

RED MOON

DAVID S. MICHAELS
AND DANIEL BRENTON

Cover design by Jeremy Robinson

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For all the beautiful women in my life –

My late, loving mother Beatrice Michaels.

My understanding wife Margo.

My wonderful daughters -

Alexandra, Arianna, and Julienne. My supportive sisters Jayne and Joan.

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PROLOGUE

0736 hours, October 17, 2001:

NASA Ames Research Center, Mountain View, California

Ice.

No mistaking that signature. Ice, on the Moon, at a latitude far lower than it had any right being.

Minutes before, Milo Jefferson had been nearly catatonic, staring at rows of arcane data scrolling across his monitor—the previous night's dump from Lunar Prospector II's neutron spectrometer, still scanning the cratered terrain during the probe's umpteenth-thousandth orbit. He thought the time long past when anything it found could quicken his pulse.

“Hey Jim, take a look at this.”

Jim Lebert chomped on a donut at his own terminal, unconcerned about crumbs dropping into his keyboard. Jefferson wondered what good all this high-tech equipment was if even the supervisors treated it like trash.

Lebert, the assistant project director, wore faded jeans and a grungy UC Berkeley sweatshirt, the Ames space cadet uniform. He licked glazed sugar off his fingers, slurped coffee, then scooted his rolling chair across the low-pile carpet to Jefferson's monitor. “Watcha got, Milo my boy?”

Jefferson winced. Lebert probably didn't mean anything racial with the “my boy” stuff. Anyway, Dad always said the “Black rage” crap was for losers and crybabies. *You'll never get anywhere if you go around with a chip on your shoulder.*

But Lebert was irritating. He always stressed Jefferson's junior status on the Lunar Prospector team. Jefferson was twenty-two, an intern who'd come on board only three months earlier.

Jefferson cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses. “Well, we've got a clear ice signature at 17.4 degrees north, 59.1 east.” He glanced at the Moon map tacked to the wall. “In the Sea of Crises.”

Lebert frowned. “Impossible. Gotta be ratty data.”

“Same thing showed up on two consecutive passes in almost exactly the same spot.”

“Did it now?” Lebert leaned closer, looked over the readout, scratched his chin stubble. “Well, it's picking up slow neutrons, but that doesn't mean ice.”

“Every other time we've picked up this signature, it's been ice.”

“By one interpretation. Some very credible folks think it's all bullshit, that we're misreading the numbers.”

Jefferson knew Lebert didn't count himself among the "dry Moon" crowd. His boss relished the role of Devil's advocate a bit too much for Jefferson's taste.

"Look," said Jefferson, tapping the screen, "a concentrated source of slow neutrons. That means cosmic rays bouncing through stable hydrogen. In other words, ice crystals. And there's a lot of it. Compared to the trace amounts at the poles, this looks like the Mother Lode."

Lebert studied the data. The room seemed very still. Jefferson swore he heard a clock ticking above the hum of computers and fluorescent lights. He hoped the numbers on his screen weren't some kind of cosmic practical joke.

All lunar ice found so far had been at the north and south poles, scattered over the bottoms of deep craters where the Sun never shone. Tough to land there. Jefferson looked again at the big Moon map and fought to control his racing heartbeat. No better landing site than the Sea of Crises. Anyone could spot it, even without a telescope—a big gray oval amid the lighter highlands on the eastern limb.

The silence deepened. Ice, for God's sake. Nothing more primal than ice. It meant water; water meant life. Not indigenous life—no organism could survive on the Moon's airless, radiation-blasted surface. But it opened the door to future life, humans on the Moon, a permanent foothold in space.

Only one thing could have caused a high-density ice deposit—a comet strike millions or billions of years ago.

Ice meant oxygen and hydrogen, the most efficient rocket fuels known, fuels that could be easily boosted out of the Moon's light gravity. Nitrogen too, to treat the lunar soil for plants, crops, the cycle of life.

