

NOVEL
5

WRITTEN BY
Keisuke Makino
ILLUSTRATED BY KAREI



The cover art depicts a male cosmonaut in a dark green uniform with numerous medals and a red sash, holding a black helmet. He has short brown hair and blue eyes. Beside him is a girl with long dark hair, red eyes, and pointed ears, wearing a white lab coat with a red sash. The background is a vibrant space scene with a nebula and a rocket. The title 'Irina' is written in a large, elegant serif font, with 'The Vampire Cosmonaut' in a smaller, simpler font below it.

Irina

The
Vampire
Cosmonaut

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Irina

The
Vampire
Cosmonaut

WRITTEN BY Keisuke Makino

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MIKHAIL YASHIN

IRINA LUMINESK

LEV LEPS

ROZA PLEVITSKAYA



THE UNITED KINGDOM OF ARNACK

FYODOR GERGIEV

“Lyudmila, is there no way through this?”

“We’ll soon be ready to carry out our own spacewalk.”

“What?!”

THE ZIRNITRA UNION

LYUDMILA
KHARLOVA

SUNDANCIA
SOPHIE ALICIA



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Луна, Лайка и Носферату

Original Cover & Logo design by Junya Arai + Bay Bridge Studio

Irina

The
Vampire
Cosmonaut

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KAREI



Seven Seas Entertainment



конфиденциальный

NATION OF
Lilitto

CLOSED ADMINISTRATIVE-
TERRITORIAL FORMATION
LAIKA44

CAPITAL: SANGRAD

**CREMEA GROUND
CONTROL STATION**

Zirnitra Union

ALBINAR COSMODROME

**Союз
Цирнитра
Социалистических
Республик**

Characters

Луна, Лайка и Носферату

- **LEV LEPS:** Humanity’s first cosmonaut. Air force colonel. Training Center vice-director.
- **IRINA LUMINESK:** Vampire and world’s first cosmonaut. Lieutenant colonel. Training Center instructor.
- **MIKHAIL YASHIN:** Cosmonaut and lieutenant colonel. Training Center instructor.
- **ROZA PLEVITSKAYA:** Humanity’s first female cosmonaut. Lieutenant colonel. Training Center instructor.
- **SEMYON ADAMOV:** Cosmonaut and lieutenant colonel. Mechta Shest member.

- **SLAVA KOROVIN:** Spacecraft and rocket development chief.
- **LT. GEN. VIKTOR:** Lieutenant general and Training Center director. Hero of the Great War.
- **XENIA KOROVINA:** Korovin’s daughter.

- **FYODOR GERGIEV:** Supreme Leader of the UZSR.
- **LYUDMILA KHARLOVA:** Gergiev’s press secretary and confidant.

- **BART FIFIELD:** ANSA engineer. Member of Arnack One.
- **KAYE SCARLET:** Dhampir prodigy employed at ANSA. Member of Arnack One.
- **AARON FIFIELD:** Bart’s older brother. UK’s first astronaut.
- **SUNDANCIA SOPHIE ALICIA:** Young queen of the United Kingdom.



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

TSUKI TO LAICA TO NOSFERATU Vol. 5

by Keisuke MAKINO

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Illustration by KAREI

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Prelude: прелюдия

NOVEMBER 3, 1957.

A hunting dog aboard a spaceship became the first living creature to orbit Earth.

Her name was Maly.

She was a test subject tragically destined to meet her own demise.

No one knew what she saw from space.

No one knew what she thought and felt on her journey.

No one knew, save for the Goddess of the Moon.

She saw herself in Maly's eyes and heard the cries of Maly's heart.

The Goddess of the Moon waited for the day when her friends from Earth would visit to tell her of their adventures.

She waited for the moment when her friends would take the first huge step in accomplishing their dreams.

She waited 380,000 kilometers away, alone, floating in a sea of stars.

She waited for you, dreaming as you stared at the sky.

The fierce Space Race continued between the Eastern and Western powers—the Zirnitra Union and the United Kingdom of Arnack. Both countries achieved great successes, transforming humanity's long-held dreams into reality.

December 1960: Irina Luminesk (UZSR) achieves the first manned spaceflight in history.

April 1961: Lev Leps (UZSR) achieves the first human spaceflight.

May 1961: Aaron Fifiield (UK) achieves the United Kingdom's first suborbital spaceflight.

August 1961: Mikhail Yashin (UZSR) becomes the first cosmonaut to spend over twenty-four hours in space.

September 1961: Steve Howard (UK) achieves the United Kingdom's first manned orbital spaceflight.

April 1962: Roza Plevitskaya (UZSR) becomes the first human woman in space.

The Space Race then paused as technological development entered a transition period. In 1964, the UZSR succeeded in a new endeavor: Their improved True Mechta I (formerly the Mechta—the first ship to achieve spaceflight) accomplished three historic feats in a single mission. It was the first multi-passenger spaceflight, the first in which crew members didn't wear space suits from launch to landing, and the first to carry nonmilitary personnel (scientists and medical staff).

The world marveled at and applauded the UZSR's efforts.

On the other side of the globe, the UK had yet to achieve any grand historic feats but nonetheless progressed steadily toward its goal of reaching the moon. Various national organizations cooperated to research and develop the rocket and spacecraft that would take them there.

It wasn't all smooth sailing. Both sides had to grapple with budget issues and the newfound problems of cutting-edge technology. To alleviate these challenges, Queen Sundancia of the United Kingdom proposed cooperative development between the UK and UZSR. The disparities between the nations were too numerous, however, and they took no such steps.

When ANSA announced its readiness to collaborate in such a way, the UZSR's government had a twofold response. First, it showed willingness to further

compromise in the areas it was already cooperating—those most applicable to daily life, including weather satellite technology and medical research.

Second, regarding cooperation in core competitive areas—namely, manned spaceflight and planetary exploration—Supreme Leader Gergiev said only that he would “consider it,” which indefinitely halted communications between the UK and UZSR.

In 1965, both countries would display the fruits of their hard work. A new Space Race was set to begin.

Chapter 1:

Afloat in a Sea of Stars

Indigo Eyes

• ОЧИ ИНДИГО •

SNOWFLAKES FLUTTERED in the air like crystalline petals outside the Albinar Cosmodrome. Inside, the Cosmodrome was receiving a transmission.

“This is Agate II!” a nervous voice reported from 500 kilometers overhead.
“Agate I’s about to...”

Agate I and Agate II were the call signs of cosmonauts aboard True Mechta II, which was currently orbiting Earth. Every single person in the Cosmodrome’s launch control center, otherwise known as the “blockhouse,” waited with bated breath for Agate II’s next words—a report on Agate I’s status.

Colonel Lev Leps leaned forward, monitoring communication with the cosmonauts and praying for Agate I’s safety. The cosmonaut was now halfway out of the ship’s airlock.

“Come on! You can do it!” Lev whispered. *Please, grant them success.* His prayer drifted toward the sky.

Agate II radioed in his update. *“He’s out! Agate I is in space! It’s the first spacewalk in human history!”*

“We did it!” Lev cried.

The blockhouse exploded with cheers.

“We did it, Chief!” Lev shook the hand of the man sitting next to him—Slava Korovin, the chief designer.

Korovin allowed himself a moment of relief, but a stern gaze soon returned to his stony face. *“Calm down, all of you!”* he barked at the roomful of excited

engineers. “This is where problems start. Don’t take your eyes off Agate I’s numbers and vital signs!”

A wave of tension flooded the room. It wasn’t just staff in the blockhouse following Agate I’s spacewalk; television and radio stations were broadcasting the event live across the UZSR.

The spacewalking Agate I was Lieutenant Colonel Semyon Adamov, a cosmonaut and Mechta Shest member. Connected to his ship via a five-meter lifeline, he floated freely among the stars.

Lev took a deep breath and asked through the radio, “How are you, Agate I?”

Adamov replied immediately and ecstatically: *“I’m fantastic!”*

On March 18, 1965, the UZSR’s True Mechta II achieved history’s first spacewalk. The sight of a human afloat in a sea of stars had the world in awe.

Confronted once again with their rivals’ success, a few UK media outlets reported that the black-and-white spacewalk photo was a fake taken on Earth. Society at large ignored those claims, seeing them as the cries of sore losers.

Beyond the media frenzy, Lev was simply relieved that the two cosmonauts had returned safely. In truth, the spacewalk—a historic feat, to be sure—had been mere moments from ending in tragedy. The Zirnitran government covered up those details, and the public was none the wiser.

Moreover, the issues with True Mechta II hadn’t only popped up during the flight. The lead-up to the launch had been plagued with the usual heaps of doubts and concerns. Would releasing a human into space send them spiraling into a mental breakdown? Was exposing a human to the sun’s rays under these conditions somehow dangerous? Numerous scientists asked questions along those lines.

With that in mind, the Zirnitran team initially chose a dog as the spacewalk test subject. When UZSR intelligence reported details of ANSA’s planned spacewalk, however, Gergieiev ordered that the animal test be skipped.

“If we waste time with a dog, we’ll lose the race,” he said. “Send up a

cosmonaut.”

His cold-blooded order had worried Korovin, but the man begrudgingly gave in to cosmonaut Semyon Adamov’s pressure and passion.

“I’ve completed the training,” Adamov said. “I can do it for our country!”

The flight was broadcast live and started off as a triumph. Adamov’s spacewalk met Gergiev’s expectations, and UZSR’s citizens were glued to the transmission. The moment things took a turn for the worse, the live spacewalk abruptly cut to a circus performance. Surely some of the citizens realized something was wrong but had no way to confirm their suspicions—they knew only as much as the government allowed.

Meanwhile, Lev, Korovin, and the blockhouse team waited, sweating bullets, as a truly death-defying feat played out in the stars above. Semyon had made it out of the spacecraft without issue, but his suit inflated beyond expectations, rendering him incapable of getting back in the airlock. That forced the cosmonaut to release oxygen from his suit to squeeze through, putting him on the verge of a blackout.

Even with that hurdle cleared, True Mechta II wasn’t out of the woods yet. Its interior oxygen density rose sharply, creating an explosion hazard. Once the crew dealt with that, the attitude-control system failed, positioning Mechta II outside its expected landing zone.

The senior officials’ reaction was nothing if not cruel: “If the ship’s at risk of landing in a foreign nation where it’ll expose confidential technology, it’s better left orbiting Earth for eternity.”

Those instructions floored everyone in the blockhouse.

“I won’t allow something so inhumane!” Korovin shouted. “I’ll ensure the ship lands within our borders!”

Lev hurriedly informed the cosmonauts of Korovin’s plan. “This is Polnoch! Agate II, do you read? Engage manual landing on next orbit!”

Despite the blockhouse team’s efforts, True Mechta II touched down some 2,000 kilometers from its intended destination. It landed safely, but the cosmonauts were stuck in a chilly evergreen forest. Since their suits lacked cold-

weather protection, they were in danger of freezing to death. Rescue teams reached them in the nick of time, before the ravenous bears and wolves that had caught their scent could go in for the kill.

Zirnitra covered up all these crises as usual. It announced only its historic success to the world, and state media once again poured salt in the UK's wounds while celebrating the UZSR. The two cosmonauts aboard the ship held a press conference where they spoke proudly of the True Mechta II's accomplishment.

Watching from backstage, Lev muttered to himself, "Is this really the best way forward?"

Thinking back on the UZSR's past flights, he realized there were *always* issues. It struck him as miraculous that they still hadn't seen any casualties. But how long could their run of miracles continue?

Although the UZSR forged ahead with its plans, prioritizing victory over the UK above all else, good luck wasn't enough to overcome the dangers on their path to the moon. The more complicated, cutting-edge technology their spaceflights incorporated, the closer death loomed over their attempts.

The May launch of True Mechta I was yet another example. Behind the flight's three reported historic achievements, things had been an utter mess. Gergiev's twisted, eccentric ideas formed the basis of all three "achievements"—none of them were actual UZSR space development goals.

For instance, the "first multi-person spaceflight" had been planned for a two-man crew until the supreme leader declared, "The UK's new spacecraft accommodates two. We must accommodate *three*! They'll all fit if we stuff them in, won't they?!"

Everyone knew how reckless and dangerous it was, but Gergiev's word was law. Nevertheless, the engineers had designed the rocket and spacecraft for two cosmonauts. To fit a third crew member, their space suits had to be discarded, resulting in True Mechta I's second historic accomplishment: It was the first spaceflight on which crew eschewed space suits from launch to landing.

Not even "the first spaceflight to carry civilian scientists and medical staff"

was a space program goal. The nonmilitary crew were chosen for political reasons, and, after much deliberation and compromise, the physically unprepared civilian personnel received just four months of preflight training.

“We’ve completed a marvelous experiment by sending scientists to space!” the government announced, although all those scientists could do was stay seated throughout the flight. Still, Gergiev’s goal was only to dash his Arnackian rivals’ spirits, so he was delighted with the results.

Despite what the True Mehta Project achieved in terms of PR, it didn’t bring the UZSR closer to the moon. Agate I’s spacewalk was no simple feat, but in practice, all the engineers really did was put a human in space. Even more pointless projects were already scheduled, however, including a twenty-day trip and a spacewalk without a lifeline. Those would certainly make headlines, but they would also waste the country’s limited time and budget. It might as well have been a circus after all.

Must this all be so stupid?! The spiteful cry rang out in Lev’s heart. He desperately wished to improve his awful circumstances, but everything felt impossible.

Lev’s superior, Lt. Gen. Viktor, had pleaded with the top brass that they were wasting money and cosmonauts, but the wall of authority was too massive to scale.

“I’m so stressed, I spend all my wages on stomach pills!” Viktor grumbled.

His higher-ups were the same people who’d sent Irina—then a test subject—on a spaceflight with only a 10 percent chance of success. If they’d changed at all, it was almost certainly for the worse. They still had little, if any, concern for the personnel doing the actual work.

The UZSR’s space projects weren’t getting easier, and countless unmanned flights and test rockets failed. So many, in fact, that scattered rocket debris littered the Albinar Cosmodrome’s surroundings.

What if those accidents had been manned flights? The thought plunged Lev into a cold sweat.

He was naturally optimistic, but one particular factor—Korovin’s health—

planted unwavering fear and confusion in his heart. Just a glance at the chief designer made it clear that things were nearly impossible on the front lines. Korovin's hair had gone completely white, his eyes were hollow, and his skin had lost its luster. The Chief said nothing publicly, but Lev had heard from those closest to him that he'd been in and out of the hospital. Korovin had already collapsed in front of Lev; he still remembered the man clutching his heart, face racked with pain.

Lev was as worried about Korovin as he was about the future of the space program.

Vermilion Eyes

MAY, 1965. The jacaranda trees bloomed a vibrant purple, hailing the beginning of summer. In Erikson, D.E.—the UK's capital—young Queen Sundancia received her prime minister's weekly report. This one primarily covered a conflict some 14,000 kilometers east of them. The United Kingdom's forces were finally withdrawing from the fight.

"If everything goes according to schedule," the prime minister told her, "we'll dissolve the military HQ we established there before the year ends."

The queen heaved a sigh of relief. One of her wishes had come true.

Ever since the Expo, Sundancia had voiced her opinions no matter who she spoke to, pleading with the prime minister to withdraw their forces from the east. She knew that she sometimes lacked background knowledge and that her government didn't always take her opinions into account, but neither concerned her. What mattered was making her positions clear.

Sundancia had seen for herself how close the world had come to nuclear war; the mere memory sent a shiver down her spine. She also witnessed firsthand how the conflict during the Expo was changing the world. Fierce anti-war protests were one reason UK forces were withdrawing from the east. Their improved relationship with the UZSR was another. In fact, the UZSR had

removed its military from the conflict zone first. That area had teetered on the edge of all-out war, but now that both superpowers were withdrawing, resolution was on the horizon.

Still, the UK was skeptical of the UZSR, which insisted on an iron curtain of secrecy. It was nearly impossible for Sundancia and the rest of the UK to understand what the UZSR's government and leader Fyodor Gergiev were thinking. Nevertheless, she asked her prime minister for an update on Zirnitra.

"According to our intelligence operatives, their economy's in bad shape," he replied. "Anti-Gergiev sentiments are growing in and outside of the country."

Gergiev had forced an agricultural expansion policy that failed, and now the UZSR was stuck in the unenviable position of importing Arnackian wheat. A sudden change in leadership would hardly be a surprise. Sundancia prayed that such a change wouldn't cause a backslide in relations—especially when both sides wished to improve them. Unfortunately, besides praying, there was little she could do.

The prime minister moved on. "Next, an update on the national space program."

This part of his report had become the highlight of Sundancia's week. She was constantly busy with official duties, but talk of the space program never failed to make her heart leap. Still, she hid her excitement behind composed grace. "Go on."

"We'll soon be ready to carry out our own spacewalk," the prime minister announced proudly.

"What?!" Sundancia blurted, leaning forward in a brief slip from her facade. Immediately after, she cleared her throat. "You mean preparations are complete?"

"ANSA's report reads, 'It is only a matter of time before we surpass the UZSR.' They're nothing if not confident." After saying as much, the prime minister showed her the document.

Project Hyperion was ahead of schedule, largely thanks to ANSA's frequent hiring of dhampir talent. The fact that society had finally shifted enough to

allow such an initiative was, in Sundancia's mind, a direct result of dhampir Kaye Scarlet's efforts. Scarlet was a central member of Project Hyperion and a development officer for its computer guidance system, a feature integral to the lunar landing's success. Her achievements had improved humans' general impressions of dhampirs nationwide. Furthermore, many dhampirs looked up to her and had thus applied at ANSA.

Whenever Kaye got too focused on her work, she relied on her partner, Bart Fifield, for support. The pair had essentially been strong-armed into public relations work for ANSA's space program, but they now stood tall and proud as two of its highest-profile representatives. Watching Bart and Kaye always encouraged Sundancia to work harder herself.

On the other hand, the queen frequently worried about cosmonauts Lev Leps and Irina Luminesk, who'd traveled the world as the UZSR's goodwill ambassadors. The public regularly saw them espouse their nation's might, but Sundancia often wondered how they really felt. During the Expo, both had shown off-the-record enthusiasm for cooperative development between the UK and UZSR. Their warmth and kindness had shone through to Sundancia; Lev and Irina clearly held different views from those of the nation they represented.

Sundancia wanted the journey to the moon to be the culmination of shared human wisdom and knowledge rather than a race. "I, for one, truly hope we can make cooperative development a reality," she told her prime minister, putting her desires out in the open. "By working *with* each other rather than against, the UK and UZSR will both lighten their respective financial loads."

Congress had continued to criticize the lunar landing's exorbitant cost. Although the UZSR's exact budget was—as always—under wraps, they no doubt struggled with those constraints as well.

"Continued disarmament could dismantle the wall of military secrecy that blocks the path to cooperative development."

The prime minister nodded. "I'm in complete agreement, Your Majesty."

He'd announced as much at the United Nations General Assembly two years earlier: "There is room for new cooperation in the regulation and exploration of space, and it's up to the UK and UZSR to set a peaceful example. Why should

man's first flight to the moon be a matter of national competition? In developing manned lunar landing spacecraft and investigating the lunar surface via unmanned probes, are we not striving for the same goals? Surely we should explore whether the astronauts and scientists of our two countries cannot work together in the conquest of space. I promise the UK would ensure that a manned lunar landing's crew included Zirnitran personnel."

It was a clever announcement. If the UZSR agreed, the UK would benefit. In the event that they didn't, the prime minister was still on record as encouraging peace.

Zirnitra would never be easy to work with, however, and scientific collaboration among *friendly* nations was already challenging. Besides, much of the UK opposed cooperative development. Many had their sights set firmly on winning the Space Race; others feared that the UZSR would steal confidential information. Newspapers and Congress alike treated nations with "differing principles" as a threat.

In the end, no matter how often the United Kingdom attempted an openhearted approach, they were completely blocked by an iron wall: the UZSR's supreme leader, Fyodor Gergiev. The man was hellbent on winning the Space Race, and persuading him to collaborate would be no easy task. The UK would have to prove their technology so vastly superior that conceding was the UZSR's only option.

That said, Gergiev was a fearsome opponent. Just a few days earlier, reconnaissance satellite photos had revealed an unusually large launch tower at the Albinar Cosmodrome. The structure was still under construction, and its exact use was unknown. ANSA engineers speculated that it might be the work of the UZSR's mysterious chief designer.

"The UK trumps the UZSR in terms of budget and manpower, and our technology is on par with theirs," Professor Vil Klaus had said, somewhat awestruck. "But we lack a genius like their chief designer."

Sundancia didn't know the chief designer's identity, gender, or age. Regardless, she relayed a message to them in her heart: *You, too, look up and dream of the stars. You don't want this race either, do you? I felt that—and,*

when I spoke to Lev and Irina, became sure of it. I hope I can talk to you too someday. Yet should the UZSR lose this race, what will become of you then?

Black Dragon's Eyes

• очи цирнитра •

FLUFF FROM THE POPLAR TREES danced like snowflakes on the breeze, blanketing the land in white. However fleeting, it was a sign of the approaching summer. Most of the UZSR was known for its frigid climate, but people could do without a coat in June.

Although the temperatures rose, Gergiev's mind remained frozen. Three months after the UZSR's successful spacewalk, the UK had already caught up and celebrated its own historic achievement, broadcasting its spacewalk live to twelve countries simultaneously via commercial satellite. Millions tuned in to watch. It was a showy success—and a derisive jab at the UZSR, which had been forced to interrupt its own live broadcast mid-flight.

Gergiev was currently in his office, playing chess with his press secretary Lyudmila Kharlova. He hadn't moved a piece for five minutes.

"We're out of options," he muttered. "Am I about to lose this game?"

Lyudmila crushed her strawberry varenye with a spoon, looking bored. "About to lose? Not in my opinion."

"We still have options, then?! There's a hidden strategy?!" Gergiev's eyes sparkled with hope.

To his dismay, Lyudmila shook her head. "I'm saying you're *already* losing. Mechta III and IV's so-called rendezvous weren't much more than the chief designer's magic, were they?"

A true rendezvous between orbiting spaceships was a complicated procedure requiring superspecialized technology. In 1962, the feat had been impossible, so Gergiev had ordered them, "Make this *look* like a rendezvous! Slap those

hamburger munchers across the face!” What Korovin accomplished in response was a kind of magic—sleight of hand on a global scale—but its effects had long since worn off.

Gergiev groaned. Hanging his head, he timidly played his next move. Lyudmila snatched his queen from the table in an instant, an icy grin on her face.

“What?! Wait!” Gergiev cried.

“No. Do you realize Arnack’s unmanned probes have caught up to ours too?”

The UZSR kept sending probes to Mars with an eye toward making the planet habitable, but they’d experienced successive failures. Conversely, the UK had photographed Mars’s surface a year ago. “There’s no life on Mars. It’s a wasteland,” they’d announced, stealing the spotlight from Zirnitra.

It was now June 1965, and the UZSR had the upper hand in just one area: unmanned lunar probes.

“Intelligence reports say Arnack’s brand-new spacecraft will attempt a rendezvous in a matter of months.” Lyudmila toyed with the queen in her hand. “At this rate, they’ll land on the moon by 1968.”

She wasn’t troubled or upset; she merely stated the facts. The Space Race was slipping from Gergiev’s grasp. His heart remained cold and hard as a frozen wasteland, but all the same, his past achievements—the first artificial satellite and the first manned spaceflight—were fading.

How had the UK caught up to him?

Ultimately, it came down to the fact that the UZSR lacked a unified space program on ANSA’s level. Zirnitran space development fell under military purview, so military applications were prioritized. Furthermore, there was little alignment between the individual design bureaus developing rockets and spacecraft. To secure their budgets, design bureau chiefs often competed to make patrons of politicians and top military brass. Different policies and agendas hamstrung each bureau. Thanks to the unnecessarily complicated web of relationships, even Gergiev didn’t have a solid picture of the entire space program.

Still, Gergiev himself had created these labyrinthine circumstances. He’d

established superfluous design bureaus out of paranoia rather than as a strategic move. The supreme leader feared that, if he entrusted industrial production to only a few bureaus, they'd combine their expertise and usurp his power. That wasn't impossible, but it was still a foolish foundation for space development.

Another factor contributing to the slow pace of Zirnitran development was how Gergiev handled the manned lunar landing project. He'd approved Korovin and the First Design Bureau's manned lunar landing project, yet entrusted manned lunar *orbit*—the step just before—to the 52nd Design Bureau. In short, Gergiev had two separate bureaus work on two entirely separate lunar projects.

Hardly a matter of strategy, his decision came about because Gergiev's own son belonged to the 52nd Design Bureau. Having lost one son in the Great War, Gergiev doted on the one who survived, and the 52nd Design Bureau Chief made the most of that. To add insult to injury, the 52nd Design Bureau Chief knew nothing about spacecraft. He was exceptional at missile development but had yet to complete a single blueprint for the lunar orbit project.

Gergiev's decision enraged Korovin, and the chief designer did his utmost to change the situation, demanding control of the manned lunar orbit initiative as well. Opposing factions shut him down, however.

Given those complications, it wasn't any surprise that the UK was verging on surpassing the UZSR.

"How long do you intend to spoil your son?" demanded Lyudmila, her frustration clear.

"Erm..." Gergiev looked down at the chessboard, sweat dotting his forehead.

Lyudmila kept up her attack. "The problem's not just space development. You've committed a whole host of political blunders. Let's not forget that attempted coup—you were almost *assassinated*."

"Yes, I remember. Had you not...cleaned that up for me, I'd already be in my grave." Where had his success, his glory, disappeared to?

When Gergiev became supreme leader, he'd led numerous national reforms, boldly proclaiming that Zirnitra would bury the Arnackians. Yet when nuclear

war loomed, he'd acquiesced to the UK's demands. Knowing that the UK's military was twenty times stronger than the UZSR's, he'd steered Zirnitra toward peace.

That call hurt the military's pride and drew the Minister of Defense's ire. He'd pulled the UZSR's forces from the east due partly to conflicts with neighboring countries, but that decision only further fractured his relationship with the military.

To make matters worse, space development fell under military control. However much Gergiev railed about a lunar landing's importance, the military barely acknowledged him, retorting, "Lunar landings and manned spaceflights have no military application." They also shut down any hope of cooperative development. Believing such initiatives would produce intelligence leaks, the military stubbornly opposed them.

"Why won't anything go well?!" Gergiev cried.

He was prone to intense mood swings. His bold ambitions had all but disappeared, and the man was drowning in pessimism and defeat. He'd meant for the chess game to clear his mind—UZSR players were the indisputable world champions of chess—but he couldn't concentrate.

The sole person he had to rely on was Lyudmila. She was the only one who didn't mince words—the only one who always gave it to him straight.

"Lyudmila, is there no way through this?" he beseeched her, desperate for a solution.

"Our economy's in tatters," she replied. "If we lose the Space Race, you will go down in history as the UZSR's worst leader."

The criticism pierced Gergiev's heart like an ice pick. "I know. I'll bring the design bureaus in line and consider what to do about my son. At that point, will there be some way for us to reach the moon first?"

"In chess, it's incredibly difficult to come back from the brink of defeat and win." A bewitching smile grew on Lyudmila's lips as she lifted Gergiev's knight off the board. "But we still have pieces to play, don't we?"

She admired the knight in her hand with the tender gaze of an angel of the

battlefield. Yet there was an ominous light in the depths of her deep-green eyes.

Chapter 2:

The Goddess of the Moon

Indigo Eyes

• ОЧИ ИНДИГО •

AS THE COSMONAUT CANDIDATES completed their descent training, their parachutes looked like white umbrellas popping open and dancing gracefully in the clear blue sky. Lev looked up at them from a wide field of short summer grass, thinking back to the day he'd been demoted to a reserve. *I can't believe I made it through that.*

He had endured a parachute return to Earth upon atmospheric reentry. Fortunately, spacecraft had improved over the past four years to allow for gentler, retrofire-aided landings. The current candidates' training was far more controlled than what he'd dealt with, and they were doing a simple emergency escape drill.

Lev, now twenty-four years old, had been promoted to vice-director of the Cosmonaut Training Center. He'd welcomed the freshman class of ten hopefuls in early spring. Former Vice-Director Sagalevich had been transferred to some closed-city backwater somewhere. Lev didn't know why, but he couldn't have cared less. He wasn't one to hold grudges or despise others, but he'd never managed to forgive the way Sagalevich hurt Irina.

"Our training's complete, Comrade Colonel!" one of the freshmen reported.

Lev nodded approvingly, standing straight and tall. He'd never get used to holding himself like a high-ranking officer, but he was determined to follow orders to ensure the manned lunar landing's success.

The sun set behind the evergreen forest, casting a red hue over the wetlands. After their descent training, the candidates returned to the space research city LAIKA44 and clustered around a soda water vending machine. The old machine

had been replaced with a newer model that offered soda water flavored with citrus syrup in addition to the plain variety.

It wasn't just the vending machine that had been upgraded. LAIKA44's residential sector had grown to encompass additional housing complexes, and the development sector had built new facilities. Now there was a giant pool for zero-gravity drills, new training and research buildings, a planetarium, and shops to improve citizens' daily lives.

About the only thing that had gotten *worse* was the dormitory cafeteria's borscht. Ever since the former dorm matron left, everyone complained that the soup wasn't what it used to be. The young woman brought in as a replacement was apparently still struggling to recreate the taste of her predecessor's beloved recipe.

Besides Lev, only a select few people knew that the former dorm matron had in fact been an undercover Delivery Crew agent from the Committee for State Security.

Lev gulped his plain soda water. "The original, and still the best!"

He was treating the freshmen to their own cups when the pine trees behind the vending machine suddenly rustled. The team readied themselves for a dog or cat, but the first sign of the interloper was a moonstone necklace glittering in the evening light. Irina popped out from the shadow of a pine tree, wearing a weathered tank top and cargo pants.

"Goodness me!" she exclaimed. "What a coincidence."

"Why do you always need to go through the pine trees?" Lev asked.

"That's the fastest route to the vending machine." Irina bought a citrus soda water. She took a moment to savor its scent, then gulped it down.

The freshmen hid their confusion behind wry chuckles, though Irina seemed entirely oblivious to their reaction. It wasn't just her attitude that perplexed them—it was also her uncanny timing. Irina *always* seemed to appear at the vending machine after they finished training. The vampire claimed it was coincidence, but it happened miraculously often.

Perhaps out of consideration for Lev and Irina, the freshmen quickly excused

themselves and headed to the dorms. Lev watched Irina drink her soda water and pluck the pine needles out of her hair. He didn't mind the "coincidences" in the slightest.

Irina was indeed clumsy and aloof in some respects, but she was now a respectable instructor in her own right at the Training Center. Sunlight bothered her, so she mainly taught classes indoors or after sundown. When Lev previously acted as Irina's supervisor, he'd switched his internal clock to match hers. As LAIKA44's sole vampire, though, Irina couldn't expect everyone to match her schedule; instead, she adjusted her own.

When the freshmen first started training, Irina had intimidated them. She wasn't just a vampire—she was also history's first-ever cosmonaut, so approaching her was a daunting task. Little by little, her students broke the ice. Yet, as a rule, Irina was cold, strict, and harsh with humans; many freshmen considered her an even more terrifying instructor than Lieutenant General Viktor. Nevertheless, Lev couldn't help thinking that Irina's personality suited this job better than his. He couldn't help going easy on his students.

"What is it? You're staring at me. No, you can't have any." Irina shielded her soda water from Lev's grasp.

"I don't want any. I just wondered how the teaching job's going for you."

"Hmm." Irina put a finger to her chin. "It's quite difficult. Now that I'm in an instructor's shoes, I understand the trouble you went to teaching me when I was afraid of heights."

Suddenly bashful, Lev joked off the praise. "Yeah, that was rough, all right. It wasn't just your fear of heights, though. You hated humans, you were arrogant, and you were ready to fight anyone at the drop of a hat!"

Irina pouted and turned away. "I was young, you know!" she huffed, as if all that were behind her now.

Actually, Irina was only twenty-two. Compared to when Lev met her, though, it was hard to believe she was the same person. She'd developed a refined grace and beauty over the years. Gone was the fragile aura that once surrounded the seventeen-year-old who'd only known life in a forest village. Traveling the world and appearing in front of so many people had matured Irina

somewhat. Still, she had a one-of-a-kind, otherworldly element to her, as though she were a piece of raw ore polished into a precious gem. Whether she liked it or not, Irina was similar to the moonstone hanging from her neck—people were drawn to her, just as they were drawn to the stone.

And, had she been just ten centimeters taller, Lev was almost certain she could've been a world-famous supermodel.

“What’s with the grin?!”

“Uh...sorry.”

However much her physical appearance had changed, Irina was the same adorable girl Lev remembered whenever she puffed her cheeks in a pout or “coincidentally” appeared between the pine trees.

“We’d better hurry and get changed,” Irina said. “It’s almost time.”

A party was being held in the residential sector to mark the completion of a high-rise apartment building. With the addition of freshmen, LAIKA44’s current dormitories had gotten cramped; they were also hemmed in by new facilities and buildings. Thus, the apartment building had been constructed for the engineers, Training Center staff, and Lev and the graduate cosmonaut candidates.

People called the new twelve-story building the “space apartments.” It wasn’t one of the horrid, mass-produced apartment blocks that Supreme Leader Gergiev frequently promoted. Rather, it was a properly constructed work of architecture, complete with a fully functioning elevator.

This building had one unique feature: In the middle of the corridor linking its wings was a lounge where people could gather and hang out. The space contained a billiards table, a chess set, a phonograph, and a small projector. It had been incorporated at the graduates’ request; they wanted a place to chat and spend time together.

The cosmonauts automatically received rooms on the apartment block’s upper floors, a small gesture that placed them all slightly closer to the stars. Everyone was eager to move in.

“Wow. The space apartments really look luxurious, don’t they?” Lev said.

“Indeed.” Irina sneered. “What happened to the *equality* this nation supposedly espouses?”

The UZSR was in the midst of a deep depression, and Lev was painfully aware how much of the national budget went toward space development. Compared to other government expenditures, Lev’s field had been fortunate, although he didn’t know how long that could go on. That being the case, moon landing projects specifically received the bare minimum financial support. Compared to the UK, which increased its budget year after year, the UZSR was investing a pittance.

The space apartments stood in the center of a plaza ringed by white birches. During the daytime, the building’s white walls shone within the surrounding forest. When the sun set, streetlamps illuminated the structure’s silhouette as it floated in the darkness, and it looked like a ship ready to blast off for space.

The party to celebrate the building’s completion would follow Zirnitran tradition, with the new occupants welcoming all who came to celebrate. Men stood at the entrance wearing suits, whereas most of the women had dressed in pure-white traditional sarafan dresses. Among them, Irina stuck out in her vibrant blouse and wrap skirt. She’d donned the traditional Lilitto sadie instead.

“This outfit was a gift from Anya, and I cherish it,” she’d said.

Anya worked in a medical laboratory far from LAIKA44. She sent Lev and Irina a letter each year about her situation, but she wasn’t allowed to meet either face-to-face. Her circumstances had been unavoidable, unfortunately—punishment for her role in Irina’s hospital escape. The fact that Anya was still alive was a blessing. Irina considered everything Anya had given her a personal treasure.

Roza complimented Irina’s outfit. “Those embroidered butterflies are adorable.”

Had she seen the garb back when she first met Irina, Roza would no doubt have attacked Irina for being the odd one out. That was the Roza of old, however. She’d once been lauded as the dignified, indifferent “White Rose of Sangrad,” but Roza’s thorns had vanished, leaving only her radiant beauty on display.



She and Irina were the only female cosmonauts, including the new freshmen, and they'd grown closer since Roza had become the esteemed first human woman in space. Their bond now went beyond race.

Noticing Lev staring blankly at the two women, Mikhail whispered, "Hey, Lev, which of them makes your heart flutter?"

"What?!" Lev fought to keep his voice down. "Neither! Enough with the weird jokes, okay?"

Lev had clearly been staring at *both*. Mikhail elbowed his ribs, grinning. "Put your game face on. Guests are arriving."

Lev and Mikhail flanked the apartment building's entrance. There were only seven male cosmonauts in the UZSR, and to Lev, Mikhail was an irreplaceable friend. They'd gone through a lot as rivals attempting to earn the role of history's first human cosmonaut, and the two had forged a strong relationship.

Before they knew it, the party had begun. The women handed out korovai with salt as their friends and family flooded in. Korovai was a special bread made to look like a beautiful flower; it was baked for special occasions like this one. Since the olden days, bread and salt had represented prosperity and health. The food signified that, regardless of how little food the building's tenants had, they would always welcome guests. Many of the attendees saw the women's gesture as ironic, however. Two years earlier, LAIKA44's access to food had been prioritized when a horrible harvest inflicted a famine on the rest of Zirnitra.

Once the tenants had welcomed all the guests, they gathered in the lounge. The tables were crowded with food and zhizni bottles, bringing grins to everyone's faces. Cosmonauts poured glasses of zhizni, passing them around for a toast.

"And this is for you," Lev said, handing Irina a cup of lingonberry seltzer.

"I can't drink? Not even on a special occasion like today...?"

"You're not allowed to get tipsy *because* it's a special occasion."

"Fine." Irina pouted, taking the cup.

Once everyone had a glass, Lev stood before the crowd. He held up his zhizni for a toast, which he intended to make short and sweet. “To a new bottle of zhizni—a new life! Cheers!” He gulped his drink. It warmed his core and settled in his stomach.

Mikhail picked up where Lev left off. “To space!” he cried. “Cheers!”

“To the nation!” an older engineering chief called out.

More drinks were poured and drunk. The partygoers wouldn’t stop now—they’d continue on and on until they were spent. Lev, on the other hand, knew he’d just pass out if he carried on too long. To preserve his dignity as vice-director, he bowed out of the drinking early and took a seat by the window.

The air was thick as the cosmonauts celebrated the start of their new lives. It reminded Lev of his first day at LAIKA44. Back then, he’d been a nobody—just another cosmonaut candidate—but when he’d stepped off the bus onto the fresh snow, his heart was aflame with ambition. He’d been hellbent on becoming a full-fledged cosmonaut, whatever it took. Every day was a desperate struggle, but just like that, his dream had manifested right here in front of him. He sat watching the rowdy celebrations, drifting in the nostalgia of old memories.

Then Irina turned up holding her lingonberry seltzer. “The alcohol vapors are going to choke me,” she grumbled, opening a window. Taking a deep breath of fresh air, she sat next to Lev. “Hey, want to head to the roof?”

The question took him off guard, and he tilted his head curiously. “But the party only just started.”

“I feel drunk just being in here,” Irina said, fanning herself. Her snow-white cheeks were tinged pink.

“Have you been drinking?” Lev asked.

“Just a sip!” She poked out her tongue, then swigged a mouthful of seltzer, attempting to shrug off his gaze.

She could be a handful, all right. Her drinking wouldn’t be an issue if she didn’t cause trouble, but Lev could already picture her getting boisterous with anyone and everyone.

Before he could reflect further, the freshmen pulled him into another toast, and he chatted with them for a while. They all saw Irina as a monstrously strict instructor. Lev was willing to bet none of them could've guessed that, when she drank, Irina turned clingy and adorably soft-spoken.

Suddenly, Lev heard that tender, adorable voice behind him. "Hey, Lev. How about the roof?"

"Hm?" Turning, Lev saw Irina holding a glass of nastoyka. "Wait, where'd you get that?!"

He followed her pointed finger to the red-faced Semyon Adamov. With a satisfied grin, Semyon gestured for them to drink up.

"Give me a break," Lev muttered.

"So taaasty," Irina said in a singsong voice.

"Stop drinking that!" Lev knew that staying at the party any longer would lead to danger and decided to make a hasty retreat. He got Mikhail's attention and said, "I'm taking Irina to the roof till she sobers up. Sorry, but can I leave you to handle things while we're up there?"

"Got it. Take some food with you!" Mikhail piled bread, aspic, and other dishes on a plate, then passed it to Lev with a cheeky grin. "Enjoy."

Lev and Irina stepped off the elevator onto the rooftop, and the humid night air ferried the smell of summer into their noses. The twelve-story building stood higher than even the trees and walls surrounding LAIKA44. From the roof, they could see as far as the sprawling marshlands, which glowed blue in the moonlight. It was quiet, as if the party had vanished entirely.

"It's so cool and comfortable up here!" Irina staggered forward, almost spilling her seltzer as she leaned against the rooftop railing. Its paint had only just dried.

"Don't climb over the rail," Lev warned her.

Setting the plate on the ground, he joined Irina, pouring himself a little zhizni to maintain the celebratory mood. As he was about to swallow it, he noticed Irina staring at him.

“During your toast earlier, you said, ‘To a new bottle of zhizni, a new life.’ What kind of life do you want, though?”

“Hm...” Lev took a moment to probe his heart. “I’d like to be a lifelong cosmonaut, if I can.”

At a glance, Lev was enjoying a fantastic life. He had fame and reputation, a high rank, and now an apartment in a wonderful new building. And, like anyone else, he appreciated that he routinely had good food and drink. But none of those things were first on his list of desires.

“You want to be a cosmonaut even when you’re a feeble old man with a bad back?” Irina didn’t mean it as a joke; her gaze was serious.

