

NOVEL
3

Irina

The
Vampire
Cosmonaut

WRITTEN BY Keisuke Makino

ILLUSTRATED BY KAREI

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MIA TOREADOR

The dhampir next to Bart—presumably Mia—continued to focus on her work without sparing him so much as a glance. Bart felt awkward about disturbing Mia while she was working so hard, but he drummed up his courage and spoke.

BART FIFIELD

"I'm Bart Fifield. I was dispatched from the Operations Division."

"That's your desk. I need to look after some things, so ask Mia to catch you up on the rest."



KAYE SCARLET

Bart wondered whether he'd misheard her, then thought it must've been a joke. But Kaye's serious expression didn't waver. There was something decisive in her eyes. Bart waited for her to go on.

"I hate the moon."





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Луна, Лайка и Носферату

Irina

The
Vampire
Cosmonaut

NOVEL

3

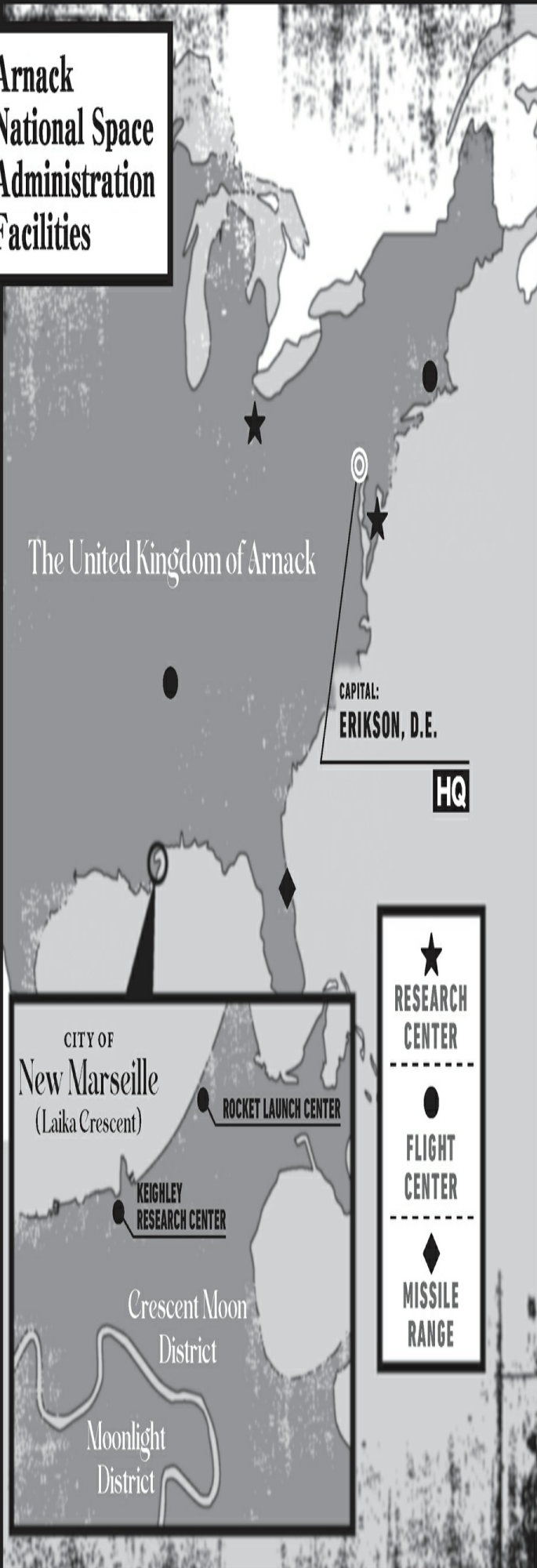
WRITTEN BY
Keisuke Makino

ILLUSTRATED BY
KAREI



Seven Seas Entertainment

Arnack National Space Administration Facilities



Characters Луна, Лайка и Носферату

- **BART FIFIELD:** 24 years old. Operations Division employee. D Room supervisor.
- **KAYE SCARLET:** 24 years old. Talented, well-educated dhampir. D Room manager.
- **JENNIFER SELLERS:** 29 years old. From ANSA Headquarters' Office of Public Information.
- **AARON FIFIELD:** 30 years old. Bart's elder brother. UK astronaut and lieutenant colonel.
- **BRIAN DAMON:** 45 years old. Operations Division Chief.
- **MIA TOREADOR:** 23 years old. Dhampir and D Room staff member.
- **STEVE HOWARD:** One of the Hermes Seven. Lieutenant colonel and orbital flight pilot.
- **LIBERTÉ SCARLET:** Kaye's mother. Deceased.
- **DOMINIC SCARLET:** Kaye's father. Dockworker.

CONFIDENTIAL

[This story is fictional. All characters, organizations, and names are fictitious and have no relation to existing people.]

TSUKI TO LAICA TO NOSFERATU Vol. 3

by Keisuke MAKINO

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Illustration by KAREI

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Prelude:

Intro

Blue Eyes

THE FULL MOON was dyed bloodred, its divine presence almost lost in the darkness. Although its light normally outshone the stars, they peeked out to glimmer from their hiding places.

One boy observed the total lunar eclipse's awe-inspiring beauty through his telescope, the bloodstained moon painting his eyes reddish brown. He was completely ensorcelled by the sight. The blood moon seemed to respond to the beating of his heart, shifting in harmony with his pulse. Eventually, the moon's dark border faded, and its bloody color drained away. Just like that, the moon had returned to its silver self, and the boy's eyes were again their natural blue.

As the phenomenon ended, the boy coughed. He'd been sickly since the day he was born, which often left him bedridden. Still, he'd at least avoided serious illness thus far.

He would have loved to watch the eclipse from the hilltop, but it was too humid and hot. The weather here in the northern United Kingdom of Arnack was cooler than in the South, but it was still hard on his feverish body. With no other choice, the boy had viewed the lunar eclipse from his room—perfectly cool, thanks to state-of-the-art air-conditioning.

The boy struggled to put away his telescope, which was about as tall as him. Then he crawled into the comfort of his bed and reached for the paperback by his pillow. It was a science fiction bestseller, *Fly Me to the Moon*. He had read it cover to cover so many times now that he'd memorized everything, and he could never tire of it. The book had inspired his keen interest in space. It was full of difficult words, but its story was so engrossing that he'd looked them all up in a dictionary.

Since he couldn't play outside like everyone else, books were both his friends and his teachers. The most popular genres at that time were horror and mystery, particularly books about so-called "Originals"—vampires who had drifted over from the old world in the seventeenth century. However, the boy wasn't interested in cold, cruel, or simply frightening tales. He didn't want to

shiver in terror but in scientific excitement.

His dream was to one day build spaceships. While other boys idolized athletic stars, and his boisterous brother dreamed of becoming an astronaut, he himself admired Professor Vil Klaus. Whenever one of the professor's special science programs aired on television, the boy sat completely enraptured. Every week, he eagerly awaited the arrival of astronomy magazines. Space stations and planetary travel were still the stuff of science fiction, but the boy believed they'd be a reality when he grew up.

He straightened his glasses and cracked open *Fly Me to the Moon* for the umpteenth time. Reading just the first few words of the prologue, he felt as if he saw the stars and the vastness of space spread before his eyes. He dreamed that, one day, he'd design a ship that reached the moon's surface.

The boy pulled the covers up tightly, shut his eyes in the darkness, and left on a trip to the moon.

Vermilion Eyes

LEAF BEETLES FLOATED in the dim lamplight like particles of dust. Using a wooden crate as a desk, the silver-haired girl did her utmost to make a hair ornament from a queen of the night flower. She reinforced the stem with wire and tape, trying to craft the section that would let the flower sit neatly in her hair. Her attempt ended in failure, ruining the stem.

“Darn it! I’m supposed to be the princess of the moon!”

She’d wanted to complete the ornament before her mother—the queen of the moon—got home. She’d meant it to be a surprise. Crafting the ornament was harder work than she’d expected, however. When she closed her eyes, she could clearly picture making these with her mother, but her hands refused to emulate her memories.

The flower she held was wilted and sticky from the tape wrapped clumsily around it.

“How did that even happen?”

The girl felt angry and inept. She threw herself into repairing the flower, sweating in the suffocating humidity unique to the South. In the end, it was to no avail; the petals dropped one by one.

“Grr... I hate this!”

She tossed the flower away and mussed up her hair in a fit, revealing her pointed ears. The girl was not a human but a dhampir—descended from a human and an Original.

Looking down at the now-tragic queen of the night, the girl heard scratching, rustling, and flapping against the window. She figured it was just bats again, although she couldn’t see them through the thin curtains. It always struck her as strange that the animals were so agitated during blood moons.

The girl wanted to look for more flowers to try crafting another ornament, but her parents had told her not to go outside by herself. Not tonight. They were

both employed—her father a dock laborer, her mother a cleaner in the human residential district—and both were working that evening. Dhampir wages in the UK were even lower than humans' minimum wage, so her parents worked day and night in the hopes of enrolling her in a good school one day.

“They’re both so late tonight,” the girl muttered, cleaning up the tape and wire.

She was planning to take a bath when the door flew open with a bang. Someone was home. When she trotted over to the entrance, she found her father there, his face as white as a sheet.

“Kaye!” he cried.

The girl’s heart thumped in her chest. She didn’t like this at all.

“It’s your mother,” he continued. “There was a gun, and...”

She watched, frozen, as her father fell to his knees and crumpled in a heap in front of her.

When that girl grew up, she would look at the moon and curse it from the bottom of her heart.

I hate it. I hate the moon.

SPACE DEVELOPMENT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM OF ARNACK

April 21, 1961 Eastern Calendar (E.C.)

The Zirnitra Union (UZSR) achieved the first manned spaceflight in history. The nation also revealed that it had successfully launched a vampire into space the previous December.

This news stunned the world, becoming known as the “Leps-Luminesk Shock.” It struck the United Kingdom of Arnack (UK) especially hard, calling its position as a world superpower into question. First Secretary Gergiev of the UZSR publicly criticized the rival nation, calling it an underdeveloped country for exploiting and discriminating against its own people under the guise of democracy.

The UK aimed to turn the tables but made missteps in arenas outside the Space Race. On April 18, 1961, the UK’s military plans to overthrow a neighboring nation’s revolutionary government failed, further embarrassing the country.

On May 5, 1961, the UK achieved its first successful spaceflight. This suborbital flight, piloted by Aaron Fifield of the Hermes Seven, arced through space and returned to Earth. The feat was admirable in its own right. Nevertheless, it paled compared to UZSR pilot Lev Leps’s orbital spaceflight, which consisted of a 108-minute lap of Earth outside the planet’s atmosphere.

Still at a disadvantage, the UK had no option other than to keep attempting to catch up.

Despite lacking funds, prospects, and technology, the UK’s Congress issued a bold declaration on May 15, 1961: “Our goal is to put humans on the moon, then bring them home safely, before the sixties end.” In the face of heated debate about the announcement, that project received a firm go-ahead.

The UK successfully launched a second suborbital flight on July 21, 1961. However, the Zirnitra Union’s achievement still weighed heavily on the nation,

which turned the Hermes Seven's efforts toward manned orbital spaceflight.

At the same time, the UK's space program struggled to gain popular support. Constant failures sparked growing dissatisfaction, and many saw space development as a waste of taxpayer money. Inspired by Gergiev's words, dhampir communities looked to Irina Luminesk as a beacon of hope, calling her a "pureblood hero" and growing resentful of unfair regional laws justifying anti-dhampir discrimination.

The UK found that it faced growing problems within its borders as the Cold War outside them intensified. By August, the country was in crisis. Backed into a corner during a protracted period of odd silence from the UZSR, the UK launched a last-ditch effort...

Chapter 1:

The Astronaut's Younger Brother and the Nosferatu Room Manager

Blue Eyes

THE DHAMPIR GIRL flew through the air from atop the stairs, her skirt billowing around her.

“Huh?!”

Bart's brain short-circuited at the unexpected sight. He did his best to prepare for an incoming attack—but this was anything but.

“Aiiieeee!”

She was falling. The shock written all over her face proved she hadn't expected to tumble down the staircase. Her large vermilion eyes darted every which way, and her silver hair danced in the air. However she felt about it, she was headed straight for Bart.

Oh!

Once her predicament dawned on Bart, he knew he should either back away or attempt to catch her. Problem was, his reflexes had always been twice as slow as average. The girl was right there, a few centimeters away—then she landed on Bart with a thump.

He fell backward, and his head collided with the linoleum floor, his glasses flying from his face. “Ow!” A jolt ran through his brain as his vision briefly went black.

I, uh... I... Bart's thoughts were suddenly hazy. *This is the basement, but I didn't go to the Vampires' Nest! I was heading back to the surface!* The girl had crushed him on his way there.

At that moment, Bart knew only one thing for certain: This was the closest he'd been to a dhampir girl—or any girl, for that matter—in his twenty-four years of existence.

Bart processed the blurry scenery around him as he lay flat on his back. Through his clothes, he felt the girl's slender, delicate body on top of his. She wasn't heavy in the slightest, although her weight created a gentle pressure.

"Ugh... Ow!" the girl said weakly, her head shifting on his collarbone. Her fine silver hair was soft and smooth; Bart caught a sweet, elegant scent like queen of the night flowers drifting from it.

"Phew! I really thought I was a goner."

Sighing in relief, she raised her head. She had long lashes, and her irises reminded Bart of red crystals. Her cheeks were as white as fresh snow, and her eyes teared up as she touched her nose, rubbing away the pain.

Then the girl's gaze met Bart's. "Wha—?! Oh, I-I'm so sorry!" As she sat up, flustered, fangs peeked from her light-peach lips.

Ah...fangs, Bart noted. His head still rang, his brain refusing to cooperate. There was something familiar in the scent of the girl's hair and her comforting voice, though—like a cool breeze at twilight.

"A-are you all right?!" The girl rolled off him and stood up.

Kerrrrunch. Bart heard the unpleasant sound of crunching metal.

"Hmm? I think I stepped on something." The girl gasped as she picked an object off the ground. "These are...eyeglasses!" The arm of the frames was bent out of shape.

Bart sighed. "My glasses..."

"I'm so sorry!" She sat back down, trying to bend the frames back to normal.

Still lying on his back, Bart heaved another sigh, long and sad. *How did this happen? Today was supposed to be wonderful.*

New Marseille was a port city in South Misibi, a state in the United Kingdom

of Arnack's southern region. Sandwiched between a giant saltwater lake and the nation's longest river, New Marseille was called "Laika Crescent" due to its moon-like topography—curving point to point "like a crescent."

In addition to being the most populous city in the state, it was unique in three ways: First, it was a space development city containing an ANSA research facility and coastal launch site. Second, it was the birthplace of jazz. The music was everywhere; it played constantly in public squares, bars, and restaurants. And third, New Marseille was subtropical, so it was always hot and humid. Since August, there'd been a string of days during which the temperature rose above thirty-five degrees Celsius. This particular day was the same; the sun burned down with fierce intensity.

Laika Crescent's heat was the kind that could fry eggs on car hoods. Bart rode through it on his motorcycle, rushing to the research facility where he worked. The stifling humidity was heavy, like a blanket; not even the wind offered comfort. The temperature softened the asphalt road, and the Misibi River's muddy-chocolate water rippled, stagnant and muggy.

"For a city named after the moon, the place sure gets a whole lot more sun," Bart muttered.

He'd been raised in the temperate north, so summer in South Misibi felt like hell. Mere minutes after he left his house, his clothes grew sticky with sweat, and he always reached work feeling drained.

Bart was in high spirits, however; today marked the start of a wonderful future. As he rode his motorcycle past the people awaiting the trolley at the station, he felt his heart bursting with pride. *The Bart Fifiield riding by you all is the newest Operations Division employee!*

ANSA always ran multiple projects simultaneously, but manned spaceflight took priority over the rest. And, while the astronauts' planned visits to the stars above fascinated the public, just as much truly meaningful work took place at the ground level. It was no exaggeration to say the Operations Division was key to the manned spaceflight project.

The day he was appointed to the Operations Division, Bart was on cloud nine. This was what he'd dreamed of since he was a boy: giving directions from

mission control, supervising engineering, creating flight plans, and protecting supplies. Still, he kept as calm as he could, telling only his parents the good news. He didn't want to brag about his new role to his current colleagues, and he didn't have friends or a girlfriend to celebrate with.

Even so, Bart couldn't keep himself from grinning. "Heh heh..."

Despite applying to ANSA's engineering team, he'd never imagined they'd accept him so soon. He had finished his military service in the air force that spring, so he'd only been at ANSA since April. In college, he'd studied aerospace engineering, but he was still a rookie with no achievements to speak of. Scoring an appointment as important as the Operations Division was a huge honor. Bart's brother, Aaron, had received even bigger honors: he was a Project Hermes member—the ace of the Hermes Seven—and the first UK astronaut to fly into space.

Bart had been so excited to join the Operations Division that he'd even bought a brand-new shirt, tie, and coffee mug. As far as he was concerned, today was his first real day of work.

He rode his motorcycle north along forest roads blooming with vivid, peach-colored crape myrtles and then past signs pointing out nuclear shelters. Once he entered the business district, signs stating HUMANS ONLY and DHAMPIRS PROHIBITED became more common. State law allowed for racial segregation, but the signs had shocked Bart the first time he saw them. The North, where he'd grown up, was very different.

Discrimination against dhampirs was part of everyday life in the South. For example, water fountains had been installed across the city to help the citizens tolerate the intense heat. While the fountains designated for humans were machine-cooled, dhampir fountains offered only tepid trickles. Breaking segregation rules meant punishment for violating state law.

In Laika Crescent, the past and future wove together; antiquated racial discrimination existed a hair's breadth from cutting-edge space development.

As Bart passed the public park, with its abundant water and greenery, the salt lake came into view. It was practically an ocean, stretching some sixty kilometers from east to west.

The Keighley Research Center, where Bart worked, was on the lakeshore. This aeronautical hub had been built before the war and was the country's oldest ANSA facility. It was a place of mysterious experiments where the nation's finest minds gathered, hence the general public's nickname for it: "Nerd Heaven." Not entirely flattering, but Bart felt there was truth to it—the center's scientists often chattered about far-fetched theories bordering on science fiction. Yet Bart thought of himself as a realist and an engineer who combined science and technology—not a nerd.

Beyond its research and development wing, the vast Keighley Center contained a mass storage hangar for aircraft, the nation's best wind tunnel, and other impressive facilities. The center boasted 770 human staff members and 30 dhampirs. Unlike the astronauts and famous scientists who appeared in the media, the vast majority of the center's employees were invisible. If astronauts were the bright, shining moon and first-magnitude stars, ordinary research center staff were nameless stardust lost in the darkness.

The particle of stardust named Bart Fifield worked in the East Sector. Dhampirs worked in the West Sector. Each sector had its own separate parking lot and cafeteria, so Bart had never once bumped into a dhampir at work. He preferred not to see them at all when he could avoid it. Few dhampirs thought highly of humans, which wasn't surprising given that they'd been enslaved by humans until just over a century ago.

In the UK, there was ongoing friction between humans and dhampirs. Bart did his utmost not to get swept up in it. He admired those who risked their lives in the battle for civil rights, but he saw it as someone else's problem. To him, the safest path was best. He wanted to live life thinking about space and only space without worrying about anything else.

At last, Bart reached the Keighley Research Center's tallest building and its main complex. The Operations Division occupied the ninth floor.

"Here we are," Bart muttered.

He walked toward the glass-walled workspace and peered inside. The Operations Division's interior looked like a government office. Everyone was chatting over coffee before starting work. Bart counted about twenty men, two

women, and no dhampirs.

Nameplates were fixed to the wall beside the office entrance. Bart's gaze ran down the names, and there it was: BART FIFIELD.

This isn't a dream!

Bart's cheek twitched nervously. He was naturally introverted and especially uncomfortable in new environments. Steeling himself to enter the office, Bart whispered his motto: "Come on! Let's do this!"

Those were the words cosmonaut Lev Leps had shouted on the occasion of his historic spaceflight. Bart loved the quote but kept it to himself; he didn't want his coworkers to think he was rooting for the enemy.

He meekly entered the Operations Division office. "Um, excuse me?" he called, voice barely audible.

Nobody noticed him. Even at the best of times, he didn't have a very strong presence.

Bart glanced around, unsure what to do. The messy tables throughout the office were littered with pens and pencils, family photos, flight plans, and mathematical documents. On the wall hung a world map and an orbital graph. The most eye-catching thing in the room was the blackboard that stretched to the ceiling, covered in equations and diagrams. At the very top were the words BEAT THE BLACK DRAGON!

"Excuse me," Bart said again. He hadn't moved from the office door. "Could someone show me my desk?"

A nearby employee shot him a suspicious look, then noticed the employee ID hanging from Bart's neck. "Whoa! You're Aaron Fifield's little brother!"

"I-I am, yes."

"Hey, everyone, it's the hero's kid brother!"

The Operations Division staff huddled around Bart excitedly. They all knew Aaron; he was a national hero. He'd received a medal of honor from the Queen herself. Although Bart was proud of Aaron, he had some mixed feelings about his older brother.

“Man, I worship the ground Aaron walks on!”

“That guy’s the real Mr. Arnack!”

“You must be so proud to be his little brother!”

Nobody called Bart by his name.

Being born into such an exceptional family had sometimes been a cruel thing. Aaron was naturally kind, and he’d pursued and achieved his dreams without help. He was a textbook example of a self-made man and patriotic Arnackian, and Bart forever walked in his shadow.

It wasn’t just Aaron who was outstanding. The Fifields were a revered military family who’d played a significant role in Arnack’s history generation after generation. Bart’s father and grandfather were both officers. As a weak and introverted guy, Bart felt small and insignificant in comparison.

Bart’s family had spared no expense on his education, and he’d achieved good grades. Beyond that, though, all he had were dexterous hands. Higher-ups praised his desk work and his skill at maintaining equipment, but he fell behind when it came to physical training. He was often out of breath, and superiors berated him for speaking too quietly.

In short, using Lev Leps’s words as a motto was Bart’s silent act of rebellion against his brother.

“So, little bro, could you get me Aaron’s autograph?”

“Well, I-I could always ask,” Bart said.

Aaron this, Aaron that, he thought bitterly.

Just as it seemed as though this celebration of Aaron Fifield would never end, the office door opened, and a tall man with a dignified demeanor entered. It was Division Chief Brian Damon. Instantly, Bart felt the room’s atmosphere shift.

Bart knew of Division Chief Damon from an interview in a science magazine. During Aaron’s flight, Damon had given orders from the control tower. He’d actually been part of the Keighley Research Center since midway through the war, when he helped develop fighter planes. His interest in space development

stemmed less from a love for science than a yearning to outdo the UZSR.

The Division Chief didn't give his staff a morning greeting. Instead, he clapped his hands for everyone's attention. "Beat the black dragon!" he cried, spurring the team on.

"Yes, sir!" everyone replied in unison, scurrying to their desks.

Bart, on the other hand, had no idea what to do. Feeling lost, he dithered until Damon approached him. Thinking it'd be best to introduce himself properly, he stood at attention. "Bart Fifield, sir! As of today, I'm assigned to the Operations Division!"

The stern expression never left Damon's face. "There's no role for you here. Head to D Room—that's the digital computing room."

"Sir?" Bart felt petrified, unable to comprehend the Division Chief's words.

"You'll be team supervisor," Damon said icily.

"C-computing...? Me?" There had to be some kind of mistake. Bart didn't know anything about computers.

Damon sensed the young man's hesitation. "Relax," he said, gripping Bart's shoulder firmly. "Nobody understands how to use the computers. You're not the only one."

That was true. The general public didn't use computers—99 percent of UK citizens hadn't even *seen* one. The largely unknown, exorbitantly expensive machinery built on invisible technology called "software" had only existed for a decade.

Computers supposedly had incredible processing power. If used correctly, they could turn a thousand-step process into a mere fifty steps, but most workers didn't like them. They were simply difficult—awkward to operate and prone to breakdowns—which led people to call the machines "white elephants."

It wasn't just supervising a computing team that worried Bart, though. He was also fretting about having to work in D Room, a godforsaken basement in the Keighley Center's westernmost corner. Humans avoided that room, which they

called the Vampires' Nest. The team working there consisted entirely of dhampir women. Being surrounded by females might've thrilled some people, but Bart wasn't one of them. The thought only made him more nervous.

However you slice it, I don't belong in the Vampires' Nest. But I'm being dropped right in! Why me?!

Damon frowned. "I know what you're thinking: 'Why me?' Well, put that out of your mind right now. I had no choice but to approve you for the role."

No choice? At those words, Bart realized that higher-ups had arranged his new position, so he had no option but to accept the responsibility. As Division Chief Damon walked him out of the Operations Division office, he felt pitying gazes pierce his back.

"All right," said Damon. "Let me tell you why you're heading to D Room."

Bart no longer cared what the reason was, but he nodded all the same. "Yes, sir."

"As of today, you're being considered for an *extremely* important project."

"Huh?" Bart looked up, surprised. "How do you mean?"

Damon's mouth twisted ominously. "All I can say is that the proposal's in its final stages. If it gets the green light, I'll let you know. For now, your job's to get used to the D Room dhampirs and comfortable with *white elephants*."



His tone made it clear that his words were an order. He removed Bart's nameplate from the wall, thrusting it toward the young man.

"It doesn't mean jack to me that you're an astronaut's kid brother. And I don't care whether you're a human, dhampir, or bottom-feeding catfish. I don't expect anything of you."

"Yes, sir."

"Your successes and results will determine your future. That's all." Turning on his heel, Damon headed back into the Operations Division office. The door closed behind him with a clack.

Bart heaved a deep sigh, his thoughts racing as he tried to reorganize them. A catfish *would* be subject to less pressure than a hero's little brother... But what was this important project Damon had mentioned?

After some contemplation, he remembered comments he'd heard from experts about the moon landing requiring computers. His heart leaped in his chest.

"Was Division Chief Damon talking about...Hyperion?"

Named after the Greek Titan, Hyperion was the lunar landing team's code name. ANSA was still assembling the team, but they would be the successors of the manned orbital flight crew. While Project Hyperion's original focus had been achieving spaceflight, the intensifying flames of the UK's rivalry with the UZSR had moved the goalpost to the moon.

Damon's order that Bart "get used to the D Room dhampirs" was probably part of a policy on friendly relations. It also suggested there were qualified dhampirs on Hyperion's team.

In any case, Bart figured there was no point racking his brain about a mission that still hadn't started. "Hmm. I guess it's off to D Room for now."

The West Sector, which was lined with factory buildings, was a ten-minute walk in the sweltering sun. Bart hadn't been there since April, when he toured the sector as a new recruit. He had no idea how to find D Room without consulting signboards.

All the engineers and technicians who passed him were carrying tools and dressed in sandals and lab coats. In his shirt and tie, Bart stuck out like a sore thumb, resembling an inspector from the head office. He didn't see any dhampirs, but he reminded himself to at least nod politely if he did.

Unlike the general human public, Bart didn't bear dhampirs any ill will. That was partly due to his upbringing—he'd been born into a prestigious family and raised with high standards in terms of character and education. In elementary school, his private home tutor even taught him Nosferatu history, since the subject wasn't in his school curriculum.

"Why did humans enslave dhampirs?" Bart had asked. "Wasn't that hard on them?"

"By making that devilish decision, humans themselves became diabolical," his tutor told him. "They crushed the goodness in their own hearts by forcing the humanlike dhampirs into torturously hard labor. And they brought their children up to think of dhampirs like cattle. The situation we're seeing today simply results from generations of that behavior."

It was an awful story. When Bart looked at his tutor's face and saw defeat written all over it, he could do little more than nod. "I see."

In that moment, Bart decided he wouldn't let himself become another devil. That held true even when the silver-haired "Blue Angel" appeared unexpectedly and dirtied his outfit in April. Had he been the type of devil who believed in human supremacy, the Blue Angel might well have been cruelly punished, but Bart hadn't demanded compensation for anything.

When he arrived at the West Sector engineering building, there still wasn't a dhampir in sight. He descended the staircase to D Room. The gloomy hallways lacked windows, and the air was heavy. He heard footsteps echo around him but saw no one.

Bart's heart thrummed as he neared the Vampires' Nest. He got nervous enough just meeting humans for the first time, and here he was, about to step into a room full of dhampirs—and all women to boot. The thought eroded his confidence, but he had to go on.

"All right..."

Come on! Let's do this!

Come on! Let's do this!

Come on... Let's—

Bart jumped as a few women with red eyes and pointed ears went ahead of him. They didn't notice him there, but his courage crumpled and his feet stopped.

Nope, I can't do this. It's too much. I have to head back to the surface. Get my wits together.

Hanging his head, Bart turned and walked to the stairs. When he neared them, however, he noticed someone at the top.

"Huh?"

As he looked up, a chill went down his spine. The dhampir girl atop the stairs was flying straight at him.

Finally recovering from his daze, Bart sat up, letting out a deep breath. "Phew..."

His new mug had rolled out of his bag, but it hadn't broken. When he touched his glasses, he could tell they were still bent out of shape where the girl stepped on them. Still, they weren't so badly damaged he'd have to buy a new pair.

The dhampir girl lowered her head apologetically. "I'm so sorry!" she said. "I slipped on the stairs, and... Are you injured? If you need to go to the hospital, I can pay for..." Her expression was as regretful as her words.

"No, I'm fine, really. And, fortunately, my glasses are fine too."

In truth, however, Bart was less intent on his own condition than on the dhampir's. Without his glasses, he couldn't see her clearly. Still, if he remembered her face correctly, she was...

Sure enough, the moment he put on his glasses, the girl's voice grew surprised. "Oh, it's you!"

Exactly as Bart had thought, she was the "Blue Angel" herself—the girl who'd

fired the compact satellite.

That was back when Lev Leps had just finished his flight through space. Bart had been eating a hamburger for lunch on a hill near the Keighley Research Center when it happened—a missile-shaped compact satellite dropped out of the sky, colliding with his meal and covering him in debris.

Afterward, the silver-haired dhampir had come running. “Oh no, your clothes... I’m so sorry... I-I’ll cover the expense...”

Even when Bart declined her offer, telling her his clothes were hardly fancy enough for the compensation, the girl insisted. She left him more money than necessary, then ran off with the compact satellite—her “Blue Angel”—in her arms. That had been the extent of their conversation. Since Bart never learned how to contact the young woman, or even her name, he’d taken to thinking of *her* as the “Blue Angel.”

The Blue Angel was actually a spacecraft in the novel *Fly Me to the Moon*, which was the kind of book anyone interested in space had to read, especially if they were Bart’s age.

Later, Bart couldn’t help wondering whether the girl was a researcher at the Keighley Center. But since the dhampirs worked so far away from him, he hadn’t seen her after that. He’d never imagined he’d reunite with her after a *second* dangerous encounter.

“You work here too, don’t you?” he asked her.

“I do,” the Blue Angel replied. With a gentle smile, she showed him the ID card dangling from her neck. “Sorry, I should’ve introduced myself. Kaye Scarlet.”

Bart looked at the card; the girl’s position was listed as “D Room Manager.” He let out a strange shriek. “You’re a manager?!”

The girl nodded as if that were the most natural thing in the world. “Yes, that’s right.” Noticing Bart’s surprise, she waved her hands in front of her chest. “Don’t get the wrong idea. It’s nothing particularly special! D Room isn’t an actual division—it’s literally just a room.”

But it *was* something special. ANSA was full of twenty-somethings, but very

few had reached Kaye's position. Moreover, Bart didn't know any *female* managers. He realized Kaye had to be outstanding in her field. Still, he hadn't shaken the first impressions he'd drawn from the compact satellite's crash landing and Kaye's staircase fall. He couldn't help wondering whether she was really qualified. Perhaps older humans who disliked computers had pushed the manager role onto her.

Bart's mind worked as he looked at Kaye. When their eyes met, he spooked and averted his gaze.

Kaye tilted her head, puzzled. "Um...may I ask your name?"

"Oh! Excuse me!" He hadn't even introduced himself. Flipping his employee ID card the right way around, he explained that the Operations Division had dispatched him to D Room.

Kaye's eyes narrowed as she thought it over, and then a bright smile bloomed on her face. "So, *you're* Bart Fifiel! Nice to meet you!"

Once again, Bart was struck by a feeling he'd had when he met Kaye in April: She didn't keep her guard up with humans. He had a hunch he'd have no problem talking to her once he got to know her better. Right now, though, they were anything but familiar. Even the flash of her fangs made his heart race.

"By the way, Bart, why were you going back upstairs?"

"Huh?" That made him pause. He couldn't bring himself to tell her the truth—that he'd been retreating. "I, uh...I got lost. Is...this the right way?"

"It is indeed! Great timing too! We can go together."

Bart trudged forward, and Kaye ushered him along. For better or worse, he found himself heading back toward D Room. He was glad he'd been able to talk to Kaye, at least. His fear was dissipating little by little.

Still, a question lingered in his mind: *Why do only dhampirs use ANSA's computer?* He didn't think dhampirs lacked talent compared to humans, but it was just plain odd from a historical standpoint.

Six million dhampirs were now officially registered in Arnack, but when they first arrived on the nation's shores in the sixteenth century, they'd numbered

only a hundred. Those “Originals,” as they came to be called, made a life with Arnack’s native people, who lived in small villages and worshipped the moon. Their communities revered and welcomed the Originals, who resembled the moon spirits of old legends.

Thus, the Originals bore descendants, and people gradually realized that vampires’ fangs, red eyes, and pointed ears were completely dominant genes. In other words, if a parent had vampire blood, their offspring always shared those physical attributes.

The vampires believed they’d found a safe place to call home, but their good fortune was short-lived. Newly immigrated human colonists claimed the land for themselves, guns in hand. The dhampirs and native people were subsequently captured and, by the seventeenth century, widely enslaved.

Because of dhampirs’ unique physical characteristics, humans made them a symbol of slavery, saying they’d “turned their backs on God.” They hammered the dhampirs with the idea that, after converting to the solar church, they could find God’s salvation in labor. The number of dhampir slaves grew, and a Civil War broke out over their treatment. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Emancipation Proclamation was issued. Dhampirs were finally free from human control.

At least, they should’ve been.

Though the declaration was official, the UK’s societal structure didn’t change, so dhampirs couldn’t escape its bottom rung. They remained poverty-stricken and generally unable to afford school fees. Given the absence of a suitable educational system, most had no choice but to work as laborers from a young age. A few more fortunate dhampirs studied at universities that accepted their applications, but they amounted to less than 1 percent of the dhampir population.

Even if a dhampir was exceptional enough to get a job at ANSA, there was no institution where groups of dhampirs could study computing. Such a facility simply didn’t exist.

Thus, Bart was incredibly curious—how had a group of dhampirs become D Room’s sole occupants? It was the equivalent of a sudden evolutionary leap. As

he and Kaye walked down the hall, he asked her about it.

The girl paused. “You’re...intrigued by our ability to use computers?” she said, looking concerned.

“It’s just that, well...nobody in the Operations Division knows how to.”

Looking down at the floor, Bart rubbed the back of his head, although it no longer hurt from his fall. That was just something he did when he talked to women—even women he’d spoken to more than once. He also avoided eye contact, especially in Kaye’s case, since she was a dhampir. He just couldn’t hold her red gaze.

“Um...” Kaye tapped her chin with a finger, thinking. “Let’s stop by the lounge to discuss it. I’m on break anyway, and it looks like that bump’s still hurting your head a little.”

The so-called lounge she took Bart to was in a storage area in the far part of the basement. There were no windows, junk was piled high, and naked light bulbs hung from the ceiling. Wooden boxes served as tables and chairs. The bleak location seemed a far cry from a “lounge.”

Bart and Kaye were technically free to use the official lounge, since the Keighley Research Center had abolished human-dhampir segregation in May. The government was pushing race reform at ANSA in response to Gergiev’s criticism of racial discrimination in Arnack. They’d even required the removal of signs limiting facility usage to one species or the other. However, nothing had actually changed, and Bart felt that invisible walls still separated the races. No dhampirs used washrooms that had once been labeled “human only,” and vice versa.

“Er, couldn’t we use the ground floor lounge?” he asked, assuming it couldn’t hurt.

Kaye’s response was almost apologetic. “I’m more comfortable here.”

Immediately, Bart regretted the suggestion. He cursed his lack of consideration, wishing he’d thought a little harder before opening his mouth.

Kaye didn’t seem particularly bothered, though. She gestured for Bart to take a seat. “Sorry it’s so dusty. The coffee’s the same as what humans drink, so help

yourself.” She pointed to the shelf that served as the coffee counter. It held an electric coffee pot and some sugar cubes.

“I guess I’ll, uh...have a cup of coffee, then.” Bart wasn’t that thirsty, but he didn’t feel like he could decline the offer.

Bart poured some coffee into his brand-new office mug. The thick liquid was pitch-black and looked to be very bitter. He perched on the corner of a wooden box, holding the mug, and Kaye sat across from him. Although he was still nervous and would’ve preferred a little more space between them, he sipped his coffee in silence.

The stuff was awful, to put it bluntly. Bart remembered hearing from his private tutor that, compared to humans, vampires had a very weak sense of taste. He wondered if they shrugged off coffee’s bitter flavor so long as it gave them a caffeine boost.

Just as he considered adding a little sugar, Kaye picked up a sugar cube and bit right into it. Bart almost spat out his coffee.

The young woman chuckled. “Shocked? I was thinking way too hard about some things earlier. I thought I’d refuel before getting back to work.”

“Um...all right.”

Her behavior threw Bart completely off guard. For a human, it would’ve been unbelievable, but Kaye chewed the sugar cube so casually that Bart decided it might be normal among dhampirs.

“Well, Bart, to answer your question about how we dhampirs learned computing... Do you know how long dhampirs have worked at ANSA?”

“I’ve never actually thought about it. Sorry.”

“Few have.” As Kaye continued, she took on the cadence of a museum tour guide. “Let’s begin around the time you and I were children—back when ANSA was the Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, focusing on fighter planes and rocket development for the military.”

Bart leaned in, taken by her calm delivery.

“Developing and expanding aerial technology massively increased calculation

requirements,” Kaye said. “That left researchers in a bind when it came to processing calculations. They wanted to solve the problem by hiring more staff—kind of a ‘human tidal wave’ strategy, if you will. And they could hire women for lower wages than men, so a large female team was assembled.”

After a breath, she went on, “In the beginning, it was solely human women working with analog calculators. They were nicknamed ‘human computers.’ But since the calculations got more complex, and the Great War caused a lack of manpower, dhampirs were hired temporarily. Up until then, we’d been prohibited from doing that type of job, so naturally, a lot of humans were unhappy with the prospect. Still, since hiring dhampirs could help end the war faster, humans generally considered it a necessary evil. To soften the blow, dhampirs’ wages were set at less than a third of human women’s.”

Her eyes narrowed at the thought of the dhampirs’ historical oppression.

“As I mentioned, the original plan was only to employ dhampirs in the short term. Since the government moved to abolish discrimination, a set number of dhampirs were allowed to continue working after the war. Keeping them on was probably more a matter of convenience than anything else. It’s true they weren’t fired, but they weren’t exactly welcome either.”

There was a hint of sorrow in Kaye’s voice. Bart tried to think of something to say, but she moved on.

“Digital computing was introduced some five years after the war. A number of facilities installed computers to meet military and production needs as well as support scientific calculation. A few years later, high-level programming languages were developed, allowing numerical formulas to be converted for use with computers. Then—”

Feeling as if he should actually respond, Bart tossed out a question. “Uh, high-level programming languages...?”

“Um, basically, there are a bunch of computer languages. High-level programming languages use words and terms similar to ours to communicate. For technological calculations, we use a language called FORX. Er, let me write an example.”

Taking a pen and notepad from her pocket, Kaye scribbled:

```
PROGRAM HELLO
```

```
DO 10, I=1,10
```

```
PRINT *, 'Hello Bart'
```

10 CONTINUE

“That’s the kind of code we use for programming,” she said.

Bart struggled to wrap his head around it. “If there are high-level programming languages, does that mean there are low-level ones too? Are they easier?”

Kaye shook her head. “Low-level languages are machine languages. You need to know them really well to use them. Here’s what a low-level language looks like.”

