

# The Winds from Above the Portal

**A Strange Tale**

*in*  
**Space**

**By Jourdan Cameron**



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## Prelude

The Eye was watching us.

For hundreds of years, a great storm whorled across the surface of Jupiter; a tempest the likes of which could never be seen on Earth, for it eclipsed that world in size more than three times over. Most of us called it the "Great Red Spot". Some simply referred to it as "The Storm", while yet others called it "The Eye of Jupiter". Those calling it by that name were wholly unaware of its great and terrible implications for our beloved home.

I was little when the storm ended. My father made no attempt to hide his excitement; I remember how he'd spent the day shaking and flustered and giddy, leaping over furniture and laughing madly.

When my mother got home from work, she soon joined in his dizzy joy. I was so very young; I can't recollect my words, but I'm sure I asked what was going on, being a nosy little girl. I can remember being hefted up into my father's arms and feeling his usually still and solid shoulders shivering with anticipation.

"Jo," he told me, holding me above his head, "the storm on Jupiter has ended."

"Jupiter?" I half-asked, half-exclaimed as most toddlers seem to do.

"That's right," he grinned, his eyes distant. "Jupiter."

My father spent most of that week away from home- when I asked my mother about it, I somehow went away with the idea that he'd gone all the way to Jupiter. I had no idea that my father was an astronomer- I didn't even know the *word* astronomer; I had only known that my father left me for Jupiter.

When he came back home, I refused to talk to him. The night of his return, he sat beside me on my bed in an attempt to make peace; I would have none of it, and remained steadfast in my bitterness.

I stubbornly held back from making eye contact with him- choosing to stare about my room, which was littered with toy rockets and big green monsters that toy designers thought looked like space aliens. As my father was about to leave the room, he stood in the doorway and in that moment, my resolve was broken by a promise.

"Jo, next time I go to Jupiter, I'm taking you with me, alright?"

Of course, my father hadn't really gone to Jupiter in the space of a few days- he had actually gone away to the International Center for Space Discovery in order to study the storm- or, rather, the anomaly that it had left behind. The storm on the surface of Jupiter, or "The Eye", had been there for as long as men have been able to see the surface of the planet. Its disappearance was in itself an event that captured the astronomical world's attention- what followed in its wake enthralled the collective imagination of humanity.

A sea of darkness came to dwell in the former area of the storm- it baffled astrophysicists and fueled conjecture among all the layers of society, from the great scientists to the lowly pulp novelists. It was a great big *nothing*- some initially thought it to be an unusually small black hole that formed for no apparent reason. It wasn't one, for it failed to distort light or draw things towards itself. It neither grew nor shrank- it remained static, unmoving. Jupiter, too, seemed unaffected- its orbit remained the same, and its surface saw no changes, save the sea of darkness.

Thus, the International Center for Space Discovery sent a probe to examine the space above the ocean of black, not knowing what to expect.

I think it's a little unfortunate the way one's memories of early childhood seem to be cut-vividly, I remember being four years old, being woken up by my mother before the sunrise and falling back asleep in the car, only to be woken up again at the airport. With perfect clarity I remember needing my mother's help to open the tiny plastic bag full of salty, minuscule pretzels they gave me before I fell asleep. I even remember the shiny white bag they came in- it was just a little larger than my hands, and made the most horrifying crinkling noise whenever you touched it. I definitely remember how I woke up on my mother's shoulder in the blazing heat of the Ecuadorian noon.

For some reason, our friendly Ecuadorian *cabbie* stands out in my memory- a tall brown man with a big nose and a white shirt buttoned up to the floppy collar, in spite of the air being so thick that a lightweight person could conceivably have swum through it. After a little eternity driving through the pitiful remains of the Ecuadorian rain forests, we reached a large white building. I fell asleep in the balmy tropical afternoon, and don't remember much except for waking up to the noise of an explosion, and seeing a long white trail cutting the night sky in half.

My parents still won't let me live down the day that I slept through a rocket launch.

## Chapter 1

"Hey Jo, how was your breakfast? I had the most *amazing* omelette, I sure wish *you* could've been here- I'm pretty sure my mom would've made you some."  
I grimaced down at my tablet. We weren't allowed to fry things on board the *The Dove*. There was neither baking nor boiling nor pan-searing. We could only microwave things.

There are seven breakfasts- in the first week, they were fantastic. Four different kinds of breakfast burritos, oatmeal with chunks of cinnamon-coated freeze-dried apples (the Sunday meal), the vegan french toast with assorted nuts (it tastes *far better* than it sounds), and the boiled eggs that came with either rye or some strange foreign bread-like food that I couldn't pronounce.

Well, I suppose everything's foreign here in space.

Fourteen days into the mission and I was still excited for whatever surprises awaited me at breakfast. I've spent a solid month in space. I'd sooner hurl myself into the eternal void outside *The Dove* than eat another burrito.

"You know better than to ask that question, Ramona. We only have the cruel, impersonal microwave. Some days I think it hates me, buzzing and beeping like it's nobody's business. You know better than to ask that question." Ramona and I have been friends since before the appearance of the anomaly, though sometimes I can't help but wonder if she's really my friend- she knows my buttons, and presses them at every opportunity.

