

Eye of the Storm

by Jim Schicatanano

The awesome spectacle of Jupiter's vast swirling Red Spot dominated the view from the viewports of the spaceship orbiting the solar system's largest planet. At such close proximity, no other region of Jupiter was visible to the ship, and the giant storm, extending over 12,000 miles long, stretched from horizon to horizon.

The captain of the ship, Julian Roberts, stood at the open doorway to the room of the ship's most noteworthy passenger. The captain's sure and proper motions and the gentle tone of his voice exhibited his profound respect and admiration for the gentleman he addressed. "Thirty minutes, George," the captain notified him.

Hiding his growing anxiety, George glanced up at the captain and calmly replied, "I'm ready to go now."

His eyes cast downward, the captain nodded sympathetically and walked away.

George returned his attention to his wife, who had just finished dressing the numerous sores on his emaciated body. "Final countdown, Anna," he said in contrived high-spirits. "It won't be long now."

"No," she responded, despondently, "it won't be long at all. George, please..." she pleaded, "while there's still time, call off this mission."

He rose from the bed where they had been seated and walked toward the center of the small room. He shook his head in defiance, maintaining the stubborn disposition that he had possessed throughout their journey. "We've been through this a hundred times now and the decision must remain the same. This is something I have to do. Can't you understand that?"

"No I CAN'T understand this! You expect me to understand your descent into certain death? This is crazy to me, George. Don't you see that? I don't want to lose you like that."

"Would you rather lose me the other way – the inevitable way?"

"In some ways it is preferable."

"Preferable to you, maybe. But not to me. I am dying, Anna. I'll be dead within days – a week at the most. And if I'm going to pass away I

will not die without some dignity...”

“Medical science is making progress all the time. They’ve already discovered a vaccine for the virus. Before long they might find a cure...” Tears began to trickle down her soft cheeks as the realization of what was to come was finally becoming real in her mind. Her voice was pleading; her hands trembled in anticipation.

“No one was more elated by the development of the vaccine than I was. Thank God no one need ever contract this disease again. It’s humiliating – degrading. It robbed us of our dignity... Yes, I am aware that new breakthroughs are occurring all the time. But for me, there is so little time left...” He turned away from her and stared into the small mirror contained within the wall across from the bed. The scabs that covered his forehead were beginning to bleed once again and a yellow liquid, mixed with the blood, oozed from the painful scabs. His face exhibited the apprehension and distraught of a man that faced certain death. He examined the lines on his face – wrinkles that symbolized his age and the suffering that he had endured. Trying to maintain his courage, he spoke softly, but the trembling in his voice revealed his anxiety. “I’m in the last stages of the disease now, Anna. There is no time for cures. There are no miracles. And if a cure were to be found, we could not return to earth in time. The journey would take months...”

“Who’s fault is that?” she countered.

“Fault...” he said with a cynical smile as he turned to her. “Always fault... So much blame to go around... The experts were right about the progression of the virus, though. I expect to live no longer than two days – three at the most. The timing is perfect. We’ve been in orbit for only 16 hours. In thirty more minutes I will descend into Jupiter’s atmosphere. And some time in the next 48 to 72 hours I shall pass away. But not before giving man more knowledge about Jupiter than ever thought possible.”

“You really expect to survive the drop? George, you are taking a small experimental biocraft and descending into one of the most hostile planets in the solar system. The atmosphere is poisonous; storms and hurricanes are everywhere; winds are hundreds of miles per hour. For heaven’s sake, where are you going to land? No one is even sure Jupiter has a surface under all those clouds.”

“A surface? Perhaps not. But I’m certain that at some point in my descent I will hit a liquid layer. I’m positive that Dr. Winslow’s theory is correct. I will float on the Jovian ocean until I die... As for your other concerns I have already addressed these to you many times. The poison atmosphere is meaningless. I do not intend to leave

the biocraft. The storms – the hurricanes – are a concern but that's where Winslow's plan comes in. I've already stated that the most gentle area on all of Jupiter lies right in the heart of that huge Red Spot that dominates our view. In the middle of the largest, most destructive storm in our solar system is the eye of the hurricane. The winds there are no more than a gentle breeze. Through that area of calm I will descend and record a lifetime of data, transmitting it back to this ship for the onboard computers to record. It's the perfect way to die, Anna. In service to my country and to humanity – and with some dignity.

