

## Ringside Seat

by E.S. Strout

Saturday, January 12, 2002. Vail, Colorado:

A sudden snow squall blinded the downhill skier. In the oblivion of whiteout he impacted a sturdy pine tree head on at twenty miles per hour. He was located ninety minutes later by the Vail Ski Patrol, unconscious and bleeding from both ears.

1.

Monday, May 11, 2015. 0915 hours. NASA/Space Corps Headquarters, Cape Canaveral, Florida:

The two NASA astronauts punched in their security codes. A steel-reinforced oak door slid open with a soft hiss. USAF Major-General Andrew J. Shaw, a slender bespectacled black man, sat at a conference table drinking coffee from a china mug emblazoned with the NASA logo. His glance was sharp, commanding. "Retinal scans, please."

"I'd rather not," the civilian mission specialist said.

A scowl. "Security, Professor. You know the drill. What's the problem?"

"It'll give me a headache."

"You're giving me one, Prof. It's a security check. Just do it."

A green light beeped acceptance. The screen confirmed:

*Commander Janice L. Erwin, USN.*  
*Mission Specialist James J. Murdoch, PhD*

Shaw nodded, "Good. Help yourselves to coffee."

"No doughnuts?"

The General scowled. "Bring your own, Prof."

"I will. For Janice and me."

"Why all the secrecy, General Shaw?" Commander Erwin, a slender, dark haired thirty-eight year old veteran of ten missions asked.

The General clicked a remote. A 70-inch HDTV third-generation plasma screen lit up with a black and white image. "What's this, Professor Murdoch?"

The thirty-six year old Ph.D rubbed his prematurely graying hair. "Saturn's F-ring."

"Good. You're both going there."

2.

Shaw speared Murdoch with an icepick stare. "You up on the CASSINI mission, Prof?"

Dr. Murdoch massaged his temples, squinted his eyelids shut and emitted a soft groan.

"Dr. Murdoch?"

"Headache. The retinal scan."

"Take some aspirin."

Murdoch crunched three Tylenol Extra Strength tablets, swallowed without water. "Your concern overwhelms me, General."

Erwin rolled her eyes. "Dueling testosterone levels," she muttered.

Shaw disregarded the barbs as he flipped pages on a clipboard.

"I know about your surgery, Prof. Skiing accident in a snowstorm. Skull fracture."

"It's all in my file, General. I was twenty-three."

"Careless."

"You approved my medical waiver request."

Shaw flipped pages, gave a single nod. "So I see."

"Since then I've made two shuttle flights and a Moon exploratory mission, all without incident."

"The CASSINI mission, Doc?"

"Of course." Dr. Murdoch ticked events off on his fingertips. "Saturn probe launched in 1997. Earth gravital slingshot in 1999 after two Venus flybys, arrived in Saturn space June 25, 2004 on an eight-year mission. It sent back spectacular photographs and data before it died three years ago."

The general exhaled a cloud of tobacco combustion products. “We have some new digitally enhanced views of the F-ring.”

“Why haven’t we seen these, sir?” Commander Erwin asked, waving an ineffectual hand at lingering wisps of smoke.

“Security concerns.”

“CIA or Homeland Security. Janice?” Murdoch whispered.

She shrugged.

A scowl from Shaw. “Got something to share with us, Prof?”

Murdoch said nothing.

The General drowned his cigarette butt in the dregs of his coffee cup and touched the remote. An enhanced Hubble-II photo appeared.

“CASSINI closed with Saturn’s F-ring and sent back visuals of the unusual knots or densities discovered there. Then something odd showed up. At first we thought it was a big rock.”

Murdoch’s eyes widened in surprise. “Wow. It’s a perfect sphere.”

“Nice diagnosis, Doc. Half a kilometer in diameter. Not ice or rock. CASSINI’s spectrographic analysis says it’s metallic, composition unknown.”

“Mystery alloy?” Commander Erwin wondered.

Shaw lit another cigarette, suppressed a cough. “You two are among less than ten persons to have access to this information.”

3.

“You’re not telling us everything, sir,” Commander Erwin said.

Shaw’s grin was cryptic. “Just bear with me. There’s been a recent propulsion breakthrough. Experimental gravity drive developed here at NASA can reach speeds approaching 30K kilos per second.”

Commander Erwin cupped a hand to Murdoch’s ear and whispered, “Area 51?”

Dr. Murdoch scribbled *X-Files* on his notepad and slid it over with a surreptitious wink.

General Shaw's glare impaled them. "Problem?"

Murdoch smiled. "Nothing Janice and I can't handle."

"No disrespect sir," CDR. Erwin said. "Surely the media would have found a source, a leak."

"Surprise. NASA finally kept a secret."

"There's more." The General opened a manila folder and spread computer printouts and photos on the table. "Commander Erwin, you know Colonel Andrew Davis, yes?"

She nodded. "Andy was top of our Space Academy class, sir. He was selected for a mission to Mars."

