

## The Round Box

It resembled a brilliant, silver, Christmas ornament; round, shiny, beautiful, and visually stunning in every detail. It was one of the most beautiful things that Jonathan Adams had ever seen. There was something about it, perhaps its glowing metallic surface or perhaps its slick, spherical shape, that instilled in him a feeling of tranquility. The brilliant spectra of countless stars, which no longer twinkled, enhanced that sensation.

There was a sense of wonder out here – a feeling of awe; a silent, yet stimulating awe that left him comfortable and secure, despite his situation. His infatuation with space that he had harbored since he was a boy had only grown over the years, and he never felt more at home than he did when he was stationed on SPACESTAT, America's latest space station.

But he was no longer in the security of that space station. Instead, a fellow astronaut and he were drifting slowly through the upper fringes of the earth's atmosphere towards their destination. All motion out here was slow, sure, and cautious. The simplest mistake, the tiniest error, could cost Jonathan Adams and Ellie Schultz their lives. There was no room for that error. Everything must be one hundred percent perfect, for their lives and their mission depended on it – such was the exploration of space. They understood their mission and they knew the risks involved, but they were well-trained and were confident in their abilities and their equipment.

As they drew slowly nearer, their eyes were fixated on the alien craft just ahead of them. The silver, shiny craft seemed no more than one hundred feet away, but, in space, distances could be deceiving.

As the sphere slowly rotated, one point of mystery, the Black Spot, became visible. It moved across the spaceship from their left to right. It was the ship's only surface feature and was the focus of considerable speculation. Ellie turned around on the Scooter and nodded to Jonathan, referring to the now visible Black Spot. He could not see her face through the helmet but he acknowledged her.

"I see it," he replied using the communication gear in his helmet. Static interference was becoming an increasing problem as they drifted towards the alien craft. Fortunately, Ellie and he were in close enough proximity to maintain communication over the static.

The Scooter they were riding was supposedly a prototype of a much larger model, but they found this one to be quite sufficient. The top

half of the Scooter resembled a motorcycle, with an elongated seat and steering bars. Buttons and gauges resided in the middle of a steering column. The column was situated in front of the seat. The bottom half of the Scooter (where the wheels would be) consisted of a long cylinder which ran parallel to the seat and housed a simple propulsion system. Extending out from underneath the cylinder, like an upside down periscope, was the rotatable exhaust, providing the Scooter a full three hundred and sixty degrees of rotation. The cylinder and the seat were less than twenty inches wide and the Scooter was nearly ten feet long. It was almost like riding a motorcycle in space; consequently, its designers often referred to it as The Space Hog. Behind Jonathan and Ellie was their mother ship, the Perseus, in an elongated orbit around the earth. The Perseus brought their team of astronauts as close as possible to the alien craft; the Scooter was carrying two of the team members the remainder of the distance.

The sun was behind them. Through the eerie silence and vacuum of space, they drifted towards the alien ship, with Ellie in front steering the Scooter and Jonathan seated behind her. Their destination was just minutes away. They had communication with each other, the Perseus, SPACESTAT, and Mission Control on earth. The airwaves were void of any words at the moment and were filled only with static.

Jonathan held his breath as he stared at the Black Spot. Was it an entrance to the ship? Was it technical equipment, or just an external symbol of some kind? He wasn't sure and at this distance he was unable to see enough detail to draw any conclusions.

The calmness that Jonathan had maintained throughout the mission was slowly being replaced with anxiety. A queasy sensation churned in his stomach as unsettling thoughts ran rampant through his mind. He pondered the theories, speculations, hopes, and fears that surrounded the discovery of the alien craft. Was it carrying a crew? Was their destination Earth? Was it an unmanned space probe? Or was it, as some feared, a bomb so powerful that it would annihilate all life on earth? The answers to the infinite questions might soon be revealed.

Jonathan recalled that day, over three months ago, when the craft was first discovered. Within twenty-four hours the entire world was in turmoil. Some, mostly optimistic scientists, regarded the spaceship as important as the second coming of Jesus Christ. To them the alien ship was the answer to their prayers and all of man's problems would soon be resolved. There would finally be no more wars or disease, for surely a race that could achieve interstellar travel must be advanced and civil enough to have overcome war and disease.

