

The Great Red Spot was Actually Kind Of Orange **By Ana Kovacevic**

Naomi never truly understood why Jupiter was called Jupiter.

All throughout her childhood and her career, she had known that it was Jupiter simply because it was *big*. It was so incredibly huge that the only name befitting such a splendidly large planet was the name used for the king of the gods.

Naomi simply didn't care for it.

Not even while she peered out of the small and circular window that perfectly encapsulated the sheer magnitude of Jupiter.

A swirling storm on the planet's surface captured her attention instantly. Of course it had.

The entirety of the human race had been enamoured by this anticyclonic storm for centuries. Ever since the first observation several hundred years ago, scientists had been studying it intensely, and even gave it the affectionate misnomer The Great Red Spot.

Much to the dismay of her coworkers, Naomi preferred to call it *The Giant Death Hole*. As she pressed her nose against the quartz glass, another behemoth floated into view. Europa.

The moon that she was supposed to walk on in two days time.

Before she could do that though, she would have to traverse the treacherous rings surrounding Jupiter.

"What the hell are you doing?"

The most grating detail about her journey to Europa: she wouldn't be alone. Walking on the moon alongside her would be the commander of the spacecraft, Mark Keating, and the lunar module pilot, Jié Zhou.

Naomi turned to Mark, heaving a sigh. "I'm stargazing."

“At a planet?” He raised one eyebrow, an ability Naomi had always been envious of.

Then, he grinned and said, “I’m excited too. It’s insane, right? We’re the first people to ever walk on something other than Earth and the moon.”

Naomi beamed back, pushing off the wall. “C’mon, let’s go see if Jié needs any help.”

Together, they passed through the narrow hallways. They stopped in front of the hatch to the cockpit as Mark opened it. All astronauts were trained for years on how to fly a spaceship, but even the sight of the flashing lights and beeping controls was enough to make Naomi’s headspin. She definitely preferred her position as mission specialist. Jié sat in the far-right seat, a tradition that’s been customary for generations of astronaut pilots. Suspended in the air before him was a laptop, one of the few personal items NASA allowed him to bring. On the screen played a movie Naomi hadn’t seen.

“Working hard, Jié?”

“Absolutely.” He said shamelessly. A few seconds later, he angled the laptop in their direction. “Wanna watch?”

“Maybe later.” Mark said. “We’re about to pass through the rings, right?”

“Oh, yeah. Don’t worry.” Jié closed the laptop and adjusted his seat. “It’s gonna be a piece of cake.”

Naomi was, in fact, worrying. The rings were nearly impossible to see due to their dark colour that faded into the inky backdrop of outer space. And a few days ago, they had had a minor collision with a rogue rock. Ever since then, Naomi’s anxiety had been at an all-time high. Navigating them today would probably be even worse because of Europa’s position. The moon was currently cast in the shadows of Jupiter, which made it almost impossible to see the perilous rings. Thankfully, they had radars to capture objects that their eyes couldn’t.

Naomi strapped herself into her seat. She fiddled with the fraying ends of her navy-blue jumpsuit. Despite the fact that all three astronauts were incredibly accomplished and intelligent,

none of them had the skills to fix the worn fabric of their clothes. NASA should have sent a tailor with them.

Jié pressed a button on the control board, enabling the powerful beam setting. There was no noise when the lights were activated – the sole indication was the sudden illumination of small meteoroids outside of the cockpit.

As their ship started to weave through the rocks at the edge of Jupiter's rings, Jié frowned at the radar.

"There's more meteoroids here than anticipated. I'll see if we can track another route to Europa."

It was moments like these that made Naomi wish they still had contact with ground control. They could manage themselves out here, but it was easier having a helping hand. When they had passed Mars, the delays in communication had become over half an hour long, and then one day there was no contact at all. NASA had planned for this, of course, but it was still jarring to be alone in the middle of nowhere.

"Will we have enough fuel?" Mark asked, looking over Jié's shoulder at the new path he was charting.

"Definitely. The only thing is that the detour might take a few days out of our schedule. Is that okay, Naomi?"