Lev had never paid it that much thought before, but she had a point. Life continued even into old age. “I want to fly as long as I can,” he admitted. “When I lose the strength and endurance for it, I’ll devote myself to teaching. What about you?” He was pretty sure he already knew the answer—that Irina also wanted to be a cosmonaut for life.

Irina’s response, however, completely stunned him: “I’m going to be a baker.”

“Huh?”

She picked up a piece of korovai and bit into it. “I want to bake cute bread loaves shaped like rabbits.” Then she giggled. “Just kidding! Did I get you?”

“This is why I tell you not to drink,” Lev muttered.

“Really, though, I want the same as you,” Irina said, nodding. “I enjoyed traveling the world as a goodwill ambassador, but I’m eager to go back to space. I want to be a cosmonaut till my dying day!” The vampire girl was so much more talkative than usual. She stared at the moon, eyes sparkling with passion.

“Even when you’re an old woman?”

“Well, I don’t just have my sights set on the moon. I’d like to travel even farther. And reaching some of those faraway stars would take a decade, right?” Irina heaved a dejected sigh. “I can’t believe mythical vampires just drink some blood and then they can live for thousands of years. Talk about unfair!” She flashed her fangs, frustrated with her own mortality. “In the twenty-first

century, do you think we'll travel through space like at the Expo?"

There, they'd ridden the Space Flier, a simulation that took its passengers to the ends of the galaxy. Lev recalled the fantastic sights he'd seen on the "ride" and how they made him feel. Being little more than a tool for Zirnitran propaganda had saddened him. It kept him away from the part of his job he loved most: space. Irina had shared those feelings. In fact, their disconsolate expressions had concerned their Arnackian host Bart Fifield, and Lev had hastened to assure him that both cosmonauts were all right.

"It's been four years since we flew into space," he mused.

He realized then that, at some point over the past few years, he'd gotten used to being grounded. The dream he'd had since he was just a boy had come true, yet he still felt as though he was on the verge of losing something important. The feeling frightened him.

Even as his hopes of a second trip through space faded, Lev continued training of his own volition. Still, he could only use the equipment outside class hours. The Training Center was for candidates, after all, not instructors. On top of that, his work was beyond hectic. As vice-director, Lev didn't simply manage cosmonaut candidates—his duties also related to Training Center engineers and instructors.

In addition to being a goodwill ambassador, Lev had also been selected for an important position among the Supreme Zirnitrans of the Zirnitra Union. "Selected" was a euphemism—in truth, Lev couldn't have refused even if he wanted to.

Lt. Gen. Viktor had stern advice for the nervous Lev: "If you aren't interested in making a name for yourself politically, don't get mixed up with the legislative board or its parties any more than necessary. Many of its members would love to get friendly with someone as famous as you. They'll reach out with invitations."

Lev juggled these responsibilities, duties, and pressures daily. That he kept up his training at all was largely thanks to Irina. Like him, she lived a hectic life, but her vampiric sensitivity to the sun limited what she could do during the daytime. Nevertheless, she was diligent about personal training.

Irina was most focused on piloting fighter jets. When she first arrived in LAIKA44, she'd never even been on a plane. She turned out to have a talent for flying, however, so Lev had trained her. Now Irina was so good she could fly solo. Piloting wasn't her end goal, though. Rather, she recognized that aeronautical engineering expertise and piloting experience were necessary for the new generation of cosmonauts.

Korovin considered his in-progress lunar landing craft to be "the ship of the future." The Rodina—named after the chief designer's hometown—was fundamentally different from the Mehta Irina had flown previously. Its design philosophy also differed from that of the Hyperion spacecraft, which the rival UK was creating for the same purpose.

A detachable three-section design was the Rodina's foremost innovation. The spherical front section, called the "orbital module," would be the base of operations during spaceflight. It could also be used for research and sleep. The orbital module contained emergency gear, an all-band full-frequency radio receiver, and various scientific equipment.

Its middle section was the bell-shaped "descent module," which cosmonauts would crew during takeoff and landing. It was equipped with a parachute system, a life-support system, a radio, and a control unit for descent. This module would detach from the orbital module during descent, so it also had a heat shield coating to protect the crew during reentry.

The end section was the cylindrical "service module," which housed the main engine and fuel. It also contained a wireless communications unit, as well as directional and mobility control systems. The service module's exterior encompassed two large solar panels that could move left or right mid-flight.

The Rodina ran almost completely on autopilot, but its automated systems weren't always reliable. During emergencies, personnel could avoid danger by manually controlling the systems and electronic equipment. Piloting a Rodina craft demanded a solid understanding of rendezvous and docking procedures, as well as spacewalk operations. The Rodina was also the first UZSR spacecraft being designed with an onboard computer.

Space development had moved beyond the times when cosmonauts needed

only a strong mind and body. If Lev and Irina wanted to reach the moon again, they had to use their limited free time to study emerging technology, staying informed on all relevant knowledge.

Their fellow cosmonaut Mikhail Yashin was also gunning for a second spaceflight. He had once been solely fixated on glory, but upon seeing the planet's beauty from a spacecraft window, he'd been captivated by the skies.

Mikhail was widely considered a shoo-in for the moon landing compared to the other graduates. Not only did he possess the necessary talent, but he was also the one cosmonaut who still lacked a "historic first" achievement. Additionally, Mikhail had ample time to train, since he had fewer responsibilities as a goodwill ambassador.

Still, however perfectly a cosmonaut's training went, a successful moon landing obviously came down to research and development personnel.

"I wonder how they're doing," Irina said, staring into the distance.

"Don't you think they're still finding reasons to cheer and drink?" Lev replied, thinking of the party below.

A startled look crossed Irina's face. "Oh, no. I mean everyone in Anival Village."

The mountain village was in the former nation of Lilitto, which was now part of the UZSR. Anival was Irina's home; she'd lived there with her family. In an effort to control the residents, the UZSR government had declared the vampires living there a "cursed species," distancing them from society at large. Ordinary Zirnitrans therefore knew nothing of conditions in the village.

Lev, however, knew that human armies had persecuted and trampled over Anival during the Great War, murdering Irina's own parents in cold blood. He'd heard it from Irina herself.

Irina didn't often mention her hometown, and it wasn't a subject Lev could easily broach. Nevertheless, he asked, "Is something wrong? This isn't like you." He wondered what was on her mind and how she felt toward the village—but most of all, he was worried about her.

"It's this outfit," she said. "It brings back memories." She pinched her sadie

skirt hem, looking at the sky with sorrow in her eyes. “In the evenings, I often went out on the balcony to gaze at the moon and stars.”

Irina’s drunkenness seemed to have disappeared. Gone too was her playful energy from the baker joke. She hovered in the darkness, the princess of a moonlit night. Lev knew he might never have another opportunity to discuss Irina’s hometown with her, so he asked something that had long been on his mind: “Have you ever gone back to Anival?”

“No,” Irina replied. “I don’t really know what I would do if I did.”

However distant and detached Anival was from the rest of the UZSR, word of Irina’s achievements had likely reached the village. It was also possible that state censors had intercepted letters sent from the place. Lev tried to say as much, but Irina shook her head.

“It’s fine. I doubt anyone at home wants me back anyway. I abandoned them.”

“You abandoned them?”

“I did.” Irina’s hair drifted on the night breeze, revealing her pointed ears. “I went to a human city to pursue my dream of flying to space. To do that, I depended on the same technology that turned my home into scorched earth. It’s unthinkable...unforgivable.”

As Lev once again observed the young woman’s determination, he thought of how Irina had been virtually imprisoned for use as a test subject, and pain lanced his heart.

Irina turned her gaze northwest to where the mountain ranges stretched into the darkness. Anival Village lay beyond the peaks. “No matter how much I accept humans, or humans accept me, Anival won’t do the same. The words ‘cursed species’ have become a *real* curse, and not an easy one to break. But that’s how it is. Anival’s Anival, and I’m myself. My hometown is Earth now. I made my decision—I will live here with others who dream of space, like me.” Irina unclasped the pendant that hung from her neck and held it high toward the moon in her own toast. “To me!” She looked at Lev, her face flushed deep scarlet with passion. “That’s my life. My zhizni. Do you understand?”

“I do. Cheers to you.” Lev held up his glass and downed the zhizni that filled it.

Although Irina still couldn’t handle drinking, she really had changed in every other way. When she and Lev first met, she’d played the part of vampire nobility—always trying to stand above her human counterparts, hiding her loneliness and her weaknesses. Traveling the world as history’s first cosmonaut, however, she saw the powerful and powerless with her own eyes, and the experience had strengthened her.

The biggest shift in her personality occurred in the United Kingdom of Arnack, where she met two young other women: dhampir Kaye Scarlet and Queen Sundancia. Amid waves of anti-dhampir discrimination, Kaye had entered the heart of ANSA thanks to her unique talents, paving the way into the computer age. Sundancia, who was only Irina’s age, was already queen of a world superpower. She held herself with great dignity and grace. In the face of potential nuclear war, she’d delivered a speech to the entire world to ease its population’s fears.

Meeting the two Arnackian women galvanized Irina, and when the cosmonauts returned home, she made her frustrations clear: “All I did was fly to space in a rocket made by humans, then parachute back down. Yet that somehow lets me stand on the same pedestal as Kaye and Sundancia. The only difference between Maly the dog and me is that I survived. That’s it. I haven’t earned the right to make any big statements.”

Irina disliked the fact that she apparently hadn’t earned her own fame and renown. After she and Lev returned to the UZSR, she focused even harder on her studies and training, determined to become the sort of person worthy of the honor she’d received.

Lev believed she would—and knew he had to give his best just the same. He needed to become someone who deserved to land on the moon.

A wooden harmonica playing “Fly You to the Moon” could be heard over the radio. However, it was no ordinary performance—the one proudly playing the melody was a UK astronaut orbiting Earth. It was August 1965, and Arnack had just achieved a successful space rendezvous.

Since 1961, the UK's biggest newspaper had run a regular feature discussing who would win the race to the moon. They surveyed the public, who believed the UZSR to be in the lead for four years running—that is, until now. It wasn't yet common knowledge that the UZSR's rendezvous was actually a trick, but the combination of Arnack's momentum and dubiousness about Zirnitra's intense secrecy turned the former from the runner-up into the firm favorite.

The UZSR's top brass were, unsurprisingly, in an uproar. They immediately held an impromptu meeting to discuss “revising” Zirnitra's space program. The attendees gathered in the capital city, Sangrad, in the Neglin's Ministerial Cabinet office. They included design bureau chiefs, military leaders, and the Minister of Defense. Lt. Gen. Viktor also attended.

Back in LAIKA44, Lev and the cosmonauts could only wonder exactly what the “revisions” might be. They prayed that Gergiev—now backed into a corner—wouldn't make any preposterous suggestions. Whatever the outcome, they'd have no idea what had been discussed until Viktor returned.

A week later, the cosmonauts and freshmen candidates gathered in the Training Center's lecture hall, where Lt. Gen. Viktor reported on the meeting. Lev and Irina had been prepared for the worst, but they were pleasantly surprised by the news. Gergiev had decided on sweeping reforms to the space program. For one thing, he was ending the True Mechta Project. That was a wise move—many had opposed the project from the very beginning, criticizing it as a waste of time and money and a pointless attempt at political propaganda.

For Gergiev to make that move so *suddenly* was a shock, however. The man himself claimed he'd considered the decision for some time; apparently, the UK's successful rendezvous was the deciding factor.

Next were the changes to the manned lunar landing projects. Originally, Korovin had been tapped to control all the lunar orbit and landing initiatives. Shortly thereafter, Gergiev's weakness—namely, his tendency to dote on his son—had gotten the best of him, and he'd agreed to split the orbit and landing projects between the First and 52nd Design Bureaus.

Gergiev was now giving Korovin full control, scrapping the 52nd Design

Bureau's plans and effectively turning his back on his own son. When the 52nd Design Bureau Chief complained, Gergiev informed the man that his bureau had made exactly zero progress. The bureau chief could say nothing in return and was reassigned to the military space station project. Korovin was now set to take over planning the lunar orbit rocket.

Though the space program now seemed better organized, developing the lunar landing rocket remained a glaring problem. The rocket had to be capable of an extremely powerful launch, like the Chronos rockets the UK was steadily developing. However, Korovin's proposed C-I rocket had been stuck in development limbo for years.

The person charged with developing the C-I rocket's engines, Boris Graudyn, had once been the UZSR's best rocket engineer—until Korovin earned himself that title. Graudyn had received the engine development role thanks to his record in the field, but his history with Korovin was dark. In his youth, Graudyn had been so jealous of Korovin that he framed the man and had him sent to the ore mines.

With such bad blood between the two, there was no way they'd easily see eye to eye. Their opinions on a suitable rocket propellant differed. Korovin advocated RP-1 kerosene and a liquid oxygen fuel, while Graudyn pushed for N_2H_4 —hydrazine. Both fuels had pros and cons, but one of the experts had to acquiesce for the rocket project to proceed. It wasn't just Graudyn and Korovin's scientific principles blocking progress but also their personal grudge, so the project was stuck at a standstill.

Eventually, Gergiev became so frustrated with the two scientists that he invited them to dinner to settle their differences. Graudyn denounced kerosene as "inferior" and refused to even make eye contact with Korovin, let alone listen to his opinions. At first, Korovin tried to be the bigger man, but Graudyn was so arrogant that Korovin exploded. "The only reason you're so intent on hydrazine fuel is that you want to get into the military's good graces, isn't it?! You *know* hydrazine can fuel tactical missiles—but you also know it's toxic! It's dangerous! Are you saying you've already forgotten the tragedy that befell Albinar?!"

In October of 1960, a missile explosion during a test launch at the Albinar

Cosmodrome had killed 150 people. That was a tragedy no one wanted to see a second time. Yet Graudyn kept criticizing Korovin's views, refusing to budge. They continued bickering to the extent that even Gergiev was powerless to stop them.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Graudyn had spat. "Carry on making your engineless metal boxes!"

"Fine!" Korovin retorted. "I'll import engines from ANSA!"

"Why not just defect, then?!" Refusing to take any more, Graudyn made his exit.

That dinner left their working relationship in tatters, and Korovin had no choice but to hire a brilliant aircraft engine scientist to take over Graudyn's work. The differences between aircraft and rocket engines led to setbacks, and after many years, the C-I's completion date was still undetermined. Even during the impromptu "revision" meeting, Gergiev had no solution to that particular problem.

As he finished his report, Lt. Gen. Viktor looked utterly exhausted. "If ANSA knew the mess we're making behind the scenes, they'd roll on the floor laughing."

"You can say that again." Lev put a hand to his forehead. He could vividly picture Bart and Kaye gaping at them in shock. The mood in the room was bleak.

Mikhail clapped to get everyone's attention and clear the air. "Okay, so we haven't solved the rocket problem yet. But the supreme leader canceled the True Mehta Project, and now the Chief has total control of the lunar program. That's good news, if you ask me!"

He was right. Those two changes alone were sure to improve the situation.

All the same, Lev felt the itch of doubt. "They make every big decision without cosmonaut input," he pointed out. "Can't we do something to grant ourselves a voice? If the True Mehta Project had been greenlit during that meeting, one of us could be preparing for a death-defying, lifeline-free spacewalk right now."

"Even when we ask to attend meetings, we get denied," said Irina,

nonplussed.

“And if you *were* allowed to attend, they’d ignore your opinions,” Lt. Gen. Viktor added.

Confusion rose on the gathered freshmen’s faces. They were suddenly becoming aware of how things worked in the space program. Lev was a national hero, the highest-ranking cosmonaut among them, and even *he* was powerless to change the higher-ups’ plans. If Gergiev made a reckless decision in a panic, what would that mean for the cosmonauts? The deeper they thought about that, the more it worried them.

“How did Comrade Gergiev look?” Lev asked. “Is he still confident?”

“He was bright and boisterous when the meeting started. As discussions continued, though, his spirits dropped and his face darkened.” Lt. Gen. Victor then lowered his voice to a near whisper. “I’m not sure I should say this, but...I worry about his mental stability.”

If the UZSR threw away its *mechta*—its dreams—what would be next? None of its citizens had the faintest idea. If the Space Race with the UK was a war, airmen like Lev could do little more than fly when they were told to. Those who couldn’t follow orders were dismissed...or *removed*.

As Lev saw the freshmen’s heavy faces and heard their dejected sighs, a foreboding feeling overwhelmed him. All the candidates had started with hopes and expectations about space and the stars above. In just a few months, though, they had come face-to-face with the grim reality of the space program.

After the meeting, on their walk back to the space apartments, Irina spoke up. “You look like you’re wrestling with some deep thoughts.”

Lev’s internal concern must’ve shown on his face. He thought for a while, then opted to confide in Irina. “Maybe I’m just worrying too much, but...”

Once he’d finished sharing his fears, Irina nodded. “I agree.”

“You’re on the same page, huh?”

“This must be a painful shock to the freshmen who’ve spent their lives believing the nation’s lies.” Her sorrow was evident in her voice. The UZSR’s

National Broadcasting Service and its national newspaper, *Istina*, released a constant stream of propaganda. And the bigger a candidate's hopes and dreams, the greater the shock of understanding that betrayal. "If I were in their shoes, I know it would leave *me* in despair."

"Me too. I think I'd lose all faith in humanity." As vice-director of the Training Center, though, Lev was responsible for watching over them. "We can't do much but keep our eyes and ears open."

Unfortunately, Lev's fears were realized less than a month later.

"A freshman cosmonaut candidate will be dismissed due to his problematic comments about the current establishment."

The report left Lev pale. Apparently, the incident had occurred during a lecture on socialism, when the freshman in question raised the following issue with the distinguished professor: "Why is the UZSR a one-party autocracy, not a two-party government like the United Kingdom?"

That was just the sort of question that couldn't be asked. In such a strictly monitored country, one wrong word could get someone arrested. That said, there was a certain amount of leeway in fields that required creativity, including space development.

Unfortunately, the rebellious freshman hadn't stopped with one question. Instead, he went on to criticize Gergiev himself. "I think it's problematic that our supreme leader faces citizens all over the globe and spouts lies. He callously hides the true peril of the spacewalk, deceiving not just the United Kingdom but the whole world."

That comment sealed the young man's fate, and he was summarily dismissed.

Both Lev and Irina had made openly dangerous comments in the past. Since their national hero status protected both cosmonauts, they escaped with little more than harsh warnings. Nevertheless, after they publicly stated their hope for cooperative development with the UK at the Expo, the Delivery Crew agent supervising them hadn't minced words. "Do that again, and you two will likely find yourselves dead in some sort of accident."

Being unable to express their opinions freely vexed them. As long as they

were UZSR citizens, though, they had to accept limits on their freedom.

In the aftermath of the incident with the freshman, Lt. Gen. Viktor gathered the cosmonauts and warned them about their situation. “You will *not* criticize our nation or its leader. I cannot guarantee your safety if you do.” Viktor wasn’t angry at any of them. Rather, the debacle worried him, and he kept grumbling that there wasn’t enough stomach medicine for him to prevent oncoming stress ulcers.

None of the cosmonauts criticized their dismissed peer. They sympathized with him, and many were equally frustrated with their government’s extreme secrecy and lies. They nursed their guilt, questioning why their work was shrouded in secrecy while the United Kingdom informed the world of its advances in space development.

Lev had felt the same way for a long time. He’d struggled with those feelings, always needing to keep them under wraps. They had especially dogged him back when his and Irina’s newspaper articles were compiled into a book entitled *The Journey to Space*. On the surface, the book consisted of the cosmonauts’ own retellings of their experiences. However, large segments of the articles were in fact penned by members of the Main Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs, also known as the Glavlit.

The only parts Lev and Irina had actually written were about experiencing space during their individual flights. The lies obscuring Zirnitran technology and the cloying praise of their wonderful nation were all the Glavlit’s work. Even Irina’s background was bowdlerized, and the book contained no hint of the grudge she’d once borne against humans. That was all replaced by a tidy “I have nothing but praise for the superb UZSR and its glorious supreme leader.”

When the book was finally published, Irina flew into a rage, insisting that publication be suspended. Unsurprisingly, her demands fell on deaf ears. When Lev tried to placate the seething young vampire, she took her anger out on him instead, calling him “just another stupid human” and nipping his hand.

Though *The Journey to Space* was full of lies, it was the UZSR’s only authorized book on space development. People considered it credible and bought it in droves worldwide. Eventually, Irina realized that objecting to *The Journey to*

Space was pointless. She gave up with a snide, “Let’s hear it for the mighty UZSR and its supreme leader Purge-iev.”

Lev had one particular sore spot when it came to *The Journey to Space*. After he and Irina attended the Expo, they’d asked Bart and Kaye whether it would be all right to write about them in a revised edition. Since the Arnackians happily gave their permission, the cosmonauts set about composing a draft. The national censors, however, noted and summarily scrubbed all the sections mentioning the UK in a positive light.

It seemed to Lev that he’d essentially broken a promise to their Arnackian comrades. Both he and Irina felt awful, but without a way to apologize directly, they could only hope Bart and Kaye understood their position.

Incredibly strict government control of the press and publishing was by no means limited to the topic of space development. Anything published and circulated within the UZSR—including fiction, poetry, and minor zines—was subject to the Glavlit censors, and anything deemed inappropriate was banned. Zirnitrans simply weren’t allowed to read freely.

Many bold individuals dared to rebel against the censors. They reproduced and bound copies of banned books using carbon paper and photographs, then secretly distributed the volumes throughout the country using illegal channels—a dissident form of publishing known as samizdat. All of Zirnitra’s typewriters and copiers were under state management, so samizdat was incredibly dangerous. As freedom fighters, the rebels relied on their own tenacity.

Unfortunately, censorship in Zirnitra didn’t stop with publishing—it could also extend to music. Genres like jazz and rock were deemed acceptable despite their roots in UK culture. Gergiev was easygoing about music, so the censors weren’t especially strict. Jazz bands sometimes performed in parks.

That being the case, a so-called “liberal music incident” had shaken the nation just a few years earlier. The songs of a global sensation, a four-man rock band called the Bees, found a gap in the iron curtain and invaded the country. Their romantic lyrics and bright, catchy tunes captivated Zirnitran youth. The government banned the music, but it could still be heard on foreign radio stations—albeit with significant noise and static.

During Lev's trip around the world as a goodwill ambassador, he witnessed the Bees' popularity firsthand. Although the band's most popular member was slammed in the UK for his critical views on religion, their fame was absolutely staggering. No cosmonaut was ever so popular that their fans screamed hard enough to faint. Although the band had stopped playing concerts altogether, they still had the ardent support of Zirnitrans youth.

Lev and Irina both enjoyed Bees music; they'd bought Bees records overseas, only to have them confiscated as contraband. The UZSR government wanted to control the populace, which meant keeping them in the dark about other cultures' liberties. They did everything they could to suppress the Bees: publicly exposing record owners, arresting those who sang covers, and shaving the head of anybody mimicking the Bees' long hairstyles.

The National Broadcasting Service openly criticized the band as well: "The corrupt Bees' poisoned honey warps the mind and soul. Their audiences scream and cry themselves unconscious!"

Despite the government's efforts, Zirnitrans youth kept following the Bees and yearning for freedom. They listened to the music on foreign broadcasts, recorded it, and secretly bought and sold records made from discarded X-rays. Foreign radio stations offered more than just Western music, though—they were sources of news beyond misinformation, and they hosted readings from books the UZSR had banned. Perhaps unsurprisingly, relevant UZSR government bureaus responded to foreign stations' popularity by running noisy interference along the same frequencies.

However high the UZSR built its walls, the band's music was just like pesky bees—it floated easily over the country's barriers, then flew around stinging people. Irina was one of many who'd developed a taste for the Bees' so-called "poisoned honey." She sometimes went around humming their tunes. Lev warned her to be careful, reminding her that the government had eyes and ears everywhere.

Irina shrugged in response. "I don't even realize when I'm doing it. Having to keep up with this government's absurd decisions is so suffocating. It's not just me, is it?"

“No, I agree. But...”

Lev had lived in the countryside before becoming a cosmonaut, and he’d always considered it completely natural that people were bound by government restrictions. The more he traveled as a goodwill ambassador, the more aware he became that the UZSR’s regime was unnatural. Even the Zirnitran citizens themselves were beginning to notice. That said, Lev also felt that it was abnormal for a country like the UK, which espoused freedom, to so obviously oppress its dhampir population. As he saw more of the world, right and wrong became less clear.

Irina felt that too. Having traveled to some twenty countries as a fellow ambassador, she’d looked at Lev with a puzzled expression and asked, “What’s the best place to live a comfortable, happy life? I have no idea.”

They *did* agree on one thing: What was happening in the UZSR wasn’t right.

After the discussion about the expelled freshman, Mikhail aired his thoughts matter-of-factly. “If the UZSR falls someday, and all its hidden truths come to light, the world will shake its head and laugh.”

He wasn’t alone in that sentiment. Though nobody said it aloud, all the cosmonauts—Lev, Irina, Roza, and Mikhail—wanted the true stories of UZSR space development to be known internationally.

“If things don’t change,” Irina said thoughtfully, “we could make it all the way to the moon, and everyone would just think we’d faked it.”

Viktor sympathized; he knew how they felt. He joked, “Quit being such downers or I’ll bill *you* for my stress medicine!”

Laughter filled the room, but it rang hollow.

Rain washed away the heat that clung to the summer grass, and the chirps of crickets echoed through the night, marking the end of the UZSR’s short summer and the arrival of fall.

Lev didn’t return home immediately once he’d finished work for the day. Instead, he headed toward Jazz Bar Zvezda. He’d put in some serious overtime;

the clock was nearing ten, and the streets were almost empty.

In the past, Lev had frequented Zvezda with Irina. Since his promotion to vice-director, Lt. Gen. Viktor had warned against that. “Instructors of opposite sexes meeting too often after work doesn’t set a good example for the candidates.”

The man raised a good point, so Lev and Irina had agreed to stop going together.

Zvezda was no longer just a place Lev visited to kill time, though. The jazz bar had become a spot where he studied outside his duties, reading recently published space development dissertations and aviation magazines.

Although his spacious new home offered a beautiful view, it was so pleasant that Lev found it difficult to do anything but relax once he arrived there. He was careful to ensure he’d completed the day’s work before heading home.

As Lev opened the bar’s red oak door, heady scents of alcohol and cigarettes surrounded him, mingling with the sweet sound of a tenor sax playing “Fly You to the Moon.” The song was beloved in the UK as their space program’s anthem, but it stoked the fires of rivalry in the UZSR. To Lev, it was a wonderful tune, one that reminded him of all the emotion he’d invested in the moon.

Holding a glass of wine, Lev headed to his usual seat in the mostly empty bar’s back corner. Strangely enough, someone was already there. Under the dim lights, Lev made out a young woman with a head of golden hair. She stared listlessly at the glass in front of her. He couldn’t believe his eyes; it was Roza.

“Huh?”

It was the first time he’d ever noticed her here. Outside of special occasions, he never even saw her touch alcohol. She must’ve come straight from work, since she still wore her long-sleeved military uniform. Lev stepped forward, about to say hello, but stopped when he noticed the distinct shade of sorrow on Roza’s cheeks. Had something happened? Should he say anything to her, or pretend not to notice her and sit elsewhere?

He froze in a moment of indecision. If Roza had been a man, he wouldn’t have hesitated, but he had no idea how to approach a woman wallowing in depression. He remained paralyzed for about ten seconds before Roza lifted her

head, meeting his gaze. She gasped, but her momentary surprise was quickly hidden behind a smile and a wave.

His escape route now eliminated, Lev approached her timidly. “H-hey. Just you tonight, or...?”

“Just me.” Roza dropped her gaze to her glass, empty save for the ice melting within. Her eyes glimmered with a hint of tears, and Lev noticed their redness. He was about to sit with her when Roza stood up. “Join me for a walk? I’d like to air some thoughts.”

Lev couldn’t ignore her grave expression. He quickly gulped down what was left of his wine and followed Roza outside. They left the alleyway with its dull neon lights and walked quietly along a birch-lined path under soft streetlamps. Roza wobbled on her feet, perhaps due to how much she’d drunk. At times, she almost bumped into Lev.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Just fine.”

She’d told him she wanted to “air some thoughts,” but she hadn’t said anything else since they left the bar. Lev felt uncomfortable prompting her, so the two meandered along in awkward silence. A chilly breeze rustled the leaves around them; the only other sound was their footsteps. Lev looked up at the night sky. Dark, thin clouds trailed upward, separating the constellations.

The two cosmonauts walked on, nearing the end of the path. Still Roza said nothing. If she was in trouble, Lev wanted to help, but he wasn’t sure what to do. He glanced at Roza as they trudged forward.

She finally stopped, her eyes on her feet. “I...”

“Mm?”

“I’m getting married to Mikhail.”

“You’re getting—what?!” That was the last thing Lev ever suspected she would say. At first, he thought she might be joking, but her eyes were somber. “W-wait. You’re *getting married* to Mikhail?” His thoughts raced. He hadn’t even noticed that Mikhail and Roza had a romantic relationship. “I had no idea...

But congrat—”

He stopped mid-sentence as an odd sensation hit him—one he couldn’t quite place. Roza’s expression was tense, and her lips trembled. She wasn’t asking for well-wishes. When he initially spotted her at the bar, Lev thought something wasn’t quite right. He wondered if it was difficult for her to talk about.

“When was this decided?” he asked cautiously.

“I can’t imagine.”

“Mikhail didn’t get a marriage license without your consent, did he?”

“Of course not.”

What’s going on, then? Lev cocked his head, even more puzzled.

At last, Roza squeezed out, “It’s a government order.”

Lev felt as though someone had just punched him in the head. Now he knew why she had looked so dejected. *But that means...* Slowly, timidly, he voiced his thoughts. “It’s a forced marriage?”

Roza nodded, a faraway look in her eyes. “Lt. Gen. Viktor opposed the decision, but he couldn’t get it overturned.”

In the UZSR, even marriage was subject to government control. It was extremely rare for ordinary citizens to be ordered to wed, but the authorities could force a marriage registration, and there’d be no escaping it.

That was why Roza looked so conflicted; this wasn’t a marriage she or Mikhail wanted. It was hard to believe the government would subject the two cosmonauts to such a thing. Lev still couldn’t grasp it.

“Why?” Though he felt sorry for asking, he knew he had to.

“The powers that be want to create a ‘cosmonaut couple.’”

Lev understood that the idea was a state directive. It fit that Mikhail and Roza were being sacrificed for the nation’s sake. Still, he wondered what value this story would actually have.

“A wedding ceremony has no risk of accident,” Roza continued, shrugging. “They can promote it without straining the national budget. And the UK can’t

copy us, since they have no female cosmonauts. The whole world will celebrate the wedding and look forward to a second-generation cosmonaut. There are no downsides.”

“They just keep using us.” Lev’s frustration mounted as he spoke. “It’s beyond the pale.”

Roza shook her head. “Hold on. Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m shocked—I still haven’t taken all this in—but I’ve decided it’s for the best. The state also made a strategic decision in honoring me as humanity’s first female cosmonaut.” It sounded like she was trying to convince herself, and Lev couldn’t get behind it.

“I mean, maybe their strategic decisions on who to send to space are acceptable, but still...”

“I haven’t told Mikhail, but forced marriage or no, I’ve decided to retire and step away from my role as a cosmonaut,” Roza said. She sounded relieved, like she’d made peace with more than just retirement. “This might be a good opportunity to do that.”

“You’re quitting?”

She let out a defeated chuckle. “You saw that there are no new female candidates, right? That just shows you what the top brass thought of my flight.”

The government covered up the details, but Roza’s spaceflight had been rife with issues, subjecting her to several awful situations. She’d piloted Mechta IV, which launched just after Mechta III to accomplish Zirnitra’s planned fake rendezvous. And until the fake rendezvous—which was broadcast on television—her flight went according to plan.

After the fake rendezvous, the nightmare began. First, Roza was violently ill due to an unusual case of space motion sickness. Soon after, she was confronted by the fact that the control system meant to fly her home was malfunctioning and moving the spacecraft *farther* from Earth. Roza had panicked, screaming and crying as she faced death. The malfunction was corrected, and Mechta IV eventually returned to Earth. Roza was then badly injured during the landing, her face black and blue. It was as if everything that could’ve gone wrong *did*, and Korovin had apologized profusely.

Even after her harrowing experience, Roza toed the government line. “It was a most wonderful trip through space,” she’d lied at her official press conference.

During a closed-door meeting, the central committee had criticized Roza. They paid no heed to the fact that her panic and vomiting were beyond her control, judging her far more harshly than Irina, Lev, or Mikhail. Therefore, having successfully sent a human woman to space, the committee decided to not consider women for the next candidate group due to their “inferior constitution.”

Roza’s shoulders slumped. “That rendezvous I participated in was all deceit. Nothing to be proud of.”

Lev wanted to cheer her up, but he knew words of praise wouldn’t encourage somebody like Roza. “Perhaps someone had a little too much to drink?” He kept his tone deliberately light.

Roza gasped. An embarrassed grin drifted to her face. “I’ve never been to that jazz bar before. It’s quite cozy.”

“I’m a regular at the place. Mikhail’s there pretty often too. If you want to learn about top-shelf liquor, he’s a good guy to talk to.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Oh, about the marriage—I think we’ll announce it tomorrow. Keep it under wraps till then, all right?” Roza brought a finger to her lips.

“Got it. Your secret is safe with me.” Although Lev wondered how Mikhail had reacted to the sudden order, he wouldn’t broach the subject until it was out in the open. “Well, shall we head home?”

The two walked back down the birch-lined path toward the space apartments. It was nearing midnight, and the streets were deserted. With autumn on its way, Lev felt a chill through his light military clothes. He turned up his collar, hunching his shoulders.

Roza shot him a reproachful stare. “I wasn’t going to tell anyone about it,” she muttered. “Then you had to show up.”

“Hey, no fair. I was just as surprised as you.”

She looked at the sky, her gaze distant as she went on. “You know, if it had been anyone other than you, I think I would’ve walked out without a word.”

“The last time we talked one-on-one was way back during candidate selection, right?”

“Ah, I remember that. You bought me some soda water.”

Roza had passed out during a parachute descent test, and Lev risked his life to save her. After that experience, Roza had opened up to him about vulnerabilities she hid from everyone. That was when Lev first realized the fiercely proud, aloof Roza was also a girl with a delicate heart—one who dreamed of chervil-shaped stars. She’d dedicated herself solely to training, determined not to lose to any man, thereby earning the nickname “the White Rose of Sangrad.” Yet the cosmonaut training had forced her to recognize her own physical limits.

“Thank you for saving me,” said Roza, a bashful smile on her lips.

Her sudden expression of gratitude startled Lev, but he shrugged it off. “That’s all in the past.”

“Maybe for you. I still feel it, though.”

“Hm? Feel what?”

Roza’s gaze wavered, and she stopped in her tracks. Looking at her feet, she put a hand over her heart. “I respect Mikhail,” she said. “He’s a comrade-in-arms and a wonderful cosmonaut. But...I’m carrying a torch I can’t bring myself to talk about. I’ve wanted to share it for so long, but I always hold back. I feel like I shouldn’t. But today, for my homeland...” Roza clutched at her chest, straining to get the words out. “For my homeland, I’ll throw that love away.”



She clamped her mouth shut, as if suppressing the emotions that threatened to escape. Lev knew then what feelings Roza wanted to voice. He couldn't respond, though. At this moment, no matter what he said, he'd only hurt her. He put a hand on her shoulder lightly, letting that be his reply.

I wish you happiness.

It was so quiet they could almost hear the stars blink. A light wind heralding the start of autumn swept through the surrounding greenery, whistling around their backs and blowing into their hearts.

Roza eventually stepped forward. She turned to face Lev, her stare resolute. "I'm sorry. Forget I said anything."

Lev nodded silently.

As they resumed walking, Roza's tone was lighter. "Can I ask you something, Lev?"

"Sure. Whatever you want."

"How would you feel if you were ordered to marry Irina?"

Lev's heart leapt in his chest as if he'd been shot. "I-I have no idea!" he sputtered. "We're not in that kind of relationship."

"Like I said, if it were an *order*." The daggers in Roza's voice stabbed him.

Lev was an inarticulate mess. "W-well, in...in th-that case, I guess we'd have no choice...?"

"Would you do it gladly?"

"Why would you ask that?!" Under the pressure of Roza's gaze, he felt himself crumbling. Excuses bubbled up and escaped his lips as he tried to wave Roza off. "There'd be so much to consider. I mean, what would *Irina* say? No way would she agree to a forced marriage! She'd go 'Human marriage laws mean nothing to me!' or something."

Roza laughed. "You're taking the question too seriously. You really do like her, don't you?"

"Huh? Wait. What?"

Giggling, Roza wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “Be happy, Lev.”

The next day, Lt. Gen. Viktor announced Mikhail and Roza’s wedding in the Training Center conference room. The cosmonauts burst into commotion as loud as a rocket exhaust valve. Even Irina responded with shock, yanking Lev’s sleeve as she stammered, “M-m-married?!”

The hubbub settled quickly, however. Everyone knew the government had ordered the forced marriage, but Mikhail and Roza accepted their fates calmly.

Lt. Gen. Viktor cleared his throat to speak, brow furrowed. “As Training Center director, I’m responsible for all of your lives. Marriage is usually a cause for celebration, but given this particular marriage’s compulsory nature, I’ll refrain from sharing my thoughts. To report only what’s already set in stone: A grand, government-funded wedding ceremony will take place in spring of 1966. Lev and Irina have been appointed the official witnesses.”

That was the first Lev and Irina had heard of it. They looked at each other in shock. It seemed to be news to Mikhail and Roza too.

The witness role was important at Zirnitran wedding ceremonies. By law, marriage certificates had to be signed not only by the bride and groom but also by two friends of the same gender and generation as the betrothed. Witnesses were additionally responsible for welcoming guests before the ceremony and at the reception.

Lev knew his role was just another government PR stunt, but he and Irina both felt honored and agreed to take part.

“So, when will the *witnesses* get hitched?” Semyon asked, a cheeky grin plastered across his face.

Lev slapped his own forehead, exasperated. After his conversation with Roza the previous evening, he’d had a feeling someone would say something about him and Irina.

Irina, however, was entirely unprepared. Her face went bright red. “Unbelievable!” she cried. “Why would I be required to marry a banal human like Lev?!”

Meanwhile, Lev had prepared a definitive statement to shield himself from further questions. “I’ve never even heard of a human-vampire wedding.”

Mikhail was quick to jump in. “Given the existence of dhampirs, it really wouldn’t be that strange.”

Lev groaned at how quickly his peers dispensed with his argument.

Roza did nothing to help. “You’ll make a wonderful couple,” she said.

“Would you stop that, Roza?!” Irina groaned. “I wouldn’t agree to a forced marriage! Human marriage laws mean nothing to me!”

Lev nearly choked. Irina had voiced the protest he’d predicted to Roza word for word. Roza met his glance with a warm grin.

Irina, now covered in nervous sweat, assumed a prim-and-proper expression. “Enough. This is a waste of my time. I am going to train,” she said, leaving.

Lev wasn’t comfortable with the idea of the freshman candidates gossiping about him being “drill sergeant” instructor Irina’s weak point. Yet he set that discomfort aside as he looked at Mikhail. The man had shown no emotion regarding the forced marriage, so Lev had no idea how he felt. He didn’t need to dig deeper, but he was worried about his friend. After the meeting ended, he got Mikhail’s attention, and the two headed to the rear of the Training Center.

“Receiving that order out of nowhere must’ve been shocking,” said Lev.

“But, finally, I too will be crowned with a historic achievement,” Mikhail bragged sarcastically. “I’ll be the groom in the first cosmonaut marriage!”

“Mikhail...”

“I’m joking, Lev. When Roza and I received our orders yesterday, I told her I was sorry she had to get married—and that it ended up being me.” Mikhail looked troubled; it wasn’t an expression he ever wore in front of the others. “I’m sure she has her own life, and now I’ve been shoved in the middle of it. At the same time, orders are orders. I can’t let my emotions get in the way.”

“Can you keep your emotions *out* of it, though?” Lev hoped wholeheartedly that Mikhail and Roza would end up happy.

“A stupid question,” Mikhail said with a wry chuckle, then patted Lev’s

shoulder. “That’s something for Roza and me to work out, though. Don’t worry about us.”

“Of course I’m worried. You’re my friends.”

Mikhail nodded, an earnest honesty in his eyes. “I promised her I’ll make her happy as long as we’re married. I don’t intend to be lukewarm throughout all this. Roza’s my comrade, and she has a beautiful heart. I think she’s a wonderful woman.”

Relief washed over Lev. Knowing that Mikhail would be sincere about the marriage eased much of his tension.

“Still...yesterday, when we parted, there was a gloom about her. That worried me. But based on her demeanor today, I guess she freed herself from her lingering feelings toward someone.” Mikhail’s gaze was oddly sharp.

“Hm?” Lev put a finger to his chin, playing dumb. “Huh. I wonder who *that* could be.”

“Yeah. I wonder.” Mikhail’s flat delivery made it clear that he wasn’t falling for Lev’s act.

