



FLY ME TO THE BOOM

A Thriller

Shortly before midnight on July 3, 1969, the Soviet Union's dreams of a landing on the moon went up in smoke and flames, consuming itself in the largest explosion of any rocket in history. Either a piece of the engine had broken off, lodging itself in the fuel pump or the engine impeller blades had rubbed against the casing, creating a spark, igniting the first stage fuel outside the engine. When dawn came, it would be July 4th. Sixteen days later the American flag would be planted on the moon.

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The following is based on a true story.

Sydney dressed in a tight black gown with a very expensive (and chest flattering) top. The skirt was silk with layers of chiffon underneath. The hemline ran just below her knees. She had no idea what this meeting was going to be about, but she was going to look her best. She spent a few minutes applying exactly the right amount of makeup. No matter what the topic, I always paid to look your best.

The building, whose address she'd been given, was a nondescript office building in one of the more crowded sections of lower Manhattan. The street outside was bustling with activity, but no one seemed to notice her. They were each locked in their own world, orbiting their own needs and desires. Inside was quiet, the lobby practically empty. The building didn't even have a receptionist or bank of elevators. She headed for the staircase on the other side of the floor with the wrought iron railing. When she arrived at the first floor, she was immediately struck by the open space. No walls, no hallways, only a collection of desks, filing cabinets, and heavy wooden chairs. Each person had an overflowing in/outbox and two telephones on their desks. The men and women at these desks barely looked up to glance at her. They were too engrossed with the phone receivers practically glued to their ears. She felt invisible. They all seemed older, perhaps each one twenty years her senior.

Each of the other floors had a similar layout. Differing only in the amount of paperwork on the individual's desks. Only the top floor was distinctive. It was divided by deep-grained wood paneling. A single desk resided in each room, but only the last room was occupied by anything living. Behind it sat a man in an inexpensive suit and a very conservative haircut. He reminded Sydney of an army captain, only without the uniform. His desk was distinctive because it had not two, but three telephones on it. The only chair was the one he occupied.

Sydney looked about for a chair and waited to be invited to sit, but the man seemed completely absorbed in his work. Oblivious to the world around him. Sydney decided to break the ice. "I take you don't get many visitors?"

He glanced up, but his expression was fixed. "Вы говорите по-русски?"

She didn't even bat an eyelash. "Yes, I speak Russian," Sydney replied casually, "is it required for the interview?"

He didn't move, not a muscle. He simply kept staring at her expectantly, awaiting a reply. Finally, Sydney decided to turn on the charm. She batted both eyelashes at him. "Да, я говорю по-русски."

At last, he smiled. "Good. No, it's not necessary for the interview. But it's a step in the right direction. I'm pleased to see what they say about you is true." He got up from his seat and indicated the still-warm chair. "Please, have a seat."

"What do they say?"

"You speak the language without an accent."

As Sydney sat, the man began pacing the floor, hands clasped behind his back. He barely looked in her direction. "You must be here about the job then, correct?"

"Yes. My manager over at..."

He interrupted her with a gruff wave of his palm. The kind of dismissive gesture she was used to seeing from her Columbia professors. “You should get used to not replying to questions as you did there.”

Sydney’s forehead wrinkled. She tried to suppress it as soon as she realized she was doing it. It wasn’t a good look for her. “I’m afraid I don’t follow. Doing what exactly?”

“Answering more than what was asked.”

“Sorry. Yes. I’m here about the job.”

“You should stop doing that too.”

“Excuse me?”

“Apologizing.”

“Yes... well, I see what I can do.”

He didn’t look impressed with her fortitude. Nervously, she uncrossed and recrossed her legs. She wasn’t covering her mistakes well. But then she hadn’t been to many interviews. He grunted and continued his pacing. “I understand you’ve done some work building small rocket engines.”

Sydney wanted to sink down into the chair and disappear. People who worked in these kinds of buildings weren’t interested in her hobby. They didn’t even want to know she graduated with honors in Physics. It tended to put people off. When the Columbia trustees found out about her interest in rockets, they almost showed her the door. Suddenly, a whole series of arguments with Professor Morrison popped back into her mind. The National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics wanted bigger engines, not the small ones.

“Small rocket engines are more efficient,” She remarked, lowering all her protective masks. She went right back into the defensive mode she’d had to use with Professor Morrison. “Smaller engines use less fuel, which means you can burn the engines longer. Longer burns mean more distance, less weight, better altitude...” She stopped abruptly because the man had stopped pacing and was hanging on her every word. She found this situation even more unnerving than everything which had transpired up to this point.

