

## It's Complicated

"Normal gravity's for losers. Doing things the hard way is more fun," Zoe said. Moments later a stick of bamboo bonked into her head. A panda floated after it.

"Well, unless you want to complain to the captain, and shortly thereafter become the first person to attempt to enter a dark hole sans spacesuit..." Ralph said as Zoe ducked. The panda drifted past, snacking. "Keep it to yourself."

"Some of these animals can barely survive when they're standing on their own legs," Zoe said. A few of the younger pandas cartwheeled, and she tickled a soft tummy. The motion pushed them apart. "I wonder what they're thinking. Are they scared?"

Far above their heads, a panda rebounded off a bulkhead of the station's massive dome, unperturbed.

"Hand me the five-sixteenths wrench." The tool floated into Ralph's grasp. "As long as the gravity generators don't lose power, all of these animals will be back on their feet just like nature intended." He paused. "You should probably get them down to ground-level."

Zoe corralled the pandas. After a few minutes Ralph closed the panel he had been working in, and the gravity generator for the panda enclosure gained power. He hovered his thumb over the on switch. "Ready?"

"I almost don't want you to turn it on." Zoe floated near the floor, cross-legged, a panda child in each arm. "They're just so adorable," she said. She made kissy lips at one of them. "Aren't you adorable? Aren't you?"

It vomited undigested bamboo onto her.

#

"Become a space zookeeper, they said. See the galaxy, they said. Use your majors in animal sciences and astrophysics, they said." Zoe stood with her hands under the hot water jet. "They should have mentioned panda vomit in the brochure."

Ralph shrugged, floating in the doorway. "You get used to it."

"I shouldn't have to get used to zero-g bamboo barf." Zoe shut off the tap as the sink vacuumed the water down. "Any kind of barf, really."

"At least it wasn't one of the big cats. Try seeing that knowing the mess hall is serving chili."

Zoe stuck out her tongue. Ralph pushed himself into the hallway scrolling through his pad.

"That's all set. Now we need to go below-deck and double check the breakers on the power units attached to the gravity generators. If one of those things shorts out, our lives will get a lot more hectic."

"More hectic than floating pandas?"

"The generator is also attached to the enclosure fields. If it gets overloaded, we've suddenly got animals floating around the station." Ralph raised an eyebrow at her. "Not just pandas or big cats. Everything except the aquarium. If you think pandas aren't suited to zero-g, imagine birds, who are under the impression they should be able to fly, but can't."

Zoe wiped her hands on her jumpsuit. "You can go first."

Floating down a hatch, they entered the dark and dingy underbelly of the space station zoo. Work lights cast sharp shadows from pipes and wires, and assorted animal sounds drifted down as they wound their way through the labyrinth.

"I didn't know I would be doing so much mechanical work on this job," Zoe said. "That wasn't in the brochure either. To be honest, there wasn't very much at all in the brochure."

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"What did it have?"

"Pictures of animals." Zoe ducked under a large, sooty pipe. "How much I'd earn. And all the places I'd be visiting if I joined."

"Was the event horizon of black hole B22-J27 one of them?"

"It was not."

"Well then," Ralph said, as they rounded a corner. "It sounds like you're getting even more than you were promised. Here she is."

They stood in front of an immense device. Wires exited and entered it from every direction, panels of readouts blinked over keyboards, and huge pipes, spiraling out in all directions, plugged into one end. "This is the generator for the enclosures, currently acting as a backup for the artificial gravity."

"Seems a little bit like asking for it to have the same generator powering both of those things," Zoe said. Ralph squinted at her. "If it goes down there's chaos. If there are two smaller generators, and only one of them goes down, it's much more manageable. Plus the wattage..."

"Little miss smarty-pants here," Ralph said. "Do you have an electrical engineering degree, too?"

"I do."

Ralph wrinkled his brow. "What kind of college did you go to?"

"Jupiter Station. Our mascot was the moons. Which is fine unless the frats get drunk. What's the plan?"

"It's simple." Ralph laid a hand on the immense, vibrating generator. "We run a test current for all of the different fuses. We monitor the fuses for fluctuations and replace them if they're out of the acceptable range."

"But wouldn't that..."

"Zoe." Ralph put his hands on her shoulders, shaking her. "I know you have a six-pack of big fancy degrees from Big Fancy University, but I've been doing this for thirty years. You look way too young to be down here if I'm being completely honest. What are you, twelve? Never mind, it doesn't matter. My job is to teach you, but it's also my job to make sure a black hole doesn't pulverize this place into a single atom. So I want you to trust me that I know how to do my job. Can you do that?"

