

LEMURIA 7 IS MISSING

Allen M. Steele

Allen M. Steele has been a frequent contributor to *Asimov's* beginning with his first published story, "Live from the Mars Hotel" (Mid-December 1988). Dozens more stories have appeared in this magazine over the past thirty-five years, including three that have received Hugo awards. Before becoming a science fiction writer, he was a journalist and investigative reporter. Allen's latest tale was inspired by Martin Caidin's *Ghosts of the Air* (Bantam, 1991), a nonfiction account of unsolved aeronautical mysteries that includes aircraft disappearances. He tells us, "Reading this book, I began to wonder, now that space tourism has become a reality and adventure flights to the Moon are being proposed by private space carriers, how long it will be before we lose a manned spacecraft for reasons no one can explain."

The history of sea and air travel is replete with mysterious disappearances. Since the times when Egyptian galleys and Phoenician trading vessels sailed the Mediterranean, ships have set out upon sun-freckled waters, their captains and crew confident in the belief that nautical skill, favorable winds, and the mercy of the gods would guide and protect them in their travels.

But the sun can vanish behind threatening clouds, the wind can shift directions and become ominously strong, the gods may forsake the most pious seamen, and even an experienced captain can make mistakes that will bring doom upon his vessel and crew. When these things happened, ships didn't make their scheduled landfalls and it soon became coldly apparent their sails would never again be seen above the horizon, and the cries of wives who'd just become widows were once more heard in seaport towns.

There are many tales of ships that have vanished without explanation. The legendary *Flying Dutchman* is only the most famous, more myth than history; there are others whose existence and subsequent disappearances are more verifiable. The SS *Waratah*, a British passenger steamer, vanished off the coast of Australia in 1911,

taking 211 crew and passengers with her. In 1963 a tanker, the *SS Marine Sulphur Queen*, entered the roster of ships and planes to disappear off the southern Florida coast, thirty-nine people sailing with her into the infamous Bermuda Triangle. In 1979 an Indian bulk carrier, the *MV Kairali*, was lost along with forty-nine lives while en route from India to Germany. These are but a few; there are many more.

Sea vessels aren't the only craft to have gone into limbo. Once airplanes were invented in the twentieth century, it wasn't long before they began to vanish as well, sometimes literally into thin air.

Perhaps the most famous aviation mystery in history is the December 1945 disappearance of five U.S. Navy TBM-3 Avenger torpedo bombers during a training flight from Ft. Lauderdale Air Naval Station to the Bahamas. When radio contact was lost with the five planes somewhere off the Florida coast, the navy dispatched a PBY-3 Martin Mariner from Ft. Lauderdale to search for it; this "flying boat" subsequently vanished as well. Again, these craft vanished in the Bermuda Triangle; altogether, twenty-seven men were lost aboard the six planes. Many years later the remains of the Avenger squadron were discovered on the bottom of the sea, but the Martin Mariner was never found and the reason why these aircraft were lost has never been definitely explained.

Almost forgotten, but just as intriguing, was the disappearance of the *Star Tiger*, a British South American Airways Avro Tudor-4, in the same area of the South Atlantic. The four-engine airliner was en route from London to Havana when it vanished on January 30, 1948; twenty-five passengers and six crew were aboard. The *Star Tiger* hadn't yet been found, and its disappearance was still unexplained when, almost exactly a year later on January 17, 1949, its sister airliner, the *Star Ariel*—same type of aircraft, same airline—vanished between Kingston, Jamaica, and Santiago, Chile, this time with eighteen passengers and crew aboard. Neither aircraft was ever found.

Enigmas like these don't solely belong to the twentieth century. On March 8, 2014, Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 disappeared en route between Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. This time, the aircraft was a Boeing 777 jetliner with 227 passengers and twelve crew aboard. The enormous jet was over the South China Sea east of Malaysia when it inexplicably went off course, making a southwest turn that took it back across the Malaysian Peninsula and over the Andaman Sea, where it vanished. Although pieces of debris identified as belonging to the 777 were later recovered, the fate of the aircraft and the 239 people aboard remain unknown.

In all instances, determined efforts were made to locate the lost vessels. And when it became obvious that the craft would probably never be found and the lives of the people aboard were lost as well, equally determined efforts were made to explain what happened. Many theories were advanced, some more probable than others. The more plausible conjectures were often supported by evidence: garbled radio transmissions, recovered bits of wreckage, documented records of extreme weather conditions. Nevertheless, the ships and planes were, quite simply, gone.

When humankind began to leave Earth and permanently venture out into space, perhaps it was only inevitable that much the same thing would happen again, out there in a darker sky, a deeper and more trackless ocean.

The disappearance of *Lemuria 7* remains an unsolved mystery. It wasn't the first time a spacecraft was lost without a trace. Dozens of unmanned probes went missing in earlier decades, mainly those sent to Mars by the United States and the former Soviet Union. Although these losses occurred long before anyone actually set foot on Mars, their disappearances were embarrassments to their respective governments' space agencies, happening as they did during the Cold War when America and Russia were geopolitical rivals with something to prove, as they unfortunately became again in the twenty-first century.

Yet it's one thing to lose a probe, and quite another to lose people. Only six men and women were aboard the *Lemuria*, yet their loss couldn't have been more noticeable if their spacecraft had been large enough to carry six hundred. The disappearance of the *Lemuria 7* flight, the passenger moonship's sixth journey to the Moon—*Lemuria 1* was an orbital test mission—captured the world's attention. For an entire two-week news cycle it dominated the global news media, the first time since Apollo 13 that an imperiled craft in space received so much notice. Yet this is a mystery without resolution, a tale without an end. The *Lemuria* is still gone, the fate of its crew and passengers still unknown.

This is the story of the final flight of the *Lemuria*, as related by contemporary news reportage and interviews with individuals who had direct involvement in the affair, including journal entries by one of the disappeared passengers. Through investigative journalism, firsthand recollections, and social media commentary, a factual narrative has been stitched together: not a dramatization, like some that have been done already, but instead as close to a participatory account as possible.

This is a story that will frustrate many who read it. It has no clear and simple resolution; questions that weren't answered back then remain unanswered today. And yet, some of those who've studied these records have developed theories—however incredible or implausible as they may seem—about what happened to *Lemuria 7* and the six who were aboard.

Upon reading this, perhaps you will, too.

* * *

Associated Press wire story (science feature):

EDISON SMITH TO VISIT MOON

Huntsville, AL. March 16, 203-: Billionaire tech entrepreneur Edison Smith is scheduled to visit the Moon aboard the *Lemuria* lunar excursion vehicle, it was announced today at a joint press conference by spokespersons for private space company Phoenix SpaceTours and Smith's renewable energy company MyEnergy Systems, held at PST's corporate headquarters and flight control center in Huntsville.

Smith, fifty-nine, will be accompanied by his wife Mary Alice, fifty-five, and their daughter Amelia, twenty-two, all residents of Concord, NH, where MyEnergy has its corporate headquarters. Joining them as *Lemuria's* fourth passenger will be Todd Bakke, twenty-six, MyEnergy's vice-president of marketing. Phoenix SpaceTours spokesperson Sharyn Dupree confirmed that Smith has booked all four passenger berths for the flight, which will be officially designated *Lemuria 7*.

The flight will have special significance for Smith. *Lemuria* is scheduled to launch from Cape Canaveral, FL aboard a Legend Space Spock-C flyback booster on May 24, with its lunar landing scheduled for May 26, Smith's sixtieth birthday.

"Edison will be turning sixty during the flight," said MyEnergy spokesperson Toni Martinez. "Walking on the Moon is something he's dreamed of doing since he was a kid, so this trip will be a birthday present to himself."

"There's another reason for the trip as well," added Phoenix spokesperson Dupree. "However, that will not be made public until the Smith family reaches the Moon." She said that the announcement will be streamed live from the lunar surface through social media at 0600 GMT on May 26.

The pilot for *Lemuria 7* will be Archie Lemmon, a fifteen-year space veteran from Great Britain who was formerly with the European Space Agency before joining Phoenix SpaceTours as Senior Astronaut. The copilot will be Jake Skribiski, formerly a NASA pilot and a veteran of its Artemis project. This will be Lemmon's third flight aboard the *Lemuria* and Skribiski's second lunar flight; both astronauts have previous flight experience aboard NASA spacecraft.

This will be the seventh crewed flight for *Lemuria* and the sixth to land on the Moon.

Toni Martinez: former press liaison, MyEnergy Systems public relations office

The press conference where we announced that Ed and Mary Alice and Amelia were going on vacation was nothing special until Sharyn Dupree joined me at the mic and we dropped the bombshell about where they were going. Ed had put Amelia in charge of the press office about six weeks earlier after he fired my last boss for not doing exactly what Ed told him to do; he wanted to make the announcement the usual way by issuing a routine MyEnergy press release, which is effective but boring. Amelia shared her papa's predilection for bombshell announcements, and she knew the trick to turning a normal press conference into a headline grabber is to start off making it sound like a routine statement, and then toss in a cherry bomb at the end. Sharyn was game for it, so . . .

So we decided to do it during SpaceTours' weekly press briefing, held every Wednesday morning, 9 A.M. sharp, in Huntsville, not far from NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center. Fifteen people showed up, about five more than usual. We got a slightly higher turnout because Amelia told me to deliberately leak that something out of the ordinary might be announced. Reporters who'd been covering Edison Smith and MyEnergy for a while knew that when they caught wind of something like that, they'd be wise not to blow it off, so they hopped the next flight to Alabama.

Most of the press thought we were going to announce some space-business story such as MyEnergy getting involved in a powersat project like the Japanese were doing. When I went up to the podium, I told them instead that Edison and Mary Alice were planning to take a brief leave of absence, get away from the company for a while and take a vacation. When I said this, I could see people rolling their eyes and giving other ho-hum looks like we were wasting their time. I'm sure they thought the next thing I'd say was that they'd be going to Fiji or St. Thomas or maybe even Nepal to go hiking in the Himalayas. I waited a second or two, then dropped the bomb: one of the most successful tech guys of the twenty-first century was going to the Moon.

Ed and Mary Alice and Amelia had quietly arrived before the press showed up, and we'd hidden them in a little area back behind stage where they wouldn't be spotted until Sharyn and I made the announcement. Todd [Bakke] was there, too, but we made the strategic decision not to bring him out on stage with the others, but instead have him in the back of the room. Todd and the New Hampshire reporters knew each other, so we figured that seating him among them when the announcement was made would make it seem like one of their own was going on this trip . . . and space tourism, especially lunar tourism, was still enough of a novelty that it seemed like only rich people and celebrities got to go.

Todd was supposed to be everyman, the middle-class guy who just got lucky. The official reason for him getting a seat on *Lemuria 7* was that MyEnergy wanted to bring its senior marketing guy along for "product research." If anyone asked what that meant, the question would be deferred to me, and I had a whole song and dance ready for them. What no one outside the family knew—well, no one but them and a few executive-level people like me—was that there was another reason why Todd was coming along. He and Amelia had recently become engaged, and they'd livestream the wedding announcement from the Moon.

For someone who claimed to abhor public attention, Ed sure knew how to manipulate the news media. As press stunts go, that was a beauty. And since sales of the Windstar home wind turbine and its storage batteries had begun to flatten a bit, Ed and Mary Alice . . . the company's CEO and CFO respectively . . . decided that a trip to the Moon, together with public announcement of their daughter's engagement, would put MyEnergy back in the news again.

MyEnergy's last major announcement was that Ed was open-sourcing the design

specs for the first-generation Windstar, making it possible for small businesses or even just someone with a basement workshop to build an affordable household wind turbine. But that had been two years ago and the shine had worn off. Maybe blueprints for MyEnergy's original home windmill were now in public domain, but the real money came from sales of its storage batteries, and the design specs for those were still proprietary and definitely *not* open source. *Lemuria 7* was good PR . . . a little adventure, a little romance, something to make everyone feel good. So when MyEnergy announced Windstar Version 3 just a few weeks after the Smiths came home from the Moon, the company would have picked up a lot of good will.

The press conference went off just as planned. No one saw it coming, and for the first time in almost a year the room really came alive, especially when Ed walked out from backstage with Mary Alice and Amelia. And y'know, since Amelia had a rep as one of the world's most eligible young bachelorettes, there was just the right amount of speculation when Todd came up onstage and stood beside her. A few reporters noticed the new diamond ring on Amelia's left hand, just as we wanted.

We'd planned that, too. The whole thing was planned. But no one suspected, let alone knew for sure, that Amelia and Todd's relationship wasn't quite the sweet romantic fantasy we were led to believe it was. There were . . . issues.

* * *

"Cleveland at Midnight with Danny Cleveland"; Deep Channel, March 19, 203-

Danny Cleveland: So . . . I hear you're going to the Moon.

Edison Smith: You've heard correctly. Yes, I'm going to the Moon. Having my sixtieth birthday there, in fact.

Cleveland: Are you throwing a party? (*Audience laughter.*)

Smith: Yes, but it'll be rather small. Just me, my family, a friend from the office, and the two pilots. (*Pause.*) You can come too, Danny, but you're going to have to get your own ride. (*Audience laughter.*)

Cleveland: Thanks. I'll rent a limo. (*Laughter.*) But seriously, why the Moon? Sure, you can afford it . . . and it's not just you who's going, but also your wife and daughter and . . . uh, this other fellow.