"We've thought of everything. The craft has been designed and tested to withstand the incredible pressure that I will endure when descending through Jupiter's thick atmosphere. Stabilizers will ensure that the craft neither spins nor strays from the hurricane's eye. Once – or if – an ocean of methane, or whatever it may be, is detected, the retrorockets will fire, providing me with a comfortable drop into the ocean. And of course, the biocraft will certainly float.

"Pressure readings, atmospheric components, temperature, and other data well beyond my understanding will be continuously beamed from the biocraft through the eye and back to this ship. It's incredible, Anna. It's the perfect way to die. Please don't begrudge me of this. We've been married too long and I love you too much to leave here having you feel like this. Please accept this, Anna... For my sake."

"This is how you want to spend the final days of your life – on Jupiter?"

"Why not? I can afford it. Hell, I can afford anything."

"You mean you COULD afford anything. You've spent most of your billions on this project of yours..."

"Don't worry, I still left you millions."

"Millions? Is that what you think worries me? George when we were first married we were barely able to put food on the table. Do you think I really care that much about money? I don't mind the absence of the money, but..."

"But what?"

"You know what they're saying back on earth. Here's one of the richest men in the world wasting billions on some eccentric journey to Jupiter while people continue to die of starvation and disease. I can't help but agree with some of them, dear. Think of how much good you could have done with that money. Your billions might have found a cure for

the disease. Can't you see their point of view?"

"I see THEIR point of view all too well. Now let me tell you something. I'm doing this PRECISELY for those millions who are dying of this disease. I know what they're saying about me and frankly I couldn't care less. People are always telling me what to do with my money; that's nothing new.

Visibly upset by her assertion, he slowly filled with resentment and anger, and began to pace the room. He had carefully contemplated his course of action dozens of times and was growing weary of being questioned on his decision. He could still feel the sting the media had inflicted upon him the days following his announcement, and he could not remove from his memory the hundreds of protesters that had assembled outside his estate, demanding that his money be spent towards more productive goals. George Rossner was a man of decisiveness, however, and was not one to back down from a decision. He only wished they could understand.

"Now, I want you and everyone else to understand MY point of view. Do you know how many young lives this disease has taken? Do you realize the talent and expertise that has been lost. Children and teenagers – their entire lives ahead of them – have perished at the hands of this virus. All those young minds, all the possibilities, all the dreams that have been irreparably destroyed – all that – is why I am undertaking this mission. I am going to fulfill their dreams and their hopes. They can't afford it, so I'm going to buy it for them. Through me, I hope everyone afflicted with my disease can have a sense of what it's like to fulfill one's dreams AND die with dignity. No, Anna, they won't physically be out here with me. They'll never be able to reach out to the stars like I have. But I swear to you that each of those people are here in spirit – and in that respect, they WILL be with me these final days. And for each one of them who will never fulfill their dreams, for every man, woman, and child who has ever looked to the stars and wondered, for every person who has lost their life to this disease, I am venturing out to the largest planet in our solar system, I'm going to descend through that atmosphere, and I'm going to tell the entire universe that, DAMNIT, I've met the greatest challenge the world has ever seen and I have conquered it – REGARDLESS of my affliction!"

An onrush of lightheadedness swept over him, and George quickly stumbled to a white plastic chair at the far end of the room.

"Are you alright?" Anna asked him as she hurried to his side.

He nodded. The words he had spoken had been forming in his mind since the onset of the journey. They had become a veritable speech that he

had been mentally rehearsing for months. He had not wanted to unleash them verbally in the manner that he did, but instead had hoped to save them for the end of his personal journey. The conviction and the anger at which he delivered his speech weakened him and his lips trembled as he struggled to regain his erratic breath. He mentally vowed to conserve the little energy he still possessed, for it would be necessary if he wished to succeed in his mission.

