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SPLIT

PART TWO OF THE GAS GIANT SEQUENCE

DAVID BROOKES

SPLIT is a stand-alone story.

*You do not need to read the other entries in
THE GAS GIANT SEQUENCE,
although it is recommended.*

PART ONE: ORBITS

Long-cold particles, flicked from the corona of the distant sun, curled in streamers over the massive magnetosphere of Jupiter. They sparked and then began to glow, like a tired bulb, and created translucent patterns shimmering several kilometres above the surface of the planet.

The magnetosphere, powerful and invisible, could not deflect all of the particles. They cut through the magnetic barrier and were pulled towards the huge presence of the gas giant, brightening into a glowering sheet of plasma. Buzzing particles created a powerful radio signal that alternated between screeches and airy groans, the sounds of injured men or duelling animals.

*

Ashley Havers took off the slimline headset and placed it on the console. The noises emanating from the magnetosphere were unnerving and put him on edge. He wouldn't listen to the sounds for any longer than he had to, but unfortunately he had been charged with full-spectrum monitoring duties of the planet, and that included audio.

He saved the noises to a data file, named it and noted down the date and time. He saved the file in a folder along with several hundred others.

Ashley looked at the liquid display screen suspended in front of him. It provided a wide view of the emptiness outside the space station, a panorama of blackness punctuated by innumerable points of light. On left edge was the vast, imposing bulge of Jupiter's side. Red and orange rings of colour rotated imperceptibly as ferocious winds thundered through its gaseous atmosphere.

The rest of the space station was very quiet. It was small and ill-fitting: three space shuttles that had been abandoned in orbit around the planet had been brought together a few weeks ago and hastily welded together. A lot of the room was taken up by additional machinery and equipment, stuffed into the hollowed-out craft and leaving enough space for only a bare minimum. Several of these makeshift stations were in orbit around Jupiter, there to monitor the unusual activity in the region. This one held a team of only two.

'A full ten minutes of meaningless noise, analysed and catalogued,' Ashley reported over the radio. 'How well spent our time is.'

In his ear, his colleague and wife returned his sarcasm. 'We're so necessary.'

Sinda Vandrewala, who had kept her birth name after the marriage purely to defy her old-fashioned parents, was outside taking photographs. Tethered by a steel umbilicus, she floated in front of the intimidating gaze of Jupiter's swirling red eye, recording the beauty of the new developments.

'I can barely believe this,' she said over the radio. 'That something like this should happen ... and in our lifetimes, too. What are the chances?'

'I'm still undecided if it's a good thing,' Ashley told her.

He watched the feed from Sinda's cam on a small monitor. He could see the remnants of what had once been one of the planet's four primary moons. Europa, the ice moon, had cracked and crumbled into thousands of small, frozen chunks. Gravity had tugged at the debris, dragging the pieces into a wide, glittering arc that was quickly forming a new planetary ring. Nobody had any explanation for it.

‘Do you think this is what happened to Themisto?’ asked Sinda. Themisto was a tiny, irregularly-shaped moon that had been discovered in the 1970s, lost, and rediscovered around the turn of the millennium. It then disappeared off the radar completely, having drifted around the back of the gas giant and never seen again.

‘I don’t know,’ said Ashley.

‘Think Europa was hit by a meteor?’

‘Meteoroid,’ he corrected. ‘And I think it’s unlikely. We’d have seen it coming. And the pieces would have been smashed right out of orbit, or into the planet itself. The way this ring is formed, it looks like the moon just ... fell apart.’

‘Hmm,’ she said.

‘You should come back in. You’ve got your footage.’

‘I’m still getting the station in the shots. I’m going to extend the umbilicus.’

‘It’s already at thirty metres.’

‘It’s safe to go up to forty.’

‘No it isn’t.’

