

A large, red, segmented robot with a silver chest and a silver gun in its right hand. The robot is standing on a lunar surface. In the background, the Earth is visible in the sky, and a smaller astronaut is seen on the moon's surface.

**A Novel Of The Life-Or-Death
Race Between The U.S.A.
And The U.S.S.R.**

FIRST ON THE MOON

Jeff Sutton

FIRST on the MOON

by JEFF SUTTON

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To Sandy

SUICIDE RACE TO LUNA

The four men had been scrutinized, watched, investigated, and intensively trained for more than a year. They were the best men to be found for that first, all-important flight to the Moon—the pioneer manned rocket that would give either the East or the West control over the Earth.

Yet when the race started, Adam Crag found that he had a saboteur among his crew ... a traitor! Such a man could give the Reds possession of Luna, and thereby dominate the world it circled.

Any one of the other three could be the hidden enemy, and if he didn't discover the agent soon—even while they were roaring on rocket jets through outer space—then Adam Crag, his expedition, and his country would be destroyed!

PROLOGUE

One of the rockets was silver; three were ashen gray. Each nested in a different spot on the great Western Desert. All were long, tapered, sisters except for color. In a way they represented the first, and last, of an era, with exotic propellants, a high mass ratio and three-stage design. Yet they were not quite alike. One of the sisters had within her the artifacts the human kind needed for life—a space cabin high in the nose. The remaining sisters were drones, beasts of burden, but beasts which carried scant payloads considering their bulk.

One thing they had in common—destination. They rested on their launch pads, with scaffolds almost cleared, heads high and proud. Soon they would flash skyward, one by one, seeking a relatively small haven on a strange bleak world. The world was the moon; the bleak place was called Arzachel, a crater—stark, alien, with tall cliffs brooding over an ashy plain.

Out on the West Coast a successor to the sisters was shaping up—a great ship of a new age, with nuclear drive and a single stage. But the sisters could not wait for their successor. Time was running out.

CHAPTER I

The room was like a prison—at least to Adam Crag. It was a square with a narrow bunk, a battered desk, two straight-back chairs and little else. Its one small window overlooked the myriad quonsets and buildings of Burning Sands Base from the second floor of a nearly empty dormitory.

There was a sentry at the front of the building, another at the rear. Silent alert men who never spoke to Crag—seldom acknowledged his movements to and from the building—yet never let a stranger approach the weathered dorm without sharp challenge. Night and day they were there. From his window he could see the distant launch site and, by night, the batteries of floodlights illumining the metal monster on the pad. But now he wasn't thinking of the rocket. He was fretting; fuming because of a call from Colonel Michael Gotch.

"Don't stir from the room," Gotch had crisply ordered on the phone. He had hung up without explanation. That had been two hours before.

Crag had finished dressing—he had a date—idly wondering what was in the Colonel's mind. The fretting had only set in when, after more than an hour, Gotch had failed to show. Greg's liberty had been restricted to one night a month. One measly night, he thought. Now he was wasting it, tossing away the precious hours. Waiting. Waiting for what?

"I'm a slave," he told himself viciously; "slave to a damned bird colonel." His date wouldn't wait—wasn't the waiting kind. But he couldn't leave.

He stopped pacing long enough to look at himself in the cracked mirror above his desk. The face that stared back was lean, hard, unlined—skin that told of wind and sun, not brown nor bronze but more of a mahogany red. Just now the face was frowning. The eyes were wide-spaced, hazel, the nose arrogant and hawkish. A thin white scar ran over one cheek ending.

His mind registered movement behind him. He swiveled around, flexing his

body, balanced on his toes, then relaxed, slightly mortified.

Gotch—Colonel Michael Gotch—stood just inside the door eyeing him tolerantly. A flush crept over Crag's face. Damn Gotch and his velvet feet, he thought. But he kept the thought concealed.

The expression on Gotch's face was replaced by a wooden mask. He studied the lean man by the mirror for a moment, then flipped his cap on the bed and sat down without switching his eyes.

He said succinctly. "You're it."