"So what? What are you going to do in outer space, Johanna Lenine? You're a million-billion-jillion miles away! You can't touch me- you can only yell at a little piece of plastic. I can mention breakfast bur-"

"Ramona, you have been warned."

"I can mention *breakfast burritos* and have nothing to fear," she haughtily proclaimed, with a harsh pause between *breakfast* and *burritos*.

"Alright," I replied calmly, drawing a deep breath. "I didn't want it to come to this, but it looks like I'm going to have to turn the ship around. This is now a suicide mission."

Ramona giggled. I continued, maintaining my perfect mask of dread and seriousness.

"We're crashing into New York City- the impact should wipe out life in a large radius around the impact site. This... This didn't have to be done. Let it be known that Ramona, mentioner of the accursed burrito, has become death, destroyer of worlds."

Ramona sniffed loudly, pretending to wipe a tear from her eye.

"That was beautiful, Jo. Had me going for a moment."

"Yeah, well, now I have to go do something that people will think is *actually* beautiful," I sighed.

"You sound so down about being sent into space for being a poet," burst Ramona.

"Let's get real, Ramsy, I'm here because I'm Doug Lenine's daughter."

The jittery, pixelated video stream that let me see my best friend's face from the void of space was momentarily clear and smooth- long enough for me to catch sight of her rolling her eyes at my statement. In that moment of clarity, I saw her just as I remembered her; her dark skin and shoulder-length hair with tight little curls were just as I had left them.

"Well, perhaps," she replied tersely, "but whatever the case, you're there for a reason. Now, go accomplish it."

"K," I replied. "Bye."

"Bye."

I lay in my bunk, staring at my tablet- the flat, glowing box that sat propped against the wall was a few inches shorter than the bones of my forearm; the petite device was my umbilical cord to Earth- with it, I could observe the goings-on of my slow-moving

hometown in pictures and words. Of course, I'd also send a different poem every day- that was my job.

I was feeling particularly lazy. I wasn't really worried about being fired- I didn't have to write anything on par with the piece that got me on *The Dove*. Not until we reached the anomaly.

Rolling onto my side, I began to poke at my tablet's gently glowing screen and a sheet of white light momentarily blinded me. I slid my finger along the left side of the screen to adjust the brightness, and in a moment, I was writing, my finger gliding across the slippery plastic surface, forming letters.

"Here in the darkness of space/the darkness of my bunk/like the womb does encase/the darkness of my bunk..."

Unsatisfied with myself, I slashed at the words with a pair of fingers and watched them vanish. Too many words, not enough feeling.

"Know but darkness, black space/Chill fingers caress metal case/The bunk is my room/I'm a twin in shared womb/My tablet aglow a beating heart/Inhale the void, exhale the art."

I did a little mental shrug and decided that'd have to do. I swiftly slid my finger from the bottom to the top of the screen, and my words headed back home to Earth. They'd have to do, and I'm sure that they'd do just fine. In a matter of minutes my words would be splattered across screens, regurgitated by the myriad of blogs, put into images and mixed, remixed, all to be forgotten for the next shiny thing. Such is the way of the world, I suppose. My mom sometimes blames the Internet as being responsible for man's failure to care about things for more than fifteen seconds; my dad will inevitably argue back that people were *always* this stupid, and that the Internet's not to blame for humanity's omnipresent stupidity. To this, my mother will argue that the commercial aspect of the Internet has caused most of it to simulate a Skinner Box, to which my father will reply...

Some days, I wished that my parents would argue over normal stuff.

I felt a little bad about lazing around in my bunk, not working like the rest of the crew, who were busy with measurements and calculations and observations and communications- not that I knew *how* to help with any of that, but I'd have been happy with another job. I'd have been happy with almost *any* other job, if there was one to spare. Unfortunately, our *Dove* was tremendously self-sufficient, and would continue to care for itself in the absence of crew- its onboard computer is programmed to fly us over the anomaly, around Jupiter, and back home again.

I decided to head to the ship's gym; I'd feel slightly less terrible about not working a job if I was at least working out. I rolled over and pulled aside the dark, thick curtains which by slid with a faint *swooshing* noise. If this ship were but a few years older, I'd have been met by harsh white light, which would've led me to stumble awkwardly out of my bunk into a cold, sterile chamber vaguely resembling a morgue.

Fortunately, research vessels have become significantly more comfortable in recent years thanks to the excitement surrounding this mission. When I pulled aside the curtain, I was greeted by a bedroom that resembled a warm lounge. Instead of stark white walls and panels, rich brown wood (or a thing like it) covered most surfaces. Several cloth curtains hung at regular intervals along the wood-paneled walls, sealing off bunks from the rest of the ship. Both walls of bunks terminated with a bright yellow lamp, shaded by a translucent, emerald-colored cylinder of plastic.