“I’m glad to hear you say that.”

“Excuse me?”

“There you go again.”

She tried to recover a small measure of control. “I seemed to be at a disadvantage here. Is there something you are not telling me?”

The man grinned and resumed his pacing. “Take a look at some of the documents on the desk in front of you. I assume you read Russian as well.”

Sydney glanced at the stack of papers on the desk. She read the first one with great interest. Then she flipped the page to read the second. Her eagerness was apparent by the time she’d read the third and

she was now rapidly flipping through the pages. “It seems Russian rocket science is having the same arguments our people seem to be engaged in.”

“Yes,” the man beamed, “but unlike people on this side of the Atlantic, in Moscow, the small engine group seems to have gotten the ear of the Soviet Premier.”

This got Sydney’s attention. “Khrushchev?” She stopped paging through the material and looked up. “This is all very interesting, but what does it have to do with the job?”

“Everybody says you are our small engine expert. The only one doing any serious work in the field.”

She enjoyed being complimented, but she still didn’t understand what this was about. “Well, that’s all very flattering, but you haven’t answered my question. What does this have to do with the job?”

“Sydney Newmann, the United States government would like to hire you to go to the Soviet Union and find out exactly what is going on with rocket research behind the iron curtain.”



Ed Sherman’s nose wrinkled. Sydney had learned he always did this when he was disappointed. “No, you have to understand the Soviet Union is the most paranoid state on the planet. The Committee for State Security will be alerted the moment you start asking questions. The Directorate once used the phrase “Death to Spies” as its mission statement.”

Sydney slapped her hand on the table. “Then how am I supposed to find out anything? I mean without asking any questions? You understand how the scientific method works right?”

“Let them come to you.” The two of them stared at each other in silence. Two people whose experiences couldn’t have been farther apart, working together. “We want you to *give* them information. Once they think you know something, they’ll come after you.”

Her face held an exasperated expression. “I don’t think *that’s* a good idea.”

“Neither do I, but it’s the best we can do. It’ll work. Trust me.” Sydney found trusting the poorly shaved young man difficult. She wasn’t fond of being asked to give her trust to someone she knew nothing about. Was he married and simply didn’t wear a ring, divorced, or single? Nothing he did gave her any clue. What made it even more disconcerting was the fact he seemed to know everything about her. *He even knew about Jimmy Phillips in junior year and the trip to Boston.*

“So, how is this going to work?”

There was a gleam in his eye as he explained. “We’re going to get you a place at the State Academy of Aeronautics in Moscow as a student. You’ll turn in the information about your engine research as a paper.”

Her thinking raced past the mere realization of her assignment. “With a few errors thrown in to put them on the wrong track.”

Ed's face turned cross. "Absolutely not. No false information. You give them your best data. That's what will make them interested. If you hand them any mistakes, we're through. You'll be through... and your next class will be in the basement of the Lubyanka Square."

"But my engine designs will work," Sydney protested.

"Exactly," Ed seemed pleased she was finally getting the picture. "That's what we want. It's what will make this work. We need them to offer you a job with Sergei Korolev of the OKB-1 Design Bureau."

"Who's Sergei Korolev? I've never heard of him."

"There's no reason why you should have. He's one of their biggest kept secrets. Even in Russia, he is only known as Glavny Konstruktor or the Chief Designer. We want you to get close to him, very close. I don't think you'll have a problem with this part of your assignment."

Sydney was pleased. She didn't even think he'd noticed... and she'd put in a lot of effort into her appearance.

"When he was married to his first wife, he had an affair with a younger woman named Nina, who was an English interpreter. Although they were married in 1949, he is still known to have had affairs even after this second marriage."

Sydney's face turned red. "You expect me to have an affair with him?"

Ed's face never changed from his usual stony visage. "Well, that would be ideal, but no, we want you to get us information. You're an attractive young lady, and quite bright. I sure your appearance will help you get what we need out of Korolev."

She was at least a little mollified by the compliment, but Sydney's face remained red. "If this Korolev is supposed to be so secret even the soviet people don't know who he is, how do you know his name?"

Finally, Ed broke a smile worthy of the name. "It's my job."



The students sat in a grad semi-circle, seated in a high sloped auditorium. The school was old, leftover from the Tsarist days. It had once been used to train ballerinas and opera singers. At the base was a large lab wooden table and beyond this a series of sliding blackboards. Dr. Alexi Rozanov's lecture was about as boring as it was long. Sydney had a difficult time staying awake. Rozanov kept droning on about using nitric acid and gasoline as rocket fuel. Sydney already knew that they'd moved beyond that, with hydrazine as their main motive power source.

