

The Pharaoh's Airship

by Sean McMullen

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When we arrived at the Amberley Air Force base, the wreckage of his machine had been collected in one of the hangars, along with the remains of the F/A-18 Hornet fighter that had killed him. My companion was Adele Taylor from the CIA, and one of her agents waited in the car outside.

A guard checked our passes at the hangar door then sent for Dr. Richards, technical adviser to the inquest into Stephen's death. I picked him for an academic as he hurried over to greet us, a short, greying man, a civilian who coped badly with the guards' deference to his authority. I toyed with a small, black rock in my pocket. It had jagged edges, but the surface was mirror smooth where one corner had been sliced away.

"Welcome, welcome," Richards said excitedly as we shook hands. "I'm so glad to see such important people taking an interest in Stephen's work."

The government of the United States was taking Stephen's work a lot more seriously than he could ever have guessed. Taylor was posing as a propulsion engineer, while I represented the services. In a sense both identities were technically correct.

"Your preliminary report did cause some interest," said Taylor noncommittally.

In fact, the report on his report had my seniors gasping for breath and reaching for their "TOP SECRET" stamps. I fingered the rock in my pocket again.

"I suppose the military potential of Stephen's craft is what interests you most," said Richards as we entered the hangar and approached the piles of wreckage.

"What military potential?" snapped Taylor, alert and alarmed.

"Why, a submarine with a limited flight capacity could have quite a number of applications, I should imagine. Surprise attack, sabotage, even nuclear weapons delivery."

That had been a bad moment. Richards still had no idea what Stephen Cole had done. Any suspicions at all would have been in his report, but there had been nothing.

The Pharaoh had been shattered by its collision with the jet fighter. All that had been recovered from the sea bed was the cabin, a tangle of wires and tubes, some small gas tanks, a cheap industrial robot arm, and a heavy metal container. The cabin was a modified propane gas tank, and it had been partly split open by the impact.

Richards had built a mock-up based on what had been recovered. It resembled nothing more than a small submersible, the type that is used for prospecting on the sea bed. An access hatch and a window had been cut in the main tank, and a frame for the robot arm welded on just below the window. The whole assembly rested on two steel tubes that served as skids.

"Welding marks on the original cabin indicate that quite a lot more was attached," Richards explained. "That would have been the propulsion units and fuel tanks, of course. Those are indicated by the red circles. A cylindrical container is bolted on the left skid, and this was found to contain rocks in the original vehicle."

"Just a simple little machine for prospecting on the sea bed, except that it could also fly," I observed.

"Yes, yes, but there are several design faults, too," he said with that pedantic obsession that one sees in some engineers. "See here? The access hatch hinges inwards, and the seals compress in the wrong direction: dangerous under water, you know."

A collection of items from the cabin was laid out beside the mock-up. There were several plastic food and drink containers, some garbage bags, a pile of nappies, and a sleeping bag. I peered inside the hatch. Just below the window was a control panel with several dozen lights and switches, and six small joysticks. The cabin was heavily padded and insulated.

"Have you any idea how much of the original vehicle is missing?" Taylor asked.

"Ah yes. I conducted some tests to determine that just after I submitted my report. The night that he left, Stephen dragged the Pharaoh out of the garage and left it sitting on the lawn for about an hour, according to his mother. From the indentations that it left I estimate that it weighed nearly a ton. The wreckage recovered, plus Stephen's weight and the rocks, comes to about two thirds of that."

"Yet 98% of the jet fighter was recovered," I added before I could stop myself. Behind Richards Taylor was frantically shaking his head.

"Well yes, I follow your reasoning," laughed Richards. "I think that the drive unit was still functioning when the crash tore it loose. It could have flown for miles before finally hitting the sea and sinking. Getting back to what we did manage to find, though, his consumption of food and use of nappies indicates that he was sealed inside the cabin for the whole three days from when his mother last saw him to when he hit the jet. The condition of the catalyst in the air purifier bears out this estimate, too."

Taylor walked over to the pile of twisted metal that was the original Pharaoh and knelt beside the sample container. Releasing a spring loaded cap she reached in and withdrew a small, dark rock. It had jagged edges, and gleamed wet in the hangar's floodlights.

"Dr. Richards, I must be frank with you," she said, turning the rock over in her fingers. "The material in this cylinder is of great strategic importance."

"Really? What is it?"