Lev moved his hand to cover his whole face, groaning. The truth was out in the open; he couldn’t do anything to hide it. “Well, look,” he said with a smile. “Roza *did* say you’re a wonderful cosmonaut.”

Mikhail smiled back. “She did?”

“She said she respects you too!”

“I see,” Mikhail muttered. Suddenly, he wrapped his arms around Lev’s body, squeezing it tight—a technique from the Zirnitran martial art known as samozashchita bez oruzhiya, or SAMBO.

“Ow! Mikhail!”

“You deserve *some* punishment, don’t you?”

“But I...didn’t...urk!” As Lev tried to wriggle free, Mikhail wrapped him in another joint lock, and Lev collapsed. Mikhail continued to wrench his body while he cried out in pain. “Wait, wait!”

“Hmph. Looks like we’ll battle each other our whole lives,” said Mikhail. “I won’t give up on the moon that easily!”

“Let’s keep this...” Much as Lev wanted to add *peaceful*, he could barely manage through his gasps as Mikhail buried his consciousness in the motherland.

While everyone was in an uproar about the upcoming wedding, the UZSR progressed steadily on its path to the moon. The country’s unmanned lunar probes were named after the moon goddess Diana. Under Korovin’s watchful eye, the Diana program allowed the UZSR to make additional historic lunar discoveries. In 1959, Diana 2 reached the moon successfully. Then Diana 3 photographed its far side. While the wedding was in the works, yet another Diana probe would attempt a historic first “soft landing” on the lunar surface—a project of utmost importance.

To move forward with manned lunar landings, a soft landing was essential so that the UZSR could photograph the moon’s surface up close. Long-distance photos weren’t enough for them to determine whether the surface was really hard rock. If it was actually a dust or dirt layer, a spacecraft couldn’t land on it directly, nor could the cosmonauts inside return home. That would essentially prevent humanity from landing on the moon.

The lunar probe’s soft landing would challenge the stuff of legends. After all, the moon had been the subject of mythology and imagination since the olden days. People all around the world had written about it. One of Korovin’s greatest dreams was to land a probe on the moon’s surface and photograph it as it actually was.

However, the project wasn’t going entirely according to plan. Diana 4, 5, and 6’s soft landing attempts failed one after another. Those crushing defeats drew the ire of the military, who demanded that the lunar projects be canceled and that Korovin focus his skills on tactical satellite development.

That put the Diana program in a precarious position. If Diana 7 failed, there would be no more chances. Yet Korovin couldn’t devote all his time to unmanned lunar projects, given that he was also working on manned

spaceflights. Furthermore, there was the issue of his failing health; the man took on far more work than he could bear.

In a bold decision, Korovin entrusted the development of the unmanned lunar probes to a reliable engineer. “I bestow my beloved daughter upon you,” he said. “Guide her to the moon.”

With the faith and expectations of the nation’s top scientist resting on his shoulders, the engineer was exceptionally determined. He threw himself tirelessly into solving the project’s problems and improved the rocket to boot. After various tests on Earth, the team felt they were on the cusp of success.

Then came the fateful day: October 4, 1965. Eight years after the Parusnyĭ satellite’s successful launch, Diana 7 attempted a soft landing. Korovin, who’d been hospitalized, ignored his doctors’ warnings and fled to the Albinar Cosmodrome to lead the maneuver.

The launch went off without a hitch, and Diana 7 began its four-day, 380,000-kilometer journey to the moon, destined for a wide expanse on the surface known as Oceanus Procellarum. But would it succeed?

In addition to the audience in the blockhouse, Lev and LAIKA44’s cosmonauts gathered in the Training Center and prayed for Diana’s success. Irina held her moonstone close to her chest. The Zirnitran government, ANSA, citizens of both the UK and UZSR, and people all over the world waited eagerly for Diana to reveal the nature of the moon’s surface.

Back in the blockhouse, Korovin monitored equipment for the signal that would alert them to Diana’s success. The silence lasted an eternity; nobody even let out a breath. Then the audio tape recorder’s needle moved, jotting down a signal.

“Here it comes!” Korovin exclaimed.

The recording continued. A signal had arrived. There were no issues so far, but they still didn’t know whether Diana 7 had succeeded.

“Don’t stop...”

Everyone watched and waited with bated breath. Would the moon goddess smile upon them?

“Did we make it?!”

Right then, the crowd’s uncertainty and anticipation turned to delighted realization. The Diana probe’s communications proved that there was no dust or dirt layer. The lunar surface was solid rock, so a landing was possible. It was time for the world to say goodbye to the moon of myth and greet the real one.

Korovin stood and thrust his fist into the air. “Success! We did it!”

The engineers and everyone else in the blockhouse cheered and hugged each other. As Korovin’s comrades surrounded him, the scientist’s cheeks flushed red.

“Thanks to you, we’ve accomplished a long-held dream!” he cried. “But we mustn’t stop here! Today’s success is simply a brick in the road to tomorrow. We’ll send Diana 8 into lunar orbit next. For now, let’s indulge in this joy with our comrades around the world!”

He thrust both arms into the air, and the blockhouse erupted in applause. That was when Korovin faltered in place, clutched his chest, and collapsed to the floor in pain.

“Chief?!”

The blockhouse’s joyous atmosphere instantly warped into panic.

Dull gray clouds covered the evening sky like a robe for the moon. Perhaps the celestial body was embarrassed now that people had seen its bare skin up close. With Diana 7’s success, people around the world understood the lunar surface far better. Only a handful, however, knew that the scientist who’d helmed the project for most of its duration had been re-hospitalized.

Korovin had collapsed due to a heart attack and was immediately whisked to a top-class hospital especially for high-ranking officers. An exam revealed nothing serious, but the doctor ordered Korovin to rest, and it still wasn’t clear when the chief designer would return to active duty. Lev and Irina were in Sangrad for work, and they wanted to see him as early as possible, but their busy schedules made it difficult. By the time they finally had a chance to squeeze in a hospital visit, it had already been a week since his admission.

Korovin's name was not listed among the hospital's patients. He'd been admitted as "Professor Smirnoff, physics lecturer." If the public figured out that the chief designer himself had been hospitalized, morale in the development sector would plummet, while the UK would likely feel a certain relief. Therefore, the higher ups hid Korovin's condition at all costs. Korovin's identity would likely stay anonymous until the UZSR finally won the Space Race—or perhaps even until the nation itself collapsed.

The hospital was a solid seven-story structure in downtown Sangrad. Professor Smirnoff was staying in a corner room on the fifth floor.

"That old geezer," Irina muttered as she and Lev walked the clean linoleum floors toward the room. "Still pushing himself too hard, even though he's already a feeble wreck. What do I care if he breaks down?"

Lev knew the harsh words were merely a cover for Irina's concern. When she first heard the news, she was tearful and sleepless, anxious about what would happen if Korovin actually perished.

In the past, when Irina—then considered merely a test subject—was set to be disposed of, Korovin went so far as to throw his weight around to *the supreme leader* to save her life. That had left a deep impression on Irina. With both her parents gone, the young vampire began to see Korovin as something of a father figure—not that she ever let those feelings show.

"You know, you're literally the only person who could get away with calling him that," Lev said.

"A wreck's a wreck. He's a broken-down old man and a space-travel crackpot!"

"Irina, I'm begging you. Please don't say anything that raises his blood pressure."

As the two cosmonauts bantered, a small man strode past them and rounded the corner. He wore his collar turned up and a hat over his eyes. He ambled along slowly with one hand against the wall for support. Lev felt as though he'd seen the fellow somewhere before. Though the old man carefully hid his face, he couldn't conceal his very aura.

“Hey, is that who I think it is?” Lev asked.

Irina had noticed him too. “That’s our wreck, all right,” she whispered back.

Korovin was attempting to escape from the hospital. He’d done that so often that he was known for it. Lev and Irina approached him quietly, blocking his way.

“Excuse me, Professor Smirnoff,” Lev said. “Where do you think you’re going?”

The man froze, and sharp eyes peeked out from between the hat and raised collar. There was no mistaking it—it was Korovin.

“I just wanted a cigarette. They get mad when I smoke inside,” Korovin said, fishing a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket.

Irina snatched them instantly, glaring at him. “You’re a patient here! You old wreck of a—mmph!”

Lev clapped a hand over her mouth, keeping his voice low as he spoke to Korovin. “If you need to, have us convey messages to the team. But please, rest. We don’t want to make a scene that brings the doctors running. The Delivery Crew might be watching too. You don’t want to find yourself tied up in some windowless basement, do you?”

Korovin lifted his hat, smiling. “Ah, Zilant. How cheeky you’ve become.”

It was a short walk back to Korovin’s hospital room. The place was littered with development documents and technical papers. It might as well have been just another office. Lev and Irina removed a few papers from a corner sofa and took a seat. Korovin himself sat back on his bed.

“My wife and daughter often scold me, and now you two as well? Tell me, how can I rest? Development’s at a critical point, and I finally have full control of the lunar projects. If they’re taken from me while I sleep, we’re back to square one!”

Korovin had been brought to the hospital because of his heart attack, but he was still inpatient because of the upcoming removal of polyps in his large intestine. The hospital would operate once they confirmed that his heart had

stabilized.

“Not that they need to go to all this trouble over some polyps,” Korovin griped.

Lev felt it best that Korovin not stretch himself thin. The chief designer got older and more worn out each year. Yet even after angering his family, Korovin had still fled the hospital, and Lev wasn't about to push the point.

Irina, on the other hand, made her opinion crystal clear: “I think you're suffering from something much worse than polyps. Make sure they do a full head-to-toe exam.”

“That's how they found the polyps,” Korovin replied. “Besides, I've had heart problems for a long time.”

“It's more than that,” Irina said, frowning. “The scent of blood in this room makes me nervous. I don't like it.”

“All I smell is disinfectant.”

“Excuse me?!” Irina leapt from the sofa to Korovin's bedside. “When it comes to rockets, you triple-check every little thing down to each individual screw, and then you fix what needs fixing! Why are you ignoring your own body?!”

“Hm...I see your point.” Korovin nodded and gave his chest a light thump. “I've got a weak heart, so perhaps we could replace it with a steel pump. We'll use kerosene for blood. I'll blaze with energy!”

“Why not fly yourself to the moon to boot?! Do you even realize how worried we are, you bucket of rocket bolts?!” Irina looked ready to bite the chief designer.

Lev grabbed her shoulders, pulling her back. “Calm down, calm down! Let's keep quiet, all right?”

“Did you hear him?! A steel pump and kerosene, he said!” Irina fell back onto the sofa, pouting.

It was Lev's turn to try to talk sense into Korovin. “You really have to take care of yourself, Chief. I still remember seeing you collapse as we stood at the launchpad the day before my flight. I'll never forget it...” His voice trailed off. He

didn't even like thinking back on the sight.

Irina lifted herself and went back to Korovin's side. "Please, go through another exam, all right? I'm not trying to worry you. I realize it just seems like a hunch, but I know it's something serious. What vampires lack in taste, we make up for in smell. And we're especially sensitive to blood."

Faced with two pleading cosmonauts, Korovin scratched the back of his head. "Fine. I'll undergo another exam and stay here until I recover. Don't expect me just to rest, though! I'll have detailed instructions delivered on the development of the lunar probe and new spacecraft from here, and I'll ready people to deliver my messages. Are you satisfied?"

Irina nodded. "I'm fine with that. Just be sure not to do anything too suspicious. After all, you're an obscure lecturer, *Professor Smirnoff*."

Lev felt somewhat relieved, but he was still worried about one thing: "Say, Chief, is development really so far behind that you needed to sneak out of the hospital?"

Korovin waved off Lev's concerns. "I have my most talented comrades working on Diana 8. They'll see her to completion, and I have no doubt we'll achieve a successful lunar orbit by the end of the year as scheduled. What worries me is the manned flight." He sat up in bed before continuing. "The Rodina's still a prototype—it's not even ready for mannequins. If we launched it now, it'd be doomed."

"Doomed?" Lev felt the word's heavy weight, as did Irina.

"Don't worry." Korovin's tone became bright. "We have a year before Rodina I's scheduled to launch. We're on track to complete it by then. It'll take time, yes, but that's because Rodina's so revolutionary. Engineers other than myself still can't fully grasp it. Leave it to me—I guarantee it'll succeed!" The chief designer's confidence impressed the cosmonauts. An instant later, however, his expression turned grave. "What's *not* on track is the C-I rocket."

They didn't have to ask why. The delays stemmed from Korovin's conflict with Gaudyn.

"If he were less intent on fueling the rocket with hydrazine, it would be

another story,” Korovin continued. “But we can’t allow any of you cosmonauts to pilot a spacecraft attached to a rocket full of such toxic fuel. If it leaked and exploded, what would Graudyn say for himself? He and the military seem to see you as little more than rocket parts.”

Understanding that Korovin had pushed so persistently for kerosene to ensure the cosmonauts’ safety warmed Lev’s heart.

“No matter what I say, *this* is the reality.” Korovin opened some documents beside his pillow. They were design specifications another scientist—one of Graudyn’s underlings—had put together. “Look at this. The first stage requires thirty thrusters. They can’t possibly think that’s feasible! It’ll be impossible even in the twenty-first century. They’re dreaming.”

Irina tilted her head, confused. “What will the UK’s rocket engines be like?”

“They plan to use five large thrusters, apparently. If you want to know more, look at those papers you cleared off the sofa earlier.”

Irina and Lev found the documents, which turned out to be hand-drawn design specifications labeled “Project Hyperion,” “Chronos Rocket V,” and “Ultra Large-Scale Galactica Rocket (Development Canceled).”

“Hm? What are these?” Lev muttered. As he realized, a chill ran down his spine. “Are these from ANSA?! How did you even get them?”

Suspicion flashed through Irina’s eyes. “You already knew about ANSA’s plans? Even when we didn’t?”

“Relax,” said Korovin. “They aren’t Arnackian originals. *I* drafted them.”

“You did?!”

“I used all those as reference materials.” Korovin pointed to a corner full of cardboard boxes. “It’s easy to get hold of reference documents from the UK; they’re less secretive over there. The intelligence division supplied a number of them. Put them all together, and they provide a picture of the current state of Arnackian development. We live in different countries, but we’re on the same planet, and the same humans are putting projects together. Our rivals aren’t building UFOs, you understand. Cars have four wheels. Planes have two wings.”

Korovin's logic was sound, but it was hard to believe he'd figured the designs out completely on his own. Perhaps that tremendous ability was exactly why his rivals feared him and people spoke of the mythical "chief designer" with awe.

"Can't we use these documents as a springboard to produce a design like the UK's?" Lev asked. "That would ensure we win the 'Space Race' the top brass are so worried about, right?"

"I wouldn't be so certain," Korovin replied sharply. "When it comes to budget, manpower, and cooperation, the UK runs rings around Zirnitra."

"I see."

"But let me say this: If we look to the distant horizon, rather than what's immediately ahead, the Rodina's overwhelmingly superior to the Hyperion. It'll last well into the future."

Feeling the fierce pride in the scientist's words, Lev was suddenly embarrassed at suggesting they simply create a spacecraft resembling Arnack's. "Sorry to ask such a thoughtless question."

"Don't be. There was much logic to your thinking. My own project's far from complete, and I'm stuck in bed, unable to direct it in person. I can't stand being in this state at such an important juncture." Korovin's words came as a surprise—he rarely revealed this kind of weakness.

When Irina spoke, there was warmth in her voice. "You've guaranteed our success yourself, right? And aren't rockets about making the impossible possible? If you lack confidence, maybe I need to give you a kerosene injection!"

Korovin laughed. "I so love that intensity of yours." Anytime Irina was especially rude to the Chief, Lev felt uneasy, but Korovin and the vampire seemed to have a relationship all their own. Korovin also appeared to take Irina's point to heart, tapping his forehead as he went on. "My doubts about emulating the UK stem partly from what I saw in the documents our intelligence provided me."

"Because we can make something better?" Irina guessed.

The chief designer let out a thoughtful hum. "Call it a hunch. Or perhaps I just

misunderstood. After all, an obscure professor shouldn't be allowed to get their hands on anything confidential to begin with. But we shall soon see what ANSA's capable of."

When Korovin named ANSA, Lev remembered the wish he'd long wanted to share with the chief designer—something he'd hidden in his heart ever since he and Irina revised *The Journey to Space*. Perhaps it was something he shouldn't bring up, since Korovin had made his pride as a scientist so clear. Furthermore, Lev knew his statement could be considered traitorous, depending on his wording.

At the same time, he wasn't sure whether an opportunity like this would present itself again, so he plucked up his courage and spoke. "Chief, when Irina and I attended the Expo, I made something of a promise with an engineer there. We agreed that a UK spacecraft equipped with a rocket created by the UZSR's chief designer would truly be the best of both worlds."

"Oh! I thought the same," Irina said.

Korovin only furrowed his brow, so Lev hastily added context. "I didn't say that in any official capacity, of course. That was just a hope he and I shared as individuals!"

"Providing the UK with a rocket would be very difficult," Korovin said. His expression remained difficult to read.

"I know. I apologize. I got carried away in the moment."

"I understand how you feel, and I consider cooperative development a good idea, but it's best not to speak of something like that too recklessly. Many higher-ups see the UK as an enemy. You get where I'm going with this, yes?"

"You're right," Lev said, awkwardly scratching the back of his head. "I'll be more careful."

He wanted to discuss the prospect in depth, but it seemed best to move on, given Korovin's clear warning. Still, Lev wouldn't soon forget that Korovin was also in favor of cooperative development. That felt like salvation of a sort.

In any case, Lev and Irina had never intended to stay long at the hospital. Now that they'd checked on the Chief, they figured it was time to head out.

Just then, Korovin pulled a notebook entitled *My Fight for Health* from under his pillow. “What do you think this is?”

“A diary?” Lev ventured.

“Do you think I’d write such a thing?” Korovin’s eyes glinted. “That title’s just a ruse. This book contains cutting-edge ideas for traveling to the moon!”

Lev leaned forward involuntarily. “What?! What kind of ideas?!”

“Show me!” Irina demanded, reaching for the book in a heartbeat.

“Wait.” Korovin held a finger to his lips. “Quiet, please. At the moment, this contains little more than the half-baked delusions of a hospital patient with too much time on his hands. I don’t want it to fall into the wrong hands, so I gave it a fake title. As for its actual planned contents, all will be revealed when the time is right.”

“Understood! We can’t wait,” Lev said, pushing away the urge to pore over the book immediately. By “the wrong hands,” Korovin likely meant Graudyn’s people and the Delivery Crew. If there was a chance Lev might involuntarily expose the book’s contents and get himself and Korovin into trouble, then the less he knew the better.

Irina seemed to be thinking along the same lines. Although she eyed the book with lingering regret, she gave up on seeing it now. “Show it to us then, please.”

Korovin tucked the book back under his pillow. “By the way, I heard the most ridiculous story the other day,” he added, his expression souring. “Plans are apparently in the works to create a ‘cosmonaut couple.’”

“Oh. Um...” Lev wasn’t even sure where to start.

Irina pursed her lips in annoyance. “It’s stupid. Who are they trying to please?”

Korovin nodded apologetically. “I wanted to stop it, but given my position, I had no means of doing so. I know an apology does nothing to help, but...I truly am sorry,” he said in a self-chastising manner.

In Lev’s mind, Korovin had nothing to apologize for. If anything, Lev felt as though *he* was the one who should apologize. “I’m sure Mikhail and Roza know

how you feel, Chief.”

“I truly hope so.” It was then that Korovin began patting around his body.

“Looking for these?” Irina asked, flashing the cigarette pack she’d swiped in the corridor earlier.

She was right on the mark, and Korovin grinned bashfully. “Before you go, would you two mind indulging this hospital patient’s ramblings a few minutes more?”

“Of course.” Lev and Irina sat back down on the sofa.

Korovin propped his back against the head of his bed, then gazed at them seriously. “As you can see, I’m just a broken-down old man. Long ago, I wanted to be a cosmonaut—to pilot my own rocket and spacecraft, experience zero gravity, and see Earth from space. I still want those things even now. But if I did make it to space, I don’t think I’d survive the return trip. So, I entrust my dreams to you.”

He spoke deliberately and carefully, only stopping to cough for a moment. When he continued, it was with newfound strength.

“I kept saying the same thing to those leading the government—‘Space development is for our nation and military’...but I was lying. To reach my hopes and dreams, I had to feed them the honey they hungered for. It was revoltingly sweet.” Korovin’s face twisted as he poked out his tongue in disgust. “I don’t need honors or money. I don’t care if my name is Smirnoff. But dreams that aren’t bolstered by power and authority will be crushed. Those are essential.”

Slowly, Korovin got out of bed and walked to Lev and Irina. He was always a slight man, but his ongoing illness made him smaller still. Nonetheless, the light in his eyes was clear. His gaze shone more powerfully than that of any “authority.”

“In all of our planet’s 4.6 billion years, only a few people have made it to space and back, so there’s a truth only you cosmonauts can speak to. It’s a weapon stronger than any bayonet, and it will defeat anyone. I’m sure there are those who wish to use you for that reason. That’s only natural; you are unbelievably valuable. But listen to me now. Dreams are no longer just dreams.

The Mehta spacecraft turned you into people who lived and achieved dreams, just as the Diana probe ended the myths and mystery of the moon. The world you live in is real.”

Korovin thrust a weathered hand toward Lev, who took it in his own strong grip.

“Even if you’re grounded now, Zilant, use your power to continue your flight,” said Korovin. “When the day comes that a favorable wind blows, your passion will take you to the moon.”

The words lit a fire in Lev’s heart. “Yes, Chief!”



Korovin turned to Irina with the same strong gaze. “You were once just a child, but you’ve grown into a beautiful woman.”

Irina’s cheeks flushed red. “Wh-what?”

“Just an old wreck’s ramblings,” Korovin said. “I’ll tell you this, though—I look forward to the day when a beautiful lycoris blooms on the moon’s desolate surface.” He reached out to shake Irina’s hand.

She ignored him, crossing her arms. “Hmm...” Nodding to herself, she reached into her jacket pocket. “I might as well lend you this.”

Korovin peered at the leather pouch Irina placed in his hand, then tipped its contents into his palm. It was a single copper coin minted in 1943.

“That coin...!” Lev blurted.

It was a good-luck charm he’d given Irina—the fare to the moon. Lev was happy she’d carried it all this time, but part of him couldn’t believe she was giving it to Korovin. The Chief, for his part, simply blinked at the coin. He had no idea what it meant.

“That’s a good-luck charm from Lev and me,” Irina explained. “Get better, then give it back, all right? If you don’t, I’ll start charging interest. A hundred percent, maybe two hundred. You get the picture?”

Korovin cracked a smile. “Perhaps I’ll recover faster if I give up smoking.”

Shortly after, Lev and Irina headed for the hospital exit. Korovin seemed fine when they left his room, but the unnerving scent of blood Irina had mentioned worried Lev. His only comfort was the fact that the hospital was one of Zirnitra’s best, with unrivaled doctors and medical equipment. He thought Korovin would be fine so long as the man didn’t do anything rash.

“We might need to post guards to make sure he doesn’t try another escape attempt,” he told Irina.

“And we need to pray that Diana 8 succeeds. If it fails, he might wind up bedridden through next year.”

As they left the hospital, a crescent moon peeked out behind the sky’s hazy clouds. To orbit that moon, Diana 8 would need to travel some 380,000

kilometers.

Irina turned back toward the hospital for a moment. The building consisted of sixty rooms; from where they stood, around three-fifths of them were illuminated.

“Lots of high-ranking, important people are staying in this hospital,” Irina mused. “But I hope Korovin especially gets to see the moment we land on the moon.”

“We can’t rush things,” Lev said, “but we have to move fast too.”

Crows flew out from a nearby crimson rowan tree. Its ripe red berries dropped, bouncing off Lev’s shoes. Winter was encroaching. How many more winters would they see before someone stood on the moon?

The hard work of Korovin’s trusted engineers paid off. Diana 8 achieved history’s first-ever lunar orbit on December 31, 1965. The probe then continued to orbit, becoming a lunar observation satellite.

That momentous follow-up to Diana 7’s soft landing excited the world. Yet those in the blockhouse muted their joy, since Korovin wasn’t present; he was undergoing surgery in the hospital. He’d been scheduled to oversee the mission, but the follow-up exam Irina advised had uncovered something besides polyps: two large tumors. That caused major changes to the schedule, and Korovin’s operation date happened to overlap with Diana 8’s planned lunar orbit attempt.

Unsurprisingly, Korovin resisted, demanding that the hospital postpone the operation until the new year so he could direct the mission. The doctors wouldn’t hear it; they told him to put his health first. Keeping his promise to Irina, Korovin begrudgingly gave up on leaving the hospital. As Diana 8 cruised the stars, reaching the 80,000-kilometer mark on its trip to the moon, Korovin waved to the sky and reluctantly entered the operating theater.

In light of that, Lev and Irina weren’t in the mood for celebration. Instead, they held a simple toast in the Training Center cafeteria with some peers.

Everyone was nervous and restless as the new year drew ever closer. Lev

found himself relieved that another year had passed without disasters—there had been no major accidents and, aside from the one expelled freshman, no candidates had dropped out. Semyon went around excitedly suggesting that they hold a big party to celebrate Diana 8's lunar orbit, the Chief's release from the hospital, and the New Year all at once.

Lev seized the opportunity to joke to Mikhail and Roza. "If the Chief doesn't get well soon, we might end up celebrating his recovery alongside your wedding."

"Then we'll have him officiate our marriage," Roza said with a laugh.

Zirnitran wedding ceremonies usually took place in municipal offices. The bride and groom signed a registration document in the presence of the government official overseeing the marriage. Recently, however, marriages were changing, and lavish "wedding palaces" were being constructed for such occasions.

"Having the chief designer in disguise as your wedding officiant might be fun," Irina said. "ANSA would get a real shock when they found out."

"Where will we hold the wedding, anyway?" asked Roza, pressing a finger to her chin. "Sangrad City Hall? I'd love to have it at a grand wedding palace someplace."

"Let's ask. We have the right to request that, at least," Mikhail replied.

Mikhail and Roza were both preparing for their wedding with a positive mindset, which made them seem like a couple who'd been together for years. Lev found it all rather uncanny.

The cafeteria fell into the comfort of easy chatter until the door burst open. Lt. Gen. Viktor rushed in, panic written all over his face.

"Listen up, everyone!" he barked. Conversations in the room stopped instantly as everyone realized something was wrong. "The Chief's operation didn't go well. He's in a coma."

At once, the comfortable atmosphere iced over.

"Cosmonauts, come with me," Viktor said. "We're going to the hospital."

Lev and the others quickly boarded a military plane. The new year arrived during their flight, and they landed in Sangrad around daybreak, heading straight for the hospital.

Peering through the window into the intensive care room, they saw Korovin lying in bed. His chest rose and fell silently and rhythmically, thanks to the artificial respirator and other medical equipment he was hooked to.

“Chief!” Lev called. No matter how much he cried out, though, his voice never reached Korovin.

Irina was like a statue, motionless with shock.

The operating doctor addressed them, his expression sorrowful. “It should’ve been a short, simple operation, but it became much more difficult than I’d imagined. All we could do was stabilize him.”

Korovin had ignored his health for many long years, and his body—already battered by forced labor during his youth—had reached its limits. He’d simply been unable to endure the procedure.

Lev tried to remain calm. “When will he recover?”

“That depends on him,” the doctor replied, but his voice was uncertain. “He may wake up tomorrow. He may never wake up at all. We can’t say for certain.”

Lev clenched his teeth, holding back the feelings that threatened to burst out. He knew that blaming the doctor would do no good.

Irina, however, cornered the doctor. “Do something!” she pleaded, teary-eyed. “Wasn’t surgery supposed to fix him?!”

“We did the very best we could.” The doctor’s face twisted in frustration. “This may sound like an excuse, but we’re lucky we even found that cancer. It’s the reason he’s breathing now. Had we gone into that operation thinking we were just removing polyps, he never would’ve stood a chance. You recommended his second exam, so you’re the one who saved his life.”

“Don’t say things like that until he fully recovers!” Irina sank to the floor, her face racked with anguish as she fought back tears.

Grief consumed all those in the room. Lev turned once more to look at

Korovin. The chief designer lay in bed like a corpse, seeming far smaller than when they last saw him. As Lev stared at the Chief connected to all those life support systems, a plethora of emotions coursed through his heart. Was this the body with which Korovin oversaw their projects? One racked with illness and now unable to endure surgery? What would happen to Zirnitran space technology if Korovin didn't recover? Should they have forced him to visit the hospital the first time he collapsed? The loss Lev felt was unbearable.

Mikhail placed a hand on his shoulder. "Chin up, Lev. You really think he'll let it end like this?"

Lev gasped. "You're right. He's just exhausted. He needs some rest." He slapped his own cheeks to gather himself. Now wasn't the time to falter.

"We'll send you a wedding invitation, Chief," Roza said. Despite the obvious sorrow in her face, her voice emerged clear and strong. "I was only ever a hassle to you as a cosmonaut, but still, we really want you there."

She and Mikhail stood side by side, hands folded at their chests in prayer.

Irina stood and walked to the glass window, hands on her hips. "You have to get better, Chief," she muttered, tears filling her scarlet eyes. "Don't tell me you're such an old wreck that you've forgotten our promise."

Lev put a fist to his chest. "We'll be waiting for you, Chief."

He imbued the words with everything in his heart. He'd continue to train and oversee the new candidates' training. Those were his duties as a cosmonaut.

Black Dragon's Eyes

• очи цирнитра •

THE STATE COMMISSION kept Korovin's condition under wraps, but then the problem of who would be his standin arose. Korovin was *the* chief designer, deified even by space development personnel. Not just anyone could take over his position.

After much discussion, the First Design Bureau's second-in-command—who'd spent years as Korovin's assistant—was appointed as his replacement. Still, he was just a substitute. The man was intelligent, but he lacked Korovin's leadership and decision-making skills. He also didn't have the political or mental clout to withstand military criticism or factional infighting.

Slowly, the absence of Zirnitra's space development linchpin rippled through related organizations and bureaus, producing confusion among those who worked on the ground level.

The clearest, most serious example was the Rodina's development. The team lacked a strong sense of direction. To meet the government's launch deadline, they were essentially working things out as they went. The low-level engineers creating the spacecraft could only follow the orders they received; they had no way of knowing Korovin was down for the count.

Thanks to Korovin's prodigious talents, the UZSR had kept up with the UK despite the former's struggling economy. But they'd structured space projects around one person's skills, so they were hurtling toward failure now that he was indisposed. If the UZSR's space development initiatives had been organized more like ANSA, with connections between each research center and enterprise, things would've been different. Losing a figure like Professor Klaus wouldn't plunge the UK into complete disarray.

While the UZSR disintegrated further with each consecutive decision, amply funded long-term projects in the UK bore fruit. Unmanned Arnackian probes achieved a soft landing and lunar orbit at the start of 1966, achievements on par with Diana 7 and 8's. Since the UK had already completed a rendezvous, the success of their unmanned probes put them well ahead of the UZSR.

The subzero days continued in February, freezing the grass and forcing all kinds of creatures to huddle together for warmth. In the plains on Sangrad's outskirts, a giant tourist destination—Wondrous Wonderland—neared completion. Gergiev had ordered the construction of the facility. It was being billed as a potential rival to both the UK's Expo *and* its biggest theme park, which was considered a “wonderland for children.” Essentially, Wondrous

Wonderland would be an “educational” facility bringing together all the UZSR’s member states in a single park.

Snowfall was heavy as Gergiev and Lyudmila’s car headed toward the symbol of Wondrous Wonderland—a magnificent palace—to inspect the facility. The grounds would’ve covered fifty baseball fields, but given Zirnitra’s budgetary restrictions, workers had built only the central palace and surrounding structures. The economic crisis had cut deeply into the construction budget, and weaker member states’ pavilions were little more than superficial props.

Gergiev, however, completely ignored the ramshackle sights outside the car window. He focused on Lyudmila instead, droning on about his so-called “wondrous project.”

“I was told the cosmonaut suits have been redesigned based on firsthand feedback to keep them from ballooning in zero gravity. That problem’s now solved,” he said.

Lyudmila’s brow furrowed. “Intriguing. But a launch is still dangerous, isn’t it? Won’t one be newsworthy enough?”

Gergiev was still terrified that the UK had overtaken them. He wouldn’t listen to reason. “Danger’s merely part and parcel of adventure,” he quickly retorted. “So, we reach for more—in everything! With this wondrous project, we’ll reach so high the whole world will applaud us! We’ll glorify the history of space development! The first launch, the second, and the third—even if they happen to fail, we don’t lose anything, do we?”

“We don’t? I suppose not.” Lyudmila flashed a bold grin. “Well, I suppose it’s true that *you* have nothing to lose.”

“Then it’s decided!” Gergiev exited the car in front of the blue-and-gold palace, then spread his arms wide, not even worrying about keeping off the snow with an umbrella. “Here’s where it begins! This is where we celebrate our cosmonaut couple’s wedding!”

The supreme leader’s voice boomed like thunder beneath the dreary sky.

Chapter 3: For Whom?

Indigo Eyes

• ОЧИ ИНДИГО •

MIKHAIL AND ROZA’S wedding day was in April, and the earth had shed its gown of pure-white snow to feel the breath of spring. It was a clear, beautiful day—perfect weather for the wedding, which would take place at Wondrous Wonderland.

Thanks in part to the couple’s good looks, the “Cosmonaut Wedding” spectacle attracted worldwide attention on par with a rocket launch. The ceremony was also set to mark the opening of Wondrous Wonderland.

International news outlets arrived in droves that morning, and attendees—including high-ranking government officials—packed the seats. The 300 guests had all been carefully selected; anti-Gergiev dissidents were weeded out, leaving only his faithful.

The cosmonauts, all wearing formal attire, waited in an exhibition hall-turned-dressing room for the bride and groom’s arrival. Lev had attended various events and ceremonies around the world, but this was the first time friends of his were getting married, and he was nervous. Irina was equally jittery and couldn’t stop playing with her hair.

Just after ten, the bride and groom finished dressing and entered the room. Mikhail, usually the definition of calm and collected, seemed unusually nervous in his dark, expensive suit. Roza, meanwhile, wore a veil and lily-white dress. Its hem was embroidered with beautiful roses, as if in reference to her nickname. Though Roza usually just wore basic makeup, she looked like a princess from a fairy tale today. The cosmonauts were speechless. One heaved a sigh of admiration, while another whistled suggestively.

“Um, could you please not stare?” Roza asked, blushing as she looked at the floor.

“She’s so pretty,” Lev mumbled, dazzled at the sight of his comrade. Suddenly, he was violently blindfolded with a sash from behind. “What the—hey!”

Unwinding the serpentine sash, he turned to see Irina in a pale sky-blue dress, pouting at him. “That’s your witness sash,” she told him, spinning her own like a lasso.

“Well, you could just have given it to me like a normal person!”

“I saw that look in your eyes. I had no choice but to block them.”

“What look?! Please behave yourself. There’re guests besides cosmonauts here today, and you’re an official witness, so you’d better act like one.”

Outside, the bride and groom’s close friends and family—who were still in the dark about the true nature of the marriage—exchanged greetings. There was an air of celebration, yet a lone shadow fell across Lev’s heart. Korovin had still not awakened from his coma, so Roza’s jest about him officiating their marriage would never come to pass. The nation’s supreme leader, Gergiev himself, would do the honors instead.

All the cosmonauts were concerned about Korovin, but they promised themselves they’d enjoy the day. They knew the Chief would never have wanted the wedding to be a gloomy affair. Perhaps if they were rowdy enough, they joked, Korovin would awaken just to tell them to shut up.

Lt. Gen. Viktor sat in a corner, peering at Roza with a troubled expression.

“Something wrong?” Lev asked.

“Roza’s trip through space...” Viktor kept his voice low. “It didn’t negatively impact her functions...as a woman, did it?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m concerned about whether Roza can still be a mother. Her spaceflight did a number on her. I mean, she vomited in her own space suit! Is she still capable of pregnancy? Childbirth?”

In other words, he was asking whether Roza's trip through the unknown had affected her reproductive organs. Lev wasn't sure how to answer. As a married female cosmonaut, Roza had had no real forerunners. He *did* remember Anya saying space travel didn't impact such functions, though, and she'd worked at a biomedical laboratory. Lev figured pointing that out might assuage Viktor's worries.

"The vomiting was just bad space travel sickness," Lev said after recounting Anya's explanation. "Neither Roza nor Irina have had any physical issues since they got back. Also, although I know comparing people and animals is rude, the puppy we sent Queen Sundancia—Kukushka, I think her name was?—seemed healthy too. Her mother was a test dog."

"Oh, really? Hmm." Nodding a few times, Lt. Gen. Viktor grew sheepish. "I'm sorry. I saw a wedding and a bride, and my thoughts just... In any event, let's pray for lots of healthy children and send them a mountain of diapers."

Viktor's scarred, stern face made him an intimidating figure, and he really was as imposing and strict as he appeared. Nevertheless, Lev knew the man was something of a surrogate father to the cosmonauts.

"Sorry to keep you all waiting!" a voice cried out.

The person who'd spoken was delivering a giant korovai baked especially for the wedding. A skilled craftsman had spent a whole week making it to order and decorating it beautifully with a pair of swans—a symbol of love. Everyone surrounded the korovai with awestruck looks and admiring sighs.

"The swans," said Irina, entranced. "They're so cute."

Roza smiled. "I'll give them to you."

"Really?"

Single women received wedding korovai decorations as symbols of future wedded bliss. Irina seemed oblivious to that particular custom, though.

As Lev watched her reaction intently, Mikhail slapped his shoulder. "So, when are you two getting married?"

"Where'd that come from?!"

“She wants to get hitched. Don’t you, Irina?”

Irina’s eyes widened in surprise. “Wh-what?!”

“Well, you wanted those swans, right?”

“Huh?” It was now obvious Irina really wasn’t aware of the custom.

Mikhail turned his attack on his friend. “What about you, Lev?”

“He’s all for it, I’m sure,” Roza said. “You saw them with that sash, flirting away!”

“Irina was giving me grief!” Lev protested.

Irina’s voice rose sharply. “No! I was punishing Lev for ogling you, Roza!”

“We humans call that ‘jealousy,’” Mikhail interjected.

Panic seized Irina, her face flushing hot red all the way to her pointed ears. Semyon and the other cosmonauts saw that as a prime opportunity to jump in with more teasing.

“So, after this historic marriage between cosmonauts, we’ll attend a historic marriage between a human and a vampire! It won’t be just the world watching that—it’ll be the universe!”

“Where will the honeymoon be? The moon? Maybe Mars?”

“I don’t suppose you’re *already* engaged, are you?”

Irina trembled with mortification and rage. She bared her fangs, hitting her boiling point. “Shut up! I’ll *never* marry a human! It would spoil my bloodline... disgrace my species!” Her furious cries rang out around them, completely incongruous in such a celebratory setting.

Lev shrugged them all off with a grin and a chuckle, but he didn’t think Irina had to be *quite* so harsh about the prospect.



Wondering just how fully her reaction reflected her real feelings, Lev glanced at her, curious. When she noticed, he received only a scathing glare.

“Well then, let’s prepare to serve as witnesses!” he said.

Irina pulled her sash on, cheeks puffed into a pout. “I’m doing this for Roza,” she muttered.

It was nearing eleven o’clock. A military brass band tuned up as the wedding’s official start time approached. The ceremony wouldn’t begin immediately, though. Zirnitran weddings were preceded by a unique custom called the “vykup,” during which a groom overcame several trials to reach his bride. If he couldn’t prove his love, he wouldn’t make it to the marriage registration.

The vykup was an important aspect of the official witnesses’ responsibilities. It was Irina’s job to help Roza set her trials, and Lev’s to help Mikhail through them. Mikhail would head through the Wondrous Wonderland toward where Roza waited, but he’d need to overcome the trials to get there.

Lev was nervous. He’d seen the vykup unfold at weddings, but he’d never been a key player, and the entire world was watching. He wondered how that struck Irina. She, like him, was experiencing this for the first time. When he spotted her under a parasol, shaded from the sun, her face was stiff and twitchy—clearly she was just as anxious as he was.

Mikhail and Roza, on the other hand, prepared with easy smiles. They were the stars of this wedding, and as their friend, Lev was intent on ensuring that everything went without a hitch.

When the clock struck eleven, the brass band played a fanfare to mark the start of the wedding, and Gergiev appeared at the Wonderland palace’s entrance to give opening remarks. “My beloved comrades! People of the world! We’re gathered here today for the wedding of two Zirnitran heroes—Comrades Mikhail Yashin and Roza Plevitskaya. Let’s celebrate the marriage of these two exceptional cosmonauts!”

At Gergiev’s gesture, Mikhail and Roza made their grand entrance. They bowed gracefully to the audience, who showered them with applause.

“Next, let me introduce our official witnesses, whom I’m sure you all know

well—Comrades Lev Leps and Irina Luminesk!”

Lev and Irina walked out with cheerful expressions, standing beside Mikhail and Roza respectively. The crowd again burst into cheers. It wasn't every day that they saw the four cosmonauts together, and media reps fought fiercely to snap the best pictures.