Sydney's paper proposed using a highly refined form of kerosene outwardly similar to jet fuel. It was cheaper, stable at room temperature, and far less hazardous than hydrazine. Miss Newmann breathed a sigh of relief when professor Rozanov finally completed his lecture. When he was done, even he sounded exhausted. "Class dismissed. You may pick up your papers on your way out. Miss Alexandrovna will see me before you leave."

Lyudmila Alexandrovna was the name Sydney had been given for her assignment in New York. It rolled off the tongue, but at the same time sounded vaguely long to Sydney's ears. She approached the front

desk with a bit of trepidation. Unlike the others, her paper didn't have a grade on it. Sydney picked it up and walked over to the professor, desperately trying not to look too nervous. Her heart sank. She had a sudden and intense feeling she'd given something away in her paper. The jig was up. The Soviets had learned about her real identity and she was about to be arrested.

Sydney had heard all about the paranoia found all over Moscow. Back in New York, they'd drilled it into her. But once she was here, it was more like they were looking at paranoia through the rear-view mirror.

Rozanov lowered his wire-rimmed glasses over his nose. Sydney gathered that it was his attempt to appear superior and smug. "Your parents grew up in Moscow?" He asked with his stone-cold monotone voice.

Sydney found her voice choking slightly as she spoke. "Yes."

"What did your parents do?"

"I don't know what my mother did, she died in a bombing attack in 1941. My father was a pilot with the Red Air Force." She knew she wasn't supposed to offer any extra explanations, but the professor stood there like a stone, waiting for her to continue. "He took me to see his fighter once, a YAK-1. I wasn't supposed to be there, but my father was so proud of this plane."

The professor shook his head. "The YAK-1 was an inferior model."

"Yes, but my father saw it as a gift from the Soviet people. He often thought of the many factory workers and miners who labored so hard so he would be able to fly the machine for the motherland against the fascist invader."

"He was shot down in 1943?"

Sydney thought of her kid sister, who'd been killed in a freak school bus accident years before. She hoped the memory would give her face the right expression. "Yes."

Rozanov pushed his glasses back up his nose. "The YAK-1 was a piston-driven aircraft. Your father was killed well before that advent of jet flight, Miss Alexandrovna. How is it you've become so familiar with jet fuels?"

Sydney tried to look cheerful. "I guess I picked up my father's love of aviation. He always found it exhilarating to fly. I've tried to keep up with the technical improvements since his day."

"You've done an admirable job." The remark sounded odd to her ears. Rozanov didn't go in for encouraging his students.

"May I ask then why my paper was not graded?"

"I'm not the appropriate person to grade your paper." He sounded angry, frustrated. Sydney was familiar with the tone. The voice quality appeared when someone in authority told you not to do something, but you didn't understand why. "Come, walk with me. There is someone I'd like you to meet." Professor Rozanov picked up Sydney's paper and headed straight for the door. He didn't even stop to see if she was following him.

The hallways had a musty smell to them as if they had not been swept since the revolution. Sydney got the feeling the teaching staff enjoyed the smell. It was as if the aroma gave them some legitimacy. On the other hand, it might simply be intended to keep the KGB at bay. Professor Rozanov took her to a small office at the end of one of the smaller school corridors. The door to the office was equally tiny, with a frosted window in the upper portion so no one could not see who was inside. Rozanov opened the door.

Inside there was a man sitting on the edge of an old wooden desk, leaving the only chair in the room empty.

She recognized the man inside the room as Sergei Korolev. Rather she assumed that's who was, she'd never been shown a picture. He was a heavy-set man with a receding hairline. In America, he wouldn't be the type of man to attract enough women to have many affairs. Sydney certainly wasn't attracted to him, he looked far too close to Edgar J. Hoover for her tastes, but with a far less pleasing smile. What he did have was something designed to attract the attention of any woman in Moscow. He was wearing a long leather coat, a clear outward sign of wealth and influence. The only display of power permitted in the Soviet capital. Sydney batted her eyes in a most flirtatious way.

His voice was deep and resonant. "You are Lyudmila Alexandrovna? Daughter of Yuri Alexandrovna?"

"Yes."

