

To Reach For The Stars

by Jim Schicatanano

The terrain is rugged on the dark side of the moon. The topography consists of endless craters, inch-thick dust, rocks, treacherous pits, and jagged hills that make passage to our destination particularly dangerous. We are traveling by a remodeled Lunar Rover which plods forward at such a sluggish pace that the landscape barely seems to be passing by.

Our destination is a crash site, less than a mile ahead, was located by the lunar probe, USA-L9. The orbiting probe was mapping the lunar surface in addition to scanning the moon for precious minerals. On its twenty-fifth orbit it unexpectedly photographed a strange spaceship that appeared to have crashed there some time ago.

The discovery of the ship captured the attention of the world. And the problems of Mars were temporarily forgotten.

There had been numerous accidents at the American-Martian mining site including dozens of deaths, and the U.S. Congress decided it was time to return to the moon. Mars' atmosphere had proved inhospitable. The endless dust storms were wreaking havoc with the mining equipment making the missions there unexpectedly dangerous. The atmosphere on Mars was too thin to support humans, and since no major source of water was discovered (either underground or in caves), the miners were forced to wear their astronaut suits and import all water and food. Public consensus dictated that since the miners were forced to wear their suits anyway, why risk lives when the nearby moon posed the same problems minus the dust storms. Probes were launched to orbit the moon and the mapping procedures began.

Carl Peters, Amanda Wagman, and I were departing Space Station 1 for Earth to partake in some long overdue 'R & R' when the order was given. Our destination was altered to the dark side of the moon. The Earth Reentry Ship was not capable of a lunar landing, so we boarded a small X-Craft and began the mission.

Our assignment was to land the X-Craft near the crash-site and transmit visual images of the ship to Earth via a Space Station 3 satellite in elongated orbit. We were then to enter the craft and, most importantly, discover its origin. All countries on Earth had denied losing a spaceship of such size on the Moon, although many admitted to losing small probes. That piqued the curiosity of the public. If the nations of the earth denied ownership of the crash,

then an alien origin was a possibility. Waves of apprehension and anxiety were sweeping the earth.

Many questions were asked. How old was the crash site? Were alien life forms still alive in the ship? Did the aliens make similar attempts to land on Earth? Or was this just another case of Soviet secrecy?

I had made a small wager with Carl that the ship was the property of the old Soviet Union. In the days of the Apollo missions, America had gained worldwide respect for its technological achievement in its moon landings. I found it difficult to believe that our major competitor at that time would not have attempted to counter our accomplishment with a secret moon mission of their own. If the mission had ended in failure, which was very possible, then the Soviet Union would not have publicly announced the disaster. Word of their mission was probably silenced, documents were destroyed, and all traces of the lunar venture were gone forever. It was just a hunch of mine, but I was reasonably convinced that Carl and I were headed for the remains of that failed mission.

Amanda waited for us back in the X-Craft. Radio communications were maintained between us and, using scanning equipment, she was guiding us to our destination. "Straight ahead," she announced. "Not more than 500 feet."

The problem with the 500 foot distance between the crash site and our rover was the rising and falling, rough, cratered terrain that blocked our view. The golden rays of the sun shined directly down on us and it was midday at our position. Its rays did little to brighten the dreary, gray, primitive landscape of the moon.

The rover's small seats did not allow much movement and our bulky astronaut suits worsened the condition. I awkwardly turned to Carl and asked, "Do you see anything?"

Carl maintained his focus directly ahead, then replied. "Nothing but rock. At this slow rate, 500 feet will seem like an eternity. Still betting on the Soviets?"

"Why not?" I replied.

"All right, but remember, I've got the rest of the universe."

Carl Peters was the commander of the mission. We had attended cadet school together, yet had never been close friends during our training. The six month shift together (with Amanda) on the cramped Space Station 1 facilitated a working friendship between us. Peters rose above me in rank by virtue of connections – a fact he didn't deny when

asked. His father had been a member of the Space Corps during its infant stage and still held great influence today. He was an honorary member of the Space Exploration Commission and was able to position his son to the assignments that most influenced one's career. Despite his father's lofty position, Carl, now approaching forty, never wavered from his duties, nor was he one to boast of his authority. I was skeptical of the man's abilities when I was first assigned to Space Station 1, but I had grown to like him and respect him.