In terms of politicking and propaganda, Lev knew that the Zirnitran leaders would see the wedding thus far as a huge success. Still, he couldn't help feeling dubious about distracting people from the essence of space development. He was almost despondent at the cosmonauts' position. On the other hand, he couldn't show those feelings at an event like this, so he wore the bright expression required of him.

Gergiev was obviously unaware of Lev's emotions. “People of the world, have you heard of our traditional ‘vykup’?” the supreme leader inquired, jumping into an explanation.

This opening ceremony would be all Gergiev. The bride and groom needed to wait until after registering their marriage to make remarks. Their witnesses would give speeches at the reception, during which they'd introduce the bride and groom and share stories about them.

Since today was the Wondrous Wonderland's grand opening, the wedding ceremony was held outside, rather than in the palace as originally intended. A special stage especially for the occasion had gone up in front of the palace.

When Gergiev's remarks ended, it was finally time for the vykup to begin. Roza was in an exhibition hall some 500 meters from Mikhail, while Irina waited on the path as a kind of trial supervisor. Lev and Mikhail would leave the palace, overcome Irina's trials, arrive at the exhibition hall, and bring Roza back.

The brass band began playing a proud air force march to spur Mikhail on.

“Come on, let's do this!” Lev cried.

With that, he and Mikhail headed down the path toward Roza. Since Wondrous Wonderland had been designed to represent the Zirnitra Union, it was divided into states and countries like a giant map. Crossing from one state to another, the groom and his witness saw Irina waiting for them.

The vampire twirled her parasol and glared sharply at Mikhail. “What do we have here? Is it true you wish to marry Roza, Mikhail?”

She was like a cheeky, impudent sprite from a fairy tale. Lev didn’t know whether the marching band’s buoyant music or Irina’s own nerves had inspired this act, but she was running with it.

“Don’t think I’ll let you get to her *that* easily.” Irina giggled. “First, you’ll have to prove your love through three trials.”

“I accept your challenge!” Mikhail declared, standing tall. “I’ll overcome your trials with a love even deeper than the cosmos!”

“Such fiery passion! Very well, prepare yourself.” Irina revealed a white lace handkerchief with three red kiss marks. “Which of these lipstick prints are Roza’s? If you don’t choose correctly, pack your bags and head home!”

“Hm...”

Mikhail appeared to fall into deep thought, but he was really just acting. In truth, he already knew the answer. A groom who failed his vykup normally just paid the supervisor a fine, but given the worldwide audience, every part of this wedding had been planned from the start.

Irina herself had left lipstick prints on the handkerchief earlier. “I’ve never kissed anyone,” she’d muttered nervously when the time came, but Roza had assured her that she just needed to press her mouth to the fabric. She applied the vampire’s lipstick, after which Irina had puckered her lips like a little bird and pecked the handkerchief.

“Oh no! They’re crooked!” she’d cried. When she noticed Lev watching, though, she chuckled the lipstick at him. “Go away!”

Mikhail pointed to the correct lipstick print. “That one there is Roza’s!”

“Urgh!” Irina stamped her foot in frustration. “We aren’t done yet! The trials ahead are *much* harder!”

There was no need whatsoever for Irina to play this “mischievous sprite” role, but Mikhail seemed to enjoy it. “Who is she, Baba Yaga?” he asked, chuckling.

Crossing into Wondrous Wonderland’s next “state,” Mikhail turned to Lev and

spoke from the heart. “With one trial down, I’m one step closer to marriage. It’s such a strange feeling.”

“I can’t even imagine,” Lev replied. He wondered whether he’d get married someday—and if so, to whom—and glanced at Irina, who was walking ahead of them. Instantly, a recent memory overshadowed those thoughts. *“I’ll never marry a human! It would spoil my bloodline...disgrace my species!”*

“Now, are you ready for your next trial?” Irina twirled her parasol and pointed at twenty lemon slices arranged on a table. Underneath each slice was a name card, and only one was Roza’s. “Surely a man as loving as you can overcome a few sour experiences? Come then, Mikhail! Find your love,” Irina said, straightening up.

“Do it for love!” shouted Semyon and the other cosmonauts watching from the sidelines.

Mikhail looked at the lemon slices, hesitant. “Lev, which is hers?”

“Hm...” Lev mulled it over. It was all another act, however. Finding Roza’s name on their first try wouldn’t be very entertaining, so they’d planned to make a few intentional mistakes. “How about *that* one?”

Driven by Lev’s confidence, Mikhail ate the sour lemon slice, revealing the name underneath: Irina.

The vampire scowled at the groom and his witness. “Oh, you want to marry *me* now, is that right?”

Mikhail shoved the vampire’s name card at Lev. “*You* marry her!”

“S-sorry,” Lev stammered.

The spectating cosmonauts’ hoots and hollers of “Marry her!” drew laughter and applause from the crowd. Irina pretended not to hear any of it, shielding her face with her parasol.

After several more attempts, Mikhail succeeded and held Roza’s name card high. The crowd swelled, delighted.

Irina harrumphed yet again. “Well...you made one or two mistakes, but no life is free of a few tumbles. I grant you permission to proceed. But know this—the

last trial awaits!”

The two men followed the blushing vampire to the exhibition hall where Roza waited. Little by little, she and Mikhail had edged closer to this moment, and to the official registration of their marriage. What was Roza thinking as she stood there awaiting Mikhail’s arrival?

An image of Roza flashed through Lev’s mind. He recalled her trembling voice as they talked on the night she’d told him she was marrying Mikhail. She’d been alone at the jazz bar with a glass of liquor, her eyes moist with a hint of tears. Those tears surged forth later on, when she declared her intent to abandon the love in her heart and live for her homeland.

Months had passed since then, and now Roza waited in a beautiful wedding gown with a happy smile on her face. Even if the government had decided her future for her, Lev hoped it would be a bright one. He wanted that for her, and he felt that—with Mikhail at her side—things would work out fine for Roza.

When he and Mikhail arrived at the exhibition hall, Irina waited at the door with a daring grin. “Your last trial. Are you ready?”

“Of course,” said Mikhail. “Hurry up and tell me what to do.”

Irina fixed the pair with a haughty look, her eyes glimmering with hidden meaning, then knocked on the door behind her. “I’ve played my part, Mikhail, so now you’ll answer an important question from your bride. You had one for him, didn’t you, Roza?”

Wait, what?

Lev and Mikhail watched her, puzzled. This wasn’t what they’d rehearsed. The plan was for Irina to ask Roza’s birthdate and star sign. Instead, the vampire opened the door to the exhibition hall where Roza stood in silence. Though it was almost imperceptible, Lev noticed a flash of uncertainty cross Roza’s face behind the pure-white veil.

She’s just as surprised, so does that mean this is Irina’s idea? Lev wondered, glancing her way.

Irina’s shoulders were hunched, and she wore a mischievous, guilty look that said she knew the cat was out of the bag. She’d played them all.

“What awaits us now?” Lev muttered.

Mikhail snickered. “Finally, a real trial.”

Roza gazed at him, clearly nervous. “I’d like to ask a question.”

“Anything at all.”

“I’ve served in the air force all my life. Up until now, I never even considered marriage. Every day, I steered aircraft instead of stirring pots and assembled firearms over threading needles. I have no real domestic skills. If I ever give up life as a cosmonaut, I’ll have nothing to offer. What say you to that, in the moments before we wed?”

Roza was asking about something much deeper than her birthdate. Yet as the entire world watched, Mikhail accepted the uncertainty in her eyes, replying with kindness in his own. “If we find cogs in our borscht, we’ll replace them with chickpeas. You know how to use a gun, so I trust that you’ll drive away anyone who tries to harm us. And should you end your career as a cosmonaut, I’ll bring you back a moonstone. Like you, I never once thought of marriage. But as comrades who’ve flown the same skies, I believe we’ll build a wonderful future together.”

Mikhail reached out a hand and waited. Roza’s face relaxed. She stepped out the door, and he embraced her. The crowd exploded into applause and cheers.

Lev was relieved everything had gone well. He sauntered over to the supremely satisfied Irina, whispering, “You went and changed the trials, didn’t you?”

“Well, *some* of it ought to be real, right? At any rate, it’d be strange for a third party like me to give the final trial.”

The mischievous Irina had shaken everyone up, to be sure, but the earnest smiles on Mikhail and Roza’s faces as they looked at Irina made Lev somewhat grateful for the surprise.

“The groom has overcome the trials!” Gergiev announced from the special palace stage. “Young cosmonauts, march forward! Heroes of Earth, march onward! You are a bride and groom destined for happiness, brought together by heartfelt courage and pure love!”

At Gergiev's operatic announcement, the brass band began a grand rendition of "Here Comes the Bride." Mikhail and Roza linked arms and strode toward the palace, their footsteps in time with the music. Lev and Irina followed a few paces behind.

The guests watched warmly as the cosmonaut couple walked on. Cameras flashed as Gergiev awaited them, smiling. Mikhail and Roza climbed onstage and stood before the supreme leader, ready to begin their vows. They spoke simultaneously:

"I, Mikhail Yashin..."

"I, Roza Plevitskaya..."

Their voices became a chorus. "...declare my desire to marry today."

They promised to love and respect each other, and to create a warm and loving household in the future. The vows went smoothly. Once they finished, Gergiev gestured for them to write their names on the registration document. Mikhail and Roza exchanged glances, nodded, and signed. After that, it was time for Irina and Lev to inscribe their own names as official witnesses.

Lev's grip on the pen tightened, his palms sweating as he realized this would affect his friends' lives. Like him, Mikhail and Roza were among the scant few people who'd become cosmonauts in all the world's 4.6 billion years. They were comrades who'd been through the same highs and lows, and now they would walk into a shared future. Even if the wedding had been arranged for Zirnitra's sake, Lev wanted the couple to be happy and blessed.

Once he'd signed, Irina wrote her own name in neat, clear handwriting. Lev was certain that she felt the same way. Then the two witnesses stepped back behind the bride and groom.

Gergiev held the marriage certificate aloft. "It gives me great pleasure to announce this marriage! Let's give a loud round of applause to our two heroes, Comrades Mikhail Yashin and Roza Yashina, whom the new generation will know as the Cosmonaut Couple!"

The crowd again erupted into applause, and Mikhail and Roza responded with warm smiles. Enveloped in a celebratory feeling, Lev and Irina shared a grin.

The supreme leader waited for the cheering to quiet. “Ladies and gentlemen, before rings are exchanged, I wish to offer a gift from the motherland!”

Gift? What gift? Worry pricked at Lev’s heart. This wasn’t the way they’d expected the ceremony to proceed.

Gergiev scanned the gathered guests and reporters. When he spoke, his voice boomed with new passion: “Our nation’s revolutionary Rodina I spacecraft is scheduled to launch this fall. The pilot we’ve chosen for this flight is none other than Comrade Mikhail Yashin!”

Lev’s jaw dropped at the unexpected announcement. The reporters immediately launched into chatter, while the guests clapped with fervor.

“Did you hear about this?” Irina whispered to Lev, cocking her head.

“Not a thing.”

Since Mikhail and Roza stood in front of Lev, he couldn’t see their expressions, but Mikhail’s hands clenched into fists by his sides. He was also likely hearing this for the first time. At the edge of the palace’s guest seating, Lt. Gen. Viktor was racked with uncertainty. He looked at those around him for confirmation.

Did the supreme leader make this decision without consulting anyone? Lev wondered.

Blissfully unaware of the doubts and worries swirling nearby, Gergiev went on, “The day after Rodina I’s launch, we will also launch Rodina II, piloted by a pair of cosmonauts. Those two spacecraft will rendezvous and dock in orbit!”

At that, Lev almost fell backward. Was Gergiev trying to catch up with the UK’s efforts within the UZSR’s next two spaceflights?

Yet Gergiev was far from finished. “We’ve selected Comrade Roza Yashina to be part of Rodina II’s crew!”

Roza’s shoulders shook as she glanced at Mikhail. Their expressions were tense, and there was panic in their eyes. Lev grasped for clarity despite his shock, feeling anger welling up inside him. Irina’s gaze had suddenly sharpened—she couldn’t believe what was happening either. The wedding guests, who didn’t know any better, were entirely enraptured.

“This wedding ceremony will only continue once those two spacecraft dock! The bride will spacewalk from Rodina II and enter Rodina I. That will be the trial *she* must overcome so the couple can exchange rings aboard Rodina I—then kiss to mark their vows! This will be a wedding of the future! The honeymoon will be an orbital lap around Earth, and the bride and groom’s child will belong to the next generation of cosmonauts, leading us into twenty-first century space development!”

Lev fought back the urge to vomit. He understood that the government chose cosmonauts strategically, but he couldn’t stand the idea of them using Mikhail and Roza like show ponies on such an important day. Furthermore, how could Gergiev announce a spacewalk so carelessly? Had he completely forgotten that Semyon almost died during the nation’s first attempt? He ground his teeth together, swallowing the complaints that bubbled in his throat.

“This is too much!” Irina muttered. Her lips trembled as she likewise struggled to rein herself in.

The two cosmonauts’ rage didn’t reach the supreme leader, who outranked every UZSR citizen. “We’ve designated Comrade Lev Leps as the backup for Comrade Yashin, and Comrade Irina Luminesk for Comrade Yashina!”

“Wha—?!”

Lev and Irina were beyond anger now; they were utterly stunned. Irina hid her face behind her parasol, but her rage was clear from her grip on its handle. Her fists shook with strength that threatened to snap the rod in two. Mikhail and Roza stood side by side, equally dumbfounded. Gergiev had turned their wedding into theatrical political propaganda.

The crowd of 300 Gergiev loyalists applauded the supreme leader mechanically. Gergiev absorbed the cheers, empowered, and his bald head flushed red. “Comrades!” he bellowed. “My deepest apologies, but we must postpone the rest of this wedding! I hope you can save your celebrations for when the bride and groom return from their honeymoon!”

Cheers echoed through the Wondrous Wonderland. The ceremony ended, and the lavish korovai prepared especially for the occasion was abandoned.

Lev heaved a great sigh in the warmth of the gentle spring sun. *Why is this*

kind of thing allowed to keep happening?

As soon as the cosmonauts boarded their bus, Lt. Gen. Viktor voiced his rage. “Exchanging rings during a spaceflight? Are they out of their minds?! What do they think the Space Age is?!” They couldn’t overturn the supreme leader’s decision, and everyone knew it. Viktor sucked in a breath, hanging his head apologetically. Discomfort was etched on his face as he looked toward Mikhail and Roza. “It’s completely out of my control. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine, Comrade.” Mikhail’s voice was resolute. “I’ve long wished to fly to space again, and I’m honored to be the first cosmonaut piloting a new spacecraft. I completely understand that this rendezvous and docking attempt are not only for publicity but also tests to ensure a successful lunar landing.”

“These are important roles,” Roza said, nodding. “I’ll continue to train diligently to play my part. My previous spaceflight went so badly, I’d like to restore my honor.” She’d said she would be retiring, but she was just as dutiful as Mikhail.

Semyon had been chosen as Roza’s copilot, since he was the only one who’d experienced a spacewalk. “I’ll teach you everything I know,” he promised.

It seemed unlikely that any civilian would agree to turn their wedding into some kind of space circus, but the cosmonauts were air force officers. They’d been selected from tens of thousands of hopefuls and endured rigorous training. They were the top of their field. It was their job to see duties through without their feelings or opinions getting in the way.

Of course, Lev had no idea how Mikhail or Roza actually felt. To him, though, they already seemed to have switched gears. They had dispensed with whatever shock and panic sent chills down their spines at Wondrous Wonderland and set their sights on the goal arranged for them.

Lev had mixed feelings about that. He would be Mikhail’s backup, so their positions were reversed compared to when they’d fought to sit in Mechta I. That move felt intentional on the top brass’s part. For five years, Lev had wanted nothing more than to fly again. Now he had to watch as the higher-ups selected a cosmonaut not for their abilities or hard work, but for other reasons entirely. It made him feel breathless, as though his lungs were filled with ice.

Irina sat next to Lev with her eyes closed, occasionally letting out a listless sigh. After a while, the bus departed for LAIKA44, and desolate silence descended on them all.

Most of the cosmonauts slept as the bus sped north along the highway in the middle of the night, but Lev couldn't stop wondering what he'd do in Mikhail's shoes. He imagined receiving orders to marry a fellow cosmonaut for the sake of propaganda, plus having his coveted second trip to the stars turned into a stage for the exchange of wedding rings.

Orders were final. Refusing them meant never flying again—and that was *if* you survived after a show of defiance. Soldiers fought for the sake of their employer, the very nation they lived in. However fierce the battleground or unclear the circumstances, they went forth and risked life and limb. But was the mission Gergiev had ordered at Wondrous Wonderland really worth dying for? Lev was mired in doubt.

"If you ask me, by flying all the way up there into space, you showed them that you're not chained to this nation." His father's words were carved into his heart. At the same time, as long as Lev lived in the UZSR, there was no escape.

"Hey, Lev..." Irina whispered.

"Can't sleep?"

She shook her head, then leaned in closer with a quick look around. "I can't stop thinking about the... 'weapon' we cosmonauts wield."

"The one the Chief mentioned, you mean?"

"Yeah. How are we supposed to *use* it? Four of us were there today, but we have no choice other than to do as we're told."

Lev thought back to Korovin's warning that they'd be crushed without power or authority. Right now, they were in danger of exactly that. Even so, he wasn't sure how to buoy himself up by pulling rank as a cosmonaut. He mulled over the thought, then ultimately decided he should complete this mission first.

"We can't change anything now," he told Irina. "Tomorrow, the space wedding announcement will hit the papers, and everyone will know. At present, all we can do is see our orders through and be the best backups possible."

“Right,” Irina agreed. “As their witnesses, we have to make sure this cosmonaut couple has a bright future.”

“Once we’re back, we’ll jump straight into training. Even if you can’t sleep, try to get some rest.”

“All right. Good night.” Irina closed her eyes.

Lev did the same. The bus rumbled along the roads. As he dozed, a ghastly new uncertainty occurred to Lev: Would the design bureaus even finish the Rodina?

Development of the Rodina continued without pause in April 1966. Yet “the spacecraft of the future,” as Korovin had proclaimed it, wasn’t just gigantic. It was also incredibly complex. No one had seen or worked on anything like it. And although Korovin’s successor—the First Design Bureau’s second-in-command—tried his best, the team entered developmental hell.

Nonetheless, senior Zirnitrans set an utterly merciless deadline for the project without asking for input. The team was to finish the three main systems—the spacecraft, large-scale rocket, and lunar lander—in a year and a half. A more detailed schedule soon followed:

DECEMBER 1967: Lunar orbital flight—Rodina (unmanned), lunar lander (unmanned)

APRIL 1968: Lunar orbital flight—Rodina (manned), lunar lander (unmanned)

AUGUST 1968: Unmanned lunar landing—Rodina (manned), lunar lander (unmanned)

SEPTEMBER 1968: Manned lunar landing—Rodina (manned), lunar lander (manned)

It was entirely impractical, and the engineers panicked. Even if Korovin had been conscious and healthy, that schedule would’ve been the stuff of dreams. All it did was plunge those working on the Rodina into despair. Orders from the top were final, though, so it was their job to follow through somehow.

Under those circumstances, and through much blood, sweat, and tears, the

team readied two Rodina prototypes for testing. They loaded mannequins in space suits onto the crafts and launched them. The goal was to dock fully via autopilot.

The first spacecraft entered orbit without issue, but the team lost control when it malfunctioned. They detonated the onboard explosives before the ship crash-landed on foreign soil. The second craft's rocket engine failed ignition, producing a huge explosion that engulfed even the launchpad. The damage required extensive repairs, shunting the official plans off schedule.

With both prototypes failing spectacularly, the engineering crew threw themselves into finishing another. Three months later, they attempted a third test with mannequins. The launch was successful, and the ship entered orbit, but its attitude control thrusters failed. Right after that, there was a power shortage. The malfunctions were deemed "minor," and the team continued the flight, but it proved to be a mistake on their part. Due to an unexpected atmospheric reentry angle, the prototype sank into the icy ocean. The team found holes in the craft after its recovery. Had it been manned, the crew would've died.

Basically, the Rodina was a long, long way from genuine completion.

The tragic failed tests floored Lev and the rest of LAIKA44's cosmonauts, who were still in the midst of preparations. Their legs trembled at the mere thought of boarding what would essentially be a metal coffin. There was *some* good news, though: The senior officials had held an impromptu meeting to discuss scheduling changes.

"Let's hope they delay the launch dates. And maybe cancel this whole wedding fiasco," Lev said, fingers crossed.

Irina was more worried about something else. "Why didn't they summon you to attend the meeting? Aren't you part of the Supreme Zirnitrans of the Zirnitra Union?"

Lev shrugged. "The Neglin's top brass don't like listening to the rank and file whine. It wasn't just me either—Lt. Gen. Viktor was left out too. All we can do is hope for a slight delay."

They needed the senior officials to have the sense to do the right thing.

Unfortunately, the committee's decision was thus: "Proceed per the schedule."

The cosmonauts gathered in the Training Center conference room, and Lt. Gen. Viktor read the decision, his gravelly voice thick with rage. "There will be no issues with the Rodina so long as holes are patched. The second launch's explosion did not occur during the third launch. Such an explosion is therefore no longer a risk. Autopilot caused the flight malfunctions, so they won't occur on a manned flight piloted by crew members. In short, all current issues can be solved."

None of the cosmonauts could believe their ears. The report had focused only on the third flight, and its conclusion that there were no longer serious issues was entirely unfounded. Everyone glanced over at Rodina I's pilot, Mikhail.

"Now that the flight's been announced so grandly to the world," Mikhail said, voice level, "we have no choice but to go on."

"Why don't they just postpone?" Irina asked, her sorrow evident.

Roza shook her head. "It's not that easy. The UK completed the Hyperion spacecraft, and they're prepping their own launch. We can't let them get ahead."

"This is stupid." Irina looked at the ceiling. "Why don't the people making these decisions fly the spacecraft?"

She'd put words to what everyone felt. The room fell silent.

Just then, the telephone rang. The nearest cosmonaut answered, and the longer he listened, the graver his expression grew. "Comrade Lt. Gen.!" he cried, covering the mouthpiece. "There's been an accident!"

Everyone's expressions spoke for them: *Not again.*

"What happened and where?" Viktor asked wearily.

"It's ANSA!" the cosmonaut replied.

The story of the accident spread like wildfire around the globe. Even sources in the UZSR covered it. "ANSA's new spacecraft Hyperion has erupted in flames and exploded!"

ANSA had run ground tests on the Hyperion's systems at the UK's Rocket

Launch Center, located in the space development city Laika Crescent. After the aircraft manufacturer tasked with Hyperion's development delivered the ship, ANSA engineers painstakingly made some 700 adjustments by hand. Despite that, they'd discovered that multiple components including the electric circuits and radio still needed improvements or repairs, and they couldn't complete them prior to the test launch.

On that date, ground testing progressed to a drill simulating launch leadup procedures. Personnel placed the Hyperion on the launchpad and engaged its systems. Everything went the way it would've for an actual launch, right up to the countdown. The only thing omitted was actual rocket engine ignition.

A crewless test had originally been scheduled, after which they would run another test with astronauts aboard. Several politicians asked that ANSA begin with a manned test. They felt that the test launch was low risk without the ignition. There was greed simmering beneath their request, however. Outpacing the UZSR would improve the politicians' positions in the upcoming election, so they put financial pressure on ANSA.

At that time, astronaut Aaron Fifield pointed out several issues with the spacecraft. "The three-layer hatch doesn't accommodate emergency escapes. Even under normal circumstances, it takes ninety seconds to open. And the fact that it opens *inward* is potentially life-threatening."

The aircraft manufacturer had worked so desperately to complete the spacecraft in time, they hadn't considered such emergencies. ANSA and the government convened to discuss Aaron's points, then elected to run an unmanned test to be safe. It was conducted shortly after.

During the unmanned ground test, communications systems malfunctioned and personnel noticed an unknown smell. Warning alarms rang continuously, alerting the team to the craft's high oxygen levels. ANSA paused the test for an investigation but couldn't find the oxygen's source. When they resumed, a fire broke out aboard the ship, which then burst into flames. Had the test been manned, its three occupants would've perished.

While it was fortunate that there were no casualties, ANSA assembled an investigative committee to uncover the source of the accident, unavoidably

delaying progress on the Hyperion.

Amid the commotion around the failed test, tabloid *Arnack News* boldly published the following headline: “IS THE UK PULLING OUT OF THE SPACE RACE?! HYPERION’S MANUFACTURER HID DEADLY FLAWS!”

Of course, nobody believed the third-rate paper’s so-called “scoop.” An astronaut’s death might have forced the UK to halt development, but an accidental fire wouldn’t stop ANSA from moving ahead. Exorbitant amounts of money had been poured into Project Hyperion.

Yet the accident sent shock waves through the UZSR and its engineers. The UK had money and engineering muscle. Was developing a lunar spacecraft so daunting that even *they* encountered problems they couldn’t solve? The Zirnitran team wondered whether the Rodina would even reach completion before the Hyperion.

Mikhail, Roza, Lev, and Irina were apprehensive and doubtful. They took no breaks all summer, instead devoting themselves to training. They had to be ready to respond the moment they received orders. If everything went according to plan, Rodina I and II’s manned flights would launch in the fall.

The season changed in the blink of an eye, and the leaves on the trees turned yellow. In response to a summons, Lev and the other cosmonauts crewing Rodina I and II gathered in the Director’s Office in the Training Center.

“They’ve finalized the launch dates,” Lt. Gen. Viktor told them. He rose from his chair, holding documents on the committee’s decision. “Rodina I will launch November third, and Rodina II a day later, on the fourth.”

That was two months away. They’d predicted and prepared for an autumn launch, yet hearing confirmation sent shivers down their spines.

Mikhail’s face tensed. “Have the issues with the spacecraft been fixed?”

“They’re being addressed as we speak.”

“Will they finish in time?” Roza asked, her voice low.

Lt. Gen. Viktor frowned and shrugged. “I don’t know. But if we intend to make

the most of our rival's misfortune, there's no better time."

"Wait a second," Irina cut in. "November third? The anniversary of Maly's flight?"

Lev gasped, astonished. He wasn't alone—Mikhail, Roza, and everyone else in the room shared his shock. November 3, 1957 was the day Maly, one of the UZSR's test dogs, had become the first animal to achieve spaceflight. In 1966, Rodina I would launch on the same date the tragic hunting dog traveled to space and became one of the stars.

This infuriated Lev. The senior officials were showing no concern for human life. They evidently saw cosmonauts and dogs as the same. "Are they serious?! Hyperion only just blew up!"

Lt. Gen. Viktor crossed his arms, nodding. "Supposedly, they used ANSA's accident report to improve the Rodina. Concentrated oxygen levels and sparks from wiring caused the Hyperion fire. The Rodina's been rewired with better-insulated material, and they've removed substances likely to overheat, so they assume there won't be issues."

"We don't just need to worry about fires! Anyway, are you saying the Rodina would've been inadequately fireproofed if the Hyperion hadn't exploded?!" Lev knew shouting about this was pointless but unleashed his rage nonetheless. Then he gasped, realizing who he was talking to. "My apologies, sir!" he shouted, lowering his head in regret.

"At ease. It looks like you could use some stomach medicine too." Lt. Gen. Viktor fell back into his chair, and gloom filled the air.

"If only the Chief were here," Semyon muttered, breaking the silence.

While hospitalized last year, Korovin had told them, "If we launched it now, it'd be doomed... Leave it to me—I guarantee it'll succeed!" He'd said that, if he had a year, completing the Rodina was feasible. The cosmonauts wanted nothing more than for the Chief to recover, but it seemed more and more like he'd go on sleeping eternally.

Irina looked down, her face sorrowful. "No one here could do anything without him. It was always 'Chief this' and 'Chief that.' He worked so hard he

broke himself.”

Korovin’s own desires had driven him, but there was no doubt he’d been under incredible pressure. Shouldering that responsibility must’ve been both physically and mentally taxing.

Lev thought back to his last conversation with Korovin in the hospital room. The Chief had said not to worry and that he would complete the Rodina in time, and then he had entrusted Lev with the dreams of his youth. “Continue your flight,” he’d said, encouraging Lev to chase after his aspirations.

If Korovin could see the mess they were in now, though, he might fall straight back into a coma. The defective Rodina was far from complete, and while the cosmonauts heard all kinds of depressing news about the spacecraft they would fly in, they still hadn’t laid eyes on it.

A realization dawned on Lev. “Wait. Has anyone here actually *seen* the Rodina?”

Nobody had.

Korovin wasn’t working on the Rodina. If he had been, though, he would already have invited the cosmonauts to come assess it. The exact chain of command around the Rodina wasn’t clear, as everything was so covert. Perhaps the personnel actually creating the spacecraft weren’t in contact with the cosmonauts.

In that case, Lev had to take the initiative. “I want to visit the spacecraft to check it out myself. Aaron Fifield from the UK did the same with Hyperion, and his observations saved lives. If we find pressing problems, we might buy time to fix them.”

Mikhail nodded, but he wasn’t entirely convinced. “Good point. Will they even let you access someplace so secure, though? We may be cosmonauts, but we’re technically outside direct development. They may prohibit access entirely.”

The First Design Bureau was located some twenty-three kilometers northeast of Sangrad, and it wasn’t in a closed city like LAIKA44. With it being a military development center, however, entry was strictly regulated. Lev knew that much

—although he didn't really want to say it, he'd have to use leverage to get in.

"I'm a national hero, a cosmonaut, vice-director of the Cosmonaut Training Center, and part of the Supreme Zirnitrans of the Zirnitra Union." He jabbed a thumb at himself. "The nation put those weapons in my arsenal. They won't oppose me for *using* them sometimes."

Irina's eyes lit up. "Then I'm going too!"

Lev turned to Lt. Gen. Viktor. "Comrade Lt. Gen., permission for the backup cosmonauts to inspect the Rodina's development site?"

"Granted." Viktor thumped his own chest. "Might as well use my own 'Hero of the Union' status as a weapon to get you there."

He contacted the First Design Bureau immediately, and Lev and Viktor's "weapons" proved to be marvelously effective. The second-in-command who'd taken the wheel in Korovin's absence agreed to grant them entry. Although their request surprised him at first, he had a change of heart upon hearing their reasoning and practically begged them to visit. Perhaps the situation was more desperate than they'd thought.

The First Design Bureau was in a city on the edge of a deep forest inhabited by moose and porcupines. Before the war, it had been a center of arms manufacturing, but Korovin had since reorganized and repurposed the spot for space development.

After arriving, Lev and Irina changed into work coveralls and then followed the chief engineer through high-security steel doors into a factory. There, they first saw the "spacecraft of the future" with their own eyes.

"So, this is Rodina," said Lev. *The ship that will travel the stars to the moon.* The thought shot through his body like a bolt of lightning.

Rodina was seven meters in length, far larger than a Mehta spacecraft, and consisted of three compartments. Lev and Irina were in awe, but the chief engineer—whose hair was turning white—got straight to the point. "We can't keep up with all the adjustments and repairs!" he wailed. "I'm so sorry!"

The low-level engineers developing the ship gathered around Lev and Irina, heads bowed apologetically. Lev didn't intend to attack or blame the team,

though. They weren't adding fuel to the fire—the problems were the absence of leadership, inadequate budget, and impossible orders from high above. Lev knew the engineers were giving their utmost, and he wanted to acknowledge their efforts.

“Please, stand tall,” he said. “We’re all comrades-in-arms. We share the goal of reaching the moon. Irina and I are here because we’d like to assist you!”

“Lev and I flew into space thanks to your efforts,” Irina added kindly. “We’re grateful for all your work. Let’s do our best to safeguard the upcoming spaceflights.”

At those words of encouragement, the engineers’ dejected faces brightened.

Now, let’s figure out the issues, Lev thought.

Despite their enthusiasm, the cosmonauts realized how bleak things were as soon as they took a look at Rodina. On top of that, the chief engineer briefed them on a tidal wave of flaws that hadn’t yet been addressed.

“Th-there are *that* many?” Lev asked in disbelief.

“Whenever we fix one thing, something else stops functioning. It never ends.”

Inspecting the machinery overnight, Lev and Irina uncovered even more issues.

“What the heck’s going on with this spaceship?!” Irina spat as she worked, her face smeared with dark grease.

“Wasn’t this all supposed to be fixed when we ran the unmanned test?” Lev asked. He wasn’t about to scapegoat the engineers, but he was nearing the end of his rope.

“When the delivery deadline arrived, we had no choice but to say Rodina was finished,” the chief engineer admitted, his voice raspy and face haggard. “Then Korovin’s acting successor told the central committee we could fix any issues that emerged during the flight.”

The energy drained from Lev’s body. Things had completely collapsed in Korovin’s absence. “Well, let’s continue. We need to make a plan, or we’ll be looking at dire consequences.”

Lev recognized that assessing Rodina would take ages. He contacted Lt. Gen. Viktor and informed him that the backup cosmonauts would return when they finished. Then he asked the chief engineer to prepare two beds in the Design Bureau team's lodgings. That done, Lev and Irina painstakingly looked at each and every component of the ship, driven by their impatience.

Problems kept piling up. The heat shields, the airproofing, the components' ability to detach upon reentry. Each individual type of sensor—the optical sights, attitude indicator, gyroscope, computer control system, rendezvous and docking sights, and probe navigation system.

Lev and Irina didn't even have time for leisurely lunches. They munched on hard pieces of bread as they worked day and night. It took a whole week, but they finally finished the inspection.

Unfortunately, counting the Rodina's issues left them stupefied.

"This is really bad," Lev muttered.

There were 203 known problems. Some were minor, but it was still beyond awful. Lev and Irina were sleep-deprived, hungry, and on the verge of collapse.

"We'll bend over backward finding ways to fix everything!" the chief engineer said, but his face was pale.

There was simply no way to know how many issues the team could address in two months. With this many problems throughout the Rodina, crewing a flight would essentially be suicide.

"What do we do, Lev?" Irina asked.

"We have to convince them to give us more time."

Lev asked the chief engineer how the senior officials oversaw the First Design Bureau's work. It turned out that, since Korovin had fallen into his coma, not one senior official had visited to inspect Rodina. In short, the Neglin alone had concocted its flight schedule in ignorance of the Design Bureau's actual progress.

Ultimately, Lev had only one thread of hope: Surely if the higher-ups knew how bad things were on the ground, they'd need to reconsider their plans.

“Irina, let’s write a report to push the central committee to revise the current schedule.”

Simply listing the two-hundred-odd issues would have little effect; the committee members didn’t know enough about aeronautics to understand them. Instead, Lev and Irina summarized each problem so even laymen could clearly and easily understand its danger. They made sure to highlight every single concern. The more they wrote, the more deeply they despaired, but it was something they had to do. Those at the top needed to realize the recklessness of their plans. After two days without sleep, they finally finished their report. Neither liked looking at it, given what it revealed.

“All right, let’s clear this with the rest of the team,” muttered Lev.

The backup cosmonauts were completely exhausted, but they wished the engineers good luck and headed back to LAIKA44, where the cosmonauts and engineers gathered in the Training Center’s conference room to see Lev and Irina’s report. It shocked them all.

“I intend to submit this to the central committee,” Lev said.

“If it doesn’t trigger a committee meeting, that’ll be pointless,” Lt. Gen. Viktor pointed out.

In these circumstances, the UK would’ve scheduled a meeting so that those developing the spacecraft could speak with those handling the bigger picture. Such opportunities for communication didn’t exist in the UZSR, however.

The cosmonauts’ end goal was to convince Gergiev himself. If they mailed their report, it would probably be disposed of before ever reaching him. Attempting to deliver it directly to the Neglin would also see them turned away with hardly more than a word. Gergiev had a soft spot for Lev, but all he wanted to hear from the national hero were travel stories and praise for Zirnitra’s efforts. The supreme leader wouldn’t entertain complaints about the state of space development or engineering struggles.

“Could anyone use this report to demand a delay that allows the Design Bureau team to improve Rodina?” Lev wondered. The only person with the clout to do so was seemingly Korovin.

“Should we ask the Delivery Crew...?” Lt. Gen. Viktor asked somewhat reluctantly.

Sending messages to higher levels of government through a third party was standard. And if the cosmonauts’ report reached party leaders not merely as a development team petition but a Committee for State Security memorandum, the Rodina’s schedule was sure to be questioned. The Committee for State Security’s Delivery Crew oversaw military and government affairs—and there was the Delivery Crew’s director to consider. He’d held a grudge against Gergiev ever since the supreme leader usurped some of his power. If the cosmonauts gave him the means to undercut Gergiev, he’d be all too happy to do it.

“But even if we did, do we know anyone in the Delivery Crew who’d pass the report on?” asked Roza.

“That’s the problem,” Viktor replied.

“I know someone.”

Everyone turned to Lev.

“I can’t talk about it, but I can take care of it,” he added.

A Delivery Crew agent had once been assigned to disguise herself as the dorm matron and surveil the cosmonauts. She later accompanied Lev and Irina on their trip to the UK—sans disguise this time. The agent currently worked in the Sangrad headquarters. Since she was difficult to reach, Lev contacted her successor, stated that he had an emergency, and strong-armed them into a call.

“It’s always trouble with you, isn’t it?” Natalia asked him.

Lev had just explained the situation and made his request. He could picture her troubled expression on the other end of the line.

“Even just passing along documents that could interfere with state affairs is dangerous. You realize that, don’t you?”

“I’m begging you! Our comrades’ lives are at stake!”

Desperate as Lev was, he was certain she would help. He’d once been put in solitary confinement for assaulting Vice-Director Sagalevich, and Natalia had managed to get him permission to visit Irina on the day of the vampire’s

spaceflight. Besides, as dorm matron, Natalia had cared for the cosmonaut candidates and cooked them delicious meals daily. She wouldn't simply abandon Mikhail and Roza.

"Please, Natalia!"

"How many times do I have to tell you? I'm not Natalia! That was a fake name I used undercover."

"You'll always be Natalia to me. And everyone's complaining that the borscht's gotten worse since you left!"

"Damn it, Lev," she muttered. After a beat, Lev heard her sigh through the receiver. *"Fine, I'll pass your report along."*

"Thank you!"

"But you must understand, that's the most I can do."

She knew as well as anyone that passing on the document might not change anything. Even so, the cosmonauts had no other choice.

It was the beginning of October, almost a month before Rodina I's launch. ANSA finished investigating the Hyperion incident and announced the project's long-awaited resumption. The news sent shock waves through the upper ranks in Sangrad.

A central committee document entitled "Rodina I and II's Planned Flights" arrived, and the crew and backups gathered in the Training Center conference room. Lev felt fear and uncertainty in the pit of his stomach as he looked at his copy, wondering whether the schedule had changed.

"November 3: Rodina I launches with Mikhail aboard. November 4: Rodina II launches with Roza and Semyon aboard immediately after Rodina I passes over the Albinar Cosmodrome. Rodina II makes orbital lap. Rodina I alters course to close distance. Rendezvous, followed by docking. Roza performs spacewalk, transferring from Rodina II to Rodina I. Rings are exchanged, followed by kiss. Team returns to Earth."

The dates hadn't changed at all; the plans were just more concrete. The

central committee also noted the outcome of their discussion of Lev and Irina's report, "Known Issues With Rodina." They'd voted almost unanimously to continue as scheduled—the lone "nay" came from the First Design Bureau's second-in-command.

"We failed..." Lev murmured.

He and Irina slumped in disappointment. They'd tried their best, and the Delivery Crew had indeed helped force the committee into an impromptu meeting. In the end, the cosmonauts hadn't overturned the committee's schedule. The power of national authority crushed the report they'd poured their blood, sweat, and tears into.

"We can't do one last unmanned test launch?" Mikhail asked, his expression grim.

"We're jumping straight into manned flights due to budget issues. And now that ANSA's resumed their efforts, we apparently can't postpone things," Lt. Gen. Viktor replied. A vein on the side of his head bulged as he crumpled the document in his fist. "Delaying the space wedding would require a major accident, like the Rodina exploding before launch."

That might save the cosmonauts, but engineers' heads would roll in their place.

Irina heaved a deep sigh. "Perhaps I've misunderstood you this whole time, and it's not just vampires humans happily treat as nothing. They seem just as awful to their own species."

As a test subject, she had been prepared to die for her dream of flying to the stars. Yet circumstances were different now that Mikhail and Roza's lives were on the line for the sake of propaganda and the Space Race.

Gergiev was behind it all.

Lev had heard that Gergiev was distraught when Maly the test dog died in space. Was he still that same man? Had the long years and political struggle changed him? Or had that story been a lie from the start, little more than a convenient anecdote to paint him in a favorable light?

Frustration and anger churned Lev's stomach. "Are we no better than hunting

dogs?!” he growled, full of rage he couldn’t direct. “Giving our lives for the nation’s sake, just like Maly?!”

No one spoke. The air in the room grew oppressively heavy.

“Let me say one thing, Lev.” Mikhail’s voice was calm. “You shouldn’t operate under the assumption that we *can’t* survive this flight.”

