

James McGann checked his parsec counter. Twenty-three. He bit his lip and looked around. Chip was frantic. Poor kid. It was his first ride I-GAL and to have your lifepack beeping uncontrollably on your first I-GAL was pretty bad. What the hell could you do about it, McGann thought. Lifepacks beeped or they didn't beep, that was all. If there was anything McGann knew from being an I-GAL hauler it was that your life was in your own hands whether you had a lifepack or not. Sure, they regulated your O2 flow and temperature and made sure your guts didn't explode, but what kind of a man couldn't take a few punches in the gut every now and then.

---Mr McGann! What are we going to do? I'm scared, Mr McGann. I'm really scared.

---Shut up, kid. Stop fiddling around with your pack. I said stop. We're going to be fine. Just trust me.

---I trust you, Mr McGann. But we're going to suffocate! There's no O2.

---What do you mean, no O2? What does it say here? `Low'. Low does not mean empty. Now why would it be low? Maybe because we just passed by the Cryolysis star. And maybe the Cryolysis star just happens to be a cold-fusion star. You thought of that, Chip? And maybe, if you had paid more attention in the academy instead of doing everything you could do to get onto an I-GAL hauler, you would have known that the O2 mods don't work as well in the cold. Once this counter hits twenty-four we'll be fine.

Chip seemed placated. But only slightly. He still looked confused. McGann felt almost disgusted.

---But Mr McGann, why did we have to come this way?

McGann sighed.

---Listen, Chip. We're trying to make good time aren't we? I'm not one of those suckers that takes the Trans-Helial highway. Take that route and if you aren't robbed by an Oontarian clipper you're stuck behind a cruise vessel from Mongra.

Chip nodded. It made sense to him now.

---Sorry, Mr McGann. I understand now. I just panicked, that was all. I never had to worry about my lifepack before - not in real-life, at least.

---Can't learn everything from the sim, kid.

---I know, Mr McGann. Thanks, Mr McGann.

McGann looked at Chip. What a kid. Fourteen earth-years and straight into the haulers, of his own free will. What a kid. Chip's hair was a sandy colour. Reminded him of the ocean. At home on earth the ocean used to roar and crash on the beaches. It was nice at sunset, not as beautiful as the triple-spectrum twilight on Ethiere but beautiful nonetheless.

McGann too left young, at eighteen. He went to the hauling agency out of desperation. With his mother dead two years after his father's disappearance, what else was he going to do?

His mother always said his father had run off to be with an alien. 'Alien' was an insult to any non-earth species, especially Sapioids, and she said the word to rub it in. Dad was with an alien. Officially, Captain McGann was killed when a stray asteroid fragment smashed through his propulsion crystals on a solo black hole research mission. In his last transmission he said he had almost fixed it. But the spacecraft was never found. Authorities concluded that he hadn't repaired the system in time to avoid gravitational drift towards the singularity.

It was a hopeless situation, they said, especially in the circumstances.

Yet Mrs McGann insisted her husband was alive.

---John can fix anything, she said, I know it.

---I'm sorry, ma'am, said the officer. Not even John can escape a black hole.

---O, he'd find a way. I know he would.

Mrs McGann had started to sob.

---If only...if only he loved me. I know he had an alien bitch. He just went to be with her. I know it.

---Ma'am - ma'am, let's not be ridiculous, ma'am.

She spent her final two years miserable and alone. For the first year all she did was talk about black holes and alien bitches and in the second year she did the same, but in a nursing home. It was a pitiful sight. James McGann grimaced at the thought of it. When he had been told the news of her death all he did was nod and say yes. The next day he was at the hauling agency.

The beeping had stopped. The parsec counter read 24.1. Finally, they had passed the Cryolysis star.

---See? Wasn't so bad, was it, kid?

---Yes, Mr McGann.

McGann felt an urge to drink. He got out his bottle of triple-aged Translyrian spirits.