Cometary ice also meant rare isotopes, captured from the solar wind by repeated thawing and refreezing during innumerable encounters with the Sun. Visionaries had suggested baking the lunar surface for an isotope of helium to serve as fuel for nuclear fusion. But here, in a subsurface lode of cometary ice, isotopes of not just helium but hydrogen as well would be waiting. A cleaner source of power, remote from the fragile Earth.

Jefferson couldn't imagine anything more important than getting humanity off this crowded planet. As a kid, he used to spend a few days with his dad every summer at the Creek Indian reservation. He remembered the tribal elders saying they always looked "seven generations hence" before making any important decision. In far less than seven generations, the Earth could well be an overheated, exhausted hell.

His Mother Lode could be the key to colonizing other worlds. Nothing less than the salvation of the human race.

Could he, Milo Jefferson, the bright-eyed Black kid from Birmingham, have found the Holy Grail? Jesus God Almighty, that would be so sweet. It would make Dad's words about keeping an open mind and a positive outlook more than platitudes. It would make everything he'd endured—Mama's early death, Dad's dead-end job as a middle manager at US Steel, the asthma that had kept Jefferson grounded and desk-bound, the bull-shit he'd had to wade through to get an education, even being treated like a kid by a slob

like Lebert—seem somehow directed toward a purpose.

Jefferson let himself luxuriate in the feeling, the clarity. Maybe the space program, like Prometheus, would steal fire from the heavens and bring it to the feet of humanity.

Hubris? He didn't know, didn't care. *You're going to come down at some point*, a small voice in his mind warned. *Shut up and enjoy it, brother*, a larger voice responded.

Jefferson regarded Lebert with an almost Olympian mirth. *You really don't see it, do you? A treasure lying at your feet, and you're afraid you're going to trip over it.*

He felt his chest tighten, dug out his inhaler, and took a preemptive hit. He didn't need a wheezing fit now.

Lebert looked up, glanced around nervously. "Look, let's not jump to conclusions here."

"Who's jumping to conclusions?"

Lebert hesitated for a moment, perhaps unsettled by Jefferson's sudden air of confidence. "I can already see two problems with your analysis. One, how could ice possibly survive at this latitude, when it gets blasted by the Sun for days on end? Two, why haven't we noticed it before?"

Jefferson got up and walked to the map, ran his finger along it to the Sea of Crises. "Let's say our Mother Lode is deep subsurface, with some kind of a narrow vent to the surface. When the Sun comes up, the ground heats up, any ice in the vent turns to vapor, outgasses, gets redeposited in shady spots. That's what we're picking up— redeposited ice. As the Sun swings higher, it vanishes."

Lebert stared at him. "Not bad for an intern. What, you working on your doctorate or something?"

Jefferson grinned. Whole decades of his life came into focus. *Nothing as trivial as that, little man.*

"Hotshot, eh?" Lebert eyed him askance, turned back to the monitor. "Did you notice this other anomaly here, from the GRS?" He swung the terminal around to face Jefferson.

Jefferson squinted at the screen. The gamma-ray spectrometer was supposed to detect mineral and ore concentrations in lunar regolith. "Yeah, I did. Looks like aluminum, too small and concentrated to be natural. Thought it must be ratty."

Lebert tapped the scroll key. "Same thing came up on two previous scans, just like your ice signature."

Jefferson felt a tingle of puzzlement. He turned back to the map and found the Sea of Crises. A red pin was stuck near a small hummock in the terrain. "What's this?"

"Landing or impact site. Blue for American, red for Russian."

"I didn't think the Russians landed on the Moon."

"No manned landings, just a few unmanned probes."

Could the Russian probe have locked onto the outgassing and decided to land? No, surely he would have heard of this. He'd studied the most esoteric papers on lunar geology he could get his hands on, and no one had even suggested lunar ice prior to the

DOD's Clementine orbiter in the early 1990s.

Surely it was a coincidence. Odd that the Russian probe would be right there, next to his putative Mother Lode.