"I've got it?" Crag gave an audible sigh of relief. Gotch nodded without speaking.

"What about Temple?"

"Killed last night—flattened by a truck that came over the center-line. On an almost deserted highway just outside the base," Gotch added. He spoke casually but his eyes were not casual. They were unfathomable black pools. Opaque and hard. Crag wrinkled his brow inquiringly.

"Accident?"

"You know better than that. The truck was hot, a semi with bum plates, and no driver when the cops got there." His voice turned harsh. "No ... it was no accident."

"I'm sorry," Crag said quietly. He hadn't known Temple personally. He had been just a name—a whispered name. One of three names, to be exact: Romer, Temple, Crag. Each had been hand-picked as possible pilots of the Aztec, a modified missile being rushed to completion in a last ditch effort to beat the Eastern World in the race for the moon. They had been separately indoctrinated, tested, trained; each had virtually lived in one of the scale-size simulators of the Aztec's space cabin, and had been rigorously schooled for the operation secretly referred to as "Step One." But they had been kept carefully apart. There had been a time when no one—unless it were the grim-

faced Gotch—knew which of the three was first choice.

Romer had died first—killed as a bystander in a brawl. So the police said. Crag had suspected differently. Now Temple. The choice, after all, had not been the swarthy Colonel's to make. Somehow the knowledge pleased him. Gotch interrupted his thoughts.

"Things are happening. The chips are down. Time has run out, Adam." While he clipped the words out he weighed Crag, as if seeking some clue to his thoughts. His face said that everything now depended upon the lean man with the hairline scar across his cheek. His eyes momentarily wondered if the lean man could perform what man never before had done. But his lips didn't voice the doubt. After a moment he said:

"We know the East is behind us in developing an atomic spaceship. Quite a bit behind. We picked up a lot from some of our atomic sub work—that and our big missiles. But maybe the knowledge made us lax." He added stridently:

"Now ... they're ready to launch."

"Now?"

"Now!"

"I didn't think they were that close."

"Intelligence tells us they've modified a couple of T-3's—the big ICBM model. We just got a line on it ... almost too late." Gotch smiled bleakly. "So we've jumped our schedule, at great risk. It's your baby," he added.

Crag said simply; "I'm glad of the chance."

"You should be. You've hung around long enough," Gotch said dryly. His eyes probed Crag. "I only hope you've learned enough ... are ready."

"Plenty ready," snapped Crag.

"I hope so."

Gotch got to his feet, a square fiftyish man with cropped iron-gray hair, thick shoulders and weather-roughened skin. Clearly he wasn't a desk colonel.

"You've got a job, Adam." His voice was unexpectedly soft but he continued to weigh Crag for a long moment before he picked up his cap and turned toward the door.

"Wait," he said. He paused, listening for a moment before he opened it, then slipped quietly into the hall, closing the door carefully behind him.

He's like a cat, Crag thought for the thousandth time, watching the closed door. He was a man who seemed forever listening; a heavy hulking man who walked on velvet feet; a man with opaque eyes who saw everything and told nothing. Gotch would return.

Despite the fact the grizzled Colonel had been his mentor for over a year he felt he hardly knew the man. He was high up in the missile program—missile security, Crag had supposed—yet he seemed to hold power far greater than that of a security officer. He seemed, in fact, to have full charge of the Aztec project—Step One—even though Dr. Kenneth Walmsbelt was its official director. The difference was, the nation knew Walmsbelt. He talked with congressmen, pleaded for money, carried his program to the newspapers and was a familiar figure on the country's TV screens. He was the leading exponent of the space-can't-wait philosophy. But few people knew Gotch; and fewer yet his connections. He was capable, competent, and to Crag's way of thinking, a tough monkey, which pretty well summarized his knowledge of the man.

He felt the elation welling inside him, growing until it was almost a painful pleasure. It had been born of months and months of hope, over a year during which he had scarcely dared hope. Now, because a man had died...

He sat looking at the ceiling, thinking, trying to still the inner tumult. Only outwardly was he calm. He heard footsteps returning. Gotch opened the door and entered, followed by a second man. Crag started involuntarily, half-rising

from his chair.