---Have a sip, kid? Not your usual Moon Juice.

Chip hesitated then smiled.

---Yeah, I'd love a sip. Thanks Mr McGann.

He poured two shots and they clinked glasses. They had two fat grins on their faces.

Several months later McGann and Chip were cruising in the Andromeda galaxy when McGann had an idea to cross by the black hole. That would complete their shipment in exactly thirteen-sixteenths of the usual time. And then they could relax in Sapiosa. Sapiosa was filled with naked female Sapioids who reproduced via mitosis. McGann had heard great things about the planet but had never visited. It made him think of his father.

---Look at that, Chip. Isn't it magnificent?

---The black hole, Mr McGann?

McGann put away his plasmotic alcohol converter, which he was about to show to Chip. He was very fond of the converter because it could synthesise alcohol from energy.

---Yes Chip, the black hole. All that matter being sucked in and crushed and thrown out into space...

---I'm scared, Mr McGann. What if we got too close? We wouldn't be able to escape. I don't like that, Mr McGann.

---Shut up, kid. We aren't anywhere near the event horizon. And even then, you wouldn't be doomed.

McGann stared at the revolving mass of dust and gas in the distance. There was a small speck of blue but everything else glowed red due to the violent disintegration of spacetime. From the I-GAL hauler it looked so still and peaceful. Maybe the rumours were true: maybe there was a wormhole at its centre which would take you to the fifth dimension. Assuming you survived the descent. Now how could you do that...

Before long they arrived at the city of Clamaria, in Quadrant Two, Sector Six-Ten of the planet of Sapiosa.

---You're early, said the shipment inspector.

---Yes, said McGann.

The inspector looked hard at McGann and Chip.

---Yes? said McGann.

---It's nothing. You may proceed. I wish you a safe journey back.

---Yes, said McGann.

McGann and Chip nodded at the inspector, turned around, and returned to the hauler.

---Yee-haw! Sapioid time! said Chip.

They were sitting in the back of The Von Clam, one of Clamaria's most reputed dives, sipping contentedly on quadruple-strength Pagorian liquor after several rounds with the female Sapioids.

---You know Chip, said McGann, this is what I call living.

---You're right, Mr McGann, said Chip. I especially liked it when the one I had pulled her leg around and then your one came over with her arms and did the little flip.

---Yep, we're living all right, McGann said with a smile.

---I want to come back here for my fifteenth birthday! said Chip.

---We should have been here for your fourteenth! joked McGann.

---Haha, laughed Chip.

They clinked glasses and downed the shots.

Suddenly, a Sapioid approached McGann.

---O, sorry, said McGann, we already had our time.

---Don't tell her that! joked Chip.

---Haha, good one, laughed McGann.

The Sapioid shook her head.

---No, she said, that's not why I'm here. Actually, I...I saw you from behind the bar and something about your face struck me.

---Yes, I have that effect on women sometimes, said McGann. On Earth, I am reputed to be very, very handsome. I guess the Clamarians think the same way.

---Yessiree! said Chip.

McGann grinned.

---Thanks, kid.

The Sapioid continued.

---Well, what I mean to say is, you remind me of someone I used to know quite well. Someone...I saw very often. In fact, some might have said we were...in love. His name was John.

James McGann put down his drink. He started to feel very warm. His blood was running cold. His heart was racing and pounding on his chest. His hands were clammy with sweat and all the neon lights and chairs of The Von Clam began to

spin.

---Ma'am, and this is very important ma'am...what was his last name?

---His last name?

---GODDAMN IT, LADY, DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH OR NOT?? I NEED YOU TO TELL ME HIS GOD-GIVEN LAST NAME, SURNAME, CLAN NAME, OR TRIBE NAME, WHATEVER THE HELL IT IS YOU USE HERE.

---It began with M...Mick, or something, I don't know for sure anymore, she stammered, sobbing.

---Ma'am, he said very softly, was it...McGann?