"I'm afraid I can't say, but we need to know where he got it."

"But he left no maps."

"The microflora attached to the rocks will give us an idea of the depth and latitude, but we need all the material available."

Richards began to nod reflexively in agreement, then stopped.

"You want to take all the material?" he asked suspiciously.

"That will be necessary, Dr. Richards. I've checked with your government and we have permission-- as long as you think it has no direct bearing on the crash investigation."

"Well, ah, I suppose not." He was reluctant, but he still signed the papers releasing the rocks to us. "How did your people in the US come to learn about the rock samples so quickly?"

"An investigator from the US recognised the rock sample and had it sent back home for analysis," I explained as I looked into the container. "What puzzled us, though, was why you included it with your report."

Annoyance darkened his face for a moment.

"It was just a mistake," he said quickly. "A new assistant misunderstood his instructions."

Taylor and I were very excited as we returned to the car. I suspect that her own feelings were related to snatching such a secret from under the very nose of a foreign government. I, on the other hand, was fascinated by Stephen's work. The Pharaoh's simplicity was amazing, but even so it was quite a feat for an undergraduate student working by himself.

"He must have had help, Adele," I said as we walked. "There was some very skilled welding in the Pharaoh, and a lot of other high quality work that a short-sighted mathematics student just could not have mastered."

"I don't know. The seal on the sample canister was not watertight."

"It doesn't have to be. His work is very good where it counts, though."

* * *

We sent a coded report to Washington over the car's radio, then drove out to Stephen's home. It was a timber house in an old suburb of Brisbane, with a large garage in the backyard. Richards had already been out there, looking for clues to the secret of the Pharaoh's propulsion unit. There were none. There

were no drawings: Stephen knew what he wanted to build. There were no offcuts: Stephen was meticulous in cleaning up after himself.

Mrs. Cole met us at the front door. She was a thin, tense woman in her fifties. She had a heavy cough and she chain-smoked for the whole time we were there.

"I took him a cup of chocolate milk every night at nine," she said as she showed us the garage. The tools remaining gave us no clues. Outside, I could see two deep grooves in the lawn where the Pharaoh had rested briefly.

"So you saw it for the whole six months it took to build," said Taylor. Mrs. Cole wheezed, then coughed violently before she could reply.

"Oh yes, but I don't understand mechanical things. That Dr. Richards has already asked me about all that."

She had seen the Pharaoh every night as Stephen built it. I groaned inwardly at the thought that she might develop lung cancer and die-- as her husband had.

"Mrs. Cole, would you agree to undergo further questioning under hypnosis?" Taylor asked.

"I've already told you all I know," she said impatiently. "I don't remember any more than that. I'm not a technical person, Dr. Taylor. He could have been building an atomic bomb for all I know."

"Under hypnosis you often remember things more clearly," she assured her. "The US government will compensate you for your time and trouble, of course."

If Stephen had been building an atomic bomb it could not have caused more consternation. At the mention of a four-figure compensation payment Mrs. Cole agreed to undergo hypnosis, and to having her house and garage searched yet again. Taylor, efficient as ever, produced the forms from her briefcase at once.

I wandered into Stephen's old bedroom while I waited. There was nothing out of the ordinary among the books and notes remaining there. The furniture was somewhat sparse and almost military in neatness. A photograph above the desk caught my attention. It was of an impossible contraption, a collection of large balloons supporting a deckchair, which in turn had an engine and rotor beneath it. It was several feet above the ground, and there were uniformed police in the crowd watching it land. I brought it to Mrs. Cole's attention. She became uneasy.

"Oh yes, he did get into trouble over that thing, but he was only 14 at the time. He flew it to school one day as part of a science fair, and the police arrested him."

"He probably committed half a dozen breaches of your Air Navigation Act," laughed Taylor.

"Oh yes, but they let him go with a warning. He was such a *good* boy. Now that I think of it, he named that balloon thing the Pharaoh, too."

"He did?" I exclaimed with a sharp pang of excitement. "Are you sure?"

"Of course. It's in the police museum if you want to see it."

* * *

The officer in charge of the museum was more helpful than we could have dreamed. Among the exhibits were such strange items as a small cannon that fired beer cans filled with concrete: it had once belonged to a bikie gang, we were told. Stephen's two flying machines put all the other exhibits to shame, however.