She extended anyway. He could hear the squeak of the winch over the radio, transmitted up the cable and into Sinda’s suit. The umbilicus was drawn out further, unravelling like a hose. On the screen, he saw the view through Sinda’s cam: she was moving through space away from the station. Jupiter and its new ring took up the whole of the view, but for the tip of the furthest edge of the station. The giant spot that was an ancient storm stared down the lens and out of the screen. He remembered the electrons in the magnetosphere, howling at 30 GHz.

Later, when she returned and had released the locks on her equipment, he helped her climb out of suit. Her short hair was sticky against the dark skin of her nose and cheek. She immediately applied moisturising balm to her lips, kissing it into the dry cracks.

‘Why didn’t you come in when I told you?’ he said.

‘We don’t have a lot of time,’ she replied testily. ‘We don’t know when things will change again.’

Outside, things were happening.

*

A different station, several kilometres further around the massive planet, was monitoring the state of the other Galilean moons. Many of the smaller stations were unmanned and collected simple data that didn’t need to be analysed or checked. They studied geological changes and spikes in seismic activity. Radios broadcast the results to the occupied stations, including the unnamed hulk to which Ashley and Sinda had been assigned by the World Treaty Organisation and the aeronautics division of Richard Karlson Enterprises.

Sinda lay on her bunk with a headset on, listening to the beeps and blips of the emotionless transmissions. An animated chart on the nearest screen illustrated the seismic activity of Io, Ganymede and Callisto. Many of the other sixty-odd moons in orbit around Jupiter had smaller displays beneath.

As Sinda half-worked, half-dozed, Ashley spent his time on an ailing exercise machine. It had been in one of the shuttles which now compromised the station, and he’d salvaged it to pass the time between tests and excursions.

Sweat oozing from his pores, he stared at a screen fastened to the wall in front of him. It showed the hastily-compiled footage of Europa's drawn-out demise. The revolving shards of its demolished body curved elegantly into space.

Sinda turned on the light. He winced and snapped, 'Give me warning before you do that.'

'Sorry.'

'Blinded me.'

'Sorry,' she said again, not meaning it. Like Ashley, she had long since learned to avoid the worst arguments by pretending that they weren't happening. It was probably the only reason they hadn't split up yet. 'I think the same thing that happened to Europe is happening to the other moons. They're being shaken apart from the inside – the liquid cores are being rolled over and over until the crust splits and the pieces just drift apart.'

'It's like a kind of heuristic churning,' he said, pumping away on the cycle.

'What's that?'

'Like food inside a stomach.' He had qualifications in biology, as well as biocybernetics: he knew how bodies operated as a whole and often applied this knowledge to the work aboard the station.

'Oh. Yes, it's a little like that. Churned up until it breaks down. What could do that?'

'Jupiter's gravity is like twice as powerful as Earth's. We don't know what kind of tides are rolling around in there.'

'It's two point three-five Gs. We need to take another dive.'

'The other crew got that job, remember? We're strictly look but don't touch.'

'The other team's been disbanded.'

'They're just not answering. It doesn't mean that they've been called home. We'd have heard about it.'

'Then they're all dead.'

'Their radios are just down,' he said, scowling. Sweat was gathering in his eyebrows. He was on an uphill routine that automatically made itself more difficult as he pedalled furiously. 'Or the satellites. Jupiter's a big fucking planet; they have to bounce the signals around it.'

'Don't swear at me, Ash. I'm just thinking out loud.'

Half an hour later they went to sleep in separate bunks. Ashley fell asleep quickly, leaving Sinda awake by herself to stare at the dark bulkhead above her. She touched her stomach, feeling it churn. Somewhere there was a border her fingers couldn't find; somewhere in that area her stomach ended and her uterus began. Once that scarred hollow had been filled with life. Now it was empty, and a curving Caesarean scar, made too late, was nothing but a ridge for her finger to rub over.

They needed to take another dive.