"I think so. I mean, yes sir," Zoe said as her head wobbled forward and back in the weightlessness.

"Good. There will be plenty of time to answer all of your questions after we're done here, but this is a big job, and it will take us a while, and if we don't do it right-" Ralph pointed above their heads. "Have you ever seen a camel fly? We want them to stay on the ground, where at least they won't hurt anything else."

An elephant trumpeted above them, over the din of the machines.

After checking the fuses, he led her to a machine big enough to house numerous families. "This is our gravitator. Don't say the name too much, it might make you hungry." Zoe frowned but Ralph continued. "This is...it creates the gravity. Yes, you're right, gravity isn't a substance you can produce, it's a force," he said as Zoe opened her mouth. "Well, that's where you're wrong. I mean, you're right, but you're also wrong. Like a news anchor."

He slapped the machine, and floated a bit. "As you can see, the gravitator does not work at the moment. It's the black hole. It does stuff to gravity."

"Oh, I learned all about black holes at JSU. Did you know that once you're inside the event horizon, all directions point further inside? And..."

"If the gravitator was working, it would produce the gravity, and send it throughout the zoo, using these pipes here." He tapped one. "These gravitational particles adhere to everything in the

station, trapping them together." He linked his fingers and gripped them, locking his hands tight.

Zoe narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. Ralph shrugged. "All right, I'm not really sure how it works. It makes the gravity and it doesn't work right now because of the black hole. It's complicated."

#

"At least I can do this," Zoe said to herself. One of the zebras ambled up and nudged her. She shoved a bag of oats over its snout, and munching sounds soon issued forth. She sighed, and slapped her heavy gloves on the ground. "Makin' fun of me just because I got an education. Significantly more education. What are you, twelve?" she said, mimicking Ralph's voice. She picked up a broom and started sweeping. "No, no, I shouldn't be like that. Remember what it was like, Zoe. At least he's talking to you."

When she finished sweeping she dislodged the food bags from the zebras. She began to brush, the zebras, talking as she did so, filling the quiet enclosure with wandering one-sided conversation.

When she locked the enclosure, she occupied a small space between the flashing blue lines marking the enclosure--not even the strongest animals could push past the beams of energy--and one of the station walls. She walked until she got to a window. Most of the time when she found herself looking out a window, distant white dots glittered. Stars, millions of lightyears away, quiet and alone. Sometimes a closer body, such as a planet or moon. Here, nothing but a void, an absence, a lack. The black hole the station traveled past presented an empty canvas, sucking anything too close inside--light, gravity, time. She pressed her face against the window and tilted her head, smushing the right side against the glass and looking past the sucking void at the event horizon.

Normal space glittered beyond the razor-thin strip of space between death and life. Light warped, smearing into knives of starlight. Where time meant nothing and space became pointless.

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Someone cleared her throat behind her. Pulling her flattened face away from the window, she spun around. Captain Dush, a short, compact, middle-aged man, stood with his hands linked behind his back. He wore an officer's uniform.

Zoe coughed. "Captain!" She saluted, bringing the blade of her hand against her forehead with too much speed.

"Miss Jaia," the captain said as Zoe rubbed her head. "Enjoying the view?"

"Not particularly, sir. It's just all black. At least it's a window."

"Of course. Usually it's a bit more interesting. How has your first week been?"

"Busy, sir. Learning everything has taken up most of my time."

"Your record seems to indicate learning is something you do very well. Animal sciences, physics, Greek literature, macroeconomics, ethnomusicology. The list goes on. Enjoyed your time at Jupiter?"

"Not particularly, sir. Uh, but sir, the details of my time there are a bit different than most..."

Dush waved a hand, and Zoe halted halfway through the next word. "Stroll with me, Miss Jaia?"

She floated after him. "I and the other officers couldn't help but wonder why the only person from Jupiter's STE project elected to become a zookeeper." They passed the bonobo enclosure, and the captain stopped, rotating a crisp ninety degrees to look inside. The lines of energy keeping the animals out obstructed the viewing little. "You could have built warp engines. You could have joined the far-reaches investigators. You could have become the world's premiere name in a dozen hard sciences all at once. You could have discovered an element and named it after yourself. So why, Miss Jaia, do you don a green coverall and mop up animal droppings, and then on the same day get your hands covered in grease while making sure the backup gravity generators keep our precious cargo on the ground?"

