

PLANET STORIES



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Guide a black galleon to the lost, fear-haunted Citadel of the Xanthi wizards—into the very jaws of Doom? Corun, condemned pirate of Conahar, laughed. Aye, he'd do it, and gladly. It would mean a reprieve from the headman's axe—a few more precious moments of life and love . . . though his lover be a witch!

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TASK to LUNA

THE ROCKETS STARTED almost simultaneously. From two widely separated points on the great curving surface of Earth they reached upward and outward—toward the Moon.

It wasn't really so strange a coincidence. Space navigation is governed by mathematics and logic, not politics. The fact that man-carrying spaceships happened to be developed concurrently on two sides of an iron curtain meant little to the Universe. It happened, that's all. And there is a proper time to launch such missiles. When that time came, they were launched.

In a manner of speaking it was a race. A race wherein the prizes were such things as: "gravity gauge" and "surveillance point" and "impregnable launching sites." The contestants were earnest, capable men; each certain that the Moon must not fall into the hands of the opponent. It made a stirring and patriotic picture, vivid with nationalistic fervor. It was thrilling with its taste of high adventure and self-sacrifice. For each rocket pilot it was a personal crusade against the thing he had been raised to regard as *the enemy*.

But somehow under the steady, cold scrutiny of the eternal stars, they must have looked a little ridiculous . . . perhaps just a tiny bit tragic, too.

HARSH WAS THE MOON. There was black and there was white. Great jagged cliffs and razor-backed mountains slashed the pocked surface of the crater

floor, humping themselves at the huge unwinking stars. The sun was a stark disc of fire, incredibly white, hung in the black sky. The shadows were bottomless pools. Within them there was nothing. In the sunlight, the pumice soil glared white.

The Russian rocket had crashed on landing. Randick could see the tiny, buckled shape of it high on the mountain. No doubt the pilot was dead, but he had to be sure. The risks were too great for any unsupported assumptions. He had to go up there and see for himself.

Ponderous in his pressure suit, Randick emerged from the open lock of the Anglo-American rocket. He slogged across the pumice of the crater floor toward the spot where the mountain's sheer talus erupted skyward. If there were no trouble from the Russki, he would return to his own ship and begin setting up the first cell of what would soon be the Anglo-American Moon Base. As soon as he signalled a safe landing and no opposition from the Russian, other rockets would come to add their cells, and presently there would be an atomic rocket pointed dead at the heart of every Russian population center. A rocket each for Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Vladivostok . . .

Randick frowned. It would be a lot simpler if the crash had finished the Russian pilot. He knew the Russians had exactly the same plan for the Moon. Only the rockets would be aimed at Washington, London, Paris, San Francisco, The slight

by ALFRED COPPEL



*Their sides hurt with laughter
tears rolled down their faces . .*

Two rocketships bit into lunar dust. Two men—a Yankee, a Russian — dueled in nightmare shadow and glare, each eager to destroy the Enemy. What cosmic joke made them drop their weapons and die laughing?

weight of the one-man bazooka on Randick's back seemed suddenly very comforting.

Randick knew himself to be on the very edge of known territory. His map showed him that he was in the highest part of the Doerfel Mountains. Behind him lay the two great bowls of Bailly and Schickard, and far to the north he could see, as he climbed higher, the smooth surface of the Mare Humorum. He looked up to the spinelike ridge beyond and slightly above the wreck of the Russian ship. There was a deep pass that slashed like a wound into the backbone of the range. He felt a slight thrill. Beyond that cleft lay . . . mystery. The other side of the Moon.

The sun's rays beat down brutally. Even through the heavily insulated suit Randick could feel their searing touch. All around him stretched a jumbled nightmare of black and white. He was suddenly very glad that he could not see the Earth in the sky. The homesickness would be unbearable.

Randick found himself frowning. He had no time for such thoughts. He was a soldier. He reminded himself that up there in the tangled wreckage of the Russian spaceship there might be another soldier, ready to kill him. Two human beings on the Moon. Each eager to kill. Randick shook his head angrily. He had no right to let his mind dwell on such things . . .