*

PART TWO: THE DIVE

The station was in moving orbit 80,000 kilometres inside the planet's halo ring. One of four discs of dust that surrounded Jupiter, the halo ring was the closest to the gaseous surface. At this distance the station was in no danger of being hit by the smaller moons Metis andAdrastea, nor could they be drilled to pieces by the speeding flecks of ice and stone orbiting the gas giant.

Sinda was climbing into a bulky mechanical exoskeleton. It was extremely heavy and black on every surface from heat-scarring. There were tiny cracks and pits where it had been taken beyond its pressure threshold.

Ashley stood next to her on the outer hull of the station, peering over her shoulder at the closet of the massive bands of colour that roved eternally across Jupiter's belly. It was thick and yellow, roiling massively just beneath the equator. Storms larger than the Earth but far smaller than the Great Red Spot turned independently, white like summer clouds. They looked like blots of creamy fat in a stream of vegetable oil. He could almost hear the roar of the speeding, grating winds.

'Are you all sealed?' he said.

'Do you care?'

'Of course I do.'

She checked a display inside of her thick helmet. Her voice, when she spoke, was muted and apologetic. 'I'm tight. Ready to roll.'

'This is a dumb idea.'

'I'll live. Home says it's okay.'

'Did they say what happened to the other team?'

'They said everything's normal.'

'Think they're lying? If everything's normal then why are they sending us in there?'

She didn't move. He realised that, hidden inside the exoskeleton, she was shrugging.

He was overcome with an urge to kiss her, but their suits prevented it. He touched his helmet against the sturdy curve of the exoskeleton's faceplate, looking down. He was aware of her, not moving. He looked up.

'I can go instead,' he suggested. At times like this he forgot that they were falling out of love.

'I'm already suited up,' she said simply.

They kept the radio open at all times. After she departed, blasting away at terrific speed towards the planet, the cam kept on relaying the images that her helmet saw. The pus-yellow belt of turbulent hydrogen grew taller as she approached, slicing through the hundreds of kilometres that lay between the station and the belt. She aimed for the centre of the pale stripe; the border between each belt and zone was where the magnificent storms were created, a mighty interaction of cloud layers and overlapping convection currents. The best place to make contact with the cloud deck would be in the centre of one of the dark belts or white zones, away from the turbulent borderlines.

Again Sinda thought of the seam running down her belly. It was the join where the two halves of her stomach had been peeled apart to reveal a lifeless baby, pink and soft in its already-decaying cushion. They had already named that baby, which made the situation much more painful: Europa, after the moon.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she saw the huge spot of Jupiter split from one end to the other and retract, the orange whorl parting like curtains, and the spot became an eye that opened to reveal a perfect smoky whiteness. The bright, massive cataract observed her for as long as it took to focus on it, and then it was gone – if it had ever been there – and the eye was a storm again, infinitely hostile.

The fuel in her pack was halfway spent; energy fields, made of compressed super-heated ions to form an invisible shield, pulled at the space in front of her and pushed at the space behind, propelling her even further. She was halfway to the planet, careening at ridiculous speeds. The exoskeleton injected her with blood thinners and mild barbiturates; the metal frame around her did the rest. She felt wholly protected but for the lingering fear of that sort-of-vision. Her heart was still pounding. She felt scrutinised by the planet. What had made her hallucinate like that?

Ashley was talking to her. He made conversation that had no real beginning or end, punctuated by anecdotes that reminded him of shared memories, which in turn made him think of the future, their future. He'd always oscillated between trying so hard to make things work and being an utter shit.

It took half an hour to reach the first cloud deck. Now all she could see was off-white, the wide currents of creamy air curling visibly around themselves as 100kph winds tore through the hydrogen atmosphere. They looked like a squiggle made by a doodling pen, or a child's depiction of waves.

The so-called surface looked unusually pocked, as though meteoroids had punctured the cloud layer. The holes bubbled, trying to repair themselves after whatever trauma they had suffered. Sinda wondered if the broken pieces of Europa had been sucked into the planet's gravity well yet, but she doubted it. This was something else, which frightened her far more...