She wrote another example:

```
TZE PXD 0754 RTT 0760
```

It was like a secret code.

“Uh-huh... At least FORX contains words I know,” Bart muttered.

“Yeah, it’s so much easier to learn! That’s why FORX was created in the first place—to make programming easier by integrating familiar words.”

To Bart, Kaye explaining computing languages was like a goddess who’d descended from the heavens describing unknowable, unfathomable powers. And it seemed as if things would just get more and more bewildering.

Seeing the confusion on Bart’s face, Kaye smiled at him. “Don’t worry. We won’t throw the kitchen sink at you from the get-go in D Room. We’ll start with simple tasks so you have a chance to get used to everything.”

“All right.” Bart knew FORX would be something of a mountain to climb. It might even be harder to learn than a foreign language. “But, Kaye, where did

you learn all this?”

“I studied computer science in college in the North. That was where I first ran into ACE.”

Arnack Computing Electronics—ACE for short—was a leading global enterprise that supplied military machinery.

Science and engineering universities were generally pricey. For a moment, Bart imagined that Kaye might be a CEO’s daughter or similar. Some dhampirs, though not many, managed to accumulate great wealth through business ventures.

Kaye bit into another sugar cube. “The research organizations near my college all used computers for work. I knew right then and there that analog computing was on the way out and that digital computers would become central to science. So, I borrowed a textbook from a lab researcher who helped at ACE. Then I learned even more as an intern there.”

“ACE accepted you?” Bart was surprised; a number of companies barred dhampirs outright.

“They welcomed me, in fact. They’re devoted to spreading revolutionary technology,” Kaye replied. “ACE’s motto is ‘All are equal in the world of science,’ so I felt right at home.”

Despite what she said, working at the Keighley Research Center couldn’t have been easy for Kaye. The historical roots of discrimination still ran through the facility; that was crystal clear just by looking at the “lounge” they were sitting in.

As he learned more about the young dhampir woman, Bart understood why she didn’t prickle around humans. By this point in her journey, she must’ve interacted with lots of them. Still, who could possibly have imagined that the girl snacking on sugar cubes atop a wooden box was a master of cutting-edge technological know-how? Most ANSA employees probably had no clue.

“When did you join ANSA, Kaye?”

She chewed her sugar cube as she answered. “At the end of last year, when they first brought an ACE computer in. Back then, D Room was part of the

analytical calculations division, but I was the only staff member. ANSA loves new technology, and they didn't have a budget ceiling, so I think they just figured they'd get a computer and see how it went. The dhampir technician was an added bonus."

"Bonus?"

"Well, yeah. Human employees need promotions and salaries, but me? I'm the bottom of the barrel. All I need is a little pig blood, and I'm fine."

"Huh? Blood?"

"It isn't much, is it? That's why I told them to throw in some cheese too." A bolt of anger flashed across Kaye's face. Then she eased into a giggle, shrugging. "Just kidding."

"Oh, uh... Heh." Since he'd taken her words at face value, Bart was a bit taken aback. He felt a little closer to Kaye now that he knew she sometimes cracked jokes.

"So I came here to ANSA and met other dhampirs doing computing work like humans. They were all bright, but they only knew analog computing. Maybe I stepped out of line, but I took it upon myself to teach them FORX and data processing. They were skeptical of the white elephant at first, but I brought them around. I warned them that if they didn't stay ahead of the curve, they'd lose their jobs. I mean, if ANSA educated its staff about computers, humans would always be preferred for computer-related roles."

Thanks to Kaye's foresight, when D Room was officially established, only dhampir staff knew how to use computers. Thus, they were automatically assigned to the team. She was the sole reason all the D Room employees were dhampirs.

"Hm?" Just then, a sudden thought occurred to Bart. *If Kaye's been here since last year, maybe she was involved in Aaron's spaceflight?*

When he asked, Kaye smiled. "Yep! I did some calculations for it. But his flight was just suborbital, so doing them without a computer was easy."

"Easy? Really?"

“Yeah. You just had to consider Earth’s rotation from the rocket’s launch angle to its reentry point. Oh, but I did need to correct other calculations, since the human scientists who did them first made a mistake.”

Kaye must have noticed the error right when they brought her the aforementioned calculations. “So...if you hadn’t been here, the launch might’ve failed?” Bart said.

“Probably.”

The young D Room manager’s potential seemed immeasurable. “It’s like you’re introducing me to a completely different person from the woman who fell down the stairs,” Bart said with admiration.

Kaye’s gaze went to the floor, and her face flushed in embarrassment. “Oh, that. My mind was preoccupied with orbital flight. We have to formulate a new equation for it.”

The orbital flight calculations, she explained, needed to accommodate various elements that were never factored in previously. They included Earth’s rotation speed, imperfectly spherical shape, and gravitational pull, as well as the speed and weight of the rocket itself.

“When I concentrate, my head fills with numbers, and I lose sight of what’s around me,” Kaye told him. “It feels like I use my brain’s entire processing power.”

Bart glanced at the top of her head. “Wow. You use so much brainpower, your feet slip.”

Kaye waved him off. “Please just forget that fall—and definitely don’t tell anyone in D Room about it! They’d give me grief again.”

“*Again?* Do you fall down stairs often?”

“Urk!” Kaye’s red cheeks puffed out. Apparently, Bart had touched a nerve. She cocked her head with a blank expression. “Did I say ‘again’? Must’ve been a slip of the tongue.”

“Wait. Just now, you—” Bart stopped himself, remembering the day the two had first met. “Come to think of it, you *did* crash that ‘Blue Angel’ compact

satellite, right?”

Kaye’s eyes went wide as full moons, and she let out a bewildered grunt.

“Was that another thing your team gave you grief for agai—”

“N-no! That compact satellite had nothing to do with D Room! It was a hobby I was pursuing on my own. I was running that orbital flight experiment to check calculations!”



Kaye seemed upset; Bart could tell she really didn't like his bringing up the crash. Her reaction was so funny that he couldn't help pushing her a little further, although he knew it was a bit mean. "You checked those calculations on the computer?"

"I did, and the *calculations* were perfect! Th-the problem was...the satellite I constructed." Kaye twisted her wrist, pretending to tighten a screw. Even the way she mimed the action suggested she wasn't great at it.

"Did you make the satellite yourself, Kaye?"

"Er..." Her face was all the answer he needed.

Bart saw this as a good opportunity to bring up his own experiences. They'd landed on a topic they had in common, and he hoped they could talk about it again in the future. "I've actually done that, you know. I mean, constructed a compact satellite for fun."

"Wha—?! It wasn't 'for fun'! It was an experiment!"

"An experiment, huh?"

"A-anyway, the satellite's got nothing to do with D Room! It's a secret—and so is my fall down the stairs! Got it?!"

As if Bart were dreaming, the logical young woman he'd been talking to was suddenly replaced by a distraught girl who reminded him of a deer in headlights. She was so panicked that he felt sorry for her.

"It's a secret, I tell you! Are we clear, Bart?!"

"Uh, crystal."

His reply didn't inspire Kaye's confidence, and she leaned forward, baring her fangs. "You will keep mum about this under all circumstances! *All* circumstances! You're going to forget the Blue Angel!"

"Okay, okay!" Bart nodded apologetically. "Consider it forgotten. Sorry."

Kaye let out a little breath, calming herself. "I'm sorry too. I... When it comes to calculations, my work is perfect. Now let's go." With that, she stood and left the lounge.

Bart sat for a moment, stunned, and wondered what to do about his coffee. When he couldn't see a place to throw it out, he drank it in a big gulp. "Ugh! So bitter."

Worry was starting to give him stomach pangs. He hoped the other dhampirs were as easy to talk to as Kaye.

Kaye led the way to the D Room door. Employees nameplates were displayed beside it, as they had been in the Operations Division. At the bottom of the row of ten red nameplates, Bart placed his own. Human nameplates were white, while dhampirs' were red; the color difference made it all too clear that Bart was an outsider.

Through the window, he saw dhampirs busy doing office work around a huge, boxy, coffin-like machine with a one-of-a-kind presence. The white elephant.

The "coffin's" interior was like nothing Bart had ever seen before. It was full of switches, knobs, and two spinning reels. There was a component that sucked cards in with jerky motions and another that spat them out.

This wasn't the eerie Vampires' Nest he'd expected. It was more like a secret base from a science fiction novel.

"Well, go ahead, Bart." Kaye gestured with one hand.

Come on, let's do this.

As he stepped into D Room, Bart felt a chill on his neck and caught the scent of something like perfume. It tickled his nostrils, reminding him of a department store makeup department.

"Huh? Is that...a human?"

The female dhampirs had noticed him and were whispering among themselves. They had no reason to welcome him; on the contrary, Bart wanted to apologize on behalf of the entire human race. Pierced by the women's red eyes, he froze like a catfish surrounded by gators.

"This is Bart Fifield," Kaye told everyone in an easygoing voice. "He's been dispatched from the Operations Division."

“Uh...” Bart gave an awkward bow of sorts, simultaneously sneaking a peek at the dhampirs in the room.

Kaye was the only one with pure silver hair. The others were brunettes. Their ages varied—one woman looked even older than Bart’s mother. Perhaps she’d worked here since the war. There wasn’t a starched white shirt among them; everyone was wearing whatever they liked.

“Bart, perhaps you could introduce yourself?” Kaye prompted.

Bart felt entirely unprepared for the situation, however, and he repeated Kaye’s introduction almost verbatim. “I’m Bart Fifield. I was dispatched from the Operations Division.”

There was no applause in response, only the clanking sounds of the nearby machinery. It was unbearable. Bart shot a pleading gaze at Kaye.

She pointed to a simple desk in the corner. “That’s your desk. I need to look after some things, so ask Mia to catch you up on the rest.” Kaye then headed toward the machine in the center of the room.

Left entirely alone, Bart shuffled to the corner and put down his things. On his desk, he found a general operations manual and a hundred-page textbook titled *ACE Reference Book*. He flipped through it. The textbook was full of equations he’d never seen, as well as explanations of machinery, FORX, and other strange topics.

The dhampir next to Bart—presumably Mia—continued to focus on her work without sparing him so much as a glance. She appeared to be the youngest team member; she probably could’ve passed as a high schooler. Her hair was slightly reddish, and there was something foreign about her features, as though her family tree might include immigrants.

Bart felt awkward about disturbing Mia while she was working so hard, but he drummed up his courage and spoke. “I’m sorry to ask you for help, but Kaye said I cou—”

“Mia Toreador,” she said flatly.

Her snappish answer was like a prickly cactus stabbing Bart’s heart.

“I’ll give you the rundown.” Mia stood and pointed her pen toward the coffin-like machine. “That’s the ACE data-processing system.”

Bart fumbled for a pen to jot down notes.

Pointing at D Room’s different devices, Mia introduced each in a curt fashion. “That machine Kaye’s working on is the central processing unit—the CPU. The input unit consists of a card reader and magnetic tape drive. The output unit’s made up of a card punch and magnetic tape drive. That’s the printer. That’s the CRT recorder.”

Bart wrote as quickly as he could but just couldn’t keep up, especially since Mia had said “magnetic tape drive” twice now, and he had no idea what that was. “Um...Miss Toreador?”

“Display, magnetic drum storage, magnetic core storage, data synchronizer. That’s everything.” Mia clearly had zero interest in showing Bart the ropes. “Next...”

Bart grabbed his manual and textbook, following behind her. Kaye was friendly, but he felt a solid wall between Mia and himself. Maybe that was actually typical of human-dhampir relations. Regardless, he felt she took it to an extreme.

“This paper’s for punch cards. Those are used for programs.”

A staff member was flipping over thick sheets of rectangular paper, about nine by nineteen centimeters in size. There were eighty horizontal and twelve vertical rows of paper, each printed with the numbers one through nine. Paper “punch cards” weren’t unique to this white-elephant computer. They were also used for statistical processing in government offices, so Bart knew of them, although he’d never actually handled one.

Another employee was penciling a program on a sheet of grid paper with eighty squares per line. “That’s coding paper,” Mia said. “You need it for the punch cards.”

Putting together her fragmentary explanations, Bart began to understand. According to his manual, coding paper was brought to the key-punch operator, and they punched holes into punch cards based on that coding paper. That was

how data and programs were recorded onto punch cards.

However, the process wasn't quite that simple. One punch card equaled one line of programming, so a fifty-step program required fifty punch cards. Complicated programs needed thousands. Boxes, each full of two thousand cards, were piled high in one corner of D Room.

Having walked a lap around the office, Mia returned to her seat. "I'll teach you the particulars when you start using the equipment. Until then, read up."

Bart obediently followed her orders and attempted to study, but he was so curious about D Room that he couldn't concentrate. The conversation flying back and forth consisted entirely of equations and computing language; not a single word seemed connected to space travel. Even his textbook made no mention of the topic—it was limited to explanations of computing and computational science, equations and complex numbers, jargon Bart had never come across, and technical terms like "loop-level parallelism" he couldn't even begin to understand.

Next to Bart, D Room's eldest team member rummaged through a cabinet of countless drawers. "Huh? Where are the purple felt-tip pens?"

"Oh, I know!" Kaye put a finger to her right temple and closed her eyes. "Hrm... In the fifth drawer, second row from the left."

"Ah, there they are! Right again!"

Kaye's memory was impressive, although Bart found something strange about it too. He tried to work out exactly what, but just then, one of D Room's machines made a strange grinding sound. The card reader had jammed.

"Wait! No!" someone shrieked.

"Happens all the time," Mia muttered.

If a punch card's corners were even slightly crinkled, the reader jammed and bent the card out of shape. At that point, the key-punch operator had to remake the card.

"We can just redo it," Kaye said, trying to cheer up the employee who'd caused the jam.

The dhampirs attempted to remove the bent punch card, but it was stuck deep in the machine. As he watched, Bart felt an urge to help. He was dexterous—particularly good at repairs and detail-oriented work—which had come in very handy while he was in the air force.

Kaye stood with her hands on her hips in front of the card reader, looking at the machine dejectedly. “You’re awfully sensitive. I suppose we won’t get anywhere unless we call for help.”

Bart couldn’t bear to watch any longer. He stood from his chair and walked over to Kaye. “Uh, maybe I can help?”

“You know how?!”

“Possibly...”

Borrowing the tool the dhampirs had been using, Bart disassembled the machine and removed the jammed punch card. As he’d guessed, the card reader wasn’t nearly as complicated as the machinery he’d worked with in the air force.

“All right. That should do it.”

The dhampirs turned the machine back on, and the card reader rumbled as if it were happy to be working again. A few of the staffers tittered in admiration.

“Wow!”

“He did it!”

“So smoothly too!”

Kaye’s eyes lit up, and she clapped. To someone as clumsy as her, watching Bart fix the jam was like seeing a deity perform a miracle before her eyes. She wasn’t alone; other dhampirs shot him looks of envy.

Bart felt suddenly shy and bashful. It didn’t *feel* like he’d done anything. “I can do that kind of thing...whenever you need the help,” he said. Fixing his glasses nervously, he headed back to his desk.

“Um...Bart?” Kaye called out, stopping him.

“Yes?”

“There’s, uh, one more thing I’d like your help with.” Looking hesitant, she pointed at the boxes piled in the corner of the room. “Would you mind moving those punch cards?”

And so he did. The boxes were so heavy that pain shot through Bart’s back and arms. Still, he loaded them on the cart and pushed them behind Kaye to the key-punch operator. The cart’s wheels creaked under the tremendous weight.

Bart was already exhausted. “Whoa... They’re so heavy, it’s a real struggle just to turn corners.”

“Be careful,” Kaye said, brow furrowed in worry. “If the boxes fall and the cards are mixed up or bent out of shape, you’ll get on everyone’s bad side.”

“Please don’t threaten me.”

“That’s no threat. It’s a warning. They get really mad. Like, *livid*.”

Kaye’s words rang true somehow. Bart wondered whether she’d been on the receiving end of that anger. In fact, he was almost sure she had. He held off joking about it in case she exploded again.

“I know what you’re thinking. ‘I bet she’s tipped the cart over.’ Right?”

“Uh, actually, yes.” The answer slipped from his mouth before he could stop it.

“Ergh...” She looked vexed but quelled it.

She shouldn’t have asked to begin with, Bart thought. But regardless of what Kaye had or hadn’t done, he knew this heavy labor must’ve been tough for the team of female dhampirs.

“Can I ask you something?” Kaye said, derailing his train of thought.

“Sure.” At the same time, he thought, *What now?*

“Does it bother you to have Mia and I teach you things and give you instructions?” Kaye’s expression showed that she was serious.

“Huh?! No, of course not. Is that how it looks?”

She tilted her head to one side. “No. I just thought you might dislike it.”

“Not at all. Actually, I think it’s amazing that you can use computers.” Bart

wasn't trying to be kind; he was just being honest.

"Hunh..." Kaye let out a sigh of surprise and admiration, her eyes curious.

Bart's answer made sense, since he didn't think much like the general public. The popular consensus was "humans above dhampirs," and many humans would've felt humiliated having a dhampir order them around. That discrimination was rooted in fear—people didn't want life as they knew it threatened.

For a long time, dhampir workers had been relegated to rural farms. Many were laid off as industrialization arose in the twentieth century. They flowed into cities for work, creating competition for employment between the dhampir and human working class. The latter felt threatened, since employers could hire dhampir workers much more cheaply than humans.

That led cruel, inconsiderate humans to try to stamp the dhampirs out, saying, "We will not recognize the rights of former slaves! Dhampirs belong in the underbelly of society!"

Kaye had never mentioned discrimination within ANSA, but it was very possible that the human computers who weren't part of D Room held a grudge against the dhampir team.

"Phew... I think that's all of them." Bart's back ached as he unloaded the last box, passing the key-punch operator another huge load of punch cards.

It would be a few days before the team saw any benefits from moving the boxes. Processing punch cards took a while, although the white elephant's overwhelming calculation speed outweighed the time and effort of programming.

All in all, Bart didn't understand any of this—not the punch card holes, nor the indecipherable FORX commands. "So," he asked, curious, "what does that huge punch card collection have to do with rockets?"

Kaye grimaced. "I have no idea, unfortunately. We just receive materials to calculate from each division and process them automatically."

"Without knowing what they are?"

“Yeah. Other divisions won’t tell our department anything unnecessary.”

It was perhaps true that, if D Room’s team simply solved equations and created formulas, they didn’t exactly *need* the explanations behind the materials they received. Nevertheless, Bart was surprised that an ANSA division seemed so far removed from outer space and the stars.

“But what harm is there in telling you?”

“It was decided that, if our team knew the purpose of our calculations, there was a chance we’d sell that information to somebody outside,” Kaye said reluctantly.

“Wait. You mean, like, a spy?” *Don’t they trust you?* he wanted to ask, but he swallowed them down so as not to be rude.

However, Kaye changed the subject. “This kind of work seems boring to you, doesn’t it?”

She was exactly right, but Bart downplayed it. “No, it doesn’t. We’re all part of space development here, whatever our role is.”

“Right.” Kaye smiled. “Everyone’s got their eyes on the skies. In our own way, D Room’s proudly reaching for the same thing.”

This conversation was reminding Bart that, although D Room worked with stellar technology, their tasks were incredibly covert and secret. “By the way, how long did it take other D Room staff to learn to use the computer?”

“About three to six months.” She went on to tell him that half the team consisted of talented dhampirs from rural areas.

Bart knew he’d have to work hard not to fall behind. “Also, Division Chief Damon mentioned an ‘extremely important project’ to me—have you heard anything about that?”

“An important project?” Kaye tilted her head. She clearly had no idea what he was talking about.

Bart realized then that if the higher-ups hid calculation details from Kaye’s team, there was no way they’d share project information. “Oh, if you don’t know, don’t worry about it. He might’ve been talking about a different

division.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, let’s head back.”

Suddenly, Bart’s stomach grumbled; he felt as if it were being pricked. The culprit was either the stress of returning to the Vampires’ Nest or the extremely bitter coffee he’d gulped down earlier. Chances were it was both.

“I need to use the bathroom first,” he said. “Excuse me, Kaye.”

Running to the nearest restroom, Bart sat in a stall and sighed in relief. The day had been hectic from the start, but now he could finally relax.

When he clocked in, he never imagined Damon would drop him into the Vampires’ Nest. All the strange, head-splitting new terms, the jam-prone machinery, and the incredibly heavy punch cards... It was no wonder humans avoided the white elephant. The machine was like nothing Bart had ever handled before. It seemed difficult to grasp, unapproachable.

“Where’d space go?” he sighed.

From the basement, Bart couldn’t see *anything*. He remembered Kaye’s words—“*Everyone’s got their eyes on the skies*”—but he couldn’t help questioning them.

“Guess I’ll put my hopes in that ‘extremely important project,’ then.”

He didn’t want to get fired for being less than a catfish, so he had to get to work. If he trusted what Kaye had said, then when computers became the core of scientific development, he’d have a strong advantage. This ability to think positively when he was down in the dumps was one of Bart’s strengths.

“I should get back,” he muttered. “Too long in here, and they’ll think I’m slacking on the job.”

As Bart left the stall, however, he found himself staring straight at a dhampir man wearing coveralls.

“Oh!”

“Eep!”

They were close enough that they almost collided. Bart’s heart nearly

stopped. The brawny, intimidating dhampir's eyes widened in shock at having bumped into a human *here*, of all places.

"Er... Pardon me." Bart nodded timidly.

"No, pardon me," the dhampir replied awkwardly, nodding back as they gave each other room to pass.

This was the same research facility Bart knew, yet it felt like an entirely different country. Leaving the bathroom, he glanced at his watch. It was almost lunch, but he didn't have an appetite—not because of his stomachache but because of mental exhaustion.

Maybe I'll just buy salad and spend some time by myself on that hill in the cotton field.

The cafeteria was packed at lunchtime, filled with noisy chatter and the smell of oil. There was an invisible wall between humans and dhampirs here as well. Humans took the well-lit seats by the windows, forcing the dhampirs into dimmer corner areas.

And then there was Bart, eating bean salad with the D Room team. Across from him, Kaye ate french fries and okra soup. Bart had planned to head outside by himself, but the moment he returned to D Room, Kaye invited him to lunch. He'd had no choice but to agree; he was horrible at turning people down.

On one hand, he was grateful that Kaye was so kind. On the other, the cafeteria's suffocating atmosphere was uncomfortable. Nearby dhampirs looked at him as if to ask, "What's a human doing *here*?" while humans peered over as if wondering, "What's a human doing *there*?" Bart didn't even have the energy to eat his salad.

Kaye watched him push beans around with his fork. "No appetite, Bart? Are you not feeling well?" She seemed worried.

"No, I'm all right." He forced a bean into his mouth.

Kaye's french fries floated in a ketchup ocean. She took a spoon to them as if eating stew. She even squeezed ketchup into her okra soup, turning it red. It

wasn't just Kaye who had odd eating habits—all the dhampirs went way over the top with seasonings and condiments.

Noticing Bart's eyes on her, she meekly said, "I, um... I like ketchup."

Bart held off from saying, *Yes, I can see that*. Instead, he changed tack. "Doesn't the cafeteria lady get mad at you for using too much?"

"Uh..." Kaye licked ketchup from the corner of her mouth, looking embarrassed. "A while ago, she got really angry. She was like, 'If you're going to use a whole bottle, go buy your own damn ketchup!' Ha ha! So, that's what we all do now. If I don't use a lot, I don't feel like I ate."

Although they consumed the same food as humans, dhampirs evidently found the flavor too bland. Even Mia, sitting next to Kaye, had poured extremely spicy habanero sauce into her already bright-scarlet red pepper soup. That just perplexed Bart; it looked as if Mia were eating pure heat.

Mia looked back at him. "Want to spice up your salad?"

"Er, I'm fine. I'm not so good with spicy food."

Mia waited for Kaye to turn her attention toward her fries, whereupon she poured habanero sauce into Kaye's soup. She kept a straight face the entire time she set up the prank, and Bart opted to pretend he hadn't seen it. Still, he wondered how dhampirs' sense of taste worked.

Then he remembered something his private tutor had told him. "Oh..."

Originals and dhampirs looked similar, but their five senses were actually quite different. Originals' cold resistance was high, since they came from frigid areas. And, because daylight was limited in those locations, they'd developed the ability to see in the dark. Furthermore, since their main sources of sustenance were blood and animal milk—which consisted of the same elements—they didn't register the taste of anything but blood.

Dhampirs had human ancestors, and they'd adapted to the United Kingdom's environment over several generations. Therefore, their senses were more similar to humans'. They could withstand heat and sunlight, and they had a vague sense of taste. Overly rich or salty food didn't sicken dhampirs, though, perhaps thanks to their vampiric lineage.

As for vampiric behavior, a scant few dhampirs developed something called Nosferatu Syndrome during blood moons and on other nights when the moon was stained red. There was no detailed research on that phenomenon.

Though dhampirs descended from vampires, who were known to drink blood, dhampir bites hadn't caused any human deaths in recent years. To the mass media, Nosferatu Syndrome was too delicious a story to resist, but the news reported animals being bitten a few times annually at most. Whenever an animal-biting incident *did* occur, however, it caused uproar; humans reacted as if it were the work of a serial killer.

There were also "attempted blood-sucking incidents" in which humans shot dhampirs and then defended themselves by claiming the victim had tried to bite them. The human supremacy movement supposedly concocted that excuse to mask straightforward shootings as legal self-defense. Still, since only humans made courtroom decisions, the punishment was often light when a dhampir had been killed. It was common for a shooter to receive a few years in jail at most—or be found innocent for lack of definitive proof.

Brrrrriing! The cafeteria bells suddenly rang out for an emergency broadcast.

"Hm?"

The casual atmosphere in the room suddenly froze. Bart unconsciously squeezed his fork. Kaye paused, her bowl of steaming soup hovering in her hands. All conversation stopped.

Had nuclear war finally broken out?

A tense voice boomed from speakers near the ceiling, reading an announcement. *"The cosmonaut Mikhail Yashin is currently in the midst of spaceflight."*

The message came as a total shock, like an unprovoked slap in the face. Everyone held their breath and waited for more.

"We've been informed that, over the course of twenty-five hours, he's lapped Earth twenty times, eaten three meals, and slept."

This declaration dizzied everyone in the room.

“Are they serious?” Bart muttered.

The United Kingdom had only achieved suborbital spaceflight. Now the distance between the two countries’ successes was even greater.

Right then, the frozen air in the room shattered into all sorts of conversations. Some people were stock-still in disbelief. A few groups ran from the cafeteria.

The UZSR’s incredible, Bart thought. He was more impressed than upset or embarrassed at the Zirnitra Union’s engineering might. At the same time, he felt heartsick that the value of his own brother’s flight was fading.

Across from Bart, Kaye stared blankly at the ceiling, her soup bowl still clasped in her hands. “*Incredible.*” He didn’t hear her say it, but from reading her lips, he knew that she had. Still dazed, Kaye brought the soup to her mouth and devoured the entire bowl. A moment later, her eyes widened.

“Hngh!” Kaye hurriedly dropped the bowl on the table with a crash, her hands grasping at her throat. “It’s hot! Hoooot!”

Bart and the rest of the D Room team watched her sudden outburst in astonishment.

Kaye’s scarlet eyes grew wet with tears. “W-wa...w-wat...”

“What? ‘What’ what?” Mia said, her eyes glinting mischievously.

Kaye gasped for breath. “*Water!*” She was acting as though she’d been burned, all thanks to Mia’s extra-spicy addition to her soup. Bart didn’t even want to imagine its flavor. Sticking out her tongue as if cooling it on the surrounding air, Kaye gulped some water down.

“What’s wrong, Kaye?” Mia asked without a hint of guilt.

Sweat poured from Kaye’s forehead as she flapped her hands, downplaying the situation. “N-nothing! I thought I was drinking water, but it was soup. Quite a shock!”

How do you mistake soup for water? Bart wanted to tease her, but he kept the comment to himself.

Mia gave Kaye a long look. “I bet your mind was on another calculation, wasn’t it?”

Kaye laughed. “Today’s soup is really, really spicy!”

“Well, I didn’t expect you to drink it in a single gulp.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Mia looked away, sipping her own bright-red soup, and Kaye turned to Bart with a slightly awkward smile. Unsure how to respond, Bart smiled back. It was clear to everyone that Kaye was absentminded, to the extent that they could use the trait to play practical jokes on her. Since Kaye had told him to keep his mouth shut about the Blue Angel, though, Bart decided to forget Mia’s prank too.

The heart of Laika Crescent was lined with buildings that gave off the scent of history. Tourists often roamed the beautifully decorated city streets, sampling the many restaurants serving freshly caught seafood. Upper-crust residential neighborhoods—places highly paid doctors and lawyers called home—made up the expensive surrounding areas.

By contrast, Keighley Center employees received low monthly wages. They lived away from the city center, either on the lakeshore or outside town. ANSA didn’t have to worry about a budget, but despite the organization’s cutting-edge research, its wages were no different from a small-town factory’s. Bart was a new recruit, so his salary was nothing to write home about, and he lived in a dirt-cheap, twenty-year-old apartment on the Misibi River.

Upon his return home from the Vampires’ Nest, Bart was utterly exhausted. Even a shower didn’t make him feel any better. He sank into his easy chair and drank an ice-filled glass of cola. He’d bought a science magazine on his way home, but he lacked the energy to read it, so he’d just thrown it atop his messy bookshelf. There was a baseball match on television, and his home team was losing by nine runs.

Taking a deep breath, Bart thought back on the day’s events. He’d left for work enveloped in joy, but his exuberance had completely disappeared.

“So, which comes first?” he muttered. “Our arrival on the moon or my

breakdown?”

Bart’s last-ditch hope was the “extremely important project” Division Chief Damon had mentioned. That the Chief himself hadn’t come off as particularly excited alarmed Bart somewhat. He had a crushing feeling that it was because Damon had less faith in him than a catfish.

Once the baseball game ended, the news took its place. *“As dhampir unrest grows, another large-scale protest has taken place...”*

There hadn’t been any good news for several days now.

“Violence broke out, and the dhampirs were suppressed. We have information about the many injured...”

Danger was part of protesting, and some human supremacists took advantage of uproar to incite violence. The clearest example of that was a secret society known as the Solar Flare Club.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, secret societies of all kinds were in vogue among human males. The Solar Flare Club was one of many, and when it began, it was far from an extremist organization. Rather, bored youths inspired by Nosferatu fiction had started it as an occult group. They donned black hoods and beaked plague masks, invented unsettling rituals to worship the sun god Hyperion, and goofed around chasing dhampirs. As the Solar Flare Club’s numbers slowly increased, however, their mischief gave way to harassment and worse. Suddenly, they became an organization with a dangerous central belief—that dhampirs were an evil the Solar Flare Club needed to purify.

Club members masqueraded as ordinary, law-abiding citizens by day and donned their masks to wreak havoc at night. They included former soldiers and coal miners with expertise using explosives, which the club had recently planted in dhampir homes and churches. This destructive behavior was a crime but often overlooked—particularly in cities where the town sheriff and state police officers were also members of the club. Since law enforcement usually couldn’t trace the offenses to clear culprits, arrests and prosecutions of Solar Flare Club members were rare, and people eventually dubbed the events “ghostly devilry.”

Laika Crescent was no exception to Solar Flare Club activity. Once, when Bart was walking along the Misibi River long after dark, he'd encountered a group conducting some kind of ceremony around a bonfire. They'd looked straight out of the Middle Ages as they crept around in the dead of night. Even from afar, Bart saw what they were burning: photos of Irina Luminesk and others who fought for civil rights. Bart's hair had stood on end at the sight of it all, and he'd run away as quickly as he could. Ever since then, he refrained from going out late in the evening. The bloodcurdling image of those ghosts was burned into his mind.

"Still...I never imagined I'd be working with dhampirs."

Bart turned his gaze out the window. The Misibi River's muddy water flowed lazily under the dim moonlight. After the Civil War, the river had been stained red, which earned it the ominous nickname "Blood River." At the same time, it was also called Laika Crescent's "bloodline"—its human-dhampir border.

The Misibi drew a clear line between the human and dhampir residential districts. Dhampirs made up 90 percent of the Moonlight District on the river's far side. The remaining 10 percent were humans with dhampir families, poverty-stricken immigrants, and unlawful residents. If the Crescent Moon District where only humans lived was light, the Moonlight District was the darkness. Gunshots rang out there from time to time, and the general attitude was that the Moonlight District was unsafe and that humans should avoid entering unless necessary. Bart was not one to put himself in harm's way, so he'd never crossed the bridge into the Moonlight District.

Having now worked in D Room for a day, however, Bart didn't consider Kaye and the other dhampirs all that distinct from humans. They had a unique look and ate differently, but those were the only significant variances. Among humans, there was a pervasive image of dhampirs as inferior—dishonest and lazy—but that was the polar opposite of what Bart had seen.

The news transitioned to a report on cosmonaut Mikhail Yashin's orbital flight. *"First Secretary Gergiev of the UZSR has made an official statement."*

The picture shifted to Gergiev, full of confidence, his victorious grin clear as he spoke. *"While the United Kingdom is busy playing catch and launching*

fireworks, we've taken another step closer to the moon!"

For the keen listener, "playing catch" was an obvious jab at the UK's suborbital spaceflight, while "fireworks" alluded to their failed launch.

"That guy really looks down on us," Bart said with a sigh. It was frustrating, but as long as the UK kept failing, they'd have no retort to Gergiev's comments.

In 1957, the launch that the United Kingdom attempted in response to Parusnyĭ One had exploded in two seconds. In 1959, the UZSR took a photo of the far side of the moon, and the UK failed a second time. Then Irina Luminesk, Lev Leps, and Mikhail Yashin's spaceflights had taken place.

"If the UZSR loads rockets with nuclear bombs, it's all over." The newscaster was only helping to fan the flames of uncertainty. *"If their satellites capture photographs of our Department of Defense, it's all over. Is ANSA much more than a huge elephant devouring the national budget?"*

"We're doing the best we can," Bart muttered.

Turning off the television, he drank the rest of his cola, its ice now melted.

Even as he did his utmost at ANSA, he felt as if he were crawling through the darkness of space.

Star Eyes

THE UK HAD NO CHOICE but to recognize cosmonaut Mikhail Yashin's success. Officials met for an emergency meeting at ANSA's headquarters up north in Erikson, D.E., the UK's capital city. The Prime Minister, other cabinet politicians, the Administrator of ANSA, and ANSA's top scientists were among those gathered to discuss countermeasures.

"Yashin's flight spanned multiple days. They're warning us that they can drop a nuke whenever they please!" spat an enraged senator. "Gergiev's spouting a message of peace, but that's just a cheap way to win the world's support!"

Unbeknownst to the general public, the UK's government was in the process

of building a huge bunker beneath a hotel to protect themselves in the event of a nuclear strike. They were downright terrified.

“If we don’t do something, we won’t even be able to look our own queen in the eye!”

Arnack’s queen, a young woman who would turn eighteen that year, hadn’t said a single word regarding the space program. Not by choice, however—Congress had kept her quiet, since she held a vastly influential position.

As the emergency meeting progressed, heated arguments flew back and forth between those in favor of space development and those against it.

“The people are frightened,” one attendee insisted. “We must show them that the United Kingdom can rival the Zirnitra Union. That means launching a successful orbital flight as soon as possible!”

Yet again, the problem of funds reared its head. When the UK’s citizens had learned of the project’s enormous budget, they exploded into criticism. But since the moon landing had been announced, ANSA needed to push ahead with it.

“We have riots breaking out across the country and the threat of war outside it! Countless areas are in desperate need of tax money! How long do we intend to gamble on these expensive failures?!”

“Without our current budget, we can’t succeed,” said a space development proponent. “The metal rockets, the combustion and guidance systems—we need to make them all over again every time there’s a launch!”

One reason for the ongoing launch failures was that private companies bid on each aspect of rocket production. Cheaper bids were typically chosen, leading to rockets developed with lower-quality parts.

Money budgeted for the Space Race was actually only 10 percent of what was set aside for the military. The space program was just an easy target for criticism. “Space” and “historical first” were easy buzzwords to pick up on. Additionally, the launches hadn’t resulted in any clear victories.

However, it wasn’t just dreams and romantic ideals that had the United Kingdom reaching for the moon. It was also stubborn pride. People had long

questioned the value of sending humans to space. Unmanned spaceflight was already possible, and it was more than adequate for scientific research and exploration. There was very little to gain from sending people to space besides prestige and media coverage. Likewise, landing a manned flight on the moon had zero value outside besting the Zirnitra Union. Everyone at the highest ranks of government understood that reality.

A senator had once asked ANSA's Vice Administrator, "What practical purpose is there in sending someone to the moon?"

The Vice Administrator had quickly replied, "None, in my opinion. If we're shooting for scientific advances, we should ignore the Union and set our sights on establishing a laboratory in outer space or aiming unmanned probes at its vast reaches."

This was a valid opinion, but the senator had an excellent counterpoint: "Taxpayers won't celebrate victories achieved by an unmanned probe. People want a modern-day hero."

In the end, it was the Union that had produced "hero" cosmonauts, and the emergency meeting continued with a report on Lev and Irina: "The first cosmonauts are now touring countries bordering the Union. They're welcomed wherever they go. The two of them are quickly becoming global heroes."

As Irina's popularity rose, the UK's dhampirs grew more restless, and their discrimination came under fire worldwide. Everyone was falling under Gergiev's spell.

"If we keep sitting here, twiddling our thumbs, their chief designer will unleash his next work of sorcery!"

The identity of the man responsible for the Union's rockets was still a mystery, and he frightened the UK government like some kind of demon. Despite having agents all over the globe, the UK's information bureau simply couldn't infiltrate the Union's internal affairs.

As arguments raged on, a middle-aged man with white hair quietly raised his hand. "May I have a word?"

Everyone turned toward him. The one who'd spoken was Vil Klaus, the UK's

rocket development supervisor. He spoke calmly, with a foreign accent.

“Reaching the moon requires completely different skills and technology than orbital flight. The Union still lacks the means to do so, as far as our data analysis is concerned.”

Although the UK’s spies couldn’t enter the UZSR, it was still possible to use radar to analyze the country’s orbital flights and gain a general sense of their technological abilities.

“So now what?” someone asked. “We keep *talking* about the moon, but we’re still ‘playing catch.’”

“My rockets are somewhat risky for the moment, but they are capable of orbital flight,” Klaus replied. “The errors that caused Rocket No. 3 to fail in March have already been corrected. There will be no more ‘fireworks.’ ACE’s processing capabilities are likewise more than adequate. We can also use *her* technical report and research thesis.”

Though Klaus was rocket supervisor, he wouldn’t accept the blame for past failures. The primary reason for the UK’s slow progress was pointless infighting between the army, navy, and air force, which had handled rocket development originally. They’d booted Klaus and his team from rocket development on account of their status as immigrants, transferring them to a remote laboratory where it was difficult to make headway.

In the wake of the “Parusnyĭ Shock,” the armed forces were forced to reconsider their position. Realizing that infighting would only lead to self-destruction, the Department of Defense organized space development under a single banner: ANSA.

Once Klaus was appointed development supervisor, rocket development made a full turnaround. Klaus knew sending humans to the moon was a pointless endeavor, but his passion went beyond the goal’s pragmatic value.

Regardless, the United Kingdom’s citizens didn’t know of the long road ANSA had traveled to modern rocket development. They judged based on what they saw—results. After the Union achieved spaceflight, the UK’s public had considered Klaus useless, going so far as to label him an immigrant war criminal.

After some thought, the prime minister slammed his fist on the table. “I don’t

care about our present situation! Our problem is what to do *next*,” he snapped, urging the group to make a decision.

There were upcoming plans to transfer a number of staff to the Keighley Research Center for the moon landing project, and to fully assemble Project Hyperion’s team. But without public support, ANSA’s budget would drop, and the space program would likely be cut.

“First, Project Hermes. Do we continue *that* little experiment?”

Klaus and the ANSA leaders discreetly resolved themselves and settled the question, nodding.

“Next, the dhampir response, the rebuilding of public trust in scientific technology, and the final decision on Arnack One.” The prime minister’s secretary handed top secret documents to all the attendees.

The prime minister spoke dispassionately, his jaw set in determination. “If this eye-wateringly expensive white-elephant space program keeps bleeding taxpayer money, we must decide not how to keep it on life support but whether to euthanize it entirely.”