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The spaceship continued to hover over the eye of the Red Spot as Captain Roberts and his crew busily made their final computations. To this point, the entire mission had progressed flawlessly – but each crew member knew the greatest challenge still awaited them and they remained anxious, fully aware that even the most minute error in space was too often fatal.

Captain Robert's mind wandered from the primary mission for just a moment as he proudly examined the ship that he had piloted from earth. The billions that George Rossner had spent on the upgrade of the ship had been well spent, in the captain's expert opinion. The atomic propulsion system was arguably the most noteworthy of the renovations, allowing the ship to travel five times faster than any other spacecraft designed. The engines had received most of the attention from earth as the human race saw interstellar travel within their grasp for the first time. But the artificial gravity unit was Julian Robert's favorite advancement. It made space travel bearable and – at least he hoped – more popular among the residents of earth.

Returning his thoughts to his work, he headed towards the departure compartment where the biocraft awaited George Rossner. Pulling his electronic notepad from his backpocket he began to record some readings. The smooth, silver craft resembled a bullet standing upright and was actually designed for two passengers. The prototype had been tested on Mars with spectacular results, but this new craft had never been used....

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A member of the crew knocked on the open door of George and Anna's cabin. "Excuse me, Mr. Rossner."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Sir, you told me to inform you when you had five minutes left before you must begin your procedures for departure." He glanced down at his watch, raised his right hand and extended his forefinger. "Five minutes, sir."

"Thank you. Oh, could you please close the door behind you." The crewman obliged and departed.

"Well," George said as he took a deep breath. "This is it."

"This is it," his wife repeated. What was left to say to each other? The decision had been firmly made and he was not about to change his mind. She sat in the plastic white chair in silence, anxiously awaiting his final words.

George Rossner sat on the edge of his bed, hands folded before him, eyes turned down sullenly to the floor. A heaviness enveloped the room – a quiet sadness that had been growing since the inception of the voyage. Only the smooth hum of the ship's atomic motors could be heard as husband and wife remained despondently silent.

"I never cheated on you, Anna," George announced abruptly without glancing up. Anna's eyebrows rose in surprise. She had not anticipated that their final conversation together would begin like this. "I know that some years back there was some question... And I admit that for a time... Well, I was tempted. But I never did. NEVER. I only hope that you believe me and forgive me for even considering it."

A tear trickled down her cheek, which she instantly wiped away. "If you didn't do anything then there's nothing to forgive you for. And in case there was ever any question in your mind, I've always been faithful to you, too."

His eyes grew red and watery but he maintained his focus on the floor before him. "Thirty-seven years of marriage and we remained faithful all those years. I'd say that's pretty good."

"I'd say that's very good."

"I've left you SOME money, Anna. Perhaps it wasn't fair, spending all those billions on this project. But you know me, once I get an idea in my head I have to go all out."

"The millions you left me will be more than enough to live on," she replied in overstatement.

Silence enveloped the cabin once again before he found the strength and courage to speak. Finally raising his teary eyes from the floor he gazed into hers. "What do you think of all this?"

"What do I THINK?" She was surprised by the question for she thought she had already made her opinions quite clear to him – opinions that she had been relentlessly repeating since the conception of the

journey months earlier. Rising slowly from her chair she began to pace their cabin, carefully considering her feelings at the moment. Unable to face him, she turned her attention to the viewport and at the giant Red Spot below. She had been told the storm turned counter-clockwise but at such close proximity she was unable to determine any direction at all.

"Well?" George questioned her, anxiously awaiting a reply.

Still staring at the Red Spot she took a deep breath and softly replied, "I don't know what I feel anymore. I'm not sure of anything, George. There are so many emotions right now. Anger... Bitterness... I feel cheated..." She slowly returned to her chair, and dropped her head towards the floor as tears began to trickle down her face once again. "I guess most of all... Most of all, I'm tired. Tired of the disease... Tired of that damn Red Spot... Tired of everything." She glanced up at him before adding, almost in a whisper, "I'm tired of life..."