He squinted his eyes and made an appraisal of her. Sydney would have preferred to be wearing something which made her more attractive, rather than the same outfit worn by any factory worker on this side of the tracks. A little makeup wouldn't have done any harm either, but it would have given her away. She would have to rely on charm and intelligence to win this one over. Korolev snatched her paper from Professor Rozanov's hands. He quickly flipped through some of the pages, obviously searching for something. "What are these extra pipes for?" Korolev demanded, slapping the paper with his index figure.

Sydney glanced at the page he was indicating. It was the illustration of her engine design. "Only 65% of the fuel will burn in the mixing chamber of a rocket engine. It's inefficient. In our current rockets, you must carry extra weight you cannot use for thrusting. In the end, all this unburned fuel reduces thrust, but if you recycle the exploded fuel back through these vents you can feed this fuel back into the thrust chamber."

He squinted one eye. "You believe the fuel will simply go into these tubes by their own accord?"

"No, that's why there are valves here and here," she indicated several places in the drawing. "The force of the explosion will force some of the unburnt fuel past these valves and the pressure will drive the fuel back into the reaction chamber."

"Not good enough. You could only recycle 50% of the unused fuel this way. This only leads to a 17.5% increase in thrust."

Sydney gave him a pleasant, almost seductive grin. "Yes, but it improves overall engine efficiency to 82.5%." She tried to hide the pride in her face. But not too much, she wanted him to see it was there.

Korolev stood and he flipped through the rest of her paper, pausing occasionally to let his eye linger over certain passages. She tried to wear her most attractive expression. Korolev couldn't even be bothered to glance her way. "Alexi, you can go. I sure the rest of our conversation will not be of much interest to a man such as yourself." Professor Rozanov was clearly irked by the remark. Never-the-less, he produced a clearly audible grunt and made his exit from the room, closing the door behind him. The window in the door rattled.

Sydney again tried batting her eyes subtly. "Did I do something wrong?"

Korolev snorted. "You agreed with my assessment as to the proper type of fuel required for our rockets. Even most of the others in the Design Bureau are too rigid in their thinking to have reached this conclusion yet. In this sense, you couldn't be more right." He continued to stare at the paper, flipping back to the figure on page three.

Sydney shifted her weight between legs and waited for Korolev to finish. "Shall I return to class now, sir?"

"No, your time at this school is finished." he folded her paper and placed it in an internal pocket of his leather jacket. "There is nothing more they can teach you here." Only now did his eyes return to looking at her. He examined her with more than a curious eye. "I like the addition of the return nozzles. Clever. I hadn't even thought of this."

Before she even had a chance to appear pleased, Korolev's big frame pushed right past Sydney and he reached for the doorknob. When it was opened, two uniformed officers, who'd been clearly listening at the door, scrambled. They jumped back to attention even before the door stopped opening. Sydney looked out into the hallway and her heart skipped a beat. She tried desperately not to sweat. The uniforms the men were wearing were clearly KGB.

Sergei Korolev glanced at the two men with disdain. "This is Lyudmila Alexandrovna. See to it she is given all the appropriate clearances."

The two men snapped to attention. Sydney could see they were resisting saluting. Their hands wavered. "Yes, Chief Designer."

Korolev stormed off down the hall. When he noticed he could hear only his footsteps he turned on his heels. "Come along Miss Alexandrovna. We don't have all day to chit chat. We have work to do." Sydney rushed after him as he resumed walking, her heels clicking on the floor.

"Do you mind if I ask you where we are going?"

Korolev didn't even turn around. "Of course not. We on our way to Kazakhstan."



The two of them had been arguing over her rocket engine designs for hours. Korolev insisted she should add more of her return valves. "You might be able to get the efficiency up to 90%," he insisted.

"If you add too many, the overall pressure inside the tubes drops, slowing up the recycle feed to the engines."

“That doesn’t matter. The pressure will build up in any case over time.”

“You need the high pressure at launch, so you burn the fuel faster. Otherwise, you are still carrying it around only now in the return tubes and not in the tanks.”

Korolev frowned. “I can see you are going to be a problem. Too headstrong. I have already hired enough people to argue with.”

Sydney sat back in her seat dejected.

“At least,” Korolev muttered glancing out the windows at the flat, featureless terrain, “you use that pretty little head of yours. This is good.”

Sydney forced herself not to show him her strategy was beginning to have some effect. She’d had a glimmer of this before they left. He took her to the Moscow Department store. And bought her a nice pastel dress. The same as might be worn by a secretary for some high-level soviet party members. Most of the common citizens of Moscow were not even allowed through the doors. She gathered this was Korolev’s attempt to impress her.