She continued to blast forwards, the exoskeleton's outer sensors telling her that the heat was increasing massively. The outer surface of the exoskeleton was burning up, but she could barely feel it, only the increasing push/pull of the jets and the energy fields mixed with Jupiter's unrelenting gravity.

*

'It looks okay,' Sinda said over the radio. *'It all looks fine. No abnormalities as far as the sensors can tell...'*

Ashley turned up the volume on his earpiece. He had never been able to afford a node implant which would have sent the broadcast directly into his ear – not on a bio-astronomer's wage – and had to make do with headsets that were adjustable, but only to a variety of misshapen arcs that never seemed to fit.

'Go on,' he said.

He didn't know why he was speaking; Sinda hadn't responded to any of his comments or suggestions so far, or even acknowledged him. Suspecting interference, he watched the monitors instead.

'Movement getting sluggish. It's like I'm swimming here. But there's nothing different, nothing worth noting. I'm – wait ... There's something here.'

There was a delay between sound and image of about sixty seconds, caused by a mixture of distance, interference and poorly-synchronised equipment. When Sinda said that she could see something, the mists appeared to Ashley wholly unremarkable. When Sinda commented on the strangeness of it, there was nothing strange to speak of. It was as though she were looking out at different skies – which, of course, she was.

'What can you see?' he was asking. *'There's a delay in the vid. Are there any formations? Are the winds consistent?'*

'There are shapes,' she said, but he knew that she was having a one-sided conversation, the same as him. *'They look like...'*

On the screen, there was still nothing.

'There's a lot of lightning. I'm not sure how normal that is for the layer. I'm a bit deep at twenty K. Reversing the jets and fields. Don't want to stop but I'd better, I think.'

Then: *'Oh my god, Ash. There's—'*

On the screen, Ashley could see what Sinda had seen a minute ago: mists parting and reforming in peculiar patterns. There were gaps left like wakes in the wind of invisible creatures, which sealed themselves instantly as the winds raged. Indefinable shapes developed in the blinding storm. Lightning flickered, but lack of solid backgrounds meant that no perspective could be gained; they could be far away, or right in front of Sinda's nose.

'Ash, my god! They're wonderful! They're ... swimming. The wind doesn't affect them. I don't think they're all here. They're very close ... Are you seeing this? I can't believe it, Ash ... I wish you were here seeing this...'

There was a short pause. Ashley could only hear his wife's breathing. Then:

'They're close enough to touch. I can't feel them through the suit. They're not entirely solid. I don't know if they're sentient. I wish I could ... I feel like I'm swimming with dolphins or something! Are you seeing them?'

'Sinda? I can't—'

'Ash—!' she said suddenly, and then stopped.

Ashley stared intently at the screen, at the forms developing in the horizontal winds. It was extraordinarily difficult to discern outlines or shapes. They appeared colourless, like microscopic creatures made large, but they didn't have the jellylike sheen of deep-dwelling ocean fish or protozoa. It was like they were formed of the screaming winds that they inhabited, extremophiles of the truest nature, created within and sustained by the same inhospitable tempests.

'Ash,' Sinda said, her voice bursting from the speakers and into his ear. *'Ash, they're in my suit! I don't think ... They're hurting, they're—'*

Sinda screamed, her cries made tinny and staccato by the imperfect signal. *'Ash! Ash! They're—'*

He was shouting her name, but if she made any response he couldn't hear it over the noise of his own hoarse voice. There was an electrical squawk that meant the radio was picking up sound and feedback that was too loud to transmit. Sinda was screaming. Then, abruptly, Ashley heard a moment of quiet before the shriek of tremendous winds sucking out the contents of the suit, tearing it inside out, before finally disabling the radio completely.

