

Futures

The Schwarzschild defence

A boost to the ratings. By M. V. Melcer

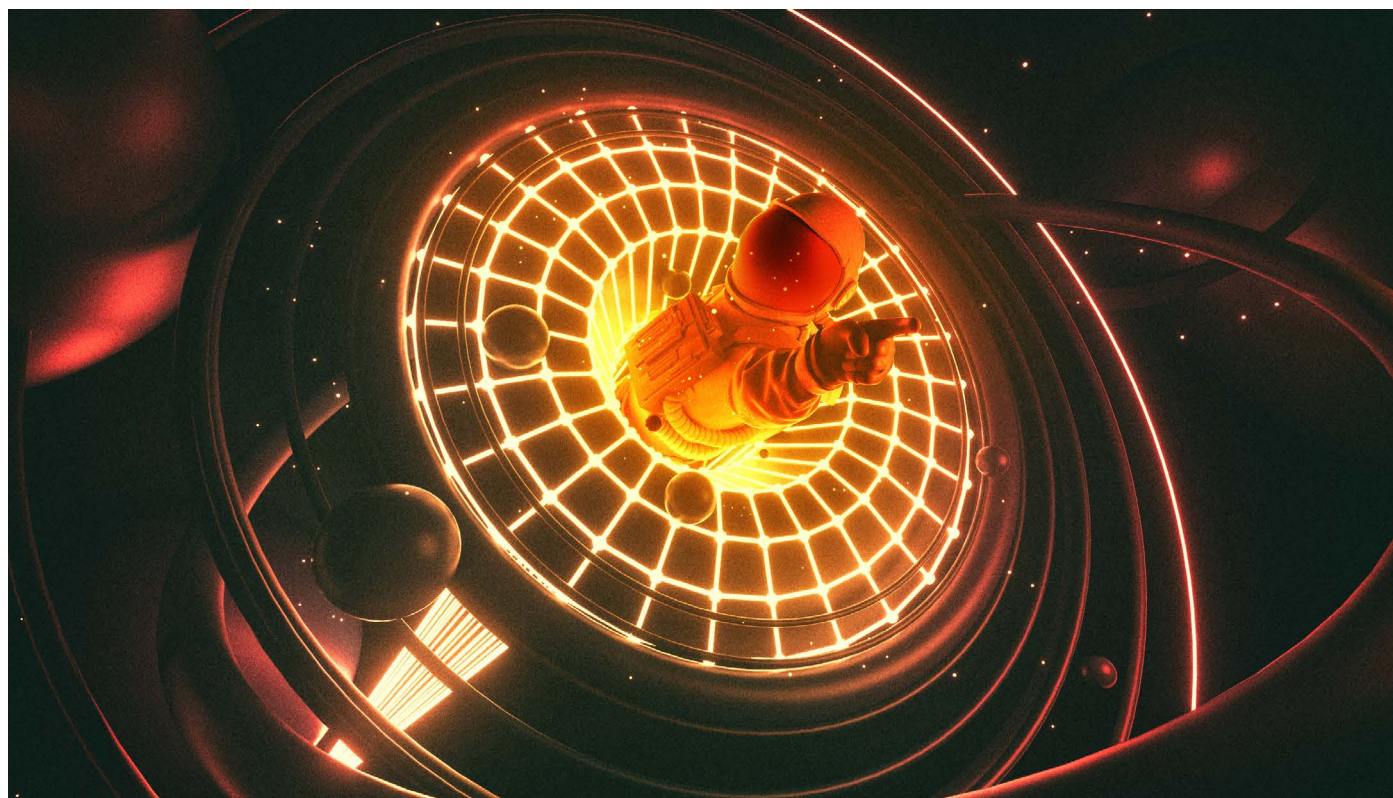


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

None of this was my idea, Detective. Xavier came up with the whole plan. The black hole had been all the rage ever since it appeared, wreaking havoc in the Kuiper belt, but Xavier was the first one to declare he was going to surf the accretion disk. He played it badly, though, an unusual lapse of judgement on his part. He gave it away too soon.