He was within a hundred yards of the wreck when a streak of fire and a soundless blast drove him into the shadows. Pumice showered him from the starshaped depression where the explosive missile had struck. Randick cursed heartily. The Russian was very much alive, and there wasn't a thing wrong with his eyesight. The shot had been uncomfortably close.

Unslinging his bazooka, Randick began to work his way around behind the Russian rocket. A slight movement among the wreckage caught his trained eye and he launched a projectile at it. It flared wickedly, tearing fragments of metal loose and flinging them fantastic distances down the sheer slope of the ridge. There was no return fire.

Randick broke out of the shadow and

ran for the cover of a large pumicestone boulder farther up the draw. A sun-bright flash of fire spattered the loose soil a dozen feet from him. He slid for the darkness on his belly. That one had been a near thing!

Behind the boulder lay a trench-like depression that sloped away up the draw toward the pass. Randick dropped into it and began to crawl laboriously upward. If he could flank the Russki he could finish this with one good shot. Another explosion rocked the boulder he had just left. Randick didn't even look back.

He felt his breath rasping in his throat and his body felt hot and sticky inside the bulky pressure suit. Glancing down and to his right, he could see the proudly erect shape of his own rocket far below on the floor of the crater.

It took him almost thirty minutes to reach the edge of the shadow that spilled from the side of the mountain pass. To his left, not ten feet away, was the sudden white glare of the pumice floor. He was well above and almost behind the wreck of the Russian's ship. His flanks were heaving with the exertion of the climb as he searched the buckled mass of the crash for his opponent.

There seemed to be a dark shape wedged in between two twisted bulkheads. It looked like a man. With pounding heart, Randick murmured a prayer and lifted his bazooka, aimed, and pressed the firing stud. The shadow vanished in silent white fire.

The return blast almost knocked him down. For a moment Randick was stunned, wondering foggily where the shot had come from. Then his brain cleared and he realized that the Russian too had climbed to the pass, leaving Randick to fire at shadows.

Randick cursed himself for his dangerous stupidity. The other must be among those shadowy rocks directly across the bright floor of the pass. He raised his bazooka carefully, searching the Stygian blackness for some sign of movement. His finger curled around the firing stud . . .

OUT OF THE CORNER of his eye he saw the flare. The Russian rocket

erupted in a gout of bluish flame and the whole mountain seemed to rock. Randick stared stupidly at the glowing crater where the ship had been. For just an instant he thought that perhaps a meteorite had struck it, but the explosion had been unquestionably . . . atomic.

The Russian must have been stunned, too. For he moved out into the light, empty-handed, his helmet turned woodenly toward the rapidly cooling lake of magma where his space ship had been.

They both saw the bright arc of fire that raced up from beyond the ridge and curved down gracefully toward the floor of the crater far below. Openmouthed, Randick watched his ship vanish into flame and he felt the vague tremor of the ground under him as the shock rumbled across the face of the Moon.

The Russian rocket was gone. The Anglo-American rocket was gone. Moon-Base was gone before it had ever been.

The weapon fell from Randick's hand, and he stepped unsteadily into the light toward the Russian. Suddenly human com-

panionship was very, very important. Panicky terror was plucking at his throat.

The two men stumbled toward each other across the pass cut deep into the jagged back of the Doerfel mountains. As one they turned and looked out across the vast expanse of the Moon's hidden face.

They were soldiers. They knew an invasion base when they saw one. As far as the eye could see, lines of sleek mammoth spaceships of unknown design stretched away into the distance. The face of the vast unnamed *mare* was covered with them.

Suddenly Randick felt himself beginning to giggle. He tried to stop, but the laughter welled up inside of him, echoing wildly within his confining helmet. He could see that the Russian was laughing too, white teeth gleaming behind the plexi-glass faceplate. They laughed until they gasped. Their sides hurt with laughter, tears rolled down their faces. They were arm in arm and still laughing when the third rocket arced down on them from out of the black and star-flecked sky.

