

NEWTON'S FIRST

by S. Raphael Williams

It was a situation which only a handful of people would ever experience, and of those, none would ever be able to fully communicate their emotions or perceptions of the event to the ones who were left behind. Of course, there had been fear in the beginning, despite the months of training, a fear so deep that it reached down through the individual's experience and touched the very roots of humanity's collective subconscious, but after a time the fear had subsided enough to allow a great sense of peace and well-being to develop.

He felt that peace now very strongly as he gazed down at the vast curving edge of the blue-white sphere so many miles beneath him. He could see North Africa and the Persian Gulf from this position, he could almost run his finger, god-like, directly along the sharp and fragile outline of the continents.

A few meters away from him, the shuttle's cargo bay doors were open like clipped gull wings, stark and blinding white in the light of the sun, which shone all around in its full strength and purity. The man's mission had been to remove a small fragment of stray metal which had jammed the swivel mechanism on the large robot arm; the existence of the scrap had been deduced after several nervous hours of troubleshooting and conjecture, but everything was back in perfect working order.

He slowly manipulated the controls on his motorized suit so that he was in the proper position for the solemn and ballet-like return to the airlock; he remembered the days of the umbilical tethers, which gave a man a lifeline but seemed a strange imitation of the real thing, which existed in the warmth and secure closeness of the womb. As he came close to the airlock, a faint glint against the backdrop of stars and space caught his eye; it was heading straight for him, tumbling end over end and clearing the top of the shuttle by less than a meter.

The man reached out his cumbersome, heavily gloved hand and caught the object; the forward propulsion units on his suit saved him from being thrust eternally backwards due to the force of the impact. He examined the object in the stark light; it was metal, about seven inches long, curiously twisted at both ends, and bore a few strange markings on its sides.

And even though it was unlike anything he had ever seen before, it instantly gave him a nagging sense of familiarity.

After two months of intensive and top secret testing, and a month more of government consultations and meetings, world media was invited to a highly unusual press conference. Tension and excitement on the appointed morning was extremely tangible; network affiliates across the country stood by to interrupt their programming, while newsmen in every nation waited by their wire service machines.

At the end of the large conference room, scientists and official spokesmen sat at a long, microphone-hedged table; they had with them a set of photos, charts and enlarged diagrams. The real object was locked away in a monitored vault.

Then the news was given to the world: An artifact of alien origin, made of an unknown alloy and bearing an unknown message, had been retrieved by an American astronaut on the last shuttle mission. The artifact's function was not yet clear, but scientists were trying to decipher the example of writing that it bore, and it was believed to be some form of message beacon, an alien Voyager.

While flashbulbs popped and video cameras focused on the diagrams, the man who had found the object sat alone, many miles away, and watched the proceedings on a television set; and the screen became filled with the charts and photos of the mysterious metal thing, everything became clear to him. He realized what it was and why it had come here, he could see the events as though they were happening before his eyes.

Untold light years away an alien astronaut, and adventurer of an unimaginable race, had been on a spacewalk of his own; something had gone wrong and he had started to drift away from his craft and in order to get back, he had started to drift away from his craft and in order to get back, he had thrown out what ever he had been holding at the moment, hoping that the counter force would save him.

The object had then traveled at the same speed and in a straight line, miraculously not encountering any significant dust or asteroids, not falling into the gravity fields of any stars or planets until it reached Earth. It was not a message-in-a-bottle from an alien civilization, but a simple tool, like a wrench.

The Earthman smiled thoughtfully and sank back in his seat. He hoped his distant counterpart had thought his own home planet was beautiful when seen from space; he hoped that he had made it back safely.



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