He was looking at himself!

"Crag, meet Adam Crag." The Colonel's voice and face were expressionless. Crag extended his hand, feeling a little silly.

"Glad to know you."

The newcomer acknowledged the introduction with a grin—the same kind of lopsided grin the real Crag wore. More startling was the selfsame hairline scar traversing his cheek; the same touch of cockiness in the set of his face.

Gotch said, "I just wanted you to get a good look at yourself. Crag here"—he motioned his hand toward the newcomer—"is your official double. What were you planning for tonight, your last night on earth?"

"I have a date with Ann. Or had," he added sourly. He twisted his head toward Gotch as the Colonel's words sunk home. "Last night?"

Gotch disregarded the question. "For what?"

"Supper and dancing at the Blue Door."

"Then?"

"Take her home, if it's any of your damned business," snapped Crag. "I wasn't planning on staying, if that's what you mean."

"I know ... I know, we have you on a chart," Gotch said amiably. "We know every move you've made since you wet your first diapers. Like that curvy little brunette secretary out in San Diego, or that blonde night club warbler you were rushing in Las Vegas." Crag flushed. The Colonel eyed him tolerantly.

"And plenty more," he added. He glanced at Crag's double. "I'm sure your twin will be happy to fill in for you tonight."

"Like hell he will," gritted Crag. The room was quiet for a moment.

"As I said, he'll fill in for you."

Crag grinned crookedly. "Ann won't go for it. She's used to the real article."

"We're not giving her a chance to snafu the works," Gotch said grimly. "She's in protective custody. We have a double for her, too."

"Mind explaining?"

"Not a bit. Let's face the facts and admit both Romer and Temple were murdered. That leaves only you. The enemy isn't about to let us get the Aztec into space. You're the only pilot left who's been trained for the big jump—the only man with the specialized know-how. That's why you're on someone's list. Perhaps, even, someone here at the Base ... or on the highway ... or in town. I don't know when or how but I do know this: You're a marked monkey."

Gotch added flatly: "I don't propose to let you get murdered."

"How about him?" Crag nodded toward his double. The man smiled faintly.

"That's what he's paid for," Gotch said unfeelingly. His lips curled sardonically. "All the heroes aren't in space."

Crag flushed. Gotch had a way of making him uncomfortable as no other man ever had. The gentle needle. But it was true. The Aztec was his baby. Gotch's role was to see that he lived long enough to get it into space. The rest was up to him. Something about the situation struck him as humorous. He looked at his double with a wry grin.

"Home and to bed early," he cautioned. "Don't forget you've got my reputation to uphold."

"Go to hell," his double said amiably.

"Okay, let's get down to business," Gotch growled. "I've got a little to say."

Long after they left Crag stood at the small window, looking out over the desert. Somewhere out there was the Aztec, a silver arrow crouched in its cradle, its nose pointed toward the stars. He drew the picture in his mind. She stood on her tail fins; a six-story-tall needle braced by metal catwalks and guard rails; a cousin twice-removed to the great nuclear weapons which guarded Fortress America. He had seen her at night, under the batteries of floor lights, a gleam with a milky radiance; a virgin looking skyward, which, in fact, she was. Midway along her length her diameter tapered abruptly, tapered again beyond the three-quarters point. Her nose looked slender compared with her body, yet it contained a space cabin with all the panoply needed to sustain life beyond the atmosphere.

His thoughts were reverent, if not loving. Save for occasional too-brief intervals with Ann, the ship had dominated his life for over a year. He knew her more intimately, he thought, than a long-married man knows his wife.

He had never ceased to marvel at the Aztec's complexity. Everything about the rocket spoke of the future. She was clearly designed to perform in a time not yet come, at a place not yet known. She would fly, watching the stars, continuously measuring the angle between them, computing her way through the abyss of space. Like a woman she would understand the deep currents within her, the introspective sensing of every force which had an effect upon her life. She would measure gravitation, acceleration and angular velocity with infinite precision. She would count these as units of time, perform complex mathematical equations, translate them into course data, and find her way unerringly across the purple-black night which separated her from her assignation with destiny. She would move with the certainty of a woman fleeing to her lover. Yes, he thought, he would put his life in the lady's hands. He would ride with her on swift wings. But he would be her master.

