

HOW IT FEELS TO BE SWALLOWED BY A BLACK HOLE

Into the unknown.

BY GRETCHEN TESSMER

How does it feel to be swallowed by a black hole? The short answer is: not great.

I suppose there's less stretching than I expected — no rapid, violent pulling apart of life and limb. The ship remains in one piece. So do I. So does Emma, who really deserves to be ripped apart, after skimming us so close to the edge of this black hole in the first place. And Julius, who deserves it even more, because he's always been the one to rein in Emma's recklessness before, and we've come to depend on it. This time around, he failed completely.

But these two are endlessly disappointing. After years of bickering, baiting each other, and indulging in some classic pilot-navigator sexual tension that had the rest of us rolling our eyes and covering our ears, they finally started hooking up on the last trip. Whatever. I don't begrudge the whole 'falling in love' nonsense... unless it leads to me cresting the edge of a black hole and slipping down the other side with the sticky, slow sensation of molasses flowing downhill.

What a god-awful mess.

They say time slows when you enter a black hole. Three hundred thousand years can pass by in three minutes. Maybe. But it certainly doesn't feel like eternity. Unless eternity only needs three minutes to wrap itself up? The whole notion seems terribly anticlimactic.

We stand at the rear window of our ship, all six of us — Emma, Julius, Myreen and the shadow-frequency, Lex Bethel and me — all watching the star-lit rim of the event horizon quickly recede farther and farther from view.

The rim gleams with a fierce strip of blinding light. Stars crest the steep fold in space-time before tipping over the edge and sinking into the same inkwell that our ship plunges into, drowning. The silver-and-gold trim of the hole in space thins the deeper we sink, casting our various skin hues in shades of deep violet.

"We're watching the end of the Universe up there," Lex Bethel remarks from where he leans against the bulkhead doors, corded arms crossed over his broad chest. He says it matter-of-factly, with no hint of wistfulness or fear. He's our engineer and has a reputation of steely nerves to maintain. If this



catastrophe were a little less catastrophic, he might lighten the mood with a joke. I would nod, Emma would smile. The shadow-frequency would hum. Naturally more dour, Julius and Myreen would do absolutely nothing at all.

But no joke follows. Instead, Myreen uses their raspy tenor to say, in a quartet of harmonized voices: "You can't be sure of that. Perception and reality are two very different things."

The shadow-frequency buzzes in the air around Myreen, predictably agreeing with its guardian. Myreen and the shadow-frequency work together seamlessly, in one voice. I would expect no less from a communications officer and their sentient radio.

"It doesn't matter either way. Not to us," Julius mutters, his hand tightening around Emma's as they face the scene outside the window, together... as if holding hands can stave off the doom of sinking into a black hole.

I say nothing. My people are introspective, to the point of losing our ability to speak verbally several generations ago — my mental voice is a by-product of conversations with the shadow-frequency, who watched way too many late-twentieth-century sitcoms as a young, sentient radio. Like, way too many.

But the silence serves my people well, as we're natural data collectors and password/secret-keepers for half the fleet. Despite our child-like appearance,

we're also typically much older than our crewmates, with life spans counted in centuries, not decades. Lex Bethel, with his grey beard and wrinkled laugh lines, is closest to me in age, with only 67 years between us.

Our tendency to silence sells the whole ancient-child with superior knowledge of the Universe 'thing'.

But Emma suddenly breaks off her hand-holding with Julius and turns to me. She asks, "Is this the end, Lysa-child? Is there anything we can do? Can you search your memories to find out what our options are?"

If she thinks I haven't searched and researched the data cluttering up the secondary brain-space stored in my wrists and forearms, she's just being super stupid. Or hopeful. I suppose the line between those two constructs

is about as wide as that gold ring on the rim of this ridiculously deep gash in the cosmos.

I shake my head. But they all look so desperate and child-like in that moment, even Lex Bethel, that I decide I should say something. So I reach out and borrow the shadow-frequency, letting Myreen speak for me.

"The end of the Universe is an illusion. We'll pass through the other side and emerge in new beginnings," Myreen's many voices flicker over my words, both prophetic and mystical. The voices glimmer with unsubstantial hope and pure lies.

My lies soothe them, even if they don't soothe me. We're falling into a black hole. I feel swallowed up, guzzled down the throat of an apathetic god of cold starlight. The sides of this deep well close in. Darkness seeps through the cracks in our ship. If I were to stretch my hand out beyond the ship doors, I would feel the chill of an empty hole — and there's nothing to fill it. Not Myreen's voices or Lex Bethel's laughter. Not even the bickering of Emma and Julius, which, despite the whole 'falling in love' nonsense, suddenly picks up right where they left off.

"I told you to stay to the left of that cluster."

An eternity passes... in just about three minutes. ■

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