

Extraordinary sacrifice

NPR has a truly remarkable story of self-sacrifice.



Valentina Komarov, the widow of Soviet cosmonaut Vladimir Komarov, kisses a photograph of her dead husband during his official funeral, held in Moscow's Red Square on April 26, 1967. (AFP/Getty Images)

So there's a cosmonaut up in space, circling the globe, convinced he will never make it back to Earth; he's on the phone with Alexsei Kosygin — then a high official of the Soviet Union — who is crying because he, too, thinks the cosmonaut will die.

The space vehicle is shoddily constructed, running dangerously low on fuel; its parachutes — though no one knows this — won't work and the cosmonaut, Vladimir Komarov, is about to, literally, crash full speed into Earth, his body turning molten on impact. As he heads to his doom, U.S. listening posts in Turkey hear him crying in rage, "cursing the people who had put him inside a botched spaceship."

*This extraordinarily intimate account of the 1967 death of a Russian cosmonaut appears in a new book, *Starman*, by Jamie Doran and Piers Bizony, to be published next month. The authors base their narrative principally on revelations from a KGB officer, Venymin Ivanovich Russayev, and previous reporting by Yaroslav Golovanov in Pravda. This version — if it's true — is beyond shocking.*

Starman tells the story of a friendship between two cosmonauts, Vladimir Komarov and Soviet hero Yuri Gagarin, the first human to reach outer space. The two men were close; they socialized, hunted and drank together.

In 1967, both men were assigned to the same Earth-orbiting mission, and both knew the space capsule was not safe to fly. Komarov told friends he knew he would probably die. But he wouldn't back out because he didn't want Gagarin to die. Gagarin would have been his replacement.

?You'll definitely want to read the rest here.