There came only silence. Although Ashley couldn't hear her, he could still watch the delayed feed from her cam, as though her ghost was broadcasting a message to him – not an SOS, but a black box cataloguing an individual's final moments. Hot tears rolled down Ashley's face. It was a poor legacy: the footage was blurred by atmospheric interference, and showed only the gradually coalescing mists silently flooding into Sinda's suit. The horror of her thrashing arms. The sickening, lurching view through her faceplate, revealing only the gale that had the strength of a god. The mists, vaguely taking the shape of winged or finned animals, buoyant on the fierce currents, were creating imperfections in the exoskeleton and the suit beneath. The winds caught the frayed edges; Ashley watched his wife torn to pieces, the only soundtrack the pulse of blood against his ears.

*

A great distance below where the remains of Sinda's body were now suspended, the second cloud deck ended abruptly and there was an ocean. A thick layer of dense, metallic hydrogen shimmered like a sea below the clouds, gas compressed to liquid under immense pressure. The sea seemed flat and serene, despite a temperature of over 10,000oC. Through its compacted body rained droplets of denser helium and neon, streaking the deep aquatic landscape with colour, splashing the immense ocean with an illusion of vitality in all the shades of the spectrum.

*

PART THREE: ATMOSPHERIC BEASTS

There were several saved messages on the inbound transmissions board. The newest one, having arrived just a few seconds before, now shone on the smallest of the screens in the outmoded console. It had once been the tertiary control deck for one of the shuttles, and still had a seat attached to the floor in front of it, laden with buckles and safety webbing that Ashley had no need for. The seat was unoccupied, its padding reflecting the light of the video message.

‘Mr and Mrs Havers, this is Charlotte Aven calling from Karlson Enterprises. We haven’t received any data bursts from you guys for the 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th of this month. We were wondering if there were any problems or technical issues that we should be aware of. Could you please make sure that the backlog of data is transmitted as soon as possible, and that a report of the delay is filed for our reference.

‘Take care guys.

‘Transmission end.’

*

He lay on her bunk with the flexible screens pinned to the bulkhead above him, staring at the images. The exercise bike where he had pedalled – facing away from her – now had wet clothes draped over it. It was particularly cold in the station, probably because Sinda had been making daily adjustments that he hadn’t been aware of and now he didn’t know how to do it for himself.

He rubbed his arms vigorously. His only piece of clean clothing was a grey T-shirt he didn’t usually wear because it was so thin. His trousers were grubby but wearable. Occasionally scratching his growing beard, he focused on the screens and tried to piece together a puzzle that he felt he had no hope of understanding.

The moon Callisto had broken into pieces. So far its gravity kept it in a vaguely spherical shape, but soon the natural rotation would spin the fragments outwards and the gravity would fail. The moon would become another ring around the massive planet, spread like chalk dust across the blackness of space. Eventually, like Europa, the bits would be dragged into the dark gravity well of Jupiter and devoured, reconstituted by the massive heat and pressure and regurgitated as energy, or not at all.

Was it his imagination, or had more white spots appeared in the planet’s red belts? It seemed that an unholy turbulence was sweeping across the entire gas giant. Sensors indicated a flux in the deep layer of liquid hydrogen, which in turn was stirring up the gaseous cloud decks above. The epicentre might even point towards an even denser liquid core – the truth of which had not yet been confirmed – rather than a solid core. Like internal tides, or the churning of a stomach, that tightly-packed ball of liquid was rolling and rolling over and upon itself. With a core like that it was no wonder that Jupiter’s magnetosphere was so huge.

Was the planet somehow resonating with its moons, shaking them apart from the inside out? Ashley couldn’t quash the notion of the planet devouring its children, strengthening itself on their reconstituted matter.

He sighed, muttering, ‘What the hell is going on?’

