



**“The Dark of the Moon”  
by Tom Riley**

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(2425 words)

**Sometimes you do meet demons in the depths of space; but sometimes that’s not such a bad thing, especially if they are your own.**

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**On the Real Moon:**

Oh, God, how tired I am." He spoke out loud but not to anyone and not really to himself. He sat on the narrow bench in the airlock and slouched against his pack. Every time he stirred, the tracked-in lunar dust ground between his boots and the metal floor, grating on his nerves.

Cosmonaut Nikolai Aleksandrovich Ozerov was a tired man.

He had handed the damaged cable through to the tech robot as soon as the inner lock door opened. The repair should not take long; the remote robot operator, the American James McKay, was competent. And so Ozerov just sat: his close-cropped hair slick with sweat, his hands hanging down between his legs. He sat waiting

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It was the last task of the last job of Cosmonaut Ozerov's long career. Outside was the hard vac; and the dust; and the heat; and the cold; and the job, his job; and the loneliness, his loneliness. It was the very end-of-the-line. It was the west limb of the Moon where you really could hide from the noise of Earth behind any little roll of the terrain or shadow of a rim mountain.

Outside, a dozen remotely controlled radio telescopes rested on the floor of Crater Grimaldi. The Earth hung well below the western rim of the crater, the rim blocking out the noise of all mankind. Radio noise, light noise, every noise -- all of it. For the approaching 14-Earth-day-long lunar night, the noise of the sun was blocked out too.

Like metallic gossamer, the radio dishes floated above their cold superconducting bases. Their commands came in and their data went out over a shoestring of fiber-optics cable. He had helped the robots plow that line into the lunar regolith. The line ran eight kilometers through a pass in the eastern crater rim to a high point where the Earth could just be seen at all times. No radio transmitters were allowed here to disturb the silence. Even the local robots stood motionless when there was science to be done.

No one lived here of course; people are noisy. When it was needed, new equipment would be shipped to Grimaldi direct from Earth; then a single spacer would fire up a Lunar Hopper and join it. With one short burn he would enter a suborbital ballistic trajectory that carried him one quarter of the way around the Moon. The Armstrongville to Grimaldi express, one quick burn to start, one skillful burn to stop. Most of the half hour between was all free-fall.

"Found it," McKay called out, his head just visible on the small monitor. "There is a fiber glass needle run up under the cable sheath. It nicked the cladding on a data line."

"How long to repair?" Nikolai barely moved his head. He was beyond caring what must be done; now he cared only how long it would take.

"I can swap in a spare line in a few minutes, but I have to take data for a failure report first. Oh, one hour total."

That was par for this course. "Give me a ten-minute-to-completion heads-up," replied Nikolai slowly.

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Somewhere that cable had rubbed hard against its shipping crate. Perhaps it had happened in the flight from Goddard to the heavy lift spaceport at Plesetsk, perhaps in the *Energia II* ride up Earth's deep gravity well, perhaps in the trans-lunar insertion burn, perhaps while landing on the Moon. Somewhere a stray needle of glass fibers from the

shipping container had lanced the cable and then slowly worked its way to a nerve. Just as Luna's cold loneliness had lanced Nikolai's once thick hide and now chilled him to the bone.

It was a simple job, this last job. Jump to the west limb science station and roll out one new instrument. Connect up a few cables and wait in the maintenance shack while the remote tech and the science team initiated the new system. He could leave the clean-up to the local robots and their controllers back on Earth.

He had taken charge of this simple little job so he would not have to think about the inevitable. He was overdue to be rotated back home and then be retired. He had exceeded his lifetime hard radiation limit for a cosmonaut. There could be no exceptions. He was overdue to be turned out. And now he was overdue to complete. The simple little job had gone south.

Problems with the new equipment arrival check out had bumped him from the hopper schedule — not his fault. When the hopper was available, fuel was not — not his fault. When the fuel shipment arrived, other equipment broke down and the tech was tied up with that — not his fault. He had actually tried to argue with SallyRide05, the head AI on the Moon, over the schedule. Arguing with a big AI went exactly the way you would think — Nyet, No go --.

When they arrived at Grimaldi, the delivery vehicle for the new disk was sitting with one leg in a small crater. It took six hours to do the 20-minute unloading task. Now a data cable was lanced. There was no joy to be had anywhere. He was in the second week of a two day job.

It was late afternoon at Grimaldi. The quiet night observing time was worth fifty thousand dollars an hour, but not with a clumsy clown stinking up the place. He could hear the tension in the controller's voice over the long link; the tension and the dissatisfaction with the job he was doing. The controller could shove it. Thank God, McKay had tactfully taken over communication management after he had landed.

Still he knew that excuses would not cut it. Your reputation was your last job. He hated the idea of leaving the service on a sour note. He hated it almost as much as he hated the half full bag of urine at his leg. He hated it almost as much as he hated the grit that got into his suit seals. He hated it almost as much as he hated the idea of going back outside.

He was getting too old for this game. He was getting too old for this place. Hell, he was

42. Twenty-one years fighting space was enough.

He would not think on this fouled up job any more. He would think on going home. He would think of loading up, of hopping back to Armstrongville, of a good shower, of a shot of vodka, of a good night's sleep. He could see the cloud of dust kicked up by the lunar transfer vehicle flashing in the sunlight. He could see the dust fly as the ship left the Moon, as it left with him on board. He could see the capsule waiting in LEO to take him home to Earth. He could feel the shudder of reentry and the sock of the chutes opening. He could taste the sweet moist air.