Smith: Well, it's been a long while since the last time I've taken any sort of trip that wasn't strictly business, and even longer since I've gone anywhere with my family, so now that the company is making money—

Cleveland: MyEnergy hasn't gone bankrupt? Even after putting your blueprints for home windmills in public domain so anyone can build one themselves? That's like Coca-Cola releasing their formula. I'm surprised you're not wearing a barrel.

Smith: Only at home. I put on a suit for your show. (*Laughter.*) No, really, the company isn't going under. In fact it's doing quite well. Even though they can, most people who want to put a wind turbine in their backyard or on their rooftop don't have the skill to do so, not to mention deal with local zoning ordinances and environmental impact statements and so forth, so they hire a contractor to do it for them, and most of those local contractors use the free MyEnergy windmill specs they download off the net. But no one builds home wind turbines better than MyEnergy, and even if you do opt for home construction you still need to buy and install long-term storage batteries, and the ones we make are the only ones that are 100 percent compatible with our windmill designs. So we're still able to show a profit while doing something good for the environment, make cheap, clean energy production available as open-source technology. I'm not losing my shirt on this . . . I'm just surprised no one thought of it sooner.

Cleveland: It's certainly earned you a lot of friends. Half of your company's profits go to supplying poor towns in America and villages in third-world nations with free wind-power systems. Last month the president presented you with the Medal of Freedom at a White House dinner in your honor—

Smith: Yes, that was quite humbling.

Cleveland:—and there’s a rumor that you’ve even been considered for the Nobel Peace Prize—

Smith: Only a rumor. I don’t deserve it.

Cleveland: Oh yeah, riiiiiiight (*Laughter and applause for the host’s laugh line*). Anyway, as I was saying . . . most people, when they want to take their family on vacation, pack up the SUV and head for Disneyland. You go to the Moon. In fact, you’ll be the first billionaire to do this. Everyone else who’s gone to the Moon since tourist flights began has been a celebrity, like an actor or a rock star, or a research scientist whose company is able to afford a ticket. Is it just because you have enough money to, or—?

Smith: Oh, no, no. It’s more than . . . Danny, seriously, I’ve been fascinated by space travel and the Moon my whole life. Going out there is something I’ve wanted to do for a long, long time. But I didn’t want to settle for a fifteen-minute suborbital jaunt aboard a space capsule, where you’re up there just long enough to do a zero-g somersault and take a selfie. And I also want to—(*pause*) there’s something out there I want to check out for myself.

Cleveland: I see. And that’s the . . . uh, surprise announcement the company says you’re going to make?

Smith: No, no, that’s something different.

Cleveland: Scuttlebutt has it there’s something going on with your daughter Amelia . . . whom you named after Amelia Earhart, I understand.

Smith: Family tradition. I was named after Thomas Edison.

Cleveland: I’ve heard Amelia’s become engaged to a vice-president at your company. Todd Bakke, who’ll be *Lemuria 7’s* fourth passenger.

Smith: Well, that’s between the two of them. We’ll let Amelia make the announcement when the time comes.

Cleveland: Of course, but tell you what . . . if things don’t work out and they call it off, will you give me her number? Nice girl like her shouldn’t be lonely. (*Laughter*).

Smith: Amelia’s never had that problem. (*Laughter and applause*).

* * *

From “A Tourist Ship for the Moon” by Blithe Osaka; The New York Citizen, Nov. 16-23, 203-

When the principals behind Phoenix SpaceTours realized that their company’s best—and perhaps only—chance of survival in the new and highly competitive space tourism industry lay in offering something no other space company did, it became apparent that it would have to be more than just offering three orbits of Earth instead of just one. They would have to (if you’ll pardon an old sci-fi cliché) go where no sightseer has gone before. And obviously, that was the Moon.

By then, NASA had finally fulfilled a burning ambition by sending American astronauts back to the Moon for the first time since 1972. The Artemis missions were a success, restoring the country’s stubborn belief that it was still the world’s leading space-faring nation, but this success came at a price. NASA was now saddled with the Space Launch System, a heavy-lift booster taller than the Saturn V that was just as difficult and expensive to launch; getting a rocket and its Orion payload through the Vehicle Assembly Building and out to the launch pad in less than six months was all but impossible. The giant rocket also vibrated during lift-off to a worrisome degree. As one anonymous NASA engineer who’d worked on the project at Marshall Space Flight Center put it, “(SLS) shakes like a dog who’s just come out of the rain.”

Worst of all, like Apollo, almost none of SLS’s components are reusable. Aside from the Orion space capsule and solid-rocket boosters, which are recovered at sea, everything else is thrown away during launch. Even the Artemis lander, while inarguably

a masterpiece of space engineering, can perform its mission but once. It appeared as if NASA had decided to revisit its glory days of the 1960s by falling back on tried-and-true approaches instead of developing a new spacecraft for the twenty-first century.

But while it made sense to build a new craft designed specifically for lunar tourism, achieving that goal was more difficult. Most of the concepts previously envisioned by aerospace engineers depended on wish-list technology that hadn't yet been developed, tested, and proven reliable. Phoenix SpaceTours had a good business plan, but the company couldn't afford to wait a decade or more for someone to build a dream ship for them. If the company was going to leapfrog its competitors and corner the market for lunar tourism, they would have to revisit concepts that predated Apollo and perhaps even NASA itself.

"We decided to investigate ideas that might've worked if someone had actually bent metal," says Bruce Roberts, Phoenix's Chief Engineer and head of the team that designed the Lemuria lunar spacecraft (which he prefers to call a "moonship"). "So we walked away from NASA's Apollo-era design philosophy, where everything is used just once and then either dumped in the ocean or left on the Moon, and looked elsewhere for inspiration. And we found it even further in the past than Apollo."

The concept Phoenix used as its starting point was one devised by the British Interplanetary Society in 1939 and subsequently revised in 1947, a nameless single-stage spacecraft resembling a gumdrop that has sprouted four spidery legs. One of the BIS members involved in the 1947 redesign was the legendary astrophysicist and author Sir Arthur C. Clarke, who described the vessel in his 1951 nonfiction science bestseller *The Exploration of Space*. Roberts rediscovered the BIS proposal while skimming through *The Dream Machines*, space artist Ron Miller's massive 1993 compendium of real and imaginary spacecraft designs. A cutaway blueprint of the ship appears in the book's frontispiece; Roberts says the moment he saw it, "I knew then and there I'd found what we were looking for."

At his suggestion, the Phoenix R&D team updated the BIS design. This time, they rejected the atomic engines projected in the 1947 version and instead adapted the moonship so that it could be launched as two connecting modules by Spock-C reusable heavy-lift boosters built and successfully flown by Legend Space.

The Phoenix team adapted the BIS design in other significant ways. The hull was now fifty-six feet tall as opposed to the earlier version's forty-foot height, and instead of a streamlined conical shape, the new craft looked like an oversized bottom half of an Apollo lunar lander married to a giant badminton shuttlecock, with a cylindrical crew module as the tip of the conical midsection. The resemblance to the previous NASA design was acknowledged in the name given to the new ship: *Lemuria*, a pun on NASA's technical name for its Apollo lander, the Lunar Excursion Module, or LEM.

But the LEM was a small, homely spacecraft designed with mass and weight conservation in mind, so stripped-down that it even lacked seats; the astronauts slept in nylon hammocks. By comparison, the *Lemuria* was built with the comfort of its four passengers as a high priority. "We knew from the start that tickets would probably be priced somewhere around one million dollars," Roberts says (in fact, single-passenger fare costs \$1.15 million). "Anyone who's spending that kind of money for a vacation is going to expect better than sleeping in a bag, having protein bars for dinner, and peeing in a suction hose."

Lemuria's cylindrical passenger module, by contrast, is a feat of travel luxury. Twenty-four feet tall, twelve feet wide, it contains three primary decks. The top deck, A-deck, is where the pilot and copilot sit side-by-side in a spacious cockpit with fold-down control panels and LCD flatscreens; eight portholes surrounding the pilots' seats provide a 360-degree exterior view that no spacecraft has had before. A-deck

also serves as the pilots' living quarters; although they don't share the amenities enjoyed by the passengers, their couches fold down horizontally to become padded cots, a considerable improvement over hammocks and sleeping bags.

A manhole in the center of the deck, furnished with a ladder for when *Lemuria* is on the Moon, leads down to B-deck, the passenger quarters. Four couches are spaced in a circle, each with its own 4' x 6' porthole. During launch and landing maneuvers, B-deck is one large compartment, but once the moonship gets underway, accordion panels can be unfolded from the interior bulkheads and linked together to form individual, wedge-shaped "staterooms" arranged like pie cuts around a circular central compartment, the "dining room" complete with a well-stocked galley. Microwaveable western omelets, grilled Atlantic salmon, and goat-cheese ravioli are among the entrées.

The B-deck couches also fold down to become beds unless passengers opt for sleeping weightless during the two nights of the trip not spent in lunar one-sixth gravity. Instead of the cold functionality of most spacecraft, B-deck is cleverly made to resemble the main cabin of a nineteenth-century sailing yacht. The bulkheads are paneled to resemble oak walls, the portholes have curtains, the deck is covered with Velcro mats patterned to resemble antique Persian carpets, and even the storage compartments are fashioned to look like cedar cabinets.

Unfortunately, passengers and pilots alike have to share the ship's only privy, located down in C-deck. However, facilities such as a zero-gee toilet and enclosed shower stall are a vast improvement over the suction urinals, feces disposal bags, and sponge baths of twentieth century spacecraft. C-deck also contains the "ready room" for moonwalks; beneath an airtight floor hatch is a ladder with an enclosed vertical shaft leading down through the lunar service module (LSM) to the airlock and outer hatch at the bottom of *Lemuria's* lower hull.

With its pilots and passengers aboard, the passenger module is launched from Cape Canaveral on top of a Spock-C booster, which separates from the module once it reaches orbit and returns to the Cape for a soft landing. By then, the passenger module has rendezvoused and docked with a pilotless orbital transfer vehicle (POTV) that carries it the rest of the way to SpaceHome One, the private Astrodyne space station periodically leased by Phoenix to serve as an orbital step-off point for each lunar flight.

There, the crew module is mated with *Lemuria's* LSM. The bottom half of the moonship, an elongated cone containing tanks for fuel and consumables, is connected to the octagonal descent hull with its folded landing gear and solar array. The LSM remains docked with SpaceHome One between excursions, where it is inspected, repaired, and refueled by an Astrodyne support team shortly before each lunar flight. The passengers spend the next twenty-four hours aboard SpaceHome One, receiving basic instructions they need to function in space while *Lemuria* itself is prepared for the next phase of the journey.

Phoenix SpaceTours makes a subtle point of using the word "excursion" to describe its lunar flights. "We want to make each excursion seem more like an adventure trek than a NASA mission," says Phoenix spokesperson Kris Dyson. Nonetheless, the one-day sleepover on SpaceHome One serves another purpose, albeit unspoken: it gives passengers a final chance to reconsider their plans, a "chicken-out" period mandated by Phoenix's insurance underwriters. A low-orbit Astrodyne shuttle is ready to come up and retrieve anyone who decides at the last minute that they'd rather not go the rest of the way, but full refunds are not offered.

However, no passenger has yet decided to exercise that option. So far, twelve people have paid over a million dollars each to ride *Lemuria* to the Moon and back. Each excursion is assigned its own number; *Lemuria 1* was an orbital test flight, and

Lemuria 2 carried only its two pilots to the Moon, but *Lemuria 3*, *Lemuria 4*, and *Lemuria 5* have all carried fare-paying passengers, and *Lemuria 6*, *Lemuria 7*, and *Lemuria 8* are scheduled to fly next year.

According to Dyson, thirty-six people have each made the five-hundred-thousand-dollar reservation deposit, and all passenger berths have already been booked for the next nine excursions. Dyson declined to give the names of any passengers but confirmed that they include some notables. One of the upcoming excursions will even carry an entire family, leading many in the press to speculate on who is wealthy enough to spend over \$4.5 million for a family vacation.

Dyson sees nothing unusual in this. Until Phoenix SpaceTours launched its first crewed lunar excursion, only thirty-two American, European, and Chinese astronauts, including the original twelve Apollo moonwalkers, had ever set foot on the Moon. "There was a time when just two people, Sir Edmund Mallory and Tenzing Norgay, ever stood on the summit of Mt. Everest," she says. "Machu Pichu was once a lost city visited by only a few explorers, and for awhile just a handful of oceanographers and filmmakers saw the wreckage of the *Titanic*. But within just one or two generations after any of these places were found or visited, tourists were all going there."

As she spoke, her gaze traveled to a small plastic model of *Lemuria* perched on the shelf above her desk. "It's been more than seventy years since Armstrong and Aldrin were the first men to walk on the Moon, so it's taken longer for us to get lunar tourism. But why not? Why not have a honeymoon on the Moon?"

* * *

Wyatt Stone; journalist, author of Master of the Wind: The Life and Unsolved Mystery of Edison Smith (HarperCollins, 2003-).