Chapter 2:

Arnack One

Blue Eyes

EACH DIVISION at the Keighley Research Center had been notified of sudden changes to the Project Hermes schedule. Test launches for the orbital flight carrying a mannequin and chimpanzee had been canceled. The next launch would be the real thing—manned orbital spaceflight. With the staff's backs firmly against the wall, the Keighley Research Center buzzed with activity.

During this emergency priority shift, Bart and Kaye were called to the main building's conference room without explanation. They stood nervously before the facility Director, the Manager of the Office of Public Information, and Division Chief Damon. A glamorous, charming woman Bart had never seen also attended the meeting. She had long, platinum-blond hair and wore a very metropolitan suit. Frankly, she wasn't the kind of person one typically saw in Nerd Heaven.

The facility Director, his face creased with exhaustion, explained why Bart and Kaye had been summoned. "I'll get straight to the point. We want you two to join a new government project. In other words, we'd like you to work on Arnack One."

Bart's nervousness peaked. *Arnack One? Is that the "extremely important project" Division Chief Damon mentioned?*

The Director gestured to the blond woman, who walked up to Bart and Kaye. "Jennifer Sellers. Pleasure to meet you. I'm with ANSA Headquarters' Office of Public Information."

Why is there a public relations person here? Bart wondered.

Jennifer oozed self-confidence as she reached out to shake his hand, smiling. When Bart took her hand, his was crushed tight. There was no softness to Jennifer; her grip was hard.

Her smile melted off as she offered a handshake to Kaye. After little more than a touch, she yanked her hand clear. It appeared Jennifer didn't think highly of the dhampir girl, nor of dhampirs in general. Kaye kept her cool, wearing the

same placid smile as always. Bart could tell she was used to the treatment.

Then Jennifer showed them some documents on Arnack One, including one titled “Promoting Superpower Status through Scientific Technology and Racial Reconciliation.”

“So,” she began, “Arnack One has two objectives. First, we need to improve the UK’s image when it comes to racial issues. Most people don’t know the Keighley Center employs dhampirs, so we want to show that they work with humans to develop space technology.”

Bart nodded, but he was having trouble grasping all this; it gave him a bad feeling.

“Second, to showcase the UK as a technological superpower, we’re really going to promote ACE’s computers, which are the best in the world. The UK isn’t winning the Space Race, so we’ve been criticized for lacking in tech, but that’s simply untrue. Naturally, we’ll need to keep some aspects of the space development program confidential. Unlike the Union, though, our goal isn’t absolute secrecy. It’s fine to publicize some internal activities.”

Kaye’s lips pressed in a thin line, and she nodded.

Jennifer brushed her hair from her shoulders, letting a pause fill the room before speaking again. “Essentially, you two were selected to be walking billboards—no offense. Bart will be humanity’s representative, and Kaye will represent the dhampirs.”

“Huh?!”

Humanity’s representative?! Bart couldn’t believe his ears. Kaye seemed equally shocked.

“You two are ideal candidates. Bart here is the younger brother of astronaut Aaron Fifield—a national hero. Kaye can use a computer, and she helped with the calculations for the suborbital launch.”

He felt as though Jennifer had smashed his self-esteem with a hammer. *Everywhere I go, I’m always the little brother.* On top of that, the sheer weight of the responsibility Jennifer described staggered him. He was a nobody—little more than a shard of stardust. How could he possibly stand in the spotlight?

Glancing at the increasingly bewildered Bart, Jennifer continued on with gusto. “If astronauts are like adventurers bravely risking their lives, you two will be like sages who can control a magical new machine!”

She was wrong, and Bart hurriedly corrected her. “Um, Miss Sellers? I, uh... I actually still don’t know how to use a computer at all.”

“No worries. We don’t plan to show people particulars of your work. In any case, I’ll oversee all your media relations.” There was a finality in Jennifer’s tone.

The facility Director cut in, “You two will embody the UK’s space program. We want you to be courageous, assured, friendly, and mindful of your positions as public officials. You’ll essentially rival the Union’s own figureheads, Lev and Irina. When they visit the UK, we’ll have you meet with them.”

His expression made it clear that he wanted Bart and Kaye to see this as an honor. While it *would* be a tremendous honor, Bart sensed Jennifer and the Director dragging him into something beyond his abilities. He looked to Damon for support.

Damon sat in silence, his arms crossed. His stern gaze didn’t falter; he merely shook his head a few times. The gesture said, *This has nothing to do with me.*

Bart felt as though he finally understood what Damon had meant when he said, “For now, your job’s to get used to the D Room dhampirs and comfortable with *white elephants*.”

“By the way, Kaye, this PR campaign wasn’t devised by humans alone,” Jennifer told the silent young dhampir. “National Dhampir Alliance reps also had input in the planning.”

“What kinds of things will you expect us to do, Miss Sellers?”

In response to Kaye’s composed question, Jennifer had a composed response. “Lots. Interviews, photo shoots, meet-and-greets... Attend events with astronauts. Introduce people to FORX. And ACE Computing will also promote their contribution to the space program.”

The stocky public relations manager looked at Bart and Kaye. “As you know, our space development program is built on taxpayer money,” he said, adopting

a pleading tone. “If we can’t win public support, the government will cut our budget. Nerd Heaven will basically go to hell.”

Bart understood that much, but his heart and mind were racing. Sticky sweat clung to his back.

“You might be walking billboards, but you won’t be out in front of people every day,” the public relations manager continued. “On weekdays, you’ll work at the Keighley Center as usual. On weekends, you’ll take part in promotional activities. You’ll need to wear a couple of different hats, but you’ll be compensated for weekend work, and there’s a nice signing bonus. It’s a good deal, don’t you think? Now, any questions?”

Kaye spoke first. “Am I the only dhampir you selected for this? Aren’t there any astronaut candidates?”

“There’s one. The government managed to strong-arm the air force into picking up the most exceptional dhampir candidate.”

“‘Strong-arm’? You mean, dhampirs aren’t being selected as astronauts?” Kaye’s usually calm voice took on a sharp edge.

Jennifer smiled, recognizing the misunderstanding. “Don’t get the wrong idea, please. There weren’t many dhampir candidates to begin with, and none had the abilities required to become an astronaut. To be eligible, you need test flight experience in over twenty-four fighter planes and graduate-level education in science. The chosen dhampir candidate doesn’t even meet those baseline requirements. He’s set to keep learning as a trainee, but...well, who knows how that’ll go?”

“I pray for his success.” Kaye put her hand to her heart, as if she really was offering him her prayers.

The Director tapped the contracts on the desk, aiming to have them sign so he could expedite the process. “I know this is all very sudden, but will you do this for us? Help us support the space development program?”

“It would be an honor,” Kaye replied immediately, picking up a pen and quickly writing her name.

Bart, on the other hand, was frozen solid. *How could she sign off on*

something so weighty so fast?

Kaye set the pen in front of him, and the Director slid the contract closer to put on the pressure. “You’re with us, aren’t you, Bart?”

“Uh, well, it’s just...” He looked down, away from the contract. He’d dreamed of shaking hands with Lev Leps, but he never imagined doing it so publicly. Just thinking about it sent a chill down his spine.

Why me? There were hundreds of ANSA employees all across the country, and he was a new recruit with no track record—yet he’d been chosen because he was an astronaut’s younger brother.

It was ridiculous.

Bart stood rooted to the spot, his eyes downcast. He felt a heavy doubt rise in the air and settle on his skin—the others were questioning whether he was right for the job. Jennifer shrugged, sighing. Kaye’s serious gaze pierced him from one side. She stared at him as if assessing his ability to act as her counterpart.

He held still, gazing at the contract once more. *Should I refuse? Is that even possible?*

If he quit here, he’d only disappoint everyone. His brother would be shocked. His family would write him off for shaming the Fifield name. Even the Keighley Center personnel would be ashamed of him. He might lose his place in D Room and then his job. Getting kicked out of the facility would mean giving up his goal to be at the heart of space development, and that was the one thing he couldn’t abandon.

Bart had nothing aside from his dreams of space, and he’d finally arrived at the gates. Now he was going to shut them on himself? That was true foolishness. Maybe the higher-ups *had* chosen him because he was Aaron’s little brother, but he needed to move forward.

Making up his mind, Bart gripped his thighs so hard they hurt. “I’ll do it,” he said meekly.

He picked up the pen and signed his name. Next to Kaye’s beautiful handwriting, his looked messy and muddled, like an expression of his feelings.

With the contracts signed, the Director spoke. “Public acceptance of the space program now rests on your shoulders. I must also caution you to avoid scandalous behavior, though I’m sure it won’t be an issue.”

After that, he and the public relations manager made a swift exit. Division Chief Damon uncrossed his arms, brows scrunching together.

“Bart. Kaye,” he said, voice sharp. “Your real work’s still in D Room. Do your best with the promotional stuff, but don’t let it undercut Project Hermes. The manned orbital spaceflight’s the top priority.” He glanced at Jennifer, then left the conference room.

Jennifer shrugged, palms up. “That guy’s the Chief of the Operations Division? He must be so annoying. Right, Bart?”

Bart coughed, muttering, “Well, not really, Miss Sellers...”

“Hmm. Whatever. He *is* a division chief,” Jennifer said. “Oh—at this point, we’re all part of the same team, so you don’t need to worry about the whole ‘Miss’ business. Just call me Jennifer, okay?”

Dropping the formalities seemed to come as a relief to Jennifer. She passed Bart and Kaye booklets entitled *Mass Media Handbook* and *Public Relations Manual*. “These were made for astronauts, but make sure to read them.”

The booklets were about as thin as a slice of pizza, but in Bart’s hands, they felt as heavy as iron plates. He wondered whether he could remember their contents while simultaneously trying to wrap his head around FORX.

“I can’t look after you day and night, so you’ll have to manage yourselves,” Jennifer informed them. “By the way, do you both own swimsuits?”

The question took them by surprise.

“Well, yes. But...” Kaye looked troubled. “Will we be training underwater? Like astronauts?”

“Nope. You’ll need them for magazine pinup shots.”

“Huh?”

“Haven’t you seen those photos of the Hermes Seven wearing their swimsuits at the beach? Like they’re on vacation? They’re ridiculously popular. We’ll also

need pictures of you two soon. Oh, I should say this up front—I was dispatched as project supervisor, but my superiors at ANSA Headquarters make all the decisions. So complain all you want... Just know that I can't do anything about it, mmkay?"

In other words, they had no choice but to go along with the decisions Jennifer's bosses made. Kaye dropped her gaze, running her hands along her upper arms for a moment, then nodded. She seemed less embarrassed and more worried.

Jennifer's sharp eyes didn't miss Kaye's body language. "Huh? Kaye, don't tell me you aren't confident about your body."

Kaye uttered something like a squeak in surprise.

"Don't worry about not being a pinup model." Jennifer's tone, and the way she showed off her curves, added an extra message: *Even though I basically am.*

"I-It's...fine. I'll do it," Kaye said, shrinking into herself.

"Well, I'll contact you with the schedule soon, then. For now, just keep your weekends open. Bye-bye!" Jennifer started to leave, then turned back around. "Oh, one more thing. Don't be so stiff around each other. Act warm. You're going to symbolize the UK's race relations, remember? No time like the present!"

She clapped her hands once, as if starting them off, then left Bart and Kaye alone in the conference room.

Once she'd left, Bart heaved a long sigh. "That was...unexpected. This is all a bit overwhelming, wouldn't you say?"

He hoped Kaye would agree, but she turned to him grinning ear to ear. "The swimsuit part was...quite a surprise. We ought to strive to do our best, though. Wait. I need to be less formal, right?" She did a cute little flex, pumping her fist. "We're gonna give this our best shot, Bart!"

Kaye was using a more casual tone right off the bat. The girl actually seemed delighted to have been selected for the public relations plan. Then again, maybe that *would* have brought most people joy. Bart, however, just felt uncertain; he already regretted signing on.

“Hey, Bart, why don’t we head to the lounge before we go back to D Room? We can read through these booklets together.”

“Yes. Let’s do that.”

Kaye pouted, dissatisfied. “No, no, no. Loosen up! Say something like ‘Roger that!’ or ‘I can dig it!’”

She was already calling him out on his demeanor. Bart’s throat itched, but he ignored it and spoke again. “Roger that, Kaye.”

Kaye giggled. “This’ll take some getting used to, but we’ll figure it out.”

Bart was glad to have her as his partner. It would’ve been grim to team up with someone like Mia.

He and Kaye left the conference room, heading back toward D Room together. Although the ANSA employees who passed them were in a hurry, they all eyed the pair with suspicion. A human and dhampir walking side by side would be a very strange sight indeed to anyone unaware of the Arnack One project.

The duo left the main building. Outside, more cars than usual sped back and forth. Given the sun’s burning heat, however, few people were out.

Kaye and Bart veered to walk in the shade. After a silence, Kaye spoke hesitantly. “Um...”

“Yes?”

“Now that you’re my partner, I want to tell you about my special talent. The other D Room staff already know.”

No way... Has she got Nosferatu Syndrome? Bart steeled himself for Kaye’s next words.

“I can remember stuff really well,” Kaye said sheepishly. “It’s called ‘eidetic’ memory.”

“Eidetic memory?” Bart repeated, feeling out the term. “What’s that?”

“My brain records things I see as images,” she replied. Closing her eyes, she tapped her temple with a finger. “When I do this, I see those things—

documents, scenery—as clearly as photographs on the back of my eyelids.”

Hearing Kaye describe it reminded Bart of something. “Ah, I see. I *thought* there was something weird about how you found those pens after I first got to D Room. Now I know why.”

“Oh?” Kaye covered her mouth with a hand, surprised. “Did I say something funny?”

“Well, usually, a person would say, ‘I think those pens are around here,’ or something. But you said, ‘in the fifth drawer,’ like you were totally sure.”

Kaye nodded. “Yeah, I might’ve said something like that.”

“So, the view we’re seeing now—will you remember that image too?” Bart pointed at the factory building.

Kaye shook her head. “No. It doesn’t work unless I really focus on burning an image into my mind. I made a point of remembering those pens after I organized the cabinet because I was sure everyone would forget where they were. The only exception is when I suffer a shock; those moments imprint themselves even if I don’t want them to.” She paused, and her expression clouded.

Realizing that Kaye probably remembered lots of things she’d rather forget, Bart decided not to dig deeper. He asked other questions about eidetic memory as they strolled toward D Room. It turned out that Kaye could memorize a regular high school textbook in about twenty minutes, although she needed to read more complex science or engineering documents about three times. She said it was her memory that had helped her learn FORX so quickly.

Although Kaye’s eidetic memory seemed all-powerful, the truth was that remembering and applying things were *completely* different. For example, she noted, her ability to memorize a piano score didn’t mean she could play it.

“But you can use complicated science and engineering books at work, right?”

“I don’t know if ‘use’ is the right word,” Kaye said. “Sometimes, it’s like my brain combines and processes memories automatically. I don’t know what happens inside my head...but even solutions to math problems come to me instantly, before I can find them using a formula. Even if I don’t *know* the

formula, I know the answer.”

That was unbelievable to Bart, who always struggled with calculations. Given the unknown depths of Kaye’s potential, he was beginning to see the young woman herself as some kind of cutting-edge computer. “How’d you learn it? Did you have to train, or...?”

Kaye waved off the idea. “I was born with it, I think. Ever since I can remember, I’ve memorized all kinds of things. I read all the books in my house cover to cover, and—oh!” Her eyes widened as she realized something. “I’m not the only one with this kind of memory! Lots of humans have it too, like...”

She named an artist widely credited as a genius, a mathematician known as a monster, and a scientist who’d invented something related to electricity—all well-known figures Bart knew of.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, though,” she added. “I brought those names up because they’re easy to recognize. I know I’m not on nearly the same wavelength as them. I mean...at best, I can pull off a winning streak at cards.”

“Cards?”

Kaye’s eyes narrowed, and her lips curled into a cunning smile. “I’ll never lose at poker, or any other game of concentration.”

Bart imagined the silver-haired girl in an illegal gambling den, taking mobsters for all they were worth. He knew that couldn’t possibly be the most her unique ability could accomplish. “Does eidetic memory have downsides?”

“While I’m memorizing something, I can’t focus on anything else or it’s a waste of effort.”

“Oh. So, that time you fell down the stairs, you were memorizing something?”

Her brow furrowed. “Huh?”

“You know, that time on the stairs. You fell from—”

“Hmm?” Kaye brought her face close to Bart’s, glowering. “Didn’t I ask that you forget that ever happened?”

The moment her voice took a pointedly polite tone, he knew he’d put his foot in his mouth. “I forgot it! I’ve forgotten it entirely. Because I, uh, have an awful

memory.”

“Good. Let’s both put it out of our minds,” Kaye said with an icy smile.

However, Bart was sure he’d never forget the fright he felt when Kaye flew at him from above, nor her scent and feel when she was so close.

They walked in the shade without speaking for a while, and Bart mulled over what Kaye had just told him. Her potential was truly unknown, but he knew *he* had no such talents. He was just another particle of stardust among countless others. If he weren’t labeled “the astronaut’s little brother,” he would’ve been another replaceable cog in the machine.

Well, I just need to make sure I don’t embarrass humanity as its representative. And that I don’t damage Aaron’s reputation. As the thoughts occurred to him, the weight of responsibility came crushing down. His stomach didn’t like that at all.

“Er, Kaye? On our way to the lounge, do you mind if I stop by the bathroom?”

“Do you have a weak constitution?”

It’s not that I’m weak! It’s that you’re too strong! Bart cried from the bottom of his heart.

Once she and Bart had returned to D Room, Kaye told the rest of the team about Arnack One.

At one point, she paused to give Bart a nudge. “Right, Bart?”

“R-right, Kaye.”

Everyone was skeptical about Kaye serving as an advertisement, and seeing her chat casually with Bart just increased their suspicion. Glares lanced them with every “friendly” exchange.

Nevertheless, Kaye took her time, explaining the PR campaign’s significance patiently and carefully. She assured everybody that D Room could go about its duties as always. The team wasn’t entirely convinced, but they all got back to work.

Aside from Kaye and Bart's upcoming PR obligations, D Room's hands were full with its core responsibility—the success of Project Hermes. Astronaut Steve Howard's orbital flight was scheduled for mid-September, just a month and a half away. Now that the rocket wouldn't merely carry a mannequin, every department had to revise a number of things, so they absolutely flooded D Room with requests. Bart finally understood D Room's true importance to each division.

The Keighley Center's human staff, however, were awful to the occupants of D Room. Those who hated the idea of dhampirs using computers epitomized arrogance and didn't show a hint of respect.

"What creeps," Bart muttered.

"To humans, we're just machines," Mia said coldly. "We suck in their equations and spit out calculations. That's all."

She made it sound as though dhampirs were hens who lived to lay eggs or cows who lived to make milk. Still, Bart didn't detect anger or sadness in her voice. He *did* hear a sad sigh from Kaye, but when he turned to her, she wore the same smile as always.

"I know all the extra work's tough," Kaye told him. "We're glad you're giving us a hand, though."

"Of course."

He'd never imagined representing humanity. Even now, the term "representative" rubbed him the wrong way. On top of that, he'd need to buckle down during workweeks too or face Division Chief Damon's wrath.

"Come on, let's do this!" Bart cheered himself on, gulping down some bitter coffee.

Bart had finished reading the ACE reference book, so now he could start making programs. He'd have to take great care with each one, though, since even the smallest mistake could cause a major accident.

That said, D Room's team received long request forms full of formulas to process, and they had no idea what those calculations would be used for. If they received a request that had nothing to do with space—for example, one to

produce nuclear weapons or bioengineer synthetic food—they'd never know. They'd just crunch the numbers.

Bart didn't mind programming, since he preferred working silently on his own. He *did* wish D Room's work contained a little more space and stars.

He heaved a sigh. "Phew..."

Mia glared at him. "Are you bored? Tired of the work?"

"It's not very interesting, is it?" Bart asked honestly.

Mia pointed to the formulas on a request form. "Why not look for space in the equations?"

"Huh?"

"You can express space numerically. Imagine deep space in the formulas. Maybe *this* represents the moon's gravity. Maybe *this* is a rocket engine that could reach Jupiter. Or maybe it's something entirely different. Your imagination's free to do as it likes."

"Oh..." When she put it that way, each equation gained its own meaning.

He turned to Mia in admiration, but she shook her head. "Wasn't my idea. I don't look for space."

"I see. So whose idea was it?"

"Kaye's. She's always muttering about numbers and equations without realizing. Sometimes you hear her say things like 'comet' or 'galaxy' in the process."

Kaye was at her table, hunched over as if in deep conversation with her calculation sheet. Perhaps her head was someplace where space stretched out endlessly—where the science and astronomy her eidetic memory carved into her mind met and fused.

"How about you, Mia? What do you imagine while you're programming?" Bart asked casually.

Mia looked at him in silence, as though she were about to spray him with habanero sauce.

“Never mind,” Bart said quickly, returning to his work. “Just forget I said anything.” He had to be careful. He could get himself hurt trying to chitchat with other D Room staffers the way he did with Kaye.

When he looked at the paper in front of him again, he tried to see space in the equations, like Kaye did. His pencil scribbled on the paper. *What’s this program for?* he wondered. *A rocket that’ll fly to the moon?*

It was so strange to express space’s unfathomable depths in numbers. And, though Bart could feel his heart crushing under the pressure of becoming a “billboard” for ANSA and humanity, Kaye’s idea gave him some small solace.

Vermilion Eyes

SUMMER DAYS in the South were long. The sun didn't start setting until after seven. The cumulonimbus clouds dotting the sky looked like monsters stained by the setting sun.

It was the Friday evening before Kaye's first weekend as a walking billboard. She took the bus home from the Keighley Center, getting off at the first stop on the Misibi River's far bank. That was one of only a few stops in the Moonlight District, but it was as close as the bus got to Kaye's home. Buses wouldn't drive any farther on the district's unpaved roads, since rain turned the ground into a gluey, muddy stew.

The bus driver was a disgruntled human who closed the bus doors as Kaye disembarked, seeming to push her out. Kaye felt a little responsible for his impatience. She'd been so lost in her thoughts that she almost missed her stop. With the orbital spaceflight on her mind, as well as her whole "dhampir representative" role, she struggled to think straight.

She used to commute home with Mia and a few others, who always reminded her of her stop. Now that she was D Room Manager *and* a PR rep, however, she was working overtime and going home alone.

"Can't let it get me down," she murmured. "Have to give it my best."

Just a few days ago, she'd tumbled down the stairs and crushed Bart. Embarrassment made her shudder as the memory flashed before her eyes as clearly as a movie.

"Ugh! I can't believe that happened."

Even if she wanted to forget it, it was carved into her mind. She was lucky Bart was a good person. Anyone else, and she might've been paying medical fees.

Kaye was genuinely glad that Bart was the human who'd been dispatched to D Room. He didn't harass anyone, he wasn't stuck-up, and he was trying diligently to wrap his head around the computer. As a fellow "billboard,"

however, he wasn't particularly reliable.

Tomorrow—Saturday—would be Arnack One's debut event at the Rocket Launch Center in the coastal district. Bart and Kaye were set to attend a send-off party for the Hermes Seven. There, they'd both deliver a one-minute speech. Bart had been pale from start to finish as Jennifer explained the task in detail. He'd also gotten another nasty stomachache.

To make matters worse, he and Kaye had learned they'd do their beach pinup photo shoot after the event.

All of D Room was cheering Kaye on, saying things like, "You're the best rep we could've asked for." They trusted her. Still, everyone was worried about her teaming up with Bart. "Will you be okay? Don't you think he'll make things tougher?"

Even Bart himself had been anxious, asking, "Can I really do this?"

Kaye herself was nervous, but she was also determined. "I've got no choice but to give it my all!"

For now, she'd simply go practice her speech at home. She lived in the wetlands, a long way south of the bus stop—about thirty minutes on foot. The walk was hot and uncomfortable, but Kaye was used to it.

She stopped for a drink of lukewarm tap water from a fountain, kicking up reddish brown dust as she plodded along weedy paths. The Moonlight District resembled the country before the war, a far cry from cutting-edge computer technology. Shanties huddled together in disarray behind fences covered in peeling paint. Newspaper was taped over the cracked windows of terraced houses covered in ivy. One big hurricane could tear it all away.

In the grassy fields full of fire ant hills were rows of trailers where poor and illegal immigrants made their homes. The unmaintained street lamps were dead, and in the darkness of alleys, sinister-looking characters gambled and drank moonshine from bottles, mingling with underage prostitutes.

They were as low as the United Kingdom got. Kaye hurried past them, her feelings a mix of pity and hate.

In the center of the Moonlight District was the Civil War Memorial Square,

which contained a park with a statue of a mounted soldier. Around the square was a bustling shopping district containing restaurants and bars, as well as a supermarket, a barbershop, and a funeral parlor. An electric appliance shop was the only place in the district with a television. It faced the street like a community broadcast.

There was no fully equipped hospital, per se, but a local clinic doubled as a maternity facility. The Moon Faith Church offered spiritual support and served as a community hall. Everything was bare-bones and simple compared to its Crescent Moon District counterpart, but the owners were dhampirs and immigrants who didn't have money to expand.

One major difference between the Moonlight and Crescent Moon Districts was that the former lacked a police station. Thus, vigilante groups roamed the streets with old rifles, wearing hats similar to police officers'. They sometimes fired their guns into the night air to intimidate the Solar Flare Club, which was most active in the evening.

As Kaye reached the shopping district, she saw some children huddling around the appliance shop's television, cheering on a dhampir boxer.

When the kids noticed Kaye, they hurried over, full of smiles.

"Kaye! You're back!"

"Sure am. Home sweet home!" Kaye reached into her bag and took out a round tin of butter cookies she'd bought in the ANSA cafeteria. She handed the tin to the kids. "Make sure to share. Don't fight over them, okay?"

"Thanks!" The kids piled on Kaye and hugged her, their limbs dirty and thin.

As day turned to night, people finished work and trickled into the shopping district. Most of the men did physical labor at the docks or the sawmill. Women usually prepared food at the seafood factory or worked as cleaners or waitresses in the Crescent Moon District.

Kaye dropped by the supermarket every day. It lacked the range of products available at human supermarkets, but it was full of herbs, spices, and tomatoes for homemade ketchup. She always bought ready-made food, since she was a terrible cook who'd endangered herself on numerous occasions. She cut her

fingers when she handled anything sharp, she'd absentmindedly burned herself using pots and pans, and when she tried to peel vegetables, the edible parts always seemed to vanish.

She grabbed canned corn, onions, and green peppers, along with sautéed celery and deep-fried catfish, then took it all to the cash register. Next to the register was a poster for the PR event she was taking part in. Seeing it, she felt a little embarrassed. The poster put the Hermes Seven front and center, with Bart and Kaye's photographs below. Someone had circled and highlighted Kaye's photo, however, making it clear that she was the main event as far as the Moonlight District was concerned.

The old, white-haired shopkeeper tallied up Kaye's groceries with a grin, telling her, "I don't know much about those newfangled 'computers,' but I know you're somethin' special, Kaye."

Since the shopkeep's teeth were in bad shape—fangs long gone—and drooping eyelids hid the red eyes beneath, only the pointed ears distinguished this dhampir from an elderly human.

"You used to be my calculator," the shopkeeper added. "Now look at you, calculating for the nation."

When Kaye was just a girl, the shopkeeper would read her the item prices, and she would calculate the totals. Each time, the shopkeeper rewarded her with a strawberry candy, telling her it would give her energy for the trip back. Kaye had licked the candy happily as she walked the hot road home. Even now, its taste brought back the sweet flavor of those memories.

Noticing her inside, the customers swarmed her.

"They're finally recognizing your hard work, Kaye!" said one.

"You said it. She helped with the launch before, didn't she?" asked another.

Kaye *had* been a big part of Aaron Fifield's suborbital flight, but only Aaron and Vil Klaus had ended up on television. Even when the news mentioned the ACE computer, Kaye's name was never brought up, which bothered the Moonlight District's residents.

Regardless, Kaye downplayed her achievement. "I'm not the one who made

the computer,” she said modestly. “Lots of people work at ANSA.”

The shopkeeper squinted at the poster by the cash register. “We all wish you the best, Kaye. That’s why I put this up. But as for space development...I just can’t get behind it.”

The customers around the shopkeeper nodded, chiming in with their own opinions.

“If the UK has the money to send people to the moon, can’t it make education free for dhampir kids?”

“Not to mention proper sanitation facilities and paved roads...”

“Or it could have those scientists research Nosferatu Syndrome.”

“I’m sick of the government folks looking at the stars! I want ’em to keep their eyes on Earth.”

“We’re such a small percent of its tax revenue, we’re practically invisible.”

Although they were proud of Kaye for working at ANSA, they couldn’t support its projects. Their opinions were right and valid; there was nothing Kaye could say in response. She just nodded along, feeling awkward among them all.

The sky rumbled, and a crack of thunder and lightning shook the supermarket’s windows and doors. Everyone fell quiet, as though the storm had blown away their complaints.

Kaye saw that as the perfect time to make a getaway. “I should go home before the rain starts!” she exclaimed, heading toward the door.

“Kaye! You forgot something!”

The old shopkeeper’s voice stopped her in her tracks. She’d left behind her groceries. “Oh! Excuse me.”

Everyone had a chuckle at that. “You’re all grown up, but some things never change.”

Kaye scratched the back of her head and laughed, blushing.

During elementary school, Kaye had lived in the Moonlight District, but she’d moved up north and stayed in student dorms in junior high. There were no

higher education facilities for dhampirs in the South due to segregation, and Kaye was from a poor family who didn't have money to send her to school. Fortunately, one of her teachers had noticed that she was a prodigy and couldn't bear to see her talents neglected. They'd implored the community to raise a little money, and even the old shopkeeper had chipped in.

Thanks to the Moonlight District's citizens, Kaye had left her poor neighborhood, attended college, and learned computing. If it weren't for the people who understood her, humans eventually would've labeled her problematic, and life would've passed her by.

As soon as Kaye landed a job at the Keighley Research Center, she moved back home. She was grateful to the Moonlight District for making her what she'd become, and with that gratitude in her heart, she did everything she could to repay the residents—for instance, buying treats for local children.

"All right. This time, I'm *really* going home." Kaye took her shopping bag and headed out.

"Kaye!" the old shopkeeper called, sounding worried. "It's good to be devoted to your work...but look after yourself, you hear?"

"You got it!" she replied energetically.

At that, the shopkeeper's mouth widened in a fangless grin.

The darkness of night swooped in as the sun sank over the horizon. Rain pattered heavily on the water lilies covering the swamp, and water dripped from kudzu vines wrapped around hickory trees. Fish and crayfish thrashed in streams, and alligators followed the river where it flowed into the woods. That was life by the bayou.

Kaye lived in a small wooden house on a brick foundation, deep in a garden surrounded by clumps of queen of the night flowers. Inside the house, the rain against the window of the bathroom let up eventually, and the endless echo of croaking frogs replaced it.

Kaye sighed. "I'm all wrinkly," she muttered.

She'd practiced her speech while soaking in the tub; before she knew it, the water went lukewarm. However, it wasn't the speech that was bothering her—it was the swimsuit. She'd been so shocked when Jennifer announced the photo shoot that it had made her dizzy.

Cupping some water in her hand, Kaye poured it on her arm and gently rubbed it in. "Hmm...at least you can't see anything." The photo shoot would be embarrassing nevertheless.

She washed her hair with queen of the night flower shampoo; its sweet, gentle fragrance contained unforgettable grief. When Kaye reflected on how badly she wished to show her mother how far she'd come, the girl's heart tightened in her chest.

As she rinsed the shampoo from her hair and stepped out of the bathtub, the sound of the radio drifted in from the living room.

"Oh...Dad?"

Kaye's father, Dominic, hadn't been there when she got home, so she figured he'd just come back from working at the docks. Kaye toweled off, threw on some loungewear, and headed to the living room.

Dominic had returned, as she expected. He sank into the sofa, drinking moonshine and picking at the fried catfish she'd purchased. His shaved head and bare, bulky chest were red. He'd probably had a lot to drink. His drenched work clothes hung over the back of the chair. Even his pants were soaked; he might've gotten caught in the downpour outside.

He was waiting to bathe, Kaye realized. "Sorry I was in there so long. It's all yours." She urged him toward the bathroom.

Dominic finished his moonshine and cleared his throat. He grabbed his work clothes and headed for the bath, pausing in front of Kaye. "I'm not watching anything humans organized," he said, the displeasure in his voice crystal clear.

Kaye nodded. She was already well aware of the fact. "Yes, I know."

No sooner did she reply than Dominic stepped into the bathroom, slamming the door.

Truth be told, Kaye didn't *want* her father to watch the event. His reluctance made her lonely, yes, but she also understood his feelings so keenly that it hurt.

"Well, guess I should eat!" she said, smiling to cheer herself up. "Ketchup! Ketchup!"

As she looked out the window at the blooming queen of the night flowers, she promised herself, *If I do my best, we'll find happiness. Not just this town—the whole world. No matter what, I've got to reach deep into the darkness and take that shining star!*

Chapter 3:

Stargazing

Blue Eyes

THE DAY OF Bart and Kaye's debut event was finally upon them. Jennifer drove them to the Rocket Launch Center. Due to the noise and the risk of falling rocket parts, the facility was located far from Laika Crescent.

There weren't many houses along the road, which offered only a view of oil rigs and a junkyard for military vehicles that had been abandoned after the war ended. As they entered the coastal district, signs appeared declaring that they were on THE ROAD TO SPACE!

Thanks to Sam the chimpanzee's successful launch at the beginning of the year, followed by Aaron's suborbital flight, the Rocket Launch Center had become something of a space development holy ground. Model rockets decorated the lobbies of nearby hotels, and souvenir shops sold a variety of memorabilia. The place buzzed with journalists and tourists whenever there was a launch. Even the local church—which had nothing to do with space—was adorned with images of rockets.

In contrast to the rolling ocean and bright sun out the car window, Bart's heart was full of clouds. His stomach was already in knots.

The hour-long event would mostly celebrate the Hermes Seven. Bart and Kaye were going to speak at the very beginning, and the attention on them would be minimal. Still, the *amount* of attention wasn't the problem. In addition to his stomachache, Bart had been so nervous for the last two nights that he'd barely slept a wink. There were deep dark circles under his eyes.

Jennifer peered at him in the rearview mirror. "You don't look so hot. You know we've got a photo shoot today, right?"

"Yes, I-I know."

Bart looked at Kaye, who sat next to him by the open car window. The dhampir girl soaked in the sea breeze, lost in thought. *She* didn't look the slightest bit nervous. Her face—which was already pretty without makeup—seemed even brighter and more charming than usual. She wore an eye-catching

red floral dress. Bart was in his usual work clothes—a plain shirt with plain slacks. At a glance, he looked like Kaye’s assistant.

When the car stopped at a set of traffic lights, Jennifer handed them pamphlets. “We’ll pass these out at the event. They’re your profiles.”

The pamphlets depicted a photo of each of them, and under the photos were their individual records. Bart skimmed Kaye’s profile. She was his age, twenty-four, and she’d been born here in New Marseille. Then he looked at her educational record.

“Huh?”

Bart was speechless. Kaye was utterly *outstanding*. She’d skipped grades on her path into one of the world’s most prestigious universities, then earned a bachelor’s degree in computer science. And that wasn’t all. At age twenty, the pamphlet said, Kaye had participated in both moon orbit calculations and tracking Parusnyĭ One at the National Astrophysical Observatory.

Bart had graduated top of the state from a well-known college, but compared to the successful Kaye, he was little more than a bottom-feeding catfish. When he learned about her eidetic memory, he’d known she was extraordinary, but he never could’ve imagined this.

He gaped at her until she asked, “What is it?”

“It’s just...your education. You never told me...”

“Didn’t I?” Kaye tapped her cheek, tilting her head to the side in contemplation. “I’m sure I said I started using computers in a college laboratory, didn’t I?”

“Well, yes, but I never expected *this*! I was absolutely obsessed with the National Astrophysical Observatory’s reports! I wish you’d told me sooner.” Bart was gushing, as he always did about anything space-related.

Kaye, however, sighed softly. “It’s just...some humans get envious when they hear about my background.”

It suddenly hit Bart that revealing a track record like that could easily come off as bragging. He desperately wanted to ask about the research she’d done, but

he sensed that she didn't want to discuss it. Instead, he stuffed the urge back down.

"As for me, I'm not jealous in the slightest," Jennifer chimed in from the driver's seat, a somewhat competitive undercurrent in her voice. "By the way, Kaye, I noticed when I looked at your academic history that we attended the same college. I'm technically your upperclassman."

"Oh, really?!" That was clearly news to Kaye.

"I studied political science, so our majors were different." Jennifer took on a serious tone. "You've heard of Lyudmila Kharlova, the UZSR's press secretary, right?"

That was the woman at Gergiev's side: pretty, yet ice-cold. Bart had seen her on television and in the newspaper a few times.

"What about her?" asked Kaye.

"A student in my year looked just like her. *And* she was on an exchange program."

"Oh? Do you think it was Kharlova?"

"Who knows?" said Jennifer, sounding a little skeptical. "That girl had a different name and nationality, but if she was actually an operative, that'd make sense. Knowing the Union, it's possible they killed someone and had her assume their identity."

That was an utterly terrifying possibility. It struck Kaye and Bart odd how casually Jennifer could talk about something so ruthless.

"This is in the manuals I gave you, but it bears repeating," Jennifer said, voice heavy. "Once you get famous, tons of people will try to get close to you. You can't give them any openings. Especially not *you*, Bart."

Bart gulped.

"You look like you'd be weak to a woman's wiles," she added. "Like you'd fall right into a honey trap."

"I would not!"

Kaye stared at Bart for a while. Her beautiful vermilion eyes flustered him.

“Wh-what?”

“You *do* look like you could get honey-trapped.”

“N-not you too! I won’t get honey-trapped... I don’t think.”

Still, Bart knew he had to be on his guard—he had no idea what lurked out there. There *had* been spies in a nuclear weapons laboratory, and the people connected to that breach had been arrested and sentenced to death.

“Heads up,” said Jennifer. “We’re almost there.”

Bart and Kaye looked out the window at a missile-tracking antenna array. They’d arrived at the “holy ground.” Bart had admired and dreamed of this place, but he’d never guessed he’d go as a part of the Arnack One publicity team.

Once they reached the event space, Bart and Kaye were directed to a waiting room. Bart couldn’t have been more nervous. Staff served them lunch, but he couldn’t eat a single thing. Instead, he read his speech over and over.

Looking at the event schedule, Bart saw that his speech would take place during the kick-off, of all times. On top of that, his own brother would be the emcee. The PR team had probably wanted to start the event with the two siblings sharing the stage, but that did Bart’s mindset more harm than good.

He sighed so often that his throat grew parched, and he drank glass after glass of water. Kaye worried that he might wind up stuck in the bathroom. She, meanwhile, chomped away on ketchup-soaked cornbread.

Envious of her confidence, Bart offered a small suggestion. “Hey, about our speeches... I’m all for ladies first. How about I go after you?”

She shut him down immediately. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to change things at the last minute.”

Eventually, Bart’s mood sank so low that Kaye had to give him a pep talk.

“Look at it this way, Bart. Compared to that speech Irina and Lev made to the

entire world, we'll basically just be talking to frogs and crayfish, right? At least, that's what I'm telling myself to stay calm."

"Frogs and crayfish?"

When he thought of it that way, his heart rate *did* slow a little, even if it was just his imagination. It was also the first time he'd ever heard Kaye mention Irina. For a moment, Bart forgot the entire PR event, wondering what his partner thought of the Nosferatu girl.

That was when Jennifer brought over a middle-aged man with a camera. "This is a *Living Illustrated* reporter. Don't forget he'll need photos, okay?"

Living Illustrated was a mostly photographic magazine that had an exclusive contract with ANSA's public relations division. The contract allowed the magazine to document and share the private lives of UK astronauts, and it was the only official publication providing such information. That way, ANSA could protect its astronaut team from the mass media while releasing information at their own convenience. Unfortunately, it frustrated reporters who lacked access to *Living Illustrated's* information gold mine.

