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Opening Extract from...

Radiant State

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Published by Gollancz

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First published in Great Britain in 2015 by Gollancz
An imprint of the Orion Publishing Group
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA
An Hachette UK Company

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 575 13064 7

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by Deltatype Ltd, Birkenhead, Merseyside

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Chapter One

We will leave our planet by a radiant new path.

We will lay out the stars in rows
and ride the moon like a horse.

Vladimir Kirillov (1889–1943)

On the canals of Mars we will build the palace of world freedom.

Mikhail Gerasimov (1889–1939)

1

She sees with eyes too wide, her ears are deafened with too much hearing, she feels with her skin. She is the first bold pioneer of a new generation: Engineer-Technician 2nd Class Mikkala Avril.

Age twenty-three? Age zero! Fresh-born raw today, in the zero day of the unencompassable zero season of the world, she descends the gangway of the small plane sent personally for her, the only passenger, under conditions of supreme urgency. *Priority Override*. (The plane is still in its shabby olive livery of war: no time is wasted on primping and beautifying in the New Vlast of Papa Rizhin.) Reaching the foot of the wobbling steel stair, she steps out onto the tarmac of the Chaiganur cosmodrome, Semei-Pavlodar Province, and into the heat of the epochal threshold hour.

To be part of it. To do her task.

The almost-bursting heart in her ribs is the heart of her generation, the heart of the New Vlast, a clever strong young heart pounding at the farthest limit of endurability, equal parts dizzying excitement and appalling terrible fear.

Today will be a day like no other.

It is not yet quite six years since the armies of the enemy surrounding Mirgorod were swept from the face of the planet in a cleansing, burning wind by Rizhin's new weapon, a barrage of atomic artillery shells. Not quite six years – the vertebrae of six long winters articulated by the connective tissue of five roaring summers – but for the New Vlast the time elapsed has delivered far more and felt far longer. General Osip Rizhin, President-Commander of the New Vlast and Hero of the Peace of a Thousand Years, has taken time by the scruff of the neck. He has stretched the weeks tight like wire and made each day work – *work!* – like days never worked before.

Some may express doubt that all this can been achieved so quickly, Rizhin said on First Peace Day, outlining his Five Year Plan, his Great Step into the Future. *But the doubters have not grasped the true nature of time. Time is not a dimension, it is a means of production. Time is too important to be trusted to calendars and clocks. Time is at our disposal and will march at our speed, if we are determined. It is a matter of the imposition of human will.*

Rizhin had seen the Goal and envisaged the completion of Task Number One. It would be delivered at the speed that he set.

And so it was. In two thousand hammer-blow days, each day a detonation like an atomic bomb, he made the whole planet beat with a crashing unstoppable rhythm perceptible from a hundred million miles away. The New Vlast was a pounding anvil the sun itself could feel: it shook the drum-taut solar photosphere, the 6,000-degree plasma skin.

But no day will ever beat more strongly or echo more enduringly down the corridors of the coming millennia than this one day, and Engineer-Technician Mikkala Avril will play her vital part.

She pauses on the airfield apron, savouring the moment, fixing it in memory. The furnace weight of the sun's heat beats on her face and shoulders and back. Hydrogen fusing into helium at a steady burn. She feels the remnants of the solar wind scouring her cheeks and screws her eyes against the bleach and glare. The air tastes of bitter herb and

dusty cinder, of hot steel and of the sticky dust-streaked asphalt that peels noisily away from the soles of her shoes at every step. Breathing is hard labour.

Chaiganur is a scrub of desert steppe, baked dry under the rainless shimmering sky, parched to the far horizon. Flatness is its only feature. The dome of the sky is of no colour, the sun swollen and smeared across it, and the steppe is a whitened consuming lake bed of silent fierce unwatchable brightness. Nothing rises more than a few inches above the crumbling orange-yellow earth and the low clumps of coarse grey grass, nothing except pylons and gantries and hangars and scattered blockhouses: only they cast hot blue shadows. Miles to the south lies the shore of an ancient sea, and when the hot breeze blows it brings to Chaiganur a new covering of salty corrosive grit: ochre dust, clogging nozzles and caking surfaces.

The workers at Chaiganur put scorpions in bottles and watch them fight.

Throughout the two-hour flight from the Kurchatovgrad Barracks, Mikkala Avril had studied the technical manual, memorising layouts and procedures she already knows by heart. The night-duty clerk woke her in the early hours of the morning, agog with news, his part in her drama. A telephone call had come: instructions to go instantly to Chaiganur, transport already waiting. Her principal, Leading Engineer-Technician Filipov, had been taken suddenly and seriously ill and she – she, Mikkala Avril, there was no mistake, there was no one else, none qualified – was required immediately to take Filipov's place. Not an exercise. The thing itself.

As she put on her uniform she spared a thought for Filipov. He and his family would not be heard from again. Their names would no longer be spoken. It was a pity. Filipov had trained her well. Her success this day would be his final and most lasting contribution.

The plane bringing her to Chaiganur flew low. She watched through the window as they crossed the testing grounds and saw scars: the wide grey splash-craters of five years' worth of atomic detonations, the fallen pieces of failed and exploded engineering, the twisted wreckage of spent platforms cannibalised from war-surplus bridges and pontoons. Half-buried chunks of stained concrete resembled the dry bones and broken tusks of dead giants.

Didn't mammoths once walk this land? She might have heard that somewhere. Hadn't someone – but *who*? – taken her once, a girl, to rock outcrops polished smooth by long-dead beasts (by the scraping of scurf and ticks from their rufous hairy sides). That might have happened to her, she wasn't sure. Whatever. Nothing thrives now in all that flatness of stony rubbish but scorpions and rats and foxes and the sparse nomadic tribes with their ripe-smelling beards and scrawny horses.

The plane that brought her leaves again immediately, engines dwindling into sun-bleached silence. She heads for the control block, picking her way across pipes and thick cables that snake along the ground. She might be only one small component in the machine, one switch in the circuit, but she will execute her task smoothly, and that will matter. That will make a binary difference; that will allow the perfection of the most profound accomplishment of humankind. She will make no mistake. She will do it right.

2

Exactly one hour after the arrival of Mikkala Avril, a convoy sweeps at speed past the security perimeter of the Chaiganur cosmodrome trailing a half-mile cloud of dust. Three-and-a-half-ton armoured sedans – chrome fenders, white-walled tyres – doing a steady sixty. Motorcycle outriders and chase cars. They are heading straight for Test Site 61.

The sun-baked sedans carry the entire membership of the Central Committee of the New Vlast Presidium, and in one of the cars – no one is sure which, the bullet-proof windows are tinted – rides the President-Commander himself, General Osip Rizhin. Papa Rizhin, the great dictator, first servant of the New Vlast, coming to witness this greatest of triumphs and certify its momentousness with his presence.

Two jolting trucks bring up the rear. A sweating corps of journalists is tucked in among their movie cameras and their tape recorders. The men in the open backs of the trucks crook their arms in permanent