Lev gasped. “You’re right. I...I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. We’re making an extremely dangerous attempt, no doubt about it.” Mikhail walked to Irina, fixing her with a level gaze. “Irina, I think I finally understand how challenging the unknown really feels. During your spaceflight, you were prepared to die. For that, you’re truly great.”

“Wha...?” The sudden compliment caught Irina off guard, and she was momentarily flustered. “Hmph! I just sat in the cabin. It wasn’t all that incredible.”

“Still, the world sees you as a preeminent cosmonaut. And you vowed to more than 3 billion people that you’d visit the moon with Lev, didn’t you?”

Irina stared down at her hands, floundering. “I-I completely forgot about that. It was a slip of the tongue!” she stammered.

“I see. Be that as it may...” Smiling, Mikhail leaned down and whispered something into Irina’s ear.

Her embarrassment instantly peaked, and she flushed red. “What?! Say that one more time and I’ll bite you!”

“All right. Consider my lips sealed.” Mikhail raised his hands in mock surrender. Irina sat with her head ducked, her expression concealed behind her hair.

What in the world did he say to her? Even if he asked, Lev knew she wouldn’t tell him a thing.

He was still mulling it over when his eyes met Roza’s. She giggled.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Roza replied. “I just think Irina’s adorable. Anyway, back to the

Rodina.” Her expression hardened, and she held a hand over her heart. “I’ll keep training in order to make this flight a success,” she announced, as much for everyone in the room as for herself. “I’ll face my weaknesses and overcome my fears. Death may await me, but that’s no different from when I was a test pilot—except now, we face the world of the unknown. Right?”

The cosmonauts nodded. If there was no going back, they would push forward, even if the Rodina flights were suicide missions. Should the road ahead end, they had to remain resolute.

The moon was once a place of myth and wonder, but in the year since Diana 7’s successful soft landing, its barren landscape had become just another aspect of the everyday. The same was true of Rodina. That being the case, this wasn’t a time to be skeptical about whether it would return. It was a time to believe in their engineering comrades’ skills and ability to achieve great things, and to believe in miracles.

Lev closed his eyes in earnest prayer. *Goddess of the moon, guide us.*

Fall continued, and the rowan trees’ berries flushed deep red. As winter neared, so did the fateful date of the Rodina launches.

In mid-October, only three weeks before the first launch date, the cosmonauts began training in the Rodina. The flight would be primarily autopiloted, but everyone on the ground agreed that some manual piloting was inevitable, since there would be emergencies.

Lev telephoned the First Design Bureau’s chief engineer for an update on the Rodina’s state of completion.

“We’re making changes, but much has yet to be done,” the man said meekly.

The engineering team were doing their utmost, but they couldn’t give Lev exact details. There was no point hiding the gravity of the situation, so Lev reported it to Lt. Gen. Viktor and the cosmonauts involved. It cast a solemn pallor over them all.

In Mikhail’s shoes, Lev would’ve forced a bright smile and told everyone that everything would be all right. He had backup duty this time, though, and didn’t

want to say anything irresponsible.

Mikhail clapped to clear the air. “Well, let’s start training. If they get the ship in working order, and we screw up, all their efforts will have been for nothing.” His demeanor betrayed no hint of uncertainty.

Roza didn’t seem the least bit doubtful either. “Like Mikhail, I’m taking my duties seriously,” she declared. “There’s no autopilot when spacewalking—I’ll need to rely on my own body. This time, I’ll overcome my space sickness.”

Lt. Gen. Viktor nodded, impressed. “You two would’ve been marvelous in the Great War. I just know it.”

Mikhail and Roza exchanged tepid smirks. “I’m not sure about that,” Mikhail said.

The cosmonauts memorized their flight itineraries and began more intense training. They angled the spacecraft simulator at the end of the centrifuge’s metal frame to practice atmospheric reentry. An improper angle would subject the body to such intense pressure that it screamed for release.

They also did rendezvous and docking training. The UZSR still hadn’t achieved either, forcing the cosmonauts to copy the technical details of the UK’s success.

Mikhail, Rodina I’s pilot, was flawless in the simulator. He stayed perfectly calm throughout. “No problem, so long as the real thing listens to human instructions,” he said, wiping sweat from his brow. Although the Rodina had never been manned, everyone felt it was in extremely capable hands.

Lev, on the other hand, only managed to “pilot” the craft after multiple attempts in the simulator. He’d spent much more time training than Mikhail, but Mikhail was a far superior pilot. Lev’s failures vexed him, but Mikhail remained calm and collected.

“Relax, Lev. There won’t be any need for a backup pilot.”

“I’ll do my best to prepare anyhow. Injury and illness are still risks.”

“No. If you fly, then you kiss Roza. That’s not going to happen.” Mikhail looked dead serious, which sent Lev into a panic.

“N-no, that wouldn’t happen, right?”

“Irina wouldn’t be pleased if you cheated on her.”

“Hey, I told you—”

Mikhail smacked Lev’s sweaty head, chuckling. “I’m joking. Don’t take it so seriously.”

At that moment, Lev felt he understood why Mikhail had been selected as the Rodina’s first pilot. His piloting abilities and his self-possession vastly exceeded Lev’s. The same difference was equally noticeable between Roza and Irina. Unlike the White Rose of Sangrad, Irina didn’t even have test piloting experience. She’d achieved a lot, and she could now fly a plane on her own, but trusting her with a revolutionary new spacecraft would be difficult.

Gergiev had appointed Lev and Irina the Rodina’s backup crew because the likelihood that they’d actually pilot the craft was low. Lev wasn’t sure whether Irina had already worked that out herself. She was still training hard, and he thought bringing it up to her would only hurt her feelings. He kept the realization locked inside his own heart.

The higher-ups had entrusted Roza with a daring task: spacewalking from one craft to another. Given that there was no way to perfectly recreate the conditions of zero gravity on Earth, Roza would have to train underwater.

With Semyon’s guidance, she conducted zero-gravity training in the enormous pool, wearing a mock space suit. Irina accompanied her, an oxygen tank strapped to the vampire’s back so she could regulate Roza’s buoyancy. The two women swapped roles at set intervals, since Irina had been designated the backup for the flight.

It was tough going to begin with, but both women were natural athletes, and they adjusted quickly. Nevertheless, they were only underwater, so they could feel their weight and the water resistance. They also had safety nets—the water’s surface was right there if needed, and a team of engineers watched over them. They’d have no such safeguards during their mission. If they lost their lifelines, they’d simply float into the depths of space.

Training underwater for extended periods was grueling, and the training space suits were hot and heavy. Both women eventually grew dizzy. When they emerged from the pool and pried off their space suits, their swimsuits were

drenched in sweat. Irina—who was sensitive to heat to begin with—panted for breath, limp and exhausted.

The UZSR's cosmonaut group was almost entirely male; Irina and Roza were the only women, so it was just the two of them in the otherwise empty locker room.

"Are you all right?" Roza asked, passing Irina an iced lemon seltzer. "Here, drink this."

Irina gulped it down greedily. "Thank you." She sighed in relief, chewing the ice in the cup. "I feel life flowing through my veins again."

"Don't mention it. It looked rough for you down there."

"It didn't *look* rough. It was. I can't handle that heat," Irina muttered, setting the icy cup against her forehead and arms to cool herself. "Living with humans makes me a bit jealous. For one thing, carrying a parasol is awkward. It's also kinda lonely being the only one who can't taste anything, among other things..."

"I imagine so."

"Oh!" Irina blurted, snapping to attention as she realized what she'd admitted. "I'm not *that* jealous. Vampires are superior in lots of ways, you know! We have night vision, so I see the moon and stars about ten times clearer than you. And I can stand in a snowy field watching the aurora without feeling the slightest bit cold. And, um...I can tell all sorts of things from the mere scent of blood!"

Irina's attempts to maintain her species' fierce pride amused Roza, but she suppressed the feeling. "You know, Irina, I've wanted to apologize to you about something," she said, looking at her vampire teammate.

"Huh? About what?"

"When you returned from space, I said really horrible things—that you belonged to a cursed species and that you were no better than a dog."

Irina dipped her head in acknowledgment. "I hated you and Mikhail so much back then."

Roza nodded back apologetically. "I know. And I'm sorry."

The apology startled Irina, who waved it off. “I wasn’t exactly an angel myself. I called you something rude too. What was it again? A whirligig? A slug?”

“Neither. You called me a snow bug.”

Irina cocked her head as she racked her memory. “Snow bug? Oh, because of your hair! Now I remember. So—”

“*Slug* is a bit cruel, don’t you think?” Roza cut in.

“Well, that just shows how painful I remember it being.”

“What’s a ‘whirligig,’ anyway? Some sort of butterfly? It sounds cute.”

“No. They’re little bugs that zip around on the water.”

Roza dropped into a pout. “I rescind my apology, then!”

“Don’t you think saying someone’s ‘no better than a dog’ is cruel too?”

“Doesn’t envying humans make you *lower* than a dog?”

Irina groaned. “I don’t have to listen to a human no better than a snow bug!”

“Such impudence.” Roza sighed. “I pity Lev, given all he has to put up with.”

In response, Irina heaved a mock sigh of her own. “And I worry about Mikhail. What’ll happen when he finds cogs in his borscht?”

The pouting cosmonauts glared at each other, then burst into laughter.

“We should get back,” Roza said with a bashful smile. “I’m going to shower.” She picked up her change of clothes and began walking off.

“Hey,” called Irina, stopping her.

“What’s up?”

“Do your best out there. On the spacewalk, I mean. I’ll be cheering you on from down here.”

“Thanks.”

Irina’s gaze wavered with concern. “And don’t die.”

Roza turned to look at the vampire, gripping her clothing tighter. “I’m prepared to face death,” she said, but then her voice hardened. “But I won’t. I

promise.”

Gergiev’s so-called wondrous project continued without setbacks, like a tank crushing metal fences beneath its treads.

In the last week of October, Rodina I and II’s crew members moved to the Albinar Cosmodrome to begin final preparations alongside the facility’s personnel and engineers, as well as the First Design Bureau’s second-in-command.

Rodina I was scheduled to launch at 12:35 a.m. on November 3. During the week leading up to that date, the cosmonauts would be on standby, responding to media requests and undergoing final medical exams.

Albinar was a closed city in a rocky desert far from any other settlements. It had benefited from the space development program, growing to offer an array of facilities. There was no need for the cosmonauts to eat and sleep in cramped rooms, as Lev and Mikhail had so long ago. Instead, they stayed in a new hotel.

The hotel contained an amusement center, where the cosmonauts gathered to show the visiting reporters that they were totally at ease. They hung around a billiards table, where a cameraman wanted stylish footage of them sinking shot after shot. But Lev, Irina, and Roza missed consistently, and they could do little but shrug off their lack of skill with forced smiles. Mikhail, on the other hand, was on fire. He couldn’t have missed a shot if he’d tried. The photographer had no complaints.

As they watched him, Lev and Irina whispered to each other.

“Is he some kind of monster?”

“His confidence is off the charts.”

Immediately before the shoot began, all four cosmonauts had been summoned to an emergency meeting about Rodina. The chief engineer informed them that, even now, his team was making improvements and adjustments. That was shocking, and this was certainly no time for any of them to relax over billiards.

Their meeting with the chief engineer had started with good news. “We repaired that hole that opened during the unmanned test, and the heat-resistant exterior passed intense heat testing,” the man declared. Unfortunately, it was all downhill from there. “The solar panels are interfering with other systems, and sometimes they impede functionality. We’ll fix that in time for the launch.”

Lt. Gen. Viktor frowned in response.

Mikhail was more positive. “I’d like a list of the faults you’re aware of,” he said. “If I know them ahead of time, I’ll respond better during manual piloting.”

Although his tone was serious, he was neither attacking the chief engineer and his team nor letting them off the hook. Lev knew Mikhail was intent on succeeding as this flight’s pilot.

When it came to Mikhail’s attitude, Roza agreed with Irina and Lev. “It sometimes strikes me as strange that I don’t even know what he’s thinking,” she whispered to them.

“Even though you live together?” Irina asked.

“Well, I’m glad I married him. He’s dependable and trustworthy,” Roza replied with a small, self-deprecating shrug.

The words came as a relief to Lev, lifting a load from his shoulders. Still, in just a few days’ time, the couple would face a very unique vykup. Lev had mixed feelings about that.

When the billiards game—which Mikhail ran away with—ended, the newlyweds gave a press conference. The reporters didn’t know anything about the state of Rodina, so their questions were straightforward.

“How do you feel about participating in history’s first space wedding?”

“Very confident.” Mikhail’s tone was relaxed and polite. “As cosmonauts, we’ve done lots of intense training. The new Rodina spacecraft encapsulate the efforts of our nation’s brightest scientists and engineers. I’m certain our comrades everywhere will witness a truly wonderful spaceflight.”

That was exactly the answer expected of him.

Mikhail then exhaled, narrowing his eyes. “If I’m worried about anything,” he admitted, “it’s the ring exchange and kiss. There was no way to practice those in zero gravity!”

“Those are my main concerns too,” Roza agreed, looking a touch bashful. “We’ll have to make sure we don’t put the rings on the wrong fingers or smack into each other’s noses when we kiss!”

The reporter chuckled. “May we see the rings?”

As requested, the pair revealed their matching gold bands, which glimmered beautifully.

“When it comes to Roza’s cooking, what’s your favorite dish?”

“Her chickpea borscht,” said Mikhail with a bright, happy grin. “She’s a wonderful cook, so I have to watch my weight.”

The reporter turned to Roza with a cheeky look in his eyes. “Any accidents in the kitchen? Say, cogs in the borscht?”

“The only extra ingredient so far is love.”

Both cosmonauts answered each question politely. Lev watched the interview from the corner of the room, stomach twisting. Irina looked to be in agony as well.

She leaned in to whisper to him. “They’re coming for us next, aren’t they?”

“Just stick to the script, and we’ll be fine,” Lev replied.

When the Cosmonaut Couple finished their interview, the reporters crowded around Lev and Irina for comments.

“What a celebration! This huge moment in space is an international victory. We’re kicking off the Space Age!” Lev said conscientiously.

“It’ll be a wedding our comrades around the world can look up at and admire,” Irina said.

They ignored the dull aches in their hearts and bellies. They could genuinely smile at the press conference *after* the flight, once their fellow cosmonauts returned home safely.

When night fell, the cosmonauts gathered in a small room in the hotel.

“It pains me to ask,” Lt. Gen. Viktor said, “but I need you all to write these.”

This was the second time Lev had found himself composing his will.

“Wait!” Irina cried. “You all wrote wills before your flights?!”

It dawned on Lev that, since Irina was a test subject, the higher-ups hadn’t required her to prepare a will before her launch. Even Lt. Gen. Viktor hadn’t realized that; she’d become such a natural part of the team since then.

Viktor took it upon himself to explain the process to her. Prior to Lev’s spaceflight, those selected as cosmonauts needed to keep their role secret even from their own families. If their spaceflight failed, their will would be their last form of contact. Since Lev completed his flight, however, cosmonauts had come to see composing a will as a luck-bearing tradition.

Once Viktor gave her the facts, Irina seemed less than impressed. “The people in charge of this country really have gone crazy,” she told Lev. “I’m not allowed to write ‘This ship’s dangerous,’ am I?”

“The censors would rewrite it for you.”

“Well, if they’ll do that, I can write whatever I want.” Irina looked serious.

“Don’t,” Lev said sternly. “Write the wrong thing, and you’ll just get yourself detained for ‘fabricating falsehoods that defame the nation’ or something.”

“Fine. Show me what a good fake will looks like.”

“All right, all right.”

Talking Irina through the process, Lev glanced at the trio who would actually crew Rodina I and II. They were under heavier pressure than the backup cosmonauts. Mikhail wrote silently, while Roza heaved a sigh, her head resting on her palm. The usually cheerful Semyon had also frozen in place, eyes closed in thought.

Viktor watched over them, his expression grim. “I pray these wills end up unused and that I’ll burn them upon your return.”

The cosmonauts nodded, resolute.

Three days before the launch, the central committee showed up for a final check on the spacecraft and rockets. The top brass directing the project included engineers who'd assisted in the Mechta's development, as well as Military Industrial Council members. They were briefed on the project by those directly involved: the First Design Bureau's second-in-command, the chief engineer, the 52nd Design Bureau Chief who led the rocket's development, and Lt. Gen. Viktor.

No smiles graced the central committee's faces. Not only had they learned that Rodina had multiple issues, but they'd also been hit by a shocking announcement courtesy of ANSA that very morning.

"On the first of December, the United Kingdom will launch a manned orbital flight utilizing our Hyperion spacecraft and new large-scale Chronos V rocket!"

Arnack's government had reviewed the fire that broke out during testing and subsequently increased the next year's space program budget. That put the poverty-stricken UZSR in a tight spot. Failure was now totally unacceptable.

While the central committee conducted its final check entirely in secret, the cosmonauts planted trees behind the hotel to commemorate the upcoming flight. Planting elm saplings had been customary for cosmonauts ever since Lev's spaceflight in 1961. The act expressed the UZSR citizens' will to live with their roots in the motherland. Today, Mikhail, Roza, and Semyon added saplings for Rodina I and II. As backup crew, however, Lev and Irina didn't need to plant a thing.

Albinar had a dry climate with harsh temperature changes, but the nine seedlings planted up till now were all going strong. Seeing them touched Lev's heart. "If space development continues, perhaps one day we'll see a path lined with trees for every cosmonaut," he mused.

Irina's shoulders slumped. "I never planted one."

Since she'd been classed as a test subject, Irina hadn't participated in any preflight rituals. She'd been excluded from a preflight planting, like writing a preflight will.

“Oh no!” Lev exclaimed. “Shall we plant one now?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll just water what’s already planted,” Irina replied with a sour look. Lev passed her the can, and she went about watering the elms. “Make sure you all grow big and strong.” She grinned, then deliberately skipped Lev’s tree.

“Uh, what about mine?” Lev asked.

“Why not water it with zhizni?”

“Because it’ll die!”

The other three cosmonauts echoed Irina. “Yep. Zhizni for sure.”

Lev scratched the back of his head. “Do I really drink *that* much?”

At any rate, it warmed his heart to see that Irina—whom the cosmonauts once treated as an outcast—was now just another colleague.

When they finished planting the saplings and took commemorative photos, the group prepared to return to the hotel. Then a woman in a fur coat appeared before them. “Why, hello there, my cosmonaut comrades!”

It was Lyudmila. Her smile was icy as ever, and she held a paper bag. Lev’s guard shot up in an instant. The other cosmonauts tensed as well.

Lyudmila showed no hint of concern at the nervous atmosphere. She held her bag out to Mikhail. “A gift. Sweet, delicious chak-chak for you all.”

Mikhail nodded and took the bag. “Thank you.”

After that, Lyudmila gave them a simple briefing: “The committee’s finished checking Rodina. The flights will proceed as planned.”

The sudden news gave Lev goosebumps, but he’d expected it. The Rodina had improved since he and Irina managed to file their report, and with ANSA’s launch looming, canceling Mikhail and Roza’s flights was off the table. Mikhail, Roza, and Semyon were ready for the news, accepting it without question.

“However,” Lyudmila continued, “the committee won’t return to Sangrad right now. They’ll stay here until your return.” That was surprising. They usually oversaw the launch, then returned to Sangrad to await the report. “Perhaps

they're nervous," she added.

Lev pictured the central committee's faces, which repulsed him. He felt utter disappointment. "Why don't they cancel the launch, then?" he muttered.

Lyudmila knelt to touch the leaves of an elm. "They can't. Once the whole committee agrees on a course of action, they aren't able to backtrack. That report you pushed through stirred them up, but in the end, only one person—the Chief's successor—opposed the schedule. He's got guts, I'll give him that. I hope he isn't *delivered* somewhere he never returns from." She chuckled.

"Did you plan this marriage?" Irina demanded, glaring at Lyudmila accusingly.

"I didn't." Lyudmila tittered again. "The wedding and launch—I opposed both."

"Really?"

"Really. Comrade Gergiev wanted them badly, so I'm just giving him a hand. Still, if he'd decided to hold a space wedding for you and Lev, I would've stopped him outright."

"Why?" Lev asked.

Lyudmila tilted her head as if he should already know the answer. "The loss is immense if either of you dies," she said simply.

In other words, it wasn't worth stopping Gergiev just for Mikhail and Roza.

"Quit treating us like objects with price tags," Lev snapped.

Lyudmila giggled. "You realize it's not just *me* who would've stopped Gergiev, don't you? Oh, so many people want to use you two. You're known worldwide. Humanity's first human and vampire cosmonauts—you're irreplaceable."

Lev was silent. He despised Lyudmila's lack of filter, but he knew nothing he said would faze her.

"Well, see you all at the reception." With that, Lyudmila began to leave.

Mikhail thrust the paper bag of chak-chak back at her. "Take it back. I don't like sweets."

"A pity," Lyudmila said, taking it. "Well, I'm sure your honeymoon will be

quite sweet. Enjoy that.”

She left with a wave, and Roza glared daggers at her back as she faded into the distance.

Mikhail put a reassuring hand on his wife’s shoulder. “She can say whatever she likes. Let’s take a walk and cool our heads.”

“Good idea.”

Mikhail and Roza strode off between the trees by themselves, off toward the fields and the stream flowing through them.

Lev and Irina were at a loss. The senior officials were always worlds from the rank and file, but now even the upper ranks seemed to lack solidarity. It was all a disorganized mess. And how had the engineers fared after the committee’s inspection?

“I’m going to check the spacecraft and rocket,” Lev said, taking the bull by the horns. “You two want to join me?”

Irina and Semyon nodded, and they headed for the hangars.

On November 2, the day before the launch, the UZSR’s *Istina* newspaper ran a front-page “space wedding” special with extensive coverage and an exclusive report. It included introductions to Mikhail and Roza as well as outlines of their backgrounds, interviews, and the other cosmonauts’ banter over billiards. The reports were fact-based, but one lie stood out: the description of the as yet unseen Rodina.

“The sixty-ton ‘spaceship of the future,’ is the size of a minibus,” the newspaper stated. “It can fly eight crew members total through space.”

In reality, the Rodina weighed only thirty tons and could carry three people total.

The paper published the lie after UZSR intelligence learned that the UK had received mistaken reports that the Rodina was far larger than Hyperion. The Zirnitran government directed the *Istina*’s editors to hit ANSA with a little more angst.

In reality, Rodina was still incomplete. Not only that, but the engineering team had discovered a new malfunction during the final inspection, which forced them into unprecedented rush work replacing parts. Nonetheless, preparations continued without delay. The rocket arrived at the launchpad, and the launch entered its final stages.

At 8:30 p.m., just four hours before Rodina I's launch, black clouds filled the sky above Albinar. A light drizzle was visible through the Cosmodrome lights.

Mikhail passed his health exam without issues, locking him in as the pilot. He and Lev would board a bus for the launchpad, where Lev would meet the Rodina II group at the base of their rocket. They'd observe the launch from the blockhouse.

"This is all the exact opposite of when you became a cosmonaut," Mikhail mused as he changed into his space suit. His tone was as laid-back as always. "That was a calm spring day, and the skies were blue. I was where you are now, seeing you off."

"Yeah, the shoe's on the other foot now." Lev laughed, yet his heart swirled with worry. Could the Rodina fly? The ship had been outfitted with a plethora of emergency repairs, but Lev knew undiscovered problems still lurked aboard, awaiting the chance to emerge.

Was there no way he could stop the launch at this point? The Rodina was already on the pad. Barring an act of God or natural disaster, the launch would proceed as planned. The fateful moment crept ever closer, and suddenly, it was time for the bus to depart.

Mikhail pointed at it. "Let's go."

The pair left the changeroom. As Lev watched Mikhail descend the steps in front of him, a thought flashed through his mind: *I could push Mikhail down the stairs and injure him.*

He quickly shooed it away; it was a stupid idea. If Mikhail were injured, the backup pilot would still have to take his place. And unlike Mikhail, who was capable of perfect flights, Lev had failed repeatedly in the simulator. Their billiards game the previous night also demonstrated their stark difference in headspace. Lev wasn't confident that he could avoid a crisis if an emergency

mid-flight required manual piloting. He'd make a mistake, things would get worse, and he'd be as good as dead.

Then a second bolt of inspiration struck him. It was a dangerous gamble, though.

"Something wrong, Lev?" Waiting at the foot of the stairs, Mikhail glanced up, concerned. "You've looked rattled ever since we set foot in the changeroom."

"Oh. Uh, I think I'm nervous." Lev hurried downstairs, hiding his true fears. *Think, Lev. There's still time.*

He just had to come up with a way for Mikhail to drop out and make Lev the pilot. If he did, the wedding would be off the table, and the central committee might delay the launch for fear of losing the first human cosmonaut.

But what if they didn't? After promoting the Rodina's launch for so long, they might just go through with it minus the wedding. In a worst-case scenario, the committee might order that Irina replace Roza and the *backups* get married, so *two* cosmonaut couples would attend the postflight press conference.

That seemed totally impractical, but this was the UZSR. Lev couldn't imagine what Gergiev was thinking now that he was backed against the wall. Had Lyudmila really opposed this plan, rather than masterminding it?

His mind a storm of thoughts and worries, Lev boarded the bus. Mikhail sat in the front, Lev behind him. Their official photographer and several doctors were seated in the back. Few of the passengers knew the dangers the upcoming flight presented, so they were full of excitement.

Lt. Gen. Viktor, his face hard, passed Mikhail the small box containing Roza's wedding ring. "Don't drop it," he warned.

Mikhail took the ring out and held it up for everyone to see. "If I left this on Earth, I'd never, *ever* live it down. You know one side of Roza, but the other... Well, I'll leave that to your imagination. I wouldn't want to learn this conversation had been recorded."

It was a corny joke, but it set Lt. Gen. Viktor at ease, and laughter filled the bus. Lev, however, still couldn't relax.

The bus departed, and the tension in the air ramped up as it sped toward its destination. Mikhail stared at the ring in his hand, then closed it in his fist and lifted it to his heart. Impatience burned in Lev's chest. This was like watching the grim, sorrowful bravery of someone leaving on a suicide mission.

As they reached the midpoint of their drive to the launchpad, the bus slowed, then stopped completely. This had nothing to do with technical issues; it was just part of a ritual Lev had unwittingly started.

Mikhail put the wedding ring away and rose. "Sorry, but nature calls."

The other passengers smiled warmly, applauding as Mikhail struggled out in his unwieldy space suit. As the bus doors opened, cold, wet air crept into the bus, and the darkness outside swallowed Mikhail.

For a moment, Lev was full of indescribable terror. Unable to sit still any longer, he leapt to his feet. "Same here!" he cried.

The bus erupted with laughter, but Lev just wasn't calm enough to respond with an easy smile like Mikhail's. He rushed out the door after the other cosmonaut. The night air was foggy with misty rain, and Lev used the light leaking from the bus to guide himself behind it.

When he spotted Mikhail, who'd reached the vehicle's back tires, Lev called, "Wait."

Mikhail turned to look at him quizzically. "Nature called you too?"

"No, I..." He trailed off. He'd leapt from the bus, but he still wasn't thinking straight.

"Let's hurry up and get this tradition over with," Mikhail said, continuing toward the back of the bus.

Right then, Lev blurted out his true concern. "Please, pull out of the flight."

"You know I'm the better pilot between us," Mikhail said, his expression unchanging.

"I'm begging you. Pull out."

"If I do, *you* have to fly."

“No, they might postpone it for me. You heard what Lyudmila said. Losing humanity’s first cosmonaut could be a risk they aren’t willing to—”

Mikhail cut him off. “And if they *are* willing? You’re grasping at straws, Lev.”

“Am I? They probably *would* postpone it, right? Using a backup would ruin the space wedding.” Lev meekly tried to make his case.

Yet Mikhail bore down on him, gaze stern. “What will you do if they tell you and Irina to get married?”

How does he know what I was just worrying about? Lev’s head spun.

At that, Mikhail’s expression softened. “When we took our walk, Roza and I discussed what to do if you tried to get me to switch places with you. And you did exactly that.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry, Lev. I have tons of flight experience, and I’m ten times the pilot you are. I can fly myself out of situations you’d crash in.”

Lev had no rebuttal; he knew it was true. The rain continued to come down, wetting his cheeks and falling from them in cold droplets.

Mikhail gripped his friend’s shoulders firmly, a smile on his face. “I don’t deny what Lyudmila said. You *are* more valuable than me. That’s a fact. You’re no longer just a national hero—you’re a hero to the very planet we live on. We can’t let you throw your life away for this country.”

His eyes bored into Lev’s. *You have to live*, they said.

“Roza and I agreed that you need to stay by Irina’s side,” Mikhail continued. “She’s alone. She can’t survive on her own.”

Memories flashed through Lev’s mind of the sorrow he sensed in Irina when she was just seventeen. “*You don’t want to be seen with me, right? I’m sorry... that I’m a vampire.*”

She put on noble airs, but when she knew they’d be apart, she’d shown her pain and worry. If that same anguish struck her after this flight, who would reach out to her? Lev recalled embracing her, and that same pain lanced through his heart.

“I want you to watch over us this time, Lev,” said Mikhail. “Be our witness.”

“All right. I’ll pray for a safe trip. I’m just as worried about you leaving Roza on her own. You have to come back. You both do.”

“I promise.” Mikhail pulled Lev close, and their helmets knocked against each other. “So, does this mean you’ll hold your wedding on the moon?”

Lev chuckled shyly. “I hope so.”

“No, you will,” Mikhail said, his gaze confident. “Give me your word you will, all right?”

Lev’s expression quickly grew resolute. “I promise. We’ll go to the moon. Me, you, all of us.”



“Good. That’s the Lev Leps I know.” Mikhail’s eyes grew misty as he turned away. “Now, let’s get this done and ensure a safe flight.”

When the bus arrived, the launchpad was wet with rain. Lev and Mikhail met Irina and Roza, who were waiting for them.

Before their eyes, glimmering fantastically under the service tower’s lights, stood a three-stage rocket with a total height of forty-five meters. It was an immense, overwhelming sight up close. The 52nd Design Bureau had planned the rocket, which was dramatically larger than the one used on Mechta flights. Still, its size was nothing in the grand scheme of things—the five-stage C-I rocket for the lunar landing was set to stand 105 meters tall. Even imagining such a gigantic metal behemoth flying into the sky was no easy task.

Looking down from the rocket, Lev and Mikhail saw a group of central committee members, grim expressions peeking from underneath their umbrellas. They also saw engineers in coveralls and Cosmodrome staff. There was no sign of Korovin, though. Frustration and helplessness seared Lev’s heart.

Once Mikhail formally greeted the gathered committee members, Lt. Gen. Viktor took the reins. “Comrade Lt. Col. Mikhail Yashin!” he said, voice booming. “Your objective on this flight is a safe return! In an emergency, you may change established plans at your discretion!”

Mikhail stood at attention, saluting. “I believe in the UZSR’s technological might!” he declared.

The committee members must’ve heard Lt. Gen. Viktor urge Mikhail to return safely, but none of them uttered a word of criticism or agreement. They merely observed the proceedings with strange, unflappable severity.

Irina sidled up to Lev. “The Chief always found a way to talk those guys into doing things his way, didn’t he?” she whispered.

“They don’t seem like they’ll listen to a word we say, though.”

The committee’s stern, bearded delegate glared at them, and Lev and Irina fell into silence. In that strange atmosphere, the launch time finally arrived. Everyone participated in the customary send-off.

“Take your seats!” Lt. Gen. Viktor ordered.

They all sat, knelt, and rose back to their feet a second later. It was little more than superstition, yet something about the process was reassuring.

Mikhail had the aura of someone leaving on a mission from which they might never return. Roza rode the elevator with him to the Rodina’s hatch. They hugged on the steel platform, shared a quick kiss, and stared into each other’s eyes for a moment, their gazes full of love and care. Then Mikhail entered Rodina I.

Once the rocket launched, they couldn’t communicate with Mikhail from the Cosmodrome. The control center was 3,000 kilometers west at the Crenea Ground Control Station, part of the Center for Deep Space Communications. Beyond receiving spaceflight reports at the blockhouse, the most Lev and his fellow cosmonauts could do was watch the sky and pray for Mikhail’s safe return.

Five hundred and forty seconds after launch, Rodina I made it into orbit without issue. The cosmonauts following the proceedings from the blockhouse were relieved. Rodina I just needed to stay in orbit until Rodina II launched the next day.

Not long into the flight, however, an emergency report arrived from the Crenea Ground Control Station. “Malfunction noted. Spacecraft’s left solar panel won’t open.”

The solar panel—a known problem the engineers hadn’t addressed in time—had broken down during the ship’s first orbital lap. All the ship’s numerical data still looked normal. Nevertheless, forcing it to function on a single solar panel would halve its electrical output, compromise attitude control and orbital corrections, and make rendezvous and docking procedures impossible. Nevertheless, the flight continued. Control instructed Mikhail to manually position the craft to receive the most sunlight.

Roza put on a brave front. “It’s Mikhail. He can do it.”

Lev and Irina put their faith in Mikhail too.

Around that time, the National Broadcasting Service made an announcement

to the nation that hid the facts. *“The launch succeeded, and the flight is proceeding without issue!”*

Three hours passed. The next report from mission control sounded despondent; Rodina I’s problems had gone beyond its left solar panel. “Further complications noted. Ship has developed abnormal spin and is moving out of control.” The high-frequency radio and backup antenna had also malfunctioned, confining communication with Mikhail to the airspace above the UZSR.

Roza staggered to a chair, and Irina went over to sit beside her.

“Comrade Lt. Gen., we have to request a change in plans!” Lev exclaimed.

“Yes,” Viktor agreed. “We can’t let things get any worse than this!”

Lev and Viktor decided that the first order of business was to talk to those who could cancel Rodina II’s launch. They approached the central committee members waiting in a separate room, who denied their request.

“Preparations to launch Rodina II will continue,” the committee delegate said. “Repair Rodina I immediately.”

“Rodina I shows no sign of stabilizing,” Lev objected. “The situation’s dire. Continuing as planned is impossible.”

The committee delegate refused to listen to reason. “The plan will continue,” he repeated mechanically. “Leadership’s orders.”

He then forced Lev and Viktor out of the room.

Lev couldn’t hide his frustration. “Why don’t any of them understand?!”

The delegate had also instructed them to order Rodina II’s crew to sleep in preparation for their flight, but Roza and Semyon responded the same way: “How can you expect us to sleep?!” Neither planned to follow the order.

Everyone on the ground morosely gulped coffee as they worked all through the night, griping about the senior officials. The misty rain turned into a proper downpour. By dawn, it had become a storm.

The National Broadcasting Service made a second announcement, once again withholding the truth from listeners. *“Rodina I continues to fly without issue while Rodina II is readied for launch.”*

Lev and Viktor were still intent on having the flight called off. The chief engineer joined them, and the three started a heated debate with the central committee that ran late into the night. The committee refused to break, insisting that Rodina I see the mission through to completion.

“Couldn’t we change Rodina II’s objective to a rescue?” one member suggested. “Roza can repair Rodina I’s solar panels during her spacewalk.”

The proposal was so disconnected from reality that Lt. Gen. Viktor bristled with anger. “That’s technologically impossible. Even launching in this kind of storm is far too risky! Rodina I already strayed from its planned orbit. Repairs aren’t an option now! If you want to avoid killing one of our cosmonauts, cancel Rodina II’s launch and order Mikhail to return Rodina I immediately!”

Finally, the committee delegate gave in and telephoned the prime minister’s official Sangrad residence for Gergiev’s opinion. After a while, he returned with a response. “They’ve canceled Rodina II’s rescue operation. Rodina I will finish its flight and return home.”

“That’s what we told you to do!” Lev snapped.

“Lev!” Lt. Gen. Viktor took his arm. “Fly to the Crenea Ground Control Station immediately. You’re Rodina I’s spaceflight director now.”

“Me?!”

Viktor’s gaze was terrifyingly intense. “As Mikhail’s backup, you went through all the same training as him. No one can make more informed judgments than you! I’ll call ahead!” Without waiting for a reply, he contacted the station for permission.

“Listen, Lev,” he said afterward. “Rodina I will be outside communications range between its seventh and thirteenth orbital lap. That’s a period of nine hours—more than enough time to make it to Crenea before communications resume. As soon as you’re in touch with Mikhail, call him back!”

“Understood!”

Roza jumped from her chair. “I’m going too! I don’t need to be here if Rodina II’s launch is canceled!”

The committee delegate had other ideas. “Wait! I only said the rescue operation’s canceled—not the flight.”

“How can you still insist on that?!”

“It’s canceled!” Viktor slammed his fist on the table. “What other choice is there?!”

The delegate grimaced. “I can’t make such a major decision on my own. It requires permission from upper leadership.”

“Then go get it, and hurry!” Lev shouted, fueled by his anger.

“I’ll consider it.”

“You are beyond ridiculous!” Irina cried. Taking hold of Roza’s forearm, she opened her mouth wide and plunged her fangs into it.

“Ow!” Roza’s soft flesh split under the force, and blood gushed from the bite wound.

Everyone else froze. Lev stood in place, dumbfounded. Roza looked down at her arm in shock as blood trickled from it. Irina’s ruby eyes glared fiercely at the delegate, Roza’s blood soiling her lips.

“Roza’s now injured and unable to pilot a spacecraft,” she said. “If you insist on sending Rodina II to space, you’ll send it with the backup crew member—me. Are we clear?”

Roza’s eyes widened. The delegate seemed completely flustered.

“I said, *are we clear?!?*”

Overwhelmed, the delegate stepped back.

Irina spun toward Roza. “Go talk to Mikhail! Your voice will give him the courage to get through this!” She glanced at Lev. “That’s how it was for me.”

“I heard your voice.”

An image flashed through Lev’s mind: Irina’s teary face in the freezing, snowy plains.

“I heard you call to me... I heard it! You told me I could do it...all on my own. You said I’d be fine...doing a solo jump.”

“Irina, you...”

The vampire wiped blood from her mouth with the back of her hand, smiling.

Lt. Gen. Viktor issued a new order. “Lev, Roza, to the airfield, now!”

“Got it! Let’s go, Roza!”

They jumped on a midsize military plane with other passengers traveling to the Crenea Ground Control Station. The moment they boarded, Lev treated Roza’s shallow bite wound.

“Irina didn’t need to go that far,” Roza muttered. “The committee delegate must hate her now.”

“She never expects anyone to like her in the first place.”

Irina was a constant hassle, but Lev appreciated the way she never bowed down to anyone. At the same time, as Mikhail said, she was alone. She could open her heart to very few people.

The military plane flew 3,000 kilometers west through the wind and rain. Just before dusk, it arrived in Crenea, a coastal city on the UZSR’s inland sea. The sun glittered brilliantly as it sank behind the water. There was a two-hour time difference between Crenea and Albinar, where night had fallen already.

They sped along the roads in a military vehicle, entering an area full of giant antenna arrays that traced spacecraft communications. Inside the mission control center, Lev and Roza quickly introduced themselves to the exhausted workers on duty, who hadn’t slept a wink. Then they immediately prepared to contact Mikhail. The storm had slowed down their flight, so their next chance would be Rodina I’s *fifteenth* lap, not its thirteenth.

While the two cosmonauts waited to make contact, a host of personnel subtly readied themselves for an emergency. Experts from design bureaus and scientific institutes were drafting plans to get Mikhail home. As they did so, they discovered a huge problem: Due to its solar power issues, Rodina I could only complete nineteen orbital laps. Any more than that, and its battery would die, making a return to Earth impossible.

Lt. Gen. Viktor and a handful of committee members were heading to

Mikhail's expected landing site some 800 kilometers north-northwest of Albinar. Everyone was doing their utmost to see him return safely.

"Lap fifteen! Comms established!" a control engineer cried, urging Lev to make contact.

Lev did his best to keep his voice calm. "This is acting spaceflight director Zarya. Oven, do you copy?"

"This is Oven. I hear you. Is that you, Aster?" Mikhail responded in a placid voice, addressing Lev by his old call sign.

"It is. Deva's here too," Lev said, then gave Roza time to speak. Their call signs—Zarya for Viktor, Deva for Roza, and Oven for Mikhail—represented the sunrise, Virgo, and Aries respectively.

"This is Deva," she said. "Aster will guide you from here."

"Understood." They could hear a slight brightness in Mikhail's reply.

All right. Now time to get you home.

To return to Earth on the correct trajectory, Mikhail needed to slow the craft using the reverse thrusters at the right time and from the right position. Beyond that, the experts had prepared two potential return flight plans. The first, which relied on the ship's ion sensor, was fairly straightforward. The second was extremely difficult, and they hadn't practiced it in the simulator.

Naturally, Lev preferred the first return flight plan. He asked Mikhail to confirm that the ion sensor worked properly; Mikhail reported no issues. "You'll make your return attempt on lap seventeen," Lev explained. "Handle attitude control manually."

Mikhail brought Rodina I on track exactly as Lev directed.

"I knew he could do it!" Lev said, momentarily relieved. For some reason, though, Rodina I's reverse thrusters wouldn't work. "Was there an engine malfunction?"