"That's what you were told."

The Commander blinked. "Sir?"

"Colonel Davis and Mission Specialist Diane Williams were the crew for manned probe *Saturn-1*. It was fitted with the prototype gravity drive. Orbit was achieved after eleven hours, fifty-one minutes. It was equipped with an experimental tachyon transmitter."

General Shaw tapped the remote again. Columns of flight data scrolled down the screen.

"General Shaw, I apologize for my skepticism," Commander Erwin said in a hushed, reverent voice.

Dr. Murdoch gave a slight nod. "Impressive."

General Shaw blew a perfect smoke ring. "Listen up now. This was their only transmission. Voice only, video was blank."

4.

Astrophysicist Williams's voice was garbled and interrupted by an annoying buzz of static:

"January 14, 2013, 1415 hours. Achieved orbit below F-ring . . . (Static) . . . Have located spherical anomaly. Designate it Sierra Foxtrot Romeo Alfa-1."

"January 15, 0855 hours. Colonel Davis on line. Diane went EVA to do close-up evaluation of SFRA-1 . . . (Static) . . . She returned with photos. Initial exam shows possible hatch cover. Transferring photos for data storage and transmission to NASA . . . Christ! Where did that come from?"

A loud burst of static followed, then the background hiss of elemental particles in the cosmic abyss.

5.

“Where did what come from?”

“Unknown, Commander Erwin. No further contact. JPL people are still trying to reboot *Saturn-1*'s computer. No luck.”

“Now look at this.” Another Hubble-II view filled the screen.  
“Doc?”

Dr. Murdoch massaged his forehead. “Saturn’s F-ring.” He rose and tapped a fingertip on a bright dot. “This is *Saturn-1*.”

The picture zoomed to a grainy close-up view. “See anything amiss, Commander Erwin?”

She walked to the screen. “No structural damage. The hull appears intact.”

“We’ve received no distress signal,” the General said. “And no emergency beacon has been launched.”

“Could their video transmissions have been knocked out by solar flares?” Dr. Murdoch asked.

“Unknown. If they had a serious problem, they would have aborted the mission.”

“This a rescue mission, then,” Professor Murdoch said.

Shaw blew a smoke ring, nodded.

“Just give us a ship, sir,” Commander Erwin said.

“You’re my best, Commander. You will have the *Saturn-2*. It has the same gravity drive. Your launch window opens at 0624 hours day after tomorrow.”

“One question, General,” Dr. Murdoch said. “Why me?”

Shaw gave him a brief nod, “Somebody at the Pentagon said you were good.”

“Quit while you’re ahead, Jimmy,” CDR Erwin whispered.

6.

Friday, 15 May. 1715 hours:

“I’ve got the SPACECOM beacon five by five. You’re on, Janice.”

“Commander Janice Lindsay Erwin, USN on line. Autopilot put us in Saturn orbit as programmed. I’ve got manual control. We are in geosynchronous orbit with Saturn-1 below F-ring. Last transmission still a puzzle. Findings bizarre.”

“Jimmy will brief you now, General Shaw.”

“James Jason Murdoch here. Closeup scan confirms no structural damage. EVA entry accomplished after we received no response to either electronic or visual signal.”

“Colonel Davis and Dr. Williams are alive, repeat, alive. They are reclining in their deceleration seats, apparently asleep. Automated waste disposal and IV nutrient infusion units functioning. Their biomonitors show zero brain activity and there is no response to voice or tactile stimuli.”

“I’m downloading their bioscans to Space Corps medical branch for analysis, Prof,” General Shaw said. “Anything else?”

“Their data banks are empty. No hardcopies. No personal notes, General.”

“JPL has received your data. Any further on metallic composition of F-ring anomaly?”

7.

“We docked with the structure.” Murdoch said.

“It’s a sphere, half a kilo in diameter. Our robot arm chipped off a piece of its skin for analysis in our micro-metallics lab. It’s comprised of an alloy, part titanium and part unknown silicon-carbon based compound. It also has a two meter oval aperture. A window. It’s an extremely hard, transparent glasslike compound. We couldn’t break any off for analysis.”

“There’s more, sir,” Commander Erwin said. “I authorized another EVA for Professor Murdoch.”

“No problems, Prof? The closed rebreathing systems in those EVA suits, the CO<sub>2</sub> buildup . . .?”

“All my bioscans are in the green General Shaw.”

“Carry on.”

8.

Two hours later:

“I found the access hatch Diane described. It was sealed with a magnetic device which I disabled. Inside there’s a narrow walkway between banks and banks of electronic gear, gyroscopic stabilizers. Very sophisticated stuff. It has something to do with GPS location. There’s an instrument with finely ground high resolution lenses facing the aperture. It’s a surveillance camera. There’s also a hi-tech device with a signal booster that’s got our primitive tachyon transmitter beat by centuries. They can collect real-time info from intergalactic distances. It’s not Earth technology, General Shaw.”