The Baikonur Cosmodrome was one of the most secretly held places in the Soviet Union. In Moscow you could be shot merely for spreading the rumor it *might* exist. Korolev and Sydney approached Tyuratam railway station. The whole place looked like a sleepy Arabian town. There was even a mosque with two minarets on the outskirts. None of the buildings at the train station were particularly impressive, but the massive towers holding up the power lines gave away the indisputable fact something was going on here.

For the last 90 kilometers, the KGB checked everyone’s papers every fifteen minutes. Each time she got her papers out of her purse for their review, but the KGB agents past right by them as soon as they saw Korolev sitting next to her. Until now she’d begun to wonder if this man was who he claimed to be. This wasn’t a special train. Sydney had traveled in dozens of identical cars in the months she’d been in Moscow. If anything, these seats were less comfortable. Only at the end did she realize it was part of the security plan. No foreign agent would follow such an ordinary train car.

They exited the train at the station and were escorted to a caravan of waiting cars, ZIS-115, the ubiquitous luxury car of the Soviet government. Korolev motioned her into the first car in the group. Sydney noted the windows didn’t roll down. They were one-inch-thick bullet-proof glass. It was going to be a hot ride out here in the desert.

Sydney needn’t have been worried; the ride was short. Out of the windows, she gazed at a most stupendous sight. There where row after row of launch pads. This facility wasn’t intended to launch a test rocket or two... it was intended to launch thousands. She couldn’t keep from staring. Her eyes never even blinked. “This is Baikonur City,” Korolev explained. “They tried to rename it Leninsk, but it never caught on.”

Sydney simply gasped.

“We have plans,” Korolev suggested, “Big plans.”



His office was more modern than anything she had yet seen in Russia. Unlike the mold and dust of Moscow, this place smelled of fresh paint and polished steel. An older woman stood as Korolev marched through the door. She appeared about as matronly as any movie actress would look like for the dark and secret offices of the soviet empire. Her hairstyle looked like it went back to the harsh peasant styles of the 17th Century. She looked like the west-Urals version of Margaret Dumont. Although her nose seemed as though she inherited it from Zeppo Marx. It was extremely cliché.

Korolev waved his hand. "This is Natalia Denisovna, my executive secretary. Anything you need, anything you want, you tell Natalia. Natalia, this young lady is Lyudmila Alexandrovna. Get her an office in the main building. Get her a desk and then fill it with everything we have on the N-1 engine designs and the RP-1 liquid oxygen fuel formulas."

Her voice was as gravelly as you'd expect. "But Chief Designer, the security protocols..."

His face flushed. "There were no 'buts' in my instructions, Natalia. Get her an office. Get her a desk. Do you see? I didn't use the word 'but' once."

"Yes, sir. I'll see to it at once."

Korolev retained his gruff exterior. "You also mean to say thank you for letting me keep the job that means everything to me and my family."

Denisovna straightened up. "I'll get to it at once."

Sydney tried her best to look concerned. "I don't want to cause any problems."

Sergei changed his directed ire to Sydney. "Are you going to read the material?"

"Of course."

"Then you're not causing a problem." His face changed to an even colder expression than he'd been using before. "In fact, I'll be causing a problem for you. Are you aware the material you are about to read is highly classified?"

She was sure her face now looked a pale shade of green. "Now I am."

"This information cannot leave this facility and other than myself, no one who knows this information leaves this facility either. Then you'll be spending the next ten years right here, Miss Alexandrovna, at Baikonur City."



Lyudmila Alexandrovna was launching her thirteenth test flight. It was a small missile containing only one of her engines. With only a 100-mile range, it would be simple to recover and bring back to the facility.

Arkhai Khasar sat on a low slope. His sheep seemed nervous, they kept running excitedly between different parts of the grazing fields. The dogs were doing extra work trying to keep them from wandering off. The sky overhead was one crystal clear, royal blue canopy. There wasn't a cloud to be seen. Squinting his eyes, he saw the red and white of the parachutes blossom as if it was a flower.

“Chormakhan, get the sheep out of here. We need to be miles away when the Red Army arrives.” There was a scramble of activity and now the sheep were even more nervous than they were before.

Arkhai walked up to the wreckage calmly. He pulled off one of the outside panels so it would appear as if it was loosened in the crash. Turning it over, he peeled a piece of tape off the inside of the panel. The message almost blew away in the wind, but Arkhai managed to grab the paper before it turned into a paper airplane floating on the desert air currents. He unfolded it and glanced at the markings. To the untrained eye, it looked like nothing more than launch calculation, but it was more than that... much more.