---Yes! McGann! That's exactly it! John McGann! O, how I loved him. You're his spitting image.

McGann was speechless.

---Ma'am...John McGann was my father. I am his son. He was the husband of my mother, son of my paternal grandfather and grandmother. Yes, he was the pride of our family. My mother certainly thought so. She loved him very much. It's been sixteen years since he died. She didn't last much longer. I haven't forgotten any of it. In fact, if none of that had happened, maybe I would've stayed on Earth. Maybe I would've sailed the seas, instead of this crazy empty universe. Hell, maybe I'd be swimming with dolphins. Damn cute, they are, dolphins. But no. All I could think of during those years was hauling. So I went I-GAL. And here I am.

---But...John never said he had a family...he told me he was a traveller...

---What a rake! said Chip.

---Shut up, kid, you're drunk, said McGann.

---If John died sixteen years ago...then that must mean...he died just after I last saw him. He said was going to see the black hole of this galaxy. I suppose he never made it. Maybe an accident or something.

The Sapioid had stopped crying by now. She wiped away her tears and held out her hand. McGann shook it.

---Anyway, that's all past, she said. No use looking back, right?

---No, ma'am. No use looking back.

---My name is Rawunza, by the way. Come back any time.

---Very good to meet you Rawunza. I'm sorry about bringing all this up.

---O, forget about it. Just seeing you has made my day. You really do look just like him.

---My mom used to say the same thing.

---Say, you don't think...no, nevermind.

---What are you trying to say, ma'am?

---Well, John and I had a son and he shipped the baby to Earth. I never knew what happened to the boy. It's probably not you though. Haha, what a thought.

---Haha, laughed McGann.

---But that's enough of that. How about another round, boys?

---Sure thing! said Chip and McGann.

Rawunza turned back to the bar.

---Girls! she said. Get over here! There's some unfinished business...

The entire journey back, McGann could not stop thinking about his father and Rawunza. Jeez, was she hot. No wonder the Captain went for her. And to think she was the last being to have seen him before the black hole...the same one they were just now passing.

Chip suddenly cried out.

---Mr McGann! Look! There's a blue thing near the black hole! I think it's...a spaceship!

McGann looked out of the window. It was the same blue speck he had seen earlier, but it was closer now. He pulled out his rangeoscopic aggrandiser to look in more detail.

---You're right, kid. It's a spaceship.

---What are we going to do Mr McGann? Should we rescue them?

---Could be dangerous, kid. Besides, we don't even know if they need help. Might not be at the event horizon.

---But Mr McGann! How do you know for sure?

---Well, kid, I don't. And I'm not risking my life for these dumb tourists. Only an idiot would get so close.

---I bet you're scared.

---No, I'm not.

---Scaredy-cat! Scaredy-cat!

---Shut up, kid.

---McGann's a little pussy! McGann's a little pussy!

---I said shut up!

---McGann is just an orphan, while I have a mom and dad!

There was a loud slap and thunk as Chip's head hit the control panel, which cracked from the impact.

The fourteen-year-old was unconscious.

He was bleeding and blood trickled from his head onto the electronics and pooled on the floor.

McGann sat in silence. He felt warm and slightly damp in his forehead and armpits. His hand stung from where he had hit Chip. He did not regret it.

Suddenly from circuitry in the depths of the controllers there emerged a bright spark and the smell of burnt plastic. The ship began beeping.

Maximum emergency acceleration initiated. All fuel dumped into the ion blaster. No going back.

Typically used for escaping a black hole.

Except now, he was going.

Towards.

It.

In this moment McGann knew he was going to die, and whatever regrets he may have had, thumping Chip was not one of them. He lay back, pulled down his trousers, and thought back to Sapiosa and all the beautiful Sapioids. With his free hand he pushed Chip to the ground and rummaged under the control panel for his Translyrian spirits and plasmotic alcohol converter, which had produced a decent amount of juice.