"Be careful of reporters who aren't with *Living Illustrated*," Jennifer warned them. "They take candid snapshots as a matter of course."

Stakeouts and ambushes were a given with the media. When Aaron went to space, about a hundred reporters had surrounded his family home. They'd even approached Bart for the inside scoop on his elder brother. Aaron was squeaky clean, however; Bart couldn't have told them anything even if he'd wanted to.

Gossip rags and tabloids dug up whatever rumors they could about astronauts. They'd print almost anything that boosted sales, even if the information was suspect. Recently, *Arnack News* had announced that history's first cosmonaut was a man by the name of Captain Vladimir Susnin, and the Zirnitra Union had heavily criticized the paper for publishing a false report. Not that *Arnack News* learned its lesson—they published an article afterward claiming that the UZSR had launched a werewolf into space.

Bart and Kaye introduced themselves to the reporter, and Jennifer pointed at the door. "Now the heroes arrive."

At her words, the Hermes Seven and their spokesman entered in all their splendor, dressed in sharp, well-tailored suits. The Hermes Seven were commanders in their thirties; they'd been selected from the navy, air force, and marine corps, and they were older and higher-ranking than their UZSR counterparts. All the Hermes Seven members were under a hundred and eighty centimeters tall, due to rockets' height restrictions. Still, each radiated confidence. They seemed at least two meters tall to Bart.

Aaron—whose blond hair was cut short—saw his brother and lifted a hand in greeting. “Hi, Bart. It’s been a while.”



Bart hadn't seen Aaron since the ticker-tape parade honoring his suborbital flight three months ago. All the astronauts had their own responsibilities, and they were busy across the country. There weren't many opportunities for them to gather.

Aaron was as capable as they came—although he was worried about Bart, whom he could tell was shrinking with nerves. "I'm not exactly good at publicity work either," he told his little brother. "But fame's part of our mission. ANSA and the nation volunteered to make our dreams come true, so it's only natural that we have PR responsibilities."

He turned to Kaye and offered her a handshake. "Nice to meet you, Kaye. I hear no small part of my flight's success was thanks to your help."

"I'm honored to hear that," Kaye replied, smiling.

Although Aaron and Kaye were meeting for the first time, their conversation flowed naturally. There was no hint of a racial wall between them. Watching them, Bart felt that the sight of the handsome young man shaking hands and talking with the beautiful dhampir was a true symbol of space development. He thought bright, intelligent Kaye was like his older brother in many ways. The main difference was that his brother wasn't a clumsy type who tumbled down staircases.

Steve Howard, the astronaut assigned to pilot the UK's orbital spaceflight, approached them. "Hey, Aaron. Introduce me, will you?"

If Aaron was slick, Steve was wild, and he had a military mindset suited to a risky flight. Steve himself was famous for having set the record for transcontinental flight in a supersonic aircraft while a test pilot. When Steve heard that the higher-ups pushed the orbital flight forward to September 13, he'd chuckled and said, "Gambling on a veritable prototype in this fight... We're playing pretty fast and loose."

A hint of dissatisfaction flashed across Steve's face when he glanced at Kaye. "Hmph. I'd prefer putting my life in the hands of *human* intelligence, but I guess that's not an option." Every word dripped with skepticism about dhampirs using computers.

Kaye didn't even flinch. "No need to worry. Human intelligence made the computer."

Steve grinned and patted Aaron on the shoulder. "Let's go," he said, leading Bart's brother away.

Jennifer, who'd been arranging things with reporters and the Hermes Seven spokesman, beckoned Bart and Kaye over. "We're moving to the event space," she told them.

Bart's heart thumped in his chest. The event would take place in an auditorium full of press from various countries. Since this was the official announcement of both the United Kingdom's planned orbital flight and Arnack One, the media was paying a lot of attention. Some three hundred people—90 percent human—sat in the auditorium's general seating area. The dhampirs in attendance were crammed into one corner.

Bart stared at the audience as he stood beside the stage. His feet felt rooted to the spot. A banner above the stage read, THE DREAM PROJECT.

Looking at the banner, Jennifer chuckled almost derisively. "There aren't any dreams in space development."

Bart and Kaye turned to Jennifer in tandem, blurting out, "Huh?"

"Newspapers and publishers promote the space program for their print numbers, politicians push it for votes, and businesses support it for sales," she continued, as if talking to herself. "They all just use the idea of a *dream* for their own interests. Nevertheless, we're relying on you two to passionately describe your dreams to touch taxpayers' hearts and convince them to keep us out of the red. Are we clear?"

Jennifer's outlook wasn't wrong—it was realistic. Kaye nodded. "C-crystal."

At exactly one o'clock, a chime rang to mark the start of the event. Aaron took the stage as emcee, and the auditorium erupted into applause, cheers, and countless camera flashes.

Picking up the microphone, Aaron kicked off the proceedings. "My flight was but a footstep on the path to a grand adventure..."

Kaye's face was taut with anxiety, and Bart was so nervous that none of what Aaron said reached his ears. He double-checked his notes, repeating his speech over and over in his mind until his moment arrived.

Soon, Aaron glanced offstage. "Today, before we bring out the Hermes Seven," he said, voice rich with expectation, "I'd like to introduce two very special guests. Bart, Kaye, if you would!"

The time had come.

Bart fixed his glasses and tie with clammy hands, then walked onstage to thunderous applause. His legs quaked, and his stomach prickled. He felt impaled by all the eyes. As he and Kaye stood next to Aaron in the center of the stage, random camera flashes made him dizzy.

This audience is just frogs and crayfish, compared to Lev and Irina's. Frogs and crayfish...

"Shall we start with you, Bart?" Aaron patted his shoulder.

Remembering Lev's speech, Bart mentally chanted his magic words: *Come on, let's do this!*

Carefully, he recited the speech he'd memorized. "H-hello... I'm Bart Fifield, Aaron's younger brother." He felt as if his voice would crack. "I'm the supervisor of D Room, and—"

"By the way, Bart," Aaron interjected. "What does the 'D' in D Room stand for?"

Bart's heart stopped. "Oh. Uh... 'Digital.' And, um..."

Aaron's abrupt question had emptied his mind completely. He'd forgotten his entire speech.

"Uh..." Bart reached into his pocket, but his notes were gone. "Um..." Pale as a ghost, he looked at his feet, pretending to fix his glasses as his thoughts raced.

Whispers and chuckles rose from the audience.

"Thank you, Bart." Aaron smiled, taking the microphone from his hand. "Bart here won a compact satellite contest as a college student," he added, drawing applause from the crowd. The toxic racket flooded Bart's ears, knocking him

further off balance.

“Now, let me introduce D Room’s manager, Kaye,” Aaron continued.

Suddenly put in the spotlight, Kaye stood ramrod-straight, letting out a short breath.

“Kaye helped complete calculations for my suborbital flight,” said Aaron. “She’s a computing expert, and her work was instrumental in my trip through space. We’re grateful for all she and the dhampirs in D Room have done for us.”

Aaron saluted Kaye, and the crowd clapped. The dhampirs were especially loud, whooping and whistling with great pride. Kaye bowed bashfully, looking ahead at the audience, then began speaking.

“Hello, everyone!” she said, her voice ringing clear. “I’m Kaye Scarlet. I use the world’s most powerful computer, ACE, to contribute to the space development program along with Bart and D Room’s dhampir team.”

As Kaye’s introductory speech continued, Bart stood by her and Aaron like a shriveled-up cactus. He felt left out, alienated, as he watched her and his brother speak side by side. Again, he felt it should be Aaron and Kaye, if anyone, who met Lev and Irina as the UK’s representatives.

Wishing for it all to end, Bart stared down at his feet, then snuck a peek at the audience. He noticed a human section of the crowd raising their middle fingers to Kaye, their thumbs making throat-cutting gestures.

“Huh...?”

It was humiliating. None of them were here to support the Hermes Seven or Arnack One. They came to boo the government for using their hard-earned tax money for space development—and at the fact that Kaye’s status was higher than theirs. Some might have been Solar Flare Club members attending to see their target.

The mere thought made Bart picture the humans in plague doctor masks, and he looked away. Since the “ghosts” of the Solar Flare Club targeted dhampirs, they’d just as likely haunt dhampir allies too.

Kaye must’ve noticed them, yet she kept chatting with Aaron as if they were

invisible. When she finished, Aaron gestured for her and Bart to exit. Bart sketched a quick bow, then hurried offstage.

“That was the worst speech in ANSA’s history,” Jennifer scolded him, her eyes narrowed.

Kaye tried to cheer him up. “It’s not your fault. It was your first time.”

Bart felt like a dead crayfish. It took all his energy to nod and mutter a reply. “Thanks.”

This had been Kaye’s first time too—and in front of people looking to ruin her moment. Despairing at his awful, humiliating speech, Bart sat gloomy and depressed in a corner of the waiting room until the event finally finished.

Afterward, he and Kaye had a photo shoot, and the Hermes Seven needed to attend another event. They parted in the lobby.

“Good luck, Bart. Do it for the Fifield name,” Aaron said, piling on the pressure.

Bart wanted to quit his role as a “billboard” right then and there, but this wasn’t the time nor the place. He scratched his head uncomfortably. “It was my first time. I was really nervous.”

Aaron shook his head. “Kaye was nervous too. Her smile was forced, and when I shook her hand before she went offstage, it was pretty sweaty.”

“Really?”

Bart looked over at Kaye. She stood in the corner of the lobby, surrounded by astronauts asking about ANSA’s computer. They were entrusting the enigmatic machine with their lives, and they wanted Kaye to assuage their worries. When she noticed Bart and Aaron peering at her, she flashed her usual smile.

“She was probably nervous for a whole different reason, though.” Aaron lowered his voice. “You saw the group heckling her, right?”

“Yeah. They were awful.”

“And they’re everywhere you go. But even the Solar Flare Club wouldn’t do her any harm in public—for now, at least. Still...if anything happens, you’ve got to be there to protect her.”

“Uh...okay.” Bart *did* want to protect Kaye, but that creepy organization seemed like too much for him. All he could do was pray nothing happened.

Aaron gave Bart a hug and a thumbs-up, then left with the other astronauts. Finally free of all their questions, Kaye jogged over. She and Bart met Jennifer and the reporter and headed for the parking lot. They’d need to relocate to a more scenic coastal setting for the photo shoot.

En route to the parking lot, they came across an older air force member stationed at the Rocket Launch Center.

“Excuse me, Bart,” he said. “Could I ask for your autograph?”

Bart couldn’t believe someone would request that after his disastrous speech. “Are...are you sure you want it?”

The old man nodded. “I saw in your profile that you were in the air force. So far, all the air force’s rockets have basically been fireworks, so we’re counting on you,” he said with a chuckle.

Bart glanced at Jennifer. “Go on, give him what he asked you for,” she prompted.

When the old man handed him a pamphlet, Bart took it and smoothly signed the photograph of his face.

Kaye was impressed. “Wow! You’re great at that. Like a movie star.”

“Uh, well...” After his dud of a speech, he couldn’t bring himself to tell Kaye that he’d practiced.

“Did you practice writing it?” she asked, as if reading his thoughts.

He flinched and muttered, “A little bit, maybe.”

Kaye didn’t laugh or make fun of him, though. “I wonder if I should practice too.”

The old air force member took his signed pamphlet, staring at Bart for a while. “Seeing you up close, you look just like my son. We lost him in the war.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, sir.”

“When he first went into battle, he was nervous too. All clumsy and awkward.

Not much to be done about that,” the old man mused. “Even the Space Race is pretty much war. Just know that, if anything happens, I’m here to help you. But pull yourself together a bit, all right? We can’t have you making the air force look milquetoast.”

Bart felt suddenly embarrassed by his neat signature.

Once the older man left, other attendees on their way home crowded Bart for autographs, forming a long line in front of him. They flustered him at first, but Jennifer hissed “It’s your duty!” in his ear, so he got to signing. On the other hand, only a few dhampirs queued in front of Kaye. A couple of humans glanced over as if wanting to ask for Kaye’s signature as well—but with the invisible wall of discrimination between them, none did.

One young human boy *did* jump out of Bart’s line and run toward Kaye, calling her name. The boy’s parents panicked, jerking him back by the arm to keep him from getting any farther. “You’ll get bitten!”

Kaye’s face was etched with a whole host of emotions. Bart could only imagine the amount of sadness and rage she was suppressing, but perhaps she was used to that. Anti-dampir racism was by no means rare.

Human parents instilled fear in their children if they tried to befriend dhampirs and planted seeds of hate to dissuade those same children from falling in love with them. The United Kingdom’s government liked to endorse “racial reconciliation,” but those words had yet to reach its citizens. Even if the government had ordered the two races to get along, that wasn’t something that could just happen—not while brutal state laws were in effect.

As Bart signed autographs, the humans in line muttered racist insults.

“I bet sharing a room with those dhampirs is rough on you,” one told him.

“Uh, well, it’s not bad, actually.” Bart gently shot down the comment.

Still, that didn’t stop other people from airing their opinions.

“Arnack’s a human country.”

“If you ask me, those dhampirs brought vampire bacteria from the moon to wipe out the Earth!”

Bart was getting tired of all their slander. Jennifer seemed equally weary of the long line of people waiting for autographs.

“Unfortunately, we’ve got a schedule to keep!” she called out. “Please save your autograph requests for the next time you meet Arnack One.”

Jennifer cleared away the crowd, pulling Bart and Kaye into the parking lot. The pair heaved relieved sighs almost simultaneously, but from very different places.

Under the sun, the white sand was scorching, and the emerald-green ocean sparkled beautifully. In a beachside change room, Bart pulled on a pair of solid navy swimming trunks. The UK prized strength and muscles, so he disliked the idea of exposing his weak, pale body in public. Every year, he told himself he’d work out for the summer, but he gave up after only a few days.

Bart left his change room just as Kaye exited hers. Her one-piece polka-dot swimsuit outlined her slim figure nicely. It also complemented her porcelain skin, her distinct collarbone, the slender arms she’d seemed worried about, the gentle curve of her chest, and the line between her...

Kaye blushed and covered her chest with her arms. “Stop staring at me.”

“S-sorry!” Bart averted his gaze.

Still, he couldn’t figure out why she’d been so concerned. She looked truly beautiful in her swimsuit. In Bart’s eyes, she was obviously cute and had an almost exotic grace. If her photo were published anywhere, she would draw all sorts of fans—humans included.



“Sorry for the wait!” said Jennifer, who handed them both life jackets.

“Huh? These are...” Bart trailed off, exchanging a confused look with Kaye.

Jennifer giggled, grinning mischievously at them both. “It struck me that you still don’t really know each other that well. There’s a palpable distance between you. In light of that, we’re changing plans.” She pointed at a speedboat racing along the water, towing over an inflatable raft. “Get ready for some team-building water sports!”

“B-but you never mentioned this before...”

“Hm? Did you say something, Bart?” Jennifer was an intimidating woman. Bart felt instinctively that it was in his best interests to obey her.

“Um...” Kaye awkwardly pointed at a sign reading HUMANS ONLY. “This place is, erm...”

Jennifer grinned. “We’ve got permission from the state itself.”

Handing Jennifer his glasses, Bart put on his life jacket. He hopped into the inflatable raft and lay on his stomach next to Kaye, trying to ensure that he didn’t touch her. The boat was so compact that he couldn’t avoid her arms and legs.

The salty sea air drifted to Bart’s nose, and wind blew through Kaye’s silver hair. Bart peeked at the beautiful dip of her collarbone and the drops of water resting in it.

Their eyes met, and Kaye shot him a curious look. “Hm?”

“Um... Er... It’s just that I... I’m an awful swimmer,” Bart stammered. He wanted to avoid falling in the water if at all possible.

“Me too. I can’t swim.” Kaye heaved a deep sigh and ran a slender hand through her hair. For a moment, the sweet scent of queen of the night flowers wafted on the sea breeze.

“Hey, you two! Smile!”

Bart and Kaye whipped their heads toward the shore. There, the reporter standing next to Jennifer was aiming his camera at them.

Yikes! I've got to be careful. If they print a photo of me gawking at Kaye's swimsuit, I'm gonna make the Fifi fields look bad.

"Smile?" Bart did his best to plaster on a grin. Just then, the motorboat revved without warning, taking off at tremendous speed. "Whoa!"

"Eep!"

The shock of riding the waves hit Bart's stomach with unexpected impact. He almost fell out of the raft but somehow grabbed the handle on its side, gritting his teeth. This was no time for smiling.

Kaye screamed, her legs flailing behind her. "Wait, wait, wait!" she cried. "I'm going to fall out!" The boat veered, impacting their centers of gravity. The force overwhelmed Kaye, and she slammed into Bart. "Ahh!"

"Huh?!"

"Eek! Oh no, oh no, oh no!"

"If you don't lean the other way, you'll fall in!"

"Why?!"

"Think about the g-force!"

"I am!"

As they rode in the raft together, it became clear to Bart that Kaye wasn't athletic in the slightest. She was leaning her body weight so the raft inclined *farther* sideways. The speedboat carved out another turn, picking up speed.

"Whoa!" Seawater sprayed Bart's face. This was scarier than any roller coaster he'd been on.

Kaye's eyes grew teary. "I thought today was just a photo shoot!" she squeezed out.

The speedboat snaked left and right, and their inflatable raft followed. *Is the driver crazy?!* Bart wondered. At that point, the driver gazed backward, sending a dirty look in Kaye's direction.

"They're doing this on purpose?!" Bart fought to stay on the raft, clinging for dear life. As Kaye's weight shifted wildly, however, Bart felt her pushing him

out. “Don’t lean against me!” he shouted. “I’ll fall!”

“But—oh no, my fingers are going numb! I can’t...hold...” Kaye’s hands slipped from the raft’s handles. “Ack!”

The next instant, she hurriedly wrapped her arms around Bart, tangling her legs in his and clinging tight.

“Huh?! Wait! I can’t hold on!”

“Save meee! I can’t swim!” Kaye buried her face in Bart’s torso. With each shriek she let loose, he felt the tickle of her nose and breath under his arm. Her hands clung to him tighter, and her soft breasts pushed into his side. His leg was trapped between her thighs.

“Kaye, I-I can’t...” Bart’s head and heart exploded as he reached the limits of his fear and the intensity of Kaye’s stranglehold. Then...

Splash!

The inflatable raft overturned, and Bart and Kaye plunged into the sea.

Neither drowned, thanks to their life jackets, but they didn’t have the energy to swim. Kaye floated on the water’s surface like a dead jellyfish, and Bart looked up at the sky. *How in the world did I end up floating in the ocean with a dhampir girl? I was supposed to be in the Operations Division.*

When they returned to shore, Jennifer and the reporter were waiting with stern expressions.

“You two looked so tense, we couldn’t get a single good shoot!” Jennifer said. “Now we have no choice but to go with the original plan.”

“Got it,” Bart mumbled.

He removed his life jacket, put on his glasses, and sat on the hot sands of the beach with Kaye. The ordeal on the inflatable raft had dizzied and utterly exhausted them both. Bart could still feel Kaye clinging tightly to his body, which compounded his stupor.

“Bart!” Jennifer barked. “Your glasses are crooked! And put on a smart-looking smile, would you?”

“Y-yes, ma’am.” He fixed his glasses and beamed, whispering to Kaye, “I guess we just have to pray this will actually benefit the space program.”

“I guess so...”

While the photographer snapped their pictures, Bart couldn’t help reflecting on his speech at the event. He still felt that photos of Kaye and *Aaron* would be far better and more appropriate for Arnack One.

As the photographer changed the film in his camera, Bart turned to Kaye. “My brother would’ve made a better human billboard, don’t you think?”

Kaye shook her head. “No. I’m glad it’s you.”

“Really?” His heart leaped a little at the thought.

“Yeah. I mean, Aaron’s an astronaut and a national hero. He’s different from me.”

At that moment, Bart realized Kaye might feel the same way he did.

“Besides, space isn’t just about the stars sparkling in the sky,” she added.

“Hm?”

“There are only ten or so astronauts, including the ones in the Union. But tens of thousands of engineers, technicians, and scientists work behind the scenes so those astronauts can fly. I guess I want people to know that, even though the moon’s up there shining in the night sky, beautiful queen of the night flowers are blooming under the moonlight down on Earth. Or something like that.”

Kaye’s tone was a bit sad, but she smiled as the photo shoot resumed.

Bart had always seen himself as dim stardust next to his constantly luminous older brother. Hearing Kaye’s words made him realize that perhaps it was fine to not be on the same level as Aaron.

Regardless, people expected the UK’s new “billboards” to be earthbound heroes rivaling the heroes of the stars. At that thought, Bart felt a different pressure: a doubt that it was even possible. All the same, he looked at the camera and gave it an awkward smile.

The following day—Sunday—Bart mostly lingered in bed, but his mind and body didn’t feel rested afterward. He rolled around, drank a once-icy glass of

cola, and stared blankly at the television. The PR activities he'd gotten wrapped up in dominated his thoughts.

After the photo shoot, Jennifer had handed Bart and Kaye PR schedules. There were so many meet-and-greets with UK citizens that the thought gave him a headache.

Jennifer's response had been sharp. "You'll get used to it. Which is to say, you *have* to get used to it."

Bart had felt like his spirit might break. Kaye, however, had his back after looking at the schedule. She smiled warmly at him. "It won't be easy, but let's give it our best shot!"

As she spoke, she'd pumped her fists in an adorable show of confident enthusiasm, and Bart had opted to hold back his complaints. He was well beyond telling Kaye and Jennifer that he wasn't good with people.

Now, Bart's TV was showing a science special on the blood moon, which would apparently be visible on the evening of September 3 through to early morning on September 4. Professor Vil Klaus was a guest commentator on the special. Bart felt inspired by Klaus, who'd been involved in the entertainment industry for well over a decade. He had even taken part in making an animated film about space travel.

"Even Professor Klaus does PR," Bart said. "Guess I've got to pull my weight too."

He looked up at the moon in the sky. Space was a new frontier—a place to explore, discover, and cultivate. Of course there were difficulties and hardships. The only answer was to overcome each and every one.

"If I can't become one of Earth's heroes, I'll never make Hyperion."

In an effort to encourage himself, Bart pumped his fists the same way Kaye had.

Bart participated in ANSA's PR activities on weekends, but every Monday, he was back at work in D Room as usual.

After the morning meeting, Kaye came over to check on him. “Are you used to ACE yet, Bart?”

“Not really.” Bart wiped the sleep from his eyes. “I’m a long way from any kind of grasp of it.”

He was getting a handle on FORX bit by bit, but he was still very much a beginner. He could help Mia make programs, but for the time being, moving punch cards and doing odd jobs were a bigger part of his duties. Some of D Room’s dhampirs still fretted about giving a male human orders, but Bart didn’t mind. He did whatever was asked of him. When it came to fixing the machinery’s constant paper jams, he’d become something of an expert; the team had begun to rely on him in those moments.

There was admiration in Kaye’s eyes whenever she watched Bart fix a paper jam. “I wish I were good with my hands.”

“That’s all I’ve got going for me,” Bart said. He wasn’t being modest—he really believed it.

Kaye shook her head. “I disagree. Even if you’re busy with your own work, you always find ways to help people when needed. I think that’s a fantastic trait.”

“Y-you do?”

Bart still wasn’t sure how useful he really was to the team, but Kaye’s kind words made him happy. He’d been a nervous wreck when he arrived at D Room, but he felt much more comfortable these days. It was easier now that the team didn’t bother any more with him than necessary.

Eventually, Bart became something like D Room’s receptionist when humans visited. Engineers and scientists sometimes came by to drop off or pick up calculations, and they went straight to Bart, since they were more comfortable talking to a fellow human. They were probably also familiar with his face, now that he was so deeply involved in public relations.

Visitors to D Room always asked about Kaye as they made small talk. It was only logical that they were curious about the dhampir girl and her amazing achievements.

“What kind of person is Kaye, anyway?” they’d inquire.

“She’s intelligent and exceptional at her work,” Bart would respond, keeping mum about her clumsiness to preserve her reputation.

Kaye’s workload was something to behold. The better part of D Room’s tasks went through her. She also guided and instructed the team, often working without rest. If she collapsed one day, work in D Room would grind to a halt. Were Bart to put it in computing terms, Kaye was D Room’s CPU.

She was the perfect choice for a dhampir “billboard.” Her work deserved to be seen and recognized. Like Kaye, Bart devoted himself to his duties; he knew he had to put his nose to the grindstone, since he was always standing by Kaye’s side.

Still, the computer was a difficult machine to work with. It gave D Room’s team a lot of grief. They frequently went to the effort of making punch cards only to meet some unknown error. They’d have to restart completely after figuring out whether the issue was caused by the programming, the key punch operator, or something else.

On top of that, the actual task of swapping out punch cards was troublesome and risky. If a bundle fell and got mixed up, a team member had to rearrange the cards while referencing the original list document, which took forever. The staff took the greatest care to ensure they didn’t drop the punch cards, but they were dealing with thousands of cards that could fall or be knocked over by the slightest disturbance.

The ACE computer was incredibly fast, which probably made all the work worth it. But even so, using the physically and mentally grueling machine sapped Bart’s energy, and he was already exhausted from his weekend PR commitments. He started seeing punch cards in his dreams. The key puncher would run him through, and he’d end up squeezed between cards like a hamburger patty.

Despite being enthusiastic about working in D Room, Bart often got sleepy and dozed off.

“Ouch!”

Every time, Mia—the sentinel by his side—would poke his arm with a pen.

“Fall asleep again, and I’ll write on your face,” she warned.

“I apologize, Miss Mia.”

Bart went to the bathroom and washed up. He came back to find Kaye looking over test results for the orbital calculation program, tilting her head in confusion.

“Huh?” Kaye said. “Was there a calculation error?”

Everyone gathered around her.

“Something’s weird about the output numbers for this request form,” she explained. “They don’t add up. I did the calculations in my head just to make sure.”

When it came to space development, no mistake could be overlooked—errors could potentially lead to catastrophic failures. Since Bart had made punch cards for the calculations in question, his drowsiness vanished instantly. D Room needed to investigate the issue, which meant they might miss the agreed-upon delivery deadline, so they contacted the engineering division that sent the request.

“This is why dhampirs can’t be trusted with computers!” was the spiteful reply. The mood in D Room grew suddenly heavy.

Kaye clapped her hands to get everyone’s attention and cheer them up. “As long as we remove the error, there won’t be an issue. It’s probably a punch card mistake. We just have to find it and correct it!” Her optimistic attitude and trust in the team boosted their morale.

D Room split into two groups—one to complete regular work and one to analyze the error. Naturally, Bart worked on error analysis, referring to his FORX textbook as he looked at the punch cards and final calculations. He hoped and prayed he wouldn’t notice errors in sections he’d worked on. His eyes grew bleary as he checked everything line by line, constantly readjusting his glasses.

After a full day of work, Bart found a tiny, almost imperceptible issue while carefully double-checking a section he’d contributed to. A line that should have said “DO 10 I=1.10” read “DO 10 I=1,10”

A chill ran down his spine. “Urk...that’s a comma, not a period. Is *that* the issue?”

The mistake boiled down to a single punctuation mark, but it was a major error for the computer, which recognized periods as data values and commas as a way to separate commands. The world darkened before Bart’s eyes. His thoughtless mistake was the source of the bug.

“Couldn’t the computer at least understand this was wrong?” he said under his breath. But the computer always worked faithfully, doing exactly as it was told.

After Bart located the error, relief washed through the room. Kaye put a hand to her chest, heaving a sigh. “That’s a weight off my shoulders! If we’d never noticed that, it could’ve caused a bad accident.”

Although everyone in D Room was glad, Bart had still made them complete extra work, and they looked at him with icy eyes. Unable to erase his guilt, he could only apologize profusely.

“Please don’t be too hard on him,” Kaye said, sticking her neck out for him. “He can’t even rest on weekends, since he has PR work. Exhaustion’s catching up with him. Let’s not forget he got here less than a week ago! I think he’s doing the best he can. Have you all forgotten the mistakes you made when you started?”

“Well, I guess she’s got a point,” Mia said. She and the others broke into nostalgic exchanges about their past slipups.

Kaye turned to Bart and smiled. “Just watch out next time, okay?”

“Got it.”

Although Kaye’s encouragement let him off the hook, Bart knew *she* didn’t get weekends off either. Yet she was always hard at work, showing no hint of exhaustion. He felt ashamed of himself.

Bart took a short break after dinner, heading to the roof with a cup of coffee. The bathroom and roof were his two refuges—places where he could be by

himself. Part of him thought a cigarette might calm his unhappiness, but his respiratory system wasn't particularly strong, and he didn't really like smoking. He decided to stargaze to clear his mind instead.

The Summer Triangle asterism sparkled overhead, and a silver half-moon floated in the sky. Although the day's scorching sunlight was gone, the air was still hot and humid. An uncomfortably warm wind blew in the dampness of the nearby salt lake, clinging to Bart's skin. He walked behind the water tower, a place nobody would go.

Or so he thought.

Bart was surprised to see a figure leaning against the fence. "Oh..."

It was Kaye, staring at the night sky with a little bottle in her hand. When she noticed him, her eyes widened. "Hm? Bart, are you on break?"

"Yeah. So, you come here too?"

"Sometimes. Being in the basement too long can get suffocating. I like it here because it's quiet, and there's nobody else around." Kaye shook the little glass bottle; it rang with the sound of sugar cubes.

Bart also wanted to be alone, and he felt bad for interrupting her break, but the idea of going back was awkward. Instead, he leaned against the fence, leaving a gap between them. Kaye sipped a sugar cube out of her bottle, sucking it like a piece of candy. Nursing his coffee, Bart decided to bring up his error from earlier. He'd been so downcast about his mistake, he hadn't had a chance to acknowledge Kaye's response.

"Thanks for standing up for me even though I caused you all so much hassle."

"It's okay. Everyone makes mistakes when they're tired."

Despite the fact that his error had caused unnecessary overtime, Kaye wasn't blaming him. Bart felt there was more to that than just the fact that they were partners in ANSA's public relations campaign.

"Why did you go so far to defend me once we found the error, though? Just looking at everybody's faces, you could see how upset they were. I expected you to come down hard on me, frankly."

Kaye swirled her glass bottle, looking sheepish. “Well...in high school and college, I was surrounded by human males. I was all alone. I thought you probably felt the same as I did then.”

Her vermilion eyes wavered. She’d probably suffered terrible discrimination. Yet she still had the heart to show kindness to Bart, a human male.

Kaye lowered her gaze, falling silent. Perhaps painful old memories had risen to the surface of her mind. Bart thought it’d be best not to get any deeper into the topic, so he changed the subject. “In two weeks, they’ll launch the first Shoot for the Moon prototype.”

“Huh?” Kaye lifted her head, looking as though she didn’t believe him.

Various planetary exploration plans were in progress at ANSA facilities across the UK. The Shoot for the Moon Project was just one. A city out west, far from Laika Crescent, was developing the probe. Promotional documents said that facility used ACE computers too.

The Zirnitra Union’s attempts to photograph the moon had succeeded two years earlier. Compared to them, the United Kingdom had only just left the starting line.

“It’s something to look forward to,” Bart mused. “It seems like all the things I dreamed of as a kid are becoming reality.” He looked up at the moon, thinking about space travel. “Sometimes I wonder how it’d feel to be part of Hyperion someday. I don’t know if they’d accept a guy who mixes up periods and commas, though.”

Chuckling, he looked over at Kaye. “But you? You’d be a shoo-in for the Hyperion team.”

“Oh? Hmm.” Kaye rolled her glass bottle across her palm restlessly. Her face relaxed for a moment, then her eyes dropped to the moon’s reflection on the surface of the salt lake. “I don’t know. We aren’t even sure whether this country’s space program has much of a future.”

“I’d love it if the queen just commanded, ‘Fly me to the moon!’” Bart laughed. “Then everyone naysaying space travel might come around, you know?”

Kaye giggled. “Well, I should be getting back,” she said, pushing herself off the

fence and ambling away.

“Wait! I’ll come too.”

She turned toward him with a blank, surprised look. “But you just got here.”

“Yeah...but it was my fault everyone had to work overtime. At this point, I should be picking up the slack.”

“That’s really nice of you,” said Kaye, impressed. “In that case...”

Walking up to Bart, she opened her bottle and plopped three sugar cubes into his coffee.

“You need to refuel.” She grinned. “Drink up.”



Kaye seemed to intend the sugary coffee as Bart's punishment. He bowed deeply.

"You have my deepest apologies," he told her in a deliberately groveling tone. "I won't fail you again!"

Another laugh spilled from her lips. "Well, let's get back to it, then."

Stretching her arms wide, she walked away. Above her, the silver moon sparkled brightly in the sky.

As he watched Kaye's silhouette under that spotlight, Bart promised himself, *I'll work as hard as I can as a person, team member, and partner. Whatever it takes to keep up with Kaye.*

He downed his extra-sweet coffee, including the still-intact sugar cubes, and then returned to the battleground where the computer waited.

The cold war between East and West steadily intensified. On August 13, one of the UZSR's satellite nations suddenly surrounded a UK-occupied territory with barbed wire and troops, locking down a forty-five square kilometer area. The incident was headline news for days, relegating the space program to the newspapers' back pages alongside other current stories.

Living Illustrated's special "Arnack One" edition featured a lengthy spread that included big photos of Bart and Kaye's debut at the Rocket Launch Center event. It also contained their swimsuit photographs. With that, Bart and Kaye were recognized worldwide as "the outstanding man and woman helming scientific progress in the United Kingdom."

"They really went all out on this," Bart mumbled.

Having finished his usual tasks, he was in the Keighley Center's Office of Public Information, looking at the *Living Illustrated* Jennifer had given him. His bashfulness at seeing his photos in the magazine mingled with his ambivalence about the world's precarious state. Kaye evidently felt the same; she perused the magazine with an embarrassed smile on her face.

In the photos from the event, Bart was hunched over. He looked awkward,

gawky, and utterly pathetic compared to the dignified Kaye. However you sliced it, she and Aaron were the really photogenic combination.

It was the same in the swimsuit photos, in which Bart—looking timid and wearing his glasses—stood next to Kaye, who resembled a movie star. To make matters worse, the magazine had printed *“Astronaut Aaron Fifield’s little brother!”* alongside Bart’s name.

Taking a long look at Bart’s face, Jennifer said, “Next to Kaye and your brother, you have zero presence.”

“You think I don’t already know that?!”

“All the same,” Jennifer went on, “even *you* received a healthy amount of fan mail.” She dropped a heap of two or three dozen letters in front of Bart.

“Whoa. Seriously?!”

He couldn’t believe it. It wasn’t just fan mail, though—the city’s restaurants and eateries had also written asking for photos and autographs. For the first time ever, Bart felt popular. His life had changed completely, all because his brother was a hero.

Kaye was also becoming famous. She was flooded with fan letters and presents from dhampirs nationwide. Including letters from humans, she’d received at least twice as many as Bart.

“I don’t believe it.” Completely unaware of her own charm, Kaye really couldn’t wrap her head around the fan mail.

“Hmm...” Bart opened a letter and found that it was from a dhampir woman who’d included a raunchy photograph of herself, complete with a lipstick kiss mark. The letter said she wanted to meet for dinner. Flustered, Bart tried to play it cool. “Is...is this a honey trap?! I don’t intend to fall for it!”

Kaye looked over, her gaze chilly. “That’s not a honey trap. That’s a social climber. Lots of dhampir women want to marry a human to change their position in society.”

“Oh...really?”

Kaye nodded, her expression one of sadness and disgust. “I certainly can’t

imagine getting married for that reason,” she said, her words oddly cold.

“So naive,” Jennifer interjected. “It’s not like you’re a saint yourself.”

The comment was cutting. Kaye looked away, falling silent.

Noticing the reaction right away, Jennifer gazed at her mischievously. “Oh, Kaye, am I to understand you *are* a pure little saint?”

Kaye gulped nervously but remained quiet.

“Well?”

Kaye turned away, her neck and cheeks tinged pink. “Does it matter?”

Jennifer let out a teasing whistle, then pointed at Bart. “You’re also innocent through and through, aren’t you?”

“D-don’t talk like you know me!”

Jennifer shrugged, tired of messing with them. “At any rate, you’ll keep promoting the wonders of Arnack’s technology earnestly and honestly, like a good little couple. And *without* getting too big for your britches. Are we on the same page?”

“Yes,” Bart and Kaye said in harmony, both pouting.

On weekends, the pair visited the human residential district for a series of summer events. Jennifer and the *Living Illustrated* reporter went with them. They introduced computers to a group of a hundred Boy Scouts, held a talk at a stock car race, and spoke about space at a charity barbecue. They went anywhere and everywhere people gathered, from rodeos to baseball stadiums.

Bart struggled in front of the crowds. He was nervous and muddled; cheerful, friendly Kaye rescued him constantly. Since the audiences were always human, though, everyone supported the awkward, puzzling Bart. They smiled kindly at him, writing him off as just another “Nerd Heaven” employee.

As he appeared in more events, Bart got a little more familiar with being in front of crowds. And as he grew increasingly comfortable with doing PR, his efficiency in D Room likewise improved, so Mia no longer needed to threaten him with her pen.

It was thanks to Kaye's kind support and encouragement that Bart could continue even when he felt he'd crumble. Humans tended to find the dhampir girl irritating, but she always looked out for him. Although he felt deeply grateful, he was too shy and embarrassed to tell her directly. Instead, he made sure she had sugar cubes on her breaks, and at lunch, he always had ketchup ready for her and watched out for Mia's pranks.

Bart and Kaye only ever attended events in the Crescent Moon District—that is, until late August, when Jennifer announced, "Time for our first Moonlight District event!"

Kaye looked relieved. She always kept her cool, but being around humans all the time was clearly a strain on her. Bart, on the other hand, now felt his eyes darting fearfully.

Jennifer's voice snapped him back to attention. "Relax. There won't be speeches this time. We're just looking to take pictures of you two having fun, like with the swimsuit photo shoot."

She had arranged for Bart and Kaye to attend the Blood Melon Harvest Festival, a big dhampir celebration held annually in August. Blood melons were members of the gourd family; they were often eaten in summer, when their acidic sweetness came out in full. The melons' name came from the fact that their rinds, flesh, and juice were all bloodred. That was also why people associated them with dhampirs.

Bart couldn't believe his first-ever trip to the Moonlight District would be during the biggest dhampir festival in the South. His stomach was already kicking up a fuss.

A few days earlier, on August 23, ANSA had suffered yet another failure. The Moon Shoot Project had launched its prototype successfully, but the probe failed to enter orbit. It was lost to the depths of space, heightening the UK citizens' growing dissatisfaction.

ANSA published a puff piece in *Living Illustrated* attempting to win over the general public, but they were lagging behind in the Space Race. The UZSR was pulling further and further ahead, producing a crisis of confidence in the UK.

ANSA's backs were against the wall.

A bulky bodyguard drove Bart toward the Moonlight District for the Blood Melon Harvest Festival. Jennifer and the *Living Illustrated* reporter were with them; Kaye planned to meet them on-site.

Just thinking about the festival filled Bart with gloom. However, there was one silver lining: the high-grade telescope ANSA had provided for a special stargazing event. That activity's official objective was to apprise skeptical dhampirs of the space program's wonders, but Bart was set to enjoy the experience on a wholly personal level.

Their car drove across the bridge over the bloodline into the Moonlight District. Even though there was only a single river between the two districts, it felt like crossing the border into a foreign country. The Moonlight District's unpaved roads were strewn with scraps of paper and garbage. Its houses were discolored with dirt.

The dhampirs attending the festival were clearly different from the ones working at the Keighley Center. They were gruff and rugged, their clothes were tattered, and they glared pointedly at Bart. On the street corners stood men wearing hats similar to police caps, armed with old rifles.

Jennifer's disdain was clear in the furrow of her brow. "You're looking at vigilante gang members," she told Bart. "I don't like this. I wouldn't even be here if it weren't for work."

Bart was just as worried. Few humans knew anything about the Moonlight District, which was why it was sometimes called Laika Crescent's "dark side." Everyone considered the area too dangerous to visit unarmed. Since the Solar Flare Club had been so active lately, there was uncertainty in the air, exacerbated by the arson scare that had occurred in a neighboring city just the previous night. It felt like anything could happen.