I rolled over the edge of my bunk and began my slow descent to the thin, brown carpet. Over a decade of furious research and development was enough time for spaceships to become, on the whole, more comfortable. *The Dove* generates gravity- it's rather weak, and doesn't work on the ship's upper levels, but it helps prevent your bones from turning to jelly. Nonetheless, the human body wasn't built for zero-g (or even low-g), and an excess of exercise is crucial to keeping the strength in muscles and the bulk in bones.

I enjoyed my fall.

The first time I fell out of bed was accidental- I flailed about for a few seconds before realizing how slowly I was moving; now, it's the only way I'm willing to get out of bed. Eventually, I settle on the floor and stare up at the simple white ceiling for a few moments before getting up for real. This day, however, I made the time for no such leisure- I had to get to the gym.

After getting up, I walked to the bifurcated sheet of fabric that hung from the doorframe at the end of the room; it helped maintain the illusion of privacy in the bunk room, in spite of the fact that the entire crew of *The Dove* slept in there. With a little sigh, I walked through it and entered into the control room in the belly of the ship. When the crew wasn't otherwise occupied eating, taking measurements in the upper data aggregation room, corresponding with the ICSD or sleeping, they were in the control room, a large white space where most of the work got done. From the otherwise unadorned walls jutted counters, upon which old-fashioned computer mice and keyboards sat just beneath large monitors, which were embedded within the walls. Several white, plastic stools were bolted to the floor at each computer terminal.

"Well, somebody's finally awake! Enjoy your afternoon siesta did you?"

"Father," I began, "Surely you're well aware that as Poet Laureate to the Stars," I said this bit with a slight swoon- "it is my duty to remain well-rested both physically and mentally? Do you *want* to compromise the integrity of my mission?"

"Well, as *father* of the Poet Laureate to the Stars, it's my job to keep you in line when you start pulling fancy-talk with me," my dad replied.

"I'll save it for the anomaly," I sighed, to which my father nodded in agreement. "Maybe I should try writing my next poem about this space. Everybody's used to the melodramatic pieces about the romance of the womb of outer space, nobody ever hears about the control room in the middle of the ship."

My dad shrugged. "Go for it. Have you talked to your mother yet? You know she gets worried when you don't call."

"Not yet," I sighed.

In spite of her eagerness for the mission, my mother refused to quit worrying, and insisted on my calling her daily. In spite of being separated by millions of miles of space, it's as if she were there in the rocket, chastising me for some reason or another. I kind of wished that our telecommunications technology could've been less advanced. Still, it allows me to chat with Ramsy from halfway across the solar system- it's not entirely disadvantageous.

"Well, I'm heading to the gym."

My dad raised a cautionary finger. "You might want to hold off on that- somebody *e/se* just got there," he said with a hushed voice, even though the control room was near empty.

"Ah," I replied gently, knowing exactly what he meant.

Among the ship's crew was a curmudgeonly old man with a bad tendency towards belittling anybody who wasn't already aged by the cynicism that put lines in his face and prickly gray stubble on his chin.

"So what are you working on?"

My dad spun around in his stool with an expression that was simultaneously surprised and slightly silly, as if he were trying to formulate a witty comeback.  
“You must be really bored to ask *that*. Right now, I’m searching for aliens- you wouldn’t happen to know anything about those, would you?”  
“They’re the reason we’re here, Dad,” I said, rolling my eyes.

## Chapter 2

My memories surrounding the launch of the probe are fuzzy at best, time-embellished and fragmented at worst. The day the probe made contact with the anomaly, however, is unforgettable. To oversimplify, the probe was essentially a camera welded to a rocket ship that flew by Jupiter to capture footage of the anomaly.

I was sitting in an uncomfortable wooden chair in my classroom, staring at the large screen that sat atop my teacher's desk. The normally noisy eight year-olds were sitting behind their desks, hushed, gazing silently as the probe got closer and closer to what looked like a big black horizon. The probe rushed over a seemingly endless sky of whirling beige clouds, and time hurried by, as though our eager anticipation was forcing the fabric of reality to hasten itself forward.

The probe eventually flew into the edge of the anomaly. The beige surface of Jupiter disappeared from the screen, and our view was filled with black- the curtains in the classroom were drawn, and the little light that had come from the screen was suddenly no more- we sat in the dark, staring at the faintly glowing window to another world. Some of us thought that something had gone wrong, and that the probe was turned off- one of the girls in my class, Roberta, ran to the dark blue curtains at the far end of the room, but before she could open them, the room was filled with a faint humming noise. Everybody forgot that they were sitting in the dark.

The noise made me forget everything for a while; I forgot that Ramona had again stolen the cookies from my lunchbox, and that I was angry with her. The teacher forgot what she'd planned on talking about with us after the feed from the probe went dead. Everybody went home mute.

That night, there was no conversation around our dinner table- after we ate, my father sat staring wide-eyed at the ceiling, as if gazing into space. My mother stared blankly at him.

Voice eventually returned to me.

"What's going on?" My parents snapped back to attention- the sound of a voice wrenched them from rapture.

"We're going," whispered my father, "and you're coming."

Eventually, the world returned to normal, and folks discussed the probe for months. It continued to broadcast the strange song of the anomaly for a few more days; eventually, it passed completely over the great dark spot and flew off to some corner of the solar system.