The official reason why Edison Smith took his family to the Moon—that is, the reason given to the press by MyEnergy's and Phoenix SpaceTour's P.R. departments and parroted by the Smith family's heirs—was that Ed simply had a lifelong interest in the Moon and he'd dreamed of going there since boyhood. So when he finally became wealthy enough to splurge on what was essentially a vacation getaway for himself and his family, including his prospective son-in-law, he laid down five million dollars and thought little of it.

But there was more to it than that. Quite a bit more. Smith didn't breathe a word of his other reason in all the TV and newspaper and website interviews he gave before the flight, and made sure that the very few people who were aware of his plans wouldn't say anything, because he knew what would happen if it came out in public: he'd be called a nut, a crackpot, a space cadet, if you'll pardon the obvious pun.

Public ridicule might have reflected badly on his company, but Smith's principal concern was his personal reputation. Although he truly did have an altruistic purpose in bringing affordable personal-energy production to even the poorest individuals, with MyEnergy wind turbines donated to Native American reservations and third world shantytowns, he had a private ambition as well: the Nobel Peace Prize. And he knew that he'd never get to Stockholm if it came out that he thought there might be aliens on the Moon.

It's not a generally known fact, but for hundreds of years, about as long as people have been observing the Moon with telescopes and binoculars, mysterious lights have been spotted on the lunar surface. Tiny lights, luminescent flashes that randomly come and go, usually lasting just a few seconds before vanishing again. Their locations are never predictable—they've been spotted all over the lunar nearside, in the mare, in lowlands and highlands, in and around craters, near both poles and around the equator—and sometimes they're red or green or blue. They've usually lasted just long enough for the person who spotted them to note the specific location,

which is why most documented sightings have been made by professional astronomers or amateur moonwatchers.

In 1968 a NASA technical report coauthored by British astronomer Sir Patrick Moore finally gave these lights an official name: Transient Lunar Phenomenon, TLP for short. Over time, space scientists have ascribed the lights to a variety of natural causes: outgassing of volatiles trapped within the lunar crust and released by moonquakes, large meteorite impacts, static electricity generated by magnetic material in the lunar regolith, or simply ordinary optical illusions, mirages seen by people who've been gazing through telescope eyepieces for much too long. In other words, interesting natural phenomena, but nothing worth taking seriously.

If it has anything to do with outer space, though, then you can bet there's always going to be a more fantastic explanation. So just as UFOs or Unexplained Aerial Phenomena have been the subject of obsessive fascination here on Earth, so TLP have been regarded much the same way by the smaller number of people who've heard of them. And one of those people was Edison Smith.

I spent some time looking into Smith's interest in TLPs, but it wasn't easy. His heirs have tried hard to keep that aspect of Ed's personality under wraps. Although they were willing to grant me access to all his technical notes, journals, private memos, and anything else leading to the development of the first MyEnergy wind turbines, they did their best to bury everything he'd put in his private diaries about TLP. But so far as I could tell, Edison Smith became interested in the subject sometime during his middle-school years, when he stumbled upon a paperback, *Somebody Else Is on the Moon*, by George Leonard.

Leonard's book was one of any number of ostensibly factual books about extraterrestrials secretly visiting Earth that were popular during the seventies, a fad begun by Erich von Daniken's pseudoscience bestseller *Chariots of the Gods?* The premise of Leonard's book was more original than most von Daniken imitators: the author claimed to have stumbled upon classified NASA information (including an anonymous—and possibly fictional—planetary scientist who serves as the book's "Deep Throat") showing that aliens were secretly inhabiting the Moon. The evidence for this are sometimes immense structures—domes, towers, even bridges—that were cleverly, if not wholly successfully, built to masquerade as natural features.

The book had several pages of NASA photos, most taken through telescopes or from lunar probes at high-orbit altitude (but no close-up shots, odd for a book published so soon after the Apollo missions) that allegedly showed these mysterious structures. When I looked at the book's plates, I saw nothing but boulders, hills, and craters. Yet the author also gave, as proof of his theory, a description of well-documented TLP sightings, claiming that they weren't weird but explicable natural phenomena but indeed further signs of the alien presence.

Few people paid much attention to Leonard's book, and within a few years *Somebody Else Is on the Moon* lapsed into out-of-print obscurity. But the book haunted Edison for years, though he seldom talked about it with anyone. All the same, it gradually faded to the back of his mind, buried beneath the much more urgent desire to create inexpensive means of home energy production, and he might have eventually forgotten it completely if something hadn't come along to kick it back to the center of his attention.

Around 2019, physicist James Benford—twin brother of Gregory Benford, also a physicist as well as a renowned science fiction author—published a scientific paper titled "Looking for Lurkers" in which he put forward an intriguing theory: the possibility that extraterrestrials may have visited our Solar System in the recent past and left behind automatic probes positioned in Trojan orbits close to Earth, where they could observe our world over a long period without having their presence detected.

Dr. Benford dubbed these probes “Lurkers” and suggested a number of places near Earth where they might be hiding. Naturally, the Moon was mentioned as a possible locale, although Dr. Benford considered it less likely that lurkers might be there; only about 240,000 miles away, the Moon was too close for extraterrestrials to remain active without being detected. Since alien artifacts have never been spotted on the Moon, Dr. Benford reasoned this had to mean that Lurkers weren't there and therefore humans needed to search elsewhere in the Solar System for these quiet sentinels, if indeed they existed.

Dr. Benford would later reconsider and give Lurkers higher odds of being on the Moon.

Nonetheless, when Edison Smith read the original paper, he perceived a flaw in the author's reasoning. Perhaps signs of an alien presence *had* been discovered on the Moon and even publicly reported, yet had been dismissed as pseudoscience, thus intimidating SETI investigators into turning their attention elsewhere in the system. But what if George Leonard had been on the right track all along, and the continued sightings of TLP lights were indications that Lurkers actually were on the Moon? Not just in the past, but possibly even now, in the present day.

By then, lunar tourism was being discussed as a real possibility, with Phoenix SpaceTours announcing its intent to partner with Legend Space and Astrodyne to make civilian travel to the Moon a reality within the next ten years. Quietly, with no one except his wife Mary Alice and daughter Amelia (both of whom belonged to the company's Board of Directors) knowing what he was doing, Edison invested \$2.5 million of MyEnergy personal profits into Phoenix SpaceTours, thereby securing four seats aboard the as-yet unbuilt and unchristened moonship.

No one except a few people knew that Edison was financially involved with Phoenix SpaceTours; the Smith family kept it as a closely guarded secret. But in exchange for his company's early investment, Edison made another stipulation besides being able to make reservations for four people. He also wanted the ship to be designed so that it could accommodate a mass spectrometer, much like the ones put aboard some NASA and ESA planetary probes.

* * *

Ebony Nicasio; former NASA astronaut, Phoenix SpaceTours passenger instructor

We usually trained *Lemuria* passengers for two weeks, ending five to seven days before their scheduled liftoff. We called this Moon Camp and it took place at the Civilian Astronaut Training Center, or CAT-C. That's the facility at Spaceport America in New Mexico that Phoenix established with a couple of other private space companies. We train folks how to be “astronauts” there. I use the term under protest because, in my honest opinion, nobody should get their astronaut wings just for buying a ride on a rocket. It took me eleven years to get from my first solo in a Cessna to the left-hand seat of a Space Shuttle cockpit. A ride at Disney World will give you much the same experience without ever leaving the ground. But if you manage to get a lift above the Karman line, the Federation Aeronautique Internationale says you're entitled to wear the wings, so . . .

Anyway, my job at Moon Camp was making sure these people were prepared for the trip they were about to embark on. To make sure they were prepared for the moment they climbed through *Lemuria*'s passenger module hatch on the launch pad to the moment they left through that same hatch after the module returned to the Cape aboard another Spock-C. Although I wasn't making the trip, I was with them every step of the way, training and rehearsing them in Roswell until the day we packed 'em off to Florida. Then I'd fly to Huntsville and take a shift as Capcom at the company's Flight Control through the rest of their excursion. So I was their instructor and their nurse and their mama and the mean ol' bitch who'd yell at them

when they forgot to switch on the suit air after they closed their helmets, because that was my job, and I did it well so they'd come home in one piece.

I'd done this enough times to know what to expect from rookies. But the *Lemuria 7* crew was different. For one thing, we had to cut Moon Camp short, from two weeks to ten days, because that was only as much time as Edison Smith was willing to take away from running his company, and it might've been even shorter if we hadn't worked out a compromise. I had to take away Ed's cell . . . really, every morning I had to *demand* that he hand it over before we started class, or otherwise he would've been on the phone every minute and wouldn't have learned a thing. Mary Alice, his wife, was sweet, one of the nicest people I ever trained, but she was such a nervous wreck about anything that didn't involve more than sitting in a mockup that I often wondered whether I was going to have to tell the company she wasn't suitable for space flight and ground her, something I wouldn't do unless it was really necessary.

They both made it through somehow or another, and by the time their ten days with me were up, I was reasonably confident that they'd go to the Moon, have a great time, and come back healthy and alive. If I'd had any clue at all about what was going to happen, I would have grounded the whole family, even though it would've cost the company four and a half million dollars and probably made me lose my job. It wasn't Ed and Mary Alice who had me worried, though. They were fine once I snagged Ed's iPhone and got Mary Alice to stop throwing up every time we went up in the Gulfstream for zero-g training. It was Amelia and her fiancé Todd . . .

No. No, scratch that. It was Amelia and Todd and one other person, and that was Jake Skribiski, *Lemuria 7*'s co-pilot. Nobody saw it coming, and I don't think anyone *could* have seen it coming, but once the three of them were together, they were trouble. Didn't make any difference that they were going to the Moon. They would've been trouble if they'd been on a Gray Line tour bus in Nashville. Hell, I wouldn't have even shared an Uber ride with them. But I was stuck with training them and . . . well, I don't know for sure whether they had anything to do with what happened later, but it's possible.

Amelia, I liked. Just as nice as her mother, looked like a younger version of her. Pleasant disposition, very intelligent, willing to listen and learn . . . but what really got everyone's attention was her looks. The Moon Camp suit techs would argue over who got to be the one who'd help her into her practice gear today, and even though she was wearing an engagement ring she had endless invitations to go dancing in Las Cruces, maybe a nice midnight drive out to the desert to look at the stars. And she wasn't even *trying* to get attention. She naturally had what a lot of women need to work at getting. Nothing as simple as sex appeal, because, really, you can get that from a bottle. It was just an undefinable *something*, the sort of aura comes from having a good soul . . . you have it or you don't. As one of the Gulfstream pilots put it, she was attractive even when she was throwing up. My only regret was that I'm married and, besides, she was too young for me. Otherwise . . . well, y'know.

As for Todd . . . I swear, I couldn't figure out what Amelia saw in him. He was good-looking, yeah, okay, I'll give him that. I might even say that he had a nice ass if that sort of thing about a guy meant anything to me, but having a nice ass is one thing and *being* an ass is another. I was told that he'd met Amelia at her father's company, where they both worked, right when she was coming off a bad relationship. For some reason, even the nicest women attract, and get attracted to, the worst guys. Anyway, Todd managed to catch her on the rebound, and because he was a minor exec at MyEnergy, he'd used her to climb the corporate ladder, becoming their marketing head as a consequence of proposing to her.

I don't know whether that's all true, but he definitely acted the part. Todd bossed people around Moon Camp like we were serfs, pretending he already knew

everything there was to know about space travel when it was pretty obvious that what he actually *did* know had come from Wikipedia and YouTube. One day I asked him to give me his Android because he wasn't paying attention, and when he refused and told me that he was going to have me fired, I took it from him anyway. Didn't scare me. The contract he'd signed with SpaceTours said that during training my word was law and I was entitled to ground anyone for any reason, so there really wasn't much he could do. I was tempted to kick him off the flight then and there, but Amelia begged me to forgive him, that sometimes her beau just rubbed people the wrong way.

Amelia stuck up for Todd so I gave him a break that I wouldn't normally have given anyone else, but even so there was something going on with them. I sensed their relationship was becoming tense, that she was having second thoughts about their engagement. Maybe she'd finally wised up and was on the verge of dumping the little creep. And then she met Jake and made friends with him . . . no, that's the understatement of the century. I know it's a cliché, but I kid thee not . . . what happened with those two was love at first sight.

I'd known Jake for years, going back to when we were both in the NASA astronaut corps. Shortly after I left, he came over to Phoenix and became one of *Lemuria's* pilots. His nickname was Ape Man, his old navy call-sign back when he was an F-22 pilot, and maybe he wasn't the handsomest guy I've ever met . . . he was actually kinda homely, reminding me and everyone else of a big, friendly gorilla . . . but his personality made up for it. Males aren't my thing, but that doesn't mean I don't know an attractive guy when I meet one. With some men, it doesn't matter how they look. Ape Man could've charmed the pants off any heterosexual woman he wanted.

And the lucky lady was Amelia Earhart Smith. I was there when the two of them met for the first time in the hallway outside the *Lemuria* simulator at Moon Camp, and it wasn't hard to see sparks flying the moment they laid eyes on one another. Jake was everything Todd wasn't, a natural charmer, and by the end of the day it was clear that Amelia had developed a crush on Ape Man and vice versa.