Zoe tapped her index fingers together. "It's a bit complicated, sir."

"Complication lives inside the mind, Miss Jaia." Captain Dush tilted his head up. "Is there a way to explain it in five words?"

"I don't believe so, sir."

"Think on it. You may be surprised." The captain turned away from her and drifted forward. She followed. "Mister Hendriks tells me you were asking about the gravitator. A complicated problem." He spun to face her; she bumped into him, unable to stop her momentum. He ignored the contact. "You may find most things are complicated, when you stop to think about them. You, surely, are well-suited to unraveling complications. If you have time, go down and see if you can work out the details of the gravitator on your own."

The captain glanced at his watch. "I'm afraid I have an appointment. Welcome to the zoo, Miss Jaia."

The station light's programmed dimming--signaling night--began as Zoe locked up the enclosure for the rhinos. She floated to her small bedroom, squeezed between two bulkheads, near the alligators.

She sat on the edge of her bed. The taut covers could bounce her against the ceiling. She hadn't used the bed yet. During the station's night she read, listened to music, or wandered the somewhat quieter zoo, leaning against the bars and talking at the nocturnal animals. Now she sat and thought. After a few minutes, she exited her room, floating into the hallway.

She checked out a manual from the records room and then pulled herself down into the sharp shadows of below-decks, machinery clanking or whirring away. She floated down the same path Ralph had led her on, past a few cussing night-shift engineers, and arrived in front of the silent gravitator.

A few lights winked at her in erratic intervals. She pulled close to it and arranged herself into a

cross-legged posture. She stared at it, drifting.

Rubbing the spot, she opened the manual. An hour later she closed the back cover.

It should be working. The right amount of power reached it. The computer said the mechanical components worked. Still it did nothing. It sat idle, in between a water purifier and a bundle of fiber optic cables similar to a glowing anaconda orgy, taking up what must have been half an acre with nothing to show for it. She floated laps around it, getting to know it like she had sculpted it at Jupiter. Every angle, every hollow, every curve, every bulge.

She twiddled her bottom lip. Ralph said the black hole disrupted it. She unhooked a flexible tube, finding a dark grate and additional darkness beyond.

She lifted the grate off and stuck her head inside, and then her vision became a ring of blurry, smudged faces.

"Miss, can you hear us?" one of them asked. The blur faded, and the smudge turned out to be oil. All the night-shift engineers, to a man, hunched over her, hands on their knees, worry creasing their faces. "Are ya all right?"

"I...think so?" She coughed, and tried to rise. Something kept her down. "What's on top of me? Something's on top of me."

Confusion replaced worry, and they looked at each other, their heads swiveling over her. "Nothing, miss. We didn't want to touch ya, coulda been hurt."

"I feel okay. What happened?"

"I was closest," one of them said. "I heard an almighty commotion, thought maybe the gravitator had turned on, and came as fast I could. Found you lyin' on the ground. Looked like you'd been kicked by a colt."

"Kinda feels like it." Zoe lifted her head. Her neck hurt. Nothing kept her down. She tried to lift



her arms. "I think I'm gravitized."

"Kenson, go get Needles," one of the engineers said.

"No, no, no need for Needles," Zoe said. "I'm sure it's just...static electricity." She pushed herself up, and the blood rushed out of her head, pitching her forward. "Nope, that's gravity," she said, mouth against the floor. The engineers drifted above her. "Fine. Take me to Needles."

#

"Peculiar," Needles said.

Zoe sat on the cold examination table, hair stuck out in every direction. Before she had undone her ponytail, it had stood on end. Needles--a pale, hairless man--floated in front of her with one hand on his chin. Ralph and Captain Dush floated behind him. "Yeah, I'll say."

"Be so kind as to tell us what happened," Dush said.

"I went down to the gravitator to look at it. I was sort of...fiddling with it, and got knocked out. The engineers woke me up, and now I'm here."

"And you happen to have your own personal gravity," Dush said. "Most of you. You are moving about the ship as if the gravitator works, yet it doesn't."

Zoe shrugged.

"Zoe, why were you messing with the gravitator?" Ralph asked. "You don't know anything about it!"

"I read the manual."

"The manual is five hundred and eleven pages!" Zoe spread her hands.