Inspection revealed that the ion sensor interfered with the thrusters, rendering Lev's preferred return flight plan impossible.

"Do we have any other options, Aster?"

“We do, but it won’t be easy.”

As Lev opened documents to explain the second return flight plan, mission control staff reported, “Comms down! He’s outside contact range!”

They’d spent too much time on the first plan. Lev’s blood turned to ice as Rodina I pushed into lap eighteen of its orbital flight. Nineteen laps was the limit; the next would be their last. If they failed at this point...

“Damn it!” He slammed his fist on the table.

Roza placed her hand over his. “Regret and anger won’t turn back the clock. Stay positive.”

Lev lifted his head to look at her. His heart ached at the tears forming in her eyes.

“Give him the right instructions,” she said. “That’s all he needs. It doesn’t matter how difficult they get—he’ll make it through. I know it.”

“You’re right. If anyone can do it, it’s Mikhail.” Lev gathered himself and looked at the mission control staff. “We’ll get him home!”

The team cheered. While they waited for communications to return, Lev made sure he understood the second return flight plan. The manual controls were so complicated, Lev knew he would’ve failed. Mikhail wouldn’t, though—he was the world’s best cosmonaut.

“Comms are back!”

The announcement filled the control center with nervous apprehension.

“This is Aster,” Lev said, maintaining his composure. “The nineteenth lap’s your last chance. The Rodina’s battery won’t last any longer.”

“This is Oven. Understood.” There wasn’t even a hint of anxiousness in Mikhail’s response.

Lev’s palms sweated as he held the documents on the return flight. “You didn’t go through this procedure during training. It’s complicated, and you’ll need to leave the comms area. It all rides on your abilities.”

“Understood.”

Lev spoke slowly and clearly, careful not to make a mistake. “First, take manual control and position the thrusters. Then, before entering nightside orbit, enable KI-38 gyroscope stabilization. Forward the gyro data. Maintain the ship’s attitude. So far so good, Oven? Over.”

“Got it. Over.”

“Once you leave nightside orbit, manually fix the reverse thrusters’ orientation. Enable the attitude control subsystems, then fire the reverse thrusters. Maintain engine burn 150 seconds. If the integrator doesn’t cut the engine off automatically at that point, stop it yourself. Once you slow down, prepare for reentry.”

“Copy,” Mikhail said confidently.

“We believe in you.”

The return flight was officially underway. After Lev’s initial orders, Mikhail responded in an even tone. *“Everything’s going smoothly. Numbers normal.”*

Then Mikhail left the comms area, plunging them once more into radio silence. Roza closed her eyes and brought her hands to her heart. Everyone in the control center prayed for Mikhail as he hurtled through space. They couldn’t afford a single slipup, but they could still make it. Hope flowered within them. With nothing else to do but wait, time passed at a glacial pace.

“Comms are back!”

Mikhail’s voice came through the radio. *“This is Oven. Everything’s on track. Ready reverse thrusters.”*

His tone was still resolute and strong. He’d wrangled the disastrous spaceship into submission, and the return flight could continue.

Lev praised the man in the quiet of his heart. *No one can deny you’re truly a hell of a pilot.*

“Reverse thrusters engaged successfully,” said Mikhail. *“Integrator active.”*

“Great! Wait for shutdown and prepare for reentry!” *He did it.*

Joy coursed from the very depths of Lev’s being. Rodina I was a wreck in every sense, but Mikhail was forging ahead, his human hands wrenching the craft

back onto a path toward home.

“Prepare for descent! Take a deep breath, Mikhail!”

“Name!” Roza poked Lev’s ribs.

“Oh! His call sign...”

Mikhail chuckled. *“Hmph. This is Oven. Maybe you should take the deep breath. Over.”*

“Sorry. You’ve been incredible.”

“I owe it to you. Thanks.”

The return vessel eventually separated and began to descend. Communications would cut out again as the ship reentered the atmosphere.

“I want to send Deva a message,” Mikhail said. *“I’ve been so busy, I haven’t had a chance to eat.”*

Tears welled in Roza’s eyes. “This is Deva. You want to eat something?”

“Chickpea borscht sure would hit the spot. We’ll have some with a drink when I get back.”

“I’ll make sure it’s ready.”

Communications dropped once more. All that remained now was the landing. A hole had opened in the hull during the unmanned test flight, but Rodina I had passed heat-resistance tests and was equipped to deal with the problem—it wouldn’t happen again.

A shared sense of relief filled the control room. Some applauded Mikhail’s efforts, while others ran to Roza, offering handshakes. She accepted them with her lips pursed, holding back tears.

Lev sighed. He felt as if he’d just watched a miracle play out before his eyes. Lt. Gen. Viktor had ordered him and Roza to meet the advance team in Mikhail’s expected landing zone if reentry succeeded, and to go to Sangrad if it failed. They’d be heading to the landing zone.

“Let’s go meet Mikhail, Roza!” he said.

Tears ran down her cheeks as she smiled. “All right!”

They bid farewell to the control room staff, preparing to leave. The next day had arrived during all the commotion; it was now November 4.

A voice came through the radio. *"This is Oven."* Mikhail's communications were back. *"Something's wrong with the parachute."*

"What?!"

The joy in the room evaporated instantly. Everyone ran to their chairs in a panic. Roza gasped, and Lev jumped on the radio. "This is Aster! What's wrong?!"

"The parachute, it's... Damn it! What the hell's going on?!" They heard the first edge of fear in Mikhail's voice. The mechanical sounds of piloting were deafening.

"Calm down," said Lev. "Don't panic. Tell me what's wrong."

"The main parachute won't open!"

"But it was fine during the unmanned test!"

"It won't work!"

"What about the backup?! Try that!"

"I did, but it's no good! Why?!"

"Mikhail!"

"It's useless! The temperature's rising!"

"Mikhail! Status!"

"Put Roza on!"

Roza ripped the mic from Lev's hands. "Mikhail! Talk to me!"

"Roza, there's no t—"

That was as far as he got.

"Mikhail?!"

Communications went dead. Only Roza's cries echoed through the control room. Her intense pain and sorrow pierced Lev's very soul.

“Answer me!”

They waited and waited, but Mikhail never responded.

FROM *ISTINA*'S NOVEMBER 5, 1966 ISSUE:

Rodina I launched overnight on November 3. Comrade Mikhail Yashin, a national hero, piloted the new spacecraft. He spent over a day in orbit, not only completing a scientific experiment but also assessing innovative new technology.

On November 4, Rodina II's launch was canceled due to adverse weather, while Rodina I was ordered to return to Earth. Upon reentering the atmosphere, Rodina I had an unforeseen accident. Its parachute tangled after opening at 7,000 meters, and the craft crashed down to Earth.

The death of this exceptional cosmonaut, taken far too soon, is an immense loss to us all.

"We are devastated to learn of the loss of such a tremendous cosmonaut. Having heard from Mr. Mikhail Yashin's fellow cosmonauts of his tireless work ethic and deep passion for space, we consider him an eternal comrade. We send his widow, Mrs. Roza Yashina, and his fellow cosmonauts our deepest sympathies."

—Joint message from the United Kingdom of Arnack's forty-seven astronauts

"Mr. Mikhail Yashin's passing is a tragedy felt worldwide. He gave his precious life as a pioneer working for the sake of scientific development and the hopes of the human race. On behalf of the people of the United Kingdom, I offer my prayers to Mr. Yashin's family and the UZSR's citizens."

—Message from Sundancia Sophie Alicia, Queen of the United Kingdom of Arnack

Chapter 4: A Historic First Tragedy

Indigo Eyes

• ОЧИ ИНДИГО •

“COSMONAUT KILLED IN SPACEFLIGHT ACCIDENT.”

The report sent shock waves through the world, and condolences for Mikhail Yashin poured in.

Five hours after the accident, the National Broadcasting Service—which had previously reported that the flight was “proceeding without issue”—was forced to issue an abrupt newsflash informing the nation that cosmonaut Mikhail Yashin was dead. The UZSR’s citizens were dazed. Until that moment, they’d been virtually brainwashed, convinced that Zirnitran technology was exceptionally advanced and that accidents were impossible. News of Mikhail’s passing hammered those fragile perceptions, waking the citizens from the haze of their long-held dream.

Until now, the government had been able to hide its many failures, but concealing a tragic passing like Mikhail’s was impossible, especially since they’d so widely promoted the flight and space wedding. Instead, they covered up specific details—namely,

the issue with the solar panel and the mid-flight struggles. They publicized only what related directly to the accident: the cause of the crash.

“An investigation into the parachute landing’s failure revealed the issue to be human error rather than a system malfunction. A heat-resistant coating was applied to Rodina I after extremely high temperatures during the unmanned flight created a hole in the craft. Polymerization subsequently occurred in the main parachute’s storage area, preventing the parachute from opening. Unfortunately, the backup parachute then tangled with the drogue parachute

and came loose. The pilot consequently could not reduce the descent module's speed and collided with Earth at 150 kilometers per hour. The reverse thrusters meant to ease landing impact exploded, and damaged hydrogen peroxide containers on board burst into flames."

The whole world was side-eyeing the news, given the tragedy's magnitude. Many inside and outside the UZSR were aware of the nation's secretive nature and inclination toward censorship, so rumor and conjecture ran rampant. That suspicion rippled backward into the past, and some even doubted the achievements of Lev, Irina, and the other cosmonauts.

In an attempt to quiet the commotion, the central committee ordered Lev to helm an official Neglin press conference to discuss the accident and assuage the citizens' worries. Lev couldn't decline, although he still grieved the loss of his friend. Two days after the accident, he took the reins at the press conference, explaining "flight details"—which were, unsurprisingly, riddled with falsehoods—to press from around the world.

"Every aspect of the flight went as planned," Lev said. "After atmospheric reentry, however, the parachutes tangled and the craft collided with Earth. It was an accident—unforeseen and terribly unfortunate."

The vague explanation wasn't entirely convincing. Surely more skeptical journalists suspected that the parachute failure was really the pilot's fault, and that Lev was attempting to save Mikhail's status as a national hero. Desperate to avoid giving that impression, Lev emphasized Mikhail's piloting skills. "Comrade Yashin was perfect. He flew Rodina I without a single error. He was an exceptional cosmonaut in every respect... The best of all of us."

Lev had readied those words for his speech at the wedding reception after Mikhail returned. He'd never thought he'd speak them in such tragic circumstances.

"No one could've stopped the parachute accident. It was a terrible, unavoidable stroke of misfortune."

He chose his words carefully, not wanting to blame the design bureau engineers. Though the error had ultimately been human, the engineers had worked on an impossible schedule. The central committee, on the other hand,

had done the final check at the Cosmodrome and greenlit the launch.

“Rodina, the new ship created by our chief designer, is unquestionably the spacecraft of the future,” Lev continued, wanting to protect Korovin’s honor. The man was still comatose. Had he given the orders at the scene, none of this ever would’ve happened.

The longer he spoke, the more resentment bubbled within him. No one who’d worked on this project directly was at fault; they’d given everything they could for their country. Those truly responsible were the senior officials who’d panicked over the UZSR’s need to remain competitive.

Additionally, the parachute polymerization issue wasn’t limited to Rodina I. Post-accident inspections revealed that Rodina II suffered the same problem. If the second ship had launched—and even if Mikhail and Roza had pulled off the space wedding—both spacecraft could’ve been doomed upon returning. Avoiding that situation had been a silver lining of a sort, though it certainly didn’t feel like one.

The nation’s supreme leader had caused all this. Having become a casualty of Gergiev’s reckless plans, Mikhail was posthumously awarded the nation’s two highest honors and promoted to major general. A bronze statue was also erected in his hometown. He’d wanted none of it.

Unveiling the truth right here at this press conference would feel so satisfying, Lev thought. Yet he said only what was expected of him to keep a lid on things. “That concludes my statement on the accident.”

At that point, the reporters asked their questions. Inquiries about Roza, the planned space wedding, and the ring exchange were off-limits “out of consideration for the mourning widow’s mental health.”

The government had, as always, set the restrictions on acceptable questions. Still, Lev was truly worried about Roza. After Mikhail’s comms had cut out at the Crenea Ground Control Station, she and Lev flew to Sangrad, where they came face-to-face with Mikhail’s remains being transported from the crash site. The man’s corpse was a black lump; he’d been burned to charcoal, his face and limbs unrecognizable. Roza had let out a breathless wail and fainted on the spot.

Immediately afterward, she holed up in her hotel room at Sangrad. Irina was with her at all times, but Roza's refusal to eat concerned her. Lev wanted nothing more than for Roza to be left alone until her feelings calmed, but she was expected to attend Mikhail's funeral the next day.

Roza was resolute. She told Irina that she'd be there.

Ashen clouds filled the skies above the Neglin on the day of Mikhail's national funeral. Tears fell from the sky, and black umbrellas bloomed on the ground below. Over twenty floral wreaths were placed by various groups, including the central committee, the Ministerial Cabinet, the air force, and the cosmonauts. The mourners were of different ranks and positions, but they all shared in grieving the fallen cosmonaut.

Mourning ribbons hung from the ceiling of the auditorium where the funeral took place. Mikhail's coffin was onstage, decorated beautifully with scarlet carnations. The venue was packed with people wanting to say their goodbyes to the tragic hero, and cameras from media outlets worldwide captured the sorrowful cries that filled the air.

A military band played a funeral march to start the ceremony, and the mourners accompanied Mikhail's coffin to the UZSR's most esteemed burial ground: the Neglin Wall Necropoli. Soldiers in dress uniforms carried the wreaths, while Lev and Irina held between them a large portrait of a softly smiling Mikhail. A tank behind them transported Mikhail's coffin, with Roza walking in front. Her cheeks were hollow, and the light was gone from her eyes, but Lev felt somewhat relieved by the strength in her gait.

The march finally arrived at the Necropoli, where a huge crowd had already gathered. They set the wreaths and the portrait against the wall, and the coffin in front of the mausoleum.

Standing before the structure, Lev felt a rush of nostalgia amid his tempestuous emotions. Back when he'd competed against Mikhail to be the UZSR's first cosmonaut, they'd thrown coins into the sky right here to "pay" for a trip to the stars. Lyudmila had watched them do so, judging their worth. That was five and a half years ago. Both Lev and Mikhail had gone on to travel in

space, but one had become part of the stars above.

Lev turned his gaze to the stage overlooking the mausoleum where he'd once addressed 200,000 citizens. It was now occupied by senior officials. Gergiev stood rigid at their center, his face drained of life. He looked like a wax figure as he stared down at Mikhail's coffin. However long Lev gazed at the man, he never seemed to enter the supreme leader's field of view.

National ministers finished their formal mourning addresses, after which Lev and the other pallbearers lifted the coffin and proceeded into the Neglin's burial grounds. Historic greats and heroes had been laid to rest in this earth. Mikhail's full name and birthdate were carved on a new nameplate among them.

It was time to say farewell. They opened the coffin and removed the urn of Mikhail's ashes, which was terribly light. Carrying the urn with great care, Lev and Irina set it in the wall. Roza's gaze was desolate as she stared at Mikhail's portrait. Applause that both mourned and celebrated the fallen hero rang out from those in attendance.

Having placed the urn, Lev and Irina stood by Roza's side. Her lips quivered as she took a wedding ring from her jacket pocket and strode to Mikhail's portrait. She saluted the mourners, then placed the ring before the portrait, which she gently kissed. The rain fell in cold droplets, drenching Mikhail's widow. Water dripped from her hair as she pulled away from the long kiss, staring once more at her former husband. Tears streamed from her eyes, and she collapsed to her knees, plunging her hands forward into muddy puddles as her body shook. She sobbed through gritted teeth, her tears falling on the backs of her hands.

Irina ran to Roza, who still couldn't bring herself to stand, and gently stroked her back. The vampire's own eyes were bloodshot.

Heavy guilt weighed upon Lev. If he'd forced Mikhail to pull out of the flight, his colleague wouldn't have perished. Would Lev himself have been sacrificed then? Perhaps not. Lev knew only one thing for sure: The moment Mikhail stepped aboard Rodina I, his death was set in stone.

Why did Mikhail have to die? He did everything right. His piloting was perfect. What was all our blood, sweat, and tears for? Why did I let him do it?!

Lev ground his teeth as sorrow and rage swelled in his heart. Before he was even aware of it, tears flowed down his cheeks. Roza was drenched, but she clung to Irina and wept bitterly. Where were the people who'd done this to her? Lev's fists clenched as he looked around for those most deserving of his hatred.

Above the mausoleum, Gergiev, his inner circle, Lyudmila, and the Delivery Crew looked down on the proceedings. Not one shed a single tear. Lev could see them standing right there, yet the gulf between them and himself was hopelessly vast—he felt so far from those who ruled with guns and authority. He didn't move or scream. Instead, he bit down on his lip till it bled.

The cold and the mournful rain that fell from the skies above enveloped the cosmonauts in deep, deep sorrow.

After Mikhail's national funeral, Lev and the others returned to LAIKA44, where the customary memorial service would take place. It was usually a chance to remember the life of the deceased. Since LAIKA44 was a closed city, however, two separate services were being held—one in LAIKA44 and one in Mikhail's hometown.

The space apartments' lounge was the venue for LAIKA44's memorial service. Everyone involved in the space development program was invited, but Roza was far too distraught to attend. She returned to her apartment to rest, with Irina accompanying her.

Lev and Semyon greeted mourners at the lounge entrance, and female Training Center employees handed out korovai to visitors. Natalia's Delivery Crew successor attended, and she seemed to feel immense regret over the Rodina report's ineffectiveness. She said that, as she'd watched Mikhail march to his death, she felt that she played a part. It wasn't her fault—not in the slightest—but her heart ached over the accident that befell the cosmonauts she deeply respected. It was out of character for a Delivery Crew agent to become so shaken over a single death, but Lev thought of the woman as a comrade-in-arms.

They'd prepared a seat at the memorial for Mikhail himself. They poured him

a glass of zhizni, placing a slice of rye bread atop it like a lid and sprinkling it with salt. Then they set the glass and bread next to Mikhail's portrait. They'd leave it there until forty days after his death; at that point, he'd depart for the afterlife, and everyone would meet once more to say their last goodbyes.

The mourners gathered around, and Lt. Gen. Viktor led a toast, his eyes sunken and hollow. "May Mikhail's soul rest in peace."

Everyone raised their glasses toward Mikhail's portrait and gulped down their zhizni. Afterward, people ate kutia and blini, drank brandy, and shared their memories of Mikhail. Both the veteran and freshman cosmonauts drank more than their fill, as if driving away their fear and sorrow. Lev was no exception.

In place of the man himself, Mikhail's will occupied his seat. It hadn't been read to the public, and Roza had asked that it be displayed during the memorial service. The will was written in Mikhail's strong, neat handwriting. It described his love for Roza, gratitude to his friends, and acceptance of his potential death.

"Sooner or later, death comes for us all, like the great equalizer," it read. "But I don't fear its coming. I was born of this Earth and raised on its blessings. My death will be a step toward Zirnitra's conquest of space."

Mikhail had likely been aware of the UZSR's censors, so it wasn't clear how much of his will expressed his true feelings. The last line in particular, however, caught Lev's attention.

"As a cosmonaut, it is my ardent desire to achieve what only I can until my last breath."

Reading that reminded Lev of what Mikhail once told him: *"You're no longer just a national hero—you're a hero to the very planet we live on. We can't let you throw your life away for this country."*

Korovin had said something similar—that Lev's cosmonaut status was a weapon. He'd implored Lev to fight so that he could keep flying. But Lev didn't think of himself as exceptional, nor as someone who could live up to the expectations of a genius scientist and the best cosmonaut the nation ever knew. He felt a gaping hole in his heart at his friend's death and Korovin's absence.

The night after Mikhail's memorial, Lev couldn't sleep, so he took a glass of zhizni up to the roof of the apartment building. Cold wind nipped at the back of his neck. Soon the breath of Moroz would arrive from the north, chilling the air with each exhale. Lev rested his elbows on the steel rooftop railing, sipping his drink. LAIKA44's lights had gone out, and quiet spread throughout the closed city. All he heard was the wind whistling through the trees.

Space development had been indefinitely suspended since Mikhail's accident. The Rodina was riddled with problems, and repairing and testing them would take quite a while. Nobody knew when things would kick off again.

Lev looked at the stars and into the depths of the dark blue night, where the lonely moon's white light shone down upon him. The moon was so impossibly far away, and for the time being, he could do nothing more than simply look at it.

"Oh, there you are!" called a voice from behind him. Lev turned to see Irina, still in her air force jacket. She walked over. "You weren't in your room, so I thought you'd be here."

"What's up?"

"I just wanted to report that Roza's asleep. She ate some porridge too. I think she's a little calmer now that the memorial's over."

"That's a relief. Thanks for staying with her, Irina. I'm sure it wasn't easy."

"It's all right. That's about all I *can* do." Irina leaned on the railing next to Lev. "The moon's so pretty."

"Yeah, but that just makes Earth look even dirtier." The moon's reflection wavered in Lev's zhizni glass. "I don't know why we're even aiming for the moon anymore. If people get hurt in this stupid competition, maybe we should stop altogether. Why fight for a deceitful nation that has no chance of victory?"

Irina blinked, shocked and worried, as Lev revealed the feelings eating at him. "Lev..."

"Our dream... No, the human race's dream... Well, I think our Arnackian comrades will be the ones who achieve it."

He thought of Bart, Kaye, and Aaron all the way on the other side of the night sky. Although the UZSR had met with tragedy, the UK's manned space program showed no sign of stopping—no delays or scheduling changes.

Arnack would certainly use its bountiful budget to keep its plans moving forward. Soon enough, it would plant its flag on surface of the moon. It wasn't just Lev who thought that; so did everyone directly involved in the UZSR's space development program. It was undeniable that the pace of Zirnitran space development had slowed. The government had given a host of excuses, but it seemed as if—little by little—they were bringing the program to a standstill.



Interlude: интерлюдия

DECEMBER 1, 1966. Just a month after Mikhail Yashin's death, while Zirnitran space development was on indefinite hiatus, the UK's Project Hyperion pressed ahead with its first manned flight. All eyes were on the launch, at which ANSA unveiled the new Chronos V rocket and Hyperion II spacecraft. Hyperion II incorporated a CSM—command and service module—but not a lunar lander, which was still in development.

The daunting Chronos V stood 110 meters tall. It blasted off with a deafening roar as expected, launching its crew of three into orbit aboard Hyperion II. So long as the flight returned to Earth, it heralded the UK's Space Race victory.

However, a malfunction occurred aboard Hyperion II while it was in orbit. The astronauts noticed shaking and ignored it, assuming it stemmed from the impact of space debris. But the cause was, in fact, a small onboard explosion that damaged the hull and systems. Noticing the trouble, the Arnackian control center assigned the flight emergency status.

Circumstances were dire, repairs were impossible, and oxygen levels dropped. The three astronauts hurtling through space had no escape. Their attempts at a forced return to Earth proved futile; leaving orbit, the ship became a metal coffin and floated into the vast reaches of the galaxy. The three astronauts perished in space, their corpses irretrievable.

This historic tragedy sent shock waves around the world. ANSA's leadership held a press conference to apologize, and Queen Sundancia wept as she offered condolences. In the aftermath, the Zirnitran government sent sympathy telegrams to the families of the deceased, while Lev penned a letter on the cosmonaut team's behalf. A grand funeral was held to mourn the astronauts. After that, investigations to confirm the course of events and determine responsibility began.

Although the new Chronos V rocket had proven successful, the Hyperion

spacecraft came under fire. The model had now experienced serious failures in two successive flights. ANSA had internally investigated the Hyperion I explosion, but Arnack's government led the Hyperion II inquiry, establishing an external committee with oversight from the involved parties. The committee halted all ANSA projects until the end of the investigation.

The UK couldn't retrieve Hyperion II from the far reaches of space, so inspecting the craft was impossible. Therefore, the investigation would be long-term and far-reaching; it would look into the ship's designs and systems, the aircraft manufacturer in charge of development, and the subcontracted companies. Investigators reviewed ship component maintenance records and ran computer simulations.

ANSA had been poised to take the lead in the Space Race, yet in one fell swoop, it found itself in a serious predicament. Civilian backlash against the space program was open and harsh. Unlike Zirnitrans, who could be arrested for protesting, Arnack's citizens didn't hesitate to attack their government. They made their frustrations loud and clear.

Moreover, ANSA had long been the target of criticism for consuming vast amounts of funding. Even the Hyperion II investigation had significant costs. Protesters around the nation called for Project Hyperion's cancellation.

"The government should think harder about how it spends our money!"

"How can they possibly increase the space program budget now?!"

"What's the point of sending people to space?!"

One news program ran a special report, "A Hundred Things We Could Accomplish Without Project Hyperion," which fanned the flames of criticism further. The third-rate *Arnack News* cashed in on the disaster, running several unreliable "scoops." Headlines included "DID A UZSR AGENT BLOW UP HYPERION II?!", "PROFESSOR KLAUS, WAR CRIMINAL", and "UFO WITNESSED DURING HYPERION ACCIDENT!"

Throughout this period, a specific train of thought emerged among Arnackians: *The UZSR's space development program is stalled too. It's time for both countries to end these manned spaceflight projects and stop racing to the moon.*

Chapter 5: Last Hopes

Indigo Eyes

• ОЧИ ИНДИГО •

DED MOROZ ARRIVED in the UZSR and covered the land in a pure-white carpet. Snow and ice blanketed LAIKA44 as well, marking the start of a long, harsh winter.

Lev stared out his apartment window, watching the deep red sunset dye the vast, snowy landscape. He sipped some now-tepid lemon coffee, then tumbled into bed.

It had been ten days since a tragic accident befell Hyperion II. The investigation was still underway, and protests had erupted across the UK. Lev didn't know whether the accident had anything to do with Hyperion's computer systems, but he was worried about Bart and Kaye. Even so, he had no means to contact them, and he wasn't even sure what he'd say if he could.

What did the future hold?

The UZSR had previously treated this kind of accident as a chance to pull ahead, but this time, there were no orders to that effect. Perhaps the higher-ups *did* want to attack while their opponent was weak and simply had no ammunition.

A month had passed since Mikhail's death. The UZSR's space development program remained on hiatus. The Space Race's ceasefire had impacted Lev's everyday life; the Cosmonaut Training Center was essentially closed, and no diplomatic tasks were scheduled. Lev belonged to the Supreme Zirnitrans of the Zirnitra Union, but they'd shut him out of recent meetings. He'd heard rumors that they were discussing what to do with the space development cities.

LAIKA44, which had been built up alongside the national space development

program, had lost all its energy. Citizens began torturing themselves with jokes about the “closed city” literally closing for good, buried beneath the snow as if it had never existed in the first place.

With his sudden abundance of free time, Lev wanted nothing more than to visit Korovin, but he hung back. It would just raise suspicion if a famous cosmonaut visited an otherwise unimportant professor of no renown too often. Lev knew Korovin’s wife and daughter were looking after him. As tight-lipped as the nation was about the man’s identity, the Training Center would receive word if his condition changed at all.

Still, Lev wondered, why doesn’t the government consider cooperative development?

If there’d been no rivalry with the UK, Korovin could’ve focused on his projects without pushing beyond his limits. Would both nations have avoided their respective tragedies then?

“Too late for that,” Lev muttered, sinking deeper into depression as he considered all that could’ve been.

As the lonely winter swept the country, Lev felt as though the ice and snow were burying him. He tried looking at his aerodynamics textbook, but none of it sank in, and he was left idly sipping his coffee.

There was also the matter of the next day’s importance. December 12 was the date Irina had flown to space. The day should’ve been commemorated, but it wasn’t because the UZSR considered her flight secret. In contrast, April 12—the date Lev flew into space—was now a public holiday: Cosmonaut Day. On this day each year, Lev received presents from around the world.

Irina shrugged off the prospect of being celebrated. She claimed she didn’t care and certainly didn’t want *Zirnitra* honoring her anyway. Still, Lev hated the discomfiting exclusivity. So, each year, he found some way to mark Irina’s flight.

He couldn’t do anything outrageous as far as festivities went. He sometimes sent Irina flowers and perfume, knowing she enjoyed interesting scents. Other years, he did his best to fulfill any request she had. She never asked for anything particularly grandiose. Last year, he took her to a movie called *A Most*

Resourceful Man, a hit slapstick comedy that had 70 million Zirnitrans rolling in their seats.

At the movie's conclusion, Irina had let out a bored yawn. Her review was simply, "Humans are so stupid." She'd cackled throughout the film, though; Lev saw her crying with laughter during a scene where a character slipped on a banana peel. He hadn't wanted to hurt her pride, so he kept his observations to himself.

This year, though, Lev had no idea how to commemorate Irina's achievement. They were still in the middle of Mikhail's forty-day mourning period, and Irina had been looking after Roza all along. Would she even *want* to celebrate her spaceflight at a time like this? On the other hand, perhaps Roza didn't need to be coddled. She didn't smile often, but she'd at least recovered to the point of doing her own shopping.

Those thoughts swirled in Lev's head as night fell. He decided to ponder them over a meal, standing up just as the doorbell rang. He opened the door to find Irina. She looked as though she'd just returned from shopping—snow dusted her hair and clothes, and she carried a paper bag.

"Er, what is it?" Lev asked.

"I know you humans don't like the cold, so I went shopping for you." Irina thrust the bag toward him. It contained a few cans of fish.

"Oh. Thank you," Lev said, admittedly more perplexed than grateful.

Irina hadn't done this in about two weeks. After Mikhail's funeral, Lev had been consumed by feelings of loss and guilt, and he'd locked himself in his apartment. Irina visited occasionally to deliver food and alcohol.

"I was out shopping for Roza anyway," she always said. Regardless, her gestures lifted Lev's spirit. Thanks to her, his heart had healed to a degree.

But why was she shopping for him now? Did he look more out of sorts than he thought? Something was definitely on Irina's mind as she brushed snow off her clothes.

Lev thought for a moment, then gasped. "Oh! Money for the groceries! Hang on a sec."

He was a little ways down the hall when Irina stopped him. “Wrong.” Her tone was cold and a touch lonely. She stepped into his apartment, closing the door behind her. “You haven’t forgotten, have you? You usually ask me every year.”

Her spaceflight. “Of course I remembered,” Lev replied. “It’s just...I wasn’t sure what to do this year.”

“I had a hunch you’d feel that way.” Irina lowered her gaze. When she spoke next, her voice was bashful and hesitant. “There *is* something I want to do this year. I’d like to fly the night skies in a trainer plane, and I want you to pilot it.”

“Uh...that’s a bit sudden. How come?”

“Because I want to fly, so take me already.”

“That’s not even an answer.”

Irina glared sharply at Lev. “The Chief told you to keep flying too.”

“I don’t think he meant in a trainer plane.”

“Ugh!” Irina stepped closer to Lev. “Enough splitting hairs. I want to look at the nighttime scenery. So, will you fly me or not? Which is it?”

“I mean, I want to, but all training’s suspended for now...”

“You’re the Cosmonaut Training Center’s vice-director *and* a member of the Supreme Zirnitrans of the Zirnitra Union. Surely you have the authority to do something about my request.”

“That’s how badly you want to fly?”

Irina nodded resolutely, her scarlet eyes betraying her yearning for the skies. It was the first time she’d asked Lev for something this insistently. Perhaps she had a reason she couldn’t tell him outright.

Lev hadn’t piloted a trainer plane in over a year, and he had some concerns about flying on a snowy winter night. Still, he doubted he’d have trouble if they just cruised through the air.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll talk to the mechanics.”

“Good! We’re doing this!” Irina’s expression softened, her tone cheery. “Just wait here. I’ll get ready.” With that, she turned and left Lev’s apartment.

Powdery snow fell on the plains around Lev and Irina as they rode a military 4WD to the airfield some ten kilometers from LAIKA44. There, Lev told a mechanic to ready a plane for what he called an impromptu evening training session. The mechanic was naturally suspicious. Although Lev felt guilty for doing it, he pulled rank, flashing the badges on his uniform and essentially forcing his way past the mechanic by calling the training “top secret.”

“I only did that because today’s a special occasion,” Lev said as he and Irina approached the trainer plane.

“Yeah, yeah.”

At first, Lev hadn’t been that excited about the prospect of flying. As soon as the scent of jet fuel wafted into his nostrils, though, his melancholy dissipated. He hopped into the pilot’s seat, Irina in the seat behind him. As he turned the trainer gently onto the runway, the engine rumbled through his body, and it seemed if the clouds filling his heart suddenly cleared.

He attached his oxygen mask and turned on the radio. “Irina? Good to go?”

“Ready when you are,” Irina confirmed, calm and collected.

They’d first ridden a plane like this two weeks after they met. Irina could barely open her eyes back then due to her fear of heights. Lev was struck by how far she’d come.

“Come on, let’s do this!”

The wheels rolled along the ground, the engines blasted, and the plane shook as Lev put it into full throttle and pulled the yoke toward himself. The trainer lifted its nose and fought gravity, taking off into evening skies full of flurries.

“Where should I go?” Lev asked.

“Wherever you want.”

Lev just wanted to enjoy the skies. He didn’t fly far, merely circling the airfield.

Irina kicked the back of his seat. “Higher!” she commanded.

“How high?”

“Just higher! Above the clouds!”

“Roger that!”

Lev pulled the yoke again, pointing the plane upward, then engaged the afterburner. Flames spewed from the exhaust, and the trainer plane picked up speed, rapidly rising into the sky. It shook off Earth’s gravity and pierced the clouds hovering over the airfield below. Beyond this layer was another world where the moon and stars glimmered brightly.

Their bodies lightened as Lev slowed and leveled the plane. “Here we are.”

“Just fly.”

He did as Irina directed, soaring freely without a destination in mind. Clouds beneath the plane dropped their snow on the world below, but nothing blocked their view of the stars above. They could move freely in the vast sky, which stretched on for an eternity. Flying through it refreshed Lev and freed his mind, body, and soul.

Here in the sky, the chains that constrained him in daily life melted away. He realized it’d been ages since he felt free of them. His once-frozen soul shuddered, drawn to the silver moon that hung in the air, beckoning to him.

Irina interrupted his thoughts. “How’s it feel, Lev?”

“What do you mean?”

“To fly.”

“Aren’t *you* the one who wanted to fly?”

“Yes. For you.”

“For me...?” Lev looked at her in the plane’s rearview mirror.

Her deep scarlet eyes stared back. “I wanted you to remember how much you loved flying and yearned to visit space.”

He finally understood what she hadn’t been able to tell him in his apartment, and it touched his heart. He sat still, listening.

“Remember when we first met?” Irina went on. “I was afraid of heights, but

you forced me up into the skies. And just like that, I was fine—as if the moon cast a spell on me.”

Irina took out her necklace, holding the lunny kamen to the sky. The moonstone glowed pure blue, bathed in the moonlight.

“You told me I could take this to the moon myself. I live by those words.” Her eyes reflected the stars. She blinked as they grew damp. “I wanted to go to space, and I didn’t care if I died. But when I met you, I decided to live. I used to hate humans, but then I met humans I liked—here in the UZSR and in the UK too. My dream’s changed a little. I still want to go to the moon with you, but now I want everyone else to be there with us. The Chief, for instance. I wanted Mikhail there too.”

“I feel the same. I really do.”

Mikhail had sent his final transmission from about this height. Lev didn’t want to imagine it, yet he couldn’t help picturing the descent module. How anguished must Mikhail have felt?

He and Irina were silent for a while. The only sound was the trainer plane soaring through the skies.

“Hey, Lev...” Irina’s voice was no louder than a whisper.

“What is it?”

“When Mikhail told me I was ‘truly great,’ he whispered a joke in my ear.” Her gaze dropped bashfully to her hands. “He said he and Roza would be happy to serve as witnesses when you and I got married.”

“He did?” Heart aching, Lev thought back to the days he’d spent with Mikhail. He wouldn’t be their witness. Not now, not ever.

In the rearview mirror, Irina was on the verge of tears. “The Chief should never have fallen into a coma, but he did. Mikhail should never have died, but now he’s gone. Space development’s at a standstill. Maybe we’ll never go to the moon. But I...I refuse to accept that.”

Much as Lev wanted to reject it too, he couldn’t resume space development on his own. “It’s pointless to speculate, but things might’ve gone better if the

Chief were all right.”

Lev and Irina last spoke to Korovin after the unmanned probe Diana 7 achieved a soft landing on the moon. Lev never imagined then that surgery would leave the Chief comatose. If he awakened into the current space development crisis, would he have a solution no one thought of? Lev knew that thought was delusional, but...

“Hm?”

Delusional? The word gently tugged on a thread of memory. *Half-baked delusions... The hospital!*

Lev yelped as the realization hit him.

“Don’t yell like that!” Irina shrieked back. “You’ll rupture my eardrums!”

“Sorry!” Lev said. “But do you remember that book the Chief showed us? The one he said had cutting-edge ideas for reaching the moon?!”

That jogged Irina’s memory immediately, and her jaw dropped. “*My Fight for Health?!?*”

“That’s the one! The Chief hid it under his pillow. He said he didn’t want it falling into the wrong hands. Do you know what happened to it?”

“If Vice-Director Lev himself doesn’t know, how am I supposed to?”

She had a point. If the notebook had been discovered—and publicized, not secretly incinerated—there would’ve been a noticeable reaction. Yet Lev had heard nothing. The launch had proceeded as the government directed, and Rodina I met its demise.

So where was Korovin’s notebook now? A whole year had passed since he’d shown it to them, and staff must’ve cleaned his room since he fell into the coma.

As Lev fretted, Irina kicked his seat. “Theorizing about it won’t get us anywhere. Why don’t we check the hospital out ourselves?”

“Good idea. The fact that he used a pseudonym will be a headache, though.”

If Lev telephoned, hospital staff wouldn’t be able to confirm he was really Lev

Leps. Whatever he asked, they'd likely feed him lies about the nonexistent "Professor Smirnoff." He and Irina had no option but to make the preparations and head out themselves.

"Irina, we're going to Sangrad."

Even if the notebook was no longer in the hospital, the Chief's wife or daughter might've brought it to his home nearby. Korovin had invited Lev and Irina over several times. The cosmonauts had talked and eaten with his family, who trusted them.

Fortunately, with space development suspended, they had plenty of time to look into this. They just needed to make sure they returned the day after tomorrow for the memorial service forty days after Mikhail's passing.

Lev and Irina explained the situation to Lt. Gen. Viktor the next morning, and he granted them permission to visit the hospital. They left LAIKA44 early, reaching the Sangrad facility around noon. Holding flowers, they hurried to "Professor Smirnoff's" room, where Korovin rested.

In front of the door stood a muscular young man—a Delivery Crew agent on guard duty. His presence betrayed the fact that Professor Smirnoff was a VIP, but it also meant no civilians could search the Chief's room or endanger him. Lev only told the agent that they'd come to visit. He watched the cosmonauts carefully as they passed him and went inside.

Korovin lay in bed, his eyes closed. He'd lost a lot of weight and looked noticeably older. Twelve months had elapsed since his operation left him comatose. A coma patient's chances of recovery dropped considerably if they didn't regain consciousness in a year. The Chief appeared to be sleeping peacefully, as though he might wake and speak at any moment, yet he also looked like he might go on sleeping for the rest of his life.

That thought pierced Lev's heart, but now wasn't the time to wallow in sorrow. He looked around the room, knowing he had a mission to complete. There wasn't a book or document in sight. The notebook had been under Korovin's pillow a year earlier, but the moment someone changed his bedding, they would've found it. It had either been removed from the premises or

thrown out when the room was cleaned. Either way, Lev and Irina wouldn't find it in this hospital room.

Lev set the flowers near the window, and he and Irina knelt at Korovin's side. The leather bag containing the coin Irina had given the Chief hung by his pillow.

"It didn't work," Irina said, and Lev gently placed a hand on her back.

"He's alive now because you gave him that."

"I suppose." She put her own hand to Korovin's forehead and said affectionately, "Wake up soon."

Lev clasped the Chief's once-thick hand, which had atrophied with time. "I'm so sorry about Mikhail's accident," he told Korovin.

He wanted to say they'd come for his notebook, but he knew there was a chance the Delivery Crew had bugged the room, so he gripped Korovin's hand tighter instead. *We still haven't given up. We're taking matters into our own hands now. I hope you understand.* Lev sent these thoughts through the ether, but Korovin didn't stir from his silent repose.

Repressing the loneliness creeping into his heart, Lev stood. "Well, we may as well ask if the guard knows something."

"Right."

Telling Korovin they'd visit again, they left.

The guard might not know who Smirnoff actually was, so Lev posed his question in a roundabout way. "Were books in this room moved during a cleanup? I'm looking for one I loaned the professor."

"I don't know," the agent replied curtly. His answer would likely have stayed the same even if he *had* known. The secret to a long life in the UZSR was speaking no more than necessary.

Lev and Irina walked toward the exit, mulling over their next move. The answer came to them quickly.

"To the Chief's house," they agreed.

Hopping into a taxi, they headed north. Korovin's home was about a half hour

away by car. They didn't know his telephone number, so all they could do was turn up.