If you think her fiancé didn't like that, then give yourself first prize. It didn't take Todd long to notice that his girl was making doe eyes at this big goofy-looking guy who was supposed to be one of their pilots, but for every snarky remark Todd directed at him, Jake played it cool. He'd just let it slide, giving Amelia this quiet look like *Hey, I'm not doing anything . . . this is all on him*. And Amelia responded just the way you'd expect, spending less time every day with her jealous fiancé and more time with the guy who'd literally fly her to the Moon. And that went on all the way until the day they left New Mexico and flew off to Florida for their launch.

And just three weeks later, they were gone.

Did any of this have much, or anything, to do with *Lemuria's* disappearance? I honestly don't know. I've tried hard not to cast doubt on anyone for something that might've had nothing to do with them, but . . .

Well, maybe it did. A lot of people think so.

NewsHead Top News; May 24, 2013-

Lemuria 7 Launches From Cape Canaveral

5.24.3- 7:30 EDT Cape Canaveral FL.—Private spacecraft *Lemuria* lifted off this morning at 7:25 EDT from Kennedy Space Center, Florida. Spock-C rocket carried the moonship to low orbit and returned to Cape. Rendezvous with SpaceHome private space station expected later today. The six-person crew includes billionaire Edison Smith and family. Lunar landing planned 5/24. #*Lemuria 7* #*Edison Smith* #*Lunar tourism*

2,479 responses:

Bazooka Joe 155: Oh yay. Another rich f**k goes to the moon. The 1 percent gets all the cool toys while the rest of us work two jobs and still can't pay the rent. Let Smith stay there. #Fedupwithrich

I.D. Claire: Edison Smith isn't a bad guy. I have a MyEnergy wind turbine in my backyard that I couldn't have afforded if he hadn't decided to make them public domain. My boyfriend built it for me, and except for the windmill parts all I had to buy was a MyEnergy storage battery, and I'll have that paid off next year. My electric bill is now just a few dollars a month, and the air is already getting cleaner in San Diego. If the guy who made this possible wants to splurge a little and take a vacation trip to the Moon, I say let him, he deserves it!

#Smith is my hero.

Hungry Harry 87: Have you ever seen his daughter? Yowsah! I'd like to get into her spacesuit! #Moon babe.

Mankiller 10: Harry, you're a sexist a**hole.

Toad Jedi: I'm happy Smith is able to take his family on vacation to the Moon. Wish I could, too. What annoys me, though, is that that seems to be the only reason anyone is going to the Moon. After the last Apollo mission in 1972, it took almost sixty years for an American to walk on the Moon again, and China beat us before we got there. NASA called it quits after just one Artemis mission, but SpaceTours is still getting people there . . . but not for science or exploration or He3 development, but for tourism. So Americans are on the Moon again, but only megarich people get to go, just so they can take selfies and brag to all their friends how they're now "astronauts." I'll never go, though. Man, that sucks. #Disgusted.

Warrior Woman: Agree w/ Toad J but why go back to moon at all? Spend money better on schools, environment, feeding poor etc. #No space.

Toad Jedi: That's a tired old argument, Warrior Woman. The U.S. tried doing that in the seventies when Congress canceled the last three Apollo flights and nixed plans for a manned Mars mission; the only thing the U.S. did in space for the next ten years was use leftover Apollo hardware for Skylab and the Apollo/Soyuz mission with Russia. And you know what happened? The poor stayed poor, public schools didn't get any better, and Lake Erie caught fire. Canceling space didn't make any difference back on Earth. The case you're making against space was debunked years ago. #Space matters.

Warrior Woman: Toad Jedi, you're a racist.

Toad Jedi: WTF?

Space Cowboy 45: Way to go Edison Smith! Hope you have an excellent trip! Have fun & come home safe. #Over the Moon.

* * *

Following Lemuria 7's liftoff from Cape Canaveral, Amelia Smith began keeping a diary of the trip. More like impressionistic notes she jotted down on the fly than a travel journal, she apparently did this with the intention of later writing a book about her experiences. However, given the personal nature of some of the material, it's unlikely that she meant to ever publish the diary itself.

Nonetheless, it's the only first-person account to survive the doomed flight. Once Amelia finished an entry, she'd immediately close the file, encrypt it, and then access Lemuria's communications system and transmit it back to Earth as an email attachment to her MyEnergy address, where it lingered in her inbox as unopened email awaiting her return to Earth. Because Amelia hadn't told anyone what she was doing, the diary wasn't discovered until three months after Lemuria 7's disappearance, by which time she and everyone else aboard the moonship had been declared missing and presumed dead. Her former assistant at MyEnergy found the messages while

sorting through Amelia's computer files to determine what needed to be archived and what could be deleted. Fortunately, she didn't delete the unopened email, but instead alerted Wallace Leary, the public affairs person at MyEnergy tasked with being the company's liaison with the National Transportation Safety Board.

Upon learning of the diary's existence, NTSB accident investigators, with permission from the Smith estate and its lawyers, had the encryption broken so that the entries could be recovered and studied. It was hoped that Amelia's account, as sparse as it was, might reveal information pertinent to the resolution of the mystery.

This is the first time excerpts from this diary have been made public. They have been abridged and edited for clarity.

May 24, 203-

Liftoff! Launch at 7:25 a.m. Clear sky, smooth ride all the way up; barely felt the g's and the max-q shakes we were warned about except for boo-sep [booster separation]. Biggest jolt I ever felt—wham! like getting kicked in the behind.

Reached LEO about three minutes later (note to self: check time). Through windows we can see Earth: huge! Stretched out like blue-white plate curved at ends. Ape Man called down from the flight deck, told us we could open harnesses & get up [from] couches. Pulled myself close to nearest porthole, looked out. Felt like I was outside *Lemuria*, on other side of glass, totally out in space. No words for it, can't describe it, just . . . awesome, beautiful, incredible.

Then Todd starts upchucking, cussing & complaining . . . just like training. Blames Ebony, Archie, Jake—especially Ape Man; it's clear that he [Bakke] really hates him [Skrubiski]. Even takes it out on me. I know he's going to be my husband soon, but did we REALLY need to bring him?! Real PITA [Pain In The Ass]. Kinda sorry we ever met (maybe shouldn't say that).

Mama and Papa did better, though Mama had brief panic attack. I calmed her down & she's okay now, but she's someone else who maybe should've stayed behind. Hope she gets better.

Papa's getting into it! Totally digging everything, doing somersaults all around B-deck, babbling away, enjoying every second. Always been a big kid, but never seen him so happy.

OTV [Orbital Transfer Vehicle] rendezvous & docking went off no problemo. Jake let me come up to A-deck and watch thru ceiling docking porthole. Ape Man handled the maneuver; showed me how everything works, even tried to get me to take the stick for a minute (no way!). Archie just hung back, let his copilot do everything. Todd stayed below in B-deck, still sick. Good . . . lets me spend more time with Ape Man. ☺

Coming up for rendezvous with SpaceHome OTV. Final 24-hr checkout before heading off to the Moon. Let's be honest: hoping Todd decides space travel not for him & stays back.

Going on dream trip w/ perfect guy. Just one catch . . . perfect guy not my fiancé!

* * *

Douglas Chen: Gold Crew Commander, StarHome private space station

StarHome was staffed by two three-person teams, Blue Crew and Gold Crew, who rotated shifts to take care of the station for clients. The shifts would normally last six to eight weeks, depending on how long the station was being used and the reasons why the clients had leased the station. I was the crew chief for Gold Crew; the other two people in my team were Allison Henry and Eugene Schneider, former NASA astronauts who became famous, if only for a week, for being the first couple to get married in space aboard the old ISS.

Our primary job was the day-to-day work of keeping the station running smoothly assisting clients, who often had no prior space experience. In our case, we'd usually

handle SpaceTours excursions. Typically those were either tourists coming up for a visit to LEO or the Moon, or scientists doing microgravity research or conducting low-orbit geophysical observations. Between visits, the three of us had tasks of our own, usually operating small-scale, semi-autonomous experimental packages sent up there by companies or universities who didn't have the funds to send up a research team of their own and therefore hired us to run those experiments for them.

Lemuria 7 was the sixth time the station had been used by Phoenix SpaceTours as the jump-off point for one of their lunar excursions. Those were the easiest jobs . . . usually the easiest, I mean . . . because it just meant pulling the LSM out of its hangar, hooking it up to the *Lemuria's* crew module once it arrived, and then refueling and checking out the ship to make sure it was ready to head off to the Moon again. If there was any free time, we'd help *Lemuria's* pilots put the passengers through a little last-minute training, getting them ready for the rest of their big adventure.

Next morning we'd give them breakfast, let 'em take a few more pix or record messages for the folks back home, then pack 'em into *Lemuria* and send 'em on their way. Five days later, we'd see them on the way back from the Moon. Detach the LSM again and put it back in the hangar, attach the crew module to the Spock-C that had been sent up the day before, and send 'em back home. About five hours later, we'd watch the NASA-TV feed from the Cape to see the rocket touch down on the landing pad.

It was lot of work for us, but it was always fun to meet people who were about to spend three days on the Moon and then see them again on their way home. *Lemuria 7* was the third time Gold Crew had been assigned to handle a lunar excursion . . . Blue Crew typically specialized in scientific research, not as much fun . . . and we were looking forward to it.

Eugene and Allison were particularly thrilled because, just a couple of days before launch, we'd been let in on the big secret that Amelia Smith and her fiancé Todd were planning to publicly announce their engagement on the Moon. That meant the first couple to get hitched in space would be on hand to congratulate the first couple to be engaged on the Moon . . . a big deal if you've got a soft spot for that kind of thing.

But just a few hours after OTV hauled *Lemuria's* crew module to the station, we knew it was going to be . . . um, what's the title of that old song? Yeah, now I remember: "Third-Rate Romance, Low-Rent Rendezvous." Sorry to be cynical, but that's the way things were with the so-called happy couple. It was pretty clear after they'd been with us for just awhile that Amelia was having some serious second thoughts about telling the world she was going to marry a guy whom she didn't seem to even like very much. Todd was still trying to act like she was his only true love, but she'd seen through that. She even told Allison in private she believed that Todd wasn't interested in marrying her so much as he was interested in marrying her father's money.

Not just that, but something else was obvious . . . Amelia was falling for Ape Man and falling hard. And from the way he treated her, Jake was just as smitten. You'd never think a guy with a nickname like Ape Man would have a chance with a high-class lady like Amelia Smith, but there it was.

Todd knew it, too, and he wasn't happy about it. Apparently he'd gotten space-sick on the way up, because his fiancée kept asking him if he was feeling okay, saying maybe he should consider not going any further, maybe he should stay aboard SpaceHome and wait until everyone got back. He couldn't miss what she meant by that, and he wasn't taking the hint.

As for Amelia's folks, they couldn't have been more oblivious. Her mother was on the verge of a nervous breakdown . . . if there was anyone who ought to have been left behind, it was her . . . and her father was completely absorbed with hooking up

the mass spectrometer that had been shipped up earlier to *Lemuria's* auxiliary experiment rack. Once that was done, he spent the next couple of hours with Eugene and Archie going over a set of photos recently taken by a Japanese lunar orbiter, deciding exactly where to land *Lemuria* once they reached the Moon the day after tomorrow.

That turned out to be pretty important. Just two weeks before, the orbiter picked up a bright, pale green light within Aristarchus, a large impact crater in the nearside west hemisphere about 25 degrees north of the equator. As it so happens, Aristarchus is the spot on the Moon with the highest number of recorded TLP sightings . . . 122 since the mid-nineteenth century, almost three times more than Plato, which has forty sightings. And although it's widely believed by selenologists that TLPs are caused by sunlight reflecting off plumes from subsurface outgassing, the SETI camp has continued to insist that they may be signs of extraterrestrials on the Moon.

Edison Smith wanted *Lemuria* to land in Aristarchus, but Archie was reluctant to set down there. The crater is about forty kilometers wide, which sounds pretty big, but it's also fairly deep, about three thousand meters from the crater rim to the crater floor. And like most lunar impact craters, Aristarchus has a central peak in the middle of some pretty rough terrain, and the crater walls were pretty steep as well.

All this made for hazardous landing conditions. *Lemuria* was easier to fly than the old Apollo LEMs, but all its previous landings had been on flat terrain like Mare Tranquillitatis, the Apollo 11 landing site. The company insisted that *Lemuria* was more reliable than the Apollo LEMs or even the Artemis landers, but Aristarchus was also one of the candidate landing sites for the Apollo 18 mission before the program was canceled, and even back then the Apollo astronauts had been leery about setting down in craters, where one mistake during final approach and landing could've caused the LEM to smash into a crater wall.

Archie argued with Ed Smith, telling him that touching down in Aristarchus would be like trying to land a single-engine plane in a baseball stadium. There were plenty of other places where TLPs had been spotted . . . why not go to one of them instead? But Ed was insistent. He wasn't spending almost four and a half million bucks just to get a family picture on the Moon. He'd done his homework, and he knew that Aristarchus, along with the nearby Schroter's Valley, had a long history of TLP sightings. Aristarchus was where one had just been spotted, and he wanted to find out what caused it, period.

But even though Smith offered Archie and Jake a five-hundred-thousand-dollar bonus if they'd land there, Archie refused. "A half-million bucks isn't worth a bucket of piss if we crash on the way down," he said. And when Ed tried to get Jake to side with him, Ape Man let him know that he was against putting everyone's lives at risk . . . Amelia's in particular.