From his training, Ashley remembered that the atmospheric proportions of gases of the planet were shockingly close to what theorists believed to be the composition of the solar nebula, the primordial stellar mist that eventually gave birth to Sol and all its resident planets. It was as if Jupiter was a lingering throwback to those ancient times: the foundations of a protostar, rippling with potentiality...

'Life,' he muttered, dragging his finger across the screens to bring up fresh information. Thoughts of Europa flickered through his mind, resurrecting images of Sinda that broke apart like the moon and shrivelled like their child. Sensing that he was losing track of his thoughts, he concentrated on his theories.

There would always be theories, but Ashley couldn't credit any of them. He played the final shots of Sinda's doomed camera, the floating shapes in the wild currents of Jupiter's lower atmosphere. The chances of life were miniscule, but should the prehistoric chemical compounds and the staggering force of Jovian lightning coincide in just the right way, it was possible that amino acids might be created.

'Wrong direction.'

He continued to rub his arms. Jupiter could never create or support life. The idea was ridiculous.

'Go back to the beginning.'

*

Swirling vapours whirled around an infant star. Throw-off from the stellar fusion excited molecules and sent them vibrating into each other, forming clumps, chunks, vast accretions of particles. Rocks became mountains became planetoids. Water vapour turned into water worlds. Gas molecules grew into gas giants.

Jupiter was small, and then it was large. The core, under heavy pressure, became like liquid. But was there liquid there now? Had there ever been? Or had the helium and hydrogen and pinches of methane and ammonia simply coalesced around a larger gravitational force, a magnetic mass that had already existed?

Could the planet be more than a heavenly body? Could the heavenly body be a vessel for a heavenly consciousness?

*

Far beyond the space station, the shifting bands of colour around the belly of Jupiter were changing. The red belts were softening in colour. The white zones suddenly burned with increased chromophore saturation, flaring golden as the winds swam in unusual patterns. The two distinct colours swirled into one another on the gaseous surface, as the Great Red Spot span into a multi-armed spiral that reached out, out, with tendrils to finger across the inner longitudes like a starfish, or a skein of scars around a bloodshot eye.

*

Ashley Havers watched as the planet got steadily closer.

Twenty minutes previously he shivered through his suit as he left the station, possibly (*probably*) for good, feeling the sudden biting chill of space without atmosphere. As he stumbled mechanically from the station's outer hatch to where the exoskeletons were stored, the metal hull had rung like a huge bell, enhancing his sense of being uncontained, a microscopic object on a stage too large to imagine. He was encompassed by darkness, unheated by the distant stars.

The straps of the exoskeleton were heavy, and the pieces of the sealed suit around it had been difficult to put into place without anybody to help him. Eventually the magnetic locks had engaged, and the onboard sensors indicated a complete seal. The jets and the energy fields had done the rest, bringing him this far.

He was already very close to the upper cloud deck. All he could see was white-cream, struck through with unusual rivulets of gold and auburn. Although dreading the sense of drowning that came with entering the gaseous folds of the planet, he knew that he had no choice. He would never come to regret it, either. He knew that he would have to go in, following the trail that Sinda had left, and witness the changes for himself. It was stupid and reckless, but he had set that knowledge aside.

He punched through the cloud deck with a faint popping sound. The pressure jumped; stress indicators said that the buffers were at sixty percent. That was fine – normal. He widened the view on the cam, which recorded his every moment and relayed the signal back to the station to be permanently stored. He depended on the screen inside the suit that showed what his external camera saw. The hydrogen-helium mix was like a thick fog, dragged into horizontal streaks by the ceaseless wind. The fog was changing colour, the chromophores here anaemic from being further away from the Sun.

He continued to fall. The jets had switched off automatically; with them on, it would be too easy for the wind to flip him around, disorient him inside this massive ball of turbulent gas ... The gravity had taken him now, bringing him down with only minor nudges from his shields to take him through the thicker pulps of mist.

There were two layers, fifty kilometres deep. He was getting into the more extreme pressure zones now, but he was still only a tiny distance away from the outer surface. The hydrogen gas was becoming charged with frantic explosions of electrical energy.