He'd just completed his latest stunt, free-diving in Titan's methane ocean, and his ratings broke all the records. It seemed like the perfect time for the announcement, except Titan – and Xavier – happened to be on the other side of the Sun. By the time he reached the right corner of the Kuiper belt, everybody who was anybody had already been there, body surfing shredded asteroids and posing for the cameras with their protective gear artfully ripped. A few got themselves killed, of course, but that wouldn't deter Xavier. Not when there was so much to gain.

Where was I at the time? I was with him,

Detective; he wouldn't have it any other way. I was always with him, watching with trepidation, my hand pressed to my lips. We tried fainting once, but it did nothing for the ratings so Xavier decided I shouldn't bother.

Surfing was going to be his next achievement – but by the time we arrived, his competitors had made it old news. The public was already losing attention, moving on the next new thing. To get any traction, Xavier needed something special, something so daring it would make the others look like amateurs. Something the public and the sponsors couldn't ignore.

To him, there was only one option. He was going to dive in deep, deeper than any human, deeper even than the automated research craft. He would skim the event horizon and emerge as the net's new superstar.

The idea was tricky, though. No, I don't mean the risk to his safety. That's never been a concern for Xavier. You see, in his mind, failure and injury only happen to lesser people. Which is

pretty much anyone who isn't Xavier. No, his worry was the logistics. Time dilation, specifically. See, the deeper he went, the better for his ratings – but also, the faster the time passed for those on the outside. Go in too deep, and by the time he emerged, nobody would remember his name. Physics can be so inconvenient.

Was that when ... I don't know what you mean, Detective. Oh, you have it on camera? A cockpit recording you've recovered? I see ... Well, no point denying, then. I confess to the sabotage. Murder? Absolutely not. A small damage to his property, that's all.

What gave me the idea? It might have been one of the press conferences or a live-stream event, when Xavier pontificated about his prowess and bravery while I stood behind him smiling. Just before, he had told me my ratings were dropping and he wasn't sure another rejuvenation would fix them. Or maybe it was earlier, the day he demanded I quit my engineering job because it didn't fit his image, or when he declared I was not to be

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seen without him because my appearances diluted his ratings.

Why didn't I leave? Oh, Detective, you don't understand. Nobody *leaves* Xavier; the damage to his image would be unacceptable. One of his assistants made that fact very clear. Yes, you are correct – his first wife divorced him, and died soon after in a rather unfortunate accident. Nothing to do with Xavier, of course, he was far away at the time. He rushed back for the funeral, though, all distraught and in stunning black silk. It brought a nice boost to his ratings, too. For about a week.

Anyway, where were we? Right, his departure. He had it planned to the tiniest details. I was to see him off at the dock, waving tearful goodbyes as he boarded *Xavier-1*, the prototype designed to his personal specifications

by a new sponsor. I did my part as requested, in that body-hugging silver space suit he'd had made for me. I followed him into the cockpit for a farewell kiss. He was streaming his pre-launch speech when ... Well, you saw the rest.

The sabotage? Oh, it affected the steering. I used to be an engineer, you see. Once he turned towards the black hole, the controls locked. He can't turn back anymore. He can only fall.

Murder? Detective, I'd never. He was my ... *is* my husband, after all. Time dilation, remember? Time stretches when you go deep. I've heard it slows down to infinity. Yes, he's falling into the black hole – as long as we're alive, he will still be out there, falling. He will outlive us both, Detective. See this image here? That's his signal. It's very dim now and very red; the

physicists can explain. He's still streaming, too. I'm told for the past two days he's been on the letter 'u'.

That's all there is, Detective. Clearly, there's been no murder. Inconvenience, probably, but has he actually said so? Is he pressing charges? I didn't think so.

May I leave now? Thank you. I've been so busy ... I've got so much work managing the business. As you might guess, the whole affair has been amazing for our ratings.

M. V. Melcer is a Polish-born science-fiction writer residing in the United Kingdom. She's currently pursuing an astronomy degree, with a special interest in black holes.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

M. V. Melcer reveals the inspiration behind *The Schwarzschild defence*.

Ideas come from unexpected places. Who knew that enrolling on a course about the relativistic Universe would spawn an idea for the perfect murder? If anything, it only confirms that it's never too late to learn. Even ~~murder~~ cosmology.

This story is dedicated to the tutors of the Open University course S383, especially IC and GW. (Honestly, though, they didn't say anything about murder.)