"The government really has its hands full with the Solar Flare Club. I'm sick of it," snapped Jennifer. "If the state police don't do something, the military might."

“The military?”

“The ghosts used Molotov cocktails. They’re practically terrorists.”

From the bottom of his heart, Bart prayed he’d never, ever have to deal with anyone like that.

The harvest festival grounds were on a plot of land where a fort had once been. Even now, Bart could see the remains of that eighteenth-century stone stronghold. Their driver circled to the back of the grounds, parking beside a public cemetery. They headed from there to the festival entrance, where Kaye awaited them.

Bart had gotten used to being around D Room’s team, yet he still felt overwhelmed at the sight of the countless dhampirs—men and women, young and old—who’d gathered from all over. Even the strong-willed Jennifer seemed to shrink behind her bodyguard, refusing to let go of him. They weren’t playing on home turf at this event, and their hesitation only grew as they neared the festival.

“Bart! Over here!”

Kaye waved from the festival entrance. Her silver hair shone against her red dress. Even among the crowds of dhampir women, she was eye-catching. She looked brighter and more energetic than usual.

“Mia and the others are here too!” she told Bart, pulling him through the gate.

The festival had already begun, and the bustle grew as more and more dhampirs entered the grounds. Lively laughter and children’s cries filled the air. The wind carried the aroma of barbecued meat to mingle with the scents of tobacco and sweat. Colorful balloons decorated ring toss stalls and shooting galleries. Birds and stray cats picked at the blood melon rinds littering the ground. Bart rarely encountered this kind of lively atmosphere in the Crescent Moon district.

Red eyes and pointed ears were everywhere Bart looked. Clearly the odd ones out, Bart and his two human companions found themselves the object of suspicious stares from all sides. Festivalgoers pointed and laughed at them. It

was the complete opposite of what they were used to. As they were clearly part of Kaye's group, however, the humans never felt the need for a gun to protect themselves.

"Let's grab something to eat over there," Kaye suggested.

She led Bart to a large canvas tent displaying various blood melon dishes festivalgoers could enjoy, including grilled melon, melon salad, fried melon rind, and melon pickles. Next to that display, perhaps unsurprisingly, were several bottles of habanero sauce and ketchup.

In one corner of the tent, Mia drowned her grilled melon in habanero sauce. The dish quickly became a deep, intimidating red.

"Is that...good?" Bart asked timidly.

"Sweet and spicy," Mia replied, spooning grilled melon into her mouth as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Just then, Jennifer thrust crimson, ultra-spicy mesh-grilled melon in Bart and Kaye's direction. "Chow down," she told Bart. "Think of it as a cultural exchange."

"Huh?" The melon's steamy heat stung Bart's eyes. He glanced toward Kaye for support.

She'd covered her own melon in ketchup and was chomping away. "It's great!"

Sensing the photographer's camera point in his direction, Bart caved, making up his mind and biting into the spicy melon. The moment it touched his mouth, he choked. "Urk! Bleh!" His mouth and throat felt as though they were on fire.

"Oh my." Jennifer grinned. "Too much habanero sauce, perhaps?"

"W-water..." Bart's vision blurred with tears. He grabbed the cup someone gave him and drank from it. "Blegh!"

Sudden acidity numbed his tongue, and even more burning-hot spice assaulted his throat. He realized then that *Mia* had passed him the cup.

"It's habanero cola," Mia told him, throwing him a smirk. Then she disappeared into the crowd as Bart writhed in agony.

Kaye laughed so hard, she clutched at her stomach. “Looks like Mia just hazed you!” she exclaimed, ketchup dotting the edges of her mouth.

“That was horrendous,” Bart sighed, his mouth numb. “It’s definitely going to upset my stomach.”

Sweat poured from his entire body as they walked the festival grounds.

In the center of the festival, a giant fifty-kilogram melon sat like a god at rest. Various competitions and activities were taking place around it, including a speed-eating contest and a group carving melon rind helmets. Bart saw D Room team members here and there; the oldest had even brought her children. The dhampir Bart often bumped into at the bathroom was there enjoying himself too. All the Keighley Center’s dhampir staff were smiling in a way they never could at work.

Almost everyone who spotted Kaye approached to say something, shaking her hand and asking for an autograph. Others watched her with eyes full of pride.

“They really love Kaye here,” Bart said to Jennifer.

The woman nodded with a hint of envy. “She’s top-tier across the board—brains, face, personality. You can’t fault her. That’s why she’s one of our walking billboards. A famous astronaut’s little brother could learn lots from a girl like her.”

“Did you have to put it that way?”

However she phrased it, Jennifer was right. Kaye was the ideal engineer. If Bart wanted Division Chief Damon to see him as more than a bottom-feeding catfish, he couldn’t just do his job. He had to lead his team exactly the way Kaye did.

After two hours of roaming the festival grounds under the blazing sun, Bart and Kaye sat in the shade of a hickory tree with bowls of shaved ice.

“I’m so tired, I’m not sure I could even make tonight’s stargazing event,” Bart admitted. “Besides, that habanero sauce upset my stomach.”

“I’m a little lightheaded myself,” Kaye agreed. “I haven’t even had a chance to

sit down until now.”

Both were completely exhausted—Bart from the stress of the completely foreign environment, Kaye from being hounded for autographs.

At that moment, the festival grounds exploded in cheers. Apparently, the blood melon race had begun. Out of all the festival competitions, the one in which people raced carrying ten-kilogram blood melons was the most popular. Jennifer had taken the bodyguard and *Life Illustrated* reporter to cover it.

Spooning shaved ice into her mouth, Kaye turned to Bart. “I’m going to stay here and rest, but do you want to check out the race?”

“I’ll pass. It’s too hot.” Bart slumped forward. Suddenly, something poked his back, and his heart almost jumped into his throat. “Ow! Hey!”

He turned to see a group of dhampir children “equipped” with tree branches and melon rind helmets.

“We won’t excuse your bullying Kaye, Sir Bart!” They didn’t even know him, yet they were calling him “sir.”

“Wha—?! But I did no such thing!” From the kids’ cheeky expressions, Bart knew this was a prank, but he had no idea how to respond.

A troubled look crossed Kaye’s face. She knelt in front of the children, talking to them the way a teacher would address students. “I can’t believe you guys! What do you think you’re doing?”

“W-wasn’t that guy bullying you? Or hitting you?”

“No! I’m absolutely fine. Bart’s very kind, actually! He always gets me ketchup and sugar cubes when I need them.”

“Huh?” The kids eyed Bart with great suspicion.

Kaye shook her head, heaving something of a defeated sigh. She passed the children some coins. “How about you buy yourselves a treat?”

The kids cheered. “Thanks! In return, you can have this!” They gave Kaye a melon rind helmet, then ran happily toward the festival stalls.

Encountering the storm of children left Bart a bit shocked. “Who were those

kids?”

“Um...” Kaye’s eyes flashed with sorrow as she watched the youngsters leave. “Orphans who live at the church. Sorry if they offended you. I hope you’ll forgive them.”

The children survived by fishing in the swamps, she explained, and she brought them food occasionally.

“Wow,” Bart replied. “I guess to those kids, you’re like a saint.”

Kaye said nothing, her cheeks burning red. Bart had meant to express his admiration, and at first, he couldn’t work out her reaction. Then he realized “saint” was the exact word Jennifer had used not long ago.

“Oh, uh... I meant, like, a *kindly saint*...uh, not ‘pure’ or anything.”

His words just embarrassed Kaye more, and she hid her face with her new blood melon helmet.

Awkward silence enveloped them just as Jennifer arrived. “Kaye, is that a melon rind hat...? Anyway, you two are racing. We signed you up at the last minute.”

“Huh?” Bart and Kaye blurted in unison.

It was already too late to decline, however. The race officials were coming to find them.

Bart and Kaye stood at the starting line surrounded by large, muscle-bound dhampir men. Bart’s blood melon was dramatically bigger than everyone else’s—at least double the size of Kaye’s. But when you played on another team’s home turf, that was how things went. He’d been hoping to swap out his melon, but he hadn’t had a chance. Bart had always been the worst in his class at sports, but at the very least, he didn’t want to lose to Kaye.

“On your mark... Get set!” The announcer waved his flag. “Go!”

Due to Bart’s poor reflexes, he quickly lagged to last place. Kaye, on the other hand, had a flying start. Unfortunately, she was in such a hurry that she tripped over her own feet after three steps.

“Eek!” Her blood melon slipped from her hands right into Bart’s path.

“Huh?!”

Bart tried to go around it, but instead stepped right *on* the melon and slipped. In the next instant, his face collided with the ground below.

“Ow! Ugh...”

The crowd roared with chuckles, applause, and whistles. Everyone seemed unusually excited by the debacle.

“Ouch...”

Bart lifted his head, feeling something warm drip from his nose to his lip. He hurriedly wiped his face with a fist, and it came away covered in blood. The dhampirs gaped at him immediately, and Bart withdrew from the race, scampering away like an armadillo fleeing an alligator.

Shortly after, Bart cooled his nose with shaved ice in the corner of the festival grounds closest to the cemetery. Kaye, meanwhile, had escaped with little more than a grazed knee.

She apologized profusely, on the verge of tears. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry!”

“I’m okay. And, hey, at least my glasses are unscathed.”

Jennifer sipped a cola, watching them in disbelief. “First that raft at the beach, and now this blood melon race. Well, I guess when we asked for billboards for Nerd Heaven, we certainly got them.”

After Kaye spent a bit more time on the bench with Bart, some kids visiting from another city pulled her away, dragging her into another round of signing autographs. As for Bart, nobody bothered him for his signature, although nearby dhampirs chuckled at his nose plug.

Jennifer looked around at everything, crunching an ice cube in her mouth. “This whole Arnack One project...” she mused. “Promoting the UK’s science and technology is one thing, but the ‘reconciliation’ part will be no small feat.”

“What do you mean?”

“My boss told me, ‘It’s important to show we can compromise.’ But it’s not as

if *he* knows anything about what it's actually like here on the ground."

"It sounds like you aren't fully on board with this idea."

"I guess not. I just can't help thinking there's a better way to do it."

"Like what?"

"Like pitting you against the Solar Flare Club, for example."

Bart was speechless.

"It's a joke. No need to look like you're about to march off to your death."

"N-no, ma'am." When Jennifer said it, it hadn't sounded like a joke at all. Bart broke out in a cold sweat.

"How do I put this...? The government ordered us to hold these official events. But I feel like when dhampir citizens with nothing left to lose protest, it generates incredibly powerful sympathy. We have to ask ourselves—does that power exist in a feeble boy with a nosebleed who happened to be tapped as humanity's 'billboard'?"

"Uh, yeah, I get that." Jennifer's statement was like a knife. After attending numerous events in the human residential district, Bart felt likewise. Jennifer said whatever she wanted and ran him ragged as she pleased, but he was glad she was open and straightforward.

Jennifer flapped her shirt against her chest to fan herself. "As far as I'm concerned, so long as you, Kaye, and ACE get famous, we're okay. Just keep on keeping on."

The woman was businesslike through and through, and Bart felt no passion for space from her. Maybe that was unsurprising; she'd majored in political science, which had nothing to do with space. That said, diplomacy was obviously essential to a public relations team member.

"Why did you join ANSA, Jennifer?" Bart asked, struck with the desire to know.

"I used to be a newspaper reporter, but I was scouted when ANSA was established," Jennifer answered calmly. It seemed she had nothing to hide. "At the time, they only had scientist and engineer types. You know, way too

logical.”

“I see.”

“When it comes to work, I do what I have to. And recently, I set myself a goal. If the UZSR’s press secretary really *is* the girl I knew in college, I’ll humiliate that hag so badly she’ll feel like I forced her to guzzle down a pool of habanero sauce.”

“Did...something happen between you two?”

“None of your business.”

There was rage in Jennifer’s hands as she yanked blades of grass from the ground at her feet. Her pride had evidently taken a blow at some point in the past. Bart didn’t know how, but had a distinct feeling romance was wrapped up in it somehow.

He knew prying further was a bad idea, so he held off. Rising to his feet, he told Jennifer he was going to head to the bathroom. He had a stomachache, and he wanted to clean his bloody face.

At that point, Bart noticed a bald dhampir man in the slow-moving crowd staring daggers at him. Bart fixed his glasses, timidly glancing back. The fearsome dhampir looked to be sizing Bart up, and his expression made it seem like he had something to say. For a moment, Kaye’s face flashed through Bart’s mind. He was afraid to scrutinize the man, though, so he looked away.

“Something wrong?” asked Jennifer.

Bart snuck another peek at the dhampir out of the corner of his eye. The man turned and walked off.

After that, Bart stepped into the dirty bathroom. Flies buzzed around inside, and the walls were so dilapidated they had holes. Unable to relax, he reached toward the stall door to leave. Just then, he heard the gruff voices of dhampir men complaining on the other side.

“That Kaye chick’s at the human’s beck and call,” one said.

Putting his eye to a hole in the door, Bart saw a dangerous-looking group answering the call of nature.

“Outer space isn’t our battlefield. Why do we need humans or the Space Race anyway?”

“What was that machine called? A compewtore? If it’s *that* powerful, why can’t it revolutionize this crummy society?”

Dhampirs who hated humans couldn’t stand the ones who climbed human society’s ladder of success, like Kaye.

“I’ve got to admit, though, she looks great in a swimsuit,” another said with a chortle. “That’s probably all she’s good for!”

Their comments and vulgar jokes made Bart’s blood boil. Still, he didn’t leave the stall until they were gone. When he returned to the bench, Kaye was also back from her impromptu autograph session.

“My hand’s tired from all those signatures and handshakes,” she told him, flapping it in the air. Then she winked. “I think I got better at signing my autograph, though!”

There was something heartwarming and pure about her then. Bart prayed that she could be kept far away from the men he’d encountered and the venom they spat.

As the sun began to set, the harvest festival wrapped up too. From the graveyard behind the festival grounds, Bart heard trumpets playing a sad, beautiful tune. Looking over the fence, he saw a coffin being carried by a line of mournful dhampirs with umbrellas and handkerchiefs. A marching band walking along with the procession was playing the song.

“Is that part of the blood melon festival?” he asked.

“No.” Kaye shook her head. “It’s a funeral.”

“A funeral?”

The dhampirs shuffled along strangely, as if invisible balls were chained to their feet. They moved with the trumpets in a way that didn’t seem very funereal.

Jennifer snapped her fingers. “Right! It’s a jazz funeral.”

Bart had heard of the musical funeral unique to dhampirs in the South. The

ritual had begun some hundred years ago, when the dhampirs created a secret society for mutual aid that funded “gorgeous funerals with musical accompaniment.”

As a marching band accompanied the bereaved through Laika Crescent to the church, its music gathered residents, sometimes in their hundreds. After the church funeral rites finished, a bell signaled the pallbearers to carry out the coffin. Then the funeral procession headed to the graveyard while the marching band played a mourning song.

Right now, Bart, Kaye, and Jennifer were watching that very procession arrive. At the sight of such a unique tradition, Bart’s curiosity was piqued. He stared from the fence as if the haunting sight entranced him.

Countless stone crypts filled the graveyard. The graves were in disarray; some of the stonework had crumbled, exposing the crypts’ contents to the world. The mourners gave the coffin over to the undertaker, shedding tears as they prayed and left flowers. The flow of events was similar to an ordinary funeral.

Once the coffin lid was fastened, the heavy, humid air instantly changed. The drums began a swing beat, and the trumpeters and saxophonists blew a loud melody.

“Huh?”

The marching band began a lively, energetic jazz standard—“March of the Sun and the Moon”—that didn’t seem to suit a funeral. The weeping mourners lit up with smiles, and some leaped around, dancing.

“Oh, when the sun sinks down below! Lord, lead me to the moon!”

“Oh, when the stars in the night sky glow! Lord, lead me to the moon!”

The eruption of such force and movement frightened grasshoppers and butterflies; the insects sprang from the shade and flew away. Festivalgoers trickled into the graveyard, singing and dancing to the music. The sight dumbfounded Bart and Jennifer.

“Wh-what the...?” Bart muttered.

Led by the marching band, the funeral attendees lined up and joyfully left the

graveyard behind. Kaye watched as they faded into the distance, tapping her thigh to the music.

“They’ll drop by some spots that meant something to the deceased, then go home,” she told Bart.

Seeing such a puzzling funeral for the first time filled Bart with questions. “How come they arrive playing sad music, then leave to happy music?”

“On their way to the burial, mourners grieve the passing of the deceased. Afterward, they celebrate the soul being freed from this world’s suffering and going to heaven.”

Kaye’s eyes were lonely as she looked at the graveyard, bathed in the light of dusk. As if singing to herself, she murmured the lyrics of the hymn.

“Oh, when the sun sinks down below... Lord, lead me to the moon.”

Once the sun had set completely, and the earlier heat and celebrations died down, the harvest festival came to an end.

The moon shone in the sky as ANSA’s stargazing event began. In the fort ruins near the festival grounds, Bart and Kaye set up a high-powered telescope—one far too expensive for an ordinary person—and awaited visitors.

However, nobody came. The ruins were completely deserted. Perhaps all the festivalgoers felt the same as the group Bart had overheard in the bathroom.

He heaved a sigh as he glanced at the unused telescope standing between him and Kaye. “You don’t often get a chance to look through a telescope this good,” he said. “To think the legends call vampires ‘People of the Moon’... Think Mia and the others’ll come?”

Kaye shrugged and gave him a sad smile. “They already went home.”

Jennifer lazed on a rotting bench a short distance from the pair, venting to the reporter and bodyguard. “I’m serious—does my boss know *anything* about what it’s like down here? What a waste of money. It’s so damn hot! And all these mosquitos! I want a shower...”

She let out a huff, glanced at her watch, and then nodded as if she’d made a

decision. Gathering her things, she stood and walked to Bart and Kaye. “I’ll wait by the car.”

“Huh?”

“Look. It’s gotten dark, and I’m worried about our car getting stolen or damaged. You two are the stars of this particular event, so make sure you stay for the next hour, okay?”

Bart and Kaye could only listen, resigned, as Jennifer once again leveled with them. “Okay...”

The older woman offered them two bottles of cola as a parting gift, then left with the bodyguard in tow. The *Life Illustrated* reporter, now abandoned, seemed unsure what to do. Eventually, he told Bart to call him if anyone arrived, then disappeared after Jennifer.

That left Bart and Kaye all alone. The two had spent the whole day together, and they’d completely run out of things to talk about. A damp wind blew between them, making Kaye’s silver hair flutter. She gazed up at the stars. The silence was deafening, but they had nothing but time on their hands.

“Well, if nobody else is coming, let’s take advantage of this opportunity ourselves.” Bart moved to the telescope.

Kaye watched him but said nothing.

Pointing the device at the moon, Bart looked through the finderscope. He adjusted the handle, peering into the eyepiece. As he focused the tool, the beautiful arc of the crescent moon came into view.

“It’s stunning. This is way better than my telescope at home.” Staring up at the moon took Bart back to his childhood. “I was sickly when I was young,” he told Kaye. “I couldn’t go outside much, so I could only really enjoy books and stargazing.”

Space hadn’t changed in the slightest since Bart first gazed through a telescope. Was he getting a touch closer to the dreams he’d had after reading *Fly Me to the Moon*? The crescent floating in the telescope lens was so big that he felt he could touch it. Still, he knew it was actually some 380,000 kilometers away.

The feelings hidden in his heart welled up and spilled from his lips. “ANSA’s had a string of failures, and this very project is on the rocks... But I don’t want to give up until there’s no other choice. Jennifer said there are no dreams in space development, but I *want* to dream. Lev and Irina reported that there was no God in space...yet we raise prayers to the moon and wish on the stars.”

As he spoke, entranced by the view in the telescope, trumpets echoed in the distance. Another funeral procession, perhaps. It was late evening, but that wasn’t unusual for dhampirs’ funerals, since their faith revolved around the moon.

Bart looked up from the telescope. Kaye was staring at him as if something was on her mind. “Oh, sorry. I shouldn’t hog it. Want to take a look?”

“I’m fine.” She lowered her gaze, releasing a breath.

Bart was embarrassed. Thinking back on his comments, he felt like he’d gotten on a soapbox. He always found himself saying things he ordinarily wouldn’t when it came to space. Who was *he* to talk of dreams and God? His stomach tightened, and he could tell his face had flushed.

“Uh...feel free to forget everything I just said. But, really, take a look. It’s a beautiful crescent moon.”

Kaye didn’t reply. She looked troubled as the wind brushed her hair across her ears.

Bart tried to fill the awkward silence. “I know! We should give those kids from the church a chance to see this. It might be fun for them.”

“Fun?” Kaye lifted her head.

“Yeah! I would’ve been about their age when I got interested in space. Why not bring them over?”

The dhampir shook her head. “I appreciate the sentiment.”

“Oh, uh... Well, it *is* pretty late. And they’ve probably got a curfew.”

“Thanks for thinking of them,” Kaye said with a lonely smile.

Bart’s suggestion had somehow made the situation even more awkward. He took his glasses off, fiddling with the arms and polishing the lenses as he tried

to find something else to say.

“By the way, when did you develop your interest in space, Kaye? Did you go to an out-of-state college to work on space development?”

“Erm...” Kaye put her hands to her cheeks, looking down. She still appeared troubled.

Sensing that she might not want to talk about the past, Bart hurriedly changed the subject. “Would you, uh, mind telling me about your research on the moon’s orbit?”

Kaye turned a serious gaze on him. “Bart...to be honest, I...” She paused and took a breath, clearly unsettled. Bart tensed as he waited for her next words. “I just don’t care about space.”

“Huh?”

“I hate the moon.” Bart wondered whether he’d misheard her, then thought it must’ve been a joke. But Kaye’s serious expression didn’t waver. “You might not understand my outlook, but you should hear this.”

There was something decisive in her eyes. Bart waited for her to go on.

“Most dhampirs hate space development, and I’m the same way. This society is oppressing us. We want the government to help *us* before they spend the budget defending national pride. Do you know how many poor children they could send to school for the cost of one rocket launch?”

The kids from earlier flashed through Bart’s mind.

Kaye’s emotionless eyes seemed unconvinced, but she continued to voice condemnations. “The Moonlight District’s the ‘dark side,’ full of despair and humiliation. Everybody here wants to leave for something better, but the light never reaches us. We don’t choose our own jobs; we’re just exploited. We want televisions, and to drive cars and motorcycles. We want air-conditioning. We want to enjoy ourselves, eat what we want, wear clothes and jewelry we like, but we can’t. We don’t have time for dreams—we’re too busy trying to survive.”

Every word sank into Bart’s body, and his heart grew heavy. He’d been so

absorbed in his own saccharine dreams that he hadn't even tried to look at the reality around him.

The heavy music of a funeral procession drifted on the wind from the cemetery.

"Even the medical services here barely scratch the surface!" Kaye had never shown her anger before, but now her voice quivered with emotion. "People who could be saved are dying! Humans don't care about curing Nosferatu Syndrome in the slightest, so no one's researching it!"

She bit her lip, taking a deep breath to calm herself. Although her outburst had overwhelmed Bart, he found his voice. "You're involved in space development you don't want to do? Why are you at ANSA, then? You're even doing all this PR stuff!"

"I need to show that dhampirs can become scientists and engineers! Propping up the space development program makes humans recognize us!"

"So that's why..." Everything Kaye did clicked in his head. He understood why she taught computing and attended PR events so enthusiastically. All this time, he'd thought she was just passionate about the space program. He couldn't have been more wrong.

Kaye ran a hand through her hair. Her tone carried indignation as she spoke. "Even though the monarch's a queen, this country revolves around men. ANSA's no different. Becoming an engineer is no small feat for even human women. Since we're lowest in the pecking order, female dhampirs can't get equal footing, however hard we try. We can't even earn minimum wage! When they assigned me to the Keighley Center, the Personnel Division people made fun of me! 'Pay her in pig blood,' they said. They won't be saying that a second time!"

Hearing that someone had actually made the suggestion Kaye joked about came as a total shock. Bart was at a loss for words.

She stared into the darkness on the far side of the ruins, her eyes reflecting the fierce passion inside her. "I know centuries of discrimination can't be undone easily. This is a hierarchical society headed by humans, and there are horrible laws that facilitate racial discrimination. The government's talked about

reconciliation, but that's not possible. I just...want humans to *recognize* us."

The Kaye in front of Bart wasn't the clumsy, smiling woman he knew. She was a saint carving a path into the future, carrying the dhampirs' fate on her thin frame.

"That's why I never keep humans at arm's length," Kaye continued. "If I put up a wall, so do they. We'll never break the cycle of discrimination that way." She cocked her head, looking at Bart. "But with you, it was odd... There was no wall, even at the very beginning."

Bart didn't know what to say. He wasn't good at acting aloof with people in the first place.

Kaye stood and stepped toward the graveyard, facing the light of the torches that wavered like will-o'-the-wisps. "When I saw Irina, I knew changing the world was possible," she declared. "I made a decision right then and there. I'd show them all that even someone like me, born at the bottom of the pecking order, could reach up and touch the moon."

She stared straight at the crescent hanging in the sky. "I don't want the moon landing to be canceled. If it is, my dream goes with it." Then she turned to Bart with a sorrowful smile, as if bottling up the feelings about to burst forth. "Unloading my complaints on you doesn't change anything, though, does it? Sorry."

"No, I should be sorry. I had no idea."

Kaye's earnest wish had pierced Bart to the core. One thing worried him, however—the words of the men in the bathroom earlier. He didn't want to repeat them exactly, given how painful that might be, so he alluded to them. "But...to dhampirs who don't know your true feelings, it might seem like you're just bowing and scraping before humans, right?"

She nodded, evidently already aware. "I know some people hate me. My dad's one of them."

"What?"

Bart waited for her to elaborate, but she said nothing. Joyful music started in the cemetery, trumpets shattering the silence between them. Kaye flicked a

lock of hair from her forehead.

“Forget I said anything about him,” she replied sadly, looking at the ground and biting her lip. “It’s just a family squabble.”

Perhaps something had happened between Kaye and her family, but she and Bart weren’t nearly close enough for him to press the topic. For a while, neither spoke. They just listened to the music until Kaye raised her head.

“Um...everything I said just now was a secret. If the Keighley Center staff hear that I have no love for outer space, it might cause trouble. I told you because... we’re partners, and I don’t want us to have any wires crossed. Besides, if you go around talking about space in a place like this, kids will hate you. I don’t want that.”

“Got it,” said Bart. “Thanks for telling me, though.”

Kaye’s face relaxed, relieved. And yet, Bart couldn’t help feeling that something wasn’t quite right about her expression and the comments she’d made. He didn’t expect her to spill her guts completely; after all, he was a human she’d only recently met. Although Kaye had apparently leveled with him, Bart sensed some sort of disconnect between her words and heart. On the other hand, he didn’t want to pursue the question, for fear of breaking the bond he and Kaye had built. He couldn’t think of anything else to say, so he shut his mouth tight.

“I’m getting hungry. I’d like to go home, but we have to stay a while, right?” Kaye asked with a bored chuckle. She looked through the telescope. Then, in a whisper, she said, “Why reach for the moon? It’s so stupid.”

“I hate the moon.”

Her statement clawed at Bart’s heart. Kaye wasn’t the only one who lacked enthusiasm for space, however. Jennifer, the government, even the general public—none of them dreamed of space itself. Everyone looked at the same moon and felt something completely unique.

Bart wondered whether he was any more than an ignorant daydreamer. Beside him, Kaye gazed silently at the stars. The hair behind her ears fell in front of her eyes, but she made no move to tidy it.

As Bart peered at her profile, questions struck him. *What does she see when she looks at space? What does she feel?* He couldn't begin to imagine it.

He put his glasses back on, looking at the sky. If the upcoming orbital flight failed, the Space Race would end in the UK's defeat, and that would be the killing blow to the space program. Critics would target Arnack One, and Bart and Kaye's dreams would disappear.

Space development on a national scale wasn't something one person could do alone, no matter how they reached for the stars. Bart was embarrassed to be part of an institution where Personnel Division employees joked about dhampirs drinking pig blood. He wanted to see that change. He wanted the dhampir orphans to get excited about peeking into a telescope.

"Oh, when the sun sinks down below! Lord, lead me to the moon!"

The dhampirs' joyous voices seemed to resonate from the Earth's core, as if they might echo forever.

Vermilion Eyes

THE NIGHT AFTER THE HARVEST FESTIVAL, Kaye visited the cemetery alone. When she'd heard the funeral music with Bart, childhood memories had rushed back to her, and she'd almost told him too much.

Kaye placed the queen of the night flowers she'd picked from her garden on the grave of "Liberté Scarlet." That name meant "freedom" and "independence"; it belonged to the mother Kaye loved, whom she'd lost as a child.

Her mother had made Kaye the young woman she was today. Liberté had worked as a cleaner in the Crescent Moon District, and she'd been the first to notice her daughter's remarkable memory and aptitude for mathematics. She secretly began bringing home books scavenged from dumpsters and junkyards, books they couldn't acquire in the Moonlight District.

Kaye absorbed all the volumes, memorizing textbooks, engineering guides, scientific works, classic world literature, and huge bundles of old newspapers. She read things she liked repeatedly, her excitement blooming as her imagination ran wild.

"Dhampirs lack two things: a good educational foundation and the means to get one," Liberté used to say. "No dhampir from the Moonlight District has ever gone to college. But since there's no precedent, *you* can be the first, Kaye."

"Me...?"

"Yes. You possess enough talent to rival anyone else in the world."

There were countless times when Kaye hated her eidetic memory. As a dhampir, she was loathed by humans for simply existing, but her dhampir classmates also ostracized her for being different from them. It made her feel like there was no place she belonged. With Liberté's support and encouragement, however, Kaye eventually accepted her gifts. Meanwhile, her father lost sleep to work longer hours to save up for her school fees.

When Kaye went to bed, her mother stroked her hair and murmured, "The

path you walk will make history.”

“History?”

“Yes. In the future, people will fight battles armed with knowledge. Primitive violence will be a thing of the past. Standing on the front lines to change our nation’s history will come down to you. Or maybe that’s a bit much?” Liberté gave her daughter a playful wink.

“It’s a lot, but I’ll try,” said Kaye, imitating her mother and winking back.

Liberté wasn’t formally educated, so she couldn’t teach Kaye to study. Instead, she taught her daughter fashion and style. Every summer, they made shampoo and perfume from the garden’s queen of the night flowers, as well as floral hair ornaments fastened with tape and wire.

Smiling, Liberté tucked one in Kaye’s hair. “This regal flower looks so good on you! I wonder if *you’re* a queen of the night?”

“Nope. *You’re* the queen, and I’m the princess!”

Liberté giggled. “I see.”

Kaye’s mother, who had the same silver hair, often spoke of coming from a noble bloodline. She said the proof of her Original ancestors was a ring with a blue jewel handed down through her family. The heirloom was called a “lunny kamen.”

“Take pride in your dhampir heritage,” she told Kaye. “Hold your head high and live with dignity. Whatever a human says about you, don’t pay them any mind.”

Kaye loved the way her mother always inspired confidence in her.

“When you grow up, and this ring suits you, I’ll give it to you,” Liberté told her.

She never kept that promise.

“I’m working late tonight, so don’t you dare go outside! If I find any good books, I’ll pick them up, all right?”

That was the last time Kaye ever saw her mother’s smile. On the night of a

blood moon, Liberté was shot through the heart next to an alley dumpster. The police cornered a human suspect, who claimed, “I saw a woman bite a dog. Then she attacked me, so I shot her.” They took the suspect at their word, branding the murder “justified self-defense against a sufferer of Nosferatu Syndrome.” No further investigation took place.

Liberté was a kind woman who never would’ve attacked a human, and the fact that her ring was gone proved the killing wasn’t self-defense. Kaye’s father questioned the police decision, pleading with the officers to classify the crime as a murder and robbery.

They wouldn’t listen, however, and sided with the human suspect. “Your wife probably dropped her ring,” they said.

A governor known to promote discrimination controlled Laika Crescent’s police force. Still, Kaye’s father refused to give up, visiting the Crescent Moon District himself to look into the case. One evening, though, Solar Flare Club members attacked and injured him badly.

Kaye hated humans and grieved the loss of her mother. She was no longer sure she even wanted to attend a human college. Yet her mother’s words remained in her heart, strengthening her determination.

I’ll make history. I won’t resort to violence—I’ll use knowledge as my weapon.

To see her mother’s hopes and dreams come to fruition, Kaye transferred to a Northern high school. She left against her father’s wishes, but with the support of the Moonlight District’s residents.

Kaye attended the school on a scholarship, and was the only dhampir student. Other students bullied her, telling her to drop out. Those she outscored on tests threw mustard at her. She often teetered at her breaking point. Every time, however, she reminded herself that responding to the stupid humans was pointless and held her head high. As she continued attending the school, her results spoke for her, and some humans humbly acknowledged her skills and talents.

That was when she first encountered computers.

Computers listen to instructions, even from a dhampir. If I learn to use those

as a weapon, my dreams are sure to come true.

High-pitched trumpets sang in the night air. It was another funeral.

Waking from her nostalgia, Kaye wiped away the tears in her eyes. She steadied herself, concentrating, and faced her mother's grave once more.

"Mom, I'm going to be Arnack's Irina," she said.

Kaye had been shocked when she first saw the blue stone hanging from Irina Luminesk's neck—a lunny kamen, like the one her mother had lost. In that moment, she became very conscious of her own destiny.

"You just watch me!"

Kaye's eyes shone red, reflecting the sunset's brilliant light. They were the color of blood—a deep crimson produced by the blood of the Originals.

Chapter 4:

The Night of the Hurricane

Blue Eyes

SEPTEMBER CAME, but the sun burned ever brighter in the sky, its blistering heat refusing to falter. Relations between the UK and UZSR, on the other hand, cooled to the point of freezing.

In mid-August, the UZSR had blocked entry to a city in the old continent with barbed wire and concrete. The UK subsequently reinforced all one hundred fifty kilometers of the city's concrete wall and sent a huge number of troops to defend it. Tensions rose as the nations glared at each other from their respective sides.

The Space Race suddenly felt like a proxy war, and the UK's orbital spaceflight—which would take place in two weeks—was set to be a watershed moment.

In the lead-up to the launch, each ANSA department hammered out details of the rocket's orbit, atmospheric reentry, and water landing. The calculations were incredibly difficult. Mass, weight, speed, time, distance, friction—if even a single data point changed, ANSA personnel had to restart the calculations from scratch.

The schedule was tight, and D Room's workload increased exponentially. Everyone put their noses to the grindstone from early morning until the last bus home. The nerve-racking situation changed Bart and Kaye's PR schedule. Arnack One activities were on hold until the launch, since its success was paramount. The one exception was that *Living Illustrated* came to photograph the pair as they worked.

After the harvest festival, Bart was newly aware of the hopes and dreams Kaye held tight. Though he never brought them up directly, they spurred him to work harder than ever. He'd gotten stronger from moving punch cards, and though he still hadn't mastered FORX, he'd learned enough to understand it.

Kaye checked every computer program and the calculations it produced, however extensive. She addressed any errors she found immediately. D Room's calculations weren't the only factor that would make or break the orbital flight's

success—there was also the construction of the rocket to consider. Still, the team proceeded diligently at a steady pace.

Then it happened.

“This is strange.” Kaye scratched her head as she scrutinized some calculations. She clearly didn’t like what she saw. “Something’s definitely wrong here. What produced these results? They’re nonsensical.”

Everyone in D Room gathered around her.

“Was it a computer error?” Mia asked.

“No. The *request* contains errors.” Kaye held up the form. “If we base our calculations on this, the orbital spaceflight won’t make it back to Earth.”

The request had come from the Operations Division. It was essential to the rocket’s orbit.

“Errors...? How do you mean?” Bart asked.

“Orbital calculations should always be based on the technical report I put together last year outside work hours,” Kaye said angrily. “This request isn’t, though. And no matter *how* you do these equations, the results are impossible.”

Kaye’s technical report had been a thick document consisting of twenty-five algebraic symbols and seven signs. Professor Klaus himself had signed off on it.

She put a finger to her temple. “I’ve memorized every formula and result up until now: figures on rocket mass, friction coefficients, wind tunnel results... If this request had been based on my technical report, I’d recognize the answers.”

“Which means...?”

“It probably means that a human who didn’t like my report—or doesn’t like *me*—did things their own way to give themselves a leg up.”

The room erupted in disbelieving chatter. Bart was disgusted. ANSA employees should’ve shared their goal of space travel. It was outlandish that one person would be so selfish, so near the launch date; he couldn’t believe someone would just trample over Kaye’s report like that.

“Kaye, you and I need to report this to Damon,” he said. “I technically belong to the Operations Division. That’s where the request came from.”

Kaye smiled, but her brow soon furrowed. “I’d be happy to go with you, but first, you have to know you might not like what happens.”

“Huh?”

“Humans tend to argue when dhampirs point out their mistakes. They just don’t like it. That’s what happened when I caught an error in Aaron’s flight data.”

While each department was examining rocket specifications for Aaron’s flight, Kaye explained, she’d noticed a mistake in documents D Room received. A renowned scientist from the engineering department had drawn up the documents, but they contained inaccurate data. When Kaye flagged it, the scientist refused to admit their mistake. They flew into a rage, attacking Kaye. Most people at ANSA assumed the young dhampir was wrong. However, further examination confirmed Kaye’s assessment, and Aaron’s flight was ultimately a success. The scientist in question took all the credit, never apologizing to Kaye.

Bart could hardly believe his ears. He’d never known such a battle took place behind the scenes on his brother’s flight.

“No matter how right we are, we’ll be doubted and treated skeptically,” said Kaye, putting a hand over her heart. “I need you to understand that before we go.”

“Got it.” Bart gave her a tense smile.

Just imagining himself—a bottom-feeding catfish—bearing the brunt of Division Chief Damon’s fury sent shivers down his spine.

With the computer’s calculation results in hand, Bart and Kaye entered the Operations Division office. The employees inside eyed them suspiciously.

Kaye explained the mistake while Damon sat back in his chair, a stern look etched on his face. “I see,” he said finally. “So, you’re saying our division made

an error.”

He seemed skeptical, just as Kaye had predicted.

“If we launch based on these numbers, what then?” he asked.

“The UK will lose to the Union.” Kaye’s voice was steady.

“Hmm.” Crossing his arms, Damon closed his eyes in a moment of thought.

The employee who’d sent the request glared at Kaye. “Chief, the computer miscalculated,” he said angrily. Bart could tell the man simply couldn’t stand her.

Damon’s brow creased. He groaned, uncrossing his arms. “We’ll take these results at face value.” Turning to Bart and Kaye with a sharp gaze, he asked, “How much recalculation time would you need to produce a new program and values?”

Kaye ran the numbers in her mind. “Forty hours.”

Damon shook his head, holding up three fingers. “Thirty. We won’t wait any longer than that. We’ll decide what results to use at that point.”

Their deadline was tomorrow, September 3, at 11:59 p.m.

To recalculate the data, they’d need Kaye’s technical report, so they borrowed a copy from the Operations Division. The author’s name was blacked out; Kaye glared at it for an instant, but held her head high and stormed out the office.

“I can’t believe they’d do that,” Bart said, catching up with her. “That’s awful.”

Kaye tried to act like the censored name didn’t bother her. “That kind of thing happens all the time. And at least Professor Klaus knows my name.” The way she flicked her hair behind her ear made her frustration clear.

Crossing Kaye’s name out was one thing, but Bart was also worried about their deadline. “Will thirty hours be possible? Division Chief Damon slashed ten hours from your estimate.”

“We’ll make it. Looks like I’ll be pulling an all-nighter, though. On the bright

side, at least D Room’s air conditioner works!” Kaye laughed, but Bart knew she had to be seething inside.

“If I can do anything to help, please, just say the word.” That Operations Division employee hadn’t insulted Bart directly, but Bart still wanted to make him eat his words.

When she and Bart returned to D Room, Kaye informed everyone of the situation.

The team was irate. “He ignored your report and used his own unintelligible calculations?! That’s ridiculous!”

Bart had a strong feeling that the women of D Room were fighting for something far more important than the orbital spaceflight’s success.

“All right, everyone, let’s get to it!” Kaye walked over to the coffin-shaped ACE computer and patted it gently. “This’ll be kind of rough. Don’t break down on us, please.”