He almost broke a smile before he nodded in agreement. He also shared those same emotions.

"And you?" she asked him. "What are you thinking?"

"I guess first off, I should thank you for caring for me these last several years. I know there've been times when I've been... well, irritable... and difficult... And I'm sorry for that. It's just that learning that you have a fatal disease... Well... Anyway, thank you. You've been there for me."

"It's the least I could do. You've taken care of me many times when I was ill."

He nodded. "We've taken care of each other... Something else I've been meaning to say..."

"What?"

He grew silent for several moments until he was unable to hold back any longer. A flood of tears suddenly erupted from him and he trembled as he attempted to speak. "I just want... you to know... that you are the finest... most appreciative... uncomplaining... wife... a man could ever ask for. And... most of all," he gasped as tears ran down his reddened cheeks and a lump filled his throat, "I... LOVE YOU, Anna." His heart was racing uncontrollably; his breath was short and uneven; his body trembled from the sudden and climactic release of emotions that he had suppressed for months. And he continued, "More than anything else in the world... I LOVE YOU..."

He was unable to speak any longer as the sobs overcame him and he buried his moistened face in his trembling hands. No more words were needed to be spoken – he had expressed all that he really wished to say. Quickly rising from her chair, Anna hurried across the room and sat beside him. Overwhelmed by an uncontrollable surge of emotions they embraced each other – husband and wife of thirty-seven years.

The tears flowed continuously; their hearts weighted down in sorrow and finality. An accumulation of months of anguish and affliction came to a climax. And they remained tightly embraced – their final embrace – together.

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Minutes later, there was an ominous knock on the cabin door and George and Anna Rossner knew the time to part had come all too quickly. “George,” the Captain said softly, “it’s time.”

“I have to go,” George announced as they broke their embrace. Anna nodded in acknowledgement, wiped the tears first from his face and then hers, and helped him off the bed.

“Your wounds,” she said suddenly. “Your sores. Are the dressings alright?”

He nodded. “I can still feel some blood oozing from the scabs on my back – and of course, my forehead – but they’ll be alright. I have to go.”

They opened the door to find Captain Julian Roberts standing silently in the hallway, waiting for George’s command. Without hesitation, George declared, “I’m ready.”

“The biocraft has been thoroughly inspected twice, and all instrument readings both on the craft and on this ship are in perfect working order. We should have communication with you throughout most of your descent. Of course, that all depends how far down you descend.”

“I understand.”

“This way, George.” The captain led the Rossner’s down the white, unadorned hallway to the biocraft departure compartment. The entire crew was assembled there, gathering in honor of the man that made possible their journey. Most of the 12 member crew were scientists that had been gathering a veritable encyclopedia of data since the ship had taken orbit around Jupiter. One crew member was filming the episode which was to be beamed back to earth for the entire world to watch.

Clutching Anna's hand a bit tighter once he witnessed the crew, George began to thank each of them for all their time, their efforts, their expertise, and the sacrifices they had made. In return, each one of them shook his hand and thanked him for the tremendous opportunity.

"You're one of a kind, Mr. Rossner," said one scientist.

"I'm naming my son after you," announced another.

"You're an inspiration, sir," noted yet another.

With the formalities completed, George wasted little time, and Anna and the crew helped him enter the biocraft. Before closing the top hatch, he glanced one last time at Anna. He remained silent for several moments until, realizing that there was nothing left to say, merely mouthed the words, "I love you." Wiping away her tears, she replied the same way to him. He turned his attention to the crew, saluted them, and descended into the biocraft, closing the hatch above him.

There was a small viewport on the biocraft which allowed Anna and the crew watch her husband as he strapped himself into the pilot's chair. George began mentally reviewing the instrument panel before him. Despite months of training and several simulations, he still found the various lights, knobs, buttons, and monitors to be intimidating.

Feeling the ooze flow once again from the scabs on his forehead he quickly dabbed the painful areas with a sterile cloth that was provided in the craft. He snickered when he remembered that he had been told that all the articles in the biocraft's medical chest were carefully sterilized. What could they possibly worry about a dying man catching? Finally situated, he awaited the final countdown.

