

INT - LAUNCH CHAMBER

We're shown into the launch chamber where we take our seats and an attendant helps us don VR headsets.

VR HUD:

We see our launch chamber where the roof is opening up as steam of pouring from the launch pads.

SHALA

Thanks for joining me today  
Explorers. We're headed into  
Jupiter's Great Red Spot to snag  
some new footage for Encounter 360.

The Tardigrades squeak from a tube in her cockpit.

SHALA (CONT'D)

Yes, and the tardigrades are also  
getting some cool action shots for  
their own personal use.

The Tardigrades squeak again as Shala looks defeated.

SHALA (CONT'D)

Anyway, suit up and prep for launch  
explorers. We'll rendezvous in  
orbit before triangulating toward  
Jupiter. Sound good? Great! Now  
hurry up before we miss our launch  
window.

A pre-launch sequence counts down from 10 as we blast through the atmosphere and finally emerge in orbit. We see a space pod with mechanical armature that waves at us as we approach.

SHALA (CONT'D)

Everyone ready? I'm going to punch  
in our coordinates to Jupiter and  
share them with your onboard nav  
systems. Just don't press anything,  
sit back, and enjoy the ride.

We careen through space, flying past Mars, through the asteroid belt, through one of Saturn's rings, until Jupiter sits in the distance.

SHALA (CONT'D)

There it is, the Gas Giant... And  
I'm *not* talking about Tag on Mapo  
tofu night...

(MORE)

SHALA (CONT'D)

Jupiter has been documented as far back as the 7th or 8th Century BCE, documented by Babylonian astronomers. Ancient Chinese astronomers even based their zodiac on the relative position of Jupiter in the night sky. Let's get a closer look.

Shala blasts off toward Jupiter's horizon.

SHALA (CONT'D)

Careful now Explorers, Jupiter's magnetosphere is ten times stronger than Earth's. Ah look, there it is.

From over the horizon, Jupiter's Red Spot appears.

SHALA (CONT'D)

Right on schedule. We've been observing Jupiter's Red Spot for over almost 200 years. It's an anticyclonic storm that's similar to hurricanes on Earth. In fact, it looks a lot like Earth's upper atmosphere, but its chemical makeup is wildly different.

The Red Spot comes into clearer view.

SHALA (CONT'D)

We're gonna take it nice and slow toward the Spot. Feel free to take some photos on the approach... Hey look, there go the tardigrades now.

A small thumbnail pops up in our HUD that shows a small airlock opening on Shala's pod. A small ship appears and the thumbnail gets magnified with 1x, 5x, 10x, 100x appearing in the upper corner. The small ship is a scale replica of Shala's, with T-1 painted on its rear fuselage.

We hear excited squeaking and go straight to a selfie-style view of one of the Tardigrades with a blinking LIVE notification in the corner. It's squeaking away in the style of a typical online video preamble. A small air lock opens behind it and the Tardigrade exits, attached to a futurist 'wakeboard' looking device and holding on to a tether. It exits and the T-1 banks toward Jupiter.

Shala keeps talking over the thumbnail of the Tardigrade carving it up through space, towed along by the T-1.

SHALA (CONT'D)  
So when we enter the eye, we'll  
need to position some supplementary  
cameras to--

We see the Tardigrade struggle a bit. It's being drawn toward  
Jupiter's magnetosphere!

SHALA (CONT'D)  
T-1, come in T-1, you're getting  
too close! Pull up now before you  
burn too much fuel!

The T-1 fires its burners, eliciting a panicked "squeeeeeeee"  
from the Tardigrade as they blast off into the distance.

SHALA (CONT'D)  
T-1! Alright Explorers, small  
change in programming today. If I  
had a research grant for every time  
I had to save those little guys....

Our HUD updates with a large green text box: COORDINATES  
RECALIBRATING. TARGET ACQUIRED.

SHALA (CONT'D)  
Hold on Explorers, I've set our  
autopilot to pursuit mode. Hold on  
tight, it may get bumpy!

We feel the G forces as we pull out of Jupiter's  
gravitational field.

SHALA (CONT'D)  
I've engaged evasive maneuvers  
Explorers, there's 70 moons around  
Jupiter, so keep your head on a  
swivel for potential collisions.