In the middle of Sangrad's space district was a giant monument depicting a rocket launch. It stood 107 meters tall and symbolized the first step in conquering space: the launch of Parusnyĭ One, history's first satellite. The engraving read *"What's impossible today is possible tomorrow,"* a quote from K. E. Tikhachevsky, father of space science. A relief on the pedestal depicted scientists, engineers, and cosmonauts, along with the space dog Maly.

The human-vampire pair disembarked the taxi in front of the monument, heading to Korovin's residence with their collars high and trapper hats hiding their faces.

Korovin's detached house, a two-story affair with a garden, was a rarity in Sangrad. Massive apartment blocks were far more common. The government had awarded it to the chief designer for his space development achievements. Most scientists preferred dachas, but Korovin enjoyed living in Sangrad.

They rang the doorbell, greeting Korovin's family through the big wooden door. There was a moment of silence before it swung open. Korovin's daughter, Xenia, poked her head out and peered at them.

Recognizing Lev and Irina, she broke into a grin, although they'd arrived without warning. "Hey! How's it going?"

Shouldn't she be a little more confused about our impromptu visit? Lev wondered.

Xenia's light-brown hair was tied in a neat ponytail, and she wore refined, metropolitan clothes. She was shorter than Irina, and her freckled face made her look younger than nineteen. Still, the courage in her posture showed she was every bit the chief designer's daughter.

"It's so cold out! Come on inside." Xenia ushered them into the hall, then stared at them with wide, blinking eyes. "What's wrong? Is this about Dad?!"

After apologizing for stopping by uninvited, Lev explained that they'd just visited Korovin in the hospital and mentioned their goal. "We're looking for something. I don't suppose you've heard the title *My Fight for Health*?"

“Oh!”

“Is it here?!” Irina asked before Korovin’s daughter could say another word.

Xenia nodded meekly. “Dad asked us to keep it at home till after the operation, so we promised to hold on to it.”

It wasn’t thrown away! That’s great. Lev fought back his impatience, asking politely, “Could we look at it, if you don’t mind?”

The chief designer’s daughter gazed at them like a scientist observing her experimental subjects, then nodded. “Sure. I think even Mom would be all right with you two seeing it.”

Lev and Irina nodded gratefully and followed Xenia.

The grand living room adjacent to the hall boasted the newest television and radio models, as well as a piano. A ceramic dog also sat on a shelf; Korovin once revealed that he’d bought it to remember Maly’s flight by. At that point, Irina told him to buy a vampire bust next. The joke had noticeably flustered the Chief.

Xenia passed the living room, taking the wooden staircase to the second floor. Its interior brought to mind Western architecture. The open, spacious design and large windows were a far cry from Zirnitran norms. They walked down a shaded, inviting corridor and arrived at a study. As Xenia opened the door, a unique and musty smell filled their noses.

The Chief’s daughter directed Lev and Irina to a black leather sofa. “The book’s hidden. Hang on a sec.” She headed to the back of the study.

Lev and Irina sat and looked around. This was the one place in the house that truly felt like the realm of a space scientist. About 3,000 books filled the huge, sturdy floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in an orderly fashion. They were a mix of old and new texts, mostly covering space sciences, astronomy, aeronautics, and engineering. There were volumes unrelated to science too, such as a vast collection of Arnackian literary magazines, art pieces, and cultural relics.

Among those were texts censors had banned. Possessing such books was generally a crime, but Korovin had claimed that all creative pursuits facilitated scientific development, so his ownership was overlooked. Korovin even had a

few magazines with the Bees emblazoned across the covers; he'd likely gotten away with that for the same reason. Lev and Irina knew for a fact that he also owned official Bees records.

Film cans were piled next to the bookshelf. Lacking time to visit the theater, Korovin had bought a projector so he could enjoy movies at home.

"Here it is!" called Xenia, returning with Korovin's notebook in her hands. She narrowed her eyes for a moment. "Mom and I have no idea what to do with it. We wanted to give it to someone, but Dad always grumbled about how we were 'surrounded by enemies,' so... Anyway, take a peek!"

"Thanks so much, Xenia!"

"Don't mention it. I'll be downstairs. Feel free to look at anything you like. This study's a treasure trove of photo albums, isn't it? There's foreign typewriters and other dangerous stuff up in the attic at the far end. Dad apparently had them brought here in secret, hidden among spaceship parts. Still, they're just for show. Amazing what you can do when you've got that kind of power. He didn't use them, though. Oh, if you want a drink, feel free to come downstairs. We've got some bland and soggy snacks too!" The girl finished rattling things off like a machine gun and skipped away, zooming down to the first floor.

Lev couldn't help chuckling at just how politely he'd tried to address her. "She's as keyed up as always. I'm glad this situation hasn't gotten her down."

Irina nodded. "I like her. She's so easy to talk to." Since the moment they'd met, Xenia hadn't feared Irina in the slightest. In fact, they'd bonded as fellow Bees fans in no time.

Lev looked at the notebook in his hands. It was time to find out just what Korovin's so-called "delusions" were. Opening the volume to the first page, the cosmonauts read a shocking introduction: *"The Zirnitra Union's space development program suffers from a debilitating illness. Unless drastic measures are taken to heal it, all that awaits it is death."*

Did the title *My Fight for Health* refer to the health of the nation?

"Come on, turn the page," Irina prompted, eyes wide.

Korovin's handwriting was strong and sharp, but the text was clear and neat, as if written for others to read. *"First of all, selfishness, greed, and ego have poisoned the large-scale C-I rocket currently in development. It will not even be capable of leaving Earth, let alone reaching the moon. I declare here and now that it's impossible to control thirty engines during the first stage of a launch. All you will achieve is an explosion. Therefore, no living creature can be allowed to launch along with the C-I."*

Lev and Irina heaved a synchronized sigh. Now they knew why Xenia wasn't sure what to do with this notebook. Korovin had participated in the rocket's design, but he pointed out here in his own hand that it wouldn't work. In leaving this notebook with his family, he'd entrusted them with a truly incendiary bombshell. Still, the Chief had fully expected to retrieve it post-surgery.

As the two of them sat there, dumbfounded, piano music drifted up from downstairs. "That's the Bees," Irina said.

Xenia must've been playing the living room piano. Compared to the way the girl spoke, her playing was calm and relaxed—and just the right volume to keep the traitorous tunes from reaching the neighbors.

As the light, easy melodies of love songs floated around them, the cosmonauts looked back down at the notebook. *"Based on the design specifications and resources I've accessed, the Hyperion spacecraft likewise contains numerous fatal flaws that could well cause accidents—and, at worst, casualties. I pray ANSA's engineers notice them in time. In any event, they won't be easy to resolve. ANSA too is subject to the whims of those who wish to use the Space Race for their own selfish gain. That increases the risk of errors and flaws, intentional or not."*

They couldn't tell what flaws Korovin had identified, but the man had foreseen problems, whether they were surface fires or orbital issues. As he slept, those very problems tragically came to pass.

So far, the book was all about the "illnesses" plaguing space development. "He's saying a manned lunar landing's impossible, isn't he?" asked Irina.

Lev nodded. "But what about his 'cutting-edge ideas'?"

With hearts full of hope and fear, they turned the page. *“My goal, however, is for the moon to be a stepping stone to Mars. I ultimately wish to achieve interplanetary flight. Here, I’ll lay out the first step in a new plan for people to reach the moon.”*

“He has a new plan, Lev!” Irina cried, slapping Lev’s arm.

Lev’s pulse quickened. He turned the page timidly, as if looking for the results of a test he wasn’t sure he’d passed. *“Project Soyuz will launch a Zirnitran Rodina spacecraft using an Arnackian Chronos V rocket. By uniting cosmonauts and engineers from both nations, we can build a bridge to the moon!”*

Team up with the UK? Lev’s hands shook. “Is he kidding?”

He looked at the ceiling, releasing a deep breath. Korovin had been secretly planning for cooperative development. Lev thought back to when he told the Chief about the promise he’d made with Bart. Korovin had said their goal was impossible. It really had been impossible—Lev got the sources of the rocket and spacecraft completely backward.

Suspicion rose on Irina’s face as she read. “This notebook... These aren’t just delusions, are they?”

It certainly didn’t seem like it. “Let’s keep reading,” Lev said. He felt overwhelmed, nearly drowning in wave after wave of shock, but he pulled himself together and read on.

The section on Project Soyuz coherently and logically outlined design specifications, but the technical details were extremely complex. Lev and Irina couldn’t decide whether they were fantastical or viable. They’d both done their best to keep studying aerodynamics, but neither was a first-rate engineer.

For a moment, Lev wondered whether *My Fight for Health* was little more than a prank, but he quickly pushed the thought from his mind. A book of “plans” with no grounding in reality wouldn’t even have made good entertainment. Korovin had poured his soul into writing this; it was essentially his last will and testament. From the way the handwriting sometimes wavered, Lev could see that Korovin had fought the pain racking his body as he wrote.

Even if Project Soyuz’s details were difficult, the cosmonauts had reason to

believe Korovin's plans could work—namely, he'd had access to UK space program resources and used them to guess at ANSA's development plans and draft design specifications. In other words, he'd basically had the Chronos rocket's blueprints on hand, so he could revise the Rodina's design with cooperative development in mind.

Yet why had Korovin gone to such lengths over such an audacious plan?

Lev imagined it was due to the discord that ran deep through Zirnitra's whole space development program. Knowing that the C-I rocket would never come to fruition, Korovin secretly abandoned it and focused on the Rodina, watching for an opportunity to strike. When the UK found flaws in the Hyperion, and senior UZSR officials finally gave up on the C-I rocket, Korovin could've announced his new plan.

"These aren't delusions at all," Lev said.

To realize his dream, Korovin had jotted down both nations' weak points and devised a way for them to band together: Project Soyuz. One might still write that off as a scientist's fantasies, except that the Hyperion accident Korovin anticipated had really happened. The one thing he hadn't expected was his own inability to regain consciousness.

"Lev," said Irina, "do you think the Chief would've put this into action after the hospital released him?"

Lev thought about it. The crux of the plan was the Rodina. Although its most recent launch had failed, the reasons for that were clear. Its engineers hadn't understood Korovin's design but had pushed on regardless. The ship had launched after they were forced to meet a deadline without leadership. Yet Korovin had promised he'd complete the Rodina, which meant that—given enough time and refinements—they could address its flaws.

That left the formation of a UZSR-UK partnership. It was no simple task, and certainly not something Lev could handle alone. Korovin had said he'd reveal everything when the time was right, but how had he intended to do that?

"He might've banked on making his move after the UK had an accident," Lev reasoned. "Still, a plan like this, so contrary to the government's current direction... Well, submitting it to the central committee would almost certainly

have provoked punishment—including removal from his position as design bureau chief.”

Irina raised a finger. “What if he was waiting for Gergiev to admit defeat? At that point, this kind of idea would’ve been an ace up his sleeve.”

“That’s definitely possible. If things went on long enough without them finishing the C-I rocket, it’d leave the nation with no choice. They’d have to give up.”

Whatever the truth was, they’d only be guessing the motives of the notebook’s author until he woke and decided to speak. Should they simply return the book to its hiding spot and pretend they never saw it?

“Both nations’ space programs have halted indefinitely,” Lev said, reflecting on how he and Irina should proceed. “They might shut down altogether if things go badly. At the very least, the UK might pick things back up again, but...”

“The UZSR’s doomed, isn’t it?”

“It may not just be the space program that dies either. It could be us.”

If the senior officials kept up their pattern of outrageous orders, there was every chance that more cosmonaut casualties loomed. Lev and Irina had to do something to keep the higher-ups from sacrificing the cosmonauts like pawns on a chessboard.

Irina hugged Korovin’s notebook to her chest, gazing at Lev with determination. “I want to make Project Soyuz a reality. That way, we can team up with Kaye and Bart to reach the moon and grant Sundancia’s wish for cooperative development.”

“I want that too. For the Chief’s sake as much as ours.”

In retrospect, Korovin’s parting words to Lev had themselves been like a will. Perhaps Korovin knew his body was at its limit, and just as he’d put the unmanned probe in trustworthy hands, he’d entrusted Lev and Irina with his plans for cooperation and a manned lunar flight.

Lev’s interpretation of the Chief’s actions might’ve been convenient, but if his hunch was right and Korovin *did* write the document for the sake of the

cosmonauts' generation, it was up to them to bring his hopes and dreams to life. Maybe the man himself would wake up and get angry that they'd jumped to conclusions about his work and taken matters into their own hands. Still, Lev was sure Korovin would forgive them. He'd pat Lev's shoulder, face red with vibrant energy, and say, "Zilant! You did tremendous work while I was away dreaming!"

With that, Lev's mind was made up. He would make the scientist's "delusions" a reality. But how?

"Irina, say we handed this notebook to the central committee as is. What do you think would happen?"

"They'd burn it."

"Right. We'd earn the ire of Gergiev and his senior officials, and the central committee would never give us the time of day again."

"How about reaching out to share Project Soyuz with ANSA? Wait—that's pointless," Irina said, second-guessing herself. "The UK's already approached *us* about working together, and Gergiev always ends the exchange by saying he'll 'consider it.'"

"Hmm." Lev's thoughts hit a dead end. He tousled his hair with his hands. "I don't think there's any doubt that our comrades in space development would agree with the Chief's plans. But..."

The specter of "national victory" still haunted the higher-ups. They wouldn't be swayed by individual ideas that diverged from the national doctrine. Such suggestions would be summarily purged.

And Project Soyuz wouldn't simply begin once they somehow got UZSR authorities on board. The UK needed to agree to cooperate as well, and the Zirnitrans' request—"Throw away your Hyperion and use your rocket to launch our Rodina!"—would likely come off as ridiculous.

The longer Lev considered the challenge, the more insurmountable it seemed. Irina crossed her arms, closed her eyes, and fell into thought. The winter sun streamed through the windows, and floating dust motes sparkled in the light. Its true owner absent, the study was silent aside from the Bees melodies

drifting in as Xenia played piano.

“It’s like the Bees’ music, isn’t it?” Irina muttered, standing and walking to the bookshelves. She picked up a magazine with the band on its cover. “So many people right here in the UZSR want to listen to the Bees, and pointless rules hold them back. The same goes for the Chief’s book and Project Soyuz. I’m sure lots of people would want to know about the realities of space development and the Chief’s project. The problem is, you can’t write about those things without censors blacking it all out.”

“Right. That’s the country we live in. They’d change the title from *My Fight for Health* to *My Health Report*, and the book would be all about how vibrantly healthy Zirnitran space development is.”

Irina cringed. “Couldn’t we take our message across the country? Tell people our own government basically killed Mikhail, and cooperative development’s our only chance of reaching the moon?”

Lev shook his head. “We’d be arrested in the first town and tried for incitement.”

“Incitement?! It’s the truth!”

They would’ve loved Korovin’s help with this dilemma, but sadly, he wasn’t there. In his place were bookshelves chock-full of expertise. Lev scanned the spines, hoping one might prove helpful. He browsed without knowing where to begin, hoping a burst of inspiration might materialize.

Then, as Lev’s thoughts entered a maze he might never escape, his eyes rested on a book penned by a sixteenth-century scholar during the Scientific Revolution. His writings expressed his support for a heliocentric system as opposed to the then-favored geocentric model, and he espoused his belief in an endlessly expanding universe. In asserting the truth of his findings, he earned the church’s ire and received the death penalty. They burned him at the stake and threw his charred corpse into a river.

That struck Lev as awfully similar to what he and Irina faced, since their goal would be an act of treason against the authorities. All told, the revolts of the weak were little more than pointless if well-intentioned whining. The weight of authority crushed them. This book had been banned after its author’s

execution, and three generations passed before it finally received the appraisal it deserved.

Lev and Irina didn't have three generations, though. They also couldn't let themselves be killed by authorities looking at things the wrong way. If they couldn't get those same authorities on board, the path to the moon would stay blocked.

It dawned on Lev that they couldn't stop at persuading those in power. He remembered unveiling the truth about Irina to the whole world during his speech—Gergiev had just reshaped the revelation in a more convenient way. Besides, trying the same thing again wouldn't work. Lev simply couldn't win on his own.

Was there any way to achieve Korovin's goal? To block the tyranny of those in power, convince them to listen to reason, and extend an olive branch to the UK? To appeal to all their comrades who desired the truth and find the way to an alliance?

As Lev thought and thought, the Bees' music from the piano downstairs tickled his mind. Could Project Soyuz spread through the UZSR the way the Bees' albums had, gaining the nation's support?

They obviously needed to publicize Korovin's secret project if they wanted it to stand any chance of success. Maybe Irina was right, and they just needed to start spreading their message, accepting that they might be tried for incitement. If they were arrested and basically burned at the stake, though, it was all over.

Just then, a free-floating piano melody stung Lev's heart like a bee. "Ah!" he cried.

There *was* a way...but it was a dangerous gamble. Lev couldn't shoulder it on his own, and it might bring everything crashing down around them.

"Lev? What's wrong?" asked Irina.

Lev hesitated for a moment, then decided he could confide in her. "I want your thoughts on an idea."

The vampire eyed him with suspicion before he cautiously shared what was

on his mind. He didn't need to lower his voice, yet he still found himself whispering. As he went on, Irina's eyes went wide, then darted around with worry. In a cramped study full of books, Lev was discussing a plot with the power to shake the whole nation.

"And that's the gist of it," he concluded. It hadn't been an especially long explanation, but he still felt parched.

Irina paced the small room with her head in her hands, muttering to herself. Evidently, she was struggling to digest the idea. After about five minutes, she turned to Lev. "Impossible," she said. "On our own, that is. The question is how to bring comrades on board for this small-scale, hush-hush 'collaborative development.'"

"So, that means *you're* on board?"

She glared daggers at him. "What did you expect? This sounds fun. Korovin himself said cosmonaut status is a weapon, right? Let's use it to make that old wreck's delusions come true."

Her words turned Lev's doubts and fears into confidence, as if success was nearly in their grasp. "Let's get to it!"

"We need Xenia's permission before we start anything," Irina pointed out.

The cosmonauts went downstairs to where the girl was playing piano.

"Excuse me," said Lev. "We have a request."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Am I playing too loud?"

"No, it's not that. It's about *My Fight for Health*."

They set about selling Xenia on their plan. Lev explained the broad strokes, and Irina jumped in where he was unclear. All that was left was to wait for Xenia's response.

"Got it," Korovin's daughter said. "I'll talk to Mom about it, but I think that'll be fine. We were just going to burn Dad's notebook if he didn't wake up."

They were astonished by how easily she accepted. "Are you sure?" asked Irina.

Xenia nodded. “You bet. Dad loved you two like his own children. He’d forgive you even if you failed—just like me. Anyhow, waiting for him to wake up might take till the twenty-first century.” She shrugged, then shook her head, mumbling, “Nah, forget I said that. No failing, all right? You have to succeed. You *have* to!”

“Of course!” Lev agreed.

“Leave it to us,” Irina said.



Lev and Irina headed back to LAIKA44 with more than they could've hoped for. En route, they discussed how best to reveal their plan to their Training Center comrades. They decided to raise the topic after the memorial service that would be held forty days from Mikhail's passing. Neither wanted to block his soul's path as it departed on its next journey.

As with his first, Mikhail's forty-day memorial service was held in the space apartments' lounge. There were only about forty attendees, including the cosmonauts, Lt. Gen. Viktor, Training Center staff, and engineers. No senior officials were present.

The food was simple, as it had been during his funeral reception. Roza had made chickpea borscht, the dish Mikhail requested over the radio from Rodina I. She'd previously been gaunt and unable to leave her room, but as the day that marked Mikhail's passing into the afterlife arrived, she seemed more at ease.

Next to Mikhail's portrait was the glass of zhizni covered with the rye bread slice. They removed the bread, and the cosmonaut's soul departed out the open window. A silvery full moon hung low in the purple evening sky, and everyone prayed Mikhail's soul would make its way to the moon he'd always longed to visit.

When the service ended, a lonely feeling enveloped the lounge. Many of the guests were mourning not just Mikhail but the space development program as a whole. They'd devoted themselves to now-lost dreams and goals, and they felt like empty husks.

Lev wanted nothing more than to rekindle the fires of passion that once powered their strides. Standing beside Irina, he announced, "I want to talk to you all about something related to the space program."

Having gotten everyone's attention, Lev and Irina closed the lounge window to keep the discussion private, then stood next to Mikhail's portrait.

"May I?" Lev asked Roza. Neither he nor Irina had told her their plan in advance, but seeing their weighty expressions, Roza nodded resolutely.

It was time to learn whether their colleagues would accept their plan. Lev was nervous, but all the same, he took out *My Fight for Health* and set it in front of Mikhail's portrait. He wanted Mikhail to see it as clearly as everyone else.

"The Chief wrote this in secret while he was in the hospital," Lev said. "It's a new lunar landing project."

A murmur rippled through the guests as they crowded around the notebook.

"His 'fight for health'?" someone said.

Everybody seemed skeptical, so Lev summarized the notebook's contents. As soon as he did, their collective demeanor did a 180, and they clamored to read its contents for themselves.

"Pulling something like that off would be an amazing achievement!" Semyon cried, beaming with excitement.

Others, however, assessed the Chief's notebook much more coolly. "The top brass will never sign off on this," one man said. "Up till now, they've constantly turned down the UK's proposals to cooperate."

"That's right," said Lt. Gen. Viktor, his expression grim. "The central committee won't approve it. They'll discard it, claiming it's not worth consideration, then immediately demote the Chief and anyone endorsing his plan. The military will also come down hard on any suggestion that the countries cooperate." His words filled the room with despair.

Irina, however, replied with a knowing smile. "We predicted that much ourselves. Right, Lev?"

"Yep. That's why we won't bring this directly to the committee." Lev sucked in a breath before going on. "We plan to turn *My Fight for Health* into a published book by the chief designer himself—the samizdat way."

His words caught everyone off guard. Publish the notebook *illegally*? Deep silence fell across the room, soon peppered by worried murmurs as people whispered among themselves.

"Are you serious?!" asked Semyon, bewildered.

"One hundred percent," said Lev. "The Chief's family granted us permission

too.”

“Yeah, but...samizdat?”

“LAIKA44’s a closed city. So long as space development’s at a standstill, no one’s coming here anytime soon. There’s no better place to covertly publish a book.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

The lounge was full of worried looks. Roza likewise watched Lev with great uncertainty. Everyone weighed in, a disbelieving air settling over them.

Lev was resolute. “We can cry all we want to the top brass. It won’t do any good. I became painfully aware of that when Irina and I tried sending them our report on the Rodina. We’ve got to change our plan of attack. This isn’t just about us as individuals—this is about how *everyone* on the ground feels when it comes to space development.”

It was then that Roza spoke up for the first time. “Do you have a solid strategy, though?”

“We’ll start by distributing the book among rank-and-file scientists and engineers. They need to understand that Project Soyuz is the only way to reach the moon. That’ll increase support. Then we’ll put the book in the hands of interested parties in cities. Once UK intelligence gets hold of it, its contents will reach ANSA and Arnack’s government quickly. If it picks up steam, it’ll be in the newspaper and discussed on the radio, and it’ll spread around the world. If Project Soyuz garners enough support before our government crushes it, the central committee and military will have no choice but to consider it seriously.”

Lev’s explanation left many unconvinced. “Is that even possible?” Semyon muttered.

“It is,” Irina declared, cutting through the doubt. “Books and music spread that way. The government gets worked up and uses censors to purge what they don’t like, but it can’t eradicate them completely. Look at the Bees. Thanks to their music, a yearning for freedom has spread across the nation. More and more young people are leery of the establishment. New waves are crashing against our borders—we’ll make the most of that sea change! And if the

government and National Broadcasting Service ban our book, or condemn it openly, they'll just make it more apparent that they don't want the truth to get out."

UZSR citizens had long since given up trusting domestic television stations and newspapers. Still, it was simple enough to gather information censors hadn't tainted by listening to foreign radio frequencies.

Lev and Irina's impassioned pleas assuaged the attendees' concerns, but they hadn't convinced everyone.

"I want to pull off the Chief's project as much as the next person," said a cosmonaut, "but this isn't a book or record. Those are complicated design specifications meant for colleagues in space development. They'll go way over laypeople's heads, and the government will claim the book's a UK conspiracy or impossible lies under some famous scientist's name. That might be all it takes. How could we expect supporters to reproduce the book after that?"

Lev nodded. "You're absolutely right. A book on complex space science *is* totally different from literature or music. If it just contains plans civilians can't make heads or tails of, can we expect it to be a bestseller? Honestly, I don't know."

A wave of disappointed sighs whooshed through the crowd.

Nevertheless, Lev's expression was sunny. "Don't worry about that, though. We've got a plan to attract ordinary citizens who lack that expertise. Our book will be a two-parter."

"A two-parter?" said Semyon, confused.

"Uh-huh. The other section's title will be *Confessions of a Cosmonaut*. We'll publish Korovin's proposal for Project Soyuz alongside an exposé revealing details of Zirnitran space development cover-ups."

"*All* the details," Irina added, cocking an eyebrow. "That includes my being a test subject, Lev's parachute landing, the fake rendezvous, and Semyon's brush with death during the spacewalk."

The lounge erupted into commotion. Semyon himself was so flabbergasted, he looked like he was choking on a pirozhki.

Lev calmed it with a hand, lowering his voice as he added, “There’s only one thing we *have* to lie about—the Rodina accident. We need to go along with the government line that Rodina I had no issues besides a parachute malfunction.” He glanced at Mikhail’s portrait, wishing he could apologize personally to the man. “Admitting that Rodina I and II had tons of issues would damage trust in Project Soyuz. For the sake of Mikhail’s honor, I’d rather the whole world know how valiantly he fought the true battle right before atmospheric reentry. But this isn’t just about me, it’s about our entire space program.” He looked at Roza, praying that she’d understand.

Her face remained hard. “How will you explain the parachute and crash?”

“We’ll say that, while the chief designer was hospitalized, politicians eager to use the space program for their own interests pushed the launch through. We won’t admit that the Chief’s still comatose. We’ll say the surgery went fine, and he’s back on his feet. He’s completely anonymous, so nobody will know the difference. And the book will include a message from our engineers that says, ‘We envision Rodina shuttling humans to space stations. We’ll make it the spaceship of the future.’ What do you think?”

“I see. Thank you,” Roza said curtly, her tone neither pleased nor disapproving.

Semyon sensed that things were wrapping up. Wiping sweat from his forehead, he posed a question to Lev and Irina. “I see what you’re aiming for, and I want people to know the truth about my spacewalk. Still...it’s one thing to say the chief designer wrote that first section on Project Soyuz, but who’ll be named as the author of *Confessions of a Cosmonaut*? Are we going to vote on someone from the team?”

“No worries.” Lev grinned and raised a finger. “I thought of the perfect candidate.”

“Oh yeah?” Semyon tilted his head quizzically.

At that point, an engineer-in-training interjected, “This project’s dangerous. You’re talking about criticizing the government. That’s incitement. You know what that means, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Lev replied. “I don’t want people to misunderstand. Irina and I are

criticizing the direction of space development, *not* the nation. That's essentially what Queen Sundancia said at the Expo—that space development *isn't* political."

"Semantics. That's little more than an excuse. There's still every chance the government will treat what you're planning as a crime."

Irina stepped forward. "That's right. It *is* criminal in this country, and anyone who pitches in with publishing this book could find themselves arrested. In a worst-case scenario, Lev and I might end up dead in an 'unforeseen accident.'" The vampire's statement shook many of the listeners.

"As cosmonauts, we face death whenever we fly," Lev said. "We all know that feeling. But make no mistake—nothing in the heavens can issue our death sentences. The guilty parties would be here on Earth." He pushed on, feeling Lt. Gen. Viktor's hard gaze. "If we keep obeying orders from the powers that be, we might find ourselves sacrificing a second cosmonaut for another reckless plan. Or maybe space development will grind to a complete halt, and snow will bury this whole city, like it never even existed. Mikhail's death would be for nothing. Will you stand for that?"

"Cooperative development will be a dream forever if we don't raise our voices and say something." Irina held up *My Fight for Health*. "The Chief poured his blood, sweat, and tears into this. Isn't it something we should fight for?"

"We aren't musicians, so we can't move people with records," Lev said earnestly. "But all of us involved in space development have a weapon nobody else has. Spaceships and rockets are the technology of the new generation! In the entirety of human history, there've only been a tiny number of cosmonauts. Let's end this stupid Space Race and pointless rivalry between nations. We can join forces with the UK and achieve a goal *everyone* holds!" The words were like a weight off his shoulders. He looked at Mikhail's portrait. "I promised Mikhail we'd go to the moon. Me, him, all of us."

Everyone's expressions grew somber as they looked at the smiling portrait, their hearts and minds in turmoil.

Crossing the room to Viktor, Lev stood at attention. "Comrade Lt. Gen., I know if we go through with this, it'll just bring you trouble as our director. We

could've done this without telling you a thing, but I simply couldn't allow that. I didn't want to betray you after everything you did for us." Lev bowed deeply, then went on. "Please grant us permission to publish this. I'll take full responsibility."

Would Viktor punch him in the face? Would he tie Lev up and drag him to the authorities? Lev was prepared for both possibilities.

"This plan of yours... You haven't told anyone else about it?" Viktor asked, his face grim.

"The only other people who know anything are the Chief's family."

"I see." Viktor was silent for a while. Then he uncrossed his arms and put his hands on his hips. He faced the group and ordered in a fierce, strict tone, "You'll forget everything Lev proposed here in this lounge. Lev said nothing at all. Is that clear?"

He wasn't granting them permission, then. In that case, they'd have to think of something else.

"Lev!" Viktor barked, taking Lev by the hair and lifting him off the ground. He glared at the cosmonaut, eyes bloodshot. "Understand this. *I* came up with the samizdat plan, and *I* suggested it to everyone here tonight! *Is that clear?*"

Lev was utterly confused. "What...what do you mean?"

Viktor's next words clarified everything: "If anyone dies for this, it's me."

"Comrade, you—?!"

"My duty as Training Center director is to make you all first-class cosmonauts. But since I couldn't protect Mikhail, and ruined Roza's life, it's also my duty to take responsibility."

"But—"

"You'll follow my orders," Viktor said, cutting Lev off. "Comrades! The samizdat plan is exactly as you heard. Those of you with wives, husbands, and children, your encouragement alone is sufficient. If you don't help publish or distribute this book, the authorities have no reason to arrest or prosecute you. If the majority gathered here decide against publishing this, we'll return the

Chief's *Fight for Health* to his family. We'll go on as if it never existed, watching orders from above decide our space program's future. Those who chose life"—Viktor picked up a zhizni bottle and filled his glass—"will meet me on the roof. *Don't* use the elevator. We'll wait for your decisions until midnight." Leaving that weighty proposal hanging in the air, he left the lounge.

Before Lev and Irina could move, Roza had already poured a glass of zhizni. "I know what Mikhail would've chosen." She took his portrait and followed Viktor, her mind made up.

Immediately after, Semyon and the graduate cosmonauts poured glasses and left the lounge. It wasn't *just* cosmonauts either; engineers and Training Center staff also served themselves zhizni, glancing at Lev and Irina. Though none spoke a word, their faces expressed thanks.

"Let's go, Irina," said Lev.

"Please tell me you'll at least let me have a glass of zhizni on a night like this."

"Just don't overdo it."

As he and Irina made to exit the lounge, Lev turned to those who remained. Many of them seemed to be weighing their options. "Nobody will force you to take part," he said. "If you choose not to, no one's going to attack you. It's up to you. I just...don't want this to end without trying to do something."

With that, they left and headed upstairs. The twelve flights to the roof were like a light physical training session. It dawned on Lev exactly why Lt. Gen. Viktor forbade them to use the elevator—each step took time, and everyone would use that time to reflect on their decision. If the attendees had crowded the elevator and gone straight to the rooftop, they might've walked into something they hadn't thoroughly considered.

This was a hugely important decision, one they'd stake their lives on. Nobody knew where this staircase would truly lead—a rocket launchpad or death row. Each step took them closer to the unknown.

Reaching the rooftop, Lev and Irina looked at the people who'd arrived before them sitting here and there on the concrete. There were no rooftop lamps, but the bright, clear moonlight was more than enough to see by. The pair leaned

against the metal railing, sliding down to sit side by side. The concrete was cold as ice. They took deep breaths of the freezing night air, and it bolstered their courage.

There was little conversation around them, only the white puffs of people's breaths disappearing on the evening wind into the birch forest around the space apartments. The winter moon floated in the sky. Outer space surrounded it, a deep aquamarine blue.

Others who'd gathered in the lounge slowly reached the roof—graduate and freshman cosmonauts, engineers, Training Center staff—all with glasses of zhizni, their faces showing they'd made their minds up.

Oh, you came?

Yeah. I was on the fence for a while, though.

The gatherers didn't voice the words; they spoke with their eyes and expressions. As Lev gazed at each and every person becoming a comrade-in-arms in the samizdat plan, his own eyes shone with deep gratitude. He felt the heavy weight of responsibility.

Irina's eyes were closed. Her shoulder or arm occasionally brushed against him as she shuffled beside him. The moonstone was clenched tightly in her hand. He was only ever supposed to know her for two months as her supervisor on the Nosferatu Project, yet they'd suddenly found their lives on the same track. How much further would they go together? Where would their path end?

By the time the moon was directly overhead, everyone who'd been in the lounge had reconvened on the rooftop. The last arrival told them nobody else was downstairs.

Lt. Gen. Viktor chuckled. "Quicker than I expected. I'm cold and hungry, and I'd like to go home. Comrade Lev Leps, Cosmonaut Training Center Vice-Director—a rousing toast, please."

"Sir!" Lev rose.

Everyone else followed suit. Roza clutched Mikhail's portrait in her arms, where it reflected the moonlight.

Lev's thoughts silently peeled from his heart to his friend's soul.

I hope you're watching, Mikhail. The day I first went to space, you said something to me—words I've lived by to this day.

"Be yourself. Nobody knows how to be a cosmonaut yet. You're the first."

Your body may be part of the stars now, but you'll live on in our hearts eternally as an exceptional, courageous cosmonaut.

I don't know whether I'm making the right choice. But if the only other option is to be buried in snow, I want to choose a path I can believe in. And I believe this path will take us to the moon. I'm giving my life for the moon.

"To all our comrades," said Lev. He raised his glass high in the air, and moonlight sparkled off his zhizni. "Cheers."

The water of life ran down his throat as he drank. His body felt warm to its very core.

"Cheers!" Lev's comrades lifted their own glasses, downed the contents, and looked at the stars.



Irina had only had a sip, but her ears were already red. She let out a deep breath and lay down on the concrete, stargazing. Lev scratched the back of his head, unsure what to do about how quickly the alcohol had affected her. Then he heard it.

“Sinus Iridum...”

Closing her eyes, Irina uttered a poem that hit Lev with a nostalgic sting. On the space apartments’ rooftop, under the frigid moonlight of a cold winter’s night, the vampire from Anival Village chanted to the moon.

“Palus Somni...”

The beautiful poem, composed in a time when the moon was still a mythical place, entranced everyone on the rooftop.

“Mare Tranquillitatis...”

Each word sank into the comrades’ hearts and melted into the blood flowing through their veins.

“Oceanus Procellarum...”

Aside from Irina’s chanting, the solemn night of remembrance was silent.

“Lacus Somniorum...”

So very silent.

Work on the book began the next day. Nobody had actual experience self-publishing, but the Training Center staff regularly put together documents, and their guidelines helped the project go smoothly.

The group based themselves out of a spare room in the space apartments and the currently unused Cosmonaut Training Center—possible thanks to Lt. Gen. Viktor’s cooperation. Though Lev wanted to thank Viktor for his help, he followed orders and didn’t voice his gratitude. They had to maintain the image that Viktor was the operation’s de facto ringleader.

They didn’t involve anyone with a family directly in publication; those individuals played support roles instead. The Delivery Crew agent who’d

succeeded Natalia turned a blind eye to the proceedings. She told Lev in secret that, although she couldn't help, she was cheering on their efforts.

When the two workspaces they required were ready, it was time to draft the book. It would be a two-parter consisting of an attention-grabbing exposé as well as Korovin's *My Fight for Health*, so two separate draft texts were necessary.

They based the first section, *Confessions of a Cosmonaut*, on Lt. Gen. Viktor's journal as Training Center Director, with input based on Lev, Irina, and Roza's actual experiences in space. Reprinting and redistribution would be harder if the book was too long, so they narrowed the subject matter down to key points.

The engineering leads handled the second section, *My Fight for Health*, which focused on Project Soyuz. They had to maintain a certain confidentiality, so they couldn't publish all the Chief's design specifications. Instead, they selected only the most powerful parts of the text. The project's importance therefore wouldn't be lost on the general public, and at the same time, it would inspire any engineers and scientists who read the book.

While drafting the book, they faced some unique problems. They wanted to use typewriters, but such machinery was managed by relevant authorities. Handwriting, on the other hand, was traceable. Lev's solution was to covertly bring in the imported typewriters hidden in Korovin's attic.

Xenia was excited to see the operation take off. "Mom's a little scared, but she's totally on board," she said with a giggle.

Lev was apologetic about involving them. "We'll be really careful not to cause you trouble."

"Too late for that. Besides, who knows how long Dad will go on sleeping? The only good thing about it is that he's not smoking around here now."

All Lev could do was chuckle weakly.

Xenia poked his forehead. "That's not inspiring much confidence, Lev. Guess I'll have to give you orders in Dad's place." She puffed up her chest, frowning as she glared at Lev. "Fly at top speed, Zilant! Lycoris will bloom on the lunar

surface!”

The order was just as emphatic as Korovin’s were, and it buoyed Lev. “Understood, Chief!” he said with a salute.

Xenia grinned. She was cute, but she had her father’s stately presence. Her confident face said it all: *Do as you like, and don’t worry about us.*

Snow and ice covered LAIKA44 as the cold, wintry breath of Moroz blew. The drafts developed steadily, and they prepared paper and photographic film to print the book. Lev’s plan was to complete one book, have the rest of the team check it, discuss any issues, and then print 200 copies of the finished product.

Then, in mid-January, they intended to distribute the volume among design bureaus, universities, and scientific academies, as well as in cities where they knew groups reproduced contraband publications. Once that was done, all they could do was wait for the book to spread the way literature and x-ray records usually did: through samizdat and copying.

As they composed the draft, they also worked on a cover. Up until now, whenever the Zirnitrans government had publicly released a photo of rockets or spacecraft, it had always censored details with black ink. With that in mind, they decided the cover would show just the top half of a rocket.

“What will we title the book?” asked Roza, who was in charge of the cover design. “*My Fight for Health* doesn’t make much sense for both sections.”

“Irina and I have an idea about that,” said Lev. “Right, Irina?”

“Maybe it’s time we share it with everyone,” she replied.

They gathered the team, and Lev announced their suggestion. “As far as the state’s concerned, we’re *all* test subjects—hunting dogs like Maly they can use and dispose of. So, we’ll act like hunting dogs and go straight for their throats.”

Irina bared her fangs. “That’s the point of this title.”

On December 25, 1966—the date when many people around the world celebrated God’s birth—Lev’s team bound their two manuscripts into one volume, completing an illegal publishing project with the power to shake a nation.

HOWLING AT THE MOON:

Memoirs of a Cosmonaut and the Chief Designer

[Foreword]

Perhaps the feats we accomplished will go entirely unknown. Perhaps none will ever praise our efforts and our names will go unrecorded in human history. Perhaps our existence will be buried in darkness. Before our motherland meets its end, however, I wish to record the truth as I experienced it through my own eyes.

—Vladimir Susnin
(Cosmonaut No. XX)

With space development in crisis, I propose Project Soyuz—the launch of Zirnitra's Rodina spacecraft using Arnack's Chronos V rocket. By uniting the engineers and cosmonauts of both nations, we can build a path to the moon. I foresee a future in which that moon landing marks a giant leap forward for us all.

—K. E. Tikhachevsky
(Design Bureau Chief, Chief Designer)

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Editor-in-Chief: Nikolay Denisovich Karamazov

Arnack News

JANUARY 31 , 1967

COSMONAUT SUSNIN REVEALS ALL!

Our source in the UZSR has obtained a copy of the book everyone's talking about—*Howling at the Moon*. That's right, we've got the inside scoop! In a shocking twist, one coauthor is cosmonaut Vladimir Susnin himself. Regular readers of this paper are already well aware that this isn't the first we've heard of Susnin.

Cosmonaut Susnin has declared in print that the UZSR's statements are "riddled with lies"! In the past, the Zirnitran government criticized this paper's exclusives as false. Well, who's spreading falsehoods now? Project Soyuz proves definitively that our scoop was the real deal!

This jaw-dropping news is just the beginning. What happened to Susnin during his hospital stay?

Are alien messages
HIDDEN in the
songs of the Bees?!