"Doctor," Dush said, rotating his body toward Needles. "Are there any possible complications?"

"Well, yes, actually. Heart failure, organ damage, muscle damage, a change in bone density. Quite a few."

Dush sighed. "I mean other than the normal effects of gravity."

"Oh. Then no. As far as I know, gravity particles are entirely harmless. You could eat a bowl of them for breakfast every day, and nothing would happen to you at all."

"I see." Dush turned back to Zoe. "Is there any discomfort? Strange sensations?"

"No sir."

"Everything seems to be in order," Dush said. He floated away, and the door sighed shut after he left. Needles regarded her again.

"Would it be all right if you stayed until lightup? We've never had anyone receive such a concentrated dose of gravitator particles. As far as I know they are perfectly harmless, but one is never sure."

Zoe looked at Ralph, who nodded. "I guess so," she said to Needles. "I'll need something to do, though. I don't really sleep."

"Insomnia? I have a few things I can give you. None of the strong stuff though, that's just for surgeries. And parties."

"I mean I...don't sleep. Ever."

Needles pursed his lips. "I assume this is unrelated to the aforementioned dose of gravitator particles. Why is it?"

Zoe sighed. She tried to smooth her hair back, but it sprang up again, every strand standing straight up from her scalp. "It's complicated."

Ralph excused himself. Needles crossed one leg over the other in the weightlessness and gestured toward her. "Still a few hours left until lightup."

#

"And you haven't slept since Jupiter?" Needles said, hours later. He yawned. Zoe nodded, and

her floating hair swayed. "Very interesting. They shut the project down, I heard. Related?"

"A direct consequence of my...me." Zoe sat up straight. "I don't mind it too much. It took some time to get used to it, but think of how much you could get done if you didn't have to sleep."

"Yes." Needles looked up at the ceiling. "Think of the naps." He checked his wristwatch. "Almost lightup. Feel any different?"

"Not a bit."

"Wonderful. You're free to go. If anything strange happens, see me without delay. In the meantime I'll contact some of my colleagues in the medical profession and see if they know of any further research into gravitator particles."

Zoe walked back to her room, running her hands through her hair over and over, feeling it pop back into place with each pass. She weaved between the animal enclosures, going down one of the main avenues. An elephant trumpeted as she went by, and a voice called after her. She turned, but no one else occupied the path. The elephant trumpeted again, and the voice called again.

She shut her eyes and squeezed the bridge of her nose, then looked into the elephant enclosure.

One of the elephants trundled up to her. The rest of the herd stirred on the other side of the enclosure.

The elephant's big eye rotated toward her. "Hey Zoe, 'sup. What's with the hair?"

Zoe closed her eyes again and put her hands on her hips. She tilted her head down and shifted from foot to foot. "Is the elephant talking to me?"

"I don't see any other pachyderms around here. Something up? You're acting strange."

Zoe pressed a fist to her forehead, then to her mouth, then opened it flat, then pointed her index finger, then curled it back into a fist and pumped it, grimacing and shaking her head. She leaned toward the elephant. "What?"

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"What?"

"What?!"

"Zoe, you're acting weird," the elephant said.

"It's happened," she said. "I've finally cracked. They all said I should try to sleep anyway, but I didn't listen to them." She put a finger to her lips. "Maybe I could sue."

"Ey, Zoe." She whirled, toward the antelope enclosure.

"Great," she said. "Someone saw me crack and now it's a one-way ticket from the space farm to the funny farm." Again, no one stood on the path, but one of the antelopes gazed through the energy bars.

"You doin' okay?" It had a Jersey accent. "Yu, somethin' going on over here? What's with the hair?"

"Dunno," the elephant said. "She's kinda creepin' me out."

Zoe shrieked, bringing her hands to her ears, trapping a few strands of hair between them and her head. They muffled the elephant's trumpet.

"Zoe, what in gawd's name are you doin'?" the antelope asked.

A human appeared. Tina, one of the zookeepers, floated around the corner of the enclosure, eyes wide. "Zoe? Was that you screaming?" She inspected her. "How are you standing? And what happened to your hair?"

"It's complicated. Animals talking. In human voices."

Tina tilted her head away, mouth hanging open.

"That's what's got her wound up?" the elephant said. "I talk to her all the time! Do you talk to her, Jed?"

"Of course I talk to her!"

Zoe motioned from one animal to the other, then to Tina, then to herself, then back to the animals, then to Tina again.