"Mr. Smith," he said, "I told your daughter I'd show her the Moon. I'll be damned if I'm going to let it become the last thing she ever sees." When he said that to Ed Smith, I think that's when her old man finally caught on that Ape Man had feelings for Amelia, because he suddenly went quiet.

Then Archie suggested a compromise. He punched up a map of the Aristarchus Plateau on the nav screen and showed Ed an alternative landing site . . . another crater, Herodotus, just fifteen or so kilometers west of Aristarchus.

Herodotus is a little smaller than its neighbor, just thirty-five kilometers wide, but since it was formed by an extinct volcano whose floor had been filled with lava during its final eruption, it had a flat, smooth floor surrounded by low walls, making it a much less dangerous place to set down. And best of all, the entrance to Vallis Schroteri was in the north wall. Schroter's Valley was a long, thin rill formed by a lava tube that had collapsed, making it look a bit like a dry riverbed. It was the spot

on the lunar nearside with the third-highest number of TLP sightings. Archie told Ed that, if he and Jake could bring *Lemuria* down close enough to the valley mouth, they'd be able to unload the rover and drive it up there, which was much less dangerous than trying to land directly in Aristarchus.

Smith was reluctant to go along with this, but Mary Alice was in on the conversation, too. Now that she was aware of the risks of landing in Aristarchus, she let her husband know that she wanted to explore Schroter's Valley instead. I couldn't tell if Amelia was siding with her mother or taking Ape Man's side, but she voted for Herodotus as well. As usual, Todd took his boss's side . . . the kid was a major brown-noser . . . but the two of them were outvoted. Besides, Archie had the last word. So the final decision was made to land in Herodotus.

Next morning, the six of them climbed aboard *Lemuria* again, and off they went to the Moon. I shook hands with everyone before they departed, so I was the last person to ever see them . . .

Well, the last person from Earth, maybe.
* * *

Ebony Nicasio:

During a lunar excursion, twenty-four people worked in the Phoenix SpaceTours mission control in Huntsville—its official designation was the Flight Control Center, but everyone called it the Bird House—with each person pulling an eight-hour shift each day for a seven-day excursion. About a week or so before launch, all the people who'd be on the control team for the next excursion would show up in Huntsville to prepare for the flight, including the three people who'd work as CapCom each day. The first thing each control team would do was pick which shifts we'd take. Normally we rotated the order from flight to flight so no one would get stuck with the same shift every time, so because I was third-shift Capcom for *Lemuria* 6—2 P.M. to 10 P.M., everyone's favorite—it was now my turn to hold down everyone's *least* favorite . . . first shift, 10 P.M. to 6 A.M., aka the graveyard shift.

Graveyard shift in the Bird House really wasn't all that bad. From the moment *Lemuria* lifted off from the Cape to the moment the crew module landed in New Mexico atop a Spock-C, the flight schedule was on Greenwich Mean Time. That's six hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time, Huntsville's time zone. This meant that when I clocked in at 10 P.M., it would be 0400 GMT aboard *Lemuria* and everyone up there was still asleep.

The pilot and copilot usually woke up before the passengers, so a couple of hours later I'd get the first transmission of the day when Archie and Jake up on A-deck would check in while the passengers down on B-deck were still catching Z's. That would usually be around midnight in Huntsville, so I was often the only person on duty in the Bird House . . . everyone who'd been on third shift had left, and the rest of first shift wouldn't show up for a while.

The first thing we'd do, of course, was run down the morning checklist, making sure *Lemuria* was fully functional and nothing happened overnight like a teensy bit of space debris hitting the ship while everyone was asleep. Then Archie would read us the logs from the previous day, which was superfluous since he'd be transmitting the same stuff later as a text message. We didn't know it then, of course, but those logs would become invaluable, when every scrap of data from *Lemuria* 7 was scrutinized by FAA and Space Force investigators . . . but we how could we have known?

Once the housekeeping chores were done, I'd switch off the flight recorder for a bit. Since the flight crew kept the manhole closed while the passengers were still asleep, for a little while the three of us would get a chance to kick back and have a little off-the-record chat without anyone else listening in. Archie and Jake would have their morning coffee in squeeze-bulbs, I'd relax with hot Irish tea in my favorite *Star Trek*

mug, and they'd give the skinny on what was going on up there.

Understand, this was just the fifth time we'd flown everyday people to the Moon. No professionals, no experienced spacers, just a bunch of civilians who'd received the bare minimum of training the FAA would let us get away with. So the first day was spent cleaning up gobs of floating puke and dealing with panic attacks, and the second day would be about getting everyone accustomed to eating and swallowing solid food and using the zero-g commode and floating weightless without kicking each other in the face. By the third day, though, they'd usually have their shit together, and now they'd be all fired up and ready to go moonwalking.

At least that was the way it'd been for *Lemuria's* four previous passenger groups. This time, though, things were different. Judging from what Archie told me once while Ape Man had gone to C-deck to check something, it was . . . I dunno, call it human drama or call it soap opera, or maybe it was a real-life sitcom like something you'd see on Netflix, only it wasn't on TV and nobody could just change channels or turn it off and walk away. What it boiled down to was that, in the middle of everything else going on, we had a shipboard romantic triangle between Amelia, Todd, and our friend Jake. And while the situation wasn't life-threatening, it soon got bad enough that, when Archie told me he was wondering whether he'd have to stop someone from shoving someone else out the airlock, I wasn't sure if he was kidding.

By the time *Lemuria* reached the Moon, it had become obvious, after three days in space, some kinda chemistry was brewing between Amelia and Jake. Archie said that whenever the two of 'em made eye contact, the sparks were so hot he'd wonder whether he'd have to break out the fire extinguisher . . . his words, not mine. They spent every minute together they could and used any excuse—and in zero-gee, believe me, there are plenty—to touch each other in ways that were becoming increasingly intimate. Their voices dropped when anyone else was around, and though no one knew what they were whispering to each other, if you could have bottled the pheromones they were sharing, you could've sold 'em to Estee Lauder as aphrodisiac perfume.

In short, Jake and Amelia were falling in love, fast and hard. And that was just peachy for them, but if this had been on Earth and we'd been on a cruise ship, I would've taken a bucket of seawater and thrown it on 'em. Because Todd was there, too, and he couldn't miss what was going on. And this was the kind of hot romance that can get dangerous, especially when you're in close quarters and far from home.

* * *

From "Mystery in Space: The Disappearance of Lemuria 7" by Grant Weldon; I Spy, Sept. 16-30, 203-

According to members of *Lemuria's* support team in Huntsville who were receiving daily radio reports from Capt. Archie Lemmon, reactions by everyone else aboard the moonship to this unanticipated affair were mixed.

Amelia's mother barely noticed what was happening with her daughter. The further *Lemuria* got from Earth, the more anxious Mary Alice Smith became. She'd come on the lunar excursion only because her husband Ed insisted that she join him and their daughter on this adventure, perhaps the last one they'd take together as a family before Amelia got married, but now she regretted ever setting foot on the launch pad.

That wasn't all. According to family friends, Mary Alice had always been disinclined to get in Amelia's way; once she'd become an adult, her mother had decided that her daughter's life was her own. If she wanted to end her engagement to a charming young man to take up instead with some guy she'd just met who people called Ape Man . . . well, then that was her business. Mary Alice had other things to worry about; namely, living through a trip she wished they'd never taken.

On the other hand, Archie Lemmon disapproved of the relationship evolving between his copilot and a paying passenger. Lemmon confided in one ground controller in Huntsville that he'd privately ordered Jake Skribiski to knock it off and leave the girl alone until they were all back home. There was little *Lemuria's* commanding officer could actually do, though, and Ape Man knew it.

"Go ahead, fire me," Skribiski purportedly said. "Just let me know when my replacement shows up . . . I'll clean out my desk and turn in my key."

As for Edison Smith, it appeared as if he could've cared less. Like his daughter, MyEnergy's CEO had an obsession of his own: the Moon, in particular the area surrounding Aristarchus Crater. According to unnamed sources at Phoenix SpaceTours familiar with the details of *Lemuria's* last flight, Edison Smith spent every waking moment of the two-day journey to the Moon on the moonship's flight deck, holding a tireless vigil at the instrument panel where the mass spectrometer had been rigged or glued to the flatscreens displaying close-ups from *Lemuria's* bow cameras. As the Moon steadily grew larger, Smith was fixated on the landing site at Herodotus Crater and nearby Vallis Schroteri, hoping to catch a glimpse of unexplained lights flickering briefly within one of the two craters or the nearby valley, and also keeping an eye on the readout from the mass spectrometer to see if it picked up anything unusual from the lunar regolith in the landing zone. The fact that Amelia was lovesick over someone other than the man to whom she was engaged was of little or no interest to her father; if there were extraterrestrials on the Moon, Edison was determined to find them.

This left Todd Bakke, who suddenly found himself in an unenviable role: the jilted lover, the heartbroken groom who's just discovered that his bride-to-be has dumped him for another guy and figuratively left him standing at the altar. True, the engagement hadn't been officially broken, his fiancée hadn't yet given back the ring, but nonetheless it must have been obvious to him that his romance with Amelia Smith was toast, over and done.

He wasn't just losing his girl; he was also losing the fast rise up the social ladder he'd anticipated from marrying the boss's daughter. Sources at MyEnergy privately confirmed that Todd Bakke pursued Amelia Smith in large part because he believed marrying Edison Smith's daughter would be the ticket to wealth, fame, and a life of ease; some even questioned whether he'd ever truly been attracted to her at all. If that were so, then it's possible that Amelia may have already sensed this and welcomed an affair with a working-class space pilot as a way out of a matrimony she no longer desired.

For Todd, the situation couldn't have been more demoralizing. The three of them were stuck aboard a spacecraft on the way to the Moon. There was no sympathetic friend for him to visit, no way to go to the nearest bar and get properly drunk, the things heartbroken men have done since time began. On the second day out from SpaceHome, Amelia asked Capt. Lemmon to restore the divider wall on B-deck that separated her personal space from Todd's; they would no longer share a stateroom where he'd doubtless expected to enjoy some pre-nup zero-g lovemaking with his fiancée.

Resting in a fold-down couch that Amelia now declined to join him on, no longer socializing with the Smith family, Todd spent sleepless hours gazing out his berth's porthole as Earth receded and the Moon gradually came closer. Between them was a void as lightless and cold as his heart had become. One can only speculate what dark thoughts may have gone through his mind, what dire actions he may have contemplated.

* * *

Partial Transcript of Lemuria 7 Communications Log: 5.25.203- ;1019 GMT

Ebony Nicasio, CAPCOM: Lemuria 7, this is Bird House. You are go for powered descent on final approach vector.

Capt. Archie Lemmon, Lemuria Commander: Roger that, Huntsville. Lem 7 above Herodotus, altitude 32,500 feet and descending. Main engine ignition for five-second burn in ten seconds on my mark.

CAPCOM: We read you as go for five-second MEI on your mark, over.

Lemmon: Mark.

Copilot Jake Skribiski: MEI burn complete, Huntsville. Altitude 3,700 feet, descent rate 815 feet per second. Looking good.

CAPCOM: We copy, Ape Man. What's your current position?

Skribiski: Seated, Capcom.

CAPCOM: Please repeat, Lemuria 7. Transmission unclear.

Lemmon: Apologies, Huntsville. Communications error corrected. Ground position 23.5 degrees North, 49.2 degrees West, above north end of Herodotus. Over.

CAPCOM: We copy, Lem 7. Thank you for that correction. Please ask Ape Man to be a bit more clear.

Lemmon: We copy, Capcom. Affirmative.

Skribiski: Wilco, Huntsville. Apologies for garbled transmission. Com problems resolved.

CAPCOM: Roger that, Ape Man. Please don't let yourself be distracted by the view.

Skribiski: Copy that. View of landing site is beautiful. Low crater wall not in immediate vicinity. Smooth terrain, few rocks, radar shows no major obstructions.

Lemmon: Altitude 2,500 feet, descent rate 210 feet per second.

CAPCOM: We copy, Lem 7. Looking good, go for touchdown. Over.

Skribiski: (*singing*) "Oh, fly me to the Moon . . ."

Lemmon: (*laughing*) Hey, knock it off, you love-happy simian!

CAPCOM: Please concentrate on final approach and landing, Jake.

Skribiski: (*laughing*): Wilco, Capcom. Sorry 'bout that.

* * *

Amelia Smith's diary:

May 26—We're here! Finally on the Moon!

Landing a little scary. Capt. Lemmon and Ape Man brought *Lemuria* down in a hurry, like they couldn't wait to get on the ground. Clutched armrests so hard I thought I'd leave fingerprints, but touchdown hardly more than a bump. Everyone quiet for a sec, then we broke out cheering. Solid four-point landing (astronaut lingo), no worries.

We folded back divider walls just before descent so we'd be seated all together when we landed (except Todd, who still says he just wants to be alone). Papa the happiest I've ever seen him; I actually thought he was going to start crying. Mama just relieved to be on the ground again even tho we're not on Earth. Closed her eyes, said something quietly to herself; couldn't make out what it was, but I think she was praying—Mama sometimes gets religious when she's stressed. I wish she'd stop fretting so much and enjoy this trip.