The first looked like a hang glider attached to a propeller-driven go-cart-- except that the thing was made out of packing-case wood, the wheels were from a pram, and the motor was electric. Stephen had been 10 years old when he had built the thing and had done it alone. It showed signs of extensive damage, carefully repaired.

"This bird actually flew," Sergeant Powell told us. "It only got off the ground because he was such a small kid, the experts told us, but still, he did it."

"He must have had help," I said. "Who bought the tools and materials?"

"No problem. His old man died the year before, and he had free run of the workshop in the garage. He scrounged the parts from neighbours, or the local dump."

There were three photographs beside the aircraft. In the first, a small boy wearing thick glasses stood

beside his creation. His face was a study in determination, mixed with nervousness. In the next, the aircraft was a few feet above the ground. The last showed a scattering of wreckage, with an ambulance and police car in the background.

"He took off from the street in front of his home. The motor's coil burned out, the craft stalled, and you can see the results. A neighbour took these pictures.

"Fantastic," I said, "but most kids just build models if they're interested in flight. Why did he go to so much trouble? Why do something so dangerous?"

"Oh, just some rivalry at school. A couple of kids were talking about becoming pilots when they grew up, and Stephen said that he wanted to fly as well. They began teasing him, and told him that nobody as short-sighted as he was could ever get a pilot's licence.

"It's funny, you know, but most people think of Stephen as a sort of absent-minded little whiz kid. He was actually stubborn, bad-tempered, resourceful, and very, very proud. He shouted that he would pilot a plane before they could even drive a car, then went home and started to build this. He was right, too."

I looked at the last photograph again. "Was he hurt?" I asked. "He seems to have come down pretty hard."

"Rather badly," said the sergeant, shaking his head. "When he got out of hospital we agreed to forget the whole thing if his mother kept him locked out of the tool shed. He wore that for a year or so, then decided he wasn't going to be pushed around. He ran away."

"All kids do that," said Taylor, "I used to run away to Granny's nearly every month."

"Little Steve was not just any kid," he replied, walking along to the next exhibit. It was a display of newspaper clippings. "It was over a year before we found him, in a city 2000 miles away. He had travelled by hiding on trains and big rigs, and earned money by selling newspapers, sweeping, and other odd jobs. Talk about resourceful: he was renting a cheap room, and had \$500 in the bank when we found him. The kid was barely 13!"

We examined the clippings and photographs. A picture was emerging of Stephen's character, but one that was not at all encouraging for us. He must have had helpers: find his helpers, they had told us in the Pentagon. It was becoming clear, however, that this short-sighted little boy had enough resourcefulness and mechanical skills for a dozen normal people. He could have built the Pharaoh with no help at all.

The last exhibit was a deck chair. Floating above it was a cluster of weather sonde balloons attached by thin wires. It rested on a wicker frame which enclosed a gimbaled chainsaw engine driving a small rotor. Deflectors cancelled the torque.

"He called it the Pharaoh's Chariot," said Sergeant Powell. "It can't leave the ground until the motor is started, as it needs a small downward thrust to rise. The deckchair was from his mother's sunroom, the chainsaw engine from a neighbour's junkpile."

It was a masterpiece of safety design, and Stephen had clearly been influenced by his earlier accident. It could not crash! If the motor failed, the craft drifted down slowly. If some balloons burst as well, he could reduce weight by dropping the motor and wicker frame, and still descend slowly. To steer he tilted the rotor slightly, to descend he just throttled back. His main expense had probably been the balloons and hydrogen.

"He was 14 when he built this," explained the sergeant. "His school was running some sort of science fair, and the kids were told to bring along some special project. This was Stephen's contribution, and he actually flew it to school."

He pointed to a photograph that had been taken on the day. The Pharaoh's Chariot was descending towards the school's football field, while a police helicopter hovered in the background.

"He seems to have a police escort," Taylor observed.

"He sure did, and this time he was in real trouble. He had flown through the approach path to Eagle Farm airport, and he was charged with nine counts involving the Air Navigation Act. He was given a good behaviour bond, and I was one of the officers who counselled him. He behaved himself for the next five years, so we must have done some good."

I reached out and touched the deckchair, and it wobbled slightly, nearly light enough to float.

"We've noticed that Stephen named his last two craft after the Pharaohs," I said. "Did he ever mention

his interest in ancient Egypt to you?"