GET WORD TO ED SHERMAN THERE WILL BE A SUB-ORBITAL LAUNCH BEFORE
HOLLOWEEN. IT WILL BE SUCCESSFUL.

He refolded the paper and placed it into the top of his boot. He started walking towards the sun, his footsteps covered by the numerous hooves of his sheep. Arkhai sighed. It would be a long walk to Tibet and an even longer walk to India. Privately Arkhai doubted he could get this information back to the United States before December, let alone October. He shook his head. Mr. Sherman was going to be both disappointed and surprised.



“What is your operative doing, Sherman?” Vice President Nixon's face was a portrait of anger. “What the hell is she doing out there?”

Ed Sherman whipped the sweat off his upper lip. “She’s doing her job, Mr. Vice President. If she wasn’t doing her job, we wouldn’t know what we know now. We wouldn’t have known anything. You, Mr. Vice President, you wouldn’t even know we have an agent out there. The only agent who has told us anything about the events going on in the Soviet space program. If you want to blame someone for our lack of success at launching satellites, I suggest you call up the NASA administrator.”

Nixon grumbled. He was not ready for another South American trip... especially in the District of Columbia. “What’s the plan?”

“Excuse me, sir?”

“What’s the plan.”

Ed Sherman squirmed in his congressional sub-committee chair. “We’re going to find out what the Russians are up to, Mr. Vice President, and then we’re going to put a stop to it.”

Nixon stormed out of the room. The door shook as he slammed it on his way out.

Sherman turned to an aid sitting uncomfortably behind him. “Who told Newmann she could contact us in the first place?”

“She did it on her own, Ed.”

“How do we get her to stop?”

“We can’t, sir. She’s inside the most secure site in the most paranoid state on the planet. We have no way to contact her.”



Sydney’s apartment was in a small complex near the research area. It was sparsely furnished. A closet with no door showed a rack of white lab coats. The tiny kitchen held a large pile of dishes that hadn’t been cleaned in some time. Still, the room smelled of rose petals and just a touch of coriander. The room had a grey pallor to it, even when the sun was shining. There were no plates on the dining room table. Instead, it was covered in papers filled with mathematical formulae. Sydney sat, scratching out additional numbers with a small pencil.

The knock at the door wasn’t just loud, it was pounding. Before Sydney could even reach the door, it burst open. In rushed a set of uniformed KGB guards. A man in a colonel’s uniform accroached her as the rest of the officers began ransacking the apartment. “Lyudmila Alexandrovna?”

“Colonel, why do you persist in asking questions where you already know the answer?” She glanced up at him. “How will you learn anything until you venture into new areas?”

Colonel Melekhin pulled out a chair across from her. “Do you mind if I sit?”

Sydney shrugged her shoulders.

“Have you ever been to the West?” He asked, pulling out a cigarette.

“Other than here, I’ve never been outside of Moscow.”

He toyed with the cigarette, rolling it around with his fingers, before lighting it with a match. “I have a penchant of the West. This shouldn’t come as a shock. I lot of my fellow security officials enjoy the West; you know.” He took a long drag on the cigarette and watched the smoke slowly curl as he exhaled. “They have a lot of crime in the West.”

“I’ve heard. Decadence will cause such things to occur.”

“But their policemen at quite adept at catching the criminals. Their jails always seem to remain full.”

Sydney sat silently.

Taking another drag on his cigarette, Melekhin continued. “They have a theory, these policemen in the West, you know. Criminals always make mistakes. The smarter they are, the more mistakes they make. The belief is the smart ones want to be caught so the genius of their plans can finally be made public and they can bask in the light of their seemingly clever efforts.”

A uniformed lieutenant strode up to the table. “The apartment is clean.”

“I doubt that,” Melekhin snorted without even looking at the officer. His eyes were glued to Sydney’s. “Because you are an incompetent fool. Now get out.” The other officers hurried to leave the room. The lieutenant was the last to leave, slamming the door behind him. “Every time I search someone’s apartment in the complex, I always find some type of contraband. Magazines, books, western alcohol... most of the women are fond of Cuban dresses. But not you. Do you know what I think?”

Sydney gave him a wry grin. "Watching you work, one would assume there was no thinking involved."

Melekhin didn't even react to the comment. He leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. "I think you have something big to hide."

"I shall have to request bigger rooms then. This place is not much on space."