The song of the anomaly became fuel for discussion, fanning the flames of controversy that heat the boilers of news agencies the world over. Nobody knew what to make of it- fanatics declared it the "Voice of God", and the cult of Voxa Deus was thus born.

Outside the cult, the overwhelming majority of the populace regarded the song of the anomaly with some form of reverence- even the hardened conspiracy theorists who condemned the thing, having declaring it a siren calling man unto doom, to spend his hard-earned money on a space oddity, were unable to deny its beauty.

A vocal minority felt very strongly about this siren call. They felt it was calling them home, and this minority group pushed very hard to have their very strong motivation be the driving force behind launching a manned mission to the anomaly on Jupiter. They were met with no opposition.

"Fine," said the unyielding conspiracy theorists, who all believed that the mission was another way to throw away hard-earned taxpayer dollars, "but don't come crying to us when you find nothing!".



"Fantastic!" The public at large was happy to see *The Dove* reaching for the stars- the news of a mission to the anomaly excited the world.

Falling up can be just as unpleasant a thing as falling down. During the launch, I tried ignoring the fact that the tons of explosive substances beneath me could erase my existence with a flash and a bang, and decided to focus on something a bit more positive. For the first time in a long time, people the world over were celebrating a rocket launch. Some part of me wished that I was on the ground and at one of the parties, watching a group of scientists and otherwise important people heading heavenward. Instead, I was strapped to a chair next to him, and...

I was floating weightless.

"So, what're you going to write about *this time*?" The way he spoke his last two words flipped my stomach.

"Well, if I were a young lady in your situation, I'd think about *how very lucky I am* to be going on a mission to Jupiter funded by the whole world. Perhaps you could write something along along those lines."

“The ship is very very quiet/Through dark space it’s flying/I’m so happy everybody has my back/They’re working hard, as a poet I’m just trying/The world sent me up, but you know that/I’m here with my Dad, the crew, and General Kat.”

As per usual, my words ricocheted around the world- this time, though, with far less impact than usual. I decided that my worst was only mediocre, and as such, would neither be remembered as great or terrible. Never again would I spite somebody with mediocrity. A childish practical joke involving the space toilets would've been far more effective and infinitely more gratifying.

In spite of the miserable old General Kat, however, my days aboard *The Dove* were generally stressless.  
As we neared Jupiter, things began to change.

## Chapter 3

The idyll of days without night made me restless. Jupiter loomed on the “horizon” as a bright object against the blackness of space- we had “almost” reached it, in much the same way it’s “almost” time to sleep while you’re still chewing your dinner and you’ve had a long, hard day. We still had a long way to go, and I was thoroughly sick with space travel. I definitely *felt* sick- zero-g has the tendency to cause a bit of stuffiness, since the fluids that’d ordinarily drain out of your sinuses won’t without gravity pulling them down. The weak gravity in the ship’s living areas wasn’t nearly strong enough to do anything for my sinuses. Bouncing around in the low-g got old quick and, frankly, I nearly died of embarrassment when General Kat walked in on one of my moon-gymnastics sessions. He didn’t say anything- just glanced at me as I was halfway through a slow motion backflip. I scrambled into my bunk and drew the curtain, never again to grace the depths of space with interstellar gymnastics.

During breakfast one morning, I was halfheartedly stuffing a burrito into my face when my father floated through the control room door.

“Jo, come see this!”

Clutching my burrito, I hastened for the door. I had to be careful- a crumb of burrito floating through the near low-g areas of the ship was dangerous (and kind of gross). I followed my dad through the ship’s well-lit galley, where the burritos (and all the other food) were stored, hidden away in simple white cabinets that lined the walls. The designers of *The Dove* did a fantastic job at making it look more like a posh modern housing solution than a utilitarian spacecraft.

“So Jo, have you been to the observation deck lately?”

I shrugged. “Well yeah, I have to pass it to reach the bathroom.”

“You pass it, but do you ever stop to look? I mean, really look?”

I held back from giving breath to a sigh. As much as I loved my dad, his persistent pleas that pushed me to observe “the natural world, in its rough glory,” have driven me mad. Since he promised never to visit Jupiter without me, he’s spent half of his waking hours looking for ways to make me love the natural world. Don’t get me wrong- he succeeded. Unfortunately, I don’t think he’s noticed, and I haven’t the heart to tell him otherwise.

“Look at that, Jo. We’re standing in space!”

“Not literally, of course-“

“Don’t be a spoilsport, Jo.”

The observation deck was a big room made of super-strong transparent plastic that allowed us to feel as if we were standing in space. The first time I tried it, I felt disoriented- it’s comparable to diving into the deep end of a pool and realizing that there’s no bottom, swimming up, and realizing that the surface is gone.

I sighed impatiently. The observation deck was still cool, of course, but I’d gotten used to it. I’ve seen it every single day.

“So what did you want to show me? I know what the observation deck looks like. You acted like the anomaly sprouted a massive black hand that was about to crush the ship.”