Jefferson squinted through his glasses and read the tiny hand-lettered tag:

LUNA 15

PART I: LUNA

CHAPTER 1

0925 hours Houston Mean Time (HMT) July 24, 2019: Sea of Crises, Moon

They sailed a sea more arid than any earthly desert, but the Rover bucked and heaved life a skiff riding huge swells.

It was enough to make even an astronaut seasick.

Janet Luckman eased off the throttle and twisted the hand controller, guiding the Rover's wire mesh tires around another in a series of big, gray hummocks. They looked like overlapping giant's footprints on a trash-strewn beach.

Where had she heard that before?

"I'll be damned," she said. "The Moon looks just like Bill Anders described it on Apollo 8—like a dirty beach."

Alexei Sergeyovich Feoderov raised a bushy eyebrow, an expression plain even through the glare on his helmet. "Not very poetical, but one must consider the source."

"What, cosmonauts are more poetic than astronauts?"

"Is in our blood. Example, I look around and see wondrous things—plains of powdered glass, mountains old as time. You see dirty beach."

Luckman's gaze swept the undulating horizon. Maybe the Russian was right. Maybe she was inured to the wonders around them, all business, scanning for hazards in the rock-studded regolith, when she might instead be overwhelmed by awe.

Like most of the cosmonauts Luckman knew, Sasha Feoderov had the brain of a test pilot, heart of a Tolstoy, soul of a Pushkin, kidneys of a Cossack. Were they preselected for such gravitas, or was it part of their training?

"All right," Luckman said, "if it's poetry you want, try this. 'Over the mountains of the Moon, down the Valley of Shadow. Ride, boldly ride, the shade replied, if you seek for Eldorado.'"

Feoderov sniffed. "Poe, your version of Lermontov. Obvious, but not bad. Perhaps we make cosmonaut of you yet."

Too late, Luckman spotted a football-sized rock in their path. She jerked the hand controller, but the left front tire slammed into the boulder, sent a jolt through the frame.

"Shit!" She checked the fender for damage, found none.

Feoderov chuckled. "Perhaps I should take over?"

"Keep your paws off my hot rod, Sasha." Driving the Rover was her job, goddammit. It was an ungainly beast – four seats and a control panel bolted to an aluminum

frame resting on four wire-mesh tires. But she loved the vehicle for the sheer fun of driving it.

A garage-sized crater loomed up in front of them, a fresh one deep enough to tip them over. Luckman swerved, a maneuver that would have been more dramatic had they not been trundling along at a leisurely 14 kph. The sharp turn sent a spray of moon dust into the black sky. Tiny glass beads glittered as they arced back to the surface in dream-like slow motion, each in its own precise parabola.

Wondrous.

An icy hand caressed her neck. God, how she wished Marcus had lived to see this. She imagined his sparkling blue eyes, his deep-dimpled grin.

Another boulder-strewn crater yawned before them, yanking her back to the present. Luckman steered carefully, keeping the Rover on the narrow rise between the two depressions.

“Still getting used to the close horizon,” she said. “Stuff just pops up in front of you. The sims haven’t got it right.”

Feoderov grunted. “We shall have to reprogram them. But should not we be seeing the target by now?”

Luckman checked her retinal display. A yellow triangle marked their position, a red cross their target. “If there’s anything left to see. Only three clicks away now.”

“Pull over.”

Luckman wasted a moment thinking how silly the phrase sounded—no roadside to “pull over” to—then eased off the throttle knob. The Rover rolled to a halt.

Feoderov unlatched his seat restraint and stood, his big, space-suited frame glowing brilliant white in the harsh, unfiltered sunlight. He turned, scanning the horizon.

The Sea of Crises was a broad, flat plain, though “flat” was a relative thing on a world bombarded for eons without an atmosphere to shield or gentle its surface. The lunar soil—regolith—was uniformly gray, ash-textured, strewn with blocky boulders. Nothing on Earth’s surface looked so lifeless.

She swung her gaze up to the gibbous Earth, a swirl of vivid blue and white in the black void, suspended above the rolling horizon. A strange tightness clutched her throat.