His mood changed. He turned from the window thinking it was a hell of a way to spend his last night. Last night on earth, he corrected wryly. He couldn't leave the room, couldn't budge, didn't know where Ann was. No

telephone. He went to bed wondering how he'd ever let himself get snookered into the deal. Here he was, young, with a zest for life and a stacked-up gal on the string. And what was he doing about it? Going to the moon, that's what. Going to some damned hell-hole called Arzachel, all because a smooth bird colonel had pitched him a few soft words. Sucker!

His lips twisted in a crooked grin. Gotch had seduced him by describing his mission as an "out-of-this-world opportunity." Those had been Gotch's words. Well, that was Arzachel. And pretty quick it would be Adam Crag. Out-of-this-world Crag. Just now the thought wasn't so appealing.



Sleep didn't come easy. At Gotch's orders he had turned in early, at the unheard hour of seven. Getting to sleep was another matter. It's strange, he thought, he didn't have any of the feelings Doc Weldon, the psychiatrist, had warned him of. He wasn't nervous, wasn't afraid. Yet before another sun had set he'd be driving the Aztec up from earth, into the loneliness of space, to a bleak crater named Arzachel. He would face the dangers of intense cosmic radiation, chance meteor swarms, and human errors in calculation which could spell disaster. It would be the first step in the world race for control of the Solar System—a crucial race with the small nations of the world watching for the winner. Watching and waiting to see which way to lean.

He was already cut off from mankind, imprisoned in a small room with the momentous zero hour drawing steadily nearer. Strange, he thought, there had been a time when his career had seemed ended, washed up, finished, the magic of the stratosphere behind him for good. Sure, he'd resigned from the Air Force at his own free will, even if his C. O. had made the pointed suggestion. Because he hadn't blindly followed orders. Because he'd believed in making his own decisions when the chips were down. "Lack of *esprit de corps*," his C. O. had termed it.

He'd been surprised that night—it was over a year ago now—that Colonel Gotch had contacted him. (Just when he was wondering where he might get a job. He hadn't liked the prosaic prospects of pushing passengers around the country in some jet job.) Sure, he'd jumped at the offer. But the question had

never left his mind. *Why had Gotch selected him?* The Aztec, a silver needle plunging through space followed by her drones, all in his tender care. He was planning the step-by-step procedure of take-off when sleep came.

CHAPTER 2

Crag woke with a start, sensing he was not alone. The sound came again—a key being fitted into a lock. He started from bed as the door swung open.

"Easy. It's me—Gotch." Crag relaxed. A square solid figure took form.

"Don't turn on the light."

"Okay. What gives?"

"One moment." Gotch turned back toward the door and beckoned. Another figure glided into the room—a shadow in the dim light. Crag caught the glint of a uniform. Air Force officer, he thought.

Gotch said crisply; "Out of bed."

He climbed out, standing alongside the bed in his shorts, wondering at the Colonel's cloak-and-dagger approach.

"Okay, Major, it's your turn," Gotch said.

The newcomer—Crag saw he was a major—methodically stripped down to his shorts and got into bed without a word. Crag grinned, wondering how the Major liked his part in Step One. It was scarcely a lead role.

Gotch cut into his thoughts. "Get dressed." He indicated the Major's uniform. Crag donned the garments silently. When he had finished the Colonel walked around him in the dark, studying him from all angles.

"Seems to fit very well," he said finally. "All right, let's go."

Crag followed him from the room wondering what the unknown Major must be thinking. He wanted to ask about his double but refrained. Long ago he had learned there was a time to talk, and a time to keep quiet. This was the quiet time. At the outer door four soldiers sprang from the darkness and

boxed them in. A chauffeur jumped from a waiting car and opened the rear door. At the last moment Crag stepped aside and made a mock bow.