The computer let out a low whir in response.

D Room corrected the orbital flight calculations while simultaneously handling their usual tasks. Kaye’s workload was excessive, calculation documents laid out left to right in front of her. She ate a mountain of sugar cubes and took a short break every few hours, but she was otherwise completely immersed in her work. Anyone going by could hear her quietly whispering as if she were chanting.

$$t(\theta_{2e}-\theta_1) = 54.012$$

$$\Delta\lambda_{1-2e} = -198.808$$

$$\theta_{2e} = -260.863$$

$$t(\theta_{2e})$$

$$I = 66.996$$

$\Psi_1 = 201.203$

In Kaye's brain, the limitless vastness of space stretched before her. The rest of D Room worked silently, battling source code and punch cards, and the computer churned out values. With the magic of FORX, known only to them, the Keighley Center's dhampir staff kept completing complex formulas.

The team didn't have time to visit the cafeteria, so Bart—the least knowledgeable when it came to the computer—went to buy everyone food. Being a dhampir errand boy was the kind of thing the Solar Flare Club would've beaten him up for. In the month since Bart arrived at D Room, however, he'd become its de facto handyman. He carried punch cards, shopped, and did odd jobs around the office. He vastly preferred that to the Operations Division, where he was "Aaron's little brother." Here in D Room, he felt that he really contributed to the space program.

At the cafeteria counter, Bart heard the forecast over the radio. *"The hurricane originated near the coast and is expected to hit shores sometime between early evening and midnight tomorrow. Unfortunately, cloud cover will likely obscure the highly anticipated blood moon."*

Bart had been so busy, he completely forgot about the blood moon. "Well, I guess there's always next time..."

He bought hamburgers, french fries, and a plethora of snacks. His extra ketchup, habanero sauce, and sugar cubes drew a suspicious look from the cashier. He headed back, carrying the food to D Room's lounge.

When he passed the men's restroom, he bumped into the dhampir who'd become his bathroom buddy of sorts. As the lone dhampir in the human-filled engineering division, the man was in a similar situation as Bart. Thanks to that, the awkwardness between them had practically vanished. They sympathized with each other, and their conversations had become casual and easy.

"How's your nose after the festival, Bart?"

"Back to normal, thanks. By the way, did I see you dancing at the jazz funeral that day?"

The dhampir chuckled. “Oh, you saw that?”

Their kinship was perfect for shooting the breeze.

Late in the evening, D Room filled with the ominous echo of grinding machinery. It was a paper jam, right when the team least needed it. The card reader cried out for help as the exhausted dhampirs looked on.

“Oh...”

“Not again.”

As the computer’s racket broke the team’s concentration, a wave of yawns and sighs went through the room.

“I’ll take care of it,” Bart said, leaping into action.

He fixed the card reader, which sprang back to life with a satisfying whir. While the computer’s abilities far surpassed humans’, it could still be clumsy and inept. Bart couldn’t help having a soft spot for it—in his mind, it was just like Kaye.

Bart chuckled to himself as he watched the dhampir woman silently battle equations. As she turned the page of her calculation document, she bumped the plate of sugar cubes beside her. She didn’t even flinch as the plate crashed to the floor, just kept on working, entirely focused on processing formulas.

Kaye was so engrossed in her work that it worried the rest of the team. She’d last spoken hours ago, muttering, “Oh, a big hurricane...?” Since then, she’d been lost in a sea of numbers.

Kneeling to gather the sugar cubes, Bart glanced up at her. She had a graceful, beautiful profile that revealed no trace of exhaustion. Her red eyes bored through formula after formula, the pen in her hand tracing numerical values. She was awe-inspiring, defying the boxes of “human” and “dhampir.” Bart considered her the embodiment of all the scientists’ and engineers’ aspirations. He wondered if, someday, he might also occupy that hallowed space.

D Room was in the basement, far from the stars above. It had no windows, no sunlight or moonlight. The only way to check the time was a single clock. When

the hurricane arrived, the team might not even realize.

The air was cold, and the basement room was full of coffin-like shapes arranged side by side. Humans hesitated to approach this dim space, as if it were an open grave. But D Room was also full of people burning with a passion to live decently and righteously in this world. It was truly the front line of space development.

It was six o'clock in the evening on September 3, and time continued to tick by. The D Room dhampirs didn't even have a few minutes to head to the lounge, so Bart set up a snack table in the corner by the door. On it were sweet-tooth fixes like sugar cubes and cookies, habanero sauce to fight drowsiness, and ketchup for Kaye.

The computer went on working quickly as always, but D Room's team members were all running on fumes. Bart was no exception; fatigue plagued his eyes, back, and shoulders. Only Kaye kept processing equations, not even eating, as if she were impervious to exhaustion. Since only she knew how the orbital spaceflight recalculations were going, everyone was getting anxious.

"Think we'll be okay?" Bart asked Mia as he switched out punch cards.

Mia rubbed her eyes sleepily, answering with a big yawn. "It's Kaye. We'll be fine."

Then Kaye yawned widely herself—the first sound she'd made since anyone could remember. She glanced lazily at the clock and tilted her head, curious. "Morning or evening?"

"Evening," Bart said.

Kaye spun toward him with wide eyes but then her expression relaxed. "Looks like we'll wrap up on time."

Relieved smiles spread through the room.

"Think we'll finish around the same time the hurricane passes?"

"Hurricane? Uh...what?" asked Kaye, rubbing her temple with a finger. Then, flustered, she jerked up in her chair. "Oh! The hurricane! I can handle the rest

myself, everybody. Head home, please!”

The team’s jaws dropped.

“The hurricane could stop the buses from running, right? If that happens, you won’t even be *able* to go home!” Kaye added.

D Room’s staff were reluctant to leave. Someone began, “Yeah, but—”

Kaye shook her head stubbornly, cutting them off. “If wind and rain damage your houses, what will you do? Your homes come before work, so go be with your families! Consider those my instructions as manager!”

Everyone was silent.

Bart spoke up. “I’ll hold down the fort. I rode my motorcycle here, so that’s how I’m going home too. If you guys have leftover tasks, you can leave them with me. I’m technically part of the Operations Division anyway.”

“With Bart here, I can focus on my calculations. No need to worry,” Kaye agreed, reassuring the rest of the team. “Besides, I’m a little worried about my own house flooding. Could someone please swing by for me?”

Mia nodded reluctantly, realizing there was no dissuading Kaye. “Fine. But take care of yourself.”

“I will! I’ll see you all tomorrow, then. I know it’s Labor Day, but I’m counting on you to help!”

They watched Mia and the others leave. Then Kaye turned to Bart, smiling. “Thanks for staying on a day like this.”

“Of course. We still need to convince Division Chief Damon.” Bart wouldn’t let Kaye’s hard work be for nothing. Whatever it took, he’d make sure the Operations Division acknowledged her findings.

“Phew. Just a little more to do. Let’s get to it!”

Perhaps because she was finally alone, though, Kaye suddenly looked run-down. As she tried to get back to work, she found herself wobbly on her feet.

The sight worried Bart. “You’ve barely eaten anything at all, Kaye. You should really grab a bite before you start again.”

“Yeah...I think I’ll do just that.”

Kaye walked to the snack corner Bart had set up, soaked a sugar cube in ketchup, and popped it in her mouth. Bart’s eyes bulged in sheer amazement at the sight; he wondered if sugar cubes and ketchup were some kind of “superfood” combination.

Suddenly, Kaye’s face scrunched up, and she stuck out her tongue. “Ew! That was disgusting! What’d I just eat?”

Bart knew then that staying with Kaye had been the right decision. “When we’re done here, you really need to take a break.”

Kaye got back to poring over equations, double-checking the formulas for the computer. Bart tied up some loose ends and then focused on supporting her. While moving punch cards to another room, he happened to look outside and saw the landed hurricane raging. Wind and rain as fierce as the wrath of the gods threatened to break the windows.

“Hopefully it dies down a little by the time we head to Operations Division,” he muttered. That was only a few hours away.

Upon his return to D Room, Bart kept helping Kaye work. There was no conversation between them; only ACE’s rumbling and the scratch of Kaye’s pen on paper echoed through the room. Whenever her sugar cubes ran low, Bart topped them up. He also made sure Kaye’s coffee was cool enough not to burn her tongue, placing it carefully in a spot where she couldn’t knock it over.

At 11:30 p.m., with just a half an hour left until the deadline, Kaye announced that she’d completed her calculations.

She slumped across her desk as though she’d completely run out of batteries. “It’s done.”

“Great work!” exclaimed Bart, who’d been watching beside her.

Kaye slapped her own cheeks to wake herself up. “Let’s report to Division Chief Damon!”

They wanted a break more than anything, but time was of the essence. Bart

called the Operations Division to ensure that Damon was in, and they hurried to the office. As Kaye dragged herself there, Bart couldn't help but worry about her.

The wind and rain outside had died down, but thick clouds still covered the evening sky. They hid the moon and blanketed the Keighley Center in gloomy darkness. The vast majority of employees had long since headed home, so the various buildings' lights were mostly extinguished. Given the weather, Bart realized, he might not have spotted the blood moon the radio mentioned, even if he'd had the evening off work.

Division Chief Damon was the only one in the Operations Division office. He nursed a coffee and smoked as he worked overtime. When he noticed Bart and Kaye, his face didn't change. He merely nodded, accepting their file.

"Appreciated," he said. "We'll take this into account and contact you if warranted."

That was the extent of his thanks, and he turned back to his work.

Damon's response was so blunt, however, that Bart felt compelled to speak. "Will Kaye's calculations be used for the orbital flight?"

"I made a call based on the technical report Professor Klaus approved."

Damon's tone said it all—they *would* use Kaye's calculations, but only because they considered Klaus's judgment paramount. Bart glanced at Kaye. She pressed a hand to her forehead, looking beat.

Bart decided to go to bat for her. "I heard that Kaye noticed an error right before my brother's flight too. Isn't it about time she got the recognition she deserves?"

"Which would mean what, exactly?"



Under the pressure of Damon's gaze, Bart's voice shrank. "Well, you could add her to Hyperion's science and engineering team, for example. Or let her attend their meetings."

"What the hell are you talking about? We haven't even accomplished orbital flight."

"Sorry, sir."

Damon lit a cigarette, jerking his chin toward the slogan on the blackboard: BEAT THE BLACK DRAGON!

"To defeat the UZSR, we need pieces just like Kaye Scarlet on the board. She's essential, yes—but I'm not supervising Hyperion. Scarlet's results and record will determine her career trajectory. As for you, Bart, take a good look at yourself before you stick your neck out for someone else's future."

He'd shut down Bart's suggestion in one fell swoop.

"Now go," the Division Chief ordered. "I have work to do."

Bart and Kaye left the office as quickly as if Damon were chasing them out himself.

As they waited for the elevator, Kaye didn't say a word. Now that he'd had a chance to cool down and think, Bart wondered whether commending Kaye like that had been condescending. The thought—or perhaps his racked nerves—gave him a stomachache.

The pair rushed onto the elevator, and an awkward silence settled between them.

"Hey, Bart..." It was the first time Kaye had spoken in at least five minutes. "The things you said about me joining Hyperion..."

"Oh, uh... I'm sorry about that. I just thought, well, you deserve a good position as an engineer here. I got carried away and spoke without thinking. Now Division Chief Damon might think I suggested it on your behalf—that *you* want a role on Hyperion. Sorry."

Kaye pouted. "I bet he does."

Bart wanted to die. He wished he'd never said anything. "I'm so sorry. Really."

"It made me really happy, though." Kaye's fangs peeked out as she grinned. "Thank you."

Bart's stomach didn't know how to deal with all the ups and downs he'd undergone.

As the night winds blew, he and Kaye made it back to D Room.

"I'm going to ride my motorcycle home. What about you, Kaye?" Bart asked. No more buses were running; it was a new day, basically.

"I can't go home," Kaye replied, her voice thick with fatigue. "I figured I'd just sleep on the floor in D Room. Are there still snacks there?"

"Just sugar cubes and condiments, unfortunately."

"Ugh," Kaye sighed. "The cafeteria's closed too."

Bars would still be open, but taking a dhampir to one would just be asking for trouble. They wouldn't escape without some drunk saying something or other.

The wind buffeted the pair from the side, and Kaye staggered.

"Whoa!" she cried, struggling to maintain her balance.

Bart was concerned about leaving her alone at the Keighley Center. She hadn't slept a wink, and her only sustenance had been sugar cubes and coffee. Computers could recharge no problem, but Kaye wasn't a machine. If she didn't rest properly, her body would give out.

He wondered whether he should take her home on his motorcycle. He knew the way to the harvest festival grounds, at least. Sure, it would be embarrassing if she turned him down, but he couldn't just stand there saying nothing when he saw her teetering.

"I could take you partway home, if you want?"

"Sorry?"

"You could...ride on the back," he mumbled, looking away.

“Hmm.” Kaye put a finger to her cheek for a moment, thinking. Then she nodded. “All right. I’m worried about my house, so...as long as you don’t mind.”

Bart was immediately relieved that she’d accepted—until a wave of shyness crashed over him at the thought of the coming motorcycle ride. Still, it was late at night just after a hurricane. Not many people would be out, so it was unlikely anyone would be around to fuss over the two of them.

Bart hopped onto his motorcycle, and Kaye got on behind him wearing an engineer’s helmet.

“I haven’t ridden a motorcycle before. Do I hold on like this?” Her hands tickled Bart’s sides, startling him.

“Wha—?! N-no!”

As Bart gave Kaye instructions, she first positioned herself so her skirt wouldn’t fly up. Then she hesitantly wrapped her arms around his abdomen and clenched her thighs to ensure she didn’t fall off as they rode. It was Bart’s first time riding with a female passenger. His heart thumped at the warmth of Kaye’s body through her clothes.

“Hold on tight and stay still,” he told her. “We don’t want a fall like that one on the raft during the swimwear photo shoot. And don’t fall asleep, okay?”

“I’m way too nervous to drift off.”

When Bart looked at the bashful Kaye in the rearview mirror, her cheeks were flushed. He revved the motorcycle to mask the sudden pounding of his heart.

“All right, let’s go!”

Puddles on the road reflected the motorcycle’s headlights. The wind was still strong, and the trees rustled as Bart and Kaye passed them by. Damp, humid air brushed their cheeks. It was cooler than usual; perhaps the hot city air had blown away.

This late at night, there were no vehicles on the road to the Keighley Center. They only saw headlights flicker occasionally in the distance.

Kaye was so quiet, Bart worried she might be dozing off. Occasionally, though,

he'd feel her reclang her hands or adjust her legs, confirming that she was awake.

When they stopped at traffic lights, Bart felt Kaye's weight against his back and shoulders. Her hair tickled his neck, and her breasts pushed against him. At that thought, he blushed, breaking into a sweat. To clear his mind, he chanted the words "*law of inertia, law of inertia*" over and over in his head like a mantra.

"Hey, Bart..." Kaye whispered.

He flinched, wondering if she'd somehow detected his impure thoughts. "Wh-what's up?"

"Do you know how long you'll work in D Room?"

Negative. He was safe. "I haven't heard yet. Why?"

"When we talked to the Division Chief earlier, you mentioned my future, but you didn't say anything about *yours*."

"Well... My record isn't even half as good as yours. If I told him I wanted to join Hyperion, Division Chief Damon would rip me apart."

"You'll go back to the Operations Division at some point, though?"

"Um...it's up in the air." Bart's answer was wishy-washy, but he really didn't know.

The traffic light turned green, and the motorcycle took off again.

After a while, Kaye said something in a small voice. "...I'd..."

The rest of her comment was lost amid the sound of the motorcycle.

"Sorry! I didn't catch that over the engine," he told her.

Kaye leaned close so she could speak into his ear. "If you enjoy it, I'd love for you to keep working in D Room."

"Huh?"

Her words took Bart completely by surprise, but he needed to focus on driving, so he couldn't turn to face her—instead, he looked at her in the side mirror and listened to her speak.

“I really feel bad that we always assign you grunt work that has nothing to do with space. But me and everyone else...we’re grateful for your help.”

Bart had never, ever felt like anybody relied on him. His heart soared.

Kaye rested her jaw on his shoulder, and their helmets knocked gently. “Even if the team talks about you when you aren’t around, they never say anything bad. Although I guess it’s understandable if you hate the idea of staying.”

Bart tilted his head slightly toward Kaye. “I don’t hate it. I mean... As the only guy in D Room, I feel like the odd one out sometimes. At the same time, I want to be an engineer just like you.”

Her gentle gasp of surprise tickled his ear. “Like me?”

“Yesterday and today, I watched you work your butt off nonstop. How could I not be impressed?”

“You were watching me the whole time? Now I’m embarrassed.” Kaye pulled away bashfully, looking down. She didn’t speak again.

Bart focused on driving. The cool wind was refreshing, and it felt good to have Kaye riding behind him. He wanted to go the long way to extend the ride, but they had another day of work ahead of them, so he stayed on the quickest route to the Moonlight District.

He rode his motorcycle along the path in the woods where he’d once spotted the Solar Flare Club, heading for the bridge. Puddles dotted the road, so he slowed to avoid splashing muddy water onto Kaye’s skirt.

As the bridge came into view, a fierce wind roared through the woods. Rainwater dripped from the trees as hundreds of bats hidden in the darkness flew out at once. The black clouds covering the sky floated fully across it, as if dragged away by the bats, and a reddish-brown full moon appeared between them.

The lunar eclipse—the blood moon.

“Wow. Look, it’s—” Bart stopped himself from saying more. He’d almost forgotten Kaye didn’t like the moon.

Suddenly, Kaye’s arms flew from his sides. “*Stop!*”

“Huh?!”

Her shriek pierced his ears, and Bart slammed on the brakes. The motorcycle kicked up sprays of water as it screeched to a halt, and Kaye leaped off the back.

“What’s wrong?!” Bart couldn’t figure it out. He whirled to face Kaye.

She looked terrified underneath her helmet. “I...I-I... It’s just...”

“What is it?”

“M-my stomach...hurts! I’m...going to the bathroom. You can go home! G-good night!”

She yanked her helmet off and, covering her mouth as if she might be sick, wobbled down a gloomy path into the forest.

Bart simply stood straddling his motorcycle, completely shocked, as he watched her go. “The bathroom?”

Although it *was* true that Kaye had worked virtually without a rest or bathroom break, something wasn’t right—but Bart wasn’t sure whether he should follow her. The path she’d rushed down led into darkness. It was lit only by countless wandering fireflies.

After a moment’s thought, Bart shook his head. “No. I have to go after her.” His body tensed, but when he thought of how defenseless Kaye would be against the unsavory types who might lurk in the forest, he couldn’t just leave her. “I *have* to.”

He tried to use the motorcycle’s headlight to illuminate the way, but the trees were too dense. Besides, the uneven path was full of rocks and tree roots. Giving up on the motorcycle, he pursued Kaye on foot, relying on the fireflies and moonlight.

Rain dripped from the trees’ gray leaves. The path was strewn with windswept figs, and Bart had to tread carefully to avoid slipping on the muddy ground. The fireflies around him lit the path like little blinking stars.

A thin branch jabbed his cheek. “Ow!”

Kaye hadn’t run off even five minutes ago, so she had to be close. Still, there

was no sign of anyone nearby.

“Kaye!”

She’d looked so unsteady on her feet, yet she’d made it through the darkness with ease. Bart had to wonder whether she’d inherited vampiric night vision.

“Where’d she go...?”

Brush rustled a little ways away, but he had no idea whether it was Kaye or an animal. As he forged ahead, led by the fireflies’ dim light, he prayed that no wild predators were waiting to pounce. After the rustling, it was incredibly quiet. Bart felt his heart shrink, but he pushed his fear away and forced his feet onward.

After a few minutes, the moon’s redness began to fade, and Bart spotted a small figure. It crouched at the roots of a tall oak tree that reminded Bart of a forest elder. The figure faced away from him, but he could tell it was Kaye. Passing fireflies lit up her silver hair.

“Kaye? Are you all right?”

Even when he called out, she didn’t turn. She looked like she was hiding, and she cradled her right elbow, trembling as if crying.

Bart approached slowly and cautiously. “Hey...” He walked around to peer down at Kaye’s face. “Ergh!”

A violent chill ran down his spine. Kaye had rolled her sleeve up and was biting her own arm, her face sunken in grim sorrow. Blood flowed down her forearm as her fangs pierced the soft skin.

“Wha—?!” Mind-numbing dizziness struck Bart, and he fell onto his backside.
A vampire!

Instinctive fear raced through him, freezing him in place. For a moment, he braced himself for an attack. Kaye didn’t seem to notice him, however; her red eyes weren’t focused. A tear ran down her cheek into the blood around her lips.

“Kaye...?”

Why are you crying?

As the dazed Kaye listlessly lifted her head from her arm, the fireflies drifting around her crimson-stained sleeve and bloody mouth and fangs painted the scene in an ethereal light.

Bart should've been terrified, yet he wasn't. Kaye was shivering, cringing, and whimpering like a lost puppy.

Did she run off because she didn't want anyone to see her?

Time oozed by. The moon's redness gave way to its familiar silver shade, and in turn, the light returned to Kaye's dull eyes.

"Huh?" Kaye looked around as if she couldn't grasp what was going on. Their eyes met. "Bart...?"

"Kaye... You, uh..." He tried to stay calm, but he couldn't hide the quaver in his voice.

"Hm?" Wiping her lips, Kaye looked down at her bloodied arm. Her face paled as she slowly began to understand. *"No!"*



Covering her mouth with her hands, Kaye tried to dart deeper into the woods, but she was still unsteady on her feet. She tripped on a root and fell; at the same time, her skirt caught on a branch and tore. She lay there on the ground, unmoving.

“Kaye...” Bart stood and walked to her slowly. “Do you have...?”

The dhampir let out a wail, wrapping her arms around herself. “I told you to go home! Why did you come? Why?!”

“I-I...I was worried something might happen to you. I never thought...”

I never thought you'd be drinking blood.

Heavy silence fell over the pair. Through the dim forest, Bart saw that Kaye wasn't bleeding much. Still, he didn't know what to say.

As he stood by her side, Kaye turned slightly toward him, a worried look on her face. “I have Nosferatu Syndrome. Does that scare you?”

Bart was frank with her. “I'd be lying if I said it didn't, but right now, I just want to hear your side of this.”

With an exhausted nod, Kaye leaned against a fallen tree. “I need to rest. Let's talk here.”

She'd bitten her right arm, so she motioned for Bart to sit to her left. As he did, she looked up at the night sky.

“Are you okay now?” Bart asked.

“Yes. Once I taste blood, I calm down. I'm still a little dizzy, though. The blood moon causes it.”

“I've heard that vampiric incidents skyrocket during lunar eclipses.”

Kaye nodded, placing her hands on her stomach. “When I feel the light of the crimson moon, a thirst for blood overcomes me. I always make sure I'm safe inside my house, so it can't get to me. This time around, I was so focused on work, I completely forgot the eclipse. I hadn't slept, I was hungry, I felt sick, and then...”

She curled up, heaving a deep sigh. Her tiny shoulders were saddled with the

fate of the dhampirs, the success of the space program, and—on top of everything else—Nosferatu Syndrome. Bart wanted to pat her back to comfort her, but he couldn't muster the courage.

"Sorry, but..." Kaye lifted her head hesitantly. "Do you mind if I eat one of these figs? I won't be able to think straight if I don't eat something."

She picked up a comparatively clean fruit and tried to peel it, but her hands shook too badly.

"Give it here," said Bart. "I'll do it."

As he took the fig from Kaye and began peeling it, though, a dangerous thought suddenly struck him: *What would happen if I gave her my blood?* He knew being bitten would hurt, but imagining Kaye's fangs piercing his skin was spine-tingling. At the same time, he knew she'd refuse if he offered, and he was sure the suggestion would only sadden her. Bottling up his wicked thoughts, he passed the sticky fig to Kaye.

"Thank you." Nibbling the fig, Kaye continued her story. "The first time it happened, I was seven. I looked up at the blood moon, and the next thing I knew, I was biting my arm. My parents were shocked, and they rushed to stop me, but it happened again. We found out I had a type of Nosferatu Syndrome."

"Why do you bite your own arm? The vampire incidents on the news are always about livestock and small wild animals."

"It holds back the thirst. I can drink my own blood while I'm still thinking clearly. From a very young age, dhampirs grow up hearing that bloodsucking is an awful thing. We know it's morally wrong. I think those dhampirs on the news lost all reason."

It was tough for Kaye to discuss, and her gaze dropped to the ground as her eyes welled up with tears. Bart wondered if the surfacing memories pained her even now.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Kaye blinked, surprised. "Oh! Sorry. It's been a while since this last happened. I'm a nervous wreck."

Bart could see she was wounded and knew he shouldn't pry further. At the same time, he and Kaye would be working together in the future, so there were some questions he had to ask. "And you're absolutely fine during the day?"

"Yes, but after I have an episode, my memories are hazy. Even when there's no blood moon, I worry about biting myself involuntarily. That's why I was stunned when Jennifer suggested that beach photo op—I was terrified I might have bite marks on my arm."

Kaye gently stroked her bloodied right arm. The sight reminded Bart of the day Jennifer had mentioned the swimsuits, when Kaye had clasped her own arms. Bart had misinterpreted her reaction at the time; he'd thought she was worried about looking too fat, or too skinny, or something like that.

"Do Mia and the others know?"

"No, I haven't told them. Humans are terrified of Nosferatu Syndrome, of course, but it's looked down on even among dhampirs. Sufferers like me are just another reason humans don't like our species."

Human communities often ostracized those who were different, and that tendency was even more pronounced when it came to groups they discriminated against.

"Only the people who were around me when I was younger know. I was lucky my parents and teachers just saw me as a smart, talented girl who was a little bit different." Kaye looked into Bart's eyes unsteadily. She seemed riddled with anxiety. "Do I...scare you?"

"If this had been my first time meeting you, I don't know how I would've reacted," Bart replied honestly. "I think I would've been too scared to sit here talking to you like this. But I know you, Kaye."

Her face softened, relieved, and she giggled. "You're a weird human."

"What else did you expect from a Nerd Heaven employee?"

"Asking you to forget everything you've heard about Nosferatu Syndrome would be too much, wouldn't it?" Kaye gazed at Bart with a flash of sorrow and regret.

“That might be a tall order.”

“I thought so,” Kaye said with a dry chuckle. She clasped her hands in front of her chest. “Please don’t tell anyone about this, though. If they find out, I won’t be allowed into the Keighley Center.”

Bart nodded resolutely. “I won’t tell a soul. We’re partners.”

“Thank you...” Kaye heaved a sigh of relief that seemed to emanate from the very bottom of her heart.

After eating two figs, she felt a little better, and they headed back to Bart’s motorcycle.

The sight of Kaye in the light of the streetlamps shocked Bart, and he gasped. “Oh!”

It wasn’t just her arms that were covered in blood—so were her face and clothes. Her ripped, muddy skirt revealed her thigh.

“You look like you were attacked.”

Kaye peered at herself in the motorcycle’s rearview mirror. “It looks bad, doesn’t it?” She held her head in her hands. “I look appalling.”

“And you need to wear that shirt, right...?”

Kaye nodded, embarrassed. “Otherwise, I’d be in my underthings.”

Bart rushed to conceal Kaye as a car drove by. The vehicle didn’t stop, but someone might call the police if they saw a girl covered in blood on the back of his motorcycle.

“I guess it’s this or nothing, then,” muttered Bart. He pulled off his shirt and passed it to Kaye, leaving him in his undershirt. “Here. Put this on. It should hide most of the blood.”

“Are you sure? It’ll get really dirty.”

“That’s all right.” He’d bought the expensive shirt especially for his first day at the Operations Division, but it didn’t matter to him anymore.

Kaye tugged on the garment. It didn’t match her skirt, but it at least hid most of the blood.

“We can blame your muddy skirt on a tumble easily enough. You really should wash your face and arm, though. Is there water nearby?” Bart looked around.

Kaye pointed at a puddle on the road. “There’s some there...”

“No! Not that! Not even if you were a man. Hmm... The river water’s dirty, and there are no fountains here.”

“There’s a dhampir fountain just across the bridge.”

“Oh, really? In that case, let’s go. Jump on!”

Bart hopped onto his motorcycle, but Kaye remained standing under the streetlamp, staring at him. She bit her lip as though holding words in, and the uncertainty in her eyes flustered Bart.

“Wh-what is it?”

“Nothing.” A hint of a smile flashed across Kaye’s face as she pulled her helmet over her eyes.

They crossed the bridge over the bloodline, and Kaye washed her face and arm at the dhampir drinking fountain. Bart asked where she lived, intending to drive her home, but the unpaved roads were flooded and muddy. He wasn’t sure they could ride in the dark without causing an accident, getting his tires stuck, or losing control. Eventually, he stopped on the side of the road.

“Now what?” he asked. “Is there another way to your house?”

“I’ll walk home. I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure you can, after what you’ve been through? It’ll take you half an hour.”

“It’s nice out now. Besides...I don’t think you should come any farther, Bart.”

The hurricane’s fierce winds had strewn the area with bottles and scraps of paper. Cheaper houses were missing roofs and walls. Dhampirs were clearing away structures that had collapsed entirely. Vigilantes carrying guns were on the lookout, and Bart felt in his bones that humans were barred from the area.

“That is, uh... Well, it doesn’t look very welcoming, but...are you sure you’ll be okay? It’s dark out.”

“I’ll be fine. We dhampirs have night vision.” Kaye took off her helmet with a smirk, dismounting the motorcycle.

Bart was concerned about letting her go home alone, but she was probably just as anxious about *his* safety. Stubbornly insisting on taking her all the way to her house would only make her fret.

“All right. See you tomorrow, then,” he said. “Oh, and don’t worry about getting the shirt cleaned. It’s not urgent.”

“Thank you, Bart. Really. Good night.”

He waved as Kaye walked away down the muddy road, then turned his motorcycle around and went back to the bridge.

He’d never imagined Kaye could have Nosferatu Syndrome. She was usually on top of things, but he figured it wouldn’t hurt to give her a heads-up next time the blood moon was coming.

“That is, depending on whether the blood moon comes once a year.” Bart chuckled at that thought.

Just how long will I be working with Kaye, anyway?

He looked out at the full moon’s reflection on the Misibi River.

“She hates the moon, huh?”

The hurricane passed, and then it was Labor Day. Across the country, people held festivals and other events to savor the last sliver of summer. With the orbital spaceflight looming, however, the Keighley Center didn’t have the luxury of observing public holidays. All the employees, including Bart, went to work.

In D Room, Kaye was completing tasks as if nothing were any different from usual. She showed no sign that last night’s events had affected her. Bart was relieved to see her checking in with everyone else, asking how their homes fared in the hurricane.

The wind and rain had hit the Moonlight District hard, including the residences of many D Room employees. Mia said the swamp waters had risen and that she found a scary snapping turtle on her doorstep. Others had their

houses flooded or windows broken. Under normal circumstances, it would've been no time to come to work.

Kaye had asked Bart not to tell anyone about her Nosferatu Syndrome, but he was certain that even if the team knew, they'd happily accept it as part of who she was. Still, he intended to keep his promise.

The grueling work Kaye did on the night of the hurricane hadn't been in vain. Each value she'd submitted to Division Chief Damon was approved for the orbital flight. And Bart's offer to stay behind and work seemed to have impressed Mia and the others.

"Want a medal, Bart?" Mia teased, and he felt a touch more warmth from the young dhampir than before.

"I'm fine, thanks."

There was still distance between them, of course. He also had mixed feelings about Kaye's statement that the team discussed him when he wasn't around. He wasn't sure if he wanted to know what they said or if never knowing was preferable.

After work, Kaye discreetly returned his shirt, although its right sleeve still had reddish-brown splotches.

"I'm so sorry. I washed and washed it, but I couldn't get the bloodstains out. I'll buy you a new one," she whispered. "Do you mind waiting until payday?"

"You don't have to do that. It wasn't that expensive anyway."

"But I hate that I'm staining all your shirts."

To this day, she felt guilty about splattering him with food when her Blue Angel crashed back in April. Bart could only assume that the incident had burned into her eidetic memory. He wished he could overwrite it with something more fun. He might have been the victim in that whole episode, but he still felt sorry about it.

One week remained until the launch of the orbital spaceflight. Each division and laboratory connected to Project Hermes entered its final preparations.

Arnack One was temporarily on hold, but it was expected to restart as soon as the launch was done. They'd even received a notice: *"Following the orbital flight's success, we expect Bart and Kaye to participate in the commemorative parade."*

Jennifer was waiting for Bart and Kaye in a conference room in the main building to discuss the parade. It would be an honor to take part in, but Bart wasn't especially excited. In D Room, he was little more than Kaye's assistant. He didn't feel he'd worked nearly hard enough to stand by her side.

As far as the general public was concerned, Bart was *the* human with computing expertise, but he didn't like stealing thunder from the other D Room staff. He was especially conscious of that because Kaye wanted to change those dhampir women's circumstances and give them their due.

"If the parade gives us a chance to promote D Room's work, will you consider that a step closer to your dream of humans accepting dhampirs?" he asked Kaye, curious about her opinion.

"Of course... But I'd much prefer having the team in the parade with us," she replied, looking disheartened.

Since Kaye always put her friends first, that was exactly the viewpoint Bart expected. He had strong reservations about the prospect of standing next to such a true saint. If the world found out that he wasn't a hero on the same level as Aaron, Bart wouldn't just be humiliated—he'd also tarnish Kaye's name.

"What's got you looking so scared?"

Bart's anxiety must've shown on his face. "Uh, I was...I was just imagining the parade. And, well..."

"You've got a stomachache now?"

"Something like that...ha ha."

Bart felt he couldn't just stick his head in the sand and keep taking D Room's credit, but that was his job. He didn't have a mission in life the way Kaye did. As part of a huge project, and as a representative of all the humans who dreamed of space travel, Bart's responsibility was to do the tasks he was given as best he could. Still, when it came to this particular flight, he hoped to do something to

help queen of the night flowers like Kaye bloom.

D Room's internal phone rang. It was Jennifer.

"Come to the Director's office immediately! Both of you!" Her voice blasted from the earpiece, making it clear that the call was urgent.

Bart and Kaye left right away. Something told them this wouldn't be an ordinary meeting.

It wasn't just Jennifer waiting in the Director's office. Bart also saw Division Chief Damon, the Director of the Keighley Center, the Manager of the Office of Public Information, and a man as round as a beer keg who turned out to be the Personnel Division Chief. Everyone sat around the table looking grave. The Director sucked on a cigarette, looking frustrated.

In the gloom of the wafting smoke, Jennifer threw a newspaper onto the table in front of Bart and Kaye. "This is going out tomorrow," she said.

It was an issue of *Arnack News*, a tabloid infamous for criticizing the government. The outrageous front-page headline and accompanying photograph sent Bart reeling.

"KAYE SCARLET REVEALED AS VAMPIRE! ATTACKS HUMAN!"

Kaye froze, hands covering her mouth. The photograph was of Kaye, her mouth and arm covered in blood. While the image was grainy and unclear, it was easy to tell it had been taken on the night of the hurricane, just after she came out of the forest.

That wasn't the only photo, however. There was also a smaller shot of the bloodstained shirt Bart had lent her, which he'd thrown into a dumpster near his house. Thinking that someone had gone through his garbage sent a shiver down his spine. Jennifer had warned both him and Kaye to watch out for the media, but he'd underestimated the lengths they would go to for a scoop. Bart hated himself for not having been just a little more careful, a little more thoughtful.

Kaye, meanwhile, stayed completely frozen with her hands still glued to her mouth.

"First things first." The Director's finger tapped the table loudly. "Read

through the article.”

Bart skimmed the paper with growing trepidation. The article falsely accused Kaye of sucking Bart’s blood. It also contained quotes from an anonymous dhampir stating that Kaye had Nosferatu Syndrome from an early age and that her mother had suffered from it too.

Did Kaye’s mother really have Nosferatu Syndrome?

“We don’t know whether these photos were taken by a spy or just someone with a grudge against *Living Illustrated*’s exclusivity deal,” said the Director, his voice sharp. He glared at Bart. “But that’s neither here nor there. Explain this.”

“Yes, sir.”

From start to finish, Bart outlined everything that had happened after he and Kaye left the Keighley Center on the night of the hurricane. The Director ground his teeth. The Manager of the Office of Public Information sighed, exasperated. The Personnel Division Chief glared at Kaye with loathing. Damon closed his eyes, crossing his arms, while Jennifer looked at the ceiling in disbelief.

Bart also pointed out the error in the article. “Kaye didn’t attack me.”

That particular tidbit was of little interest to the Director, and he responded accordingly. When Bart finished describing the events, the Director rubbed his jaw and cheeks. He nodded to himself, thinking, and then turned a stern gaze on Kaye.

“If we’re to believe Bart, your actions resulted solely in self-harm, and you have no prior record of injuring anyone. Regardless, you neglected to mention Nosferatu Syndrome when you submitted your records to ANSA. Why?”

Kaye’s head hung low. “You’re right, I did hide it. I’m sorry.”

With a vacant stare, she explained that universities and scholarship programs denied access to Nosferatu Syndrome sufferers, however talented and exceptional. To avoid that, she’d hidden the truth from the moment she left the Moonlight District’s small dhampir community. She thought she could hide the condition as long as she didn’t have an episode.

Kaye didn’t make any excuses; she admitted her past mistakes openly and

apologized for them. "It's all my fault."

When he heard her voice tremble, Bart felt plunged into an emptiness he could barely stand.

The Director made no attempt to hide his frustration. Crushing his cigarette, he looked at the group gathered in the conference room. "Even if this article's details aren't accurate, the UK is a free country. Unlike you-know-where, we Arnackians don't have the authority to kill a newspaper story. When this is published, it'll cause a huge fuss. ANSA and the government will be raked over the coals."

Kaye's lips pressed tight as she struggled to hold back tears.

"We'll talk about who's responsible for this later. For now, we can only count our blessings that the orbital flight calculations are basically finished. That's correct, right, Damon?"

Damon's arms remained crossed, but he gave a curt nod. "We're safe for launch."

"Is disciplinary dismissal an option?" At the Director's ice-cold words, Kaye's breath caught in her throat.

The Personnel Division Chief wiped sweat from his forehead and spoke. "I wouldn't advise it. If we fire the dhampir to save face, rights organizations and dhampirs themselves will be up in arms."

"What about Arnack One?"

"We're currently considering the next steps," said Jennifer, her voice dispassionate. "We'll most likely need to suspend it indefinitely."

In other words, no parade for Bart or Kaye. Everything had turned upside down. Bart couldn't bring himself to speak.

"Kaye Scarlet," said the Director, his features grim and unforgiving. "You're on suspension until further notice, and you aren't to leave your house unless called. Go home." He punctuated the last word with a slap on the table.

Kaye's lips quivered on her distraught face. She looked up to speak, but no words left her mouth.

The Manager of the Office of Public Information scratched his head ruefully and motioned to the door. "I'll drive you home."

"I'm...I'm so sorry..."

Kaye's voice was little more than a whisper, and her feet dragged along the floor, as if she were doing the walk of a condemned criminal. As she headed for the door, she turned just slightly toward Bart, letting one more word slip from her mouth.

"Sorry..."

Bart didn't know what to say. His fists scrunched his pant legs as he watched Kaye's lonely figure leave the room.

Once she was gone, the Director began assessing Kaye's future in D Room. "There's no telling how much uproar it'll cause, but reinstating her after home suspension may be impossible. We might need to send her to a more remote facility to work in isolation."

That made Bart's blood boil. Not a single word was said about saving or protecting Kaye. Instead, she was shunned, already an outcast. But even if Bart protested now, he couldn't offer a good plan to help Kaye. None came to mind.

"Bart." The Personnel Division Chief pointed his barrel-shaped belly in Bart's direction. "About D Room's current employees... It's still too hard to tell how this situation will work out, so let's keep an eye on things for the next few days. We've reached out to ACE about temp staff in case we need to act fast."

"Temp staff?"

"Well, the D Room team are all *that* race, like Kaye. Depending how things pan out, we may need to replace everyone. That said, it'd be a headache. We can't pay human programmers in pig blood, sadly."