She’d grown up helping her parents work the family orchards in Lindsay, California, bringing forth life from the San Joaquin Valley’s cracked hardpan. Then came the Great Drought. The Colorado River ran dry, irrigation subsidies evaporated. Acre-by-acre, their prize orange and olive trees withered into black, gnarled hands clawing at an empty sky.

Within three years, desert reclaimed the hard work of generations, the dead dunes of the great valley looking not so different from the surrounding moonscape. Inevitably, as the runaway greenhouse effect progressed, the whole Earth faced the same fate.

Unless they found the Mother Lode.

Luckman looked in the rearview mirror at the Rover’s tracks, four silver lines snaking across the regolith. If her mentor Milo Jefferson was right, locked beneath the Sea of Crises was a huge deposit of cometary ice, chock-full of the rare isotopes deuterium and

helium 3, precisely the fuel needed for the new clean-burning Helios-class thermonuclear reactors. A glass of water from it could have the energy potential of five million barrels of crude oil. If the Mother Lode was as big as Jefferson suspected, it could supply the world with clean, green energy for centuries to come.

Four days they'd been searching for it. So far, no good. All core samples and spectral surveys had come up dry. She wished to hell they were out looking for it today, instead of for a fifty-year-old piece of Soviet space junk.

Feoderov raised his right arm toward the horizon. "I have something—two o'clock." Luckman caught sight of a metallic glint near a swell in the pockmarked moonscape.

"You think that's Luna 15?"

"Possibly. I wish I had binoculars for better look."

"There's some in the back. You'll have to remove your helmet to use them, though."

"Ha ha. Good one." Feoderov sat down, buckled in. "Astronaut humor much better than your poetry."

That's about the closest thing to a compliment she could expect from Feoderov. She knew it galled him that a rookie spacefarer with only four years' training, a geologist for God's sake, had been put in command over him, a stalwart of the Russian program for nearly a decade. It didn't help that she was a woman.

What the hell. Luckman had never asked to be made commander. That political maneuvering was way above her pay grade. But commander was her assigned role, and by God she was determined to perform it well.

"Tallyho, and hang on." Luckman twisted the hand controller, applied throttle. She rather enjoyed the Russian's startled look as the acceleration shoved him back into his seat.

They bumped along for another few minutes as the star-like point resolved into an obviously metallic object.

"Looks fairly intact," said Luckman. "I thought we'd find an impact crater and fragments."

Feoderov gave a grunt of assent and puzzlement.

Her headphones beeped. "Rover One, this is Armstrong station." The Aussie drawl belonged to Roger Maitland, the mission's third crew member. No doubt he wanted to be out gallivanting around with them, not cooped up in the MLV.

"We copy, Armstrong."

"If you'll check your time, you were supposed to have been on site and starting your broadcast four minutes ago."

"Can't help it. Terrain's a bit rougher than we anticipated. We have it sighted. ETA in, oh, ten minutes."

"Copy, Rover. But the folks back home want their show."

"I'll bet." This mission was too much of a dog-and-pony show for Luckman's taste. Of course, that's why President Dorsey had signed on to Project Prometheus in the first place.

She remembered her one meeting with the dwarfish, big-eared ex-media mogul. Dorsey had waxed nostalgic about what he called the most memorable event of his childhood, watching Armstrong and Aldrin cavort around Tranquillity Base in eerie black-and-white. He'd used the search for the Mother Lode as a means of squeezing bucks out of a tightwad Congress, but Luckman suspected the president was really after a replay of Apollo 11, a flag-waving extravaganza to be broadcast live on DTV and experienced by millions more via virtual reality on the Web. Perfect for a nation trying to recapture past glories after a decade of Depression and Dustbowl.

"Sasha," she said, "can you switch on the camera?"

"Da." Feoderov reached back and flicked a toggle on the pole-mounted stereo DTV camera. "How do you read?"

"Good signal, Rover. You're giving all the VR surfers a nice roller coaster ride."