With a puff/splash he hit the innermost layer. It was clearer here – he could see his hands in front of him. It was yellow-white all around, as though heaven had been left out to go sour. Far away he could see lightning, blasting at all angles left to right, top to bottom and *vice-versa*. He was contained in a grid of jagged bolts, each one a thousand times more powerful than the pale sparks produced by Earthly storms. Crystal of frozen ammonia glittered like yellow jewels, suspended or slowly moving through the atmosphere. Ashley and Sinda had often had nightmares about this place. In the past they had both woken in horror after dreaming of the violent mists: it was too easy to get lost in there, too easy to be struck dead in an instant.

Formless objects rippled through the dense gas. The clouds coiled into shapes that dripped out of sight almost instantaneously, leaving in the mind impressions of ripples, thundershocks, streamers...

It seemed that life stammered in and out of reality here, uncertain of its own existence. The inconsistent creatures were all around him, at distance and up close, visible and then lost in the raging storm, shifting in and out of the mists.

Ashley did not try to speak to them. He knew that they would not listen even if they could: they did not appear sentient, in fact they barely seemed alive at all, but moving with the fluid stupidity of amoebas. Many were long, fluke-like creatures that moved sinuously behind the sheets of wind. They had gaping pits of mouths, ridged with spines or teeth. Despite their monstrous appearance, the creatures looked thoroughly benign in the hostile atmosphere. They really were extremophiles – hardy atmospheric beasts.

In a sudden whirl of motion Ashley was spun around, caught in a minor eddy whipped up by the larger storms that lined the upper cloud belts. The vortex took him down, triggering a sequence of thoughts brought on by his suit's inability to modify the oxygen output efficiently: Sinda on Earth, her fingers in the red soil; their marriage in the grasslands in the south of her country; the fear and stabbing survivor's guilt after the death of their child, Europa, during her C-section. Ashley remembered his delight at having their requests to work together granted by Richard Karlson Enterprises, the opportunity to do real pioneering stuff together right out towards the edges of the solar system, even get close to Jupiter: their shared obsession.

He was pitched into freefall. The winds parted, creating an impossible split down through the dense fog, through the lurching liquid hydrogen. Arrested by the fierce gravity he lost conscious thought, yanked through open space and through the trail of his own memories and experiences, thrown towards a hollow core thousands of kilometres down. The distance closed spectacularly fast; he passed out momentarily, then returned to see the

atmospheric beasts tripping through the void with him, engulfed by the split as – far above, where distance made the details misty – the tear in the cloud deck resealed itself.

The creatures swam in the nothingness, neither breathing nor drowning, perfectly suited to whatever absurdity the preternatural forces threw at them. The fluke-like creatures curled around his falling body, gently breaking away the super-strong exoskeleton. His mind was not functioning well enough to figure out how, but it was as though by merely touching the metal and hardplastic they were causing them to decay into dust. The flukes reminded him, unthinkingly, of the villi of the intestinal wall, thoughtlessly stripping the food of its nutrients. The other shapeless forms were like antibodies, tearing apart Sinda and now Ashley.

They grasped him painfully, but the pain was distant and impersonal. With the vacuum around him shrinking to a mile-wide bubble beneath the returning winds of the upper deck, his lungs screamed in agony while his voice failed.

He felt searing heat, and the intimate engulfment of hot liquid. He had hit the outer core; the force of it sent shards of bone spearing through his flesh as he was broken apart. Even as he felt his nerves overload with impulses, he opened his fogging eyes and saw a torrent of air and liquid particles rushing away from him, coiling outward from the gaseous atmosphere into the reaches of space, towards the burning centre of the solar system.

He was gone, and he felt no more.

*

He woke up shivering, pressed against cold metal. From the smell and sounds he knew that he was back on the station. He wore only tatters of the tight-fitting inner suit; the exoskeleton had been completely eroded away.