He slowly puffed on his cigarette. "Did you know Barkova Alexandrovna was a secretary in the Tsarist Ministry of the Interior?"

"My father's mother? That was before I was born Colonel. I've heard the rumors, of course, but no one in the family talked about her."

His eyes bore into hers. "I met her recently in Gorky."

She tried to show her surprise gently. All the background data had shown her disappearing in 1944. The general consensus was she was dead. She let her facial expression change from astonishment to anger. Before she could reply, Colonel Melekhin continued with both his smoking and his conversation. "We had a very long chat. A delightful woman for someone of her age. What a memory. She had the most interesting stories about Prince Nikolay Shcherbatov. But it was what she told me about her own family I found most interesting..." he stopped to blow a smoke ring. "She told me her daughter never had children. I think that's interesting, don't you?"

Sydney returned his stare with determination. "And where did you meet my grandmother?"

"Gorky."

"Yes, I know. You've told me that. I'm afraid you'll have to be more specific. Or do the salient details elude your mind?"

"A hospital."

"You can do better than the obvious, Colonel Melekhin."

"The Gorky..."

"Yes?"

"...Psychiatric Hospital for the Criminally Insane."

"I would think, Colonel, the title above the main door would tell you something significant. All you need to know, in fact."

The door flew open again. But this time it was Sergei Korolev. "Colonel Melekhin, have you solved my fuel recycling problem?"

Melekhin coldly put out his cigarette. Only he didn't use an ashtray. He crushed the remains out on the bare wood of the table. The KGB officer's voice was dismissive. "Comrade Chief Designer."

"I'll take that as a no." Korolev rattled. "So, if you don't know how to fix my problems, stop harassing those of my staff who *can* solve my problems."

The colonel pushed back the chair and stood. The chair legs made a squeal across the wood rivaling any passing of fingernails on a blackboard. "Miss Alexandrovna, we'll talk again later."

Sydney barely looked up. "Anytime colonel."

"Get out," Korolev yelled.

He bowed formally and slowly and exited the room.

"Sorry about the disturbance, I only just heard, my dear." Korolev sneered at the door. "I hope you didn't find him disturbing."

Sydney settled back in her chair. "I find flies and mosquitoes disturbing... and much more preferable than the good colonel. They're cleaner." She brushed the remains of the cigarette off the table.



The halls were crowded, people rushing from place to place. All the women ignored her, and all the men favored her with their eyes. But not too much. It wasn't a good plan to make Korolev jealous. He could have a mean streak.

Everything was going as she expected they would. Sydney knew that if she insisted on fewer return vents, Korolev would demand more. She was right. Korolev was even easier to manipulate than most men. He had the flaw of always insisting he was in the right. The man was both proud and arrogant. It was a useful combination. She had no difficulty planting ideas in his head he would later insist were his own. If things proceeded as they were going, her plan would be a complete success. Still, she had no idea why he wanted her in the main lab today.

Natalia Denisovna gave her an uncomfortable stare as she entered the room and then quietly departed. She was always protective and efficient. The woman always glared at Sydney as if she had a stone in her shoe. Amazingly, it somehow comforted Sydney the woman had no fashion sense. In the center of the room was a large table. There was something tall under a sheet in the table's center.

Normally the lab was full of workers. Typically, it was wall to wall lab coats, but today it was nearly empty. She'd never really noticed how big of a space it was before. But even without the crowds, it still smelled of solvent, paper, and the plastic of slide rules.

Korolev was beaming. "Come in, come in. I have something I want to show you." he indicated the covered object on the table with his hand. Sydney had never seen him this pleased. "Go ahead," he announced, "Pull off the sheet."

She had always found the chief designer to be taciturn, at times almost bordering on the morose. It had gotten worse once the Americans had begun their Gemini program. It was clear they had jumped ahead. Once they started these flights the government in Moscow started to lose interest. They only wanted long-range missiles to launch bombs. Once the propaganda value of manned spaceflight faded, it was all they were willing to fund... weapons.

Korolev had been back and forth to Moscow several times in the last few months. The frequency of his trips increased. But he had never returned happy. The arguments in the lab had never been more

heated. The other engineers seemed to sense his weakness, his loss of power. Each of them had a score to settle the Chief Designer for his slights and their lack of promotion. Still, his trips to Moscow were odd. Sergei seemed to like bureaucrats even less than Sydney liked Colonel Melekhin. No one could understand his latest mood. He'd been especially secretive lately.

Sydney gave the material a light tug. It hardly moved.