"Are you getting enough sleep, Zoe?" Tina asked.

"She doesn't need sleep, Tina. You know, you should get to know your co-workers better."

"The elephant just said something to you," Zoe said.

"Noooooooooo...it didn't...." Tina said, glancing at the elephant.

"What? Yes I did!"

"He did," the antelope said. "I heard him."

"And the antelope too," Zoe said.

"That's it, I'm taking you to see Needles." Tina propelled herself forward. "And I'm getting you some hair ties."

"Jed, I don't think she can hear us."

"I don't need to see Needles! I'm fine! I just spent all of lightdown with Needles! I got hit by a bundle of gravitator particles and I told him about time-traveling through college!"

#

An hour later she stood in front of the elephant enclosure again. Tina, Needles, Captain Dush, Ralph, and a few other onlookers stood near her. They floated while she stood on two feet. Needles poised to write, pen against paper and shoulders hunched. Zoe's hair floated in tied wads.

"Well?" Zoe said to the elephant. "Don't say silent now!"

Needles began to write.

The elephant waggled its trunk. "What do you want me to say?"

"They think I'm crazy!" Zoe said. "I need to prove I'm not! How about this--you tell *me* what you're going to do, I tell *them*, then you do it."

"Clever girl," the elephant said. "Alrighty. I'm going to spin a full rotation clockwise, trumpet, then rotate counterclockwise." Zoe told them.

"Incredible," Needles said, writing. Ralph blinked in surprise, and Tina held a dozen hair ties as she scrunched her face. Captain Dush frowned.

"Okay, okay." Zoe rubbed her face. "We need to bring it home. What's something really off-the-wall you could do?"

"What do you want me to do, dance a jig?"

Zoe stared inside the enclosure. "Could you?"

"No!" The elephant looked around. "Aha! I'll pick up that twig there with my trunk, drop it in front of me, and stomp on it."

"You can talk to animals," Ralph said, after the elephant had done so.

"We thought everyone could talk to us! This has sent a shockwave through the zoo! The gorillas are inconsolable!"

"I don't expect this to stay between us," Captain Dush said to those around him, "but try to respect Miss Jaia's privacy as we figure this out. Zoe, if you would accompany me to my statesroom."

#

Zoe stood in the center of the wide window in the wall of the captain's statesroom, the black hole's void in front of her. Behind her, Captain Dush sat at the rectangular table. Zoe smoothed her hair down, and the bunches sprang back up.

"Maybe I should get some sleep," she said, turning away from the window.

"I have heard it does help the mind deal with problems. However, I doubt this will help us find an explanation. Time-travel, your own personal gravity, and now communication with animals. What other wondrous secrets do you hide, Zoe?"

"Dunno," Zoe said, sitting across from him.

"Zoe."

"What?" Zoe said, looking up from her crossed arms.

Dush raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"You said my name."

"I did not."

"Oh for-" Zoe stood up again, running her arms in circles, breathing in and out. "I could have sworn I heard someone say my name."

Even the captain's subtle face wrinkled in confusion. "I heard nothing. Perhaps one of the animals?"

"It sounded pretty close."

"Perhaps a bit of rest is in order," Dush said. "Have you spoken to...friends recently? I'm sure they would like to hear how you're doing."

"You think I have space madness, don't you?"

"I said no such thing."

"Zoe."

Zoe whipped her head around. "Who said that?"

"I did."

It came from behind her. She spun toward the window, and the circle of nothing around the black hole. "Hello."

Zoe ran out of ways to show exasperation. "Captain, it seems the black hole is speaking to me."

"Miss Jaia." The captain floated up from his chair, fingertips resting on the table, gazing ahead with hard eyes. "I suggest you attempt to pull my other leg. I have attached bells to it."

Zoe pressed her forehead against the window, shutting her eyes. "Mr. Black Hole, how are you talking to me?" Nothing came. "I really am losing my mind, aren't I? I have space madness. Lunacy, in its original form. I'm gazing into the abyss and the abyss wants to have a conversation." She looked at the captain. "Requesting permission to have a mental breakdown, sir."

"Permission denied, Jaia."

Zoe pressed her back against the window and slid down until her butt touched her heels.

"I don't get to talk to anyone."

A tremor ran through the station. Zoe rolled away from the wall, though it didn't affect the captain.

"Usually it's just empty out here. I was glad someone came so close."

