

## The Moon

Two silver rockets were locked in an embrace high above planet Earth. One was the Pacifica Queen, an independent merchant ship, well-travelled and crewed by merchant spacemen. The other, the Murmansk, a Soviet military rocket bristling with laser canon that, along with its naval crew, was manned by a company of 'Black Death' Soviet Marines.

Century Smith was supercargo on this job, overseeing the transfer of Russian mining equipment from the Murmansk over to the Queen. Standing with him was his Russian counterpart, Ensign Strovich, who like Smith, was also wearing a heavy lead radiation suit. Both were slightly hung-over.

"So how long do those labor camp in-mates last, working with this machinery?" asked Smith.

"They do not so bad. Maybe six years. Sometimes more depending on their job. They have the best radiation suits and the lack of atmosphere on the moon keeps their exposure to the minimum," said the Russian.

"Why even use this contaminated stuff?" asked Smith.

"The Ministry can't keep up with the expansion of our lunar mining operations. The mining collectives have to meet the production targets of the five year plan. We must utilize every resource at our disposal. These drills come from an American mine," said the Russian smugly, "in Alaska."

"I'm sure they're happy to let you keep them," said Smith, turning to instruct the Mercurian crewman who was securing the shielded containers. The equipment was too hot for the human crew to handle without protection but Mercurians, however, could stand enormous levels of radiation without harm, inured to the effects by the nature of their home world.

Ensign Strovich watched the grey, slug-like creature with a sour expression as it moved a container into the Queen's cargo hold. "I don't know how you stand those creatures on your ship. They make my stomach turn over."

"We don't see them much," said Smith. "They mostly stay in the core chamber. They do a good job. The Captain says he'd replace every Earthman crew member with one if he could. He can't pay us with lead and feed us raw sewage. It's a good thing they can't climb ladders or we'd be out of a job."

"Hah!" the Russian laughed. "We have Uzbeks to pay with lead and feed sewage."

There was a pause in the conversation while a Soviet Commissar passed the viewing window of the gangway, the ubiquitous scowl on his face. Smith continued the conversation after he had gone. "There's a rumor going around that your people have found something on the Moon."

Strovich checked to see if the Commissar was returning and, determining that they were safe, said, "Since we drink together my friend, and you are no Yankee; yes we found some interesting archeological artifacts. One of our deep mining operations has broken into a cave system; an artificial cave system. We've found proof that the Moon was once inhabited."

Smith pressed, "Every planet in this system seems to have been inhabited at one time or another. What's so special?"

"We've found technological remains. Machinery, we think. Machinery more advanced than anything our race has ever developed. It is completely alien in nature."

"Boy," said Smith, "your scientists must be falling over each other, trying to figure the stuff out."

"That is an understatement," said the Russian. "They say they are down there like flies on a dead dog. We hear that they have, so far, been unable to unlock the secret. They are unable to learn anything about how these machines worked, if they are indeed machines and not something else."

"The Americans must be chewing their lower lips to shreds right now," said Smith.

Strovich chuckled. "That would be amusing. "But there is more. They have found physical remains of the race that built the tunnels and artifacts. Fossils of their bodies. They were insects. Grasshoppers we call them. That is what they look like; big grasshoppers."

"There are a lot of strange life forms out here," said Smith, watching his Mercurian assistant sliding up the gangway.

"There is more," continued the Russian. "They've found humanoid skeletons as well. Fossils identical to those of our ape-man ancestors. The ones discovered in Africa before the atomic war. Some of our scientists think that the tunnels are five million years old."

"So these Moon creatures were able to come to earth five million years ago and kidnap our ancestors?"

"That is the theory," said Strovich. "What were they doing with our ancestors is the question."

Smith thought about it for a second and an uncomfortable chill crept under his skin.

Just then the Captain's voice came over the intercom. "Wrap it up down there. We have a schedule to keep. The Moon will be in perihelion in twelve hours."

Smith and Strovich exchanged slaps on the shoulder and parted. Within thirty minutes the two rockets had separated. The Pacifica Queen fired her atomic engines and was on her way to the Moon.