"Yeah, he was crazy about it. You should have seen his room: books and comics piled everywhere, walls covered with pictures of Egyptian art. Apparently a teacher had once told his class that the ancient Egyptians could have flown using hot air balloons. They had coal burners, papyrus fabric and wicker baskets. All they needed was the idea. By the way, did you know that he took out a patent on his balloon-helicopter hybrid? It brought him a couple of thousand dollars in royalties."

"One last question," said Taylor as we turned to leave. "What was his bedroom like when you visited to counsel him?"

"It was a pigsty. I don't like to run down the departed, but it was full of rubbish and bits of radios, dirty mugs and plates, piles of clothes. His mother had given up on him years ago."

* * *

"More answers and more mysteries," I said as we drove through the sub-tropical heat to the university. "At some stage he changed from being a slob to being meticulously tidy. He was certainly capable of building the Pharaoh himself, and he had the money for materials."

"Well, our contact at the university discovered that he lived with another student for five months," said Taylor, ticking off items in a file. "She must know something."

I smiled. "His mother was very quiet about that."

"And his police record. Poor woman, she just wants to remember him as a good, clever son."

I began to daydream. A hot air balloon was drifting over the palace of one of the Pharaohs. The pilot called to the guards and waved. The guards looked up, properly astonished, then one of them panicked and shot the aviator dead with an arrow. He tumbled from the wicker gondola, and with his weight gone the balloon rose rapidly. The wind took it out to sea, and by the time the Pharaoh's chief technical advisor arrived it was out of sight.

"This man was flying over the wall, so I shot him," the guard informed the advisor, pointing to the body.

"How was he flying?" asked the engineer. "Did he have wings?"

"No, he was in a basket under a huge bag. His clothing had the smell of burning coals about it."

"He must have had wings," said the advisor. "When birds and insects fly they use wings. Think again, did he have very thin wings, perhaps?"

"Er... he was waving his arms."

"Marvellous!" exclaimed the advisor. "He was obviously flapping invisible wings."

"But what about the huge bag?" protested the guard.

"Hah! The man was clearly a thief, and the bag was to carry off the Pharaoh's treasures."

Far out to sea the furnace beneath the balloon died, and it sank slowly to the waves. The little fantasy had its lesson for us. The Egyptians certainly could have built a manned balloon 3000 years ago, yet the idea of using hot air to fly did not arise until the Montgolfier Brothers began their experiments in late 18th Century France.

Dianna, Stephen's former lover, was a part-time tutor and research student at the university, and our agent had arranged a meeting in her room in the Geography Department. She was fresh faced and well scrubbed, and wore no makeup whatever. Her long pale hair was drawn tightly back into a neat pony tail. The room was severe and spotless, with only a desk, five chairs, and a bookcase. Most of the time that we were there she stood staring through the window.

"Stephen and I were lovers for about a year, and he lived with me for five months," she began in a flat, controlled voice. "I met him at a friend's party, and found him interesting, different. He had a marvellous dry sense of humour, and delightfully different ways of looking at things. He would ask people things like 'if your right hand becomes your left in a mirror, why doesn't your head get swapped with your feet', and 'if I put a book on this chair, then take the chair away but maintain the book's potential energy, should it fall?'"

"His mother said nothing about you," said Taylor. "Were there problems between you?"

"Were there ever! He must have been the most badly house-trained person I've ever met, and I'm sure Mrs. Cole did it deliberately-- so that the likes of me would never go near him. The only time he ever washed his own clothes and dishes was when he ran away that time, and when he finally moved in with me, he seemed to think that I was taking over from his mother. For a while I put up with it, but then he started yelling at me for tidying up after him, and disturbing the order of his mess. One day it became too much for me, and I changed the lock on my flat, packed his stuff into cartons and sent it off to his mother's house. Then I left for a conference in Sydney that I'd been thinking of attending."

"From what I know of Stephen, he would not have taken that lying down," I said.

"True. He tried tears, threats, and presents, then he went through a stage of following me about everywhere-- and I mean everywhere. It was then that I met Brian, who was on an exchange program from the States. He was a trainee astronaut in the Space Shuttle program, and was patient, considerate, and clean. All the things that Stephen was not.

"One night we arrived at my flat to find that the little fool had picked the lock, then got himself drunk on two of the best bottles of red wine in my collection. I told Brian to go for a walk for a half an hour, opened all the windows so that the neighbours could hear everything, then told Stephen what I really thought of him.