But to most of the apprehensive residents of earth, the spaceship

represented a threat far greater than man had ever encountered. If they were anything like man then they would use their superior technology to control us. That fear led to the most obvious question: what were they like?

Jonathan tried to piece together the enigma. From here the ship appeared lifeless or in hibernation, Jonathan thought, but in reality that ship is emitting high intensity radio waves of practically every frequency possible, conveniently allowing us to detect its presence just beyond the orbit of Mars.

One frequency carried the sounds of a possible alien version of Morse Code. Another frequency seemed to carry a conversation amidst a crowd, only it did not resemble any language used on earth nor did it sound human. The different frequencies carried a multitude of noises that resembled running water, wind, rain, city life, animal life, and more. Whatever the sounds represented, it was obvious that whoever designed the craft had the answers – and they may be inside there to answer them.

What was their goal? Everybody naturally assumed that earth was their ultimate destination. This was a reasonable assumption, particularly when the ship decelerated upon reaching the upper fringes of the earth's atmosphere. In fact, the only debate between many experts was if the craft was originally programmed to travel to earth or if it had been lured here from the stars by something we emitted – like radio waves. But the assumption that an alien race had set out directly to contact us seemed only to serve man's self-aggrandizement. And although Jonathan had not successfully formed his own theory, he was able to raise many questions concerning the theories available.

Foremost among his disagreements with the experts, was his opinion that earth was neither the first nor the final destination of the craft. Judging by the calculations made by his team of astronauts and scientists, the alien craft did not seem to be traveling to earth – instead, it seemed to be merely passing by. This would indicate that there would be no landing on earth. The radio waves were being emitted by the ship in the hope that someone would hear them. He was also certain that the craft was unmanned. From all measurements, the craft was no more than fifty feet in diameter. That seemed uncomfortably small to carry humanoids through interstellar space, even if they were in hibernation. Plus, by all calculations, the craft was incredibly light – too light to be carrying large machinery needed to conduct research. And where, in such a small ship, did they store food or cargo? The number of questions he could raise was endless, but reviewing them in his mind was necessary, since he wished to keep his thoughts occupied.

He attempted to think from the alien's perspective. They sent out an unmanned, interstellar space probe, probably thousands of years ago, emitting radio waves of every frequency possible. It traveled at an incredible rate of speed, hundreds of times faster than the fastest ship on earth. Its intriguing, spherical shape was so friendly, smooth, and slick that no one could imagine any harm coming from it once they saw it. Its surface was beautifully, yet mysteriously, illuminated, making it glow like a dim star.

These beings were clearly endeavoring to be noticed. They were saying 'We are here'. Perhaps this craft had already passed through several other solar systems without any success. After all, for a civilization to become aware of the presence of this craft in their solar system, they must at least have knowledge of radio waves. To physically reach the craft would require the ability to travel into space.

As the Scooter drew closer to the alien ship and Jonathan further pondered the situation, his apprehension only grew. There was something disturbing about the ship. In his position, it was natural to be afraid, but his fear transcended the normal fear of the unknown. There was something more to it – but what?

As Jonathan was piecing his theory together, the Black Spot could now be seen in more detail and the enigma was solved. Ellie pointed to it.

"See it?" she asked him, interrupting his deep thought. Her muffled voice, coming through over his headphones, was barely discernible above the static emitted from the ship.

His eyes were glued to the Black Spot as he nodded in response. They were now physically close enough to recognize that the Spot was an entrance to the ship. Perseus suddenly opened communication and static filled the airwaves.

"Scooter One... Scooter One... This is Perseus... Are you reading?... Over..."

"Roger, Perseus," Ellie replied. She turned her head sideways to address Jonathan. "Static's worse than we anticipated, Jon. Radio signals are too strong. Going to lose contact with Perseus. Contact with earth and SPACESTAT is probably gone, too."