Feoderov punched a couple of buttons on the control panel. The computer map projected on Luckman's retina was replaced by the DTV image, showing the horizon ahead bouncing crazily. Feoderov touched the "zoom out" key, and the picture drew back to a steadier wide-angle view.

"That's better, Rover. Care to say a few words to the billions back on Earth?"

She glanced over at Feoderov. He shrugged.

Her gut squirmed. "Okay, ah, greetings to all from the Sea of Crises. This is Mission Commander Janet Luckman. My colleague is Colonel Alexei Feoderov. Today Alexei and I are on a quest to answer one of the great mysteries of space exploration—what became of Luna 15? Alexei, why don't you fill in our audience."

"Of course, Janet. Luna 15 was unmanned space probe launched from Soviet Union on 13th of July, 1969, just before American Apollo 11 mission. Aim of this probe was to land on Moon, dig up lunar sample, return it to Earth. Radio contact was lost with probe as it descended. Is believed to have gone out of control and crashed into lunar surface."

Luckman made mental note of what he was leaving out: launched at the very climax of the Moon Race, Luna 15 was a blatant attempt by the Soviets to steal the thunder on Apollo 11 by returning a lunar sample before the Americans could get back with their own Moon rocks.

She wondered what Feoderov thought about the issue. The old communist empire had collapsed when he was all of twelve, yet he took as great a pride from his nation's heritage in space as Luckman did from hers.

"The object you see now on your screen is what remains of Luna 15," Luckman said. "By recovering some of the wreckage, we hope to learn about the effects of long term exposure to extreme lunar conditions on structural parts and electronic components. This will be helpful when it comes time to build our own permanent—"

Suddenly, her vast audience seemed light years distant.

The crash site was now only about 200 meters away, its details resolving into clarity. The vehicle was in remarkably good shape. But it was also utterly unlike the old Soviet mechanical drawings or mock-ups. Luna 15 was supposed to be a squat, pyramidal vehi-

cle about three meters tall, surmounted by a sphere the size of a soccer ball.

Luckman made out a descent stage studded with fuel tanks and stubby landing legs. Mounted atop it was a huge silvery egg.

It looked nothing like the photos and line drawings of Luna 15. Nothing at all. Even taking the close horizon into account, it appeared maybe twice as tall as the mock-up, much larger than any robotic space probe she'd ever seen.

This wasn't part of the program. She let go of the throttle knob. The Rover trundled to a halt.

"Wrong," she muttered. "It's all wrong."

"Da," rasped Feoderov. "Is not, not Luna 15."

"Are you getting this, Armstrong?"

"Roger that." Maitland's voice sounded distant, mystified. "Could you give us a closer view?"

Luckman touched the "zoom" key. The image pulled in. Her mind struggled to make sense of it. There was an opening in the side of the silvery egg. A ladder extended from the opening to the scorched lunar surface beneath the vehicle.

Prickly unease spread through her. She turned to look at Feoderov, met his baffled gaze. "Armstrong," she said quietly, "are any manned lunar missions supposed to have set down in the Sea of Crises?"

A long pause ensued while Maitland relayed the question back to Mission Control. But she knew the answer already.

"Ah, that's a negative, Rover."

"*Boz'e moy*," Feoderov said.

Luckman fought to control her breathing. A high tone sounded in her earphones, shot straight down her spine.

"Rover, this is Houston. Do you copy?"

She recognized the Texas twang of Samuel "Satch" Owens, flight director for Project Prometheus. Jesus, some serious shit must be hitting the fan for Flight to jump straight into the com loop. A serious deviation from procedure.

"Copy, Houston."

"Your camera is malfunctioning. Please shut it down."

The words resounded in her head. "Say again?"

"I repeat, shut down your camera. Turn it off. Now."

Feoderov reached back and flicked the power switch. Luckman's retinal display went blank. She felt the blood pumping in her head, her heart thudding against the mesh lining of her space suit.

Alien spacecraft? Couldn't be. She'd never bought any of that UFO crap, always thought the people who'd reported being kidnapped by bug-eyed creatures back in the 80s and 90s were suffering from "millennium fever."