McKay's voice broke his reverie. "Ten minutes to EVA."

He started replacing his helmet and gloves with slow, practiced, mindless motions.

"The cable checks out perfectly now," McKay said as the robot handed over the cable. "Just make the two connections by the original procedure and we should have joy tonight."

Nikolai grunted in affirmation. McKay watched though the robot's eyes as he checked his suit seals and strapped the coil of cable to his chest.

The robot tech then withdrew and the inner lock door dogged shut. Nikolai cycled the lock and waited for the indicator lights to show a hard vacuum. He opened the outer door and stepped out.

He was on the dirt ramp leading up to the surface from the door of the buried maintenance shack. He trudged up the ramp, even in one-sixth G a trudge was the best he could do this day. When he reached the surface, he was facing due West with the sun at a steep angle straight ahead. The sun's disk was just clear of the crater rim; night would come soon. The new radio dish was the fourth in a shallow rille that ran off to his left about 800 meters.

The low sun threw long shadows. Objects in the sun were so brightly lit that their colors were washed out. Objects in the shadow were in bitter cold pitch black. He retraced the trail of his earlier footprints hardly looking up. "One, two, three," he counted the dishes he passed. Then he was there.

Two connections and he was done; done for today, done for this trip, done forever. He removed the dust cover from the jack on the instrument and dropped it. It could stay where it lay for eternity for all he cared. He released one chest strap and removed the dust cover from the red-tagged end of the cable. He dropped that cover too. He inspected the connector for dust. There could be no more screw-ups.

"Dear God, don't let there be any more screw-ups." Had he heard someone say something out loud?

The connector halves mated and the locking ring turned with a precise detente snap that he could feel through the glove. He released the second chest strap and stepped backward four slow paces. The cable unwound from his chest like the line off a spinning reel. He kept the blue-tagged connector in his left hand. He popped the dust cover from it and from its mate on the terminal box half buried in the ground beside his leg. He dropped to a kneeling position and inspected both parts of the connection. The two mated smoothly and he again felt the snap as the ring turned into place. He would remember the feel of that snap clearly for the rest of his life.

"The cable is made. I am clear of the dish," he said as he stood up.

"I am reinitiating checkout now," came the reply. "All data lines are up and running. Time to completion is 20 minutes. How is your air, Nikolai?"

"My air is fine. I'll wait here until you complete."

The dish began to move with slow purpose. There was nothing left for Nikolai to do but take one last long look around.

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To his north stood a rock. It was the size and shape of a giant's torso and buried to about the sternum. It was clearly standing erect. A million lunar rocks lay on their sides for every one that stands erect. It was standing tall purely by chance. The surface around it was free of footprints and robot tire tracks, so Nikolai knew it was natural.

Some unknown geological force had left it there like an ancient standing stone in a Paleolithic dig he had once visited back on Earth when he was a boy. It stood like the stones that shaman had used to cast magic when technology was a knife-edge of obsidian.

It looked old. It was old, older than the oldest rocks on the surface of the Earth. He felt as old as that stone. Did that stone feel as old as he did? Yet, it had to remain standing for an eternity.

He looked down at his footprints and thought of all the footprints he had left in the dirt of the Moon, in the damned gritty dirt of the Moon. One distant day his footprints would be old like that stone. For a time span no man could imagine his footprints would mar the smooth surfaces of the Moon. Those footprints would be his revenge for all the danger and discomfort that the lunar grit had caused him in his life in space.

The dish moved again, taking the edge off the glare from the sun. His suit heaters overcompensated, then steadied. He saw the black sky. A sky that was not black like velvet, but black like nothingness. A black that no matter how hard you looked there

was nothing there to see, and you knew there was nothing there to see. He had seen that sky many times before.

The stars were small cold points within the black. They were so terribly far away but they were much closer than that black. Are there other beings out there? He had always known there were, and had thanked God for the great distances between the stars. Would man ever go there? Standing in that utter loneliness he knew man would. An old joy from his youth reached his heart at the thought that he had been alive at the start of that journey.

That old joy cleared his mind and lifted his heart. The pain of a lifetime uncoiled from his chest like the cable roll moments before, and it too fell into the dust at his feet.

In the distance the movement of a local robot caught his eye. It rolled toward its night station by the maintenance shack. The new dish moved too, aligning itself with its older sisters. Were they finished? Yes!

Suddenly he knew he was free. He was free of this last damn job, free of this career. He was free of his fatigue. He was free of his loneliness. He was free of the longings that had led him to this desolate place. He was free of his youth. He was free not to be young anymore. He was free to go home. He was free to stay home, exploit his first-hand knowledge of space, and grow rich and fat. He was now very sure that the standing stone was old, that the sky was black, and that Nikolai Aleksandrovich Ozerov was now a free man.

"All tests are complete and signed off. We have joy tonight," McKay was on the comm line again. "I am relinquishing control to Goddard. Science team, are you there? Come get your baby."

"Nikolai, you ought to come in from the cold." McKay's quiet voice betrayed a shared knowledge.

"Yes, I can come in now," Nikolai said. "Good work McKay. Let's go home."

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So Nikolai turned his back on the stars and headed toward the Hopper. He did not trudge this time. This time he used a skipping gait, the loping stride made possible by the Moon's low gravity that lunar walkers had used for the last eighty years. Nikolai Aleksandrovich Ozerov was at last a free man.

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