“Because I wanted to show you *this*!” My father accented his last word with a backflip. In order to make the observation deck as “perfectly seamless and integrated into the fabric of space,” as possible (as the lead designer insisted during one of the many lectures I sat through), there’s no gravity generator in the room- it’s just a massive empty space, a galactic aquarium for weird looking fish.

“Space gymnastics, Dad?”

“No, space *acrobatics*!” He leapt upwards, twisting through the air and landing feet-first on the ceiling, only to rocket off to the wall...

He was thoroughly winded by the end of his demonstration.

"Was-" gasp "-that-" gasp "-awesome-" gasp gasp gasp.

"Sure, Dad, it was. Especially since there's no gravity pulling you down."

He grinned. "Wanna see me do it again?"

"I have, um, things to do."

"Of course, can't forget about your job as Poet Laureate to the Stars. Well, I'm going to go bathe."

At the far side of the room were the ship's few real doors- right on the "floor" level- that is, the one with gravity generators- were to be found bathrooms and the ship's only shower.

The shower room was weird and wonderful- its brown tile floors were home to no gaping drains, and there was nary a metal showerhead to be seen. Rather, water was shot from a matrix of holes in the simple white walls- tiny holes in the floor constantly suctioned the water away, doing the double duty of keeping the floor dry and returning the water to be filtered and recycled. On one of the walls is a little hatch, home to a big white towel- after it's used, it's stuffed back into the hatch to be laundered, sucked dry, and made perfectly fluffy again.

Up above the doors that led to the bathrooms and shower room was a large, round opening; it seemed to be vomiting up a progression of bright blue ladder rungs that led down the wall and to the floor. A little while after the *The Dove* broke loose of Earth's gravity, we were free to move about the ship. For some reason, I was stupidly nervous. My hands had begun to sweat, and I couldn't catch my breath. I tried to be subtle about it. My dad and the rest of the crew seemed enraptured, and I wasn't about to stamp out their bliss.

I snatched at the blue bars and clung to them as, slowly, I descended into the observation room. This seamless space exacerbated my condition.

Clinging to the ladder, I stared up past the wall into the heavens, and tried breathing deeply, which proved difficult, since it felt as though a miniature black hole had formed in the pit of my chest, and had begun to pull my ribs tight over my lungs.

I held fast there, suffocating, staring up.

Then, my dad floated from the big round launch room, practically howling with laughter.

"I'm flying! I'm really flying! This is just like *Marry Poppins*!"

The absurdity of it all evacuated the little remaining air in my lungs, and I began laughing. Before my brain could warn my legs against the idea, I sprung out towards my father, who caught me as we went hurtling towards the big, transparent wall. For a moment, we were falling together through space.

"Ow," he groaned as the wall stopped our fall. "I seem to have forgotten that just because we're free of gravity doesn't mean that we're free from physics," he sighed.

"Shame on you, Dad, you're an astrophysicist!"

"Astronomer," he corrected with a smile. "And you're his daughter, who knows better than to throw her dear old father into walls."

I rolled my eyes and pushed gently off the wall towards the floor. I'd forgotten all about being nervous, and decided to try my hand at walking around the observatory in zero-g. It was a bouncy experience.

While my dad was busy bathing, I decided that'd be the best time to call my mother and let her know about his latest shenanigans in space.

"Then, he did this backflip and I realized that he was just showing off 'space acrobatics'." I was in the dark comfort of my bunk again.

"Well, it could've been worse."

"Oh?"

"He could've tried space-skating."

"That sounds like a cool sport," I thought aloud.

"Right," sardoned my mother. "Just like space acrobatics."

"What did you think of my last poem?"

"They've been pushing me hard at work, I haven't read it yet," she shrugged.

I gasped dramatically.

"Don't worry, sweetie, I will! You know how it is! They push so hard here, and—"

"Mom, I'm kidding, I understand. I'd imagine that you of all people would grasp the sarcastic gasp."

She laughed, brushing a few strands of her shiny black hair away from her face. It hadn't yet begun to grey.

"That's funny, *grasp* and *gasp*. Have you tried writing space limericks?"

"They're not really my style."

"Pity," she sighed, her brown eyes distant.

"You know, your father wrote me some pretty cringeworthy love-limericks after I agreed to marry him. This was a long time back, when his hair was still dark. There's one I still remember- against his better judgement, he tried reading it to my parents over dinner to let them know that we were engaged. They didn't understand it."

"Wait, what?" I couldn't remember my father ever caring much about poetry that wasn't mine.

"I cannot find a greater joy, there's no comparing a shiny toy. I got myself a red sports car, but with no co-pilot I can't go far- I have in my possession a Davis jazz session, it pales in comparison to her life-lesson. Lin is the love of my life, and I'd like your blessing to make her my wife!"

"So, I take it your parents didn't appreciate his sense of humor?"

"No, mostly because they barely understood a word he said."

"But I thought my grandparents learned to speak English by the time you grew up?"

"They did. Unfortunately, your father tried his hand at Chinese after a few glasses of wine. It didn't go well."

"It's the thought that counts?"

"Well, he should've put more thought into it."

After speaking with my mother, I decided to leave my bunk for the obligatory daily gym visit.