Bart's jaw clenched tight. He wondered if this was the person Kaye had described patronizing her, making jokes about paying her in pig's blood.

The Director stood from his chair and shot Bart another stern look. "Remain in D Room and report to us about its atmosphere. We have no choice now but to wait and see how big this article's impact is. There's a good chance the media

will hound you for comments or interviews, but you're to keep mum. ANSA and the government will state their positions soon enough. This is a hell of a scandal, but you'll have to endure it."

It wasn't a scandal. It was an offense with a victim, and her name was Kaye. Yet however it burned in his heart, Bart's rage never made it out of his mouth. He was no more than a new hire. The group wouldn't entertain a single suggestion from him.

Bart left the meeting feeling dejected and got into the elevator with Jennifer.

The woman's cheeks puffed in a dissatisfied pout. "Agh..." she sighed, jabbing her floor's button repeatedly and clicking her tongue. "To think our project was just reaching orbit. What the hell? If Arnack One fizzles out, I'll take a pay cut—and it'll just be more stupid, pointless complaints from my boss. This wasn't even my fault!"

Bart couldn't hold in his anger any longer. "What are you saying?"

"Huh?"

"Don't you care about Kaye at all? What about trying to help her? What about *that?!'*"

"Come again, boy?" Jennifer's face contorted into a fierce scowl. "Of course I want to help her. Yeah, okay, maybe I'm not crazy about her, but I recognize that she always does her best. What am I supposed to do, though? What about *you*, for that matter? Maybe you helped her wipe the blood off, but was that much more than a hollow gesture?"

Bart had no retort.

"Ugh! This is the *worst!*" Jennifer cried, kicking the elevator door.

The alarm above them rang, and the elevator ground to a halt.

"You have got to be kidding me!" With a thud, she slid into a sulk against the elevator wall.

Bart looked down at his hands as they balled into fists. He had to do something, but he couldn't. When he thought of how Kaye must feel as the Manager of the Office of Public Information drove her home, his heart felt like it

would tear itself to shreds.

Kaye's bloodsucking incident erupted into scandal.

ANSA didn't deny the report, merely announcing that it was "investigating the facts." Vampires became a hot topic among the general public. The human supremacy movement slammed Kaye, demanding that *all* dhampirs be removed from public service.

The uproar reverberated through the areas of the Keighley Center where dhampirs worked as well. It felt like a ghost had appeared and stuck pro-segregation flyers all over the bathroom and cafeteria walls. The humans leveled accusing stares at D Room's dhampirs, with many wondering whether Kaye was the *only* employee with Nosferatu Syndrome.

Mass media representatives weren't allowed into the facility, but Bart felt on edge whenever he was outside. He took to wearing a hat pulled over his eyes. It wasn't just reporters or photographers he was scared of now—it was also the Solar Flare Club.

Kaye was still on suspension, and the other dhampirs said it was hard to see her, so nobody had visited. Mia and the others seemed deflated. The groundless slander hurt, but the fact that Kaye had hid her condition from them was *more* hurtful.

"Why didn't she tell us she had Nosferatu Syndrome?"

"I wonder if she didn't trust us...?"

The fact that Bart alone had known only spurred further suspicion.

"You're hiding other things too, right?" the team asked him.

Bart knew they'd eventually find out about the ACE temp staff, so although it was excruciating, he told them what he knew.

"We're being driven out?" Mia heaved a defeated sigh.

The eldest employee fell to her knees. "Shouldn't we just quit, then?! If some human astronaut goes into space, what difference does it make? We work ourselves to the bone, and we don't earn enough money to repair the damage

from that hurricane!”

The room filled with agreement from the dhampirs.

“Wait!” Bart did his best to stop them and persuade them to stay. “If you give up now, humans really will take D Room from you—for good. Think about Kaye, please. Think about how hard she tried to protect this place!”

But Mia just looked at him with a gaze that felt like ice. “What do you know about anything, *human*?”

Her fangs peeked from her mouth as she spoke, and Bart felt her words bite into his very soul.

The uproar around the *Arnack News* article did anything but die down. It only worsened. Buses and trams denied dhampirs access. The Solar Flare Club rioted in a number of cities. Radical dhampir rights groups held “Save Kaye” protests that culminated in violent struggles between dhampirs and humans.

Amid all the trouble and commotion, preparations for the orbital spaceflight quietly went on. A dedicated space for media outlets was set up at the Rocket Launch Center’s entrance. Unlike the UZSR, the UK would update citizens across the country *and* people around the world on the progress of the launch. International journalists could access ANSA technical documents, request news and formal statements, and interview individuals connected to aeronautical companies and the Department of Defense. The news center had a resident public relations supervisor, but Jennifer was also involved.

On September 12, the day before launch, another uproar engulfed the Keighley Research Center when all its dhampir staff were placed on a leave of absence.

Personnel Division employees pushed their way inside D Room, virtually forcing Mia and the others to give up their IDs. “For your own safety, you’ll remain at home until this situation calms down,” they told the team.

A crew of outsourced ACE employees would be doing D Room’s work temporarily. It was little more than a glorified layoff, but the dhampirs were powerless to do anything but accept it. Only Bart was allowed to remain in D

Room; the dhampir team glared at him as they left.

Behind the scenes, ANSA had opted to promote Bart to D Room manager. Both he and Kaye were now known worldwide thanks to their PR activities, which couldn't simply be swept under the rug. Bart was informed that once the orbital flight succeeded, Kaye would go on "indefinite sick leave," and Bart would become D Room's manager and Arnack One's sole representative. The promotion would essentially yank him out of his long-standing inferiority complex. He'd stop being a nobody and finally live up to his family name.

Truthfully, however, Bart would be little more than a puppet. He'd manage a new human team, but it wouldn't mean he understood ACE the way Kaye did. And if humans really did run D Room eventually, that would erase dhampirs from the space development program for the rest of time.

"What do I do?" Bart muttered, standing alone in D Room.

The phone rang. It was the Personnel Division Chief. *"Bart, we forgot to collect the dhampirs' nameplates. We need you to remove them and put them in the storage room,"* he said dispassionately.

Heading into the corridor, Bart found himself standing in front of the bright-red nameplates. One by one, he removed the dhampir employees' names. With each nameplate, a smiling face from the cafeteria or the harvest festival floated up in his mind, then disappeared. Some, he'd never even spoken to; there were still invisible walls between them.

"Mia Toreador..." Thanks to Mia, Bart had begun to understand FORX. Her nameplate was heavy as lead in his hands. Removing the nameplates felt like wiping the dhampir women from history.

"I'm sorry, Kaye," Bart said as he put a hand to her nameplate—the last red one—and slid it out.

When he finished, the only nameplate left was his own.

Bart felt despondent, lost in loneliness, as he placed the stack of nameplates in the punch card storeroom. The space was piled high with boxes full of tens of thousands of punch cards. They symbolized the work the team had accomplished, yet now they looked to him like gravestones.

Closing the storeroom door felt as though he were burying everything. Before leaving, he left it open just a crack, allowing light into the space.

Steering clear of the media's prying eyes, Bart returned home. Still wrapped in the humidity of the night, he forced himself to drink some whiskey, but it made him feel ill. He picked up his copy of *Fly Me to the Moon*, hoping to lift his spirits. He only made it through ten pages before he slammed the book shut. Although the novel had always helped him in trying times, it made things worse for him now.

As he stared vaguely out the window at the distant Misibi River, the phone rang. He picked up; it was Aaron.

After they'd swapped pleasantries, his brother brought up the launch scheduled for 2:47 p.m. the next day. "You know those orbital flight calculations? Steve really pushed for us to use the Operations Division's original calculations."

"Huh? But we know Kaye's were correct."

"He said he didn't trust a vampire who attacked a human," Aaron said, irritated.

It shocked Bart to hear that even some astronauts distrusted Kaye. "So, what happened?"

"I talked him out of it. I said, 'Look, if you intend to be a hero, you'll trust in Kaye's work. If I'm one today, it's because of Kaye.'"

Relief flowed through Bart's heart. He listened closely as his brother went on.

"I mean, I didn't just make a case for her based on emotion. I convinced Steve because we'd verified that her calculations were accurate. On top of that, it's only natural that I'd trust my brother's work."

Bart felt nothing but gratitude toward Aaron in that moment. "Thank you."

Aaron's voice dropped. "It's not all good news, unfortunately. The rumor around here is that some high-ranking humans are going to pin the blame on Kaye and the dhampir team if the orbital flight fails. They say that's feasible,

since it isn't like the general public know anything about computers."

"What the hell?!"

"The rocket's made of some two million individual parts, all bought from the lowest bidder," Aaron reminded him. "They're hoping to protect the manufacturers' brands and the UK's image as a leading industrial power. In other words, they want a scapegoat."

So, if the orbital launch succeeded, D Room would receive no praise—but in the case of failure, they'd be saddled with all the responsibility.

Bart felt sick to his stomach. "But that's unconscionable!" Rage bubbled up inside him.

Yet Aaron remained rational and straightforward. "That's the nature of national projects of this scale. The nature of war. Anyway, what's happening with Kaye?"

Wishing he hadn't asked, Bart said, "I don't know. I haven't been able to see her or contact her."

There was a frustrated sigh on the other end of the line. "Bart, what're you doing, leaving a comrade-in-arms to suffer alone like that?"

Comrade-in-arms. The words wounded him. "Sorry..."

"Why the hell are you apologizing to *me*?" Aaron asked. It was the first time Bart had heard such rage and pity in his voice. "The Personnel Division says you're getting a promotion. You'll be D Room's manager and Arnack One's sole PR rep. That can't possibly be what you want, can it?"

"Of course not."

"But that's how it'll *look* if you do nothing, won't it?"

Aaron was exactly right. Bart couldn't say anything. What was he supposed to do, though? He stood with the phone pressed against his ear, silent.

The voice of reason piped up on the other end. "Bart. You're selling yourself short. Why not stand up for what you believe?"

"I'm...I'm not like you. I'm—"

“I’ve always been so proud of you.”

“What?”

“When you were little, you were sickly and weak. Most of the time, you barely even got to school. But you hit the books, and eventually you launched your compact satellite higher than anybody else. You won. The record you set that day—nobody’s broken it.”

“Really?” Someone was actually checking the record every year? Bart didn’t know whether that would be Aaron or another member of his family.

“Why, even your private tutor couldn’t believe how good you were at science!”

“But I...I never knew.”

“It’s not compact satellites anymore, though. It’s rockets to the moon, right?” Aaron chuckled.

“That’s what I want,” Bart agreed. “For us to get there.”

“With who?”

“I...” Bart’s head spun. He couldn’t put his thoughts into words. *Why was Kaye squeezed out? Why was I left on staff? I still can’t use the computer!*

“Hey, Bart. Why do you think Lev Leps called himself the *second* cosmonaut and introduced Irina Luminesk to the world?”

“Why? Because...”

Because it was true?

Aaron didn’t answer his own question; he merely left it for Bart to think on. “You carve the path to space with your own willpower,” he said encouragingly. “I wish you luck and success, Bart Fifield!”

After their call ended, Bart stood still for a while. *I can’t let things stay like this.*

He knew that, but he didn’t have a plan. His thoughts raced into the early morning, when the moon began to sink.

Vermilion Eyes

IN A CORNER OF A ROOM blanketed in gloomy darkness, Kaye leaned against a wall like an empty husk. Ever since *Arnack News* published that story on her, and the higher-ups sent her home, she'd spent all day cooped up in her house.

Through the window, she could see that her queen of the night flowers had been damaged in the hurricane. As was the window itself—they'd hastily covered the house's broken windowpanes with newspaper as a stopgap solution, but Kaye could still hear everything outside.

Bang!

The dry, familiar echo of a gunshot rang in the distance. She hoped it was just vigilantes intimidating would-be intruders. She got goosebumps at the mere thought that it could be the Solar Flare Club. A kindly, well-intentioned neighbor had told her that they were burning pictures of her face in the streets. Kaye wished she'd never heard it.

After that article was published, human journalists began sniffing around the Moonlight District for an interview with "the vampire in question." Some third-rate reporter had even hounded her father at the factory where he worked. Most dhampirs simply waved the reporters off, but some lied if they knew there was money in it.

As a result, Kaye had stopped going out altogether. Now that she was usually home, she spoke to her father more often. He was drinking more moonshine than usual. When he did, he would rant about humans and then fall into deep gloom. He'd also told Kaye about a horrible rumor that the entire D Room staff had been replaced by humans.

Kaye was worried about Mia and the rest of the team, but she couldn't bring herself to face them—not if it was her fault they'd lost their jobs. None of D Room's employees had visited her since the article came out, and she felt certain it was because they hated her for hiding her Nosferatu Syndrome. She rubbed the scabs on her right arm, looking at them in disgust.

“All that work I did, just so a human astronaut could fly into space...” she murmured. A sorrowful sigh slipped from her lips, and weary pain spread from her heart through her body. “I was supposed to be like Irina. That’s what I dreamed of... Maybe I would’ve been better off defecting.”

She glanced at the books lining her dilapidated shelf, which might collapse any day now, and a wisp of a thought rose from the bottom of her heart.

I don't need any of them anymore.

Chapter 5:

March of the Sun and the Moon

Blue Eyes

IT WAS LAUNCH DAY for the United Kingdom of Arnack's manned orbital spaceflight. The skies were clear with a light breeze—ideal launch weather.

Television and radio programs were abuzz from the early morning, building up to the scheduled 2:47 p.m. launch. The public knew the UK was on the verge of a historical achievement. Crowds packed Laika Crescent, food stalls were set up throughout the coastal district, and international mass media crowded ANSA's news center while public relations staff hurriedly attended to them.

Excited fervor wrapped the different areas and crowds. ANSA and the government, on the other hand, were on tenterhooks. This was a mission they couldn't afford to have fail.

Radar systems were operating worldwide, twenty-four battleships with fifteen thousand staff total were ready and waiting, and sixty fighter jets were prepared to fly—all for pilot retrieval following the predicted water landing. The military chose to take a step back from the proceedings, fearing that tunnel vision on the launch would leave them open to a surprise attack from UZSR forces.

Division Chief Damon and Professor Klaus visited the Rocket Launch Center's mission control center to run in-depth final checks. Neither Bart nor Kaye were present. The computer supervisors were human programmers, each proudly wearing an ACE company badge.

While the nation prepared for the test upon which it had staked its very dignity, Bart stood in a corner of D Room, hanging his head. He'd racked his brain the entire previous evening, and he hadn't slept a wink. In the end, he hadn't thought up a real plan.

"There'd be nothing for you to do at mission control," the Keighley Center Director had told him. "The media would just hound you about the incident with Kaye. Stay at the Keighley Center and keep making a show of handling the computers."

D Room was full of temp staff from ACE, and they were on standby to respond to requests from the Rocket Launch Center. Launch preparations were proceeding smoothly, so there was no sign of work on the horizon for the new team thus far. Everyone chatted as they watched the live launch broadcast.

Since ACE had taken over D Room, Bart no longer felt at home there. He sensed accusation in the young temp employees' eyes. He could tell they wondered why he was manager, given his minimal grasp of FORX.

"I've got to say, I'm impressed," an elderly employee said. The man was returning from checking the punch card storeroom to prep for future tasks, but Bart had no idea what he was talking about. "I made sure to peek at all the programs you've got in there. It's almost unbelievable to think she figured all those out herself, and in no time. Then again, I suppose that's Kaye Scarlet for you."

It turned out that the man knew Kaye personally. Four years ago, in 1957, he'd worked alongside her on the orbital calculations project. He appeared to be quite nostalgic about it.

"We wanted her for ACE's development division," he told Bart. "We tried to keep her, but she left. She said she wanted to work closer to home, at the Keighley Center. She actually turned down quite a paycheck to join the space program."

"Huh? But she told me she hates the moon," Bart replied.

The moon caused Kaye's Nosferatu Syndrome flare-ups, after all. On top of that, the space program did nothing to help dhampirs. There was no reason either would appeal to her.

"Yeah, she sure did hate it to begin with. She wasn't crazy about figuring computers out either. But the more she visited the National Astrophysical Observatory, the more the place won her over. I can't speak to the specifics—she didn't talk about herself much—but the day she was accepted into Nerd Heaven, her eyes lit up."

Bart was silent. What did it mean? He felt suddenly confused.

"Hey! Countdown's starting!" shouted a temp employee near the television.

The old man rushed over.

It was 2:47 p.m. Bart could hear Division Chief Damon, the mission's Flight Director, on the broadcast.

"We wish you luck and success, Steve Howard. Ten, nine, eight, seven... ignition...five, four, three, two, one... All engines are go. Lift off! In the name of peace and scientific progress, give it all you've got and fly!"

The rocket blasted high into the sky without issue. Everyone in D Room cheered. The orbital flight hadn't yet reached space, however, and there was a real risk of it ending as a grand display of "fireworks."

All the same, the newscaster excitedly read the information ANSA had provided them. *"Astronaut Steve Howard will now pilot Glorious VII on its three scheduled laps around Earth! The spacecraft's ocean landing is expected around 7:40 p.m. this evening, following reentry through the atmosphere."*

Bart watched the broadcast for a while, but his mood only plummeted as the rocket soared ever higher. He didn't carry a grudge toward the ACE temps, but he didn't feel like joining them. If he was going to watch the launch with anyone, he wished it could've been Kaye and D Room's original team.

The room grew suffocating, and Bart quietly left. The nameplates by the D Room door were all human now, and Bart's marked him as manager. It felt wrong.

With nowhere else to go, Bart walked the corridors aimlessly. His feet dragged as if pulling a ball and chain. As he wondered if he should just hide in a bathroom stall, he found himself standing by the stairs to the surface—the same ones Kaye had tumbled down the very day he was dispatched to D Room.

"That threw me for a loop," Bart said.

He remembered the weight of Kaye's body and the pain that shot through the back of his head when he hit the floor. That had been little more than a month ago, yet he felt as if they'd been comrades in the battle for the space program so much longer.

"Oh, Kaye..."

Vivid images of the summer he and Kaye spent together rushed back to Bart in fragments: Drinking coffee in the lounge. Kaye's tongue burning from the spicy soup. The feeling of her clinging to him as they balanced on the inflatable raft. Her lonely expression as she peeked through the telescope's eyepiece. How dignified and serious she'd looked as she battled with formulas. Her body's warmth against his back as they rode his motorcycle. The tears she'd wept in that forest of fireflies, her mouth and arm bloody.

Although Bart lacked Kaye's eidetic memory, his recollections of her floated up one after another. His mind repeated his brother's words: *What're you doing, leaving a comrade-in-arms to suffer alone like that?*

By not trying to see or talk to her, wasn't he deserting Kaye? He'd told himself that he wanted to help and support her, yet he did nothing. That was no different from abandoning her.

Why did Lev declare Irina history's first cosmonaut to the world? Because...

Bart had an epiphany. "Because he wanted to save her, even if it meant throwing everything away!"

He dashed upstairs to the surface. Things wouldn't necessarily just work themselves out if he saw Kaye. And maybe she didn't want to see him—but he had to save her.

Bart jumped on his motorcycle, left the research facility, and raced through Laika Crescent, heading for the Moonlight District. Helicopters hovered in the air, people crowded around street-facing televisions, and police officers on horseback directed traffic. Bart didn't know exactly how the orbital flight was going, but judging by everyone's excited faces, it was progressing smoothly.

"And we owe it all to Kaye," he muttered.

Steve Howard's rocket was blasting through the air because of calculations Kaye had poured her heart and soul into. But nobody cared about that. Instead, they panicked about the circulating lies that she was a vampire who'd bitten a human.

"I won't let anyone erase what she worked for!"

Bart crossed the bridge over the Misibi into the Moonlight District. The

unpaved roads were still scarred from the recent hurricane. He sped down them, stirring up sand and dust. He wasn't sure how to get to Kaye's house, but for now, he kept heading south.

As he passed the graveyard, the heavy sound of a funeral march rang in the air. He'd steered his motorcycle straight into a jazz funeral taking up the whole street. Slowing down, Bart felt the mourners' somber gazes bore into him. Their harsh expressions said it all: *If humans hadn't wasted the nation's budget on the space program, this dhampir would still be alive today.* To them, the orbital flight deserved criticism and antipathy.

Bart gritted his teeth and rode alongside the funeral march. As he entered the lively shopping district, a broadcast of the orbital flight played on the television facing the street. Dhampirs crowded around it.

"It's now 3:30 p.m., and ANSA reports that Glorious VII is flying through space without issue. Its present location is on the far side of the Earth."

Around the TV were blood melon stalls and vendors selling soft drinks from hand trucks. At a glance, it appeared to be a festival. The atmosphere, however, was entirely unlike what Bart had felt in the human residential district. Not a single dhampir seemed thrilled, and their gazes were icy. Bart thought they might even be crossing their fingers for the flight to fail.

He stopped his motorcycle, looking through the crowd for Kaye's unique silver hair. When he didn't see it, he moved on a little, and soon he spotted the D Room dhampirs listening to a radio in front of a church. Their eyes met Bart's in mutual surprise.

Although he knew they hadn't parted on good terms, Bart mustered the courage to speak to Mia. "Is Kaye here?"

Mia looked especially taken aback. "Did you come looking for her?"

"I'm worried about her. What she's doing?"

"She's probably at home."

According to Mia, they'd considered asking Kaye to join them, but they knew that dragging her out into the public eye would only cause a stir. In the end, nobody had gotten in touch with her, and they hadn't been able to make

amends.

Passersby noticed Bart as he spoke with Mia and the D Room dhampirs. “That’s Kaye’s partner,” they murmured. The old supermarket owner glared at him.

Mia told Bart the route to Kaye’s house, and he jumped back on his motorcycle. Leaving the shopping district behind, he followed farming roads south through a gloomy hickory forest, emerging into a swamp dappled with water lilies. A small, fenced-in wooden house stood by itself in one corner of the area.

“I wonder if that’s it?”

Bart got off his motorcycle and approached the structure. Withered queen of the night flowers littered the garden. Their faded white petals stained with dried mud were a sad sight. A thin plume of smoke rose from the backyard. Curious, Bart circled behind the house.

He found Kaye sitting on a fallen tree by a small stream. She cradled her head in her hands with a lonely expression. The source of the smoke was a pile of burning books.

Bart plucked up his courage and approached her. “Kaye...”

Noticing someone arrive, she raised her head, then jolted with surprise at the sight of him. “Bart?!”

Kaye was clearly confused. She lowered her gaze, hurriedly wiping her eyes, but Bart caught the glint of the tears she was hiding.

“What are you doing here?” she asked him. “Isn’t the launch in progress right now?” Keeping her eyes low, she poked the burning books with a branch.

Bart took a step forward and hung his head apologetically. “I’m...I’m so sorry, for everything.” There was so much to apologize for, he had no idea where to start. He couldn’t string the words together.

“You shouldn’t be here. My dad will be furious if he sees you.”

“Well, I came because...I couldn’t just leave you alone out here,” Bart said honestly.

Kaye didn't answer as she gazed at the books slowly turning to ash in the flames. Beside her were another ten volumes, likely also intended for the fire. They included books on science, mathematics, and engineering; technical manuals on FORX; and academic theses.

"Why are you burning those?"

"I don't need them anymore," Kaye replied, halfheartedly chucking the FORX manual onto the fire.

Since Kaye could memorize books, Bart didn't see a practical reason for her to keep them, so he assumed the ones she'd held on to were significant to her. But now she wasn't just throwing them away—she was burning them to ashes. He sensed from her bleak expression what the act meant and what she was gearing up for.

If she planned to quit, he intended to stop her. "One of the ACE guys they brought into the Keighley Center was singing your praises."

"Yes... I heard D Room got taken over."

Her words were a gut punch. "So, you knew."

How much does she know, though? He couldn't bring himself to tell her that he was on the verge of becoming D Room's manager. And there was no way he could say she'd be held responsible if the orbital flight failed. He'd come here without a plan, and now he was scratching his head and beating around the bush, wondering what to do. No answer came.

Just then, Bart looked down at the books scattered on the grass. One in particular caught his eye, with its memorable cover emblazoned with a moon and a rocket.

It was *Fly Me to the Moon*.

The cover was worn, the spine was ragged, and the torn pages had been perfunctorily repaired—all signs that the book had been read over and over.

"You called your compact satellite 'Blue Angel.' This must be the reason why," Bart said, picking the book off the ground.

Kaye gasped, embarrassed.

“This book is the reason I wanted to work in space development,” he told her. “I read it when I was a kid. I’ve still got it too. Just reading the prologue and revisiting the Blue Angel’s courageous moon landing, I can’t help getting sucked in.”

“Mm.”

She seemed indifferent to Bart’s story. Still, since she claimed to have no interest in space, Bart found it suspicious that she’d held onto this book specifically. *Fly Me to the Moon* was a page-turner, but all in all, it was dated science fiction. If you applied modern science to its contents, parts didn’t hold up; the book wasn’t the least bit useful to an ANSA employee.

Bart reflected on the elderly ACE temp’s memories of Kaye, his suspicions mounting. “Kaye...do you *really* hate the moon?”

“I already told you that, didn’t I?! Everything is the moon’s fault!” As she spoke, she wouldn’t meet Bart’s eyes.

He crouched next to her. “You told me you don’t care about space at all. But that isn’t true, is it?”

“What are you talking about?!”

“One time, I went up to the roof on my break, and you were there stargazing. You looked shocked, like you didn’t want me to catch you there.”

“Hm? I-I don’t remember that.” And yet, she hesitated. Looking down at the burning books, she brushed back the hair falling in front of her eyes.

Bart didn’t want to keep pressuring her, but he had to know how she really felt. “I think you...you *sympathize* with dhampirs’ criticisms of the space program.”

“No, it’s more than that!”

“And you keep telling yourself you’re wrong to have a dream in a place where people live without them.”

“Wh-why would you even think that?!” Kaye said, but her voice wavered. Bart was right.

“Why? Because that’s who you are. You’re kind. You always put others before

yourself.”

“No, I’m not!” In spite of her rebuttals, Kaye looked anxious. She’d never been good at lying.

“Back when your Blue Angel crashed, you told me you didn’t build it for fun, and you made me promise to keep it secret,” he reminded her. “That wasn’t because you were worried people would think you were clumsy. You just wanted to hide your interest in space from Mia and the others, didn’t you?”

Kaye didn’t reply, and Bart’s suspicions became certainties—convictions.

“On the night of the harvest festival, you looked at the moon through the telescope and said, ‘Why reach for the moon? It’s so stupid.’ That wasn’t directed at ANSA’s humans, was it? You were talking to *yourself*.”

Bart thrust the copy of *Fly Me to the Moon* toward Kaye, but she didn’t take it. She merely gripped her skirt in her fists.

“You’ve memorized this, so it shouldn’t matter if you burn it, right? Your inspiration won’t disappear along with it,” Bart went on. “I lived my whole life worried about how everyone around me saw me. I’m the black sheep in a family of heroes—nothing more than Aaron’s little brother. My dream of space was the one thing that set me apart, that seemed like it was mine. You had the opposite experience, though. You had to carry far too much—and by that I mean everything—on your own.”

“No, I...” Her soft voice trailed off as books crumbled to ashes in the flickering flames.

Bart looked up at the clear blue sky. “This planet’s suffocating. Violence, war, discrimination, despair... It’s a dark place. You embody the hopes and dreams of the dhampirs, though. You can’t give up your own dreams.”

He rested the novel on Kaye’s thighs as she quietly watched the fire dance.

“You and I both want to see the Blue Angel soar into space,” he said. “And we both gave up on being astronauts ourselves as soon as we realized how physically demanding it was.”

Kaye giggled and picked up the book. “You really *do* know me. Of course I

memorized *Fly Me to the Moon*. There's no other book I've read as many times as this one. Whenever I skim a few lines, it reminds me of how I felt way back when I first read it."

She held the book close, squeezing it to her chest as though it were her own child.

"My mom picked it up. I wasn't sure I'd enjoy it, since a human wrote it, but it was just so good. It gave me all these dreams about the moon and space, but then..." She clenched it tighter. "I was diagnosed with Nosferatu Syndrome, my mom was killed, and I started to hate the moon."

Kaye's lips quivered as she struggled with her sadness, but she went on.

"Even back when I was working on orbital calculations at ACE, I realized that I do love space. After I moved home to the Moonlight District, though, it was so hard. Everyone hated the space program, and they'd all chipped in on my education. I couldn't betray them. I felt like I had no choice but to hide my dreams and insist to everyone that I just did my job for the dhampirs' sake."

"How about telling the D Room team how you honestly feel?"

Kaye shook her head. "No, I can't. I'd just drive a wedge between us."

"They were shocked to learn that you have Nosferatu Syndrome, you know. They're afraid that you didn't trust them enough to tell them, so they feel like they can't come see you, even though they're worried sick. It wouldn't drive a wedge between you."

"You really think we'd be all right?"

Bart nodded. "I've only been with D Room for one month," he said, raising a finger, "but I figured out your true feelings about space. Everyone else was with you longer—and almost every single day. I wouldn't be at all surprised if they already knew too."

"I'm not sure," said Kaye, closing her eyes and hiding her hesitant face in her hands.

"Either way, let's go see them. We can't chip away at the wall between humans and dhampirs yet, but holding your fellow dhampirs at arm's length

won't do any good."

"All right. But..." Kaye still seemed unsure. Her hand gripped the book tight as her gaze dropped to her feet.

"I'll go with you," Bart said. "If you freeze up, I'll help you tell them."

He stood and offered a hand. Kaye stared at it for a while, then finally looked up at him. "I can tell them." Taking his hand, she pulled herself to her feet with a smile. "Thank you, Bart."

Bart fixed his glasses and mustered a vague, bashful reply. "Don't mention it."

He doused the fire with water from the nearby stream while Kaye put the rest of the books back inside. Then the pair hopped onto his motorcycle and headed to the shopping district.

"You're lucky my dad didn't see you. He really would've dressed you down." Kaye looked completely serious.

Bart's blood ran cold again. "You did say he hates humans, didn't you?"

After everything that'd happened recently, it was possible Kaye's father loathed humans even more, which Bart found alarming. Still, he didn't want to stick his nose into Kaye's family circumstances.

Riding out of the hickory forest, they spotted Mia and the D Room dhampirs walking away from the church toward Kaye's house.

"Hm?"

Bart stopped the motorcycle when they got close, and the dhampirs approached them. He backed away a bit to give the women some space.

"Hi, Kaye. Listen, we don't care about the orbital flight," one of the dhampirs said, looking a bit awkward. "We care about *you*."

Kaye hung her head apologetically. "I'm so sorry for hiding my Nosferatu Syndrome from you all." Apologizing repeatedly, she tried to explain that she hadn't wanted to concern them.

Mia clasped Kaye's hand in hers. "Oh, Kaye..."

"Yes?"

“We all worked in D Room because of you. We’re sorry too. We should’ve come to see you right away.”



The dhampirs reached for Kaye's hands, patted her back, and hugged her shoulders. Bart watched as the air between them cleared and Kaye's smile returned.

"There's one more thing I hid from you all," Kaye said, remorse briefly clouding her features. "I actually work at ANSA because I'm fascinated by space and the space program."

Her tone conveyed her earnestness, but Mia and the others weren't surprised in the least.

"We already knew that," Mia replied, breaking into a cheeky smile when Kaye's jaw dropped in surprise. "You think we shrugged off all the times you missed your bus stop staring at the night sky?"

"Oh... Ha ha!" Kaye turned to Bart, poking her tongue out with a guilty grin.

Bart could only shrug and smile back. Meanwhile, Mia noticed Kaye's momentary distraction and tickled her ribs on both sides.

"Eek!" Kaye jumped in surprise.

"If you like space, that doesn't bother any of us," Mia said in a softer tone. "I might not be interested myself, but you know, some of the others do want to be part of Hyperion."

A few dhampirs scratched the backs of their heads awkwardly or acknowledged Mia's comment with a nod. At that moment, Bart knew that letting ANSA squeeze the dhampirs out of the space program was tantamount to accepting anti-dampir discrimination. For now, though, he was simply relieved to see Kaye and the others as friends again.

"By the way, how *is* the orbital flight going?" Kaye asked.

Bart was curious too, so he stepped closer to the group.

"Last we heard on the radio, it was sailing smoothly through space," Mia informed her.

"I hope Glorious VII lands safely," Kaye said earnestly. It was clear that she prayed her calculations would be useful. She had no idea that a dark future alone in some remote laboratory awaited her even if the flight succeeded.

The oldest dhampir turned to Bart. “Even if the flight’s a success, we don’t have jobs to go back to, do we?”

“Um...”

It wasn’t just that—there was also the fact that ANSA would scapegoat the dhampir team in the case of failure, making them the lightning rod for all the criticism that would follow. Bart wasn’t sure he should warn them. Ultimately, he decided it was better that the team know now, rather than have such a terrible shock sprung on them later.

“I, uh, have to tell you all something.” Stuffing down his hesitation, he calmly explained what ANSA’s leadership planned.

The faces of the D Room team went from hesitant to enraged, then deflated. Mia ground her teeth audibly. “You mean everything we achieved was for nothing? We just got used for what we were worth and thrown away?”

Some of the dhampirs were so shocked that they sat down on the spot. Kaye’s smile vanished, and her shoulders slumped. Bart fumed at seeing them so dazed by the news, but he had no outlet for those emotions. He was angry at ANSA’s top brass, and at how utterly powerless he was.

What could he do to help them? He had to find a way to use his role as a “billboard” to promote D Room’s work, the way Lev had introduced Irina to the world. He’d racked his brain all night, but no good ideas had come to mind. He wouldn’t receive a platform the way Lev had, and asking Aaron for help wouldn’t be the right way.

Nobody spoke or moved. Surrounded by the echoing cries of birds and insects, they sat scorching under the light of the sun. Would they simply continue to sit there like earthworms drying out in the heat?

As Bart stood detesting his own helplessness, he became aware of trumpets in the distance. It was a jazz funeral. When he passed them earlier, they’d been playing mourning music, but now he heard the brighter “March of the Sun and the Moon.” He was reminded of what Kaye had said about the tradition: Jazz funerals celebrated a soul escaping this world’s suffering and ascending to heaven. At first, it struck him as strange.

As he listened, the brass band's clear tones and rapid drumbeat moved his sinking heart, forcing his mood to brighten. Was this how the mourners felt? He thought back to the festive energy of the one he'd watched at the harvest festival. That was the first time he'd ever witnessed such a ceremony, and astonishment had burned the experience deep into his memory. The tradition had the kind of appeal Jennifer had wanted for Arnack One's PR activities, but it was far too late for that.

"Hmm."

Wait a second. It's not too late. No humans know about this ceremony—it'd draw everyone's attention.

If they weren't going to give Bart a platform to speak from, he'd just have to create one. This would be a way to announce and promote not just Kaye but everyone on the D Room team.

"A march," he said.

Kaye's head tilted at Bart's words. "What march?"

"We'll march right up to the Rocket Launch Center!" Kaye and the dhampirs gave him blank stares, but his confidence grew. "Right now, the coastal district's full of visitors and reporters from all over the world. We'll make a big racket and declare to everyone that it was all of *you* who did the orbital flight calculations and worked out the location for the water landing!"

"Bart...are you serious?"

"I've never been more serious! If we don't do anything and just sit here twiddling our thumbs, we'll regret it for the rest of our lives! We can reach the launch center in two hours from here!"

Mia gave Bart a long, hard stare. "You're going to get fired, you know." Her sharp voice was straight to the point.

Yet Bart didn't falter. "I know. That'll probably be the end of my time at ANSA. It'll be a real headache for my brother and family too."

"On top of that, the Solar Flare Club may kill any human who helps us." Mia's tone was cold; she was testing Bart's resolve.

He wouldn't back down, though. "I'm prepared for that. My efforts won't make humans' crimes against dhampirs disappear. It won't earn us humans' forgiveness either. Maybe it's just for my own satisfaction...but I want the world to know what you did. Since April, I've trained with each division of the Keighley Center. Before that, I was in the air force's engineering department. But D Room is head and shoulders above all those. You're on the cutting edge. Working with you all, I learned how amazing the ability to operate a computer is."

"Hm..." Mia turned to Kaye. "What do you think? The moment we start marching through the Crescent Moon District, there's no way we'll avoid a big ruckus."

"I know." Kaye nodded, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the proposed march.

Bart was painfully aware that she was scared. Before he was dead and buried, though, he wanted to help the team create a new path forward.

"You won't cause any trouble for anyone." Bart put his heart and soul into his plea. "You won't have done anything wrong. Besides, the stuff happening today was only possible because of you. You're the reason my brother's flight succeeded. Why do we have to hide that? I hate it!" His hands balled into fists, nails biting into his palms.

"You really mean all that?"

Seeing Kaye's pained look, his heart ached. "I should've thought of this earlier. Should've acted sooner." He raised his head to look at all D Room's team members. "I know it's weird for a human to say this, and you might think I'm teasing you, but I want you to be with us as we find a way to the moon. I want us to walk the path to space together."

"With us...?"

He nodded. His eyes shone with honesty as he stood in front of Kaye, looking at the other D Room dhampirs. "Who else?" he asked. Passion filling his voice, he continued, "Today's orbital flight isn't a battle between the UK and UZSR. It's between dhampirs and this nation's awful history!"

Kaye looked uncertain. "History?"

Bart stared straight at her. "You'll stand at the forefront of that battle and change history. Just as computers changed history for science as we know it, you'll revolutionize the history of humans and dhampirs. You've got wonderful talents, Kaye. You can do it."

"Wonderful talents," she echoed, and the words rang with a certain nostalgia. She put a hand to her heart. "I can change history..."

Her vermilion eyes welled up, and her lip quivered. She looked down as tears fell, leaving Bart lost and unsure what to say. Mia and the other dhampirs looked at each other, confused about what had just happened.

"Kaye?" said Bart.

Kaye wiped her tears, lifting her head. "I'm all right. I just...remembered something," she said, smiling as teardrops glinted at the ends of her eyelashes. "Someday, you might make a really fantastic mother."

Bart wondered if he'd just misheard her. "Me...a mother?"

"Never mind." Kaye turned to Mia. "I'm joining the march. I'll walk to change history."

"Us too," said Mia, letting a hint of a smile show on her face. The other dhampirs nodded, having seemingly made up their minds.

Kaye looked up. There was a dignified expression in her eyes. "I hate the moon," she said. Running her hand through her hair as if casting off her sorrow, she pointed to the sky. "That's why I'm sending the Blue Angel up there. We'll conquer space to keep evil from taking root!"

She giggled, giving them a cheeky wink.

The D Room team gathered in one corner of the park in the shopping district to get ready for the march. None of them had ever attended a protest. They mostly followed Bart's lead as he created props with his deft hands to announce D Room's efforts to the world.

They used objects and materials thrown away after the hurricane, wrapping

old fabric and curtains around poles to make flags and creating banners out of bed linens. Given how hastily the team created them, the banners and flags weren't the prettiest, but they did reflect the dhampirs' plight and struggle. There was a strange power to them.

"Argh! Huh? What the—?!" Kaye, clumsy as ever, had somehow made a tattered rag look even worse for wear.

The rest of the D Room team stopped her. "You just watch for now," they told her.

Dhampirs listening to the broadcast nearby gathered to see what the D Room team was doing. Some were intrigued, and nobody tried to stop them.

Looking at the banner they'd made, Kaye turned to the group. "Don't we need a name? Something that the world will remember, like 'Hermes Seven.'"

Everyone agreed. They threw suggestions around, including "Team D Room," "The Dhampir Revolution Solution," and "Project Computer," but none felt quite right.

Then Bart had an idea. He passed Kaye a pen and a sheet of paper. "Kaye, tell me your mother's name."

"It was Liberté. Why?"

Bart had heard a lot about Kaye's mother since they started working together. He knew how important the woman was to her. "How about this? We'll combine her name with the Blue Angel's. 'Angels of Liberté'!"

Kaye had just finished scribbling Liberté's name on the paper. At Bart's suggestion, her hand paused. "Huh?"

"We don't need to use it if you don't like it," he said. "But Liberté means 'liberty' and 'freedom,' right? 'Angels of liberty' has a nice ring to it, you know?"

"I do like it, but..." Kaye trailed off and looked around. Everyone appeared to be in agreement.

"Then it's decided," said Bart.