How else to explain the manifestly real object resting on the Sea of Crises?

As an astronaut, she'd trained to expect the unexpected. There were always proce-

dures—if not A, try B, or C, or any number of alternates. There was no A for this.

“Armstrong? Houston? Do you read?”

“Rover, your signal is breaking up.” Owens again, his voice inhumanly calm. “Please maintain radio silence until we establish a secure uplink.”

“Copy.”

Silence. She became aware of noises she’d long ago tuned out: the rasp of her breathing, the whirl of fans forcing oxygen into her helmet, the burble of coolant circulating through her suit lining.

“Janet, do you read?” Feoderov was using their private channel. She looked at him. Wide gray eyes stared back from behind his faceplate. “We go in for a closer look. Yes?”

For a moment, she felt the sharp edge of fear. The moment was brief. She was an astronaut, goddammit, and a scientist. She lived for this kind of thing.

Her gloved hand closed around the throttle.

CHAPTER 2

1003 hours, October 25, 1968: Over the Indian Ocean

“I am Eagle! I am Eagle!”

The words flashed without warning through Grigor Belinsky’s mind as he stared through the porthole of Soyuz 2.

Titov’s words, shouted in a moment of weightless euphoria as his Vostok spacecraft soared over the Motherland. Belinsky remembered the technicians looking up from their consoles in horror, wondering if Gherman Titov, second man to orbit the Earth, might be losing his mind.

Belinsky remembered wondering the same thing. Cosmonauts were carefully selected for their ability to report conditions accurately, without emotion. In his historic first flight, Gagarin had uttered mostly literal, one-word responses to queries from the ground. Gagarin was the prototype cosmonaut, the ideal New Soviet Man.

Yet at his own moment of fulfillment, culminating eight years of relentless training, Belinsky thought not of Yuri Gagarin, but of Gherman Titov. Titov, who had emerged from his spacecraft with that strange lunatic’s glow, as though he’d seen the face of God almighty. Titov, who’d been decorated by Krushchev, displayed like a bemedaled icon, then quietly shoved into a dead-end post and removed from flight status indefinitely.

The radio crackled to life. Belinsky welcomed the interruption of his reverie. In all things, his model must be Gagarin. He would not suffer Titov’s fate.

“Soyuz 2, this is Dawn. Diamond, do you read?”

“Dawn” was the call sign for Ground Control, in this case the *Marshal Nedelin*, a Soviet freighter equipped as a tracking and relay station. Belinsky squinted through the porthole, trying to make out the ship’s wake as it cruised the Indian Ocean. Too much cloud cover. But the signal was strong.

“Diamond here. I read you well, Dawn.”

“Report your status.”

“Conditions nominal. All systems functioning within parameters.”

In truth, the climate control had proven balky—it swung between sultry heat and clammy cold—but it was nothing he couldn’t endure. There was also a peculiar smell, like burned coffee grounds, pervading the cabin. He would note the defects, but they were nothing to trouble the engineers about now.

“Your condition, cosmonaut pilot?”

“Excellent.” He’d adapted speedily to weightlessness, experiencing only the merest twinge of disorientation or sickness. His endless hours flying zero-G parabolas in MiG-15 trainers had paid off.

“Prepare for docking sequence initiation.”

“Acknowledge. Permission to contact Soyuz 3?”

“Granted.”

Perhaps it was the sight of Soyuz 3 floating in space outside his viewport, seemingly skimming over the shimmering cobalt blue of the Indian Ocean 200 kilometers below, that had made him think of eagles. With its solar panel wings spread wide, the big spacecraft looked quite eagle-like. The porthole on the orbital module gleamed like a raptor’s eye, and the conical docking probe resembled a sharp beak.

But more than that, Belinsky could now understand the giddy rush Titov must have experienced as he looked down on the world from space. Belinsky felt a twinge of giddiness himself. If God existed—of course as a good Communist he understood there was no God, but in the hypothetical sense—this must be how He viewed the world from on high.