Todd didn't say anything during landing and still won't speak to me. After landing I went to his room, found him staring out the window. Wouldn't look at me. I tried to take his hand, but he pulled away, and when I tried to talk to him again about what's going on, he just gave me an ugly look and told me to go away.

A few minutes after we landed, Ape Man came down the ladder from the flight deck. Congratulated us for being the 42nd, 43rd, 44th, and 45th people to land on the Moon (not including Archie and himself; they've been here before) and we'll be officially registered as such with that French astronomical society (get name later). Then talked about the landing itself. Everything went smooth during final descent, landed

as planned in the NE side of Herodotus C., just 10 km south Schroter's Valley, which is where we'll go once we unload the rover. Inside valley is a terrain feature called Cobra Head; he believes this will be where the valley walls are low enough that we can use the rover to climb up and out of the valley on Aristarchus Plateau, then attempt to drive remaining distance to Aristarchus C., approx. 30–40 km. from here.

Archie came down from the flight deck to join us. We unfolded dinner table & chairs, then sat down and discussed plans for the next three days. Jake and I had talked things over by then, so that's when I made my suggestion. And just as I thought, my 'rents weren't real happy about it . . .

* * *

Grant Weldon; "Mystery in Space" cont'd

The six-wheel Porsche/VW-made lunar rover *Lemuria* carried in its cargo bay at the bottom of the LSM was christened the *Mondhund* (German for "Moon Hound" or "Moon Dog"). It was designed for long-distance sorties within a fifty-kilometer range and could carry up to four people, including the driver. A far cry from the golf-cart-like lunar rovers of the Apollo program, the enclosed and pressurized *Mondhund* made it possible for lunar tourists to make overnight sorties to places beyond hiking distance of *Lemuria's* landing site.

However, the FAA mandated that one crew member (either the pilot or copilot) had to remain aboard *Lemuria* whenever a long-distance sortie aboard the rover was made, while another crew member accompanied the passengers wherever they went. Obviously, taking the rover out for overnight wilderness trips was much more fun than spending the night aboard the ship. During *Lemuria 6*, their previous excursion, Archie and Jake had mutually agreed to take turns. So, because Jake had driven the *Mondhund* while Archie stayed back, the same order would be reversed for *Lemuria 7*; this time, Archie would take the *Mondhund* out while Jake stayed back.

Since the rover could carry only three passengers, this meant that one of *Lemuria 7's* passengers needed to stay behind. Amelia was ready for this. As soon as Capt. Lemmon explained this difficulty and added that it was up to the passengers to decide who would remain with Jake aboard *Lemuria*, she stuck up her hand and volunteered to stay back while Archie took her parents and her estranged fiancé on the overnight sortie.

In her diary, Amelia wrote: "Todd doesn't like that . . . not one bit! The idea of leaving me and Ape Man alone for even one night is something he doesn't want, no way. But before he could make a stink, Mama did something so unexpected, I'm still having a hard time believing it: she took my side and agreed with me!"

Why did Mary Alice Smith come out of her shell to let her daughter spend a night with a man who wasn't the man who was supposed to soon become her son-in-law? Family friends believe she'd seen through Todd Bakke. The first time he'd asked Amelia out on a date, Mary Alice had warned her daughter to be careful. She believed he might be a gold digger, and in the months that followed she'd seen nothing in him that changed her opinion. On the other hand, Jake Skribiski was much more the kind of man Mary Alice had always hoped her only child would meet and eventually marry. So when Amelia slyly suggested that she stay behind with *Lemuria's* copilot while everyone else went away—including Todd—Mary Alice may have seen this as a last, best chance to help her daughter extricate herself from a betrothal that had gone bad, and seconded the motion.

As for her father's reaction, Amelia wrote: "Papa doesn't care one way or the other, I don't think. All he wants is to get out of the ship & walk on the Moon, what he's wanted since he was a kid, and maybe find one of those TLPs he's obsessed about. Besides, he never stands up to Mama when it comes to stuff he thinks is trivial, and

that includes who goes out with him and Mama. So he just shrugged and said yeah, sure, whatever.”

That meant Todd was outvoted before he could even raise his hand. Moreover, he couldn't really object without saying why—i.e., he didn't want to leave his girl alone with a guy he believed was trying to steal her—and not make an ass of himself. It was bad enough that he was losing his fiancée; any misstep of etiquette, any unnecessary rudeness, might cost him his career as well as his marriage. So unless he wanted to square off against Ape Man, he had no choice but to man up and accept his change of fortune . . .

Or take action and get revenge.

* * *

Ebony Nicasio:

Although my shift in the Bird House ended shortly after *Lemuria* landed, I didn't go home at once. I was too wired to sleep. Something was going down up there that made the back of my neck itch, and it compelled me to stick around a while and listen in on Archie's planning session with the passengers.

He'd accidentally left his headset mike on when he went down to B-deck, and *Lemuria's* headsets were BluTooth-enabled, so when an argument broke out about who was going on the rover trip, I heard everything. And knowing what I did about the ugly little feud that was developing between Amelia, Todd, and Ape Man, I had reasons to be concerned. In any case, I didn't want to leave the Bird House.

There was a fold-out cot in one of the broom closets, so I dragged it to the cubbyhole I called an office and sacked out for a few hours, letting everyone know that the first person to knock on my door was dead. I slept most of the day through, and by the time I woke up, most of the *Lemuria 7* crew had left the ship, they'd pulled the *Mondhund* down from its storage bay, and were getting it assembled and ready to go.

That really surprised me. In the past, passengers were usually content to spend the first day just enjoying the novelty of being on the Moon . . . hopping around in their moonsuits, taking selfies with Earth in the background, maybe doing something meaningful like scatter the ashes of a loved one. But Ed Smith didn't have the patience for that sort of thing. The first-shift controllers told me that as soon as he suited up and went EVA, he demanded that Archie and Ape Man open the rover bay and roll out the *Mondhund*, and get it ready to go. They were kinda reluctant to hurry, but when Ed waved a bonus under Archie's nose again, the skipper let himself get bribed.

Ed wanted to get on the road ASAP, but as I stood in the Bird House and watched the EVA on the big screen, I noticed after a little bit that one of the moonsuits was missing. Each of *Lemuria's* suits had a big numeral stenciled on the front of its helmet above the visor and also on the back of the life-support pack, and those numbers were identifiers for whoever wore it. I spotted 1 and 2, which were Archie and Ape Man, and working beside them was 3, which was Ed. The logbook told me that suits 4 and 6 hadn't yet left the ship, and those suits had been assigned to Mary Alice and Amelia respectively. That left suit 5, which was Todd's, but even though I'd seen him cycle through the airlock with Archie, he was no longer anywhere in sight.

I went over to the Capcom desk, got on the blower, and paged him. No answer, and during EVA, rule numero uno is *always stay in contact and in sight of everyone else*, period. And since he was nowhere in sight outside the ship, that could mean just one thing. Without first asking permission from the captain . . . a big no-no there . . . or telling anyone what he was doing, he'd climbed back up the ladder and entered *Lemuria*. And I knew that couldn't be good.

By the time the first-shift team located Todd again, he'd cycled through the airlock, went up to C-deck and got out of his suit, and then gone the rest of the way up

to B-deck. Amelia was having a late lunch with her mother when the floor hatch slammed open. If that didn't scare them, the look on Todd's face when he came up the manhole did.

After it was all over and I was able to have a private girl-to-girl chat with Amelia, she told me what happened. It wasn't pretty. Apparently Todd had gone EVA with Archie, her father, and Jake for the purpose of getting the other men off the ship, then once they were busy assembling the rover, he'd snuck away and come back inside. He'd carefully watched everything Jake had done to safely cycle through the airlock, including closing and dogging tight all the pressure hatches after going through, so he'd been able to get back into *Lemuria* on his own.

Amelia said that it was lucky her mother had decided to have lunch with her instead of taking a nap in her stateroom, because she was afraid to think about what might have happened if Todd had caught her alone. He'd demanded that Mary Alice leave B-deck, but instead she'd planted herself between him and her daughter while Amelia got on her headset and called for help.

Although Mary Alice prevented Todd from physically attacking Amelia . . . no one had much doubt he had this in mind . . . it didn't stop him from verbally assaulting her instead, and so for the next ten minutes or so, she had to listen to the guy she was supposed to marry yell some of the worst things she'd ever heard at her. None of it she deserved, of course, but nonetheless it hurt as much as if he'd slapped her across the face. And that was when she realized what kind of creature Todd Bakke really was, what kind of horrible mistake she'd make if she went forward with marrying him.

While this was going on, Jake and Edison had cycled through the airlock. Only two people can go through it at a time, so Archie had to remain outside for a few minutes. They'd ditched their helmets on C-deck, but were still wearing their moonsuits when they scrambled up the rest of the way up the ladder to B-deck. Amelia told me that the moment he came up through the hatch, Ape Man flew across the compartment and punched Todd so hard, she was afraid he'd go right through the porthole behind him and cause a catastrophic blowout. And man, when you deck someone in lunar gravity, they *stay* decked.

Even so, it took Ed and Mary Alice both to pull Jake off the guy whom, just days ago, they'd planned to publicly announce would soon be their son-in-law. But the Smith family wasn't done with him yet. Amelia herself got the final word. After things had calmed down a bit, she removed the diamond ring from her finger, calmly dropped it on the deck beside Todd, and told him to go to Hell and take his ring with him.

I wish I'd been there to see that, but it didn't matter. Mary Alice's headset mike was hot, so I heard the whole thing over the comlink. We all did, everyone in the Bird House, and because all Earth-Moon communications are recorded, so did many other people. After *Lemuria 7* went missing, the recording left them with the impression that they knew what had happened out there.

Maybe they did. But I'm not so sure.

* * *

Grant Weldon, "Mystery in Space" cont'd

Sources at Phoenix SpaceTours confirmed Nicasio's allegations that Bakke attacked Amelia Smith. The incident was further verified by an encrypted report texted from Capt. Lemmon to ground control in Huntsville, which the company released to FAA investigators and *I Spy* was later able to obtain under a FOIA request. It paints a disturbing picture of what transpired aboard *Lemuria* when it came out that its copilot had begun to have an affair with a passenger in full view of her fiancé.

No one knew how to respond because a situation like this had never occurred until

then. In all the history of crewed space flight, there had never been a documented instance of one crew member or passenger physically assaulting another (although there have been unsubstantiated accounts of altercations between Russian cosmonauts during early Soviet Union missions). No protocols had ever been considered, let alone implemented, for violent acts aboard SpaceTours excursions; not so much as even a pair of plastic wrist restraints were aboard *Lemuria*. And although it was unanimously decided that Bakke would be confined to his quarters for the rest of the flight, the divider wall was flimsy, and the door could not be locked from outside. Bakke could attack her again, and from the way he continued to glare at Jake Skribiski, it would probably not be a good idea for *Lemuria's* copilot to turn his back on him.

The option of canceling the rest of the excursion and immediately lifting off for the return flight to Earth—which the company *had* planned for in case of an emergency—was briefly discussed but almost immediately rejected by Edison Smith. The billionaire had invested a considerable amount of money into the trip, and by this point the fees were not refundable (particularly since *Lemuria 7's* problems had been caused by one of Smith's guests, making him responsible, not Phoenix SpaceTours). But more than that, the trip was something Smith had dreamt of doing his entire life. He wasn't about to let anything get in the way, not even the sudden annulment of his daughter's engagement. *Lemuria* would remain on the Moon until its scheduled departure time, period.

Therefore, it was decided that the trip up Schroter's Valley to Aristarchus Crater would proceed as planned. The *Mondhund's* passengers would continue to be Edison and Mary Alice Smith with Archie Lemmon as their driver, but it was determined that Todd Bakke would be going with them, too, an unwanted guest confined to his seat for the entire trip. No one thought it was particularly wise to have Bakke remain aboard *Lemuria* with Amelia or Ape Man, not while it was obvious that he still had trouble on his mind. And although the elder Smiths weren't delighted to be making this trip with their daughter's former fiancé, at least this way Capt. Lemmon could keep an eye on him.

There was another unspoken reason: Amelia would be able to spend a night on the Moon the way she'd wanted, alone with the man whom she loved. And indeed, Phoenix SpaceTours had planned to tastefully publicize this as a selling point for lunar excursions: a marriage proposal on the Moon, with earthrise in the background. The trip wasn't working out the way everyone expected, but this was one thing Amelia didn't want to give up. She'd probably never go to the Moon again, and this would be her one and only chance at having something millions of women back home anticipated and envied her for having. She'd get her night of lunar romance: only the man had changed.

Surprisingly, Todd seemed to have no objection to any of this. He knew that his time with Amelia was over and done. The ring had been given back, the wedding was off; he'd made his feelings known, but there was no point in fighting things any further. Or so he said when he promised everyone that they'd get no more trouble from him. Although he wasn't ready to forgive Amelia and Ape Man yet, he told them he was willing to put things aside for the rest of the trip and wait until everyone was back home to work things out between the three of them.