As we traveled over the crest of a small hill, Carl suddenly pointed straight ahead. "Did you see that?" he asked.

The meager atmosphere of the moon yielded a perfect, clear view. I scrutinized the craters, boulders, and barren hills ahead of us. The black backdrop of space enhanced the crystal clarity of the horizon and the path before us. But nothing appeared unusual. "Negative. What did you see?"

"It was nothing natural. Let's keep moving forward."

That's what we were doing, all right. We were moving forward into the unknown. This was the type of mission that had originally motivated me into joining the Space Corps – the dangle with death and the exploration of the unknown. It set my nerves afire. It heightened my senses to a pitch. It beckoned me. It cried out to me. And I could not dismiss the calling even if I were ordered. It was the enigmas of space that intrigued me. The ship just beyond the next hill was a large enigma. And while I prayed it posed no real danger to our mission and humanity, I hoped that it contained some startling, earthshaking secret. I was convinced that other forms of life existed throughout our region of the galaxy. Inevitably, we would encounter them. This might provide the opportunity for me to be a part of that incredible first encounter.

"Any sign, yet?" Amanda asked us.

"Our vision is still blocked. We're close, though . . ."

We descended to the bottom of the hill which formed a shallow gully. The moon dust was several inches thick and the rover slowed a bit as it struggled to move forward. Carl displayed great patience as he steered us out of the gully and around a small crater. He suddenly brought the rover to a halt.

The crash site was now visible – and it was impressive. The enormous craft was lodged into an embankment, covered above by a precipice which had hidden it from our view from space for decades. The shadow of the precipice enveloped the ship below, and the darkness

surrounding the structure gave it an eerie appearance.

Carl instantly made contact with Amanda. "X-Craft, we have encountered spacecraft – the origin is unknown."

"Can you give me a visual?"

I operated the camera which was located on the 'hood' of the rover and directed it toward the ship.

"Do you have visual?" I asked.

"Yes. Gentleman, is that as large as it appears?"

"It's enormous. It's tubular shaped . . . Must be at least 500 feet long and 200 feet high. We may have discovered an ancient race of giants."

"Any guess to its age?" she asked Carl.

He scanned the length of the craft and shook his head. Hundreds of meteors had pierced its metal hull. Huge areas were discolored, signifying deterioration from age.

"It's old! Thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of years old."

"And little chance of life inside," I added.

"My guess is whoever built the ship have been dead a long time. Soviet Union, eh? I'll be collecting on that bet when we return. All right, X-Craft, we're moving on. Let's do it!"

"Careful, guys," Amanda cautioned us.

"You can count on that," Carl replied as we began moving again.

Carl guided the rover to within 30 feet of the crash site. He hesitated briefly as we examined the huge ship before us. There were no visible structures on the exterior and the ship's tubular surface appeared very smooth. It was as if someone took a large metal cylinder and thrust it into the side of a hill.

"Ready?"

"Ready," I answered.

We climbed out and cautiously approached it. Our movement forward was further hindered by the meager gravity of the moon. I felt as if we were traveling in slow motion. Following standard procedure and taking

some precaution, we carried our laser weapons in our right hand. Our left hand held heavy-duty laser flashlights. Carl pointed to a particular area to our right and we slowly moved in that direction. As I tediously stumbled forward, I gazed upward at the towering structure, still awed by its enormous size. Had it once contained giants? Or had an entire civilization once flourished inside its metallic walls?

My heart began to beat faster and I felt a shortness of breath. Carl recognized my hesitation and asked if I was all right. I nodded and we moved toward our destination.