Although her face was not visible to him, he thought he detected uncertainty in her voice – an uncertainty that he fully shared. "Black Spot is visible, Perseus," she continued. "It is an opening. Repeat... Black Spot is an opening. Scooter One proceeding towards alien craft... We are going to enter space ship... Over."

"Roger, Scooter One..." Perseus' reply was barely audible. "Having

trouble communicating... Continue with..." Static consumed the remainder of the transmission and Jonathan instantly lowered the volume on his headphones. The alien ships' transmission at this frequency was no more than static to him.

Ellie guided the Scooter to within fifteen feet of the ship, before bringing it to rest. Because of the ships's rotation, the Black Spot had moved to the opposite side and was no longer visible. Once again, both astronauts examined the craft but no details were visible. Some scientists had believed that the glowing hull of the ship was merely the reflection of light from the sun, however, it was now obvious to the astronauts that the unique material that covered the surface of the ship was indeed glowing.

The absence of surface details made it difficult to determine the speed of its rotation, but the prolonged absence of the Black Spot revealed that it was slow. The estimates of its size, however, seemed to be accurate. The sphere was about fifty feet in diameter, as they had anticipated.

The astronauts hesitated momentarily, then slowly climbed off the Scooter and floated closer to the alien ship, using their SPAG (Self-Propulsion And Guidance) Packs to guide them. As they approached the alien craft, Jonathan felt, once again, that trouble awaited them. Although he was certain the ship was unmanned, he was just as certain there was danger, nonetheless. The ship reminded him of something – but what?

Finally they touched the ship. If it had been rotating any faster they would have been catapulted into the vast emptiness of space. Using their SPAG Packs they propelled themselves to move along with the ship, rotating next to it above a fixed point. The great, blue earth was below them and the sun was still behind them. Perseus anxiously awaited their response. The moment they made contact with the alien craft, Ellie Schultz and Jonathan Adams became the first humans ever to touch something made from another world. But that moment of accomplishment was brief as fear of the unknown quickly gripped them.

The ship's surface was as smooth as it appeared and Jonathan found that fact to be somewhat puzzling. Considering the great distance the craft must have traveled, he had anticipated some signs of deterioration on its hull. The deterioration would particularly occur when the ship entered the upper fringes of the atmospheres of the planets it encountered, as his theory suggested. The mysterious, glowing hull was either harder than any material known to man or the ship utilized some invisible force field that had yet to be detected.

"There's the Black Spot," Ellie said. The static was so severe that he

could barely hear her. The astronauts had achieved the position they wanted and were actually rotating with the spaceship. Ellie lead the way as they edged to their left, inch by inch, as if they were on the ledge of a skyscraper. The Black Spot was now visible to Jonathan and he estimated it to be between eight to ten feet in diameter. It was just a few feet away but it seemed like an eternity to reach. When they finally encountered the opening they switched on their flashlights.

"Scooter One calling Perseus... We are entering alien ship... Repeat... We are entering..." Ellie turned to face Jonathan and shook her head. He understood. Contact with Perseus had been broken; consequently, they were on their own.

Ellie took a deep breath and nodded to Jonathan who did likewise. Despite much apprehension, they were ready to enter.

Their SPAG Packs slowly propelled them into the mysterious alien craft. An ominous blackness enveloped the spaceship and this time it was Ellie who felt uneasy. Still floating, they entered a large, spherical chamber which Jonathan estimated to be about forty-five feet in diameter. The unexpected size of the chamber indicated that the hull could be no more than two to three feet thick. This allowed little room for the propulsion system or life support. The beings that designed the spaceship were obviously centuries ahead of man in technology. Ellie and Jonathan shined their flashlights around the ship, searching for anything of significance as they drifted towards the center. The walls were smooth and had a metallic appearance, much like the material on the exterior of the ship. The interior metal, however, did not glow. The floor beneath them dropped down and curved away, like the bottom of a bowl. The craft appeared to be no more than a hollow, metal sphere.

"What is that?" Ellie asked, as she shined her flashlight on the opposite wall. She illuminated a plastic, red bubble, which resembled a stoplight.

"What do you..."

But before Jonathan had a chance to reply, the red bubble suddenly began to glow, startling the astronauts and instantly illuminating the interior of the ship.