"After you, Colonel." His voice held a touch of sarcasm.

Gotch grunted and climbed into the rear seat and he followed. The chauffeur blinked his lights twice before starting the engine. Somewhere ahead a car pulled away from the curb. They followed, leaving the four soldiers behind. Crag twisted his body and looked curiously out the rear window. Another car dogged their wake. Precautions, always precautions, he thought. Gotch had entered with an Air Force officer and had ostensibly left with one; ergo, it must be the same officer. He chuckled, thinking he had more doubles than a movie star.

They sped through the night with the escorts fore and aft. Gotch was a silent hulking form on the seat beside him. It's his zero hour, too, Crag thought. The Colonel had tossed the dice. Now he was waiting for their fall, with his career in the pot. After a while Gotch said conversationally:

"You'll report in at Albrook, Major. I imagine you'll be getting in a bit of flying from here on out."

Talking for the chauffeur's benefit, Crag thought. Good Lord, did every move have to be cloak and dagger? Aloud he said:

"Be good to get back in the air again. Perhaps anti-sub patrol, eh?"

"Very likely."

They fell silent again. The car skimmed west on Highway 80, leaving the silver rocket farther behind with every mile. Where to and what next? He gave up trying to figure the Colonel's strategy. One thing he was sure of. The hard-faced man next to him knew exactly what he was doing. If it was secret agent stuff, then that's the way it had to be played.



He leaned back and thought of the task ahead—the rocket he had lived with

for over a year. Now the marriage would be consummated. Every detail of the Aztec was vivid in his mind. Like the three great motors tucked triangularly between her tail fins, each a tank equipped with a flaring nozzle to feed in hot gases under pressure. He pictured the fuel tanks just forward of the engines; the way the fuels were mixed, vaporized, forced into the fireports where they would ignite and react explosively, generating the enormous volumes of flaming hot gas to drive out through the jet tubes and provide the tremendous thrust needed to boost her into the skies. Between the engines and fuel tanks was a maze of machinery—fuel lines, speed controllers, electric motors.

He let his mind rove over the rocket thinking that before many hours had passed he would need every morsel of the knowledge he had so carefully gathered. Midway where the hull tapered was a joint, the separation point between the first and second stages. The second stage had one engine fed by two tanks. The exterior of the second stage was smooth, finless, for it was designed to operate at the fringe of space where the air molecules were widely spaced; but it could be steered by small deflectors mounted in its blast stream.

The third stage was little more than a space cabin riding between the tapered nose cone and a single relatively low-thrust engine. Between the engine and tanks was a maze of turbines, pumps, meters, motors, wires. A generator provided electricity for the ship's electric and electronic equipment; this in turn was spun by a turbine driven by the explosive decomposition of hydrogen peroxide. Forward of this was the Brain, a complex guidance mechanism which monitored engine performance, kept track of speed, computed course. All that was needed was the human hand. His hand.



They traveled several hours with only occasional words, purring across the flat sandy wastes at a steady seventy. The cars boxing them in kept at a steady distance.

Crag watched the yellow headlights sweep across the sage lining the highway, giving an odd illusion of movement. Light and shadow danced in

eerie patterns. The chauffeur turned onto a two-lane road heading north. Alpine Base, Crag thought. He had been stationed there several years before. Now it was reputed to be the launch site of one of the three drones slated to cross the gulfs of space. The chauffeur drove past a housing area and turned in the direction he knew the strip to be.

Somewhere in the darkness ahead a drone brooded on its pad, one of the children of the silver missile they'd left behind. But why the drone? The question bothered him. They were stopped several times in the next half mile. Each time Gotch gave his name and rank and extended his credentials. Each time they were waved on by silent sharp-eyed sentries, but only after an exacting scrutiny. Crag was groping for answers when the chauffeur pulled to one side of the road and stopped. He leaped out and opened the rear door, standing silently to one side. When they emerged, he got back into the car and drove away. No word had been spoken. Figures moved toward them, coming out of the blackness.

"Stand where you are and be recognized." The figures took shape—soldiers with leveled rifles. They stood very still until one wearing a captain's bars approached, flashing a light in their faces.

