velcro on these suits. It rips through the silence of the station.

I stow the dismantled suit in a locker. I cross the short distance between the locker and the door in a few strides, and let my mind wander as I take the necessary turns back to my quarters for the thousandth time.

The shower water falls almost scalding across my bare flesh. A hot shower was the one amenity I had always refused to compromise on. Even out here. They told us we should cut back on our luxury power usage, but I never really saw the point. If the system is self sufficient, how can this be a waste of power?

Probably just leftover from the early days of space exploration. Stupid tradition.

Besides, it sure as hell isn't my fault that the self-sufficiency was a lie.

After I finish towelling myself off, I head, wearing nothing but the towel, over to my desk.

So much routine. Always routine. What could I possibly have to log today?

The clock reads late. I was out longer than I realized.

So? Late is meaningless when you have half a month of night time.

Besides, I'm not done. Clothing goes back on. Boots. Jacket. Corp insignia. Rope in hand.

Feels good to be clean, at least.

Back through the long metal hallways. The motion-activated lights follow me, but I'd just as soon make this trek in the dark. I don't want to see the white-washed walls, pressing in on me, on all of us. I'd just as soon be rid of it. I'd just as soon be home.

Wouldn't that be the shit.

Spacesuit on. Helmet sealed.

More routine. With a twist.

I enter the holding bay. The refrigerated cylinders glow a faint blue from internal lighting. A keypad unclasps the locks holding them, and they thud softly to the floor. This is the hardest part of it all. In almost all respects I'd prefer being here, on some semblance of a solid surface, to being stationed on a satellite or something, but in this situation even the weak gravity works against me.

One... two... four... seven.

That's right, of course. I took the rest out yesterday. I had a plan. I'm nothing if not deliberate.

What a lie. Chance is the only reason you're still -- STOP.

Wearily, I pace between the containers and thread the rope through the metal loops that line their sides. Connecting them is a pain, but it sure beats moving them one by one. I learned that from experience. It's not going to be fun either way.

I'm careful not to look too closely.

After today, I've washed my hands of all of it.

I drag the first up against the wall by the airlock, letting it use up the slack before tension finally pulls the second along. I punch in the key sequence necessary to open the first door, and painstakingly maneuver the cylinders through the narrow airlock.

If only they had made these things bigger.

It's a tight fit, but I manage to gain purchase on the wheel, and almost start turning it before I realize with a jolt that I've forgotten to depressurize the place.

Stupid.

Depressurising the airlock seems to take a lifetime, though the clock ticks down only a few minutes.

Perhaps it's broken. Perhaps I'm broken.

I turn the heavy wheel with the easy grip of someone who's done it a thousand times past, which I have. And then the door swings out, revealing the desolate, starlit wasteland of the dark side of the moon.

I've heard my share of romantic poetry about the moon's surface. Much of it even from first hand accounts. But when I'm out here, I see none of that. Starlit, yes. Glowing with twinkling starlight as if it were a place of fey energy -- not even close.

I just made that line up. Why would I make that up if I don't believe it? Perhaps I AM broken.

Once the seventh container is out, I turn, shut the airlock door, and spin the wheel back into place. The magnetic lock broke long ago, but a little elbow grease works just as well in my experience.

Why was it ever magnetically locked if arm power works? This place makes less sense the more I think about it. Stupid. So stop thinking about it.

Can't. Won't?

Paths on the moon are far removed from the whimsical trails through lush forestland that I recall from Earth. Every stride covers meters at a time, so they're really more a series of landing pads, packed down over time in a few select locations. In the dim, almost non-existent light, they can be damn near impossible to find.

Stupid. Use a flashlight.

But I'm supposed to be CONSERVING ENERGY.

But the place is "self sufficient," isn't it? Isn't it?

No. Seven hells, no.

I'm hindered by the containers behind me, but in spite of my months here, I can still feel the difference in the weight. I'm making good time, even with a chain seven cylinders bobbing along obscenely on my tail.

Has it only been months?

These past few days alone have been years.

My destination is another part of the mining station, but the route is quicker across bare rock. I can see its hatch clearly, and the smooth curvature of its walls, and the sharp cant of its peak, and the powerful tubes at its base, all so at odds with the clunky asymmetricality of the rest of the station. It's getting closer.

'Moon walking can be therapeutic, if you let it.'

Stupid. Not this type of moon walk.

I stop to catch my breath, and notice my panting amplified tenfold through my helmet's comm. system.

Why do I still have that thing on? Concentrate.

I reach for the hatch, repeating the routines I'm all too familiar with. I can imagine the *whoosh* as air escapes, though no sound penetrates the suit. No point depressurizing now. There are two steps leading up to this hatch, to keep the compartment off the ground, and it's a challenge hoisting up the cylinders. One goes up, clanking down on the metal of the floor.

Easy does it. Don't look.

There goes a second.

Getting there. Gotta keep my head.

More like my stomach.

On the third, my clunky space boot snags a step, and the cylinder slips from my arms and back down the way it came. My balance goes with it -- it feels like falling in slow motion, except this is no dream.

Get through today and it's over -- OH GOD.

I'm falling toward the cylinder, and I can't tear my gaze from...

God, it's a joke. It has to be a joke.

But you can't pull that kind of shit on the comms. It's so strictly against regulation it's ridiculous.

Which means...

I know I can't look again, but I can't stop...

I'm tearing back toward the station, floating dangerously high on the low-grav surface, but already I can see it's no joke. Streams of gas are escaping from the wings, and they shouldn't be visible in this limited atmosphere and they shouldn't be there in the first place and they shouldn't... they shouldn't... the place was supposed to run itself!

His eyelid has been fused open where the flesh was burned away. I tried to close the others, but he had nothing to close...

I fling open the hatch and the place feels raw. Blood, and pain... it's palpable. First body is right at the entrance, half-suited. Her research shift is just after mine.

They weren't dead when I got in there, but it would have been better if they had been. In my suit, the leak didn't affect me, but I couldn't do anything either. I bumped through the halls, unable to touch, unable to speak...

I know how to shut it off and default to the base life support, but it's too late. Our med bay isn't enough. I find the control center, send the commands... watch my friends die as I wait for the atmosphere to restabilize.

Afterwards, what was there left to do but clean up?

Sending signals back to Hub Momma down in Houston, but she's lost contact, too. This isn't just the life support -- external comms are down, too. Shit! System-wide failure? It's a nightmare. It's THE nightmare. Things never go this wrong.

My eyes flash open and I realize I'm lying faceup on the moon's surface. The cylinders are still beside me, with their infernal viewing windows clear for the world to see.

What world? Just me.

I cleaned them up. I packaged them. Our escape launcher was never stocked for an actual rendezvous with earth, so it only has about enough fuel to break orbit and then... drift.

Better funeral than any they'd get down here.

So now here I am, finishing the job. I can still finish it, if I block out the memories, the implications, the lost potential, the unfinished... *stop*.

I load the final containers, seal the ship. Its autopilot takes a while to get the whole system warmed up, so I have time to walk a good distance away while the thing detaches its couplings and activates its lower rockets. I have a front seat view of their final departure.

I watch until the colony is a tiny blip in the star-studded sky, and then turn towards that familiar, unknowable horizon.

There is no day here. There won't be for several weeks.