We race through space, dodging a couple small asteroids and  
mini moons. A large satellite appears in the distance.

SHALA (CONT'D)  
I'm picking up the T-1. It's on Io,  
one of the Galilean moons.  
Communications are fried on the T-  
1, so we'll have to perform a  
skycrane extraction. Follow me  
explorers, I don't want any more  
separations.

We dive in toward Io's surface. Upon bursting through the  
sulfurous clouds of Io, we see a surface pockmarked with  
teeming volcanoes.

We carve our way through exploding plumes of magma, keeping tight behind Shala. A thumbnail appears containing the Tardigrade selfie view, featuring a scorched Tardigrade holding on tight and squealing as it continues narrowly avoiding eruptions.

SHALA (CONT'D)

There you guys are! How many times have I told you to leave my flight simulations alone!? Prepare for retrieval T-1.

Shala fires her afterburners as she maneuvers in front of the T-1, deploys a skycrane...

SHALA (CONT'D)

Gotcha!

...and reels in the T-1. A bubble of magma appears on the surface between us and Shala.

SHALA (CONT'D)

Watch out!

We pull out to the side, once again feeling the G's as a plume of magma appears next to us.

We drift out and find ourselves in space, floating in an uncanny calm.

SHALA (CONT'D)

Roll call explorers... alright... Looks like we're all present. T-1, sound off.

A series of three squeaks, two normal, one very exhausted, sounds off from Shala's side of the intercom.

SHALA (CONT'D)

Very good. I've put us all on an expedited course for the Red Spot. Let's get this footage and get out of here.

We enjoy a short, rocky burst of a ride until we see the Red Spot appear again.

SHALA (CONT'D)

Hold on tight explorers, here we go.

We tip down into Jupiter's gravity field and rumble our way on an entry path that takes us down into a banking arc around the wall of the Red Spot. Shala races above us to drop a probe that unfurls a parachute after a short free-fall.

SHALA (CONT'D)

Enjoy the view Explorers. We'll rendezvous with the probe at the epicenter of the storm system and make our way out of here. Feel free to take some photos for your own personal Field Journals.

We enjoy a churning red mass of surging storm clouds that erupt with lightning as we explore the perimeter. We're moving in an anticyclone arc, following the elegant flow of this massive storm system. We make our way toward the middle, meeting up with Shala's ship. We see her retrieve the probe as the parachute goes limp and is sucked into her cargo bay like a limp ramen noodle into a mouth.

SHALA (CONT'D)

Alright Explorers, hope you enjoyed the show. We got plenty of footage, so let's get back home.

(aside)

Prepare exit velocity protocols.

Our HUD shows a brief model of a line arcing out of the middle of a short squat cylinder overlaid with a graphic of the Red Spot. Shala blasts off in front of us, but almost immediately we receive a warning.

HUD: FUEL LOW, THRUST LIMITED.

SHALA (CONT'D)

I was worried about this... chasing after the T-1 drained our fuel supply... We have to take a direct exit from the cyclone, hold on!

We make an acute turn and are staring down the wall of the cyclone. Lightning cracks around us and in the distance is a deep, dark, red cloud that rises and billows ominously. We feel the G forces again as we climb steeply up and out of the storm system, Jupiter's heavy gravity weighing on us palpably.

We're racing toward certain doom. The clouds build and swell like a wave about the crash down upon us...

Until Shala races ahead, causing the clouds to part around us with a dramatic swoosh. We barely pass over the cloud as lightning flares around our cockpits.

We find ourselves drifting calmly in space before our HUD displays "REENTRY PROTOCOL INITIATED"

We sail back to Earth as Shala debriefs us.

SHALA (CONT'D)

Great job out there Explorers. One of the most important lessons at the Academy is to be ready for anything. Remember to save your photos in your Field Journal. And I'll be sure to talk to the Tardigrades yet again about risky maneuvers when Recruits are present.

A couple squeaks of protest come from the unseen Tardigrades.

SHALA (CONT'D)

You guys *always* say that after I have to rescue you...

We enter back into the retractable roof of Space Jump as our pods rumble back into place. Text in our HUD says "LANDING COMPLETE. PLEASE REMOVE FLIGHT VISOR".

An attendant gives us a gentle prod to take off our headset if we aren't getting it.

END