"Identity?"

Crag's companion extended his credentials.

"Colonel Michael Gotch," he monotoned. The Captain turned the light on Gotch's face to compare it with the picture on the identification card. He paid scant attention to Crag. Finally he looked up.

"Proceed, Sir." It was evident the Colonel's guest was very much expected.

Gotch struck off through the darkness with Crag at his heels. The stars shone with icy brilliance. Overhead Antares stared down from its lair in Scorpio, blinking with fearful venom. The smell of sage filled the air, and some sweet elusive odor Crag couldn't identify. A warmth stole upward as the furnace of the desert gave up its stored heat. He strained his eyes into the darkness;

stars, the black desert ... and the hulking form of Gotch, moving with certain steps.

He saw the rocket with startling suddenness—a great black silhouette blotting out a segment of the stars. It stood gigantic, towering, graceful, a taper-nosed monster crouched to spring, its finned haunches squatted against the launch pad.

They were stopped, challenged, allowed to proceed. Crag pondered the reason for their visit to the drone. Gotch, he knew, had a good reason for every move he made. They drew nearer and he saw that most of the catwalks, guardrails and metal supports had been removed—a certain sign that the giant before them was near its zero hour.

Another sentry gave challenge at the base of the behemoth. Crag whistled to himself. This one wore the silver leaf of a lieutenant colonel! The ritual of identification was exacting before the sentry moved aside. A ladder zigzagged upward through what skeletal framework still remained. Crag lifted his eyes. It terminated high up, near the nose.

This was the Aztec! The real Aztec! The truth came in a rush. The huge silver ship at Burning Sands, which bore the name Aztec, was merely a fake, a subterfuge, a pawn in the complex game of agents and counter-agents. He knew he was right.

"After you," Gotch said. He indicated the ladder and stepped aside.

Crag started up. He paused at the third platform. The floor of the desert was a sea of darkness. Off in the distance the lights of Alpine Base gleamed, stark against the night. Gotch reached his level and laid a restraining hand on his arm.

Crag turned and waited. The Colonel's massive form was a black shadow interposed between him and the lights of Alpine Base.

"This is the Aztec," he said simply.

"So I guessed. And the silver job at Burning Sands?"

"Drone Able," Gotch explained. "The deception was necessary—a part of the cat and mouse game we've been playing the last couple of decades. We couldn't take a single chance." Crag remained silent. The Colonel turned toward the lights of the Base. He had become quiet, reflective. When he spoke, his voice was soft, almost like a man talking to himself.

"Out there are hundreds of men who have given a large part of their lives to the dream of space flight. Now we are at the eve of making that dream live. If we gain the moon, we gain the planets. That's the destiny of Man. The Aztec is the first step." He turned back and faced Crag.

"This is but one base. There are many others. Beyond them are the factories, laboratories, colleges, scientists and engineers, right down to Joe the Riveter. Every one of them has had a part in the dream. You're another part, Adam, but you happen to have the lead role." He swiveled around and looked silently at the distant lights. The moment was solemn. A slight shiver ran through Crag's body.

"You know and I know that the Aztec is a development from the ICBM's guarding Fortress America. You also know, or have heard, that out in San Diego the first atom-powered spaceship is nearing completion." He looked sharply at Crag.

"I've heard," Crag said noncommittally.

Gotch eyed him steadily. "That's the point. So have others. Our space program is no secret. But we've suspected—feared—that the first stab at deep space would be made before the atom job was completed. Not satellites but deep space rockets. That's why the Aztec was pushed through so fast." He fell silent. Crag waited.

"Well, the worst has happened. The enemy is ready to launch—may have launched this very night. That's how close it is. Fortunately our gamble with the Aztec is paying off. We're ready, too, Adam.

"We're going to get that moon. Get it now!" He reached into a pocket and extracted his pipe, then thought better of lighting it. Crag waited. The Colonel was in a rare introspective mood, a quiet moment in which he mentally tied together and weighed his Nation's prospects in the frightening days ahead. Finally he spoke:

"We put a rocket around the moon, Adam." He smiled faintly, noting Crag's involuntary start of surprise. "Naturally it was fully instrumented. There's uranium there—one big load located in the most inaccessible spot imaginable."