Naomi considered his question. Their mission, and her purpose, had to be done on a very strict schedule to maximize chances of success. "As long as we're done with Europa within the next week, it'll be fine."

A few minutes later, Jié uploaded the new route to the GPS (Galactic Positioning System) and let autopilot take control. Soon after, they coasted easily in the relatively empty vacuum. It was amazing just how similar being in a spaceship was to going on a road trip. There was a lot of doing nothing and asking "are we there yet?" The only difference was that you can't really stop for a gas station pee break in the middle of outer

space.

For hours they stayed like this – sitting in their designated chairs and chatting about their lives on Earth. There wasn't much to talk about since they've been together for so many years in this spaceship and had already discussed everything of importance. When the conversation died down and they were left with comfortable silence, Naomi dozed off.

Naomi was awakened by a peculiar sensation of falling. Which was odd because there was no gravity in space, and therefore no way that she could possibly be falling. When she opened her eyes, she could see Jié's hands frantically flying across the control board while Mark yelled senseless commands.

Ah, she thought, this seems bad.

Then, the spaceship gave a worrying jolt which in turn, jolted Naomi from her stupor. She quickly straightened up and asked, "what's the problem?"

"Unexpected meteoroid cluster. It must've been obstructed by radiation emitted by Jupiter, and the sensors didn't catch it quickly enough." Mark said, never taking his eyes off of the apocalyptic landscape outside the cockpit window. Large boulders hovered near the spaceship, each one seeming perilously closer to them than the last. "Jié's trying to navigate through without hitting any that will cause critical damage."

"Do we know how long until we get out of the cluster?"

"Not sure, the radiation is messing with our signals, but we can make an emergency landing on Europa if necessary. We're almost in lunar orbit."

Naomi flicked a switch on her side of the control board that initiated the forward thrusters. As they propelled through the meteoroids, the three astronauts prepared for a sudden landing – they secured all loose objects, readied the landing radar, and double-checked that the landing rockets were set. Each time Naomi felt a wave of turbulence from meteoroids that crashed into them, she hoped it wouldn't cut their mission (and lives) short. Miraculously, there wasn't any substantial damage to the spaceship, and

they flew as smoothly as ever.

When they felt the lurch that meant they entered orbit, they buckled themselves into their seats and braced for the descent. Jié let them orbit the moon a few times, attempting to find their planned landing spot. When he found the crater, they had to land into, he lowered the ship and turned on the landing rockets. Then, they waited.

Naomi drummed her fingers anxiously against her seat. Normally, a landing could take hours. Theirs would be over in forty minutes. As the ship sank, Mark went over all of the procedures that they would follow *if* they landed. Jié and Naomi rattled off their responses to their designated roles, occasionally pausing to check the condition of the spaceship. From the window, they could see flames rising from the speed of the ship, despite the frigid temperatures outside.

Naomi took a sharp breath when they started feeling the gravitational pull of Europa. As her whole body became unbearable heavy, she tried to relax her muscles as much as possible. A (mostly) painless landing would only happen if she didn't let her tense muscles take the brunt of the bumpy landing.

A high whistle filled their ears as their descent became faster than ever. The emergency parachutes had opened, but they did little to help.

Boom!

The astronauts' heads snapped forward from the force. Naomi froze for a few seconds, dazed.

"Is everyone alright?" Came Mark's voice from her left.

"Yeah." Jié and Naomi groaned in unison. Her bones ached and her head was swimming, but thankfully she was *alive*.

"Okay. We have two hours to get ready. Then we're going out."

Two hours and one minute later, Naomi was under the spaceship and fiddling

with the giant drill. In the bag slung over her shoulder, she carried some neon lawn chairs and

magazines. Due to Jié's landing skills, he directed the ship to a spot that was very close to where their original plan stated. Thankfully, they could carry on with their mission without anymore detours.

When Naomi finished readying the drill, she unfolded the lawn chairs and plopped into one. As the drill began to whirl, breaking through the frozen surface, she flipped open a magazine. NASA had simulated this process during their training, so she knew how tedious it would be. After all, the drill had to dig down sixteen kilometres.