Captain Roberts picked up a microphone on the main console in the compartment and initiated contact with George. "Can you hear me, George?"

"That's a big roger-rooski," he replied with a forced smile. Despite the jovial reply, the tone of his voice exhibited anxiety.

The captain smiled. "We have thirty seconds before we're in position, George. Please try to remain calm and remember your training. We're already monitoring your vital signs so we'll know the state of your condition throughout your mission. The drop will be difficult but remember, the engineers of the craft have already considered your age and weakened condition, and have guaranteed that the retros will counter most of the enormous gravitational pull of Jupiter and the powerful force of the drop. At the expense of most of your fuel, you

should descend reasonably smooth (he emphasized 'reasonably'). You're an inspiration to us all, Mr. Rossner. We wish you the best of luck and may God bless you."

"Thank you. And don't worry, if I forget anything I'll just pull out the biocraft's owner's manual in the glove compartment."

Several seconds of silence passed. "What's that, George?" the captain asked in bewilderment.

"Nothing. Bad joke..." Anna wondered where her husband had suddenly discovered this new found sense of humor.

Without further deliberation, the captain pressed a single button and the floor below the biocraft slowly opened. As the biocraft descended into a position where it would begin its descent, George Rossner extended his right hand towards the viewport, focused his eyes squarely on Anna, and gave a thumbs up. It was the last she would ever see of him. Seconds later, the biocraft was no longer visible and the floor returned to normal.

"O.K., biocraft is in position," the Captain announced. "Countdown to descent begins in five... Four... Three... Two... One... There it goes."

"I didn't hear anything," Anna noted curiously, moments later.

"Good, that means nothing's wrong," replied a crewman.

"Let's go," a scientist ordered his staff with an energetic clap of his hands. "Now is when the fun begins. Let's get to work. Man your stations..." The room suddenly came to life as every crewman hurried to his position.

"Your husband is descending into that Red Spot as we speak, Mrs. Rossner," the captain explained. "Let's go to the main control room. We can follow his progress there. We'll only be in the way here."

An ominous silence gripped the main control center and the view remained dominated by the enormous Red Spot. Anna approached the main viewport and gazed down at the storm below her. She strained her eyes, searching for any sign of the biocraft.

"You won't be able to see him," the captain informed her. "He's already too far away."

"Is he in the eye of the storm, yet?"

"Twenty seconds to impact. There's a message coming in over the communication monitor. Funny he isn't using voice linkage." Anna

joined the captain at the monitor as the first message from her husband was being displayed.

"The disease has chosen the time of my death, Anna. But I did not allow it to choose the manner. I am to die with dignity and honor, and I am to die in the service of humanity. Perhaps when all is said and done, I have won the battle after all."

The biocraft entered the Jovian atmosphere, descending precisely into the eye of the Red Spot. The data being transmitted back to the ship would keep scientists busy for the remainder of their mission – and well beyond.

Anna Rossner returned to her cabin where she would spend the rest of the journey. She knew she would be alone for the remainder of her life; yet she could not feel loneliness. She realized that millions of victims of the disease would turn to her for support when she returned to earth; yet, she could not feel sorrow for them. She recognized that her journey through life contained more anguish and grief than she was capable of enduring; yet she could no longer cry. As the crew of the spaceship worked long and hard, and with enthusiasm and elation over the once-in-a-lifetime challenge set before them, she sat alone and in silence in her cabin.

Emotionally drained, she stared out her viewport for some time at Jupiter's infamous Red Spot – the wondrous storm that meant so much to so many. While scientists studied it with curiosity and marvel, and earth remained overwhelmed by its sheer size and intensity, the disdain she felt for the solar system's most intriguing phenomenon had only intensified during the voyage. Her opinion was not swayed by either its magnitude or its majestic beauty. And how it maintained itself all these centuries failed to pique her curiosity. Only one point of fact was relevant to Anna Rossner: Jupiter's Red Spot was her husband's final resting place.