"It's still talking to me, captain. I...I think it's lonely." The station shook again.

"Engineering, what's happening?" Dush said into his wristwatch. A small voice responded a few moments later. "The station has stopped moving," he told Zoe.

"Is that all they can say?"

"If you'd like to put your engineering degree to use, you may join them. However, it seems as if we have...." He looked out the window. "Bigger problems."

"I can't let you go now. I want someone to talk to." A third tremor, much stronger than the first two, bounced Zoe against the wall. "I just want someone to talk to."

A crackle of power, like someone slapping an electric fence with a guitar, burned through her. Zoe clamped her hands over her ears and made a face in the captain's direction. He made a face back.

"Please talk to me."

Zoe cried out, going to her knees and putting her forehead against the tough carpet. "Stop shouting! Stop shouting! I think I'm getting a nosebleed!"



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"I'm sorry."

Zoe took a few deep breaths, wiping the tears out of her eyes. "That's better." She stood and looked at the black hole. She tried to find the center. "What's your name?" There was no answer. "Are you an animal?"

The captain spoke into his wristwatch.

"How old are you? Are you the black hole?" Zoe leaned forward, placing her palms on the windowsill. "Most conversations have two people."

"Don't get angry."

"Can you answer any of my questions?"

Nothing happened. Zoe, still feeling the effects of the harsh vocals only she could hear, let her head rest against the window. After a minute, a response came. "I don't know what I am."

"What do you mean?"

"Zoe," the captain said. "If you would be so kind as to relate the conversation to me."

"I'm just...here," the black hole said. "I hear so much. I hear everything."

"Can you see?"

"In a way."

"Are you the black hole?"

"I am surrounded by a dense nothing."

"I'm pretty sure it's the black hole," Zoe said to the captain. His wristwatch chirped. She turned back to the window. "Can you let us go?"

"I finally have someone to talk to. Do you know what it's like to have nobody at all to talk to?"

Zoe screwed up her face. "Yeah. If we talk about it, will you let us go?"

"No."

Zoe looked behind her, but the captain discussed something with his wristwatch. "What do I have to do for you let the station go?"

She recognized the heavy pause. Like when the captain had asked her why she worked as a zookeeper, the black hole hunted for an answer.

"If the station stays here, we won't last long," she said. "We need to get more supplies. There are a lot of animals on board who won't be able to survive."

"Zoe," the captain said. "The station is losing power. It's doing something to our systems."

"You stop it right now!" Zoe said, pointing a finger out the window. Some of the lights in the room flickered and dimmed. "Turn the power back on or I'll stop talking to you!" The lights stopped diminishing.

"Don't get angry."

"We still have power but we're low," the captain said.

"If you take our power away," Zoe hoped to make every slow word count "We will die, and you will have no one to talk to."

Another short period of searching silence. "Zoe."

"That's my name, don't wear it out."

A third, much shorter period. "Can that happen?"

"It's just a saying."

"...I will let you go if you come out and talk to me."

"I can't do that. You'll suck me in."

"No."

"Yes."

"Don't get angry."

The lights flickered and exploded over her head. A fierce tremor sent the station spinning. The captain's wristwatch shouted.

"Zoe, several systems have overloaded. The animals' gravity is shut off, and their enclosures have opened up."

"Black hole," Zoe said. "You need to give us our power back."

"Come out and talk to me."

"I can't do that. It goes against the laws of physics."

"You have your own gravity," the black hole said. "I won't be able to do anything to you."

Zoe told the captain what it had said. "I refuse to allow you to do such a thing," he said.

"Stepping outside the station this close to the black hole--even if we didn't now possess the knowledge it is some sort of living creature--is foolhardy at best, a station-wide death warrant at worst." He paused. "That is what I would have said, had it not just crippled us. The decision is up to you."

Zoe looked out at the emptiness. She imagined having no one to talk to for hundreds, thousands, millions of years. She stared at it for a very, very long time, though only a few seconds passed. "Your time will not be our time," she said to herself. She nodded.

"Then we had better get going," the captain said. "We have to get across the station."

"I'll be waiting."

They stepped outside the stateroom to find a thousand species of animals floating through the zoo. Zoe's mouth hung open. Then the animals noticed she stood among them, and they all started shouting.

"Whoa, whoa!" she tried to yell over her private din. "One at a time!"