Tasted so good, the drinks. Outside, so pretty. Yum. Dead in a hole. Just like dad. Rawunza. Lost two guys. Same way. Ra. Wun. Za. Raw. Unza. Rawunza. What an incredibly luscious, illuminated, euphoric, ecstatic way to go.

McGann lay back and closed his eyes and slept so profoundly that he did not notice the blue spaceship as it approached from behind and activated its magnetoionic vaccuumbtether, attaching itself to McGann's hauler, and pushing it away from the black hole until there was no more danger of being sucked in.

There was loud knock on the window which woke McGann from his slumber. A man was standing outside and grinning. He was around McGann's age and had a striking resemblance to him. Outside, it looked like the spacecraft hangar of The Von Clam. McGann depressurised the hauler and opened the doors. The man walked in.

---So! said the man. Full speed into a black hole! What are you, suicidal?

---I don't understand, said McGann.

---Nor do I. What exactly is going on here? Is that your son? Is he hurt?

---My son? No, this is my...co-pilot. His name is Chip. He...hit his head.

---Looks pretty young for I-GAL. How old is he?

---Nineteen. He hit his head and I was trying to reach a medic. It was a serious injury, you see. I went full speed and must have taken a wrong turn.

---You're naked and I see you finished a bottle of Lyrian and a bottle of plas-con.

---Yes. Is there a problem?

---I could have you arrested, you know.

---On what charges?

---The obvious. Not downing TWO bottles of Lyrian!

McGann and the man broke into hearty laughter.

---What's your name? asked the man.

---James. James McGann. Where are we, by the way?

---We're in Sapiosa. But hold on. My name's McGann too, John McGann. I named my son James. Are you trying to put me on or something?

---You're Captain John McGann? Earth Quadrant Two, Sector Five-Three? I'm his son!

---But...how...

---How did you...

---My son is a young boy!

---You're supposed to be dead!

They fell silent.

---It's not possible, said James.

---It's absurd, said John.



---One of us is lying.

---It's certainly not me.

There was noise of footsteps and they turned around. It was Rawunza.

---Sweet mother of Clamar! exclaimed Rawunza. John, is that you? And you, James? O, I could faint.

---Rawunza! cried James and John.

---James...five years since I last saw you...which means...twenty-one years since you died, John. O, John, my love! Are you real? Kiss me!

John stepped towards Rawunza and grabbed her breasts with both of his hands. She sighed and he moved his lips towards her and they kissed long and slow.

---Awesome! said Chip, who had regained consciousness.

---But I don't understand, said McGann.

---What? asked Chip.

---Rawunza said it's been five years, but we were just here a few days ago. And my father, how can he be alive?

---It's simple, said Chip. Captain McGann must have been orbiting the black hole all this time. Because of the gravitational time dilation effects, as predicted by special relativity, he perceived just a few days to have passed by, which for an outside observer would have meant twenty-one years. We must have accelerated close enough into the black hole and orbited it with him for long enough that we were away for an equivalent of five years.

---I see, said James.

John and Rawunza were making out passionately against the walls of the I-GAL hauler.

---Well, Chip, said James.

---Yes, Mr McGann?

---Looks like we got to get ourselves a new hauler.

---Sure thing, Mr McGann.

---And dad?

---Yes, son? said John, slightly out of breath.

---How about we go home? Back to Earth, I mean. Have a swim with the dolphins, you know.

Rawunza gazed at John with tender loving eyes. He returned the gaze and kissed her again.

---Thanks, son, but no thanks. I think I'll stay here in Sapiosa for now. I'll catch you on the intergalactic highway. But no more black holes!

James and John chuckled.

---Then see you on the road, dad. C'mon, Chip, let's go.

---Yee-haw! Sapioid time! said Chip.

Chip bounded out of the old hauler and into The Von Clam. McGann walked slowly down the ramp and looked back at his father and Rawunza one last time. They were on the floor, heaving. He turned around, took a step down, and continued walking.