As I passed through the control room, Jeb O'Mara, the mission's xenobiologist, stopped me; apparently, he was interested in a discussion.

"...And that's how we discovered the source of the mysterious 'blip' noise."

"Fascinating," I nodded, having instantly forgotten what he'd told me. Jeb's a nice guy, but he bores me to death- mostly, I suppose, since he has the tendency to talk about fascinating theories and concepts in the least exciting way. Before the anomaly appeared, the idea of there being life outside the wonderful ecosphere on Earth was regarded as, at best, farfetched- at worst, absurd and impossible.

There's no evidence of the dark hole on the surface of Jupiter being alive- at least, not by our standards. Our xenobiologist has been rather busy corresponding with thousands of researchers back home, speculating as to the nature of the anomaly; the more conservative among the xenobiologists postulate that the noise coming from the portal is the result of some ordinary physical phenomenon, and that the "song" of the portal is no song. Rather, it's a thing that has of its own accord come into being, and noise it makes just so happens to resonate within the human brain at a level not yet understood.

The other camp of xenobiologists tends to lean in another direction entirely, being generally of the mind that the anomaly is, in some capacity or another, a living thing, humanity ought collectively love and praise it, basking in the glory of the song. I tend to view these people as a little bit nutty. Of course, they're not a unified body- among them are a few sane folks with fascinating and potentially correct ideas. Regrettably, sane opinions have a bad tendency to be drowned out by lunatic whispers.

Against my better judgement, I decided to stick around Jeb awhile longer. He was more interesting than a treadmill.

"So, what do you think's at the anomaly? I mean, what do you think we'll find?"

Jeb laughed and shrugged.

"I think that's the beautiful thing," he said snorting, "I don't know."

"Well, do you at least have an opinion?"

"I've decided to refrain from forming one, lest it color my expectations."

With that, I left for the control room for the gym.

## Chapter 4

"Good morning Ms. Lenine, did you rest well?" I had just emerged from behind the dark blue curtain separating the control room from the bunks; what I saw left me half-convinced that I was still dreaming.

"G-good morning General Kat!" The old man's deep-set frown lines hadn't disappeared, but they were outshone by the grin that occupied the corners of his face.

"I took the liberty of microwaving your burrito," beamed Amanda Doba, the systems engineer who I hadn't heard speak since *The Dove* launched.

I opened my mouth to ask what exactly was going on, and I realized that we were less than an Earth-day away from Jupiter. Still, as I took my seat on one of the white control room stools and bit into my warm breakfast burrito, I couldn't help but feel that the sudden launch into euphoria wasn't solely on account of *The Dove* being under twenty-four hours away from the anomaly. Something else was happening, and I couldn't say for certain that I liked it.

"So, did anything exciting happen this morning?"

Jeb's mouth was stuffed with burrito, and he nodded enthusiastically a few seconds before answering.

"The song is strong..." he trailed off.

"The song is strong..." my father followed suit.

"The song," growled General Kat, "is strong."

"The song is strong!" I winced, a bit taken aback; I'd never heard Amanda exclaim anything before.

"The song is strong," they said in unison, "The song is strong!" The lot of them were wild eyed and shouting.

Suddenly, my father clutched at his abdomen and began laughing. Amanda shot him a dirty look, then she and the rest of the crew followed suit.

"You should've seen the look on your face," blurted Jeb; I exhaled loudly, and realized that I'd been holding my breath, and my burrito-free hand had been clutched into a tight fist.

"Mmf," said Amanda with a mouthful of burrito, "you *can* see your face!"

She spun around on her stool to the computer behind her, and with a few rapid keystrokes and clickity noises, the screen before her lit up with the antecedent scene of the control room.

"Let me guess, you're going to use our woefully limited bandwidth to send this video back home?"

"You guessed right! Please refrain from video calling until the upload's complete." I sighed.

The jovial mood persisted among the crew for the rest of the day. As I lay in my bunk that night, I couldn't help but wonder what we'd find at the anomaly. I realized that I'd have to write some sort of poem soon after seeing it or hearing it or whatever the experience would be. I decided to chat with Ramona.

"Well, I didn't find it funny at all."

"You need to lighten up," she said, rolling her eyes. Her dark little curls seemed fatter and looser than I remembered. "Anyway, the mission's almost over- you'll be above the anomaly in a few hours, right?"

"Yeah. I still don't have an idea for my next poem though."

"But you don't need one, won't it just come to you once you're above the anomaly staring into the beauty of a big black spot on the surface of the redder planet?"

It was my turn to roll my eyes. "Ramsy, what if nothing happens at all? What if the



song's no more interesting directly above the anomaly than after being strained through a tiny probe's weak little radio?"

"Well, you'll know in a few hours. Goodnight, Jo."

"Goodnight, Ramsy."

The dawn came in on massive wolf paws. While the rest of the crew had to stay in the control room to measure information coming in through the sensors and instruments that arrayed the outside of *The Dove*, I got to sit on the observation deck and watch Jupiter looming near. It was a massive, striated thing; its orange and red lines seemed to be moving slowly, though I knew better. Jupiter is a massive and stormy world, and those lines were channels of gases flowing against one another, like cream and tomato soup simmering in a saucepan. Jupiter's mass is mostly atmosphere- there's no place for *The Dove* to land.