This was why Titov came back from his mission looking as he did. He hadn’t seen God. He’d been God.

What would Mirya make of that? Belinsky’s beautiful ex-wife was a devout believer, in her mystical Russian fashion. If Christ was God made man, how would she view the notion of God as a cosmonaut? Sacrilege, surely.

He felt a stab of remorse. Amazing how he still looked at things through Mirya’s eyes. Had her views contaminated his to such an extent?

He pushed Mirya’s image from his mind and adjusted radio frequencies. “Argon? Can you read?”

“Affirmative, Diamond. Fair maiden, prepare to be fucked!”

Belinsky chuckled dutifully. At 46, Georgi Volkov, code name Argon, was the eldest cosmonaut, a veteran Red Air Force jet jockey. Belinsky, all of 34, was the youngest of the group, an engineer. Test pilots and engineers occupied enemy camps in the Cosmonaut Corps. When Volkov cracked wise, it was usually at Belinsky’s expense.

Of course, the symbolism of Soyuz 3 sticking its long, phallic probe into the vaginal receptacle on Soyuz 2 was lost on no one. Belinsky raised his voice to a fluttery falsetto. “I await your approach, kind sir. Please be gentle.”

Belinsky’s role was passive—to keep his spacecraft stable and on station while Soyuz 3 approached and docked. Part of him rebelled at the idea of playing the supine female, lying back with her legs open. On the other hand, it had one advantage: when the LK lander rose from the lunar surface to dock with its orbiting mother ship, its role too would be passive. So playing passive in this exercise raised at least the possibility of getting an early lunar landing mission.

Grigor Ivanovich Belinsky, son of a watchmaker murdered by fascists in Leningrad,

grandson of a Nepman sent to camp by Stalin, might one day tread on the surface of another world. He found himself grinning foolishly at the prospect.

Provided the Americans didn't beat them to it, of course. But the Americans had their own troubles—three good men killed in an absurd launch pad fire the previous year, an untried and troublesome spacecraft, a balky booster rocket built by transplanted Nazis. And from what he'd heard, a populace more distracted by sex, drugs, rock music, and the hopeless war in Vietnam than interested in space travel.

"Dawn here. Docking sequence initiated."

"Are you picking up my signal, Argon?"

"Clearly. Autopilot engaged. Line-up commencing."

Through the porthole, Belinsky saw Soyuz 3 rotate on its long axis, shift sideways, and disappear. Since his portholes allowed no forward vision, he'd be blind to Soyuz 3's maneuvers until it came into periscope view.

Tricky, keeping station in orbit. On the ground, huge analog computers and banks of technicians feverishly working their slide rules analyzed each maneuver. The enormous complexity of it all never ceased to amaze Belinsky.

The periscope viewfinder showed only empty space. Then Soyuz 3 came into view, making quick, jerky movements.

Soyuz 3's antenna locked onto his ship's homing signal. The range finder showed a distance of 342 meters between the crafts—nearly perfect.

"You're right on target, Argon."

"Acknowledge. Approach sequence commencing."

Soyuz 3 fired forward thrusters and began its approach. As it swept closer, the ship looked more like a vulture than an eagle, its drooping solar panels ready to engulf Belinsky's craft. Belinsky knew it was a trick of the periscope's fish-eye lens. Still, the effect was unsettling.

More unsettling was the rate at which the two ships were closing. Too fast. Much too fast.

A collision at this speed would surely damage the docking apparatus, might even puncture his orbital module.

Belinsky became acutely aware he sat in a pressurized cabin, wearing only a leather pilot's helmet and flight coveralls, surrounded by perfect vacuum. If the hull ruptured, he'd die a rapid, horrible death of asphyxiation and bursting blood vessels.

Surely Ground Control could see the problem, couldn't they? Perhaps the television camera wasn't working.

"Dawn, are you picking up the image?"

"Affirmative. We are, ah, analyzing the situation."

Soyuz 3 kept closing, if anything, accelerating. If the "analysis" continued, he and Volkov would attain another historic milestone—first fatal collision in outer space.