It was perfectly quiet.

Moving in increments, testing himself for injuries, Ashley stretched and tensed until he felt sure that nothing was seriously damaged. Relief and astonishment hit him simultaneously. Then, as he flexed in order to sit up, his back came in contact with something hot and smooth, and tears sprang immediately to his eyes.

He turned over in the silence. Sinda was unconscious, her arms curled up between her breasts, her elbows a cradle for them. Her suit had been burned right off her, as was her long hair. Her scalp was smooth and black, as though soot had been scoured into the skin. Even her eyelashes and eyebrows were gone.

When she stirred, he called her name. She opened her eyes. He didn't notice, but her right hand slid over her stomach and pressed the soft curve where a scar had once been.

'Ashley,' she said.

He nodded. 'Are you okay?'

'I'm cold...'

'Can you walk to the quarters with me?'

He helped her to her bunk and laid her across it. He took a spare suit, one that they only used outside the station but which was, by design, heat retaining, and dressed her in it. She assisted him sleepily, saying nothing. Soon she was lying on her back with a quilt up to her shoulders, staring at the inactive screens fixed to the sloping roof.

'I took a dive, didn't I?' she said.

'Yeah. Me too, after you didn't come back.' He didn't tell her that the sensors had detected what was left of her body – at only twenty percent mass – several days before he had even made up his mind to follow her.

‘I feel okay, but I feel different.’

‘Tired?’

She hesitated, then nodded.

‘We can sleep.’

After a moment, she said, ‘Is it still there? The planet?’

‘I don’t think the entire planet will have disappeared,’ he said lightly, reaching to switch on one of the screens. He wasn’t so sure. By the time the image was relayed from the cams positioned outside, he already half-expected it to be gone completely, eradicated like a dream upon waking.

There, on the screen, they saw a silver-blue globe rotating slowly against the backdrop of stars. They had orbited to an angle where their own Sun, distant but large and bright, was in the background, leaving most of Jupiter’s fat surface silhouetted. There appeared to be no atmosphere at all.

‘Is that what was under those winds?’ Sinda asked. ‘It’s so small...’

‘You’re the expert,’ he said, ‘but I don’t think so. I reckon liquid hydrogen would freeze solid out in space, don’t you?’

‘I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘I have no idea.’

‘It looks a little like Europa, doesn’t it?’

‘Hmmm,’ she said. ‘I wonder where the rest of it went.’

Ashley didn’t reply. He recalled quite clearly the deluge of screaming gas and wind, surging outward from the liquid outer core. He had witnessed it first hand, whilst wrapped in effervescent sheets of semi-corporeal creatures.

He shook his head, rubbing his temples as they started to throb. He had no answers for Sinda, and none that would satisfy his own curiosity. He doubted that he would ever be able to get to the bottom of what happened to the moons – all of which appeared to have been thoroughly broken down just as Europa had – or of what happened to the gas giant itself.

They both spent several days deliberating on what might have occurred, and what to tell home once they were ready to report in. Most of the time Ashley’s thoughts jerked away on a tangent, breaking his concentration, and conjured an image of a swirling red eye, split down the centre, opening slowly to reveal blue coldness and a staggering intensity, far too huge to comprehend with one mind.

*

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David Brookes is a writer and editor currently living in the UK, from where he runs his editing firm [The St. Paul's Literary Service](#).

He has stories published in many magazines including Electric Spec, Pantehnicon, Bewildering Stories, Whispering Spirits, Morpheus Tales, The Cynic and Aphelion.

His fiction has appeared in printed anthologies, most recently 'Skull & Crossbones' from Bedazzled Inc.

His first novel, ['Half Discovered Wings'](#), was published internationally by Libros International in 2009.

Read more about his work at his website, mrbrookesabroad@wordpress.com, or his [Amazon Author Central](#) page.