"Arzachel," Crag said simply.

"The south side of Arzachel, to be exact. That's why we didn't pick a soft touch like Mare Imbrium, in case you've wondered."

"I've wondered."

"Adam," the Colonel hesitated a long moment, "does the name Pickering mean anything to you?"

"Ken Pickering who—"

"What have you heard?" snapped Gotch. His eyes became sharp drills.

Crag spoke slowly: "Nothing ... for a long time. He just seemed to drop out of sight after he broke the altitude record in the X-34." He looked up questioningly.

"Frankly, I've always wondered why he hadn't been selected for this job. I thought he was a better pilot than I am," he added almost humbly.

Gotch said bluntly: "You're right. He is better." He smiled tolerantly. "We picked our men for particular jobs," he said finally. "Pickering ... we hope ... will be in orbit before the Aztec blasts off."

"Satelloid?"

"The first true satelloid," the Colonel agreed. "One that can ride the fringes of space around the earth. A satelloid with fantastic altitude and speed. I'm telling you this because he'll be a link in Step One, a communication and observation link. He won't be up long, of course, but long enough—we hope."

Silence fell between them. Crag looked past the Colonel's shoulder. All at once the lights of Alpine Base seemed warm and near, almost personal. Gotch lifted his eyes skyward, symbolic of his dreams. The light of distant stars reflected off his brow.

"We don't know whether the Aztec can make it," he said humbly. "We don't know whether our space-lift system will work, whether the drones can be monitored down to such a precise point on the moon, or the dangers of meteorite bombardment. We don't know whether our safeguards for human life are adequate. We don't know whether the opposition can stop us...."

"We don't know lots of things, Adam. All we know is that we need the moon. It's a matter of survival of Western Man, his culture, his way of life, his political integrity. We need the moon to conquer the planets ... and some day the stars."

His voice became a harsh clang.

"So does the enemy. That's why we have to establish a proprietary ownership, a claim that the U.N. will recognize. The little nations represent the balance of power, Adam. But they sway with the political winds. They are the reeds of power politics ... swaying between the Sputniks and Explorers, riding with the ebb and flow of power ... always trying to anticipate the ultimate winner. Right now they're watching to see where that power lies. The nation that wins the moon will tilt the balance in its favor. At a critical time, I might add. That's why we have to protect ourselves every inch of the way."

He tapped his cold pipe moodily against his hand. "We won't be here to see the end results, of course. That won't be in our time. But we're the starters. The Aztec is the pioneer ship. And in the future our economy can use that

load of uranium up there."

He smiled faintly at Crag. "When you step through the hatch you've left earth, perhaps for all time. That's your part in the plan. Step One is your baby and I have confidence in you." He gripped Crag's arm warmly. It was the closest he had ever come to showing his feelings toward the man he was sending into space.

"Come on, let's go."

Crag started upward. Gotch followed more slowly, climbing like a man bearing a heavy weight.



The Aztec's crew, Max Prochaska, Gordon Nagel and Martin Larkwell, came aboard the rocket in the last hour before take-off. Gotch escorted them up the ladder and introduced them to their new Commander.

Prochaska acknowledged the introduction with a cheerful smile.

"Glad to know you, Skipper." His thin warm face said he was glad to be there.

Gordon Nagel gave a perfunctory handshake, taking in the space cabin with quick ferret-like head movements.

Martin Larkwell smiled genially, pumping Crag's hand. "I've been looking forward to this."

Crag said dryly. "We all have." He acknowledged the introductions with the distinct feeling that he already knew each member of his crew. It was the odd feeling of meeting old acquaintances after long years of separation. As part of his indoctrination he had studied the personnel records of the men he might be so dependent on. Now, seeing them in the flesh, was merely an act of giving life to those selfsame records. He studied them with casual eyes while Gotch rambled toward an awkward farewell.