"Hi Zoe!" a duckling quacked as it floated past, wings floundering. "Can you help me? I don't want to be in the air but I am!"

She tucked it under her arm. It snuggled up next to her. "You're warm."

"Thanks, duck," she said. "Animals of the zoo!" she called, as loud as she could. "Unless I go and talk to the black hole, we will all die!" She grimaced at herself. "I have to get to the front of the zoo as quickly as I can!"

A wild mustang, legs pinwheeling and head whipping back and forth, floated over her head.

"Anyone?"

"Zoe!" A deep voice came from over her head. The ever-shifting ranks of the animal kingdom revealed a silverback gorilla waving both arms, hanging on to the inner hull of the station with his feet.

"To me! We shall ride to freedom!"

"Can you get down here?"

"I will try, friend!" it said. It worked its way down.

"Perhaps you could just walk," Captain Dush said to Zoe. The next moment a water buffalo bounced off the ground in front of them.

"Zoe!" Zoe looked up. An elephant, lounging in the zero gravity, loomed. "Yu!"

"Let's get you to Chunky, girl." Yu said. His trunk wrapped around her waist. "Pardon me. No need to fear, Zoe. You're perfectly safe."

"That's what they told me at Jupiter, too." The gorilla seized her. "Careful with those hands."

Chunky climbed up the inner dome, above most of the animals. The gorilla roared and pounded his chest with his free fist. "Clear a path! Make way for she who hears!" He roared again, and a tunnel pointing to the front of the zoo opened up as animals helped each other out of the way. "Years ago I carried my children this way," Chunky said, whispering to her. His wide chest filled with air. "Now this alpha soars."

He stuck out his jaw, squeezed Zoe close--she squeezed the duckling close--and pushed off

from the rafters, making for the floor. They raced past the silent animals, gaining speed. Animals following in their wake; Chunky the gorilla lead a banner of beasts through the air of the weightless zoo, the whole animal kingdom in flight behind him. Zoe screamed, hair pulled out behind her, and the duckling flapped its wings in her grasp.

The ground neared. Zoe's gravity drew them down, and Chunky landed on his feet and free hand, jarring Zoe. He set her on her feet and gave her a gentle push toward the zoo's entrance.

She stumbled into a room full of deflated space suits, attached to hooks. Bulbous helmets floated above each suit. She stood with her knees pressed together and shoulders slumped, a cacophony behind her. She smacked her lips, trying to get moisture back into her mouth.

"Zoe!" Ralph floating in. "The captain just contacted me. You're really going out there? Are you crazy? Why do you have a duck?"

She let the duckling go. "I guess?"

"But why?"

Zoe grimaced. "It's complicated. The black hole demanded it." The station shifted under her feet, and the lights flickered. "Help me into one of these."

She zipped into a suit, guiding her wild tentacles of hair into the helmet and snapping it in place. "Feel alright?" he asked, through her radio.

"Fine."

"The captain says to make sure you have a tether on you."

"If I get sucked in be sure to cut it."

Ralph frowned. "Zoe..."

"I don't want to risk all of you--not to mention the animals. Ralph...thank you. I know you read my file. You could have treated me like some kind of freak, but you didn't. Not a lot of people have

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treated me normal, not since Jupiter."

"What, just 'cause you did some weird stuff in college?" Ralph swatted his hand down. "You come back, you hear?"

"Yes sir."

#

The second airlock opened.

Her feet stuck to the floor of the airlock even without air around her. Her arms still felt heavy; her floating hair obstructed her view, and she shook her head to clear it.

The black hole drifted in front of her. No stars to indicate position. Stepping up to the edge of the airlock, she detected the warped, silver edge, where light from stars began to shred. The black hole welcomed her, a limitless, lidless eye.

She leapt out of the airlock, expecting to float, but her gravity brought her down. Her feet landed on hard nothing. She took a step forward, walking as if back at Jupiter. The spacesuit didn't hinder her. She advanced, the only sound her pounding heart, feet connecting with a floor hers alone.

"Is this close enough?" she asked the emptiness, after a few minutes of walking. The tether could have pulled her back in an instant, yet she had to concentrate to keep from losing her mind.

"Yes."

The voice buzzed with static. Zoe winced, and nodded. "What do you want to talk about? Do you have a family? Friends? Are there any...girl black holes?"

No response came. Zoe blew air out and glanced at her oxygen supply. It still read a hundred percent. "Well, here I am. Will you power the station back up now? Uh, Ralph, you should probably get the animals back to the ground."