"There was plenty. He was a lousy lover, had the manners of a pig, dressed terribly, liked to live in squalour, and couldn't finish a major project to save himself. He said that it was all an excuse to leave him for an astronaut, and that he was as good as any astronaut. That was the end. I pushed him out of his chair and told him to get out. As he got up he took a little metal box from his pocket and pressed a switch. When he released it, it just hung in mid-air. Then he pressed the switch again and handed it to me.

"It was just some cheap trick, but then he said 'I'm better than Einstein, too!' It's funny, you know-- I really felt something snap inside me. I threw the box in the waste-bin, got his arm in a judo lock and marched him through the door and down the stairs. I told him that I could have him charged with breaking and entering, and that he'd be jailed when they looked at his past record.

"That was eight months ago. Friends told me that he had suddenly become very neat and well dressed, had started wearing contact lenses, had learned to drive, and was studying for a pilot's licence. I'm sure you know more about the rest of his story than I do."

A working model of the Pharaoh's drive! It had to be. I did not trust my voice to conceal my excitement, so I glanced at Taylor and nodded.

"I don't suppose you know what happened to that floating box?" Taylor asked, her voice as cool and calm as a spring morning. "We're doing a study of his discoveries, and it could be quite interesting."

"That toy? I threw it out with the garbage."

"And what happens to the garbage?"

"It's... er, it's taken to a depot, incinerated, then dumped in an old quarry. You'd need an army to dig it out again." She sighed. "He was a virgin when we first met."

How could I tell her that we might be able to get an army to excavate the dump.

"Could you describe the box?" I asked instead.

"It was probably a small sardine tin, sort of greyish in colour. The lid was held down by four bolts, and there was a plastic switch in the middle. It weighed about as much as four small radio batteries. Virgins get so obsessive about the first lover."

She turned away from the window for the first time, sat down at her desk, and drew a rough sketch of the box.

"Stephen was working fairly hard to get you back," said Taylor as she studied the sketch.

"I know, and I also know that I could never have gone back. Sure he cleaned himself up, and became a bit more like Brian, but he was an intellectual slob as well. I mean, he was never happier than when he was re-reading old 'Space Patrol' comics, and he said that the 'Star Wars' film was a greater art form than any opera. The better I got to know him, the worse he looked." She walked back to the window and stared out at the Great Court again. "Honestly, he could have given me the moon and I wouldn't have gone back."

We were lucky that she was looking the other way just then. The sketch slipped from Taylor's fingers, and the alarm on both our faces must have been clear. For one perverse moment I felt like handing Dianna the piece of moonrock in my pocket, but the gesture would have achieved nothing.

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I sat on a wooden bench overlooking the river. Beside me our driver filled in a crossword, while in the car Taylor radioed her coded report to our superiors.

My daydream returned, and in it the Pharaoh had decided that he wanted to fly. The chief advisor, for all his theories about wings, could produce no results. His head was now on a platter, and the face had a strong resemblance to that of Richards. A new advisor was at work, examining scraps of papyrus and wicker from the aviator's house in the minutest detail, and interviewing the neighbours. A big bag and a fire! Perhaps he was making a continual burnt sacrifice to the gods? The lump of moonrock lay in the palm of my hand, mocking me. It is so simple to fly, one needs only a large, light bag and a source of hot air. It is so simple to travel to the moon. It had taken the \$15 billion might of Project Apollo to put me on the moon, yet this kid had done it himself for perhaps 10 million times less cost.

For the lack of an idea, a universe is lost. I took the accident report of the fighter pilot from my briefcase and re-read it for at least the twentieth time:

There had been sightings of a UFO from a commercial jetliner, and a radar anomaly confirmed them. I was on a training flight in the area, flying an F/A-18 Hornet. Base radioed the co-ordinates, bearing and speed to me and ordered an intercept for observation. My aircraft was not armed at the time.

I observed a craft of unknown design moving at a speed of about 60 knots, and travelling so close to the water that it left a slight wake. It was headed for mangrove flats on the coast, not directly for Brisbane. We were 10 nautical miles out to sea at the time.

On my second pass I approached the craft from behind, and had slowed to just above stalling speed for a better view. Suddenly the craft rose into my path with phenomenal acceleration, and I was unable to avoid a collision. I ejected successfully, and as my parachute opened I noticed that part of the craft's wreckage was travelling upwards at a steep angle. I concluded that the craft's drive unit had been torn away, but was still functioning. I could see no details of its mechanism.