An opening that was roughly the size of a large man had been created by the deterioration of the metal. Carl pointed toward it and I nodded. With great apprehension, we entered the dark, foreboding alien ship. Laser flashlights had always amazed me by their ability to illuminate even the darkest areas – and their effectiveness was evident again. My previous speculation about the ship harboring an entire civilization was quickly dashed. Instead we witnessed a cavern like, empty hull that stretched longer than a football field. We scanned the blackened wall of the craft opposite us and discovered computer panels lining its side as far as we could see. They were fifteen to twenty feet tall. This ship had once harbored giants.

I directed my flashlight toward the posterior of the ship, uncovering more large technical equipment that was smashed and had deteriorated with age. I looked upward, at the black ceiling, but saw nothing of significance.

Suddenly, Carl seized my shoulder. I was startled by his sudden grasp and my heart skipped a beat. "What?" I asked him, trying to regain my composure. He pointed his beam toward the anterior of the ship and the remains of ships' inhabitants were revealed.

"Oh my God!" were the only words that I could utter.

Of all the stunning revelations that mankind had ever uncovered, this surely surpassed them all. I held my breath in astonishment. And my mind, instantly recognizing the magnitude of what I saw, began to produce question after question.

But first, I realized how greatly we had underestimated them.

How could we have known? How could any of us have ever known? How could we have recognized their ambitions, their intelligence, and accomplishments? How could we have ever envisioned the sophistication that they had reached?

And I speculated what other wonders they had achieved. Their civilization might have been a glorious one – filled with treasures and wonders and secrets which they alone possessed.

Perhaps they constructed dwellings far more luxurious than our own. Perhaps their massive cities, bridges, infrastructure, and computers even surpassed ours. They had undoubtedly achieved the means to globally communicate with each other. And that allowed the sharing of ideas and the challenge of debate.

They might have developed a culture rich in the arts. Music may have once soothed their troubled souls or have inspired them to great personal accomplishment. They may have even been artistically inspired by the world around them. Could have they developed philosophy and logical argument? Did their artists create masterpieces of literature and sculptures and paintings and theater? Perhaps they engaged in these 'finer' things in life and perhaps their artistic abilities rivaled our own. I could not even begin to guess.

Certainly they had developed a highly structured society. They would have had to produce families and develop communities. Perhaps the family was the backbone of their society as it is in ours. They must have raised their young ones, educated them, cared for them, and guided them into their adult years. Their communities were organized and friendships between neighbors followed. But their social order would probably never be known.

They may have had a passion for sports, hobbies, and other social outlets. Heroes and heroines were developed. Legends of famous battles, folklore, and cultural advancements took the form of stories passed down through the generations. Like every other culture, forms of entertainment were produced and evolved with the passage of time.

They probably developed a religion and worshiped a God. And like us, they undoubtedly constructed great buildings of worship – buildings that were the finest and most appealing structures in their communities. They would tower above the rest of the landscape, alluring the congregation and all who saw them. And when they prayed to their God, they undoubtedly saw Him in their own image. And who could say what that Image was, anymore?

Government or governments were developed to maintain law and order. Goods and services were probably provided to their citizens. Even elections might have been held but a dictatorship was more than likely. Armies were developed. Technology and lifesaving medicines were advanced through research and development. Commerce experienced periods of growth and contraction. Values and morals were debated through periods of social tribulation. How many ways were they like

us? And how were they different? It was a question that would probably never be answered.

And I wondered how far out into the stars they had traveled. Did colonies of theirs exist amongst the planets of our galaxy? Did the inhabitants of those planets ever know their true origin or even consider it? Or did their species end with the crash of the ship that we had entered. Was this their finest technical achievement – the pinnacle of a mighty civilization? Or was this just the beginning of their accomplishments, the first step out into the wonders of space.

I studied their ancient bones once again – the long tail, the thick powerful legs that supported their enormous mighty bodies, the diminutive arms, and the razor sharp teeth that were designed to kill. Their identity could not be mistaken. My eyes were apprehensively fixed on the remains of 'Tyrannosaurus Rex'.