Jié dropped down next to her and snatched a magazine from her. He opened it and tilted his head.

"How the hell can you read this? It's so blurry through my helmet." He whined, squinting at the pages to prove his point.

"Maybe you should take off your helmet then." "Ha. You're so funny, you know that?"

"Thanks, I try."

If somebody had wandered onto Europa during that moment, they would've thought that it was an absurd scene – two highly trained astronauts sitting on plastic chairs, holding outdated tabloids, and making jokes about killing themselves. Naomi smiled at the thought.

"What were you doing out here?" Naomi asked, trying to make conversation.

"Oh, there was a rip in our gas tank from the meteoroid three days ago that I was fixing.

No biggie."

"Okay, as long as it's not too bad."

As hours passed, they ventured back into the ship for meals and played card games (while accusing each other of cheating). From the south facing windows, they could see the enormity of Jupiter, taking over the entirety of the view.

When they finally heard a jingle coming from outside, they suited up and rushed out to the drill. The monitor on the side showed the current depth that the drill reached:

15.7 KILOMETRES

Mark whooped, his eyes alight with joy. Naomi and Jié joined, and soon all three of them were dancing around the drill and shouting with delight. Despite the triumph she felt, Naomi knew this was only half the battle. Next to go down was the extractor.

This step was marginally faster since the extractor could travel through the pre-made hole left by the drill. Nearly an hour later, the last of the machinery resurfaced. Alongside it; a closed bucket filled with water from the hidden ocean below.

Naomi was shaking as she unclipped the container. When she brought it into the laboratory, Jié and Mark followed. They stood behind her silently, knowing that this was her job as mission specialist.

She put on her mask and latex gloves, keeping the environment sterile. Then she pinched the top of the pipet to let it fill with the ocean's water and carefully spilled a drop onto the glass plate below the microscope. Her heart thrummed as she adjusted the settings of the lenses, and when she managed to control her nerves, she took a look.

She saw something moving.

It was . . . microscopic, but it was there nonetheless. "Oh my god." She said in a hushed voice.

"What?" Mark and Jié asked in unison. "We just discovered an alien life form."

Optimally, that was NASA's plan all along. They had predicted that since Europa had similar properties to Earth, they could potentially find primitive life.

After hours and hours of celebration, the three astronauts were ready to start their longflight back to their home planet. As they strapped themselves into their seats and prepared for

takeoff, Naomi was struck with a sudden feeling of déjà-vu. Seven years ago, she said goodbyeto her loved ones in search of alien life. And now, she was finally going home.

She couldn't wait for the moment they came into contact with ground control again and told them the life changing news. As they blasted off Europa, Naomi looked down at the moon once more, and said a silent goodbye. They orbited around Europa twice before they finally exited her gravitational field. Outer space was clear at the moment, none of the meteoroids thatpreviously plagued them were in sight.

It was smooth sailing from here on out. And then, a red light started blinking in a way thatwas comically similar to that of a car – it could only mean one thing. They were dangerously lowon fuel. Their detour to escape Jupiter's rings and the rip in their fuel tank had cost them more than they thought.

The quiet that filled the room was nothing short of deafening.

Jié finally spoke, saying what nobody wanted to bring into existence. "We're not going home."

Naomi's heart beat erratically in her chest. Stupid, stupid them. In all of the excitement,none of them had bothered to check their fuel levels. And if they had? It wouldn't have helped either way. By this rate, they wouldn't even make it past Jupiter.

They would die out here, alone. If they didn't get pulled into Jupiter's gravitational field first.

Outside, the gas giant loomed threateningly over their miniature ship.

They sat in silence, each of them wrapped up in their own brains. Their ship tilted and they faced Jupiter head on. As they slowly drifted towards the planet, Naomi gave a crazed laugh at something she hadn't noticed before: the Great Red Spot was actually kind of orange.

For the first time in her life, Naomi feared the cyclones spinning across Jupiter.

She feared the storms that were double in size to their pitiful Earth, and feared the gravity that she knew would crush her like a tin can the moment they got too close.

It was a force to be reckoned with.

Naomi finally understood why Jupiter was called Jupiter.