Flying submarine indeed! I conjured up the image of Richards' head on a platter again. If it had been a submarine, why did not Stephen dive to escape, instead of trying to fly straight up? The kid knew as well as anyone that seals designed for a vacuum might be of little use under water.

The sequence of events, if nothing else, was clearer. He had taken off at night, and had flown straight up from his backyard. Apparently the drive allowed him to navigate by dead reckoning, as there was not so much as a pair of binoculars found in the cabin. On the surface of the moon he had used the robot arm to fill a canister with rocks. He must have planned the trip to take three days, but for some reason he was 12 hours late returning to Earth. Finding that it was after sunrise in the city, he had descended far out to sea.

Perhaps he did not want publicity, or perhaps he remembered his earlier problems with the police over unauthorised flying machines. In his position I would have flown the Pharaoh to the coast at sea level, then hidden it in the mangrove swamps until after sunset. When he realised that a jet was investigating him and possibly preparing to shoot him down, he tried to escape back into space. He did not see it coming in from behind as he rose.

* * *

Taylor finished her report, and I returned to the car. As we left the university she told the driver to return to the air force base.

"It looks like we finish here quite soon," she said when I asked her how long our remaining work would take.

"Soon? But it would take a large team of people months to search the dump for that model of the drive. And what about a search of the sea bed for extra fragments from the Pharaoh?"

"These two operations have been costed out at near \$10 million," she replied with a sigh. "We are to proceed with questioning Mrs. Cole under hypnosis, and with the searching of her house and garage. If nothing results from all that, we are to return. Oh yes, and all evidence that shows the Pharaoh was a viable space vehicle is to be secured and turned over to the Pentagon."

"Are you trying to say that the investigation is off unless we find a quick, cheap answer?"

"In a word, yes."

"But we spent billions on Project Apollo and the Shuttles."

"And we were pretty sure that we would have something at the end of it all. What guarantee do we have this time? The can with the model drive in it was probably crushed in a garbage compactor, then melted in some incinerator. Even if it survived the heat, the components inside would have been fried beyond recognition. As for what a search of the sea bed could turn up, there was so much of the drive's mechanism torn free in one piece that it continued to function. The pilot saw it rising into the sky, and that means any bits left are not vital to its working."

I slumped back in my seat, stunned. The Pharaoh had become bored with the airship project. Told that the secret of flight might only be rediscovered after years of experimentation with charcoal burners, wicker baskets and papyrus bags, he ordered his staff to return to the problem of designing a theft-proof pyramid. He had thought that his airship would be driven aloft by a great, glorious pair of wings. Wicker baskets and charcoal burners were ignoble.

"It's always the same!" I said, slamming my fist against the car door. "The technology is there, but we ignore it. If Goddard and his people had government support we could have had the first satellite orbiting before the Second World War. Today we have the technology to establish a lunar base, or even land a team on Mars. We're lucky to even have the Shuttle."

"The Shuttle is no mean achievement," replied Taylor, a slight chill in her voice. "And you seem to have forgotten the development of the atomic bomb, and the lunar landings. That's a strange thing for a former Apollo astronaut to do."

Her reply was calculated to tell me that my views were deviant, that they were potentially disloyal. There were no votes in this issue, so it should not concern loyal citizens.

"Yes, yes, they were fantastic achievements," I said wearily, "but it took fear to loosen the purse strings to pay for all that. Fear of Nazi Germany, and fear of the Soviets. Why haven't we reached Mars?"

"A thing's being technically feasible is no reason to do it. Look at the size of the deficit. Tack the cost of an expedition to Mars onto that, then tell me what the returns are expected to be."

"But Stephen's drive would be dirt cheap, once we know how it works. Never mind space. It would revolutionise transport here on Earth. You could attach them to autos and fly anywhere in the world for peanuts."

She sat back in her seat, shaking her head and staring through the window. I knew her well, well enough to realise that her beliefs reflected her orders. Determine the facts, and secure the evidence that Stephen had actually reached the moon, we had been told. Now there had been new orders.

"In a way Stephen's drive is too good," she said finally, the issues and her orders reconciled in her mind. "People would have so much freedom of movement that governments would lose control. Anyway, try to imagine the trouble if the petroleum, automobile and aircraft industries collapsed overnight. If we uncover the secret, we need to guard it and use it responsibly until the world is ready. If the discovery is lost, so much the better."