It seemed like an equitable solution. Amelia wrote little about this in her diary, an indication that she didn't intend to put it in the book she planned to write, and the only people back on Earth to know what had happened were the Phoenix SpaceTours flight controllers at the Bird House, whom the company had sworn to secrecy.

"We thought it was all over and done," said Ebony Nicasio, the *Lemuria 7* Capcom

who found herself in the unexpected role of being Amelia's confidante as well as Jake's. "Just a soap opera in space. We even joked about what would happen if and when the tabloids got wind of this. But we thought it was over, done, period."

She paused, and then her face became serious. "But it wasn't over," she added. "No one knew what weird stuff was just getting started."

* * *

FAA/NASA Space Accident Investigation Report: 7/1/203- Event Timeline (declassified excerpt).

5.27 0731 GMT—Long-Distance Lunar Rover (LDLR) *Mondhund* departs from *Lemuria* 7 base camp and proceeds on North by Northwest bearing across Herodotus C.

Initial destination stated to be an area of the Aristarchus Plateau where collapse of the crater wall created a pass leading from the crater floor to the southern end of the Vallis Schroteri (Lat. 23.7 W x Long. 52.1 N), a long, narrow rill created by the collapse of an ancient lava tube. Average rover ground speed 15 kmh. Visibility reported good with maximum sun exposure. Telemetry with *Lemuria* optimal with low static interference.

0816 GMT—*Mondhund* reaches initial destination at northern valley wall. Brief in-vehicle survey and inspection by Capt. Lemmon and Dr. Smith confirms that a tectonic event caused a break in the crater wall, creating a narrow but traversable pass through the surrounding Aristarchus Plateau to the lower V. Schroteri. After brief consultation with lunar base camp and flight controllers at Huntsville, permission is given for *Mondhund* to continue its sortie into Vallis Schroteri. Telemetry still optimal with low interference.

0829 GMT—*Mondhund* enters pass and continues NW toward V. Schroteri. Capt. Lemmon reports high canyon walls that are "narrow and really deep" with shadows cast across valley floor, reported to be rocky and causes vehicle to slow to 5–10 kmh. Visibility slightly impaired; vehicle floodlights switched on. Increased radio interference but still audible.

1005 GMT—Capt. Lemmon reports that *Mondhund* has successfully traversed approx. 25 km through crater wall break (tentatively named "Smith Pass") and entered lower V. Schroteri. Valley described by Dr. Smith as narrow and quite deep; average width 500 meters, estimated depth 700–1,000 meters. Radio interference increased, still audible but with static breaks. Communications transcript:

Copilot Skribiski (Lemuria 7 base camp): Careful there, Archie. It's a long way for us to send the wrecker.

Capt. Lemmon (on rover): Wilco, we're (inaudible) but we'll get there.

A. Smith (at base camp): Hey, Papa, having fun yet?

E. Smith (on rover): Loads, sweetheart. Your mother (inaudible) be enjoying herself. (Pause) Todd says hi. (Inaudible) and wishes you were here.

A. Smith: (Pause) Have fun, Mom.

1152 GMT: *Mondhund* reports position Lat. 25.1 W x Long. 51.9 W, estimated distance 3 km from Cobra Head. Telemetry weak; consistent static interference. Communications transcript:

Capt. Lemmon: Lemuria, this is (inaudible). Do you copy?

Skribiski: Copy that, *Mondhund*. What've you got there?

Lemmon: Object ahead, unidentifiable but not (inaudible). About 70 meters from us on right side of valley, east side of (inaudible) like blister sticking out of (inaudible).

Skribiski: Copy that, *Mondhund*. Is it a natural formation, maybe like a lava bubble?

E. Smith: Negative, *Lemuria*. It's (inaudible) wait (inaudible) can you get us (inaudible) Archie?

A. Smith: Dad, what do you see? What have you . . . ?

Lemmon: Hey, what? What . . . ?

E. Smith: Wow! Look at that! It's (*inaudible*) white light, something in (*inaudible*) looks like a door in (*inaudible*) dark (*inaudible*).

Skribiski: Breaking up, *Mondhund*, do not copy. Archie, boost your signal! (*No contact. Dense static for 22 seconds*).

Dr. Smith: TLP! TLP!

Skribiski: Repeat, *Mondhund*! Losing telemetry! Boost gain! (*Static continues indefinitely*)

1153 GMT: Loss of signal from *Mondhund*. No further contact with rover or its passengers.

* * *

Ebony Nicasio:

My shift ended while *Mondhund* was still en route to Schroter's Valley but I hung around the Capcom desk anyway, keeping myself awake with coffee and some glucose tablets one of the other controllers, who's diabetic, kept around for low blood sugar crashes. So I was there in the control room when we lost touch with the rover.

At first, everyone took it calmly . . . well, maybe not calmly, but nobody freaked out either. The dude who'd relieved me at the mic kept at it, repeating the same thing over and over: "*Mondhund*, this is Huntsville, please come in, over . . . *Mondhund*, this is Phoenix Flight Control, Huntsville, please acknowledge, over . . ." And he kept saying this, like a robot, over and over, again and again. But we were getting nothing from them except static. Like someone had thrown a switch, they were gone.

On *Lemuria*, though, they were freakin'. Ape Man wasn't having any of it. He was like us at first, trying to keep cool and work the problem, the way they teach you in flight school and astronaut training. What they don't teach you, though, is how to react when four people you know, including your best friend, up and vanish and the last thing you hear is one of them yelling something crazy. I don't really know what Jake thought about this whole TLP business, but I doubt he gave it much thought. Just something weird, don't worry about it.

What I do know was that we waited ten minutes, then went to work on a rescue plan. Ten minutes doesn't sound like much time, but it is when you're dealing with a space emergency. After ten minutes of hearing nothing but carrier-wave static, everyone had come to grips with the fact that something might have permanently knocked out the rover's radio, so it was up to us find the four people aboard and get them to safety.

Unfortunately, the emergency procedures the company had considered for a lunar EVA either assumed having the moonwalkers close enough to *Lemuria* to make it back on their own power or having an operational rover to carry them back. Until now, no one had considered the possibility of the accident taking place way beyond normal EVA distance and also not having the *Mondhund* available. The rover's last known position in Schroter's Valley was about forty kilometers from the *Lemuria 7* base camp in Herodotus. Ape Man knew there was no way he and Amelia could get there on foot; their suits simply didn't carry enough air for that. So that left him just one option . . . use *Lemuria* itself for the rescue.

Problem was, *Lemuria* wasn't really designed for that sort of thing. It was built to get six people to the Moon, make one landing and one landing only, then take off and return to Earth orbit. It wasn't a plane or a helicopter, it wasn't made for short hops, so short-distance low-altitude flights weren't anything Jake had ever rehearsed in the trainer back home. Not only that, but the only possible LZ was Cobra Head. It was just a few clicks north of the rover's last reported position, but it was only a wide spot in the valley, no larger than 10 kilometers, and that's a really small target for a ship with such limited lateral control as *Lemuria*.

To make things even hairier, *Lemuria's* fuel supply had almost nothing left in reserve. It would take almost everything still left in its tanks to lift off from the Moon and get home. The ship carried a little extra just in case the pilots had to abort a final approach because of bad terrain and come down a short distance away, but no one knew whether this would be enough for a second take-off and landing. If *Lemuria* used up too much fuel, the tanks would either go dry during its second launch and the ship would fall back down and go boom, or it wouldn't have sufficient fuel for midpoint course correction and deceleration into LEO, in which case *Lemuria* would simply fly past Earth and go bye-bye.

By now, the Bird House was crammed with people, some of whom I'd never seen there before. Not just suits from upstairs, but completely new people. Someone must have called our next-door neighbors at Marshall [Space Flight Center], because in just fifteen minutes three NASA guys walked in, engineers who'd worked on Artemis and had lunar landing experience. And right after that, who walks in but a bird colonel from Space Force, a senior officer from Colorado who just happened to be visiting Marshall on unrelated business when he heard about our little crisis. Space Force and NASA don't always see eye to eye, and Phoenix SpaceTours usually resented both of them poking their noses in our business, but that morning, y'know, everyone put all the bickering and rivalry aside and pitched in.

I have to tell you, I've never seen a roomful of space geeks work so fast. They came up with two scenarios for *Lemuria*. One was the "bunny hop" as someone called it, where *Lemuria* would lift off and ascend on a parabolic trajectory to a maximum altitude of two or three miles, then make a lateral course-correction before descent that would bring it down in Cobra Head. This would be tricky because *Lemuria* would have to fire its main engine the entire time and that would sponge up a lot of fuel. The other scenario was called "the long way" for short because it called for *Lemuria* to ascend all the way to orbital altitude, about sixty miles up, then let lunar gravity capture it and put it in low orbit. This would use little or no fuel, and therefore the main engine could be cut off for a little bit to conserve fuel. *Lemuria* would swing around the Moon once, taking just under twenty minutes for one full orbit around the far side and back, then descend again, this time coming down in Cobra Head. It was thought that final approach from high orbit and landing would be easier for the pilot to make than one from low altitude, where the pilot would have just seconds to react to any problems and likely have to go to manual control, without computer guidance, during final approach and landing.

A number of people thought the long way was the right way because it seemed to be the safest and most fuel conservative, but Ape Man didn't agree. He wanted to make the bunny hop, saying that it would use less fuel and give him more flexibility. Two of the NASA guys disagreed with him, while just about everyone from the company trusted Jake and thought he had the right idea.

While the two sides were quarreling over this, I watched the Space Force colonel, a hard-nosed guy in blue uniform, Sgt. Rock in space, sit down by himself, pull out a pen and a notebook and a scientific calculator, and run the numbers, quietly and all by himself. When he was done, he got up, walked back to where the fight was still going on, and interrupted it by telling everyone to shut up, he'd just made the calculations for both approaches, now be quiet and listen. And then he said Ape Man was right, the bunny hop will use about 20 percent less fuel than the long way and take just ten to fifteen minutes.

That settled it. Nobody argued with him. Whoever he was, he had a lot of respect. The flight director told Jake that they'd proceed with the first option, and the Huntsville control team broke some kind of record writing the flight profile to be transmitted to *Lemuria 7* for Jake to program into his main computer, but just an

hour and a half after the big decision was made, *Lemuria* lifted off from Herodotus.

We had two video feeds from the Moon, with just a two and a half second delay from what we saw on the screen and what was actually happening. There was the video feed from a camera on Deck A directly above the cockpit seats, looking down from above. Jake was in the left-hand pilot's seat, and he'd put Amelia in the right-hand seat even though there was nothing for her to do except watch. They'd both put on their suits, and about ten seconds before main-engine ignition sequence I saw her reach over and squeeze the back of his left hand for a moment, quietly wishing him good luck.

The other video feed came from a wireless TV camera they'd set up outside the ship during the first moonwalk the previous day. The camera was about fifty yards away from the spot where they'd set down, and when the countdown reached zero, we saw *Lemuria* lift off, moving so fast that it was gone in a blink of an eye, sending powdery grey regolith scattering all around where it had once stood.

Inside the cabin, it was a smooth ride, hardly even a jiggle as they went up. The colonel's calculations were right. The whole flight took just a little more than ten minutes. *Lemuria* ascended to two and half kilometers, then Ape Man throttled back the main engine and used the maneuvering thrusters and auxiliary descent engines to make the lateral course-correction that would bring the ship back down on a slightly different landing trajectory than what it had taken going up. The first two minutes of the return leg were largely guided by the ship's computers, but as the ship started to make its primary approach to the new LZ coordinates, Jake switched back to manual control and began to fly *Lemuria* himself.

Inside the ship, everything was looking good, A-okay. The cockpit cam showed Ape Man calm as calm can be, Mr. Right Stuff coming in on a wing and a prayer. Amelia's sitting beside him, not saying or doing anything, just watching the screens and occasionally turning her head to look out a window beside her. If you look close at the playback, you can even make out the computer readouts. That's how we know that ship was only about fifteen hundred meters from touchdown when it happened.

* * *

Partial Transcript of Lemuria 7 Communications Log, 5.27.203- 1449 GMT

Lemuria 7 Copilot J. Skribiski: Huntsville, this is *Lemuria 7*.

CAPCOM S. Wattman: We copy, *Lemuria 7*, go ahead.

Skribiski: We are commencing final descent. Altitude 1,700 meters, descent angle zero-zero-two, fuel nominal and within critical limits.

CAPCOM: Copy that, *Lemuria*. Looking good, Ape Man, stay on course. How's your passenger?

A. Smith: I'm fine. I'm fine.

CAPCOM: We copy, Ms. Smith. Thank you.

Skribiski: Main flight computer disengaged, under manual control. Altitude 1,600 meters, fuel level nominal and remaining within reserve limit.

CAPCOM: Copy you on manual pilot control, *Lemuria 7*. Don't scratch the paint.

Skribiski: Copy, Huntsville. Altitude 1,500 meters. Target landing zone in tight. Fuel . . .

A. Smith: I think I see the rover!

Skribiski: You sure? I can't look. Have to keep my eye on . . .

A. Smith: I spotted something in the valley, down near Cobra Head. Looks a little like the roof of the rover. I . . . what . . . ?

Skribiski: What's the matter?

A. Smith: See that?

Skribiski: Can't look, babe. Gotta keep my eye on the ball. What did you . . . ?