"If everybody's all right with it," said Kaye, her voice trembling, "we'll use my mother's name, and..." She paused for a moment, then hid her tears behind a

wide grin. “Bart, let’s go ask the marching band to come with us!”

Leaving the rest of the preparations to Mia and the others, Bart and Kaye hurried toward the church, where the marching band was resting after the funeral performance.

“March all the way to the Rocket Launch Center? What in the world are you talking about, young lady?”

The ten marching band members, who all seemed to be in their forties, raised their eyebrows skeptically. Nevertheless, they listened as Bart and Kaye earnestly asked for their help.

“We want to head into a new future and bury the dark past! That’s why we should have a funeral march,” Kaye insisted.

“Well, well...” one musician said. None of them had seemed interested in the pair’s explanation at first, but Kaye’s plea drew them in.

Suddenly, the marching band’s leader—the drummer—rapped his snare with great confidence. “Now, that *does* sound fun. To be honest, I don’t give a crap about the space program. It’s a human project for humans, you know? But you two want to fight to make it a project for dhampirs too? That’s the kind of march we can give you a band for.”

“Thank you so much!”

“And you’ve got more guts than appearances suggest, nosebleed boy.”

“Nosebleed boy...?”

The marching band leader remembered Bart’s tumble at the harvest festival. As far as Bart was concerned, though, that was better than being recognized for a crime or misdeed.

When they headed back to the D Room team, the crowd of dhampirs had grown by a few dozen, and the march preparations were just about finished. Now they just needed to emblazon their flags with their slogan—but they didn’t have a motto like the Operations Division’s BEAT THE BLACK DRAGON!

Standing in front of a plain flag, Kaye groaned. “What do I write? A formula? FORX?”

“Nobody’s going to understand it if you do. But we could take inspiration from *Fly Me to the Moon*. Like, say...” Bart looked up at the sky, and it hit him. “The ones ‘flying’ are the astronauts, not us, right? So, how about changing the ‘Me’ part of the title? We’ll make our slogan, ‘Fly *You* to the Moon’!”

Kaye clapped her hands without a moment’s hesitation. “I like it! Let’s lead everyone to the moon!”

Grabbing yellow paint and a paintbrush, she wrote the slogan exuberantly. She was painting freehand, so the words hardly fit on the banner, but that also reflected her strong feelings.

As Kaye finished painting the slogan, the crowd of onlookers parted. A bald dhampir appeared, his face warped by resentment and anger. He clutched a paper bag in his hands.

Kaye lifted her head to look at him, and shock filled her expression. “Dad?!”

Bart and the D Room dhampirs stood awkwardly to one side as Kaye’s father eyed his daughter fiercely. “Off doing something stupid again,” he said, his voice husky from moonshine.

“I’m sorry, but I have to do this.”

The gazes of the two dhampirs, father and daughter, locked. Bart was suddenly nervous.

Then Kaye’s father thrust the paper bag toward her. “It’s not like I could stop you, even if I wanted to,” he grumbled. “I’m not going, but take this with you.”

When she opened the bag, Kaye couldn’t believe her eyes. “This is...”

As if retrieving a priceless treasure, she reached in and took out a queen of the night hair ornament, its stem neatly reinforced with pins and tape.

Although his daughter looked astonished, Kaye’s father’s expression remained stony. “I found it blooming in the shade of the house. Probably couldn’t tell night from day.”

Looking away from Kaye, he glared at Bart and then paced toward the young man.

“Huh?” Bart, full of extraordinary fear, froze on the spot.

Kaye's father raised his hand and smacked Bart on the shoulder. Shock ran through Bart's body; he felt like his arm might've dislocated.

"Ow!"

"If anything happens to my daughter, expect hell."

"Y-yes, sir. W-we'll be very careful."

Her father glanced once more at Bart, who was rubbing his shoulder, then left without turning back.

Kaye, meanwhile, looked sheepish about the whole encounter. "He detests humans," she whispered to Bart. "Sorry he was a bit...intense."

"It's okay," Bart replied. His shoulder was still numb where Kaye's dad had slapped it, but he felt that was something he'd needed to experience. He wouldn't forget it. "To think he made a point of bringing you that hair ornament!"

Kaye shrugged, smiling. "He's never been much of a talker. He'll put on a show of going home, but he'll watch. Actually, he even snuck over to see me at the harvest festival."

Bart realized then that the bald man who'd glared at him at the festival had been none other than Kaye's father. Bart wasn't sure what to make of the man. He looked terrifying, but he cared deeply for his daughter.

Kaye kissed the accessory gently, then fastened it into her hair. So adorned, she looked like a saint in a church painting. She was the very portrait of an angel of liberty. Bart's heart thumped in his chest at the sight.

"Well, let's get to it, everyone!" Kaye said. Everybody got in position.

Bart had never imagined he would one day take part in a protest march. He'd spent his whole life avoiding trouble, but now it felt like that part of himself was dead and buried.

"I'll go in front," he said. "This was my idea. If anything happens, I'll take the blame for it. How about you, Kaye?"

Although he was resolute, he wanted Kaye to make her own choice. If she marched through the Crescent Moon District, he knew she'd be met with jeers

and harassment. Bart thought the best place for her was somewhere in the middle of the march, where they could protect her, but...

“I’ll go in front too,” she said. “I need to take responsibility for bringing D Room to this point. And I need to be by your side.”

Stepping forward, she stood next to him with radiating confidence. Behind them were Mia, the D Room team, and the marching band with their instruments readied. They stood at the park entrance, a thirty-strong army ready for battle. It was time to get going.

The electronics shop owner turned on a radio and handed it to them. “You’ll want to keep up with the flight, right?”

“It’s four in the afternoon. In the next ten minutes, we expect Glorious VII to reach this continent’s western edge,” the radio presenter remarked. “Every aspect of the orbital flight’s first lap is proceeding smoothly at present!”

The flight was going well...for now. How far Glorious VII could get was anyone’s guess, however, given the cheap parts ANSA had used to construct it. The project had been pushed through without even a trial flight, leaving nothing but uncertainties. The real tests would be atmospheric reentry and the water landing. If the newscaster announced the orbital flight’s failure while the march was underway, Bart and the dhampirs would be walking targets.

Even so, they had to march on. Bart held up his flag—which was as tall as he was—and began to mutter his magic words. “Come on...” *Let’s do this.*

For a moment, he fell silent. He wasn’t Lev Leps, nor was he just an astronaut’s little brother.

He was Bart Fifield.

Bart turned around, shouting to the dhampirs behind him. “Here, today, we’re executing a program made up of tens of thousands of punch cards!” He gestured dramatically, as if pointing out a march route from the darkness of space to the Earth’s light. “Today, we execute program, ‘Hello World’!”

Onward, to the Rocket Launch Center!

He thrust his flag toward the sky, signaling everyone. The march was on.

Beneath the sky where astronauts soared at twenty-eight thousand kilometers an hour, their march would push along at five.

The band's drumbeat was lively, and the trumpets and trombones rang into the blue sky above. The call of the music gathered excited, enticed crowds. "March of the Sun and the Moon" pushed the group along. They pressed forward, one step at a time.

Kaye clapped to the music's beat while the marchers held their flags and banner aloft, singing into the sky.

"Oh, when the sun sinks down below! Lord, lead me to the moon!"

They continued singing with lyrics of their own.

"Oh, when the sun sinks down below! *We'll* lead you to the moon!"

Even Bart, who never sang in front of people, raised his voice and joined in.

Some of the dhampirs watching the television broadcast cocked their heads curiously at the sight of the march, but many others clapped along with the beat, spurring the group onward. Some even joined the march, as if it were a jazz funeral.

A group of skinny kids ran up to Kaye. "We'll come too!"

"Aw, you guys!"

"We're doin' it! We *can* come, right, Sir Bart?"

"Yeah, but would you stop calling me 'sir'?"

"You got it, Bart!"

Bart had to chuckle. *You could at least call me "mister."*

The supermarket's owner and staff appeared with a handcart of bottled soft drinks.

"Take what you need!" the owner called. "Wish I could come with you, but I'd just collapse before we made it halfway."

Bart nodded politely. "Thanks!"

"Tch!" Wagging a finger, the shopkeeper said, "I didn't say *you* could have

anything on the house.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry.” As much as he wanted to buy a drink, Bart had left his wallet at the Keighley Center.

The old supermarket owner grinned wryly, forehead wrinkling. “I’ll put it on your tab, for Kaye’s sake.”

Kaye laughed bashfully, and the shopkeep turned to her.

“Thanks for always listening to an old-timer’s grumbles. I don’t care much for the UK or ANSA, but I’ll be glad the day they finally recognize you for who you are! Been cheering you on since you were little.”

The old dhampir took out two pieces of strawberry candy from a pocket and placed them in Kaye’s hand. “Those should have enough energy to get you to the moon. It’s farther than your house, so I’m giving you double.”

“Oh...thank you.”

Kaye put one of the candies in her mouth. Its nostalgic flavor spread through her like relief, filling her with happiness.

“Oh, when the sun sinks down below! Lord, lead me to the moon!”

Their voices rang out in harmony with the brass band. The drums kept the beat while stray cats and sparrows danced along. More and more intrigued dhampirs joined the march. They arrived at the fort ruins where the harvest festival had taken place, then at the graveyard.

“Hey, Bart!”

Turning toward the voice, Bart found himself looking at the dhampir man he always bumped into in the bathroom.

“Mind if I join you?” the dhampir asked. His eyes shone with a desire to change the oppression he felt every day at work.

“Of course not! But, uh...are you sure you don’t need to use the bathroom first?”

“Ha ha! Are you?”

As Bart and the dhampir joked with each other, Kaye turned toward the

graveyard and clasped her hands. “I hope you’re watching, Mom.”

A gentle breeze blew in from the cemetery like an answer to her quiet prayer, fluttering the petals of her queen of the night hair ornament.

One block, then two, then three—with each block they passed, the number of marchers rose, swelling to more than a hundred. A handful didn’t even know what the march was for.

The scorching sun was unforgiving, and the marchers already dripped with sweat. However, they’d only just gotten started. They reached the bridge spanning the Misibi and began to cross the bloodline.

Another progress update blared over the radio. *“Glorious VII is currently passing through UK skies. What a stunning first lap! And it’s on to its second!”*

Bart looked at the sky. He couldn’t see the rocket up there, but that was where it was—the orbital flight he, too, was wrapped up in.

“Please make it home safe.” He sent the heartfelt prayer into the sky.

“Oh, when the sun sinks down below! We’ll lead you to the moon!”

Crossing the bloodline, the Angels of Liberté marched into the Crescent Moon District. The scenery around them immediately modernized. There were paved roads beneath their feet, and not a single weathered shanty house in sight.

The dhampirs cowed a bit as they entered enemy territory, but Bart shouted encouragement: “Hold your heads high! We sing and we march!”

After that, the marchers’ fervor grew even stronger as they strode toward their holy land.

“Let’s keep this party going with a hit even humans will recognize!” the marching band leader called out.

He started a catchy rhythm on his drums, and the brass band followed with a lively tune. It was “My Beloved”—albeit a faster, up-tempo swing arrangement.

“Whatever the language, I want to tell you that you’re dear to me!” someone sang.

Kaye clapped along to the new beat. “This is Irina’s favorite song!” she told

Bart.

The Zirnitran newspaper *The Istina* had published an exclusive interview with Irina, in which a reporter had asked, “Do you enjoy any of what human culture offers?”

Irina replied, “I like jazz. Particularly the song ‘My Beloved.’”

“Is Lev your beloved?”

She brushed off the second question, answering, “Soda water means more to me than Lev does. I want to taste all the soda water in the world.”

The Istina had neglected to mention Irina’s expression then.

The march entered the downtown area. Humans watching street-facing televisions for updates on the orbital flight turned, astonished, at the commotion of the passing dhampirs.

“A protest...?”

At first, people thought they were another activist group looking to abolish discrimination. Then, they noticed the waving banner’s message: “FLY YOU TO THE MOON.”

“Angels of Liberté?”

“Is this some Nerd Heaven thing?”

Curious onlookers leaned out of trams and buses to catch a better glimpse.

So far, so good, thought Bart.

The streetside televisions’ next update riled the crowds up further. “*We’ve received word from space from astronaut Steve Howard! He says, ‘The world’s exquisite! There’s absolutely no doubt it’s God’s creation!’*”

That was, perhaps, a response to Lev Leps’s statement that there was no God in space. Either way, the people on Earth’s surface could only imagine the sights reflected in the astronauts’ eyes. Even seeing a photo snapped from space was completely different from actually experiencing the scenery firsthand.

“Oh, when the sun sinks down below! Lord, lead me to the moon!”

Whether there was a god up there or not didn’t matter. The Angels of Liberté

were still the ones creating the path.

The marching band's music caught people's attention and drew them in, but most humans were repulsed by the march itself. None joined it. As more of them became aware of the Angels of Liberté, they stared at Kaye with judgment in their eyes, spitting venomous words.

"That's the vampire. Watch out, or you'll get bitten!"

"Monsters like that belong in an asylum."

Kaye seemed hurt. Her face fell.

"Don't even listen to them," said Bart. "Whatever they say, it won't change who you are or what you're worth."

"You're right." The light returned to Kaye's expression, and a hint of a smile reappeared on her face. "I've decided to look at it like this: If more people around the world learn about me and Nosferatu Syndrome, maybe someone will finally be crazy enough to research a cure!"

The farther they went into the downtown area, however, the more HUMANS ONLY signs appeared, as well as abusive hecklers. Rowdy groups in front of bars laughed disgustedly at the marchers, showering them with insults.

"Keep marching right to prison!"

"Go back to the dark side where you belong!"

The jeers weren't based in true hatred of the dhampirs—they were just a way for the onlookers to blow off steam and lift their own spirits. All the same, the cries left the dhampir children shivering in fear, and Bart regretted letting them join the march. He'd underestimated the humans' spite.

"Damn it," he muttered.

The insults were like machine gun bullets, tearing down the children mercilessly.

"I'll drain your blood and kill you!"

"We'll leave you sleeping in a coffin forever!"

"This isn't fair to the kids!" cried Kaye.

She'd had enough, and she asked a few tougher adult dhampirs to escort the children home to the Moonlight District. The kids were on the verge of tears as she embraced them.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I promise you all, I'll change this world."

"We believe in you, Kaye."

The heckling and jeers weren't just for the dhampirs—they were for Bart too.

"Dhampir lover!"

"Vampire freak!"

"How's it feel to have your blood sucked?"

It was so coarse and tasteless, so vulgar, it made Bart sick. He refused to acknowledge the humans confronting the marchers. To do so would be to lose to them.

Today, he had a bigger goal to reach.

Bart stood tall and hefted his flag high, marching on. As they kept walking, though, the malice never lessened. A tomato smacked against Mia's banner and fell to the ground, stopping the dhampir in her tracks. She stared down at the splattered fruit.

"Mia!" Kaye shouted, immediately worried.

Mia raised her head and assumed her usual nonchalance. "They'll get their just deserts," she said confidently. "What a waste of a good tomato."

Although she put on a brave face, her hands gripped the banner tightly. If people only threw tomatoes, that was fine, but Bart broke into a cold sweat at the thought of more dangerous ammo. Standing at the front of the march, he'd look like any other pro-dhampir activist, as far as the Solar Flare Club was concerned. He felt like he was in danger.

However, he'd anticipated this before the march started and still volunteered to walk in front. He had to keep going. If an astronaut's job was to risk their life flying to space, an engineer's job was to risk their life mapping the route. Each marcher today had joined with their own sentiments and motivations.

The dhampirs' loud songs and cries were now gathering as much attention as the orbital spaceflight itself, and the march was quickly becoming a subject of conversation in the crowd. Bart heard it as they walked.

“Computers...?”

“They’ve apparently got something to do with launching rockets.”

If the Keighley Center Director learned about this, Bart was done for, but at least this march was showing results on the PR side. He was worried about the humans who’d threatened to call the police, but there hadn’t been any big incidents thus far.

As the march left the downtown area, the church bell rang the time—five in the afternoon. A road sign let them know it was another three kilometers to the Rocket Launch Center. The land between where they stood and the coastal district was largely undeveloped. Virgin forests and grassy plains lined the road ahead on either side. There was barely a house in sight, so there’d be no more residents to hurl abuses at them.

At the same time, as much as the marchers wanted to keep up their momentum, everyone was tiring. The heat had sapped their energy. When they passed the bloodline, the march had numbered nearly a hundred people, but they’d lost some of their entourage along the way. Without clear opponents in front of them, the music and singing lost steam. The drinks the supermarket staff gave them had nearly run out too.

Bart’s arms ached as they hefted his flag. He’d gotten stronger carrying punch cards, but he’d never been especially resilient. Still, he gritted his teeth and walked on.

Kaye reached a hand out to him. “Let me carry it. All I’ve done up till now is clap.”

“Thanks. Just for a little while—then I’ll take it back.”

She held the flag high and exclaimed, “Let’s go!”

The sun was sinking, and the huge steel towers standing in the fields cast long, dark shadows. All of a sudden, an ominous report came from the radio. Bart and Kaye froze on the spot.

“We’ve just received an emergency announcement from ANSA.”

The music stopped. Someone turned up the volume, and everyone listened in.

“The orbital flight scheduled to complete three laps around Earth will now only do two.”

They didn’t give a reason for the change, but it was easy to infer that Damon had made the decision based on some curveball.

“If ANSA’s switching plans midflight, something probably happened aboard the ship,” Bart said.

Fearing the same thing, Kaye gripped the flagpole even more tightly. The cheap rocket parts ANSA had used to stay on budget might’ve led to the problem, but if Glorious VII failed to return or land safely, blame would fall on her and her team.

“ACE’s calculations will cover however many laps the ship does,” she replied. “Still...”

There was nothing they could do. Not while they were so far from both the ship and the mission control center.

“At this point, Glorious VII will pass over the continent, reenter the atmosphere, and land in the eastern seas.”

Everyone looked at the sky with silent gloom, praying for a safe flight. The uncertainty of the situation made their hearts sink.

Bart clapped his hands to draw the marchers’ attention and boost their morale. “We have to keep going! Whatever happens to the orbital flight, we need to reach the media and explain the role you played.”

“That’s right!” Kaye turned toward the marchers, grinning brightly. “Break time’s over! Let’s get going!”

On Kaye’s instructions, the band started another round of “March of the Sun and the Moon.” The bright music energized the group, and they pushed ahead. They sang, clapped, and walked in time to the beat until they reached a junkyard for military vehicles. Signs reading “The Road to Space!” flanked the coastal district roads. The beach wasn’t much farther.

The sunset shone brightly and ominously above; it stained the military vehicles strewn around them dark bloodred.

“Glorious VII has passed Arnack, and will...” Static hit the radio broadcast, cutting off the announcer. *“...atmospheric...re-en...and...”* Then the radio shut off completely. It was either out of batteries or broken—they didn’t know which.

“Just when we needed it most,” Bart said with a sigh.

A sticky, humid wind blew through the abandoned military vehicles.

Bart took the flag and waved it high. “We march on!” he shouted.

His feet were blistered and his hands were sore, but he put one foot in front of the other and kept moving. At the end of the road ahead, the setting sun kissed the ocean, which glimmered like gold.

“Just a little farther!”

The streets near the beach were crowded and lively with people. The marchers spotted a sign for the Rocket Launch Center. A few more steps, and they’d be on the coastal road.

However, ominous red lights flashed in front of them—police cars. On top of that, ten officers on horseback were headed right for the march.

Kaye’s brow furrowed. “Are those...state police?”

The mounted officers weren’t there to direct traffic. They fanned out across the road, blocking the march from moving forward.

Bart eyed them nervously. “We’d better be careful.”

“They definitely want to stop us,” Kaye said.

She touched her flagpole to the ground, standing at the ready. The marchers bringing up the rear peeked around, unsure why the group’s momentum had halted. When they saw what was ahead, they cried out in surprise.

Two mounted policemen broke ranks and trotted over. Both officers reeked of aggression and wore sneers of distaste.

“What do you think you’re doing?” one asked.

Bart approached them. “The bus denied us access, so we’re walking to the Rocket Launch Center.”

The policemen acted like they hadn’t even heard him. “So, it’s the vampire girl and the boy she bit,” one said. “Give it up. Go home.”

“Keep marching, and we’ll arrest you for rioting,” said the other.

Bart wasn’t about to let himself feel cowed. “But this is an ANSA PR event, not a protest march.”

“Well, you’re holding it without permission. We’ve received numerous complaints.”

At that, Kaye also stepped forward to face off with the officers. “There’s no law against dhampirs playing music and walking through the Crescent Moon District.”

“There’re laws against rioting and obstructing law enforcement.”

The policemen looked down at her with cold cruelty, as if she were a criminal. The guns on their belts moved as their horses shifted.

But Kaye wasn’t about to cave either. “I don’t listen to police who turn a blind eye to cold-blooded murder.”

The officers exchanged a glance and a nod, then closed in on Kaye.

“This is bad,” Bart said under his breath.

As one officer directed his horse to charge at Kaye, Bart moved to stop it.

“Watch out!”

“Aah!”

The horse knocked Kaye over. She rolled across the street, her flagpole clattering to the ground.

“Kaye!” Bart ran to her and held her in his arms. “Are you okay?!”

“I’m fine...” She sounded hurt. Blood ran from scrapes on her arms and knees.

Bart glared at the mounted policemen. “Why would you do that?!”

The officer clicked his tongue in disgust. “If you get in our way, you’ll be under

arrest for the same things.”

“We haven’t done anything wrong!”

Bart’s defiance just brought a cruel sneer to the officer’s face. He moved aggressively toward the pair; he was going to charge them again. Bart positioned himself in front of Kaye to protect her.

“Ow!”

The horse knocked him hard into the ground, facedown. Jolting pain shot through Bart’s back. His glasses fell from his face and skidded along the road, where they were crushed under the horse’s hooves.

“Bart!” Kaye shouted, sitting upright.

“Ngh...” Bart tasted blood. His back was numb, and he couldn’t stand.

Mia and the dhampir marchers stood frozen in place. Sightseers watched curiously from a distance.

The policeman who hadn’t charged Bart unclipped his handcuffs and went for Kaye. “Kaye Scarlet, you’re under arrest for rioting, obstruction of law enforcement, and for vampiric assault on Bart Fifield.”

“Give me a break,” muttered Bart.

He could barely hold back the anger rising within him. Using the flagpole as a crutch, he lifted himself to his feet and faced the officers once more.

“Kaye didn’t do anything wrong!” he said, stepping forward. “All she did was follow her dreams.”

Bart’s body hurt all over—his back, his arms, his legs, his forehead—but it seemed like nothing compared to the pain Kaye had endured.

“You’ve got no right to arrest her,” he continued, standing next to Kaye and aiming his flag at the policemen. “Now get out of our way, and let us forge the path to space!”



His plea was desperate, but the officers remained stone-faced and cold. They had a dangerous aura, as though they might draw their guns at any moment. If the march didn't back down, the marchers' safety would be at risk.

Is this where we fold? Bart wondered. *Do we crumble here, before evil?*

Despair gripped them all just as the coastal road erupted in cheers.

"Woo-hoo!"

"He did it!"

"Glorious indeed!"

Everyone involved in the standoff—even the police—paused in shock and confusion. Bart and Kaye exchanged looks.

"Does that mean...?"

"The flight was a success?!"

The mounted officers confirmed the news over their radio. They tried to maintain their grimaces, but their lips trembled at the effort.

Bart also suppressed his surging joy. He turned to the still-hesitant marchers behind them. "Listen, everyone! It's all over if ANSA claims your efforts as their own!"

"The flight succeeded! Be proud of what you did! Hold your heads high!" added Kaye.

They nodded at each other and shouted in tandem, "Come on! Let's do this!"

Bart chuckled. He only realized the words were the same as Lev's after the fact. He had more important things to think about now, however. He thrust the flagpole high into the sky. The sea breeze caught the drooping flag and lifted it up to wave in the wind.

Kaye glanced at the marching band and raised her hand. "Hit it!" she cried.

"You got it!" said the drummer. He played a drumroll, shouting, "A one, a two, a one-two-three!"

The drums kicked things off as the band again launched into an energetic

rendition of “March of the Sun and the Moon.”

“Oh, when the sun sinks down below! We’ll lead you to the moon!”

The marchers bringing up the rear surged ahead. Mia and the other dhampirs in front, still trembling, took one step forward, then another. The band’s energy pushed against the policemen, whose horses spooked and whinnied. They pranced left and right, ignoring their riders, and trotted away.

“Onward!” Bart shouted, waving the flag to spur on the march. “Space—and our future—lie ahead!”

The dhampir march progressed right past the mounted policemen.

“Oh, when the sun sinks down below! We’ll lead you to the moon!”

Sightseers visiting the coast turned toward Bart and the marching band.

“Hey, they’re from ANSA!” some said.

“Lead us to the moon!” others called, their voices overjoyed.

The march continued straight past the police patrol cars. The mounted officers had no choice but to pull back.

“Yes!” shouted Bart.

They’d reached the “road to space.” It was only one kilometer to the Rocket Launch Center.

“Just a little farther!”

At that moment, a truck pulled up alongside Bart and honked its horn.

Don’t tell me they’re trying to stop us again.

When Bart looked at the man behind the wheel, however, he saw the old air force soldier who’d once requested his autograph.

“I’ll escort you all to the holy ground!” the old man offered. “You want to avoid them cops bothering you again, don’t you?”

“Huh?”

“Told you I’m here to help you, didn’t I?” The old man gave Bart a thumbs-up, raising the volume of the truck radio.

“Glorious VII did one lap fewer than planned,” said the announcer. *“Still, this historic moment deserves celebration!”*

It was like all the weariness in the group’s bones vanished instantly. Singing, they marched on to the Rocket Launch Center. Their ragged, handmade flags seemed to fill the evening sky, which burned a beautiful red.

The march’s arrival seemed to shock the human groups celebrating the orbital flight’s success on the roadside. Jubilant about Glorious VII, they joined the march—old, young, man, woman—without worrying about race. Nearby photographers snapped photos of it all as the group strode on.

Hello, world! Bart thought. *Look! These women are terrestrial heroes!*

“Angels of Liberté!” the new marchers cried out, singing proudly,

“Oh, when the sun sinks down below! Angels of liberty, lead Arnack to the moon!”

Bart and the original dhampir marchers responded with a confident chorus of their own.

“Oh, when the sun sinks down below! We’ll lead you to the moon!”

Bart felt a surge of momentum behind him and Kaye as the human sightseers and onlookers accepted the march’s arrival.

Kaye sang loudly, mouth wide, showing her fangs proudly for all to see. The queen of the night flower in her hair danced in the breeze, and she didn’t seem to care at all that her pointed ears were no longer hidden. Her eyes glittered vermilion in the evening sunlight, like beautiful jewels.

As Bart sang, he shared a smile with Kaye singing by his side. He’d always been mortified to sing in front of people, but now he stood tall and sang with confidence. He’d finally found something to really take pride in.

The sun sank below the horizon, painting the sky in a deep indigo color. A beautiful half-moon floated overhead. Media representatives crowded in front of the news base next to the Rocket Launch Center’s main entrance. The area was so packed that people nearly spilled over the seawalls.

As Bart and Kaye arrived with their hundreds of marchers, Jennifer and the

Living Illustrated reporter ran to them in a panic.

“What on earth are you two doing?!” Jennifer cried.

“A PR event, obviously,” said Bart. He waved his flag to the crowd behind him.

They erupted into cries. “Angels of Liberté! Angels of Liberté! Angels of Liberté!”

Kaye turned to the marching band, arms outstretched like a conductor to urge them on. The musicians were so thunderously loud and powerful that all the reporters and media reps turned to look.

Frustrated, Jennifer ran a hand through her hair. “I don’t even care anymore. Do what you want. This *does* look like it’ll have ten times the impact of the boring ideas my boss comes up with.”

She was griping, but there was a certain enjoyment in her carefree shrug.

The media crowded around, surrounding the front of the march; camera flashes blinded the marchers. Reporters thrust their microphones forward, spewing rude questions.

“Did you know we have documents that show today’s successful orbital flight was thanks to ACE personnel?!”

“Kaye, can you comment on that blood-sucking incident?”

“Bart, as the computer room’s manager-to-be, could you please make a statement?!”

They crowded and pushed like a hill of fire ants, every single one hunting for a headline.

Bart couldn’t stand it. “Everybody, quiet!” he bellowed as loudly as possible.

His outburst shocked the media reps, who froze in place.

“I have something to say. Please, just listen.” The earnest feelings burdening him rose from the pit of his stomach. “Why write articles that scorn and disparage dhampirs? Shouldn’t you write about how we’ve made one giant leap closer to the moon?”

Not all the reporters liked what Bart was saying, but he ignored them and

went on.

“ACE employees didn’t do the flight calculations for Glorious VII. It was a group of female dhampir programmers living in the Moonlight District. As for their manager, that wasn’t me—it was Kaye Scarlet.”

Bart took Kaye’s wrist and held it aloft. The action caught her completely off guard, but she put her game face on just as quickly.

He kept holding her hand as he went on speaking. “Thanks to Kaye, we saw the suborbital *and* orbital flights succeed, but you didn’t write anything about that! Instead, you got excited about a story that wasn’t even true. I’ll state it for you here, loud and clear: Kaye didn’t bite me!”

Releasing Kaye’s hand, Bart held his arms wide in front of the reporters. “You don’t even know how kind she is. Please don’t go writing lies like facts. Aren’t there humans committing crimes you should write about, instead of law-abiding young women?”

Bart’s plea charmed the media completely.

“One last thing. The problem here isn’t that Kaye’s a dhampir, and it’s not that she suffers from Nosferatu Syndrome. It’s that we have to work as one—hand in hand, together—if we want to achieve our dream of landing on the moon.”

The dhampir marchers, and a portion of the reporters, applauded.

Bart gestured to Kaye. “Kaye, you want to say something, right?”

Looking out at the assembled media reps with brave dignity, Kaye spoke from her heart. “Humans! With the success of the manned orbital launch, the UK enters a new era. Tonight, many of you will thoroughly enjoy celebrating this achievement. When you do, I ask just one small thing...” She paused to unpin her queen of the night hair ornament, placing it in her palm like a fragile treasure. “Please don’t forget the many sacrifices upon which that history was made.”

At Kaye’s heavy words, the media reps were utterly speechless. Mia and the dhampirs bit their lips, some bursting into tears.

As Kaye pinned the flower back into her hair, everyone noticed a commotion at the Rocket Launch Center's front gate.

Bart followed their gazes. "What the...?"

It was Division Chief Damon, pushing his way through the crowd. The orbital flight had succeeded, yet Damon wore a more worried expression than usual. He ran straight for Bart and the marchers. Bart readied himself—he had no idea what the Division Chief might say. Kaye's expression tensed. Silence spread, creating a strange atmosphere at what should've been a celebration.

Damon stood in front of Bart and Kaye, arms crossed. He furrowed his brow. "Bart Fifield," he said in a low, grave voice.

"Sir..."

"Kaye Scarlet."

"Yes?"

They saw no hint of joy in Damon's eyes at the success of Glorious VII. Bart was prepared for anything. He'd left the Keighley Center without permission and behaved rashly. It would come as no surprise if ANSA fired him for his actions, just as Mia had warned him. Sweat dotted his back.

Damon uncrossed his arms. "You did it," he said, patting the pair's shoulders.

Bart's heart leaped.

"Today's success came thanks to the calculations you two worked to deliver. You have my gratitude as Project Hermes's supervisor."

Unbridled joy swelled in Bart's chest, filling his entire body. He held it in, fighting to maintain his composure. "Thank you, sir!"

Kaye put a hand to her chest and sighed in relief.

Damon let a rare hint of a smile cross his face. "Will you all fly me to the moon too?" he asked.

For a moment, Bart stood gaping, unsure what the question meant. "Huh?"

Lifting an eyebrow, Damon pointed at the slogan on their banner. "That's what that says, right? 'Fly You to the Moon'?"

“Oh!”

Bart and Kaye glanced at each other and laughed. Then Damon spoke again—not just to them but to the dhampirs, the media, and everyone else gathered.

“Angels of Liberté... I believe we should judge people—human or dhampir—on their merits. I know you’ve long been ignored and toiled in the shadows. But given today’s success, I can and will recommend you all for Hyperion.”

Even the stoic, ever-strict Division Chief Damon recognized their hard work. It was so unexpected, so hard to believe, that Bart wasn’t sure if what he was experiencing was even real. Kaye and the other dhampirs likewise expressed both disbelief and joy.

“Those of you wishing to join Hyperion are to report to me. I’ll vouch for your worth to the Director.”

With that, Damon’s face returned to its familiar sober expression, and he walked back to the Rocket Launch Center. Bart had no idea how to react.

“Aren’t you going, Bart?” asked Kaye, turning to him with a grin. “I am.”

Passion bloomed inside him as he finally understood the reality of Damon’s announcement. He held back his tears, fighting to play it cool. “Of course I’m going.”

The Rocket Launch Center gates opened to welcome the arriving dhampirs. As Bart and Kaye headed toward the building, the marching band played a celebratory arrangement, and camera flashes flickered like stars in the night sky.

“Bart,” said Kaye. “Division Chief Damon said all that because of what *you* told him when you recommended me on the night of the hurricane. I’m sure of it.”

Bart laughed. “Maybe.”

He pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose to fix his glasses, then realized he wasn’t wearing them. That explained why his vision was fuzzy. Raking a hand through his hair, he wiped at the tears in his eyes.

Coda:
Outro

Blue Eyes

THREE DAYS AFTER the orbital flight succeeded, a huge ticker-tape parade was held to celebrate in the capital of Erikson, D.E. Participants included the heroes of the Hermes Seven, Division Chief Damon, Professor Vil Klaus, other high-level ANSA employees, and Bart and Kaye. As they drove the parade route toward the event hall, people showered their cars in cheers and confetti. The other Angels of Liberté had also been invited, people cheering them as they walked the road.

Bart, once known only as an astronaut's little brother, was now seen as an outstanding engineer in his own right. And despite having been mired in a vampiric scandal, Kaye herself had again come to symbolize the dhampir community's hopes and dreams.

The space program's future had once been in doubt, but with the orbital flight's success, the initiative finally enjoyed growing support from the UK's population. Kaye's role in the flight even helped increase appreciation among the dhampirs. In light of that, Project Hyperion's funding increased. They were still playing catch-up with the UZSR, but the race to the moon was just beginning.

Behind a special event stage set up in Central Park, Bart and Kaye walked toward the backstage stairs to give their speeches. Bart had bought new blue-framed glasses to replace his broken ones. And, although they hadn't planned it in advance, Kaye coincidentally wore a blue dress for the occasion. Bart was pretty sure she'd done so with the Blue Angel in mind, but he didn't bring it up.

The pair was scheduled to say a few words alongside Arnack's young queen, Sundancia II. They neared the stage, incredibly nervous. Knowing that they couldn't afford to make any mistakes during their speeches had their hearts racing.

Then Kaye, staring blankly at the sky, tripped on one of the stairs leading to the stage and almost fell. "Eep!"

“Watch out!” Bart grabbed hold of her arm, saving her from the tumble.
“Careful now,” he whispered.



She poked her tongue out bashfully, giggling. “Sorry.”

“What formula were you thinking about this time?”

Kaye shook her head. “It wasn’t a formula.” She looked up at the sky and closed her eyes. “It was a trip to the moon.”

Bart closed his eyes as well. Beyond the bright sunlight, the dream he’d had since he was a boy continued. Now, however, they had a weapon he’d never imagined—the computer—to help fly the Blue Angel to the moon.

When that day came, Bart hoped he’d watch the moon landing with the kids from the church, through a telescope placed on the very hill where Kaye once crashed her compact satellite.

Cosmonaut Eyes

• ОЧИ КОСМОНАВТ •

IN A COUNTRY neighboring the Zirnitra Union, Lev and Irina were enjoying dinner at a high-end restaurant.

“So this is an ‘ice cream soda,’ eh? Mmm. Such a wonderful vanilla scent. Human beverages are fascinating, varied things.” The creamy froth on Irina’s upper lip hampered the air of sophistication she was trying to wear.

As Irina and Lev went from country to country on their tour, Irina took great pleasure in trying an assortment of carbonated drinks. Although she disliked being bogged down by a constant security detail, and wasn’t a fan of the never-ending photo ops, she was enjoying her first travel experiences thoroughly.

“What kind of carbonated drinks do you think the United Kingdom has, Lev?”

“Aren’t you more interested in the day you’ll get to meet Kaye?”

When Irina had seen the parade in Erikson, D.E. on the news, she’d seemed excited about the prospect of talking to Kaye Scarlet. Lev had a hunch that witnessing a dhampir on the front lines of space development made her happy. She also seemed worried about Kaye when the news slandered the girl, but the world had apparently realized those reports were untrue.

Irina responded to Lev’s question with a conceited pout, however. “Is that your thing?” she demanded. “Silver hair?”

“I-I don’t follow.”

Looking closely at Lev, Irina pried further. “Who do you want to meet more, Bart or Kaye?”

“I want to meet them both...”

“Hrm.”

Lev glanced at the silent Irina sipping her ice cream soda, then looked through the window at the moon. It was night where they were, but the sun was still up

in the United Kingdom. Across the sea were comrades who shared the same dream, who aimed for the same moon. And yet, they felt so distant, it was like they were entirely out of reach.

It was true that competition inspired morale and pushed engineers to hone their skills. Still, Lev wished he, Irina, Bart, and Kaye could ignore the borders that separated them and join forces.

“Lyudmila would just say I’m being naive, though.” Lev chuckled at himself. Pouring a glass of zhizni, he silently toasted his comrades in the United Kingdom.

He longed for the day they could talk freely, smile among themselves, and fly their one rocket toward the moon. He didn’t care how many years it took.

Among the skies and stars was freedom.

Afterword

FOR THIS VOLUME, we moved to the United Kingdom, which has its own engineers and workplace roles. What did you think?

February 20, the date this volume was released in Japan, is the same day America accomplished manned orbital flight in 1962. Humanity first achieved spaceflight ten months earlier, in April, the month in which Volume 2 was released. I began work on Volume 1 in December, and it was also released in December. There's a certain sense of real-time progression to this series.

At any rate, this story's set in the early 1960s. At first, I thought more documents would be available for research from America than a certain ultra-secretive nation. Taking a closer look, however, I realized very little translated material outside the Apollo projects was available.

Around that time, the movie *Hidden Figures*—released as *Dream* in Japan—came out, and I used it as a reference. I was shocked that my novel's settings overlapped with the film the way they did. At the same time, I struggled with G**gle Translate to learn what I could from English websites. Machine translation's really something, actually. I read most of the sites just fine.

That was how I learned that computers, for all the convenience they provide now, were perplexing machines just half a century ago. I used that fact as a springboard for my own series. Historically, much about them was obscured, but I'm making them public on account of Lev and Irina's work.

By the way, I took Kaye's formula in this volume from an actual engineering report for spaceflight.

Recently, it seems like there's excitement around space development as people race to explore the moon's surface. (I contributed a bit to the Hakuto project under the name Korovin.) Now we've got to wonder—in real life, and in this story, who will land on the moon next?

Special thanks to my supervising editor, Tabata, for always correcting stories' orbits. You helped us land safely.

To KAREI, this volume came with a host of new characters. One after another,

they all looked fantastic. You have my total gratitude.

Thanks to science writer Akiyama Ayano and *TELSTAR News* editor Junichi Tsuchiya for making time for interviews.

Finally, thanks so much to everyone who read this volume. Lots of great things happened last year because of your support, including the announcement of a manga version! I'll do my very best in hopes that I'll have more good news this year too.

KEISUKE MAKINO

From the Author

Keisuke Makino In addition to light novels, I write for games and TV dramas.

I mentioned wanting to try Russian cuisine in past volumes, but now I have a hankering for spicy Cajun dishes. Just in case, I've got a stockpile of soda water at the ready.

Books by Keisuke Makino

Flick & Break

Flick & Break, Vol. 2

Flick & Break, Vol. 3

Irina: The Vampire Cosmonaut

From the Artist

KAREI

According to the annual “luck by birthday” chart, mine is No. 1 this year. I’ve been dying to tell somebody.

Pixiv: 3410642 Twitter: @flat_fish_



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