"But all new inventions upset the status quo!" I insisted. "Think of all the errand boys put out of work by the telephone, or of the blow that the car trade was to the horse trade. The world goes on, and is usually the better for them."

"*This* invention is dangerous at *this* time."

"That's just the opinion of some timid CIA civil servant."

"We need a full investigation right now. The model drive will corrode away if we wait too long. I mean,

the idea could be like that of the airship: the ancient Egyptians had the materials and technology in 1000BC, but the idea had to wait another 3000 years. This might be the same."

"The airship might have also destroyed civilisation as they knew it," she muttered, folding her arms. That was her signal that the discussion was at an end.

I would trade a few pyramids for a chance to live among the stars in 1986, I thought to myself.

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The next two days were a disaster. All that we managed to learn from Mrs. Cole was that the Pharaoh had two large batteries, a bank of solar cells, four small gas tanks, and a refrigeration unit. Our search of her house and garage revealed nothing, apart from some quite ordinary metalworking tools. Taylor was pleased, as the case was drawing out to a tidy conclusion, and the status quo would be maintained. I, on the other hand, could see whole worlds slipping out of our grasp for centuries.

My work became more administration than investigation, and I patiently checked and crosschecked the reports and evidence for consistency. This involved, among other things, checking the security ratings of all Australians involved, and it was this way that I discovered that Richards was British. His rating was good: he had worked on the British Black Arrow Launcher that had put up their Prospero satellite. I smiled and shook my head sadly. Surely such a man would-- of course such a man would realise! The moonrock in my pocket had been sent out by accident, and by an assistant who had probably had his backside kicked severely.

I drove out to the city dump to do some checking for myself. Everything was as we had been told. There was an incinerator, piles of ash, and a disused quarry. I checked the records, and they confirmed that the load containing the model drive had been burned, but there was more. Some loads were dumped as general fill at other sites, and these were not burned. Scope for forgery.

With the aid of a street directory and a list of dumps and old quarries, I began a very strange tourist trip of Brisbane. Eleven dumps later, I found what I was looking for. The dump was closed, but there was evidence of intense activity by heavy earthmoving equipment. I learned from the local kids who gathered to watch that the dump had been closed two months ago, and that the army had moved in for some weeks. It was an exercise in handling rubbish in quantities that would be generated by a nuclear attack, the locals had been told.

Back in my office I checked the dates: Stephen had died ten weeks ago, and the recovery of the wreckage began the next day. There was plenty of time to discover the micrometeorite pitting on the rock samples and its significant chemical composition. Taylor entered, and I handed her the files that I had been working on.

"The case is pretty well wrapped up," she said, sitting on the edge of my desk. "Look, I'm sorry that we couldn't go all out to solve this one, but you know how it is. Why put a huge amount of effort into discovering something that may be more trouble than it's worth?"

"That could be said of any invention, Adele. You and your budget conscious superiors seem to have forgotten the benefits."

"No we haven't. We just weighed everything up, then decided to do what seemed best. I know it's disappointing, but that's the way it has to be."

I tried to seem both sad and resigned, but the temptation to laugh was very strong. Luckily I had been trained to keep a straight face when I had first become involved in intelligence work.

"So when will we be going home?" I asked, beginning to tidy my desk.

"Tomorrow night. I thought you might like to drive out for a bit of real sight-seeing in the morning, though."

"Sure, why not? We're not likely to be sent back here again."

* * *

Somewhere off the coast of ancient Egypt a Greek trading ship had seen the balloon drift out of the sky, and had recovered it then set a course for home. The Pharaoh might not have been interested in the

airship, but when the Greeks flew brazenly over his city, he would be forced to pay attention.

My first reaction was to tell Taylor everything, to show her the marks of the army search at the dump, then tell her all the other scraps of evidence. The search had been called off abruptly, and secrecy maintained: they must have found the model drive. My government would be forced to open negotiations for sharing the secret, and the last frontier would be brought a lot closer. Then I had second thoughts. Money is spent in direct proportion to the severity of the fright. An Australian team landing on Mars within the year could loosen up so much public money for research that the first starships might be built within my lifetime.

I began to draw up a list of places to visit before we left Brisbane. I included the Performing Arts Complex, the Botanic Gardens and the main shopping mall, but most certainly not a small municipal dump that showed evidence of recent excavation.

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