I felt a little heavy and short of breath- we'd turned off artificial gravity on *The Dove*, since we were deep enough into Jupiter's own gravity well to be pulled down by it. I'd forgotten how very lame it is to be bound by gravity- having to worry about up and down is annoying, and I nearly landed on my face when I tried drifting out of bed that morning. I hardly noticed as we edged towards the border of the great black anomaly. For a few moments, my heart raced in anticipation; I've been waiting months to see the thing up close and personal. My enthusiasm was soon extinguished by the realization that we'd not be above the anomaly for a good half hour, give or take. I leaned my head against the smooth, transparent wall of the observation deck, bored. My tablet sat in my lap, glowing gently. Via the various social networks, a few thousand folks were trying to talk to me.

Onscreen, a neat row of images- icons- sat against a simple black background. I tapped a bright red square that framed the outline of a chimpanzee's face, and my tablet's screen suddenly turned white. A fuzzy picture of a party choked into view, beneath it the words "WhoooOoooo Anomalllyyy paarrrrrrty! Go spacegirl go!!!"

It was quick replaced by a fat guy's face, a picture of some cats, a big dark square, a photo of *The Dove* taking flight...

I couldn't keep track of what the world wanted to show me, and frankly, I didn't really care. I just watched the pictures fading in at a furious pace, wondering if my mother was right about the Internet.

I figured that I'd done a good enough job distracting myself when I realized that there were no stars beneath me. In fact, there were none above me, either. The observation deck seemed swallowed by darkness. My legs, which were propped up against the floor at an angle, fell flat before me. I couldn't move. My arms felt as if they'd been glued down.

"Dad!" I yelped and suddenly couldn't refill my lungs. I lay on the observation deck floor, suffocating, my tablet glowing beside my head, seemingly stuck to the wall. I don't know what happened in the minutes that followed.

## Chapter 5

Winter sunsets. There's something incredible about winter sunsets; no matter how hard the bitter cold wind blows, or how sharp the bits of airborne frost that seem to find their way into your face are, winter sunsets make up for all of it. Their fantastic, almost insane orange light warms not the skin, but the soul. The thing seems to last forever, an eternal crescendo into the richest imaginable shades of orange and yellow and, if there are clouds about, an incandescing purple and suddenly, soon as it sees a zenith, disappears over the edge of the horizon forever, the sun's final few moments burned near indelibly on the corneas of gawking onlookers, to fade away to nothing at the next bright thing occupying the eyes.

I awoke to a loud, low noise, and found that a strange buzzing sensation had taken up occupancy in my throat.

I realized that the noise was my own moaning. I willed myself to stop.

If you have binocular vision, close one of your eyes. Which did you close, left or right? It doesn't matter, because whichever eye you've shut is the one you're now blind in. If you shut both eyes, you'll get to see the darkness within your lids. Shut one, however, and it's as if the eye fails to exist altogether. That's what I was experiencing in both.

Blindness, not darkness.

Besides my dead eyes, my voice was gone as well. I stumbled about the dark, wondering if I was dreaming my last when a terrible noise, a thing wholly unlike the anomaly song, filled the deepest corners of my mind. The sensation was comparable to having the contents of one's skull extracted and dragged across beach, but the ocean is vinegar and the sand is rusty nails.

The noise brought me to my knees.

I'd like to be able to say something poetic, profound or otherwise artistically dignified about what happened, but there's no good way to describe the experience. There's nothing romantic about being accidentally tortured.

The barrage halted suddenly, and my mind felt hollow. After a moment's stillness, a feeling like an apology shuffled awkwardly about the edge of my consciousness.

My mouth moved as if I tried calling out "*hello*", but my vocal cords seemed dead. I couldn't shout for help.

"Hello?" The feeling of remorse that poked around my mind quickly turned to one of bewilderment, and formed itself into an idea- a puzzled greeting.

How I managed to stutter a thought, I'm not sure, but I did.

"H-hello?"

"Welcome to the Intergalactic Trading Post, you're the first of your kind! Would you like to purchase a..." Somehow, the last part of that thought seemed to trail off in my mind, as though I couldn't mentally formulate the idea conveyed.

"A what?"

"Would you like to purchase a- wait, how advanced is your civilization, exactly?"

"Who are you, and how are you thinking to me?"

In reply to my last question, I seemed to receive the equivalent of a psychological sigh.

"You *poor creatures*. You've somehow managed to accomplish space travel in spite of barely understanding how the fabric of reality is woven together. Pitiful. You must've come from one of those militaristic species." These thoughts were laced with sarcasm.

"Can you please just tell me where I am?"

"The Intergalactic Trading Post, an area of space that defies what likely constitutes your rudimentary knowledge of physics."

"Who are you?"

Another sigh. "I'm your superego."

I'm pretty sure I managed to convey the concept of a disapproving frown as I got the answer I was looking for.