“Understood. Keep me informed.”

“Commander Erwin here, General. It may be just collecting scientific data from Saturn, like our probes. We’ve still got a few things to check out. We’ve got a first contact scenario here. *Saturn-2* out.”

9.

“Jimmy, I’m going to take us on a cruise around the F-ring. Okay with another EVA?”

“Wouldn’t miss it, skipper.”

Three hours, forty minutes later: “There are nine more satellite cameras and gyrostabilizer platforms hidden in the F-ring, General.” Dr. Murdoch said. “They have a specific orientation. Equally spaced, so that each one covers a one hour, eleven minute segment of a complete F-ring rotation They’re making recordings of Earth. Plus there’s a hi-tech telescopic array in each one taking star sightings, plus a triangulation setup for global positioning.”

Shaw’s voice was low, muted, betraying disbelief. “Come on now, Prof. What can they see from trillions of kilometers away?”

“Janice jury-rigged a playback of their recordings through our video system. Their images are sharper than anything our surveillance satellites can produce. This is getting pretty scary.”

“Please continue, Dr. Murdoch.”

“They have close-ups of worldwide population centers, military bases, the Pentagon, U.S. Capitol. There’s also some voice overlay, not an Earth language. Forwarding it for translation . . . Oh God. Headache . . .”

“Jimmy! Wait one, General. Professor Murdoch’s passed out.”

“Something’s going down, General. Unknown ship, it didn’t set off our proximity alerts. Oh, hell. Not responding to COMM challenge. Stand by. Hostile approach posture. Can’t rouse Jimmy. Disengaging from anomaly . . .”

## 10.

NASA/Space Corps Headquarters:

“What the hell happened out there, Lieutenant Franklin?” General Shaw demanded, his face an angry crimson.

“*Saturn-2* just went off line, sir. Hubble-II video monitors out, too. We’ve captured Professor Murdoch’s transmissions of alien COMM traffic.”

The aide’s face was ashen as she handed over a hardcopy. “Translation verifies this is correct version, sir.”

“Took ‘em long enough,” General Shaw grumbled. He tapped the face of his wristwatch with a fingertip.

“Just read this, sir.”

Shaw balanced a pair of reading half-glasses on his nose and frowned. “What the hell?”

*“ . . . First inhabited alien ship arrived. Brain scans unsuccessful, tissue damaged beyond repair. Initial frequencies too high. For second ship we modified and reduced electronic intrusion parameters. Scans failed, cause unknown but we have complete information on status of their military readiness. They are no threat to us. Flagship battle cruiser Visigoth enters orbit of third planet cloaked. First target selected . . .”*

As General Shaw fumbled for the red alert phone, another officer rushed in, waving sheets of hardcopy. “A second message, sir,” he shouted in a high-pitched tremolo of disbelief. “In the clear, from Professor Murdoch.”

## 11.

Thursday, May 21. 1030 hours:

General Shaw sat in a chair next to the NASA VIP infirmary bed. “How’re you feeling, Professor Murdoch?” His voice was soft, respectful.

The astrophysicist nodded, drank coffee from a Styrofoam cup. “Better, sir.”

Shaw produced a box and laid it on the bedside table. “Doughnuts.”

“Wow. This really is VIP quarters.” He selected one with powdered sugar, took a large bite.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll save some for Janice.”

“Are you okay for debriefing now? It can wait.”

“Let’s do it now.”

“Your last message. How did . . .?”

“Just lucky, General. There were a few seconds after I came to. I set autopilot for Earth, then passed out again.”

“And that location was so precise,” Shaw said.

“They had to be transmitting Earth coordinates based on GPS. To a major target, I figured.”

“We concentrated all our laser and neutron armament at your choice site,” General Shaw said.

“The Pentagon.”

“Their flagship had to uncloak and lower its shields before firing. We vaporized it. The rest of them about-faced and split for the galactic rim. We were lucky as hell, and so were you and Commander Erwin. Less than a second after you initiated the gravity drive, all their surveillance stations self-destructed.”

Murdoch mopped his brow with a sleeve. “Is Janice okay?”

“Commander Erwin’s right here.”

She smiled. “I’m fine, Jimmy. *Saturn-1* was recovered. Astronauts Davis and Williams are being evaluated here. No word yet.”

General Shaw fidgeted, patted a pocket for a cigarette. “One more question, Professor?”

“Of course, sir.”

“The alien mind probe. Why did it fail?”

Dr. Murdoch tapped his temple with a fingertip. “They got a null reading when it bounced off this titanium plate in my skull.”

“He shielded me with his metal implant,” Commander Erwin said.

Shaw shook his head in amazement. “I’m recommending both of you for decorations.”

Murdoch grabbed Janice’s hand. “Would that guarantee us some more doughnuts, General?”

Shaw nodded. “Civilians,” he muttered under his breath.

The End