"What's happening?"

The bubble continued to grow brighter until the entire interior of the ship was a deep, glowing red. They had activated something and the sphere had come alive in response. Frightened, and not knowing what

else to expect, Ellie yelled, "Let's get out of here!"

But as they turned to exit through the Black Spot, the ship's interior walls suddenly began to glow, much like its exterior surface. The glowing metal was soothing and suddenly the ship did not seem overly dangerous. The entire interior was now visible and it appeared very plain and without detail. The red bubble was dark once again. Jonathan and Ellie switched off their flashlights.

"Whoever it is, knows we're here," Jonathan noted. "We set off some kind of alarm when we flashed our lights at the red bubble."

"There's no floor to walk on," Ellie said. Still floating in the center of the ship, both astronauts looked down at the round bottom of the sphere but saw nothing of any significance. Ellie glanced upwards. "I wonder if there's a... Oh my God!"

Jonathan quickly looked above him and was startled at what he saw. "What are they?"

Four alien bodies were floating freely above them. They were definitely not human and all appeared to be lifeless. Moments passed as both astronauts stared in disbelief. The four figures actually seemed to be two pairs of different races and each figure was wearing material that seemed to be a spacesuit. They were hideous by all measures and Jonathan could sense trouble.

"You think they died during the journey?"

"I don't know," Ellie slowly replied. "They sure look dead."

"Maybe they're in hibernation."

"Maybe. But there are no life-support lines from them to the ship."

Jonathan nodded in agreement. "Wait a minute!" he said suddenly. Once again, he scanned the interior of the ship. Except for the red bubble and the four bodies which floated above them, there was nothing else to see. He had that troubled feeling again – and this time he was certain there was danger. Something was stirred in his memory and he felt closer to understanding the purpose of the alien craft. If only he had more time to think.

He stared at the bodies. "Look at them, Ellie," he said slowly.

"What is it?"

"They're separate races."

"I think you're right. But why would different races be operating a ship together?"

"They're not. They didn't build this ship."

"I don't understand. If they're not running this ship then what are they doing here?"

He hesitated before answering and then turned to her. She could see by his expression that he had pieced together the puzzle. "They came here for the same reason we did."

"You don't think... Let's get out!"

Realizing the danger they were in, they turned quickly to exit the ship, but the opening no longer existed. The glowing, metallic walls surrounded them on all sides and there was no trace of the Black Spot that had allowed them entry. They were trapped inside. In confusion and utter desperation they banged uselessly on the sides of the craft. Of course, no one could possibly hear them.

The red bubble shined brilliantly once more, for perhaps ten seconds. Upon its cessation, the glow that the metal had emitted began to fade and within seconds the entire interior was thrust into blackness. The two astronauts quickly switched on their flashlights, but they knew their lights would not last forever. The craft suddenly accelerated, leaving the atmosphere of the earth behind. The abrupt acceleration flung the two astronauts and the four, dead, alien bodies against its smooth, but hard, metallic walls. Jonathan and Ellie were knocked unconscious.

The ship continued its acceleration away from the earth. From all indications it appeared to be traveling towards the constellation, Taurus, but nobody on earth would ever know for certain.

The ship was programmed to make several more visits to planets deemed capable of supporting life. As it neared those planets, it would, once again, emit radio signals and open its Black Spot to entice curious astronauts. When its mission was completed it would return home to the planet and the beings that had launched it hundreds of years earlier.

They would be eagerly awaiting its return there, excited to discover what life forms their sphere had encountered and captured. To mankind, the passage of hundreds of years was an unacceptable span to wait. But the designers of the craft were a patient and intelligent race who saw no need to explore the vast and desolate regions of space. It was too risky and costly, and, more often than not, the great floating rocks that revolved around the stars were lifeless. Perhaps some day, based



on what they found trapped within their sphere, they would venture across the enormous distances between the solar systems, and they would encounter, first hand, the beings that their sphere had captured. But for now, their space probe, acting like a trap to catch wild animals, would do the work for them. And they were content on bringing the universe home.