"Alright, fine, I'm a trader of technologies- civilizations fly their ships above the portal, offer *their* technologies and species and what have you, and I offer *my* technologies and such. Right now I'm offering a special on antimatter containment fields and..."

The thoughts once again turned to a scramble of information I could neither process nor attempt to think about.

"That's nice," I shot back, "but I need to get back home."

I got the equivalent of a mental shrug.

"Your ship's heading away from the portal now, you should be returned to normal space in about five minutes."

"Well, thanks," I thought.

"I suppose you're not planning on buying anything." The thoughts brimmed bitter with disappointment.

"I never said that. Tell me, is poetry an acceptable form of payment?"

"No." Oh, irony. I was Poet Laureate to the Stars, and the stars had no interest in my poetry.

"Well, that's a pity. Do you know what happened to me?" I tried my best to transmit by thought my last few experiences, unpleasant as they were to recount. There was a moment's stunned silence.

"Your ship isn't even shielded properly. It's a marvel you haven't been killed by cosmic radiation! Well, if you survive the trip out of the portal, you'll find a token of goodwill on your observation deck. I look forward to-"

I never heard the end of that thought, as the last vestige of the idea grew sickeningly swollen and fell away from my brain. A massive black hand crushed my ribcage and nearly emptied my lungs. Once again, I was glued to the surface of the observation deck, losing consciousness.

Just before I slipped away, I was greeted by a bright warm flash of orange as my mind fell away over the horizon.

## Epilogue

"Maybe we should jettison the thing. It's probably a bomb!" General Kat's holiday mood hadn't lasted long.

"With all due respect, General, maybe you should just back off!"

"I won't have some snot-rag spin doctor telling me what to do! I say we toss this thing out the airlock!"

"For your information, I'm a *xenobiologist*, and I'm in favor of keeping it! We just made first contact with intelligent life- they left us a *gift*."

"We didn't make first contact because we were all out cold! A dreaming little girl says she heard a voice in her head and..."

On and on they argued, shouting at one another whilst standing at opposite ends of the oblong blue box that had materialized itself onto the observation deck. It was long and tall as a coffin, and almost twice as wide. During our flight over the anomaly, I was somehow the only member of the crew to regain consciousness- General Kat wasn't very comfortable with the idea that a *little dreaming poet girl* managed to wake up. As I recounted my story to the crew, he frequently and impolitely interjected with a variety of guttural noises.

"We're not doing anything," insisted my father, "until we hear from the ICSD."

General Kat grimaced, momentarily defeated, and glowered momentarily at the box. Its surface glistened like cheap plastic, though quick inspection by knuckles reveal it as being built of some sort of metal.

I stood in the doorway with the rest of the crew. I never really noticed before, but if you stared from the right angle, people and objects on the observation deck seemed to be floating in space, not standing on the floor.

General Kat looked absolutely miserable, even when standing above the majesty of the universe.

"Just be ready to restrain Jebediah when the time comes," he said, as he walked away from the box.

Jeb stared straight at me.

"He's a menace to man's progress, and I'd much sooner jettison *him* from the airlock," spat Jeb.

I couldn't bring myself to respond, and didn't have to; the infuriated xenobiologist leaped up towards the gym at the far end of the observation deck, leaving me alone with my father.

"Looks like everybody's true colors are coming out," I said. My dad's eyes were distant again; he was staring at out at the rippling surface of Jupiter. *The Dove* was passing around it, and in a matter of hours, would be slung back towards Earth by the force of Jupiter's gravity.

"I'm proud of you, Jo."

I sighed. Sure, I'd managed to make the legendary *first contact* that everybody spoke of- I also managed to botch it spectacularly. Everybody's hopes and dreams, the collective wish to ask impossible questions and gain impossible answers- I failed.

"I know you're disappointed, but I don't see why- you established first contact with an alien race! That's something to be proud of."

"Yeah, but I didn't-"

"You didn't what? Ask the meaning of life? The secret of Faster Than Light travel?" He turned to me.

"Do you think that when Columbus established first contact with the Americans, he asked to learn the wonders of their culture? He sneezed in their faces and gave them smallpox." An awkward, snorting laugh escaped my dad's lips. He was in the bad habit

of laughing at his own jokes early.

"The point is, the first contact established between civilizations has a bad tendency to be catastrophic. You bucked the trend."

My dad patted me on the solder and turned to leave the observation deck.

"You know, Dad, I slept through a rocket launch," I gloated, "but you slept through the legendary First Contact."

He laughed as he left, leaving me alone with the stars and my thoughts.

I stared into the void, knowing he was right. I decided to write my final poem. My tablet sat atop the mysterious blue box. As I retrieved it, I reached for it slowly, half expecting something magical to happen.

It didn't. The box was just a box.

First Contact  
by Johanna Lenine

Timespace;  
In our perception, vastest place,  
Across eternity man chose to gaze,  
Exploring the stars he'll spend his days.

Solar wind fills the great steel sail,  
Thirsting for knowledge in an ocean of black,  
With new understanding,  
He'll always come back.

We are traders of data,  
With busied hands and hearts full,  
Across the heavens we shall soar,  
We sail the Winds from Above the Portal.