"You'll need to do better than that," Korolev declared. He grabbed a corner of the sheet and furnished a serious yank as if he was a magician pulling a tablecloth out from under a fancy dinner setting. What appeared was the most extraordinary model. Sydney's eyes went wide. She pointed at it with her fingertips. "It has stages."

"Three actually." Korolev grinned. "I call it the N-1, our super-heavy lift vehicle."

Sydney's eyes lit up with a glow rivaling the stars. "Are we going to build a space station?"

"No," Korolev declared, his pride showing. "We are going to put a Cosmonaut on the moon. The American president has announced they plan to go to the moon by the end of the decade. This one trip will put the motherland back on top. We're going to land in 1968. Its first stage is the most powerful single stage of any rocket ever made, and this includes anything the Americans are building, especially their Saturn V," he snorted.

Sydney stood her mouth agape.

"We're going to be using your engines Lyudmila." he grinned happily. "They are going to help us to plant the motherland's red hammer and sickle on the moon."



Arkhai Khasar sat in front of a single desk in an empty room. The desk was distinctive because it had a large telephone on it with buttons for multiple lines... at least three. Arkhai was a long way from his sheep herd. His journey had left a path through snow-covered mountains, he'd ridden camels, elephants, jeeps, and had taken his first ride in an airplane. Yet after all this, he still smelled like damp wool. A man entered wearing an inexpensive suit and a very conservative haircut. He reminded Arkhai of a Red Army captain, only without the uniform. "What happened?"

Khasar shuffled his feet. As a shepherd, he was cool and confident, as a messenger... well, he was still learning about how to handle relaying news. In the end, he simply blurted it out. "There was an explosion."

"We know about the accident already." He put his hands in his pockets. "Do you know what happened?"

Arkhai swallowed hard. "You know she had Sergei Korolev killed. He was the only one who could have pulled this off."

The man in the polyester suit seemed doubtful. "I thought he died due to a poorly performed operation for hemorrhoids?"

“Do you really think the Soviets would allow one of their doctors to botch an operation on Korolev? There would have been another purge of doctors, just like under Stalin before he died. Believe me, you’d have noticed the event in the press.”

The man in the suit steered the conversation back to the subject. “So, what happened with the launch?”

Arkhai looked uneasy. “They tried a night launch. Just before liftoff, the liquid oxygen turbopump in the number eight engine exploded. At first, the rocket lifted into the night sky as everyone expected. But moments after it cleared the tower, there was a flash of light, and debris could be seen falling from the bottom of the first stage.” He nervously shifted his feet again. “You know her design was perfect. It was brilliant. All the engines instantly shut down. Unfortunately, this caused the N-1 to lean over at a 45-degree angle and fall back onto the launch pad. The result was a massive blast and shock wave shattering windows across the whole complex. It destroyed the entire launchpad. there is nothing left. Your moon program is safe now. They will never recover from this. The Central Committee is no longer interested in sending anyone to the moon. They are not going to foot the bill.” Arkhai struggled to keep back tears. “Without Sergei to protect her, she was vulnerable... exposed. You should have pulled her out. It was arrogance. You’d have been much better off using her engine designs anyway.”

The man in the budget suit adjusted his tie. “So, the KGB has her.”

“No.”

“Then where is she?”

“Didn’t you hear what I said before? The pad was completely destroyed.”

The other man raised his voice. He was not used to having his questions evaded. “SO, WHERE IS SHE?”

Arkhai’s voice choked. “She was on the pad.”

The man in the suit took a step back. “She’s gone? Are you sure?”

“I wasn’t there when it happened. If I had been, I wouldn’t be here telling you about it now.”

The man in the suit sank down and leaned against the desk for support.

Arkhai continued. “You know, half an hour after the explosion, searchers encountered droplets of unburned fuel still raining down from the sky.”

“So?”

“She was a genius. Only the first stage exploded. She avoided the worst-case scenario. It didn’t happen. Only 15% of the fuel exploded. If it had all gone up, the entire town would have been whipped out; men, women, and children... everyone for miles. She stopped them from going to the moon and all it cost anyone was her life.”

Arkhai stood, brushing the dust of the journey from his jacket. “Do you know a Barkova Alexandrovna?”

The man smirked. “No why?”

“She was an old woman in a hospital in Gorky. She was killed about a week later.”

He didn't seem impressed. "You think there is a connection?"

Arkhai fussed with his clothes. "How would I know? I herd sheep for a living. All I know is they found traces of rocket propellant on the old woman's nightclothes. Odd, don't you think?"