"Argon, abort. You're coming in too fast!"

"Acknowledge—"

On came Soyuz 3, until it filled the periscope screen. Abort, nothing—it seemed hell-bent on ramming his ship!

Belinsky grabbed the left hand controller and yanked it to the rear, firing reverse thrusters. His gut lurched as Soyuz 2 jumped backward, away from its onrushing twin. Too late to avert impact. He gritted his teeth and waited for the crunch of metal, the hiss of escaping air.

It never came. At the last moment, Soyuz 3 veered upward and sailed over his own ship. Belinsky's porthole went black as Soyuz 3 briefly blotted out the Sun.

Belinsky heard a gentle hiss, his own breath escaping through clenched teeth. "That was close, comrade."

Volkov's wry chuckle sounded in his headset. "Missed by at least a kilometer."

"Try two or three meters, at most."

"Good thing you backed away, else our friendly screw might have turned into a bloody rape. Quick thinking."

Belinsky was surprised by the compliment. Normally, it was like pulling teeth to get a kind word from Volkov. "The, ah, automatic abort seemed sluggish."

"That it was, but a miss is a miss."

Belinsky caught the disappointment behind Volkov's remark. Their first attempt at docking had failed. A prime mission objective remained unfulfilled.

Anxiety gnawed at Belinsky. Rendezvous and docking were essential for future lunar missions. Worse, the Americans had perfected the technique during their Gemini program.

"Diamond, Argon," came a strange, artificial voice from Ground Control. "Has the procedure been carried out?"

"Odin, is that you?"

"Indeed it is, Diamond."

Sergei Pavlovich Korolev, the fabled Chief Designer, was on the line, his voice filtered through a modulator to disguise it. They must have passed within range of stations in the Motherland. Belinsky glanced out his porthole. The rippled ridges of the Himalayas rolled below, a spectacular sight. The Indians and Chinese were surely monitoring these transmissions.

"The procedure was a complete success," said Belinsky, using the coded phrase for an abort.

"Understood. Report vehicle status."

"Excellent. All systems functioning according to program Zed." Again, he used code: No damage to either spacecraft, but failure of the automatic docking system.

If anyone could figure out the problem, SP Korolev could. He had single-handedly supervised the design of nearly every Soviet space vehicle back to Sputnik 1.

Korolev was a father figure to all cosmonauts, Belinsky in particular; to the rest of the world, he was a dead man. His huge public funeral two years before had been a magnificent piece of *maskirovka*, designed to keep the CIA guessing and the West in the dark

about the Soviet lunar program. By all accounts, it had succeeded admirably. The Western press now openly doubted whether the Soviets were even in the Moon Race.

Belinsky chuckled at the irony of a dead man's voice bringing reassurance across the vast, airless void.

The chief designer quickly isolated the problem and gave a new set of procedures. They would repeat the docking maneuver, Volkov manually applying reverse thrusters to slow the approach.

"All right, my young falcons," said Korolev, "let's do this dance again, shall we?"

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



DAVID S. MICHAELS is an aviation journalist, classical numismatist (specialist in ancient coins), and historical reenactor who has written numerous articles on technology, space flight, and world history. A California native, he now resides in Valencia, CA with his wife and three daughters. *RED MOON*, his first novel, is based on seven years' research into the secret Soviet lunar program. Readers are invited to contact him at his email address, flaviuscrispus@yahoo.com.



DANIEL BRENTON'S pursuit of the writing of fiction waxed and waned in the past, but came to a focus when Dave Michaels, inspired by a chance visit to a Sotheby's auction of (astonishingly) Soviet space hardware and the success of the film *Apollo 13*, presented the idea of developing "Sea of Crisis" into a screen treatment. Soon after, the novel developed and Daniel penned a number of the book's later chapters.

Daniel works for a government contractor and currently lives in Las Vegas, Nevada, with his wife and their psychotic cat. Readers are invited to explore more of his universe at www.danielbrenton.com.

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