Radio RAKUS

How's everyone doing out there? You're listening to the Jimmy Coop Show here in the Grand Duchy of Rakus! Today, we're talking about the UZSR space program and the self-published book you've probably all heard of—*Howling at the Moon*—that we first caught wind of about halfway through January. We got ourselves a copy of that book! Its authors are supposedly a cosmonaut and none other than the “chief designer” himself. Whether those two actually exist... Well, that's debatable. Still, the contents are shocking! The book goes behind the scenes in space development. I couldn't believe it—it's like night and day, compared to everything the Zirnitrans government publicly stated! The book claims Irina Luminesk was a test subject, that Lev Leps ended his descent with a parachute landing, and that the first spacewalk was almost fatal! Now, look. I don't know whether the book's contents are true. Project Soyuz sure sounds intriguing, though. Cooperative development between the UK and UZSR—is that even possible? Well, rumors say even ANSA employees are reading *Howling at the Moon*. It was self-published, so you might have trouble getting a copy. And you can't buy it legally everywhere, so be careful, got it? Still, I recommend reading it if you can. Is it all lies? Well, that's up to readers. With that, on to our next song: another Bees hit you all know and love...

Chapter 6: The Hunting Dogs

Indigo Eyes

• ОЧИ ИНДИГО •

IN FEBRUARY OF 1967, the illegally published *Howling at the Moon* spread through the UZSR and around the globe. Readers were skeptical of its contents at first, but they found the book oddly convincing.

Lev and the team had worked through the winter holidays to bind 200 copies and, per Lev's plan, distribute them secretly in mid-January to Project Soyuz's likely supporters. They sent the book to antiestablishment organizations as well as those involved in space development.

One factor contributing to the chatter around the book was the questionable existence of a coauthor: cosmonaut Vladimir Susnin. In April 1961, *Arnack News* had reported that Susnin was secretly hospitalized after a crash landing.

In reality, the cosmonaut didn't exist. The hospitalized "Susnin" had nothing to do with space development. The Zirnitrans' cover-up of their failed Venus probe had given rise to the misconception, which Lev took advantage of to ignite debate. At the same time, he used Susnin's name as a revenge of sorts. He'd felt outraged when *Arnack News* published smear headlines like "KAYE SCARLET REVEALED AS VAMPIRE! ATTACKS HUMAN!" and labeled Irina a "disgrace to vampires."

As he'd expected, *Arnack News* was more than happy to take the bait he laid out, accepting the task of promoting the book throughout the UK and the wider world. You couldn't completely wash your hands of even the third-rate *Arnack News*; every hundred reports or so, they landed an actual scoop. Directly after the Hyperion accident, for instance, they reported "HYPERION'S MANUFACTURER HID DEADLY FLAWS!" During the ensuing investigation, such suspicions grew as

the newspaper claimed “the aircraft manufacturer helming development hid Hyperion’s fatal flaws to meet their deadline.”

The aircraft company had defended itself against ANSA’s criticism by asserting that those issues existed at the design level and should’ve been caught during ANSA inspections. As the two entities battled over their culpability in court, there were even reports that the aircraft manufacturer would pull out of the space program.

One person who *had* noticed the Hyperion’s flaws was Chief Designer Korovin, coauthor of *Howling at the Moon*. The Chief’s pen name—K. E. Tikhachevsky—was that of a revered Zirnitrans known as the father of space science. Professor Klaus himself had publicly acknowledged Tikhachevsky’s influence. Identifying the long-anonymous chief designer with such a famous forerunner would certainly enchant the engineers who read the book.

Unlike Susnin and Tikhachevsky, however, editor-in-chief “Nikolay Denisovich Karamazov” was entirely made up. Lev and the others had created about thirty fake names, then picked one at random to confuse official investigators.

Despite *Howling at the Moon*’s factual contents, the mystery surrounding its authors and editor left room for criticism. Yet that haziness also drew interest and gave rise to rumors.

UZSR citizens knew nothing of what took place behind the scenes, since the government had decided they didn’t need to. *Howling at the Moon* offered a peek past the nation’s veil of secrecy. It was handed from person to person, riding the waves of freedom that the Bees’ music had created. The dangerous scent of bookbinding glue and the whispers of black-market salesmen drifted through the Zirnitrans night.

Urban legends spread among the citizens too. Had the incendiary book been written not by the suspicious “Susnin” but rather as Mikhail Yashin’s last will and testament? When Roza first heard that claim, she smiled and said, “I’m sure he’s laughing about it right now.”

Lev and the samizdat team rejoiced in secret. Their plan was apparently going smoothly; it even seemed likely that ANSA had learned about Project Soyuz. As the book’s popularity grew, however, so did the team’s fears. Space

development was a matter of national dignity—the government wouldn't just let the buzz continue without reacting.

The Glavlit, which oversaw the national censors, immediately designated the book “a self-published collection of fabrications meant to disturb the national space development strategy.” The government likewise criticized its publication as “an act of incitement undermining national order” and “libel against the establishment.” To neutralize the truths that filled the volume, they quickly began countermeasures.

Graudyn—whose own rocket was criticized in the book—lambasted *Howling at the Moon* via the National Broadcasting Service: “The dubious book in question is merely a scheme to interfere with space development. As of this moment, our large-scale rocket's very near completion.”

The national *Istina* newspaper also published criticism of *Howling at the Moon* from scholars and engineers: “‘*The documents penned by someone claiming to be chief designer are delusions at best,*’ says P. Ivanovich, astronomical engineer. ‘*It's the work of pranksters. I've never heard of Project Soyuz,*’ adds N. K. Semak, senior designer of the First Design Bureau.”

Yet those critics themselves were entirely imaginary—the government created them to spread its message. Similar quotes were pushed to set the record straight about the cosmonaut “Susnin” and his claims:

“*Famed cosmonaut Lev Leps warns the people, ‘No cosmonaut named Susnin exists. Do not fall for these tricks, comrades.’ Fellow cosmonaut Irina Luminesk laments the falsehoods: ‘It saddens me to read lies about vampires being used as test subjects.’ Cosmonaut Roza Plevitskaya also vehemently slams the fabrications within, saying, ‘Mikhail Yashin and I chose to get married. I deny that book of lies outright.’*”

Neither Lev nor any of his colleagues had made such comments, of course. The newspaper had just used their names as the government ordered, releasing the statements as accurate.

“Unbelievable,” Irina griped. “Do they think cosmonauts are mannequins they can pose as they like?”

Lev reminded her that they needed to bear the propaganda. “We saw this

coming. It isn't the first time the state's used us to amplify praise for national efforts."

"No, but..."

"It's easiest to imagine that they keep an entirely separate version of you at the Neglin."

Aside from his occasional attendance at in-person press conferences, Lev had no need to confirm that he stood by the printed comments. It was all just standard government fluff anyway.

However hard the government tried to stomp out the truth, it would not bend. In fact, the book's contents began to soak into the zeitgeist. Possession and reproduction of *Howling at the Moon* were punishable in Zirnitra, and some people were arrested for doing so. Still, brave citizens continued distributing the book, increasing the number of copies in circulation. The hunting dogs' howls had freed the souls trapped under the heel of the motherland.

In contrast to the uproar and commotion outside LAIKA44, silence enveloped the closed city, as if it were an entirely different world.

To keep their equipment from being used as evidence, the samizdat team dismantled and disposed of the typewriters they'd used to write *Howling at the Moon* and burned their publishing tools. Not a single copy would exist in LAIKA44 unless somebody smuggled one in. Korovin's original notebook, *My Fight for Health*, was carefully wrapped and buried behind the Cosmonaut Training Center.

They gathered information on the outside world from newspapers and the radio. Based on the government's reactions thus far, it seemed to oppose Project Soyuz. However, they couldn't yet take that at face value—the top brass would never accept the project outright. Behind the scenes, the government might've assembled engineers and scientists to verify details of Korovin's designs. The fact of the C-I rocket's inability to fly was sure to shake Gergiev, and there was still a chance he'd move toward cooperation over outright defeat.

If everything went according to plan, there'd be nothing more to reveal. Lev and his comrades knew they wouldn't get through this entirely unscathed,

though. Regardless of whether the government realized that *Howling at the Moon* was published in LAIKA44, the Delivery Crew would arrive at some point.

Everyone was on edge, waiting for the agents' early-morning arrival to the space apartments—whether for an investigation, interrogation, or arrest. Back when Lev was in elementary school, his teacher said, “*Aircraft are meant to fly the skies—they aren’t weapons of murder.*” The next day, that teacher had disappeared from the village. Lev wondered whether he was walking the same path as that teacher, who’d been deemed an enemy of the state.

Winter in the UZSR was long, dark, and depressing. Heavy, oppressive clouds covered the sky, the snow never stopped, and sunlight was rare. Some of those who’d taken part in Lev and Irina’s plan felt suffocated and made their fears clear. They pictured an army of black leather coats beyond the red pine forests, and it terrified them.

Lev told them the words of a well-known scholar. “‘Perhaps your fear in passing judgment on me is greater than mine in receiving it.’ A sixteenth-century scientist spoke those words at the time of his execution. He fought for heliocentrism until the bitter end.”

The scholar’s book, which had upended common sense, had a home in Korovin’s study. His words were just as true of the government’s senior officials.

Lev and Irina were invited to a committee meeting, and they traveled via plane to Sangrad with Lt. Gen. Viktor. They’d prepared for such a meeting for a while, but the message they received hadn’t accused them of any crime. Rather, it asked for advice regarding the illegal publication of *Howling at the Moon*. Although Irina wasn’t a committee member, she’d been looped in because the book explicitly mentioned vampires.

None of the three were at ease. They had no idea how deep the Delivery Crew’s investigations had gone.

Disembarking at an airfield on Sangrad’s outskirts, Lev, Irina, and Viktor hopped in a car sent by the government and headed toward the Neglin. The snow there was lighter than in LAIKA44 to the north, but the ground around them was blanketed in white all the same.

As they drove along the road toward the city, they saw young men and women—all with their hair cut in the Bees' signature style—holding pictures of Mikhail to their chests as they walked along the roadside. The commemorative portraits had been printed when Mikhail became a cosmonaut.

"So, those are the rumored protests Rodina I sparked," Viktor muttered, his expression souring.

Howling at the Moon hadn't touched on the issues that plagued Rodina I, but many Zirnitran youths read between the lines, and mourning Mikhail became an act of defiance among them. They gathered and marched through the city, inspired by Bart and Kaye's actions in the UK back in the summer of 1961.

In the UZSR, however, protests and claims seen as critical of the government could quickly provoke arrests. For all appearances, the youth of Zirnitra were just mourning a fallen hero's death in silence. Still, their desire to protest touched Lev's heart, and Irina gave them a subtle nod. The two cosmonauts were certain their message was reaching others too.

They drove along the street for a while. Then the driver picked up his radio and listened to a message from someone. "Roger," he said.

The car turned at the next intersection. Something about it rubbed Lev the wrong way. Weren't they going *away* from the Neglin? He glanced at Lt. Gen. Viktor in the side mirror. The Training Center director stared sternly out the window.

Nevertheless, their driver said nothing, and they sped along to an alley flanked by snowcapped rowan trees. Their bright-red berries stained the snowbanks like big drops of blood. On either side were rusty warehouses, and there was no sign of anybody.

Irina tensed; she had the same bad feeling Lev did. Where were they being taken?

The car entered another alley, then slowed to a stop. Five men draped in black leather coats appeared from the shadow of a nearby factory. It was the Delivery Crew. The sight sent goosebumps all over Lev's body. Trying to look calm, he moved to shield Irina.

An agent opened the passenger door without asking. “Committee for State Security,” he said coldly. “Comrade Viktor, you’ll come with us.”

Viktor’s expression didn’t change. “See you later,” he told Lev and Irina. As he got out of the car alongside its driver, Delivery Crew agents slid into the driver and passenger seats.

“You two will come with us,” the new driver said.

The cosmonauts had no choice but to obey. Lev pressed his lips together and glanced at Irina, who simply stared straight ahead.

They drove Lev and Irina to the Committee for State Security’s headquarters about a kilometer from the Neglin. The building’s basement consisted of jail cells, interrogation rooms, and an execution chamber. It was the first time Lev had ever set foot in the place. The gloom assailed him immediately; he was struck by a despair that froze his blood. Somewhere in the distance, he thought he heard a scream and gunshot, and he shivered.

Instead of a jail cell, the cosmonauts were brought to a small, plain room with a desk and a couple of chairs. One agent directed Lev and Irina to sit. They did as instructed, albeit somewhat hesitantly. The agent left the room without a word, taking up a post beside the door.

They hadn’t been hurt up to this point, and the atmosphere didn’t feel conducive to an interrogation, so Lev was primarily worried about Lt. Gen. Viktor. The man had made himself the samizdat operation’s ringleader.

After some time, they heard the *clack-clack* of shoes approaching. Then a woman in a fur coat entered the room: Lyudmila.

“Well, well. Long time no see.” She spoke as if greeting a friend.

Closing the door behind her, Lyudmila sat opposite Lev and Irina. The pungent, saccharine scent of neroli tickled Lev’s nose, but Lyudmila’s voice seemed to drain everything sweet from the air.

“I called you two here because I wanted to talk privately. Now, let me preface this by saying I don’t want to get rough with you. It’s cold here, and I don’t wish to stay long. Be honest when you answer.”

The woman placed a sheaf of papers on the desk in front of her. It was a copy of *Howling at the Moon*. She looked at Lev, then Irina.

“This is your work, isn’t it?” she asked, tapping the book. “No one knows this much except you two.”

She’d probably brought them here based on some kind of evidence, so feigning ignorance seemed impossible. And since she was right in front of them, she’d question them relentlessly if they made a single misstep. Lev’s mind raced for an answer.

“Oh, right!” Lyudmila clapped, interrupting his thoughts. “I forgot to mention something important. I’ll put it to Irina.”

“What is it?” Irina asked.

Her ice-cold gaze apparently didn’t bother Lyudmila. “You’re aware that the headquarters’ basement is invite-only...but do you know the three specific, *special* places people receive invitations to?”

“Cells, interrogation rooms, or the execution chamber,” Irina replied.

“Correct.” Lyudmila let a cruel smile creep onto her lips. She pointed at the papers on the desk. “So, answer my question, Lev. And keep this in mind—your response could move Irina to one of those three special places.”

Lyudmila’s deep-green eyes, enveloped in darkness, bore right through Lev. The sole reason she’d made Irina answer was to intimidate him. She was ordering him to tell the truth...or else.

Lev stared straight back at her. “Before I answer, I have my own question.”

“Very well.”

“Where did you take Comrade Lt. Gen. Viktor?”

“They’re holding him in a hotel nearby on suspicion of orchestrating incitement. Once the evidence is organized, the Supreme Zirnitrans of the Zirnitra Union will question him. He’ll be charged according to Zirnitran law for undermining political stability. His actions opposed the government and were tantamount to state defamation. He’ll also be prosecuted for perjury.” Lyudmila snickered. “Doesn’t just listening to it all tire you out?”

It was clear from her tone that the woman was enjoying herself. Yet the crimes she spoke of were incredibly serious. Lt. Gen. Viktor was being hit with every charge they could throw at him, all for protecting the cosmonauts.

“Well, I gave you your answer. Now give me mine.” Lyudmila reached into her coat. For a moment, Lev braced for a gun. Instead, the woman took out a tin of hard candies and rolled a bright-red one across her tongue, eyeing Lev like a venomous snake. “Did you forget the question? I’ll ask once more. This samizdat was your work, wasn’t it?”

Lev fell silent as he racked his brain for the right response. When he pictured Viktor, the Training Center director—who hadn’t abandoned Lev even when he was demoted and who’d looked after him upon his return—he simply couldn’t bring himself to lie.

“I was the one orchestrating it,” he confirmed. Next to him, Irina gasped, but Lev went on. “I asked Irina, Lt. Gen. Viktor, and my Training Center comrades to help draft and publish the book. All the responsibility falls on my shoulders. And just to clear up any misunderstandings here and now, I *didn’t* intend it as incitement or to oppose the government. I just wanted to save the space program by kick-starting Project Soyuz.”

Lyudmila stared at Lev, wide-eyed. She couldn’t stifle the laugh that escaped her lips. “If you weren’t a national hero, this would be your *third* death sentence. You insist on being a hunting dog when all we’ve asked for is an obedient puppy. I guess that’s a pipe dream?”

“I told you before. I’m not going to be a pawn in your game.”

“Yes, yes, I remember.”

“Then you should know as well as we do that, at this rate, the national space program’s over.”

“That’s clear as day.” However impassioned Lev’s points were, Lyudmila waved them away. “And it’s why I’m here now. I’m grateful to you two.”

“Grateful? For what?”

“Well, if anyone misunderstood anything, it’s you and Irina.”

“Huh?”

“You’re in ordinary chairs, aren’t you? Not electric chairs. You aren’t cuffed to them either.” Lev and Irina lifted themselves slightly from their seats, and Lyudmila giggled. “As you guessed, Project Soyuz might indeed save the UZSR from defeat.”

Lev was bewildered. He hadn’t at all expected Lyudmila to agree with him. Sure, the government would assess the book’s claims, but “grateful”? Then his confusion dissipated, and he recognized that his chance had come. His heart hammered as he took a deep breath and asked, “You’re saying the government’s seriously considering the project?”

“As we speak. By the way, your book left out significant design details. Was that intentional?”

“Yes. We had to protect certain secrets. The essence of the Rodina’s design is faultless.”

“And Korovin himself was the ‘chief designer’ who authored half the book, right? He made sure you received his work before falling into his coma?”

Lyudmila’s sharp deductions sent a shiver down Lev’s spine—but the fact that she was still confirming information suggested she didn’t yet suspect Xenia or her mother.

“Yes, I received the Chief’s original documents.” Lev seamlessly slipped the half truth into his explanation. “But submitting them to the central committee as they were seemed too risky. There was a chance they’d be ignored, like our report on Rodina I—or, at worst, incinerated. I decided to go public with them in a way the government couldn’t overlook.”

Lev was clearly criticizing the top brass, but that didn’t affect Lyudmila. Instead, joy sparkled in her eyes. “I see. And if your plan succeeds, it’ll clear out the space program’s unnecessary design bureaus and manpower, freeing it from those military dimwits.”

Before he could let something slip, Lev cut to the heart of the matter. “Does Comrade Gergiev see cooperative development with the UK as feasible?”

Lyudmila nodded. “He has no other option. He tried to outshine the UK by

forcing that space wedding of his, and it couldn't have gone worse. Then there's the Chief—comatose and showing no sign of waking. At Mikhail's funeral, Gergiev couldn't think about anything but the fact that his own life is essentially over. He just moaned and muttered that he'd go down as the worst leader in Zirnitra's history."

Lev thought back to the Gergiev he'd seen that day, standing like a wax figure on the mausoleum stage. Even after losing Mikhail, the man could think of nothing but himself. Lev's hands balled into fists at the thought.

Although Lyudmila saw his rage bubbling, she paid it no mind. "He was at rock bottom when Project Soyuz popped up. A chance to turn the tables, to be named in the history books as the man who led space development to a successful manned lunar landing. Even if the space program failed, he at least would've played a role in ending the cold war with the UK. Either outcome would let him conceal his misgovernment. I don't know what Project Soyuz's chance of success is—that largely comes down to the UK's decisions—but intelligence reports have confirmed that your book *did* make its way into ANSA's hands."

That statement was like a ray of light. "What'd ANSA have to say?!" Lev asked before he could stop himself.

Lyudmila raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "You look just like Comrade Gergiev did. He was beside himself as soon as ANSA came up. It was as if they'd saved his life. I hadn't seen him like that in a long time—not since I suggested the Nosferatu Project."

"Wait," Irina cut in. "Since *you* suggested it?"

"Mm-hmm. I'm the mother of the Nosferatu Project."

"You?!"

"You look surprised, Irina Luminesk. Or should I say N44?"

"I had no idea," Lev said. He'd always thought senior officials greenlit the plan.

Their dumbfounded reactions amused Lyudmila; her smile brought dimples to her cheeks. "We're all glad you left Anival, Irina. You went from accursed to

cosmonaut, and now you're famous! If you were human, you could've indulged in the whole world's treats and delicacies. It's such a pity you lack a sense of taste."

Irina looked away. "It doesn't make a difference to me."

Lyudmila went on, unfazed. "In any case, Comrade Gergiev's nothing but grateful to the samizdat mastermind. But the military... Well, they're furious. If we'd like to pull this project off, your group and ours need to work together."

The thought of joining forces with the people responsible for Mikhail's death sickened Lev, but there was no other way to achieve what they all dreamed of.

"Still, airing our dirty laundry in *Confessions of a Cosmonaut* was a touch too far," Lyudmila continued, her expression suddenly souring. "All that extra work I needed to do to make things right, ugh...! Not that either of you have to worry. We found scapegoats to clean things up easily."

Her words were nothing if not ominous. "Scapegoats? What're you talking about?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. Standins to hand over to the Delivery Crew."

When Lev thought one of those standins might be Lt. Gen. Viktor, his heart sank.

"This whole time, a former freshman cosmonaut expelled for antiestablishment comments was *posing* as the cosmonaut Susnin. You can certainly see his motive, can't you? As for the chief designer, perhaps you remember former engineer Franz Feltsman?"

"Franz?!" When the man worked at the Training Center six years ago, he and Lev had been friends. However, someone had ordered him to put an end to the Mehta Project, so he'd tried to kill Irina by sabotaging her centrifuge training.

"He was sent to work in the mines after being discovered," Lyudmila said coldly, "so his hatred of the space program grew. He stole the Chief's plans, scheming to destroy our national space strategies through samizdat. In short, he and that freshman held grudges against space development and planned to sabotage it... Or so the story goes."

“Wait a minute!” Lev cried. “I never asked for a standin!”

“It’s too late for that. Those two were invited here, and well, you only go one of three *special* places in that event. We crossed the t’s and dotted the i’s mere moments ago.” Lyudmila pointed to her temple and mock-fired.

Lev thought back to the scream and gunshot he’d thought he heard earlier. It hadn’t been his imagination after all. He trembled at the cruelty. “Why do that *before* talking to us?”

“Separate issues,” Lyudmila said flatly.

Irina glared at her. “One day, someone’s going to kill you.”

“Hah, thank you for pointing it out. I’ve been prepared for that for a long, long time. Just as you cosmonauts risk your lives to fly to space, I’m giving my life for my own dream.”

“Your own dream?”

“Dismantling and reconstructing the UZSR,” Lyudmila said, cracking her candy loudly between her teeth.

Lev couldn’t believe his ears. “What did you just say?”

“Dismantling and reconstructing the UZSR,” Lyudmila repeated, staring Lev straight in the eye. “Visiting the UK as an intelligence operative, I realized that—at some point—they’d take international supremacy. I came back home and found our motherland under the thumb of a delusional supreme leader and self-interested officials. Infighting for power and authority was rotting our governmental bodies, and the recession saw the nation’s strength slip. The Delivery Crew’s leaders were worried that the UZSR would destroy itself, and those worries were justified. In less than three decades, we will.”

Lyudmila’s relaxed criticism of the state filled Lev with unfathomable fear.

“What do you think, anyway?” Lyudmila inquired.

“About what?”

“Do you think our nation’s a Wondrous Wonderland? Be honest.”

Lev wasn’t sure how to respond. He didn’t think the UZSR was a wonderland

at all, but he couldn't say that aloud. He was literally sitting in the Committee for State Security headquarters, and there was no telling who was watching or listening. For all he knew, Lyudmila's words were a trap—her question a test to see whether he was an insurgent. That whole spiel about scapegoats might've been a lie. One wrong word could see him vanish from the face of the earth.

Beside him, Irina stared silently at the copy of *Howling at the Moon* on the desk.

Lyudmila's face was serious. She went on without waiting for an answer. "Attempting a great purge in this era would just draw criticism from neighboring countries and isolate us further. That's why we've adopted procedures to solve problems and dispose of troublemakers peacefully. Our beloved comrade Fyodor Gergiev is prone to recklessness, but he longs to be a revolutionary hero, so I crushed the attempted coup and surrounded him with supporters. Now Zirnitra will recreate itself as a *true* Wondrous Wonderland. Uniting with the UK is simply the first step. It's not about competition but coexistence. The goal isn't a cold war between East and West but control for both East and West."

It was ambitious to a nearly unbelievable degree, and Lev still had lingering doubts. Lyudmila couldn't have crushed a coup and surrounded Gergiev with supporters on her own. In short, she had allies around her, like countless evil spirits hidden in the shadows. Were they Delivery Crew agents? People in the UK? Others entirely? Lev didn't know.

"Is your group aiming to revolutionize Zirnitra?" he asked timidly.

"Group? What group? Lev, if you'd like to continue as a cosmonaut, you'd better get your eyes checked." Chuckling, Lyudmila rose from her chair and walked to Lev's side. She took a black candy and a blue candy from her tin and set them in front of him.



“I’ll ask one last time—what do you think of this country? Do you agree to a partnership in order to achieve a true Wondrous Wonderland? If so, eat the black candy. It’s very sweet. But if you hold the nation dear to your heart as it is, eat the blue rat poison candy and die.” She took a handgun from her pocket and pointed it at Lev, urging him to choose. “Eat whichever one you like.”

Lev wasn’t about to be intimidated by Lyudmila. He took both candies and stood. “I already told you, I won’t be a pawn for anyone. Not for the state, and not for you. I’ll pick my own path.” He then thrust them toward her.

Lyudmila accepted them, grunting. Her hand only touched his for an instant, but it was frigid. “Declining others’ generosity, just like Mikhail. Oh, that’s right. You don’t like sweets, do you? I’ll bring something bitter next time.” She popped the blue candy—the one she’d just called rat poison—in her mouth. “Now, Lev, you realize you’ll make enemies of those protecting the national status quo, don’t you?” There was a smile on her face as she pushed him to agree.

“I’m aware that it’s unavoidable if we continue toward cooperative development.”

“Good. Then give me the design specifications you withheld from the book. I’ll have them delivered to ANSA. I’ll also arrange a press conference about *Howling at the Moon*, at which you’ll say ‘Please don’t believe these lies. Susnin doesn’t exist. That said, I consider Project Soyuz a wonderful idea. I support it wholeheartedly.’”

“Understood.”

Lev fumed. Once again, he was following orders from those above him. He also knew that he couldn’t make meaningful progress by himself when it came to cooperative development. The degree to which Lyudmila wanted to “dismantle and reconstruct” the UZSR wasn’t clear, nor was it apparent how serious she was about “control for both East and West.” Still, Lev believed joining forces with the UK would point Zirnitra in the right direction, so he had to compromise. He glanced at Irina, who stared silently at the ground. Did she agree with his decision to accept Lyudmila’s proposal?

Lyudmila stepped toward the vampire and looked down at her. “Irina, you

understand just as well as Lev, don't you?"

"I'd like to say one last thing."

"And that is?"

Irina stood and looked Lyudmila in the eye. Although Lyudmila was looking down at the shorter Irina, the vampire gazed back with a cool, powerful stare. "I've sat here listening to you this whole time, and you haven't once mentioned Roza."

"Is that so? I didn't notice."

"Will you apologize to her?"

"Why would I need to?"

"You had a role in planning the space wedding, right?"

"So?" Lyudmila looked entirely indifferent, and that enraged Lev. To her, others really were pawns.

"Her life's been little more than a plaything for you all!" Irina cried out, furious.

Lyudmila rolled her hard candy along her tongue. "I'm sorry. All I remember about her is that she puked in space."

Instantly, Irina slapped Lyudmila across the cheek with all her strength. The sound echoed through the room, and Lyudmila fell to her knees. The candy dropped from her mouth and rolled along the floor, leaving a line of saliva as it went. And a single thread of blood trickled from Lyudmila's lips.

"That's what you get," Irina spat, staring down at her contemptuously, "for treating my friend like nothing and killing the man she loved."

Lyudmila slowly rose to her feet. "Letting your emotions get the best of you and resorting to violence. Not so different from Lev, are you?" She fluidly cocked her gun and aimed it directly at Irina's face.

Lev gasped and yelped as the shot rang out.

Strands of hair by Irina's neck fluttered and dropped to the floor. At the same time, the wall behind her crumbled where the bullet had struck. Irina

swallowed hard. Lev rushed in front of her and stood with his arms wide, shielding her from Lyudmila's gun and blank gaze.

"Are you all right?!" he asked.

Irina trembled, shocked. "Yeah..."

The door flew open, and a Delivery Crew agent hurried in. Right when Lyudmila glanced at him, however, the agent closed the door.

"You shot at her!" Lev shouted.

"I aimed for the wall," Lyudmila said with a sneer. "But remember this—I can kill you whenever I want."

She tucked her gun away, looking at them with an expression that said she'd executed hundreds of others.

"You're only alive now because you're valuable. Project Soyuz is the same. It's only moving forward because it's valuable. Understand? If you're going to the moon for anyone, that person is me." Lyudmila's words lingered as she licked blood from her lips.

Korovin had warned Lev that power and authority were everything. Now he truly understood the Chief's meaning. As the supreme leader's aide, Lyudmila had connections in both the Delivery Crew and the United Kingdom. If the UZSR was a sea, she was free to swim wherever she liked. Many hated her and wanted her dead, but her power protected her.

"Come with me," she said. "You hunting dogs want a piece of the man who killed Mikhail. I'll bring you to our supreme leader."

She turned on her heel and left the room.

Irina was still petrified. Lev put a reassuring hand on her back. "Sorry. I should've brought up Roza."

"It's all right. I wouldn't have been satisfied until I said something myself. I'm just a little startled. I didn't expect her to fire at me." She took a breath, running her hand through the ragged locks of her hair. "Well, let's go take a bite out of the so-called supreme leader."

As they left, Lev glanced back at the bullet hole in the wall and a chill ran

down his spine. If he'd made one wrong choice, that bullet could just as easily have pierced Irina's neck. *The weight of a life is far too light in this country*, he thought.

Lev and Irina left the Committee for State Security's headquarters and joined Lyudmila in a car to the Neglin. From there, they headed to the Cabinet Room. The air was tense, and no words were spoken.

When they arrived, Lyudmila strode into Gergiev's office, Lev and Irina in tow. Inside, a large world map covered a wall. Gergiev sat alone, staring down at a chessboard. He was thinking deeply about the puzzle before him, his back hunched and his bald head in his hand. He looked like an elderly retiree; there was no trace of his well-known "blabbering sunflower" persona.

"I brought the pair who will protect the Wondrous Wonderland," Lyudmila said.

Lev and Irina stood at attention and greeted Gergiev formally.

"Col. Lev Leps reporting!"

"Lt. Col. Irina Luminesk reporting."

Gergiev lifted his head to survey them. His expression instantly brightened, as though they'd flipped a switch. "Will Project Soyuz work?!" he asked. "Do the remaining design specifications exist? What's our chance of success?"

There were no words of greeting or condolences from the supreme leader—only questions. That wasn't arrogance but rather the desperation of a man backed into a corner. Lev had met Gergiev more than once, and he'd always received at least a greeting.

Suppressing his anger at the man who'd sent Mikhail to his death and offered no consolation, Lev responded, "Project Soyuz has a one hundred percent chance of success, and the design specs are accounted for."

Gergiev looked relieved.

"We expect the military to oppose the project, but persuading them won't be an issue," Lev went on. "Regarding rocket development, the UK's already

surpassed us. We no longer have to fear our opponent stealing our rocket technology—if anything, it's the reverse. As for the Rodina, we always planned to install a computer in the finished spacecraft. Using Arnackian computer technology will make a huge difference.”

Gergiev nodded enthusiastically, but then doubt flashed across his face. “And as long as we have the design specifications, there won't be problems, will there? We can perfect the Rodina, can't we?” He was grabbing on to Project Soyuz like a man on the brink of defeat, clutching at straws.

“Yes. As long as we don't rush the process, we can finish the Rodina.”

Lev laid out the plan in further detail, allaying the supreme leader's fears. Gergiev's expression lightened, and life returned to his face. Just when Lev was certain he'd convinced Gergiev, his expression clouded.

“Just handing over our spacecraft for nothing feels wasteful,” he said. “Do we not have an alternative rocket design? If Korovin won't wake up, how about assigning Graudyn a new project?”

Gergiev still wasn't willing to admit defeat, and now he asked the impossible. Lev seethed in silence; it felt as though the supreme leader was dismissing all of Korovin's effort. He was about to defend the Chief, but Lyudmila moved first. She looked down at Gergiev's chessboard.

“Comrade Gergiev,” she said, “only one strategy has a one hundred percent chance of success.”

“And what's that?”

Lifting the white queen from the board, she thrust it before Gergiev's eyes. “Well, if you don't approve Project Soyuz, you'll be placed in checkmate by Queen Sundancia—who, may I remind you, is even younger than your son. The people will forever call you the worst leader in Zirnitra's history, and your name will be smeared in history books. Is that what you want?”

Gergiev's face twisted in panic, and he gulped.

Showing no hint of sympathy, Lyudmila set the white queen back on the board and lifted a black knight. “Turning the tables from a position of near defeat is next to impossible. When circumstances permitting a draw arise—

which is as close as we'll get to victory—there's no other choice. You take that opportunity." Her finger tapped the chessboard, showing Gergiev where to place the knight. "Hasn't the answer to your problems presented itself?"

"Erm, yes! It has indeed!"

He snatched the knight from Lyudmila, setting it where she'd indicated. The sight spoke volumes to Lev. Although Gergiev was the nation's supreme leader, he was under the spell of his secretary and her dangerous ambitions.

Gergiev looked up at Lev and Irina, revitalized. "I've made my decision," he announced. "We'll proceed officially with Project Soyuz. Let's draft a formal proposal to send to the United Kingdom!"

It took a somewhat forceful last push on Lyudmila's part, but the UZSR's supreme leader had finally embraced cooperative development. Lev felt more relieved than glad. Still, though a storm of emotions filled his heart, he knew they'd taken an important step forward.

"One more thing." Lyudmila looked at Lev. "We have a caveat for you two that we won't put in our official proposal."

"A caveat?"

"I've heard the Rodina carries a crew of three. Is that right?"

"You have to consider their exact weight, but yes, it's designed to carry three."

"Then you'll both occupy seats," Lyudmila said.

"Me and Irina? But—"

Irina cut him off. "The UZSR wants a larger share of the manned landing than the UK gets, doesn't it?"

"Frankly, yes. Right, Comrade Gergiev?"

Gergiev stared at the cosmonauts. "You'll take two seats. You'll step on the moon's surface before they do, and that first step will be human, not vampire. Those are the conditions for cooperative development."

Lyudmila stepped toward Lev. "You'll take the lead, Comrade Lev Leps." Her

voice didn't give him any leeway to refuse.

Until the very end, the UZSR would treat space development as a competition and obsess over victory. Lev wondered whether he could simply agree to this without consulting the UK's astronauts or Irina.

Before he could say anything, Irina spoke up. "Lev's first, then. I don't care about order," she declared, her voice clear. Then she turned to Lev, chest puffed up with dignity and pride. "Let's go to the moon. We'll work with the UK and make our dream come true with our comrades."

"Irina..."

"In all our planet's 4.6 billion years of history, one cosmonaut chosen out of 30 billion people will represent Earth and walk on the moon for the first time. That single great step will resonate hundreds—no, *thousands* of years into the future. Even if Earth's destroyed someday, the story will be handed down through eternity in the far reaches of the galaxy. It'll tell of how there were brave cosmonauts, and how we were among them."

Her scarlet eyes made Lev's heart flutter. Irina was right. He wasn't reaching for the moon for himself, or Lyudmila and Gergiev, or the UZSR. This was a dream held by everyone, and he couldn't let it end up just a dream. Now that a manned moon landing was nearly a reality, his job was to accomplish the task. That achievement would begin a brand-new Space Age. The twentieth century would end, and in the next, Lev's world would pass away. Nations would crumble over the millennia that followed. In the ancient history of space, all that would persist was the fact that someone from somewhere took a great first step forward.

What point was there obsessing over who was first when it would only last a fleeting instant? Lev didn't need to see things from the perspective of those who single-mindedly chased ambition or victory.

All I need to do is look to the skies and keep flying. That's who a cosmonaut should be. Just like the great cosmonaut Mikhail Yashin.

"Comrade Gergiev," said Lev. "Thank you for selecting me, an ordinary human. The UZSR will best the United Kingdom, and I will aim to be first. No—I *will* be first!" He stepped forward, saluting firmly.

With this move, Lev was practically drenching himself in honey to make himself more delectable. Lev knew the honey might become deadly poison, but he'd made up his mind. Nobody would extinguish the fire in his soul. He'd make good use of the nation. Armed with his status as history's first cosmonaut, he'd reach the lunar surface with his comrades and receive the blessings of the goddess of the moon.

To all the people who have ever dreamed of the moon and the stars.

To all the people who look up at the far reaches of space from the earth below.

To all the people who strive for a future in the skies.

I, Lev Leps, offer my life.



Afterword

This afterword contains spoilers. Please read it after the book.

IN THIS VOLUME, we returned to the UZSR. What'd you think?

Before I go further, here's an announcement. Those following this series on the internet might know that, between Volume 4 and Volume 5, I published an online spin-off called *Star Town*. It was a collaboration with the musical group H△G that used their song "Beyond the Night on the Galactic Railroad" as a motif. (*Star Town* is unconnected with this volume—it's not required reading.) The spin-off's set in 1964 in Star Town (modeled after Okazaki in Aichi prefecture). As the song title implies, it's a retelling of Kenji Miyazawa's *Night on the Galactic Railroad*.

The protagonist, Misa, is an ordinary high school student. She has her own dreams, but she lacks the confidence to chase them. Misa ends up journeying to the stars with a transfer student named Aria who's rumored to be a vampire because of her appearance. The story is about what awaits them at the end of the solar system. It's a fantasy and completely different from recent volumes of the *Irina* series.

Star Town combines storytelling and music. Voice actors even read from the book at a concert. The term "historic first" gets thrown around a lot in this series, but I think that type of live performance was a historic first too!

The concert was intended as a one-night-only performance, but the response was so great that another was scheduled for autumn 2019. I hope you were able to go see it!

A revised version of *Star Town* is also scheduled for print. I'll have more news about that as things progress. While *Star Town* is a spin-off, it may weave into the main story sooner or later.

Also, you can now hear Volume 1 of *Irina* as a Japanese audiobook! You've really got to listen to it. It's great hearing Lev and Irina's voices throughout.

Apparently it's dangerous to listen to on the train because you might wind up crying in public.

Okay, on to Volume 5!

The year 2019 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Apollo 11 lunar landing, and that year also saw Irina's adventure make its first serious moves toward a similar moon landing.

Up until now, *Irina* has often matched historical fact. As of Volume 5, we're splitting from history and entering the worlds of illegal publishing and cooperative development!

Let's look at differences between history and the book:

History: The Soviet Union's leader was ousted in 1964.

Book: Gergiev remains in power due to Lyudmila's covert activities.

History: The Soviet Union's design chief died on the operating table in 1966.

Book: Thanks to Irina, Korovin survives.

History: Soyuz I saw the first accidental death during spaceflight in 1967.

Book: In 1966, Rodina I, well...

History: Gagarin died in a crash landing following a flight in 1968.

Book: ???

History: America accomplished a manned lunar landing in 1965, defeating the Soviet Union.

Book: ???

History: Apollo 13 experienced an accident in space in 1970. (The team survived thanks to a lunar module.) Book: Hyperion 2's accident occurs in 1966. (It had no lunar module, so...) History: America and the Soviet Union agreed to an Apollo-Soyuz docking mission in 1972, ending the Space Race.

Book: ???

Apple TV+ recently released a sci-fi drama based on what might've happened

if the Soviet Union beat America to the lunar landing. But in the world of *Irina*, what lies ahead? Nobody knows. Even fifty years ago, the future was a journey into the unknown!

Wanting the best picture of what cooperative development might've looked like, I was lucky enough to meet with Toudou-sama and discuss the science and technology that could've been at play. Thank you so much for your assistance, Toudou-sama.

Thanks to my editor Tabata for the responsiveness and support through all the twists and turns. Don't go too hard on the zhizni.

KAREI, thanks in advance for your help on *Star Town*. SumaXXra awaits...

And, of course, I'm forever thankful to all you readers for the support. Thanks to you, I can announce projects like *Star Town*, as I did in the first half of this afterword. By the way, the *Irina* series got past the paperback censors and was legally published, so you won't get arrested for promoting it! In fact, circulation and promotion are recommended! The authorities welcome each and every tweet about *Irina*.

That said, please don't reveal any Volume 5 spoilers when discussing the book online. The previous volumes were Hollywood-esque in that the heroes came out on top, but this one had a few real shocks. Some people might read it and wonder, "Wasn't this supposed to be a *light* novel?" If you'd simply observe history in that regard, I'd be very grateful.

From the Author

Keisuke Makino

In addition to light novels, I write for games and TV dramas. I recently moved and set myself up with a new writing space, but the piles of unread books and unplayed games just keep growing!

Books by Keisuke Makino

Flick & Break

Flick & Break, Vol. 2

Flick & Break, Vol. 3

Irina: The Vampire Cosmonaut

Irina: The Vampire Cosmonaut, Vol. 2

Irina: The Vampire Cosmonaut, Vol. 3

Irina: The Vampire Cosmonaut, Vol. 4

Irina: The Vampire Cosmonaut, Vol. 5

From the Artist

KAREI

I've started drinking Yomeishu herbal liqueur.

Pixiv: 3410642 Twitter: @flat_fish_



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