A. Smith: Something at the mouth of the valley, ahead of the rover. Something lit

up for a sec, like a little green light . . . see? There it is again!

CAPCOM: Lemuria 7, Huntsville. What are you seeing, Ms. Smith?

A. Smith: Light! I see a light!

Skribiski: I see it too, Huntsville. Bright. Steady light at the mouth of Vallis Schroteri, green . . . kinda green . . . it's (static) and moving.

CAPCOM: Is this light on the ground, Lemuria? Is it in motion?

Skribiski: Affirmative. It (dense static) closer. It seems (static) and not . . .

Heavy static for 5 seconds. Voices audible but indistinct.

CAPCOM: Lemuria 7, do you copy? Jake, are you . . . ?

A. Smith: (screaming) Oh, my God!

Skribiski: Amelia, get your head down! Head down!

A. Smith: Oh, my God! (static) Papa . . . !

Loss of signal. Communications terminated.

* * *

NewsHead Top Headlines: May 27, 203-

Lemuria 7 Disappears on the Moon

5.27.3- 1500 EST Huntsville AL—Radio contact with Lemuria, the privately owned manned lunar spacecraft, has abruptly ceased on the second day of its sixth flight to the Moon. Sources at Phoenix SpaceTours say that the ship itself appears to have disappeared along with its two pilots and four passengers, including billionaire tech entrepreneur Edison Smith along with his wife and daughter.

Lemuria was engaged in an attempted rescue of its long-distance rover after radio contact abruptly ceased during an expedition to a lunar valley approximately twenty-five miles from Lemuria 7's landing site in Herodotus Crater. The rover was driven by Capt. Archie Lemmon; its passengers were Dr. Smith, his wife Mary Alice Smith, and MyEnergy vice-president Todd Bakke, who is said to be engaged to Amelia Smith, Dr. and Ms. Smith's daughter.

An unnamed source at Phoenix's flight control center in Huntsville told the Associated Press that the moonship, flown by copilot Jake Skribiski with Amelia Smith as passenger, had lifted off from its original landing site and was attempting what's been described as a tricky "bunny hop" to land the craft again closer to the rover's last known position when radio contact between Lemuria and Huntsville was lost as well.

All subsequent attempts to regain contact with Lemuria and its rover have been unsuccessful and attempts to gain visual sighting of either vehicle via NASA lunar survey satellite Selene have also been futile.

NASA, the U.S. Space Force, and Federal Aviation Administration are working together to investigate the disappearance. There has been no official announcement of when a search-and-rescue will be attempted, although NASA spokesman Will Travis has confirmed that the Chinese space agency has offered support if NASA is unable to bring its Artemis spacecraft to the launch pad in time for an effective rescue.

3,460,097 responses:

Toad Jedi: Holy crap!! What's happening here? Did the spaceship crash, or did it just . . . what? Disappear into thin air? (Yes, I know there's no air on the Moon. Just an expression.) And why isn't the company saying more?

Sweet Cheeks 99: Maybe they know more but can't say anything. Space Force is involved—that means trouble. :0 #Moon Cover-up

Space Cowboy 45: What are you saying, Cheeks? You think just because USSF has been called in something is happening that's not just some kinda accident?

Gonzo Puppy: If it didn't crash and it didn't explode and there's no wreckage, then there's only one possible explanation: the Democrats did it. Or maybe it was the Republicans. Who can tell the difference anymore? #Conspiracy.

Space Cowboy 45: The twenties are over, Gonzo . . . get used to it. ;) Seriously, tho . . .

if you're saying what I think you're saying, then you mean the Space Force got involved in this not 'cause it's an accident but 'cause there's someone or something on the Moon that wants to be left alone. And it ain't the Chinese. #Lurkers.

Toad Jedi: Aliens?! Are you saying there's f**king aliens on the Moon? Oh great! Someone call Homeland Security . . . we got illegal immigrants on the border again. ;)

Warrior Woman: Toad Jedi, you're a racist.

Toad Jedi: WW, do you always call someone you disagree with a racist, or do you just need to grow up?

Phoenix Leak: Look, I know it's wicked cool to think there may be ETs on the Moon and they're responsible for taking out Lemuria 7, but I work there (don't waste your time trying to figure out who I am; my ass is covered like you wouldn't believe), and here's the straight dope: it wasn't aliens at all, it was caused by someone aboard. #True Story

Space Cowboy 45: Say what?! Are you serious?! No way! :o

Phoenix Leak: Way. And I'm serious. Word up is there was some hanky-panky going on between Lemuria's copilot and Edison Smith's daughter Amelia, and her fiancé Todd Bakke, who was aboard, too. No one knows for sure yet, but FAA and Space Force investigators strongly suspect that Bakke went nuts and did something to sabotage both the rover and the ship. A murder-suicide thing, in other words. #Lemuria #Murder-Suicide

Gonzo Puppy: Total bullshit, Leak. :\

Polly Gripe: No, Puppy, Leak may be right. It's more plausible this could be caused by an angry male wanting to take revenge against a woman for rejecting him. How could there be aliens on the Moon all this time and no one know about it until now?

Phoenix Leak: You got it, PG. No aliens . . . just a romantic triangle gone wrong. That's what I'm hearing on the PS company grapevine in Huntsville. I work there. Trust me . . . I KNOW! #Inside Scoop

* * *

Ebony Nicasio:

The investigation began as soon as the White House was able to make a deal with the Chinese government to give a couple of NASA astronauts a lift to the Moon. It was galling for the U.S. to have to do this, but that's what we get for letting Congress turn NASA's only remaining Artemis lander into a museum piece and killing funds for building any more heavy-lift boosters. If it wasn't for Phoenix SpaceTours, America would have no way of getting to the Moon, but our second *Lemuria*-class moonship was still under construction, and so there was no other way to get there in a hurry.

And they needed to hurry, all right, because in less than twelve hours *Lemuria's* disappearance was global news. Russian military exercises on Finland's border, the breakup of the North Pole icecap, even the divorce court hearings between what's-his-name and what's-her-name . . . all that was immediately shoved aside by the news that a spaceship on the Moon had vanished without a trace.

And not just any ship, but one with a famous billionaire and his wife and daughter aboard. That really supercharged the story, especially when Amelia's face was suddenly on every screen in the world. She was no glamour puss, sure, but she was attractive all the same, and when you couple that with the fact that her parents were wealthy . . . well, I don't think I have to tell you, the public loves it when awful things happen to rich people.

The story went everywhere, and it was just a matter of time . . . five minutes, probably no more than ten . . . before the first conspiracy theories began to appear in social media. Within hours they'd gone as viral as Covid at a college football game, and by the time the search team lifted off from China, you would've had to look long and hard to find someone who didn't have some opinion about why *Lemuria 7* vanished.

I don't know who was responsible for manipulating social media to pin the blame on Amelia, Todd, and Jake, but I'll hand it to them, they masterminded the best hoax since the Big Lie. It began with someone who called himself Phoenix Leak putting out the word that there had been a rivalry between Ape Man and the Toad . . . sorry, I should say Todd . . . and claiming that it, not some kind of alien presence, was responsible. Maybe it was NASA, maybe it was Space Force, maybe it was the FBI or the CIA or the NSA . . . I mean, hell, it could've been Lisa Simpson for all I know. But it was a masterpiece of diversion, of getting the public to believe one theory so that they'll stop paying attention to another one, the one that's more likely to be true.

There was a seed of truth to the romantic triangle theory, and that made it all the more credible. Never mind the fact that Todd Bakke couldn't have sabotaged a toaster, let alone a lunar lander and its rover. Never mind that doing so would've been suicide. Never mind that, even if he'd been able to hike all the way back to *Lemuria* after single-handedly killing Edison, Mary Alice, and Archie, and then single-handedly murder Amelia and Jake, too . . . that's my favorite bullshit story . . . there's no way he could've lifted off from the Moon in *Lemuria* because . . . well, because *he didn't know how to fly a fucking spaceship!*

No, it didn't matter if those theories and all the other ones like it are stupid as hell. If you repeat something long enough and loud enough, a certain number of people will accept it and believe it. Doesn't even have to be a majority. The loudest voice in the room gets the attention, and in the end that's what matters. Whoever came up with this hoax knew that, and that's how they got the majority of the public to ignore or disbelieve the wilder yet more logical explanation.

There's someone else on the Moon. And they don't want us to know they are there.

* * *

Wyatt Stone; Master of the World cont'd:

Seven weeks after contact with *Lemuria 7* was lost, China's *Chang'e-4* lunar lander launched. Before making their descent to Aristarchus Plateau and Vallis Schroteri, mission commander Chung Li and copilot Duke Walsh agreed, along with their passengers Dr. Andreas Krause from NASA and Joni Heck from the FAA, that they shouldn't attempt a landing until they'd orbited the Moon at least twice to make sure there was nothing down there that might even hint at trouble, such as a TLP in the Aristarchus region. By then it was public knowledge what Edison Smith had been searching for on the Moon when he and his family disappeared.

When two low-altitude flybys revealed nothing except a wasteland of gray rock and dust, the expedition members crossed their fingers and went down to the lunar surface to see what they could find. The Chinese moonship touched down in Cobra Head one kilometer from the mouth of the Vallis Schroteri, possibly the very spot where *Lemuria* might have landed if it hadn't disappeared. The four explorers suited up, cycled through the ship's airlock, and proceeded on foot to the narrow lunar valley, already shrouded by deep shadows cast from the high rock walls in the late lunar afternoon.

They found the *Mondhund*. It stood in the middle of the valley floor at the place where Vallis Schroteri starts to narrow before continuing the rest of the way to Herodotus Crater. The vehicle was dead, its roof-mounted headlights dark, the rover's batteries drained by the intense cold of the two lunar nights that had passed before China was able to get a Long March-D booster and *Chang'e-4* to the launch pad.

Yet the *Mondhund* wasn't just lifeless; it was also deserted, no bodies anywhere to be found. The rover was equipped with emergency supplies including adequate air, water, and rations to keep four people alive for two weeks; there was also an inflatable pressure dome with a connectable airlock, a satellite transceiver, and a solar-cell carpet complete with rechargeable batteries. All of this was still packed away in the back of the *Mondhund*, untouched.

Edison and Mary Alice Smith, Todd Bakke, and Archie Ferris had disappeared. There weren't even any bodies to be found; they were simply gone.

There were only two clues discovered by the American investigators. First, the rover's outer airlock hatch was open and the airlock itself was voided, while the passenger compartment remained pressurized. All four moonsuits were missing from the rack. Obviously, all four people aboard had suited up and cycled, two at a time, through the airlock. There was no indication that the vehicle had been abandoned in haste; everything within the compartment was where it should be. It looked as if the four of them had climbed out just a few minutes ago.

The second was the presence of footprints outside the vehicle. In the windless, rainless environment of the Moon, there's no erosion to disturb footprints; the ones left behind by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin in the Sea of Tranquility are still there today. So the rocky regolith outside on the rover's right side was disturbed by a broad patch of overlapping footprints; it was impossible to distinguish one set from another, yet it was clear that at least four people had climbed out of the *Mondhund*.

The footprints led away from the rover, heading in a diagonal direction across the valley floor in the general direction of Cobra Head. Intrigued, the American and Chinese cosmonauts followed the footprints as they crossed the narrow valley, avoiding boulders and piles of debris where rock had fallen from the surrounding walls during ancient moonquakes. The footprints led to a place in the wall on the eastern side of the valley where such a landslide had occurred at some indeterminable time in the past. And there they stopped dead, without turning about to make a new set of footprints returning to the rover behind them.

Why had they stopped the rover to put on their suits, climb out, and walk across the valley to a featureless wall? To this day, no one knows.

Nor does anyone know where *Lemuria* went. The expedition found no trace of the moonship anywhere in Cobra Head or the surrounding area. There was no wreckage anywhere in the valley or the adjacent craters, just as there were no round indentations or scorch marks in the regolith to show where a spacecraft made a soft landing.

Lemuria vanished, completely and utterly, leaving behind only a final recorded radio transmission: Amelia Smith's terrified voice, screaming for her father.

* * *

Ebony Nicasio:

It's been several years now since *Lemuria* vanished. I stayed with the company while the investigation was going on, even gave a sworn deposition to the review panel. But when the official inquiry finally wrapped up, after the government released that big, two-volume report that told us absolutely nothing we didn't already know, I quit my job with Phoenix SpaceTours and took a teaching position at UMass, my alma mater. Adjunct professor of space physics, that's what I am now. People on campus know that I was involved somehow with the disappearance, but I tell my students on the first day of class that I'll talk about anything except *Lemuria* 7.

I don't know what happened to those people. I knew the crew, Archie and Jake, well enough to call them my friends. And although I'd only briefly met the Smiths, I feel like Amelia had been a friend, too. And although I can't say I miss Todd Bakke, I'm sorry that whatever happened to everyone else happened to him, too.

I've heard just every theory about how and why *Lemuria* disappeared . . . two or three smart ones and hundreds of stupid ones, too . . . and I've given up trying to understand what happened to it. Maybe one day we'll find out, but to be honest, I don't think we will. The Universe is a big place, and sometimes there are mysteries that just can't be solved.

But when there's a clear night and a full Moon is in the sky, I don't look up at it. I'm afraid I might see a light.