"I..."

Zoe leaned forward. Static grew in her ears; she pressed her jaw together. It receded. "Do you know what it's like inside a black hole?"

Zoe folded her hefty, suited arms. "Sure. I learned it at college."

"Did you know you can see the past? Visibly. It's black all around, but light from the past gets in, somehow. I don't...I don't understand it."

"Well, it's complicated."

"I really want to understand."

"Intense gravity...changes physical laws," Zoe said. "We don't really know what it's like, because if we get too close we...compound into a single atom and die horribly. In fact, I'm the closest anyone has ever been. We can only guess."

"My time is different. I see the past, but I exist at all times. And...my mass...I destroy everything. I have my own gravity. My existence tears the universe apart. There is nothing." The voice, like a whisper, deafened her. "I have watched humans, for millennium, and every moment they meet, or talk, or touch, I have seen a thousand times.

"Do you know what it's like to have your own time? Your own pocket of space no one else dares get near? To have no one?"

Zoe shuffled her feet. She clasped her hands in front of her. "I do."

Seconds passed. "How?"

She licked her lips. "I went to college at a floating station, around the planet Jupiter. I...I don't have any family left. My parents, my siblings...they're gone. They've been gone for years. But I'm smart. Brilliant, they tell me. I went to Jupiter for a special program."

"You traveled through time?"

She shook her head, and her hair floated into her face. "Not exactly. Would you believe it, they

made a mini black hole. In a room. In a box."

"I don't understand."

She shrugged. "I know. It's complicated. Time went almost to a stand-still when I was near it, and for ten years, I was always near it. In reality, to the researchers, it was only ten seconds. I had my own big room, a library with tons of books, a computer with every single piece of information the human race had collected. I had a bed. I had a desk. I had exercise equipment. I had music, movies, recorded television, games galore. And I had a list of tasks to simulate classes. So I learned. Do you know what I learned?"

"Many things."

"All right, smart guy, yes. But the thing I learned quickest, and hardest, was what it's like to be lonely. I'll never forget it. I had ten years to learn it. Not being able to talk to someone...like there was a cage around my brain. I pounded on the doors, screaming, crying to be let out. I bawled until I was dehydrated. I destroyed everything I could put my hands on. But it didn't matter. A week-long tantrum was two-hundredths of a second to the people watching me. I didn't age. I couldn't sleep, something about the experiment made it unnecessary. I tried, of course, but my dreams seemed to last for days. Do you know what that's like?"

Zoe stared straight into the black hole. "Everything turns to nightmares in the end."

Seconds passed. "What happened?"

"It ended, eventually. They shut the black hole off. I'd done the work necessary to get myself over a dozen degrees. The project was a success."

"It does not seem like it was a success."

"They haven't done it since. They saw what it did to me." Zoe stared at her gloved hands. "I got out about a month ago. I started working here, at the zoo. So far, I like it. And now look at me!" She



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stomped her booted feet on the hard, invisible, impossible floor under her. "I have my very own gravity, too!"

"We are...alike."

"I guess we are, aren't we?" She twirled, arms out, and got the tether wrapped around her. "So? Anything you want to talk about?" She checked her oxygen level. "I have some time before I need to get back in. As long as you promise to give the station power again."

"First, I have a question."

"Shoot."

"You said you were brilliant. Why do you take care of animals?"

Zoe smacked her lips. "They'll listen to me." She smiled. "There, captain. One word better."

#

The animals drifted down. The lights came back up. Zoe watched her oxygen tank dwindle down to half, then one quarter, then ten percent. A little bit later she told the black hole she had to go back inside. She walked back to the airlock. When the door closed, it floated alone again, but someone had been there to listen.

"We heard your responses," Captain Dush said as she peeled herself out of her spacesuit. "What did it say?"

"Sorry, captain. I promised not to tell." She presented her wrist to Needles, who began to measure vitals. "I learned some stuff, though. Like you wouldn't believe! Real shocking stuff! Deep, intimate secrets."

"About?"

"I told you, I can't tell."

"Everything seems in order," Needles said. "How do you feel?"

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"Better than ever, doc," she said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to thank a bunch of animals. I hope I never fly Air Gorilla again, but they probably saved all our lives. Also, I need to think of something to repay a giraffe I almost choked out. I'm sure some of the others will want to talk, too. How could I not listen to them?"

END